

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11102-7 - The Beginnings of Mesoamerican Civilization: Inter-Regional Interaction and the Olmec

Robert M. Rosenswig

Excerpt

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SECTION I

AN EARLY FORMATIVE MESOAMERICAN PROBLEM

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Introduction

Tell me, O Muse, of that ingenious hero who traveled far and wide after he had sacked the famous town of Troy. Many cities did he visit, and many were the nations with whose manners and customs he was acquainted; moreover he suffered much by sea while trying to save his own life and bring his men safely home...

Homer, *The Odyssey*

Inter-regional exchange of goods and ideas is a distinctly human practice that qualitatively separates us from other creatures on earth. Why did people originally travel to faraway places and why did only certain peoples reach out while others did not? Furthermore, after inter-regional exchange networks were established, how did they change the internal organization of interacting societies? The desire for resources that are not locally available is the most obvious answer to the first question. However, this explanation is not sufficient. To understand the social processes that allowed people separated by space, custom, language and religion to come together requires that the political nature of exchange be addressed. Exploring the effects of inter-regional interaction through the use of archaeological data is the objective of this book.

Mesoamerica was one of a half-dozen original cradles of civilization in the world. The societies that occupied the Gulf Coast of Mexico, particularly the early inhabitants that constituted the San Lorenzo polity, were some of the first Mesoamerican peoples to display clear evidence of social stratification. Despite (or more likely because of) this, disagreements have raged for the past thirty years over the nature of the San Lorenzo polity and its influence on

neighboring regions. These disputes currently provide one of the most challenging research topics for Mesoamerican archaeologists. The resolution of this disagreement is crucial to understanding the early prehistory of Mesoamerica as well as the comparative study of how complex societies developed worldwide.

Debate over the nature of Early Formative Gulf Coast civilization and its influence on other regions of Mesoamerica has been intense (e.g., Blomster et al., 2005; Clark, 1997, 2007; Diehl and Coe, 1995; Flannery and Marcus, 2000; Flannery et al., 2005; Grove, 1997; Neff et al., 2006a, 2006b; Sharer et al., 2006; Stoltman et al., 2005). Some authors adopt a “Sister Culture” perspective, which proposes that the inhabitants of many regions of Mesoamerica interacted on equal footing and together developed a distinctive inter-regional art style and new social institutions. There was therefore no center to the Early Formative Mesoamerican world. In contrast, others propose that the residents of San Lorenzo created a novel political and ideological system that was the “Mother Culture” of all subsequent Mesoamerican societies. In this second view, the elite at San Lorenzo disseminated innovations through ideological, political and economic exchanges. The inhabitants of San Lorenzo were thus qualitatively different from their neighbors whom they taught (and perhaps even conquered) to spread their ideas and institutions.

The essence of most disagreements about Gulf Coast Olmec civilization revolves around the nature of inter-regional interaction between San Lorenzo and other polities during the second part of the Early Formative period (ca. 1250–900 BCE).¹ The Soconusco provides the single most sensitive region from which to explore competing ideas regarding the nature of Gulf Coast influence on other areas of Mesoamerica. This is the case because of prolonged and intensive contact between the two regions as well as a long history of investigation in the Soconusco (Blake et al., 1995; Ceja Tenorio, 1985; Clark, 1994; Clark and Pye, 2000; Coe, 1961; Coe and Flannery, 1967; Green and Lowe, 1967; Lesure, 1995; Love, 2002a; Lowe, 1975; Rosenswig, 2005). However, because the intensity of contact between the Gulf Coast and the Soconusco is exceptionally strong, it cannot be used to characterize the relationship between the Gulf Coast and other areas with weaker ties. In contrast, the intensity of Gulf Coast–Soconusco interaction provides one of the only plausible cases for evaluating whether the Gulf Coast polity of San Lorenzo was a colonizing empire (Clark, 1997).

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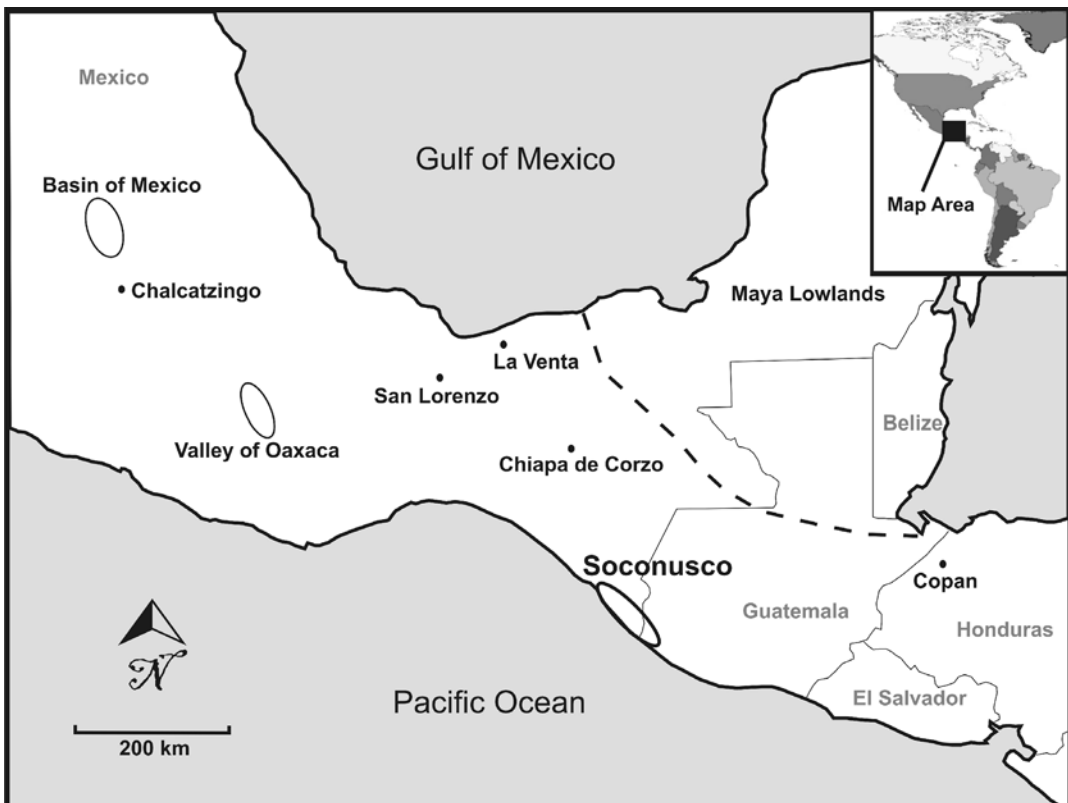
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This book addresses late Early Formative inter-regional interaction from the perspective of the Soconusco. Located primarily on Mexico's south Pacific coast, the Soconusco extends approximately 15 km into Guatemala on the hot, coastal plain between the Sierra Madre and the Pacific Ocean (Figure 1.1). This is the most fertile region of Mexico today and has been a center of innovation for the past 3,500 years. The Soconusco was the most distant province of the Aztec empire, and the tribute list of the Codex Mendoza evidences its richness in Prehispanic times (Gasco and Voorhies, 1989). Prior to the Aztec, the Quiché Maya had also invaded (Carmack, 1981; Navarrete, 1970). Cacao was always the most sought-after product from the Soconusco (Gasco, 2006), but other jungle products, such as jaguar pelts and tropical bird feathers, were also included on the Aztec tribute lists. Interestingly, the Soconusco was also required to provide jade and amber to the Aztec and, as these products were not locally available, fostered exchange with more peripheral areas (Blanton and Feinman, 1984). Just after the Spanish conquest, the population of the area was estimated at between sixty and one hundred thousand

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INTRODUCTION

Figure 1.1
Location of sites and areas of Mesoamerica mentioned in the text.



people (Orellana, 1995: 31), and the area was the center of a thriving trade network that connected the Mexican Gulf Coast and Central highlands with Guatemala and lower Central America. At the end of the Classic Period, the region was the source of Plumbate pottery that was traded across all of Mesoamerica (Neff, 2002). If we go back to the Late Formative period (300 BCE – CE 300), this region was a center of early carved stone stelae, depicting historical and mythological scenes, at the site of Izapa (Lowe et al., 1982). The subject of this book, however, is the centuries that precede the emergence of Izapa as a regional center.

The book explores the period between 1600 and 800 BCE that begins with the earliest settled villages and ceramic use in the Soconusco and extends through the rise and fall of San Lorenzo. The Soconusco has an exceptionally well-defined ceramic chronology that allows the fine-grained tracking of changes before, during and after the apogee of San Lorenzo (Blake et al., 1995; Clark and Cheetham, 2005). During the intervening 800 years, political rank (Blake and Clark, 1999; Clark and Blake, 1994) and stratification (Love, 1991, 2002a; Rosenswig, 2007) emerged in the Soconusco, maize began to be used as a staple crop (Blake, 2006; Blake et al., 1992a, 1992b; Rosenswig, 2006a) and trade in obsidian became organized at such a scale that the development of a prismatic blade technology was feasible (Clark, 1987; Jackson and Love, 1991). Population levels rose and fell, and people moved fluidly across the landscape while social interaction became more complex and integrated increasing numbers of people (Blake and Clark, 1999; Clark and Pye, 2000). The subject matter of this book begins when the inhabitants of the Soconusco had developed more sedentary societies and ends just as the first long-lasting hierarchically organized society emerged.

Data patterns from my investigations at the site of Cuauhtémoc serve as an index for regional developments in the Soconusco. They provide a unique opportunity to do this as Cuauhtémoc is the only documented site in the Soconusco that was occupied for the entire period in question (Rosenswig, 2005, 2009). The book further documents the abandonment of Cuauhtémoc and the surrounding area at precisely the time when Izapa emerged on the piedmont 20 km away (Lowe et al., 1982). This book thus provides a regional perspective on the effects of the rise and fall of the San Lorenzo polity from a detailed study of one corner of the Soconusco.

OUTLINE OF BOOK

In Chapter 2, I explore ethnologically documented patterns of long-distance travel, exchange and distant cultural interaction. A core-periphery perspective for the study of long-distance interaction in Mesoamerica is discussed within the context of a reformulated World-systems theory. Such a perspective does not require a core-centered system that Wallerstein described for the fifteenth century. Instead, my approach here employs the macroregion as the unit for more fully understanding local processes.

I propose that the control of arcane knowledge can provide a powerful basis for maintaining an ideology of inequality. As the epigraph to this chapter emphasizes, the experiences that Ulysses gained in the course of his travels, including his knowledge of distant “manners and customs,” are the stuff of legend. Such knowledge, shared through the telling, is what made Ulysses an exalted hero in Greek society. The elite control of ideas exchanged over long distances is described in this book as a knowledge kula that can operate in societies at various levels of complexity. I propose that such a knowledge kula emerged as the outgrowth of an archipelago of complexity in Early Formative Mesoamerica. This archipelago was formed by isolated pockets (or islands) of relatively more complexly organized peoples within a “sea” of less developed groups, some of whom maintained a mobile, foraging adaptation around the earliest sedentary food producers (see Rosenswig, n.d.). Within their respective islands of complexity, both Soconusco and Gulf Coast elites were able to maintain their elevated political position at home partly as a result of their *geographic distance* from each other and partly due to their *cultural distance* from their immediate neighbors. Chapter 2 concludes with examples of four other archipelagos of complexity: Trobriand Islanders in the Pacific, Eastern European Germanic tribes beyond the direct reach of the Roman Empire, Early Bronze Age Cycladic Islanders in the Mediterranean and Chavín Horizon communities in Peru.

In Chapter 3, Soconusco culture history is reviewed in relation to developments on Mexico’s Gulf Coast with special attention to the San Lorenzo polity’s rise and fall. I define an Initial Ceramic Period and three subsequent ceramic style horizons during the Early and Middle Formative periods. These four temporal epochs each

encompass a number of ceramic phases. Although this is not the traditional manner into which time is divided in Mesoamerica, such a scheme facilitates inter-regional comparisons based on similar stylistic and technological changes through time.

In the second part of Chapter 3, I outline three hypotheses that have been used to account for the nature of Early Formative society in Mesoamerica. The first is what I term a “Peer Polity Model” (PPM) in which innovations are not centered on the Gulf Coast or anywhere else. Instead, a number of distinct yet equal polities across Mesoamerica inherited a shared iconographic system and developed sociopolitical complexity at roughly the same rate. Second is an “Elite Emulation Model” (EEM) that proposes that less politically developed areas borrowed ideas and material culture from the more advanced San Lorenzo polity. Third is an “Aztec Analogy Model” (AAM) that proposes a case of Early Formative Gulf Coast imperialism, which would have occurred in much the way that the Aztec later conquered their distant Soconusco province during the fifteenth century. For each of these three hypotheses, material expectations are outlined for the periods before, during and immediately after the apogee of San Lorenzo. These three models are formulated in this book to evaluate the nature of Gulf Coast–Soconusco relations. However, I hope that formally comparing these alternative hypotheses will be useful for researchers working in other areas of Mesoamerica.

Chapters 4 through 7 then present archaeological data from the Cuauhtémoc zone of the Soconusco as well as the arguments that attempt to link them to past human behavior. Each of these four chapters presents a thread with which I will attempt to weave together 800 years of developments in the Cuauhtémoc region. In Chapter 4, settlement survey results are summarized and used to provide a basic demographic history of the area. The fluctuations in relative population levels within the Cuauhtémoc survey zone illuminate aspects of the overall political history of the Soconusco during the Early and Middle Formative periods. In the first part of Chapter 4, changing settlement patterns from the Cuauhtémoc and Mazatán zones of the Soconusco are compared to those at San Lorenzo. Results from each of these three survey areas document politically volatile landscapes during the Early and Middle Formative periods, where centers emerged for a few centuries and then collapsed. A network of polities with signs of incipient leadership emerged in the Mazatán zone during the Initial Ceramic Period. These were abandoned during

the apogee of San Lorenzo, and the political center of the Soconusco shifted to the banks of the nearby Coatán River. Then, coeval with the collapse of the San Lorenzo polity, virtually all settlements in the Mazatán zone of the Soconusco were abandoned and population was drawn into a new, more hierarchical polity around La Blanca to the south. For the first time in the Soconusco, four tiers of settlement are documented based on the extent of sites and the size of their central mounds.

The history of architectural construction at Cuauhtémoc is presented in the second part of Chapter 4. During the Initial Ceramic Period, two structures at Cuauhtémoc were oriented northwest–southeast, which is parallel to the coastal plain. Then, during Horizon I, a low platform mound was oriented east–west with no obvious referent on the local landscape but consistent with the arch of the sun. The first conical pyramid mounds were then built at the center of Cuauhtémoc during the Conchas phase. The significance of building conical mounds for the first time is explored. These construction projects are discussed both in terms of labor organization as well as the transformation of the built landscape. The emergence of social stratification and the building of large mounds in Hawaii (Kolb, 1994, 2006) are discussed, and parallels are drawn to the organization of labor in the Soconusco.

Chapter 5 explores the changing domestic economy of Cuauhtémoc society. Faunal analysis and isotope data are presented to explore past diet and illuminate the manner in which the inhabitants of the Soconusco fed themselves. Food-processing practices are subsequently presented as the proportion of the ceramic assemblage made up by utilitarian tecomates (i.e., neckless jars) as well as changes in the size of these vessels. Changing quantities of fire-cracked rock, ground stone and obsidian from Cuauhtémoc are presented as are changing proportions of manos and metates versus mortars and pestles. These classes of data each indicate continuity in domestic patterns throughout the Early Formative period, followed by a marked reorganization of the domestic economy during the Conchas phase (see Rosenswig, 2006a). The most dramatic changes in the Soconusco domestic economy were therefore not the result of contact with San Lorenzo but instead occurred after its fall during the early Middle Formative period.

Feasting behavior is then explored using ceramic data. The proportion of serving-to-cooking vessels is tracked through time as is the

size of slipped tecomates. Changing overall proportions of decorated serving dishes is quantified as is the distribution of their sizes. These data indicate that there were significant changes in the Soconusco with the political reorganization that corresponded to the rise of San Lorenzo. In contrast to dramatic changes in the domestic economy, Conchas-phase patterns show an overall continuity in food presentation practices. Thus, the political superstructure was transformed first and then the economic base followed. This view is contrary to traditional materialist assumptions and highlights the importance of relying on empirical evidence to document political evolution.

Changes to the Soconusco representational systems are presented with specific examples from Cuauhtémoc in Chapter 6. Ceramic vessels and figurines are the most important classes of data employed for this task. A dramatic change in the overall appearance of ceramic assemblages from small red tecomates to an assemblage dominated by larger black and white dishes is quantified and its meaning explored. Parallels are drawn between the use of late Early Formative white-rimmed blackwares and the equally distinct Ramey Incised pottery that was widely distributed in the American Southeast during the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries (Pauketat, 2004). In this example from the southeastern United States, a black and red color scheme contrasted the rest of the ceramic assemblage and encoded a political message in the vessels. Another Soconusco novelty documented during Horizon I, along with the change in color aesthetic, was the introduction of abstract iconography for the first time. This iconography depicted mythical creatures such as the Olmec dragon – part caiman, part harpy eagle. The function of abstract iconography is explored as is its introduction into a society for the first time.

The evolution of three successive figurine complexes during the course of Cuauhtémoc's occupation reveals a changing world-view expressed symbolically in the representation of the human form. First, human representation was naturalistic during the Initial Ceramic Period with two figurine types: young, naked females and fat, clothed elders who were generally seated. Then, as part of a new aesthetic during Horizon I, figurines depict androgynous, infantile individuals whose age and sex are ambiguous. During Horizon II, a wider range of individuals are depicted but age and sex continue to be unclear. These patterns indicate that the most significant changes in Soconusco representation conventions of the human form coincided

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temporally with the florescence of San Lorenzo. Therefore, whereas the most dramatic economic change occurred at Cuauhtémoc after the fall of San Lorenzo, the local political and aesthetic superstructure was transformed during the rise of this distant Gulf Coast polity.

A review of Spanish ethnohistorical sources on trade between the Soconusco and Gulf Coast is presented in the first part of Chapter 7. Travel times and trade routes to and from the ancient Soconusco can be more accurately reconstructed with the aid of these documents. Such accounts provide estimates of the time required to move from one area of Mesoamerica to another using preindustrial technology.

Exchange patterns from Cuauhtémoc are evaluated in the second part of Chapter 7 based on the results of obsidian and ceramic sourcing studies. These analyses link changes in the Soconusco to materials brought in from other parts of Mesoamerica. I argue that obsidian was deposited at Cuauhtémoc at the beginning of Horizon I as the exchange of this material from the Guatemalan highland sources brought this material through the Soconusco, on its way to the Gulf Coast. In the opposite direction, ceramics vessels decorated with a novel black and white aesthetic (some of which were the distinctive white-rimmed black wares) were being transported to many parts of the Soconusco, including Cuauhtémoc.

In Chapter 8, the patterns presented in the preceding four chapters are evaluated in relation to the expectations outlined in Chapter 3. A pragmatic positivism (Kelly and Hanen, 1988) is employed as the most productive way in which to evaluate data and enhance our knowledge of the past. Evidence is synthesized for this assessment, which describes changes in the Soconusco through Cuauhtémoc's rise and fall. I conclude that the EEM more fully and parsimoniously accounts for the available data than does either the PPM or the AAM.

In Chapter 9, I review the empirical contributions of this book and summarize the Cuauhtémoc data. The review and summary are followed by assessing whether it is productive to use the Mother Culture and Sister Culture concepts to achieve an anthropological understanding of Cuauhtémoc society. I argue that such concepts (along with the typology of chiefdom and state) have obscured our understanding of how Early Formative polities in Mesoamerica actually operated. Instead, I propose that Horizon I society in the Soconusco is best understood diachronically in terms of how things changed from the previous Initial Ceramic Period and were, in turn, transformed again during Horizon II. Chapter 9 concludes with a historical