

**SOCIAL PATTERNS
IN PRE-CLASSIC MESOAMERICA**

A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks
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Preface

MORE THAN A QUARTER-CENTURY separates the first Pre-Columbian conference at Dumbarton Oaks, on the Olmec, and the 1993 symposium from which this present volume evolved. Comparing the earlier, slim volume from the 1967 conference and this later, larger one, the advances in our understanding of early Mesoamerica are notable, not only in terms of more detailed examinations but also in the number of fine scholars at work.

The Olmec volume was produced at a time when broad brush strokes were still filling in the outline of the nature and dimensions of Olmec culture. It concentrated on large sites, particularly, La Venta and San Lorenzo, looked at regional patterns relating to the Olmec heartland, and addressed such basic questions as the relationship of Olmec and Maya art and the Olmec were-jaguar motif.

This volume, edited by Rosemary A. Joyce and David C. Grove, like its predecessor is both a summation of work that has been carried out over a long period of time and a signpost pointing the way for future studies. In it, we can see the reflection not only of more than two decades' research on early Mesoamerica, but also the theoretical influences of the past twenty-five years. Issues regarding gender, social identity, and landscape archaeology are present, as are the analysis of mortuary practices, questions of social hierarchy, and conjunctive studies of art and society that are in the best tradition of scholarship at Dumbarton Oaks.

Another Dumbarton Oaks publication, in 1981, *The Olmec and Their Neighbors: Essays in Memory of Matthew W. Stirling*, expressed the efflorescence of Olmec studies in the great richness and detail that became possible in the relatively brief period between its publication and the first Olmec conference. Now, we have reached yet another stage in understanding the Pre-Classic. The authors of the chapters in this volume have framed their discussions of early cultures to

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address broad questions regarding the Pre-Classic throughout a great portion of Mesoamerica. In doing this, they have concentrated on issues of social patterns that represent a new phase and a new view of the issues at stake. And while the debate on the Olmec as the “mother culture” may not be settled, in some quarters, the approach expressed here offers a particularly valuable way of examining the past that directly contributes to discussions of the origins of social complexity in Mesoamerica, Latin America, and beyond. It has only been through the careful and sometimes tedious and difficult research of scholars in both the old and new volumes, over many years, that we have been able to reach such a point in our analyses.

Considerable labor also has gone into the production of this book, which was begun under the guidance of my predecessor as director of Pre-Columbian Studies, Elizabeth H. Boone. It should also be noted that Richard A. Diehl was acting director of Pre-Columbian Studies in 1993, when the conference took place. My thanks to Professors Boone and Diehl and Grove and Joyce for the opportunity to work with this wonderful project that marks a significant milestone in our study of the Pre-Columbian world.

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