

This is an extract from:

Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica

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Published by

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection

Washington, D.C.

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Washington, D.C.

Printed in the United States of America

www.doaks.org/etexts.html

*Commentary: Ritual, Social Identity, and Cosmology:
Hard Stones and Flowing Water*

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With the topics of ritual, social identity, and cosmology that guided the symposium, broad cultural interpretations are at stake in our treatment of the archaeological record. While many layers or dimensions of meaning can be addressed among these topics, a tension exists among perspectives in this volume regarding the degree of emphasis on the social and more particularistic on the one hand and the cosmological and more general on the other. I will add to this tension, as it seems likely that it may have been recognized, even sought, in the past.

I selected two themes to explore, stone and water, that were highlighted in two of the papers presented Sunday morning when I served as a discussant. Ponciano Ortíz and María del Carmen Rodríguez' presentation on El Manatí and Ann Cyphers' contribution on San Lorenzo dealt with Olmec ritual practices or monumental sculpture and constructions. Papers by David Grove, Michael Love, and William Ringle are also concerned with the monumental and its implications.

SACRED STONES

... monuments of its own magnificence ...

William Butler Yeats, 1928, in Rosenthal 1986: 102

Cyphers' evidence at San Lorenzo leads her to comment that stone itself may have been sacred. This remark and the observations by Ringle about the functions of monumentality stimulated me to reconsider how we think about

Olmec sacred stones. By “sacred” I mean related to spiritual, transcendental, or supernatural properties and requiring or inspiring reverence or devotion.

Cyphers found an area devoted to recarving of stone monuments (see also Porter 1990) and offerings made to a monument set aside for recarving. If the stones were sacred, this suggests a general meaning, an element of the Olmec view of the essential character of the cosmos. But can we rule out alternatives? More particularistic social factors could be reflected as well. Rulership commemoration or the individual(s) commissioning monuments (including ones that conveyed sacred themes) may have led to lineage or social group offerings to monuments through memory and continued ritual observance.

With greater time lapse, ritual practices directed at carved monuments may still occur. For example, a colossal head at the later Pacific Coast site of El Baul is the object of recent ritual dissociated from its now-unknown ancient role(s). We cannot argue that the stone *per se* is sacred in this later context, as the scarcity of carved monuments and especially the representational quality of this carving are sufficient to account for its present selection for ritual. Without the carved visage, it is questionable that the boulder would be the object of special interest, as there are many large rocks in streams in the area. A parallel exists between the supra-ordinary context of ritual and the unusual character of the monument in the environment.

A few years ago the state of Veracruz was scoured for carved sculptures by a former governor for the inauguration of a new building for the state museum of anthropology. If the stone monuments were not sacred to the Gulf Olmec, they are partly so today—valued emblems of the past, representatives of social continuity, contributors to a modern cultural identity, yet claimed and utilized by people in selected localities and thus acquiring a new, specific social meaning and function. The intrinsic qualities of carved monuments and the particular social contexts in which they function continue in a dynamic relation.

For comparison, can we posit that the Manatí offerings of wooden busts and staffs, in addition to celts and other items, indicate that wood was sacralized? Do wooden carvings help us understand the case for sacred stones? Perhaps Olmec celt offerings elsewhere also had wooden materials included, and the use of wood was not unique to El Manatí. However, hard tropical woods would be a much less scarce material than stone for the Gulf Olmec, unless a particular rare species had properties that others lacked.

Helms (1987) has written about the role of polished, black, wooden artifacts in the Caribbean, providing an ethnohistoric parallel. A particular species of palm yielded desirable qualities, and certain artisans possessed the expertise to process and work it. She argues on the basis of widespread evidence among

native societies, including Mesoamerica, that black and blue-black were associated with cosmological realms and supernaturals. In the case of Gulf Olmec carved stone, as well as the Manatí wood busts, sometimes paint or pigment was added. Ortiz and Rodríguez (1989: 37, 44) describe red-orange paint covering much of a wooden staff and part of the faces of some wooden busts, which suggests that dark color was not a critical, unvarying feature. Nor is the finish of the busts consistent, indicating that the degree of polish was not crucial.

The ancient Manatí wooden objects do not provide a close parallel with the Caribbean case, but one of the Manatí busts is oddly shaped, perhaps to accommodate the wood used, and shows an adjustment to the presence of a knot (Ortiz and Rodríguez 1989: 44). Thus, on occasion, pieces of wood may have been employed that limited the scope of the carver, which might indicate some limitation in supply. However, no species identifications are available yet, and it is not possible to argue that the wood selected was scarce.

The Gulf Olmec focus on stone as a scarce material for artifact offerings and carving would not in itself constitute a case for sacred stone without the suggestive evidence of offerings to San Lorenzo monuments undergoing recycling. Many exotic materials circulated in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica and were endowed with special significance through prestige associations, workmanship, and their roles in restricted ritual contexts; the treatment afforded them does not imply that the raw material itself was sacred, unless unworked and thoroughly broken pieces were offered the same treatment as finished, complete ones. The carved symbolism of Olmec monuments appears to be crucial in their treatment rather than the stone itself, as a recycled monument was provided with offerings, but chips and fragments from stoneworking were not.

Subsistence Stones

Mundane stone artifacts reveal other aspects of Olmec ritual and contribute to the idea that stone itself was not sacred, but that its worked form and symbolism in ritual could make it so. Petrography at San Lorenzo demonstrated that different outcrops were used preferentially for monuments versus metates, apparently for functional reasons (Coe and Diehl 1980: 397–404), although the basalt for both was imported from Cerro Cintepec in the Tuxtla Mountains. The distance involved in procurement is one link between subsistence implements and carved monuments.

In their presentation at Dumbarton Oaks, Ortiz and Rodríguez noted that scattered mortars and metates, celts, and beads were among the earliest offerings in the El Manatí spring-fed pool (see also Ortiz and Rodríguez 1989: 31–32); also, two natural blocks of stone bore grooves that might have been used for

sharpening celts. Later offerings there consisted of groups of celts in more formal arrangements, but grinding tools no longer were included. Two radio-carbon dates are mentioned for the oldest Manatí deposits, at about 1600 b.c. (Ortiz 1993: 18).

Much later at La Venta, some celts in offerings bear evidence of use, possibly in agriculture (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: 137–139). Sometimes Olmec celts are made of rarer greenstone, and some bear astonishing, glassy polish, seemingly making them labor-intensive versions of mundane objects. Yet both workaday and elaborate examples were placed in ritual caches. At La Venta, some “pseudo-celts” were fabricated, perhaps as surrogates for actual implements (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: 135). The celt seems to be the crucial notion rather than the material.

If mortars and metates are assumed to have been tied mainly to women’s social roles in grinding maize or other foods, and if celts are assumed to have been associated with men’s roles, including clearing forest for horticulture, then ritual offerings of these subsistence artifacts, both made from imported materials, initially involved two genders at El Manatí. The choice of celts and metates as appropriate offerings may reflect both their historical agricultural importance in land use and in transforming plants and the necessity of obtaining the materials nonlocally in the Gulf lowlands. Regardless of whether early domesticates were crucial in lowland subsistence or, instead, in feasting and social aggrandizement (compare Clark and Blake 1994), the significance of the implements in transformations remains the same. However, a connection with leaders’ activities, especially rituals, would help explain the tendency to favor special imported materials and high labor investment in celts. The roots of transformational meanings would extend back into the Archaic period as food production was developed and increased in importance. Here I am looking backward to derive significance from historical antecedents rather than forward to the Late Post-Classic period, which has supplied many of the meanings imputed to Pre-Classic remains.

At El Manatí it appears that a segregation of ritual activities led to the predominance of men’s(?) implements among later ground stone offerings, although Ortiz and Rodríguez (1989) interpret some of the busts as representing women. Marcus (this volume) notes a segregation of what she assigns as male and female ritual activities in the early Oaxaca record. Details of dating for El Manatí are not yet published. Initiation of offerings in the Early Pre-Classic period is suggested by Ortiz and Rodríguez (this volume). If a degree of segregation of ritual contexts occurred early among the Gulf Olmec, it became a rather consistent structural feature in view of the continuation of celt offerings without metates in the Middle Pre-Classic period at La Venta.

Thus manos and metates, like celts and monuments, were acquired from distant banks of raw material, but grinding tools were not placed in public or sacred offerings except for the earliest and least formalized Manatí offerings. Yet both grinding stones and celts were crucial in the transformation of the “raw to the cooked.” If this parallel is accepted, we have an indication of differential social valuation of subsistence stones. Rather than conforming to a general, cosmological notion of sacred stones, I suggest that celts and grinding tools had meanings that developed from their historical roles, specifically from the extraction of resources from nature, and initially both were selected as part of a narrow range of materials offered back, perhaps to the underworld. Grinding tools were eventually excluded from public ritual practices. We can view subsistence stones as conveying information about changing social relations as well as ritual.¹

Massive Stones

Mass in carved stone has several potential implications. Monument size can be viewed in economic terms. The labor investment to quarry and move multi-ton blocks may have made recycling of stone attractive to Gulf Olmec leaders, as Cyphers (this volume) remarks. If we anticipate a reduction sequence of monuments that shrank steadily in size through recarving, it is striking that the largest—thrones (altars), heads, and some stelae—emphasize people and leadership themes, while medium and smaller-sized carvings also represent creatures, including supernaturals, with more strictly mythic or sacred themes (compare Grove, this volume). Massive stones seem to have been devoted first to key presentations about leadership, supporting Grove and Gillespie’s (1992) characterization of the Gulf Olmec tradition as emphasizing a cult of the ruler.

However, massive stones are more than just “fuss and feathers,” that is, the sacred-social appurtenances of the person and prestige of the ruler. Trigger’s (1990) exposition of the rationale for monumentality stresses its flagrant viola-

¹Graham (1992) traces possible later historical links among Olmec cached celts, those used in lowland Maya kingly regalia, and Costa Rican celts adapted as ornaments and grave goods. He notes that in Costa Rica ornately carved metates also developed as symbols of chiefly power and wealth. He interprets such objects as “a new language of power”; special labor invested in them represents wealth—“a concrete index of the devotion and direction of past human labor” (Graham 1992: 169). In comparison, I view the Manatí metates and celts as symbolic because of their transformational roles. However, their fabrication from imported stone is congruent with Graham’s perspective. Graham (1992: 175) interprets later, special celts in Costa Rica as symbolic of agriculture, warfare, and sacrifice. The earliest examples at Manatí, however, cannot be directly tied to warfare and sacrifice, except that they, like other items and some human bone, are offerings in a sacred place.

tion of the “principle of least effort.” Monumentality was conspicuous consumption that objectified the social power used to mobilize human labor. The monumental achieved a universal message by its violation of a universally understood principle. Trigger (1990) continues with a consideration of additional aspects of monumentality and elite legitimization, both across and within classes. Such messages about social power have many ramifications (e.g., Ringle, this volume, and Grove, this volume, for explorations of how settlement space was orchestrated symbolically with major monuments and architecture).

Another universal dimension is important for understanding Olmec carved monuments. In a calculus developed by Helms (1993), geographic, temporal, and spiritual distances occur along horizontal and vertical spatial dimensions and on a time scale (calibrated through events). The distant and less known is equated with the supernatural or sacred. These concepts can have expression at varied scales, with space divided along the same lines when domestic and community or settlement space is contrasted with natural surroundings.

In Mesoamerican schema, there was a vertical axis along which the underworld, the earthly plane, and the celestial world were closely articulated; the surrounding natural environment—its hills, springs, or caves—offered access to the underworld. For this reason, natural features of the landscape likely were seen as cosmologically significant. Massive stone monuments have the weight, solidity, and durability of immutable parts of the landscape. Massive stones brought to riverine sites on the coastal plain have a character different from that of tools. Their limited portability assimilates them to the landscape and nature, and, once they are carved, either their visible (or historically remembered) imagery or their embodiment of qualities of nature may affect their treatment. Perhaps this leads us back to “sacred stones,” but only big ones. By sheer size they assimilate to the landscape and become part of the essential; any observer would have to mobilize a social effort to shift them. The same is true for massive architecture.

Trigger (1990) comments on the communication of power by physical scale that can be apprehended personally and thus universally, for example, by observers who walk across enormous architectural constructions. Love (this volume) comments on the fixity and obtrusiveness of monumental architecture. Surely physical scale is as important a universal message as conspicuous consumption. Gulf Olmec stone monuments at riverine sites fuse the qualities ascribed to the geographically distant with the fixity of the natural landscape where outcrops and hills do not change appreciably in the span of a human life. Alteration of the natural and sacred transforms it into part of the immediate social realm and requires mobilization of social action, a fitting display and

confirmation of a ruler's power. Helms (1993) discusses the importance of transformation, travel, and the distant, dangerous, and dimly understood for the expression of a ruler's authority.

A recycling of stone monuments does not undermine these ideas until the stone is so decreased in size that it no longer is particularly difficult to move, although even small carvings retain their special qualities derived from importation. For centers located near stone sources, like Tres Zapotes, monumental stone presents a message derived from physical scale, not distance.

Cowgill (1993) asked whether we can elaborate a "middle range theory of mind" that identifies general cognitive principles shaping cultural particulars of the archaeological record. If there are universally accessible messages in massive stones and in the monumental in general, we can discern some elements of such a theory. Gulf Olmec monuments at riverine centers were obtained from deposits well removed spatially; their presence drew the horizontally distant, more mysterious, and sacred to the center in a violation of the principle of least effort. Monumental sculptures and constructions are material symbols in an accessible, universal language of physical size, weight, and durability. In a Mesoamerican context, at least, these monuments called attention to the vertical axis involving celestial and underground regions—both, like the stones, relatively inaccessible; monument size and relative immobility provided a link with features of the landscape that naturalized cultural and social messages in worked stone. Monumental stones, suitably manipulated, constituted a nexus of social and sacred statements. The sacred quality of massive worked stone, which required labor mobilization for its expression, became thoroughly entangled with its social messages.

FLOWING WATER

... where lies a coffer burly all of blocks ...
And the water warbles over into, filleted with glassy grassy quicksilvery
shives ...

Gerald Manley Hopkins, in Gardner 1963: 86

As Sullivan notes (1991: 207), "water comes in different forms; its containers are essential structures of the cosmos. Waters inhabit the sky and fill its clouds, waters dwell in named mountains, spill out of mountain springs and caves, cascade down." The El Manatí spring analyzed by Ortíz and Rodríguez formed a natural shrine illustrating the same preoccupation with spring water suggested by Cyphers for the San Lorenzo drain system, which Krotser (1973) also viewed as ritually important. Cyphers' excavations indicate that one San Lorenzo

pond postdates the Pre-Classic, making this aspect of water control questionable in the Olmec repertoire.

One perspective on water control emphasizes its practical functions. Water is not a scarce resource in Gulf Olmec country, although water quality is variable because of seasonal flooding and the sediment load of rivers. In some Veracruz locales today, such as in the Mixtequilla on the west side of the Lower Papaloapan basin, hand-dug wells tap the water table, providing domestic water and allowing pump or “pot” irrigation during the dry season. Whether this possibility existed in southern Veracruz and Tabasco is not clear. In a hot climate, high water consumption is important physiologically, and water is often used for more frequent bathing.

Do these functional considerations help us understand the San Lorenzo stone channels and the Manatí spring offerings? Not really. Rather than performing a unique practical function, natural springs probably embodied a dramatic emission of water from the underworld and, symbolically, the dynamic quality of water in seasonal rains and floods that provided for agricultural success and regulated aspects of fishing and travel. At least at some sites, the Gulf Olmec were concerned with water and its control and integration into the layout of centers. This may have set in motion a continuing pattern of symbolic water manipulation that can be observed in the trans-Isthmian lowlands. As I indicate below, water was important as part of a simultaneously sacred and practical landscape. Water also figured in architectural planning.

*Of Land and Water*²

To consider the implications of a preoccupation with symbolic water control, I briefly sketch the historical outline of a trans-Isthmian tradition that unfolds in post-Olmec times and contrast it with other parts of Mesoamerica. El Balsamo, a Middle or Late Pre-Classic center on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, had a shallow pool constructed on the top of one mound (Clewlow and Wells 1987: 31).³ At the center of Izapa on the Pacific Coast of Chiapas, a subterranean stone-lined channel enters a boulder-faced, buried reservoir near the largest mound, Mound 60. A surface pond is positioned in front of this mound (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 167–263). At Izapa small springs flow to the Río Izapa, and effigy and plain troughs and basins occur in some num-

² This adapts a phrase from Nietschmann's (1973) title.

³ Shook (Shook and Hatch 1978) interpreted a low area immediately west of El Balsamo as a formal reservoir, but it is not integrated with central architecture and remains undated. Shook observed it in the rainy season and represents it as rectangular. In the dry season this form was not apparent to me.

bers, some placed to catch or direct spring water. Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 103) interpret the troughs and basins as evidence of concepts of sacred spring water. Pond construction is continued in some Classic period centers on the Pacific coast; Voorhies' (1989: 105) map of Acapetahua shows two such features near major mounds in the Classic portion of the site.

By the Late Pre-Classic to Classic period on the Gulf Coast, pond systems became a fixture of public space and site planning in the Mixtequilla region. Ponds, often squared off, are integrated with formal architecture. At Cerro de las Mesas, temple platforms and other public constructions ring a formal pond system (Stark and Heller 1991), while at Azuzules, another Classic center in the Mixtequilla, a pond surrounds the formal construction, making the center almost an island (Stark, unpublished field data). At centers along the Lower Río Cotaxtla, Daneels (1997) recorded architectural arrangements in which slope and connections to the river channel would have recharged ponds with water and fish during the rainy season. The geographic and temporal extent of these Classic period patterns in the Gulf lowlands deserves further study. In northern Veracruz at Tajín, probably in the Epi-Classic or Early Postclassic, stream diversion or runoff catchments from constructions at Tajín Chico fed an artificial cistern that may be depicted on low-relief carvings (Cortés 1989). The Tajín cistern and drains reflect a combination of practical and symbolic functions, improving drainage from built areas and establishing a body of water for rituals adjacent to public buildings. Generally in the trans-Isthmian lowlands, encirclement and horizontal axial proximity of water and sacred buildings were emphasized.

The symbolic importance of springs and other aquatic features is documented in the Mexican highlands as well, but with somewhat different expression. The Middle Pre-Classic center of Chalcatzingo, Morelos, was located adjacent to a spring, and there is water symbolism on bas-reliefs at the site. The dammed and partly channeled stream flow draining the hill behind the center is fed by a spring. The stream seems to have been directed into agricultural production below, but also to have fed a series of ponds, where it was stored for domestic use or pot irrigation on terraces (Angulo 1993: 195–208). Perhaps the closest parallel to trans-Isthmian features is ponds constructed inside caves and rockshelters on the hillside above the center, where the pools likely served in a ritual setting (Angulo 1993: 198; Grove and Cyphers 1987: 53–54).

At Teopantecuanitlán, Guerrero, also a center with Olmec-related art, a stone-lined channel probably drained an impoundment pond fed by runoff and a spring originating in the hill behind the site (Martínez Donjuan 1986: 64–65). At these two highland sites, practical functions of water control have overshadowed the symbolic qualities of spring water and pools in archaeological interpretations.

At Cholula, Puebla, construction of the Great Pyramid began as early as the Late Pre-Classic period; the pyramid is situated at a spring that still supplies water in wells at a shrine (McCafferty and McCafferty n.d.). Later in the Terminal Pre-Classic and Classic periods at Teotihuacan in the Basin of Mexico, river canalization played a symbolic role in the architectural layout of the city, as analyzed by Sugiyama (1993). Springs occur today, mainly within the southern portion of the city, but do not seem to have been a major focus of public architecture (Millon 1973: 38, 47). Stone drainpipes within the cave-tunnel under the Pyramid of the Sun suggested the presence of a spring to Hayden (1981: 3), but other supporting evidence of a spring is unavailable. Barba et al. (1990: 431, 435) argue that some other cave-tunnels below the city contained springs. Apart from the ambiguous case of the Pyramid of the Sun, springs do not seem to have been magnets for architectural effort, even though sacred springs (or water imagery) are portrayed in a Tepantitla residential mural (Kubler 1967: figs. 4, 5; Hayden 1981: 5). Millon, Drewitt, and Cowgill (1973: 9, 17, 18, 77) suggest four reservoirs occurred in the city; they are located among residential compounds rather than integrated into central precincts, but two are near major structures, the Ciudadela and the Pyramid of the Moon.

Still later in the Post-Classic period, the position of Tenochtitlán in the lake system of the Basin of Mexico and the aquatic symbolism of some offerings in the Templo Mayor have been suggested to signify a cosmogram (Broda 1987; Matos 1987). Thus a series of major centers in the central highlands demonstrates an interest both in sacred natural water sources and in the integration of architecture with them. Perhaps this tradition underlies the Nahuatl concept for “city-state,” *altepetl*. “The word itself is a slightly altered form of the metaphorical doublet *in atl, in tepetl*, ‘the water(s), the mountain(s),’ and thus it refers in the first instance to territory, but what is meant is primarily an organization of people holding sway over a given territory” (Lockhart 1992: 14). However, with the possible exception of a pit or well within the Ciudadela at Teotihuacan (Sugiyama 1993: 121), these highland cases do not follow in detail the layout principles discernible in the trans-Isthmian lowlands, where the proximity of pools of water and sacred buildings was emphasized.

The integration of artificial water storage features with public architecture is not usually handled with such overt symbolism in the Maya Lowlands as in the trans-Isthmian lowlands. Practical functions of water storage are more obvious, and reservoirs are commonly placed near, but not formally integrated with, the layout of public architecture; instead, reservoirs are positioned to draw upon the catchment offered by formal complexes (Scarborough 1993). Edzna, Campeche, is an exception (Matheny et al. 1983: 67–82, 196, 200). Canals there

may have had multiple functions, such as providing drainage, domestic water, transport, aquatic resources, and defense (by surrounding the “fortress” at Edzna). However, Matheny et al. (1983: 80–81) note that the Great Canal is aligned toward a major building complex, Cinco Pisos, for 3 (of 12) km, as are several other canals. It is likely that canal orientation (or building placement) was in part symbolic. Two symmetrically placed ponds within the “fortress” also suggest a combination of practical and symbolic functions (Matheny et al. 1983: map 9). In sum, natural sources of water had symbolic importance at many Maya centers, for example, the cenote at Chichén Itzá (Tozzer 1957: 199), but, Edzna excepted, major architecture was not geared to incorporate bodies of water. “Adjacency” and convenience seem to be featured.

To what should we ascribe a continued interest in and elaboration of aquatic features in public space in the trans-Isthmian lowlands? Ponds have numerous potential functions: borrow pits for fill, reservoirs in the dry season (uncontaminated by stock), fish tanks, defensive isolation of the center if they encircle it, but, above all, a cosmologically significant setting for centers. Ponds contributed to an integrated arrangement of constructed earthen space with its buildings, interments, and offerings positioned beside the watery realm on which the land may have been conceived to have rested. Centers as elaborated in the Classic period of south-central Veracruz juxtaposed land and water in a fashion calculated to override the varied practical conveniences that ponds also offered.

Despite the cosmological implications of centers built “of land and water,” human intervention is obvious. Leaders organized or commanded the construction and thus inserted their presence into the order of the cosmos, despite the fact that these twin natural elements can be appreciated easily from the banks of rivers or along the Gulf coastline. As with monumental carving, architectural statements sculpted with earth and water sought to incorporate the essential qualities of the landscape and cosmos, yet they remain quintessentially social in their communications.

In sum, I have explored how the manipulation of stones in ritual and the design of public space sought to naturalize social actions and relations in terms of fundamental properties of the cosmos—the world both as conceived and experienced. A tension between the particular and the general was inevitable. Because architectural and carved stone monuments were so intimately linked to early Gulf Olmec leadership in social hierarchies (as well as in post-Olmec societies), it is reasonable to view the ritual control of stones and water sources as the outcome of strategies of legitimation, whether consciously undertaken or simply favored in the varied efforts of leaders to elaborate and hold power. I doubt that the tension between the particular, or social, and general, or cosmo-

logical, is simply the optional variation in perspectives that we, as archaeologists, can bring to bear in analyzing the material record. Connected to a strategy of legitimization, this tension is an inherent outcome of past actions.

STUDYING RITUAL, SOCIAL IDENTITY, AND COSMOLOGY

One problem with interpretative approaches that seek meaning in ritual, social identity, and cosmology is to decide which among many meanings are convincing. This introduces dilemmas raised explicitly by postprocessualist archaeology in recent years, although Mesoamericanist investigations of symbolism have a very long history.

From a postprocessual perspective, the material record is supercharged—not merely suited to analysis of economic or social information but suffused with culturally constituted meaning governing and negotiated by people, past and present. There are multiple meanings, and our own meanings intervene between us and the record from the past. From this perspective, there is a profusion of “voices” from and about the past. For example, regarding Gulf Olmec imagery, the jaguar, toad, rattlesnake, caiman, possibly shark, and fish have spoken to someone, at least (Coe 1989; Furst 1981; Grove 1987; Joyce et al. 1991; Luckert 1976; Stocker, Meltzoff, and Armsey 1980), yet it is impossible for all of these interpretations to be accurate about the same material objects unless, as sometimes suggested, Olmec representations blend attributes from this bestiary. Complementary distributions of motifs on different kinds of vessels imply that at least some of these interpretations apply to different representations (Joyce et al. 1991).

In contrast to this example of a degree of cacophony in “voices,” recently Lounsbury (1991: 810) wrote in regard to Proskouriakoff’s (1960) and Berlin’s (1958) pivotal work on Maya writing, which had countered conventional wisdom: “Their papers embodied such elegant detective work, were so thoroughly researched and carefully crafted, and had their conclusions stated so cautiously, that no knowledgeable reader could fail to appreciate them and be persuaded.” The symposium papers in this volume recognize both diversity and shared patterns in the Pre-Classic period and suggest that we can indeed discriminate among alternative accounts of past symbolism, ritual, social identity, and cosmology in terms of how much evidence is accounted for and how parsimoniously.

The new analyses and discoveries reported in this volume are particularly exciting with regard to the detail and variety that are recognized for social groups and ritual activities. Many new questions can be raised as a result. Does El Manatí reflect smaller-scale community ritual (people who did not haul in massive stones), different rituals at springs, or simply diversity in practices among communities? Does the recycling of San Lorenzo area monuments and the

possibility of changing monument arrangements imply diversity and fluidity in Olmec ritual practices? Or does it mean that the instability of chiefdoms led later rulers to capitalize on the raw material of earlier monuments, reverently perhaps, but subverting them to their own sculptural programs?

Instability among Pre-Classic societies is a particularly crucial topic that I hope will be clarified with continuing research. Part of what is at stake are competing groups—some of the multiple “voices” in the past. Cohen (1978: 56–57) has argued that chiefdoms are unstable and fissiparous and that states are not, because they effectively combat such tendencies. Likely this contrast is overdrawn, but it is a significant issue. Although the lifespan of centers is not directly tied to the orderly succession of rulers, fragmentation of a chiefdom might be expected to “demote” a paramount center severely.

In apparent contradiction to the evidence of instability among historic chiefdoms, a number of early centers in the Mesoamerican Early and Middle Pre-Classic continued to be important during a fairly lengthy span of time and do not suggest the degree of instability predicted by some theories. Low population densities during the Early and Middle Pre-Classic periods point to favorable conditions for agriculturalists in respect of available land; these conditions argue for expectations concerning the stability of social hierarchies different from those exemplified during historic times. Perhaps dissident aspirants to high office more easily relocated, leaving centers and factions that continued their roles. These are among the questions that must be left for future research. In establishing new findings and demonstrating the importance of new questions, the studies in this volume highlight the importance of ritual, social identity, and cosmology in understanding the Mesoamerican Pre-Classic.

Acknowledgments I thank the contributors for the stimulus their papers provided, as well as David Grove, Rosemary Joyce, and Dumbarton Oaks for their invitation to participate in the symposium “Ritual, Social Identity, and Cosmology.” John Chance, George Cowgill, David Grove, Joyce Marcus, Geoffrey McCafferty, Vernon Scarborough, Saburo Sugiyama, and Barbara Voorhies provided helpful comments or information, but they are not responsible for the content of this essay.

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