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Megaliths and the Early Mezcala Urban Tradition of Mexico

Keywords: Mexico, Guerrero, Xochipala, megaliths, plain stelae, boundary markers

Abstract:

In 1971, Carlo Gay presented a report in *Almogaren* on the megalithic traits of the Olmec tradition. In the report, Gay suggested that these megalithic structures were part of the ancestral developments of the Xochipala region of Guerrero, Mexico. Using the Las Mesas monoliths from Xochipala as examples, this paper re-examines their proposed Middle Formative period chronology and asserts that they were part of an early urban tradition associated with the Mezcala archaeological culture. This report also presents evidence that the Las Mesas monoliths served as boundary markers which defined the social practices which took place at the site.

Resumen:

En 1971, Carlo Gay presentó un informe en *Almogaren* sobre los rasgos megalíticos de la tradición Olmeca. En el informe, Gay sugirió que estas estructuras megalíticas eran parte de los desarrollos ancestrales de la región de Xochipala (Guerrero, México). Usando los monolitos de Las Mesas de Xochipala como ejemplos, este artículo revisa la fecha de periodo formativo de los megalitos propuesto por Gay y afirma que formaban parte de una tradición urbana temprano relacionada con la cultura Mezcala. Este informe también presenta evidencia que los monolitos de Las Mesas sirvieron como hitos que definen las prácticas sociales que se produjeron en el sitio.

Zusammenfassung:

1971 veröffentlichte Carlo Gay in diesem Jahrbuch einen Bericht über die megalithischen Züge der olmekischen Kultur. Er schlug vor, dass diese megalithischen Strukturen Teil einer durch Vorfahren geprägten Entwicklung in der Xochipala-Region (Guerrero, Mexiko) seien. Die Las-Mesas-Monolithen von Xochipala als Beispiel verwendend, untersucht der vorliegende Beitrag erneut die als "Mittlere Formative" Periode vorgeschlagene Chronologie und macht geltend, dass die Steinmonumente Teil einer frühen urbanen Tradition waren, die archäologisch gesehen mit der Mezcala-Kultur verbunden ist. Der Aufsatz belegt außerdem, dass die Las-Mesas-Monolithen als Grenzmarkierungen dienten, was das soziale Brauchtum dieser Gegend kennzeichnet.

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Introduction

The megalithic character of early Mesoamerican architecture has been the source of much debate. The placement of large worked and unworked stones within architectural settings dates back minimally to the Early Formative period along the Gulf Coast of Mexico at sites such as San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán in Veracruz, Mexico and La Venta in Tabasco, Mexico (Cyphers 2004; Stirling 1943). Based on these observations, it is not surprising that Carlo Gay (1971; 1972) came to a similar conclusion when examining other instances of megalithic architecture in the Mexican states of Morelos and Guerrero. He too traced these megalithic traits to an ancestral Mesoamerican tradition dating to the Early Formative period (c. 1500 BC) and related to the Olmec archaeological culture.

In this paper, I revisit one of these megalithic sites – the Las Mesas monoliths and their associated mounds – in order to re-examine Gay's proposed Middle Formative period chronology for these megalithic traits. In the process, this brief paper presents evidence that the monoliths described by Gay were part of an early urban tradition associated with the Mezcala archaeological culture, dating from the Late Formative period to the Epiclassic period (300 BC – AD 900). Comparisons with other Mezcala sites in Guerrero, will also demonstrate that the Las Mesas monoliths served as boundary markers which defined the social practices which took place at the site. I begin with a description of Las Mesas and its associated mounds and monoliths.

The Las Mesas Monoliths

The Las Mesas monoliths and their associated mound are part of a complex consisting of three other mounds – two are located to the southeast of the mound with the monoliths and one is located to the northwest (Figure 1). This mound complex is located on the Las Mesas plateau approximately six kilometers to the south/southwest of the modern town of Xochipala in Guerrero, Mexico. The plateau is located just to the south of Cerro Tepeltzin and has an approximate area of 20-25 hectares (Schmidt 1990: 32). The plateau is situated on the western side of the expansive Xochipala Valley in the Sierra Madre mountains of north-central Guerrero (Figure 2).

The Las Mesas monoliths originally consisted of a set of large minimally-modified stones set up-right on either side of an earthen mound. The mound is approximately 30 meters in length and 1.5 meters in height. Its description as "earthen" seems to be based simply on the fact that the mound is covered by soil and wild grass in places. Given the ubiquity of small-to-medium stones throughout the Las Mesas plateau, it is likely that it was faced with stones although this hypothesis must remain speculation until appropriate exca-

uations of the site are made. The monoliths are comparable to some of the plain stelae recorded in Guerrero, Mexico (Reyna Robles 2006: 118-122) and the Petén region of Guatemala (Stuart 2010: 283-285). I observed one of the monoliths in situ to the northeast of the mound (hereafter "Monolith 1") in June 2006 and another has been documented by previous researchers to the southeast of the mound (Gay 1972; Schmidt 1990). A brief account of this worked stone (hereafter "Monolith 2"), based on existing published sources, follows my discussion of Monolith 1.

Monolith 1 is situated on the northeastern side of the mound and faces the extensive lowlands, now used for agriculture, situated to the east of Las Mesas. This monolith is an irregular, slab-like stone with a triangular face on its front and back sides (Figure 3). The top of the monolith has been flattened. The monolith is composed of medium gray andesite. This coloration is consistent throughout the boulder. The volcanic origins of this stone are evidenced through the vesicles visible on its back or western side. The front or eastern side of the monolith measures 88.9 cm in height and 96.5 cm in width at its base. The sides of the monolith are roughly 25 cm wide and have a spine of rocky material covering the entire length of the monolith on each side indicating that the monolith was produced via bifacial pecking.

Monolith 2 was originally situated on the southeastern end of the mound (Schmidt 1990: 32). Visual inspection of the area revealed that no corresponding up-right stone was still standing in the area. Gay (1972: 16) observed that both monoliths were the same height, approximately one meter. Several possible stones of the same approximate size as Monolith 1 were found on the southeastern side of the mound and to the northeast of the mound. The stone to the southeast was observed in a toppled state and was light tan in color (Figure 4). The stone measured approximately 75 cm in height, 55 cm in width, and 49 cm in depth. It showed signs of fracturing and this may account for why none of the possible remnants of Monolith 2 appeared to be similar in form to published pictures and drawings of the monolith (see Gay 1971: 80, Fig. 6; Schmidt 1990: 226, Lámina IVb).

The Archaeological Context of the Las Mesas Monoliths

Based on comparisons with European megalithic structures, Gay (1971: 71-72) asserted that the mound with the monoliths may have been a burial structure and that the monoliths functioned as burial markers (see Gay 1971: 80, Fig. 6). It is clear that their placement at the northeastern and southeastern end of the mound suggests that the monoliths were deliberately arranged relative to the mound and therefore constitute a petroform. Gay also reported local

rumors that indicated that the two Las Mesas monoliths were originally part of a circular arrangement of six monoliths but that four of these monoliths had been removed and buried in a cornfield.

Although there was no evidence to corroborate this rumor, it should be noted that the top of the mound with the monoliths as well as the areas to the east, south, and north of the mound have been turned into small cornfields. In the case of the fields to the north and northeast, this transition was accompanied by the building of fences and stone walls from lithic material readily available on the surface of the Las Mesas Plateau (see Figure 1). It is possible that Monolith 2 was used to build a section of one of these walls. In fact, Monolith 1 is located less than 1 meter to the east of one such wall. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that other monoliths surrounded the mound as the local rumors suggest. It is more likely that the mound in question was actually a terrace or platform mound that joined with the elevated surface of the plateau on its western side.

A surface survey of the immediate surroundings of the mound with the monoliths revealed a great deal lithic material (e.g. ground-stone axes, ground-stone metates, and obsidian blades) and ceramic sherds (Figures 5-7). Due to the use of these terraces and mounds as cornfields, the stratigraphic context of the sherds and lithic materials in and around Las Mesas has been greatly disturbed through plowing. As a result, there is likely to be a mixture of ceramic materials and lithic products reflecting many periods of occupation and use on the surface of Las Mesas and, more specifically, the mound with the monoliths. The majority of the lithic material was observed on the northwest quadrant of the mound with the monoliths; while ceramic sherds were found throughout the plateau. This patterning suggests that the mounds were the location of house compounds in which specialized craft production took place.

Among the ceramics noted on the surface of the Las Mesas mounds were blanco granular (white granular) sherds with painted red designs (Figure 6). This ceramic type is common from the Tejas to the Gorongoro phases at Xochipala and is comparable to Late Formative period Ticoman ceramics from the Basin of Mexico and Goma phase ceramics from Tehuantepec in Oaxaca (Schmidt 1990: 123-133). A second group of ceramics observed on the mounds corresponds to the rojo pastoso (pasty red) ceramic type of the Tejas phase (Figure 7). These ceramics tend to have a rough texture and are present during the Xaltipan and Gorongoro phases at Xochipala (Schmidt 1990: 115). Ceramics identified as blanco pastoso (pasty white) were also found at Las Mesas. These are associated with the Tepenacaxtla phase at Xochipala (Schmidt 1990: 156). Less common were plumbate sherds belonging to the metálico ceramic type found from the Tejas to the Chichitlantepec phases

(Schmidt 1990: 119) as well as the *café claro pulido* (polished clear tan) ceramic type encountered more frequently at Chichitlantepec phase sites surrounding Las Mesas (Schmidt 1990: 117-119). The concentration of these Tejas and Xaltipan phase ceramics on top of the mound with the monoliths and the neighboring terraces correspond to the chronology established by Schmidt's surface surveys near the mounds. They suggest that activities took place on the mounds from the Middle Formative period to the Epiclassic period (see Schmidt 1990: 215, Fig. 122). This time frame corresponds to the early urban tradition at Xochipala and is associated directly with the development of the Mezcala archaeological culture in the region surrounding the Balsas and Mezcala rivers in central Guerrero (Reyna Robles 2006: 228-229).

Archaeological Comparisons

The archaeological associations and ceramic chronologies mentioned above allow Las Mesas to be compared to several other early Mezcala sites with megalithic architecture found throughout Guerrero. These comparisons may provide insights into the actual function of the Las Mesas monoliths as an arrangement of megalithic stones near a platform mound. I begin by drawing attention to two contemporary Mezcala sites located in central and eastern Guerrero – La Cruz Chiquita and Tememistitla. Both feature stone-faced platform mounds decorated with two large uncarved monoliths or plain columns, each measuring 1.5 to 2.0 m in height (Reyna Robles 2006: 118-122). Ceramics collected at both sites indicate that they were occupied between the Formative period and Early Postclassic period, approximately the same temporal range as Las Mesas.

While the use of megalithic stones and large natural basalt columns appears to have been pioneered in the Gulf Coast lowlands during the Early and Middle Formative period (1500-700 BC) and is attested at Teopantecuanitlán in Guerrero (Martínez Donjuán 1986), these features appear to have been used quite differently. At La Venta in Tabasco, for instance, basalt columns functioned as retaining walls for burial chambers and as ritual enclosures on top of terraces (Stirling 1943:60 and Plate 46). Megaliths at Mezcala sites, including Las Mesas, do not appear in relation to burials or on the mounds associated with their civic-ceremonial cores. Rather, apart from Tememistitla and its large 10 m high mound, Mezcala megalithic architecture appears to have been exclusively associated with small domestic units and household mounds.

The Mezcala pattern also differs markedly from the use of megaliths and plain stelae in southeastern Mesoamerica. In this region, two distinct architectural arrangements featuring large worked and unworked stones

appear to have been common. The first pattern was initially documented in association with the Olmec-style low-relief carvings at Xoc and Pijijiapan in Chiapas (Ekholm-Miller 1973; Navarrete 1969) but has since been found at a number of Late Formative period and Classic period Maya sites such as Palenque in Chiapas and San Diego, in Petén, Guatemala (Stuart 2010: 284-287). It features the use of large rock outcrops, sometimes decorated with low-relief carvings, away from inhabited sites. The second pattern has been recorded primarily on the Pacific Coast of Mexico and Guatemala at Late Formative and Early Classic period Maya sites such as Group C at Izapa (Stirling 1943: 68-69; Lowe, Lee and Martínez Espinosa 1982: 201-202) and Tak'alik Ab'aj (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010: 179, Fig. 8.2). It consists of an arrangement of plain stone slabs in front of large earthen or stone-faced mounds. Unlike the monoliths and plain columns observed in Guerrero, however, Pacific Coast examples are most often part of stela-altar pairs or sculptural arrangements related to astronomical observation, such as those found on Structure 7 at Tak'alik Ab'aj (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010: 203).

By comparison, the Las Mesas monoliths and other examples of the Mezcala megalithic tradition appear to have had very different meanings. They are not associated with flat altar stones and they are not arranged in elaborate sculptural sequences. In fact, the documented examples from Guerrero occur exclusively in pairs. It is therefore not immediately clear that they had the same function and meaning as their Middle Formative period Olmec predecessors and Late Formative-Classic period Maya contemporaries. Based on the observation that the lithic material at Las Mesas was found only on the mound with the monoliths but the diagnostic ceramic sherds were found throughout the site, I suspect that these megalithic features were used as boundary markers to designate the mound as the location of house compounds in which ground-stone tools and other lithic materials were produced as part of specialized production activities, possibly as part of a monumental entranceway similar to the one recorded at Tepecoacuilco (Reyna Robles 2006: 207). A similar pattern has been documented by Reyna Robles (2006: 122) at Tememistitla on the Guerrero-Puebla border where the plain columns are associated with both a large ceremonial mound and a several domestic areas affiliated with stone-working situated directly to the north.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to re-visit the Mexican megalithic features first described by Carlo Gay in *Almogaren* (1971). A re-examination of the Las

Mesas monoliths and their archaeological contexts reveals that these megalithic features were actually part of the Mezcala cultural tradition of central Guerrero and dated from the Late Formative to the Epiclassic periods (c. 300 BC – AD 900). Further comparisons with other Mezcala sites in Guerrero showed that megaliths were linked to domestic structures and platform mounds primarily affiliated with stone-working, further indicating that the Las Mesas monoliths were not burial markers but were rather used as boundary markers to indicate the type of activities which took place on the mound marked by the monoliths. These observations, in turn, suggest that comparing architectural forms across cultures is a risky proposition, especially when not enough archaeological work has taken place to allow for the proper contextualization of the data. Without this kind of information, as Carlo Gay expressed so eloquently in the pages of this journal (1971), it is far too easy to make facile claims of cultural diffusion and to deny the indigenous peoples of Mexico a historical link to an extraordinary heritage.

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Figure 1. The Las Mesas Plateau, Guerrero, México. Photograph by the Author.



Figure 2. The Xochipala Valley, Guerrero, México. Photograph by the Author.



Figure 3. Monolith 1 from Las Mesas in situ. Photograph by the Author.



Figure 4. Possible remnant of Monolith 2 from Las Mesas. Photograph by the Author.



Figure 5. Ground-stone metate from Las Mesas. Photograph by the Author.



Figure 6. Blanco granular (white granular) ceramics from Las Mesas. Photographed in situ by the Author.



Figure 7. Rojo pastoso (pasty red) ceramics from Las Mesas. Photographed in situ by the Author.