INTRODUCTION

This Special Issue focuses on recent research centered on the ancient site of Izapa and its territory, located in the Soconusco region of southeastern Chiapas, Mexico, and southwestern Guatemala. Those who know even a little bit about Izapa understand that it was a major center of Late Formative civilization and the center of origin of a unique sculptural style that spread throughout eastern Mesoamerica during this time. Fifty years ago, prevailing scholarly thought on Izapa was summarized in the first edition of Coe’s (1966:60) *The Maya*: “Izapan civilization…occupies a middle ground in time and space between the Middle Formative Olmec and the Early Classic Maya.” This statement, a convenient oversimplification, referred mainly to the elaborate Izapan art style. As Guernsey (2006:50–51) points out, the idea came from Miguel Covarrubias, but its heritage extends back to eighteenth-century art historical theories of development and decline. Izapa received attention mainly because of its putative transitional spatial and temporal position between the Middle Formative Olmec and the Early Classic Maya. In addition to the problem that it was not entirely accurate (see Lowe et al. 1982:18), that judgement devalued centuries of important events and developments during the Late Preclassic and later at Izapa itself and in the Soconusco region. Recent research allows a more nuanced, historically contingent view. This Special Issue presents new data on and discussions of the many developments at Izapa and in the surrounding region, as well as evaluations of Izapa’s impact on greater Mesoamerica.

The ruins of Izapa evoke mental images of a populous, monumental urban center set in a lush, tropical environment. The city boasted great intellectual achievements and material wealth based on a stable maize subsistence economy and dynamic pre-Columbian trade in cacao, tropical bird feathers, and other preciosities controlled by powerful, divine kings (Guernsey 2016; Rosenswig and Mendelsohn 2016). From their Pacific piedmont location in Soconusco, Izapan rulers, priests, and merchants maintained interactions with elite peers near and far. At present, it appears that Ataco, in western El Salvador, may be the most distant site (a 277-km, straight-line distance from Izapa) at which Izapan-style sculpture has been identified (Paredes Umaña and Martínez Espinosa 1982; see Guernsey 2006:62–63). Rosenswig and Guernsey continue with the recent context for research on Izapa and comments on the papers presented here. They conclude with a review of topics for future research.

In the second paper, John Clark presents and interprets data on objects from two Izapa burials that Thomas A. Lee Jr. excavated in 1963. The authorship of this paper deserves comment. Clark states that “ethics of intellectual property dictate” that Lee be considered a posthumous author of the paper (Clark and Lee 2018:265). Clark thus creates a dialog in the paper between himself and Lee, based on interrogation of Lee’s excavation records and Clark’s own interpretations of the significance of the objects that accompanied the burials. The dialogic style makes for fascinating and engaging reading. The crux of the matter lies in the relative importance of ceramic vessels versus obsidian artifacts that Lee encountered in the excavations of these burials. Several of the ceramic vessels in question consist of Teotihuacan-style, lidded, cylindrical tripods made at Izapa in the Middle Classic period (A.D. 400–600), perhaps during only a short time span in this period. The artifacts of special interest consist of a large, bipoited (“laurel leaf”) biface made of green Pachuca obsidian; a necklace of more than 1,000 tiny, flat Pachuca obsidian beads made from perforated pressure-blade segments; more than 400 short, tabular beads of an unidentified red stone; and a small jadeite pendant. Clark argues...
persuasively that these unusual objects indicate direct contact with the peoples of Teotihuacan, while the locally made Teotihuacan-style vessels might indicate only an indirect connection with Teotihuacan. Green obsidian artifacts found at Izapa represent compelling evidence for Teotihuacan contacts, and Clark concludes that such interaction seems to have been of a noneconomic nature, not based on market principles of supply and demand or commodities trading, but rather more on the symbolic or sociorelational significance of Teotihuacan-related objects. Following Spence (1996), Clark considers such objects to be gifts from Teotihuacan elites to their Izapa counterparts and thus very significant markers of direct relations between them.

In the next paper, Rosemary Lieske presents a comprehensive analysis of 12 human interments discovered in the excavations of Izapa Mound 30a, the largest pyramidal construction in the Group B plaza, an important ritual space richly appointed with carved stone sculptures, stelae, and altars. Due to poor preservation in acidic soils, the interments, consisting of a stone crypt and 11 urn burials, did not contain human remains. The crypt burial dates to the Late Formative Guillén phase (300–100 B.C.), while eight of the urn burials date to the Terminal Formative Hato phase (100 B.C.–A.D. 100), two later intrusive urn burials pertain to the Early Classic Jaritas phase (A.D. 250–400), and one is undated. Lieske’s study focuses primarily on grave goods and patterns of the elaborate urn burials of the Hato phase in Group B. She offers comparisons between the burials of Group B and those of Izapa Group F, reported by Lowe et al. (1982:231–233), noting that the Group B interments were more elaborate and accompanied by more diverse grave goods. Study of contemporaneous mortuary patterns from the neighboring regional centers of El Ujuixe, Takalik Abaj, and Kaminaljuyu allows Lieske to draw some significant comparisons and contrasts with Izapa. She finds no clear, overarching pattern but, compared to these other centers, Izapa at its Terminal Formative apogee appears quite distinctive.

Rebecca R. Mendelsohn follows with the fourth paper, providing a summary of the archaeological evidence for social and political changes that occurred at Izapa during the Terminal Formative Hato phase. Lowe and colleagues in the 1980s saw these changes, heralded by changes in burial patterns, discussed by Lieske, and the presence of Usulután resist-decoration pottery and other wares that originated in Guatemala and El Salvador as evidence for an invasion from the southeast. With new evidence from household excavations, Mendelsohn offers an alternative interpretation, viewing these material changes as the result of increased network participation and a change in the institution of kingship beginning about 100 B.C.

Julia Guernsey, in the next paper, presents a detailed study of Izapa stone sculpture with imagery of warfare and sacrifice, focusing on the social discourse of captive representation, especially as seen in the graphic images of Izapa Stela 21. Guernsey assigns most of the sculptures to the Late Formative Guillén phase (300–100 B.C.). She begins with an important caveat: the majority of carved stone monuments at Izapa and other centers with Izapan-style art do not focus on warfare, captives, or sacrifice but rather on kingly authority and its mythological justification. An emphasis on authority and its basis accompanied scenes of aggression in the overall “visual framework for expressing political subordination” to create a discourse of positive and negative assertions (Guernsey 2018:334). Guernsey devotes attention to a panoply of monuments depicting captives with their hands bound behind their backs and others that show individuals with their hands clasped in front of their bodies. She discusses some archaeologically known occurrences of individuals interpreted as sacrificed bound captives. One of the most important points that Guernsey makes is that the imagery of violence, bound captives, and warfare in Izapan monuments formed part of a broader discursive context with a wide range of meanings encompassing political, economic, and cosmological agendas. She also discusses the significant possibility that warfare, or conflict more generally, could have provided an impetus for the development and growth of urbanism.

Stephanie M. Strauss follows with a paper that takes on the difficult issue of the scant occurrences of hieroglyphic script on Izapan carved monuments. Strauss observes that Izapan political, economic, and cosmological authority found graphic expression in an elaborate visual narrative system that did not employ narrative glyphic texts. An incidental finding of the study concerns linguistic affiliation, an issue that Strauss generally eschews, discussing very good reasons for doing so, but she notes that the syntagmatic ordering of the few stringed glyphs known at Izapa accords with linguistic conventions of both the Mixe-Zoquean and Mayan language families. At the same time, she remarks that, “[a]s difficult as it may be to admit, there are no clear phonetic signatures at Izapa, and the language of its glyphs is a question that modern archaeologists, linguists, and art historians will likely never answer” (Strauss 2018:350). She argues that a more fruitful approach would be to examine the differences between visual culture systems in the ways that they balanced image, time, and text. In Strauss’s analysis, time and visual narrative held sufficient importance to the Izapa elite that text served a secondary or tertiary role in their preferred mode of expression and performance. Linguistically transparent texts, such as those in the Zapotec and Mayan writing systems, did not suit the Izapan monumental program. The paper offers many more intriguing ideas on the distinctive nature of the Izapan communicative strategy.

With the seventh paper, by José Luis Macías, José Luis Arce, Lucía Capra, Ricardo Saucedo, and Juan Manuel Sánchez-Núñez, we change the subject to the impact of the eruption of San Antonio volcano, a component of the Tacaná volcanic complex, sometime between 30 B.C. and A.D. 80. Pyroclastic flows from this event filled local ravines with deposits more than 10 meters thick. The urban center of Izapa did not suffer a direct hit by the eruption, but thick debris from these deposits damned nearby rivers. According to the authors’ reconstruction, heavy rains set in soon after the eruption, and swollen rivers choked with mud created an enormous lahar that flowed through the piedmont with catastrophic effects on crops, settlements, and human lives. Swirling waves of mud and water six meters in height engulfed the monuments and constructions at Izapa. The social, political, and economic impact of this major environmental disaster seems to have consisted of, at minimum, a hastening of the collapse of the Izapa kingdom of the Late Formative period.

In the following paper, Rosenswig, Brendan Culleton, Douglas J. Kennett, Lieske, Mendelsohn, and Yahaira Núñez-Cortés present an overview of recent excavations, new dating, and Middle Formative ceramic analyses conducted by the Izapa Regional Settlement Project (IRSP). Their results show that, by the late Middle Formative Escalón and Frontera phases (750–300 B.C.), the Izapa kingdom had already established its regional center at the apex of a four-tiered administrative hierarchy. The authors present a detailed report of the 2012 IRSP excavations and ceramic analysis. This work provided new information on late
Middle Formative architecture preserved under a later platform expansion and ritual feasting activity during that early time.

An interesting paper by Hector Neff, Paul H. Burger, Brendan J. Culleton, Douglas J. Kennett, and John G. Jones on archaeological survey and excavations in the mangrove-estuary zone south of Izapa follows. The authors cover salt production during the Archaic and Formative periods, and, significantly, the greatest extent of salt production in the estuary occurred at the same time as the Late Formative political apogee. Both the lower Izapa political center and the estuary salt production collapsed at the same time.

The final paper in the collection, by Christopher A. Pool, Michael L. Loughlin, and Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos, provides a Gulf Coast perspective on Epi-Olmec and Izapan interaction based on recent iconographic studies and archaeological investigations in and near Tres Zapotes, Veracruz. They see the shared characteristics of Epi-Olmec and Izapan ceramics and stone sculpture as the result of transisthmian social networks that overlapped in space, prompting the formation of social identities that probably had little to do with known ethnolinguistic groupings or elite/commoner distinctions. Pool and his colleagues note the need for more fine-grained quantitative analysis to test this proposition, and future researchers should find their ideas useful.

In sum, the 10 papers presented in this Special Issue shed much new light on Formative-period Izapa and its region. The authors of these papers provide a wealth of new data, interpretations, refinements, and clarifications that contribute to a better understanding of the origins and legacies, relations with contemporary societies, landscapes, art, architecture, and material culture of the ancient Izapa kingdom of 2,000 years ago.

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