Late to Terminal Formative period political transformations and their household-level impact at Cerro Jazmín, Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca

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1. Introduction

The political transformations that take place in societies directly impact their inhabitants. These impacts are perhaps more pronounced in urban societies, where sectors of the population, such as the higher socioeconomic classes not directly involved with food production, have become more dependent on power structures that are subject to change. In the Late to Terminal Formative period polity of Cerro Jazmín, in the Mixteca Alta region of Mesoamerica (Fig. 1), our investigations detected a shift in the sociopolitical strategies employed by the urban center, first to consolidate its position as a nascent urban center using an exclusionary political strategy, and later to convey its regional independence. In this article, we investigate whether the sociopolitical changes that took place from the Late Formative to the Terminal Formative period at this settlement are also evident at the household level. The article focuses on a household located on Terrace 131 where our excavations revealed a continuous residential occupation, fluctuating material wealth, and changes in household economic activity. The patterns identified and the timing of these shifts reflected broader socioeconomic changes that took place across the entire polity and region.

In the Formative period, Cerro Jazmín, a settlement in the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca, experimented with different sociopolitical strategies to first consolidate its position as a nascent urban center and later to convey its regional independence. In this article, we investigate whether the sociopolitical changes that took place from the Late Formative to the Terminal Formative period at this settlement are also evident at the household level. The article focuses on a household located on Terrace 131 where our excavations revealed a continuous residential occupation, fluctuating material wealth, and changes in household economic activity. The patterns identified and the timing of these shifts reflected broader socioeconomic changes that took place across the entire polity and region.

In the Late to Terminal Formative period of Cerro Jazmín, in the Mixteca Alta region of Mesoamerica (Fig. 1), our investigations detected a shift in the sociopolitical strategies employed by the urban center, first to consolidate its position as a nascent urban center using an exclusionary political strategy, and later to convey its regional independence following a more corporate political strategy (Blanton et al., 1996; Pérez Rodríguez et al., 2017a,b). In this article we document how this sociopolitical shift forced the household located on Terrace 131 (T131 hereon) to change economic strategies and its material display of wealth. Excavations at T131 revealed continuous occupation of a household whose material wealth fluctuated; the timing of these changes in the household’s wealth corresponds with sociopolitical changes across the entire settlement (see Fig. 2).

The household unit is central to economic production and consumption, as well as to socio-political action and reproduction (Blanton, 1994; Wilk and Netting, 1984). Therefore, this article focuses on the household to learn about the broader transformations that took place in Cerro Jazmín society between the Late Formative and Terminal Formative periods (300 B.C.-A.D. 300). This study builds on the work of scholars who have established protocols to assess household material wealth and their use as a proxy for household status (Smith, 1987). Based on the analysis of these material markers, we argue that the T131 household was possibly part of the city’s elite, as they enjoyed greater access to foreign goods during the Early Ramos period. We argue that the T131 household was possibly part of the city’s elite, as they enjoyed greater access to foreign goods during the Early Ramos period (300–100 BCE) when its government followed an exclusionary political model and status was displayed by possession of foreign items (Blanton et al., 1996). The T131 household then experienced a period of stress and adaptation in the Late Ramos period (100 BCE–200 CE) when evidence from other city sectors suggests that the polity moved towards a more corporate political strategy that minimized the use and display of foreign materials and replaced them with locally made ceramics, especially in feasting events that integrated greater numbers of people (Blanton et al., 1996; Pérez Rodríguez et al., 2017a, 2017b). Along with the rest of Cerro Jazmín, the residents at T131 increased the use of locally produced ceramics; however, their access to these lower-quality goods occurred at the same time that they diversified their economic activities by engaging in lithic craft production. We believe that taking up this production was an adaptation in the face of a new economic and political reality in the Late Ramos period.
Fig. 1. The location of Cerro Jazmín in the Mixteca Alta and other sites mentioned in the article. Cartographer A. Martínez Tuñón.

Fig. 2. Map of Cerro Jazmín showing the location of T131 and the civic-ceremonial sectors of Tres Cerritos and the Sunken Patios. Cartographer A. Martínez Tuñón.
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