

SELECTED PAPERS OF THE
HARVARD MIDDLE AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEMINAR, 1955-56

AN INTRODUCTION

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These three papers, selected from a series prepared by my Middle American archaeological seminar group during the Fall of 1955, deal with substantive and theoretical problems of major interest. They were written rapidly, under the pressures of the academic year, and they have been revised only slightly. The ideas which are generated in them are, nevertheless sufficiently timely and stimulating to justify their publication as "study essays" if not polished products. They deal with the tripartite divisions of Mesoamerican pre-history, the Formative, Classic and Post-classic periods or stages. Each was intended to be factual (within the limits of 40 or 50 manuscript pages), analytically critical, and imaginatively constructive. The success with which these requirements were met we must leave to the reader. My own opinion is that they all score remarkably well toward these high goals.

The papers speak for themselves. No synopses are necessary, but I will offer some brief comments.

Michael D. Coe sees the Middle American Formative period as a two-fold one in which its earlier and later parts are distinct enough to prompt a division in nomenclature. This is an extension and modification of Wauchop's (1950) idea of a (1) Village Formative, (2) Urban Formative, and (3) Protoclassic sequence. Coe would retain the Village Formative period and group the other two together as Protoclassic. He emphasizes in the Village Formative the sedentary agricultural community with its basic arts and technologies of pottery, weaving, and minor carving. For the Protoclassic he observes as criteria those traits which have, heretofore, been associated with the Classic period: the ceremonial center with its mound architecture and the beginnings of monumental art styles, the calendar, and hieroglyphics. The integrity of a Village Formative level, without mound constructions, is suggested, although not fully demonstrated in most Middle American regional sequences. The Valley of Mexico (El Arbolillo, Zacatenco, etc.), the southern Maya Lowlands (Mamom), and the Huasteca (Pavon, Ponce, Aguilar) are examples in point. In the Guatemalan highlands the early Formative phases (Las Charcas, Arevalo) may be exceptions to the classification. There is a logic to it although in exploring the course of human history logic often plays us false. I would not be surprised if it turns out that the very earliest Middle American agricultural societies were organized around some sort of ceremonial centers. Coe's argument carries weight, nevertheless, in that we cannot deny that ceremonial center constructions were of greater size in the latter part of what has been called the Formative than in the earlier part of that period.

The question of major art and hieroglyphics in the Protoclassic has been sharpened by a reevaluation of the principal manifestations of the Olmec style and of the scattered "Seven Cycle" stelae (Coe, 1954) in southern Mesoamerica. The weight of the evidence now suggests that these features are equatable in time with Coe's Protoclassic rather than with early Classic Tzakol and Teotihuacan II, as Drucker (1943, 1952) had originally proposed. This is a change of profound importance for any generalizations about Middle American prehistory. It is not only that a Protoclassic period emerges more clearly as a full-fledged transitional one between Village Formative and Classic, but we have in Olmec art the earliest sophisticated style of the area; a style fully comparable to the later great ones of the Classic period. The presence of hieroglyphics and such a style as the Olmec on the Protoclassic time level must be taken, I think, as indicators that at least one "form" of Middle American civilization had crystallized by the latter half of the first millennium B.C. and perished by the first century A.D.¹

Donald W. Lathrap conceives of Olmec, and Olmec-related, art as the beginnings of a "Lowland Macro-style" in Middle America, ancestral to the later Maya and Totonac styles. He also designates a "Highland Macro-style" as a counter-poise. The "Highland Macro-style" is the Teotihuacan horizon art, also referred to by him as the widely diffused complex of "X-T" traits (Xolalpan-Tlamimilolpa). Lathrap argues that "X-T" traits, in their wide distribution, may reflect more than trade or diffusion and be, in fact, the residue of an actual empire. Kidder (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook, 1946) once suggested this with regard to Teotihuacan architecture and ceramic influence in Classic Period Kaminaljuyu of the Guatemalan Highlands, and the idea would bear further investigation.

Lathrap's other main point is the evaluation of the concept of a Classic period in Middle American prehistory by an analysis of the criteria used to define the Classic cultures. It is his feeling, and, I think, he is correct in this, that the essential criterion most writers have relied upon has been the superlative art style. The degree to which esthetic excellence correlates with socio-political institutions or the florescence and climax of other aspects of culture is questioned by Lathrap. He does not deny possible correlations in some spheres of activity, but he goes on to propose an interesting hypothesis of negative correlation between artistic flowering and politico-military expansionism.

Jane Holden examines the Postclassic period as to criteria which have been advanced as definitive of it: urbanism, militarism, and secularism. She concludes that all three traits are present in the late Precolumbian centuries but that for none of them is there uniform evidence throughout the Mesoamerican culture area. In my own mind I am much less sure now that the Postclassic phases were more urbanized than the preceding Classic cultures. Urbanism, by a formal definition of large, closely packed, population clusters, may well have been related closely to certain natural environmental conditions in Middle America. The Valley of Mexico and the Guatemalan basin may have been urban centers in Classic times or, possibly, even earlier (Millon, 1957; Shook and Proskouriakoff, 1956). Opposed to

this, the Peten or the Veracruz lowlands may never have been the settings for aboriginal urban communities of the same demographic scale as those of the highlands. Yet, turning to other qualities of civilization besides those of the physical population mass of the city itself, it is obvious that lowland cultures of Middle America equaled or surpassed the highland centers in arts, architecture, and intellectual achievements. I think that this gives us a clue that "civilization," in the broader meaning that it has come to have, is not solely a corollary of the civitas. It must, of course, have a base in the cooperative efforts of sizable numbers of people; but the community pattern need not be one of urban living. Militarism does appear to have been a paramount activity in the Postclassic period. We have, perhaps, underrated the peaceful nature of such societies as those of the Classic Maya or Teotihuacan; but large scale militarism still seems to have been more common in the Postclassic. It is difficult to evaluate the ultimate causes for this; however, an immediate agency was almost surely the expansion of Nahuatl speaking peoples out of northwestern Middle America. The interpretation of archaeological data as indicative of "secular" as opposed to "sacred" forces is a more tenuous inference than those made in support of urbanism or militarism. From what we know of the historic Aztec or Maya it is clear that religious motivations were always strong sanctions for behavior. It is still my impression, though, based upon the weight of artistic and architectural evidence, that a trend toward secularization marks the Postclassic.

The concepts of Formative, Classic, and Postclassic have been used as periods in Middle American archaeology and as stages in Middle American culture history. This double use of the terms has led to some confusion, although I believe the authors of the papers which follow have been careful to make their meanings clear on this point. There is no question but that periods (horizontal time bands) would be better expressed in a completely non-committal, non-connotative way, perhaps by numbers. Sorenson (1955) has argued this, and I would agree; but I would be hesitant to try to establish a series of "sequence numbers," as coefficients for phases of art styles, pottery types, and other traits, after the manner of Flinders Petrie in Egypt. This, I am afraid, would introduce more difficulties and complications than it would dispell. With the increasing number of radiocarbon dates, with better possibilities for tying central Mexican and northwest Mexican sequences into Southwestern United States archaeological chronologies; and with hopes for a resolution of the Maya calendrical correlation problem, I would prefer to await an early use of true sequence numbers in the form of absolute dates.

As to the employment of the Formative, Classic, Postclassic concepts as stages (sloping time bands), I think it is evident, on the one hand, that technologies and styles have diffused from one region of Middle America to another in a very complex pattern of interchange. Over and beyond these certain diffusions it is also reasonably clear that independent local regional development was an important factor in the growth of Middle American civilizations. I do not think we can as yet say what forces coalesced to bring about such institutions as religion and the state in their various and peculiar forms. Both parallels and divergences may be observed in these institutions in the several Mesoamerican regional cultural continua which we can

trace through time, but I can detect no inevitabilities in these courses of development. The Formative, Classic, and Postclassic historical-developmental stages, as I have referred to them here and elsewhere (Willey and Phillips, 1955, 1957), are useful devices of descriptive generalization about culture history in Middle America and other parts of the New World; but I do not consider them to be the keys to causative explanations.

NOTE

- (1) The term and concept "form" is used here in the sense that Henri Frankfort gives it in connection with Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilization (Frankfort, 1954).

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