

Let Me Tell You a Story: History, Political Theory, and Mesoamerica, Part 1

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Abstract:

This two-part article attempts to use a novel method- creative non-fiction (or story-telling) to make a serious point about History, Political Theory, and Mesoamerica. Since Mesoamerica is a politically-sensitive topic and because any attempt to apply Political Theory to the history of ancient Mesoamerica may be met with implicit biases, the novel use of creative non-fiction-style story-telling (where all of the facts are portrayed accurately and cited) has been employed before the formal theorization is presented. This combines one of the strengths of traditional Political Theory- the use of the thought experiment with actual historical and archaeological data. The names of places and persons are present not only in the citations throughout the paper but also in the second half of the paper, which analyzes the story and reveals three important themes. This is a natural experiment in which the psychological biases of the reader are tested and allows to compare ancient Mesoamerica to other places, in this case, ancient Italy. This leads to a third theme, that the rise of ancient Mesoamerica through the Mixe-Zoquean civilization (and not the Mayans as many scholars pretend) empirically proves that Aristotle's theory of the origins of civilization is correct. This paper is in two clear halves to show these three themes from both the theoretical-narrative and historical-empirical perspectives.

Keywords:

Creative non-fiction, ancient Mesoamerica, Political Theory, History and Politics, Aristotle, republicanism.

I. Introduction

Let me tell you a story. Rather than tell you what I am speaking of, of when, and of where, I would rather tell you the story, with all of the facts included in the narrative, to be the best estimation of the current evidence in the field, without the names of places and cultures. To demonstrate my three themes, I want your unbiased and full attention on the story. Only after I have told it without the names of persons and places will I then explain these themes in detail.

1.1 In the Beginning.

There was a house in a place far from here. Over time, more houses were built. Households were formed, families grew and split and more families gathered. Villages formed. Then, more people came or were born. Small villages became large villages. As households grew and the villages grew, so did the wealth that could be claimed from the land. Over time, some people had more than others, but they did not form distinct classes instantly.

As this happened, some families built somewhat bigger houses than others. As the community started to grow, it became political. Decisions had to be made. Ceremonies and rituals began to be practiced. Yet new types of buildings were not built. Instead, the leading families held important meetings in their houses, with their households hosting emerging

political functions. The ceremonial and ritual aspects of the emerging political community were conducted out of the houses of the leading local families but with the participation and approval of the whole political community. Over time, social stratification increased. The ceremonial and ritual functions, and eventually, the strictly political functions, were moved out, giving birth to separate temples and elite residences.

However, the people of the village were not alone. There were other villages becoming large villages in the area. As in other lands, they competed, traded, cooperated, and perhaps sometimes fought each other. The people of the villages were all similar culturally. Sometimes, they would leave home for other lands.

Now, it happened that in the early days of these villages, either in the main village or nearby, a few people moved away. They grew as a family, then as a village, and continued to grow into a large village. A few more people from the villages far away came to this other land, where they found their relatives. They did not bring much with them, but perhaps the journey was not that long for those days. They passed relatives as they started out new lives with their more distant relatives on the other side of the land. They brought with them ideas, but little in goods, at least at first. Trade, however, certainly occurred, involving all three groups- on both sides of the trade route and in between.

II. Review of Literature

Now, the Land was divided into areas. There was an Isthmus continuing the two far sides of the Land and in and around this Isthmus were trade routes, including the one referenced above. In the Interior of the Isthmus and the areas around were people related to both of the major areas of each side of the isthmus. Together, these three groups were the People of the Land. The people of the first region, where the first villages had developed, were the people of the first region. Chief amongst the first villages was a main village that was in truth the First Town of Mesoamerica. The People of the Interior lived in and around the Isthmus. The People of the Second Region were on the other side of the Isthmus from the People of the First Region.

The People of the Second Region, after the People of the Second Region had built sanctuaries in homes but before temples had been built, began to build great houses on a plateau in the middle of what was a town and became a city. The city had no ceremonial center per se, other than the houses of the elites on the plateau. Ceremonial functions were not as public in the houses as in the first village. Instead, the wealthy would create monuments, from gigantic heads (called colossal heads) to altar-thrones to small statues. They would place these monuments outside of their houses. While there was some strategy and/or ceremonial/ritual purpose to this placement, it would have looked like an ancient, elite version of a stereotypical trailer park to us. This was the heart of the city, which never developed temples despite being larger and more populous than the large village of town started it all in terms of this kind of building

Now, this city has grown large and prideful. It became the First Great City It sent people back to those villages on the other side of the land, on the other side of a narrow isthmus in fact, and these people helped build one town to be more powerful than the First Town. Yet this town did not have temples per se. Despite its defeat, the old town's ideas survived somehow. The concept of temples and separate elite residences would spread throughout much of the wider region, despite the fall of the First Town.

Now, the First Great City that had sent these men to the First Region probably had little control over them. The Second Town was under the influence of the First Great City, but not under its control. It also was having trouble closer to home. Another city in the Second Region was struggling to gain power nearby. It was also of the People of the Land. Now, this city had been a Vassal City to the First Great City. However, now it sensed that the time was right to revolt, and it declared its independence. The First Great City did not take this without fighting, and a war broke out between it and the Vassal City

2.1 The Fall of the First Great City

Yet, there were others in the Second Region who had built villages and towns. There were those living in small villages in the Mountains where the rulers of the First Great City mined the stone to make their monuments. There were people even to the north of the mountains, but they were not yet strong enough to do much. Across the plain where lay the First Great city, the marsh beckoned. There, on an island, a town was forming.

In the middle of the Isthmus and around it, people were growing in number and power. Also, in the First Region, which was under the influence of the Great City, there was movement as well. In the Second Region, the City on an Island became truly powerful for the first time. At the same time, for the first time, people from outside the people or culture of the Land came into the picture. Although the truth is still obscured in the fog of history, it seems that a New People was emerging from the forests near the lands of the People of the Land. These people were not welcome for some reason amongst their own people. They were in fact on their way across the lands of the People of the Land, to get to a new land that they could truly claim as their own.

The New People built large buildings, but not necessarily temples or elite residences. It was a sanctuary from a turbulent time and possibly a semi-permanent refugee camp. It was semi-nomadic in character and of a transitional nature. The new people left this large camp and continued on their migration through the land of the first people.

Yet, the People of the Land did not want the new people in their lands. The People of the City on an Island lived closest to them, but probably viewed this new people as allies against the great city that had become cruel and decadent. The New People migrated from their camp in waves, aided by various faction of the People of the Land.

In truth, the First Great City had made many enemies amongst the People of the Land, but none of them could truly harm the First Great City. Instead, the New People were used as a means to an end by the people of the land. In the end, both of the main cities- the First Great City and its rival, Vassal City- fell, while the rest of the lands of the first people remained both intact and free. The New People eventually simply migrated north of what would become the Borderlands north of the mountains held by the People of the Land, creating a new socio-political border that would be more or less permanent for a long time. These New People would become the Northern New People, distinguishable from the main New People that had yet to come into contact with the People of the Land

With the migration over, the main group of the New People did not emerge into the light of civilization immediately. Instead, the People of the Land, in the both First and Second Regions, as well as in between, regained prominence after the fall of the great city. However, times had indeed changed. The First Great City recovered to some degree, but it was under the influence of the City on an Island. The Vassal City simply never recovered. The People of the

Mountains prospered, but did not immediately change much, for they were free and happy. The lands north of the mountains did form a town that was significant, having gained from the migration; this town would eventually become the City in the North. The People of the Marsh prospered, but were under the control or at least heavy influence of the People of the City of an Island.

Further away, in the First Region, the Second Town had been overthrown just as had the First Great City, to which it was linked. A new town arose which grew into a city, the First City of the First Region. The People of the Land became separated and divided after the fall of the great city and became two related and often inter-connected peoples with many divisions and factions. In the lands of the Interior, in and around the Isthmus, numerous towns grew, in fact new cities were developing. In the lands south of the first region, cities were also developing for the first time, eventually to become the Southern Cities.

At this time, the First Region was split into a Southern Part, which would resemble the Southern Cities, and a Northern Part. This Northern Part seems to have been headed by the First City of the First Region. At the same time, the People of the Interior and the various peoples of the Second Region remained, broadly-speaking one people with the Northern Part of the First Region. Thus, one people would develop in the Southern Part of the First Region and in the Southern Cities, while a second people would remain closer to the common heritage of the undivided People of the Land

2.2 The Rise of the City on an Island

As time passed, the City on an Island grew to be, according to some, more magnificent than the First Great City had been, and perhaps more arrogant. It sought to control trade with other regions well beyond the Land of its ancestors, but while these attempts spread ideas, trade goods, and sometimes people (who moved to new regions), it did little to strengthen the City on an Island. In fact, the City of an Island spread itself so thin that it could not defend itself.

The People of the City of an Island built great temples and elite residences. They built great monuments, even colossal heads. However, they were starting to mistreat the People of the Land. The City on an Island began demanding more from the people, which led to conflict between the rulers of the city, elites under them and nearby, and the common people. The People in the Mountains were, as always, obsessed with ensuring their freedom. The people in what would become the City in the North sought the same. The old First Great City, having fallen under the thumb of the city of the island, had no desire to maintain the status quo. The main part of the New People were starting to migrate, just had their kin now north of the Borderlands. The People of the Interior were intrigued by the new people and far from loyal to the increasingly-oppressive city on an island. The People of the First region on the other side of the Isthmus, though divided, were if anything, opposed to the City on an Island. The Southern Cities were increasingly happy to be left alone.

Between the increasing power of the City on an Island and the anger towards the ruler and elites, and between the elites, something had to give. Resources were starting to run low and the power was stretched thin. Regions outside of the homeland were starting to break free of the City of an Island both culturally and politically. A new city-state was forming in the Central Region of the Wider World, west of the Land; for the first time, the local people had a city-state organized that could challenge the City on an Island. Trade routes were first pressured, then

squeezed, then cut. The economic downturn hurt the political power of the ruler and the elites were arguing over less power and even less resources. The common people started to assert themselves, as likely they had before when the great city had fallen

2.3 The Fall of the City on an Island

The next part of the story is less clear. Likely, the town in the north became a city a century or so before the final drama that ended the City on an Island. A city-state was formed. It became the City in the North. The ruler was bolstered by his elites and the common people were, for the first time in the north, subjugated. The ruler was the first to have a colossal head carved in the mountains amongst the free people, the People of the Mountains. The common folk who brought the head back noticed that their loss of freedom was not a universal problem. Perhaps they took note

The ruler, or one of his immediate heirs, began to think to himself. He might have thought that the City on an Island is weak. Thus, the ruler broke off diplomatic contact with the City on an Island or otherwise obstructed the trade route going north.

Now, the trade going north through the mountains and the northern edge of the land eventually goes to the land of the Northern New People who helped defeat the old Great City. These people had long acceded to the power of the City on an Island but now grew tired of any kind of hegemonic relationship with the People of the Marsh. Perhaps at this time, a messenger came from the City in the North and convinced the Northern New People to cut off trade with the City on an Island. Without trade, the City on an Island's days were numbered.

So, the north, both the People of the Land in the area and the Northern New People, cut off trade and the economy of the city of the island suffered. This led to discontent amongst the common people and outright dissension amongst the elites. At first, the ruler probably tried to get more trade out of the old trade route that went through the First Region. However, that region, as noted above, had splintered

At this point, people started leaving the lands around the City on an Island and the land of the Marsh in general. People started coming to the Mountains and to the land to the north of the mountains. So many people came that the Northern New People seem to have given up some of the Borderlands, which expanded the Land in the north for the first and last time. People were probably moving into the Interior and even to the divided First Region and the Southern Cities below it, so that both peoples descended from the original People of the Land at times lived together

Making things more complex was that the main branch of the New People, from lands east of the Land, were finally starting to move in earnest. Some of them lived in the Southern Cities. Others moved to the Interior of the Isthmus. Still others moved to lands near the Marsh. Still others may have come to live, perhaps in small numbers, in the Southern Part of the old First Region. The New People started to build real city-states for the time. They are almost ready to emerge fully in the light of civilization. Yet, they are not the ones who end the glory of the city of the island

No, the glory of the City on an Island is ended primarily by the common people of the People of the Marsh. First, they protest as the economic and political stress becomes too much over a century. Then they riot. Then, many of them flee. The hardened stalwarts then flat-out revolt. The elites are divided. Then, a coalition of peoples from all over the Land, and beyond,

starts to march. Perhaps northerners from both the People of the Land and the Northern New People join with the people of the city-states of the Interior, seeking a chance to gain their full political and economic freedom. The Southern Cities, if they cared, may have supported the alliance economically and/or politically, or even militarily. The First Region is probably involved, although it is largely split politically and culturally into the two peoples of the Land. The main New People preparing to emerge are likely involved mostly as migrants to the parts of the Land now conspiring to end the City on an Island.

The City on an Island does not give up easily, despite being divided, poor, and outnumbered. The result is that when the City on an Island finally dies screaming, it brings many of its foes down. This leads to a reorganization in the region and finally allows the new people to truly expand. The Marsh is never again a major city-state, and it forms the peopleless border between the People of the Land and the New People. The old Great City and the region around it became largely abandoned, just as the Marsh becomes abandoned. The Mountains gain more population and the free people federate now, if not earlier, with a new town as the capital. The City in the North becomes the leading city-state in this region and around it, but it is not as powerful in other parts of the Land as the first two great cities had been

2.4 A Major Change in Thinking

By now, the Land has lost ground in the east to the New People, up to the Marsh. It has probably lost some southern ground, but the Southern Cities still are largely based on the old first people, though in some places mixed with the New People. The peoples of the Land realize that they need more than power, numbers, and money to be remembered. The older people had experimented with something new and revolutionary but now that a second revolution had truly happened, this new technology was developed into full reality. A civilization across the Western Mountains had come close to perfecting it, but never did. Instead, the People of the Land perfected for real, during, just before, or perhaps the century after the fall of the City on an Island, the second Great City

The rulers of the City in the North stopped making colossal heads. Only two were ever installed there, as opposed to four in the city on the island and ten in the first great city. A head found its way to a southern city and was made into an altar-throne. Another stone head in the mountains was never finished and remained in situ, stuck in the mountain-rock. What happened?

It did not happen all at once, but a ruler got smart eventually. In the century after the fall of the City on an Island, the same pressures that had brought and the first Great City low were building up. The People of the City in the Borderlands, who had recently moved north of the City of North, were at least to some degree competing with them. Perhaps the City in the North was an overlord, but it still had some competition from its own vassal, the City in the Borderlands. This competition was not conflict outright and the ruler realized that there was a way out of the same cycle of power, greed, and resentment, decline, and revolution- but it was neither easy nor immediate.

Externally, the City in the North had a more equal and less violent relationship with its immediate neighbors, including the free People of the Mountains and the City in the Borderlands to its north. These were likely vassal states, but more likely allied states than oppressed neighbors. This meant less power and wealth for the great city-state. However, this different political model broke the cycle, at least for centuries. The neighbors could live with the city in the north being a sort of *primus inter pares* (first among equals), a more representative or even republican hegemon or overlord as opposed to the older, more despotic model.

Internally, the City in the North also changed. There remained a ruler most likely, but that ruler only had some power. Four factions, evolved from four families, shared power. The ruling house was little if at all more powerful or wealthier than the others, but likely had some ceremonial or military role. The government was a republic, one of checks and balances. For centuries, the city knew internal and external peace and reasonable, but not spectacular prosperity

At the same time, power and wealth were not the most important markers of civilizational achievement anymore. The people of the City in the North began memorializing their lives with perfected writing and this writing system spread both north to the Borderlands and south to the Interior of the Isthmus. It is unknown if it spread further than these areas. However, the idea of writing, of full or true writing, spread in the southeastern lands and never west of the Western Mountains, which only had a form of semi-writing, although it was at times quite advanced.

Most likely, the People of the Land in the north and in the Interior of the Isthmus invented the first true, full writing, which evolved from the semi-writing of their ancestors. The peoples of the Southern Part of the First Region on the coast and in the Southern Cities adopted a version of this script, adapted to their similar but distinct language. Apart from the people of the land, the New People to the southeast, but not to the north, adopted and adapted a type of writing from the second People of the Land, who got it from the first People of the Land. Thus, three distinct peoples- the People of the Land that we have been mostly following, the break-away culture related to them, and the New People- all developed true writing, but only these three peoples in the wider world.

After writing was invented and spread, the City in the North came up with another idea. For many years, peoples all over the Wider World had used a combined calendar that allowed people to distinguish dates within a 52-year period. However, distinguishing dates outside of a 52-year calendar was impossible. This older system was likely invented by the ancient People of the Land before the fall of the two great cities cut the Southeastern part of the Wider World off from the rest of it.

However, the People of the City in the North, most likely with the People of the Interior of the Isthmus, began a longer system of counting time. It divided the world into long ages and then divided those ages into smaller and smaller periods of time until it got to days. By calibrating these periods with the older combined calendar, the people of the City in the North could pinpoint exact days in historic time for the first time. This was a revolutionary invention, but it did not spread past the Western Mountains and remained in solely the Southeastern part of the Wider World. It remained in the Land.

It did eventually get to the New People's land, but it took a while. By the best estimates, it took centuries to get to the new peoples' land. It took less time to get to areas of the land likely inhabited by both the People of the Land and the New People. It spread to the Southern Cities and the Southern Part of the First Region by the coast, and likely in the Northern Part of that region as well. This was in addition to the region in the Interior of the Isthmus as well as the region around both the City in the North and the City in the Borderlands. It did not spread to the Northern New People, but like writing, it did spread to the New People to the southeast

2.5 The Rise of the Great City of the Center

In the meantime, a new power arose in the Center of the Wider World. The city that had first thrown off the influence of the People of the Land had been (or was in the process of being) overthrown by a new, eventually even more impressive city. This Great City of the Center was unlike the first, smaller city in one important respect- it was not content simply ruling the Center. It had a thirst for expansion, or at least influence, in regions outside of the Center of the Wider World.

This included ambitions in the Land, and not just in the north, which was closer to the Center, but in the rest of it as well. However, these ambitions took centuries to fully actualize. Meanwhile, the City in the North lasted for centuries with its republican model, which spread to some other cities, including one or more Southern Cities and a city in the Southern Part of the First Region. It may have even made it to the Interior of the Isthmus. Either way, the republican model of government was spread from the City in the North. It is unclear if this model ever got north to the city in the Borderlands

However, eventually, factional contestation became factional conflict. The four factions got along for centuries, but eventually, the ruler wanted to be a true ruler again. In at least one other city in the period, the compromise was to the ruler and his faction be a true *primus inter pares*- a true first among equals, with more power than the other leaders, but not too much of it to defeat a republican check-and-balances system. It is likely that this system was used in the city in the north for some time, with a ruler who was strong and executive in authority, but who was checked by other factions with official, legal functions in the City in the North.

Yet, the eventual trend, over three centuries, was towards a single absolute ruler. There is no evidence that single, absolute ruler was ever successful in the City in the North. The evidence for such a ruler is not even very strong about this in the city in the Borderlands. What is clear, though, was that in the rulers' attempts to gain absolute power, the City in the North, after existing for at least a millennium, fell. It was probably mostly an internal revolt, but as usual, the revolutionaries probably had help

This help came, unlike in earlier times, from outside of the land, in fact from outside the southeastern part of the wider world. The Great City in the Center was likely involved, having finally found a way to spread its influence, and even a form of rule, to regions other than the center. The City in the Borderlands may or may not have helped the invaders. However, what is clear is that the invaders did not stay and garrison the place. Instead, after the City in the North was gone, the City in the Borderlands and the People of the Mountains were likely more or less independent vassals of the Great City in the Center for about three hundred years.

As for the rest of the Land, the Great City of the Center was important there as well. It took longer, but in the next century, the People of the Great City of the Center had conquered and vassalized most of the cities in the First Region, Southern and Northern Parts, as well as most of the cities and peoples of the Southern Cities and the New People's lands. They were the overlords of almost everyone for about two centuries.

III. Research Method

3.1 An Important Interruption

This part of the story is quite separate from the rest of the story. One should think of these parts as separable units. It is relevant to the three themes of this paper. We will understand better in a minute. Now, for our current purposes, the story continues from the first part to the second part.

IV. Result and Discussion

However, the Great City in the Center did at least destroy or force into decline one of the most important cities of the People of the Land in the Interior of the Isthmus. Other cities remained and even prospered under the influence and loose control of the Great City of the Center, but this did not really ever recover. In fact, the People of the Land in this region would eventually be driven out by another group not related to any that we have discussed around the time of the fall of the Great City of the Center

For all the destruction that Great City of the Center caused in some areas, it promoted trade, largely kept the peace amongst its vassals, and allowed the local peoples to prosper. Things got much worse as the Great City in the Center declined and then fell (or at least retreated from the wider world). When this happened, as we can tell, the People of the Land, in all varieties, suffered. Eventually, the Great City fell, or at least suffered a terminal decline. When this happened, the City in the Borderlands collapsed, as did the Southern Cities and in the First Region. The New People to the southeast of the Land, though they suffered for a while, would emerge temporarily even more prosperous; however, the People of the Land would not recover.

V. Conclusion

After the fall of the Great City of the Center, the People of the Land lost some of their territory. They moved to other places. They lost their writing and advanced calendar, as far as we know. They still existed, but no longer were part of the story of civilization in the Southeastern Part of the Wider World. From this point on, the story of the Southeastern Part of the Wider World was entirely, or almost entirely, in the hands of the New People. As a result, many people today forget that the People of the Land, and not the New People, created the first civilization in the southeast, and in fact, the first civilization in the Wider World.

So ends our story, which is actually entirely based on facts and the best possible analysis of those facts. Obviously, I omitted key names and dates to eliminate or reduce bias on the part of the reader. In the second part of the article, I will explain the parable

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