

Asking New Questions about the Mesoamerican Pre-Classic

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Between the initial recognition that the elaborate art style known from Gulf Coast sites such as La Venta, Tres Zapotes, and San Lorenzo was early in the sequence of Mesoamerican cultures, and the Dumbarton Oaks symposium for which these papers were prepared, research on the Pre-Classic period was in many ways preoccupied with the problem of defining “Olmec.” To some extent, this situation reflected the real distinctiveness of features that have come loosely to be labeled Olmec in the development of Mesoamerican societies. More than for any later period, Mesoamerica’s Pre-Classic sites were characterized by unprecedented developments, including the development of monumental architecture and public art, whose creation was credited to Olmec people or Olmec influence. Also initially fueling concern with defining Olmec was the patchy nature of the archaeological record of the Pre-Classic. Few sites had been investigated in any detail, and those studies tended to focus on the more monumental features that first attracted attention.

The necessity to understand the changes that took place during the Pre-Classic and the paucity of good contextual data to address this task helped foster the creation of models that stressed common features at the expense of differences, and gave a singular active role in cultural evolution to the presumed originators of Olmec art. With an expansion of projects producing primary data about Pre-Classic life in many areas of Mesoamerica, the integrity of a pan-Mesoamerican Olmec culture and the significance of Olmec influence became points of considerable contention. Debate about the definition of Olmec

art, style, and culture, and the role that any of these had in the general developments of the Pre-Classic, was amply reflected in the different points of view expressed by contributors to *The Olmec and Their Neighbors* (Benson 1981) and *Regional Perspectives on the Olmec* (Sharer and Grove 1989).

The papers included in these volumes incorporated data from extensive field projects in the Basin of Mexico, Morelos, Oaxaca, and Chiapas. These projects complemented Gulf Coast research centered initially on La Venta and Tres Zapotes and later on San Lorenzo. The results of these research projects provided a reasonable level of chronological control as well as contextual information for a variety of kinds of activities. They also fostered specialized analyses to address questions of exchange directly. Remaining disagreements about the nature and significance of the Olmec in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica aired in these volumes seem unlikely to be settled by more fieldwork or new analyses of existing data, as they reflect basic differences in the interpretation of the same evidence.

Our purpose in organizing the conference for which the papers in this volume were prepared was to go beyond the terms set by the existing Olmec debate and ask new questions about the Pre-Classic. We begin with the assumption that repeated behaviors should be recognizable in the now abundant and well-documented material remains from good contexts in Pre-Classic sites. We use the contextual data for repetitive behavior as evidence for exploring the meaning objects and places accrued through their use in social life. We argue that patterns in the archaeological record can be understood as material traces of (among other things) the marking of social boundaries, the development of distinct social identities, and the enactment of ceremony. This volume begins to explore the social mechanisms of the radical transformations underlying emerging social stratification that characterized the Mesoamerican Pre-Classic.

THE PRE-CLASSIC REVOLUTION

More than any period of time that followed, the Mesoamerican Pre-Classic witnessed the development of unprecedented features in site form, artifact inventory, and use of materials. Every later Mesoamerican society developed within a framework that was laid in the Pre-Classic. The material features that we see archaeologically as typical of Mesoamerica took their essential form during this period. By the end of the Pre-Classic, monumental architecture in the form of large pyramidal structures was a general feature of the Mesoamerican landscape. The centers visually marked by these monumental buildings were further distinguished by symbolic elaboration embodied in the ornamentation

of architecture and in the creation of large-scale freestanding monuments that marked out spaces. Similar media were used to surround the centers with a symbolically rich landscape. Within the centers and hinterlands that thus took form, differences in the scale and elaboration of residences, in the forms and materials of craft products used in daily life and ceremony, and in the tasks carried out by different people formed the basis for defining social identities that continued to typify complex society throughout the remainder of Mesoamerica's Pre-Hispanic history.

We asked participants in the symposium to address aspects of these developments using data specific to particular areas, in order to illuminate processes that might have more general significance for the Pre-Classic as a whole. The phenomena in which we are interested vary in scale. At the most intimate level, the origins of social complexity must be sought in shifts in social relations within and between households. Even in supposedly egalitarian societies, there are sharp disparities in the respect and authority accorded different people. Such factors as age and experience, skill and knowledge, may become recognized bases for certain individuals to be accorded special value and recognition. While the resolution of the archaeological record seldom allows us to identify and follow the individual, we can examine the arenas where differences between individuals are institutionalized and look for the material media through which differences in identity are given imperishable symbolic form.

At a slightly wider scale, the construction of architecture of unprecedented size and form can arguably be taken as an indication of community-level efforts. While it is always possible to suggest that a complex public work could have been carried out by a small number of people working for a long period of time, archaeological data suggest that much of the public construction that we see in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica was accomplished over fairly short periods of time. Regardless of the number of people involved and the length of time required, building these features depended on people undertaking a wholly new kind of activity. Once constructed, monumental buildings changed forever the form of the place and the spatial habits of those dwelling there. These new constructions became part of specialized settings for ceremony and features of reference for everyday movement. They established a difference between places that was part of a deliberate creation of a new social landscape.

The newly differentiated people involved in habitual action within the freshly transformed landscapes of the Pre-Classic were ultimately engaged at a very wide scale in interactions we see archaeologically in the contemporaneous spread of materials and symbolic media from Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador. Through the creation of the networks that linked distant Pre-Classic commu-

nities, Mesoamerica itself took recognizable form. The papers in this volume do engage with wider issues of the nature of Pre-Classic Mesoamerica, which have generally been seen as aspects of the Olmec problem. But they do so by first examining the local-level, and even household-level, forces that fueled the formation of long-distance links.

CHANGING ASPECTS OF PRE-CLASSIC SOCIAL IDENTITY

The small-scale setting of probable remains of domestic life is the critical place, the preexisting context for the beginnings of all the transformations that occur during the Pre-Classic period. Residential sites were the location of activities through which social groups reproduced themselves, materially through subsistence and craft production and socially through ceremonies marking social boundaries and transitions. Behavioral contrasts between the inhabitants of different residential groups resulted in variation in, among other things, burial form and contents, evidence of craft production, and use of symbolism. Through such behavioral contrasts and the relative value accorded some kinds of activities, distinct social identities, including those between elites and commoners, took form.

The papers that open this volume all concern this scale of Pre-Classic societies. Drawing on burial data, Rosemary A. Joyce explores variation in aspects of mortuary ritual. She finds that distinctions are more evident between clusters of burials than between individual burials, emphasizing the investment of the social group in the ceremonies that resulted in burial assemblages. Taking the social group responsible for clusters of burials as a corporate participant in competitive and cooperative social relations, Joyce identifies three aspects of burials as potentially indicative of social group interests. First, there are clear differences in the degree to which different groups engaged in mortuary practices that resulted in the burial of resources including pottery vessels, figurines and musical instruments, costume ornaments, and stone and bone tools. It appears that, even in the absence of wide gulfs in wealth and status that can be identified after the emergence of elites, there were already sharp divisions in the ability or motivation of different social groups to engage in competitive displays.

Among those groups that did engage in elaborate burial displays, two notable features can be isolated, both with implications for wider Pre-Classic concerns. The inclusion of tools and raw materials for different kinds of productive activities in burials draws attention to the probable importance of craft production organized at the small-scale social group level in the emergence of social stratification. The singling out of some burials through costumes incor-

porating exotic materials that have the most standardized form of any burial goods known from Pre-Classic Mesoamerica makes clear that social groups engaged in competitive displays were forming external alliances to mobilize resources from outside the local social system.

Structured burial data like those used by Joyce are one of the more abundant sources for study of repetitive behavior in small-scale social settings of Pre-Classic societies. Norman Hammond contributes an updating of the chapter summarizing burials and caches from the landmark publication of the archaeology of Cuello (Hammond 1991; see Robin and Hammond 1991 for the original version, and Robin 1989 for details of this analysis). Cuello has been a crucial site in the continuing debate about the integration of the Early and Middle Pre-Classic Maya Lowlands in the wider Mesoamerican world. At Cuello, Hammond notes evidence of processes of stratification and formalization of ritual parallel to those taking place elsewhere in the late Early Pre-Classic and Middle Pre-Classic Mesoamerican world.

The inhabitants of Cuello initially buried their dead in what appear to be household compound clusters, with all ages and sexes represented. Hammond describes the earliest burials as having some of the least standardized burial goods of any period, consistent with the general impression for contemporary Mesoamerica of significant individualization and differentiation between house compounds in ritual practices. But at the same time, Hammond describes a range of practices comparable to those Joyce notes in her examination of burials from contemporary Tlatilco. While apparently abstaining from the use of the specific symbolism that spreads across Mesoamerica in the Early and Middle Pre-Classic, the lowland Maya society represented at Cuello already accepted pan-Mesoamerican standards of value and participated in the long-distance exchange and craft patronage necessary to supply early Mesoamerican luxuries. Indeed, Hammond suggests that some of the jade items in these burials were products of exchange with centers fully participating in the use of pan-Mesoamerican symbolism in the Gulf Coast. By the beginning of the Late Pre-Classic period, both the use of space and burial practices signaled a formalization of ritual and the emergence of a segment of society distinguished by the use of human remains as burial inclusions.

Joyce Marcus explores two aspects of social differentiation in Pre-Classic Oaxaca: segregation in ritual between men and women, and the shared veneration of ancestors by men and women of different segments of the population. Marcus identifies ten specialized buildings in Early Pre-Classic Oaxaca which she interprets as sites where men commemorated their individually named and recalled ancestors. She draws attention to the singling out of some males for

burial in a distinctive seated position, a format also noted by Hammond for the males who were the center of mass burials accompanying the construction of monumental architecture in Late Pre-Classic Cuello. Marcus identifies seated male burials as probable foci of ancestor veneration. Her argument that these ancestors were preferentially venerated by men draws on previous discussions of the distribution in burials in Oaxaca of vessels with complex iconography that she identifies with Lightning and Earth (Marcus 1989; Flannery and Marcus 1994). She notes that in Oaxaca such vessels were never deposited with adult females, and burials containing them were spatially segregated in different areas. These observations imply the existence of two spatially fixed and differentiated groups in which males shared the prerogative of displaying the symbols of an important supernatural.

Remarkably, throughout the burial material considered by Joyce, Hammond, and Marcus, there is a decided balance between features that are strictly local and others that reflect participation in more widespread practices. Marcus notes burials from Copan that share iconography she identifies with Earth and Lightning descent groups in Oaxaca. Others (Porter 1953; Longyear 1969; Healy 1974; Fash 1985, 1991; Joyce 1992, n.d.) have previously noted correspondences between iconography of vessels from Copan and other Honduran sites, and examples from Mexican archaeological sites including San José Mogote and Tlatilco. Joyce (1992, 1996, n.d.) suggests that in Honduras these and other pan-Mesoamerican motifs were used to assert distinctions between different local groups relating to craft patronage and participation in long-distance exchange, rather than a codified division between two descent groups. At Tlatilco, Paul Tolstoy (1989) noted a tendency for such motifs to occur in specific burial clusters, but his evidence suggested an emphasis on the maternal, rather than paternal, line. While pottery vessels, figurines, and costume are incorporated in burials across Pre-Classic Mesoamerica, burials are simultaneously distinguished by use of local objects in patterns that lack broad distribution. The strongest shared pattern is the use of certain materials, especially greenstone and shell, for ornaments. Pre-Classic burials reflect subtle social differentiation within the small-scale setting of the residential compound mobilizing common practices and standards of value for local ends.

Julia A. Hendon reviews the evidence for common and distinctive patterns in the elaboration of Pre-Classic residential compounds. She emphasizes that analysis of practices whose outcomes can be observed in the material record is ultimately more fruitful than the search for rules of social structure. By emphasizing that group identity is not a given, but needs to be formed and maintained, Hendon draws our attention to one of the implicit social processes of

the Pre-Classic: the institutionalization of internal social differentiation between kinship groups. Hendon views the abundant evidence for craft production within the residential setting as an indication of possible competition between residential groups, and between individuals within them, for social distinction, a perspective also extending to participation in ritual within the setting of the residential group (compare Clark and Blake 1994; Clark and Gosser 1995).

Hendon suggests that material from early middens at Uaxactun documents craft production of textiles and shell ornaments. Noting that textile production in later Mesoamerica is virtually universally associated as a specialized practice with female gender, she implicitly identifies the Pre-Classic as the period during which the definition of gender identities may have been formalized. In this regard, the notable disjunction between the prominence of females in Pre-Classic figurine imagery, and their virtual absence in monumental imagery, is brought into sharper relief. Rather than simply reflecting a given reality of sociopolitical organization, in which men had privileged access to positions of power, this disjunction may be a means by which Pre-Classic societies began to create arenas in which women's participation was played down. Hendon, highlighting the probable use of figurines in household-level ritual at Uaxactun, draws attention to the importance of the house compound as an arena of action accessible to both men and women in the Pre-Classic, when separate formal spaces for political and religious ceremony did not already exist.

Marcus interprets the Oaxacan data in a similar fashion, assuming that specialized buildings functioned as lineage shrines for men, while women practiced distinctive ancestor veneration in other locales. Marcus suggests that figurines were made and used by women in house-based veneration of recently deceased, preferentially female, ancestors. Her model is one of several recent analyses of Pre-Classic figurines that view these as media for ritual action and negotiation of social status. Ann Cyphers (1993), like Marcus, identifies a majority of figurines from Chalcatzingo as representations of female subjects, arguing that they symbolize stages in the female life cycle and might have been used in house-based rites of passage. Richard Lesure (1997) identifies a wider range of gender, age, and status differentiations in figurine assemblages from the Pacific Coast, and suggests they reify distinctions between elders who achieved status through ritual and the younger members of their kin groups whose lives they controlled. Joyce (1993, this volume) identifies the Pre-Classic Playa de los Muertos figurines of the Ulua River Valley in Honduras as media for the permanent recording of individual personae enacted through distinctive body ornamentation, particularly of female subjects. While in each area the actual com-

position of figurine assemblages varies substantially, and consequently models for their social effects are equally varied, production and use of these highly distinctive assemblages in house compounds and in burials are at the same time fairly common aspects of Pre-Classic Mesoamerican traditions.

The production of shell ornaments is the second major craft activity represented at Pre-Classic Uaxactun. This craft activity contributed to differentiation in costume practices like that evident in mortuary data discussed by Hammond, Marcus, and Joyce. Michael Love finds evidence of differential consumption of precisely these kinds of ornaments in conjunction with practices that internally divide the space of sites in Pacific coastal Guatemala. This is not simply a matter of privileged access to, or appropriation of, luxury goods or the products of long-distance exchange and craft production. Rather, as Hendon and Love explicitly argue, the selective use of such materials was a means by which certain individuals actively set themselves apart from others in their communities. Joyce's analysis of practices typical of clusters of burials at Tlatilco extends this analysis to distinctions between groups, not solely between individuals.

The setting of craft activities at Uaxactun within a Pre-Classic household that later features unique buildings, possible stages for ceremony, raises the probability that economic activities within the household were at the heart of the development of social stratification during the Mesoamerican Pre-Classic. Hendon notes that the elaboration of these special-purpose buildings at Uaxactun, and elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands, distinguished them from other quotidian structures in the same groups, providing a distinctive setting for action. Marcus documents equivalent architectural elaboration of otherwise small-scale buildings she calls lineage houses. Hendon and Marcus make the point that households already contained within themselves both means to create distinctions (through limitation of participation in production and ritual) and grounds, including age and sex, for social ranking. At the same time, the spatial setting of the residence offered profound opportunities for the reformulation of the experience of everyday life that, projected to a larger scale, is reflected in the Pre-Classic innovations of monumental architecture and monumental art.

BUILDING THE NEW SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

The small-scale, face-to-face context of the residential compound was necessarily the setting for the development of social distinctions in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica, because it existed before other kinds of marked spatial locations. One of the most disruptive aspects of the social transformations that took place during this period was the elaboration of new forms of architecture—an entirely

new pattern of construction of monumental architecture and settings of monumental art creating unprecedented kinds of space in Pre-Classic sites.

Michael Love provides a detailed consideration of the process and effects of the introduction of monumental architecture. He emphasizes the central importance of practices that differentially include and exclude members of society in creating internal social differentiation. He argues that the new constructions evident in Pre-Classic sites created different zones subject to differential access, serving to discriminate between people in ways not possible prior to the existence of those arenas of action. Drawing on data from the Pacific Coast, he documents the beginnings of this process in the elaboration of what appears to be a very large residence which was the setting for more public activity than was typical of other houses. This is followed in the region by the construction of freestanding mounds of monumental scale that Love suggests may have been built as shrines or temples for specific residential groups whose houses encompass the larger structures. By the end of the Pre-Classic, monumental architecture formed new specialized spatial settings including ballcourts and enclosed patios.

Love emphasizes the ways that new monumental construction would have transformed day-to-day experience, ranging from requiring modification of previous patterns of movement through sites to creating differences between those with differential access to the new features. The architectural innovations created new spatial settings that controlled and habituated residents to newly defined, or at least acknowledged, internal social distinctions. Love puts special emphasis on the way that monumental architecture created a center and peripheries. He argues that differences in material culture within households parallel changes at the larger scale, creating an elite distinguished by consumption of stylistically distinctive materials and exotic materials. Hendon echoes some of these themes, arguing that the construction of specialized structures as settings for ritual within the small-scale residential group was in part a competitive response to the construction of other settings for ceremony outside the confines of the house compound. Hammond's description of the correlation between new monumental construction (of a platform, pyramid, and stela complex) at Cuello in the Late Pre-Classic testifies to the same injection of spatial segregation in the intimate confines of residential space. At Cuello this transformation is accompanied by innovations in the scale and form of caches and burials, including the differentiation of some males as subject to privileged burial and other persons as objects for inclusion in graves.

The inextricable connections that Love and Hendon illuminate between transformations within the small-scale, face-to-face context of the household

and the large-scale settings that monumental architecture and art newly created are also fundamental to the arguments advanced by Ann Cyphers. Cyphers' work at San Lorenzo has documented the presence of a monument workshop associated with the remains of a residential group. Large-scale and special materials distinguish at least one of the buildings in this group. Cyphers notes the possibility that the workshop was joined to this building by a walled enclosure, creating a segregated physical setting for attached craft specialization.

Cyphers also introduces a discussion of the use of monumental sculpture to mark locations outside the center as of particular significance. She characterizes Loma del Zapote, 3 km from the San Lorenzo plateau, as a hinterland of that center. The monuments whose placement, alteration, and relationships she documents at Loma del Zapote were material media for the incorporation of a wider spatial expanse into a social landscape. As Love argues for the Pacific Coast, through monumental construction and the use of stone sculpture, the scale of social space was broadened and at the same time broken up into different kinds of places. The different possibilities for action posed by the variety of places newly defined through the use of architecture and monuments are at the core of the social differentiation that we recognize as the distinctive product of the Pre-Classic revolution.

Emphasizing the construction in Pre-Classic Maya sites of more formalized house platform groups, and of monumental constructions joined to each other by processional ways, William M. Ringle demonstrates that here, as in the Pacific coastal region discussed by Love, new forms of construction transformed the space within the center into more differentiated settings. Ringle argues that concurrent with the construction of new spatial settings, there is a shift in the location of ritual action from the house compound to the areas of monumental construction and even to the processional ways themselves. The multiplication of different spatial settings within sites would also have increased the grounds for distinctions between the individuals acting within those settings. As Joyce, Hammond, Marcus, Hendon, and Love show, archaeological remains from Pre-Classic households demonstrate the existence of a number of cross-cutting distinctions established in part through the practice of ritual and craft production. The segregation of action in space that created the broader Pre-Classic landscape was accomplished through material changes that began in the households with the construction of distinctive kinds of residential settings.

GIVING MEANING TO THE PRE-CLASSIC LANDSCAPE

Ringle addresses key questions about the meanings that monumental architecture must have had to have engaged the necessary communal labor for con-

struction. He argues that among the Pre-Classic Maya it is not possible to demonstrate the existence, *before* these works were undertaken, of an elite that could have exercised coercive power. He suggests that buildings were seen as fixed points in a flow of energy or spirit through space and time, and had significant value to the people who constructed them as materializations of that flow and the union of space and time it accomplished. He argues that within the "cityscape," processions between different architectural settings were enactments of social relations given sacred sanction through ritual.

The incorporation of a broader landscape in Pre-Classic societies was also clearly accompanied by the impression of meaning on space and on different natural features. Cave sites with Pre-Classic art, such as Oxtotitlan, Guerrero (Grove 1970), extend to an extreme periphery the construction of different kinds of places that Love suggests is made possible by the development of monumental architecture and art. To these cave sites, we can now add the likelihood that water sources were incorporated in Pre-Classic sacred geography. At Laguna Manatí, Ponciano Ortiz and María del Carmen Rodríguez have documented one of the most complex sequences of Pre-Classic ritual yet known at such a marked site on the landscape. The highly structured nature of the deposits at this site suggests the routinization of the ceremonies conducted there. Ann Cyphers suggests that a central theme of monument use at San Lorenzo was the control of water. Ortiz and Rodríguez compare the setting of Laguna Manatí with other Pre-Classic sites placed in relation to natural hills, such as Chalcatzingo's location at the base of Cerro Chalcatzingo. Their argument echoes Ringle's explicit identification, based on later Classic Maya data, of pyramids as built representations of sacred mountains.

David C. Grove takes on the systematic task of providing an analysis of the incorporation of features of a sacred geography into the social world and of replication of these in sacred landscapes. He explores the complex intersections of center and periphery, architecture and natural features at a series of Pre-Classic centers. His argument extends beyond the general propositions of Love, Ringle, and Cyphers to incorporate more specific features of the symbolic and representational content of monumental art used in creating sacred landscapes.

Grove shows that the monuments that occur in different segments of the differentiated spaces created by placements of architecture feature particular themes or groups of themes. A general distinction between monuments with mythic narratives and those with images of rulership is repeatedly associated with the segregation of a political center from its periphery. Distinctive spatial settings in the center are further embellished and given specific inflections of meaning through the distributions of particular kinds of monuments. Grove's

analysis in fact suggests that one of the motivations for the creation of Pre-Classic monumental art may have been the desire by new elites to reinforce limitations on free action in new spaces within sites created by innovations in architecture.

Grove argues that monumental art marked the periphery of individual centers as equivalent to the encompassing natural world, and through depiction of cosmological scenes, as equivalent to the distant past (compare Helms 1979, 1988). This particularly dramatic use of art may be an unusually clear example of the way the limitations of action in new spaces were defined through symbolic means. Marking a spatial periphery as a supernatural location, the monumental art discussed by Grove also advances the claim that only those competent to deal with the supernatural can deal with spatial distance.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the spatial reorganization of Pre-Classic sites through innovations in monumental architecture and art is most evident at the small scale of the household and the medium scale of the political center with its periphery. But the Pre-Classic revolution also involved, for the first time, the definition of an even larger scale that we recognize today as Mesoamerica. For elites with the asserted ability to deal with the supernatural world and ancestors placed symbolically beyond the edge of the individual polity, long-distance connections assumed a great weight. The material display of such connections embodied in portable art with common iconographic themes and in the use of materials such as greenstone and iron ore, especially for distinctive costumes, is evidence for the emergence of this ultimate sphere of interaction in the Mesoamerican Pre-Classic.

The papers in this volume contribute to identifying those factors that ultimately define Mesoamerican civilization as an object of study. We hope that the dimensions of variation they single out—internal differentiations within the face-to-face confines of the household, the division of space through the use of monumental architecture and art, and the marking of different spatial domains through symbolic media—will continue to engage the attention of scholars exploring the distinctive phenomena of the Pre-Classic period.

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