

Moving the Study of Mobility and Migration to New and Better Places

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Mobility and Migration in Ancient Mesoamerican Cities should be considered a seminal work for the topic of mobility and migration studies in Mesoamerica. This collection of research examines population movement in relation to the processes of urbanization and deurbanization using different methodological approaches. The main goal of the volume is to rethink the long-standing separation between sedentism and mobility. This reconsideration propels the field of Mesoamerican studies forward as a whole because it allows researchers to see how the people and societies within Mesoamerica changed throughout time and space and how they interacted with each other in ways not previously acknowledged. The chapters include a variety of regions and time periods, and the body of the volume is divided into three sections. Each section deals primarily with either bioanthropological (Part 1), archaeological (Part 2), or ethnographic methods (Part 3). Each chapter in the book, however, goes beyond using a single methodological approach, often combining at least two different methods to arrive at the final conclusions.

The introduction by Charlotte Arnauld, Christopher Beekman, and Grégory Pereira provides an overview of previous research on population movements, including methods and influential theories and concepts. The introduction also briefly details what each chapter will cover and gives the first definitions for “mobility” and “migration.” The editors define “mobility” as encompassing “the broad range of habitual physical movements that facilitate (or complicate) social and cultural practices” (3) and “migration” as “a form of movement that takes place under unusual circumstances” (3).

In Chapter 1, Carolyn Freiwald details her work in the Belize River Valley using isotopic analyses to study migration patterns among the Maya. Her samples come from Barton Ramie, Belize and date to the Late and Terminal Classic period. The Barton Ramie samples reflect trends from the Belize Valley and elsewhere in the Maya area. In Chapter 2, Julie Hoggarth, Carolyn Freiwald, and Jaime Awe sample individuals from Baking Pot, Belize. Isotopic values reveal data on population movements but include archaeological data in the form of burial and settlement patterns and material culture to strengthen their study. Chapter 3, by Andrea Cucina, Thelma Sierra Sosa, and Vera Tiesler, describes population movements and economic changes at the coastal site of Xcambo, Mexico. Through bioarchaeological and archaeological evidence, the team explains that Xcambo experienced population growth at the beginning of the Late Classic, which in turn, caused extremely active economic interactions in the form of salt trade. In Chapter 4, Meggan Bullock studies mobility and migration at the urban site of Cholula, Mexico during the Postclassic period through the health and biostatistics of a sample of 309 skeletons.

In Part 2 of the volume, Elizabeth Graham and Linda Howie study the scale, direction, and causes of population mobility in Chapter 5. The authors use both archaeological and stable isotope analyses from Lamanai, Belize and Marco Gonzales, Belize. In Chapter 6, Nancy Gonlin and Kristin Landau examine the ways in which mobility is seen in the archaeological record at Copan, Honduras, specifically within the Copan Valley and the urban site of San Lucas. The authors introduce four definitions of certain types of migration: local, circular, chain, and career. In Chapter 7, by Nicholas Dunning, Michael Smyth, Eric Weaver, and Ortegón Zapata examines settlement patterns in the Puuc region, Yucatan, Mexico. Archaeological evidence such as changes in monumental and residential architecture suggest that the patterns of population movement and resource control changed as a result of the end of elite control within the urban areas. In Chapter 8, M. Charlotte Arnauld, Eva Lemonnier, Dominique Michelet, and Mélanie Forné investigate ancient Maya mobility in Lowland sites during the Terminal Classic. Specifically, the authors sought a better understanding of transformations during the Terminal Classic by studying different types of mobility and how they can be identified in the archaeological record.

Part 3 begins with Sarah Clayton investigating migration at the site of Chicoloapan, Mexico. Clayton uses archaeological data covering the arrival of nonlocal populations at the site, resulting from the decentralization of power due to the breakdown of the Teotihuacan state.

Chapter 10, by Grégory Pereira, Marion Forest, Elsa Jadot, and Véronique Darras, explores the migration of populations to an ecologically and socially different environment. Using archaeological indicators, the authors investigate four site-formation processes: urban fabrique, waste discard, obsidian waste, and burials. In Chapter 11, Prudence Rice investigates Lowland Maya population movements of the Itzas of central Petén, Guatemala. Rice uses ethnohistorical and archaeological data to validate the Lowland Maya migrations mentioned in the Chilam Balam books. Chapter 12, by Christopher Beekman, examines one-way migrations that made certain enclaves in west-central Mexico easier to study through archaeological and historical data. Finally, Chapter 13, the discussion by Dominique Michelet in Part 4 of the volume, provides a summary of the chapters and addresses some inconsistencies throughout the book.

While definitions are given for “mobility” and “migration” in the Introduction, each of the chapters provides a slightly modified version of one or both of the definitions. At first, the presence of so many definitions might be seen as problematic or a hindrance to the general understanding of the concept as a whole. However, the varying definitions can also be seen as a way to highlight the complexity of the concept. Additionally, the book underscores how integral the study of migration and mobility is to understanding an ancient culture in general. Each chapter discusses a slightly different aspect of ancient Mesoamerican society from other within the same section, from burial position and orientation, to architecture, ceramics, and even the environment and ecology. The various authors successfully linked mobility and migration with many different aspects of ancient activities, such as subsistence structures, political strategies, settlement planning, burial rituals, and economic activities. By the end of the volume, the reader understands that the questions of “how” and “why” populations and people moved in ancient times can be integral in discussions of modern migrations.

Finally, the entire volume is easy to understand, without any unnecessary jargon or confusing concepts. While the book might be inappropriate for younger or introductory scholars without a basic background of Mesoamerica, archaeology, or bioarchaeology, any chapter within this volume is an acceptable reading for an upper-level college or graduate course. Additionally, professional Mesoamerican scholars can benefit from reading this book as it informs on many aspects of past Mesoamerican culture besides just population movements. The extensive reference list at the end of the volume is a valuable tool for students and professionals alike, encompassing over 70 pages.

Mobility and Migration in Ancient Mesoamerican Cities is an exceptional addition to the existing published work on mobility and migration studies. Each chapter in the book adds something new for the reader, both on the topic of mobility and migration studies and on Mesoamerican culture in general. The recent and current work by the authors provides compelling evidence for researchers to rethink the dichotomy of sedentism versus mobility. The fundamental value of this book lies in its ability to compel the reader to critically analyze the different, but still similar definitions being presented and come to their own conclusion of how and why the ancient Mesoamerican people moved around the landscape. This critical analyzation will ensure that the lessons of the past will be available for current and future discussions on mobility and migration.

Cheryl Foster is currently a PhD Candidate in the Department of Geography and Anthropology at Louisiana State University. She participated in archaeological projects in Belize, the Bahamas, and Italy. Her dissertation research focuses on human-environment interactions in Paynes Creek National Park in southern Belize, specifically on the relationship between sea-level rise and cultural activities at salt works sites.



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