In historical analysis as I see it, rightly or wrongly, the long run always wins in the end.  

(Braudel, 1973, p. 1244)

Over the last half century, archaeologists, focused on the historical examination of human socioeconomic networks and groups, have become increasingly sensitive to the complexities and nuances of geographic scale. Gone are the days when researchers could facilely extrapolate or generalize from findings at lone sites (or often just small parts of large sites) to entire regional societies. The advent of systematic settlement pattern studies in the mid-20th century (Parsons, 1972; Billman & Feinman, 1999; Kowalewski, 2008; Fish & Kowalewski, 2009) convinced most archaeological practitioners in many regions of the world that long-term social change must be examined at multiple scales and that those scales ought to include a broader spatial or regional perspective that was systematically derived from archaeological surveys or settlement pattern research. Only through such studies can archaeologists explore differences between communities in a region and how those differences, whether they relate to community sizes, monumental construction, or artifact distributions, change over time. Likewise, only broader-scale vantages allow researchers to examine the relationships and degrees of connectivity between communities across a landscape and between a region of settlements and their ecological landscape (Kowalewski, 1995).

More recently, scholars studying long-term cultural sequences have realized that even regional vantages are not entirely adequate and that larger-scale perspectives are required to examine the borders and boundaries of polities, and to assess the relative permeability of geographic and political barriers when present (Kowalewski, 2004). We have seen repeatedly through history that even hierarchically organized polities are rarely bounded in hermetic fashion or that the nature of territorial control is uniform across space (e.g., Wolf, 1982, pp. 6, 7, 17; M. L. Smith, 2005, 2007). In addition, economic and cultural networks often are not coterminous with the limits of political units (e.g., Blanton & Feinman, 1984; Smith, 2012). It is for these reasons that, over the last few decades, archaeologists, especially those working at regional scales, have considered and called for broader, macroregional conceptual schemes and perspectives that allow researchers to define political and economic interactions over wide spatial scales (Kowalewski, 2004; Hall et al., 2011) rather than assuming that patterns of human behavior always have been defined and tightly constrained by formal geographic regions (sensu Haggett, 1966, pp. 242–247). Human geographers have long recognized that interactive or nodal regions often do not strictly conform to formal topographic or landscape features.

In this volume, we examine the deep history of the Ejutla Valley (Oaxaca, Mexico) over roughly 3,000 years from the advent of the region’s first sedentary villages to the Spanish Conquest. Yet our vantage on the Ejutla Valley is informed and contextualized by our knowledge of neighboring areas in Mexico’s Southern and Central Highlands, including the larger, adjacent, and more intensively studied Valley of Oaxaca (Fig. 1.1). Thus our perspective in this work is explicitly diachronic and multiscalar, incorporating pertinent information and analytical vantages from sites to regions to even larger-scale perspectives whenever possible.

The Valley of Oaxaca is the largest expanse of flat land in Mexico’s rugged Southern Highlands and has long been recognized as a core region of pre-Hispanic importance (Palerm & Wolf, 1957). Early sedentary agriculturalists in the valley were among the first to construct public buildings in Mesoamerica, and carved-stone glyphs at valley sites represent some of the region’s earliest writing (e.g., Marcus & Flannery, 1996). Monte Albán, situated at the nexus of the valley’s three branches or arms, was one of highland Mesoamerica’s earliest cities (founded ca. 500 BC), and it remained the most populous and architecturally monumental settlement in the Southern Highlands for more than a millennium (Blanton, 1978). Up to the Spanish Conquest, the Valley of Oaxaca was a locus of political, demographic, and economic power in Mesoamerica.

The systematic, full-coverage settlement pattern survey of the Valley of Oaxaca placed Monte Albán in its larger regional context and documented local variation and important changes in settlement location, population, spatial distribution of settlements relative to agrarian resources, and patterns of exchange over time (Blanton et al., 1982; Kowalewski et al., 1989). Monte Albán was founded on a hilltop near the center of the region, but only during the regional survey of the surrounding area did it become evident that this central area of the Valley of Oaxaca had not been heavily populated before the site’s establishment (Kowalewski, 1976). Nor was the new capital situated near the best agricultural land in the valley (Kowalewski, 1980, 1982). Such local factors as the distribution of agricultural land and resources could not adequately explain the location of Monte Albán or its rise and fall. Such local factors also could not account for the rises, falls, and distributions of the valley’s population over time. The processes and causal linkages that underlie long-term change in the valley clearly extend beyond the bounds of the region that had been systematically surveyed as of 1980 (Kowalewski et al., 1989). Understanding key processes—the rise and collapse of complex polities, imperialism, and changing commodity flows between regions—requires comparable data from a much larger area, a conceptual reframing from a regional scale to the macroregion (Blanton & Feinman, 1984; Feinman, 1997; Balkansky, 1998a, 2006; Finsten & Kowalewski, 1999, p. 29; Kowalewski, 2004).

The Valley of Oaxaca is part of a larger physiographic system—the Central Valleys of Oaxaca—that incorporates smaller valleys on its perimeter. The Ejutla Valley, on the southern fringe of the Valley of Oaxaca, was a logical place to begin expanding our investigatory scale beyond the region (Fig 1.2). When we began our full-coverage survey of the Ejutla Valley in the mid-1980s, our initial focus was on the relationship between two valleys that appeared unequal not only in size but also in past importance—in one sense, a core