

# Linda Manzanilla and the Foundations of Mesoamerican Household Archaeology

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*Resumen:* El conocimiento académico de la Mesoamérica prehispánica ha crecido exponencialmente en los últimos 75 años. Dos de los grandes catalizadores de esta rápida acumulación de información son la arqueología de los asentamientos y la arqueología de contextos domésticos. Aquí, el enfoque está en el último, con uno particular en las contribuciones fundacionales de la Dra. Linda Manzanilla. Durante las últimas seis o siete décadas, el estudio de las unidades domésticas prehispánicas ha revolucionado nuestras perspectivas sobre una serie de temas, que van desde las economías mesoamericanas precoloniales hasta las identidades prehispánicas. Las investigaciones de la Dra. Manzanilla han sido fundamentales para estos avances, a través de su introducción reflexiva e innovadora de métodos científicos en las investigaciones arqueológicas y, específicamente, a través de sus estudios a largo plazo centrados en la gran metrópoli de Teotihuacan. Se revisan los impactos y perspectivas clave de sus contribuciones.

*Palabras clave:* arqueología doméstica, economías premodernas, gobernanza, organización política, urbanismo, Linda Manzanilla.

*Abstract:* Scholarly knowledge of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica has grown exponentially over the last 75 years. Two of the great catalysts for this rapid accretion of information are settlement and household archaeology. Here, the focus is on the latter with a particular focus on the foundational contributions of Dr. Linda Manzanilla. Over the last six-seven decades, the study of pre-Hispanic domestic units has revolutionized our perspectives on a suite of issues from pre-colonial Mesoamerican economies to pre-Hispanic identities. Dr. Manzanilla's research has been central to these advances both through her thoughtful and innovative introduction of scientific methods into archaeological investigations and specifically through her long-term studies focused on the great metropolis of Teotihuacan. Key impacts and prospects of her contributions are reviewed.

*Keywords:* domestic archaeology, pre-modern economies, governance, political organization, urbanism, Linda Manzanilla.

To put it most simply and directly, prehispanic Mesoamerican household archaeology and Dr. Linda Manzanilla are basically synonymous. Over the last four decades, the advancement of household archaeology in Mesoamerica reflects the intellectual and methodological trails that Dr. Manzanilla has pioneered. It is my great honor and privilege to have the opportunity to contribute to this volume and, especially, to recognize the innovative and influential research of my dear friend and long-time colleague, Dr. Linda Manzanilla.

In 2011, David Carballo (2011) published a synthetic article reviewing Mesoamerican household archaeology in the *Journal of Archaeological Research*. As an illustration of the critical centrality of Dr. Manzanilla's investigations, a simple search of the article reveals that her name appears 77 times, far more than any other researcher. And if this article was updated today (11 years later), Professor Manzanilla's name would have to be mentioned at least as many more times; since 2011, she has continued to innovate, publish, and contribute to

our knowledge of prehispanic domestic units at an incredible pace.

To illuminate the seminal importance of Linda Manzanilla's household archaeology, I divide the remainder of my comments into three sections. First, I review some of the core archaeological assumptions and practices that dominated just prior to and at the time that Linda Manzanilla (and I) began in archaeology around a half century ago. Next, I outline what I see as the fundamental tenets or principles that Linda Manzanilla advanced and fostered during her extensive career of archaeological fieldwork and writing in regard to household archaeology. These key research foundations are firmly evidenced not only in Dr. Manzanilla's own research, but also in that of her students, colleagues, and collaborators. I elaborate the importance of the core tenets, which have been central to Dr. Manzanilla's research program. And third, I discuss how the focus on domestic units and Dr. Manzanilla's approach have been so instrumental in advancing general knowledge of (and revising our perspectives on) prehispanic Mesoamerica.

## A Mid-Twentieth Century Vantage on Prehispanic Mesoamerican Archaeology

To appreciate what we have learned and the depth of Linda Manzanilla's contributions, it is necessary to reflect briefly back six-to-seven decades and think about the practice of archaeology, and specifically Mesoamerican archaeology, at the time that Professor Manzanilla was starting out in the field. In recalling the mid-twentieth century, I fully recognize that the archaeologists prior to (and during) that era also made incredibly significant contributions, including building regional chronologies, finding, publicizing, and protecting key archaeological sites, and setting up the infrastructures for subsequent archaeological investigations and conservation. These early contributions by the founders of our field (for example Wolf, 1959; Bernal, 1980) were foundational for the discipline, and my aim is to recognize and acknowledge, not critique, Mesoamerican archaeology's earliest practitioners.

And yet, at the same time, it is important to recognize where the field of archaeology was situated conceptually 50–60 years ago. It was a time when test pits and arbitrary levels were still standard field practice. With limited contextualized information available, type sites and an adherence to basic principles of culture history were the rule (for example Kirchhoff, 1943)—in general the view was that cultures or populations were basically homogeneous, not just within sites, but for entire regions, which were named as (and equated with) ethnic groups (cf. Feinman and Neitzel, 2020). Reliance on extrapolations from sixteenth-century textual sources and application of the direct historical approach constrained opportunities to recognize both spatial variation in regions as well as temporal change, which thereby fostered an overemphasis on cultural continuity and environmental determinism. Temporal changes generally were attributed to external factors, such as environmental or climatic perturbations or foreign influence. As Manuel Gándara (2012: 31–32) has recognized, early Mesoamerican archaeology had its conceptual roots in American historical particularism and European culture history and diffusionism. When human socio-economic dynamics were given consideration, heavy reliance was placed on the top-down Eurocentric presumptions of Karl Marx's (1971 [1859]) Asiatic mode of production and Karl Wittfogel's (1957) Oriental Despotism, including the view that in Mesoamerica, centralized states and top-down, despotic rulers tended to directly and uniformly control production and distribution in redistributive economies that were managed centrally (Polanyi *et al.*, 1957; cf. Feinman and Nicholas, 2012; Feinman, 2017).

Over the last five decades, two streams of research were instrumental in providing the empirical basis to broaden the analytical and conceptual focus beyond the prehispanic 0.1% (the uppermost elite) and to recognize the complexity and rich diversity of the pre-colonial Mesoamerican past: systematic settlement studies and household archaeology. The former, first implemented in the 1960s and 1970s (Blanton, 1978; Sanders *et al.*, 1979), documented both non-uniform paths of temporal change through time as well as synchronic diversity in settlements across regions (for example Balkansky, 2006; Kowalewski, 2008; Feinman, 2015). Advances in the latter, house excavations, which were begun during that same era, amplified the empirical underpinnings for variability and change.

## Household Archaeology

Five-to-six decades ago, most excavations by Mesoamerican archaeologists were conducted with test pits, deep profile trenches ('telephone booths'), or the exposure of burials and tombs. If features, like houses, were encountered, they rarely were exposed in full. In Mesoamerica, Linda Manzanilla was one of the first archaeologists to implement excavations in meaningful units. She followed the recommendations of Kent Flannery (1976; see also 1973), in the *Early Mesoamerican Village*, to excavate broad horizontal exposures and to concentrate on units, like houses, that had behavioral meaning in the past (rather than on small, randomly placed test pits). The study of broad, horizontal exposures gave greater context to the archaeological record.

But, Linda Manzanilla (1986, 1987; Manzanilla and Barba, 1990) took this approach a key step further. Early on, she recognized that in order to define the uses of (and activities that took place in) these exposed living surfaces and spaces, an archaeologist could not depend (Schiffer, 1985) on the distributions of artifacts (on floors) alone (since people tend to clean up the places where they live). Rather, she recognized that archaeologists needed to buttress household archaeology with a suite of fine-grained, innovative techniques, many of which required partnerships and collaborations with geophysical, geochemical, and biological scientists (for example Price *et al.*, 2000; Álvarez-Sandoval *et al.*, 2015; Pecci *et al.*, 2016; Manzanilla *et al.*, 2017; Manzanilla-Naim, 2022;) to extract maximum information and multiple lines of evidence from these excavated contexts. The micro-remnants of past behaviors are less susceptible to episodes of cleaning or post-depositional distortions.

The integration of analytical innovations (including geophysical analysis and the intertwining of multiple lines of evidence) are not only firmly present in the works of Dr. Manzanilla's students and collaborators, but they are a consistent hallmark of the research and publications that Linda Manzanilla herself has contributed on the Maya region, Teotihuacan, and everywhere she has investigated for decades (for example Manzanilla, 1986, 1987, 2020; Manzanilla-Naim, 2022). With collaborators, she has pioneered and repeatedly shown how we can extract detailed and empirically rich information on production, exchange, the use of space, the biological compositions and dietary histories of inhabitants, population movement, and so many more areas of interest.

A key dimension of these path-breaking analyses is that Linda Manzanilla has employed multiple lines of empirical evidence to outline axes of variation—whether that is in the differential uses of space within compounds, the variable occupational pursuits of apartment compound residents, or the biological diversity of the inhabitants of apartment compounds (Manzanilla, 2015a, 2017). The recognition and definition of these axes of variation is important because it serves to illustrate that prehispanic Mesoamerican cities and polities were not inhabited by homogeneous populations or even a uniform underclass. Householders were neither blind followers of all-powerful elites, nor were they slavish captives to static or rigid community norms (for example Robin, 2016). Rather, through her research, Linda Manzanilla has peopled the past, giving the inhabitants of Teotihuacan, and even individual apartment compounds, agency to craft different economic practices, engage in distinct ritual behaviors, mark their identities and affiliations in diverse ways, and participate in divergent trade networks (for example Manzanilla *et al.*, 2017). The research that she has directed at Teotihuacan over decades underpins (with rich, multiple lines of data/evidence) entirely new ways to envision that main Central Mexican metropolis, and so prehispanic urban settlements and preindustrial cities more generally (Manzanilla, 2015a, 2015b, 2020).

## Reframing Our Understandings

I cannot overemphasize the importance of Linda Manzanilla's contributions. We see it through the other papers in this volume written by her mentees, where scientific innovations pioneered by Manzanilla are widely applied to other Mesoamerican regions and refined. But household archaeology as enhanced and applied also is revolutionizing how we must conceptualize and model the prehispanic Mesoamerican past. To mention one example, at

Teotihuacan's Oztoyahualco complex, Dr. Manzanilla (2017) defined individual household units within the compound, and while each of the households were involved in making lime, the ritual activities varied from one domestic unit to another.

Likewise, Linda Manzanilla's (1993, 2012, 2018, 2019, 2020) studies of different Teotihuacan apartment compounds (see also Carballo *et al.*, 2021) have documented empirically that each had its own economic specializations and ethnic affiliations. Collectively, and underpinned with evidence, Professor Manzanilla has revealed the heterogeneity of Teotihuacan's population, ethnically, occupationally, and in terms of socioeconomic status. Furthermore, through the integrative analyses of biological and chemical investigations with archaeological markers of identity, she has unequivocally shown that the city was multi-ethnic, not just at its fringes, but at its central core as well (Manzanilla, 2015a).

Linda Manzanilla's research not only exemplifies methodological breakthroughs: (a) incorporating scientific techniques, (b) investigating multiple analytical scales from the activity area on up, (c) squeezing many lines of evidence from the archaeological record, (d) studying in meaningful units (like houses) as opposed to test pits and trenches alone, and (e) publishing her findings with both thoroughness and alacrity. But the findings she has given us help break the entrenched conceptual bonds that stem back to the middle of the last century, offering up a new agenda of questions and problems to guide innovative research.

On political organization or governance, Manzanilla (2015a) has shown that at its apogee Teotihuacan generally was not ruled top-down by a singular, all-powerful despot, but had a more distributive power and decision-making arrangement. The city also did not have a simple status system divided into two discrete classes. Rather, axes of socioeconomic differentiation were more muted and less starkly dichotomous (for example Smith, 2020). Like all cities, Teotihuacan and its history were in some respects unique, but governance through distributed power arrangements and without ostentatious, aggrandizing rulers (Carballo, 2020) was by no means rare in prehispanic Mesoamerica (for example Feinman and Carballo, 2018).

On the economy, Manzanilla (2007) has amply illustrated that production was situated domestically in Mesoamerica and so could not possibly have been centrally managed by rulers (Feinman and Nicholas, 2012). Economic access and distribution of foreign goods was not exclusively controlled through centralized redistribution (Hirth, 2020). Throughout the entire prehispanic sequence, households, large and small, were the principal units of production, agrarian

and craft (Feinman, 1999; Hirth, 2009). And even when centralized coordination was involved in major water management projects, it occurred in an imperial context, late in the pre-colonial sequence (Offner, 1981a, 1981b).

In regard to urbanism, prehispanic cities were, at least in some cases, multi-ethnic and heterogeneous, so we must break from notions that sociocultural affiliations are one-dimensional or static and, most importantly, that people who share an affiliation necessarily behave uniformly or for the good of the group as a whole (for example Blanton and Fargher, 2016). In my own view, social identity is to a degree situational, and interpersonal cooperation is therefore contingent (Feinman and Neitzel, 2020). In prehispanic Mesoamerica, neighborhoods and other multi-household collaborative units were key institutions (for example Arnould *et al.*, 2012; Carballo, 2022; Kowalewski and Heredia Espinoza, 2020), and the movement and mobility of households and smaller social units were key features of urban growth at Teotihuacan and beyond (for example Feinman and Nicholas, 2020; Nicholas and Feinman, 2022).

To return to where we started, the implications of Linda Manzanilla's household archaeology, especially when considered in context with other research over the last decades, are monumental. In my opinion, we can no longer adhere uniformly to the core tenets (top-down rule, state-controlled economy) of Marx's Asiatic mode of production for prehispanic Mesoamerica, nor do the bounded, homogeneous, and rather static presumptions that have long bolstered culture historical explanations fit our current findings comfortably. The new, rich empirical paths blazed by Linda Manzanilla's research have defined new research procedures and technologies for Mesoamerican archaeology, her focus on domestic units has raised new questions, and building on her legacies, we are set to move forward with a new, richer perspective on Mesoamerica's prehispanic past.

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