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## Research Notes

### An Olmec Concave Mirror from El Salvador

SAN SALVADOR (Karen Olsen Bruhns, Paul E. Amaroli, Fundación Nacional de Arqueología de El Salvador (FUNDAR)). Small, highly polished, concave mirrors of iron ore are typical artifacts of the Olmec culture. Aside from the mirrors themselves, we see people wearing them as pendants in stone sculptures (such as a relief figure on the side of Altar 5 of La Venta) and on the figurines of clay and green stone found at a number of sites on the Gulf Coast and the Valley of Mexico. These depictions suggest that mirrors may have been important insignia of position or office. According to Flannery (1968: 106) and Pires-Ferreira (1976), these mirrors were made in Oaxaca, where there are sources of the appropriate raw materials, and were traded to the Gulf Coast Olmec as part of an elite-oriented trade in sumptuary items. However, these mirrors are occasionally found outside of Olmec territory as generally defined. Here we report upon one such mirror found in El Salvador.

The mirror is in a private collection in San Salvador from whence it will pass, upon the owner's death, to the National Museum of Anthropology along with the rest of his collection. It is of iron ore, probably magnetite (it cannot, of course, be removed from the country and there are no trained mineralogists available in El Salvador for consultation). A thin slab, it measures approximately 7.5 x 9.7 cm. One side has a concave mirror, very highly polished in the centre; the other side is only roughly smoothed (Figures 1 & 2). There are two conical holes for suspension along one long side, and as is usually the case for Olmec mirrors, these were drilled from the back (Carlson 1981:119). Scarce traces of dull red pigment persist in the minute rugosities of the unpolished rim and back. The mirror has been slightly damaged along the edges and has a hairline crack, but is otherwise in good condition.

The mirror is said to come from the site of Cara Sucia, in western El Salvador, close to the border with Guatemala. Although Cara Sucia is best known as a Late Classic Cotzumalhuapa centre, the site also has a substantial Middle Preclassic

occupation (Amaroli 1987). In 1980–81, shortly before the mirror was acquired, Cara Sucia suffered the most devastating episode of archaeological depredation in the history of El Salvador, leaving behind over 6,000 looters pits and placing large numbers of Cotzumalhuapa and other artifacts on the illicit market. This looting may be the source of the mirror.

There is significant evidence of Olmec influence in western El Salvador during the Middle Preclassic. The well-known Las Victorias Olmec reliefs come from nearby Chalchuapa and several pieces of portable art have been looted from sites around Chalchuapa, Atiquizaya, and Ahuachapán (Boggs 1950, 1971). In fact, the famous “Young Lord” or “Slim” Olmec figurine is commonly reputed to have been looted from a tomb in Atiquizaya. Unfortunately, most evidence for the Olmec in El Salvador is anecdotal, coming from looters, dealers, and collectors, not from archaeology. However, a provenience of Cara Sucia for this mirror is not at all improbable.

The function of these mirrors has been hotly debated and has inspired many improbable theories. It is known that they were worn as pectorals by presumably important people and, perhaps, by supernaturals as well. People have suggested that they were used for making fire, for astronomy, self-contemplation, medicine, or divination (Carlson 1981, Lunazzi 1995, Taube 2004). We must note, however, that these attributions are generally not supported by direct evidence. In part they represent speculation, and in part are far-flung analogies drawn from the Aztecs, the Classic and Postclassic Maya and other Mesoamericans distant in time and place from the Olmec, and in some cases from even further afield, from ancient China and Siberia.

An experiment in trying to start a fire with this mirror, carried out by archaeologists Paul Amaroli and Zachery Revene at noon on a very sunny day which also happened to be the June solstice, showed that the fire-starting hypothesis is not supportable, at least not for this particular artifact. Using very dry tinder after 20 minutes it was only possible to slightly darken an edge or two of the highly flammable material! This experiment was performed at latitude 13.7°, far to the south of the Olmec heartland.

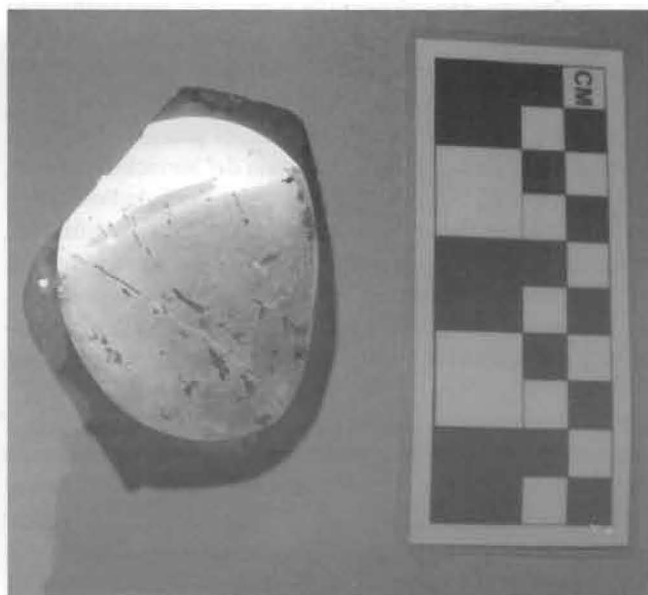


Fig. 1 Olmec mirror, front

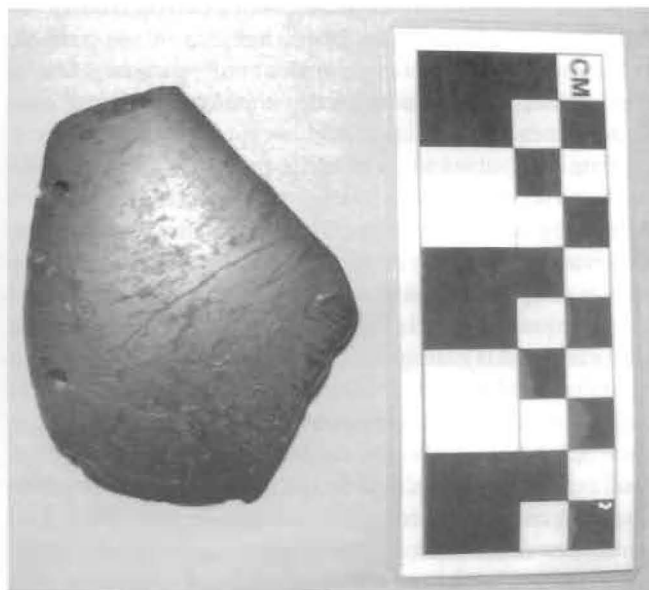


Fig. 2 Olmec mirror, back

To date, only one Olmec mirror has been demonstrated as capable of starting a fire, and it is unusual in both its large size and nearly perfect spherical optics (Ekholm 1973). We express concern that its attribution to Río (or Arroyo) Pesquero relates this anomalous mirror to the large corpus of suspect stone masks and other Olmec artifacts supposedly looted from that locality (Kelker and Bruhns 2010:170–172).

A new hypothesis was generated by the chief author, who had never held an Olmec mirror before. She simply held it up and looked into it. The mirror gives an extremely clear image; comparable to that of a glass mirror, but it is a magnifying mirror! The image is such that it would be perfectly possible to use it to pluck one's eyebrows, paint small and detailed designs on one's face, or get a really good look at skin flaws. Even pores are clearly reflected and magnified. Since we presume that the Olmec, like other ancient Mesoamerican peoples, plucked and painted, perhaps these mirrors had more mundane functions as well as any hypothetical ideological or mystical functions. Their cosmetic use would in no way contradict the evidence that mirrors were also prestigious and rare imported items for Olmec elites, worthy of ostentatious display as pendants.

No archaeological investigation aimed at delineating the Olmec presence in El Salvador has been carried out for more than thirty years. Until there is more field investigation in this area we are left with only tantalizing glimpses of what the Olmec might have been doing on the southeastern edge of Mesoamerica.

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