

A Singular Man, A Plural Way of Seeing

Mario Humberto Ruz*



Tabasco, the Huastecas regions, Tlamilco, Veracruz, Campeche, Hidalgo, Jalisco and Puebla: a wide swathe of land from which to scrutinize an equal number of ethnic formations: Huastecs, Chontals, Nahuas, Olmecs, Mayas, Zoques and Totonacs.

Archaeology, history, ecology, ethnography and linguistics: a plurality of disciplines for approaching river or maritime cultures, cultures from the mountains or the highlands, from the swamps and the wetlands; to look at the ecology of ancient landscapes and changes in the use of the soil; traditional

and hydraulic agriculture; settlement patterns and housing units; physical types and dress; eating habits and pre-Hispanic medicine; the ceramics of the post-classical and contemporary periods; yesterday's ports and trade routes, today's markets; from prehistoric rock paintings to the development of the state; from the rituals of the peasants of today to the complex cosmogonies of the pre-Hispanic elites.

His sources? Mainly pre-Hispanic evidence obtained from others or from his own work, whether from the soil (topographic surveys, the collection of surface materials, digs), from the air in reconnaissance flights, or from the water, using *cayuco* canoes and rowboats. Plus chronicles and other colonial documents, old dictionaries, the writings of nineteenth-century travelers, participatory observation, guided or semi-guided interviews, ethnological analogy...

Nothing seemed alien to Lorenzo Ochoa's way of seeing; everything interested him. Scattered, some say; I would call it pluralistic.

Certainly, in his work there are priority cultures, themes and periods: the Huasteca region and the lowlands of Tabasco constantly reappear on the list of his writings and lectures. The interest in articulating geographical diversity and the cultural unit seem primordial in many of them, and the pre-Hispanic is an element that connected not a few of his penchants. But they never limited his efforts as a researcher, an educator of human resources or a disseminator of culture.

Dating from at least 1974, his contributions to knowledge about the pre-Hispanic territory that is now Tabasco are as numerous as they are varied. Outstanding among them are undoubtedly those dealing with topics and archaeological approaches to the Olmec presence in the Usumacinta Valley, to Mayan development in the northwestern lowlands, the study of the trading ports that flourished in the post-classic-

* Director of the UNAM Peninsular Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences (Cephcis).

al period like Potonchán and Xicalanco, the history of river and land routes between the Tabasco coast and inland areas, as well as the geography and archaeology of the Gulf region in the classical and post-classical periods and at the moment of contact; his careful approximations to the development of Tierra Blanca and Jonuta (by analyzing their ceramics and figurines, respectively), settlement patterns in the San Pedro Mártir Basin or how and why floodplains were abandoned.

He also concerned himself with writing the history of the work of those he considered precursors of anthropological and archaeological efforts in the state of Tabasco, like Carl Bartholomeus Heller, Desiré Charnay, Francisco J. Santamaría and Francisco Pimentel; plus some more contemporary work like Soyataco's studies on modern ceramics and even the spread of stories originating as far away as the Tarahumara in the Balacán area.

Equally broad in terms of the periods dealt with and covering an even more sweeping array of topics is his contribution to knowledge about the Huasteca in the pre-Hispanic period, which has in him one of its most profound, versatile scholars. It is impossible in such a short article to do justice to the far-reaching range of disciplines that his interests touched on. Suffice it to point to the fact that he paid particular attention to sculpture and ceramics; landscape and culture; space and territoriality; the social, political and economic order; dress and customs; the conquest of the southern part of the Huasteca by the Nahuas (and the role that the Triple Alliance played in that); and, above all, Teenek and Totonac religion, including the Mayan impact on them. Cosmic views and cosmogonies present in the language, in representations of the universe, in the pantheons of divinities (particularly those linked to agriculture, health and death), in witchcraft or funeral customs. Beliefs, concepts and imaginaries found in writing, prayer and even dance.

Besides looking at these topics separately, he offered us larger works with a more holistic perspective and greater diachronic depth, in which he summarized the pre-Hispanic history of the Huasteca, that of its language and culture, and even that of the archaeological and historical research done about it.

His was not a solitary effort. He knew how to interest others in his own academic passions, as his students can testify to, and as is demonstrated in the invaluable texts that came out of projects he coordinated in the northwestern lowlands of the Mayan zone, in the sheltered rocky areas of Tenosique, Tabasco, in the Candelaria River, Campeche, and



Nothing seemed alien to Lorenzo Ochoa's way of seeing; everything interested him. Scattered, some say; I would call it pluralistic.

Tamiahua Lagoon Basins, or in the market and trade route systems of the Huasteca.

A passionate, demanding editor, he thoroughly enjoyed writing book prologues and prefaces—he was always willing to accede to the requests of colleagues—writing reviews and commentaries—always critically—and promoting the founding of or consolidating magazines. We owe him the initiative of creating *Tierra y Agua*. *La antropología en Tabasco*, a journal that meant so much to publishing new research or old work about the Olmec, Mayan, Zoque and Nahua worlds of Tabasco—which, unfortunately, like so many academic efforts, succumbed to some change of presidential administration—and the consolidation of *Anales de Antropología* between 2003 and 2006. He was a constant contributor to both, as well as to journals like *Estudios de Cultura Maya*, *Fronteras*, *Arqueología Mexicana*, *Cultura Sur* and *Voices of Mexico*.

Strict and severe in his judgments to the point of sometimes being exasperating, he also had the gift of recognizing his mistakes and, above all, infecting others with his enthusiasm with the power of his frank smile and irresistible optimism.

For those to come, the legacy of his written work will remain; for those who had the privilege of his friendship, the memory of his unbounded generosity will also remain. ■■