

IDEOLOGY AND EVOLUTION AT THE PRE-STATE LEVEL

FORMATIVE PERIOD MESOAMERICA

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The evolution from simple farming societies to complex chiefdoms characterized by differential access to resources, land, labor, and services took place in Mesoamerica during the Formative (Preclassic) period. The concern of this chapter is the role played by ideological as well as material factors in that evolution. We recognize that investigations of ideology using archaeological remains confront the fundamental problem that "Mesoamerican archaeology has absolutely no coherent and consistent theoretical framework" for analysis and interpretation of data related to the ideological realm (Flannery 1976: 331). Nevertheless, when processes of culture change are being examined, the role of ideology cannot simply be ignored, for causes will not have social effects "except via human perception and evaluation of them" (Hodder 1986: 13).

In our discussion of the Formative period archaeological record we will be dealing with ideology primarily in terms of how conceptions of cosmic and social order structure behaviors and give meaning to events, as well as the role events may have played in reconstructing those concepts. Our use of the term *ideology* follows Geertz's (1973: 90) definition of religion as a symbolic system that acts to establish powerful, pervasive motivations in people by formulating a general order of existence, a model for perceiving their world. This definition has the advantage of dealing with symbols—objects, beliefs, and customs—as well as motivations and behaviors, including those involved in culture change.

The relationship between perception and behavior provides a means for understanding culture change. The assumption that ideology merely legitimates the status quo, and that it "dupes" the masses into accepting

the dominance of their masters, treats humans as automatons bereft of creativity and incapable of independent thought (Hodder 1986: 25–26). In fact, ideological systems are not merely derivative of other aspects of culture, nor are they static. They are constantly redefined and transformed by the dialectical processes involved in fitting the constructed order of existence to actual historical events (Drennan 1976: 347; Sahlin 1985: 138). This process of the transformation of ideology and its effects on future human behaviors is an integral part of cultural evolution: “If we can understand the ideological structures of phase *a*, then we can begin to examine how the change to phase *b* was produced, and given meaning” (Hodder 1986: 27).

This chapter concentrates on the Formative period in western Mesoamerica and particularly the Gulf coast, the Valley of Oaxaca, and central Mexico. Equally important developments occurred elsewhere in Mesoamerica during that time but are not discussed here. Two factors have influenced our discussion. The first is simply the limited quantity and quality of archaeological data relevant to an understanding of ideology in this early time period. The second is our perception that most scholars have generally misunderstood the few data available. Interpretations of Formative period developments have usually been Olmec-centric and thereby assume a precocity and priority for Gulf coast Olmec culture. A variety of artifacts across Mesoamerica have been identified as somehow Olmec-related, which has led to hypotheses of widespread Olmec cultural influences as the basis for most Formative period achievements. The Olmec-centered model may be incorrect, however, since it is becoming evident that other regions had independent and equally important early cultural developments (e.g., Demarest 1989; Flannery and Marcus 1976b; Flannery, Marcus, and Kowalewski 1981; Grove 1989b; Marcus 1989).

This chapter first focuses on the Early Formative (ca. 1500–900 B.C.) and begins with a discussion of public architecture, which is used to demonstrate early and widespread cultural complexity and to suggest some ideological correlates for its pan-regional importance. Next, the evidence of Early Formative long-distance exchange is examined, for it has long been recognized that this exchange was a probable mechanism in the spread of various abstract concepts from one region to another (e.g., Flannery 1968b). The exchange data are compared to the contemporaneous distributions of certain pottery motifs taken by scholars to represent a diffused “Olmec” belief system, and a lack of correlation is shown.

Only after presenting these data do we turn the discussion to the Gulf coast Olmec manifestation. We consider why the Olmec have been thought to be superior to other early Mesoamerican cultures, and we argue that actual differences were not necessarily ones of degree but instead reflect two markedly different ideological systems. The chapter then turns to the Middle Formative (900–500 B.C.) to consider the changes Mesoamerica underwent after 900 B.C. in terms of ideological transformations. It concludes with a brief observation on the legacies of the two Formative period ideological systems in later cultures.

THE EARLY FORMATIVE PERIOD (1500–900 B.C.)

PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE AND THE CREATION OF SACRED SPACE

One useful archaeological indicator of evolving social complexity throughout Formative period Mesoamerica is the marked increase in public architecture, built by or for the community at large. Beginning about 1500 B.C., evidence of public architecture emerges in the archaeological record in a variety of forms. In the Valley of Oaxaca during the Tierras Largas phase (1500–1150 B.C.), the people of San José Mogote built special houselike public structures distinguished from residences by their lime-plastered floors (Flannery and Marcus 1976a: 210). On the tropical Pacific coastal plains of Chiapas, several Ocosingo phase (1500–1100 B.C.) villages include what may be Mesoamerica's earliest "temple mounds," such as the "three meter high central mound surrounded by a quadrangular arrangement of very low platforms or house mounds covering several acres" at the site of Paso de Amada (Lowe 1977: 211; see also Ceja Tenorio 1985). On the Gulf coast, the Bajío phase (ca. 1350–1250 B.C.) inhabitants of San Lorenzo, Veracruz, began enlarging and leveling a natural hill, eventually creating a large artificial plateau that apparently served as public space for mound architecture (Coe 1970: 22–24, 1981b: 124). In west-central Mexico, at Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero, a very different form of public architecture has been found to date to ca. 1400–900 B.C.—a large, rectangular, clay-plastered sunken patio (Martínez Donjuan 1982, 1986).

After about 1200 B.C., public architecture became increasingly important and abundant in western Mesoamerica, and each region appears to have followed a different, independent evolutionary path. The construction of ritual-use structures at San José Mogote, Oaxaca, included public buildings on raised stuccoed platforms (Flannery and Marcus

1976a: 211). Mound architecture was apparently present at Gulf coast Olmec sites (see Diehl 1981) and on the Chiapas-Guatemala coast (Clark et al. 1987; Lowe 1977) but is poorly represented in the present archaeological sample. To the north, in the temperate highland valleys of central Mexico, public mound architecture was uncommon but has been documented at Chalcatzingo, Morelos (Grove 1984: 41; Prindiville and Grove 1987), and at Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero, where it complemented the sunken patio, both embellished by this time with stone facing (Martínez Donjuan 1986).

Although the creation of public space and architecture is a sign of evolving social complexity, the material and ideological motivations stimulating those labor efforts cannot easily be extracted from the archaeological record. The presence of raised mounds and public buildings demonstrates to some degree formalized group behaviors, and the architecture can be inferred to have functioned in part as a stage or backdrop for ritual displays that were important for the community to witness and verify. In their initial stages, these constructions need not have been associated exclusively with chiefdom-level societies. They may reflect community-based labor carried out for the ultimate benefit of the local group in general. These public works projects help to reinforce community solidarity and ties with the land. They may also have an ideological content; these projects identify sacred space within the landscape and thereby legitimate community "rights" to the land by metaphorically converting nature and wilderness to culture and community, and perhaps by linking the people to supernatural patronage.

In chiefdom-level societies with multilevel settlement hierarchies, public architecture is normally restricted to the highest-level sites (e.g., Spencer 1987: 371). In fact, site hierarchies are frequently first recognized archaeologically by the presence and quantity of public architecture, which creates the possibility of self-validating the public architecture criterion for identifying hierarchies. When public architecture and site size are used as major criteria, multilevel settlement hierarchies are recognizable for the Ocos phase on the Chiapas coast (Clark 1987a; Clark and Salcedo Romero 1989; Clark et al. 1987), the San Lorenzo phase on the Gulf coast (although data on regional settlement patterns are virtually nonexistent), the Tierras Largas phase in the Valley of Oaxaca (Flannery, Marcus, and Kowalewski 1981: 65–67), and the Tlatilco culture manifestation (ca. 1100 B.C.) in the Valley of Mexico–Morelos region (Hirth 1987: 348–52; Porter 1953: 34; Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979: 94–97, map 5).

INTERREGIONAL EXCHANGE IN THE MAINTENANCE OF CHIEFTAINSHIP

As Elman Service (1975:293) and others have documented, chiefs (or other high-ranking officials) do not maintain their position by physical force but via continual "gift" exchanges with their followers ("clients") within their sphere of influence. Service has noted that the redistributive authority of a chief rests on his ability to be generous and fair in his allocation of resources, and thus, "a leader is created by his followers, not by their fear of him but by their appreciation of his exemplary qualities" (1975:293). Chiefs also coordinate and control interregional exchange with their peers—other chiefs—and these interactions may involve different kinds of materials with values that are not necessarily based on their utility (e.g., Helms 1979). In fact, the value of exchange materials may be directly proportional to their use as symbolic markers of chiefly rank; thus, some understanding of the role of perceptions of value must form part of any discussion of interregional exchange.

Many archaeologists recognize that intensive and extensive interregional economic interaction was a primary factor in the evolution of complex culture in western Mesoamerica (see Hirth 1984). As noted above, some have suggested that the Gulf coast Olmec stimulated much of that interaction, which resulted in a restructuring of local ideological systems to reflect Olmec ideas (e.g., Bernal 1969:130–43; Coe 1968:91–103). We believe that this hypothesis is not supported archaeologically. Although source analysis data and iconographic evidence do indicate that extensive interaction took place in Mesoamerica, the nature of the exchange relationships is unclear. It is difficult to determine to what extent trade in certain resources, such as obsidian, was controlled by chiefs, and the available evidence reveals that there was no single ("Olmec") network of interaction along which both goods and ideas flowed.

Nonperishable evidence for Early Formative long-distance exchange consists primarily of obsidian and iron-ore mirrors. Greenstone was a rarity at that time. Whereas obsidian has an obvious utilitarian value, and was the material of choice for cutting tools, the other two items lack similar intuitively economically useful characteristics. Their value may have been based in the specific meanings attached to mirrors and to the color green in Mesoamerican belief, as well as in the fact that they were available from very limited, often far-distant sources and thus were accessible to only a privileged few. Hence the perception of value is crucial to understanding their function in the society.

It is often suggested that unequal access to these limited items was a source of power for chiefs, but in fact the argument should be reversed. What the chiefs possessed was an unequal access to certain statuses in the society (see Fried's [1967: 109] definition of "ranked societies"). We suspect that one of the material correlates for those statuses may have been the right to control or display certain items, only a few of which are preserved archaeologically.

Obsidian. The most ubiquitous nonperishable material relevant to an understanding of long-distance exchange, and the material for which there is also the greatest quantity of source analysis data, is obsidian. Four major obsidian source regions served most of Mesoamerica (fig. 2.1): highland Guatemala (El Chayal, San Martín Jilotepeque, Ixtepeque, Taju-

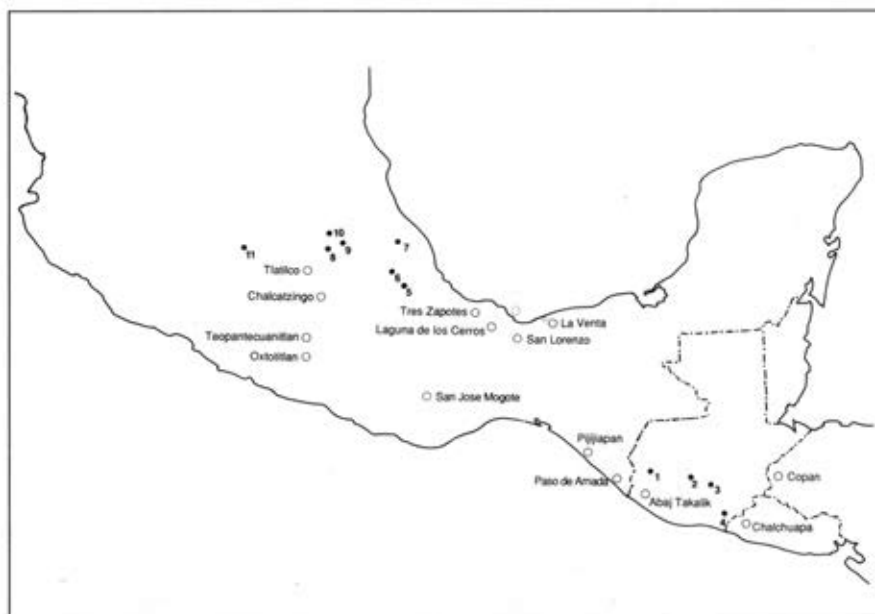


Figure 2.1. Major Formative period Mesoamerican sites and obsidian sources (numbered) mentioned in the text. Obsidian sources in highland Guatemala are (1) Tajumulco, (2) San Martín Jilotepeque, (3) El Chayal, and (4) Ixtepeque; in the Puebla-Veracruz region, (5) Pico de Orizaba, (6) Guadalupe Victoria, and (7) Altotonga; in north-central Mexico, (8) Otumba, (9) Paredón, and (10) Pachuca; and in west Mexico, (11) Zinacantan.

mulco), Puebla-Veracruz (Pico de Orizaba, Altotonga, Guadalupe Victoria, etc.), north-central Mexico (Otumba, Paredón, Pachuca), and west Mexico (Zinapécuaro). Several sources remain unidentified, and not all known sources are considered here.

During the Early Formative period, sites along the Chiapas coast acquired obsidian almost exclusively from the Guatemalan sources (Clark and Lee 1984; Clark and Salcedo Romero 1989). The Gulf coast Olmec center of San Lorenzo also obtained obsidian from a Guatemalan source (21 percent, El Chayal) as well as from sources in Puebla-Veracruz (63 percent, Guadalupe Victoria and Orizaba) and central Mexico (5 percent, Otumba and Paredón) during San Lorenzo subphase A (1150–1000 B.C.).¹ In the Valley of Mexico, 74 percent of the obsidian used by Early Formative settlements came from the closest central Mexican sources: Otumba, in the Teotihuacan Valley, and Paredón (Boksenbaum et al. 1987: table 3). Curiously, although these sources could have provided more obsidian than the amount necessary to fulfill local utilitarian needs, another 10 percent of the obsidian came from Zinapécuaro in west Mexico, and 1 percent came from Altotonga, Veracruz (Boksenbaum et al. 1987: table 3).

The obsidian from the Valley of Oaxaca provides an important data base with which interaction between Oaxaca and central Mexico and the Gulf coast can be hypothetically compared. The basic Valley of Mexico obsidian source complex of Otumba-Paredón (36 percent), Zinapécuaro (20 percent), and Altotonga (8 percent) is found at Early Formative Oaxacan villages, and exchange with central Mexico is confirmed by other data. Oaxacan villages also received obsidian from Guadalupe Victoria, Veracruz (28 percent), the major supplier for the Olmec at San Lorenzo, and exchange between Oaxaca and the Gulf coast likewise has other confirmation (e.g., Flannery 1968b; Pires-Ferreira 1975: table 3; Pires-Ferreira and Flannery 1976).

If the Guadalupe Victoria obsidian can be taken as a measure of a Gulf coast Olmec exchange link with any of the other regions, then it is significant that no obsidian from Guadalupe Victoria appears in even minor quantities at any central Mexican Early Formative site. Furthermore, only a small percentage of San Lorenzo's obsidian came from the central Mexican sources of Otumba (5 percent) and Paredón. Significantly, the two external sources important in the Valley of Mexico obsidian profile, Zinapécuaro and Altotonga, do not appear at San Lorenzo until after 1000 B.C. (San Lorenzo subphase B; Cobean et al. 1971: table 1), long after alleged Olmec influences appear in the Valley of Mexico. Conversely, in highland

Guatemala, where source analyses *do* indicate important Gulf coast interaction (which brought El Chayal obsidian to the Olmec chiefs at San Lorenzo), "Olmec influences" are absent.

In all reconstructions of obsidian exchange patterns, the quality of the data must be considered. Only small samples of the obsidian from a site can be subjected to analysis, and these quantities may only poorly reflect the reality of numerous discrete exchanges that took place during the lengthy time period usually being studied. Resulting observations and interpretations are thus based on very minimal data. Nevertheless, even with these limitations in mind, and even if the obsidian data only minimally reflect general exchange interactions, the characterizations fail to support the assumption (e.g., Bernal 1969:130–43; Coe 1968:91–103) that prior to 1000 B.C. there was a significant Gulf coast Olmec–central Mexican exchange network through which ideological ideas and symbols from the Gulf coast were transferred to the Valley of Mexico.

The obsidian data obviously provide no easy answers concerning the nature of Early Formative exchange systems; rather they illustrate the systems' complexity. Obsidian exchange between sites and regions seems to have been highly variable through time. The presence of both Zinapécuaro and Altotonga obsidian at Valley of Mexico sites, even though the nearby central Mexican sources could have fulfilled all needs, indicates that nonutilitarian factors may have been involved in the interaction, and that obsidian exchange cannot be thought of only in terms of "cost-effective" linear distances. Although obsidian was used by nearly all members of a society, some obsidian artifacts—particularly blades—were possibly acquired and redistributed by the chiefs (Clark 1987b:280). Furthermore, a general temporal correlation is evident throughout western Mesoamerica between the appearance of blade technology and certain pottery motifs described below (Boksenbaum et al. 1987). Still needed are data on possible differential distributions of obsidian within local site hierarchies, and within sites themselves (e.g., Clark and Lee 1984:table 11.5), as well as on exploitative settlements at or near sources, all of which might clarify suspected limits to access and distribution.

Iron-Ore Mirrors. During the time span of the Early and Middle Formative periods, polished iron-ore mirrors, both flat and concave, became increasingly important as indicated by their numbers, geographic distribution, and social contexts. The use of mirrors as status markers began as early as the Barra phase (ca. 1500 B.C.) on the Pacific coast of Chiapas (Clark 1987a:6; Clark et al. 1987:17). Although concave mirrors are usually

thought to be "Olmec" in origin, Carlson's (1981:130) characterization of a "pan-Mesoamerican mirror tradition" is more appropriate. The only good evidence for mirror production is found in the Valley of Oaxaca, where mirrors were manufactured at San José Mogote during the Early Formative period with ores obtained from nearby sources (Pires-Ferreira 1975:37–61, 1976b). Oaxacan mirrors have been found in the Mixteca region, in the state of Morelos, and at the site of San Lorenzo, Veracruz (Pires-Ferreira 1975:60–62, 1976b; Grove 1987d:380, table 23.2), and thus help to document Oaxacan-related exchange networks. The restrictions in access to sources, manufacture, and exchange demonstrated by Pires-Ferreira (1975, 1976b) strongly suggest that the process was under chiefly control. How that control was effected remains to be determined.

Greenstone/Jadeite. In western Mesoamerica, greenstone was rarely used until the Middle Formative period (see below).

Perishables. Interregional exchanges undoubtedly included numerous perishable items that have escaped archaeological detection. The sixteenth-century *Codex Mendoza* provides tantalizing evidence of the movement of such items as feathers, jaguar pelts, textiles, and cacao beans, which during the Formative period might have passed between regions via chiefly interaction. Again, the San José Mogote excavations have provided the best archaeological data on the long-distance exchange of perishables, many of which apparently had ritual uses. Objects recovered include a turtle carapace (drum), macaw feathers (entire wings, with bones), conch shells (trumpets), a crocodile mandible, and fish and stingray spines (perforators) (Drennan 1976:341–44, tables 11.3, 11.4; Flannery and Marcus 1976b:380, figs. 3, 5). The spines were presumably used for ritual bloodletting, an act of significant consequence in the construction and maintenance of cosmic and social order (see below).

Shared motifs on pottery. Far better evidence of interregional interaction in western Mesoamerica results from the use by most Early Formative societies of a shared set of abstract motifs on their local pottery. Frequent designs include the "were-jaguar," "fire-serpent," and "paw-wing" (fig. 2.2; also see Flannery and Marcus 1976b:381, fig. 6; Joralemon 1971). The widespread nature of these motifs, which occur from the Gulf and Soconusco coasts in the south to central Mexico in the north, has led to their designation as a "horizon style" (Lowe 1977; cf. Grove 1992).

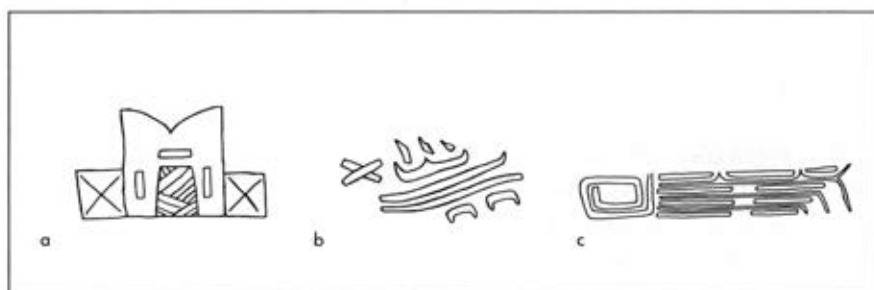


Figure 2.2. Early Formative motifs on ceramic vessels from Las Bocas: a, "were-jaguar" (from Joralemon 1971:fig. 123); b, "fire-serpent" (from Joralemon 1971:fig. 102); c, "paw-wing" (from Joralemon 1971:fig. 112).

Interestingly, the motif complex is thus far absent from both highland and lowland Guatemala and Yucatan, but it has been found in Honduras (Fash 1982; Healey 1974; Schele and Miller 1986: 75, pl. 28–30).

Although similarly decorated vessels are present at Early Formative Gulf coast Olmec sites (e.g., Coe and Diehl 1980: 162–85), good contextual data (i.e., houses or burials) are lacking. In the Valley of Oaxaca and at Tlatilco culture sites in central Mexico, however, this pottery is frequently found associated with burials as well as in general household refuse. At San José Mogote, Pyne (1976) and Flannery and Marcus (1976b; Marcus 1989) note a differential distribution in certain pottery motifs across the village and suggest that these discrete distributions may indicate the motifs served as lineage or descent markers. Burial data from Tomaltepec, Oaxaca (Whalen 1981), and Tlatilco in the Valley of Mexico (Tolstoy et al. 1977: table 5; Tolstoy 1989) suggest the motifs served a similar function there as well. As Marcus (1989) has noted, the two common motifs at San José Mogote ("were-jaguar" and "fire-serpent") may possibly reflect the basic cosmological opposition of the Oaxacan world view, earth and sky, and this important opposition would have been well suited for symbolizing kin-based separations within the society.

The interpretation of the shared design set as social markers differs from the earlier assumption that the motifs are "Olmec style," and by inference that they originated with the Gulf coast Olmec and hence demonstrate borrowing from, or interaction with, that area. In fact, Gulf coast origins for any of the motifs have yet to be demonstrated archaeologically

(see Grove 1989b for a discussion of the motifs and their regional variations). This is also true of the white-slipped baby-face figurines traditionally thought to be Olmec. The presumption by scholars of an Olmec priority for these pottery motifs and figurines was stimulated in large part by the elaborate archaeological discoveries at La Venta and the observation of similar symbols on various monuments and jades, which are now known to postdate the ceramics (see below).

Based on present archaeological data, the widespread ceramic motifs and baby-face figurines are best understood and dealt with as a shared symbol system whose individual icons may have originated in diverse regions and societies (Grove 1989b). It is clear that small agrarian communities were undergoing tremendous changes during the Early Formative period in means of production, land use, and the integration of social groups within larger population concentrations. Societies would have searched for order at a time of social disorder. Based on the Oaxaca data, we suggest that across western Mesoamerica the intracommunity use and intercommunity sharing and manipulation of this symbol system on the most common and accessible portable artifacts—ceramics—were one means of establishing and communicating order.

OLMEC: A POLITICAL IDEOLOGY MADE MANIFEST

The tropical Gulf coast witnessed an apparently rapid and precocious evolution that culminated ca. 1200 B.C. in the archaeological culture known as Olmec. San Lorenzo and La Venta are the two Olmec centers for which the best archaeological data are available, and until recently, only San Lorenzo had yielded any substantial evidence of pre-Olmec occupations.² Archaeologists therefore have looked to that site for explanations of the Olmec “phenomenon” and the development of Mesoamerica’s “first chiefs.”

Using analogies with present-day agricultural practices, Coe (1974, 1981b: 182–84) has suggested that although the low hillsides would have provided the main horticultural lands for most families at San Lorenzo, the prized lands were the river levees, which are capable of extremely high yields. Coe argues that control of the prime lands by one family or group could have provided the stimulus for acquiring economic, political, and social control. Following Carneiro (1970), he has hypothesized that coercion and “circumscription” were involved in restricting control of the levee lands to a small minority, who then parlayed their greater access to

crop yields into political power. This hypothesis has not yet been confirmed archaeologically, nor does it preclude alternative pathways for the development of the Olmec elite at San Lorenzo.

Any attempt to understand the Olmec manifestation in Formative prehistory requires an examination of the one factor that differentiates the Olmec "achievement" from developments in other regions of western Mesoamerica: the construction and use of monumental stone art (colossal heads, tabletop altars, statues, and stelae). Just as Mayanists today study Classic and Postclassic period artworks and inscriptions to improve their understanding of the ideology of those periods (e.g., Demarest and Freidel, chapters 6 and 7, this volume), archaeologists studying the Gulf coast monuments likewise offer valuable insights into Olmec concepts of rulership and power—concepts that gave meaning to the control exerted by the Olmec elite.

Images displayed on Olmec monuments include both supernatural representations and portraits of specific persons. Colossal stone heads appear to have been one of the earliest important monument types and are realistic depictions of specific personages, apparently various Olmec chiefs. Headdress motifs on these and other portrait carvings served as identifying emblems, probably naming devices of the individual chiefs (Coe 1977:186; Grove 1981b:66). The creation of these early monuments must have resulted from powerful motivations, when the enormous expenditure of labor is considered. Much of the stone came from the Tuxtla Mountains area (Velson and Clark 1975; Williams and Heizer 1965), more than 60 kilometers from San Lorenzo and nearly 120 kilometers from La Venta. The stone came from an area most likely under the control of another Olmec center (Laguna de los Cerros or Tres Zapotes), which implies early elite interaction.

Useful for improving our understanding of the nature of Olmec chieftainship are the tabletop "altars" showing seated personages. These massive carvings frequently depict the identified ruler seated within a niche carved into the altar's front face, beneath a projecting tabletop ledge. The ledge is often carved with motifs indicating that it symbolizes the earth's surface. The niche below the ledge is thus the "cave"—the entrance into the underworld, the realm of supernatural powers in Mesoamerican belief (Grove 1973, 1981b:64).

This depiction of the chiefs seated at the entrance to the underworld displays their pivotal position in the cosmos as mediators between society and the supernatural forces associated with rain and fertility, over which they were believed to have influence. In other words, the chief was figu-

ratively positioned at a critical point within the general order of existence—linking humanity and divinity—as shown by the position of his portrait at the juncture between the earth's surface and the underworld. This meaning was reinforced by the fact that the "altar" is really a throne, the ruler's direct means of contacting the supernatural infraworld; when seated on the throne, he placed himself at that cosmological threshold (Grove 1973, 1981b:64). Thus, the altar was his "seat of power," his visual charter for rulership. Although chiefs elsewhere in Mesoamerica may have made similar statements about their ability to influence supernatural forces, using platforms or other public architecture as a stage-setting, the Olmec are set apart by their emphasis on depicting the individual chiefs, in stone, as permanently in contact with otherworldly power.

The iconography of Olmec monuments makes explicit an ideological concept that may have been pan-Mesoamerican: the chief was elevated above society by his sacred quality. This elevation may be a clue to the process of cultural evolution from an earlier, more egalitarian stage. As Service (1975:291) notes, even in nonranked societies, individuals are exalted for their personal differences. One difference might result from a societal belief in heightened access to supernatural power by certain persons who are often called shamans in the literature. Service suggests that these perceptions of inequality could lead to the development of permanent hierarchies and unequal access to power of other kinds. That appears to have been the case for the Olmec because the monuments depict individual chiefs in positions of access to cosmic power apparently denied to other persons, and they involve materials and ritual space under elite control.

The fact that the Olmec people provided the labor to transport and carve those monuments to glorify specific individuals indicates not merely that the ruler was powerful, but that his status was part of the symbol system that motivated the creation of "public works projects" with definite ideological (nonmaterial) content. Motivations other than utilitarian need or the threat of physical force could have accounted for public participation in the erection and display of the monuments, especially for a shamanic ruler: "A priest-chief can be an awesome figure, his own supernatural powers augmented by the power of his ancestors who are now gods in an hierarchical pantheon—and thus potentially frightening to be sure" (Service 1975:296). The people were probably not coerced by simple fear into creating these monuments; on the contrary, they quite likely perceived their work as an opportunity to acquire prestige for

themselves by enhancing the prestige of their leader and community, as well as a religious act to strengthen their own position vis à vis the supernatural world. By their labors and participation in the rituals in which the monuments were used, the salient features of their ideology were made manifest, and the role of the ruler in the parallel structure of the cosmos and society was confirmed (see, for example, Feeley-Harnik 1985: 293).

Furthermore, the monuments themselves may have been perceived to incorporate some form of power associated directly with the chief portrayed on them. This inherent power would have served to reinforce the messages of the monument and helped to place the forces of the supernatural realm in support of the chief's proclamations and actions. At the death of a chief his monuments were evidently broken and buried to neutralize any remnant supernatural power they may have contained (Grove 1981b: 64–65). The personalized power of the chief was apparently concentrated in the attributes of the monuments identifying his persona—his unique facial features and naming devices—for these parts of the monuments suffered the greatest mutilation. Statues were decapitated and colossal heads defaced. The altars, the seats of power that displayed the chief permanently in contact with the supernatural world, were mutilated by smashing their corners and tabletop ledges, and they are the most damaged of all the types of monuments.³ From these and other data it seems probable that monument mutilation and burial was the final participatory ritual by which the people expressed their beliefs concerning their relationship to the chief and the nature of his right to rule.

In addition to the primary representation of the chief in contact with underworld forces, secondary messages on altars indicate his relationships with other elites. Subsidiary personages are shown in bas-relief on the sides of some altars, and two themes are apparent in the relationships of those personages to the chief. On some altars the ruler seated in the frontal niche holds a supernatural "baby," and in one instance persons displayed on the altar's sides also hold similar babies (La Venta Altar 5). Exactly what these babies symbolize is still uncertain, and at this point they are best interpreted as symbols related to rulership. The subsidiary figures may represent the chief's distribution of authority among his more important clients, thereby insuring their loyalty to him. Alternatively, they may represent kinsmen or ancestors who shared his elite rank by virtue of their kinship ties, suggesting that an entire descent group, rather than a single chief, may have held a status denied to the nonelites (the typical situation in chiefdoms or ranked societies).

Stone statues of personages holding supernatural babies or other ob-

jects also occur separately, without an altar. Although the precise chronological position of these monuments is unclear,⁴ they may indicate an important development in chiefly ideology in which the visual charter for rulership, explicit on the altars showing the chief at the cave entrance, was abstracted into the form of portable hand-held objects. These objects include the supernatural babies, scepters or bars, and the so-called torches and knuckle-dusters (see Grove 1987e).

Another secondary message is found on altars on which the chief, depicted within the niche, holds a thick rope, which passes along the base of the altar to the subsidiary personages on the sides. Of particular value in understanding its meaning is the San Lorenzo altar labeled Monument 14. Although the chiefly figure in the niche has been badly effaced and eroded to the extent that he cannot be identified by name motif, the secondary personage carved to his left is recognizable by both facial features and bird-claw headdress motif as the ruler portrayed by La Venta Colossal Head 4 (Grove 1981b: 66). The depiction of a ruler from one major Olmec center on the monument of a second Olmec center is clearly significant, for it serves to link the chiefs and sites together. Grove (1981b: 66) suggests that the rope symbolized the Mesoamerican metaphoric "rope of kinship" (rather than an alternative interpretation, the capture of prisoners, since the individuals are not bound by the rope). The monument thus suggests a chiefly network based on real or fictive kinship, binding the elites of different sites to one another and further sanctioning their separate statuses from their subjects.

IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE MIDDLE FORMATIVE (900–500 B.C.)

At about 900 B.C., a gradual societal transition becomes apparent in the archaeological record across western Mesoamerica. The change is particularly evident in decorated ceramics and other portable objects, which were sufficiently changed that their differences have been used by archaeologists to define the boundary between the Early and Middle Formative periods. The Early Formative iconographic motifs on pottery gradually disappear, as do clay baby-face figurines. Middle Formative ceramic assemblages generally become plainer. Vessels usually lack fancy designs, and instead, many are decorated around their rims with a variety of simple linear motifs called the "double-line-break" (Dixon 1959; Plog 1976). Figurines are frequently simpler and less well modeled.

The change to plainer ceramics cannot be understood as an isolated

phenomenon but must be seen in conjunction with the rapid rise in prominence of jadeite and greenstone objects, many of which carry abstract symbols. These objects include items of personal adornment, celts, perforators, and baby-face figurines. Quality greenstone sources are uncommon, and the only known jadeite sources for Mesoamerica are in the Motagua Valley region of Guatemala. For most of western Mesoamerica, therefore, greenstone had to be acquired via long-distance exchange networks. Archaeological contexts and ethnohistorical data indicate that greenstone objects were generally restricted to the elite.

Although scholars often associate jadeite and greenstone with the Gulf coast Olmec, the earliest archaeologically documented use of these materials may be at Copan, Honduras, in the southern Maya area (Fash 1982; Schele and Miller 1986: 75, pl. 17). Greenstone is rare in Early Formative contexts anywhere, and the Olmec do not seem to have linked into jadeite and greenstone exchange networks any earlier than did the peoples of the Valley of Mexico (Tlatilco culture) or Oaxaca—ca. 900 B.C. The greatly increased popularity of greenstone in the Middle Formative may have been due to the desire by nascent chiefs for new symbols to consolidate their positions further. As part of the overall Middle Formative transition, exchange networks in all commodities became restructured, and resource acquisition and craft production came increasingly under elite control (Parry 1987: 133–34; Pires-Ferreira 1975, 1976a, 1976b).

In view of the timing of the introduction and popularity of greenstone into western Mesoamerica, its restricted availability, its manufacture into articles of ritual rather than utilitarian function, and the fact that green is known to have been a sacred color in later periods, it is significant to note that greenstone now became the major medium for the expression of iconographic motifs.⁵ The Early–Middle Formative transition saw a nearly complete transfer in the display of the shared symbol system from one medium, ceramics, available to all, to another, greenstone, available to a few. This change appears to indicate that across western Mesoamerica the access to and control over ritual and cosmological symbols, probably relating to social order and the integration of kinship groups, was taken over by a limited number of high-ranking people.

The elite presumably succeeded in another major achievement: reserving for themselves the authority to oversee kin-group relations among their constituents (Service 1975: 295). This authority to maintain social order was paralleled by increased responsibilities of the chiefs in the maintenance of cosmic order, as discussed below. The gradual evolution of this type of power has been demonstrated ethnographically, as for ex-

ample among the Bashu of Zaire (Packard 1981), whose chiefs evolved from a low-level ritual status into persons responsible for regulating relations among social groups, correlated with their ability to regulate relations between society and the cosmos.

MIDDLE FORMATIVE GULF COAST

The Gulf coast Olmec elite's continued emphasis on monumental art, extensive use of greenstone, and massive consumption of raw materials clearly distinguish them from the rest of Middle Formative Mesoamerica. For example, the Complex A excavations at La Venta (Drucker 1952: 36–79; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959) uncovered secondary mounds surrounded by walls of massive upright basalt columns, a columnar basalt tomb, huge buried mosaic “supernatural masks,” tremendous buried offerings of more than 100 tons each of imported serpentine blocks, cruciform greenstone celt offerings, greenstone figurines, and iron-ore mirrors. The lack of similar monumental buried offerings elsewhere in Mesoamerica should not be simplistically interpreted as a quantitative difference between a “more advanced” Olmec society and “less complex” others. A major factor to consider is that the Gulf coast Olmec had different conceptions than their counterparts of how social and cosmic order intermeshed, and how elite status was related to supernatural power (Gillespie 1992). The Late Middle Formative constructions and spectacular buried offerings at La Venta should be seen as a consequence of the Early Formative Gulf coast ideological trajectory that emphasized elite control over the importation of stone for ritual purposes on a truly public scale, as well as a preoccupation with the underworld as a source of supernatural power personally associated with the chiefs.

Several changes are notable in Middle Formative Olmec monumental art. Stelae appeared at about 700 B.C., most likely as a medium to communicate more narrative statements. Probable lineage references associated with the standing personages shown on La Venta's Stelae 2 and 3 appear as ancestral name motifs embedded in their tall headdresses. The embedded motif in the headdress on Stela 2 appeared several centuries earlier on Colossal Head 1, and the desire of the Stela 2 ruler to relate himself to that putative ancestor may explain the repositioning of Colossal Head 1 beside Stela 2 (Grove 1981b: 65–67). These data strongly suggest that the elite had made a further major achievement in the consolidation of their status: the successful transfer of office to a successor, most likely via a lineage tie. These transfers are characteristic of true chiefdoms

(Service 1975:293). Elite status, and the ability to contact infraworld forces, had thus become ascribed by that time.

Another significant change is the display on monuments of the chief holding new kinds of power objects as symbols of office. Recent iconographic analyses have suggested that many of those objects are associated with bloodletting (Andrews 1987; Grove 1987e; Joyce et al. 1990), part of a ritual complex which extends back in time to at least the Early Formative. Based on what is known for the Classic Maya (e.g., Schele and Miller 1986; Stuart 1984b), bloodletting was a means of communicating with ancestors and supernaturals. During the Early Formative, bloodletting was apparently carried out on a household level (Flannery and Marcus 1976b), indicating that any descent group could contact its ancestors and ask them to intercede with the supernaturals on behalf of their descendants. In the Middle Formative, however, although bloodletting continued at the household level, the elite seem to have taken some control of the ritual. They restricted for themselves the use of certain bloodletting instruments, including imported stingray spines and sharks' teeth, and introduced new perforator forms in greenstone. Some objects with bloodletting associations, such as "knuckle-dusters" and "torches," essentially became material symbols for chieftainship in monumental and portable art (Andrews 1987; Grove 1987e).

NON-OLMEC WESTERN MESOAMERICA

The continued lack of a stone monument tradition in non-Olmec Middle Formative period societies indicates that as they evolved in complexity, and though they interacted with the Olmec in pan-Mesoamerican exchange networks, they continued to maintain different means of manifesting the role of the elite in the cultural order, "uninfluenced" by Gulf coast beliefs. Despite the resulting anonymity of their chiefs, elite actions within those societies can be discerned in the archaeological record. Public mound architecture increased in quantity throughout the Middle Formative. Apart from the architectural sequence for the Valley of Oaxaca (Flannery and Marcus 1976a), however, its development in western Mesoamerica is still poorly understood.

One pattern is the widespread use of a basic template or layout of major public architecture: a large mound or pyramid facing a plaza (public space) that is flanked by one or two long, linear mounds. This pattern is found by ca. 700 B.C. on the Pacific coast of Chiapas (Love 1991); in the Chiapas highlands (Lowe 1977:fig. 9.4); on the Gulf coast at San

Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980: map 2), La Venta (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: fig. 4), and Laguna de los Cerros (Bove 1978: map A); and in Oaxaca at San José Mogote (Flannery and Marcus 1976a: 215). A variation of the template is also found at Chalcatzingo, Morelos, in the central highlands (Grove 1984: fig. 9; Prindiville and Grove 1987). Since the public architecture at those sites would have been planned and directed by the elite, the widespread occurrence of the shared template suggests that networks of elite interaction were in place. It also evidences the inter-regional sharing of ideological concepts and rituals involving the chief or his lineage, particularly because his and other elite residences were often within this precinct. Used in the cultural shaping of sacred space, this template may have been a model of the perceived cosmos (Lathrap 1985) within which chiefs displayed their pivotal roles.

Bloodletting was another widespread chiefly ritual activity in both non-Olmec and Olmec Mesoamerica, and bloodletting symbolism occurs on some of the greenstone objects (e.g., celts and perforators) used and controlled by chiefs in numerous Middle Formative societies.⁶ Although non-Olmec societies appear to have held ideas about rulership that did not motivate representations in stone of the ruler in contact with supernaturals, their chiefs did serve as cosmic mediators via the blood they ritually sacrificed on behalf of their people. It is conceivable that this method of mediation, which focused attention on the sacred and powerful qualities of the chief, was attractive to emerging elites throughout Mesoamerica. Indeed, the portability of the bloodletting objects and iconography accessible via elite networks may have facilitated the transmission of that concept of chiefly power between many societies.

THE RESTRICTED SPREAD OF OLMEC IDEOLOGY

To this point we have argued that substantial archaeological evidence of Gulf coast Olmec "influence" on other societies is lacking, and we have interpreted the shared symbol systems, both nonelite (Early Formative) and elite (Middle Formative), as the material correlates of social processes more complex than simple "core-periphery diffusion." During the Middle Formative period, however, archaeological evidence is evident for the limited appearance of a distinctively Olmec trait—monumental art depicting elite personages—beyond the Gulf coast. This type of art appears at two groups or "chains" of sites. The first chain, in central Mexico, comprises the sites of Chalcatzingo, Morelos (Grove 1984, 1987a), and Teopantecuanitlan (Martínez Donjuan 1982, 1986) and Oxtotitlan (paintings) in

Guerrero (Grove 1970). The second chain, along the Pacific coast, consists of Pijijiapan, Chiapas (Navarrete 1969, 1974); Abaj Takalik, Guatemala (Graham 1982); and Chalchuapa, El Salvador (Boggs 1950; Sharer, ed. 1978). Based on the presence of narrative scenes and certain other stylistic traits, these monuments appear to date to the late Middle Formative or ca. 700–500 B.C. (Grove 1987b:426–30, 1989a), although Graham (1982) and Navarrete (1969, 1974) have proposed that some Pacific coast monuments are slightly earlier.

The sites listed above that have been intensively investigated were all found to have been important centers prior to the appearance of monumental art. They are located in regions with no previous stone-carving traditions, and their monuments incorporate some of the basic canons of Gulf coast Olmec art. Some differences in thematic content and iconography have led to the designation of their style as “frontier” (Grove 1984:109–10, 1987a:436; Grove and Kann 1980) to distinguish it from Gulf coast Olmec art. The major difference is that the frontier style frequently makes explicit concepts that were only implied on monuments at La Venta and San Lorenzo. This change is presumably due to a perceived need to communicate messages to an audience unfamiliar with the socio-cosmic model for the “general order of existence”—at least as expressed via the new medium, monumental art.

There seems little doubt that the frontier monuments occur as the result of interaction between elites of the already established centers and those of the Gulf coast. The Middle Formative period witnessed the rise in complexity of numerous chiefdoms across western Mesoamerica. Archaeological survey data indicate a marked population increase, which would have created greater demands for both local and nonlocal resources. Source analysis data reveal ever-widening networks of resource acquisition. Grove (1984:161–64; 1987a:436–440) has therefore suggested that the appearance of Olmec-influenced art outside the Gulf coast may be tied to long-distance economic alliances. The frontier art phenomenon occurs along two corridors leading to important nonutilitarian resources apparently controlled by elites—greenstone (Guerrero) and cacao and jadeite (Chiapas-Guatemala coast)—and may represent the adoption of the Gulf coast ideology by the elites to verify these relationships.

The alliances introduced into those regions an alien ideology associated with conceptions of rulership, along with its material correlates. Ethnohistoric examples of similar alliances and the subsequent borrowing of iconography have been discussed by Helms (1979). Together with the appearance of the frontier art are the first depictions outside the Gulf

coast of identifiable rulers in stone portraiture and, at Chalcatzingo, in ceramic figurines as well (Gillespie 1987; Grove 1987b:423–24; Grove and Gillespie 1984). That ideology, requiring public displays of chiefs' portraits in stone or clay, was transitory, lasting perhaps only a century or two at these centers. Other regions, equally important and at equivalent levels of sociopolitical complexity, continued as before with essentially "anonymous" chiefs.

FORMATIVE PERIOD LEGACIES

Despite the acceptance at several central Mexican Middle Formative centers of a strikingly different ideology, the long-term impact of the Gulf coast—inspired conceptions relating chieftainship to the cosmology, along with its concomitant frontier-style art, was negligible. No monument tradition continued in central Mexico after the decline of Chalcatzingo and Teopantecuanitlan at the end of the Middle Formative, and later societies were apparently not motivated to maintain the portrayal in permanent media of identified rulers. Even the large public architecture at Late Formative central Mexican nucleated centers, such as Cuicuilco, is probably derived from roots other than the Chalcatzingo-Teopantecuanitlan manifestation. In the Late Formative period, monumental stone art became important in Oaxaca and on the Pacific coast, but it appears to lack any strong thematic continuity with earlier Gulf coast art. At Monte Albán, Oaxaca, the theme was conquest (Marcus 1976b, 1976c), and the Pacific coast monuments (e.g., Parsons 1986), including those of Izapa (Norman 1973), seem to lack the major Gulf coast focus on the identified ruler and his power symbols.

On the Gulf coast, chieftainship seems to have emerged from an earlier shamanic role as mediator with underworld forces. The chief's link to superhuman power was communicated via stone monuments, which also emphasized the idiosyncratic characteristics of the individual chiefs. In other societies, the ruler was not the focus for permanent public display, and thus their chiefs are anonymous. Yet they were probably just as important and powerful as their Olmec counterparts, and they may also have been viewed as mediators between the secular and sacred worlds. Their control over public labor is demonstrated by the creation of massive public architecture. Across Mesoamerica, pyramids and plazas emphasized and made permanent the setting aside of sacred space for elite use and provided for public participation (at least as spectators) in rituals that constructed and reinforced societal conceptions on the nature of rulership.

Those two disparate conceptual systems, models of a "general order of existence" motivating different expressions of the relationship of the ruler to supernatural power, were further elaborated in the Late Formative and succeeding periods. They thus may have served as ideological trajectories with determinative effects on the organization of the earliest states in Mesoamerica. The Classic period Maya developed further a conceptual system first manifested by the Olmec, stressing the identified ruler and his acts of kingship, which they then permanently fixed in time using hieroglyphic writing and the Long Count calendar. In contrast, the later central Mexican ideology of rulership and power as expressed in architecture and monumental art seems to have emphasized the sacred center (e.g., Monte Albán, Teotihuacan, Tenochtitlan) more than the sacred king.

Notes

1. Percentages are based on Pires-Ferreira (1975:table 3), which did not include Paredón ("Group A", Cobean et al. 1971), Orizaba, or unidentified sources in the calculations; thus, regional percentages are actually greater. Percentages and sources vary through time; see Cobean et al. (1971:table 1) and Boksenbaum et al. (1987:69, table 3).

2. Recent excavations at La Venta have discovered pre-Olmec occupations at that Olmec center as well (González Lauck 1988; Rust and Sharer 1988), although the data are not yet published.

3. An important observation by Porter (1989) indicates that at least two of San Lorenzo's colossal heads had been recarved from tabletop altars. He suggests that altar "mutilation" may have been the initial act of transforming an altar into a colossal head. This intriguing hypothesis does not account for all of the destruction suffered by altars or by the other types of stone monuments, but it does merit further testing.

4. Although some tabletop altars appear to be contemporaneous with the colossal heads in the Early Formative, there are reasons to believe that La Venta's two major altars, No. 4 and No. 5, as well as statues of persons holding supernatural babies, were carved in the Middle Formative period.

5. It is probably not coincidental that the first appearance throughout much of Mesoamerica of green obsidian from the Pachuca, Hidalgo, source correlates closely with the increasing utilization of greenstone beginning in the Middle Formative (Boksenbaum et al. 1987:table 3; Cobean et al. 1971:table 1).

6. The Middle Formative iconographic motifs, including those dealing with bloodletting, appear to be a further extension of the shared symbol system of the Early Formative. Each region of Mesoamerica manipulated and innovated that system in distinct ways, and presently its origins are not traceable to the Gulf coast Olmec.