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SPECIAL SECTION: RETHINKING THE OLMECS AND EARLY FORMATIVE MESOAMERICA

INTRODUCTION

In the handsome exhibition catalog *Descubridores del pasado en Mesoamérica*, Beatriz de la Fuente (2001) summarized the history of Olmec archaeological studies. De la Fuente (2001:56-57) identifies four "crucial moments" (one might say "milestones" or "turning points") in the history of Olmec archaeology: (1) the employment of the term "Olmec" to define a distinctive art style by Marshall H. Saville in 1929; the acceptance of the term and the assertion of the "mother culture" concept by Alfonso Caso and Miguel Covarrubias at a meeting of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología in 1942; the Dumbarton Oaks conference on the Olmecs in 1967 which addressed issues ranging from Olmec style, iconography, and chronology to relationships between the Gulf Olmecs and contemporaneous societies; and (4) the reconsideration beginning around 1990 of new archaeological data and interpretations from projects at major Gulf Olmec sites like El Manatí, San Lorenzo, and La Venta. The following brief sketch draws on de la Fuente's masterful historiographic essay as well as additional summaries by Bernal (1969:28-32), Miller (2006: 21-41), and Pool (2007:1-2, 34-65).

The history of Olmec studies opens with the discovery of the first-known Olmec colossal head by José María Melgar y Serrano in Hueyapan, Veracruz in 1862 (later designated as Monument A of Tres Zapotes) and the description of the Kunz Axe by the mineralogist George Kunz for the American Museum of Natural History in 1890. Marshall H. Saville in 1900 published a commentary extending Kunz's discussion of the eponymous votive axe noting that it represents a jaguar mask and presaging later discussions of the Olmec art style. The next four decades of pioneering explorations and research by Leopoldo Batres, Hermann Beyer, Franz Blom, William Henry Holmes, Oliver La Farge, Saville, Eduard Seler, Caecilie Seler-Sachs, George Vaillant, Albert Weyerstall, and others in Olman, or the Gulf Coast region of Veracruz and Tabasco, constitute the antecedents of scientific excavation in the region. By 1929 Saville was able to define Olmec style (*nota bene*: an ancient art style, not an archaeological culture) in terms of a consistent set of diverse and specific traits such as the human body with feline face, downturned feline mouth, projecting upper lip, cleft head, and so on.

Matthew W. Stirling, assisted at different times by Philip Drucker and Waldo Wedel, launched the first real archaeological research in Olman in late 1938 with excavations at Tres Zapotes and later at La Venta, Cerro de las Mesas, and several sites on the Río Chiquito, including Tenochtitlan, San Lorenzo, and Potrero Nuevo. Stirling would direct eight seasons of Olmec archaeology sponsored by the National Geographic Society and the Smithsonian Institution of Washington from 1939 to 1946. Marion Stirling Pugh (1981) provides a warmly personal perspective on these projects. Bernal (1969:31) noted that the Stirling explorations "form the solid foundations of Olmec archaeology," and they provided an impetus for the beginings of debate about the nature of Olmec civilization. More precisely, they set the stage for the second *Mesa Redonda* of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, at which specialists gathered to debate the meaning of Stirling's discoveries and their chronological position. At this meeting, Alfonso Caso famously proclaimed the Olmecs to be the "cultura madre" of all later Mesoamerican civilizations, and Miguel Covarrubias offered a detailed definition of the basic traits of Olmec art (de la Fuente 2001:60-61; Pool 2007:45-46). The work of Stirling and his associates established the antiquity of Olmec civilization. Radiometric dating would arrive a few years later to confirm it. Still, not all specialists, especially Drucker, were immediately convinced of the early dating (Pool 2007:48-50). With regard to Olmec primacy and dominance, while we generally accommodate the Olmecs and Early to Middle Formative Mesoamerican cultures within a matrix of ideas from "mother culture" to "sister cultures," multicentric lattices of interaction, and subtle nuances of intensity and directionality of cultural relationships (Pool 2007:15-17, 179-180), we should recall the extreme opposition to the primacy and antiquity of Olmec culture that existed in 1942 and even into the 1950s (Bernal 1969:31; Coe 1976:69; Diehl 2004:15). Indeed, the debate continues even as we write.

Archaeological work intensified in Olman with the work of Drucker, Robert Heizer, Robert Squier, Eduardo Contreras, Román Piña Chan, Roberto Gallegos, and Luis Covarrubias at La Venta in the 1950s and that of Michael D. Coe and Richard A. Diehl at San Lorenzo in the late 1960s (de la Fuente 2001: 60-61). Significant progress was also made in research on Formative period cultures elsewhere in Mesoamerica during the 1960s, especially with the work of Christine Neiderberger at Tlapacoya in the Chalco region of the southern end of the Basin of Mexico; the systematic survey of the Valley of Mexico by William T. Sanders, Jeffrey R. Parsons, and Robert S. Santley; and the Valley of Oaxaca project directed by Kent V. Flannery which involved the excavation of the important Formative period sites of San José Mogote and Tierras Largas (Pool 2007:55).

The landmark Dumbarton Oaks conference on the Olmecs in 1967 and its publication the following year (Benson 1968) captured

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the excitement of new data and interpretations in the late 1960s, especially with regard to views on relationships between Gulf Olmecs and their contemporaries (de la Fuente 2001:62; Pool 2007:56). Another enormously influential volume of the time was Bernal's *El mundo olmeca* (1968; English translation 1969) which treats equally of Olmecs in Olman (metropolitan Olmecs), their Mesoamerican contemporaries, and the subsequent impact of both (de la Fuente 2001:62).

Unfortunately, we must curtail this brief introduction at this point. It would not be prudent or appropriate to attempt to summarize the flood of research and tremendous advances that have occurred in Olmec archaeology, epigraphy, and iconography since the early 1970s. We refer readers instead to the perceptive summaries of de la Fuente (2001) and Pool (2007, 2009), and the comments of David Cheetham and Jeffrey Blomster, below.

We offer this Special Section as an opportunity for reflection on the enormous advances achieved in studies of the Olmec world since a mysterious visage was first glimpsed by visitors to Hueyapan almost 150 years ago. We take no side in the current polemics, but instead encourage further contributions to this fascinating dialogue.

William R. Fowler
Geoffrey G. McCafferty

The Early Formative period represents a crucial time in Mesoamerican prehistory; complex societies appeared for the first time and the features that define Mesoamerica coalesced. Central to understanding this development is the Gulf Coast civilization known as the Olmecs. The Olmecs have always played a contested role in Mesoamerican archaeology, but the past two decades have been a particularly exciting time in Olmec studies, with an explosion of research involving both the Gulf Olmecs and their late Early Formative (ca. 1200-900/850 bc, uncalibrated; 1450-1000 BC, calibrated) contemporaries across Mesoamerica. New data have been generated by a variety of research projects, ranging from those focused on better defining San Lorenzo and its hinterland to those exploring Gulf Olmec interaction throughout Mesoamerica, with approaches including stylistic comparison and compositional sourcing of ceramics. The variety of approaches extends to the kinds of questions being explored, with scholars investigating myriad topics including the nature of Olmec subsistence, the modification of the landscape by the Olmecs, and the arrangements and hierarchies of monumental sculpture at San Lorenzo and its secondary centers. To understand the Olmecs, data are necessary from various regions of the Gulf Coast as well as from societies across Mesoamerica with whom they may have interacted. The diversity of recent questions and approaches has generated information that challenge old models and assumptions about the Gulf Olmecs and encourage us to think about their complex interactions at home and abroad in new ways.

Nowhere is the generation of new data more evident and fundamental than in Olman itself, the southern Gulf Coast area of Veracruz where Olmec culture originated and flourished. Over the past 20 years, Ann Cyphers and her colleagues have excavated the paramount Olmec site of San Lorenzo, building upon Coe and Diehl's (1980) earlier work and amassing a wealth of new data amenable to a host of research questions both within and beyond Olman (e.g., Di Castro and Cyphers 2006). An important addition to this new information comes from sites within the settlement hierarchy of San Lorenzo itself. For instance, to open this Special Section, **Carl Wendt**, provides data on household layout at El Remolino, commodity production, and the full range of ceramic vessels used by the settlement's residents. Similarly, **Olaf Jaime-Riveron** considers the production, morphology, and use of jade and serpentine objects from sites near the El Manatí spring southeast of San Lorenzo. Data from these and other projects near San Lorenzo are essential as Olmec scholars move forward with the comparative work necessary to gain a better understanding of Early Formative Gulf Olmec interaction with contemporary cultures elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

When considering Gulf Olmec contact with distant regions of Mesoamerica it must be stressed that the non-perishable material culture of greater Olman was not uniform during late Early Formative times. In fact, **Christopher Pool, Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos, Carmen Rodríguez Martínez, and Michael L. Loughlin** present data from Tres Zapotes and the Tuxtla Mountains (Arnold 2009) that indicate slight to considerable variation across the region, both in terms of style and classes of artifacts present. This variation demonstrates that not all San Lorenzo cultural practices—including those of a mundane nature—were present in neighboring Olman zones (see Pool 2007). Nor would we expect this large and diverse area to be homogenous in its material culture, although for decades many scholars have unwittingly used the concept of Gulf Olmec as a monolithic category. Systematic recording of precisely this kind of variability, although in its infancy, is critical for understanding Gulf Olmec interaction both within Olman and between Olman and other regions of Mesoamerica. Along similar lines, we should not assume that specific practices documented for outer zones of Olman were necessarily present at San Lorenzo, as has been argued in the debate on Olmec subsistence, for example, by Arnold (2009), who downplays San Lorenzo agriculture based on the importance of floodplain resources and limited impact of maize agriculture in the Tuxtla Mountains area. Understanding the heterogeneous nature of contemporaneous Olman societies represents a particularly exciting avenue of research.

Until quite recently, our understanding of Gulf Olmec interaction with distant cultures has been shaped almost entirely by versions of the so-called emulation model, advanced by Kent Flannery (1968) in a paper that challenged the prevailing, and generally unsupported, view that envisioned the Gulf Olmecs as an imperial polity. The emulation model itself, however, also remained unsupported, with ethnographic analogy used to promote the idea of distant groups receiving symbols from somewhat more complex contemporaries (the San Lorenzo Olmecs) only to reutilize such symbols in competitive displays, thereby enhancing the power of local elites operating within the confines of indigenous tradition. Over the years this view has transformed into what is often referred to as the peer-polity model, in which groups roughly comparable in sociopolitical complexity compete and interact with each other over long distances, leading to shared symbols with different local meanings and no group playing a dominant role in the interaction. As enduring as these models have been, other testable hypotheses

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certainly exist. The most pressing need, however, is to generate robust data sets amenable to comparison and, hence, relevant to the assessment of any model. In this Special Section we describe several efforts to address this need.

Blomster et al. (2005) recently published a chemical characterization study of Olmec style pottery. The report featured a large data base, involving some 1000 assays of ceramic pots and raw clays from several Mesoamerican regions, including the Gulf Coast and San Lorenzo. The startling results, showed that Olmec-style pots were made in all regions sampled, but only pots made in the vicinity of San Lorenzo moved between regions. While each region outside of Olman sampled in the study made local variants of Olmec pots, these do not appear to have been exchanged between regions and were not imported by the Olmecs at San Lorenzo. Despite strong reactions to these findings and the underlying methodology (Stoltman et al. 2005), the data are solid (Neff et al. 2006a, 2006b) and they answer several basic questions related to the production and distribution of Olmec-style pottery, both decorated (carved-incised) and fine-paste wares.

While chemical characterization data confirm that various non-Olmec Mesoamerican cultures received at least some of their Olmec-style pots directly or indirectly from the Gulf Coast, it tells us little of the social mechanisms or political impetus underlying the movement of the objects, why local imitations were made, and who made them. Was trade between Gulf Olmec peoples and those of distant regions and differing cultures direct or the product of down-the-line exchange? Were ceramic pots (and undoubtedly other ceramic and non-ceramic items) carried by Gulf Olmec traders, emissaries, or elites who interacted with local leaders that subsequently adopted or ignored Olmec cultural practices? Or did objects move between Gulf Olmec peoples in the homeland and immigrants residing in enclaves within foreign territories and communities? A host of additional questions could be posed, and no reason exists to assume that the answers, when and if they come, will be applicable to Mesoamerica as a whole. In fact, given the variable nature of the archaeological record from region to region during the late Early Formative period there is every reason to believe that the answers will differ tremendously on a regional basis.

Realizing the advantages and limitations of the chemical characterization data, in the fall of 2005 we began a dialogue on how to build upon the chemical data base in order to pose and answer questions pertaining to the nature of Gulf Olmec interaction with distant regions of Mesoamerica. Knowing that INAA could be used to separate locally made from imported (Gulf Coast) ceramic objects was a starting point that would allow us to compare non-chemical aspects of the objects in question (vessel shape, decoration, design composition, and so on) and thus begin to build a data base amenable to questions like those posed above. Our second realization was that, to be viable, such data needed to be amassed for multiple regions of Mesoamerica so the variable nature of Gulf Olmec interaction, if indeed this assumption proves to be the case, could be tested and fleshed out in a convincing manner. We therefore organized a symposium for the 71st Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, with the goal to bring together scholars working in several regions of Mesoamerica with access to relevant materials from good archaeological contexts. This Special Section represents the product of that meeting and a preliminary step toward assembling and sharing data with the above research issues and goals in mind.

The results presented in this series of papers are by no means the end product of our efforts, which will be broadened to include more objects and classes of objects as collaborative work unfolds. Still, armed with the knowledge that physical linkages are expressed in pottery between the San Lorenzo Olmecs and contemporaneous cultures elsewhere in Mesoamerica, we may now consider these objects in a new light. For example, detailed analyses of the kinds of symbols that appear on Olmec-style vessels, and their organization on pots, is explored for two regions of Oaxaca: the Mixteca Alta by **Jeffrey Blomster** and the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec by **Liliana Reyes** and **Marcus Winter**. These analyses show that even within one modern Mexican state (which constitutes a single archaeological zone), tremendous diversity may be seen in response to Gulf Olmec contact, with close adherence to some Gulf Olmec stylistic canons in the Isthmus and both local and Gulf Coast traditions evident in the Mixteca Alta. In terms of people, this suggests that the cultural and ethnic affiliations of the makers and consumers of Olmec style pots varied within regions and between sites. **David Cheetham** discusses an extreme example from Cantón Corralito, Chiapas, where a host of ceramic and other correspondences with San Lorenzo suggest that this site, at least in its earliest phase, was a settlement enclave inhabited by Gulf Olmec immigrants from the vicinity of San Lorenzo. In still other cases, there appears to have been so much space—physical as well as conceptual—between Gulf Coast inspiration and iconographic expression that substantial local re-imagining of Olmec-style symbols must have taken place. This distant echo or generic style, which may have had minimal impact on the development of local cultures, is amply documented by **Rosemary Joyce** and **John Henderson** for northern Honduras and is known in other areas of Honduras (Gordon 1898; Fash 1985; Healy 1974) and the Maya lowlands of Guatemala and Belize (Cheetham 2005).

Olmec studies have come a long way from the polarized debate typified by the "mother culture" and "sister culture" metaphors. Avoiding this loaded terminology, the authors of this Special Section present robust data sets that permit well-grounded, testable, and diverse interpretations about the nature of the Gulf Olmecs and their impact abroad, opinions that mirror what we think was the diversity of Gulf Olmec interaction across Mesoamerica during late Early Formative times. Above all, it is our hope that the collaborative spirit that drives this entire body of work and others like it yet to come will move Olmec and Early Formative studies in a direction in which debate and model-building rest firmly upon data that are detailed and amenable to comparison. With these papers and other projects in the works, we stand at the dawn of a new age of discovery and interpretation of the Olmecs and their Early Formative neighbors in Mesoamerica.

David Cheetham
Jeffrey Blomster

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