

SCULPTURE AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN PRECLASSIC MESOAMERICA

Julia Guernsey



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Sculpture and Social Dynamics in Preclassic Mesoamerica

This book examines the functions of sculpture during the Preclassic period in Mesoamerica and its significance in statements of social identity. Julia Guernsey situates the origins and evolution of monumental stone sculpture within a broader social and political context and demonstrates the role that such sculpture played in creating and institutionalizing social hierarchies. This book focuses specifically on an enigmatic type of public monumental sculpture known as the “potbelly” that traces its antecedents to earlier small domestic ritual objects and ceramic figurines. The cessation of domestic rituals involving ceramic figurines along the Pacific slope coincided not only with the creation of the first monumental potbelly sculptures, but with the rise of the first state-level societies in Mesoamerica by the advent of the Late Preclassic period. The potbellies became central to the physical representation of new forms of social identity and expressions of political authority during this time of dramatic change.

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*For Tony Guernsey and Rita Ford Guernsey,
my heroes;*

*For Abby and Jack,
the centers of my world;*

*and for Michael,
who made it all possible.*

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Julia Guernsey

University of Texas at Austin



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Introduction

Mesoamerican sculpture

When one thinks of Mesoamerican sculpture, one conjures numerous images: the massive Olmec heads of San Lorenzo, the contorted Danzantes of Monte Albán, the fantastically carved stelae of Copán, the hauntingly impersonal stone masks of Teotihuacan, and the regal carved throne, or *teocalli*, of Motecuhzoma. The images include monumental stone sculpture, smaller portable objects, and the artistic production of artists and scribes from the second millennium B.C. through the arrival of the Spanish in 1519. They also hail from a region spanning central, western, and southern Mexico, the Yucatán Peninsula, Guatemala, Belize, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador. Despite the fact that numerous linguistic and ethnic groups flourished throughout this vast territory, they shared a suite of cultural practices that enables us to define, and think productively about, this region known as Mesoamerica and its artistic traditions (Fig. 1.1) (Kirchhoff 1943; also see Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010).¹

Mesoamerican sculpture was diverse from its inception – one need only look at the range of forms produced by the Olmec, the first culture to create a remarkable sculptural legacy, which was in full bloom by the early part of the Preclassic period (1500 B.C. to A.D. 250) (Fig. 1.2).² Olmec forms include carved stone altars, thrones, stelae, massive heads, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, and smaller-scale objects. This variety of forms was paralleled by equally eclectic content that addressed social, political, and supernatural themes, as well as those drawn from nature. This diversity, in many ways, remained a constant in Mesoamerica, with cultures such as the Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec continuing to expand and experiment with the expressive potential of sculpture in a variety of forms and mediums. While

attention has typically focused on the large-scale monuments erected in the central plazas of Mesoamerican cities, smaller sculptural objects designed for personal use, including figurines carved from stone or modeled in clay, plaques, masks, celts, and axes, are also known from the archaeological record. The forms and themes of this corpus of art – already richly varied by the Preclassic period – are perhaps the most striking testament to the critical role that sculpture played in most Mesoamerican cultures: it was a vital form of expression, materialized in an array of scales and materials, and viewed in contexts that ranged from public to private.

Yet an issue rarely addressed in studies of Mesoamerican sculpture concerns the complex relationships that surely must have existed among the different sculptural forms created in ancient Mesoamerican society. Perhaps art historians, such as I, are most guilty of a certain bias toward the monumental works that visually dominated site centers. Monumental sculpture appears to have been, in many cases, the prerogative of rulers: certain types of sculpture were commissioned by them exclusively, and these monuments speak to the concerns of the ruling elite and the messages they saw fit to broadcast in such large-scale, visible form. This type of sculpture was typically of stone, and size appears to have mattered. Or, perhaps better said, size was often an index of power, both political and economic, especially when the stone was procured from a distant region, hauled to a site without the aid of the wheel or beasts of burden, and then meticulously carved without the benefit of metal tools. But size was not always the primary criterion, and elites certainly availed themselves of an impressive array of small exquisite objects crafted from other materials, including greenstone, clay, precious stones, cloth, and paper.

While the issues at play in any discussion of monumental sculpture are many and rich, there are also certain assumptions built into such discourse. A way out of this predicament, and one that I have used to guide this study, is to pose a series of questions. How, for instance, do we define “public” or “elite”? What was the relationship between site centers, sculpture, and elite agendas? Was monumental or large-scale sculpture always commissioned by rulers and elites? Was it necessarily “public”? What about other forms of sculpture, which appear to have occupied spaces at the intersection between the “public” sphere and the more “private” realm of domestic residences? Did ancient Mesoamericans, particularly those of the Preclassic period, differentiate between public and private space, and when did this dichotomy develop? Should public space be correlated directly with

elites, or were there public spaces reserved for functions and objects that resonated with non-elites or other sectors of society? What can sculpture tell us about these spaces, their uses, and their audiences?

Perhaps even more fundamentally, we need to think about what, precisely, constituted “sculpture” for ancient Mesoamericans (Love 2010). The word “sculpture” refers to objects, figures, or designs that have been carved or modeled or deliberately shaped in some way. Yet in Preclassic Mesoamerica, naturally formed objects were often accorded the same veneration as sculpted objects. At the site of Zazacatla, Morelos, which flourished during the Middle Preclassic period (900–300 B.C.), Monument 4, a piece of natural and apparently unmodified cave flowstone whose shape resembles a seated figure, was given the same reverential treatment as other monuments carved by human hands (Canto and Castro 2010). This natural form at Zazacatla calls to mind the many uncarved altars and stelae that were also displayed in Preclassic centers, only subtly shaped by humans, if at all, and points to an interest in the materiality of sculpture in and of itself rather than its role as a vehicle for modification or decoration. Mesoamerican monuments thus challenge traditional definitions of sculpture and appear to have included both objects that were modified by human hands and those that were not.

Beyond large-scale monuments, archaeology in the domestic sectors of sites has long documented small-scale objects utilized with great frequency, such as the ceramic (or sometimes stone) figurines that are ubiquitous in many elite and commoner households throughout Mesoamerica (Fig. 1.3). Were they also perceived as sculpture by ancient Mesoamericans? Many scholars, whether art historians or archaeologists, exclude such small-scale objects from the category of “sculpture,” organizing them instead by medium and grouping them under a heading such as “ceramic objects” (which also include pottery and spindle whorls) or “stone objects,” which range from utilitarian *manos* and *metates* to small stone figurines and jade beads. But such categorizations are really a reflection of our Western biases and methods of classification, and we should not presume that, among ancient Mesoamericans, the small-scale and (sometimes) less durable materials of some objects necessarily precluded them from the same considerations and significance assigned to larger-scale “sculpture.” In years past, traditional art historical schemes often falsely distinguished between “high” art, which included “masterpieces,” and “low” art, which included crafts and utilitarian objects. Yet in ancient Mesoamerica, patterns of ritual accompanied the use, dedication, or veneration of both monuments and small-scale objects, blurring





Figure 1.1. Map of Mesoamerica with sites mentioned in the text. Drawing by Michael Love.

		Calibrated		Western Guatemala Coast	Central Guatemala Coast	Takalik Abaj	Kaminaljuyú	Soconusco	Chiapa de Corzo	Chalchuapa																						
		900	800								Uncalibrated																					
Classic	Late	Early	700	600	Marcos	Pantaleón	Ralda	Pamplona	Peistal	Paredón	Payu																					
												500	400	Cojolate	Guzman	Amatle	Metapa	Maravillas														
																			300	200	Alejos	Castillo	Esperanza	Loros	Laguna							
																										100	AD BC	Pitahaya	Ruth	Arenal	Hato	Horcones
	Middle	Early	1100	1000	Conchas D Conchas C	Sis	Ixchiyá	Majadas	Duende	Vista Hermosa	Colos																					
												1300	1200	Conchas B Conchas A	Tecoiate	Las Charcas	Conchas	Dili														
																			1500	1400	Jocotal Cuadros	Coyolate II	Arévalo	Jocotal	Jobo							
																										1700	1600	Cherla	Coyolate I	Cuadros	Cotorra	
																																1900
1900	1600	1900	1600	Locona	Coyolate I	Locona	Locona	Ocos	Ocote																							
1900	1600	1900	1600	Madre Vieja			Barra																									

Figure 1.2. Comparative chronology of Preclassic Mesoamerica. Drawing by Michael Love.

the lines between “high” and vernacular art; both were “utilized” in a sense, although context, scale, audience, and materials differed significantly. While many of us continue to differentiate between art and material culture, often with good reason, objects such as small-scale figurines challenge these distinctions, particularly when they bear striking visual relationships to large-scale monuments (Halperin et al. 2009; S. Scott in press). We need to be attentive to the ways in which our categories of “art” and “material culture” obscure potentially dynamic

relationships that existed among types of objects, materials, functions, and contexts in the ancient past (see Davis 1993).

This may be particularly true for Preclassic art, the focus of this book. Preclassic sculpture ranged dramatically in scale, form, theme, medium, context, and display. While some monuments portray rulers and are categorized as “art” without question, others render messages that are, at least ostensibly, less focused on rulership – the pedestal sculptures with monkeys or felines come

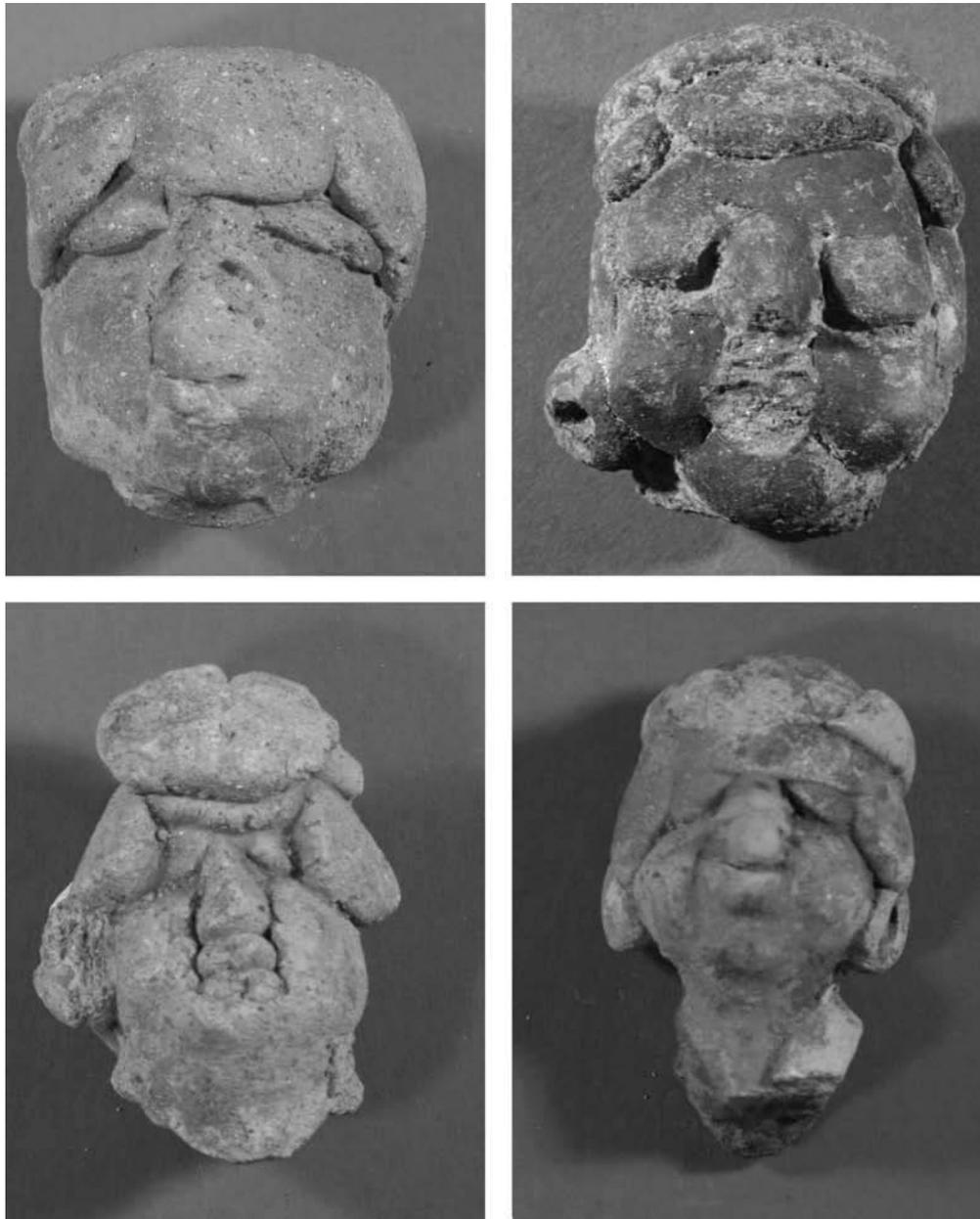


Figure 1.3. Ceramic figurines from the Middle Preclassic site of La Blanca, Guatemala. Photos by author.

to mind, or the mushroom stones with their array of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. Were there categorical distinctions between these forms for ancient Mesoamericans? Was the art of rulers akin to our notion of “high” art, while objects that depicted other themes considered vernacular? Can we determine whether these diverse objects were appreciated, venerated, or utilized in different manners? Did sculptures that represent animals, ancestors, themes from nature, or other broadly shared concerns resonate with sectors of society beyond that of the ruling elite? Or did they employ a more metaphorical language of forms whose significance, elite based or otherwise, is now, thousands of years later, lost upon

us? Queries such as these inevitably – and productively, I would maintain – force us to revisit a number of traditional assumptions about Preclassic sculpture and its meaning(s).

Even an understanding of the imagery, however, does not always elucidate the rationale for crafting and erecting the sculpture in the first place. Better questions, I would assert, go beyond issues of iconography and instead engage issues of motivation, inspiration, utility, and changing social circumstances. And they are important to ask, whether answerable or not, because they direct attention to larger discussions of sculpture’s social significance. Why was sculpture erected in ancient



Figure 1.4. Monte Alto Monument 4. Photo by author.

Mesoamerica, and how were these motivations transformed through time and space? What spectrum of issues were addressed through sculptural forms? Why did some sites erect stone sculpture and others eschew it in favor of a different expressive medium such as architecture or mural programs? What are the possible origins of specific sculptural forms, and what does a consideration of their developmental trajectory reveal about message, audience, and function? Who “used” sculpture, and how did these uses shift depending on context or a specific moment in time?

The potbelly sculptural form

It was, in fact, these various inquiries concerning sculpture and its communicative role in ancient Mesoamerica that gave rise to this book, which focuses on a specific type of Preclassic sculpture – the potbelly, or *barrigón* – precisely because it demands investigation of many of these fundamental questions and definitions. Although the dating of the potbelly sculptural phenomenon is riddled with difficulties, a topic dealt with in detail in [Chapter 4](#), the

vast majority of scholars agree that its primary florescence occurred during the Late Preclassic period (300 B.C. to A.D. 250), although examples may have appeared already by the Middle to Late Preclassic transition, perhaps as early as the fourth or fifth century B.C.

Potbellies are typically described as rotund human figures, carved in the round from boulders, with distinctive features that often include bloated faces with closed eyes and puffy eyelids. Monument 4 from Monte Alto, Guatemala ([Fig. 1.4](#)), carved from a massive rock that lends its monumentality to the sheer bulk of the figure’s three-dimensional form, typifies these features. Its head is anchored by heavy jowls and a thick chin that is deeply delineated. The wide, sloping planes of the face are further accentuated by a broad nose and closed eyes whose swollen lids echo the contours of the sagging jowls. The arms of the figure are not cut free from the boulder, but instead wrap around and rest at the front of the figure’s corpulent stomach. The legs and feet are handled in the same manner, paralleling the arms in the way they encircle the figure’s lower body and meet, soles facing each other, at the base of the figure’s stomach. Although fingers are precisely rendered on the hands, the feet are

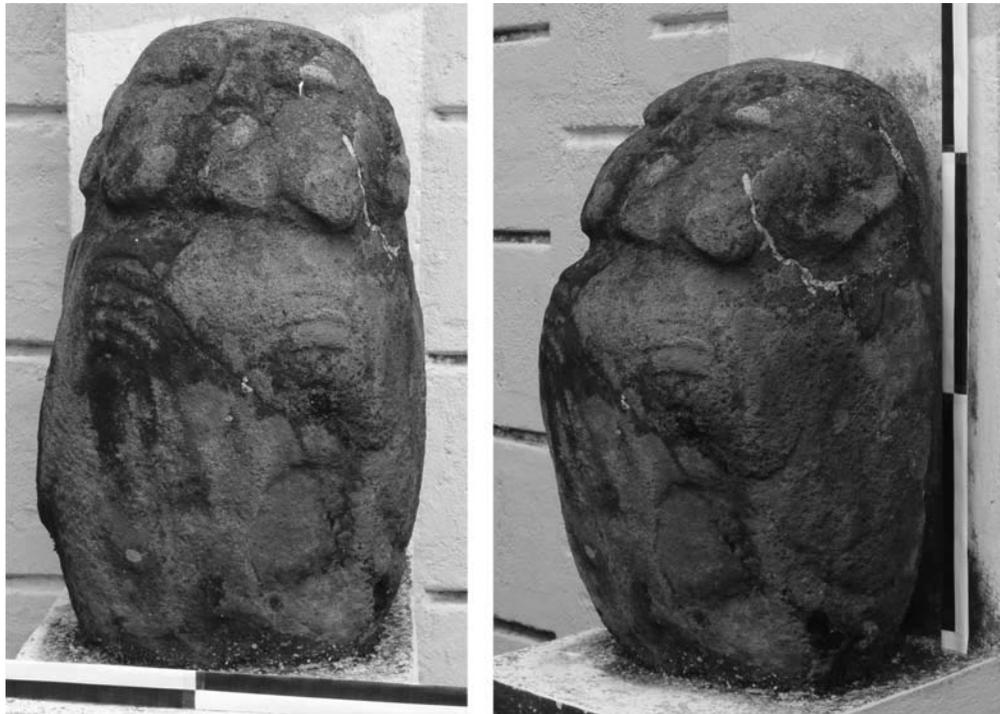


Figure 1.5. Two views of Finca Nueva Monument 1. Photos by Juan Pablo Rodas, courtesy of the Dirección General del Patrimonio Cultural y Natural del Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes.

handled much less realistically, creating a palpable tension between naturalism and stylization.

Although Monte Alto Monument 4 embodies many of the recurring characteristics associated with the potbelly form, it is important to emphasize the surprising variation that exists within the larger corpus of potbelly sculptures. For example, a number of potbellies, such as Monument 1 from Finca Nueva, Guatemala (Fig. 1.5), are much less imposing in size and more stout than obese, although their arms nonetheless rest on their stomachs in a manner consistent with Monte Alto Monument 4 (see the detailed regional map in Fig. 4.2 for the locations of sites on the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica with potbelly sculptures). Others, such as Finca Sololá Monument 3 (Fig. 4.10d), possess a prominent navel, a characteristic often attributed to potbellies despite the fact that Monte Alto Monument 4, Finca Nueva Monument 1, and other examples lack this feature, making it clear that prominent navels were not essential to potbelly sculptures at all sites. What is consistent between Finca Nueva Monument 1 and Monte Alto Monument 4 are the facial features, which emphasize heavy cheeks, a broad nose, and closed and bulging eyelids. Other related sculptures from Monte Alto, such as Monument 10 (Fig. 1.6), consist of a head alone, with the same bloated features and closed eyes. Examples such as this, which lack the obese

bodies, suggest that the most consistent and critical features of these “potbelly” sculptures could be conveyed by the heads alone, with their distinctly jowly features and heavy-lidded eyes. In fact, on the basis of these examples from Monte Alto and others presented in the following chapters, I suggest that the closed eyes and jowly facial features are more diagnostic than the obese bodies of stone potbelly sculptures, an opinion shared by John Graham and Larry Benson (2005), who cautioned that a “more consistent characteristic” of the potbellies was “fatty or swollen eyelids.” Only a small percentage of the stone potbellies and Monte Alto heads have open eyes that diverge from the typically closed, puffy-lidded examples. Of the more than fifty potbellies illustrated by Sergio Rodas (1993), for example, only four or five have open eyes.³

If this suggestion, which will be discussed in detail in later chapters, is confirmed, then previous interpretations of the potbellies that have focused primarily on the obesity of their bodies as the primary clue to their meaning should be reconsidered, and greater attention paid to other, more consistent features emphasized in their faces and heads. This is not to say that the bodies carried no meaning; rather, I hope to redirect attention to other salient features that may elucidate more fully the significance of this sculptural form during the Preclassic



Figure 1.6. Monte Alto Monument 10 with a young David Stuart in front and Roberto Stuart to the left. Photo by George Stuart.

period. This reassessment is in keeping with Graham and Benson's (2005: 349) admonition concerning superficial generalizations about the potbellies:

[S]everal writers mistakenly conflate all obese images into a "potbelly style." ... There exists no more a "potbelly style" than there exists a "toad style," or, by the same coinage, a "Buddha style," a "Crucifixion style," or a "Virgin Mary style." Apparently, it is necessary to reiterate [that] the "potbelly" ... constitutes a theme, a subject, an icon, occurring in a great diversity of stylistic expressions. "Style" is a means of representation, a set of solutions to the task of depiction, not what is represented (Ackerman 1963: 164–186). The duration through time of the image and its various adaptations remain to be explored; recognition of the image in varying stylistic expressions is one useful step toward that objective.

By focusing attention on different, recurring, and obviously significant attributes of the potbellies, we can suggest new avenues of investigation for this sculptural form. For example, the bloated facial features and closed eyes of the potbellies appear to trace their antecedents to a type of ceramic figurine produced during the Middle

Preclassic period (900–300 B.C.) along the Pacific slope of southern Mexico and Guatemala (Fig. 1.7). At first glance, this is perhaps not terribly interesting, but what it indicates is a certain sharing of traits or fluidity between categories of objects: in this case ceramic figurines and stone sculpture. It also points to a persistence of attributes through time, as the figurines are securely dated to the Middle Preclassic period, while the stone potbellies do not appear until the transition between the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. Also intriguing are the contextual differences between these objects with shared features: the stone potbellies, as a type of monumental sculpture, are associated most frequently with public plazas, while the ceramic figurines are a hallmark of the domestic sphere, where presumably more private rituals took place. It is my contention throughout this study that the careful exploration of the formal and symbolic parallels between the monumental stone potbellies and small, ceramic, hand-modeled figurines associated with domestic ritual informs many of the issues alluded to earlier, including our assumptions concerning sculpture's role within the continuums between public versus private space and elite versus commoner contexts. As I hope to



Figure 1.7. Middle Preclassic ceramic figurines from La Blanca in the Shook Collection, Guatemala. Photo by Robert Rosenswig, courtesy of Marion Popenoe de Hatch and the Department of Archaeology, Universidad del Valle de Guatemala.

demonstrate, the implications of this evidence also lend insight into how and why certain forms and meanings associated with Middle Preclassic domestic ritual were incorporated and monumentalized into the sculptural programs of Late Preclassic plazas.

Methodological issues and challenges

Although a number of scholars have devoted considerable attention to the potbellies, most have focused on a

single site, a circumscribed region, issues of chronology, or the relationship between potbellies and earlier Olmec or later Maya sculptural traditions (Demarest 1986; Graham and Benson 2005; Miles 1965; Parsons 1986; Popenoe de Hatch 1989; Rodas 1993). This study relies heavily on these important earlier works, yet attempts to utilize the remaining gaps in our understanding of this sculptural form to explore issues of formal development, meaning, function, and context. One of the major challenges of this book, or any exploration of the Preclassic period more generally, is the lack of textual data. The rich

hieroglyphic traditions of the Classic period, which often include dates or references to historical events and people, impart a level of specificity that is sorely lacking for most Preclassic sculpture. Yet I would maintain that the lack of writing does not ensure that the Preclassic period and its body of works will remain inherently unknowable. While it certainly poses challenges, the lack of text can be offset by vigilant iconographic, stylistic, and archaeological analysis that helps situate these objects in time and space and provides data for discussions of form, context, and function.

For example, certain iconographic elements of the potbellies, such as their recurring facial features, present clues that link them to long-standing traditions of representation. For the ancient Mesoamericans who created these monuments, their portrayal – devoid of hieroglyphs as it was – was nevertheless considered complete, and so we must find and utilize methods for their study that recognize and respect their grounding in a system of representation that did not include text. This process is made more difficult by a tendency in Mesoamerican studies to give priority to inscriptions and the objects that they grace. It is further compounded by the fact that the stone potbellies emerged at a moment in Mesoamerican history when some of the earliest known hieroglyphic inscriptions also first appeared. In other words, the potbellies debuted more or less contemporaneously with burgeoning writing traditions, yet the potbelly form was neither inscribed with text nor, presumably, viewed as an appropriate surface for inscription. And the potbellies were not alone in this – the vast majority of Preclassic monuments lack texts. But we should not assume that the patrons and makers of these sculptural forms were illiterate or view the lack of text as a commentary on the literacy levels of any specific site or region. Rather, we must move forward with the conviction that the lack of inscriptions associated with the potbelly form was a deliberate choice and that sculptural forms lacking text and those objects carved with dates or hieroglyphs were equally effective communicators.

This book then, at one level, becomes a case study of how these issues are addressed, what alternative methods exist for meaningful analysis, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. Throughout, I focus on the Preclassic period, its sculptural corpus, and the available archaeological record. However, the long persistence of potbelly sculptures and many of their features throughout the course of Mesoamerican history, as well as their reuse in secondary contexts for hundreds of years, occasionally demands consideration of evidence from later periods. This very situation – the long duration and reuse of potbellies at numerous sites throughout many

linguistic and culturally diverse regions – has proved problematic for interpretations of them and has often resulted in assertions of continuity through time that may not have existed, despite superficial resemblances. At stake, then, in this study is whether the evidence gleaned from the potbellies supports the notion of a “unified cultural tradition” in Mesoamerica as articulated by Gordon Willey (1973). As will be demonstrated in later chapters, there do indeed appear to be consistent themes associated with the potbellies throughout much of Mesoamerica, which could be viewed as confirmation of the integrity of a Mesoamerican ideological system. However, a thorough reading of Preclassic evidence – without an undue emphasis on later, Classic-period data or a methodological approach in which meaning is traced backward through time – highlights points of divergence and unique uses of the form. In fact, this very tension between continuity and reinvention calls to mind the famous rejoinder to Willey by George Kubler (1973; also see Kubler 1985), who cautioned that disjunction – or a difference in meaning – could accompany symbols that otherwise bore a similar formal appearance. In order to avoid the pitfalls of disjunction, which have long plagued the interpretation of potbelly sculptures and Preclassic sculpture more generally, this volume does not start with the Classic period and work backward in time, assuming continuity; after all, time does not march backward. Rather it establishes the range of traits and meanings that characterized the potbelly sculptures and their precursors, in ceramic figurine form, during the Preclassic period, while also recognizing the obvious continuities that persisted into later periods. In the end, I believe that it is the points of continuity and divergence, so beautifully crystallized in the form of potbelly sculptures, that provide the most profound clues to understanding this sculptural type as well as some of the social dynamics of the Preclassic period.

Sculpture and social processes

The questions and issues raised by potbelly monuments are far ranging, provocative, and even, perhaps, impossible to answer definitively. But I think that they are important to contemplate, since they foreground sculpture as a vehicle through which we can begin to think about issues of meaning, function, context, space, ritual, performance, audience, and the ways in which these variables intersected or conflicted with each other. When one visits an archaeological site in Mesoamerica, it is often immediately clear that sculpture was integrated with thoughtful consideration into the built environment. But it did

more than structure space or communicate messages and aesthetic ideals. Instead, as I argue in this book, sculpture materialized social processes and should be viewed as tangible evidence through which we can explore how objects, ideas, and people interacted in the ancient past.

How far one can effectively sustain arguments concerning sculpture and its role in structuring or affecting social processes is a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Barbara Mills and William Walker (2008a) focused on the relationship between the materiality of social life – which can include sculpture – and agency, a term that refers to social actors, their motivations, and actions. As they explained, traditional anthropological theory has long emphasized human agents. Yet, more recently, scholars such as Bruno Latour (1993, 2005) and Alfred Gell (1993, 1996, 1998) have “questioned the anthropocentric assumption that only people possess agency. In so doing, they have challenged the boundary between people as subjects and artifacts as objects” (Mills and Walker 2008a: 14). In other words, such scholars have forced us to rethink the impact that sculpture has had on past cultures, past spaces, past messages, and past interactions. They have, in effect, highlighted the need to move away from a focus solely on humans and, alternatively, to acknowledge the possibility that sculpture, or material things, were active participants in the conceptualization and materialization of social forces. Objects matter, as Latour (2005: 70) pithily argued, and should not dissolve away in favor of discussions of formless social forces:

As soon as you believe social aggregates can hold their own being propped up by “social forces,” then objects vanish from view and the magical and tautological force of society is enough to hold *every thing* with, literally, *no thing*. (Emphasis in original)

Before we can fully engage with sculpture’s social role, however, we must recognize it as something more than static, as embodying more than a singular meaning, as must the environment in which it functioned and the people who viewed it. It demands consideration within the “network of intentionalities” in which it is enmeshed (Gell 1998: 43) or as a vital part of a “system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it” (Gell 1998: 6). As Rosemary Joyce (2008: 33) summed it up, when sculpture is viewed as “inextricably connected by visual, spatial, and experiential relations with human beings over time,” it can then be understood to constitute “both a potential site of innovation in (inflection of) practice” and a “material agent tending to promote certain kinds of practices.” It thus becomes, as Latour (2005: 10) asserted, an actor and “not simply the hapless bearer of symbolic projection.”

Accorded such agency, sculpture – and nonhuman things more generally – do more than serve as a “backdrop for human action”; they also “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (Latour 2005: 72; also see Gell 1998: 6–7; Hodder 1982: 85; N. Thomas 1998: ix–x). As these scholars have trenchantly argued, sculpture should not be viewed as merely a passive tool, but instead as a dynamic participant in the formulation of solutions, dissent, practices, and messages. Viewed as such, the potbellies – grounded in a tradition of representation that originated in the domestic sphere but that was monumentalized and transformed into stone – become a site of innovation. They materialize, quite literally, a series of social processes that engaged both public and private realms and a multiplicity of actors in Preclassic Mesoamerica.

While, in this volume, I focus on applying the methods of art history – in which Preclassic art, particularly sculpture, is the primary vehicle for gaining an understanding of the past – I do so against the backdrop of anthropological and social theory and with a healthy admixture of archaeological data. My method, in the end, foregrounds sculpture as a means of getting at several social processes that were in play in Preclassic Mesoamerica. I attempt to see the “embedded human agency” (D. Miller 2005: 13; Mills and Walker 2008a: 15) in sculpture, while also recognizing the power of images in and of themselves to articulate social concerns and affect audiences. To paraphrase Mills and Walker (2008a: 17), I readily concede that objects do not have intentions, but nonetheless maintain that “they can cause practices to happen.” Or as Dobres and Robb (2000) characterized it, “[M]aterial culture must be viewed as not only actively constructing the world in which people act, but also the people themselves.” Put more simply and less controversially, I am deeply interested in the social role of Preclassic Mesoamerican sculpture and in exploring how the tools of art historical analysis can be wedded with those of archaeology and anthropology to recover glimpses, from the ancient past, of a variety of social processes.

Organization of the book

In order to contextualize this exploration of potbelly sculptures within the greater continuum of Mesoamerican art in general, Chapter 2 presents a brief historiography of the scholarship surrounding Preclassic Mesoamerican sculpture. In particular, it focuses on the major issues and tensions that have shaped not only this current study, but

the study of Preclassic monuments overall. It casts its net broadly, addressing themes, discoveries, and trends from literature addressing many regions of Mesoamerica, including the Olmec heartland along the Gulf Coast, the Basin of Mexico, the Guatemalan Highlands, the Maya Lowlands, and the Pacific Coast and adjacent piedmont that are the focus of this study.

Chapter 3 zeros in on the Preclassic Pacific Coast and piedmont of Mesoamerica, where the major florescence of the potbelly sculptural form transpired. Although the distribution of potbellies extended in a much less concentrated fashion into Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and the Maya Lowlands, the best contextual data for considering the developmental trajectory of the potbellies come from the Pacific slope. Furthermore, the Middle Preclassic Pacific coastal site of La Blanca, Guatemala, affords a concrete archaeological context for the ceramic figurines whose puffy facial features anticipate those of the later stone potbellies, as well as an opportunity to consider their transition from ceramic to stone within a geographically and temporally circumscribed framework.

At Middle Preclassic La Blanca, ceramic figurines were ubiquitous in households of all economic levels and a hallmark of domestic ritual at this time. Interestingly, however, upon the decline of La Blanca at about 600 B.C. and the concomitant rise of the site of El Ujuxte, 13 km to the east, the nature of domestic ritual – and the use of figurines in particular – shifted dramatically (Love 2002a). At El Ujuxte, which reached its apex during the Late Preclassic period between 400 B.C. and 100 A.D., there was a drastic reduction in figurine usage; other markers of household ritual, such as feasting vessels, also declined precipitously. In fact, this evidence for a decrease in certain aspects of domestic ritual was paralleled by increased evidence for ritual display and ceremonial caching in the public sector (Guernsey and Love 2005; Love 1998; Love and Balcárcel 2000). Even more significantly, the gradual changes detectable in both the public and private spheres of La Blanca and El Ujuxte coincide with the period in which the first stone potbellies appeared in this region. These shifting trends visible in the archaeological and sculptural record, moreover, were most certainly related to major political transformations, such as the rise of the first state-level societies by the start of the Late Preclassic. This dynamic milieu of political and social transformation offers an ideal environment in which to explore the development and significance of the potbelly sculptural tradition along the Pacific slope of Preclassic Mesoamerica.

The Pacific slope also provides fertile ground for considering the currents of exchange between linguistic and cultural regions in ancient Mesoamerica. The Pacific

coastal plain of Mexico and Guatemala was located at the nexus of two major linguistic groups during the Preclassic period: Mixe–Zoquean speakers to the west and Mayan speakers to the east. The lack of hieroglyphic inscriptions at both La Blanca and El Ujuxte, as well as at other sites in this vicinity, makes assigning a linguistic affiliation to the people who inhabited these ancient communities enormously difficult, if not impossible. So, too, the material assemblages at these sites make assignment of a cultural affiliation challenging: ceramics, figurines, monuments, caching patterns, and architectural forms and orientations demonstrate participation in communication spheres stretching both eastward and westward.

As Chapter 3 also addresses, an ongoing debate in the field concerns the nature and boundaries of Preclassic communication spheres. For example, while La Blanca can be considered an “Olmec” site, in the sense that it was engaged in the exchange of ideas with other Middle Preclassic Olmec sites such as La Venta, the term “Olmec” falsely implies a point of origin for these ideas and cultural traits in the Gulf Coast Olmec “heartland.” In reality, numerous sites in various linguistic regions were participating in a Middle Preclassic “Olmec” cultural sphere, and the term “Olmec” should probably best be used to “describe peoples who followed a particular suite of cultural practices” that was widely shared, despite differences in “biological, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds” (Clark and Pye 2000b: 218; Pye and Clark 2000: 12). By the end of the Middle Preclassic period, and the era of La Blanca’s decline, Olmec cultural influence was waning along the Pacific Coast, undoubtedly in partial response to the collapse of powerful Olmec heartland sites such as La Venta. Yet the ensuing Late Preclassic period along the Pacific piedmont witnessed the same dynamic mix of influences from a variety of regions, and it was within this matrix of shifting social diversity that the stone potbellies appear to have flourished.

A geographic and temporal context for an examination of the potbelly form having thus been outlined, Chapter 4 presents the distribution of potbellies throughout Mesoamerica, organized according to country and state or department. This chapter, in particular, relies on the groundbreaking efforts of such scholars as Francis B. Richardson (1940), Suzanne Miles (1965), John Scott (1980, 1988), John Graham (1981a), Lee Allen Parsons (1986), Arthur Demarest (1986), Marion Popenoe de Hatch (1989), Sergio Rodas (1993), Carlos Navarrete and Rocío Hernández (2000), and Oswaldo Chinchilla (2001–2002), who first assembled much of this corpus. The chapter also engages the thorny issues of dating and chronology that have plagued discussions of potbelly sculptures. The long history of moving and reutilizing

potbellies contributed significantly to this problem and resulted in a situation in which the vast majority of potbelly sculptures lack good contextual information that can be used to date their creation. Beyond issues of dating, scholars such as Frederick Bove (1989a, 2011) and Michael Love (2010) have noted that the distribution of potbelly sculptures is intriguing in and of itself, as it suggests that sites of varying scale – large states and smaller second- or even third-tier sites – utilized this sculptural form to serve ideological agendas that appear to have crosscut political hierarchies. The formal variability among potbellies is also addressed in this chapter. The potbellies share important features with a range of other sculptural types, and the functions and features of these different sculptural forms serve to illuminate the meanings of their potbellied counterparts.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the domestic, ceramic figurine tradition at La Blanca and elsewhere that shares specific key attributes with the later stone potbellies. Attention is paid to the figurines, their context, and their distribution at La Blanca, as well as to a broader discussion of the porous boundaries between public and private space during the Preclassic. This chapter explores the use of small-scale “sculpture” within the domestic arena during the Preclassic and serves as an important counterpart to the rest of the book, which is more focused on the “public” stone monuments that populated the civic centers of sites, or those areas that were physically and conceptually tied to the political and administrative structures of the governing body. Certain features of the ceramic figurines, several of which were later incorporated into the stone potbellies, offer clues to meaning, particularly in relationship to archaeologically attested ritual patterns. These data are new, and I hope that their complete presentation, for the first time, opens up new ways of thinking about the shared features of the figurines and potbellies and what they can tell us about the inherent performativity of sculpture and how it engaged audiences in various types of spaces. Perhaps even more significantly, this chapter tackles the contradictions endemic to discussions of “private” versus “public” or “domestic” versus “civic” and the endlessly complex continuum that exists between them. While I acknowledge the limitations of such dichotomies (and admit to having struggled with them in the writing of this book), I maintain that they provide a useful heuristic for considering sculpture’s role in negotiating meanings, rituals, performances, and spaces that were not simply public or private, or domestic or civic, but often something somewhere in between.

Chapter 6 presents a history of previous interpretations of the potbelly sculptures. For many decades,

numerous scholars have linked the potbellies to a mysterious character that Hermann Beyer (1930) coined the “Fat God.” I trace the origins and development of this “Fat God” character, focusing on both its connections to and departures from the earlier Middle Preclassic ceramic figurines and Late Preclassic stone potbellies. This discussion broaches issues of disjunction and continuity in Mesoamerican art, and illustrates both the potential and danger of assumptions of consistent meaning based solely on shared attributes.

Chapter 7 presents alternative interpretations of the potbellies that do not rely on claims of uninterrupted continuity with later, Classic-period potbellied characters. To begin, it contemplates the possibility that the potbellies, with their closed eyes and swollen features, depict deceased individuals, as previously conjectured by a number of scholars (Miles 1965: 244; Parsons 1986: 45; J. Scott 1988: 26–29; Stuart and Stuart 1969: 198). Considering them even more specifically as ancestors, the chapter explores how ancestors were conceptualized and portrayed during the Preclassic period. The chapter also undertakes other avenues of interpretation, particularly those focused on iconographic attributes shared by Middle Preclassic figurines and the stone potbellies, which allude to concepts of breath and vitality and even whistling or the emanation of sound. Such clues point to expanded interpretive possibilities that can be assimilated into the growing body of literature concerning how Mesoamerican sculpture “performed” anciently. Mesoamerican sculpture, of all sizes and materials, was an active participant in the ancient environment and a critical vehicle through which messages were perpetually materialized. While some of these alternative lines of investigation correlate well with earlier interpretations, others point to new directions for understanding the Preclassic potbelly form. In the end, however, all of these potential explanations hearken back to the prescient observations made by Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1971), who noted that stone sculpture probably developed and endured in Mesoamerica because, after all, it served as an effective and robust medium for communication.

Chapter 8, the final chapter in this book, synthesizes the diverse data presented in the previous chapters and places the potbellies and their precursors, the puffy-featured ceramic figurines, within the social milieu of Preclassic Mesoamerica. If one accepts their identification as ancestors, as argued in Chapter 7, an obvious tension must be acknowledged between this identity and their rather homogeneous form and lack of individuality. It is this very lack of specificity in how their identity is composed that, I argue, imparts significant clues regarding their role in the construction of a social identity that

was inclusive or collective in nature. More than undertaking an examination of their attributes or iconographic associations, however, this chapter situates the potbellies within the social dynamics of the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period. It emphasizes that the significance of potbelly sculptures cannot be fully comprehended without recognition of other patterns of fabricating ancestry at this time, including mortuary traditions. All of these diverse data point to the potbellies as a powerful new sculptural form that addressed a unique set of social circumstances. The chapter also briefly considers how the potbellies, by embodying currents from both public and private spheres, provide yet another example of the way in which, throughout much of the world, specific motifs and ritual associations from the private sector have been effectively incorporated into public, monumental artistic programs. In short, without anticipating my conclusions too much, I contend that the potbellies, as ancestors, embodied an identity forged and manipulated by rulers of the time in response to the social upheavals and political developments that characterized the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period.

Having worked through an enormous amount of data ranging from the large scale to minutia, this final chapter also pays heed to the original questions that inspired this study: What was the significance of sculpture during the Preclassic period? Who used it, and for what purposes? Where was it used? What methods, especially without the benefits of contemporaneous text, can be used to access its meaning? How can sculpture, understood by way of these different methods and theoretical approaches,

inform our understanding of the social processes that played out during the Preclassic period? The closing chapter probably raises more questions than it answers, but perhaps this is what good scholarship should do, after all.⁴ In the end, I hope that it is a lesson in the vast potential (despite the equally enormous frustrations) that can be gained by thinking carefully and inclusively about Preclassic Mesoamerican sculpture.

Conclusions

This is a study that, at one level, seeks to demystify the renowned but elusive potbelly sculptures of Preclassic Mesoamerica. At another, it represents an innovative approach within the field of Mesoamerican art history to breaking down traditional boundaries and assumptions concerning the nature of sculpture, its developmental trajectory, and its political and social significance. It is my basic premise that the potbellies, for all of the many reasons alluded to earlier, are uniquely situated to facilitate an exploration of these various concerns. This study is also a demonstration of how sculpture becomes a sensitive tool for understanding the past when it is cautiously, and with painstaking attention to details, situated at the entangled intersection between humans, objects, and their interactions. In the end, it is an inquiry into how we can link sculpture – and specifically the Preclassic potbellies – to social processes, social identity, and the considerable political transformations that were unfolding throughout this fascinating period in the ancient Mesoamerican past.

Potbellies and Sculpture: A Brief History of Preclassic Scholarship

Introduction

Three primary objectives guide this chapter's contextualization of the potbelly monuments within the extensive literature devoted to Preclassic sculpture in southeastern Mesoamerica. While certainly not a compendium of the many contributions and scholars involved in this pursuit, it first and foremost seeks to situate the present study within a continuum of scholarship that emerged during the nineteenth century and has grown exponentially since then. Second, rather than providing merely a chronological overview of the literature, it highlights the currents that have shaped our understanding of Preclassic sculpture with a focus on the major events, tensions, and themes that characterized the decades up to the present. Third, it concludes with an eye toward the future and an assessment of how this current study, focused on the potbellies, builds on the research and discoveries of the past, yet simultaneously seeks to chart a new path for inquiries into the Preclassic period and its sculptural production. The approach to sculpture demonstrated in this book would not be possible without the rich body of data available to Mesoamerican scholars, which, because of its depth and methodological diversity, enables a consideration of sculpture as a viable and potent contributor to the social fabric of ancient Mesoamerica.¹

An interest in Preclassic sculpture is not unique to our modern world, however. Elizabeth Benson (1996: 17) astutely observed that an interest in the Preclassic period as a whole began in Precolumbian times with the persistent reuse of Preclassic styles, symbols, and even objects that were "heirloomed" by later cultures such as the Maya and Aztec. The Late Preclassic murals at San Bartolo, with their Olmec-style Maize God, vividly illustrate how the early Maya made direct reference in their artistic programs to earlier deities and forms, citing them

while at the same time reinventing them to suit new social agendas. Likewise, the veneration of a Preclassic potbelly monument in a Late Classic shrine at San Bartolo (Craig 2005) demonstrates the same reverence for the past, here materialized in sculptural form. So, too, the Postclassic inhabitants of the site of Xaltocan, in the northern Basin of Mexico, gathered and curated ceramic figurines that were created as far back as the Early Preclassic period, not unlike contemporaneous Aztec rulers who collected objects from previous eras (Brumfiel and Overholtzer 2009: 303; Umberger 1987; also see Hamann 2002). Indeed, even in Precolumbian times, Mesoamericans were keenly aware of the significance and power of objects from the deep or even more recent past, or motifs that were endowed with ancient associations. As Eduardo Douglas (2010: 162) shrewdly recognized with regard to early colonial-period manuscript traditions in Central Mexico, tendencies to quote from the past should be cast as deliberate and savvy decisions in which "the aura of antiquity" became the very "touchstone of . . . historical veracity."

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

Beyond the ancient world, a historical interest in Preclassic objects began in the nineteenth century with adventurers and scholars such as Alexander von Humboldt (1810) and José María Melgar y Serrano (1869, 1871) and continued unabated with increasingly serious attention into the early twentieth century with individuals such as Marshall Saville (1900). Driving many of these early studies was a fascination with the "strange" and "grotesque" objects first coined "Olmec" by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso in 1892.² Equally mysterious was the place of these objects within the vague chronology and cultural map of ancient Mesoamerica of that time. Early attempts to tackle this chronological riddle and ascertain the cultural affiliation of these and related objects include Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge's pioneering efforts (Blom and La Farge 1926), George Vaillant's excavations in the Valley of Mexico (Vaillant 1935),³ Mathew Stirling's investigations at Tres Zapotes and La Venta (Stirling 1943), and Miguel Covarrubias's work at Tlatilco (Covarrubias 1943). The mystery surrounding these unusual objects and the culture(s) that had created them was certainly deepened by the growing number of reports from as far away as the southern Maya region of objects bearing "Olmec" motifs or stylistic associations (Gordon 1898; also see Stirling 1943: 61).



Figure 2.1. Photo from Alfred Maudslay's *Biologia Centrali-Americana: Archaeology* depicting "stone figures on the road side." From Maudslay (1889–1902: vol. 2, plate 75a), courtesy of Mesoweb.

The earliest presentation and description of potbelly sculptures occurred during the same era. Alfred Maudslay's massive *Biologia Centrali-Americana: Archaeology* appeared in 1889 and illustrated some Preclassic material, including a photo and plan of mounds at the site of Kaminaljuyu, in the highlands of Guatemala, where several potbelly sculptures were recorded. Maudslay illustrated two rather forlorn-looking examples, clearly not in their original context, identified only as "stone figures on the road side" (Fig. 2.1) (Maudslay 1889–1902: vol. 2, plate 75a). It was not until 1925 that the first systematic excavations at Kaminaljuyu and the identification of significant Preclassic remains were made by Manuel Gamio (1926). Resumed excavations at Kaminaljuyu in 1936 by Alfred Kidder, Jesse Jennings, and Edwin Shook under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution further revealed the extent of Preclassic occupation at that site, although the dating of the sculpture encountered

in these excavations remained controversial. In particular, the investigators questioned whether many of the monuments – particularly finely carved stelae – were "too sophisticated" to assign to the "relatively early period" of the Preclassic (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946: 103). Individuals such as Robert Burkitt (1930), Gustav Eisen (1888), Walter Lehmann (1910, 2000 [1926]), and Franz Termer (1934) had previously documented sculpture in the Guatemalan Highlands and Pacific piedmont, and Samuel Lothrop (1926, 1933) had described early materials around Lake Atitlán, Guatemala, and on the outskirts of Guatemala City at the Finca Arévalo (later identified as part of Kaminaljuyu), including several potbellies that he described as "crudely yet vigorously carved" (Lothrop 1926: 164). The potbellies, with their emphasis on volume and more minimal modification, stood in sharp contrast to finely carved and more narrative stelae, and posed distinct challenges to understanding how these

diverse sculptural forms fit together in any chronological or developmental sense. Nonetheless, scholars such as Lothrop (1926: 166–167) insisted that, on the basis of available evidence, “an early date must be assigned to at least part of the [potbelly sculptural] group to which the crude Finca Arévalo statues belong, if not actually to those statues themselves.”

Gustav Bruehl (1888), during his travels to the site that would later become known as Takalik Abaj, described an eclectic assortment of monuments. He attributed the stelae to the Early Postclassic Toltecs but suggested that the “rude stone figures” – probably a reference to the many potbellies at Takalik Abaj – were created by the Quiché Maya, whose conquests and histories he had studied in the “aboriginal testimony” of the *Popol Vuh* and *Título de los Señores de Totonicapan*. While his assessment reflects the chronological confusions of the time, it was quite precocious in its application of ethno-historical documents to make sense of the cultural diversity of the Pacific slope.

Interestingly, potbelly sculptures were featured in other publications of the time, such as *Art and Archaeology: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, which targeted a more general audience interested in everything from Mesoamerican archaeology to art and painting in Russia. Published by the Archaeological Institute of America, the journal included regular contributions, “Masterpieces of Aboriginal American Art,” by William H. Holmes, who in 1920 became director of the National Gallery of Art. Holmes often included commentaries on new discoveries and the archaeological controversies of the day, including such things as Manuel Gamio’s (1926) report, “Cultural Evolution in Guatemala and Its Geographic and Historic Handicaps.” This essay summarized the ancient artistic and architectural accomplishments of the Guatemalan Highlands region, utilizing an evolutionary paradigm that emphasized “progress” and increasing naturalism through time, while also bearing in mind geographic factors and limitations. Gamio illustrated one of the Kaminaljuyu potbellies (Monument 6), describing it as a “Neo-Archaic, Anthropomorphic Sculpture from Arévalo, Guatemala.” Although by 1931 Robert Burkitt had photographed and mapped the site of Monte Alto, in Escuintla, Guatemala, with its impressive corpus of potbelly sculptures and related monumental heads, this data remained unpublished (Popenoe de Hatch 1989: 25).

These early investigations transpired during a time of intense intellectual attention to issues of dating and cultural affiliation in Mesoamerican studies, when knowledge of relative chronological sequences lagged behind other advances, such as an understanding of Maya

calendrical notation. In fact, Vaillant’s (1928) review of recent archaeological investigations in Central America addressed the irony of this situation, in which sophisticated knowledge of the Maya calendar made it possible to establish “a more or less absolute chronology” that had not yet been correlated with a “comparably accurate” sequential archaeology. While he praised the popular volume by Blom and La Farge (1926), entitled *Tribes and Temples*, as “a most successful combination of scientific information and the intellectually lighter aspects of travel,” he opined, “Once more, however, we feel the tragedy of the situation in Maya archeology: the dates are exact, but the correlation between the time factor and the material culture is vague.”

The 1940s

The temporal conundrum haunted Mesoamerican scholarship into the following decades and was a topic of contention at the 1942 Mesa Redonda held in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Mexico. One of the goals of the conference was to more fully define and understand the Olmec cultural phenomenon, which had not yet been firmly and unequivocally anchored to the Early and Middle Preclassic periods. During the 1940s, the possibility of a Mesoamerican culture with such significant time depth, predating that of the Maya and Aztec, was a radical concept. Although scholars such as Vaillant argued for a very early date for Olmec culture, J. Eric S. Thompson insisted that it dated to the Postclassic period (Mayas y Olmecas 1942). Thompson was perhaps loathe to acknowledge that the Maya of the Classic period had been preceded by another culture with an equally precocious artistic tradition. Others, such as Alfonso Caso (1942), exhibited no such resistance, boldly asserting that Olmec culture was “without a doubt the mother of other cultures such as the Maya, the Zapotec, and that of Teotihuacan and El Tajín, among others.”⁴ Decades later, in 1968, Matthew Stirling, famed for his investigations of several Preclassic sites, concisely summarized this situation: “As a result of the prevailing belief that the Maya, because of their great achievements in art, architecture, and the calendar, originated all high-culture elements in Middle America, the majority of North American archaeologists were reluctant to believe that the Olmec civilization had preceded them” (Stirling 1968: 6).⁵

The Maya and Their Neighbors, edited by Hays et al., appeared in 1940 and included a number of important articles by Alfred Kidder, J. Eric S. Thompson, Sylvanus Morley, and George Vaillant, among others, addressing Maya civilization and its relationship to

surrounding regions. Francis B. Richardson's essay in the volume, entitled "Non-Maya Monumental Sculpture of Central America," focused on Preclassic sculpture from Guatemala, El Salvador, and elsewhere, and included a discussion of the monumental heads and potbelly sculptures from Monte Alto. Richardson cautioned that there left "much to be desired in the initial archaeological procedure of determining the general nature and distribution of remains" along the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, in particular cultural designations and their linguistic affiliations. He did, however, assert that the Monte Alto potbellies and monumental heads (Figs. 1.4 and 1.6) bore a close stylistic relationship to the Olmec sculpture of La Venta, an assessment that spurred interest in the sculptures as possible "links" between the cultures of the Gulf Coast and southeastern Mesoamerica. Uniting all of the essays in this volume was a consideration of regional paths of communication and influences as reflected in the ceramics, architecture, writing systems, and monuments throughout Mesoamerica and to the north and south. The breadth of the book is a testament not only to the range of investigations during this period, but also to the frustrations with the lack of an established comparative chronology for adequately evaluating the relationship between these various regions, cultures, and their material records.

The volumes and conference proceedings of the 1940s are a poignant reminder of how new the field of Mesoamerican scholarship – and the Preclassic period in particular – truly is. Drucker (1975: 103) recounted how Matthew Stirling, while en route to the 1942 Mesa Redonda conference, had detoured to the Olmec site of La Venta, where excavations were under way. This visit was, as Drucker described, "a most fortunate circumstance, for he was thus able to present to the conference a report on the first 'Olmec' objects found in an archaeological context." While some of the most controversial issues of the 1940s, such as the time depth of Olmec culture, were resolved with the advent of radiocarbon dating in the following decade (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1957), others – such as the ethnic and linguistic affiliations of the Olmec and other Preclassic cultures, and the exact nature of the relationship between the Olmec and the Maya – persist seventy years later.

These issues are particularly germane when one is contemplating the Pacific slope and adjacent Guatemalan Highlands, where major cultural manifestations occurred during the Preclassic period. The monuments associated with these developments are literally – geographically and temporally – wedged between the florescence of the Olmec during the early parts of the Preclassic and that of the Maya, which attained its greatest extent during

the Classic period. In fact, the history of scholarship on the Preclassic is inextricably intertwined with a gradual understanding of the nature, extent, and temporal parameters of these civilizations and with the development of an increasingly detailed chronology for Mesoamerica as a whole. Perhaps more significantly, the history of Preclassic studies attests to the complex task of establishing a canon of art for an enormous geographic region that witnessed the waxing, waning, and complex interactions of numerous cultures. With regard to the Pacific slope in particular, the first systematic archaeological investigations were not even inaugurated until the 1940s. Bove (2000: 104) commented on this, remarking with some incredulity, "When I look back on this period, I find it remarkable that while there had been a steady stream of visitors to the coastal region from the mid to late 1800s, no scientific excavations took place until Thompson's work at El Baúl in 1941 (Thompson 1948)."

While perhaps best characterized by the Mesa Redonda, the 1940s witnessed other flurries of activity. Investigations by Stirling at La Venta and other sites along both the Gulf and Pacific Coasts eventually culminated in the publication of *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*. This volume included a photo of Tres Zapotes Monument L (Fig. 2.2), an eroded potbelly discovered during excavations undertaken between 1938 and 1940, which Stirling described as "a dwarflike potbelled human figure with bent elbows and hands placed over the stomach" (Stirling 1943: 24). His description of this potbelly from the Gulf Coast followed Thompson's (1942) publication of a similar monument from the Pacific Coast. Thompson recounted a visit to the area of Takalik Abaj, then known as the Fincas San Isidro Piedra Parada and Santa Margarita, and described the presence of "extremely crude sculpture," a reference to the potbellies that hearkened back to that made by Gustav Bruehl in the preceding century. Thompson would later, in a 1943 publication, illustrate several more examples from Takalik Abaj. Such studies devoted to sculpture were certainly amplified by other scholarly investigations like that by Philip Drucker, who in a 1947 essay on the La Venta ceramics broached the topic of Preclassic social and political organization.⁶

The 1950s

The 1950s ushered in an era of intense archaeological investigation and analysis in the Olmec heartland (Berlin 1953; Clewlow and Corson 1968; Covarrubias 1957; Drucker 1952; Drucker and Heizer 1956; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959; Medellín Zeníl 1960, 1971),



Figure 2.2. Tres Zapotes Monument L. From Stirling (1943: plate 10c).

Central Mexico (Piña Chan 1955, 1958; M. Porter 1953), and southeastern Mesoamerica (Balsler 1959; Boggs 1950; Shook 1956). In terms of sculpture, Tatiana Proskouriakoff's (1950) *Study of Classic Maya Sculpture*, despite its focus on the Classic period, also dealt with the complex stylistic relationships that characterized the preceding Preclassic period. Still echoing Vaillant (1928) more than twenty years later, Proskouriakoff bemoaned the fact that the stylistic association of monuments from Olmec, Zapotec, and Pacific slope sites had not yet "been successfully correlated with that of the Maya and that their internal sequences are virtually unknown." Nonetheless, she insisted that the tools of art history – such as iconographic and formal analysis – were as important as those of archaeology for solving questions of dating, cultural affinity, and influence.

New topics – including subsistence patterns, irrigation, and the role of agriculture – also gained momentum in the 1950s (Diehl 1989: 23–26) and yielded models of population size that would dramatically affect future studies of social, economic, and political differentiation. Such advancements also factored significantly into a

growing understanding of how sculpture was employed by elites within each site and region to negotiate this differentiation. The nature of interrelationships throughout Preclassic Mesoamerica, however, continued to dominate conversations (see, e.g., Jiménez Moreno 1959: 1019–1108). Covarrubias was particularly vocal on this topic, as evidenced by his posthumously published 1957 *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*, perhaps most well known for its "flowchart" of rain god visages radiating out through Mesoamerica from an Olmec prototype (Covarrubias 1957: fig. 22). At the heart of Covarrubias's volume was a reassertion of Caso's (1942) Olmec "Mother Culture" theory. His views, as Michael Coe (1968a: 151–152) observed, were cleverly expressed in a cartoon that succinctly, and quite humorously, criticized scholars who questioned the temporal primacy of Olmec art. In this animated sketch, an Olmec "baby" bites the behind of an agitated figure rendered in the Classic Maya style. The accompanying script reads:

Oh! Sharper than a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful child,
Particularly when his bite a bottom has defiled,
One blushes hot to think it was a meditated plan.
What is worse is when this evil child – was father to
this man.

In a more serious vein, other scholars such as Kidder (1950: 7) criticized the evolutionary bias connoted by the terms "Preclassic" and "Classic," concluding that "our present nomenclature fails to reflect what actually happened in Mesoamerica." Coe, in an essay that appeared in *The Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers* in 1957, astutely framed these discussions of the Preclassic period against the backdrop of an ongoing competition among scholars to lay claim to the earliest and most important site, region, or cultural florescence – the place where "the stealing of the Promethean fire" had taken place, to borrow Coe's phrase (1957: 8). His essay also included a discussion of Preclassic monuments with dates and writing, and asserted that much of the initial development of sculptural forms took place during this early period; the Classic period had only to build on these foundations.

The 1960s

The 1960s witnessed major archaeological projects in the Olmec heartland at San Lorenzo, directed by Coe and Richard Diehl (Coe, Diehl, and Stuiver 1967), and at La Venta under the aegis of Drucker and Heizer, both of which yielded new radiocarbon dates confirming the antiquity of Olmec culture (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham

1968). Increasing attention was also paid to determining the nature of Preclassic sociopolitical organization (Bernal 1969; Caso 1965; Coe 1968b; Heizer 1960; Sanders and Price 1968). Major excavations likewise took place in Central Mexico at sites such as Tlatilco, in Guerrero at Tlapacoya, as well as in the Valley of Oaxaca, confirming widespread occupations, ritual centers, and sophisticated art traditions throughout Mesoamerica during the Preclassic (Flannery 1968; Grove 1968, 1970; Niederberger 1975; Tolstoy and Paradis 1970).

Many of these new findings were featured in the *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, edited by Elizabeth Benson (1968). Of special note in this volume was Proskouriakoff's (1968: 121) assessment of sculpture from the site of Monte Alto, which included a series of potbelly and related sculptures. While she contended that the Monte Alto sculptures represented a "distinct sculptural tradition" from that of the Olmec, she added the caveat that Lee Allen Parsons and Edwin Shook were about to begin excavation of Monte Alto (Fig. 2.3). As she concluded, "Until we have this information, it is futile to guess whether the sculptures represent a substratum of the Olmec development or a provincial manifestation of its boulder-carving tradition." This contrasted to some degree with the view expressed by Bernal (1969: 139) the following year, in which he contended that the Guatemalan potbellies were "cruder" than Olmec monuments. Despite this rather pejorative assessment of the potbellies, he acknowledged a "connection" or "influence" between them and Olmec forms, although he admitted that he could not yet discern a temporal or geographic direction of movement between the two sculptural traditions.

The 1960s also witnessed extensive excavations throughout southeastern Mesoamerica, including the Guatemalan Highlands (Shook 1965) and the piedmont and highlands of Chiapas (Ekholm-Miller 1969; Greene and Lowe 1967; Lowe and Agrinier 1960; Lowe and Mason 1965). Continued discoveries along the Pacific Coast (Coe 1961; Coe and Flannery 1967) spurred a few, such as Rafael Girard (1968), to assert that southeastern Mesoamerica was the locus of origin of the Olmec style.

The scholarship of Michael Coe (1962, 1965a, b, c, 1968a, b) best exemplifies the continued emphasis during the 1960s on discerning the relationships between the art of the diverse cultures of ancient Mesoamerica. Coe, like Caso and Covarrubias before him, viewed the Olmec as the fountainhead of most Mesoamerican art and argued that Olmec art was "classic," with its emphasis on volume and stability. By contrast, Late Preclassic- and Classic-period works, with their emphasis on intricately carved, highly narrative, and often densely detailed presentations, were "baroque"; similar sentiments were

expressed by Ignacio Bernal (1969). These implications of development and decline in Mesoamerican art were in keeping with then-current art historical theories regarding evolutionary cycles in the art of Europe and ancient Greece (Graham 2008; Guernsey 2006b: 54). Yet they did little to explicate the nature of the potbelly sculptures, with their emphasis on three-dimensionality in an area better known for its elaborate stela-altar pairs, whose highly narrative, two-dimensional presentations of imagery appeared to be contemporaneous.

In 1965, Suzanne Miles proposed a highly influential sculptural seriation in which a variety of Preclassic monuments were organized into chronological periods based primarily on stylistic criteria. With regard to the potbellies, the study by Miles and that by Lee Parsons and Peter Jenson in the same year were particularly influential. Miles (1965: 242) assigned the potbellies to the earliest chronological division in her seriation, roughly equivalent to or preceding the Olmec horizon. Parsons and Jenson (1965: 143), however, on the basis of their recent archaeological investigations at Monte Alto, assigned the monuments to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. Significantly for the interpretation of Preclassic sculpture in general, Miles (1965: 237) asserted that monuments from the Chiapas-Guatemala region, which included the potbellies, were situated in "ceremonial centers," where they were "primarily religious in function." This assessment, which emphasized the religious rather than political content of the sculpture, would be sustained in the literature for many years despite the recognition by other scholars, such as Coe (1966: 60), of "profane" scenes of decapitation and defeat that spoke to more historical concerns. In fact, this insistence on the "religious" function of sculpture stood in marked contrast to the focus of other scholarly approaches during this decade that sought, by contrast, to understand the potential sociopolitical significance of sculpture (Bernal 1969; Caso 1965; Coe 1966, 1968a).

By 1969, the question of the Pacific slope's relationship to Olmec culture was featured in George Stuart and Gene Stuart's *Discovering Man's Past in the Americas*. They included several photos from the Monte Alto excavations directed by Parsons in this *National Geographic* publication, which was designed, as Matthew Stirling noted in his foreword to the book, for a general audience. Two photos in this present study (Figs. 1.6 and 8.3), in fact, were taken by George Stuart while traveling with his family in March 1969 to visit Parsons and his colleague Edwin Shook, who was analyzing the ceramics recovered from the Monte Alto investigations. Although photos of potbellies had been published in numerous scholarly studies by this date, this was in essence the first



Figure 2.3. Photo of the site of Monte Alto and Monument 2 taken in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Photo by Gareth W. Lowe, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

time since Gamio's (1926) essay in the popular *Art and Archaeology: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine* that the potbellies had been presented to the general public, in this case as an important, if mysterious, part of the cultural history of ancient Mesoamerica.

The 1970s

Proskouriakoff's contribution to the 1970 symposium *Observations on the Emergence of Civilization in*

Mesoamerica gave new primacy to monumental sculpture as a vehicle that could, through its presentation of iconic imagery and narratives, provide insight into the social, ritual, and political aspects of the ancient past (Proskouriakoff 1971). This assertion was particularly important, as it emphasized the historical content of the monuments versus their religious or mythical import, a somewhat radical departure from previous approaches that viewed Mesoamerican art as purely mythic or religious. In the same volume, Shook (1971) surveyed new evidence from the Preclassic coast and highlands of

Guatemala. Of note was his report on recent field seasons at Monte Alto, which indicated that the major occupation of the site occurred during the Late Preclassic. Although the excavations could not confirm the placement of the potbellies within the site's chronology, Shook acknowledged that the evidence suggested a Late Preclassic date for the sculptures. He offered this summary:

The Middle Pre-Classic appears to be the period of rapid increase of population, a formalization of ceremonialism, societal organization, city planning and utilization of the agricultural and ritual calendar. However, the cultural apogee of the Pre-Classic was reached in Late Pre-Classic times somewhere between 300 B.C. and 0 A.D. with the widest inter-regional cultural affiliation and trade relations, a proliferation of stone sculpture and styles, and the development of Maya hieroglyphic writing. (Shook 1971: 77)

The potbellies again garnered the attention of the general public in a 1979 article in *Time* magazine. The article, entitled "The Fat Boys," featured the work of Vincent Malmström, who argued that the navels, and sometimes right temples, of the rotund figures and massive heads from Monte Alto revealed natural, localized points of magnetism. Malmström linked this attribute of Monte Alto monuments to other magnetic sculptures he had documented at the site of Izapa (Malmström 1976), although he conceded in later works (Malmström 1997: 30–39) that it was justifiable to question whether ancient sculptors were aware of these magnetic fields. Interestingly, the *Time* reporter who penned the article neglected the observations by Shook (1971) and others (Navarrete 1974a; Parsons and Jenson 1965) concerning a probable Middle to Late Preclassic date for the Monte Alto potbellies and instead characterized them as "apparently of pre-Olmec origin," an opinion shared by several scholars at this time (see Chapter 4). The reporter also intimated that the magnetic sculptures might "hint at contacts with the Chinese," echoing earlier scholarship that had pursued diffusionist explanations for the development of Mesoamerican civilization (Jakeman 1958a, b; Keeler 1957, 1961).

As both Diehl (1989: 17) and Benson (1996: 22) observed, although the 1970s witnessed a drastic decline in excavations in the Gulf Coast region, significant archaeological projects were initiated in Central Mexico and other areas of Mesoamerica (Gay 1967; Grove 1970, 1973, 1984; Henderson 1979).⁷ Exploratory investigations likewise began in 1976 at Takalik Abaj under the auspices of the University of California at Berkeley. Directed by John Graham, Robert F. Heizer, and Edwin Shook (1978), the project sought to fully document

the extensive and stylistically diverse corpus of Preclassic sculpture at that site, a significant percentage of which was composed of potbelly representations (Fig. 2.4). The focus on stylistic relationships that had characterized previous decades was complemented by volumes such as *Mesoamerican Communication Routes and Cultural Contacts* (Lee and Navarrete 1978), which focused on the physical paths through which the exchange of goods and ideas occurred (also see Adams 1977). This was also the era in which scholars such as David Freidel (1978, 1979, 1985, 1986, 1990, 1992; also see Freidel and Schele 1988) began to explore in greater detail the relationship between monumental sculptural programs, ideology, and political organization.

The various publications of the 1970s that continued to struggle with the multitude of relationships between regions and cultures during the Preclassic must be viewed against the backdrop of the seminal debate between George Kubler and Gordon Willey, which addressed the integrity of a Mesoamerican ideological system. Willey (1973) maintained that Mesoamerica could be viewed as a "unified cultural tradition," defined not so much by spatial boundaries as by a suite of shared cultural practices first proposed by Paul Kirchhoff (1943). Although Kirchhoff had acknowledged that Mesoamerica was composed of numerous linguistic and ethnic groups living in a vast region characterized by different ecological zones and access to diverse resources, he nevertheless identified a series of cultural traits and beliefs that, he argued, were shared by Mesoamerican groups through time and space. Building on Kirchhoff's observations, Willey contended that methods such as ethnographic analogy (or the direct historical approach) – in which inferences can be drawn among people, objects, and cultures within a geographically and historically circumscribed framework – were warranted and, ultimately, productive in Mesoamerican scholarship.

On the other hand, Kubler (1975: 762) warned of the dangers of disjunction when dealing with the vast geography and great temporal span that the term "Mesoamerica" denotes:

These efforts to reaffirm the pluralist view of Mesoamerican cultural history which I had learned from Spinden and Vaillant challenged what I regarded as a simplistic view of anthropologists of Mesoamerica as a single huge cultural system subsisting from formative beginnings to the Spanish Conquest without undergoing major changes in the symbolic system.

Kubler's alternative emphasis on potential points of reinvention, rupture, or revival grew out of the art historical theories of his professor, Erwin Panofsky (1955),



Figure 2.4. Excavations in 1980 at Takalik Abaj on Structure 7, Terrace 3, with members of the Berkeley project and Monuments 58 and 50. Photo by Michael Love.

who had first coined the term “principle of disjunction” to explain “the medieval re-use of classical forms and meanings” (Kubler 1975: 761). Panofsky’s ideas, which so profoundly influenced Kubler, traced their lineage to his mentor, art historian Henri Focillon (Focillon, Hogan, and Kubler 1942). As Kubler explained, “The axioms of this method were first stated in 1934 (in *La vie des formes*) by Focillon. They are (1) that a visible form often repeated may acquire different meanings with the passage of time, and (2) that an enduring meaning may be conveyed by different visual forms.” According to Kubler, then, later cultures in Mesoamerica may indeed have used the forms created by earlier civilizations, but they were equally likely to have refashioned their meaning.

Few would disagree that this debate helped to forge the development of a methodological framework for studying the artistic record of ancient Mesoamerica in which formal and symbolic continuities were posited most convincingly only within geographically and historically circumscribed frameworks, and with careful attention to archaeological context. This debate, which hinged on the application of ethnographic analogy, was

also linked to the identification of linguistic affiliations for specific sites and regions, a source of important and growing research during this period by scholars such as Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman (1976), as well as Gareth Lowe (1977).

The 1980s to the present

Attention to the Early and Middle Preclassic periods surged in the 1980s, resulting in new publications and discoveries in the Olmec region, the highlands and the Basin of Mexico, and Chiapas.⁸ Works focused on Preclassic ceramic arts (Feuchtwanger 1989) and monument mutilation and reuse (J. Porter 1989b) appeared, pointing to the connections that existed between categories of objects as well as the ways in which monuments could be recarved and reinvested with new meaning through time. In particular, the rare and exciting discovery of wooden sculpture in the sacred springs at El Manatí, near San Lorenzo, opened a new vista into the potential origins of stone sculpture and the range of media employed by

ancient sculptors, while also poignantly reminding us of what is often lost due to the vagaries of preservation (Ortiz and Rodríguez 1989).

These many discoveries became the focus of several important conferences and publications (Benson 1981; Carmona Macias 1989; Ochoa and Lee 1983; Sharer and Grove 1989; Uriarte and González Lauck 2008). Uniting all of these studies was a common interest in a broad contextualization of Preclassic culture involving archaeological assessment, iconographic and architectural analysis, and considerations of ideology and political organization – studies possible only because of the growing body of data available to scholars. Contributors also dealt with the problematic nature of the term “Olmec” and the conflicting definitions and uses that persisted in the literature (see Diehl 1989). It is important to underscore that such debates characterize the literature even today, and attention has very recently been refocused on the “Mother Culture” debate that dominated the 1942 Mesa Redonda. A series of articles, dealing primarily with Early Preclassic ceramic data, have looked at patterns of exchange of iconographically charged pottery between the Gulf Coast heartland, the Valley of Oaxaca, and other regions of Mesoamerica in order to engage questions of origin, exchange, and influence.⁹

A new project at Takalik Abaj returned to the lingering research questions from the Berkeley project of earlier decades and reevaluated the relationship between Olmec- and Maya-style objects found in abundance along the Pacific slope. Under the direction of Miguel Orrego Corzo (1990; Popenoe de Hatch, Schieber de Lavarreda, and Orrego Corzo 2011), a series of publications produced by Orrego Corzo, Christa Schieber de Lavarreda, and their colleagues have continued to deal not only with the diversity of sculptural forms at this site, but also with the context and significance of the potbellies, which were often placed adjacent to stelae and other types of monuments (E. García 1997; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2001; Orrego Corzo 1998). Most recently, Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010b) stressed that the potbellies at Takalik Abaj should be understood as a form of sculpture that was “local” or distinct from both Olmec- and Maya-style monuments at the site, and most likely created during the Late Preclassic period.

Arthur Demarest’s (1986) study of Santa Leticia in the southeastern highlands of El Salvador revealed important contextual data on another assemblage of potbelly sculptures; it also confirmed the geographic breadth of this Preclassic sculptural tradition. Demarest’s investigations followed up on earlier reports by Siméon Habel (1878) and Stanley Boggs (1969) of large-scale potbelly

sculptures at Santa Leticia (Fig. 4.38). Most significantly, as presented in detail in Chapter 4, were the radiocarbon dates obtained during excavations of the Santa Leticia potbellies that anchored them to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition.

The increasing amount of research focused on the Preclassic Pacific slope is well illustrated by the volume *New Frontiers in the Archaeology of the Pacific Coast of Southern Mesoamerica*, edited by Frederick Bove and Lynette Heller (1989). Of particular significance with regard to the potbellies were Bove’s (1989a) and Marion Popenoe de Hatch’s (1989) essays. Bove noted the wide distribution of potbelly sculptures along the Pacific Coast in centers of various scales and settlement sizes, initiating the first discussion of their potential significance for understanding the relationship between different types of monuments – such as potbellies and stelae – and a site’s relative regional authority. Popenoe de Hatch undertook an ambitious seriation of the potbellies at Monte Alto, concluding that they had most likely been erected during the Late Preclassic period. This was also the era of Parsons’s (1986) *The Origins of Maya Art: Monumental Stone Sculpture of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, and the Southern Pacific Coast*, which offered an authoritative synthesis of sculptural developments in southeastern Mesoamerica between the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. His study also provided the most complete inventory of potbelly sculptures to date. Contributions by Chinchilla (1996, 2001–2002) elaborated on the contexts of potbellies found in the region of central Escuintla, illustrated for the first time several unproven examples, and explored the stylistic variation and iconographic significance of this genre of sculpture.

Articles by John Scott also focused, in great part, on the potbelly genre. The first, entitled “Post-Olmec Art in Veracruz” (J. Scott 1980: 245), identified a series of sculptures in the Veracruz/Tabasco region that represented “variants of the pot-bellied boulder sculpture so common on the Pacific region of Guatemala.” This study was important not only for pushing the geographic boundaries of the potbelly form farther west, but for its discussion of the potbellies in this region as successors to earlier Olmec carving traditions. These observations were further developed in his 1988 essay “Potbellies and Fat Gods.” Although Beyer (1930) had coined the term “Fat God” a half-century earlier to describe a series of Early Classic ceramic figurines from Central Mexico, J. Scott was one of several scholars during the 1980s to continue associating the Preclassic stone potbellies with this later “Fat God” identity. As I argue in Chapter 6, the connections between the stone potbellies and Central Mexican figurine traditions are far more complex

and much less linear that this “Fat God” designation implies. Nevertheless, Scott’s essay effectively called attention to the potbelly sculptures and their relationship to other sculptural forms and themes from a variety of Mesoamerican regions.

In the Maya Lowlands, increasing evidence of extensive Preclassic occupation forced scholars to reassess the geographic extent of a Middle and Late Preclassic florescence in Mesoamerica.¹⁰ Although several projects explored the developmental trajectory of monument erection in the lowlands as a vehicle for dynastic propaganda, sculpture was not necessarily the focus of all of these investigations. Nonetheless, each contributed significantly to a broader contextual understanding of the development, complexity, and regional manifestations of Preclassic civilization in the Maya Lowlands. Such investigations were complemented by a wide range of iconographic studies focused on Lowland Maya sculpture, several of which identified recurring sculptural themes and motifs (see, e.g., Coe 1989; Hellmuth 1986; Schele and Miller 1986; Taube 1987).

The vast amount of research focused on the Preclassic in recent years speaks to a growing interest in this period. Several volumes have been particularly important for our understanding of the diversity and themes of Middle Preclassic sculpture. For example, the catalogue *The Olmec World* (Princeton Art Museum 1995) ushered in an era of new attention to Olmec cosmology that went beyond purely iconographic analyses and sought to discern aspects of worldview. Essays by Kent Reilly and Karl Taube in this catalogue and elsewhere best demonstrate the rich potential of these methodologies (Reilly 1995, 1999, 2002; Taube 1995, 1996, 1998, 2004). Other works, such as *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico* (Benson and de la Fuente 1996), *Los olmecas en Mesoamérica* (Clark 1994b), and *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica* (Clark and Pye 2000a), assembled an impressive array of scholars who reconsidered the Olmec phenomenon throughout the Gulf Coast, Central Mexico, Oaxaca, and Chiapas.

The nuanced relationships between the forms and iconography of Middle and Late Preclassic sculpture, emergent writing traditions, and statements of political authority were also the topic of numerous essays (Clancy 1990; Córdova Tello and Meza Rodríguez 2007; Fahsen 2000; Fields 1991; Reilly and Garber 2003; Taube 2004) or were addressed by various authors in an impressive number of edited volumes (Bell, Canuto, and Sharer 2004; Garber 2004; Grube 1999a; Koontz, Reese-Taylor, and Headrick 2001; Laporte and Valdés 1993; Powis 2005; Stone 2002). A series of volumes also tackled broader social patterns and issues of ideology or

political economy during the Preclassic and later periods, including those by Demarest and Conrad (1992), Grove and Joyce (1999), Masson and Freidel (2002), and Cyphers and Hirth (2008). Most significantly, the wealth of data presented by scholars in these volumes enabled them to productively contemplate how sculpture, architecture, and the built environment were central to the development and implementation of fundamental social and political processes. Attention also continued to be focused on issues of language and ethnic affiliation, spurred in part by the discovery of La Mojarra Stela 1 in 1986 (Houston and Coe 2003; Justeson and Kaufman 1993, 1997; Wichmann 1995; Winfield Capitaine 1988) and other artifacts and sculptures with early, arguably non-Maya texts (Pohl, Pope, and von Nagy 2002; Rodríguez et al. 2006).

Along the Pacific Coast and in the Guatemalan Highlands, the last decade of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first were characterized by extensive excavations and research, best summarized in essays by Michael Love (2007) and Marion Popenoe de Hatch and Edwin Shook (1999). Love, Popenoe de Hatch, and Héctor Escobedo dedicated an edited volume to the pioneering explorations of Edwin Shook in 2002, and Lynne S. Lowe and Mary Pye published a tribute to Gareth Lowe in 2007, both of which contained numerous articles concerning Preclassic sculpture and its archaeological context. Detailed discussions of the iconographic significance of Preclassic sculpture appeared in a number of essays or books focused on the Pacific slope, the Guatemalan Highlands, and the Maya Lowlands (Fields and Reents-Budet 2005; Grazioso Sierra 2002; Guernsey 2006a, b, 2010a; Guernsey Kappelman 2001, 2002, 2004; Kaplan 1995, 2000).

Significantly, the present state of scholarship on Preclassic sculpture was the topic of a conference and volume organized by Dumbarton Oaks in 2007 and included contributions from scholars working throughout a variety of cultural regions in Mesoamerica (Guernsey, Clark, and Arroyo 2010). The volume emphasized the sociohistorical contexts of Middle and Late Preclassic monuments, as well as their life histories and patterns of reuse, in an attempt to underscore the multifaceted role of sculpture in the construction and manipulation of political authority. Perhaps most interesting in the volume are the points of disagreement among authors. Such divergences in opinion are probably the best measure of the work that remains to be done; they also remind us of the pivotal and multifaceted roles that sculpture played within the long and rich history of Mesoamerican visual culture.

Lastly, in this summary of scholarship up to the present, a recent volume devoted to figurines is important to

note, as its focus on these small-scale ceramic objects – themselves a form of sculpture – makes it rare in Mesoamerican archaeological literature to date. The volume, edited by Christina Halperin et al. (2009), goes well beyond the typological assessments typically used to discuss figurines and instead views them as “indices for the social processes of the ancient peoples who produced and used them.” The numerous essays in the volume, which present methodologically different approaches to the study of figurines, exemplify how the close and contextualized examination of small-scale objects can provide fruitful insight into the broader social experiences of ancient Mesoamericans, particularly as articulated through the representation of the human form.

Conclusions

As this brief – and certainly not comprehensive – survey of studies that have dealt with Preclassic sculpture attests, approaches to monuments have varied significantly through time, yet have been consistently engaged with complex and often elusive issues such as relative chronology and cultural affiliation. Nonetheless, as each year has passed, our understanding of the diversity, contexts, functions, and styles of Preclassic sculpture has also expanded considerably. Interestingly, as my colleagues and I noted in our introduction to the recent *Dumbarton Oaks* volume on Preclassic sculpture (Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010), it is only in recent years that the role of sculpture has been restored to the place of prominence that it originally held in Mesoamerican studies. It was the major interpretive tool embraced by early scholars such as Alexander von Humboldt, Matthew Stirling, and Miguel Covarrubias. But it was eventually eclipsed in the mid-twentieth century by a new focus on scientific archaeology that “viewed sculptures as epiphenomena of civilization and accorded them scant attention” (Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010: 24). Today’s studies of Mesoamerican sculpture avail themselves of a plethora of archaeological data and more refined chronologies. They have become methodologically diverse, incorporating tools drawn from art history, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and other disciplines, and have moved well beyond the more (necessarily) descriptive studies that characterized the first generations of Mesoamerican scholarship. The dramatically expanded data available to modern scholars also evince a greater complexity for the Preclassic period than ever envisioned by the scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although we are probably stuck with the term “Preclassic” or, alternatively, “Formative” to describe these early years

of Mesoamerican history, the truth of the matter is that the Preclassic period witnessed a mature expression of civilization that did not, as the terms’ implied evolutionary bias suggests, lack sophistication or maturation. Ironically, this exponentially increased body of data that we have now, in the twenty-first century, also complicates the situation, attesting to avenues of communication and exchange that often make questions of origin and influence more difficult to answer, rather than easier.

The corpus of Preclassic sculpture quite literally manifests the complexity of interrelationships and overlapping cultural, linguistic, and political spheres in early Mesoamerica. The efforts expended in determining the stylistic parameters of sculpture produced by a particular group, such as the Olmec or Maya, were enormously important and still guide the way we talk and think about style, ethnicity, and culture. Yet regions such as the Pacific slope, the focus of this book, challenge our desire to create neat and clean stylistic assessments of objects or to assign a specific and meaningful cultural affiliation. The potbellies, for instance, constitute a sculptural form that is widely distributed and cannot, with any certainty, be assigned to a specific ethnic or linguistic group. Their concentration throughout the Pacific slope and Guatemalan Highlands exacerbates the situation, as this region itself – the topic of the next chapter – was undoubtedly home to numerous linguistic and ethnic groups throughout the Preclassic period.

Another important trend in recent scholarship is to regard sculpture as more than a reaction to other forces – political, social, economic, and so on. Rather, sculpture is being viewed by the current generation of scholars as one of the vehicles through which these forces were formulated and articulated. Sculpture was a solution during the Preclassic period, an effective means of formally presenting social transformations, conflicts, political ideologies, and religious beliefs within communities. Certainly there was not a single artistic “solution” or “response” to the rapidly unfolding social issues of the Preclassic period, especially as each community would have experienced these pressures in unique ways. But we must remember that sculpture was pivotal to these ancient communities, not merely at the moment of its dedication or erection, but repeatedly because of its physical presence along the paths of daily life. Modern scholarship has given careful thought to what these “paths of daily life” included. Over the past several decades, increased attention to domestic sectors, settlement patterns, and the “hinterlands” of sites – beyond the central plazas and confines of the ceremonial cores – has also expanded our understanding of how sculpture functioned, depending on its location and context. Although the monumental

sculpture of the great plazas at the heart of civic and ceremonial centers perhaps first comes to mind and has traditionally received the majority of attention, sculpture also appears at places of transition, or marks boundaries or pilgrimage paths. Sculpture also appears to have been employed at sites of varying rank, and tracking how its forms varied among sites is a promising avenue of investigation. Context matters, not only in the sense of associated artifacts or monuments, but also in the sense of the greater landscape and the articulation of messages in discrete spaces.

What this book addresses is the range of social concerns that Preclassic sculpture may have engaged and how we can go about determining and gaining access to these messages. The methods involved in this pursuit, as described in [Chapter 1](#), are possible only because of the great amount of archaeological investigation that has transpired in the past century. Sculpture cannot be divorced from its archaeological context, and understanding where it was located, how it was viewed, and how it related visually and conceptually to its surroundings is critical for determining what it signified in the ancient past. Sculpture is a form of material culture, and recognizing it as such opens up avenues of investigation that go beyond iconography, epigraphy, stylistic analysis, or other traditional tools of art historical investigation. But, that said, we must also bear in mind that sculpture played by a different set of rules than did ceramic vessels, for instance, or other forms of material culture. Sculpture had a different relationship to the governing forces of a community than did domestic figurines or pottery, and so we must not expect these very different types of data to track the same changes, dynamics, or relationships.

As this book explores, sculpture may have been used in the ancient past to bridge social gaps or negotiate ruptures of change. The potbellies, with their jowly facial features and closed, puffy eyes, can be viewed simultaneously as both conservative and radical: conservative in the sense that they invoked long-standing traditions of representation well known from the domestic sector, and radical in the sense that they transformed these features into a new medium, on a new scale, and relocated them to a new and more public context. In order to understand how these sculptural forms functioned in the ancient past, we need to pay heed to how their messages operated in a dynamic matrix of exchange, communication, and social transformation that might seem contradictory at times. While the distribution of ceramic wares may reveal fairly well demarcated spheres of exchange, sculpture often appears to transcend these boundaries, perhaps in testimony to the need to articulate certain messages regardless of cultural affiliation, language, ethnicity, or even economic spheres. In short, sculpture has the potential to track a variety of messages ranging from unique, site-specific themes to broadly shared, multiregional narratives. This observation is, however, not new, as a quote from Meyer Schapiro's (1953) essay on style in *Anthropology Today* demonstrates: "[W]e recognize that the various arts have different roles in the culture and social life of a time and express in their content as well as style different interests and values." It is the contention of this book that the potbellies provide a productive avenue of investigation for considering the role of sculpture in Preclassic Mesoamerica and that their study can contribute to an evolving understanding of just how sculpture was employed during the Preclassic period to give voice to social issues of the time.

Situating Sculpture on the Preclassic Pacific Slope of Mesoamerica

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica, the region with the highest concentration of potbelly sculptures during the Preclassic period. The Preclassic was an era of vibrant social, economic, and political development throughout most of Mesoamerica, and the Pacific slope was no exception. Although the adjacent Guatemalan Highlands also contained a significant corpus of Preclassic potbelly sculptures, I privilege the Pacific slope in this discussion because it provides more detailed archaeological data for both the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. This evidence, in turn, provides a rich context in which to explore the development of monumental carving traditions and the potbellies in particular. Beyond its discussion of sculpture, however, this chapter provides the reader with a sense of the social dynamics at play during the Preclassic period in southeastern Mesoamerica. Only with an understanding of these events can we begin to grasp the developmental trajectory and significance of the potbelly form.

The appearance of potbelly sculpture correlated with a particular set of changing social relationships, not the least of which was the formation of the first states in this region of Mesoamerica. Yoffee (2005: 16–17) presented a clear assessment of the issues at stake in the rise of states, neatly summarizing the data which showed that their development was not isolated from other social dynamics, such as kinship and lineage. The complex relationship between the formation of states and issues of kinship is important to note – and I return to this topic in later chapters – because it appears to have been at the heart of the messages articulated by the potbelly sculptures. As Yoffee explained:

In less complex societies major roles are allocated on an ascriptive basis and division of labor is based on family

and kinship units. In complex societies a central authority develops in order to bring relatively autonomous subsystems within the contours of a larger institutional system. . . .

In any event, kinship ties and their various functions in local production, distribution, and legal arrangements that characterized the organization of local communities did not disappear in states. The emergence of a political center depended on its ability to express the legitimacy of interaction among the differentiated elements. It did this by acting through a generalized structure of authority, making certain decisions in disputes between members of different groups, including kin groups, maintaining the central symbols of society, and undertaking the defense and expansion of the society. It is this governmental center that I denominate as the “state,” as well as the territory politically controlled by the governmental center. . . .

State and civilization are in a sense coeval since it is the emergence of the idea that there should be a state – a central authority, whose leaders have privileged access to wealth and to the gods – that must accompany the formation, legitimacy, and durability of a political center.

Sculpture was, in my opinion, a critical factor in the equation of Late Preclassic state formation, literally lending tangible form to statements of legitimacy or, to paraphrase Yoffee (2005: 17), forging some of the “central symbols” of society. However, by invoking the term “state,” I do not, in this book, wish to belabor the ongoing archaeological debate concerning the utility of the concept of state. Nor do I muster the data necessary to present a case for state formation within this region. Rather, I rely on the previous work of archaeologists who have provided extensive and convincing arguments that the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period along the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica witnessed the formation of states with increasingly complex and centralized political and economic systems (Bove 1981, 1989b, 2005; Love 1991, 1999a, 2002a, b, n.d.).

Throughout this survey of the development, decline, and sculptural production of the major sites along the Pacific slope and within adjacent regions, I emphasize the types of data – archaeological, linguistic, iconographic, and stylistic – that together make up our current understanding of the social milieu of the Preclassic period. I also highlight the shifting power structures in which this sculptural corpus developed in order to convey to the reader the complexity of this era and sculpture’s role in articulating this complexity. In effect, this chapter



Figure 3.1. View of the Pacific coastal plain and southern Sierra Madres from near La Blanca, Guatemala. Photo by author.

provides the background necessary to begin thinking about how and why sculpture rendered visible specific currents of social transformation that characterized the Preclassic period.

Geography and the linguistic evidence

The Pacific slope of Mesoamerica stretches from Chiapas, Mexico, through Guatemala and into western El Salvador (Fig. 1.1; also see Fig. 4.2 for a more detailed map). A stunning backdrop to this region is formed by the rugged volcanic peaks of the southern Sierra Madres, which run parallel to the narrow Pacific coastal plain (Fig. 3.1). Numerous rivers flow downward from this mountain range, cross the coastal plain, and empty into the Pacific Ocean, carrying with them volcanic ash that fertilizes the sloping piedmont and makes this region, even today, a fertile agricultural zone. During the Postclassic period, much of this region stretching from Tiltepec, Chiapas, to the Río Tilapa, in modern Guatemala, was known as the Soconusco or Xoconochco and represented the most southeasterly extension of the Aztec Empire

(Coe 1961: 15; McBryde 1947: 5; Thompson 1943: 108, 1948: 10; Voorhies 1989: 2; Voorhies and Gasco 2004). Crisscrossing this region were numerous estuaries, canals, and streams, probably navigable only during the dry season, which may have created inland waterways (Navarrete 1978: 80–81; Orellana 1995: 16). Even more extensive were the overland roads, which stretched from the coast to the rugged mountain ranges, providing pathways into the highlands of Guatemala, the interior valleys of Chiapas, modern Oaxaca, and the Gulf Coast (Navarrete 1978: 76–79, fig. 16). Many of these pathways appear to have existed since Preclassic times, as suggested by the presence of Olmec-style low-relief carvings that may mark ancient trade routes through the Pacific slope region (Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010: fig. 1.4; Lee 1978: 63–66).

While the Soconusco was famed for its cacao production during the Postclassic period (Gasco 1989; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982; McBryde 1947: 33), the ecological diversity of the coastal plains, piedmont, and adjacent highlands as a whole created an environment of zonal complementarity (Love 2007: 278). Along the coast, aquatic resources such as fish and mollusks, as well



Figure 3.2. Takalik Abaj Stela 5. Photo by author.

as salt, were procured; cacao, cotton, maize, beans, and other cultigens were produced in the piedmont, while the highlands provided access to natural resources such as obsidian and copal resin. In fact, the changing patterns in the control and distribution of natural resources, such as obsidian, which are identifiable in the archaeological record, provide insight into constantly shifting corridors of communication and exchange, themselves a reflection of waxing and waning political and economic relationships throughout this region during the Preclassic period.¹

Certainly contributing to the richly textured variability of the Pacific slope is the very fact that it lay at the nexus of two major linguistic zones during the Preclassic period, with Mixe–Zoque peoples to the west and Maya peoples to the east. The geographic distribution of Mixe–Zoquean languages closely corresponds to the Olmec heartland of the Gulf Coast, as well as Olmec communication corridors that extended through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Báez-Jorge 1973: 57–63; Hasler 1958: 461; Lowe 1977: 200). Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman (1976) noted the correspondence between Olmec sites and the distribution of Mixe–Zoquean languages, which,

in conjunction with a glottochronological time depth for Mixe–Zoquean languages that corresponds to the emergence of Olmec civilization around 1500 B.C., led them to suggest that the ancient Olmec were speakers of an ancient Mixe–Zoquean language. This proposed language block extended into the highlands of Oaxaca and Chiapas and continued down along the Pacific Coast, where it abutted regions attributed to Mayan speakers in the sloping piedmont and highlands of Guatemala.² The presence of Mayan speakers in the piedmont and highlands is, according to some scholars (Fahsen 1999, 2000; Josserand 2011; Justeson and Kaufman 1993; Kaufman and Justeson 2001; Mora-Marín 2001, 2005; Valdés and Wright 2004), suggested by Late Preclassic monuments at Takalik Abaj and Kaminaljuyu bearing inscriptions that appear to be written in a Mayan language (Fig. 3.2).³ However, other epigraphers such as Alfonso Lacadena (2010) have questioned the association between Mayan languages and Late Preclassic texts at piedmont sites such as Takalik Abaj and have proposed, instead, that the inscriptions might be written in a Mixe–Zoquean language. His suggestion coincides with David Mora-Marín’s (2010) observation of a “close and direct” relationship between Preclassic Mayan and Mixe–Zoquean texts and his recommendation that these questions of linguistic affiliation be considered within the broader context of Late Preclassic social and cultural processes.

Determining with any certainty the geographic boundaries of language groups during the Preclassic may not yet be possible given the available evidence (Fahsen 2010b), and these scholarly debates highlight the lack of consensus on this topic. Even more to the point, to think of the Pacific slope only in terms of two language groups is most likely an oversimplification, as the trade and communication networks that were in place throughout southeastern Mesoamerica during the Preclassic would have created an environment conducive to the exchange not only of goods but also of customs, ideas, and words. At the time of the Conquest, representative languages from all four of the major language families in Mesoamerica – Mixe–Zoquean, Mayan, Ottomanguan, and Uto-Aztecan – were spoken along the slope, as were several unrelated or “isolate” languages, including Xinka and Lenca (Josserand 2011; see also Lowe 1977; McQuown 1955; Sapper 1927; C. Thomas 1911; Thompson 1943: 108). However, according to Kathryn Josserand (2011: 162), many of these languages appear to have moved into this region following the Preclassic period, and evidence suggests that the linguistic group that most likely dominated the Soconusco region during the Preclassic period was Mixe–Zoquean. Yet Josserand (2011: 162) cautioned that linguistic data often “perishes

with language loss” and that, during the Preclassic, the “Pacific Coast may have been much more diverse linguistically than we can ascertain from known data.” As a result, she warned that the “fit” between linguistic and archaeological data cannot necessarily be expected to show a precise correspondence, despite their creation via the same social processes.

Nevertheless, models for understanding ancient Mesoamerica tend to conflate language and ethnicity with material culture assemblages. Yet archaeologists do not agree – even among themselves – on how ethnolinguistic identity can be securely correlated with an archaeologically defined culture, or how this information can be effectively used for understanding shifting spheres of political control (Henderson 1992; S. Jones 1997; Love 2007: 278). For example, Marion Popenoe de Hatch (1987, 1998, 2007; Popenoe de Hatch, Schieber de Lavarreda, and Orrego Corzo 2011) posited that specific ceramic traditions can be used to effectively identify and trace the presence and movements of social groups through time. Using this methodology, Popenoe de Hatch, Schieber de Lavarreda, and Orrego Corzo (2011: 206) linked the Middle Preclassic archaeological culture identified by the Ocosito ceramic tradition at the Guatemalan piedmont site of Takalik Abaj to the Early Preclassic archaeological culture of the Pacific Coast, identified by the Ocos ceramic tradition. As they articulated, “The evidence indicates that the Ocosito tradition possibly has its source in an Early Preclassic Ocos ceramic development, the population probably entering from the coastal plain to settle at Takalik Abaj where it remained in occupation until Early Postclassic times.” They further linked the early Ocos ceramics to ceramic traditions that developed later, without any “evidence of a sudden change or major foreign intrusion,” in the Guatemalan Highlands, a region with a long history of Mayan speakers. As they concluded, “Tracing the evolution to its source, then, we are led to the tentative conclusion that the Ocos ceramics belong to a very ancient complex related to what was to become, ethnically, the many and diverse highland Maya peoples.”

Ceramic assemblages, in conjunction with a suite of other cultural practices, have also been utilized by Gareth Lowe (1977), Douglas Bryant and John Clark (1983, 2005a, b), and John Clark and Mary Pye (2011) to argue for the movement of linguistic groups during the Late Preclassic period, particularly the arrival of a Maya presence in the interior of Chiapas.⁴ As Bryant and Clark (2005a: 282) asserted:

The Late Preclassic lowland Maya, demonstrated by the presence of the Chicanel type Sierra Red [ceramics,]

appear to have spread throughout the Maya world at this time. To be sure, in many instances the appearance of Sierra Red may indicate influence rather than the actual arrival of people from the Maya Lowlands. Nevertheless, in the upper Grijalva Basin and Central Highlands of Chiapas, the Late Preclassic appears to have been a time of immigration from the lowland centers of Maya civilization.

While Bryant and Clark focused their discussion on the interior of Chiapas, Lowe (1977: 234) used similar ceramic evidence to assert that the site of Izapa and its environs along the Pacific slope were also “increasingly aligned with the southern Highland Maya or other non-Zoquean northern Central American groups” toward the close of the Late Preclassic period.⁵

While I do not pretend to critique these methodologies, which are the domain of archaeologists and those who work with the ceramic record, I nonetheless think it is vital to clearly present the ways in which the ancient ethnolinguistic history of the Pacific Coast, Pacific slope, and Guatemalan Highlands has been constructed in modern scholarship. What emerges from the evidence, regardless of the methods employed, is the conclusion that the linguistic composition of the Pacific slope – as well as that of the adjacent highlands – was convoluted. Josserrand (2011: 141) acknowledged this fact, yet invoked Franz Boas’s (1911: 7–8) admonition that language and culture are not necessarily directly correlated and strongly cautioned that scholars must be vigilant about assuming that linguistically defined regions correspond to cultural spheres. Language and culture are, as she stated, “separate variables whose coincidences must be demonstrated by the investigator, not assumed. While they have close connections, language, culture and race are independent variables.” Love (2007: 279–280; also see Henderson 1992) elaborated on the problematic nature of defining cultural regions on the basis of poorly defined linguistic boundaries, a problem particularly acute along the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica, and suggested that scholars pay attention to alternative, non-linguistically based factors:

Archaeological cultures, culture regions, and cultural traditions are useful heuristics for research, but there is always the danger that they will be reified, especially when attempts are made to project modern ethnic and linguistic identities into the past ([S.] Jones 1997). The perils of such essentialist concepts of identity are well known to archaeologists and most now favor more flexible and dynamic theories of identity. . . . Some researchers in the southern Pacific region (e.g., Clark and Pye 2011; Clark, Hansen, and Pérez Suárez 2000) have been careful to avoid the essentialist trap by framing arguments

in terms of agency and historical circumstances. A still common pitfall, however, in many discussions is a predisposition to equate language with identity and style with spatially bounded ethnic groups. . . . Groups defined by consanguinity, affinity, economic class, or gender, to name a few, may have been more important depending upon the historic, social, and political circumstances.

Many of the sites throughout the Pacific slope and adjacent highlands may have been multilingual by necessity.⁶ The cultural identities of the peoples living within these sites were undoubtedly diverse and fluid, reflecting the many social factors at play in any community at any given moment in time. The distribution of potbellies along the Pacific Coast, in the piedmont zone, in the Guatemalan Highlands, and throughout various regions in ancient Mesoamerica – in what were surely diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural zones – makes these issues even more important to bear in mind, even if they cannot be resolved adequately. It is also important to remember that the wide distribution of potbellies suggests that this particular sculptural form superseded linguistic or ethnic boundaries or, at the very least, permeated them and was employed by distinct groups who must, at certain times, have been in competition with each other.

The potbelly form did not appear out of a vacuum within this complicated cultural mix, but within well-established and long-standing sculptural traditions. The following summary is not, however, a comprehensive survey of sculpture from this region, and I encourage readers to consult Clark and Hodgson (2007–2008), Clark and Pye (2000b), Fahsen (2010a), Love (2010), Parsons (1986), and Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010b) for more inclusive considerations of the sculptural corpus found throughout the Pacific slope, Chiapas interior, and Guatemalan Highlands. With this caveat, and having briefly outlined the linguistic complexity of this era and region, I now turn to a discussion of the region's equally complicated sculptural history, with an eye toward understanding the social and political environment in which these developments occurred. I begin with the Early Preclassic period, which ushered in the first monumental sculptural traditions in Mesoamerica.

The Early Preclassic period

The advent of the Early Preclassic (1500–900 B.C.), a period only touched on in this book, marked the transformation along the Pacific Coast of an “Archaic” era, characterized by a seminomadic lifestyle, to one in which the first permanent villages were established and a new dependence

on agriculture developed. During the first part of the Early Preclassic period, the Pacific Coast was home to groups of pottery-using peoples who took advantage of both coastal estuaries and the fertile inland piedmont, establishing fishing and agricultural villages.⁷ However, villages of even earlier pottery-using peoples already existed along the Pacific Coast during the Barra phase (1700–1500 B.C.) of the Late Archaic period (Blake et al. 1995; Clark and Blake 1994). In fact, the Soconusco region is one of the few places in Mesoamerica with demonstrated Late Archaic and Early Preclassic occupations (Arroyo 2004; Clark 1994a; Clark and Pye 2000a: 230; Kennett and Voorhies 1996; Lesure 2009; Lowe 1975; Voorhies 1976).

During the ensuing Locona phase (1500–1350 B.C.), numerous sites developed along the Pacific Coast, and there is evidence of ranked societies and settlement hierarchies, especially in the Mazatán region of coastal Chiapas (Arroyo 2003; Clark and Blake 1994; Love 2002b; Pye 1995; Rosenswig 2008, 2010; Voorhies 1989). By the Ocós phase (1350–1200 B.C.), the presence of a large, well-built structure atop a mound (Mound 6) that might have functioned as an elite domestic residence at the ancient village of Paso de la Amada in Chiapas further suggests the presence of social inequality (Blake et al. 2006: 207).⁸ A ballcourt dating to the same phase was also identified (Hill and Clark 2001). Clark (2004: 60) discussed the implications of this architecture at Paso de la Amada, the range of its functional complementarity, and its contribution to a “self-perceived community” during this early period. As he stated:

We believe the ballcourt to have been a “public” building in the sense of “common access” for viewing sporting contests and for participating in related activities such as feasting and gambling. We also consider the possibility that the ballcourt was privately owned and sponsored. Mound 6 was a domestic residence, but it may also have served some “public” functions, especially in the patio area north of the house (see Lesure and Blake 2002).

These observations are important to note because, as is explored in later chapters, the distinctions between “public” and “private” space are often difficult to determine and hinge, too, on the patterns of interaction between individual households and the civic center, or those areas of sites that were physically and conceptually tied to a centralized political and administrative structure. Yet a close examination of these contrasting kinds of spaces and the activities or patterns of ritual associated with them often reveals insights into how different social groups within a site negotiated relationships. Equally significant is Clark's (1991) observation that the Pacific slope and coastal zones witnessed a precocious development

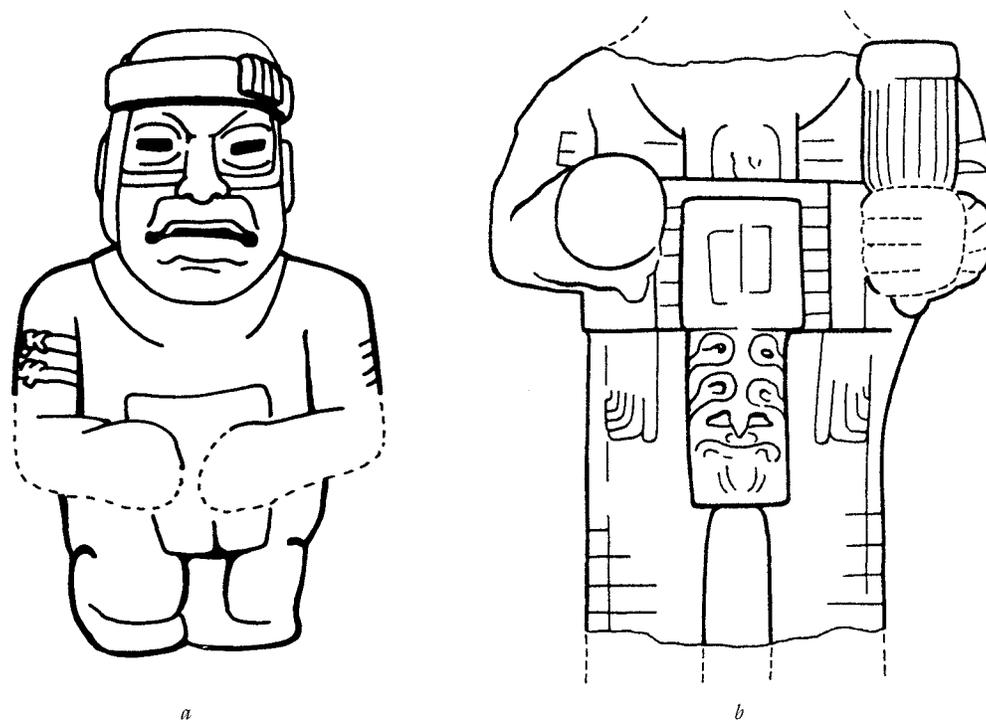


Figure 3.3. Preclassic monuments from Chiapas, Mexico: (a) Buena Vista sculpture; (b) Alvaro Obregón sculpture. Drawings courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

during the first stages of the Preclassic period at a time when Olmec sites along the Gulf Coast were not yet established. At Paso de la Amada, the ceremonial center is well defined by the presence of a ballcourt, large plaza, and several platforms (Clark and Pye 2011: 31).

During the subsequent Cherla (1200–1100 B.C.) and Cuadros (1100–1000 B.C.) phases, settlements in the region continued to be concentrated along marine estuaries and the inland coastal plain. This was a period of pervasive change in the Mazatán region, during which figurine and ceramic inventories show an increasing influence by the Gulf Coast Olmec heartland (Cheetham 2009; Clark and Pye 2000b: 232–234, 2011). The site of Cantón Corralito appears to have become the major regional center in Mazatán by the Cuadros phase, and its material culture inventory reveals strong correlations with that of San Lorenzo, which flourished in the Gulf Coast Olmec heartland region of southern Veracruz between 1200 and 900 B.C. (Cheetham 2006a, b, 2009; Cheetham and Clark 2006; Clark 2007; Pérez Suárez 2002). David Cheetham (2009: 173), commenting on the consistent correlations between figurines from Cantón Corralito and San Lorenzo, interpreted this as a “cultural imperative” in which “the Cantón Corralito figurine makers remained faithful to the stylistic canons of San Lorenzo” and, by extension, a “Gulf Olmec identity.” At the site of Izapa, ceramics and figurines dating to this phase also bear close

affinities to those of San Lorenzo, and these continuities persisted into the ensuing Jocotal phase (1000–900 B.C.), suggesting that at this time Izapa was participating in a widespread Early Olmec interaction sphere (Ekholm-Miller 1969: 96; Lowe 1977: 212–218). The extent and impact of this Olmec interaction sphere throughout the Pacific coastal region are not as clear, however, because ceramic assemblages from sites in coastal Guatemala bear only generic resemblances to Gulf Coast Olmec ceramic collections at this time (Bove 1989a: 5, 2005; Demarest 1989: 315–316; Love 1999b).

Although no sculpture has been found at Cantón Corralito, two sculptures from the greater Mazatán/Tapachula region, one from Buena Vista and the other from Alvaro Obregón, appear to date to the Cuadros phase (Clark and Hodgson 2007–2008; Clark and Pye 2000b: 226–227, figs. 5 and 6) (Fig. 3.3a and b). This assessment is based on the stylistic affinities these two sculptures share with Olmec sculptural canons. Although the parameters of the Olmec style are somewhat difficult to characterize and not without considerable variation – certainly to be expected over the course of an eight-hundred-year florescence – a brief explanation of what constitutes the “Olmec style” is necessary.

Carolyn Tate (1995) offered a thoughtful analysis of Olmec style that built on the pioneering work of Michael Coe (1965c) and Beatriz de la Fuente (1973, 1981,

1984, 1996), and that best captures the array of formats and stylistic issues apparent in Olmec-style art, and I paraphrase her here. As she noted, most Olmec-style sculptures are conceived in the round, but often possess flattened surfaces that accommodate additional low-relief carving. Examples include the monumental heads of San Lorenzo (Fig. 3.4a) and other seated or standing figures that evince a tension between two- and three-dimensionally rendered imagery and a balance between positive and negative space. These sculptures contrast with other objects, such as stelae and altar/thrones, which incorporated flatter, more regularized planes that provided a field for more detailed, low-relief carving, as on La Venta Altar 5 (Fig. 3.4b). On the two-dimensional surfaces, human figures were typically rendered in profile, in contrast to the emphasis on frontality that characterizes the niche figures and monumental heads. The scale of Olmec sculpture also varied considerably: the monumental heads of San Lorenzo weighed many tons, and their mass contrasts dramatically with smaller, portable sculptures also conceived in the round that could be incorporated into sculptural tableau (Cyphers 1999: 170). While Olmec art typically emphasized the human form, often quite naturalistically, it also explored supernatural themes, mythic narratives, and symbolic elements that could result in fantastic forms far removed from the realm of nature.

Coe, de la Fuente, and Tate were very careful to distinguish between Olmec style and Olmec iconography (also see Graham 1981b). Within the field of art history, “style” refers to the constant forms, elements, qualities, and expressions in the art, whether of an individual, a group, or a society (Schapiro 1953: 287), while iconography addresses the subject matter of a work. Olmec iconography, while complex and wide ranging, has been demonstrated by scholars to cohere, at least to some degree, into a recognized system of symbols (Joralemon 1971, 1976) or themes (Coe 1972, 1973; Grove 1987; Pohorilenko 1996, 2004; Reilly 1994, 1995; Taube 1995). By the Middle Preclassic period, these symbols and themes were employed throughout a broad communication sphere that Kent Reilly coined the “Middle Formative Ceremonial Complex.” This is not to say, however, that “Olmec style” or “Olmec iconography” was without variation or that it emanated from a single point of origin in the Gulf Coast (Grove 1997; Sharer and Grove 1989). In fact, the work of scholars such as David Grove (1984, 1987, 1989a, b, 1996, 2000: 292; 2007: 222; Grove and Gillespie 1992) has explored the impact of the Olmec style, or the lack thereof, throughout Mesoamerica at various junctures throughout the Preclassic period. While there was certainly a demonstrable Middle Preclassic “international” style – the result



a



b

Figure 3.4. Olmec sculpture: (a) San Lorenzo Monument 61 (photo by author, authorized by the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, Universidad Veracruzana); (b) La Venta Altar 5 (photo by author, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

of interactions among sites located throughout the Gulf Coast, Guerrero, the Valley of Mexico, Puebla, Oaxaca, and the Pacific Coast of Mesoamerica – this period was also characterized by independent, site-specific, or regional variations and inventions (Love and Guernsey 2008). During the Early Preclassic period, however, the vast majority of our information about Mesoamerican sculpture comes from the Gulf Coast site of San Lorenzo, which appears to have initiated the tradition of monument

carving (Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010; Cyphers 1992, 2004; Grove 2007: 221; Milbrath 1979: 7). That said, the extent of San Lorenzo's influence throughout Mesoamerica during the Early Preclassic is a subject of ongoing debate.⁹

To return to the Chiapas sculpture attributed to the Cuadros phase that Clark and Pye (2000b) characterized as Olmec in style, the Buena Vista monument is conceived in the round, as is typical of Olmec sculpture, and blends a naturalistic human form with the snarling facial features often portrayed in Olmec art that persisted into the Middle Preclassic period.¹⁰ Perhaps even more tellingly, the sculpture from Alvaro Obregón bears a close resemblance to another standing figure on Monument 19 from Laguna de los Cerros, a site located in Veracruz, in the Olmec heartland (Clark and Pye 2000b: 221; de la Fuente 1977: fig. 78; Milbrath 1979: 7). The dating of the Laguna de los Cerros monuments has been a subject of long-standing debate, but recent investigations by Susan Gillespie (2000c: 111; also see Borstein 2008) support an Early Preclassic date for their production. Although the dating of the Alvaro Obregón sculpture cannot be confirmed due to a lack of archaeological context, its stylistic relationship to Early Preclassic Gulf Coast Olmec sculpture is evident and supports Clark and Pye's assertion of significant Gulf Coast Olmec influence on sculpture in Chiapas during this period.

By the Jocotal phase (1000–900 B.C.), the site of Ojo de Agua appears to have replaced Cantón Corralito as the regional capital. Clark and Pye (2011: 35) suggested that, during this period, Gulf Coast Olmec influence waned and new trade connections were forged with different regions, such as Central Mexico. Despite these political and social changes, however, stone sculpture traditions persisted in this region and continued to evince connections to Gulf Coast Olmec carving traditions, as demonstrated by a small, 66-cm-tall standing figure, Ojo de Agua Monument 1, made from local andesite (Fig. 3.5a) (Navarrete 1974b). The diminutive personage portrayed on the pectoral worn by the standing figure bears distinctly Olmec facial features and is framed by typically Olmec “flame” eyebrows, while the swept-back cranium of the standing figure, which is cleft at the back, compares to that of Gulf Coast monuments such as the Río Pesquero statuette (Benson 1971) and San Martín Pajapán Monument 1 (de la Fuente 1981: fig. 11).

More recently, a small, 1-m-tall carved stela from Ojo de Agua, designated Monument 3, was discovered by John Hodgson in a Jocotal-phase archaeological context (Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010; Clark and Hodgson 2007–2008; Hodgson, Clark, and Gallaga Murrieta

2010), which would make it considerably earlier than other stelae, often plain, documented at many sites in this region as well as farther south in Guatemala by 800–600 B.C. (Arroyo 2007a, b; Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010: 25, n. 2; Demarest 1976; Ferdon 1953: 81–100; Guernsey 2006b: 36–41; McDonald 1983: 39; Pereira 2008; Pereira, Arroyo, and Cossich 2007; Robinson et al. 1999; Shook 1971). This discovery is particularly interesting in light of imagery such as that found on the Middle Preclassic relief carving from Xoc, Chiapas (Ekholm-Miller 1973), in which a striding anthropomorphic figure carries a small, bundled stela (Fig. 3.5b). As Reilly (2006) and I (Guernsey 2006a) have argued, the Xoc relief suggests that small-scale stelae were utilized in ritual performances and speaks to the “performative” role that sculpture played from very early on. Preclassic sculpture along the Pacific slope, like that in the Olmec heartland, varied considerably in scale, and small, readily portable objects may have been utilized in ever-changing contexts or performances.

Although the sculptural inventory from the Pacific Coast region during this early period is limited and often poorly dated due to a lack of good archaeological context, it is quite clear that it was strongly influenced by Gulf Coast traditions. Yet, in spite of this influence, artists working on the Pacific slope were also experimenting with new formats of representation, as confirmed by the Ojo de Agua standing figure, which blends standard Olmec-style motifs with unusual elements, such as the large “sandwich board” pectoral and goggle-rimmed eyes. The relationship between these early monuments and the role of sculpture in articulating political authority is even less clear, in great part because, as Clark and Pye (2000b: 227) noted, most of these early monuments “appear to be isolated pieces unassociated with major archaeological sites.” Future excavations in the region may help to elucidate the role that sculpture played during the Early Preclassic period along the Pacific Coast.

The Middle Preclassic period

The advent of the Middle Preclassic period (900–300 B.C.) witnessed a shift in economic and political power from the Mazatán zone to east of the Río Suchiate, which forms the boundary between modern Mexico and Guatemala, where sites such as Takalik Abaj and La Blanca burgeoned. These shifts were accompanied by a “dramatic growth in population and the development of a regional system that was much larger and more hierarchically structured than anything previously seen”

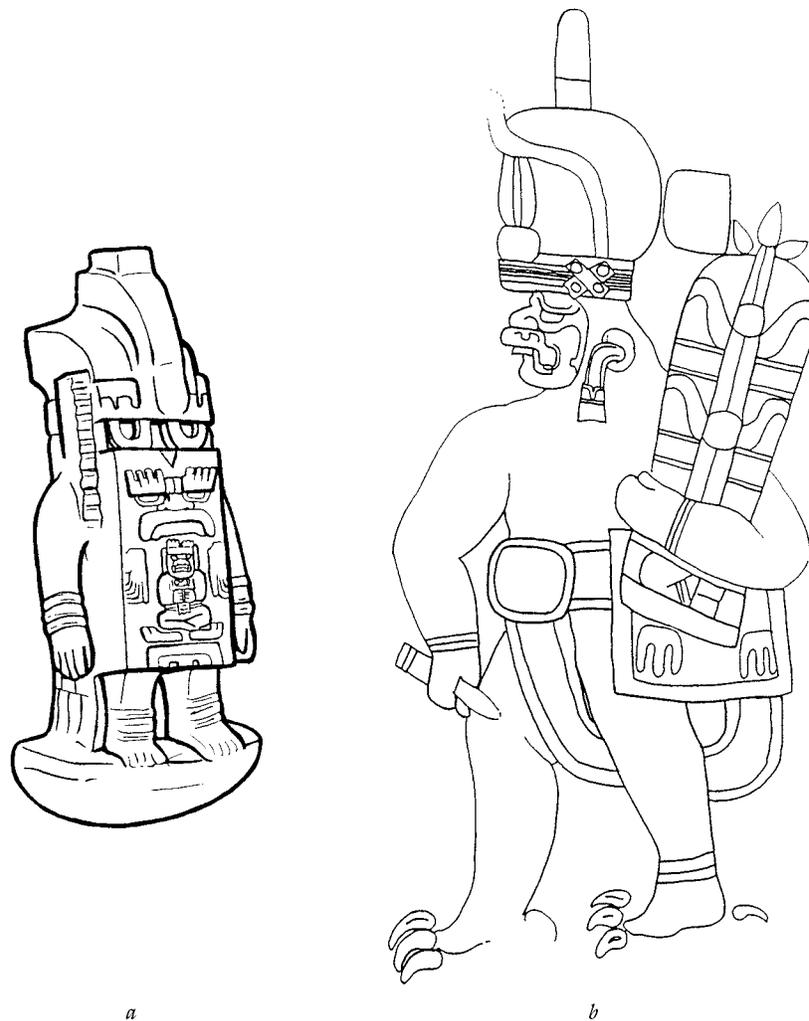


Figure 3.5. Preclassic monuments from Chiapas, Mexico: (a) Ojo de Agua Monument 1 (drawing courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation); (b) Xoc relief carving (drawing by F. Kent Reilly III).

(Love 2007: 288–289, n.d.). Robert Rosenswig (2008: 401–403) also documented a population increase in the adjacent region of Cuauhtémoc, Chiapas, just west of the Río Suchiate, and suggested that the site of Cuauhtémoc was “integrated as a third-tier center during La Blanca’s rise to regional prominence” at this time.

Extensive excavations at Takalik Abaj, strategically located along the sloping piedmont between the Pacific Coast and the Guatemalan Highlands, have documented a significant corpus of Middle Preclassic sculpture rendered in the Olmec style (Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978; Orrego Corzo 1998, 2001; Popenoe de Hatch 2000; Popenoe de Hatch and Schieber de Lavarreda 2001; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2001, 2002). The focus of archaeological efforts at Takalik Abaj since the 1970s has been the ceremonial core of the site, and hence the nature of its internal organization or the

extent of its settlement, particularly during the Middle Preclassic period, remains unclear (Love 2007: 288). Nevertheless, excavations have revealed that the construction of low terraces and tamped-clay platforms began at Takalik Abaj during the Middle Preclassic (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010b), and while sculpture that dates from this period may have originally been associated with Middle Preclassic structures, much of it was relocated in ancient times and lacks a primary context (Graham 1979:184, 1981a, b, 1982).

Utilizing ceramic traditions to identify and trace the movements of people through space, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Popenoe de Hatch (2007: 163; Popenoe de Hatch, Schieber de Lavarreda, and Orrego Corzo 2011: 213–217) suggested that the Middle Preclassic population of Takalik Abaj emigrated from the Pacific Coast to the piedmont zone c. 900 B.C.

Her arguments are based on the local ceramic tradition at Middle Preclassic Takalik Abaj, known as Ocosito, which bears a relationship to the Early Preclassic Ocos tradition of the Pacific coastal plain. Popenoe de Hatch further asserted that this Middle Preclassic population initiated contact with the northwestern highlands of Guatemala and other sites along the Pacific piedmont zone during this period. These diverse communication networks, attested ceramically, may explain the eclectic nature of sculpture at Takalik Abaj, even during the Middle Preclassic; although ostensibly “Olmec” in style, the sculptural corpus also evidences local variation.

The corpus of Middle Preclassic Olmec-style sculpture at Takalik Abaj includes petroglyphs, sculpture in the round, boulder sculptures,¹¹ and niche sculpture (Graham 1981a, 1982; Graham and Benson 2005; Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978: 12–14; Orrego Corzo 1990; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2001, 2002: 59, 2010b). Their stylistic assessment as Olmec is based, in great part, on the stark contrast that John Graham discerned at Takalik Abaj between an Olmec “preoccupation with volume” and a later Maya predilection for “flat slab-like surfaces . . . [and] two-dimensional, decoratively patterned relief surfaces” (Graham and Benson 2005). Examples of the range of Olmec-style art at Takalik Abaj include Monument 14, which features a frontally facing, squatting figure clutching an animal, one feline and the other hooved, in the crook of each arm. The facial features and helmet worn by the individual compare closely to Gulf Coast Olmec sculptures. The massive three-dimensionality of Monument 14 contrasts with that of Monument 16/17, an unusual pillar-like rendition of an Olmec head that was broken in the ancient past (Graham 1979: 231) but that displays the snarling mouth typical of Olmec features and a towering headdress not unlike that seen on La Venta Stela 2. More variation in “Olmec-style” monuments is evidenced by Takalik Abaj Monument 1, a petroglyph, or incised carving, on a massive boulder located in a gully to the east of the principal area of architectural construction (Fig. 3.6) (Graham 1979: 232).

Takalik Abaj Monument 64 (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010b: fig. 8.14b) has also been dated to the Middle Preclassic period, c. 800–600 B.C. (Popenoe de Hatch 2004) and was recovered in the portion of the site known as El Escondite, located directly to the west of Terrace 3 in the Central Group. El Escondite is in a natural depression that, while probably prone to seasonal inundations, also revealed the earliest residential compounds at the site dating to the early Middle Preclassic (Popenoe de Hatch 2004; Schieber de Lavarreda and Pérez 2004). Monument 64 was found



Figure 3.6. Takalik Abaj Monument 1. Photo by Michael Love.

on the east bank of the El Chorro rivulet, which was linked to a series of aqueducts that carried water to the south (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2001: 31). Reflecting its watery environment, the imagery of Monument 64, which I have suggested portrays a water deity (Guernsey 2010a: 216–217), also includes a series of S-scrolls closely associated with rain-bearing clouds in the Preclassic period (Reilly 1996; Stone 1996: 403; Stuart and Houston 1994). The conceptual relationship between aqueducts or hydraulic systems and sculpture with water-related imagery is important to note, as other sites – from Early Preclassic San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980: 361–362) to Late Preclassic Izapa (Guernsey 2006b: 120–126, 2010a) – also erected sculpture bearing images of water gods in conjunction with public works designed to transport water through sites. Such conceptual programs underscore the critical relationship between sculpture, the built environment, and messages involving the deities and their role in the affairs of the community from the very beginnings of the Preclassic period. This sculpture, through its reference to systems

involved in the actual movement of water, also created a link between the supernatural realm and that of practical public works, uniting both domains under the supervision of the ruler who most likely commissioned the sculpture (Guernsey 2010a).

In the coastal zones adjacent to the piedmont region of Takalik Abaj, Middle Preclassic settlements such as Monte Alto in Escuintla, which would be home to a large corpus of potbellies and related monumental heads by the ensuing Late Preclassic period, also developed (Shook 1971: 74–75). Frederick Bove (1989b: 63) suggested that construction activity began at Monte Alto during the Middle Preclassic, at which point, he believes, it was already functioning as a “primary regional center.” Occupation may have begun there even earlier, during the Early Preclassic, a suggestion based on Lowe’s (1977: 205) observation of Barra-phase ceramics at the site. Bove (2005: 98) also noted that sites such as El Bálsamo (Shook and Popenoe de Hatch 1978), Reynosa, and Los Cerritos Sur (see Fig. 4.2 map) emerged as regional centers during the Middle Preclassic; potbellies are found at both El Bálsamo and Los Cerritos Sur, although they probably date to the Late Preclassic period. The concentrated settlement in this area of central Escuintla during the Middle Preclassic is probably attributable to its ready access to the piedmont and adjacent highlands, as well as its predictable rainfall and agricultural potential (Bove 2005: 98, fig. 8.3). In contrast, farther to the east along the Guatemalan coast, Marilyn Beaudry-Corbett (2002: 95–96) saw little evidence of significant Middle Preclassic occupation. She attributed this scarcity of settlements to the increasing width of the more easterly coastal plain, which may have made access to resources available only on the piedmont and highlands more difficult because of greater travel distances. Although Francisco Estrada Belli (2002: 110) documented some occupation in the southeastern corner of Guatemala beginning with Early Preclassic villages along coastal estuaries, he confirmed that the emergence of large-scale polities did not transpire there until the early years of the Late Preclassic.

In the Guatemalan Highlands, sculpture is well documented during the Middle Preclassic period. At the site of Naranjo, which was the largest site in the region before the rise of Kaminaljuyu, more than twenty plain stelae, many with altars, were erected in three rows within the main plaza, and some were associated with ritual offerings (Arroyo 2007a, b; Arroyo et al. 2007; Pereira 2008; Pereira, Arroyo, and Cossich 2007). The principal occupation of the site, which included an extensive habitation zone, dates to the Las Charcas phase (800–600 B.C.), following which there appears to have been a population decline. As Love (n.d.) summarized, Edwin Shook (1952; also see

Gamio 1926: 212) documented several large sites within this region of the Guatemalan Highlands during the Las Charcas and ensuing Providencia (600–400 B.C.) phases, including Piedra Parada and Virginia, both of which possessed plain stelae. There was also dispersed occupation at Kaminaljuyu during the Las Charcas phase (Popenoe de Hatch 1996, 2002b; Valdés 1997), although the site’s major florescence began in the Providencia phase, as did the construction of large buildings. Hydraulic works, including the Miraflores canal (Barrientos 1997, 2000; Popenoe de Hatch 2002b), also date to the Las Charcas phase and appear to have been designed to carry water from Lake Miraflores to agricultural fields.

To the west of Kaminaljuyu in the eastern Kaqchikel highlands of Guatemala, sites such as Urías also evidence Middle Preclassic occupation and reveal ties to both Kaminaljuyu and the Pacific Coast (Braswell and Robinson 2011; Robinson and Farrel 1998; Robinson et al. 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005). Bove (2005: 97) noted that Urías is adjacent to the Río Guacalate and suggested that early settlers may have migrated to the highlands from the coast following the course of this river. At Urías, a small uncarved stela was found in a Middle Preclassic context along with a ceramic cache. An even earlier Middle Preclassic stepped, earthen platform lay below, with a simple interior cache that was topped by a plain stone boulder. As Eugenia Robinson et al. (1999) demonstrated, such findings clearly indicate that uncarved boulders and stelae were already used to mark ritual spaces in this region by the Middle Preclassic period.

Despite a shift of political and economic power to sites in modern Guatemala, sculpture continued to be produced in some regions of Chiapas, Mexico, during the Middle Preclassic period. Archaeological assemblages from the site of Chiapa de Corzo, located in the Grijalva River valley along a major trade route to the Gulf Coast, indicate an ongoing relationship with the Olmec heartland, as does the site’s basic layout (Clark in press; Clark and Hansen 2001; Clark and Pye 2011; Lee 1969; Lowe 1977). While its material culture inventory, including pottery and figurines, reveals especially close ties to La Venta, no monumental sculpture dating to this early period has yet been found at Chiapa de Corzo, in stark contrast to contemporaneous Gulf Coast sites as well as the Chiapas coast. For example, Monument 1 from Pijijiapan, located near modern Tonalá, Chiapas, is a massive boulder carved in low relief with a series of figures. The sophistication of the scene, as well as its suggestion of narrative, compare to contemporary monuments at La Venta (Clark and Pye 2000b: 220–221; Milbrath 1979: 27). A stela-like monument from Tiltepec, a large site with more than seventy mounds just east of Tonalá, also probably dates

to the Middle Preclassic period (Clark and Pye 2000b: fig. 16; Milbrath 1979: 27–28, fig. 51; cf. Navarrete 1959, 1974b: 10). Other stylistic parallels between Middle Preclassic Chiapas and Guatemala include a stela from Finca La Unión, located in Cacahoatán just to the north of Izapa (Fig. 3.7). Clark and Pye (2000b: 222) noted the similarities between the figures on Takalik Abaj Monument 1 and the La Unión stela but found a comparison to Olmec sculpture more compelling. It must be recognized, however, that the La Unión figure is in a very similar position to the figure on Takalik Abaj Monument 1, only in reverse, and wears an equally tall and ornate headdress. Interesting, too, is the location of the La Unión sculpture in a pass just north of Izapa that leads into the Guatemalan Highlands (Clark and Pye 2000b: 222). As will be recalled, Takalik Abaj Monument 1 was carved on a massive boulder on the eastern margins of the site, also in a location of transition.

Several Middle Preclassic monuments have also been documented at the site of Tzutzuculi, located just outside the modern town of Tonalá. Tzutzuculi Monuments 1 and 2 were placed on either side of the stone stairway on Mound 4 and dated to c. 650–450 B.C. by Andrew McDonald (1983: 37–39, figs. 29–31). They were apparently conceived in conjunction with their architectural backdrop and predate other monuments at the site, such as Monuments 3 and 4, which represent early stelae and were found in association with a horizontally oriented stone altar to the west of Mound 4 in a context that dates to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition (McDonald 1983: 39, figs. 32, 33). These Tzutzuculi monuments are especially interesting, as they provide a context for understanding the variation in the way sculpture was utilized during the Middle Preclassic along the Pacific Coast.

In the same vicinity, a highly eroded boulder sculpture, now in the Casa Cultural in Tonalá, is attributed to the site of Tiltepec (Ricardo López Vassallo, personal communication 2010). Although little is known of its context or dating and few features of its carving are clearly legible, it appears to adhere to Olmec stylistic canons in its resemblance to the colossal heads better known from the Gulf Coast sites of San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes, although on a much more diminutive scale. While the presence of such a sculpture along the Pacific slope in the Middle Preclassic certainly confirms Olmec stylistic influence in this region, the monument must also be viewed within the context of burgeoning local sculptural traditions.

The Middle Preclassic period also witnessed the beginning of monumental construction activity at Izapa, located in Chiapas near the border with modern Guatemala.



Figure 3.7. Stela from Finca La Unión, Cacahoatán, Chiapas. Photo by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

Susanna Ekholm-Miller (1969: 98) recognized several early platform phases deep within Mound 30a that dated to 850–650 B.C. Although the first complete structure appears to have been only 2 m tall, the final one constructed during this period attained a height of approximately 10.5 m. Postmold evidence suggested the presence of a small temple that surrounded a circular stone disk, inserted into the floor, which may have functioned as an altar (Ekholm-Miller 1969: 17–18, fig. 14).¹²

The restricted nature of these early occupations at Izapa, concentrated along the Group B terrace, gave way during the Escalon phase (650–450 B.C.) to a more widespread occupation that encompassed the entire central zone of the site (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982: 127–129). Although little Escalon-phase architecture was identified at Izapa, enlargements of the Mound 30a pyramid continued to be made (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982: 127). Love (1991: 57,

1999a: 137, 2002b: 44) posited that, during the Middle Preclassic period, Izapa may have been a secondary center within the greater polity of La Blanca, located across the Río Suchiate in modern Guatemala. The ensuing Frontera phase (450–300 B.C.), which represented a transition from the Middle to Late Preclassic period, was characterized by Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa (1982: 12) as a “developmental continuum” that witnessed the ascent of Izapa to a position of relative importance within the region by the Late Preclassic. This rise was certainly related to the decline of the Pacific coastal site of La Blanca, discussed later, which dominated this region throughout the Middle Preclassic period.

There is a sculpture at Izapa, Miscellaneous Monument 2, which may date to the Middle Preclassic period on the basis of its resemblance to Olmec niche monuments (Fig. 3.8) (Clark and Pye 2000b: 224; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982: 196–199; Miles 1965: 252–255; Stirling 1965: 725). Other niche monuments are known from this region, although Parsons (1986: 18–20) felt more comfortable placing them in his “Olmecoid” – or Olmec-derived – style category that encompassed sculpture dating to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. Bove (1989b: 84, fig. 87) discussed one such example, Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2, which portrays a squatting figure within a niche. As he observed, it bears a close resemblance to Takalik Abaj Monument 25, another niche figure. Occupations at Los Cerritos Sur, Takalik Abaj, and Izapa from the Middle Preclassic onward support the possibility that these monuments date to the Middle Preclassic period. However, whether they represent Middle Preclassic Olmec influence or a somewhat later, Middle to Late Preclassic transition Olmec-derived style is not as clear. What they do demonstrate, however, is that a number of sites along the Pacific slope were utilizing closely related sculptural forms by at least the end of the Middle Preclassic period.

Middle Preclassic La Blanca

The site of La Blanca rose to power as the major center along the Pacific slope by 900 B.C. and maintained its prominence for approximately 300 years, or until about 600 B.C.¹³ The site covered more than 200 hectares at its peak and boasted some of the earliest monumental architecture in Mesoamerica (Love 2002a, c). Mound 1, built c. 900 B.C. of rammed earth with a capping layer of clay, was one of the first pyramids in Mesoamerica, comparable to the great mounds at La Venta and Chalchuapa, which were also constructed during the Middle Preclassic. Mound 1 was more than 25 m tall and measured

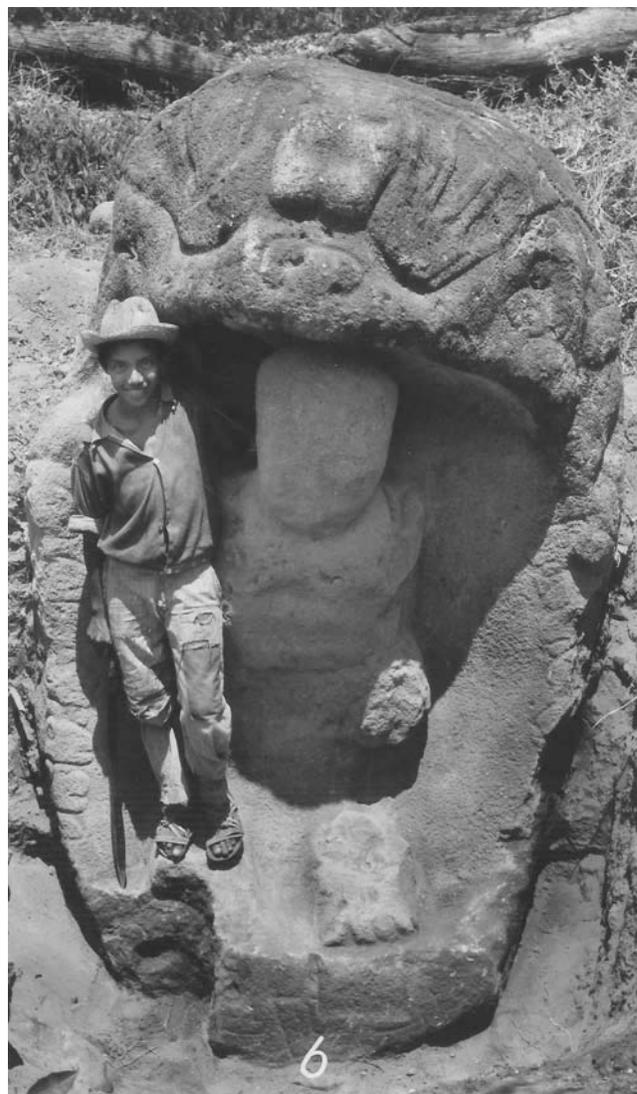


Figure 3.8. Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2. Photo by Richard Stewart from Stirling (1943: plate 53b), courtesy of George Stuart.

150 × 90 m at its base before its destruction in 1972 for road construction (Love et al. 2005). Mound 1 would have visually dominated the central core of La Blanca, which was surrounded by four plazas and contained a large elevated area, the East Acropolis, which appears to have held a series of elite residences, and another large elevated area referred to as the West Acropolis, which may have served more ceremonial and/or administrative functions (Fig. 3.9) (Love and Guernsey 2011).

Beyond the central core of the site, intensive excavations in residential zones have also been carried out (Love 1999a, 2002a, b; Love and Guernsey 2006). As Love (2007: 289) noted:

Excavations in residential zones at La Blanca show significant social differentiation at the household level (Love 1991). Elite households are marked by high densities

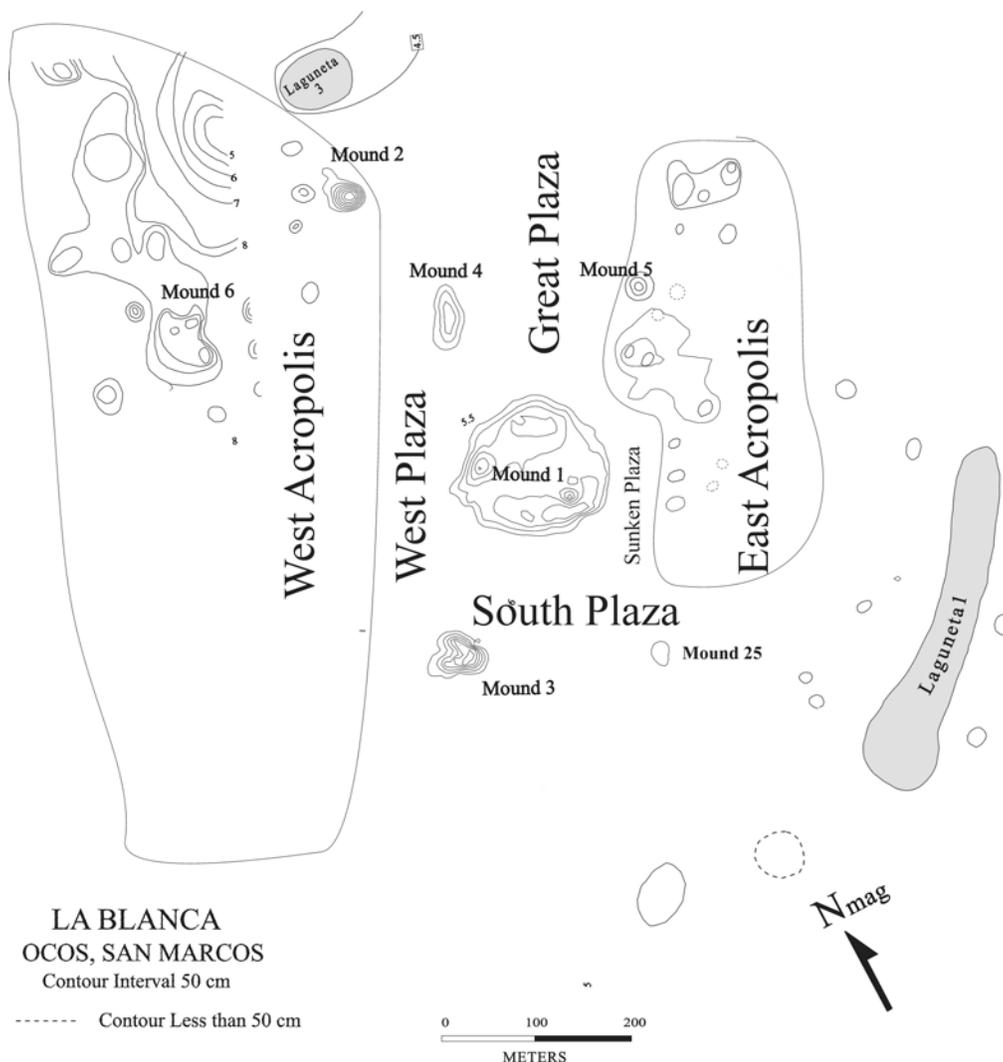


Figure 3.9. Map of the site of La Blanca. Courtesy of Michael Love.

of prestige goods, including jade, mica jewelry, and fine paste ceramics decorated with elaborate iconography, including so-called “Olmec” designs. The elite residences also have higher densities of obsidian and greater numbers of cores, suggesting that they controlled long-distance exchange.

All of these data – indicating economic power and social stratification, a marked concentration of population at the site that drew people from adjacent regions, and the mobilization of labor that was clearly necessary to create the massive architecture at the center of La Blanca – provide strong evidence for some form of governmental and administrative apparatus at La Blanca. As Love has qualified, however, the overall size and population of La Blanca are too small to rank it as a state, and it lacks secondary centers with significant administrative complexes. These characteristics suggest that La Blanca is best defined as a complex chiefdom:¹⁴

Despite the evidence of a pronounced social hierarchy, control over labor, and an ideology of rulership, La Blanca is best understood as a complex chiefdom. Although the elite may have been powerful, and perhaps wealthy, the institutions of government were poorly developed. Mechanisms of financing governmental operations don’t appear to have existed, beyond the ability to draw upon the labor of the populace. The elite of La Blanca may have been able to extract a profit from the long-distance trade routes that ran along the Pacific Coast, but that possibility is purely inferential. The La Blanca polity did, however, successfully subjugate a large hinterland from which it could draw labor and resources. In that respect, it established the basis for centralized power that was to become more pronounced and more developed in the years that followed its decline. (Love and Guernsey 2011)

The ideology of rulership at La Blanca, as already alluded to, can be addressed through the sculptural record at

the site, which, although limited, provides insight into the ways in which elite power was expressed. Only two fragments of stone sculpture are known from La Blanca to date, yet both point to La Blanca's participation in a Middle Preclassic "Olmec-style" sphere. Monument 1, the disembodied head of a larger stone sculpture, was damaged during the same road-building project in 1972 that leveled Mound 1 (Love 2010: fig. 7.2a; Shook and Heizer 1976: 6) and bears distinctly Olmec facial features. It shares its broad nose and deeply recessed eye sockets with another sculpture at La Blanca, Monument 4, a ceramic object recently discovered in a domestic residence on the East Acropolis (Love 2010: fig. 7.4; Love and Guernsey 2011). La Blanca Monument 2 (Love 2010: fig. 7.2b) is a knee fragment from a standing human figure, and its presence suggests that there may have been a naturalistically based sculpture tradition, much like that of the Gulf Coast, at Middle Preclassic La Blanca as well. Beyond the two stone monuments, Shook (personal communication to Michael Love 1985) reported the rumor of a stela in the west plaza of La Blanca, but it was never located. The most unique sculptural monument from La Blanca is, however, Monument 3, an earthen altar in the shape of a quatrefoil (Fig. 5.9). Its context and iconography reveal the role of sculpture in the configuration of ritual space during the Middle Preclassic period (Love and Guernsey 2007; Love et al. 2006). I discuss it in greater detail in Chapter 5, as it provides an excellent "case study" for contemplating the conceptual relationship between sculpture, the built environment, and public versus private space – issues that factor significantly into a discussion of the development of the potbelly sculpture tradition.

While, as this discussion has outlined, sculpture was produced in a variety of forms and throughout the Pacific slope and adjacent highlands during the Middle Preclassic period, it is important to remember that sites in other regions, such as La Venta along the Gulf Coast and Chalcatzingo in the highlands of Morelos, witnessed even more extensive sculptural productivity during this period. As Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo (2010: 19–20) observed, "The wide dispersal of Olmec low-relief monuments in Mesoamerica masks the actual distribution of stone monuments in the Middle Preclassic period," which was confined primarily to La Venta, Chalcatzingo, and Takalik Abaj. This situation changed dramatically, however, in the ensuing Late Preclassic period, after the collapse of La Venta. So, too, did the styles, themes, and forms of sculpture, which expanded and proliferated along the Pacific slope and throughout the rest of Mesoamerica. The "Olmec style" that had dominated

the Middle Preclassic gave way to new forms of expression and experimentation, including the monumental stone potbellies, as well as other, architectural means of expressing political and regional authority.

The Late Preclassic period

By 600 B.C., La Blanca had waned considerably, and although Love (n.d.) suggested that there may have been a period of perhaps one hundred to two hundred years in which this region of the Pacific Coast lacked political centralization, the site of El Ujuxte rose to establish regional dominance by 400 B.C. (Love 1999a, 2002a, b). La Blanca's collapse was felt regionally; Rosenswig (2008, 2010: 313) documented a significant population decrease in the adjacent Cuauhtémoc region of Mexico, which had reached a population peak during the florescence of La Blanca and had probably been a part of the La Blanca political sphere. El Ujuxte, in stark contrast to its piedmont neighbors of Takalik Abaj and Izapa, produced almost no monumental stone sculpture during its Late Preclassic apogee. Exceptions to this dearth of sculpture are three uncarved altars, Monuments 1–3, which compare to plain altars known from a variety of sites during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods (Love and Balcárcel 2000: 65), as well as two small potbellies, found in association with a low domestic mound at the site and discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Most of El Ujuxte was carefully laid out according to an astronomically oriented gridlike plan (Fig. 3.10). The principal axis of the site aligned with the point on the horizon where the bright star Capella rose, while other alignments marked important astronomical phenomena, such as the zenith transit of the sun, and winter and summer solstices (Poe 2000). It appears that the ruling elites of El Ujuxte chose to express their authority in the form of an astronomically significant urban design instead of by sculptural means. Bove (2005: 105, 2011) commented on this tendency along the South Coast of Guatemala to express rulership through large-scale construction projects and astronomical alignments rather than monumental sculpture, and interpreted it as a "corporate embodiment of authority." Nonetheless, at El Ujuxte, the three uncarved altars, Monuments 1–3, were integrated into this architectural scheme and placed at the base of Mound 2 along one of the main axes of the site. Furthermore, their ritualistic significance within this program was underscored by the offerings associated with Monument 1, which consisted of two vessels and a ceramic object with a cruciform or rectilinear quatrefoil shape (Guernsey and Love 2005; Love n.d.; Love and

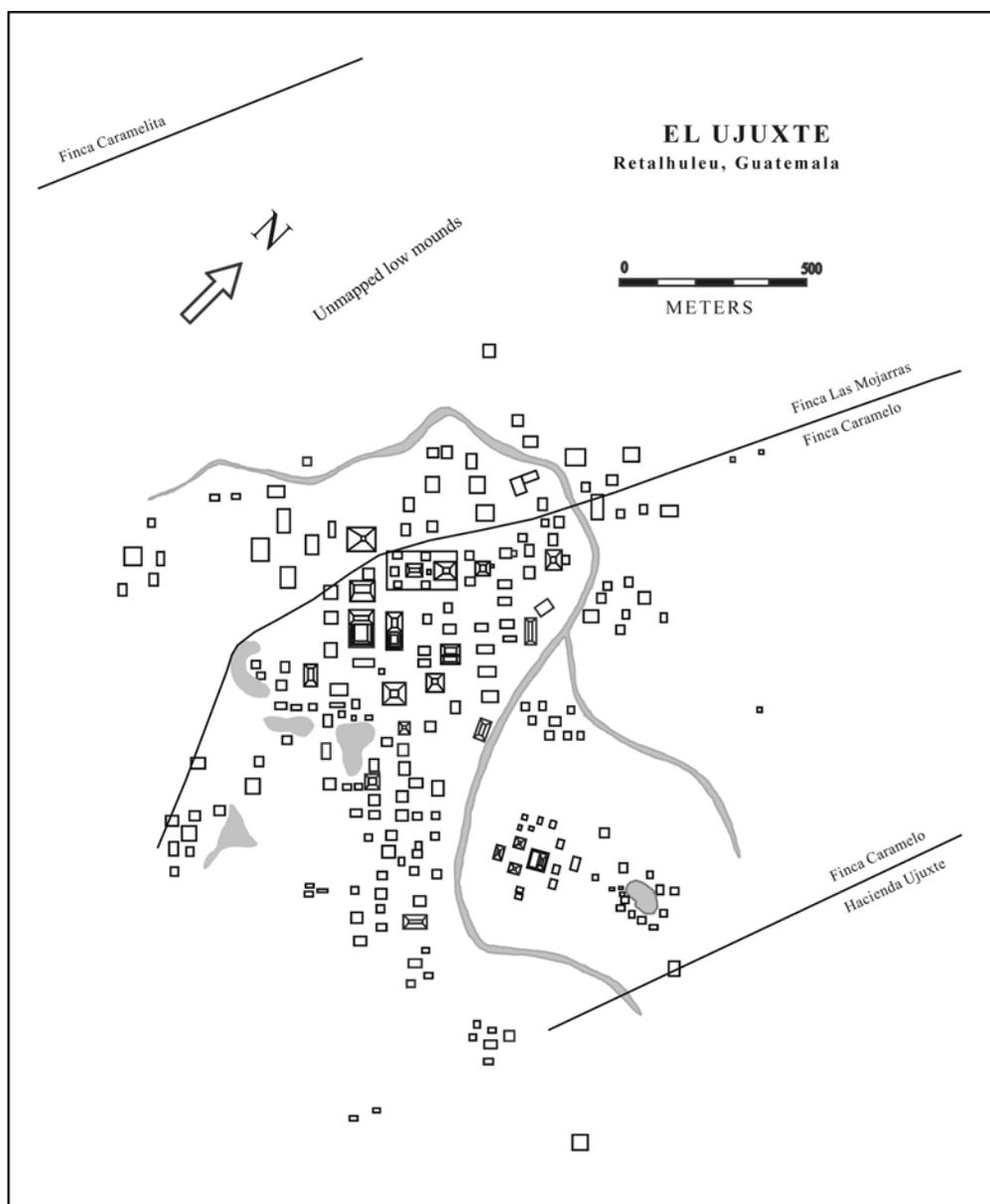


Figure 3.10. Map of the site of El Ujuxte. Courtesy of Michael Love.

Balcárcel 2000). Another offering encountered farther to the west, very near the intersection of the two main axes of the site, consisted of ceramic cruciform objects, bowls, and small plates (Guernsey and Love 2005: fig. 5). These cruciform ceramic objects echoed the architectural planning of the site while also invoking the symbolic form of a quatrefoil, which was closely associated with places of supernatural access throughout the Preclassic period (see Chapter 5; Guernsey 2010b; Guernsey and Love 2005: 42–43; Love and Balcárcel 2000).

The cruciform central plan of El Ujuxte was duplicated in the secondary centers surrounding it, which indicates a regional standardization of site organization that echoed that of the primary center (Love 1998, 1999b,

2002b, 2007: 294; Love, Castillo, and Balcárcel 1996: 11; Poe 2000). El Ujuxte's secondary polities were small cities in and of themselves, and there may have been up to six tiers of hierarchy within the El Ujuxte regional system. The sheer scale and complexity of this regional system led Love (2007: 295, n.d.) to suggest that it constituted a state-level political structure by c. 300 B.C. The rigidity evident in the site plan of El Ujuxte is paralleled, to some degree, by that of sites such as Tzuy, in central Escuintla, which Bove (2005: 102) sees as a precursor to the rigid urban settlement of Balberta, which rose to power in the ensuing Early Classic period.

Love (2011: 55) suggested that the eastern boundaries of El Ujuxte probably bumped up against those

of Izapa, which reached its apex of growth during the Late Preclassic Guillen phase (300–50 B.C.). This phase was characterized at Izapa by extraordinary construction activity in which all of the central plaza groups reached their maximum proportions (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982: 133). Most Late Preclassic structures at Izapa were of earthen construction, finished with riverstones, clay facing, or occasionally lime plaster and were typically arranged quadrilaterally around central plazas. The site center was composed of seven distinct plaza and mound groupings, focused around Mound 60, which reached a height of 22 m at this time and was surrounded by a series of reservoirs, dams, and aqueducts that channeled water from the central plazas to the Río Izapa along the eastern boundary of the site (Gómez Rueda 1995; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982: 133, 263).

Considering that Izapa's sphere of control was contiguous to that of El Ujuxte, with its lack of monuments, the vast quantity of sculpture at Izapa is somewhat surprising. According to Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa (1982: 23, 133, 159), the majority of monuments at Izapa were carved and set into place during the Guillen phase, with the latest possible dating for others in the subsequent Terminal Preclassic Hato phase (50 B.C. to A.D. 100). The plazas of Groups A and B, located to the west and northeast of Mound 60, respectively, held the highest concentration of carved monuments and appear to have been the loci of ritual activity during the Late Preclassic florescence of the site. Within these plaza groupings, many of the monuments were organized into stela–altar pairs, as Mathew Stirling (1943: 61) first observed during his early visit to the site. Beyond the many stela–altar pairs, however, were other types of sculpture, including carved drain spouts, pedestal sculptures, thrones, a number of miscellaneous monuments, and one potbelly sculpture.

At Izapa, the monuments literally punctuated the plaza space with their imagery and messages, and indicate the conceptualization of a unified program of sculpture and architecture that demarcated sacred space. The messages of the stelae ranged from representations of deities, such as the water god on Izapa Stela 1 (Guernsey 2010a; Norman 1976: 87–92), to complex scenes in which an image of a ruler appears to have been inserted into a mythic narrative, as on Stela 4 (Guernsey 2006b). This imagery enabled rulers to relate their actions and authority to practical and natural concerns, as well as more conceptual issues such as the involvement and sanction of the gods in the affairs of their community. By visualizing the office of rulership, rulers could also articulate their role in maintaining the delicate balance of

well-being, both practical and spiritual, within their communities (Guernsey 2010a). These concerns were not limited to the site of Izapa, however, and it is important to note that the messages of these Izapa stelae compare to similar messages and imagery at other Late Preclassic sites, including neighboring ones, such as Takalik Abaj, but also more distant sites, such as Kaminaljuyu in the Guatemalan Highlands and San Bartolo in the Maya Lowlands.

The audiences at Izapa to whom these messages were directed, however, must be considered carefully. The authors of the messages recorded in monumental sculptural and architectural form were undoubtedly the ruling elite of the site, and the ideas conveyed by them reinforced their claims to authority by linking them and their actions to mythic events, beings, and locations. Yet it must not be assumed that all levels of society “bought into” or passively accepted the ruling elite's claims to political and cosmological authority. That said, an almost complete lack of data from residential sectors at Izapa makes assessing the effect of these elite-driven statements on the local non-elite population almost impossible. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that the monumental statements of authority at Izapa resonated with more than local elites or those visiting from other regions. Many of the messages and themes recorded on the monuments in the site center reflect themes with ties to fundamental agricultural cycles, astronomical events, or myths that appear to have been broadly shared at this time and grounded in the rhythms of daily life. In other words, monuments with such narratives at Izapa were probably, to some degree, effective at communicating an elite ideology to a non-elite population (Guernsey 2006b).

What is also important to remember is that the messages and iconography of the monuments at Izapa were not isolated phenomena. Rather, the messages were part of a currency of elite ideological exchange that was shared across southeastern Mesoamerica and into regions to the east and west. The sculpture was a particularly powerful vehicle through which notions of Late Preclassic political authority, ideological exchange, and social cohesion were communicated. The sculpture also provides an important data set for identifying pathways of elite communication that permeated ethnic and linguistic boundaries and that must be used in conjunction with other cultural assemblages, like pottery, which may point to different and potentially conflicting pathways or conduits of exchange (Guernsey 2006b, 2010a, b, 2011; Guernsey Kappelman 1997, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004).

Another major Late Preclassic site along the Pacific piedmont was Takalik Abaj, in Retalhuleu, Guatemala.

Takalik Abaj, which by the Middle Preclassic period already possessed a significant array of Olmec-style sculpture, may have been inhabited by Mayan speakers by the Late Preclassic period.¹⁵ Takalik Abaj rose to a position of regional prominence during the Late Preclassic, during which time extensive construction of plazas, terraces, monumental structures, and water control systems took place (Marroquín 2005). The public spaces of the site were filled with a diverse array of monuments, many of which featured rulers and mythic scenes that exhibit intriguing affinities to specific sculptures at Izapa; several stelae bear inscriptions and some of the earliest dates in the Long Count calendar (Graham 1979; Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978). The formal and iconographic relationships between the corpus of Late Preclassic monuments at Takalik Abaj and those at Izapa confirm that a recurring repertoire of symbols and narratives was shared by distinct political spheres at this time (Guernsey 2006b).

By the Late Preclassic, earlier Olmec-style monuments at Takalik Abaj appear to have been integrated with new styles of sculpture into alignments at the bases of or on top of low mounds at the site. These eclectic groupings led Graham (1982) to comment on the reuse of early Olmec-style monuments, which, as he recognized, clearly continued to be venerated or valued in some way by Late Preclassic inhabitants of the site. According to Christa Schieber de Lavarreda and Miguel Orrego Corzo (2010b), most of the sculptures at Takalik Abaj retained their positions after about 150 A.D., and few were destroyed or moved following that general date. The ceramic evidence suggests continuity in local populations throughout much of the Preclassic period (Popenoe de Hatch 2004), which led Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010b) to conclude that “the dramatic changes in sculptural styles that occurred in the Preclassic likely indicate passing fashions that they adopted from time to time rather than population replacements.”

Takalik Abaj Stela 5 exemplifies the Late Preclassic “Maya” style and bears two Long Count dates that fall between 83 and 126 A.D. (Fig. 3.2) (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010b). On its front appear two elite individuals, perhaps early rulers, who face each other across a hieroglyphic panel, while the sides of the stela portray seated individuals, one on a throne. Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010b) suggested that the individual on the front of Stela 5 who clasps a serpent bar – an emblem of rulership throughout the Preclassic and Classic periods – may be buried in a royal tomb in Structure 7A, which dates to the end of the Late Preclassic period (Schieber de Lavarreda 2003: 797–805; Tarpay 2004).

More difficult to categorize as either “Olmec” or “Maya” are the numerous potbelly sculptures at Takalik Abaj (Fig. 3.11). Throughout his publications, as previously stated, Graham (1982, 1989: 236–238; Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978: 15) emphasized the relationship between the potbellies and boulder-carving traditions in which an interest in volume was often paramount. As he correctly observed, the potbellies were but one of several Preclassic sculptural traditions along the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica that involved the modification, to various degrees, of raw boulder forms. He related this fascination with volume to similar stylistic tendencies in Olmec art. While recognizing these stylistic relationships, Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010b) nonetheless view the potbellies as “probably coeval with early Maya sculptures during the Late Preclassic.” Issues of dating aside, it is important to note that many of the potbellies at Takalik Abaj were placed at the base of mounds in conjunction with other sculptural forms, most in the Central Group of Takalik Abaj on Terraces 2 and 3, where the majority of sculpture is found at the site (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010b).

Izapa, Takalik Abaj, and El Ujuxte were not the only significant sites along the Pacific Coast and piedmont during the Late Preclassic, however. As the distribution of potbellies presented in Chapter 4 confirms, there were numerous sites, many with sculpture, scattered throughout this general region. The site of Sin Cabezas, Escuintla (Parsons 1986: figs. 15–17), is one important example, as it possesses an inventory of several unusual headless and seated figures that bear some superficial similarity to the potbelly tradition, a topic I return to in Chapter 6. Although Beaudry-Corbett (2002: 77) concluded that the major florescence of Sin Cabezas took place during the Late to Terminal Preclassic, when the site functioned as “a major center,” excavations detected some minimal habitation during the preceding Middle Preclassic period, as well as a later Classic-period occupation. Likewise, the site of La Perseverancia, to the west near the town of Tonalá, Chiapas, was at least “as large or larger than Izapa” according to Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa (1982: 8). A sculpture there bears some resemblance to earlier niche monuments (López Vassallo 2007: 40), yet a potbelly sculpture was also recorded from this site, underscoring the diversity of sculptural forms characterizing the Pacific coastal region during the Late Preclassic period.

Also near the town of Tonalá at the site of Tiltepec, which, as mentioned earlier, had a Middle Preclassic Olmec-style stela, another series of potbelly sculptures was erected. Several were found in association with a 9-m-high mound and platform in Group 4 and were



Figure 3.11. Potbellies and other sculptures on the access to Terrace 3, Takalik Abaj. Photo by author.

made of readily available local rock (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: 591). Related potbelly monuments from Arriaga, La Perseverancia, and Alvaro Obregón indicate that sites in the Tonalá region of Chiapas were an integral part of the potbelly sculpture phenomenon at this time.

The diverse political, social, and economic relationships that surely existed between the many sites throughout the Pacific region are not as clear, often because of a lack of archaeological exploration or published data, particularly for smaller sites or the hinterland betwixt and between the various polities. For example, Love (2010) described a series of previously unpublished sculptures from several sites in this area, noting both the points of similarity with monuments from other centers and the points of departure (also see Shook 1971). A stela from the site of El Jobo, located not far from Izapa on the Guatemalan side of the Río Suchiate but largely uninvestigated, portrays a bound and decapitated captive at the feet of his captor (Shook 1965: 185, fig. 1f). Such imagery, which also appears at Izapa, Takalik Abaj, and elsewhere, certainly suggests that the relationships within this region were not always peaceful; it also points to the role of sculpture in articulating messages of conflict.

Pye (1995) likewise documented a number of large, planned Late Preclassic sites with extensive monumental construction in the Río Jesús region of Retalhuleu, which had been relatively unpopulated during the Middle Preclassic. Pye (1995: figs. 7.11, 7.12) illustrated two sculptures from the Río Jesús region, one a seated feline figure and the other a fragmentary zoomorphic head. These sculptures, stylistically Late Preclassic, correspond to the period in which this region witnessed its highest population densities.

The site of Monte Alto, located in Escuintla along the fertile alluvial plain about 34 km from the Pacific Coast, also achieved its florescence during the Late Preclassic period. Ceramics from the site demonstrate strong ties to the Guatemalan Highlands and Kaminaljuyu based on shared styles and forms (Popenoe de Hatch 1989: 39). The site is characterized by approximately fifty earthen mounds (a maximum of 10 m in height) (Bove 1981: 63; Parsons 1976: 325) and a sculptural inventory including not only a series of potbellies and monumental heads but also plain stelae, altars, and boulder monuments (Parsons and Jenson 1965; Richardson 1940; Shook 1971). According to Shook (1971: 72), three plain stelae were erected “in a north–south line” and may have been used to observe the position of the sun.¹⁶ This row of plain

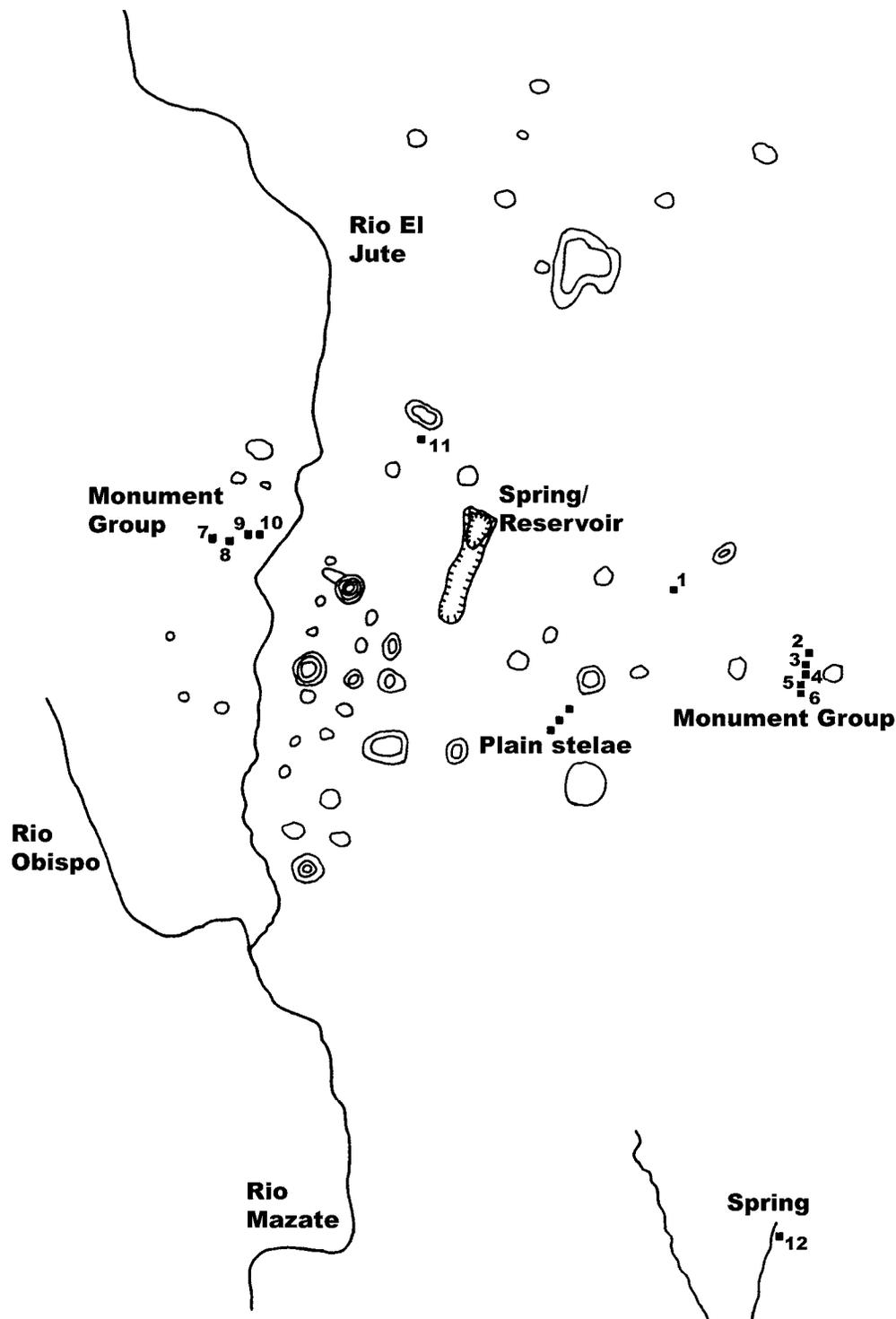


Figure 3.12. Map of the site of Monte Alto. After Popenoe de Hatch (1989: fig. 2.1).

stelae just east of the center of the site was flanked farther to the east by Monuments 2–6, also in a north–south alignment (Fig. 3.12). As Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 25) detailed, this easternmost grouping was composed of potbelly Monuments 4 (Fig. 1.4), 5, and 6; Monument 2, one of the monumental heads; and Monument 3, a

boulder monument depicting Chahk, the god of rain and lightning (Guernsey 2010a; Taube 1995: 96–97). All of these monuments faced west, with the exception of Monument 2, which faced north.¹⁷ Between the row of plain stelae and Monuments 2–6, and just to the north, stood Monument 1, another monumental head, facing



Figure 3.13. View of the town of La Democracia and monuments from the site of Monte Alto, July 2008. Photo by author.

southwest. Opposite, along the western margin of the site across the Río Jute, stood another grouping of three monumental heads, Monuments 7, 8, and 10 (Fig. 1.6), and one potbelly, Monument 9. Monument 11, another potbelly, stood alone at the northern end of the site, while Monument 12, a heavily eroded potbelly, was found in a spring 1,200 m southeast of the site center (Popenoe de Hatch 1989: 25).

While the positioning of these monuments at Monte Alto is intriguing, both Shook (1971: 75) and Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 25) acknowledged that they had probably been repositioned in ancient times and that their locations do not represent their original, Preclassic positions; I return to this problematic situation, particularly as it regards the dating of the sculpture, in the following chapter. As Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 25) elaborated, the monuments

were found in contexts of mixed Middle and Late Preclassic fill, some almost completely buried, having no direct association with any construction or platform (Shook, personal communication). The one exception (Monument 11) was found to rest upon a low masonry platform in the fill of which was a mere handful of small, very weathered sherds that appear to be Late Preclassic, but the sample is insufficient to be certain.

The sculptures were moved again in recent years, and now many of them reside in the central square of the nearby town of La Democracia (Fig. 3.13) (Chávez van Dorne 1999; Popenoe de Hatch 1989: 25).

Central Escuintla also witnessed greater regionalization during this same period, and several sites with potbelly sculptures appear to have formed a polity during the Late Preclassic. Bove (2005: 102) suggested that the capital of this zone was San Antonio, with Giralda and several other smaller sites exhibiting similar architectural structures and alignments (see Fig. 4.2 map). As discussed in the following chapter, there is a concentration of potbelly sculptures in this region of Escuintla, although they demonstrate a stylistic variation that alludes to a creative tension between shared forms and unique, site-specific innovation. Sites such as Giralda and San Antonio also erected plain stelae (Bove 2005: 105, 2011: 103). Farther to the west, but beyond the San Antonio political sphere, sites in the La Gomera region and beyond also erected potbelly sculptures, as did sites to the east in the department of Jutiapa and to the north in the greater Cotzumalguapa Nuclear Zone.¹⁸ What these data indicate, quite unequivocally, is that the potbelly form was accessible to a variety of Late Preclassic centers operating within different political boundaries at this time.

Sculpture is also found, in more limited quantity, at sites farther east along the coast of Guatemala whose ceramic assemblages point to connections with populations in Highland Guatemala and western El Salvador (Kosakowsky, Estrada Belli, and Petit 2000). Estrada Belli (1999, 2002) reported six stelae, only one of which was carved, at the site of Ujuxte in the Santa Rosa district of the southeastern coast. The stelae were found in situ in association with five altars. Three of the stela–altar combinations, as Estrada Belli (2002: 111) described, faced “the point of sunrise on the horizon during the equinox,” confirming the role of plain stelae as astronomically significant markers of sacred space. Two additional stela–altar pairs were found at the northern and southern edges of the main plaza, and one stela had once stood at the center of the plaza. Estrada Belli (2002: 112) added that one grouping of stelae at Ujuxte created a quincunx formation in the central plaza and may have signified a cosmological model marking the four directions and central pivot (see Coggins 1980). Interestingly, Ujuxte – even with its sculptural inventory – does not appear to have been the largest site in this region. Rather, the settlement pattern surrounding the site of Nueve Cerros, located to the south, suggests that it was the regional civic and ceremonial capital, although no sculpture has yet been found there (Estrada Belli 2002: 115). This situation recalls the site of El Ujuxte in Retalhuleu (discussed earlier, and not to be confused with the site of Ujuxte in Santa Rosa), which also appears to have eschewed sculpture as a means of expression in spite of strong regional sculptural traditions.

Also participating in this dynamic interaction sphere was the site of Kaminaljuyu, which dominated the Guatemalan Highlands during the Late Preclassic. Recent epigraphic investigations indicate that the inhabitants of Kaminaljuyu spoke a Mayan language (Fahsen 1999, 2000, 2002; Josserand 2011; Mora-Marín 2005; Valdés and Wright 2004; cf. Macri 2011). It is significant that certain monuments from that site display the same symbolic vocabulary found at Izapa and Takalik Abaj, which strongly indicates that it, too, was an active participant in this larger southeastern Mesoamerican communication sphere (Guernsey 2006b; Guernsey Kappelman 1997, 2001; Kaplan 1995; Parsons 1986). Contributing to Kaminaljuyu’s success was its optimal location at a natural pass between the Pacific Coast and interior Guatemala. Recent excavations also have demonstrated the presence of elaborate water management and hydraulic engineering systems that enabled the establishment of a stable agricultural base, which, in turn, attracted a growing population and contributed to developing commercial interests (Barrientos 2000; Popenoe de Hatch

et al. 2002; Valdés 2002; Valdés and Popenoe de Hatch 1996; Valdés and Wright 2004).

Kaminaljuyu’s role as the principal polity within the southern highlands may have been linked to its proximity to two major obsidian sources in the Guatemalan Highlands: San Martín Jilotepeque and El Chayal (Braswell 2002; Braswell and Amador Berdugo 1999; Braswell and Robinson 2011; Michels 1979). The control of limited resources and regional trade routes had immediate societal ramifications, as evidenced by two extraordinarily rich Late Preclassic tombs at the site (Popenoe de Hatch 2002b: 282; Shook and Kidder 1952). These interments, which date to consecutive construction phases, were placed within Mound E-III-3, the largest structure at Kaminaljuyu. The scale of Mound E-III-3, as well as its function as a mortuary monument for what appears to have been two successive rulers (Shook and Popenoe de Hatch 1999: 304), indicates that Kaminaljuyu’s political power, by this time, was concentrated in the hands of individual rulers who wielded the power to commission – or coerce – the construction of monumental architecture (cf. Shook and Kidder 1952; Valdés and Rodríguez Girón 1999: 145; Valdés and Wright 2004).

Carved monuments from the same Late Preclassic period at Kaminaljuyu bear witness to the power wielded by individual rulers. Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 (Prater 1989: fig. 6.1) depicts a standing figure grasping a chipped flint ax remarkably similar to one recovered from Tomb I in Mound E-III-3, which suggests a relationship between the individual portrayed and the Late Preclassic ruler interred within the structure (Parsons 1986: 66, fig. 175; Shook and Kidder 1952: fig. 79c). Images such as Stela 10 articulated a message of political authority to local populations but also undoubtedly operated within a broader, regional network of rhetoric, competition, and exchange. However, Stela 10 stands in stark contrast to the many potbellies that also characterized Kaminaljuyu during this period. These differences suggest that sculpture was being employed by Preclassic rulers at Kaminaljuyu to address a variety of messages, themes and, presumably, audiences, a topic that I explore in later chapters.

The original, Preclassic locations of the Kaminaljuyu potbellies are uncertain, with most having been repositioned during later periods. Parsons (1981: 283), for example, referred to the Palangana at Kaminaljuyu as a “monument plaza” for Preclassic sculpture on the basis of the number of Preclassic sculptures, including potbellies, that had been repositioned there during the Classic period. The Palangana, a large architectural complex consisting of plazas and associated structures, has a long

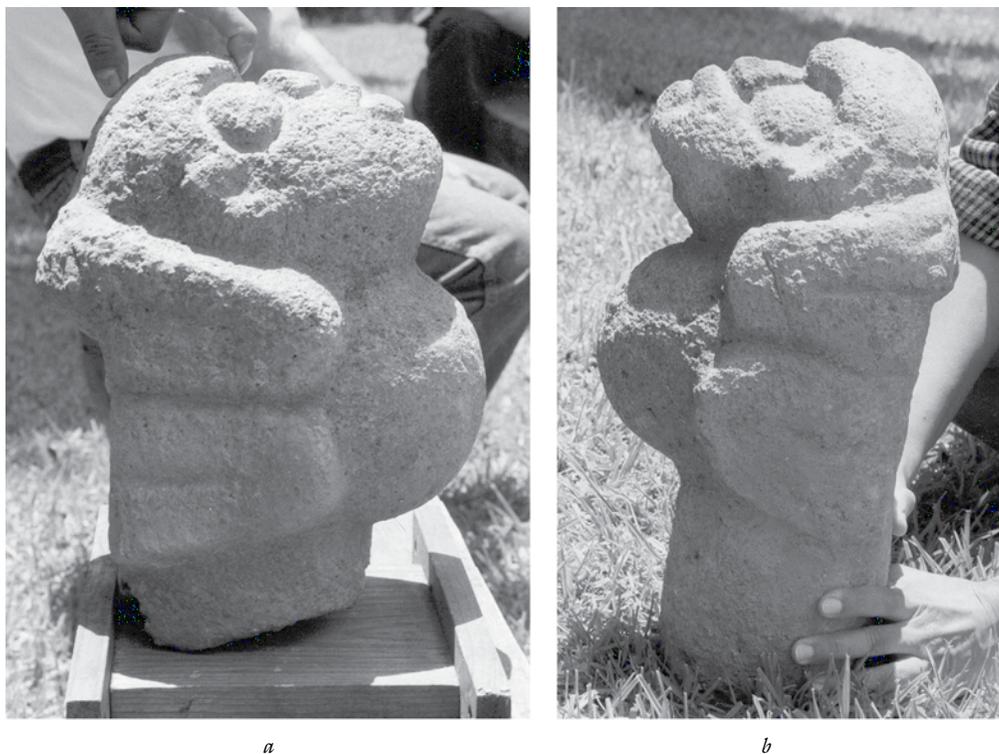


Figure 3.14. Monuments from Finca Pacaño, Patzicía, Chimaltenango, Guatemala: (a) Sculpture 2; (b) Sculpture 1. Photos courtesy of Eugenia Robinson.

construction sequence beginning during the Middle Preclassic and continuing through the Late Classic period (Alvarado 2005: 499). As Carlos Alvarado elaborated, Structures C-II-12 and C-II-14 of the Palangana may have functioned as residences for the elite during the Late Preclassic period, although much of the later Classic-period evidence in the Palangana as a whole points to a more ceremonial or administrative function (Alvarado 2005: 497–499; Popenoe de Hatch 2005: 512). Parsons’s (1981) characterization of the Palangana as a “monument plaza” parallels Graham’s (1982) observation that the reuse of Preclassic monuments at Takalik Abaj constituted a sort of “museum display” of earlier art forms. Clearly, at both sites, potbellies continued to be reutilized and revered in sculptural tableaux for long periods of time, and integrated with other sculptural forms such as stelae and altars.

Monuments at sites such as Chocolá, located in the sloping piedmont between Kaminaljuyu and Takalik Abaj, bear a close relationship to sculpture at Kaminaljuyu. Chocolá Monument 1 shares many affinities with Kaminaljuyu Stela 10, including its fine carving style and the costume elements worn by the individuals portrayed (Miles 1965; Parsons 1986: 70; Prater 1989: 128; Valdés et al. 2004). Also, like Kaminaljuyu and other sites on the piedmont and coast, Chocolá participated in the potbelly

tradition, erecting one potbelly sculpture (Monument 30) in front of a structure at the site (Paredes Umaña 2006a: 90). The elite at Chocolá took advantage of the site’s location along a vital communication corridor, as well as its rich agricultural environment. Recent excavations at the site have revealed extensive water management systems, artificial terracing, and a carefully orchestrated astronomical orientation for the central ceremonial precinct (Kaplan 2005; Paredes et al. 2005; Valdés and Vidal 2005).

Two monuments discovered at the Finca Pacaño, located in Patzicía, Chimaltenango, in the Guatemalan Highlands, illustrate how various stylistic currents could be hybridized to create unusual sculptural forms. The monuments (Fig. 3.14a and b), which are nearly identical, depict two figures that resemble Olmec dwarves like those pictured in *The Olmec World* catalogue (Princeton Art Museum 1995: figs. 112, 113, 114, 118; also see Benson and de la Fuente 1996: cat. nos. 63a, 64), which also tilt their heads backward, grasp their heads, or squat on their haunches in a similar manner. However, the remaining vertical tenons of the Pacaño figures indicate that they functioned as pedestal sculptures, very similar to those frequently found on the Pacific slope, in the Guatemalan Highlands, and elsewhere (see Fig. 8.1).¹⁹ More important for this discussion, Robinson (2005: 531) correctly

noted that the prominent stomachs of the Pacaño figures link them to the potbelly tradition.

The Pacaño monuments appear to have marked a ritually significant site, which was located near a natural cave (Cueva Julimax) and two springs (Robinson et al. 2008: 25). Although the material recovered to date suggests that ritual activities were carried out for a period stretching from the Preclassic through the Classic period (Robinson 2005: 533), the two monuments – as well as a crude stone sculpture that resembles a toad altar (Robinson et al. 2008: fig. 8) – appear to date stylistically to the Preclassic. The two pedestal monuments show evidence of having been exposed to fire, perhaps in ancient rituals, as well as moved and slightly damaged in ancient times (Robinson 2005: 532–534). Perhaps even more interesting, the two pedestal sculptures are made of an unusual material, either clay or a decomposing volcanic rock (Eugenia Robinson, personal communication 2009). Despite this unusual medium, their format is remarkably similar to that of the more traditional stone pedestal monuments. It is unclear whether the Pacaño monuments reflect a lack of readily available high-quality stone for carving, a provincial sculpting tradition that worked with local or nontraditional materials, or an intentional choice to depart from a more typical medium. As La Blanca Monument 3 confirms, monumental stone and clay sculpting traditions could be practiced simultaneously at sites, so it is not surprising that other monuments in southeastern Mesoamerica might speak to the variety of materials incorporated into sculptural production during the Preclassic (Love 2010).²⁰ At any rate, the Pacaño monuments blend traditions of representation drawn from pedestal sculptures, portable figures, and potbellies, and manifest them in an unusual medium that attests to the fluidity between materials, styles, and forms during the Preclassic period.

Another vital region within this Late Preclassic communication sphere was the northern Maya Highlands, including the Salamá Valley of Baja Verapaz and the San Andrés Sajcabajá Valley of Quiché. These regions straddled a natural communication route between the southern Guatemalan Highlands and the Maya Lowlands to the north (Kidder 1940; Sharer 1989: 258; Sharer and Sedat 1987, 1999). Sites such as El Portón in the Salamá Valley witnessed increasing sociopolitical complexity during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition, as evidenced by large-scale ceremonial centers and sculpture such as Monument 1, which bears an early hieroglyphic inscription (Sharer and Sedat 1973, 1987, 1999). While Monument 1 demonstrates the site's participation in the rapidly expanding vogue for stelae that gained momentum at the end of the Middle Preclassic period, there is

a curious paucity of potbelly sculptures in this region, as Federico Fahsen (2010a) shrewdly observed. Fahsen suggested that this situation might be explained by the fact that messages comparable to those encoded by the potbellies may have been articulated with alternative sculptural forms in this region during the Late Preclassic period.

Several scholars have suggested that farther west, in central Chiapas, Maya groups had emigrated into the highlands and upper Grijalva River valley by the early Late Preclassic period (Bryant 2008; Bryant and Clark 2005a, b; Clark and Pye 2011). At Chiapa de Corzo, Clark and Pye (2011: 44) see Maya influence in the shift from earthen platform architecture to cut-stone- and stucco-faced structures, and in the construction of Mound 1, a palace and temple complex that was also the burial place for a series of presumed rulers. The offerings interred in the tombs, they noted, reveal ties not only to the Maya region but to Oaxaca as well and underscore “the widespread renown and prestige of some of these Chiapas kings.” This is also the period in which sculpture was first produced at Chiapa de Corzo, including several stelae that were found in the construction fill of Mound 5B, thus lacking a primary context (Lowe 1962).

In an earlier publication (Guernsey 2006a), I compared several of these Chiapa de Corzo stelae that have abstract, horizontal designs to stelae from Izapa. In both cases, the designs appear to mimic textile patterns, which may have referenced the wrapping or bundling of stelae and other ritual objects, a practice well documented in the corpus of Mesoamerican art (Guernsey 2006a; Reilly 2006; Stuart 1996). Such imagery at Chiapa de Corzo indicates that rulers at that site were participating in broadly disseminated Late Preclassic symbolic systems. More recently, Caitlin Earley (2008: 124–128) demonstrated how the monuments also bear close stylistic and iconographic associations with sculpture at sites such as La Mojarra and Cerro de las Mesas. Her research points to a strong Isthmian connection for Chiapa de Corzo during the Late Preclassic period and provides a counterpoint to arguments, noted earlier, that have focused on Maya influence or occupation to explain the changes in sculpture and architecture that mark this period. Also notable at Chiapa de Corzo is the Long Count date on Stela 2, which corresponds to 37 or 36 B.C., making it the earliest known date in the corpus of Mesoamerican art (Coe 1976: 112; Lee 1969: 105; Lowe 1962: 194; J. Marcus 1976: 51).

Isthmian connections also characterize a monument from Ocozocoautla, Chiapas. Ocozocoautla Monument 1 was intentionally mutilated and then interred in a plaza at the site at some point in the ancient past. Stylistically, it

dates to the late Middle Preclassic or early Late Preclassic period and bears striking compositional similarities to La Venta Monument 19 (Tejada Bouscayrol and Davies 1993). Interestingly, Clark and Pye (2011: 44) asserted that sites such as Ocozocoautla, despite some discernible Maya influence, appear to have remained independent of Maya control, unlike contemporaneous Chiapa de Corzo, which they consider to be tied more closely to Maya groups during this period (also see Agrinier 1992). The differing opinions concerning the cultural connections apparent throughout Chiapas at this time reflect the various ways in which the evidence can be interpreted and call attention to the many paths of exchange that are demonstrated at sites throughout this region. In fact, Marcus Winter (2007: 205) made the important point that excavations in the Southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec in general “reaffirm the cultural complexity” of this zone, which was undoubtedly the result of population increases that ensued after the collapse of La Venta at the end of the Middle Preclassic.

Corridors of communication throughout Late Preclassic Mesoamerica also extended throughout southeastern Guatemala and western Honduras, and into El Salvador. The site of Chalchuapa, El Salvador, located approximately 120 km southeast of Kaminaljuyu, was first occupied during the Early Preclassic period but witnessed intense construction activity during the Late Preclassic (Sharer 1978). According to Robert Sharer, Marcello Canuto, and Ellen Bell (2011), Late Preclassic Chalchuapa was closely connected to Kaminaljuyu, a conjecture based on shared ceramics as well as similar architectural forms and site plans. A large pyramid and a series of plazas and ceremonial platforms were erected during the same period and were accompanied by monumental stone sculpture such as Monument 1, which contains an early hieroglyphic inscription (Sharer 1974). Potbelly sculptures such as Monument 7 were also integrated into the sculptural corpus of Chalchuapa (Sharer, Canuto, and Bell 2011: 319). While Monument 7 is the only known potbelly from Chalchuapa, other sites in El Salvador participated in the potbelly tradition, most notably Santa Leticia, where three large potbellies were prominently positioned along an artificial terrace that led to the ceremonial center of the site (Demarest 1986: fig. 40). Two other sculptures from Santa Leticia show close stylistic ties to sculpture documented in the southeastern highlands of El Salvador and Central America (Demarest 1986: 9–10, fig. 16; Paredes Umaña 2006b; Richardson 1940), as well as to Monument 3 of Monte Alto, which Taube (1995: 96–97) identified as a representation of the god of rain and lightning, Chahk. It is significant that representations of Chahk and related water gods recur with

great frequency in the corpus of monuments from the Pacific slope and elsewhere during the Preclassic period (Guernsey 2010a), again pointing to Santa Leticia’s ties to the west.

Conclusions

The sheer diversity of sculpture along the Pacific Coast and slope, as well as the waxing and waning influences of different cultural groups, makes a neat summary of its developmental trajectory a bit elusive. Nonetheless, a few points are worth emphasizing because they illuminate several of the social dynamics of sculpture during the Preclassic period. Stone sculpture appears to have been present along the Pacific slope by the end of the Early Preclassic, at which time it was focused on representations of the human form, much as along the Gulf Coast during the same period. It is important to acknowledge, however, that these Preclassic stone-carving tendencies grew out of long-standing traditions of figural representation in the form of ceramic figurines. While the medium, scale, and styles changed, Preclassic stone sculptures must have resonated with peoples who had been crafting representations of humans in clay for years. In truth, it is perhaps important not to make too much of the transition to stone. As Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo (2010) noted, “The basic techniques for shaping hard stone were known to all peoples who fashioned metates (grinding stones).” In other words, a stone-working tradition was already well established by the beginnings of the Early Preclassic period; it was its elaboration and application to large-scale sculpture that were novel. The appearance of stone sculpture of a significant scale must have been impressive, unusual, and significant: stone sculpture was not widespread at this time but rather was limited to a few regions, which suggests that cultural beliefs and some sort of socially significant power were involved in its distribution (Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010).

Along the Pacific slope, the lack of archaeological context makes it impossible to deduce the function of the earliest sculptures with any certainty. What is clear, though, is that during the Early Preclassic and into the Middle Preclassic, strong stylistic influences from the Olmec heartland were evident. Nevertheless, as the Jocotal-phase (1000–900 B.C.) Ojo de Agua figure demonstrates (Fig. 3.5a), sculpture from southeastern Mesoamerica does not suggest only passive receptivity. Rather, there appears to have been local experimentation as early as c. 900 B.C., during the final throes of the Early Preclassic period. The relatively small scale of objects like

the Ojo de Agua figure or the recently discovered miniature stela from the same site is also important to note. Sculpture like this would have been readily portable and well suited to a role in ritual performances. As mentioned previously, the Xoc relief carving provides insight into the types of performances in which these objects may have been used and alludes to their changing contexts, which were probably rarely static.

During the ensuing Middle Preclassic period and its concurrent demographic shifts, population growth, and dramatic increase in hierarchically structured regional systems, sculpture continued to transform along the Pacific slope. Yet there certainly remained very visible stylistic continuities with the Gulf Coast. Indeed, some of the formal trends apparent in Gulf Coast sculpture were echoed along the Pacific slope, such as an emphasis on increasingly narrative and two-dimensional imagery. This is also the first period along the Pacific slope in which sculpture possesses good archaeological context, and it is clear from evidence at sites such as Tzutzuculi and Takalik Abaj that sculpture was being erected by ruling elites with messages that were carefully conceived in conjunction with the natural surroundings and built environment. Tzutzuculi Monuments 1 and 2 were conceptualized in association with Mound 4 and its staircase, while the imagery of Takalik Abaj Monument 64 clearly relates to its watery setting. There was also continued experimentation with materials, as the La Blanca Monument 3 quatrefoil proves. While the quatrefoil form of Monument 3 confirms La Blanca's participation in elite communication spheres that stretched into the Mexican Highlands, where the same symbol was invoked, its medium of rammed earth was unique. Despite this experimentation, however, sculpture along the Pacific Coast during the Middle Preclassic was still not widely or evenly distributed: the largest corpus in southeastern Mesoamerica is at Takalik Abaj, while sites such as La Blanca and Tzutzuculi had few monuments by comparison.

It was during the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic that the sculptural form of the potbelly emerged. It debuted at a moment when the potential of sculpture was dramatically unfolding and being fully embraced by elites at numerous sites to articulate a variety of messages. It also developed precisely when sculpture production exploded across this region of Mesoamerica, not only at major sites that already possessed an extensive sculptural corpus, such as Takalik Abaj, but at sites of varying scale and rank. The potbellies were often erected in conjunction with diverse carved and plain sculptural forms, including stelae with detailed political and cosmological messages, altars, pedestal sculptures, and other types of monuments.

The appearance of potbellies also coincides with the rise of the first centralized political centers, identified as states, along the Pacific slope. While their distribution (discussed in the next chapter) at sites of contrasting socioeconomic scale makes a link between them and the process of state formation difficult to prove, it does suggest that their messages were somehow seen as pertinent to social and political trends that were developing throughout much of southeastern Mesoamerica, regardless of site size or relative position in the regional hierarchy. As a matter of fact, the presence of potbelly sculptures at diverse sites may speak to the role of sculpture in negotiating social transformations that were shared by many sites of varying scale. Potbellies must have been intended to address multiple audiences separated by any number of linguistic, ethnic, or other social variables. It is also important to reiterate here that the potbellies, like the majority of Preclassic sculpture, were "glyph free." Text was not integral to their message, and this perhaps contributed to their success throughout a wide geographic region. These issues – of message, meaning, context, and audience – are the focus of the remaining chapters. But before we delve into the interpretive realm, [Chapter 4](#) addresses the broad distribution of the potbelly form across the landscape of Preclassic Mesoamerica.

The Dating and Distribution of Potbellies and Potbelly-Related Sculpture

Introduction

The challenges involved in dating the potbellies, complicated by the frequent lack of archaeological context, have long hindered discussion of their place within the trajectory of Mesoamerican sculpture. Certainly exacerbating this contentious topic has been the tendency of many scholars to consign all potbellies to one amorphous group, neither anchored definitively in time nor afforded the sort of individual description that might reveal significant variations in form, iconography, and style. In this chapter, by describing each potbelly monument individually, I highlight the continuities and points of departure visible within the corpus, as well as point to similarities with other Preclassic sculptural forms. I emphasize the recurring motifs that most explicitly unite the potbelly monuments, specifically the characteristics of closed, puffy-lidded eyes and broad, jowly cheeks. As I argue, it is actually this suite of facial features that appears to be most diagnostic of the potbelly sculptural form, rather than their torsos as the term “potbellies” nonetheless implies. I acknowledge quite willingly that this chapter is detailed and, perhaps, a bit tedious at times. But such meticulous analysis is necessary in order to define the parameters and variations of the potbelly style.

In order to facilitate an examination of regional trends, how and where the attributes associated with the potbellies cohered or diverged, or where the potbelly form shares formal attributes with other sculptural types, I have organized this chapter geographically, beginning with Guatemala and continuing with El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico. Where possible, I provide a discussion of the archaeological context of each sculpture, although in many cases such data are not available.

Dating the potbelly sculptures

Dating the potbellies has historically been riddled with difficulty, due in great part to the chronic lack of original context for the vast majority of the sculptures, many of which were repositioned in the ancient past and modern era. As recounted in [Chapter 2](#), an early report by Alfred Maudslay in his *Biología Centrali-Americana* (1889–1902: vol. 2, plate 75a) illustrates this problem ([Fig. 2.1](#)). He recorded two potbellies that had been stationed as sentries outside the gateway of a home between Guatemala City and Mixco, noting that they came from nearby mounds associated with an “ancient Indian town.” Samuel Lothrop followed up on Maudslay’s report of these Finca Arévalo materials – later recognized as part of the ancient site of Kaminaljuyu – and noted their association with “archaic” pottery. He bemoaned the lack of information concerning this “archaic” material, stating that “[t]he name of the originators of this culture is unknown, and none of the historic tribes can be associated with its early phases,” which makes it “one of the chief problems of Middle American archaeology” (Lothrop 1926: 168, n. 10).

Fourteen years later, in an essay that discussed and illustrated several potbellies, Francis Richardson (1940: 399) still cautioned that “[p]resent-day archaeological indications in Central America neither substantiate nor refute” the existence of a pre-Maya culture in the Guatemalan Highlands and Pacific slope region. He added that this situation was complicated by the fact that the region had witnessed the influence of numerous cultural groups through time. Nonetheless, he did suggest that the “closest parallels” to the potbellies and massive heads from Monte Alto ([Figs. 1.4, 1.6, and 3.13](#)) were with the colossal heads at the Olmec sites of La Venta and Tres Zapotes. This sentiment was echoed by Ignacio Bernal (1969: 394–395) and Román Piña Chan (1972: 13), who believed that the potbellies of southern Mesoamerica predated and were perhaps antecedent to the Olmec colossal heads. This opinion was most explicitly expressed by Rafael Girard, who in 1968 published *La misteriosa cultura olmeca: últimos descubrimientos de esculturas pre-olmecas en el municipio de La Democracia* and argued that the monuments found along the Pacific Coast were the forebears of those in the Olmec heartland. Philip Drucker (1952: 222), however, questioned this assessment, stating that it was “chiefly in their massiveness and simplicity (which seems to be a part of their crudeness rather than a feature of artistic chastity) that they resemble Olmec sculpture. There may perhaps be a

connection, but it would seem to be a most tenuous one, and one belonging either to a very early developmental horizon, or else to a late degenerate one.”¹

The first attempt to integrate the potbellies into the extensive corpus of sculpture from southern Mesoamerica was undertaken by Suzanne Miles (1965: 242), who placed them in her first, or earliest, chronological division of Preclassic sculpture. Her early dating of the sculptures was motivated in part, as she acknowledged, by an illustration in Miguel Covarrubias’s *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (1957: plate 18) of stone figurines whose features and postures were reminiscent of the potbelly sculptures. Although the examples in Covarrubias were unprovenienced, Miles remarked on their resemblance to Middle Preclassic Las Charcas-phase figurines from the Guatemalan Highlands and early Olmec sculpture. Miles (1965: 244) based her early dating of the potbellies on a small surface collection of pottery she had compiled in 1960 at Monte Alto, which she believed to include ceramic types dating no later than the Middle Preclassic period. However, Lee Parsons and Peter Jenson (1965: 143), on the basis of their mapping project and surface collections at Monte Alto in 1963, revised Miles’s dating and postulated that occupation at Monte Alto peaked during the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic, during which time most of the monuments were probably carved. They added the caveat, however, that it was possible that some of the sculptures at Monte Alto had been carved “as early as 1000 B.C.”

Parsons (1976, 1981), upon initiating excavations at Monte Alto, later refined this dating even further. He attributed both the potbelly sculptures and monumental heads to a “Post-Olmec” period between 500 and 200 B.C., that corresponded to the transition from the Middle to Late Preclassic periods, although he acknowledged that most of the sculpture had probably been repositioned between 200 B.C and 200 A.D. As Parsons (1976: 327) detailed in his report on the excavations at Monte Alto submitted to the National Geographic Society:

The 1969 interval between digging seasons, half of the year 1970, and the entire year 1971, were devoted primarily to the laboratory analysis of some 200,000 potsherds recovered in stratigraphic excavations.... Regretfully, by the termination of the grant period, this task had reached only a preliminary stage of sorting and typing.

Fortunately, however, Edwin M. Shook elected to remain in Guatemala for the purpose of continuing the analysis of pottery and the correlation of field data.

On the basis of this more detailed analysis of ceramic material from Monte Alto, Shook and Popenoe de Hatch

(1981: 578) placed the apogee of Monte Alto slightly later again, stating that it “had a moderate to heavy occupation in Middle Preclassic times, which reached its height during the Late Preclassic period.” This reassessment of the ceramics was more recently confirmed by Michael Love (personal communication 2009), who agreed that the majority of the pottery present at Monte Alto is Late Preclassic in date. According to Love, what Middle Preclassic pottery is present at Monte Alto most closely resembles late Conchas-phase ceramics that do not appear at other sites, such as La Blanca, until the final years of the Middle Preclassic period.

Despite an increasing consensus that the Monte Alto ceramics point to a Late Preclassic apogee for the site, the placement of the sculpture within this ceramic chronology is more problematic. Echoing Parsons and Jenson (1965), Shook (1971: 74–75) cautioned that excavations at Monte Alto had not yielded sufficient data to “assuredly place the sculptures in the sequence of the site,” which was complicated by a moderate Early Classic habitation as well as a smaller Late Classic occupation. Shook added, referring not only to Monte Alto but to other known sites with potbelly sculptures, that “[p]ractically all known examples, including those from the type site [Monte Alto], have been moved in ancient and modern times from their original positions and context.” A possible exception was Monte Alto Monument 11, the lone potbelly at the northern end of the site, which still stood on its original platform and was associated with pottery that was apparently early Late Preclassic in date (Parsons 1976: 329; but see Popenoe de Hatch 1989: 25). Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 41), in her seriation of the Monte Alto potbellies, reiterated Shook’s cautions concerning the dating of the monuments but nonetheless concluded that “a Late Preclassic date seems to be a reliable estimate for the sculptures.”

The repositioning of potbellies by later groups at Monte Alto was paralleled at other sites such as Kaminaljuyu (Parsons 1986: 42), where significant quantities of potbelly sculptures had also been recorded. As Shook (1971: 75) described, “The more than a dozen examples from Kaminaljuyu were discovered mostly in unrecorded diggings at the site, the majority of them being heavily eroded, broken or mutilated.” Although he duly noted that a fragment of a potbelly had been found in a controlled excavation in an Arenal-phase context at Kaminaljuyu, he nonetheless maintained that “[e]vidence for dating the Monte Alto style, as previously indicated, is woefully meager and unsatisfactory. The finding of the Kaminaljuyu fragment in an Arenal Phase context proves that the style is definitely Pre-Classic, but from the results at the Monte Alto excavation, the

style's Late Pre-Classic placement in time is no more than suggestive."

Working from the vantage point of style, John Graham (1981a, b, 1982, 1989: 236–238; Graham, Hiezer, and Shook 1978: 15), as previously discussed, situated the potbellies within a Pacific slope boulder-carving tradition that was long lived and that shared an interest in simplified forms and monumentality with much of Olmec art. Unlike some earlier assessments, which, as John Scott (1988: 25) correctly observed, were based on evolutionary sequences of development that classed them as "simple" or "crude" compared with Late Preclassic stela-altar monuments found in the same region or the finely carved sculpture of the Gulf Coast Olmec (see, e.g., Girard 1968: 16–17), Graham sought to contextualize the Takalik Abaj potbellies within a milieu of sculptural experimentation that characterized the Pacific piedmont throughout the Preclassic period. By contrast, Carlos Navarrete (1977: 105) asserted that the potbellies only superficially resembled Olmec sculpture, perhaps representing a distant and final phase of influence from the Gulf Coast described by some as "olmecoide." Parsons (1976: 327; also see Stuart and Stuart 1969: 198) took a somewhat different stance, characterizing Monte Alto sculptures as "a derivative, and in a sense provincial, development out of the Olmec tradition."

Radiocarbon dates derived from charcoal beneath a potbelly sculpture at Santa Leticia, El Salvador, initially appeared to offer a remedy to the dating controversy. Even though Siméon Habel (1878: 32) had reported numerous figurines and "two sculptured heads of colossal size" during his reconnaissance of this part of El Salvador, more than eighty years passed before Stanley Boggs put in a small test pit at Santa Leticia. His excavations yielded Preclassic pottery and carbon samples in association with a potbelly sculpture, Santa Leticia Monument 1 (Boggs 1969; Demarest 1986: 10, fig. 22), which pointed to a late Middle Preclassic–early Late Preclassic date for its erection. Boggs also recorded that two additional potbellies, Monuments 2 and 3, appeared to have been positioned in alignment with Monument 1 on a large terrace, which his test pit revealed was artificially constructed. Unfortunately, however, the charcoal samples recovered by Boggs had come from the structural fill of his test pit around Monument 1 and included "bits of charcoal scattered throughout levels of the pit" (Demarest, Switsur, and Berger 1982: 563). As Demarest, Switsur, and Berger stressed, structural fill, by its very nature, provides an uncertain context and thereby rendered Boggs's radiocarbon dates unreliable (also see Eldridge, Stipp, and Hattner 1976). Nevertheless, Demarest, Switsur, and Berger (1982: 563) readily acknowledged

that "Boggs' test pit had proven that the potbellies were the first known to be found in situ – in an unambiguous, Preclassic context." Further refinement of this vague "Preclassic" dating, however, remained to be done.

It was not until Arthur Demarest initiated a project at Santa Leticia in 1977 that an extensive systematic investigation of the site was undertaken, including excavation of its Preclassic habitation zone. Demarest (1986: 138–139) and his colleagues (Demarest, Switsur, and Berger 1982) determined that associated ceramics and carbon from the construction fill of the terrace indicated a Late Preclassic date for the potbellies, which were aligned in a north–south row facing west toward the peak of Cerrito de Apaneca (Fig. 4.1). Although the habitation zone of Santa Leticia revealed ceramics dated to as early as 500–100 B.C., the terrace supporting the potbellies had been raised in one construction phase that occurred between approximately 100 B.C. and A.D. 100 (Demarest, Switsur, and Berger 1982: 567).

Although Demarest (1986: 139) entertained the possibility that the Santa Leticia potbellies had been reset in the Late Preclassic after their original carving, he thought this unlikely because of their "undisturbed contexts at what is essentially a single-component site." He concluded that, even if the monuments had been reset, they still most likely could be dated to no earlier than 500–400 B.C. Demarest confirmed that this contextual data from Santa Leticia coincided with Parsons's (1981) and others' assessments of the potbelly genre as "Post-Olmec," but acknowledged that he was nonetheless unable to completely rule out Graham's (1982, 1989: 237) contention that the potbelly type had been long lived and that the Santa Leticia material might possibly evidence the later part of a more persistent boulder-carving tradition.

While admittedly far from conclusive, the limited data from excavations of in situ potbellies support the opinion of the majority of scholars, who concur that their development most likely began with the transition from the Middle to Late Preclassic period, probably during the fourth century B.C. Most also agree that potbelly sculptures had a long-lived florescence and persisted as an important sculptural form throughout the Late Preclassic period. This proposed dating for the potbelly sculptures is supported by Frederick Bove's (1989b) more recent surveys and excavations at several sites with potbelly sculptures along the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, including San Antonio and Giralda. As he demonstrated, "Both Giralda and San Antonio have occupations seemingly limited to the Late to Terminal Formative... In no case does any evidence exist for an earlier dating" (Bove 1989b: 85).

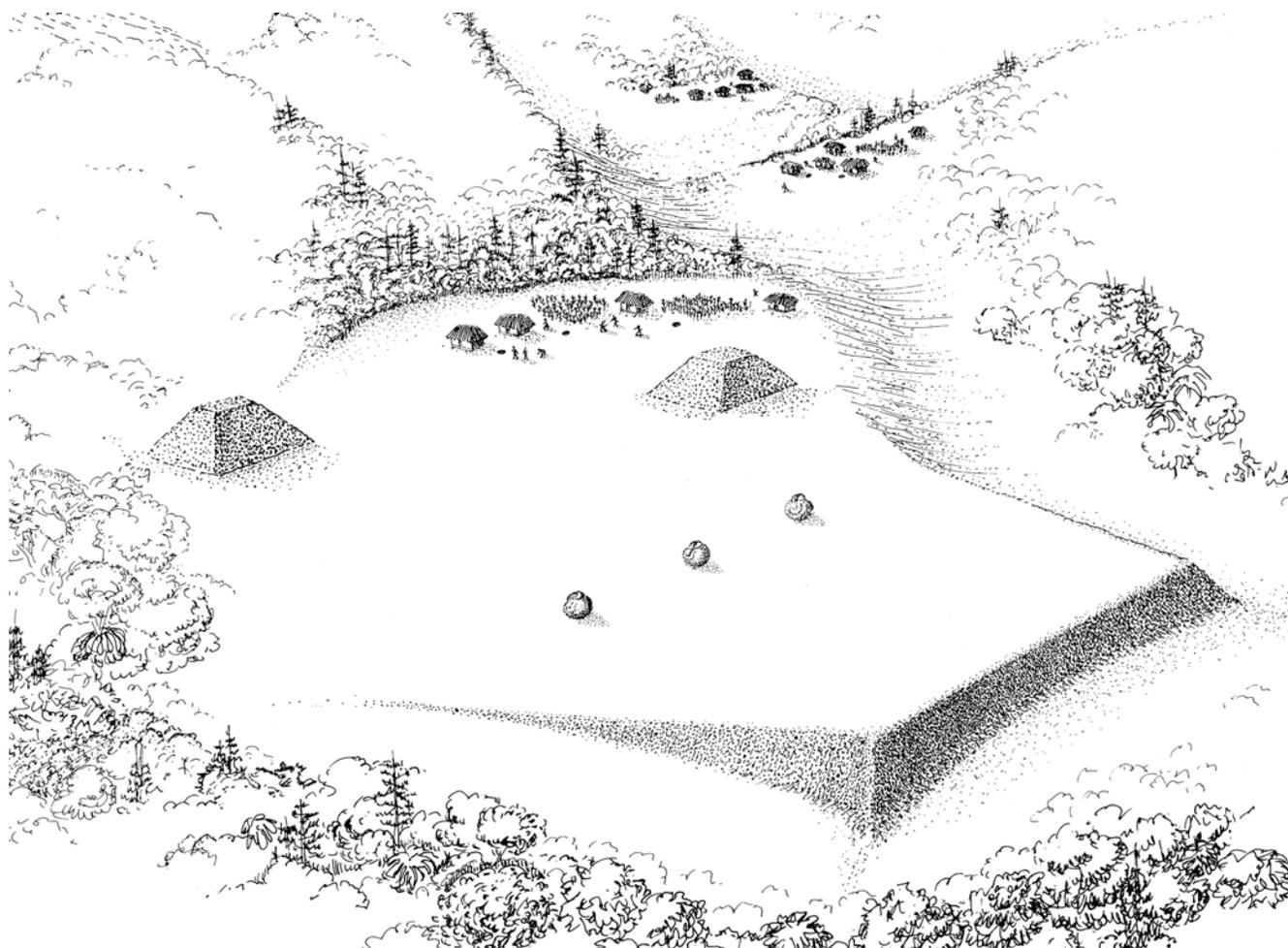


Figure 4.1. Santa Leticia terrace with potbellies. Reconstruction drawing after Demarest (1986: fig. 40), courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

Despite the difficulties of dealing with a corpus of objects frequently lacking archaeological context, some observations concerning their distribution can still be made. Both Bove (1989a) and Love (2010: fig. 7.10) noted that potbelly sculptures are widely distributed along the Pacific Coast and in the Guatemalan Highlands, appearing at primary, secondary, and tertiary settlements. This pattern is markedly different from that of stelae with carved images of rulers, for instance, which in this region are found only at the largest sites (Love 2010: 160). Rodas (1993) documented potbelly sculptures at sites lacking public architecture, which, as Love (2010) observed, may indicate their presence even at lower-level settlements. Nonetheless, as Love (2010: 161) qualified, “The quantity of potbellied works, however, at a site may correlate with its regional importance. Thus the three sites with the greatest number of potbellies are Kaminaljuyu, Monte Alto, and Takalik Abaj.” I return to the implications of these findings later in the book, after having defined as well as possible in this

chapter the distribution of potbelly sculptures throughout Mesoamerica.

The distribution of potbellies

Potbellies are found in greatest concentration on the Pacific slope and in the Guatemalan Highlands (Fig. 4.2) but have a fairly far-flung distribution throughout ancient Mesoamerica (see Fig. 1.1). The inventory presented here draws on the work of many scholars, particularly Carlos Navarrete and Rocío Hernández (2000), Lee Parsons (1986), Marion Popenoe de Hatch (1989), Sergio Rodas (1993), and John Scott (1980, 1988), who previously assembled extensive compilations of potbelly sculptures, typically focused on a single state or country. The inventory presented here expands on these previous studies and includes potbellies from Guatemala (organized according to department), El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico (organized according to state). Interspersed

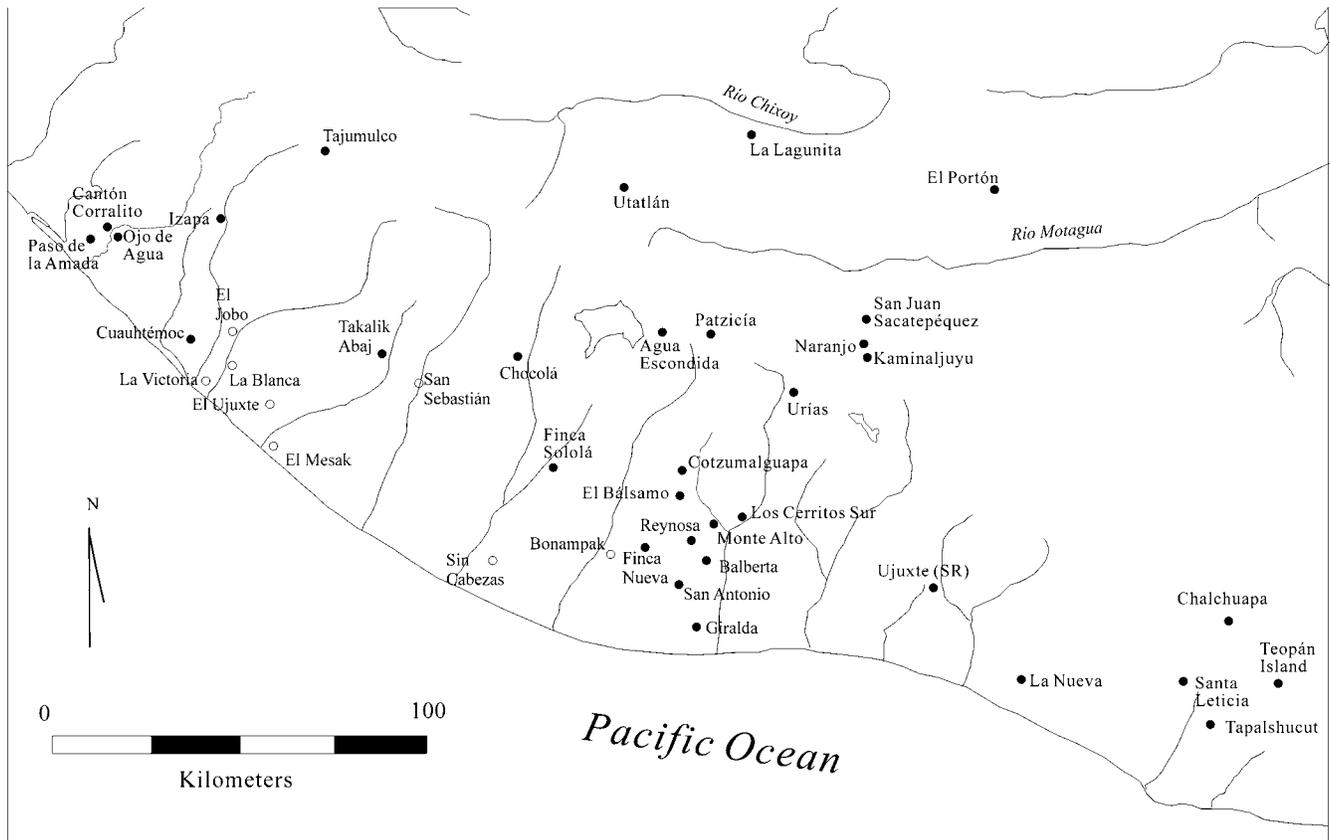


Figure 4.2. Map showing the distribution of potbelly sculptures in southeastern Mesoamerica. Courtesy of Michael Love.

within each regional section are related monuments that share some critical characteristics with the potbelly sculptures.

Throughout this chapter, my discussion focuses on the facial features of the potbellies in an attempt to highlight attributes that have received less attention traditionally and that point to new possibilities for determining meaning. In order to supplement this discussion, Table 4.1 summarizes the most salient traits of the potbellies, including body type, costume details, and other categories that illustrate the range of variation within the corpus. In some cases, I was unable to see the sculptures in person, and I have worked from available photographs and drawings. In situations where details were not clearly visible and I was unable to view the sculptures myself, I indicated this in the table with a question mark. If the monuments were effaced or damaged in some way and particular details were impossible to discern due to the state of preservation, I indicated “NV” (for “not visible”); an “X” signifies the trait is present. Despite the fact that this compilation is the most extensive to date, I must acknowledge that it is, inevitably, incomplete. The sheer portability of many potbellies, some only 15 cm in height, has made them especially vulnerable to casual collecting, and numerous unrecorded examples exist in

private collections and the dusty bodegas of museums. Nonetheless, and with these caveats, I have attempted here to track down and provide illustrations for as many as possible, and include them and several closely related monuments in Table 4.1.

Guatemala: Escuintla

In the department of Escuintla, the site with the highest concentration of potbellies is Monte Alto, which boasts Monuments 4, 5, and 6 (Fig. 4.3) and Monuments 9, 11, and 12 (Fig. 4.4).² In addition, Monuments 1, 2, 7 (Fig. 4.5), 8 (Fig. 4.6a), and 10 (Fig. 4.6b) are monumental heads that share many of the same features.³ As described in the preceding chapter (see Fig. 3.12 for a plan of the site), potbelly Monuments 4, 5, and 6 were grouped along the eastern edge of the site with Monte Alto Monument 2, one of the monumental heads, and Monument 3, another massive head portraying Chahk, the god of rain and lightning (Fig. 4.6c) (Guernsey 2010a: 220; Taube 1995: 96–97). Along the western margin of the site stood a grouping of three monumental heads with potbelly facial features (Monuments 7, 8, and 10) and one potbelly, Monument 9. Monument 11, another potbelly, stood alone at the northern end of the

Table 4.1. *Potbelly and related monument traits*

	Form	Face	Body	Limbs	Navel	Adornment	Base	Notes
	B=body H=head	J=jowls C=closed eyes P=puffy lids L=pursed lips	O=obese S=stout L=slender	A=arms L=legs		L=loincloth C=collar P=pectoral E=ear H=headdress B=back O=other	(pedestal or conical)	
GUATEMALA								
ESCUINTLA								
Monte Alto Mon. 1	H	J/C				E		
Monte Alto Mon. 2	H	J/C				E		
Monte Alto Mon. 4	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		E		
Monte Alto Mon. 5	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		E		
Monte Alto Mon. 6	B/H	J/P	O	A/L		C/P/E		
Monte Alto Mon. 7	H	J/C/P				E		
Monte Alto Mon. 8	H	J/C/P						
Monte Alto Mon. 9	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		E?		
Monte Alto Mon. 10	H	J/C/P						
Monte Alto Mon. 11	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		P/E		
Monte Alto Mon. 12	B/H	J	S	A/L				
Unprov. head with pursed lips	H	J/C/P/L				E?		
Finca Costa Brava head	H	J/C/P				E?/H		
Los Cerritos Sur Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P	L		NV	E?		
Los Cerritos Sur Mon. 3	B/H	J/C/P	S	A			X	
Giralda Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		E		crossed legs
Giralda Mon. 2	B/H	J/C/P	O	A				
San Antonio La Gomera Mon. 1	B/H	J	S	A/L				clasped hands, crossed legs fragmentary
Finca Bonampak Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P	NV	NV	NV		NV	
Finca Nueva Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P	S	A		E		
Finca Sololá Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	?/?	?	L?/C	?	
Finca Sololá Mon. 2	B/H	J/C/P/L	L	A	?	C?	X	
Finca Sololá Mon. 3	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A	X			
Finca San Antonio La Paz potbelly	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/?	?	E?/B?	?	
Concepción-Cementerio Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L				crossed legs
Concepción Mon. 3	B/H	J/C/P	O	A	X	L?/C/E/O	?	
Bilbao/Concepción Mon. 46	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/?		C/E/H/O		
Bilbao/Concepción Mon. 47	B/H	J/C/P	O	A	X	C/E/H/O	?	
Bilbao Mon. 58	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		E		crossed legs
Concepción-Anexo Col. Mon. 2	B/H	J	O	A/NV			?	
El Bálsamo, Santa Lucía Cotz. Mon. 1	B/H	J	O	A			X	crossed arms
JUTIAPA								
Pasaco Mon. 1	B/H	J	S	A	X	L/C/O	X	
Pasaco Mon. 2	B/H	J/L	S	A/L	X			crossed legs
Pasaco Mon. 3	B	NV	S	A/L	X			crossed legs
La Nueva monument	B	NV	O?	A/L	?		X	
RETALHULEU								
Takalik Abaj Mon. 2	B/H	J	O	A/L			X	
Takalik Abaj Mon. 3	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/?		C	NV	

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

	Form	Face	Body	Limbs	Navel	Adornment	Base	Notes
	B=body H=head	J=jowls C=closed eyes P=puffy lids L=pursed lips	O=obese S=stout L=slender	A=arms L=legs		L=loincloth C=collar P=pectoral E=ear H=headdress B=back O=other	(pedestal or conical)	
Takalik Abaj Mon. 12	B	NV	O	A/?	?	L?	X	
Takalik Abaj Mon. 40	B/H	J/C	S	A/L		E/H?/O		crossed legs
Takalik Abaj Mon. 41	B/H	J/C/P	S	A		E?		
Takalik Abaj Mon. 46	B	NV	S	A/L	?			
Takalik Abaj Mon. 58	B/H	J/?/?/?	O	A/L			X	
Takalik Abaj Mon. 69	B/H	NV	O	L?	NV		?	
Takalik Abaj Mon. 94	B/H	J/C/P	O				X	
Takalik Abaj Mon. 99	H	J/C/P				E		
Takalik Abaj Mon. 100	B/H	J/?/?	O	?/L	?			
Takalik Abaj Mon. 107	B/H	J/C/P	S	A		C?	X	
Takalik Abaj Mon. 109	B/H	J	S	A/?		C/P?/H?/B		
Takalik Abaj Mon. 113	B/H	J/C/?	O	A			?	
Takalik Abaj Mon. 179	B/H	J/?/?	O					
San Sebastián Mon. 3	B/H	J	S	A		L?/O?		
San Sebastián Mon. 4	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/?		E?/H?/O?	?	
San Sebastián Mon. 5	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/NV			?	
San Sebastián Mon. 6	B/H	J/C/P	S			L?/B?	?	
El Ujuxte Sculpture 2	B	NV	S	A			X	
El Ujuxte Sculpture 3	B/H	J/C/P	S	A			X	
GUATEMALA								
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 3	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		C/E		
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 4	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		O		
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 6	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/L	X	C/E		
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 7	B	NV	S	A/L	X	C		
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 8	B/H	J/C/P?	O	A/L		C/B/O		
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 38	H	J/C/P	NV	NV/NV	NV		NV	
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 39	B	NV	O	A	NV	O		
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 41	B	NV	S	A/L	X	C		
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 57	B/H	J/C/P/L	L	L		C/P/E/H/O		crossed legs
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 58	B/H	J/C/P/L	L	L		C/P/E/H/O		crossed legs
Kaminaljuyu Mon. 66	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		C/E		
Kaminaljuyu Pieza A	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/L		C		
Kaminaljuyu Pieza B	B/H	J/C/P	S	A		C/E/H?		
Kaminaljuyu Pieza C	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/L	X	C/E/H?		crossed legs
Kaminaljuyu Pieza D	B	NV	S	A/L	X	B		crossed legs
Kaminaljuyu Pieza E	B/H	J/?/?	L	A/L		B/O	X	crossed legs
SAN MARCOS								
Tajumulco Mon. L	B	NV	O	A/L	?	P?/B?/O?		
SACATEPEQUEZ								
San Juan Sacatepéquez Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A/L	X	C/E		crossed legs
Antigua, Sacatepéquez Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L		C/E		
SOLOLA								
Agua Escondida Mon. 1	B	NV	S	A/?		C/P		
QUICHE								
Utatlán Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L	X	C		

	Form	Face	Body	Limbs	Navel	Adornment	Base	Notes
	B=body H=head	J=jowls C=closed eyes P=puffy lids L=pursed lips	O=obese S=stout L=slender	A=arms L=legs		L=loincloth C=collar P=pectoral E=ear H=headdress B=back O=other	(pedestal or conical)	
SUCHITEPEQUEZ								
Chocolá Mon. 30	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A		E/B?	?	
San Antonio Suchitepéquez potbelly 1	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/L		C:/E:/B?	X	
San Antonio Suchitepéquez potbelly 2	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/L		C:/E:/B?	X	
San Antonio Suchitepéquez potbelly 3	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/L		C/E:/B?	X	
PETEN								
Tikal Misc. Stone 82	B	NV	O	A/L	NV	L:/B/O		
Grupo Santa Fe Misc. Mon. 167	B/H	J	O	A/L	?	C/B		
Chanchich II potbelly 1	B	NV	O	A/L	NV	NV		
Chanchich II potbelly 2	?	?/?:/?:/?:	?	?/?:	?	?		?
Naranjo NREM-58 potbelly	B	?/?:/?:/?:	?	?/?:	?	L/O		?
La Tractorada potbelly	?	?/?:/?:/?:	?	?/?:	?			?
El Jobal potbelly	?	?/?:/?:/?:	?	?/?:	?			?
San Bartolo potbelly	B/H	J/NV/NV/ NV	O	X/?		L:/C/B/O		
UNPROVENIENCED <i>(Guatemala)</i>								
Barbier-Mueller Mus. potbelly	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/L		C/B?		
Mus. Popol Vuh standing potbelly	B/H	J	O	A		C/E:/H/ B:/O	X	
Priv. coll. peg sculpture potbelly	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/?		L:/E:/B:/O?	X	
EL SALVADOR								
Santa Leticia Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P	O	A	X	E		
Santa Leticia Mon. 2	B/H	J/C/P	O	A	X	E		
Santa Leticia Mon. 3	B/H	J/C/P	O	A	X	E		
Chalchuapa Mon. 7	B/H	J/C/P	S	A			X	
Tapalshucut Norte potbelly	B/H	J/L	L				X	
Teopán Island potbelly	B/H	J/C/P	O	A/L	X	H/O?		
HONDURAS								
Copán potbelly (CPN 46)	B	NV	O	A		C/P/B/O		
MEXICO								
TLAXCALA								
Tlaxcala Escultura femenina potbelly	B/H	J	O	A/L		L:/C/H/ B/O		
Tlaxcala Escultura asexuada potbelly	B/H	J	O	A/L		L:/B/O		
CHIAPAS								
Tiltepec Mon. 1	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A/L		H/B/O		
Tiltepec Mon. 23	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A		B?		
Tiltepec Mon. 24	B/H	J	S	A/L		L/E/H/ B:/O		

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

	Form	Face	Body	Limbs	Navel	Adornment	Base	Notes
	B=body H=head	J=jowls C=closed eyes P=puffy lids L=pursed lips	O=obese S=stout L=slender	A=arms L=legs		L=loincloth C=collar P=pectoral E=ear H=headdress B=back O=other	(pedestal or conical)	
Tiltepec Mon. 25	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A/L		L/P/E/H/ B?/O		
Tiltepec Mon. 26	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A/L		L/E/H/B/O		crossed arms
Tiltepec Mon. 27	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A/L		L/E/H/B/O		crossed arms
Tiltepec Mon. 28	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A/L		L/E/H/ B?/O		crossed arms
Tiltepec Mon. 33	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A/L		E/H/O		
Tiltepec Mon. 34	B/H	J/C/P/L	S	A/L		L/H/B?/O		crossed arms
Tiltepec potbelly, Tonalá Casa Cultural	B/H	J	S					
Tzutzuculi Mon. 10	H	L				E/H/B?/O		
Colonia Alvaro Obregón potbelly	B	NV	S	A/L		C/B	X	
La Perseverancia potbelly	B	J/L	O	A/L		P/O		
Arriaga potbelly	B/H	J/L	O	A/L		C/P/H/B		
Tonalá Cerro Bernal potbelly	B/H	J/L	S					
Tonalá Casa Cultural sculpture 1	B/H	NV	O	A/?				
Tonalá Casa Cultural sculpture 2	B/H	J/L	O	A/L		E/H/O	X?	chin strap
Izapa Mon. 70	B/H	J	S	A/L		E?		
VERACRUZ								
Tres Zapotes Mon. L	B/H	J/P	S	A/?			X	
Jardín del Baluarte potbelly	B/H	J	O	A/L	?			
Polvaredas potbelly	B/H	J/C/P	S	A/L		C?/P/E/H/ B?/O?		
Veracruz City potbelly	B	NV	S	A/L	?	NV		
Nopiloa potbelly	B/H	J/C	S	A/?	X	L?/E?/H/ B?/O	X	
Antigua, Veracruz potbelly	B/H	J	S	A/NV	NV		?	
Manlio Fabio Altamurano potbelly	B/H	J/L?	S	A/L		L/P/O		
GUERRERO								
Teopantecuanitlan potbelly	B/H	J	O	A/L	?	B/O		

site. Monument 12, a heavily eroded potbelly, was found in a spring 1,200 m southeast of the site center (Popenoe de Hatch 1989: 25). As is worth reiterating, both Shook (1971: 75) and Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 25) cautioned that the locations of these monuments may reflect repositioning in ancient and modern times, so not too much should be made of these configurations.

The most prominent features of the Monte Alto potbellies and massive heads are their jowly cheeks and closed eyes. All five of the massive heads feature heavy

cheeks and closed eyes; three of the five (Monuments 7, 8, and 10) also have distinctly puffy eyelids. Their faces are rendered rather schematically (Monuments 1 and 2 somewhat less so), with a triangular area defined for the nose and mouth through a deeply furrowed brow at the top and vertical creases that extend down and outward to the chin, which is framed by fleshy cheeks. Stylized ears are rendered on all of the heads, and ear ornaments are worn by Monuments 1, 2, and 7. As Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 27) observed, the heads are well adapted to the

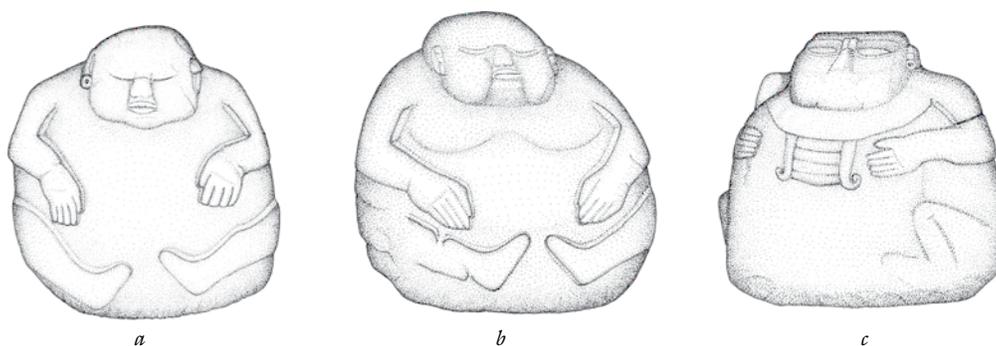


Figure 4.3. Monte Alto potbellies: (a) Monument 4; (b) Monument 5; (c) Monument 6. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

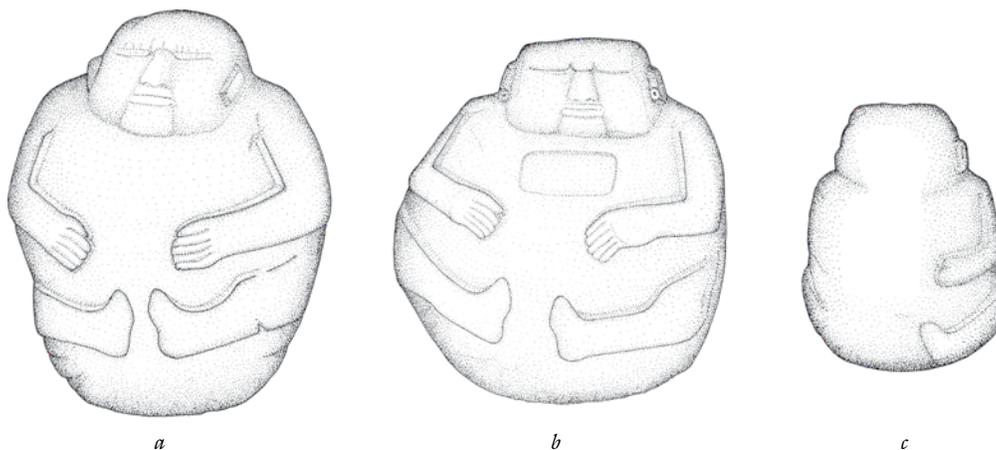


Figure 4.4. Monte Alto potbellies: (a) Monument 9; (b) Monument 11; (c) Monument 12. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

natural form of the boulders and range in size from 91 to 147 cm in height and from 102 to 200 cm in width. The extraordinary depth of several of these heads, between 88 and 185 cm, is well illustrated in a photo of Monument 7 taken by George Stuart (see Fig. 8.3) during a visit to Monte Alto in 1969.

Of the Monte Alto potbellies, all six have wraparound arms and legs, although the legs of Monument 6 are bent at the knees as if squatting. They all also display swollen faces, with Monuments 4, 5, 9, and 11 portraying closed eyes; bulging eyelids are featured on Monuments 4, 5, and 11. The eyelids of Monument 9 are somewhat less bulbous, and Monument 12 is too effaced to distinguish. The eyes of Monument 6 are handled differently and may in fact be open, although they retain the fatty eyelids of the other monuments. Interestingly, all six of the Monte Alto potbellies lack navels. While Girard (1968), Popenoe de Hatch (1989), and Rodas (1993) provided detailed discussions of many of the distinguishing features of the Monte Alto monuments, here I wish to emphasize the consistent handling of the facial features. Of the preserved

potbellies and massive heads (not including Monument 12, which is effaced), all ten have distinctly jowly cheeks, nine have closed eyes, and eight have eyelids that range from slightly to unambiguously puffy.

Two related monuments, both freestanding heads that bear a close resemblance to the monumental heads from Monte Alto, were published by Chinchilla (2001–2002: figs. 4, 5). The first, 61 cm in height, bears the typical distended features and closed eyes but possesses a more conical and pointy head (Fig. 4.7a). Its pursed lips compare closely to those of Finca Sololá Monument 1 (discussed later) and mark another departure from the otherwise Monte Alto-like features of this head. The second monumental head is from the Finca Costa Brava, La Democracia, Escuintla (Fig. 4.7b). It is 48 cm in height and possesses sagging cheeks, closed swollen eyelids, and unusual vertical striations between the eyes, as if from a furrowed brow. It bears a close resemblance to Monte Alto Monument 10; however, as Chinchilla (2001–2002: fig. 13) observed, the back of its head is adorned with a headband composed of a geometric



Figure 4.5. Monte Alto monumental heads: (a) Monument 1 (photo by Michael Love); (b) Monument 2 (photo by author); (c) Monument 7 (photo by Juan Pablo Rodas, courtesy of the Dirección General del Patrimonio Cultural y Natural del Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes).

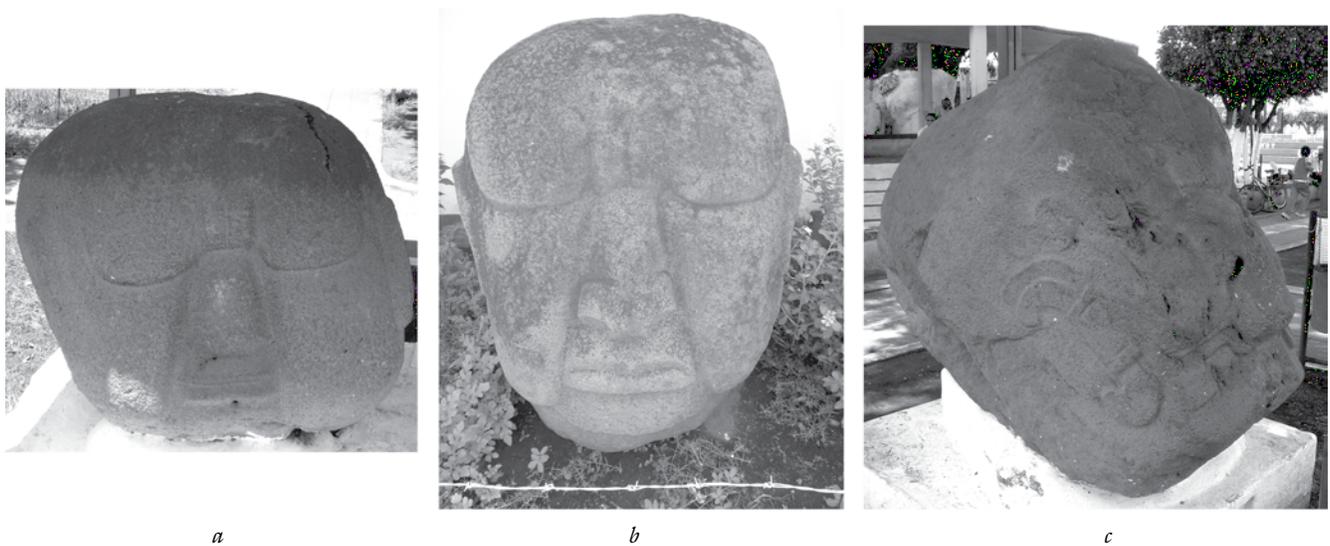


Figure 4.6. Monte Alto monumental heads: (a) Monument 8; (b) Monument 10; (c) Monument 3. Photos by author.

pattern of alternating vertical, horizontal, and diagonal bands, and two circles (Fig. 4.7c). This design compares to that of carved decorative bands on other Late Preclassic monuments that I identified as textile representations (Guernsey 2006a).

Also within the department of Escuintla, a number of monuments, including a niche figure, several plain stelae, one potbelly, and a related sculpture, were documented at Los Cerritos Sur, located on the banks of the Río Guacalate, which connected the Guatemalan Highlands and sites such as Urías to the Pacific Coast (Bove 2005: 97). Bove (2011: 113) described Los Cerritos Sur as one of the largest regional Middle to Terminal Formative centers in the department of Escuintla strategically located to control commercial movement to and from the central Guatemala highlands and the important El Chayal and

San Martín Jilotepeque obsidian sources. It had, as Bove (2005: 100) documented, a significantly higher density of obsidian than any other site during this period in the central Escuintla region. Los Cerritos Sur Monument 1 (Fig. 4.8) (Bove 1989b: 84, fig. 86) is 74 cm tall with the closed puffy eyes and full cheeks typical of potbellies but with an unmodified lower trunk. This led Bove to identify it as a vertically tenoned sculpture that was probably designed to be erected upright in a plaza or structure, not unlike Chalchuapa Monument 27 (Anderson 1978: fig. 14c, d). The rounded head and slender body of the monument lend it a somewhat phallic appearance – comparable to Pasaco Monument 1 and the potbelly monument from Teopantecuanitlan, both discussed later. Its phallic appearance is enhanced by the distinct ridge separating the head from the body/shaft of the monument.



Figure 4.7. Monumental heads of unknown provenience: (a) unprovenienced head with pursed lips; (b) head from Finca Costa Brava, La Democracia, Escuintla, front; (c) head from Finca Costa Brava, back. Photos by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

Although Rodas (1993) did not include Los Cerritos Sur Monument 1 in his catalogue, Bove (1989b: 84) originally photographed and documented this sculpture in the backyard of a house bordering Los Cerritos Sur. However, he observed on a subsequent visit to the site that the monument was missing and that “the new occupants of the house know nothing of its whereabouts.” It is now located in the town of La Democracia in front of the Rubén Chévez van Dorne Museum. Los Cerritos Sur Monument 3 (Fig. 4.9a) is a small potbelly, 80 cm in height (Bove 1989b: 84, fig. 91; Rodas 1993: fig. 8). The face is quite eroded, yet jowly cheeks are clearly visible and the vestiges of what appear to be closed and fatty eyelids are recognizable. It possesses wraparound arms but lacks legs and, instead, rests on a rounded base.

Other potbellies from the La Gomera region of Escuintla portray the same heavy cheeks and closed eyes with distended lids. These include Giralda Monuments 1 (104 cm height) and 2 (170 cm height) from Finca Giralda, Puerto San José, both of which have fat stomachs and wraparound arms (Fig. 4.9b and c). The legs of Monument 1 are crossed, and it is notable for its defined pectorals that are drooping and V-shaped. Monument 2 lacks comparable legs and an obvious base. Rodas (1993: 5) observed that Monument 2 retained traces of red paint over various parts of its body, and such rare evidence provides a tantalizing glimpse of how these sculptures may have appeared in the ancient past. It reminds us, too, of how many clues to the meaning of these potbellies may have, quite literally, faded with time.

For purposes of clarification, it is essential to note that Giralda Monument 1 appears in Parsons (1986) and Richardson (1940) attributed to Obero, a town located 12 km to the east of Giralda (Bove 2011). As Bove (1989b: 85; also see Bove 1993a: 145) explained, Shook (1949: n. 2) reported that several stone sculptures had been moved from an unidentified archaeological site near Obero at some point before 1949.⁴ Bove eventually identified the site from which they had come, christened it Giralda, and located additional monuments.

In the same La Gomera region, San Antonio La Gomera Monument 1 (64 cm height) (Fig. 4.9d) has wraparound arms, crossed legs, and somewhat effaced eyes that Rodas (1993: 5) believed to be peering upward, although closed lids may be indicated. It is unusual for its clasped hands, which are held beneath its chin.⁵ As Rodas (1993: 5) described, Girard (1968) encountered the decapitated body of this monument in San Antonio, while the head was found on a neighboring finca. Bove (2005: 102, 2011) suggested that San Antonio was the probable capital of a zone that encompassed Giralda and several other small sites, given the similar architectural attributes at each. The concentration of potbellies within this La Gomera region of Escuintla is noteworthy, particularly in light of the fact that there is considerable stylistic variation between them.

Farther to the west in La Gomera, but outside of the proposed San Antonio political sphere, is Monument 1 from Finca Bonampak (Fig. 4.10a) (Bove 1989b: 85; Rodas 1993: fig. 4). Monument 1 is fragmentary, with only the head and part of one shoulder remaining, but



Figure 4.8. Los Cerritos Sur Monument 1. Photo by author.

its jowly cheeks and closed puffy eyes are preserved. The ears are rendered simply as rectangles, and it is unclear whether they constitute stylized ears or adornments. Another monument from the La Gomera region, Finca Nueva Monument 1 (64 cm height) (Fig. 1.5), possesses the typical sagging cheeks and closed swollen eyes. Its neckless head tilts backward so that its face gazes upward. This is visually emphasized by curvilinear ears that also tip back so as to be nearly horizontal. Its hands, with carefully delineated fingers, are somewhat atypical and rest on its stout upper chest. It does not possess wraparound legs, but instead rests on a rounded base. Rodas (1993: 14) noted that Finca Nueva Monument 1 was moved to the Rubén Chévez van Dorne Museo Arqueológico in La Democracia without documentation of its original location (cf. Chévez van Dorne 1999: 35). Even farther west, outside of La Gomera, Monuments 1, 2, and 3 (Fig. 4.10b–d) from Finca Sololá, Tiquisate, are all quite small, ranging from 42 to 78 cm in height. All three potbellies feature heavy cheeks and closed, bulging eyes. Monument 1 displays lips pursed in a perfect “O,” while those of Monuments 2 and 3 appear to form a more oval shape. None of the three is particularly obese, and Monuments 1 and 2 wear collars.

Within the vicinity of the Cotzumalguapa Nuclear Zone, Chinchilla (1996: 108–109, 2001–2002: fig. 3) reported a 79-cm-tall potbelly from Finca San Antonio La Paz with arms wrapped around its protruding belly. The same jowly features and prominent eyelids characterize Concepción-Cementerio Monument 1 (100 cm height), Concepción Monument 3 (90 cm height), Bilbao/Concepción Monument 46 (128 cm height), and Bilbao/Concepción Monument 47 (123 cm height) (Fig. 4.11a–d).⁶ Concepción Monument 3 and Bilbao/Concepción Monuments 46 and 47 are notable for their elaborate collars with triangular designs, as well as carefully rendered earspools; Concepción Monument 3 wears additional flaps or ornamentation over its shoulders, and Bilbao/Concepción Monuments 46 and 47 both have a form of head decoration that resembles a sagittal crest or “mohawk” hairstyle in which a single strip or lock of hair runs vertically over the top of the skull. A similar crest or hairstyle appears on La Venta Monument 5 (de la Fuente 1977: fig. 65) and clearly endured as an attribute for some time, given the presence of a similar motif on an anthropomorphic stone ax attributed to Classic-period Central Veracruz (Tate 1993: plate 18). Closed, bulbous eyes and cheeks also characterize Bilbao Monument 58 (132 cm height) (Fig. 4.12a). According to Parsons (1969: 54), Monument 58 was found on its side at the base of a dressed stone stairway (F-14). He concluded (Parsons 1969: 122), “Evidently this Preclassic style sculpture was being reused in front of a Late Classic stairway.” It is interesting that Monument 58, like some potbellies at Takalik Abaj, was integrated with other stylistically and temporally distinct monuments into an area of the site that Parsons (1969: 44) designated a “Monument Plaza” because of its great concentration of sculpture. Yet as Chinchilla (1996: 109) elaborated, “Whether this represents an intentional reference to the past, a revival of an ancient cult on the part of Late Classic inhabitants of Bilbao, or rather an expansion of a still fully functional component of coastal ideology cannot be determined.”

Two more potbellies from this region of Escuintla possess similar features, yet have open eyes. Concepción-Anexo Colorado Monument 2 (75 cm height) (Fig. 4.12b) has small, oval, apparently open eyes. The contours of drooping cheeks are visible on another potbelly, El Bálsamo, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa Monument 1 (90 cm height) (Fig. 4.12c).⁷ The face is badly eroded, yet one can detect some facial features in photos that appear in both Parsons (1969: plate 54a) and Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1978: fig. 3); they are quite curious and may indicate that the monument was recarved at some point.

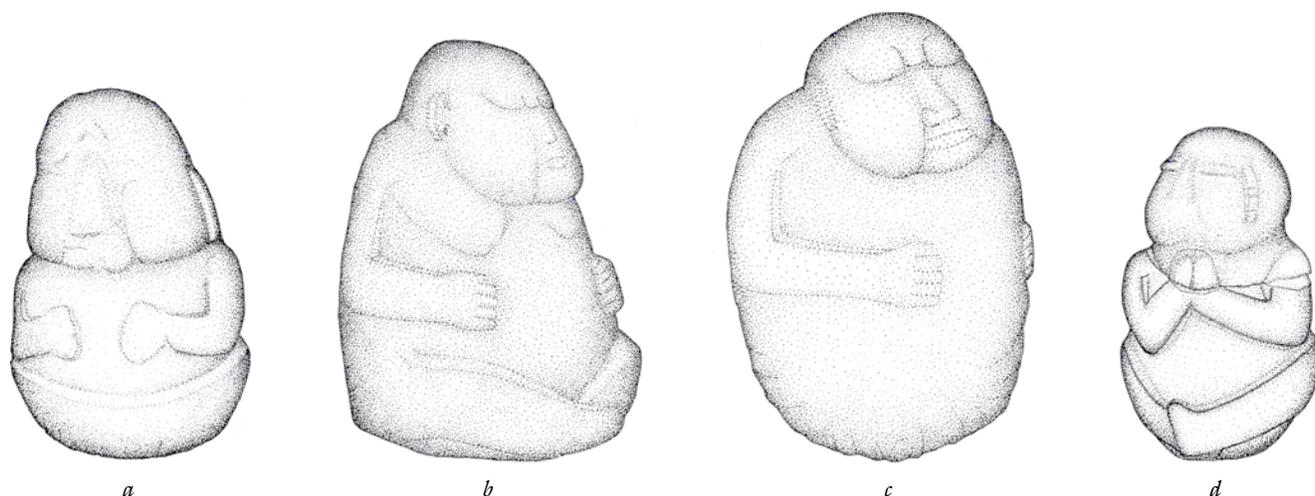


Figure 4.9. Esquintla potbellies: (a) Los Cerritos Sur Monument 3; (b) Giralda Monument 1; (c) Giralda Monument 2; (d) San Antonio La Gomera Monument 1. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

It is significant that, of the thirty-one documented potbellies or related monuments from Esquintla, all appear to have jowly facial features, and twenty-six possess closed eyes, usually with puffy eyelids. There is more variation in their bodies, with two (Los Cerritos Sur Monument 1 and Finca Sololá Monument 2) being relatively slender and seven more being thickly built but certainly not obese (see Table 4.1). This indicates a striking consistency throughout the Esquintla corpus in terms of facial features, with the vast majority sharing the specific characteristics of full cheeks, closed eyes, and swollen eyelids. Other facial features that merit attention are the distinctly pursed lips of the three monuments from Finca Sololá and the one unprovenienced monument with Monte Alto-like features (Fig. 4.7a).⁸

Guatemala: Jutiapa

Four potbellies have been documented in the department of Jutiapa, all from the municipality of Pasaco, which contains the site of La Nueva (Chinchilla 1996: 492–498; Estrada Belli 2002: 110; Rodas 1993: 15–16; J. Scott 1998: fig. 5; Termer 1948). Of those recorded, only Pasaco Monument 1 (100 cm height) is complete, and it possesses several surprising traits, including quadrangular eyes, a squared upper lip from which dangles a tongue, a somewhat rectilinearly rendered loincloth, and what Rodas (1993: 15) described as a squared cape on its back (Fig. 4.13a). It has a wide and heavy face, less jowly than the monuments from Esquintla, and lacks a prominent belly despite the clearly rendered navel above a horizontal band around its waist. J. Scott (1988: 29) suggested that the odd handling of the head and shaft of the body lent Monument 1 a phallic appearance. Pasaco Monument 2

(56 cm height) (Fig. 4.13b) has an unusually rectilinear mouth, although in this case the lips appear to be pursed in a manner reminiscent, though more stylized, of the potbellies from Finca Sololá; its eyes are almond shaped and apparently open, and its face is wide and heavy. The head is completely missing from Pasaco Monument 3 (Fig. 4.13c).⁹ The torso of Monument 3, like that of Monument 2, is broad and stout, and both possess navels. Estrada Belli (1999: fig. 10) located a fourth monument on the acropolis of the site of La Nueva during a regional survey in 1996; the monument shares some features with the potbellies. It is unusually columnar, with a conical base. One can see the arms and legs of a figure wrapped around the column, which appears to constitute the torso of the figure; the monument is broken above the arms, so no neck or head is visible.¹⁰

Rodas (1993: fig. 52) recorded a small, 6.4-cm-tall figurine made of basalt that was collected from La Nueva during a reconnaissance of the area in 1984 (Fig. 4.14). It shares several characteristics with the potbellies, including droopy cheeks, closed eyes, and wraparound arms, and its body terminates in a conical base. It diverges somewhat from the larger potbellies in the tilting or turning of the head, the lack of legs, and the hands clasped over the belly. The date of this figurine cannot be determined, but its formal relationship to the potbellies is noteworthy. Rodas (1993: figs. 53–59), in fact, illustrated a series of small (5–18.8 cm tall) basalt figurines that also share a superficial resemblance to more monumental stone potbellies. All of them, in private collections, lack provenience. Additional stone figurines, again without provenience, rest in an unlabeled vitrine in the Rubén Chévez van Dorne Museum in La Democracia, Esquintla.

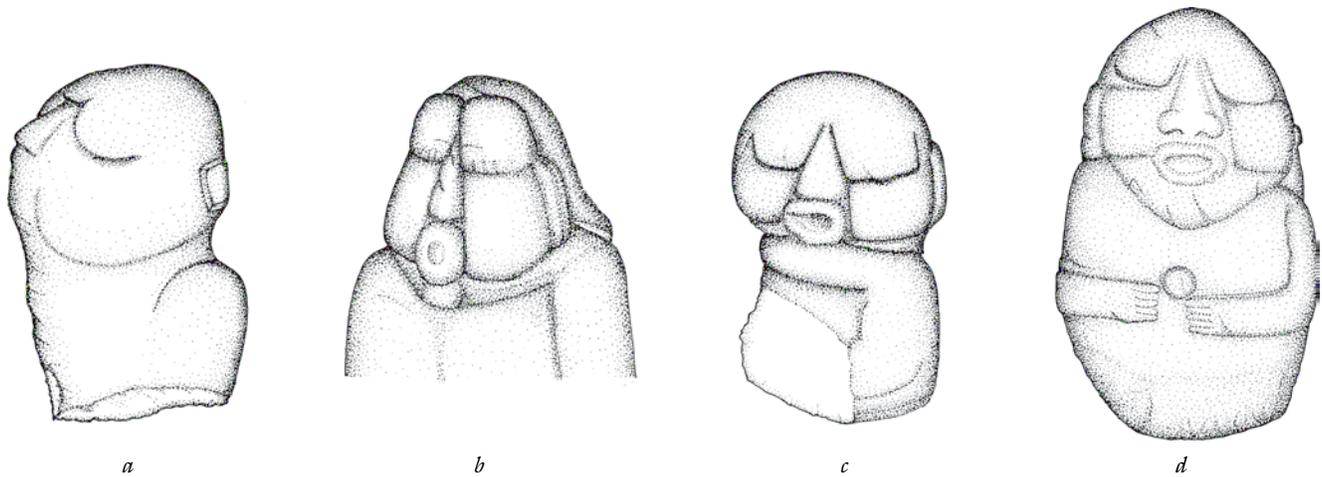


Figure 4.10. Potbellies from La Gomera and Tiquisate, Guatemala: (a) Finca Bonampak Monument 1; (b) Finca Sololá Monument 1; (c) Finca Sololá Monument 2; (d) Finca Sololá Monument 3. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

Guatemala: Retalhuleu

After Escuintla, the department of Retalhuleu has the greatest quantity of potbelly sculptures, with fourteen of the twenty attributed to the site of Takalik Abaj.¹¹ Takalik Abaj Monument 2 (163 cm height) (Fig. 4.15a) appears to have the typical heavy facial features in spite of considerable damage and erosion to the head; the chin droops down onto the figure's chest in an odd way. Monument 3 (117 cm height) (Fig. 4.15b) is a jowly potbelly with closed eyes and thick lids. Monument 12 (Fig. 4.16a) is an eroded, headless potbelly with a paunchy stomach originally published by Thompson (1943: 112a), who recorded it at the Hacienda Santa Margarita. Today, Monument 12 is attached to a base that resulted from the sculpture having been cemented to a corner of a driveway at Santa Margarita (Graham 1980). Monument 40 (140 cm height) was found just east of Mound 28 (Fig. 4.15c). It possesses fat cheeks and closed eyes, and while the eyelids are not particularly large, they are accentuated by heavy bags beneath them. The back of the head has two circular depressions or concentric rings; this miscellaneous decoration may represent a headdress or vestiges of an earlier carving as Graham (1981a: 172) suggested.¹² Monument 41 (Fig. 4.16b) is a small potbelly that was found northeast of Monument 40. Half of its head is missing, but the remaining portions reveal the typical bloated features and closed eyes. Monument 46 (Fig. 4.16c) is another potbelly missing its head (Graham 1981a: fig. 10).

Takalik Abaj Monument 58 (Fig. 4.17a) was found on Terrace 3, Structure 7, adjacent to Stela 50, which was excavated in 1980 by Michael Love. Monument 58 sits on a very broad and well-defined base that is comparable to that of Monument 2, and its thick features are

discernible despite severe erosion to the face.¹³ The surface area of the stone frames the face and forms a semi-circular plane, which is difficult to interpret. According to Love (personal communication 2009), Monument 58 was accompanied by a cache that contained two small sculptures, Miscellaneous Sculptures 399 (Fig. 4.17b) (21.5 cm length) and 400 (Fig. 4.17c) (23.5 cm length). While Miscellaneous Sculpture 399 appears to represent a small dog, Miscellaneous Sculpture 400 may depict a pizote. According to John Graham's (1980) Takalik Abaj sculpture inventory, one other small dog, Miscellaneous Sculpture 190, is known from the site. Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010b) reported that "monuments on Structure 7 were the focus of repeated dedication rituals" and that the significance of Structure 7 was underscored by the interment of a ruler by the end of the Late Preclassic period in Structure 7A (Schieber de Lavarreda 2003: 797–805; Tapy 2004). I return to the potential significance of this context for Monument 58 in Chapter 7.

Takalik Abaj Monument 69 (Fig. 4.18a) is an unusual potbelly that was positioned in front of the south side of Structure 12, probably during the Late Classic period (Michael Love, personal communication 2009). However, as Love recounted, it was positioned backward so that it faces the platform rather than looking forward toward the plaza. Its head is almost completely missing, so facial characteristics cannot be ascertained, and it is only upon close study that its original identity as a potbelly is evident. Much of its body is likewise eroded or was severely mutilated at some point in the ancient past. Its position, facing backward, is curious and suggests, among a number of possibilities, that it either carried little significance as a potbelly by the Classic period or was already so severely eroded that its orientation was not clear.

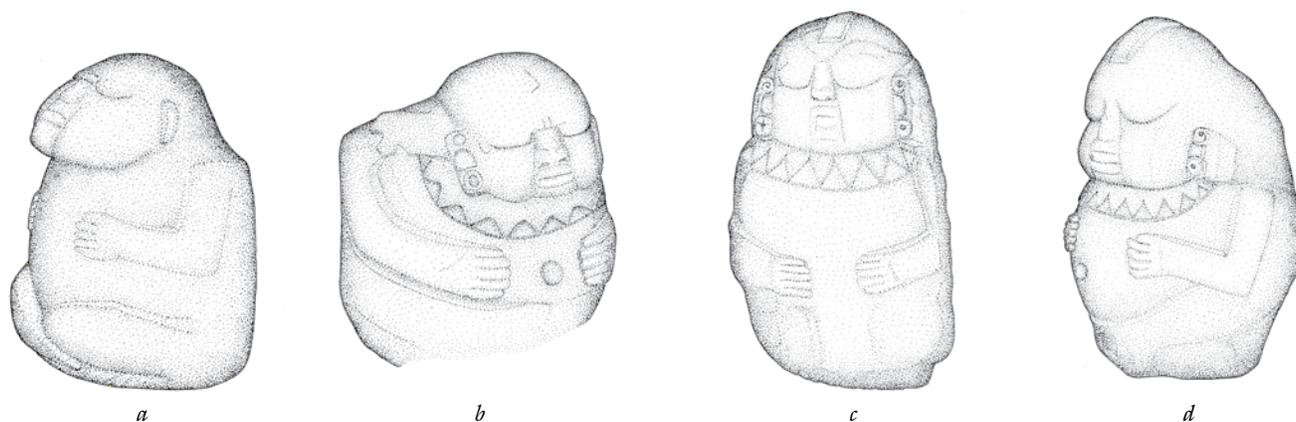


Figure 4.11. Potbellies within the vicinity of Cotzumalguapa: (a) Concepción-Cementerio Monument 1; (b) Concepción Monument 3; (c) Bilbao/Concepción Monument 46; (d) Bilbao/Concepción Monument 47. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

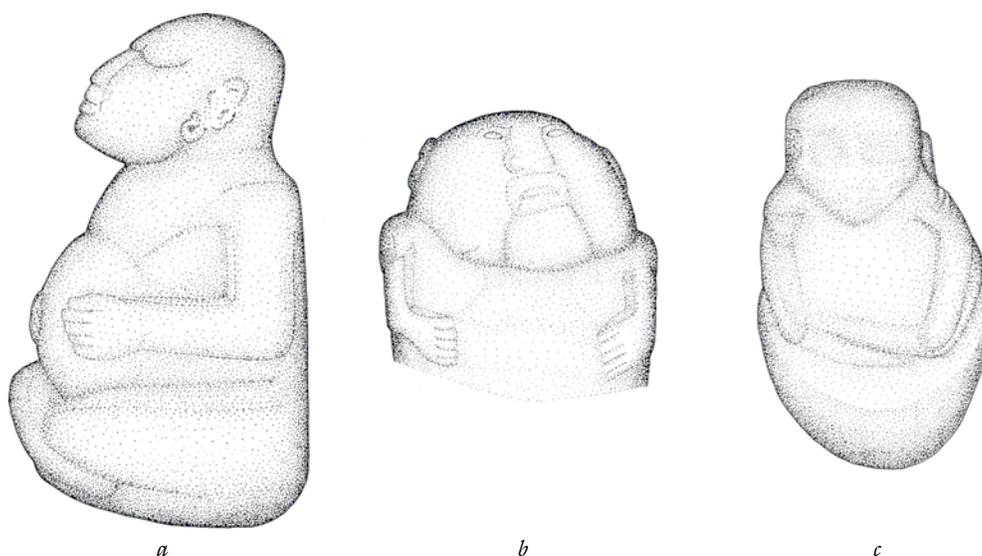


Figure 4.12. Potbellies within the vicinity of Cotzumalguapa: (a) Bilbao Monument 58; (b) Concepción-Anexo Colorado Monument 2; (c) El Bálsamo, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa Monument 1. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

Monument 94 (Fig. 4.18b) is a potbelly with stooped shoulders, arms that hang down at its sides instead of wrapping around the front of its belly, and a heavy chin that rests on its chest like Monument 2. It was placed near the northwest corner of Structure 13 and bears the typical features of sagging cheeks, closed eyes, and protruding lids (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2002: 39). Monument 179 (Fig. 4.18c) is another eroded potbelly with heavy features, a prominent stomach, slumping shoulders, and arms that hang down at its sides. Its sinewy shape compares to that of Chocolá Monument 30, discussed later. Facial features are visible despite significant effacement. The figure has a long, raised ridge for a nose and its eyes appear as recessed circles, as does the mouth, almost as if the figure is howling.

Monuments 100, 107, and 109 (Fig. 4.19a–c; also see Fig. 3.11) were found along the access to Terrace 3, with one potbelly at the base of both the east and west stairs and two at the base of the central staircase (E. García 1997; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010b: 190). On the basis of his excavations, Edgar García (1997: 169) believes the potbellies were positioned on Terrace 3 during the Late Preclassic period, where they remained throughout the site's history. Although they are eroded to some degree, bloated features are visible in all three, and their torsos range from stout to obese. Their arms partially wrap around their bellies, and the hands and fingers of Monuments 107 and 109 point downward. A fourth potbelly, Monument 113 (Fig. 4.20a), sits on this terrace farther

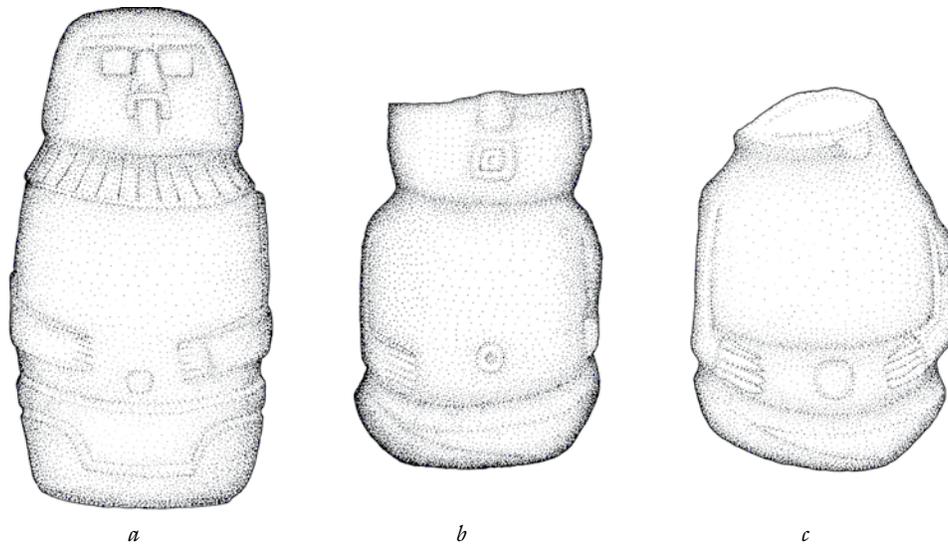


Figure 4.13. Potbellies from Pasaco, Jutiapa: (a) Monument 1; (b) Monument 2; (c) Monument 3. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

to the west; it too is quite eroded. Nonetheless, its droopy cheeks are detectable.¹⁴

Of the fourteen potbellies from Takalik Abaj, eleven have jowly features. Similar attributes characterize Monument 99 (Fig. 4.20b), a large disembodied head that is evidently related to the potbelly corpus given its bulbous cheeks and closed eyes. Like Monument 40, there are lines beneath the eyes suggestive of heavy bags. These repetitive facial qualities are significant in light of the variation in the bodies of the potbellies. While eight of the potbellies might be described as obese or very heavy, six are stout at best. Another feature exhibited by several of the Takalik Abaj potbellies (Monuments 2, 94, and 107) is downturned hands with fingers pointing toward the ground. This trait appears as well on Takalik Abaj Monument 33, a headless standing figure with a protruding belly (Rodas 1993: fig. 28), as well as on the recently discovered Monument 215/217 (Persson 2008; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010a).¹⁵ Of significance is that at least five of the Takalik Abaj potbellies sit on pedestals of various shapes. In some cases the pedestal appears to substitute for legs; in others both a pedestal and wraparound limbs are present.

The site of San Sebastián boasts four potbellies, Monuments 3, 4, 5, and 6, all of which are now located in the Museo Horacio Alejos L. in Retalhuleu (Fig. 4.21). Love (2010) suggested that San Sebastián, located approximately 20 km southeast of Takalik Abaj, may have been a subsidiary center within the Takalik Abaj political sphere. The faces of all four potbellies, in spite of erosion, indicate that they possessed the same full features as their counterparts at Takalik Abaj. Three whose faces are

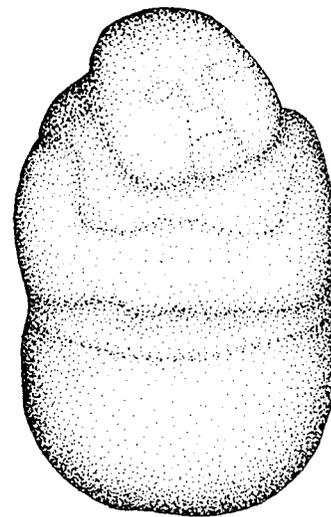


Figure 4.14. La Nueva basalt figurine. Drawing by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

somewhat less eroded (Monuments 4, 5, and 6) appear to possess closed, thick-lidded eyes. Despite being stout, only one of the figures (Monument 5) might be described as obese. The tapered body of Monument 6, which may be slightly bifurcated at the base – it is unclear whether this is a deliberately carved groove or a natural indentation in the stone – bears some resemblance to silhouette figures described by Mora-Marín (*in press*). Monument 6 is, as Love (2010) observed, the least three-dimensional of the four San Sebastián sculptures and, in my opinion, displays a sort of hybrid form that merges potbelly features with those of related small stone figurine traditions, like the silhouette figures or camahuiles, described later.

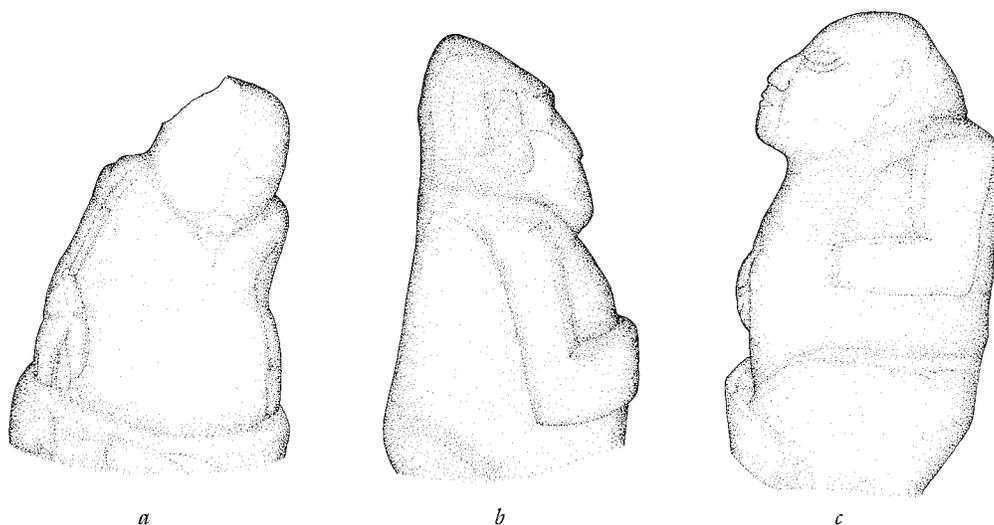


Figure 4.15. Takalik Abaj potbellies: (a) Monument 2; (b) Monument 3; (c) Monument 40. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

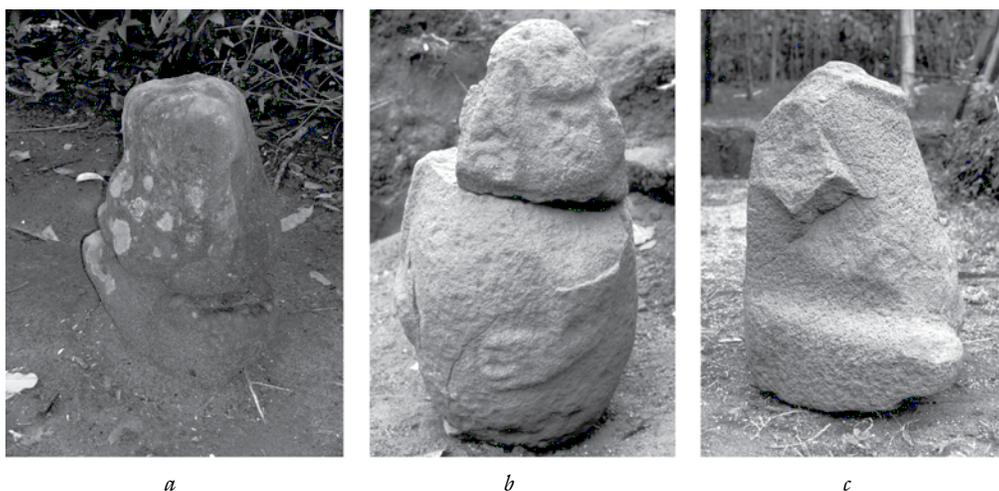


Figure 4.16. Takalik Abaj potbellies: (a) Monument 12 (photo by author); (b) Monument 41 (photo by Michael Love); (c) Monument 46 (photo by Michael Love).

The third site in Retalhuleu with potbellies is El Ujuxte. Sculpture 2 (Fig. 4.22a) is partially destroyed, and only its lower torso with stout belly and wraparound limbs is visible. Sculpture 3 (Fig. 4.22b) is more complete, with a similar body, inflated cheeks, closed eyes, and prominent lids. Each lacks wraparound legs and instead possesses a shallow, sloping pedestal. Both are less than 15 cm in height and were found, standing upright, during a surface collection of a low domestic mound in the eastern portion of El Ujuxte (Love 2010). They faced east, separated from each other by about 1.5 m on what appears to be opposite sides of a doorway. As Love (2010) observed, their talismanic position on either side of a threshold compares to the Late Preclassic locations of Monuments 100, 107, and 109 at Takalik Abaj, which

were also associated with a point of transition between Terraces 2 and 3. Although there was a Late Classic occupation at El Ujuxte, its locus was in a different part of the site, and there is no evidence of Classic-period occupation or reuse of the portion of the site where the potbellies were found (Love, personal communication 2009). The same liminality characterizes the location of the Monte Alto potbellies and monumental heads, which were positioned in various groupings along the eastern and western margins of the site; a single potbelly, Monument 11, stood alone to the north. Likewise, the three potbellies at Santa Leticia, El Salvador, were placed in a line on a terrace leading to the ceremonial center of the site. Although the contexts of the Monte Alto potbellies may not represent their original, Preclassic locations,

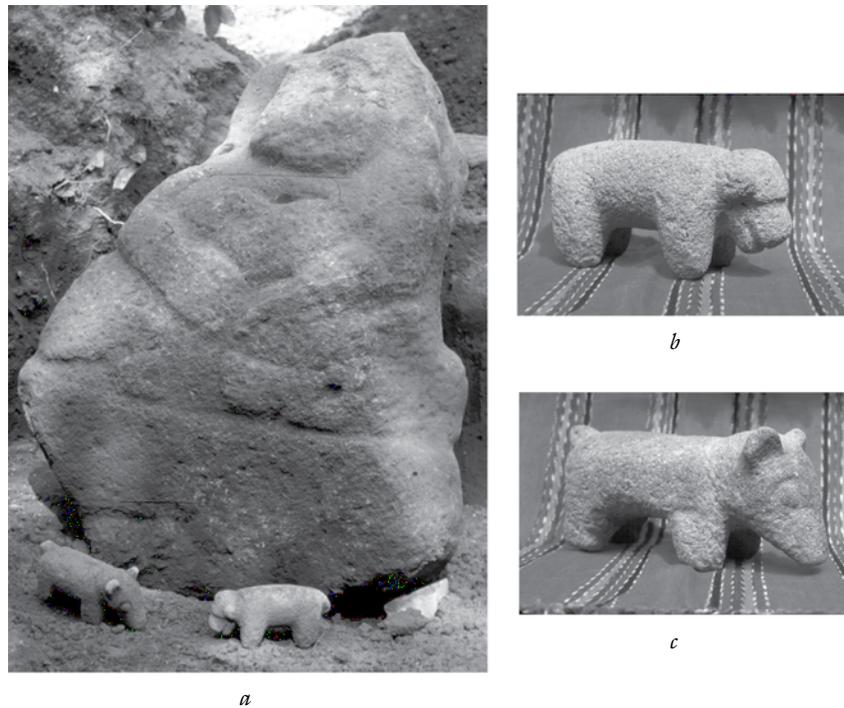


Figure 4.17. Takalik Abaj potbelly and associated cache: (a) Monument 58 and cache contents; (b) Miscellaneous Sculpture 399; (c) Miscellaneous Sculpture 400. Photos by Michael Love.

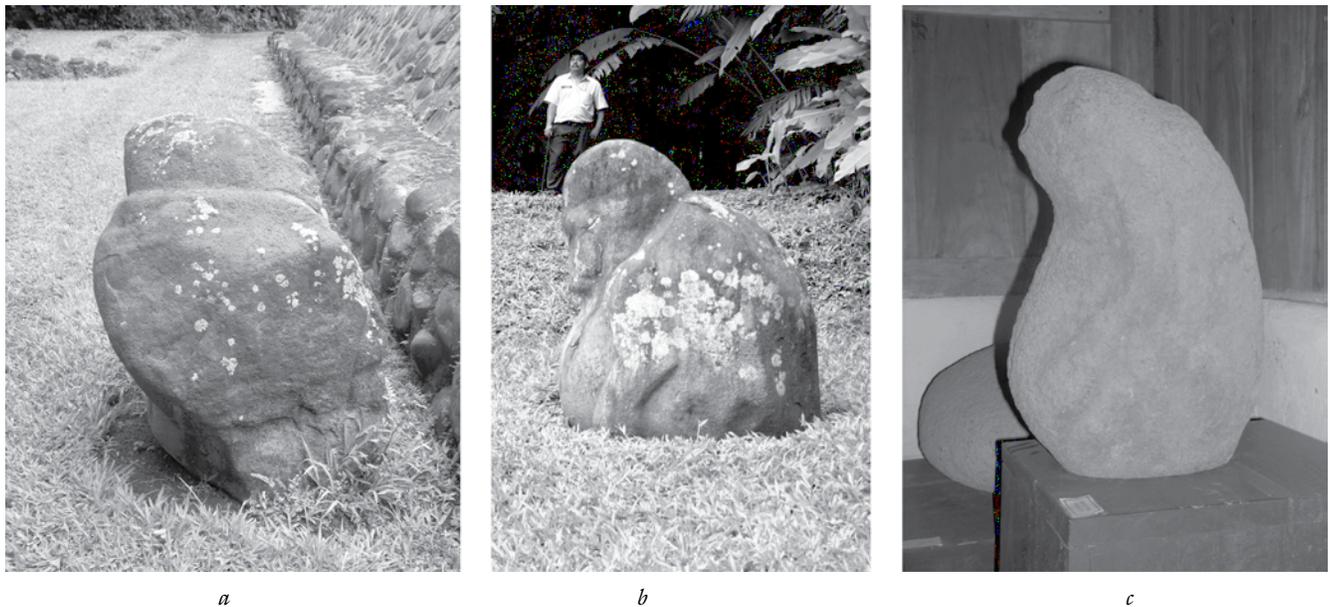


Figure 4.18. Takalik Abaj potbellies: (a) Monument 69; (b) Monument 94; (c) Monument 179. Photos by author.

the consistently transitional positions of potbellies at several sites are worth noting.

Of the twenty-one potbellies or potbelly-related monuments documented in Retalhuleu, eighteen have heads and visible facial features. Of these, seventeen possess jowly cheeks, eleven have visibly closed eyes, and nine

have clearly puffy eyelids; in the others, such details are not distinguishable because of damage or erosion. Only about nine of the twenty Retalhuleu potbellies with bodies can be accurately described as obese; the other eleven possess what I would describe as thick, though certainly not corpulent, torsos. Thus, in Retalhuleu, the trait of



Figure 4.19. Takalik Abaj potbellies: (a) Monument 100; (b) Monument 107; (c) Monument 109. Photos by Michael Love.

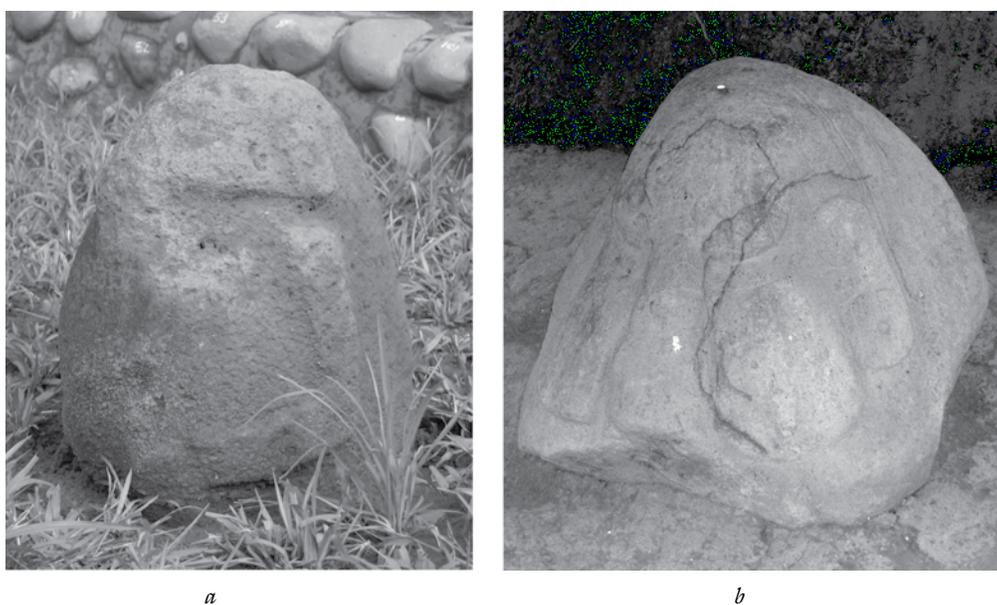


Figure 4.20. Potbelly and related monument from Takalik Abaj: (a) Monument 113 (photo by Michael Love); (b) Monument 99 (photo by author).

swollen facial features is the most dominant attribute and more consistently rendered than an obese belly.

Guatemala: Guatemala

A significant group of potbellies has been credited to the site of Kaminaljuyu (Parsons 1986: 42), although some authors (Rodas 1993; Chinchilla 2001–2002) have questioned several of these attributions, preferring to list

their provenience more generally as the department of Guatemala. Kaminaljuyu Monuments 3, 4, 6, and 66 (Fig. 4.23a–d), Monument 57 (Fig. 4.24), Monument 58 and Piezas A, B, and C (Fig. 4.25a–d) are characterized by heavy faces, closed eyes, and swollen lids, though less so in the case of Monument 4. Heads are lacking on Monuments 7 and 39 (Fig. 4.26a and b), Monument 41 (Fig. 4.27a) and Pieza D (Fig. 4.27b), and the faces of Pieza E (Fig. 4.27c) and Monument 8 (Fig. 4.26c)

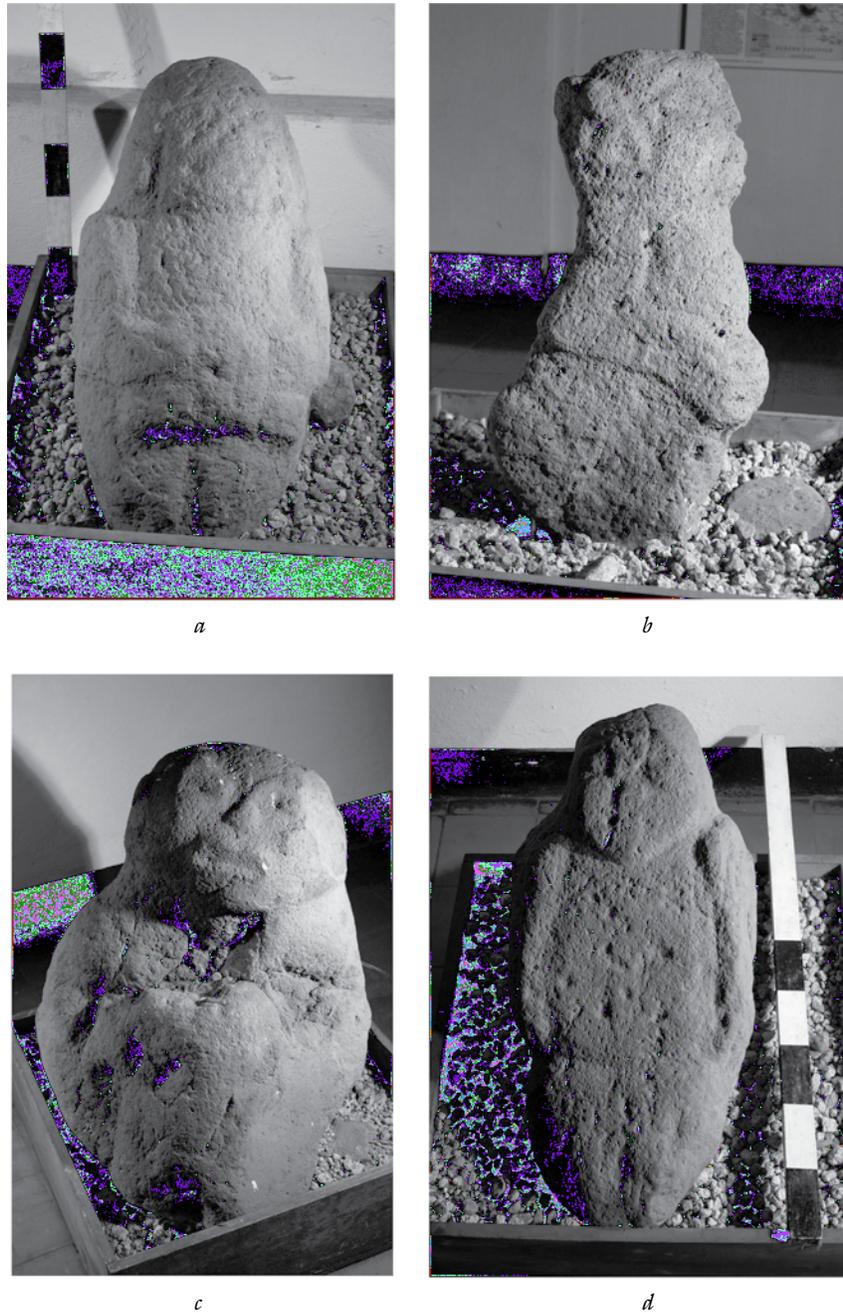


Figure 4.21. San Sebastián potbellies: (a) Monument 3; (b) Monument 4; (c) Monument 5; (d) Monument 6. Photos by Michael Love.

are somewhat effaced, making details difficult to discern beyond the distended cheeks.¹⁶ Monument 38 (Fig. 4.28) is a disembodied head that displays inflated cheeks, closed eyes, and thick lids. According to Parsons (1986: 42), the head originally was attached to a body but was reworked at a later date. Of the seventeen potbellies attributed to Kaminaljuyu or the department of Guatemala more generally, ten have heads with clearly visible features, and of these ten, all display the typical jowly cheeks, closed eyes, and puffy eyelids.

Of the sixteen (and perhaps seventeen) potbelly or closely related monuments variously attributed to Kaminaljuyu, at least eleven wear clearly visible collars, making this a more consistent feature of potbellies at Kaminaljuyu than at other sites. Six, although certainly not the majority, have clearly rendered navels. The tilting head of Monument 4 is unusual but compares to that of the stone figurine from La Nueva (Fig. 4.14).

The scale of the potbellies attributed to Kaminaljuyu varies considerably: Monument 4 measures 118 cm in

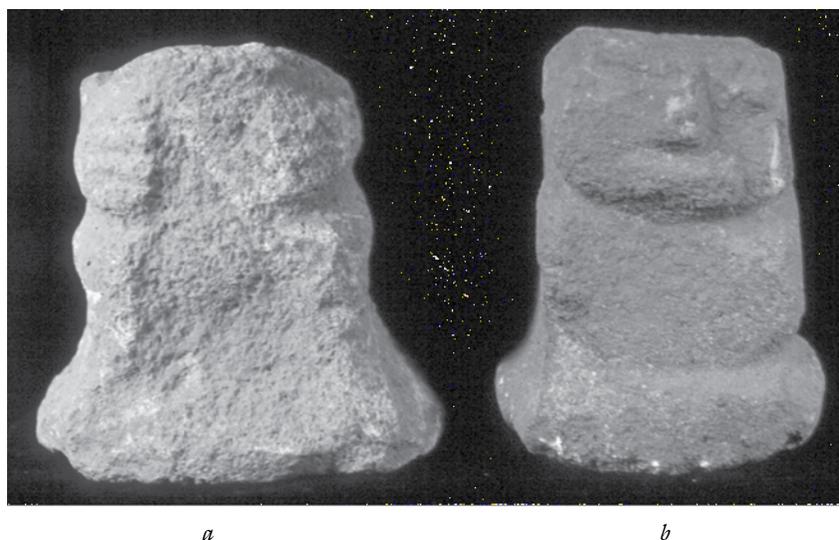


Figure 4.22. El Ujuxte potbellies: (a) Sculpture 2; (b) Sculpture 3. Photos by Michael Love.

height and Pieza E only 17 cm.¹⁷ They also diverge noticeably in terms of girth, with several, such as Monument 7, being quite corpulent, and others, such as Monuments 57 and 58 and Piezas A–E, more slender. Pieza C is particularly unique, as the figure is not freestanding but is, instead, attached to a vertically projecting piece of stone in the back. Rodas (1993: 25) interpreted this as a head-dress, but it extends down behind the figure to its base, making this suggestion unlikely in my opinion. Rather, Pieza C appears to have been conceptualized differently, as a partially attached sculpture instead of as a purely freestanding potbelly. The framing panel of stone behind the head of Pieza C recalls, to some degree, the similar uncarved plane of stone that frames the face of Takalik Abaj Monument 58 (Fig. 4.17a).

The site of Kaminaljuyu lends significant insight into the reuse of potbelly sculptures. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Maudslay (1889–1902: vol. 2, 39, plate 75a) reported two potbellies that had been repositioned as sentries beside the gated entry of a home outside Guatemala City (Fig. 2.1). This reuse is also well documented in the more ancient past. Lothrop (1926: fig. 57) and Parsons (1986: 42) noted that potbelly Monuments 3 and 4 were placed in an alignment along the southern edge of the Lower Plaza of the Palangana during the Late Classic period along with Monument 5, a feline-headed sculpture that bears a formal relationship to the potbellies (see Fig. 6.2a). Recent excavations by Alvarado (2005: 498) indicate that, before construction renovations and the repositioning of these sculptures were undertaken during the Classic period, the Lower Plaza functioned as a habitational zone and included domestic refuse and two burials. Likewise, Kidder,

Jennings, and Shook (1946: figs. 14a, 133a–c) recorded that Monument 38 had been repositioned on a platform above Tomb B-1 during the Classic period.

A series of other sculptures at Kaminaljuyu share affinities with the corpus of potbelly monuments and deserve comment. Kaminaljuyu Monument 51 (Parsons 1986: fig. 133), a stone sphere approximately 35 cm in diameter with a human face carved on it, possesses somewhat pursed lips, fat cheeks, and closed eyes, although in this case the distinctly protruding eyelids are missing.¹⁸ Parsons (1986: 52) observed that Monument 51 came from a cache of several small-scale sculptures, all apparently Late Preclassic in date, which was found approximately 200 m west of Mound C-IV-8. A similar stone sphere with a more eroded face is also known from Takalik Abaj (Fig. 4.29a).¹⁹ Distinctly sagging features appear as well on Kaminaljuyu Monument 10 (Fig. 4.29b and c), a vertically tenoned block carved on four sides with human faces, although in this case the eyes of all four faces are almond shaped and open (Navarrete 1977: fig. 5; Parsons 1986: fig. 191). Interestingly, Monument 10 bears some similarities to a fragmentary monument from Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala, which displays one carved face, in this case with droopy cheeks as well as closed and bulging eyes (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: fig. 18b).

Navarrete (1977: 100, fig. 3a) discussed a small, 65-cm-tall stone sculpture from Kaminaljuyu, originally published by Girard (1962: fig. 232), which also bears some relationship to the potbellies (Fig. 4.30a).²⁰ It has simplified wraparound arms and legs, its stout stomach is covered in part by a medallion or large pectoral, and it has a ridge around its neck that may be a collar or perhaps the base of some sort of wrap covering

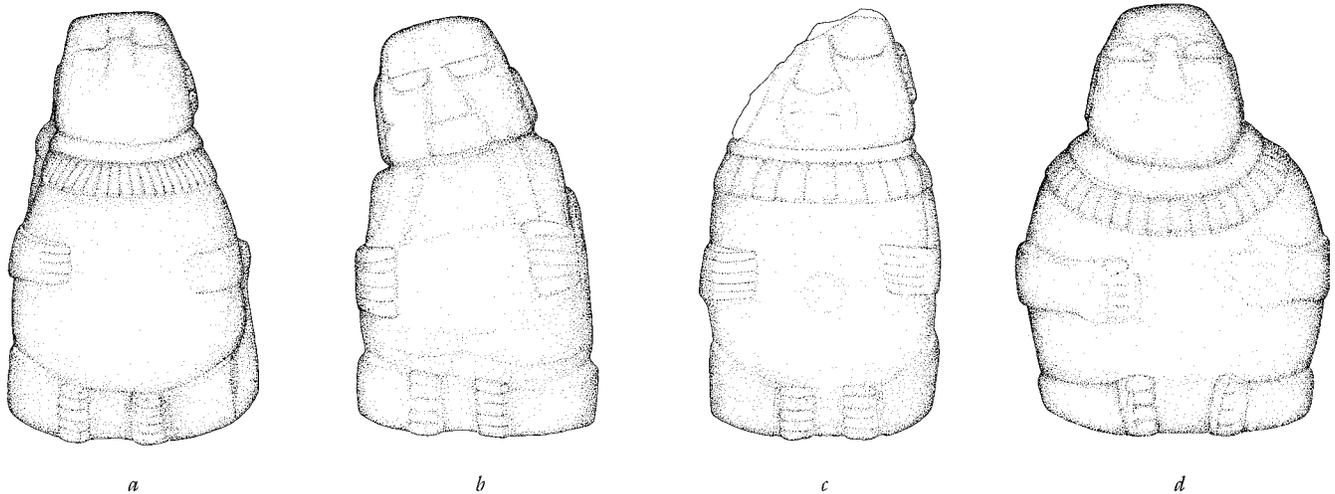


Figure 4.23. Kaminaljuyu potbellies: (a) Monument 3; (b) Monument 4; (c) Monument 6; (d) Monument 66. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

the head. Its stylized face is composed of two circular depressions for the eyes and a somewhat oval shape for the mouth, creating the sense of very simplified facial features. Navarrete (1977: 100) compared the simplified face of the figure to those of figurines found at Teotihuacan and at sites such as San Miguel Amantla in the Valley of Mexico that wear some sort of headgear or wound headband but possess similar circular eyes, as well as round or oval mouths, and also lack noses (Fig. 4.30b; also see Fig. 4.45b) (Feuchtwanger 1978: fig. 5, right; S. Scott 1994: plates 46, 156–159, 2001: plate 51, 2003; Seler 1998: vol. 6, 5, figs. 53, 88). With several of these Central Mexican figurines, it appears that the circular holes for the eyes and mouth are not simplified facial features but instead indicate the openings in a hood or facial covering of some sort (see, e.g., Barbour 1976: fig. 15; Seler 1998: vol. 6, 5, fig. 53, plate 25, 2; S. Scott 2001: plates 99–105, 2003). This led to their designation in many studies of Teotihuacan figurines as “Xipe” types on the basis of their resemblance to the later Aztec god who wears a flayed skin (e.g., Seler 1998: vol. 6, 207). Other scholars, such as von Winning (1987: vol. 1, 147–149), maintained that these Teotihuacan figures were not antecedent to the Aztec god Xipe Totec, a point taken up more recently by Sue Scott (1993: 46–50, 2003), who argued that the Teotihuacan figurines, garbed in heavily padded costumes, were better understood to be ballplayers, as suggested by a comparison to Late Classic representations in the Cotzumalguapa region of Pacific coastal Guatemala such as El Baúl Monument 35 (see Chinchilla 2009: fig. 6.14; Parsons 1969: 139, plates 55e, f). Karl Taube and Marc Zender (2009) likewise contended that the Teotihuacan figurines are closely linked to masked



Figure 4.24. Kaminaljuyu Monument 57. Photograph courtesy of the Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Guatemala.

boxers known from other regions of Mesoamerica, including Late Preclassic Dainzú, Oaxaca. As Orr (1997, 2003) and Taube and Zender (2009) demonstrated, these helmeted figures were participants in ritualized combat or a larger competitive sports complex that was closely associated with rainmaking. In a dissertation on Teotihuacan figurines, Goldsmith (2000: 57), who continued to use the designation “Xipe” for these

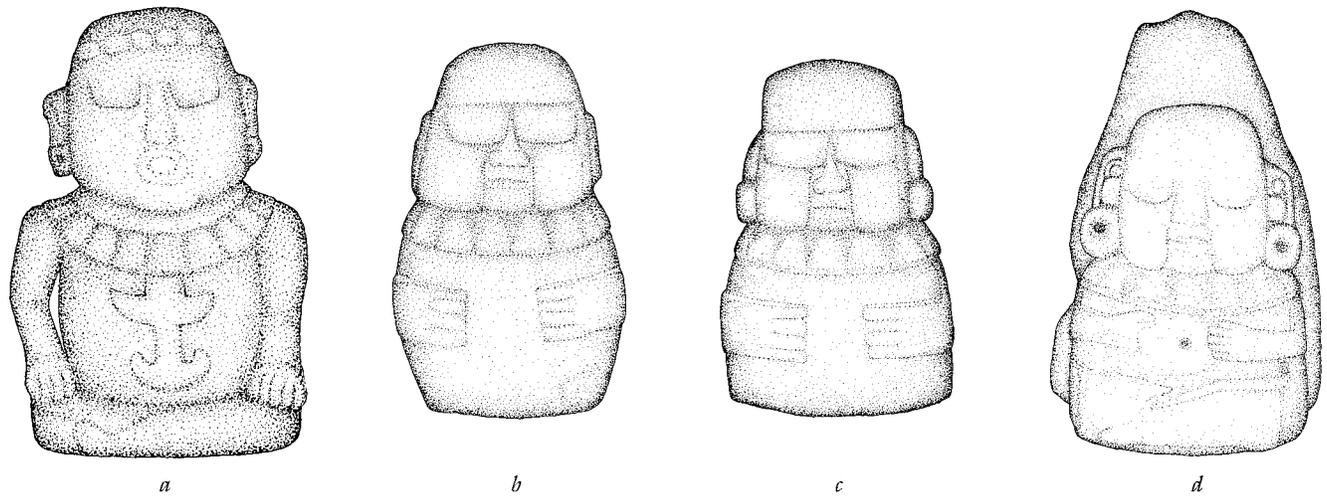


Figure 4.25. Kaminaljuyu potbellies: (a) Monument 58; (b) Pieza A; (c) Pieza B; (d) Pieza C. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.



a



b



c

Figure 4.26. Kaminaljuyu potbellies: (a) Monument 7; (b) Monument 39; (c) Monument 8. Photos by Michael Love, with the authorization of the Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala.

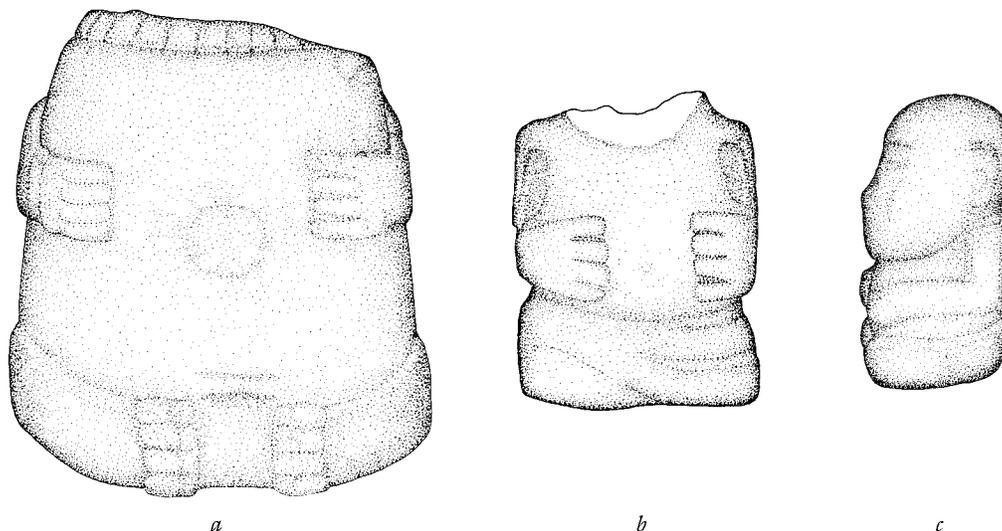


Figure 4.27. Kaminaljuyu potbellies: (a) Monument 41; (b) Pieza D; (c) Pieza E. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

figurines with simplified facial features she likened to bowling balls, reported that they appear in the archaeological record by the Miccaotli phase (150–200 A.D.) and are known in both handmade and mold-made form at Teotihuacan. S. Scott (1993: 46, 2003) concurred with this dating, noting that during Montoya’s (2001) excavations in Teotihuacan’s Pyramid of the Moon the torso of one of these figurines was encountered in material associated with the Miccaotli phase.²¹

Another potbelly-related monument at Kaminaljuyu, Monument 15 (Fig. 4.31a), bears similar simplified “bowling ball” features (to borrow Goldsmith’s apt yet neutral term), here clearly the result of a hood with holes for the eyes and mouth (Navarrete 1977: 98; J. Scott 1988: 35). Monument 15 possesses the rotund body and wraparound limbs typical of potbelly sculptures but displays a number of divergent characteristics, including its bottleneck head, the hood, an implement or staff of some sort wielded in its right hand, knotted arm and wrist ornaments, and a chasuble draped over its shoulders that has a disk at the front and effaced emblem. Parsons (1986: 34–35) recognized that Monument 15 has a companion piece, Monument 11 (Fig. 4.31b), which, although missing its head, has the same “potbelly” body type, wraparound limbs, and chasuble with a better-preserved emblem at the back. Parsons further observed that Monuments 11 and 15 share features with a small, 73-cm-tall stone figure, Kaminaljuyu Monument 9 (Parsons 1986: fig. 71), which closely resembles the stone figure illustrated by Girard (1962: fig. 232) and possesses the simplified facial features as well as a large round disk over its chest. The mask worn by the Monument 15 figure, as well as the implement carried in its right hand, which

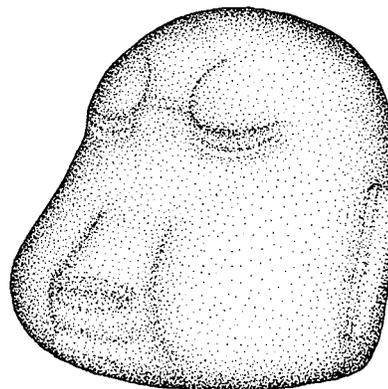


Figure 4.28. Kaminaljuyu Monument 38. Drawing by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.

might represent a weapon or club of some sort, raises the possibility that this Kaminaljuyu potbelly-variant figure was somehow conceptually related to a broader Mesoamerican boxer/ritual combat/ballgame complex, which is attested at Dainzú by the Late Preclassic period (Orr 1997, 2003).

The parallels between stone potbelly-like sculptures, such as Kaminaljuyu Monuments 9, 15, and the one illustrated by Girard, and Teotihuacan/Valley of Mexico “Xipe,” or combat ritual, figurines are important to mention, if difficult to understand and even more problematic to date. As mentioned earlier, Goldsmith (2000: 57) suggested that these “Xipe”-type figurines may first have been made during the Miccaotli phase (150–200 A.D.) but appear with more frequency in the ensuing Tlamimilolpa phase after 200 A.D. The related Kaminaljuyu monuments, however, lack a primary context and are therefore impossible to date with

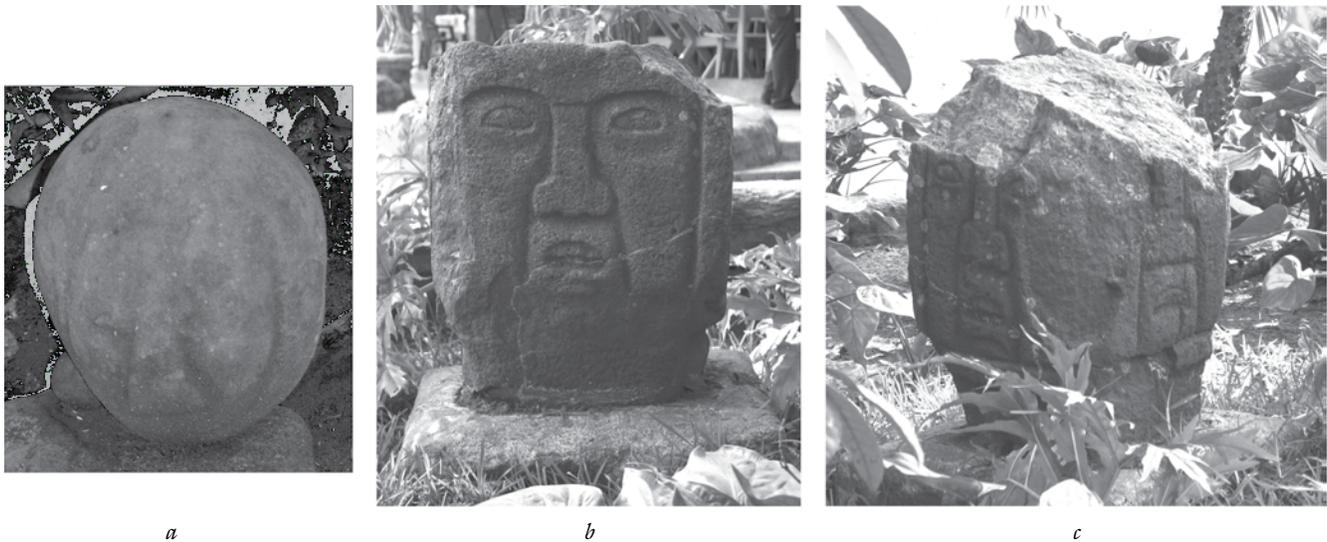


Figure 4.29. Sculptural heads with puffy features: (a) Takalik Abaj Monument 312 (photo by author); (b) Kaminaljuyu Monument 10, frontal view; (c) Kaminaljuyu Monument 10, oblique view (photos by Michael Love, with the authorization of the Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala).

any precision. I would suggest, nonetheless, that these intriguing stylistic relationships suggest that the potbelly sculptural form was merged with other traditions of representation and symbolic meaning, perhaps as early as the Late Preclassic but at least by the Early Classic period. In other words, it is possible that the unusual potbelly-like monuments at Kaminaljuyu, such as Monuments 9, 11, and 15 in particular, represent a sort of hybrid form that combined aspects of the Preclassic potbellies – such as the stout body and wraparound limbs – with traditions of representation well documented in the Valley of Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca by at least the Late Preclassic or Early Classic transition. It is important to note that the “bowling ball” or masked boxer visage persisted, relatively unchanged, well into the Classic period in southern Mesoamerica, as evidenced by El Baúl Monument 35 (Chinchilla 2009: 157; Chinchilla, Bove, and Genovez 2009), as well as other representations known from the Cotzumalguapa Nuclear Zone (S. Scott 2003). In fact, Sue Scott (2003) referred to this “bowling ball”-featured figure as the “Teo-Cotz Guy” on the basis of identical imagery from Teotihuacan and Late Classic Cotzumalguapa, where, as she demonstrated, only the head of the figure appears, almost emblematically, in the sculptural corpus of this Guatemalan site. These permutations of forms and motifs strongly indicate that certain attributes of the potbelly tradition endured and were eventually integrated with new traditions of representation – and perhaps meaning – from elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

While I admit that these musings are somewhat speculative, they also serve to demonstrate the caution

necessary in defining the parameters of the potbelly form, its overlap with other sculptural or figurine types, and specific traits that may have persevered but had been merged with new forms through time. In short, these possibilities are an excellent and perhaps somewhat humbling reminder of Kubler’s (1973) sage counsel to be wary of both the continuities and points of disparity that are detectable in any artistic record. This cautionary advice is particularly crucial to bear in mind at the site of Kaminaljuyu, which continued to flourish into the Classic period and whose corpus of sculpture and architecture is a visible testament to changing stylistic trends through time. The nature of these changes at Kaminaljuyu at the beginning of the Early Classic is a subject of ongoing debate, with scholars such as Braswell (2003: 137) arguing for minimal Teotihuacan influence at Kaminaljuyu during the Early Classic period. Others, such as Houston et al. (2003, 2005), see evidence, particularly in the form of architectural innovations within the Kaminaljuyu Acropolis, for a complex history of engagement with Central Mexico. Sculpture such as Monuments 9, 11, and 15 may be another piece of the puzzle pointing to the subtle ways in which stylistic features were shared by Kaminaljuyu and the Valley of Mexico.

That said, and despite the fact that this discussion is somewhat peripheral to the potbelly phenomenon per se, it must be acknowledged that the simplified facial features that characterize these curious Kaminaljuyu sculptures and the Teotihuacan figurines have a long duration in Mesoamerica that extends back into the Preclassic period. For example, Preclassic figurine traditions, like

those of the so-called Charlie Chaplin type, sometimes display simple round eyes and mouths (see, e.g., Freidel and Suhler 1999: fig. 89). Similar triadic arrangements of three circles, like the simplified “bowling ball” facial features of the Kaminaljuyu monuments and Valley of Mexico figurines, also appear above the snouts of four creatures that line the sides of a Middle Preclassic stone vessel from Xochipala, Guerrero (Guernsey 2010b: fig. 2c; Reilly 1995: fig. 3).²² The many contexts and duration of these simplified facial features make them difficult to date or attribute to one region or group, as

does the presence of generic, potbelly-like attributes on a range of portable objects.

Love (2010: 171–173) observed that the formal relationship between potbellies and portable objects (such as that illustrated in Fig. 4.14) is also evinced by greenstone *camahuiles*, which likewise bear a superficial resemblance to potbellies.²³ As Love explained, *camahuiles* is a K’iche’ Maya term used to describe small greenstone figures with angular features that sometimes have exaggerated bellies with arms placed on them, not unlike the potbellies. They are widespread throughout the Guatemalan Highlands and bear affinities with Mezcala-style figures from Guerrero, Veracruz, and Oaxaca (see Gay 1995; Paradis 1991; Reyna Robles 2006). While the *camahuiles* are typically associated with domestic ritual, they show up at the site of La Lagunita, in the Guatemalan Highlands, in Early Classic sarcophagi placed in the central precinct of the site, which indicates that the context and ritual associations of these portable stone figurines varied considerably (Love 2010). Likewise, some Middle Preclassic incised celts, such as the one illustrated in *The Olmec World* (Princeton Art Museum 1995: cat no. 123), two-dimensionally render the human form with wraparound arms and limbs that anticipate the three-dimensional form of the potbellies. In fact, the figure on this celt, with its eyes tightly squeezed shut and fingers pointing downward, uncannily presages several of the characteristics of potbelly sculptures. Furthermore, it confirms that canons of representation for the human figure were already well

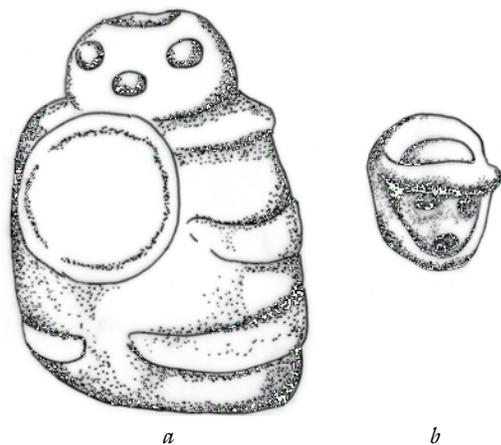


Figure 4.30. Objects with potbelly-related features: (a) stone figurine from Kaminaljuyu (drawing by author after Navarrete 1977: fig. 3a); (b) Valley of Mexico figurine (drawing by author after S. Scott 2001: plate 51a).

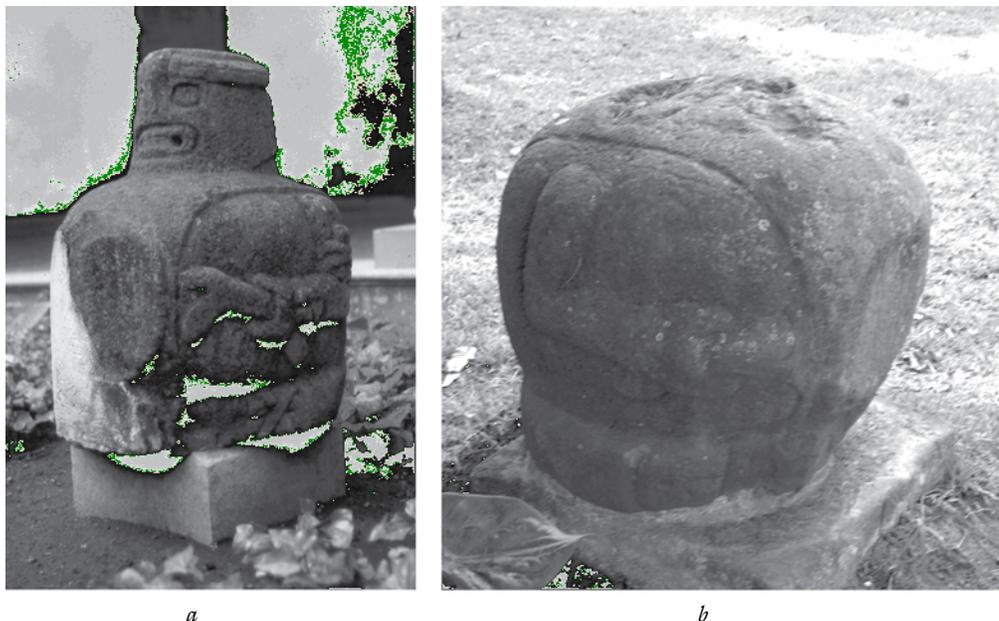


Figure 4.31. Potbelly-related monuments from Kaminaljuyu: (a) Monument 15 (photo by author); (b) Monument 11 (photo by Michael Love, with the authorization of the Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala).

established and widespread in a variety of two- and three-dimensional mediums by the Preclassic period.

In short, the traits shared by sculptural types – large-scale monuments and portable figurines of greenstone or other types of stone – may help to explain how certain characteristics persevered through time and were shared, manipulated, and transformed throughout a variety of regions in Mesoamerica during the Preclassic and Early Classic periods. These threads of continuity certainly support Mora-Marín's (2006, 2009, in press) and Rodas's (1993) observations that the potbelly and figurine traditions share certain attributes that link them stylistically.

One final example underscores the fluidity of some of these features, as well as the difficulties of dating due to a lack of archaeological context. A greenstone figurine (16 cm height), illustrated in Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959: fig. 72) and discussed by Milbrath (1979: 28), possesses features – wraparound arms, chin strap, simplified facial features – that compare to those of the other figurine and sculpture examples. It was reportedly found in the fill of a mound near La Venta, although Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959: 231) confessed that they had been unable to “obtain specific information on the original location of the figurine.” Objects such as this illustrate the geographic spread and manipulation of particular stylistic features, as well as the chronology problems that will continue to plague scholars as a result of the lack of archaeological context for so many of these small-scale objects. One must by necessity pay heed to both the correlations and discrepancies among these categories of objects and leave open the possibility of shared influences among regions and through time.²⁴

Guatemala: San Marcos

In the department of San Marcos, a sculpture from the site of Tajumulco may be related to the potbelly tradition. It was illustrated by Antonio Tejada (1947), a staff artist with the Guatemalan office of the Carnegie Institution who was dispatched to Tajumulco by Alfred V. Kidder to document a series of sculptures, many of which had been excavated by Bertha Dutton and Hulda Hobbs in 1938–1939. The presence of the potbelly-like monument Sculpture L (57.2 cm height) (Fig. 4.32a) (Dutton and Hobbs 1943: fig. 22; Tejada 1947: 112), in conjunction with other sculptural forms that are clearly later in date and often demonstrate strong Central Mexican influences, raises the distinct possibility that the monument was not in its original context and may even have been relocated from a different site. Sculpture L was found during excavations by Dutton and Hobbs (1943: map 6) adjacent to Sculpture K (another

boulder monument with badly weathered carving still visible) on the eastern margin of a quadrangle within the main plaza at the site. Sculpture L is damaged or may have been modified: it appears to be missing its original head, although it has wraparound arms and legs that are still visible. Most curiously, across the chest in the position of a pectoral appears an anthropomorphic face.²⁵ The mouth of this face is pursed, much like those of several Preclassic potbellies, and it bears some resemblance to the pursed-lip faces that appear on monuments at the site of Tiltepec, Chiapas, discussed later. The anthropomorphic face on Sculpture L is anticipated, intriguingly, by Middle Preclassic ceramic figurines, as an example from La Blanca illustrates (Fig. 4.32b). Another monument illustrated by Tejada (1947: 121, no. 7) possesses wraparound arms and the vestiges of a face on its chest as well. The head of this monument, which would have sat on a fairly narrow neck, is missing. The narrow neck, however, bears some similarities to that of a probable Late Classic monument from El Baúl, discussed later, which suggests caution in assuming that it is Late Preclassic in date. Several columnar and pedestal sculptures also illustrated by Tejada reveal distinctly Late Preclassic stylistic traits, and one in particular (Tejada 1947: 121, no. 9) possesses wraparound arms and legs reminiscent of the potbelly sculptures. Dutton and Hobbs (1943: 108) commented on the eclectic mix of sculptures found at Tajumulco and recognized that several monuments do, indeed, bear a resemblance to “sculptures found on an early horizon at Kaminaljuyu, and specimens from Monte Alto and Obero.” But they cautioned that “these same examples have details in common with sculptures evidencing no great antiquity.” The lack of good contextual data for many of the Tajumulco monuments exacerbates this complicated situation and makes assigning any concrete date to these monuments, even on stylistic grounds, quite difficult.

Guatemala: Sacatepéquez

Two potbellies now in private collections were recorded from Sacatepéquez, both with the typical puffy facial features. San Juan Sacatepéquez Monument 1 (45 cm height) (Fig. 4.33a) is stout, with a prominent navel, collar, heavy cheeks, and closed, bulging eyelids. Its pursed lips compare most closely to those of Finca Sololá Monument 1 and Monuments 57 and 58 from Guatemala, as well as to the pectoral/face on Tajumulco Sculpture L. Monument 1 from the town of Antigua, in Sacatepéquez (108 cm height) (Fig. 4.33b), is more rotund, sports a collar, and compares quite closely to potbellies from Kaminaljuyu. Its eyes are closed and swollen, although the lower portion of the face is heavily eroded.



Figure 4.32. Figures with anthropomorphic faces on torsos: (a) Tajumulco Sculpture L (drawing by author after Tejeda 1947: 112); (b) ceramic figurine from La Blanca, Guatemala (drawing by author).

Guatemala: Sololá

Only one potbelly from the site of Agua Escondida is attributed to the department of Sololá (Fig. 4.33c). Discovered during road construction between the towns of Godinez and San Lucas Tolimán, Agua Escondida Monument 1 (65 cm height) is decapitated and quite eroded; nonetheless, portions of a collar and medallion are visible (Rodas 1993: 27).

Guatemala: Quiché

The Uatlán Monument 1 potbelly (106 cm height) (Fig. 4.33d) was discovered in Uatlán, moved to Guatemala City, and eventually transported to the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1863 (Parsons 1986: 43; Rodas 1993: 28). It portrays a rotund, jowly-featured figure wearing a collar and, as Chinchilla (2001–2002: n. 3) noted, bears a close resemblance to potbellies from the site of Kaminaljuyu.

Guatemala: Suchitepéquez

One rather odd potbelly was found at the site of Chocolá. Monument 30 (Fig. 4.34) was apparently reworked at some point in the past: its lower portion terminates in a curve, and perforations suggestive of pupils were made into the figure's closed, swollen eyelids. It was found along the access to the south facade of Structure 6 in association with Monument 29, an altar (Paredes Umaña 2006a: 90). As specified later, at the site of Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico, a potbelly was also found in association with an altar. This evidence suggests that, in some cases, potbellies were positioned analogous to the stelae in stela–altar pairs (Guernsey 2010a; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982: 107, fig. 6.15; Paredes Umaña 2006a: 90–91).

Three miniature potbellies in a private collection in San Antonio, Suchitepéquez, were documented by Federico Paredes Umaña (Fig. 4.35) (2006b: fig. 43). Although the provenience of these potbellies is unknown, I include them here with Suchitepéquez examples on the basis

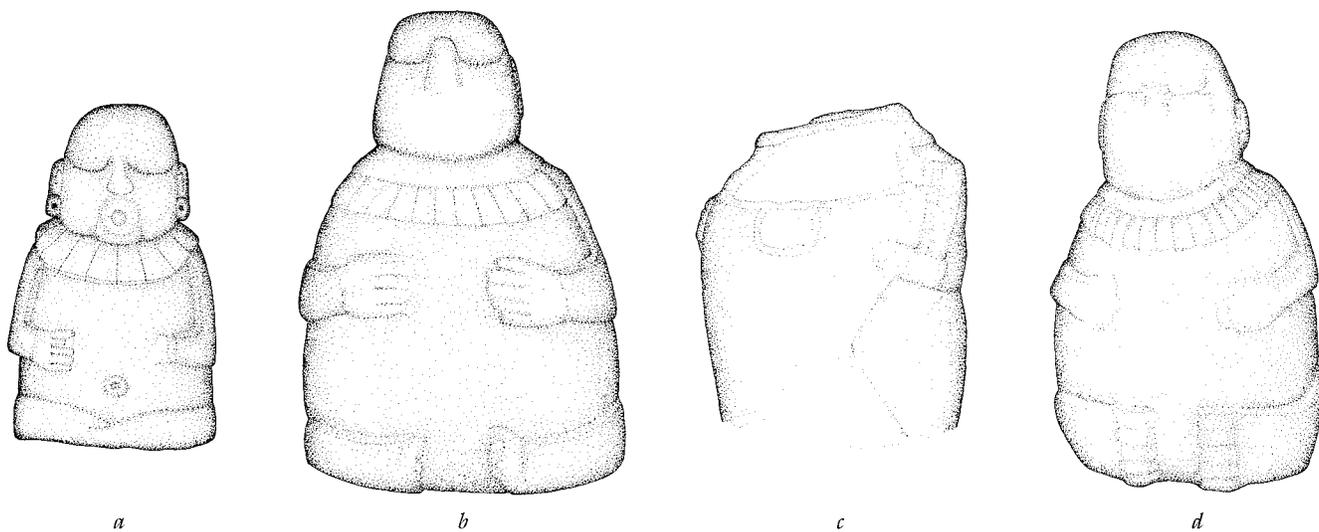


Figure 4.33. Potbellies from Sacatepéquez, Sololá, and Quiché: (a) San Juan Sacatepéquez Monument 1; (b) Antigua, Sacatepéquez Monument 1; (c) Agua Escondida Monument 1; (d) Uatlán Monument 1. Drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove.



Figure 4.34. Chocolá Monument 30. Drawing by Daniel Salazar, courtesy of Federico Paredes Umaña and the Chocolá Archaeological Project.

of their present location. All three possess wraparound arms and legs, and their torsos are thick yet not obese; very short, conical bases appear beneath them, comparable to those beneath the two small potbellies from El Ujuxte. The three sculptures exhibit wide cheeks and closed eyes with prominent lids, and at least one wears a segmented collar.

Guatemala: Petén

A series of potbellies are reported from the department of Petén. Tikal Miscellaneous Stone 82 (24 cm height) (Fig. 4.36a) is a decapitated potbelly that was recovered

from the supporting fill of Floor 9, which was constructed following the abandonment of an earlier stage of the North Acropolis (W. Coe 1965: 1415, fig. 18). The North Acropolis was a veritable necropolis for rulers at Tikal, and a Late Preclassic burial (Burial 85) may represent the tomb of the first ruler in the Tikal dynasty, Yax Ehb' Xook. A wavy horizontal line around the lower torso of the Miscellaneous Stone 82 potbelly might indicate the bottom of a cape or some form of costume or cord.

Three kilometers to the northeast in Grupo Santa Fe, Miscellaneous Stone 167 was recovered (82 cm height) (Jones and Orrego Corzo 1987) (Fig. 4.36b). The facial features of this potbelly are completely worn away, but enough of the heavy body is preserved to illustrate some surprising details, including a medallion on the figure's back. Miscellaneous Stone 167 had been abandoned by looters and then recovered in 1977 by Rudy Larios and Miguel Orrego Corzo near Structure 426, which contained a tomb with Late Preclassic ceramics (C. Jones 2001; Jones and Orrego Corzo 1987: 131; Barrios Villar 2010: 364–365).

Vilma Fialko reported two potbellies from a residential group at the site of Chanchich II, located within the greater Naranjo region; the only one illustrated is missing its head (Fig. 4.36c) (Fialko 2005: 259, fig. 10a). Fialko (2008: fig. 18, 2009: fig. 11) discovered another mutilated potbelly (NREM-58), associated with a cache of twenty-four pottery sherds, in the East Patio of the Central Acropolis at Naranjo. Its location seems to have had some significance, as it was associated with a shallow stone basin that may have been a receptacle for offerings, as well as another fragmentary sculpture. The basin and sculpture fragment were set in place prior to the potbelly,



Figure 4.35. Three miniature potbellies in a private collection in San Antonio, Suchitepéquez. Photos courtesy of Federico Paredes Umaña.

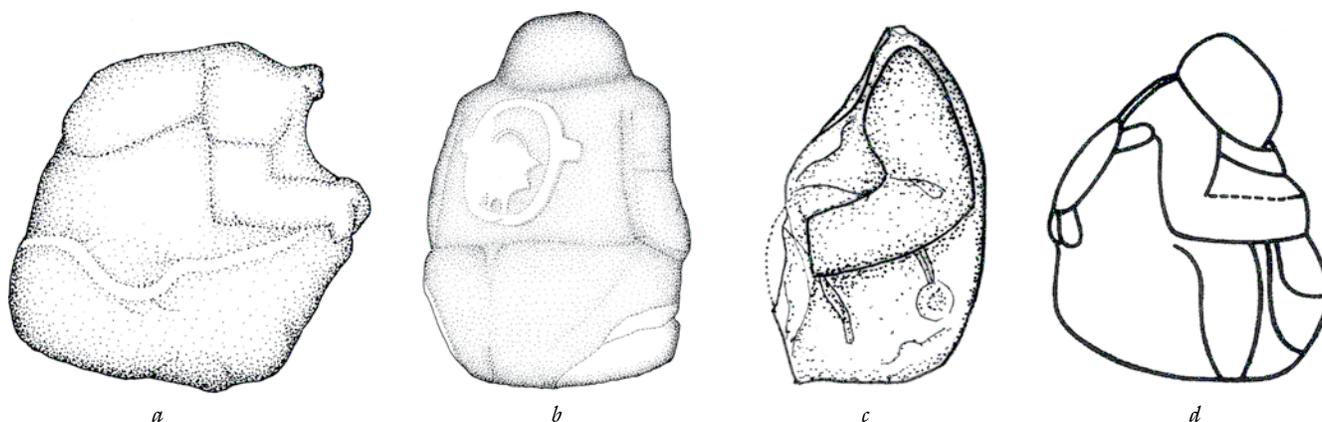


Figure 4.36. Petén potbellies: (a) Tikal Miscellaneous Stone 82; (b) Grupo Santa Fe Miscellaneous Stone 167 (drawings by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove); (c) Chanchich II potbelly (drawing by author after Fialko 2005); (d) San Bartolo potbelly (drawing by Rene Ozcata, courtesy of Jessica Craig and the Proyecto Arqueológico Regional San Bartolo).

which rested on its own small layer of earth and sherds (Fialko, Cambranes, and Segura 2009: figs. 18, 39). Fialko, Cambranes, and Segura (2009) reported that ceramic materials associated with the sculptures point to Terminal Classic ritual activity and offered the following description of the potbelly:

The *barrigón* or pot-bellied figure (NREM-058) was oriented toward the east (where the Main Plaza is located, with a group-E type format). This sculpture is quite rough, and apparently it is quite early. The head, arms and frontal part are mutilated, but it is still possible to see the upper part of the shoulders and a belt on the right side; likewise on the back can be seen part of the loincloth and a curve of the right buttock.

As they explained, at some point during the Terminal Classic another floor was constructed that covered the potbelly, but the location was marked by a plain altar; in addition, they documented a third event in which two plain altars were placed on the ground surface. Fialko (2005: 259–260) reported, but did not illustrate, additional potbellies from the sites of La Tractorada and El Jobal near Naranjo. As she observed, evidence from this region in the northeast Petén indicates an in situ Preclassic sculpture tradition with stylistic parallels to the Pacific Coast and Guatemalan Highlands.

Another potbelly from the site of San Bartolo (120 cm height) was found in association with Structure 63, a small Late Classic building near the main plaza that was a locus for ritual activity (Fig. 4.36d) (Craig 2005). The context of the San Bartolo potbelly attests to the continued veneration of potbelly sculptures in later periods. According to Craig (2005), Structure 63 was explicitly constructed as a shrine for the potbelly sculpture, which was set into place before construction of the building

and accompanied by a cache. The “heirloom” of a sculpture that stylistically dates to the Late Preclassic is particularly fascinating at San Bartolo; this site is renowned for its Preclassic mural program, which also contains stylistic references to earlier cultures, as in the very “Olmec” Maize God portrayed in the Las Pinturas north wall mural. A reverence for the past appears to be a theme that has some duration at the site. The facial features of the San Bartolo potbelly, though eroded, reveal heavy jowls. One remarkable feature is the medallion on its back, which appears to portray a headless turtle (Craig 2005: 276). Medallions decorating the backs of potbellies are rare in the corpus, although a close parallel exists with Monument 167 from Grupo Santa Fe on the Tikal periphery. However, monuments from sites outside of the Maya Lowlands suggest that the conceptual link between potbellies and turtle-shaped medallions was not aberrant. In Mexico at the sites of Tiltepec, Chiapas, and San Miguel, Tabasco (discussed later), several monuments combine the facial features of potbellies with medallions that appear to represent abstracted turtle carapaces and bodies. Such parallels with regions far removed from the Petén suggest a shared iconography and conceptual domain surrounding potbelly sculptures and their associations.

Guatemala: Unprovenienced

Chinchilla (2001–2002: fig. 7) reported a small, unprovenienced potbelly, 22 cm in height, in the Barbier-Mueller Museum of Pre-Columbian Art in Barcelona. It exhibits broad cheeks, closed and bulging eyelids, wrap-around limbs, and a fat stomach. On the basis of features shared with potbellies from Kaminaljuyu, Chinchilla



Figure 4.37. Unprovenienced potbellies in Guatemala: (a) standing potbelly in the collection of the Museo Popol Vuh (photo by Oswaldo Chinchilla, courtesy of the Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín); (b) frontal view of peg sculpture potbelly; (c) profile view of peg sculpture potbelly (photos courtesy of Oswaldo Chinchilla).

(2001–2002: 13) conjectured that it may originally be from that site. He published two additional unprovenienced sculptures that display traits directly associated with potbelly sculptures. These include a standing figure, now in the Museo Popol Vuh, with protruding belly, wraparound arms, and a collar, like many of the potbellies (Fig. 4.37a) (Chinchilla 2001–2002: fig. 6). The figure is garbed in a loincloth and a headdress of some sort, and its facial features depart from those of the typical potbelly. An even more startling variation on the potbelly theme is a horizontal peg sculpture of unknown provenience now in a private collection that portrays a small potbellied figure (Fig. 4.37b and c) (Chinchilla 2001–2002: fig. 10).²⁶ The figure has wraparound arms, bulbous cheeks, and closed, thick-lidded eyes. Chinchilla (2001–2002: 17, fig. 11) noted that this horizontal peg potbelly shares heavy facial features with other known peg sculptures, including one at the Museo Popol Vuh of unknown provenience and Tres Zapotes Monument F (Chinchilla 1996: 92–94; Pool 2010: fig. 5.18; Stirling 1943: plate 8a). These examples confirm that the typical potbelly features were not limited to potbelly sculptures per se, but could be applied to other sculptural forms that included standing figures, stone spheres, and peg sculptures.

El Salvador

Six potbellies have been reported from El Salvador, three hailing from the site of Santa Leticia. As previously

discussed, Arthur Demarest’s excavations at Santa Leticia indicated a Late Preclassic date for the massive potbellies that were arranged in a north–south line along an artificial terrace that led to the ceremonial center of the site (Fig. 4.1) (Demarest 1986: fig. 40). Monuments 1 (160 cm height), 2 (200 cm height), and 3 (180 cm height) (Fig. 4.38a–c) all possess the typical inflated features, closed eyes, and protruding lids, as well as prominently rendered navels on their obese bellies and downturned hands reminiscent of potbellies at the site of Takalik Abaj. Monuments 4 and 5 represent stylized jaguarian heads much like others from El Salvador that were originally described by Richardson (1940) and that have been discussed more recently by Paredes Umaña (2006b; Paredes Umaña and Escamilla 2008).²⁷ They may be conceptually related to jaguarian versions of Chahk, the god of rain and lightning, much like Monte Alto Monument 3.

Bove (1989b: 84) and Amaroli (1997: n. 1) recognized that Chalchuapa Monument 7 (Fig. 4.39a) was a small potbelly (53 cm height), although it had not been identified as such by Anderson (1978: 156). It possesses the typical heavy face, closed eyes, large belly, and wrap-around arms but is missing legs, which appear to have been replaced by what Anderson described as a “crude base.” The potbelly was found within Feature 7 of Structure E3–1-2nd, and Anderson (1978: 156) listed its date as early Middle Preclassic. However, its stratigraphic position is ambiguous, as Feature 7 appears between

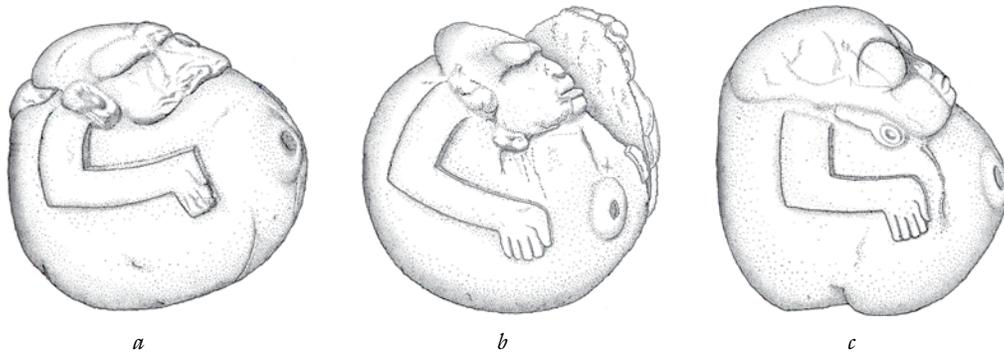


Figure 4.38. Santa Leticia potbellies: (a) Monument 1; (b) Monument 2; (c) Monument 3. From Demarest (1986: figs. 7, 11, 13), courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

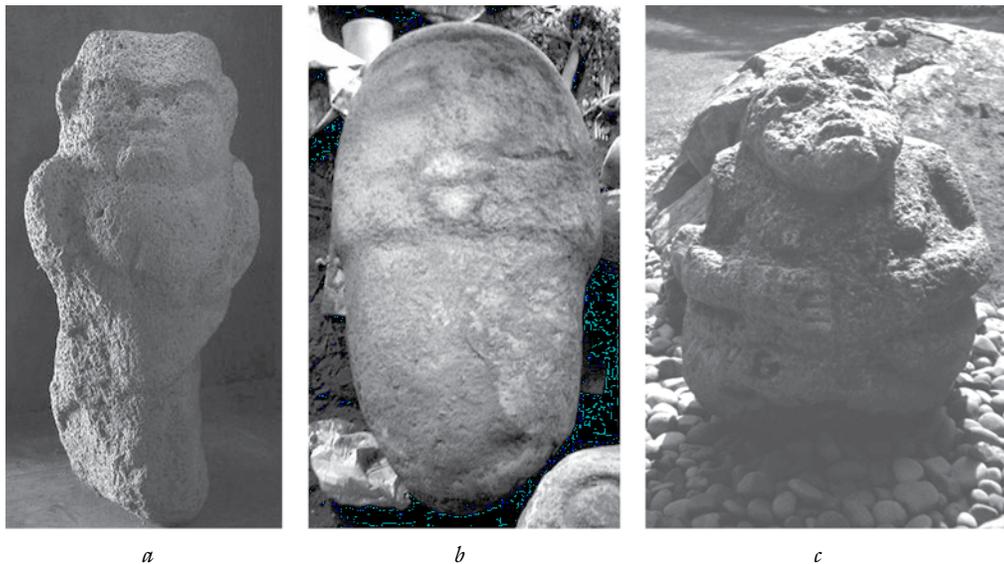


Figure 4.39. Potbellies from El Salvador: (a) Chalchuapa Monument 7 (photo by Federico Paredes Umaña); (b) Tapalshucut monument (photo courtesy of Paul Amaroli and Karen Olsen Bruhns, Fundación Nacional de Arqueología de El Salvador [FUNDAR]); (c) Teopán Island potbelly (photo by Karen Olsen Bruhns).

stages E3-1-2nd and E3-1-1st of the structure, and a more conservative conclusion, in my opinion, would be that the sculpture was placed there sometime between 500 B.C. and A.D. 0.

The fifth potbelly from El Salvador was discovered at Tapalshucut Norte, an unexplored site located approximately 1.5 km to the north of the town of Izalco in the western part of the country (Fig. 4.39b). As Amaroli and Bruhns (2002) reported, the monument was found in association with a cylindrical sculpture with a stylized serpent head, as well as three stylized jaguar heads like those originally described by Richardson (1940); the combination of jaguar heads with one or more potbellies parallels that of the Santa Leticia and Monte Alto monuments. The Tapalshucut potbelly bears a close resemblance to Los Cerritos Sur, Guatemala,

Monument 1 (Fig. 4.8): both incorporate a cylindrical pedestal base that, as Amaroli and Bruhns observed, links them to broader pedestal traditions of the Pacific Coast and piedmont and sculptures such as Chalchuapa Monument 7 (Fig. 4.39a).²⁸ Such formal hybridity recalls the two monuments from Pacaño (Fig. 3.14), which likewise demonstrate the mutability between sculptural forms during the Preclassic. Although the eyes of the Tapalshucut potbelly are difficult to clearly discern, the typical sagging cheeks are apparent, as are rounded, modeled lips that approach the pursed form of other potbellies.

The sixth El Salvadorean potbelly was discovered in 1996 on Teopán Island in western El Salvador, a site located only about 30 km from Santa Leticia (Fig. 4.39c). Amaroli (1997) suggested a tentative Late

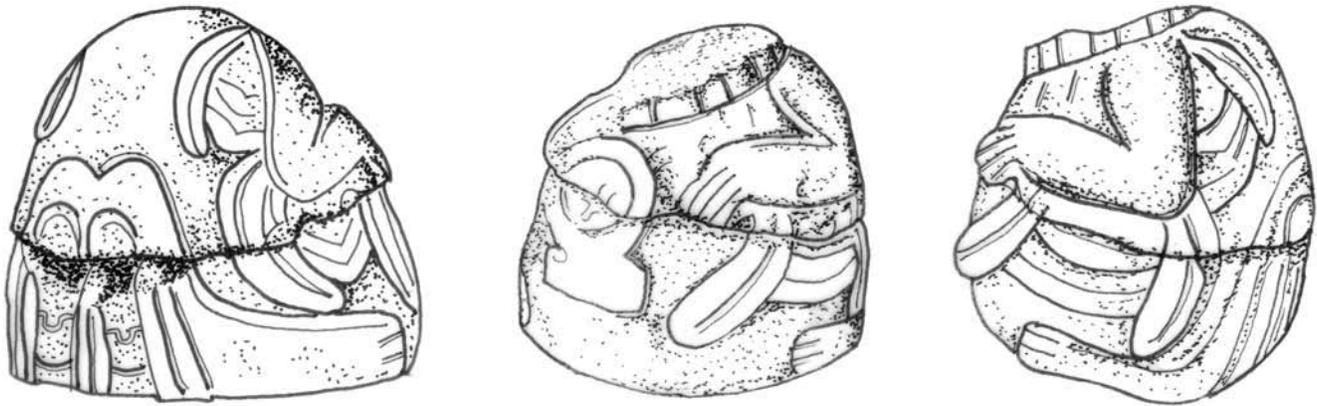


Figure 4.40. Three views of Copan potbelly CPN 46. Drawing by author after Richardson (1940: fig. 37).

Preclassic date for the Teopán potbelly, a proposal based on surface collections and other typical Late Preclassic sculptures found at the site. He noted that the Teopán sculpture displays several typical potbelly traits, including jowly cheeks, wraparound arms, and a prominent navel. Its eyes, according to Amaroli (1997: 52), were originally puffy and closed but were reworked at some later time “by carving two oval and rather irregular concavities in the center of the large eyelids.” On the basis of the figure’s chest, which reveals pendent breasts, Amaroli (1997: n. 2) identified it as female and compared it to Monte Alto Monuments 4 and 5 and Bilbao Monument 58, all of which have sagging pectorals. An even closer comparison, however, is to Giralda Monument 1, which displays similar, V-shaped breasts that are sagging and flat. However, I am hesitant about the identification of the Teopán potbelly as female, in great part because of the range of chest definition within the corpus of potbellies, especially on Monte Alto Monument 5, Bilbao Monument 58, and Giralda Monument 1. When these monuments are compared, it appears possible that the girth of these figures was sometimes expressed not only by the stomachs, but also by flaccid pectorals that resemble breasts, and that this feature does not necessarily indicate the female gender. Follensbee (2009: 78–80; cf. Cheetham 2009: 157) discussed the difficulties and pitfalls of identifying gender in Preclassic, and specifically Olmec, sculpture and concluded that breasts were not a primary marker of femaleness for the Olmec, who emphasized other physical characteristics. While the Teopán potbelly is not Olmec, of course, the issues of gender ambiguity expressed through its representation are similar. Nonetheless, the possibility that the Teopán potbelly is female should not be ruled out; rather, I would caution that the evidence is uncertain in light of other potbelly sculptures with similar sagging chests that may not signify the female gender.

Honduras

One curious potbelly was found during the late nineteenth century at the site of Copán in a Late Classic foundation cache beneath Stela 4 (122 cm height) (Fig. 4.40) (Baudez 1994; Dieseldorff 1931: 27; Richardson 1940: fig. 37; Parsons 1986: 39). The potbelly, CPN 46, is missing its head but possesses typical wraparound arms and wears a collar. It is covered in a series of plumes that may represent a feathered costume and that descend down its back from some sort of backrack and curl around its sides. In addition, the figure bears a keyhole-shaped medallion over its torso and stomach. Sharer, Canuto, and Bell (2011) view this Copán potbelly as evidence of a connection with highland Guatemala as well as Chalchuapa and Santa Leticia, El Salvador. Other cultural materials at Copán attest to its intermediate location between eastern El Salvadoran centers and sites in the Guatemalan Highlands (Fash and Davis-Salazar 2008; Viel 1999).

Mexico: Tlaxcala

Delgadillo and Santana Sandoval (1989) recorded two potbelly sculptures during a salvage project in 1982 in the municipality of Nativitas, on Cerro Xochitécatl, to the west of the Cacaxtla archaeological zone. On the basis of associated ceramics, they assigned a tentative date of 500–200 B.C. to the two monuments, which diverge considerably from local sculptural traditions and compare more closely to the potbelly phenomenon of the Pacific coastal plain (Delgadillo and Santana Sandoval 1989: 57). Commenting on these two monuments, Contreras Martínez (1991: 160) suggested that they might have originally been associated with a Preclassic-period site located to the southeast of Cerro Xochitécatl known only as Canterita (or T-288). He based this possibility on the proximity of Canterita to the discovery location of the sculptures and the site’s known Preclassic occupation.



Figure 4.41. Tlaxcala potbellies: (a) “Escultura femenina”; (b) “Escultura asexualada.” Drawings by author after Delgadillo and Santana Sandoval (1989).

The first of the potbellies (Fig. 4.41a), which Delgadillo and Santana Sandoval (1989) referred to as “Escultura femenina” (approximately 1.5 m height), has wide, heavy cheeks and open eyes, and wears a headdress with flaps that are attached to a horizontal band and dangle downward in front of the ears. As they observed, a wide, recessed, and unnatural “channel” separates the head from the torso and is located in the same position as the collars worn by potbellies from elsewhere. Beneath this recessed area dangle the arms, which wrap around the obese stomach and terminate in fingers that point downward, a feature similar to that of potbellies at Takalik Abaj and Santa Leticia. The legs, while wrapped around the torso like those of other potbellies, terminate in feet that point downward in an awkward position opposed to those of other potbellies (compare, e.g., the feet of Monte Alto Monument 11). Another interesting feature of this Tlaxcala potbelly is the bullet-shaped pendent motifs identified as breasts by Delgadillo and Santana Sandoval (1989: 54). The shape of the breasts recall those of the Teopán potbelly and Giralda Monument 1, which, as previously discussed, could represent sagging pectorals rather than signal gender. Delgadillo and Santana Sandoval (1989: 54–55) also described a heavily worn trilobate motif in the figure’s genital region.

The second potbelly (Fig. 4.41b), again approximately 1.5 m in height, is described by Delgadillo and Santana Sandoval (1989: fig. 6) as an “Escultura asexualada” and possesses the same thick face, open eyes, obese stomach, wraparound arms, and legs with inverted feet. A motif that consists of a horizontal bar with descending vertical striations decorates its abdomen. Although Delgadillo and Santana Sandoval (1989: 56, 59) proposed that

this represented a stylized phallus, this seems unlikely; its closest parallel is with the chest medallion on Monte Alto Monument 6.

Overall, the two potbellies from Tlaxcala resemble those from other regions in terms of their corpulent bodies and wraparound limbs and may, as Contreras Martínez (1991: 160) suggested, represent contact of an “unknown intensity and duration” during the Late Preclassic period. However, to my mind, the unusual details just described also indicate a series of distinct stylistic and perhaps thematic departures. By contrast, another carved stone from Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala, mentioned previously and illustrated by Navarrete and Hernández (2000: fig. 18b), features a face with more typical potbelly facial features, including jowly cheeks, closed eyes, and puffy eyelids.

Mexico: Chiapas

The state of Chiapas is home to a number of potbellies, with the highest concentration at the Preclassic site of Tiltepec, which flourished between 500 and 200 B.C. (Navarrete 1959: 4, 1974a). Information about the corpus of monuments at Tiltepec comes predominantly from a study of fat-bellied sculptures in Mexico by Carlos Navarrete and Rocío Hernández (2000).²⁹ Monument 1 (156 cm height) (Fig. 4.42a; also see López Vassallo 2007: 29) possesses a stout body and wraparound limbs and, despite a very eroded face, appears to have closed eyes and pursed lips. Unlike other potbellies discussed previously, its face is bordered by a chin strap that attaches to a horizontal headband divided into quadrants. At the center of the headband, which completely encircles the head, is a trilobate motif reminiscent of



Figure 4.42. Tiltepec potbellies: (a) Monument 1 (photo by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia); (b) Monument 23 (photo courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation).

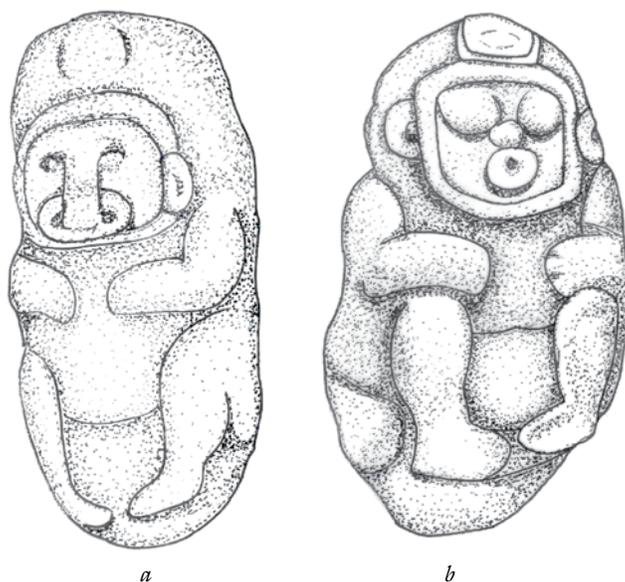


Figure 4.43. Tiltepec potbellies: (a) Monument 24 (drawing by author after Navarrete and Hernández 2000: fig. 7b); (b) Monument 25 (drawing by author after photo courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation).

the foliated Jester God insignia (Fields 1991); vestiges of some carved design also appear above the center of the headband. Monument 1, like several of the other Tiltepec potbellies, renders the legs somewhat curiously, with more of the haunches or buttocks indicated, as if to suggest that the figure is seated. Monument 23 (102 cm height) (Fig. 4.42b) is a more typical stout potbelly with fat cheeks, closed and swollen eyelids, and lips pursed

as on Finca Sololá Monument 1, San Juan Sacatepéquez Monument 1, and Kaminaljuyu Monuments 57 and 58. It has wraparound arms but lacks legs. Monument 24 (122 cm height) (Fig. 4.43a) is a stout potbelly with wraparound arms and legs. Its face is encircled in a circular band, above which is the remnant of a central medallion, now almost completely effaced; the band appears to incorporate the ear ornaments of the figure. The eyes



Figure 4.44. Tiltepec potbellies: (a) Monument 26; (b) Monument 27. Photos by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

of the figure are almond shaped, and some sort of nose plaque descends and partially obscures a wide and open mouth. Navarrete and Hernández (2000: 592) suggested that a loincloth may be indicated between the legs of the figure. Monument 25 (73 cm height) (Fig. 4.43b) closely resembles Monument 24, although the figure's facial features include closed eyes and pursed lips, like those of Monument 23, and it wears what appear to be large earspools. An object, described as a pectoral of some sort by Navarrete and Hernández (2000: 592), descends from the band encircling its face and connects to the loincloth below.

Tiltepec Monument 26 (147 cm height) (Fig. 4.44a), which is considerably more elaborated, retains the stout body and wraparound limbs, although in this case the arms actually overlap. It has closed and bulging eyes, its lips are thick and possibly somewhat pursed, and it wears large earspools and a loincloth with vertical striations. Its face is surrounded by the same circular framing band, but in this case it is topped with an inverted "V" with projecting volutes; two other curving elements are visible on the sides of the monument. Above the figure's forehead, however, is a small medallion whose contours echo those of the band encircling the figure's face. This medallion contains another smaller visage with nearly the same features, including closed and bulbous eyes and pursed lips, and is topped by the same foliated "V" design; two small

curls descend from its base.³⁰ Traces of another small circular medallion with a faintly visible face and pursed lips are discernible on the upper portion of the back of the sculpture's head. Taube (2004: 158) observed that the cartouche forming the upper front medallion resembles the body and carapace of a turtle and compares to the less abstracted versions that decorate a colossal head at the site of San Miguel, Tabasco, not far from La Venta (Stirling 1957: plate 50; also see Milbrath 1979: fig. 73, who identified the monument as La Venta Monument 71). The carapace-like motif, as previously observed, also bears a resemblance to the motif that decorates the back of the San Bartolo potbelly.³¹

Tiltepec Monument 27 (102 cm height) (Fig. 4.44b) has features that resemble those of Monument 26, including the overlapping arms, although the face in the small medallion at the top of the monument lacks the typical potbelly-style features and instead is created with three small circular indentations (see Navarrete and Hernández 2000: fig. 9b for an illustration).³² This visage in the medallion bears a peculiar similarity to the faces of the small stone sculptures with wraparound limbs from Kaminaljuyu – Monument 9 and the ones illustrated by Girard (1962: fig. 232) and Navarrete (1977: fig. 3a) – which also compare to widespread figurine traditions, including the "Xipe" examples from Teotihuacan, discussed previously. The small "bowling ball" countenance

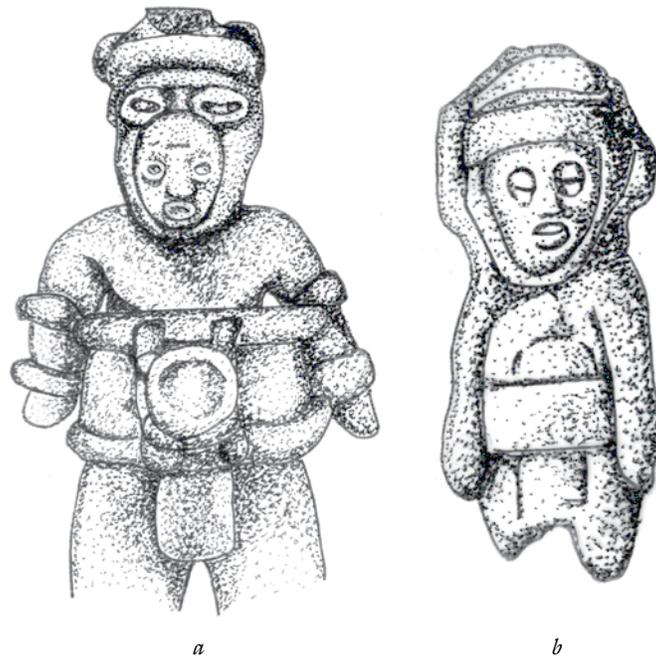


Figure 4.45. Related figurines: (a) figurine from Tlapacoya (drawing by author after Coe 1965b: fig. 185); (b) figurine from San Miguel Amantla (drawing by author after Seler 1998: vol. 6, 5, fig. 53).



Figure 4.46. Tonalá region monuments: (a) Tzutzuculi Monument 10; (b) Tonalá monument with standing figure. Photos by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

on Monument 27, as well as the other divergent characteristics of the Tiltepec monuments that set them apart from the rest of the potbelly corpus may, as I discussed earlier with respect to Kaminaljuyu, indicate a late date, perhaps at the tail end of the Late Preclassic or early part

of the Early Classic period. However, this suggestion does not coincide with Navarrete's (1959) dating of the florescence of the site to between 500 and 200 B.C., nor does it take into consideration the fact that these "bowling ball" facial features have a time depth going back into

the Preclassic period (Sedat 1992: 85–87). In truth, like the Kaminaljuyu monuments discussed previously, the Tiltepec monuments embody another interesting dimension of the potbelly genre that illustrates the intersection of alternative traditions of representation whose origins and dating are not well understood. This complex may, in fact, have enormous time depth in Mesoamerica, as evidenced by a figurine from Tlapacoya (Fig. 4.45a) illustrated by both Coe (1965b: fig. 185) and J. Marcus (1998: fig. 8.28). The figurine displays the heavy padded equipment like that worn by ballplayers or ritual combat participants, but also has a small mask over the lower part of its face, which possesses slightly pursed lips like those of the potbellies at Tiltepec and elsewhere.³³ By contrast, the similarity of Tiltepec Monument 27 to the figural representation of a supernatural character from the Ulúa Valley in Honduras that wears a simple “bowling ball”-featured mask above its brow is striking (Lopiparo 2006: fig. 6.17). This example from Terminal Classic Honduras illustrates the long duration of these motifs throughout an extensive geographic region.

A related monument from Chiapas carries importance with regard to this discussion. Tzutzuculi Monument 10 (1.2 m height) (Fig. 4.46a), a head lacking a body, bears a face and imagery closely related to the Tiltepec monuments (López Vassallo 2007: 34; Navarrete and Hernández 2000: 593, fig. 11b). The face, enclosed in another framing band, displays pursed lips, round and open eyes, and a nose that Navarrete and Hernández described as quite naturalistic. Above this visage appear four smaller circular medallions, each of which contains the simplified “bowling ball” face of three circular depressions, much as on Tiltepec Monument 27, the stone sculptures from Kaminaljuyu, and the Valley of Mexico figurines. Navarrete (1959: fig. 8d; Navarrete and Hernández 2000: 593) first encountered Tzutzuculi Monument 10 on a cement base at a fish-packing plant; such a context obviously provides little help with dating.

Another monument from this general vicinity is worth discussing, as it again alludes to the possibility of Central Mexican influence on sculptures in this region by the Early Classic period (see Ferdon 1953). A small sculpture recovered within the modern urban center of Tonalá (56 cm height) (Fig. 4.46b), discussed by Navarrete and Hernández (2000: 593, fig. 12), depicts a standing human figure with arms at its sides, wearing a simple belt and loincloth. The figure emerges in fairly high relief from a lozenge-shaped stone, not terribly thick, which may have been freestanding or perhaps wall mounted originally. The figure wears a headdress and chin strap that closely resembles the headdresses worn

by the “Xipe,” or ballplayer/ritual combat, figurines at Teotihuacan. A comparison between this Tonalá monument and a Teotihuacan-style figurine from San Miguel Amantla (Fig. 4.45b) published in Seler (1998: vol. 6, 5, fig. 53; also see S. Scott 2001: plate 102) underscores this point: the costume and the posture of the figure are nearly identical to those of the figurine. Although this parallel does not resolve issues of dating with any precision, due in great part to the long duration of production of this type of figurine in the Valley of Mexico, it certainly highlights the need to pay heed to the various influences apparent in the sculptural corpus through time and how they intersect with motifs visible on the potbellies. The Tonalá sculpture, like Kaminaljuyu Monument 15, may represent a sort of “hybrid”: while the headdress and chin strap are nearly identical to those of Teotihuacan figurines, they also compare to the framing bands surrounding the faces of the Tiltepec potbellies, especially those of Monument 1. These traits are slippery and their dating problematic, but their very presence demands a cautious consideration of the various continuities and departures between the potbelly form and other, potentially related sculptural types.³⁴

To continue with the corpus of Tiltepec potbellies, the face of the main figure on Tiltepec Monument 28 (134 cm height) (Fig. 4.47a) diverges somewhat from that of the typical potbelly and incorporates an additional U-shaped design beneath and curling up around the sides of the mouth. In contrast, the typical potbelly facial features, replete with a distinctly pursed mouth, are represented in the smaller medallion above the figure’s countenance, which may lack the turtle-like configuration. Monument 33 (126 cm height) (Fig. 4.47b) bears similar facial features within a circular framing band, perhaps including the U-shaped element around the mouth. Above, typical heavy features are repeated in a small medallion that lacks the turtle carapace shape.³⁵ Monument 34 (1 m height) (Fig. 4.48) is simplified, lacking the upper medallion and instead possessing only the primary figure’s visage with swollen eyes and pursed mouth enclosed within a circular framing band that is topped by the foliated “V” design. The figure has clearly rendered haunches and crossed arms, as do three of the other Tiltepec potbellies (Monuments 26, 27, and 28; the hands of Monument 33 may be crossed).

Another potbelly, which currently resides in the Casa Cultural in Tonalá, is attributed to the site of Tiltepec (López Vassallo 2007: 28) (Fig. 4.47c) and was brought to my attention by Claudia García-Des Lauriers (personal communication 2010). It has hunched, almost nonexistent shoulders, and although its face is much eroded, jowly cheeks and heavy facial features are still discernible.

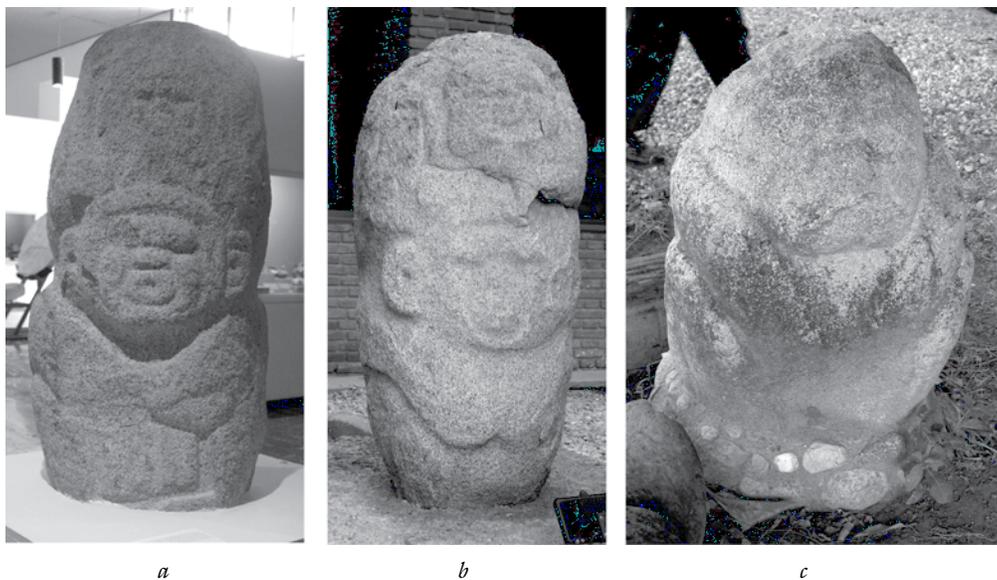


Figure 4.47. Tiltepec potbellies: (a) Monument 28 (photo by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia); (b) Monument 33 (photo by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia); (c) Monument in Tonalá Casa Cultural attributed to Tiltepec (photo by Claudia García-Des Lauriers).

The crossed arms of several of the Tiltepec potbellies necessitate further comment, as they represent a trait that persevered for a long time and once again raises questions of influence and dating (Chinchilla 2001–2002: 17); for an apparently early, small-scale, and portable example see San Lorenzo Monument 132 (Cyphers 2004: fig. 146). Along the Pacific slope, a headless sculpture from El Baúl, Escuintla (Parsons 1986: fig. 112), displays similar crossed arms, a loincloth, and legs with haunches.³⁶ As Parsons (1986: 43) recounted, the sculpture was found during farming operations at El Baúl, north of Bilbao, in 1976. It shares some features with the potbellies, such as a thick torso and wraparound limbs, yet its narrow neck sets it apart from the mostly neckless potbellies, and it is probably Late Classic in date; its narrow neck also recalls that of the Tajumulco sculpture illustrated by Tejeda (1947: 121, no. 9). Several monuments from the Cotzumalguapa Nuclear Zone (Chinchilla 1996: 107, 219–221) portray figures making similar, crossed-arm gestures. As Chinchilla (1996) described, although several monuments from El Baúl and neighboring Bilbao date to the Late Preclassic, the major florescence of the Cotzumalguapa Nuclear Zone, which encompasses El Baúl, Bilbao, El Castillo, and other sites, took place during the Late Classic, when sculptures such as El Baúl Monument 25 and El Castillo Monuments 11 and 12 were carved. Navarrete, Lee, and Silva Rhoads (1993) also documented a series of stone monuments depicting human figures with crossed arms and wearing loincloths in Chiapas that date to the Late Classic to Postclassic



Figure 4.48. Tiltepec Monument 34. Drawing by author after Navarrete and Hernández (2000: fig. 11a).

periods. Most of these figures appear to stand upright, and several have legs that are either somewhat truncated or that wrap around the monument.³⁷ While I do not intend, in this discussion, to imply that the Tiltepec monuments also date to the Late Classic period, I do wish to emphasize the difficulty of establishing temporal parameters for some of the features associated with the Tiltepec potbellies, including their crossed arms, their loincloths, and the “bowling ball” features of the small medallions. Rather than lump them in an unproblematized way into the corpus of Preclassic potbellies, it is crucial to note

those features that make their dating and stylistic affiliations difficult to pinpoint with any certainty.

Despite the problematic issues of dating and external influences that one encounters when considering the Tiltepec potbellies, it is prudent to reiterate the obvious relationship they share with monuments at the site of San Miguel, Tabasco, located 40 km east of La Venta, as pointed out by Taube (2004: 158). The turtle carapace-like cartouches that appear on Tiltepec Monuments 26 and 27 compare closely to those that appear in a series of repeating, schematic turtle-shaped medallions on a monument from San Miguel originally reported by Stirling (1957: plate 50). Stirling described the sculpture as a fragmentary monumental head, like those of Early Preclassic San Lorenzo and Middle Preclassic La Venta, which had apparently been recarved at some point in the ancient past. These turtle-like cartouches link this Tabasco monument not only to the Tiltepec sculptures, but to the potbelly from San Bartolo, Guatemala. According to Rust (1992: 127), the site of San Miguel

began in the Late La Venta period as a relatively small village cluster in the Río Bari zone. During the first half of the Late Preclassic, after La Venta's demise as a major center, San Miguel grew considerably in size and importance; several earthen mounds ranging up to 12 m in height were constructed in a central plaza, where stone sculpture occurs in styles closely allied to Late Preclassic examples from Pacific coastal Chiapas (Parsons 1986; Stirling 1957).

During the Early San Miguel period (500–200 B.C.), the site shows increasingly clear evidence of links between this portion of the Gulf coast and the developing complex society in the Maya regions of the east and south. One recently excavated deposit in San Miguel's central mound group, radiocarbon dated at about 300 B.C., produced elaborately carved and incised ceramics that closely resemble contemporary "Post-Olmec" or Izapan-style carvings at Kaminaljuyu and other Late Preclassic centers (Rust 1987: Fig. 8.2).

As a result of Rust's excavations, the dating of the San Miguel sculpture with the turtle carapaces to the Late Preclassic period is more secure. This proposed dating is further supported stylistically by the sculpture of a seated figure attributed to San Miguel, which possesses the closed and puffy eyes typical of potbelly sculptures (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: fig. 16a).³⁸ The face of the figure is enclosed within an odd framing device or circular opening that may be part of a tall headdress. In contrast to the other stylistic features of the Tiltepec potbellies discussed earlier, this parallel with two monuments from San Miguel seems to support a Late Preclassic date

for Tiltepec monuments, or at least particular aspects of their design. Moreover, the relationship between the San Miguel sculptures, the Tiltepec monuments, and the San Bartolo potbelly further substantiate Rust's (1992) assertions, based on ceramic data, that San Miguel was participating in a communication sphere that encompassed the Pacific slope and the Maya Lowlands during the Late Preclassic.

When one assembles the various lines of evidence associated with the Tiltepec potbellies, they point to very diverse stylistic influences that were incorporated into the potbellies' production. The monuments certainly share a number of features that set them apart from potbellies from other sites or regions. Six of the nine wear loin-cloths, two of which include a vertical, incised design. Eight of the nine also bear some sort of headdress that incorporates a chin strap or framing band that encircles the face. Four and possibly five of the potbellies have arms crossed over their chests, a gesture seen only rarely in potbellies from other sites. Noteworthy, too, is the fact that none of them is obese; rather, they are all stout or barrel chested. The formal diversity that characterizes the Tiltepec monuments makes dating them stylistically virtually impossible, as many of these traits were not only widely shared, but persisted for centuries. This complexity may be exacerbated, in part, by the location of Tiltepec at a crossroads of communication connecting the Olmec region, Central Mexico, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and southern Mesoamerica. While dating the arrival of these various influences at Tiltepec is fraught with difficulty, I would argue that these diverse currents were integrated into an already fully developed Preclassic potbelly tradition. While some traits of the Tiltepec monuments, such as the puffy features and turtle-shaped cartouches, seem to be Late Preclassic in date, others, such as the simplified "bowling ball" faces, bear a resemblance to Central Mexican figurine traditions that appear to have been produced in greater frequency during later periods, beginning in the Early Classic. By contrast, the potbellies from nearby Arriaga and La Perseverancia (discussed later) are much more in keeping with the traditional potbelly corpus and serve as a foil for the atypical Tiltepec monuments. It must also be remembered, as touched on in Chapter 3, that the vicinity encompassing Tonalá, Tiltepec, and Tzutzuculi witnessed stone-sculpting traditions from as early as the Middle Preclassic period, and occupation in the region persisted into the Postclassic. Perhaps the eclectic nature of the Tiltepec potbellies can be attributed, in part, to the long and vibrant sculpting traditions that characterized this zone; this seems a reasonable conclusion that does not necessitate the suggestion that the Tiltepec monuments were recarved at

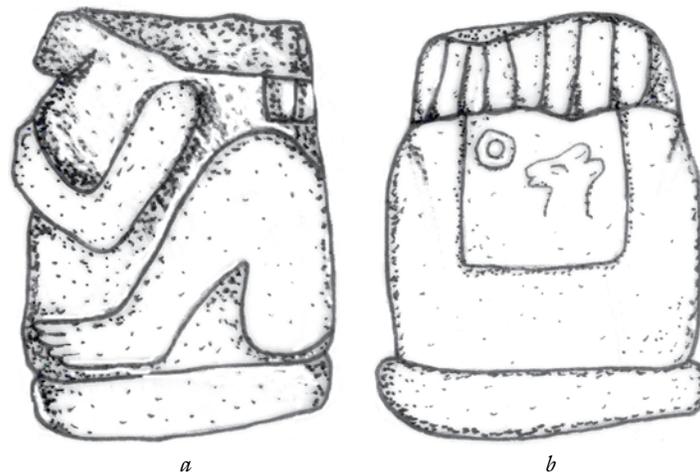


Figure 4.49. Colonia Alvaro Obregón potbelly: (a) profile view; (b) rear view. Drawings by author.

some later period, although this possibility should not be ruled out.

In addition to the Tiltepec monuments, several other potbellies have been reported from Chiapas. A small (59 cm), headless, columnar-shaped potbelly from Alvaro Obregón, now located in the Museo Regional de Tapachula, displays the typical wraparound limbs, and the carving of its legs is similar to that of potbellies from Tiltepec, as if to indicate that the figure is seated on its haunches (Fig. 4.49a) (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: fig. 13). The back of the figure displays what is either a vertically striated collar or hanging locks of hair, as well as a rectangular cartouche with glyphlike elements, including one dot and the head of a deer or rabbit (Fig. 4.49b). Navarrete and Hernández (2000: 594) suggested three alternative scenarios to explain this glyphic cartouche: (1) it is an early example of a calendrical sign on a Preclassic sculpture; (2) the sculpture was recarved with these signs during a later period; or (3) the entire sculpture dates to a later period. I tend to agree with their second suggestion.

A mostly headless potbelly from La Perseverancia (84 cm height) possesses typical wraparound limbs and remnants of drooping cheeks and seemingly pursed lips (López Vassallo 2007: 37; Navarrete and Hernández 2000: fig. 14a). It has a round concavity on its chest in the position of a pectoral, 13 cm in diameter, which Navarrete and Hernández (2000: 594) compared to the rectangular depression on the chest of Monte Alto Monument 11. A small, 68-cm-tall potbelly from Arriaga (Fig. 4.50a), west of La Perseverancia, has wraparound limbs, sports a headdress or headband, and wears a collar with a central, bowl-like design below it that is difficult to discern (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: fig. 15). Its eyes appear to be open and are marked above by incised,

arching eyebrows. Another potbelly from the Tonalá region was photographed by Claudia García-Des Lauriers in 2004 when it was located at the house of Don Ramón Zambrano on Cerro Bernal (Fig. 4.50b); it is now gone and its current location is unknown. It has fleshy cheeks and an unusual ridge around the base of its head that extends around to the sides and, in the front, bears some resemblance to a beard.³⁹ Although beardlike elements are known on two other potbellies – one from Nopiloa (Fig. 4.52b) and the other from Teopantecuanitlan (Fig. 4.54), both discussed later – the beards, if indeed that is what they represent, display little resemblance to each other. Most significantly, the potbelly from Cerro Bernal bears the pursed lips seen on other potbellies.

The Casa Cultural in Tonalá also possesses two other severely eroded and unprovenienced sculptures, grouped haphazardly in the patio space, which may be related to the potbelly tradition. Working with Ricardo López Vassallo and Michael Love, we took photos of these sculptures in 2010 in an effort to document the possibility that they were potbellies or monuments with related characteristics. The first (Fig. 4.50c) is missing a significant portion of its head and chest, but enough remains of the monument to discern its obese form and wraparound arms. The second (Fig. 4.50d) is also considerably damaged and/or mutilated, with extensive areas of exfoliation visible on the stone's surface and an unusual protuberance on the back that defies the more typically boulder-like form of most potbellies. Although half of the head is missing, one open eye and possibly pursed lips can be discerned, as can faint vestiges of a chin strap that frames the figure's face and extends upward toward a horizontal headband. This chin strap is unusual for potbellies and compares much more closely to Tiltepec Monument 1 (Fig. 4.42a) or Middle Preclassic Olmec-style regalia, yet



Figure 4.50. Potbellies from the Tonalá region: (a) Arriaga potbelly (photo by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia); (b) potbelly from Cerro Bernal, current whereabouts unknown (photo by Claudia García-Des Lauriers in 2004); (c) unidentified monument in Tonalá Casa Cultural (photo by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia); (d) unidentified monument in Tonalá Casa Cultural (photo by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

the figure's wraparound limbs are more consistent with potbelly canons of representation.

The final potbelly reported from Chiapas is Miscellaneous Monument 70 (80 cm height), which was discovered at Izapa on Mound 30b in association with a small, irregularly shaped stone altar (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982: fig. 6.15). According to Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa (1982: 107), the context of the potbelly and altar suggests a Late or Terminal Preclassic date, “almost surely later than the bulk of the

Izapa sculptures.” This potbelly and altar configuration mirrors the arrangement of stela–altar pairs throughout Izapa and parallels the relationship between the Chocolá potbelly and its associated altar.

An unusual monument from Chiapas warrants attention. A drum-shaped sculpture carved with serpents and three human faces similar to those of the potbellies was discovered at the site of Ojo de Agua in the Upper Grijalva Basin of Chiapas by Douglas Bryant (2008) (Fig. 4.51a). As he reported, the sculpture, 29 cm in diameter, perhaps

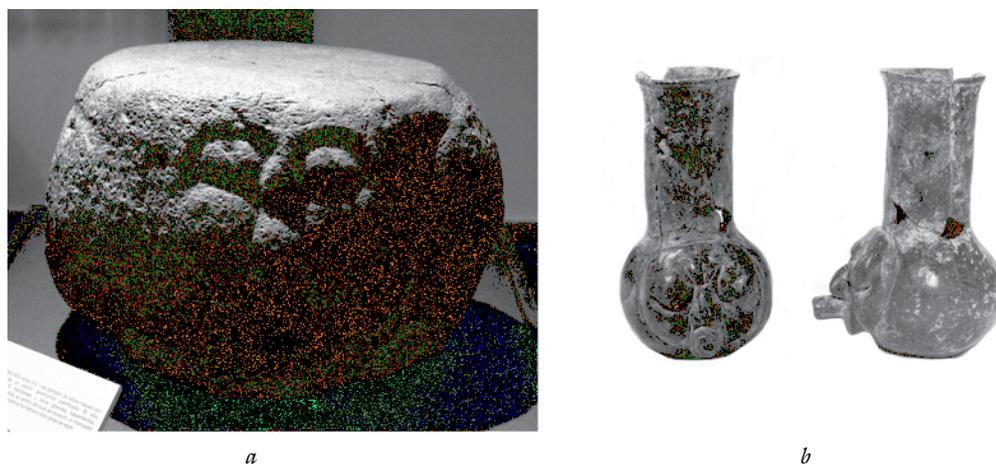


Figure 4.51. Related objects from Chiapas: (a) drum-shaped sculpture from Ojo de Agua, Upper Grijalva Basin of Chiapas (photo by Michael Love, authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia); (b) two views of vessel from Chiapa de Corzo Mound 17 archaeological salvage project (photo courtesy of Thomas A. Lee Whiting and the New World Archaeological Foundation, Brigham Young University).

functioned as a ballcourt marker and was found in “the middle of the ballcourt playing alley” in a location similar to that of other stone monuments “frequently recovered from the centers of ballcourts in the upper Grijalva Basin (Agrinier 1983, 1993)” (Bryant 2008: 42). According to Bryant (2008: 192), Ojo de Agua was initially occupied in the Middle Preclassic period, c. 500 B.C., by people participating in “the Zoque ceramic tradition prevalent throughout the Grijalva Basin.” However, the site was abandoned by 300 B.C., only to be reoccupied during the Late Preclassic period, c. 100 B.C., by people demonstrating a “Maya cultural orientation” (Bryant 2008: 167). Although found within the context of an Early Classic ballcourt, it is tempting to suggest, on the basis of style, that the monument is Late Preclassic in date. The first human face, framed by two serpent heads, is rather heart shaped, with full cheeks and thick-lidded eyes, one of which is damaged. The second face bears an even closer relationship to the bloated features of potbelly sculptures and displays closed eyes, heavy cheeks, and distinctly rounded or pursed lips. The features of the third and final face are a bit more difficult to discern, but appear to depict sunken eyes and an oval, clearly outlined mouth. While the context of these puffy-faced characters on a drum-shaped monument is unique, the features of the faces compare closely to those of potbelly monuments, monumental heads with similar features known from Kaminaljuyu, Takalik Abaj, and La Vigía, as well as Kaminaljuyu Monument 10, in which a jowly-cheeked visage is portrayed repeatedly around the sides of the sculpture.⁴⁰

Lastly, an effigy jar from Chiapa de Corzo is important to note (Fig. 4.51b). According to Thomas Lee (personal

communication 2010), the vessel came from a Late Preclassic Francesca-phase cache (Cache 11) in Mound 17, which was destroyed during construction of the local Nestlé plant.⁴¹ The effigy jar depicts a puffy-cheeked visage with bulbous eyes and extended, emphatically pursed lips, especially visible in the profile view. The similarities between this image and monuments with pursed lips, such as the unprovenienced head from Guatemala (Fig. 4.7a), Finca Sololá Monument 1 (Fig. 4.10b), and examples from Kaminaljuyu and Tiltepec, are remarkable and demonstrate that the attributes associated with potbelly monuments during the Late Preclassic period could also be extended to elite ceramic wares.

Mexico: Veracruz

Stirling (1943: 24, plate 10c) recorded an eroded potbelly, Monument L (66 cm height), at the site of Tres Zapotes, which he described as a “dwarflike potbellied human figure with bent elbows and hands placed over the stomach” (Fig. 2.2).⁴² Although the face is quite eroded, the contours of jowly cheeks are visible. As will be recalled, a horizontal peg sculpture, Monument F, with related puffy yet distinct facial characteristics, is also documented from Tres Zapotes (Pool 2010: fig. 5.18; Stirling 1943: plate 8a). According to Stirling, Monument L possesses a circular base; James Porter (1989a: 108), however, noted that, despite the monument’s poor preservation, “short incipient legs” were indicated.

Another potbelly was recorded by Navarrete and Hernández (2000: fig. 18) at the Jardín del Baluarte de Santiago, Veracruz. However, their photo is quite dark,



Figure 4.52. Veracruz potbellies: (a) Polvaredas potbelly; (b) Nopiloa potbelly; (c) Manlio Fabio Altamurano potbelly. Photos by Michael Love, authorized by the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, Universidad Veracruzana.

and details of the figure's body and facial features are not visible.

The most extensive documentation of potbellies in the state of Veracruz is found in the work of John Scott (1980, 1988), who recorded several examples, including one from Polvaredas. The Polvaredas potbelly (76 cm height) (Fig. 4.52a) was excavated by Alfonso Medellín Zenil in the municipality of Soledad de Doblado, located about 30 km southwest of the city of Veracruz in the Remojadas area (Medellín 1960: plate 69). It possesses the typical wraparound limbs, sagging cheeks, fatty eyelids over almond-shaped eyes that appear to be closed, a small rectangular pectoral, and a broad headdress or transverse crest that runs from one side of the head to the other, not unlike that on the potbelly from Arriaga, Chiapas. The almost egglike shape of the Polvaredas potbelly brings to mind the egg-shaped monument from Lake Catemaco that features similarly closed eyes and swollen facial features, as well as several of the Tiltepec monuments.⁴³ Medellín (1960: plate 69) further illustrated a fragmentary stone head from La Vigía, also located in the municipality of Soledad de Doblado, with bulbous cheeks and closed eyes (Fig. 4.53). Held between the parted lips of the mouth is what appears to be a small bead. Medellín (1960: 117) did not include the precise dimensions of the La Vigía head or illustrate any others, but he did indicate that other examples exist, all of which are approximately 40 cm in diameter.⁴⁴

A headless potbelly, only 30 cm high, was recorded by J. Scott (1980: fig. 3) in Veracruz City, and it displays the large belly and wraparound limbs typical of other potbellies. J. Scott (1980: 244, 247–248, fig. 16) documented two more, one of which he referred to as the Loma de



Figure 4.53. Stone head from La Vigía. Drawing by author after Medellín (1960: plate 69).

Santa Clara potbelly. This potbelly, now in the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, has been more recently identified as hailing from the site of Nopiloa in the municipality of Tierra Blanca (Fig. 4.52b). It has a stout stomach, wraparound arms, bulging cheeks, almond-shaped eyes that appear to be closed, and a broad crest that runs across the top of the head from one side to the other, as on the Polvaredas potbelly. An intriguing characteristic of the Nopiloa potbelly (59 cm height) is the beardlike element that falls from its lower lip and resembles a goatee. The other potbelly, reputedly from the town of Antigua, Veracruz, as depicted in J. Scott (1980: 244, 247), is set in cement from the waist up and is reported to have come from Cortés's palace.⁴⁵ As Scott commented, such stone monuments are clearly not in their original contexts and have been moved about a great deal since their creation.



Figure 4.54. Teopantecuanitlan potbelly. Photo courtesy of Gerardo Gutiérrez.

Another potbelly on display in the Xalapa Museum is reportedly from Manlio Fabio Altamurano, west of the city of Veracruz, and has bulbous cheeks, wraparound arms, and eyes that are strangely circular and may have been reworked (Fig. 4.52c). The figure wears a loincloth of some sort, as well as a large fish-shaped pectoral probably carved at a later date, which explains the museum signage labeling this figure “Dios Obeso 2 Pescado.”

Of the seven potbellies documented in Veracruz, only one could be described as particularly obese; most are only stout or thick bodied. All six that possess heads appear to have the typical broad, puffy cheeks. The eyes of the Veracruz potbellies display variation, with only two having clearly closed eyes and only one of these two with obviously swollen lids. The Polvaredas potbelly conforms most closely to patterns seen elsewhere, with its closed eyes and heavy lids, as does the fragmentary head from La Vigía. Two of the potbellies, from Polvaredas and Nopiloa, wear some sort of narrow band or headdress that runs across the top of the head from ear to ear; interestingly, the only other potbelly with a comparable headdress is from Arriaga, Chiapas. This horizontal headdress differs considerably from the vertical “mohawk” ones worn by Bilbao/Concepción Monuments 46 and 47.

Mexico: Guerrero

A sculpture related to potbellies was documented and described by Guadalupe Martínez Donjuán (2010)

during her investigations at the site of Teopantecuanitlan in Guerrero (Fig. 4.54). The monument is 1.40 m in height and portrays a portly individual with arms that wrap around to the front of its body. The figure carries an object in its left hand and wears a loincloth with a waistband that continues around the back. Unlike most potbellies, however, the figure kneels, and its legs and feet are visible at the rear. The face of the figure was destroyed by plowing, but Martínez Donjuán (2010: 73–74) interprets a smooth, rectangular plane descending from the front of the face down to the figure’s breastbone region as a “long, false beard or a duck-bill mask,” which she related to the Tuxtla Statuette (Holmes 1907) and the figure on La Venta Altar 7. Martínez Donjuán noted that the monument represents a distinct departure from other sculptures at Teopantecuanitlan and a sort of hybrid form that appears to combine duck-billed imagery with that of the potbellies more familiar from coastal Guatemala. The same relationship between potbellies and duck-billed figures was posited by Navarrete and Hernández (2000: 595–596), who related the obese figure on Cerro de las Mesas Monument 5, which wears a duck-billed mask, to potbellies and figures such as the Tuxtla Statuette. They cautioned, however, that the similarities were “more in spirit than in the details.”

The hybrid form of the Teopantecuanitlan monument once again demonstrates the variability between potbellies and other Preclassic sculptural types. Taube (2004: 169–173) suggested that Preclassic duck-billed figures – including the Tuxtla Statuette, a pendant in the collection at Dumbarton Oaks, and the individual on La Venta Altar 7, as well as several others – anticipate Classic and Postclassic duck-billed characters that he related to the Aztec deity Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl and an agricultural fertility complex associated with wind and rain. The antiquity of duck-billed figures is attested by the discovery by Rosenswig (2003, 2010: fig. 6.15) of a duck-billed human on an effigy tecomate fragment from a stratified midden in Cuauhtémoc, Chiapas, dated to between 1400 and 1250 B.C. Rosenswig’s discovery is particularly intriguing because this is the earliest example of a duck-billed human figure in Mesoamerica, which predates other examples from the Middle Preclassic, or post-900 B.C., Gulf Coast region. The presence of numerous duck-billed pendant forms and representations throughout the Preclassic and Classic periods further alludes to a costuming or performance complex and suggests that the sculpture from Teopantecuanitlan may reference these associations with costumed performance.

Beyond the duck-billed associations, it is essential to acknowledge that the head of the Teopantecuanitlan potbelly, particularly from the rear, has a somewhat



Figure 4.55. Two views of unprovenienced mushroom stone-potbelly hybrid from Guatemala. Photo by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Fred Bove.

phallic appearance, as it is clearly differentiated by a deep ridge from the shaftlike neck of the figure (see Martínez Donjuán 2010: fig. 3.22). As such, it can be compared to Pasaco Monument 1 (Fig. 4.13a), which J. Scott (1988: 29) described as distinctly phallic, and Los Cerritos Sur Monument 1 (Fig. 4.8). All of these monuments might also be viewed in light of a mushroom stone in a private collection that combines a projecting mushroom/phallic top with the head and body of a potbelly (Fig. 4.55).⁴⁶ The relationship between the Teopantecuanitlan sculpture and these other Preclassic forms and iconographic motifs is complex, and suggests a fairly flexible set of traits that were shared by overlapping categories of sculpture but that seem to intersect with the potbelly form.

Conclusions

This corpus of potbellies is, without a doubt, incomplete, but it does represent the most extensive one compiled to

date. There are surely potbellies in private collections, in museum vaults, and in small regional museums that I have not visited, which are not included in this study. One of the greatest challenges to assembling this corpus is the fact that many of the potbellies are poorly illustrated, and some – particularly those that lack good provenience or are severely eroded – have never been published. This situation calls to mind a comment made by Navarrete and Hernández (2000: 594) with reference to the Arriaga potbelly. As they related, the potbelly, now located in the Museo Regional de Tuxtla Gutiérrez, was originally brought to the National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City by Enrique Juan Palacios, where it spent many years in the bodega of that museum, a “sad destiny for works considered ugly.” Many of these potbellies are, I would have to concede, not the most beautiful or aesthetically appealing monuments within the corpus of Preclassic art. Yet as will be discussed more fully in the following chapters, homely or not, they are critical for understanding the developmental trajectory, content, and function of Preclassic sculpture.

Blurring the Lines: Public Space, Private Space, Sculpture, and Figurines

Introduction

As addressed in [Chapter 4](#), discussions of dating, context, and stylistic seriation with regard to the potbelly phenomenon are inevitably hindered by the consistent lack of contextual data for the vast majority of potbelly sculptures. This study, in fact, grows out of a desire to move beyond these rather barren debates, which may never be adequately resolved, and to suggest a different avenue of investigation that considers possible sources for this sculpture tradition. I begin the chapter by looking at this alternative evidence, which is typically found in the domestic sectors of Middle Preclassic sites. I focus in particular on a subset of figurines from the Middle Preclassic site of La Blanca, Guatemala, because they share certain key facial attributes – bloated cheeks and closed eyes with swollen lids – with the potbelly sculptures and related monumental heads from Monte Alto (Guernsey 2010a; Guernsey and Love 2008).

At stake here is the question of why these figurines, so ubiquitous in household assemblages during the Middle Preclassic, nearly vanish from use during the ensuing Late Preclassic period in this region. It certainly seems more than serendipitous that the stone potbellies, with their remarkably similar repertoire of closed, puffy eyes and bloated cheeks, emerged at the moment when the figurine tradition waned. As I explore in detail, it appears that specific types of domestic ritual were curtailed at the end of the Middle Preclassic period in southeastern Mesoamerica, at the same moment when there is increasing evidence for public ritual, performed within spaces of the site that were physically and conceptually linked to the political and administrative structures of an increasingly centralized Late Preclassic ruling authority.

This chapter also questions the patterns of continuity between the puffy-faced ceramic figurines and their stone,

potbellied counterparts. Can a link be made between the two discrete forms? And, if so, what does this tell us about the relationship between small-scale sculpture – or ceramic figurines – and large-scale sculpture like the potbellies? Or, even more important, what does it reveal about the connections between these different sculptural forms – small and ceramic or large and stone – and their respective types of space, private and public, in Preclassic Mesoamerica? It is queries such as these that I focus on in the final part of the chapter, as the evidence indicates that the boundaries between private and public space in Preclassic Mesoamerica were porous, yet subject to increasing control with the advent of the Late Preclassic period and the rise of the first states.

At the heart of this chapter is a contextual examination of these sculptural transformations, in which key attributes of small-scale ceramic figurines were transformed into stone on a much grander scale and, often, in a dramatically different setting. Although these formal transformations are interesting in and of themselves, I seek to reconcile them with the social transformations that accompanied the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic. In order to do so, I cast my net fairly broadly and move beyond the Pacific slope to consider how ceramics and sculpture negotiated the realms of private and public space at other sites during this dynamic Preclassic period.

The ideas presented in this chapter are, by necessity, couched within a larger discussion of “private” versus “public” space, ritual, and exchange. As alluded to in the introduction to this book, the use of terms such as “private” and “public” provides a useful heuristic for analysis, yet surely obscures what in fact was a complex and perpetually in flux continuum of space and activities. A number of scholars have tackled this very problem with regard to Mesoamerica, and I turn to their work in order to elucidate my own discussion. As these scholars have addressed, ritual activities of various form, purpose, and scale permeated many spaces that ranged from private to public. For societies like those of ancient Mesoamerica, where politics and ritual were inextricably intertwined, teasing apart the “functions” of space can be an exercise in frustration, if not futility. Spaces probably rarely served a single purpose, and our ability to ascertain when they were “private” in nature, or with restricted access, versus when they were “public,” in the sense of unfettered access, is limited by the data at hand. It is logical to assume that many spaces operated within a broad spectrum from private to public, with audiences that ranged from small scale to large scale depending on the event. Yet even with

these caveats, I maintain that a “sculptural lens” – or a method that foregrounds evidence gleaned from sculpture of all sorts and scales – provides nuanced insight into these very issues of space, ritual, audience, and meaning and the ways they transformed through time.

Middle Preclassic figurines and issues of context and use

La Blanca, as described in [Chapter 3](#), was the major center along the Pacific Coast of Guatemala during the Middle Preclassic period and one of the largest sites of its time in ancient Mesoamerica ([Fig. 3.9](#)) ([Love 2002b](#)). It flourished during the Conchas phase (900–600 B.C.), when large earthen mounds and monumental architecture were constructed in the site center as well as extensive habitation zones that included many dozens of low residential mounds in the surrounding area. The domestic assemblages from these residences, which account for both elites and commoners, are characterized by an abundance of hand-modeled ceramic figurines. At La Blanca, as at many Preclassic sites throughout Mesoamerica, such figurines are omnipresent in household assemblages ([Love and Guernsey 2006](#); also see [Rosenswig 2010: 186–187](#)). It is important to acknowledge here, however, that figurines at La Blanca are not found exclusively in domestic contexts. Nevertheless, when figurines are found in civic or nondomestic spaces at La Blanca, they typically come from structural fill that appears to have been gathered, in part, from miscellaneous domestic deposits that also include broken ceramics, animal bone, obsidian fragments, and shattered *manos* and *metates* – all the discarded refuse of domestic sectors, which was combined with earth and clay to construct the large structures, such as Mound 1, at the site.

The consistent association between Preclassic figurines and domestic contexts is not unique to La Blanca or the Pacific slope region. For Middle Preclassic Chalcatzingo, [Grove \(1984: 85\)](#) observed that the abundance of figurines “around residential areas suggests their probable use in household rituals.” [Cyphers \(1988: 99\)](#) elaborated on this, stating that, at Chalcatzingo, “[s]patial occurrence of figurines tends to be exclusive of public ceremonial contexts. They are quite rare as burial offerings and are not found in association with monumental art. Although unspecified midden or fill may contain figurine fragments due to ancient earth moving activities, rigorous analysis of archaeological contexts shows that these objects tend to be associated with habitation structures, their patios, and directly associated respective garbage middens.” [Marcus \(1998: 3\)](#) documented a somewhat

similar pattern for Preclassic Oaxaca. As she detailed, “In Oaxaca, figurines occur in three *primary* contexts – in residences, in burials, and in deliberately arranged scenes in households. Their most common *secondary* context is in household midden debris ([Drennan 1976a, 1976b](#); [Marcus 1989, 1996](#)). Figurines found on the surface, encountered while cutting the profile of an excavation, or redeposited as mound fill are considered to be in *tertiary* context” (emphasis in original). She underscored this evidence by adding, “It is noteworthy that public buildings, including Men’s Houses, were *not* a primary context for figurines.”¹

Domestic contexts for figurine use are also well documented in the Maya Lowlands during the Preclassic. According to [Brown \(2003: 105\)](#), “Household level ritual activities are evident at Blackman Eddy [Belize] from the numerous figurines found near the early structures and within household features cut into the bedrock.” The same pattern appears to hold true at first glance for Middle Preclassic Cahal Pech, Belize, where figurines have been found in association with all houses within the community ([Cheetham 1998: 43–44](#)). However, figurines also appear in ritual deposits at the north and south corners of a large Middle Preclassic platform (Platform B) ([Garber and Awe 2008](#)).² As [Garber and Awe \(2008: 187–189\)](#) detailed, these deposits were layered to form what they interpret to be cosmograms and included such materials as polished greenstone, obsidian chips, and river pebbles in groups of three or thirteen; in one was placed a headless figurine and in the other a disembodied figurine head. They linked these deposits/cosmograms to themes of resurrection, given the presence, also in Platform B, of two stone slab-capped crypts, one of which contained a human skull that had been placed in a bowl and the other of which held a headless skeleton. They concluded that these deposits, with their figurines, indicate rituals or some sort of orchestrated narrative related to the deceased individual ([Garber and Awe 2008: 189](#)).³ As [James Garber \(personal communication 2011\)](#) added, this evidence from the Maya Lowlands strongly suggests that figurines could, at times, serve roles in community rituals at structures such as Platform B. He cautioned, however, that contexts such as these are difficult to label either “private” or “public”; rather, they point to blurred boundaries between domestic structures and civic/ceremonial spaces that were probably controlled by an emerging elite at this time (also see [Brown 2008](#)). Nonetheless, [Garber \(personal communication 2011; Garber and Awe 2008: 189\)](#), [James Awe \(personal communication 2011; Awe 1992\)](#) and [M. Kathryn Brown \(personal communication 2011; Brown and Garber 2008: 154\)](#) all view the Middle Preclassic figurines from sites such as Blackman

Eddy and Cahal Pech – whether recovered from within a household or in more “communal” spaces – as imbued with messages derived from long-standing domestic ritual traditions that were gradually being manipulated by an emerging elite.

This situation, in which figurines were utilized not only in domestic ritual per se but also in communal rituals held in association with newly developing civic/ceremonial spaces or structures, is paralleled at the Preclassic site of Playa de los Muertos in Honduras. Joyce (2000a: 38–39) initially noted: “The few Playa de los Muertos figurines documented archaeologically were found within household groups, either discarded in trash or in burials under house floors. At none of these sites where these figurines are found is there any evidence for segregated spatial settings marked by monumental architecture or art. The figurines themselves were presumably viewed and used in small-scale interactions in the arenas of house compounds by members of the house and others closely connected to them.” In a later publication, however, Joyce (2003b: 250) clarified that, although it is indeed clear that Playa de los Muertos figurines “were used in practices carried out close to residential spaces,” there is also evidence that figurines were used “in ceremonies in newly-created spatial arenas separated from houses.”

Evidence from the site of Naranjo in the Guatemalan Highlands provides another counterpoint to this discussion and underscores that, as in Honduras and Belize, figurines could be used and deposited in nondomestic contexts. Bárbara Arroyo (personal communication 2011; also see Linares Palma 2009 and Linares Palma and Arroyo 2008: 83) noted that the majority of figurines at Middle Preclassic Naranjo derive not from domestic structures, but from places that appear to have been the locus of communal or more “public” ritual, particularly the South Platform. As Arroyo et al. (2007: 868) detailed, the South Platform contained a concentration of ceremonial deposits but no domestic refuse, which supports its identification as a location of ritual activity rather than a residence. This evidence suggests a pattern of use or discard that is markedly different from that documented at La Blanca and sites such as Chalcatzingo and San José Mogote – or even Cahal Pech, where figurines also characterize domestic structures. However, as Arroyo (personal communication 2011) acknowledged, the majority of the salvage operations at Naranjo have been concentrated in the center of the site, and corresponding data from residential sectors are lagging by comparison (Linares Palma 2009: 115–116).

Synthesizing these diverse data, which may reflect regional differences, poses a challenge. In the case of some sites, it seems safe to say that, when figurines occur

with some frequency in “public” ceremonial contexts, it is because household structures or settlement areas have not been excavated as extensively as “public” ones. By contrast, data derived from a number of sites where extensive excavations have explored both civic and domestic spaces point to a significantly higher concentration of figurines in Middle Preclassic domestic sectors than in corresponding nondomestic ones. Yet again, evidence from sites such as Playa de los Muertos and Cahal Pech illustrates that, at times, figurines were clearly employed in what might be characterized as community rituals; but, equally provocatively, the data also suggest that the boundaries between these spaces may not always have been strictly defined, maintained, or even well conceptualized during the Middle Preclassic in all regions or in the same ways.⁴ Despite this variability, when various lines of evidence are considered, there are threads of continuity that indicate, consistently and in a number of regions, that figurines are a sensitive indicator of domestic ritual activity during the Middle Preclassic period. Even when more civic or “public” contexts for figurines suggest their use in communal rituals – as at Playa de los Muertos, Cahal Pech, and Naranjo – I would maintain that the figurines still signified meanings that were consonant with quotidian, domestic ritual practices.

Questions of context for figurines are paralleled by debates concerning their meaning and function. Preclassic figurines have been interpreted as objects invoked in rites associated with important life-history events, stages in the life cycle, and the creation of social identity (Cyphers 1993; Joyce 2003b; Lesure 1997, 1999; S. Scott 2003). Other scholars have viewed them as indicative of ancestor veneration (Flannery and Marcus 1976; Grove and Gillespie 2002; Marcus 1998, 1999, 2009; Marcus and Flannery 1994), curing and disease prevention (Follensbee 2000), and fertility cults (Rands and Rands 1965). What unites these interpretations, nevertheless, is the consensus that figurines functioned as ritual objects, used primarily within households to visualize and/or legitimize different social roles, a conclusion supported by the data at La Blanca (Love and Guernsey 2006).⁵

La Blanca and the puffy-faced figurine tradition

With regard to the focus of this study, numerous figurines from La Blanca display the jowly cheeks and closed, puffy eyelids consistently associated with the Preclassic potbellies, as well as the massive heads from Monte Alto (Fig. 1.4) (Arroyo 2002; also see Ivic de Monterroso 2004: 420). The most complete figurine (11.5 cm height)

(Fig. 5.1) with these features at La Blanca represents an adult female (a determination based on the representation of breasts), wearing a skirt, collar, wristband, earspools, and a headdress that consists of a wraparound band and two “hornlike” projections, an attribute seen on other figurines at La Blanca and elsewhere (see Arroyo 2002: fig. 106b; Marcus 1998: fig. 6.5). The figurine also displays a solid, spherical nose bead, which may be a symbol of “breath” or life essence (see Houston and Taube 2000). This nearly complete figurine, missing only one arm, came from Mound 9, a household located in the elite residential precinct at the center of the site that was also associated with a quatrefoil-shaped altar, La Blanca Monument 3 (Love and Guernsey 2007). The figurine exhibits facial features that anticipate those of the potbellies and Monte Alto heads, including bulging cheeks and closed eyes with swollen lids. In contrast to most of the potbellies, however, this figurine has arms reaching outward to the sides and legs extending forward in a seated position. It is also worth noting that her belly is not obese and does not appear to represent pregnancy, but instead sags as if to represent maturity.⁶ The figurine is firmly dated to the Conchas phase, which indicates that this figurine type predates the stone potbellies, most of which appear to date to the Late Preclassic period or Middle to Late Preclassic transition. While the handling of the figure’s body and appendages clearly does *not* anticipate later potbelly sculptures, the striking similarities between the facial features of this figurine and those of many of the later potbellies and Monte Alto monumental heads are compelling.

Another nearly complete figurine from La Blanca possesses the same, though more eroded, facial features (Fig. 5.2a and b). The figurine wears a wraparound headband similar to that of the other figurine, although in this case it appears to be made of twisted cords or cloth and holds in place long hair that cascades down the individual’s back. The figurine’s right arm is bent at the elbow and reaches back, over the shoulder, as if smoothing the long locks of hair.⁷ Suspended from the collar around the neck and resting over the stomach is an enigmatic, pouchlike object; this assemblage covers the chest, so no breasts are discernible. The pouchlike object is somewhat circular and may have had a surface design at one time that is now effaced. Although the lower body is missing, the stumps of legs are visible, as is a horizontal waistband that separates the stomach from the lower body and the upper fragments of what appears to have been a skirt that encased the legs. Similar skirts appear on other figurines from La Blanca that represent women. I would thus suggest that this figurine, like the one described previously, represents a female with the heavy cheeks and

closed, bulbous eyes like those of the later stone potbelly sculptures. Another figurine from La Blanca (Fig. 5.2c), although without the distinctive puffy features, provides support for this contention. This figurine also has long flowing hair that drapes dramatically over the left shoulder and frames her profile face. Breasts are clearly visible, as is a detailed skirt with waistband. The similar ways in which the hair is rendered, as well as the comparable skirts, suggest that the previously discussed figurine also represents a female.

Although these are the only two figurines that possess distinctly bloated facial features as well as (mostly) intact bodies, forty-eight examples of disembodied heads with remarkably similar puffy features have been found in excavations at La Blanca, and they appear to represent a distinct type or category of individual. Thirty-two of these were recovered from domestic mounds at the site, and the remaining sixteen came from the fill associated with Mound 1. In addition to these forty-eight excavated examples, numerous other heads with the same facial features exist in surface collections made by Edwin Shook at La Blanca prior to systematic excavation of the site (Fig. 1.7). In fact, as Ivic de Monterroso (2004: 420) observed, the Shook collection contains seventy examples of figurines with closed, bulging eyes. Yet because only two figurines of this type at La Blanca retain bodies, it is impossible to know whether these facial features were consistently associated with a particular gender. This is compounded by the fact that the vast majority of figurines from La Blanca are incomplete, most representing disembodied heads, decapitated bodies, or other separate body parts such as legs, arms, hands, and feet. While many of the extant body/torso fragments in the collection from La Blanca do appear to represent female bodies (as suggested by the representation of breasts) (Arroyo 2002: 234), it is impossible to match these female bodies to the isolated heads with puffy features (despite my futile attempts to do so by poring over thousands of fragmentary figurines from individual operations in order to reunite heads with bodies).⁸ Thus, any discussion of the gender associations of these puffy-featured figurines is limited to the two examples with bodies, which provide too limited a sample to make generalizations about the possible gendered significance of these features during the Middle Preclassic at La Blanca.

The most consistent features of figurines of this type are the fleshy faces, often with full cheeks, closed eyes with distended lids, and broad, even bulbous noses. Many wear large, round earspools, and the most common headdress is a band of cloth that wraps around the head, often with a central medallion that contains an incised



Figure 5.1. Two views of seated female figurine with puffy features from La Blanca. Photos by Michael Love.

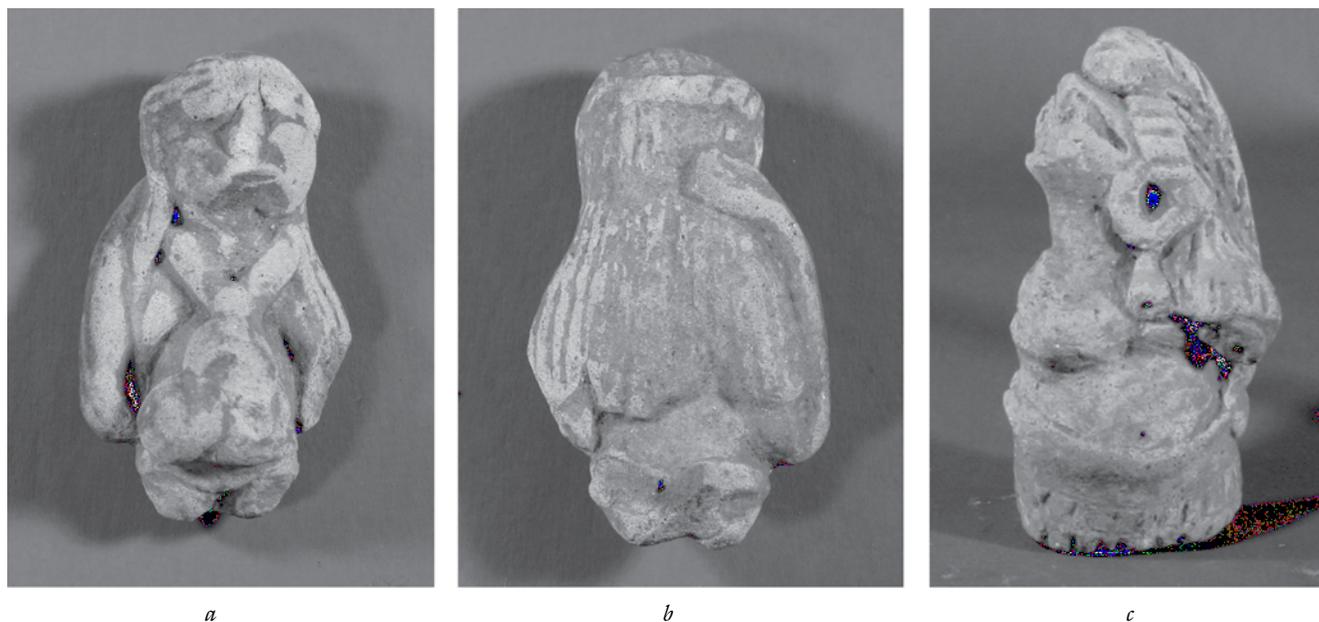


Figure 5.2. Female figurines from La Blanca: (a) puffy-faced figurine, frontal view; (b) puffy-faced figurine, rear view; (c) profile figurine with long hair. Photos by author.

cross (Fig. 5.3a and b). There is variation in the hairdos, including “hornlike” peaks on the sides of the head (Fig. 5.3c) and lobelike “bangs” that hang over the forehead, sometimes with vertical incisions (Fig. 5.3d and e).⁹ In other examples, the hair is textured in different ways (Fig. 5.3f and g). Likewise, there is variation in facial features, including several examples with partially open eyes, a few with short vertical striations on their closed eyelids or eyebrows, and several whose mouths are definitely open or lips deliberately parted, or who possess a spherical nose or breath beads.

Puffy-faced figurines beyond La Blanca

Jowly faces and closed, puffy eyes characterize a number of figurines found at other Preclassic sites, both within the vicinity of La Blanca and elsewhere. Coe (1961: 26, fig. 55p) documented one such figurine at nearby La Victoria, noting that it came from very late Conchas 2 deposits in Mound III, a 2.3-m-high mound that “had been built from gradually accumulating midden deposits and house foundations.” Rob Rosenswig (personal communication 2008, 2010: fig. 6.11b, c; see his Hernández Group,



Figure 5.3. Puffy-faced figurines from La Blanca showing a range of attributes: (a, b) headdresses with central medallions and incised crosses; (c) hornlike peaks on sides of the head; (d, e) lobelike bangs with or without incisions; (f) textured bangs; (g) rear view of figurine with textured bangs showing headband. Photos by author.

Type 7) recorded several examples of this figurine type in the adjacent region of Cuauhtémoc, Chiapas, in Conchas-phase contexts. Lesure (1993: fig. 6, 2009: fig. 11.1m) published a related example from salvage operations at El Varal, in the Mazatán region of Chiapas. Another figurine head, nearly identical to puffy-faced versions from La Blanca, is located in the Mazatán region figurine sample housed at the Research and Study Center of the New World Archaeological Foundation in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. Farther to the southeast, Dahlin (1978: fig. 3, d3) illustrated two fat-faced figurines with closed

eyes at Chalchuapa; one wears a headdress nearly identical to some seen at La Blanca. These figurines are identified as “Gonzales Fat-faced: Gonzales Variety,” which formed part of the Kulil figurine complex, dated to between 1200 and 600 B.C. Dahlin (1978: tables 1, 2) indicated that the Gonzales Fat-faced figurines appear during the middle of this time span, making them contemporary with the Middle Preclassic figurines from La Blanca.¹⁰ An example from the Middle Preclassic Guatemalan Highland site of Naranjo was also recovered from the west side of the South Platform (Fig. 5.4) (Bárbara Arroyo, personal

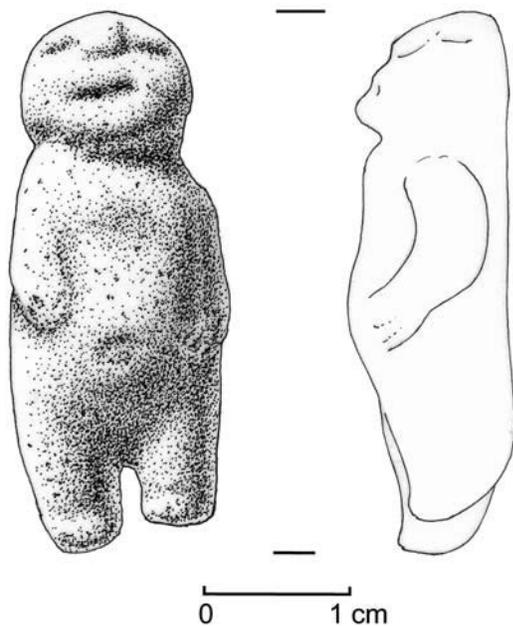


Figure 5.4. Figurine from Naranjo, Guatemala. Drawing by Adriana Linares, courtesy of Bárbara Arroyo and the Proyecto de Rescate Naranjo.

communication 2007; Linares Palma 2009: 77, fig. 34). Interestingly, this Naranjo example possesses a body with a heavy stomach around which are wrapped the figure's arms; it stands upright on two vertically extended legs. The navel is clearly rendered, although the figure is lacking any sexual features that would indicate gender. Its head is tilted back, as if looking upward, in a way that anticipates Concepción-Cementerio Monument 1 (Fig. 4.11a). Another figurine head from Naranjo also has closed eyes and bloated cheeks and may be related to this complex (see Linares Palma 2009: fig. 32). Related puffy-faced figurines also appear in archaeological assemblages from Kaminaljuyu (Gamio 1926: 219).¹¹

Puffy-faced figurines appear to have been fairly far flung during the Middle Preclassic, albeit somewhat rare, as a single published example with bloated features from La Venta, Tabasco, attests (Drucker 1952: plate 40A, l). A figurine with closed eyes rendered almost like slits, very dramatically swollen cheeks, and exaggerated lips from Middle Preclassic San Andrés, Tabasco, may also be related to this complex (Mary Pohl, personal communication 2010). As Tway (2004) described, however, its unfired state and lack of temper make it anomalous at San Andrés. While these examples indicate that puffy-faced figurines were not limited to the Pacific Coast, the available evidence suggests that they not only were more plentiful in this general vicinity, but also had a greater time depth. Figurines of this type have been recovered from Jocotal-phase contexts dating to the

Early to Middle Preclassic transition at the site of El Mesak, Guatemala (Mary Pye, personal communication 2008), and John Clark (personal communication 2008; Clark et al. 1990) reported a small stone figurine head with similar features from Early Preclassic Ojo de Agua, Mazatán, Chiapas (Fig. 5.5).¹²

A few particularly unusual figurines of this type from La Blanca warrant further discussion. One with the typical fleshy features and closed, bulging eyelids is perforated on the top of its head and functioned as a whistle (Fig. 5.6). A similar whistle, also with distended cheeks and closed eyes, is documented from Chalcatzingo. As Grove (1984: 88–105, plate 65) detailed, it was one of only two whistles with human features: “Each is a simple human head, about 6 cm long, with puffy hollow cheeks, and holes above the cheeks for eyes. . . . These are two-toned whistles, for each cheek is a sound chamber. The whistles are blown from the forehead area into the eyes, which are the inlets to the chamber.” Despite the pointy chin of the Chalcatzingo figurine, which differs from the chin of the La Blanca example, the correlations – closed, heavy-lidded eyes, puffed cheeks, and holes for blowing – are striking.

Several other puffy-faced figurines at La Blanca have pursed lips (Fig. 5.7a) identical to those of Finca Sololá Monument 1, San Juan Sacatepéquez Monument 1, Kaminaljuyu Monuments 57 and 58, and Tiltepec Monument 23, although they did not function as whistles. Such pursed lips are not, however, limited to puffy-faced figurines at La Blanca, as they do occasionally appear on figurines lacking these features at La Blanca and other Preclassic sites.¹³ This feature of dramatically pursed lips appears to have been widespread in Mesoamerica, as illustrated by two figurines in Feuchtwanger (1989: fig. 72) that display the same pursed lips as well as heavy-lidded eyes. A jadeite mask at Dumbarton Oaks (Benson 1981: figs. 8, 9) is also noteworthy for its unusual lips, which are pursed but separated by a very round hole; it has open eyes that are partially obscured by thick lids. Ricketson and Ricketson (1937: plates 74,d,2 and 75,b,e) documented “puffed-cheek” human effigy heads with pursed lips “as though the figure were blowing and cheeks are distended” that functioned as whistles from Uaxactun (Fig. 5.7b).¹⁴ As in the example from La Blanca, the mouthpieces of the Uaxactun whistles are at the top of the head; however, the faces lack the features of closed and heavy-lidded eyes. Similar puffy-cheeked whistles, though without the other distinct facial features of the La Blanca figurines, are widespread throughout the Preclassic period and appear in the assemblages of sites such as Blackman Eddy (M. Kathryn Brown, personal communication

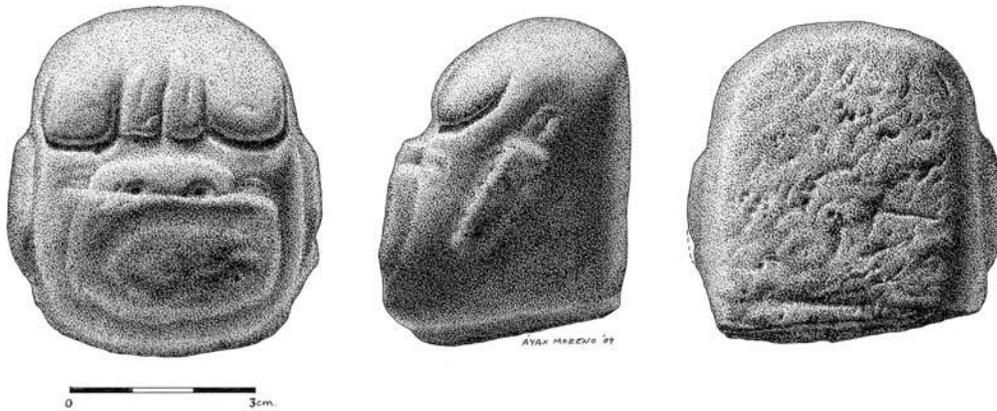


Figure 5.5. Three views of Ojo de Agua stone figurine head with closed, puffy eyes. Drawings by Ayax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

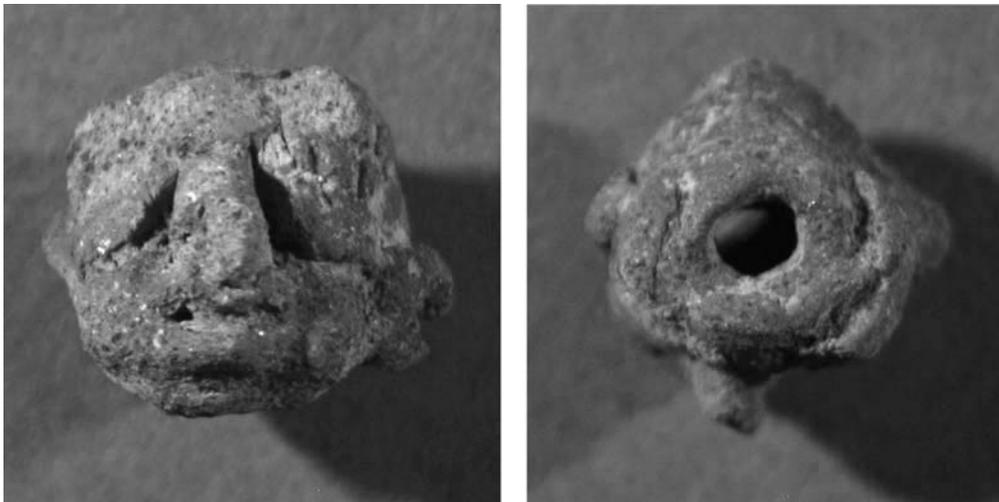


Figure 5.6. Puffy-faced figurine/whistle from La Blanca, views from front and top. Photos by author.

2008; Garber et al. 2004: fig. 3.3e), in the Guatemalan Highlands (Kidder 1965: fig. 3g), and in coastal Oaxaca (Hepp 2007: 176, photo 81).¹⁵ What this evidence suggests is that the pursed lips that appear on several of the stone potbellies were anticipated in widespread figurine traditions and that the pursed lips of the figurines were conceptually related to the emanation of sound or whistle making in a variety of regions. An Early Preclassic figurine from the Puebla–Tlaxcala region illustrated by García Cook (2005: fig. 17f) also possesses lips rounded into a distinct “O” shape, as if uttering some sound, and demonstrates the antiquity of this feature in figurine traditions.

A ceramic whistle attributed to Kaminaljuyu and dated to the Middle Preclassic Las Charcas phase reveals the most direct correlation with the later stone potbellies (Fig. 5.8). The whistle is formed as a potbelly, replete with wraparound arms and a collar remarkably similar

to those worn by stone potbellies at Kaminaljuyu. The whistle possesses protruding eyelids and heavy cheeks identical to those of stone potbellies, as well as pursed lips that compare to those previously noted and to those of the unprovenienced monumental head from Guatemala (Fig. 4.7a) (Chinchilla 2001–2002: fig. 4). It also unambiguously demonstrates that many of the most fundamental features of the stone potbellies – closed and puffy eyes, jowly cheeks, and in this case pursed lips – were already fully developed in small-scale ceramic traditions by the Middle Preclassic.

Given this widespread figurine and whistle tradition and its suite of features that anticipate those of the stone potbellies, it can be asserted that the Late Preclassic stone potbellies and monumental stone heads at Monte Alto trace several of their key attributes to Middle Preclassic, or probably even earlier, ceramic figurine traditions. To take this one step further, the data strongly suggest that

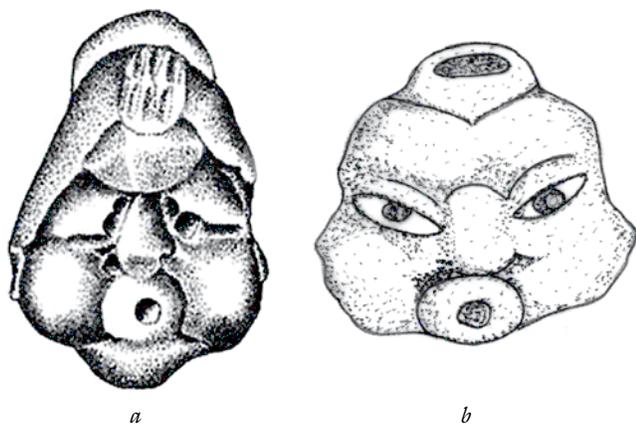


Figure 5.7. Pursed-lip and puffed-check figurines: (a) figurine from La Blanca (from Arroyo 2002: fig. 116f); (b) figurine from Uaxactun (drawing by author after Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: plate 75, b).

the stone potbellies were formally grounded in a tradition of representation that was developed in much earlier Preclassic domestic contexts.

Figurine use: Temporal patterns and implications on the Pacific slope

The implications of this evidence are loaded and warrant careful scrutiny, as they suggest that rulers – who were most likely responsible for monumental sculptural commissions – adopted specific motifs from earlier

domestic ritual objects and employed them on Late Preclassic stone potbelly sculptures. As my colleague Michael Love and I have discussed elsewhere (Guernsey 2010a; Guernsey and Love 2005; Love 1999a, 2002a; also see Arroyo 2004), there was a precipitous decline in domestic figurine use along the Pacific slope during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition, the juncture at which the earliest stone potbellies appeared. During the Middle Preclassic period, individual residences were the locus of ritual activity, to which thousands of figurines in domestic contexts attest. This is most definitely the case at Middle Preclassic La Blanca, where the vast number of ceramic figurines and large feasting vessels in domestic contexts suggests that household ritual – presumably outside the direct supervision of the ruler – was of major importance at this time.¹⁶ However, by the beginning of the Late Preclassic period, these tendencies changed abruptly. At El Ujuxte, which rose to power following the decline of La Blanca c. 600 B.C., domestic figurine use almost ceased. This decline in figurine use was concomitant with a decline in household feasting (Love, Castillo, and Balcárcel 1996: 8). By contrast, there is dramatic evidence for increased civic ritual, in the form of elaborate caches and rigidly orchestrated public spaces at El Ujuxte. A similar escalation in the centralization of power was manifested at other sites in this region, such as Izapa, Takalik Abaj, and Monte Alto, by a new emphasis on monumental sculpture to define and structure the ritual and administrative centers of the sites.¹⁷



Figure 5.8. Two whistles from Kaminaljuyu, the one on the right sharing features with potbelly monuments. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (photographic archives record identifier pea526667).

The data that reveal the most about the changes in the structure of ritual at the household level during this transition come from La Blanca and El Ujuxte, with significantly fewer comparative domestic data available from contemporaneous sites in the region. At Izapa, Ekholm (1989: 33) noted that the corpus of figurines consists of only approximately 130 heads and numerous body fragments, and that only rarely did she and her colleagues encounter a figurine in its original context. Her report indicates that, during the Middle Preclassic Escalón (650–450 B.C.) and Frontera phases (450–300 B.C.), figurines were common in various parts of the site. This tapered off during the following Guillen phase, which corresponds to the Late Preclassic and the period during which most of the stone monuments at Izapa were carved (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa 1982: 23, 133).¹⁸

This evidence suggests that Late Preclassic elites along the Pacific Coast and piedmont succeeded in deemphasizing ritual at the household level and moved it – figuratively and symbolically – into the sacred centers of sites (Guernsey 2010a; Guernsey and Love 2005, 2008).¹⁹ As already stated, this new attention to visualizing ritual within civic centers was manifested in a variety of ways, from monumental sculptural programs to rigid axial planning and astronomically significant alignments. Yet the transformation of puffy-faced figurines into larger-scale stone sculptures presents a unique opportunity to consider how, and why, the trappings and symbols of Middle Preclassic domestic ritual were reconfigured for use within public spaces that were controlled by rulers. Was this process the result of an overt appropriation of certain domestic rituals by Late Preclassic rulers? Or, perhaps less dramatically, was it a concession or nod to more traditional domestic rituals and belief systems, tolerated when under a ruler’s direct supervision and control?

Transformations in scale

The presumed transition from small-scale ceramic figurines to large-scale boulder sculptures demands careful consideration. Parsons (1986: 39), in spite of nagging questions of context and dating, asserted that “smaller potbelly sculptures are generally earlier and the larger Monte Alto boulder effigies and heads . . . are generally somewhat later.” Although virtually impossible to substantiate, Parsons’s proposed transition from smaller to larger versions of the stone potbellies could be argued to be a reflection of their origin in smaller, ceramic form. Several small-scale stone potbellies are particularly

interesting in light of this possibility. El Ujuxte Sculpture 3 (Fig. 4.22b) (Love 2010) bears the swollen attributes of the La Blanca figurines, while Kaminaljuyu Monuments 57 and 58 purse their lips like some figurines at La Blanca. Even more interesting, Parsons (1986: 42) suggested that the arms of Monuments 57 and 58 (Figs. 4.24 and 4.25a), which are cut free from their bodies, indicate an early date and link them to figurine forms in which there was often an open space between the arms and torso. The “slender” form of these miniature potbellies is also important to note, a characteristic of other miniature potbellies such as Kaminaljuyu Pieza E, only 17 cm in height (Fig. 4.27c). Likewise, Monuments 57 and 58 do not conform to the typical potbelly posture of wraparound legs and bodies. In fact, analysis of the entire potbelly corpus reveals considerable variation in the ways in which arms and legs could be represented. While arms were commonly rendered as wrapping around the stomach, carved in raised relief, they terminated in a variety of ways: resting on the knees, clasped under the chin, hanging at the sides, crossed over the chest, or meeting at the center of the chest with fingers pointing down. Legs, too, reveal similar variation: crossed, kneeling, bent as if squatting, missing entirely, or wrapped around the body parallel with the arms and with feet pointed upward, downward, or inward. These many variations in posture, several of which appear in association with the miniature potbellies, support the contention that potbellies trace their origins to figurine traditions, like those represented at La Blanca, which also reveal a similar range of postures. These variations also reinforce the suggestion that puffy facial features are a more critical diagnostic trait of the stone potbellies, being far more consistently rendered than the corresponding bodies, which range from slender to corpulent and assume a variety of positions.

There is other good evidence to support the suggestion that potbelly sculptures trace their antecedents to figurine traditions. For example, the head of the stone figurine from Ojo de Agua (Fig. 5.5) displays the bulging eyelids so common among the potbellies. Recent excavations at Ojo de Agua have ascertained that the site’s complete florescence dated to the Jocotal phase and that the figurine thus may very likely date to the later years of the Early Preclassic period (John Clark, personal communication 2008). This stone example from Ojo de Agua compares to a 6-in.-tall yellow sandstone figurine illustrated by Stirling (1957: plate 62) from a Ceiba, Tabasco, shell mound, which also possesses closed and swollen eyes as well as a cylindrical body with wrap-around limbs. Although the lack of a controlled context for the Ceiba figurine makes its dating unclear, the stone figurine from Ojo de Agua indicates that small-scale

figurines with puffy features were created in stone – at least on occasion – from as early as the final years of the Early Preclassic period.

A complete ceramic figurine from Chiapa de Corzo illustrated by Lee (1967: fig. 3d) portrays a seated figure with a large belly, wraparound limbs, distended cheeks, and closed, thick eyelids. It was found in a Francesca–Guanacaste-phase context, or at the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period. The small figurine wears a beaded collar that compares to the prominent collars worn by many of the potbellies, as well as to the collar worn by the Kaminaljuyu whistle. The La Nueva, Guatemala, basalt figurine (Fig. 4.14) illustrated by Rodas (1993: fig. 52) may also represent an early transitional type, although its lack of context makes this possibility much less certain. At least by the Middle Preclassic, this figurine tradition was also merged with whistle production. The ceramic whistle from Kaminaljuyu (Fig. 5.8) closely anticipates the stone potbellies, yet was a functional instrument as well.

These examples underscore the variability between puffy-featured potbellies and small portable figurines found throughout Mesoamerica, many of which share the traits of wraparound limbs and heavy facial features. Despite the difficulties of dating many of these figurines, because of their lack of context, their inherent portability, or the long duration of figurine-making traditions in Mesoamerica, several important points can be made. First, the portability of many of these objects may explain the widespread potbelly genre, in which several of the features of these smaller objects were applied to monuments of a much grander scale. Second, from a purely formal perspective, the tendency on stone monuments to represent arms and legs attached to the body, or heads connected to bodies without necks, was undoubtedly driven by the medium, for which less flexibility existed than for small-scale figurines rendered in clay. It was also practical: at any scale, such a technique minimized breakage as well as effort. It also remained true to the stone's original and natural shape, a point worth noting especially with regard to the potbellies, which are, in essence, a form of boulder sculpture (Graham 1981, 1982; Graham and Benson 2005). Stone in and of itself had symbolic value (Stuart 2010), and the stone figurines and large potbelly boulder sculptures were often only minimally modified, as if their significance was enhanced through this overt statement of their “stoniness.” Clay may have communicated similar messages, also being a substance of the earth, with the capacity to transform from malleable in its wet state to solid once fired (Joyce 2009: 410; Love 2010: 156–157).²⁰ These observations coincide with those made by Paul Amaroli (1997; personal communication

2009) concerning the formal parallels between potbellies and figurines in El Salvador. He suggested that at relatively small sites such as Santa Leticia it is likely that the sculptors carving the potbellies were from the same small community as those carving figurines and that canons of representation must certainly have been shared.

Sculpture and public versus private space at La Blanca

The relationship between monumental sculpture and figurine traditions raises pertinent questions concerning how private versus public space was conceptualized and configured during the Preclassic period, whether this dichotomy even existed at this time,²¹ and how sculpture may have been used to negotiate different types of space. Fortunately, the context of the nearly complete seated female figurine from La Blanca lends insight into the problem. It also necessitates consideration of how private realms intersected with the public sphere at Middle Preclassic La Blanca. This next section is dedicated to a lengthy discussion not just of this figurine's context, but of what we know about the parameters of public and private space and ritual during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. Although ostensibly tangential to the subject of potbellies, it in fact is crucial for making sense of the relationship that existed between the stone potbellies and their earlier small-scale ceramic counterparts. As will be argued, the locations, functions, and overlapping features of sculptural forms – figurines and larger-scale monuments – speak to the roles played by sculpture in navigating spatial, ritual, and social boundaries during the Preclassic period.

The seated female figurine (Fig. 5.1), described earlier, came from Mound 9, a household located in an elite residential precinct on La Blanca's East Acropolis. To the west of Mound 9 and the East Acropolis was Mound 1, the 25-m-tall pyramid that dominated the site center, and between Mound 1 and Mound 9 was a large sunken plaza measuring approximately 40 × 100 m. Although Mound 9 appears to have been primarily residential in nature, it faced a plaza and monumental temple that were probably “public” and ceremonial in function (Love and Guernsey 2007).

The domestic refuse, hearths, ceramics, groundstone artifacts, and other assemblages found during the Mound 9 excavations support its identification as an elite residence (Love et al. 2006). As described by Love and Guernsey (2007: 924), the percentage of cooking wares in Mound 9 is comparable to that of other households at the site; however, the presence of a higher percentage of Ramirez

wares – which are linked to elite contexts at La Blanca – indicates that the residents of Mound 9 were of significant status. Likewise, the higher density of jade associated with Mound 9 supports its identification as an elite household. Jade is an excellent indicator of status at La Blanca: while all residences thus far excavated at La Blanca have jade, mostly in the form of small disk-shaped beads less than 5 mm in diameter, the continuum of densities associated with specific households makes it a particularly useful artifact for determining relative socioeconomic rank (see Love and Guernsey 2007: fig. 6). As Love (in Love and Guernsey 2007: 924) elaborated, “Small jade beads were probably a vital means of preserving household wealth by converting perishable agricultural surplus into durable wealth. The beads, pendants and earspools would also have been an important means of social display.”

Figurine density throughout La Blanca also displays a gradient, in which Mound 9 ranks highest among the domestic contexts analyzed to date at the site (Love and Guernsey 2006). The corpus of figurines from Mound 9 includes unusually complete specimens such as that of the seated female; very few other complete figurines are known from the site. The size of this female figurine is also unusual: at 11.5 cm in height, it is considerably larger than most at La Blanca. That said, the vast majority of figurines from Mound 9 are quite similar to those of other residences.²²

Mound 9 also revealed high densities of animal bone, which Love (n.d.) interpreted as evidence for the sponsorship of feasts by the elite residents of the household. Although large ceramic vessels associated with feasting are widespread at residences of various socioeconomic levels at La Blanca – which suggests that all households may have held feasting events – the density of animal bone associated with Mound 9 indicates that these feasting events may have differed in scale (Love and Guernsey 2011). This suggestion contrasts to some degree with Rosenswig’s (2007, 2009: 22, 2010: 162–171) data from Cuauhtémoc, in adjacent Chiapas, Mexico, which indicate that feasting, by the Conchas phase, was more carefully controlled by elites. He argued that Cuauhtémoc elites sponsored feasts in order “to enhance community cohesion” while simultaneously demonstrating their own elevated social status. Rosenswig believes that feasting events were critical for navigating the relatively sudden increased social stratification that characterized the Middle Preclassic period in this region during the Conchas phase. Although feasting seems to be more widespread at La Blanca across socioeconomic levels during the same period, it is worth reiterating that Mound 9 appears to have sponsored feasting events at a larger scale than other residences.

The vast majority of Love’s work at La Blanca has focused on domestic economy and ritual; hence, very good data are available for considering the relationship between individual households and centralized political authority at La Blanca. The most consistent discriminator among residences at La Blanca is the quantity of jade, which reveals a skewed distribution among the households, with the highest density corresponding to elite residences on the East Acropolis, in particular Mound 9 (Love and Guernsey 2007, 2011). Elite households were also better constructed than their non-elite counterparts, with floors made of well-compacted materials with high clay content, in contrast to less highly ranked residences whose floors were simply packed earth (Love and Guernsey 2011). Elite residences were also occupied for longer periods of time and underwent renovations, unlike “commoner” households, which appear to have had only single occupations.

While the artifact assemblages of Mound 9 identify it as residential, a sculpture found in association with the mound during excavations in 2004 complicates this picture by suggesting that there was a certain amount of fluidity between some domestic and civic spaces during the Middle Preclassic period at La Blanca. La Blanca Monument 3 was discovered on the western slope of Mound 9, adjacent to the sunken plaza that probably functioned as a more communal gathering space. Ceramics associated with the monument indicate that it was constructed and used c. 900–800 B.C. (Love and Guernsey 2007).

La Blanca Monument 3 (Fig. 5.9) is a slightly concave basin with exterior rings and a channel, which was formed of compacted earth into the shape of a quatrefoil or a four-petaled flower. The quatrefoil symbol was invoked during the Preclassic period at sites located in geographically and linguistically diverse regions but nonetheless appears to have retained a consistent association with expressions of elite power, supernatural communication, and watery realms. In fact, despite differences in medium, the form and symbolic associations of the La Blanca quatrefoil compare most closely to those of several stone versions at the Middle Preclassic site of Chalcatzingo, Morelos, Mexico (Angulo 1987; Gillespie 1993; Grove 1968, 1999, 2000; Grove and Angulo 1987). Chalcatzingo Monument 9 (Fig. 5.10a) was placed on top of a large earthen platform within the central core of this site (Grove 1999: 262, 2000: figs. 1, 10). Chalcatzingo Monument 1 (Fig. 5.10b), by contrast, was carved onto the face of a large boulder along the slope of Cerro Chalcatzingo (Grove 2000: fig. 2; Grove and Angulo 1987: 115). As Grove (2000) and Gillespie (1993) elaborated, the scene on Chalcatzingo

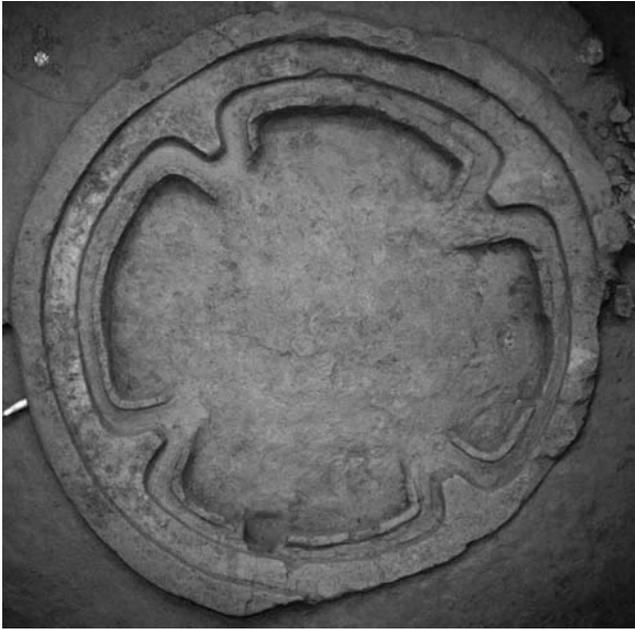


Figure 5.9. La Blanca Monument 3 quatrefoil. Photo by Michael Love.

Monument 1 appears to provide a more narrative elaboration of the kind of rituals – associated with supernatural access and invocations of rain and agricultural fertility – performed in conjunction with Monument 9 (Gillespie 1993; Grove 2000). Grove noted that Monument 1’s less accessible location contrasts with that of Monument

9, which was positioned atop the largest public platform at the site, where, erected vertically, it would have been “easily visible to the peoples living in the ancient village surrounding the mound, and any ritual activities associated with the monument would likewise have had community visibility” (Grove 2000: 285). Monument 9 also faced the major elite residence at the site (Grove 1999: 262). As I have elaborated elsewhere, the proximity of Chalcatzingo Monument 9 to the site’s highest-status residence compares to the situation at La Blanca, where Monument 3 was located at the heart of the site in association with an elite residence. During the Middle Preclassic, not only do the monumental quatrefoils appear to have been physically incorporated by elites into their domestic zones, but the ritual associations of these quatrefoils were also claimed as an elite prerogative (Guernsey 2010b).

The context and associations of the La Blanca quatrefoil merit further comment, however, for what they can tell us not only about elite ritual and sacred space, but about quotidian space as well. The artifact assemblage indicates that Mound 9 was residential in the sense that people lived in the building at the center of the mound and that food preparation, food service, and other daily activities and typical domestic rituals – such as the use of figurines, including the puffy-faced female – were carried out. Yet the presence of the quatrefoil and the location of the mound in the central precinct point to expressions of political authority associated with widespread

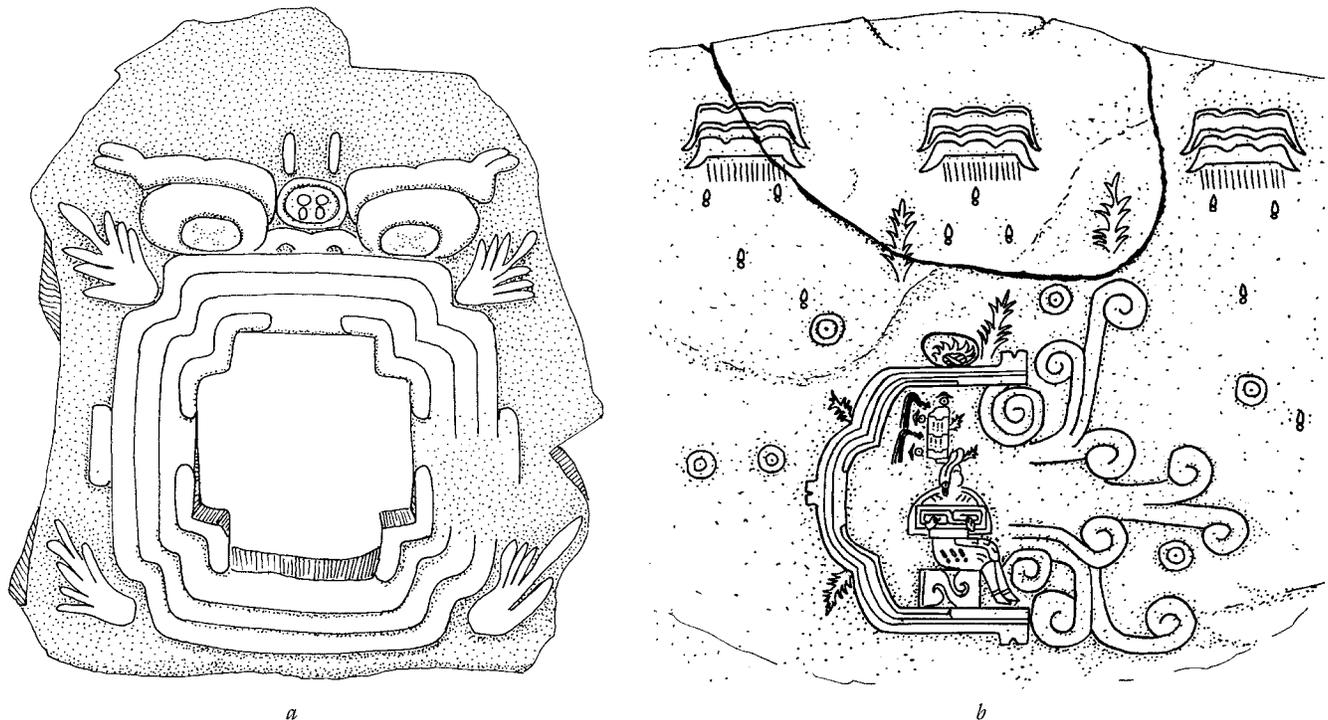


Figure 5.10. Chalcatzingo quatrefoils: (a) Monument 9; (b) Monument 1. Drawings courtesy of David Grove.

elite exchange and ritual practices. In fact, the contradictions embodied by the La Blanca quatrefoil challenge any simple interpretation based on a rigid dichotomy of public versus private space (Bradley 2003) or in terms of the Great Tradition/Little Tradition paradigm popularized by Redfield (1956) for Mesoamerica. In Redfield's model, the Great Tradition concerns cosmology and the ideology of elite power, while the Little Tradition concerns rituals of the household, including the marking of life-transition events and the veneration of ancestors, as evidenced by domestic figurine assemblages. The Great Tradition was ritualized in "public" places with priests or rulers officiating, while the Little Tradition was performed in "private" compounds where, presumably, elders or lineage heads presided.

McAnany (2002: 115, 117) criticized the Great Tradition/Little Tradition model, which she felt conflated issues of class with those of ritual practice by implying that "ritual practice undertaken at the domicile or within a local community was somehow small and insignificant when compared to the pomp and splendor of state ritual. The term, moreover, seemed contradictory because, quantitatively speaking, far more people were actively engaged in local ritual or popular religion than in state ritual." She further argued that the use of terms such as "public" was misleading, as "ritual conducted within so-called public architecture probably was severely restricted" (McAnany 2002: 118). In comparison, domestic ritual, as evidenced by figurines, may have been much more prevalent and popular – more "public" in the sense that it was broadly shared, practiced, and accessible across socioeconomic levels (Long 2011). Unlike McAnany, M. Smith (2002) opined that the Great Tradition/Little Tradition model retained some utility, if only for helping to identify the continuum that existed between private and public religion. Plunket (2002: 4) took a similar, more moderate position, arguing that "[i]n ancient Mesoamerica, domestic ritual, court ritual, and public state and/or popular ritual can be seen as overlapping systems that sometimes interacted harmoniously but often may have contributed a significant amount of tension and conflict to the social environment. It is impossible to separate these systems, and a discussion of one necessitates reference to the others." Hendon (2002: 85; also see 2000) addressed these issues as well, noting that typically Western notions of private versus public emphasize enclosed areas as *prohibiting* access despite the fact that it might be more accurate to consider how such enclosed spaces *controlled* access. As she asserted, "Residential compounds were places into which resources and people flowed to support rituals and feasts that celebrated life-cycle events and reinforced status and

were places out of which resources and people flowed to support similar events in other compounds or in the civic/ceremonial center."

Part of the difficulty inherent in these debates is the language used, as alluded to by McAnany in her criticism of the term "public." Certainly there were spaces in Preclassic Mesoamerica that served both public and private functions, depending on the moment or the event taking place. Mound 9 at La Blanca provides some evidence for this: domestic assemblages and an abundance of ceramic figurines – part of the Little Tradition – share space with a central icon of the Mesoamerican Great Tradition, the quatrefoil. At La Blanca and elsewhere during the Preclassic period, the civic spaces at the heart of the site were often designed to incorporate open plazas that could have accommodated large groups of people. It is logical to assume that, at times, these plazas were used for the performance of rituals that were intended to reinforce the larger identity of the site and were "public" in the sense that access was widely available and perhaps even encouraged.²³ It is important to note that these public spaces at La Blanca were envisioned as harmonious vis-à-vis the natural world: Mound 1, which the sunken plaza flanked, was aligned with the volcano Tajumulco on the horizon, creating a visually powerful parallel between the natural environment and the center of the site itself (Love and Guernsey 2011). Nevertheless, at other times – and probably most times, I might argue – the central spaces of these civic centers were closely regulated by the elite and certainly were not "public" in terms of ready access. Even if access was often prohibited, such spaces may have been the site of innumerable more "private" rituals performed by smaller groups of, perhaps, more elite individuals.²⁴

I contrast these civic spaces at La Blanca with those of the domestic sphere, whether elite or commoner, which were also the loci of frequent ritual activity. The rituals that took place within these residential spaces may have been "private" and limited to certain individuals or groups. Yet the presence of figurines – part and parcel of much more broadly shared ritual practices – suggests that these ceremonies had a more "public" or "popular" nature in terms of accessibility and the sheer number of participants engaged in them across the site (Long 2011).

At the end of the day, we are left with creating models for discussing space and ritual that are imprecise and inevitably inaccurate to some degree. As M. Smith (2002: 95) described with regard to the Aztecs:

Public rituals are those that take place in open, public settings, whereas private rituals are those conducted out of public view, whether in homes, temples or other

buildings; in the countryside, caves, or other isolated areas; or else secretly at night. State rituals are sponsored and promoted by the state, whatever their spatial scale or social context, whereas popular rituals either originate with the people or else enjoy widespread participation and support among nonelite sectors of society. In practice, popular rituals often have complex interactions with state-sponsored rituals, and it is not always easy to distinguish them empirically. It should be emphasized that these are analytical dichotomies for purposes of classification and analysis; they should not be reified or given undue significance as empirical realities.

So, too, I use the terms “public” and “private” with the recognition that, while they represent useful categories for analysis, they do not represent an empirical reality (also see Hendon 2002: 75–76). Notwithstanding these limitations, one could posit that the boundaries between “public” and “private” or “civic” and “domestic” were blurred at La Blanca in the case of Mound 9 and its quatrefoil.

Hendon (2002: 80), discussing the Classic Maya, suggested that we move beyond simple public versus private dichotomies and instead talk about “a continuum of increasingly elaborate space that is controlled by different segments of society. What I have been calling the political center is, in fact, the space controlled by the rulers and their households.” A similar situation appears to characterize Middle Preclassic La Blanca, in which there was a continuum of space and ritual but in which the physical and ceremonial center of the site was dominated by rulers and their residences. Moreover, at La Blanca, sculpture appears to have played a pivotal role in defining these spaces and their functions. I would posit that the Monument 3 quatrefoil functioned as a vehicle through which spatial transitions were navigated. In this sense, it bridged the conceptual gaps between private and public, domestic and civic, situated as it was at the threshold between a household mound and the large sunken plaza that it faced. It invoked broadly shared symbols of cosmological power that were used to buttress elite authority but was affiliated with a domestic structure that bears the hallmarks of traditional domestic and most likely private, or at least restricted, rituals. The symbols of elite political authority during the early years of Middle Preclassic La Blanca thus appear to have been – at least in this case – conceptually and literally grounded within the domestic sphere.

The term “elite,” which I have used with a certain degree of liberty throughout this chapter and elsewhere in this book, is another problematic one that deserves some scrutiny before we move on to a discussion of evidence

from beyond the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica. The term is defined in different ways within the array of anthropological, sociological, and ethnographic literature dealing with the subject. However, as Chase and Chase (1992: 3) summarized, many Mesoamericanists follow the work of George Marcus (1983) and associate the term with the “rich, powerful, and privileged in any society.” Others seek to identify elites within material culture assemblages and archaeological remains, despite the fact that

elites are not necessarily characterized by luxury goods and other items found in the archaeological record; rather, the elite would be those who managed the political, economic, social, and religious institutions. A consideration of the elite, then, must by definition concern itself with the concepts of power and control; these are abstract notions that are difficult to identify concretely in the archaeological record. (Chase and Chase 1992: 3)

I do not pretend to offer an archaeological definition or even full discussion of the term “elite” in this book, nor do I broach in any detail related – and complicated – questions of social stratification, rank, class, or political structure. Webster (1992: 135) pointed out the advantages of using the term “elite” because it does “identify an important principle of comparative social organization,” despite the fact that it “implies nothing about the actual forms or principles of stratification and ranking.” As he further acknowledged, however, the lack of consensus concerning the social structure of Classic Maya society, for instance, made “this very vagueness . . . felicitous.” Our knowledge of Preclassic social structure is even less complete, and so I hope that my admittedly vague use of the term “elite” throughout this text is not only felicitous, but helpful in stimulating further discussion of how sculpture operated within the matrix of Preclassic society. Stating this somewhat differently, and paraphrasing George Marcus (1992: 294), I use the term “elite” as a heuristic in order to say something about how sculpture, its context, and the material record of the Preclassic Pacific slope can “say things about relationships of power and domination.” I am as interested in the developmental trajectory, process, and strategy of Preclassic sculpture as I am in its form and meaning.²⁵

Beyond the Pacific slope

Evidence from sites in various regions underscores the fluid relationship between public and private spheres and associated sculptural forms during the Preclassic period. Other sites demonstrate that, as with La Blanca Monument 3, sculpture bridged the porous boundaries

between contrasting spheres and spaces during the Preclassic. For example, Grove (1984: 49–65) noted that a number of monuments at Chalcatzingo depicting individuals were erected on platform terraces that functioned not only as a public space for ritual activities but also as the location of elite residences.²⁶ The placement of the Monument 9 quatrefoil atop the Structure 4 platform mound – the largest public platform that faced the major elite residence at the site (Plaza Central Structure 1, or PC Structure 1) (Grove 1999: 262; Grove et al. 1976) – illustrates a similar situation in which sculpture was used to visually arbitrate transitions between public and private domains. Farther to the north, a refuse pit intruding into one of the platform terraces led Grove to suggest that each of the platforms within the central precinct of Chalcatzingo “may have served as the base for an elite residential structure” (Grove 1984: 61–62), with one domestic structure per terrace (Grove et al. 1976: 192). Grove (1984: 62) added, too, the possibility that each of these platforms was associated with a particular lineage or held the shrines of deceased rulers. As Grove and Gillespie (2002: 13) elaborated, “[S]ubfloor graves were present in every Cantera phase domestic structure excavated at Chalcatzingo,” including the elite structures on the terraces also associated with the stelae. The greatest number of burials were associated with PC Structure 1, as well as the only crypt graves constructed of stone slabs at the site (Grove and Gillespie 2002: 14; Merry de Morales 1987). Of particular note was the presence of a stone statue head, Monument 17, within one of the Structure 1 burial crypts. Grove and Gillespie (2002: 14–15; also see Grove 1981) linked this decapitated stone sculpture to ritual practices in the domestic sector, in which “the overwhelming majority of figurines recovered at sites of the Early and Middle Formative period in Mesoamerica, including Chalcatzingo, were purposely broken, usually by snapping their heads off in an act of decapitation.” Grove and Gillespie thus outlined a context for sculptures at Chalcatzingo in which they appear to have transcended any one realm: their prominent placement on the terraces described by Grove and Gillespie (2002: 13) as “public mound architecture” was orchestrated in conjunction with the “private” spaces of elite residences and their associated burials. Given this context, Grove (1984: 57–62, 1999: 262–264) suggested that the stelae erected on the terraces may have depicted specific individuals, perhaps rulers or ancestors at Chalcatzingo.

More recently, Hirth (2008: 102–103) expanded on Grove’s observations, suggesting that the sculptures at Chalcatzingo might portray elite individuals or ancestors that were associated with important events in the life of the community and that were used to forge a corporate

identity for Chalcatzingo as it contended with regional and interregional social alliances. Hirth based his suggestion, in part, on intriguing evidence from the Preclassic site of Tetimpa in Puebla (Plunket and Uruñuela 1998, 2002; Uruñuela and Plunket 2002). According to Uruñuela and Plunket (2002: 21), burial evidence at Tetimpa between 700 and 200 B.C. (Early Tetimpa phase) “reflects a lineage structure and a tradition of ancestor veneration that were among the underlying factors that ordered the ancient village social structure.” During this Early Tetimpa phase, some family members – a “privileged few” – were interred beneath the floor of platforms within domestic structures. As the authors described:

The most complex burials tend to be located towards the center of the main platform behind the shrine, beneath the floor of the room where we have proposed that communal functions, including rituals, took place, thus linking the most important ancestors with those activities. (Uruñuela and Plunket 2002: 26)

However, such burials have not been found in residential compounds of the Late Tetimpa phase, 50 B.C. to A.D. 100. In these highly standardized residences, which were “defined by two perpendicular axes that intersect at the center of the courtyard,” a small household shrine was typically erected, often in conjunction with small stone sculptures or “shrine stones” (Uruñuela and Plunket 2002: 21). Even when a shrine was lacking in the domestic compound, the center of the courtyard was marked with a stone, creating a central pivot that Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: 31) interpreted as a “point of contact with the underworld,” in keeping with cosmological models of the universe known from elsewhere in ancient Mesoamerica.

As the authors further discussed, such shrines have not been documented during the Early Tetimpa phase, and no burials have been dated to the Late Tetimpa phase, which suggests a shifting pattern of mortuary treatment. Perhaps even more interesting, however, Uruñuela and Plunket (2002: 26; Plunket and Uruñuela 2002: 31, 34) demonstrated that the courtyards containing the shrines during the Late Tetimpa phase “contain several elements that invoke the ancestors,” including the buildup of ash indicative of ritual censer burning, groupings of small stones like those found associated with Early Tetimpa burials, the presence of small-scale sculptures or “shrine stones,” and, in one case, a skull deposited beneath a shrine.

Plunket and Uruñuela (2002) argued that these sculptures situated in domestic contexts represent the material evidence of ritual at the lineage level. In other words, the evidence at Tetimpa illustrates the role of

small-scale sculpture in memorializing kinship and lineage within the domestic compound. Although the sculptures took a variety of forms, including vertically oriented small stone stelae (Plunket and Uruñuela 1998: 302, fig. 15), several portray human or anthropomorphic visages. One type is particularly interesting because of several features shared with potbelly sculptures. As Plunket and Uruñuela (1998: 303, 2002: 38) described, the head displays furrowed hair, round bulbous eyes, and “mouth and cheeks puffed in the act of blowing” (Fig. 5.11). Two sculptures of this type were found, and Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: 40) suggested that they might “represent lineage founders, and thus explain the repetition of some of these images at different domestic units.” Like the potbellies, these two anthropomorphic heads shared several features but also displayed some variation, suggestive of an overarching “type” that could possess individualized features or traits.²⁷

While most of the stone sculptures were associated with household altars or the centers of courtyards, Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: 33) also documented contexts in which the objects appear to have been moved and repositioned. One example is of particular interest, as it involved “the reuse of three carved stones as supports for *cuexcomates* [wattle-and-daub storage bins] at one of the detached kitchens.” They suggested that the purpose of this unusual context, which occurred at a residence without any earlier burials – or, by extension, which lacked ancestors – was to direct the sacral power of the stones toward agricultural abundance, which may have been of particular concern for residents living in newly built structures that lacked earlier, ancestral burials.

What is especially fascinating at Tetimpa is the role that sculpture played in negotiating these transformations in domestic ritual and the interment of the dead. As Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: 42) suggested, these transformations were undoubtedly linked to changing social and historical circumstances and emerging political hierarchies within the greater region. Equally significant is the very fact that sculpture was employed at Tetimpa within the domestic compound – it was not the stuff of civic space and ritual but, instead, appears to have been tied to statements of lineage and domestic ritual. The evidence from Tetimpa suggests, as Hirth (2008: 103) observed, a direct association between the social integration of lineages and the role of stone monuments not unlike that proposed for Middle Preclassic Chalcatzingo. Such evidence is enormously important for understanding the boundaries and intersections between public and private space and ritual during the Preclassic, as well as how these parameters varied among regions in ancient Mesoamerica. Preclassic sculpture can obviously not be



Figure 5.11. Tetimpa shrine stone with puffed cheeks. Drawing by author after Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: fig. 4.7).

thought of as doing just one thing or of operating in just one type of space; it was far more dynamic than that. I return in Chapter 8 to this topic of how Preclassic sculpture, and the potbellies in particular, may have been used to integrate potentially conflicting forces of social identity, including the veneration of ancestors and the emergence of elite authority and state-level societies.

Back to the Pacific slope

The Late Preclassic site of El Ujuxte in coastal Guatemala illustrates another facet of the complexity of social transformation during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition that is of significance to this discussion of potbelly sculptures and their antecedents in domestic figurine traditions. While the lines between public and private space may have been somewhat blurred at Middle Preclassic La Blanca, these divisions appear to have become more austere defined in the ensuing period at El Ujuxte. As discussed in Chapter 3, El Ujuxte rose to prominence following the decline of La Blanca, establishing itself as the regional power by 400 B.C. (Love 1999a, 2002a, b). It was characterized by an astronomically oriented gridlike plan (Fig. 3.10), and its regional authority was echoed by the replication of this cruciform plan in the secondary centers surrounding it (Love 1998, 1999b, 2002b, 2007: 294; Love, Castillo, and Balcárcel 1996: 11; Poe 2000).

Love (2007: 295) elaborated on the changes visible in the archaeological record at El Ujuxte that illuminate the Middle to Late Preclassic transition along the Pacific Coast:

In addition to population growth and the development of a large regional system, there were important economic and ideological changes that enhanced elite

power and solidified the growing gap between elites and nonelites. Economically, household autonomy was undercut through a series of actions that centralized many aspects of production and exchange. Elite households controlled surpluses through large storage vessels in and around their households. The exchange of key commodities, notably obsidian, may also have been centralized by reducing opportunities for households to produce their own obsidian tools. Ideologically, household ritual was curtailed and public rituals became dominant. Figurine use in households nearly ceased at 600 cal. B.C. [or approximately 500 B.C. uncalibrated].

The transformations that took place at El Ujuxte at the household level are significant. The almost complete cessation of figurine use at El Ujuxte stands in stark contrast to the situation at La Blanca, where figurines were ubiquitous in households throughout that site's florescence. At La Blanca, one figurine fragment was found for every five ceramic vessels; at El Ujuxte, this ratio drops to one figurine for every twenty-five hundred vessels (Love 2002: 227). Bove (1993b: 185, 2005: 102) documented a similar absence of figurines at numerous Late Preclassic sites in coastal Guatemala. He compared this to the Lowland Maya region, which also witnessed a cessation of figurine production at the same time that domestic structures became more permanent and formally arranged and monumental architectural construction also burgeoned (also see Bove 1981: 206; Brown 2003; Brown and Garber 2005: 47; Ringle 1999: 190–193). Similar patterns were documented by Marcus (1996: 287, 1998: 9, 1999: 88, 2009: 31) for Preclassic Oaxaca and by Plunket and Uruñuela (1998: 304–305) at Tetimpa, where Middle Preclassic figurine traditions gave way during the Late Preclassic to patio shrines and a new ritual repertoire. As Marcus noted for Oaxaca, the numerous figurines that characterized Preclassic ritual activity and that she associated with ancestor veneration “decreased significantly in number after 700 B.C. and virtually disappeared by 200 B.C.” These changes were accompanied by transformations in architecture, such as the appearance of “larger and more spectacular public buildings” (Marcus 1999: 86), which she related to the rise of the Zapotec state (Marcus 1996: 290).

Congruently, the evidence for feasting that was so prevalent at La Blanca across all households appears to be restricted to elite residences at El Ujuxte (Love n.d.). Furthermore, as Love discussed, these dramatic changes in domestic ritual were paralleled by a marked increase in social control by the elite in the form of rigid urban planning that extended into the domestic domain, not only at El Ujuxte but also at secondary and tertiary sites

surrounding it. The extent of this social control is evident in burials within individual domestic residences at El Ujuxte, which were aligned within the overarching axial grid (Arredondo 2002; Love and Balcárcel 2000). At first glance, then, these burials appear to conform to the patterns of social control visible in other sectors of the site.

However, as Love (n.d.; Love and Castillo 1997) asserted, the very presence of household burials at El Ujuxte may have represented, in actuality, a certain amount of resistance to the imposition of social control.²⁸ At La Blanca, only two burials have been discovered in household mounds that can be clearly dated to the Middle Preclassic period, which constitutes very little evidence for burial of the dead in residences at La Blanca during this period. By contrast, the practice of burying the dead in domestic compounds is well attested at Late Preclassic El Ujuxte and accompanied by postmortem offerings, including juveniles who were decapitated and placed in jars (Arredondo 2002). These offerings, in conjunction with the primary interment of an adult, appear to represent a form of ancestor veneration (Arredondo 2002; Love n.d.; Love, Hager, and Arredondo 2002). This contrast in data between La Blanca and El Ujuxte is probably not merely the result of issues of preservation, as there is little variability between these neighboring sites in terms of soil acidity, moisture, and so on. Nor is it likely due to a lack of investigation in the domestic sector of La Blanca, as the vast majority of excavations have been focused in residential zones. What the evidence at La Blanca suggests is that the dead were disposed of in a different way or in a different place during the Middle Preclassic. Uruñuela and Plunket (2002: 30) noted that burial is only one of several options for disposing of the deceased and that alternative practices, such as cremation, are attested in Colonial accounts; there is also evidence for cemeteries in ancient Mesoamerica (Geller 2004: 262–262; M. Smith 2002: 109). At La Blanca, evidence to date suggests some form of alternative disposal of the dead – perhaps cremation, perhaps interment in a yet undiscovered community graveyard. Interestingly, this pattern changed after the decline of La Blanca, when Late Preclassic groups occupied the site. Several Late Preclassic burials associated with domestic residences at La Blanca have been found, marking a significant shift in the disposition of the dead at a point in time that coincides with the florescence of nearby El Ujuxte (Love, personal communication 2009).

The new domestic ritual practices at El Ujuxte, such as the interment of deceased family members beneath household floors, may represent “an attempt to maintain the identity and coherence of the household and lineage in the face of challenges from centralized institutional

power” (Love n.d.). While overtly the burials were “on the grid,” so to speak – or in accordance with the axial alignment of the site – the patterns of veneration associated with them point to a potential act of resistance in the form of domestic ritual that was separate, distinct, and perhaps in conflict with, or in disregard for, any strictures guiding or allowing ritual expression. Grove and Gillespie’s (2002: 13) observations concerning mortuary practices are pertinent here:

While mortuary ritual is not usually thought of as “domestic,” the practice of burying a deceased person beneath the floor of his or her house was relatively common in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. In such instances the rituals accompanying those interments can be considered as within the realm of domestic ritual. Such burials reflect specific decisions made by the surviving kin and/or community members to inter the deceased within that structure rather than in some other, nondomestic location (for example, Joyce 1999: 18). Julia Hendon (2000) observed that burials, together with buried caches and items placed in storage units, reflect practices that contribute to the construction of social memory within the household, further shaping its self identity. Since the dead were likely transformed into ancestors as a result of mortuary rituals, including rites subsequent to the primary interment, burial within the house can also serve to maintain spatial contiguity between the living household members and their ancestors.

The burial evidence from El Ujuxte is an important indicator of the major social paroxysms that marked the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period along the Pacific Coast. The data also constitute a fascinating, almost inverse relationship to the Middle Preclassic ceramic figurines from La Blanca: when ceramic figurines disappear from the Late Preclassic archaeological record, household burials surge. These changes in the domestic sector provide an important foil to those perceptible in the civic sector, such as the evidence for increased and more tightly regulated centralized control.

Conclusions

It was during this period of dramatic social transformations that the large-scale stone potbellies emerged as a sculptural form. Their facial features – the jowly cheeks, closed eyes, and puffy lids – demonstrate clear continuities with Middle Preclassic domestic figurines, which were waning in terms of production and use by the arrival of the Late Preclassic period. To put it simply, publicly displayed potbellies evince traditions of representation

forged within the domestic sector. This is not to suggest a one-to-one correspondence between the potbellies and earlier figurine traditions: while certain features were clearly borrowed, others (costume elements, postures, hairstyles, even gender attributes, etc.) were abandoned.

Why certain features were adopted and others ignored certainly depends, to some degree, on differences in scale, viewership, medium, and function between figurines and stone sculpture. Brumfiel and Overholtzer (2009: 298) spoke to this very problem, noting that “[r]epresentational differences among ... various media expose some of the tensions generated by the negotiation of social categories and social relations, especially when the different media are controlled by different groups.” Bodily representation and issues of aesthetic treatment more generally were also at stake. As Faust and Halperin (2009: 11–12) stipulated, figural representations constitute the permanent materialization of “bodily practices of everyday experience,” which in turn “can be viewed as an index for sociopolitical, religious, and ideological experience.” Brumfiel and Overholtzer (2009: 316) expressed this somewhat differently, discussing the human body and its varied representation as the ideal vehicle for exploring transformative processes. At first glance, figurines and potbellies appear to have little in common beyond a general interest in the human form, and their sheer difference in size, materials, and context exacerbates this situation. Joyce (2009: 411–414; also see Bailey 2005: 26–43) addressed the issue of scale, noting that figurines are miniatures, which by their very nature leave out some details and select others for emphasis. By contrast, many of the potbellies are on the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of sheer size. Yet, as I have argued, a remarkably similar set of features was emphasized in both, despite radical differences in scale, how they were viewed (or handled, in the case of figurines), and materials. As Joyce (2009: 413) summed it up, “Miniaturization absorbs people into a smaller world. Scaling up expands the scope of that separate dimension of experience.” The potbellies, in a sense, “scaled up” an ancient repertoire of closed eyes, puffy lids, and jowly features, yet “scaled down” details of costume, hairstyle, gender, and posture. In other words, the potbellies evidence a deliberate emphasis on a fairly consistent repertoire of facial features, yet an equally deliberate disdain for other components of bodily representation. This “scaling up” of specific and limited attributes was also accompanied by a fairly dramatic relocation – in this case, from the household into a public domain that was increasingly defined as elite and that, surely, engaged a “separate dimension of experience.”

It is probably not coincidental that, when the stone potbelly monuments were first conceptualized, the

divisions between private and public space became more clearly defined and regulated – through architecture, sculpture, and patterns of ritual detectable in the archaeological record of the Pacific slope. However, as the burial evidence from El Ujuxte suggests, the stricter spatial definitions may not have met with complete acceptance by the populace; rather, new forms of domestic ritual in the form of household interments have to be considered as plausible acts of resistance.

Sculpture – as discussed for the Middle Preclassic sites of La Blanca and Chalcatzingo, and at Late Preclassic Tetimpa – appears to have played a critical role in mediating different types of space. At times sculpture appears to have dissolved these lines, creating a dialogue between public and private domains as at La Blanca and Chalcatzingo. At others, sculpture seems to have been closely integrated with the formulation of household identity, lineage structure, and community identity as at Tetimpa and, perhaps, Chalcatzingo. During the Preclassic period, sculpture does not always appear to have done exactly the same thing or expressed the same message. But it consistently played a critical role within

the continuum of public and private space and often gave voice to issues of identity at varying scales, from panregional elite communication spheres to those focused on the ancestors of a specific household. It also did so at sites of different magnitude and complexity, from villages like Tetimpa to regional chiefdoms like La Blanca. This is particularly important to bear in mind, because it indicates that sculpture was not the unique privilege of major sites during the Preclassic. That said, I would nonetheless add the caveat that other sculptural variables, such as medium, scale, and content, may have been subject to stricter regulation.

Before attempting to contextualize the potbelly sculptures within these social dynamics, which I do in [Chapters 7 and 8](#), I turn in [Chapter 6](#) to a discussion of traditional interpretations of the potbellies. As will be seen, past analyses have not fully considered the role of potbelly monuments in bridging the public and private domains. Nor have they addressed how their very presence in the plazas of Preclassic sites represents one mechanism of social transformation that was given form through the medium of stone sculpture.

Big Bellies and Fat Gods

Introduction

The name “potbellies” provides, of course, the first clue that scholars have traditionally focused on the corpulent stomachs of potbelly sculptures as their primary attribute. Upon closer inspection, however, as demonstrated in [Chapter 4](#), this designation becomes problematic, as it does not adequately capture the most diagnostic traits of these sculptures. Moreover, as a perusal of the corpus of Preclassic Mesoamerican art illustrates, the trait of a fat belly is not unique to the potbellies, but is a widespread expressive feature that was used to represent many different characters and categories of natural and supernatural beings. This chapter begins with a discussion of the attribute of an obese belly and then traces its duration in various regions. I emphasize throughout the need for caution in assuming continuity solely on the basis of one attribute, or even a suite of attributes, whose configuration and context often shifted.

In this chapter I focus in particular on a corpulent character known in the literature as the “Fat God,” which shares several iconographic traits with the potbellies but also diverges from them in significant and revealing ways. Discussion of the “Fat God” necessitates that I move through material better known from the Classic period and areas well beyond the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica. I chose to do this deliberately – at this point in the book – after having laid out the basic corpus of Preclassic potbellies and the contextual issues at play, so as to underscore a fundamental premise of this study: that an undue emphasis on later, Classic-period manifestations of “fat,” puffy-cheeked individuals has obscured the rich meanings of the Preclassic monuments, many of which we can ascertain only by situating them within the unique social transformations of the Preclassic period. That said, however, the Classic-period material provides important

insights into the ways in which some of the meanings and attributes of these “fat” characters persisted for centuries. Because of this, I first address these issues of continuity (and disparity) with later periods before continuing, in [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#), to more fully explore the Preclassic significance of the potbelly monuments.

Corpulence and social status in the Preclassic

Fat bellies are a frequent and fluid attribute of Preclassic figurines, sometimes alluding to pregnancy while in other cases appearing to reference maturity or obesity (see [Joralemon 1981](#)) ([Figs. 5.1](#) and [6.1](#)). Corpulent seated figures from Mazatán dating to the Early Preclassic Ocós period have been interpreted by [John Clark \(1991; Clark and Pye 2000b: fig. 25 top\)](#) as village shaman-chiefs. The figures have large stomachs and arms that wrap around them, and wear what [Clark](#) interpreted as animal masks and costumes. As [Richard Lesure \(1997: 237, fig. 5\)](#) confirmed, this interpretation is supported by a figurine from Chilo, another large Early Preclassic village site in the Mazatán region, in which a human face peers out from a hood with animal ears. These figurines appear in the archaeological record during a period, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#), when other indications of ranked society and social inequality also developed along the Pacific Coast ([Clark 1991](#)). [Lesure \(1999: 241\)](#) observed, however, that the masks and garments associated with the corpulent Mazatán individuals appear on figurines found at different villages throughout the region, which would indicate ready access to such regalia. Accordingly, he cautioned that it may not be the masks and costumes that signify higher social status or political office. Instead, [Lesure](#) argued that it is the trait of obesity that functions within this suite of attributes as “a symbol of seniority, [indicating] that the fat, masked figures are depictions of respected elders.” As he elaborated:

I would like to suggest that obesity, and the social authority it implied, were linked to age. These figurines were depictions of elders, perhaps mainly men but also women, who appeared in masked rituals to mediate between human communities and the animal and/or supernatural worlds. ([Lesure 1999: 241](#))

By extension, [Lesure](#) implied that the attribute of obesity was a more accurate index of seniority and social authority than the costumes worn by the individuals (also see [Rosenswig 2010: 193](#)).



Figure 6.1. Fat-bellied figurines from La Blanca. Photos by author.

Lesure's observations are supported by the very fact that the portly Mazatán figures sit on seats that literally and figuratively “raise” their status and that anticipate Late Preclassic portable thrones (Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010). This relationship between corpulent figures and elevated, seated positions also presages, to some degree, the sculptures at Sin Cabezas, a site that, as briefly mentioned in Chapter 3, reached its apex during the Late Preclassic period.¹ The Sin Cabezas sculptures, which were decapitated at some point in the ancient past, portray individuals seated cross-legged on large, broad, and somewhat conical-shaped pedestals. Sin Cabezas Monument 3 (Parsons 1986: fig. 17) depicts an individual with a distended stomach that compares to those of some of the potbellies. However, another analogy can be found with Middle Preclassic ceramic figurines from La Blanca and elsewhere that also sit in cross-legged positions, often with a portly belly (see, e.g., Arroyo 2002: fig. 131b).

While the dramatically bloated stomach and encircling arms of Sin Cabezas Monument 3 do, indeed, recall the potbelly tradition, as does its pedestal to a lesser degree, I would assert that the Sin Cabezas sculptures represent a distinct sculptural tradition that conveyed a different set of meanings than the potbellies. This assessment is supported by the obvious lack of fat stomachs on Sin Cabezas Monuments 1 and 2 (Parsons 1986: figs. 15, 16), which sit on even taller pedestals in a nearly identical posture; clearly, obesity was not the primary clue to meaning in these sculptures as a group. What I would highlight, instead of the singularly fat belly of Monument 3, is the formal flexibility that the Sin Cabezas monuments share with other categories of sculpture – and even ceramic figurines – conceived during the same general Preclassic period.² I would also emphasize that the Sin Cabezas

sculptures, like the potbellies, emerged out of local traditions of representation already well established by the Middle Preclassic period, at least on a small scale in clay.

It is significant that these traditions trace an even greater time depth in the Gulf Coast region, where stone versions of figures seated in cross-legged postures appear at San Lorenzo (see Cyphers 2004: figs. 178, 181). The cross-legged posture appears to be closely related to elite status and even rulership as early as the end of the Early Preclassic or by the first part of the Middle Preclassic period, and continued to carry this meaning from the Late Preclassic throughout the Classic period, as well attested in the Maya Lowlands.³ I would assert that, while the obese stomach of Sin Cabezas Monument 3 may have conveyed a message of age or seniority similar to that imparted by many potbellies, the cross-legged postures of the individuals as well as their placement on elevated pedestals signal a different set of meanings engaged more specifically with social status and, probably, political authority. Moreover, these meanings appear to have been widely shared during the Preclassic, as evidenced by Gulf Coast sculpture that dates to the Early or Middle Preclassic period, as well as local, Middle Preclassic figurine traditions that portray seated, cross-legged individuals. Certainly small-scale portable objects like figurines or, perhaps even more important, later jade plaques portraying individuals in a similar posture (Schele and Miller 1986: plates 6, 34) must have facilitated the exchange and persistent duration of ideas concerning the representation of politically or socially empowered individuals. The obese belly of Monument 3, then, may have been signaling age or seniority but was operating within a different set of meanings than those conveyed by the potbellies, whose overall posture and presentation are remarkably distinct.



Figure 6.2. Hybrid corpulence: (a) Kaminaljuyu Monument 5 (photo by Michael Love, with the authorization of the Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala); (b) potbellied animal figurine from La Blanca (photo by author).

Hybrid corpulence

It is noteworthy that, at La Blanca, fat bellies embraced by wraparound arms and legs are not limited to human figurines but are also frequently associated with hybrid human–animal characters. This situation is paralleled by stone sculpture in the case of Kaminaljuyu Monument 5 (Fig. 6.2a) (Parsons 1986: fig. 68). Monument 5, 100 cm tall, has a protruding stomach, collar, and wrap-around legs and arms that are markedly similar to those of the monumental potbellies, yet it possesses a zoomorphic, perhaps feline, face. It was repositioned during the Classic period in a row of sculpture at the south margin of the Palangana Lower Plaza along with two potbellies, Kaminaljuyu Monuments 3 and 4 (Parsons 1986: 34). While one could certainly argue that the feline face represents the later modification of an originally human face, one must also acknowledge that antecedents for potbellied, distinctly nonhuman animals exist during the Preclassic. At Middle Preclassic La Blanca, for instance, the body of an animal-faced figurine with earspools and human arms and legs (Fig. 6.2b) compares closely to Monument 5 and other monumental potbellies. So,

too, a Late Preclassic Maya Floral Park Complex vessel cover illustrated by Gifford (1965: fig. 213) depicts a monkey-like figure with pursed lips and arms that wrap around its obese belly. As these examples indicate, “potbelly-ness” – defined only by an obese torso and wraparound limbs – was a fluid trait that was shared by animals, humans, and composite creatures during the Preclassic period. As such, the term “potbelly” is inherently problematic, as it not only is less diagnostic of the potbelly sculptural form than other traits, but highlights an attribute that was broadly shared by many Preclassic characters, ranging from human to animal, in a variety of media.

The “Fat God”

In addition to corpulent stomachs, other attributes of the potbellies and figurines persisted into later periods in association with a variety of characters, particularly those referred to as representations of the “Fat God.” The “Fat God” complex was first defined by Hermann Beyer (1930) to describe a series of mold-made ceramic

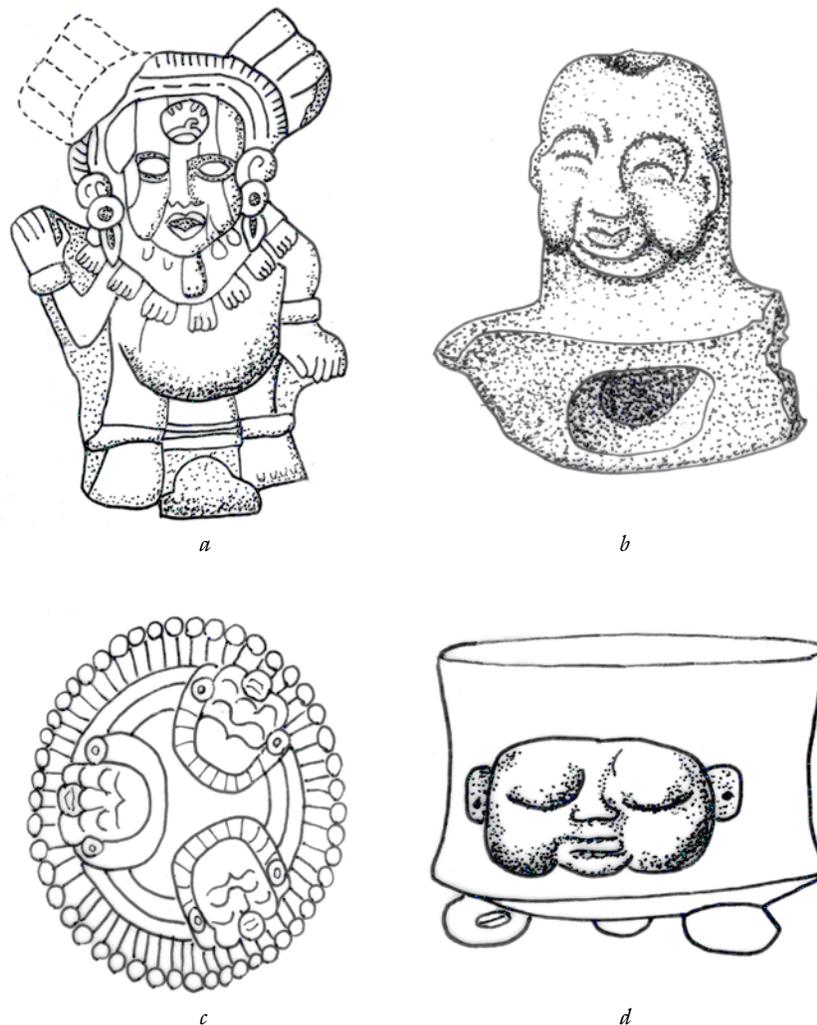


Figure 6.3. “Fat God” representations: (a) “Fat God” figurine (after von Winning 1987: 1, k); (b) ceramic vessel fragment from Teotihuacan (after Linné 1942: fig. 306); (c) convex lid from Teotihuacan (after Séjourné 1966: fig. 206); (d) Early Classic vessel from Tampico or northern Veracruz (after von Winning 1987: vol. 1, chap. 12, fig. 3, b).

figurines found at Teotihuacan and elsewhere in the Valley of Mexico and adjacent regions. Comparing a figurine from Veracruz with one from Teotihuacan, for instance, Beyer (1930: 82) wrote (and I include here several passages from his essay):

This same mythological personage is quite common among antiquities of Teotihuacan style. . . . We note the same drooping lids and cheeks and, besides, a voluminous belly. Thus, this deity evidently represents a fat man. That we have to do with a male deity is indicated by his scanty vestment, a red breechclout, one end of which, adorned with transverse bands, hangs between the legs. Personal adornment is represented by disks and triangular pieces in the ears, a broad collar with pendants, bracelets, and anklets, a peculiar coiffure, and face and body painting.

A fat man might represent a divinity of happiness, of felicity, of bliss, as with the Chinese. . . .

The frequent occurrence of heads and figurines of the Fat God in the ancient remains of Teotihuacan and Atzacotalco . . . make it sure that he was a familiar deity of that people. He evidently had his assigned place in a pantheon of recognized deities.

As is clear from Beyer’s description, the Teotihuacan “Fat God” shares key features with the Preclassic potbellies, including an obese belly, jowly cheeks, closed eyes with puffy lids, and a prominent collar (Fig. 6.3a). However, the Teotihuacan figurines also possess divergent features, including a decorated loincloth, disks with triangular ornaments in the ears, pendants or tassels that dangle from the collar, a distinct headdress and coiffure, straight/standing legs, and gesturing arms that are separated from the body.⁴



Figure 6.4. Las Charcas-phase three-prong effigy *incensario* from Kaminaljuyu. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (photographic archives record identifier pea526759).

Several decades later, Hasso von Winning (1987: vol. 1, 145) questioned the assignment of “god” to these Teotihuacan characters (also see Armillas 1945), noting their absence in the sculpture and painting of Teotihuacan. He suggested instead that they represented ritual practitioners who officiated over diverse ceremonies of domestic life. Sue Scott (1994: 181) concurred with von Winning, adding that “there is no evidence of a deity at Teotihuacan that Beyer likens to a Bacchus. Indeed, from our evidence, the fat torso is merely one in a series of figures wearing loincloth attire.”

“Fat God” faces with similar distended cheeks and closed eyes with heavy lids also appear at Teotihuacan on ceramic vessels and braziers, as well as in a triadic arrangement around the edges of a convex disk that may have functioned as a miniature vessel lid (Fig. 6.3b and c) (Linné 1942: fig. 306; S. Scott 1994: 180–181; Séjourné 1959: figs. 98, 121, 1966: figs. 15, 72, 100, 101, 206; Seler 1998: vol. 6, 229; Taube 2004: 161; von Winning 1987: vol. 1, chap. 12a, fig. 1, o). The association between puffy-faced characters and braziers, however, is presaged by a Middle Preclassic Las Charcas-phase three-pronged effigy *incensario* from Kaminaljuyu that displays three heads with closed, bulging eyelids like those of the potbellies (Fig. 6.4). Apparently, the association at Teotihuacan between bloated characters and braziers had far more ancient antecedents. Similar “Fat God” faces appear on Early Classic vessels in other

regions as well, such as one from Tampico or northern Veracruz (Taube 2004: fig. 73a; von Winning 1987: vol. 1, chap. 12, fig. 3, b) (Fig. 6.3d), and provide evidence of continuities linking these various objects and regions.

Comparable characters also appear in the Maya region throughout the Late Classic period, in both large- and small-scale form, as evidenced by the north column from Structure 3C7 at Oxkintok (Proskouriakoff 1950: fig. 97),⁵ a carved vessel from northern Yucatán (see Kerr vessel no. 9090), and the tripod feet of a Late Classic bowl (Brainerd 1958: fig. 58; Taube 2004: 161). The Oxkintok character possesses sagging cheeks and closed eyes with protruding lids; however, its standing posture departs from that of the Preclassic potbellies and more closely parallels that of the Teotihuacan figurines first discussed by Beyer. Rhonda Taube and Karl Taube (2009: 246) noted several other references to Teotihuacan in the sculpture of Oxkintok, despite the fact that “by the time of the Puuc florescence Teotihuacan was already in historical memory.” The costume of the Oxkintok figure is very distinct, consisting of a tight-fitting and nubby-textured suit. Similar swollen-faced characters, some with closed, puffy eyes and wearing nubby-textured suits, appear among Late Classic Maya figurines (Halperin 2007: figs. 30, 31; Tate 1993: plate 28; Taube 2004: fig. 73c).⁶ One Late Classic Jaina figurine with distended cheeks and wearing the same nubby costume (Fig. 6.5)



Figure 6.5. Jaina whistle. Photograph by Justin Kerr (Kerr Portfolio 6818).

is in fact a whistle, which is especially intriguing given the recurring association between puffy-faced figurines and whistles going back to the Preclassic period. Grove (1984: 88), in fact, noted with regard to the puffy-cheeked whistle from Middle Preclassic Chalcatzingo that “some scholars have referred to such heads as the ‘fat god.’” Similarly, Triadan (2007: 279) recorded several figurines from Aguateca that appear to represent the “Fat God” or depict humans wearing “Fat God” masks (also see Lopiparo 2006: fig. 6.14 for an example from the Ulúa Valley, Honduras). While the masks of these figurines in and of themselves reference some form of performativity, Triadan also reported that a number of these Aguateca “Fat God” figurines were whistles.

Numerous scholars since Beyer have continued to associate the Preclassic potbellies with this “Fat God” complex, despite variations in costuming and attributes that allude to potential disjunctions in meaning throughout time and space. As Sue Scott (2001: 97) observed with some frustration, “Unfortunately the label stuck and nowadays is applied to every corpulent figure in Precolumbian Mesoamerica.”

Marion Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 41), in her seriation of Monte Alto sculptures, carefully considered these correlations between Preclassic potbellies and later “Fat Gods,” and made the astute observation that “fat-faced, puffy-eyed figurines” do not make an appearance in the Valley of Mexico until the Early Classic period.⁷ She added that this appearance of “Fat God” figurines in the Valley of Mexico coincided with considerable Teotihuacan influence along the Pacific Coast during the Early Classic. As will be remembered, even during the Early Classic period, numerous potbellies were still readily visible and many had been repositioned at sites such as Takalik Abaj and Kaminaljuyu in places of prominence. Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 41) conjectured that this new “Fat God” imagery must have carried some significance for Teotihuacanos, as

[t]here are mold-made “fat-god” faces luted onto musical instruments and onto the walls of tripod cylinders at Teotihuacán (Séjourné 1966: Figure 129; Linné 1942: Figure 287, Plate 2), and they occur on a basal frieze around a tripod cylinder from Tiquisate (Shook collections, Antigua, Guatemala). Although this deity never became a dominant figure at Teotihuacán, it may have been an element absorbed into their idea system after contact with the Pacific South Coast of Guatemala and Kaminaljuyú.

Popenoe de Hatch’s observations are significant, as they strongly suggest that the Teotihuacan “Fat God” representations were influenced by contact with the Pacific Coast and Guatemalan Highlands, where potbelly

sculptures were visible or being reutilized at sites during the Early Classic period. While the formal parallels are obvious, the “Fat God” figurines apparently took on new and different meanings at Teotihuacan, as evidenced by the changes in their representation and costume, as well as their reconversion, if you will, into small-scale ceramic objects.

Patterns of interaction between Teotihuacan, the Pacific slope, and southeastern Mesoamerica

Frederick Bove and Sonia Medrano (2003) summarized the nature of interaction between Teotihuacan and the Pacific slope during the Early Classic period, paying heed to conflicting interpretations of the evidence reflected in the scholarship devoted to this topic. They concluded, on the basis of their extensive excavations at the fortified site of Balberta, the largest Early Classic regional center on the Pacific Coast, that Balberta’s development was closely tied to “early and ongoing contacts with Teotihuacan” (Bove and Medrano 2003: 50; also see Bove 1989b; Bove et al. 1993).⁸ While they pointed to a range of archaeological data to support this assessment, they further noted their surprise at the presence of “large numbers of whole and fragmentary figurines of a type previously unreported not only for the Pacific Coast but also for southern Mesoamerica” that demonstrate close ties to “portrait” figurines known from Teotihuacan (Bove and Medrano 2003: 66–67). While a detailed discussion of these “portrait” figurines is not essential to the arguments here, it is crucial to recognize that the assemblage of Early Classic figurines from this Pacific slope site reveals Teotihuacan influence, much as the “Fat God” figurines at Teotihuacan demonstrate influence from the Pacific slope. These various lines of evidence indicate that the dynamics of influence went both ways and that new forms were borrowed from and introduced into the ritual and material culture of both regions.

Bove and Medrano’s conclusions from the Pacific Coast point to more intense patterns of interaction with Teotihuacan than Geoffrey Braswell (2003) has argued for Kaminaljuyu during the same Early Classic period. Braswell (2003: 136–141) interpreted Teotihuacan influence at Kaminaljuyu as having been the result of deliberate choices by elites to adopt a foreign style, manifested in the form of architecture and mortuary furniture. As he concluded, this “hybridized Teotihuacan–highland Maya ethnicity could have been fabricated to create even greater social distance” between local rulers and their subjects.⁹ There is no consensus concerning the relationship between Teotihuacan and Kaminaljuyu, however, despite ongoing

archaeological investigations that address this issue. For example, citing their investigations of the Kaminaljuyu Acropolis, Houston et al. (2003: 50) countered that the novel and “foreign” nature of architectural innovation visible in the Acropolis suggests a detailed knowledge of building design and technologies that points to “more intimate contact with Teotihuacan and its proxies than mere copying by local elites and their workmen.”

To return to the Pacific Coast, Claudia García-Des Lauriers (2007) provided a detailed analysis of evidence from the Early Classic site of Los Horcones, located in the Tonalá region of the Pacific slope of Chiapas, where a series of Teotihuacan-influenced sculptures were initially documented by Navarrete (1976, 1986; also see García-Des Lauriers 2005, Taube 2000). As García-Des Lauriers demonstrated, Los Horcones evidences a number of clear ties to Teotihuacan, not only in its sculptural assemblage but in the organization of its public spaces as well. Moreover, the vast majority of obsidian found at Los Horcones comes from Pachuca, a clear indicator of economic ties to Central Mexico. On this basis, García-Des Lauriers (2007: 176) postulated that Los Horcones may have been established in order to control the trade and exchange of obsidian between Central Mexico, the Soconusco region, and Guatemala. García-Des Lauriers (2007: 235–236) concluded, however, that Los Horcones is best understood not just through its relationship to Teotihuacan, but as a site that was effectively integrated into trade networks that included the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, the Maya Lowlands, southern Veracruz, and the Central Depression of Chiapas. Her work clearly underscores the paths of communication and exchange – moving both north and south, east and west – that characterized the Pacific Coast during the Early Classic period.

In short, despite the fact that the topic of interaction between Teotihuacan and southern Mesoamerica extends well beyond the confines of this study, it is vital to note the transformations that characterized the transition into the Early Classic period, if only to underscore the need to be extraordinarily cautious in postulating an uninterrupted chain of meaning between puffy-faced or “Fat God”-like characters that persevered into the Classic period in a variety of regions. The best evidence to date indicates that the Pacific coastal region, home to the potbelly sculptures, witnessed intense economic and ideological exchange with numerous regions during the Early Classic, including Central Mexico and Teotihuacan in particular.¹⁰ In his report on Monte Alto excavations, Parsons (1976: 330) had already observed as much:

An ancillary product of general regional reconnaissance was the recovery of strong evidence of “Middle”

Classic Teotihuacan intrusion on the Pacific coast south of Monte Alto. This occurred in the manifestation of a quantity of Teotihuacan-style incense burners and cylindrical tripod vases, which are also prevalent at Lake Amatitlán and Kaminaljuyu in the adjacent highlands. . . .

This reinforces the role of the Pacific coast as a corridor for the transmission of traits between highland Mexico and highland Guatemala.

The advent of a new figurine tradition along the Pacific slope during the Early Classic period – following the virtual absence of one during the Late Preclassic – is critical to acknowledge, as is the presence of distinctly Teotihuacan attributes. So, too, is the appearance of a new figurine tradition at Teotihuacan, also during the Early Classic period, which appears to have borrowed specific features from the Late Preclassic Pacific slope stone potbelly tradition, yet reduced them to a miniature scale, transformed them (back) into ceramic, and combined them with a novel suite of traits and distinct costume components. As I discuss later, these currents of exchange – and their timing – must be carefully factored into any suggestion of formal or iconographic continuities with regard to the puffy-faced potbelly tradition of representation.

The “Fat God”: Continuity or disjunction?

Related to this discussion of influence and exchange is Karl Taube’s (2004: 159) comparison of the “Fat God” complex to a category of Classic Maya supernaturals known as *sitz’ winik*, which represent gluttonous *way* (or supernatural co-essence) characters often characterized by a large, though not necessarily obese, belly with a distended navel (Grube and Nahm 1994: 709–710; Taube 2004: fig. 74). In one example on a Late Classic Maya vase, the *sitz’ winik* displays not only an enormous stomach but closed eyes, heavy cheeks, and a collar, traits Taube rightly compared to those of the stone potbellies (Fig. 6.6a). In another example, the *sitz’ winik* is garbed in a textured suit that compares to those worn by the “Fat Gods” in Yucatán (Taube 2004: fig. 74c). Taube (2004: 159–160; Miller and Taube 1993: 86; Taube and Taube 2009: 246) argued that the “Fat Gods” and *sitz’ winik* characters functioned within a context of social commentary or ritualized humor, satirizing the character trait of gluttony, and that the fans grasped by the individuals and their dance gestures suggest the role of performers. I would note, however, that these Classic Maya characters appear to represent a hybrid form that variously shares features with the Preclassic potbellies (including large bellies, prominent navels, jowly cheeks, and closed eyes),

the Early Classic “Fat Gods” of Teotihuacan (the collars with pendants and loincloths), and the Late Classic characters from Yucatán (the nubby-textured suits). These features appear to have been recombined – or disregarded – in different ways and contexts during the course of the Classic period, with varying levels of consistency: the characters are not always fat, do not necessarily have swollen facial features, and at times are wide eyed and actively engaged in ritual activities such as smoking.

This discussion also calls to mind the unusual potbelly-like sculptures from Kaminaljuyu discussed in Chapter 4, including the stone figurine and Monuments 9, 11, and 15 (Figs. 4.30a and 4.31a and b; Parsons 1986: fig. 71). As I noted there, the lack of context for these Kaminaljuyu monuments makes dating them difficult, which is compounded by their eclectic mix of attributes, which appear to combine potbelly-like bodies with the iconography of ritual combat that is better documented at Late Preclassic Dainzú and in Early Classic Teotihuacan figurine traditions. These unusual potbellies, like the so-called Fat God representations, appear to benefit from a fluid suite of traits and elements that were freely borrowed and recombined in various ways for centuries throughout much of Mesoamerica.

As the work of many scholars has demonstrated, there was indeed a geographically and temporally widespread occurrence of fat and/or jowly-featured individuals in the art of Mesoamerica. However, as the variations in forms suggest, these figures may have taken on new and different meanings among culture regions through time. It is important to bear in mind Popenoe de Hatch’s observation that the Teotihuacan figurines do not appear until the Early Classic period, at which time there is good archaeological evidence to suggest frequent communication and exchange between Teotihuacan and the southern coast of Mesoamerica with its high concentration of potbellies – many of which were still being utilized and repositioned in readily visible locations. We must be cautious in assuming that the meanings of these “Fat Gods” in later cultures or regions – at Early Classic Teotihuacan, in the Late Classic Maya Lowlands, or in Yucatán – directly apply to Preclassic images of corpulent figures. To state this in a different way, I would caution that assuming that the Preclassic potbellies carried the same meaning as the Classic-period “Fat Gods” is problematic, as is the assignment of the “Fat God” moniker to the Preclassic sculptures. One should not suppose an unbroken chain of meaning from the Preclassic period through the Classic period. To assert continuity, without carefully considering the apparent disparities among the various “fat” figures, seems unwise, particularly given that the Middle Preclassic figurines from La Blanca also



Figure 6.6. Fat-featured individuals: (a) Classic Maya *sitz' winik* figure; (b) Tlatilco vessel. Drawings courtesy of Karl Taube.

possess many of the same diagnostic traits but lack the feature of “fatness,” as do many of the potbelly monuments themselves.

Other types of objects from the Early and Middle Preclassic periods further complicate this situation and demonstrate how various attributes associated with a loose category of “Fat Gods” frequently appear in the iconographic record in connection with a variety of unique characters. An Early Preclassic vessel from Tlatilco (Feuchtwanger 1989: fig. 105; Taube 2004: fig. 71a) depicts a jowly-cheeked individual; the volumetric form of the vessel lends itself well to the rendering of the inflated features of the figure (Fig. 6.6b). However, this individual’s eyes are handled in a distinct manner and do not bear any resemblance to the bulging, closed lids that characterize the La Blanca figurines and most of the later stone potbellies. In contrast, another vessel attributed to Tlatilco, rendered as the body of an old woman (Coe 1965b: fig. 149), portrays the woman with puffed cheeks and closed, heavy-lidded eyes that resemble those of the later potbellies. A Manantial-phase (1000–800 B.C.) ceramic vessel from Tomb 1 at Chilpancingo, Guerrero, displays similar jowly cheeks covered with incised designs,

but the figure's eyes are open and quite naturalistically rendered (Reyna Robles and Gonzáles Quintero 1998: photo 24).

Likewise, von Winning (1987: vol. 1, chap. 12: 1, f) illustrated a swollen-faced figurine from Tetelpan in the Valley of Mexico that possesses distinctly protruding cheeks yet whose eyes appear to be open. Another example is provided by a ceramic censer from Middle Preclassic Colha (Anthony and Black 1994), which displays a jowly individual with wide-open eyes that, once again, differ considerably from those of the La Blanca figurines and the majority of potbelly sculptures. Like the vessel illustrated from Tlatilco (Fig. 6.6b), the volumetric form of the censer is well suited to the obese attributes of the figure, whose arms clasp the stomach in a gesture quite similar to that of both the stone potbellies and animal figurines from La Blanca; its legs, however, which are only suggested, appear to protrude forward from the front, quite unlike those of the stone potbellies.¹¹ Moreover, several greenstone masks (Paradis 1981: fig. 5a; Princeton Art Museum 1995: cat. nos. 183–185) demonstrate that the attribute of heavy jowls could be paired with a variety of eye types and, presumably, discrete categories of individuals or beings during the Middle Preclassic. A ceramic figure attributed to Xochipala, Guerrero, and illustrated by Berjonneau, Delataille, and Sonnery (1985: plate 310) and Feuchtwanger (1989: fig. 22) illustrates this well, for although it possesses dramatic jowls, it has open eyes and an unusual “horned” headdress, and stands in an erect posture with bent arms and hands resting on its thighs.

Sculptures from a variety of regions also portray a range of fat-featured individuals. The jowls of Takalik Abaj Monument 99 (Fig. 4.20b) are highly exaggerated, yet the eyes of the figure are quite distinct from those of the Monte Alto heads. Swollen features are likewise rendered on the faces of Kaminaljuyu Monument 10, which appears to have been a vertically tenoned block (Fig. 4.29b and c) (Parsons 1986: fig. 191). The stone spheres at sites such as Kaminaljuyu and Takalik Abaj further illustrate how potbelly-related attributes were expressed in a variety of artistic forms, as does a jade plaque in the Cleveland Museum (Princeton Art Museum 1995: no. 155), which portrays what appear to be closed and heavy-lidded eyes.

As these examples demonstrate, specific attributes of jowls or closed eyes with bulging lids were widespread during the Preclassic period and do not cohere into one neat category or character type. The same mutability characterizes figures with wraparound limbs and rotund stomachs that make appearances on diverse types of ceramic and stone objects, including vessels, figurines, potbellies, pedestal sculptures, and mushroom stones

(Ohi 1994: 323; Ohi and Torres 2001: 162). Certainly the two monuments from Pacaño (Fig. 3.14) (Robinson 2005: 531), in the highlands of Guatemala, are an excellent example of how these various features could be combined to create hybrid sculptural forms: while the Pacaño sculptures are clearly pedestal monuments, they display the puffy facial features and corpulent stomachs of the potbellies.¹² The same variability is illustrated by a mushroom stone, now located at the Posada de Don Rodrigo in Antigua, Guatemala, which weds the typical mushroom stone form with the figure of a potbelly (Fig. 4.55). Even more interesting, the figure's mouth is open in a way that closely recalls the mouths of other potbellies, several of the La Blanca figurines, and whistles from various regions of Mesoamerica. In fact, the significance of this open mouth is emphatically rendered on the mushroom stone: the perforation continues through the body to the back of the sculpture.

Conclusions

The interpretation of the Preclassic potbellies as early representations of a Mesoamerican “Fat God” is a long-standing one in the literature. It is certainly not without some merit: the fact that features are shared by the Preclassic potbellies, the Teotihuacan figurines, and Classic Maya characters is compelling and is a topic I return to in Chapter 7. Nevertheless, I believe that this label, when applied superficially or without adequate discussion, is problematic and, ultimately, misleading. When one considers them critically, as I have briefly done in this chapter, the points of divergence that characterize the “fat” characters in different regions become apparent. The situation is, I confess, complicated by the sheer time depth of characters displaying “potbelly” or “Fat God” features, as discussed here and in Chapter 5. To my mind, it seems imprudent to assume that these various individuals – in an incredibly diverse array of mediums, scales, contexts, and regions – represent one specific character or “Fat God” that persevered in form and meaning through time without any significant change. Rather, what strikes me as more interesting is the fact that they *do* appear to morph and change through space, yet continue to borrow from a suite of traits that traces its antecedents to Preclassic figurine assemblages and domestic ritual.

At issue here, on a very basic level, is the question of continuity or disjunction, which has been at the heart of Mesoamerican inquiry for decades. As discussed in Chapter 2, Gordon Willey (1973) argued that a direct historical approach, in which inferences were drawn among people, objects, and cultures within a geographically

and historically circumscribed framework, was justified and productive for Mesoamerican scholarship. In sharp contrast, George Kubler posited that superficially similar imagery – evidence of continuity at first glance – could, upon deeper examination, reveal “disjunction” or meanings that had shifted, subtly or radically, within an altered set of historical circumstances. As he succinctly stated, “Continuous form does not predicate continuous meaning, nor does continuity of form or of meaning necessarily imply continuity of culture” (Kubler 1975: 671).

More recent scholarship has demonstrated the merits of a direct historical approach when undertaken cautiously and with an eye toward the potential for shifts in meaning or form.¹³ This study attempts a similar balancing act. As I noted earlier, there are fundamentally intriguing continuities between the Late Preclassic potbellies and “Fat God” characters. Yet these continuities are tempered by sharp disparities, such as the fact that the “Fat God” does not make an appearance at Teotihuacan until the Early Classic period, hundreds of years after the first stone potbellies appear to have been conceived and following a period of intense contact between the Pacific slope and Teotihuacan. Moreover, when the “Fat God” emerges at Teotihuacan, it does so accompanied by formal continuities with the Preclassic potbellies – such as puffy features – as well as other novel and distinct traits. It is this tension between continuity and variation that particularly interests me, as it points to the possibility of some fundamental unity between these various forms, but one that – to my mind – may be grounded in a meaning far removed from the “Fat God” designation, which in and of itself is poorly understood.

The archaeological data from both the Pacific slope and Teotihuacan confirm that the Early Classic period was a time of momentous change in ancient Mesoamerica. There is compelling evidence, in the form of figurine traditions, among other things, that forms, styles, and attributes were being shared and adopted in different regions and were moving in different directions. The fact that “Fat God” figurines do not make an appearance at Teotihuacan until the Early Classic period, after a significant amount of Teotihuacan influence and presence along the Pacific Coast, cannot be merely coincidental. To my mind, Popenoe de Hatch’s observation of this is critical to understanding not only that the potbelly-like characteristics that appear in the “Fat God” figurines were consciously borrowed, but that they were also deliberately transformed and, as will be discussed

in Chapter 7, merged with long-established notions of swollen-featured characters well documented from several regions in Preclassic Mexico. Ironically, the features that appear on the stone potbellies were converted back into ceramic form at Teotihuacan and incorporated into a distinct representational system. Certainly their context and usage also changed considerably, with Teotihuacan “Fat Gods” never playing an obviously public or monumental role, but instead functioning at a smaller, much more private scale. Given this rather remarkable transformation of motifs, medium, context, and geographic location, I would stress the need to seek more nuanced interpretations for the Preclassic stone potbellies that do not hinge solely on later, Early Classic developments and interpretations.

These issues and tensions speak to inherently methodological concerns, and this study privileges the Preclassic data in an attempt to avoid obvious pitfalls of disjunction in which later meanings – derived from Classic-period evidence – are applied uncritically to an extensive corpus of Preclassic sculptures, despite obvious differences in use and materials. Time does not march backward, as we all know. Applying this obvious logic to the present study, then, we must bestow any meanings derived from later periods on earlier objects only in a very cautious manner that carefully takes into consideration differing historical circumstances. I do not propose to reject later evidence; on the contrary, I use it with discretion, but only after plumbing the depths of data from the Preclassic period in an attempt to discern patterns of meaning that illuminate the specific historical circumstances that gave birth to the Preclassic sculptural form.

In the final chapters of this study, I explore an alternative set of meanings for these amorphous “potbelly” characters that attempts to strike a balance between recognizing the patterns of continuity while simultaneously paying heed to the points of divergence. I posit that the clues to the meaning of the potbellies lie in the patterns of overlapping and shared traits visible in the Preclassic record, and that these features allude to a far richer significance for these characters than the superficial designation of “Fat God” does. The exploration of these meanings in the following chapters also returns to many of the ideas touched on earlier in this book, such as the relationship between “private” and “public” ritual traditions, sculpture’s role in negotiating these divides, and its function in visualizing social identity during the Preclassic period.

Potbellies, Ancestors, and Performance

Introduction

Given the problems inherent in continuing to think of the potbellies merely – or uncritically – as Preclassic “Fat Gods,” what other lines of evidence can be pursued in order to offer new interpretations of their symbolic significance? I suggest that several clues to meaning can be found in the swollen facial features and their range of conceptual associations during the Preclassic and in later periods, and that these associations are consistent with, or logical outgrowths of, those that were carried by domestic figurines bearing the same traits during the Middle Preclassic period. More explicitly, I suggest that specific features of the potbellies point to their significance as representations of ancestors. Using material drawn from the considerable literature concerning ancestors and ancestor veneration in Mesoamerica, I explore how the potbellies visually communicated the identity of a deceased yet vitally animated being.

This discussion relies on the demonstration of a certain amount of continuity in forms, attributes, and their meanings through time. I begin by carefully building the case that the Preclassic data anticipate that of the later Classic period and arguing that there were long-standing Mesoamerican notions concerning death and the representation of ancestors that were formally conveyed in the artistic record, on a large and small scale, in figurines and monumental sculpture. As I also discuss, specific attributes, such as the pursed lips that are associated with both jowly-faced figurines and the potbellies, suggest that the emanation of breath or sound communicated an animate quality, even in death. This attribute, more than any other, moves the discussion into the realm of performance; in other words, these objects – whether figurines or sculpture – were not conceived as merely static, but were understood to be performative objects

that conveyed vitality, whether it be in the form of issuing breath or emanating sound. As I conclude in this chapter, even the limited archaeological evidence surrounding the potbellies suggests that the monuments continued to “perform” an identity as ancestral beings in later periods as well.

Puffy features, death, and breath

Early on, scholars observed that certain traits of the stone potbellies, including the closed eyes, puffy facial features, and corpulent stomachs, suggest death (Miles 1965: 244; Parsons 1986: 45; Stuart and Stuart 1969: 198). John Scott (1988: 26–29) even suggested that the potbellies represented mummy bundles.¹ Indeed, evidence indicates that the trait of closed, bulging eyes – one of the most consistent attributes of the potbellies – is frequently associated with deceased or otherworldly individuals. On a very basic level, the shut eyes preclude sight, the very act of which is “procreative” and vital (Houston and Taube 2000). The associations between closed eyes and death are vividly rendered on a stylistically Late Preclassic pedestal sculpture, published by Dieseldorff (1926: plate 39), which portrays a half-kneeling, half-squatting figure. The individual’s head is rendered with a protruding, closed eyelid on one half of the face and a skeletal visage on the other.² The relationship between closed, bulbous eyes and death or an otherworldly state persevered into the Classic period.³ For example, closed, puffy eyes characterize a zoomorphic creature on a Late Classic cylindrical vessel that blows a conch shell in an underworld scene inhabited by supernaturals (Fig. 7.1a) (Schele and Miller 1986: plate 120a). In addition, Classic-period hieroglyphic texts portray skeleton or corpse heads with distinctly shut eyes in conjunction with *ik’*, or “wind,” signs (Fig. 7.1b). Proskouriakoff (1963: 163) was the first to recognize these phrases, including the *ik’* sign, as death expressions involving the exhalation of breath and, by extension, life (Houston and Taube 2000: 267). In these examples – the Late Classic vessel image and the hieroglyphic texts – closed, puffy-eyed characters or glyphs are associated not only with death or the supernatural realm, but with the act of exhaling, either in the form of breath or in order to produce sound.

These examples from the Classic period suggest a parallel with a number of the Preclassic La Blanca figurines and several of the potbelly monuments, which also express a concern with the visualization of “breath” or some form of exhalation. At La Blanca, several figurines

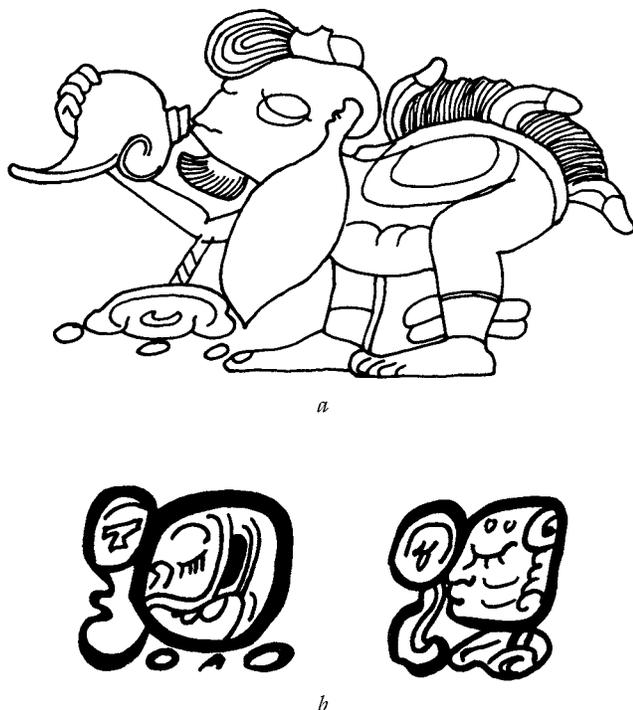


Figure 7.1. Classic-period representations of breath: (a) Late Classic cylindrical vessel, detail of zoomorphic conch shell trumpet player with closed eyes (drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.); (b) hieroglyphic expressions for death and the exhalation of breath (from Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006: fig. 4.7c).

possess “breath” beads that are typically represented as solid spheres beneath the nose, as if breath is emanating from the nostrils of the individual (Fig. 7.2a and b). Similar nose beads also appear in the corpus of Middle Preclassic monumental art, a point well illustrated by La Venta Stela 19 (Houston and Taube 2000: fig. 3a) (Fig. 7.2c). By the Late Preclassic period and the advent of the potbelly tradition, similar “breath” beads appear occasionally in the mouths of several of the sculptures. This is clearly portrayed on Pasaco Monument 2 (Fig. 4.13b), in which a round bead with central perforation appears in the unusually squared lips of the individual. On the La Vigía head, a spherical bead also appears between the figure’s parted lips (Fig. 4.53). The Tiltepec fat-featured individuals (see, e.g., Fig. 4.43b) represent an almost hybrid form that combines the pursed lips of earlier figurines and some potbellies, such as the Finca Sololá examples, with an open mouth enclosing a perforated bead as on Pasaco Monument 2.

Such ambiguity, in which it is unclear if a bead or rounded/pursed lips are represented, may be clarified by evidence from the Classic period. In Classic-period iconography, a bead or “stone” in the mouth of an individual could symbolize the “breath” of both living and

deceased individuals. Several scholars (Coe 1988: 225; Houston and Taube 2000: 267; Taube 2005: 30–31) pointed to a reference in Miles (1957) of burial practices in the Alta Verapaz recorded by the sixteenth-century Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, which described the burial rites of the northern Pokom Maya, who preserved the breathlike soul of a deceased ruler in a “precious stone”:

When it appears then that some lord is dying, they had ready a precious stone which they placed at his mouth when he appeared to expire, in which they believe that they took the spirit, and on expiring, they very lightly rubbed his face with it. It takes the breath, soul or spirit. (Translation in Miles 1957: 749)

Similar customs were recorded among the Aztecs by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who wrote that a piece of stone, placed in a corpse’s mouth, became the dead person’s *yolia* (Furst 1995: 54). According to Jill Furst, *yolia* not only signified “heart” but also encompassed concepts of the soul, animating force, breath, and vital signs. An Aztec chant recorded by Sahagún describes the origin of an infant as the result of acts of breathing and drilling, which, as Houston and Taube (2000: 267) and Taube (2005: 31) explained, equates the creation of the child with the fashioning of a bead or jewel:

... the infant, who was created by us, in the Omeyocan, in the place of the nine levels ...

... you were breathed into, you were drilled into your house, in Omeyocan, on the nine levels. (López Austin 1988: vol. 1, 208)

A recent discovery at the site of Chiapa de Corzo confirms the antiquity of these burial customs in the Grijalva River region of Chiapas, Mexico. A variety of jade jewels filled the mouth of the primary occupant of an elite tomb in Mound 11, dated to the Middle Preclassic period (Roach 2010). Such archaeological evidence provides a contemporaneous parallel to the corpus of figurines at La Blanca and the imagery on La Venta Stela 19, and indicates that a symbolic overlap between breath and beads was already prevalent during the Middle Preclassic period and expressed in burials, domestic ritual, and monumental sculpture traditions. However, even earlier antecedents for this convention are attested archaeologically at the Early Preclassic sites of Tomaltepec and San José Mogote in Oaxaca, where both males and females were interred with jade beads in their mouths (Marcus 1999: 73–75, figs. 4, 5). This practice is also reported from the site of La Libertad, Chiapas, Mexico, where a juvenile was placed with a bead in the mouth in a Late Preclassic burial (Glenna Nielson-Grimm, personal communication

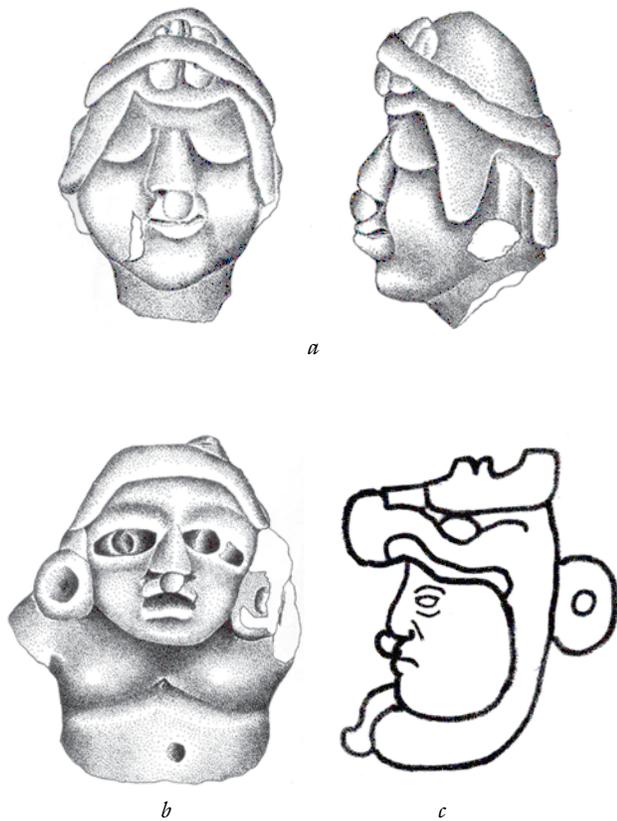


Figure 7.2. Breath bead imagery: (a) profile and frontal views of La Blanca figurine (from Arroyo 2002: fig. 116e); (b) La Blanca figurine (from Arroyo 2002: fig. 121a); (c) La Venta Stela 9, detail (drawing by author after Houston and Taube 2000: fig. 3a).

2010), as well as along the Pacific slope by the Early Classic period at the site of Balberta, in coastal Guatemala, where several burials included individuals with jade beads in their mouths (Arroyo 2004: 82).

The relationship between death, beads, breath, and mortuary customs is repeated throughout numerous regions of Mesoamerica and corresponds well with the suggestion that the potbellies represent deceased individuals. I would qualify this suggestion slightly, however, and propose that the potbellies represented a specific category of deceased individuals – ancestors. Moreover, I would argue that the features and representation of these ancestors were influenced significantly by earlier Preclassic domestic figurine traditions. Key aspects of this tradition of representation included the breath beads, inflated cheeks, and pursed lips, which emphasized the emanation of breath. Such representations of vitality may have been central to the depiction of ancestors, both in public sculpture and in domestic figurine traditions. To put it another way, I propose that the pursed lips and beads that appear in association with the figurines and several of the potbellies encompassed notions of breath and animate souls, and symbolized an ancestor’s spirit both in life and in death.

This suggestion dovetails nicely with Patricia McAnany, Rebecca Storey, and Angela Lockard’s (1999: 131) discussion of the relationship between breath, ancestors, and mortuary ritual, in which they recalled an ethnographic observation made by Evon Vogt. Vogt (1993: 58) recorded that a black rooster, interred beneath the floors of a household, “fed” the house and breathed life and soul into it, and that this act could be extended to the deposition of ancestors beneath households, which also “transform[ed] a mere structure into a house with a soul.”

I further suggest that the pursed lips of several of the La Blanca figurines (Fig. 5.7a) (Arroyo 2002: fig. 116f; Ivic de Monterroso 2004: fig. 9), which form perfect circles like the rounded beads, overlapped within this conceptual domain. As already noted, beads were symbols of breath or exhalations. The puffed cheeks of these figurines certainly imply an act of exhalation, as do the pursed lips and distended cheeks of the stone potbellies that display the same characteristic. In fact, the “breath” beads and pursed lips that persevered in the later potbelly corpus appear to have been interchangeable traits in the Middle Preclassic figurine corpus, with either effectively symbolizing the vital life essence of an individual.

The associations between breath and souls or vital life essences are well documented ethnographically among the Maya and other Mesoamerican groups (López Austin 1988: 171; Marcus and Flannery 1994: 57–58). John Watanabe (1992: 87) recorded that an “inner soul” (*aanma*) among Chimaltecos “refers to a personal animating essence associated with the breath.” A brief passage in Gossen (1974: 210) integrates notions of breath, souls, and something – like the bead of the Preclassic figurines and potbellies – perched between the lips. As he recounted, “Each person has three souls or spirits. One dwells on the tip of the tongue and is associated with his candle of fate in the sky.” The “candle of fate” refers to an individual’s life span; when a candle is extinguished, one’s life ends (Gossen 1974: 15). Nash (1970: 131) recorded similar beliefs among the Tzeltal Maya; she noted, for example, that “when a person dies, his soul is believed to go out from his tongue.” Especially intriguing, however, given the recurring associations from the Preclassic period onward between ancestors, parted lips, breath, and protruding beads, is the location of this particular type of soul on the tip of the tongue. The Classic-period Maya seem to have held a similar concept regarding pursed lips and death, as well evidenced by the inverted and shrunken trophy heads that hang from the belt of the king on Yaxchilan Lintel 9 (Tate 1992: fig. 45). Similar ideational overlaps may also be posited for Teotihuacan. Laurette Séjourné (1959: fig. 165, 1966: fig. 19) illustrated a *candelerero*, a type of object closely

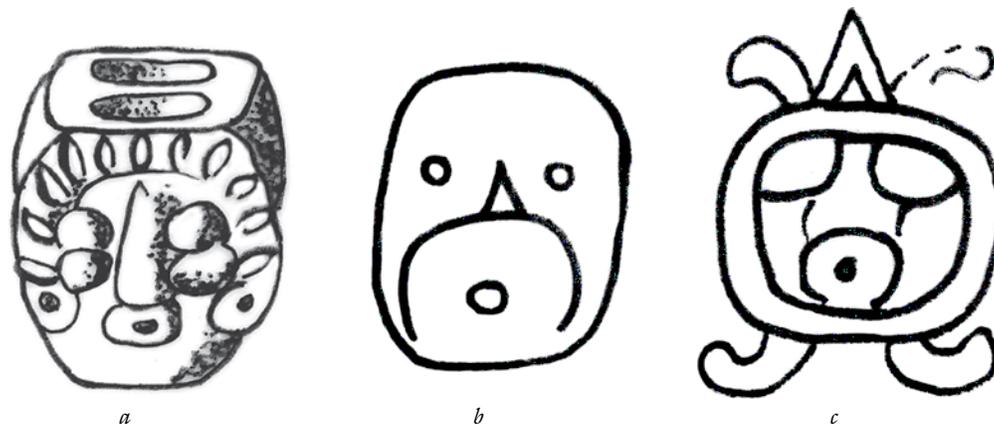


Figure 7.3. Pursed-lip imagery: (a) Teotihuacan *candelero* with pursed lips and puffy cheeks (drawing by author after S ejourn e 1966: fig. 19); (b) early *ajaw* glyph (drawing by author after Mora-Mar ın 2006: fig. 3a); (c) detail of Tiltepec Monument 26 cartouche (drawing by author after Navarrete and Hern andez 2000: fig. 9a).

associated with domestic ritual at Teotihuacan, having a face with pursed lips very similar to those of the potbellies and Preclassic figurines. In this case, however, the pursed lips may have alluded to the smoke that issued from the object, perhaps akin to breath or an animating force (Fig. 7.3a).

From breath to sound

Several of the Preclassic figurines from La Blanca and elsewhere suggest that the exhalation of breath – as evidence of an animating life essence – may have been accompanied by sound, as if the figure were whistling. To state it differently, the emanation of sound or a whistle may have made audible an individual’s vitality. This is exemplified by the puffy-faced figurines from La Blanca and Chalcatzingo that functioned as whistles (Fig. 5.6), as well as the swollen-faced effigy whistles from other regions of Mesoamerica (Fig. 5.7b). The best example, however, is the whistle from Kaminaljuyu, dated to the Middle Preclassic Las Charcas phase, which depicts a potbelly-like figure replete with collar (Fig. 5.8). This Preclassic association between distended features and whistling or sound emanations certainly anticipates the scene on the Classic-period cylindrical vessel in which the conch shell trumpet player also possesses heavy cheeks and closed, thick-lidded eyes.

There also appears to have been an association between acts of utterance and rank or authority in ancient Mesoamerica. David Mora-Mar ın (2006) discussed the importance of the pursed mouth and its emanation of sound to early representations of the *ajaw* glyph, which signified “lord, ruler” in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions.

He also traced the history of scholarship addressing the *ajaw* glyph and its associations with caves, jaguar mouths, and shouting. He noted that Virginia Fields (1989: 75) had originally suggested that the Mixe word for “mouth,” *ajw*, may have been the linguistic source of Maya *ajaw*. As Fields had further observed, this Maya title was paralleled by the Aztec *tlatoani*, or “speaker,” title, which also alluded to the ruler’s role as one who vocalizes. Building on these observations, Mora-Mar ın discussed the similarity in appearance between early *ajaw* glyphs and the swollen, pursed-lip faces in the cartouches above the Tiltepec potbellies (Fig. 7.3b and c) (also see Sedat 1992: 85–87). Mora-Mar ın’s observations not only underscore the significance of these facial features for Preclassic sculptural representations, but also suggest that they were incorporated into nascent writing systems, where they continued to signify a vocalization or emanation of sound. In a later work, Mora-Mar ın (2009) expanded on these ideas, noting that the use of imagery such as this was an example of cultural framing and embedding, in which complex ideas – such as “rulership” – were presented “in the form of every-day, common-sense scenarios that are culturally relative and culturally relevant, and therefore, designed to be appealing to the target audiences.”

Giving sculptural form – and voice – to ancestors

The potbellies, as images of ancestors, fit into an ancient tradition of ancestor representation in the art of Mesoamerica on a variety of scales and in multiple media (see Coe 1968b; Cyphers in press; Gillespie

1999; Grove 1973, 1981). For example, the Early Preclassic wooden busts from El Manatí may very well have represented ancestors. Ponciano Ortiz and María del Carmen Rodríguez (2000: 83) noted that the busts were “wrapped like mortuary bundles” and accompanied, in what appears to represent a single offering event, by groups of plants, leaves, and reeds. Rosemary Joyce (1998: 155) further noted that surface wear on the busts suggested that they “were interred after a use-life.” In a similar vein, J. Scott (1980: 26) linked the Monte Alto heads to the earlier monumental heads of San Lorenzo that appear to have portrayed rulers – or, by extension, powerful ancestors – individualized by distinctive features and headdresses (Fig. 3.4a) (Coe 1977: 186; Grove 1981: 65–67; Stirling 1955: 20; Wicke 1971). This tradition of representing powerful leaders or ancestors in the form of monumental heads persevered into the Middle Preclassic period at La Venta, where a trio of heads (Monuments 2, 3, 4) was placed at the northern edge of the site (Stirling 1943: 56–58). In this location, they must have served as impressive sentinels guarding the northern entry to the site (González Lauck 2010; Reilly 1999: 29). Perhaps, too, this grouping of heads symbolized a gathering of ancestors. Or, as Grove (1981: 67) suggested, they may have been erected side by side in order to illustrate genealogical or dynastic succession. Christopher Pool (2010) suggested a similar function for the monumental heads at Tres Zapotes, which “seem to mark the perimeter of the center, perhaps announcing the entrance to the heart of the Olmec polity,” as well as the monumental Cobata head (de la Fuente 1973: no. 88), which was “located in an important pass at the divide between the lower Papaloapan and the Tepango Valley, [and] was intended to serve as a territorial marker for the Tres Zapotes polity.” The Cobata head is especially interesting for this discussion, as its eyes are quite distinct from other Olmec heads and appear to be closed, with somewhat puffy and slit lids suggestive of death, according to de la Fuente (1973: 125).⁴ The location of these monumental heads certainly anticipates the placement of potbelly sculptures or puffy-faced heads at liminal places of transition at sites such as Santa Leticia, El Ujuxte, Takalik Abaj, and possibly Monte Alto during the Late Preclassic (Love 2010). Perhaps the groupings of potbellies at Monte Alto, Santa Leticia, and Takalik Abaj conjured a gathering of ancestors. Identified as such, their presence calls to mind the body of anthropological literature dealing with death, funerary rites, ancestors, and liminality (Turner 1967, 1969; Van Gennep 1960).

Another aspect of two of the Olmec colossal heads at La Venta further anticipates the features of several of the potbellies and parallels traits found in Middle Preclassic

figurines. La Venta Monuments 3 and 4, as Rebecca González Lauck (2010) observed, have parted lips. The third head in this group, which marked the northern entrance to the site, Monument 2, also has parted lips as if smiling. González Lauck suggested that this trio, vigilantly surveying the periphery of the site, may have been rendered as if “speaking,” which is in keeping with the relationship between authority and vocalizations, as discussed earlier.

So, too, as discussed in Chapter 4, Olmec representations of ancestors, in the form of large, nearly round colossal heads, share key formal features with the monumental heads from Monte Alto, as well as other carved stone spheres known from Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu, Takalik Abaj, and La Vigía. The recurring spherical form and/or overlapping suite of traits or liminal contexts shared by these objects suggest a broader, more generalized category of forms deemed appropriate for representations of ancestors or deceased individuals, or for themes of fertility and generation.

It is difficult, given the lack of hieroglyphic writing and the inconsistent preservation of archaeological data, to fully comprehend the dramatic social upheavals that transpired during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. Yet I would suggest that the sculptural programs at many Preclassic sites indicate that rulers were navigating these social transformations, in part, by commissioning monumental forms that were grounded in conventions of representation that borrowed generously from more ancient and culturally relevant domestic ritual and/or traditions of ancestor veneration. Other evidence supports this assertion. Tate (1993: 15), for instance, pointed to the numerous images throughout Mesoamerica that focus on “images of the head or face alone.” She related this ancient practice to ethnographic descriptions of modern Maya ritual recorded by Gossen (1974: 35–36) in which the heads and faces of carved images of saints in Chamula “receive a great amount of attention in ritual action and symbolism, the reason being that the head is the source of heat and power.” These notions were echoed by Houston, Stuart, and Taube (2006: 68), who linked the massive Olmec heads to Maya and Mesoamerican notions of the head and face as “the essential manifestation of the body.” They pointed to ethnohistoric evidence involving the curation of ancestor skulls and remains in which the head functioned as the primary signifier of identity: “Diego de Landa notes the custom of drying and remodeling the heads of venerable lords for storage in ‘oratories of their houses with their idols’; the ashes of cremated nobles were gathered and inserted in ‘wooden statues of which the back of the head was left hollow’ for this purpose (Tozzer 1941: 131).”⁵

A monument from Kaminaljuyu suggests that, on rare occasions, the emphasis on heads – and, in particular, puffy-featured ones – was translated into the more two-dimensional stela form. Karl Taube (personal communication 2010) pointed out to me that Kaminaljuyu Stela 5 (Parsons 1986: fig. 53) portrays a fleshy-faced individual with a heavy-lidded eye that may be closed.⁶ According to Lucia R. Henderson (personal communication 2010), the carving style of Stela 5, with its thicker forms and lines, suggests an early date, probably sometime in the first part of the Late Preclassic. The head on Stela 5 is flanked above by an open-mawed snake, while other zoomorphic creatures appear behind and below it.⁷ The attention to the detailed earflares worn by the individual – clearly marking him as elite – and the emphasis on a supernaturally charged space, or environment, of zoomorphic creatures set this monument apart from the more iconically rendered potbellies and related monumental heads. Nevertheless, the composition's deliberate emphasis on a face with jowly features and a heavy-lidded eye provides an unusual, more narrative stela counterpart to the boulder sculpture form of the potbellies and monumental heads. Its emphasis on a two-dimensional surface for the portrayal of a puffy-featured head also invites comparison to sculptures such as Kaminaljuyu Monument 10 and the monument from Tlaxcala, yet is distinct from them in its deployment of the figure's profile. In the end, though, the obvious emphasis on the head in this composition, combined with the specific repertoire of puffy features, may well designate the portrayed figure as an ancestor.

Remarkable continuity between the facial traits of domestic figurines and the more monumental potbellies and related sculptures supports the notion that the head was the locus of specific messages. Similar observations have been posited by Joyce (1998: 160, 161; also see Hoopes and Mora-Marín 2009: 312–313), who noted that “Costa Rican sculptors made the head the seat of individual distinction” and endowed it “with unique character through the embellishment of hair and head-dress, [and] the sensory engagement for which the parts of the face serve as vehicles.” She further noted correlations between figurine and stone sculpture traditions, positing that

[t]he bodies constructed through the body processing and its public representation are a record of and instrument for experience. Stone and pottery human images form a record of the bodily practices particularly significant in these societies. By giving permanent material form to selected practices, pre-Hispanic Central American artists exposed fleeting aspects of human experience to

reflection, shifting bodily practices to inscribed practices. As the unreflective reenactment of traditional postures and actions, bodily practices reinforced the status quo. Their inscription in material media shifted the temporality of the experience further toward reiteration, citation of precedent.

The transfer of figurine traits to stone sculpture during the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic poses a somewhat different situation, in which inscribed practices endured for a long stretch of time, and in various spaces, during a period of gradual social transition. Yet this may be particularly telling, as it speaks to the need of rulers to quote from tradition or precedent – at least superficially maintaining the “status quo” to some degree – while simultaneously reinventing a public sculpture tradition that suited their own political agenda.

Beyond the facial features of the potbellies, other traits also point to their identity as deceased ancestors. As previously noted, the drooping pectorals of several of the potbellies (Giralda Monument 1, Monte Alto Monuments 4 and 5, the Teopán Island potbelly, and Bilbao Monument 58) may suggest age, as might the stooped shoulders of examples such as Takalik Abaj Monuments 2, 94, and 100, and Concepción Monument 3. During the Classic period, stooped shoulders and sagging chests and bellies were common markers of aged individuals.

A recently discovered monument (Monument 215/217) from the site of Takalik Abaj also supports the identification of the potbellies as ancestral figures (Persson 2008; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010a). Although quite unusual, the monument appears to depict an individual bearing a “mummy bundle” on its back that is not unlike the one representing Huitzilopochtli that was carried by Aztec ancestral leaders during their migration (Boone 1991). As Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010a) detailed, Monument 215/217 was integrated into the wall of Structure 7A at the same time during the second half of the Late Preclassic period that a royal burial was placed in the same structure and became the focus of repeated dedication ceremonies. Of significance, to my mind, is the fact that the mummy bundle on Takalik Abaj Monument 215/217 has puffy cheeks and wears a collar that compares to those worn by some potbellies. Equally suggestive are the mummy bundle's hands, which are positioned so that the fingers are pointed downward in a somewhat awkward gesture. This same positioning of the hands is repeated on potbelly sculptures at Takalik Abaj (see, e.g., Monuments 94 and 107), as well as on the potbellies from Santa Leticia.⁸ Such clues lend credence to my assertion that the potbellies were meant to

invoke ancestral figures. The new sculpture from Takalik Abaj also lends insight into how statements of lineage and ancestry, articulated in a variety of sculptural forms, may have been critical to assertions of power by Late Preclassic rulers.

The significance of the obese stomachs of many of the potbellies is more elusive; they perhaps indicate bloating, as in death, or the increasing and sagging stomachs of maturity (much as in the seated figurine from La Blanca), or perhaps even social status and a life of plenty (Lesure 1999: 241). While some have suggested that the large stomachs of the potbellies, especially in concert with a distended navel, suggest pregnancy, the lack of other overt gender markers makes this difficult to sustain. The same lack of identifiable markers plagues efforts to assign gender to the corpus of figurines at La Blanca, as discussed earlier, making any concrete discussions of gender difficult to undertake, although I return to this topic in [Chapter 8](#).

From puffy cheeks and sound to performance

The exhalation of breath and the making of sound or a whistle suggested by some of the potbellies and figurines indicate the dynamic or performative roles of these sculptures and figurines. My use of the concept of performativity here to describe the potbellies and figurines is important to address. It posits that symbolic forms of expression, such as sculpture, could, to borrow Bell's words (1997: 51, 72–83), “create the sense of reality, and act upon the real world as it is culturally experienced” (also see Tambiah 1985). Objects in this sense are neither static nor mute but can be used, as Davis (1993: 257) phrased it, to “identify and interpret the ‘speaking’ dimensions of what might once have been regarded as the inert or silent archaeological record.”

This approach to Mesoamerican sculpture in general is not new, although its application to sculpture lacking inscriptions is novel (Guernsey 2006a, b). Working with the extensive corpus of Classic Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions, Houston and Stuart (1996: 304, 1998: 87–88) and Stuart (1996) demonstrated that Classic Maya stelae were more than just static monuments or more than mere surrogates for the image carved on them. In fact, the texts indicate that Classic Maya stelae were understood to literally manifest and embody the images depicted on their surface, whether those of god or human, a situation that Houston and Stuart (1998: 87–88) characterized as an “essential sameness between image and subject.” Work by Grube (1999) supports these notions. In Maya hieroglyphic writing, the quotative particle *cheben*, “it is

said,” appears in inscriptions on a variety of objects. In these contexts, the quotative particle indicates that the objects themselves were the authors of the message or, at the very least, the medium through which the message was delivered.

While the potbellies and figurines that are the focus of this study lack the specificity of text, great care was taken to imbue many of them with attributes that allude to their “performativity,” or their capacity for communicating notions of vitality, breath, and sound. As such, the animate or performative nature of objects documented during the Classic period appears to have deep, Preclassic antecedents, which emerge from a careful reading of the iconography and ritual function of these objects within their Preclassic contexts.

Houston and Taube (2000: 273–281) discussed at length how sound emanations are expressed in Mesoamerican art. They noted the close correlation between speech, song, breath, and vitality, which was visualized through speech scrolls that could be decorated with beads or floral forms (also see Mora-Marín 2007). One example they cited includes a singer glyph from the Bonampak murals in which the lips are shown in profile, pushed dramatically outward and open, emitting a beaded speech scroll. In another example from an Early Classic conch shell trumpet, the lips of the profile head are pursed, while a sound scroll emanates from between them (Houston and Taube 2000: figs. 10b, f). These glyphs, as they elaborated, signify “singer” (*k'a-yo-ma*) and were a title not only of royal courtesans but also, at Tikal, of a ruler of the city, “suggesting that singing counted as an important accomplishment of royalty” (Houston and Taube 2000: 276).

McAnany (1995: 24, 31) also observed a correlation between rank and vocal utterances in descriptions of the office of *hol pop*, or “head of the mat,” which, as Roys (1957: 7) described for the Maya of Yucatán, referred to “the head of the most important lineage of a town.” The *hol pop* also assumed entertainment duties, including that of “head singer and keeper of the musical instruments” (Roys 1939: 46). As Inomata (2006: 195) further pointed out, “According to Cogolludo (1971: 1: 243), the *holpop* was a principal singer who set the key, taught others, was entrusted with various musical instruments, and was a venerated figure who had important roles in religious affairs, at feasts, and in assemblies.”

The artists of the Bonampak murals likewise stressed the act of blowing by portraying trumpeters with extended cheeks and pursed lips (M. Miller 2001: 215). These Classic-period representations recall Preclassic figurine traditions, which also emphasized the emanation of sound or breath. This is vividly illustrated by a Late

Preclassic ceramic figure from West Mexico that portrays an individual beating a drum while presumably singing, as indicated by his lips, which form a perfect “O” shape (Tate 1993: plate 89). Pursed lips and inflated cheeks, like speech scrolls, appear to have been ways of visualizing the ephemeral nature of sound and breath consistently through time.

Among the Aztecs, music involving wind instruments was a critical part of mortuary rites, among others. According to Guilhem Olivier (2002: 119), “Through wind instruments one attracted the attention of the gods and even provoked their descent upon the earth.” As Olivier (2002: 120) described, when the god Quetzalcoatl descended into the underworld to retrieve the bones of ancestors, the death god, Mictlantecuhtli, presented him with a blocked conch shell. It was not until Quetzalcoatl successfully made the conch sound that he was able to retrieve the bones of the ancestors. Arnd Both (2004: 264; 2007: 96) likened this act to a “primordial blast heralding the creation of humankind.” Likewise, Braakhuis (2009: 20) recounted a story reported by Ichon (1973) in which the Maize God, Chicome-Xochitl, resurrected his father with a flute. Olivier (2002: n. 41) also cited a ceremony described by Alfred Tozzer (1907: 119–120) in which Lacandon Maya blew on a conch shell in order to summon the gods. Vogt (1977: 232, 241) linked the whistling sound made by blowing over water-filled gourds to the summoning of the dead among Zinacantecos, while Gary Gossen (1974: 211) connected the same ritual to the calling of a soul that needed to return to its owner.⁹ More generally, as Olivier (2002: 12) elaborated, it was through the acquisition of music that humans were able to honor the gods. The relationship between music and ancestors among later cultures may even be anticipated by millennia at the site of Tlatilco, where burials of older individuals most commonly included musical instruments (Joyce 2003b: 258). Musical instruments, including conch shell trumpets, are documented archaeologically in Preclassic Oaxaca, and as Flannery (1976: 335) noted, *Strombus* trumpets are still used to summon villagers for “obligatory communal work” and tend to be “associated with a public office rather than an individual.”

The fact that many of the potbellies possess deliberately puffed cheeks, which during the preceding Middle Preclassic period were associated with whistles/wind instruments, alludes to their performativity. More specifically, I would suggest that their bulging features and pursed lips link them to a domain of ritual activity involving the utterance of sound, music, and whistling (see Hendon 2003; Lopiparo and Hendon 2009). The same act of blowing was highlighted in masking traditions of the Olmec (Mora-Marín 2006, 2009; Stross and Kerr

1990), which suggests that the utterance of breath and sound was a fundamental part of ritual performances from very early in the Preclassic period.¹⁰ The turtle carapace motifs associated with the Tiltepec monuments, the San Bartolo potbelly, and the monument from San Miguel, Tabasco, may also allude to music and performativity, as turtle carapaces often functioned as drums in ancient Mesoamerica.¹¹ Gossen (1974: 218) noted that wind and percussion instruments are considered by Chamulans to “belong together as a group,” while Houston, Stuart, and Taube (2006: 259–260; also see Vogt 1977: 239) observed that drums and flutes appear in sequences in murals at Bonampak and Las Higueras, Veracruz, depicting ritual performances.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these apparent musical or performative associations of the potbellies also apply to the “Fat Gods” of Teotihuacan. S. Scott (2001: 97) noted, for instance, that the “Fat God” from Veracruz illustrated by Beyer is actually a whistle. Furthermore, J. Scott (1988: 34) remarked that Beyer (1930: 83) had initially observed that the ear ornament worn by the “Fat God” at Teotihuacan “was, among the Nahua peoples, a common insignia of musicians and dancers.” Séjourné (1959: 99) and Henry Nicholson (1971: 16) linked these “Fat Gods” to the cult of Xochipilli (flower prince), the Aztec god of flowers, song, music, dance, and poetry. Likewise, Goldsmith (2000: 60; personal communication 2010) commented on the variety of arm positions that set “Fat God” figurines apart from most others at Teotihuacan, which typically adhere to one consistent configuration per type. By contrast, the Teotihuacan “Fat God” figurines appear with both arms at their sides, both arms raised, or one raised and the other down. Such variations in posture may also connote performance.

The associations of the Central Mexican “Fat God” also parallel, to some degree, those of the Classic Maya *sitz’ winik* characters as dancers and performers (Taube 2004: 159). Clearly, despite potential changes in attributes and meaning throughout time and geographic regions, these jowly-faced characters appear to have been consistently associated with performance, and most frequently with the concepts of breath, sound emanations, and music. This is effectively illustrated by the Late Classic Jaina “Fat God” figure that also functioned as a whistle, as well as at Late Classic Aguateca, where several whistles depict individuals wearing what Triadan (2007: 278–279, fig. 12) referred to as “fat man” masks, which she related to the broader “Fat God” complex (also see Healy 1988: 26–28). Triadan (2007: 283–285) noted that many of the figurines found at Aguateca were “associated with other musical instruments such as turtle carapaces, ceramic drums, and in some cases, bone rasps.” In fact,

she concluded, “the majority of the figurines at Aguateca were musical instruments, and they were found as part of household assemblages.” Their association with domestic materials at Aguateca, as Triadan (2007: 289) observed, expands our understanding of the range of Classic-period “performative activities” (also see Stöckli 2007).

A similar heavy-faced, mold-made whistle from El Salvador (Boggs 1974: fig. 41) fits into this complex given its nubby suit, which compares to Classic Maya *sitz’ winik* characters and “Fat Gods” from Yucatán. Likewise, Willey (1978: 31) noted that a “Fat Face”-type mold-made figurine whistle from Late Classic Seibal was related to “Fat God” imagery; he, in fact, suggested that the figurine might represent a musician. More important for this discussion, however, is recognition of this far-flung and startlingly persistent complex, which appears up and down the Pacific Coast, in the Maya Lowlands, in the Valley of Mexico, and in the Guatemalan Highlands, where the Las Charcas-phase whistle from Kaminaljuyu (Fig. 5.8) uncannily presages the stone potbellies and displays the pursed lips so closely associated with the emanation of sound or breath. Recognition of these traits and their relationship also moves the discussion away from the attribute of an obese belly and instead allows us to focus on identifying a new set of meanings and associations for the potbellies and related figures that were grounded in the domain of performance.

Interestingly, the temporal perseverance of these particular performative associations is also attested in Postclassic Huastec art. Katherine Faust (2009: 209, figs. 8.2e, 8.3a, 8.3d, 8.5c, 8.6f) noted that the mouths of several Huastec figurines reveal tightly pursed lips, “as if whistling, blowing, or exhaling.” Furthermore, she linked the vertical body markings on one of the pursed-lip figurines (Faust 2009: fig. 8.8a) to the practice of mortuary bundling, as well as to broader rituals of sacrifice, death, and renewal. The pursed lips also characterize figures rendered on Huastec vessels known as *sopladores*, or “blowers,” which appear in the hocker position that signifies “the body birthing and as bound in death” (Faust 2009: 226).

What this evidence suggests is that the Late Preclassic potbellies do, indeed, share a symbolic domain with the later Teotihuacan “Fat Gods,” the Classic Maya *sitz’ winik*, and even certain Huastec characters. Furthermore, this symbolic domain appears to have revolved around notions of performance – vocalizations, music, whistling, breath and vitality, and a supernatural realm that included ancestors.¹² Even more significant for this study, however, is the demonstrated antiquity of this complex.

Even the potbellies that I previously suggested represent a sort of hybridized form, combining traditional

potbelly elements with those associated with ritual combat, factor into this discussion of performance. As described in Chapter 4, Taube and Zender (2009) linked a series of masked performers to a widespread and temporally deep complex of ritualized combat or competitive sports that was metaphorically linked to spectacles of dance and performance:

As both a festive and entertaining event, boxing was celebrated in dance, and in one Late Classic scene, sap-wielding figures are epigraphically described as performing the “ballgame dance.” . . . Another vessel scene portrays helmeted boxers dancing and even singing. (Taube and Zender 2009: 209)

The figurine from Tlapacoya (Fig. 4.45a) provides evidence that, from the Early Preclassic period onward, certain aspects of the potbelly sculptures were shared by other types of individuals and appear to have been linked together within the realm of performance. The Tlapacoya figurine, while costumed as a participant in some form of ballgame or ritualized combat, wears a small oval-shaped mask over its lower face that portrays pursed lips similar to those that categorize numerous figurines, whistles, and the later stone potbelly sculptures. The combination of attributes seen on the Tlapacoya figurine anticipate those of Kaminaljuyu Monuments 9 and 15, the stone figures attributed to Kaminaljuyu published by Girard and Navarrete, as well as several of the Tiltepec monuments. In all of these examples, there are shifting but nonetheless overlapping sets of attributes – masks or hoods, chest medallions, simplified “bowling ball” facial features, and distinctly pursed lips – which allude to performances of some type.¹³

Potbellies and domestic ritual

I would suggest that attention be refocused on these sets of overlapping attributes and what they can tell us about the Preclassic potbellies. The common denominator for the various attributes appears to be the domain of performance, which often includes references to vitality expressed as exhalations of sound, breath, and music. Moreover, these lines of evidence indicate that many of the “performative” features were deeply grounded in widespread traditions that trace their origins to domestic ritual. In other words, the suite of attributes repeatedly emphasized in the potbellies did not originate in the public or civic sector, but in the domestic sphere of private ritual. This observation dovetails well with Taube’s (2004: 161) argument that the potbelly complex was metaphorically associated with domestic kitchen hearths,

which could be symbolized by the triadic arrangement of three stones that signified the world center.¹⁴ He pointed to examples of triadic groupings of potbellies at Santa Leticia and Finca Sololá as evidence for the significance of the potbellies as symbolic three-stone hearths, as well as to the stone spheres (like those at Kaminaljuyu and Takalik Abaj) that bear puffy-faced visages, which he interpreted as symbolic “hearth stones.” The Las Charcas–phase three-pronged *incensario* from Kaminaljuyu – itself a “portable hearth” – whose effigy heads display closed, thick-lidded eyes (Fig. 6.4), certainly supports Taube’s proposition and demonstrates the time depth of these associations.¹⁵

The connections between hearths, domestic ritual, and jowly-featured, potbellied individuals are also sustained at Teotihuacan. As discussed in the preceding chapter, Taube (2004: 161) noted that three-pronged braziers at Teotihuacan, whose prongs are quite often decorated with “Fat God” visages, functioned as “portable versions of a three-stone hearth.” Evidence from an apartment compound at Teotihuacan, reported by Ortiz Díaz (1998), supports this association. A fragment from a three-pronged vessel portraying the “Fat God” was recovered from a courtyard in the Oztoyalco residential compound, which also included a miniature temple that appears to have been the focus of domestic ritual in this unit of the compound. Perhaps Teotihuacan borrowed these associations from other regions of Mesoamerica, as the three-pronged incense burner from Kaminaljuyu certainly anticipates these braziers at Teotihuacan.

Although I certainly concur with Taube that these associations between fleshy-faced characters and triadic hearths are well documented and widespread, I would qualify his assertion somewhat and suggest that these associations are an outgrowth of a symbolic significance derived from domestic ritual more generally. The potbellies – like the figurines before them – appear to have carried attributes rooted in ancient domestic traditions concerned with supplication of the deceased, performance, vitality, and emanations of sound and breath.

The convergence of these patterns within the domestic sector is exemplified especially well at the site of Tetimpa, Puebla, which also illustrates how these traditions were central to ancestor veneration. Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: 33) noted that, in one residence at Tetimpa, three of the small carved stones typically associated with domestic ancestral shrines were reutilized as supports for a *cuexcomate* (storage bin) in a detached kitchen. As they described:

This deviant use of shrine stones occurred at a newly founded residence with no ancestors, who could be called upon for favors, buried within its platforms. The

carved images might have been placed under the storage bins precisely because, as *sacra*, their residual power could be channeled toward agricultural fertility or the protection and enhancement of the seed inside the *cuexcomates* until the next planting season.

Even more interesting, Plunket and Uruñuela (1998: 303, 2002: 38) observed that one of the small stones used as a support for the storage bin portrays the head of a character with furrowed hair and compares to other “furrowed hair” shrine stone figures at Tetimpa, one of which, as mentioned in Chapter 5, also possesses closed, distended eyes and “mouth and cheeks puffed in the act of blowing” (Fig. 5.11). This bulbous-featured shrine stone rested on top of the “chimney” of one of the effigy volcanoes erected on the ancestral shrine. Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: 34) identified five such chimney shrines at Tetimpa, which they interpreted as “effigies of the Popocatepetl volcano, whose crater lies only 13 km to the southwest” and is clearly visible from the site (Uruñuela and Plunket 1998: fig. 3.1). What is especially remarkable at Tetimpa is the association of this bulging-cheeked “blowing” figure with a chimney shrine.¹⁶ As Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: 35) described, “At least on ritual occasions, the chimneys were filled with pine (*ocote*) splints that when lit, produced plumes of smoke and ash that puffed out from beneath the stone figures capping the flues.”

It is fascinating that, at Late Preclassic Tetimpa, a pursed-lip and puffy-cheeked figure was associated with issuing smoke, an ancestral shrine, and a volcano effigy. These rituals certainly had a strong performative component, as Plunket and Uruñuela (2002: 34) noted, in which the burning of resinous pine was used to “transfer messages and other items to the ancestors in another world.” What is even more compelling, however, is how this evidence from Tetimpa confirms the consistent underpinnings for many of the recurring motifs discussed throughout this study – ancestor veneration, fat-faced figures, pursed lips, performance – within the domain of domestic ritual. It is equally significant that the evidence from Tetimpa makes clear that these associations were expressed in a sophisticated way at sites of varying scale and in numerous regions throughout Mesoamerica as early as the Preclassic period.

In fact, a comparison between the Tetimpa shrine stone with furrowed hair and rounded cheeks (Fig. 5.11) and the Teotihuacan *candelero* (Fig. 7.3a) reveals startling similarities and suggests that, perhaps, the same figure or character type was being invoked. In addition to the domestic associations of both the Teotihuacan *candelero* and the Tetimpa shrine, it is worth noting as

well that the *candelero*, with its double chambers, recalls the double-chimney configuration of the ancestor shrines at Tetimpa (see Plunket and Uruñuela 1998: fig. 17). Although I am aware of only one additional Teotihuacan effigy *candelero* that appears to depict the same character (Rattray 2001: fig. 104f), these similarities seem more than coincidental.¹⁷

The parallels between the swollen-cheeked individual at Tetimpa and that on the Teotihuacan braziers also indicate that the concept of a puffy-faced character, directly associated with domestic ritual and ancestor veneration, was already well established, at least by the Late Preclassic, in the Puebla region of Central Mexico. Other examples of even earlier bulbous-featured characters from various regions in Mexico – such as that illustrated in Fig. 6.6b or the jade mask at Dumbarton Oaks (Benson 1981: fig. 8) – suggest that this was an ancient and widely shared concept from at least the Early Preclassic period. In other words, the “Fat Gods” that appear at Early Classic Teotihuacan appear to represent a uniquely hybrid character that grew out of a variety of Preclassic characters closely associated with domestic traditions and, in particular, those associated with ancestor veneration and performativity. While some of the “Fat God” features seem to be clearly derived from the Preclassic stone potbellies and their iconographic repertoire, they also appear to have been wedded to ancient Central Mexican traditions of bloated-faced characters likewise associated with ancestors and the domestic realm.

To briefly summarize the discussion so far and before considering additional archaeological evidence, I would reassert that a careful consideration of several of the key facial features of the potbellies strongly indicates that these sculptures functioned within a system of representation that encompassed themes of performance, ancestor veneration, vocalization or music, and breath and vitality. Moreover, these themes were rooted in a vocabulary of forms that had been developed and employed within the domain of domestic ritual since at least the Middle Preclassic period, and probably as early as the Early Preclassic. Although I do not want to belabor the topic of Teotihuacan “Fat Gods,” which is really not at the heart of this study, I would emphasize that it is far more interesting, to my mind, to reconsider the “Fat Gods” as an outgrowth of these much deeper traditions of representation that originated in Preclassic domestic sectors. Further, I would argue that the moniker of “Fat God,” in the end, obscures these more subtle meanings and inaccurately alludes to a single category of god or being. It would be productive to revisit the Classic-period “Fat Gods” and even the *sitz’ winik* characters in light of this new analysis, searching for the ways in which

ancient notions of ancestry, performance, and vitality were incorporated into the Classic-period characters that display many of the same attributes. Put another way, it seems more fruitful to work forward in time, exploring how these traits and meanings developed and varied through the years, rather than move backward, assuming that later meanings necessarily apply to the earlier, Preclassic potbellied characters. The very movement of this recurring suite of attributes between the domestic sector – as in the Middle Preclassic figurines, as well as the later Teotihuacan “Fat God” figurines and Classic Maya examples – and the public domain – as in the Late Preclassic potbellies and even the Oxkintok sculpture – suggests that, in essence, the meanings invoked by these traits were viable and significant in both spheres off and on throughout the history of their use.

Potbellies, ancestors, and the archaeological evidence

When one is building a case for the identification of the potbellies as ancestors, it is critical to also consider the archaeological evidence. Although contextual data may be lacking for the vast majority of the stone potbellies, there are some convincing clues from later periods, toward the end of the Late Preclassic and during the ensuing Classic period, which indicate that potbellies were associated with burials or locations of ancestor veneration.

At Takalik Abaj, potbelly Monument 58 (Fig. 4.17a) was excavated by Michael Love at the base of Structure 7B, a small mound located at the northeast corner of the Structure 7 platform. Dominating the southern end of the Structure 7 platform were three rows of monuments that comprised an eclectic mix of stylistically Olmec and Maya sculpture as well as plain monuments (Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978; Popenoe de Hatch 2002a; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2001, 2002, 2010a, b). As recounted in Chapter 4, Christa Schieber de Lavarreda and Miguel Orrego Corzo (2010b) observed that the monuments erected on Structure 7 were “the focus of repeated dedication rituals,” as attested by the cache associated with Altar 46 that consisted of “171 artifacts that date to the final part of the Late Preclassic period.” Also, by the end of the Late Preclassic period, a ruler was interred in Structure 7A, which marked the northern side of the Structure 7 platform (Schieber de Lavarreda 2003: 797–805; Tarpy 2004), along with Monument 215/217, which portrayed an individual transporting a “mummy bundle”-like ancestor (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010a). At the base of Structure 7A stood Stela 13, whose dedication was

accompanied by an even more impressive cache, also dated to the Late Preclassic period, of more than six hundred vessels and artifacts (Popenoe de Hatch 2002a; Schieber de Lavarreda 2003; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2002: 70–74).

The Monument 58 potbelly associated with Structure 7 was likewise accompanied by a cache, much smaller but equally fascinating, which contained two small sculptures, Miscellaneous Sculptures 399 and 400 (Figs. 4.17b and c), one representing a dog and the other, with its extended nose, probably a pizote. Love (1981), reporting the discovery of this cache, noted that in Mesoamerica dogs are frequently linked to death and the underworld (Sahagún 1950–1982: bk. 3, 43–44). That these beliefs were widespread is demonstrated by a series of Late Preclassic earthenware models from West Mexico, which often portray dogs on the lower level of the architectural pavilions, presumably akin to “Xolotl, the Aztec dog who guided souls of the dead across the underworld river” (Butterwick 1998: 98). What is especially noteworthy is that the Monument 58 potbelly was directly associated with at least one dog sculpture, or symbolic messenger from the underworld, which corresponds nicely with my suggestion that the monument represented an ancestor. Moreover, the Monument 58 potbelly and its cache were part of the larger context of Structure 7, which included an elite burial and a series of dedication rituals undertaken during the final years of the Late Preclassic period.

References to deceased ancestors can also be inferred for a potbelly from Tikal, Miscellaneous Stone 82 (Fig. 4.36a). This potbelly was recovered from the supporting fill of Floor 9, which was constructed following the ritual interment of an earlier stage of the North Acropolis (W. Coe 1965: 1415, fig. 18). This ritual interment sealed a vaulted tomb, Burial 85, which had been built on the North Acropolis probably during the later part of the Late Preclassic period. This tomb appears to have marked a significant shift in royal burial patterns at Tikal, which began to be placed in the North Acropolis at this time and may have been the resting place of the founder of the Tikal dynasty, Yax Ehb’ Xook. In light of these significant changes regarding the interment of kings and the apparent designation of the North Acropolis as the necropolis for Tikal’s rulers, the inclusion of a potbelly sculpture in the fill sealing this early and important burial on the North Acropolis may be related to its significance as an ancestral figure. There is also the possibility – admittedly hypothetical given the lack of good archaeological data – that the Miscellaneous Stone 167 potbelly from Grupo Santa Fe that was abandoned by looters near Structure 426, which held a tomb

with Late Preclassic ceramics (C. Jones 2001; Jones and Orrego Corzo 1987), may also have invoked ancestral associations.

The context of puffy-faced Monument 38 (Fig. 4.28) from Kaminaljuyu likewise alludes to ancestors. Alfred Kidder, Jesse Jennings, and Edwin Shook (1946: fig. 14) recorded that Monument 38 appears to have been originally repositioned on Platform B-4a, above Tomb B-1. Platform B-4a was part of the Structure B-4 construction that “signaled the burial of that tomb’s occupant” during the Classic period (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946: 34). Despite the eventual collapse of Platform B-4a in the ancient past, which caused Monument 38 to fall into Tomb 1, Kidder, Jennings, and Shook (1946: 34) documented ashes and charcoal and concluded that the platform “probably served for ceremonies in memory of the personage resting in the tomb below.”

At Kaminaljuyu, a similar association with ancestors may characterize potbelly Monuments 3 and 4, which were placed in an alignment, along with the rather hybrid feline/potbelly Monument 5, at the southern edge of the Lower Plaza of the Palangana during the Late Classic period (Lothrop 1926: fig. 57; Parsons 1986: 42). As mentioned in Chapter 4, Carlos Alvarado’s (2005) excavations in the Lower Plaza of the Palangana identified domestic refuse and two burials from the Late Preclassic period, indicating that this had been a habitational zone at that time. Alvarado (2005: 499) described the Late Preclassic occupation of the Palangana as significant and noted that it was an outgrowth of occupation initiated during the preceding Middle Preclassic period. As he further observed, Charles Cheek’s (1977) excavations had suggested that, during the Late Preclassic period, Mounds C-II-12 and C-II-14 of the Palangana had served as residential platforms for the elite. Although the Upper Plaza of the Palangana underwent significant augmentation during the Classic period, the Lower Plaza appears to have more or less retained its original dimensions (Alvarado 2005: 499). On the basis of Alvarado’s excavations, it seems plausible to at least suggest that the potbelly monuments erected in the Lower Plaza during the Late Classic period marked or memorialized a zone that was occupied by Kaminaljuyu elites during the Late Preclassic and that continued to house the buried remains of those ancestors.

The “Fat God” also seems to be associated with death at Teotihuacan, as both Goldsmith (2000: 60) and S. Scott (1994: 181, 2001: 40) observed, although in this case the deceased was an infant. A cylindrical tripod, illustrated by Rubén Cabrera Castro (1990: 108, fig. 43), was found during salvage operations by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia at San

Francisco Mazapa, Teotihuacan, and contained the skeletal remains of a child. The visage of the “Fat God” appears on the outside of the vessel. Cabrera Castro noted that funerary practices at Teotihuacan “were quite varied and burial in urns and vessels was frequent, especially in the case of infants and newborns whose remains may have been used as offerings.” The same case might be made for the convex miniature vessel lid depicting three “Fat God” visages (Fig. 6.3c), as Claudia García-Des Lauriers called to my attention. Although Rattray (2001: 211) conceded that little was known about the specific function of these miniature vessels, she added that “[a] ceremonial function seems likely because of their occurrence in burials.” Although such evidence, while tantalizing, is admittedly limited, it nonetheless points to the possibility, as discussed earlier, that Teotihuacan “Fat God” personages may have invoked associations with death that were similar to those conjured by the Late Preclassic potbellies.

Whether the contexts of these potbellies from Takalik Abaj, Kaminaljuyu, and Tikal constitute a survival of meaning, in which the Preclassic associations with death and ancestors continued through the final years of the Late Preclassic and into the Classic period, is difficult to assess.¹⁸ Yet the parallels are provocative and certainly suggest the possibility that the potbellies continued to carry the same messages beyond the confines of the Preclassic period. The links between the Teotihuacan “Fat God,” death, and burial are also significant and again point to a broadly shared – and archaeologically attested – concept of jowly-faced, puffy-eyed characters connected to ancestors and rituals of veneration. While I am quick to acknowledge that the evidence for strict continuities in meaning is tenuous, it would be equally unwise to neglect to mention or posit such possibilities. At the very least, I would assert that, in some cases, the contexts of potbellies at Takalik Abaj, Kaminaljuyu, Tikal, and elsewhere strongly suggest that the monuments were the physical manifestation of social memory of place and ancestry.

Conclusions

The iconography of the potbellies – and specifically the suite of traits that included swollen cheeks, pursed lips, and breath beads or references to vocalizations – points to their identity as vital ancestors. Even more tellingly, this iconography developed out of Early and Middle Preclassic representational systems that were grounded in domestic ritual traditions. Equally fascinating is the fact that this vocabulary of forms persevered, with

marked consistency, into the Classic period and beyond. Throughout its long duration, this repertoire of forms also appears in a variety of media and at many different scales, from small ceramic figurines to large-scale monumental sculpture. Such evidence underscores the permeability between “public” and “private” domains, as well as the need to pay close attention to how forms and meanings shifted, were shared, or were appropriated by different spaces and different sectors of society.

Central to the meaning of the potbellies as ancestors were the concept of performativity and an emphasis on the communication of vitality expressed as breath or sound. Although this assertion is clearly supported by a close reading of the Preclassic evidence, it is not limited to the Preclassic period or even the Pacific slope. In fact, these associations between puffy-faced characters and performativity very clearly transcended cultural boundaries in ancient Mesoamerica, to which the Teotihuacan “Fat Gods” or Classic Maya *sitz’ winik* characters attest. What is most significant about this evidence is that it points to a commonality among these various characters that is grounded in concepts of performance that trace their roots, or consistent vocabulary of representation, to ancient traditions derived from domestic ritual and the sphere of the household. I would therefore assert that the persistent attributes shared by these diverse fleshy-faced characters – from potbellies to “Fat Gods” to *sitz’ winik* beings – do not indicate a common, singular identity or character as the designation “Fat God” unfortunately suggests. Rather, the persistent attributes suggest that this diverse group of characters was constructed from a vocabulary of forms that grew out of ancient and widely shared notions of performativity and ancestor veneration. The specific, individual meanings of these characters and objects – what they performed, where, and for whom – were flexible, however, and appear to have been adapted to unique historical circumstances that were constantly in flux.

The final chapter of this book considers the implications of this evidence. What did the potbellies, as representations of ancestors, “do” at Late Preclassic sites? Why were sculptural programs featuring ancestors erected at Late Preclassic sites? Why was the suite of attributes associated with the potbellies deemed appropriate for their representation? How does this understanding of the iconography of the potbellies illustrate the ways in which sculpture bridged the public and private spheres during the Preclassic period? And, perhaps most important, how was sculpture – as a vehicle that was integrated at various scales into both the public and private spheres – used to navigate the social dynamics of the Preclassic period?

Potbellies and Social Identity in the Preclassic

Introduction

As this final chapter will make clear, I do not pretend to have solved the riddle of the potbellies; many aspects of their ancient meaning remain locked in the past. But I do believe that their significance, as ancestral representations, is far richer than that typically attributed to them and that an exploration of this deeper significance raises broader issues concerning the function of sculpture during the Preclassic period, its potential for integrating themes and tensions from both the private and public domains, and its role in the formulation of a social identity in Preclassic communities of various scales.

I tackle these objectives by first contextualizing the potbellies and their precursors, the puffy-faced figurines, within the social milieu of the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. Preclassic sculpture was diverse in form and message, and the potbellies, with their unique set of traits drawn from the sphere of household ritual, set them apart from other types of monuments. Yet the potbellies, as ancestors, lack individual specificity and instead appear to represent a sort of generic type. This very lack of individualization, I argue, provides important clues that the ancestral identity invoked by the potbellies was a collective one, which had political appeal and value to sites of varying scale and in various regions. When employing the term “collective identity,” I do not, however, intend to imply the existence of some form of uniform or monolithic “collective or culture as a whole” (Mills and Walker 2008a: 6). Rather, I use the term interchangeably with “social identity” in order to acknowledge and better accommodate the role of individuals in the process of creating and structuring this identity and the variability that most certainly existed due to specific historical circumstances that were constantly in flux.¹

Other factors come into play in this chapter. Assertions of ancestry and social identity necessitate a discussion of the tensions between ancestor veneration and rulership that surely existed during the political transformations of the Preclassic period. Fortunately, there is excellent scholarship concerning the construction of ancestry, ancestor veneration, and the conflicts that such practices – which logically extend into the domain of land rights, social boundaries, and the development of rank and inequality – posed to kingship and claims of “kingly prerogative” (McAnany 1995: 40). This literature provides a framework for my own assertions regarding the potbellies and their role in constructing an ancestral identity.

As touched on briefly in Chapter 5 and elaborated in this chapter, the changing nature of domestic ritual, evidenced by the cessation of figurine traditions along the Pacific slope at the cusp of the Late Preclassic period, was linked to equally dramatic changes in mortuary patterns. New forms of domestic ritual, in the form of household burials, may speak to the tensions and acts of resistance that characterized a period during which other forms of domestic ritual, involving the use of figurines, were curtailed. These seemingly disparate developments provide a context for the appearance of potbelly sculptures, a public sculptural form that invoked – yet also effectively monopolized – a long-standing tradition of forms derived from household ritual.

This chapter also explores why potbelly sculptures, as embodiments of an ancestral social identity lacking individualism or even an overt gender, were so widely dispersed throughout southeastern Mesoamerica at sites of highly divergent scale. Their presence at numerous polities, sometimes accompanied by other types of sculpture and sometimes alone, suggests that their identity as ancestors transcended specific individuals or lineages and may have been invoked to facilitate horizontal affiliations among communities.

The relationship between sculpture and the formulation of social identity has not been well explored for the Preclassic period or, for that matter, Mesoamerica as a whole. While I do not wish to engage in a theoretical discussion of social identity here, I do need to define how I use the term. Edward Schortman (1989: 53–54), following Amos Rapoport (1982), stressed that social identities are formed by the use of significant cues that not only signal membership in a particular social category, but also guide interpersonal behaviors. Citing the work of Ian Hodder (1982) and Anya Royce (1989), Schortman (1989: 55) went on to explain that “possession of a set

of symbols among identity holders also reinforces group solidarity by giving concrete expression to feelings of commonality” and that the more visible and redundant the symbols are, the more effectively they are recognized. Moreover, materials detectable in the archaeological record – and I would argue that these include sculpture – were employed to convey ideological aspects of social identity:

Items that served in the ideological realm conveyed the belief system of the group, its religious views, and the underlying rationalizations of the social system. The social category contains those objects and patterns that facilitated the articulation of individuals within a coherent interacting group. (Schortman 1989: 57)

These ideological items could also be used to forge links and alliances on a regional or macroregional scale, between sites or polities (Freidel 1979, 1981; Schortman 1989: 58; Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001; Yaeger 2000).

I argue that sculpture, and the potbellies in particular, were part and parcel of the “ideological items” that were used to assert claims concerning ancestry. The recurring suite of attributes associated with the potbellies – their “redundancy,” in effect – may have been deliberate, the goal having been to articulate specific messages concerning the role of ancestors, and membership in certain social categories more generally, in Preclassic society. Moreover, the references to domestic ritual that are integrated into large-scale potbelly representations point to a conceptualization of social identity that was predicated, at least in this case, on the clever integration of notions that carried significance in both the public and private spheres. This line of inquiry, I believe, which views the potbellies as sculptural objects imbued with ancestral references that negotiated multiple spheres, productively frames them as a vehicle involved in the construction of new, and changing, social identities during the Late Preclassic period.

The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of the larger dynamics at play with the potbelly sculptures, in which themes and symbols from the private sector were deliberately incorporated into the public rhetoric of monumental sculpture. There are numerous examples from other parts of the world that well illustrate the mobility of forms between private and public space and their utility in constructing statements of political authority. I touch on these briefly, for comparative purposes only, in order to highlight the role of the potbellies as one of many effective mechanisms employed by rulers to navigate the changing social dynamics of the transition into the Late Preclassic period. In the end, what I hope emerges from this investigation is a recognition of the

power of sculpture in the ancient past: how it embodied or quite literally gave physical form to the themes and tensions of the time, and how it can be used to illuminate the social dynamics of a particularly fascinating period in Mesoamerican history.

From domestic sector to public realm

Although the goal of this study is to present an encompassing analysis of the potbelly sculptural phenomenon and related materials, perhaps most significant is its contribution to more expansive discussions concerning the relationship between domestic traditions and those expressed in the public sector in the form of monumental sculpture. During the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic along the Pacific slope, it appears that specific symbols and themes drawn from domestic ritual were employed – or appropriated – by rulers in the form of public sculpture. As the extensive distribution of potbellies throughout Mesoamerica substantiates, however, this was not a localized occurrence, although it can certainly be demonstrated to have been more concentrated along the Pacific slope and in the Guatemalan Highlands. At sites such as Monte Alto, Takalik Abaj, and Kaminaljuyu, potbellies were interspersed with other types of monuments (Fig. 3.11). At smaller sites, they sometimes represent the only type of sculpture that was present, or in other cases they were associated with plain stelae, altars, and more readily portable objects such as pedestal sculptures. In other words, the scale of the sites at which potbelly monuments were erected varies considerably, at times representing what must have been regional capitols (such as Takalik Abaj or Kaminaljuyu) and at other times what were most likely subsidiary centers (such as Giralda [Bove 2011]). This variability is perhaps difficult to understand, but it may provide insight into the types of sculptures that could be erected at sites of varying scale.

Love (2010) addressed the diversity of sculptural forms in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica, noting that “while it is undeniably true that most monumental sculpture was located in major centers, sculpture was everywhere in Preclassic Mesoamerica.” Regional powers such as Izapa, Takalik Abaj, and Kaminaljuyu (El Ujuxte being a notable exception) typically erected dozens of sculptures, many of which focused on images of rulers or portrayed narrative scenes that linked the office of rulership to mythological events (Guernsey 2006b). Lower-tier sites, however, appear to have boasted fewer monuments on a monumental scale, often exhibiting instead a diverse corpus of more (possibly) vernacular monuments, including potbellies, anthropomorphic altars,



Figure 8.1. Pedestal sculptures from La Argelia, Guatemala, a secondary center located midway between the regional sites of Izapa and El Ujuxte. Photo by author.

and pedestal sculptures (Fig. 8.1). These data suggest that perhaps there were sanctions in place governing what types of sculpture could be erected at sites of different scale. By contrast, certain types of sculpture – pedestals, anthropomorphic altars, and potbellies, to name a few – appear to have crosscut these hierarchical divisions, having been erected at sites of varying size and political authority during the Late Preclassic period. Clearly the presiding authorities of sites of varying scale viewed potbelly sculptures as relevant, expedient, or perhaps even integral to statements of authority. At the same time, major regional powers do not appear to have been threatened when a potbelly sculpture was erected at a subsidiary or even competing site; erecting potbelly sculptures was, at one level, a sort of “standard operating procedure” at many sites. On the basis of this evidence, one could suggest that potbellies were erected at lower-tier sites to fulfill a need or desire for sculpture that did not challenge supposed prohibitions regarding the display of certain types of monuments. Yet the presence of potbellies at regionally powerful sites confirms their desirability to rulers of greater authority as well. Given this situation, my suggestion that the potbellies signified ancestors might make sense: ancestral figures could be invoked to justify assertions of authority or kinship at any level, but stopped short of representing the image and office of living rulers, which seems to have been restricted to the most powerful sites.

That said, the rationale for erecting potbellies at sites is nonetheless ambiguous: Was it a deliberate appropriation of specific themes from the domestic sector by rulers, in which they controlled and limited the use and ritual associations of this imagery? Or was it a form of concession, in which Late Preclassic rulers sought to assert their power while also choosing representations that resonated with the general populace? Data that might help us answer these questions are limited, yet excavations at La Blanca and El Ujuxte indicate an abrupt cessation of household ritual, or at least the use of ceramic figurines, by the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic. Concurrently, ritual in the public domain, ostensibly under the control of rulers, received increasing attention. As reiterated throughout this study, it was in the midst of these transformations in ritual patterns that the monumental stone potbelly form appears to have been conceived. Thus, evidence from the Pacific coastal region implies that rulers were concerned with moving ritual into the public sphere and limiting the performance of certain ceremonies – at least those that utilized figurines – in the domestic sector. By the same token, the potbellies, which preserve key traits of Middle Preclassic domestic figurines, allude to a deliberate reinvention of these traits and their symbolic associations by rulers for use in the public domain. Even if this is viewed as an overt appropriation, one could argue that it was perhaps received by the general populace as a conciliatory or concessionary

measure, designed to memorialize in stone a pattern of ritual and suite of symbolic associations that resonated with all sectors of society.

These possibilities, and a critique of the assumptions they entail, guide the ensuing discussion of the social significance of the potbelly sculptures. But one important thing must be kept in mind. The sculptural choices made by rulers were certainly not driven by a lack of available resources or sources of inspiration; this region of southeastern Mesoamerica had been witness to a long history of sculptural innovation, and a variety of sculptural styles and forms were certainly accessible to rulers and their scribes. The potbelly form, then, must be understood to have been a calculated choice, one that was imbued with conscious references to domestic ritual traditions.

I need to clarify one point before continuing with my arguments. I assume, in this discussion, that the stone potbellies were commissioned by ruling elites.² There is no smoking gun to prove this, however, and other scenarios are possible, although in my opinion they are not as likely. For instance, it is possible that various secondary lineage heads at any given site commissioned the sculptures and that the ruling elites of sites (of any scale) thought it wise or prudent to incorporate such monuments into their public programs, perhaps to appease competing lineages that would otherwise have posed a greater threat to the integrity of the acting ruler's authority. This scenario is not unlike the situation documented during the Classic period, when there appear to have been strict regulations making the erecting of monumental sculpture a kingly prerogative. This seems to have changed during the final years of the Classic period, however, when the institution of divine kingship weakened. At that time, at sites such as Copán, nonruling elite nobles began to assert their own power and authority in the form of carved monuments, erected within their private residences. As Robert Sharer and Loa Traxler (2006) phrased it, the text and imagery of these sculptures indicate that "these lords presided like lesser versions of the high king himself." Yet this appears to have been tolerated by the king in an effort to sustain his kingdom in the face of threatening social, political, economic, and environmental dynamics (Baudez 1989; Sanders 1989; Schele and Freidel 1990: 330, 336–345; Webster 1989).

Given this Classic-period evidence, it is possible that, at the cusp of the Late Preclassic period, emerging rulers needed to curry favor or forge alliances with powerful lineages and that the potbellies represented one vehicle for accomplishing this.³ Even if so, however, many portions of my argument, presented later in the chapter, would not change. Either way, we see a persistent

exchange between the domestic and public realms and the reinvention and relocation of ancient domestic traditions. Likewise, whether commissioned by a ruler or powerful nobles, the potbellies appear to have effectively negotiated some form of social identity through the medium of sculpture. Certainly, if someday it could be determined, without a doubt, who commissioned the potbellies, this would lend enormous insight into the processes of early state formation and the negotiation (if not the resolution) of conflicts between rulers and lineage factions. But even without this knowledge, the ensuing analysis demonstrates that we can still contemplate the significance of these sculptures in visualizing rituals and messages that had resonance in both the public and private sectors.

With this caveat, however, I also need to reiterate that, in my opinion, the evidence to date strongly indicates that the potbellies were erected by rulers. I make this assertion only after a careful and detailed consideration of a variety of contextual data, and do so despite the fact that some might argue that this conclusion falls into the trap of assigning a sort of "super-agent" status to Preclassic rulers. John Clark (2000: 101–107) correctly critiqued this methodological pitfall, in which undue credit is given to "over-endowed agents." In the same vein, Joyce and Lopiparo (2005: 367) cautioned against the dangers of assigning "perfect knowledge and unfettered self-centered intensions" to any individual or class of individuals. In spite of these warnings, I would emphasize that, to my mind, archaeological evidence from the Pacific slope during the Late Preclassic period points to increasing political centralization, increased control of space and ritual by rulers, increased hierarchy, and increased control of access to exotic goods by elites, to name just a few of the trends. These were paralleled, as I have outlined in detail, by a decrease in domestic ritual of several kinds, including the use of figurines and feasting vessels, which suggests that some forms of residential autonomy were curtailed. The potbelly sculptures emerged within this milieu, and the best argument – given the data – suggests that they did so at the hands of ruling elites, as a tool to mediate the many conflicts that surely arose during the major social and political upheavals of the time. To paraphrase Love (2011), archaeological data – and art historical evidence, I would add – from the Preclassic Pacific slope of Mesoamerica indicate that "the process of urbanization set in motion new forces for the dynamic construction of identities and meaningfully changed the ways that people lived." I would maintain that the potbellies evidence one of the ways in which new identities were created and visualized at the hands of ruling elites.

Ancestors, mortuary patterns, and social dynamics

In [Chapter 5](#), I summarized Love's archaeological evidence from the Late Preclassic site of El Ujuxte, which points to a dramatic increase in social control by elites in the form of rigid urban planning. This was accompanied, in the domestic sector, by a drastic decrease in figurine production and feasting. As Love (2007: 295) neatly summarized the situation, "Ideologically, household ritual was curtailed and public rituals became dominant." Another archaeologically identifiable transformation was a new pattern of curation of the dead – different from that which appears to have characterized the region during the Middle Preclassic – in which deceased individuals were interred in burials beneath domestic residences at El Ujuxte. Their deposition was accompanied by post-mortem offerings, which Ernesto Arredondo (2002) and Love (n.d.; Love, Hager, and Arredondo 2002) interpreted as evidence of ancestor veneration. Although, as mentioned in [Chapter 5](#), the El Ujuxte burials were aligned within the overarching grid of the site – and thus overtly in accordance with centralized social control – Love (n.d.) suggested that the patterns of ancestor veneration might point to "an attempt to maintain the identity and coherence of the household and lineage in the face of challenges from centralized institutional power."

These transformations coincided with the appearance of stone potbellies in the region, including two miniature ones at El Ujuxte. I would suggest that this is more than coincidental. In fact, I not only concur with Love, but further suggest that the ancestor veneration implied by the burial evidence symbolically substituted for or replaced previous domestic ritual behavior, such as figurine use, aspects of which were transformed and symbolically moved to the public sector. In other words, while ruling elites appropriated certain key attributes of the figurines and their associated domestic ritual, and quite literally reconfigured them into the form of public stone sculpture, new forms of ritual were developed and performed in the household, such as domestic burials of deceased family members and devotional practices in the form of ancestor veneration.

McAnany (1995) provided a comprehensive discussion of the veneration of ancestral remains – and the forging of kinship structures more generally in Mesoamerica – as a social process that often conflicts with that of kingship. She synthesized the vast and complex array of data concerning these issues, which necessitate discussion of land rights, boundaries, economics, inequality, genealogy, and so on. While these topics exceed the scope of this study, they nonetheless intersect with several of

the themes presented here. As McAnany demonstrated, ancestors served a variety of roles in the process of social formation.⁴ They legitimized and brought order to daily life, while simultaneously underwriting and reinforcing social and economic inequality, to paraphrase her words (McAnany 1995: 111–113). Ancestors are, fundamentally, a "social construct" (McAnany 1995: 60), and the social construction of ancestry – tied as it was to land entitlements and other economic prerogatives – was manipulated by elites. As McAnany (1995: 40) put it, the invocation of ancestors in the Maya region was central to political display – so much so, in fact, that Classic Maya elites appropriated the domain of ancestor veneration and transformed it "from a kinship ritual tied to land entitlements to a ritual legitimizing kingly prerogative" (McAnany 1995: 40). Divine kingship, in effect, sought to "establish hegemony over kinship" (McAnany 1995: 143).

My suggestion that elites appropriated specific ancestral references drawn from domestic ritual corroborates, to some degree, McAnany's arguments. However, the burial evidence at El Ujuxte suggests, as Love (2007) observed, that such appropriations were not without parallel transformations within the domestic sector. Perhaps these new mortuary patterns point to a countereffort by the populace to assert resistance – in the form of mortuary ritual that memorialized their own genealogical integrity – against the centralized authority of the elites. Which event happened first – elite invention of the potbellies and appropriation of their attendant ancestral symbolism or new patterns in the curation of the dead – is impossible to determine from the data at hand. What is clear, however, is that along the Pacific slope at this juncture between the Middle and Late Preclassic periods, these two processes went hand in hand. Moreover, both appear to have been directly tied to the social construction of ancestry.

I would argue that the archaeological data from the Pacific slope not only provide insight into many of the social currents that characterized the Middle to Late Preclassic transition, but establish a context in which the stone potbellies can be understood as embodiments of these dynamics. The potbellies confirm the complexities of these social currents and the inherent conflict between ancestor veneration and centralized political authority, but also provide a glimpse into how elites may have negotiated this conflict. The very form and primary attributes of the potbellies – such as the jowly cheeks, closed eyes, and puffy eyelids – were grounded in a long-standing tradition of visual representation that appears to have invoked ancestors and that originated in the domain of domestic ritual. Their formal antecedents

were the clay figurines that had figured so consistently in patterns of domestic ritual from the early part of the Preclassic period. The appearance of the stone potbellies, however, coincided with a time when elite authority appears to have become increasingly centralized – so much so, that traditions of domestic ritual that had survived for centuries – such as the making and use of figurines – were, apparently, curtailed. The stone potbellies, however, indicate that some currents of domestic ritual were redirected, or reconfigured, and literally given new form as larger-scale, stone public monuments. What the evidence suggests is that elites successfully appropriated these particular attributes and symbols of domestic ritual and recombined them into a sculptural program that, while perhaps visually accessible to all, was nonetheless relegated to elite control and an elite-driven political and social agenda. What burial evidence from the Pacific slope also indicates is that these transformations, visualized in sculptural form, did not meet with passive acceptance. Instead, new traditions of ancestor veneration materialized in the private sector.

Portraying ancestors

It is my contention that potbelly sculptures embody the complexity of these social dynamics. They were conceived at a moment when many social forces were in flux, as is certainly true of any moment in history. Although I have built a case, based in great part on iconographic arguments but also on the limited archaeological evidence, that the potbellies portray deceased ancestral figures, it is much more difficult to address who, what, or which ancestral figures the potbellies represented. As I have acknowledged previously, the potbellies lack any sense of portraiture or individualized details. Put simply, they cohere into a sort of generic “type” that persistently emphasized bloated facial features, closed eyes, and sometimes collars or other attributes. This stands in contrast to the greater individualization of the San Lorenzo heads, for instance, which display unique facial expressions, headdresses, or other insignia. Although there is a counterpoint of variation and experimentation among the potbellies and related art forms, indicating some freedom of expression, innovation, and perhaps individualization, the overarching sensibility is one of consistency or generality. This strikes me as significant, as it alludes to a deliberate strategy: the knowledge and ability to signify individuality through particular attributes or insignia were certainly there, but not applied to the potbellies.

In fact, potbellies were portrayed in a repetitive, conventionalized way in spite of numerous, long-standing

pictorial devices that had been used to depict ancestors from at least the Middle Preclassic period and that continued to be refined throughout the Late Preclassic. These include ropes or cords as symbols of kinship, as has been suggested for La Venta Altar 4 (Fig. 8.2a) (Coe 1968b; Gillespie 1999; Grove 1970; Guernsey Kappelman and Reilly 2001: 41); disembodied heads that peer down from the upper registers of stela compositions like that of El Baúl Stela 1 (Fig. 8.2b) (Looper and Guernsey Kappelman 2001: fig. 20); the puffy-featured disembodied head on Kaminaljuyu Stela 5; and the imagery of an enthroned figure carrying a mummy bundle, as Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010a) suggested for Takalik Abaj Monument 215/217. These conventions were further developed in the Maya region during the ensuing Classic period, when hieroglyphic inscriptions named progenitors, provided dynastic information, and evoked the “centrality of the ancestors to Maya statecraft” (McAnany 1995: 39–55). McAnany (1995: 130) argued that these formulaic compositions, already well developed during the Preclassic period, positioned Maya elites as “producers and storers of information considered crucial to the continuation of society” and represented “a kind of appropriation of the collective memory.”

The lack of costuming associated with the potbellies may be related to their paucity of individualized features. Joyce (1999: 19) noted that costuming in Preclassic Mesoamerica appears to have been “viewed as a medium for the creation of individuality” and that this individuality was also expressed through personal adornments and costumes placed on the bodies of interred individuals. The lack of individualized adornments and costumes on the vast majority of potbellies may further underscore their identity as types rather than specific individuals. Although one could postulate that, at one time, the potbellies may have been “clothed” or decorated with other regalia, it is not clear how such costuming would have been successfully integrated with sculptural details, such as wraparound arms, legs, navels, and collars, without obscuring such elements completely.

Potbellies, lineages, and social identity

Given the evidence at hand, how can the potbellies and their lack of individualization be understood? In an important article, Susan Gillespie (2000d) critiqued the literature addressing ancestors, lineage, and social organization among the ancient Maya. As she observed, McAnany’s (1995) work identified a “cult of the dead,” which involved “unnamed antecedents whose ties could not be traced to their putative descendents.” Gillespie



a



b

Figure 8.2. Images of ancestors: (a) La Venta Altar 4 (drawing by F. Kent Reilly III); (b) El Baúl Stela 1 (drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.).

pointed to McAnany's differentiation between this "cult of the dead" and "ancestor veneration," in which "a specific ancestor is the focal point for the collective identity of persons who recognize their relationship to one another by their common descent from that ancestor and often invest authority in those persons who are closest genealogically to that ancestor" (Gillespie 2000d: 473). As Gillespie outlined in some detail, contemporary Maya

ancestor worship is characterized by groups of "usually anonymous spirits, for most of whom no genealogical ties are demonstrated. Nevertheless, ancestors provide a focus for group identity, a mechanism for the construction of group authority, and a means to control access to property rights, especially to land" (Gillespie 2000d: 474, 2000b). Joyce (1999: 17) discussed a similar dynamic surrounding burial practices, in which "the

dead are transformed through mortuary ritual from unique persons to members of social collectives, such as ancestors, of interest to the living (Bloch 1982; Watson 1982).” Gillespie cited modern ethnographic evidence showing that, through time, the dead lost their individual identity and became fused with groups of anonymous ancestors, referred to as “mother-father” figures by some contemporary Maya (Vogt 1969: 144; Watanabe 1990: 139). She also noted that “[c]ontemporary practices reveal how the ritual recognition of ancestors is tied to the construction of social identity and the delimitation of a corporate group, sometimes at the level of an entire community” and that this “ritual recognition” was made possible by the development of an idiom through which this continuity with the past could be expressed (Gillespie 2000d: 474).

One of Gillespie’s objectives in her essay was to demonstrate that lineage does not adequately account for Maya social organization, as it neglects other mechanisms for the creation of social memory and social identity that were equally instrumental in the structuring of inheritance patterns, succession, control of agricultural land, and even political authority. As she asserted, notions of ancestor veneration among the ancient Maya should be expanded beyond those limited to named ancestors:

The evidence from ancestor veneration practices suggests an important insight into the construction of “descent groups” in the prehispanic era. Rather than record agnatic descent *per se*, social memory was innovated in collective efforts toward the erection, dedication, and continued use of dwellings for the living, tombs for the dead, and shrines for the ancestors in order to maintain continuity with the past (see Fox 1993: 1). Actions directed toward ancestors’ bodies and spirits were used to create social and political differences between nobles and commoners and among different noble groups. . . . Ancestor veneration thus provides an additional means for understanding group organization based on references to common origins, social memories, the curation of land and other property, and collective ritual activities, but the evidence downplays the demonstration of strict descent ties. (Gillespie 2000d: 475)

I would suggest that the potbellies constitute an example of the Late Preclassic development of the notion of collective or social memory. They do not portray specific ancestors, but instead embody a more expansive notion of group identity, with references to common origins and ancient, broadly shared domestic ritual. By alluding to figurine traditions and domestic rituals that were shared at all socioeconomic levels, the potbellies provided the ideal embodiment of group identity. They also provided

an effective mechanism through which this group identity was celebrated in the civic/ceremonial sector, albeit at the expense of private ritual practice, which may have been perceived as a threat to centralized authority. As Gillespie (2000d: 476) noted, a number of anthropologists have demonstrated, convincingly, that models focused on lineage and descent groups do not adequately account for the variety of mechanisms that “linked groups together into networks encompassing different levels of society (Henderson and Sabloff 1993: 456).” More effective models, exemplified by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1982, 1987) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977), seek to understand social arrangements as enacted through daily practice (Gillespie 2000d: 475–476). As Gillespie wrote:

Kinship is better considered “the product of strategies (conscious or unconscious) oriented towards the satisfaction of material and symbolic interests and organized by reference to a determinate set of economic and social conditions” (Bourdieu 1977: 36).

In other words, Gillespie (2000d: 476) continued, “[r]elationships are expressed in ‘the language of kinship,’ but that kinship itself is subverted in the process (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 187).” I would suggest that the potbellies, by invoking ancestors and ancient patterns of ritual and performance, were an effective tool for elites, as they enabled them to employ “the language of kinship” but to subvert it to their own ends and fabricate a collective identity of elite authority. This collective identity, in turn, was intended, at least at some level, to substitute for, or compensate for the cessation of, certain ritual activities at the household level that had previously been critical to articulating social identity. The potbellies, in a clever way, spoke to the masses while also embodying elite exclusivity.

It is important to stress that the potbellies were not invoking the same messages as the stela monuments or other sculpture that portrayed rulers. Such monuments, as previously mentioned, had a more limited distribution along the Pacific slope and highlands at that time and appear to have been limited to first-tier sites such as Izapa, Takalik Abaj, Kaminaljuyu, and El Jobo. The potbellies, on the other hand, reveal a much wider distribution at sites of varying scale. I would therefore suggest that their message was concerned not with the persona of an individual king *per se*, or even one lineage or descent group, but rather with more expansive notions of identity that exceeded the boundaries of any individual site.

This is not to say that the potbellies were not elite monumental art. As I have argued, potbellies appear to have been commissioned and orchestrated within the

public sector by the ruling elite. As Joyce (2000b: 72) elegantly articulated:

Monumental architecture and monumental art, both products of high culture, were particularly effective material expressions of the exclusivity that stemmed from the limitation of legitimacy to an elite. They formally imposed order on the three-dimensional space within which social life took place. They transformed spatial order utterly from what had gone before, changing the patterns of habitual movement of all the inhabitants of the site, stratifying space and hence the people who were allowed access to different space, creating and marking centers and peripheries.

In order to think about how the potbellies functioned within the public places of the Late Preclassic period, it is helpful to contemplate the points raised by Joyce (2000b). Her ideas work well in tandem with those expressed by archaeologists such as Love (1999a), who applied Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of the structures of discipline and Bourdieu's (1977) and Anthony Giddens's (1984, 1985) notions of habitual action or daily routine to understand the impact, on individuals, of moving through spaces and confronting the built environment. In fact, the lessons drawn from anthropological or social theory can be effectively combined with the insights gleaned from my more art historical inquiry into the function of the potbelly sculptures. Certainly the potbellies had a dramatic effect on audiences for several reasons, including their scale, in many cases, as well as their participation in a web of meaning that was well established and ancient. The potbellies, to borrow from Christopher Tilley's (1982: 32) work on social theory, were not passive. They were an active element within a larger and more complex social web, and were used by rulers to legitimate the social world in which they existed.

Even at second- or third-tier sites, I would assert that potbellies were commissioned and employed by the local ruling elites. Yet the message of elite exclusion embodied by the potbellies (see Joyce 2000b) was conveyed by a suite of attributes strikingly different from those of stelae, altars, thrones, or other art forms that appear to have been accessible only to rulers of the most powerful sites. This vocabulary of forms, with its roots in quotidian life and a veneration for ancestors, must have benefited from the "residual weight derived from the histories of [its] prior use" (Joyce 2000b: 72). While this visual repertoire took on a different scale, a different medium, and a different context, I would argue that it nonetheless functioned within a "notion of order" (again, borrowing from Joyce 2000b: 75) that was effective and deliberate.⁵

Returning briefly to my earlier discussion of the relationship between ancestors, souls, and breath, and bearing in mind how this suite of associations appears to coalesce in the potbelly sculptures, I wish to call attention to a modern ethnographic parallel. As described previously, Watanabe (1992: 87; also see Watanabe 1989) recorded that an "inner soul" (*aanma*) among Chimaltecos "refers to a personal animating essence associated with the breath." He also indicated, however, that the *aanma* was closely linked to the concept of *naab'l*, or a "way of being that alludes less to individual personality than to the shared – and therefore moral – proprieties of the community from which that person comes" (Watanabe 1992: 81; also see Vogt 1976 for the relationship between concepts of soul and social control). As he articulated, there is a complex relationship between an individual soul and social identity:

Chimalteco souls precipitate a powerful language of moral affinity and local identity predicated on a people's common history, shared experiences, and knowing familiarity. Having a soul entails any individual action that expresses commitment to the spirit of that history, experience, and knowledge. (Watanabe 1992: 91)

This complex relationship, according to Watanabe, results in individuals speaking of souls in both a singular and plural sense, or blurring the boundaries between individual identity and community identity. I would suggest that these ethnographic data provide a provocative analogy to the potbellies, which embodied notions of breath and ancestors in a form that lacked individuality and appears to have spoken to larger concepts of group identity.⁶

Potbellies, alliances, and boundaries

Exploring the concept of social identity further, I would also posit that the distribution of the potbellies at numerous sites and in multiple regions indicates the possibility that they communicated horizontal affiliations or alliances among different political entities and realms. Marcello Canuto (in press) discussed Preclassic social organization and complexity in the Maya region and the mechanisms that enabled the eventual formulation of states. He focused on the role that lineage played in this equation but also noted that "[h]orizontally integrating mechanisms, like marriage, trade, or political alliances, led to the creation of institutions and practices that differ from and even undermine descent groups (Sanders 1989: 102). In fact, the founding family of any lineage eventually came to have more in common with founding

families of other lineages than with the families of their own lineage.” Canuto (in press) continued:

The internally stratified social descent-based group thus begins to reflect a social organization of both kin-based affiliations manifested through descent rules and personal alliances cemented through marriage or even fictive kin. This combination leads to a form of social integration in which “political and economic interests, on the verge of invading the social field, have not yet overstepped the ‘old ties of blood’” (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 186). In this manner, the integration of a stratified descent-based social group is based more on alliances, affiliations, and contractual relationships to the central household in which “nothing prevents the substitution of affinity for blood ties whenever the need arises” ... (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 187; see Gillespie 2000b).

Canuto’s ideas correspond to those articulated by Gillespie (2000a, b, d), Hendon (1999), Joyce (2000b), Marcus and Flannery (1994), McAnany (1995: 16–20), Ringle (1999), and Yaeger (2000) addressing the formation of social identities in Mesoamerica that may have superseded individual families or descent groups. Canuto (in press; also see Hendon 2002: 78; Lopiparo and Hendon 2009) noted, however, that these transformations were certainly anticipated by the Middle Preclassic and, significantly, in the domestic sector:

The material culture associated with these personae, figurines, stamps, clothing, shells, jadeite, hematite suggest that a complex suite of practices of exchange, production, and expertise underpinned the formation of these social personae. These data suggest that the social relations that composed the domestic sphere of society expanded to create non-kin-based social roles.

John Clark (2004: 61) pushed the date back even further for these social forces, noting that the forging of community identity among different lineage groups was probably directly related to the construction of public space from at least the Early Preclassic period. It is important here to reiterate that the very vocabulary of forms invoked by the potbellies – the puffy features and closed eyes – was grounded in that of domestic figurines, which had functioned as powerful vehicles in and of themselves for the formulation of social identity in the Preclassic (Blomster 2009; Lesure 1997). This may not have been lost on the ruling elites, who appropriated a repertoire of forms that was understood to be effective in articulating key – and dynamic and inherently performative – aspects of social identity and social memory.

To my mind, all of the data presented in this study indicate that the potbellies embodied a Late Preclassic

social persona that was constructed and manipulated by elites to facilitate horizontal affiliations that transcended individual rulers, specific lineages, and single sites. As Schortman, Urban, and Ausec (2001: 313) described for the Late Classic period:

A shared elite identity, therefore, facilitates cooperation among distant magnates engaged in the common enterprise of political domination. Such an affiliation also restricts participation in cross-border contacts to those who express membership through appropriate use of relevant symbols (Curtin 1984; Donley 1982; Schortman 1989; Wells 1984).

The social persona and collective identity embodied by the potbellies were articulated through a vocabulary of forms that had been curtailed, in the domestic sector, due to increased control of ritual by centralized authorities during the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period. But this vocabulary of forms, even relegated to the hands of the elite, was certainly recognizable to audiences from all sectors of society, recalling as it did ancient patterns of ritual and performance.

As such, the potbellies may have constituted an effective mechanism for intersite social alliances, as they provided a vehicle through which elite control was effectively asserted, yet couched within metaphors grounded in ancestral references. This dovetails nicely with Hirth’s (2008: 103) observation that the function of Preclassic stone monuments was at times closely linked to social integration, as well as his earlier remark that “[t]he mechanisms involved in forming social hierarchies through interelite alliances duplicate those operating in household and lineage maintenance networks” (Hirth 1992: 27). Erecting a potbelly was not merely an assertion of one lineage’s or one site’s superiority or strength, but rather another tool used by elites at many sites to create a shared language of elite authority that was grounded in ritual traditions of enormous time depth.

By extension, I would also argue that the potbellies embodied a sort of collective memory. Canuto (in press) observed, “Connerton (1989) notes that the development of collective memory is sustained within the rubric of performance that enacts a master narrative that conveys proto-typical behavior and synchronizes it among the larger social group.” I would suggest that a master narrative, shared by elites throughout many regions of Mesoamerica, was signified by the potbelly sculptures and that this master narrative visualized an imagined community composed of elites at sites of multiple scales. That said, this was just one of many master narratives, “rhetorical strategies” (Hodder 1993: 274), or formal vocabularies shared by numerous sites during the Late

Preclassic period. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, diverse themes, narratives, and symbols were expressed throughout the artistic programs of the Late Preclassic (Guernsey 2006b, 2010a, b; Guernsey Kappelman 1997, 2004).

Potbellies, space, and “master narratives”

Whether this master narrative of collective identity, embodied by the potbellies and spatially defined by their distribution, was real or imagined – akin to Adam Smith’s (2003: 143) “proscriptive spatial fantasy central to the reproduction of political authority” – is more difficult to determine. The potbellies may have operated, as A. Smith (2003: 143) described for Classic Maya stelae, “not by enforcing specific contours in physical space or by evoking an understanding of authority relations but by advancing a particular imagination of the proper political community.” Yet, even with this caveat, the master narrative embodied and repeatedly reproduced by the potbellies appears to have been successful, at least at first glance, during the Late Preclassic period along the Pacific slope: their extensive distribution points to a certain level of utility, while the corresponding decline in certain aspects of household ritual makes this possibility even more compelling. However, as Schortman, Urban, and Ausec (2001: 314) wisely cautioned, the repetition of a symbol (or form in this case) “does not guarantee uniform interpretation of its meaning,” nor can its “material prominence . . . be equated with its political efficacy.” They continued:

Nevertheless, those who would rule must *try* to legitimize, in the eyes of their subordinates, the polity they seek to lead and their preeminence and distinctiveness within that unit, all while gaining acceptance by other paramounts with whom they wish to establish politically lucrative relationships. Accomplishment of these objectives requires manifesting the abstract in the material. It is only by expressing such abstruse concepts as “identity” in concrete terms that they can become part of the shared experience of a population and so influence behavior (Earle 1997: 10, 147–148). Material styles and their spatial distribution, therefore, are the surviving physical clues whose study contributes to understanding the use of social affiliations in ancient political strategies. Specifying how successful those machinations were is a far more difficult task. (Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001: 314)

Upon deeper inspection, however, the “master narrative” invoked by the potbellies does not appear to have

met with passive acceptance by Late Preclassic populations. To assume that the potbellies signified the successful mobilization of domestic ritual into the public sphere or to suggest that they provide visual testimony of effective social integration would, in my opinion, be an oversimplification (see Freidel 1981: 206 for a discussion of similar dynamics in the Maya Lowlands). The development within this region of new burial patterns, focused within the household, strongly suggests that new patterns of domestic ritual – and potentially new patterns of resistance and assertions of autonomy – accompanied the promulgation of the potbelly tradition.

The potbellies, with their references to ancestors, performance, and patterns of domestic ritual, might also be viewed as a tool employed by the elites to provide a bridge of sorts not only between sectors of society – commoners and elites, for instance – but also through physical space. What limited contextual data we have for the potbellies suggest that they were most frequently positioned in civic/ceremonial centers, in locations that must have functioned, to some degree, as “public” spaces in the sense that they witnessed performances or held monuments whose messages were designed for public consumption. Their “public” context, however, stood in contrast to their physical attributes, which were keyed into domestic or “private” ritual traditions. This tension between context and form recalls Love’s (2010) observation that potbellies at Takalik Abaj were positioned at places of transition, in this case between Terraces 2 and 3. As I also noted, the same liminality characterized the location of the potbellies at Santa Leticia, which stood like sentinels on the terrace leading to the center of the site, as well as the potbellies and monumental heads that were positioned in various groupings along the eastern, western, and northern margins of Monte Alto (although in this case, as noted in Chapter 3, their locations may not correspond to their original placement in the Late Preclassic period). The liminal positions of these potbellies, which mark spatial transitions, may go hand in hand with their role as hybrid objects that signified a social persona that united the contrasting domains of public and private ritual. Important, too, is Love’s observation that the two miniature potbellies from El Ujuxte were found on what appears to be opposite sides of a doorway to a low domestic mound. Even in this case, in which the context suggests that potbellies – at least on a miniature scale – may have been occasionally employed in the private realm, an association with liminal or transitional spaces was preserved.

The transitional locations of potbellies may be linked to what McAnany (1995: 64; 1998) described as a “genealogy of place” in which ancestry, land rights,

and boundaries were conceptually intertwined (also see Ek 2006). This concept was not limited to ancient times, as she observed, but is well documented among modern Guatemalan Highland Maya groups such as the Cakchiquel, who refer to ancestors as “guardians” (Orellana 1984: 96). Gillespie (2000d: 474) also addressed the relationship between ancestry and place, citing Vogt’s work among the Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan, who claim “that ancestors first obtained the use-rights to land parcels and water-holes, and claims to those resources by individual multiple-family local groups (sna [house]) are maintained by rites of veneration that they perform (Vogt 1969: 145–147).” As Gillespie (2000d: 475) further observed, Watanabe’s (1990: 140) work has also demonstrated that the living Maya define themselves, through ritual, as the “descendants” of their ancestors.

The ritual or performative role of the potbellies may be key to understanding how they, too, functioned in liminal or transitional spaces. As will be recalled from Chapter 7, they seem, in some instances, to have marked burial locations that were inherently liminal points of intersection between the dead and the living. The potbellies, in these transitional spaces and imbued with ancestral references, appear to constitute a message long recognized in the artistic programs and cosmologies of Mesoamerica: that “maintaining an open portal of communication with ancestors is key to wellbeing,” as McAnany (2002: 119) asserted. This “portal” of communication – manifested in the form of potbellies – was perhaps invoked by rulers at some sites as an expression of their ability to commune with the realm of the ancestors. This supernatural communication, however, was controlled by rulers, who seem to have held the prerogative to erect these potbelly sculptures and impart these messages. Accordingly, at a very basic level, the potbellies functioned quite like other monumental art programs during the Preclassic, whose messages were keyed into the king’s ability to control supernatural access, which was invoked to justify his political authority (Guernsey 2006b).

The potbellies may, in fact, embody one of the richly informative intersections between “practice, place, and artifact” (McAnany 2002: 117) that serves as a point of entry for critiquing simplified notions concerning public versus private, elite versus commoner, or Great Tradition versus Little Tradition. As McAnany (2002: 119) elaborated, “Quite often, ritual is seated at the crux of power negotiations between the household and the state; thus, as we enhance our understanding of domestic ritual, we also learn something of the reach of the power of the state.” The relationship between the potbelly monuments, domestic ritual traditions, and even emerging

patterns of domestic interment point to a deeply complex and conflicting set of societal forces during the Preclassic period along the Pacific slope. The El Ujuxte potbellies, found associated with a domestic structure, highlight this complexity, as they indicate that, at least on occasion, small-scale potbellies were erected in nonpublic contexts. The other miniature potbellies described in Chapter 3, all of which lack archaeological context, certainly also raise the possibility that the large-scale public personas of the potbellies could, at times, be mitigated by small-scale, perhaps even private contexts of display and use.

The picture that I am painting in this study is rather messy: it situates the potbellies within a set of societal forces and traditions that do not converge neatly or allow for simple explanations. Perhaps this is the best indication that this study is on the right track; rarely, if ever, in the real world do all data converge precisely to describe a moment in history when the trajectory of societal development was clear, uniform, and met with no resistance.⁷ I also do not mean to suggest in a reductionist fashion that the potbellies signified only one thing, always and consistently, through space and time, like static props on the stage of history, to paraphrase Catherine Bell (1997: 266; also see Robb 1998: 342). On the contrary, I would argue that their performative associations precluded this – performance is, by definition, not static. Nor should the meanings assigned to any performative object ever be assumed to be static. Rather, the potbellies provide a glimpse into the shifting dynamics and points of conflict that characterized this period in Mesoamerican history and constitute, in a sense, a strategic practice (Bourdieu 1977). The characteristics of ritual described by Bell (1997: 266), in fact, might be equally applicable to the potbellies: “The contexts in which ritual practices unfold are not like the props of painted scenery on a theatrical stage. Ritual action involves an inextricable interaction with its immediate world, often drawing it into the very activity of the rite in multiple ways. Exactly how this is done, how often, and with what stylistic features will depend on the specific cultural and social institution with its traditions, conventions, and innovations.” In the end, one must bear in mind that the period I am considering here, in which the potbellies were created and displayed, spans many centuries. Over the course of hundreds of years, variation – even contradictions – should be anticipated rather than greeted with surprise or frustration. By acknowledging these contradictions, tensions, and trends, I am better able to situate the potbellies within a social milieu in which the boundaries between private and public, past and present, tradition and innovation, and the mundane and the sacred were constantly blurred and reinvented.

Gender, identity, ancestors, and memory

Having established a framework within which the social identity of the potbellies, as ancestors, can be understood, I wish to return to a more elusive aspect of their social identity, that of gender. As touched on previously, it is difficult to address the topic of gender with regard to the potbellies due to their lack of overt or definitive sexual characteristics (Chinchilla 2001–2002: 11). However, this ambiguity can be productively explored in light of ethnohistoric and ethnographic data concerning ancestors in Mesoamerica. For example, ancestors among the Maya are often invoked as “mother-fathers,” as in the case of the creator couple, Xmucane and Xpiyacoc, in the *Popol Vuh*. While the term encompasses both male and female creative forces, Dennis Tedlock (1983) cautioned that it is not clear whether it referred to distinct entities or two different aspects of one creator god (see Hendon 2002: 81 for a discussion of this).⁸ Among the Zinacantecos, Vogt (1990: 19) observed, “it is impossible to pray separately in Tzotzil to either a male ancestor or a female ancestor. The name Totilme’il may be literally translated as ‘Sir Father-Madam Mother,’ with the father image always linked to the mother image, indicating that the concept is a unitary one representing the primordial reproductive pair in the Zinacanteco universe.” The Aztecs likewise had a creator god, Ometeotl, “God Two,” who appears to have been dual sexed.

Gillespie (2000d: 474), extending her arguments on the bigendered quality of ancestors invoked in contemporary Maya ancestor veneration, argued that this was conceptually related to the notion of ancestors as anonymous beings who lack demonstrable genealogical ties to descendants. She cited Watanabe (1990: 139), who wrote: “The Maya call these ancestors ‘mother-fathers’ or ‘grandfathers,’ although these figures rarely represent named ascendants of specific kin groups – evidence of the general attenuation of Maya blood relations beyond the immediate extended family.” As Gillespie asserted, ethnographic work by Watanabe (1990) and Vogt (1969: 144) illustrates that the process of transformation from a deceased individual, remembered by name by descendants, to an anonymous ancestor – or “father-mother” among the Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan – takes about four generations. The modern Maya thus view ancestors as “bi-parental, collective, and anonymous,” an attitude also encapsulated in the “Postclassic Yucatan term for ‘noble,’ *almehen*, the progeny of a ‘mother-father’ unity” (Gillespie 2000d: 474).⁹

It is significant that notions of gender duality permeate discussions of the representation of rulers on Classic Maya monumental sculpture. Andrea Stone (1988,

1991) asserted that male rulers, through specific costuming and ritual activities, appropriated the traditionally female domain of fertility for political purposes. In a similar vein, Joyce (1996) argued that male and female costume elements were worn by rulers on carved monuments in order to blur the boundary between genders and encompass both masculine and female aspects.¹⁰ Yet the situation among the potbellies is distinctly different from that of the Classic-period examples, as gender statements were not expressed through text or costume components; instead, there is an almost complete absence of inscriptions, gender-signaling costume, and sexual features. The potbellies appear to be genderless rather than bigendered.

Joyce (2000a: 29, 42) addressed this situation in relationship to Preclassic figurine traditions. While she acknowledged that the vast majority of Preclassic clay figurines from across Mesoamerica appear to depict females, she observed that certain classes of Preclassic figurines cannot be classified as either male or female. She suggested that they “may better be understood as media for presenting an aspect of human identity that is independent of sharply marked dichotomous sexes, a sexually neutral human image.” As she further noted, these sexually neutral figurines may be related, in their conceptualization, to anthropomorphic greenstone figurines that were also frequently depicted as sexually neutral (see Princeton Art Museum 1995: nos. 20, 21, 22; cf. 26). Likewise, Billie Follensbee (2009: 109–110) observed that small stone Olmec carvings tended to have a higher percentage of ungendered representations than their contemporaneous ceramic figurine counterparts and that an even greater percentage of large-scale Olmec sculptures revealed a similar tendency toward gender ambiguity.¹¹ Accordingly, in Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica, there were already well-established traditions of representing sexually neutral individuals at a variety of scales and in multiple mediums. Significantly, the figurine from Naranjo (Fig. 5.4) that portrays a puffy-faced individual with a standing, gender-neutral body represents a sort of hybrid form that combines features of clay figurines with the sexually neutral body type more typical of greenstone objects. This evidence suggests that the potbelly sculptures – which display sexually neutral bodies – were not anomalous, but were instead grounded in canons of representation that had developed during the Early and Middle Preclassic for both small-scale objects of private ritual and large-scale public monuments.

These various interpretive possibilities regarding ancestors and gender are productive to consider in light of the potbelly sculptures. The potbellies, on one hand, could be argued to represent gender-neutral figures. Just

as readily, however, a case could be made that their lack of sexual characteristics signified their dual-gendered nature. In truth, we probably do not have adequate information to construct strong arguments either way. It may also be the case, as Jeffrey Blomster (2009) argued for Early Preclassic figurines, that sex and gender were not of primary concern to the makers of the potbellies but that they were engaged, instead, with other social identities. I would concur and reassert that the primary social identity articulated by the potbellies appears to have been that of ancestor, but how this category of ancestral “potbelly” being was construed in sculptural form – as sexually neutral or dual gendered – is unclear.

In order to avoid such gender-related questions, which I do not perceive to be answerable at this time, I would steer discussion in another direction. In a provocative critique of Gillespie’s (2000d) study, Stephen Houston and Patricia McAnany (2003) discussed the Classic Maya evidence regarding ancestors and identity. The Classic-period data are much more extensive and nuanced than those for the Preclassic period and consist not only of archaeological data but of rich hieroglyphic information as well. Houston and McAnany (2003: 31–32) noted the “tension and balance between individuation and royal roles” that hieroglyphic texts indicate existed in Classic Maya society:

Maya dynasts often assumed elaborately concocted and ancestrally linked identities. Epigraphers have long known of highly variable, non-repetitious pre-regnal names ... along with generationally transcendent regnal names. The former hint at individuation, the latter at muted personal identities that merge with those of antecedent rulers.

Even with the specificities of text, Houston and McAnany conceded that problems inherent in the complex issue of naming and personhood persist in Classic Maya studies. Moreover, as they acknowledged, such issues stand in the way of a full appreciation of how ancestors – and ties to ancestors – were conceptualized during the Classic period.

If we consider the Preclassic evidence in light of these Classic Maya data, similar tensions can also be posited, in which ancestry was configured in a variety of ways, ranging from household burials that singled out and revered specific ancestors to potbelly images that appear to have represented ancestor “types” rather than specific individuals. The lack of individualization apparent in the potbellies is not without parallel, however. The images of rulers that were erected at numerous Preclassic sites along the Pacific slope and into the highlands – at Izapa, Takalik Abaj, and Kaminaljuyu, for instance – are

often somewhat generic, as if the office of rulership was more central to the message than the actual individual portrayed. This may be due to our inability to “read” the imagery or identify potential nominal statements encoded into the costumes and headdresses, a practice well confirmed among the Classic Maya. Nonetheless, an overarching sense of uniformity and types, rather than of individuals, prevails; attention does not seem focused on portraiture on Late Preclassic stelae, but instead on common regalia, costume devices, and a shared vocabulary of forms and themes (Guernsey 2006b, 2011). By the same token, what appears to be emphasized in the potbellies is not individual features, but rather consistently shared attributes, the most common of which were the jowly cheeks and closed eyes, followed by the fat or obese bodies. So, too, their formal features were often conceived in concert with natural boulder forms or rock shapes. The Monte Alto potbellies and monumental heads, for example, reveal significant portions of unmodified surfaces, as if this were an assertion of their inherent “stoniness” or as if their form and identity were somewhat linked to the earth (Fig. 8.3) (see Stuart 2010). In other words, the primary aesthetic choices appear to have emphasized a suite of consistent attributes as well as stone and its natural form; consistency and repetition were paramount to individualization and innovation. Of course, one could argue that the potbellies were painted or costumed at one time in the ancient past; as will be recalled, various parts of Giralda Monument 2 retain traces of red paint, which raises the possibility that the potbellies were painted originally and thereby rendered with more individualized attributes. But this is only a possibility, and certainly not one that could be used to sustain an argument for long.

Even with all of this said, and various possibilities accounted for, it is difficult to assert a more specific identity for the potbellies beyond that of “ancestors.” Nor does the evidence preclude the possibility that they represented deified ancestors or deities that carried the attributes of ancestors. In short, the possibilities are numerous, but the data needed to corroborate them are not as forthcoming. Nonetheless, when the potbellies are considered carefully, within the context of the Middle to Late Preclassic transition along the Pacific slope, their identity as ancestral representations is, in my opinion, the strongest interpretive possibility, despite its limitations. I cannot “prove” that the appearance of the stone potbellies was directly linked to the cessation of domestic figurine ritual. Yet what can be demonstrated is that key attributes of the potbellies were appropriated from ancient domestic rituals, as shown by numerous figurines from the Early and Middle Preclassic periods. It may be that the florescence



Figure 8.3. Monte Alto Monument 7 and a young David Stuart in the background. Photo by George Stuart.

of potbellies throughout the Late Preclassic period quite literally embodied the “tension and balance between individuation and royal roles” that Houston and McAnany (2003: 31) observed for the Classic period. Although I have argued that the potbellies represented a social persona that was constructed and manipulated by elites, I must concede that the specifics of this “social persona” are not clear.

In the end, I would assert that the potbellies represented a powerful new sculptural form that was employed in the public sector to address a unique set of social dynamics, different from those addressed by the monumental stelae, altars, and other types of large-scale sculpture. Their display, by ruling elites, was also imbued with references to ancient ritual, domestic traditions, ancestors, and vital life forces. The control of these associations

by rulers, in turn, appears to have buttressed claims to political authority and worked in conjunction with other sculptural programs at each site. The generalized features of the potbellies may, in that sense, be related to the fact that public ritual, expressed through the medium of sculpture, was at times meant to transcend “individual lives and memories” (Joyce 2000a: 49). Ultimately, however, the potbellies appear to have been transformed into monumental “public transcripts” that were manipulated and controlled by the ruling elite (James Scott 1990).

The control of this imagery by rulers represents what Joyce (2000a: 50) referred to as the restriction of memory of ritual performance. Yet social memory is a process that is continually transformed in response to the needs of the present (Van Dyke and Alcock 2003: 3). These ideas can be readily applied to the potbellies, in which

imagery invoking ancestors and ancient ritual patterns – the stuff of memories – was employed, controlled, and restricted by elites in order to negotiate a period of social and political transition. As Van Dyke and Alcock (2003: 3) noted, “The construction of memory can symbolically smooth over ruptures, creating the appearance of a seamless social whole.” It can legitimate authority while simultaneously creating a community identity.

Although the literature concerning memory is much too extensive to adequately summarize here, I wish to highlight a few examples.¹² Authors such as Carla Sinopoli (2003: 18–19), working with South Indian history, explored the elite manipulation of historical knowledge and postulated that its success rested in its ability to resonate among social groups. As she demonstrated, elites created and gave visual form to memories that simultaneously acknowledged the past while creatively transforming it, thereby creating the sense of “continuity and legitimacy” (Sinopoli 2003: 26). In the same volume, Joyce (2003a: 108) focused on how memory could be constructed through the materiality of everyday life. Her study provides a counterpart to my exploration of the potbellies, as it links small-scale objects and the materials of daily practice, like the Preclassic figurines I have discussed, to the construction of social memory. In a different but equally pertinent way, John Clark and Arlene Colman (2008) focused on the making of memory in Mesoamerica by “re-presenting supposed pasts.” As they concluded, “[W]e appreciate the labile utility of a deep past coupled with a malleable future. In Mesoamerica, the past was a social resource for kings” (Clark and Colman 2008: 96). Such conclusions resonate with my own musings on the Preclassic potbellies, in which I have argued that rulers capitalized on memories of the past, quite literally reconfiguring and appropriating the forms and ritual patterns of domestic traditions in order to suit a changing social and political environment.

From private to public in Mesoamerica and beyond

Before concluding, I wish to point out that the incorporation by rulers of specific motifs and ritual associations from the private sector into the public domain is not unique to ancient Mesoamerica but rather is a process documented in numerous cultures and periods throughout history. In their essay on the royal body in ancient Mesoamerica and the Andes, Stephen Houston and Tom Cummins (2005: 364) observed as much, pointing to examples from several societies in which the practices of rulers “often originated in common acts, appropriating

the form and logic of everyday activities.” So many examples abound, in fact, that they lend credence to Maurice Bloch’s (1987: 271) assertion that all symbolic constructions of authority are historically grounded in nonroyal symbolism.¹³ During the transition from Republican to Imperial Rome, for instance, the emperor borrowed imagery and notions from the private domain of the family and adapted them to public monumental sculptural and architectural structures designed to symbolize the authority of the new imperial monarchy. As Beth Severy (2000) argued, rulers deliberately employed earlier, well-established forms and traditions from the private sector – such as the busts of famous ancestors typically displayed in aristocratic homes – in order to develop a “quasi-public cult of a private family” that could be invoked in monumental form.

Nowhere, however, is the importance of ancestors and lineage for justifying political authority better attested than in ancient China. As Wu Hung (1995: 79, 88) described, a Zhou ritual hymn in the *Book of Songs* reveals that the principal feature of an archaic Chinese capital was its lineage temple. For the Western Zhou, such a temple functioned not only as a place for ancestor worship but also as the political center and seat of civil administration. Late Western Zhou bronze inscriptions reveal, however, that emphasis gradually shifted from ancestral deities to self-glorification and, in the end, to a “division of the traditional temple into twin centers: a temple, which continued to exist as a religious or sacrificial center, and a palace. . . . A temple continued to belong to a larger kinship group and worshipped a collective body of ancestors; a palace was the property and symbol of one man and his small family” (Wu 1995: 99). Examples like those drawn from ancient Rome and China, although useful only for analogy, demonstrate the diverse ways in which ancestral associations could be appropriated and reinvented by rulers through patterns of ritual, symbol, language, and text.

Closer to home, and more readily applicable to the topic of the potbellies, is Michael Smith’s (2002: 95) suggestion that the Aztec New Fire Ceremony represented the appropriation by Aztec kings of “an ancient and widespread ritual” that was given “imperial trappings and symbolism.” For the Aztecs, the New Fire Ceremony was celebrated upon the completion of a fifty-two-year calendrical cycle and was linked to the fertility and renewal of the world as well as cosmic time. Christina Elson and Smith (2001: 171) presented evidence suggesting that certain ritual aspects of the New Fire Ceremony were prevalent throughout many regions of Mesoamerica long before the rise of the Aztec Empire. However, with the advent of Aztec imperial power,

the Mexica kings appropriated the popular ceremony and gave it the trappings of cosmic renewal and imperial authority. When the central imperial new fire was drilled to start a new calendric cycle, the fire was distributed by runners – under the king’s supervision and permission – from the Templo Mayor to all parts of the empire, where people used it to rekindle their hearths and begin life anew. This controlled distribution of the new fire was one component of Mexica imperial ideology that signaled cosmic favor and political domination. (M. Smith 2002: 111)

Elson and Smith (2001) also documented the archaeological evidence for New Fire Ceremonies performed at several sites outside the capital during the florescence of the Aztec Empire, confirming the participation of local communities in this ritual event. They acknowledged that one might argue that this evidence indicated “the penetration of imperial ideology down to the provincial household level” (Elson and Smith 2001: 170–172). However, their analysis of the archaeological and ethnohistoric data suggests, instead, that a “bottom-up” perspective is more likely, in which “the Mexica appropriated a more widespread popular ritual for imperial purposes.”¹⁴ Their conclusions correspond to those of Cecilia Klein and Naoli Lona with regard to Aztec figurines and sculpture. Klein and Lona (2009: 329, 367) argued that “artists working for the Aztec state drew upon an iconographic repertoire already in existence among clay figurines,” appropriating and codifying entities from figurine traditions into the pantheon of Aztec deities.

Conclusions

I have argued that the potbellies represent a sculptural form that was reinvented and manipulated by elites to buttress their own agendas during a period that witnessed social upheaval and political transformation. Yet, ironically, I would also assert that the potbellies symbolically bridged – or at least visually mitigated – some of the gaps between social sectors and economic levels by invoking a tradition of ritual that was recognized on all levels of society.¹⁵ As I have written elsewhere (Guernsey 2010a), many scholars have described how the material aspects of ritual were reinvented, replicated, expanded, and

contracted within and between the domestic and public domains (see Lucero 2006 for an excellent summary). The puffy facial features of the stone potbellies subtly allude to a similar dynamic between private and public ritual traditions, which was exploited by rulers and given physical form. References to traditional practices of ancestor veneration were transformed and reconfigured, but they nonetheless linked the past to the present in an accessible and tangible way. At a fundamental level, the potbellies articulated these social dynamics in sculptural form.

To come full circle and return to the ideas articulated in the introduction concerning the power and agency of sculpture: the approach taken in this book has attempted to move beyond merely tracing the formal development of the potbellies or mapping out their iconographic heritage. Instead, it has placed these developments within the social processes of the Preclassic period. As such, my methods, I hope, do some justice to Gell’s (1998: 6) concept of an “action-centered” approach to art, in which art is viewed “as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.”

Sculpture provides fertile ground for an analysis of the dynamics between the public and private spheres, elites and commoners, and Great and Little Traditions; it is also a vehicle for exploring how both physical spaces and conceptual domains were navigated by rulers and communities during the Preclassic period. The potbellies are fascinating because they quite literally bridged disparate social dimensions by referencing ancient domestic ritual but took, more often than not, the form of monumental public sculpture. Even with the admission that specific details of their identity will remain lost in the past, I would still assert that this study demonstrates that a close reading of their formal characteristics, their iconography, their spatial contexts, and their place within the larger social milieu of the Preclassic period reveals the complex identity of the potbellies as ancestral figures. Preclassic sculpture played a multiplicity of roles, and the potbellies, with their recurring and striking features, certainly exemplify the expressive capabilities of sculpture. Perhaps most significantly, though, the Preclassic potbellies demonstrate that one of the most enduring capacities of sculpture was its ability to constitute and negotiate social identity in Mesoamerica.

Notes

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1 But for comparative purposes, see M. Graham (1993).
- 2 All dates used in this study are uncalibrated.
- 3 See Rodas (1993: figs. 3, 17, 23, 24, and possibly 11) as well as Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 30), who observed that Monte Alto Monument 6's open yet puffy-lidded eyes are unusual.
- 4 See Robb (1998: 342), who, in his essay "The Archaeology of Symbols," stated: "Material things are central to our understanding of one another's roles, purposes, and values and thus furnish the focal points of ambiguity and of multiple interpretation. But ambiguity is not anarchy, and material culture may productively be viewed as systematic miscommunication."

2 POTBELLIES AND SCULPTURE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRECLASSIC SCHOLARSHIP

- 1 I avoid attempting to integrate the history of hieroglyphic decipherment into this discussion of Preclassic sculpture, despite the obvious fact that advancements in the decipherment of Classic-period inscriptions have contributed significantly to our ability to understand the historical specificity of sculpture and provided insight into the ways in which sculpture functioned in the ancient past. Instead, I point readers to Houston (2001) for an excellent discussion of recent advances in hieroglyphic studies. I also neglect in this summary the regions of Oaxaca and West Mexico, which, although with rich histories of Preclassic occupation and artistic traditions, are removed from the immediate discussion of the potbelly genre.
- 2 As Benson (1996: 17) elaborated, the objects – actually ceramic figurines – described as "Olmec" by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso were from Morelos and Guerrero rather than the Gulf Coast region now known as the Olmec heartland. It was not until 1927 that the word "Olmec" first appeared in an English-language review by Hermann Beyer of Blom and La Farge's (1926) *Tribes and Temples* (Benson 1996: 18).
- 3 Stirling (1968: 3) observed that "[y]ears before the excavations of Vaillant, ceramic and other finds beneath the Pedregal lava flow near Mexico City gave firm evidence that these were fairly advanced cultures of considerable antiquity. Nuttall, Holmes, Boas, Seler, Spinden, and especially Gamio, all contributed to the establishment of the so-called Archaic Culture."
- 4 Caso (1942: 43–46), translated in Diehl and Coe (1995: 22).
- 5 One must bear in mind the challenges facing these early investigators in ascertaining good archaeological data for dating these early cultures and their

- monuments. For example, Thompson (1942) wrote of the difficulties in understanding the stratigraphic placement of stelae at the site of El Baúl, in Escuintla, Guatemala, which were associated with a mix of pottery that included sherds similar to those at Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu as well as Plumbate ware, which is a hallmark of the Late Classic and Early Postclassic periods.
- 6 Philip Drucker (1943) accompanied Stirling to La Venta and Cerro de las Mesas during the 1939–1940 field season. As Grove (1997: 57) observed regarding Stirling and Drucker, “[E]arly in their relationship an interesting publishing dichotomy developed. Stirling published primarily on the stone monumental art recovered at sites they excavated ... , while Drucker dealt with the archaeological aspects of their investigations.”
 - 7 As Grove (1997: 68) noted, however, regional surveys in the Olmec heartland led to the discovery of new monuments in the environs of Tres Zapotes, including the missing upper half of Tres Zapotes Stela C (Beverido 1987) and, farther to the south, the Las Limas figure (Beltrán 1965; Medellín Zenil 1965).
 - 8 For the Olmec region see Coe and Diehl (1980), Cyphers (1992, 1996, 1999, 2004), de la Fuente (1984), Gillespie (1994), González Lauck (1988, 1989, 1996, 2010), Grove et al. (1993), Ortiz and Rodríguez (1989), Pool (2000, 2003, 2010), Santley (1992), Stark and Arnold (1997), Symonds (1995), Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez (2002), and Wendt (2003); for the highlands and the Basin of Mexico see García Moll et al. (1989), Grove (1996, 1997, 1999, 2000), Martínez Donjuán (1985), Niederberger (1986), Santley and Arnold (1996), and Serra Puche (1993); for Chiapas see Agrinier (1984) and Lee (1989).
 - 9 See Blomster, Neff, and Glascock (2005), Flannery et al. (2005), Neff et al. (2006), and Stoltman et al. (2005).
 - 10 See, e.g., Adams (1999), Andrews (1987), Andrews and Ringle (1992), Andrews and Robles Castellanos (2004), Awe (1992), Brown and Garber (2005), Carrasco (2005), Fash (1991), Folan et al. (1995), Hammond (1982), Hansen (1990, 1992), Healy (1992), Laporte (1999), Laporte and Valdés (1993), McAnany (1995), Ochoa (1983), Stanton (2000), and Valdés (1989).

3 SITUATING SCULPTURE ON THE PRECLASSIC PACIFIC SLOPE OF MESOAMERICA

- 1 The literature on Preclassic obsidian procurement and networks of distribution in southeastern Mesoamerica is extensive; see, e.g., Braswell (2002), Braswell and Robinson (2011), Clark (1987), Clark and Lee (1984, 2007), Clark, Lee, and Salcedo (1989).
- 2 Another major language family in Preclassic Mesoamerica, Otomanguean, was spoken in the highland areas of Central Mexico to Oaxaca.
- 3 Mayan speakers may also have inhabited the northern highlands of Guatemala during the Preclassic, when sites such as El Portón and La Lagunita flourished there (Fahsen 2010a; Ichon 1977, 1992; Josserand 2011; Sedat and Sharer 1972; Sharer and Sedat 1987, 1999).
- 4 Many of these arguments are further developed in Clark, Hansen, and Pérez Suárez (2000), who linked these population movements to the expansion of the El Mirador state during the Late Preclassic period. Also see Clark and Cheatham (2005) for a discussion of Preclassic ceramics from Chiapas.
- 5 See Freidel (1981) for an interesting analysis of Lowe’s (1977) model.
- 6 See Macri (2011) for a discussion of the “multi-ethnic existence of textual traditions in Mesoamerica” that points to an “intellectual sharing” between scribes working in Maya and Isthmian writing traditions. Also see Schieber de Lavarreda (2010) for the transcription of a recent exchange concerning these issues by a number of archaeologists and epigraphers working in the Pacific piedmont and Guatemalan Highlands.

- 7 See Arroyo, Neff, and Feathers (2002), Clark (1991: 16), Clark and Pye (2000b: 230–234, 2011), Coe (1961), Coe and Flannery (1967), Love (2002b, 2007), Lowe (1975), Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa (1982: 8), Neff and Arroyo (2002), Pye and Demarest (1991), Rosenswig (2002), Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1979), and Voorhies (1976).
- 8 An array of literature dealing with these transformations and offering different interpretations exists. For a representative sample see Arroyo (2004), Blake (1991), Ceja Tenorio (1985), Clark (1991, 2004), Clark and Blake (1994), Clark and Pye (2000b: 231–232), Flannery and Marcus (2000), Hill, Blake, and Clark (1998), Lesure (1995, 1997, 1999), Lesure and Blake (2002), Love (2007), Lowe (1977: 211), and Rosenswig (2000, 2010).
- 9 These questions pertain directly to the ongoing “Mother Culture” debate; see Chapter 2, note 9, for the most current discussions of this debate.
- 10 According to Clark and Hodgson (2007–2008), Cuadros-style figurines reported from the same area as the Buena Vista sculpture support the stylistic dating of the monument to this part of the Early Preclassic.
- 11 As Graham (1981a: 169) defined them, boulder sculptures are “large stones in which the natural contours remain substantially recognizable or distinguishable. The natural form of the boulder may be entirely unmodified (in which instance it is only the incising, grinding, or grooving of features that makes the boulder a sculpture), slightly altered, or considerably modified; the essence of the definition rests upon the recognition of the original volume and contours of the boulder.”
- 12 The period in which this early construction took place, 850–650 B.C., is referred to as the Duende phase at Izapa and is defined by a problematic ceramic complex. Lowe, Lee, and Martínez Espinosa (1982: 123–127) viewed the ceramics of the Duende phase, which they described as “coming from the non-Mixe–Zoque east,” as a short-lived intrusion but cautioned that it was also possible that Duende and the prior phase, Jocotal, were contemporaneous; the Duende ceramic complex has more recently been described in greater detail by Clark and Cheetham (2005: 359–366). Nonetheless, Love (2002b: 44) suggested that the vast majority of the Duende assemblage was equivalent to the Conchas (900–600 B.C.) assemblage defined for Pacific coastal Guatemala at the site of La Blanca.
- 13 This 300-year period is defined as the Conchas phase at La Blanca. There is some evidence for Late Archaic and Early Preclassic occupations at La Blanca, but no undisturbed deposits have been found and no radiocarbon dates have been obtained to confirm this possibility (Love and Guernsey 2011).
- 14 The literature concerning urbanism, social complexity, household differentiation, and centralized political systems is vast and a topic unto itself that cannot be adequately addressed here. For the best summaries of this literature as it pertains to the Pacific slope and, particularly, social transformations that transpired during the Preclassic period, see Clark (1997, 2004, 2007, in press), Clark and Blake (1994), Flannery (1999), Love (2007, 2011, n.d.), Love and Guernsey (2011), and Rosenswig (2005, 2010).
- 15 According to John Justeson (personal communication 1997), a hieroglyphic inscription on Late Preclassic Takalik Abaj Stela 5 bears the title *ajaw* spelled in Mayan with the phonetic complement *-wa*; also see Justeson and Mathews (1990). Josseland (2011), however, offers some critique of this interpretation. So too, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, do Lacadena (2010) and Mora-Marín (2010), who posit a Mixe–Zoquean influence in these early inscriptions.
- 16 Shook (1971: 75) reported twelve additional uncarved stelae at Monte Alto.
- 17 However, Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 25) noted that Robert Burkitt, during an early mapping project at Monte Alto in 1931, recorded that Monument 5 had also faced north at that time.

- 18 See Chinchilla (1996) and Chinchilla, Bove, and Genovez (2009: 451, fig. 6) for a discussion of the sites encompassed within this Cotzumalguapa Nuclear Zone.
- 19 For other examples see Parsons (1986: figs. 35–41) and Love (2010: fig. 7.17). The Pacaño sculptures also compare to La Venta Monument 56 (de la Fuente 1977: 185–186, figs. 39, 40), in which the figure displays a nearly identical posture replete with tilted head and raised arms and hands that grasp the back of the head or neck. Unlike the Pacaño sculptures or even the Olmec dwarves, however, the La Venta figure lacks obvious legs and, instead, the lower torso is merged smoothly with the vertical tenon. De la Fuente (1977: 185–186) suggested that La Venta Monument 56 anticipated the tenoned pedestal sculptures more frequently associated with Late Preclassic sites such as Tres Zapotes or those of the Guatemala Highlands and Pacific slope. De la Fuente (1977: fig. 40) shows La Venta Monument 56 following its “reconstruction,” which, as she noted, was undertaken arbitrarily and without any knowledge of the original, destroyed facial features. Figure 39 in her text shows the monument before reconstruction.
- 20 The same tension between clay and stone is also well documented at Teopantecuanitlan (Martínez Donjuán 2010).

4 THE DATING AND DISTRIBUTION OF POTBELLIES AND POTBELLY-RELATED SCULPTURE

- 1 Also see Girard (1973: 198).
- 2 Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 25) recounted that Monte Alto Monument 12 had been located after the other monuments; she did not illustrate it in her essay because of its eroded state. Rodas (1993: 11) referred to the same monument as Monument 13 and included a drawing. In this study, I am following Popenoe de Hatch’s original numbering (Monument 12) but using Rodas’s drawing of the potbelly.
- 3 The height of the Monte Alto monuments, taken from Parsons (1986) and Rodas (1993), are as follows: Monument 1 (127 cm), Monument 2 (147 cm), Monument 4 (157 cm), Monument 5 (138 cm), Monument 6 (122 cm), Monument 7 (140 cm), Monument 8 (165 cm), Monument 9 (185 cm), Monument 10 (145 cm), Monument 11 (154 cm), and Monument 12 (55 cm).
- 4 “Información verbal del señor Carlos Dorión, de la ciudad de Guatemala. Dorión dió noticias de un gran lugar arqueológico compuesto de unos catorce montículos en la Finca San Carlos Las Jabillas, en donde se hallaron hace algún tiempo siete u ocho esculturas de Piedra, que fueron trasladadas a las fincas Las Victorias y La Máquina” (Shook 1949: n. 2).
- 5 See Ohi and Torres (2001: 161) for a mushroom stone with hands clasped under the chin in a similar gesture.
- 6 Monuments 46 and 47, previously attributed to Bilbao (Parsons 1969: plate 45), are now known to have come from the Finca Concepción, Escuintla, according to Chinchilla (1996: 487, 2001–2002: n. 2).
- 7 Rodas (1993: fig. 15) identified this sculpture as El Bálsamo Monument 1 in the text but as Monument 4 in the figure caption. However, Parsons (1969: 136, plate 54a) illustrated the same monument and labeled it Monument 1, which appears to be the correct designation and the one that I have used here.
- 8 There are also two very eroded monuments in the Rubén Chévez van Dorne Museum, in the town of La Democracia, where the Monte Alto sculptures are on display, which may be related to the potbelly sculpture tradition. Although the faces of both monuments appear to have been reworked, the vestiges of neckless heads with heavy-set faces and wraparound arms are visible.

- 9 Parsons (1986: fig. 111) and J. Scott (1988: 29) referred to Pasaco Monument 1 as La Nueva Monument 1; Parsons (1986: fig. 97) identified Pasaco Monument 3 as Kaminaljuyu Monument 40.
- 10 For comparative purposes, see San Lorenzo Monument 130 in Cyphers (2004: fig. 144), which also portrays an individual whose body is wrapped around a columnar-like zoomorph.
- 11 Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010b: 186) classified only twelve monuments at Takalik Abaj as potbellies.
- 12 Graham (1981a: 169–172, fig. 12) related the two rings on the back of the head of Monument 40 to very similar concentric rings on two other monuments at Takalik Abaj, Monument 1-A and Monument 38, which he interpreted as simple eyes added to lend an animate quality to these otherwise minimally modified stones. As he concluded regarding Monument 40, “What has survived, however, in this otherwise carefully dressed carving is an old, unprepared surface on the back of the potbelly head. Here the distinctive ‘staring eyes’ of the simple, earliest type of Abaj Takalik boulder sculpture may be easily discerned. These antique features obviously were valued, perhaps even revered by those who later so thoroughly and finely dressed the stone, and thus were carefully preserved.”
- 13 Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010b: 192, 202) characterized Monument 58 as “Olmec” and considered it distinct from the potbellies. They did acknowledge some stylistic similarities, however, and suggested that Monument 58 may have been antecedent to the potbelly form.
- 14 Christa Schieber de Lavarreda (personal communication 2008) graciously provided monument numbers for several of the unpublished Takalik Abaj potbellies.
- 15 Unusual downturned hands, with only four digits each, also appear on the sculpture of a seated figure with a thick torso and wraparound limbs from Huehuetenango, illustrated by Navarrete and Hernández (2000: fig. 4).
- 16 Although I have been unable to confirm this, according to Parsons (1986: 42, n. 6), “There is another potbelly sculpture, of nearly identical size and detail to Monument 8, in the Newton private collection in Antigua, that reportedly has been in the same colonial house since the turn of the century.”
- 17 The height of the Kaminaljuyu potbellies, some only fragmentary without heads, is as follows (from Rodas 1993): Monument 3 (110 cm), Monument 4 (118 cm), Monument 6 (105 cm), Monument 7 (74 cm), Monument 8 (103 cm), Monument 38 (24.6 cm), Monument 39 (40 cm), Monument 41 (65 cm), Monument 57 (37 cm), Monument 58 (38 cm), Monument 66 (100 cm), Pieza A (19 cm), Pieza B (19 cm), Pieza C (35 cm), Pieza D (20 cm), and Pieza E (17 cm).
- 18 For a similar stone sculpture of a rounded head with closed eyes and jowly features that recall those of the potbellies, see the Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (record identifier pea503747). The sculpture is attributed to the Hacienda El Naranjo near Kaminaljuyu.
- 19 Stone spheres, some with carved faces, are found in many regions throughout Mesoamerica, although not all bear the closed eyes and puffy features associated with the potbelly monuments (see, e.g., Orr 2009: fig. 9.4). Orr (2009: 256–260) linked these Mesoamerican spheres to an iconographic complex associated with the ballgame/ritualized combat, decapitation sacrifice, and agricultural fertility. She incorporated earlier discussions by Gillespie (1991) and Reilly (2002), who argued that the spherical Olmec colossal heads were likewise iconographically related to narratives concerning the ballgame, seeds, and creation (also see Hoopes and Mora-Marín 2009 and Mock 1998). This suite of objects and imagery from Mesoamerica, which overlaps but also clearly exceeds the boundaries of this study, suggests a very broad complex of symbolic elements

- that could, at times, be shared by different categories of monuments, including stone spheres and disembodied carved stone heads, perhaps because of generally related notions of seeds/generation, sacrifice/fertility, and the ballgame. An egg-shaped monument from Tenaspi Island in Lake Catemaco, which displays similar puffy facial features, may also fit into this conceptual scheme (Blom and La Farge 1926: fig. 21). Also see Braakhuis (2009: 6) for the symbolic relationship between eggs and rebirth.
- 20 Also see a small “lava idol” in the Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (record identifier pea503747), as well as an object labeled a fragmentary “pot-bellied” figure from near Miraflores, which bears a medallion over its chest (record identifier pea505457).
 - 21 S. Scott (2003) provides the most extensive discussion of not only these “Xipe” figurines but the appearance of the same visage on nonfigurine materials at Teotihuacan, including cylindrical tripods, a ceramic seal, or *sello*, and several stone slabs.
 - 22 Also see Feuchtwanger (1989: fig. 171).
 - 23 See Love (2010), Rodas (1993: figs. 53–59), and Demarest (1986: fig. 118) for related stone figurines.
 - 24 For another example, see a small stone figure attributed to Kaminaljuyu that bears some resemblance to the potbellies. See the Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (record identifier pea553196).
 - 25 See Parsons (1986: figs. 26, 27) for Kaminaljuyu Monument 6, which also possesses a face over the area of its chest.
 - 26 Although this peg sculpture potbelly appears as fig. 10 in Chinchilla (2001–2002), the caption reads incorrectly; the correct caption appears with fig. 12 in Chinchilla’s essay.
 - 27 Monument 5 was found “in the humus near Monument 2” (Demarest 1986: 17, fig. 17); it compares to Monument 4, which was found farther to the east of the potbellies (Demarest 1986: fig. 15).
 - 28 It is worth noting that the form and conical bases of the potbellies from Los Cerritos Sur and Tapalshucut bear a resemblance to smaller-scale Olmec effigy axes (see Princeton Art Museum 1995: cat. no. 93 for comparison).
 - 29 Also see López Vassallo (2007), McDonald (1983), Milbrath (1979: 27–28), and Navarrete (1959).
 - 30 For comparative purposes, see a Teotihuacan figurine illustrated in S. Scott (2001: plate 144) whose headdress is decorated with a “chubby face mask.”
 - 31 The combination of turtle carapace and puffy visages visually anticipates the much later Classic and Postclassic associations between turtles and katun period endings, symbolized by *ajaw* signs, discussed by Taube (1988). However, these Preclassic examples appear to lack more overt calendrical references or direct associations with the cycle of thirteen katuns commemorated by later monuments.
 - 32 Although there is heavy spalling on the back of Monument 27, hints of a horizontal incision, as if to suggest shoulders, are visible.
 - 33 Two *hachas*, both bearing faces with closed, puffy-lidded eyes and exaggerated pursed lips, published in Bolz-Augenstein and Disselhoff (1970: plates 21, 22), further point to an intriguing overlap between these facial attributes and the ballgame.
 - 34 Similar figurines with helmets and chin straps are found in other regions of Mesoamerica as well. See Pulido Méndez (2008: fig. 23) for examples from the Río Balsas delta region.
 - 35 There is heavy spalling on the back of Monument 33, and no carving is visible.
 - 36 For other examples, see Parsons (1969: plates 43g, 46a, b, 47a, 48h).

- 37 See Navarrete, Lee, and Silva Rhoads (1993: figs. 8, 24, 34, 35, 36, 37, 40, 41, 62, 63a, 64).
- 38 According to Navarrete and Hernández (2000: 595), Clewlow and Corson (1968) attributed this seated sculpture to the site of La Venta.
- 39 This beardlike element may actually be the result of the artist's having incorporated a natural vein or mineral deposit in the stone into the composition. Although I was unable to see this potbelly in person due to an absence of information concerning its current location, a small, oblong, and rather phallic-shaped stone in the Casa Cultural in Tonalá was likewise carved with careful consideration to a natural vein of stone that encircles the shaft like a ridge. Although it is impossible to assert that these two sculptures were carved by the same hand, or even come from the same site, it is intriguing that the natural irregularities of the stones appear to have been incorporated into both compositions.
- 40 Although I think it is possible to make the case, on the basis of stylistic criteria, that the Ojo de Agua monument is Late Preclassic in date, I must acknowledge the fact that other disk-shaped objects, some with carved human faces, appear throughout this region and may represent a very long-lived carving tradition. See, e.g., Weeks (2003: figs. 170, 271) for monuments from Pueblo Viejo Quen Santo and Gracias a Dios.
- 41 This vessel is now on display at the regional museum in Tuxtla Gutiérrez in association with a reconstructed burial. However, according to Thomas Lee (personal communication 2010), the vessel was not from the burial on display at the museum, but rather from Cache 11 in Mound 17.
- 42 Monument L is erroneously labeled Monument H in Stirling (1943: plate 10c).
- 43 See note 19. Also, another monument from Polvaredas (no. 10904 in the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa) is dated to the Early Classic period, and although various attributes (an erect phallus, zoomorphic ears, and unique costume elements) distinguish it from other potbellies, its overall form and contours are in keeping with the potbelly tradition. I thank Sara Ladrón de Guevara for bringing this monument to my attention.
- 44 J. Scott (1978: 12–13, figs. 3, 4) illustrated two stone heads from Oaxaca that he linked to the Cerro el Vigía head as well as to the Monte Alto monumental heads and Olmec colossal heads, although he provided no dimensions and noted that one, originally excavated at Monte Albán, is now missing. A drawing of the now-missing Monte Albán head, however, shows similar jowly cheeks but the eyes appear to be handled differently, as does the mouth.
- 45 J. Scott (1980: 244) lists the Antigua potbelly's "possible height" as 73.5 cm.
- 46 Sergio Rodas (personal communication 2009) brought this mushroom stone to my attention.

5 BLURRING THE LINES: PUBLIC SPACE, PRIVATE SPACE, SCULPTURE, AND FIGURINES

- 1 Marcus (1996: 287) noted that, although figurines do not show up in these public spaces, other probable ritual paraphernalia, including drums and conch shell trumpets, were associated with these public structures.
- 2 Another figurine head was recovered in association with the fill of 17.5-m-long Platform B (Garber and Awe 2008: 188).
- 3 Although this study is focused on ceramic figurines, it is important to note that greenstone figurines were cached, in a deliberately arranged scene, at Middle Preclassic La Venta. See Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959: fig. 38) and Drennan (1976b: fig. 11.10).
- 4 For further discussions of domestic ritual activity and its relationship to communal ritual and emerging elites in the Preclassic Maya Lowlands, see Brown

- (2003, 2008), Willey (1973: 29), Hammond (1991) Hendon (1999: 99, 111, 115), and Ringle (1999).
- 5 The diverse roles of Mesoamerican figurines from all periods and their broader relationships to other figural art traditions have been explored in a volume edited by Halperin et al. (2009), the first to be devoted entirely to the social significance of Mesoamerican figurines. Also see Triadan (2007: 289) for a discussion of figurines from the site of Aguateca, Guatemala, in which she concludes that “Late Classic Maya figurines likely had multiple and changing functions throughout their uselives, many of them probably not associated with ritual activities.”
 - 6 See Barbour (1976: fig. 4) for shared conventions of representing mature female bodies; he compares Teotihuacan figurines depicting women with sagging stomachs to an image in the Fejérváry–Mayer Codex.
 - 7 See Joyce (2003b: figs. 9, 10) for a strikingly similar gesture made by a figurine from Playa de los Muertos, Honduras.
 - 8 In a similar vein, S. Scott (1993: 11) commented on the repeatedly broken or fragmentary figurines at Teotihuacan. Her analysis of more than four thousand fragments, and fruitless attempts to find fragments that could be joined back together, led her to conclude “that breaking and at least partially destroying figurines were involved in Teotihuacan household ritual.” Also see Grove (1981), who linked similar patterns of breakage not only to ritual behavior in the domestic sector, but also to practices of monument mutilation and defacement. This recurring evidence of figurine breakage and decapitation at other sites (see, e.g., Coe 1961) matches data from La Blanca and points to widely shared but poorly understood patterns of ritual involving ceramic figurines.
 - 9 It is interesting that a similar “horned” hairdo is worn by female figurines in later periods, as among the Aztecs, for whom it appears to have designated a married woman (Klein and Lona 2009: 330; M. Smith 2002: 103). The same hairstyle appears outside figurine traditions as well, as evidenced by a sixteenth-century Tlaxcalan genealogy (Fane 1996: no. 2).
 - 10 Dahlin’s (1978: 169) figurine analysis at Chalchuapa was based on excavations at Laguna Cuzcachapa, where “deposits yielded 252 figurine heads, or 50.6% of the entire collection recovered in all field seasons; the remaining 246 figurine heads came from construction fill and from surface contexts.” As Sharer (1978: vol. 1, 56) explained, the Laguna Cuzcachapa was utilized primarily as a water source and trash disposal area, and ceremonial activity was “limited to a single probable cache.”
 - 11 See record identifier pea552527, center example, in the Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. Other possibly related puffy-eyed visages appear as figurines, conical effigy prongs, effigy heads, and rim heads at Kaminaljuyu and may bear some relationship to the puffy-eyed figurines discussed in this chapter. See, for examples, record identifiers pea518377, 518398, 577298, 552526, 507903, 515332, and 591249.
 - 12 Closed, puffy-lidded eyes also characterize a type of figurine from the Río Balsas delta region. Although this type appears to lack the jowly cheeks, mouths are often open and sometimes contain a bead, like figurines from La Blanca. See Pulido Méndez (2008: fig. 7B and cover illustration), who classified these figurines as Grupo 2: Muertos.
 - 13 See, e.g., Hansen (2005: fig. 5.7e) for a zoomorphic figurine with distinctly pursed lips.
 - 14 Also see a figurine from Uaxactun in the Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (record identifier pea533762).
 - 15 See an effigy prong from a three-pronged *incensario* from Kaminaljuyu dated to the Middle Preclassic Las Charcas phase that also has distinctly pursed lips (Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology,

- Harvard University, record identifier pea525690). For the widespread Classic-period continuation of characters with inflated cheeks on whistles, see T. Joyce's (1933: plate 8, nos. 17, 18) description of specimens from Lubaantun, Boggs's (1974: fig. 13) example from central El Salvador, and von Winning's (1987, vol. 1, ch. 12, fig. 2, a) sample from Veracruz, c. A.D. 300–450.
- 16 See M. Smith (2002: 93) for similar assertions that “[t]he ritual use of ceramic figurines in domestic settings was a manifestation of an ancient Mesoamerican tradition that flourished largely outside of the control of the state.”
 - 17 Also see Brown and Garber (2005: 47) for similar dynamics at Blackman Eddy: “In the archaeological record, ritual activity mirrors the change in special function architecture and becomes more restrictive in nature as well, shifting from communal feasting activities to restrictive caching behavior which seems to have excluded the public from physical participation (Brown 2003).”
 - 18 Ekholm (1989: 33) reported one figurine from a cache in Mound 59 and mentioned several others that may date to this Late Preclassic period. Following the Guillen phase, the figurine tradition disappeared at Izapa.
 - 19 Marcus (1996: 297) posited a similar set of circumstances for Preclassic Oaxaca: “Small solid figurines had largely disappeared from domestic contexts and the archaeological record by 200 BC, when the first standardized temples and full-time priests appear. I would suggest that those priests had appropriated many activities formerly handled in private houses.” For a discussion of a similar dynamic in later periods, see Chase (1992: 133), who noted the correlation between changes in the archaeological record in terms of access to incense burners, cache figures, and figurines, and transformations in religious practices between the Classic and Postclassic periods. As she summarized, practices “appear to have been integrated into a single religious complex characterized by more public ceremonies controlled and carried out by the Postclassic elite.”
 - 20 See Klein and Lona (2009: 364) for a different opinion concerning an Aztec regard for clay.
 - 21 For discussions of the difficulty in defining “public” versus “private” space in the Preclassic, particularly along the Pacific Coast, see Blake et al. (2006), Clark (2004), Hill and Clark (2001), Lesure (1997), and Lesure and Blake (2002). Flannery (1976: 334), in a discussion of Preclassic villages in Oaxaca, suggested a cautionary approach to defining public space, which pertains to this discussion as well: “Certain Oaxacan villages, but not others, had evidence of structures that were evidently public buildings rather than residences. As yet, we have no idea what *specific* public activities were carried out at these buildings. Nor do we know what percentage of this public activity was ‘ceremonial’ as opposed to ‘secular,’ if indeed such a distinction can be made for the Formative.” For a summary of the broader archaeological, anthropological, and social science literature concerned with distinctions between public and private space, which by necessity engage with “the Durkheimian (1915[1995]) distinction between the sacred and profane,” see Fogelin (2007: 59–61). Also see note 4 of this chapter for comparable discussions regarding the Maya Lowlands.
 - 22 Although animal figurines were also found in the Mound 9 assemblage, as is typical throughout the site, the majority portray humans. The heads of most of these are naturalistically rendered with great attention to facial characteristics, headdresses, hairstyles, and personal adornment including jewelry, clothing, and tattooing. As Arroyo (2002) observed, the heads are hand modeled and smoothed, with details created by modeling fillets of clay to form earspools, collars, and other decorative elements. In some cases, fragmentary remains of red paint can be seen on various parts of the body and in decorative details. The corpus of figurines associated with Mound 9 also appears to be consistent with Arroyo's data from other sectors of the site, which indicate that the majority of the fragmentary figurines represent females, many of which display a visibly fleshy or swollen abdomen that may emphasize their reproductive potential.

- Nonetheless, in spite of this preponderance of ostensibly female figurines, an assignation of sex or gender is often impossible.
- 23 The evidence for public ritual at La Blanca is not extensive, perhaps because excavations of the civic center are more limited than those focused on the residential zones of the site. However, the clearly defined central precinct of La Blanca appears to represent a domain that could have accommodated crowds gathered around Mound 1 and extending into the sunken plaza to its east. During Love's 2008 excavations of Mound 1, an earlier structure associated with a dense quantity of shells, bone, and small pebbles was discovered, which had been covered when the great mound was constructed. As Love (Love and Guernsey 2011) noted, this structure may represent an earlier temple platform, or it may have been built to dedicate the site before Mound 1 was constructed. Love suggested that the dense quantities of bone indicate that food preparation and feasting accompanied the event, while the quantities of small pebbles anticipate caching patterns known from elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Earley 2008: 53–33; Estrada Belli 2006: 62; Love n.d.). It represents the best evidence to date of large-scale and ostensibly "public" rituals associated with Mound 1. For discussions of similar issues throughout Preclassic Mesoamerica, see Brown and Garber (2008), Garber and Awe (2008), Hendon (2002: 79), Joyce (2003b), Love (1999a), and Ringle (1999).
 - 24 See Chase and Chase (1992: 9–10) for a good summary of the traditional associations in Mesoamerican scholarship among "public" spaces, elite functions, and a two-class (elites and commoners) model of social organization.
 - 25 See Lohse and Valdez's (2004: 5) edited volume, *Ancient Maya Commoners*, for a counterpart to these ideas concerning elites. As they argue, any effective discussion of these concepts must be historically situated, because all identities – elite or non-elite – "involved situationally negotiated expressions of wealth and power."
 - 26 These include Monuments 21, 27, 28, and possibly 23 and 26.
 - 27 Another face, created out of modeled daub and perhaps displaying a rounded mouth and puffy cheeks, appears on the *tablero* of the main platform of the center building in one of the domestic compounds at Tetimpa (Plunket and Uruñuela 1998: fig. 14).
 - 28 For an excellent discussion of the importance of identifying archaeological evidence for possible acts of resistance, particularly during periods of social upheaval in Mesoamerica, see Joyce, Arnaud Bustamante, and Levine (2001) and Joyce and Weller (2007). But for contrast see Manzanilla (2002), Winter (2002), and Halperin (2009), who examined various domestic ritual patterns from different periods at Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, and Motul de San José, respectively, and viewed them as a means for encouraging or negotiating cooperation with the state.

6 BIG BELLIES AND FAT GODS

- 1 While Marilyn Beaudry-Corbett (2002: 77; Whitley and Beaudry 1989, 1991) concluded that the major florescence of Sin Cabezas took place during the Late to Terminal Preclassic periods, she also noted that excavations detected some minimal habitation during the preceding Middle Preclassic period as well as a later Classic-period occupation. Because of this complicated history of occupation and evidence that the monuments had been repositioned in later periods (Parsons 1986: 20), one is left with primarily stylistic clues for understanding their chronological placement. At first glance, the naturalistic and volumetric handling of the Sin Cabezas monuments recalls Middle Preclassic Olmec traditions. Yet also of note is their relatively diminutive size, especially given their formal relationship to regional Middle Preclassic figurine traditions. The Sin Cabezas figures themselves are only between 30 and 46 cm in height, whereas their broad conical

bases range in height from 32 to 70 cm; the pedestals certainly lend a sense of monumentality and, by association, status or rank to the seated individuals. Their shape also, interestingly, compares to similar – yet shorter – broad conical bases that support several potbellies at Takalik Abaj, on Los Cerritos Sur Monument 3, or even, on a much smaller scale, the miniature potbellies from El Ujuxte. This commonality, not only in terms of fat bellies but also in terms of pedestal supports, is important to observe, as it may help anchor the Sin Cabezas monuments more firmly to the same period – spanning the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic – in which the potbellies were also conceptualized.

- 2 See Parsons (1986: figs. 18, 19) for related sculptures.
- 3 See, e.g., the postures of the Hombre de Tikal (Fahsen 1988), Uaxactun Sculpture 22 (C. Jones 2001: fig. 3), and the rulers on Copán Altar Q (Fash 1991: figs. 11, 12).
- 4 Beyer (1930: figs. 1, 3) also published a closely related figurine from Tabasco, as well as a head with similar features from Toniná.
- 5 Also see V. Miller (1985: 146–147), Pollock (1980: figs. 522, 627), and J. Scott (1988: fig. 13); Proskouriakoff (1950: 168) mentions other examples in Yucatán.
- 6 Also see Martí (1955: 66). Examples from Yucatán compare to a stone head from Maxcanu, in the vicinity of Oxkintok, which appears to have closed, puffy eyes (Pollock 1980: fig. 576c). Several other badly eroded sculptures from Yucatán also resemble the potbellies in their heavy torsos and wraparound limbs (see Pollock 1980: figs. 762b, c, 980b).
- 7 Popenoe de Hatch (1989: 41) stated that “Fat Gods” do not appear in the corpus of Teotihuacan figurines until Teotihuacan IV; von Winning (1987: vol. 1, 141) dated their appearance to Teotihuacan III and IV; and Barbour (1976: 13), in his dissertation on the figurines of Teotihuacan, noted: “It is possible that the ‘fat god’ appears in the Early Tlamimilolpa phase. Representations of the ‘fat god’ remained outside the official pantheon until the end of the Metepec phase.” According to Goldsmith (2000: 59), “Although the temporal range of this figure may have earlier beginnings, the examples in these collections [La Ventilla and ‘El Corzo’] principally date from the TMM and Coyotlatelco phases [post 350 AD], however there are also examples here from the Aztec and non-Teotihuacan proveniences.” All of these scholars, despite some variation in dating, concur that the figurines do not seem to make an appearance at Teotihuacan until the Early Classic period. However, as Goldsmith (personal communication 2010) cautioned, the lack of data on figurines from Cuicuilco, the site that dominated the Valley of Mexico during the Late Preclassic period, makes it impossible to completely rule out that “Fat God” figurines were not present in this region before the Early Classic period.
- 8 Also see Neff and Bove (1999).
- 9 Carmen Varela Torrecilla and Braswell (2003) proposed a similar argument to explain Teotihuacan-related features at Oxkintok, although they did not address specifically the puffy-featured character on the column from Structure 3C7. They interpreted Teotihuacan stylistic elements as evidence of participation in an extensive “international system” of ideas and exchange that included numerous sites throughout Mesoamerica during the Early and Late Classic periods, rather than as some form of influence that reverberated directly from Teotihuacan or Central Mexico.
- 10 See Hellmuth (1978) for Teotihuacan artifacts in Escuintla, Guatemala.
- 11 Also see the Floral Park Complex vessel cover illustrated by Gifford (1965: fig. 213), which depicts a monkey-like figure with pursed lips and arms that wrap around its obese belly. Michel Quenon (personal communication 2010) and Sue Scott (personal communication 2010) also pointed out to me that rotund figures – animal and human – associated with ceramic forms can be traced forward in time in a variety of regions, as evidenced by the Early Classic

so-called cookie jar ceramics or effigy vessels from Teotihuacan. See Berrin and Fields (2010: plate 135) for an example of one such vessel, found in Chiapas, in the shape of an individual with closed eyes and puffy cheeks.

- 12 Also see Braun (1978: fig. 28) for another pedestal sculpture that shares attributes with the potbellies.
- 13 See, e.g., Houston and Taube (2000: 290–291 n. 5). But cf. Fogelin (2007: 58), who provided a critique of the “convenient research strategy” that results from assuming stability of meaning over time and pointed to the need to guard against undemonstrated assumptions of continuity.

7 POTBELLIES, ANCESTORS, AND PERFORMANCE

- 1 There is very little archaeological evidence for the wrapping or “mummy” bundling of corpses along the Pacific slope during the Preclassic period, although this could be attributed to vagaries of preservation; the only evidence that I am aware of for a bundled burial comes from the site of El Ujuxte and dates to the Late Preclassic (Michael Love, personal communication 2009). In later periods and other regions of Mesoamerica, however, Spanish chroniclers did record that corpses were wrapped in textiles (Reese-Taylor, Zender, and Geller 2006; Tozzer 1941: 130). There is also little evidence along the Preclassic Pacific slope for flexed burials, the postures of which could be reasonably compared to that of the seated or squatting potbelly sculptures. All of the other, admittedly limited, Preclassic evidence from the Pacific slope points to a more common pattern of extended burials. Such factors make J. Scott’s (1988: 26–29) appealing suggestion difficult to substantiate. However, see my discussion, later in this chapter, of a new monument from Takalik Abaj that may depict a mummy-bundled ancestor, which would lend credence to Scott’s assertion that the potbellies signify deceased and bundled individuals. This lack of data for the Preclassic Pacific slope can also be contrasted to arguments by McAnany (1998: 276) and Marcus (1999: 73), who, on the basis of more concrete evidence from the Maya Lowlands and Valley of Oaxaca, respectively, linked the seated posture of buried individuals to representations on ceramic figurines and the expression of rank and authority during the Preclassic period.
- 2 A pottery head attributed to the Kaminaljuyu region portrays a similar skeletal visage on one half of the face and a jowly, puffy-eyed representation on the other. See record identifier pea526586 in the Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.
- 3 For an example from Río Viejo, Oaxaca, see Hepp (2007: 180, photo 181).
- 4 Although see Hammond (2001), who suggested that the unusual features of the Cobata head may indicate that its carving was incomplete.
- 5 Also see Reese-Taylor, Zender, and Geller (2006: 51, 54) for burial practices in the Maya Lowlands in which the heads of decedents appear to have been deliberately enclosed or covered, as if the head were given special attention. Calnek (1988:48) and Deal (1988: 80–82) both address the veneration of ancestral bones and use of figurines in domestic ancestor ritual.
- 6 Although the thickly incised line defining the bottom of the figure’s eye suggests a heavy, closed lid, a much more faintly incised line arched above the top of the eye cavity leaves open (forgive the pun) the possibility that the eye is meant to be understood as open. While I tend to believe that the way the eye is carved indicates that it is meant to be understood as closed, it is wise to acknowledge this ambiguity and not rule out the possibility that the eye is open.
- 7 See Taube (2005: 34) for a discussion of the iconography of this stela, which he linked to concepts of breath, jade, and water.
- 8 The downward positioning of hands and fingers also characterizes San Lorenzo Monument 52 (Cyphers 2004: fig. 62), and may have carried a specific meaning since the Early Preclassic period or, just as likely, merely represents a formal

solution to effectively rendering hands and fingers. It is likewise seen on Middle Preclassic celts, like that illustrated in *The Olmec World* (Princeton Art Museum 1995: cat. no. 128), which also portrays a round-faced and closed-eyed individual whose posture compares to that of potbelly sculptures. The same gesture is also made by the squatting feline Chahk figure in the Yale Peabody Museum (Karl Taube, personal communication 2010), which indicates that a range of characters and deities repeat this gesture.

- 9 Also see Both (2004: 266; 2008: 30–31) for the use of shell trumpets by the Lacandon to summon deities and Stevenson (1968: 82), who noted that “[a]s late as 1670 Francisco de Burgoa (1605–1681) continued to complain of the ‘out-of-tune’ flutes played by the natives to invoke their gods” in Oaxaca. The relationship between sound and the supplication of deities in Mesoamerica has been discussed by several scholars (Both 2004: 262, 266; Hammond 1972; Healy 1988; Monaghan 2000: 32).
- 10 A Classic-period terracotta whistle from the Totonac region (Otter 1994: plate 3), which portrays a character with a perfectly spherical mouth, indicates that these conventions for the representation of sound persevered in objects used for ritual performance. So, too, does an Aztec whistle (Martí 1955: 72–73) conceived as a human head with open mouth and closed eyes.
- 11 Turtle carapaces are also associated with creation narratives and the myth of the Maize God among the Maya and along the Gulf Coast (Braakhuis 2009: 8–10, 20, 24–25; Quenon and Le Fort 1997; Taube 1985), and may have constituted a symbol that involved music as well as rebirth, regeneration, and fertility. Braakhuis (2009: 10) noted the patterns of substitution between turtles and skulls in Maya imagery and the relationship between turtles, the aquatic realm, and the place of the dead in both Maya and Gulf Coast Nahua mythology; he pointed to a Classic Maya vessel (Kerr vessel no. 7287) that illustrates these correspondences. It may very well be that the turtle imagery on the Preclassic potbellies invokes a range of meanings, including performance, music, death, and ancestors. As noted previously, the relationship between turtle carapaces and *ajaw*-like cartouches, like those that appear at Tiltepec and on the monument from San Miguel, may also presage Classic and Postclassic images of katun wheels with turtle motifs and calendrical associations (see Taube 1988). Akkeren (2000: 207, 261–264) discussed turtle imagery and its associations with the ancestral creator couple that appears in the woven headbands of traditional costumes in Rab’inal, Guatemala. Also see Chinchilla (2006) for a discussion of the symbolic overlap between ancestor cartouches, celestial motifs, and creation narratives. Even more interesting is a Late Classic ceramic bowl that underscores the thematic overlap between puffy-faced individuals and creation stories, particularly those concerning the Maize God. This bowl, called to my attention by Karl Taube (personal communication 2010) and illustrated in Berjonneau, Delataille, and Sonnery (1985: plate 377), portrays a rotund, fat-faced, and puffy-eyed character who, as Taube noted, has a curl at the back of his head like that of the Early Classic Maize God. Taube (1998: 460–462) discussed the narrative of the Maize God’s resurrection, which effectively qualified him as a deified or apotheosized ancestor.
- 12 For another example illustrating the overlap between “Fat God” imagery and performance in the Maya region, see a carved vessel from northern Yucatán in which the puffy-faced individual dramatically raises a fan above his head (Kerr vessel no. 9090).
- 13 My assertion that the potbellies were grounded in a tradition of representation that carried “performative” associations is further supported by two puffy-faced figurines illustrated by Franz Feuchtwanger (1989: fig. 72). The figurines clasp staffs much like those wielded by the central figures of Chalcatzingo Monument 2, who participate in some narrative scene involving two other figures. The figure on the far right of Monument 2 is in a supine position,

- perhaps the victim of sacrifice (Reilly 1995: 34). David Grove (1987: 142) noted that small clay figurines recovered from excavations at Chalcatzingo are portrayed in the same supine posture and perforated, as if for suspension, perhaps to be worn as pectorals. Evidence like this certainly alludes to lost narratives that were invoked both at a monumental scale in the public realm and at a smaller, more private scale in figurine traditions. It is logical to suggest, by extension, that the potbellies were crafted according to traditions of representation that would have likewise resonated with audiences and signaled associations with ancient rituals and performances. There is also a Classic-period *hacha* from the Gulf Coast (Berjonneau, Delataille, and Sonnery 1985: plates 78–80) that portrays a puffy-faced individual with closed eyes and a transverse crest, not unlike those on the potbellies from Arriaga and Polvaredas, which alludes yet again to the persistent performative associations of these figures.
- 14 Also see Taube and Taube (2009: 242) for a discussion of figurines, meaning making, and the ways in which objects are often formally and theoretically grounded in quotidian traditions.
 - 15 Although lacking overt hearth associations, the monument from Ojo de Agua (Upper Grijalva Basin) also bears a set of three puffy-faced characters, and its location at the center of an Early Classic ballcourt suggests that these associations may have persisted into later periods.
 - 16 See Marcus and Flannery (1994: 59) for the relationship between burning incense, smoke, and communication with royal ancestors among the Zapotec.
 - 17 But see Séjourné (1966: fig. 19) and Rattray (2001: fig. 137a) for effigy *candeleros* with other faces/characters represented. Rattray (2001: 209) noted the association between the “Fat God” motif and *candeleros*. She also dated the appearance of the effigy *candeleros* to the Early Xolalpan phase, or about 400–450 A.D.
 - 18 See Braun (1978: 185) for a discussion of the problem of recognizing Preclassic survivals, heirlooms, revivals, or objects that “continued to be expressive of prevailing concepts” in later periods.

8 POTBELLIES AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE PRECLASSIC

- 1 For excellent discussions of “collective identity” and “social identity” see the volume edited by Mills and Walker (2008b), in which many of the contributors relate these concepts to that of memory making and remembering. They emphasize the “ways in which material culture engages in the transmission of memory and how archaeologists use knowledge of these interactions to interpret identity, ritual practice, political action, and other facets of past societies.” They also note that “[m]emory does not reside in, and is not transmitted by, cultures but in people as members of social groups” (Mills and Walker 2008a: 6). Also see Lopiparo (2006) and Hendon (2010) for a discussion of social memory, identity, and their relationship to material culture.
- 2 See Cyphers (1999) for evidence from as early as the Early Preclassic period of elite control of sculpture’s materials, location, reuse, and content.
- 3 For related ideas, see Ringle’s (1999: 211) discussion of “cultic practice.” As he argues, despite the fact that “we have little evidence of the nature of cult objects at this time, the disappearance of figurines from domestic contexts does suggest their replacement by figures with power over wider aspects of the community and nature.” Perhaps the potbellies might be usefully considered along similar lines.
- 4 Although I am focusing discussion here on the ancient Mesoamerican past, excellent sources concerning the roles of ancestors in constructing a social identity among the modern Maya, for example, exist; see Nash (1970).
- 5 A number of scholars have commented on how objects, material culture more generally, or specific narratives often involve established and well-understood

sets of symbols or attributes and “an awareness of what already exists, or has existed in the recent past” (Bradley 2002: 12), which are used to create statements or commentaries concerning the present (also see Hodder 1993). Mills and Walker (2008a: 18) provide a useful discussion of “citation” that is also pertinent to this discussion: “Citations to the past are ways in which genealogies of practices are built, forming bridges between people across large expanses of time and space, and these can be expressed at different social scales ranging from the individual to larger social fields or collectives.”

- 6 It is also intriguing to consider how these notions of community identity, which do address the moral properties of a community, as Watanabe (1992) recognized, may presage the Classic Maya *sitz'winik* characters, which also, as Taube (2004) asserted, function within a context of social commentary.
- 7 See Ek (2006: 177), Henderson (1992), Hodder (1993: 280), Inomata (2003), and Kubler (1975) regarding the need for scholars to search for both conflicting and converging lines of evidence. Kubler (1975: 766) quoted the work of physicist Niels Bohr (1934), who stated that clarity could be achieved only through the “exhaustive overlay of different descriptions that incorporate apparently contradictory notions.”
- 8 Allen Christenson (2007) provided additional information regarding this creator couple, Xmucane and Xpiyacoc: “Ximénez translated their Quiché names, Alom and K'ajolom, as simply ‘Mother’ and ‘Father.’ A more accurate translation for Alom, however, is ‘She Who Has Borne Children,’ from the perfect aspect of the root verb *al* (to bear children). The name of the male god, K'ajolom, specifically indicates his having begotten male offspring, thus ‘He Who Has Begotten Sons.’”
- 9 Also see Marcus (1999: 90–94) for a very interesting discussion of how ancestor veneration differed between locations – the household for women and Men’s Houses or “Ancestral Halls” for men – in Preclassic Oaxaca. Ancestors worshipped in the home were recently deceased, within four generations. By contrast, “the ancestor worship that took place in the Ancestral Hall involved a longer sequence of ancestors, one that could even lead back to the lineage founder.” Once in the Ancestral Hall, “an ancestor’s worship became ‘more impersonal,’ for in the hall he was endowed with a more remote and less individualized personality.” It is important to note this pattern identified by Marcus, in which a gradual loss of individualization accompanied the veneration of a specific ancestor through time, within this discussion of ancestor veneration and identity. For comparative purposes, Helms’s (1993: 176–177) discussion of different types of ancestral power – anonymous or personalized – is worth consulting, as is Isbell’s (1997) analysis of fictionalized ancestral figures and their relationship to mummy bundles among the Inca.
- 10 SeeLooper (2009: 227–228) for an interesting discussion of gender in relation to performance. As he concluded for the Classic period, the majority of dancers – and, by extension, performers – appear to have been male, and this statistic only increases in relation to the prestige or visibility of the medium, such as public stelae vs. small-scale ceramics. He observed that the bias is documented in contemporary performances in the Maya region, where “musical performance is almost universally a male activity.” These points are difficult to extend to the Preclassic potbellies, with their overt lack of gender, but are interesting to bear in mind in relationship to notions of performance and implications with regard to gender.
- 11 To further contextualize this discussion within the Preclassic data from various regions of Mesoamerica, see Blomster (2009: 127) for the differences regarding the representation of gender and sexual characteristics between Preclassic figurines and monumental art in Oaxaca.
- 12 There is also extensive literature concerning memory and death, which could be productively applied to the potbellies as representations of deceased ancestors.

- I point the reader to Hallam and Hockey (2001), who, though focused on Western traditions, explore the many relationships between memory, death, ritual practices, material culture, imagery, and texts.
- 13 As Bloch (1987: 272) elaborated, the symbolism of authority needed to create and follow “a transcendental model” while simultaneously compromise “with this model to make it relevant to this life.” Also see Bell (1997: 188), who, in describing traditional Chinese culture, observed that “official religion shares many of the premises of the local practices from which it indeed emerged.”
 - 14 Also see Winter (2002) regarding the household roots of public religion among the Zapotec, A. Joyce (2000) for a discussion of specific innovations to widespread ritual traditions that were instituted by Zapotec elites during the Preclassic period in order to generate support among commoners, and McAnany (2002: 117), who noted that “studies of the interplay between royal or imperial ritual and domestic or community ritual have the potential to illuminate state strategies of domination and legitimation or community strategies of resistance.” Also for the Maya region see Lucero (2003, 2006).
 - 15 For comparative purposes, I point the reader to an essay by Halperin (2009: 394–395), who studied the relationship between Classic Maya figurines and centralized authority, noting how the presence of “ruler figurines” in households may have indicated “that the state used figurines to strengthen or naturalize their authority and help socialize the populace in shaping and accepting their social roles and obligations.” However, as she further observed, their very presence in domestic compounds would have enabled them “to be disentangled from their regal aura and reflected upon in new and perhaps critical ways that were not possible within the confines of ceremonial and administrative proceedings at the heart of polity capitals.”

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