Participants

Votive Axes and Celts in Formative Mesoamerica - John Clark

Some of the earliest offerings in Mesoamerica were jade axes and celts. Offerings of multiple axes were a diagnostic trait of the La Venta Olmecs, but the practice of caching axes goes back beyond Olmec times to the beginning of the Early Formative period. In this presentation, I attempt to place early axes and celts in their context so we can understand rituals of which they were a part. In particular, I analyze axes found in offerings, carved Olmec axes without archaeological context but known to be authentic, and traces of axes in domestic contexts. Axes are especially interesting artifacts because they played a vital role in both domestic and ritual life. Images on the carved axes are thought to have represented gods. On the other hand, one of the remarkable features of Formative archaeology is that so few axes or axe fragments have been recovered in non-ritual, domestic contexts. The earliest jade axe offerings lacked carved or incised axes, although they were highly polished and carefully shaped. The offered axes were placed in formal patterns, such as crosses or quincunxes. The practice of carving or incising axes appears to date from 1000 to 500 BCE, virtually the period of dominance of the La Venta Olmec. John E. Clark has conducted research in southern Mexico for the past 31 years, with particular attention to Formative societies in Chiapas and their development. His interest in stone tools and their functions goes back even further. He received B.S. and M.A. degrees from Brigham Young University and a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. None of his mentors should be blamed for his career path or activities. For the past two decades he has been director of the New World Archaeological Foundation with headquarters in Chiapas, Mexico. His current research focus is the origins of hereditary social inequality among the earliest villagers of proto-Mesoamerica. Of equal interest are subsequent developments among the Olmecs of cities, complex government, and the rituals and beliefs that went along with them, as most clearly evident in their art and ritual practices.

Thrones - Ann Cyphers

Thrones and colossal heads are major symbols of Olmec rulers and only occur in important sites. Thrones have a wider distribution in the Gulf Coast than heads, and their sizes correlate with the size and complexity of the respective centers. The restricted distributions of icons of divine descent in conjunction with throne size indicate that not all rulers were equal in importance. In this talk I will explore the possible kinds of relationships that may have existed among rulers and sites based on throne characteristics. Ann Cyphers is a Senior Research Scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and Research Associate at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She specializes in Formative period archaeology of Mesoamerica, with particular interest in the central Mexican highlands and Gulf Coast regions. Her research has concentrated on ceramic classification and chronologies, figurine analyses, Olmec settlement pattern studies, iconographic and contextual analysis of monumental art, domestic spaces, and heritage preservation. She has performed fieldwork in the Midwest, as well as in the Mexican
states of Morelos and Veracruz. She has conducted research at the San Lorenzo
Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project since 1990.

**Olmec-inspired Influences on the Nature of Early Maya Divine Kingship - Virginia Fields**

Recent archaeological, art historical, and epigraphic investigations have further refined the understanding of the social, economic, and artistic factors that led to the appearance and expression of divine kingship among the ancient Maya. Characterized by specific patterns related to royal titles and ceremonial responsibilities as well as royal clothing and specific paraphernalia, the phenomenon of divine kingship, found among pristine civilizations throughout the ancient world, is expressed in distinctive patterns among both highland and lowland Maya peoples of the Late Preclassic period. These patterns, often rooted in earlier Olmec style manifestations and initially described in my dissertation (1989), are re-examined and substantiated in light of new data from recent excavations and analyses. A specialist in early Mesoamerican art and archaeology with a Ph.D. in Latin American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin, Virginia Fields joined the staff of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as its first curator of pre-Columbian art in 1989. She has taught pre-Columbian and Native American art history at UCSB, UCLA, and other California state universities. At LACMA, she co-curated the nationally touring exhibitions *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* (1994-95), *The Road to Aztlán: Art from a Mythic Homeland* (2001), and *Lords of Creation: The Origins of Sacred Maya Kingship* (2005-06), which received the annual book award from the Association for Latin American Art. She was recently appointed as a Senior Fellow in Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections in Washington, DC.

**Flesh of God: Maize and the Consolidation of Power in Mesoamerica - David Freidel**

Olmec civilization arose in the Gulf Coast during the Early Formative period, when domesticated maize was just emerging as an important food and no people exhibit primary reliance upon it as a staple. By the Middle Formative period, the Gulf Coast Olmec were committed to maize, and they celebrated the maize god and its avatar, the Olmec king. The cult of the divine maize god king prevailed among the neighboring lowland Maya for a millennium and a half after the decline of the Olmec in 500 BCE. The convergence of maize and power were not coincidental. Olmec rulers, and Maya rulers after them, managed the strategic storage of surplus maize in the system of trade networks and markets linking areas of abundance with areas of crop failure and their people celebrated rulers consequently as the sources of vital food.

**A Glimpse at Olmec Rituals at La Venta, Tabasco - Rebecca González Lauck**

The ancient Olmec city located at La Venta, Tabasco had many functions. Its monumental architecture, its thematically diverse sculptural corpus, and multiple kinds of subterranean offerings demonstrate its unequalled status in Mexico’s Gulf Coast plain in
the first millennium BCE. Recent research at the site shows that at least part of the sculptures were displayed in thematic groups associated with specific architectural spaces and buildings. These patterns are key in discerning their possible function and meaning. Its ceremonial precinct – Complex A – built in the course of four centuries held an impressive array of offerings some which accompanied burials. Others, such as the enigmatic Massive Offerings are unique to the pre-Columbian world. These are but a few clues indicative of complex ritual activities of the Olmec at La Venta. Rebecca González Lauck is an archaeologist at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Tabasco. She has worked at the Olmec site of La Venta intermittently since 1984, undertaking archaeological research as well as carrying out protection and conservation programs at the site and its associated museum. She studied anthropology at Tulane University (B.A.) and the University of California, Berkeley (M.A. and Ph.D.). She has worked on archaeological projects in Louisiana, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Bolivia, as well as in various parts of Mexico.

La Blanca in the Olmec World - Julia Guernsey and Michael Love

Monuments and imagery from the site of La Blanca - one of the largest Middle Preclassic sites of ancient Mesoamerica – attest to the cultural and economic connections between Pacific Coastal Guatemala and other regions of Mesoamerica. This paper explores these relationships and their significance in understanding the role of La Blanca within the sophisticated communication and political networks of the Olmec World. Julia Guernsey is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research and publications focus on the Middle and Late Preclassic periods in ancient Mesoamerica, in particular on sculptural expressions of rulership during this time, and she is project iconographer for the La Blanca Archaeological Project. Her most recent research appears in her book Ritual and Power in Stone: The Performance of Rulership in Mesoamerican Izapan-Style Art (University of Texas Press, 2006), the journals Antiquity and Mesoamerican Izapan-Style Art (University of Texas Press, 2006), the journals Antiquity and Ancient America, the Memorias de la Segunda Mesa Redonda Olmeca, and the proceedings of the annual Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala. Michael Love is Associate Professor of Anthropology at California State University Northridge. He is Director of the La Blanca Archaeological Project, and his research focuses on Middle and Late Preclassic Mesoamerican household economy and ritual along the Pacific Coast of Mesoamerica. His most recent research appears in the journals Antiquity and the Journal of Archaeological Research, the Memorias de la Segunda Mesa Redonda Olmeca, the proceedings of the annual Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, and in his New World Archaeological Foundation monograph on Early Complex Society in Pacific Guatemala: Settlements and Chronology of the Río Naranjo, Guatemala (2002).

Symbols of Power among the Olmec: Monumental Sculpture - Sara Ladrón de Guevara

Surely the most impressive remains of the Olmec culture are its monumental sculptures. The evaluation of this culture’s cosmovision in comparison with that of the rest of Mesoamerica is based on a review of iconographic elements found in its statuary. This
paper proposes an assessment of monumental Olmec sculpture, particularly the colossal heads, taking into consideration the following topics: the symbolism and iconographic motifs in the colossal helmets, the lack of female Olmec statuary, the angle of deviation of the Olmec head bases, and the use and reuse of Olmec monuments in contemporary and later times. The above will be presented within the context that monumental Olmec sculpture was an important factor in the expression of power, validating legitimacy and lineage. Sara Ladrón is Director of the Museo de Antropología in Xalapa, Veracruz. She has taught at the Universidad Veracruzana and the Universidad de Guadalajara, and has been a visiting professor at Smith College and the Sorbonne. Ladrón has participated in numerous archaeological projects in both Mexico and Europe, with a special emphasis on the iconography and symbolism of Mesoamerica. She has published more than 60 texts, among them Imagen y pensamiento en El Tajín and Diseños precolombinos de Veracruz. She holds a B.A. in anthropology from the Universidad Veracruzana, an M.A. from the Sorbonne, and a Ph.D. from UNAM, also in anthropology.

**The Origins of the Cult to the Sacred Mountain, Springs, Bodies of Water, and the Ball Game at El Manatí - Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos**

The data collected in the sacred place of El Manatí has allowed us to obtain important information on aspects before unknown on the use of sacred spaces tied to varied ritual paraphernalia. These include a rich variety of cultural elements like the presence of rubber balls that represent the earliest evidence of this sacred game that persisted as a legacy for other Mesoamerican cultures. This paper presents a discussion on the sacred hill and a description of the context in which the rubber balls were found, along with evidence of the beverages that accompanied the ceremonies, including chocolate. Ponciano Ortiz is a full-time researcher at the Instituto de Antropología at the Universidad Veracruzana. He received an M.A. in anthropology from the same institution in 1975. He has carried out archaeological investigations at several sites on the Gulf Coast, in Chiapas, and on the coastal plain of Belize. Currently he co-directs the Manati Archaeological Project, supported by the Instituto de Antropología e Historia (INAH) of Mexico. The project has also received support from the National Geographic Society and the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection of Harvard University. His research interest is the archaeology of Mesoamerica, with an emphasis on the study of Olmec culture and the dynamics of change among established societies in the Formative period on the Gulf Coast.

**The Olmec and the Language of the Sacred: Ritual Objects and Sacred Bundles in the Middle Formative World - F. Kent Reilly III**

Iconographic investigations of Middle Formative monuments from the Olmec heartland and other contemporary areas of Mesoamerica reveal that ritual objects, as well as colossal heads, altar/thrones, and stelae were often wrapped or bundled when not actively in ritual use. Undoubtedly, bundling served several ritual and perhaps cosmological functions. The act of bundling not only covered objects and monuments but identified their sacredness and supernatural power through the act of screening. A carved image on a vessel attributed to the site of Chalcatzingo depicts an open bundle. The carved or
incised imagery on such objects as the Chalcatzingo Vase, the recently discovered Cascajal Block, and the Humboldt Celt, and the placement of caches within the layout of the archaeological site of La Venta illustrate the fact that in the Middle Formative Period, just as in later Mesoamerica, open bundles were framing devices that both identified and located the bundled contents within a sacred cosmology. The recognition of bundle imagery within the larger corpus of Middle Formative art demonstrates that much of the ritual behavior of the later Classic Period has its origins deep within the Mesoamerican Middle Formative past.

The Monuments of La Merced, Veracruz, and the El Cascajal Carved Block - María del Carmen Rodríguez Martínez

This paper presents iconographic comparative studies of these two important Olmec monuments, and their archaeological context. The site of La Merced also corresponds to another sacred space where a massive offering of green stone axes associated with a carved stone tablet and two anthropomorphous axes was deposited. We will present a summary of the data and an iconographic discussion in light of this new information. María del Carmen Rodríguez is a full-time investigator at INAH Veracruz. She graduated in anthropology from the Universidad Veracruzana. She has collaborated on archaeological projects at Tula, the Papoloapan River basin in Oaxaca, and Las Higueras, Veracruz. She was also responsible for the maintenance and conservation of the archaeological zone of Castillo de Teayo in Veracruz. Currently she co-directs, with Ponciano Ortíz, the Manatí Archaeological Project in southern Veracruz. Her research interest is the study of early civilizations along the Gulf Coast, particularly the development of the Olmec culture in southern Veracruz.