

THE NORTHERN CENTRAL AMERICAN BUFFER: A CURRENT PERSPECTIVE

ARCHEOLOGIE DE LOS NARANJOS, HONDURAS. By CLAUDE F. BAUDEZ and PIERRE BECQUELIN. (Mexico: Mision Archaeologique et Ethnologique Française au Mexique, 1973. Pp. 432.)

This volume presents the results of two years work (1967–69) in the Lake Yajoa area of Honduras, on the southern frontier between Mesoamerica and Central America. This general area has been one of increased contemporary archaeological activity, with areal significance manifested most recently by conferences of professional archaeologists in Tegucigalpa, Honduras (22–28 June 1975) and San José, Costa Rica (30 June to 6 July 1975). Interest in the cultural boundary theme can be traced back at least to Spinden (1925), Stone (1934; 1939), and Lothrop (1939; 1940). While most other views of this area have been from the north, the perspective of this essay is from the south.

While a brief summary of the Los Naranjos work has appeared elsewhere in French (Baudéz and Becquelin 1969), there is presently no available résumé in English, and the somewhat prohibitive price of the book suggests that its distribution will be rather narrow. Given the importance of the site and the value of the work, it is useful to summarize briefly the chronological periods represented at Los Naranjos, and its major developmental characteristics.

Excavation focused on the main structural and two secondary groups and disclosed a long cultural sequence divided into four phases. The first structure in the main group was built during the initial Jaral Phase (800 to 400 B.C.), and was protected by what is described as a "defensive ditch." Ceramics and other cultural traits are seen to reflect Olmec influence. The succeeding Eden Phase (400 B.C. to A.D. 550) is characterized by two subphases; important architectural additions were made to the main group, and a new defensive ditch was built. Ceramics are closely related to Preclassic and Early Classic complexes at Copán and share numerous traits with the Chicanel horizon in the Maya lowlands. In the following Yajoa Phase (A.D. 550 to 950), there are minor modifications to the main group, while new areas were inhabited on the western part of the Los Naranjos plain and the northeastern shore of Lake Yajoa. Polychrome pottery is seen as reflecting strong influences from the Maya lowlands, mainly related to the Tepeu 1–2 horizons. In the final Río Blanco phase (A.D. 950 to 1250), settlement is limited to the western part of the plain and consists of small structural groups, two of them having a ball court. Ceramics from this period reflect contact with the Greater Nicoya area of Pacific Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The authors see Los Naranjos as part of the non-Mayan Mesoamerican tradition throughout its pre-Columbian occupation, and consider such "atypical" traits as the Middle Preclassic defensive ditches as being regional variations. My own assessment is that the status of the

ditches as “defensive” is better considered hypothetical than conclusive, and that additional work is necessary to establish their status.

The book is of good technical quality and is well illustrated, although a few tables are inverted and some photographs darkened. Of the 432 pages of text, 235 are devoted to ceramic typology and 41 to other artifacts, while the bulk of the remainder describes excavations in various parts of the site. The conclusions, limited to 16 pages, consist primarily of a descriptive evaluation of the site and its areal relationships as seen through ceramic and architectural data. Comparative data, that can also be construed as interpretation, are contained within individual pottery type descriptions. The ceramic typology forms the focus of the publication but is separated from accompanying illustrations and relevant interpretations thus interrupting the flow from what was done at the site to what can be interpreted from it. Few people read ceramic typologies from beginning to end—they are presented for reference—and in the present format they are awkward to use. A satisfactory solution would have been to make the ceramic section an appendix; an index to help locate specific type descriptions would also have been useful.

I visited Los Naranjos three times while work was in progress and found the quality and quantity of work impressive, given limitations of time and human and financial resources. In general, the present publication is a qualitatively excellent example of a traditional archaeological report; the overriding emphases are descriptive, focusing on ceramics, chronology, architecture, and testing in the main ceremonial and other structural groups. There is little emphasis on environmental or domestic habitational data, or on theoretical constructs derived from the archaeology itself, or from the broader field of anthropology, or other disciplines.

The frontier location of Los Naranjos attracted the interest of many archaeologists in the past (Stone 1934; Yde 1936, 1938; Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938), and initially stimulated interest leading to the 1967–69 research. However, there is little explicit indication of a methodological or conceptual framework within which the work was conducted. Implicitly, the establishment of a firm chronological sequence, together with examination of ceramic and architectural data, was expected to produce a solid descriptive picture of the relationship of the site to adjacent areas. However, this approach omitted at least two important considerations.

First, given the lack of evidence for domination by outside forces, it seems that cultural contacts may have been managed by, and had a deeper influence on, the upper classes rather than the lower. Ceramically, while a number of the finer decorated types have firm chronological associations, many of the culinary ceramic wares cut across temporal boundaries and in some cases persist for almost the entire duration of the sequence. A variety of hypotheses could be constructed on the basis of this observation and would greatly elucidate the pattern of development of the site and its position on the cultural frontier. This would have necessitated an explicitly defined sampling strategy for the site, leading in particular to increased sampling of domestic areas. However, the original research design did not result in a sufficient data base to examine features which may have

resulted from social stratification or social distributions within the site. Second, there appears to have been little emphasis on acquisition of environmental data that might produce climatic perspectives on the development of the site and area.

Thus, despite a long-standing interest in this cultural frontier, our collective emphasis to date has been largely descriptive rather than explanatory. Changes in temporal periods are marked by shifts in various ceramic types, without the benefit of cultural hypotheses or the adequate exploration of ancillary data, either cultural or ecological. An important shift away from this pattern is Sharer's recent article on the southeastern Maya periphery (1974), as well as the work of E. Wyllys Andrews V. at Quelepa, El Salvador (n.d.).

Baudez and Becquelin indicated strong evidence of Olmec influence at Los Naranjos via the presence of a cinnabar-covered interment; the possibility of resemblances (which left me unconvinced) between Structure I Los Naranjos and the "fluted" pyramid at La Venta, a figure in definite Olmec style; and general similarities with the Playa de Los Muertos ceramic complex. However, as others have noted (Longyear 1969; Willey 1969; Coe 1965), there is no real Olmec ceramic complex, but rather a general participation in what Willey (1969) termed a southern Mesoamerican pottery tradition. While it is clear that Olmecoid traits are present at Los Naranjos, it is unlikely they were there in any numbers. Looking at the frontier from the south, this is the exact nature of the Olmec presence we see in Central America. There are presently no known Olmec materials from Nicaragua, and the ones from northern Costa Rica (Balsler 1959; Coe 1965; Stone 1972) are invariably widely scattered finds of jade and occasional Olmec motifs on ceramics.

The process by which these materials/motifs arrived in Central America is unclear. One problem throughout the area is the apparent lack of a temporal equivalent to the Jaral Phase at Los Naranjos. All Olmecoid occurrences further south are either concurrent with the disappearance of Olmec influence in Mesoamerica proper, or substantially postdate the Jaral Phase. The pursuit of carefully structured research is necessary to further examine this problem. Clearly, the explanation of the nature of the expansion of this major Preclassic cultural influence into Central America (if it occurred at all) is essential to our understanding of subsequent regional developments.

The Los Naranjos material also raises important questions regarding the relationship between the lowland Maya and Central America. From the southern perspective, the Maya area served both as donor and recipient of Central American influences (Stone 1964). In a previous publication I called for consideration of the lowland Maya area with an increased emphasis on Central American connections and deemphasis on Central Mexican connections (Lange 1971), and I would repeat that suggestion here.

The Eden and Yajoa Phases show strong influence from the Maya lowlands, and these are further reflected in ceramic developments in the northern Pacific sectors of Central America. There was never a sustained Maya physical presence, but there is ample evidence for long-standing ceramic influences. Just as with the Olmec, we have previously been satisfied with detailing traits which support this projected relationship, rather than developing paths to explain the

relationship itself. Sufficient chronological and descriptive data have been accumulated, and we must begin to pose the explanatory questions.

In the final Río Blanco Phase at Los Naranjos, the pattern of influence shifts and there is evidence of contacts from Greater Nicoya. Greater Nicoya was originally defined by Norweb (1961) to include the Pacific coasts of Costa Rica and Nicaragua from the Bay of Fonseca to the tip of the Nicoya Peninsula. The recent conference in San José generally agreed that the term is no longer useful within this framework. An important problem is the striking contrast between ceramics from the Nicoya area and those from Quelepa (Andrews V. n.d.) only a short distance to the north. Here again we have evidence of a significant pre-Columbian frontier based primarily on the presence/absence of shared traits, rather than on an understanding of cultural process and development.

Our current picture of this frontier, from above or below, is one of a fluid zone more properly conceived of as a buffer rather than as any defined frontier. The location, nature, and composition of the buffer shifts through time, and one outstanding feature is that the local Central American peoples maintained strong indigenous traditions despite, and within the framework of, these repeated external pressures. The answers to be derived will not flow from simple presence/absence analysis of particular traits or modes at various times and places. There must be a new dawning of conceptual and theoretical frameworks from those of us working in this area. This is not to deny that, given the lack of even the most basic surveys in some parts of Central America, there is a strong need for survey, testing, and establishment of basic reliable chronological sequences. However, these activities must be couched within explicitly stated research designs.

Nonetheless, the development of carefully structured research may be a false exercise if the professional community, in cooperation with the governments of the Central American nations that span the buffer zone, do not confront head on the major problem facing prehistoric research today: The rapid economic development and population expansion that threaten to seriously deplete or destroy the Central American archaeological record before it can be studied. Economic development has replaced the *huaquero* or grave-robber as the most serious threat to the pre-Columbian heritage.

Massive salvage legislation, within the context of other national priorities, is a primary necessity if an archaeological record worthy of scientific endeavor is to be preserved. It is significant that the research design at Los Naranjos might have been somewhat different had not areas of the site been disturbed or damaged by activities related to the building of a nearby hydroelectric facility.

With respect to the preservation of the archaeological record, a number of significant steps have been taken in the past few months. (1) At a meeting in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, in January 1975, the Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica pledged large-scale support for archaeological research leading not only to salvage, preservation, and interpretation of scientific materials, but also to development of the tourist potential of the Central American countries. (2) At the conference in San José, Costa Rica, strong support was expressed for the development of a school of Central American archaeology in Central America to train local personnel. An important step in this direction was taken with the

establishment, on 15 August 1975, of a National Center for Anthropological Studies under the auspices of the National Museum of Costa Rica. The Center will be engaged in research and teaching activities. (3) In addition, all concerned countries are currently enacting or examining new legislation responsive to present and future needs of scientific archaeological research. This should result in increased levels of protection and preservation of archaeological resources and, in conjunction with the personnel who will become available if the new archaeological school comes into existence, provide a greatly increased base of knowledge regarding pre-Columbian developments in Central America.

As Mary Helms (1975) wrote, it is difficult to understand the development of the Mesoamerican heartland without a concurrent understanding of the southern frontier, or buffer zone. In this sense, full interpretation of Olmec and subsequent Central Mexican and Mayan developments can only be obtained through increased research in the Central American buffer zone. The buffer is also of obvious importance vis-à-vis South America. The subject of cultural frontiers and buffer zones represents an important theoretical area in anthropology that has been little pursued by either ethnologists (Cole and Wolf 1974; Doolittle and Lintz 1973) or archaeologists. Central America presents the opportunity for diachronic study of flux and stability in a buffer that has responded to bilateral and even trilateral pressures through a significant period of New World cultural development, while at the same time maintaining vestiges of strong local traditions. However, such a study can be successful only within a professional framework that stresses cultural explanation and interpretation in addition to description, that places proportionate value on environmental as well as cultural data, and that exists within a contemporary political and cultural context that promotes the preservation and study of prehistory on a regional basis.

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