

VISUALIZING CULTURE, SOCIETY, AND IDEOLOGY IN MESOAMERICA

Books on Olmec, Izapan, Classic Maya, and Teotihuacán
Archaeology and Art

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Ritual and Power in Stone: The Performance of Rulership in Mesoamerican Izapan Style Art. By Julia Guernsey. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. Pp. 213. \$45.00 cloth.

The Teotihuacan Trinity: The Sociopolitical Structure of an Ancient Mesoamerican City. By Annabeth Headrick. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. Pp. 210. \$55.00 cloth.

The Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience among the Classic Maya. By Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. Pp. 324. \$55.00 cloth.

Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica. By Christopher A. Pool. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. 354. \$30.99 cloth.

The four books under review make important contributions to the study of Mesoamerican art and archaeology. Together they cover a long time span (c. 1400 BCE to 900 CE) and a broad geography, considering aspects of sociopolitical development, public architecture, art styles, and worldview in four major cultural traditions: Olmec, Izapan, classic Maya, and Teotihuacán.

Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica examines the origins and development of Olmec society and culture, and its impact on contemporaneous and later Mesoamerican societies and cultures. Pool notes that, in the restrictive sense that he himself favors, the term *Olmec* first referred to an art style recognizable on jade artifacts (e.g., effigy axes, celts) and monumental stone sculptures (e.g., colossal human heads, rectangular altars) whose geographic center seemed to lie in the southern gulf coast of Mexico, known as the heartland, or *Olman*. As archaeological projects at La Venta and San Lorenzo began to provide firm dates (c. 1500–400 BCE), Olmec was recognized as a major formative-period culture that some considered a mother culture of Mesoamerica. A broader definition applies the

term *Olmec* both to Gulf Coast archaeological culture and to artifacts used or produced elsewhere, whose style and symbolism nevertheless relate to those at heartland sites. Although Pool finds merit in this definition used by scholars such as John Clark and Mary Pye—who argue that *Olmec* signifies a set of cultural practices embodied in Olmec style art and artifacts, yet shared by several societies and peoples—he notes that the spread of Olmec iconographic motifs is fundamentally an elite phenomenon, in that the adoption and display of these material symbols benefited local leaders by identifying them as cultural Olmecs, that is, as participants in broader networks of trade and political alliance also able to contact and mediate supernatural sources of power.

One important contribution of Pool's book is its recognition of the complex evolution of early to middle-formative Mesoamerican culture. Although Olmec is sometimes described as a "horizon style," there have been vigorous challenges to the notion that the adoption of related symbol systems by elites of different regions represents a one-way dissemination from the Gulf Coast to peripheral zones.¹ Pool sees parallel paths of development, stating that there was never a single, unitary Olmec society (282). He brings together an abundance of data to demonstrate that even in Olman there were diverse types of settlement and political organization. San Lorenzo's many and diverse monuments (e.g., colossal heads, table altars, figural sculptures) and possibly elite residential structures indicate that it was the paramount political administrative center during the early formative period (1400–1000 BCE). El Remolino to the north, Loma del Zapote (including El Azuzul) to the south, and possibly Potrero Nuevo to the east were secondary centers. Another important regional center was Estero Rabón, which may have rivaled San Lorenzo prior to 1400 BCE but afterward became a secondary administrative center in the San Lorenzo polity. Olmecs in the Tuxtla Mountains instead lived in small, shifting settlements, and the large center of Laguna de Los Cerros, though trading with San Lorenzo, may have been an autonomous polity.

The transition from the early formative to middle formative period (c. 900–400 BCE) witnessed the rise to power of La Venta, Tabasco, which replaced San Lorenzo as the dominant sociopolitical capital and center of architectural and artistic activity in Olman. Settlement data cited by Pool indicate that La Venta may have controlled a "highly stratified polity with three or four administrative levels" (176), but it coexisted with

1. David C. Grove, "'Olmec' Horizons in Middle Formative Mesoamerica: Diffusion or Social Evolution?" in *Latin American Horizons*, ed. Don S. Rice (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993), 83–111; Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, "Formative Mexican Chiefdoms and the Myth of the 'Mother Culture,'" *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 19 (2000): 1–37; Arthur Demarest, "The Olmec and the Rise of Civilization in Eastern Mesoamerica," in *Regional Perspectives on the Olmec*, ed. Robert J. Sharer and David C. Grove (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 303–344.

other polities that ranged from small egalitarian communities in the Tuxtla Mountains to simpler, two-tiered chiefdoms headed by sites such as Estero Rabón and Tres Zapotes. Pool interprets the sequential dominance of San Lorenzo and La Venta, and the shifting patterns of settlement and political dominance at other centers throughout Olman, as the periodic cycling of power in chiefdoms and archaic states, in which authority was fragile and subject to factional challenges. The variation in procurement networks for valuable commodities such as jade and obsidian, and in styles of monumental art and artifacts, is, for him, evidence that no single polity ever governed all of Olman.

Chapter 6, "Olmecs and Mesoamerica," addresses the central question as to whether the Olmec art style (and the conceptions of the cosmos and of the nature and sources of political power and authority that it embodies) originated on the Gulf Coast and was then borrowed by other societies or whether there was a more interactive and reciprocal exchange of goods and ideas among Mesoamerican societies undergoing parallel evolutions toward greater complexity and centralized political leadership. Pool identifies three principal models for formative cultural interaction: (1) the unidirectional or heartland-centered model, which sees Gulf Coast Olmec as the *cultura madre* and principal inventor of ideas and iconographic elements that spread to other regions; (2) the bidirectional model, in which Gulf Coast Olmecs contributed to and received influences from other regions; and (3) the latticelike model of reciprocal, multidirectional influences among various formative-period societies. He proposes that elements of all these models apply, depending on the particular regions, time periods, and societies involved.

During the early formative period, the direct impact of Olman is most evident at the site of Cantón Corralito in the Mazatán region of Guatemala, where Olmec-style stone monuments and changes in settlement hierarchies seem to reflect strong contacts, perhaps even an enclave of heartland Olmecs. Pool sees the presence of Olmec artifacts and symbols elsewhere (e.g., at San José Mogote in Oaxaca, at Tlatilco in the Basin of Mexico) as more "a consequence than a cause of increasing sociopolitical complexity" (293).

Similar nonuniformity characterizes the relationship between the heartland center of La Venta and other Mesoamerican centers in the middle formative period, "suggesting that Olmec principles of rulership had wider influence" (293). This is particularly evident at Chalcatzingo, Morelos, where rock carvings, stelae, and a table-altar throne share themes and a bas-relief carving style with monuments at La Venta and Teopantecuanitlán, Guerrero (where the Olmec maize god is depicted with iconographic attributes like those at La Venta and the nearby site of Río Pesquero), and at sites throughout the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Xoc, Chiapas), and along the Pacific Coast from eastern Chiapas (Tzutzuculi, Pijijiapan) to western

El Salvador (Chalchuapa). Nevertheless, Pool observes that “other regions, including the Basin of Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca, pursued their own paths toward increasing sociopolitical complexity with little or no direct Olmec contact in the Middle Formative period” (294).

Although emerging elites in various regions of Mesoamerica adopted, adapted, and made contributions to the Olmec art style and iconographic system, Pool recognizes the importance of heartland sites, pointing out that during the early formative period the leaders of San Lorenzo used large-scale architectural works and stone sculptures to express their authority in ways that involved greater amounts of labor than in any contemporaneous society in Mesoamerica. Given the size of its major pyramidal platform (representing a sacred mountain) and the linear arrangement of platforms and plazas to its north (beneath which were placed a series of complex offerings, caches, and elite burials), La Venta held a premier place during the middle formative period. Imported prestige goods (e.g., jade, greenstones) appear in greater quantity during this period, testifying to the strengthening and intensification of far-flung trade networks that connected La Venta with centers throughout greater Mesoamerica. Pool’s reasonably thorough discussion of middle-formative Olmec iconography indicates that various elements from the early formative period (e.g., colossal heads, table altars, the Olmec dragon) carried over, while new features were added. Perhaps the most important of these innovations centers on the importance of maize and its role in mythic narratives of creation. This symbolism is seen on incised jade celts from Arroyo Pesquero, which depict Olmec God II (interpreted as a personification of corn, or the maize god) standing amid four smaller celtlike objects, a pattern representing the world axis and four cardinal directions.

These are only some of the many topics and problems considered in Pool’s comprehensive, extensively researched, and up-to-date synthesis of Olmec archaeology. Combining clear prose with sophisticated theoretical interpretations, though perhaps not the best illustrations, it is a “must-buy” for Mesoamericanists and others interested in cultural evolution in early civilizations.

The late-preclassic period (c. 300–50 BCE) is now recognized as a time of critical transformation in sociopolitical organization, when basic patterns for classic Maya society and art were established.² Julia Guernsey makes a valuable addition to the study of these processes by examining

2. Lee A. Parsons, *The Origins of Maya Art: Monumental Stone Sculpture of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, and the Southern Pacific Coast* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1986); Rosemary Joyce and David C. Grove, eds., *Social Patterns in Pre-Classical Mesoamerica* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1999); John E. Clark and Richard D. Hansen, “The Architecture of Early Kingship: Comparative Perspectives on the Origins of the Maya Royal Court,” in *Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya*, vol. 2, ed. Takeshi Inomata and Stephen Houston (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 1–45; Virginia M. Fields and Dorie Reents-Budet, eds. *Lords of*

the significance of art and architecture at the site of Izapa, Chiapas, whose cultural apogee dates to the late-preclassic period. The book provides an excellent introduction to Izapa, to the history of research on the site, and to the relationship between its principal monuments and those with comparable iconography (the Izapan art style) at centers in the southern Gulf Coast region, from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Pacific piedmont of Chiapas and Guatemala to the Guatemala highlands. Early investigators such as Matthew Stirling and J. E. S. Thompson, who first used the term *Izapan style*, noted the common subject matter and motifs of stelae at Izapa and at other Pacific piedmont sites (Takalik Abaj, El Baúl), and their possible derivation from Olmec art.³ As scholars became more secure in dating Olmec sites to the early and middle preclassic (c. 1400–400 BCE), Izapan style monuments were seen as cultural and artistic intermediaries between Olmec and classic Maya traditions. While recognizing the contributions of this approach, Guernsey strives to take Izapan art on its own terms, focusing on the meaning of coherent and interrelated sets of iconographic themes and motifs, and using these to interpret how architecture and art functioned to legitimate political authority at Izapa and other late-preclassic centers.

Focusing on a set of monuments at Izapa and other sites with Izapan-style art featuring avian impersonation and transformation, Guernsey discusses both the common subject matter and evident differences in the iconography and treatment of individual forms. Figures wearing avian outfits are shown in dynamic poses, suggesting that they take part in a repeated cycle of rituals. One key monument at Izapa, stela 4, shows a human bird impersonator striding (or dancing?) on a terrestrial band beneath a composite human-avian supernatural entity descending from a celestial sky band. Suggesting that this may be a “scene of ritual transformation expressed as a simultaneous vision: below, the protagonist performs in the costume of a bird in the earthly realm, while above he appears transformed into his avian counterpart, engaged in an act of supernatural flight” (79). Guernsey compares this to middle-preclassic (i.e., Olmec) imagery (Oxtotitlan mural 1, La Venta altar 4, Motozintla plaque) that depicts humans wearing avian headdresses or costumes, possibly to represent their shamanic ability to engage in spiritual flight or move between cosmic realms. Guernsey suggests that related Izapan imagery also alludes to shamanic sources of supernatural power as a basis for political

Creation: The Origins of Sacred Maya Kingship (London: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Scala Publishers, 2005).

3. Mathew W. Stirling, *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 138 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1943); J. E. S. Thompson, “Some Sculptures from Southeastern Quetzaltenango,” *Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology* 17 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1943), 100–112.

authority. While acknowledging, and to some extent accepting, the views of scholars who criticize Mesoamericanists' overreliance on shamanism as an imprecise designation for any type of reference to elite mediation with the supernatural world, she notes that K. C. Chang made a convincing case that political authority in ancient chiefdoms or emergent states was supported by belief systems that recognized the ruler as having the most powerful access to supernatural realms of power, and that in many aspects represent an outgrowth of earlier shamanic conceptions.⁴

Two possibilities regarding the identity of supernatural birds featured on Izapan stelae are explored. One associates these with the coessence or *way* of the Maya creator deity Itzamnaaj (a manifestation frequently signaled by a shared floral headdress diadem), while the other compares these to a character from the Popol Vuh known as Vucub-Caquix (Seven Macaw), the "false sun" defeated by the Hero Twins to make way for the creation of the Maya people. In addition to stela 4, versions of this supernatural bird appear on other monuments in group A, including stela 25, which may correlate with a later Popol Vuh episode in which Vucub-Caquix tears off the arm of the Hero Twin Hunahpu. Because of abundant evidence that some aspects of the creation mythology and characters mentioned in the Popol Vuh can be identified in classic Maya art and inscriptions, it seems plausible that elements of the tale extend back to the late-preclassic period, an idea strengthened by the recent discovery of mural paintings at San Bartolo, Guatemala.⁵

Guernsey incorporates other Izapa buildings and monuments into her argument, viewing group B as the other principal locus of ritual activity at Izapa during the Guillén phase (300–50 BCE). Here, a triangular group of three columns supporting spherical stones is set at the base of mound 30,

4. On shamanic aspects of Olmec art, see Peter T. Furst, "The Olmec Were-Jaguar Motif in the Light of Ethnographic Reality," in *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1968), 143–178; F. Kent Reilly III, "Art, Ritual, and Rulership in the Olmec World," in *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*, ed. Jill Guthrie and Elizabeth P. Benson (Princeton, NJ: The Art Museum, Princeton University, and Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 27–45. Comparative discussion of shamanistic elements in the art of early China appear in K. C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). A critique of the emphasis given to shamanism in discussions of Mesoamerican art is Cecelia F. Klein, Eulogio Guzmán, Elisa C. Mandell, and Maya Stanfield-Mazzi, "The Role of Shamanism in Mesoamerican Art: A Re-assessment," *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 3 (2002): 383–420.

5. On creation mythology and characters related to the Popol Vuh in classic and preclassic Maya art, see Michael D. Coe, "Hero Twins: Myth and Image," in *The Maya Vase Book*, vol. 1, ed. Justin Kerr (New York: Kerr Associates, 1989), 161–184; Michel Quenon and Genevieve Le Fort, "Rebirth and Resurrection in Maize God Iconography," in *The Maya Vase Book*, vol. 5, ed. Barbara Kerr and Justin Kerr (New York: Kerr Associates, 1997), 884–899; William A. Saturno, Karl A. Taube, and David S. Stuart, *The Murals of San Bartolomé, El Petén, Guatemala, Part 1: The North Wall* (Barnardsville, NC: Center for Ancient American Studies, 2005).

the largest pyramidal structure on site. Guernsey interprets this triadic grouping as a reference to the three-stone hearth, a symbol of the cosmic center or heart of the world. Guernsey relates this to the triadic arrangement of temple structures at several preclassic sites in the Maya lowlands (El Mirador, Lamanai) and to references in classic Maya creation texts to the setting of such hearthstones as a foundational act at the start of the present world era. By placing throne 1 in front of the three columns at Izapa, rulers could correlate political authority with the ontological center embodied in the cosmic hearth.

Guernsey makes a serious contribution to scholarship and sheds new light on how the built environment and visual imagery gave ideological support to the state-level societies that emerged in southeastern Mesoamerica during the late-preclassic period. However, her book is not without problems. It makes a compelling case for the mythical identities of characters on key monuments and for the ritual functions of some principal structures and public spaces, but it does not give equal attention to the entire site and downplays many sculptured monuments that fit less clearly into the creation narratives cited. The book should be required reading for those seeking to understand the messages of Izapan art during the late-preclassic period, but readers will also want to consult other works.⁶

The study of ancient Maya society has undergone dramatic changes during the past fifty years. New information has been provided by archaeological projects and synthetic works on Maya cultural evolution and customs, and on indigenous modes of thought and expression. The latter has been assisted by important breakthroughs in translating Maya hieroglyphic writing and by careful studies of Maya art and iconography.⁷ One

6. In addition to works cited in notes 2 and 3, see Jacinto Quirarte, *Izapan Style Art: A Study of Its Form and Meaning*, Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology 10 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1973); Michael D. Coe, "Early Steps in the Evolution of Maya Writing," in *Origins of Religious Art and Iconography in Mesoamerica*, ed. H. B. Nicholson, UCLA Latin American Series 31 (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center, 1976), 107–122; Gareth W. Lowe, Thomas A. Lee Jr., and Eduardo Martínez Espinoza, *Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation 31 (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1982); Virginia G. Smith, *Izapa Relief Carving: Form, Content, Rules of Design, and Role in Mesoamerican Art History and Archaeology*, Studies in Pre-Columbian Arts and Archaeology 27 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984); Jonathan Kaplan, "Monument 65: A Great Emblematic Depiction of Throned Rule and Royal Sacrifice at Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11, no. 2 (2000): 185–198.

7. Joyce Marcus, "Lowland Maya Archaeology at the Crossroads," *American Antiquity* 48 (1983): 454–488; Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: William Morrow, 1990); William L. Fash, "Changing Perspectives on Maya Civilization," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 181–208; Takeshi Inomata and Stephen D. Houston, eds., *Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya*, vol. 1 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); Arthur Demarest, *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Robert J. Sharer with Loa P. Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 6th ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). On hieroglyphic writ-

substantial contribution of this sort is *The Memory of Bones*, a penetrating study of how art reflected and shaped the worldview and lived experience of the ancient Maya. Viewing art as a window into the Mayas' mental landscape, the authors combine anthropology, ethnohistory, ethnography, epigraphy, art history, sociology, and psychology to plumb ancient notions of the body and the self, while considering Mayan ways of eating and excreting, hearing, tasting, and smelling, and the roles of dance, ritual performance, deity impersonation, dishonor, captive display, sexuality, and humor. This results in fascinating and informative interpretations, which, if not always airtight, are well supported. *The Memory of Bones* is intrinsically interesting as documentation of the concerns of ancient Maya, while also providing important insight into the ideological role of art and writing, how the Maya created a sacred royal persona, and how the royal body was contrasted with those of captives taken in war.

Chapter 2, "Bodies and Portraits," discusses Maya concepts of personhood, the self, and the importance that royal portrait sculptures had as active presences of the personage portrayed. Two terms critical for understanding Maya conceptions of personhood are *winik*, which conveys the general sense of a person, and *baah*, which relates more to his or her material form (58–59). The phrase *u-baah* (which means "his, her, its face or body"), followed by a name, was regularly used to indicate, not only that it was a king (such as K'ahk' Tiliw Kan Chaak on Naranjo stela 22) or elite personage represented on a carved monument or painted image, but that the image itself holds something of his or her physical presence and spiritual essence. Another phrase couples *u-baah* with the names of a deity and the king, thereby implying that their identities are ritually merged. Thus, garbed as a god, the king was not playacting but temporarily incarnating the deity, a practice well attested by the *teixiptla* (deity impersonator) among late-postclassic Aztecs of central Mexico and that still survives among highland Maya peoples.

These ideas are extended in chapter 8, "Dance, Music, Masking," which reviews mounting evidence for the importance of dance (*ak'ot* in inscriptions; *okot* in colonial Yucatec) in classic Maya ritual. Such dances, performed with musical accompaniment, varied over time and region, and were more or less formal depending on the occasion. Impressive and spectacular public dances formed part of ritual sequences involving Maya rul-

ing and iconography, see Linda Schele and Mary E. Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (Fort Worth, TX: Kimbell Art Museum, 1986); Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992); David A. Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: William Morrow, 1993); Stephen Houston, "Into the Minds of the Ancients: Advances in Maya Glyph Studies," *Journal of World Prehistory* 14, no. 2 (2000): 122–201; Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008).

ers and elites, who impersonate deities by wearing distinctive costumes and masks (*k'oh*), of which a rare example was found at Aguateca, Guatemala. The sacred, transformative quality of headdresses and masks is attested by scenes of their presentation to rulers or of elites donning them during rituals such as royal accessions, and by evidence that they were carefully stored and treated almost as animate beings when not in use.

If one important role of Maya rulers was to contact deities and bring them to life during spectacular rituals timed to coincide with calendar cycles and events such as accession to power, marriage, or funerals, another was that of leaders in war. Successful exploits were documented on public monuments. Figural poses, facial expressions, and accompanying glyphs emphasize the gulf between victors and defeated enemies, who appear stripped of their finery, dressed in specialized costumes, and physically tortured or killed by decapitation or disembowelment. The defeated were demoralized psychologically, humiliated sexually, and compared to hunted animals. In the greatest dishonor, they were trod beneath the victor's feet, suggesting that they were like "manure to fertilize the victor's soil and provide building materials for the enemy's city" (207).

This emphasis on captives befits the authors' definition of classic Maya society as a "timocracy," a society in which a "sharp sense of personal value ('pride'), especially among men, played a marked role in face-to-face interaction" (202). Elite status led to an ambiguous attitude toward the defeated. The highest-ranking prisoners (e.g., the Palenque king K'an Joy Chitam captured by Toniná) might be accorded honors. Other prominent captives could be shown as individuals, either at the moment of their defeat or in later public displays, but became mere statistics when listed in ongoing glyphic tallies of coups by a successful war leader. The contrast of the pain and pathos of the prisoner to the static pose and reserved expression of the captor was deliberate, conveying the premium placed on controlled, correct behavior and bodily practice in ancient Maya court society. In this connection, the authors observe that overt display of emotions is relatively rare in classic Maya art. Thought to be located in or associated with the heart, strong emotions were downplayed, but those represented fall into five categories: drunken abandon, lust, grief and mourning, humor through buffoonery and ridicule, and the terror and depression of prisoners already mentioned.

As permitted by their evidence, Houston, Stuart, and Taube strive to create a Geertzian "thick description" of the thought and feeling embodied in classic Maya art and writing. They admit that reconstructing an ancient mindset and code of behavior can never be achieved with complete confidence, as no live informants are available to confirm an interpretation, and because the images and texts at issue were commissioned by, and reflect the biases of, a courtly elite. Nevertheless, they glean a great deal from their sources, giving a sense of the subtleties of Maya percep-

tion and feeling deliberately expressed in art and writing, while hinting at a richer set of experiences that we may never know.

Annabeth Headrick's *The Teotihuacan Trinity* is an ambitious effort to interpret the sociopolitical system of Mesoamerica's largest and most influential classic period city. Boasting several of the most impressive architectural projects in ancient Mesoamerica, and known to have housed more people (about 100,000–200,000) than any other contemporary center, Teotihuacán has long been a focus of scholarly interest.⁸ Yet with its highly ordered site planning and stylized art focused on deities and stereotyped human beings engaged in group rituals, Teotihuacán seemed to differ from earlier Olmec and Izapan and contemporaneous classic Mayan cultures, whose art and iconography make clearer reference to specific rulers. Headrick endeavors to demonstrate that this dichotomy is not so clear cut and proposes that the city was governed by three principal social components: a king, residential kinship groups, and the military.

Headrick charts interpretations of Teotihuacán's sociopolitical structure, from early views that it was a vast but largely vacant ceremonial center, to later analyses (based on data from the Teotihuacan Mapping Project) that suggest it was governed by a succession of powerful rulers between 1 CE and 300 CE, when the largest architectural projects were completed. The construction of residential apartment complexes after 300 CE has, with evidence of large-scale human sacrifice in dedication of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, led to the conclusion that local inhabitants checked the abuses of autocratic kings and moved to a more bureaucratic, council-based government.

While noting that images of recognizable or named rulers are difficult to discern at Teotihuacán, Headrick suggests that its sheer size and orderly layout, along with its far-flung impact throughout Mesoamerica, imply that strong central authority existed throughout most of its history. Anchoring this interpretation is her reading of the White Patio of the Atetelco apartment complex, where two shrinelike portico structures featuring wall paintings of figures clad as bird and canine warriors flank a central structure whose walls bear repeated images of a richly clad personage. Building on an insight by her mentor Linda Schele, Headrick identifies this figure as a Teotihuacán ruler, first because his costume has attributes associated with the so-called great goddess of the Tepantitla

8. Janet C. Berlo, ed., *Art, Ideology, and the City of Teotihuacan* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1992); Kathleen Berrin and Esther Pasztory, eds., *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods* (San Francisco: Thames and Hudson and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1993); George L. Cowgill, "State and Society at Teotihuacan, Mexico," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 129–161; Esther Pasztory, *Teotihuacan: An Experiment in Living* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Saburo Sugiyama, *Human Sacrifice, Militarism, and Rulership: Materialization of State Ideology at the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, Teotihuacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

murals and second because the key elements of his staff resemble those on the staff of office held by the Zapotec ruler 12 Jaguar on stela 1 from Monte Albán, Oaxaca. Because various Mesoamerican iconographic traditions associate rulers with the central world tree erected at the beginning of the present cosmogonic era, Headrick suggests that the Atetelco figure wears attributes of the “personified mountain-tree” to claim “the centrality and authority of rulership” (30).

Because this identification of a Teotihuacán ruler is potentially one of the most important contributions of Headrick’s book, it deserves scrutiny. While similarities between the staffs held by the Atetelco figure and 12 Jaguar provide evidence of political authority, a similar staff was also used as a symbol of office by two high-ranking personages at Reyes Etna, Oaxaca, who can less clearly be considered kings. More important, the same staff appears in two murals from zone 11 at Teotihuacán.⁹ Yet here the figures holding it, though accompanied by a mat motif (a pan-Mesoamerican symbol of rulership), wear headdresses that differ from the horizontal headdress of the “personified mountain-tree,” somewhat complicating the use of that costume to identify human rulers at Teotihuacán. An alternative identification has been proposed by Saburo Sugiyama, who argues that headdresses representing either feathered serpents, or the reticulated reptilian head (itself identified as a headdress) that alternates with the feathered serpent heads on the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, were worn as symbols of rulership. According to Sugiyama, such headdresses demonstrate the “divine authorization” of the person who wore it to rule the cosmos created by the Feathered Serpent.¹⁰ Not all scholars, of course, accept Sugiyama’s interpretation. Nevertheless, his notion is perhaps more plausible than Headrick’s, which is based on an analysis of figures who appear not in the centrally located Feathered Serpent Pyramid but in the more distant Atetelco residential complex.

Another important component in Teotihuacán’s political structure were the many lineages whose members, and possible retainers, lived in large apartment compounds throughout the city. Headrick suggests that these families provided a counterbalance to the more distant, centralized power of the sovereign. This is not a completely new idea, but Headrick amasses and organizes a large amount of data that show that small altars

9. For the examples at Reyes Etna, see Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico’s Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 216. The zone 11 mural appears in Arthur G. Miller, *The Mural Painting of Teotihuacan* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1973), 91–92, figs. 147–149.

10. Sugiyama, *Human Sacrifice*, 235–36. For an alternate interpretation of this head as a Teotihuacán war serpent related to the later Aztec Xiuhcoatl, see Karl A. Taube, “The Temple of Quetzalcoatl and the Cult of Sacred War at Teotihuacan,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 21 (1992): 53–88.

or shrines at the center of formal patios contained ancestral burials or were sites of ancestor veneration. She also presents substantial, though circumstantial, evidence that the remains of some of the most exalted members of highest-ranking lineages may have been preserved in specially prepared mortuary bundles, which were kept and displayed in the temples that lined the Street of the Dead, allowing them to be honored and perhaps consulted by their descendants.

The third component of Headrick's sociopolitical trinity was the military. As recently as the 1960s, the notion that Teotihuacán was a largely peaceful theocracy was still fairly common among leading Mesoamericanists. Headrick notes that there is abundant evidence for a powerful military presence in the city, with images of warriors in mural paintings and other media. Again taking the White Patio of the Atetelco apartment compound as her point of departure, she notes that warriors, depicted as human figures with canine or avian attributes, or portrayed more symbolically as coyotes or birds coupled with emblems of sacrifice, are featured in the mural paintings of the two flanking porticoes. She accepts an earlier interpretation by Clara Millon that the identification of soldiers with animal mascots presages the later high-ranking military orders of the Aztecs,¹¹ and points out that the presence of well-defined subdivisions of the Teotihuacán army is indicated by the coupling of warriors with individual glyphs representing possible patron animals or deities, as seen in murals from the Techinantitla apartment compound and on the Las Colinas vessel from Calpulalpan.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

To a greater or lesser extent, all four volumes under review offer data and interpretations of the role of art in Mesoamerica and its association with social organization and political power. In 1996, Richard Blanton and his colleagues proposed that studies of cultural evolution in Mesoamerica should focus less on whether particular societies have reached a particular evolutionary stage (e.g., band, chiefdom, state), and more on the agency of individual actors and the strategies they use "to construct and maintain polities and other sociocultural institutions."¹² Following Anthony

11. Clara Millon, "Painting, Writing and Polity in Teotihuacan, Mexico," *American Antiquity* 38, no. 3 (1973): 294–314; Clara Millon, "A Reexamination of the Teotihuacan Tassel Headdress Insignia," in *Feathered Serpents and Flowering Trees: Reconstructing the Murals of Teotihuacan*, ed. Kathleen Berrin (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1988), 14–134.

12. Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Peter N. Peregrine, "A Dual-Processual Theory for the Evolution of Mesoamerican Civilization," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (1996): 1–14, quotation on 1.

Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and Thomas Sewell, they noted that while culture provides paradigms for thought and behavior, it is constantly reconstructed and renegotiated in accordance with the conflicting aims of individuals who strive to influence governing institutions in pursuit of wealth, status, or power. Viewed in this sense, art, along with religion and ritual, is a symbolic source of power distinct from material sources (e.g., the control of resources, labor) that political actors use to influence others by either exclusionary or corporate means. In exclusionary systems, political leaders aim to monopolize sources of power, while in corporate systems power is shared among different groups and factions to promote a sense of inclusion. Of course, no society conforms exclusively to only one of these models, but their organization may tilt more strongly toward one or the other.

Pool deals specifically with these issues in noting that “Olmec archaeology offers ample evidence of political leaders manipulating multiple sources of power and of their employing them toward individualizing aggrandizement as well as communal projects with collective themes” (287). The best-known examples of Olmec art—such as the massive heads and stone altars that portray ancestral rulers mediating cosmological realms, or figural narratives depicting rulers on middle-formative stelae at La Venta—stress the separate ontological status of political leaders, while the importation and exchange of exotic goods also bespeaks a more exclusionary “network strategy,” in which local elites, at Olman and at other centers, used symbolic sources of power to strengthen claims to authority. On the other hand, Pool notes that contemporaneous offerings at the sacred spring at El Manati, Veracruz, or even the massive buried offerings at La Venta, seem to express collective themes connected with agricultural fertility and world renewal. While much of his book focuses on the ecological setting and material forces involved in cultural evolution during the early- and middle-formative periods, he also recognizes the importance of symbolic sources of power and notes that, “to be most effective as a source of political power, . . . ideology must be materialized in physical symbols and ceremonies, the creation, use, and performance of which can be controlled by political actors” (86).

Houston, Stuart, and Taube include a brief but knowledgeable discussion of how classic Maya conceptions of portraiture, self, and being, and of the function of art in society, compare to Western aesthetics, particularly in regard to the value and significance of representation, or mimesis as the Greeks called it. They note that, from Plato onward, there has been a tendency to recognize the emotional and psychological power of representation while distinguishing between depictions and their original models. However, as Hans Belting and David Freedberg indicate, this distinction is not always maintained in the case of images considered to have

supernatural power or to be capable of action.¹³ The designation by Houston, Stuart, and Taube of classic Maya society as “timocratic” is consonant with the generalized understanding of the hierarchical and courtly organization of classic Maya city-states, in which great paramount rulers claimed authority through legitimate royal descent, their ability as war leaders, and their role as ritual specialists. As others have noted, these claims were subject to dispute, and royal charisma had to be reinforced through periodic pageantry, alliance building, and redistribution of prestige goods to secondary elites.¹⁴ The many sculptures that glorified royal military triumphs and that, in the Maya conception, literally embodied the king engaged in ritual transformation demonstrate the vital ideological role that art played among the classic Maya.

In her study of Izapan art, Guernsey implicitly accepts the idea that the built environment and monumental sculptures conveyed important messages regarding the mythic and supernatural sources of political power. She notes that sculptured monuments were not mute and passive. Like the better-documented examples of the classic Maya, whose forms and meanings they presaged, they charged space with active presences whose complex narratives and iconography demanded and called forth interaction from visitors. Her study is important for bringing to light the degree to which Izapan imagery not merely is mythical but also sought to legitimate claims to authority by individual rulers. Nevertheless, Guernsey stresses the integrationist aspects of Izapan visual culture, presenting a somewhat-idealized view of the mutually reinforcing and largely symbiotic effect that architecture, art, and ritual had on members of the Izapa community. The shared icons and rituals of various sites with Izapan-style monuments also suggest the effort to sanction local leaders, whose taloned or clawed eccentric flint and obsidian axes perhaps refer to their spiritual powers on one level, and to more coercive powers on another, as graphically demonstrated by the sacrificial decapitation of a captive on Izapa stela 21.

Headrick also discusses various ways in which visual and graphic communication joined with ritual to promote the balance of institutionalized forces (e.g., ruler, lineages, military) that led to Teotihuacán’s long-lived political, economic, and military power. In this, she differs from more idealized interpretations of the integrationist message of Teotihuacán’s art such as that of Esther Pasztor, for whom the abstract style and lack of

13. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

14. Arthur Demarest, “Ideology in Ancient Maya Cultural Evolution: The Dynamics of Galactic Polities,” in *Ideology and Pre-Columbian Civilizations*, ed. Arthur A. Demarest and Geoffrey W. Conrad (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1992), 135–157.

portraiture at Teotihuacán, and the prominence of a female deity, promoted a group-oriented ethos “that did not glorify a divine king and warrior aristocracy above a farming people.”¹⁵ Hendrick’s view is not as benign. Using analogies to Aztec society, she suggests that the military served as a buffer between the ruler and the heads of powerful lineages, who might otherwise challenge his political supremacy. Military service was apparently widespread and created bonds that transcended particular families while giving them a common purpose and mission. She even suggests that this martial ethos was reinforced by the *talud-tablero* profile and its correspondence to images of butterflies, symbols of the paradisaical survival of the souls of dead warriors.¹⁶

Given that classic Maya seem to have considered images to possess a vital power that enabled men to become gods through ritual performance, Houston, Stuart, and Taube are correct to assert that Maya art is not merely propagandistic (203). However, it was certainly a form of visual ideology. Cultural imagery that they (like Guernsey and others) see as cultural poetics,¹⁷ Joyce Marcus views as propaganda,¹⁸ perhaps also an appropriate usage in that this term was used to describe Catholicism’s efforts to stem the tide of Protestantism with the formally complex, dramatic, and emotionally engaging art of the baroque period.

All four studies show that Mesoamerican art was so successful in conveying ideological messages because fundamental premises about the origin and organization of the cosmos were shared by elite and commoner alike. But this does not mean that everyone in society was equal. Indeed, each of these works provides important insights into how the built environment and visual culture shaped shared perceptions in ways that both responded to, and helped promote and justify, significant differences in power, prestige, and access to material and symbolic goods. This was a common feature of the hierarchical societies of Mesoamerica from the preclassic Olmec and Izapan cultures, to the classic civilizations and state-level societies of the Maya and Teotihuacán.

15. Esther Pasztor, “Abstraction and the Rise of a Utopian State at Teotihuacan,” in Berlo, *Art, Ideology*, 288.

16. This recalls the work of Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, who suggests that Aztec state religion and ritual gave ideological support to Tenochtitlán’s imperialistic policies by inculcating a sense of divine mission in young men in the military, an institution that also provided the best opportunity for personal betterment in a fairly rigid class society. See “Aztec Hearts and Minds: Religion and the State in the Aztec Empire,” in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, ed. Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D’Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison, and Carla M. Sinopoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 283–310.

17. Adam Herring, *Art and Writing in the Maya Cities, A.D. 600–800: A Poetics of Line* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

18. Joyce Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems—Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).