

Classic Stage

DEFINITIONS

In our previous article¹ we observed that the criteria of the Classic stage are, to a large extent, qualitative and relative rather than quantitative and absolute. We listed such qualities as excellence in the great arts, climax in religious architecture, and general florescence in material culture. We adhere to these definitions, but we wish to add one more, which overrides them in importance. The Classic stage in New World native cultures marks the beginning of urbanism. It is the threshold of civilization in so far as "civilization" is defined as city life. Our earlier hesitancy to see the Classic as the stage of urbanism derived largely from our caution in interpreting the archaeological record of Middle America and Peru. For the succeeding stage, the Postclassic, both areas provide certain architectural evidence of large, tightly massed population concentrations. Such fitted, without cavil, the formal and physical requirements of an urban community. For the Classic the record in and on the ground is much less definite. In some instances, such as the Teotihuacán Classic in the Valley of Mexico with its numerous closely spaced apartment-like structures, or the Gallinazo III subphase of north coastal Peru with its thousands of "honeycomb" adobe-walled rooms, there is material evidence of city living. In other cases, however, of which the Classic Maya of the Petén lowlands is a prime example, urban dwelling clusters are either lacking or undiscovered. Nevertheless, for the Classic Maya,

1. Willey and Phillips, 1955.

and for other archaeological phases adjudged as Classic by our definitions, there is strong inferential evidence of an urban society. The attributes of civilization in the commonly accepted sense of the term—outstanding public architecture, great art styles, class differentiations, codified intellectual systems (preserved in writing) and some knowledge of science, formal hierarchies of deities, widespread trade in raw materials and luxury goods—are there. That such a complex achievement could have been effected without an urban basis of some sort is most unlikely.² Accordingly, we characterize the American Classic stage as urban.

In establishing standards for Classic stage achievement, our frame of reference has been the hemisphere. As stated in the foregoing discussions, we appreciate the historical semi-independence of the various New World cultures and concede that a "classic" stage, in the sense of a climactic point, could be defined within the limited context of any of these cultures; such a formulation would have meaning for a study of the culture growth of a particular area, subarea, or region. In an evaluation of the Western Hemisphere as a whole, however, an evaluation which considers all agricultural America as a kind of vast historic entity, only in two areas do cultures measure up to the criteria of urban civilization. From our point of view the Classic stage in the New World is limited to Middle America and the central Andes.

At the risk of some repetition we restate, then, that the American Classic stage is characterized by urbanism and by superlative performance in many lines of cultural endeavor. There is evidence not only of the mastery of technologies and arts but of their con-

2. This view emphasizes the functional, rather than the purely formal, definition of urbanism. It may well be that such attainments as those cited above were reached by the ancient Maya without the concomitant of massed, house-to-house settlement that the word "urban" connotes. The crucial factor is the number of people who could be drawn upon and organized in the interests of the society and the culture. Maya society undoubtedly drew upon and coordinated the energies of a great many people. This would have been possible even with primitive methods of transportation, under conditions of dispersed settlement.

junction in single cultures and societies. The various and scattered inventions and innovations of the Formative are now drawn together into rich, diverse, and yet unified patterns. The Classic is the stage of great artistic achievements in so far as greatness can be appraised not only subjectively but by the evident time, care, and emotion devoted to the artistic products. It is the stage of monumental and ambitious architecture, in the form of pyramids and special buildings which seem to have been dedicated primarily to religious purposes. Fine, specialized craft products designed as burial furniture, ceremonial appurtenances, or luxury items were turned out in profusion. In the Classic cultures of both Middle America and Peru there is evidence of strong social class distinctions and of heavy pomp and dignity surrounding the ruling classes. With the perfection of writing and astronomy, intellectual interests as well as the arts flourished in Middle America. Here, also, and to a lesser extent in Peru, there was active trade between the regional centers in ceremonial and luxury goods. In spite of this trade, however, it is noteworthy that a strong regional ethnocentrism is reflected in sharply differing art and architectural styles.

MIDDLE AMERICA

The Classic civilizations of Middle America centered in the Valley of Mexico and its environs, Oaxaca, the Guatemalan highlands, the Petén-Usumacinta-Motagua lowlands, and coastal Veracruz. The status of regions such as Michoacán, Guerrero, the Huasteca, Jalisco, Colima, and northwestern Mexico is less clear. These lie within the historical orbit of the general Middle American tradition, but their native cultures were probably below Classic standards in the arts and architecture. The chronological span of the Middle American Classic civilizations probably varies regionally, but the characteristic developments seem to have originated approximately around the beginning of the Christian Era. Gauging chronology by early dated Maya monuments (with the 11.16.0.0.0 correlation), the round figure of A.D. 300 is frequently given as a

starting point for the Maya Classic of the Petén.³ Radiocarbon dates on late Formative phases in the Valley of Mexico indicate that the Teotihuacán culture of that region had its Classic inception about contemporaneously or only a little earlier. Cross-datings with the Monte Alban sequence in Oaxaca⁴ and the Kaminaljuyu sequence of the Guatemalan highlands⁵ suggest that the apogee of the Zapotecan and highland Maya traditions is roughly coeval with the central Mexican highland and the Maya lowland Classic cultures. Tajín Totonac⁶ of central Veracruz is, perhaps, only slightly later. The La Venta-Middle Tres Zapotes phase⁷ of the Olmec regional-cultural tradition of southern Veracruz and Tabasco may be earlier than other early Classic developments; but, if so, it quite likely overlaps with them chronologically.⁸ The terminal dates of the Middle American Classic cultures may coincide rather closely. The figure of A.D. 900 (11.16.0.0.0 correlation) is one postulated closing date for the Maya lowland Classic; A.D. 650 (12.9.0.0.0 correlation) is another. The apparently abbreviated and not well-defined Teotihuacán IV (Tlamimilolpa) phase of the Mexican highland Classic may have closed prior to the collapse of the great lowland Maya ceremonial centers, or it may have run contemporaneously with them.⁹ A reasonable estimate for the fall of Teotihuacán is about A.D. 800. According to the best archaeological cross-referencing that can be effected, the end of the other Middle American Classic cultures is co-ordinate with these. In brief, and in gross, the Classic phases span the first millennium A.D., or most of it.

3. The 12.9.0.0.0 correlation, favored by Spinden, would place this date 260 years earlier. Recent radiocarbon dates (Kulp, Feely, and Tryon, 1951; Libby, 1954a) have favored the 12.9.0.0.0 correlation.

4. Caso, 1938.

6. García Payón, 1943.

5. Kidder, Jennings, and Shook, 1946.

7. Drucker, 1952.

8. There is considerable debate about whether Middle Tres Zapotes-La Venta is contemporaneous with, or earlier than, the Tzakol phase of lowland Maya. We are inclined to believe that it is essentially earlier. Recently announced radiocarbon dates (*New York Times*, December 29, 1956) are as early as 400-800 B.C.

9. See Armillas, 1950.

The content of the Middle American Classic civilizations is well known and needs no detailed itemization in this survey account.¹⁰ The Classic culture of the Maya lowlands has its inception with the occurrence of the Maya corbeled vault, the initial series dates and stelae, and the ornate and unique Maya art style as this is expressed both in sculpture and in painted pottery.¹¹ The first appearance of this complex is in the Petén, and there is every reason to believe that it evolved, *sui generis*, in this locality or in nearby regions. During the earlier part of the Maya Classic, sometimes designated as the Tzakol phase,¹² ceremonial centers with stelae and characteristic art were first constructed in the central Petén (Uxactún, Tikal). From here the Classic features spread to Oxkintok,¹³ in Yucatán, and southeastward to Copan in Honduras. Somewhat later the great sites of Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras¹⁴ were established on the Usumacinta drainage to the west. Certain ceramic cross-datings, utilizing the basal-flanged bowl form of Tzakol and the frescoed tripod jar of Teotihuacán II-III, indicate that during this earlier half of the Maya Classic the other major civilizations of Middle America were becoming firmly established. It was at this time that the principal monuments of Teotihuacán—the Pyramid of the Sun, and Pyramid of the Moon, and the Ciudadela—were constructed, and the distinctive pottery and moldmade-figurine styles of that culture came into being.¹⁵ Similarly, the Monte Alban IIIa phase of Oaxaca and the Esperanza phase at Kaminaljuyu, in that order, were the first real blossomings of Classic cultures in those regions.

Aside from the few rather specific cross-finds of pottery and occasional items of architectural detail, Tzakol, Teotihuacán II-III,

10. See Thompson, 1954; Brainerd, 1954; Linné, 1934, 1942; Caso, 1938; Caso and Bernal, 1952.

11. Spinden, 1913.

12. Thompson, 1943, 1945; R. E. Smith, 1955; Proskouriakoff, 1950; Morley, 1946.

13. Thompson, 1945. 14. Maler, 1901-3; Satterthwaite, 1933.

15. Vaillant, 1941; Armillas, 1950.

Monte Alban IIIa, and Esperanza are alike only in that each expresses this first full vigor and brilliance of a regional-cultural tradition. As we have stated, the art styles are all unlike. Certain gods, or god-themes, seem to have been held in common by some of these cultures, but the particular expressions are quite different. Monte Alban shared the trait of writing with the lowland Maya, but the glyphic system is distinct and less developed. Competence in sculptural art was a feature of the Maya, and the Olmec of La Venta, but was less characteristic of the other Classic phases. The trick of the ceramic mold possessed by Teotihuacán was not shared by other Classic cultures until later.

From these facts it is evident that two fundamental forces were at work in these Classic cultures. Intercommunication existed among them and was an important factor in their growth. They profited from being a part of a larger community of ideas more than did the various cultures of the Middle American Formative. Yet this intercommunication and interchange was by no means all-embracing. Technologies, elements, goods—these were exchanged; but complete idea systems remained regionalized. How this stylistic regionalism may be interpreted in terms of sociopolitical structure is a major problem for Middle American prehistorians.

In the late Classic of the Maya lowlands (the Tepeu ceramic phase),¹⁶ the number of active ceremonial centers increased greatly. Huge building programs were undertaken. As in the early Classic (and the late Formative), constructions were flat-topped pyramids and platforms grouped around rectangular courtyards or plazas. Temples and palaces and were elaborately carved and decorated with sculptures. In the late Classic the palace type of building—generally containing more rooms and situated upon a lower platform than a temple—became somewhat more common than in earlier times. The function of these Maya centers seems to have been largely religious and ceremonial. These were the integrating points in the network of Maya culture. It was in these centers that the peasantry of an agricultural society gathered to be in-

16. R. E. Smith, 1955; Proskouriakoff, 1950; Morley, 1946.

structed and inspired by the priest-leaders. The Maya aristocracy—regulators of agriculture, guardians of the seasons and of time—was maintained by, and in turn maintained Maya civilization with, a remarkable pact of mutual faith rather than force. When this pact dissolved, so also did the structure of Classic Maya society.¹⁷

The decline and abandonment of the Classic Maya centers about A.D. 900 (11.16.0.0.0 correlation) probably were preceded by the decline of the other regional Classic cultures. Teotihuacán appears to have been destroyed in the second half of the first millennium A.D.—quite possibly by invaders identified with the Tula-Toltec culture.¹⁸ Bearers of this same Tula-Toltec culture moved into other parts of Middle America at this time or shortly thereafter.¹⁹ The breakdown of the old regional states or confederacies of the Classic stage may, in part, be attributed to these invaders or to waves of social and political disruption and dislocation which they set in motion on the northern frontiers of the high civilizations. Other causes for these sweeping and radical changes in the cultures of Middle America at the close of the Classic have also been suggested. One of these, for which archaeologists have only partial evidence, is overpopulation or the pressures of steadily increasing population. In the Guatemalan highlands there are indications that the population around Kaminaljuyu at the close of the Formative was as great as, or greater than, the population at any time thereafter.²⁰ In the Valley of Mexico, at Teotihuacán, there is little doubt that population was more densely massed around that important center in the Teotihuacán IV phase than in the preceding Teotihuacán II and III phases.²¹ In the Maya lowlands we know that more ceremonial centers were constructed in the latter part of the Classic than in the earlier centuries. This certainly suggests an over-all population increase for the jungle country, and recent

17. Willey, 1956a.

19. Tozzer, n.d.

18. Armillas, 1950.

20. Shook and Proskouriakoff, 1956.

21. Armillas, 1950. See also Linné, 1934; Sanders, 1956.

studies of domestic settlements in the Belize Valley of British Honduras support this suggestion.²²

SOUTH AMERICA

The Peruvian Classic cultures, to which we have referred in our discussion of the Formative, include the late Gallinazo-Mochica phases of the north coast, Maranga²³ of the central coast, Nazca of the south coast,²⁴ Recuay²⁵ and Cajamarca II and III of the northern highlands,²⁶ and Classic Tiahuanaco²⁷ and, probably, Pucara²⁸ of the southern highlands. Dating control is poorer here than in Middle America. Recent estimates,²⁹ while lengthening the Formative stage phases back in time, have still held Classic cultures, such as late Gallinazo and Mochica, to the last half of the first millennium A.D. Radiocarbon dates, however, tend to push the beginnings of the Classic phases back to the opening of the Christian Era or even earlier.³⁰ Terminal dates for the Peruvian Classic are based on guesswork plus historical reckoning.³¹ There has been a general and provisional acceptance of A.D. 1000 as a closing date. If Classic beginnings are set back on the chronological scale, perhaps this figure should also be set back. The best we can conclude is that Peruvian Classic cultures flourished, as did those of Middle America, during the first millennium A.D. and that they were more or less contemporaneous.

The regionalistic tendencies of the Peruvian Formative crystallized in the Classic stage into distinctive civilizations and styles. On the north coast the early trends toward public building were brought to fulfillment in the massive, flat-topped, adobe pyramids and palace

22. Willey, Bullard, and Glass, 1955; Willey, 1956b.

23. Stumer, 1954.

26. Reichlen and Reichlen, 1949.

24. Gayton and Kroeber, 1927.

27. W. C. Bennett, 1934.

25. Bennett, 1944b.

28. Kidder II, 1948b.

29. Strong and Evans, 1952; Willey, 1953c.

30. See dates on Mochica and Nazca in Libby, 1952, and Broecker, Kulp, and Tucek, 1956.

31. Rowe, 1945.

complexes of the Chicama, Moche, Virú, and Santa valleys.³² At the same time, the old north coast predisposition for three-dimensional or modeled art reached full scope in Mochica ceramics. In this same region metallurgy, which also had beginnings as early as the Chavín horizon,³³ was further developed to include casting, alloying, annealing, soldering in gold and copper, and gilding, as well as the manufacture of copper weapons and helmets.³⁴ The south coastal regional tradition produced a contemporaneous but separate brilliance. Multicolor painting of pottery, which began with the Formative Paracas phase,³⁵ reached a peak in the Nazca ceramics; and the emphasis on elaborate textiles, another Paracas trait, was also maintained in Nazca. Metallurgy, on the other hand, remained in its infancy in this south coastal section, at least until very late Nazca times.³⁶

Throughout the highlands there is a strong tradition of stone architecture. The temple at Pucara is a Classic stage example, with its dressed-stone blocks and complex plan, its numerous compartments and subterranean chambers.³⁷ The famous Calasasaya inclosure, the monolithic gateway, and the great stairway at Tiahuanaco are even more notable examples,³⁸ and the carved stone statues of both Pucara and Tiahuanaco are the outstanding representations of Classic art in the southern highlands. Farther north, the stone-carving and multiple-storied stone buildings of Recuay show the continuity of an old regional tradition.³⁹ In this instance the earlier stone masonry and sculpture at Chavín de Huantar appears superior to the Recuay developments. As stylistic affinities indicate that Chavín de Huantar is approximately contemporaneous with the Formative coastal Chavín cultures, we may have here an example of unconformity between time-horizon and stage, at least in so far as architecture and sculpture are concerned.

32. Willey, 1953*c*.

33. Lothrop, 1941.

34. Root, 1949*a*; Larco Hoyle, 1938-39.

35. Kroeber, 1944.

36. Root, 1949*b*; Lothrop, 1951.

37. Kidder, 1948*b*; Bennett and Bird, 1949.

38. Posnansky, 1945.

39. Bennett, 1944*b*.

Concerning settlement and community size, it is of interest to note that large population clusters first came into being during the north coast Classic.⁴⁰ And these clusters, as was the case with Teotihuacán in central Mexico, were formed around pyramid or temple centers. An excellent example of this is the late Gallinazo period aggregation of thirty thousand adobe-walled rooms around the Gallinazo pyramid in the Virú Valley. Settlement surveys have not yet been made in many parts of Peru, but such studies as are available tend to confirm this urbanization tendency, at least for the north coast of Peru.⁴¹ Another Classic change in north coast Peruvian sequences is the appearance of buildings composed of large rooms, courtyards, and corridors. These are usually in conjunction with, or near to, the great pyramids.⁴² They have been interpreted as "palaces" or special public or governmental buildings. The comparability of this trend with a similar one in Middle America has been pointed out.⁴³

Between the Peruvian and the Middle American civilizations we have designated as Classic there are many differences, both in configuration and in content. Despite these, however, some similarities in the wider configurations are evident, particularly with reference to the place and apparent significance of the Classic stage cultures in each historical setting. In the Guatemalan-Mexican regions, as well as in Peru, the Classic cultures take form out of a somewhat less differentiated Formative base. That is, in each of these two major areas there is a greater homogeneity of culture in the Formative than in the Classic stage. Also of interest, from the point of view of history and diffusion, this homogeneity is shared in the Formative between these two areas.⁴⁴ Subsequent to the Formative, differentiation rises in accordance with regional interests. Many of these Classic interests or preoccupations can be seen in certain tendencies manifested in the Formative, but they are underlined and dramatized during the Classic stage.

40. Bennett, 1950; Willey, 1953*c*.

41. Schaedel, 1951.

42. Willey, 1953*c*, p. 356.

43. Adams, 1956.

44. Willey, 1955*a*.

Another phenomenon may also be noted at this point. At the same time that regional differentiation moves to its Classic completeness in the various geographical localities of Peru and Middle America, there is a growing trend for each of these two great culture areas, or co-traditions, to diverge from each other. Thus, despite the parallelisms, it is also a fact that the civilizations of Middle America and Peru are more unlike each other, both in content and in pattern, during their Classic stages than at any time previously or later. In the Formative they present a cultural similarity and evenness due, presumably, to the common possession of many historically interrelated traits of a New World sedentary-agricultural way of life. In the Postclassic there is again a leveling of a more complex sort, historically distinct in the two areas and deriving, as near as we can tell, from internal social and political causes. The Classic cultures, between the Formative and the Postclassic, enjoy the greatest freedom and independence from either historical or functional causality.⁴⁵

45. Willey, 1955*b*.