

settlement in both an inner surrounding area of 90 sq. km, judged to be the primary sustaining zone for the Olmec centre, and flanking areas to north and south totalling 403 sq. km. The 271 sites documented and classified by the degree of landscape modification employed often showed long occupation, although the most striking observation is how many clustered around the San Lorenzo plateau in the early and into the middle Preclassic, and how few, by comparison, were occupied at any one time thereafter until the Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic period nearly two millennia later. In the Matacapán area of the Tuxtlas, reported by Robert Santley, Philip Arnold and Thomas Barrett, the late Preclassic retained a healthy population, although the authors claim a lower degree of sociopolitical complexity.

Annick Daneels describes the Belgian work in the lower Cotaxtla basin, inland from the city of Veracruz and an area where modern development is especially threatening ancient sites; the fieldwork was done in the early 1980s, and it is valuable to have it reported succinctly here. As Daneels notes, alluviation has probably buried much Preclassic settlement, while in the Classic, here as in the Tuxtlas, contact with the central highlands and Teotihuacan was less obviously 'colonial' than some investigators have claimed.

Alluviation was also, and perhaps more apparently, important in understanding changing settlement patterns in the lowlands of the Grijalva delta east of the major Olmec site of La Venta, as this reviewer noted long ago (Hammond 1976: 126–7). Christopher von Nagy contributes a sophisticated

gearchaeological analysis of community microcosm along the Pajonal and Arenal palaeochannels running into the El Carmen and La Machona lagoons. Barbara Stark defines pottery style zones in southern Veracruz as another way of analysing political geography, arguing for a qualitative difference between the small communities, few major centres and low population densities of the period before 400 BC, and the emergent chiefdoms or states of the late Preclassic through Postclassic.

Stark notes that 'the "Olmec" problem has virtually hypnotised researchers, with the result that élites have been the chief object of investigation' in the southern Gulf Coast region, dragging attention away from later periods and the northern sector. It is one of the merits of the research reported in this book that, while the Olmec are still clearly influential, they are being seen in a broader context of landscape and settlement studies, and the diversely fascinating lands of the littoral are at last attracting the same kind and quality of scholarly attention as other parts of Mesoamerica.

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