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Archaeologists and lithic specialists have often overlooked the symbolic and iconic nature of lithic artifacts in Mesoamerica. Obsidian Reflections attempts to fill some of these gaps in method, theory, and interpretation with a special focus on a single material type. Obsidian is analytically unique for sourcing accuracy, and the often regular and predictable way in which it was worked allows for reliable reconstructions of regional exchange networks, intrasite production, and consumption patterns. Too great an emphasis on obsidian materials, however, tends to obscure the ways in which chipped-stone production and consumption practices overlapped and were intertwined with the working of other related materials. In chapter two, Darra eloquently echoes this point, noting the symbolic and linguistic overlap between Tarascan notions of obsidian and chert. Ceramics, flint, obsidian, jade, shell, and animal remains, among other materials, were used together in ritual deposits to create elaborate and multivalent kinds of significance throughout Mesoamerican history. I have argued that a focus on obsidian symbolism and meaning without addressing other materials so often placed in opposition to obsidian results in a diminished understanding of obsidian symbolism itself. Although obsidian is the focus of this volume, Puche et al. and Levine make strides toward incorporating multiple material types in their interpretations.

To its credit, this volume does not restrict itself to a single culture area in Mesoamerica. This Pan-Mesoamerican approach is one of the strongest points of Obsidian Reflections, revealing much continuity in obsidian use in Mesoamerica through time and across space. After an invaluable literature and theory review, Levine notes that the contributors to Obsidian Reflections make a point of elucidating the local and regional cultural perspectives and histories in examining these meanings. Thus, while one may look for similar strains of thought across Mesoamerican belief systems, these chapters provide important local information per time period.

The second section consists of a thorough review of Mexican ethnohistorical and ethnographic information on obsidian and, in Darra’s case, flint or chert artifacts. Although these chapters focus on West Mexico, Central Mexico, and Oaxaca, leaving somewhat of a gap in the volume for Eastern Mesoamerica and the Maya Area, Pauwels and Athie do explore some sources from Highland Guatemala. They provide a comparison of belief systems that reveal common strains of thought regarding obsidian symbolism, but also highlight how each region had a unique approach to these materials. In particular, Monaghan provides an intriguing argument about the continuity between sharp chipped-stone tools and weapons and the machete, which was introduced by the Spaniards during the Contact period. The machete seems to be a locus of syncretism around male-gendered cutting instruments and male identities.

The next section features largely archaeological data collected on a regional and intrasite scale from the Maya area and Oaxaca. The main value of both Aoyama’s and Levine’s contributions lies in the data and the distributional analysis of these data with a concomitant application of theories discussed in the first chapter. While specific symbolic interpretations of individual deposits and objects are not necessarily attempted from an emic
In the third section, focused on interpretation, Carballo concentrates on a single deposit discovered through his investigations at La Laguna, Tlaxcala. Importantly, Carballo applies a semiotic approach to an obsidian cache from the site, a method that I believe is essential to better understanding these complex cache deposits in Western and Eastern Mesoamerica alike, from all time periods. This cache, which contains what can only be called unique obsidian eccentrics, was nevertheless deposited in a fashion typical of Mesoamerican caches. He further uses iconographic analysis to place the eccentrics in a symbolic continuum within obsidian and flint eccentric traditions from the Maya Lowlands and Central Mexico. These one-off pieces suggest to me that the knappers at this site may have had other influences, perhaps from places located to the east, in Veracruz. Stemp and Awe use use-wear analysis in a strong interpretation of obsidian blades from cave contexts in Belize. Moving beyond simple artifact counts and broad generalizations, Stemp and Awe explore the possible religious context of caves in Maya and Mesoamerican thought. Furthermore, they conduct micro-wear analysis of the blades to determine how the blades may have actually been employed; while the blades may have been used in a variety of ways, their transport to cave contexts was likely for sacrificial or ritual purposes.

Although the Pachec et al. chapter on Xochitecatl-Cacaxtla might fit better in the previous section because it focuses on distributional analyses and more general interpretations of production and use, it is a valuable contribution for its integration of multiple artifact types and their association with what appear to be obsidian bloodletters. The authors make a good argument that the needles and punches were not used for utilitarian purposes, since they are not associated with typical blades and debitage common in household middens, but rather were used in ancestor worship and perhaps agricultural rites. These Epipalaeoindian data fill a gap in our understanding from these sites, which in many other ways seem to constitute a bridge between Maya and Central Mexican artistic and cultural traditions.

Parry ties the volume together nicely with decades of expertise on Central Mexican chipped-stone traditions. This chapter, however, reveals a Central Mexican bias in what is supposed to be a Pan-Mesoamerican compila- tion, with most of his comparative analysis focused on Teotihuacan and Aztec archaeology. From a largely functionalist perspective, Parry's contribution provides a sobering critique of how far we can correlate the rather spotty ethnohistoric and ethnohistorical records with the archaeological record, (e.g., the ancient value of obsidian and its associated symbolic and iconic meanings). Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Parry's chapter is his discussion of obsidian in mortuary contexts at Teotihuacan, which synthesizes previous studies, some not published in English, in a concise manner. Overall, the volume represents movement in a positive direction for obsidian studies and should be necessary reading for Mesoamerican archaeologists in general.


This handsome volume represents the results of excavations carried out between 2000 and 2005 in a large number of early burial sites located in the Mascota Valley of northwest Jalisco, about 60 km east of Puerto Vallarta. Discovered on the slopes of a low hill by a local farmer while building his field for a maize silo, the site of El Pantano proved to be a village cemetery with no fewer than 39 burial pits, representing the interment of about 175 individuals, with abundant burial offerings. El Embocadero II, another cemetery of the same age as El Pantano, was located some 10 km to the southeast; it had once consisted of masonry shaft-and-chamber tombs, but had been seriously looted before the archaeologists arrived to conduct salvage excavations. A third site, also heavily looted, was Los Coznajales, located further up the Mascota Valley, not far from the town of Mascota.

Mountjoy places these three sites in his Middle Formative period, which he defines as extending from 1200 to 300 B.C., with three subdivisions: (1) Initial Olmec, 1200–900 B.C. (San Lorenzo); (2) Intermediate Olmec, 900–600 B.C. (La Venta); and (3) Terminal Olmec, 600–300 B.C. (Tres Zapotes). This, of course, is only a chronological ordering, as there is nothing that can be identified as Olmec or even Olmecoid in any Jalisco site. In contrast, most archaeologists dealing with Olmec and Maya would fix the beginning of the Middle Formative at about 900 B.C., with the demise of San Lorenzo and the subsequent rise of La Venta and lowland Maya monumental. Six calibrated radiocarbon dates from El Pantanal and two from Los Coznajales firmly establish that these cemeteries were in active use from ca. 900 to 600 B.C. A wide variety of burial types is present in the skeletal remains. Many burials were single and extended, while other pits contained anywhere from two to as many as 12 individuals. Some were secondary “bundle” burials, in which the bones had probably been wrapped in matting before being deposited. The detailed osteological analy-