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MESOAMERICAN CIVILIZATION

Christine Niederberger Betton, *Paleopaysages et Archéologie Pré-Urbaine du Bassin de Mexico Collection. Etudes Mésoaméricaines*. 2 Volumes (856 pp.) illustrated. CEMCA (Centre d'Etudes Mexicales et Centraméricaines), Sierra Leona 330, Mexico D.F. 11000, 1987.

I first heard about Christine Niederberger Betton a little over a year ago when I went around Mexico City asking: "Who knows the latest about the Olmecs?" Then I met Niederberger at the International Congress of Archaeologists in Mainz last August, where she read her paper on "Middle America: From the Beginning of a Sedentary Life to the Rise of the first Regional Centers" at a plenary session. Thus I heard that the latest about the Olmecs was that they did not exist—at least not as the inventors and bearers of what we know as the "Olmec" civilization. This civilization is now dated from about 1250 to 600 BC. It rose not just on the Gulf coast but, from the start, all over Mesoamerica, simultaneously in many regional center. It is a pre-urban development, following the establishment of sedentary village life, widespread interchange of goods, and the development of effective agrarian practices. It precedes the rise of the city of Teotihuacan in the valley of Mexico which took place around 300 to 100 BC. Niederberger calls the regional centers of Cuicuilco and Tenantongo, developing their monumental architecture around 600 to 500 BC, "proto-urban."

Niederberger accepts the fact that the designation "Olmec"—that is a Nahuatl word for "from the land of rubber"—has by now become so firmly established for cultural products with certain stylistic characteristics that it cannot be replaced. But she insists that no one people of whatever name originated this civilization, that the society was multi-ethnic, and that it spread over ecologically most diverse regions.

Niederberger works in Mexico for INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) in the Department of Prehistory. She deplores that many art books and museums show specimens of "Olmec" art but that numerous reports on archaeological work remain unpublished and that only a few and incomplete publications ordering and analyzing these findings exist. She has therefore set out to compile the existing knowledge about the prehistory of the Valley of Mexico from 8000 BC up to the time of the rise of the "Olmec" civilization.

Niederberger describes the three principal lines of her synthesis as follows:

1. An evaluation of the data and hypotheses accumulated so far.
2. A discussion of the recent breakthrough and restatement which, in some instances, radically challenge traditional views.
3. And, last, a presentation of the new cognitive schemes which may now be formulated.

Niederberger's review of the work undertaken since 1910 to study the settlement of the Valley of Mexico before the rise of Teotihuacan combines the results of many disciplines: archaeology, geology, climatology,

hydrography, botany, zoology, demography, ethnology and so on. Excavations begun in the late sixties and still going on have led to a new chronology which, again, leads to a new understanding of the sequence of events in all of the region here called "Middle America," especially between the end of the second millennium and the first millennium BC. Emphasis is laid on three points: First the examination of the interactions between people and their ancient environment, especially its transformations through human activities. Then the degree of socio-political and cultural complexity of the agrarian societies of 1250 to 600 BC. And, finally, the nature of the sociopolitical and economic relations which these ancient societies of the Valley of Mexico maintained with other contemporary social units of the emerging civilization.

The new chronology and ordering of data for the 1250 to 600 BC time span relies mostly on the work undertaken during the last 15 years at Tlapacoya-Zohapilco and at Tlatilco, both in the State of Mexico. Tlatilco is situated in the hills near the river Hondo, southwest of Mexico City. It has been the site of a number of excavations—and many robberies—over the years. With the new data and modern archaeological methods, the earlier interpretations of findings at this site have been superseded. Tlapacoya-Zohapilco is a lacustrine site on the shore of the now dried-up Lake Chalco, southeast of Mexico City. In 1969 Niederberger assumed responsibility for the excavations there. They were conceived from the start as interdisciplinary. At Tlapacoya, she was able to establish a sequence of paleolandscapes back to 5,500 BC and to create a general outline of agrarian development that agrees with the results of other excavations. Several reports have been published.

Niederberger makes only brief mention of the important new site "discovered" in 1983 in the western state of Guerrero—after many artifacts robbed from that lonely site in the mountains about halfway between Mexico City and Acapulco appeared on the black market. The site is called Tlaczotitlan after a village nearby, or Teopantecuanitlan, that is, "place of the Jaguar-temple" in Nahuatl. Archaeological work undertaken by Guadalupe Martinez Donjuan and also by Niederberger is reported in special publications. But the story of this site raises hopes that under another one of the numerous "Jaguar Hills" in Mexico further important findings lie waiting to be discovered.

At one point, Niederberger wonders what would have happened if Teopantecuanitlan in Guerrero had been discovered in 1925 instead of La Venta, Tres Zapotes and San Lorenzo on the Gulf Coast. The characteristic art style and the unmistakable religious symbolism would not have been attributed to a people named "Olmecs." Those archaeologists, who—like Covarrubias—claimed that the origin of this culture was in the valley of Mexico, would have had a jump on those of their colleagues who claimed origins for the Gulf coast around Vera Cruz. Money for excavations would have gone to further sites in the valley of Mexico and we might just now begin to know those eight colossal heads from San Lorenzo or the gathering of sixteen tiny dignitaries made of polished jade from La Venta. And books would have been published

describing—as Soustelle has done for the Olmecs—how the people of Guerrero had spread all over Mesoamerica down to the Gulf coast.

I have enlarged on Niederberger's aside, because it is important to remember how fortuitous and fragile our knowledge is. I suppose, the experts will find holes in Niederberger's arguments. But first her careful, detailed research, which encompasses the results of many disciplines and combines them into a solid structure, has to be taken into account. What does it mean for general theories of the origin of civilizations if one accepts Niederberger's findings?

According to the sequence of events deduced from the excavations at Tlapacoya-Zohpailco and Tlatilco, the rise of a Mesoamerican civilization was slow and even, without sudden spurts. Beginning around 1250 to 1100, a simultaneous development accelerated in many places between the Gulf coast and the Pacific coast, already interconnected through trade and circulating information or messages. A cultural symbiosis was added to the economic symbiosis. The double systems were densely and regularly distributed over the whole region. There is no sign of a privileged center from which raw materials or manufactured goods or symbolic messages radiated out. On the contrary, a complex multidirectional and dynamic network of organized exchanges with varying configurations over time is in evidence.

In her paper read at the International Archaeological Congress in Mainz last year, Niederberger states: "At the end of the 2nd millennium BC, regional centers which constitute the expression of a new type of settlement unit and territorial organization appear in various zones. . . . As suggested by general archaeological evidence and by the archaeology of Helladic Greece, in particular, the term 'civilization' is not necessarily synonymous with 'urbanism'. In Mesoamerica, . . . civilization is related to the rise of capitals or centers of regional integration, here defined in the Latin sense of *caput* and not as *urbs*. . . . For the first time too in the general sequence [from 8000 BC on] status differentiation and hierarchies within the social system are clearly observed. The emergence of social ranking is attested both by iconographic evidence—for example in the monumental stone sculptures—and by the study of burial offerings. Some form of political formalized leadership seems to be linked to the religious sphere. Public architecture with earthen mounds and platforms, sometimes associated with monumental stone sculptures, are already present. Specific groups of artifacts—such as the free-standing anthropomorphic stone sculptures, 'altars' and colossal heads—and iconographic elements indicate that these major sites are the setting for elaborate ceremonies. Ceremonies may have included the Mesoamerican ritual ball-game."

We can only guess about the content of the messages expressed in a series of recurring symbols like hybrid creatures—were-jaguars, jaguar-men, and bird-serpent-jaguars—"baby-face" figures, and a complex graphic play with isolated motives like crossed bands, four-petaled flowers, almond eyes, claws, stylized eyebrows or jaws, feline mouths, masques in the form of birds' beaks, and particularly the motive of the

cleft brow. But the analysis of archaeological material—especially huge quantities of ceramics—shows a common system of myths and symbols in which all the Mesoamerican societies participated, actively codifying, evolving and transmitting. This mythic system does not appear to be superimposed, but to be fully integrated within each of the regional units, though producing certain local variations. Niederberger assumes that this common cosmological and mythical system acted as “one of the principal motors of an interregional cultural integration,” the other motors being “the long economic osmosis between regions which were geologically and bioclimatically most diverse.”

Among the signs of integration among regions and ethnic groups Niederberger lists: “the conception of settled space, the ensemble of beliefs and symbols codified graphically and manipulated, the ritual artifacts used, the technical means employed, the food specially valued, the ornaments, the intentional bodily deformations and mutilations, the mortuary practices, and the dominant food choices.” These common traits pertaining to different ethnic groups in different regions lead Niederberger to say that from 1200 BC on America’s first civilization crystallized in Mesoamerica.

This exposition forms only an Epilogue to the volumes here reviewed. Niederberger is working on a full-length treatment. The outlines are, however, clear: The primary civilization in America arose as one out of multiethnic, agrarian, ranked societies in interconnected regional, preurban centers across Mesoamerica. (This does not prejudge the question whether Teotihuacan with its successor-societies in the Valley of Mexico and the Maya civilization should be designated as two secondary civilizations or as one!)

What is missing in Niederberger’s scheme is the motive or impulse which set in motion these changes, for example, the acceleration of material and nonmaterial interchanges between regions which she notes as occurring around 1250. Did the development create its own momentum? If so, why here and not somewhere else? Our old question!

One may hope that at least the content of the common religion (or ‘conglomerate myth’) will become clearer with newly inspired analyses of the data. A lot of material is scattered in private collections and museum storerooms and is awaiting such imaginative studies as those recently applied to Maya material.

Imogen Seger Coulborn