

VI. COMMENTARY ON: INVENTORY OF SOME PRE-CLASSIC TRAITS IN
THE HIGHLANDS AND PACIFIC GUATEMALA AND ADJACENT AREAS

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In his Inventory Paper, Mr. Shook has given an inventory of some pre-Classic traits in the area under consideration, focusing his study on the archaeology of the regions he knows better than anyone: the Guatemala Highlands and Pacific Coast. I think that we may get a broader understanding of the Pre-Classic of Southeastern Mesoamerica if the area under discussion encompasses the following adjacent regions: to the west, central and southern Chiapas, eastward, El Salvador and northern Honduras.

The archaeology of central and southern Chiapas has become one of the best known in Mesoamerica: many detailed monographs as well as articles of synthesis have been published and if new data are available - particularly from Izapa - I am confident that Mr. Lowe will supply them in the course of the ensuing general discussion.

On the other hand, very recent work in El Salvador and north-central Honduras has produced information on the Pre-Classic which for the major part has not been published yet. Therefore it may be pertinent to present here a short account of these new results which we feel are relevant to the discussion.

Archaeological work was resumed in 1966 in the very promising Chalchuapa zone in western El Salvador. Chalchuapa is located at an approximately equal distance of 120 km from Copán and Kaminaljuyu. At 700 meters in altitude it is in a transitional zone between the Pacific Coast and the central Maya Highlands. Robert Sharer claims to have found a very long ceramic sequence running from the Early Preclassic to the Late Classic. From the information at my disposal I shall mention a few points which I consider as particularly significant:

Sharer's earliest ceramic complex (called Tok and dated approximately by comparative analysis from 1200 to 1000 B.C.) discloses in the author's terms "direct ties" with the San Lorenzo phase ceramics.

The famous Las Victorias boulder with Olmec reliefs is located a few kilometers east of the mound groups. The Chalchuapa archaeological zone

covers approximately 6 square kilometers and includes the mound groups previously designated in the literature under the names of Tazumal, El Trapiche and Casa Blanca. The map shows the mound groups disposed along an axis slightly east of the north, as in many Pre-Classic sites in the area.

If the majority of the tested or excavated mounds seem to have been built during Early Classic times, at least one of the highest structures (Structure) E3-1 or El Trapiche Mound 1 is 23 meters high) has a Late Pre-Classic association for its terminal stage of construction (Sharer 1969).

Farther east in El Salvador, the site of Quelepa which was recently excavated by Wyllys Andrews V, seems to have had most of its architectural activity in Early Classic times. Nevertheless an earlier Late Pre-Classic platform or terrace with rockfill and a series of superimposed floors was found in the East Group of the site.

In north-central Honduras, on the northern shore of Lake Yojoa, a cultural sequence divided into four phases has been constructed on the basis of excavations undertaken in '68-'69 at Los Naranjos by Pierre Becquelin and myself. Our earliest phase, Jaral, dated approximately 6 or 500 to 200 B.C., is characterized by early spectacular cultural achievements and "Olmecoid" manifestations. Although we have undisputable evidence of only two buried structures pertaining to this phase (one 6 meters, the other 2.50 meters high), we have good reasons to think that most of the higher structures which make up the Main Group overlay an inner Jaral building. The site was limited on two sides by a defensive ditch (1300 meters long, 15 to 20 meters wide and 7 meters deep) enclosing a flat area of some 85 hectares. Differential treatment of the dead has been evidenced in Str.IV (the highest referred to above). Buried in the top of this platform an extended burial was found without pottery offerings but with an abundance of jade ornaments. At the western foot of the same structure, four burials, mostly secondary, have been unearthed. They had no other offerings except one jade axe rubbed with cinnabar and stratigraphically associated with the group of burials. Although the pottery is only rarely decorated and generally crude (the Yojoa monochrome of Strong, Kidder and Paul) the jade ornaments (beads of several kinds, ear-plug flares 12 cm. in diameter) are the products of excellent workmanship. A few sculptures in the round from Los Naranjos were published in the thirties. Another excellent although mutilated example was found a few years ago while digging a canal for an hydro-electric project. This sculpture depicts a free-standing individual of almost natural size. Although we did not find any piece of sculpture in our excavations we may safely and on pure stylistic grounds label, as Michael Coe previously has done, these sculptures as Olmec-inspired.

The succeeding phase, Eden, assuming there is no gap in our sequence, covers the 200 B.C. - 4 or 500 A.D. span (we have two C14 dates: 100 ± 100 and 250 ± 100 A.D.). The pottery, which has a number of types in common with other

contemporary complexes in Honduras (precisely in the Ulua and Comayagua valleys) cannot, in answer to Gareth Lowe's assertions (Green and Lowe 1967, pp. 61-62) be compared to the Valdivia material. Most of its forms and decoration are shared with many Late Pre-Classic and Proto-Classic complexes in southern Mesoamerica. Eden is a phase of major building activity: two of the biggest structures in the Main Group (Structure 1 is 20 meters high) are mainly Eden, having been only slightly modified in Yojoa - Late Classic times. Another defensive ditch (3 kilometers long, 8 to 15 meters wide, 4 meters deep and with a 2 meter high bank on the inner side) enclosed an area of around 290 hectares, probably protecting settlements as well as milpas. Although there is no formal arrangement of the structures composing the Main Group seen as a whole, an Acropolis-like construction should be mentioned: Structure IV includes a stepped platform on the top of which is a plaza limited on three sides by 3 meters high substructures and on the fourth by a small altar platform. Access to the plaza is made possible through a ramp. Stepped platforms and pyramids are made up of clay with retaining walls of unworked blocks of limestone. No evidence of lime plaster has been found in the structures of the Eden phase.

Thus, as early as Middle Pre-Classic times, Los Naranjos is a ceremonial center with temple platforms, sculpture in the round, and jade working (or trading?) worthy of note. A stratified society thus is inferred. The construction of the structures as well as the digging of the ditch represent a notable amount of collective work. Furthermore the presence of the ditch, unusual in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica, shows that the "Jaraleños" had to fear hostile attacks from potentially strong foes. The Jaral culture does not appear as marginal or belated when compared to most of the contemporary known cultures of Mesoamerica. The same can be said of the Eden phase which represents a climax in Los Naranjos history. A corresponding cultural peak had been observed before in the Comayagua valley (Yarumela III and Lo de Vaca II).

The following discussion will be centered on the major problem of evaluating the role played by the Gulf Coast cultures in the emergence of civilization in southeastern Mesoamerica.

Considering the long time span (around eight centuries, according to the C14 dates published in Dr. Bernal's inventory paper) covered by the Olmec sequence at La Venta, it has become increasingly more confusing and dangerous to use the concept of an "Olmec horizon". "Olmec tradition" corresponds better to our present knowledge, particularly when it refers to the Olmec art-style. At La Venta as well as at San Lorenzo, the cultural sequence is still mostly a ceramic and architectural sequence. The most conspicuous Olmec trait, sculpture (non portable as well as portable pieces) has not been yet chronologically divided into types or sub-styles. Therefore we are presently unable, when finding an Olmec or Olmecoid sculpture, to ascribe it by itself alone to a definite period. Michael Coe's interesting hypothesis (cited by Dr. Bernal) that Olmec sculpture in the round preceded low-reliefs and carved

stelae has still to be proven even in the heartland. As for the pieces in our area, their unknown or doubtful chronological placement makes them of little help in the solution of this problem.

We are on firmer grounds when comparable ceramic complexes with corresponding absolute datations can be equated and set up a ceramic horizon. A Cuadros-San Lorenzo ceramic horizon has been recognized these last years, the recognition of such an Horizon allows us to consider as roughly coeval - in the last part of the Early Pre-Classic 1100 to 900 B.C. - a number of sites spread over a vast area: Gulf Coast (San Lorenzo, La Venta), Central Chiapas (Chiapa de Corzo, Santa Marta rockshelter, the first phase at San Isidro, (Mal Paso), Padre Piedra, Vistahermosa, etc.) and the Pacific Coast (Izapa: Mound 30a fill, Pijijiapan, Salinas la Blanca, Chalchuapa: Tok complex). At present no ceramic complex of comparable antiquity has been found in the Highlands. At most of the sites mentioned above - with of course the exception of the Gulf Coast - we have very little information besides ceramics. They seem to have been hamlets or small villages with a similar way of life to the one led in the first part of the Early Pre-Classic. Outside the Olmec heartland, no monumental architecture has been reported with the exception of a few low clay platforms (as at San Isidro). The Cuadros-San Lorenzo ceramic horizon (or may we call it a sphere?) shows that the Gulf Coast and the Pacific Coast peoples were sharing the same or very similar ceramics. This obviously indicates the existence of relationships from Coast to Coast, but it seems to me a little hasty to infer with Lowe (op. cit.) "an Olmec population block astride the Isthmus". Other evidences of active relationships between the civilized centers of the Gulf Coast and southeastern Mesoamerica are meager: the life-size reliefs carved on huge boulders and discovered by Navarrete at Pijijiapan (Navarrete 1969) may belong to this period. The possibility remains that other Olmec sculptures are associated with Cuadros ceramics: the free-standing sculpture found near Colonia Obregon, west of Tapachula, and the Las Victorias boulders. But these associations remain to be demonstrated.

For the Middle Pre-Classic period, we have more evidences of cultural manifestations which attest to, in Miss Proskouriakoff's terms, a concern with permanence. Clay or adobe platforms, sometimes faced with stones and sometimes of complex plan, are reported in Central Chiapas (Mirador, Vista-hermosa, Chiapa de Corzo, San Isidro, etc.), on the Pacific Coast (Mound 30a at Izapa, pyramidal mounds of the Conchas phase), at Kaminaljuyu and Los Naranjos. There is no doubt that around 400 B.C. important ceremonial centers were to be found all over the area, from San Isidro to Los Naranjos. Among the sculptures which can be assigned to this period, some of them clearly belong to the Olmec art-style tradition, such as the monument at Padre Piedra and the Los Naranjos free-standing figures. Other realizations in stone such as the plain stelae and the pedestal sculptures appear to be original productions. Between the two groups, I would place some of the contents of the Majadas cache in Structure C-III-6 at Kaminaljuyu, which seem to reveal an indirect Olmec influence through: (1) the use of columnar basalt,

(2) stela 9 which appears to me a copy, although in a very different technique and style, of the Olmec figures holding up a torch (reproduced in M. Coe, 1965, Fig. 51-52). The excavations at San Isidro have made us aware of the fact that we may have Olmec presence without Olmec sculpture. But other Olmec traits are often hard to pinpoint: I can only refer to the axe offerings at San Isidro and at a lesser degree at Los Naranjos, and the occasional presence of Olmec-style clay figurines.

The cultural history of the area, taken as a whole, presents two climaxes or peaks in terms of population density, exploitation of natural resources, monumental architecture, artistic creativity, intellectual achievements...These two periods of maximum cultural intensity are the Late Pre-Classic and the Late Classic. In this discussion our concern is naturally with the first of these periods.

Late Pre-Classic sites are to be found almost everywhere in the area under discussion: more than 50 have been numbered in Central Chiapas alone and there are undoubtedly comparable figures for settlement density on the Pacific Coast, including western El Salvador as well as in the Guatemala central Highlands and in central Honduras. On the other hand, many highland regions such as the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, the Chiapas plateau, the western and northern Highlands of Guatemala seem to have been sparsely peopled during this period. The most important ceremonial centers reported in the area (Izapa, Monte Alto, Kaminaljuyu, etc.) conform, with the exception of Los Naranjos, to the general axial disposition of the structures. These are higher and more elaborate than those of the preceding period, and temple-platforms as well as residential substructures are reported. At Kaminaljuyu as elsewhere, social stratification with concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an elite are clearly inferred from the burials excavated in Mound E-III-3. Sophistication in ceremonialism is indicated by evidences of animal and human sacrifice, huge incense burners in stone and other features. The concern with permanence is evidenced not only by architecture, but also by the carving of representations and the recording of calendrical dates in a durable material (Cycle 7 monuments). Once again, we are faced with one of the most exciting and at the same time frustrating problems of the archaeology of this area: sculpture. The Izapa and the Monte Alto styles have both a very broad geographical distribution and are said to be of Late Pre-Classic age. If this is actually the case, I wonder what meaning is to be given to the coexistence of two such distinctive styles. Do we have here superposition of an imported, sophisticated sculpture over a local, cruder one? The Izapan sculpture has the widest distribution of both, from Tres Zapotes through the Chiapas Coast to Kaminaljuyu and perhaps beyond. Assuming that the Izapan style is Olmec derived - and we have many good reasons to think it is - we must reckon a time span of several centuries between the end of La Venta and the appearance of Izapan sculptures. It is hoped that transitional forms between the two styles will be someday found. I would favor the hypothesis that the Izapan style

developed out of Olmec low-reliefs in the Gulf Coast region (at or near Tres Zapotes) and from there spread to the south and southwest, where probably local developments did occur. Very few sculptures from Kaminaljuyu have been reliably dated. The two most famous stelae (10 and 11) found in a Miraflores context are strikingly distinctive: stela 11 is clearly Izapan whilst the style of stela 10 is much closer to the Maya and has a hieroglyphic inscription in Maya fashion. As Miss Proskouriakoff points out: "Apparently sculptors from many localities resided and worked in this cosmopolitan center."

Now that we have weighed the available archeological evidence, I wonder if we possess sufficient data to answer the main questions: Was civilization genuine or imported in southeastern Mesoamerica? What has been the role of the Gulf Coast cultures in the process?

As far as the Olmecs are concerned, we have not yet found a site in our area which would be to La Venta or San Lorenzo, what Chichen Itza is to Tula or what Kaminaljuyu is to Teotihuacan. Axial planning of ceremonial centers may have a Gulf Coast origin, but this has to be proven. Ceramic ties are very strong in the Early Pre-Classic but seem to get loose in the following periods. Olmec portable objects are rather rare - - very few have been found in controlled excavations - east and south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, in contrast to the Mixteca-Puebla-Guerrero regions. The Olmec presence or influence is unmistakably only attested through sculptures which, unfortunately, are for the most part, not well dated.

The same may be said of the Izapan style. Assuming that its birthplace was the Gulf Coast region, it would have represented a second wave of influences to Chiapas and the Pacific Coast. Disappointing as it may seem, I think we are presently on too shaky grounds to determine whether the contacts between the Gulf Coast and southeastern Mesoamerica have been direct or indirect (stimulus diffusion).

The Chiapas and Guatemala Highlands offer a problem of their own. No Early and Middle Pre-Classic sites have been reported from the Highlands, with the exception of the Guatemala central zone. Late Pre-Classic settlements are rare in the Chiapas plateau (two sites reported) and in the Guatemala western Highland (Salcajá, Chukumuk). During his survey of the northern Highlands Richard N. Adams did not find any Pre-Classic occupation either in the Cotzal valley or at Chajcar (Alta Verapaz). Pre-Classic remains are also conspicuously absent in the Nebaj region. Adams' conclusions are that this lack of Pre-Classic material indicates an absence of Highland-Lowland contacts through these regions in Pre-Classic times. Be that as it may, these conclusions may appear too hastily drawn, since several Late Pre-Classic sites from the northern Highland ceramic zone have been reported: Cambote (in the Huehuetenango region), Rio Blanco (near Sacapulas), and in Alta Verapaz: Chama, Chichen, Chipoc and San Pedro Carcha (Becquelin, 1969, p. 118). These

sites need to be thoroughly investigated before a definite answer to this problem may be given. It appears nevertheless that the Chiapas and Guatemala Highlands - the central zone excepted - were peopled well after the southern Lowlands and that even in Late Pre-Classic times, the population was sparse with no centers as important as Izapa or Kaminaljuyu. Actually the major part of the Highlands seem to have played a minor role in the emergence and development of civilization.

If there was ever a path of civilization, it would have been primarily a Lowland path or a "peripheral coastal lowlands" path, as Parsons would call it. Starting from the Gulf Coast, the flow would have spread through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and from there, avoiding the mountains, extend into the Grijalva depression on one hand, and along the Pacific Coast to El Salvador and perhaps beyond, on the other. As for the route through which Los Naranjos was reached, there is presently no answer: one relay might have been the Copan valley.

The central Highlands and particularly the valley of Las Vacas may have achieved their peculiar destiny due to their geographical situation: they are within easy reach of the Coast through Escuintla and Amatitlán, and have access northward to the Motagua valley. According to our present knowledge, civilization in the Highlands has its most immediate origins in the adjacent Pacific Coast. Nothing on hand indicates that the Maya Lowlands have contributed in any way to the emergence of civilization in the Highlands. Did the latter then have any influences on the early developments of the former? This is a question we had better keep for the next session.

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