Chapter 2

The Beginnings of Mesoamerica: Apologia for the Soconusco Early Formative

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In popular usage, Mesoamerica represents that slice of Middle America dominated by and co-extensive with the "Mesoamerican tradition" of high civilization (Kirchhoff 1943). As a cultural area, Mesoamerica blurs at its margins and becomes fuzzier the further back in time one goes. The Mesoamerican tradition was first clearly in place by Olmec times (Coe 1968). Here its beginnings are traced back five centuries before the Olmecs to the Mokaya of the Pacific Coast of Chiapas, Mexico (Clark and Blake 1989).* It is argued here that the first complex societies in Middle America arose in this littoral zone and had profound and widespread civilizing influence on the area that would soon become the nucleus of Mesoamerica. Recent research in the Mazatan region of coastal Chiapas (Figure 1) suggests that simple chiefdom societies were in place by at least 1650 B.C. The intent of this chapter is to present evidence for these precocious rank societies; processes implicated in their development are addressed in a companion paper (Clark and Blake 1991). Discussion of early rank societies will be more intelligible if questions of chronology and Early Formative subsistence practices are first resolved.

CHRONOLOGY

Based upon recent field work and a new series of 28 radiocarbon dates, the coastal Early Formative has been divided into the phases shown in Figure 2. This sequence generally

*The term "Mokaya" is used for Early Formative cultures of the Soconusco previously known only by reference to phase names. One reads of Barra, Ocós, Cuadors peoples, etc., which only fosters confusion. In discussing the formation of rank societies in the Mazatan area, for example, one would have to discuss how the Barra people developed from the Chantuto people and into the Locona people, and so on. Since these were the same group of people during all of these subsequent phases, most likely speakers of proto-Mixe-Zoque, they are referred to by a single term. "Mokaya" is an anglicized version of the Mixe and Zoque word mok' haya meaning "corn people".
follows previous sequences published for this coastal zone. The major change is the insertion of the Locona and Cherla phases. As evident in comparison to previous phasing, these can be thought of as early and late Ocós, respectively.

Early Formative coastal chronology has been critically reevaluated by Shook and Hatch (1979). In 1979, the relative sequence for the Pacific Coast Early Formative was based principally upon Coe’s (1961) excavations at La Victoria, Guatemala. Coe and Flannery’s (1967) later work at nearby Salinas La Blanca, and Lowe’s investigations at Altamira, Mexico (Green and Lowe 1967, Lowe 1975, 1978). Beginning with the Barra phase, the sequence proceeded to the Ocós, Cuadros, Jocotal, and Conchas phases (Figure 2). This
definition of phases and relative placement of ceramic complexes resulted from astute interpretation of complex stratigraphy and ceramic cross-references with better dated complexes from adjacent areas (see Lowe 1978). No known site exhibited the entire sequence in clear stratigraphic superimposition, and known stratigraphy masked hypothesized hiatuses. Until recently, radiocarbon dates to confirm the relative and absolute placement of phases had been minimal. Coe and Flannery (1967, p. 68) published four dates for their Cuadros phase and one for the Conchas phase. At the opposite end of the Formative sequence, Ceja (1985) obtained two dates for the poorly known Barra phase from his excavations at Paso de la Amada (published in Lowe 1975). The Ocós and Jocotal phases remained undated.

Shook and Hatch (1979) argue that the coastal sequence has been accepted too uncritically, and they attempt to demonstrate its principal errors. The core of their seven-point critique stresses the developmental illogic of the successive ceramic complexes. For them, Coe's (1961) initial sequence of Ocós to Conchas, based upon his dissertation research at La Victoria, makes the best technological sense. Coe and Flannery's (1967) later accommodation of the unsophisticated Cuadros and Jocotal phases between the Ocós and Conchas phases, they argue, cannot be justified on the basis of stratigraphy, sherd analysis, radiocarbon dates, or ceramic cross-references. As a viable alternative, Shook and Hatch propose a Barra-Ocós complex that was contemporaneous with a Cuadros-Jocotal complex. They see these two lines of development converging in the Conchas ceramic complex (Shook and Hatch 1979, p. 173).

More recent dates from eight Chiapas sites confirm and refine the original sequence proposed by Coe, Flannery, and Lowe. Ceramic stratigraphy at Aquiles Serrano, Chilón, and Paso de la Amada allowed the refinement of the phase sequence and the definition of two

<table>
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<th>Phase</th>
<th>Radiocarbon years b.c.</th>
<th>Calibrated years B.C.</th>
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<td>Late Conchas</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>750</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early Conchas</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jocotal</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>950</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuadros</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>1000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cherla</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocós</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>1350</td>
</tr>
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<td>1500</td>
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<td>Barra</td>
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<td>1650</td>
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<td>???</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>1850</td>
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<td>2150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantuto A</td>
<td>2700</td>
<td>3400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantuto A</td>
<td>3800</td>
<td>4650</td>
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Note: Uncalibrated radiocarbon years, b.c.; calibrated years, B.C.

Figure 2. Revised chronology of the Mazatan region.
more phases.* Both phases appear to have been times of especially accelerated ceramic innovation. As mentioned, the Locona phase witnessed the emergence of chiefdom-level societies. In contrast, the Cherla phase marks the period of maximum, independent interaction with the Gulf Coast Olmec. In the following Cuadors phase, the Mazatan area appears to have come under Olmec hegemony (Clark 1991, Clark and Blake 1989).

ENVIRONMENT AND SUBSISTENCE

Mazatan lies in the area known since Aztec times as the Soconusco, one of the most productive areas of Mesoamerica and a principal producer of cacao. This coastal plain continues to be the most productive zone of Chiapas. Presumably, the environment of the Mazatan area during the Early Formative has remained much as it existed 50 years ago, before the founding of new ejidos (farming communities) and the advent of modern farming practices radically altered the habitat. Important zones were the beach, estuary, inland swamps bordering the estuary, a broad, forested coastal plain flanked by piedmont, and the towering Sierra Madre mountains (Figure 1). The largest Early Formative communities occupied the central strip of the coastal plain (between 10 to 15 m above sea level); specialized hamlets were located at the edge of the estuary. The part of the plain of particular concern appears to be a recent river delta. Numerous abandoned river channels radiate across this semicircular fan; until recently, these served as runoff channels during the height of the rainy season and as favored garden plots (called chahuites) at the end of the dry season. The effect of these seasonal rivers and streams was to break up the tropical forest into a patchy mosaic of trees, shrubs, small lagoons, and swamps, ideal for a great variety and density of small fauna. The abundance of game persisted until the 1950s and is implicit in the Aztec name of this zone, Mazatan, "place of the deer".

The hunter-gatherer-fishers who became the first farmers of this area continued to exploit the rich resources available to them. Faunal analysis conducted by Kent V. Flannery and Karen Mudar of the University of Michigan documents a wide variety of species. Freshwater fish and turtles (especially black mojarra) were particularly important. Deer, dog, armadillo, rabbit, squirrel, pocket gopher, opossum, birds, snakes, crocodile, iguana, crabs, and other shellfish were also consumed. Clearly, hunting, fishing, and gathering persisted as substantial subsistence pursuits throughout the Early Formative.

The principal staple of Barra and Ocós agriculture, whether corn or manioc, has been a topic of some heated speculation (Davis 1975, Flannery 1982, Green and Lowe 1967, Lewenstein and Walker 1984, Lowe 1975, Voorhies 1976, Zeitlin 1979). Lowe (1975) and Green and Lowe (1967) proposed that these Barra and Ocós farmers cultivated manioc. Our investigations demonstrate, however, that they cultivated corn, beans, and probably squash. Carbonized cobs, corn kernels, and beans have been found in Locona deposits. Traditional corn-processing tools, manos and metates, are also present. Independent evidence from historical linguistics lends support to the thesis that a corn complex was well developed by Olmec times and probably earlier (Campbell and Kaufman 1976). It is of more than passing interest that the same proto-Mixe-Zoque (PMZ) linguistic evidence has reconstructed terms for roots and tubers, in particular, sweet potato, edible tubers, and manioc (Campbell and Kaufman 1976, p. 84). Roots were probably important in the diet, as argued by Coe and Diehl (1980, Vol. 2) for San Lorenzo, even though they cannot yet be demonstrated archaeologically. The presence of corn and beans does not logically preclude the use of roots and tubers. The general impression of the Early Formative faunal and botanical remains is one of a true, mixed subsistence economy, with roots in Late Archaic foraging practices (see Voorhies 1976 and Michaels and Voorhies 1989 for Late Archaic societies).

*Other refinements to the coastal sequence are based on dates obtained by Love (1989) at La Blanca, Guatemala, and by Pye and Demarest (1989) at El Mesak, Guatemala.
EVIDENCE FOR RANK SOCIETIES

Contrasting patterns and scales of integration and differentiation suggest the presence of simple chiefdoms or rank societies in the Mazatan zone by at least Locona times. The limited data presently available point to integrated polities and differentiation among individuals, elite and nonelite.

The best evidence for discrete integrated polities comes from settlement data. The distribution of settlements during the Locona phase is shown in Figure 3. Settlements
clustered around several large villages, most notably, Paso de la Amada, Chilo, and San Carlos. Known elite housemounds are also confined to these large villages. Based upon total area of occupation, the population of each settlement cluster is estimated at about 1000 to 1500 persons (Clark et al. 1987) — 500 to 1000 people could have resided in some of the large villages alone. The site of Paso de la Amada, for example, covered 53 ha during the Locona phase. Overall, population density of the zone may have been about 12 to 18 persons per square kilometer. Some mechanism(s) for promoting social cohesion would have been necessary to adjudicate domestic conflicts that inevitably arise in villages of this size. As noted, large villages were ringed by smaller villages, hamlets, and isolated residences. And some of these, bordering the estuary, appear to have been established for specialized subsistence pursuits, perhaps salt extraction, shrimping, and/or drying fish. The apparent two-tiered hierarchy of inland settlement and of functionally specialized sites within each hypothesized unit is additional evidence of political integration or organic solidarity (Durkheim 1933). Recent study of obsidian artefacts supports this interpretation.

Obsidian was imported to the Mazatan region from at least three different sources during the Early Formative, and the obsidian from at least two of these sources appears to have entered the zone from different directions and by different means — El Chayal obsidian via the coastal waterway (Navarrete 1978) and Tajumulco obsidian via an overland route (Clark and Lee 1984, Clark and Salcedo 1989). Data on the relative frequency of each kind of obsidian found at Ocós phase sites indicate differing consumption zones and suggest an area partitioned into elongated sociopolitical units that crosscut most environmental zones, from the estuary to the piedmont. The obsidian data make the most sense if each unit was politically integrated and if the administrators of each interacted most frequently with their counterparts to the west and to the east (Clark and Salcedo 1989). The information summarized in Figure 4 demonstrates the substantially different ratios of the three kinds of Guatemalan obsidian that each hypothetical political unit received. On the other hand, distribution of these types of obsidian within each large village was remarkably homogeneous, especially when compared to the distribution among major villages (Clark and Lee 1984, Clark and Salcedo 1989). This leads to the inference that during Ocós and probably Locona times as well, some mechanism existed for equitable distribution of obsidian products (by source, but not quantity) within the large villages, or what would be considered “redistribution”. Implications of obsidian redistribution vis-á-vis chiefly legitimation are addressed elsewhere (Clark 1991).

At this point, other evidence for centrally controlled economic transfers remains more inferential (pending completion of ongoing analyses). The Locona phase witnessed a dramatic increase in the types and frequencies of elaborate serving vessels. This change in vessel forms, from fancy tecomates to deep plates and dishes, may represent an important shift in emphasis from ritual drinking (Clark and Blake 1989) to increased public feasting, but this prospect is still being analyzed. It is of particular interest that stone vessels were first manufactured in the Locona phase and were precise imitations of decorated ceramic forms. For the Locona phase, these elegant stone plates have been found only at central villages, and usually in association with elite housemounds.

Finally, there is the possibility of food storage. Evidence for elite residences housing a chiefly elite is convincing, as discussed by Blake (Chapter 3) for Paso de la Amada. The large, elevated structure he describes could easily have accommodated an extended or polygamous family. Alternatively (or additionally), much of the space could have been utilized for above-ground storage of foodstuffs, especially the rafters and loft. It is noteworthy that the largest storage and cooking vessels (and the only ovens) found in excavations at Paso de la Amada are also associated with this elite structure, perhaps indicative of special
food preparation and feasting; however, we presently lack the comparative data to cast these suggestions into proper relief.*

None of the preceding evidence is definitive by itself, but points consistently in the same direction: to well-integrated polities. Indicators of social differentiation also date to Locona times. The unusually large residence at Paso de la Amada (Blake, Chapter 3) is mute testimony of persistent privilege and transgenerational social distinctions (indicated by periodic renovation and enlargement of the structure and placement of its dedicatory offerings). Also, at Paso de la Amada, some households appear to have maintained differential access to foreign goods and luxury items such as stone bowls, large hollow figurines, napkin-ring clay earspoons, mica, jade, iron-ore mirrors and earspool flares, and special trichrome pottery (see Clark and Lee 1984). Some long-distance imports were converted into special goods locally, perhaps controlled by the elite. The only evidence for manufacture of green-

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*As this chapter goes to press, the author and Michael Blake are initiating another season of field work designed to investigate the hypotheses proposed here. In particular, the sample of both elite and nonelite housemounds and associated refuse midden sites at Paso de la Amada and San Carlos needs to be increased.
stone beads, for instance, comes from the elite residence at San Carlos. Some of these special goods should show up as mortuary offerings.

The sample of Locona burials recovered is suggestive of rank differences. Many adults were buried with just a few cobbles by the head (Ceja 1985). In one case, an adult was interred with two ceramic vessels, a mortar, and about ten flat cobbles, most of them simple tools. The one exhumed child was unusual in several respects. This 11-year-old had been sprinkled with red pigment and was wearing a forehead mirror made of white mica mounted on a sherd disk (Figure 5). A similar, circular mirror was also recovered at Paso de la Amada. Such mirrors were most likely parts of helmets or headdresses. Several male figurines
(Ocós phase) found in the area are shown in Figure 6a and b wearing what could be helmets and forehead mirrors; see Carlson (1981) for an interesting review of the symbolic and political significance of mirrors among the Olmec (cf. Clarkson 1985). All male figurines of this period that can be identified depict enormously fat individuals, usually seated upon legged stools and wearing animal skin chest coverings, chest mirrors, and animal masks (Figure 6c and d). These may be representations of shaman/chiefs. Interestingly, the reconstructed proto-Mixe-Zoque etymon "na?wa" (the historic root of "nahual") means "(old) man/witch" (Campbell and Kaufman 1976) and implies early nagualism and perhaps shaman/chiefs. (The animal masks of these early figurines could have represented the individual’s nagual or animal soul companion.) Helmeted fat males, sometimes with chest mirrors, are

Figure 6. Early formative figurines from the Mazatan zone. (a and b) Photographs of helmeted (?) male figurines; (c and d) drawings of masked male figurines, possibly depicting shamans.
characteristic of the first Gulf Coast Olmecs some 400 years later (Coe and Diehl 1980). This tradition began at least by Locona times. In both instances, it is supposed that political/religious leaders were being depicted (see Grove and Gillespie 1984).

A final indicator of social differentiation is the presence of patronized craft specialists. These included ceramic and figurine artists and lapidaries who fashioned stone bowls and jade beads (Figure 7). Because of the labor-intensive nature of these crafts and the scarcity of some necessary raw materials, craftpersons engaged in these activities would likely have been dependent upon special patrons for some support, especially those who carved and polished the stone vessels. Attached craft specialization of this sort predominates in chiefdom societies (Clark and Parry 1990); patrons are usually chiefs. Commissioned goods produced under such patronage become the property of the patron. It was noted above that consumption of these items during the Locona and Ocós phases appears to have been restricted. The kinds of specialized goods produced during the Locona phase and their limited distribution fit our expectations of privileged consumption. Furthermore, they indicate wide ranging trade in semiprecious materials and, most likely, control of long-distance exchange by a privileged few.

The distribution of Locona and Locona-like ceramics across Mesoamerica is shown in Figure 8. The extent of the territory circumscribed by this interaction sphere and the kinds of items circulated suggest that societies in many areas of Mesoamerica were becoming socially and politically more complex. Clark and Blake (1989) have previously proposed that the well-publicized, enigmatic origins of Olmec civilization are to be found in this earlier Locona-Tierras Largas interaction sphere. Many of the communities participating in this network were probably simple chiefdoms, or rapidly becoming so. In short, Mesoamerica as a cultural area was assuming recognizable form. The frequency, content, and nature of interaction and exchange of exotic goods at this early date have yet to be determined fully (see chapters in Hirth 1984). The precocious development of rank societies in the Mazatan area, and the later emergence of the San Lorenzo Olmec and their emulators, will become clear only after Locona phase sites (and their temporal equivalents, what Winter [1989a, 1989b] calls the red-on-buff horizon) from many regions of the interaction sphere have been adequately investigated.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the risk of hiding one complex problem behind another of more ample proportions, I have conflated the discussion of the origins of rank society in Middle America with the beginnings of Mesoamerica as a cultural area. This, of course, requires a simplification of Kirchhoff’s (1943) original trait list, but remains true to common usage of “Mesoamerica” as an integrated area of high civilizations sustained by full-time agriculture. The focus on Mesoamerica also emphasizes the widespread interaction characteristic of the Early Formative societies about 1700 B.C. (Locona/Tierras Largas phase). Currently, the best evidence for a core area for these developments favors the southern sector of the Soconusco region of Chiapas and the Guatemalan coast. Simple chiefdom societies appear to have been present in this area about 1650 B.C. Clark and Blake (1991) address elsewhere the issues of how and why they arose in the Mazatan area.

At this point in the research it is appropriate to acknowledge the preliminary state of the analysis and to avoid reification of preliminary hypotheses through unwarranted repetition. As presented here, much of the argument remains a string of assertions based upon unpublished data of uneven quality. As work remains in process, the presentation of this chapter is simplified pending full documentation in a later publication. Only then can the
Figure 7. Examples of Early Formative lapidary from the Mazatan zone. (a to c) Ocós phase carved beads; (d) photograph of a Locona phase effigy bowl, probably of a Black Mojarrá (bass).
critical reader assess the relative strength or weakness of each inference. The preceding presentation should only be considered the best-reasoned assessment of the data currently in hand. These ideas are continually being reevaluated.

The fundamental point of this chapter is that the civilizational process, and the emergence of Mesoamerica, must be approached as problems of interregional interaction (cf. Demarest 1989; see Price 1977, 1984). The precocious developments of the Mokaya during the Locona phase will only be fully understood when complementary data for this period are available from adjacent regions of Mesoamerica.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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