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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

CATHARINA E. SANTASILIA, GUY DAVID HEPP, AND RICHARD A. DIEHL (EDS.)
2022, *Identities, Experience, and Change in Early Mexican Villages*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 350 pp. ISBN 13: 9780813069296

The Mesoamerican Formative period is divided into three logical time periods (Early/Initial, Middle, and Late/Terminal) with absolute (radiometric) regional and site chronologies varying within the 2000 BCE-CE 250 timeframe. It is characterized by critical transitions in social, political, and economic dynamics, with the appearance of sedentary farming communities, pottery technology, long distance trade/exchange, and increasing social inequality fostering larger and more abundant settlements leading to the formation of cities.

Editors Santasilia and Hepp are recent PhDs, while Diehl has retired recently. Sixteen contributors range from a student seeking her Master's degree, a recent PhD, and younger and seasoned scholars. Four writers are from Mexico and two others are recently retired archaeologists. One-third of the contributors have direct connections to the archaeology program at the University of Colorado.

The editors' goal was to assemble an international group of scholars to explore the development of social identity in a broad selection of Formative period Mexican communities. This research topic is, they write, "ripe for investigating the interplay of changing identities, interaction, and lived experiences as well as the relationships of these to broader socioeconomic changes" (p. 2). The book, dedicated to Michael D. Coe (1920-2019), a pioneer of Formative period studies, contains the editors' contextual essay, nine chapters of case studies, and concluding assessment. The narratives are accompanied by 48 figures, 12 maps, three tables, a list of 26 abbreviations, a set of brief author biographies, and a very useful 12-page index; each chapter has its own bibliography. The chapters cover diverse topics unified by recent research on Formative period social identity ranging from studies of individual archaeological sites to the assessment of

ceramic figurines, an archaeometric study of portable greenstone objects, shifts in subsistence, and dynamic ritual and social modifications.

Blomster focuses on the Early Formative Eatlatongo site in Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca and an assemblage of ceramic figurines, their distributions, and meanings. Using agency theory, he identifies two types of rubber ballgame players, redefines “individual” social identities, and relationships to Olmec art style. The Early to Middle Formative in the Gulf Coast is emphasized by Arnold III in his analysis of wild plant and animal subsistence resources, hunting and fishing, which precede incipient farming. He illustrates this transformation with several data sets from southern Veracruz, and postulates a diachronic model of settlement pattern, economic, and ritual changes where offerings became more formalized.

Hepp reviews social changes during Early Formative coastal Oaxaca, focusing on sensorial applications of archaeological contexts and materiality at the village site of La Consentida. Sounds, smells, and other sensations are inferred to define the roles of feasting, public performance, and ritual practice. Bernard, Ladrón de Guevara, Manrique, and Ruvalcaba report their preliminary examination of Olmec greenstone portable sculpture, most of which lack archaeological context. They detail mineralogical characteristics of Mesoamerican jadeite using portable FTIR, FORS, and XRF technologies, from museum artifacts and new Arroyo Pesquero site finds. They conclude that the Olmec maintained continuous relationships with foreign groups who controlled the raw material source or its subsequent distribution.

Regional and corporate identities in West Mexico are documented by Beekman, who notes that this huge region is not well-studied. Tombs at El Opeño, Michoacán provide evidence of offerings from widespread sources. Diachronic changes in social equality suggest a similar cosmovision between the west and central regions rather than the Gulf Coast; fire and earth deities prevailed, not Olmec water deities. At the Central Mexican site of Tlatilco, Ochoa Castillo documents ritual activities including shamanism (Burial 154). The pan-Mesoamerican ballgame, acrobatic figural representations, mortuary rituals, and osteological evidence are expressions of the cosmology. Santasilia concentrates on artifacts from 450 Tlatilco burials. Olmec influence toward the end of the Early Formative was minimal, as seen in ceramic ballplayer figurines, masks, and pottery. An analysis of 80 objects from a museum in Riverside,

California shows affinities with the Chupicuaro, Guerrero site, demonstrating that Post-Olmec Tlatilco trade interests shifted over time from southwest to east and southeast.

The “critical period” of Middle Formative in the Basin of Mexico and adjacent Puebla Valley is refined by Murakami, who examines the radiocarbon calibration curve problem (the “Hallstadt Plateau”), provides a chronological revision and new understanding of regional social transformations. His well-argued Bayesian modeling and recalibration, revisions to Chalcatzingo site chronology, combined with ceramic cross-dating, concludes that societies in Central Mexico did not face sociopolitical disruptions seen in the west and south. Chalcatzingo’s decline and associated population nucleation in the northeast Basin of Mexico stimulated the formation of the Classic period Teotihuacan state (250-650 CE).

Brzezinski, Monson, Joyce, and Barber examine ceremonial offerings from the Cerro de la Virgen site on the Oaxacan Pacific Coast during the Terminal Formative. These artifacts reflect competing forms of political authority and the fundamental role of religion as a “crucible of tension.” Communal rituals, caching, burials, and mortuary goods illustrate status differences, political fragmentation, and eventually site abandonment. Diehl reflects on the Formative period in four ways (pp. 291-298): 1) its history; 2) the nature of the period (2000 BCE-AD 250); 3) studies characterizing the period, 1900-1960; and 4) research revealing the period 1960-1980, with new technologies, directions, and understandings 1960-present. The latter has a cultural evolutionary framework with supporting demographic and settlement pattern studies. The 1967 Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec established a new research agenda. He observes that the new approaches employed by the authors examine several longstanding concerns about the Mesoamerican Formative. Lastly, Diehl comments on the nine contributions (pp. 298-308), concluding that Formative studies are thriving and in good hands. He laments the destruction of archaeological sites and foresees “several great syntheses of Formative Mesoamerica in the near future.”

This unique approach to Formative studies provides a foundation for the reassessment of social identity complexities and interactions during this critical period in Mesoamerican studies which precede the rise of multifaceted states during the Classic period. Prior research focused on

materiality and socioeconomics whereas this volume demonstrates how nontraditional approaches can lead to new perspectives and interpretations. The essays by Murakami, Ochoa Castillo, and Santasilia are especially outstanding. This volume joins other recent publications that demonstrate transformations during the Formative; especially Love and Guernsey (eds.) (2022) *Early Mesoamerican Cities: Urbanism and Urbanization in the Formative Period*; Delance and Feinman (eds.) (2022) *Framing Complexity in Formative Mesoamerica*; Doering (2014) “Mesoamerica in the Preclassic Period: Early, Middle, Late Formative” in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*; Williams (2018) “Ancient West Mexico in the Formative Period” in *Ancient West Mexico*; and Ebert (2023) “The Formative Period in Mesoamerica” in *Elsevier Reference Collection in Social Sciences*. Diehl’s other syntheses have arrived.

Charlie Kolb holds a B.A. in History from The Pennsylvania State University and earned his Ph.D. at Penn State in Anthropology and Archaeology focusing on, Latin America and Central Asia. From 1962-2018 he conducted archaeological field work in Mesoamerica, Central Asia, and Northeastern North America. He taught for 24 years at Penn State, Bryn Mawr, and Mercyhurst University, retiring after 23 years as Senior Program Officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities. Kolb conducted archaeometric analyses on ceramics since 1962, and served for 26 years as Associate Editor for Archaeological Ceramics of *The Society for Archaeological Sciences Bulletin*. Since 1965 he has authored 6 monographs, 169 articles and book chapters, 858 book reviews, and 63 encyclopedia contributions.

Drs. Diehl and Kolb were undergraduate and graduate classmates at Penn State in the 1960s mentored by Bill Sanders. They both excavated and conducted extensive site surveys in Mexico’s Teotihuacan Valley. Dick worked on the Formative sites, while Charlie labored on the Classic period – their dissertations were on those subjects.



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