THE LAST SECTION OF the excavation was finished, but a few large potsherds still jutted from the side wall. I must have walked past that open pit and those tempting sherds at least a hundred times before eventually deciding to extend the excavation. Within an hour, a polished jade ax was found, then another, then another. When the dirt was cleared, what lay in front of me was a 3,000-year-old burial, an adolescent skeleton surrounded by 15 jade axes arranged in the shape of a giant ax. A decapitated adult was found two yards to the south, no doubt associated with the momentous event that brought the juvenile and the axes together.

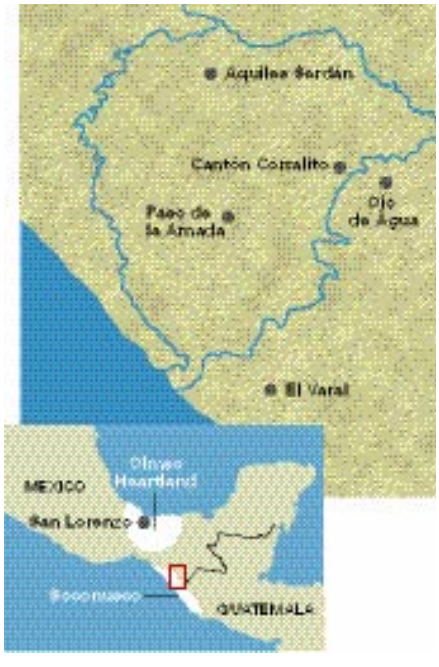
This extraordinary discovery typifies the archaeology of Cantón Corralito, a possible colony of Gulf Olmec people located in the Soconusco, a narrow strip of coastal Chiapas and Guatemala with some of the richest agricultural soils in Mesoamerica ("A City by the Sea," page 46). What makes Cantón Corralito so intriguing is the incredible quantity and quality of foreign "Olmec-style" objects and its location in the center of a territory occupied for centuries by the Mokaya people, a culture with its own distinctive traditions and styles.

The Americas' First Colony?

A possible Olmec outpost in southern Mexico

by DAVID CHEETHAM

Yet the Olmec inhabited the low-lying coastal region of southern Veracruz and western Tabasco, a 4,000-square-mile area roughly 300 miles north of Cantón Corralito that archaeologists call the "Olmec heartland." Olmec culture flourished there from approximately 1250 to 500 B.C., a time frame that can be divided into three periods—Initial Olmec (1250–1150 B.C.), Early Olmec (1150–1000 B.C.), and Late Olmec (900–500 B.C.)—based on distinctive artifacts and practices. (The dates used in this article and in "A City by the Sea" are in radiocarbon years. Calendar years are about 150 years earlier.)



The most important Early Olmec period site is San Lorenzo. This 1,200-acre urban center—the first of its kind in the Americas—is famous for its colossal heads and multi-ton stone altars quarried from volcanic outcrops 40 miles away and then dragged or rafted to San Lorenzo, an incredible feat at the time considering the required organization and labor. Lesser known are the site's distinctive ceramic figurines and vessels decorated with abstract religious themes and supernatural creatures such as bird-serpents and crocodiles. These objects are also found at sites hundreds of miles away, where they were both locally made and imported from San Lorenzo.

Given this distribution, archaeologists use the term "Olmec" to signify both an archaeological culture—the Olmec of the Gulf—and Mesoamerica's first widespread art style, which transcended cultural boundaries and set the stage for later developments. Where did this style emerge? How did it spread? These are two of the most fundamental and fiercely debated questions in Mesoamerican archaeology.

Since there is no precedent for the grandeur of San Lorenzo, some archaeologists interpret Olmec-style artifacts found outside the Olmec heartland as evidence of San Lorenzo's influence on less complex societies. This is often called the "mother culture" interpretation. Others consider the Olmec style a visual expression of deeply rooted

Courtesy New World Archaeological Foundation

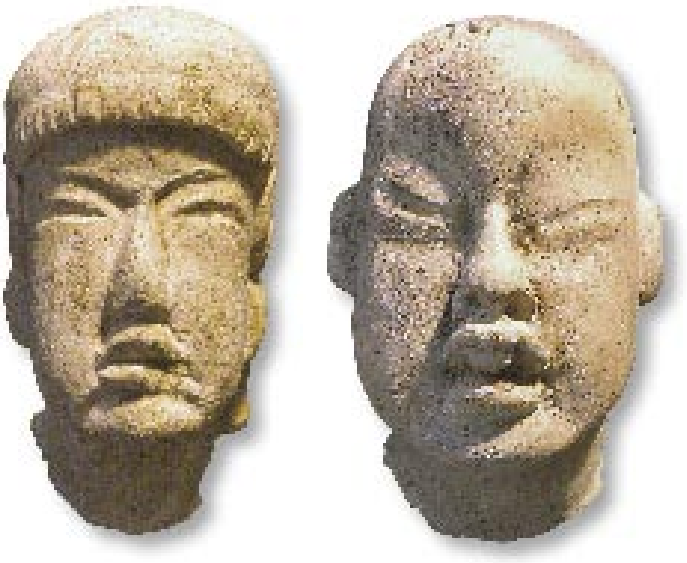
A man and a teenager, possibly father and child, were two of three members of a group burial at Cantón Corralito from 1200–1150 B.C. The only grave artifact was discovered with the third burial (not shown): a two-sided iron-ore mirror that had been placed on the person's stomach.

religious beliefs shared by numerous Mesoamerican cultures. After 1200 B.C., with increased contact between regions, these beliefs began to be depicted on pottery and other objects. According to this view—held as the "sister cultures" interpretation—the Gulf Olmec were not solely responsible for the creation and spread of the Olmec style, nor were they more advanced than the cultures they contacted.

At the heart of the matter, but often sidestepped, is the extent of similarity between Olmec-style artifacts found at San Lorenzo and at distant sites. This point may seem obvious, but despite decades of research, few detailed comparative studies have appeared. (Visit archaeology.org for "Olmec People, Olmec Art.") Many sites in Mesoamerica are worthy candidates for this kind of investigation, but the quantity and quality of Olmec-style artifacts at Cantón Corralito demands it. If this site was an Olmec colony, it will change the perception of culture contact in early Mesoamerica and shift the tenor of this decades-old debate.

Cantón Corralito was first explored in 1985 by John Clark of the New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAF), who dated its one visible earthen mound to 1600-1250 B.C. It had been one of several chiefdom centers of the Mokaya people, whose tradition came to an abrupt end about 1200 B.C., when several large sites such as Paso de la Amada were abandoned. Olmec-style artifacts first appear in the region's archaeological record at the same time. Together with the NWAF's Michael Blake, Clark proposed that the region was subjugated by the Olmec.

This impression only increased in subsequent years, as land-



Courtesy New World Archaeological Foundation (4)

Olmec-style artifacts at Cantón Corralito include figurines wearing helmets or completely bald, and carved pottery of the style most often found both within and beyond the Olmec heartland on the Gulf Coast. The contrasting styles of figurines produced by the local Mokaya, left, and the Olmec, right, are shown here reflected in an iron-ore mirror found in one burial.

owners in the modern community of Cantón Corralito, which overlies the ancient site, discovered Olmec-style artifacts while digging wells and trash holes. In 1997, the NWAF sponsored archaeologist Tomás Pérez Suárez to dig several small test pits. Under six feet of silty sand, he encountered an unusually large quantity of Olmec-style objects, more than had ever been excavated in the region. Based on this information and the change in the region's settlement pattern, Clark proposed that Cantón Corralito had been the administrative center of a territory ruled by Gulf Olmecs on behalf of San Lorenzo royalty.

It was against this background that, in 2004, I initiated the Cantón Corralito project under the auspices of the NWAF. First I had to determine the size of the site, a difficult task considering that it's now buried below several feet of river sand. With no surface remains to go by, test pits and trenches were spread over nearly one third of a square mile. More than 900 square feet of terrain were excavated, but the site's edge was encountered only in one direction. This means that Cantón Corralito covered at least 60 acres by 1000 B.C.—a sizable town by early Mesoamerican standards. More important, thousands of Olmec-style objects were unearthed across the site, a discovery unlike any other known site in Mesoamerica outside the Olmec heartland.

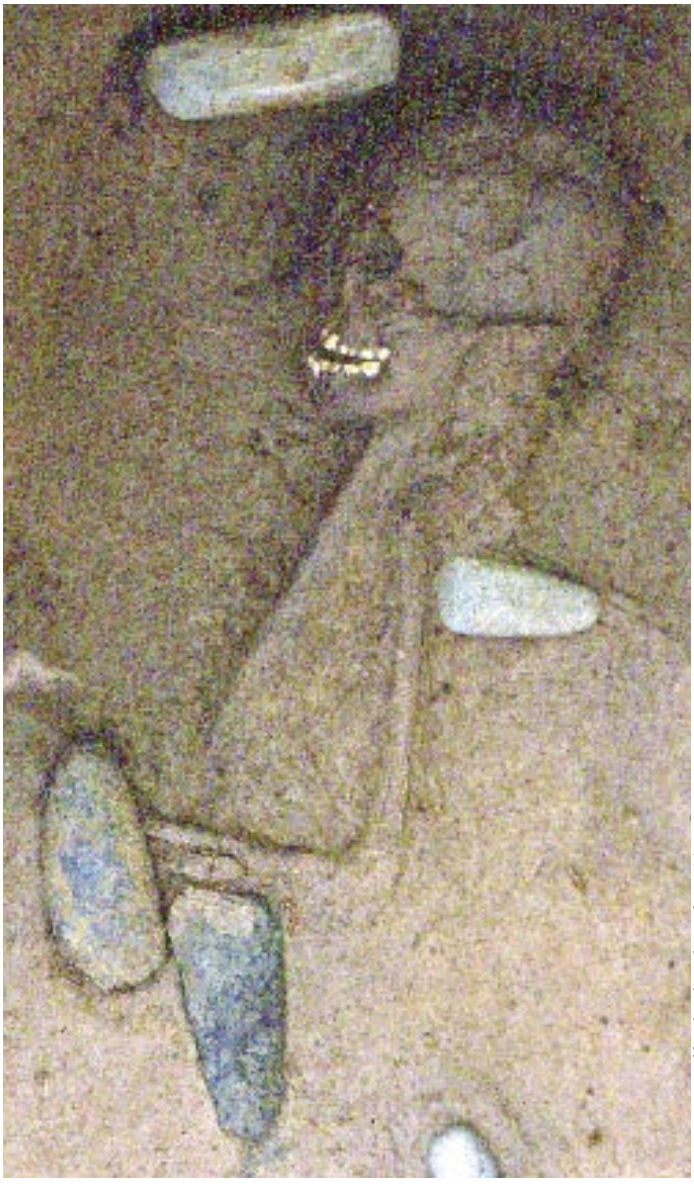
My second goal was to determine if Cantón Corralito was in fact an Olmec colony. To do so, I needed to assess the level of similarity between various kinds of artifacts made at Cantón Corralito and San Lorenzo. One approach, proven useful in prehistoric cases of colonization elsewhere in the world, is to isolate culture-specific "technical styles" of production evident in such things as the dimensions and shape of finished products. This method can be applied to any type of artifact and is particularly useful for everyday items like food-preparation utensils and serving vessels, since they are unlikely to be replicated by the host or indigenous population.

This and other comparative methods eventually led me to Yale University, where I spent several weeks systematically recording the pottery, figurines, and other artifacts excavated at San Lorenzo during the 1960s by archaeologists Michael Coe and Richard Diehl. The same procedures were applied to the Cantón Corralito collection at the NWAF facility in San Cristóbal, Chiapas. In addition, samples of 650 Olmec-style objects from both sites were sent to the University of Missouri for instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA), a kind of chemical fingerprinting that can precisely determine the geographic origin of objects. The results, expected in the coming months, will be enormously helpful because local and imported Olmec-style objects at Cantón Corralito cannot be separated by eye. Initial INAA work by archaeologist Hector Neff and physicist Michael Glascock indicates that up to 20 percent of the Olmec-style pottery came from San Lorenzo. With only one one-thousandth of Cantón Corralito excavated, we can estimate that the entire site contains millions more Olmec-style artifacts.

Even the most basic observations separate this site from its contemporaries and hint that it may have been inhabited by Gulf Olmecs. For example, we found an unprecedented 4,257 pieces of carved-incised ceramic vessels, many so well preserved that blood-red hematite pigment still adheres to the exterior. The similarity between many of the designs and specimens excavated at San Lorenzo is uncanny.

We also found more than 1,200 fragments of "fine paste" pots, including delicate squash-shaped bowls and other pecu-

liar vessels made from untempered white (kaolin) and orange clay, which match those found at San Lorenzo. Even more startling was the discovery that almost all other pottery types defined at San Lorenzo occur at Cantón Corralito. Vessel forms were also shared, from the most common serving dishes to rare, odd-shaped pots. One of the most mysterious shared artifacts is the ceramic spatula. These spoonlike objects may have been used to stir pieces of incense in special ceramic "censer" pots and, like carved-incised pottery, occur with household trash at both sites. After pottery, the most common Olmec-style artifacts are ceramic figurines. Their function unknown, these curious little objects have narrow eyes and mouths with downturned corners. At Cantón Corralito, we found about 800 Early Olmec period fragments, including large, hollow adults and infants, ball players with mirrors and protective padding, and faces with closed eyes, perhaps representing sleep or death. All occur in the collection of figurines excavated at San Lorenzo. Other shared traits include headdresses and hairdos, helmets or caps, knee-length skirts, symbols carved into the backs of heads, and the occurrence of both male and female effigies. The manner of manufacture is also remarkably similar, as indicated by dimensions, proportions, and even posture and gesture.



Courtesy New World Archaeological Foundation (2)

While the pottery and artifacts leave no doubt that Cantón Corralito enjoyed close ties with San Lorenzo, burials may provide the most incontrovertible evidence. Are they the remains of Gulf Olmec immigrants? We don't know yet, but future isotopic analysis of teeth may tell us where they lived during childhood.

One group may be a man, woman, and teenager—possibly a nuclear family—laid to rest in sand below a trash pit about 1200–1150 B.C. The only artifact found was a large, two-sided iron-ore mirror on the belly of Burial 3, the probable woman; it is exceptional for its size and distortion-free surfaces. Fragments of flat mirrors have also been found at San Lorenzo.

The other burials, the sacrificed adult and adolescent, date

One of the most startling discoveries at Cantón Corralito was this "ax burial" of a juvenile surrounded by 15 polished jade axes from a quarry 200 miles away in eastern Guatemala. The youth may have been sacrificed: he had been buried about six feet from an adult who had been decapitated.

to about 1050 B.C. Although the overall arrangement is utterly unique for this time period, archaeologists Ponciano Ortiz and Carmen Rodríguez recently discovered hundreds of jade and serpentine axes at sites close to San Lorenzo. They were also deposited as offerings and, according to archaeologist and jade expert Olaf Jaime Riveron, came from the same source as the axes at Cantón Corralito: a boulder concentration along the steep banks of the Motagua River in eastern Guatemala.

If Cantón Corralito was a colony of Gulf Olmecs, trade and the search for exotic materials may have been the motives for its founding. For travel between the Olmec heartland and areas to the south, the Pacific Coast was a much better route than the mountainous interior. The Soconusco would have been a strategic control point.

The Olmec style is still a long way from being fully understood, but if the Gulf Olmec were responsible for its creation and spread, there is no reason to assume that they had an equal effect on all cultures that they contacted. For now, the cultural affiliation of the ancient Cantón Corralito residents is unresolved. Still, the evidence gathered to date suggests they were Gulf Olmecs or a mix of indigenous Mokayas and Gulf Olmecs, meaning that several aspects of the "mother culture" interpretation would be relevant, including the ability of San Lorenzo's leaders to marshal the resources necessary to create and sustain such a colony.

Despite an apparent mastery of local politics, the people of Cantón Corralito were no match for nature's fury. One fateful stormy day about 1000 B.C. the nearby Coatán River began to rise. Before long the town was engulfed by the sands of its rapidly shifting channel, the residents no doubt fleeing to safer ground and a new life. Thus ended the occupation of what may well be the Americas' first true colony. ■

David Cheetham has been a research associate with the New World Archaeological Foundation since 1997. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Arizona State University.