Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

“When we step back to enlarge the field of vision, we do not retreat from phenomena but better perceive their significance.”

(Adams, 1977, p. 276)

In this volume, we report on the pre-Hispanic settlement history of the eastern edge (the Guirún/Albarradas area) of the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico. The regional-scale research that is our focus was conducted in 1995. In many respects, it is a spatial extension of the systematic archaeological survey project that we implemented in the 1970s and 1980s with Richard Blanton (Blanton et al., 1982) and Stephen Kowalewski (Kowalewski et al., 1989) in the Valley of Oaxaca, a sustained effort that continued under our direction in the neighboring Ejutla Valley (Feinman & Nicholas, 2013). Two decades now have passed since we led the fieldwork in the Guirún/Albarradas area, although key empirical findings from this study were published earlier (Feinman & Nicholas, 1996, 1999). Nonetheless, the elapsed time has allowed us to take a fresh lens to the settlement data from the Guirún/Albarradas area in light of recent excavations in the Valley of Oaxaca (e.g., Feinman, 2007; Feinman & Nicholas, 2009; Faulseit, 2013), new sourcing studies of obsidian (Feinman et al., 2013; Golitko & Feinman, 2015), pertinent theoretical tacks (e.g., Blanton & Fargher, 2008; Blanton, 2016), and other relevant publications (e.g., Hutson, 2014).

The more than four decades since the Valley of Oaxaca Settlement Pattern Project was initiated in 1971 with the mapping of the urban center of Monte Albán (Blanton, 1978) also mark an era of significant change in how archaeologists conceptualize the past and the ways in which they link data and concepts. Theoretical perspectives on themes fundamental to the analysis of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, including political organization (e.g., Blanton et al., 1996; Blanton & Fargher, 2008; Blanton, 2016), economy (M. E. Smith, 2004; Feinman, 2017), boundaries (e.g., M. L. Smith, 2005, 2007, 2012), interregional interaction (e.g., Rice, 1998; Hirth & Pillsbury, 2013; Golitko & Feinman, 2015; Feinman, in press), and identity (e.g., Jones, 1997), either have evolved considerably or are under intense debate. Thus, in discussing the Guirún/Albarradas area and the shifting interconnections of the people who lived there with the inhabitants of other sectors of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca and beyond, we would be remiss if we did not seriously mull and reconsider long-standing questions about the history of the entire region in the context of both these new findings and changing perspectives.

Since inception, a long-standing theme of the settlement pattern studies in the Valley of Oaxaca has been to address the nature of (and shifts in) the relationship between the broad center of the Valley of Oaxaca, the surrounding system of smaller valleys, and the mountainous regions that ring the valleys. The Guirún/Albarradas area, both distant from the center of the valley and more mountainous, provides an arena to assess these changing relations from a new physiographic vantage. Today, the Guirún/Albarradas area lies close to an ethnic frontier between the Zapotec peoples, who long have lived in the Valley of Oaxaca and its immediate surrounds, and Mixe-speaking peoples who live in the mountainous region to the east. Here, we examine the history of settlement at the eastern edge of the valley system with issues of boundaries, frontiers, and political relations at the forefront.

We addressed frontier and boundary issues in a recent volume (Feinman & Nicholas, 2013; see also Feinman & Nicholas, 1992) that looked at the settlement history of the Ejutla Valley in the context of the larger Valley of Oaxaca to the north (Fig. 1.1). The Valley of Oaxaca is the largest expanse of flat land in Mexico’s Southern Highlands and has long been recognized as a core region of pre-Hispanic importance (Palerm & Wolf, 1957). Monte Albán, founded circa 500 BC at the nexus of the valley’s three branches, was one of highland Mesoamerica’s earliest cities, and it remained the most populous and architecturally monumental settlement in the Southern Highlands for more than a millennium (Blanton, 1978). Its depopulation and loss of political centrality ramified across the Southern Highlands of Mesoamerica. Nevertheless, up to the Spanish Conquest, the Valley of Oaxaca remained a locus of political, demographic, and economic power in Mesoamerica.

The Ejutla Valley, situated at the southern edge of the Valley of Oaxaca, is not separated from its neighbor by a stark physiographic feature. In this sense, it differs from the Guirún/Albarradas area, which is divided from its larger neighbor by tall, rugged mountains. In this study, we examine and compare these two distinct edges of the Valley of Oaxaca to see how the settlement histories of these regions were similar and different and as demographic, political, and economic shifts occurred in the larger valley system of which they were part as well as across Mesoamerica. The inhabitants of the Valley of Oaxaca always had connections with areas far beyond its physiographic borders (e.g., Flannery, 1968; Blanton et al., 1999, pp. 20, 36), but as the results of our investigation of the Ejutla Valley illustrated, the importance of specific travel routes and the nature of interaction were not static over time. As populations rose and fell, economies varied, and the nature of political relations changed (in Oaxaca and throughout Mesoamerica), the flows of goods and information shifted in volume and occurred through different kinds of social networks (e.g., Blanton et al., 2005). Over the past century, the Guirún/Albarradas area has had a key role in these long-distance connections and movements of goods (Schmieder, 1930, p. 34; E. C. Parsons, 1936; Beals, 1979). What is the deep history of the trade connections that in recent times extended east from the Valley of Oaxaca?

Frontiers, Boundaries, and Interaction

The introduction of regional survey to the archaeological tool kit brought boundaries and frontiers into greater discourse in archaeology in the 1980s (e.g., De Atley & Findlow, 1984; Green & Perlman, 1985). Whether based on physiographic or arbitrary features due to limits of time and funding, regional surveys produce settlement pattern maps with defined borders, but not necessarily ones that coincide with any meaningful past