

New Perspectives on Formative Mesoamerican Cultures

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Perspectives on Olmec-Maya Interaction in the Middle Formative Period

Richard D. Hansen

In the past few years, scholars have debated the chronological and cultural relationships between the Maya, Highland Mexico societies, and the Olmec of the Gulf Coast (Clark 1997, 1990; Coe 1977; Demarest 1989; Flannery and Marcus 1994; Graham 1989; Grove 1989a, 1989b, 1993; Hammond 1989; Joesink-Mandeville 1977; Lowe 1977, 1981, 1989a; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Neiderberger 1996, 2000; Reilly 1991; Sharer and Grove 1989). The early nature of Olmec occupation has formed the basis for arguments about rulership, craft specialization, diffusion versus independent innovation, and settlement organization. The dispersal of Olmec art over a vast geographical area of Mesoamerica, and its antiquity, have led some scholarly opinions to assume complex chiefdoms, "kingship", "archaic state" formations, and an Olmec origins model for Mesoamerican socio-political complexity (Caso 1965; Coe 1977, 1989; Clark 1990, 1993; Drucker 1981). The concept of "cultura madre" (mother-culture) or "Olmec-centric" is an assertion that has been vigorously promoted and aggressively posited, particularly from Mexico, or from scholars working in Mexico (see for example, Caso 1942; Covarrubias 1942, 1957; Clark 1991, 1997; Clark and Pérez 1994; Clark and Pye 2000; Coe 1968; Diehl and Coe 1995; Piña Chan 1989; Stirling 1965). In a paper presented at the University of Texas at Austin, John Clark (2001) argued that the Olmec were the prime instigators of Maya socio-political complexity, primarily on the basis of ceramics and sculptural art. Clark's position, and that of many Olmec specialists (i.e. Coe 1977), is that the Maya were late-comers in the course of cultural sophistication in Mesoamerica, and that they borrowed Olmec symbolism, deities, and the trappings of the "divine elite" established during Olmec periods (Clark and Pérez 1994:263; Coe 1977; Reilly 1994). As Coe (1977:185) opined, "No less than seven centuries separate the downfall of La Venta and the appearance of high culture in the Maya Lowlands." Clark has posited the possibility that Olmec rulers may have even made a foray into the Maya Lowlands, providing the supposed leadership or intellectual stimulus that ultimately persuaded the Maya to accept a more sophisticated political, economic, and ideological behavior pursuant to the advent of civilization (Clark 2001; Clark et al. 2000). In some cases, the rhetoric resorted to fallacies of persuasion and propaganda to evoke emotions as, for example: "Otra ilusión que usan los antiolmequistas en sus esfuerzos por descoronar y desvanecer dicha cultura es la de quitarla de sus cumplimientos" (Clark 1991:3; emphasis mine).

The focus of this paper is to examine the evidence for some of the claims and chronologies for Olmec societal

sophistication, present evidence of early Maya cultural contemporaneity with the Olmec, evaluate the evidence (or lack of it) for Olmec-Maya direct interactions, as compared with regions such as the Soconusco, and propose an alternative model based on an autochthonous development and Renfrew's peer polity interaction model (Renfrew 1996). This is best executed on both an ideological and an empirical level for comparison with areas of "known" Olmec "intrusions" or occupation. By such a perspective, I suggest that the Maya developed a modest "peer polity interaction" with the Olmec, including imitation, emulation, possible periods of conflict or detente to explain the presence of a real border between the Olmec heartland and the Maya (Usumacinta), and what I believe is competitive ideology that propelled important innovations and notable variations among both the Maya and the Olmec. Evidence for the intrusion of Olmec material culture (and ultimately, by Olmec people) is evident in the Soconusco (e.g. Clark 1990; Lesure 2000) and the Basin of Mexico (i.e. Tolstoy 1989: 98), particularly based on ceramics, sculpture, and figurines. The sudden appearance of Olmec material symbolism is interpreted as the expression of Olmec governance (Clark 1997:212) through a process of exchange, emulation, and finally incorporation into the Olmec system (Clark 1991).

I propose here that the lack of such evidence in the Maya Lowlands was not that it was culturally vacant, but that the Olmec were unable to exert governance over the emerging powerful polities of the Lowlands, a position which I hope can encourage further studies, hypotheses formation and testing, refinements, and model constructions. Such an exercise is useful to critically evaluate the data upon which many assumptions are made relevant to Olmec economic and ideological behavior and the relationship to what is now known about early Maya socio-political complexity. The archaeological data from the Maya Lowlands, and particularly the Mirador Basin of northern Guatemala, demonstrate that the early Maya were essentially coeval with the apogee of Olmec society in the Middle Formative period, and yet, they appear to have been essentially free from the physical "intrusion" of the Olmec. The Maya may have been rivals or competitors to the Olmec, which stimulated some sort of ideological interaction manifest primarily in the adoption or adaptation of important linguistic terms (i.e. "pom"-copal) and symbols (i.e. trefoils, jade, stingray spines). It is apparent that areas of the Olmec heartland and the Pacific Coast certainly had antecedent populations in the Early Formative, but the behavior to which "civilization" can be ascribed does not appear until the Middle Formative period. Thus, a parallel cultural development or "cultura

hermana" concept seems to best describe the socio-political process of peer interaction during the Middle Formative. The changes that permeated Maya society at the beginning of the Late Formative period (ca. 350-300 B.C.; see below) are what I believe to be state-like complexity, a process that began centuries earlier in the Middle Formative.

Numerous definitions have appeared in print (see Clark and Pye 2000; Diehl and Coe 1995), but Clark and Pye's definition of the Olmec as "a group of people, or peoples, who shared a suite of cultural practices", "probably (but not necessarily) spoke the same language" (Mixe-Zoque), and had a "structured form of cultural behavior and/or material symbols" is sufficient here. The "Maya" refer to the societies occupying the eastern Lowlands of Mesoamerica, primarily on the Yucatan shelf, who probably, but not necessarily, were Mayan speaking groups (proto-Cholan, Q'anjobal, Yucatecan). It is possible and perhaps even probable that multiple ethnic groups could have inhabited the Lowlands before the amalgamation into "Mayan" societies (see Andrews 1990). A minor point of chronological terminology is the use of the term "Formative" as opposed to "Preclassic". The term "Formative" has been largely employed loosely to imply an evolutionary stage of Maya cultural development towards the Classic period, a point which causes me to wince in the face of overwhelming data suggesting that the early Maya had accomplished, or were superior in, many of the attributes that define Classic Maya civilization. I prefer the term "Preclassic," rather than "Formative" so as to specify a chronological value (prior to the Classic) rather than a judgment of evolutionary behavior (Formative). However, for the sake of consistency and continuity of this volume, I use the term "Formative" with a disclaimer as to its evolutionary implications.

Olmec vs. Maya: Influence or Intrusion?

The Olmec model of the origins of Mesoamerican cultural complexity has been challenged by several researchers on a variety of arguments. Norman Hammond (1989), Christine Niederberger (1979, 1996, 2000), and Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus (1994) independently described early Mesoamerican cultures as a "cultura hermana" or sister culture of the Olmec, as opposed to the "cultura madre" concept to describe the Olmec-Mesoamerican interactions. Even some Olmec scholars have noted that the Olmec were not necessarily the "mother culture," but a "primus inter pares" culture (Diehl 2000:25; Diehl and Coe 1995:11; Graham 1989; Grove 1989). The concept of the "cultura-madre" was rejected by Marcus and Flannery for the Oaxaca area (see below) because of the evidence for parallel societal evolution, the lack of cultural similarities with the Gulf Coast regions, and the strong variations within contemporary Mesoamerican societies (Flannery and Marcus 1994:385-390; Marcus and Flannery 1996:92, 119, 120). The study of Olmec contemporaneous societies within the Maya area has historically been limited. Often, these remains were considered non-existent or, at best, deeply buried. As early

as 1947, Drucker noted the ceramic affinity and "lines of influence" of early or "lower" Tres Zapotes Olmec pottery to the "archaic" materials from Uaxactun (Drucker 1947:4, 8). Similarity with Olmec ritual behavior was found in sites such as Seibal, which had a cruciform cache with greenstone celts and a greenstone "bloodletter" buried 2.80 m below the surface and under six unbroken plaza floors (Smith 1982:243-244). Similar caches have been recovered from the Olmec sites of La Venta, El Manatí (Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000), and San Isidro, Chiapas (Lowe 1998). Lowe noted that San Isidro's celt caches, buried below the plaza on the east-west centerline axis of a 12 meter high pyramid represent one of the best examples of Olmec ritual practices outside of the Nuclear zone (Lowe 1981, 1998).

The appearance of Olmec influence had archaeologically visible effects on local populations. At Mazatan, Chiapas, Clark noted the abrupt change in human figurine forms from the Ocós local style to the deformed cranial "Olmec" figurines (Clark 1990:51). Similarly, Richard Lesure demonstrated that the Soconusco region of Chiapas and Guatemala had a rapid decline in realistic ceramic animal effigies, thought to be associated with local traditions about 1000 B.C., while representations of stylized mythical creatures and symbols became common on incised vessels associated with the Olmec art (Lesure 2000). Sharer (1982:259) noted that the presence of monumental Olmec sculpture outside of the heartland area "is often considered *prima facie* evidence of short- or long-term Olmec occupation in foreign areas" which, in this case, extended as far south as Chalchuapa in the Pacific coastal zones. The "Olmecization" of the Pacific coast societies through emulation and/or contact with the Gulf Coast Olmec produced changes in ceramics (from red serving wares to black or white wares) (Clark and Pye 2000:234). Architecturally, structural patterns and spatial organization of those sites who were potentially accessible to direct Olmec occupation accords to the north-south axis orientation of Olmec sites, as evident for example at Finca Acapulco (Lowe 1977:285), San Isidro (Lowe 1989a), La Libertad (Lowe 1989a:382), and La Venta (see Gonzalez Lauck 1996:74). These transformations would appear to corroborate Olmequista arguments that the Olmec influence pervaded the Soconusco sometime around 1000 B.C., and coincided with shifts in social, political, and economic organizations, indicating perhaps an actual presence of Olmec occupants.

A second visible shift is purported between 900 and 600 B.C. in which Olmec presence is suggested by the appearance by small portable objects such as figurines, plaques, and jade celts. The presence of paraphernalia suggests a historic connection to the Olmec and their politico-religious ideology. The easier viable trade and transportation routes along the Pacific coast made participation easier for the coastal societies in the broader interactions with the Olmec (Clark and Pye 2000). The antiquity of the societies along the Pacific coast and adjoining piedmont areas allowed ready identification of

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of the San Lorenzo sculpture in comparison to the La Venta sculpture (see also Graham 1989:229, 240-242). It is possible that the sculpture, and the socio-political and economic sophistication that produced it, may be confined to the early Middle Formative period. A similar observation was made by Stark (2000:38), who noted, with reference to Taube's (1995, 1996, 2000) iconographic studies of Olmec art, that the complex Olmec motifs and themes found on incised celts, for example, date exclusively either to the Middle Formative period or do not have context or firm dating.

Cyphers (1996a) notes that the monumental modification of natural plateau at San Lorenzo was sufficient to have incorporated "enormous" human labor (see also Diehl 1981:74) for the construction of terraces, filling and cutting operations and earth removal (Cyphers 1996:70). But, whether this implies that we accept the "monumental" plateau modification during the Early Formative must await additional excavation and sampling information for an independent assessment. Indeed, data from the area of La Venta shows that an equally early occupation occurred there (Rust and Sharer 1988), suggesting a more coeval or contemporaneous nature of the cultural development and monumental sculpture of San Lorenzo and La Venta.

It appears that the concept of independent innovation and autochthonous development occurred in other areas of Mesoamerica. For example, Marcus notes that the Tierras Largas phase figurines in Oaxaca (1400-1150 B.C.) show "no Olmec characteristics" (Marcus 1989:156), and that "the origins of public architecture in highland Oaxaca had nothing to do with the Olmec" (Marcus 1989:163). The subsequent San José phase (1150-850 B.C.) displayed an extraordinary growth, covering an area more than 20 hectares and pottery over an area of 70 hectares. Early sculpture from San José Mogote shows no stylistic Olmec traits, arguing for an autochthonous ideological development as manifest in architecture, artifacts, and religious symbols. The Formative Oaxacan chiefdoms differed from the Gulf Coast areas by: (1) use of lime plaster for one-room public buildings by 1400 B.C.; (2) use of planoconvex adobes by 900 B.C.; (3) use of simple stone masonry for public buildings by 900 B.C.; (4) megalithic masonry buildings by 700 B.C.; (5) non-Olmec monuments by 900 B.C.; (6) agricultural systems by about 1000 B.C. The Oaxaca area did adopt (1) sting ray spines for auto sacrifice; (2) use of figurines in burials and caches (3) stylized pottery motifs including were-jaguar and fire-serpent elements (Marcus and Flannery 1996), which could be expected in a peer polity interaction of emulation and imitation (as opposed to physical presence). Neutron activation of the ceramics from the Oaxaca area demonstrate that there were no Olmec imports into the region, and that the pieces with "Olmec art" were manufactured in various locations throughout the mountain valleys and not controlled by any particular group of people (Herrera et al. 1999).

By the Guadalupe phase (850-700 B.C.) at San José Mogote, public architecture such as Platform 3, and the Rosario Phase (700-500 B.C.) architecture such as Structure 38 and Structure 19 consisted of large vertical-walled platforms, megalithic stone stairways, and danzante-like sculptures with hieroglyphic day names and carving on the sides and edges of the monuments (Marcus and Flannery 1996:129). During the Rosario phase, circular buildings, formal tombs, and even dams were constructed, indicating a social and political complexity that matched anything in contemporaneous Mesoamerica.

A model compatible with peer polity interactions can be applied to the Olmec Heartland and surrounding areas. For example, Grove (1989a, 1989b) has suggested that the sculptural iconography of Chalcatzingo compares, in many ways, with motifs at Gulf Coast Olmec centers, but many of the elements of Chalcatzingo are not found in the Heartland area. Rather, he sees the blend of Gulf coast and central Mexican elements at Chalcatzingo, in what he has viewed as a "shared ideological system with attributes derived from many regions in Mesoamerica" (Grove 1989:13). Such a model is more plausible with those from the cultural and ideological interactions in the Middle East, Europe, and China.

Christine Niederberger (1996) notes that the diffusionist models involving direct or indirect interaction with the ethnic groups from the Gulf Coast do not agree with the data from the Basin of Mexico. She sees independent development, which, by the end of the 2nd millennium B.C., resulted in organized long distance exchange systems, earthen architecture, shared symbol systems, and regional, nucleated centers of ranked societies in a shared, pan-Mesoamerican system.

What then are the empirical evidences in the Maya Lowlands for "Olmecismos", "olmequización," or otherwise direct Olmec influences such as those that appeared in the Soconusco? According to above cited data, such material would involve: (1) Olmec art and iconography as displayed on sculpture and incorporated in architecture; (2) shifts in existing, pre-Olmec figurines, ceramics, and settlement configurations to Olmec or Olmecoid figurines and ceramics, and a reversion to more traditional styles once the Olmec imports or presence ceases; (3) shifts and alignments to the typical north-south alignments of architecture common to Olmec architecture or other sites with "direct" Olmec influence; (4) definite boundaries where Olmec influence did not or could not reach; (5) if there were such boundaries, there would have to be contemporaneous polities of sufficient economic, military, and demographic clout to enforce the boundaries; (6) evidence of Olmec ritual and economic practices such as buried celt caches, import of exotic stone for mirrors, caches, figurines, and mosaic figures; (7) reciprocal items incorporated back into Olmec society from other contact societies. If there were contemporaneous, competing, or rival polities, it is possible that some form of exchange or innovation should be reflected in Olmec groups.

Olmec-Maya Interaction: The Maya Lowlands

On the basis of available data, it appears that the Maya Lowlands: (1) had occupations that were contemporaneous with the cultural events that occurred in the Olmec heartland, particularly at La Venta, and perhaps with Middle Formative San Lorenzo; (2) the Mirador Basin Maya of northern Guatemala were in the early stages of an incipient state development by the late Middle Formative period (and a subsequent state-level society by the Late Formative period), perhaps in response to the cultural development at La Venta. The peer polity interaction model of competitive ideologies would explain the absorption of political and religious concepts while maintaining distinctive architectural forms (E-Groups; plaza compounds) and construction patterns (cell constructions; megalithic blocks), unique artifact assemblages (flaked chert and obsidian bifaces; non-Olmec figurines), specific exotic exchange items (Strombus, Marginellidae shell), and a general cultural autonomy (Middle Formative Maya ceramics); (3) lack of Olmec "intrusion" into key areas of the Maya Lowlands may have been the result of competing or rival polities that rejected or inhibited such interaction. For example, the Mirador Basin appears to have had the population and economic clout necessary to enforce the autonomy; (4) Elements and symbols of Olmec kingship found their way into Maya society, just as architectural features such as the E-Group complexes, lime plaster utilization, trade items (jade, feathers, shell), and massive platform constructions may have found their way into Olmec society; and (5) the lowland Maya were autochthonous in much of their cultural development, and parallel the pan-Mesoamerican accomplishments of their peers in Oaxaca and the Basin of Mexico.

The work conducted in Belize, particularly at Cuella (Hammond 1991) and Colha (Hester 1996; Iceland and Hester 1996), and the Belize Valley under excavations headed by Healy, Awe, Cheetham, Powis, Garber, Brown, and Ball and Taschek (see Healy and Awe 1995), have demonstrated the antiquity of formal settlements that are stratigraphically and chronologically comparable to the Olmec apogee in the Middle Formative period (see Ball and Taschek 2003). The Swazey materials from Cuella, the Cunil materials from Cahal Pech and surrounding regions, and the early Middle Formative materials found by James Garber and Kathryn Brown at Blackman Eddy have shown a correlation of residential

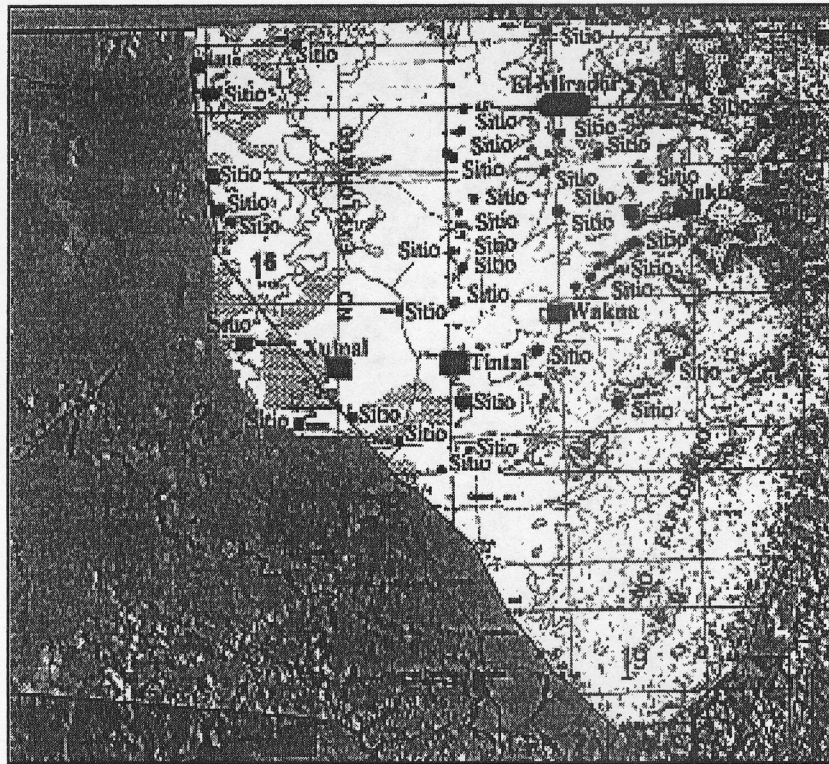


Figure 5.1: The Mirador Basin, Peten, Guatemala (after Hansen et al. 2002).

and public structures with early ceramics, as well as the possible chronological superiority of certain occupations within the region (Cheetham et al. 2002, this volume; Hammond 1991). The Blackman Eddy excavations located a crucial deposit of Cunil-like ceramics (Kanocho phase) directly overlying bedrock that is earlier than Jenny Creek Middle Formative assemblages, indicating an extraordinary antiquity of occupation in the Belize River Valley as well as the contemporaneity of these populations with the Olmec heartland societies (Garber et al. 2002).

The Mirador Basin

Archaeological studies conducted by the UCLA - FARES Mirador Basin Project- Regional Archaeological Investigation of the North Peten, Guatemala (RAINPEG) have identified data relevant to the origins and dynamics of incipient occupation and the stages of early socio-political complexity of the Maya in the Mirador Basin of northern Guatemala (Figure 5.1). The region had been the object of previous large-scale scientific excavations by Brigham Young University and Catholic University at the major Formative site of El Mirador from 1978 through 1983, and the RAINPEG project has implemented excavations and investigations since 1989 at Nakbe, Tintal, Wakna, La Florida, Pedernal, Isla, Xulnal, and El Mirador, and numerous smaller settlements (n=14), mostly Classic, dispersed within the Basin. The primary occupation of these sites dates to the Middle and Late Formative periods (ca. 1000 B.C.-350 B.C., 350 B.C.-AD 150), with relatively little overburden from the large-scale

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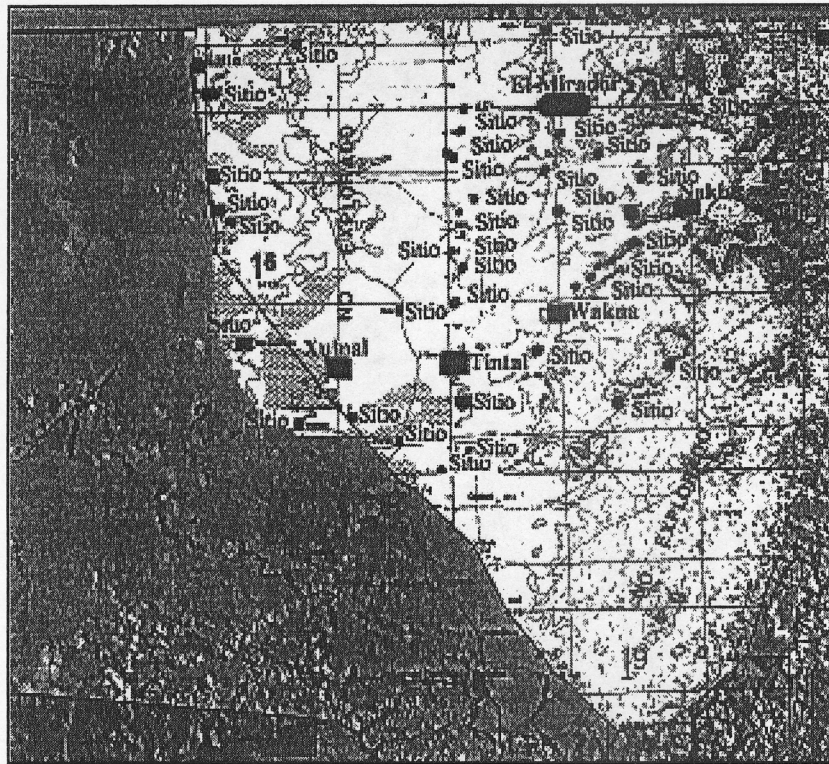


Figure 5.1: The Mirador Basin, Peten, Guatemala (after Hansen et al. 2002).

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2001; Hansen et al. 2002). Stone sculptures (stelae) and large stone altars were also carved and utilized during the latter Middle Formative period, indicating increasing emphasis on stone monuments with mythological and historical images that would be important for political and religious ideologies.

Early Middle Formative Period: Early Ox (1000-800 B.C.)

The Middle Formative occupation in the Mirador Basin has been identified at El Mirador (Forsyth 1989:13-20; Howell and Copeland 1989:7-9, 45-47), Nakbe (Forsyth 1993; Hansen 1998, 2001), Wakna, La Florida (Hansen and Suyuc 2002), and Tintal (Forsyth 1980). The earliest manifestations yet identified, however, are at Nakbe, where C-14 dates and ceramics are more abundant with stratified contexts. The earliest occupation yet known at Nakbe dates chronometrically to approximately 1000 B.C. (based on radiocarbon years) and is associated with the lowest levels stratigraphically. The ceramics from this period, termed the early Ox phase (Figure 5.3), are found in both the East and West Groups at the site (Figure 5.4), but are limited due to the extensive deposits of later Middle and Late Formative occupation and construction.

The ceramics associated with these earliest levels are extremely sparse, and consist of tecomate forms and/or restricted-rim vessels, particularly unslipped and unburnished vessels with a red, daubed rim, bowls with double or multiple lines incised on the rim, pre-slip and post-slip incised bowls, and figurines (Figures 5.5 and 5.7). In addition, red-rim restricted vessels with finger punctations, and gadrooned vessels are found in the earliest deposits. Radiometric dating from primary deposits throughout the site has yielded a sequence of dates that are

DATE	PERIOD	UNRACTON	ALTAR DE SACRIFICIOS	EL MIRADOR	NAKBE
1000	POST-CLASSIC		JICHEN		
900			BOCA	POST-LAC NA	
800	TERMINAL	3			
700	LATE	TEPEB 3	PAHON	LAC NA	UUC
600		1	CHENEB		
500		3	CHENEB		
400	EARLY	TEPEB 2	PAHON	ACROPOLIS	UUC
300		1	SALINAS	PAHONCITO	UB
200	PROTO-CLASSIC				
100					
0	P	CHICANEL	PLANCHA	CASCABEL	KAN
100	LATE				
200					
300					
400		MAHOM	SAR PELIN	MONOS ?	late
500					
600	MIDDLE		HE		middle
700					
800					early
900					

Figure 5.3: Ceramic sequence of Nakbe (after Forsyth 1993).

fairly homogeneous, and suggest a rough contemporaneity among the earliest deposits (Table 5.1).

Architecture of the earliest structures consists of packed, earthen floors with post holes carved into bedrock, indicating perishable superstructures directly on or close to existing bedrock. This was followed shortly after by low stone walls constructed with roughly hewn, thin, rectangular stones, which were placed vertically three to four courses high. Another structural type identified from this time period is the wattle-and-daub construction, consisting of packed clay floors bordered by vertical upright wooden poles with fine clay and lime plaster which had been packed over the poles, and a row of rough, large stones on the exterior side of the poles (see Hansen 1998:58).

Table 5.1: Radiocarbon dates for the Early Ox phase at Nakbe, Guatemala.

Lab No	Sample No.	Uncorrected	Uncorrected C-14 Dates	Cal Dates
UCLA 2831	51C.10.23	2900 +45	950 B.C. +45	B.C.1212-1014
UCLA2834	51C.29.122	3085+50	1135 B.C. +50	B.C.1433-1265
UCLA 2836	51G.09.43	3185+55	1235 B.C. + 55	B.C.1519-1412
UCLA 2840	53G.15.36	3110+45	1160 B.C. +45	B.C.1436-1318
UCLA2849D	51H.13.60	2980+100	B.C.1390-1051	B.C.1390-1051
Beta 31754	51C.19.58	2950 +80	1000 B.C. + 80	B.C.1370-1051
UCLA2849F	51H.16.77	2780+65	830 B.C. +65	B.C. 1047-835
UCLA2849K	51H.12.52	2790+40	840 B.C. +40	B.C. 1005-842

2001; Hansen et al. 2002). Stone sculptures (stelae) and large stone altars were also carved and utilized during the latter Middle Formative period, indicating increasing emphasis on stone monuments with mythological and historical images that would be important for political and religious ideologies.

Early Middle Formative Period: Early Ox (1000-800 B.C.)

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700	LATE	TEPEB 3	PABON	LAC NA	UUC
600		1	CHIBON		
500		3	CHIBON		
400	EARLY	TEPEB 2	EVN	ACROPOLIS	UUC
300		1	SALINAS	PAINDANCITO	UB
200	PROTO-CLASSIC				
100					
0	P	CHICANEL		CASCABEL	KAN
100	LATE		PLANCH		
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300					
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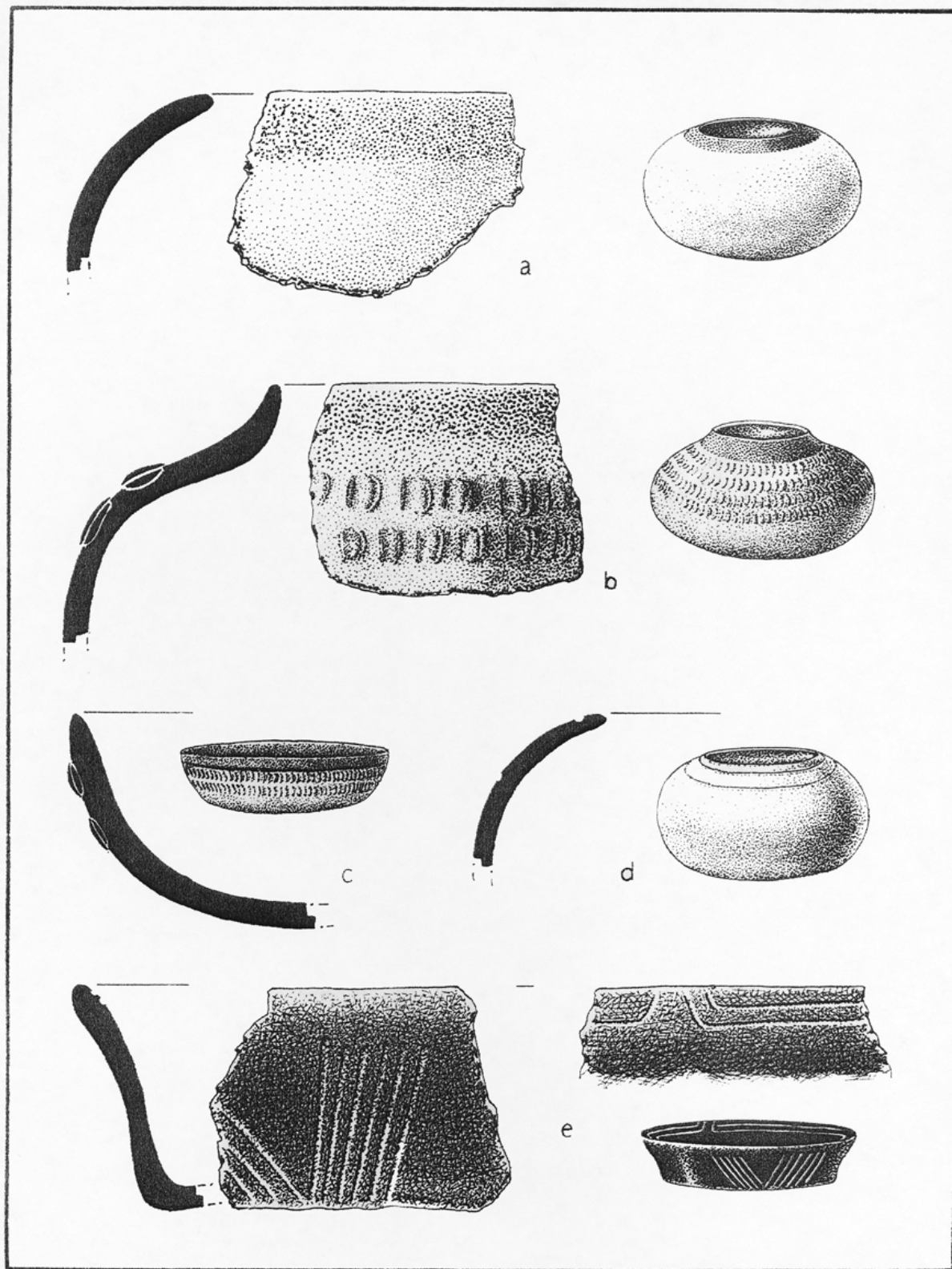


Figure 5.5: Early Ox ceramics at Nakbe, Mirador Basin: a) Red rim-on-buff tecomates; b, c) Finger punctate vessels; d, e) Incised bowls (Chunhinta Group).

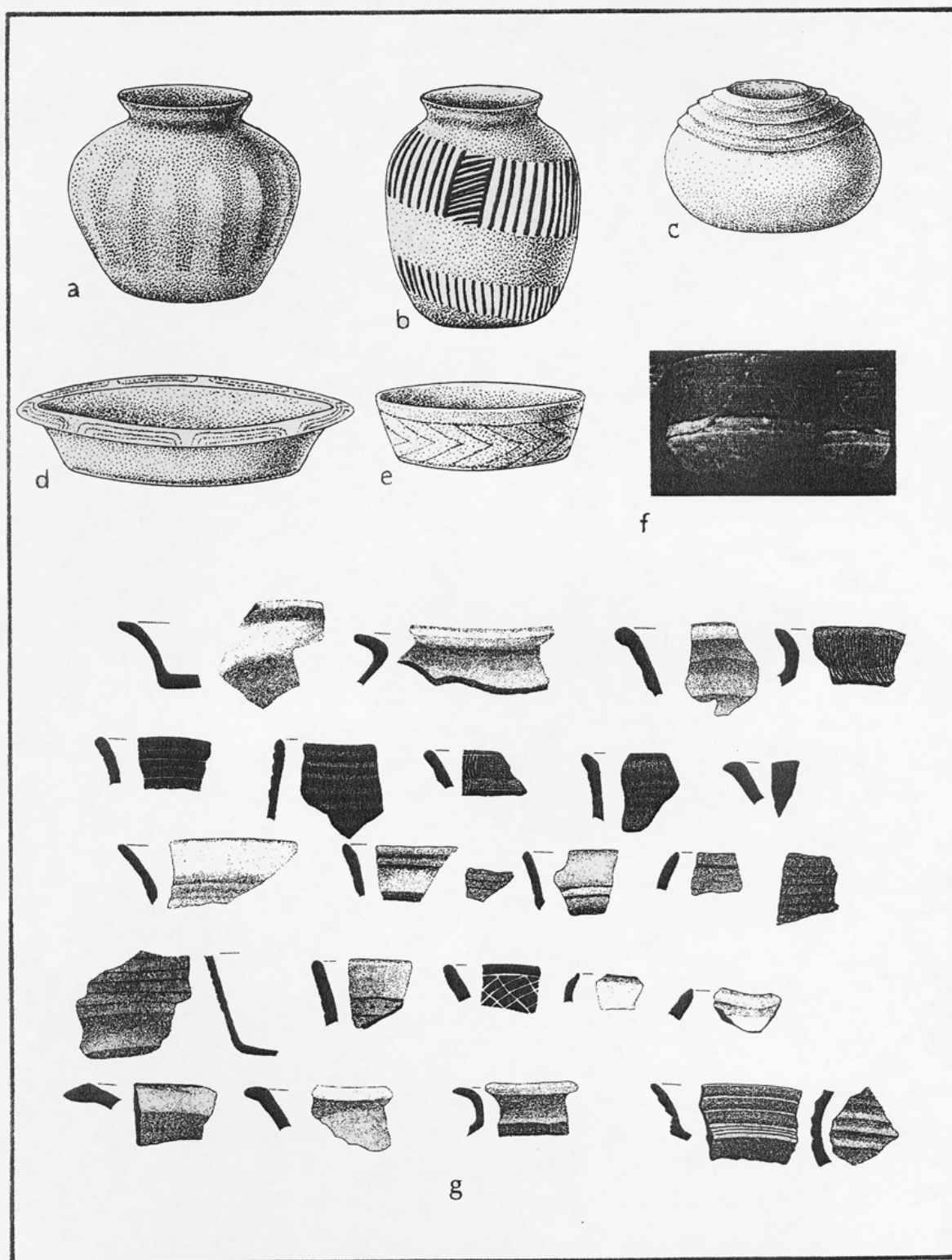


Figure 5.6: Middle Ox ceramics at Nakbe and La Florida, Mirador Basin: a, b) Palma Daub; c) Chamfered tecomate, Pital Cream; d) Incised black, red, and cream bowl; e) Chevron incised-on-red (Juventud); f) Bichrome, dichrome, incised and chamfered bowls; g) General Middle Ox ceramics from Nakbe.

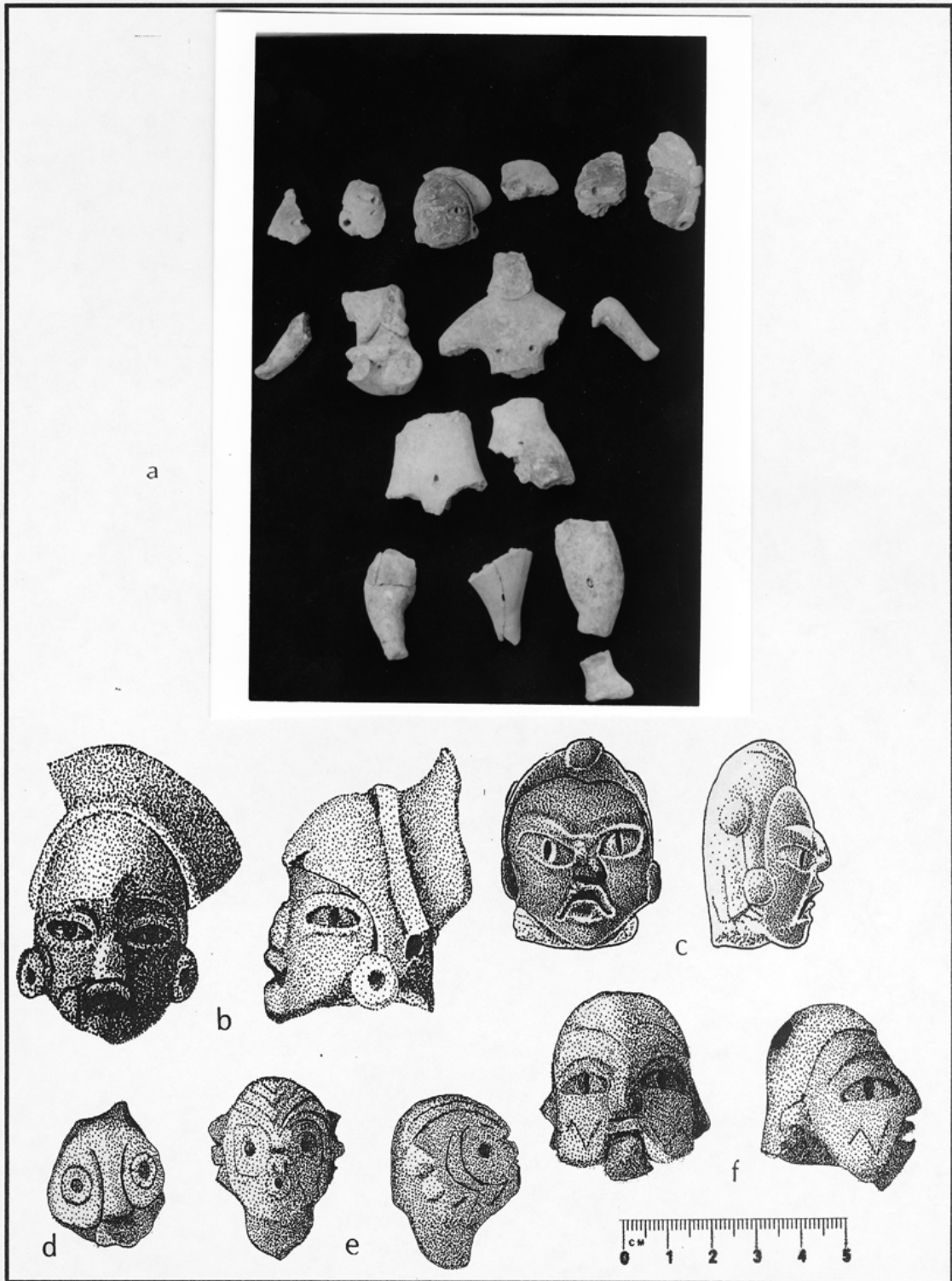


Figure 5.7: Middle Formative (Early and Middle Ox) figurines from Nakbe: a) general figurines showing a variety of body shapes and figurine assemblages; b) Op. 51 C.09.02; c) 51 L.12.37; d) 51 H.13.63; e) 51 H.05.16; f) 51 H.12.48.

the middle Ox phase, is noted for the wide variation of plastic surface treatment of ceramics, with extensive chamfering ("clap-boarding"), pre-slip and post-slip incisions, fluting, resist decoration that occasionally is found in definite patterns, bichrome and dichrome slip decorations, and the application of thin washes (Figure 5.6). Often, the surface treatment involves a wide combination of these decorative techniques, so that a single vessel could have a resist treatment, such as Tierra Mojada resist, but also be chamfered, incised, fluted, and with a fine, thin paste. Among the most common ceramics are the monochrome groups, such as the Juventud Ceramic Group (orange-red slips), Chunchinta Ceramic Group (black slips), and the Pital Group (cream slips), often with waxy slips. These groups are commonly found as flat bottom or slightly concave bowls with flaring walls and slightly everted or direct rims. Often the rims are incised with lines, which occasionally cut to the outside of the rim ("double line break").

The interior, slipped surface of bowls is often incised with broad, pre-slip multiple incisions in a myriad of designs. Also abundant are rounded bowls, restricted-neck jars, and cuspidor shaped vessels, each with abundant and multiple superficial treatments. Another type which appears fairly common in midden debitage of an elite nature are the bichromes and dichromes, particularly Muxanal Red-on-Cream, with color distinctions often coinciding with chamfering, incisions, and form variations. On rare occasions, monochrome vessels with waxy slips (usually black) were covered with painted stucco, occasionally with red and green geometric patterns.

Unslipped vessels are also very common, often with fire-blackened exteriors. Striated vessels are completely absent during this period, and unslipped vessels are distinguished by a light brushing of the surface. Particularly abundant are restricted, short-neck, rounded unslipped vessels with a thin red or dark brown wash applied to the neck to form the ceramic type known as Palma Daub. Often, light white bands or black painted bands extend down from the red-necked rim. This single type represents the greatest number of sherds in the primary deposits at Nakbe, and has considerable longevity during the Middle Formative period

but with decreasing frequency until the end of the Ox phase, about 400 B.C.

Figurines, both solid and hollow appear in all Ox deposits, particularly early and middle Ox phases (Figure 5.7). The variety of anthropomorphic figures suggest portraiture art, but the context and broken nature of the figurines, which appears to be primarily intentional, suggest a more ritual or domestic use. Zoomorphic figurines, consisting of primarily of birds, bird whistles and ocarinas, and composite creatures are also present in the corpus.

During the middle Ox phase, it is clear that a social and economic hierarchy developed relatively quickly as suggested by several indicators of rank and status such as the importation and distribution of exotic goods, variations in residence size and sophistication, and the display of symbols that in later Maya society were representative of political and religious authority (cranial deformation, dental incrustations, modeled or carved trefoils). During the middle Ox phase, trade routes had been established to import a variety of exotic items, including obsidian, hematite, and shells into the Mirador Basin. Obsidian from Middle Formative contexts at Nakbe, currently being analyzed by Ray Kunselman of the University of Wyoming, shows a high percentage (65%) of obsidian from San Martin Jilotepeque, with 32% from El Chayal and 1% from Ixtepeque (Kunselman, in preparation).

Of particular note during the middle Ox period is the importation of Strombus and Marginelladae shells from the Caribbean. While a variety of shells were imported into Nakbe during the Middle Formative period, the Strombus shells have proven to be a distinct marker chronologically, not only for Nakbe, but for Uaxactun, Tikal, Cahal Pech, Blackman Eddy, and a number of other sites as well. These shells are usually distinguished by a single, conically drilled perforation (usually from the inside of the shell) in a cut or broken fragment which is otherwise unworked, including the natural spines and projections of the shell. Less frequently, the shells are bi-conically drilled or punched (Woods and Camp, in preparation). Middle Formative burials recovered to date in the Maya Lowlands do not have these shells as jewelry or offerings, and the

Table 5.3: Radiocarbon dates for the Late Ox phase at Nakbe, Guatemala.

Lab No.	Sample No.	Uncorrected C-14 Dates	Dates	Uncorrected	CAL Dates
UCLA 2839	35A.13.14	2370 +110	420	B.C. +110	B.C.755-382
UCLA2849G	26C.06.07	2340+140	390	B.C. +140	B.C. 720-220
UCLA2849I	27A.25.63	2340+50	390	B.C. + 50	B.C. 408-392
UCLA 2849J	27D.20.31	2320+50	370	B.C. +50	B.C. 408-381
Beta 31751	32F.16.35	2400 +80	450	B.C. + 80	B.C. 759-396
UCLA 2849R	75B.11.14	2350 +210	400	B.C. +200	B.C. 704-250*
Beta 104282	51L.10.30	2480 + 50	490	B.C. +50	B.C. 760-405

note: after Hansen and Berger n.d.

possibility that they served as some sort of currency, as in the South Pacific islands, has not been ruled out.

Other indicators of rank and status for this period include ceramics with the woven mat motif (Hansen 2001:54), figurines with the three-prong "Jester" symbol (Hansen 2001:54), human incisors with inlaid hematite disks (Mata and Hansen 1992), and cranial deformations. Vertical walls of structures continue to be enlarged, and the first platforms appear during this time, indicating that the control of labor was developing, although the introduction of specialist production in quarries was not to appear until the latter Middle Formative period.

Late Middle Formative Period: Late Ox (600-350 B.C.)

The late Ox period (Table 5.3) at Nakbe represented clear evidence for centralized administration of government as well as increased specialization and production. It was during this period that radical transformations in stone quarrying techniques were implemented, shifting from the crudely quarried wall stones to massive, finely cut blocks nearly a meter in length (Figure 5.8), and replicating similar masonry at San Jose Mogote (Str. 19) in Oaxaca. The evidence for expanding technical specialization is found in the limestone blocks of consistent size and form used for various architectural constructions which were extracted through specialized quarrying techniques



Figure 5.8: Monumental block wall (Str.35), late Middle Formative period, Nakbe. Average block size: 98 cm x 47 cm x 45cm.

(Forsyth 1993b; Hansen 1992c; Hansen et al. 1997; Woods and Titmus 1994, 1996). The blocks, measuring approximately 1m x 50 cm x 40 cm, were placed with the long axes parallel to wall line which allowed the maximum exposure of stone in the architecture as well as creating the opportunity for architectural innovations. It was during this period that apron mouldings first appeared, allowing the overhang to shield and protect lower portions of the walls.

The late Ox period also witnessed the construction of large platforms covering thousands of square meters of surface area. They were associated with the introduction of major architecture, up to 18 m high, placed on the edges of platforms and defining spatial plazas. But it is clear that the construction of such architecture was ritually significant. Indeed, the first ritually consistent architectural form, the "E-Group" complex, appears during this time as evident at Nakbe, Tikal, and probably Wakna (Hansen 1998).

Many of the ceramic traditions which appeared in the middle Ox period continue, but in the latter part of the period (ca. 400 B.C.) start to develop some of the early Chicanel forms of the Late Formative, such as incised rim bowls, but with Middle Formative surface treatment (incising, mottled slips). A particularly diagnostic mode characteristic of the latter Ox period is the introduction of extremely wide everted rims on bowls, occasionally as wide as 13 cm.

The introduction of carved stone monuments with depictions of cosmic themes occurred during the Middle Formative in the Mirador Basin (Isla Stela 1, Nakbe Mon. 8, Mon. 2, Mon. 3, Pedernal Mon. 2,3; La Florida Stela 1) (see Figure 5.9). Large slab altars (Nakbe Altar 4), placed in the center-line axis of ritually significant architecture, appear to have been utilized as early as 600 B.C., if not earlier. The increasing size of slightly later stelae with sophisticated images (Stela 1, Nakbe; Stela 1, Tintal) appears to correlate with architectural size. Stelae were carved in celt form of large width and height (4.5 m x 2 m x .50 m), with some monuments made from "exotic" stone from some distance, such as the sandstone identified from Altar de Sacrificios area for Tintal Stela 1 (Hansen et al. 1997) and hard crystalline limestone for Nakbe Stela 1. Monument forms, Middle Formative iconographic formats, tendency for exotic stones, and large stone sizes parallel those at contemporaneous La Venta and other Olmec sites, but with distinctive Maya images (Hansen 2002).

Discussion: The Olmec and Maya

I believe it is unlikely that the Maya, Zapotecs, or other Mesoamerican complex societies generated the cultural dynamics of "civilization" as a self contained process in the absence of significant outside influence, although this is a position that several scholars have attributed to the Olmec occupation at San Lorenzo. Such a position must be considered with a great deal of skepticism, as

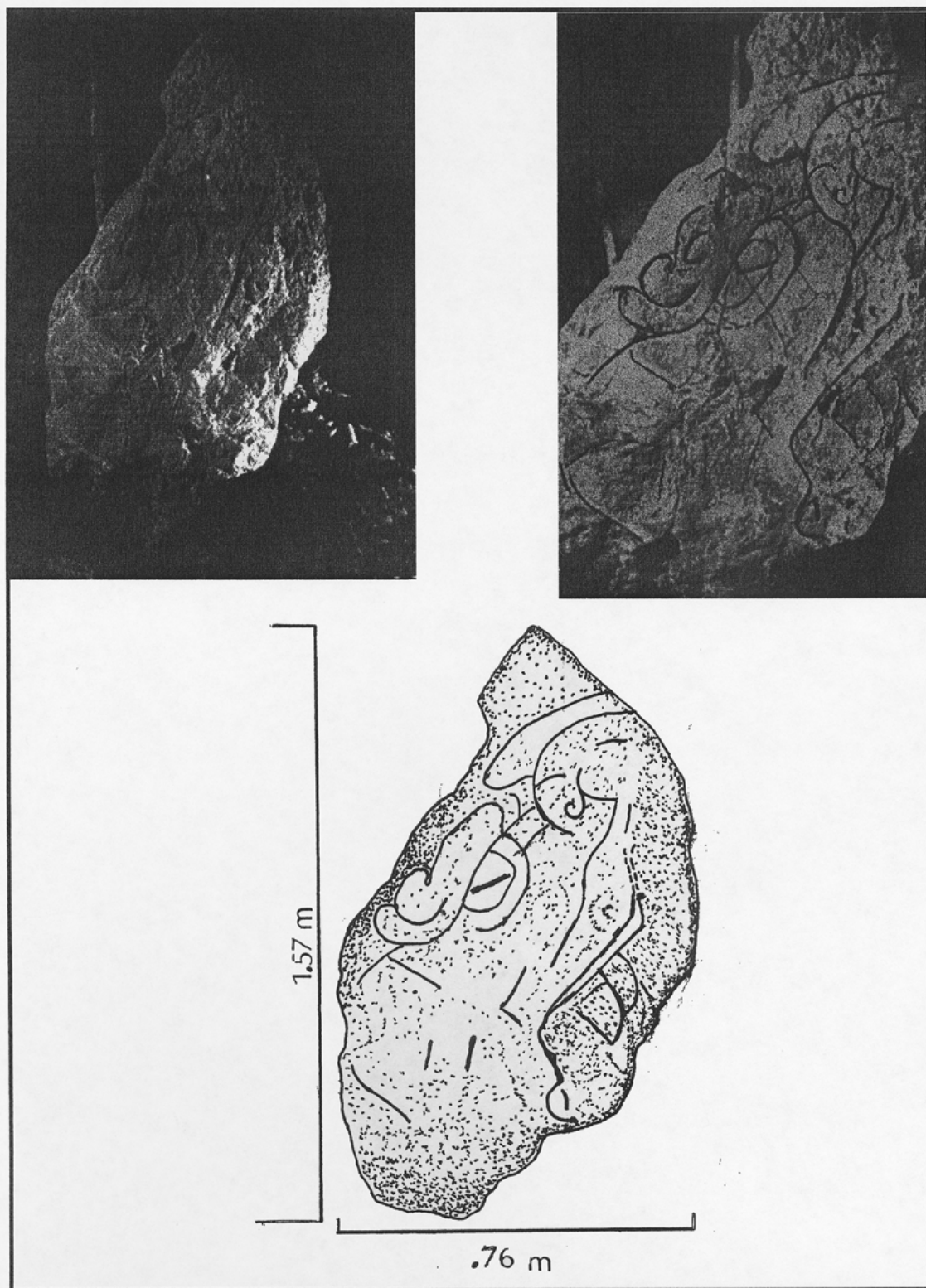


Figure 5.9: Isla Stela 1, Middle Formative period (estimated). Note upward looking saurian monster, with eye, eyebrow, curled snout, and teeth.

early states (or chiefdoms) do not exist in isolation (Renfrew 1996:115-116). The case for the incipient occupation of the Maya Lowlands must be equally cautious in light of the evidence for a substantially earlier occupation on the Pacific coast (Mokaya) and in parts of the Olmec heartland. Earlier occupation, however, does not imply greater cultural sophistication, nor does it necessarily generate the mechanisms of socio-political complexity, as evident, for example, in the cases of Amazonian forest tribes. But the concepts of Renfrew's peer polity interaction model (Renfrew 1996) do allow for political and economic structure of societies to develop through neighboring early state modules (ESMs) by competitive emulation and imitation, or perhaps even periods of conflict or detente. It is this perspective I find most compelling when considering: (1) the increasing size of stone monuments and iconographic content at the end of the Middle Formative period in the Mirador Basin (and other sites such as Abaj Takalik on the Pacific piedmont); (2) the nature of exotic imports; or (3) the emphasis on increasing architectural size and complexity peculiar to each region. As Renfrew notes (1996:127), "If status is achieved, for instance, by erecting a particular kind of monument, the neighboring polity will most readily acquire greater status by doing bigger and better." Such predictable quirks of human nature are replete throughout history, and it is risky to view the Olmec or Maya as exceptions.

According to peer polity interaction, it is possible that the Maya may have received the formula for "Coca Cola" (e.g. "divine kingship") from elsewhere, but they packaged it in their own bottles and brands. Indeed, the changes that occurred in societies believed to have had direct contact with the heartland Olmec such as those in the Mazatan region (i.e. Clark 1990; Clark and Blake 1989; Lesure 2000) do not appear to have occurred in the Maya Lowlands. For example, Olmec sites had a north-south orientation. Early Maya sites of the Mirador Basin (El Mirador, Nakbe, Tintal) appear to have been organized on an east-west orientation (see for example *Figure 5.4*). Olmec economies involved the importation of exotic iron ores and ilmenite, while early Maya economies imported drilled strombus shell fragments. The Olmec imported obsidian from La Victoria (Puebla) and El Chayal, while the Maya imported obsidian primarily from San Martin Jilotepeque (Rio Pixcaya) in the Middle Formative period, and subsequently, almost exclusively from El Chayal in the Late Formative period after ca. 350 B.C.

It appears that the Mirador Basin Maya were in the stages of a simultaneous complex political development by the late Middle Formative, perhaps in response to or even instigating more complex architectural, socio-political, and ideologically structured development at La Venta, in sort of a competitive ideology. At about 700-400 B.C., the structures and platforms at Nakbe, and possibly at Tintal, Wakna, and Xulnal, were as massive (or more so) and as sophisticated as anything at La Venta. The format of architectural placement, cache patterns, ceramics, fine jade

and serpentine masks and figurines, monument themes, etc. suggest that the Olmec were mostly independent of the Maya. The evidence is equally persuasive in the Maya area that there were no Olmec influences in the placement of principal structures and platforms, architectural construction techniques and methods, cache locations, ceramics, lithics, quarry techniques, obsidian sources, and use of shell.

The homogeneity of the Mamom ceramic sphere throughout the Mirador Basin and certain surrounding areas of the Lowlands suggests the possibility for a more centralized or perhaps more unified ideological structure, in much the same way that Olmec ceramics, iconography, and ritual paraphernalia found their way along the Pacific coast. The subsequent Chicanel ceramic sphere of the Late Formative is even more uniform throughout the entirety of the Lowland Maya area, with ceramic homogeneity extending even to domestic and utilitarian pottery. I believe that this period represents the first true state-level society in Mesoamerica (Hansen 2001). Perhaps it is possible to view the preceding Middle Formative period as an example of the rise of parallel, complex political, economic, and religious polities. Parallel polities differ from primary or secondary ones in that they arise simultaneously, each with different ethnic and/or linguistic backgrounds, but both affected by the historic influences of previous or neighboring complex societies. In this sense, I would view the evidence as being clearly defined borders (which appears to have been particularly between the Olmec/ Usumacinta and the Maya/Candelaria), independent commodity import and development (ilmenite and jade for the Olmec, versus obsidian and strombus shells for the Maya), unique artifact assemblages such as flaked lithic bifaces, and a possible competitive ideology. The nature and form of architecture and stone monuments in the Maya area and in the neighboring Olmec heartland give a hint, I believe, of a competitive emulation of political and religious ideology.

How this competitive or peer polity formation was eventually satisfied is still uncertain, and will require substantial investigation on a variety of fronts to more adequately determine. But it is apparent that the Maya ultimately won the higher hand. The competitive or rival posture disappeared by about 400 to 300 B.C. when La Venta was apparently sacked and burned (a subject that merits a great deal more investigation), and El Mirador and the causeway-linked polities of the Mirador Basin were marshaling a control of labor which allowed the construction of the largest architectural constructions in Maya history over the entirety of the Basin (e.g. Hansen 1990, 1998; Howell and Copeland 1989). Stone stelae in the Mirador Basin, which were gaining size and complexity (> 4 m high) during late Middle Formative times, were consistently reduced to piddling monuments less than a meter high during the Late Formative period, but with the addition of a new element: writing (i.e. Hansen 1991a, 2001, 2002). Radical architectural formats such as the three-summit triadic style buildings on platforms

appear relatively quickly by about 300 B.C., and were developed by the Maya to an extraordinary size and sophistication by the early Late Formative period (ca. 300-200 B.C.). These monumental structures were decorated with deity portraits, and cosmic formats that were never replicated in similar formats by the Olmec remnants (with a possible exception at Tzutzuculi). There was no need. The competitive nature of the ideological struggle had been satisfactory on behalf of the Maya, and the notion was probably backed up by a potent military acumen.

The data, when presented in compared chronologies, suggest similarities and variations of specific economic developments in several areas of Mesoamerica, characteristic of independent chiefdoms who were aware of, and imitated or rejected cultural traits of peer societies. The ethnohistoric examples for the development of parallel states are everywhere: Egypt-Assyria, Assyria-Babylonia, Babylon-Isin-Larsa, Greeks-Persians, (perhaps even the U.S. and former USSR). Such models are far more universal, with world-wide precedents, and seem to account better for the data. The Maya probably obtained some of the symbols and rituals of kingship from the early Olmec, although the concept of "Divine Kingship" is something that appears to be a universal manipulation of power. The Code of Hammurabi in Babylon (ca. 1780 B.C.) states explicitly in the prologue on the stela that he, Hammurabi, was "god among kings" (Anker 1995:28). But, there is no evidence, at present, of Olmec immigrants, refugees, ritual caches, or trade items to date in the Mirador Basin or elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands at comparable periods other than Seibal. If the Olmec had extensive physical interaction with the Maya, they adopted Maya architectural patterns, Maya ceramics, Maya burial practices, and left behind their Olmequismos, at least where we have looked. We might do well to be cognizant of the historical trajectories in the Eastern Hemisphere, where rival states and empires ebbed and waned continuously. The thing that is particularly striking about the Old World are the historical texts and monuments describing the importance of charismatic (and individual) protagonists who, as kings, propelled their societies into greater or worse situations in peer polity interactions. Examples of Shamshi-Adad I, Ramses, Sargon the Great, Hammurabi (Babylon), Tikulti-Ninurta I and Tiglath-Pileser I (Assyria), Sennacherib, and Nebuchadnezzar, are potent models that merit reflection and consideration. While the Old World state-level polities had contact with each other (i.e. they bordered each other), the key ingredient here was the competitive peer interaction of their lifestyles, ideologies, technology, status, and charismatic character of certain leaders in their history. A common denominator among many historical protagonists appears to be the quest for power and status (see Clark and Blake 1994). I am confident that the early Mesoamericans were equally as human in their historical trajectories.

Summary

In summary, many of the elements that Olmec specialists would like to see the Maya acquiring from the Olmec by about 400 B.C. were already in existence long before the

fall of La Venta. The details such as dental incrustations (appear to be exclusively Maya) appear by about 800 B.C. Cranial deformation appears prior to 500 B.C. Monuments appear to originate earlier in the Olmec regions although particularly large stelae seem to evolve coeval with the late Olmec. There is the possibility that foreigners (i.e. the Maya?) were interacting at some level with the Olmec, as suggested by La Venta Stela 3, Monument 13, and Monument 19.

Mounting evidence continues to suggest that there were at least four cooks in the Mesoamerican cultural kitchen, creating complex architectural centers, developing writing, monuments, political hierarchical structures, and ceramics of an autochthonous nature, while at the same time, being knowledgeable and incorporating features from neighboring societies.

Such data can provide the theoretical foundations for more focused investigations of early Maya sites, instigate the organization and implementation of studies of border areas between the Olmec, Maya, and other Mesoamerican societies and, at the least, generate a lively argument over the origins of socio-political and economic complexity in the rise of Mesoamerican civilization.

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appear relatively quickly by about 300 B.C., and were developed by the Maya to an extraordinary size and sophistication by the early Late Formative period (ca. 300-200 B.C.). These monumental structures were decorated with deity portraits, and cosmic formats that were never replicated in similar formats by the Olmec remnants (with a possible exception at Tzutzuculi). There was no need. The competitive nature of the ideological struggle had been satisfactory on behalf of the Maya, and the notion was probably backed up by a potent military acumen.

The data, when presented in compared chronologies, suggest similarities and variations of specific economic developments in several areas of Mesoamerica, characteristic of independent chiefdoms who were aware of, and imitated or rejected cultural traits of peer societies. The ethnohistoric examples for the development of parallel states are everywhere: Egypt-Assyria, Assyria-Babylonia, Babylon-Isin-Larsa, Greeks-Persians, (perhaps even the U.S. and former USSR). Such models are far more universal, with world-wide precedents, and seem to account better for the data. The Maya probably obtained some of the symbols and rituals of kingship from the early Olmec, although the concept of "Divine Kingship" is something that appears to be a universal manipulation of power. The Code of Hammurabi in Babylon (ca. 1780 B.C.) states explicitly in the prologue on the stela that he, Hammurabi, was "god among kings" (Anker 1995:28). But, there is no evidence, at present, of Olmec immigrants, refugees, ritual caches, or trade items to date in the Mirador Basin or elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands at comparable periods other than Seibal. If the Olmec had extensive physical interaction with the Maya, they adopted Maya architectural patterns, Maya ceramics, Maya burial practices, and left behind their Olmequismos, at least where we have looked. We might do well to be cognizant of the historical trajectories in the Eastern Hemisphere, where rival states and empires ebbed and waned continuously. The thing that is particularly striking about the Old World are the historical texts and monuments describing the importance of charismatic (and individual) protagonists who, as kings, propelled their societies into greater or worse situations in peer polity interactions. Examples of Shamshi-Adad I, Ramses, Sargon the Great, Hammurabi (Babylon), Tikulti-Ninurta I and Tiglath-Pileser I (Assyria), Sennacherib, and Nebuchadnezzar, are potent models that merit reflection and consideration. While the Old World state-level polities had contact with each other (i.e. they bordered each other), the key ingredient here was the competitive peer interaction of their lifestyles, ideologies, technology, status, and charismatic character of certain leaders in their history. A common denominator among many historical protagonists appears to be the quest for power and status (see Clark and Blake 1994). I am confident that the early Mesoamericans were equally as human in their historical trajectories.

Summary

In summary, many of the elements that Olmec specialists would like to see the Maya acquiring from the Olmec by about 400 B.C. were already in existence long before the

fall of La Venta. The details such as dental incrustations (appear to be exclusively Maya) appear by about 800 B.C. Cranial deformation appears prior to 500 B.C. Monuments appear to originate earlier in the Olmec regions although particularly large stelae seem to evolve coeval with the late Olmec. There is the possibility that foreigners (i.e. the Maya?) were interacting at some level with the Olmec, as suggested by La Venta Stela 3, Monument 13, and Monument 19.

Mounting evidence continues to suggest that there were at least four cooks in the Mesoamerican cultural kitchen, creating complex architectural centers, developing writing, monuments, political hierarchical structures, and ceramics of an autochthonous nature, while at the same time, being knowledgeable and incorporating features from neighboring societies.

Such data can provide the theoretical foundations for more focused investigations of early Maya sites, instigate the organization and implementation of studies of border areas between the Olmec, Maya, and other Mesoamerican societies and, at the least, generate a lively argument over the origins of socio-political and economic complexity in the rise of Mesoamerican civilization.

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