

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Power, Memory, and Prehistory: Constructing and Erasing Political Landscapes in the Naco Valley, Northwestern Honduras

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ABSTRACT In this article, we explore how research conducted among societies and social segments that are not historically documented can contribute to a comparative study of social memory. Such investigations, it is suggested, might profitably focus on how different population segments strategically used materials of various sorts to create landscapes for the enactment of power and its precedents. By attending to the strategies through which diverse factions in varied times and places yoked memory and power, we can heighten our appreciation for the ways in which culturally distinct symbols were deployed in broadly comparable processes to centralize control, build hierarchies, and resist both of these effort. This approach is exemplified in the study of the fluid political situation that pertained during the Late Classic (C.E. 600–800) to Terminal Classic (C.E. 800–1000) transition in the Naco Valley, northwestern Honduras. [*social memory, power, Mesoamerican archaeology*]

In this article, we explore how research conducted within purely prehistoric contexts might contribute to comparative studies of social memory: the recollections of what has happened, and what it signifies, shared by members of a group (Van Dyke and Alcock 2003a:2; cf. Halbwachs 1992). Without documents or informants, there are limits to what can be said about peoples' understandings of their past. Still, archaeologists are well-positioned to cast light on how factions competed over time for control of social memory by strategically deploying materials to create frames for recalling history and imbuing it with meaning (Goffman 1974). This long-term perspective on the materialization of social memory complements approaches to the topic provided by other social scientists (e.g., Kuchler 1988; Maffi 2009; O'Neill 2009). Enhanced collaboration among researchers working from different vantage points on this important topic would, however, be helped by the following: identifying concepts central to comparative investigations; addressing problems with, and advantages to, crossing the prehistory–history divide; and formulating methods to bridge that gap. Here, in a case study drawn from our research in southeastern Mesoamerica, we consider and illustrate ways of dealing with these issues.

When calling for a “comparative” study of social memory, we refer to the creation of schema that facilitate investigations of how the past is instantiated in the present among distinct societies and across segments of the same society as well as the ways in which these interpretations change over time. Accomplishing the above goals, we suggest, involves focusing on a theme of enduring significance to most people in most periods, deciding what aspects of social memory related to that domain are amenable to comparative examination, and developing concepts appropriate to these studies. One such theme centers on power, the ability to direct the actions of others and to defend one's capacity to define and achieve goals by manipulating tangible or intangible assets (Giddens 1984:38, 258–261; Mann 1986; Smith 2003:108; Wolf 1990). Numerous archaeologists (see chapters in Mills and Walker 2008a; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003b; Yoffee 2007) argue that the political significance of social remembrances often depends on the extent to which people understand who they are and their relations to others by reference to their variably shared pasts. Insofar as present realities of hierarchy and power concentration are rationalized and legitimized by recourse to precedents, the faction that writes history is the victor (Le Goff 1992:92, 98). This is not to say that social memory is invariably or solely yoked

to political contests—only that it often is. Consequently, investigating how social memory figures in power contests is a fruitful field for comparative research.

In studying this intersection of remembrance and power, it is important to bear in mind that social memory is often encoded in, and conveyed through, multiple communicative fields, ranging from oral recitations to composition of texts, and to bodily practices enacted within symbolically charged settings. How precedents are written about, spoken of, and performed are often variably related to each other through the initiatives of diverse agents seeking to insinuate their potentially conflicting versions of the past in the present (Beaudry et al. 1991; Connerton 1989:72–73; Hendon 2000; Joyce 2003). Historians, ethnographers, and other specialists drawing on distinct lines of evidence, therefore, illuminate different aspects of memory, power, and their interrelations. Archaeological studies of the topic generally focus on how competitions over remembrances were waged through strategic manipulation of the material symbols by which selectively recalled antecedents were put in the service of political projects (DeMarrais et al. 1996; Hendon 2010; Joyce 2003; Moore 1996, 2003). One of the salient values of this approach is that it highlights the ways in which understandings of the past and present are routinized through practices enacted within symbolically charged political landscapes (Hodder and Cessford 2004; Smith 2003).

Political landscapes are defined here as ordered arrangements of meaningful places that exist at multiple spatial scales, from houses to regions, and provide contexts for learning about and enacting power relations (Smith 2003:72–77; cf. Duncan 1990:17; Hendon 2010:230; Knapp and Ashmore 1999:8–13). The importance of political landscapes in ordering power follows largely from the premise that such processes as hierarchy formation and power concentration must be internalized and performed to affect interpersonal relations (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1984; Hendon 2010:25; Mauss 2007). Such knowing and acting occurs within webs of signification that encourage some understandings while discouraging others (Geertz 1973). Political landscapes comprise one of the most significant of these action frames in which authority is constituted, reproduced, and challenged on a regular, if often implicit, basis (Goffman 1974; Smith 2003:75–77). By changing those settings, agents can modify what is known, what is done, and the power relations that are thereby materialized and perpetuated (Alcock 2004:28, 51; Bloch 1977a, 1977b; Casey 1987:226–230; Gallivan 2007; Wallis 2008).

In examining political landscapes, archaeologists are frequently better positioned to infer how physical symbols were deployed in strategies to routinize and question power relations than to specify the array of ideas those objects conveyed (see Duncan's [1990:17–19] distinction between rhetoric and signification in landscape studies; Alcock 2004:140; Bailey 2005; Inomata 2006:807; Stanton and Magnoni 2008:2). Strategies and signification are certainly related; without at least a general sense of a symbol's mean-

ings, it is hard to infer how, and with what degree of success, it was deployed in contests to secure power through channeling practices instantiating social memory. Still, an emphasis on strategy means that examinations of past political landscapes will tend to address the central questions of “how are memories constructed, by whom, and to what purposes?” (Mills and Walker 2008b:9) by analyzing the patterned manipulation of material symbols, the meanings of which may be grasped only in a broad sense. Consequently, comparative studies of social memory that incorporate time periods and population segments lacking historical documentation may fruitfully focus on how materials were deployed in rhetorical gambits to secure power.

Pursuing such investigations, we suggest, requires inquiring, to the extent the data allow, into the following: the meanings of objects, their uses in constructing political arguments, and the degree to which these meanings and strategies were contested within societies. Inferring the meanings of items without recourse to documents or the original participants requires attending to how the objects figured in practices through which present realities were imbued with the legitimizing aura of revered antecedents. Careful attention to recurring patterned relations among artifacts and features preserved in their contexts of recovery is crucial to this effort, as are comparisons of such configurations across space and time (Hodder 1992:110–111; Hodder and Cessford 2004; Kuijt 2008).

Although varied, strategies used to insert the past into the present and to deny such linkages by manipulating objects appear to be finite in number and repeated across different culture-historical settings. Such commonalities might profitably be grouped initially within two major categories, each appropriate to the linked processes of remembering and forgetting. The former, we suggest, generally involves fabricating or restoring buildings, artifacts, and other features to provide physical frames for teaching and performing the past (Goffman 1974; Hendon 2000, 2010; Maffi 2009:14; Meskell 2003). The closely linked process of forgetting is often seen in acts of erasure: that is, the materials by which memory is invoked and imbued with political significance are obliterated or redefined within reconfigured symbolic frameworks (Canuto and Andrews 2008; Elsner 2003; Flower 2006; Mills 2008; O'Neill 2009). Remembering and forgetting are creative processes that are often combined in strategies to shape tangible frames for learning and enacting aspects of social memory (Hendon 2010:27).

In considering how political landscapes are continually transformed through such stratagems, there has been a strong tendency to attribute great causal weight to the goals and machinations of rulers (Marcus 2003; Wilson 2010:4). This makes sense as elites frequently commanded the labor needed to reshape their capitals and countrysides by fabrication and destruction in ways that still catch our attention (Canuto and Andrews 2008; DeMarrais et al. 1996; Iannone 2005; Navarro Farr et al. 2008; Trigger 1990; cf. Manahan 2008). Further, surviving texts frequently provide insights

into the dominant ideologies that paramount lords sought to advance using various rhetorical devices. Nevertheless, processes of creation and erasure were often employed by people of different social positions to instantiate their own understandings of social memory in concert with, or in opposition to, hegemonic narratives (Duncan 1990; Golden 2005:271; Smith 2003:110). Evaluating the degree to which there were multiple political landscapes encompassing varied spatial and temporal scales and materializing different, possibly contradictory, understandings of past and present requires extensive research conducted in diverse settings, from households to monumental site cores to entire regions (Alcock 2004; Falconer and Redman 2009:8; Knapp and Ashmore 1999:16–18; Wilson 2010). Here we might productively explore the extent to which elite ideologies drew on, penetrated, and challenged perspectives on the past and present articulated in political landscapes fashioned by members of different social groups, or “memory communities” (Hendon 2010:5, 238), as well as the degree to which the latter were variably co-opted by, or resisted, these efforts.

How much can be said about what members of different factions remembered or forgot, the mechanisms used to promote selective recollections, and how such processes related to political struggles depends greatly on how many political landscapes we can discern in the data at our disposal. We may never be able to reconstruct all the discourses on social memory articulated through varied media. By seeking to encompass as many perspectives as possible on the ways in which the past was materialized in the present, however, we can contribute to a broad understanding of how people operating in varied cultural and historical contexts and from diverse structural positions drew from a wide, if finite, set of

strategies to manipulate material remains in search of power (Hendon 2010:28). Archaeologists are well-positioned to trace these competitions over long time periods, charting the moves and countermoves of different factions as they reconfigured political landscapes.

The above approach to the study of social memory and power is illustrated here with respect to changes in the political landscape made during the Late (C.E. 600–800) and Terminal Classic (C.E. 800–1000) in the Naco Valley, northwestern Honduras. These transformations, we argue, were crucial to instantiating novel power relations and relating them to precedents. In the absence of contemporary or later texts that shed light on the meanings of Naco Valley political symbols, we center attention on describing strategies that those competing for power employed in reshaping their houses and towns as they searched for preeminence and challenged others’ claims to it.

LATE CLASSIC POWER STRATEGIES

Located in Southeast Mesoamerica (see Figure 1), the Naco Valley encompasses 100 square kilometers and is watered by the Rio Chamelecon (see Figure 2). The basin’s prehistory extends from at least 1200 B.C.E. through the Spanish conquest (Schortman and Urban in press; Urban et al. 2002). Hierarchy building and power concentration were most marked during the Late Classic, when the basin’s capital was La Sierra (see Figure 3; Schortman and Urban 1994; Schortman et al. 2001). Information on developments during the Late and Terminal Classic derives from nine field seasons during which 464 ancient settlements were recorded and 60 sites dating to this span were excavated. This latter

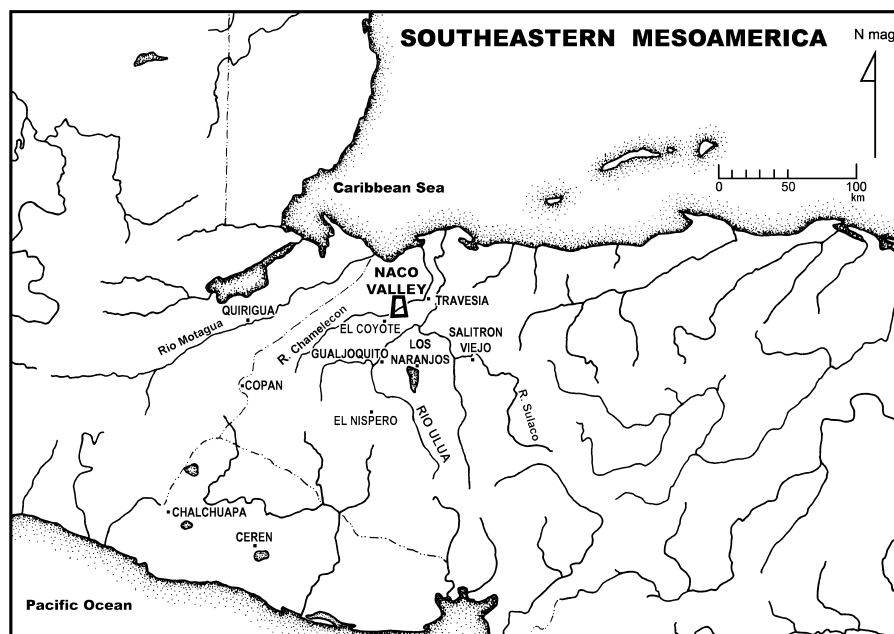


FIGURE 1. General map of southeast Mesoamerica showing sites mentioned in the text.

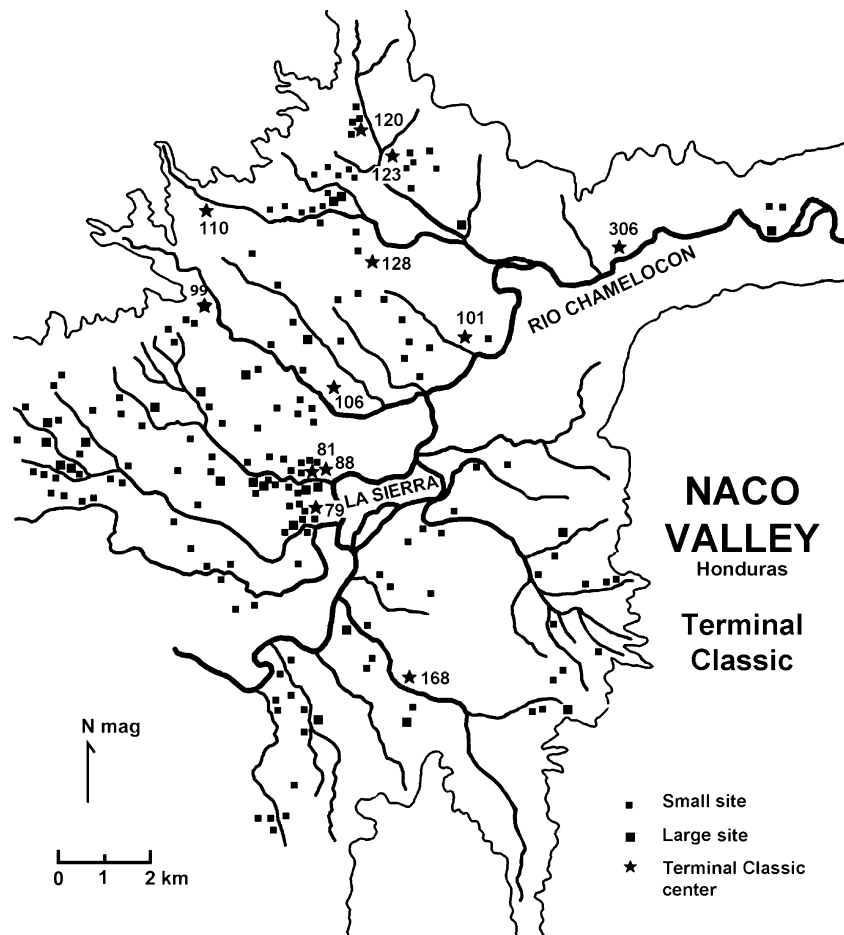


FIGURE 2. Distribution of sites dating to the Late and Terminal Classic periods in the Naco Valley. Terminal Classic political centers are distinguished by stars.

sample spans the full range of intravalley settlement locations and sizes, including La Sierra.

The aggregation of nearly one-third of all known Late Classic structures at and within one kilometer of La Sierra, coupled with the largest intrabasin concentration of monumental platforms here (21), points to strong centralized control over people and their labor (de Montmollin 1989; Roscoe 1993). We hypothesize that this preeminence was partly based on elite monopolies over the acquisition, production, and distribution of generally needed items, especially obsidian blades and pottery containers. Both commodities are ubiquitous at excavated Late Classic sites, but evidence for their manufacture in the form of imported nuclei, sizable firing facilities, and production debris is largely found at La Sierra (Connell 2001; Ross 1997; Urban et al. 1997). We surmise, therefore, that La Sierra's rulers undercut the autonomy of other valley residents, transforming equals into dependents who owed loyalty and labor to the monopolists in return for generally needed items (cf. Ekholm 1972; Friedman and Rowlands 1977).

Implementing a strategy of centralized control through encouragement of craft production at the capital posed its own problems. One of these was the development of novel interest groups with which paramount lords would have to

contend. During the preceding Early Classic (C.E. 200–600), individual loyalties seem to have focused primarily on households composed of people who occupied structures surrounding a plaza. These social groups, as throughout much of Mesoamerica, were apparently elementary units of residence whose members frequently cooperated in basic processes of production, consumption, and social reproduction (see chapters in Santley and Hirth 1993; Sheets 2002; Wilk and Ashmore 1988). Early Classic households were grouped within three small polities each focused on a diminutive capital distinguished by small numbers of monumental platforms (Urban 1986). Limited excavations at nine of these sites, in addition to studies of their forms, suggest that people of all ranks in the Early Classic valley lived in similarly structured domestic units with a few enjoying somewhat more control over labor than others. Aside from these power differences, very little apparently distinguished one household from another.

Households marked by much the same physical features and engaged in similar domestic chores continued into the Late and Terminal Classic (see Figure 4). If anything, the number of buildings comprising plaza groups and the tightness of their packing increased during the seventh through tenth centuries. Principles of solidarity underlying



FIGURE 3. Map of La Sierra.

each household were internalized and performed using comparable quotidian and ritual objects in analogous ways (cf. Hendon 1996, 2010). It appears, therefore, that some level of household autonomy and distinctiveness was maintained as members of each domestic group conducted their own rites and prosaic tasks, even as a sense of interhousehold unity was stressed by similarities of beliefs and actions.

Production of such items as obsidian blades and ceramic vessels was grafted onto these domestic units in the Late Classic. By concentrating artisans engaged in specialized manufacture at La Sierra, valley rulers, perhaps inadvertently, highlighted interhousehold divisions based on occupation while facilitating the development of ties among craft workers who shared similar positions within the political economy (see chapters in Costin and Wright 1998). Distinct sections of the site devoted to pottery production emerged on La Sierra's north and south margins, whereas specialists pursuing a variety of crafts resided within tightly

nucleated portions of the capital immediately surrounding the monumental site core. Insofar as these artisans were linked to paramount elites and clients in comparable ways, they probably experienced their relations to the broader political economy in roughly analogous manners. La Sierra, therefore, was likely an arena for the creation of novel interhousehold affiliations and distinctions founded on craft specialization.

Adding to these complex relations based on occupation and household identity is differentiation in the power of households, at least as this variable can be measured by the sizes of constructions that comprise domestic compounds. La Sierra's site core occupies the pinnacle of this continuum, its central plaza delimited by, and containing, 21 massive stone-faced platforms. No other contemporary patio group approaches La Sierra's epicenter in size and level of elaboration, suggesting that the core's occupants enjoyed unparalleled power within the Late Classic valley.



FIGURE 4. Map of Site PVN 122, home to a Late Classic household.

The Early Classic political landscape was probably more complex than the image conveyed here of relatively homogenous households distinguished primarily by modest power differences. Nonetheless, it is hard to escape the impression that whatever divisions existed in the basin during the third through sixth centuries had greatly increased by the Late Classic. Although households remained fundamental units of social, political, economic, and religious organization, they were now parts of a political economy that fragmented earlier forms of commonality along lines of, minimally, occupation and more pronounced expressions of power. These developments posed serious problems for La Sierra's rulers. To forge a unified realm with themselves ensconced at the apex, they needed to invoke a sense of solidarity that transcended enduring household affiliations and emerging sociopolitical distinctions (Schortman et al. 2001).

One way in which this seemingly was accomplished was by promoting an ideology of shared essence (see Duncan's [1990:19] concept of "reductive normalization"; Kuijt 2008:176; Kus and Raharijaona 2000). This approach attempts to counteract social fragmentation by stressing deep-seated commonalities that unite all members of a society despite their increasingly divergent life experiences and interests. Appeals to fundamental similarities are often rooted in a presumed common history out of which a widely shared sense of self is thought to arise (Cohen 1978; Royce 1982). Such commonality can also be founded on commitments to extant institutional arrangements that transcend distinctions of power, household membership, and occu-

pation. Apparently La Sierra's rulers shaped the political landscape of their capital to accomplish both objectives.

The configuration of La Sierra's Late Classic site core resembles that of Terminal Preclassic (200 B.C.E.–C.E. 200) Santo Domingo (PVN 123) in the basin's northwest corner (see Figures 5–6). The latter is the earliest-known capital of the Naco Valley, succeeded during the Early Classic by the fragmented political landscape described previously. The specific resemblances between the La Sierra and Santo Domingo monumental epicenters are as follows: a roughly circular arrangement of sizable platforms around the main plaza, placement of some of the largest edifices in the center of that patio, and location of the tallest platforms on the north plaza margin. Excavations at both centers suggest that their cores were households writ large in form and function (cf. Figures 4–6). By choosing to model their center of power on a household cluster and an ancient predecessor, we argue, La Sierra's rulers fashioned the site's political landscape so as to highlight continuities with the earliest-known form of centralized rule in the valley and with the domestic arrangements of their lower-ranked contemporaries (cf. Kus and Raharijaona 2000). We cannot specify what the configuration of La Sierra's site core signified to all members of Late Classic Naco Valley society. What we can infer is that the aforementioned formal resemblances were likely parts of elite strategies to unite leaders and followers by invoking commitment to purportedly timeless political formations and to widespread domestic arrangements.

Promoting solidarity through the creative use of history and domestic institutions may help consolidate a realm but does not necessarily set one faction above another. La Sierra's Late Classic magnates moved to accomplish this goal by performing their preeminence in rites they alone conducted within La Sierra's epicenter. Rather than challenging the distinctive quality of household religious observances enacted with paraphernalia of local origin, they co-opted religious symbols and practices from the lowland Maya kingdom of Copan, about 120 kilometers to the southwest. Such "borrowing" had several advantages: the rites in question articulated well-established links between supreme political and religious power that could be used as models for novel hierarchical relations in the Naco Valley (e.g., Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Miller 1986); the foreign source of these ideas and symbols facilitated their exclusive control by La Sierra's monarchs; and appeals to distant realms as inspiration for politically potent rituals of rulership have a long history in Mesoamerica (Agurcia Fasquelle and Fash 2005; Davies 1977; Pohl 2003; Stuart 2005; cf. Helms 1979, 1993).

Evidence for the use of this strategy takes the form of architectural modifications and enactments of political power within these constructed settings employing locally distinctive ritual objects. The buildings and practices in question have no local precedents, are restricted almost exclusively to the La Sierra core, and closely parallel Copanec prototypes.

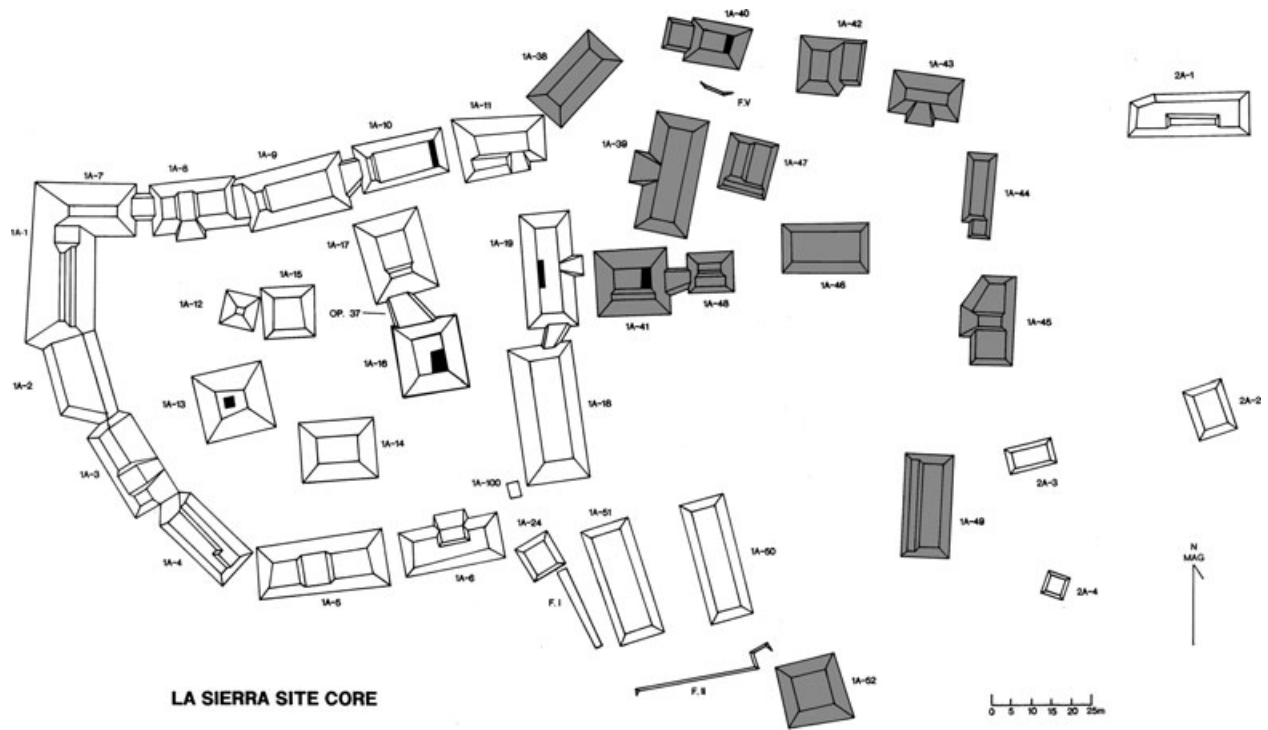


FIGURE 5. Map of the Late and Terminal Classic La Sierra site cores. The buildings shaded in gray were raised during the Terminal Classic. Note that Structures 1A-50 and 1A-51 define the ball court and that the solid black squares and rectangles indicate stone features visible on ground surface.

The most notable representative of architectural emulation is the ball court (see structures 1A-50 and 1A-51, Figure 5). This distinctive complex has a long history in the adjacent Maya lowlands (Scarborough and Wilcox 1991) but no clear antecedents within the Naco Valley. The La Sierra example closely resembles its Copan counterpart in that they are both oriented roughly north–south, open on the north, and backed on the south by a terraced eminence; at Copan the Acropolis forms the backdrop while at La Sierra a 2.48-meter-high natural ascent was faced with ten stone-faced terraces. In addition, the ball court and many of the site-core platforms were faced with masonry. Although commonplace at lowland Maya centers, this construction form diverges from the nearly ubiquitous, time-honored Naco Valley practice of fashioning platforms of all sizes from unmodified rocks. Recovery at La Sierra of drain stones, distinctive features of lowland Maya masonry superstructures, suggests that some of the largest platforms here originally supported buildings fabricated using at least some shaped stones. This is a marked departure from the erection of wattle-and-daub edifices atop virtually all other Naco Valley substructures regardless of size and time period.

These novel architectural forms and arrangements were given meaning, in part, through the actions conducted in and around them. We argue that such practices largely centered on rituals that made tangible the power of individual monarchs and linked them to potent supernatural forces along the general lines set by Copan's *k'uhul ajaws*, or holy

lords. The evidence for such a claim lies in the marked similarities between objects of royal ritual paraphernalia found in the La Sierra site core and at its lowland Maya neighbor to the southwest. One of the few pieces of stone sculpture recorded for any period in the Naco Valley, a tenon portrait head, was recovered in the core; it may have been mounted in Structure 1A-14, where an empty socket in a southern terrace facing was identified. The turban adorning this individual owes its inspiration to the distinctive headgear worn by Copan's monarchs. *Spondylus* shells, which figured in ritual bloodletting performed by lowland Maya notables, were also found almost exclusively within La Sierra's epicenter. In addition, numerous fragments of elaborately modeled ceramic-effigy incense burners were unearthed from the environs of La Sierra's monumental edifices. The forms and at least some of the decorations of these burners resemble Copanec examples that were employed in elite rituals.

Late Classic Naco Valley rulers, therefore, seemingly manipulated architecture and artifacts in practices that added another layer of meaning to La Sierra's political landscape. By stressing in the same place continuity, commonality, and distinctiveness, paramount lords rooted their power in a selectively recalled past, stressed solidarity with their lower-ranked compatriots, and set themselves apart from the latter through their privileged associations with foreign practices and divine powers (cf. Alcock 2005:325–326). One consequence of employing these interrelated strategies is that the resulting political landscape was distinctive of Late

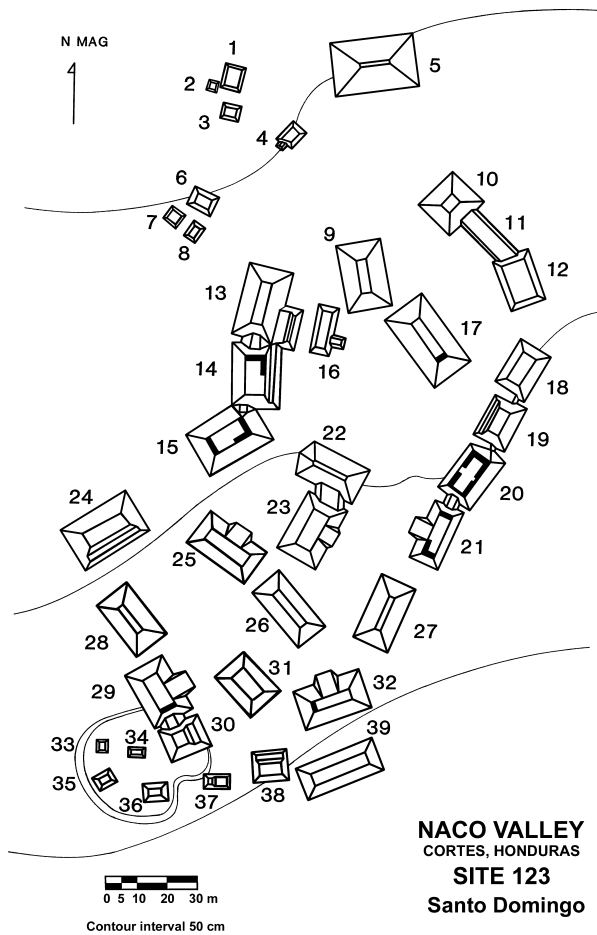


FIGURE 6. Map of Site PVN 123, the Terminal Preclassic capital of the Naco Valley. Structures 33–39 do not date to the Terminal Preclassic but were raised and used during the Late and Terminal Classic.

Classic La Sierra, neither an exact model of lowland Maya forms nor a replica of autochthonous prototypes.

How widely was this newly constituted ideology believed? In general, there are signs that the majority of the basin's Late Classic population surrendered power to those residing in the La Sierra core. This subjugation is inferred from several lines of evidence. First, excavations into the fill of five structures within the site core indicate that they were raised over a relatively short span by large work forces presumably operating under the direction of paramount lords (additional buildings were not tested sufficiently to infer their construction histories). Second, La Sierra's rapid growth from a modest Early Classic settlement to a primate center containing within its environs slightly less than a third of all Late Classic edifices known for the valley bespeaks successful elite efforts to concentrate subordinates where they could be effectively monitored (de Montmollin 1989; Roscoe 1993). Finally, the restructuring of the political economy outlined above indicates that local rulers were capable of affecting not only where people lived but also what occupations they pursued. Taken together, these findings strongly imply that the Naco Valley's Late Classic lords successfully moved to con-

centrate power in their own hands while building a hierarchy that they dominated. The social and economic distinctions unleashed by this process were apparently countered to some extent by general acceptance of the efficacy of elite-led rites conducted at the capital. The latter observances seemingly helped forge a hierarchically structured realm characterized by at least a moderate degree of unity. There is no evidence that physical coercion played a major role in promoting these developments; no weapons have been recognized and martial themes are not highlighted in any art form. This is not to say that all valley residents accepted wholeheartedly the innovations promoted by their monarchs. Rather, whatever resistance there was to these schemes did not coalesce into successful efforts to derail the rise to power of La Sierra's magnates.

REWRITING HISTORY IN THE TERMINAL CLASSIC

The elite strategies materialized in La Sierra's political landscape did not work for long. The key to understanding what happened in the Terminal Classic is recognizing that most portable symbols of Late Classic elite power were found buried in a deposit of ash and earth lying between Structures 1A-16 and 1A-17 in the core (see Figure 5). The frequency of modeled incense burners here is minimally 60 times greater than that seen elsewhere in the valley. In addition, the 24 *Spondylus* shells unearthed in this concentration comprise nearly all such objects recorded for the basin. Finally, the damaged and decommissioned tenon head was also interred here.

Those monumental platforms used by Late Classic magnates were also subject to vandalism and enrobement. Of the 11 investigated structures in the western site core, including the ball court, eight had lost at least parts of their masonry facings in antiquity. Cut blocks on one of the largest platforms, Structure 1A-13, for example, survived only in basal terraces where they were probably too deeply entrenched to remove easily. The same situation applies to the ball court. There, cut blocks on the flanking buildings were recorded primarily in the lower courses, not on upper, more exposed, facings. The round stone markers that commonly bisect the alleys in lowland Maya courts were also missing from the La Sierra example.

After removing the facing blocks, at least parts of eight monumental platforms, including both ball court structures, were covered with variably dense layers of cobbles set in an earth matrix. In some cases, these deposits obscured all final-phase architecture. In others, the coverage was partial, concentrated on the upper portions of the facade. In all locales, the additions hid at least some of what had made these monumental platforms distinctive: their terraces, steps, and superstructures were smoothed over and buried leaving only the rounded contours of low artificial hills still visible. Accentuating this change would have been the vegetation that likely soon blanketed their surfaces. The 0.3 meters of dirt overlying the platforms' flanks and 0.4–0.6 meters of soil

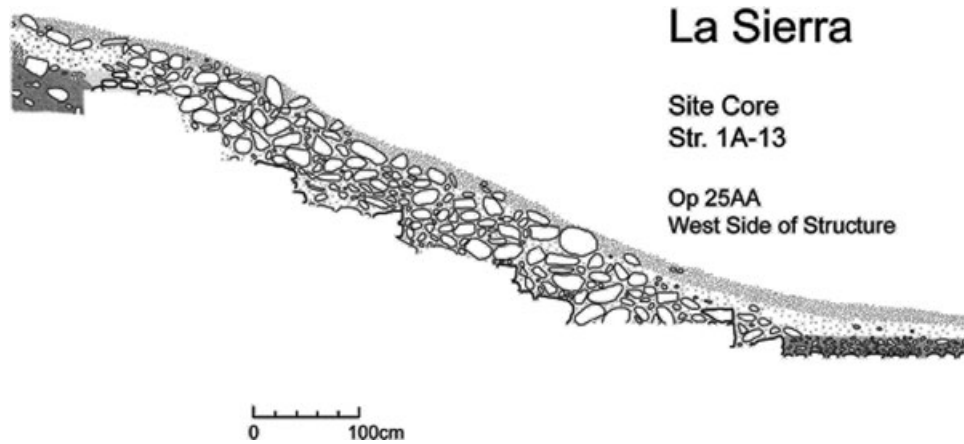


FIGURE 7. Detail of a section showing the stones and earth burying Structure 1A-13's west flank. Structure 1A-13 is a monumental platform in La Sierra's Late Classic site core.

on summits, even after over 1,000 years of erosion, is more than enough to sustain grass and shrubs today.

To be sure, it is difficult to distinguish the effects of natural processes from the intentional burial of a structure (Hall 1994). Our contention that buildings in the Late Classic site core were purposefully blanketed with soil and stone is based on the following: the relatively great depth of dirt that still covers these edifices well after they were no longer being maintained; and the density and generally flat-lying attitudes of the stones overlying final phase architecture (see Figure 7). If these large structures had simply been abandoned, we would anticipate less soil accumulation on their steep sides and for any rocks fallen from their superstructures and terrace facings to have generally assumed down-slanting aspects.

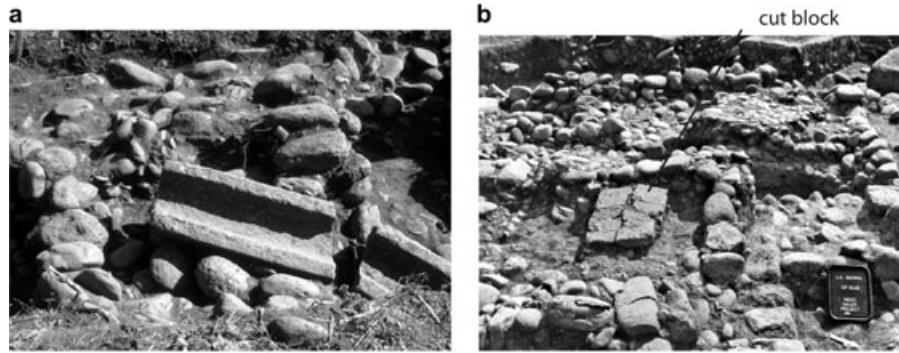
The burial of Late Classic symbols of rulership is remarkably thorough. Not content with abandoning objects and buildings associated with earlier leaders, La Sierra's Terminal Classic population hid these reminders of the past from sight. Even large platforms were turned into something approximating hills, thus redefining their significance and possibly denying their cultural origin and associated memories (cf. O'Neill 2009:101; Smith 2003:166–168; Stanton and Magnoni 2008:10–11). These processes of erasure speak to a concerted effort to induce collective forgetting of what the earlier landscape of elite power had so ostentatiously sought to fix through architecture, artifact, and action. The result was a new setting antithetical to learning about and performing supreme power based on references to Late Preclassic precedents, principles of household organization, and Copan's divine lords (cf. Schreiber 2005:250–251, 258–259).

Was this burial of architectural features driven solely by a desire to obliterate them from memory? The stones and earth blanketing Late Classic elite architecture might represent unfinished renovations. Covering monumental platforms may also have been integral to terminating their use,

perhaps formally controlling the supernatural power they contained (Freidel 1998; Iannone 2005:40; Mock 1998; Navarro Farr et al. 2008). Jettisoning sacred objects and interring buildings could thus have been motivated by a variety of factors. The net effect, however, would have been to occlude the original appearance of these prominent and distinctive symbols of Late Classic rulership, thus facilitating their disappearance from memory.

Whatever combination of motives drove the actions described above, these efforts likely accomplished two goals essential to processes of forgetting. First, those who directly experienced Late Classic rulership would have been keenly aware of their ability to rewrite history by entombing symbols of past lords. The continued existence, in transformed states, of earlier monuments would have driven home this message by reminding all viewers of what was to be forgotten (Elsner 2003). Second, by stripping memory of its physical cues, future generations would have been hard-pressed to celebrate Late Classic monarchs and the ideology they promoted.

Who lost faith in the premises materialized in La Sierra's Late Classic political landscape and engaged in these acts of creative vandalism? We infer that failure of the elite ideology was general, based on what happened to all of those robbed blocks. Masonry removed from Late Classic monuments was recycled in Terminal Classic constructions of all sizes and locations throughout La Sierra and, to a lesser extent, beyond the center (see Figure 8). Population continued to grow at the capital after the demise of the Late Classic ruling elites, and the buildings being raised, along with additions made to preexisting edifices, frequently incorporated cut blocks. This masonry was often mixed with river cobbles as a minority component in terrace and platform walls. In other cases, blocks were set in thresholds to summit rooms or used to make steps. Most often the shaped stones involved were simple rectangles, although fragments of L-shaped blocks and drain stones were sometimes employed as terrace treads and



**Reused cut blocks: a. Drain set as lintel (fallen)
b. large rectangular block set as entry stone**

FIGURE 8. Examples of how faced blocks from La Sierra's Late Classic site core were reused in Terminal Classic buildings at the center.

lintels. Circular stones, possibly former ball court markers, are also set in thresholds, although some may be replicas as the total of all known round stones is greater than the usual number of such markers in a ball court. The blocks employed in Terminal Classic architecture were not likely made for that purpose. Such distinctive items as drain stones are clearly recycled whereas even rectangular blocks do not seem functionally necessary.

This widespread reuse of fragments of Late Classic monumental architecture suggests the operation of two related processes (cf. Papalexandrou 2003; Rice 2009). First, remodeling the Late Classic site core involved the concerted efforts of much of the capital's population. The thoroughness of efforts to vandalize and bury earlier monuments points to the operation of a sizable work force proceeding systematically about its task. That the "fruits" of their labor, in the form of recycled stones, were used in Terminal Classic constructions throughout the capital and beyond suggests that most had a hand in dismantling what their ancestors had worked so hard to fashion.

Second, that so many people desired pieces of that past indicates that wide swaths of the capital's Terminal Classic population were busily involved in reformulating history as they reconfigured the political landscape to instantiate new understandings of present realities and their precedents. The reuse of cut blocks was certainly meaningful to those avid recyclers in ways that went beyond the pragmatic. Exactly what these pieces of masonry signified to the many people who used them we cannot say. Those who repurposed fragments of shaped stones in steps, facings, and entryways, however, were employing strategies to materialize links to what they otherwise seemed so intent on erasing. Ironically, stones that had previously been symbols of elite distinctiveness and superiority were now among the tangible expressions of solidarity tying together members of a still-large population divided by at least occupation and household affiliation (cf. Pauketat and Alt 2003). This unity was probably built on a notion of shared essences that was rooted in a selective recollection of the immediate past; it was something they

"owned," that inhered in the very materials with which they built their present.

The actions described above took place within a context of changing political relations. These shifts are characterized by several features. For one thing, power was now more widely dispersed than it had been during the Late Classic (Schortman and Urban 2004). In the latter interval, we are hard-pressed to identify elites within the Naco Valley other than the paramount lords residing in La Sierra's site core. During the Terminal Classic, however, there are at least 13 sites, including La Sierra, that were political centers. Each of these settlements contains 1–13 monumental edifices pointing to at least limited control over labor by some privileged segments of the Naco Valley's population.

The political landscapes of these new site cores also diverge from that seen at Late Classic La Sierra. The buildings that comprise that site's core are tightly clustered around a plaza to which access is very limited. The emphasis here, as in most well-established Naco Valley domestic compounds of the period, was apparently on restricting entrance to the central patio. This arrangement of domestic structures continues into the Terminal Classic, implying some persistence of quotidian social forms and practices. Monumental site cores, however, are now far more open, access to their sizable patios being fairly easy from a number of points. The large plaza built in the Terminal Classic immediately east of La Sierra's Late Classic epicenter is a particularly good example of this often-repeated arrangement (see Figure 5).

We hypothesize that the above architectural form signified something quite different than the tightly nucleated organization of La Sierra's Late Classic epicenter. At the very least, the trope of mimicking household forms was being eschewed, as was exclusive paramount control over ritual foci and whatever power derived from such monopolies. Rhetorical strategies stressing greater openness and a more marked distinction between domestic and public spheres of activity were apparently now being pursued.

Roughly contemporary with these architectural shifts is the disappearance of just about all material symbols that were

integral to Late Classic performances of sacred rulership, such as *Spondylous* shells, modeled *incensarios*, and sculpted portraits of monarchs. The behaviors through which power was instantiated had apparently changed just as the political landscape in which they were enacted was transformed. At very least, it appears that individual potentates were no longer being celebrated as they had been during the Late Classic.

In general, dramatic changes in the Naco Valley's landscapes of power over the Late to Terminal Classic seem to materialize novel political relations in which the following was true: power was diffused among an extensive array of elites; preeminence was performed within material frames that stressed general participation by subordinates in activities hosted in open, easily accessible plazas; and the latter did not replicate widely shared forms of household organization. Whatever public ceremonies Terminal Classic magnates may have led, their preeminence was no longer founded primarily, if at all, on exclusive control over religious observances based on lowland Maya prototypes. Power within the basin seems once again to have been legitimized by reference to parochial precepts. Those premises, however, were now being learned and performed within the locally unprecedented frames of open plazas.

Erasing tangible expressions of centralized leadership founded on foreign principles was, we hypothesize, a creative step in making an explicit break with the past. That so many people of different ranks cooperated in transforming La Sierra's Late Classic political landscape suggests that these acts of obliteration were potentially extended communal performances of renouncement through which a sense of unity was enacted based on new precepts. Just as people likely gathered in monumental plazas for communal observances, they also worked together in appropriating prominent reminders of Late Classic rulership and turning them to new purposes. Wide sharing in political processes may well have been a guiding principle of Terminal Classic action that was expressed in patterned instances of both creation and erasure.

IMPLICATIONS

This case study highlights the issues of meaning, rhetoric, and methods raised earlier with regard to studying social memory in prehistoric contexts. Turning to the first point, the polysemic qualities of ancient symbols are rendered here in simplified forms. What little we could say about the meanings of relevant materials relied on inferring the practices in which these items figured based on their contexts of recovery (buried in prepared deposits, recycled in later buildings) and on comparisons with analogous items from the Copan realm and earlier phases in Naco Valley prehistory. For example, similarities between ritual paraphernalia and constructions found in La Sierra's Late Classic epicenter and those used by Copanec elites suggested that these buildings and objects were implicated in comparable practices and expressed analogous meanings in both locales. Even so, we cannot assume

that modeled censers, ball courts, and *Spondylous* shells were viewed in exactly the same ways at La Sierra and Copan. Thus, elite rites among the lowland Maya often conjured up and celebrated divine ancestors (Schele and Miller 1986). No such link can be established at Late Classic La Sierra, where explicit references to deified predecessors were not identified. More likely, similar forms of architecture and artifacts found in generally comparable contexts at La Sierra and Copan were used in enactments of paramount power founded on broadly analogous principles that nonetheless differed significantly in their details.

If much of past cultural content eludes us, investigations of social memory's political significance can still be pursued by studying the diverse rhetorical means that factions employed in constructing and using varied political landscapes (Inomata 2006:807, 820, 832). In the case reviewed here, these stratagems included instigating a general sense of shared essences (by stressing formal similarities in frames for enacting power that evoked ancient precedents and contemporary social arrangements); erasure (through burying monuments and artifacts integral to performing power during the Late Classic); appropriating charisma (by selective use of materials that instantiated some premises of Copanec rulership); and reinterpretation (through recycling faced blocks, former symbols of elite distinctiveness, in a wide array of domestic contexts within and beyond La Sierra). There are certainly other means by which materials can be manipulated to create frames for conjuring the past in the present (cf. Alcock 2004; Crawford 2007:15; Hastorf 2009; Hendon 2010; Kadambi 2007:176; Wilson 2010). All of these are creative processes by which shifting conceptions of self in relation to power were seemingly internalized and performed by a wide array of agents who actively used material culture in patterned and systematic ways.

Assessing how these strategies were deployed by various factions to configure social memory by shaping political landscapes requires conducting research in diverse settings spanning as full an array of ranks, occupations, genders, and other dimensions of potential social variability as possible. In this way, we can evaluate how landscapes materializing varied political relations founded on diverse understandings of the past were constructed at differing scales and the extent to which hegemonic discourses co-opted, or were resisted by, distinct population segments. Investigations in Late Classic household compounds as well as the La Sierra site core, therefore, revealed commonalities in domestic arrangements during the Late Classic and the reappropriation of former elite symbols (i.e., faced blocks) in the Terminal Classic. Insofar as examinations of power and social memories depend on inferring the multiple landscapes in which political relations were instantiated and legitimized, we are best served by studying the operation of these processes in as many contexts as possible.

Herein, we contend, is a potential contribution that archaeologists working without the benefit of texts can make to the study of social memory generally. Lacking written

documentation and informants' reports concerning how memory is linked to power, we have no choice but to attend closely to the political landscapes created by ancient actors. Identifying the multiple ways in which space is and was configured over different territorial expanses further calls attention to the subtle and ostentatious manners in which power is now and has been contested by those with and without overt voice in shaping political relations. This may be the primary means for researching connections between social memory and power in many archaeological contexts. Nonetheless, investigating political landscapes also offers a fruitful line of inquiry that complements those provided by spoken and written accounts in more recent periods (e.g., Maffi 2009; O'Neill 2009). Such analyses of the constructed environment can act as checks on reports provided by other sources, even as they enrich and contextualize text- and informant-based narratives.

Ongoing debates concerning the fate of Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddhas illustrate how current competitions over politically potent pasts might be analyzed by attending to the use of materials in processes of erasure, creation, and, in this instance, restoration (Lawler 2002; UNESCO 2010). Systematic destruction of these massive images and their associated murals by the Taliban was at least partly motivated by state-inspired efforts to forge a political landscape in which notions of a unified Afghanistan could be taught and enacted, untroubled by memories of its non-Islamic past. Attempts to restore the site have, in turn, been championed by agents of different local, national, and international bodies contesting to use Afghanistan's history in support of their own projects. Hence, some Bamiyan Valley residents seek to reset the buddhas to strengthen their position culturally and economically (through tourism); while some Kabul officials prefer to avoid direct provocation of Taliban sympathizers by enclosing sculptural fragments in a modest onsite museum; and still others, foreigners, treat Bamiyan as a World Heritage site whose significance derives in part from its position within intercultural networks that stretched along the Silk Road. Buddhas, ball courts, and other materials are and were important components within networks of memory employed by factions, spread over differing spatial extents and enduring for variable periods, to modify landscapes in support of sometimes conflicting political projects. Analyzing the strategies employed in such contests to materialize power provides an important line of evidence that highlights the multitude of actors involved, the resources they deployed, and the volatile political formations resulting from said struggles. This is fertile ground for collaboration among ethnographers and archaeologists.

Archaeologists, in general, also have the advantage of being able to study political processes through landscape modifications that cover temporal spans not accessible to most ethnographers and many historians. In the Naco Valley case, it was possible to discern how agents reconfigured their material world in the course of political competitions that lasted roughly four centuries. We can certainly not

describe these shifts in detail. Even with the aforementioned limitations, however, such diachronic studies can extend our understanding of the reflexive relations among material, power, and memory beyond what can be obtained from the analysis of processes occurring over shorter intervals.

Communication among researchers involved in these diachronic and synchronic studies would be greatly facilitated by development of a common vocabulary designating recurring strategies for shaping political landscapes at all levels (Brady and Ashmore 1999:140; Hendon 2010; Smith 2003; cf. Bailey [2005] for a comparable effort to identify the broad strategies by which Neolithic figurines from southeastern Europe were imbued with social power by those who made and used them). Formulating such a vocabulary should not be an exercise in categorization. Rather, this lexicon could enhance efforts to identify and discuss recurring patterns in how landscapes were fashioned by members of different social groups to frame memory and its relations to practices of political centralization, hierarchy building, and denials of both. We are not urging a search for universal laws of memory manipulation in support of political pre-eminence but for a means of communicating findings and insights across multiple studies of this important topic.

Texts, when available, remain significant in such analyses. Still, we suggest that many people in antiquity and today grasp the present, recall the past, and act on those understandings through direct bodily experiences with political landscapes (Connerton 1989). A comparative framework for studying social memory and its political significance cannot, therefore, privilege written accounts or rely primarily on insights derived from their study if it is to incorporate the perspectives of the numerous people whose active engagement with constructed landscapes is not represented in those documents (Marcus 2003).

CONCLUSION

Comparative studies of social memory and its relation to power could enrich our understanding of how people working from diverse structural positions in distinct historical and cultural contexts and over varying lengths of time (1) drew on finite sets of strategies to instantiate political precepts in varied landscapes; (2) promoted, in this process, visions of past and present realities that were hegemonic, contestatory, or combined elements of both; and (3) thus reinforced or changed political formations. As the Naco Valley case study suggests, analyses of these processes in purely prehistoric settings are unlikely to identify the full range of meanings conveyed by ancient symbols. Such investigations can, however, cast light on the rhetorical devices by means of which different factions strove to inscribe on the land their relations to power through the strategic use of diverse materials. The result is unlikely to have been one political landscape that conveyed an unchanging and enduring dominant ideology favorable to elite aspirations. Instead, we can expect in most cases the coexistence of, and changes within, multiple material configurations that provided frames for

inculcating and enacting distinct, differentially evanescent, and variably conflicting understandings of power and its precedents.

Identifying these dynamic and complexly related political landscapes, and the strategies through which they are and were created, will be greatly aided by defining concepts and methods appropriate to comparative research in this domain (Golden 2005). Such a framework will help focus debate and promote constructive engagement with each others' findings in ways that will benefit us all.

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