

SPECIAL SECTION: OTUMBA AND ITS NEIGHBORS

# INTRODUCTION

In this issue we present the second part of the special section on recent research on Late Aztec Otumba, Tepeapulco, and Teotihuacan by Thomas H. Charlton, Deborah L. Nichols, Cynthia L. Otis Charlton, and their colleagues. The background to this research was discussed by those authors in our previous issue (Charlton, Nichols, and Otis Charlton 2000), and, as I pointed out in the introduction to the first part (Fowler 2000), a distinct advantage provided by the Otumba research is that the data generated allow us to assess general models proposed for the origin and development of city-states in the Basin of Mexico during the last few centuries before the Spanish Conquest. To summarize briefly, two general models have been proposed—one emphasizing economic symbiosis and craft specialization and the other focusing on regional political competition among elites. The Otumba data and analyses allow us to perceive and explore further valid aspects of both models.

In this introduction I wish to highlight an intriguing issue in the study of the Late Aztec city-state, and that is the very notion of the city-state itself in Postclassic central Mexico. Originally rooted in an understanding of the Greek *polis*, the familiar concept of city-state evokes the image of a strong centralized polity with a dominant city at the core, surrounded by subordinate settlements, and characterized by ethnic homogeneity and governmental autonomy. This conception of the ancient city-state found a natural home in studies of ancient Mesopotamia where, as in ancient Greece, the city-state was the fundamental political unit providing the setting for economic and social development. Neoevolutionary comparisons between Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica resulted in the use of the concept in the latter area. In the first detailed comparative treatment of the rise of civilization in Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica, Robert McC. Adams (1966), for example, drew parallels between Early Dynastic Eridu, Kish, and Lagash and Late Postclassic Tenochtitlan and Tetzaco. While the use of the term in archaeological studies of ancient Mesoamerica is certainly not inappropriate, it is not generally appreciated that, when we refer to Postclassic city-states of central Mexico,

we are using an etic concept that may be somewhat misleading with regard to the structure of the polity and the behavior of its residents.

The Aztecs had their own emic term for their city-states. The *altepetl* lay at the center of the organization of the Nahua world. The word itself can be glossed in English as “the water(s), the mountain(s),” and, according to James Lockhart (1992:14), it refers in the first instance to territory, but the intended meaning is probably an organization of people holding sway over a given territory. The constituent parts of the *altepetl* were the *calpolli*, and Lockhart (1992:17) notes that in many respects they were microcosms of the *altepetl*. The *calpolli* contributed separately and approximately equally to the common good or obligations of the *altepetl*. Most important was the fixed rotational order of the *calpolli* regarding draft labor or the delivery of products to the *altepetl* (Lockhart 1992:17). With regard to settlement—and this is precisely where the city-state notion may be inadequate—urban nucleation occurred, but to the Aztecs the idea of a dominant central city was incompatible with the principles of *altepetl* organization. The central urban cluster would actually be formed by parts of several constituent *calpulli* (Lockhart 1992:19). As we consider the *altepetl* of Otompan, we would do well to reflect on these emic views as well as the etic view of the city-state.

In the papers that follow, we have a wealth of data that touch directly or indirectly on this issue. The first paper by **Susan Toby Evans** addresses the issue most directly, as she provides a detailed overview of the Otumba city-state, its history, and development. **William J. Parry** examines the production and exchange of obsidian tools in Late Aztec city-states. **Emily McClung de Tapia and Boris Aramis Aguilar Hernández** offer a fascinating examination of vegetation and plant in Postclassic Otumba. And **Jean-François Genotte** provides a detailed study of the *Mapa de Otumba*, a document that offers abundant information on post-Conquest culture change in the Otumba area.

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## REFERENCES

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