

FAMSI © 2003: Richard Diehl

A FAMSI-SPONSORED CONFERENCE REPORT The Archaeology of México's South Gulf Coast: Future Directions

Research Year: 1997

Culture: Olmec to Olmec-Huixtotin

Chronology: Pre-Classic to Post Classic

Location: Veracruz and Tabasco, México

Sites: Various

Table of Contents

[About the Conference](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Conference Themes](#)

[Participants](#)

[Conference Schedule](#)

[Recommendations](#)

[Appendix A](#)

[Appendix B](#)

About the Conference

Nineteen scholars from the United States and México met in Birmingham, Alabama in September, 1997, to discuss the present state of archaeological investigations in southern Veracruz and Tabasco, México and formulate future priorities for research and cultural resource protection. The Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) sponsored the conference. The participants addressed four basic issues:

1. What do we know about the Prehispanic cultures of the region?
2. What are the most critical research priorities in the future?
3. How can we adequately protect the region's archaeological sites and resources?
4. What institutional arrangements can foster collaborative research between Mexican scholars and their foreign colleagues?

Their conclusions and recommendations are presented in the following pages.

INTRODUCTION

The lowlands of south-central and southern Veracruz, and Tabasco, México were the setting for a succession of brilliant Pre-Columbian cultures from the precocious Olmecs to the historic period Olmeca-Huixtotin. Unfortunately, the vast archaeological legacy of the region has not received the attention it merits from modern scholars. Only a handful of the thousands of archaeological sites have been examined in even a cursory manner. Furthermore, most of the research prior to 1980 focused on three large Olmec centers: Tres Zapotes, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, and La Venta. While these yielded considerable information on this spectacular early culture and its art, later Classic and Postclassic civilizations were known only through small excavations in the Mixtequilla, the lower Papaloapan basin and the Tuxtlas, the Villa Alta phase remains at San Lorenzo, and looted artifacts in museums and private collections.

Two long term projects in the early 1980s opened a new era of investigations: the *Proyecto Matacapán* directed by Robert S. Santley and Ponciano Ortiz C., and Annick Daneels' *Exploraciones en el Centro de Veracruz* project in the Jamapa-Cotaxtla river region. Since that time, new projects have created a vast new fund of information on Gulf lowland archaeology. These include site-centered investigations at La Venta, San Lorenzo, el Manatí, Laguna de los Cerros, Llano del Júcaro, Las Limas, Comoapan, Bezuapan, La Joya, Tres Zapotes, La Mojarra, and Cerro de las Mesas, as well as regional surveys in the La Venta and San Lorenzo hinterlands, the Tuxtla mountains, the Mixtequilla, and the middle Cotaxtla. At the same time, anthropologists and art historians intensified their investigations of the region's fascinating art styles and iconography while geographers, paleobotanists and geomorphologists began to reconstruct the ancient environments. Ethnoarchaeologists carried out several informative studies in the Tuxtlas and epigraphers attempted to decipher what may be Mesoamerica's oldest writing system.

This research already has revolutionized our understanding of the ancient cultures. More importantly, the pace of investigation increases every year. In 1995 alone, archaeologists were active at La Venta, San Lorenzo, el Manatí, La Joya, Tres Zapotes and La Mojarra. The number of investigations should continue to increase in the future when students working on current projects become practicing professionals carrying out their own research.

For several years many archaeologists working in the region have sensed the need for a planning conference similar to that organized by Eric Wolf on the Valley of México in 1959. That conference laid the foundation for some of the most innovative and fruitful research in the history of archaeology, and even today it continues to influence investigations in that region.

The impetus for a south Gulf Coast planning conference came during informal conversations at professional meetings in Villahermosa and Veracruz City in 1991 and 1992. In 1993 Dumbarton Oaks hosted a brief meeting of scholars from the United

States and México after its Pre-Columbian Fall Symposium. The group enthusiastically supported the concept of a planning conference and Diehl agreed to organize it. In 1996 the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) agreed to sponsor the Conference as part of its mandate to foster investigations into ancient Mesoamerica's cultural heritage. We wish to take this opportunity to thank FAMSI and Sandra Noble, its Director, for their generous and unfailing support.

CONFERENCE THEMES

The Conference was guided by the philosophy that young scholars who will actively pursue research in the coming decade need to formulate a shared vision of what needs to be done, and present it to the larger scholarly community for critique and discussion. Four fundamental themes served as points of departure for detailed discussions: Basic Research, Preservation of the Archaeological Database, Archaeology and Tourism, and Research Infrastructure. Specific questions related to each theme were posed to help conceptualize the inquiries.

I. Basic Research

1. What do we know about the prehistory of the various subregions and time periods?
2. What would we like to know in 15 years?
3. How can we proceed in a coordinated fashion to achieve these goals?
4. How might art history, ethnohistory, ethnography, linguistics, geography, ecology, agronomy, and other disciplines contribute to our understanding of the ancient cultures?
5. What roles can museums and similar organizations play in this effort?

II. Preservation of the Archaeological Database

1. How can we preserve archaeological sites from destruction by road building, urban development, mechanized agriculture and other forms of economic development?
2. What mechanisms and procedures can we establish to ensure adequate salvage archaeology on sites impacted by development activities?

3. How can private initiative and other non-governmental funds be brought into play?
4. What can be done to halt or reduce the depredations of looters?

III. Archaeology and Tourism

1. What is the present relationship between the two activities in the region?
2. What positions should archaeologists assume with regard to the excavation and restoration of sites for tourism?
3. How can museums contribute to better public understanding of the past?

IV. Research Infrastructure

1. What organizational structures can be established to coordinate Mexican and foreign research efforts in the region?
2. What physical facilities are needed to house research activities?
3. How might such organizations and facilities be financed?
4. What models exist elsewhere in the world for such organizations and facilities?

PARTICIPANTS

Convener - Richard A. Diehl, University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa

Coordinator - Sue Scott, University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa

Assistant Coordinator - Michael Loughlin, University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa

Observer - Sandra Noble, FAMSI (Noble was unable to attend)

Conferees

Philip Arnold III. Loyola University

Ann Cyphers. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Rebecca González Lauck. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Tabasco)

Thomas Killion. Smithsonian Institution

Sara Ladrón de Guevara. Universidad Veracruzana

Roberto Lunagomez. Universidad Veracruzana

Alejandro Martinez. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (México City)

Fernando Miranda. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Veracruz)

Ponciano Ortíz. Universidad Veracruzana

Christopher Pool. University of Kentucky

María del Carmen Rodríguez. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Veracruz)

Robert Santley. University of New México

Barbara Stark. Arizona State University

George Stuart. National Geographic Society (could only attend one day)

Karl Taube. University of California, Riverside

Sergio Vázquez Zárate. Universidad Veracruzana

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

September 20. Conferees arrived at Birmingham.

September 21. Trip to the Moundville Archaeological Park with a barbecue hosted by the University of Alabama Anthropology Department and the Alabama Museum of Natural History's Office of Archaeological Research.

September 22. Morning and afternoon meetings dealing with Basic Research.

September 23. Morning and afternoon meetings dedicated to Preservation of the Archaeological Database.

September 24. Morning discussion with George Stuart. Free afternoon; optional trip to the Birmingham Museum of Art.

September 25. Morning and afternoon meetings devoted to Archaeology and Tourism, and Research Infrastructure.

September 26. Morning and afternoon meetings devoted to summary and preparation of recommendations.

September 27. Conferees returned home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. BASIC RESEARCH

Despite archaeological research dating back to the Nineteenth century, much remains to be learned about the ancient inhabitants of the region. Even the most thoroughly studied cultures are poorly understood, and vast sections of the archaeological map are blank. Therefore, we recommend the following priorities for future investigations. In formulating them, we acknowledge the value of fostering a diversity of theoretical perspectives and do not wish to restrict future activities to a few approaches or activities which currently enjoy popularity.

Archaeological surveys

Terrestrial surveys are important tools for basic research and for implementation of site preservation strategies. Although numerous surveys have been carried out in recent times, much remains to be done. Therefore, we make the following recommendations:

The Atlas Arqueológica de Veracruz program should be resumed in a systematic fashion, and should be based upon examination of aerial photographs accompanied by verification on the ground.

Interested parties are encouraged to establish a dialogue about survey methods. One major goal of this dialogue should be to identify methodologies and approaches appropriate to the region's environments. We believe it is highly desirable for future surveys to produce comparable data while achieving each individual investigator's particular goals. Meetings of the Society for American Archaeology or the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología might be appropriate venues for this undertaking, or they might be special events at the Museo de Antropología in Xalapa, or the Veracruz Centro Regional INAH in Veracruz City.

We have identified the Gulf Coast plain between Alvarado and the Tuxtla mountains, and the Uspanapa section in the Coatzacoalcos river as the two most critical priorities for new systematic regional surveys. Both are completely unknown at the present time. We also feel that additional studies are needed in numerous other areas as well.

Archaeological excavations

We believe that all future excavations should address specific research problems and have clearly defined goals. Urgent salvage situations would be the only generally recognized exception to this rule. We also recommend that in the future, excavations should attempt to reveal the entire range of ancient settlement types and activities. Finally, we believe the site of El Picayo is the most important priority for systematic surveys and excavations in the near future. It is still reasonably intact and should be investigated before it suffers looting or destruction. As far as we know, nobody is contemplating investigations at El Picayo, the largest site in the western Tuxtlas.

The Visual Record

The rich corpus of stone and ceramic sculpture and other artistic remains of the region never has received the systematic, comprehensive study it deserves. We urge that such studies be undertaken as soon as possible. Basic data must be recorded for all objects and a permanent record, including photographs from all angles, accurate drawings, petrographic analyses, and detailed descriptions should be deposited in archives open to all interested scholars. We also strongly support preparation and publication of comprehensive catalogues of collections held in the various regional museums.

Specific Research Topics

While we are committed to fostering a diversity of theoretical perspectives, we have identified ten critical topics for investigations in the near future:

1. the Archaic/Formative (Preclassic) transition cultures,
2. clarification of ancient ethnic identities, and formulation of methodologies to study ethnicity in the archaeological record,
3. the full range of ancient life-ways on every level of the social hierarchy through studies of residences, activity areas, and other special-use sites,
4. development of more complete and detailed chronologies,
5. paleo-environmental, paleo-hydrological, geological, and ecological studies of the dynamic environments of the region,
6. changes in agriculture and other subsistence activities over time,
7. the social and political context of the transition from Olmec to Classic cultures,

8. economic and stylistic exchanges, especially as reflected in ceramics and obsidian,
9. integrated archaeological and ethno-historical investigations of Contact period culture,
10. development of symbolic systems and writing.

II. PRESERVATION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATABASE

Mechanized agriculture, urban expansion, road building, and looting are destroying archaeological sites at an ever-increasing rate. Since very few sites are systematically investigated beforehand, the loss of information is incalculable. Destruction will increase in the future unless we take vigorous and coordinated action to prevent it. We recommend the following five steps:

1. INAH and other federal, state and local governmental bodies should vigorously pursue every possible means to protect archaeological sites.
2. Every archaeologist who works in the region should collaborate with governmental organizations in their efforts to protect archaeological sites.
3. We insist on the need to preserve entire site contexts, including the surrounding terrain and geographical features that affect ancient cultural settings as well as individual archaeological sites.
4. Local populations and communities must be enlisted in the effort to protect sites. Local citizens know immediately when destruction occurs, can help prevent it, and are in a position to inform authorities. We strongly endorse efforts to educate local citizens about the value of archaeology, both in a general sense and more specifically about the ancient remains in their region. Ladrón de Guevara, Lunagómez and Vásquez propose one such preservation/education initiative in Appendix B. Other approaches are possible but regardless of which are adopted, it is absolutely essential to involve local inhabitants in our effort to preserve the archaeological database.
5. The archaeological database includes not just sites but sculptures, artifact collections, and other materials already out of the ground. Unfortunately, adequate repositories for curation and study of these materials do not exist in the region. We must take better measures to preserve these materials on a permanent basis (see Research Infrastructure).

III. ARCHAEOLOGY AND TOURISM

Tourism will play a growing role in the future course of archaeology in the region. Government officials, private developers, business leaders, and others will call for the creation of archaeological attractions such as architectural restorations, museums, ecological parks, and other facilities which directly impact the archaeological remains. In view of this, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Archaeologists must be involved in all phases and aspects of tourism planning, and assessments of tourism's impact on the archaeological resource base should be an integral part of all such developments.
2. INAHs efforts to improve existing museums, archaeological zones, and related facilities should be increased and we encourage the foundation of new ones whenever possible.
3. Well-written, informative guidebooks to archaeological zones and museums should be prepared and kept up-to-date; and highway sign systems directing the public to archaeological sites need to be improved.

IV. RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

We devoted considerable time to discussion of this topic. We define research infrastructure as the physical facilities, organizational arrangements, and long term agreements between the various governmental bodies, research units, and universities that currently operate in the region. We make the following recommendations in this regard:

1. The present storage and study facilities at the Fuerte de San Juan de Ulúa in Veracruz City are utterly inadequate and must be replaced with a modern, functional laboratory/curation facility where archaeological collections may be safely stored and studied. This is a critical matter and the single most important proposal for many of the Conference participants.
2. Permanent laboratories need to be established at various locales throughout the region. Potential locations for such facilities include the Papaloapan river basin, the Tuxtlas, the Coatzacoalcos river basin, and La Venta. They could be maintained through collaborative agreements among the various institutions working in each locale. These would not replace the central repository called for above, but rather would serve as places where active field projects might keep and study materials prior to their deposition in a permanent storage facility.
3. The region lacks specialized laboratories for technical studies of archaeological materials, and those elsewhere in the Republic frequently have large backlogs of materials waiting to be processed. We support creation of such laboratories in Veracruz and Tabasco in order to handle the materials generated within the

region. These facilities should include facilities capable of studying plant and animal remains, soils, dating, trace element analyses, and other technical studies.

4. Universities and research institutions should foster greater communication among scholars working in the region by establishing and periodically updating Internet connections. We also encourage archaeologists to explore the potentials of electronic publication of basic field data, reports, and other materials.
5. Multi-institutional research programs should be encouraged, including both short term research projects and collaborations over longer periods of time. The Universidad de Veracruz is a particularly appropriate host institution for such efforts.

APPENDIX A.

ENDANGERED REGIONS, ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS.

At the request of the conference participants, Christopher Pool prepared this list of sites regions, and monuments which are currently in danger of destruction, as well as the source of the threat. The inventory is far from exhaustive; indeed, it only highlights the most critical cases.

Endangered Regions

1. Gulf Coast plain between Angel R. Cabada and Lerdo de Tejada: mechanized cultivation of sugar cane
2. Highway 145 (the Veracruz-Acayucan toll road): road building and commercial development
3. Lower Coatzacoalcos/Uspanapa basin: commercial and urban development, intense forest exploitation
4. Isthmus of Tehuantepec between Coatzacoalcos and Salina Cruz: construction of transportation routes
5. Mixtequilla: mechanized agriculture, especially wet rice cultivation

Archaeological Sites

1. Tierra Colorada (Municipio of Acayucan): urban expansion
2. Jáltipan: urban expansion
3. Las Choapas: urban expansion
4. Oluta: urban expansion
5. El Zapotal: modern occupation on the site, need to upgrade museum built around the unfired clay Mictlantecuhtli sculpture
6. Cerro de las Mesas: mechanized agriculture
7. Tenochtitlán village (Municipio of Texistepec): modern settlement on the site

Stone Monuments

1. Tres Zapotes, especially Stelae A and C: inadequately protected in the local museum
2. El Mesón monument 1: located in the open in the Angel R. Cabada plaza. It should be protected from the elements and vandalism
3. El Azuzul monuments: they are inadequately protected

APPENDIX B.

PROPOSAL FOR A PRESERVATION AND EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Sara Ladrón de Guevara, Roberto Lunagómez, and Sergio Vásquez Zárate drafted the following proposal during the last days of the Conference. Since there was not time for the entire group to endorse it, we include here without formal approval of the full group.

We propose formation of a pilot group of fifteen accredited archaeologists to act as custodians of the archaeological patrimony in southern Veracruz and Tabasco. Each would permanently reside in different municipios selected on the basis of their archaeological remains and the risks those remains face. Salaries and support for the archaeologists would be paid by the state governments, although PEMEX and other industries which affect the archaeological resources also might be asked to contribute.

The archaeologists would collaborate closely with the appropriate INAH Regional Center. Their basic tasks would include: (1) creation and maintenance of an

archaeological site inventory and depositing the information with INAH's Department of Archaeological Registry, (2) constant patrol of their assigned areas in order to uncover and report any destruction or looting, (3) provide legal counsel to municipal authorities during planning and execution of public works projects that endanger the archaeological patrimony, (4) help educate local residents, including both school students and adults, about the value of archaeology and the need to protect local remains.