

The Rise of Civilization in Mesoamerica

A one-day conference at Riverside Main Library in
collaboration with RMM, RAM, CIS, and UCR.

February 3rd, 2018

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In conjunction with Riverside Metropolitan Museum and Riverside Art Museum’s exhibition:
“Uncovering Ancient Mexico: The Mystery of Tlatilco”

Schedule

8:30 AM Registration
9:00 AM Welcome

Keynote and Session 1

9:15 AM Keynote: Dr. Karl Taube (UC Riverside, Anthropology) *Powers of Rain and Lightning: The Olmec and the Origins of Rain Gods in Ancient Mesoamerica*
10:00 AM Dr. Patricia Ochoa Castillo (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Curator) *Tlatilco, a reevaluation of the site, its materials and the definition of the Olmec*
10:25 AM Dr. Christopher Pool (University of Kentucky, Anthropology) *It's Complicated: Gulf Olmec Participation in Interregional Networks*
10:50 AM Discussion and questions
11:00-11:15 break

Session 2

11:15 AM Dr. Ronald Bishop (Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, Archaeologist) *Neutrons and PreClassic Mesoamerica*
11:40 AM Catharina Santasilia (UC Riverside, Ph.D. Candidate, Anthropology) *Results from the scientific laboratory analysis on the Tlatilco collection at RMM*
12:05 PM Discussion and questions
12-15-1:45 break for lunch

Session 3

1:45 PM Dr. Elizabeth Paris (University of Calgary, Anthropology) *Style and Value in the Early Complex Communities of Northern Belize*
2:10 PM Dr. Jaime Awe (Northern Arizona University, Anthropology) *The Genesis of Civilization in the Eastern Maya Lowlands: A Belize River Valley Perspective*
2:35 PM David Lebrun (Night Fire Films, producers of "Breaking the Maya Code" and "Out of the Maya Tombs") *Animating Tlatilco*
3:00 PM Discussion and questions
3:10-3:25 break

Session 4

3:25 PM Dr. Michelle Rich (San Antonio Museum of Art, Mellon Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow) and Dr. Matthew Robb (UC Los Angeles Fowler Museum, Chief Curator) *Ritual Journey: The Transformation of an Olmec Transformation Figurine*
3:50 PM Dr. Richard Lesure (UC Los Angeles, Archaeology) *Early Figurines from the Coast of Chiapas, Mexico, and the Origins of Mesoamerican Art*
4:15 PM Dr. Diana Magaloni and (LA County Museum of Art [LACMA], Director of the Program for Art of the Ancient Americas) *Offering 4 from La Venta: Material and Artistic Analysis*
4:40 PM Wrap up, discussion, and questions

Abstracts

Jaime J. Awe

Northern Arizona University

The Genesis of Civilization in the Eastern Maya Lowlands: A Belize River Valley Perspective

More than two decades of investigations by the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project (BVAR) has recovered a rich and extensive body of data for prehistoric occupation in the upper Belize River Valley. Besides recording a sequence of human activity that spans from the PreCeramic to Historic periods, the data particularly provides us with a special opportunity to examine the Formative evolution of cultural complexity in this sub-region of the Maya lowlands. This presentation summarizes some of the key discoveries of our archaeological research, it highlights several of the important cultural features of PreClassic Maya life in the Belize River Valley, and reveals the existence of a precocious and increasingly complex Formative period Mesoamerican community in this eastern lowland sub-region of the Maya area.

Ronald L. Bishop

National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institute

Neutrons and PreClassic Mesoamerica

Archaeological interpretation rests heavily upon the distribution of artifacts, especially ceramics. Patterns involving similarities of decoration and form in the material record, perceptible attributes of style, say something about past human action. Shared styles of pottery in the mid Twentieth Century were taken as nominal indicators of the diffusion of cultural norms or perhaps evidence of migration. Following the development of a self-sustaining nuclear reaction and its destructive application in World War II, the US government was eager for “peaceful” applications of nuclear energy. Archaeology benefited, as innovations involving the use of neutrons to characterize the bulk constituents of pottery made possible new alternatives for interpretive models. This presentation briefly outlines stages in the characterization of pottery by means of nuclear methods. As will be highlighted, the “science” of the application ends when the analytical data are obtained. From there, interpretation takes on an increasingly inferential nature, seeking a “best fit” among the analytical and more traditional archaeological information into order to weave a consumable narrative. Examples will be drawn from research concerning PreClassic cultures of Mesoamerica and an ongoing investigation in the Maya region that has potential ties to the Valley of Mexico.

David Lebrun

Night Fire Films

Animating Tlatilco

As part of the exhibition *Uncovering Ancient Mexico: The Mystery of Tlatilco* at the Riverside Art Museum, David Lebrun and Night Fire Films have created a ten-minute animation installation based on their original photography of over 400 formative period figurines in US and Mexican museum collections. This animation, *218 Figurines from Tlatilco and San Pablo, Central Mexico/1200-900 BCE*, is part of the broader project *The Forms: Four Worlds*, an immersive museum exhibition using animation to trace the development and interrelationships of fundamental artistic symbols and motifs from the early Paleolithic to the late middle ages in four world culture areas. This presentation will describe the creation of the Tlatilco animation piece and its place in the context of *The Forms: Four Worlds* and Night Fire’s other work on ancient Mesoamerica, including the documentary films *Breaking the Maya Code* and *Out of the Maya*

Tombs. (As an outreach event related to the *Uncovering Ancient Mexico: The Mystery of Tlatilco* exhibition, *Out of the Maya Tombs* will be shown on January 28 at the UCR ARTSblock screening room.)

Richard G. Lesure

University of California, Los Angeles

Early Figurines from the Coast of Chiapas, Mexico, and the Origins of Mesoamerican Art

The dissemination of the Olmec style from the Gulf Coast region across much of Mesoamerica between 1400 and 1000 BC is often understood to mark the origins of Mesoamerican art. In most regions, artistic expressions older than 1400 BC are poorly understood. Early modeled ceramic images from the coast of Chiapas, Mexico, constitute a dramatic exception. There, the adoption of Olmec style from 1400/1300 BC interrupted a thriving local tradition of ceramic figurines and effigies. This talk examines that early tradition for any hint of themes familiar from later Mesoamerican art. If “Mesoamerican” themes can be found in this early, localized tradition, then we would have to imagine the origins of a shared tradition of Mesoamerican art as extending deeper than 1400 BC.

Diana Magaloni and Laura Filloy

LACMA and Museo Nacional de Antropología

Offering 4 From La Venta: A multidisciplinary study of its artistic and technical characteristics

Offering 4 from La Venta was discovered in 1955 in an archaeological project co-directed by Philip Drucker and Robert Heizer. Offering 4 represents an event of religious and political relevance that transpired ca. 3000 years. 16 individuals and six stele carved in different greenstones were placed in a tomb as though they were the participants of a sacred event. They were placed in a tomb as an offering, and were interred carefully in a cache which has layers of colored earths: the first clay strata is reddish brown, followed by orange, pink, yellow and white. The meaning of the group of figures escapes our knowledge, however, we can contribute to better understand their meaning by analyzing them through multiple disciplines. This talk is a summary of the studies by art historians, archaeologists, physical anthropologists, and material scientists conducted in 2011/2012 in the Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Patricia Ochoa Castillo

Subdirección de Arqueología, Museo Nacional de Antropología, México

Tlatilco, a reevaluation of the site, its materials and the definition of the Olmec

Tlatilco is, without a doubt, one of the most relevant sites of the Formative period. Its complexity manifests its participation within the important dynamic that existed since that period, both in the Center of Mexico as well as in other areas of Mesoamerica. Having an amazing number of potential research possibilities at Tlatilco, it was decided to focus this investigation on the analysis of cultural groups, being the most complex one linked to the Olmecs. With the goal of making a reevaluation of Tlatilco, this research presents an introduction that will cover general aspects, including all the information available at the present. Subsequently, the analysis of the materials will be presented, basically ceramics that, supposedly shows traits of Olmec affiliation, particularly those that were recovered in secure archeological contexts, trying to place them in time by means of association of burials offerings, comparing them with those found at other sites, both in and out of the Center of Mexico. The above with the purpose of having, through these new analysis, new perspectives, in particular on the elements considered Olmec, and its relations with other sites, and to have greater information about the importance that Tlatilco had within the rise of the great Mesoamerican civilizations.

Elizabeth H. Paris

University of Calgary

Style and Value in the Early Complex Communities of Northern Belize

The Middle Formative period (900-300 BC) saw the emergence of complex community networks in Northern Belize. During this period, sites such as San Estevan, Cuello, Colha, Cerros, and K'axob developed networks of interaction that facilitated the exchange of raw materials, technologies and emergent systems of value. These communities exchanged fine-grained, high-quality Colha chert, and developed tool inventories that supported the intensification of agricultural systems. Rather than relying on a single production center, local flint nappers often created specialized tools in their own communities using locally available raw materials, such as tranchet adzes and burin spall drills, executing complex production techniques with varying degrees of success. Household inventories from this period also reflect an increasing emphasis on the elaboration of shell ornaments and currencies, as emerging complex societies increasingly sought to create media of exchange that buffered their communities against the risk of agricultural shortfalls. These community interaction networks paved the way for the emergence of specialized artisan communities and the proliferation of long-distance exchange relationships during the political ascendancy of Late Formative period kingdoms.

Christopher Pool

University of Kentucky

It's Complicated: Gulf Olmec Participation in Interregional Networks

Although the rhetoric of the “mother culture-sister culture” debate has cooled in the past decade, discussions of Olmec involvement in Formative (or Preclassic) interregional networks still tend to oversimplify by (a) modeling interaction as occurring exclusively with the largest Gulf Olmec site of each period or (b) considering a single exchanged good or realm of expression as representative of interaction as a whole. Evidence from a range of Gulf Olmec sites and materials suggests a more complex situation in which some components of economic and social networks were organized autonomously by households and smaller communities. In this paper I review this evidence and its implications for Olmec political economy and interregional interaction.

Michelle Rich and Matthew H. Robb

San Antonio Art Museum and the Fowler at University of California, Los Angeles

Ritual Journey: The Transformation of an Olmec Transformation Figurine

A quintessentially Olmec-style transformation figurine (ca. 1500-400 BCE) was discovered during excavation of a seventh century Maya royal tomb at El Perú-Waka', Petén, Guatemala. The presence of this figurine in the mortuary assemblage of a ruler—from a geographically distinct region who died centuries after the Olmec apogee—speaks to the persistence and longevity of Formative-period iconography. Our goal in this conference is to situate more broadly the notion of Mesoamerican movement and interaction based on an examination of what appears to be a Formative period object discovered in a tomb context associated with an unexpected time and faraway place. Because of the lack of archaeologically-excavated transformation figurines, this artifact provides a rare opportunity to explore the deeper meaning of such a piece, as well as the meaning of the “past in the past”. This paper reflects on the meaning of this Olmec artifact, one, found outside the Valley of Mexico and, two, archaeologically-provenienced to a later time period. A seventh century Maya royal tomb is a curious starting point entitled Rise of Civilization in Mesoamerica.

Catharina E. Santasilia

University of California, Riverside

Results from the scientific laboratory analysis on the Tlatilco collection at RMM

Riverside Metropolitan Museum (RMM) houses a significant collection of objects from the Early Formative culture of Tlatilco (1200-900 BCE). 3000 years ago, Mesoamerica saw a lot of movement across the continent and between the many cultures. Particularly the Olmec appear to have been socio-politically involved throughout most of central Mexico, including at Tlatilco, where the Olmec culture made its way into the artistic expressions of the ceramic crafts. In the fall of 2015, I assisted Dr. Ronald Bishop in sampling objects for Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis (INAA). Dr. Bishop has since processed the samples and the data is providing us with a new understanding of the intriguing ceramic traditions of Tlatilco, as the production location of ceramic objects, can as a result INAA, be determined. This creates new data where objects of *foreign design* found at Tlatilco can yield information about ancient movement and possible shared cultural identities.

Karl A. Taube

University of California, Riverside

Powers of Rain and Lightning: The Olmec and The Origins Of Rain Gods In Ancient Mesoamerica

Among the most basic defining traits of Mesoamerica is maize, which although highly productive, demands considerable amounts of water to thrive during the spring and summer months. In fact, the northern border of this cultural area is defined by where farming is no longer possible without irrigation. As in Neolithic Europe, the Formative period in Mesoamerica constitutes the time when agriculture, along with settled village life and ceramics, first developed, with one of the preeminent cultures being the Olmec (ca. 1200-500 b.c.). In this presentation, I will discuss the Olmec rain god, including his attributes as well as attendant ritual and symbolism. In addition, I note that many later rain gods of Classic and Post classic Mesoamerica, including the Zapotec, the Maya and Central Mexico derive in many respects from this ancient Olmec being. In addition, due to recent archaeological discoveries, it is readily to document the origin and development of Mesoamerican rain gods in considerable detail.