INTRODUCTION

Over 100 years after the publication of the first colossal stone head – the most recognized material expression of Mexico's ancient Olmec culture – debate rages about the Early Olmec style and its impact across Mesoamerica between approximately 1200 and 1000/900 bc (uncalibrated radiocarbon years). Indeed, the intensity of the debate has only increased with the recent release of chemical data indicating a persistent, one-way movement of Early Olmec style pottery from the largest Gulf Olmec site, San Lorenzo, to distant regions of Mesoamerica (Blomster et al. 2005; Neff, Blomster, Glascock, Bishop, Blackman, Coe, Cowgill, Cyphers, Diehl, Houston, Joyce, Lipo, and Winter 2006; Neff, Blomster, Glascock, Bishop, Blackman, Coe, Cowgill, Diehl, Houston, Joyce, Lipo, Stark, and Winter 2006; cf. Flannery et al. 2005; Sharer et al. 2006; Stoltman et al. 2005).

This book provides a unique contribution to the field of Olmec and Early Formative studies. All of the contributors agreed to focus primarily on data, with interpretation downplayed. For the first time, scholars working at sites across Mesoamerica are using the same terminology to discuss formal and technical style, as well as the motifs and compositions associated with the Early Olmec style. Such a unified approach enables a more focused level of inter-regional comparisons, irrespective of the different regional interpretations and contexts that make each case study unique. Our focus on objects corresponds with a growing interest in materiality studies in archaeology, which examine the ways things and society co-produce each other. Yet, as recently noted by

Ian Hodder (2012), many of these studies fail to closely consider the actual objects themselves. The contributors to this book share the conviction that more careful examination of the properties of Early Olmec style objects, including vessel form, surface color and treatment, technique of decoration, etc., will encourage a reappraisal of previous models of Early Formative interaction and provide a firm basis for new ones.

ISSUES

What is the origin and significance of the enigmatic Early Olmec style and the concepts that underlie it? Two general models encapsulate the polarization of archaeologists. Some scholars argue that the Early Olmec style began in the southern Gulf lowland region at or near San Lorenzo and then spread to other parts of Mesoamerica (Bernal 1969; Clark 1990, 1997; Coe 1965, 1968; Diehl and Coe 1995). The Gulf Olmec were, in this sense, what scholars once referred to as the "mother culture" of Mesoamerican civilization, a term that we avoid in this book due to the enormous amount of baggage it carries (see also Cheetham and Blomster 2010). Other scholars consider the Early Olmec style the outcome of a convergent process, with input from many Mesoamerican "sister cultures" that had attained, as the phrase implies, more or less comparable socio-political systems (Demarest 1989; Flannery and Marcus 2000; Grove 1989).

More than anything, debate surrounding the significance of the Early Olmec style has become inflexible because it usually centers on the aforementioned perspectives and their underlying epistemologies at the expense of raw data. Perhaps this reflects the changing priorities of archaeologists; a mid-twentieth-century concern with large-scale phenomena and major Gulf lowland discoveries that, by the 1970s and 1980s, was challenged by scholars working beyond the Gulf lowlands; primarily informed by a neo-evolutionary perspective, they focused on regional development and autonomy. But neither extreme accurately represents the varied relationships that must have existed throughout Early Formative Mesoamerica. Indeed, research within the Gulf lowlands itself (e.g., Arnold 2000) demonstrates considerable heterogeneity.

Curiously, the extent to which the Early Olmec style varies between regions is based almost entirely on decorated pottery, ceramic figurines, and a few other portable artifact classes, but details regarding these objects are seldom presented and openly discussed in a way that makes them comparable between sites and regions. This is unfortunate because a precise understanding of the interregional similarities and differences in Early Olmec style objects is necessary to reconstruct the cultural affiliations of their makers, thus allowing the style to be considered in terms of people and the possible movement of people and ideas between regions. Given the wealth of new data obtained over the

past few years, there is a pressing need to move toward a multi-regional, comparative, data-centered dialogue.

The origin of this volume dates to a symposium we organized in 2006 at the Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Motivated in part by recent discoveries in the movement of Early Olmec style pottery based on chemical composition, the goal was to update scholarly opinion and data concerning interregional interaction and Gulf Olmecs. These papers, published in *Ancient Mesoamerica* (Cheetham and Blomster 2010), provide diverse information and interpretive opinions, but the disparate nature of how our colleagues – and ourselves – employed the concept of "Olmec style" in many ways hindered interventions with this topic. Diversity among the datasets and how they were framed, in particular, necessitated a shift from a focus on interpretation to establishing the nature of the actual data to better facilitate comparison.

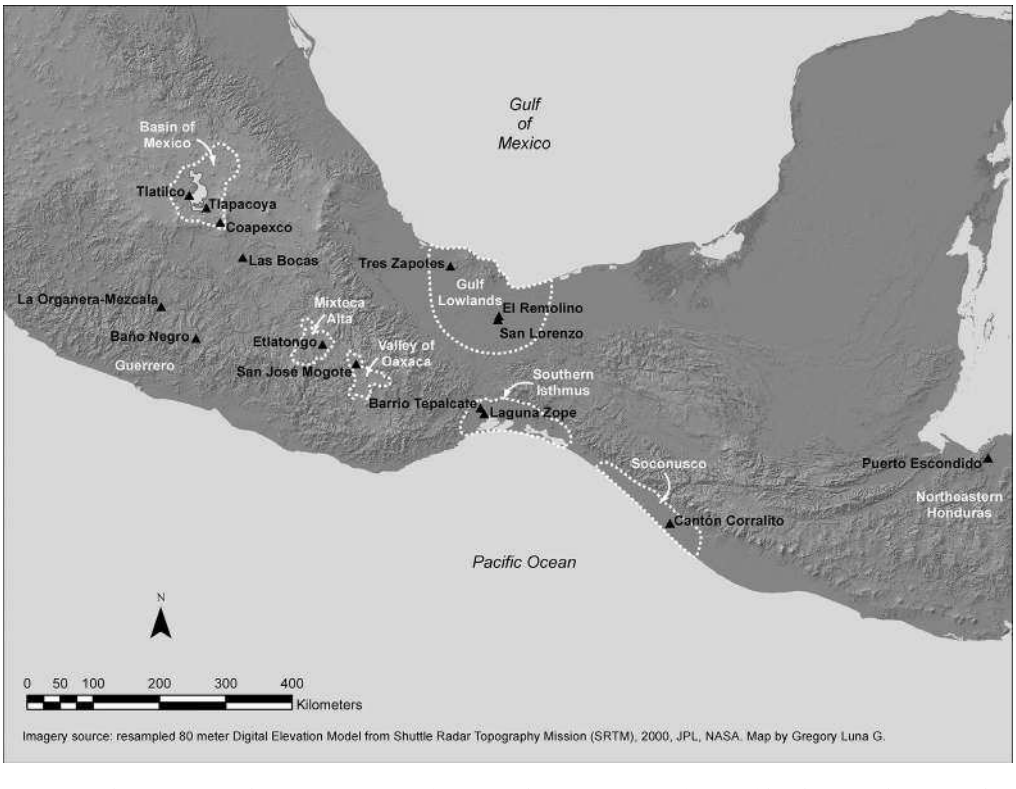
To address this need, we organized an international round table, held in November of 2009 at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library in Washington, DC. Included were archaeologists representing a diversity of opinions on the significance and nature of interaction between Gulf Olmecs and their neighbors, yet all agreed to focus exclusively on data. Each participant, including those with active field projects in the Gulf lowlands and other regions of Mesoamerica, presented detailed information related to pottery, figurines, and other portable artifacts amenable to comparison. Several prominent Olmec specialists, including John Clark, Ann Cyphers, Richard Diehl, and David Grove, served as conference observers, offering valuable insights that informed subsequent drafts of essays and, ultimately, the overall scope of this volume. The conference was pioneering for its focus on a well-bounded timeframe – the "Early Horizon" or first era of Olmec politics and interaction during roughly the closing two centuries of the second millennium bc. Later developments, involving sites such as La Venta and Chalcatzingo, differ culturally and are not pertinent to the time frame in question. (Referred to variously as the "La Venta Horizon," the "Intermediate Olmec Horizon," the "Later Olmec Horizon," or the "Olmec Whiteware Horizon" [see Pool 2007:220], this later time period is referenced simply as the "Early Middle Formative era" in its few appearances in this volume.) The success of the round table was best captured by David Grove, co-editor of an earlier volume that resulted from a gathering of Olmec specialists (*Regional Perspectives on the Olmec*, 1989), who proclaimed that we had achieved what they had wanted to accomplish: presenting important comparative data without being engulfed by polarizing interpretive debates. With such a ringing endorsement, all involved see this series of essays as an essential contribution to one of the most persistent problems in New World archaeology.

A few points regarding the terminology used throughout this volume are necessary to ensure clarity. Unless otherwise noted, the term "Olmec" designates a distinctive art style imbued in objects ("Early Olmec style") or a people ("Gulf Olmecs") that once inhabited southern Veracruz and western Tabasco or the ancient residents of San Lorenzo ("San Lorenzo Olmecs"). The Early Olmec style originated and then spread to various regions of Mesoamerica during the "Early Horizon," a term that carries chronological and interpretive (rapid dissemination) meaning (see Willey and Phillips 1958:33). Because objects crafted in the Early Olmec style were made by Gulf Olmecs and non-Olmec peoples residing in other regions of Mesoamerica – where such objects may diverge significantly from the Early Olmec style of San Lorenzo and the Gulf lowlands – the term "Gulf Olmec" carries geographic and ethnic meaning in this work. The region in which Gulf Olmecs lived and San Lorenzo is located is variously called the "Gulf lowlands," the "Olmec Heartland," or " Olman" (see Diehl 1996:29). We present specific dates and time spans in uncalibrated radiocarbon dates (denoted by the lowercase letters "bc"), unless otherwise noted. For the Early Horizon time frame, uncalibrated radiocarbon dates are approximately 150–200 years more recent than "real" (Gregorian calendar) dates (BC).

VOLUME OVERVIEW

Our examination of the San Lorenzo Olmec and their neighbors consists of ten chapters, each covering a particular topic, set of methodological issues, or detailed presentation of Early Olmec style materials at a given site or in a given region (Figure I.1). In Chapter 1, David Cheetham and Jeffrey P. Blomster summarize issues and problems regarding the Early Olmec phenomenon and place them within a larger temporal, spatial, and thematic context. To properly situate other essays in this volume, the authors present an up-to-date account of the archaeology of San Lorenzo – the largest and almost certainly the most influential Early Formative period site in Mesoamerica – based on findings of the Yale Project (1966–1968) and the Proyecto Arqueológico San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán (1989–present). Their summary is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather focused on basic data and issues pertinent to better understanding the nature of interactions between the San Lorenzo Olmec and their many neighboring cultures.

A basic obstacle in debates over what is Early Olmec style in the Gulf lowlands and other regions of Mesoamerica is a lack of uniform vocabulary for describing objects and the icons that appear on them, a necessary first step that should precede identification of what Early Olmec style symbols refer to. In Chapter 2, Jeffrey P. Blomster, David Cheetham, Rosemary A. Joyce, and Christopher A. Pool seek to identify what is already a common lexicon and to indicate ways to standardize use of current terminology. Beginning with what



1.1 Map of Mesoamerica locating regions and main Early Horizon sites discussed by the contributors to this volume.

should be the least controversial topics – labels for object forms and terms used to describe techniques of manufacture – the authors identify basic aspects of the Early Olmec "technical style" at San Lorenzo, including elements of design execution and the form of objects on which they occur. With this guiding information, the authors present the core symbols associated with the Early Olmec style in order to create a common vocabulary. The issues of where and when Early Olmec style symbols first occur are briefly explored, but the main thrust of the chapter is to define, classify, and present an overview of the iconography on Early Olmec style ceramics at San Lorenzo. The authors also consider how style and production techniques may have been communicated.

Chapters 3 and 4 concern the Early Olmec style within the Gulf lowlands. In Chapter 3, Carl J. Wendt presents data from El Remolino, a riverine settlement close to the San Lorenzo site center, as an example of Early Olmec style manifestation in a non-elite, domestic setting. Wendt's findings demonstrate variation of the Early Olmec style within one settlement in the immediate periphery of San Lorenzo, most notably in the frequency and kinds of Early Olmec style objects and symbols present. Variable expression of the Early Olmec style within Gulf Olmec territory is further explored by Pool and his

colleagues (Chapter 4) in their presentation of data from Tres Zapotes, a site located in the Tuxtla Mountains on the western edge of the Gulf lowlands. The authors discuss the contexts and dating of the newly defined Arroyo phase at Tres Zapotes and describe the ceramics and figurines. Based on a comparison of the Early Olmec style at Tres Zapotes, San Lorenzo, and more distant regions, Pool and his colleagues stress both similarity and difference in Early Olmec style materials from San Lorenzo and the western Gulf Olmec area.

Chapters 5 though 9 concern Early Olmec style manifestations in regions beyond the Gulf lowlands. In Chapter 5, Louise I. Paradis provides a synthesis of Early Horizon occupation and cultural markers in Guerrero, Puebla, Morelos, and the central highlands of Mexico based on the distribution, manner of execution, and varied forms that Early Olmec style objects took in those regions. While her conclusions stress the importance of culture contact with San Lorenzo and the role that Early Olmec style artifacts maintained in the social–political development of cultures in both areas, they are notably sensitive to regional input in crafting material expressions of the Early Olmec style and the importance that local traditions maintained in the face of contact. Paradis' chapter also demonstrates the rarity of hallmark Early Olmec style ceramic objects in the state of Guerrero, and points to the lack of recent systematic archaeological projects focusing on Early Olmec sites in all regions discussed. Indeed, we hope that this chapter's conclusions will be superseded by new research before the next such Olmec edited volume appears.

The theme of coexisting local and Early Olmec style traditions is also evident in Blomster's Chapter 6, which explores associations between Early Olmec iconography and ceramic vessel types and forms at the site of Etlatongo, in the Nochixtlán Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico. What do decorated Early Olmec style pottery vessels look like at Etlatongo? Blomster analyzes motifs and compositions and concludes that Etlatongo Early Olmec style pottery forms and designs are more similar to those of San Lorenzo than they are to well-known early sites in the nearby Valley of Oaxaca, such as San Jose Mogote. This finding underscores the variable nature of Gulf Olmec contact within distant regions and contributes new data from an area often considered peripheral in debates on Early Olmec interaction.

In Chapter 7, Marcus Winter and his colleagues explore Early Olmec style materials from the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, considered to be a Mixe-Zoque linguistic zone like San Lorenzo. The authors argue that there should be similarities of artifacts and ceramics among groups in the same language family because related languages imply contact. And Early Olmec style materials from the Isthmian site of Barrio Tepalcate demonstrate just that: they are more similar to materials from San Lorenzo and other Gulf Olmec sites than they are to materials from highland Oaxaca sites, such as San José Mogote and Etlatongo, that were not in the Mixe-Zoque linguistic group.

The Isthmian data reflect a close relationship with San Lorenzo and one that becomes more prominent farther southeast along the Pacific Coast.

In Chapter 8, David Cheetham and Michael D. Coe compare ceramic vessels made at San Lorenzo and Canton Corralito, the latter located on the Pacific Coast of Chiapas some 400 km south of San Lorenzo. Their analysis involves the complete suite of Early Horizon (San Lorenzo and Cuadros phase, 1150–1000 bc) ceramic vessels at both sites, and thus should be considered a companion piece to the information presented in Chapter 2. The resulting data – including pottery types, surface treatments, forms, frequencies, and technical production styles – are central to the identification of Canton Corralito as an implanted colony of Gulf Olmecs with antecedents in the preceding Initial Olmec era (Chicharras and Cherla phase, 1250–1150 bc). Informed by these data, the authors briefly discuss the diachronic social and political relationship between the residents of the Canton Corralito colony, local peoples, and Gulf Olmecs of San Lorenzo. By presenting a series of detailed metric data on various ceramic attributes, this chapter contributes a practical model for how such comparisons can be conducted in the future.

Moving farther southeast, Rosemary A. Joyce and John S. Henderson (Chapter 9) describe Early Horizon materials from the site of Puerto Escondido, Honduras. The authors assert that the materials in question follow earlier histories of development involving other areas of Mesoamerica, thus challenging models that would have Gulf Olmec peoples responsible for integrating a Honduran periphery into Mesoamerica. Joyce and Henderson caution that while the Honduran material is an Early Horizon manifestation, it is found in discrete sites, often in specific contexts within those sites, and was produced in Honduras for Honduran purposes and with Honduran understandings. This chapter contributes data and perspective from the region most distant from the Gulf lowlands included in the volume.

Barbara L. Stark's commentary in Chapter 10 concludes the volume and situates the information against the intellectual framework of previous work. Stark discusses the importance of both new data from ongoing projects and the reinterpretation of existing data in a re-thinking of early developments in Mesoamerica. She cautions that while methods for comparing local cultural and social variation during the Early Horizon are key to understanding change during the crucial beginnings of Mesoamerican social hierarchies, the selection and justification of comparative methods depend on overarching models and expectations about such early societies.

At present, neither methods nor interpretive ideas constitute a completely agreed-upon framework among Olmec scholars, but it is our hope that this will become less of a contentious issue in the future. We view this as a very exciting time in Olmec and Early Formative archaeology. While some colleagues proclaim that they are finally asking the right questions about the

Olmec, we prefer to see many different questions and approaches deployed in order to provide a richer mosaic through which we can better understand Early Formative societies. We think that the data presented in this volume will be a positive step in exploring the varied nature of regional interaction during the Early Horizon, although much remains to be learned about the ancient San Lorenzo Olmec and their neighbors, both near and far.