

**WEALTH AND HIERARCHY
IN THE INTERMEDIATE AREA (1992)**

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Finally, Willey (1984: 377) questioned whether "... in closing, can we conceive of lower Central America as a culture-area-with-time-depth? The seminar was of the general opinion that we could not, at least not in the sense that we can conceive of such an entity for Mesoamerica or Peru."

The geographical coverage of the Santa Fe seminar was limited by the number of participants, and there was some feeling, albeit intuitive, that we might have had a better sense of "culture-area-with-time-depth" had we been able to include participants from northern South America and to discuss the regional culture history within the geographical framework of the "Intermediate Area," rather than the artificial limitations of "Lower Central America."

Depending on where each of us had worked, and on our individual theoretical leanings toward interpretations of the emergence and evolution of complex societies, the Santa Fe seminar participants were more than ever aware of the discontinuous distribution of formal architecture and evidences of mortuary wealth in Lower Central America. In addition, we were uncertain about the correlation between grave wealth and architecture (and the relevance of such discontinuous data) for general inferences of increasing social complexity or, more specifically, the emergence of chiefdoms.

Thus, when the Dumbarton Oaks Pre-Columbian Studies program offered the possibility to focus on the corpus of data (jade, gold, stone sculpture, polychrome ceramic, and architecture) that has traditionally been purported to represent elite behavior, and to do so within the broader geographical framework of the "Intermediate Area," the opportunity was seized. Just as the Santa Fe seminar in 1980 established one plateau, the Dumbarton Oaks symposium of 1987 has significantly advanced the study of the "non-high" civilizations of the Intermediate Area of the New World to new levels of recognition.

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The Intermediate Area: An Introductory Overview of Wealth and Hierarchy Issues

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INTRODUCTION

THE INDIVIDUAL CHAPTERS in this volume review and synthesize the temporal, geographical, and cultural aspects of wealth, elites, and hierarchies in the prehistoric Intermediate Area (as well as some of the data and methodological problems attendant on such an inquiry). Here, as background, we (a) define the ecological and geographical characteristics and the temporal depth of the Intermediate Area, (b) evaluate the level of cultural integrity of the area, (c) consider the concepts of elites and hierarchies, (d) set forth the broad data categories that may be most useful in the analyses and interpretations in the succeeding chapters, and (e) delineate some general questions that all participants in the symposium were asked to address.

GEOGRAPHICAL LIMITS, ECOLOGICAL FEATURES, AND TEMPORAL DEPTH

Geographical Limits

The geographical area covered in this volume has, through the years, been included (all or in part) in a number of spatial schemes. Relatively few researchers have focused on the Intermediate Area or how it relates to other existing spatial units, and a review of different spatial concepts will aid us in focusing on the geographical-cultural regions included in the symposium and in this volume. This review is not exhaustive, but rather is intended to provide the reader with a sense of the range of spatial-organizational terminology and concepts that have been applied to some or all of the lands herein considered as comprising the Intermediate

Area. Various "labels" in this terminological inventory have been used interchangeably (especially Mesoamerica and Middle America and Central America and Lower Central America) by different scholars. In this volume an attempt has been made to standardize cultural-geographical descriptive labels to the definitions given below.

Culturally, the Mesoamerican Area was delineated by Willey (1971: 85) as extending "... from central Honduras and northwestern Costa Rica on the south, northward through Mexico to the Rio Sota la Marina in Tamaulipas and the Rio Fuerte in Sinaloa on the north." These boundaries are arbitrarily marked (Willey 1971: fig. 3.6) and do not follow any distinct topographical features. As Maldonado-Koerdell (1964: 3) noted: "Rarely do the political limits of a region coincide with its natural limits (if there be such), and even more rarely do they do so in the area known as Mesoamerica. . . ." On both the northern and southern peripheries, the "geographical" boundaries grade according to the amount of Mesoamerican cultural presence perceived by different scholars (for the north, see Kelley 1966; Di Peso 1974; Ellis 1976; for the south, see Coe 1962; Healy 1980; Lange 1984b). The geographical-cultural area of Mesoamerica is oriented toward the high civilization loci of the Valley of Mexico, the Yucatan Peninsula, the Guatemalan Highlands, and the Valley of Oaxaca. In doing so, it omits the areas that are the main focus of this volume: the eastern portions of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, all of Panama, and the western/northern segments of Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador.

Geographically, Maldonado-Koerdell (1964: 3) defined Middle America as "all the territory from Central Mexico to northwestern Colombia . . . (roughly between the Tropic of Cancer and latitude 6°N)." While this geographical unit includes much of the Central American isthmus that was omitted from the cultural definition of Mesoamerica, it also includes the main Mesoamerican cultural hearths, while excluding western Venezuela and northern Ecuador.

Culturally, Nuclear America was defined by Weaver (1972: 5) as "two areas [that] pulled ahead of their neighbors and attained high peaks of civilization unparalleled elsewhere in the New World. These regions, roughly the Andean area and the Mexican-Guatemalan complex. . . ." Weaver (1972: 7) noted that by her definition "... the southern limits of Mesoamerica would not extend to Costa Rica until perhaps Conquest times." In this sense, she recognized the dynamic of the relationship between prehistoric isthmian peoples and those farther to the north.

Politically, Central America was designated by Baudez (1970: 11) as corresponding to "Five states—Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama." Geographically, he noted (1970:11) that "the isthmus can conveniently be described in three zones of unequal width. These are from west to east, the Pacific zone, the central highland zone, and the

Caribbean zone." For the purposes of the present volume, this unit has the disadvantage of including the heavily Mesoamericanized western parts of Honduras and El Salvador, while excluding western Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

Archaeologically, Lower Central America was characterized by Lange and Stone (1984: 3) as encompassing "most of El Salvador and Honduras, and all of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama." They also noted (1984: 3): "Both the terms *Central America* and *Intermediate Area* would have stretched the geographical coverage beyond that included here. Our main constraints were limits on the size of the seminar group and the sheer bulk of new data from lower Central America."

Placing extant archaeological data in the context of modern political boundaries, the prehistoric Intermediate Area (apparently first defined as a cultural-spatial concept by Haberland [1959], and subsequently described by Rouse [1962] and Willey [1971]) includes eastern Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, northern Ecuador, Colombia, and western Venezuela. Willey's map (1971: 256) excluded northwestern Costa Rica and Pacific Nicaragua from the Intermediate Area, while the text included these areas in the discussion. For the purposes of this volume, northwestern Costa Rica and Pacific Nicaragua are considered part of the Intermediate Area (Fig. 1).

This configuration incorporates the lands south of the southern periphery of Mesoamerica and also those north of the northern limits of Andean culture influence. The opportunity for transisthmian contacts across the narrow neck of land is also a significant geographical feature. The cultural characteristics of long-term cultural stability and a related absence of extensive cultural horizons and state-level societies contrast strongly with the presence of such traits in Mesoamerica and the Andes.

As Payson Sheets notes in Chapter 2, the absence of state-level societies was directly related, perhaps paradoxically, to long-term cultural stability in the Intermediate Area. A strong emphasis on regionalism and stability, traits emphasized in many of the following chapters, was an essential element in the structure of Intermediate Area culture history. For those accustomed to dealing with high civilizations, the term *Intermediate Area* may offer a false sense of cultural unity; taking the word *area* to mean nothing more than "a part of the earth's surface; region" (Webster's 1983), it assumes a more relevant geographical orientation.

Ecological Setting

The Intermediate Area (Fig. 2) is characterized by a wide diversity of climates, from seasonally dry (northern Pacific Costa Rica and southern Pacific Nicaragua, the Santa Elena Peninsula of Ecuador) to the highest

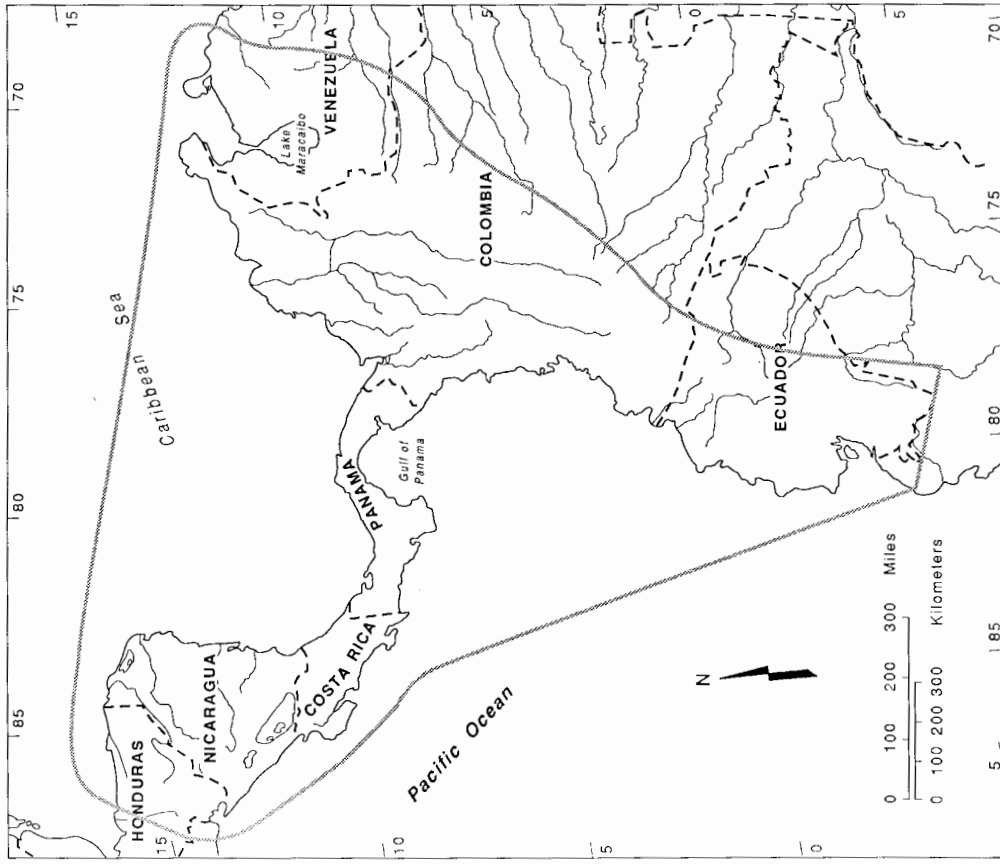


Fig. 1 Cultural limits of the Intermediate Area.

levels of precipitation in the New World (the Atlantic watersheds of Costa Rica and Panama). The area is composed of what is commonly classified as either wet or dry tropical (Aw', Afw', Amw, Amw', and Anw' in the Koeppen classification) (Lange 1984a: 40, 46).

Temporal Limits

Regional cultural patterns characteristic of the Intermediate Area can be identified as early as 1500 B.C. and continued until Spanish contact. Prior

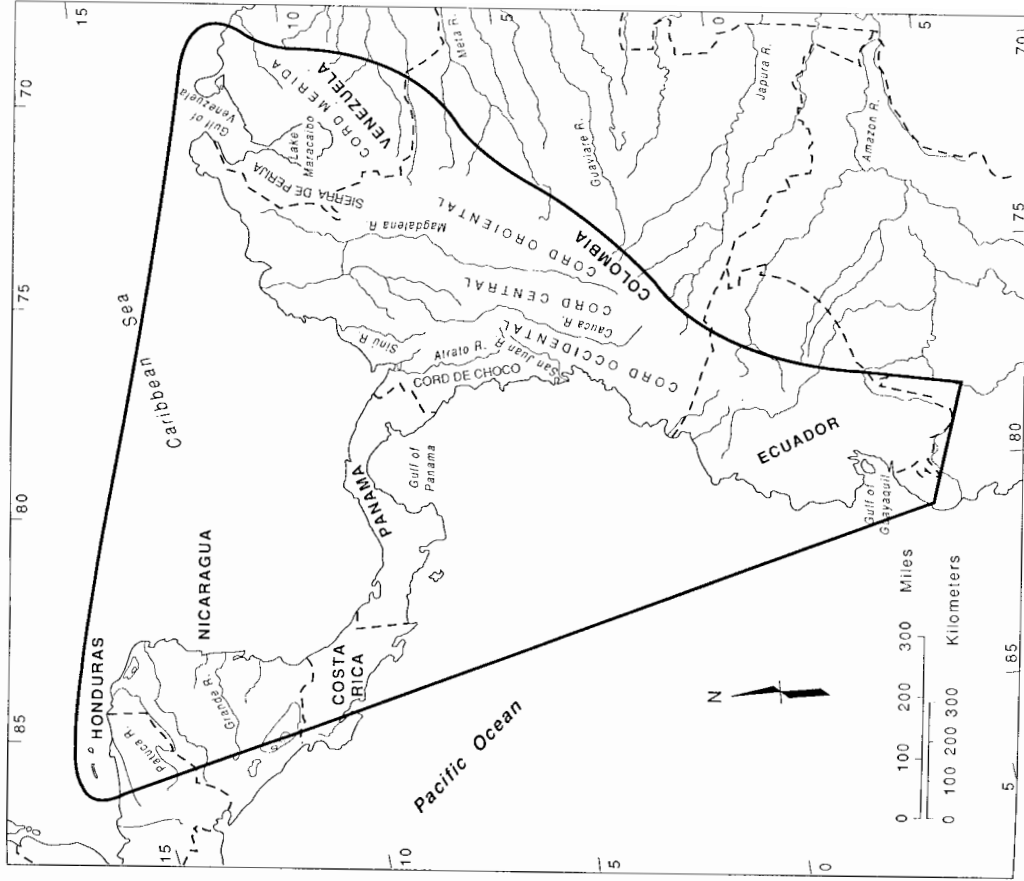


Fig. 2 Geographical features of the Intermediate Area.

to this, peoples in the area participated in the more generalized "Northwest South American littoral tradition" (Wiley 1971: 263). Richard G. Cooke and Anthony J. Ranere (Chap. 9) have documented the longest currently available sequence of the evolution from simple hunters, gatherers, and collectors to ranked societies in the Intermediate Area. As seen in the following chapters, there are no horizons or similar organizational devices that allow us to divide easily the development of the area on a broad geographical scale. The stages elaborated by the School of American

ELITES, WEALTH, AND HIERARCHIES

The accumulation of wealth, the emergence of ranked societies, and the evolution of economic/political (regional and extra-regional) hierarchies have traditionally been identified as the consequences of mature, settled village life. Although it was not automatic, the assumption is implicit that once village life was established, more complex societies and differentiation based on status and wealth evolved among individuals and groups, and in some locations this led ultimately to the evolution of the state. Although this evolutionary sequence is appropriate to the Andes and to the Valley of Mexico, the process was truncated at a lower (chiefdom) level of complexity in some parts of the Intermediate Area, and at the tribal level in others. As William R. Fowler shows in Chapter 12, there do seem to have been considerably more chiefdoms at the southern extreme of the Intermediate Area than were present on the northern periphery.

In the Intermediate Area, differences between the wealthy and non-wealthy were neither so pronounced nor so obvious (and are thus more difficult to detect archaeologically). In similar fashion, the relative importance of individual sites is more difficult to ascertain. There were changes in the cultural inventories reflecting elite behavior, and some sites that appear to have been somewhat more important than their neighbors gradually evolved. However, in much of the Intermediate Area, significant changes in social complexity that resulted in clearly defined status differences at either the individual or community level are archaeologically ambiguous.

IDENTIFYING THE ELITE: SPECULATION, JUST SO STORIES,
AND TRUTH THROUGH REPETITION

In the Intermediate Area, as in many other regions of archaeological research around the world, speculation both led to and resulted from the earliest research. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, assumptions about stylistic and cultural relationships between Mesoamerican and South American peoples produced gross generalizations about the nature of elite behavior and community hierarchies in the Intermediate Area.

The history of research in Lower Central America, which constitutes a large part of the Intermediate Area, has been summarized by Stone (Lange and Stone 1984) and is not repeated in detail here. Explorations were recorded by nineteenth-century adventurers, and some significant work was done as early as the 1920s (Lothrop 1926). Historically, the tendency was to examine Central America (including parts now incorporated in the Intermediate Area concept) in terms of cause-and-effect relationships with the adjacent areas and not in terms of indigenous developments. Major debates have ranged over the source, direction, and nature of external

PERIODS	YEARS
VI	Spanish Conquest and Survivals A.D. 1550
	Gold and Copper Metallurgy
V	Change and Upheaval Strong Patterns of Regionalization Polychrome Ceramics A.D. 1000
IV	Carved Stone Sculpture, Jade Rise of Ranked Societies B.C. Full Fledged Formative Communities in some areas A.D. 500
	Strong Chiefdoms Weighted Toward Southern End of Intermediate Area
III	Introduction of Ceramics Participation in Nuclear American Tradition 1000 B.C.
II	Tropical Archaic Evidence Limited Mainly to Panama 4000 B.C.
I	Paleo-Indian Evidence Limited Mainly to Panama ca. 8000 B.C.

Fig. 3 Chronological framework for the Intermediate Area.

Research seminar on Lower Central America (Lange and Stone 1984) serve again here (Fig. 3), as would a more general system of Formative, Regional Development, and Late Prehistoric. Broad regional integration never occurred.

ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL INTEGRITY

The diversity of the Intermediate Area is perhaps best reflected in the bibliography of Lange and Stone (1984). This volume treated Lower Central America, which is nestled within the Intermediate Area; as one measure of diversity, there was no overlap between the bibliography for Healy's chapter on Honduras and Bray's chapter on Colombia. However, it was this broad diversity that provided long-term cultural stability for the people who lived in the area, in contrast to the cyclical upheaval and competition that was characteristic of the centers of Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations.

Willey (1971: 277-278) listed twelve features in an attempt to generalize "the salient features and conditions . . . of the Intermediate area. . . ." The chapters in this volume that are most relevant to further consideration of these points are indicated in parentheses at the end of each "feature" description.

1. First, as to subsistence, the principal crops of the Intermediate area cultural tradition were maize and manioc. Emphasis on one or the other varied according to region and, probably, according to time period. In tropical lowland riverine situations the root crop was usually the more important, with maize generally being favored in the higher elevations. There are archaeological indications in northern Colombia that manioc preceded maize, suggesting that in this part of the Intermediate area ties with the Caribbean or Amazonian areas preceded those with Mesoamerica. Terracing, the construction of garden plots, and irrigation are recorded for some regions in Colombia and Ecuador; but for the most part, either "slash-and-burn" cultivation or the creation of somewhat more permanent agricultural fields through forest clearing was the prevalent mode (Chaps. 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13).

2. The characteristic units of settlement of the Intermediate area were small hamlets and villages; however, towns and small cities came into being in some subareas in the later Pre-Columbian periods (Chaps. 2-10, 12, 13).

3. Historic period ethnography indicates that the sociopolitical units tended to be small, ranging from the single autonomous community to the petty territorial state (Chaps. 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13).

4. Ceremonial sites or centers are known from many parts of the Intermediate area. Some were incorporated within towns; others appear to have been nuclei for dispersed settlements (Chaps. 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11-13).

5. Burial forms vary greatly. Urn burials are reported from Ecuador to Lower Central America although the distribution is spotty both geographically and chronologically. Deep shaft graves are found in many places, especially from Ecuador north to Panama. The immolation of retainers in the graves of chiefs and other mortuary evidences of kingly prestige are noted in, although not continuously throughout, the Intermediate area (Chaps. 4-9, 13).

6. Ceramics derive, in part, from the early pottery tradition of the Early Ceramic Period. Later, other techniques and forms link the Intermediate area with Mesoamerica, Peru, and lowland tropical South America. In general, the Intermediate area tradition emphasizes pedestal, annular-based, and tripod-based bowls and plates, negative painting, and applique decoration. The quality of craftsmanship in pottery is very good; the volume of production, great (Chaps. 3, 8, 9).

influences. Modern research did not begin until the 1960s, and then only in preliminary fashion.

Initially, Spinden (1917) and, more recently, M. Coe (1960, 1961, 1962) and Snarskis (1984, n.d.) saw a spread of early Mesoamerican cultures, and they perceived interaction between Mesoamerican and South American cultures as being of major developmental importance for New World cultures. It was assumed that some cultural traits passed overland through the Intermediate Area, while others bypassed it in ocean-going transportation systems. Lathrap (1977, n.d.), on the other hand, sees the spread of the basic American cultural components of ceramics and agriculture, and resultant elite behavior, as coming out of the Amazon Basin to the west coast of South America and thence northward into Central America and Mesoamerica. Ford (1969) was another major proponent of extensive cultural contacts between Mesoamerica and South America, all of which would have gone through or around the Intermediate Area. Consideration of single versus multiple centers of development for a range of cultural traits (especially ceramics and cultigens) has also occupied the literature. There has continued to be interest in the contacts and relationships between the "bookends" (Mesoamerica/Andes) of the Intermediate Area but, as noted, relatively little emphasis on internal development.

Where initial investigations were not soon followed up, preliminary results gradually became imbued with the ring of fact (often due to uncritical readers, rather than to any intent of the original researchers). This was particularly true with regard to cultural artifacts and traits that were identified as reflecting elite behavior, external influence, and even dominance.

CATEGORIES OF DATA ANALYSIS

The paradigms that were and are being utilized in the Intermediate Area influence the manner in which data are recovered, classified, and interpreted. More than fifteen years ago, Willey (1971: 255) sought to "summarize and to generalize the salient features and conditions of the Intermediate area cultural tradition . . ." noting that:

As might be expected from its geographical position between Mesoamerica and Peru, the story of cultural development within the Intermediate area is highly complex. Currents of influence from both Mesoamerica and Peru can be recognized; and the culture of the Intermediate area, in turn, influenced those of the other two areas. This complexity is further compounded by a bewildering subareal and regional diversity in archaeological cultures—a diversity that certainly reflects to a large degree the natural environmental variations within the Intermediate area.

BROAD QUESTIONS FOR GENERAL CONSIDERATION

7. Metallurgical techniques—including casting, gilding, soldering, alloying, and repoussé work in gold, silver, copper, and alloys of these—are a prominent feature of the Intermediate area tradition. Such techniques are confined largely to ornaments or small tools. Metals are generally common in the Late Periods of the tradition; in the Regional Developmental Period, if present, they are rare (Chaps. 5, 9, 12).

8. Monumental stonework—as slab carvings or column statues—is widely distributed throughout the Intermediate area. These carvings are rendered in many styles that, although individually distinctive, share a common level of competent, although not outstanding, craftsmanship and a common bond of rather stiff or angular treatment of life forms (Chaps. 5, 9, 11).

9. Small pottery manufactures, including figurines, spindle whorls, and musical instruments, are common. The figurine mold was known.

10. Polished stone celts and small ornaments are also general; however, chipped stone tools are relatively rare and usually roughly executed (Chaps. 7–9).

11. Technological features are widely shared in the tradition, but there are no horizon styles comparable in scope to those of the Peruvian area. The closest approach to such horizontal phenomena is seen in the goldwork of Colombia and Lower Central America (Chaps. 3, 5, 9, 12).

12. Language affiliation gives some historical unity to the Intermediate area, although probably one that lies remote in time. Only three principal language families are represented: Chibchan, Paezan, and Macro-Cariban (Chap. 12).

Willey (1971: 278) concluded: “As is obvious from this listing, the Intermediate area cultural traditions lacks those highly distinctive, area wide patterns that solidify such cultural traditions as the Mesoamerican, with its 260-day calendrical system, or the Peruvian, with its series of horizon styles.” He continued:

On a general level of cultural development we see many common bonds with both Mesoamerica and Peru; however, an overall appraisal confirms the Intermediate area tradition in a developmental, as well as a geographical, “intermediateness” between the civilizations of Mesoamerica and Peru on the one hand and the simpler farming cultures lying outside Nuclear America on the other.

These twelve items establish a point of departure for reviewing how our ideas of the Intermediate Area are shifting and how the data base is expanding. They will be employed again in Chapter 14 to assist in summarizing the theoretical concepts and data bases presented in the following chapters.

The coverage of the volume shows primary concern with development of Intermediate Area settlement and subsistence systems, the utility and reliability of historic contact data, the ability to identify archaeologically ceremonial sites or centers, the utility of burial practices as indicators of elite status, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, with the individual technologies of ceramic, stone, jade, and metallurgical production.

In light of the significant diversity in the ecological, geographical, temporal, conceptual, and cultural trait variables listed previously, five basic questions were posed to the symposium participants in an effort to provide some degree of communality to the conference presentations:

1. Archaeologically, how do we compensate for a lack of elite architecture and symbolism in many regions of the Intermediate Area?

2. What is the archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence for chiefdoms, and has their presence been overrated? Are “tribes” and “chiefdoms” the best way to characterize social organization in the Intermediate Area?

3. Archaeologically, how do we identify the work of full- or part-time craftworkers, as well as the centers of raw material procurement, production, and object distribution?

4. How do we archaeologically identify elite access to commodities?

5. Was elite access to, and control of, these resources passive or active? In the following chapters, these five issues are dealt with to varying degrees, as are the characteristics of diversity and stability. It is evident that in the time since Willey described the Intermediate Area in terms of its “intermediateness,” increased archaeological and historical research has reinforced the impression of regional and subregional diversity and the lack of unifying technologies or traditions. Thus, the inquiry: why didn’t the Intermediate Area develop state-level societies?—long a preoccupation of Mesoamericanists and Andeanists—has been replaced by the equally valid question: how did the peoples of the Intermediate Area succeed in maintaining generally stable societies for relatively long periods of time? The archaeological data have brought about an increased emphasis on the integrity of *sui generis* cultural development, to the exclusion of emphasis on external influences. What Willey (1984: 342) referred to in another context as “healthy archaeo-centrism” has more and more become a perception of archaeological and cultural reality.

Reflecting this approach and the growing richness of the data base, the focus of the symposium was on the evolution of cultural systems, the accumulation of wealth, and the support of hierarchies in the Intermediate Area; it was not on their relationships to Mesoamerica and the Andes, although these themes were touched upon where appropriate.

For the purposes of this volume, we offer a slightly revised definition of

the Intermediate Area: prehistorically, the area occupied by those strongly regionalized, non-state societies of eastern Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, western Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela with significant cultural-temporal periods generally in excess of 300 years. From approximately 1500 B.C. on, the Intermediate Area had settlement patterns whose common denominators were dispersed locations with multiple subsistence bases and recognizable, but very generalized ceramic traditions.

The objective of the present volume is to make a positive, forward-looking, nonapologetic statement about the richness and significance of the Intermediate Area for New World prehistory. The reader is strongly advised to adopt the philosophical stance stated in the following chapter, which stresses the area's achievements, rather than lamenting its historically perceived shortcomings. As with any other container, our symbolic Nicoya Polychrome vessel may be either half empty or half full. The participants in this symposium prefer the latter view.

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2

The Pervasive Pejorative in Intermediate Area Studies

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INTRODUCTION

IN RETROSPECT, it is disappointing but not surprising that Intermediate Area societies often have fared poorly when scholars have compared their achievements with more complex societies in Mesoamerica and the Andean area. Architecturally, accomplishments in the Intermediate Area appear modest, when viewed from the top of Temple IV at Tikal, or from atop the fortress at Sacahuaman. Demographically, Intermediate Area settlements are not characterized by densely settled urban areas. Agriculturally, intensive productive technologies such as *chianampas*, raised fields, elaborate irrigation schemes, and extensive terracing are largely absent. Religiously, the simpler system of using ancestor worship to influence the supernatural realm does not seem as impressive to scholars as the hierarchical and complex pantheons of the state religions, with their elaborate iconographic representations and transformations. The life-size (or smaller) sculptures of the human form in the Intermediate Area are no match for the immense stone carvings that are found in Olmec, Chavin, and later civilizations.

Mesoamerican long-distance trade routes, often extending farther than 1,000 km, were impressive for being able to transport tremendous amounts of utilitarian and exotic commodities. Andean llama caravans and specialized runner-messengers, traveling well-built roadways extending for hundreds of kilometers, are impressive as they interlink distant areas. The state-supported trade routes were a key component in developing an integrated economic network, often with state-run vertical monopolies controlling access to materials, to processing, and to redistribution. They have no direct analogue in the Intermediate Area. It is not surprising that the predominantly self-sufficient, small societies of the Intermediate Area have not attracted the same economically oriented research interest as the complex Mesoamerican or Andean economies under centralized authority.