

New research finds bureaucracy linked to a nation's growth

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"Bureaucracy is the death of all sound work," said Albert Einstein, sharing a popular view about bureaucracy grinding progress to a halt.

But it now appears that the organizing functions of bureaucracy were essential to the progressive growth of the world's first states, and may have helped them conquer surrounding areas much earlier than originally thought. New research conducted in the Valley of Oaxaca near Monte Albán, a large pre-Columbian archaeological site in southern Mexico, also implies that the first bureaucratic systems may have a lasting influence on today's modern states.

The research by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), funded in part by the National Science Foundation (NSF) through its Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences directorate, is published in this week's [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#) (*PNAS*).

"The earliest evidence of state organization is contemporaneous with the earliest evidence of long-distance territorial expansion," said lead researcher Charles Spencer, curator of Mexican and Central American Archaeology at the AMNH. "This pattern was consistent with the territorial-expansion model of primary state formation, which I have proposed in a number of publications over the years."

Spencer's territorial-expansion model argues that states arise through a mutual-causal process involving simultaneous territorial expansion and bureaucratization. Spencer's model breaks with previous ideas that

suggest states rise through a protracted, step-by-step process--first the state forms, then an organizing bureaucracy takes hold, and sometime later, the state begins to expand into other regions in an "imperialistic" fashion, thus giving birth to an empire.

Archaeological research conducted by Spencer in an Oaxaca canyon some 50 miles north of Monte Albán suggests that the old distinction between state and empire probably is not useful.

In the Oaxaca Valley, Spencer found evidence of a royal palace and a multi-room temple dating to 300-100 B.C. Most Oaxaca archaeologists consider the royal palace to be evidence of a specialized ruling class and the multi-room temple to be evidence of a specialized priestly class.

Spencer notes that around 300 B.C., the first signs of state organization start to appear in the Oaxaca Valley where Monte Albán is situated. It also is the same time that the ancient Monte Albán state started conquering the surrounding regions.

Spencer suspects that all bureaucratic states--even modern ones--may be inherently predisposed, or "hard-wired," to engage in predatory expansion as a legacy of the original process of primary state formation.

The *PNAS* paper compares Spencer's work in Mesoamerica with archaeological data from five other states most anthropologists recognize as the only other locations of true primary state formation in history: Peru, Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and China. Primary states are first-generation states that evolved without contact with other pre-existing states. In each case, Spencer's territorial-expansion theory holds. But he says more research needs to be done at the other locales.

"This result may provide a cautionary lesson as we think about international relations in our contemporary world," said Spencer. "Since

the bureaucratic state as a political form originally evolved through a process of predatory expansion, we should not be surprised if states continue to have predatory tendencies, regardless of their particular ideologies."

Spencer said his research results could be seen as reason to support development of international organizations such as the United Nations to serve as a check on the expansionistic tendencies of individual states. "But, the administration of those organizations is also likely to be bureaucratic, so we should be watchful for predatory behavior from them as well," he said.

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