

Some Thoughts on the Chronological- Developmental Configuration of Lower Central American Cultures

Un esquema cronológico-evolucional o cultural satisfactorio para Panamá, Costa Rica, Nicaragua así como para la mayor parte de Honduras y El Salvador, agrupados por el autor bajo la denominación Lower Central America, aguarda aún su elaboración. Se enfocan ciertos paralelos y diferencias entre las culturas de Mesoamérica y Lower Central America y se intenta un esquema de la situación cultural del último área. Desde el punto de vista de las formas socio-políticas consiguientes, las culturas de Lower Central America no parecen haber experimentado un desarrollo más allá del tipo de organización caciquil.

While there have been some general summary treatments of Lower Central American archaeology in recent years (Baudez 1970; Willey 1971, Chapter 5; Stone 1972), no very satisfactory chronological-developmental scheme has yet been devised to synthesize the area, nor has this question been explored in any depth. An in-depth exploration of the matter is beyond the scope of this brief paper, but I would like to open up the problem on a more self-conscious or explicit level than has been the case up to now.

The very fact that there is no precise and agreed upon definition of a "Lower Central American culture area" is, in itself, an expression of our uncertainty about synthesis. For working purposes, however, we can take the modern republics of Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and most of Honduras and Salvador as comprising such an area. The southern boundary, at present, must



stand as a very arbitrary one; there is little known archaeologically of the Panama-Colombian border country. The northern boundary has received more attention and debate. How does one distinguish between Mesoamerica and Lower Central America? How fast or how fluid was any such line in times past? But, again for our purposes, I think that we can say that the minimum southern border of Mesoamerica would include only far western Honduras and western Salvador, leaving the rest of those countries in Lower Central America.

Let me make one more preface to my remarks. A chronological-developmental scheme is an evolutionary or stage device. It is not a chronological framework based purely on absolute dates. It employs chronology, but chronology is linked to culture content and configuration. The early synthesizing schemes for Mesoamerica were such. They have since become more strictly chronological in their implications, and a recent new scheme attempts to do away with the developmental factor altogether (Price 1976). I think that all archaeologists recognize the difference between the two concepts. Chronology is, obviously, a *sine qua non* of archaeology. Developmental concepts are less basic, and some object to them because they introduce a theoretical element into data handling; however, we are trying to understand, as well as to order, the data, and if we are aware of what we are doing I see no danger in them.

For Lower Central America there have been some tentative beginnings for an area-wide chronology. Perhaps the most thorough-going is Haberland's (1978) recent summarizing statement. In it he was forced, largely, to rely upon radiocarbon dates for the equations of regional columns of culture phases. To a more limited extent he used trait content, such as the appearance of Zoned-Bichrome ceramic decoration, for the construction of some horizons. In gross perspective, of course, he could arrange a developmental sequence beginning with a few Early Lithic or Paleo-Indian type remains. These were followed with a stage of Archaic-type cultures, without ceramics and essentially non-horticultural. Finally, there is a pottery-making, presumably agricultural stage. Can we generalize in any useful way beyond this on the basis of our present data?

To begin, I think we can admit at the outset that there is little hope of extending Mesoamerican developmental constructs into Lower Central America insofar as these would apply to divisions of the pottery-making, farming stage. Lower Central America just does not have the same configurations of demographic, settlement, and socio-political development through time that characterize Mesoamerica. Or, at least, it is very difficult to detect them in the archaeological records. But let us review the situation and attempt some comparisons.

To borrow terms, at least tentatively from Mesoamerica, an Early Formative or an Early Preclassic stage might be projected for Lower Central America. This would be a stage transitional from the hunting and collecting economies of both upland and littorine zones into economically successful farming.

Olga Linares and her colleagues (Linares 1976, 1977; Linares and Ranere 1971) now feel that the Panamanian shell midden Monagrillo culture was, to a degree, horticultural; and, to judge from what was going on elsewhere at this time - as in northwestern South America (Lathrap, Marcos, and Zeidler 1977) - it is reasonable to surmise that both maize and manioc may have been raised in a Lower Central American Early Formative Period as early as 2500-2000 B.C. Unfortunately, Central American archaeologists have not found much to fill out such an Early Formative Period although Sarigua in Panama (Willey and McGimsey 1954) and Dinarte in Nicaragua (Haberland 1966) may belong in its later time reaches. Such a Lower Central American stage would resemble the pre-Olmec, Early Preclassic or Early Formative in Mesoamerica (Lowe 1978) in being a level of simple village agriculture, early ceramics, and, apparently, of egalitarian society.

A Late Formative stage would find us on somewhat firmer ground in Lower Central America. This would be the Zoned-Bichrome ware horizon of Baudez and Coe (1962) and the Scarified ware horizon of Haberland (1962). The time span here is usually set at about 300 B.C. to A.D. 300, and, as such, is more or less the chronological equivalent of Mesoamerican Late Preclassic and Protoclassic cultures; however, the actual ceramic similarities between the Lower Central American Zoned-Bichrome wares and Mesoamerican pottery are with much earlier Mesoamerican horizons, suggesting a lag phenomenon from an era of Mesoamerican Middle Preclassic contacts (ca. 1000-300 B.C.) that had then ceased to continue. Lange (1976) tells us this Lower Central American Late Formative stage was one of successful inland agriculture in Costa Rica, and I think this was probably also true for the various "Scarified ware" cultures of far southern Costa Rica and adjacent Panama. From a developmental standpoint, the Lower Central American cultures of 300 B.C. to A.D. 300 are strikingly different from those of southern Mesoamerica on this same time level. Indeed, in southern Mesoamerica, Olmec developments of ca. 1200 B.C. and later mark the beginnings of complex non-egalitarian societies. Such societies featured central site establishments of large mound structures and monumental art, clearly indicative of a high chiefdom level of organization. For the most part, the Lower Central American archaeological cultures never matched this kind of politico-religious or ceremonial center development, either in a Late Formative stage or later; however, it is pertinent to point to the site of Barriles in far western Panama. It is on the Scarified ware horizon.

"Barriles was a ceremonial center of some importance, as is indicated by a number of sculptures, which are among the largest in Lower Central America. They include life-size statues of chiefs or warriors usually represented as holding an ax in one hand and a trophy head in the other. Such dignitaries are often shown as being carried 'piggyback' style on the shoulders of other men. Besides the statues, there are huge, obviously ceremonial stone metates or tables several feet high and several feet in length. Assuming the Barriles sculptures to be dated by the associated pottery, we have here an earlier - and more

elaborate - aspect of the style of sculpture that has always been associated with the (later) Chiriquí phase" (Willey 1971: 335).

From this, including the master-and-servant representations in the sculptures, it would appear that a non-egalitarian kind of social order had appeared at some places in Lower Central America in what we are calling its Late Formative stage.

What kind of stage formulations can we project after this? I will suggest a Regional Developmental stage as extending from A.D. 300 to the Spanish Conquest. This terminology derives from usages in northwestern South America. In Ecuador, Meggers (1966) has defined a Regional Developmental Period as running from 500 B.C. to A.D. 500 and as being characterized by a regionalization in ceramic styles after a Late Formative relative uniformity. The Lower Central American Regional Developmental stage would be substantially later than this in actual time, but one could argue, although not altogether convincingly, for ceramic stylistic regionalism, in contrast to uniformity, for this time. For Ecuador Meggers then defined A.D. 500 to 1500 as a period of Integration, of geographically more extensive ceramic stylistic units and geographically larger polities. This distinction between Regional Developmentalism and Integration does not emerge in the Lower Central American data. In fact, it is difficult to split up the Lower Central American Regional Developmental stage in any way other than one of arbitrary ceramic periods - periods which are difficult to project over the entire area. Baudez and Coe (1962) suggest an Early, Middle, and Late Polychrome pottery breakdown for the stage, but this has meaning mainly for the Nicoya Region of northwest Costa Rica. There are suggested differences here, other than those of ceramic style, According to Lange (1978), in the Middle and Late Polychrome Periods, or after A.D. 800, there was a shift from inland back to coastal locations and from farming to a greater dependence on sea foods. The movement may have been occasioned by a climatic shift; or, perhaps, it might have been an attempt to accommodate a population growth which was becoming increasingly too large for the agricultural potential of the lands settled in the Late Formative Zoned-Bichrome Period. To put it another way, was there an inland depopulation at this time, or were both interior and coastal zones carrying their maximum populations as these could be sustained, respectively, by agricultural and marine produce? These questions, however, pertain largely to Pacific and inland Costa Rica, and they may have little meaning for other regions of Lower Central America.

To sum up the stage picture for Lower Central America, I would see, after the initial Paleo-Indian and Archaic stages, an Early Formative, comparable in its characteristics and implied life styles to that of the Early Formative or Early (pre-Olmec) Preclassic of Mesoamerica. The Lower Central American Late Formative stage sees a step up from egalitarian village farming societies to those which have chiefly centers and a non-egalitarian order. These may have not appeared everywhere, but they were present in parts of the area.

In a general developmental way what was happening was comparable to the Middle (Olmec and after) Preclassic and Late Preclassic stages of Mesoamerica although it is obvious from the nature of the Lower Central American achievements that the societies of the latter area were not developing with the same vigor of rhythms as those of Mesoamerica. The Classic rise of the state and the Postclassic attempts at imperial formations, as these came about in Mesoamerica were never approached in Lower Central America. Indeed, a Regional Developmental stage, if this term is taken to mean a significant structural change of society and the socio-political order, is difficult to define in Lower Central America. It can be defined, and subdivided for archaeological purposes of chronology, on the base of ceramic stylistic changes - but, probably, little else. This, of course, is a question for future research. At present, it looks as though the cultures of Lower Central America achieved the lower rungs of chiefdom development, stabilized there, and underwent no further major structural changes. Was this because subsistence potential and demographic limitations in Lower Central America precluded the societal sizes and population concentrations that are the requisites for the creation, or the easy reception and assimilation, of the high chiefdom or incipient state-type organization that characterized the Mesoamerican Olmec cultures?

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