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SPECIAL SECTION: RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON MESOAMERICAN TEXTILE PRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

If we accept Good's (2001:211) definition of a textile as a "web of interlaced threads produced on a loom," we may say that textiles have a long and storied existence in ancient Mesoamerica. In this Special Section we present four new studies on Mesoamerican textile production. All four papers are based primarily on archaeological data and analyses, but, because of the nature of the material, they cross disciplinary boundaries. At the risk of indulging in a rather hackneyed metaphor, we might envision the archaeological elements of each study as the warp embellished with a weft of ethnohistoric, ethnographic, art historical, iconographic, and epigraphic data and interpretations. In this Introduction we range across the boundaries touching first on the archaeological evidence for the antiquity of weaving and textiles in Mesoamerica, the nature of textiles as a commodity, and the theoretical foundations from political economy that influenced anthropology in the 1980s and generated a seminal article on cotton in the Aztec economy. Then we reference recent research dealing with cloth as costume that signifies ethnic and gender identity, and ideological associations with female deities. Finally, we return to the archaeology and the difficulties of preservation of textiles in Mesoamerica, setting the stage for comments on individual papers since they depend on the indirect evidence of spindle whorls and weaving implements.

Loom weaving of cloth in Mesoamerica probably began in the Early Formative (Johnson 1967:217), and the importance of cloth grew until it played a major role in Mesoamerican political economies. As Mesoamerican studies moved beyond the reconstruction of culture histories and began to focus more on anthropological issues, the political economy of past societies became a major concern. Various means have been deployed to evaluate past economies, from labor investment in public architecture (Abrams 1989) to the movement of valued commodities such as obsidian (Zeitlin 1982). Textiles represent an important commodity that, due to their perishable nature, cannot be considered in the same detail as some other goods.

More than twenty years ago Berdan (1987) published an important study of cotton in the pre-Columbian Aztec economy, using abundant ethnohistorical sources including, especially, the *Codex Mendoza* tribute lists. Earlier studies by Barlow (1949) and by Borah and Cook (1963) had presaged an interest in the role of cloth in the tribute economy of the Aztec empire. Berdan's study went further, examining in detail pre-Columbian textiles and establishing their role as both a sumptuary good as well as a standard of value used in tribute and exchange (see also Berdan 1992; Brumfiel 1996; Hicks 1994).

Art historians have considered the significance of cloth as costume. Anawalt's (1981a) encyclopedic study of pre-Columbian costume from pictorial manuscripts representing several different culture groups remains a valuable source for characterizing the role of costume in ethnic and gender identities. Subsequent articles have considered more nuanced elements of identity, such as region, gender, and political authority (Anawalt 1981b, 1982, 1990; also Bruhns 1988; Joyce 1992; McCafferty and McCafferty 1994).

Discussion of the ideological construction of spinning and weaving in association with female deities has also emerged from studies of the ethnohistorical evidence for textiles. Sullivan (1982) summarized characteristics of Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina, the great spinner and weaver of Nahua mythology (see also McCafferty and McCafferty 1991; Serra Puche and Durand 1998). Similarly, Tate (1988) has discussed the role of Maya weaving deities. On an even more primordial level, Klein (1982) noted textile tropes in the very fabric of the cosmos, in her "woven heaven, tangled earth." A similar theme is found in Mixtec toponyms in which both natural and architectural elements are depicted with textile motifs (McCafferty and McCafferty 2006).

This brief survey indicates that during the past 25 years textiles have become an increasingly important focus in Mesoamerican studies. Unfortunately, archaeological textiles are also among the more ephemeral classes of material culture in ancient Mesoamerica, and extant examples are exceedingly rare. Archaeologists have attempted to capture elusive insights into textiles through rigorous study of artifacts associated with textile production. Originating with the path-breaking study of Basin of Mexico spindle whorls by Mary H. Parsons (1972), scholars have broadened and refined the methodology for classifying whorls with the goal of reconstructing the technologies and raw materials used by ancient spinners and weavers (Beaudry-Corbett and McCafferty 2002; Brumfiel 1991; Hendon 2006; McCafferty and McCafferty 2000; Nichols et al. 2000; Smith and Hirth 1988; Stark et al. 1998; Voorhies 1989).

The papers presented in this Special Section pursue these interests and continue the trends delineated above. In the first paper **Billie J. A. Follensbee** examines the archaeological and iconographic evidence for fiber and cloth textiles among the Early and Middle Formative Olmecs of the Gulf Coast. While direct archaeological evidence remains scarce, Follensbee marshals a great deal of data from depictions in anthropomorphic sculpture in stone and ceramic, spindle whorls, and other tools. Among the latter, she examines three classes of intriguing greenstone implements— "picks" (often referred to in the literature as "bloodletters" or "ceremonial perforators"), "spoons," and "plaques"—that may have served as elite weaving tools. She

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supports this interpretation with the results of a series of carefully designed weaving experiments.

In the next paper, **Christina T. Halperin** presents the case for Classic Maya textile production at the site of Motul de San José, Guatemala. She finds evidence for household-level production, several different productive strategies, and indications of more intensive or larger-scale production among large, elite households, inferred from relatively high concentrations of spindle whorls associated with the largest architectural complexes excavated at the site. **Arlen F. Chase, Diane Z. Chase, Elayne Zorn,** and **Wendy Teeter** detect a similar pattern in the distribution of spindle whorls and weaving implements at the Classic-period site of Caracol, Belize. After a review of the comparative archaeological data, ethnohistoric evidence, and iconographic and epigraphic data, Chase et al. present archaeological data from Caracol indicating that spinning and weaving were gendered activities closely associated with elite Maya women. They also suggest that elite women of Caracol may have been somewhat more invested in these activities than their counterparts at other major southern Maya lowland centers.

In the final paper, **Sharisse D. McCafferty** and **Geoffrey G. McCafferty** discuss the evidence for textile production from their excavations at Santa Isabel, on the Isthmus of Rivas, Nicaragua. They recovered a large collection of ceramic spindle whorls and bone weaving tools from five different excavation loci dating to the Early Postclassic. The whorls show an even distribution pattern, while the bone tools are heavily concentrated in one locus, suggesting that thread production occurred in all residential zones of the site, with weaving more localized.

In conclusion, we offer a few comments on the significance of the patterns discerned in these papers and how they relate to the current state of research as discussed above. First of all, studies continue to suggest that weaving in ancient Mesoamerica was most often a female-gendered task. It seems likely that this phenomenon existed as early as the Early and Middle Formative, but future research should continue to investigate this possibility; for example, the burials at Tlatilco do *not* demonstrate a strong female gender association with spinning and weaving tools (Hoar 2008). A second point, related to the first, is that elite women engaged in an intensified level of textile production as a form of status expression as well as gender identity. Berdan (1987:241) suggested that in large, polygynous noble households among the Aztecs, highly skilled women may have engaged in full-time textile production. As mentioned above, Halperin and Chase et al. present archaeological evidence to suggest such activities among elite Classic Maya women. Berdan (1987:241, 246) expressed skepticism, however, about the possibility of full-time occupational specialization in textile production; this is a problem that could be addressed archaeologically (e.g., Nichols et al. 2000), and we should expect considerable regional and temporal variation.

The papers in this Special Section expand the range of discussion, with important contributions from the Formative Olmec, the Classic Maya, and from the Mesoamerican frontier in Nicaragua. Adding innovative interpretations and rigorous data analysis, these articles usher in a new dynamic to Mesoamerican material culture studies.

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