

THE MACROSIGNIFIED OF FORMATIVE MESOAMERICA: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO THE “OLMEC” STYLE

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Abstract

This article applies the theory of archaeological semiotics to the study of the “Olmec” style. A semiotic approach differs from an iconographic study because it provides the possibility for complex analysis of all significant traits of material archeological objects without distinction between stylistic and iconographic traits. In this context, the semiotic analysis of the Olmec style as a sign system shows that its particular signs, which can be defined as stylistic traits because of the lack of specific iconographic meanings, simultaneously participated in the creation and transformation of cultural meanings. This phenomenon reflected the “macrosignified” of Formative Mesoamerican cultures, associated with a structure that linked together various meanings throughout the culture.

INTRODUCTION

The “Olmec problem” has long been a key issue in Mesoamerican archaeology because of its importance regarding questions of the origins of Mesoamerican civilization. This matter lies at the center of discussions about Mesoamerican cultural development in the Formative period. At the same time, a critical part of this discussion concerns the question of what the term Olmec actually means. This term marks the famous style of various archeological artifacts and objects of art that spread across Mesoamerica in the Formative period, and it also indicates the archaeological culture of the Formative period (2000 B.C.–A.D. 250), flourishing in the region of the Gulf Coast. The Olmec style was a set of contextually interrelated symbols, including clefts, crosses, “paw-wings,” and motifs, such as the so-called “fire-serpent” and “were-jaguar” images, which have spread in different regions of Mesoamerica since the late Early Formative period and were sometimes used as structural elements of complex visual images. Although a nearly full set of the Olmec symbols and motifs originated in the Late Early Formative times, the images and themes in the Olmec style, as well as material objects embodying this style, developed and changed over time.

The problem of relations between the Olmec style and the Gulf Coast Olmec culture has always been controversial. Apart from an unprecedented, high level of complexity, however, the Olmec culture and its stages are defined on the basis of Olmec stylistic analysis. The problem of the Olmec, therefore, is to a large degree the problem of the Olmec style. Hence, the problem is related to questions of the definition of style in archaeology, anthropology, and art history, as well as the methods of analyzing style in these disciplines. In this context, it should be noted that a general analysis of correlations

between the approaches of these different disciplines is beyond the scope of this article. Nor is this article dedicated to the definition of style as a cultural phenomenon in general or as a generic term. Instead, the goal of this work is to analyze certain approaches used in the construction of the concept of the Olmec style to reveal their weaknesses, and to suggest an additional approach by helping to explain some aspects of this style as a cultural phenomenon.

This approach is based on the theory of archaeological semiotics, analyzing the relations between components of archaeological data as relations between signs in the sign system. This theory was developed under the framework of the postprocessual paradigm in archaeology as presented in such theories as Hodder’s (1982) symbolic archaeology and Silverstein’s (1976) pragmatic (semiotic) anthropology. As a separate archaeological theory, it was developed mainly by Preucel (2006; Preucel and Bauer 2001) and his followers (Hodder and Hutton 2003). Preucel (2006:5) defines semiotics as “the field, multidisciplinary in coverage and international in scope, devoted to the study of the innate capacity of humans to produce and understand signs.” Preucel (2006) believes that archaeology itself can be considered as a “semiotic enterprise.”

At first, due to the influence of Silverstein’s pragmatic anthropology, which focused on the ideas of Pierce, the theory of archaeological semiotics was based mainly on the application of Piercean semiotics to archeological studies. As such, it was a response to structuralist approaches which applied the theory of Saussure. The founders of the theory argued that Pierce’s semiotics can be more useful in archaeology than the semiology of Saussure because the material objects cannot be arranged in linear sentences like the signs of language (Hodder and Hutton 2003; Preucel 2006; Preucel and Bauer 2001).

But other studies in the field of anthropological and archaeological semiotics, especially the fundamental handbook on the semiotic

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analysis of cultures by Danesi and Perron (1999) and works applying their ideas (Meissner 2006), showed that Saussurean semiology is not as useless to archaeology as has been claimed. The traits of material objects as signs are used as signifiers in semiotic structures in arbitrary relation to other signifiers. Moreover, the interpretation of original cultural meanings can be possible only by identifying the original roles of the signifiers in such structures. The arbitrariness of signifiers is not unrestricted in these structures because the role of a signifier is dependent on certain relations to certain other signifiers in each semiotic structure. In general, this system of relations is related to the concept of the macrosignified, which was introduced by Danesi and Perron (1999), according to whom the macrosignified “is a signified that links together signs, codes, and texts throughout the culture” (Danesi and Perron 1999:294). This phenomenon can be illustrated by the example of such macrosignified concepts of modern Western culture as “sweet love,” denoted by a set of interrelated signifiers, such as the “honeymoon,” the “sweetheart,” or giving of sweets on St. Valentine’s Day (Danesi and Perron 1999:182). On the one hand, all aforementioned signifiers are arbitrary in their relations to each other and in their relations to their signified. They are not, however, arbitrary in relation to their macrosignified, which is a certain structure of cultural meanings. The structures of cultural meanings often are unique to different cultures and different times.

At the same time, it should be noted that the macrosignified should not be perceived as a global and total structure of meanings, covering all meanings in a culture. In particular, Parmentier (2016: 85) emphasizes that the analysis of the macrosignified should take into account the historical transformations of meanings and the development of regional patterns of meanings and the relations between them, such as “interactions on the boundary of semiosphere.” At the same time, analysis should take into account the difference between macrosignifieds that originated as the result of creative, artistic, and reflexive activity of relatively isolated societies and the spread of ideological macrosignifieds in stratified societies (Parmentier 2016:85). In the context of the aforementioned, we can state that there can be various manifestations of the systematicity of meanings (macrosignifieds) in different cultures of Formative Mesoamerica, having common as well as different traits and changing through time. As will be explained, the so-called “Olmec style” was a cultural phenomenon intended to convey these macrosignifieds of Mesoamerican cultures. It has regional variants that can reflect local patterns of meaning and it changed over time. It originated as a product of local creativity in small Mesoamerican societies, but later it became the mirror of ideological systems existing in large stratified polities. The goal of this paper is to show that the application of the archeological semiotic method helps to reveal these aspects of the Olmec style.

Iconographic studies are directed toward the identification of certain meanings of signs, but, as we can see, the problem of the meaning of a sign is not related to only the identification of a particular signified value of an image. In iconographic studies, a sign is usually perceived as an icon of a thing, or a symbol of a concept. Stylistic elements are considered only as icons of themselves and indices of particular manifestations of social activity. By contrast, I argue that the order of relations between stylistic traits as signs were used by societies of the past for referring to the structure of the macrosignified that existed in their cultures; the analysis of the Olmec style can help in understanding prominent cultural phenomena. On the one hand, this method can be helpful for further iconographic studies because it suggests that the subject matter contained in these images may be stronger and

more complex. On the other hand, this method has an independent value as a research procedure in archaeology because it can help in investigating the macrosignifieds of these cultures themselves and to highlight the dynamics of their changes over time.

THE PROBLEM OF STYLE IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF OLMEC STYLE IN MESOAMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

The discussion of the role and function of style in archaeology has a broad historiography. Schapiro (1953:287) has divided the conception of style in archaeology, where it mainly plays a diagnostic function, and in the history of art, where it is “an essential object of investigation.” The discussion of the problem of style in art history, therefore, is much deeper and wider than the historiography described in this chapter. The goal of this brief survey is to illustrate the general reception of the concept of style in archaeology, which is related to the issues of the definition of Olmec style.

At first, scholars considered style as a simple set of nonfunctional traits, perceived only as a decoration, in contrast to traits that reflect certain technological functions (Dietler and Herbich 1998:237). For example, according to Klein (1991:383), style in archaeology is equal to the “extrafunctional” archaeological type, associated with stable patterns of nonfunctional traits of artifacts. These patterns of traits are formed in an accidental way, in contrast to traits of the “functional” and “subfunctional” archaeological types, which are related to particular functions of artifacts (Klein 1991:382–383). In this light, Klein (1991:384) defines cultural style as a stable pattern of traits, which was formed on the basis of accidental conditions, such as cultural contacts and traditions. In the light of the aforementioned aspects, archaeologists usually used the conception of “style” in the context of typological studies. For example, in the cultural-historical paradigm, style was considered to be an essential marker of archaeological horizons (Lyman et al. 1997:185–194; Rice 1993:1). Willey (1951:111) emphasized the importance of such components of style as its configuration (the unique manner in which the style’s content is expressed). The uniqueness often reflects the accidental character of style origins. Later Sackett (1990:37) made a distinction between the passive (isochrestic) style, based on the concept of habitus and on a reproduction of stylistic elements of material culture in the process of usual daily activity, and the active (iconological) style used by social groups as a marker of social identity in their relations with other groups. But this approach mainly focuses on the possibility of active and conscious usage of a style as a marker of social groups, while a process of its creation from the perspective of this approach would be related to unmindful activity.

Thus, in the context of such approaches, the concept of style is usually used in archaeology for marking accidental patterns of traits, with the reproduction of the style being mainly related to the concept of habitus. The use of styles in social relations, for example, to mark ethnic identity can be considered an active or conscious form of activity, while origins of styles and particular stylistic elements are perceived as products of passive or unconscious activity, influenced by accidental patterns of random factors. In this light, stylistic traits and elements as simple passive traces of human activity are considered meaningless traits, in contrast to elements that serve as representations of particular concepts and images.

As a result of this approach, archaeologists make a distinction between style and iconography (Lesure 2012, 2015). Gell (1998)

distinguishes style from iconography by noting that iconographic elements of an artwork appear as a reference to the subject matter of an image, whereas stylistic elements appear as a reference to other works. In the context of Klein's (1991) concept, iconography can be considered as a functional aspect of typology because, in this light, the iconographic traits of an image are not accidental, but are related to a way of representing subject matter. Art historians usually try to understand the iconography of art and to investigate the iconic traits that are connected to a representation of subject matter related to different cases and periods. Thus, iconography usually works from a diachronic perspective and attempts to investigate the signified value of images (Meissner 2006:49). An analysis of stylistic traits, which may appear to be meaningless, can be useful for iconographic studies because a collective investigation of specific things or concepts that are represented in a particular style might help to identify the subject matter of an image (Knight 2013:22–23). These studies usually focus, however, on the iconographic representation of the subject matter, while the analysis of style plays a secondary role. In this context, Knight (2013:22) emphasizes that “style and iconography are conceptually distinct” because a concept of style concerns only a manner in which some subject matter was reproduced, but not the subject matter itself. In sum, when style is examined in archaeological research, this research tends to focus on the investigation of ancient social interactions, rather than on the importance of ancient cultural meanings.

The so-called Olmec style, in particular, was first defined as a style based on traits that were iconographic rather than stylistic. These traits, which later became known in historiography as the traits of the “were-jaguar,” were first defined by Saville (1929:284), who suggested that the downturned lips of a group of Mesoamerican figurines should be considered as a representation of a “tiger mask.” Saville (1929:285) suggested that these artifacts were associated with the region of the Mexican Gulf Coast. Given their hypothetical geographic affiliation, these objects were, at first, attributed to the Olmec people of historical times, who were mentioned in Spanish colonial sources (Taube 2004:2). Further archaeological excavations by Vaillant in the 1930s and Stirling in the 1940s revealed that the Olmec-style artifacts belonged to Early Formative contexts. Radiocarbon dating from the 1950s finally demonstrated the Formative chronology of these Olmec objects (Taube 2004:2).

These discoveries changed the earlier conception of Mesoamerican history. The Olmec culture was thought to be the earliest civilization of Mesoamerica. But later research collected new evidence about the spread and variability of various Olmec objects, showing that the Olmec style could be a regional style shared by a number of distinct cultures, and that the Gulf Coast Olmec culture was one among other cultures of the same level of development, but not necessarily the first Mesoamerican civilization. Thus, since the 1960s, the problem of the origins and nature of the Olmec style remains controversial. The “Olmec-centrists” (Blomster 2002, 2010; Blomster et al. 2005; Coe 1968, 1989; Diehl 1989, 2004; Diehl and Coe 1996; Neff et al. 2006) argue that the Olmec style was associated with the cultural influence of the Olmec archaeological culture from the Gulf Coast area, which is considered by them to be the “mother culture” and the cradle of Mesoamerican civilization. The style, first of all, is seen as a marker of ethnicity. In contrast, the “Olmec-skeptics” (Flannery and Marcus 2000; Grove 1989, 1993; Love 1991; Sharer et al. 2006) consider the Olmec style to be a product of the interregional interaction between Early and Middle Formative sites.

Both the “Olmec-centrists” and the “Olmec-skeptics” are interested in the study of the iconography and subject matter of the Olmec style. Coe (1989:71) agrees with Stirling's (1955:19–20) hypothesis regarding the Olmec myth of a “primordial union between a feline and a human, which had resulted in a race of were-jaguar infants.” He also adopts Joralemon's concept of 10 Olmec “gods” (Coe 1989:76). In contrast, Marcus (1989:170–172) and Flannery (Flannery and Marcus 2000:13) reduce the iconography of Olmec art to the forms of representation of two world-divisions: the Sky and the Earth, and argue that they were used as the markers of lineages. Grove (1993:91) suggests that the subjects of the Olmec iconography were common for people of Mesoamerica for a long time. Lesure's (2004:88) opinion is important in this regard, because he makes a distinction between the representational system (a system of designs, forms, and illustrative strategies) and the iconography (subject matter) of the Olmec style. In other words, he emphasizes that some subject matter as well as the symbolism of various Mesoamerican beliefs can be common to different communities which existed even before Olmec times, while a representational system of Olmec style was adopted by local groups as a result of their contacts with foreigners (Lesure 2004:90–91).

At the same time, the problem of the signified value of images in the Olmec style itself is controversial. For example, Covarrubias (1957:61) considered the traits of the Olmec art to be a prototype for the later iconography of Mesoamerican rain gods. Joralemon (1971) defined 10 Olmec deities on the basis of typological analysis of Olmec symbols. He considered these deities as prototypes of later Mesoamerican gods (Joralemon 1971:90). Many archaeologists accepted the results of such iconographic studies in their work and used them for typological purposes. Pyne (1976) created the typology of free-standing motifs on the Early Formative pottery from Oaxaca on the basis of distinguishing between the iconographies of the Olmec “fire-serpent” and the “were-jaguar” motifs. Tolstoy et al. (1977:105) used Joralemon's original concept of the Olmec deities in their analysis of motifs on pottery from the Early Formative Tlatilco and Tlapacoya sites. Conversely, other anthropologists and art historians rejected Joralemon's argument. Pohorilenko (1977:10) argued that Joralemon's motifs were without sufficient consistency, so they did not represent discrete beings. According to Pohorilenko (1977:12), the *pars pro toto* depiction of things in Olmec art did not refer to real things, but became signifiers of more important concepts, and the symbols of the Olmec style had various meanings that were dependent on different contexts. Tate (2012:33) also suggests that Olmec art did not reflect discrete deities, but represented ancient Mesoamerican beliefs which sacralized “the combinations of forces and processes that constitute the entirety of a living cosmos.” Another influential explanation of symbols of the Olmec style was related to the context of shamanism and beliefs in human-animal transformations (Furst 1968; Gutierrez and Pye 2010).

Thus, the problem of Olmec style origins and the problem of meanings, coded in objects of Olmec style, are very controversial. The models, in regard to the process of the construction of the “Olmec style” and the “Olmec culture” as archaeological concepts, were based on the perception of a style as a diagnostic feature marking specific cultural horizons. These models correctly reflected the integrity and the contextual interdependence of the so-called Olmec signs and motifs. At the same time, based on this approach and considering styles as passive products of human activity, scholars analyze the Olmec style only as a cultural phenomenon that reflects social structures, either ethnicity in the context of the “Olmec-centrist” approach, or other approaches such as lineages

or systems of interregional social interaction. These models, therefore, often contradict each other. The iconographic studies provide various interpretations of the subject matter of Olmec objects, which also often contradict each other, despite most of them being based on strong arguments. These aspects show that something can be missed in the study of Olmec cultural phenomenon. An additional approach, the application of the theory of archaeological semiotics, can be useful for investigating cultural aspects of the Olmec style that have previously escaped the attention of scholars.

OLMEC STYLE AS A SEMIOTIC SYSTEM

The hypothesis of the Olmec style as a tool for representing the macrosignified of Formative Mesoamerican culture is based on the following propositions.

The Symbols of Nothing

The signs of Olmec style are not iconographic traits, in the traditional sense, because they have no fixed iconographic meanings.

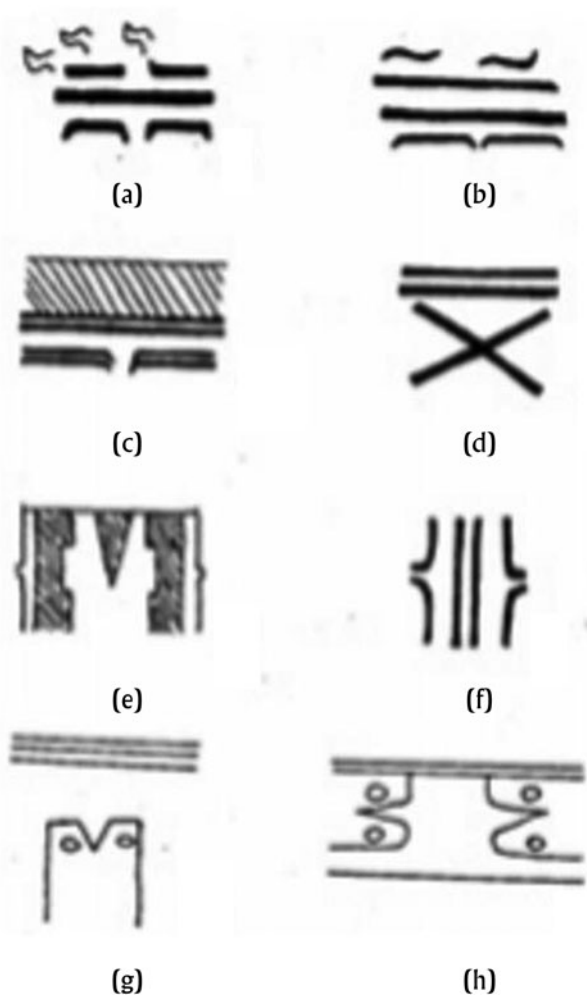


Figure 1. Pyne's typology of freestanding Olmec motifs on Oaxaca pottery: (a and b) variants of Motif 1, (c) Motif 3, (d) Motif 7, (e) Motif 8, (f) Motif 11, (g) Motif 13, (h) Motif 14. Adopted from Pyne (1976:Figure 9.7).

Attention to particular meanings of Olmec art, and attempts to apply these particular interpretations to explain all other meanings without critical reflection, leads only to a misinterpretation of Mesoamerican Formative culture in general. For example, a cleft in the head is considered to be one of the main characteristic traits of the Olmec style (Joralemon 1971:7). At the same time, there are many different interpretations of this trait. Bernal (1969:72–73) and Coe (1972:3) considers this cleft as a representation of the sagittal furrow on the jaguar head. According to Coe (1968:42), such characteristic traits of the Olmec style as the cleft-head, downturned mouth, and almond-shaped eyes are related to the representation of the so-called “were-jaguar” being (the offspring of copulation between female humans and male jaguars, who were the ancestors of Olmecs (Coe 1965:14). In contrast to Coe, Flannery and Marcus (2000:13; Marcus 1989:170–172) suggest that the cleft may be a symbol of the Earth in its “angry” form (an earthquake, for example). On the other hand, Furst (1981:149–150) suggests that the “were-jaguar” motif represents the Mesoamerican Mother Earth Goddess Tlaltecuhli in her manifestation as a jaguar-toad, the V-shaped form itself being a female symbol (Furst 1981:150–157).

It appears that scholars mainly try to understand the iconography of the Olmec cleft when it can be simply a stylistic trait. The V-shaped cleft is present on a variety of artifacts that appear in different contexts. For example, the depiction of a cleft head is present on the Early Formative vessels from Tlapacoya (Joralemon 1971:Figure 120), and this cleft is a characteristic trait of the Middle Formative Olmec jade *hachas* from various areas of Mesoamerica (Joralemon 1971:Figures 162 and 163). In many cases, the presence of this trait is considered a reason to conclude that a particular artifact belongs to the Olmec style (Grove 1989:9). But the question is—why did this cleft become one of the main traits of the Olmec style if it really represents nothing other than itself?

This question is closely related to the problem of the typology of Olmec symbols because it is based on interpretations of Olmec iconography. Pyne (1976:272) defined 18 types of freestanding motifs on pottery from Oaxaca. She defined 14 of them as “Olmec-style” motifs, which refer to the Olmec deities and can be clustered into two groups (Figure 1): motifs 1–7, related to the iconography of the Olmec “fire-serpent” or “sky-dragon,” and motifs 8–14, related to the iconography of the Olmec “were-jaguar” (Pyne 1976:272–273). On the basis of chi-square statistical analysis, Pyne (1976) argued that these two groups of motifs were mutually exclusive, that they were characterized by the antagonistic spatial distribution, and that they were associated with different settlements and different households. Flannery and Marcus (1976, 1994, 2000; Marcus 1989) completely accepted Pyne's (1976) ideas about the typology of freestanding motifs on Oaxaca pottery, but they also introduced their own idea that instead of representing Olmec deities, the iconography of these motifs was associated with a representation of two mythical world divisions: the Sky and the Earth. Flannery and Marcus (1976, 1994, 2000; Marcus 1989). Pyne (1976) explained the nature of these types as markers of lineages.

Instead of a simple comparison of formal characteristics of motifs, Pyne's (1976) typology of freestanding motifs and its adaptation by Flannery and Marcus (1976, 1994, 2000; Marcus 1989) are based on iconographical studies and assumptions about cultural ideas prevalent about Formative Mesoamerica. Pyne's (1976:272) typology took into account Joralemon's (1971) assumptions about

the existence of stable associations between “Olmec-style” motifs, considered by him as iconographic manifestations of Olmec deities. Though Flannery and Marcus (1976, 1994, 2000; Marcus 1989) fully accepted Pyne’s (1976:272) division of two groups of motifs, they did not consider them in the context of cultural types of the Gulf Coast Olmec archaeological culture. Instead, they saw them as pan-Mesoamerican motifs (Flannery and Marcus 1994).

Pyne (1976:273) argued that “symbols used to depict the fire-serpent (such as U-elements) are not used to depict the were-jaguar, and vice versa.” But what are these symbols or what are the elements of these symbols? Each motif of the Olmec style consists of carved or incised lines. Could the combinations of these lines represent the same things in different ways? Is there any real difference between these combinations? Plog (1976:272) mentioned Flannery’s suggestion that the famous Mesoamerican “double-line-break” motif actually represents stylization of two different Olmec motifs: the “U”-motif, which is associated with the “fire-serpent,” and which can be identified as a representation of serpent’s gums (Coe 1965; Pyne 1976:273), and the motif of “brackets,” which is associated with a representation of the “were-jaguar.” But if the “U”-motif and the motif of “brackets” are so similar, as in the case of “double-line-break” motif in which they hardly can be distinguished from each other, are they really different motifs related to different iconographic subjects? Moreover, are the subjects of iconography of the “were-jaguar” and the “fire-serpent” motifs really different subjects?

For example, Grove (1993:91) says that both the “were-jaguar” and the “fire-serpent” motifs could be different iconic representations of the same subject, which he calls the “earthcaiman,” with one motif representing its frontal view and the other representing its profile view. In this context, Grove (1993:91) refers to the image on a vessel from Tlapacoya (Figure 2a), in which the “were-jaguar” and the “fire-serpent” are depicted together, clearly representing the frontal and profile views of the same being since they consist of the same stylistic elements. Of interest is that there is an example of a freestanding motif on a vessel from Tres Zapotes (Figure 2b), which contains symbols of “brackets,” as in the case of motifs found on Oaxaca pottery, but, at the same time, these “brackets” shape the figures that are located in a manner similar to the frontal and profile views of the “earth-caiman” from the aforementioned vessel from Tlapacoya, and they undoubtedly represent

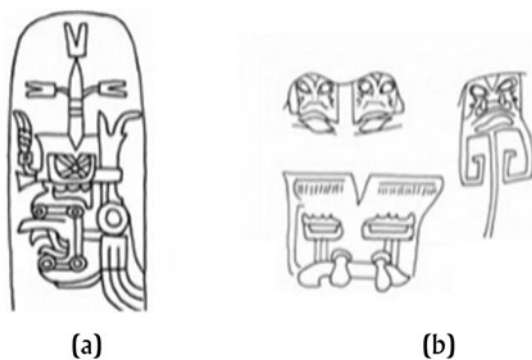


Figure 2. Profile and frontal images of Olmec mythical being. (a) Image on a vessel from Tlapacoya. Adopted from Grove (1993:Figure 2). (b) Image on pottery from Early Horizon of Tres Zapotes. Adopted from Pool et al. (2010:Figure 4).

the same thing (Pool et al. 2010:99). Thus, the “were-jaguar” and the “fire-serpent” motifs, as well as their iconic elements, cannot be considered as mutually exclusive.

Given this example, the elements of the “were-jaguar” and the “fire-serpent” motifs should be considered as stylistic traits because they are associated with different manners of representation of the same subject. In the narrow sense, their iconography is related to the particular visual traits of the mythical beings they depict. As we can see, however, in abstract forms of Mesoamerican ornament, such as the “double-line-break” motif, the difference between the visual forms of elements of the Olmec style is reduced, e.g., “U”-motif as a part of the “double-break” motif can be related to gums of the “fire-serpent” as well as to the “brackets” of images that define the “were-jaguar” motifs. In this light, this element has no certain meaning and is open to interpretation.

Meanings and Time

The complex of signs and traits on artifacts, known as the Olmec style, was not the same in different periods. Local and temporal variants of the Olmec art contributed to the process of transformation of cultural senses and the creation of new meanings. The nature of the Olmec style as a creative system helped them in achieving this ability. The study of stylistic variants of Olmec art as chronological markers can help to reveal the essence of these transformations. Originally, the division between the stages of development of the Olmec style was used to identify the chronological horizons of the Formative period (Grove 1993:87). The Early Olmec horizon is associated with the Early Formative period and the spread of pottery with specific Olmec motifs that were traditionally described as the “were-jaguar” and “fire-serpent” symbols, as well as the spread of specific “baby-face” figurines (Grove 1993:87). The snarling mouths of “baby-face” figurines are perceived as traits of the “were-jaguar,” related to the snarling mouths of images on Tlapacoya pottery (Figure 3a). These images, however, never occurred on vessels from San Lorenzo, which was considered to be the center of Early Formative Olmec culture (Flannery and Marcus 2000:27). The San Lorenzo Olmec style types of pottery, such as the Calzadas Carved and the Limon Incised, mainly carried the “fire-serpent” motifs (Flannery and Marcus 2000:27). Although, as described previously, there was probably a close semantic connection between the “were-jaguar” and the “fire-serpent” motifs on pottery, there was no direct semantic connection between the iconographic and stylistic traits of the “fire-serpent” motifs on vessels and the “baby-face” figurines. Rather, they were connected contextually under the frames of such archaeological concepts as “Olmec style,” “Olmec culture,” “Early Horizon style,” or “Early Olmec Horizon.”

This does not mean that such contextual connections did not reflect a cultural association; in particular, connotative relations of the elements of semiotic structure. But such relations of meanings in that particular period of time were not necessarily identical to cultural meanings of later periods. The complex of Early Formative Olmec traits, motifs, and artifacts, called the X-complex by Grove (1989), is usually analyzed from the perspective of the iconography of more representative Middle Formative artifacts with similar traits. The Middle Formative manifestations of the Olmec style are perceived in this context as developments of previous Early Formative manifestations. Such a perspective neglects to consider the large discontinuity between the Olmec complexes of these two periods.

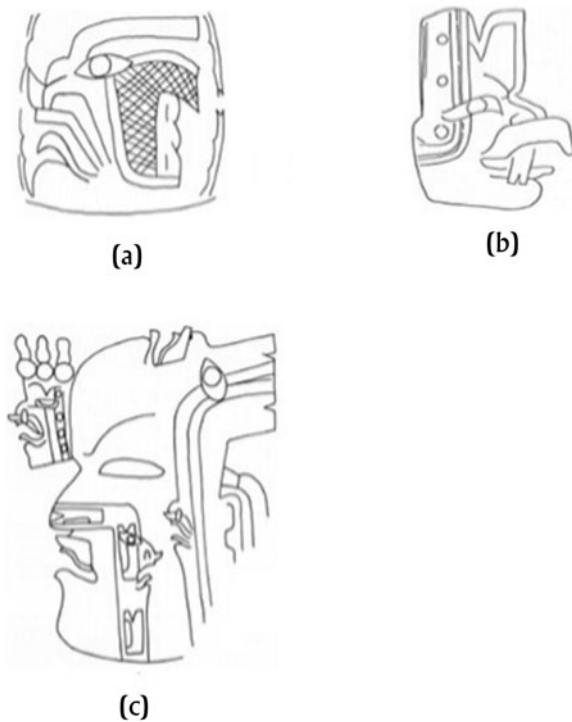


Figure 3. The long term Olmec style tradition of images. (a) Image on the Early Formative Paloma Negative pottery from Tlapacoya. Adopted from Joralemon (1971:Figure 236). (b) Image A from the Las Limas Monument. Adopted from Joralemon (1971:Figure 232). (c) Image on the Middle Formative jade plaque of unknown provenance (adopted from Joralemon 1971:Figure 233).

First of all, consider that the hollow “baby-face” figurines, as well as the classic “were-jaguar” and “fire-serpent” motifs on pottery, simply disappear in the Middle Formative times (Grove 1993:95). The pottery with Olmec motifs was replaced by wares with the double-line-break motifs, while the “baby-face” figurines were replaced by rarer greenstone artifacts with the Olmec “were-jaguar” features (Grove 1993:95–96; Rosenswig 2012:25–27). Importantly, these features referred mainly to the tradition of images that developed in the Early Formative Basin of Mexico. In particular, the style of images on the famous Middle Formative Las Limas Monument 1 is similar to the style of images appearing on works by the Early Formative Paloma Negative potter from Tlapacoya (Figure 3b). The tradition of the “fire-serpent” motifs, which was the most widespread in the Early Formative period, had declined by the Middle Formative times. At the same time, many motifs of the Olmec style, which belonged to the Middle Formative period, were clearly associated with themes of fertility because they depicted the symbols of plants. In general, most scholars consider phenomena such as the spread of rare prestige greenstone objects and themes of fertility in Olmec art as evidence of the development of complex societies in the Middle Formative Mesoamerica and the rise of social elites, who used objects in the Olmec style as signs of power (Grove 1993:97; Lessure 2004: 84–85; Rosenswig 2012:25–27).

In the context of this discontinuity between the Olmec style of the Early Formative period and the Olmec style of later times, a question arises regarding identity of cultural meanings embodied in this style during different periods. Joralemon’s (1971:59–66)

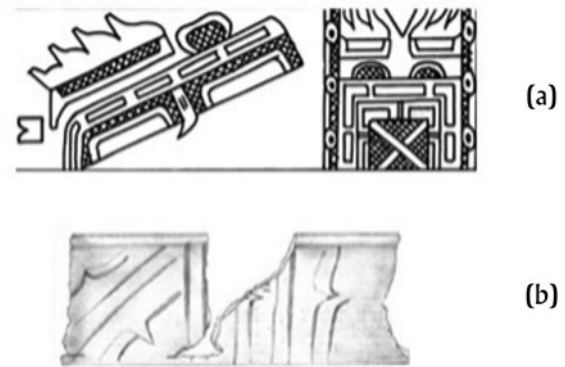


Figure 4. (a) The motif defined by Joralemon as Olmec God IIa. Adopted from Joralemon (1971:Figure 172). (b) The motif defined by Joralemon as Olmec God X. Adopted from Joralemon (1971:Figure 256).

God II (Figure 4a) has a plant motif that often sprouts from an “Olmec-style” cleft in his head, while a wide group of Olmec style motifs (motifs 81–97) were also considered by Joralemon (1971:13–14) to be symbols of vegetation in various aspects. Taube (1996, 2004:18–19) considers many motifs of the Olmec art in the context of a fertility theme. After Taube (1996:41), Joralemon’s God II certainly appears to be a representation of the Maize God, while Gods IV, VI, and X are also aspects of the Maize God that are related to phases in the growth cycle of corn: God II the green maize ear (Taube 1996:42); God IV the seed of corn (Taube 1996:44); God VI the young flexible stage of corn growing (Taube 1996:48); and God X (Figure 4b) has traits of these stages (Taube 1996:48). According to Taube (1996:42), the Olmec style cleft in the head represents the Maize God because there are examples of realistic representations of maize ears with this motif in Middle Formative art (Taube 1996:Figure 3c), so he rejects the interpretation of this Olmec trait being a symbol of earth from which the plants grow. At the same time, he considers the Olmec style motif of the back-turned head to be a representation of maize ears at a particular stage of their growth cycle (Taube 1996: 48). Therefore, the vertical form of the top of the head on images of the God VI that sits in opposition to its back-turned shape, can be seen together as images of different stages of the growth cycle, and the coexistence of these different faces of the God VI on the same image may be the visual representation of the growth cycle itself (Taube 1996:44–48).

Although the coexistence of different faces appearing on the same image of God VI can be considered a visual representation of the growth cycle of a plant, this approach cannot explain the presence of other faces that appear inside the image of the face of God VI that are similar to each other, but on opposite sides (Figure 3c). These elongated faces depicted inside the bands of God VI (Joralemon’s Motif 8) also share characteristic traits of the Olmec style (Joralemon 1971:8; Taube 2004:Figures 43–45). Taube (2004:91–93) considers them to be the small faces of the Maize God, but this explanation does not explain the affiliation of some of these faces with feline sculptures (e.g., the Jade Tiger from Necaxa, Puebla; Joralemon 1971:Figure 216).

Taube (1996:41) thinks that the bands in the Olmec style represent the ears of corn because in some cases (Taube 1996:Figure 3c) they are used in the naturalistic depiction of maize. In contrast to Taube, I think that the meaning of these Olmec symbols varied

between different times and different contexts. Taube studies the iconography of Olmec art and he seeks to understand the subject matter of Olmec symbols from a diachronic perspective, but I believe that we cannot be sure that the meaning of these symbols was static. Taube (2004:18) emphasizes that the maize symbolism in Olmec art was mainly related to the Middle Formative times and to the period of La Venta, and he (Taube 1996:65–67) notes that, by Early Formative times, maize was not a major part of Mesoamerican diet. In contrast to Middle Formative times, by which time the images of Joralemon's God II had spread, there were no clear representations of plants in the Olmec style of the Early Formative period. Elements of the Olmec motifs of this period, however, could later be used for the depiction of different subjects.

Rosenswig (2012) takes into account both the interpretation of Taube (1996), who argued that the Olmec symbol of cleft was associated with the depiction of maize, and the interpretation of Grove (1993), who suggested that the cleft motif was related to the frontal view of the "Olmec dragon." According to Rosenswig (2012:26–27), the double-line-break motif, which spread in Mesoamerica at the beginning of the Middle Formative period, was related to the abstraction of previous symbols of the "Olmec dragon." Simultaneously, it was related to the transformation of meanings of these symbols from the representation of the Olmec mythical creature ("Olmec dragon") to the representation of maize (Rosenswig 2012:26–27). This transformation was used by the social elites of the Middle Formative time for establishing links in their ideology, which was related to the increased importance of maize, to the previous Early Formative tradition. If this theory is correct, it demonstrates how the semiotic nature of the Olmec style as a source for new cultural meanings was used in the history of Mesoamerica.

From Visualizing of Ambiguity to Ambiguity of Visualized

The polysemy of Olmec symbols, as well as the high level of polysemy of Mesoamerican iconography in general, has been noted by scholars for a long time (Rosenswig et al. 2015:100). In particular, Taube (2004:35) states the following regarding Olmec art: "One of the most important conventions is that of substitution, in which otherwise distinct objects can substitute for one another, thereby implying a close relationship or equivalence between forms." Likewise, Rosenswig and colleagues (2015:100) emphasize that "Mesoamerican iconography is multivalent and can refer to various things simultaneously." From the perspective of semiotics, this phenomenon is nothing other than the flow of signifiers, which have arbitrary relations to the signified. My hypothesis is that the polysemy of the Olmec style originated in attempts to visualize the states of ambiguity related to shamanic practices and the beliefs in shamanic transformations.

Stone (2011:67) describes the issue of this theme as represented in the art of Central and South America:

...ambiguity characterizes the enterprise of physical rendering a shaman in trans: the choice to embody the disembodied et al [sic], the function of an object in relation to the incorporeal shaman (the spirit realm), and the formal properties that converge to convey the out-of-body state... If the shaman cannot precisely convey where or in what state she was—the indescribability factor—how could the artist hope to convey such impossibility?

Olmec style represents an interesting way of resolving this issue by using indexical relations between its elements for visualizing



Figure 5. The San Pedro Aytec figurine. Adopted from Gutiérrez and Pye (2010:Figure 2.3).

these states of ambiguity. Since the beginning of archaeological study of the Olmec problem, scholars noticed that Olmec art is largely centered on the theme of shamanic transformations and the theme of human-animal connections (Coe 1972:5; Furst 1968:145–148; Grove 1972:153). There is evidence that specific Olmec stylistic traits were ingeniously applied for visual representation of these themes. A case of the Late Formative San Pedro Aytec figurine (Figure 5) from Guerrero and a number of other Mesoamerican artifacts and monuments, which were considered by Gutiérrez and Pye (2010) in their study of nahualism, is a good example of such an application. They describe the noteworthy and interesting trait of this artifact:

On the lower half of the back side the San Pedro Aytec figurine exhibits another face. When one flips the figure forward or backward, head first like an acrobat, up pops the second face in a visually surprising way, as the anatomical and decorative elements used on the backside of the front figure are reused for the abstract figure on the back (Gutiérrez and Pye 2010:31).

One side of the figurine represents a human, while another side possibly represents a jaguar, so the figurine itself is a visual model of the human-animal transformation (Gutiérrez and Pye 2010:30–32). Gutiérrez and Pye (2010) consider the San Pedro Aytec figurine to be a good example of the iconography of nahualism. As we can see, however, there is no iconography in the traditional sense of this term because there are no specific traits that are definitely associated with the meaning of nahualism in the subject matter of the figurine. Visual representation of human-animal transformation, which is used in the Olmec style, is unique because it is based on the use of "meaningless" stylistic elements in the process of creation of meanings. The goal of this creative capacity was "to embody the disembodied"—to represent the state of ambiguity as related to the shamanic trans.

In the case of the San Pedro Aytec figurine, a representation of nahualism (more precisely, the Formative Mesoamerican cultural practices related to later practices of nahualism) as a system of cultural meanings is reduced to the theme of human-animal transformation, but it also relates to a structure of cultural meanings that can be considered as one of the key macrosignifieds of ancient Mesoamerica. For example, the phenomenon of Mexican nahualism was related not only to the human-animal transformations, but also to the belief in the power to control the weather (Gutiérrez and Pye 2010:37). The embodiment of the ambiguity of shaman transformation could be perceived by the people of ancient Mesoamerica as the embodiment of other meanings, which were associated with the beliefs in the power of shamans. This circumstance could lead to the abovementioned polysemy of Olmec symbols, but that polysemy was not unrestricted because it was organized within the structure of the macrosignified, related to the shamanic practices.

The San Pedro Aytec figurine is a Late Formative artifact, but the origins of the semiotic principle of the Olmec style, visualizing the ambiguity, can be traced to the Early Formative times. In particular, it can be present in the images (Figure 3a) on the Paloma Negative pottery from Tlapacoya (Niederberger 1976:Plate XLIV). These famous images were considered by Flannery and Marcus (2000: Figure 8d) as the representation of the Earth in its angry form (the earthquake). Joralemon (1971:79) considered these images on the Tlapacoya pottery as the representation of the Olmec “god” VI, whose main characteristic trait was associated with the band that passes through the eye. There are examples of these images, the form of the cleft in the head that is similar to the form of their downturned mouths (Joralemon 1971:Figures 236 and 238). In this light, the form of each trait is determined by the form of another trait.

This similarity might be accidental, but my argument can be demonstrated by the comparison of the images on Tlapacoya pottery with the image (Figure 3c) on the Middle Formative jade plaque (Joralemon 1971:Figure 233). This image represents the development of earlier images on Tlapacoya pottery with a back-turned cleft head, but, on this image, the cleft in the top of its head is, at the same time, the mouth of another face that is also located on the top of its head, perpendicular to the main face. The top of the second face is the back-turned head of the first face. Thus, the second face would become the main face if the image were rotated perpendicularly. As in the case with the San Pedro Aytec figurine, the rotation of this image on the Middle Formative jade plaque represents the way of transformation. In this context, I suggest that the images of back-turned heads in the Olmec style can represent the vector of rotation in which the second nature of the depicted being could become visible. Similarly, the band, passing through the eye of the images from the Tlapacoya pottery, can act as the axis of this rotation because it usually passes through the center of the figure, and if the head of the figure were bent backward, the band would also be bent backward.

A similar band passes through the figure of the feline (Figure 6) from the famous Relief IV in Chalcatzingo (Grove 1972:Figure 2). The head of this jaguar is notched, and it has a long plume on the forehead that is identical to the headdress of masked figure from Relief II (Grove 1972:157). The head of another jaguar from Relief IV has a symbol that is similar to the Mayan glyph for Venus (Grove 1972:157). According to Grove (1972:158–159), this symbolism shows that the jaguars from Reliefs III and IV in Chalcatzingo are not real animals, but rather, they are the representations of mythical beings. The jaguars from Relief IV can be related to Mesoamerican beliefs regarding the duality of mythical creators



Figure 6. Relief IV at Chalcatzingo. Adopted from Grove (1972:Figure 2).

and rites of fertility (Grove 1972:158). Another possible interpretation of the felines from Relief IV is associated with the concept of shamanic transformations. Grove (1972:159) considered this theory when suggesting that these felines might be the representations of the “visions, alter-egos or nahuales” of the prone human figures that are depicted in Relief IV near the felines. But he rejected this interpretation because the jaguars appear to be attacking the depicted humans (Grove 1972:159). An alternative interpretation of the symbolism of these jaguars in the context of shamanism and nahualism is possible. In this context, if the band can be considered as the symbolic axis of transformation, in the case of Relief IV it can represent a specific marker, hinting that these jaguars are not what they seem.

The Mesoamerican concept of nahual was related to the verb *naualtia*, which expressed the idea of “hiding oneself, hiding behind someone else, or hiding in the shadows” (Gutiérrez and Pye 2010:33). A depiction of second faces on Olmec artifacts, such as on the abovementioned Middle Formative jade plaque, should be considered in the context of this concept. Moreover, the back-turned heads of beings, which were depicted on the Tlapacoya pots and other examples of back-turned heads and head-dresses in Olmec art, can be markers of things that are hidden in these images. In this way, the hidden nature of images in the Olmec style is visualized as a highly abstract concept (shamanic power, which is similar in many aspects to the later Mesoamerican ethnographic concept of nahualism) that has a capacity to integrate various meanings through connotative affiliations of Olmec stylistic traits and their semiotic interdependence of iconic forms. The same traits, such as the cleft, the band, or the back-turned heads, may serve in some cases to represent human-animal transformations or links to the spiritual world of animals, while in other cases, they may represent themes of fertility as well.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The visualization of hidden shamanic power in Olmec art existed as the visualization of the macrosignified of Formative Mesoamerican culture in which stylistic traits played a constructive role. This symbolism does not mean that this macrosignified was the only one macrosignified, i.e., the structure linking different meanings and cultural codes throughout the culture. It was not strongly unified and unchangeable in both time and space in Mesoamerica. The shamanic Mesoamerican macrosignified and its material embodiment in the form of the Olmec style originated as the creative product of Mesoamerican societies of the Early Formative period.

The structure of meanings related to shamanic practices can be characterized as the macrosignified of Mesoamerican cultures because of its capacity to link together different cultural codes, meanings, and themes, e.g., human-animal transformations, medicine, or the control of weather, embodying in them belief in the power of shamanism. The polysemy of the Olmec style may have originated as the result of attempts to maintain some ambiguity related to shamanistic practices, through which multiple meanings could be incorporated, linked together through the macrosignified of Mesoamerican shamanism. The signs of the Olmec semiotic system became linked together by connotative contexts.

Different elements of the Olmec style could have originated separately in different parts of the Late Early Formative Mesoamerica. The Olmec style of this period was divided into regional variants, possibly reflecting different regional patterns of meanings which, at the same time, were linked to each other through connotative connections. For example, the “fire-serpent” motifs, together with such elements of the Olmec style as the St. Andrew crosses, which were affiliated with these motifs (Pyne 1976), were the most common Olmec motifs of the Early Horizon style. Images on the Tlapacoya pottery, which in some cases can be considered as the profile views of the “fire-serpent,” were characterized by traits such as snarling mouths, which referred to traits of the Olmec figurines. At the same time, these images were probably associated with local variants of the Olmec style in Tlapacoya (Tolstoy et al. 1977: Table 5). Of course, Tlatilco was also located in the Basin of Mexico, but this site was characterized by its own local variability of Olmec motifs. There were wide-spread representations of

Joralemon’s God III (“avian monster”), which can be considered to be another aspect or another form of the “Olmec dragon” because it is characterized by traits of the “fire-serpent” (“Olmec God I”) such as the “flame-brow” and “paw-wing” elements (Joralemon 1971:67). In contrast to the Gulf Coast region, where common images of the “fire-serpent” were usually highly abstract and highly standardized, there were less abstract and even realistic images of the “fire-serpent” or the “avian serpent” among the motifs on pottery from Tlatilco (Joralemon 1971:Figure 247).

In general, the local variability of the Olmec style contradicts the “Olmecentrist” approach, defining the culture of the Gulf Coast region as the only source of the Olmec style. The highest level of social complexity, existing in the polity of San Lorenzo and even evidenced by INAA analysis, showing that many Olmec style objects across different regions of Mesoamerica were produced precisely in the area of San Lorenzo, does not necessarily mean that the Olmec style originated exactly there. The hypothesis about this style as the visualization of Mesoamerican macrosignified reveals inner reasons for its spread in the Late Early Formative period. It could be appropriated by the social elite of the Gulf Coast region, as in the Middle Formative times when it was integrated into the new ideologies of stratified societies. The change that occurred in Olmec style during the transition from the Early Formative to the Middle Formative period reflected the changes in the macrosignified, which was transformed from the structure of meanings related to beliefs in the sacred power of shamans to that of legitimizing the sacred power of rulers, which then incorporated new themes, such as maize planting.

RESUMEN

Se aplica la teoría de la semiótica arqueológica al estudio del estilo “olmeca.” El concepto de un estilo se usa generalmente en la arqueología para marcar conjuntos accidentales de características cuya reproducción en los objetos arqueológicos se relaciona principalmente con la concepción del hábitus. Sin embargo, hay evidencias que muestran que los rasgos estilísticos “sin sentido” a veces podrían usarse para la representación visual de significados o, lo que es más importante, para la representación visual de la transformación de significados y la constitución de nuevos significados. Esta capacidad se puede describir en términos de la aproximación a la semiótica arqueológica. El enfoque semiótico es diferente al estudio iconográfico, porque ofrece la posibilidad de un análisis complejo de todos los rasgos significativos de los objetos arqueológicos materiales sin distinción entre rasgos

estilísticos e iconográficos. En este contexto, el análisis semiótico del estilo “olmeca” como un sistema de signos muestra que sus signos particulares, que podrían definirse como rasgos estilísticos debido a la falta de significados iconográficos específicos, al mismo tiempo, participaron en la creación y transformación de la cultura significada. Este fenómeno refleja la macrosignificado de las culturas formativas mesoamericanas, que se asociaba con una estructura que unía varios significados en toda la cultura. La macrosignificado de la cultura mesoamericana formativa, a su vez, probablemente se relacionó con creencias y prácticas culturales posteriores del nahualismo mesoamericano que se han registrado en tiempos históricos. El estilo olmeca lo visualizó a través de la estructura de las relaciones connotativas entre sus símbolos como significantes.

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