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In Memoriam

The Legacy of Ann Cyphers for Olmec Archaeology

Ann Cyphers (1950–2023)

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On May 20, 2023, Ann Cyphers passed away at her home surrounded by books and a voluminous manuscript on the ceramics of San Lorenzo, which she had been working on for some time. The end of her earthly days coincided with the repatriation of Monument 9 to the site of Chalcatzingo, where she had begun work in Mexico in 1972. It was as if she had decided to cross the portal into a Mesoamerican afterlife at this time as a sign of her great passion for Mesoamerica and Olmec archaeology. David Grove, her teacher and one of her greatest friends, would join her in death just three days later to continue their deep and passionate discussions about the Mesoamerican Preclassic, as Susan D. Gillespie told us.

Ann Marie Cyphers Tomic was born in 1950 in Canton, Illinois. She grew up in southern Illinois, which was an important center of archaeological research during the 1950s. She was exposed to archaeology early in life, which sparked a lifelong interest in the past. One of her first jobs was at the important Middle Mississippian site and museum of Dixon Mounds, Illinois. She attended the University of Illinois for her undergraduate education, with the intention of becoming an archaeologist and working in India. Her undergraduate training in archaeology was built on additional Mississippian research. She trained at the large site of Cahokia where she learned the intricacies of working with earthen architecture and how to excavate domestic structures made of perishable materials, techniques that would prove indispensable for her future research in the Mexican Gulf Coast. Her interests shifted when she took David Grove's course on the Mesoamerican Preclassic period. That experience shaped her interest in Mesoamerica and changed the direction of her career. She graduated magna cum laude with a degree in anthropology from the University of Illinois in 1971 and joined the Proyecto Chalcatzingo under the direction of David Grove and Jorge Angulo. Her work in Mesoamerica had begun.

During her first years in Mexico, Ann excavated domestic areas at Chalcatzingo and served as the project's laboratory director. Her research on ceramics and terracotta human figurines earned her a master's degree in anthropology from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee in 1975 and a Ph.D. at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in 1987. Ann's research on Chalcatzingo figurines has been instrumental for understanding the status and role of women in Preclassic Mesoamerica. Many of the female figurines she excavated and studied were used in an exhibition on the subject in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. In 1979, she joined the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas at the UNAM as a full-time researcher and engaged in a series of projects, including building a regional ceramic chronology for Xochicalco and other sites in western Morelos.

In the early 1990s, Ann began her research on the Olmec at San Lorenzo, where she would work for the rest of her life. She launched the Proyecto Arqueológico San Lorenzo, Tenochtitlán (PASLT), adopting a rigorous scientific focus. She insisted on precise, carefully executed excavations and reevaluating untested but established beliefs about Olmec culture. Earlier archaeologists working at the site had focused on locating stone monuments, in line with their Zeitgeist. But from the onset of her project, Ann had other research questions in mind. She focused on less studied topics, such as subsistence, domestic life, population growth, paleoenvironmental conditions, and regional settlement patterns. In the end, the questions that Ann chose to explore have given us an inexhaustible array of new information about the development of Olmec society.

One of Ann's greatest attributes was her humility. Although no one understood San Lorenzo better than she did, she never pretended to be an expert in everything. This is why she formed an interdisciplinary team, made up mostly of women, with different research specializations. She emphasized collaborative work that embraced other scientific disciplines, including chemistry, biology, demography, geography, geology, medicine, physics, and dentistry. Her research reconstructed a wide range of information on San Lorenzo's Preclassic society that included the size and growth of the site, its population and diet, its government and economy, the aDNA of its inhabitants, and both domestic and monumental architecture. She employed new analytical methods as they emerged, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and lidar. Always with scientific evidence at hand, she challenged existing paradigms, demonstrating that the development of Mesoamerica's first major urban center was based on the

management of aquatic resources, the consumption of tubers, and the management of its wetland forest, rather than on the monocropping of maize.

Two of Ann's most ambitious projects were the large-scale excavations carried out at San Lorenzo and her site-wide coring project. The coring project emerged from several seasons of surface reconnaissance combined with insights obtained from deep stratigraphic excavations. The inspiration for this research drew on the deep traditions of geology and geomorphology, in which a hand auger could be used to recover cores to study deeply stratified soil deposits. The approach was extremely productive and perfect for San Lorenzo's conditions, where all constructions used different types and combinations of earth. The coring project recovered information on 25,820 strata, identifying floors, fill zones, and architectural structures constructed using different types of soil up to 20 m below the surface. These data were incorporated into a site-wide GIS used to interpret the total size of the site, its construction sequence, the location of structures, and its overall population.

The coring project supplied new information in two different areas. The first was the ability to visualize the size, shape, and volume of monumental architecture on the San Lorenzo plateau in an unparalleled way. The second was the collection of detailed information on the type and location of domestic structures across the site—including the Red Palace, named for its singular red hematite floor. Throughout Olmec history, red floors were a symbol of high status and a testimony to the regional procurement,

exchange, and preparation of pigments for use in construction, which was the focus of Ann's research in recent years. The combination of the coring project, together with her more extensive excavations, provided comprehensive information on the diverse functions and activities related to early Olmec governance (1200–1000 B.C.).

These research results are part of Ann's book *El Palacio Rojo: Herencia de gobernantes olmecas* (2021), which documents how high-status buildings were characterized by their design and ostentatious architectural elements. The Red Palace was architecturally complex, and it included residence structures, ceremonial quarters, a basalt aqueduct, and a workshop for recycling stone monuments. The structure had multiple superimposed floors composed of various materials, including imported hematite, and it had other features reflecting the wealth of its inhabitants. Her categorical conclusion was that the structure was inhabited by a family of Olmec elite.

Explorations in the Red Palace were carried out during two separate excavation seasons: 1990–1996 and 2012–2014. In true Cyphers style, these excavations were conducted using strict stratigraphic controls and meticulous recording of layers, contexts, and the material they contained. The first stage of explorations arose because previous research (Beverido in the 1970s, and Coe and Diehl in the 1980s) had identified red floors and stone sculpture in the west and highest portion of the plateau. Remnants of these remains were evident during the first stage of the project, raising the possibility of this area containing a workshop for carving stone monuments. During the second

stage of research, excavations focused on defining the extent of the palace structure and exploring different portions of the building and the sequences of deposition within it.

The explorations directed by Ann Cyphers have clarified a great deal about both San Lorenzo and the foundation of Preclassic Mesoamerica. The Red Palace was three times the size of other contemporaneous elite structures in Mesoamerica, and its ostentatious details and large quantity of high-value objects are a testimony to the wealth and status of its Olmec rulers. The exploration of this early building was the first of its kind in Mesoamerica, and it has shed considerable light on the private and public functions of its resident elite, ceremonial activities within the complex, and the name of the ruler who built it. Ann's research spans more than three decades and provides a legacy that will not only guide a future research agenda but also ensure the protection of a site of global importance that was the cradle of one of Mesoamerica's first complex societies.

The relevance of her research was recognized by her colleagues and is reflected in the multiple awards she received during her lifetime. She was a National Emeritus Researcher and had achieved the highest level of funding within the UNAM research system. She was a regular member of the Mexican Academy of Sciences and was awarded the prestigious gold medal for Olmec research from the Museum of Anthropology at the Universidad Veracruzana, in Xalapa. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) awarded her the coveted Alfonso Caso prize on three occasions. Between 2017 and 2018, she received the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz award and the National University prize, both from the UNAM. On the international front she was recognized as a Distinguished Alumna by the University of Illinois, and she received several awards for research excellence from the National Geographic Society. In 2019, she was awarded the Research Prize of the Fourth Archaeology Forum in Shanghai, China.

Her memory lives on in her numerous academic contributions. These include 50 lectures in national and international universities and museums, and more than 100 papers delivered at scientific conferences. She authored 18 books, 75 articles, and 75 book chapters, and she edited five volumes on archaeological research, two of which are still in press. She taught 45 different courses and consistently conducted fieldwork with her colleagues and students. Ann Cyphers was dedicated to training the next generation of archaeologists at both the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. Some of her former students are leading professionals, and they hold positions in important national and international research institutions and universities.

Although a consummate academic, she also believed in the importance of public education and gave hundreds of public talks, published articles in popular magazines and newspapers, and participated in multiple media interviews. In these contexts, her main objective was to disseminate knowledge to the public and to promote the preservation of Mexico's national archaeological heritage. She generously donated her time to the social development of southern Veracruz, which included the development of community museums at Tenochtitlán and Potrero Nuevo and the formation of the archaeological research facility at Mapachapa.

She likewise designed traveling museum exhibitions for both urban and rural exhibitions and was instrumental in promoting the inclusion of San Lorenzo in the UNESCO list of World Heritage sites, a process that is still ongoing.

As a foreign national, Ann Cyphers successfully navigated the challenge of developing and coordinating a large-scale project at one of Mexico's most important archaeological sites. She defied social conventions as a woman by doing heavy-duty fieldwork, leading a field team with dozens of members, and spending long periods in rural places far from home. Ann Cyphers is a star in the history of San Lorenzo archaeology as well as a pioneer in forging community linkages in southern Veracruz to safeguard its archaeological heritage. More importantly, she participated in the development of a *new* Mesoamerican archaeology, changed interpretive models that broke decisively from traditional ways of thinking, and contributed new theories, methods, and knowledge about the Olmec and the pre-Columbian world to the discipline.

It seems appropriate that we conclude this memorial with a few of her own words, which not only reflect the vision she had when undertaking research but also express the satisfaction she felt in looking back on her long and productive career:

> Cuando comencé el Proyecto San Lorenzo hace 30 años, los conocimientos preexistentes sobre los olmecas indicaron que mi investigación no iba a ser difícil. Varios arqueólogos eminentes habían dicho que San Lorenzo era un sitio pequeño de 53 hectáreas que alcanzó un nivel relativamente bajo de desarrollo, un cacicazgo. Parecía una oportunidad fabulosa para identificar y excavar una muestra significativa de viviendas tempranas y así obtener una comprensión del desarrollo de las unidades domésticas. Esperaba seleccionar una excelente muestra a partir de los 200 montículos bajos que Michael D. Coe y Richard A. Diehl definieron como bases de viviendas olmecas; pero, las primeras pruebas en los montículos no hallaron los esperados vestigios domésticos. Es cuando empecé a preocuparme. Era evidente que las cosas no eran como parecían. Tenía que reformular aspectos de la investigación. Emprendí una renovada búsqueda de las áreas domésticas, ahora con otro enfoque. Conforme progresaba la investigación, me di cuenta que lo que había leído y lo que me habían enseñado sobre los olmecas constituía un mundo de conocimientos que se empezaba a agrietar y desmoronar. De repente mi proyecto de investigación ya no era una cosa sencilla sino todo lo opuesto. En ese tiempo era preocupante pero ahora, después de tres décadas de investigación, creo que todo ha valido la pena (Cyphers 2020, remarks at the opening ceremony of tha Contemporary Anthropology Seminar at the Universidad Veracruzana in 2020).

Ann is survived by her children, José and Jennifer Guillén Cyphers; her brother, Joe Cyphers Tomic; and her partner of the last 25 years, Artemio López Cisneros. She is also survived by the extended family she formed through her collaborators and students in the San Lorenzo Archaeological Project. The work of Ann Cyphers on Olmec culture is an outstanding contribution to Mesoamerican archaeology and our understanding of the ancient world. Her scientific, cultural, and social contributions are invaluable as a model,

not only to those who want to understand the oldest society in Mesoamerica but to the field of archaeology as a whole.

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