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Mapping political space and local knowledge: power and boundaries in a Hñahñu (Otomí) territory in Valle del Mezquital, Mexico, 1521–1574

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines historical changes in the spatiality of political power through the analysis of four communities of Mexico's Mezquital Valley during the late Postclassic (900–1521) and early colonial (1521–1574) periods. Recent research has suggested that the spatiality of ancient states is better understood by using networks and bounded-territory models rather than the dominant model of the modern nation-state. We find that tributary relationships and political entities of the Aztec imperial forces are better captured through a theoretical perspective that defines political entities as networks, while Hñahñu (Otomí) territoriality, usually defined by watershed divides, is more accurately illustrated using a model based on territory and boundaries. Post-conquest systems of spatial representation brought by the Spaniards were oriented towards idealized geometric forms and concrete borders. However, the study reveals that such systems were not fully implemented because colonial institutions were designed using pre-existing forms of political organization. Methodologically, the historical knowledge of a group of local experts was essential for reconstructing the changing spatial patterns of the region.

Political power over space is increasingly associated with the modern nation-state, where power is exercised by territorial units of sovereignty whose borders are clearly demarcated and officially recognized.[1] However, political power manifestations change shape and spatial structure across time and space, and a limited understanding of territoriality obscures other geographical frameworks in which political power also operates.[2] This paper critically examines the modern, rigid and timeless concept of political power through the reconstruction of ancient Mesoamerican polities and their transformation during early colonial times in central Mexico. This task is achieved by mapping social interactions and forms of spatial organization in order to reveal associations between historical time, political function, and borders. We argue that the conventional notion of modern political units does not capture the complexity of Mesoamerican civilizations. Scholars and historians

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often assume ancient polities as non-territorial because they do not conform to the modern principle of concretely defined territories, thereby reinforcing the colonialist myth of native lands as empty, pristine geographical spaces.[3]

Recent research on the late Postclassic Mezquital Valley has shown that Hñahñus (Otomíes) lived in *andehés*, which are typically defined as a group of people holding a single territory with visually recognized limits. Hilltops, peaks, and major vegetation types were used by Hñahñu people to define the boundaries of andehés.[4] However, scholars have employed contemporary notions of the modern state in the analysis of the Postclassic period, thus overlooking other conceptual ways of establishing territorial borders.[5]

The transition of late Postclassic polities into colonial institutions also remains unexplored. Scholarship has analyzed the transfer of power and capital from native to Spanish institutions as expressed in the evolution of *pueblos cabeceras* (head towns) and *sujetos* (subject towns) in the colonial era, thus showing that the *encomienda* — the primary institution that served Spanish officials to receive goods and labor from natives — was issued using the political, economic and spatial patterns of native territories.[6] It is also argued that early colonial administrators imagined encomiendas as idealized geometries and employed distances and directions when describing them.[7] However, few studies have focused on the contribution of native institutions to the territorial design of New Spain, now Mexico, nor on the political territoriality involving the formation of encomiendas.[8]

This paper addresses these concerns through a historical reconstruction of the late Postclassic period (900–1521) and early colonial era (1521–1574) in the northern Mezquital Valley (Hidalgo State, central Mexico). Analysis focuses on the fluid nature of geographical space and the role of political power in establishing borders, by employing two geographical models: the first defines political power as networks, while the second is based on territory and boundaries. This reconstruction integrates evidence from both conventional sources and the historical knowledge of local people — namely, a group of local experts who were engaged in the analysis of documents of various kinds in order to generate historical interpretations and cartographic representations.[9] The participation of this group of people was key because colonial records are often full of names and spatial marks that are meaningful only to those who continue to live in the territory.[10] Mapping ancient polities from different geographical perspectives and historical times with the help of local experts sheds light on the trans-historical condition of political power, conceived as a flexible social construction territorialized beyond concrete entities.

The next section describes the study area in detail, including its political complexity and historical importance in order to demonstrate the high degree of political and cultural organization existing amongst Mesoamerican societies of the Mezquital Valley. Then, we discuss the sources used to unravel geographical content and references to ancient polities leading to historical interpretations and cartographic reconstructions. Finally, we analyze the spatial organization and political situation of precolonial institutions and their role in the realization of the territory of New Spain.

The northern Mezquital valley and its Hñahñu communities

The Mezquital Valley is an arid area in central Mexico extending over the states of Hidalgo, Querétaro and the State of Mexico (Fig. 1). For over nine hundred years it has been inhabited by the Hñahñu people, one of central Mexico's most influential indigenous groups.[11] Chronicles from the colonial period describe Hñahñus as gatherers and hunters with no fixed territory and living in isolated farmhouses, incapable of culture or civilization.[12] Historical evidence shows otherwise; prior to the Aztecs taking control of the Mezquital Valley, the Hñahñus lived within organized territories or andehés and practiced seasonal agriculture.[13] They successfully grew corn, beans, chilies, tomatoes, cotton and the maguey plant in terraces and used irrigation systems to maximize soil productivity and water supplies.[14] In areas fully dependent on rainfall, the Hñahñu hunted and gathered fruits and seeds.[15] After the Aztecs became dominant in the Mezquital Valley (circa 1300–1400), a number of andehés were integrated into the imperial tribute system and were obliged to deliver goods and services. This guaranteed the economic and political continuity of the Aztec empire over

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