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**A REASSESSMENT OF OLMEC PREEMINENCE IN
THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF MEXICO:
THE EL TERROR PHASE OF IGLESIA VIEJA, MORELOS**

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ABSTRACT

The ceramic assemblage which characterizes the enigmatic Tlatilco burials is duplicated in the stratigraphy of the El Terror Phase at Iglesia Vieja, Morelos, where two components have been isolated and defined, one of which is found to be regional, preeminent, and pre-Olmec, rather than Olmec inspired as previously thought. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal associated with Olmec figurines and vessels are as early as those from the Olmec heartland.

The participants of the Tuxtla Gutierrez Roundtable, sponsored by the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología in 1942 and precipitated by a series of spectacular archaeological discoveries by Stirling (Stirling, 1938) at Tres Zapotes and La Venta in the Olmec heartland of southern Veracruz-Tabasco, Mexico, were implacably divided on two issues crucial to the interpretation of Mesoamerican archaeology; the relative place of Olmec in the Mesoamerican chronological sequence, and the extent of the generative role played by Olmec in the development of early high culture in Mesoamerica. The cleavage over these issues followed national lines, as most of the Mexican archaeologists in attendance, led by Caso and Covarrubias, vigorously proposed that Olmec antedated Maya and was in essence the "cultura madre", or progenitor of Mesoamerican civilization, while the non-Mexican contingent trenchantly defended the view that Olmec and Classic Maya were temporally coequal and that Mayan civilization developed in isolation, essentially unaffected by extraneous forces.

The polemic over the temporal issue was definitively resolved by the 1955 University of California-National Geographic excavation of the site of La Venta, Tabasco (Drucker, et al, 1959), which on the basis of 9 radiocarbon dates, established the Olmec presence at La Venta by the beginning of the first millennium B.C. (Drucker, et al, 1957), or approximately a thousand years prior to the florescence of the Classic Maya. The subsequent Yale University-National Science Foundation large scale, multi-season excavation of San Lorenzo, Veracruz, 1966-1968, corroborated the Preclassic assignment of Olmec, and resulted in the establishment of the San Lorenzo Phase, 1150-900 B.C. (Coe, et al, 1967), which presently circum-

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scribes the earliest known Olmec period in the Gulf Coast heartland, and has become synonymous with the first perceptible emergence of civilization in Mesoamerica.

These two pivotal excavations at La Venta and San Lorenzo, type locations for Olmec art and culture, apart from resolving the chronological problem, have strengthened the early assertions of Caso (1942) and Covarrubias (1942) which emphasize Olmec preeminence in the cultural history of Mesoamerica, and which have in turn engendered the currently prevalent "Colonial Olmec theory." This theory is predicated on the dictum that in the Gulf Coast heartland, during an incipient period designated Olmec I, through a process of "internal evolution" (Bernal, 1969), a large number of archetypal traits were developed, upon which all later Mesoamerican cultures were based, e.g. astronomical orientation of planned ceremonial centers, pyramid construction, monumental sculpture, ball courts, the religious significance of jade and knowledge of superior techniques for working this material, the Long Count system of calendrical calculation and the inscription of calendric glyphs on raised stele (Bernal, 1969). During the subsequent Olmec II Phase, which is equated to the construction, maturation, and entelechy of ceremonial centers like La Venta and San Lorenzo, there occurred a unilateral diffusion of this generative matrix of civilization to the less prococious penumbra outside the heartland, through the establishment of Olmec colonies over much of Mesoamerica, particularly in the significant highland focal area comprising much of the present states of Morelos, Puebla, Mexico, and northern Guerrero, or more concisely, the Central Mexican Symbiotic Region (Sanders and Price, 1970). Due to the plethora of Olmec derived art which is encountered from central Mexico to Costa Rica, adherents of the Colonial Olmec theory postulate the existence of a Pan-Mesoamerican state under the aegis of the Gulf Coast Olmec, created by the migrations of a civilizing elite and based upon military coercion, religious proselytism, and economic exploitation (Coe, 1965).

The validity of the theoretical schema of this theory is contradicted on two critical points by our data from recent excavations at Iglesia Vieja, Morelos¹ in the CMSR, formerly known loosely in archaeological literature as Atlahuayan (Gomez and Chan, 1952); (a) stratigraphical a grave containing a hollow baby-face figurine excavated in 1969, an intensive effort was figurines, which has previously been identified as Olmecoid, or Olmec inspired (Bernal, p. 76), is in reality a regional manifestation which Predates the earliest Olmec

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presence in the CMSR by several hundred years, (b) the Olmec presence at Iglesia Vieja has been dated by radiocarbon methods to be as old as the earliest palpable evidence of Olmec origins at San Lorezo and La Venta.

THE EL TERROR PHASE

The El Terror Phase of Iglesia Vieja, 1450-850 B.C., is comprised of a ceramic assemblage containing two components, one of which is earlier, overwhelmingly predominant throughout El Terror, highly visible at other regional CMSR sites such as Tlatilco, Tlapacoya, and Gualupita, and is characterized by D and K figurines, brown cajetes decorated with exterior incising in triangular zoned panels often rubbed with specular hematite, small clay masks, tripod vessels with long solid supports, and stem stamps in the shape of the human foot. The erroneous interpretation of this 'Morelos' component as the later result of the fusion of extraneous Olmec elements and the local C tradition of the basin of Mexico (Chan, 1971) is a transposition of the early CMSR sequence, as the Morelos component is clearly pre-Olmec in the El Terror Stratigraphy, an assignment confirmed by radiocarbon dating and ceramic cross-references with other Mesoamerican areas.

Charcoal associated with D2, D3, K figurines, and brown incised cajetes from early La Manuela midden, has been dated at 1860 B.C. ± 400 (Table 1), significantly prior to the earliest known Olmec appearance in Mesoamerica. The K figurines in this stratum are the type which McNeish (1970) calls Spherical and Flat-Punched Feature Heads and assigns to the lower part of the Early Ajalpan Phase of Tehuacan (1500-1100 B.C.). More recently, Kelley has encountered the K figurine in an even earlier context in Western Mexico (Kelley, n.d.). Burial 74, from Romano's Tlatilco IV excavation which

Table 1. Nebraska Wesleyan University Radiocarbon Laboratory dates corresponding to the El Terror Phase of Iglesia Vieja, based on the old half-life of 5570 years for C14.

- (1) NWU-35, 1860 B.C. ± 400. From charcoal associated with D2, D3, K figurines and brown incised cajetes from early La Manuela midden.
- (2) NWU-36, 1174 B.C. ± 150. Taken from early El Zarco midden. The charcoal from which the date was obtained had smudged part of the baby face figurine with which it was associated.
- (3) NWU-34, 1029 B.C. ± 100/290. Encountered within a cache of broken vessels, among which was a cylindrical seal with paw-wing motif.
- (4) NWU-37, 908 B.C. ± 150. Taken from the pentultimate cut of upper El Zarco midden, and associated with fragments of a baby-face figurine and a white-slipped duck figurine.

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contains ceramics very similar to those from the Morelos component of El Terror has been dated at 1230 B.C. \pm 120 (Radiocarbon, 1969), and supports our pre-Olmec positioning of the Morelos component which is the salient feature of the El Terror Phase, and delineates a continuum of roughly 600 years, beginning with the initial settlement of Iglesia Vieja in the Early Preclassic, and terminating in the upper Middle Preclassic when the Morelos diagnostics disappear.

The other component of the El Terror ceramic assemblage, intrusive, and decidedly secondary in importance, is the much discussed Olmec unit which is characterized by solid and hollow baby-face figurines, cylindrical roller stamps with paw-wing motif, Kaolin ware, white-rimmed black ware, and flat-bottomed cylindrical shaped 'vasos' decorated with such motifs as the St. Andrews cross, the U element, and zoned crosshatchure.

Utilizing as a dichotomy, the isolation and definition of these two components, El Terror has been divided into two subphases, La Manuela, 1450-1200 B.C., in which only the Morelos component is present, and El Zarco, 1200-850 B.C., which begins with the first perceptible ingress of Olmec elements. The El Terror assemblage, putatively Olmec inspired has served to support the synonymy of the Olmec interpolation in the CMSR with the beginning of civilization, as reflected in the sumptuous funerary offerings at Tlatilco and other sites (Bernal, p. 136). It is now clear however, that this assemblage, the 'sine qua non' for sustaining Olmec hegemony in the CMSR, and for categorizing Tlatilco, Tlapacoya, and Gulaupita as Colonial Olmec sites, is primarily a manifestation of a regional culture which is essentially non-Olmec. For this reason, the term "D Assemblage" (Grennes, 1972) has been employed to emphasize the salient preeminence of the regional La Manuela component in order to supplant the misnomer Colonial Olmec or Olmecoid which distorts the true nature of the assemblage.

There are no radical permutations in the La Manuela ceramic tradition with the appearance of Olmec elements, c. 1200 B.C., which do not displace existing forms and types, but become a perceptible yet limited adjunct to the CMSR regional tradition. Broken Olmec figurines and vessels with Olmec motifs are suddenly found in small numbers in El Zarco midden deposits, caches, and burials together with the ubiquitous D figurines, excised cajetes, and other La Manuela elements which comprise 92% of all identifiable vessels and figurines during El Zarco. There is no minatory aspect of the El Zarco Olmec presence, nor is there supportive evidence to sustain the thesis that Iglesia Vieja suddenly came under foreign hegemony, or was occupied by a military or sacerdotal elite. The proportional paucity of Olmec ceramics during the El Zarco Subphase does not suggest exclusiveness nor elitism, but rather underscores the secondary nature of this component within the D assemblage.

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As a consequence of the surprisingly early date of 1190 B.C. \pm 120 (Grennes, 1972), obtained from charcoal scraped from the lip of a white-rimmed black funerary vessel found in a grave containing a hollow baby-face figurine excavated in 1969, an intensive effort was made during the subsequent 1970 season to define more accurately the temporal parameters of the Olmec interpolation in the CMSR. In collecting charcoal, a strict criteria of considering only samples associated with identifiable Olmec figurines and vessels was followed, and only those which could be defended as 'in situ' burnings in which charcoal, figurines, and vessels were ceremoniously related and deposited simultaneously, ultimately qualified for dating. It was hoped that this rationale would greatly increase the probability that the charcoal would date the artifact, in this case an Olmec figurine, or vessel with Olmec motif, rather than merely dating an arbitrary portion of a phase or subphase, as is the case when random, unassociated selections are made. This rationale necessitated the abandonment of some of the large unassociated charcoal specimens, desirable from the point of view of size, in favor of much smaller samples which demonstrated the essential association to figurines and vessels. The three new dates, NWU-33, 34, 36, together with the 1969 burial date, and the Romano (Radiocarbon, 1969) and Tolstoy (Tolstoy and Paradis, 1970) dates for Olmec ceramics at Tlatilco and Tlapacoya respectively (Fig. 1), regardless of how they are averaged, show no lacunae between the initial Olmec appearance in the heartland and in the CMSR, a phenomenon which seems to have occurred simultaneously in both areas.

Although Bernal theorizes that the incipient Olmec I Phase is present at La Venta and San Lorenzo (Bernal, pp 106-110), the field archaeologists who conducted the excavations at these sites both specifically allude to the fact that there is nothing discernibly Olmec in the inchoate pre-Olmec II tangle at either La Venta or San Lorenzo. Non-Olmec Chicharras abruptly becomes San Lorenzo with no observable transitional period (Coe, et al, 1967). This same phenomenon occurs at La Venta (Heizer, 1971).

The contemporaneity of the earliest known Olmec periods in the Gulf Coast heartland and the CMSR, based on radiocarbon dates from San Lorenzo, La Venta, Iglesia Vieja, Tlatilco, and Tlapacoya, in conjunction with the lack of antecedents prior to the sudden appearance of mature Olmec elements in both of these regions, suggests the distinct possibility that the ultimate provenience of the embryonic Olmec I period will be found neither in the heartland nor the CSMR, but in a third as yet unidentified area, a prescient assessment made by Cavarrubias (1957) and Wicke (1971), based on stylistic analysis.

The sudden appearance of Olmec-inspired art in many parts of Mesoamerica, c. 1200 B.C., seems to have been the manifestation of a widespread diffusion of a religious concept symbolized in a distinctive

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iconography and a new figurine type. In the CMSR, these religious elements were absorbed into the vigorous pre-existing regional culture, much the way that alien gods entered the highly syncretic religious structure of the Postclassic. In contrast, in Veracruz-Tabasco, the religious configuration represented by Olmec iconography attained entelechy and became the "primary impetus" (Coe, 1969) for the construction and maintenance of the great ceremonial centers of the heartland which became the focus of Olmec civilization.

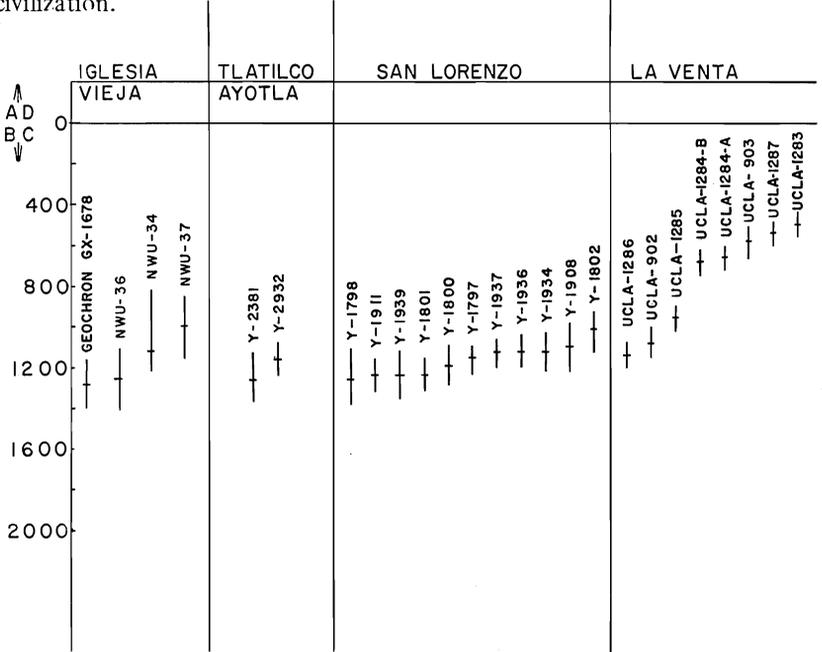


Figure 1.

Radiocarbon dates from the central highland sites of Iglesia Vieja, Tlatilco, and Ayotla compared to those from the Gulf Coast heartland sites of San Lorenzo and La Venta. The dates have been calculated on the basis of the new half-life for carbon 14, 5730 ± 40 years, and converted to calendrical dates by subtracting from A.D. 1950. The San Lorenzo dates were taken from Coe, Diehl, and Stuiver (1967) and Coe (1968). Those from La Venta are found in Berger, Graham, and Heizer (1967).

A later period of Olmec interpolation in the CMSR is in evidence at sites like Chalcatzingo and Las Bocas, when type A figurines appear. This second period is probably coequal to the apogee of San Lorenzo and La Venta and can best be explained in terms of a pilgrimage-market paradigm rather than a colonial-imperialistic interpretation.

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Consequently, as recipients of a common religious stimulus, there existed a certain degree of underlying ideological unity between the Gulf Coast Olmec heartland and the CMSR during the Middle Preclassic, corresponding to El Zarco, 1200-800 B.C. However, due to diverse socioeconomic patterns and environmental factors, there was a pronounced disparity in terms of acceptance, implementation, and emphasis given to the new religious configuration which was of crucial importance in the heartland but was decidedly marginal in the CMSR, where the quintessential nature of Olmec has been overstated to the extent that the lexicon of terms derived from Colonial Olmec and Olmecoid must be redefined and sedulously qualified in the future.

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