



ANCIENT MESOAMERICAN POPULATION HISTORY: Urbanism, Social Complexity, and Change

BY ADRIAN S.Z. CHASE, ARLEN F. CHASE, AND DIANE Z. CHASE

In April 2022 we were honored to hold an in-person seminar at the Amerind Foundation to cover a topic of importance to Mesoamerican archaeology (and, indeed, to other fields, as well)—reconstructing ancient population histories. Nearly forty years have passed since this subject was addressed by Mesoamerican scholars. Over that period, a massive amount of new archaeological data relevant to settlement patterns has been generated, including data from a new remote sensing technology—lidar. This technology offers a view of ancient landscapes much broader than previously available.

Participants in the Amerind session *Ancient Mesoamerican Population History* were tasked with examining

their archaeological data through the lens of lidar (if available) and with the methodological advances that current archaeological research and techniques had wrought. The ability to hold face-to-face discussions at the Amerind in a welcoming and convivial environment after the COVID pandemic was key to bringing the resultant book to fruition and to a needed collaboration on best practices in the reconstruction of ancient population histories.

Ancient Mesoamerican Population History: Urbanism, Social Complexity, and Change, published by the University of Arizona Press in spring 2024, covers a broad range of settlements in Mesoamerica. The book is organized into



The central architectural complex of Caana at Caracol, Belize. Lidar enabled the surrounding settlement and terracing located beneath the tree canopy to be fully documented, superseding 20 years of traditional settlement mapping. *Photograph courtesy of the Caracol Archaeological Project.*

five sections. The opening section, “The Present,” examines the context and history of archaeological population reconstructions in Mesoamerica, including varied past approaches and their limitations.

The second section, “Urban Considerations,” brings together new research addressing ancient populations. It includes new archaeological research on the large Preclassic and Early Classic (300 BCE – 550 CE) city of Kaminaljuyu located under modern-day Guatemala City, methodologies for determining population numbers and densities at the ancient Late Classic (550-900 CE) metropolis of Caracol, Belize, and new population estimates for the northern lowland Late Classic city of Coba.

The third section, “Maya Regional Considerations,” examines diverse settlement patterns and histories in the northwest Yucatán of Mexico, in the Rio Bec region of the central Yucatán Peninsula, in the western city of Palenque and its surrounding area, and for the entire central Petén of Guatemala. The fourth section, “Central Mexican Regional Considerations,” provides new and updated population histories for the Basin of Mexico, for the Valley of Oaxaca, and for the Mexican Gulf Lowlands.

Two final chapters are in a section entitled “The Future.” The first focuses on the future of settlement archaeology and issues that still need to be addressed; the second places Mesoamerican settlement archaeology into the realm of urban science, showcasing how archaeological analyses can address issues of contemporary concern.

Taken as a whole, the book—and the research contained within it—provides new population history data for Mesoamerican cities and regions, outlines the complexity and variation among these ancient urban centers, and establishes a path for future work dealing with settlement studies in Mesoamerica.

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URBANISM,
SOCIAL COMPLEXITY,
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AMERIND STUDIES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

ABOVE: Cover of the new Amerind publication. *Courtesy of the University of Arizona Press.* BELOW: Participants in the *Ancient Mesoamerican Population History* Amerind session (from left to right): Christopher Pool, Scott Hutson, José Lobo, Adrian Chase, Arlen Chase, Diane Chase, M. Charlotte Arnauld, Gary Feinman, Travis Stanton (not shown: Barbara Arroyo, Marcello Canuto, L.J. Gorenflo, Rodrigo Liendo). *Photograph courtesy of Eric J. Kaldahl.*

