



Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture

The Unborn, Women, and Creation

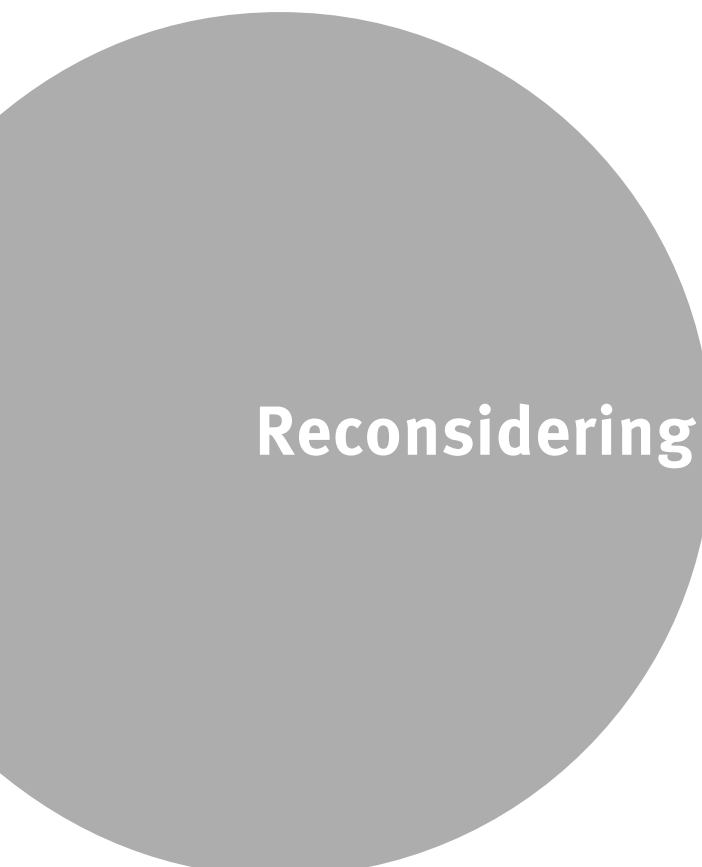
Carolyn E. Tate



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Reconsidering **Olmec Visual Culture**

The Unborn, Women, and Creation

By Carolyn E. Tate

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To Rick and Will, a toast

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Preface

“In the Hill of the Woman [*toòxykyopk*] there was a cave where the people used to put their ear of maize. In that place is where they found two little white eggs and carried them to the house.” These sentences from Walter Miller’s (1956:105) *Cuentos mixes* begin the story of Kondoy, the Mixe leader who was born from an egg.¹ These themes—caves, women, transformation, and the co-identity of maize and humans—permeate this book on the visual culture of Formative period Mesoamerica.

At the heart of the book is an investigation into the stories that early Mesoamerican peoples told to explain their lives and world. Stories can bundle together many elements of knowledge. A narrative might contain lessons based on generations of experience confronting a problem, and information about places, resources, processes, and social inequalities. Stories also describe the characters’ emotional responses to events and situations—and information, emotions, and experience are constituents of knowledge. But the stories this book explores are especially hard to hear because they were not recorded in words, but in three-dimensional shapes enhanced with two-dimensional symbols. To grasp them we must, to use Esther Pasztory’s (2005) phrase, acknowledge that humans “think with things.”

Formative period Mesoamericans made many kinds of things that obviously had symbolic and metaphoric value. For example, they lavished labor on blocks of jade in order to transform the stone into a highly polished, symmetrically balanced jade axe that they then deposited in a special configuration in a freshwater spring over a bed of limestone slabs. The stories that were told about such an axe might have included how local people transported or traded for the jade from its distant source, how the people or powers of that faraway place threatened or accepted the traders, how the traders won the stone, how supernaturals granted the skill to slab and grind

the jade, why the axe was given a phallic or coblike shape, and why the axes, along with rubber balls and seeds, were thrust into the water under the shadow of Cerro Manatí. Of course, as we look at the objects today, we cannot reconstitute the stories or the meanings of the objects. When we consider the objects in their ancient contexts, however, we can glimpse some of the characters, settings, actions, and themes. We can see some of the questions that the earliest civilization of North America, often called the Olmec, wrestled with, and how the solutions they formulated were so powerful that many were modified and reused by later societies.

Of all the topics that Formative period Mesoamericans made visible in stone and clay, this book will track three across the millennium between 1400 and 400 Bc, and across southern Mexico from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. Two of these, images of the unborn and women, are subjects that scholars have recognized but either marginalized or interpreted differently, as Chapters 1 and 2 will detail. Throughout Mesoamerica, people made ceramic figurines of women from



0.1 San Martín Pajapan Monument 1, a male raising a staff and wearing a headdress decorated with an embryo face plaque. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

2300 to 900 Bc, but after that their sculptural production gradually shifted to different forms, including, in several locations, stone monuments. Early in the century of Olmec studies (dating from Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge's 1926 survey of Mexico's southern Gulf Coast to the present), George and Susannah Vaillant (1934) excavated hollow ceramic figures of infants and recognized a tendency toward infantile faces in other Early Formative period (1400–900 Bc) objects. Following this recognition of newborns as an important subject, several authors referred to the embryo, gestational processes, and parturition. Miguel Covarrubias (1946:97), for example, described the “embryonic” character of a so-called jaguar-baby image. Doris Heyden's (1973) work on cave symbolism at Teotihuacan led others to see the images carved on Olmec stone thrones of caves containing infants in adults' laps as metaphoric wombs. Images of infants and old women in a small group of Formative period ceramic figurines attracted the attention of David Joralemon (1981). He suggested that the old woman and the child might embody dualistic opposites of barrenness and fertility, or shamanic midwives, or goddesses. Matthew Looper and Julia Guernsey Kappelman (2001) and Guernsey Kappelman and Kent Reilly (2001) identified the pervasive imagery of umbilical cords on Olmec monumental sculpture and in later art. Billie Follensbee (2000, 2006) discovered the subtle signals in body form and costume that differentiate representations of men and women in Gulf Coast Olmec art, and in doing so, identified a significant percentage of women portrayed on monuments and stone figurines from the site of La Venta (1000–400 Bc). Nevertheless, these observations about Olmec visual culture—specifically, the prevalence of infants, embryos (an egg is an embryo), and women—have not been embraced by the academic mainstream.

More prominent have been theories about hybrid beings and jaguar cults. One of the earliest publications on an object later identified as “Olmec,” the Kunz axe, referred to it as “the conventionalized mask of a tiger . . . [which] rests on the shoulders of a man” (Kunz 1892:278–280). By 1929 this idea had been transformed into “the cult of the votive axe and its tiger mask” (Saville 1929:287). The notion of a “jaguar-baby” (Covarrubias 1946:97) or “were-jaguar” (99) and other biologically impossible creatures dominated the

interpretations of Olmec objects for many decades. The monument from San Martín Pajapan (Fig. 0.1) wears a stone plaque on his headdress that has been referred to as a were-jaguar mask (Diehl 2004:110). This book examines the tendency exhibited by scholars to see Olmec images as fantastic creatures, monsters, and deities—in other words, as alterities instead of images based on ancient empirical observations of human life.

The third thread that the book traces is the development of narrative itself. It considers the narrative capacity of objects such as the jade axes of El Manatí to imply actions and stories; examines how sculptors used compositional devices to relate shifts in time, space, and state of being; and analyzes the arrays of sculptural characters in architectural settings. These arrays of three-dimensional objects were an important stage in the development of graphic narratives such as those of the Mixtec and Aztec, and were a step in the formulation of hieroglyphic writing. What they related is just as important as their compositional strategies. This book argues that the sculptural array along a 1,927 m axis at La Venta gave form to a story of creation and origins, and contained elements that resonated throughout most of the later Mesoamerican creation stories.

Ever since sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers recorded some of them, Mesoamerican creation stories have been a focus of scholarly study. Why are they so important? The tragic history of Ishi illustrates the link between such narratives and Native American identity. Readers may know the story of the man called “Ishi,” a survivor of the brutal genocide of the Yahi and other Indians in California. In 1911, after having spent several years alone following the death of his last relatives, Ishi walked out of his hiding place in the mountains and into the corral of a slaughterhouse in Oroville, California. Within twelve days, under the auspices of anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and T. T. Waterman, he had been brought to the new Hearst Museum at the U.C. Berkeley. Kroeber was thrilled at finding a person who spoke a nearly extinct indigenous language but immediately realized that they had no way to understand each other.

To help communicate with Ishi, the anthropologists invited Sam Batwi, with whom they had been working to record the Yana language, which was related to Ishi's. They prepared Ishi to document Yahi by demonstrating how the wax cylinder

recording device played back his own words in his own voice. He apparently grasped the possibility of capturing his speech, and after many years of solitude, he was delighted to relate what he considered important to Batwi, someone who partially understood him. He may have hoped that the men who showed such interest in his language would eventually come to understand what he said as well. Batwi conveyed a question from Kroeber to the man the latter called “the unknown”: “Who are you?” In response, Ishi began a performance for which he adopted different voices to animate the several characters. His enthusiastic storytelling lasted two and a quarter hours, and he refused to stop until it was finished. Eventually the linguists understood that Ishi had enacted “How Wood Duck Wooed His Bride,” part of a cycle of creation tales (Jacknis 2003: 239–255):

Ishi had explained who he was via the story of the archetypal characters from whose wise and foolish acts he learned his strategies for living. For him, the creation story was how to explain his identity. It was also a key to healing, for he performed segments of his stories for hospitalized patients who were under the care of his doctor, Sexton Pope. Within a few years, however, during which he was both an object of study and a friend to Pope, Waterman, and Kroeber, Ishi contracted tuberculosis and died in 1916.³ Despite having witnessed several massacres of members of his small band and having to struggle to survive while remaining hidden, Ishi possessed an impressive body of knowledge. He was a master at making tools. He formed intense relationships with his family and the spiritual beings residing in his locale and enjoyed a wealth of wisdom due to his most prized possessions, the creation narrative of his people. Among Ishi's acquaintances was Matthew Stirling, who later studied anthropology with Kroeber and became a pioneer of Olmec studies.

Like Ishi and his culture, Formative period Mesoamericans had not developed a written language. Their visual culture, however, was extremely rich. From ceramic hollow babies to multifigure low-relief compositions on stelae, the Olmec and their neighbors expressed their concepts by means of ideologically laden objects that could be transported across linguistic boundaries. Studying Olmec visual culture provides us with clues as to how Mesoamerica's first civilization constructed knowledge and used it for various purposes.

I hope this alternative characterization of Olmec visual culture will complement the other valuable studies of Formative period symbol systems. Into the important discussions about long-distance trade, subsistence, shamanism, and the iconography of rulership, this book inserts women and their knowledge about gestation, the unborn, infants, and food processing technologies. These discourses played important roles in the development of visual narrative, monumental sculpture, the 260-day calendar, and ritual practices, especially of caching and bundling. This book investigates the origins of some pervasive Mesoamerican metaphors, such as “humans are maize” and “skulls are seeds,” and shows how all these concepts and practices underpin the epic creation narratives. To incorporate the unborn and women into the fabric of Formative period sites is to break with the orthodox view and to recast those sites as places for rituals of protection and healing, as well as centers of political economic activity.

To consider this effort in a larger context, we can compare it to the process by which scholars recognized the presence of women in Maya art. In 1961, Tatiana Proskouriakoff wrote the first paper on that subject. Afterward it was obvious that a few portrayals of women did exist among the male rulers shown on monuments, and now there is a growing literature on those women and on gender. Males are the principal subjects of Olmec art as well, but in the spaces between the male figures are abundant images of infants, pre-birth humans, umbilical cords, disembodied sexual organs, and women. These sculptural subjects formed part of the symbolic representation of biological processes, of early scientific inquiries, and of early cosmogonies.

Because this book takes as its primary sources the objects that Formative period people made, it is essential to discuss two issues centering on the authenticity of objects and the veracity of theories about art from preliterate societies. First, to avoid basing one's interpretations on fakes, it is obviously desirable to use archaeologically excavated objects whenever possible. Most of the pieces discussed in this book, especially in Chapters 4–9, were excavated and documented under relatively controlled

situations. In Chapters 1 and 2, in which I cover the early scholarship on the Olmec, it is necessary, because of their presence in that literature, to deal with pieces such as the Kunz axe that have no provenience. Fortunately, in my career as a curator, I have taken advantage of the opportunity to learn as much as I could about how ancient objects were made and about scientific methods for testing them. I have been able to personally examine and analyze most of the unprovenienced objects to which I refer, and in some cases I have had access to scientific reports on their mineralogical composition and manufacture. The only section of the book that depends on such objects is the one that uses several stone figurines as a basis for comparison to the human embryo. Every object illustrated has been vetted by an array of experts over many decades.

Second, the various disciplines involved in Formative period Mesoamerican studies have not yet agreed upon methods of proof based on visual or iconographic arguments. In the minds of most scholars, valid proposals depend on corroboration from language in the form of words or texts that are contemporary to, and in the language spoken by, the makers of the imagery. In the absence of Olmec texts, this book relies on a coherence of webs of evidence from multiple contexts, ancient and ethnographic.

This is an interpretive, humanistic inquiry rather than a historical or scientific one. My interest has been in how Formative period symbols and shapes communicated—and contributed to the formulation of—Mesoamerican ways of knowing. As ethnographers Martin Prechtel and Robert Carlsen (1988:123) have written about the Maya of Santiago Atitlán, “To know something is not to be aware of the minute details of that thing but instead is to understand how that thing fits into an ever-expanding system. . . . whose primary function is the regeneration and continuation of time and of the world.” I think it is our task as scholars of the humanities to pay attention to the communicative efforts of past civilizations, to their myths and narratives, so that we can better scrutinize our stories about ourselves.

Acknowledgments

My efforts in conceiving and writing this book have benefited tremendously from the intellects, the talents, and the generosity of others. First, I offer my deepest thanks to Theresa May of the University of Texas Press. For over a decade, conversations with her energized my commitment to this project. Prepublication reviews by Andrea Stone and an anonymous reviewer offered valuable tactical and methodological assistance; Billie Follensbee graciously offered invaluable input on Chapter 4, as did Dorothy Chansky, a theater historian, for Chapter 8. Joe Arredondo, a highly informed amateur of Olmec studies, read the manuscript and debated many points, especially concerning the early use and symbolism of maize. The artist Corey Escoto has been an enormous help in preparing the illustrations. His superb drawings, honed by several trips to Mexico to study the objects, greatly enhance this book. Paula Yeager confronted the impossible and stretched beyond the limits of documentary illustration to create “artist’s reconstructions” of the La Venta caches. Many, many thanks to each of you.

Among the scholars who have offered me their encouragement, guidance, and support through the years, I am especially grateful to Flora Clancy, Sam Edgerton, Terry Greider, Cecelia Klein, and the late Evon Vogt. I owe a great deal to the late Gordon Bendersky, MD, for assembling a dozen Philadelphia physicians in 1998 to study the possibility that a group of Olmec sculptures represent the human fetus. Two highly knowledgeable amateurs of Mesoamerica have been among my best advisors and critics in this long process: the late Stuart Gentling and his twin, Scott, also recently deceased, were influential in the scope of this project. John Williams has provided friendship and field support for more than thirty years. He introduced me to Father Rex Hays, who has worked with the stew-

ards of Niñopa in Xochimilco. My friendships with these individuals have been among my greatest treasures.

This project transformed radically as a result of research and discussion during several fellowships. In 2001–2002, at Dumbarton Oaks and the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions, its initial shape was “Gods, Cults, and Deities?” For stimulating discussions that often sent me in better directions, I express my gratitude to scholars Elizabeth Benson, Elizabeth Boone, David Carrasco, Bill and Barbara Fash, George Lau, Allan Maca, Jeff Quilter, Loa Traxler, Tiffany Tung, Edith Turner, Jennifer Ahlfeldt (now von Schwerin), Steve Wernke, and Irene Winter, as well as to librarians Bridget Gazzo and Mark Zapatka. My commitment to dealing with the Olmec from various art historical standpoints received a valuable boost from Michael Ann Holly and Mark Ledbury of the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA. During a 2007 fellowship at the Clark I was able to discuss many of my ideas and approaches with some remarkable people and to engage with scholars whose research often crosses boundaries between art history, literary theory, performance theory, and visual culture. Special thanks go to fellow Lowery Sims for her erudite insights and her willingness to create new boxes in which to think. Through her straightforward references to the gynocentric focus of the Olmec material I was showing her, classical art historian Miranda Marvin helped me make the final shift of this book’s focus. It has truly been an honor to interact with these brilliant individuals. For its faculty development leaves, I deeply appreciate the assistance of Texas Tech University.

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As historians of Olmec visual culture, we owe a debt of gratitude to the late Beatriz de la Fuente and her collaborators for their dedication to documentation of art objects, not least for the 1973 catalogue of Olmec sculpture. Her finely tuned perceptual sensibilities penetrated the surfaces of Olmec monuments and expressed the ideas that went into their composition as no one else has been able to do.

At the beginning of my work on the Olmec, I was fortunate to collaborate with Kent Reilly, a

reigning Olmec iconographer. Through the Dallas Museum of Art, where I was the curator of the Pre-Columbian collection, we worked on an Olmec exhibition project supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities exhibition planning grant. That project eventually became two exhibitions, *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* and *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*. For six years Kent and I worked with Gillett Griffin, Dave Grove, and a host of people in Mexico and the United States. Rex Koontz provided ideas and assistance for some of that time. For their unfailingly generous friendship and help with negotiating art worlds during this time and beyond, I extend my warmest thanks to Justin and Barbara Kerr.

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Rick Dingus has offered his insights as an artist, a theorist, and a specialist in the fermentation of grains.

In the end, it is my father, Will Tate, who truly deserves the credit for anything I have been able to do. His profound integrity and humanity inspire everyone who knows him.

Finally, to those who have been skeptical of my “embryo theory,” I also offer thanks. Your comments made me question my data, stretch further in marshalling evidence, clarify my methods, and seek broader input on Formative period people’s knowledge regarding the embryo and gestation, and how they expressed that knowledge.

Chapter 1

Rediscovering Women and Gestation in Olmec Visual Culture

Like a newborn himself, a man leans out of the dark orifice of a small cave, bearing an infant. Rising from his head is a conical headdress adorned with a lustrous jade carving of a human embryo's face. From the mouth of the cave, he faces west toward a volcano. Outside the cave, two women and two men clutch a squirming toddler with strange, embryo-like features (Fig. 1.1). Nearby, around another eastward-facing cave opening, droplets of blood form flowers on long umbilical cords that descend from the sky. Out of this second cave emerges a man wearing the eagle headdress of a shaman-ruler. His extended arms grasp a thickly twisted rope. These subjects—infants, cave-wombs, umbilical cords, women, men, human embryos, and the processes that define gender and gestation—constitute the major foci of this book. The imagery I have just described appears on La Venta Thrones (Altars) 4 and 5, two huge blocks of carved basalt that originated from that western volcano. We will revisit them throughout this book, each time arriving at a deeper understanding of Middle Formative Olmec society as it flourished at La Venta, a site known for its monumental sculpture, lavish buried offerings, and earthen mounds.

A Cradle of Civilization

The Gulf Coast Olmec—those who made these monumental thrones—have been called the “mother culture” of ancient Mesoamerica. They developed monumental sculpture; organized labor to modify the landscape for earthen constructions; participated in a transition to permanent settlements that relied on agriculture; engaged in long-distance trade of materials, goods, and ideas; and established some of the knowledge systems that fueled later Mesoamerican civilizations. Yet

the Gulf Coast Olmec were not the only people who developed the architectural forms, subsistence technologies, political systems, and visual culture that characterize this fecund period, from 1400 to 400 Bc. Southern Chiapas and Guatemala, Guerrero, and the highlands of Oaxaca and the Basin of Mexico also participated in these developments. Therefore, many archaeologists argue for a “sister culture” model in which the rise of civilization was the result of a variety of intergroup interactions—in other words, with materials, technology, and ideas flowing unevenly and adopted differentially from one region to another. Archaeologists also differentiate between what they call an Olmec art style—based on objects with specific artistic canons that appear throughout a wide region of southern Mesoamerica, first described by Miguel Covarrubias and Michael Coe—and the ancient Olmec sites along the Gulf Coast (a zone of cultural development that many now call “Olman”). It is in the domain of the so-called Olmec art style that this volume aims to make a contribution. It tracks the dynamic production of discourse that occurred

by means of the manufacture, use, display, performance, and trade of communicative visual objects. From this perspective, one can see the contribution of people from many regions throughout Early Formative (1400–900 Bc) and Middle Formative (900–400 Bc) discourses. This book focuses primarily on a major component of Formative period visual culture that has been overlooked, one that depicts women and the unborn, and portrays the biological processes of insemination, gestation, birth, and regeneration as metaphors for cosmogonic creation and renewal.

Mesoamerica and Its Visual Culture

Some of these terms may require definition. *Mesoamerica* refers to the contiguous lands of Pre-Hispanic Mexico and Central America inhabited by a large number of loosely related ethnic groups that shared in a specific set of subsistence, cultural, and spiritual practices. It is also the region in which, by about 500 Bc, settled groups of people could rely on maize as a staple crop and had the technology to process it in a way that enabled them to avoid birth

1.1 La Venta Thrones (Altars) 5 and 4. Photo by author.





1.2 Map of Formative period Mesoamerican sites. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

defects. What we consider to be Mesoamerica now encompasses much of Mexico, all of Guatemala and Belize, and parts of Honduras and Costa Rica (Fig. 1.2). Mesoamerica is important as one of six regions of the world in which humans independently developed a constellation of features sufficiently complex to be called “civilization.” The other five regions communicated, to some extent, across the Eurasian continent, but Mesoamerica remained isolated from the Eastern Hemisphere.

In Mesoamerican studies, the Formative period is generally divided into the Initial (2000–1400 Bc), Early (1400–900 Bc), and Middle (900–400 Bc) Formative periods. Scholars also define a Late Formative of about 300 Bc to AD 1, and a Terminal Formative that continues to AD 300, but these are more commonly seen as the immediate predecessors of the Classic period. Thus far I have used the term *Olmec* loosely to refer to Formative Mesoamerican culture generally. It was originally used by twentieth-century scholars to refer to the monumental civilizations of the Gulf Coast (Olmec), and I agree that it is less confusing to restrict its use to people from that region. I will usually refer to groups of people in the context of a specific place,

such as Tlapacoya in the Basin of Mexico, or to Formative period people in a broad sense.

The following chapters explore visual culture during the millennium *before* full-blown, or Classic, civilization flourished. The coalescence of religion, myth, and visual symbols into consistent systems implies a long period of struggle in which people battled over what is “true” and “real.” The process of generating a civilization involves the codification of certain ways of thinking about time and space, destiny, human origins, gender, economic transactions, and social issues. It also requires a means of recording this newly established knowledge. Architecture, art, and writing—as well as ritual, performance, narrative, and song—arise in part as ways in which people negotiate their collective and individual versions of “common knowledge.” By 1400 Bc, or even earlier, Formative period people undertook projects of symbolic visual expression, some of which required truly staggering coordination of physical effort.

Visual culture encompasses the many kinds of material expressions found in Formative Mesoamerica, such as the creation of enormous platforms of live shellfish, the crafting of jade axes

later deposited in a spring, the transformation of a hill into a plateau, and the pinching of clay into figurines. The diversity of these projects makes it clear that they were locally initiated. Yet so consistent were some of their visual symbols that it is also obvious that certain ideas and patterns of activity spread through much of Mesoamerica as long-distance communications developed. By taking visual culture as the general object of study, we can track the creation of symbols and forms in one region and their differential adoption in others. We glimpse some exchanges of concepts that may be complementary to studies of the exchange of materials. We can almost see the ideas flowing and being reinterpreted within local knowledge systems.

Primary sources for this study include the ancient sites that have been found and the objects of visual culture that have happened to survive. We surely do not have a complete picture of what Formative period people made. Although the pace of excavation has increased dramatically in the past twenty years, and we now have objects of wood and rubber in addition to stone and clay, this only serves to remind us how much is missing. The documentation of crafted objects from the Formative period is erratic but improving. Ironically, much of the sculpture that is well photographed and available for study has no archaeological provenience. I incorporate these pieces into this discussion only when I have studied the objects firsthand and have good reason to consider them authentic.

More specifically, the book documents and then reexamines the major subjects of Olmec sculpture, pointing out the prevalence of imagery of women, human gestation, and birth rituals. This book contends, for example, that of about sixty-four figures of adult humans on monuments at the Middle Formative site of La Venta, twelve are female. And of five large, burial-like offerings, three contain regalia and figurines that suggest the memorialized individuals were female. Monuments with images of gestational or newborn humans numbered approximately eighteen, not counting six on which adults were wearing masks referring to pre-birth humans. This widespread imagery of humans in gestation formed part of the symbolic representation of early understandings of biological processes and of early cosmogonies.

One this book's central proposals, then, is that to Formative period peoples, the most compelling

subject was life: what it was, how it began, what sustained it, and more particularly, the mysterious processes of gestation and birth. It seems that from the beginning of the Formative period, an avenue of study aimed to show how the human gestation cycle could be linked to larger natural and cosmic cycles. In the earliest periods, such as around 1700 Bc at El Manatí, an early *altepetl* (a water and mountain ritual site) near the Gulf Coast, the processes of insemination and gestation were reenacted with symbolic objects in the sacred landscape. By 1300 Bc the symbol of the human embryo, which represented this concept in visual form, began to spread throughout Mesoamerica. It appeared on pottery, stone ornaments, and, in several places, on monuments. Where it appeared, people fashioned it in local styles and also added animal features and regalia to personalize it, or make it represent elements of local lore. It is important that this visual symbol crossed linguistic boundaries and could be used to provide a basis of agreed-upon knowledge for speakers of Mixe-Zoquean, Otomanguan, and possibly other language families. This empirically based biology, which originated among speakers of diverse languages in the Early Formative, formed a basis for Middle Formative period negotiations about a cosmogony. The evidence for a widely shared ideology of creation and origins exists in the form of a sculptural narrative arrayed along the central axis of La Venta.

Each chapter focuses on an aspect of visual culture that is different in scope, level of documentation, material, availability of archaeological context, and function. Therefore, I have developed different interpretive strategies to help find answers to the questions posed for each corpus of visual culture. These strategies are explained at the outset of each analytical endeavor. The next two sections of this chapter treat two topics. One deals historiographically with the discovery and dismissal of women and the unborn in Formative period visual culture. The other poses a broad question regarding the construction of gender in Mesoamerica.

As an art historian, I am interested in the kinds of symbolic objects that people in emergent civilizations created, and what they wished to express through deployment of these objects as agents of meaning. In the following pages I invite you to scrutinize the symbolic objects that early Mesoamericans made and to ponder how communities

used these objects to perform their ideas about origins, identity, power, and about life itself. A good place to start is to see how the earliest observations of Olmec sculptures were skewed.

Early Interpretations of the First Known Olmec Sculptures

Beginning in the nineteenth century, several isolated finds of remarkable basalt and jade sculptures in Mexico pointed to the existence of a previously unknown culture. By the mid-twentieth century, numerous ancient sites and many more similar sculptures had been found along the Gulf of Mexico and in Oaxaca, the highland Basin of Mexico, Guatemala, and elsewhere. The new technology of radiocarbon dating allowed archaeologists to confirm what had been suspected for several decades: the enigmatic sculptures had been produced by distinct groups of people, related through their trade of materials, objects, and ideas, who had flourished along the Gulf Coast and in other regions of Mesoamerica between 1400 and 400 Bc, now referred to as the Early and Middle Formative periods. These various groups apparently spoke languages from distinct linguistic families. Whether to call the various producers of the sculpture by a single name that acknowledges their shared ideas or by local names or temporal terms is a problem that still vexes scholars. The term *Olmec*—first applied to ceramic figurines from the states of Guerrero and Morelos, and then to one of the early monuments from the Tuxtla Mountains—has stuck to the related cultural production of early Mesoamerica despite many efforts to dislodge it. Its use as a general name remains hotly debated. And despite several generations of scholarly interpretation of those early isolated sculptures, their meanings are also still energetically contested.

This long-standing scholarly debate arose partly because those first remarkable sculptures introduced the world to several unique subjects in art. By 1943 scholars knew that the “Olmec” (or their fellow Mesoamericans) had made colossal disembodied heads, hollow ceramic life-size infants, and stone axes with not-quite-human features. It was also clear that the “Olmec” had built cities containing monuments of large basalt blocks into which cavelike niches and emerging figures had been carved, and enormous pits filled with green stone



1.3 The colossal head reported by Melgar y Serrano in 1862. H: 1.47 m. Drawing by Paula Yeager.

blocks. These unusual sculptures have captivated several generations of archaeologists and art historians. The next few paragraphs introduce readers to these early discoveries and the history of their interpretations.¹ This introduction reveals how some of the art subjects that are the principal interpretive foci of this book—in particular, women, infants, and the unborn—were occasionally noted by early scholars but dismissed in favor of alternative paradigms.

The first of the early discoveries to enter a wider discourse was a colossal human head fashioned of volcanic stone (Fig. 1.3). When local people showed the stone to geologist José María Melgar y Serrano in 1862, only the rounded top of the head protruded from the ground. Once the surrounding earth was removed, he found that the head was shaped rather like an enormous ball, with broad flattened features below a snug cap bordered by a narrow band. The “Colossal Head” was mysterious for many reasons. Apparently it had never been attached to a body. Wondering who made it, Melgar y Serrano (1871) surmised that because of its broad nose and thick lips, it depicted a male of African descent—but how would such a person have come to eastern Mexico in the preconquest era? Whom did it depict? And, of course, why was the head—at about 1.5 m high—so huge? As it turns out, this was one of the smallest of the seventeen



1.4 The axe published by Chavero in 1888. Photo by Walter Larrimore. Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. Drawing by Sydney McIlhany.

1.5 The axe published by Kunz in 1889. H: 30 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

such heads discovered thus far. One early interpretation suggested that the heads were portraits of notable personages. This was advanced by Matthew Stirling (1955), a pioneer of Olmec archaeology whose discoveries, ideas, and experiences will continue to engage us as we ponder the symbolic actions of the Formative period peoples. By the 1960s, the idea that each head was a “portrait of a prominent leader” (Coe 1965b:733), assumed to be male, was widely accepted. However, a recent dissertation has questioned the assumption that the heads represent males (Follensbee 2000). Also, several scholars have correlated the disembodied heads with the decapitated heads portrayed at ballcourts such as the one at Chichen Itzá and in narratives such as the *Popol Vuh* (Bradley 2001; Coe 1968; Gillespie 1991).

The next two sculptures that came to public attention were large stone axes (Fig. 1.4). In an encyclopedic series published in Barcelona, *México a través de los siglos*, an article by Alfredo Chavero (1888) on the history of the Spanish conquest of Mexico included a frontal and profile drawing of a wedge-shaped stone “axe,” the upper 60 percent of which was carved in the form of a face. It was reported to have come from coastal Veracruz (Saville 1929:271). The face had lidless, almond-

shaped eyes, a flat nose, and a thick upper lip in the form of an inverted U. Below this broad lip the mouth gaped open, reaching its widest extent at the rounded lower corners. Two large fangs, similar to upper canine teeth, emerged from otherwise toothless upper gums. Across the forehead was a headband that was not unlike the broad band around the Colossal Head. But this one terminated at the edge of the face, where on each side a protruding flange framed the face. In profile view, the upper back of the head was strangely elongated, with an extended upper parietal area. A deeply incised line defined the bottom of the head on all sides. Below that the “body”—which consisted of lightly incised upper arms and hands crossed in front of the chest, but no lower limbs—tapered to a wedge shape. The hands covered a circular depression at the center of the legless body. In his article, Chavero drew a formal comparison between this axe and the Colossal Head published earlier.

In publications of 1889 and 1890, mineralogist George Kunz described a jade axe that he had obtained. He compared its appearance to the Colossal Head, the axe, and another axe he had seen at the British Museum (Kunz 1889, 1890) (Fig. 1.5). Indeed, the Chavero and Kunz axes are extremely similar in form. The Kunz axe has the

same features: it is a wedge-shaped stone with an extension on the parietal skull, almond-shaped eyes, a flat nose, a similar mouth, and projecting side flanges. The arms are even crossed in the same position. The *style*, however, is different. The features and limbs on the Kunz axe are more rounded, and the incised details wrap delicately but crisply across the rounded forms. Zones of lightly incised texture form bands around the mouth, across the torso, and on the “ear” extensions. The Kunz axe differs from the Chavero axe in dentition and the lack of a headband. Also, while the Kunz axe is green jadeite, the Chavero axe is “black granite” (Saville 1929:271). What I will propose regarding these two axes is that the basic *subject* is the same: a large-headed, anthropomorphic creature with tapering lower body, lidless eyes, puffy upper lip, and downturned mouth. The dentition and regalia differ, as do the styles.

It was not long before more such pieces “showed up.” By 1929, Marshall Saville, a curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, had published two articles discussing a total of six such axes, two plaques (a form analogous to but flatter than axes) with comparable subject matter, and six more pieces with similar imagery but distinctive sculptural formats. Writing of the Kunz axe, Saville (1929:268) stated that the face was actually the “conventionalized mask of a tiger” on the shoulders of a man, with the lower part of the body turning into an axe. He saw the image as related to a tiger, despite the fact that only three of the fourteen illustrated pieces had canine teeth (felines have “canine” incisors), and none had feline ears, tails, or other features. By drawing into his argument the Aztec deity Tezcatlipoca, a sorcerer “who in one myth transformed himself into a tiger,” Saville (1929:290–291) concluded that the “cult of the stone axes” was related to the rain of stones from the sky as thunderbolts. The association of the stone axes with inseminating stones that fall from the sky to penetrate earth is probably correct, but the insistence that most axes portray tigers (the term then commonly used to refer to the American jaguar, *Panthera onca*) is incorrect. Saville fathered a persistent myth that has been retold and elaborated many times in modern work on the Olmec: the myth of the were-jaguar.

With the explorations of Frans Blom of Denmark, the corpus of Olmec objects suddenly included an entire ancient city. In 1925, under the

auspices of Tulane University, Blom and American anthropologist-author Oliver La Farge were exploring in the Tuxtla Mountains, looking for Maya artifacts. Within several weeks they had been led by local inhabitants to the statue near the summit of the volcano San Martín Pajapan and to the site now called La Venta. In a brief reconnaissance they located the second colossal head. They saw Stela 1, which, as Blom drew it, clearly showed a woman from the front (Fig. 1.6), and Stela 2, a large, irregular stone with a frontal figure and numerous profile “flying” figures at smaller scale. They also found four large, blocklike stone monuments that they dubbed “altars.” Two were at the south end of the earthen mound (Altars 2 and 3), and the other two were well south of the mound (Altars 1 and 4).² Altars 2, 3, and 4 are large blocks into which U-shaped niches containing a seated figure had been deeply carved. We now recognize that the seated figure on Altar 2 held an infant on its lap (de la Fuente 1973:18). Although in his book Blom frequently commented on the physical appearance of the actual women he met on his trip, he did not write anything about the presence of women on the monuments. It seems that he was determined to find Maya monuments—with writing—along the Gulf of Mexico, a goal he conveyed as he described his discoveries. For example, of Altar 3 he wrote, “There is a strong Maya feeling about this monument” (Blom and La Farge 1926:87). At the end of his description of La Venta, he wrote, “It might be well to summarize the discoveries at La Venta. We have here a collection of huge stone monuments, and at least one large pyramid. Some features of these monuments are similar to things seen by us in the Tuxtla region; other features are under the strong influence of the Maya” (90). At great effort Blom and his crew turned over monuments to locate the Maya writing, but to no avail. Little did Blom realize that he had made the first documentation of a preliterate Olmec city upon whose monuments women, infants, and the unborn played important roles.

About the same time that Blom and La Farge drew the stela depicting a woman for *Tribes and Temples*, George Vaillant was conducting excavations on the northern shores of Lake Texcoco in the Basin of Mexico, where small, solid ceramic figurines of young women were extremely numerous. Farther south, at Gualupita, near Cuernavaca, he and his wife, Susannah, found two large, hollow



1.6 La Venta Stela 1, found in 1926. H: 2.51 m.
Drawing by Corey Escoto.



1.7 Fragmentary hollow baby excavated at Gualupita in 1932. H: 28 cm. Collection of the American Museum of Natural History. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



1.8 The fetus sculpture reassembled by Covarrubias and Rivera between 1936 and 1944. Collection of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. Drawing by author.

sculptures of infants among the Middle Formative period ceramics (Fig. 1.7). On these sculptures there were no genitalia to indicate the sex of the children. To the Vaillants, their faces resembled those of the axes. They referred to the two sets of objects, the axes and the hollow babies, as elements of a “baby-face” style (instead of a subject) of sculpture (Vaillant 1934). At that point the interpretive problem became how to rationalize the ambiguity of the infant that seemed to be part jaguar. When Stirling discovered, near San Lorenzo in Veracruz, two mutilated monuments showing a jaguar (with claws and tail) above a human, he developed a hypothesis that the jaguar had copulated with a human female, creating a race of part feline, part human creatures. He considered this feline-human union to be the source of the beings represented as the axe-image (Stirling 1955: 8–20). He had also introduced a female into the discourse on Olmec art, but as a hypothetical victim of animal rape!

In 1965, when Yale anthropologist/archaeologist Michael Coe curated an exhibition of Formative period ceramics from the highlands and a few Olmec stone sculptures at the Museum of Primitive Art in New York (now incorporated into the Metropolitan Museum of Art), he called it *The Jaguar’s Children*. The exhibition and its catalogue made available for study a stunning array of ceramics from highland Central Mexico: animal effigy vessels, masks, female figurines, asexual hollow babies, and large, hollow, standing females. Coe adopted Miguel Covarrubias’s term, “were-jaguar” (see Chapter 2), and his interpretations utilized Stirling’s hypothesis. Coe (1965a: 14) suggested that “There is a whole spectrum of were-jaguar forms ranging from fairly straightforward jaguars to personages with just the slightest trace of jaguar features.” At that time, with very little contextual evidence on which to base an interpretation, he was hesitant to speculate about the female figurines. Instead, Coe cited Laurette Sejourné’s suggestion that the female figurines served to enhance the fertility of harvests (25). At this point, images of infants, without clear feline characteristics, became part of a race of jaguar-human offspring. The opportunity to query why Mesoamerica was the sole cradle of civilization that portrayed infants at monumental scale was again overlooked.

Nevertheless, the infantile images in Olmec art had attracted several scholars to the field. In 1918, 22-year-old Matthew Stirling became interested in

Olmec archaeology after seeing the image of a “crying baby” on a jade maskette. Two years later he sought out the piece in a Berlin museum (Stirling 1968b:3). And one of the first pieces collected by Miguel Covarrubias, an anthropologist/artist who “fell under the spell of Olmec archaeology” (1957), was the broken torso of a black serpentine figure. Covarrubias purchased the torso in Iguala, Guerrero, in 1936; eight years later Diego Rivera found a head and gave it to him. He described the figure as “a child or dwarf born without a lower jaw” and as “fetoid” (Covarrubias 1957; Williams 1994:93) (Fig. 1.8). In 1999, a publication in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* set forth evidence that about thirty stone figures from Formative Mesoamerica were accurate representations of fetuses, a hypothesis that was well received by scientists worldwide (Tate and Bendersky 1999; Yurdakök 2010). However, as Christopher Pool (2009) notes, Olmec scholars have not widely accepted the fetus as an ancient subject. Yet clearly infants were an important focus of ceramic and stone sculpture. Why, then, this ancient emphasis on the newborn? And why have archaeologists insisted on seeing jaguars where there are no spots, claws, pointy ears, or tails?

New Questions in Olmec Studies

Since the mid-1950s Olmec studies have become much more sophisticated in terms of technology and method. Archaeologists from the University of California at Berkeley began to use the new technique of radiocarbon dating on samples of organic material from La Venta. In the mid-1960s, Michael Coe integrated his excavations of San Lorenzo with a penetrating ethnographic and ecological study of the people and environment around the site. Forty years and dozens of doctoral dissertations later, the amount and variety of data available to researchers of Mesoamerican art have vastly increased. Two excellent surveys of Olmec archaeological studies have come out in recent years, Richard Diehl’s *The Olmecs: America’s First Civilization* (2004) and Christopher Pool’s *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica* (2007). Both authors examine the controversy surrounding whether the monuments, planned earthen constructions, the long-distance trade necessary to build them, and the social ranking, political power, and complex intellectual achievements they imply are indicators of “civili-

zation.” They provide useful compilations of the rapidly growing corpus of archaeological data from dozens of early sites across Mesoamerica. Both confront the debates about whether San Lorenzo and La Venta constituted a “mother culture” for later Mesoamerican civilizations, and about the material sources of political power. Discussions of the range of forms and subjects in monumental art and the controversies surrounding their interpretations allow readers to evaluate the arguments. These and other archaeologists address questions of Olmec origins, language, land usage, settlement patterns, subsistence technologies, craft production and exchange, geomorphological changes, the origins and social role of agriculture, and the nature of political and religious leadership.

Among other things, chronology is treated differently by Diehl and Pool. Whereas Diehl prefers not to express archaeologically generated radiocarbon dates in terms of “true calendar dates” because he thinks that there is too much variability in the techniques and judgments used in collecting and analyzing samples, Pool tackles these problems and has consistently used calibrated dates, expressed as years Bc and AD. While the calibrated dates may lend false credibility to what is still uncertain, their use makes it easier for readers who are not archaeologists to relate Formative period developments to those in the rest of the world. This book follows Pool’s chronology up to the point that it proposes a new one for La Venta (Chapter 5).

In 1989, Diehl published an article summarizing the state of Olmec archaeology and posing a series of questions that have been influential in guiding subsequent excavations and analyses. Twenty years later, in an article entitled “Asking More and Better Questions” (2009), Pool revisited those questions and found many of them still relevant and unresolved. Both scholars have been interested in trying to break through the “uncertainties and parochial disputes” in the field. However, while both have expressed the need to make the study of Formative Mexico relevant to broader discussions, neither author incorporated issues concerning women or the performance of gender in their lists of questions. Although they both include iconography, writing, and problems relating to the local versus widely shared meanings of symbols among their concerns, neither addresses the roles of myth, metaphor, or narrative strategies as factors in the development of civilizations. This book advances

Olmec studies by posing different questions that should expand the relevance of Formative Mesoamerica to a broader audience.

In undertaking this study, I have confronted some of the difficult theoretical challenges in Mesoamerican studies, not the least of which are issues of gender construction and the post-structuralist critique of interpretation. Because I have found that gender was framed in ways that are unfamiliar and unexpected to many of my contemporaries, I introduce here some of the basic concepts guiding this study.

Is Gender or Gestation the Compelling Issue?

This book takes on a complex set of gender-related issues. One of the things it proposes is that the entire site of La Venta was bracketed by monumental representations of male and female sexual organs. It also argues that there were ungendered (or ambiguous) human embryos, fetuses, infants, and disembodied heads among the gendered adult forms. This array of humans in unripe, or gestational, forms—as well as in mature, gender-explicit stages of development—called for finding some theoretical approaches that could help me think about gender, sex, and gestation in Mesoamerica's Formative period.

Fortunately, some insightful work has emerged in recent decades. The following does not summarize the growing field of Mesoamerican gender studies, but merely recapitulates some of the findings most relevant to this study. These include (1) the fundamentally animist belief that most aspects of the cosmos are animated by an indwelling vital energy or entity that may possess gender-related qualities; (2) the enactment of androgyny in Mesoamerican ritual performance and art; (3) the fluidity of gender identification depending on age, activity, and social context; (4) the ascription of gender archetypes to originary or creator couples in stories of cosmogony and human origins; and (5) the debate over whether gender or gestation was the culturally “marked” feature. The following section summarizes some of the most incisive thinking on these related topics.

In his groundbreaking work on concepts of the body in Aztec thought, historian Alfredo López Austin culled an astounding range of detailed information from the major sixteenth-century

sources that provide terminology about the body. His work clarified that vital forces and substances entered, left, and affected distinct parts of the body in ways that an individual could seek (not always successfully) to control by practicing equilibrium in consuming and expending energies. Sexual activity, labor, and consumption of specific substances were prime ways to affect the equilibrium of bodily energies and “temperature,” or hot-cold balance. One vital force, the *tonalli*, entered the gestating human but was zealously protected or reinforced by the behavior of the mother and by birth rituals. Shortly after birth, an infant received a name in the 260-day calendar and a ritual bath (Fig. 1.9). The midwife bathed the infant, offering it to the gods and asking for blessings from creators, stars, and the deities of water, earth, sky, and sun. Apparently based on the observation of genitalia, the midwife attached the appropriate male or female tools to the umbilical cord and buried it in a gender-reinforcing location, the battlefield for boys or the hearth for girls. Nevertheless, according to López Austin (1980:285), the Nahuatl language did not have terms to differentiate sex until the child reached adolescence. Similarly, age was not clearly noted for the young: the same terms referred to a person from gestation to adolescence. Aztec ways of relating the body to its external situation recognized the importance of balancing energies to achieve well-being. How a person worked, what one came in contact with, what one ate, and how one managed sexual fluids all affected the flow of vital forces within the body and even within the community. In this state of flux, gender was no exception. As a cultural construction, it varied according to age and occupation in Aztec society.

Anthropologist Rosemary Joyce belongs to a generation of scholars who have tried to develop appropriate theoretical frameworks with which Mesoamericanists can approach gender. She has pointed out one of the problems that contemporary scholars face in thinking about ancient constructions of gender. As historian Thomas Laqueur (1990) argues, the assumption that human infants are born either male or female arose in Europe only in the late eighteenth century. Until recently, many scholars have assumed the existence of “fixed dichotomous genders grounded in absolute distinctions in biology” (Joyce 2000:6–7). In seeking a more nuanced and emic description of how Mesoamericans constructed gender, Joyce



1.9 Detail from the *Florentine Codex* of an Aztec midwife at a birth ritual. Drawing by Sydney McIlhany.

has looked at the problem from many angles. She has intensively engaged the work of contemporary theorists of gender such as Judith Butler and Ruth Hubbard. She has studied sixteenth-century European descriptions of ethics and ritual, has excavated sites in Honduras and Mexico, and has analyzed many bodies of material, from figurines to Maya relief sculpture. Joyce (2001:109) argues that in Mesoamerican ideology, gender “is not an essential, innate, and immutable quality in the classic European mode, but rather produced, from an original androgeny [*sic*] or encompassment of sexual possibilities, by creative action in mythological time and recreated by social means in individual time.”

As I set forth in Chapter 3, Formative period people probably knew about the stages of human gestation. They probably observed that the embryos they saw had no visible sexual differentiation. This knowledge may have influenced concepts of gender as Mesoamerican culture began to develop. Joyce (2000:7) reflects, “If gender is not a fixed and biologically grounded identity, then in fact the fixing of specific gendered performance in everyday life and in representation takes on a slightly different significance and raises other questions.” She suggests that representation of bodies on both the household and public scale occurred within the control of political authorities who sought to “discipline gendered performance into the narrow

confines of acceptable citational practices” (Joyce 2000:198). Enforcing a disciplined, heterosexual ethos was difficult precisely because of a widely shared, long-standing ideological assumption of gender fluidity.

Joyce (2001:110) also suggests that the originary female-male couples featured in many Mesoamerican cosmogonies were constructed in three different ways. Either they were conflated by being given the same name, as in the case of similarly crowned Lord One Deer and Lady One Deer of the Mixtec *Codex Vienna* (Furst 1978); considered to be “both,” like the Aztec Ometecuhtli, a “Two-Lord” who parented other supernaturals; or conceived as fluid, being referred to in some sources as male and in others as female.

Art historian Cecelia Klein (2001) sees these originary couples, as well as the range of gender ambiguity, somewhat differently. She describes Ometeotl (Ometecuhtli), a supreme creator deity in Nahua thought, as comprised of both a male and a female aspect with separate names (Fig. 1.10). For example, in the sixteenth-century pictorial manuscript *Codex Borbonicus*, an aged creator couple, male Cipactonal and female Oxomoco, appear in a U-shaped celestial enclosure. They are represented as equal in scale but with appropriate gender-distinct poses, implements, and costume. Klein contends that such pairs, consisting of a “wholly” male and a “wholly” female entity, “structure the perception of nature” in many Mesoamerican communities today (187). She reminds us that “In many places, for example, the cosmos and its contents are believed to be composed of two discrete but complementarily gendered aspects. Among the Otomí and the Mixtec, the sky tends to be gendered male and the earth female. Each of these entities, in turn, has its own male and female aspects” (187).

At least some groups, including the Nahua of San Francisco Tecospa, refer to the aspects of nature in terms of a balance of gendered forces. Klein (2001:188) describes this kind of opposition-in-balance as “gender duality” and proposes that “For Mesoamericans, including Nahuas, a dual, male-plus-female unit was held to have generative and protective powers far greater than could be possessed either by a dysfunctional or infertile couple, or by any single individual regardless of gender.”

While Klein’s study investigated contemporary and sixteenth-century Nahuatl speakers, the idea

that a male-plus-female unit might have exceptional generative and protective powers seems to be very ancient indeed. As we shall see, nearly 3,000 years before the Aztec, the Formative period people impregnated springs and special earthen pits with stone celts and rubber balls. If the male and female significance of these ritual acts is not explicit enough for readers to glimpse, monuments at La Venta portraying a phallus and a womb framed the entire site. As it examines these Formative period sites of ritual depositions, this book considers Klein’s articulation of the idea that gendered landscapes and creator couples were metaphors for a balance of gendered forces.

Klein has also formulated a distinction between gender duality and an ambiguity of gender. In some instances, a being was not distinctively male or female but had less than one gender. This ambiguity was perceived by the Aztecs both as a disruptive source of antisocial effects and as a means of reversing the undesirable—of relieving social disorder, deformity, instability, and pollution. Klein’s study of rituals involving gender ambiguity focuses on sixteenth-century and contemporary ethnographic sources on the Maya and Aztec (Nahua). The rituals in which gender ambiguity plays an important role were all staged at the terminations of particular calendric cycles: the end of the dry season, which initiates the planting season; the end of the wet season, which initiates the time for most hunting and warfare; the end of the solar year, which is the crucible for the birth of the next; and the end of a 28-day lunar cycle.

At these times, [performances of] ambiguous gender enabled the transformation of one temporal phase into another by giving an appropriate bodily form to Nahua fears. These included fears of cosmic and social chaos, loss of direction and purpose, illness and madness, the recklessness of youth, impotence, barrenness and loss of reproductive energy, darkness and deception, the onset of poverty and powerlessness—indeed, formlessness itself. Ambiguous gender gave these dangerous forces form so that man could harness them and transform them into something new and positive. As a symbol of inversion, of reversal, and of the in-between, gender ambiguity was enormously important in Nahua ideology because it could reinstate social and cosmic order, thereby guaranteeing renewal, maturity, prosperity, and good health. (Klein 2001:185)

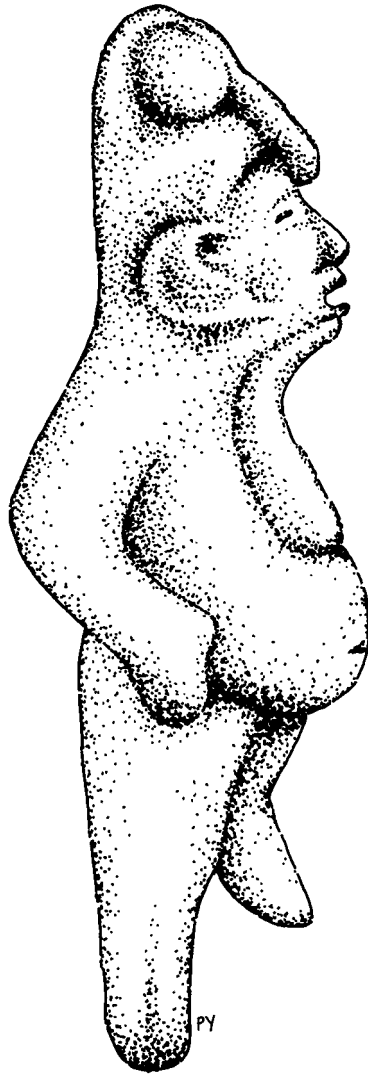
Another recent reflection on gender has come from the perspective of a historian of religions. In *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions* (2006), Sylvia Marcos proposes a theory that might account for characteristics of gender she has observed in sixteenth-century documents and archaeological remains. At the outset, she notes the pervasive concept of a divine pair of originary beings with generative and protective powers. She follows López Austin in describing their relation: "Not mutually exclusive, not static, not hierarchically organized (at least not in the modern pyramidal way), all elements and natural phenomena were construed as a balance of dual valences" (14). She sees as symptomatic of a Western mind-body split most contemporary theorists' distinctions between sex as biological and gender as cultural. For Mesoamericans, she argues, different parts of the body possessed their own gender qualities. In different situations, she explains, parts of the body may have had a variety of genders relative to the person.

Yet, the idea of duality was enhanced by still another concept, no less pervasive, that of equilibrium and balance. Rather than the static repose of two equal weights or masses, it can be conceived as a force that constantly modifies the relation between dual and/or polar pairs. Like duality itself, equilibrium or balance permeated not only relations between men and women, but also relations among deities, deities and humans, and elements of nature, . . . [E]quilibrium . . . determined and modified the concept of duality. Besides, it was the condition for the preservation of the cosmos. . . . The existence of the Meso-americans was thus the constant pursuit of an ever-to-be-

Marcos calls this fluid shifting of opposites in search of equilibrium “homeorrheic balance” (15). Instead of a stable equilibrium, as denoted by the term *homeostasis*, of gender-related identity for a thing or individual, she sees a flowing equilibrium, a dynamic slipping of gender as relations shift.

diosas de los parteros
 creyentes tenían los señores
 para hacer un negocio por no
 nombrar dios particular por ser
 a las de las donas.

Rediscovering Women and Gestation



1.11 La Venta figurine of pregnant woman. Museo del Sitio, La Venta. Drawing by Paula Yeager.

the kilns in which men produce lime. Because they are considered to frequently engage in sex, and to retain sexual fluids longer than men do, women should not sow or weed cornfields or position their bodies above the plants. In part, this is because the odors and fluids emanating from the body after sex can more easily escape from women's genitals because they wear skirts instead of pants. Some contemporary Nahuas and Mixtecs also think that multiple infusions of semen are necessary to accumulate enough to congeal into a child.

Similarly, López Austin (1980:297) writes that seminal fluids are believed to begin corrupting in the womb. In both plants and humans, the corruption or death of matter is essential to the generation of life. Such corruption may generate life or may

lead to pathology. Monaghan (2001) proposes that in the case of the man who has recently had sex, it may be the possibility of introducing pathology that prompts the taboos. In the case of a woman, she may transfer the process of corruption to the new life in the cornfield. However, if she has just conceived, the heat of the new life in her womb may cause problems as well.

Monaghan (2001:295) makes the point that the physiological process that does define gender difference is pregnancy, or gestation (Fig. 1.11). The ideas associated with conception and gestation are informed by concepts describing other productive processes. For example, when the men of Santiago Nuyoo make lime, they do so in a kiln that is conceptualized as a womb. I point out that the men's introduction of fire into a kiln/womb is a metaphor for an inseminating act: the hot sticks enter the hole, and the heat breaks down the stone. From the death of the stone, lime is born. As long as gendered beings and processes are in balance, the product turns out well. A version of the hot-cold theory observed in indigenous groups after the conquest is operative in Santiago Nuyoo. Women are colder than men. In order to conceive, their wombs must be filled with hot semen. When there is sufficient semen (which, as López Austin pointed out, is considered to be like blood), it starts to coagulate. Also, the women are heated by the friction of sex. Conception occurs when enough hot semen thickens and begins to cook (Monaghan 1998:49). Monaghan gives this example:

If a pregnant woman . . . happens by, and the process is ruined because the fire begins to burn unevenly, the men will pull out all the timbers and reinsert them [another sexual metaphor] starting the fire again. In this case, however, they will also add bone to the logs. Bone is considered a highly charged, fertile, even seminal substance in Mixtec culture . . . and thus it is as if the men have reinitiated the production process by refilling the oven/womb with bone/semen. This interpretation is supported by the Mixtecs' own explanation for this practice; they say that the bone gives *yii* "heat" or "force" to the fire. *Yii* is an unbounded morpheme that also appears in the words *yicin*, "bone," and *tee yii*, "male." (Monaghan 2001:295, citing King n.d.)

In this case, the life in the pregnant womb and the proximity of the woman upset the balance of heat/vital force/maleness and cold/femaleness in the area near the kiln. To reinstate the appropriate

sexual and/or hot-cold balance, the men initiated a new sexual act by pulling out the timbers and reinserting them into the oven/womb. As Monaghan writes, “the producers’ role is to bring together items that are critically matched and integral to the creative process” (295).

Similarly, Sheila Cosminsky (2001) discusses modern Maya births, which sometimes still occur in the *temazcal*, or sweatbath. The heat is thought to ease the birth by relaxing the mother and her muscles, and to give strength to the infant. “Heat is symbolically linked with life, and Ixil midwives indicate that ‘the heat of the sweatbath gives force, force is energy, and energy is life’” (Cosminsky 2001:90, citing Marshall 1981 and Villatoro 1994).

Monaghan (2001) contends that human gestation is conceptualized as parallel or equivalent to cycles of plant development, processes of food preparation, and the production of pottery, paper, textiles, and lime, among other things. The way I would paraphrase what he and López Austin are saying is that production is a process of transformation whereby vital energy is generated through the friction of male and female components. Monaghan explains that the process of human gestation is referred to as “cooking.” Cooking, or the application of heat to a substance,

is a widespread metaphor for creation and transformation, perhaps as widespread as birth. However, it is worth noting that, based on the Mixtec idioms, what occurs in a woman’s body is the direct counterpart, if not the equivalent, of the very process that makes humans civilized. Cleared land, where people have cut down the forest to build houses, make milpa, and carry out social activities, is also called *chi’yo* “cooked.” In the sixteenth century, the term *chi’yo* was used for altar, house site, or foundation. In the ancient writing systems, the concept of *chi’yo* was represented by a temple platform with a stairway to one side (Smith 1973:45, 47). “Cooked” lands contrast with forest and brush (*yuku*), places beyond ordered existence. (Monaghan 2001:296–297)

This brings us back to the human-made ritual landscape of La Venta. By the Middle Formative it had undergone a long transformation from an untamed place to an ordered center. This book contends that a guiding principle of the deployment of visual symbols there was to create a state of perpetual gestation/cooking/transformation in this central place. Across the whole site, from a

U-shaped womb studded with colossal fetuses to a phallic column elevated on a conical mound, a series of sculptures elaborated on the processes of gestation, birth, death, and rebirth. As the book’s penultimate chapter contends, these sculptures formed a processional visual narrative of creation and origin. Before presenting evidence for this claim, I survey Olmec visual culture from Early Formative to the last phase at La Venta.

How the Book Develops: Content and Methodologies

Chapter 2 focuses on the most widespread Olmec image, the one formerly known as the were-jaguar (for which *axe-image* is a neutral term). Its many interpretations are teased apart to the point at which their assumptions begin to unravel. The method used here is simply the historiography of this particular debate.

Chapter 3 considers the unborn and newly born in Formative period visual culture and addresses the issue of why such imagery was so important and fundamental. It begins by taking a fresh look at the axe-image. Accounting for every aspect of its appearance, it proposes a new iconographic interpretation: that it was based on the form of a human embryo. It considers the variety of formats (axes, masks, stelae, etc.) and representational modes (naturalistic, conventionalized) in which the embryo was portrayed, and tracks the origin and development of the symbol. The analysis of the symbols that co-occur with the embryo leads to a “matrix of associated symbols.” This, in turn, allows us to examine many modern examples of indigenous cultures that retain elements from the ancient “matrix.” Through this approach, the meaning of the embryo and its symbolic matrix can be approximated. The chapter ends with another ethnographic analogy, this time exploring the archaeology of hollow babies as compared to the current phenomenon of a miracle-working “baby Jesus in a boat” along Lake Xochimilco.

In Chapter 4, a study of the visual symbols relating to women and gestation throughout Early Formative Mesoamerica unfolds. An attempt is made to proceed chronologically so that the advent of gestational imagery can be tracked. This chapter considers representational forms, such as figurines of females and fetuses, and also how people

configured specific ritual landscapes to emulate, or enact, processes of insemination and gestation. By combing through a great deal of published material on the Early Formative, it locates the seeds of visual forms and abstract concepts that were later sown at La Venta.

Chapter 5 begins the book's primary focus on visual culture at La Venta. It tackles the problems of dating La Venta relative to other Olmec sequences and then scrutinizes the development of the site by means of its caches and "burials." To accomplish this, the chapter simply reorganizes and reexamines archaeological findings published in the 1950s. When combined with the identification of females and gestational beings, however, this view of La Venta's chronological development yields some surprising insights.

Starting with the work of Kent Reilly and an article I published in 1999, Chapter 6 develops further the possibility that the massive offerings and mosaic pavements represent female supernaturals of lake and earth. It looks closely at the visual culture and ritual behavior of the modern Mixe, probable descendants of the Gulf Coast Olmec, in order to construct an ethnographic analogy. Many Mixe spiritual-medical practitioners are female. In addition to serving as midwives and administering sweatbaths, many of these women perform rituals of protection and divination on earth altars that share many characteristics with La Venta's massive offerings and mosaic pavements.

Chapter 7 turns to the monuments of La Venta, reconstructing to the extent possible their original "find" locations. It then considers the two kinds of monument placement at La Venta, what I call "clusters" of disparate monuments and "sets" of similar monuments. The sets, I propose, were placed in specific settings, portray character types, and were distributed along a 1,700 m processional axis. Based on the work of art historian Richard Brilliant (1984), the chapter finds that timing, spacing, and foreshadowing provided additional elements necessary for the existence of a visual narrative that encompassed the site. Several other authors have proposed the existence of more limited visual narratives at La Venta, but this study submits that the

cyclic narrative stretched from the southernmost to the northernmost monuments, and that it dealt with themes of insemination, gestation, the creation of landscape, the origins of the human race, renewal, and possibly the migration of the inhabitants to their sacred center.

Chapter 8 explores the symbolic constellations that existed at each of the six narrative stations. Using a "semio-narrative" method based on the work of A. J. Greimas (1970) and Claude Calame ([1996] 2003), it tracks the historical permutations of several of the major symbols within other major Mesoamerican creation stories. While it is tempting to try to "read" the story based on the visual symbols, I doubt that there was ever a canonical version. It may or may not have been performed as a whole. Instead, certain portions of the site could have been used for specific rituals of protection, healing, or renewal. The chapter contends that the appeal of La Venta's visual creation and origins narrative was the flexibility of its symbolic formulations.

In Chapter 9 some of the implications of this new view of Olmec civilization and La Venta are explored. Was La Venta designed as a "landscape of becoming"? Was gender or gestation the more compelling issue in Olmec art? If La Venta was a shrine to female supernaturals of lake and earth, can we find other places dating to the Late Preclassic that developed similar ideas? As the Classic period evolved, which cultures adopted Olmec forms such as images of females, the stone figurines, the deposits of celts, and visual narrative, and which rejected them, preferring new concepts and forms of expression?

At the end of the book are appendices that I hope will assist readers. I have compiled a lengthy table that shows comparable elements in seven Mesoamerican creation narratives, and I hope it will serve others as a basis for more thorough studies. I have also listed La Venta's monuments by what I call "sculptural format"—their basic configuration—and have provided a range of information about each monument so that La Venta's sculpture will be more accessible for study until a definitive catalogue is published.

Chapter 2

The Tale of the Were-Jaguar

This is the first of two chapters about the anthropomorphic image that is a key to the evolution of Formative period beliefs and our interpretations of them. For the sake of objectivity, at the outset of the chapter I refer to it as the “axe-image.” From tiny figurines to medallions to large axe-shaped stones to grand stelae, this image pervades Olmec sculpture (Fig. 2.1). It has numerous variations. These have been construed as a pantheon of deities, as representations of shamanic patrons, and as were-jaguars and other were-animals. Although several scholars have attempted to refute earlier interpretations and reframe the image, it seems impossible for most Olmec specialists to get beyond the notion of a were-jaguar. For that reason, this chapter takes a historiographic look at the major proposals regarding the axe-image and relates them to their cultural milieu. It asks why Olmec specialists have consistently seen the anthropomorphic image as some kind of mythical creature. The purposes of this inquiry are to acknowledge the insights of previous scholars, to identify erroneous assumptions, and to clear the field for a new interpretation. A new identification of the image, presented in the next chapter, is similarly based in a contemporary cultural situation, but differs in its deployment of a very close reading of the image and its contexts.

From its earliest publication, as outlined in Chapter 1, the Olmec axe-image was interpreted as a monstrous thing. Before long, as this chapter will show, it had become an alterity known as the “were-jaguar.” Eventually scholars began to characterize the Olmec as “makers of biologically impossible creatures” that were essentially jaguarlike (Joralemon 1976:33). Peter Furst (1968:144) stated that “All writers agree that Olmec iconography centers on a ‘jaguar cult,’ with the were-jaguar and its corollary, the peculiar combination of infantile and



2.1 Embryo riding a jaguar. H: 8.9 cm. Private collection. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

feline creatures (the ‘jaguar-babyface’ motif), as the hallmarks of the Olmec style.”

Despite Furst’s claim, many students of the Olmec have questioned the existence of a jaguar cult. They have claimed that the axe-image is basically a snake (Luckert 1976), a frog (Furst 1981), a crocodilian (Muse and Stocker 1974; Joralemon 1976; Stocker et al. 1980), the Olmec supernatural (Reilly 1995), a maize god (Taube 1996), a “patron of shamanic power” (Tate 1999), and an anthropomorphic god or “A-god” (Clark 1994), among other things. The were-jaguar theory is obviously unsatisfactory, yet the alternatives have been unconvincing. Clearly, the problem remains. The notion of the Olmec were-jaguar persists in public venues, including the literature that accompanied the Olmec exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in 1996 (Joralemon 1996), in standard art history texts (Stokstad 1999:448; Adams 2002:357),

and texts on Mesoamerican art (Miller 2006:22). Olmec archaeologists also continue to fall back on the were-jaguar as an explanatory paradigm (Diehl 2004:39, 73; Pool 2007:116–117) and publications by nonspecialists have kept this term in constant play.

To enter this fray with a new proposal is to try the patience of those who have suffered through and rejected many arguments. Yet because this image is so ubiquitous—it appears on these axes, on headdress ornaments, masks, stelae, pendants, columns, pottery, and celts, as well as in the form of stone figurines—it seems to hold the key to Olmec concepts of power, knowledge, rulership, and more. It is thus important that we try to recognize what it is. A few years ago I submitted for publication an article that proposed that the model for the axe-image is the form and pluri-potentiality of the human embryo. Reviewers rejected the article. Why has the modern legend of the were-jaguar (or some other were-animal) been more appealing than a recognition of the anthropomorphic basis of the axe-image? Why does the human embryo seem so alien to us (some readers will remember the fetal proportions of *ET* of the 1982 Spielberg movie)? If the axe-image is based on the form of the embryo and can no longer be thought of as a were-jaguar, what happens to the twentieth-century fascination with shape-shifting, shamanism, and magic?

This chapter reflects on these questions. It makes another attempt to dispel the myth of the were-jaguar—at least as an interpretation for these images—by showing the twentieth-century cultural contexts in which the myth developed. It treats, chronologically, several major theories about the axe-image, from shamanic were-jaguar to maize god, and finally considers how an analogy with indigenous feminine healing practices might affect how scholars construct shamanism as an interpretive paradigm. To restate the problem, an iconographic misjudgment that arose within a specific cultural context has led to the misperception of an entire civilization. The persistence of the were-jaguar interpretation and the initial rejection of the idea that the axe-image could be based on the human embryo raise the question of why modern scholars have been so reluctant to consider an empirical basis for Olmec knowledge. It also allows us to reflect on modern academic and popular squeamishness about the quintessentially female process of gestation, the hidden formation of life.

The Birth of the Were-Jaguar

This section explores how the term *were-jaguar* evolved and examines how scholars have centered their interpretive paradigms around this notion. Representations of creatures that are part human and part animal are very old and widespread. One of the earliest Paleolithic sculptures in Europe is the “Lion Man” from Hohlenstein-Stadel (Fig. 2.2). Tens of thousands of years later, the Greeks recorded the tale of Lycaon, a man who transformed into a wolf.

Marie de France’s Anglo-Norman story “Bis-clavret,” from around 1170, daims that “In days gone by one could hear tell, and indeed it often used to happen, that many men turned into werewolves and went to live in the woods. A garwolf [werewolf] is a ferocious beast, which, when possessed by this madness, devours men, causes great damage and dwells in vast forests” (Burgess and Busby 1999:68).

The English word *werewolf* has been in use for a very long time. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records its use by AD 1000. Since then, many novels and movies have been made about the werewolf. In the late 1920s and early 1930s several novels on the topic were published, including *Werewolf of Paris* by Guy Endore and *Werewolf* by Montague Summers. For a synopsis of twentieth-century treatments of the werewolf, see Appendix 3.

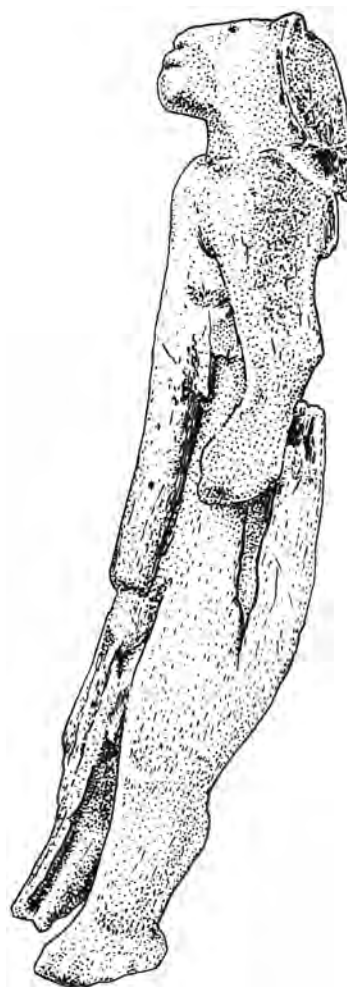
The tale of the term *were-jaguar* is shorter; however, it reveals much about the mood of the early twentieth century in the United States, when scholars, as well as popular culture, were searching for other ways of knowing—for experiences that went beyond the Judeo-Christian framework that was so prevalent. The first appearance of this word in print was in English, in *Mexico South*, a book that Miguel Covarrubias began writing in the mid-1930s. After a long gestation the volume was published in 1946 by Alfred A. Knopf in New York. As he explained the significance of the jaguar in the art of La Venta, Covarrubias (1946:99) wrote, “Today . . . more than . . . two thousand years since its [Olmec] origin, the were-jaguar, the *nawal*, is still invoked to frighten children who will not go to sleep.”

As he coined this influential term, Covarrubias was living in New York City and working as an illustrator for magazines, books, jazz artists, and the theater. He had been there in 1935 when the first

werewolf movies—*Werewolf of London*, starring Henry Hull—was released. I suspect that Covarrubias knew Hull. In 1924 Covarrubias shared a studio on West Forty-second Street with illustrator Al Hirschfeld, whom Covarrubias helped to develop his trademark fluid drawing style. Hirschfeld became a noted theatrical cartoonist, and among his subjects was Henry Hull, who in 1924 performed in *The Youngest* at Gaiety Theater on West Forty-sixth Street (Humanities Research Center 2010). Figure 2.3 shows the publicity poster for Henry Hull’s 1935 film. It depicts the werewolf of European folklore, with a downturned mouth and almond-shaped eyes. The poster was accompanied by these tag lines:

Beware the stalking being . . .

Hideous half man, half beast who terrorizes millions!



2.2 The “Lion Man” from Hohlenstein-Stadel, Paleolithic Europe. Ulmer Museum, Germany. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

By 1941, the year that *The Wolf Man*, starring Lon Cheney Jr., was released, Covarrubias had a circle of friends that included actors John Huston (who, like Covarrubias, was collecting Pre-Columbian art), Sam Jaffe, Orson Welles, and writers Bruno Traven (*Treasure of the Sierra Madre*) and Luis Buñuel (Williams 1994:139). These friends visited him at his home in Mexico and likely kept him in touch with such Hollywood novelties as *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943) (Katz 1994:1388).

In noting the existence of several novels and movies about werewolves in the 1920s and early 1930s, I am not suggesting that Covarrubias unthinkingly adopted popular culture to decipher ancient Olmec art. On the contrary, as a man of

two nations, Covarrubias worked fervently to introduce Mexican culture to the modern world, both through his own art and by curating antiquities. Furthermore, he took scholarship seriously. He discussed ancient Mexican civilization with the preeminent scholars of the era and, adding his own insights, published several books that provided a broad picture of Mesoamerican and Native American art.

As Covarrubias undertook the first of these books, *Mexico South* (1946), the artist had already established a celebrated reputation as an amateur anthropologist with the publication of *Island of Bali* (1937, cowritten with Clare Booth Luce). He was fulfilling one aspect of his aspiration by coordinating the modern section of the 1940 exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Williams 1994:110–117). In addition to assiduously cultivating a public persona for himself as an artist and celebrity, Covarrubias was exploring the origins of civilization in Mexico, as well as the ancient roots of modern traditional culture. Both fascinated him. He possessed a passion to record the complexity of his country from his unique ethnographic-artistic viewpoint. He was undoubtedly influenced by the major ideas of the era, such as those of Carl Jung in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933). Jung maintained that ancient archetypes from “primitive” societies were active in the modern psyche, but modern humanity lacked the collective life that older civilizations had enjoyed. Earlier, Franz Boas’s *Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) had cast anthropology as the kind of enterprise that could free nineteenth-century European-American society from its cultural prejudices.

As part of his research for *Mexico South*, Covarrubias introduced himself to prominent anthropologists at their excavations, including Alfonso Caso (Williams 1994:122–124). In late 1940 or early 1941, he sought out Matthew Stirling at Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz. Stirling’s *National Geographic* publications detailing discoveries of ancient monuments along the Gulf Coast had inflamed Covarrubias’s curiosity. Together the two men and their wives traveled to Izapa and other places, visiting contemporary villages as well as archaeological sites. By the time they returned, the archaeological season was almost over. The remaining excavation trench was in a mound that faced the center of the monument plaza at Cerro de las Mesas and



2.3 Poster for the 1935 movie *Werewolf of London*. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

2.4 Among the jade objects excavated by Covarrubias at Cerro de las Mesas were these two, which fit together. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



was already 18 ft deep. While he packed up, Stirling allowed Covarrubias to direct the workers digging in that trench. In an unexpected spot, Covarrubias encountered a carved stone covering the shards of an incense vessel and a circular disk of polished jade. After several other pieces of jade were revealed, he called Stirling. Together they excavated the largest cache of jade objects yet discovered: 782 pieces in all, mostly from the Classic period (Stirling 1941:291–30; Drucker 1955). The cache included a few Olmec pieces, including a small jade skull, the well-known jade “dwarf” (probably a newborn) now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, and its canoe with an axe-image face incised on the prow (Fig. 2.4). A color photograph in that 1941 issue of *National Geographic* shows his wife, the dancer Rosa Covarrubias, wearing some of the jade ornaments and holding the Olmec jade infant. Describing the nature of this figure and the Kunz axe in *Mexico South*, Covarrubias wrote,

There is always a strong feline feeling, coupled with a haunting infantile character and expression about their faces, as if they were meant to represent a totemic prototype, half-jaguar, half-baby, so characteristic and powerful

that it is short of being an obsession. In fact, many of these sculptures are actually jaguars or, rather, a jaguar deity, perhaps a jaguar-cub ancestor, as so often their snarling mouths show toothless gums. (Covarrubias 1946:83)

Covarrubias’s ideas about the axe-image and his invention of the term *were-jaguar* were informed by the theories of reigning Mesoamerican scholars. The following survey of the scholarship to which Covarrubias had access will show that despite the fact that most authors insisted that the image had jaguar characteristics, most also observed infantile or embryonic features as well. However, they seem to have had more difficulty explaining the human qualities of the image than those of the animal.

The initial publication of an axe-image, reported to have been found along the coast of Veracruz, was by Alfredo Chavero in volume I of *México a través de los siglos* (1888:63–64) (Fig. 2.5). At that time it was the product of an unknown culture. Mineralogist George Kunz (1890), describing the eponymous axe now in the American Museum of Natural History, saw the image as tigerlike (Fig. 1.5). Recognizing an anthropomorphic aspect, however, he suggested that it represented a man



2.5 The axe first published by Chavero. National Museum of the American Indian. Drawing by Sydney McIlhenny.



2.6 The Kunz axe. American Museum of Natural History. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

wearing a conventionalized mask of a tiger. In 1926, Blom and La Farge published their *Tribes and Temples*, which included Monument 1 of San Martín Pajapan (Fig. 0.1) as well as the monuments they had found in La Venta. Reviewing this book, German archaeologist Hermann Beyer (1927) referred to the makers of the San Martín monument as “Olmec,” borrowing a Nahuatl term for the later people of this region. In his influential 1929 study of a series of axe-images, Marshall Saville, a curator at the Museum of the American Indian in New York, perpetuated the tiger interpretation. He identified eleven objects carved in distinct sculptural formats as sharing the features of the axe-image. His study treated eleven objects that he had found in collections in the Americas and Europe: three from Oaxaca, two from Veracruz, one from the Puebla area, one from Tabasco, and four of unknown provenience. The axe-image appeared on five axes, two figurines, one pectoral, one eccentrically shaped plaque, one headdress of a monumental sculpture, and one incised head of a figurine. In “Votive Axes from Ancient Mexico” (1929:268), Saville quoted Kunz’s description of characteristics of the Kunz axe (Fig. 2.6), which he thought most of the objects shared: slanting almond-shaped eyes, prominent canine teeth, small nostrils, an immense flaring upper lip, and a head that occupies half the

sculpture. He noted that three of his eleven objects exhibited fangs, and six had a cleft head. Based on a comparison with the monumental Aztec, jaguar-shaped *quauhxicalli* in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico, Saville decided that the image “represents the conventional mask of a tiger” (268).

To support his claim, Saville (1929) employed an ethnographic analogy, drawing upon a story in the Phillips’s translation of the sixteenth-century manuscript *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*, to account for the cleft head of both the jaguar and the votive axe-image. During an altercation, Quetzalcoatl struck Tezcatlipoca “with a great stick and threw him down into the water, and there he was transformed into a tiger, and issued forth to slay the giants” (290). Eight decades later, it is easy to see the problems with Saville’s argument: he did not consider the functions of the objects on which the image appeared, he selected only a few features on which to base his interpretation without considering others, and he chose a decontextualized passage in a much later story to explain the cleft. Although this early association between the axe-image and the jaguar is tenuous, we shall see that the facial features Saville noted are crucial to identifying this image.

With its important collections of Pre-Columbian art, New York offered many opportunities for Cova-

rrubias to study Olmec sculpture. He sketched the Olmec pieces at the American Museum of Natural History, including the Kunz and Dorenberg axes, the Necaxa figurine, and the Chavero axe, which had been acquired by the Museum of the American Indian.

In 1942, as Covarrubias worked on *Mexico South*, the book with which he intended to introduce Mexican culture to a wider world, he attended the Segunda Reunión de Mesa Redonda sobre Problemas Antropológicos de México y Centroamérica in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. To an audience consisting of about a hundred eminent figures in Pre-Columbian archaeology, linguistics, and anthropology from Mexico and abroad, the artist presented an influential paper defining the style and subject matter of Olmec objects. In agreement with some of his archaeologist colleagues, Covarrubias referred to the “tiger” as the “basic motif” of Olmec art:

Es un arte impregnado de tigres, elementos de tigre y otras ideas derivadas del tigre. Así, tenemos verdaderos tigres con grandes colmillos, o bien tigres antropomorfos en actitudes medio humanas, medio felinas, con adornos y vestimenta de hombres. . . . Esta obsesión felina debe haber tenido un motivo esencialmente religioso, ya totémico, o bien relacionado con el culto de dioses tigres, de la tierra o de la lluvia, con los que el tigre está íntimamente relacionado. . . . (Covarrubias 1942:47)¹

While many scholars saw felines in Olmec art, some, including Covarrubias, had seen infants as well. As early as 1918, an image that Stirling (1968b:3) considered that of a “crying baby” had first piqued his interest in Olmec art. The excavations of George and Susannah Vaillant at Gualupita, near Cuernavaca, had revealed hollow ceramic sculptures of infants, which they called “babyfaces,” made during the Preclassic era (Vaillant 1934). These proved that infants were a subject of Preclassic ceramic sculpture (Fig. 1.7).

After that, the so-called “tiger” or jaguarlike image of the axe and the “babyface” gradually became conflated in the minds of scholars. It seemed necessary to determine the way in which the human and jaguar had merged. One theory was human-animal transformation, or nagualism. In 1944, anthropologist George Foster published a widely read article, “Nagualism in Mexico and Guatemala.” According to Foster, notions about the

ability of humans and animals to shape-shift formed a part of Mexican folklore.

As Covarrubias’s collection of Pre-Columbian art grew, he acquired some pieces that seemed to him “infantile.” By the mid-1940s, as Covarrubias was writing about La Venta for *Mexico South*, he puzzled over Altar 5 (Fig. 2.7), referring to jaguars but also to babies and the “embryonic,” “deformed,” “rudimentary” features of the Olmec axe-image:

The central motif of the “Quintuplet” altar seems to represent a birth scene, or perhaps a ceremony in which babies or dwarfs took part. These jaguar-like babies or dwarfs seem to have obsessed the artists of La Venta to the point where this embryonic jaguar character with headband, chinstraps, and a deeply notched head became their most important art motif. Everything about these “jaguar-babies” is hard to grasp: their deformed bodies, their rudimentary arms and legs, their despondent, toothless mouths, their stern, hollow eyes, deep-set under elaborate superciliary ridges and knitted brows, with a deep, V-shaped cleft on top of their heads. Does this cleft refer to a form of sacrifice, an ax blow [as Saville had suggested]? Or does it represent the soft, half-closed skull of a newborn baby, symbol of the connection between man and the divinity through the occiput? (Covarrubias 1946:97)

It was in the same book that Covarrubias coined the term *were-jaguar* in 1946, as quoted above. In doing so, he drew upon Daniel Brinton’s 1894 study of nagualism and used Foster’s work along with the studies of Saville and Stirling (Brinton 1894). With this term, he probably meant to evoke a parallel between European and Mexican folklore, to put both traditions on more equal footing. In any event, he described an Olmec symbol of power as a monstrous mythical being. He and Stirling shared this fascination with “jaguar-babies.” Two sculptures that Stirling excavated (Potrero Nuevo Monument 3 and Tenochtitlan Monument 1) seemed finally to offer an explanation for their existence. In 1955, Stirling published his hypothesis regarding the sexual union between a jaguar and a human female that produced the were-jaguar (Stirling 1955:9–20, Plates 25, 26a).

It is interesting that Covarrubias eliminated the term in his next book, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (1957), although he retained the notion that the jaguar was the “basic motif” of Olmec art and continued to describe some Olmec sculptures as having “a haunting mixture of human and feline characteristics in varying degrees” (50).



2.7 The front (*top*) and sides of La Venta Throne (Altar) 5. Parque Museo La Venta. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

One Were-Jaguar or Many Deities?

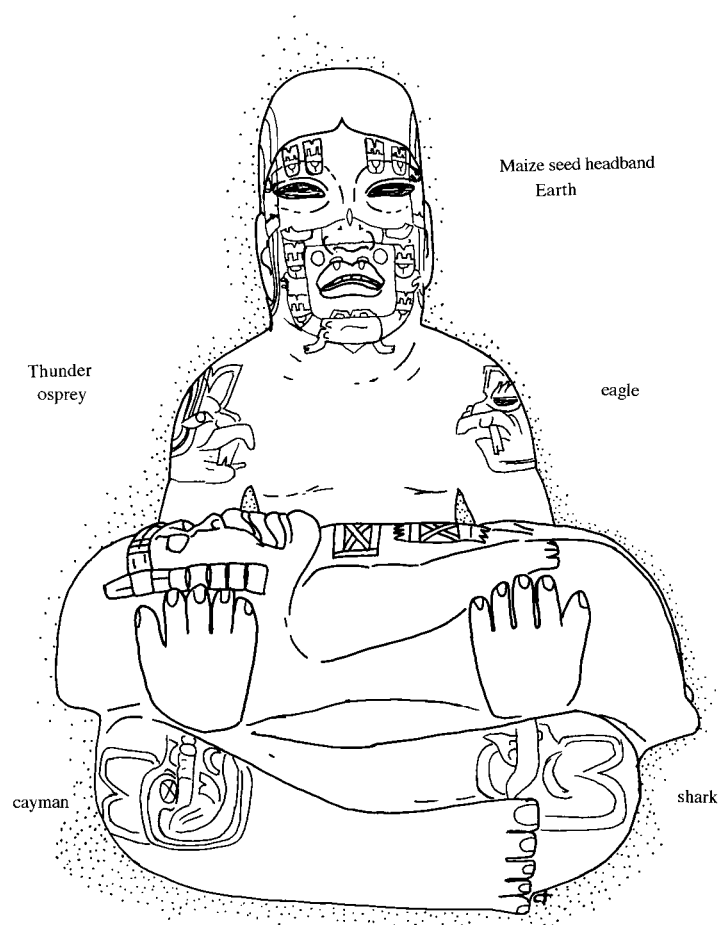
The young, Harvard-trained anthropologist Michael Coe was familiar with Covarrubias's work on the axe-image. He did consider other possible explanations for the downturned mouth and cleft head of the infantile image, including malformation of the child due to spina bifida (Coe 1962). Nevertheless, he developed the notion of the were-jaguar in his work of the 1960s, specifically calling the axe-image a "were-jaguar" (for example, in *The Jaguar's Children* [1965a:12]). I suspect that by exploring the effectiveness of the were-jaguar as an interpretive strategy, Coe was acknowledging the limitations of existing Judeo-Christian-based conceptual paradigms. Thinking of these images as having dual identities—human and jaguar—brought into question the efficacy of applying Western definitions of self, identity, power, and religion to ancient Mesoamerican visual culture. His and others' use of the concept of the were-jaguar opened a window for Euro-American researchers who wished to grasp the notion of an animate universe or a shamanic one.

After the exhibition *The Jaguar's Children* and publication of its catalogue, the discovery of a stunning greenstone sculpture with complex imagery led Coe (1968a:111) to think that Covarrubias's claim that all the were-jaguar or human infant-feline images represented the rain god was an oversimplification. In 1965, some youths in Las Limas, Veracruz, had found a seated adult figure holding a "were-jaguar" infant on its lap (Fig. 2.8). Coe identified this character by its cleft head, snarling mouth, and the horizontal band on its forehead. Incised on the adult figure were four profile heads, on its shoulders and knees, as well as a headband of seeds and an inverted U-shaped band of designs around its mouth. Coe considered the greenstone figure with its incised images to be a key to a polytheistic Olmec religion. He assumed that the incised faces were gods and proceeded to identify them based on Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec representations of Xipe Totec—the feathered serpent, the death god, and the fire god.

Not all the specialists agreed with the idea that Olmec imagery represented gods. In late 1967, at the first major Pre-Columbian conference at Dumbarton Oaks, Ignacio Bernal, an archaeologist who worked in Oaxaca before becoming director of

the new Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, balked at the identification of Olmec gods, saying, "Michael Coe mentioned the possible existence of some Mesoamerican gods even in ancient Olmec times. I am not prepared at the moment to accept this. My impression is that in the heartland the metropolitan Olmec had not yet reached the level of having concrete anthropomorphic gods" (Bernal 1968b:142).

From this point on there have been several interpretive paradigms for the Olmec axe-image. One branch of scholars has developed the notion of an Olmec pantheon, splitting the axe-image into a series of god images without interrogating the concepts of "deity" or "religion," or asking how a religion would be organized and disseminated. Alternatively, several scholars retain the idea that the axe-image represents a deity but propose other creatures as its basis. Another branch of research focuses on shamanism. Yet another queries the existence of a pantheon in the Formative period



2.8 The Las Limas figure, found in 1965. H: 55 cm. Museo de Arqueología, Jalapa. Drawing by author.

but sees the axe-image as representing a meta-meteorological power, such as rain.² In the following sections we will weave in and out of these interpretive paradigms from their initial presentations to subsequent revisions.

Coe's insights and his enthusiasm for decoding Olmec iconography inspired his student Peter David Joralemon to undertake a more exhaustive analysis of incised symbols in Formative period visual culture. Joralemon, who at one time had been enrolled in divinity school, pursued the possibility raised by his professor of a pantheon of deities. Through Coe and others, he gained access to several of the major private collections of Olmec sculpture and made a useful compilation of drawings of this material. He outlined a three-step method for "deciphering" the symbols. He broke down representations into constituent parts (such as types of eyes and mouths) and looked at patterns of co-occurrence. Joralemon (1971:6) believed that these patterns revealed the major Olmec deities. In his first publication on the subject, he proposed ten "gods of the Olmec pantheon": I, jaguar-dragon: earth, fire, volcanoes, caves, hearth; II, maize god; III, avian monster; IV, a dwarf or infant who is the rain god; V, lightning and thunder; VI, spring and renewal; VII, precious feathered serpent; VIII, death and underworld; with IX and X remaining "inscrutable" (91). It was tremendously exciting for Mesoamericanists to frame an alternative to the Western religious tradition, as Henry B. Nicholson (1971) had just done for the Aztec based on earlier works by Eduardo Seler, Alfonso Caso, Walter Krickeberg, Miguel León-Portilla, and others.

Some aspects of Joralemon's approach, however, are problematic. In his section of illustrations of whole objects from which motifs were taken, he should have indicated which had archaeological provenience or, in other words, which objects could reliably serve as a basis for constructing an argument. Once Joralemon isolated "motif combinations," he assumed that they represented deities without defining what that term might have meant for Formative period Mesoamerican spiritual or religious practice. Furthermore, his taxonomy focused on decontextualized signs, not on whole objects. As is typical of many Mesoamerican iconographers, he tended to consider motifs only if they could be easily reduced to a two-dimensional format, and to ignore the significance of the three-dimensional forms on which they appeared.

Although Joralemon, following Covarrubias and Coe, initially accepted the centrality of the jaguar to Olmec art, several scholars noted the lack of resemblance of the "were-jaguar" to a real jaguar and proposed alternative possibilities from the animal world as its source. Donald Lathrap (1971) suggested that a ceramic figure from highland Mexico, long considered to wear a jaguar pelt, actually wore a crocodile pelt. Taking this idea a step further, Mike Muse and Terry Stocker (1974) attempted to demonstrate that the ubiquitous Olmec axe-image is based on the crocodilian.

Similarly, historian of religions Karl Luckert (1976) saw little evidence for the overwhelming dominance of the jaguar in Olmec thought or sculpture; he believed that "serpentlike deities . . . ruled in later Middle America" (20) and that the maize-planting Olmec saw the forked tongue of the snake as analogous to sprouts of corn (27). He proposed that La Venta Mound C, the earliest big mound complex in Mesoamerica, may have represented an earth snake, based on his experience with "Southwest Indian sages and friends" who had pointed to a long mountain range in their own region and explained that "Big Snake lies there" (43). But the La Venta site does not have a long prominent ridge, just a single high mound. Luckert's superimposition of Native North American thought on the Formative period Mexican material is loosely applied, and most scholars have not used it.

These critiques of the ubiquity of the jaguar in Olmec art prompted Joralemon to publish a revision of aspects of his earlier study. Focusing this time on the crocodilian traits of one of the categories that he saw as a prominent deity (God I), he emphasized the important role of a composite mythological creature with celestial and telluric aspects (Joralemon 1976:37). He called this deity "the Olmec Dragon" and found its associations to be homologous to the Maya Itzam Na and similar to the Aztec Omēteotl. His most recent inventory of deities includes only the four incised images on the Las Limas figure plus a maize god, a were-jaguar (the unadorned axe-image, with or without teeth, seen on the Kunz axe), and a feathered serpent (Joralemon 1996:57).

The First Attempt to Slay the Were-Jaguar

It was an art historian who finally dismantled Stirling's hypothesis about the sexual union of a male jaguar and female human producing a race of were-jaguars. As a result of careful scrutiny of the two monuments from Potrero Nuevo on which Stirling based his argument (now renamed Loma del Zapote Monuments 1 and 3 [see Cyphers 2004]), Whitney Davis (1978) concluded that both the pose of the figures involved and the presence of clothing such as loincloths precluded the portrayal of copulation. Instead, he saw these monuments and certain reliefs at Chalcatzingo as representative of humans in jaguar costumes engaged in warfare and conquest. Although numerous scholars agreed that the human-jaguar copulation theory was overimaginative, the concept of the were-jaguar remained fixed in the conceptual construction that many had formed of the Olmec.

The Were-Jaguar as a Shamanic Alter Ego

Before the several attempts to shift the basic identification of certain axe-images to that of crocodile or snake, anthropologist Peter Furst had offered an alternative to the "pantheon of deities" approach. At the 1967 Dumbarton Oaks conference on the Olmec, he supported the previous scholars' insistence on the prevalence of the were-jaguar in sculpture; however, he disagreed that it was a god. Although jaguars are feared for their strength, and supernatural jaguars are believed to perform many activities that demonstrate control of nature, such as bringing rain or guarding sacred places, it is "rarely elevated to the status of 'deity' in the true sense of the term, much less the principal deity, even in cultures where we can speak of a pervasive 'jaguar cult'" (Furst 1968:145).

Instead, he proposed that the were-jaguar represented the alter ego of a shaman. To begin to prove this hypothesis, he sought out sculptures that illustrate such a creature. Furst agreed with Covarrubias that there exists a continuum of representations between nearly complete anthropomorphism and rare images of a purely zoomorphic jaguar. In the "mostly anthropomorphic" category, he considered any mouth with downturned corners, whether it held fangs or not, to be vaguely feline. The "grimace" could be due to the "intense inner

torment or ecstasy" typical of a transforming shaman (1968:149). One of the examples he mentioned (without illustration) was the small greenstone reclining human figure in the American Museum of Natural History (see Covarrubias 1946: Plate 8). This human figure has the "idealized Olmec" human face and lacks the ears, tail, fangs, snout, spots, or claws of a jaguar.

In the middle of the continuum he placed two small stone figures from the Dumbarton Oaks collection that represent anthropomorphically standing jaguars. After having personally examined the entire Olmec collection at Dumbarton Oaks, I have reservations about the authenticity of these two figures. A third illustration shows the stone figurine from the Fearing collection, now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and recently determined to be of modern manufacture (V. Fields, personal communication, 2011). None of these have an archaeological provenience. At the "zoomorphic" end of the continuum, Furst identified very few jaguar sculptures, but since then several have been found, including the highly stylized Azuzul pair, as well as San Lorenzo Monuments 77 and 97. These can be identified as jaguars because they have its bodily form, complete with fangs, ears, tails, paws, and claws.

Many Olmequistas—following Saville, Covarrubias, Stirling, and Furst—have leapt to the conclusion that the man-jaguar is a common subject in Olmec art. There are humans sitting with their knees drawn up and arms near their feet. But these rarely have teeth, jaguar ears, tails, spots, and so on. There are masked humans. There are also anthropomorphic faces with animal dentition (sometimes with canine teeth). As we have seen, however, only a small percentage of the axe-images—and of the masks, plaques, and incised and carved representations that show similarly proportioned beings with similar features—have canine fangs or any other jaguarlike characteristics. And what is the evidence that an otherwise anthropomorphic figure is a were-being due to its dentition? Perhaps, as I will explore later, the inclusion of nonhuman teeth on an anthropomorphic figure refers to something else. By scrutinizing Furst's assumptions, my intent is not to debunk entirely the concept of shared aspects of identity between humans and animals in Mesoamerica. The issue of shamanism will be reconsidered in Chapter 6.

Monstrous Congenital Anomalies

The next attempt to elucidate the axe-image dismissed Davis's critique of an Olmec belief system centered on human-jaguar copulation and accepted the same set of assumptions that Furst had. Anthropologist Carson Murdy (1981:861-862), with the assistance of his father, a physician, proposed that "the most common motif in Olmec art is an anthropomorphic figure, apparently that of a child, which shows feline facial characteristics to a varying degree. . . . The Olmec artistic canon . . . can be best explained by analogy with the congenital deformities manifested in . . . multifactorial neural-tube . . . defects." Murdy's use of neural tube defects as an explanatory paradigm focused on the cleft head found on most axe-images, the limp legs of the infants held on La Venta Altar 5, and the Las Limas figure. It did not account for other features of the axe-image, such as the almond eyes, the more-developed hands than feet, and the ear bulges instead of fully formed ears. It also did not address the format of the objects on which the axe-image appears or the possible functions of those axes, celts, and monuments. Instead, it selected those images that fit its purpose and ignored the rest.

Another aspect of the axe-image that Murdy did not address in his article is its frequent association with maize iconography. Joralemon (1971:59-61) had identified maize sprouts emerging from the cleft of the axe-image, a seed corn dot worn

as a medallion on the forehead, and maize seeds attached to a headband. Between about 2000 and 800 bc, farmers had worked to increase the number of grains per cob and the size of cobs. As a result, maize became more important in the Mesoamerican diet. The shift to an agricultural staple grain was probably a factor in the shift from Early Formative to Middle Formative lifeways. But the new food was not without serious, life-threatening consequences. When humans eat a diet with a proportionally high amount of maize without breaking the pericarp of the kernel and releasing enzymes and nutrients, that maize can be a factor in causing neural tube birth defects such as spina bifida and anencephaly.³ This startling connection, which would have strengthened the "congenital anomaly" argument, is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Had it been discovered at the time, Murdy could have used "El Bebé"—a large, axe-shaped sculpture of compacted clay—to support his argument. It was excavated from the Gulf Coast site El Manatí in 1994–1995 (Fig. 2.9). Dating to around 1350 bc, it is currently the oldest known anthropomorphic axe (Pool 2007). However, El Bebé is the only Olmec axe-image that lacks a cranium. Although I agree with Murdy that one Olmec axe-image does portray a fetus with neural tube defects, this singular object had not been discovered at the time of his publication.

Pantheons of Deities or Symbols of Vital Forces?

As had Ignacio Bernal, anthropologist Anatole Pohorilenko (1977) criticized the notion of pantheons of deities in the Formative period. Examining essentially the same corpus of portable objects studied by Joralemon, he concluded that Joralemon's motif combinations lacked sufficient consistency and did not represent specific entities—deities or otherwise (10). For example, the entity with the headband that signifies to Joralemon the "rain deity" might also appear with corn sprouts (Fig. 2.10). Was it also a maize deity? Furthermore, he asserted that no two Olmec pieces are identical and therefore could not reliably be said to represent a discrete entity.

Porhorilenko (1977) agreed with Joralemon that a "pars pro toto" strategy of symbolic communication existed, but differed on how such a system

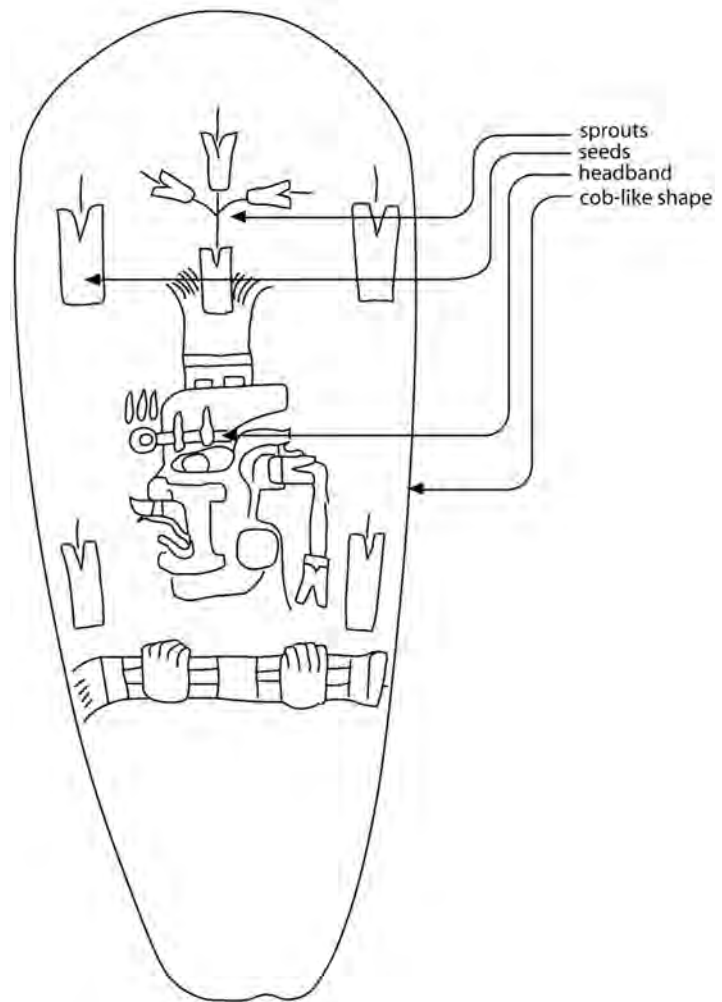


2.9 Detail of the head of El Bebé, a large, axe-shaped plaque of soft stone excavated in the mid-1990s at La Merced, Veracruz. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

might function. For example, instead of the drawing of a crocodile foot pointing merely to a crocodile, which is then said to be a deity, it “serves as a denotata, a signifier, for something much larger and more important in scope” (12). He pointed out that these symbolic objects may have had shifting meanings depending on whether they were deployed in material, ceremonial, or mythological contexts. He also indicated the important relationship between “referential signs and the human form in the anthropomorphic composite figures.” Pohorilenko saw more than composite beings in Olmec art. He also identified naturalistic representations in Olmec sculpture of “baby face figurines, tadpoles, . . . and the egg-tooth” (13). His insightful proposal that embryonic forms such as the tadpole and structures such as the egg-tooth existed in the Formative period symbolic repertoire is important to this study.

In proposing an alternative to what Olmec composite images might represent, Pohorilenko (1977) included a paragraph of ethnographic information, pointing out that in most known Mesoamerican belief systems natural phenomena are endowed with vital forces. He mentioned several groups who believe in the existence of spirits of rain, springs, and other phenomena, in a master of the hills, in small magical beings who populate hills, and so forth.

Another archaeologist who has questioned the notion of pantheons of deities in Classic and Preclassic Mesoamerica is Joyce Marcus. Her strategy was to compare comments about religious or ritual practice in Zapotec and Maya ethnohistory with the archaeological records of the two groups. She concluded that, on a fundamental level, the two groups shared very similar religious principles. Both cultures had words that expressed the concept of an indwelling vital force present to various degrees in persons and things. Neither made images of anthropomorphized supernatural beings, although ancestors were honored and images made of them. The Maya, she said, considered lightning, the sun, fire, and so forth as sacred, and depicted such forces by combining parts of different animals. To describe the general outlook of the Maya and Zapotec, she used the term *animatistic* to describe the view that “everything that moved deserved respect” (Marcus 1978:187). I consider Marcus’s argument—based on indigenous languages, practices of visual culture, and ethno-



2.10 Stone celt incised with a human-maize conflation: an embryo wearing a maize seed headband and holding a staff. Sprouts emerge from above the embryo’s head, which is surrounded by seeds. Cleveland Museum of Art. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

graphic records—to be an important step toward an emic interpretation.

Historian Alfredo López Austin has problematized this notion that it is essential to situate any discussion of religion within an emic worldview. It is unlikely, he points out, that all individuals in a specific ancient community shared a certain worldview. Surely individuals at distinct social levels who engaged in disparate activities would not articulate their beliefs in a similar way. In fact, it is unlikely that any individual could ever explain his or her society’s worldview in its entirety. López Austin (1994) made an illuminating comparison between a society’s “cosmovisión” and the grammatical structure of its language, each an “obra de todos y de nadie” (a work of everyone and no one).

No single individual possesses the entirety of a language: it is composed of the definitions and order that arise through communication. Similarly, the basis of a worldview, he wrote, “is not the product of speculation, but of the practical, quotidian relations. . . . The [Mesoamerican] *cosmovisión*—and with it religion and mythology in particular—was one of the most important vehicles of communication for the interrelations of societies as well as for the internal mechanisms of these societies” (López Austin 1994:14–15, translation mine). In grappling with the nature of the gods in Postclassic Mesoamerican religions, López Austin offered definitions from a variety of standpoints. In one in which he addressed the forces that move or are moved by the gods, he wrote:

Every being on earth has its share of forces. The invisible forces (the innate as well as those acquired or bestowed) make up the hidden depths of its history. Each being participates in the cosmic energy, but each has a unique, particular, and ever-changing combination, bathed day after day as the Sun sends time over the surface of the earth. Gods are not excluded from transformation in the total circulation of the divine forces in the world. They themselves are combinations of forces acquired during their passage in this world—processes formed by lesser processes, and forming in turn part of larger processes. Their qualities may be complementary, opposites, or at odds. The gods are dynamic beings, and their changing phases can be recognized by the garments and emblems that appear in their different avatars. . . . The garments and emblems constitute a code. Gods do not always wear the same emblems and garments, because their position, acts, and circumstances in this world change constantly. Their temporal history of earth is guided by the combination of ritual festivals. Garments and emblems are shared among the gods because each of them must occupy the same position and perform similar acts at some point in their existence. (López Austin 1993:126)

In this passage, López Austin argues against static identities for gods. To him the gods are “combinations of forces” that fluctuate depending on movement amidst and in relationship with other forces. They are nexuses of “processes” that articulate with other larger and smaller processes. When a person wants to intervene with one of the willful, ambivalent processes affecting her life, she engages the “god,” or nexus of processes, by summoning it to a ritual that attempts to reestablish the desired

distribution of forces. López Austin was dealing with primarily Postclassic material when he wrote this, but I think this description works better as a heuristic approach to the Formative period visual evidence than does a pantheon of gods. Again, especially for the Early Formative, I think it is premature to create a fixed typology of gods. That said, I agree with Joralemon that many of the Formative period concepts of power, time, space, the body, gender, and life formed symbolic webs that were prototypes for Postclassic (and Classic) deities and worldviews. But the ways in which Formative period people formulated some of these concepts were unique to that era; most of the concepts and their symbols transformed over time and in different settings.

After these publications appeared, and under the influence of Mayanist iconographer Linda Schele, a more linguistically based approach to iconographic interpretation began to be applied to Olmec symbols.

Shamanism in an Ecological Context

In the late 1980s and 1990s, F. Kent Reilly III—who, along with me, was a student of Linda Schele’s—pioneered a new approach to Olmec iconography. Reilly was working primarily with the two-dimensional symbolic system, but his work differs from his predecessors’ in several respects. He espoused the ecological approach of historian of religions Ake Hultkrantz, viewing a region’s geography, fauna, and flora as likely sources for symbols that might indicate larger ideological constructs. Rather than using the Greco-Roman model of a pantheon into which to fit symbolic representations, he took the shamanic cosmos (as defined by Mircea Eliade) as the conceptual matrix in which Olmec symbols functioned. In this model, the three cosmic levels of sky, earth, and underworld are united by a central vertical axis. Each level extends horizontally to sacred directions. Shamans are those who can “travel” to other realms. As Eliade ([1964] 1972:259) expressed it, “The pre-eminently shamanic technique is the passage from one cosmic region to another. The shaman knows the mystery of the break-through in plane.” Even before Reilly’s work, scholars such as Michael Coe, Gordon Ekholm, and Peter Furst (1968:177) had proposed that concepts of a tri-level sacred cosmos had entered

the New World with late Upper Paleolithic migrations from Asia, although this is still contested. None of them, however, had tested this hypothesis systematically by relating specific animals and other natural symbols to the tri-level cosmic realms as Reilly did. He scrutinized the features and behavior of the animals that the Olmec seemed to be depicting, relating them to details of Formative period scenic compositions. The archaeological contexts of objects remained important to his interpretations, and he relied as much as possible on excavated objects and rock art from specific sites. Reilly tested his hypotheses by examining numerous examples of symbols as part of their larger contexts, such as costuming or narrative scenes, to determine if interpretations of specific symbols remained relatively consistent. Finally, he focused on representations of special persons who seemed to function as rulers or shamans, or both: on the basis of their costuming, he proposed that they depicted “shamanic rulers.” Reilly’s original shamanic/ecological framework of interpretation for Olmec art did not include deities. Shamans may invoke supernormal entities, powers, or beings but are not considered deities themselves. Within this interpretive framework, Reilly (1994a, 1994b, 1995) contended that art objects functioned as props in rituals conducted by shamans and shamanic rulers.

When constructing an ethnographic analogy, Reilly tends to use Maya material. While I think the mythology, ethnohistory, and anthropological studies of Mesoamericans are essential to any attempt to reconstruct their ancestors’ beliefs and artistic practices, I find it problematic to rely exclusively on Maya material when dealing with the Olmec. Most Late Formative Maya communities, it seems to me, made an effort to distinguish their art and architecture from that of the Olmec, even though they did adopt some very important fundamental principles of ideology, and some symbols, from the Gulf Coast Olmec. However, Reilly’s contextual and ecological approach to symbols provides a glimpse of how Formative period symbols functioned within their own environments. Much of my work has proceeded from the formation we shared as Schele’s students and from Reilly’s sophisticated interpretive methods. The extent to which I build on his discoveries will become evident in subsequent chapters. Reilly’s attention to ecological/shamanistic frameworks has produced a more grounded series of interpretations.

The Rebirth of the Maize Deity

Karl Taube, a student of Coe’s, has continued to focus on deities, investigating complexes of imagery on Middle Formative sculptures related to rain deities (1995) and maize deities (1996). In a 1996 article he identified several variations of the axe-image as the maize deity (Fig. 2.11). Attributes that he associates with the maize god include an anthropomorphic face with lidless eyes, a projecting upper lip, and a cleft head with sprouts or cobs emerging from the cleft, or who wears a four-seed (or celt) headband. Taube interprets the celts, both



2.11 Votive axe showing the human-maize conflation: an embryo with a maize sprout. Denver Art Museum. H: 21.6 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

free-standing and attached to the body, as references to the *axis mundi*. Another symbol for this axis of communication between cosmic levels is the maize plant. Taube proposes that several figures with aspects of maize iconography, such as long lips, and who also raise their arms perpendicular to the body, assuming the form of a tree, represent maize plants. Based on the association of the iconography of maize and celts with anthropomorphic figures, Taube posited a widespread cult of maize, or a maize god, aimed at ensuring agricultural abundance.

He then turns to the economic possibilities of maize distribution and suggests that maize was too perishable to distribute successfully and was gradually replaced by jade and precious feathers. Taube (1996:76) concludes, “It is this cult of agriculture and associated riches that served to attract foreign peoples into the Olmec economic network. In both distant regions and the Olmec heartland, access to wealth and ultimately power was portrayed in terms of an elaborate religious complex pertaining to maize and agricultural fertility.”

By tracing the diaspora of maize symbols into Late Preclassic cultures, Taube builds on Joralemon’s identification of the maize symbols that arose at San Lorenzo and in the Basin of Mexico in the last centuries of the Early Formative and then became prominent in the Middle Formative. Taube sees the maize cult as spreading along trade routes used to exchange jade and precious feathers. While this seems likely, it may misrepresent the broader patterns of ideological, artistic, and economic exchange. As have many others, Taube assumes that any anthropomorphic image with nonhuman features is a deity. I counter, and propose that the ideology that spread in the Middle Formative was not a cult focused on deities. Maize represents only a portion of the concepts that were conveyed symbolically and adopted in local form by many communities. And as practitioners or scholars of non-Western religions can attest, not all belief systems construe the sacred as extrinsic to human nature.

Signs of Life

Another topic that Taube addressed in his 1996 article is the role of the “Maize God” in a Formative or Late Preclassic creation narrative. In discussing

the Olmec jade canoe from Cerro de las Mesas, he identifies the incised faces on its prow as images of the maize deity. Yet those incised faces have no maize symbolism (sprouts, cobs, silk curls, long lips, celts, etc.). He also fails to mention that when Covarrubias and Stirling excavated this canoe, it was found with a jade neonate (usually called a dwarf) that fits snugly into the canoe. As I propose in the next chapter, the baby in the boat is a metaphor for life springing from its watery source, not an image of a deity. In other words, the interpretations proposed in this book do not negate the view of Formative period beliefs advanced by iconographers such as Taube and Reilly. Instead, I attempt to reframe the symbols as constellations of motifs within larger ethnographic contexts. In doing so, a central theme emerges: that the generation and regeneration of life—or the vital force of humans, plants, animals, and insentient objects—was the focus of Formative period ritual activity and the symbols that convey it.⁴ Life is created and maintained through the interaction of opposing forces that constantly fluctuate in intensity: male and female, hot and cold, dry and wet. The health of one’s body, one’s crops, and one’s community is dependent upon balancing these forces through personal and group ritual action. As humans expressed their knowledge and beliefs in visual form, they conveyed their concern for the balancing of vital forces in each individual sculpture and each composition of objects. This shift in interpretation provides a new view of the ceremonial center as a place of healing and divination, as well as a venue for political and economic display.

So what is to become of the were-jaguar? Interpretations of the axe-image have changed along with society. Appendix 3 lists publications, films, and events that influenced the conception of the Olmec were-jaguar in the early twentieth century. As we have seen, the notion that the image represented a tiger or jaguar was initially based on a comparison between the Kunz axe and the Aztec jaguar sacrificial basin in Mexico City. The Kunz axe was linked with Tezcatlipoca after the Aztec primordial being was defeated by his brother (in a long series of conflicts). In *Mexico South*, as Covarrubias expressed what he saw as the jaguarian essence of the axe-image to a popular audience, he tried to integrate the folklore of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec with scholarly works on shamanism. But we should not ignore his almost plaintive insis-

tence on the “embryonic” and “infantile” qualities of many Olmec images.

In the 1930s, Willard Z. Park published his monograph on shamanism among Indians of western North America, and in the 1940s, George Foster addressed nagualism in Mexico and Guatemala. In the late 1960s, Furst integrated many studies by German scholars on shape-shifting among South American peoples with Covarrubias’s were-jaguar and the two (possibly spurious) figurines in Dumbarton Oaks. With these two standing figurines and a few kneeling ones, the were-jaguar now enjoyed full-figure representation and became the expression of shamanism. Furthermore, traditions of shape-shifters had been documented throughout the Americas. The literature on shamanism worldwide has become so vast that it is terrifying in itself. The debates about how to define shamanism, whether certain ritual and spiritual practices should be called shamanism at all, and whether *trance* and *ecstasy* are appropriate terms to describe the shamanic experience have raged for the last forty years.

I certainly cannot resolve this debate, yet I must clarify my current position. I have elected to take a more focused approach to defining Formative period beliefs and ritual practices, relating the practices of the Zapotec, Mixe, and Zoque to the material evidence of La Venta. This investigation is also informed by Barbara Tedlock’s work *The Woman in the Shaman’s Body* (2005) and other anthropological studies of indigenous healers. There is also abundant evidence that in many Mesoamerican societies, women and men engaged in spiritual and ritual practices in which they contacted extra-material forces and entities for the purposes of divination, healing, birthing, protection, integration or balancing of people and communities, controlling meteorological phenomena, traveling, crafting, subsistence—in short, for everything. It also seems clear that many communities had specialists in such practices. Formative period art and the archaeological record offer evidence for many of these practices. Therefore, even though we have no written record of Formative period ritual practices, we do have a material one. Whether it is wise to call this “shamanism” is still not clear to me. Also, I am very uncomfortable with the androcentric focus of most academic work on shamanism. One of the purposes of this book is to expand our knowledge of women’s roles as they are depicted

in Formative period art. Their primary roles are related to the spiritual and ritual dimensions of gestation, birth, and divination. This evidence from the Formative period for shamanistic-type practices seems clearer to me than any evidence for a religion involving the worship of deities.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the jaguarian, or shape-shifter, nature of the axe-image was questioned, and most iconographers discarded it in favor of essences of crocodile, snake, and frog. At the same time, an alternative approach developed: that of the axe-image or were-jaguar as a divinity. The image was dissected into constituent parts, and its variable elements became evidence for a pantheon of deities. In the 1990s the axe-image, especially as seen on celts, took its place as the central axis, or world tree, in a sky-earth-underworld shamanic cosmos. Maize symbols on the axe-image, first identified in the 1970s, were transformed in the 1990s into representations of a prominent maize god.

As we know, concepts of “religion” and “deity” are constructed by human intellect and action. I agree with Ignacio Bernal that there is not yet clear evidence that the “metropolitan” Olmec, by which he meant the people associated with the Gulf Coast centers, had developed a pantheon of superhuman deities. My view of the situation aligns more with that of López Austin. It seems to me that Mesoamericans sacralized what they perceived as the combinations of forces and processes that constitute the entirety of a living cosmos. Of course, my view is also the product of an era.

Although I propose in the next chapter that the basis of the axe-image is the human embryo, this identification does not negate the concept of interpenetrating identities between humans, plants, and animals. The presence of a wealth of imagery referring to gestation and birth does not eliminate shamanism; it simply indicates that women and gestation played significant roles in rituals involving birth, rebirth, midwifery, healing, and creation narratives. Seeing the axe-image as a pre-birth human allows us to recognize the whole of Olmec imagery as a product of ancient intellects making empirical observations of natural processes and engaging with the implications of the mysteries of life.

At the outset of this chapter I asked why our society has been so fascinated with the were-jaguar and so reluctant to discuss the embryonic qualities of the Olmec image. I am posing this question in an

era in which images of embryos and fetuses, made through MRI slices and ultrasound, are so common that they can be found on the Internet. This book cannot provide an answer to the question. It will, however, attempt to show that the image insistently construed by twentieth-century scholars as an

“other”—a god with ineffable powers, or a shaman who is part animal, or a biologically impossible creature—is really an image of us: of humans at a stage in which we share identities with other forms of life.

Chapter 3

The Sowing and Dawning of the Human-Maize Seed

With the exception of the Olmec, no ancient society has made effigies of infants without mothers a prominent subject of sculpture. As I described in Chapter 1, hollow, life-size ceramic sculptures of babies have been known since the 1920s. Since then, dozens have been found, mostly broken, and bits of hundreds more appear among collections of ceramic sherds. Also since the 1920s, scholars have observed the presence of infants in compositions on monumental stone sculptures. Despite so many babies, there has been minimal inquiry as to where an attending adult might be, or what the babies might signify. The worldwide rarity of infant sculptures is remarkable, as is the fact that some are spectacularly sophisticated technical and artistic achievements. Even more unusual is that Formative period Mesoamericans were apparently interested in pre-birth humans as well as those recently born. Villagers from Tierras Largas, Oaxaca, were producing images of a human fetus tucked inside the abdominal cavity of a female figurine by 1400 bc or earlier. This chapter explores the evidence that this was not a unique phenomenon—that instead, a truly extraordinary subject in Olmec sculpture is the representation of the human embryo at about six to eight weeks of gestation.

First the chapter presents the “formal” argument (based on form) that fetuses and embryos were part of the Formative period visual vocabulary. It sets forth the visual and scientific evidence that Formative period Mesoamericans observed the embryo under normal circumstances. Because the embryo symbol is one of the earliest to appear in the Mesoamerican iconographic repertoire, its chronology and spatial distribution are crucial to understanding the ideas that drove cultural development. For that reason, the chapter investigates the advent of the embryo symbol. Once the identification and chronology of the embryo image are established,

the chapter turns to a consideration of the embryo symbol's significance. It suggests that the Formative period peoples tended to construct reality in terms of "webs," or "matrices," of associated phenomena. The embryo as the "seed state" of human life is the "solid nucleus" of a matrix of symbolic elements. This web of concepts refers to life itself. It encompasses cosmic and local processes of insemination, metamorphosis of human and animal life forms, birth, survival, sexual reproduction, death, survival through seed, and regeneration. This epistemology of life involves measurements of time; concepts of sky and earth, lightning and rain; and principles of gender that affect sentient and insentient beings. Through the Formative period conceptualization of life, we observe a sense of a fluid identity as humans, animals, plants, and potencies take on qualities of the other. For Middle Formative persons, the definition of identity included a dual center: maize along with humanity.

The chapter concludes the survey of images of pre-birth and recently born humans with a study of the hollow ceramic babies and fragments. It then reconsiders the context of one of the few excavated babies, from Etlatongo, Oaxaca. This context prompts a rather daring comparison to a life-size statue of the infant Jesus. Called *Niñopa*, its sociological and material contexts are strikingly similar to those of the Etlatongo baby.

Of the methods used for this chapter, one is straightforward and the other complex. The iconographic identifications simply compare and contrast the components of forms. To elucidate the possible significance of the embryo images is not as easy. To tackle this, I have adapted a post-structuralist method used by Alfredo López Austin in his study of myth (1993). It is explained more fully below. For now, suffice it to say that the embryo symbol forms a "solid nucleus," or core meaning, around which multiple "variable elements" cluster.

If the Formative period axe-image is indeed based on the human embryo, then we must shift the way we think about early Mesoamerican knowledge systems and the people who generated them. Instead of seeing them as people who imagined "biologically impossible creatures" to combat unknown forces, we can recast Formative period Mesoamericans as people who used empirical observations to construct systems of knowledge that were logical, embodied, and spiritual, while

still allowing them to be "other." Identifying the axe-image as based on the human embryo allows much of the previous scholarship to be retained and expanded.

Images of the Unborn

Olmec Sculptures of the Human Fetus

My suggestion that the axe-image is based on the appearance of the human embryo is preceded by the proposal that the fetus was a subject of Olmec sculpture. In 1989, while working on an exhibition of Olmec art, I examined Olmec objects in collections in the United States and abroad. Initially, the organizers' goal was to eliminate any assumptions that we already understood the subject categories of Olmec sculpture. We used the photographs to try to determine what kinds of formats and subjects of stone sculpture were produced in the Formative period. One file kept growing. It consisted of photos of more than thirty anthropomorphic standing figures with very large heads, infantile features, and deeply flexed knees (Fig. 3.1). Scholars had published a few of these sculptures, referring to them by a variety of terms.

One piece in our file eventually was published as Figure 23 in my article "Art in Olmec Culture" (Tate 1995) for the exhibition catalogue. This one-legged figure was the first piece of Olmec stone sculpture collected by Covarrubias (Fig. 1.8). When he acquired it, it was a headless black stone figurine. Rather miraculously, Diego Rivera later found the head and gave to him. Covarrubias (1946:81) described the piece as "a freak, a monstrous baby or dwarf born without a lower jaw, his head thrown back in an expression of tortured anguish, showing a realistic windpipe that emerged between the collarbones and terminated in a puckered mouth between two puffed, squirrel cheeks." He reported that he had seen many more such pieces, all hunchbacked or clubfooted, and called them "unclassifiable freaks of Mexican archaeology" (81). In subsequent publications, these figurines were referred to as dancers (Drucker 1952:72–73) and as dwarfs and "jaguar-babies" (Easby and Scott 1970: Figs. 36 and 40).

I went to the medical library to verify that the figures were indeed dwarfs. The salient features of the group of eighteen sculptures that I had identified at that time were lack of teeth and hair, deeply flexed

knees, infantile features, and oversized heads. The figures did not, however, correspond very closely to the features of achondroplastic dwarfs. I then decided to pursue the “infantile” angle. Looking at books on human gestation, I was surprised by the close resemblance of these figures to fetuses—gestating humans from Week 9 to Week 38—at various stages of development. The head-to-body proportions of the sculptures are between 1:3 and 1:4. These correspond to the proportional ratios of human fetuses between twelve to thirty weeks. The sculptures’ deeply flexed legs and the position of the arms crossed over the body or raised so that the hands reach to ear level replicate precisely how the fetus adapts itself to the space of the womb. Several of these sculptures possess the incompletely articulated structure of the ears observable up to about twenty weeks of fetal development. Despite the similarities of the sculptures to fetuses, I decided I had extended myself far beyond my expertise as an art historian.

To get a medical opinion on the issue, I contacted a physician with an interest in art, Gordon Bendersky of Philadelphia. He also thought the sculptures represented human fetuses, but because his expertise is cardiology, he thought it better to consult specialists in human gestation. He invited eleven perinatologists, neonatologists, embryologists, and obstetricians to a meeting and showed them photographs of sixteen sculptures. They commented on each individually. None of these experts thought that any of the sculptures represented dwarfs. Several of the sculptures were unanimously identified as fetuses, and all were identified as representing fetuses by at least half of the specialists. (If the doctors did not think they were fetuses, they were unable to identify what the sculptures did represent.) As they commented on each sculpture, the doctors noted specific congenital abnormalities that could have caused such a fetus to spontaneously abort. These included agnathia and micronathia (lack of a lower jaw or small jaw) and macrocephaly (abnormally large head). Other sculptures represented apparently normal fetuses. The sculptures are generally so naturalistic that they include specific characteristics that allowed doctors to pinpoint which week of gestation most of the sculptures portrayed. None thought that the figures were clubfooted, as Covarrubias had mentioned. The sculptors probably carved large feet so that the figures could stand upright.



3.1 Olmec fetus sculpture with hands grasping a helmeted head, like the colossal heads of La Venta. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Drawing by author.

I thought the evidence was compelling, so Dr. Bendersky and I published this hypothesis in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (Tate and Bendersky 1999), and Ralph Blumenthal (1999) reported on it in the *New York Times*. As a result of these publications, we received a dozen letters from medical specialists around the world. All the writers agreed that the Olmec sculptures represented fetuses; however, the hypothesis has not been widely accepted among Olmec archaeologists, and other medical researchers have studied Olmec sculptures and arrived at different conclusions (Contreras Paredes 2009). For example, in her catalogue of San Lorenzo sculptures, Cyphers (2004:166) preferred the dwarf interpretation. Nonetheless, there are several characteristics of achondroplastic dwarfism that make it highly unlikely that these Olmec sculptures represent dwarfs.¹

Some of the typical signs of achondroplastic dwarfism include an exaggerated pelvic tilt to the spine that causes prominent buttocks and an unusually protuberant abdomen. All of the Olmec fetus sculptures have the opposite formation: a straight back without prominent buttocks. Bowed legs are common in dwarfs, but in Olmec fetus sculptures the legs are parallel. The knees are deeply flexed, as are the legs of the fetus in the womb. Dwarfs often have “trident hands” caused by the inability to extend the third and fourth fingers. This is never seen in the Olmec fetus sculptures. Because of short upper arms that are sometimes subluxed (misaligned), young dwarfs have difficulties raising their arms to the top of their heads. On many of the Olmec fetus sculptures, the arms are raised so that the hands reach the ears (Bergsma 1973; McKusick 1994; Wynne-Davies et al. 1985). So, while the Maya accurately represented achondroplastic dwarfs,² there is a significant corpus of anthropomorphic Olmec sculptures with fetal proportions that do not accurately represent dwarfs. Perhaps the best answer will emerge from considering which avenue of interpretation is supported by the overall iconographic context in the Formative period. This and the subsequent chapters show that symbols for birth, wombs, umbilical cords, infants, and embryos provide a framework of gestational imagery into which the fetuses fit.

Presenting the Embryo

It is clear that Formative period Mesoamericans could and did observe fetuses by 1400 bc. We know that during the Tierras Largas phase (ca. 1400 bc) the inhabitants of Hacienda Blanca, Oaxaca, produced a figurine of a female containing a tiny sculpted fetus within a cavity in the lower abdomen (Marcus 1998:26) (Fig. 3.2). Women knew about fetuses—and, I contend, about embryos—through their experiences with miscarriage. I propose that the axe-image is a stylized version of the human embryo, and that the strange face found on so many Formative period pots, items of regalia, and even stelae is also an artistic, stylized rendering based on close observation of the most amazing journey of transformation that occurs in a human life—that of the embryo.

The term *embryo*, when applied to humans, refers to the organism from approximately the third week to the end of the eighth week of develop-



3.2 Excavated in Oaxaca, a Tierras Largas partially hollow figurine that contained a fetus, ca. 1400 BC. Courtesy of Joyce Marcus.



3.3 A fifty-six-day embryo bundled in its sacs. Photograph © Dr. Bradley Smith. Courtesy of Bradley Smith.

ment in the womb (from 20 to 56 days, or Carnegie Stages 9–23). At the end of the eighth week, the fetal period begins, culminating with the birth of the infant, typically in Week 38, after at least 260 days of gestation (England 1996:5–8; Moore 1977:6).

There is a high incidence of miscarriage precisely as the human organism makes the transition from embryo to fetus. Currently, statistics gathered in the United States and England indicate that about 20 percent of recognized pregnancies spontaneously abort between the fifth and seventh weeks of gestation. Another 10 percent of recognized pregnancies end in miscarriage between the eighth and twelfth weeks, after which risk of miscarriage decreases dramatically (Tucker 1999; Baginski 2002). This significantly high rate of miscarriage occurs in modern society, and we can assume that it was at least that high in the ancient world. The organism and sacs expelled from Weeks 5 to 12 are visible. At Week 6 the embryo measures 8 to 11 mm (0.31 to 0.43 in.) from crown to rump (think of a small shrimp, curled up, with legs drawn into the body). At Week 7 it measures 17 to 20 mm from crown to rump. By the end of the Week 8 it achieves about 32 mm (1.26 in.) from crown to rump (see Moore 1977:6 or England 1996:6–8). It is therefore quite possible that certain Formative period individuals investigated the tissue and fluids expelled during a miscarriage. What they would have seen is depicted in Figure 3.3, which shows a sac surrounding an embryo of about fifty-six days. How Formative period people conceptualized what they saw is, I think, revealed to us via their crafting of a stylized image of the embryo and by how they used this image.

As I consider the embryo as a possible referent for the axe-image, I will begin with a comparison of their forms. Once the visual similarity is established, I turn to ethnographic literature to see how and where the concept of an embryo, or human seed, appears.

The most compelling aspect of the comparison is that it accounts for *every feature* of the basic stylized axe-image. As you look at the photographs and medical illustrations, bear in mind that the Olmec usually conventionalized the image for symbolic purposes (Fig. 3.4). This means they looked at the embryo's salient features—the lidless eyes, the single oral-nasal cavity, the puffy upper lip, and the large head relative to the body—and artistically turned them into a simplified form that was easily

identifiable. At 1000 bc most visual representation in the world was rendered in an idealized (made to achieve a notion of physical perfection) or conventionalized (simplified and manipulated to be readily identifiable) manner. Optical realism has not been common in world art, and in Europe it did not begin to develop until the Roman era, so one cannot expect these Mesoamerican sculptures to be anatomically correct illustrations in a modern sense.

Figure 3.5 shows a photo of a human embryo of fifty-four days (Carnegie Stage 22), one of a few days' further development (Stage 23), and an early fetus alongside drawings of Formative period figurines. The following comments refer to Figures 3.4 and 3.5.

Proportions

In each case, the head is very large in proportion to the body. The human embryo's torso from the base of the head to the rump is about 1.25 times the size of the head. The same is true of the Olmec figurine. On the axe-image, the head is even larger than the rest of the stylized body. (Normal human adult proportions of head to body are about 1:7 or 1:7.5.) The developing embryo's head grows in relation to the torso until it reaches about 1:1 at Week 10.

Head

The embryo's skull is very thin and soft. Bony portions are separated by large sutures called fontanels, of which there are normally six at the time of birth (England 1996:191). The upper, or anterior, fontanel is diamond-shaped and about 25 mm at birth. The skin over it pulsates, sometimes until the infant is two years old (191). The forebrain, midbrain, and hindbrain form bulges that create the shape of the head.

Similar swelling masses appear on the figurine's head. The stylized forms on the axe-image give the head a slightly curved, tapering rectangular shape. Both the figurine and the axe-image show the anterior fontanel. In the figurine it is subtle but present; in the axe-image it takes the stylized "cleft-head" form.

Eyes

"At Week 5, the embryo's eyes are on either side of the head" (England 1996:74). Because the eyes are oval and lidless, they appear "open." Eyelids begin to form between Days 52 and 57. On the figurine and axe, the eyes are widely spaced and lidless.



Carnegie Stage
22 or 54-55 days.
Photos courtesy
Bradley Smith.
Drawing by Corey
Escoto. Figure in
private collection.



Carnegie Stage
23 or 56-57 days.
Photos courtesy
Bradley Smith.
Drawing by Corey
Escoto. Figure in
private collection.

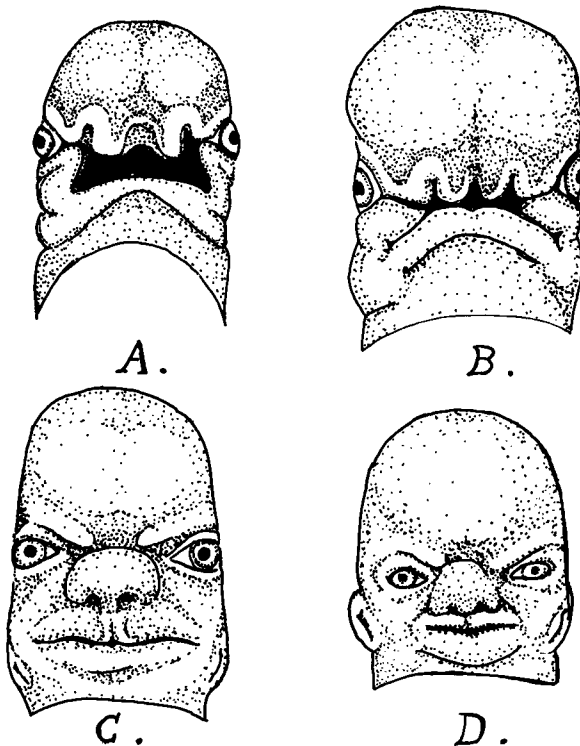


Week 14. Photo
Courtesy Bradley
Smith. Drawing
by Corey Escoto.
Figure in private
collection.



3.4 How ancient artists stylized the embryo image: *top*, a figurine showing many naturalistic features, such as the bulging head, webbed fingers, lidless eyes, and natural proportions; *center*, the shape and proportions of the embryo conventionalized as a cleft seed; *bottom*, the conventionalized seed shape with lateral extensions, transforming it into a tree form. The embryo-seed has been enhanced with a variety of related symbols, including the fontanel, axolotl gill crests, maize bundles, and canine dentition. Drawings by Corey Escoto.

3.5 A comparison of human embryos and Formative period stone figurines. Note the proportions of head to torso, the shape of the head, the almond eyes, the toothless, newly formed mouths, and the hands that are slightly more developed than feet. Photos courtesy of Bradley Smith, Ph.D. Drawings by Corey Escoto. Figurines from private collections.



3.6 Development of the human face from five to eight weeks: A, five weeks: the large hole is the oral-nasal opening; B, six weeks: lip buds grow toward each other; C, seven weeks: upper lip and nostrils are forming, and rate of miscarriage is high; D, eight weeks of gestation. Author drawing, after Gilbert, *Biography of the Unborn*.

Nose and Mouth

The development of the mouth is very interesting and might well help to explain why the Olmec developed the symbolic device of the so-called puffy upper lip (Fig. 3.6). According to physician Margaret Gilbert,

It is around the eyes, nose, and ears, and especially around the wide gaping mouth, that the [embryo's] face is now built [Weeks 4 to 8]. The lower ends of the first branchial arches fuse below the mouth to form the lower jaw. At the angles of the mouth buds of tissue appear, which grow forward above the mouth cavity and fuse to form the upper jaw. The mouth, this bounded by upper and lower jaws, is a very wide slit which is gradually reduced in size by the partial fusion of the two jaws at the angles of the mouth. The fused material then forms the cheeks.

At the same time the nasal sacs gradually move closer together so that, by the time the upper jaw has been formed, the two nasal sacs lie side by side, incorporated by a wide ridge of tissue into a single, broad nose. (Gilbert 1938:35)

As seen in Figure 3.6, in the fifth week the nasal and oral openings are not clearly differentiated. In the sixth week buds called maxillary prominences grow rapidly toward each other to form an upper lip that separates the nostrils from the mouth (England 1996:72–74). The maxillary prominences are just that—prominent or puffy. The maxillary prominences are hard to photograph because embryos tend to have their hands near their faces, but one can be seen in the upper left image of Figure 3.7. This facial development occurs rapidly and at the stage (Stage 19, about Week 7) during which the embryo is frequently lost from the womb. Anyone who had seen several miscarriages of embryos would have noticed the exaggerated upper lip and shallow nasal pits.



The face of an embryo at Carnegie Stage 19, or 47–48 days. Drawing by Corey Escoto, after England 1996: fig. 78d.

Ridged forehead.
Widely spaced eyes.
In the human embryo, the nostril pits have just formed. See the maxillary prominence (puffy upper lip).
Fingers are still webbed.



Detail of an Olmec sculpture of an embryo. Private collection. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



Embryo at Carnegie Stage 22, or about 54 days. Total crown-rump length about 30 mm. Photo courtesy Bradley Smith.

Widely spaced, lidless, almond-shaped eyes.
Ears indicated by a minimal ridge of tissue.
Nostrils have just formed, producing flat nose and puffy upper lip.
Lack of neck.
Fingers have barely formed.

Arms flexed over chest.



Votive Axe, Denver Art Museum. Height 21.6 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

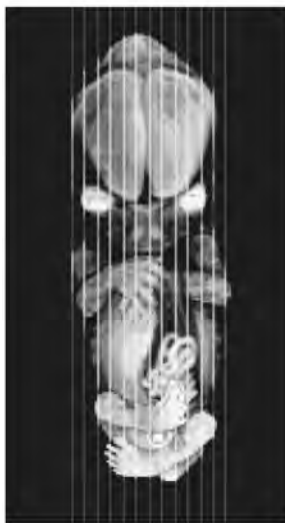
3.7 A comparison of embryo faces and the faces of some Olmec sculptures. Note the widely spaced, lidless, almond-shaped eyes; lack of nostrils; downturned maxillary prominence; and webbed fingers. Photo courtesy of Bradley Smith, Ph.D. Drawings by Corey Escoto.

I think this sequence of development accounts for the stylized version of the upper lip (the “puffy upper lip” on our Olmec symbol). As England (1996:72–74) describes, the five-week embryo’s mouth is a single slit with drooping or downturned corners. The phrase “downturned mouth” is often used to describe the Olmec axe-image. Then buds of tissue wedge their way toward each other to fuse into the upper lip and palate. This lip structure is “puffy,” another term frequently applied to the axe-image face. The flat nose is an additional characteristic of axe-images.

Most representations of the Olmec symbol clearly display their toothless gums, also evident in human embryos. However, Formative period people sometimes added the dentition of various animals to the basic image to indicate an aspect of the “matrix of associations”—a symbolic practice discussed further below. (Previous researchers have focused on relating the kinds of teeth conflated onto the embryo image to specific animal species.)

Ears

On an embryo the ears first appear as a ridge of small arches on the sides of the neck. They do not move up onto the head until Week 10 (England 1996:91). Similarly, on the figurines and axe-images, ridgelike formations represent this early ear structure.



3.8 The embryo’s pointy head. MRI image courtesy of Bradley Smith, Ph.D. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



Limbs

In the developing embryo, “The upper limb first appears late in Week 4, followed two days later by the lower limb. This . . . [arm to leg] maturity gradient is retained throughout development” (England 1996:173). Arms develop recognizable parts in Week 5, with hand plates appearing in Week 6. The arm bends at the elbow at Day 54 (Week 7). “In Week 7 the lower limb bud’s foot plate has . . . toe rays” (173). “As the thigh, leg, and foot develop, the foot faces the trunk. The knee then rotates 90 degrees” (179). Fingernails do not appear until Week 10.

Most of the Olmec images show short arms with poorly differentiated fingers (Figs. 3.4, 3.5, 3.73.8). Both the figurine and axe-image show arms that are better developed than legs. This is typical of embryo representations on many axe-images and incised celts. Interpretations of this image as a maize god or other being do not account for this developmental feature. I propose that the Olmec took care to show the developing stages of the limbs in both naturalistic and conventionalized images.

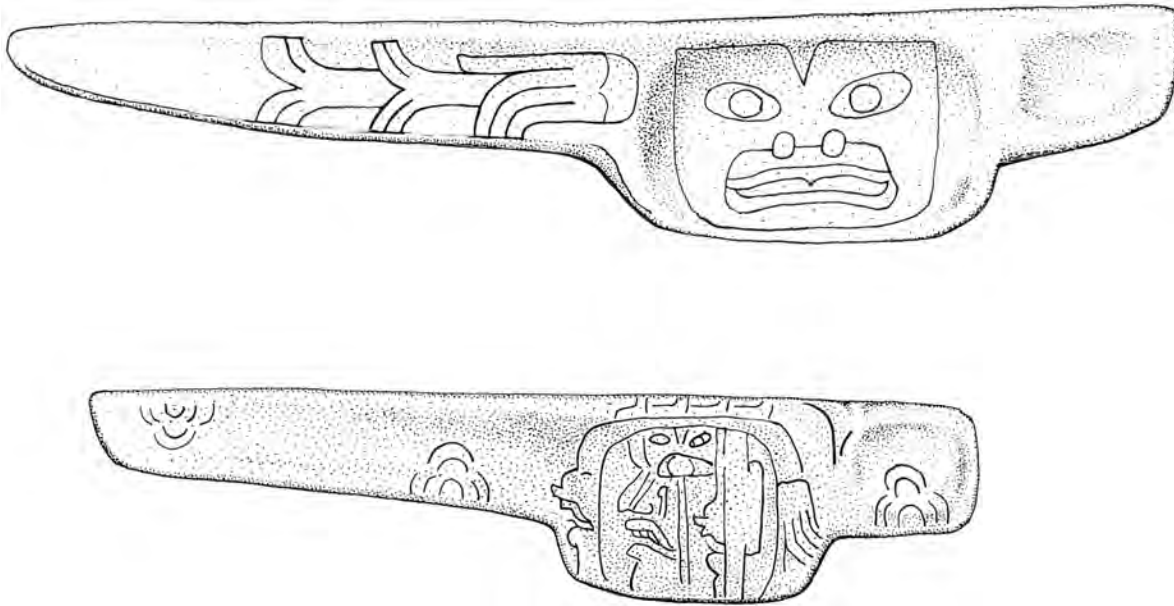
Bulge in Head

A protrusion in the shape of a rounded point forms the top of the fifty-six-day embryo’s head. This strongly resembles the Olmec maize sprout symbol. Also, several figurines show strange protrusions in the same location (Fig. 3.8).

The features of the Olmec symbol demonstrate a nearly perfect correspondence with the characteristics of the six- to eight-week human embryo. As artists conventionalized the embryo symbol, they retained an actual embryo’s proportions, its nascent limbs, and the characteristics of the just-formed nose and mouth. These features were essential to the recognition of the image as that of an embryo. Many images also exhibited the almond-shaped, lidless eyes and cleft head.

Symbolic Signifiers

Let us consider how ancient Olmec artists modified the basic embryo image to add meanings to the symbol. To its conventionalized form, they added a variety of features drawn from other animals, some of which were cultural signifiers. They chose characteristic features of birds, crocodilians, sharks, snakes, and felines and used them to amplify the embryo image, thereby making it correspond to a



3.9 Olmec “spoons,” which may have functioned as weaving tools. The forms resemble a tadpole or the human embryo at about 26 days, when it would be 4 mm in length. On the upper one a frontal embryo face occupies the bowl, and a paw and tails decorate the handle. On the lower spoon an embryo

profile wraps upward, axolotl crests mark the top, and the embryo terminates in an axolotl foot. This forms a frame for an adult profile marked with an embryo stripe. Upper: Cleveland Museum of Art. Lower: Private collection, on loan to Brooklyn Museum. Drawings by Corey Escoto.

local narrative. There is a biological basis for these zoomorphic conflations: when we are embryos, we seem to have characteristics found in the embryos of other creatures. For example, by about the fourth week, we develop a broad, tail-like bud at the base of the spine (visible in Fig. 3.5, center) and webbed digits suggestive of crocodilians (Fig. 3.5, top). At this age we are tightly curled, like a shrimp or the embryo of a bird. Formative period people must have found this fluidity of identity meaningful.

The second type of addition consisted of cultural ornaments such as headbands, earspools, and celts. These cultural ornaments *reinforced* the anthropomorphic character of the ambiguous embryo. Several zoomorphic and cultural additions—such as “flame brows” (see Fig. 3.4, center) and a headband (Fig. 3.7, bottom right)—became conventionalized and are found across time and space.

Contexts for Embryo Images

Further support of this proposal comes from scholars who have identified other gestation-related imagery in Mesoamerican art. Of course, the embryo is nourished through the thick, twisted umbilical cord, and several Mesoamericanists have addressed umbilical cord imagery in Olmec and

Maya art (Miller 1974; Freidel et al. 1993:102–107; Taube 1994;Looper and Guernsey Kappelman 2000; Guernsey Kappelman and Reilly 2001; Guernsey and Reilly 2006). Others have discussed the presence of womb imagery in the form of caves and U-shaped elements in later Mesoamerican art (Heyden 1981; Milbrath 1988). As discussed in Chapter 8, there are numerous symbolic wombs in Olmec and later Mesoamerican art. The prevalence of birth-related metaphors and images has become clear with Houston’s (1996) work on sweatbaths as the birthplaces of Palenque gods; the discovery of San Bartolo, with its gourd-birth scene (Saturno et al. 2005); and Boone’s (2007) work on the cosmogonic section of the *Codex Borgia*.

Another example of related iconography is the spoon-shaped object shown in Figure 3.9. Anatole Pohorilenko (1996:129) suggested that Olmec jade “spoons” represent tadpoles. In the third week, human embryos are about 3.5 mm and have a tadpole-like form. I think Pohorilenko is correct, except that the tadpole spoons also refer to the embryo at that stage. Supporting this conjecture is the fact that several spoons are incised with embryo images. Another common decorative element on the spoons is an avian image. Follensbee (2008)



3.10 Olmec sculpture of a fetus or newborn that was embedded in cinnabar in an alabaster bowl. Private collection. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

has convincingly suggested that these objects served as weaving battens. Throughout Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerican societies, the accretion and growth of a gestating being were likened to the processes of spinning and weaving (Klein 1982; Prechtel and Carlsen 1988). The widespread use of this metaphor points to an ancient precedent. The Formative period weaving tools—in the form of tadpoles or very young embryos, and often decorated with embryo faces—may have served to link the primal power that fuels the gestation of the embryo with the formation of the textile.

The Embryo in Its Sac: The Original Sacred Bundle

I further suggest that observations of the embryo in its sacs provide a rationale for the prevalence and meaning of Mesoamerican sacred bundles. There is a growing literature on bundles and the processes of wrapping and bundling powerful objects ranging from small caches to public monuments (Stenzel

1970). Bundles were used for transporting tutelary deities, collecting and caring for sacred originary fecundating stones (such as Mixcoatl's white flint), facilitating the rebirth of a Mexica human as a ruler (Olivier 1995), and installing vital forces such as time and a Maya ruler's life into a stone (Stuart 1996). Scholars have noted the protective or concealing function of bundling (Guernsey 2006a; Reilly 2006). They have shown that control of bundles or wrapped objects and their unwrapping is a strategy for exercising political and religious control (Guernsey and Reilly 2006). The dead are bundled in many societies, and in those cases, bundles are clearly referents to ancestors and their rebirth (Freidel and Guenter 2006). Among certain modern Maya groups a newborn's soul is secured by tying its wrists with green cotton cord (Guiteras-Holmes 1961), and similarly, wrapping anchors a life force, or "soul," to a person, bundle, or object (Reese-Taylor et al. 2006). Why were bundling and wrapping such a major aspect of ritual practice throughout Mesoamerica? How did life force, "soul," and power come to be associated with bundles? I suggest that there is a biological basis for this belief.

While a gestating being is in the womb, the amniotic and chorionic sacs and the placenta protect the embryo, and later the fetus, and provide for nutrition, excretion, and respiration (England 1996:36). When Formative period peoples encountered the embryo or fetus, it would have been enclosed in three pinkish, transparent sacs that seem like layers of blood-rich tissue. These bundles of tissue surround the seed of human life. I propose that Mesoamerican acts of wrapping and bundling ritually re-created the condition of gestation, when mysterious vital energies and substances intermingle to hasten the dawn of life.

This extends to caching as well. At La Venta, for example, as detailed in Chapter 5, layers of blood-red cinnabar enveloped offerings placed in containers or delimited areas, and there is some hint that there may have been some actual bundles before their wrappings deteriorated. The red cinnabar and the skin or cloth bundles replicate the sacs in which the embryo grows, and ritually impart this same life force to the objects within (Fig. 3.10). Many Late Preclassic Maya cache vessels, such as the offering bundles from Arenal, Belize, contain tiny anthropomorphic sculptures that likely represent

embryos or fetuses (Taschek and Ball 1999: Fig. 11a). The Classic Maya also drowned objects in cinnabar and cached them in womblike vessels to install life in buildings (Mock 1998). In addition to their economic and political significance, the objects, including many marine creatures, cached in such shrines as the Templo Mayor probably ritually re-created a gestational environment of becoming and renewal.

In summation, the form of the basic axe-image bears a one-to-one correspondence with the form of the human embryo at six to eight weeks of gestation. Because this is the point at which there is a high incidence of spontaneous miscarriage, many women would have observed the embryo or early fetus. Midwives or women experienced with pregnancy and birth would surely know what the embryo looked like, and probably helped develop and transmit knowledge about gestation and its process of around 260 days. The miscarried pregnancy involves a sac of three layers of tissue, like a bundle. It is filled with blood and fluids and attached to an umbilical cord. Within this sacred bundle is an embryo that is large enough to see. The tiny embryo does not quite look human, however; instead it seems that it could become some other animal, with a tail or gills or webbed appendages. It has a single, downturned oral-nasal cavity or, later, a “puffy upper lip.” Perhaps for this reason, features of other animals were added to the basic embryo image or substituted for certain features such as eyes, brows, and teeth. Cultural symbols, such as headbands, were added to the basic image as well. And as we will soon see, maize iconography, in the form of sprouts and seeds, is frequently affixed to the embryo image. As is apparent, the embryo as a visual symbol fits well into what is already known of Olmec and later Mesoamerican visual subject matter, including umbilical cords and womb imagery.

To better understand the Formative period embryo image and its augmentation with animal and maize characteristics, I employ an approach I call “matrix of associations.” This starts with the Formative period embryo as a “core” symbol, looks at the other significant elements associated with the embryo to identify the “matrix,” and then compares this constellation to similar “core plus matrix” configurations among twentieth-century indigenous groups in Mesoamerica.

The Formative Mesoamerican Embryo and Its Matrix of Associations

The Methodological Approach

In the absence of written texts it is always difficult to securely assign meanings to symbols. This problem is compounded for Mesoamerica because the most powerful symbols were multi-valent (Hunt 1977). For an example that will be familiar to most Mesoamericanists, consider the central icon, the human-maize tree, on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross at Palenque. It refers to so many spheres of knowledge and power that it is impossible to succinctly state its meaning. In this case, we do have a written context for the visual symbol. The texts refer to the birth of the creators, the origin of the world, the ordering of space, the birth and empowerment of the dynasty, the temples as sweatbath-wombs, the establishment of rituals, and the history of the ruler who commissioned the monument. The visual symbol depicts a stylized maize plant with human heads as fruits. The jewels and necklace it wears further anthropomorphize the maize plant, making it a human-maize conflation. Perching on it is a “principal bird deity,” which may be a portrayal of the primordial creatrix whose establishment of the sacrificial rite of bloodletting is recorded on this tablet. It is a cosmic plant, with faces that literally face the four directions even as the plant arises from a sacred, ancestral sea represented by the waterlily “monster” beneath it. The ruler portrayed next to it receives primordial regalia and makes sacrifices. The jade beads that float around it refer to the birth of the first humans in a jade enclosure, as on page 38 of the *Codex Borgia* (Boone 2007:192–195). We also know that the Maya ruler claims to receive royal legitimacy from the creator beings, and that the human-maize plant refers to the originary fourfold division of space and the pivoting motion of the sky (Freidel et al. 1993:237–261, 237–261; Bernal-García 2002; Tate 2002). So the central icon is not just a maize plant.

Similarly, the Olmec embryo symbol is not just an embryo. But given the lack of written information and the sparse symbolic contexts in which these ancient visual images occur, we must work diligently and methodically to suggest an interpretation. Furthermore, unless our interpretations bear some similarity to the beliefs and practices of

modern indigenous peoples of Mexico, how are we to know that we are on the right track?

Historian Alfredo López Austin has tackled a similar problem in his studies of the origin and significance of Postclassic gods. Of the many possible approaches to this topic, he chose mythology for his book *Myths of the Opossum: Pathways of Mesoamerican Mythology* (1993). In that work he integrates archaeological and documentary sources with ethnological ones. Those are similar to the kinds of sources that are available as we devise interpretations of Olmec art: archaeological contexts for excavated objects, the decontextualized artifacts, documentation of the beliefs of Contact period indigenous societies, and ethnological studies of similar symbols in the rituals of modern traditionalist peoples. López Austin sees that his methods might be useful for the study of visual symbols as well as verbal ones. He argues that for Mesoamerica, "Mythology and iconography as subjects of study are not as different as they might at first seem . . . [a]s symbols, [both] can be studied from the viewpoint of ideology" (López Austin 1993:1).

He justifies his use of ethnological studies as a source of comparison by constructing the bridging argument that in Mesoamerica, "the strong persistence of mythic elements is not debatable. The great number of characters, motifs, plots, sequences and meaning that appear both in the older accounts of . . . myths . . . and in those collected in our own time, prove . . . the magnitude of the persistence" (López Austin 1993:356). He finds that in Mesoamerica, myths and visual symbols, along with such elements as the calendar system, are elements of long duration, whereas political, economic, and social systems yield "different rhythms that need to be coordinated" (305). López Austin proposes a strategy for identifying the "solid nucleus" of a symbol and a variable "web of associations" that allows for the construction of local meanings.

Such matrices of associations seem to be the fundamental way in which Mesoamerican people construct knowledge, as ethnographers Martin Prechtel and Robert Carlsen explain in a description of their efforts to comprehend Mesoamerican ways of knowing:

Any attempt to conceive of the world as the contemporary Maya themselves do can be frustrating until one realizes that "to know" in the Mayan sense is not based on exact

equations, on statements of fact. To know something is not to be aware of the minute details of that thing but instead is to understand how that thing fits into an ever-expanding system. . . . the elements making up this world must be understood as parts of a *gestalt*, a vast system whose primary function is the regeneration and continuation of time and of the world. (Prechtel and Carlsen 1988:123)

This statement has been extremely helpful as I struggled with how the Maya and Olmec created meaning through visual symbols. It seems to me that this multivalency is one goal of the Mesoamerican aesthetic: to provide a composition that can be understood and performed on many different levels. Attempts to decipher iconography should follow Mesoamerican epistemology and aim to see these webs of symbols as part of "a vast system." Equally important is Prechtel and Carlsen's emphasis that the function of the symbolic system "is the regeneration and continuation of time and of the world." Those engaged in the study of Mesoamerican ideas recognize a profound emphasis on the human role in the regeneration of life. As we shall see, the embryo symbol is at the crux of the Formative period expression of this concept.

It is important to make two more comments on how Formative period visual culture signaled meanings. First, all of the variable elements do not appear in a single sculpture. We will find the entire set by examining numerous monuments that contain the embryo image. This is consistent with how elements are distributed in the records of myth. López Austin (1993:310) observed that "one can never expect to find a total congruence, an unchanged tradition. . . . One looks for clues. Finding the keys to indigenous thought allows the necessary hypotheses to be formulated." The embryo symbol conveyed various meanings within a certain range depending on its associated symbols.

Furthermore, adding another valence to a symbol's meaning, there is a strong tendency to relate to each other, through metaphor, things that have a similar shape, movement, or appearance. For example, Olmec greenstone celts and stone stelae can bear similar imagery (Porter 1996), and the green color and elongated shape relate to corn cobs. Taube related the shape of the compact Olmec loincloth to the cob, the greenstone celt, and to the world axis (Taube 1996:53–54). When Olmec celts are incised, the image of an embryo is often included. As mentioned above, several of

the earliest embryo images are on columns, some of which are clearly shaped like phalluses. Celts, stelae, columns, phalluses, and loincloths all have a similar long, thin shape, and all of them can be decorated with embryo images. This makes them a metaphoric set. I hope it is not misleading to use a term borrowed from developmental psychology, *isomorphic parallelism*, to describe such a set united by similar form. Several such sets will be identified in the course of this study.

Returning to López Austin's description of his post-structuralist method, he recommends a rigorous series of analyses in order to deal with the problem of a symbol's change in meaning over time. What he does for verbal symbols, this study performs twice, once for the images under study and once for the ethnohistoric data. These are the operations that López Austin (1993) has outlined.

1. Gather as many examples as possible.
2. Use your imagination along with your faculties of reason to attempt a preliminary identification.
3. Examine the image's chronological and geographic shifts.
4. Consider the contexts in which the image appears, as an element of a larger composition, as well as its relation to other objects.
5. Search for a "web of associations" for the element. Once it is contextualized, its meaning starts to emerge.
6. Locate the "solid nuclei" of elements that appear with the image and differentiate these from the variable parts.
7. Search for the image's vague beginning, its prominence, loss of stability, and disappearance.
8. Constantly reevaluate the preliminary identification in light of new information.

As I worked, I combined Steps 3, 4, and 7: the vague beginnings, the temporal and geographic shifts, and the contexts of each image. A decent sense of the historical and contextual development of the image allowed me to identify what was relatively unchanging—the "solid nucleus" of the embryo image—and what variable elements (the "web" or "matrix") occurred across time and space (Steps 6 and 5). So historical development of the embryo symbol is the subject of one lengthy section below, and the identification of the matrix of associated variable elements comprises another.

Analysis of the Embryo Symbol

Step 1. Gathering data. This analysis of the embryo symbol in Formative Mesoamerica evaluated more than two thousand objects, emphasizing archaeologically retrieved objects and their contexts.

Step 2. Preliminary hypothesis. As outlined above, my preliminary identification of the axe-image as an embryo was based on the one-to-one correspondence of its elements to those of the human embryo. Its significance seems to pertain to the rapid transformation that can be observed in embryonic development from ambiguous zoomorphic to human form. The embryo represents vital energy linked to the concept of life. It also refers to specialized knowledge, especially that controlled by women, of the human gestation cycle and lunar methods of reckoning time, and forms the basis for the unusual and primordial 260-day temporal cycle of Mesoamerica.

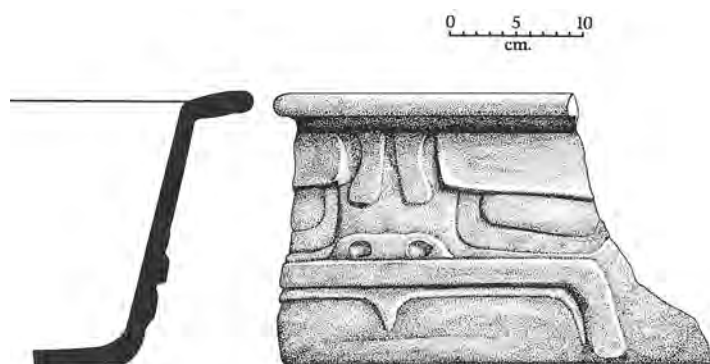
Steps 3, 4, and 7. Origins, change, and contexts. To fully explore the question of context, I employed structural analyses, considering every monumental composition and every cache or burial in which the embryo image appeared at the best-excavated sites: La Venta, San Lorenzo, and Cerro de las Mesas. I crafted charts that record all associated elements within an embryo-image composition, and others that record associated elements in caches. The following records my attempt to ascertain the origins and development of the embryo symbol.

Bearing in mind that dates for Formative objects are highly debatable, the following general chronology seems reasonably secure. The dates here are based on the recent chronological synthesis by Christopher Pool (2007), although it also considers the efforts of John Clark and Mary Pye (2000; personal communication, 2005). This discussion will take the almond eyes and/or toothless downturned mouth, the presence of a fontanel, and incipient fingers as indicators of a "core" or "nuclear" embryo image and will then consider the variable elements and sculptural formats associated with this core symbol. The resulting set of variable symbolic features will be compared, in the subsequent section, to ethnographic data. A broader view of imagery of the unborn, infants, and women in the Early Formative is presented in the next chapter.

Based on current archaeological data, the earliest example of embryogenesis portrayed in sculpture is a ceramic figurine of a female containing



3.11 From Tlapacoya, an Ayotla phase vessel with embryo images. Collection of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



3.12 Pottery fragment excavated from San Lorenzo B phase deposit, possibly an import. Drawing by Felipe Dávalos, courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

a fetus figurine in a cavity in the lower torso. It is from a site near Hacienda Blanca, Oaxaca, dating to the Tierras Largas phase, ca. 1600–1400 bc (Fig. 3.2) (Marcus 1998:26). When and where the next development occurred is hard to know. Perhaps it was in the Basin of Mexico. By 1400 a two-dimensional, conventionalized embryo face had appeared there (Fig. 3.11) (Nederberger 1987, 2000:170–173). Like the Middle Formative three-dimensional and frontal images that are compared to photos of embryos in Figures 3.4, 3.5, 3.7 and 3.8

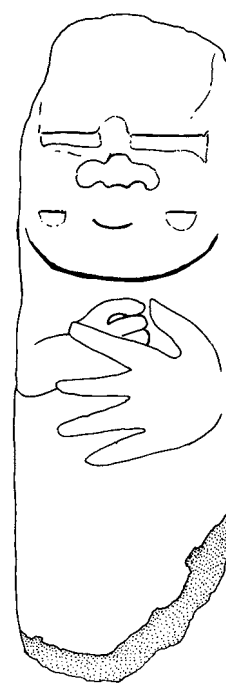
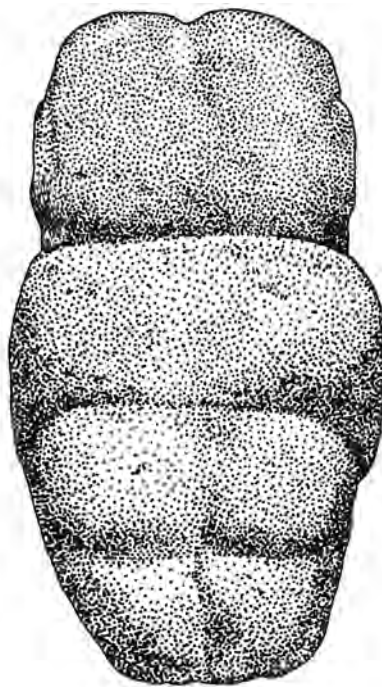
above, this Early Formative profile image shares specific features with the human embryo: lidless almond eye, toothless gums, fontanel design, and lack of an ear. Note that there are no jaguar characteristics, such as fangs or pointed ears. Like all the Ayotla phase graphic images, this one is highly stylized. The fontanel is exaggerated, as is the “puffy” upper lip. In fact, I think the upward-extending lip in this and other Ayotla phase images is shown as an ornament that hangs from the nostrils by means of an attachment or tab. I will refer to this as the “lip ornament.” The embryo was one of a limited number of motifs comprising a very early Mesoamerican graphic symbol system.

Although recent research suggests that San Lorenzo, in the Gulf of Mexico region, was a major source of pottery with “Olmec” motifs (Blomster et al. 2005), this does not hold true for the embryo symbol. Of all the excavated artifacts dated to the Chicharras and San Lorenzo phases (1400–1000 bc), only one of the pottery fragments bore the image of an embryo (Fig. 3.12). It dates to the San Lorenzo B phase, contemporary with Late Ayotla in the Basin of Mexico, on a Yagua Orange sherd that the excavators believed was an import from an unknown region (Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 158b).

However, several of the earliest monumental sculptures in Olman included embryo images. This contradicts what is generally thought—that rulers, in the form of the colossal heads, had priority as subjects of Formative period monumental sculpture. About 1350 bc, a closely observed (but stylized) late embryo/early fetus appears on the axe form called “El Bebé,” from the Gulf Coast site of La Merced (Fig. 3.13). It was carved of compacted clay. El Bebé was found surrounded by many axes, stone axe preforms and nodules, *tecomates* (small, globular bowls with restricted orifices), and fragments of pyrite mirrors (Rodríguez and Ortiz 2000:158). It illustrates a stage of embryogenesis after the eyelids have formed and closed (approximately the ninth week, when the embryo begins to appear human and is called a fetus). This image presents many conventionalized features that would become associated with the embryo image, especially the thick, inverted, U-shaped upper lip. The figure is holding a small axe, and as noted above, it was buried with dozens of other similar axelike objects. Its deeply cleft head and very little forehead are intriguing because they may indicate a case of anencephaly, a neural tube defect linked



3.13 El Bebé, 1350 bc, from La Merced. The figure holds a small axe. H: 40 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



3.14 San Lorenzo Monument 41, col. carved with embryo face and hand over which is adult hand H:2.38m. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

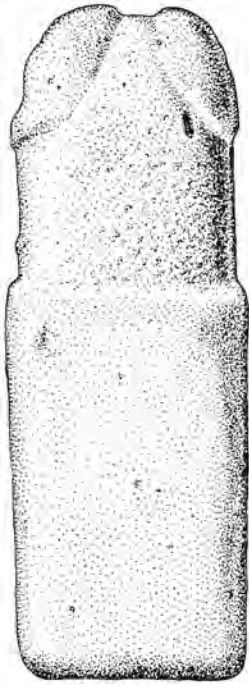
to diets high in un-nixtamalized maize and low in folic acid (see Chapters 2 and 4).

San Lorenzo Monument 41, which probably dates to between about 1400 and 1300 bc, seems to have represented an embryo, although the image was apparently early and not yet conventionalized. This 2.38 m high column is broken from a longer piece of basalt. On the upper portion of the monument is a low-relief anthropomorphic face. Its embryo-like characteristics include the proportionally large head and shallow nostrils. The figure's right hand and arm are small, while the left hand (the right side of the column) is adult-proportioned. The image suggests that an adult held or offered the embryo (Fig. 3.14). This is one of the first monumental sculptures of San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980:351). That it was a column placed on a platform is intriguing. Similar placement occurred later at other sites.

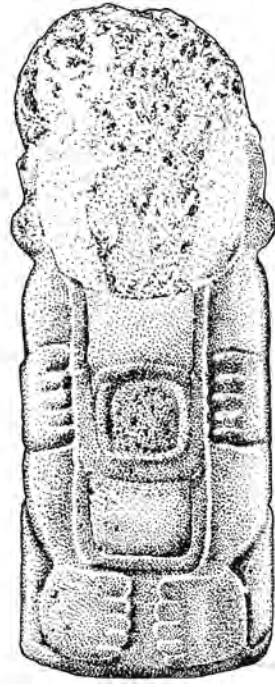
Despite the fact that its face was destroyed, San Lorenzo Monument 103 is a clear example of the embryo as the seed of the phallus (Fig. 3.15). A columnar monument 1.46 m high, it is carved in relief on all sides. The front shows an embryo or fetus, its hands and feet drawn into the body. From the other side, however, one sees a phallus with its glans specifically articulated.

The head of the embryo was conflated with a maize sprout and maize seeds on a large stone plaque or stela (carved portion 63 cm high) from La Merced (Fig. 3.16). Dated to about 1500 bc, this predates the La Venta embryo-maize stelae by several hundred years. At about the same time, the embryo appeared in the Basin of Mexico in complex compositions on pottery involving sprouting vegetation, multiple embryo faces, earth bands, and the like during the Manantial phase (1500–900 bc). By 1050 bc, the embryo image appeared as a mask worn by a crouching figure on a monument from Buena Vista, Chiapas (see Fig. 4.56).

Returning to San Lorenzo, a well-known sculpture, Monument 52, was part of a basalt water trough (Fig. 3.17). It depicts a version of the embryo-maize seed image that had become conventionalized: lidless, slanting, widely spaced eyes, a flat nose, toothless gums, and a pendant that seems to attach to the septum and cover the upper lip. Because this seems to have become the standard face of the embryo image—repeated on many axes, masks, and pendants—it is probably one of San Lorenzo's later monuments, from about 1050 bc or even later. The figure wears headgear that will be seen many more times: what may be a hat with a thick brim, a cleft top, and zigzag earflaps.



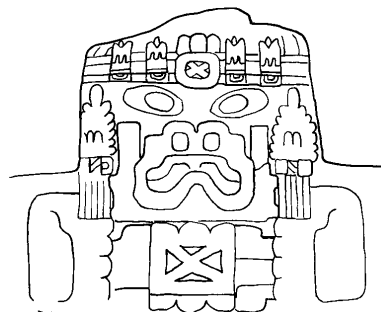
3.15 San Lorenzo Monument 103, a stone phallus conflated with the image of an embryo. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



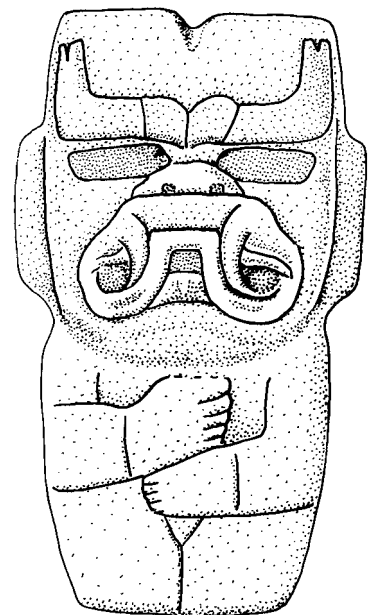
3.16 La Merced Monument 1, showing an embryo face with a cleft head from which a sprout emerges. Four maize seeds flank the face. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



3.17 San Lorenzo Monument 52, an embryo-masked human wearing regalia that probably relates to bringing rain. Drawing by Felipe Dávalos. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.



3.18 One of the four similar monuments from Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero. H: 1.24 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



3.19 A greenstone axe from the Tenoctitlan zone of San Lorenzo. Drawing by Corey Escoto, after Cyphers 1997.

Just below the chin is a crossed band. Joralemon (1971:90) originally saw this image as a dwarf or infant “rain god” associated with Aztec rituals of sacrificing children to Tlaloc in exchange for rain (Coe 1965a:14). There may have been more embryo imagery in the form of depictions of regalia or masks on San Lorenzo monuments. However, one of the frustrating facts of Olmec iconographic studies is that most of the regalia carved on monuments from San Lorenzo was at some point deliberately destroyed.

About 950 bc, some very similar embryo faces appear across the continent in Guerrero, at Teopantecuanitlan (Fig. 3.18). There are four monuments carved with faces that are very much like that of Monument 52 from San Lorenzo, having widely spaced, lidless eyes, a flat nose, toothless gums, and an ornament that attaches to the septum, creating the impression of an upper lip. The Teopantecuanitlan monoliths also show the embryo in regalia: a headband with four maize seeds flanking a mirror, crossed bands below the face, and the maize ear fetishes identified by Taube (2000). These monuments were situated at the boundaries of a sunken court, and when viewed from the center of that court, they marked the solstitial sunrise and sunset points on the horizon.

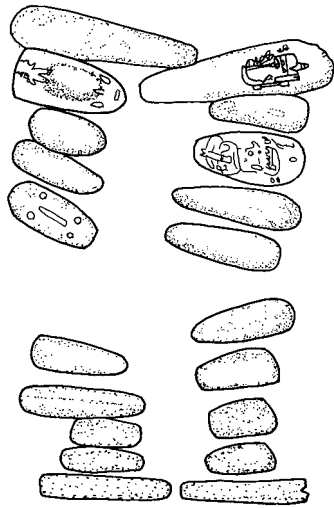
Thus it appears that by the beginning of the Middle Formative, between 1000 and 900 bc, a conventionalized image of the embryo had appeared at many locations in southern Mesoamerica. Also from the Middle Formative, or the Nacaste phase, at San Lorenzo is a greenstone ornament showing a conventionalized embryo face wearing a headband (Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 247). This was one of the few embryo motif portable objects from San Lorenzo until recently, when unplanned excavations yielded a greenstone embryo axe (Cyphers 1997) (Fig. 3.19). The upward-turning, forked bows and fangs provide additional significance to the basic axe form.

At La Venta, few embryo images appear in Phases I or II (1050–750 bc). A Phase III cache (Offering 1955–2) included one celt with a conventionalized embryo face in profile, out of which a maize sprout emerges (Fig. 3.20). Another celt, from Offering 1955–4, was incised with an embryo seed design. It may have preceded the Phase III date of Offering 1955–4 since it had been cut in half for use in that cache. In terms of cached items, there were several from Phase IV that had embryo

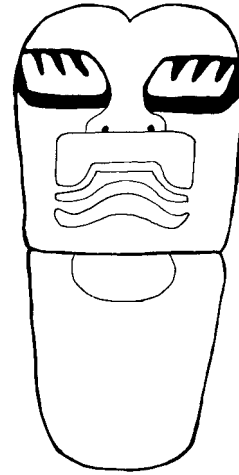
imagery. A few celts carried embryo imagery, such as the small one with flame brows in Offering 1943–F (Fig. 3.21). Highly abstracted seed images appeared on three of the thirty-seven celts from Offering 1942–C. Headdress plaques with possible embryo images were buried in caches of regalia (Fig. 3.22). In terms of embryo images on monuments, one greenstone column (now missing) from Cerro Encantado, or Group F (Stirling 1943:60), probably bore an embryo image similar to the one on San Lorenzo Monument 41 (Fig. 3.23). Its date is problematic. Images of such regalia were carved on the headdresses of several monumental sculptures, including Monuments 44 and 77 and Throne 5 (Fig. 3.24). There were seven stelae along the central axis (Monuments 22, 25/26, 27/58, 87, 88, 89) bearing embryo imagery in complex compositions (Fig. 3.25). The stelae are relatively late. Carbon samples associated with Monuments 87 and 89 on the south platform of the Great Mound point to a date of about 420 bc for the four similar complex embryo stelae placed there (González Lauck 1997:93). Embryo imagery is not ubiquitous, however. Having studied all the monuments from La Venta (numbering around a hundred), I estimate that about 25 percent of them contain an embryo symbol.

One other object that will contribute to the discussion of the variability of the embryo as a symbol is the jade figurine representing a fetus or neonate that was excavated by Covarrubias and Stirling at Cerro de las Mesas (Stirling 1941:301; Fig. 2.4). In his discussion of the materials excavated there, Drucker (1955:48) reported that the figurine was found directly above the canoe in the cache, and that its feet “fit snugly” within the cavity of the canoe. Incised on both sides of the prow are embryo symbols. Among the few figurative objects in the post-Olmec cache of 782 pieces was also a small stone skull, about which more will be said later (Drucker 1955:Plate VIII).

The chronology of many of the archaeologically excavated pieces confirms the generally held consensus that most of the axes, celts, and ornaments bearing embryo imagery, which have been hard to date due to lack of archaeological context, were made and distributed in the Middle Formative, around 1000–500 bc. This corresponds closely to the period during which maize became a staple of the Mesoamerican diet. Although maize found near the Gulf of Mexico dates to as early as



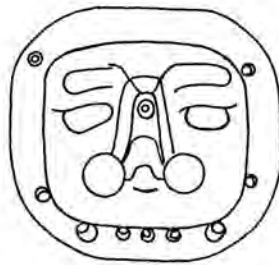
3.20 Celts in the lower layer of La Venta Offering 1955-2. Drawing by author after Drucker et al. 1959:138.



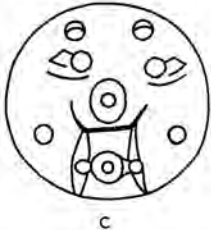
3.21 A celt from La Venta Offering 1943-F in the form of an embryo with an axolotl brow. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



a



b

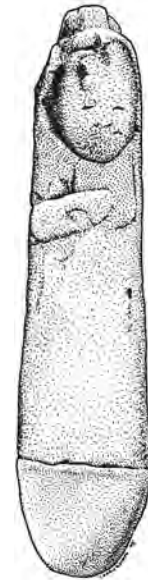


c



d

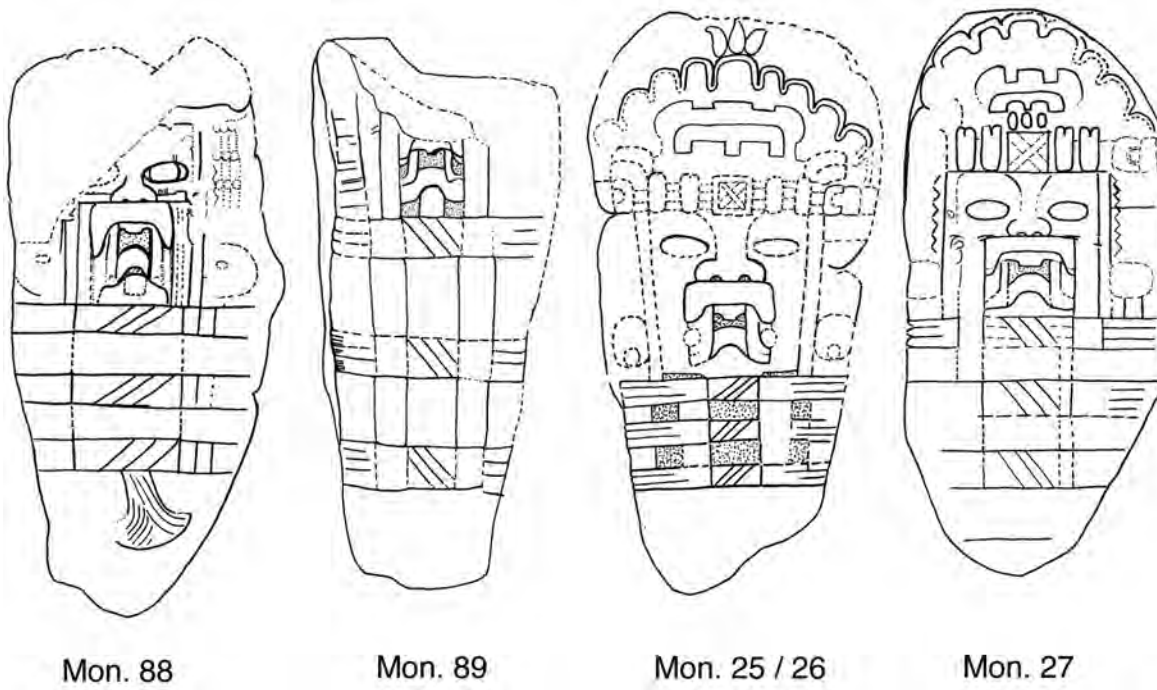
3.22 Jade maskettes from La Venta Offerings 1955-5, -6, and -7. From Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 43.



3.23 La Venta greenstone column, now missing, carved with a face and hand. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



3.24 La Venta Monument 44, of which only the head and headdress remain, shows a human wearing an embryo plaque on his headdress. Photo by author.



3.25 The stelae (Monuments 25/26, 27, 88, and 89) at the foot of Mound C portray embryos bundled in three sacs, or cords,

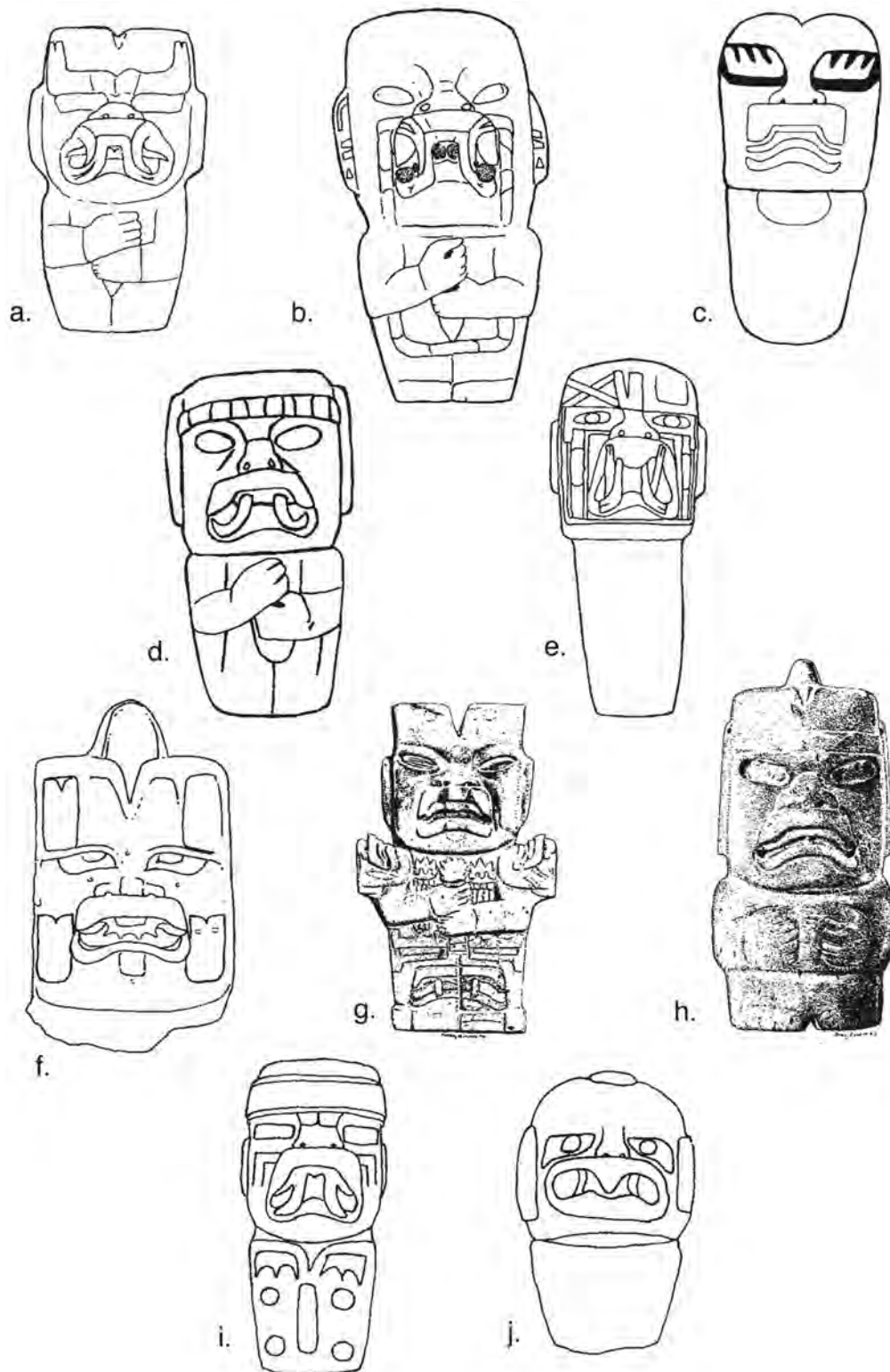
and wearing seed regalia, with maize sprouts emerging from mountain-shaped heads (not to scale). Drawing by author.

5500 bc, there and elsewhere the cobs were not sufficiently large to serve as a productive food until they reached 6 cm in length (Pope 2001). Not until the Middle Formative did cobs in the Gulf of Mexico region attain a productive size (Rust and Leyden 1994:192; Kevin Pope, personal communication, 2001). And the transition between Early and Middle Formative is precisely when the human embryo image became conflated with that of maize seed and sprouts (see Taube 2000:298—303 for a related discussion).

This chronological treatment also clarifies that images of embryos preceded images of rulers on monumental sculpture from the Gulf Coast. The large axe form El Bebé from La Merced may be the earliest one, and the huge column from San Lorenzo the next. (Early in San Lorenzo's history, some profile animals were also carved onto stone objects.) At the same time, embryo images were incised on vessels from the Basin of Mexico. After that, embryos appeared on other columns and axe-like plaques (probably the predecessors of stelae) and the large solstitial markers at Teopantecuanitlan. It is not very clear how old the majority of the votive axes are since most have no secure provenience. Because undecorated axe forms were prevalent at La Merced around 1350 bc, it seems possible that "embryo" axes, such as the Kunz and



3.26 Standing figure holding embryo-axelike being. Martin Collection, Brooklyn Museum. Photo by Justin Kerr, K4838.



3.27 Common varieties of the axe-image, or stylized embryo. Variable elements are: *a*, fontanel, upward sweeping cleft brows, rectangular eyes, snake fangs (San Lorenzo); *b*, incised ear ridges, U-shaped incisions around mouth and lower torso, crocodilian fangs (Kunz axe); *c*, fontanel, axolotl brows, incised oval on chest (La Venta); *d*, maize seed headband, feline fangs (Chavero axe); *e*, X-U and cleft on forehead, incised U around mouth, crocodilian fangs (Museo Nacional de Antropología); *f*, maize sprout from cleft head (fontanel),

maize seeds on face, shell in mouth (La Merced); *g*, cleft head (fontanel), incised embryo features on shoulders and legs, fontanel on incised heads, holds maize fetishes (Guerrero; now in the Dallas Museum of Art); *h*, maize sprout from fontanel, headband; *i*, headband, rectangular eyes, incised U around mouth, feline fangs, double merlons, and quincunx on body (Cleveland Museum of Art); *j*, protrusion on head, mouth shaped like bird beak, fangs (Peabody Museum, Harvard). Drawings by Corey Escoto.

Chavero axes, could be Early Formative, but we do not yet know. I suspect most votive/embryo axes were made after 950 bc, when the embryo image was widespread. The jade standing figure from Guerrero, depicted holding an embryo-masked infant as one might hold an axe (Fig. 3.26), may date to around this time; however, for the purpose of determining meaning through associations and contexts, to which we now turn, we do have some sense of the origin of the embryo symbol and the kinds of objects on which it appeared.

Steps 5 and 6. Identify a “solid nucleus” and construct a “matrix of associations.”

The chronological and contextual analyses have allowed me to construct a “web of associations” around the “solid nucleus,” or stable element, of the embryo itself.

I used two strategies for identifying the symbolic web. First, I restricted the analysis to a single object format or shape. This provides us with a “vocabulary” of references. The second, more syntactical, approach involves examining large, complex compositions of which the embryo is an element.

a. The axe format and its matrix of associated symbols.

For the first analysis (variability within a single format) I focused on the votive axe and a closely related shape, the plaque. This format itself bears significance, as discussed below. The “solid nucleus” is the basic, or conventionalized, embryo image: the almond-shaped, lidless eyes; a broad, flat nose; an exaggerated upper lip or lip ornament attached through the septum; an open, downturned mouth exposing toothless gums; the 1:1 head to body proportions; the incipient arms with nearly weblike fingers; and the incipient legs and feet. In Figure 3.27h, the axe is the closest to an unadorned embryo image. The overall shape of the embryo and axe (the format) is similar to a maize seed as portrayed by the Olmec. This illustration includes most of the common varieties of the axe-image. The caption lists the variable elements.

We can see that variable attributes are not consistently distributed; instead, they were used in a “mix and match” approach. Variable elements seen on axes include maize seeds, sprouts, and fetishes; double merlons, or “cosmic portal,” symbols (Stross 1996); fontanel or star (Reilly 1994b); crocodilian dentition (“upper teeth crossing inside the lower teeth” (Stocker et al. 1980: Fig. 1); the “flame brow,”

or axolotl gill stalk (the fontanel and axolotl are explained in Chapter 4); snake fangs; feline dentition; X, or sky (Stocker et al. 1980:36) and U, or womb (Tate 2008); quincunx; shell; bird beak; buccal mask; mirror; and celt.

b. Embryo motifs within compositions and the associated variable symbols.

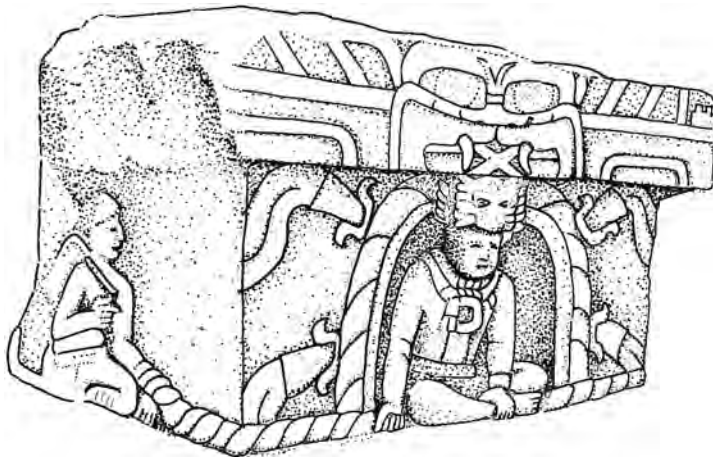
To fortify our understanding of the embryo symbol, we should also examine its syntactic role within larger compositions. For this purpose I have chosen three La Venta monuments: Throne (Altar) 5; its companion, Throne 4; and Monument 25/26, a stela.

Throne 5 was one of five such sculptures at La Venta that were south of the Great Mound. As Chapter 7 shows, these thrones formed a long quincunx with Throne 1, representing the earth crocodilian, near the center. Cave-niches were cut into the outer four thrones. The cave-niches referred to earth wombs. Various researchers have proposed that these thrones also represent sweatbaths, which are related to birth rituals and contain fire (Dahlgren de Jordán 1954; Finsten et al. 1996:33). A person entering a sweatbath is heated, or “cooked,” as is the embryo in the womb. (This notion is widespread; see the discussion of gestation in Chapter 1.) A broad U shape surrounding the niche likely also referred to the womb (see Chapters 6 and 8). On the southwest and northeast thrones, human figures emerging from the mountain caves held inert infants. La Venta Throne 5 (Fig. 3.28) was in the southwest of the quincunx. In the adult’s lap was an infant wearing an embryo mask. Many researchers have proposed that the scene was one of child sacrifice. The adult male within the cave wore a tall headdress with a curved top. Taube (1995) associated similar headdresses with rain-making shamans. On the front of the headdress was an embryo face ornament from which triple maize sprouts issued. On the sides of this altar four adults controlled four active infants with embryo features, so there was a quincunx of infants with a variety of attributes.

Near Throne 5 was Throne 4 (Fig. 3.29). According to Julia Guernsey Kappelman and Kent Reilly (2001:46), Throne 4 combined avian and jaguarian imagery to create “a potent statement of supernatural contact” between the cosmic realms of sky and underworld. The jaguar on the upper edge held a flowering cord in its mouth, a symbol of a flowering cosmic umbilicus (40) or the flowery menstrual flow of the primordial earth female (see



3.28 On La Venta Throne (Altar) 5, the embryo appears as a headdress plaque and probably as a mask on the face of the infant. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



3.29 La Venta Throne (Altar) 4. Drawing by author.

Tedlock 2005 and Chapter 6). The four flowers have also been seen as pots of rain emanating from the thrones' cave-niche. The emerging adult held a thick umbilicus that led to figures on the sides, probably his ancestors, and wore an eagle head-dress (Grove 1970), which some think identified him as a shaman (Reilly 1994b).

La Venta Monument 25/26, made of green schist (Fig. 3.24), is one of four nearly identical stelae that stood at the foot of Mound C, facing south (González Lauck 1997; Porter 1996).³ A large embryo head, with its puffy upper lip and barely formed nostrils, occupies nearly half the stela. On the head is the four-seed headband with a crossed band as the central motif. Above the seeds, a double merlon represents the opening between the flowering female earth surface and the underworld, or in other words, the earth surface/womb in which seeds are planted.⁴ Fangs affixed in the mouth are bifurcated and may be the *pars pro toto* symbol for a snake (Luckert 1976) or possibly a toad (Furst 1981). The embryo is bundled with three bands, which I propose represent the three sacs in which the embryo grows.⁵ The tissues that nurture the embryo are surrounded by blood, birth involves blood and is a female bloodletting sacrifice that yields new life, so the three sacs are the bloody, life-giving environment of the embryo. They are shed by the newborn in a manner similar to a snake shedding its skin as it grows. At the top of the monument, the embryo's cleft head is surmounted by undulating forms suggesting the placenta. The triple sprouts of maize appear on top of the mountain. The four stelae and the four maize seeds on the headband refer to the necessity of planting maize in blocks of four (or a quincunx) for pollination, so it refers to agricultural knowledge.⁶

This discussion has incorporated a wide range of symbolic elements, including those referring to gestation, maize and its planting and production, birth, certain animals, and caves. Most of these are listed in Table 3.1, as are some of the sculptural formats on which embryo-related images appear. These form the matrix of associations that will be revisited during the upcoming exploration of the anthropological literature for traditions that might serve to ground the "embryo theory" to ethnographic reality. Before turning to that, it is time to complete the last step of López Austin's method: a reevaluation of the initial hypothesis.

Table 3.1 Variable elements associated with the embryo symbol

<i>Affixed to or adjacent to the embryo image can be:</i>	<i>Embryos appear as a principal subject of these formats:</i>
Maize sprouts	Stelae
Maize seed headband	Columns
Four-directional maize seeds	Votive axes
Maize fetishes	Celts
Infants	Plaques
U shapes: cave-niche, earth-womb, and/or sweatbath	Monumental solsticial markers
Midwives	Masks
Flowering or bloody umbilical cords	Three-dimensional sculpture
Triple bands (may be uterine sacs)	Ornaments, including “winged” pendants and
Placenta (undulating forms)	headdress plaques
Fontanel	Pottery vessels
Disembodied hand	Stone figurines
“Zigzag” ear ornaments	
Double merlons or cosmic portals	<i>Embryos can appear as elements of a composition on:</i>
Flame brow (in some locales, axolotl gill stalk)	Thrones
Crossed bands ornaments	Mask on another figure
Quincunx	Headdress extension
Four (of various things)	Canoe
Crocodilian dentition	Middle Formative pottery
Ophidian dentition	As a votive axe or small sculpture held by another
Canine dentition	figure
Avian creatures	As incised images on masks, celts, plaques, and
Bird beak and possibly egg tooth	figures, often forming a mouth mask
Lip ornament	
Mirror	
Celt	
Serpent staff	
“Spoon” (probably weaving batten)	
Adults	
Canoe	

Step 8. Re-evaluation of the initial hypothesis.

The recognition that the axe-image is based on Formative period observations of the miscarried six- to twelve-week human embryo works well both in terms of the formal comparison and in terms of how this symbol of a gestational being fits within the context of other images in Formative period visual culture. Formative period peoples must have chosen the embryo as a prominent symbol because they were amazed, as we are, by its ambiguous form, which seems as much like an immature animal or fish as a human. Magically the embryo seems to change from a tadpole into a fish, a tailed animal, and, finally, into a human.

It is well known that later Mesoamerican societies envisioned human beings as having composite, fluid identities (for example, see López Austin 1980;

Stuart 1996). This belief was rooted in the earliest ranked societies in the Basin of Mexico, the Mazatán region of Chiapas, and elsewhere, as illustrated by the use of masks and masked figurines to signal shifting identities (Clark 2004:211; Lesure 1997; Niederberger 1987). Some of these masks represented the human embryo's face (Fig. 3.30). Similarly, many human images made by Formative period individuals bore tattoo-like, incised symbols of the embryo and of maize seeds and sprouts (Fig. 2.7). Formative period individuals' knowledge of the developing human embryo must have resonated deeply with the paradigms of reality that evolved as they settled down and focused on planting and processing maize and other foods. They must have seen the human embryo in the womb as comparable to a seed planted in the fertile earth: both



3.30 Jade mask portraying embryo face. H: 20.8 cm. Copyright Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington, DC.

undergo rapid changes before assuming mature form. Somehow the sense of self for human beings became linked with the maize seed and plant. The embryo symbol seems to have represented a human seed, often linked with a maize seed.

Individuals who assumed animal identities through masking, performance, or shamanic ritual recapitulated the transformations that a human undergoes in the womb. In this sense the embryo symbol represents an ancient view that the embryo—with its remains of gill structures, apparent stub of a tail, and webbed digits—seemed to be able to metamorphose into other creatures given certain circumstances. The symbol of the seedlike embryo was also used as a metaphor for a larger series of phenomena related to the creation and regeneration of the world. In the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, as Dennis Tedlock (1996:31–32) has pointed out, the creator gods wished for the emergence of earth, plants, and people: “They wish to set in motion a process they call ‘sowing and dawning,’ by which they mean several things at once.” The

process included sowing seeds in the earth so they will sprout and dawn, sowing humans in the womb to bring about their birth or dawning, and sowing humans in the earth upon death to engender sparks of light in the darkness, or stars. Indeed, all the symbols in this matrix are in some way tied to the cycle of regeneration, as Prechtel and Carlsen (1988:123)suggested in the quote above.

To refute or refine these ideas, we now turn to the ethnographic record.

Ethnographic Analogies

After establishing the embryo symbol’s origin, geographic range, functions, contexts, and complex of associations, I investigated the ethnographic record to see if embryos, fetuses, or infants form motifs in myth or ritual practice. In the absence of contemporaneous texts, the ethnographic record provides the best “textual” corroboration for the embryo identification. Remarkably, there are hundreds of casual references to the correspondence of embryos or infants to maize. Also, ethnographers have published dozens of orations about the association of embryos or infants with fish, jaguars, axes, snakes, mountains, wells, and caves. Most compelling, for this argument, are stories centered around a box that is clearly a metaphoric womb. These stories contain most of the variable elements associated with the “nuclear” embryo symbol. They have survived into the twentieth century in at least three Mesoamerican cultures that are linguistically distinct, suggesting a deeply rooted antecedent.

Embryos and Maize

Throughout Mesoamerica, explicit and implied parallels are drawn between humans, maize, and their developmental stages. As anthropologist Richard Wilson (1995:123)writes of the contemporary Quiché, “Ideas of human and maize fertility and well being are uniquely bound up together. Human reproduction and agricultural production are conceptualized according the same principles.” Alan Sandstrom furnishes a similar comment about the Nahua of northern Veracruz.

The human life cycle of birth, growth, maturity, old age and death is also mirrored in the life cycle of the corn plant. Even the human body is modeled on the corn plant, con-

sidered by the Nahua to be the source of human life. The tassel is the hair, the stalk, the body, and the roots are the feet. People told me on many occasions that the mature corn plant awaiting the harvest was an old woman holding the precious ear of corn wrapped in leaves, like a baby in swaddling clothes. (Sandstrom 2005:38)

The following section includes a selection of observations by several anthropologists regarding how indigenous cognition links human children and maize. The concept of a “seed spirit,” which in some cases is explicitly referred to as an embryo, forms part of a rich tapestry of associations with many common threads, as well as distinct motifs that arose in specific cultural areas.

Midwives among the Zoque of the Sierra Santa Marta in the Tuxtla recommend holding the umbilicus of a newborn against an ear of maize as it is cut. The seeds from this ear, stained with the blood of the child, are sown, and the crop belongs to the child. In this way the child should reap plentiful maize as well as experience prosperity generally, and will also be more firmly tied to the village (Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003:66). Several Maya groups (Chorti, Pokomam, and Tzotzil) similarly conceptualize a link between newborns and maize by cutting the umbilical cord over a corncob so that the baby’s blood stains the maize seed. This seed is saved for planting in a milpa dedicated to that child, and the harvested corn is collected over the years to create a special strain of seed commingled from that blood (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:6; Edmonson 1971:108; Stross 1994:94). Immediately after a Tzotzil mother has given birth, the infant in her womb is replaced by two maize ears placed on and bound to her abdomen for a week or more, until she feels well (Vogt 1969:63).

The Maya in Santiago Atitlán, the Atitecos, refer to the birth of an infant as “she or he sprouted” or “returned” (Carlsen 1997:54). Conversely, newly sprouted maize is addressed as *tak ai*, meaning “little children.” This concept that the child is the newly sprouted maize of the parent is seen in Classic period Maya writing, where the glyph for “child of parent” consists of an outstretched hand holding a maize curl or seed (Taube 1985:178).

The most profound demonstration of the metaphoric co-identity of the life cycle of maize with the developing human is incorporated in the 260-day cycle, which has long been identified by some scholars as corresponding to the length of

time from the last menstruation to the birth of a child or, generally, as the human gestation period (Bowditch 1910; Earle and Snow 1985; Paxton 2001; Rice 2007:38–39). The Tzeltal, and likely other Maya groups, conceived of thirteen 20-day stages for activity related to the stages of maize growth. To the period from planting to harvest—on average 180 days—the Maya added preplanting and post-harvest ritualized activities. In this way, the entire maize cycle—beginning with preparing the earth and ending with storing the seed—equaled 260 days (Berlin et al. 1974:64; Stross 1994:27).

Aztec state religion is less explicit about the human-maize relationship, but this idea pervades the Nahua communities of today and may have been part of the beliefs of Postclassic villagers as well. Alan Sandstrom (1991:239–240) records a statement by a man he called Aurelio, who said, “Rituals accomplish only what devotion accomplishes. . . . We eat that devotion as corn, we are eating it as tortillas. . . . We sprout like young corn. It is born and it sprouts here [on mother earth] and for us it is likewise . . . Corn is our blood.”

Describing his understanding of the Nahuas’ implicit attitude toward life, Sandstrom says that human bodies are thought to contain a spark of divine energy that comes from the sun in the form of heat.

Once inside the body, the heat is transferred into *chicha-huastli*, Nahuatl for a kind of energy or force that gives humans vigor and the power to act. This energy is carried in the blood . . . and it is renewed when we eat food, particularly corn. . . . Corn, then, is the physical and spiritual link between human beings and the sun, the life-giving substance that ties people to the sacred universe. (Sandstrom 1991:246)

The lives of humans and maize are so intertwined that it is hard to say which is the more fundamental ordering principle. It is becoming increasingly apparent that throughout Mesoamerica, concepts of and observations about the human body formed the basis for metaphors that shaped conceptions of much of the world. Humans sprout like corn, in the wet and cool environments of the womb and earth. And both maize and humans contain a spark of divine energy, or heat, that fluctuates according to the conditions of life. This complex equation is what I refer to as a “human-maize conflation,” or the metaphoric equivalence “humans are maize.”

Table 3.2 Embryo images and their archaeological contexts

Early Formative

- San Lorenzo: Incised on head of stone column (Monument 41)
- La Merced: Kaolin axe (El Bebé)
- Tlapacoya: Graphic symbol on pottery

Transitional Early to Middle Formative

- La Merced: Stela (Monument 1)
- San Lorenzo: Three-dimensional figure (Monument 52)
- Teopantecuanitlan: Monumental solstitial markers in a sunken court
- San Lorenzo: Greenstone axe (found in a well)
- San Lorenzo: Greenstone pendant

Middle Formative (from La Venta)

- Phallic green schist column (missing)
- Greenstone headdress ornaments
- Headdress ornaments and extensions (Throne [Altar] 5, Monuments 44, 77)
- Stelae (Monuments 15, 22, 25/26, 27, 58, 88, 89)
- Masks on infants (Throne [Altar] 5)
- Masks on seated human figures (Monuments 8, 9, 10, 64, 75)
- Masks on headdress extensions of seated humans (Monuments 44, 77)
- Mask on feline-anthropomorph (Monument 59)
- Greenstone celts
- Small axe

Middle Formative (from outside La Venta)

- Chalcatzingo: Masks on relief figures (Monument 2)
- Zazacatla: Masks on three-dimensional figures
- Juxtlahuaca Cave: Headdress ornament on the larger figure
- San Martín Pajapan: Mask on headdress extension (Monument 1)

Formative period artists made this conflation most explicit in their portrayals of the seed form or seed state of humans and maize: the embryo symbol.

Ethnographic Analogies: The Embryo and Its Womb or Seeds and Their Box

In addition to hundreds of references to the correspondence of embryos or infants to sprouting and maize (of which the above are a sample), ethnographers have published dozens of texts about the association of embryos, eggs, and infants (the core or nucleus) with fish, jaguars, axes, snakes,

mountains, wells, and caves (the variable elements). Many stories containing most of the Formative period variable elements center around a box. These stories survived into the twentieth century in at least four Mesoamerican cultures that are linguistically distinct. The modern box seems to be a metaphor for the womb. Boxes in shrines may be the more materially impoverished version of the sacred, sunken enclosures of the Formative period sites, which were “sown” with jade celts, human figurines, and many other offerings—objects intended to invigorate the earth with vital energy. Following are five “box” stories. The subsequent section compares the matrix of associations, or variable elements, found with the Olmec visual embryo symbol to those found with later embryos and fetuses. The information is summarized in Table 3.2.

A first story comes from Nahuatl speakers. In a village in northern Veracruz, people place a cedar box in the shrine of the earth mother, Tonantsij. Her domain includes ruling over her children, known as the seed spirits, who are “the life force or potential for fertility of each crop” (Sandstrom 1991:244). From woman-made paper, villagers form elaborately dressed figures of the seed spirits and place them in the box. These are cleaned, renewed, and re-dressed annually. Throughout the year they are given offerings of food so they will not want to return to their mountain cave home. The most important seed spirits, those of maize, are called Seven Flower and Five Flower and are considered to be divine human twins. Also, the Amatlán people make bundles using bandanas. They call these “elote children” and say they represent the spirit and flower of maize. Three ears of corn are tied together, one for its backbone and two for its face. Marigolds (representing the fiery energy of conception) emerge from an opening at the top, and a candle, representing the phallus, is inserted into this womblike bundle to bring male energy in the form of fire (see Sandstrom 1991: Fig. 25).⁷

Similarly, the Maya of Santiago Atitlán keep in a shrine a box representing the womb of one of the three Marías. In the box is a bundle called “heart of the placenta” (Allen Christenson, personal communication, December 2001). It is wrapped in a woven, beribboned cloth decorated with three faces called the corn girls, which a shaman places on the belly of a pregnant woman to give her fetus its face. Hanging from the ribbons, which represent umbili-

cal cords, are two small bags filled with dry corn paste. The Atitecos call these bags “divine twins”—one male, one female—and consider them to be the original placentas that wrap the original seeds of the human race: the “root of children” (Tarn and Prechtel 1986:175–176).

Another box was reported among the Mixe, possible descendants of the Gulf Olmec. Behind a major church altar in Camotán, Oaxaca, villagers guarded a box containing the ancestors, or lightning men, who protect the community from attacks of powerful *rayos* from other communities. The protectors are the remains of a male-female couple. Shamans offer them maize tamales (maize seed that has been bundled and cooked) and other foods on the new year. To accompany the protectors, four orphaned infants were buried at the four corners of the church (Miller 1956:33).

In another Mixe story about the birth of the culture hero Kondoy, a cave outside the village substitutes for a box in a village shrine. In “Hill of the Woman” was a cave where people went to put a mature cob of maize. The female earth spirit regularly transformed the cob of seeds into two eggs, which people collected and took home to eat. One day a couple went to the cave and saw that the two eggs were in a well. The woman asked her husband to cut a pole so she could “fish” them out. Three days later they cracked open. From one came Kondoy, the culture hero, and from the other, his brother, a huge snake (Miller 1956:105–109). Today the Mixe frequently employ eggs in ceremonies performed for Holy Mother Earth. They are usually placed inside a grass wreath representing the uterus (Lipp 1991). Clearly the eggs of today substitute for the Olmec embryo symbol. This story includes embryos in the form of eggs, and adds fish, a snake, and a sacred well to the symbolic web.

The Mixe live in the mountains of eastern Oaxaca, and the Zoque Popoluca in the Tuxtla Mountains of southern Veracruz. The Mixean and Zoquean languages had a single parent, Mixe-Zoquean, an early form of which was probably spoken by the Gulf Olmec. So the above story and the one that follows, from the Popoluca, are especially important to a consideration of Olmec imagery.

In the Zoque Popoluca story, an old, childless couple goes to work in their milpa, where they discover two large eggs. They take them home to have the hen sit on them but decide to eat one before it hatches. When the other one hatches, a boy

emerges. The old couple then realize with chagrin that the other must have been a girl. The boy was none other than “the venerable son-god-ear-of-corn, Sintiopiltzin” (Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003:177).

Jacques Chevalier and Andrés Sanchez Bain (2003) offer a fascinating commentary on the story, juxtaposing the old couple with the embryo (egg) and the newborn. The corn-child-egg was found in a tree like a fruit but became a grain. The old couple worked in their milpa but received the gift of the egg-corn-boy without labor. In Nahuatl, an egg is *toto-tetl*, “bird stone.” The egg, or bird stone, is a metaphor for the testicle. The *totot* bird (chicken) is synonymous with the newborn child and the penis (like English “cock”). In ancient Nahuatl, “semen was fluid from a juicy-stone testicle, an *ayo-tetl*. The pouring of sperm secreted from male stones is like emissions of juice and seed that may also stand for real children.” These authors also distinguish several webs of associated concepts in Popoluca lore, and this one they refer to as “egg-son-fruit-seed-bird-stone-testicle-penis” (179–180). Except for fruit, we see most of these in the list of symbols associated with the embryo in Olmec art. In this story, the sacred milpa, sown with a digging stick in a quincunxial process, must be the box/container for seeds.

Ethnographic Analogies III: The Fertilizing Stone

Similar to the Zoque Popoluca concept of the egg or bird stone as a metaphor for the testicle is one used by the Aztec that helps explain the importance of the axe format in the Formative period. Burr Brundage (1979:35) called this “the most crucial of Aztec myths,” although it is not as frequently mentioned as others. In this creation story, Citlalincue, or Stars-Her-Skirt, the source of wisdom, was enthroned in the Milky Way. A flint knife sprang from her womb, fell from the sky, and penetrated the sacred cave of Aztec origins, Chicomoxtoc. The flint engendered the gods, who eventually decided they needed humans as servants and food. One god, Xolotl, entered the underworld and wrested the bones of the former humans from the lord of the dead. They were shattered (as was the pumpkin head of Hunahpu when the Maya Hero Twins were in the underworld), and once human sacrificial blood gave them vital force, they became the first

Table 3.3 Embryos in art and myth: The “web of associations”

ELEMENT	OLMEC ART	MIXE MYTH	MIXE KONDOY MYTH	NAHUA MYTH	MAYA MYTH
	TABASCO: La Venta Altar 5 and Monument 25/26	OAXACA	OAXACA: Story of culture Hero Twins	“Amatan,” VERACRUZ.	Santiago Atitlán, GUATEMALA.
CAVE	Cave (A ₅)		Cave in Hill of Woman is home of earth spirit.	Distant home of seed spirit	
BOX OR WOMB	Site as domain of vital energy/protection?	Box behind church altar holds powerful lightning men protectors.		Box of seed spirits/womb	Box of corn spirits/womb
VITAL ENERGY	Embryo represents vital energy; Birth? (A ₅)	Lightning	Birth of Kondoy	Seed spirits are life force or vital energy for crops.	Birth
EMBRYO	Infant wears embryo face (A ₅); stela as embryo (M 25/26).	Remains of ancestors = seeds for new life	Eggs in a well	Paper figurines represent twin children and seed spirits.	Pregnant woman; bags of corn paste are “original placentas.”
INFANT/CHILD	Infant (A ₅)	4 orphans sacrificed.	Human twins from eggs	Human twins	Human-maize twins and child in womb
MAIZE	Maize sprout (A ₅ , M 25/26)	Tamales offered.	Maize <i>mazorca</i> (mature cob)	Maize seed spirits	Box of maize spirits
SEED	Maize seed headband (M 25/26)		Earth goddess turned seed cob into eggs.	Maize seed spirits called 5 and 7 Flower.	Original seeds of human race
MOUNTAIN	Mountain symbol (M 25/26) and Mound C		“Hill of Woman” where people brought maize	Mountain cave home	
BUNDLE/BAND	Bundle or banding (M 25 / 26)			Bundles called “elote child”; contains tamales, candle.	Cloth bundle with three faces
FIRE	Sweatbath = altar shape	Lightning		Candle in bundle	Candle in ceremony
UMBILICAL CORD	Cords flank embryo face (M 25/26).			Bands tie elote bundle.	Ribbons = umbilical cords
PAPER, FLESH, TREE		Wooden box	Pole cut for “fishing” eggs.	Women make paper for cutouts. Dress and feed them.	Wooden box
ADULT	Adult actors (A ₅)	Lightning-men	Couple	Women made paper and offerings.	Shaman and pregnant woman
OFFERINGS	Child sacrifice? (A ₅)	Tamales, for protection	Maize, for abundant food	Tamales, clothing, for abundant crops	

FISH			Woman wanted to “fish” the eggs from a well.	
FEMALE EARTH	Headband of seeds/ fertile earth (M 25/26)		Female spirit of mountain/earth	Earth Mother Tonantsij One of the three Marías, in charge of Moon and Earth
SNAKE	Snake fangs (M 25/26)		One twin turned into snake.	
CROSSED BANDS/ CENTER	Crossed bands on headband (M 25/26)	Box behind altar		Cloth placed on center of belly.
FOUR DIRECTIONS	Four infants (A5); four seeds on headband (M 25/26)	Four infants buried in corners		
RAIN	Rain headdress (A5)	Lightning spirits		Rain desired for crops.

human twins. In this story, the flint knife, *citlalcuitlatl* (“star spit”), parallels the phallus and its semen. It went from sky womb to earth womb, engendering hungry potencies who created humans, who in turn would have to offer their lives, as do maize plants for humans. The endless cycle of regeneration spins. As a long, slender stone object, the flint knife shape, or format, relates to that of Olmec columns, embryo-seed axes, stelae, and celts. All are three-dimensional symbols for “the pouring of sperm secreted from male stones” (Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003:180). These objects were thought of as the inseminators, sowers, and vitalizers of the earth and, during the Formative period, the power of human fertility as well.⁸

Comparing the Webs of Associations

These “box” stories concern human-maize children (see Table 3.3). In the Nahuatl story they are simultaneously the spirits of maize and divine human children. In the Santiago Atitlán stories, the little bags of corn paste that hang by “umbilical cord” ribbons from the “heart of the placenta” are “divine twins,” “the original seeds of the human race,” or the “root of children,” clearly referring to the fetus or embryo. In the Mixe Kondoy story, the culture hero emerged from a cob transformed into an egg (which is a chicken embryo) obtained from a well near a magical cave in “Hill of the Woman.” Again we see the linking of maize and embryos as the source of children—in this case, the culture hero. Somewhere among these concepts must lie the

meaning of the Olmec embryo-maize conflation. Most simply put, it seems to be a seed or spirit of human-maize.

In each modern story or ritual, the shrine’s box represents the womb of a supernatural female or a conceptual cave within a village shrine. Numerous myths tell of a cave that was an earth-womb where fertilizing (fiery) lightning spirits lived and where the primordial corn seeds originated (Miller 1956:105–109; Thompson 1970:351; Tedlock 1996:145–146; Bierhorst 1992:146; Watanabe 1992:67). In several stories, this cave-womb is considered to be the embryo-maize spirit’s true home. The Mixe box story includes a quincunx of infants, as does La Venta Throne (Altar) 5. When we consider Olmec cave-niche thrones, we observe their images of infants, umbilical cords, maize sprouts, and adults who may be rulers, ancestors, or shamans. It is clear that their U-shaped cave niches referred to wombs as sacred sources of fertility, and possibly as the “true” home of the local human-maize seed spirits.

In other stories the cave’s analog, the box, contains protector spirits for the community and/or its crops. The protectors are—or are accompanied by—children-maize seed spirits. Iconographers dealing with Mesoamerica have not emphasized the notion of “protector spirits,” but perhaps we should consider this construction of supernatural power. Such protectors still figure prominently in Mixe ritual. They are often related to the four directions. The four embryo-maize monuments of Teopantecuanitlan, with their offerings niches in

the rear heads and their ritual maize bundles, seem to prefigure such a notion.

The Mixe Kondoy story links the birth of the culture hero to water and a female earth spirit, as well as to eggs and maize. The old woman “fished” the egg out of the well. In this case the variable elements, fishing and groundwater, probably relate to the Mixe female potency Higiny, who controls childbirth, lakes, and fishing and conveys the spirit of a human embryo to its mother’s womb (Lipp 1991:32–33). I have proposed that the pits of greenstone (known as “the Massive Offerings”) at La Venta, which represent lakes (Reilly 1994a), are sacred female lake potencies whose domains were like those of Higiny (Tate 1999). This notion of “conveying” the spirit of the embryo across the water seems to be illustrated in the Cerro de las Mesas jade fetus in its jade, embryo-prowed canoe, as well as by the jade “hand-canoe” (private collection) and the four canoe-shaped objects in La Venta Offering 1955–3, which were found with a jade “water-bird” pendant (Drucker 1952:148). The link between the canoe and the hand as conveyors of the fetus or embryo to the womb may illuminate the significance of the outsized hands on the San Lorenzo column, the Tlapacoya vessel, and various incised celts (Fig. 3.31).⁹ The Cerro de las Mesas embryo-prowed canoe and its human-maize fetus is probably the precursor to Maya stories about the birth of the archetypal human-maize being commonly known as “the Maize God” (Freidel et al. 1993:91–100; Quenon and Le Fort 1997).

Finally, the stones in these stories—whether they are milpa stones transformed into eggs which would transform again into human-maize beings (Popoloca), or phallic columns with embryo heads (San Lorenzo), or Olmec celts and axes planted in the ground, or the flint knife falling from Citlalinicue’s celestial womb into Chicomoztoc—can transform the watery caves or fields into fertile wombs. In Chapters 7 and 8 we will explore whether the stone columns that penetrated the central axis of La Venta had a similar function of insemination and procreation.

Wrapping Up the Embryos

Several kinds of analyses have fortified my identification of the axe-image as based on the human embryo and used as a symbol of vital, gestational

power or life force. As a result of a formal comparison between the axe-image and the human embryo, a transhistorical structural analysis of the symbol and its variations, and a study of some syntactic contexts in which it appeared, I produced a matrix of associations for the embryo image. This matrix shows that the embryo symbol is part of a gestational and birth complex that includes visual depictions of fetuses, umbilical cords, and cave-wombs. A similar matrix of associations occurs in verbal narratives from Mixe-, Mayan-, and Nahuatl-speaking societies, as do other parts of the Olmec embryo’s variable associations, such as the canoe and the hand. The modern narratives also offer us an alternative way to consider the embryo image—not as a series of deities, but as seed spirits, the root of children, the “original seeds of the human race.” The “box” stories, from different cultures, vary quite a bit yet retain the solid nucleus of an unborn or newborn human-maize being. Similarly, in Formative period imagery, a few of the variations became somewhat standardized (e.g., Joralemon’s God IV, characterized by a headband and earflaps). However, there are also many nonstandard versions of the embryo image, and these probably arose from each group’s local tales about their original seeds. Each Formative period composition and each modern narrative represent a slightly different set of ideas.

Thus far the chapter has focused on the embryo symbol (in many formats) and on fetus sculptures (all of which are three-dimensional objects). Of course, Formative period people made life-size, hollow ceramic infant sculptures as well. Numerous hollow babies survive, but most are fragmentary, and many of them were looted. Despite their wide distribution, few studies of the genre have been done.

Hollow Babies

In the decades since George and Susannah Vailant excavated two hollow babies at Gualupita, near Cuernavaca, Morelos, in 1932, these sculptures have remained enigmatic (Fig. 3.31). Although they have been found in the Basin of Mexico, along the Gulf Coast, and in Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guatemala, they share some of the following features (Fig. 3.32). They are hollow ceramic objects that usu-

ally look like babies or toddlers. Many are life-size. Most are slipped in a creamy color and finely burnished. Their pose is usually seated with the legs outstretched. No excavated hollow baby (whole or fragmentary) shows any primary gender characteristics. If there is an indication of hair, it is in a tuft around which additional hair is absent. The figures are fully realized in three-dimensional space: they are equally detailed on the back and sides of the body. They are generally naturalistic in terms of being quite recognizable as babies, but of course the sculptors abstracted every detail of anatomy: brows are arced symmetrically, limbs and finger taper in abstract forms, and so on. This simplification of form, along with their polished (unnatural) surfaces, lends most hollow babies a sense of monumentality. Few, if any, other traditions of visual culture monumentalize babies independent of adults. For example, until about AD 1500, Christian art typically portrayed the infant Jesus with his mother. In contrast, even at Mesoamerican sites that had little or no monumental stone sculptures, hollow babies have been found. So, we have to ask, why did Formative period people master the difficult skill of producing life-size hollow babies of finely finished clay?

This question is difficult to answer because little archaeological context exists for the hollow babies. Jeffrey Blomster (1998) has compiled documentation for the excavation of hollow babies, and in addition to the two excavated by the Vaillants, he noted that one was rescued during the construction of the road in Atlihuayan, Morelos. However, this is not a typical baby but a caped hollow adult. To this corpus of three, Blomster added the one he excavated in Etlatongo. Based on this small sample, he proposed that hollow babies are not associated with burials (although one was excavated in the burial of a high-status, fifteen-year-old girl at Fábrica San José, Oaxaca [Marcus and Flannery 1996:134–135]). He then expanded his corpus to include other published, relatively complete, largely unprovenanced hollow babies, many of which have been reconstructed.

Using this group, he devised a list of criteria that allowed him to sort the figures into three groups based on the presence or absence of twenty-four traits. It is not clear why he included these traits, or which hollow babies made up his corpus. Major traits of his “Group 1” included white slips,



3.31 The Gualupita hollow baby, excavated by the Vaillants in 1932. American Museum of Natural History. Drawing by Sydney McIlhenny.



3.32 Hollow baby said to be from Veracruz or Tabasco. Dallas Museum of Art. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

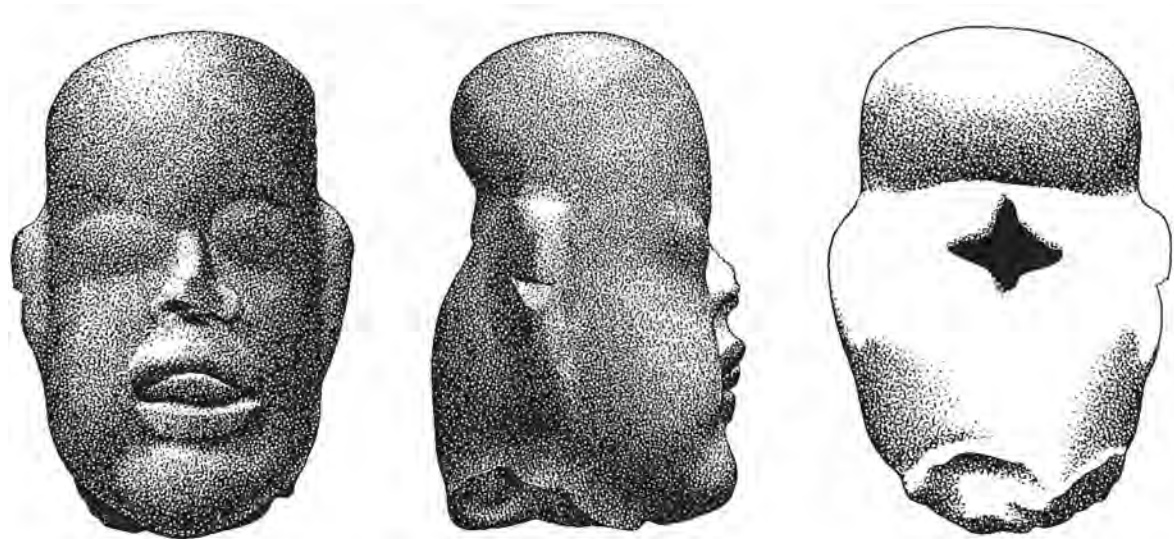
seated poses, and “Olmec-style” facial features. He considered the second group (twenty-one hollow babies with gray, brown, or no slip) as imitative of the Group 1 figures, while a third group was formed from all those that did not score high on the twenty-four trait test. Since his article did not illustrate or list the forty examples of Group 1 or any of the Group 2 or 3 babies, it is impossible to evaluate the categorization.

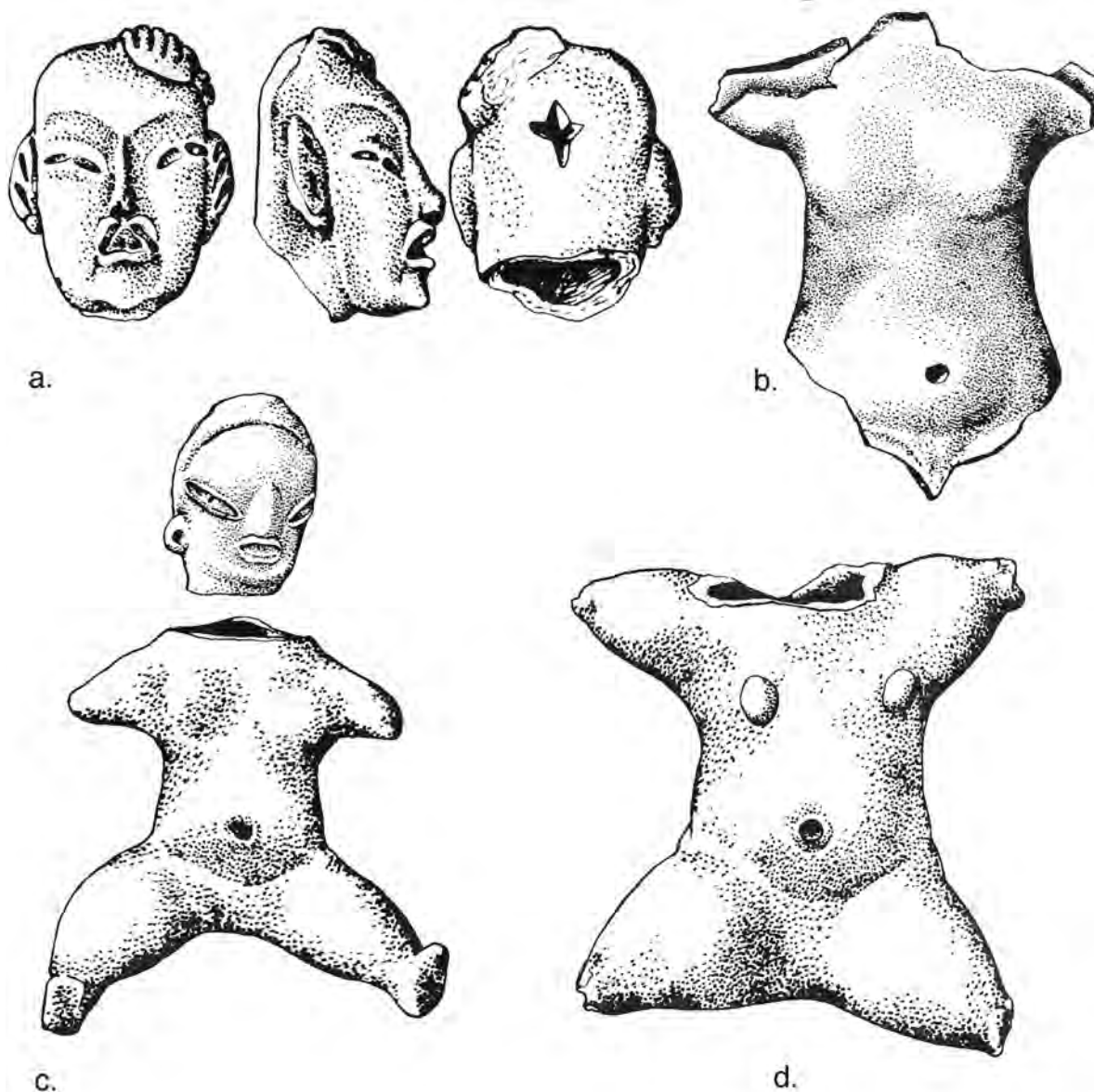
More archaeological information exists about *fragments* of hollow babies, and some of this information is revealing. In a preliminary effort to determine the distribution of hollow babies, I looked through the entire Mesoamerican collection in the warehouse of the American Museum of Natural History. There are recognizable fragments of hollow babies from sites in Guerrero, Puebla, Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Morelos, the Pacific coast of Guatemala, Michoacán, and the state of México. This helps to confirm what excavation reports reveal: that hollow baby sculptures were extremely widespread.

Site reports from San Lorenzo, Zohapilco/Tlapacoya, San José Mogote, Paso de la Amada, Teopantecuanitlan (Martínez Donjuán 1986), and many other places mention partial hollow babies. This information reveals a little more about the use and distribution of the baby figures. At San Lorenzo, the entire figurine sample gathered by Coe and Diehl (1980:260) was from construction

fill, so the original contexts are unknown. However, very early large and small hollow figure fragments occur in the Bajío phase, 1650–1450 bc (date from Pool 2007:7). From the brief Chicharras phase (1450–1400 bc) there are also a few fragments. Additionally there are some solid “dwarf” heads from figurines. From the San Lorenzo A phase (1400–1000 bc) Coe and Diehl found four heads of hollow babies, of which they illustrated three, each quite different. Of their Figure 325, they said it had typical Olmec features. It is very naturalistic, however, with the broad cranium and small, delicate features of an infant. Their Figure 326 is unusual for San Lorenzo at this time (Fig. 3.33). No other figurine they illustrated was “eyeless,” like some small, unprovenanced figurines said to be from Las Bocas (Coe et al. 1995:313–317). This figure possesses a tonsured or deliberately deformed head pierced with a fontanel in the back. The excavators did not describe the clay or finish but noted there was red pigment. The fontanel cutout and eye treatment are similar to those on hollow babies and figurines from the Las Bocas/Basin of Mexico area. The third hollow head they illustrated has heavy, triangular features and slit eyes. It is made of coarse orange clay. Another fragment, consisting of a hand resting on a foot, is made of orange paste with a cream slip (Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 346). In response to Blomster’s “Group 1,” I would point out that only the last fragment mentioned was surely white (cream) slipped and seated. The most “Olmec” looking hollow baby from San Lorenzo has some features more typical of the Basin of Mexico.

3.33 Head of a hollow baby excavated at San Lorenzo, dating to its A phase. Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 326. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.





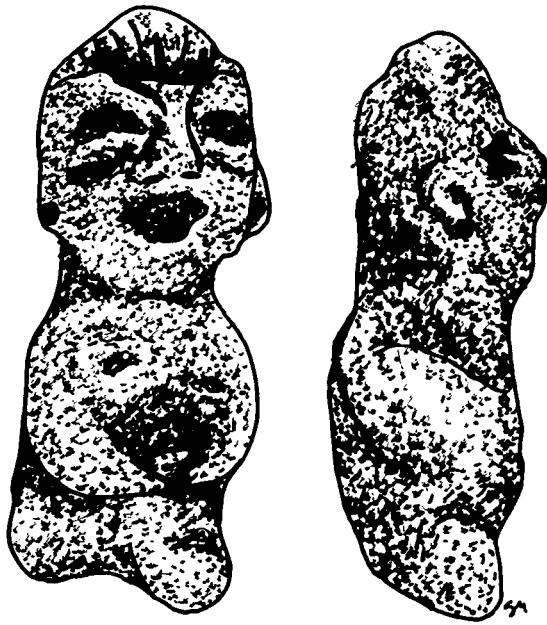
3.34 Parts of hollow babies from Zohapilco, Basin of Mexico: *a* and *b*, typical of Ayotla phase; *c* and *d*, most common in

Manantial phase. Drawing by author after Niederberger 1976: Figs. 221, 226.

At Zohapilco and Tlapacoya, Niederberger (1976) found several heads and torsos of small-scale hollow babies in the Ayotla levels (1400–1150 bc). Some of these had the fontanel, or star, design incised on the back of the head, like the one from San Lorenzo (201, 210, 214) (Fig. 3.34). Larger ones, with a highly polished beige slip, from the Manantial levels (1150–850 bc), were associated with a secondary burial (214). From Oaxaca, Marcus (1998:93–102) reported nine fragments of large, white-slipped hollow babies from “Placido’s Midden,” a refuse area for a neighborhood at San José Mogote dated between 1400 and 950 bc. In fact, quite a few hol-

low baby fragments were recovered in excavations at the site, including one in a bell-shaped pit at the earliest house in Area C (109–110), even hollow baby limbs (white-slipped) from the floor and debris pile of House 4 (117), and others (fragments described on pages 160 and 166 were in middens, and those on page 209 were in a house). Hollow baby fragments were deposited in the fill of later public buildings at Barrio de Rosario Huitzo (228).

At San José Mogote, the placement of several solid figurines of infants or fetuses suggests that they may have been used to enliven houses. A tiny figurine with crossed arms and the proportions of a fetus was



3.35 A fetus figurine from San José Mogote found buried under the foundation stone of a house. Drawing by Sydney McIlhenny.



3.36 Partial hollow baby excavated at Etlatongo, Oaxaca. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

found under a house foundation stone (Marcus 1998:112–113) (Fig. 3.35). In several houses a small, solid baby figurine was buried in the house construction (101).

Before his broader study of hollow babies, Blomster (1998) excavated a partial one from a bell-shaped pit at Etlatongo, Oaxaca (Fig. 3.36). Its brown paste is cream-slipped, the figure is broken, and the estimated original height of the seated infant is 18–20 cm. It was in a deposit roughly contemporary with the San José phase in San José Mogote. The context of the Etlatongo baby and the objects associated with it are very intriguing. Blomster's analysis of the size and contents of the pit indicated to him that it had been used by an elite household with extra-local contacts. Into the bottom of the pit was placed some silty loam that contained a dog skeleton, a ceramic tube, a solid figurine fragment depicting an animal, an obsidian blade fragment, and near the top of the silt, the hollow baby. Above that was some looser material containing ceramic vessels, miniature vessels, a ceramic pendant, and some chunks of the plaster used to line the pit. Above the pit was the fragment of an animal figurine, one that looks vaguely canine. It is almost as if the dog skeleton and the ceramic animal were a pet and toy associated with the baby, along with its miniature vessels.

This incomplete study of reports of hollow and solid baby figurines suggests several things. Based on the current state of knowledge, small, hollow babies first appeared at San Lorenzo between 1650 and 1400 bc. Between 1400 and 900 bc, they continue to appear at San Lorenzo and also among the Ayotla phase materials in the Basin of Mexico and the San José phase in Oaxaca. Although most of the babies or fragments were in refuse or fill, one was in a house, two in bell-shaped pits, and one in a burial. Although they were widely distributed, they were never plentiful. For example, at Zohapilco, Niederberger (1976) estimated that they formed 4 percent of her sample from the Ayotla phase. As Blomster (1998) aptly pointed out, the form of the hollow babies was always “divergent,” “foreign,” and “other” in terms of size, manufacture, surface polish, and, of course, subject relative to other figurines in any given place and time.

Several scholars have ventured ideas regarding the significance of the hollow babies. When Vailant found the one from Gualupita, he considered the baby face to be like the face of the axe-image.

Later Coe (1965a) referred to the babies generally as the “jaguar’s children.” Beatriz de la Fuente (1992) related them to the infants on La Venta Throne (Altar) 5—some highly active and some inert. Were they stand-ins for the sacrifice of actual infants? Perhaps the babies represent the infancy of an important member of society, such as a chief or ritual specialist (Clark 1994). Also, at least in San José Mogote, people placed small ceramic babies and fetus figures under the foundation stones of houses or somewhere in the construction, possibly as dedicatory sculptures, or with the intention of filling the house with gestation-strength life force. Blomster (1998) provides a convincing argument that the baby at Etlatongo served as a ritual object that was owned or curated by an elite family. He writes, “As ritual objects, hollow babies served to negotiate relationships between humans and the supernatural, with ancestors—real or mythic—invoked as intermediaries” (322). His idea that the Etlatongo baby was curated by a family of some wealth finds an intriguing modern parallel.

A Contemporary Baby in a Boat: Niñopa

Although I am unable to make a direct historical connection, I would like to point out some uncanny parallels between a statue of the infant Jesus that is in current ritual use and the Formative period babies, specifically the one from Etlatongo. In contemporary Xochimilco, on what remains of the lakeshore, thousands of people are involved in fervent devotion to Niñopa, a Santo Niño. The manufacture of the statue is already lost to history; it may have been made in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries. One of the former *mayordomos*, Professor Gelasio Castro González (2002:13), contends that “When the Franciscans arrived in Xochimilco, they brought with them the tradition of carving in wood. The people of the town learned this job and made various figures, among them the Niñopa, which dates to the sixteenth century. One of the functions of the Franciscans was to evangelize and what better form for doing this than with the image of a baby!” (translation by the author).

This suggests that the people of that region already had a tradition of devotion toward infants or infant images. Could it be a coincidence that so many “unprovenanced” hollow babies are said

to be from Las Bocas, about 100 km (60 mi) from Xochimilco? Others are said to be from Tlatilco, another lakeside city in the Basin of Mexico, and they formed 4 percent of the Ayotla phase figurine assemblage in Tlapacoya, only 10 km from Xochimilco.

The extant figure of the Niñopa has been extensively modified, to the extent that even its face has been retouched in the last century (Fig. 3.37). This much is clear because the custodians of the statue arranged to have some consolidation done at the Coordinación Nacional de Restauración del Patrimonio Cultural in 1995 and several times since then. What may be the original core of the sculpture is made of *colorín* wood that has been polychromed and given other surfaces over the centuries. It is 51 cm high, in the form of an infant with its right arm raised and with lightly flexed legs. Several hollow babies “from Las Bocas” in the Princeton exhibition were seated, so their heights were not as great as that of Niñopa, but if the length of the legs is added to the height, many were about 40–55 cm, so the size is similar. Unclothed, Niñopa weighs 598 gm (1.31 lbs) (Pralta Flores 2004). I could not find any indication of whether the figure is partially hollow, but given its slight weight relative to its height, it seems that some parts, such as the torso or head, might be hollowed out.

The names “Niño Pa” and “Niñopan” may derive from *niño padre* (“child father”) or may be a syncretic term that combines the Spanish *niño* with the Nahuatl suffix “-pan,” which would mean “child of the place” or “territory” (Cordero López 1994:49). Today many people of Xochimilco consider the Niñopa to be a living being or an ensouled sculpture, and he is fed, dressed, delicately cleaned, and carried to his appointments. More than that, however, people venerate him with great joy and fervor. Through the assistance of his stewards, or *mayordomos*, as well as those who sponsor the nine posadas of the nativity cycle, and many daily hosts, he participates in an annual cycle of festivals.

People say that “las cosas sólo pasan si el Niñopa así lo quiere” (things only happen if Niñopa wants them to). He travels around Xochimilco, attending festivals, going to mass, visiting the sick at home or in hospital, attending birthday parties, or just visiting for the day. As he interacts, he listens to secrets, returns people’s gazes, and offers many favors. He helps with life’s struggles and is revered for his healing, from curing headaches to more serious,



3.37 Niñopa in his canoe at a fiesta in Xochimilco. Photo courtesy of Rex Hayes.

even life-threatening, illnesses. On February 2, during the change-of-stewardship ceremony at the ancient convent of San Bernardino de Siena, the Niñopa blesses the children, the seeds that will be planted that year, and the candles that will be lit in the houses of the sick or the dead (Peralta 2004:26).

It is not just the fact that Xochimilco has a several-centuries-old tradition of reverence toward the sculpture of an infant that resonates with the Etlatongo baby's burial. As Niñopa travels through town, he is always accompanied by a living dog (González 2002:16). In the Etlatongo bell-shaped pit was the skeleton of a dog and a cute ceramic dog head. There were also miniature dishes in the pit. Niñopa receives food daily on sets of special tiny dishes, and there are more for special occasions. He has many toys, most of which are gifts from his devotees. Finally, Blomster (1998) made the point that the size of the bell-shaped storage pit indicated the relative wealth of its household. Although hosting Niñopa is a very costly undertaking, families say that its spiritual benefits—and the

sense of closeness, love, and cooperation that the cargo brings—are worth the expense.

In fact, there is a wait list to host Niñopa. As of 2007 the Xochimilco website¹⁰ said the cargo is spoken for until 2035; González (2002) reports that the next available sponsorship will be in 2042. This is despite the fact that it costs about \$100,000 (US) to be a *mayordomo*. Those who perform the service become highly honored members of the community.

The change-of-*mayordomo* ceremony on February 2 involves the community of Xochimilco, the clerics, the Comisión Organizadora del Niñopa, and the incoming and outgoing *mayordomos* (González 2002:15; Peralta 2004:26). Devotees celebrate a great fiesta with a procession that leaves the home of the current *mayordomo*, travels to the ancient convent of San Bernardino, and finally to the house of the incoming *mayordomos*. People transform every church, chapel, home, and street on the route into a sacred place, covering arches and doorways with flowers, *papel picado*, and flags.

Grandly decorated portals grace major points of the city. When Niñopa arrives in his new home, he goes to the place where the food—which has been prepared for more than five thousand people—is waiting for his blessing. Afterward he is placed on a specially constructed altar where little dishes of food await him. After he partakes, the food is shared with the rest of the community (Peralta 2004:27).

Mayordomos purchase a grand outfit, a lighted castle, and fireworks, and distribute a great deal of food in conjunction with the ceremony. In 2002 the tamales alone required 100 sacks of maize and 200 kilos of beans, and there was also 150 kilos of rice and huge quantities of mole and atole (González 2002:17). It is interesting that with the exception of rice, traditional Pre-Columbian foods accompany the ceremonies. After the fiesta there is the daily expense of feeding tamales to the fifty people who pray the rosary every evening at 8 p.m. Some *mayordomos* have even built a house in which to receive Niñopa and his quantity of presents, clothing, and toys (17–18).

On special occasions Niñopa is carried in a small wooden canoe similar to the traditional dugouts used in Pre-Columbian times. It is said he enjoys the lake and the sea. Since sand is sometimes found in his clothing, people say that he slips out at night to swim. The canoe is definitely not a symbol or object that Christians associate with other Santo Niños. It is generally said that European devotion to the Santo Niño began in Atocha, Spain. Although the Niño de Atocha was a pilgrim who in the Middle Ages fed prisoners and peripatetically roamed the mountains at night to aid the needy, he is not associated with a canoe. One statue of the Santo Niño was brought to the Philippines by Magellan. Devotees petition the Santo Niño for rain in times of drought and for help when there is illness. The one in Prague is made of wax and is 19 in. high. It was presented by a Spanish princess to Bohemia. A devotional booklet describing it states: “As long as the Divine Infant was venerated, God showed Himself a kind helper, through His Son, and the community prospered both spiritually and temporally. But when the devotion to the Infant was relaxed, God’s blessing seemed to depart from the house” (Anonymous n.d.). There are others in the Americas, including one in Fresnillo, Zacatecas. A very popular one in the Santuario de Chimayó

in New Mexico protects travelers, rescues people in danger, and helps those unjustly imprisoned. However, none of these are associated with a canoe. At least for this aspect of the Niñopa of Xochimilco, there seems to be a Formative period antecedent.

In Chapter 2 I described the discovery by Miguel Covarrubias and Matthew Stirling of the Cerro de las Mesas cache that contained 786 pieces of Pre-Columbian jade. Among them were only a few Olmec pieces, including the bright green jade “dwarf” (proportionally this sculpture represents an infant) and a canoe of the same material (Stirling 1941). In his discussion of the materials excavated there, Drucker (1955:48) said that the figurine was found directly above the canoe, and that the figurine’s feet “fit snugly” within the cavity of the canoe. Incised on both sides of the prow are embryo symbols (Fig. 3.38). Another Olmec jade canoe in the form of a hand is in a private collection (Fig. 4.25). We must bear in mind that to the Nahua, Mixe, and Popoluca, life essentially begins in water (López Austin 1980:181; Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003:155). It is really unfortunate that we have so few excavated hollow babies from primary contexts in the Basin of Mexico or the Gulf region. The only one seems to be the hollow baby found in the bell-shaped pit in the arid, high Mixteca Alta at Etlatongo, where canoes were probably not used. In the imperishable medium of jade, however, there is a testimony to the ancient conjunction of the infant with the canoe.¹¹



3.38 Cerro de las Mesas baby in a canoe. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

No one, to my knowledge, has suggested a connection between the Niñopa and Olmec hollow babies, but one of the residents of Xochimilco, Professor Rodolfo Cordero López, has argued that the Niñopa has Aztec antecedents. He has considered the references in the works of Friars Sahagún and Durán to Aztec rituals that resemble the birth and descent of gods. In August the festival of Pachtontli included waiting for a sign of the birth of Huitzilopochtli. A gourd was filled with masa and placed atop the temple while people held a vigil. What they watched for was the deposition of a child's footprint in the masa, and perhaps a few hairs from the head of his mother. In December the fiesta of Atemoztli celebrated the descent of Huitzilopochtli to the world. The sign was the descent of a child called "Agua" from the sky. Sahagún described a September ceremony called Teotleco in which altars called *momoztli* were created from branches. Cordero sees this as the precedent for the portals decorated with flowers that are placed for change of cargo ceremonies. It too is connected with the impression of feet into ground maize as a sign that the gods have arrived. He gives several other examples of preconquest ceremonies that he sees as precursors to nativity celebrations. Although establishing that both indigenous and Catholic traditions contributed to the local veneration of Niñopa may be important to a Catholic, from an art historian's standpoint these comparisons do not show a continuity of visual communication. However, the descent of the child "Agua" from the sky may be a later version of the ancient Gulf practice of inseminating the earth with axes in the form of embryos. The impression of a foot in maize is evocative of the jade celt from El Manatí into which a footprint is deeply carved (Ortiz Ceballos and Rodríguez 1994: Fig. 5.14), as well as another one from Chiapas (Clark and Pye 2000: Fig. 13).

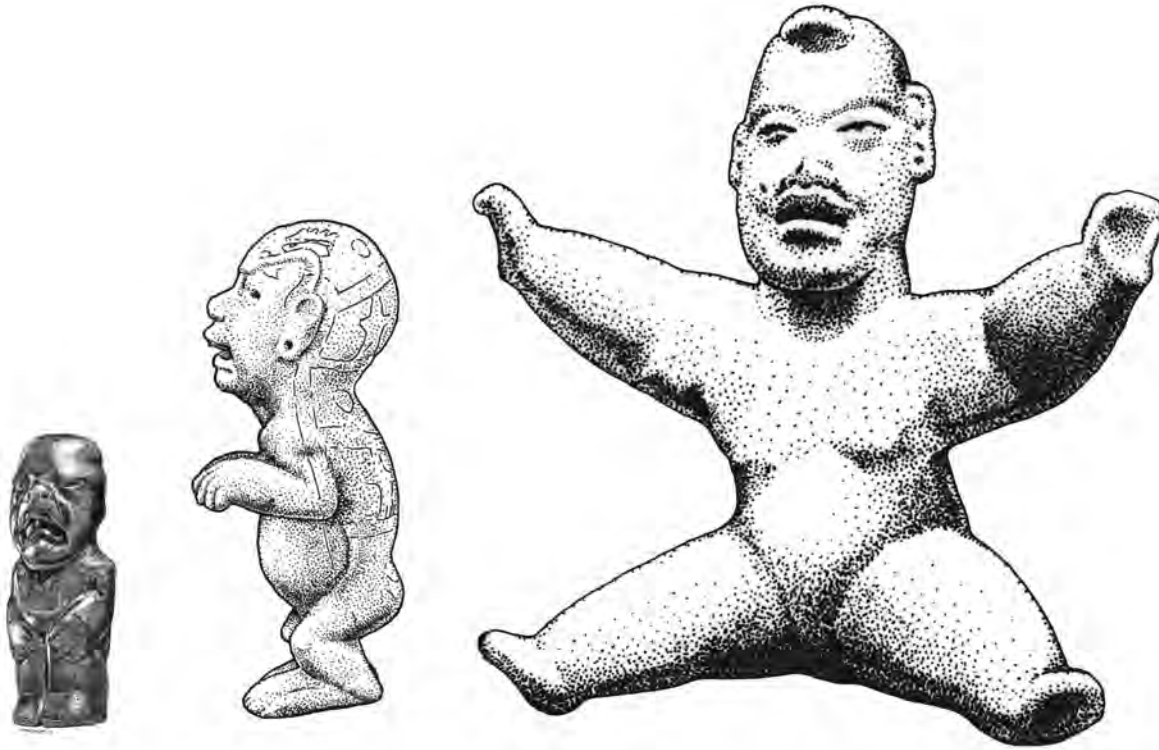
The preceding paragraphs suggest a constellation of parallels between the hollow baby of Etlatongo, the Cerro de las Mesas baby in its canoe, and the phenomenon of the Niñopa. Both the Etlatongo baby and the Niñopa are associated with a dog, a toy, and miniature dishes. Blomster's proposal that the user of the bell-shaped pit that contained the hollow baby was probably from a wealthy family is interesting as well, since clearly it takes considerable resources to steward the Niñopa. Although these connections are rather loose, we need only one more bit of information to imagine what might

have occurred around the Formative hollow babies. That piece concerns their disposal.

To the authors currently writing about the Niñopa it is important to ascertain the statue's age in order to determine how old the tradition of his veneration is. Documentation records the existence of statues of the Santo Niño as long ago as the sixteenth century (Cordero López 1994:35; González 2002:13). It is not clear whether this particular statue is that old, or whether parts of it are that old, or even whether it is a newer version substituted after an older statue was accidentally dropped into a canal (Cordero López 1994:50).

However, this focus on maintaining a single ensouled sculpture indefinitely was not a Mesoamerican practice. There is considerable evidence that statues that held supernormal potencies had a limited lifespan. For example, the Lacandonese renew their god pots every year. The ceremony incorporates a liminal period in which both the new and old vessels occupy the temple for a specific period during which the spirit of the vessel and its wisdom are passed from the old to the new ones. Eventually the old ones are removed and ritually buried. In recent years, archaeology has revealed a similar tradition associated with the large, elaborate incense burners at the Classic Maya Palenque Group of the Cross. At a certain point they were terminated, smashed, and buried in place. Regarding the sixteenth-century Maya of Yucatán, Friar Diego de Landa describes at some length the overlapping of old and new wooden statues of the gods. Each statue was intended to have a twenty-year life span, and for half of that time it cohabited with the outgoing and incoming sculptures. These sculptures, too, were processed through the town, which was decorated with arbors and banners. Perhaps so many fragments of hollow babies exist because the statues were decommissioned or ritually terminated. Some were found in refuse, and others in homes and storage pits, in the manner that seeds could be stored or cached.

With all this in mind, we can consider a scenario for the hollow babies. In general, I think, these appealing forms embodied the life-bestowing energy that propels growth and vitality. They may have been the *Niño pan*, or "child of (our) place," or a specific child. The pure, sweet energy of fresh, newly born life is so clear in infants. It seems possible that a cargo system might have been in place for the care of the hollow babies in each vil-



3.39 Stages of human development shown in Olmec art: embryo, fetus, and baby. Drawings by Corey Escoto.

lage where they existed. Their presence, like the Niñopa's, might have “blessed” (or bestowed with sacred energy) the seeds prior to planting, as well as people's children and the candles used in healing rituals. If they were transported to homes, fields, and shrines—accompanied by their dogs, dishes, and toys—they might have eventually broken. Or like the Postclassic Maya wooden ancestor statues, they might have had a limited life span after which they would be replaced and then deliberately broken.

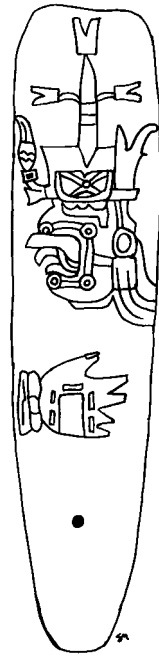
In places where canoes were necessary for transportation, a hollow baby might have had its own canoe, used like a litter to carry it. This baby, as has been suggested by Benson and others, might have been dressed. To answer the question that I posed earlier, perhaps the babies were made of ceramic so they would be lighter to carry than a stone baby, and also so that they could be “decommissioned” when it was appropriate. This scenario has little direct evidence to support it, but neither does the common notion that the babies represent the infancy of a ruler. The hollow babies seem to have been most popular during the Early Formative, when rulership may not have been quite as developed (with the exception of San Lorenzo). And

given the prevalence of fetus and embryo images in the Early and Middle Formative, the function of the hollow babies as life-bestowing embodied sculptures seems reasonable.

Conclusions about Embryos, Fetuses, and Babies

This chapter has taken a journey through gestation as portrayed by Formative period people in Mexico. If we consider the total visual output of Formative Mesoamerican people, they seem to have depicted every stage of gestation—from the tadpole-like early embryo to the six- to eight-week embryo that is miscarried, to the fetus at nearly every stage, to the newborn and toddler. Since these stages were not all portrayed by any one group in a single place, it seems safe to say that people did portray what they saw, which was mostly the six- to eight-week embryo, the early fetus, and babies (Fig. 3.39).

Images of the embryo by far outnumber those of fetuses, a frequency that coincides with the likelihood of miscarriage. In fact, images of embryos were included on many formats of Olmec sculpture, from being incised on stone masks to form-



3.40 Incised celt showing an embryo mask and a large hand. H: 36.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Drawing by Sydney McIlhany.

ing an entire stela. The most common variable element that occurred with embryo images was one of several symbols for maize, especially seeds or sprouts. Based on this visual evidence, as well as the multitude of narratives by descendants of Pre-Columbian peoples, the Olmec embryo symbol seems to have referred to the seed state of humans as they were co-identified with maize. In that seed state, embryos possess a pluri-potency that Formative period people must have conceptualized as the apparent ability to metamorphose into various animals as well as into human babies. When an embryo symbol was incised onto a mask or other object, it must have referred to that amazing vitality, which we might call the life force (Fig. 3.40).

There are far fewer fetus sculptures (I now know of about seventy). In Oaxaca they were placed within the foundations of houses, perhaps also to provide that powerful energy of gestation, of becoming, to the home. At La Venta, as Chapter 8 shows, they form the inception of a vast narrative of cosmic creation and human origins.

The hollow babies seem to have been a focus of ritual devotion. Their care may have conferred certain status on their hosts, whether in an annual cycle or a more protracted one. They were probably seen as vessels of life-bestowing energy that interacted with the seeds of crops, provided new vitality to the sick, and created cause for celebration. Perhaps as the cult of the ruler or divine ancestors developed, these powers were imputed to them as well.

The prevalence of images of gestational and newborn humans in Formative period visual expression prompts us to reflect on John Monaghan's (2001:295) contention that the state of gestation or pregnancy is a more important determinant of ritual behavior than is gender. By means of a survey of visual imagery throughout Mesoamerica during the Early Formative, the next chapter shows what has been known for years: that at the outset of visual culture, images of women were more frequent than those of men. However, what has not been recognized is that much of the ritual placement of Early Formative sculpture was intended to emulate (or honor, or stimulate, or attract, or appease the gods of) insemination and gestation. We will see that not only did adult humans wear images of gestational beings as regalia, but entire landscapes were configured as places of insemination and gestation of life. In such places of beginning, humans could complete the cycle of flowering, reproduction, death, and rebirth, and even commemorate their deeds along the way.

Chapter 4

Tracking Gender, Gestation, and Narrativity Through the Early Formative

This chapter surveys the genesis of visual culture in Mesoamerica in a roughly chronological order.¹ The major periods—Archaic, Initial Formative, Early Formative, and Middle Formative—are discussed in three sections. Within each one, I focus on sites that have been excavated. These were selected for the significance of their contributions to visual culture, and I present them in an order determined by the beginning of the relevant archaeological phase (see Fig. 1.2). This means that a few places, such as San Lorenzo, are discussed in more than one section.

Because other recent scholarship has insightfully addressed such issues as emerging settlements and the iconography of rulership, this version of Initial and Early Formative development takes a different focus. It pays special attention to several topics that I think are conceptually related. These are the imagery of women, gestating humans, and infants; the development of empirical knowledge and temporal concepts surrounding human gestation; the technologies of fermentation and transformation of food; and the landscapes created to embody—and narrate—processes of insemination, gestation, and renewal. My studies of these topics led to the contention that Formative people constructed metaphoric parallels among the processes they observed: of human development; of the temporal, seasonal, and agricultural cycles; and of cooking, storing, and consuming food. Of course, the chapter does not ignore males; it probes the ambiguity and subtleties with which gender is depicted, as well as men's roles in Formative period visual culture.

The Archaic Period, 10,000 to 2000 BC: The Beginning of Visual Symbols

Over the past century, archaeologists have gradually recovered evidence of the people who first forged civilization in the Americas. The future may hold

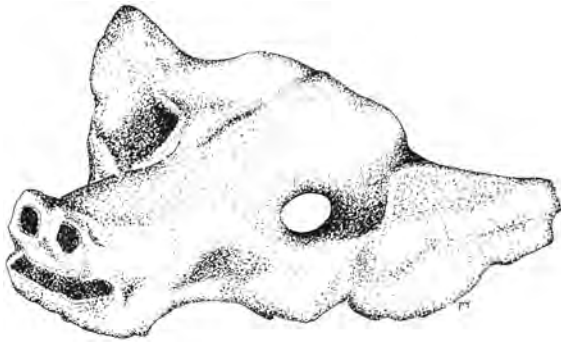
definitive answers to the question of ancient origins of humans in the New World, but tentative answers are coming to light with increasing frequency. Were humans living here as long ago as 20,000 or even 30,000 years ago? And were they primarily from northeastern Asia? Probably. We can be sure that by 14,000 years ago, humans were hunting deer and other small game as well as some larger creatures, such as mammoths and camelids, which are now extinct. For 6,000 years, people moved through seasonal camps to harvest wild resources. Gradually they began to plant seeds of beans, squash, chiles, and teosinte, an ancestor of maize. Evidence for the domestication of maize between 6000 and 4000 bc has appeared at Zohapilco in the Valley of Mexico, the Tehuacan Valley, highland Oaxaca, and the Gulf Coast, but cobs were so small that maize is unlikely to have played a major role as a dietary staple until sometime between 1200 and 800 bc (Benz 2006; Diehl 2004:86; Pope et al. 2001).

One ecological zone in which early settlement occurred in Mesoamerica is the highland Basin of Mexico. A system of interconnected lakes filled much of a 3,024 mi² basin that rests about 7,200 ft above sea level. Snowcapped volcanoes and mountains, including Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, ring the Basin. Some of these mountains affected the rain patterns around the its northern reaches, keeping the Basin relatively low in rainfall, with rivers running only intermittently. However, the western lakeshore received considerable rain. In the words of the late archaeologist Christine Niederberger (2000:170–171), the western and southern perimeters of the lake system were an “ancient Eden . . . among the most favorable habitats in Middle America . . . for the establishment of a sedentary way of life.” By 5300 bc, hunter-gatherers were camping along the southern lakeshores, collecting turtles, amphibians, fish, and aquatic and migratory birds, and hunting mammals in the nearby forests of pine and oak. They experimented with sowing seeds of edible plants in the alluvial soils, and by 3000 bc they were enjoying small quantities of maize, squash, chile pepper, and amaranth. By 2000 bc, people were using fired clay to make simple figurines and vessels, and volcanic stone for a variety of tools. Although most of the Formative period settlements in the Valley of Mexico have been damaged by modern urban expansion, Niederberger argued that a hierarchy of settlements did exist. At least some evidence of stone and

earthen structures has been found. These date to about 1250 bc (the Manantial phase) at a regional capital called Tlapacoya, to which the chapter will return. The mountain-fringed lake, with its moderate climate and impressive vistas, became the location for the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, as well as the Spanish colonial capital, and is today the site of one of the world’s largest urban centers, Mexico City. It was in this environment that the first known examples of sculpture have been found.

Mesoamerican visual culture begins with two isolated sculptures made six thousand years apart, both found in the Basin of Mexico. These two pieces seem to foreshadow several prominent themes of later art. The first of these Archaic period sculptures is a carved sacrum and hipbones from a now-extinct camelid that was fashioned into the skull-like head of a coyote-like animal (Fig. 4.1a). The conditions of its discovery in 1870 in Late Pleistocene deposits in Tequixquiac, in the northern part of the Basin, and its subsequent “wanderings” caused its authenticity to be questioned, but it is now generally accepted as Late Paleo-Indian, dating to about 10,000 bc (Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda 1965). Making a skull out of a sacrum could be dismissed as an anomalous act, disconnected from later visual symbolism, yet strangely, this is only the first of many times that sacrums were used symbolically in Mesoamerica (Stross 1996).²

The next known sculpture is a figurine formed of clay (Fig. 4.1b). It was found at Tlapacoya, in the southern part of the Basin, by archaeologists excavating a hearth at a forager’s campsite which was dated to about 2300 bc (Niederberger 1976:212–213, Lám. XCV, Foto 16). Analysis of the material indicated that it was of local manufacture. This broken form, created without arms, and neckless as well, is generally believed to represent a pregnant human female. The tiny (5.2 cm) figurine is somewhat phallic in form and proportion—basically a shaft terminating in lateral bulges (assuming the broken part formed a symmetrical whole). But at the “top” are four punched cavities flanking a ridge of clay, suggesting two pairs of eyes and a nose. Nothing indicates a mouth. If the punched features can be considered to indicate a head, then the thoracic area below the head forms a concavity (no breasts are indicated) before swelling out in what would be the abdomen. Below the swelling are what Niederberger described as bulbous legs, but they could also be considered hips. The piece could



4.1 The earliest sculptures: *a*, the carved sacrum camelid from Tequixquiac, W: 18 cm; *b*, a ceramic figurine from Tlapacoya, H: 5.5 cm. Drawings by Paula Yeager.

be the abstract representation of a pregnant female, but it could just as easily be seen as a phallus and testicles with a small face at the glans. Niederberger (1976) pointed out that some authors have considered similar figurines from other parts of the world as androgynous.³ Because of its ambiguity, is this a “crude” or “primitive” figure? Or is it symbolically sophisticated, managing to condense two images into a single form to convey a relationship between the phallus and a swelling belly? It could be a polysemic reference to the human reproductive process.

Although we do not know the significance of these pieces, these precocious sculptures are highly suggestive of three of the themes explored in this book. The carved sacrum exhibits the concept of transforming a bone into a new form, imbuing it with a vitality of imagination, and perhaps, if shamanic beliefs are as old as the Paleo-Indians, with an animating vitality. In Formative period symbolic complexes, as we shall see, the juxtaposition of skull and seed, for death and renewal, was a major metaphor. The ambiguous figurine that seems to represent both phallus and pregnant female brings up two other major themes: gestational imagery and fluid gender identities.

It is impossible to ascertain whether these isolated sculptures were intended to convey the ideas I have just suggested. However, as we look at sculptures from the Initial Formative, we will consider visual symbols as parts of specific arrays or complexes. Examining their relationships with other symbolic forms and with their settings can provide more evidence for analysis and interpretation. The rest of this book explicitly states the several methods I used for considering such relationships among visual symbols and the residue of ritual actions.

The Initial Formative, circa 1900 to 1400 BC

Archaeologists call the period between about 1900 and 1400 bc the Initial Formative because by this time societies began to become more complex. In addition to developing permanent settlements and social and political hierarchies, people began creating whole systems of visual communication, possibly in several locations. How certain aspects of visual culture developed among several Initial Formative societies is one focus of this chapter, but it also looks at subsistence technologies, particularly those involving fermentation.

Chicha is a mildly alcoholic beverage (2–12 percent alcohol) made by masticating cobs of maize, which were about an inch long during the Initial Formative. The enzyme amylase in the saliva converted the starch to fermentable sugars (Haard et al. 1999:100–101). This made the sugars available to begin the process of fermentation. The mixture was spit into gourds or ceramic vessels and stirred periodically for about four days. Ambient yeasts, present on grains and in the air, entered the mixture to complete the fermentation process. After the initial batch of *chicha*, the stick used for stirring would have been inoculated with yeasts and reused to introduce those organisms to later batches. If it was available, honey could be added, as it was in later Yucatecan and highland Maya maize beers (Coe 1994:133–134). Fermentation not only produced alcohol, it also enhanced the beverage's nutritional content. Comparing *chicha* to unprocessed maize, the riboflavin concentration is doubled, and other B vitamins are also enhanced (Haard et al. 1999:105). Since the *chicha* was not pasteurized, it contained live organisms and continued to evolve. It was probably consumed young; if not, it quickly became sour.

Around 1800 BC, when *chicha* was introduced, it was a practical use for the tiny cobs of maize that existed. Getting enough of these cobs to substantially enhance the food supply would have been difficult, but also unnec-

essary given the Mazatán region's relatively abundant resources. But when chewed (most likely by women, as is the case in modern times) and mixed with water, the cobs not only provided nutrients but also a pleasant effect.

In addition to its practicality, *chicha* also had a profound influence on Mesoamerican ideology. This desirable beverage was more easily produced in groups, and it became a central element of feasts sponsored by those wealthy enough to have land devoted to maize production and sufficient wives or female relatives to process the cobs. The process connected women and saliva to fermentation, or the transformation of maize to a drink that was obviously alive with bubbles. The earliest use of maize, then, was of fermented maize: a living brew.

Chocolate, too, which is indigenous to the region, may have been used as a drink in the Initial or Early Formative periods (Clark et al. 1994), and it too must be fermented for use. The cacao tree (*Theobroma cacao*) produces large pods that emerge from the trunk. They contain numerous seeds that are allowed to ferment with naturally available organisms for up to twelve days. The fermentation transforms the pulp of the pod and alters its chemistry, which affects its flavor, color, and aroma. Without the fermentation process, the unique flavor of cacao is not present (Katz 2003:22).

1900 to 1250 BC: Pacific Coast of Chiapas, the Mokaya

In the Mazatán region of Chiapas's Pacific coast, just west of the present-day border between Mexico and Guatemala, one of the earliest hierarchical societies arose. Archaeologists call this culture "Mokaya," or "people of the corn" in the Mixe-Zoquean language that was spoken by the region's ancient inhabitants. The Mokaya developed the architectural pattern that combines an elite residence and a ballcourt, and they made pottery to hold a nutritious and popular new drink, maize beer.

Between 1900 and 1700 bc (the Barra phase),⁴ elaborate pottery appeared quite suddenly, possibly stimulated by ceramic production in Ecuador. Although simpler ceramic vessels existed in many parts of Mesoamerica at this time, the wares found at Mokaya villages are remarkably sophisticated.

The vessel walls are thin and hard. There were large jars whose walls flared dramatically upward from narrow bases, then curved inward at the shoulder, leaving an opening only large enough to insert one's hand. Low bowls also had dramatic shapes that tended to curve inward at the shoulder. An array of red, white, and black slips formed designs of vertical and horizontal stripes, cross-hatching, and even diagonal netlike patterns. However, these decorations do not seem to be conventionalized symbols for things or concepts.

Many of the large vessels likely were made to contain *chicha*, or maize beer, for feasts. Archaeologists John Clark, Michael Blake, and Dennis Gosser (1994) think that individuals seeking prestige and influence sponsored competitive feasts that employed these vessels for serving and consuming *chicha* and other products. If so, this alcoholic drink may have been one incentive to initial urbanization. The roles of both fermentation and nixta-

malization were essential in allowing Mesoamerica to utilize maize as a nutrient without suffering from vitamin deficiencies and birth defects.

Between 1700 and 1500 bc, the Locona phase,⁵ feasting, including consumption of *chicha*, was a feature of a central village of the Mokaya culture, Paso de la Amada, in the Mazatán region of Chiapas, Mexico. Covering about 190 acres, Paso de la Amada had a population of about one thousand headed by a chief. Hamlets surrounding the central village were much smaller, covering only 2 to 12 acres. One reason that Paso de la Amada is important in our understanding of Mokaya culture is because it contains the earliest known constellation of two typical Mesoamerican building types, the palace and the ballcourt. A precursor of the Classic period palace was a probable elite residence at Paso de la Amada. Like so many later Mesoamerican structures, the residence was rebuilt repeatedly in six superimposed layers.

The Mokaya also built a large ballcourt there in multiple phases, finally measuring 86.63 m (about 284 ft) long. Two parallel platforms about 2.8 m (about 9 ft) high form its sides. In measuring and mapping the site—particularly the elite residence, ballcourt, and a plaza complex that is 304 m on each side—Clark hypothesized the use of a module of measurement based on the length of the outstretched arms of the human body (1.666 m). The length of the ballcourt was 52 times the module, and the plaza was 182.5 modules (or half of 365) (Pool 2007:186-187). If such a design system were in use, it linked the human body with calendrical units in actual space.⁶ As did later versions, the game played here likely had political, spiritual, and cosmological significance. It was played with a ball made of rubber from the adjacent lowlands. None have been yet found at Paso de la Amada, but several rubber balls have been uncovered at another early site, El Manatí, near the Gulf of Mexico, discussed below.

In addition to serving *chicha* and possibly chocolate in beautiful vessels, wealthy Mokaya feast sponsors probably displayed their fine ornaments and trade goods. Negotiations likely took place regarding salt exports and other trading activities, marriages, and probably warfare. To house the more amicable activities, wealthy residents, some of whom had become chiefs, built large dwellings. Such persons might have worn concave mirrors of



4.2 Figurine head from Paso de la Amada's Late Barra phase. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

dark stone attached to their headdresses, as shown on some figurines from the region (Fig. 4.2).

From 1900 bc onward, during the Barra, Locona, and Ocos phases, the Mokaya produced ceramic figurines that provide a glimpse of humans and their society in those times (dates are from Pool 2007). In each phase people made solid figurines representing young females, sometimes apparently pregnant. In the Barra phase (ca. 1900–1700 bc), these solid female figures were a high proportion of the inventory. There was also a small percentage of solid figurines of fat, masked nude people, and hollow, clothed humans without masks. In the Locona phase (1700–1500 bc) this production shifted. There was a larger percentage of hollow figurines, often ambiguously gendered, while the solid female figurines remained numerous. (Clark [1991] calls the hollow figurines “male,” while Lesure [1997:246-247] points out that they lack breasts or other sexual characteristics and are better described as ambiguously gendered.) The masked figurine shown in Figure 4.3 dates to the Ocos phase, ca. 1500-1400 bc. Some of these masked figures are seated on or merging into three-legged thrones. Clark (1991) has suggested that



4.3 Ocos phase ceramic figurine, from the Mazatán region, of a masked figure on a tripod. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.



A



B

10 Centimeters

4.4 Figurines from the Mazatán region: A, reconstruction of an Ocos-Cherla phase female figurine; B, composite drawing of various Ocos phase cross-legged figurines. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

they are shaman-chiefs. Lesure (1997) sees them as respected elders who may control the young women through giving them away. The drawing of the standing female in Figure 4.4a is a reconstruction of Ocos-Cherla phase figurines that are finely crafted, relatively naturalistic solid female figurines with no arms but pronounced breasts, hips, and legs that taper to tiny feet.

By the Cherla and Cuadros phases, the Mokaya had clearly come into contact with people from other parts of Mexico. They imported some ceramic vessels, possibly from San Lorenzo (Blomster 2005). As Clark (1994) has argued, the figurines of fat, masked elders were nearly replaced at this time by cross-legged, nude figures. He sees them as male (1994), but their hairstyles, pubic Y, and narrow torso below the chest suggest young females (Fig. 4.4b) (Follensbee, personal communication, 2009). These are naturalistically proportioned figures seated with their hands resting on their knees. They represent humans with partially shaven heads and stylized eyes formed of curved slits. These figurines bear considerable resemblance to others from San Lorenzo in the Gulf Coast region (as well as some said to be from Las Bocas in highland Puebla).

1650–1450 BC: Oaxaca, Tierras Largas Phase

Contemporary with Locona and Ocos phase female figurines are some remarkably naturalistic ones from the Valley of Oaxaca. Between 1700 and 1500 bc (Pool 2007:7) people in the Oaxaca Valley settled near some of the valley's prime agricultural lands close to the river. Although they were planting maize, beans, chile peppers, squash, and avocado, and working with teosinte, they also collected wild plants and ate a variety of animals. The nineteen settlements recognized thus far shared a type of pottery vessel decorated with red-painted chevrons, bands, and stripes. Out of the same clay with which they made vessels, people made figurines representing females, ambiguously gendered humans, and some males. Some of these solid figurines have been found, still whole, in burials at Site 1-1-16 near Hacienda Blanca, adjacent to Class 1 farming land (Marcus and Flannery 1996:80–81).

One of these burials, found by Marcus Winter in 1986, included four figurines, and it is interesting to consider how, in this small group, gender was indicated. We definitely know the gender of one. It is solid except for a cavity in the lower abdomen that held a small fetus figurine, its arms clasped around

the knees, which were drawn up to the chest (Fig. 4.5). This figurine, clearly representing a female, has small, rounded breasts, a gently swelling lower abdomen, and an elaborate hairdo with holes for attaching fiber decorations (Marcus 1998:25-26). Another figurine, similar in form but lacking the abdominal cavity, may be assumed to be female. The one that Marcus and Flannery (1996:85) call male has an inverted U-shaped hairdo, a pinched waist, a pubic triangle, and swelling breasts that create a softly curving W underneath (Fig 4.6). Except for having a shorter torso, these are some of the same criteria that Follensbee uses to define female sex among slightly later Gulf Coast figurines. This makes me wonder whether this figure represents a prepubescent female. The alternatives are that Follensbee's observations regarding how gender was indicated in Gulf Coast figures do not apply to this early phase in Oaxaca, or that the figure is deliberately ambiguous, and the marked state is pregnancy, not male or female gender. Given what was by this time a millennium of representations of ambiguously gendered figures, the possibility is strong that pregnancy, not gender, was the condition that most needed to be visually marked, and that this nonpregnant figure may not have been given specific gender attributes.



4.5 A complete Tierras Largas phase pregnant figurine from Oaxaca and the fetus figure it contained. Perforations in the woman's head would have allowed the attachment of decorative fibers. Courtesy of Joyce Marcus.

The clear representation of the fetus within the body of the figurine from Oaxaca demonstrates how early the knowledge of gestation became important. It certainly lends credibility to the identification of the axe image as an embryo, and of the later stone figurines of San Lorenzo and La Venta on the Gulf Coast as fetuses.

In her analyses of a larger sample of Tierras Largas phase figurines, Joyce Marcus discerns two variants. One is a small female figurine with an elaborate hairdo, which she sees as a woman just reaching marriageable age. The second has a head-to-body ratio of about 1 to 3.25. Instead of such elaborate hairstyles, the hair area of this variety is perforated for the attachment of fibers (Marcus 1998:82); the adornment appropriate to a woman's age and marital status could be added to specify identity. Male figurines, she says, are less plentiful—and many of those she sees as male seem ambiguous to me. The female figurines may express women in varying stages of life: prepubescent, marriageable, married with or without children, and pregnant (Marcus 1998:46).

There may, however, have been a differentiation in relative status for men and women at this time. At the largest community in the valley, San José Mogote, a special nonresidential building with



4.6 Figurine (male or female?) from the Tierras Largas phase. Courtesy of Joyce Marcus.

white lime-plastered floors and a storage pit for powdered lime, oriented 8 degrees west of north, with a roof supported by numerous wood posts, is interpreted as a house for male initiates, like an ancient Puebloan kiva. No figurines or burials were associated with the “Men’s House” in any of its superpositions, but nearby were found several unusual burials. Unlike most burials of extended individuals, these were of seated, middle-aged men (Marcus and Flannery 1996).

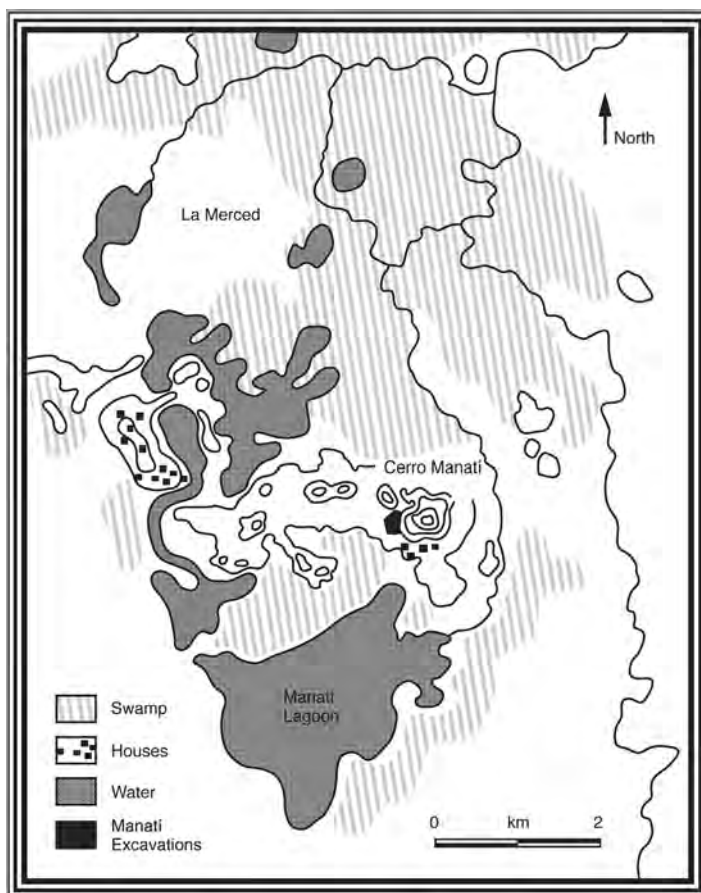
Since most of the figurines represented female or ambiguous individuals, their absence in the Men’s House but their presence in domestic contexts led Marcus to suggest that the Tierras Largas phase figurines portrayed female ancestors at a time when men were gaining the status to create their own ritual space. Such status was not yet hereditary. It was garnered, she argues, through a combination of hard work, success in gaining agricultural surpluses, organizing public constructions such as this house, and claiming enhanced communication with spiritual beings and forces (Marcus and

Flannery 1996:88–92). Whether or not the special structure with the lime-plastered floor was a men’s house, it is clear that by the subsequent phase, San José, to which we will return below, men’s and women’s burials were treated differently. Probably their relative status in political life was unequal as well. Perhaps what we can glean from the Tierras Largas phase figurines in Oaxaca is that women at that time were more of a focus in social discourses than they were later. Whether women or men made and manipulated the female and ambiguous figurines, they are so plentiful that their use must have been a matter of common practice. Within the context of these villages, the women and their social relations mattered.

1700–1200 BC: The Gulf of Mexico, El Manatí

While the Mokaya were creating hierarchically organized villages, a different kind of cultural center arose in the Gulf Coast region. About 55 km south of the modern coastal city of Coatzacoalcos, an east-west ridge rises among lagoons. On its eastern side is a salt dome, Cerro Manatí, which dominates the swampy, rolling plain (Fig. 4.7). Adjacent to the dome is a spring (Rodríguez and Ortiz C. 1997). It appears that people chose this location for a ritual center because it was a water-mountain, what would later be called an *altepetl*.⁷ From 1700 to 1200 bc, people deposited in that spring numerous jade axes, rubber balls, and wooden figures consisting of heads and armless chests, many of which were accompanied by bundles containing plants with seeds and bits of incense. Several factors—the unusual anaerobic environment of the spring, erosion, and continuing depositions of soggy material—preserved the organic remains. Despite the abundant ritual materials, there is little evidence of domestic habitation. Only a small settlement, which lacked tools for preparing meat, seems to have existed. Because of this, archaeologists Ponciano Ortiz and María del Carmen Rodríguez have suggested that El Manatí may have been occupied by people with a special plant-based diet, and that it was the focus of intermittent ritual activity attended largely by pilgrims, perhaps at stations of the annual cycle, such as the onset of the rainy season (Rodríguez and Ortiz C. 1997:92; Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000:88).

Although the 1988 discovery of the site and its subsequent excavations and analyses are well

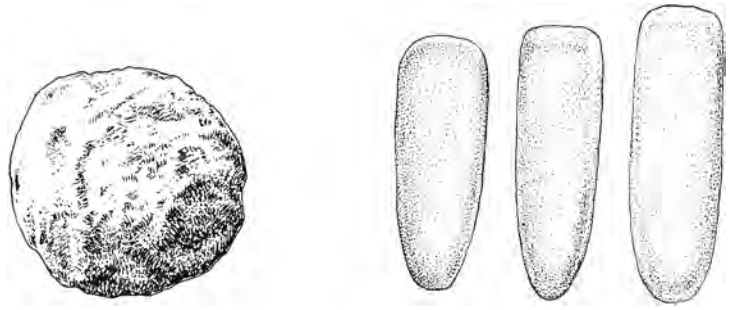


4.7 Map of El Manatí. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

published, there has been little discussion of El Manatí in terms of gender and gestation. However, its several phases of ritual activity offer tantalizing clues to how Mesoamericans viewed certain ritual activities as promoting an abundance of life energy. In Manatí A, 1700–1500 bc,⁸ people laid a foundation of roughly worked small boulders of local sandstone, sand, and gravel into the spring. The largest stones formed a north-south band. Interestingly, several had V-shaped grooves and circular depressions. These may have been created by the sharpening of fine stone axes or for the purpose of removing some of the stone for medicinal or ritual use (Rodríguez and Ortiz C. 1997:91; Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000:87). What its users threw onto the sandstone layer has surprised modern investigators. Rodríguez and Ortiz discovered nine rubber balls in the Manatí A level—the earliest such balls yet found in Mesoamerica.⁹ Also, there were dozens of finely crafted axes of jade and other stones (Fig. 4.8). One of the balls was associated with seeds and forty fine axes. The axes were not functional: their balance, thickness, shape, and polish were unlike axes used as cutting tools or for warfare. There were also jade beads, decorated stone mortars, ceramic fragments from a limited range of vessel shapes, and rocks that had been used for cooking.¹⁰ Only one small figurine head and a few bits of obsidian were found. A layer of peat, up to 10 cm thick, “extended like a carpet across the area, following the topography” (Rodríguez and Ortiz 1997:73).

About 1500 bc another phase of human deposition began (Manatí B). Many of the same kinds of objects, especially axes and rubber balls (now a bit larger at about 20 cm), were placed in the spring. People deliberately placed the axes along a north-south axis. Some were placed alone, others in groups of three to twelve. Some of these groups formed small circles, with the bits of the axes pointing up and outward. Ortiz and Rodríguez (2000:79) likened the design to the petals of a flower. In a given group, the axes were of different colors, sizes, and shapes, although they were generally “petaloid.”

Again the offerings were sealed, this time by one layer of rose-colored clay and another of dark gray, silty clay. This sealing layer was much thicker, measuring from 2 to 4 m. The next phase of ritual activity (Mayacal A, 1400–1200 bc) showed a major conceptual shift. More than forty wooden sculptures representing partial human figures were



4.8 A ball and celts from El Manatí's A phase, 1700–1500 BC. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



4.9 Three of the wooden busts from El Manatí's Mayacal phase, 1400–1200 BC. The center one represents a female. Drawing by Sydney McIlhany.

placed into the spring (Fig. 4.9). They have long, rectangular, hairless heads. The eyes consist of horizontal slits, some apparently closed but some of which indicate irises, surrounded by subtly indicated eye sockets and brows. Noses vary a bit but generally are straight with narrow nostrils. The mouths are generally closed, with drooping corners. Rounded chins and cranial deformations complete the heads, which emerge from the front of the body on very short necks. This face would be re-created in many small-scale stone sculptures, masks, and some ceramic figurines. Archaeologists often call it “typically Olmec” or even “baby-face,” which is clearly problematic since these busts do not represent babies. The shoulders of these wooden figures slope, but like the Zohapilco figurine, the Barra phase figurines from Mazatán, and several from the later Ayotla phases at Zohapilco,

none of the figures have arms. Although they are narrower around the chest than the hips, the bodies are generally hourglass-shaped. The torsos terminate below the waist with a flat base. None has a groin area. Three of the torsos (Sculptures 1, 5, and 6) have small protruding breasts, and Rodríguez and Ortiz, the excavators, identified these as female (Ortiz Ceballos et al. 1988). Follensbee thinks a fourth figure (Sculpture 2) with arcs defining the sides of the breast area may be female. She points out that of the thirty-seven sculptures known, three were clearly female, one possibly represented a female, and the rest were not clearly gendered (Follensbee 2000:385).

These are the oldest surviving sculptures from Mesoamerica that show the human figure at approximately life-size scale. As Rodríguez and Ortiz (1997) have pointed out, they embody the aesthetic canon for representing the face that endured along the Gulf Coast for several hundred years, the “traditional Olmec style” found in some of the San Lorenzo A and B phase figurines (Coe and Diehl 1980:264-265). And they are mostly gender-ambiguous, with some identifiable females. However typical this type of representation became, it is distinct from the broader, fleshier features seen on some of San Lorenzo’s figurines, particularly those with elaborate headdresses, and on most of the colossal heads.

There was considerable variety in how the figures were deposited. Some of the sculptures were wrapped in, or covered by, plant materials. These include Sculpture 1, which was also associated with a wooden “baton.” With Sculpture 2 was a chunk of hematite tied with a string, plus some hematite fragments. Some infant bones and impressions of leaves were visible among the sculpture and a heap of stones. A group of three figures, Sculptures 1, 5, and 6, “were arranged in a semicircle with an infant cranium placed in their midst” (Rodríguez and Ortiz 1997:85).¹¹ These are the three that exhibited incipient breasts, and so seem to represent young females. In other words, the three female figures formed a U shape around the infant skull. Sculptures 12 and 13 were placed under a pile of rocks, with a wooden staff inserted into the clay on the east side of each sculpture. Below Sculpture 13 was a primary infant burial. It was also covered with a layer of organic material. Sculptures 18, Ø, and 20 differed from the others in that each was carved with earplugs and pectorals. Additional stone ear-

plugs and pendants were placed with the sculptures in a pit, along with some wooden staffs. Below the pit were eleven greenstone celts and some rubber. Bundles of plant materials and nodules of copal complete the inventory of offering items. Reeds covered the sculptures, and rocks were set on top of the reeds. Now that we have a sense of the offerings of El Manatí, we can consider why people deployed these crafted objects in such specific ways.

As Ortiz and Rodríguez (1994a, 2000) have observed, El Manatí possessed three features that, among later Mesoamerican cultures, were conceptually of great importance: a natural spring, a conspicuous hill adjacent to it, and hematite, a ferrous pigment. They see the site as a precursor to Mesoamerican, perhaps especially Aztec, beliefs about Tlaloc, a patron of rain and storms who also oversaw the circulation of water through the earth (2000:84). Let us reexamine the constellation of these offerings and their locations in terms of gender and gestation.

If we choose, following Ortiz and Rodríguez, to consider Aztec cosmology as an appropriate source of analogy with El Manatí, then we should remember that according to Aztec mythistory, when Aztec creator couples fashioned the earth, all material existence was surrounded by water. The *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* relates that after Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl created the originary beings and practices (creator couples, gendered work, healing, divination, the units of and cycles of time, anti-life couples, and the thirteen heavens), they created the waters. The enormous crocodilian Cipactli became the earth surrounded by water (García Icazbaleta 1971).

In Aztec thought, the mountains and the earth contained and also purified water, making it sweet and suitable for drinking. In this way, Aztec ritual descriptions metaphorically link the human body with the earth: both are simultaneously containers for liquid and surrounded by it. Just as the earth is surrounded by water, the gestating human is surrounded by fluid. This situation—being surrounded by and containing water—is the matrix in which life generates. For some contemporary Nahua, Tlalocan, the realm of the rain god Tlaloc, “is the metaphoric world that mirrors the earth” (Knab 2001). In that realm, said Aztec priests in the sixteenth century, “things sprout and grow green in their domain . . . there ‘where somehow there is life’” (León-Portilla 1963:65). That term “somehow”

evokes the mystery and power of the life force, the magic of conception and gestation. Returning to Cerro Manatí, it rises from a swampy landscape filled with insalubrious water. But at its western edge is the freshwater spring, a source of the water that sustains life. Manatí is surrounded by water, and its springs contain water. In that life-bestowing spring, people placed offerings. Consider the forms they took.

For one thing, during the Manatí A phase, ritual participants prepared a receptacle or a bed by placing sandstone rocks in the spring. The polished greenstone axes, which scholars such as Taube (2000) consider metaphorically phallic and coblike, were scattered onto the prepared bed of sandstone along with actual seeds and jade beads. In this first phase, the other major offering was rubber balls. As discussed in Chapter 8, by the Classic period, rubber—along with semen, blood, and seeds—was part of an isomorphic equivalency complex referring to insemination. It is very intriguing that nine rubber balls were found in the Manatí A offerings. If this number was deliberate, and if the entire corpus of rubber balls was found, the presence of nine suggests that by 1700 bc, the earliest Olmec had recognized the lunar cycles and the temporal correspondence between nine lunations and the length of a human gestation. Nine is also inherent in the lunar cycle in that this is the length of days out of twenty-nine in which the moon is relatively invisible (Macri 2005). Furthermore, along with the small ceramic vessels used for seeds and plant foods, cooking rocks were included. As discussed in Chapter 1, among the Mixtec and others the gestation of the infant in the watery womb is commonly referred to as “cooking.” The phallic celts, the actual seeds, and the semenlike coagulated sap of the rubber tree seem to have been rather overt symbols of insemination of the watery, fertile realm “where somehow there is life.” The Manatí ritualists brought together the male seminal symbols with the uterine waters. Metaphorically speaking, they were ritually inseminating the watery earth and setting up the conditions for gestation. If they introduced the layer of peat as well, then they replicated an optimal way to plant certain seeds. To plant a field, one first prepares it, and then when planting is finished, one often covers the seed. Through these ritual acts, they were creating a crucible that emulated the conditions necessary for life to occur.

By Mayacal A, the ritual deposits became even

more womblike. At least some of the wooden figures were wrapped in plant fibers. This act, the bundling of the sculptures, also emulates gestation. The gestating human is wrapped in three sacs. Seeds, copal, and rubber were deployed as inseminating tropes. Along with the wooden figures were wooden staffs, which could possibly have been used as planting tools¹² or sticks for stirring beer (or as regalia that represented these kinds of tools). As such, they were symbols of rulership or some other specific role, such as that of a participant in the life-promoting processes of planting and brewing. The infant bones also helped simulate the womblike environment. They may well have been the victims of sacrifice, or, at this early stage in Mesoamerica, when perhaps the authoritarian nature of political power was not as strong as it was by 1500 AD the interred, or rewombed neonates, might have been those who died of natural causes. Perhaps the presence of the neonates lent some of the amazing capacity for growth seen in gestating humans to the wooden tree-people, who may have been, as Rodríguez and Ortiz suggested, particular ancestors or heads of clans.

Continuing in the vein of Rodríguez and Ortiz's Aztec analogy, the similarities in the ritual inventory between the Aztec I-Atl cahualo ceremony and the Mayacal offerings are rather striking. I-Atl cahualo is one of the eighteen Aztec monthly rituals, one of several in which children were sacrificed. Philip P. Arnold (1999:48) describes its purpose: “Child sacrifices at these sites physically constituted the central theme of correspondence between human life and the earth: blood and water. . . . The ritual acquisition of water required paying the high price of a child's blood.” Paper banners on living poles from budding trees were erected at the sacrificial sites. The sprouting greenness of the leafy poles conceptually paralleled the youthful, budding state of the prepubescent children. At Manatí there were wooden people and staffs, some of which were placed upright like trees or poles, as well as bundles of plant leaves and branches.¹³ The Aztec children were adorned with rubber, and the same substance also accompanied the offerings at Manatí. Seeds of amaranth, isomorphically related to fish roe and the watery world of Tlaloc, also were applied to the Aztec children, and at Manatí there were hog plum seeds in the offerings. The seven sites used during I-Atl cahualo were on the tops of mountains (containing water) and in springs of specific qualities

of water. Of course, it is unlikely that the earliest Olmec had created the Aztecs' complex ritual and calendrical cycles, which were linked with landscape, history, and empire. I suggest instead that the focus was simpler: the ritual emulated the conditions of gestation in order to reinvigorate, for a while, the processes of life. People did this in the belief that the effort they made to obtain and craft the materials, to build the ritual platform, and possibly to sacrifice newborns would nourish or pay the water-filled earth (or earth "deity") for children and crops.

If El Manatí was conceived as a watery womb of the earth, its repeated inseminations by axes, busts, bones, seeds, rubber balls, and wooden staffs would have made it a fertile crucible of gestation indeed.¹⁴ The site seems to prefigure the primordial sea, a locus of creative and procreative forces among many Mesoamerican societies (Bernal-García 1993:89–120). At the same time that people placed the enwombed wooden busts and seeds into the uterine springs at El Manatí, something apparently quite different was happening at nearby San Lorenzo.

1550–1450 BC: The Gulf Coast, San Lorenzo

A variety of ecological environments provide diverse resources for inhabitants of the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico, the birthplace of Mesoamerican monumentality. The Coatzacoalcos River, which flows from a 2,621 m (8,600 ft) high peak near the Oaxaca–Chiapas border, and the San Juan and Papaloapan Rivers, which descend from the even higher peaks of the Sierra Mixe, along with their many tributaries, carry the abundant rainfall of the Gulf Basin to deltas flanking the Tuxtla Mountains. Despite moderate temperatures, this is a dynamic region; hurricanes and storms can transform dry land into wetlands, the courses of rivers and the coastline change, wet *norte* winds rip through from September through February, and, on their own schedule, the volcanoes of the Tuxtlas and Sierra Madre del Sur spew ash and rock. During the Initial Formative, forests graced with orchids occupied the flanks of mountains, a variety of marine life flourished in the wetlands and rivers, and floodplains and levees offered a variety of soils. Villages had coalesced, and inhabitants had begun to plant some food while they continued to exploit wild resources.

Regional surveys have located 105 archaeological sites that date to between 1750 and 1450 bc (Symonds et al. 2002). Eventually, individuals and groups began to control the surplus resources, and an elite stratum of society evolved. We assume that such elites exercised some control over resources and labor, as well as political and conceptual systems. They also engaged in long-distance trade for exotic materials—for ilmenite from Chiapas and obsidian from the highlands of Mexico and Guatemala, but apparently not for jade, such as had been imported at El Manatí. The most remarkable aspect of social organization in this region may be the creation of a new kind of urban center at San Lorenzo.

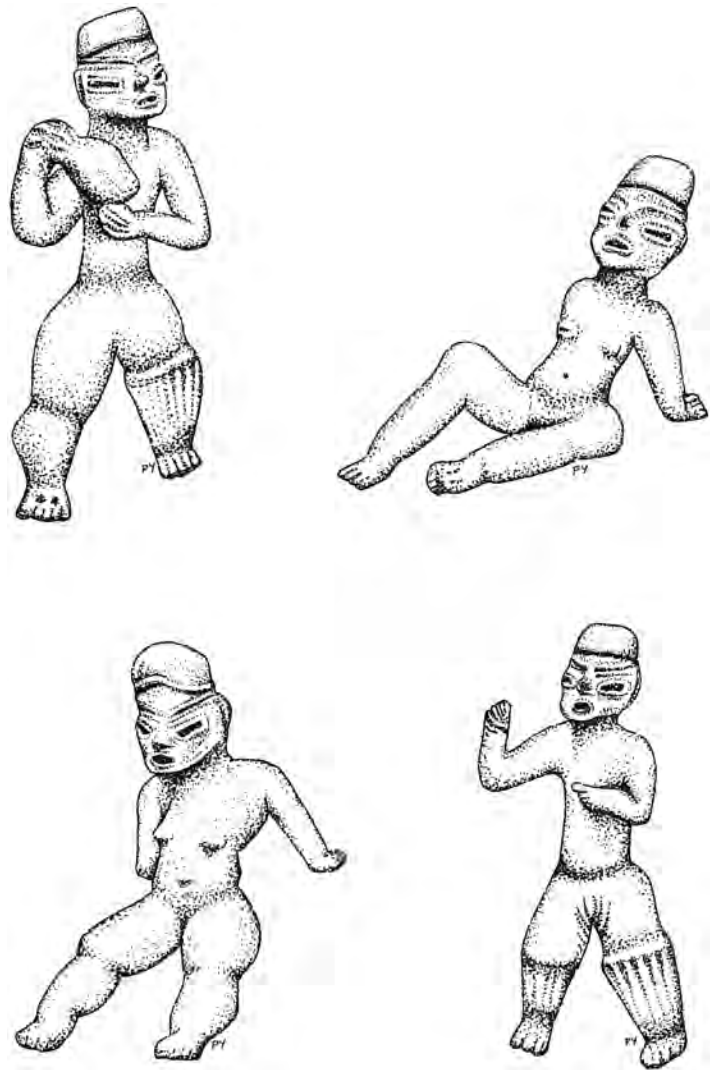
The early phases of settlement would surely offer clues to the specific motivations and social processes by which San Lorenzo became the center of a two- or three-tier political-administrative hierarchy.¹⁵ Unfortunately, efforts to learn about the earliest settlements have not yielded much information (Cyphers 1997:96–97). What is known includes the following. Markers of Early Formative construction may be the five bentonite pavements that Cyphers has excavated (99). The earliest phase for which ceramic figurines have been discovered is the Ojochi, ca. 1750–1550 bc (Pool 2007:98). Among the pieces recovered are the fragmentary legs of a white-slipped, hollow figurine. Coe and Diehl (1980:261), who excavated it, thought the legs pertained to a hollow baby, but its unusual position, with its right foot resting on the left knee, and the left leg extended as if the figure were seated on a bench, make me doubt that this is a baby (in much later art, this pose has been referred to as one of "royal ease" [Schaffer 1991]). As it is unlike the other Ojochi pieces, I wonder if this piece is correctly dated. During the subsequent phase, Bajío (ca. 1550–1450 bc), we see on Centavito Red ware some incised decorations (Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 14), but none of the symbols relate closely to those now called "Olmec." These occurred after 1450 bc and are covered below.

1500 BC: Michoacán, El Opeño

There were balls at El Manatí by 1700 bc but no images of ballplayers. At a site in the mountains of Michoacán, about 35 km east of Lake Chapala, very early images of ballplayers were discovered in the form of figurines from some shaft tombs (Fig. 4.10).

The tombs seem to date to around 1500 bc and are some of the earliest that were deliberately constructed. Among the interred objects was a group of sixteen figurines that formed a scene. It is very interesting that among these figurines, some secondary sexual traits appear to be indicated. Some of the figurines have small breasts, while others have no protrusions or nipples—just an unarticulated torso. The ones with larger breasts are seated, whereas the ones without breasts are standing and wear protective garments on their legs; some of these hold paddles or gloves as well. It seems that the padded, standing figures depict males, while the seated ones, presumably not ballplayers since they lack padding, depict females (Oliveros and de los Ríos Paredes 1993).

To show the ballgame in action, or the male players, it would not have been necessary to show females at all. Are the females just “spectators,” as some have written, or were both males and females essential to accomplish the larger purpose of the ballgame? In this situation there seems to be a complementary balance of gender. The ballgame figures were literally underground in a shaft tomb, along with some U-shaped stone objects called *yugitos*, thought to be protective gear for the game (Oliveros 1974; Oliveros and Ríos Paredes 1993). Here both males and female figurines were placed in a shaft tomb, an innovative construction that resembles a cave, or the vagina and womb, in terms of its form. The El Opeño figurines testify to the antiquity of the link between a cavelike tomb or “underworld” and the ballgame, and either to the non-Gulf Coast source of ballplayer costuming or to its very early diaspora.



4.10 Four of a group of sixteen ceramic figurines representing a ball game scene, excavated from El Opeño, Michoacán. Those with female breasts are seated. Standing figures wear leg protectors. Drawings by Paula Yeager.

Summary of Visual Culture in the Archaic and Initial Formative

As we have seen in this survey of the Archaic and Initial Formative, many of the characteristics seminal to Mesoamerica developed before the “Olmec” of the Gulf Coast introduced monumental sculpture. In terms of social organization we have found evidence of stratified societies, cooperation for large-scale projects, long-distance trade of obsidian and other commodities, and activities that are clearly ritual in nature. In the Initial Formative, enormous shell mounds were constructed in the Soconusco region of Chiapas, as well as in the states of Nayarit and Sinaloa. The one at El Calón,

Sinaloa, was 25 m (82 ft) high and had a base that was about 80 by 100 m (about 260 by 330 ft); it may well qualify as one of the first monumental mounds in Mesoamerica (Evans 2004:125). It was a conceptual “food mountain” and also a “water-mountain,” given that many of the shells used to construct it were unopened.

The female figurine containing a fetus testifies that an understanding of the human gestation process was in at least initial stages. Equally important was the origin of the second essential technology of Mesoamerican foodways, nixtamalization, which is so critical to civilization that it should be explored here.

In her book on Mesoamerican cuisines, Sophie Coe (1994) points out that Fray Diego de Landa, the priest and bishop who wrote about the sixteenth-century Maya of Yucatan, partially described the process of soaking dried corn in lime water (nixtamalization) and lists seven different drinks based on maize. Placing grains of maize in water with lime (burned limestone or dolomite) or wood ash breaks the pericarp, or skin, of the kernel. The minerals then enter the grain, improving the amino acid quality of proteins in the germ and releasing vitamin B₃, which otherwise remains bound up in the grain (Haard et al. 1999). Populations that consume a considerable amount of maize without nixtamalizing it suffer from pellagra, which causes diarrhea, mental disorders, cruelly painful skin, fatigue, and eventually death (Fallon 2001:38, 382, 454).

In the past decade, research has also demonstrated that pregnant women who during the first twelve weeks eat a diet high in maize that has not been nixtamalized, run the risk of the unborn child having a neural tube defect (NTD) such as anencephaly or spina bifida. Such defects are also caused by a folic acid deficiency, and nixtamalization helps reduce the mycotoxins *Fusarium verticilloides* and *Fusarium proliferatum*; these produce fumonisins in modern maize, which, in turn, inhibit folic acid intake in the body (Palencia et al. 2003). Fumonisin is known to cause disease and cancer in animals as well as birth defects (Masaras et al. 2004).¹⁶ In the late 1990s in Nuevo León, Mexico, the anencephalic birth rate was 0.6/1,000, and tests suggested that a cause might be the mothers' low levels of folic acid. After a two-year campaign to offer supplemental folic acid to pregnant women, rates of anencephaly and spina bifida decreased 50 percent (Martínez

de Villareal et al. 2001). Similar studies have been undertaken in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and South Africa, both areas where a high rate of NTDs was linked to consumption of un-nixtamalized maize (Masaras et al. 2004). Exposure to heavy metals, including mercury, is another factor in the affliction of gestating beings with NTDs, and of course, at some point in the Formative, Mesoamericans began to mine mercuric sulfide (cinnabar) for use in ritual deposits. It is clear, however, that without the technology of nixtamalization, a diet based on maize would have been the ruin of Mesoamerican civilization.

We do not know when nixtamalized maize became the staple of the Mesoamerican diet. Our evidence is indirect and involves such factors as increase in cob size, evidence for large agricultural fields and appropriate planting technologies, and the presence of grinding equipment. Perhaps lime from plaster production accidentally entered a pot in which maize kernels were boiling (Marcus and Flannery 1996). Or perhaps vessels from around 1500 BC that contain carbonized lime deposits point to nixtamalization (Diehl 2004:87). One wonders also about the development of a hard food made of nixtamalized dough that was inoculated with beneficial microorganisms, wrapped in leaves or placed in a container, and allowed to ferment. People could have reused the leaves or container to reintroduce the organisms to the next batch (Coe 1994:136). In addition to increasing the amino acid content, this fermentation process allowed the nixtamalized dough to be stored so that it could be carried on trips. Such a process may have facilitated the long-distance trade networks that were operative by the Middle Formative.

In Formative period visual culture there are no images that we can readily identify as scenes of eating or food processing. However, Initial Formative technologies for fermentation, and probably for nixtamalization, allowed humans to safely introduce maize into the diet. People worked with various seeds to breed maize until its size became sufficient to serve as a staple food. They made stone grinding tools, bark beaters, and plastering tools. From Paso de la Amada, we have some evidence of standardization of measurement, modular design of structures, and the palace-ballcourt-plaza template of later Mesoamerican cities. At El Manatí, we found the remarkably early jade celts, which indicate sophisticated lapidary techniques,

long-distance trade, and foremost, a high degree of conceptual complexity as they were placed ritually in the spring at the base of the hill. Wood was fashioned into representations of "Olmec"-looking human figures and staffs.

Three forms of evidence support the development of the ballgame: balls at El Manatí, figurines of padded players from El Opeño, and a massive masonry court at Paso de la Amada.¹⁷

In terms of visual imagery, some figurines of humans were constructed as female by the application of large breasts, pregnant bellies, hollow wombs, and elaborate hair styles. Follensbee (2000) has shown that the pubic triangles, an inverted, U-shaped hairstyle, and subtle W-shaped curves

on the chest also indicate females. Figurines with heavily padded costumes or masks may represent males or ambiguously gendered beings.

Pottery vessel traditions appeared in several places. The Monagrillo complex, consisting of incised vessels from the Pacific coast of Panama, may be the earliest at 2500 bc. The elegant Barra and Locona phase pots of the Mazatán region of Chiapas date from 1900 to 1500 bc. In the Tehuacan and Oaxaca Valleys, the Basin of Mexico, Puebla, and Tlaxcala, ceramics were developed about 1500 bc. While each of these developments occurred in a local context with local variations, it is also likely that ideas spread via trade, exploration, and other social interactions. How people at various locations adapted these ideas, added new ones, and expressed them in graphic and sculptural form are discussed in the next section.

The Early Formative, circa 1400-900 BC

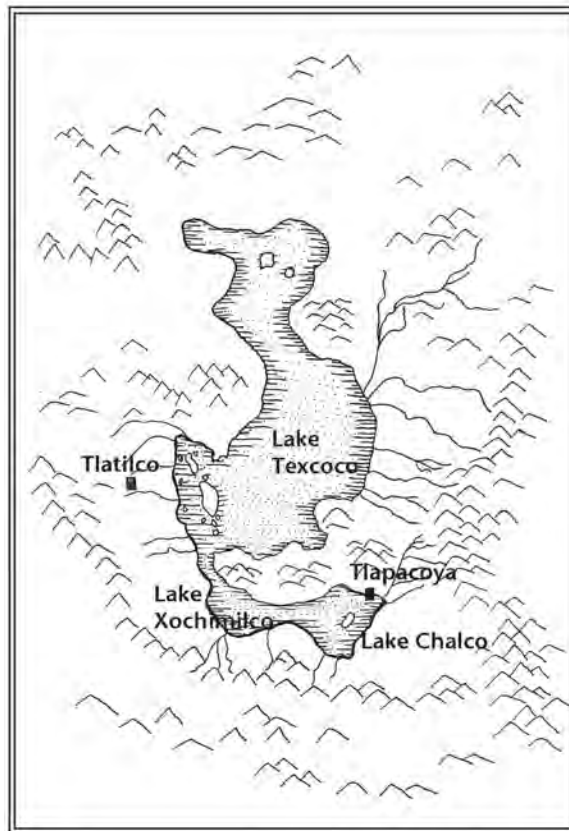
1450–1000 BC: The Highland Basin of Mexico, Ayotla and Manantial Phases

Whereas in the Initial Formative we see the evolution of essential technologies and social structures, the Early Formative is most notable for an explosion of visual culture. First we will look at the rise of a graphic symbol system in the highlands, the continued use of figurines for various purposes in several locations, and then turn to the revolutionary situation at San Lorenzo, where many concepts were given visible form. This complex phenomenon has generally been lumped together and referred to as the “Olmec art style.” Here I will tease that category apart and show that the mediums (basically clay, stone, assemblage, and earth sculpture) and the subjects were not uniform across space during the Early Formative.

In the Basin of Mexico, by about 6000 bc, people had settled in numerous locations, including Tlapacoya and Zohapilco, related sites near an extinct volcano that formed an island in Lake Chalco (Fig. 4.11). The resources of this “Edenic” environment were mentioned above. Tlapacoya was on an extinct volcano, an island of pink andesite near the northern shore of Lake Chalco. As they had at El Manatí, people selected a water-mountain location for their site. From Lake Chalco, at the southeastern extent of the Basin, there is an

excellent view of the volcanoes Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatepetl. Rivers flow from these peaks into Lake Chalco. Immediately north of Tlapacoya is Cerro Texolotl. This resource-rich and psychically satisfying area is where archaeologists found what is considered to be Mesoamerica’s earliest ceramic figurine, also discussed above, in a context that predated pottery vessels.

In terms of social complexity and subsistence technologies, societies in the southern part of the Basin apparently developed at about the same time as those in the Gulf Coast, the Mazatán region, and Oaxaca.¹⁸ Between 1450 and 1000 bc,¹⁹ however, people of this locale were using a consistent symbol system for decorating pottery. According to archaeologist Christine Niederberger (2000:181), who excavated in the region, “The evidence suggests that Tlapacoya and Tlatilco, as well as Las Bocas in the Highlands, manipulated one of the most complex symbol sets of iconographic symbols of ancient Mesoamerica.” However, Tlapacoya’s primacy in developing the graphic symbols that were used at other Early Formative sites is a matter



4.11 Map of the highland Basin of Mexico. Drawing by author.

of contention. The debate has to do with relative chronology and is largely focused on an analysis of the materials, not the designs.

Niederberger, who excavated and analyzed Formative period sites in the southern part of the Basin, is on one side of the debate. After completing geologic and pedological analyses, she concluded that the local clays of the Tlapacoya region and its ceramics

indicate that ceramic vessels with masterfully executed mythological hybrid creatures, diamond-shaped or star designs, hand-paw-wing motifs, four-petaled flowers, crossed bands, cleft heads, fangs, four-dots-and-bar motifs, and X, L or U symbols were made from local or regional clays and manufactured by local craftspersons, experts not only in the ceramic arts but also in a complex, hermeneutic knowledge. (Niederberger 2000:181)

Imported wares came from the Oaxaca and Chalcatzingo area, as well as the Panuco region of northern Veracruz. Niederberger stressed that there was no evidence of Gulf Coast influence on the local Tlapacoya ceramics in terms of imported wares, clays, or motifs (184).

An alternative position has been advanced by a team that has been trying to track the directions of pottery trade in the Early Formative using instrumental neutron activation analysis of trace elements. Jeffrey Blomster, Hector Neff, and Michael Glascock (2005) isolated a corpus consisting of 750 archaeologically excavated shards from seven regions. They claimed that pottery from San Lorenzo was exported to other sites in the Basin of Mexico and Oaxaca, and that the designs went with the exports. Of 104 shards excavated at Tlapacoya and sampled by this team, 17 appear to have been produced with the San Lorenzo clays, and 87 locally in the Basin of Mexico (Blomster et al. 2005). Several of the motifs common to the Basin of Mexico were not found at San Lorenzo, however, including the so-called “were-jaguar” profile head and the disembodied human hand (although two frontal, abstracted faces appeared on San Lorenzo phase pots at San Lorenzo). The authors stated that “Because this iconography has been linked with the dissemination of the social, political, and religious institutions of the Olmec, analyzing its origin and spread is central to understanding the development of complex society in Mesoamerica” (1068). It is not clear, however, which specific iconographic

symbols their samples contained. So although their goal was to analyze the dissemination of the “Olmec style” (the common misnomer for Olmec symbols and subjects), the study as they presented it tracked clay, not iconography. Based on the publication of ceramics from Oaxaca, San Lorenzo, and Tlapacoya-Zohapilco (Coe and Diehl 1980; Flannery et al. 1994; Niederberger 1976, 1987), it is clear that a broader inventory of the graphic symbols that began to appear on pottery in the Early Formative were produced in the southern Basin of Mexico (Tlapacoya-Zohapilco). This observation unfortunately does not clarify which of these Early Formative regional communities invented certain symbols, with a few possible exceptions. This study cannot resolve the debate about ceramic manufacture. Instead it will explore the significance of the Tlapacoya graphic symbols as a set.

The Incised Symbol System of the Basin of Mexico: Deities or Expressions of Natural Processes?

Niederberger (2000:185) referred to the symbols on vessels and figurines as a “sort of metalanguage related to cosmological and religious beliefs, and in some cases, probably associated with political power.” I concur, and further suggest that several of the symbols involve specialized knowledge of life as a phenomenon, particularly gestation and regeneration. Let us consider some of these early graphic motifs, the forms on which they occur, and how they articulate to create a system of meanings. First, however, we will examine some previous studies of this material.

Joralemon’s 1971 study of Olmec iconography and Niederberger’s 1987 study of the habitat and Formative period culture of the Basin of Mexico each identified a number of graphic signs on objects from Tlapacoya, Tlatilco, Las Bocas, and their neighbors. As mentioned previously, the thrust of Joralemon’s early study, so useful for its compilation of two-dimensional imagery, was to distinguish from the array of symbols for the deities of the Formative period. In a subsequent publication he proposed that “the Olmec worshipped a multiplicity of gods; Olmec deities are prototypes of certain Post-Classic supernaturals; Olmec religion is based on a philosophy of dualism” (Joralemon 1976:33). It seems to me that since a great deal of research has addressed Mesoamerican religions, gods, and duality since then, these premises need refinement.

As I have pointed out, Joralemon's typology of Olmec gods was premature because it lacked the contexts into which the gods might have fit. It also did not query the category or definitions of the term "gods." Furthermore, in his early study of Formative period symbols, Joralemon considered a philosophy of dualism to govern Olmec "religion." In Chapter 1 of this book the discussion of gender explored the nuances of duality as considered in more recent work, as shifting with a person's age, functionality, activity, and in ritual contexts.

Starting from this slightly different set of assumptions—that what is represented symbolically may be a nexus of processes instead of gods with fixed identities and domains—we can reconsider the array of symbols that confront us on the Ayotla phase pottery from the Basin of Mexico and elsewhere. First, however, it is necessary to think about how those symbols were derived. Were Formative period individuals looking at observable objects when they designed these symbols, were they imagining things they had not seen, or were they going through some other mental process? Joralemon addressed this question decades ago and wrote one of the often-repeated precepts of Olmec studies. He claimed that "the primary concern of Olmec religious art is the representation of creatures that are biologically impossible. . . . Natural creatures were used as sources of characteristics that could be disassociated from their biological contexts and recombined into non-natural, composite forms" (Joralemon 1976:33).

While this frequently quoted passage has some validity, it is not entirely accurate. When Formative period people made three-dimensional objects such as figurines or colossal heads, they deliberately conventionalized the visual forms of objects that were observable in daily life: the earth, sprouting plants, humans, heads, and some animals. When it came to two-dimensional imagery, it would have been easy to portray quotidian scenes. They could have developed conventionalized signs for ripples in the lake, canoes, homes, tools, and could have shown themselves fishing or building houses. Instead, as Joralemon pointed out, they disassociated specific salient characteristics from certain creatures and recombined them into hybrids. To his observation I would add that they stylized the feature to create a symbol and added the conventionalized symbols to natural or hybrid bodies. Iconographic descriptors are added to "basic"

images such as the embryo, an adult human, or a reptile to specify a role, status, stage of gestational development, habitat, or process. During the development of graphic symbols in the Basin of Mexico during the Ayotla phase, some symbols, which we might call ideograms, seem to refer to discrete entities, and other conventionalized forms do not stand alone but co-occur with other signs, possibly functioning as descriptors for the ideograms.

An important question is, why did Formative period artists opt for conventionalized forms and symbols over verisimilitude? During the Formative, several figurine traditions employed a high degree of naturalism, such as that seen in certain Xochipala figures and others from Paso de la Amada. In choosing stylization, artists wanted to convey the dynamic flux of existence and identity, or to suggest natural and cosmogonic processes, not individual identity. Now let us look at some examples of how signs can convey such processes.

The curving diamond, or fontanel A curvilinear, four-pointed "diamond" motif appears on the backs of heads of ceramic hollow babies from the Ayotla phase at Tlapacoya (1450–1000 bc [Pool 2007]) and the San Lorenzo A phase in the lowlands (1400–1000 bc [Pool 2007:7]). This co-occurring design has been interpreted as having celestial significance (Joralemon 1971; Coe 1997). It has been associated with the Maya day sign *Lamat*, which may represent "star" generally or Venus specifically (Reilly 1994b:101). These interpretations do not account for its appearance on the back of a baby's head (Fig. 4.12). However, if one looks at the development of an infant's head and also at the skull of a deceased fetus or infant, one immediately sees the origin for this symbol. The bony plates of the skulls of embryos, fetuses, and neonates exhibit a curvilinear, four-pointed, diamond-shaped cavity on the top of the head (Scott 1999). The fontanel is closed by metopic sutures at about twenty-four months after birth. A graphic sign based on the fontanel would mark the figure on which it appeared as an embryo, fetus, or infant. In excavated contexts at Tlapacoya and San Lorenzo, this sign marks a hollow baby on the back of the head, corresponding to the posterior fontanel, one of at least six expansion gaps in the fibrous sutures that separate the skull (England 1996:191–192). The anterior fontanel is identical to the curving diamond shape.

At Tlapacoya, the fontanel motif was associated

with a restricted group of hollow figures, those of the Pilli type, with cranial deformation and a partially shaved skull. There is not yet sufficient osteological evidence to determine whether cranial deformation was an elite practice (Niederberger 2000:181). Although the symbol may carry both meanings, I think it is specifically derived from observations of the infant skull. The “star” meaning, likely accrued to the sign after putative stories

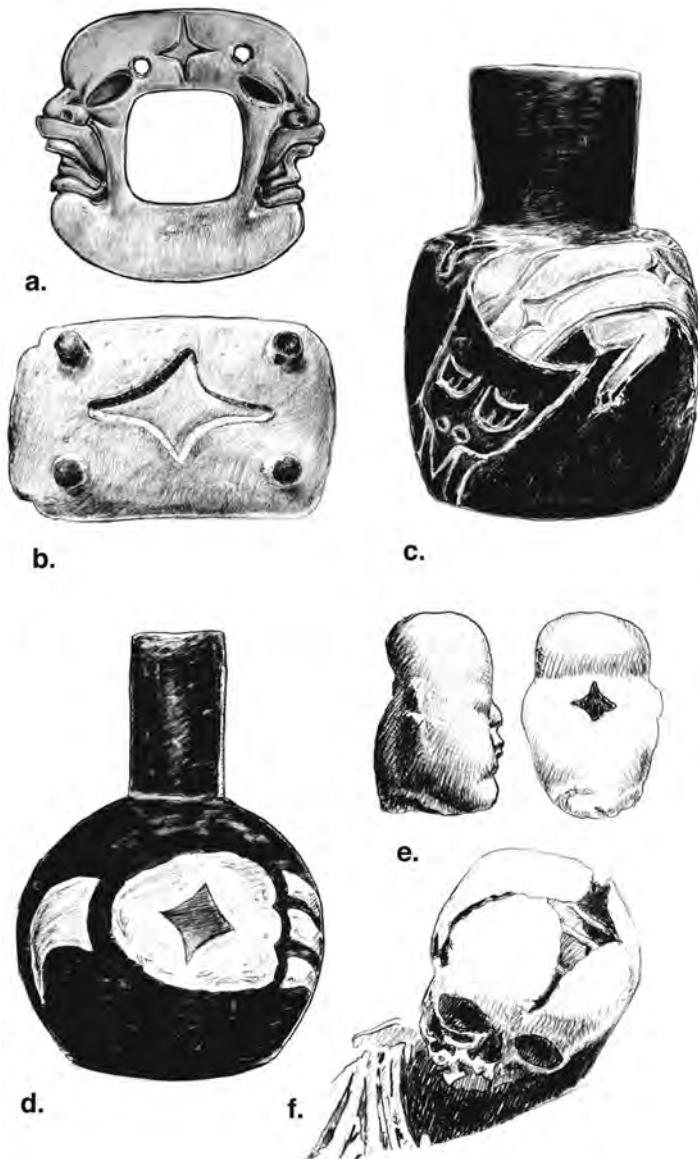
about stars as ancestors (beings waiting to be born) became important later.

A few looted items (Fig 4.12) allow us to test in other visual contexts this interpretation of the four-pointed, hollow shape as a fontanel. One is a Middle Formative jadeite ornament that shows two embryo faces joined on top of the head. The clefts typical of the embryo head meet to form a four-pointed, curvilinear diamond on the upper-back portion of the out-curving head.

A bottle looted from Las Bocas shows a two-headed, multilegged critter undulating across the surface. Because of the association of the diamond with “star,” the other authors of *The Olmec World* exhibition catalogue called this a possible representation of “serpent as sky.” The head of this creature has two long, out-curving, tusklike emanations from the mouth and a sharp central projection between them. This has usually been called a snake’s head, with the snake’s egg-tooth, and the addition of the two out-curving fangs. However, it bears considerable similarity to caterpillars and a number of insects, among them the *Megasoma elephas*, a large Central American beetle (Stanek 1969:271), which also has a curving V shape where the head joins the back. A series of fontanel motifs are placed along the center of the critter’s body. If that motif marks the developmental phase of a human, then it could signify the developmental stage or metamorphosis of other creatures, for example, from larva to caterpillar. As early agriculturalists, the people of this era would have had to carefully note insects, evaluate their potential to damage crops, and study their developmental stages.

Finally, “fontanel” was sufficiently important as a thing or concept to become a day name in the Mixe language. As we will see in Chapter 6, Fontanel is the day name of a supernormal female potency whose domain is lakes, rivers, fishing, and childbirth.

The embryo Another gestation-related graphic symbol constitutes a profile view of the human embryo face that can stand alone as an ideogram (Fig. 4.13). The earliest known incised or painted (in other words, graphic as opposed to three-dimensional) embryo images appear on straight-sided cups from Tlapacoya during the Ayotla phase, primarily on Pilli White and Paloma Negative wares (Niederberger 1976).²⁰ People

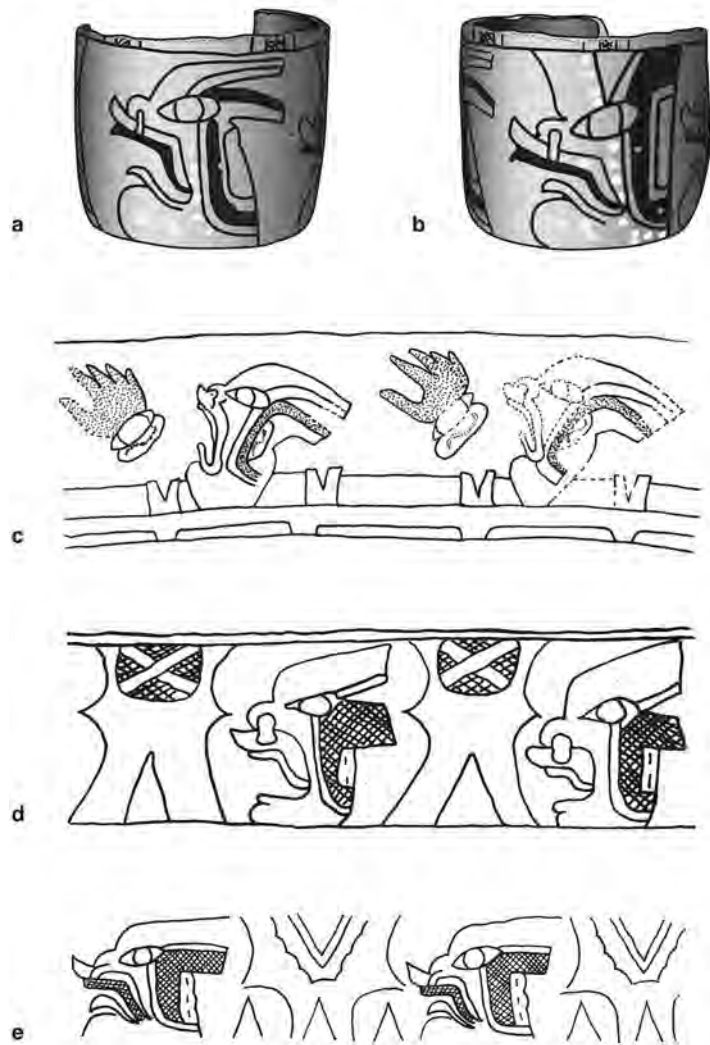


4.12 Fontanel motifs from the Basin of Mexico: *a*, fontanel on the back of opposing profile embryo heads on a jade pendant (private collection, on loan to the Boston Museum of Art); *b*, fontanel on a metate; *c*, fontanels on the back of a zoomorphic creature; *d*, a bottle with a fontanel in a paw; *e*, fontanel on the back of a hollow baby head from Tlapacoya; *f*, the principal fontanel on a neonate’s skull. Drawings by Corey Escoto.

started making Pilli White by around 1300 bc, but it became prominent around 1250 and was produced until about 850 bc. Paloma Negative dates to about 1250–1100 bc (Niederberger 1987:500–501, 546, 556). These are all types prevalent in the Ayotla phase. Pool (2007:7, 206) places the Ayotla as coeval with the Chicharras (1250–1150 bc) and San Lorenzo A (1150–1000 bc) phases at San Lorenzo. The earliest frontal sculptural image of the embryo, La Merced's El Bebé, seems to be contemporary with the Chicharras phase at nearby San Lorenzo.

The Tlapacoya faces shown in Figure 4.13a and b correspond to Joralemon's (1971) "Olmec God VI." However, the Gulf Coast sculpture El Bebé does not fit neatly into any of his categories. These facts demonstrate two problems with his system. They show that, according to his categorization of Olmec imagery as "gods," several "gods of the Olmec" originated in the Basin of Mexico before the Olmec phase at San Lorenzo. A more economical interpretation of the Tlapacoya incised profile face is that it is a symbol, based on the form of the embryo, with added features that relay certain messages. Let us examine several of the variable symbols.

On these examples, the embryo face occupies most of the vertical expanse of the vessel. These images share a lidless, almond-shaped eye that occupies the side of the head, a mouth that turns down at the outer corners, toothless gums, a rounded chin, a stripe through the eye, a deeply cleft head that curves backward, and no overt ears. All these features are characteristic of the human embryo face. The pointed upper lip, which is attached to the nostril via a tab, is so unnaturalistic that it is probably an ornament that covers the upper lip, much like the mouth-covering ornaments seen on many faces in the murals of Teotihuacan, a later metropolis in the northeastern part of the Basin. The location of a sharp point near the end of an extended, beaklike lip ornament may be a reference to the egg-tooth that many hatching creatures, including some birds, reptiles, and snakes, use to break out of a shell or egg sac. The pointed upper lip ornament, then, may reinforce the identification of the face as that of a creature that is being born (or "sprouting" or "dawning"). With this ornament, artists in the Basin were expressing their knowledge that human embryos are very similar to those of other animals, and by extension, that this similarity unites humans and animals on a profound level. This interspecies fluidity of iden-



4.13 Embryo motifs from the Basin of Mexico: *a* and *b*, two views of a Pilli white bowl with embryo head designs (Museo Nacional de Antropología); *c*, a Paloma negative bowl with alternating hands and embryo heads sprouting from an earth band (Saint Louis Art Museum); *d*, a Tlapacoya bowl on which embryo heads alternate with crossed bands, separated by shapes that play with positive and negative space (private collection); *e*, a similar design on a bowl from Morelos (Wielgus collection). Drawings by Corey Escoto.

tity provides a different vantage point from which to consider the "shamanic" notion of human-animal transformation that modern scholars have employed to understand the Olmec.

On the examples in Figures 4.13a and b, from Tlapacoya, the embryo head is the sole principal motif (except for a rim decoration on the Paloma Negative vessel in 4.13b). On the other vessels (Fig. 4.13c, d, and e) the embryo head alternates with another motif. On another vessel reportedly from Tlapacoya (Fig. 4.13c), two embryo heads appear

on a diagonal. They “sprout” from what is clearly an earth band. The lowest register of the earth band has inverted U “gum brackets” (Reilly 1994b). Above it is a band broken into segments by double merlons or clefts, widely accepted as earth-opening signs. The artist depicted the embryo heads as partially within the upper half of the earth band. Alternating with the two embryo heads are two disembodied hands. I tentatively suggest below that they refer to the bountiful aspect of earth and to the offerings humans make in gratitude for these gifts. If they do, then this pot shows the seed state, or human seed, sprouting from the earth, alternating with a sign for “bounty of precious gifts.”

On the vessel illustrated in Figure 4.13d two embryo heads alternate with two motifs involving a crossed band just below the rim of the vessel, over an inverted V. If the vessel were inverted, the V and crossed band would resemble the frontal “earth” motif found on another Tlapacoya Pilli White vessel in the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia. On the vessel in Figure 4.13d the embryo head is bordered by a serrated shape. Another shape made of arcs is widespread in Nevada, Ayotla, and Manantial phases at Tlapacoya (see Fig. 4.14). Although it appears on dozens of pots, each iteration of this design is a little different. Because of the arcing exterior lines, it bears a resemblance to a *Spondylus* shell. Reilly (1987:92) identified a similar incised shape on the Middle Formative

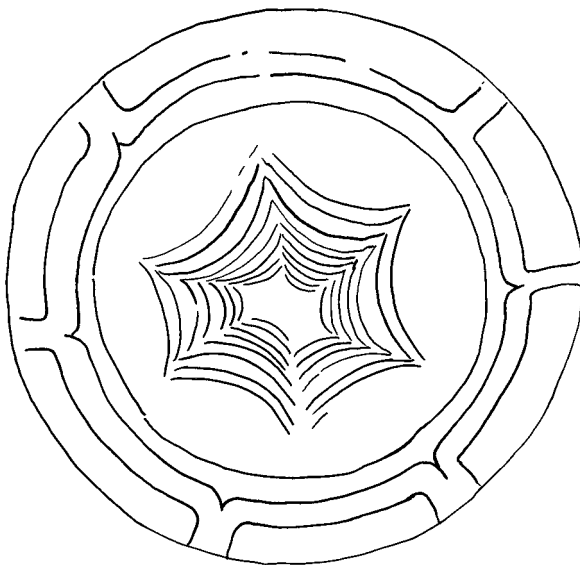
“Young Lord” jade statue as a *Spondylus* shell.

María Elena Bernal-García (1993:117) has suggested that it is a symbol of the “primordial sea,” a concept that she traces throughout creation and foundation mythology.

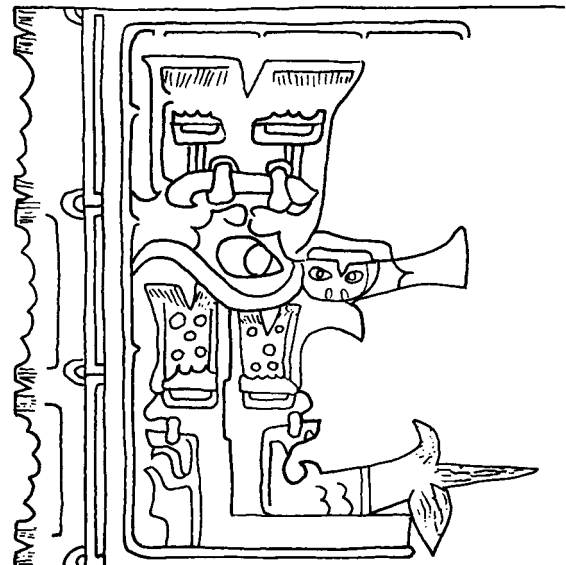
Decorating a bowl with one or two repeating, large-scale motifs is typical of the Ayotla phase. In an article interpreting the embryo face as the “face of the mountain,” David Grove (2000) correctly pointed out that there are several vessels, like the one in Figure 4.13.d that play with positive versus negative space and with alternating inverted images with those that are “right-side-up.” Over time, the compositions that feature the embryo face became more complex. As people in the subsequent Manantial phase employed the embryo motif, they represented it in multiples, with changes of scale and orientation, and combined it with other motifs (Fig. 4.15).

As points of comparison, it is useful to briefly inventory the occurrence of embryo images on pottery from sites beyond Tlapacoya. This strategy tracks a specific symbol across space but within a limited time frame. Because it stays within temporal horizons, it has a reasonable chance of avoiding a disjunction of meaning.

At Tlatilco, a site on the western edge of the Basin of Mexico, the embryo image appears on several roller seals, probably late in the Ayotla phase or in the Manantial phase (Fig. 4.16a). In this example,



4.14 Ayotla phase vessel from Tlapacoya with possible image of a *Spondylus* shell. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

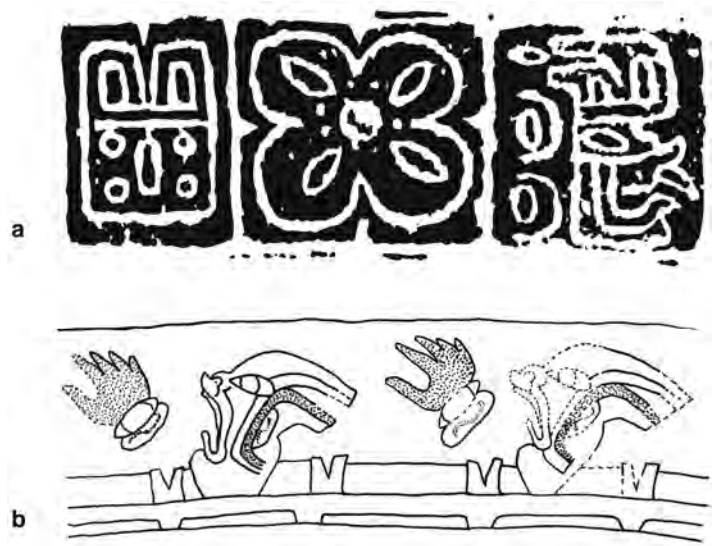


4.15 Image on a Manantial phase vessel from Tlapacoya showing an embryo in vegetative composition. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

the embryo is a distinct element, but is also combined with two other distinct elements that would soon become prominent over a wide geographic sphere. One element is the bar-quincunx infixed in a cleft shape. The bar-quincunx refers to the earth as acted upon by sunrise and sunsets at the solstitial extremes on the horizon (the intercardinal points), and also to the proper way to plant maize with a digging stick in four-directional blocks (Tate 2002). The central element is a four-petaled flower, similar to the Maya *k'in* glyph for “sun” or “day,” and could carry a similar meaning here. Because this is a roller seal, the sequence could begin with any symbol. If the viewer began with the quincunx, it might indicate: cleft, planted earth/sun/embryo or seed. Alternatively, if one began with the embryo, it would read seed/earth/sun. In any case, it is a simple statement of the essential elements for human and plant vitality.

In terms of how they sequence the symbols to create meaning, both the vessels with alternating symbols and the roller seal images combine complementary concepts to narrate a broader significance. This tactic, called merismus, is found widely in Mesoamerican artistic expression, such as on the Palenque Tablet of 96 Glyphs, where, for example, fleshed/skeletal describes the passage of time. It is often found in the *Popol Vuh*, where, for example, “‘sky-earth’ represents all creation as a whole” (Christenson 2003, I:48). And of course, we have already pondered the selection of *altepetl*, or water-mountain, for the construction of ritual centers.

The two pieces in Figure 4.16, the roller seal and the vessel, required human interaction to reveal their full message. A person looking at the roller seal itself would have seen only one of the three images in a given moment (or edges of two). To perceive the three-part message, one had to manipulate the seal, either by turning it, by rolling it on to a clay tablet, or by rolling it in a pigment and then onto a receptive surface. Although today we tend to categorize elements into independent domains, these three were linked in time and space. It required time to view the message if turning the seal, and both time and space if it were printed. Thus linked by time-space, the three elements were part of a sequence. The terse message was a visual narrative with cosmic repercussions. The same holds for these incised vessels: their messages required cyclical motion to be apprehended.



4.16 Graphic narratives from the Basin of Mexico: *a*, design from ceramic roller seal from Tlatilco: earth, sun, human-maize seed; *b*, image from a vessel from Tlapacoya with incised design of embryo heads alternating with hands. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

Scattering (of seed, bounty, rain, etc.) over the earth, sprouting of human-maize. Scattering over the earth, dawning of human-maize; the sequence expresses the cyclicity of agriculture across the seasons.

Continuing with the survey of embryo images in the Formative, none appears in naturalistic form on San José phase pottery in Oaxaca. Only one or two embryo images occur in Coe and Diehl’s report, including the Yagua Orange shard from the San Lorenzo B phase (Fig. 3.12). The presence of this atypical ware in San Lorenzo led Coe and Diehl (1980:185) to surmise that the vessel must be an import. However, the frontal image with toothless gums and pug nose is unlike anything from the highlands.

Given the current disagreement about the relative chronology of the Early Formative, it is impossible to know whether the numerous conventionalized profile images of the embryo that were used to decorate pots in the Tlapacoya region predate the less conventionalized frontal images on stone sculpture from the Gulf Lowlands. While art history offers many examples of iconography being spread by means of portable objects such as pottery, textiles, and paper, there is currently little evidence that pottery of highland manufacture was transported to the Gulf Coast region. The very early image of a gestating anencephalic human that

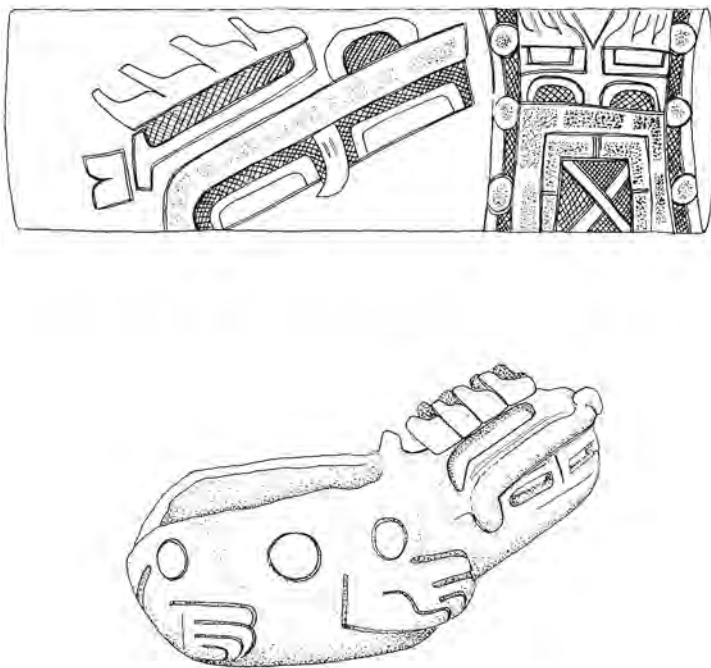
was found on a large, soft-stone axe from La Merced in the Gulf Lowlands may predate the Ayotla embryo pots. As relative chronology of ceramic wares becomes more stable, this analysis of a widespread visual symbol—the embryo—and how it became conventionalized should serve as a body of information against which to test theories based on chemical analysis.

The flame brow, or axolotl In his 1971 study, Joralemon considered a co-occurring element with three or four curving spikes arising from a horizontal base, the “flame brow,” as diagnostic of some subcategories of his “God I.” He later revised these ideas, but still categorized the flame brows as part of God I, the Olmec Dragon, a hybrid beast with “cayman, eagle, jaguar, human and serpent attributes.” He associates this “god” with fertility, earth, and water, as well as fire and royal lineages (Joralemon 1976). He sees God I as appearing on three-dimensional effigies, such as the La Venta Monument 6 sarcophagus, on small greenstone objects, and incised on axes, masks, monuments, cliff reliefs, and vessels, each time in a different guise. However, not all of his “God I” images

possess the diagnostic characteristic of the flame brow. Rather than try to unravel the large category he created, I want to use the example of the flame brow to introduce the idea that certain signs may have been modifiers, parts of meaning, in the way that Nahuatl language tends to be agglutinative. Flame brows do not appear independently; they always co-occur with a zoomorphic or anthropomorphic form, but not always with the same one. To see how this symbol works, we will examine the range of images on which it occurs.

Two vessels from the Ayotla phase at Tlapacoya are good examples of the flame brow in a corporeal context. One is the ceramic effigy vessel considered to be a dragon, and the other is the incised vessel with a frontal and a profile image (Fig. 4.17). On the effigy vessel, it is clear that there are two protrusions with four segments emerging from the top rear of each side of the head. The creature has a short snout, legs that float above the belly, and no tail, teeth, or wings. It also has some prominent circular spots. Whether this image represents a specific animal or is a combination of various animal forms, it will be important to identify which animals are involved. Three principal proposals have been advanced for the “flame brow” itself, and several for the form of the effigy vessel. I will review these and make a new proposal.

Previously, the protrusions have been identified as a harpy eagle’s crest (Lathrap 1971, following Drucker 1952). It is true that some flame brows appeared on compositions with bird beaks, as in some of the objects that Joralemon (1976) calls “God III.” However, an avian specialist at the Fort Worth Zoo confirmed that harpy eagles have a crest on the top of the head, not separate ones over each eye. Anthropologist Karl Taube (2000:304) made the same observation and proposed that the flame brow is the fanlike crest of a quetzal. He points out that quetzal feathers were valuable trade commodities and indicators of wealth. While there are some bird images with flame brows, none has the long tail feathers of a quetzal. Also, the quetzal has a single crest, not two. Nor does the suggestion that this is a bird account for the squat-bodied creature on the Tlapacoya vessel. Quetzals were not native to the Basin of Mexico. Neither are crocodiles, which have been another suggestion. The double crest, or flame brow, is part of an animal pelt on the hollow figure found at Atlahuayan in the Basin of Mexico (Fig. 4.18). While the size of

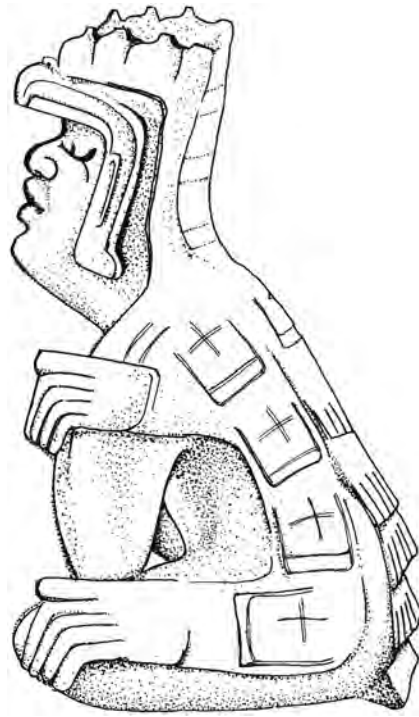


4.17 Axolotl images from the Basin of Mexico: *top*, Tlapacoya vessel with incised frontal and profile designs, H: 16 cm (Museo Nacional de Antropología); *bottom*, Tlapacoya effigy of an axolotl, H: 14 cm, W: 26.2 cm (Museo Nacional de Antropología). Drawings by author.

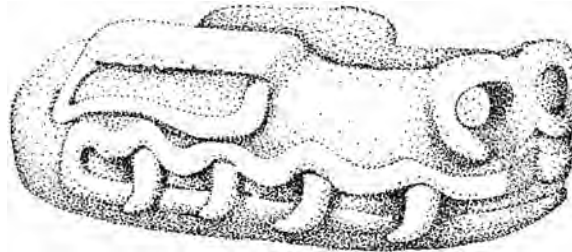
the pelt suggests that it is large enough to cover a human, it lacks a long snout, crocodile teeth, and claws, and has no long tail. What kind of costume is this figure wearing?

First Terry Stocker and later Kent Reilly have argued that the flame brow is part of a crocodilian. Stocker and his colleagues (1980) and Reilly (1994b:100–109) discuss the crocodile's ability to produce a loud, thunderlike bellow, the vibrations of which cause water droplets to leap in the air and then to fall like rain. Crocodiles bellow during the rainy season as part of a mating ritual. In this way, the “earth” uses sound to call forth “rain.” In Sayula Popoluca, a Mixean language, words for “earthquake” and “crocodilian” are related: “earthquake” is *üs* and “crocodilian” is *üs pin* (Reilly 1994b:98). Relating “earthquake” to “earth,” several investigators have suggested that the image represents a crocodile and is a symbol for the earth and its flowering mantle nurtured by rain (Joralemon 1976:37; Stocker et al. 1980:744; Reilly 1994b:91–94). Reilly adds to this motif inventory the U-shaped gum bracket, and based on a roller seal from Tlatilco, the bar-quincunx, an earth sign. Reilly has suggested that the flame brow represents the scotes, or plates, on the back of a crocodile. However, the caiman's brow does not have flamelike protrusions. The ridges on its head are not nearly as dramatic as those portrayed on the head of the Tlapacoya effigy vessel or the Atlihuayan figure. Reilly sees several of the other elements seen on the Tlapacoya effigy vessel, the paw-wing and L-shaped eye, as derived from the crocodile as well. He also points out that most representations of crocodiles lack teeth. Reilly thinks that the crocodile's teeth were removed, as were the teeth of the false sun, Vucub Caquix, in the Maya *Popol Vuh*. He concludes that a crocodile with teeth should represent a fearsome, uncontrolled terrestrial environment, while a crocodile without teeth might represent an agrarian, tamed earth (91–92).

It seems to me that only a few Formative period images are irrefutably crocodiles. The crocodilian, with its prominent teeth and flat-topped head, was naturalistically represented at San Lorenzo, on a drain stone, now in a European collection (Fig. 4.19). The American crocodile, Morelet's crocodile, and several caimans are native to the lowlands around San Lorenzo (Fig. 4.20). In the Middle Formative a crocodile-like monster was carved on the cliffs at Chalcatzingo (Monument I-B-5) and some



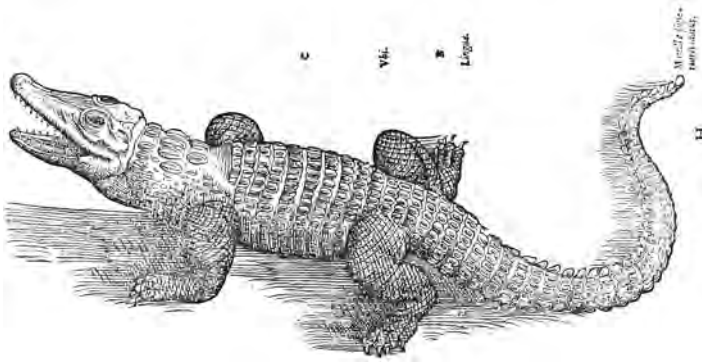
4.18 Hollow ceramic figure from Atlihuayan, Basin of Mexico. H: 29.5 cm. Museo Nacional de Antropología. Drawing by author.



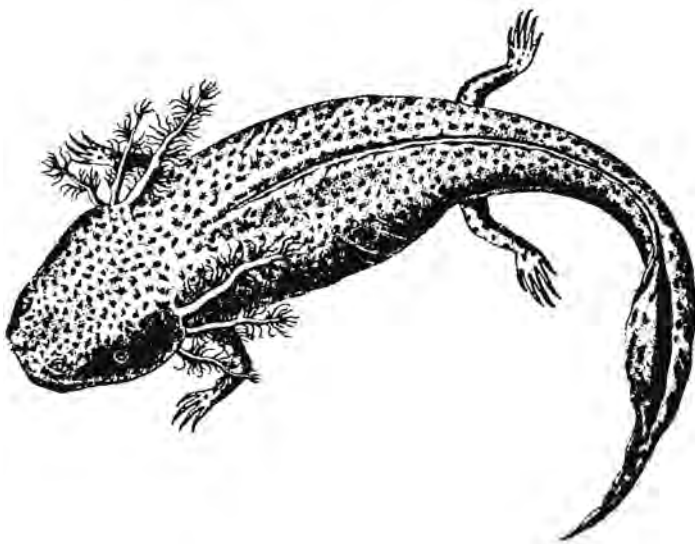
4.19 Axolotl or crocodile? San Lorenzo drain. Museum Ludwig, Köln, permanent loan to Rautenstrach-Joest Museum, Hildesheim. Drawing by author.

more naturalistic ones at Monument I-A-6. A fundamental notion in much of Mesoamerica, especially in the Postclassic but probably also earlier, seems to be that because the crocodile has a rugged top like a craggy mountain range, and because its nose, eyes, and mountainlike upper surface emerge from plant-infested swamps, its form is like that of the earth. For this reason, the image of the crocodile represents the earth, possibly in an earlier, more watery era.

However, the majority of Basin of Mexico images that have been considered crocodilians simply do not have features that clearly indicate that identity, which would include their huge



4.20 Axolotl or crocodile? Illustration of a crocodile from the book *Gesneri, Conradi* (1558). *Medici Tigurini Historia Animalium Liber III qui est de Piscium & Aquatiliu animantium natura*. Courtesy of the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.



4.21 Axolotl or crocodile? Top view of the axolotl, native to Lake Chalco. Drawing by author.

mouths with sharp teeth, claws, long tail, and scutes, osteoderms or bony buttons, located along the spine. The Atlihuayan figure's pelt falls into that ambiguous category. While it has some designs that suggest osteoderms, and has four feet, it does not have sharp teeth, claws, or a tail, but it does have the quadruple crests.

Although basin inhabitants could have referenced imported or exotic animals, we should not overlook those native to their habitat as sources for their visual images. When I looked at Niederberger's discussion of fauna that were native to the Lake Chalco area, I became intrigued, as others have for their own reasons, by the remarkable axolotl, *Ambystoma mexicanum* (Niederberger 1987: Fig.

46a). Could this creature with branchlike protrusions from the sides of the head be a visual and conceptual source for the flame brow (Fig. 4.21)?

I have explored this possibility in a recent article (Tate 2010). Here suffice it to say that this 23-25 cm long salamander is native only to Lakes Chalco and Xochimilco. The axolotl's eyes are lidless, like those of human embryos. Also like human embryos, the arms (front legs) form prior to the rear legs. In adults, the front legs have four toes and the rear have five. Teeth are small stumps that allow it to move its food into position before swallowing it whole. What is most striking are large gill structures (called stalks) that emerge from each side of the head. These external gills are lined with filaments so that they look like branches with minute hairs (Armstrong and Malacinski 1989).

Given the emphasis on the human embryo in the visual repertoire of the Basin of Mexico, it is important to realize that axolotls are perpetually in the larval or embryonic state. The larvae exhibit neoteny: they fail to undergo metamorphosis although they can reproduce. Because they are larval, axolotls have the ability to regenerate. They can regrow a missing foot, a leg, or even portions of the spine and brain. Much later inhabitants of Lake Chalco, the Aztecs, told of the "deity" Xolotl that metamorphosed into an axolotl.²¹

In the Early Formative, the axolotl was portrayed in the medium of fine Pilli ware pottery, so perhaps it was associated with elite consumption then as well. European travelers documented that up to the 1820s axolotls were still an important element of native cuisine in the Basin. Today, however, because only vestiges of their original habitat survive, they are critically endangered. Now they are bred in captivity and used in studies of regeneration and heart defects.

Unfortunately, we don't know what the Formative period residents of the Basin of Mexico called the strange creature. They surely knew about it, probably as a source of food as well as for its ability to regenerate. It is informative to compare the forms of the creatures they drew on ceramics to the form of the axolotl (Fig. 4.22). Joralemon provided several examples on pottery from Tlapacoya, Tlatilco, and Las Bocas (Joralemon 1971: Figs. 101, 102). The representations are not consistent. The so-called flame brows may have two, three, or four "flames." Some of the flames are filamented, but others are not. Sometimes there is a paw-wing

behind the head, with either four or five toes. Usually, teeth are absent or stumplike.

Let us return to the Tlapacoya vase as a source of comparison to the form of the axolotl (Fig. 4.17 top). The two images on this vessel have always been considered frontal and profile examples of the same image, but not all the elements co-occur, so it is hard to be sure. The profile view shows the flame brow with four branching elements. If the inverted U-brackets on the bottom are gums, as Reilly suggested, there is a single tooth and some rounded stumps. The latter would be similar to the axolotl. The frontal image has semicircular, eyelike elements and concentric circles on the sides, which could represent the axolotl's spots. Since the axolotl swallows its food whole, its mouth is like a portal through which beings pass; perhaps this accounts for the crossed bands in its "mouth."

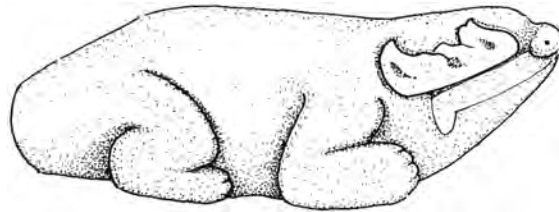
We can consider the Tlapacoya effigy vessel for a corporeal version of the image. Four "flame" ridges arise on each side of the head, similar to the axolotl's gill stalks. A trough-shaped eye on the vessel is unlike the circular eye of the axolotl. However, the stumplike teeth, four legs, and spots on the body are comparable to the axolotl. Also, in this example the digits match those of the axolotl: five in front and four in back. Its raised feet, which seem to swim rather than support the animal on the ground, are also reminiscent of the aquatic axolotl. The vessel has no tail. Axolotls have a short, broad tail, part of which is transparent.

It seems the effigy vessel was conceived as a hybrid creature, with axolotl gill stalks and a possible fang, but no tail. Its characteristics are a little closer to those of an axolotl, which is native to the place the vessel was made, than to those of the crocodilian, native to the lowlands. If it references the local, unique axolotl, the vessel relates to regeneration. If it is a crocodilian from a distant land, it relates to rain and a tamed, agrarian earth.

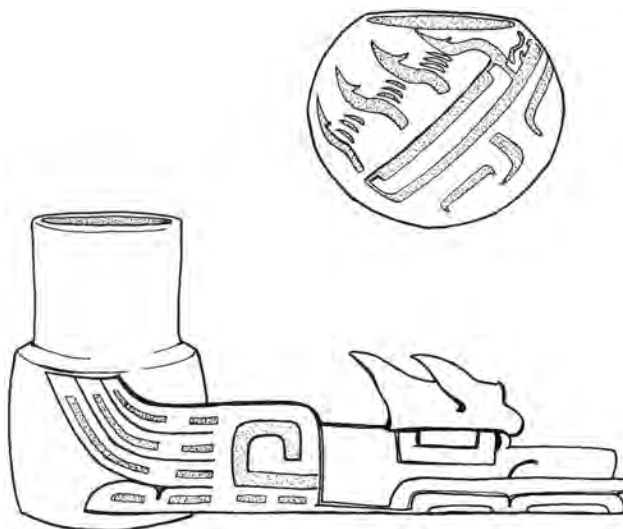
What features co-occur with the flame brow on other images from the Basin of Mexico? A series of pieces shows an interesting range of representations (Fig. 4.23). Several include a head and paw-wing. In others the paw-wing seems to be a tail or is absent. Some of the designs seem to include only the gill stalk and toothless gums. None have the teeth, claws, or a long tail that would successfully represent a crocodile. Most of the images are highly abstracted from the natural form. Some have three "branches" to the "flame," like the actual

axolotl, along with the absence of teeth or short stumps. Several include filaments on the gill stalks. The example in Figure 4.23b features a two-flame "brow," stump teeth, and a paw-wing with four toes, like some rear feet of axolotls.

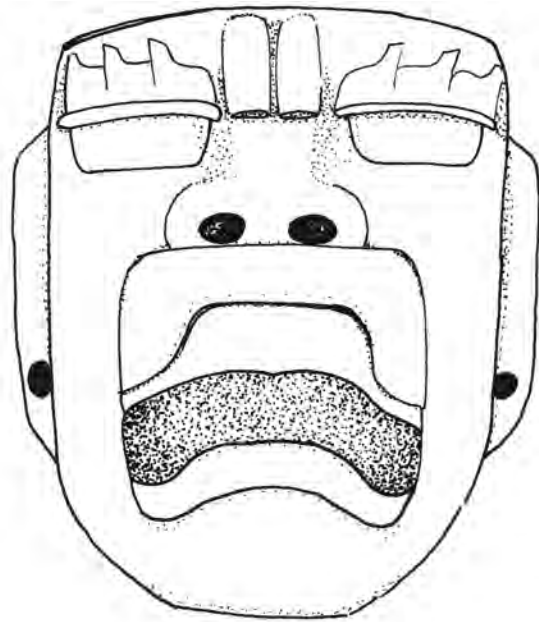
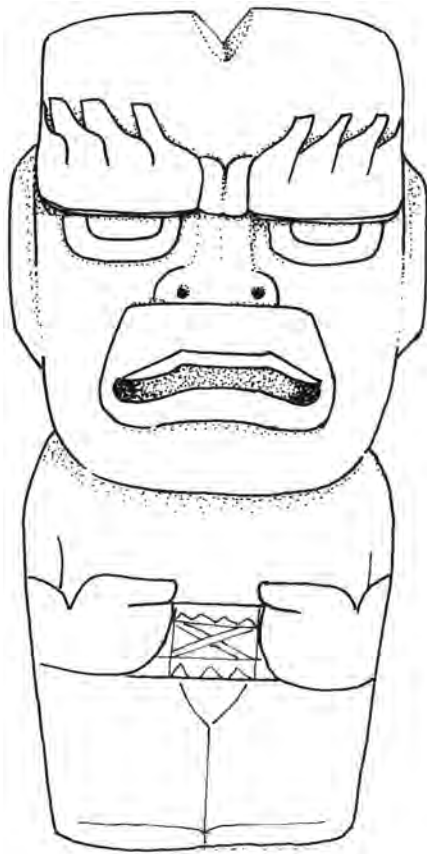
If this image on pots from the Basin of Mexico represents the axolotl, it must be symbolic of that



4.22 Axolotl or crocodile? An axolotl (top) and an Olmec jade sculpture on loan to the Brooklyn Museum. Drawing by author.



4.23 Axolotl or crocodile? Round vessel (top) with incised gill stalk from Las Bocas, H: 12.5 cm (Cleveland Museum of Art); bottom, bottle with axolotl design, H: 16.7 cm (Museo Nacional de Antropología). Drawings by author.



4.24 Axolotl or crocodile? Embryo images adorned with axolotl gill stalks: *left*, axe (British Museum) and stone mask from Costa Grande, Guerrero. Drawings by author.

creature's capacity for regeneration. No other creature has filiated branching crests emerging from the back of both sides of the head, so these must have been the metonymic reference to the axolotl and its ability to regenerate.

However, the gill stalks appear independently of the form of an axolotl-like creature. They also occur over the eyes of embryo images on axes and celts, and over the eyes of human faces on axes and masks (Fig. 4.24). A few of those axes and masks have avian beaks. In other words, the gill stalks occur with the embryo, the axolotl, and the bird. The human embryo in its sacs is comparable to the chick in its shell. Human embryo, axolotl, and chick are all embryonic forms that have the potential to undergo dramatic metamorphosis or transformation. We now know that human embryos have stem cells that, like those of the axolotl, have the capacity for pluripotentiality, or the ability to regenerate cells of different types. Because they chose these two forms as part of a limited repertoire of symbols, it seems that somehow the Basin dwellers recognized that the embryo and axolotl shared some related qualities. When they incised

profile embryo faces or gill stalks on sculptures of human bodies, faces, and masks, the motifs must have referred to these qualities.

What is rather amazing is that the people of the Basin of Mexico may have chosen to represent on pottery two creatures that represent the most highly charged stage of life. They would also have been able to observe, in the skeletons of infants who had died, the gradual closing of the fontanel, another symbol related to gestating and infant beings and rapid transformation. In each case the symbol represents a potential for, or process of, regeneration of life. In this sense the embryo and axolotl gill stalks refer to seeds, which, when properly handled, also produce new life.

The hand-paw-wing and disembodied hand

Another design associated with the "Olmec dragon" and the crocodile is the hand-paw-wing. Images of the paw-wing vary in terms of placement, number of digits (three, four, or five), shape, and associated symbols. Sometimes the paw-wing appears alone, and sometimes it is juxtaposed to a head with a gill stalk. Occasionally it is indistin-

guishable from a tail. Its palm can be infixed with a curl, an oval, two curls emerging from a central stem, or a fontanel or star. Joralemon (1976:47) suggests that “The meaning of the motif involves the metaphoric correlation of human hands, jaguar paws, and bird wings.” However, although a few of his examples have human fingernails, none have claws, so it seems the jaguar component is absent. He thinks the paw-wing is almost always associated with the hybrid “Olmec dragon,” but, as just noted, it often appears alone on pots and roller seals. We should not forget that whatever animal(s) it represents, the paw-wing is essentially a disembodied hand or wing. As such, it may classify creatures by their means of mobility or habitat.

We have seen disembodied human hands in Ayotla phase imagery (Fig. 4.16). Niederberger points out that they may be shown with eyes and what seem to be ears. On one unprovenienced vessel in Tlapacoya style, the hands alternate with embryo heads sprouting from the earth band, which she considers to represent “a clear abridged statement of power and leadership, with the profile of this mighty hybrid creature associated with three significant symbols: the constantly informed ears and eyes and the commanding hand” (Niederberger 2000:185). In the Basin of Mexico, however, a Late Preclassic tradition at Teotihuacan linked disembodied human hands with bountiful supernatural beings, some of which are female (Berlo 1992; Paulinyi 2006). Of the many hands shown in Teotihuacan imagery, it is those that hold staffs that have been most closely linked with rulership.²² Niederberger’s claim that eyes, ears, and hands link to rulership has little to support it, and perhaps the search for rulers at Teotihuacan has not yet reached its goal (but see Headrick 2007). Maybe a broader view of the hand motif would shed some light.

Its meaning varies, but the visual subject of the disembodied hand runs through Central Mexican and early North American art (not counting its appearance in parietal art). Between AD100 and 400, the people of the Hopewell culture of Ohio produced disembodied hands and claws of mica, a material they imported from the mountains of western North Carolina (Fig. 4.25). Archaeologist Mark Seaman (2004:60) speculates that one 29 cm long mica hand, which was perforated for attachment to a flexible support, “conveys a suggestion of communication between the human community and the world of spirits beyond.” Much later,

disembodied hands with eyes infixed on their palms were featured in Mississippian art, on shell plaques, stone palettes and copper pendants, all items of regalia made in the context of chiefdoms. About the hand-eye motif, Steponaitis and Knight (2004:167) similarly suggest that it was part of a “system of cosmological signs connecting the Moundville leaders to their ancestors and the forces of nature” In Late Classic Maya monumental art, especially *katun*-ending stelae, the hands (attached to bodies) often appear to be sowing or scattering small circular objects, which could be maize seeds, copal grains, blood, or other isomorphically related substances (Stuart 1984). In this context of kings marking the transition of embodied temporal cycles, such offerings on the part of rulers are meant to honor or nourish the sacred forces of space-time and the ancestors.

Much closer to the Early Formative sites of Tlapacoya and Las Bocas, Teotihuacan people painted disembodied hands within murals on the walls of apartments. Although scholars do not agree about the identity of a “deity” to whom these hands pertain, they do generally concur that these hands scattering grains or other precious things represent the “bestowing” of bounty.²³ In these examples, then, the hand is interpreted as related to scattering bounty as a means of communication with supernatural powers.

Nevertheless, these ideas about Maya and Teotihuacan images of hands do not account for the presence of the infixed eye and ear in the Tlapacoya example. In the Tlapacoya hand-eye-ear, vision and hearing might be represented along with touching, casting, or grasping. The kinds of sight that different creatures have in Mesoamerican lore is a topic well worth investigating but is well beyond our scope here. Still, I do wish to reflect on one passage in the *Popol Vuh* that specifies the bestowal of their senses on humans. As the creator couple made humans, they were formed from maize that Xmu-cane had ground nine times for the nine lunations of gestation.

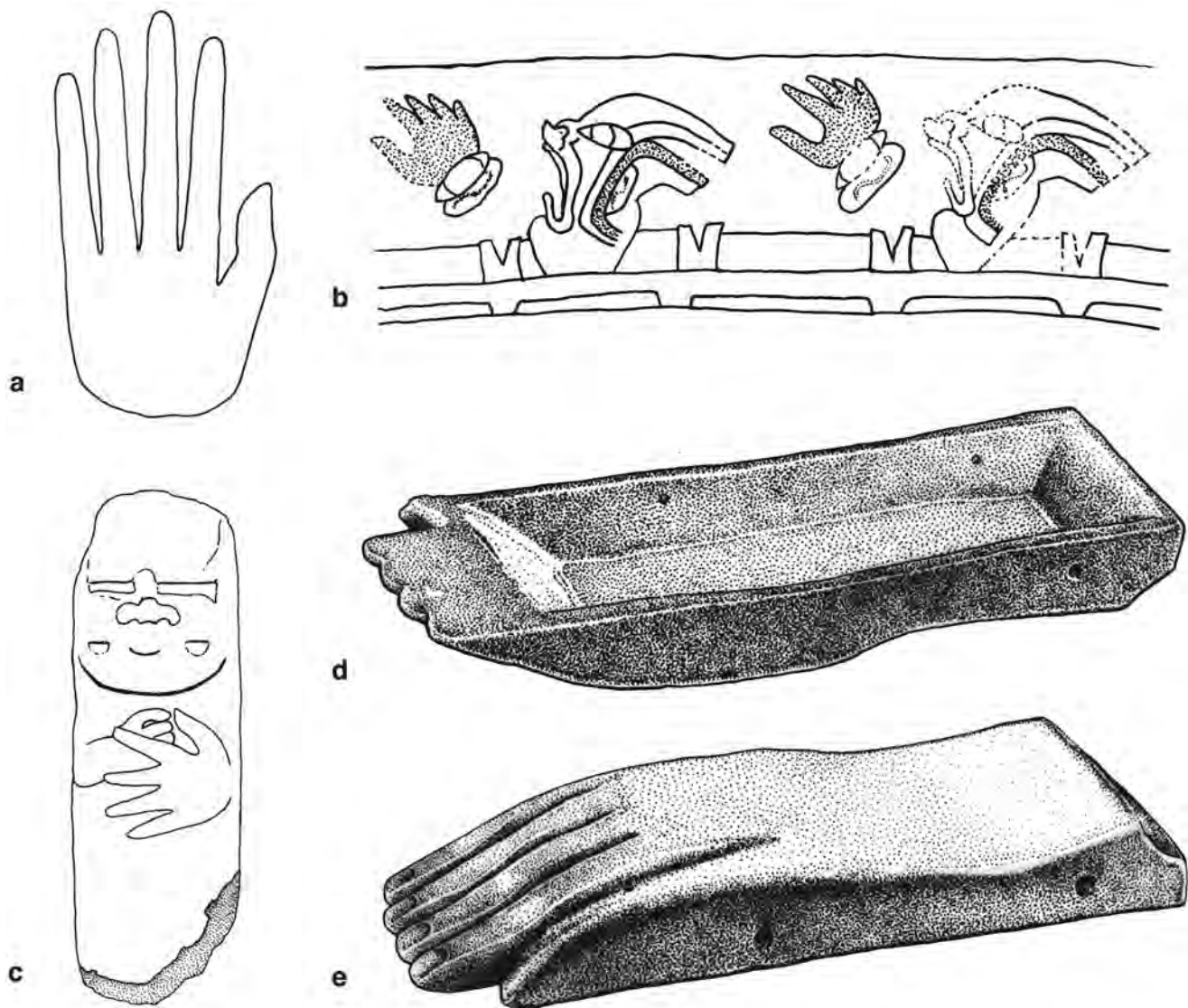
And so there were four who were made, and mere food was their flesh. . . .

Thus their countenances appeared like people. People they came to be. They were able to speak and converse. They were able to look and listen. They were able to walk and hold things in their hands. . . . they had their breath, therefore they became. . . . (Christenson 2003, l:195-197)

The images on the Tlapacoya vase are two hand-ear-eyes, two sprouting embryos, and a probable earth band (Fig. 4.25). These could refer to much of the above passage—vision, hearing (eye and ear), becoming (the sprouting embryo), the “dawning” of human-maize, and maybe locomotion (the hands and embryos are diagonal relative to the earth, possibly indicating movement). Perhaps this is an emblematic narrative of the dawning of human-maize beings and their attributes, and not a political statement. However, the Maya first humans’ extraordinary vision provided them with omniscience, which the creators found threatening.

Vision and knowledge remained linked to political relations in the Maya example, and probably in the Tlapacoya one as well. Nevertheless, in the Early Formative Basin of Mexico, the hand seems to be associated with the processes of offering or sowing, birth, and hence, creation.

We must also look at the disembodied anthropomorphic hands along the Gulf Coast. Two columnar monuments from San Lorenzo (41 and 42) and a column from La Venta (Cerro Encantado) were carved with faces and disembodied hands. Monument 42 was excavated from a San Lorenzo A phase context and may be even earlier (Coe and Diehl



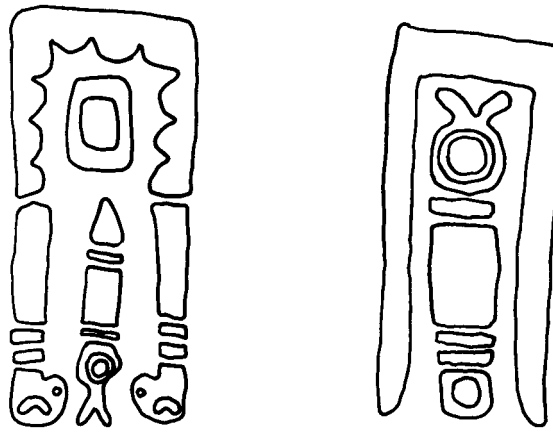
4.25 Disembodied hands: *a*, mica headdress ornament, Hopewell culture, AD 100; *b*, images on Tlapacoya vessel, 1200 BC; *c*, San Lorenzo Monument 41, about 1200 BC; *d* and *e*, top

and bottom views of the Olmec jade “hand-canoe” (private collection, on loan to the Brooklyn Museum). Drawings by Corey Escoto.

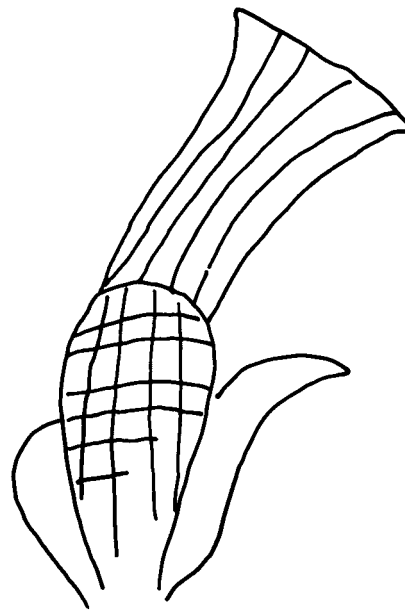
1980:351–352); the others have no secure context. Monument 41 has the best surviving imagery, including a large, disembodied hand superimposed over a smaller arm and hand of an embryo-like image. The large hand seems to convey the embryonic figure from the primordial sea to the mother's womb. As will be shown below in the discussion of San Lorenzo, the columnar monuments with embryo faces seem to represent the phallus and its human seed. It is very interesting that the large, disembodied hand is present. Is it catching the male fluid emanation, as Blood Woman's hand does in the *Popol Vuh*? Does the hand convey the life, in the form of an embryo, to the community, as does the Mixe water potency Higiny? Or does the large hand simply serve to emphasize that the smaller-scale image is a small embryo?

On the Gulf Coast phallic monuments, the hand seems to be related to conception, when the seed is caught by a hand, or to the conveying or planting of the human seed. If the analogy with the Teotihuacan hands of bounty is valid, the hand at Tlapacoya might be that of a being, human or supernatural, who provides seeds of bounty in the form of children and crops. Two more common symbols also relate to this theme of insemination and gestation of life.

The U-shaped womb symbol On Tlapacoya pottery, a series of elongated, U-shaped signs create frames for other symbols (Fig. 4.26) (Niederberger 1987: Fig. 420). On one pot, the interior of the U is rendered with an undulating line, much like those Susan Milbrath (1988) identified in Mixtec and Aztec art as symbols for the womb. On two of the several pots with U-shaped wombs is a segmented, caterpillar-like creature with a round head and antennae. Michael Coe (1965) saw it as a segmented serpent, and the U as related to the Maya lunar glyph. Another U is associated with a fontanel/star. These have been interpreted as celestial symbols. Womb, fontanel, and caterpillar are actually conceptually related: the fontanel is prominent on newborns, which of course have just emerged from wombs in a manner similar to how the caterpillar emerges from a cocoon. I suggest, then, that like its Postclassic counterpart, the Formative U symbol refers to a womb, or the concept of emergence or birth, and that its location can be either celestial or terrestrial. (The U symbol is examined at length in Chapter 8.)



4.26 U shapes: incised U-shaped frames on vessels from Tlapacoya. Drawings by Corey Escoto.



4.27 Incised image of maize cob on a Tlapacoya Pilli White cup, H: 15 cm. Collection of the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

Maize One maize cob ideogram from the Ayotla phase, or early Manantial, is illustrated by Niederberger (1987:551). It is on a fragment of a vertical-sided container made of Pilli White ware that is in the collection of the Museum of the American Indian (Fig. 4.27). Just as embryos, paws, snakes, and other Ayotla phase motifs are naturalistic enough to be recognizable, so is the maize cob. Kernels are indicated by simple horizontal-vertical cross-hatching, the tassel of fibers emerges from the tip, and the husks enclosing the cob have been partially opened. Niederberger noted that an orange slip was applied to the kernels, another

naturalistic feature. Note that during this period, maize symbolism was neither associated with embryo images nor portrayed as an emerging sprout.

To summarize, among the approximately sixteen recurring symbols on Ayotla phase pottery in the Basin of Mexico were six symbols that express aspects of a symbolic web centering around insemination, gestation, and birth. The four-pointed “star” appeared primarily on the head of infants. The cleft, or half the symbol, appeared on the backs of embryo heads. It probably was based on the fontanel and referred to the delicate process of growth associated with infancy. A conventionalized image of the human embryo appeared on numerous pots as well. It showed the human seed, or embryo, with its capacity for metamorphosis from an animal-like form to a more human one. The axolotl gill stalk may be the basis for the flame brow, and if so, probably refers to that creature’s unusual capacity for regeneration of limbs. The hand-paw-wing may have shown those severed feet. Alternatively, it may have referred to a type of zoomorphic mobility. The disembodied hand may have referred to the bounty of earth, the scattering of seed, or to conveying a life-sustaining substance to or from its supernatural home. Finally, a U-shaped bracket created a womb. Of these, the embryo symbol, the paw-wing, an occasional hand, and the design for maize were the only independent symbols or ideograms (the *Spon-*

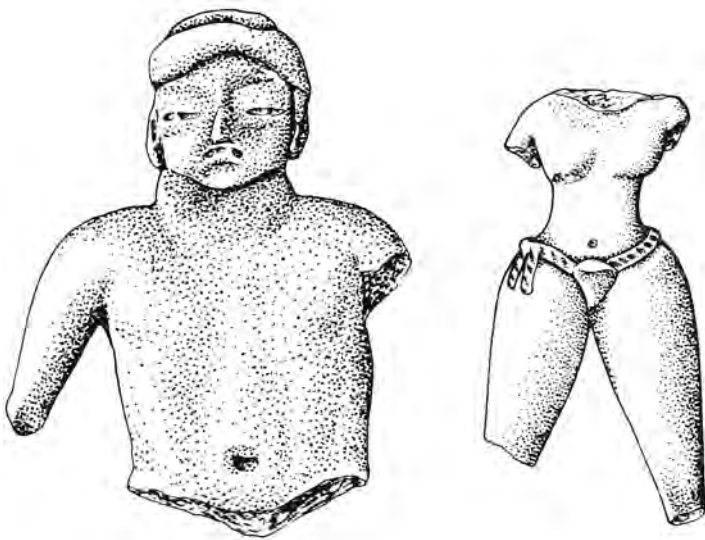
dylus shell and others not fully treated here could also be shown independently). The fontanel and the gill stalk were usually seen in combination with at least one other symbol or on a body, whether naturalistic or fantastic. Clearly the Early Formative people of the Basin of Mexico had considerable understanding of human gestation, and clearly the process played an important role in their ideology, but it is not yet clear to me whether the 260-day calendar, with its day names and numbers, had been fully developed.

In the Manantial phase, many of these symbols were combined into designs that more explicitly portrayed humanized seed forms sprouting from earth. A wider repertoire of symbols was developed.

Figurines and Gender Questions

During the Ayotla phase, the figurines of Zohapilco-Tlapacoya were primarily solid representations of standing human young adults (Fig. 4.28). An unusual group of figurines are those of the Pilli style, which, according to Niederberger (1976), consisted of 76 percent male figures, many with elaborate costuming that suggests ballplayers with big padded belts and leg pads and “shamans.” The embryo image also occurred mostly on Pilli ware vessels. Hollow babies with fontanel designs were restricted to Pilli ware as well. Figurines in other styles were mostly female. The percentage of hollow infants among Ayotla phase figurines was about 4 percent of Niederberger’s sample (1976:210-211). This information suggests that the production of a graphic symbol system and an increase in the portrayal of men were linked and were being expressed primarily (but not exclusively) by the makers of Pilli ware, possibly for elite use. Yet the subject matter of the symbol system definitely incorporated knowledge developed by women through their experiences with pregnancy and miscarriage. Here women’s knowledge was fundamental to the development of social differentiation and probably political power.

In the successive Manantial phase (150–900 bc), as the incised symbol system became more complex, there were more hollow infants, including some with the fontanel or star cutouts in their heads. Some white-slipped hollow infants are life-size (Fig. 4.29).²⁴ One is 41.5cm high in the typical seated position. Since they sit indepen-



4.28 Pilli figurines from Tlapacoya showing male and female bodies and costuming. Drawings by author after Niederberger 1976: Figs. 219, 220.

dently, they likely depict infants that are at least six months of age. Making such large hollow figurines was no easy task. The limbs and head were probably formed separately and then joined to the torso before firing. Many are well-fired, with thinner walls than one would expect. If, as I suggested in the previous chapter, the hollow babies were the focus of a ritual practice, either involving competition for the opportunity to “host” the statue, or featuring a simpler community or family shrine, these activities were part of a social complexity that expanded around 1500 bc with the beginnings of the Manantial phase.

Among the many elaborate burials of Tlatilco, a village on the west side of Lake Texcoco, were objects depicting a wide array of subjects in a variety of styles. The question of how “Olmec” styles, subjects, and ideas fit into the corpus of Tlatilco has been widely debated. For example, there are figurines whose subject matter is adorned young females with large thighs executed in a regional style. There are also figurines that portray individuals with shaved, deformed heads and ambiguous gender. Two large, hollow figurines depict contortionists, a subject produced in low relief on circular pedestals in the Gulf lowlands and Guatemalan highlands (Tate 1995). It is beyond the scope of this project to resolve the problems inherent in this material. Instead, it will look at how other scholars have used the Tlatilco corpus to address questions of gender.

Joyce Marcus (1998) and Rosemary Joyce (2000) each have asked distinctive gender-related questions of the numerous figurines found in burials at Tlatilco. Marcus is interested in the correlation between women’s graves and unbroken figurines. Based on data from the report edited by García Moll and others (1991), she points out that of 214 burials excavated in the fourth season, 37 graves contained complete figurines. Just over half of these (19) contained female skeletons. Next in frequency were children (6). Four graves of men and 4 of infants six to eighteen months of age contained whole figurines. In addition, 2 were of neonates (for a total of 12 youths), and the remaining 2 were of adults of undetermined sex. Marcus found this pattern—the highest percentage of unbroken figurines found with females, and the next highest with children—in Oaxaca in the Tierras Largas and San José phases, as well as in Early Formative burials at Gualupita and Nexpa, Morelos. Not only were the



4.29 Hollow baby from Tlapacoya, H: 41.5 cm. Museo Nacional de Antropología. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

figurines unbroken, but there were usually large concentrations of them, up to 20 in a single burial (Marcus 1998:27–29).

Based on what she sees as the tendency for whole female figurines to occur in the burials of females and children in Tlatilco and Oaxaca, and to be absent from “men’s houses,” Marcus (1998) suggests that Early Formative figurines may have functioned in household ceremonies that honored recently deceased ancestors. The generic faces and bodies, the placement of figurines in scenic groups, and their association with households in Oaxaca all indicate to her a localized communication of women with their ancestors. After the Zapotec state emerged, ca. 500 bc, fewer female figurines occurred in households. Instead, larger ceramic sculptures, probably made by specialists, honored a family’s noble ancestors (Marcus 1998).

Rosemary Joyce (2000) has considered the portrayals of gender in figurines from more than 400 Tlatilco burials. Based on a sample of 66 figurines of which enough remained to determine their sexual characteristics, 30 percent showed no sexual differentiation. Joyce doubts whether some of the figurines that Marcus considers to represent females really do. She writes, “these [generalized] figurines are often classified automatically as female because they are nude and lack male genitalia.

But 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" (Joyce 2000:29). Most of the figurines portray young but sexually mature people who are displaying their bodies. Joyce thinks that the "figurines represent a record of practices of beautification linked intimately with the expression of emerging sexuality at the transition from childhood to adulthood" (30).

Despite the destruction perpetrated by looters and construction of a brickyard, more than 200 burials at Tlatilco were excavated professionally. Of these, archaeologists determined that 41 percent of the skeletons were female. The most elaborate costumes on those skeletons wearing imperishable adornments were worn by young women of prime childbearing age: fifteen to twenty-five years. Older women, between thirty and forty-five, were adorned with simpler and fewer objects, except for ceramic rattle balls, which Joyce thinks they wore on their legs during dances. These and other patterns among the burials led Joyce (2000:30-34) to suggest that both the young, elaborately adorned nude figurines and the young, elaborately adorned females who were buried indicate a cultural focus on practices of personal beautification. While the performance of gender differentiation, especially during the years when women are likely to become pregnant, is quite plausible, the data made me wonder why so many women died between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, if not in childbirth. Perhaps they were adorned in honor of their struggle and sacrifice, or to honor the supernaturals whose influence extended to childbirth in an effort to avoid more such deaths.

In summary, between 1450 and 1000 bc, people living along the lakeshores of the southern Basin of Mexico used ceramic figurines, mostly of women, as grave furnishings. The figurines may be linked to ancestor worship or may have reflected women's concern with attracting mates. Alternatively, Follensbee (2000:79) proposed, based on an analogy with the Postclassic Maya, that figurines, even in the Formative period, may have been used in healing ceremonies. In the Basin of Mexico, hollow babies formed a small but significant percentage of the ceramic assemblage, suggesting a cult focused on infants. These people definitely were not the first to make sculptures of the fetus in the womb.

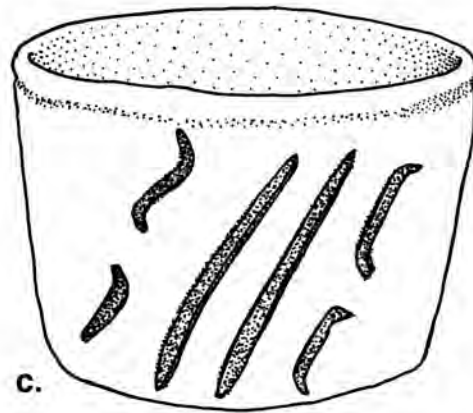
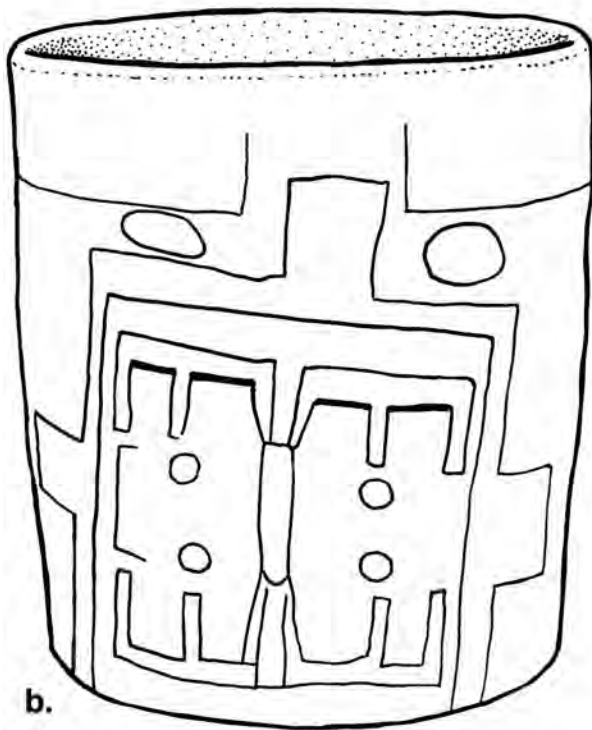
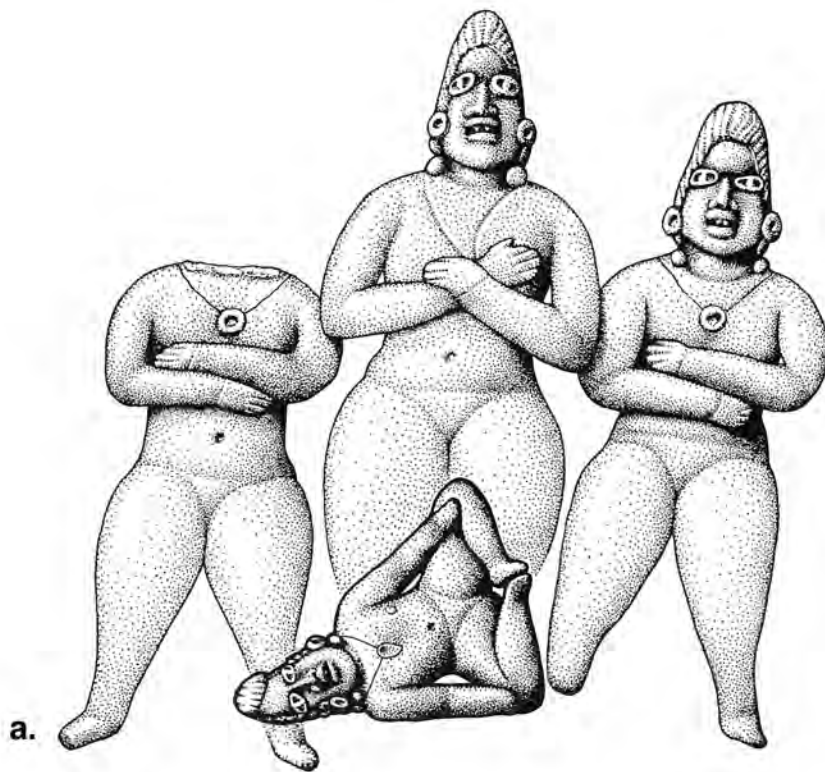
Based on current evidence, highland Oaxacans did that. Also, it is still unclear whether basin inhabitants were the first to represent the embryo, as we will see below. However, on the shores of the lakes, people developed an integrated system of graphic symbols that described the generation of life. On an elite ceramic ware, they conventionalized the graphic symbols for the human embryo, the fontanel, the womb, and the axolotl gill stalk. By placing a series of symbols on ceramic vessels and roller seals that had to be turned, they created diagrammatic visual narratives.

1400–1000 BC: Oaxaca, San José Phase

In the San José phase, 1400–1000 bc, residents of the Oaxaca Valley engaged some of the symbols that were circulating among the several cultural centers, and they seem to have adapted them to local purposes. They also developed the notion that an assemblage, or scene, of figurines could represent a ritual. They used baby and fetus sculptures in a ritual manner as well.

Two very stylized versions of the designs that appeared on pottery from the Basin of Mexico were used on vessels placed in burials of men. Flannery, Marcus, and Payne (1994) have identified the designs as versions of an axolotl-browed creature (the "fire-serpent") and the frontal embryo face ("were-jaguar") (Fig. 4.30b and c). They argue that the former represents lightning, and the latter, earth. Since the two types were never found in one grave, they consider the designs to be indicative of descent groups. While the wider variety of graphic designs on basin pottery argues against such restrictive use of these motifs there, the imported designs may well have functioned in Oaxacan villages as foreign insignia that were given local meanings and used to indicate status.

The custom of placing unbroken figurines in some burials continued from the Tierras Largas phase. In addition, people began to create assemblages of figurines (Fig. 4.30a) to form scenelike groups. One such ritual scene was placed below the floor of a small lean-to attached to House 17 at the village of San José Mogote. House 16-17 is thought to have been a relatively high status household: it contained more deer meat, shell, stingray spines, jade, and imported pottery than others. Its inhabitants made chert biface tools, baskets, mother-of-



4.30 Sculpture and pottery from San José Mogote's San José phase, 1400-1000 BC: *a*, figurines in a ritual group found below a house floor (drawing courtesy of Joyce Marcus); *b* and

c, ceramic vessels with graphic designs (drawings by Corey Escoto).



4.31 Solid baby figurine from Oaxaca (1400–1000 BC) found in a house foundation. Courtesy of Joyce Marcus.

pearl ornaments, and possibly wooden objects. A middle-aged woman was buried below the floor of the main house with jade ornaments. Because several of the numerous whole and fragmentary figurines found in the two structures seem similar enough to have been made by the same hand, Marcus (1998:174–182) thinks that the woman buried here made some of them.

The cached group of figurines was near a hearth. Three are standing figures, laid in a roughly north-south position. The fourth, set on top of them, is seated with the soles of the feet touching each other. Marcus sees these as male, but although none has a labia or phallus, they all have a pubic triangle (Follensbee 2000:62, 72). The standing figures cover their chests with their arms, so the breasts reveal little about the sex of the body. The seated figure, whose arms are on its knees, has small, possibly female breasts and a slightly pinched waist. Each wears a chest ornament, a shell or bead, on a cord around the neck. Unless their hairdos assign gender, they are ambiguous. Based on an analogy with a burial, two thousand years later, of a Panamanian chief and his retainers—in which only the chief is in a flexed or seated position, and the retainers were buried in an extended position—Marcus (1998) thinks that the standing figures' poses indicate their subordinate relationship to the seated one. I would not venture to guess what social or religious situation these figures from San José Mogote reflect. Although I see this collection of figurines in a scene as a practice that is antecedent to some deposits of Middle Formative greenstone figurines, I hesitate to assign a “subordinate” versus “chief” relationship to all Middle Formative stone standing and seated figures. Marcus's

proposal that solid figurines like these generally functioned as temporary “vessels” for the spirits of ancestors in household rituals is more convincing, especially given the strong focus on ancestors in the later Zapotec culture in the Oaxaca Valley.

Among the San José phase figurines are some that Marcus calls “tonsured caciques.” They depict persons with shaved, deformed craniums, slit eyes, and downturned mouths. The head and its features are similar to those on the hollow baby excavated from Tlapacoya and to many figurines from the Basin of Mexico, as well as to the Manatí busts.

Among the women, pregnant women, musical men, and other figures were some solid chubby babies (Fig. 4.31). In several houses, such figurines were buried within the construction as apparent dedicatory offerings (Marcus 1998). Fragments of larger, white-slipped hollow babies were also among the pieces recovered (102).

To recap this section, during the Initial and Early Formative periods in Oaxaca, we found the initial representations of the fetus within the womb of a female figurine in the Tierras Largas phase (1700–1500 BC). During this era, some figurines exhibited sexual characteristics, but others were ambiguously gendered. In the subsequent San José phase (1400–1000 BC), people placed ceramic figurines in arrays that suggest a portrayal of ritual. These were found in domestic contexts and probably functioned in rituals focused on ancestors. The seated and standing poses of the figurines parallel those of figurines found in Paso de la Amada and elsewhere. It is interesting to note that solid baby and fetus figures enlivened house foundations. Some hollow babies were included in certain burials, such as that of a woman in her early twenties (Marcus 1998). This use of fetus and baby figures in houses and burials provides some clues as to the function of this important but little-understood category of sculpture. In terms of graphic symbols, a small inventory appeared on ceramics in San José Mogote and were apparently used to identify lineages.

1410–1200 BC: Gulf Coast Lowlands, La Merced

Before turning to the early urban center of San Lorenzo, discussed at some length, we should look at how a gestational image moved from house foundations to a site center at a small settlement, La Merced.

At about the same time that the bundled wooden busts representing adult humans were deposited at El Manatí, people nearby cached the earliest known embryo image from the Gulf Coast region. The site, called La Merced, after the modern settlement, is in an archipelago of hills in an area of low swamps and lagoons. The site was inhabited from the Formative through the Classic periods, and since 1994, archaeologists have been able to uncover traces of the Formative period settlement. María del Carmen Rodríguez and Ponciano Ortiz (2000:157) initially thought the axes corresponded to the end of the Early Formative, but new radio-carbon dates indicate an even greater antiquity (Pool 2007:97).

Rodríguez and Ortiz (2000) found a deposit in the La Merced site center that is quite different from the Initial Formative ones at El Manatí. Referred to as the Ceiba group, it consisted of about 600 axes that were associated with ceramics and other artifacts, and made in three phases. These cached objects were not polished greenstone celts but larger, axe-like forms made of softer stones. While celts are elongated, tapering, coblike shapes, axes are broader, larger, and sometimes thicker. The nomenclature used by archaeologists and curators is not much more consistent than that. The first offering contained some axes of limestone and kaolin, including at least one with an incised image, of which I have not found an illustration.

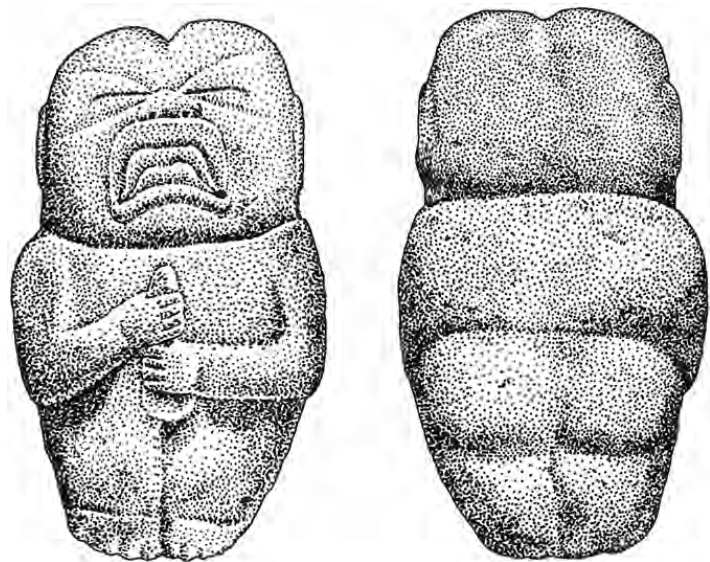
In the second phase of axe offerings, about 1350 bc, was a large axe (40 cm high, 23 cm wide, and 8 cm thick) made of stone (Fig. 4.32). It was carved into the shape of a gestating human and nicknamed “El Bebé.” It shows eyelids that have formed and closed over the eyes, so according to modern classifications, it would be at least nine gestational weeks, technically a fetus, not an embryo. However, this early image shows a small nose resting on the stylized, downturned upper lip, a mouth that opens to expose toothless gums, vestigial ear ridges, and short arms holding a celtlike object—all features typical of the conventionalized embryo images. It is the earliest known embryo image in the format of a freestanding stone sculpture, and it stands near the beginning of any process of artistic stylization. In contrast, the Ayotla phase embryos from the Basin of Mexico depict the seven- to eight-week embryo, which has not developed eyelids, and artists chose to render them in profile. The choice between frontal and profile representation may relate to the

fact that the former is a sculpture, while the latter is a graphic image.

In addition to representing a gestating being that is a few weeks older than the Ayotla images, El Bebé is intriguing for another reason: with very little head above the eyes, the image seems to represent an anencephalic fetus.²⁵ It could be based on the observation of a miscarried fetus suffering from this neural tube birth defect (NTD). As noted in the previous discussion of nixtamalization, anencephaly can be caused by a diet high in un-nixtamalized maize.

There are no known images of deformed embryos or fetuses from the Mazatán region, but we do find deeply cleft heads on the Ayotla embryos and the anencephalic axe from the Gulf Coast. Based on our current knowledge, however, 1350 bc is too early for a diet high in maize. Could the ritual specialists of El Manatí and La Merced have had access to more maize than other populations? Or to more cinnabar? As scientists continue to investigate how maize became a staple food, it is essential that we look for cinnabar use and evidence of nixtamalization, the technology that enabled Mesoamericans to eat maize while avoiding tragic birth defects.

In the later levels at La Merced, dating to the Mayacal phase (ca. 1150 bc), was a medium-sized stone monument called Monument 1 (Fig. 4.33). It is 40 cm wide and 72 cm high, but because it is broken, it may have originally been much larger. It is



4.32 El Bebé, 1350 bc, from La Merced. H: 40 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

only 9 cm thick, and its shape resembles the Middle Formative stelae of La Venta. On the large fragment is the frontal face of an embryo over which four maize seeds were incised at the four corners. From the cleft at the top of the head rises a large, rounded protrusion, probably meant to indicate sprouting maize. This is the earliest known conflation of the embryo with maize to appear on a monument, and it comes from the place where earlier, El Bebé, perhaps a memorial to an anencephalic child, or a ritual object meant to prevent such birth defects, was cached. The eyes of Monument 1 are unusually wide and include lightly incised irises. A little square is incised over the center of the nose, which happens to be the center of the face. The broad, downturned upper lip seems to issue from the nostrils, like the lip ornament seen on many of the Ayotla embryo images. As Rodríguez and Ortiz (2000) note, a shell shape is superimposed over the toothless gums. They liken it to shark or

feline teeth; I think it clearly represents a shell and is similar to the designs composed of arcs on the Ayotla and Manantial phase pots. It is interesting that the conflation of embryo imagery with maize seeds or sprouts occurred about the same time on the Gulf Coast and in the Basin of Mexico, about 1500 bc.

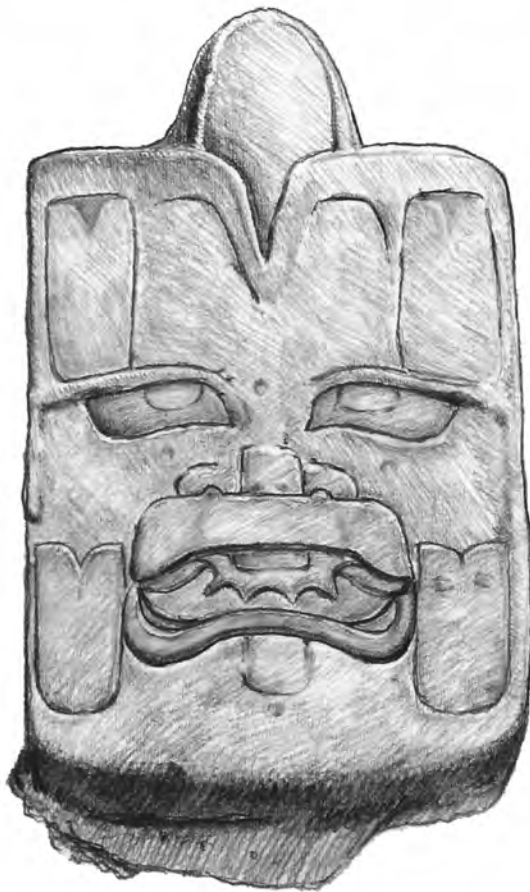
As mentioned above, at this time in Oaxaca, figurines of fetuses and chubby babies were buried in house foundations. At La Merced, images of embryos and fetuses moved into the site center. They were placed in large offerings that seem to have community-wide, not simply household, significance.

1450-850 BC: Gulf Coast, San Lorenzo

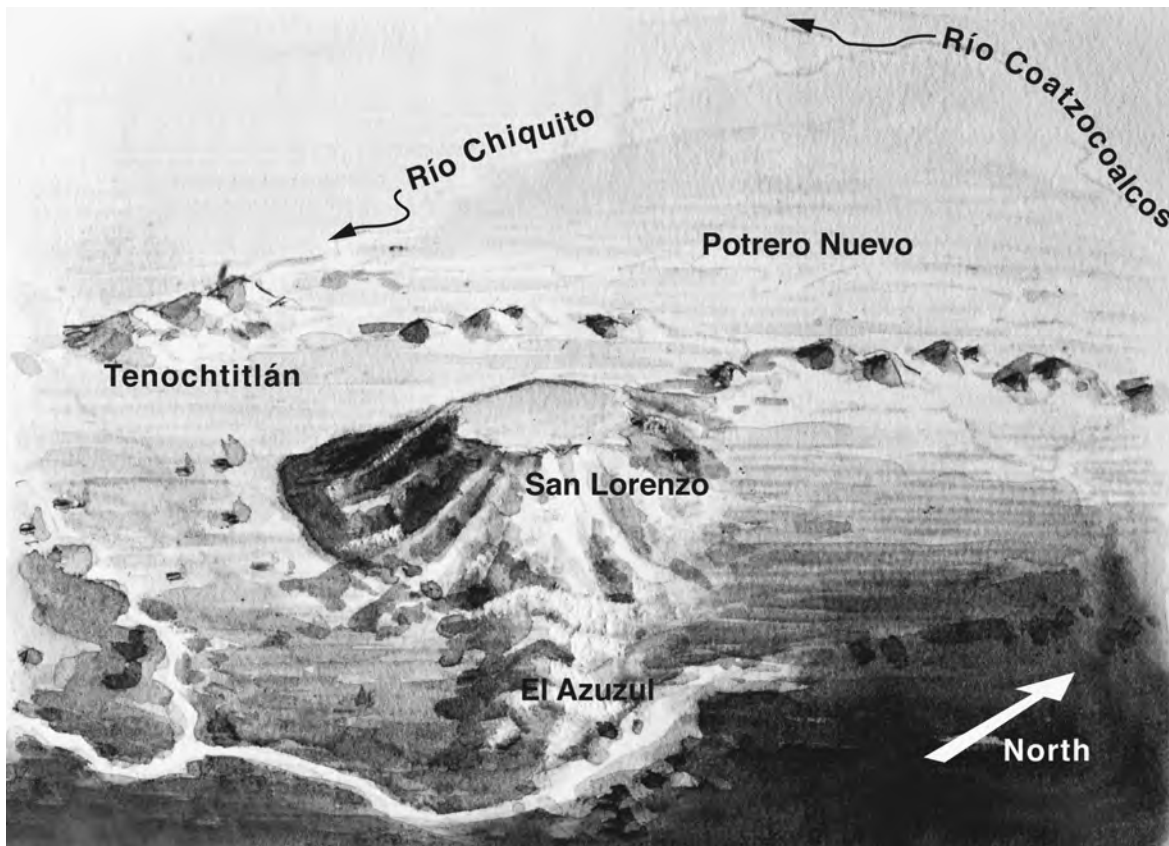
By about 1450 bc, a series of traits coalesced at San Lorenzo into what archaeologists call “Olmec.” These include monumental constructions of earth and stone, specific ways of representing the human form, and the narrative content of sculptural representation and placement. A cultural focus there became the organization of large numbers of people to expend enormous efforts in order to collectively achieve feats of transportation, construction, and carving. Chief among the materials used for visual expression was basalt. In huge teams, people transported enormous boulders from the Tuxtla volcanoes upriver and up to the top of the plateau (Fig. 4.34). At some point these boulders were carved into a variety of new symbolic forms that were arrayed on the plateau. Not surprisingly, the society of San Lorenzo borrowed or continued some cultural practices that originated elsewhere. What they created from these traditions was a new social and cultural order that employed new forms of visual expression.

Monumental Construction

San Lorenzo occupies a ridge that was once surrounded by meandering river courses about 48 km (30 miles) from the coast of the southern Gulf of Mexico. Whereas at El Manatí, La Merced, and Tlapacoya, people had chosen small, natural elevations surrounded by water for their sites, at San Lorenzo they selected a plateau that rises 50 m (164 ft) above a series of tributary rivers of the Coatzacoalcos. Then they terraced the sides and filled portions of the top of the plateau to such an extent that the labor needed to do so surpassed any previ-



4.33 La Merced Monument 1, 1150 bc. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



4.34 View of the San Lorenzo area. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

ous construction efforts in Mesoamerica (Cyphers 1997c:106; Diehl 1989). The resulting plateau was about 1,100 m long and 700 m wide (based on Coe and Diehl 1980: Map 2). As we can see, both in the selection of a site and in the complexity and size of symbolic forms, San Lorenzo differed from previous settlements. Surrounded by waterways, it was an embellished island in the sky.

Regional surveys revealed that between 1450 and 1000 bc, the population grew 20-fold: at maximum, approximately 8,500 to 18,500 lived in San Lorenzo, with another 7,000 to 15,000 living nearby (Symonds et al. 2002). The labor required to construct terraces on the plateau and to haul basalt boulders weighing up to 25 tons upstream for over 50 km (31 mi) demonstrates that the society had created institutions to organize this early monumental civic project. It remained the most impressive civic-ceremonial center in Mesoamerica for about three hundred years.

As did many ancient cities in Europe, San Lorenzo had impressive entryways. For example, like the contemporary Hittite walled citadel of Hattusas in Turkey, with its Lion Gate, San Lorenzo

was elevated, and at least one entrance was ornamented with sculpture. As far as we know, unlike Hattusas, San Lorenzo had no perimeter wall. Because of the topography, however, there were only a few easy access points to the upper plateau. Archaeologists Coe and Diehl, who began excavations at San Lorenzo in 1966, proposed that some elevated paths southeast of the plateau, which headed toward the area they called Potrero Nuevo, were such entryways (1980:297). Regional surveys conducted in the 1990s have redefined the limits and nature of surrounding settlements, and now Potrero Nuevo is subsumed into Loma del Zapote (Cyphers 2004:34). Cyphers and Fernando Botas think that Loma del Zapote, situated on a slope to the south of the site summit, was another such entrance. They found two broad, ramplike causeways there, 600 and 750 m long, that help connect San Lorenzo to the waterways (Cyphers Guillén and Botas 1994:276; Cyphers 1997c:108). Near this causeway, in an area called El Azuzul, were four sculptures, two of which were feline, similar to the lions at the entrance to Hattusas. They will be discussed below.

Excavations along the sides of the plateau have revealed that they were terraced to support both habitation and horticulture. After one had ascended the plateau, one walked on surfaces of red sand or yellow gravel. On these floors were clusters of monumental sculptures. Stone-lined canals carried water, certainly a valuable resource, to the edge of the plateau. There were some large, low platforms of clay, some of which supported walled (and probably roofed) structures. Some of these were apparently made using a rammed-earth technique. Although there were no large mounds surrounding plazas (those thought to exist by earlier scholars have been shown to be later accumulations of vegetation), one construction had carefully finished red hematite-stained floors, 4 m high basalt columns, basalt steps, and a stone-lined, meandering water channel. On the west side of the plateau was an area in which numerous basalt sculptures were found in some disarray. Ann Cyphers (1997c) considers this to be a recycling workshop in which the valuable basalt was guarded.

Accompanying the immense constructions and the population growth that began around 1450 bc was an explosion of art making on a massive scale. Teams of workers began to fashion basalt into colossal heads representing heroic ballplaying rulers wearing helmets—ten have been found to date—as well as huge thrones, columns, animal figures, and relief slabs. Cyphers's recent catalogue (2004) of the monuments lists 134 (mostly large) stone sculptures from San Lorenzo and another 32 from the surrounding sites of Tenochtitlan, El Remolino, Loma del Zapote, and Estero Rabón.

Those of us who think about the Olmec can readily visualize huge teams of people using rope to pull basalt boulders on rafts across water or on logs across land (mostly due to the *National Geographic* illustrations of such a scene). However, it is hard to imagine the creative intellect involved in the invention of so many technologies and forms. Previously, stone had been used for manos and metates—grinding tools—and for axes, projectiles, knives, hammers, blades, and bowls. Within what was probably a century, whole categories of sculptural formats were conceived and executed. Natural stone columns were incised with embryo images. Huge boulders were shaped into rectangular blocks for thrones and into heads, human figures in the round, zoomorphic forms, hybrid forms, spheres, and slabs, and smaller stones into fetuses. Many

of these forms were further enhanced with high- and low-relief carving that brought into existence a range of beings and probably graphic symbols, although many of these have been effaced. Each of the freestanding human figures was distinct, as were each of the zoomorphs and each of the sculptures that Cyphers (2004:7) considers “transformation figures.” Only the colossal heads and thrones were relatively standard formats. Of these, only two cave-niche thrones survived due to the habit of recarving them into other things (Porter 1989). It seems that one of the characteristics of the San Lorenzo phenomenon is the remarkable variety of its sculptural formats and subjects.

Representational Subjects of Sculpture

Continuing the traditions of figurine making in Mesoamerica, people at San Lorenzo created primarily anthropomorphic forms, with animals forming a secondary subject. Ceramic figurine heads described as “typically Olmec” appeared in the first Early Formative Olmec phase, Chicharras (1450–1400 bc). The heads are narrow and hairless, with slit eyes like those on the contemporary wooden figures from El Manatí (Fig. 4.35). Torsos with lots of padded costuming, alluding to the ballgame, appear at about the same time. In their 1980 book, Coe and Diehl illustrate more hollow figure fragments and some figurines that they called “dwarfs,” one of which I suggest is an infant. Also of interest is a nearly complete, solid, pregnant female figure (Fig. 4.36). Her left hand rests on her belly, and her right covers her breasts, which seem small. A low-slung garment covering her lower torso is made of Xochiltepec white paste and decorated with red. There are additional fragments of female figurines with narrow waists and compact breasts. San Lorenzo A phase figurines have more elaborate head deformation, hair, and headdresses, including wraps (Fig. 4.37). The hollow figurine with the fontanel cutout dates to this phase (Coe and Diehl 1980:265–271). To contextualize this within Early Formative figurine traditions, in the pre-Olmec and earliest Olmec phase we find some hollow figures, a pregnant woman and other female figurines, ambiguously gendered figurine heads and limbs, padded ballplayers, one-eyed anthropomorphs, and animal effigies.

Among San Lorenzo ceramic vessels, Calzadas Carved pots exhibit a limited set of the motifs found in the Basin of Mexico: shell (or arcs) infixed

with cross-hatching, paw-wings, flame-browed zoomorphs, and crossed bands. In terms of subject matter, figurines at San Lorenzo are quite similar to contemporary ones elsewhere. However, the set of graphic symbols is not as developed as in the Basin of Mexico. The only fontanel design was on the head of a hollow baby.

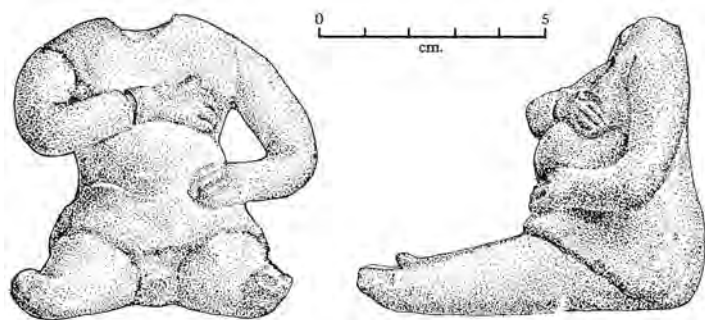
Any account of the subjects of San Lorenzo's monumental sculptures is crippled by the fact that so many of its monuments have been mutilated and, in at least a few cases, reused. The reasons for this are the topic of considerable discussion and range from revolution to the "killing" of a previous ruler's power via mutilation of monuments, to harvesting sacred power from those monuments, to recycling for economic reasons (Clewlow et al. 1967; Grove 1981; Porter 1989). Some are nearly totally destroyed, such as Monument 54. Its head, arms, and legs were removed, after which the remaining upper torso was smoothed and polished. It barely resembles a human form, yet enough remains to suggest that it once did. Others, such as Monument 83, are just bits of relief, yet in this case a human hand is clearly visible.

Despite the difficulties posed by the extreme mutilation, we can say that approximately fourteen animals were portrayed, including several felines. Quite a few other sculptures seem to have been plain forms or to have been decorated with abstract symbols. Of the thirty-four monuments representing humans, three sculptures portray a scene with two figures; in each case, one is human and one is animal.²⁶ Seventeen images of adult males survive. There are five portrayals of fetuses, and three that clearly represent embryos, plus some embryos that are composite beings. Two more show anthropomorphic figures with some embryo characteristics, and another two show zoomorphic figures with some embryo characteristics. Of the sculptures that show humans, most scholars observe no portrayals of women. However, in her analysis of sex and gender characteristics in Gulf Coast Olmec figurines and monuments, Follensbee (2000) identifies a few females. After considering the arguments that identify certain sculptures as representations of women, we will return to the other subjects mentioned above.

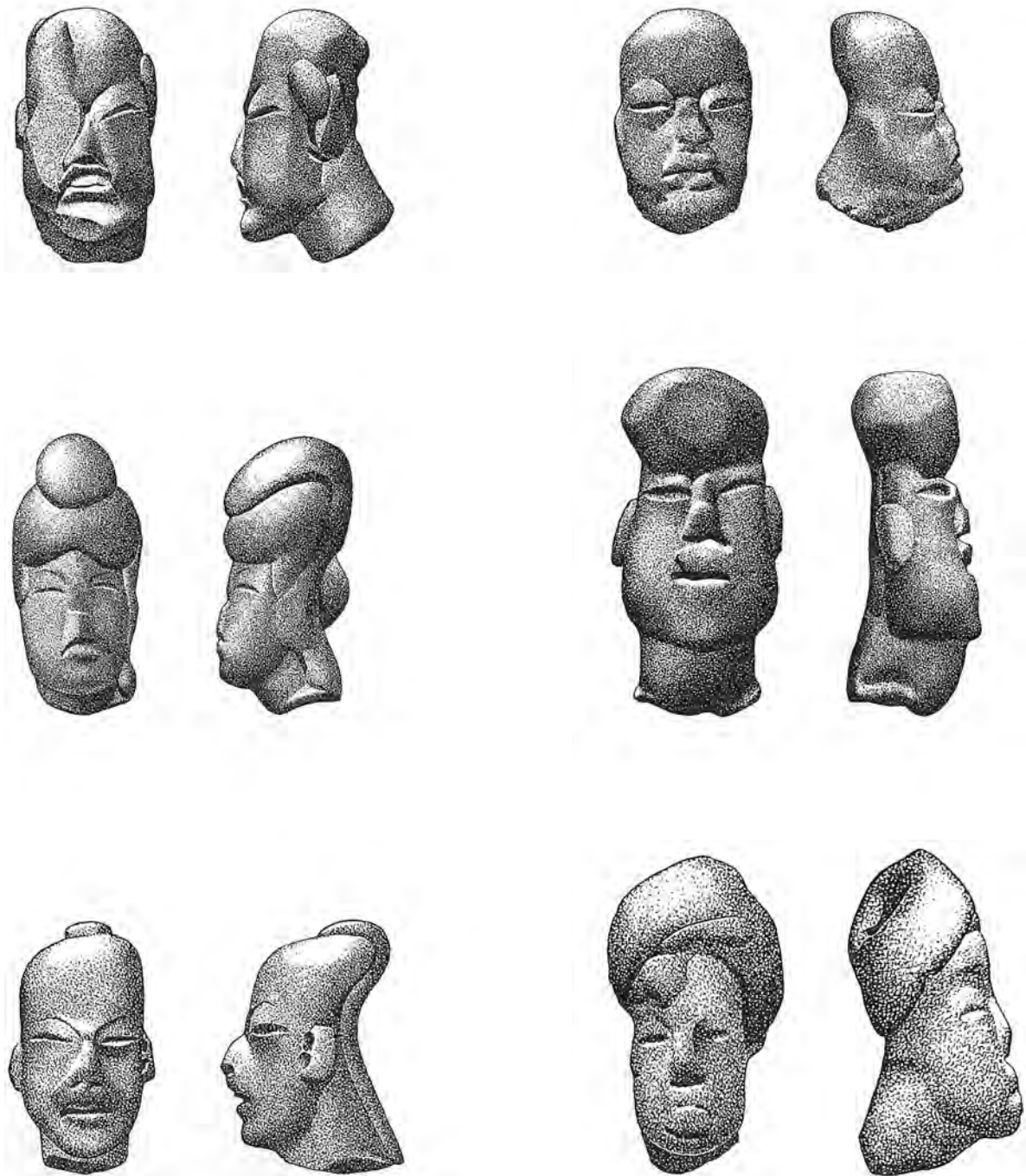
Follensbee (2000:237) counts a total of seven representations of women. Among these, she considers the two dwarfs on San Lorenzo Monument 18 as female because of their rounded breasts



4.35 Figurines from San Lorenzo's Chicharras phase, 1450–1400 BC: *top*, dwarfs or, at right, an infant; *center*, solid heads; *bottom*, solid "ballplayer," probably male. Coe and Diehl 1980: Figs. 303, 304, 305. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.



4.36 Figurine of a pregnant female from San Lorenzo's Chicharras phase, 1450–1400 BC. Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 308. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.



4.37 Figurines from San Lorenzo's A phase, 1400-1200 BC. Coe and Diehl 1980: Figs. 313-318. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

and low-slung female garments. One relatively naturalistic monument (47), carved in the round, shows a seated figure holding a snake in its lap (Fig. 4.38). The figure has small rounded breasts and wears a cape. Follensbee argues that this represents a female as well (295-298). Another figure she identifies as probably female is on the side of the

throne, Monument 14 (Fig. 4.39). This figure's chest flares out above an arm that crosses the torso. It wears several elements more often associated with females than males: pendant ear ornaments, upper arm bands, and a beaded necklace. The position of sitting with the legs outstretched is also associated with representations of women (231-233). Among

the monuments are several more whose gender seems ambiguous to Follensbee. In sum, one (or possibly two) adult females of normal stature and one monument that portrays two females of dwarf proportions is a very small number of females. It is, however, more than most scholars have recognized.

To this list of four representations of females, Follensbee tentatively adds three of the colossal heads (SL 1, 3, and 10) (Fig. 4.40). She sees the other heads at San Lorenzo as ambiguously gendered. Her arguments about the colossal heads rely on comparison with gender attributes such as the helmet and specific ear ornaments. As she points out, only two complete (with a body) Olmec figures wear the close-fitting helmet, the figure on La Venta Stela 1 and the three-dimensional Cruz de Milagro figure (Fig. 4.41). Follensbee convincingly identifies both of these as female. This headgear, the specific ear ornaments associated with representations of females, and the lack of specific masculine costuming or physical characteristics (such as facial hair) suggest to her that certain colossal heads are more likely female than male (387–412). Also, as she points out, the possibility that some heads represent females does not preclude their being ballplayers or rulers, since women are known to have acted in both roles in later societies (albeit rarely). We could object to her argument on the basis of the chronology of the monuments (the

colossal heads are generally considered Early Formative, while the La Venta stela may be Middle Formative), but the fact is that we are not certain of the chronology. It is likely that La Venta Stela 1 is not a stela anyway, but a horizontal monument



4.38 San Lorenzo Monument 47, a woman holding a snake. Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 487. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

4.39 San Lorenzo Monument 14, a woman in relief on the side of a throne. Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 439. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.





4.40 San Lorenzo Monument 3: a colossal head representing a female? Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 426. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.



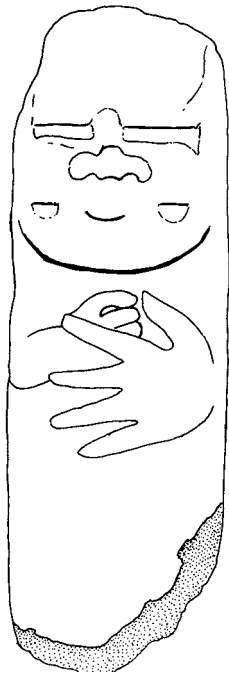
4.41 Cruz de Milagro Monument 1, a kneeling female. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

that could be relatively early. The sculpture in-the-round from Cruz de Milagro could be as early as similar sculptures from San Lorenzo. We could also object that while females at La Venta and Cruz de Milagro may wear helmets, that does not prove that wearers of helmets at San Lorenzo were female. However, either of the two monuments could have been moved from San Lorenzo. Despite the lack of secure evidence (which Follensbee admits), her analysis of the visual forms is careful, and her hypothesis is well worth further consideration.

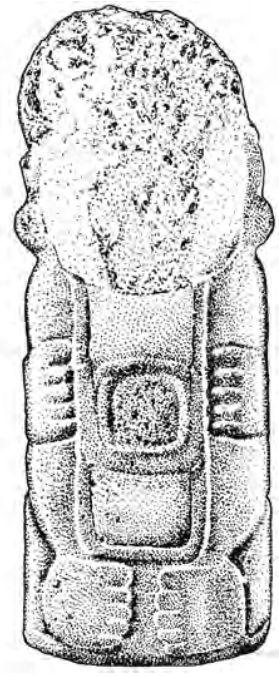
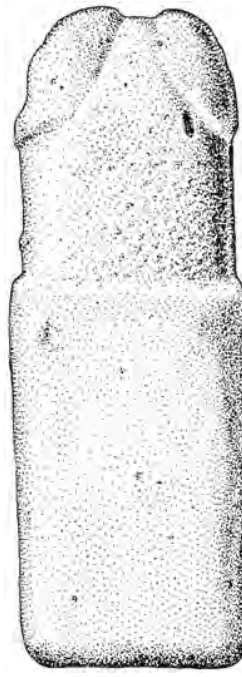
More numerous than women among San Lorenzo's monuments are embryo images. Here I would like to discuss this fascinating group in a possible chronological order.

When Coe and Diehl excavated Monument 41, they found that it was an earlier piece that had been deliberately buried during the San Lorenzo B phase (Fig. 4.42). It is a 2.38 m high and 75 cm wide fragment of a very large basalt column—found on a bentonite platform. At some point it was fractured, dragged to the platform, and buried in fill. The upper third of the surviving piece is incised with the sketchy image of a head. A long, curving line indicates the chin, and a small, upcurved line indicates the mouth. The nostrils and lower portion of the nose are created by two hook-shaped curves. Two rectangular eyes are indicated with relatively straight lines that curve outward at the edges. Less well defined are semicircular depressions on each cheek. On the proper right of the head, a curved line emerges to indicate the shoulder and upper arm.²⁷ This arm, the proper right, is of infantile proportions and terminates with fingers, all of which (except for the index finger) are folded into a fist. Overlapping this small arm is a large, open adult hand, indicated by simple but naturalistically proportioned lines.

There are several reasons why I identify this as an embryo image. First, the sculptor took care to indicate infantile or embryonic proportions: the face is large relative to the infant arm, which, since the shoulder is indicated, is clearly shown as an organic part of a figure. The large, disembodied hand emphasizes the infantile proportions of the figure that it overlaps. Second, this columnar embryo sculpture can be seen in the context of several others, including another from San Lorenzo and one from La Venta. Each of these unites an embryo face with a columnar (phallic) form. Finally, there is the face itself. If Coe is right



4.42 San Lorenzo Monument 41, a penis-shaped column with an embryo head in the place of the glans. An adult hand spreads out to hold or cover a hand proportionate to the embryo. H: 2.38 m. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



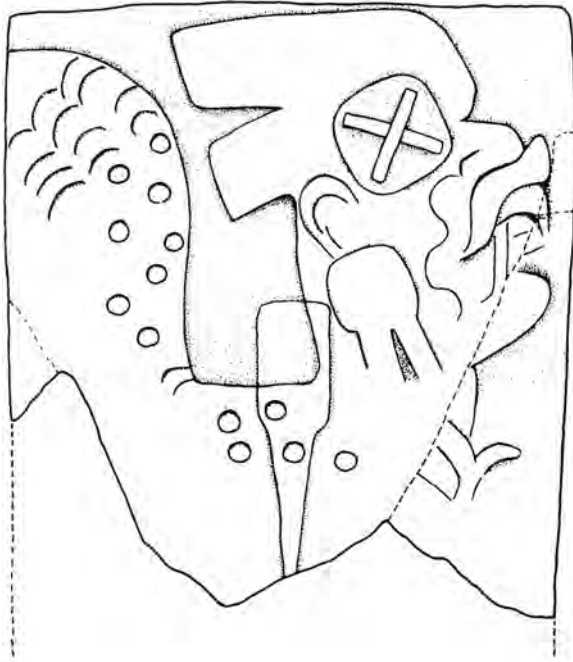
4.43 San Lorenzo Monument 103, a penis-shaped column with an effaced head in the place of the glans. Embryo-like limbs are apparent. H: 1.46 m. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

that this was one of the earliest sculptures at San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980:351), the conventionalized image may not yet have been established. Monument 41 could predate *El Bebé* from La Merced, which exhibits a conventionalized mouth, nose, and cleft head. While someone at Tierras Largas, Oaxaca, clearly initiated the fetus sculpture, given current information, La Merced, San Lorenzo, and Tlapacoya are contenders for having developed the embryo image.

Another column, Monument 103, is a more naturalistic image of an embryo, fetus, or infant (Fig. 4.43). It is 1.46 m high by about 46 cm wide. The relief is considerably deeper. Most of the relief carving appears on the front and sides of the monument, with the exception that the upper portion of the reverse side has two swelling forms, split in the middle, such that the column seems to represent a phallus, as Cyphers (1996:67) once suggested, more than it resembles the headdress that she now sees (2004:175). On this monument, both arms and legs are shown. They wrap around the sides of the monument so that the hands and very small, hand-like feet are visible on the front of the image. It may represent an embryo because of its proportions: the head to torso ratio is 1:1.5. Also, the hands are better

formed than the feet, which is true of the embryo. Unfortunately, the face has been smashed, so it cannot provide visual information. Running down the front is an elongated, biblike pectoral ornament that does, as Cyphers (2004:174) notes, resemble several published jade ornaments in the form of a canoe. Its ears are inconsistent with the form of an embryo, but since they are adorned with earspools, they may be present to support regalia. Also, the plump limbs are more infantile than embryonic, but the feet, as noted, are not as developed as those of an infant would be. The image thus currently defies identification. I suspect that the face would have clarified whether it represents an embryo or infant.

Like Monument 41, Monument 30 was also incised with an embryo image and was also broken and buried during San Lorenzo B times (Fig. 4.44). It is a fragment of a stela, about 1.12 m high, 16 cm thick, and 98 cm wide. Carved in very low relief is a profile image of an embryo very much like the ones on the Tlapacoya pots, except that its almond-shaped, lidless eye is replaced with a large crossed band in a cartouche, one of its several hybrid or agglutinative features. It also has an ear to which is attached an ornament. Below the upper lip is an



4.44 San Lorenzo Monument 30, a fragmentary stela with a low-relief embryo-snake image. H: 1.12 m. Coe 1980: Fig. 461. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.



4.45 San Lorenzo Monument 52, a hollow column open in the back so that the cross section of the stone forms a U shape. It depicts a human wearing an embryo mask and regalia associated with rain and lightning supernatural entities. H: 90 cm. Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 494. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

egg-tooth like that of a bird or snake. A curving element emanates downward. The embryo head is juxtaposed with a sinuous body covered with small circles and curved lines forming a scaly pattern. In the center of the composition, a shape similar to an inverted bottle or a punch is superimposed over the creature. This piece shows a fantastic creature, a human-snake. As discussed in Chapter 3, such a creature, *Kondoy*, appears in the origin myths of the Mixe today. Perhaps these early embryo images were destroyed and buried as part of a social shift away from honoring the embryo to focusing on the many males in San Lorenzo A and B sculptures.

The next embryo sculptures exhibit features associated with a rain or lightning supernatural. Monument 52 is widely interpreted as a rain deity, or Joralemon's (1971) God IV, although Cyphers (2004:112) calls it a figure in transformation. This hollowed-out, U-shaped piece of basalt is 90 cm high and about 46 cm wide (Fig. 4.45). Unlike Monument 41, the face of this figure is clearly a conventionalized representation of an embryo: the lidless, widely spaced eyes, the toothless gums, the puffy upper lip, and the downturned mouth. Here, as on the Ayotla phase embryo image, the puffy upper lip seems to be an ornament secured by vertical bands issuing from the nostrils. Other regalia adorn the figure: the headband or brimmed hat with a cleft crown (a "cloud" or double merlon is incised within each half of the cleft form), the wavy strips descending on the sides of the head, and a crossed-bands pectoral.

In Joralemon's (1971) parsing of "gods," he describes God IV as an anthropomorphic dwarf or infant with a toothless mouth and almond-shaped eyes. The heads of the figures he considers to represent God IV may be rounded, flat, or squared on top or exhibit an elongation in the parietal area. Most, but not all, are cleft. Most of those in his category wear a headband with zero, two, or four vertical elements. In some cases, horizontal lines or bands run between the elements. Two others share the crossed-bands pectoral. What Joralemon does not mention is that of thirteen depictions of this "god" that could be considered full-figured, only one can be identified as securely infantile, the Las Limas baby. The other sculptures are too eroded to determine whether or not they represented infants. Four have the proportions of embryos, including the distinction between better-developed arms and hands and less-developed feet and legs. Two

of the embryo-headed figures have zoomorphic bodies. The rest are ambiguous. Furthermore, those features he considers diagnostic, such as the almond-shaped eyes, toothless gums, and infantile proportions, can be seen on images categorized as other “gods.” The point here is that his “God IV” category is loose. I think it is more productive to recognize the basic embryo features of these images and to consider their message of life force and its metamorphosis than to categorize them as specific deities. We can then look at how the embryo symbol (referring to the vitality that propels human existence) is enhanced or transformed with modifiers or attributes, especially body form, regalia, and dentition.

Returning to San Lorenzo Monument 52, the proportions of this figure are very sophisticated. Viewed from the front, and including the head-dress, the head-to-torso ratio is 1:1.25—that of an embryo. It looks somewhat like a votive axe carved in deep relief, with its little hands and feet drawn up in front of the body. However, the figure is clearly sitting with its knees drawn up. If it were to stand, the proportions would be close to those used in representing adults—about 1:5. Is this an adult masquerading as an embryo? Or a precursor to the mummy bundle, in which an adult is placed in this flexed position, possibly given a mask, and then buried? What better mask to take to the grave than one representing the seed of life, the embryo? Does this embryo/human seed representation function as a rain bearer? As rain inseminates the earth, the embryo is the seed of the womb. In most Mesoamerican societies, ancestors and their mountain burial places are often associated with the mountains from which rain originates. And remember that the figure is hollowed out in the back so that it is U-shaped (womblike) in section (see the Chapter 8 section on the U isotopy), reinforcing the unborn character of the sculpture.

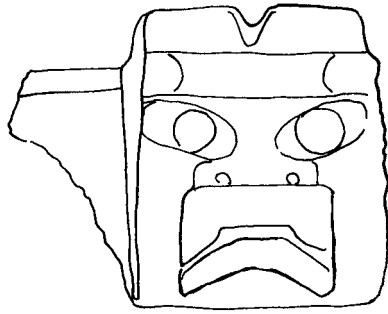
The adult-proportioned body portrayed in San Lorenzo Monument 10 leans forward naturalistically, as does Monument 52, and it wears a similar hat (Fig. 4.46). The downturned mouth and broad nose of the embryo face are portrayed, but the eyes are “L-shaped” (to use Joralemon’s terminology [1971:8]). Fangs in the mouth have prompted scholars to consider the sculpture jaguarian, although this is its only feline feature (Stirling 1955:14; Coe and Diehl 1980:316; Clewlow 1974:44; de la Fuente 1984:96). Several other scholars see this conflation



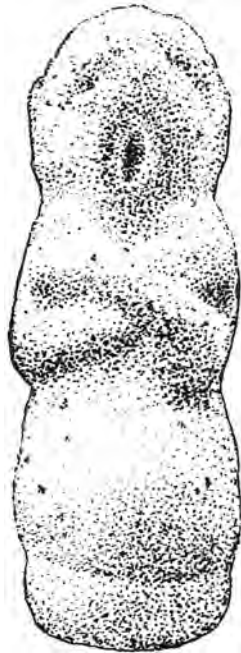
4.46 San Lorenzo Monument 10, a seated human male wearing an embryo mask and cleft headdress, and holding cut shell “knuckledusters.” H: 1.19 m. Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 434. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

of feline dentition with a human figure as indicative of shamanic transformation (Covarrubias 1957; Furst 1968, 1995; Reilly 1989; Cyphers 2004:63). This is one of several juxtapositions of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic features on San Lorenzo monuments.

A final embryo image at San Lorenzo appears on a rare piece of greenstone regalia from the San Lorenzo B phase (Fig. 4.47). It is a disembodied, cleft-headed embryo face flanked by flanges, or “wings,” that, like Monuments 41 and 30, is now broken (Coe and Diehl 1980:242–243). This one is minimally rendered. The head is in relief relative to the wings, but there is no relief on the face; its lines are simply incised. The only addition to the minimal incision of lines required to indicate almond eyes, a broad nose (without indication of nostrils), and toothless mouth (without a gum line) is the headband, which itself is enhanced with only



4.47 San Lorenzo greenstone plaque. H: 2.8 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



4.48 San Lorenzo Monument 132, a fetus figure. H: 12 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



4.49 San Lorenzo Monument 12, a seated adult holding an infant. Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 451. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

two small incised semicircles. Beyond San Lorenzo, many such plaques or pendants were made, probably after 1050 bc, and this one may have been imported.

As mentioned earlier, San Lorenzo also produced small fetus sculptures. While those in Oaxacan house foundations were ceramic, those from San Lorenzo were larger and fashioned of stone. Several have been reported recently. By its posture and proportions, Monument 132 can be identified as a representation of this subject (Fig. 4.48). It is only 12 cm high (Cyphers 2004:212-213; Cyphers disagrees with the fetus identification). In a subcategory we might call “unborn beings involved with cultural items” is Monument 131, another small basalt piece (210–211). Yet another one, Monument 19, the arms and legs of which were broken, has one body but multiple faces (197-199). This one clearly has the body and posture of a fetus, not a dwarf. Interestingly, these two subjects are also found associated with La Venta: like SL 131, La Venta Monument 5 has a ridge of hair or a headdress and holds a container in front of its chest while in a deep squatting or kneeling position. Also from La Venta is an oval rock in the shape of a head that possesses multiple faces appearing in medallions (La Venta Monument 71).

Several San Lorenzo monuments portray human infants held by adults who seem to be male. One is the freestanding figure San Lorenzo 12 (Fig. 4.49). Another infant, held by an adult emerging from a niche, appears on the tabletop throne, Monument 20.

The San Lorenzo sculptors also portrayed dwarfs. Monument 18 is a small, T-shaped basalt throne (Fig. 4.50). On the ends of the vertical axis of the T are two figures. Each body faces out of the monument and away from the other figure. The heads are turned to face the horizontal axis of the throne or, again, as far away as possible from the other figure. Why are these figures dwarfs and not fetuses or embryos? If they depicted embryos, they would have almond-shaped, lidless eyes, or a conventionalized eye. Just enough remains of these damaged figures to see that they had human eyes in sockets. In addition to possessing the eyes of the “born,” the noses are of adult proportions, as are the arms relative to the hands. Their legs are disproportionately short and slightly bowed, features typical of achondroplasia (Bergsma 1973:34-35; McKusick 1994:12-5; Wynne-Davies et al. 1985:181-188).

And what about the males? Are there unequivocal depictions of rulership? Due to the mutilation of regalia and anthropomorphic figures, it is hard to say. There are sculptures of men emerging from caves (Monuments 14 and 20); men engaged with felines (Monument 107); men seated cross-legged holding a bar, knuckledusters, or an infant (Monuments 11, 12, 10); a dismembered standing torso (Monument 25); and as Coe and later Bradley have shown, the decapitated body of a ballplayer (Monument 34) (Coe and Diehl 1980; Bradley 2001:37). None is unequivocally a ruler. Most scholars have assumed that the colossal heads represent rulers, but they could also refer to deceased ancestors, helmeted ballplayers, the rubber ball used in a game, or to some combination of these. In later cultures, some rulers certainly referred to themselves as ballplayers or portrayed themselves engaged in the game.

My hesitation in assuming that the heads represent rulers stems from two concerns. One involves an alternative view of the possible motivations for collective action. Most scholars assume that workers can be organized only through coercion, either physical, by means of social or moral authority, or by promise of payment (an economic coercion). Allen Christenson's (2001) book on the brothers who offered their service—and put their lives in danger—to reconstruct the altarpiece of Santiago Atitlán demonstrates another alternative. People can offer their work for the spiritual benefit of themselves or a community. Such work can be a means of purification or perfection of the individual's spiritual components. If this were the scenario, the themes of transformation and metamorphosis in San Lorenzo's sculpture make sense, as do the thrones formed like sweatbaths, places of purification. Shamanic encounters like that pictured on Monument 107 (below) may be part of a complex of imagery of personal journey, discovery, and quests for knowledge. Individuals wearing embryo masks, such as on San Lorenzo Monument 10, may represent such an emphasis on the potential for transformation of the spiritual components of identity. I am not sure that this is a better interpretive position, and I cannot argue the case thoroughly here.

The other concern has to do with how we recognize rulers in Mesoamerican art. Maya and Aztec rulers have special headgear or regalia, but these colossal heads wear no standardized jewel or crown other than the helmet. The Olmec embryo image



4.50 San Lorenzo Monument 18, a female dwarf. H: 60 cm. Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 447.

is the precursor to the jade “maize jewel” worn by Late Preclassic Maya rulers, but none of the seventeen colossal heads wears this ornament. We can see this image worn as headdress plaques by figures on incised celts, at Juxtlahuaca Cave, and in other Middle Formative contexts. So if the embryo/maize jewel is a Middle Formative development, what indicates rulership in the Early Formative? A staff? This won't help our consideration of the heads as rulers. In casting doubt, I simply want to warn against assuming that forms of power are exclusively political. I think it is important to remain open intellectually to the universe of human motivations until we have incontrovertible evidence that demands us to narrow our interpretations.

Continuing with the subjects of San Lorenzo's sculpture, representations of animals include a relief of a canine (SL 21), a three-dimensional insect (SL 43), a snake held by a caped woman (SL 47), a relief of a shark with embryo features (SL 58),

two ducks (SL 9 and 98), and a raptorial bird (SL 102) (Fig. 4.51). Also, in a chapter on San Lorenzo's felines, Cyphers (1997b) included several images that I see as portraying or derived from embryos (including Monuments 30 and 52). Nevertheless, there are at least half a dozen indisputable felines among San Lorenzo's monuments.

The felines in San Lorenzo's site core are more dynamic than those at the southern entry. For example, Monument 107 is a small basalt carving of two figures with an unusual amount of open space between its two major elements (Fig. 4.52). On the sculpture's proper right is a feline looking out of the sculpture. Its ears are alert, and its mouth,

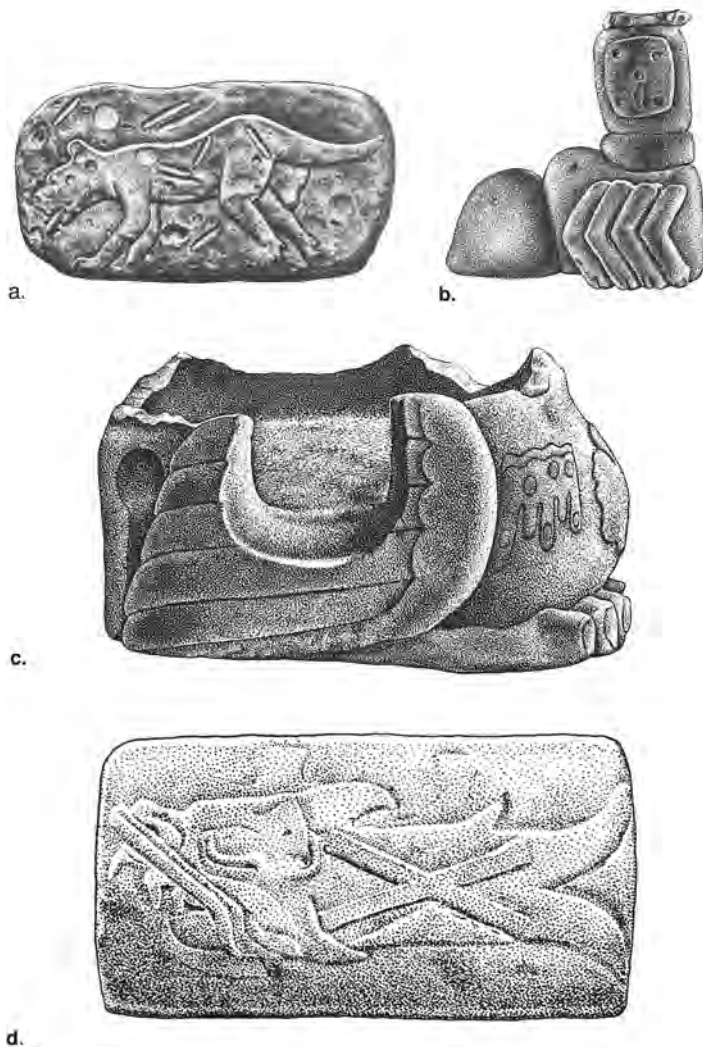
with large fangs and a shark's central tooth, opens menacingly. Large oval disks like sunglasses replace its eyes. Its torso torques, while its (human?) upper limbs grasp the proper left portion of the monument. The left half is a thick slab on which there is a relief of a bird-helmeted male. He is outstretched in an impossible position. He floats upside down, his feet extend to near what seems to be the top of the monument, his legs are spread apart slightly, and his head hangs below the torso. His proper left arm extends to form a shield for his bearded profile face, which looks straight down. This figure most closely resembles several later "flying" figures from Chalcatzingo and La Venta (Angulo 1987; Reilly 1994a:136). In this sculpture, Cyphers (2004:186) sees the feline functioning multivalently as a facilitator for the questing human. To her, it evokes the uneasy relations between light and darkness, the ballgame and its movement of celestial bodies, the warrior and the supernatural source of power, the human in communication with the underworld. Or perhaps the jaguar is a guide to the supernormal powers for the human shaman. Less complete jaguar figures include Monuments 17, 37, 56, 76, 108, 120, and 124.

In addition to innovating a range of subjects and formats of sculpture, the San Lorenzo inhabitants developed large, multigure narrative compositions. Like their predecessors at El Manatí and La Merced, they generated meaning through composition, juxtaposition, and context as well, to which we will now turn.

The Development of Narrativity

A great deal of research has focused on the evolution of phonetic writing in Mesoamerica. The development of the narrative content of written texts has received less attention. Because the monuments of the Gulf Coast clearly referred to stories, beliefs, personages, and events, it is worthwhile to consider how sculptors conveyed narratives using only visual means.

In modern English usage, the word *narrative* refers to a spoken or written account of connected events; art historians have had to demonstrate that the elements of storytelling can appear in pictorial form, sometimes unaccompanied by a written text. Two such studies have been Kurt Weitzmann's (1970) *Illustrations in Roll and Codex: A Study of the Origin and Method of Text Illustration* and Richard Brilliant's (1984) *Visual Narratives: Storytelling*



4.51 San Lorenzo monuments depicting animals: *a*, Monument 21 obverse, a canine or feline; *b*, Monument 43, an insect; *c*, Monument 9, a basin with animal features; *d*, Monument 58, a fish with human features and a crossed bands motif. Drawings *a*, *b*, and *c* from Coe and Diehl 1980, courtesy of the University of Texas Press; *d* drawn by Corey Escoto.

in *Etruscan and Roman Art*. Dorie Reents-Budet (1989) fruitfully applied Weitzmann's categorization of visual narratives as simple, monoscenic, or simultaneous to Maya bas-reliefs and paintings. An example she gave of simple narrative is the Bonampak murals, where multiple scenes occupy a total of twelve walls plus the capstone strips in the upper portions of the three vaults. The painted scenes suggest, through detailed depictions, a sequence of events that led up to the designation of a child as heir to the Bonampak throne.

Reents-Budet explored the idea that in Maya monumental sculpture, a common type of narrative is monoscenic, in which the image of a single moment contains elements that refer to other aspects of the event. A stela showing a ruler may portray him standing on a captive who was taken earlier, wearing bloodletting costuming that also refers to an earlier ritual, and standing below a deceased ancestor emerging from a cloud or blood scroll. Reents-Budet contended that such a monoscenic portrayal shows the culmination of a ritual sequence enacted at a Period Ending of the Maya calendar. If, however, we consider David Stuart's (1996) later argument that a carved stone or stela was intended to embody the presence of a ruler and the time period that the hieroglyphic dates record, then the pictorial referents to past bloodlettings or captures may not record a single ritual sequence reenacted shortly before the Period Ending but the various events that the ruler performed in the temporal period. The symbols of his actions would accrue to a representation of him although he may never have worn, held, or interacted with all those things at a single moment. In this sense the stela's image is less a likeness than an idealized symbol of the actions the ruler took and the supernatural sanctions he received in the form of regalia, all for the purposes of nourishing the supernatural patrons of time, thereby maintaining order and prosperity in his domain. The concept of a Period Ending stela as a monoscenic narrative with a dense network of referents to past and ongoing processes (both royal presence and temporal cycles) remains valid.

Reents-Budet continued the application of Weitzmann's categories to Maya art by discussing simultaneous narrative, using as an example a Late Classic polychrome vessel in which seven figures represent selected components of a larger story. Although the seven figures occupy the same



4.52 San Lorenzo Monument 107, a jaguar and an inverted human. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

pictorial field, they do not interact with each other. The action seems to be propelled through the gazes and gestures of the painted figures. These categories may be used to consider Olmec sculpture as well.

Before doing that, however, it will be useful to think about Flora Clancy's (1999:19–21) study of compositional modes in Early Classic Maya sculpture. The strategies (or modes) used to design the elements of a composition can impart or negate senses of time and/or movement, thus creating or eliminating a sense of narrativity within a single monument. She described these compositional modes as isotropic, stational, or narrative. The isotropic, or symmetrical, distribution of elements within a field implies an absence of movement or action and strongly suggests an omnitemporal condition, such as divinity. Few Early Formative monumental sculptures present perfect symmetry, but the El Manatí celts come close to this ideal. Monument 103 (Fig. 4.43), the embryo-phallus, exhibits symmetry when seen from both the front and the back, as does Monument 102, an avian form. From Cruz de Milagro, the seated female

figure (Fig. 4.41) is as symmetrical as a cross-legged figure can be, as is La Venta Monument 77, the caped shaman. The later contortionist reliefs (Fig. 9.5) manage to retain symmetry while putting the soles of the figure's feet over its head. The symmetry of these sculptures and many votive axes, stone masks, and standing stone figurines must allude to a special condition of their subjects—one that is outside or beyond ordinary temporality.

We must accept that for people who can grind jade into highly symmetrical shapes, asymmetry is deliberate. The colossal heads, while nearly symmetrical, exhibit some irregularity of facial masses or an asymmetrical distribution of knots, tassels, or other elements of regalia. These can be considered “stational” in Clancy’s classification: this mode of composition is almost symmetrical except for some deliberate breaks in symmetry that supply the movement, action, or specific identification necessary for narrative. Most Olmec monuments, like the thrones, are fundamentally symmetrically balanced, but a gesture or pose breaks into the realm of narrative time and space. On the otherwise symmetrical columnar embryo sculpture, Monument 41 (Fig. 4.42), the large and small hands create a sense of action. The figure on San Lorenzo Monument 14 (Fig. 4.39), seated in a cave-niche throne, extends one arm away from the lap while the other stretches in front of the legs. Viewers sense that the figure is moving out of, or directing activities between, the cave—a temporally and spatially “other” place—and this time and space.

Reinforcing the development of narrative through asymmetrical gesture, most Olmec thrones have a compositional field that Clancy describes as “wraparound.” This creates a tension because the viewer perceives the high-relief figure in its cave niche on the front as performing one kind of action in a specific space, but the profile images on the sides are in low relief and seem to be in another space. Thus the wraparound compositions present multiple actions and places to the viewer, whose brain generates a sense of narrative development as s/he physically moves around the monument. The Maya also made wraparound compositions, as Clancy (1980:54) and Reents-Budet (1989:192) have observed. The front of Tikal Stela 31 shows the ruler in a monoscenic narrative, or within a dense field of symbolic regalia that provide referents to beings, rituals, and supernatural covenants that convey the past into the present and probably the future. On

the sides, two images of the same ancestor convey a temporally distinct individual into present apprehension. That ancestor carries emblems of regalia from the spatially distant city of Teotihuacan. This implies a narrative that connects the various times, beings, and places even while it telescopes space, place, time and personhood into the monoscenic present. The hieroglyphic text that embellishes the stela treats multiple persons and events in a linear, fixed sequence, contrasting with the less temporally specific monoscenic image.

Olmec thrones carried dense networks of symbolic referents to past and ongoing processes. The fronts can be considered monoscenic narratives that are enhanced by the spatially and temporally disjunctive scenes on the sides (Fig. 6.13). This type of composition edges into Clancy’s “narrative” mode, which she describes as a composition that emphasizes action, either featuring a single figure in a dynamic pose that conveys movement or combining two or more figures with the suggestion of interaction. Such compositions are evident in Olmec sculptures-in-the-round as well as relief panels. San Lorenzo Monument 107 (Fig. 4.52), in which a diving male figure is touched by a jaguar who glances away, was certainly intended to represent a story or belief. Stelae such as San Lorenzo Monument 56 (Cyphers 2004:120) and La Venta Stelae 2, 3, and 5 (Figs. 8.39, 8.40, 5.13) combine profile representations, striding figures, and interactions with dense symbolic fields.

Weitzmann’s (1970) categories of narrative (applied by Reents-Budet [1989] to Maya reliefs and paintings) address two-dimensional imagery in clearly defined fields. Clancy (1980, 1999) considered the compositions of stone blocks with multiple relief-carved surfaces. To this discussion of how visual narrative works, I want to bring a consideration of the deliberate arrangement of Olmec sculptures in space. This brings us back to Weitzmann’s (1970) terms: “simple narrative,” the portrayal of related events in a sequence that suggests a progression through time, and “simultaneous narrative,” wherein figures represent selected components of a larger story. A question raised here regards the frame of the narrative scene. What we seem to see at San Lorenzo and La Venta is that large areas of the site—or, in the case of La Venta, the entire site—may form a narrative field. Sculptures as well as two-dimensional imagery can be components of larger narratives.



4.53 Loma del Zapote Monuments 7, 8, and 9, San Lorenzo. Photos by author.

Groups of monuments seem to have been arranged to create imbrications of political and ideological significance. Cyphers suggested this possibility upon discovering the four monuments of El Azuzul (Cyphers Guillén 1994). She later elaborated on this idea by proposing that the monuments of San Lorenzo were moved about to form “scenic displays” with narrative significance (Cyphers 1999). Let us look at how juxtaposition (or assemblage) generates meaning.

Creating an impressive entrance to the southern plateau was the area known both as El Azuzul and Loma del Zapote. This was adjacent to the causeway mentioned above. On a terrace were four sculptures forming a display, which would have been visible from the foot of the slope (Fig. 4.53).

From that location, the ridge on which these four sculptures rested seems to be about halfway up. On the west were two youthful male figures, kneeling (the proper right leg bends back, the proper left foot is in front) on a clay floor, facing east. These nearly identical sculptures are in pristine condition with the exception that the front of their headdresses have been damaged where insignia might have been. They wear headbands made of three parallel strips of plied fiber to which is attached a spherical object. A flat headdress made of cloth passes under the chin, ripples down the sides of the heads, and flows down the back, creating a thick swath that rests on the ground.

Attached to the flat headdress are the pleated ear coverings sometimes associated with the embryo image. Their high belts, or torso wraps, are male garments. The young men lean forward, straightening their arms so that their hands reach the ground. With one palm facing up and the other down, the youths grasp a long, thick bar. The faces of the men are intriguing. Their noses are prominent with a straight, narrow shape. The heavy-lidded eyes are narrow slits within which irises and pupils are indicated. They are set in subtly modeled sockets. The lips are full and slightly open, yet relaxed. The somewhat heavy cheeks are the only similarity to the broader-nosed visages of the colossal heads. Their elegant lines and simple forms, coupled with the beautifully proportioned faces, make a sophisticated artistic statement, one that is readily perceptible today due to their excellent condition.

Confronting them were two seated felines on the east side, facing west. Compared to the young men, the jaguars are—today, at least—humorous.²⁸ The two felines are different sizes but fairly similar in shape. They sit so that their front and rear legs are nearly on the same plane, but on all those toes, there are no claws. All the forms are simplified, and they wrap closely to the torso, as if made of rubber. The cats display their upper fangs and central front teeth but without any tension that would convincingly indicate a threatening movement. Their eyes are nearly circular, and the ears thrust up gently,

more like flat arcs than ears that are acutely attuned and ready to flick around at any susurrations. The tail wraps up the back and seems to be held still. The felines look as if they are under someone's strict control, and the only beings nearby are the two young males who gaze at them. Because the two pairs of sculptures are "twins," scholars have suggested that they are antecedents for "hero twins" like those of the Maya. In several publications, Cyphers has called such a group of physically close and apparently related monuments "tableaux" and "scenic displays" (Cyphers Guillén 1992, 1994; Cyphers 1997a, 1999).

She identified more complicated tableaux, or "scenic displays," among San Lorenzo's monuments. Each display contained a colossal head wearing a helmet (probably the image of a ruler-ballplayer), a monument in the form of a feline, a large rectangular throne containing a human adult emerging from a cavelike niche, and a water conduit and trough. Cyphers (1999) contends that each scenic display documented—in terms of the power necessary for the acquisition, conception, and manufacture of such sculptures—the origins and deeds of an individual ruler. Distant places were evoked by the cave-niches in the thrones, for there are no caves close to San Lorenzo. Trade had brought a variety of materials from distant locations to San Lorenzo, and along with the materials must have come ideas. Among these must have been the situation of creative power in caves, and the view of caves as womblike places of emergence, for it is at San Lorenzo that this subject is first found represented in a freestanding stone sculpture.

Continuing with the ways in which the inhabitants of San Lorenzo deployed contextual placement to create layers of significance, David Grove (1999) proposes that the colossal heads were situated in two north-south lines. He bases this argument on the five heads that were found in "good archaeological contexts" (177). The other heads probably moved as the surface of the plateau eroded. He notes that none of the heads was closer than 100 m to another, and suggests that this spacing indicates a processional arrangement. He finds a similar processional spacing in the southern half of La Venta, an observation that I will build upon in Chapters 7 and 8.

While Grove (1999) contends that monuments were placed along much of the plateau, making the whole area a "Major Monument Zone," he claims

that more monuments were in the southern half of the plateau. He also finds a division between the very large monuments that occur east of the line created by the two tabletop altars, and the smaller ones, which were found west of the line (which has been suggested to be a recycling zone for basalt sculptures). Grove looked at La Venta and Chalcatzingo and found a pattern similar enough to suggest the existence of a template for architectural-sculptural organization that governed the three sites. One problem with this model is that it does not take into account the northernmost or southernmost monuments at La Venta. Doing so moves the center point of the site just south of La Venta's Great Mound, which means that a number of monuments that Grove counted as being in the south are really in the northern "sector." Even without "moving the center," there are twenty-one monuments north of Mound C and twenty-eight in the south, not counting the three colossal fetuses (which Grove discounted as well) and the monuments on the Stirling Acropolis (which Grove probably counted but which may, as Reilly has suggested, be in a recycling zone). And Grove does not account for the dozen or so seated anthropomorphic figures from La Venta, which I suspect were arrayed on the long mounds in the northern sector. For these reasons, I find this part of his argument unconvincing. In terms of studies of the narrative content of groups of sculptures, Cyphers (1999) proposes that scenic displays of monuments at San Lorenzo documented the political power of rulers and their deeds. The monuments contain images of personages, actions, and regalia, and taken together may form a monoscenic narrative distributed in real space. Grove found that colossal heads at San Lorenzo formed two north-south axes, and he proposed that "performative processions" unfolded along these axes, implying that some ritual or story was enacted. We will leave the question of narrative for now, but both of these ideas will be taken up in Chapter 7's discussion of the distribution of specific monuments across the entire site of La Venta.

Reconsidering Assumptions About the Subjects and Functions of Olmec Sculpture

Although they have differing ideas about the environmental and social mechanisms that lead to political hierarchies, scholars generally see the monuments of San Lorenzo as evidence of political

control over resources and labor. For example, as Christopher Pool writes,

The contexts and content of Early Formative monuments spectacularly demonstrate that Olmec leaders employed an impressive array of ideological concepts and practices to legitimize their rule. Cosmological and mythical referents were juxtaposed with personalized images to situate Olmec rulers at the nexus of supernatural and earthly power. Colossal portraits conveyed the individual authority of living rulers and served as enduring reminders of their genealogical ties to powerful ancestors. The power of the individuals represented in these and other images was further acknowledged in practice by mutilating the monuments, whether that mutilation was effected to neutralize the power they possessed or to express rebellion against the ruler. Seated on massive thrones above their image in the cave-niche below, Olmec rulers expressed their roles as intermediaries between the levels of the cosmos. (Pool 2007:143)

I concur, yet this description omits some important information that may affect our ideas about the purpose of the site and its monuments. The earliest monuments concerned the concepts of insemination, gestation, and metamorphosis. Inseminating the earth with crafted valuables is not an explicitly political act, but one concerned with the successful regeneration of life as a vital entity. It is important that gestational processes seem to be an aspect of political symbolism. The earliest large human figures were wrapped in uterine-like bundles and placed with seeds into a moist environment. The first large stone sculptures may represent insemination by means of injecting the human seed (embryo) into the earth. As we will see in the subsequent chapters, even the colossal heads, with their husklike helmets, may be part of a seed-bone-rubber ball symbolic insemination complex. There were a few women among San Lorenzo's monuments, as well as quite a few images of gestational beings and infants. Were its monuments exclusively an expression of political power? Or might other motivations have been operating in tandem with the political nature of human society? Instead of being portrayed on monuments, did the political leaders move among the monuments on the plateau as their symbolic domain, one that included gestating beings, sweatbaths of purification as possible thrones, seated humans exhibiting various kinds of powers or skills, gigantic decapi-

tated heads, and animals representing places, powers, and cosmic strata?

It is also interesting that at another major site across the continent in Guerrero there is only one image that can be tentatively identified as a ruler. Rather than a stage in which the scenery documents political authority, at Teopantecuanitlan, monumental sculpture seems to create a sacred precinct where embryo-gestational imagery and the 260-day cycle articulated with four-directional space and solar time.

1200–800 BC: Guerrero, Teopantecuanitlan

The long Balsas River connected the western highlands of Central Mexico with the Pacific Coast, allowing trade and travel between these regions. Much of the Balsas runs through the rugged terrain of the state of Guerrero, which contains a wealth of resources such as cotton, cacao, lapidary stone, and marine resources. One recently discovered site along the Amacuzac, a tributary of the Balsas River, has shattered any notion that Guerrero was an unimportant backwater. In 1983 an archaeologist rescued Teopantecuanitlan from looters (whose ostentatious satellite dish had piqued local curiosity). It has what may be the earliest corbel vault, earliest sunken ceremonial patio, earliest known actual sweatbath, and the most sophisticated masonry techniques of its era.

The 400 acre site is nestled within the flanks of two hills and is adjacent to the Amacuzac River, making it an effective *altepetl* (a sacred water-mountain, or city) (Fig. 4.54). The earliest evidence of occupation dates to about 1400 bc. The principal archaeologist, Guadalupe Martínez Donjuán, says that there is evidence that new ideas arrived around 1200 bc. Between then and 1000 bc, people constructed a sunken patio about 19 by 14.5 m and about 2 m below the ground level. Although archaeologists dispute the radiocarbon dates, this may be the earliest known sunken patio in Mesoamerica. It was oriented roughly east-west. Bordered by earthen walls that were punctuated by stairways leading down into the patio from a walkway that ringed the patio, the whole was covered with a cap of yellow clay.

Teopantecuanitlan developed two sophisticated hydraulic systems around 1200 bc, one for ritual use and one for irrigation. Another technical innovation was found on the summit of the mountain:



4.54 Photo of Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero, in 1989. Courtesy of E. Logan Wagner.

a tomb covered with a rudimentary corbel vault. Long thought to have developed in the Maya area, this example, along with a more sophisticated one in the region, suggests that in the Americas, the corbel vault may also be a development of the Guerrero peoples (Martínez Donjuán 1986, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2001).

Between 1000 and 800 bc, the sunken patio was rebuilt using blocks of travertine for the boundary walls. Set into these walls were four similar relief sculptures, also made of travertine. In shape they resemble an inverted T (Fig. 4.55). Their locations on the eastern and western walls of the sunken patio are such that they form somewhat accurate markers of the solstitial sunrises and sunsets. The vertical axis of the sculpture represents a head with almond-shaped, lidless eyes, a flat nose, and a downturned, toothless mouth with exposed gums (the mouth is filled with red pigment on Monument 2). On the cheeks is “double merlon” incising. The figure wears a four-seed/celt headband with a circular element in the center. The circular medallion is infixed with crossed bands, and three elements emerge from it. Each head has a projection at the top, now somewhat damaged. Below the head is a high belt of horizontal elements flanking a large rectangular pectoral infixed with

a crossed band. This central portion of the figure seems to rest on or emerge from a large, upturned U. Flanking the belt are the figure’s hands, which grip vertical bundles composed of wrapped sticks from which feathers or flames emerge. Karl Taube (1995) has convincingly identified these sticks as maize fetishes. From this central head and torso the shoulders slope down, forming the base of the inverted T. The carving wraps around the sides of the monuments. On the sides, the headband continues, infixed with a crossed band, and the top of the head is curved back. While not exactly cleft, as Taube (1996:75) suggests, there are some curving elements that sweep toward the back, suggesting a cleft head (or axolotl stalk).

Several interpretations of the monuments exist. Martínez Donjuán (1986, 1994) interprets them as agricultural deities and ballplayers, related to the entry and departure from the underworld of the ballplayers/celestial bodies. Reilly (1994b:226) observes that the projection of the heads from the surrounding wall creates a double merlon at the juncture between sky, earth, and underworld. Taube (1996:45, 47, 74–76) argues that they are maize gods wearing a four-celt headband. They have attributes of other deities of the Joralemon taxonomy: the crossed-bands pectoral of God II

(mature corn) and the cleft extended parietal part of the head of God VI (young, growing maize). Pool (2007:230) asserts that they are the face of the earth monster.

I have a slightly different view of them. The projecting heads of the monuments indeed create a double merlon, as Reilly pointed out, and a profile of a ballcourt, as Martínez noted, thereby serving as interfaces between cosmic levels. The images, however, are conventionalized faces of the human embryo wearing the maize seed headband, the crossed bands, a male belt, and a diadem infixed with a crossed band, and holding Taube's maize fetishes. According to this interpretation, they are symbols of a metamorphosing human-maize seed, of the spirit or essence of life and growth, and of the 260-day gestational cycle. It is interesting that the "staffs," or cartouches, incised around the cavities on the back of two monuments seem to be a more elaborate version of a stemmed U shape containing a quincunx and sprouting maize on a celt found at La Venta. The monuments' positions certainly refer to the solstitial rise and set points of the sun, mapping the solar cycle (Martínez Donjuán 1994). From its four sides they seem also to protect the sunken plaza and the small ballcourt within it. The embryo images label the plaza as a place where the dynamic processes of regeneration occurred, on both the levels of human gestation and of seasonal renewal. Perhaps, as in the Mixe "box story" told in the previous chapter, the four embryo-faced monuments were embodiments of seed spirits that guarded the sacred sunken space.

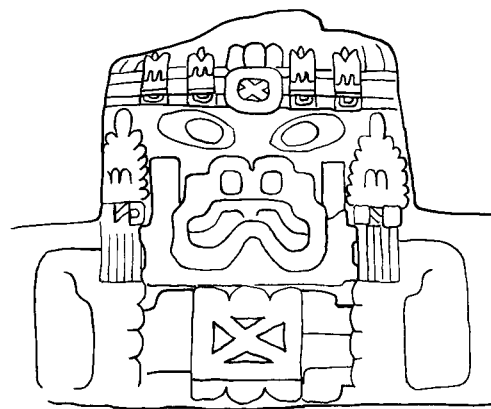
North of the sunken patio are an I-shaped ballcourt and an adobe structure that functioned as one of Mesoamerica's first sweatbaths. A small, corbel-vaulted burial chamber forms the pinnacle of a hill behind the site (Martínez Donjuán 1995b). It is fascinating that these structures occur together here as part of a complex. Both ballcourt and sweatbath symbolize birth, rebirth, and creation in later Mesoamerican thought.

Teopantecuanitlan was heavily looted, so numerous small sculptures may have been removed. The only other stone sculptures known from the ceremonial precinct are north of the sunken court, just below a low platform. Two of these are columns or pillars, one decidedly phallic in shape. A small disembodied head and a discoid altar with froglike features are the other two. As we will see in the subsequent chapters, columns and disembodied heads

may be related to themes of insemination. And of course, frogs are associated with lakes and with metamorphosis from the tadpole. At Teopantecuanitlan, then, we find considerable imagery relating to the gestation-metamorphosis-regeneration complex, and one object that probably refers to rulership.

1100–850 BC: Chiapas

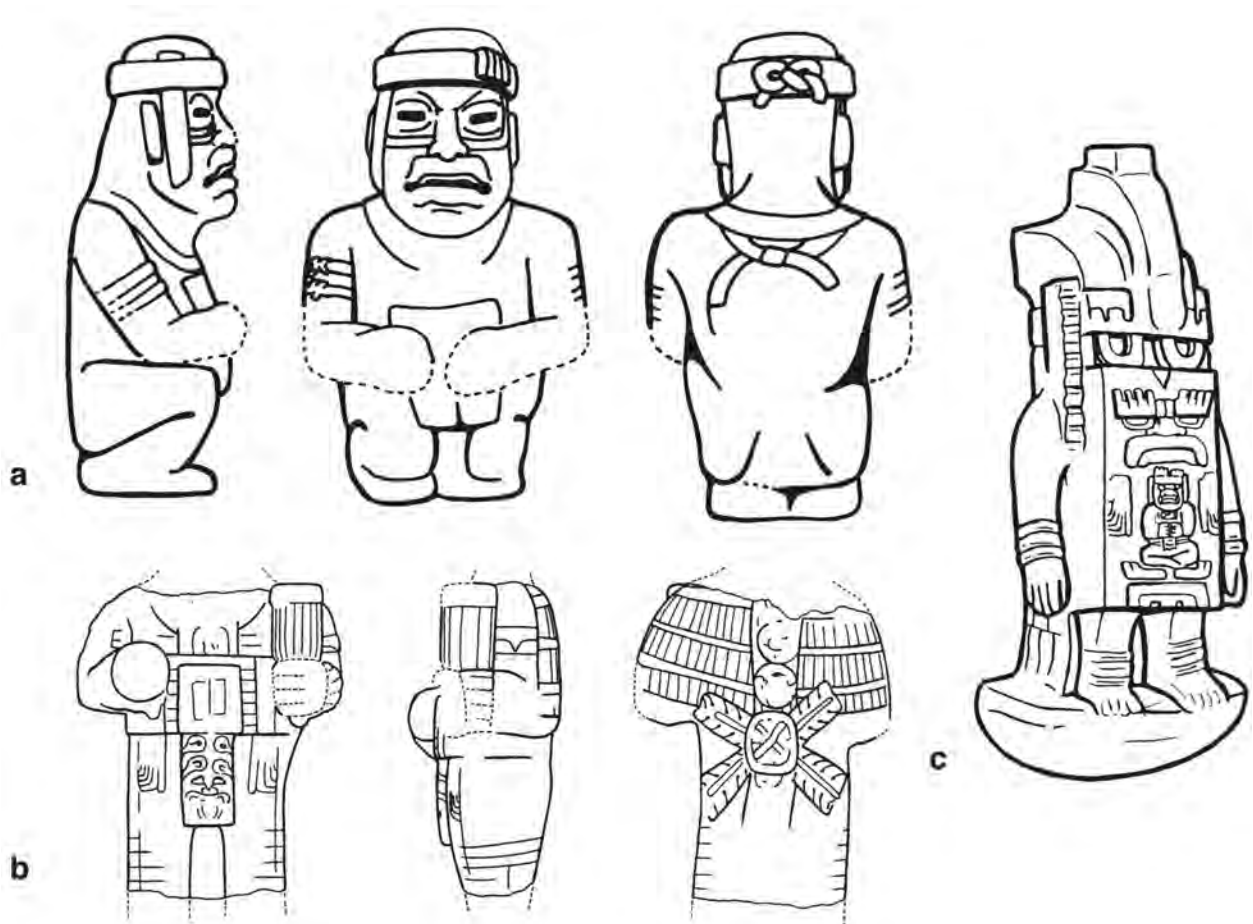
In the Middle Formative, populations in Chiapas interacted more intensively with other Isthmian groups. Visual culture shared many characteristics throughout the region (Parsons 1986). There are several sculptures in the round that combine embryo characteristics such as the mouth and headband with adult stature, although none were found in context by archaeologists. The andesite sculpture from Buena Vista has a face much like that of the conventionalized embryo except for its adult eyes in deep sockets (Fig. 4.56a). Its shoulders are broad like those of an adult, the arms and legs are also adult-scaled, but the figure sits in a deep crouch so that, like San Lorenzo Monument 52, it initially appears to have the proportions of the unborn. Bands around the arms, head, and neck are visibly knotted. The fragmentary standing figure from Alvaro Obregón is more elaborately dressed, with a tiered cape, thick banded belt, and a loin-cloth decorated with frontal bird heads and flanked by a pair of crocodile paws hanging from the belt (Fig. 4.56b). The figure holds a ritual object in its proper left hand, one that resembles the bottom of the maize scepters from Teopantecuanitlan. John Clark and Mary Pye (2000) date these two figures to between 1100 and 900 bc.



4.55 Monument from Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero, 1000–800 bc. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

Dating a little later, 950 to 850 bc, is a frontal figure standing on a stone base from Ojo de Agua, Chiapas (Clark and Pye 2000). This strange figure looks like a masked person with a tall headdress wearing a “sandwich board” on which is a relief that nests several embryo images and crocodile or axolotl features (Fig. 4.56c). The headdress consists of three backward-curving units, the central one being higher and having another blocklike element on top. It arises from what may be a headband or brim. On the brim are two double merlons. Below the brim are two high-relief, U-shaped elements that look like halved “goggle eyes.” From the side of the brim descend zigzag earflaps like those on San Lorenzo Monument 52. The “sandwich board” begins just below the goggle eyes and serves as a garmentlike unit that extends to the figure’s knees. The design is composed of three vertical registers. The top section is a face with axolotl brows over

U-shaped eyes, a flat nose, and a simple downturned upper lip. Apparently corresponding to this face are paw-wing elements on the right and left side of the middle portion of the design. In the center is a frontal embryo figure with a cleft head or hat, a headband, almond eyes, a crossed-bands pectoral, and its hands together at waist level. Unusually, however, the figure is seated cross-legged. It seems to rest on a truncated face composed of upcurving cleft brows and a downward-turning U-shaped mouth. The central embryo figure looks as if it might be a rendition of San Lorenzo Monument 19, the seated, masked embryo figure, only without the “knuckle dusters.” Returning to the whole figure, it is completely symmetrical: the arms hang loosely by the sides, and both feet are planted firmly into the sculpture’s base. There is no sense of animation at all. This large-scale anthropomorphic sculpture shows little of the human form, seeming



4.56 Monuments showing ballplayers or including an embryo image: *a*, squatting figure with conventionalized embryo face or mask (from Buena Vista, 1100–900 BC, private collection); *b*, from Alvaro Obregón, about 1100–900 BC, a fragment of

a standing male figure, possibly a ballplayer; *c*, Ojo de Agua sculpture, ca. 950–850 BC (Museo Regional, Tapachula). Drawings by Ayax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

to have served primarily as a vehicle for symbolic elements. Whether it was intended to portray a ruler, a deity, or a series of related concepts is hard to say. In any event, images of the metamorphosing embryo, an axolotl or crocodile, and zigzag earflaps generally thought to be associated with rain merge with the anthropomorphic form.

Circa 950 BC: Incised Objects and New Images of Rulers

By 1050 bc, the cave-womb altars of San Lorenzo had been carved, and the complex compositions involving embryo, vegetation, crocodile or axolotl, and earth images had appeared on Manantial phase pottery in the Basin of Mexico. Around 950 bc, the celts incised with complex compositions variously involving embryos, maize seeds and sprouts, quincunxes, human figures, and regalia began to be produced as well. The iconography of rulership, which links powerful individuals with concepts of the human-maize seed and vital energies involved in human and maize growth, had been formulated.

Around 850 bc, low-relief images of striding males on vertical stone monuments proliferated (Clark and Pye 2000:227-230). Males in profile, their feet spread, appeared on a stela from San Miguel Amuco, Guerrero (Fig. 4.57); on reliefs from Chalcatzingo, Morelos (especially Monument 2); on a boulder at Pijijiapan, Chiapas; another one at Xoc, Chiapas; and on a boulder from Chalchuapa, El Salvador. Each of these striding figures is heavily ornamented. It is because of their pose and regalia that scholars assume they are rulers in some sense of the word. We relate these images to early Maya striding figures from Uaxactun Group H, the San Bartolo murals (although the one identified as a ruler is seated on a platform), and the La Mojarra stela, which clearly depicts a ruler (Justeson and Kaufman 1993; Saturno et al. 2005; Saturno and Taube 2004). These latter monuments date to around 100 bc to AD 50. In her study of Classic Maya sculpture, published well before the discovery of San Bartolo, Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1950:18-22) found this pose from 8.15.0.0.0. to 8.17.10.0.0, or about AD 337-386. There were a few low-relief profile images of humans at San Lorenzo, and as we shall see in the subsequent chapters, three stelae from La Venta depict humans in a similar pose. In other words, the image of a striding human in profile and wearing regalia dominates anthropomor-

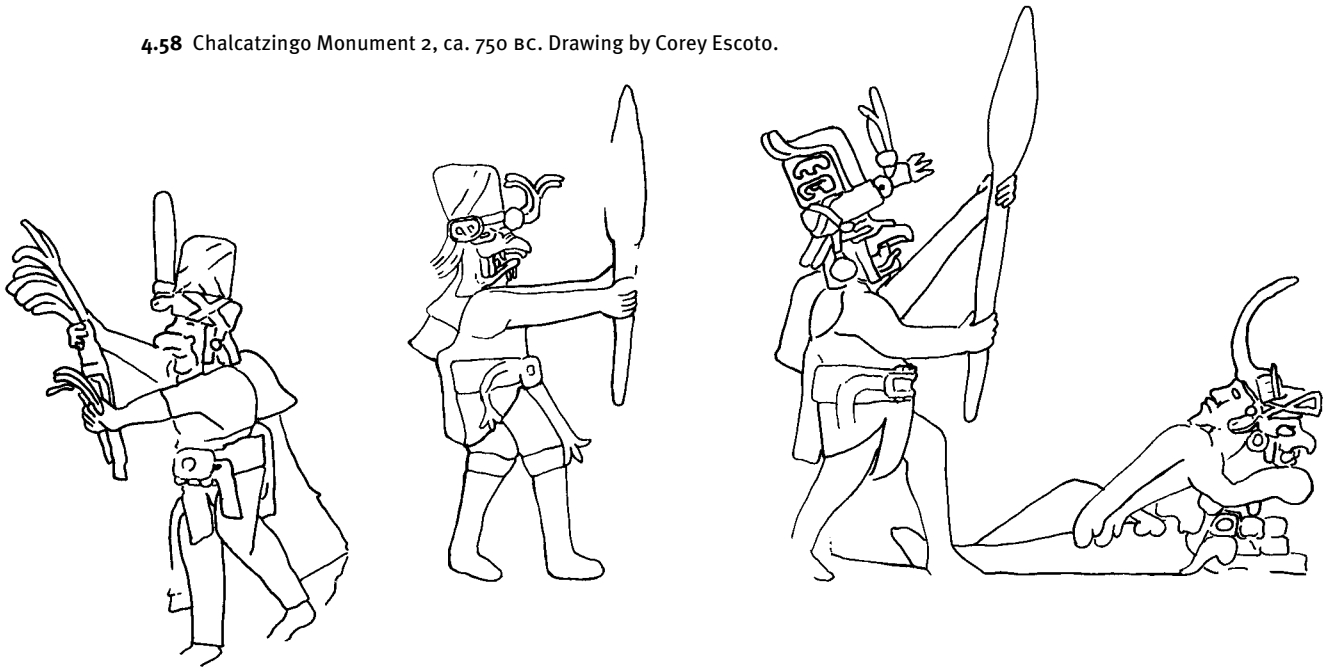


4.57 Stela from San Miguel Amuco, Guerrero, ca. 950 BC. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

phic representation on relief and incised sculptures from about 850 bc to AD 380.

The earlier anthropomorphic figures, however—those from the Initial and Early Formative—may not all represent rulers. The inverted low-relief human on San Lorenzo Monument 107 is more widely considered to be a shaman, and if he is also a ruler, he is not shown in an official moment but a spiritual one. Similarly, there are subsidiary figures in this position that flank a probable ruler on La Venta Stela 5. The point of this is to indicate that not every standing profile figure is necessarily a ruler, and that we may be able to learn more about the variety of ritual practices and social roles from a more nuanced study of these monuments.

For example, of the five Middle Formative profile low-reliefs just mentioned, three show masked



4.59 Blackware vase from Chalcatzingo area incised with embryo in a bundle. Denver Art Museum. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

figures carry staffs. On Chalcatzingo Monument 2 at least one staff is foliated, suggesting that the staffs may relate to agricultural rituals (Fig. 4.58). The other two could be planting sticks as well as clubs. This image is typically read as one of war or conquest, but the reclining figure, whose mask has slipped off and whose phallus is visible, could also be engaged in a ritual of insemination. Such a mask may have been kept in a bundle and stored in a jar, as is suggested by the image on a large blackware vase said to be from Chalcatzingo (Fig. 4.59). It is also possible that both warfare and agriculture may be indicated or in some way related. Since these images probably appeared between 850 and 700 bc, this corresponds to the period in which humans planted maize intensively and incorporated it into the diet as a staple. Whether they were shamans, ritualists, or rulers, these Formative period men would have identified with maize from gestation to death. Their monuments and regalia indicate that they honored, or tried to engage, the vital force of the human-maize seed as the energy that engendered growth, movement, change, and transformation.

figures. The staff of the Xoc figure looks more like a bundle, with clear maize sprouts emerging from the top. He has bird feet. Birds, of course, disperse seeds and are instrumental in causing the spread of plants. The Chalcatzingo Monument 2 figures wear masks that seem distantly related to embryo faces, perhaps with more avian beaks, much like the one at San Miguel de Amuco. All three sets of masked

Fluctuations in Visual Culture During the Initial and Early Formative Periods

This chapter has surveyed how people began to devise representational and abstract symbolic forms and to use them in ritual ways. During the Initial Formative, as societies became more sedentary

and complex, people began to make small ceramic figurines of females (a few of which, in Oaxaca, contained fetuses); ambiguously gendered humans, including masked figures and ballplayers; and babies. The subjects of figurines shifted as societies changed. A significant proportion displayed no specific gender characteristics. Several kinds of functions have been suggested for the various complexes of figurines. These include the portrayal or negotiation of status, the establishment or exploration of beautification practices as an element of emerging sexual awareness, the manipulation of young women by elders, and the honoring of ancestors. No one has paid particular attention to the figurines of fetuses and infants deposited in houses, perhaps because they were less plentiful.

Along with sedentism and the use of ceramic figurines for household or local social and ritual purposes, people enjoyed fermented beverages. Fermentation—or the transformation of the sugars in maize cobs into an obviously bubbling, living, alcoholic beverage—was an important technology with far-reaching consequences. It associated the women who masticated the cobs and made the beverage with both life-producing phenomena and servitude. Not only did it promote social cohesion through its manufacture and consumption, it also prompted the creation of new kinds of pottery. Its control helped some individuals achieve or consolidate elite status.

During the Tierras Largas phase in Oaxaca, inhabitants created several assemblages of ceramic figurines that were deposited within the contexts of houses. They may have been an element in an ancestral ritual, as Marcus (1998) suggested. Thinking of one's own ancestors is a very different kind of focus from creating artifactual offerings that were intended to replicate a process that is at once integral to human life and observable on a vast cosmic scale. This is what occurred at El Manatí.

Compared to the manufacture of small ceramic figurines, the scale and conceptual sophistication of the offerings at El Manatí spring were as remarkable for the Initial Formative as San Lorenzo was for the Early Formative. If archaeologists are correct about the dates for El Manatí's precocious activities, there must be an antecedent tradition of crafting jade axes that has yet to be discovered. The axes are not the only marvel. What intrigues us is the concept that motivated the deposition, over a stone foundation, of the axes, the nine rubber

balls, the seeds, and later the busts, seeds, balls, axes, batons, infant bones, and other items. Were the people who used El Manatí from the local area? What were the trading links that allowed Gulf Coast people to procure the jade? Why deposit such highly crafted objects in womblike bundles with seeds and peat in the water? Did the ritual deposition of hard green celts, coagulated rubber balls, and seeds into a fluid-filled environment intentionally emulate the processes of insemination and gestation? And why did San Lorenzo (so far as we know) so adamantly reject this practice of womblike caching?

The transition to the Early Formative is characterized by the development of a two-dimensional or graphic pictorial system, but by no means was three-dimensionality abandoned. As El Manatí declined, the concept of the human seed buried in the earth seems to have been retained and portrayed more graphically, in relief, at San Lorenzo (on the incised column, Monument 41) and La Merced (El Bebé and Monument 1). By 1200 bc, the embryo image was one of a dozen or so conventionalized symbols used on pottery in the Basin of Mexico. That symbolic complex included images that may have been related to the womb, to the fontanel of newborn infants, and to another remarkable embryonic creature native only to the Basin of Mexico, the axolotl. Given the probable emphasis on gestational and metamorphic states, processes, and beings, it is likely that around 1200 bc the creation of the 260-day count had begun, although it is not clear whether day names existed at that time. At Tlapacoya, San Lorenzo, and elsewhere, hollow ceramic babies seem to have had a special role in many communities.

When the explosion of monumental, public, community-achieved image-making occurred at San Lorenzo in the Early Formative, it retained many of the subjects that had been used for household or depositional ritual, but in new forms. Instead of ceramic babies buried in house foundations, there were infants emerging from niches on stone sweatbath-thrones or held in the laps of adults. Embryo images appeared on monuments, both alone and as masks. The emphasis shifted, however, from portraying women (the dominant subject of ceramic figurines) to men, and to images that used symbolic elements to suggest the vital energy necessary for transformation or metamorphosis. Also, in the new sculptural material of

basalt, entirely new subjects, sculptural formats, and themes abounded at San Lorenzo, from the colossal head to the seated male figure. By the latter half of the Early Formative there must have been new social arrangements that necessitated the portrayal of men amidst regalia. At this point, visual images and forms began to fix elements of storytelling. Narrative was introduced within the scope of single monuments by creating specific groupings that demanded certain interpretations to connect them, and by placing monuments along processional paths.

Between 1500 bc and 950 bc, a two-dimensional graphic symbol system was in play from the Basin of Mexico to Guerrero and Chiapas and along the Gulf Coast. Some of the symbols were relatively consistent, including the embryo image, maize iconography, flame brows, crossed bands, double merlons, and U for the womb, and many others probably had local distribution and less fixed meanings.

Unlike the San Lorenzans, people at sites such as Teopantecuanitlan did not represent many adults in stone. Their embryo-maize monuments incorporated temporal-spatial positioning. As solstitial markers, they may have served as the “spirits” of the human-maize race, or of maize itself (with its human dimension). These spirits, who may have lived in a mountain-cave home, were represented in a sacred enclosure or womblike box as permanent foci or embodied objects. In the walled enclosure they could have protected their community while the people reciprocated with offerings placed into the cavities in the backs of the sculptures.

As archaeologists have long observed, by 1000 bc San Lorenzo had declined, but many other centers were increasing in size and complexity. By 850 bc, maize had gained importance in the diet (Pope et al. 2001; Rust and Leyden 1994). Of course, maize farming was not adopted homogeneously by all communities. Varieties of maize were selected for specific environments, and dependence on maize varied according to the suitability of local soils and growing conditions, and the availability of other resources.

New concepts of rulership must have developed as well, for there were new ways of conveying the position and identity of rulers. Images of men in

low relief wearing regalia were executed on boulders, stelae, and probably a few cave walls. These seem to have replaced the sweatbath-thrones as the principal monuments of rulership. The iconography of political power, when it developed, used embryo images to describe rulers as masters of the forces of regeneration and transformation. These were conflated with maize symbols to broaden the scope of the ruler from the old feminine domain of gestation to the new one of agricultural management.

Taking images of the unborn and women as its central foci has forced me to omit from this chapter some major developments of the Early Formative. Nevertheless, I have tried to provide a sense of the major subjects of visual representation, of strategies for conveying information, and of artifactual ritual activity. Most descriptions of Early Formative Mesoamerican art assume that monumental sculpture primarily portrayed rulers, served as their legitimizing propaganda, emphasized their control of aquatic resources, and depicted their relationships with felines, often as alter egos. By surveying both large- and small-scale objects of symbolic visual culture in a chronological order, a different panorama emerges. Ambiguously gendered figures, women, pregnancy, embryos, fetuses, and babies, when taken together, composed a significant proportion of imagery in both the Initial and Early Formative periods. The earliest Mesoamerican symbolic forms include abundant references to human gestation and the insemination of the earth with crafted objects and anthropomorphic sculptures, as well as symbols for regeneration and transformation.

The rest of the book focuses in greater detail on the surprising landscape of gestational imagery and creation narratives at La Venta. By paying close attention to the buried and public imagery in its spatial and relational contexts, we will find that women and gestating beings were more important there than they were at San Lorenzo. The distribution of artifactual deposits and imagery of women at La Venta might also shed light on some of the feminine “shamanic” practices of the Middle Formative. And, not least, the site may have served as a performance ground for ceremonies of protection as well as for narratives of regenerative creation.

Chapter 5

La Venta's Buried Offerings Women and Other Revelations

La Venta was just one of several places that flourished as San Lorenzo declined,¹ but during its apogee, about 500 bc, its users amassed a concentration of raw material, sculpture, and visual symbols that was unequalled at any other location. It is clear that the people who designed La Venta's ritual landscape saw themselves as inheritors of the great traditions of El Manatí and San Lorenzo, and of the places, then only hazily known, where the ballgame became a metaphor for the mastery of generative forces. They built upon the foundations of earlier cultures by constructing a ritual-political center that contained the first large earthen pyramid in Mesoamerica, huge stone features emulating bodies of water, and an array of smaller mounds organized around a central axis.

I suspect, however, that La Venta's inhabitants did not create this remarkable place by themselves—or even for themselves exclusively. In a subsequent section, I consider theories that trade and political control motivated the transport (or import) of the hundreds of tons of stone necessary to build “the Massive Offerings” and other features. Evidence to support these theories is sparse. Instead, it seems that La Venta's wealth and importance were generated because it was a pilgrimage site.² I propose that people from across Mesoamerica gathered at this place to dispute social norms, to argue for the primacy of their knowledge, and to negotiate, through many constitutive acts, a shared narrative of creation, origins, and identity. They collaborated to create huge earthworks and stone monuments to embody the powers, processes, and statuses upon which there was some agreement. Within this constructed, engendered landscape, images of females, males, and pre-birth humans inscribed La Venta with a fluid equilibrium of gendered forces. The mosaic pavements and associated platforms and plazas may have served as huge

altars for many kinds of performances. If La Venta was a potent location for ritual and healing, can we discern what kinds of rituals might have been performed? Is there evidence for the identity of the ritual practitioners? Can we see the elements of the creation narrative? Was its performance “fixed” and codified? Or could the performers decide which parts of the scenario to engage, how long to sustain the performance, and the purposes for staging their ritual within the sculptural setting? How did the negotiation of a creation and origins narrative play a role in the integration of beliefs and practices throughout Mesoamerica at the time and in subsequent periods? And what role did the existence of a sculptural, processional stage for performance play in the development of pictorial and script-based writing in Mesoamerica?

This is the first of four chapters that attempt to address these questions by examining La Venta from different perspectives. Based on archaeologically retrieved materials, this chapter focuses on the site’s visual culture and how it developed. Because the regional topography affects choices of materials and also, I propose, the significance of the site, the chapter reviews what is known of the sources of materials used at La Venta. After summarizing the history of archaeological investigation, it tackles a primary problem, which is that despite excellent efforts and considerable attention by archaeologists, La Venta’s chronology still “floats” in relation to the rest of Formative Mesoamerica. This chapter provides a (rather middle-of-the-road) proposal for the dating of chronological developments. Then it gets to its principal task: establishing the development of visual culture. As it examines the architecture and the subterranean deposits of sculptural objects in Complex A during the four archaeologically identified phases, the chapter also establishes, to the extent possible, the locations of the monuments. Because some of the stone figurines and monuments portray females—and of course others portray gestating humans—some very interesting individuals emerge from this analysis.

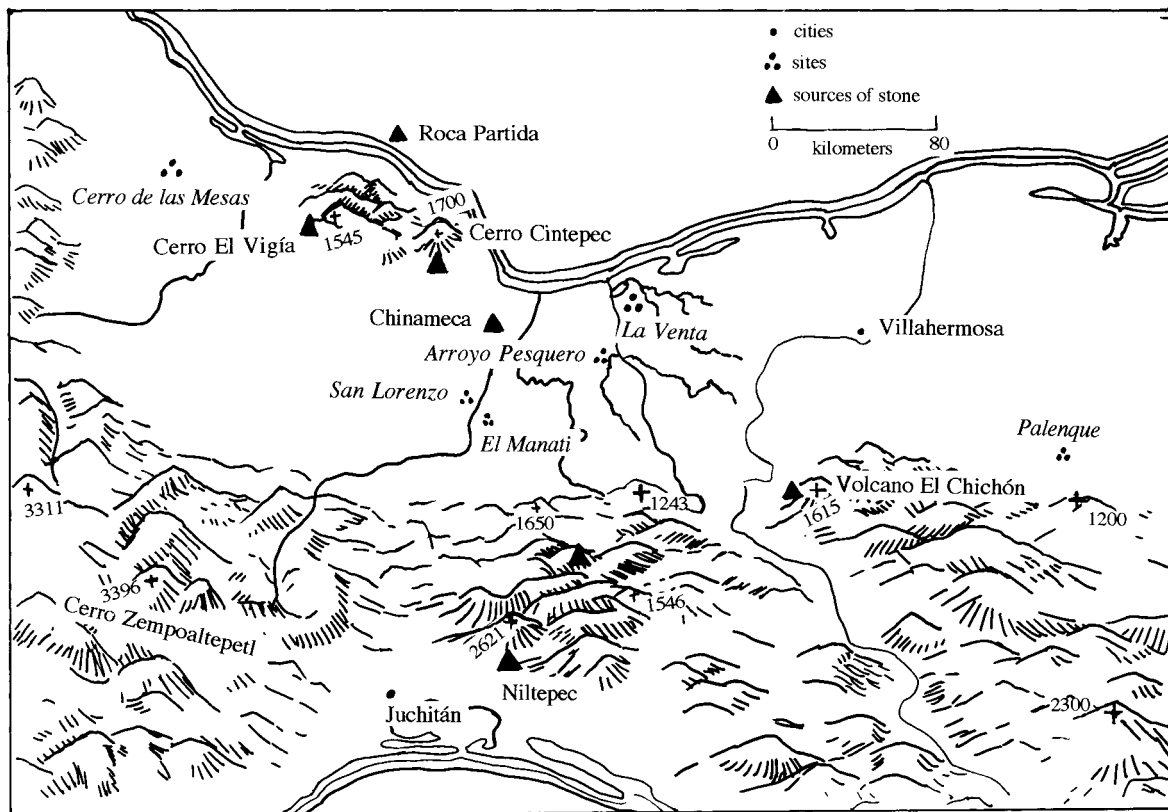
Topography and Sources of Stone

Currently in the Mexican state of Tabasco, the ceremonial center³ called La Venta occupies what was once the eastern margin of Olman (the Gulf

Coast Olmec region) (Fig. 5.1). It is now about 15 km south of the Gulf of Mexico (González Lauck 1996:73). In this low-lying delta of the Mezcalapa River, the site dominated a long, narrow salt dome amid the wetlands (González Lauck 1990; Jiménez Salas 1990). From its position on a periphery of Mesoamerica, La Venta established itself as a centripetal center for materials from distant locations (Fig. 5.2).

The mountains that bordered the southern Olman played an important role in the conception and construction of the site. To the south, the closest major peak, about 1,219 m high, lies at a distance of about 100 km. The active volcano El Chichón, or La Unión, 1,615 m high, lies about 122 km to the southeast of La Venta. Another peak the same height as El Chichón is about the same distance to the southwest, such that the three form a triangle (Defense Mapping Agency 1985). The closest of these mountains is visible today from the top of La Venta’s pyramid whenever rains clear the sky of atmospheric haze and the black smoke from the nearby oil refinery. In fact, the architecture of the site is organized around a central axis which points directly to this central, closest peak (Tate 1999).⁴ Beyond the southern mountains was the highest mountain on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the 2,621 m peak near Niltepec (12). At 200 km away, it is not visible from La Venta. The serpentine used to create the massive offerings and mosaic pavements of La Venta came from the flanks of this distant mountain that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. Closer, and possibly barely visible, is the range of twenty peaks to the southwest, Cerro Zempoaltepec, which forms the current Mixe homeland. Metamorphic rocks such as the schists, andesites, and diorites used for some monumental sculptures came from the mountains to the south (Williams and Heizer 1965), but not Zempoaltepec to the southwest.

To the west of La Venta (about 85 km) rise the Tuxtla Mountains, including the San Martín Pajapan volcano and Cerro Cintepec, which was the origin of the basalt used for monumental sculpture. Due to atmospheric conditions during my visits, I have not been able to see them from La Venta, but others have (Pool 2007:157). The Tuxtla jut into the Gulf of Mexico. Rising dramatically from the azure sea, just off the cream-colored, sandy beach off the northern flank of San Martín, is a shaft of dark columnar basalt (Fig. 5.3). Called Roca Partida, this



5.1 Map showing sources of stone brought to La Venta. Drawing by author.

5.2 View to the south from La Venta Mound C. Photo by author.





5.3 Roca Partida, the source of La Venta's basalt columns. Photo by author.

is probably the location from which La Ventans acquired the many basalt columns that formed its fences and its impressive Tomb 7 (148). In other words, distant mountains, including volcanoes, surround the site of La Venta on the south and west such that the site is in a huge basin.⁵

In their report on the sources of stone used at La Venta, Robert Williams and Robert Heizer (1965) focused on the stone used for the manufacture of monuments. We do not know where the jades, amber, amethyst, malachite, or rock crystal originated, although we can make some educated guesses. The jade indicates trade with the Motagua River source or possibly with the suspected source in Guerrero. Malachite is rare in Mesoamerica, but its use in pottery from Kaminaljuyú (Shepard 1946), a pendant at San José Mogote (Marcus and Flannery 1996:98), and murals in the Yucatán suggest a southern source. A mine near Alta Vista, Zacatecas, has been found as well (Strazicich 1998). The Chiapas highlands have well-known sources of amber (Bryant 1983). Archaeologist Juan Martín Rojas Chávez (1990) has examined the lithics industry of La Venta. After evaluating some earlier studies, he concluded that La Venta imported obsidian from Pico de Orizaba in the Veracruz

highlands, El Chayal in Guatemala, and Sierra de las Navajas in Hidalgo. With the raw material, they made and exported prismatic blades to regions far and near. They also imported raw flint and exported artifacts.

By acquiring and displaying stone from distant places, La Ventans demonstrated their intimate knowledge of the many features of the earth's surface—or their access to others who did. Anthropologist Mary Helms's book *Craft and the Kingly Ideal* (1993) demonstrates the important point that long-distance travel and trade, as well as skilled crafting of materials, were often considered highly developed technical activities in premodern societies. In an earlier work, and inspired by Helms, I imagined how the Olmec might have considered the challenges of obtaining their stone, whether they did so themselves or traded with others:

Negotiating the terrain to locate the deposits of desirable stones and negotiating with the peoples and meta-cosmological beings encountered on the journey and at the sought-for location must have made exciting subjects for many tales of exotic experiences and knowledge. Proof that the travelers had acquired such knowledge existed in the form of the materials they had acquired. Teams of

people returning with loads of stone must have occasioned some sort of festivity. Digging the pits and depositing the serpentines prior to further modification of the Enclosed Court also must have called for a ritual performance, possibly accompanied by narratives regarding the heroic adventures of negotiating the terrain and its dangers, natural and supernatural. These deeds responded to challenges beyond providing props for storytelling, however. The ultimate task was to define the known world, to model the terrestrial plane as well as the domains of above- and below-ground supernormal influences. In this way, ritual practitioners demonstrated their knowledge of these worlds and circumscribed spaces in which ritual practices aimed at supernatural knowledge and political control could be enacted. (Tate 2001b)

As we have seen, the environs of La Venta consisted of a low-lying delta at the edge of the sea, a region with little stone. Although the impetus for its initial importance is difficult to ascertain, we do know that maize was planted in the region very early (Pope et al. 2001). Gradually La Venta's earthen architecture and sculptures of exotic stones created a succinct statement about its builders' concepts of an appropriate political-ritual center. A consideration of each of the four chronological phases of Complex A allows us to see how the architecture and associated caches developed.

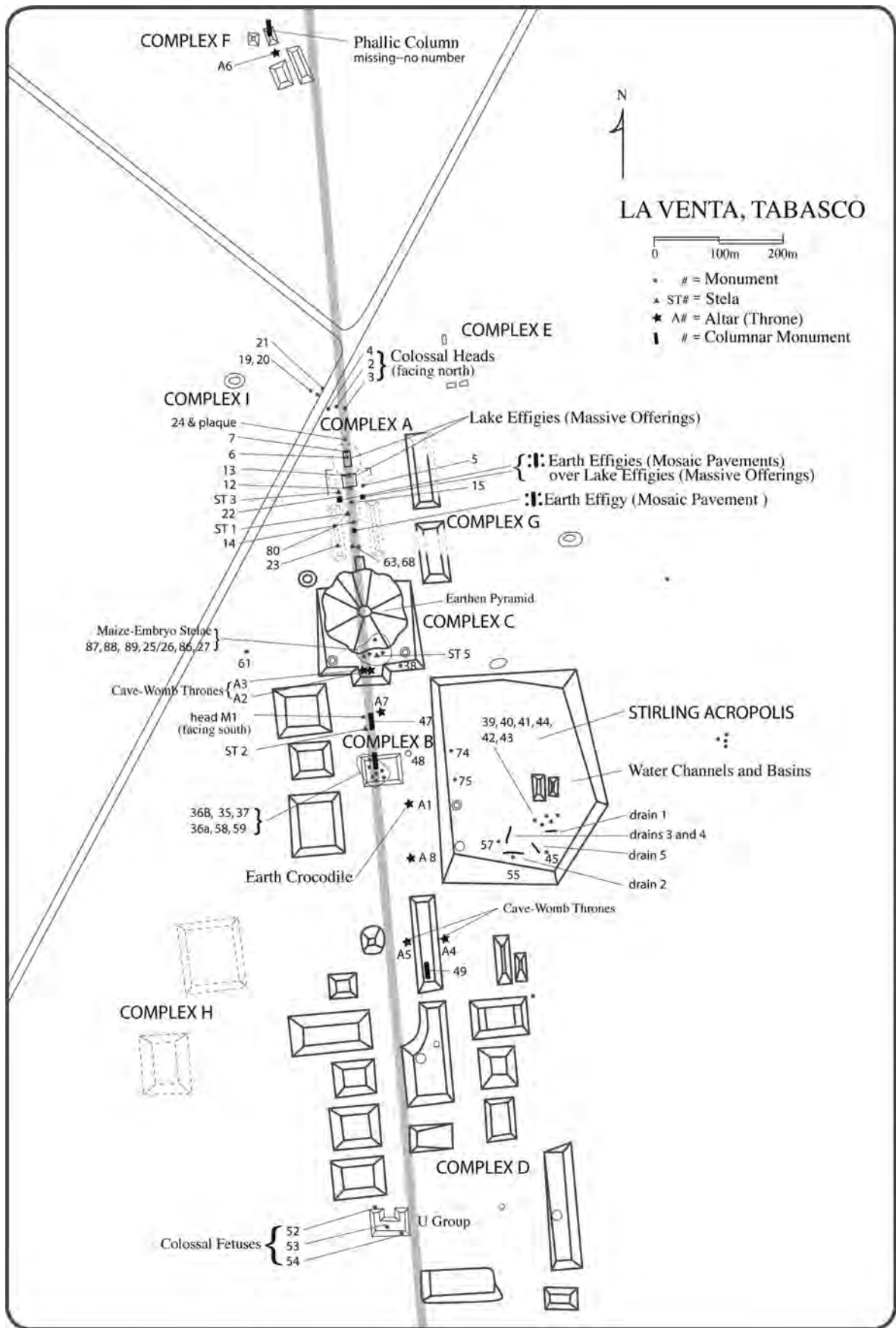
Discovery, Excavation, and Chronology of La Venta

Since it was first documented in 1925 by explorers Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge (1926), La Venta has been the subject of sporadic archaeological investigation.⁶ Intermittently between 1940 and 1968, the "jewels of jade," to use Matthew Stirling's term, as well as numerous monuments and mounds, were recovered from "the swamp." Funded by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society, Stirling worked there in 1940 and 1942 (briefly), and in 1943 with Philip Drucker, Waldo Wedel, and a full-scale crew. That year they found thirty dedicatory caches and three massive offerings. World War II precipitated a hiatus of over a decade, but in 1955 Drucker returned with Robert Heizer and Ephraim Squier, this time supported by the National Geographic Society, the Smithsonian Institution, and the University of California. They noted the existence of a central axis governing the

layout of mounds, and designated them Complex A, B, C, and so on. Individual mounds within those complexes were numbered. The Earthen Pyramid, now over 30.48 m high, was designated Complex C.⁷ A vast plaza south of the Great Mound, containing a central platform and bordered on the west by low platforms, is Complex B. Two successive courtyards extend northward from the Great Mound, along the axis. The mounds bordering these courtyards and the many features contained within the borders are referred to as Complex A (Fig. 5.4).

Most of the excavations focused on Complex A. Drucker, Heizer, and Squier discovered dozens of caches, including evidence of five massive offerings of serpentine in multicolored clay-lined pits, thirty-one stone figurines, numerous offerings of royal regalia, and several tomblike configurations containing crafted offerings but meager traces of bodies (Drucker 1952:23–26; Drucker et al. 1959; Stirling 1940, 1941, 1943, 1947).

As the oil industry began tapping deposits near La Venta in 1958, Mexican archaeologists Roman Piña Chan and Roberto Gallegos attempted some salvage work. Additional recovery efforts sponsored by University of California at Berkeley (Clewlow and Corson 1968) and recent archaeological work by Rebecca González Lauck (1988, 1989, 1991, 1997) of Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, since 1984, have brought the total number of monumental sculptures and fragments to nearly 100 (González Lauck 1988, 1989, 1991, 1997). González Lauck has also defined the extent and form of the site's center through the production of a topographic map (1990). Her work has resulted in, among other accomplishments, the clarification of the form of the Earthen Pyramid (Complex C), a better definition of outlying complexes of mounds, evidence of habitational zones, the protection of the site and its perimeter, the discovery of numerous monuments, work on reclassifying the ceramic types, and the establishment of a valuable museum on the site. Another of her major efforts has involved coordinating the evidence from within and outside Complex A to yield a single chronological sequence, and anchoring that to cultural sequences from other Formative period sites. As she explains, due to the quality of data and the aims of the early investigators, this has proven to be exceptionally difficult.⁷



Anchoring La Venta in Time

Numerous articles have offered reprisals of the problems with La Venta's internal chronology, as well as how it fits with other Formative period sites (Grove 1997; Pool 2007). Since other, more archaeologically qualified specialists have detailed the problems quite precisely and at some length, I will attempt to express the problems briefly for an audience more familiar with dates in the Christian calendar than years BP (before present). This is not as easy as it sounds. Some of the dates published in the archaeological literature as "BC" refer to calibrated radiocarbon dates, and others to uncalibrated dates. Authors do not always clarify which system they use. My aim is that the text be accessible to nonarchaeologists, so I present dates using the Gregorian calendar.⁸

The excavators (Drucker et al. 1959) determined that there were four phases of construction in Complex A, each of which lasted approximately 100 years (from 1000 to 600 bc in uncalibrated radiocarbon years, or about 900–400 bc calibrated; see Pool 2007:48). This is arguable for several reasons. The dating of the phases does not correspond well with extant radiocarbon assays. The original nine radiocarbon dates are not distributed evenly among the four proposed phases. In fact, five (more than half) of them are associated with a pre-Phase I or Phase I time span: 1354, 1104, 1044, 984, and 864 bc (González Lauck 1990:159–166). Few assays correspond to the proposed date spans for Phases III and IV, when La Venta was at its apogee, but two are later.

Since those original samples were tested, two things have happened. The material has been retested, and more samples have been obtained. González Lauck (1990:165) analyzed the collection, contexts, and testing of all the samples then available and determined that there were twenty-two acceptable radiocarbon assays ranging from 1354 to 424 bc (for Complex A), much longer than the 400-year apogee that was originally proposed (Drucker et al. 1959:264–267).

Finally, various researchers have compared La Venta's ceramics and geomorphology to develop-

ments in the surrounding region (Lowe 1989; Rust and Leyden 1994; von Nagy 2003). These studies place the beginnings of monumental architecture and art at La Venta as late as 800 bc.

It concerns me that while this late start for La Venta may correlate with regional ceramic samples, it does not account for the five radiocarbon assays that predate 800 bc. It also does not explain the similarity in format, subject, style, and material between the monuments of La Venta and those of San Lorenzo. Cultures may revive the styles and forms of antiquity, as the Italian Renaissance did with Classical Mediterranean art, but the later culture always recontextualizes the older style (or curates ancient objects) to serve the new purposes. There is too much similarity between the forms, styles, materials, and subjects of San Lorenzo and La Venta monuments for them not to overlap in time to some extent. Unless monuments were transported from the older site, which has been suggested, an exchange of ideas, materials, and sculptural subjects must have occurred between the sites. The same is true for the features that La Venta apparently borrowed from Teopantecuanitlan, including monumental reliefs of the embryo wearing the maize headband. Also, because of their specific formal affinities, there should not be a 250-year gap between the first sunken court at Teopantecuanitlan and the Phase I sunken court at La Venta. And the discovery of cached celts at El Manatí and cached embryo images at La Merced prior to 1200 bc calls into question the gap between these manifestations and the purported "beginnings" of La Venta at 800.

The scientific experts do not agree, so this art historian will make a proposal. Because each of the Drucker, Heizer, and Squier "phases," as defined by massive offerings of serpentine and layered clay floors, seems to correspond to the appearance of certain exotic materials that would indicate new trading partners or another geographic expansion, I think the concept of several cultural-architectural phases is valid. In determining dates for them, we should consider the following issues. We should not ignore as evidence of activity the "acceptable" radiocarbon assays. We should expect a degree of temporal overlap when closely similar subjects and forms occur in monumental and portable sculpture. One of the most diagnostic symbols of the Formative period is the embryo image, which can be used to trace chronologically the spread of a

5.4 (*Opposite page*) Plan of La Venta. Based on González Lauck 1990, 1991, 1997; with information from Clewlow and Corson 1968; de la Fuente 1973; Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959; and Stirling 1943. Illustration by Corey Escoto.

fundamental concept. The following is an attempt to consider these three variables at La Venta and beyond.

Archaeologists have established that the La Venta region was inhabited by 1750 bc. The radiocarbon assay of 1354 bc from Complex A seems to indicate some early activity there that would have been contemporary with the late “pre-Olmec” Chicharras phase of San Lorenzo and with the deposition of serpentine celts at La Merced and El Manatí. Between 1104 and 984 bc, the activity in Complex A seems to have heightened, for there are three assays that hover around this time. About 1050 to 860 bc seems to be a reasonable span for Phase I. The Phase I construction in Complex A was a walled court, and a similar kind of court was built in Teopantecuanitlan within 100 years of this time span. San Lorenzo was apparently producing colossal heads and cave-thrones by this time, so La Venta might also have done so. Even earlier, between 1300 and 1150 bc, embryo images had appeared on pots in the Valley of Mexico, at La Merced, and on monuments at San Lorenzo (including Monument 41). If La Venta Altar 5 dates to Phase I, as has been proposed (Milbrath 1979), then the embryo plaque worn by the principal frontal figure has temporal ties with the appearance of this image elsewhere. The same is true of the embryo masks worn by the figures on supposedly early La Venta Monuments 9 and 10, and the incised embryo face on the phallic column.

The radiocarbon assay that corresponds to about 864 bc may have been associated with the second phase of construction in Complex A. About this time, San Lorenzo was declining in terms of monumental production, but La Venta had forged strong and far-flung associations, evidenced by the importation of the hundreds of tons of serpentine needed for the massive offerings. By 774 bc, the construction of the Great Mound was also underway. It seems reasonable to date Phase II, with its early standing stone figurines and celt offerings, from about 860–750 bc.

David Grove (1997:72) suggested that Phases II and III may not be differentiated, but it seems there may be some distinctions. New materials do seem to have appeared in Phase III offerings, such as wads of ground malachite. There is a radiocarbon assay of about 710 bc that may indicate renewed construction activity associated with a third phase. The roller seal from San Andrés that has stirred a

debate over incipient writing dates to about 650 bc, or within my postulated Phase III (600–750 bc). It is basically a low-relief carving, and Milbrath (1979) thinks that the “narrative” low-relief monuments, such as Monument 19, and Stelae 2 and 3 date to this phase. The Cantera phase at Chalcatzingo, with its low-relief stelae (Grove 1987:130), also corresponds roughly to this proposed phase.

Two radiocarbon assays cluster right about 600 bc. Again, this may indicate a renewed construction activity that initiated Phase IV, and the two assays clustering between 459 and 424 bc may indicate termination or late usage. The archaeologists thought that a great deal of activity occurred in the last “Olmec” phase: the construction of Mound A-2 and A-3 with all of their elaborate offerings, as well as the importation of all the basalt columns. The use of sandstone seems to have been introduced in Phase IV, for the coffer in A-2 and the sandstone cist in A-3, as well as the colossal fetuses at the south end on Mound D-7. This creative explosion between about 600 and 400 bc (Phase IV) would correspond temporally with the completion of the narrative cliff reliefs at Chalcatzingo and the founding of Monte Albán.

In terms of ceramic ties that would help date Complex A, its ceramics most closely resemble those from the Palangana phase at San Lorenzo, which is relatively securely dated to 800–400 bc.⁹ However, the colossal heads, thrones, and other monuments from San Lorenzo are thought to *predate* the Palangana phase. As we have seen, archaeologists have maintained that most of San Lorenzo’s monuments date from 1150 to 900 bc. So if the dates for Complex A made sense in terms of ceramic similarities to Palangana phase San Lorenzo, when were the La Venta monuments, many of which are quite similar to those of San Lorenzo, produced? Were they taken from San Lorenzo a century or more after they were made? We might consider this scenario. If San Lorenzo was exporting ceramics widely in the Early Formative, but not to La Venta, as Blomster, Neff, and Glascock (2005) claim, perhaps La Venta preferred its own wares. By the Palangana phase, when San Lorenzo had declined, it had stopped exporting ceramics and was making pots like those of the rising ceremonial and/or civic center of La Venta.

My suggested placement for the phases of Complex A encompasses about 650 years. Its beginning overlaps with the end of the San Lorenzo

phase at that site, the construction of the sunken court and monoliths at Teopantecuanitlan, and major construction at San José Mogote. La Venta expanded dramatically as the founding of Chiapa de Corzo occurred, and San Andrés, near La Venta, also expanded. Phases III and IV would overlap the apogee of sculptural activity at Chalcatzingo. In this way La Venta was in sync with cultural developments throughout Mesoamerica. These temporal divisions are close to those proposed by Mary Pohl (2004) based on her excavations at San Andrés, but push the earliest La Venta phases a bit earlier to encompass the three early radiocarbon assays and to allow for connections to similar cultural features at La Merced, Teopantecuanitlan, and San Lorenzo.

Surveying La Venta's Visual Culture Through Time

Fortunately there is a little more agreement on the initial habitation of the La Venta region. The river-crossed lowlands around the site were initially occupied around 1750 bc. As they began planting a little maize, people ventured onto the high ground to create a gathering place by 1400 bc. By 1500 bc, La Venta was the head of a hierarchy of local sites, some of which had mounds and other cultural features (Rust and Sharer 1988). It eventually covered about 200 hectares (González Lauck 1994:96). The best way to further view La Venta's ideological development is to consider the materials excavated from Complex A. The following information is drawn primarily from Drucker et. al. 1959.

*Phase I, 1050–860 bc.*¹⁰ As at Teopantecuanitlan, the first ceremonial construction at Complex A was apparently a sunken court. In both cases, the alignment of the walls reflected the builders' astronomical considerations. Although La Venta's court was much larger, its builders may have been aware of the court at Teopantecuanitlan. At La Venta, Drucker (1952:9) first noted the existence of a centerline, and his work with Heizer and Squier revealed that Complex A began with a symmetrical arrangement of mounds aligned roughly 8 degrees west of north. Builders defined a sunken courtyard by removing sand that had drifted in from the nearby coastal beaches as well as the clay subsoil to create a level foundation about 40 x 40 m. On this a massive layer of relatively local clay was installed.

There may have been a major importation of materials; excavators thought that some piles of serpentine blocks indicated that there had once been a layer of serpentine that filled all or part of the excavated court. The upper court level was graded to allow for drainage out the centerline. A low clay embankment wall finished with red clay surrounded the court. Three low, rectangular mounds were placed within the embankment. Framing the east and west sides were rectangular platforms running north-south. A small rectangular platform also occupied the center of the southern half of the plaza. To the north of the embankment wall was another larger, squarish platform (Mound A-2). These low mounds were covered with various colors of clay. Finally, outside the wall on the south was a small platform (A-1-c) capped with orange and white sandy clays. It should be pointed out that at this initial phase of ceremonial construction, architectural features with carved symbols appeared Teopantecuanitlan but not at La Venta. (For useful reconstruction drawings of La Venta's construction over time, see Gillespie 2008.)

The only caches associated with Phase I were placed in the eastern low mound (A-1-f). They consisted of a few ceramic vessels and one cache of jade objects. The investigators suspected that they were intrusive. It is not entirely clear whether any basalt monuments were erected at this time, although it was certainly possible, since the contemporary site of San Lorenzo had acquired dozens of them. Art historian Susan Milbrath (1979) has offered the most cogent analysis of Olmec monumental chronology to date, although new data and reevaluation of existing data cast doubt on her chronological categories.¹¹ She assigned Monuments 23 and 31, both seated human figures (Fig. 5.5), and Altars 3, 4, and 5 to Phase I. When Monument 23 was found, it was on top of Mound A-5, which was built in Phase IV. If early, it was later moved. Throne 3 was similarly on top of a Phase IV construction when found. If Thrones 4 and 5 were carved in Phase I, we must wonder whether they were already in their "find" locations, 450 m south of the Earthen Pyramid. Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959:124–125) thought it likely that an early version of the Earthen Pyramid, Complex C, was constructed in Phase I.

*Phase II, 860–750 bc.*¹² Compared with the relatively modest undertaking of Phase I, Phase II



5.5 La Venta Monuments 23 (*top and middle*) and 31. Monument 23 from Drucker et al. 1959: Plate 52 (public domain); Monument 31 photo by author.

began with an enormous project. At some time between 900 and 700 bc, more than 2,000 tons of green serpentine blocks from the vicinity of Niltpec, Oaxaca, about 185 km (115 mi) away (Drucker et al. 1959:97), had been accumulated. This is a mind-boggling feat. If it were done only by those who lived within a day's walk of La Venta (even during its height, La Venta's total population was never more than about two thousand [González

Lauck 1994]), it would have required every one of those persons to make enough trips to the Pacific slope to carry a ton of rock on his or her own back. Since a ton is equivalent to 2,240 pounds, and a person walking 200 km might be expected to carry no more than 100 pounds, more than twenty-two trips per inhabitant would have been made. Even if it were spread over years or even a century, this is still a lot of hauling. Most scholars involved in Olmec studies believe that La Venta's hoards of stone were the result of long-distance trade, and that was likely one mechanism for its accumulation. But this assertion begs a question regarding what La Ventans were able to export that would have had similar quantity or comparable value, and no one has satisfactorily answered that question. Rojas Chávez (1990) shows that La Venta exported obsidian blades, but it was certainly not the only source of such blades. There is some possibility that the desired exchange commodity was a strain of maize bearing more kernels, or a special food from the rivers or Gulf, or possibly cacao, which grew along the Gulf Coast and is attested in the reconstructed proto-Mixe-Zoquean language (Campbell and Kaufman 1976).¹³ It is hard to imagine, however, that the chocolate trade financed the whole civic/ceremonial center, especially because cacao could be obtained elsewhere. Sea products, tar, and jaguars were also available, but there were other ways of acquiring such items that would not have required hauling stones over such long distances, even by a relay method. It seems unlikely to have been a forced effort, for the number of enforcers available simply could not have maintained control of human burden bearers over such a long distance. Therefore, to me the presence at La Venta of this serpentine from Oaxaca's coast suggests that it was a pilgrimage site (see note 2). For some reason, people from distant regions aided those from Olman in transporting the green stone.

The tons of serpentine were carefully deposited near the southeast and southwest corners of the sunken court (hereafter referred to as the "enclosed court") in two deep pits. The following description is taken from the report on the excavation of the southwestern platform (Drucker et al. 1959:78–107). Each pit measured about 12.5x 15 m at the bottom and was much wider at the top (99). The pits contained twenty-eight courses of stone set into olive-green clay. These concentrations of green stone, unique to La Venta, were dubbed by the excavators

“Massive Offerings.” Drucker, Heizer, and Squier thought that each major phase of La Venta’s construction was initiated by the deposition of such an offering (125).

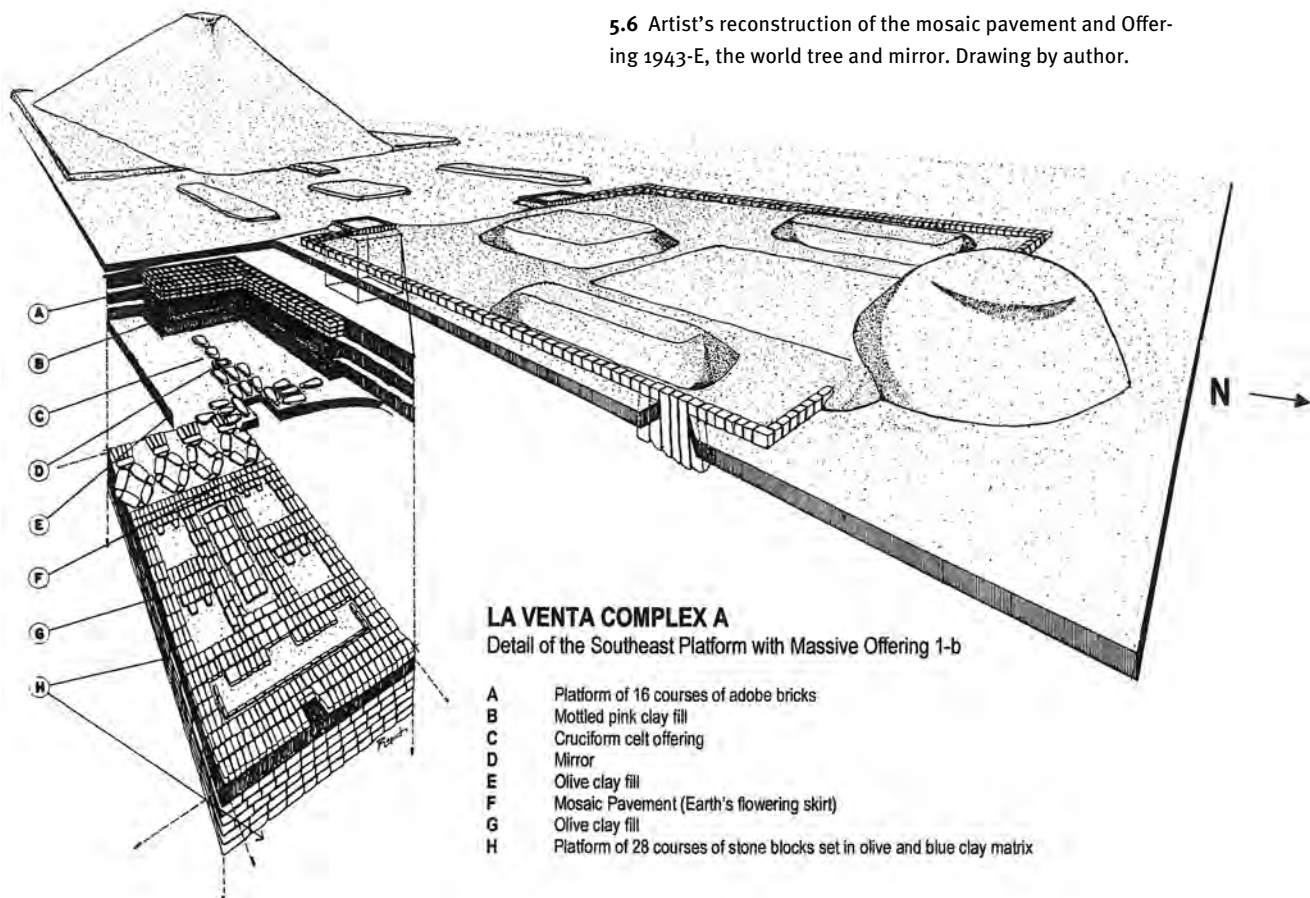
Above each of the two massive offerings, but still below ground level, the twenty-ninth course of stone was arranged in a pattern (Fig. 5.6). The excavators called these “Mosaic Pavements.” Measuring 4.69 x 6.28 m (15 ft 5 in. x 20 ft 7 in.), they have three distinct sections. The northern edge is a line deeply cleft in the center. South of that is a “double merlon” design in negative space filled with “cinnamon-colored sand” (Drucker et al. 1959:94). South of the double merlon, the central portion consists of a quincunx of smaller double merlons distributed at the four corners and flanking a central bar that parallels the site’s central axis (Reilly 1994a). South of the quincunx is a series of four “diamond” shapes, each created by four long and four square serpentine blocks. The center of the diamond was filled with a yellowish clay (95). The southernmost tip of each diamond is fringed with four radiating blocks of serpentine. These massive offerings and mosaic pavements rank among the most intriguing features of La Venta, and I think

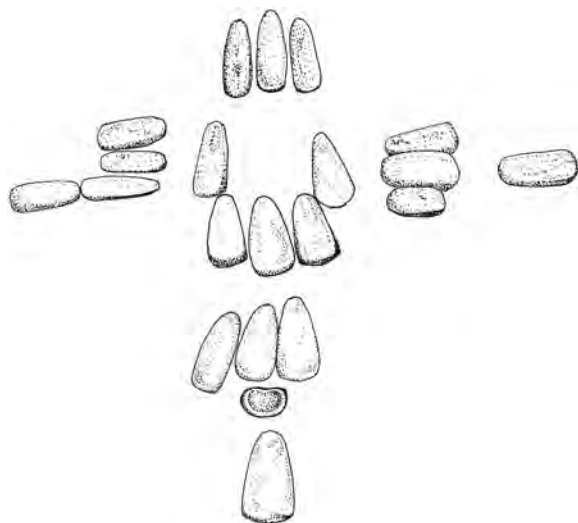
the most important as well. We will examine them in detail in the next chapter. Above the mosaic pavements were layers of colored clays: a thick layer of rose pink, topped by light orange clay into which was set a platform of adobe bricks measuring 7.92 x 10.5 m (26 x 34½ ft) at the base and 2 m high (92). It is not completely clear whether the top of the adobe platform was covered with a clay layer at this time.

For the first time at La Venta, people revived the ancient practice of placing stone figurines and celts in caches. Over the southeast mosaic pavement was a cache of twenty polished jade and serpentine celts arranged horizontally in a cruciform shape. At the southern end of the cruciform was a stone mirror (1943-E [Fig. 5.7]). The southwest mosaic pavement received an offering of six serpentine celts (1942-E). Additionally, a basalt figurine of a kneeling female, wearing a mirror pendant and already showing signs of wear, was broken before being thrown into the fill immediately on top of the southwest mosaic pavement (Fig. 5.8). All of these offerings were obscured underground.

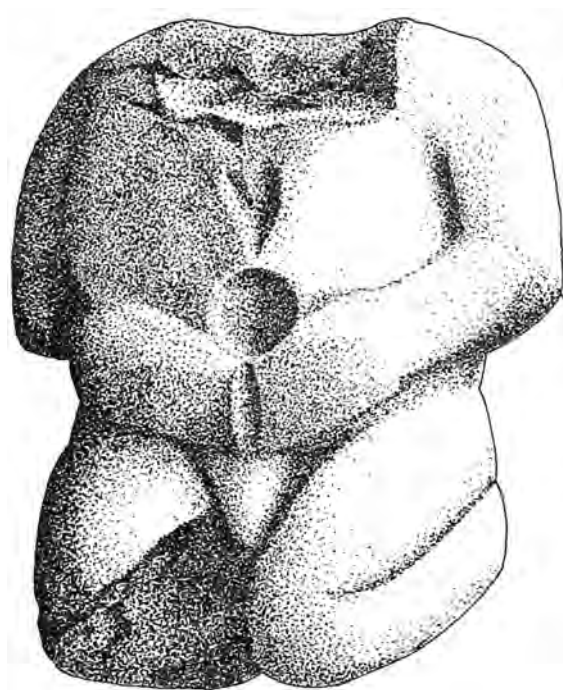
In addition to the construction of the two massive offerings in Phase II, the other mounds in Complex A were enlarged as well. This includes

5.6 Artist’s reconstruction of the mosaic pavement and Offering 1943-E, the world tree and mirror. Drawing by author.





5.7 Offering 1943-E, twenty celts in a cruciform over Phase II mosaic pavement. Drawing by author after Drucker 1952: Plate 8.



5.8 Stone figurine found in the fill of the southwest mosaic pavement. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 63 (public domain).

the northeast and northwest platforms and the south-central platform. The latter received a cache of objects made of jade and other stones (1955–3; see Drucker et al. 1959:146–152, Plates 26–29). It included the site's earliest jade figurines in the pose called simply “standing figure.” Other objects included (and this is not an exhaustive list) a jade

pendant in the form of a waterbird, four jade pieces resembling small dugout canoes, five small objects of rock crystal, and a variety of beads. According to Billie Follensbee (2000:115–150), one of the stone figurines was carved as a female but then modified by the addition of a loincloth (Fig. 5.9 top). The other represents a male. A female may have been the subject of a monument as well. Stela 1, probably a horizontal monument, depicts a female reclining face up within a carved frame or container. Her pose is rather stiff and symmetrical except for her feet, which angle within the container as if she is in a bathtub. Because it differs from the later low-relief stelae, Milbrath considers it earlier than the others and places it in her Group II, which she sees as roughly corresponding to La Venta Phase II.

The colorful clays, subterranean offerings, and surface features of Complex A were covered with a white clay floor. Presumably this was visible until the floor of the subsequent phase was completed.

As we can see from its cached offerings, during Phase II La Venta seems to have been heavily involved in the heightened interaction and exchange that characterized the Middle Formative. With its massive offerings and associated caches, it may have already been identified as a pilgrimage site, or a place with a significant, potentially unifying focus. Comparing the objects that were cached at La Venta to other known caches in early Mesoamerica, they bear much more similarity to the celts (and looted stone figurine) deposited at El Manatí between 1600 and 1200 bc than they do to anything found at San Lorenzo during the period 1150–900 bc. Similarly, it is interesting to note that colored clays were used during the Early Formative at San Lorenzo and Las Limas (Bernal-García 2006; Gómez Rueda 1996). Does this argue for an earlier placement of Phase II? Were La Venta's buried offerings part of an archaizing artistic or ritual practice? Did La Venta deliberately differentiate itself from San Lorenzo by reverting to the more ancient practices of caching stone objects that San Lorenzo apparently eschewed? If so, why the close similarity in the subjects, formats, and materials of monumental sculpture? Does the similarity of caching practice suggest that El Manatí and La Venta¹⁴ were pilgrimage places, while San Lorenzo was more political in function? Are the greenstone caches of San Lorenzo still awaiting discovery? We need more information to answer these questions.



One thing we can determine is the presence of women in the Phase II offerings. Of course, women had been the subjects of the majority of ceramic figurines since their manufacture began. Conversely, it has long been assumed that most stone sculptures, large and small, portrayed males. However, Follensbee (2000) has clarified that there are far more females portrayed in stone than previously thought.¹⁵ Stela 1 and Thrones 3 and 5, which most authors consider to have been made early in La Venta's history, all include females. The sole basalt figurine represents a female and was thrown into the fill over the massive offering and mosaic pavement. And one of the three jade figurines from this phase seems to have been modified from one that was originally female in form (98–100). The offering in which it was placed contained tiny jade canoe effigies and a waterbird pendant, and all were sandwiched between a bed of red cinnabar and a

5.9 *Left: Stone figurines from Offering 1955-3, Phase II. Bottom: Offering 1955-4, Phase III. Drucker et al. 1959: Plate 26, 30 resp. (public domain).*



layer of yellow clay (Drucker et al. 1959:146–150). We do not see a baby in a canoe, but the canoes, the waterbird, and the figurines suggest a similar theme of an aquatic transit between death and life.

To Phase II we can attribute more than 2,000 tons of serpentine, tons of different colored clays, and three caches containing twenty-six stone celts, lots of jade beads and other objects, four stone figurines, and at least one stone mirror. And ideologically, as will be explained in the next chapter, the Mosaic Pavement/Mother Earth and Massive Offering/Midwife Lake supernaturals seem to have been the recipients of these offerings.

*Phase III, 750–600 bc.*¹⁶ By the time the third phase of Complex A was built, Mesoamerica's Middle Formative was well underway. The dramatic increase in the number and types of caches and offerings in Complex A suggests that La Venta played an important role in its integration. As with the previous construction phase, this one was initiated by the creation of a massive offering. Most of the existing mounds were enlarged, and the complex was covered with a "rose" clay floor.

Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959:130–133) thought that at least some of the serpentine for Massive Offering 3, in the center of the court between Mound A-2 and the south-central platform, came from dismantling an earlier (Phase I) massive offering in a similar location. The Phase III massive offering was wide and shallow, unlike the deep configuration of the two Phase II offerings. It consisted of six layers of serpentine blocks covering an area 18.9 x 19.8 m (about 62 x 65 ft) within an even larger pit.

Ritualists deposited five caches over the massive offering. Two were quite simple (1943-C and 1955–13). The others demand consideration here. Just where the edge of the northern mound, A-2, touched the border of the massive offering was a cruciform configuration of thirty-eight celts. Three groups (8, 8, 5, bits upward, in prepared clay beds) ran in an east-west line transverse to the central axis (1955–10). (The Phase II cruciform celt offering contained twenty celts and a mirror.)

Also, a new kind of offering appeared: rare pigments. Two batches of material, considered as the same offering, were placed symmetrically over the massive offering on either side of the centerline (1955–12). One consisted of bright green

malachite grains, and one of purplish-red cinnabar (Drucker et al. 1959:187). Although it was used in Kaminaljuyú and mined near Alta Vista, Zacatecas, malachite is not particularly common in Mesoamerica, so this was a rare treasure indeed.

The northern mound, A-2, received its first offerings in this phase as well. These were quite elaborate. The simplest contained six serpentine celts (1943-D). Within A-2 and on the centerline was a cache of twenty serpentine rough celts, two with bits upright and eighteen lying flat in a north-south line (1955–1). Another Mound A-2 cache on the centerline consisted of two layers of jade and serpentine celts, twenty in one layer and, above it, thirty-one more (1955–2). This offering included several incised or carved celts, including the one in the form of a stylized embryo with axolotl brows and another with a quincunx in a flowering U shape (Drucker et al. 1959: Figs. 34 and 35).

The northeast platform, which had contained a few pottery vessels in Phase I, was enlarged. It received numerous caches of valuable regalia. Two were "pseudoburials" of jade regalia. The headband with a maskette attached, earspools, and necklace were arranged as if the items had adorned a head—but there is no evidence of an actual head (1955–5 and 1955–6).

Just east of the center of the northeast mound, but not quite over the massive offering, was the well-known "Offering Four" (Fig. 5.9 bottom). Of the sixteen stone figurines, none were made of identical material, although two figurines, 14 and 15, are similar enough morphologically to have been made by the same sculptor or shop (Follensbee 2000:119–133). Each depicted a specific stance, which I have suggested was one of deliberate mind-body integration (Tate 1996). Most of the figurines are distinctive enough in size, material, and proportion to suggest that they were not made in a single workshop. Follensbee identified two of these figurines, 9 and 18, as female, and several others as having been gendered male by the addition of features such as an incised loincloth to a female or ambiguously gendered figurine.

Could the figurines have been brought in by representatives of different polities to represent their group or their spiritual practitioners? Although the excavators claimed that the fifteen jade and serpentine figures looked at the single sandstone one, an examination of the excavation photos shows

that this is not the case. The variously gendered figures generally face toward each other, but do not neatly face a single leader. The six celts positioned behind them are sawed and polished halves of three original celts, and four are incised with two original drawings. Kent Reilly (1994b) reconstructed the designs. One is a “flying Olmec,” which he relates to shamanic flight. The other is a composite embryo face, which he called an “Earth Dragon.” The embryo stelae of Phase IV are very similar to this design.

Many features generally considered “Olmec” came together at La Venta in Phase III. Numerous celts, some of which bore embryo images, were planted over the massive offerings or stone lakes. The number of cached serpentine or jade celts increased from 26 in Phase II to 111 in Phase III. The number of stone figurines also increased due to the deposition of Offering 4. The two pseudo-headdress-burials were planted, suggesting two rulers of La Venta or possibly two rulers from elsewhere whose regalia was terminated here.¹⁷ This and the large number of jade beads and ornaments suggest an increased interaction with the Motagua jade sources or others who used the jade, possibly via the major center in the Maya area, Nakbe, which at this time, according to Richard Hansen (personal communication, 2008), was even larger than La Venta.

By 600 bc (or no later than 500), most of the basalt monuments populated La Venta’s surface. It is difficult to date the monuments with precision due to lack of original contexts or associated materials, but it is important to try, because their chronology can point to ideological discourses—among them, those involving women. According to Milbrath’s (1979) study, several monuments that lack specificity in representing the human form date to this phase. They are the figure merged with a throne (Monument 21), the figure seated on a throne with legs hanging down, (Monument 40), and a figure kneeling over a platform (Monument 74). Each of the figures that was merged with a broad supporting element was badly mutilated and apparently decapitated. Because of the featureless aspect of their carving (or extreme mutilation), they differ markedly from the highly detailed reliefs on Stelae 2 and 3, and Monument 19, which she also attributes to this phase.¹⁸ Joining the earlier Stela 1 female was a prominent woman portrayed

on Stela 3 (Fig. 5.10; Follensbee 2000:176–189). Follensbee observes the feminine pinched waist and chest strap that can be seen on the figure on the left, who wears a towering headdress, armbands, and a cape, and holds a rectangular object that could be a staff associated with rulership (González Lauck 1997; Heizer 1967). Over the woman’s head are three hovering figures that Follensbee identified as female. These females on the viewer’s left face a principal male and several floating male figures on the right. Follensbee (2000) cautions against assuming that the display of a male stepping toward a female means marriage. In fact, since the face of the female was carefully mutilated, Follensbee suggests that she is a woman of considerable power and influence, but that the nature of their meeting is unknown (188). It is not surprising that the several women on monuments from Chalcatzingo were carved about this time, between 700 and 500 bc. Finally, one more monument that Milbrath dates to this phase is an almost columnar figure with an embryo mouth (Monument 75; Fig. 5.11). In the final phase of Complex A construction, both embryos and women would be memorialized in new ways.

*Phase IV, 600–400 bc.*¹⁹ La Venta was active and flourishing during the last phase of construction in Complex A. Several new cultural features, social changes, and materials appeared in Phase IV, and these help establish chronology for the monuments. Our panorama of this last phase of construction suggests an increasingly wealthy place with much greater extra-local interaction. People, materials, and ideas were coming to this place where the unique massive offerings and mosaic pavements existed. Monuments in the form of decapitated heads, and others showing men, women, pre-birth humans, and sweatbath-cave-thrones ranged across the land. Mesoamerica’s largest earthen pyramid loomed.

Several new building materials appeared, and with them, the human-made landscape was transformed. Over 200 basalt columns were introduced (Drucker et al. 59:126–127) from Roca Partida (Williams and Heizer 1965). These were used for the construction of Tomb 7 (in Mound A-2) as well as an enclosure that defined the northern court of Complex A and a “fence” around the southeast and southwest platforms, which were over the Phase II



5.10 Stela 3, Phase III. Principal figures are a female on the left and a male on the right. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 67 (public domain).



5.11 Monument 75, Phase III. The top half of the head was found by González Lauck. Photo by author.

massive offerings. Having had to move the 2 ton basalt columns, the excavators insisted that this was no easy task and would have required considerable organization as well as “rigorous and autocratic control of the general population” (Drucker et al. 1959:127). While this is an astute observation, we should not forget the movement of stone in earlier phases for the construction of the massive offerings and the basalt monuments.

Green schist appeared for the first time in Phase IV, and four stelae were made from it. Each of these depicts a sprouting human embryo/maize seed, and each arises from a platform. The towering Monument 25/26 was set into the southern flank of the Earthen Pyramid (Complex C) along with Monument 27 (made of a greenish gneiss). These were on the east side of the centerline, while two similar stelae of a gray volcanic stone were placed along the west side of the Mound C centerline, forming a set of four human-maize seed stelae at the base of Mound C (González Lauck 1997).

Another green schist embryo image, Monument 58, rose from B-4, the central platform in

the Complex B plaza (Fig. 5.12). Yet another schist embryo stela, Monument 22, adorned the southwest platform, just outside the Phase IV basalt column configuration. In terms of possible precedents for these stelae, a similar concept (sprouting human-maize seed) was shown on La Merced Monument 1 about 1500 bc, and on the four travertine human embryo/maize seed monuments of Teopantecuanitlan, which were several hundred years earlier than the La Venta stelae. Closer in time and space, San Lorenzo (Monument 103) and La Venta (Monument 75) portrayed the embryo in a columnar format. And at La Venta, the celt incised with a stylized embryo wearing a headband from which maize sprouted (in Offering 4) predated these stelae. Over time, the embryo image was conveyed from the columnar shape to incised celts to the newer format of the low-relief stela. La Venta's sprouting embryo stelae are roughly contemporary to Chalcatzingo Monument 9, another vertical slab depicting a face with embryo eyes. It is appropriate that people selected a greenish stone, significant of the life force, for these images of the human seed at La Venta.

A unique monument of green schist was Stela 5, discovered by González Lauck (1997) amidst the embryo images at the foot of the Earthen Pyramid (Fig. 5.13). Its imagery is depicted in low relief. Standing on a ground line are three profile figures. In the center, the principal figure faces the viewer's left. This male wears a huge, fan-shaped headdress and a curving hip cover, and holds a staff of authority. His ornaments include a jaguar head at the waist. He faces another male whose right arm reaches out across the principal figure's chest. Hovering above the principal figure is a downward-facing figure, truncated at the waist, who holds a short staff. It has a large headdress that includes an animal head, a chin strap, and a crest of short feathers. This figure wears ornaments on its nose and mouth. Behind the principal figure's back, on the viewer's right, is a wizened figure wearing a skirt and a cape, as well as a headdress and ear ornaments. It also extends its arm to touch the principal figure's waist. González Lauck (1997) sees the rightmost figure's features as having a supernatural character. Follensbee (2000:190-195) contends that Stela 5 shows two men facing each other and an aged woman on the viewer's right, behind the principal male. Stela 5 is one of at least five green schist monuments introduced in Phase IV.

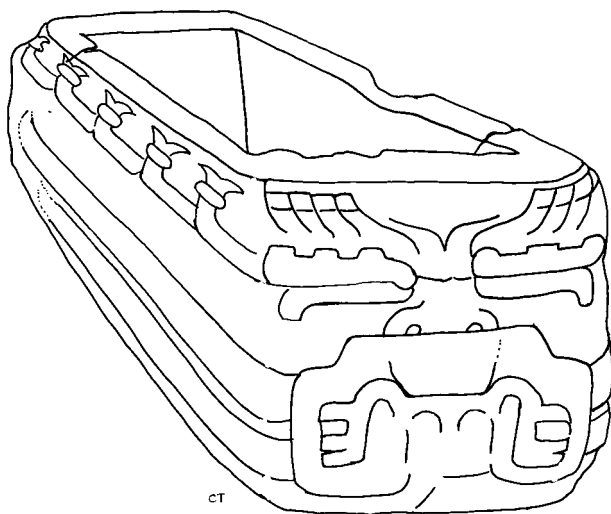
Another material used for several purposes in Phase IV is sandstone (Fig. 5.14). There were two tomblike features formed of this material. Within Mound A-2, the "Coffer," or sarcophagus, was carved on at least three sides with a wraparound image of a crocodilian with axolotl brows and contained the accoutrements of a male but no body. (This is also known as Monument 6, or Tomb B, and has disappeared.) Sandstone slabs were used to create Tomb C, the "sandstone cist" containing the regalia of a female (discussed below). Two uncarved sandstone blocks were found near Mound D-13, south of the Stirling Acropolis. The only freestanding sandstone figures are Monuments 52, 53, and 54, which I have identified as colossal fetuses. The excavation of these three monuments and the U-shaped Mound D-7 by archaeologist Judith Gallegos Gómora (1990) suggests that the fetuses were placed on this platform during or after Phase IV. On the other hand, we should not forget that sandstone was used in the earliest phase at El Manatí, and that fetus sculptures have been excavated at Early Formative San Lorenzo, so the colossal fetuses may be earlier than Phase IV and may



5.12 Monument 58, Phase IV, the central portion of a stela that once featured an embryo face. Found on the central platform of the Complex B plaza. Photo by author.



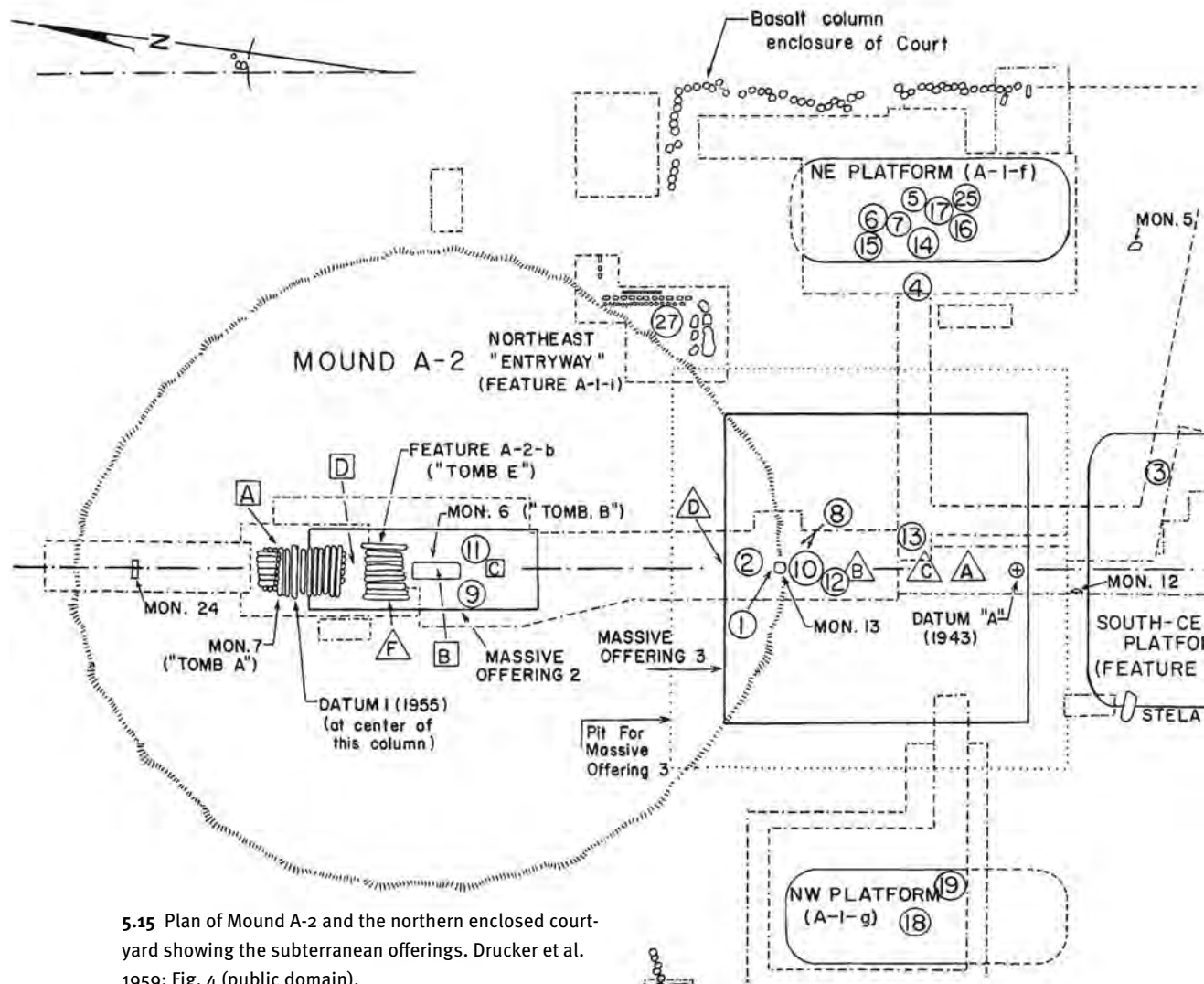
5.13 Stela 5, Phase IV or later, found on the U-shaped apron on the south side of Mound C. Drawing by author.



5.14 Monument 6, Phase IV, the sandstone coffer excavated from within Mound A-2. Drawing by author.

have been moved to D-7 late in La Venta's history. Actually, sandstone is rarely used in Olmec monumental art. Geologically speaking, it forms from sediment deposited by water. This "uncooked" state may have been part of the rationale for choosing to use sandstone to construct fetus effigies and tombs: each of the sandstone monuments discussed here can be conceptually associated with water. The El Manatí blocks were placed in a spring, the sandstone coffer depicts a crocodile-like creature, the fetuses form in the implied waters of the U-shaped womb (D-7), and the sandstone tomb of a woman may conceptually refer to a womb as well.

As with the other phases, construction of Phase IV apparently began with a massive offering. Instead of underlying part of the enclosed court, the new massive offering destroyed some of the existing Mound A-2 at the court's northern bound-



5.15 Plan of Mound A-2 and the northern enclosed courtyard showing the subterranean offerings. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 4 (public domain).



ary. When this ancient excavation was performed, it might have disturbed various preexisting tombs or caches, but we are in no way sure of this. In any event, the pit was approximately 15.08 x 6.09 x 4.87 m deep (49½ ft from north to south, about 20 ft from east to west and 16 ft deep). “Bright red sandy clay” (Reilly 1994a) covered the bottom of the pit (Fig. 5.15). A layer of carefully cut and fit serpentine blocks covered the red clay. As Reilly has said, this layer of green stone, like the previous ones, functioned as an effigy of a sea or lake, and metaphorically represented the watery underworld. He described how the sandstone sarcophagus (Monument 6, which was also designated Tomb B) incised with crocodilian features rested just south of the center of the massive offering/lake. In contrast, only half of Tomb A (also known as the basalt column tomb, Monument 7, and its contents as Offering 1942-A) rested over the “lake.” Between these tombs was a pile of eleven basalt columns that covered deposits of jade objects. To this discussion of the tombs’ contents I want to bring Follensbee’s (2000) consideration of the gendering of the figurines, as well as my own observations about embryo imagery.

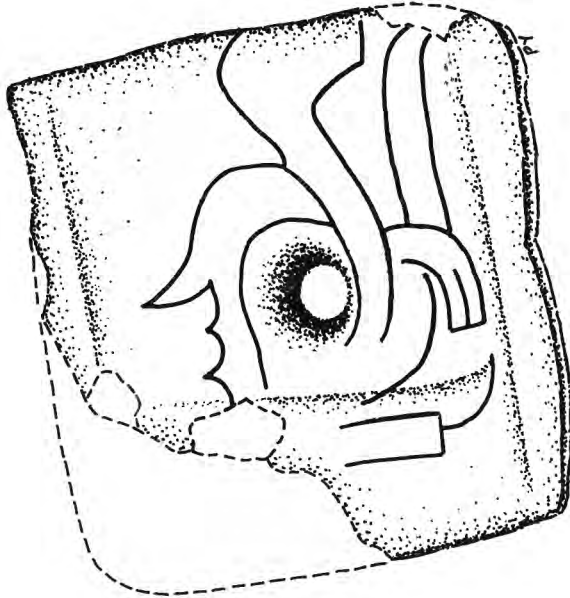
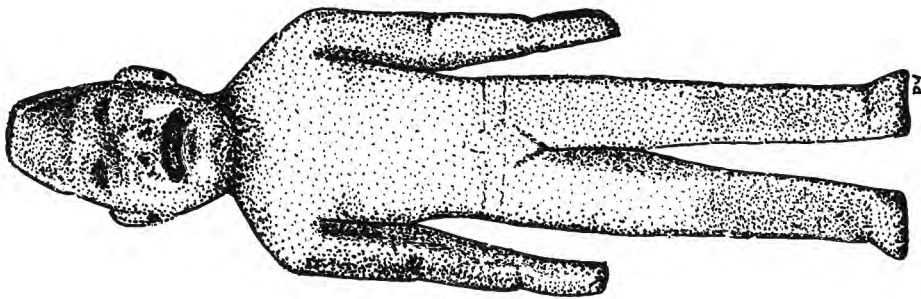
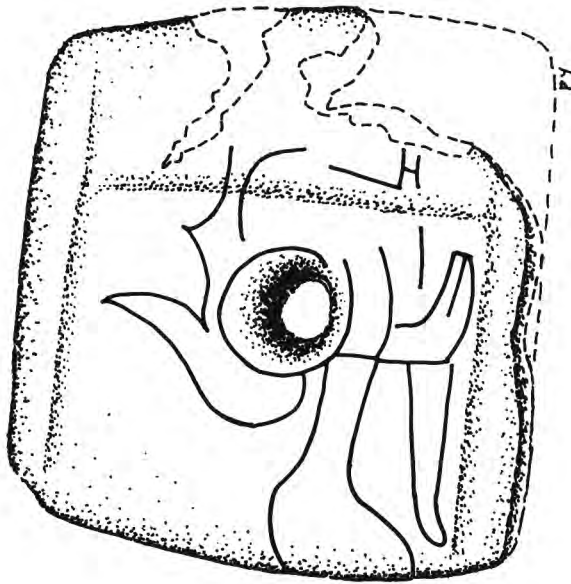
5.16 Monument 7, the basalt column tomb that contained what seem to be two bundles, each containing a standing and a seated figurine along with other items. Photo by author.

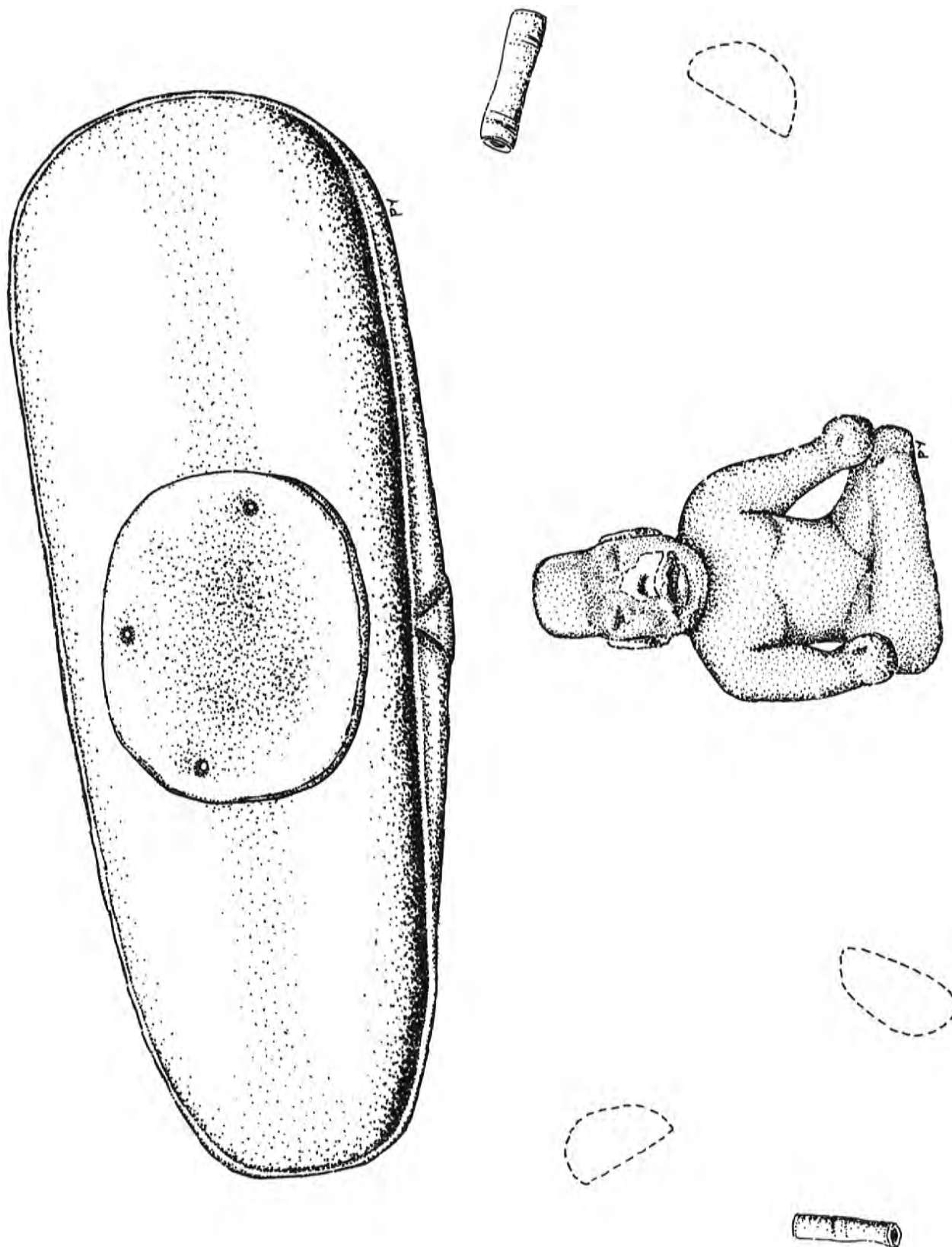
Mound A-2

Within the basalt column tomb (Monument 7; Fig. 5.16) were the remains of two “bundle burials” on a platform of limestone slabs covered with blue clay and 6 in. of cinnabar (Stirling and Stirling 1942:640). The contents of Tomb 7 were designated as Offering 1942-A. Bundle 1 contained a seated figure which the excavators called male but which Follensbee (2000:101-105) has identified as a female (Fig. 5.17a and b). Her deformed cranium may have been shaved. A standing figure of ambiguous sex accompanies her. A jade clamshell and a pair of obsidian disks (much like Tlaloc goggles), and a hematite mirror, along with other items, completed this offering (Drucker 1952:25).

Stirling conveyed his excitement at the discovery of Bundle 2 (Fig. 5.18a and b) in his *National Geographic* description.

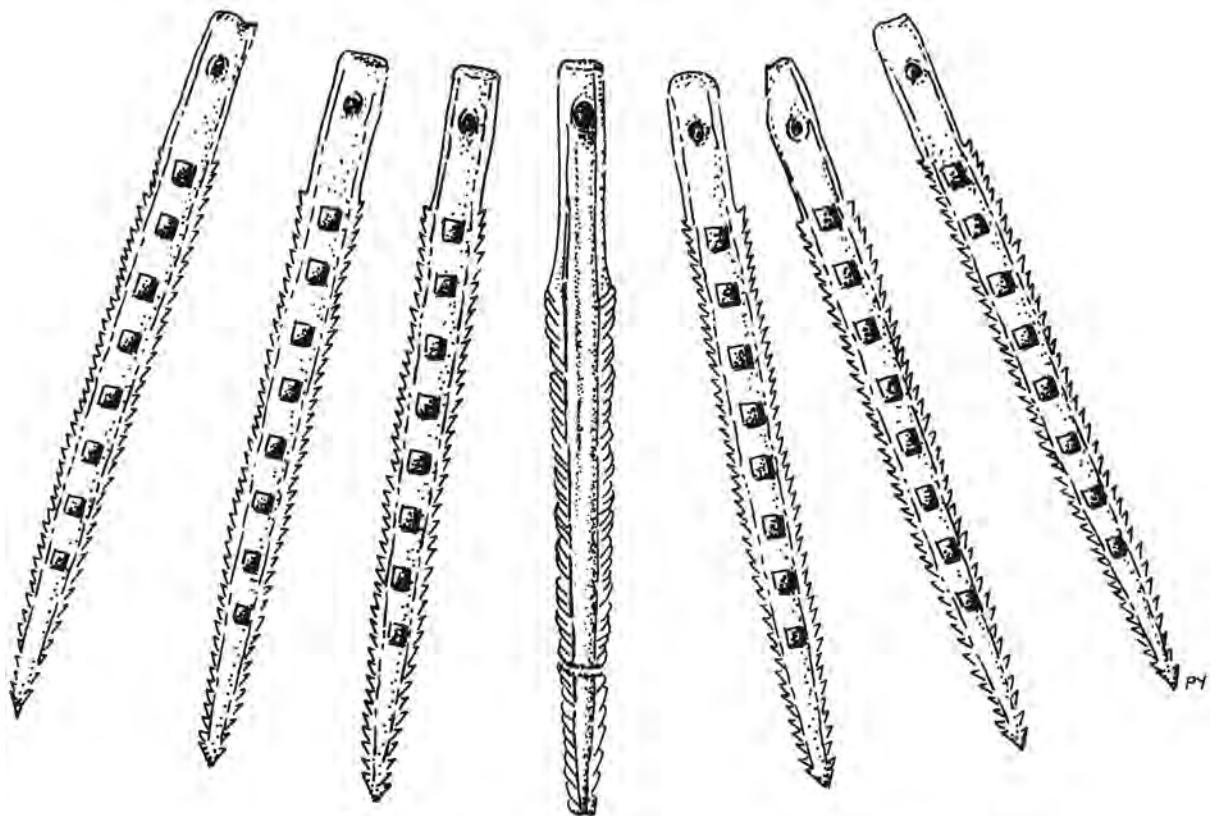
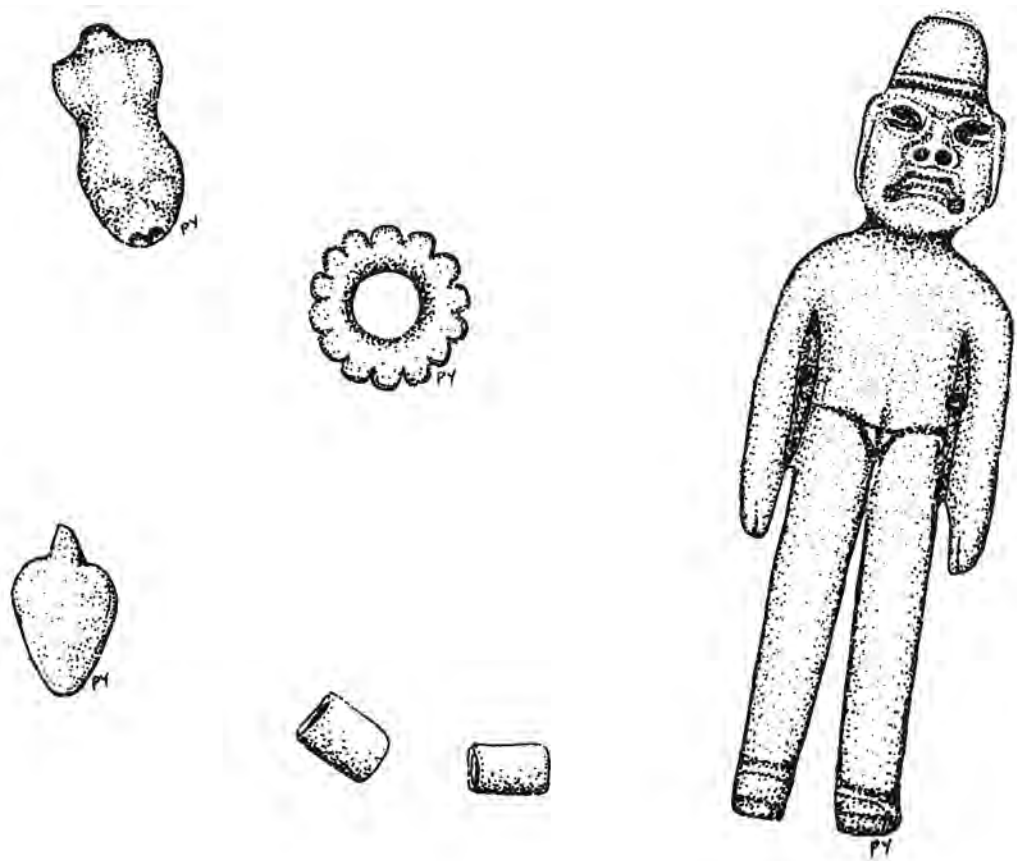
Two feet beyond [the first bundle] we came upon a realistic reproduction of a fresh-water clamshell of heavy polished jade, about 10 inches long, and perforated for use as a





5.17a and b Tomb A Bundle 1. This artist's reconstruction and the ones that follow show the objects at 1:1 scale. Their placement is based on several sources, including National

Geographic Society and Bureau of American Ethnology publications. Positions of the objects relative to each other are approximate. Drawings by Paula Yeager.





5.18a and b Tomb A Bundle 2. Artist's reconstruction. Objects shown at actual scale and relative placement. Drawings by Paula Yeager.



5.19 Eleven basalt columns were removed to reveal the Tomb E area, between the sandstone sarcophagus and the basalt column tomb. Drucker 1952: Plate 13 (public domain).

pendant. Inside it was a small oval mirror of brilliant crystalline hematite.

Lying under this “clamshell” was what is possibly the most exquisite example of jade carving known from ancient America—a seated female figure of highly polished dark-colored jade, with a circular mirror of crystalline hematite attached to the chest. . . . About a foot and a half from this same deposit were a jade frog, a green jade leaf, a jade “flower,” and two large rectangular ear ornaments of dark-green jade, each engraved with eagle-head designs . . . [and] a pair of clay ear spools, painted a pale blue as if in imitation of jade, and with them two pieces of green polished jade, carved in the shape of a pair of human hands. Two oval-shaped pieces of polished obsidian and two similar pairs of green jade were probably eyes set in carved wooden masks or figures. . . . (Stirling and Stirling 1942:639–642)

As the description shows, associated with the female figurine were a mirror, aquatic creatures, and hands, as well as possibly Tlaloc-like masks or figures. This set of symbols overlaps with the Ayotla complex (hand, axolotl, primordial sea, embryo). Temporally similar to the La Venta tomb were a disembodied hand and a goggle-eyed anthropomorphic head with earspools that were carved at

the very top of Chalcatzingo’s mountain, overlooking the scenes below. This complex seems to prefigure the murals of the Teotihuacan Temples of Tepantitla/Agriculture. The La Venta bundle burials were not directly over the massive offering but on its “shore,” where frogs, clams, flowers, and humans might be found. The whole complex of offerings seems to have acknowledged the lives of individuals who were diviners (the mirror), and possibly healers or midwives. When they receive a divine calling, Maya midwives from San Pedro de la Laguna (Lago de Atitlán) say that they are given a gift that enables their hands to perform massages. One midwife said, “The hands already know” (Cosminsky 2001:184). Remember that hands are a symbol that can alternate with embryo images on Ayotla ceramic vessels, and that the jade “hand-canoe” (Fig. 4.25) may also be a birth conveyor, like the Cerro de las Mesas embryo-prowed canoe holding an infant. The burial was installed over the massive offering, or lake effigy, so the individuals may have been associated with the female lake supernatural, as will be discussed shortly.

Over the massive offering (or lake effigy) and between Monument 7 (Tomb A) and the sandstone crocodile coffer (Monument 6/Tomb B) was a clump of eleven basalt columns arrayed roughly north-south (Fig. 5.19). These covered a deposit of worked jades and have been dubbed Tomb E and Offering 1943-F (Fig. 5.20). The only hint of a body consisted of a pair of earspools and ear pendants (Fig. 5.21). Among the thirty-five jade celts was one in the form of an embryo with axolotl brows (Fig. 5.22). Although it is smaller than typical votive axes, this is the only votive axe-like object excavated at La Venta. Found in the center of (and below) a circle of thirty-five globular beads was a tiny jade skull (Drucker 1952:64; see Fig. 5.20 near embryo axe).²⁰ Here in Tomb E we find the pairing of an embryo and a skull, also found in the later Cerro de las Mesas cache (in which “the baby in the boat” was interred). On the “shore” of the massive offering were frogs, clams, hands, and human figures, while directly over the lake effigy were the embryo and skull—the terminal nodes of a continual progression through life and death.

“Floating” over the massive offering was the crocodilian sandstone coffer (Monument 6/Tomb B). It contained a male standing figure, earspools and ear pendants, and an awl, which possibly

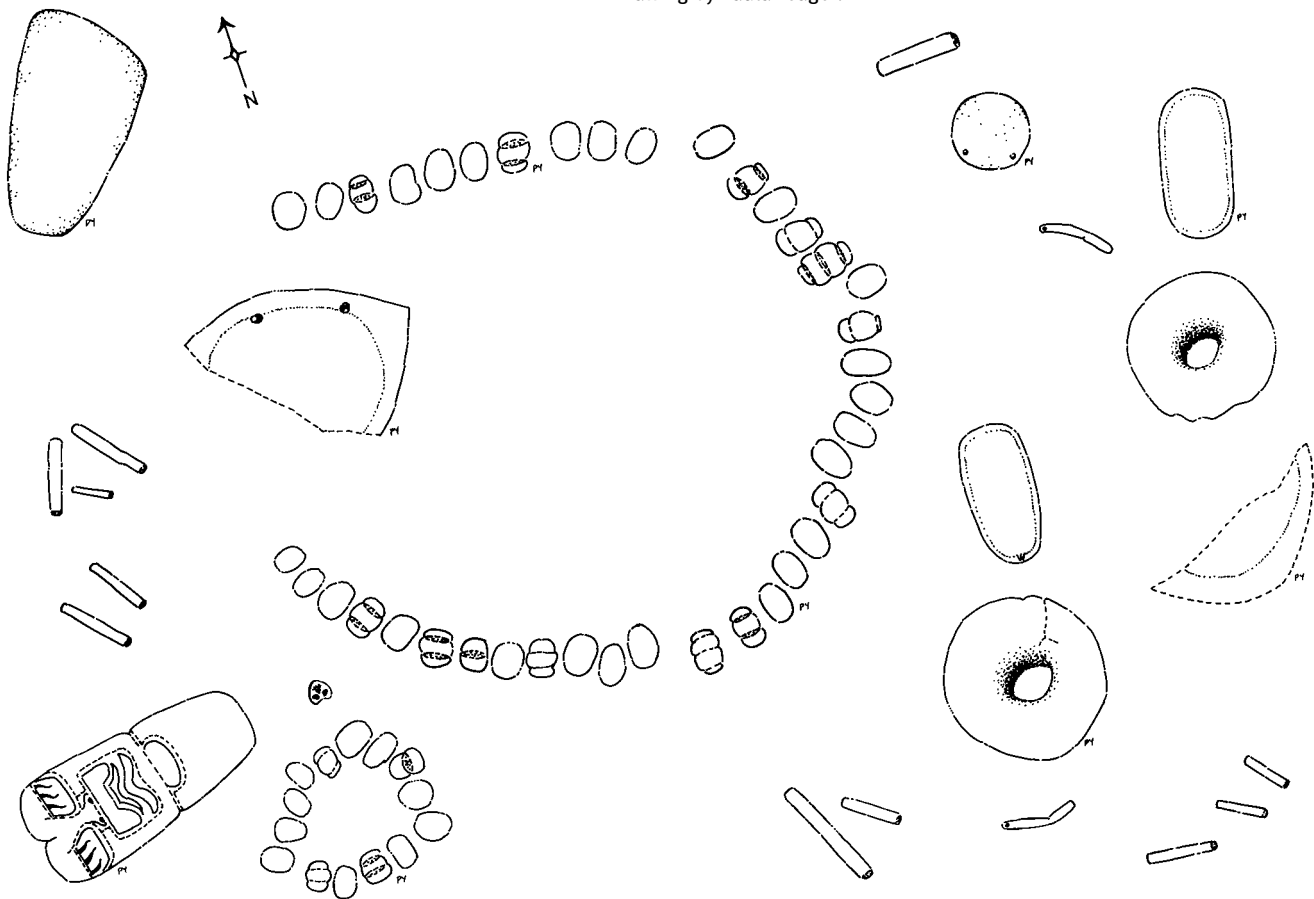
served as a bloodletter (Fig. 5.23). Follensbee (2000:107) considers the figurine to represent a male adult. About a meter to its southeast and southwest were Offerings 1955-9 and 1955-11, each of which contained nine celts, a mirror, and a patch of pigment, one of purple cinnabar and one of red cinnabar. Surrounding these items were 1,180 whole jade beads and 94 fragments. On the site centerline and south of these two offerings was 1942-C, which contained 37 jade celts, two incised with quincunx seed and sprout designs. I think we can safely say that the southern end of the massive offering within Mound A-2 was thoroughly inseminated with phallic jade celts and droplet-like beads.

Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959:211) reported that a bulldozer unearthed an oval plaque during construction of the airstrip. The bulldozer's path came closest to the centerline of the site, where so many objects were positioned, just north of Mound A-2. The archaeologists described the shape as one that "could very easily have been set into the clay

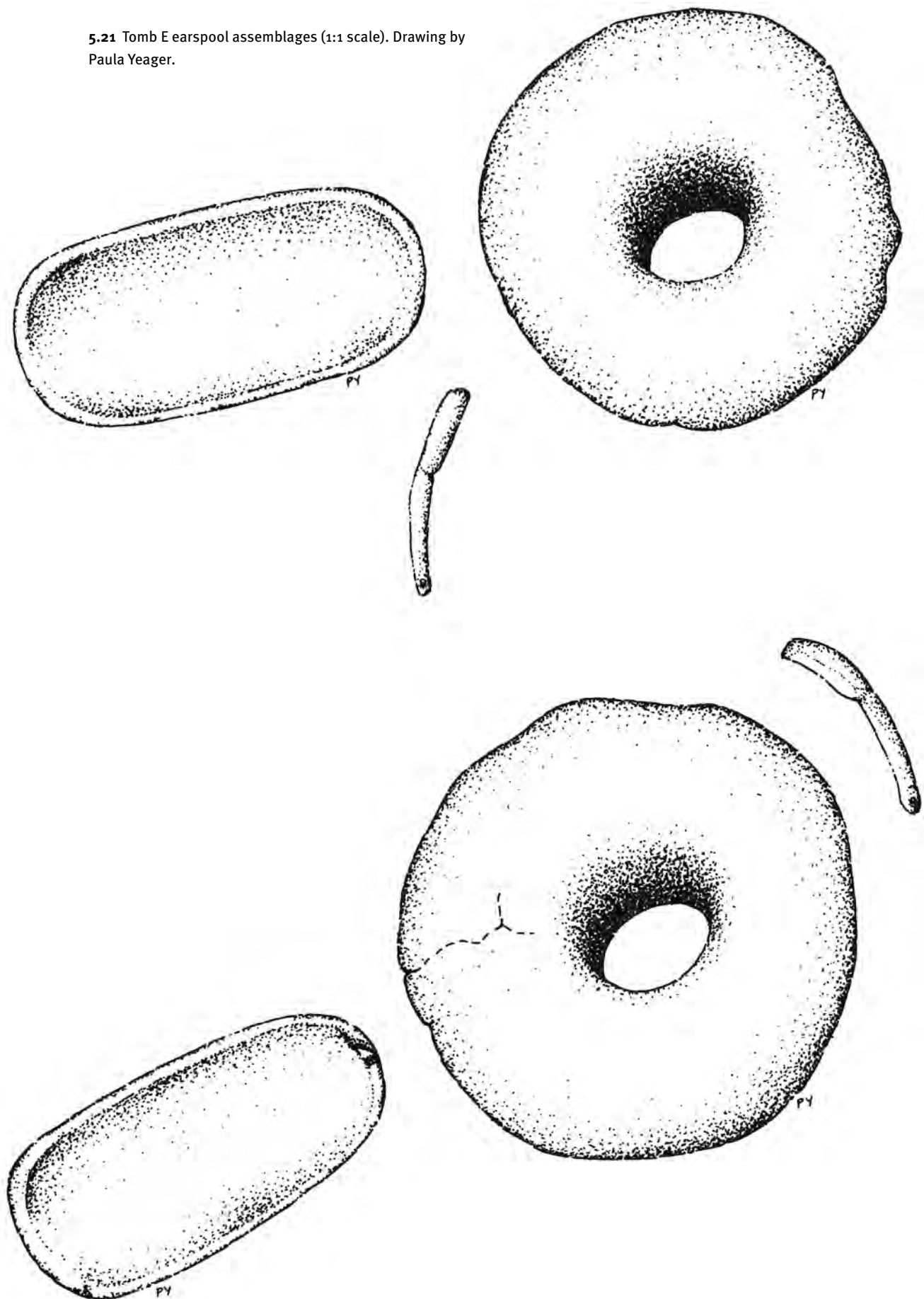
of the structure." They did not guess which structure that might have been, and I have no further information. However, the nearest substantial structure may have the northern face of Mound A-2. The broken basalt plaque, about 40 cm in diameter ($17\frac{3}{4} \times 15\frac{1}{2}$ in.), was carved in relief with a stylized embryo face (Fig. 5.24). There seem to be two sets of eyes, one on the horizontal line formed by the conjunction of nose and upper lip, and the other above. The lower eyes have notched, upward-curving brows, and the upper set is surmounted by an axolotl-like brow that supports another oval, upward-curving element. This complexity is more characteristic of Middle Formative embryo images than earlier ones. If it came from the north side of the mound, it may have marked it as an place of gestation and/or rebirth.

In any event, the Phase IV offerings in Mound A-2 seem to reflect a basic theme of the cyclical processes of life and death. Celts inseminate the earth, which floats over the watery underworld.

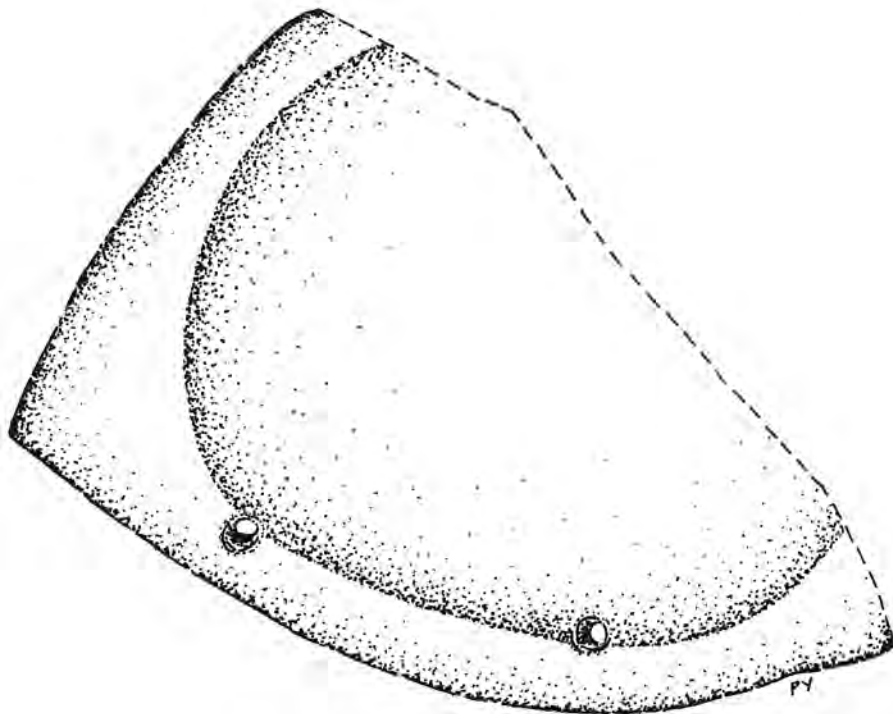
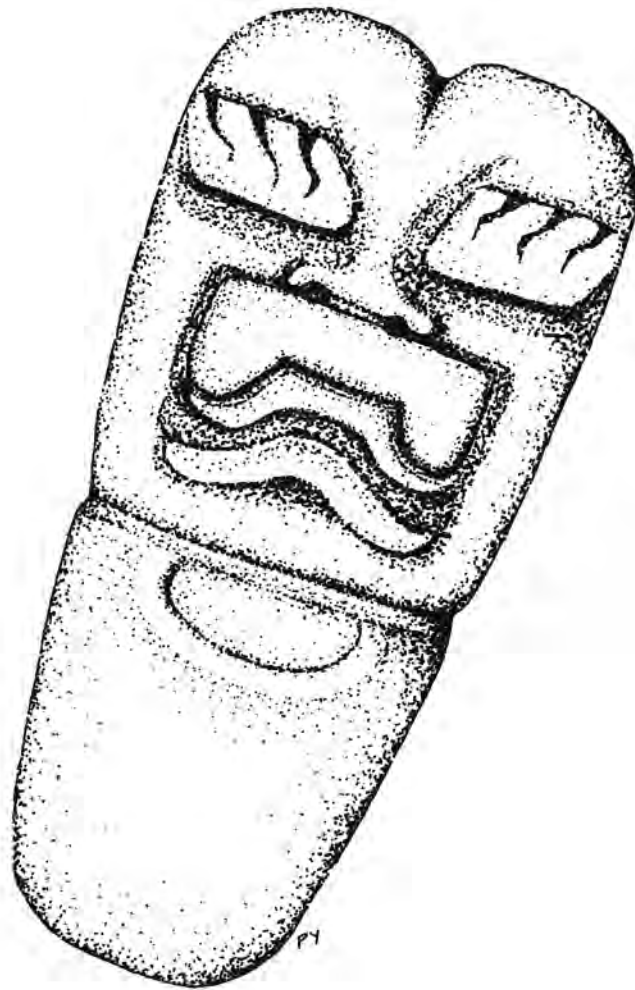
5.20a and b The offerings in Tomb E (one-quarter actual size). Artist's reconstruction of relative positions is approximate. Drawing by Paula Yeager.



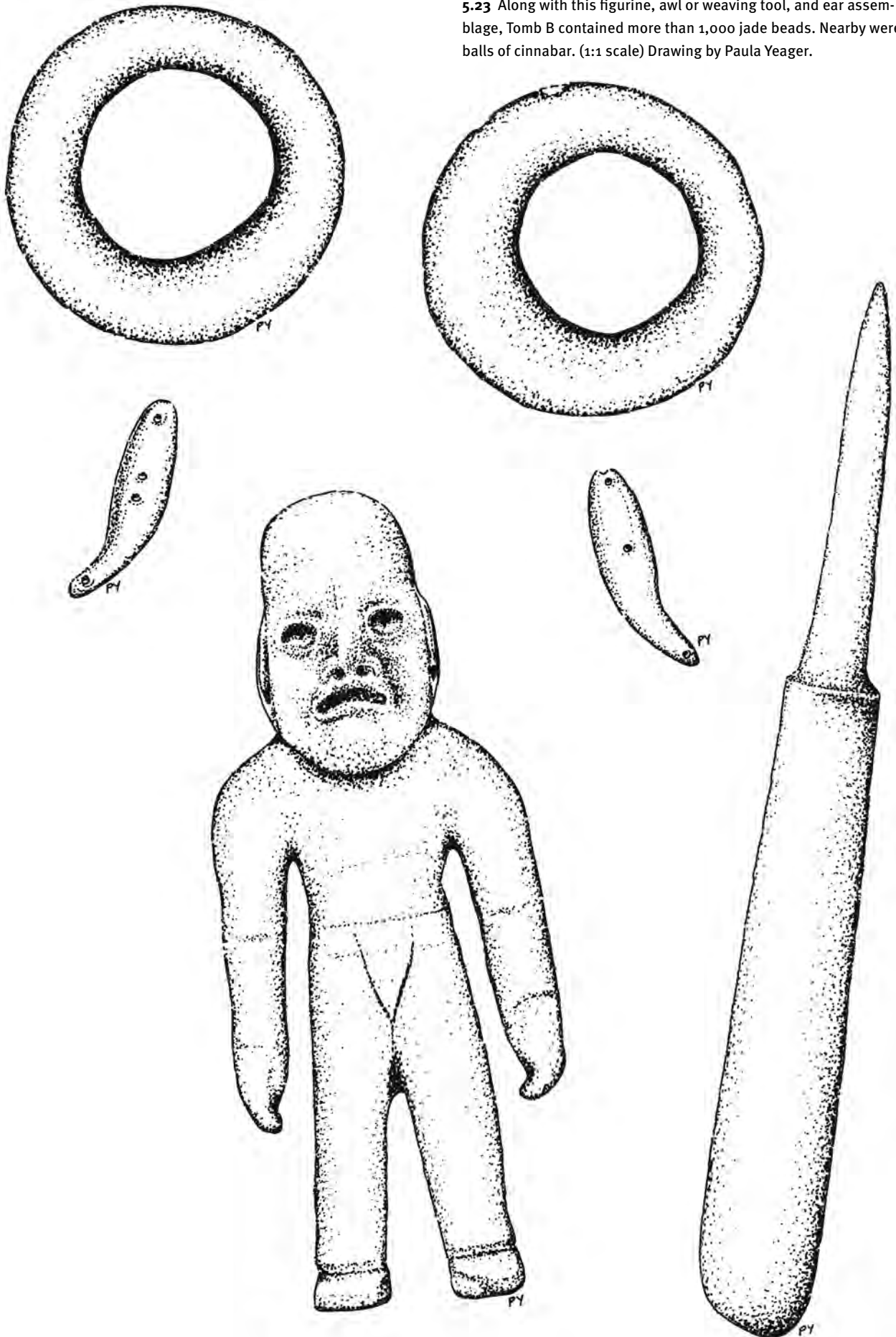
5.21 Tomb E earspool assemblages (1:1 scale). Drawing by Paula Yeager.



5.22 Tomb E embryo axe, jade skull, and mirror fragment (1:1 scale). Because the skull was never photographed and is apparently missing, its form is purely imaginary. Drawing by Paula Yeager.



5.23 Along with this figurine, awl or weaving tool, and ear assemblage, Tomb B contained more than 1,000 jade beads. Nearby were balls of cinnabar. (1:1 scale) Drawing by Paula Yeager.



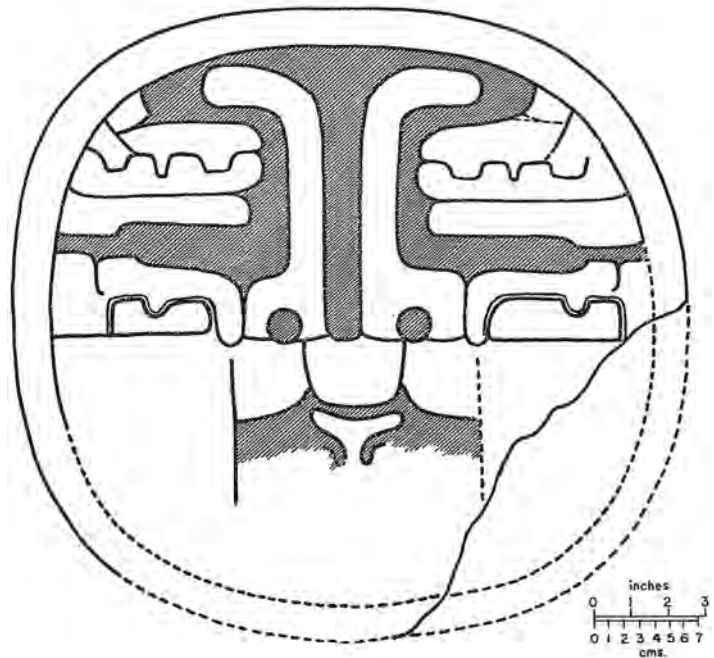
Embryo and skull designs clarify the terminations of these cycles within the context of tomblike offerings. Human figures sit or stand in disciplined poses, suggesting some sort of mastery of mind over the struggles of the body. The frogs, clams, flower, eagle, and hands in Tomb A prefigure a Tlalocan-type paradise, whether of this world or an afterlife.

Mound A-3: Midwife One Eagle, “Embryo Woman”

South of the enclosed court and on the centerline, Mound A-3 was enlarged in Phase IV in the form of a squared oval. A-3 was smaller than A-2 and was not underlain by a massive offering. However, a mosaic pavement was placed at its southern edge and was left uncovered—thus visible—during Phase IV. Buried within the mound was a series of remarkable caches.

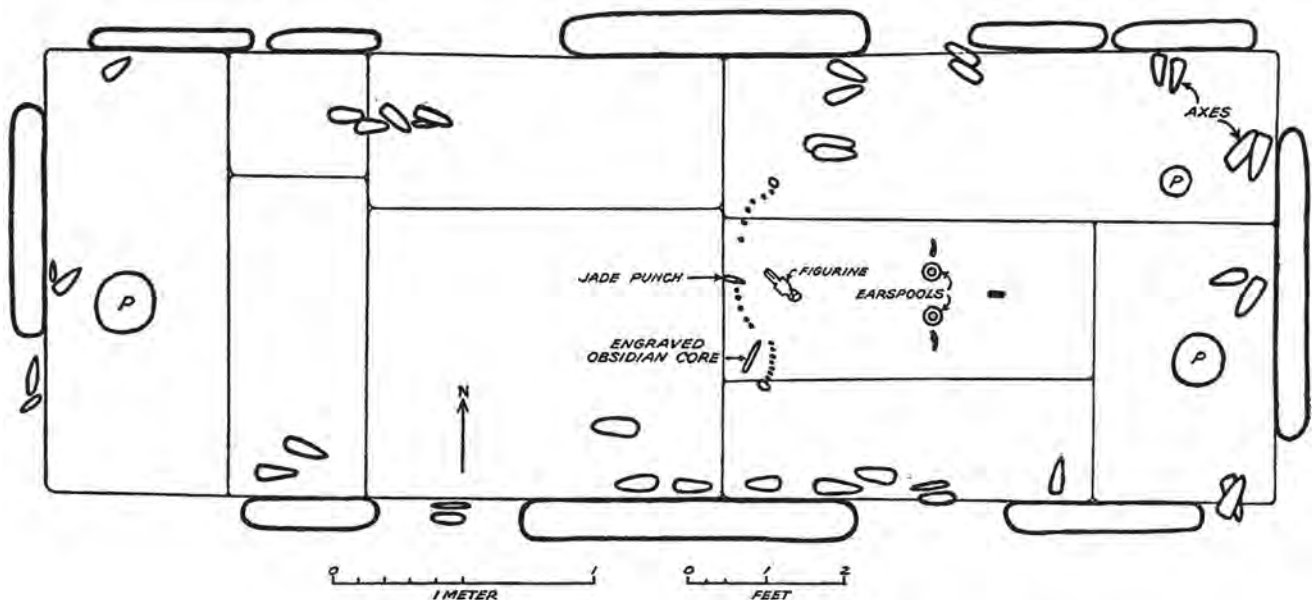
The fascinating offerings in Mound A-3 include those in Tomb C (1943-G), the so-called child’s tomb, (Tomb D, or 1943-L), and the group of four figurines of very young humans (1943-M). When considered as a unit, they indicate the existence of a very prominent woman and tell us something of how her identity was constructed.

The northernmost (and highest, at about 60 cm below the surface) feature that Drucker encountered in the excavation of Mound A-3 was an enclosure made of sandstone slabs and embedded in red clay (Fig. 5.25). This is called Tomb C and also



5.24 Plaque 1 depicts a stylized embryo face. It was carved in low relief in a concave basalt slab. Original location is unknown but thought to be near the north side of Mound A-2. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 62 (public domain).

5.25 Plan of Tomb C, possibly a memorial to “1 Eagle, Embryo Woman.” Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 72 (public domain).



the sandstone cist. Nine well-fitted slabs of various sizes comprised the floor. Ten slabs set vertically partially enclosed the sides, and five covered the roof. The long axis of the 5.2 x 1.8 m rectangle ran east-west, transverse to the site's axis, unlike the tomb features in Mound A-2. It contains Offering 1943-G: a wealth of greenstone—twenty-eight jade celts, along with nine serpentine celts—that lay outside of a huge bed of cinnabar. Like a layer of blood-infused tissue, the cinnabar mass covered a cache of jade regalia: a pair of incised earspools, ear pendants, a punch, duck head tubular beads, two jades resembling turtle carapaces, a cache of tiny, baby-sized jade ornaments, and a serpentine figurine of a female. This “tomb” also contained a crystal skull and other objects of rare quartz. Several important tropes in this assemblage point to its commemoration of a female midwife-diviner: the female figurine, the embryo earspools, and jade belt arrayed in the pseudoburial, the use of rock crystal, the numbers 9 and 28, and the marine imagery.

These objects seem to have been placed in the tomb as if they were on a body, and the individual referred to seems to have been female. So that the objects are clearly visible, the offering is presented here in the following sections: “head” region (Fig. 5.26), the “torso” or “girdle” region (Fig. 5.27a and b), the jade bead “apron” (Fig. 5.28), a sample celt (Fig. 5.29), and three of the vessels found in the tomb (Fig. 5.30). Drucker described the arrangement of the items as follows.

As will be apparent upon reference to the accompanying plan of the cist and its contents . . . the objects in the cinnabar bed lay in such positions relative to each other as to suggest mortuary offerings or a burial. The tube at the east end suggests a hair pipe or similar ornament, and the ear spools and associated objects were about where one would expect to find them on either side of a skull. The serpentine figurine might be supposed to have lain on the lower chest, with the beads and other specimens representing a girdle. (Drucker 1952:71)

Follensbee (2000) has clarified that many female figurines of clay wear precisely such a cord or girdle around the hips. However, images of males are never shown with such a low cord. The female identity of the individual commemorated by means of regalia is reinforced by the gender of the figurine. Follensbee (112-13) has identified the serpentine figurine as female because of her inverted U

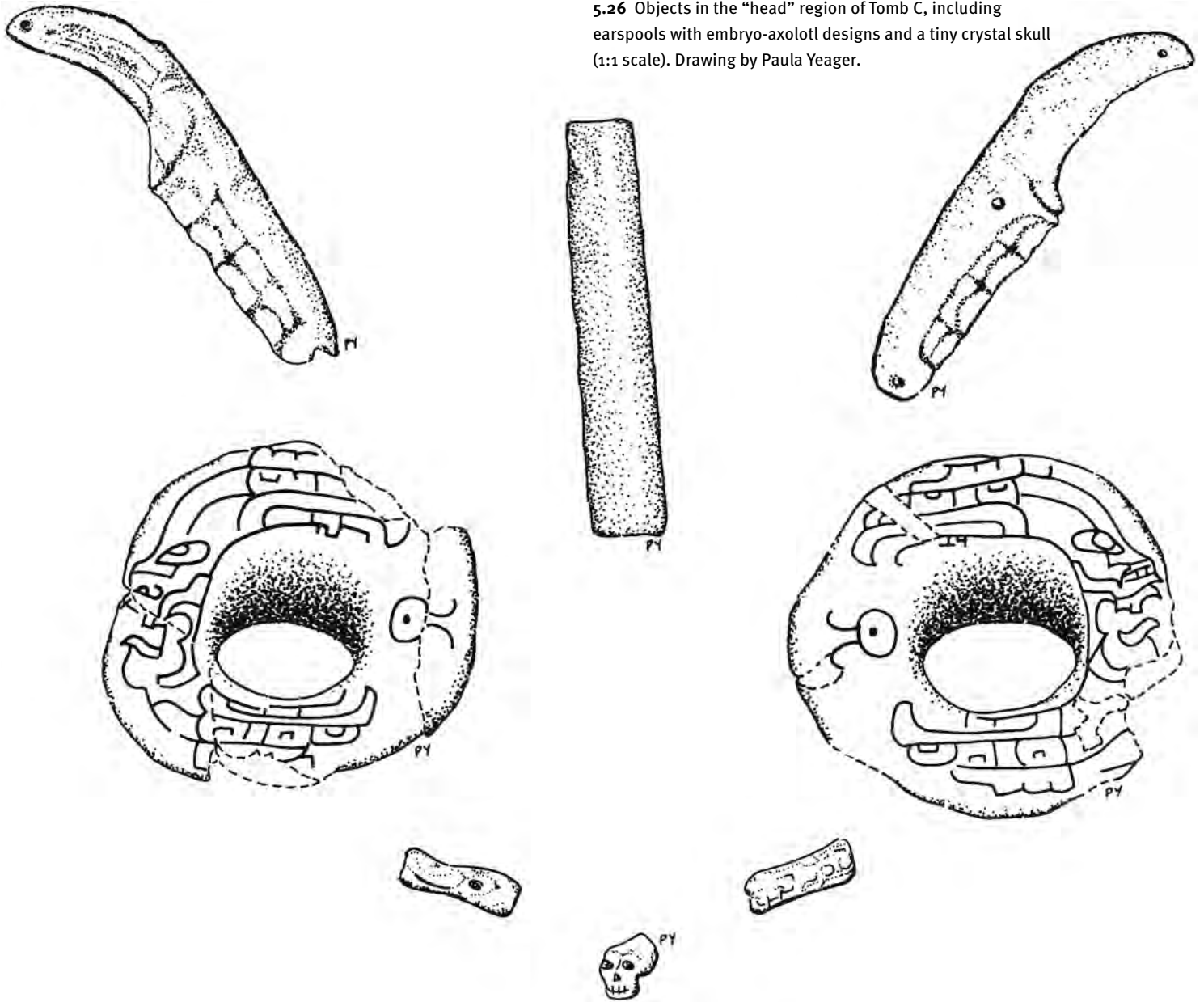
hairline, the pinched waist, soft chest, pubic Y, and upper armband. Moreover, incised on her limbs are several U shapes, or womb signs (see section on the U symbol in Chapter 8). Long, droplet-shaped jade pendants like those in this deposit are also associated with female regalia (Follensbee 2000). These long droplets take the form of deer jaws. Follensbee also identified the jade punch as a possible weaving tool, which would logically be associated with a woman (although a similar awl was in the sandstone coffer with a male figurine).

The earspools bear a design that is not uniquely associated with women but does seem to refer to a person knowledgeable of gestation and birth. Each of the two finely incised jade earspools (Drucker 1952:160, Fig. 46b) shows a magnificent embryo face in profile, with sharp teeth. Curving shapes surround the mouth. The elongated embryo head wraps around the top and bottom of the earspool, its forms terminating in serpent heads wearing axolotl brows. Opposite the embryo face is a dotted circle with two sprouts, probably a maize seed. Later, in Maya civilization, regalia was often inscribed with personal names; these earspools may have referred to the memorialized female as something like “life force woman.”

The four small quartz objects and the small crystal skull in this tomb may have been the divination stones used by this important woman. It is interesting to compare the rock crystal objects in this “tomb” with those in a Late Preclassic tomb at Kaminaljuyú: four quartz stones were found in the tomb of a person with a large, jade mosaic bird mask at Mound E-III-3 (Tomb 2). The quartz stones were heaped as if in a bundle with several other objects, including some bits of carved bone and the teeth of a porcupine fish (Shook 1952:15). In a discussion of the bird mask, Julia Guernsey (2006b:106) links these stones to those that Bishop Diego de Landa reported the Yucatec Maya carried in small bundles and used for casting lots for divination. To her, the presence of the “stones of light,” *am*, along with the bird mask, suggests that the individual in the tomb was a shaman.

Returning to Tomb C, La Venta's sole engraved obsidian core is in the Tomb C pseudoburial. The incised image is that of a “crested raptorial” bird (possibly an eagle or hawk) in flight or striking its quarry (Drucker 1952:169–170). As mentioned above, in La Venta Bundle 2, associated with the seated figurine of a female wearing a mirror were

5.26 Objects in the “head” region of Tomb C, including earspools with embryo-axolotl designs and a tiny crystal skull (1:1 scale). Drawing by Paula Yeager.

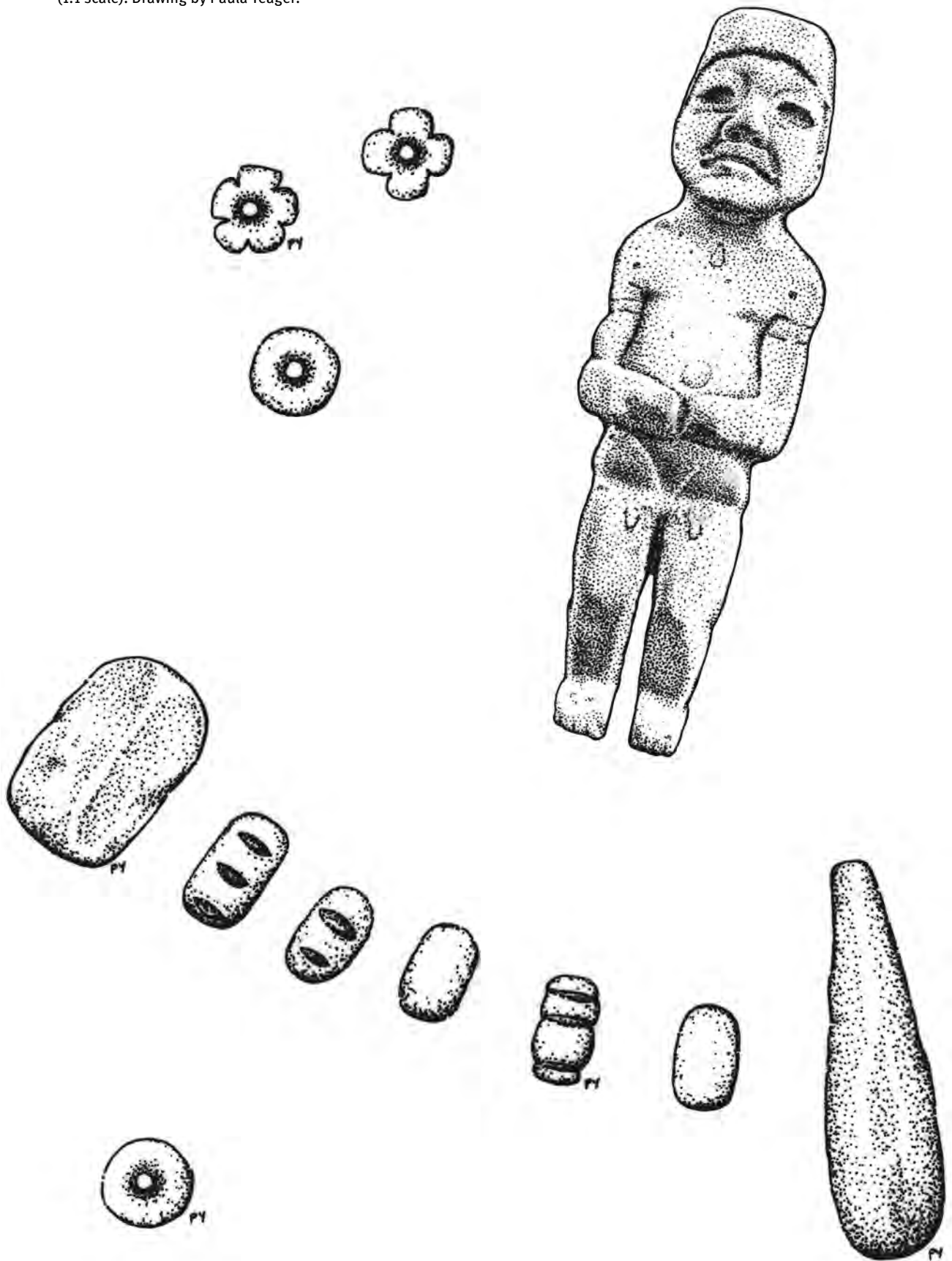


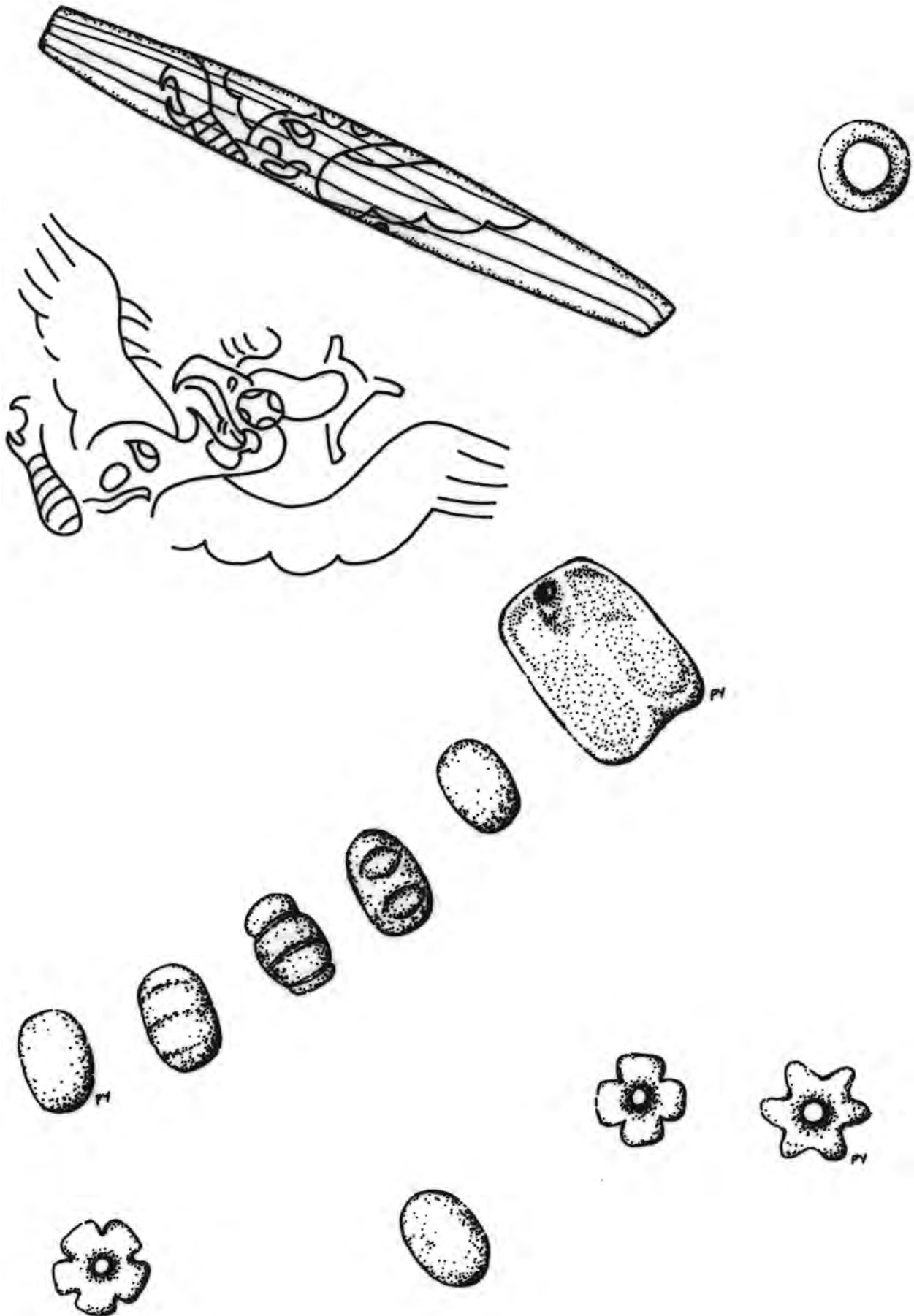
earspools carved with raptorial bird designs.²¹ In his discussion of the “Principal Bird Deity” (addressed in the U isotopy section of Chapter 8), Nicholas Hellmuth (1986) proposed that the image of the bird taxonomically represents a laughing hawk. This possibility provides an interesting allusion to healing. The hawk appears in the *Popol Vuh* as one of a series of messengers who deliver the summons of the underworld lords to the Hero Twins. The twins shoot him, and he demands that they heal him before he relays the message. Thus, the hawk was the Twins’ first “patient.”

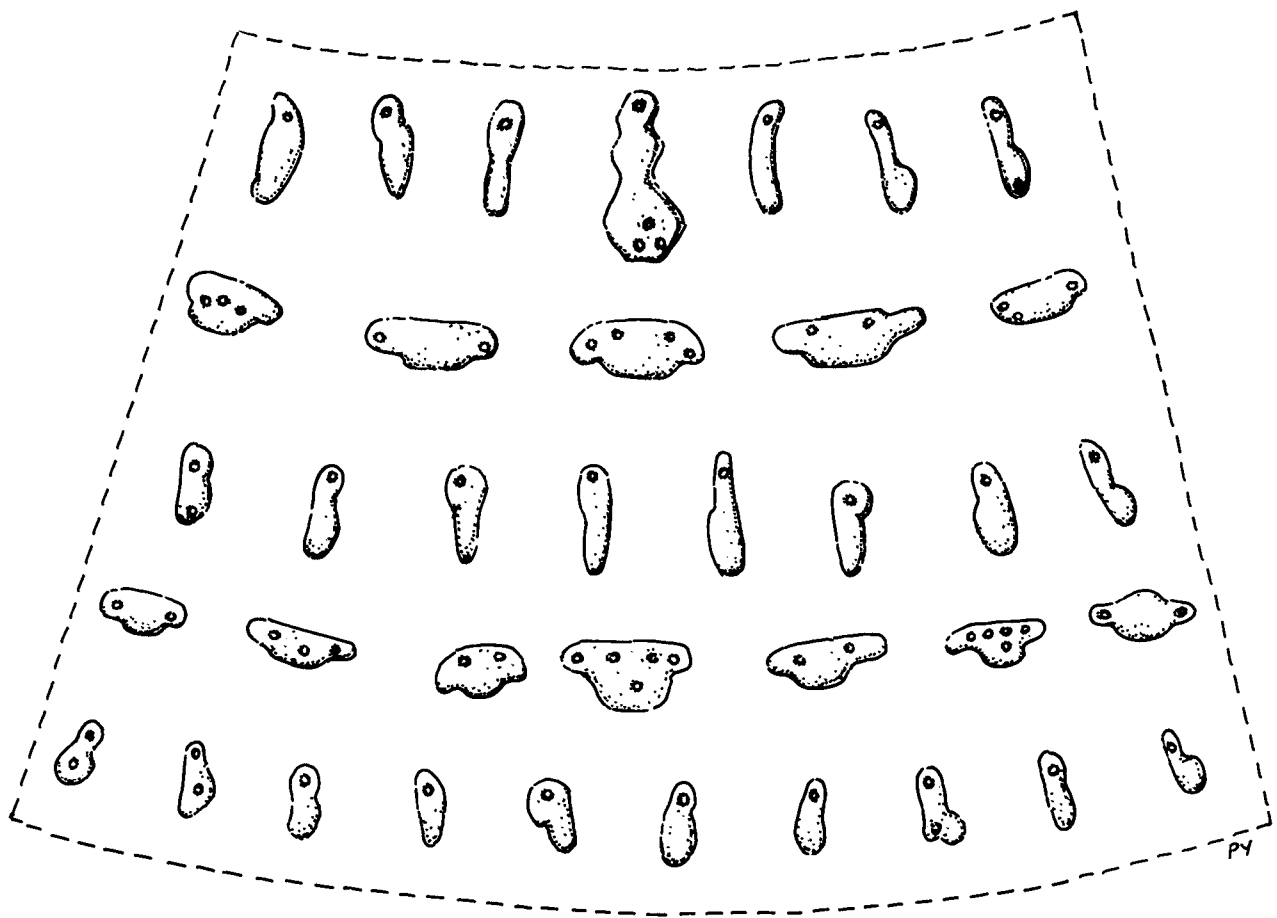
Other evidence suggests that the woman com-

memorated at Tomb C was a midwife and healer. Readers will recall that there were twenty-nine layers of serpentine in the Phase II massive offerings. The number 29 can be used in connection with lunar counts in Mesoamerica, and Drucker (1952) mentioned that the number of layers might have a lunar association. There were nine fitted sandstone slabs on the floor of Tomb C, the same number of sandstone slabs that underlay the offerings in the first phase at El Manatí, centuries earlier. Nine is the approximate count of lunations in a gestation cycle. Thus the numbers involved with the configuration of the cist and the celt offering suggest

5.27a and b Objects in the torso, or girdle, region of Tomb C (1:1 scale). Drawing by Paula Yeager.







5.28 Jade spangles from Tomb C that seem to have been attached to an apron (1:1 scale). Drawing by Paula Yeager.

knowledge of lunar and gestational cycles—and possibly a female identity for the individual honored in Tomb C.

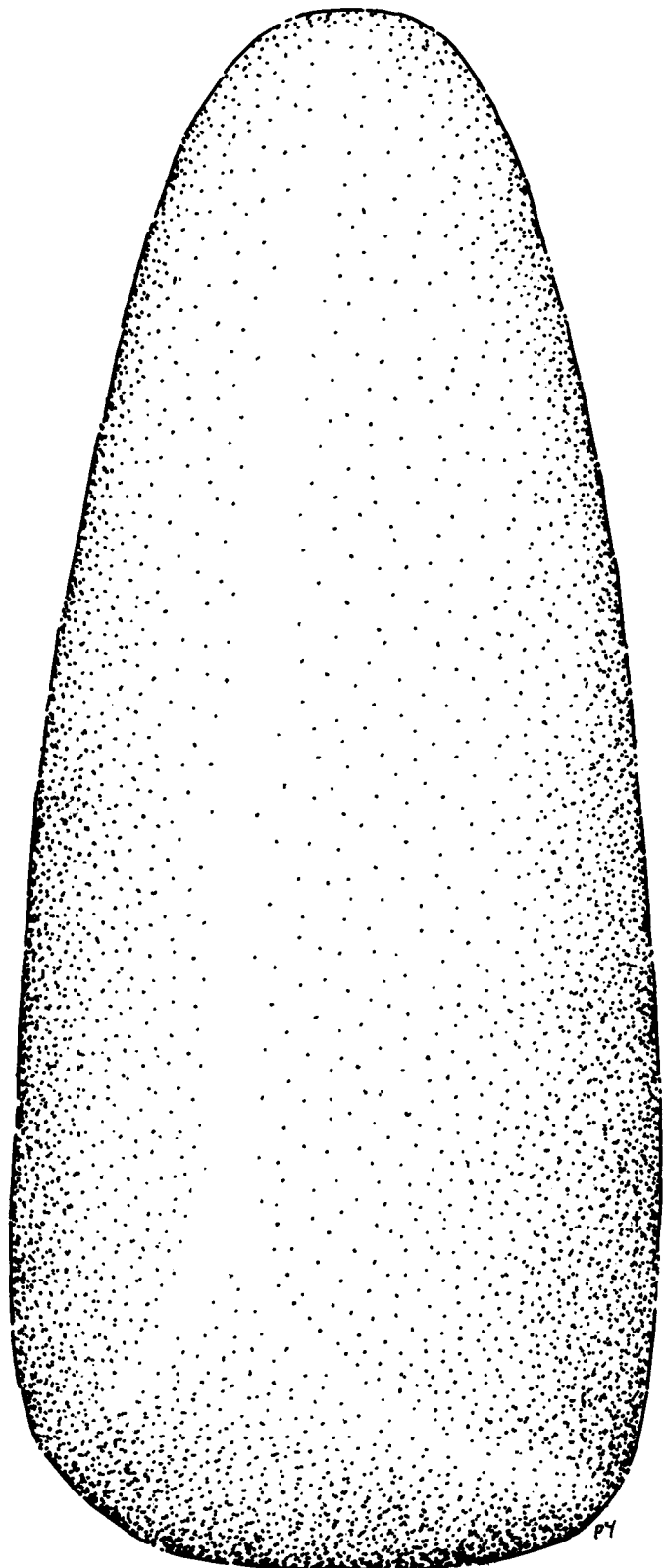
Furthermore, the combination of small quartz stones and bird imagery was also associated with marine symbols, which in turn probably referred to a female supernatural. The skeuomorphic jade animals in Tomb C included several water creatures: the duck heads, turtle shells, axolotl brows, and serpent. As in Tomb A (1942-A/the basalt column tomb) with its jade frog and clamshell, there seems to be an association of water creatures, and possibly birds, with female figurines and with divination tools (in one case a stone mirror, and in the other, five quartz stones). As the next chapter will develop in more detail, such marine imagery probably referred to the Olmec ancestor of the modern Mixe “goddess” Higiny (Life), who governs bodies of water, fishing, midwives, and procreation through sexual union.

The constellation of symbols in Tomb C is also similar to those surrounding the Postclassic Mixtec goddess of midwives, Lady 1 Eagle. As Boone (2007:200) points out, near the creator pair within a great circular hearth on *Codex Borgia* page 41 was a trecena sign, Eagle. The scene is part of the creation episode involving the first human sacrifice and Quetzalcoatl’s penis perforation, which nourished the creators Tonacatecuhtli/Tepeyollotl and Chalchiuhtlicue, “because 1 Eagle is also the day name of the aged Mixtec goddess associated with groundwater, sweatbaths, and procreation (roughly equivalent to the Aztec Chalchiuhtlicue and Toci-Tlazolteotl), who is sometimes linked to the western direction.” Byland and Pohl (1994:173–174) report that Lady 1 Eagle was associated with the segment of the Calendar Round that was linked to human fertility and reproduction. Physicians and midwives worshiped her. Similarly, owners of sweatbaths paid homage to her. Finding an entire

set of symbols—the U shape, divination stones, marine imagery as a reference to bodies of water, and an eagle—associated with females in three traditions widely separated in time and space is really remarkable. But there they are, and that is not all.

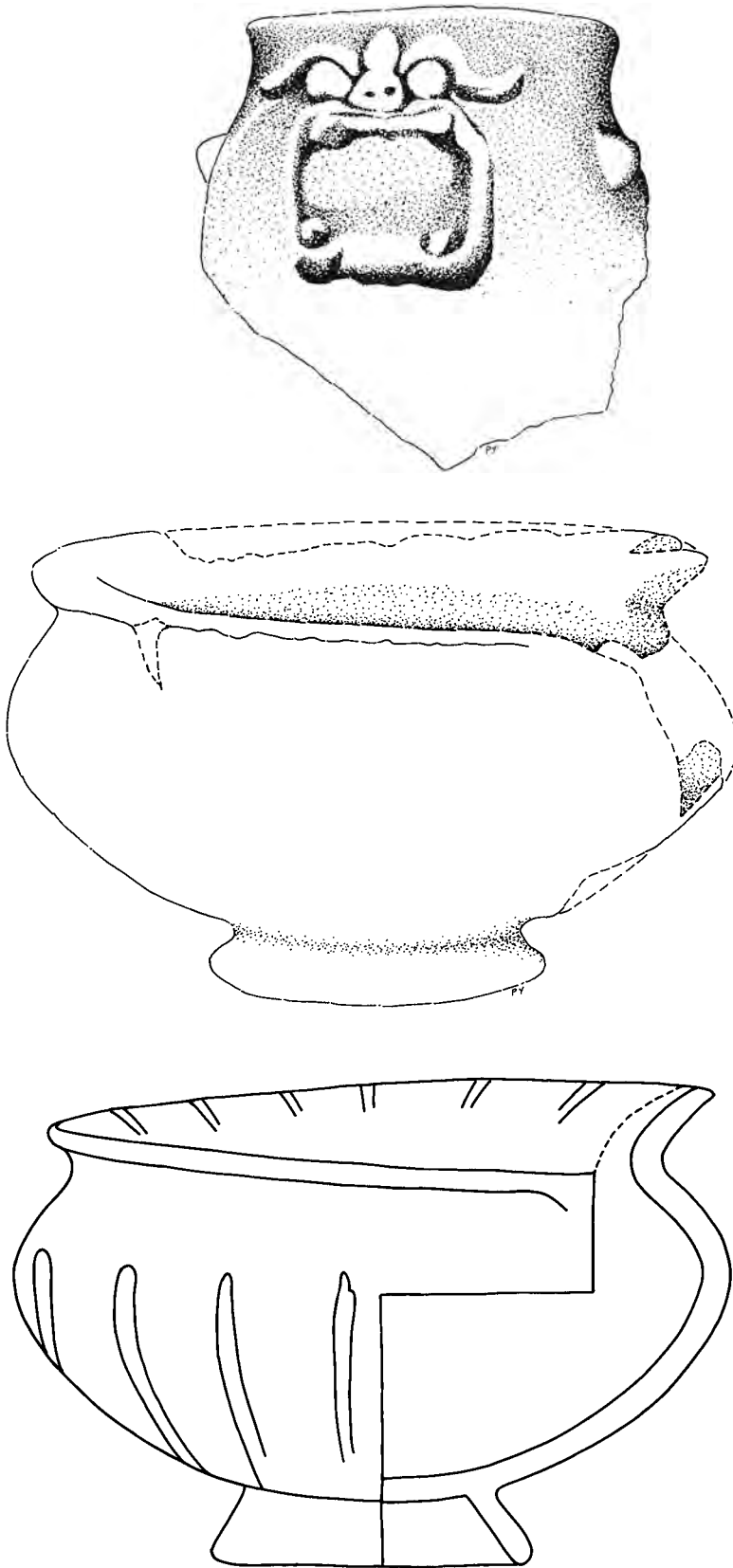
South of Tomb C were four offerings placed in a four-cornered configuration flanking the center-line. These were called Offerings 1943-H, I, J, and K (Fig. 5.31). They contained two serpentine celts, a sandstone “vessel,” a small jade mosaic plaque, and an amber pendant. Above these buried items, a stone cylinder rested on top of the mound (Fig. 5.32). Finally, 6 m farther south was a 20–25 cm deep bed of cinnabar about 30 x 50 cm across, with additional cinnabar feathering out beyond it (Fig. 5.33). The cinnabar covered a pseudoburial of child-size regalia. The excavators called this Tomb D and Offering 1943-L. Like Tomb C, it also ran transverse to the central axis. Just 1 m south of Tomb D was a cache of four serpentine figurines, designated 8, 9, 10, and 11, and Offering 1943-M (Fig. 5.34). Drucker (1952:157–159) noticed that one of them seemed infantile (Figurine 10), and that Figurine 11 had arms folded across its chest like a similar piece in the Covarrubias collection. Covarrubias (1957) referred to his piece as “embryonic” in character. I have identified it as a human fetus (Tate and Bendersky 1999). And independently, Follensbee (2000:108–115) identified Figurines 8 and 9 as female children. Thus, a progression from fetus to infant to young girl to older girl is clearly shown in this group. This progression may well have been intended to culminate in the figurine of an older female memorialized in Tomb C (Tate 1996).

If all the offerings in Mound A-3 commemorated aspects in the life of an important female from an unborn state to adulthood, we must consider them as amplifying the significance of the two monuments adjacent to this mound. “Stela” 1—the horizontal, sarcophagus-like monument containing the image of a female (Follensbee 2000:163)—was found just west of Mound A-3, on the surface of the site, on an east-west line with the buried “tomb” itself. The complete frontal figure of a woman was carved within an elongated niche (Fig. 5.35). On her frontal feet, the toes point downward, suggesting that she is not standing but reclining within the niche. Follensbee suggests that her eyes are closed and she is deceased. Above the niche, on the outer plane of the monument, is a low relief consist-



5.29 One of 28 serpentine and nine jade celts from Tomb C (1:1 scale). Drawing by Paula Yeager.

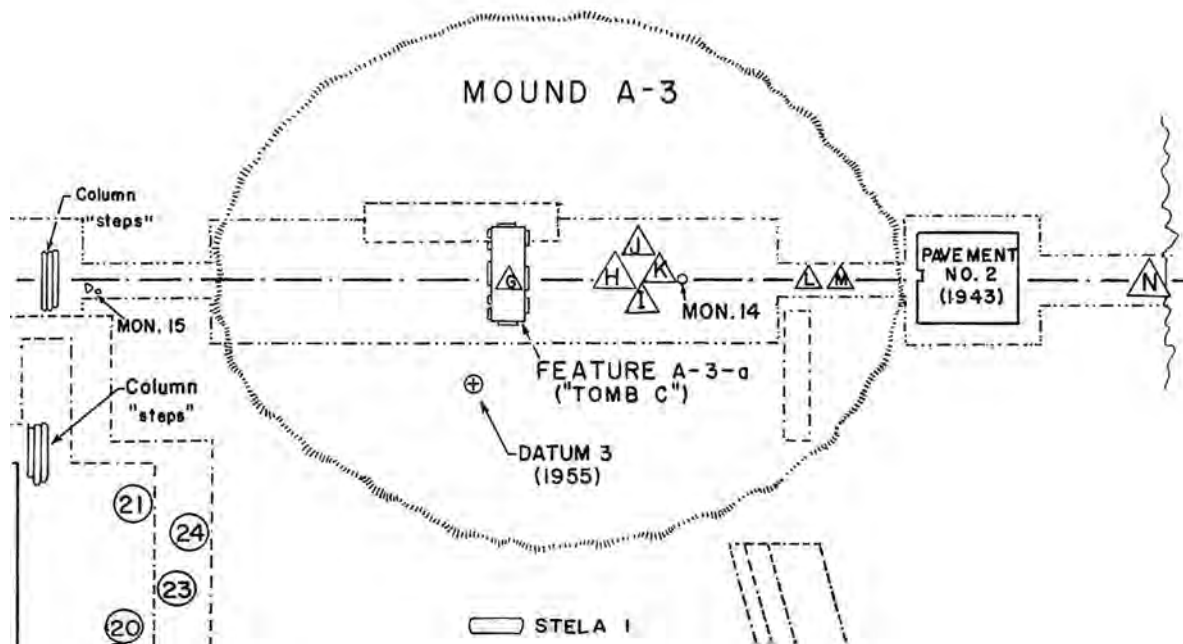
5.30 Three vessels from Tomb C (1:2 scale, half of actual size).
Drawings by Paula Yeager.



ing of inverted U shapes under diagonal bands and a gum design, which Follensbee relates to the crocodilian on Monument 6 (167). This is not as clear to me, but the design definitely relates to the other low-relief upper frame devices, such as that on the overhanging ledge of Altar 4 or those on monuments from Tres Zapotes and Izapa. Returning to the issue of the female, Follensbee points out the association of this monument to the female “memorial” within.

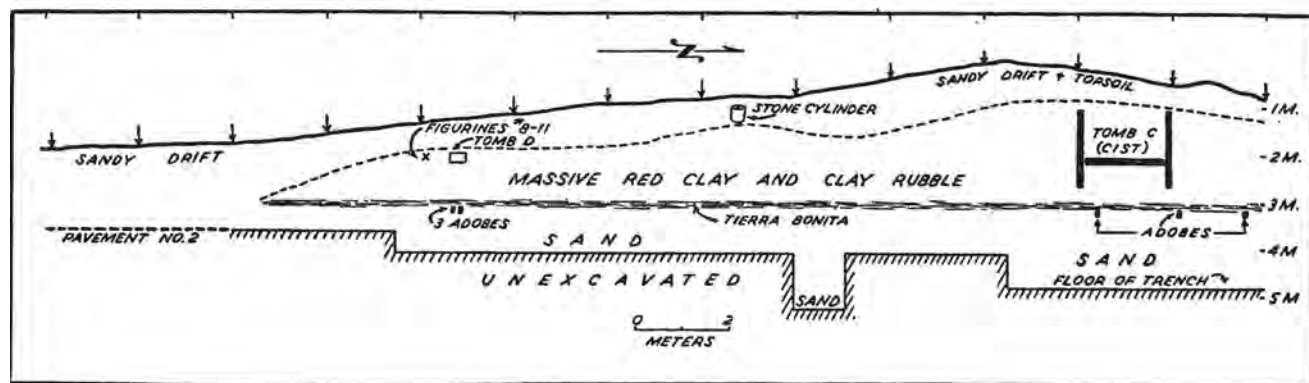
The other monument associated with Mound A-3 is Mosaic Pavement 2 (Fig. 5.36). It was nearly contiguous with the southern edge of the mound and about 50 cm deeper than the base of the mound. Because the northern stones showed a worn appearance, Drucker thought the pavement might have been exposed. Although the material (serpentine) and the design are very similar to the mosaic pavements of Phase II, it was not given the elaborate envelopment of the earlier pavements. Also, some of the blocks were missing, including any that might have formed the diamond-and-fringe pattern seen on the earlier version. Like the others, it was associated with a celt offering (Offering 1943-N), in this case 253 serpentine celtlike forms deposited on the centerline about 6 m south of the pavement (Drucker 1952:73–76). I contend that these pavements represent a female earth supernatural, as I will explain in the next chapter. There is enough evidence to propose that the “stela” of a female and this mosaic pavement (female earth surface and her flowery skirt) referred to either an actual woman who was honored in the “tombs” and offerings of Mound A-3 or to a supernormal female potency who governed the principle of transformative growth. The offerings adorned this being with both baby and adult regalia. It seems to have re-created her knowledge system, one that points to her as a midwife involved with divinatory skull-seeds, turtles, ducks, and metamorphosing embryo-axolotls.

As mentioned previously, Mound A-3 was just south of the enclosed court. It occupied a space that was initially bounded only on the south by the Earthen Pyramid. In chapter 8 we will explore the possibility that its mosaic pavement, or the “forecourt” north of A-3, served as a space for ritual performance.



5.31 Plan of Mound A-3. Tomb C (Offering 1943-G) contains the sandstone cist and the memorial to "1 Eagle, Embryo Woman." Note Mosaic Pavement 2 at the far right. The triangles infixed with letters refer to offerings found in 1943. Numbers in circles refer to offerings found in 1955. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 4 (public domain).

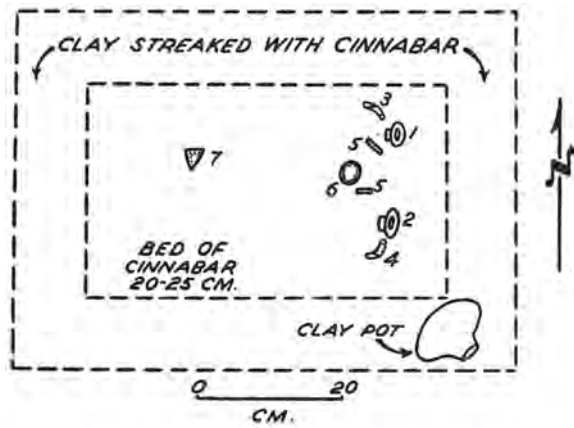
5.32 Profile of Mound A-3. Tomb C is evident on the right (north). Note that this profile and the plan view (Fig. 5.31) are oriented in opposite directions. Drucker 1952: Fig. 21 (public domain).



Women and the Unborn Return to Prominence

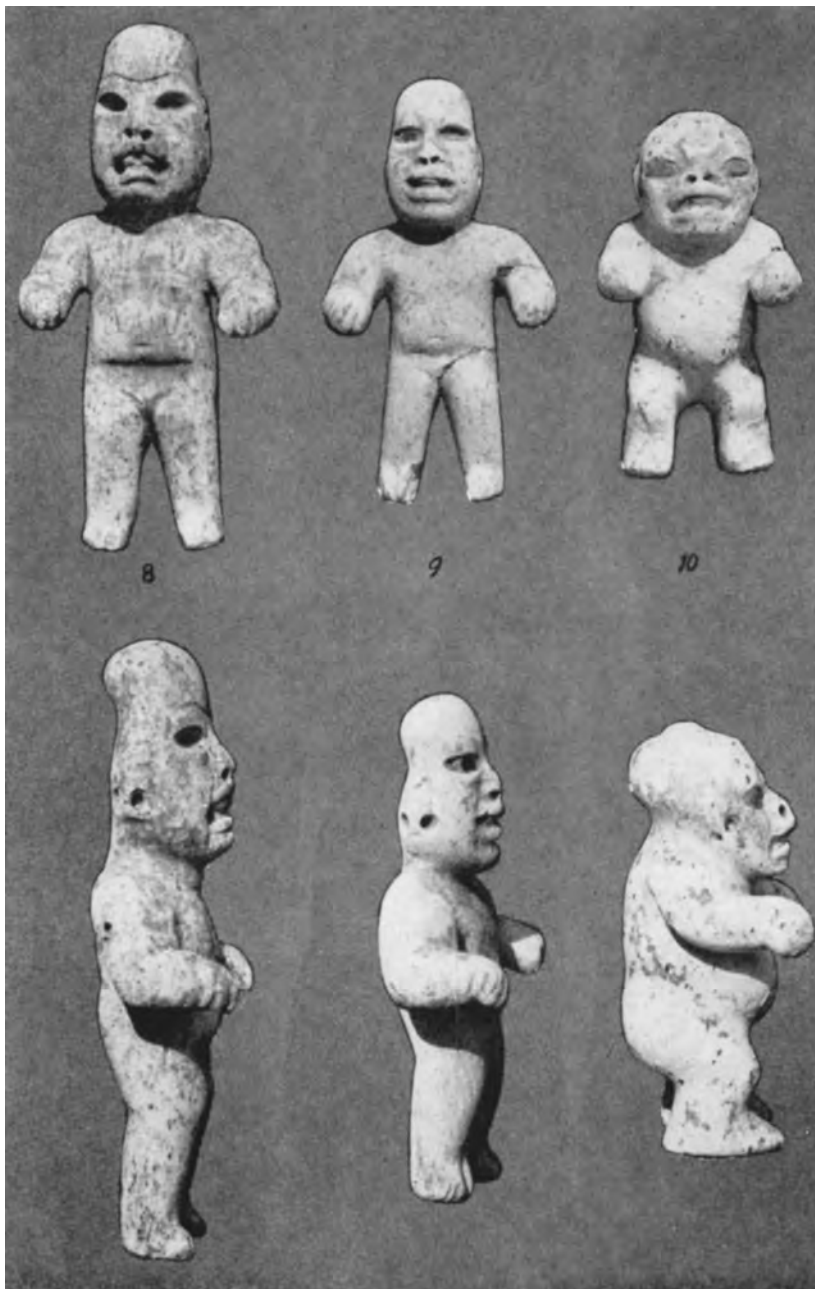
In the Initial Formative, ceramic sculptures of women dominated visual culture. Portrayals of pregnancy included separate fetuses inserted into figurines. Traditions were not uniform, however, and some figurine styles included more males than females. Usually the males played a role, either as a masked being or a ballplayer. By San Lorenzo A, based on what we have left of San Lorenzo's battered monuments, men rather than women were being forefronted. A few sculptures represent

women, such as the seated woman holding a snake (Monument 47). There are a few images of insemination, such as the embryo columns, some small fetus sculptures, and the formulation of the rain inseminator image (Monument 52). The thrones take the shape of cave-wombs. A single piece of jade regalia decorated with an embryo face hints that there may be more such items, but as far as we know, there was no zone seeded with caches as there had been earlier at El Manatí and as there would be at La Venta. Among the imagery at San Lorenzo are quite a few felines, many interacting



5.33 Within Mound A-3 was this small, tomblike configuration, Tomb D, which contained child-size regalia (Offering 1943-L). This was south of the adult regalia in Tomb C. Drucker 1952: Fig. 23 (public domain).

5.34 Figurines from Mound A-3, Offering 1943-M. From left to right, the figurines represent successively younger beings. Figurine 10 (top right) probably represents a neonate. Figurine 11 (drawing to right of photos) represents a fetus. Figurine 10 is 10 cm high. Drucker 1952: Plate 50 (public domain); drawing by author.



with human males. Overall, at San Lorenzo there seems to have been a shift away from ritual that monumentalized insemination and gestation, as seen at El Manatí, toward imagery that concretizes political power in the hands of males and their dynasties.

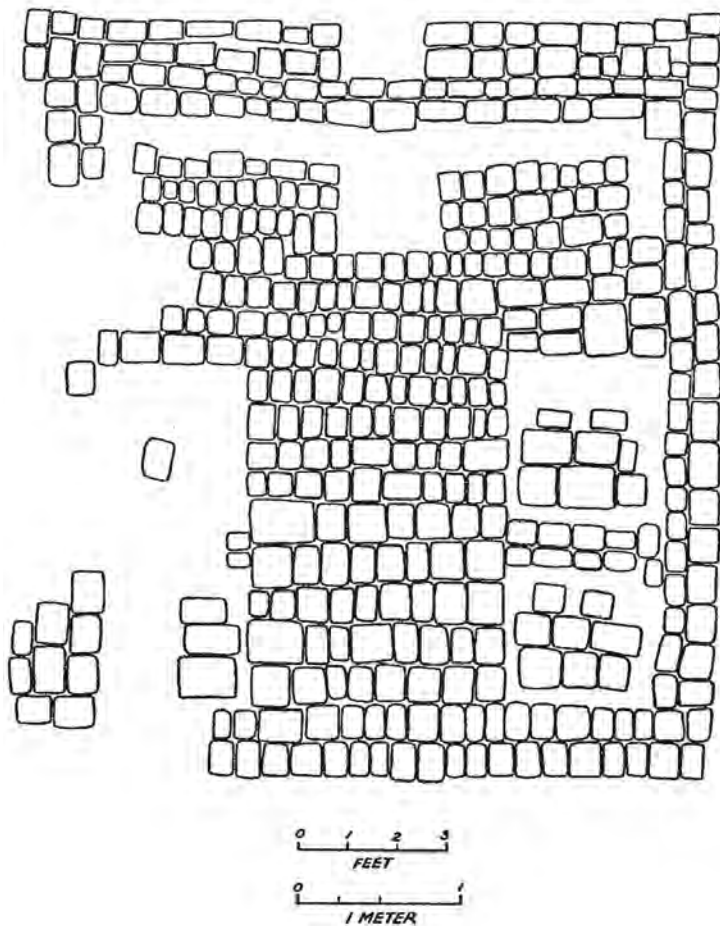
As La Venta began carving monuments and constructing Complex A, we find images of women in the Phase II offerings. I remain unconvinced of Milbrath's (1979) and Clewlow's (1974) reconstructions of the sculptural chronology but have no better one to offer. There are good and bad artists in every generation, early themes and styles can be resurrected, monuments were moved out of original contexts, and many of the monuments are so damaged that it is hard to know an order of manufacture. The importation of stone and its use as building material in the various phases tells us more than anything else of monumental chronology. We can say with some certainty that the quincunx earth-surface design (the mosaic pavements) initiates Phase II. By then La Venta was a shrine to earth-surface and water females (discussed in the next chapter). Embryo images appear on incised celts beginning in Phase III. Stone figurines of females appear with the first stone figurines in Phase II.

The preceding overview of Phase IV's highlights reveals a high degree of long-distance trade, innovation in terms of materials and building strategies, several new formats for monumental sculpture, and a significant focus on women and the unborn. In Phase IV, La Venta exploded with imagery of the human-maize seed, including the embryo-maize seed stelae (Monuments 25/26, 27, 87, 88, and possibly 15, 22, and 58), the embryo-skull pairings of Tombs C and E, and the celt in the form of the embryo (1943-F). Quite a few of these are carved in a new material, green schist. An incised embryo face on a Fine Paste shard may date to this phase (Drucker 1952: Fig. 35). The fetus figurine of 1943-M appeared at La Venta at this late date, although those excavated at San Lorenzo are probably hundreds of years earlier. Similarly, the colossal fetuses may have been carved in Phase IV, although the rare use of sandstone has ancient antecedents. Paralleling this rapid increase of human-maize-seed imagery was the deposition of pseudoburials that seem to function as memorials to specific individuals, several of them apparently women.



5.35 La Venta Stela 1, which was probably a horizontal monument. It was found to the west of Mound A-3. Photo by author.

In addition to the use of embryo and fetus images as essential components of ritual and probably political life, women were quite visible in Phase IV sculpture. At least five of ten stone figurines clearly depict females. Stela 5 shows an aged female (possibly supernatural) behind an encounter of two males. Stela 3, however, shows the encounter of a female and a male of apparently similar status (Follensbee 2000:176–189). It was placed within the enclosed court. Other Phase IV monuments depicted males, and the sandstone coffer (Monument 6) seems to refer exclusively to a male. But the presence of women and the unborn was certainly an integral element of La Venta's Phase IV ritual landscape. Before exploring the



5.36 An exposed mosaic pavement to the south of Mound A-3. Drucker 1952: Fig. 24 (public domain).

feminine associations of the massive offerings and mosaic pavements in Chapter 6, I want to make some observations about patterns of symbolism in some of La Venta's caches.

Discussion and Interpretation of Some Cached Configurations

Three patterns that emerged out of the study of La Venta's caches seem to serve as prototypes for later ritual practices. One concerns the possibility that an actual woman served as the historical antecedent for Postclassic female supernatural patrons of midwifery and sweatbaths. Another shows an early version of the role of the skull in rebirth imagery, present in the symbolism surrounding the birth of human-maize on Classic period Maya pottery. A third illuminates the Mesoamerican practice of caching objects in ritual spaces.

Eagle/Embryo Woman As a Midwife

If we compare the contents of the tomblike offerings, we find that the female figurines of Bundle 1, Bundle 2, and Tomb C were accompanied by jade skeuomorphs of aquatic creatures and eagles. The association of females with water seems to be central to Olmec thought, as will be developed below. Their relation to eagles is more surprising. Deposited with the Bundle 1 and Tomb C female figurines were objects incised with heads of raptorial birds. Both raptors were incised on a three-dimensional object—in one case, the incised obsidian core, and in the other, rectangular jade ear ornaments. The incised eagle images in the caches with the female figurines seem to function as a graphic symbol. There are males at La Venta who wear eagle headdresses, such as on Throne 4, so the eagle does not appear exclusively with women. However, the eagle-adorned male on Throne 4 emerges from a sweatbath/cave marked as a womb by its flowery umbilical cord, so he does seem to have made contact with a powerful female principle or being.²² Could the women portrayed by the female figurines in Tombs A and C be antecedents of the Mixtec supernatural Lady 1 Eagle, who was a goddess of sweatbaths (as on Altar 4), procreation, and midwives?

Embryo and Skull Pairing

Similarly, in the two caches in which a small stone skull is present, an embryo design appears on an associated object. This death-rebirth, or seed-skull, pairing is also found in the same caches as the eagles, apparently reiterating the role of the midwife as a healer who brings the spirit of the newborn across the threshold of life. This pairing did not occur only at La Venta; among the Olmec-style objects excavated by Stirling and Covarrubias at Cerro de las Mesas were the jade baby in the jade canoe with an incised embryos on its prow, and a stone skull (Stirling 1941:Plate VIII; Drucker 1955:32). As far as I know, these three are the only stone skulls excavated from Olmec sites or caches, and each of them is associated with an embryo image.²³

Caching as Enwombing

This exploration of the symbolic value of Olmec caches has suggested a way to think about cach-

ing in general. A cache is generally defined by an enclosure such as a vessel, box, tomb structure, or bundle, or by a zone of red pigment. In the case of a bundle, plant fiber encloses a crafted object. Each type of enclosure emulates a womb. At El Manatí, the wooden busts were packed with seeds and leaves, bundled, and deposited in the spring/womb. They were conceptual seeds that were “planted.” When humans plant seeds, our intention is to have them sprout, or to cause them to leave their state of passive potential and to exhibit active growth. The hundreds of celts at El Manatí and La Venta were conceptual seeds or fertilizing phalluses or cobs of maize—however they are best described, the meaning and function are similar. At La Venta, several caches made explicit this emphasis on “planting” into a ritual space (either earth or water) some crafted objects whose presence was meant to engender a state of “becoming”—to transform the place into “where somehow there is life.” The embryo and skull pairing seems to refer to the skull as a seed to be planted, and the embryo as one that has sprouted. The juxtaposition of greenstones and red cinnabar provides the two colors that may have been symbolic of the generation of life, as shown much later in the Aztec *Legend of the Suns*, when Quilaztli places the white bones that Quetzalcoatl

has resurrected from the underworld into a jade bowl and then drips his red blood into the green bowl (see Chapter 8). Caches are womblike configurations. A container or wrapper is inseminated with precious seedlike items, filled with red, blood-like pigment, and then placed in a ritual space. This ritual creates a place of conception and gestation of life. People “enwomb” the objects, causing a state of gestation that installs the ritual space with vital force.

In this chapter I have endeavored to map out how visual culture at La Venta developed through time. It has primarily been an examination of archaeologically retrieved materials, with some analogical interpretation. The lens through which Chapter 6 views La Venta shifts to one of ethnographic analogy. Focusing on the massive offerings and mosaic pavements—La Venta’s unique features—it proposes, through an analogy with descendants of the Olmec, the Mixe, that these functioned in performances as effigies of lake and earth female supernaturals, who in turn related to lunar and gestational counts and to divinatory practices. This leads to a final topic: feminine shamanic practices at La Venta.

Chapter 6

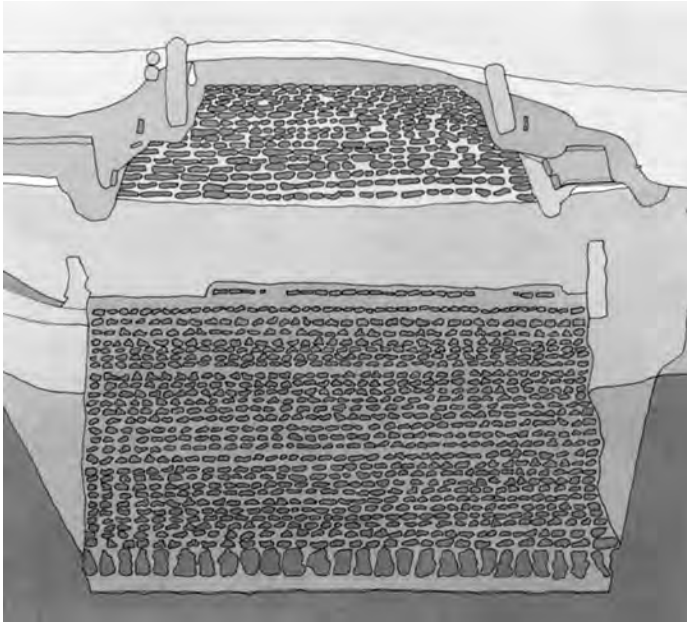
Female Water and Earth Supernaturals The Massive Offerings, Mosaic Pavements, and Mixe “Work of the Earth”

In Chapter 5, a close study of human figures and associated imagery revealed that several female figures were prominent in La Venta’s monumental art and in the pseudoburials. We also found an abundance of imagery of the unborn, primarily in monumental sculpture, but in caches as well. This chapter turns to the largest abstract sculptures of the site, the massive offerings and mosaic pavements, and considers what they might have represented, how these objects might have functioned, and why such enormous sculptures were undertaken (Fig. 6.1). In terms of method, it examines previous research and then couples a close scrutiny of the objects with an extensive ethnographic analogy. It explores the remarkable parallels between La Venta’s visual symbols and ritual practices of the Mixe, most of whose “shamans” are women. With these two methods of interpretation—an art historical attention to the forms and contexts of archaeological material, and the construction of analogies based on similar symbols—the placement of cached and visible forms at La Venta begins to form a coherent pattern.

This pattern is further addressed in Chapter 7, which proposes that six sets of sculptures formed a processional visual narrative, which in turn served as a setting for performances that transmitted knowledge. Chapter 8 compares the iconographic components of La Venta’s visual narrative to visual and verbal symbols contained in a fundamental scenario in Mesoamerican thought: the story of creation as a dynamic balancing act.

Why Construct the Massive Offerings?

As Philip Drucker and his colleagues suggested, the massive offerings of greenstone blocks formed the initial deposit of each of the major construction



6.1 A cross section of the southwest platform showing the basalt columns, adobe platform, the layers of clay that enveloped these, and the mosaic pavement as the top (twenty-ninth) layer of one of two Phase II massive offerings. After Coe 1968: 65.

phases at La Venta. When the first massive offering was built, La Venta was drawing upon a tradition established five hundred years earlier at El Manatí. At the earlier ritual center, nine large sandstone blocks had been fit into the bed of a spring at the foot of a mountain. These formed the foundation for a series of offerings of stone axes over rubber balls, along with bowls of clay and stone. The complexity of offerings at El Manatí evolved until the site's third phase, Mayacal. Its dates are 1200–1000 bc, so it may be partially contemporary with La Venta's first sunken court. During the Mayacal phase, ritual participants interspersed bundles of fiber containing seeds that had been packed around wooden effigy busts of human figures with wooden scepters, rubber balls, and disarticulated infant bones. We can infer that the axes and seeds, and even the human busts, were intended to conceptually inseminate the spring or to promote germination in a "like causes like" ritual perspective. Returning to La Venta, the first phase of La Venta's enclosed court was later disturbed (leaving us with little evidence of its offerings). By the second phase, however, the scale of the massive offering and mosaic pavements as subterranean platforms for

offerings was immense (Fig. 6.2). According to our current knowledge, no one in Mesoamerica had created a comparable series of conceptual statements or had imported stone on this scale. We have to ask why the massive offerings were built.

The excavators interpreted the purpose of the massive offerings as a simulation of jade or wealth.

These massive offerings indicate some rather unusual patterns in Olmec culture. . . . The dressed and polished green serpentine blocks used in the massive offerings may have been intended to simulate huge offerings of jade. Then there is the sheer magnitude of these offerings. Their size alone must have made them noteworthy and valuable in terms of the human effort involved in transporting such large quantities of stone over great distances, not to mention the labor expended in preparing the stone for use. (Drucker et al. 1959:132–133)

Such an interpretation of the massive offerings was typical until Kent Reilly made a bold proposal. In 1994 he suggested that if Complex C represented a mountain or volcano, as Robert Heizer (1968) had proposed, then the massive offerings, consisting of multiple courses of green stone laid in enormous, clay-lined pits, must have represented lakes. By constructing mountain and lake effigies, the La Venta earth sculptors created a conceptual cosmogram (Reilly 1994a).

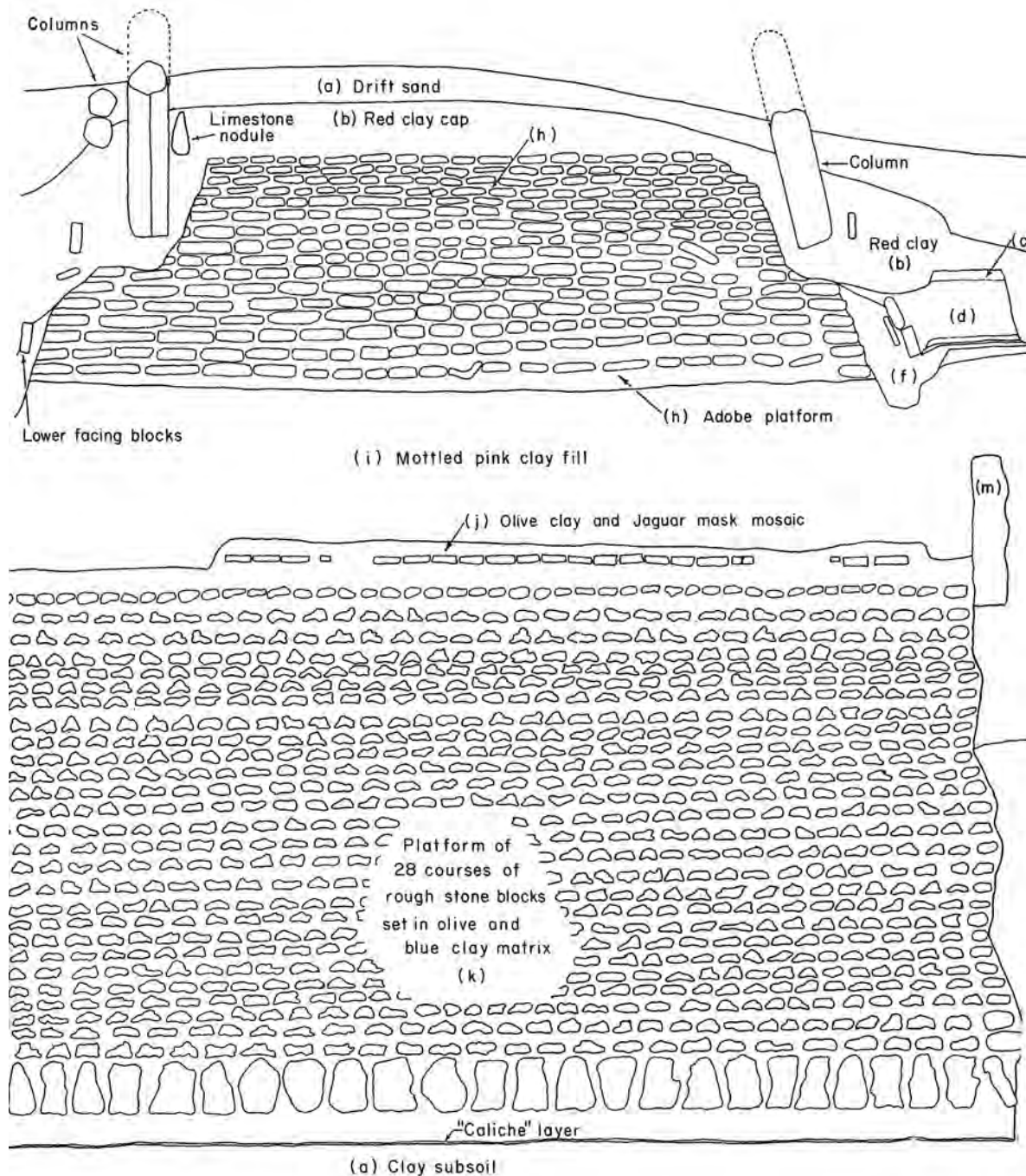
There have been some objections to Heizer's and Reilly's view of La Venta's Great Mound as the symbol of a mountain. Excavations in the 1990s by Rebecca González Lauck on the Earthen Pyramid (Complex C-1) indicate that there is a single basal platform from which a softly sloping talud rises. She found thin slabs of stone set vertically, perpendicular to the surface, embracing most of the mound's circumference. These were probably reinforcements for the earthen mound, and over the years they have created durable vertical ridges between which the earth eroded, creating an undulating surface that is unlike the more regular horizontal bodies of a stone pyramid. She also suspects there was a central stair or ramp on the north. However, she insists that the mound did not represent a volcano (González Lauck 1997). Whether or not it was intended to resemble a volcano, as a large mound it likely symbolized a mountain. While several authors have identified specific Aztec pyramids, specifically the Templo Mayor of Tenochtit-

lan, as representing a sacred mountain (Broda et al. 1987; Townsend 1982), Maria Elena Bernal-García (1993) traced this concept back to the Olmec. These and other scholars have made cogent arguments, based on ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources, that pyramidal mounds represented sacred mountains. And the recent discovery of the Cerro Manatí and its juxtaposition with the spring in which offerings had been placed by 1500 bc provides a “natural” precedent for created landscapes that combine

mountain and water. As we have seen, El Manatí clarifies that the concept of sacred ritual center that the Nahua called *altepetl* (water-mountain) is very old in Olman (Ortiz Ceballos and Rodríguez 1994).

Several bits of additional evidence, or analogy, support Reilly’s interpretation of the massive

6.2 Excavation drawing on which the color version of the southwest platform was based. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 26, detail (public domain).



offerings as sea or lake effigies. First, many items associated with the massive offerings carry aquatic associations. A significant number of the small jade carvings placed over the massive offerings were marine skeuomorphs. And the sarcophagus carved with crocodile (or axolotl) motifs (Monument 6) was placed over the last massive offering. Second, as Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959:102) noted, there are twenty-nine courses of serpentine in the Phase II massive offerings, including the partial one of the mosaic pavement. These numbers are suggestive of the lunar count. In fact, some modern Mayas describe the cycle of the moon by using four seven-day phases even as they simultaneously correct for the discrepancy between this count and the actual lunar synodic month in calculating due dates for pregnancies (Paxton 2001:54). Links between lunar goddesses and bodies of water are common among Maya peoples (Thompson 1970:245). Third, there is the ritual precedent of placing jade celts and other offerings over nine sandstone blocks (nine lunations = human gestation) in an *actual* spring-fed lake at El Manatí. Similarly, over the massive offerings at La Venta were hundreds of greenstone and jade celts. For these reasons, the massive offerings seem to be effigies of bodies of water.

A few years after Reilly's publication, I proposed an amplification of his interpretations of the massive offerings as lake or sea effigies (Tate 1999). My argument used two principal lines of evidence: the specific terrain of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and the beliefs of the twentieth-century Mixe, descendants of the Olmec. First, I proposed that mountain and water effigies symbolized their makers' knowledge of their larger political and economic environment: the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The sources of the stone for the massive offerings define a geographic region that extends from the Pacific to the Gulf. The 1,615 m high peak to which the La Venta central axis is aligned lies about 100 km to the south.¹ The shore of the sea—the Gulf of Mexico—is about 8 km north of La Venta today. On the plain between the mountain and the water, the site nestles in a wetland, near the gulf. The part of the site that received intensive caching (Complex A) is bordered by a mound to the south and a massive offering to the north. Second, by drawing a parallel with Mixe religion and ritual, I suggested that the massive offerings and mosaic pavements represented, respectively, a female water supernatu-

ral and a female earth-surface supernatural, who along with the male thunder being functioned at La Venta as sources of shamanic and political power.

Since then, several contributions to Mesoamerican studies have helped me develop these ideas about the massive offerings and mosaic pavements, their function as effigies of lake and earth female supernaturals, and their relationships to shamanic ritual and female powers. Barbara Tedlock's (2005) study of female shamans suggested how to recognize imagery associated with midwives and female healers. I have pondered many authors' thoughts on gender, and John Monaghan's (2001) on gestation. Jacques Chevalier and Andrés Sánchez Bain's (2003) investigation of the concepts held by native residents of the Tuxtlas regarding the dynamic processes of life has helped me see how the features of La Venta were intended to display a dynamic cyclicity of life processes. An article by Cecelia Klein (2008) clarifies the existence of prominent female generative deities in Aztec lore and art. As a result of this research, I have become even more convinced that many Mixe and Popoluca—and even Aztec—narratives and ritual performances have their roots in Middle Formative Olmec culture, and that the massive offerings and mosaic pavements were effigies of predominantly female sea and earth potencies.

To be able to discuss structural analogies between the massive offerings and mosaic pavements and Mixe ritual practice, the following discussion will shift between the two. Ordinarily, I try to establish symbolic patterns in the archaeological material first and then show how the "solid nuclei" are retained in modern practices. In this situation, the Mixe material provides a very different interpretive framework than the ones that have previously been applied to La Venta. For this reason, I think it is best to forefront it so readers can see its internal logic. The chapter thus introduces, very briefly, the Mixe earth surface, groundwater, and thunder supernormal entities and some very basic aspects of ritual performance. Then, having introduced the Mixe quincunxial earth altars, the chapter turns to the ancient mosaic pavements and massive offerings of La Venta. These sections address the *form* of ritual. The next section turns to the *practitioners* of Mixe ritual and provides evidence for the presence of female shamans and healers at La Venta. Along the way, the chapter suggests how calendric information was encoded

into some of La Venta's caches and offerings, and considers some of the activities that may have been performed over the enigmatic massive offerings and mosaic pavements.

Mixe Beliefs in Earth, Water, and Thunder Supernormal Entities

The current homeland of the Mixe is in a mountainous area of southeastern Oaxaca. Their language is a branch of the Mixe-Zoquean linguistic family. Linguists Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman (1976) have proposed, based on the early loans of culturally significant terms into many Mesoamerican languages, that proto-Mixe-Zoquean was the language of the Gulf Coast Olmec. This theory is widely, but not universally, accepted.² Kaufman and John Justeson proposed that the proto-Mixe-Zoquean lexicon could be used to decipher the long incised text on a stela from the second century AD that was found in La Mojarra, Veracruz (Justeson and Kaufman 1993), and despite controversy, their study has found renewed support.³ From my perspective as an art historian, the strong possibility that the Mixe may be descendants of the Gulf Coast Olmec make the parallels between Mixe religion and Olmec ritual practice at La Venta well worth considering.

There is little historical information about the speakers of the Mixe-Zoquean languages. In late Pre-Hispanic times the Zapotec and Aztec both tried to subdue the Mixe but were unsuccessful. The Mixe fended off the Spanish under Cortés as well. While they pride themselves on not having been conquered by these encroachers, their access to territory, especially to productive terrain, has been compromised as they were displaced from the Gulf Coast into a difficult mountainous region in northern Oaxaca around Mount Zempoaltepetl. The Aztec marginalized the Mixe from the economic mainstream of Mesoamerica, and their villages have remained relatively isolated.⁴

Because of their remote location, the Mixe have been subjected to less outside influence over the centuries than other indigenous groups. Among the 90,000 Mixe speakers in dozens of villages and hamlets who were documented in a 1993 census, there are individuals who use the 260-day calendar for ritual purposes. While officially Roman Catholic, many retain beliefs and practices informed by

Pre-Hispanic traditions. Thus the Mixe of today could shed considerable light on the practices of ancient Olman.

It has been difficult for scholars of the Olmec to perceive the similarities between Mixe and Olmec ritual because the economic scale of Mixe ritual, in terms of the wealth expended and the kinds of materials used, is vastly different from that of the prosperous chiefdoms or incipient states of their Gulf Coast Olmec or Classic period ancestors. Lacking their ancestors' ancient wealth, the Mixe have practiced their beliefs with available materials. Where the Olmec used greenstone celts, the Mixe use bundles of green pine needles. And in the place of massive offerings and mosaic pavements (sea and earth effigies of imported green stone), the Mixe use eggs, candles, grasses, and a few imported items, placing them on an earth altar. Nevertheless, if we look at the conceptual significance behind the configurations and materials in both places, a considerable degree of continuity seems evident. As Eva Hunt put it in her study of the transformation of the hummingbird in Zinacanteco (Maya) myth from Pre-Hispanic to the Christianized modern world,

in a sequence of decreasing variation we move from message, to code, to armature. The armature has changed little, but the code and symbol units have changed greatly. The properties of the symbolic sets as a system (armature code) have remained nearly constant. These are deeply embedded in a root paradigm of ecology, agrarian schedules and invariant astronomical events. There are, however, myths in the background of Zinacantan, whose manifest symbolic values have been lost, and which now form part of schemata buried in the deep unconscious levels of its social history. (Hunt 1977:249–250)

As we will see, there are continuities and disjunctions of message, code, and armature between La Venta and the Mixe. But the continuities—especially of thematic concerns (or armatures, or “isotopies,” a term that will be explained in Chapter 8)—seem explicit. And while we assume that beliefs and their symbols (the messages and codes) have transformed over the millennia, we can also consider the armatures of continuity, in Hunt's terms, or the solid nuclei, in López Austin's (1993).

Ethnographer Frank Lipp has described Mixe religion as follows.

The Mixe high god has created and holds dominion over multiple greater-than-human reality configurations. Although powerful autonomous entities, these encompass one whole existence, or being, *hi:'ahtpkisi*. This spiritual body is concentrated in a single being and is at the same time dispersed among an infinite variety of beings with particular life functions. According to this concept, the opposition between the one and the many does not entail the necessity of affirming one over the other. Each *existencia*, or being, exists within the whole and inversely, not because the law of participation as defined by Lévy-Bruhl . . . is valid but because each entity reproduces the whole. However, this term, *hi:'ahtpkisi*, does not mean that the whole precedes the parts or vice versa but that both are included in a further concept, which does justice to both; this concept may be described equally well as a unity that includes the many or a many in which unity is implicit.

The beings that comprise this unity are as follows: Poh Ene, 'wind thunder,' Naswiñ, 'earth surface', Yu:k, 'mountain', Higiny, 'life' and co'k, 'guardian spirit.'" (Lipp 1991:26–27)

It is interesting that there is no maize god on the list.

The nature of these beings as "many in which unity is implicit" is made clear in the prayers that accompany ritual. For example, an unsuccessful fisherman might engage a ritual practitioner who will perform a ceremony invoking Higiny. The initial step is to create a sacred space or altar on the earth. Thirteen bundles made of resinous pine are placed on the altar. Then a wreath is placed on the sacred earth. The wreath, made of grass or palm leaves, represents the pregnant uterus, and the pine bundles the male member. Five small bundles of grass are set around the wreath. Two chicken eggs and a turkey egg are placed inside the uterus/wreath, from which palm leaves extend like rays. Sacrificial blood is dripped inside the uterus/wreath (Lipp 1991:86,98). It seems that the creation of a space in which conception and gestation are occurring is the fundamental material component of Mixe ritual. Then the shamaness prays:

God, Earth [Nashwini], Wind-thunder [Ene], Great Lady of the Springs [Higiny], I now come. Take this water, this drink. Free me from robbers, from those who hate me. . . . Open my road, if I go to the east, if I go to the west, if I go south, north; free me. White thunder, green thunder, white thunder, red thunder, those who look after, those who protect. . . . Great Lady of the well where the water

springs forth, free the waters, free my work. I am speaking of snakes coming out, of lions appearing. I am speaking of evil spirits doing something to me. I want to go freely in the water and catch small fish, white fish, crabs, all kinds of fish. I now place the white water, the white tortilla, so that you pass to the table where you may receive your nourishment and fix it so that my work in the waters turns out well. (Lipp 1991:98).

Although the principal purpose of the prayer is successful fishing, and the shamaness does focus on Higiny, the matrix in which Higiny exists is also specifically invoked. Note that the offerings and prayer to the several entities is for protection from any negative force or being, whether human, animal, or noncorporeal. Protection is a common theme in Mixe and other modern Mesoamerican ritual, one that is often overlooked by scholars. We will consider it further below.

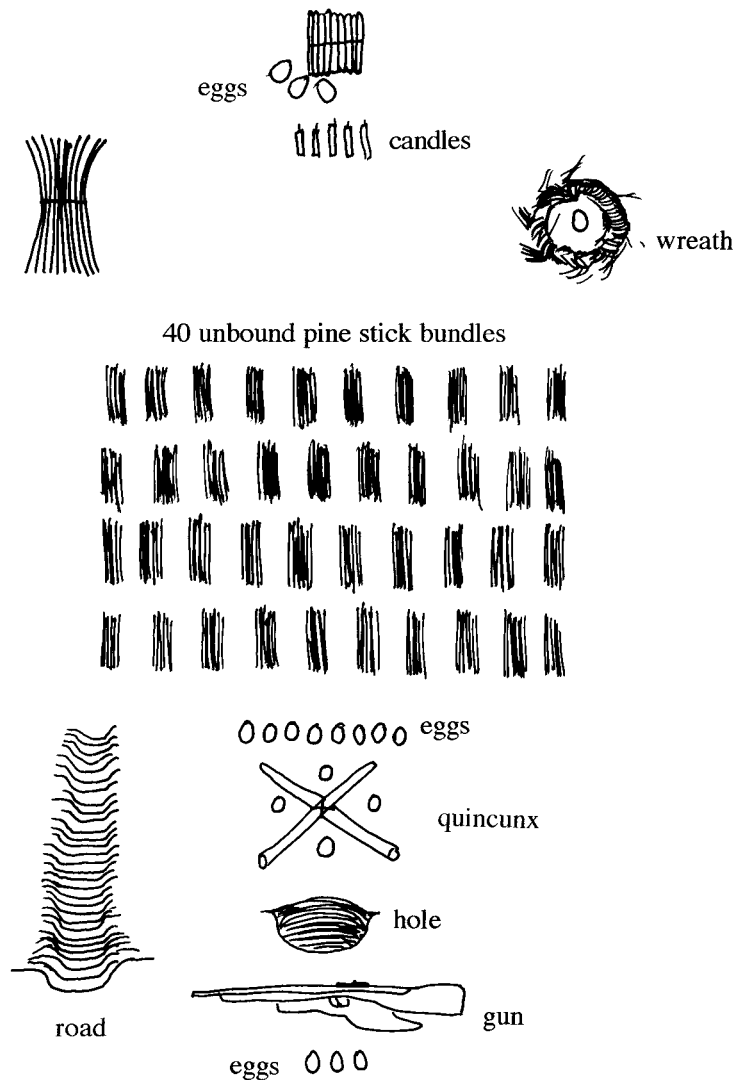
Although the powerful entities form a unity, they can be addressed as having power over relatively specific domains. Ene, or Poh Ene, is an anthropomorphic *existencia* who controls thunder, causes lightning and wind, and thereby produces rain. In fact, when he dons a certain cape, rain is the result. Ene is generally male but has a female component as well. Many Enes exist in the mountainous Mixe region. Each village has its own Ene that acts as its protector. People associate Ene with flint, the product of lightning, and obsidian blades. Ene has shape-shifting abilities: he can project parts of himself into many forms, especially jaguars and poisonous snakes, and he can also assume the form of an eagle (Lipp 1991:28–29). In a previous work (Tate 1999), I associated Ene with the Earthen Pyramid at La Venta and with the multimorphic embryo image. I am no longer sure about this. Lightning and fertilizing stone blades may have been referents of the stone columns and other vertical monuments. It does seem likely that the mound was an essential location for ritual performances. Ene, thunder, although principally male, is no more important than Nashwini, earth.

The earth surface is a supernatural reality configuration that consists of a female dyad called Nashwini.⁵ One of the litany of names by which she is called is Ta:g Nashwini, "Mother Earth Surface." Where humans walk and live, on the surface of the earth, is the living body of this mother. The trees, plants, water, mountains, and all sustenance are hers. Lipp (1991:31)says, "She is the all-knowing of

human affairs and the maternal repository of primordial wisdom. Her calendar name is *Tum 'Uh*, (i/VI), 'One World.'" Thus simply existing on the face of the earth, especially when entering sacred topographical features or cultivating the earth, requires respect. Offense to the Mother Earth Surface provokes her judgment of punishment or illness. Since she can inflict trouble, Nashwini is also a sorceress. Traditional ritual practice is referred to as *Nashwini mituni* or *Nashwini dumbi*, "work of the earth" (72).

Today, Mixe ritual (*Nashwini mituni*) focuses on promoting such processes as healing, creating bonds between families whose members are marrying, protection for one's personal guardian spirit from attack by external forces, and success in traveling or hunting. While ritual in the Formative period may have had other purposes, we should not dismiss these more practical ones, especially since the armatures of the Mixe ritual, or work of the earth, share many components with the ritual spaces created at La Venta, which itself is a literal work of the earth.

Each Mixe ritual involves the establishment of an altar or sacred space on the earth. Within the space, the shamaness deposits numerically significant offerings and calls upon the relevant potencies for protection and fair treatment while offering profound respect to them and apologies for misbehavior. On most altars a quincunx configuration for certain offerings is an essential element. For example, one of the hunting rituals illustrated by Lipp (1991) shows a quincunx formed of sticks and eggs near the bottom of the array (Fig. 6.3). The ritual elements include the bundles of pine sticks (like jade celts in their form and repetition); a grass wreath that symbolizes the uterus, inside which is an egg or embryo; and three eggs at the bottom, which recall the three circles at the base of the ritual design on the Dallas plaque (see Fig. 6.15). Several pages of the *Codex Cospi* provide a Postclassic Central Mexican precedent for the Mixe practice of creating earth altars of numerically significant counts of items in bundled arrays (Boone 2007:159–168). On the page of the codex, which corresponds to an earth altar, the bundles are often set out in an I, or ballcourt, shape. Most pages include a thinly drawn circle that may relate to the Mixe's grass wreaths. Mixtec specialists Karl Anton Novotny, Peter VanderLoo, and others have shown that these pages illustrate protocols for protective



6.3 Diagram of an altar for a Mixe hunting ritual. Note the uterine wreath (*upper right*) containing an egg/embryo, the quincunx of sticks and eggs below the stick bundles, and the three eggs at the base. Author drawing after Lipp 1991: Fig. 7.

rituals; other modern versions of such rituals with numerically significant elements are performed by the Tlapanec for banishing an evil spirit, restoring soul loss and success in hunting or marriage (Boone 2007:159–168).

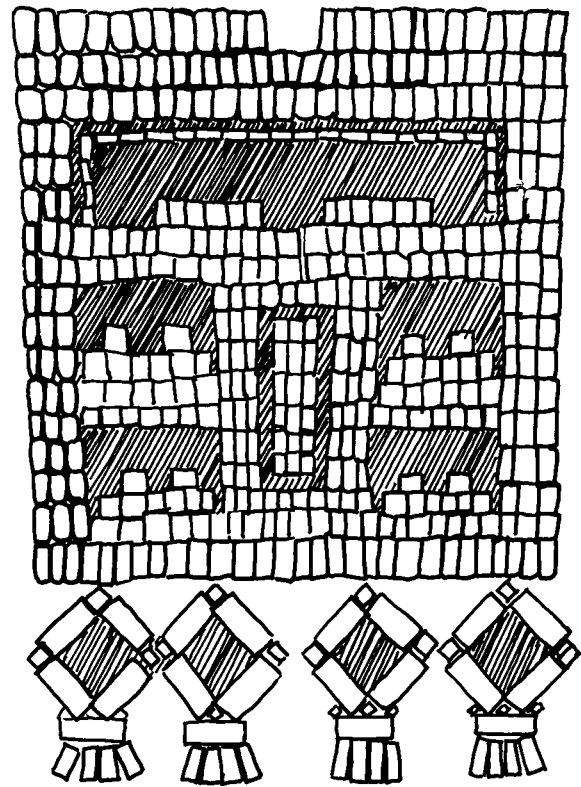
Another Mixe ceremony will help readers imagine how similar ritual objects might have been used at La Venta. Called *pohamahck*, "four winds," it is usually held on an individual's birthday and is performed to protect that person's *co'k*, or personal guardian spirit. The shamaness digs five holes in the earth in the form of a quincunx and sets up a brazier for burning copal. She places a pine bundle, which represents the male member, to one

side of the quincunx. She puts feathers from male and female fowl in each hole, the brazier, and the bundle. As the shamaness prays to the all-seeing great mother, great mountain, male and female mountains, wind, lightning, river, and sea (Nashwini, Yuk, Ene, Higiny), and the numbers 134 to 138, she sacrifices a turkey and lets the blood fall into the quincunxial holes. Other birds are sacrificed, and the shamaness drips their blood into the quincunx and on the phallic pine bundle. She raises the bundle and circles it over the heads of participants. After receiving the renewing energy from the revitalized phallic bundle, participants return home to dance and feast on the sacrificial birds (Lipp 1991:78-79).

Among the Mixe, the quincunx conveys multiple meanings depending on its social context. When farmers plant maize, they use a stick to dig a center hole and then to make four more holes in the shape of a cross. This is the ideal, but due to uneven terrain, this spacing of the plants is not always achieved (Lipp 1991:8). The quincunx also refers to the four winds and cardinal points, the intercardinal points, and to the center, which focuses a guardian spirit. On a celestial level, it refers to the constellation the Southern Cross, and on the societal level to the nodal points of inter-family relations that are brought forth in marriage. Ritual practitioners create a quincunx on an earth altar for village protection rituals, for those that protect an individual's *c'ok*, as well for divination. The value of 9 is given to the center, and 1 to each of the four corners, for a total value of 13 for the quincunx (109). These two numbers echo important temporal measurements: nine lunations correspond to the human gestation cycle (about 260 days). The number 13 approximates the number of lunations in a solar year ($13 \times 28 = 364$, or about 365 days) and is also the quantity of day numbers that revolve in the 260-day cycle.

La Venta's Mosaic Pavements

With this information about Nashwini, *Nashwini dumbi*, and quincunxes set up on earth altars, let us reconsider the components of La Venta's Phase II mosaic pavements and then the massive offerings. The pavements were the twenty-ninth course of stone that comprised the massive offerings. They were oriented with their central bars running par-



6.4 Sketch of Mosaic Pavement 1, under the southeast platform. 4.63 x 4.7 m. Drawing by author.

allel to the site centerline, or roughly north-south. On the north end was a double merlon design (Fig. 6.4). The central element was the quincunx, consisting of the central bar surrounded by the four smaller double merlons at the intercardinal points. On the southern end, the serpentine blocks were configured as four diamond shapes. Four rectangular blocks created the four-sided diamond, and a fifth block ran horizontally across the south end of the diamond. A total of twenty long blocks (and some small fillers) were used to create these diamonds. From the horizontal block on the south end of each diamond, four more blocks formed a fringe, for a total of sixteen. Remember the numerical value the Mixe give to the quincunx: 9 to the center and 1 to each corner, for a total of 13. So, if La Ventans also assigned the value 13 to the quincunx, there are some very interesting numerical counts in the mosaic pavement: 13 for the quincunx and 20 for the diamonds gives us the two components of the 260-day count. If we add the 13 for the quincunx to the 16 for the fringe, we get 29, which repeats the fact that the image in question is the twenty-ninth layer of the massive offering and

suggests a lunar count of approximately 29 days. The mosaic pavement may encode the 260-day count, a lunar count, and the solar year as well, since the four elements of the quincunx are placed at the intercardinal, or solstitial, sunrise and sunset points.⁶

Other scholars have also proposed that the Mesoamerican “sacred” numbers were incorporated into La Venta. In a study of the proportions of the major construction elements, John Clark (2001:201) suggested that there was a standard unit of measurement, of 1.54 m, which approximates one *brazada*, that governed city planning. Also, he found that the sizes of many structures are 13, 20, 52, or 260 multiples of the *brazada*. The mosaic pavements, including the quincunx and fringed skirt, is 3 x 4 *brazadas*. Although he focused on proportions of structures at the site, and I am counting elements within designs, both of us strongly suspect that the “sacred” Mesoamerican numbers were encoded in the built environment, as was seen later at Izapa and Teotihuacan (Coggins 1996). In

addition to their possible numerical symbolism, what further significance was specified by the three patterns that comprise the mosaic pavements: the quincunx, the diamond and fringe, and the double merlon? Before presenting new ideas, I will look at the most prominent previous interpretations.

Initially, excavators called the mosaic pavement design a “typical Olmec Jaguar representation” (Drucker et al. 1959:94) (Fig. 6.5). The central bar and four surrounding elements somehow represented a jaguar face, with the fringed diamonds functioning as a headdress or plumes. Drucker and colleagues apparently had not considered Elsie Parsons’s (1936) comment in her book about modern Zapotecs that the bar-and-four-dots motif in Oaxaca represented the world quarters, or four corners, of the earth. However, once interpretive scholarship on the Olmec had developed further,

6.5 The mosaic pavement as a “tiger mask”, from Stirling’s 1943 article, “La Venta’s Green Stone Tigers,” *National Geographic* 84:323.



scholars generally agreed that the La Venta quincunx design refers to the earth conceived as a center with four directional corners. Specifically, art historian Elizabeth Benson (1971:29) notes its presence on the headdress of the figure on La Venta Stela 2 and elsewhere, and considers the bar-and-four-dots quincunx to be a place sign for La Venta. According to Joralemon (1976:45-52), it represents God I, the “Olmec Dragon,” which signified the earth and its fertility.

Reilly (1994a:132–134) looks at the placement of the mosaic pavements and its components within their spatial contexts. As part of his cosmological interpretation of the three largest features of La Venta (the mound, massive offerings, and mosaic pavements), Reilly suggests that the mosaic pavements served as the interface between the upper world and underworld. According to Reilly, the design incorporates three elements. The double merlon (or double step design) at the northern end symbolizes the entrance to the underworld. The bar and four elements that comprise the large central portion of each mosaic pavement at once refer to the place of La Venta as proposed by Benson and to Joralemon’s “Olmec Dragon,” which represents the fertile earth. The fringed diamonds represented *nymphaea ampla*, the waterlily that grows in the swamps surrounding La Venta. In its entirety, the mosaic pavement design represents the flowering, watery earth surface around La Venta as an entrance to the underworld. Since there were three mosaic pavements, Reilly compares them to the “three-stone place,” or portal to the underworld, of the Late Classic Maya creation texts. If this is so, then the significance was developed during Phase IV, when the third pavement was built and remained on the surface of the site. At that time, the Phase II pavements were deeply buried and surmounted by colonnaded platforms.

In the ethnographic literature, we find that for the Mixe, the quincunx also refers to the hierogamous union of the sun and the earth’s surface. The solstitial sunrise and sunset points are where, at the summer and winter solstices, the sun reaches its northerly and southerly extremes on the eastern and western horizons. From the perspective of a viewer, these points are at the intercardinal extremes of the visible horizon, where the sun changes direction vis-à-vis the horizon. Over the course of a year, they form a quincunx relative to an observer in a specific place. In addition to

the annual horizon points expressing the spatial relation between sun and earth surface, the Olmec quincunx seems to refer to maize planting as well. Most of the quincunxial compositions of elements include sprouting maize seeds as the elements at the four corners. One example that predates the La Venta quincunx is on La Merced Monument 1 (Fig. 3.15). Superimposed on the sprouting frontal embryo face, itself in the form of a maize seed, are four maize seeds that form a quincunx. Another series of examples emerged from a probable Middle Formative cache from Río Pesquero, near La Venta. Each of the three (looted) incised jade celts shows a sprouting-headed embryo wearing a headband and mouth mask as the central axis for four sprouting maize seeds (Fig. 6.6). On these celts, the “central axis” of the quincunx has an anthropomorphic identity, but it probably also represents a digging stick. To consider this idea, we should look at the indigenous tools and processes of planting maize.

In some Mesoamerican communities, maize is planted in a series of quincunxes (squares or diamonds). In fact, a single maize plant will not thrive; in order for the maturing plants to pollinate each other, maize must be planted in such a block. I mentioned that the Mixe aim to plant maize in a quincunx. In Talea del Castro, a Zapotec village in the northern sierra of Oaxaca, each planter has a digging stick one *brazada* in length. This is a personal, bodily based measurement: it is the distance between the fingertips when both arms are outstretched to the sides at shoulder height. The digging stick, with its link to the planter’s body, pierces the earth to the point where water stains the soil a darker shade. Then four maize seeds are dropped in the center of the hole. It is important to space the holes sufficiently. “Time and again, farmers told me that spacing plants more closely than the prescribed distance would result in their ‘robbing force’ from each other” (González 2001:143). In this case, holes are one *vara* apart, this being another bodily measurement, from the heart to the outstretched fingertip, or about 80 cm (31.4960 in.). The holes in a field ultimately create a grid of squares (or diamonds).

Linguist Brent Berlin and colleagues (1974:126) describe how the Tzeltal Maya of Tenejapa plant maize. They use a digging stick to create a hole that becomes the center of the quincunx. Then, using the stick as a measuring and placement tool, they mark off four more holes in the four corners. The

distance from the corner to the center equals one length of the digging stick (about 152 cm, or 5 ft).

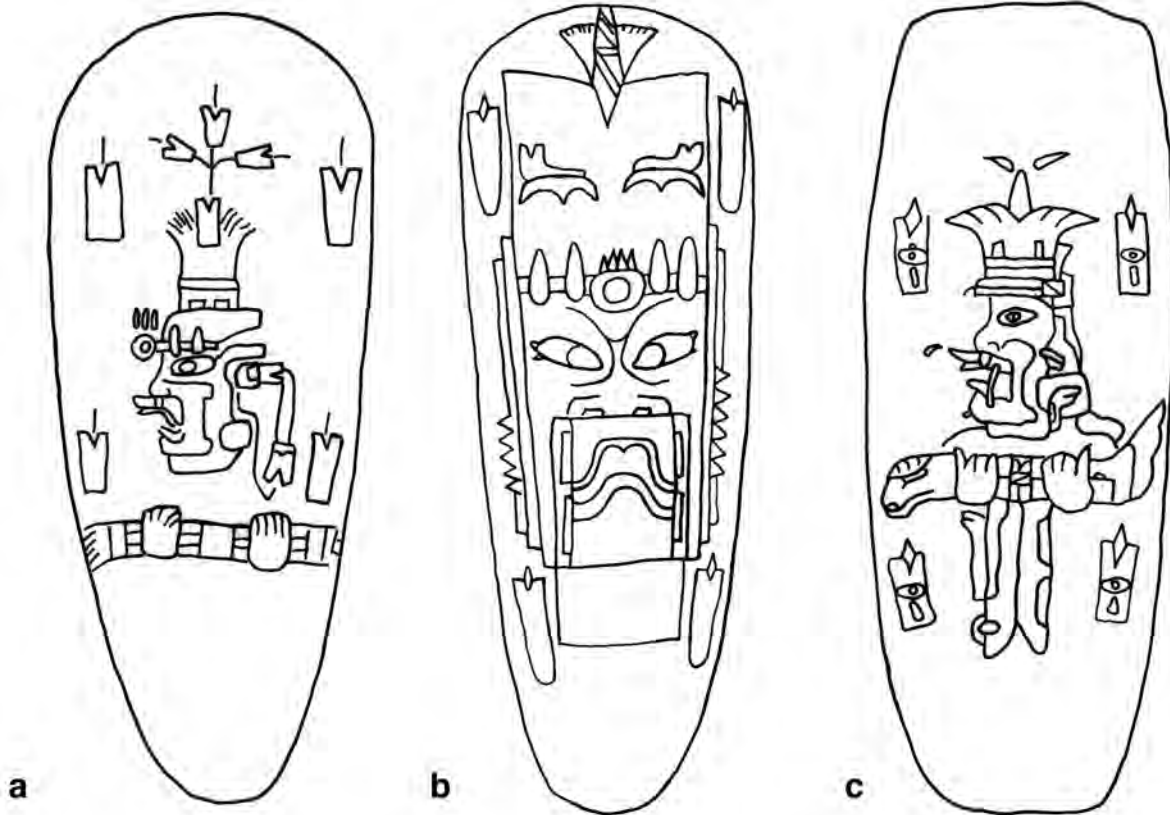
Linguist Brian Stross (1994:25) thinks this is an ancient pattern, one that dates back at least to the Late Preclassic. In an extended discussion of the “quincunx cosmogram,” he examines several Late Preclassic Maya (about AD 100) caches of five small anthropomorphic heads carved of jade and arranged in a quincunx. Norman Hammond (1987) proposed that the quincunx of heads exhibited directional symbolism. In a subsequent article, David Freidel and Linda Schele (1988) pointed out that the small heads, perforated for attachment, were likely once sewn to the cloth diadem of a Maya ruler. The headband worn by Olmec supernaturals (embryos) contains four maize seeds as well. Stross compares these three-dimensional heads to those incised on a large jade earflare from Pomona, Belize. He finds that the quincunx of heads in the three Late Preclassic Maya caches represent “developmentally significant twenty-

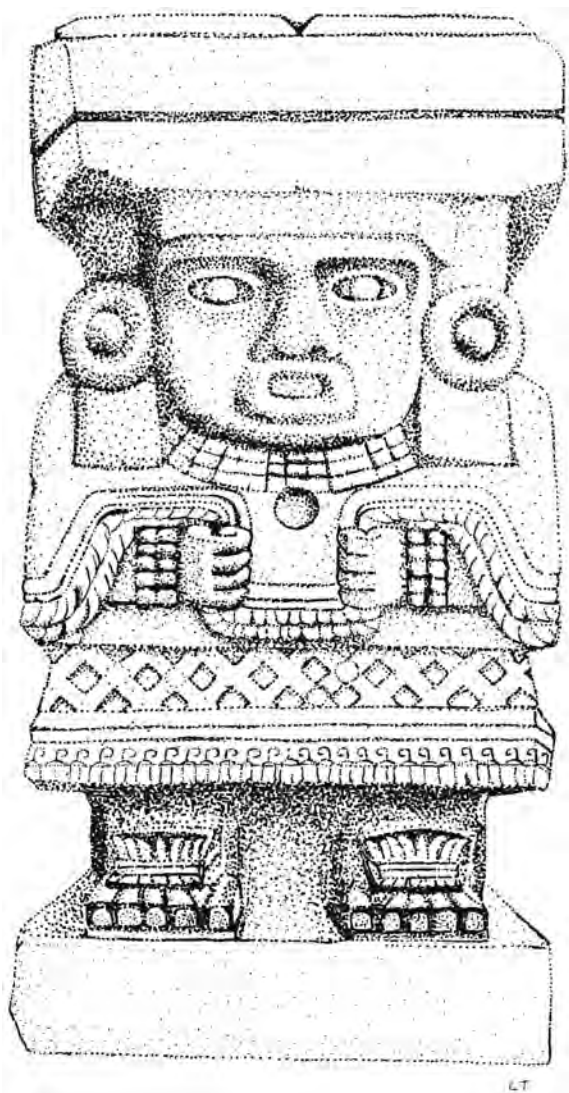
day ‘months’ in the . . . life cycle of maize” (Stross 1994:27). Stross considers the heads as representative of “maize spirits.” I suggest that the heads are Maya adaptations of the Formative embryo/maize seed concept—that is, the conflation of humans and maize. “Maize spirit” as a reference to the vital force that animates humans and maize—and can be individuated to a plant, a person, a field, a community, and so on—probably defines these heads well.

Returning to the mosaic pavement, each of the four units of the quincunx (the smaller double merlons) suggest an “elevation” view of three holes for planting separated by two mounds of earth. To make the double merlon designs, a layer of yellowish-olive clay was framed by the projecting visual field of greenstone blocks (Drucker et al. 1959:93).⁷

My proposal that these four shapes, arranged in a quincunx, refer to planting maize supports Reilly’s suggestion that, on a ritual level, the double merlon is a portal to the underworld or an interface among sky, earth, and underworld. At such nodes, prayer and offerings pass between realms. Also, the entire northern edge of the mosaic pavement is such a form. The central bar is the digging

6.6 Three Río Pesquero celts incised with embryo-maize quincunxes: *a*, Cleveland Museum of Art; *b*, private collection; *c*, Museo de Antropología, Jalapa. Drawings by Corey Escoto.





6.7 Colossal sculpture at Teotihuacan of a female wearing a *quechquemiltl* (on upper body) and beaded, fringed skirt. H: 3.2 m. Drawing by author.

stick, also an elevation view and framed by negative space. It is literally a central axis and also refers to the human body, since the stick's length is related to a bodily measurement. Additionally, it seems to be a metaphor for the penis since both penetrate the moist earth or vagina. The whole quincunxial field surrounds the digging stick/central axis/human body. In conventionalized form, quincunx represents the earth that has been inseminated, the earth acted upon by the sun at the solstitial extremes on the horizon, and possibly the numerical value 13.

In previous publications I have amplified Reilly's "Flowering Earth at La Venta" interpretation by proposing that the mosaic pavement design represents a *female* earth surface. First, I contended that

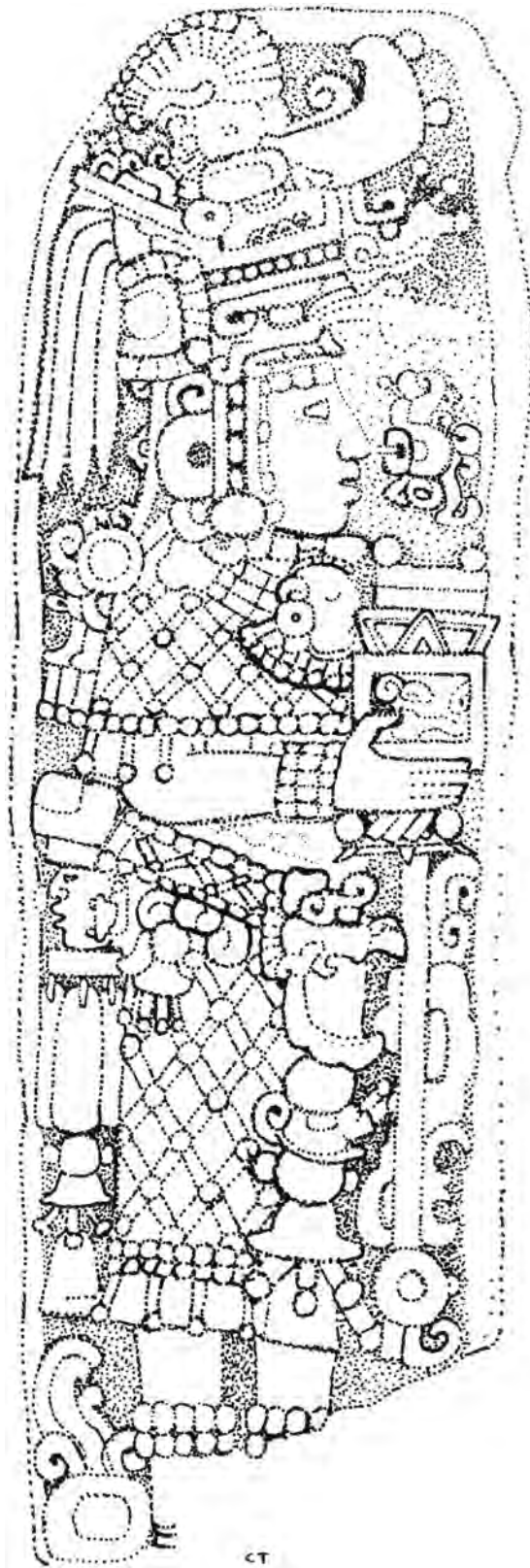
the mosaic pavement was the Formative period effigy of Nashwini, the all-knowing Flowering Earth Surface of Mixe belief (Tate 1999). In a later article (Tate 2002), I suggested that the diamond-and-fringe pattern on the south end of the mosaic pavement marked it as a design based on a skirt composed of netted beads and a fringe. Since then, I found that a skirt of jade beads was placed in the tomb of a female at La Venta. Could the pavements represent skirts that name a supernatural and refer to specific powers? We should consider the evidence for the presence of both textile and bead skirts.

Although we do not have preservation of woven textiles from La Venta, the monuments show some garments that were likely made of fiber. Reilly (1994a:134) sees the greenstone fringed-diamond design as representative of vegetation.⁸ Vegetation includes the fibers that are manipulated to form textiles, and one frequently finds the diamond shape associated with textiles. Diamonds are very ancient patterns in the fiber arts. The earliest textile fragments in Mesoamerica were found in Guilá Naquitz cave in Oaxaca and predate La Venta by several thousand years (Anawalt 2001; Marcus and Flannery 2005). Among these hand-twined textiles was a simple knotted net, made in a technique that produced a diamond pattern. It is impossible to fully document here the use of the diamond shape through the history of Mesoamerican textiles, but a few major examples should make the point.

After La Venta, the next monumentalized diamond-and-fringe skirt appears on the colossal sculpture of the earth-water goddess at Teotihuacan (ca. AD 100) (Fig. 6.7). In this case, the diamonds were probably formed of greenstone beads. The importance of her skirt in identifying the figure has long been presumed. She wears an upper-body garment that is associated with females in Teotihuacan and in later Central Mexico and Oaxaca: the *quechquemiltl*. This shows that the fringed diamond pattern represented a beaded skirt, and that a female supernatural wore it. Because scholars knew of the importance of skirts in determining names of beings in Aztec culture, they dubbed this statue Chalchiuhtlicue, "Jades-Her-Skirt." We still do not know if this statue refers to similar qualities as the Aztec Chalchiuhtlicue, who governs lakes and other ground waters, and the mountains or earth that contain them, as well as being the mother of the 400 Mimixcoa.

As is well known, the Maya used the net-patterned, jade-beaded skirt as well. At about the same time as the Teotihuacan statue, a diamond-patterned *textile* skirt (without fringe) appears on a woman from the San Bartolo mural, but not on that mural's "maize god". The earliest occurrence of the fringed-diamond beaded *jade* skirt on a Maya monumental sculpture suggests that the skirt was imported from Teotihuacan. On El Zapote Stela 5, a woman supporting a Teotihuacan-style cartouche and "Mexican year sign" wears the fringed-diamond beaded skirt (Fig. 6.8). The other side of that stela depicts a male holding a Teotihuacan-style glyph. The stela, inscribed with the Long Count 9.0.0.0.0 (about AD 435), probably depicts a founding couple of El Zapote (Clancy 1999:94–95). In this instance, among the Maya, whose monuments emphasize ancestors and dynastic succession, the skirt is worn in the context of portraying founding ancestors whose male-female union engendered a royal lineage. Among the Late Classic Maya, the diamond, executed in a tapestry weave, creates a "star" design on the elite textiles worn by Lady K'abal Xoc of Yaxchilan, wife of the ruler. Contemporary Maya weavers of Chiapas say that the diamond represents the union of sky and earth (Morris 1984:10). In other Late Classic painted and carved imagery, the fringed-diamond beaded skirt was worn by the Classic period Maya moon goddess, as well as by the androgynous, paradigmatic human-maize being that is often called the "maize deity." An anthropomorphic figure dressed as "flowering earth" sitting inside a lunar cartouche acknowledges the influence of the lunar cycle on earth's moisture and ability to serve as a matrix for germinating seeds. In all these situations, I think the wearers of the fringed-diamond, netted jade skirt display a relationship to the sacred flowering earth surface that is primarily (although not exclusively) female. On monuments, the Classic Maya emphasized this female earth archetype as a founding ancestor, of human or supernatural origins, with the associated concept of renewal of a lineage or vegetation.

The emphasis on the earth surface as having female qualities is more evident in Mixe and Aztec culture than among the Maya. As we have seen, Nashwini (earth surface) is clearly gendered female. Some Aztec earth deities were female as well: among them were Tlazolteotl in the Gulf region, and Cihuacoatl, who may have been appropriated



6.8 El Zapote Stela 5, Early Classic Maya, female side. The royal woman wears a netted and fringed jade bead *quechquemilt* and skirt, and holds a Teotihuacan-style glyph. Drawing by author.

by the Mexica to show their dominance over southern towns in the Basin of Mexico (Klein 1988). Although these two earth-related goddesses were not given “skirt” names, many Aztec supernormal females were, such as Citlalinicue (Stars-Her-Skirt), Chalchiuhtlicue (Greenstones-Her-Skirt), and Coatlicue (Snakes-Her-Skirt). This use of a skirt to stand for a female generative greater-than-normal configuration is prominent in Aztec lore and sculpture. Cecelia Klein (2008) has proposed that the colossal Aztec statue called Coatlicue represents one of several primordial generative “goddesses” who sacrificed their bodies as part of the process by which the earth was re-created and the sun began to move. On the 2.7 m (8 ft 10¼ in) stone sculpture, sacrifice is suggested by the two snakes that replace the severed head of the anthropomorphic figure. The flat, elongated breasts of the figure identify her as an older female, and her skirt consists of braided or twisted snakes. These are engraved with a cross-hatched texture that forms a diamondlike grid. Coatlicue, “Snakes-Her-Skirt,” is best known from Sahagún’s account as the mother of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec patron deity. However, a major sixteenth-century document, the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*, refers to Coatlicue as one of several female primordial beings who died on the day the sun was born. As they died, Klein contends, these “goddesses” left behind their *mantas* (a square woven cloth that was wrapped around the body to form a skirt) as signs of—and ritual foci for—their existence. Among various Postclassic peoples, stone altars carved with certain skirt designs, including a skull-and-crossed-bones, serve as “the magical skirts of female deities who had participated in, and died on behalf of, the creation of the world. The altars served as places where people could make offerings in exchange for the gods’ assistance” (Klein 2008:245).

The skirts, or their representations, like other garments and regalia, retain the vital energy (“essence and powers”) of the beings who wore them. In addition to her role as Huitzilopochtli’s mother, then, Coatlicue was also one of the *tzitzimime*, whose extraordinary generative powers inspired the petitions of those who needed medical assistance. As such Coatlicue was a “grand creator,” a model of self-sacrifice, whose statue was positioned with others around the Templo Mayor to intensify the regenerative capacity of the structure and its inseminated offerings.

Given the diamond-patterned, bead-and-fringe skirt’s appearance on females at Teotihuacan and El Zapote, the fringed-diamond design adjacent to the quincunx “earth” design at La Venta must have referred to a skirt, of the type worn by women. In Tomb C was a jade bead hip string accompanied by hundreds of small jade beads and spangles, all distributed over the lower torso and thighs of the pseudocorpse. The being memorialized there is the one associated with embryo designs on her earspools, the eagle incised on the obsidian core, and many marine skeuomorphs of jade. If she was a person, she lived during Phase IV (600–400 bc). The Phase II mosaic pavements predate this skirt, so the deified archetype may have preceded actual human use of the skirt. The mosaic pavement image is reduced to the essentials: double merlon or underworld entrance (following Reilly), quincunx (and all it implies), and skirt. These three components must have formed the name of the image and the being. She was metaphorically designated as the earth and the wearer of a vegetative (flowery) or greenstone skirt. While the Maya elites associated the skirt primarily with descent from royal lineages or from the primordial human-maize being, and secondarily with a sacred female earth surface, the Mixe and Aztec emphasized the powers of the female earth, particularly her omniscience and regenerative powers.

If we consider the multivalent meanings condensed in the components of this simple design, we find reference to space, time, place, celestial periodicity, agricultural work and ritual, natural cycles, “supernatural” animate forces and beings, sex, gestation, and probably more. Basically, the mosaic pavement design, as has long been recognized, symbolized a flowering or vegetative earth (Fig. 6.9). I have tried to show that this earth was animate, considered female, and named by a netted, jade bead skirt with a fringe. Its quincunx referred to the annual solar cycle in its four directional-ity. It prescribed circumambulation as the proper way to walk in a ritual manner as well as to plant maize. The motifs that make up the quincunx refer to planting maize—the sexual process of penetration, reception, and sowing seed—and to the larger theme of communication between the forces of sky, earth, and underworld. The quincunx, with its possible value of 13, and the twenty pieces of stone that make up the skirt encoded sacred gestational and divinatory cycles. As the twenty-ninth layer

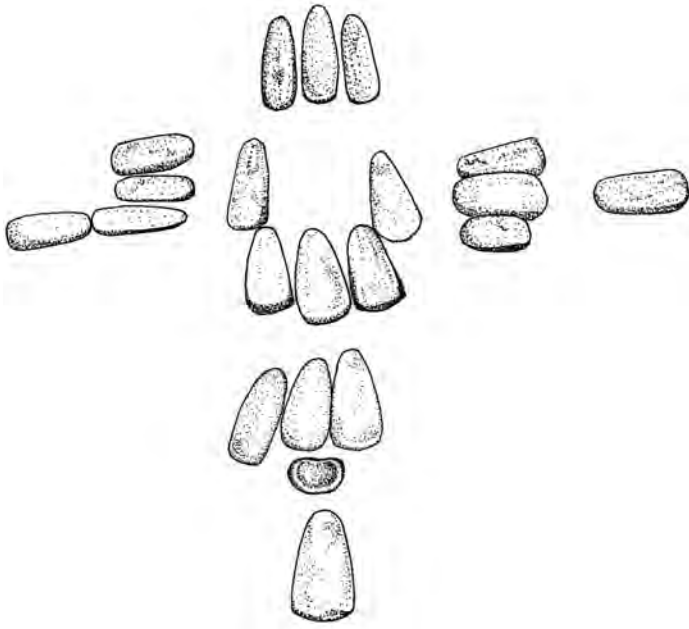


6.9 Reconstructed mosaic pavement at Parque Museo La Venta, Tabasco. Photo by author.

it referred to lunar time and lunar influence on vegetative growth and female periodicity, as well as to sacred space. I think the mosaic pavements functioned as the *primordial* earth altars, mother earth surface pavements, the ideal locations from which offerings could pass from humans to the powerful, all-knowing, flowering earth. This vegetative or flowering earth concept was probably ancestral to the Flower World of the Classic and Postclassic periods which several authors have described (e.g., Hill 1992; Taube 2004a). It prefigures Teotihuacan's colossal bead-skirted female, as well as the *tzitzimime* of Aztec myth and art, the generative female supernaturals whose skirts marked the locus of their sacrifice and served as altars at which petitioners could pray to the power of life force for healing and protection. The jade-beaded skirt came to the Maya via Teotihuacan and was used by elites to signal royal ancestry and the cycles of regeneration associated with the primordial human-maize being.

Offerings Inseminating the Flowering Earth

The offerings placed above the mosaic pavements/earth altars added even more valences to its significance. In the fill over the southeast Mother Earth Surface pavement was a single cache. It consisted of twenty polished jade and serpentine celts arranged in a cruciform shape (on the horizontal plane). A stone mirror was embedded in the long axis (Fig. 6.10). It is possible that the twenty stone celts functioned as embodiments of days. Later, the Maya would use stone stelae to embody the *tun* of 360 days (Stuart 1996). Time and carved stones seem linked, at least in Maya thought. Helen Neuenswander (1981), who worked with Aguacatec Quiché Maya women from northwest Guatemala in a health care capacity, reported that they relate the complete 260-day cycle to the lives of their children. "At the time of birth, a long slender stone (*qa-k'ub-il*) is 'planted' in the earth. [When the birth day in the 260-day calendar recurs], the parents return to the location of the stone to burn incense and ask the earth for protection of the child" (127).



6.10 Offering 1943-E, celts arrayed in a cruciform “tree” with a mirror at its base. Author drawing after Drucker 1952: Plate 8.

If the La Ventans did the same, then their deposition of twenty celts over the quincunx reiterates the components of the 260-day cycle, thirteen numbers, and twenty day names. The associations that accrue to each day name, each number, and each combination within the 260-day cycle form the heart of divination in Mesoamerica.

Helping to justify this interpretation of the earth surface pavement and its celt offering as embodying divinatory significance is the presence of the stone mirror near the base of the celts. With a stone mirror, one has access to a reflective surface, like that of a lake or basin. That such instruments might be connected with divination is also shown by Joyce Marcus’s (1999:79-82) reconstruction of women’s ritual in Oaxaca. In the Early Formative, some villagers at San José Mogote constructed shallow basins—waterproofed with lime plaster and painted red, yellow, and possibly other colors—in their household yards. Marcus has suggested that these are analogous to the water-filled basins used by sixteenth-century Zapotec diviners, who cast maize kernels onto the surface of the water. The diviners, mostly female, observed how the maize kernels fell into the water and from this predicted auspicious days for activities that would begin major phases or cycles, such as marriage and planting or the naming of a child. They also ascertained the sources of illness and its treatment. Mirrors

were portable reflective surfaces that served as tools for divination, as conduits through which the shamans could inquire of supernormal forces about past, present, and future events (Taube 2001; Tedlock 2001). Later, mirrors were an attribute of the Aztec patroness of midwives and healers, Chalchiuhtlicue (Jades-Her-Skirt) (Olivier 2001). Reinforcing this connection is the fact that one of the female jade figurines in La Venta Tomb 1 wears such a mirror.

And we should not forget La Venta’s basalt figurine of a kneeling female wearing a mirror (Fig. 5.8). This figurine, which had been roughly used and was broken or decapitated, was placed in the fill on top of the yellowish-olive clay envelope that sealed the mosaic like a sandwich. Nearby, and also over the clay, another offering of six celts was positioned over the *southwest* mother-earth-surface pavement near its center. We can only speculate as to the identity of the figurine, but as suggested in the next section, she could represent a midwife, a mother, or a precursor of Chalchiuhtlicue.

Massive Offerings: Contained Water

Under the Mother Earth Surface pavement were twenty-eight more layers of serpentine comprising Phase II massive offering. If we accept Reilly’s (1994) proposal that the massive offerings are effigies of sacred bodies of water, then there is another Mixe “greater-than-human reality configuration” that seems to correspond to such a concept. As I set forth above, in Mixe religion, manifestations of life, growth, seas, lakes, and rivers are referred to as another female dyad called Higiny. Her epithets include “Great Lady Higiny,” “Higiny Four Rivers,” and “Queen Where the Waters Spring Forth.” *Higiny* means “life.” As a governess of springs and rivers she influences the ability of humans to successfully catch fish. She also is present in sexual union and conception. She puts the new life into a woman’s body by conveying the child to her womb (Lipp 1991:32–33). Midwives pray to Higiny, who is present in the act of love, in conception, pregnancy, and birth (32, 118). If the massive offering represents a body of water, then an analogy with the Mixe supernormal potency of rivers, water, fishing, conception, birth, and life, Higiny, helps us draw closer to an understanding of why the La Ventans created such immense features of stone.

Although I am not sure if the Zoque Popoluca also conceive of such a female governess of the waters, they do see life as beginning in the water, or the moist womb, and progressing as solar warmth imparts movement and strength to humans and maize (Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003:155).

Why else would so much work have been done to create effigies of bodies of water? If a female power were thought to govern these aqueous forms of life, marine and human, she would be critical to the increase of population and maintaining a high survival rate for newborns. Obviously an essential feature for the growth of societies on the gulf was the continued health of marine life. It may be that these issues were of such importance that they motivated people from various parts of southern Mesoamerica to undertake the ritual transportation and deposition of the massive offerings.

After people dug huge pits in the earth, they laid the stones for the massive offerings within the northern court. These lake effigies were then impregnated with precious jade effigies of human and marine life, and with phallic, seedlike jade celts. This complex creates a conceptual state of perpetual fertilization and renewal, an ideally fecund uterine locus for performance of ritual to maintain, protect, and renew life in all its forms. Although the details of these rituals will never be known, we may, by returning to an examination of Mixe ritual and the imagery on sculptures, be able to identify some of La Venta's ritual practitioners and their general activities.

Mixe Healers, Midwives, and Rituals, and Their Olmec Antecedents

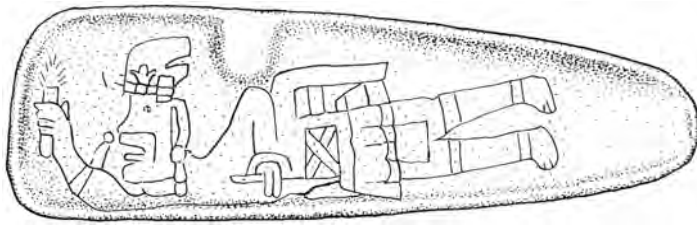
The Mixe's greater-than-human reality configurations reflect their beliefs that animistic forces inhabit the earth and the watery underworld, as well as thunder, wind, and animals. Similarly, individuals contain animistic entities, or "souls." In Mixe society, there are still traditional healers and ritual practitioners who employ rituals that engage, protect, heal, or align these spiritual entities. All such ritual performances invoke the powers of Nashwini, Higiny, and/or Ene for forgiveness and protection. In his ethnographic work, Lipp (1991:89-90, 148) referred to these practitioners of traditional healing methods as shamans and noted that most Mixe shamanistic practitioners

are female. Women healers tend to specialize as *ha:spi*, midwives and masseuses; as bone setters; or as *mu:kpi*, those who suck out venom. Today some people are suspicious of native healers, but others practically revere them. Those positive toward *curanderas* refer to them as *ispi-hkha'y*, "wise learned person"; *koco-y*, "curer of all things"; or *co:ydumbi*, "medicine worker" (148). The Mixe distinguish between healers and those who afflict illness or loss on others, *ko:zpi panaspi*, or witches and sorcerers (162).

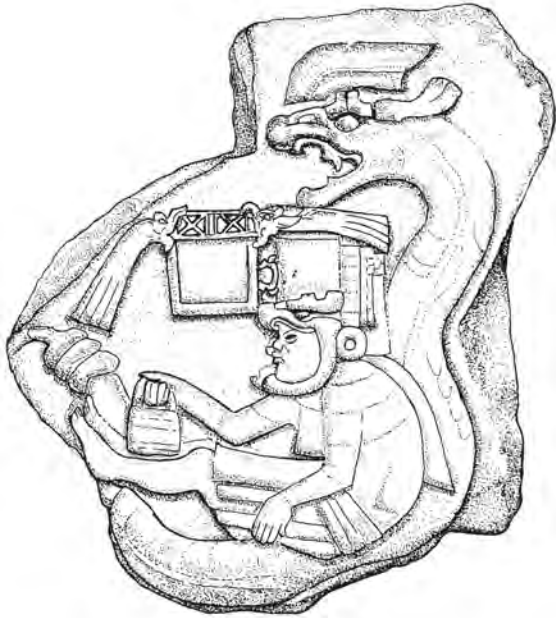
Each legitimate curer possesses a tutelary spirit, an embodiment of numinous power, Dios, which is obtained through a formalized petition. The spirit then bestows a vision or experience. The spirit can appear in several forms, including that of a serpent; the embodiment of the asterism Alnilam, the central star of the belt of Orion (see note 1); or a finely garbed female (Lipp 1991:50). Mixe shamans receive initiation via two different processes. One involves a communication with Nashwini via the ingestion of sacred mushrooms. The initiation process is undertaken on a mountaintop and in an attitude of prayerful devotion. After several days' abstinence from sexual relations and most food, the individual may experience a health crisis, such as blindness. Upon recovery, healing power permeates the body, lengthy visionary dream states may unfold, and special powers of vision and indestructibility may accrue. Through visions or instruction, the healer may acquire deeper knowledge of the curative properties of plants.

The other initiatory method occurs when the individual petitions her Dios for healing gifts. If the petition is granted, she or he experiences a series of dreams in which Dios reveals powerful symbols, orations, and images, sometimes in a mystical book. In subsequent dreams, Ene appears in anthropomorphic form to teach the curative touch and maize divination. Ene desires a pact, teaching healing practices and providing subsistence in exchange for sacrificial offerings (Lipp 1991:51-52). Women usually follow Nashwini's path, focusing on the use of mushrooms and gaining knowledge of plants useful in healing (149). In other words, female shamans often ally themselves with the spirit of the Mother Earth Surface. Both female and male shamans use the 260-day calendar to gain knowledge for divination, curing, and subsistence purposes (51).

Some of the practices and regalia of Mixe sha-



6.11 Clamshell pendant with incised profile figure shown with his right arm outstretched, holding a torch or maize fetish. His embryo-like head is flung back, and his left hand holds a cut shell implement. His cape flies behind him. 22.5 x 7.2 cm. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



6.12 La Venta Monument 19, a male enveloped by a crested snake, receiving regalia. Drawing courtesy of Cherra Wyllie.

mans seem to be depicted in Olmec imagery. Consider the Olmec figure incised on a celt from Río Pesquero (Fig. 6.6c). The person wears a feathered headdress that, through its association with birds, refers to the celestial realm. Its legs are rendered as crocodile heads, referring to the watery underworld, making the vertical figure a symbol of a cosmic axis (Reilly 1995:25–26). In the figure's hands is a snake with axolotl brows. The snake could indicate that this important figure possessed the tutelary spirit of a snake. If this snake, like the Mixe tutelary snake, refers to an asterism in Orion's belt, it may represent a rain-calling staff. The Mixe see Alnilam as the center of the constellation "child's hammock" (belt of Orion) and call upon this star for rain (Lipp 1991:111). A celestial association for

the staff also presages the Maya "serpent bar" as a celestial staff (Freidel et al. 1993:78–79).

In another example, Mixe shamans engage in flight to mountaintops and journeys to the lower world. In the lower world are flaming candles for each person's soul. The shaman can attempt to refresh the candles in order to delay a person's death. Several Olmec objects are incised with a design of a person whose head is flung back and arm is outstretched, holding a torch or candle, as if flying through the dark (Fig. 6.11) (Reilly 1989:16, 1991:58, 1994b:136). Also, Mixe shamans may carry a wooden staff or a shoulder bag containing special objects. La Venta Monument 19 may illustrate the antecedents of some of these beliefs (Fig. 6.12). Enframed by a crested rattlesnake, which could be a tutelary spirit, a caped human wearing a helmet surmounted by axolotl brows (referring to metamorphosis) assumes a slouching position with his legs extended. The man holds a bag while a feathered loincloth or bundle floats above him. Similarly, Ene dons a special cape to bring rain, and the supernormally large, non-naturally crested snake and the bag are major elements of contemporary Mixe shamanic practice. In addition to images of such male shamans, to which Reilly and others have referred, I contend that the sculpture of La Venta also contains images of female shamans.

Female Shamans

For the most part, scholars who see shamanism as a useful lens through which to view Olmec symbols have focused on male figures and masculine practices. Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock (2005) has also documented the prominent roles, largely ignored by other scholars, that women have maintained as shamanic healers and diviners in communities around the world. Tedlock criticizes the exclusive focus on male shamans, in which a shaman's symbolic dismemberment, evisceration, or other symbolic death is necessary for shamanic initiation, found in the classic works on shamanism by historian of religions Mircea Eliade ([1964] 1972) and others. Two fundamental sources for Tedlock's arguments are her relationship to her Ojibwe grandmother, who was a healing shaman, herbalist, and midwife, and her own training as a Quiché Maya daykeeper (1982). In addition, Tedlock has collected information on historic and

contemporary female shamans. One aspect of feminine shamanistic practice that she emphasizes is that “Women on feminine paths focus attention around *birth*: they receive their shamanic calling during menarche or pregnancy and are symbolically reborn into the profession” (202, emphasis added). The onsets of menstruation and pregnancy are often considered to be periods of heightened sensitivity to spiritual powers. In light of the unique emphasis on fetuses in Formative Mesoamerican visual culture, it is interesting to note that some female shamans have reported getting messages from the fetuses in their wombs.

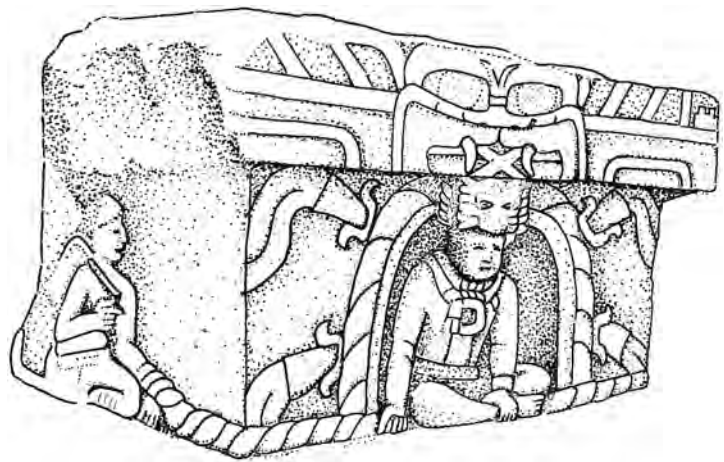
In an article about Maya midwives, anthropologist Sheila Cosminsky (2001) calls the contemporary midwife “a repository of knowledge and an agent of social control perpetuating the values of the community.” And in their highly informative article about the diverse practices of indigenous midwives in Mesoamerica, Huber and Sandstrom (2001) report that among the Nahua and Popoloca, some midwives receive a divine calling to the practice, while the route of others is secular. Tedlock (2005:206) states that for spiritually inclined shaman-midwives, participating in a birth event allows them to guide the transformation of souls who are crossing from the other world into this one. Such women develop an “intuitive grasp of the complex connections and forms of consciousness in the natural world,” and as such are instrumental in both collecting empirical information and honing their ability to mediate between the powers within plants, patients, and the community (137). The sculpture of La Venta included many explicit references to fetuses and embryos, and, I propose, metaphoric ones to birth, midwifery, and menstruation. To explore this idea, we can return to Thrones 4 and 5.

Several symbolic “solid nuclei” relating to feminine shamanic ritual are incorporated on Thrones 4 and 5. Their niches represent caves (Grove 1973). Because infants emerge from several of these cave-niches, the association with wombs has been obvious. And, of course, the niches are in the form of an inverted U, a widespread symbol for the womb among later Mesoamerican societies (Heyden 1981; Milbrath 1988).

On Throne 4, a flowering umbilicus, identified as such by Guernsey and Reilly (2001), frames the U-shaped cave-womb (Fig. 6.13). I propose that the flowers may have referred to positive aspects

of menstrual blood or to the placenta. As Tedlock (2005) notes, some contemporary Maya of Belize and Guatemala use a flower as a metaphor for the placenta. Also, the Aztec *Codex Vaticanus B* illustrates the menstrual blood of the goddess Xochiquetzal, a *tzitzimime* and a patron of sexual love and the moon, as a flower emerging from between her legs. Tedlock reports that many feminine shamanic paths celebrate the positive energy of menstrual blood in the form of flowers (174), which, of course, are the sexual, fruit-producing organs of plants. Furthermore, a connection between the flowery menstrual blood and the healing capacity of the sweatbath exists in the Mixe language, in which the term for sweatbath, *pihytihk*, means “house of flowers.” In the past these were used to heal many afflictions (Lipp 1991:18). Therefore the flowering umbilicus on Throne 4 probably marks it as a “house of flowers” or sweatbath.

The “tabletop” form of the thrones probably mimicked that of the sweatbath. Their shape is very much like later Mesoamerican versions of sweatbaths, particularly those portrayed in the Mixtec codices (Fig. 6.14). The Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec and their descendants all used the sweatbath in association with childbirth and for marriages as well (Dahlgren de Jordán 1954:256–257; Finsten 1996:33; Ravicz 1965:111). In fact, sweatbaths are part of typical midwife healing practices around the world (Tedlock 2005:207). But is there evidence for sweatbaths in the Formative period? Yes, the earliest functional sweatbath yet identified originated in Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero (Martínez Donjuán 1995). We can be sure that sweatbaths



6.13 La Venta Throne (Altar) 4. H: 1.6 m. Parque Museo La Venta. Drawing by author.

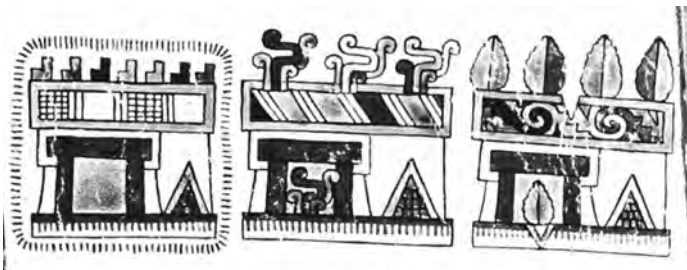
existed by the Middle Formative. Since sweatbaths are associated with birth and healing rituals, and two of these thrones portray infants, it is likely that the La Venta tabletop thrones, as well as the Early Formative ones at San Lorenzo, were given the form of ritual sweatbaths. On some of the La Venta thrones/sweatbaths, midwives may have been portrayed.

On the front of Throne 5, a male emerges from the cave-womb-niche holding an infant. He wears a scroll-top headdress affixed with an embryo-face medallion and three sprouts or rain drops. He may be a shaman or a shamanic ruler. Flanking him, on the sides of the block, some females are portrayed. In low relief on each side are two adults holding rowdy toddlers marked with the almond eyes, puffy upper lips, and cleft or deformed heads that constitute the conventionalized elements of the embryo or human-maize seed symbol. According to Follensbee (2000:260-266), the figure closest to the front niche on each side may be identified as female by the slight indications of swelling breasts and curving hips (comparable to the depiction of the woman on Stela 1). One of these women wears a cape and mirror, and the other exhibits a distinctive headdress similar to the one that appears on

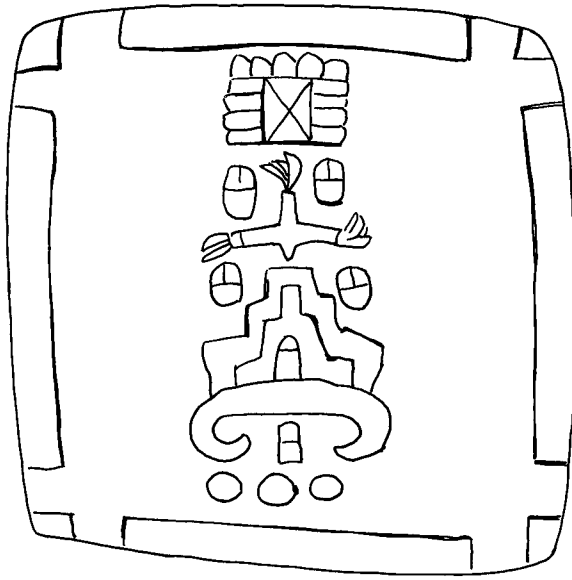
the woman on Monument 14 from San Lorenzo. Because they are depicted on the sides of a sweatbath, wear regalia associated with divination, are female, and hold babies, these images might represent La Venta's female shaman-midwives (and according to this logic, there apparently are some male shaman-midwives behind them). Are these midwives engaged with the birth of the infant and childhood rituals of the toddlers? Or, as is often asserted, were these adults sacrificing the infants? Mixe lore provides even more interpretive possibilities.

Several Mixe stories refer to powerful infants and caves. Shamans use caves for curing and other rituals. As conduits to the earth's interior, caves are the wombs of Nashwini. They contain roads to the abode of Ene, thunder. One special cave is *Ma-sung hut*, "cave of infants," regarded as the umbilicus of the world, from which sun, moon, thunder, and the four winds issued (Lipp 1991:48). Sometimes capricious winds, called "infants of the wind," abduct children, but instead of harming them, the children are nourished and given wondrous powers, and returned to their families. Instead of sacrificial victims, could the feisty embryo-headed toddlers be children who have been granted wondrous, transformative powers?

It is hard to say. I think the evidence for child sacrifice in the Formative is inconclusive. The neonates or fetus bones found among other offerings at El Manatí could well have died naturally, as could the lone child buried in the monumental bench (Monument 22) at Chalcatzingo (Fash 1987). In considering skeletal material as evidence for child sacrifice, we should not forget the high rates of infant mortality in the ancient world (Storey 1992; Storey and McNany 2006). On the other hand, we know that children were sacrificed and buried in pyramids at Teotihuacan, Tenochtitlan, and elsewhere. In the case of these thrones, it makes sense to look at the context in which the putative scene of sacrifice occurred. At La Venta, Thrones 4 and 5 multivalently refer to the womb and to the sweatbath as a place of birth and healing, hence to midwifery. If infant sacrifice is also portrayed, it is in the context of flowering umbilici, menstrual blood, midwives, and, not surprisingly, caves. What is remarkable is that these were apparently *royal thrones*. The basis of authority for the rulers who sat on these thrones was feminine generative power, perhaps enhanced by infanticide.



6.14 Three images of sweatbaths (top) from the *Codex Vindobonensis* and La Venta Throne 4. Photo by author.



6.15 Small incised plaque from Guerrero (known as the Dallas plaque) showing an elevation view of a cosmos juxtaposed with a plan view of the earth. This linear diagram is similar to the plan of La Venta. Dallas Museum of Art. Drawing by author.

The Mosaic Pavements as Conventionalized Symbols

For a moment I want to digress from iconography to a discussion of artistic considerations. Even the apparently simple composition of the mosaic pavements is charged with significance. Above I pointed out that the double merlons and central bar (or planting holes and digging stick) were rendered as a schematized elevation. This term refers to the viewpoint from which an object is shown. This kind of representation lends itself to the construction of diagrams because it can convey the vertical relationships among things. It is definitely not dependent on how one sees but on what one knows, or rather, how one conceptualizes relationships based on that knowledge. Most two-dimensional imagery in Mesoamerican art was made from this kind of imaginary elevational perspective. Things were stacked in a neutral field to show their position relative to one another. The sides of things that would not ordinarily be visible were twisted to provide the most readable view. Contrasting with, or complementing, the elevational view of the planting holes, stick, and skirt was the quincunxial arrangement of the holes. The quincunx was rendered in plan view (as from above), not elevation (from the side). The quincunx described space and time—*concepts*—as

they were known to be, not as they appeared to the eye. This combination of viewpoints, the elevation and the plan, was used in quite a few Olmec diagrams. The Dallas plaque (Fig. 6.15) and the Río Pesquero celts are examples. The same combination of viewpoints was used in Mixtec codices (although elevation definitely predominated, there are some examples of plan view, such as one of a ballcourt superimposed on the cross-section of a hill). Remarkably, the same combination was used to create the frontispiece of the post-conquest Aztec *Codex Mendoza*. The eagle, cactus, lineage heads, and conquered towns were rendered in elevation (with a tad of European perspective in the placement of the warriors' feet), while the lake and year count, in plan view, formed frames in which the specific information occurred.

Politics, Protection, and Healing

When we consider the kinds of rituals that might have been performed at La Venta, we should expand our ideas beyond the strictly political. Other authors have made cogent arguments that the tabletop altars served as thrones on which political legitimization or accession occurred (Grove 1973; Reilly 1995). Stelae 2, 3, and 5 seem to involve political personages. However, it is uncertain whether hierarchical social distinctions, such as those found in Maya kingdoms, were as clear-cut during the Formative period. While there were undoubtedly rulers, and monuments that commemorated them and their deeds, La Venta also contained sacred earth altars. They were likely sacrosanct locations with limited access for special practitioners. The ceremonies may have been more elaborate versions of a variety of popular rituals for protection, divination, childbirth, travel, and hunting, such as those the Mixe perform today. In addition to embryo-maize beings, fetuses, and infants, we also see among La Venta's monuments several women, some of them possibly playing political roles, but others who may be shamans or midwives. Several masked or transforming figures could represent La Venta's shamans, sorcerers, or characters in narratives of shamanic experiences. We should remember the Mixe distinctions between those shamans initiated by Nashwini and those by Ene, because a similar range of roles for shamans surely prevailed in the Middle Formative.

This study of the ritual depositions at La Venta and El Manatí show that the inhabitants of the Gulf Coast and adjacent mountains have been performing rituals at mountains and springs that involve men, women, and infants for a very long time. By 1500 bc, under the mountain at El Manatí, male and female wooden figures were impregnated with seeds, enwombed in fiber, sprinkled with infant bones, and deposited with phallic celts and staffs and semenlike rubber balls in a spring over nine sandstone blocks. Six hundred years later, the Olmec built mountain and sea effigies, and placed similar offerings over them. They made huge monuments to female powers of the earth surface and terrestrial waters, constructed elaborate tomblike offerings that memorialized women, and placed offerings similar to those at El Manatí. In the Classic period, at El Zapotal, among other sites in Veracruz, local inhabitants made monumental ceramic images of female supernaturals and women, and buried them with a death god altar and skeletal material in a large mound (Gutiérrez Solana and Hamilton 1977). And the Mixe of today, still not too far from the Gulf Coast, continue to revere female earth and water supernaturals, among other male potencies, as the mostly female shamans perform rituals of healing, divination, and protection.

The Earthen Pyramid, massive offerings, and mosaic pavements displayed as much spiritual or psychic richness as they did economic wealth. I think they honored the generative forces that produced the bountiful waters and earth in which life dwelled and on which it depended. To repay

and encourage this abundance, humans made enormous offerings of effort in mining, transportation, excavation, and crafting. As constructions within the ritual center, the water and earth altars remained hidden, at least partially for their own protection. Along with the smaller objects with specific representational forms, they created a substrate of numinous presence that sanctified and vivified La Venta's surface. These human efforts accompanied by spiritual focus, prayer, and performance constituted the potency of La Venta as a ritual center. This is where female and male healers would have wanted to come to effect difficult cures and to provide powerful protection. La Venta seems to have enjoyed a relatively long period of political expansion. It was probably a Tollan of its day, although not the first or the only accomplished and powerful center within the reeds to which people journeyed to perform identities, transmit knowledge, and gain political legitimization.

Thus far, we have looked primarily at the buried and earthen features of La Venta. The visible monumental sculptures also played an important role in displaying the site's political and spiritual power. Although it is difficult to ascertain how they fit into the chronology, we do know how many of them were configured on the surface of La Venta at the end of Phase IV. As suggested in the following chapter, many of the monuments, like the buried offerings, were arrayed in significant configurations. These seem to have represented characters in performances of cosmogony and origins.

Chapter 7

A Processional Visual Narrative at La Venta

Finally it is time to discover how, in its final phase, La Venta's builders organized the visual landscape to create a complex message. The previous chapter introduced the small and large, buried and visible sculptures at La Venta in their chronological contexts. By interrogating their subject matter (a first-level analysis) and their syntactical arrangements as they were deliberately juxtaposed to other sculptures (a second-level analysis), we have been able to significantly enhance existing identifications. For one thing, due to Billie Follensbee's work (2000), we know that the subject matter of La Venta's sculptures includes several female agents. The female subjects—as well as pre-birth humans, infants, sweatbaths, and umbilical cords—suggest a major thematic focus on gestation, birth, and related topics. A better grasp of the subject matter and its syntax provides a more secure, internally consistent basis for an interpretive (third-level) analysis. For example, a more detailed knowledge of the design, numerical associations, and offerings associated with the massive offerings and mosaic pavements allowed me to propose their similarities to Mixe ritual practice. This culminated in the hypothesis that the mosaic pavements functioned as giant altars to (or effigies of) a Mother Earth Surface supernatural, and the massive offerings as altars/effigies of a female Midwife-Lake supernatural. In turn, this allows us to consider new ways in which shamanistic beliefs and practices might have been portrayed in the Formative period. Furthermore, we have seen that narrative content pervaded the sculptures as groupings of single-subject pieces as well as in complexly carved individual sculptures. In this chapter, bearing all this in mind, we will consider how the monuments were arrayed at the site and what the arrangement meant.

This chapter proposes that five sets of visible sculptures, along with the buried offerings of Com-

plex A, formed six stations of a processional visual narrative of creation and origins that stretched across the entire site. In its sculptural form, the creation narrative consisted of a series of episodes or ritual contexts. Probably those who orated the narrative or performed the rituals filled in the gaps. Each narrative station provided a plethora of visual symbols to which performers could refer as they enacted a version of the story. It may be that much of La Venta's wealth and importance stemmed from its role as the place that orchestrated the production of such a narrative. It is interesting that this phenomenon occurred in the Middle Formative, long after the introduction of monumental sculpture, the ballgame, jade, embryo images, and all the other features we associate with Formative period Mesoamerica.

Why was the Middle Formative such a crucible for ideas that would capture the beliefs and imaginations of later people for centuries? Claude Calame, who brings politically contextualized discourse analysis to classical Greek poetry and narrative, writes that the symbolic process

seems regularly to be aroused by a singular occasion: decisive modification in the history, lifestyle, or ecology of the society in question, which also affects the emotional state of the individuals. This modification provokes the need for reflection, operating in contact with both empirical reality and the conceptual and cultural preconceptions and representations inherent in the society concerned to construct a figurative "response." (Calame [1996] 2003:28)

Several "decisive modifications" in the Gulf Coast region seem to have prompted the symbolic processes we see in the Middle Formative. The decline of San Lorenzo and abandonment of El Manatí clearly affected the centers to which they were linked, such as Laguna de los Cerros and Las Limas, which also lost population. Other centers, such as Tres Zapotes and La Venta, grew. Although La Ventans still enjoyed a mixed subsistence that included wild plants and marine resources, they increasingly raised maize. To process the kernels, people needed more metates and manos, which meant a greater reliance on worked basalt tools (Rust and Leyden 1994). Perhaps after the events that caused a decline of the great San Lorenzo, there was a desire to develop more widely shared answers to those important questions that concern

every individual and every society—those about the mysteries of life, origins, how to feed a growing population, how humans can contribute to the balance of natural forces and take advantage of their cycles, how to strive for individual power and recognition, how to govern and protect one's polity, and how to obtain goods and materials that are either utilitarian or status-reinforcing.

It seems that one response of Middle Formative people was to develop new visual forms and arrangements with which they could communicate and codify their changing bases of knowledge. We saw this process as we examined the variety of configurations for buried offerings during the modifications of Complex A, including the massive offerings and mosaic pavements. Similarly, the stela format seems to have developed in the Middle Formative, possibly at La Venta. The massive offerings and mosaic pavements are also examples of such formal innovations. La Ventans continued to develop the syntactical arrangements of forms, as had been done previously, for example, at San Lorenzo.

Previous Investigations of Olmec Creation Narratives

In Chapter 4 I discussed several studies that dealt with narrative in two-dimensional and low-relief art, and extended their observations to the more three-dimensional formats of Olmec monuments. Olmec sculptors employed several strategies—including wraparound compositions, stacking of locative symbols, slight asymmetries, dynamic poses, and figural interactions—to suggest temporal displacement, cosmic spatial frameworks, and narrative action. In addition to suggesting narrative through composition, Olmec sculptors used symbols that prefigured those in later Mesoamerican narratives of creation and origin. Beatriz de la Fuente (1981:90) pointed to particular Olmec sculptures as "petrified incarnations of a creation myth: the possession of the earth, the fertilization of the earth, the supernatural union that is established as the paradigm of all unions, the sacred origin of man." She also saw the thrones on which a figure emerges from a cave as reproductions of an origin myth in which the cave within the earth is the generatrix of man: his womb. She

tended to look at each monument individually and not to consider them in spatial groups. To her, the monuments portraying creation narratives were not the most numerous of Olmec monuments, but a special subset.

Ideas about how to establish a framework in which narrative could unfold at La Venta shifted in the late 1980s when Rebecca González excavated the three immense sandstone blocks (Monuments 52, 53, and 54) that Stirling had discovered in 1941. Drucker (1952:14) had described them as “great sandstone blocks . . . boldly but so crudely carved that their motifs could not be made out from the sections exposed by tunneling under them.” The blocks were so large that the team did not attempt to move them. Decades later, using special equipment, González moved them from the U-shaped platform, D-7, at the southernmost end of the site, to the site museum. There one could observe that they represented squatting figures holding their heads, which were fitted with tight helmets (Gallegos Gómora 1990). Far to the north, the three colossal heads wore such helmets, suggesting a narrative relationship between the two sets (González Lauck 1996). Although González has not agreed with my identification of the three colossal sandstone monuments as representations of human fetuses (Tate and Bendersky 1999), she has not offered another interpretation of those figures, apparently accepting the general consensus that they depict dwarfs or generic squatting creatures. To me, however, the presence of colossal fetuses wearing helmets on the southern extreme of the site, which thus balance the helmeted colossal heads north of the enclosed court, suggests a narrative continuum. This powerful connection across the site demanded that attention be paid to the spatial distribution of the other monuments.¹

Other authors have proposed that some of the monuments might have figured in a processional arrangement. In particular, two 1999 publications explored this idea. Archaeologist David Grove compared La Venta, San Lorenzo, and Chalcatzingo, finding meaningful but distinct spatial arrangements at each site. He thinks that Mound C-1 segregated La Venta into a southern zone in which processions between publicly accessible monuments could have occurred, and a northern zone (Complex A) of restricted access, in which surface monuments were little more accessible

than the buried caches and tombs (Grove 1999). In another study, Kent Reilly (1999) proposed a processional route from the large plaza (Complex B), where worship of a “maize god” and performance of creation events like those of the Maya occurred, along the east side of the Earthen Pyramid (C-1) to the enclosed court (Complex A). The latter location, with its tombs and a stela showing a human with an elaborate headdress grasping a vertically extended snake which towers above him (Monument 63), was the locus of cosmogonical and world-centering events. In this exclusive setting, rulers (presumed to be male) sought access to supernatural power. Once buried, they glided into the primordial seas below their tombs. In the watery underworld, they regenerated.

These three scholars—de la Fuente, Reilly, and Grove—were able to discern among the sculptural forms the portrayal of a creation narrative. As an art historian, Beatriz de la Fuente was unusual in her willingness to approach Olmec art—a body of sculpture for which there are no corresponding texts of any type. Reilly and Grove worked with Linda Schele, whose enthusiasm and insights into Maya iconography inspired several generations of scholars from a variety of disciplines. However, most iconographic studies of Olmec art have focused on graphic systems, not on three-dimensional objects. The disciplines of art history and history predispose us to observing two-dimensional symbols.

As Enrique Florescano, Walter Mignolo, and others have observed, the European voyages to the Americas occurred shortly after the invention of the printing press. Mignolo (1995) points out that for European humanists of the Renaissance era, the possession of alphabetic writing and historical records such as those of Herodotus and Tacitus were the symbol par excellence of being civilized. Since then, scholars—even art historians—trained in the European tradition have privileged written texts over visual images as sources of evidence. Partly this is because many scholars are more interested in writing a history than in examining myth or ritual. In his book *National Narratives in Mexico: A History*, Florescano (2006:89-90) observes that “native memory imagined many ways to rescue the past and transmit it as a legacy for future generations. Among that variety of devices, five methods of transmission of messages stand out that have come down to us without losing their evocatory force.”

He elaborates on the ways in which the songs, dances, music, and visual imagery associated with ceremonies, as well as the pictorial codices, myths, and calendars, all provided aids for memory to be honed within a group of specialists trained to keep the past alive. Florescano spotlights the importance of sculptural forms, recounting how the visual representation—in the form of the earthen pyramid, the stela, and the temples,

was a didactic lesson that described to the population of the city and its dazzled visitors the crucial moments that gave form to the new era of the world, the order that had come out of that genesis, and the values that set the norm for the lives of the inhabitants of the kingdom. It could be said that the inhabitants of the cities of Mesoamerica . . . lived in a kind of city museum, literally filled with monuments and symbols that alluded to the founding events of the kingdom. This was an image that the rulers imprinted on each city they built and whose lesson they repeated again and again in the ceremonies that year after year celebrated the origin of the gods, human beings, cultivated plants, and the grandeur of the kingdom. (Florescano 2006:89-90)

However, even in this passage he uses language appropriate for two-dimensional symbolism—for example, “imprinted” and “image.” Based on the work of Reilly, Schele, and Freidel, Florescano writes specifically about La Venta, and like them, casts the Olmec of the Middle Formative in much the same political and religious mold as the Classic Maya: kingdoms with shamanic rulers and a pantheon of gods.

While these authors have made important and valid contributions, they did not discuss the northernmost and southernmost ends of the monumental zone, and so have not considered the patterns of placement that govern the whole. Also, they had not yet explored the significance of the women among La Venta’s sculptures, not even the few whose identity as females had long been agreed upon, such as the figure on Stela 1 and the jade figurine with the mirror from the basalt column tomb. They did not consider the possibility that fetuses and embryos played a prominent role in La Venta’s political-ideological monuments. By incorporating these basic identifications of subject matter in the context of all the sculptures at the site, we may achieve a more accurate notion of how the Olmec portrayed themselves and their beliefs.

This chapter employs several methodological strategies that build upon each other. First, it examines the overall organization of the surface sculptures. It extends the first-level analyses proposed earlier—which established such elements as umbilical cords, embryos, human-maize seeds, fetuses, sweatbaths, and female human figures—by examining these in the contexts of associated symbolic units. Next, by noting patterns in the placement of monuments during Phase IV, I point out the organizational features that identify individual sculptures as segments of a whole processional narrative. The subsequent chapter will guide readers through the narrative stations, digressing to explore the Olmec symbolic webs and Mesoamerican isotopies that coalesced at La Venta.

Patterns for the Distribution of Monumental Sculptures

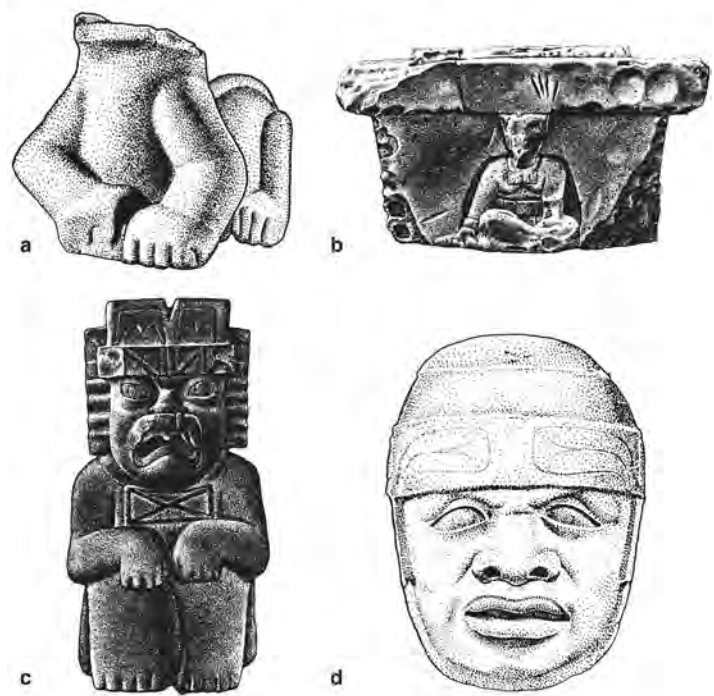
Until now, scholars have not recognized the existence of a coherent pattern governing most of the monuments on the surface of La Venta. This is largely because of the piecemeal nature of reports of discoveries at the site. Furthermore, La Venta has suffered depredation from many economic interests. Not the least of these is Petroleos Mexicanos, which built an oil refinery a mile away. Over the decades, many sculptures have been removed from the site with little documentation of their original locations. In some situations, there are conflicting reports of location, orientation, and dimensions of monuments. The numbering of several has been changed as well. By combing through the reports of the numerous exploratory and scientific interventions at the site, however, I have been able to situate with a limited degree of accuracy approximately seventy monuments on a site plan (Fig. 5.4). Any final determination of their nomenclature, dimensions, condition, and location will be the domain of the archaeologists of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología.

As I attempted to assign the monuments to specific locations on the plan, it became obvious that a pattern had governed the placement of certain monuments along the central axis. They were placed in sets of similar formats and subjects. On one end were three helmeted colossal fetuses on a U-shaped platform. The penultimate set consisted of three helmeted colossal heads looking north-

ward toward the last monument, a phallic column situated on a 6.1 m high conical mound. Given that the first and last sets seemed to relate to each other across about 2 km of distance, it seems likely that people traveled from one end of the site to another, engaging in processional performance of narrative. Helmeted fetus, helmeted decapitated head; a low, womb-shaped platform, an elevated phallus. To me, these pairs of oppositions imply a dynamic series of mediations required to traverse the conceptual space between them. They suggest a story of creation and destruction and human origins—the kind told by many later Mesoamerican peoples.

Before we consider the distribution of monuments at La Venta, it is useful to review how sculpture was organized at San Lorenzo (Fig. 7.1). While there is a north-south orientation for several earthen plazas, the majority of monuments are not aligned on an axis. Exceptions may include several of the colossal heads, which follow two ragged north-south lines (Grove 1999). Other monuments formed scenic displays that documented the origins and deeds of an individual ruler.² Cyphers (1999:157) pointed out that the context of a monument includes “not only [that of] the single object, but those objects found together with it, including constructed architecture and/or modified landscapes, [whether] immediate or more remote.”

As San Lorenzo declined, about 900 bc, monumental construction accelerated at La Venta, about 100 km (60 mi) to the northeast. At the later center we find two distinct patterns of placement, which I call “clusters” and “sets.” At least three clusters of diverse monuments are similar to San Lorenzo’s scenic displays. One, near the very center of the site, includes a colossal head, a zoomorphic jaguar throne with an embryo face, a stela, and several other heavily battered pieces (Monuments 1, 36a, 36b, 47, 58, 59, Altar 7, Stela 2) (Fig. 7.2). The monuments on the Stirling Acropolis might be considered as one or two clusters. Another consists of Monuments 19, 20, and 21 (a low-relief carved slab discussed in the previous chapter, the three-dimensional effigy of a cetacean, and a figure which is merged with a throne). These formed a small cluster to the northwest of the colossal heads. Within such a cluster, each monument bears distinctive, complementary iconography. Additionally, there are a few isolated monuments, and many for which the original locations are undocumented.³



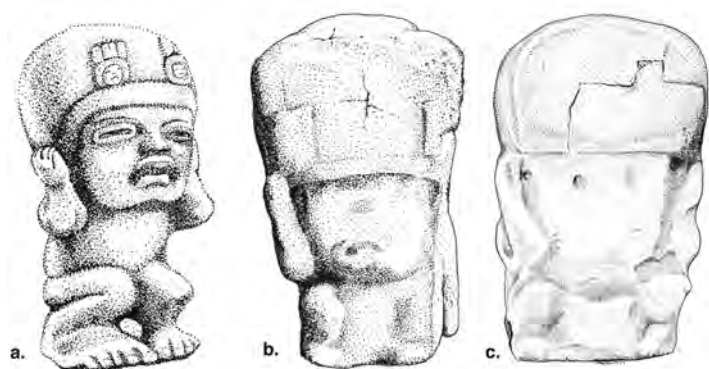
7.1 A scenic display, or cluster, of disparate monuments from San Lorenzo: *a*, Monument 77; *b*, Monument 14; *c*, Monument 52; *d*, Monument 61. Drawings *a* and *d* by Corey Escoto; *b* and *c* from Coe and Diehl 1980, courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

Contrasting with La Venta’s several clusters, however, are “sets” of nearly identical monuments (Fig. 7.3), each consisting of three, four, or five multiples of a single subject (Fig. 7.4). These numbers relate to essential spatiotemporal concepts in Mesoamerica: the tripartite division of the cosmos as sky-earth-underworld, the four intercardinal directions, and the fifth sacred direction, or vertical axis, as well as the number of digits on a hand, which was eminently important in Mesoamerican counting and calendrical systems (Closs 1986; Coggins 2007). The sets are clearly intended to make a statement strengthened by repetition. Slight differences among the sculptures in a set served to differentiate individuals who occupied a specific role. For example, on a set of three colossal heads, insignia on headdresses probably provided names, a device that was common in later Mesoamerican art. It is also possible that such repetition with variation was intended as a poetic device, a topic that deserves further development.

La Ventans situated the sets and clusters differently. They made a clear distinction between the two types of monuments and how they should be



7.2 A cluster of monuments from La Venta's Complex B plaza: a, Monument 1; b, Throne (Altar) 7; c, Stela 2; d, Monument 47. Photos by author.



7.3 A set of monuments from La Venta, the colossal fetuses. These are the Station 1 sculptures. A small basalt sculpture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (a) is very similar and shows what the other two must have looked like; b, Monument 52, H: 200 cm; c, Monument 54, H: 375 cm. Drawing a by author; drawings b and c by Corey Escoto.

seen within the spatial organization of the site. The sets are configured relative to the centerline, while clusters fall on one side of the centerline or the other.

Among Gulf Coast Olmec sites, La Venta was apparently the first to have a bilaterally symmetrical plan organized around a central axis. I suspect the axis might have shifted slightly at some point, since the southernmost and northernmost sets occupy another axis that is parallel to the recognized centerline. Since they are parallel, both axes run 8 degrees west of north (Drucker et al. 1959). The importance of this organizing principle was recognized when the early excavators, Drucker and his crew, found buried offerings along the axis, or centerline, or arrayed symmetrically on either side. However, although platforms and mounds on the surface also ran parallel to the centerline or were placed right on it, no one has noticed that it was marked by visible sculptures as well—by columns.

In researching the locations of sculpture, I recognized that several stone columns penetrated the site along the central axis⁴ (Monuments 35, 47, 49, 62, and an unnumbered one). The central one was red; the rest were green (Fig. 7.5). The southernmost column, Monument 49, 2.74 m tall and formed of greenish schist, was on the south end of the “Long Mound,” between Altars 4 and 5. North of it, Monument 35, a 3.5 m high column, also of greenish schist, stood on the square platform in the center of the Complex B plaza, on the centerline. About 75 m to the north was a reddish basalt column, also 3.5 m high, on the floor of the Complex B plaza. There is another basalt column, Monument 62, 6.6 m high, but its original location is unknown. A smaller, greenish column, Monument 12, carved with regalia and possibly zoomorphic features, was found on the centerline just 1 m south of the central platform in the ceremonial court. Finally, a 2.36 m high column rose upon a 7 m conical mound, named “Cerro Encantado.” It was the northernmost monument at the site, found and photographed by Stirling (1943:60), but missing as of this writing. These columns had no apparent structural function (such as supporting a lintel). They rose *between*

7.4 (opposite page) Plan of the sculptural stations at La Venta, based on González Lauck 1990, 1991, 1997; with information from Clewlow and Corson 1968; de la Fuente 1973; Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959; and Stirling 1943. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

STATION SIX
Phallic Column

COMPLEX F

LA VENTA, TABASCO



0 100m 200m

- # = Monument
- ▲ ST# = Stelae
- ★ A# = Altar (Throne)
- || = Columnar Monument

STATION FIVE

Colossal Heads
(facing north)

COMPLEX A

STATION FOUR

Lake Effigies (Massive Offerings)

|| Earth Effigies (Mosaic Pavements)
over Lake Effigies (Massive Offerings)

|| Earth Effigy (Mosaic Pavement)

STATION THREE

Maize / Embryo Stelae

87, 88, 89, 25/26, 86, 27

COMPLEX C

Sacred Mountain

COMPLEX B

STIRLING "ACROPOLIS"

Water Channels and Basins

drains 3 and 4

drain 1

drain 5

drain 2

STATION TWO

Cave/Womb Thrones

Earth Crocodile

Cave/Womb Thrones

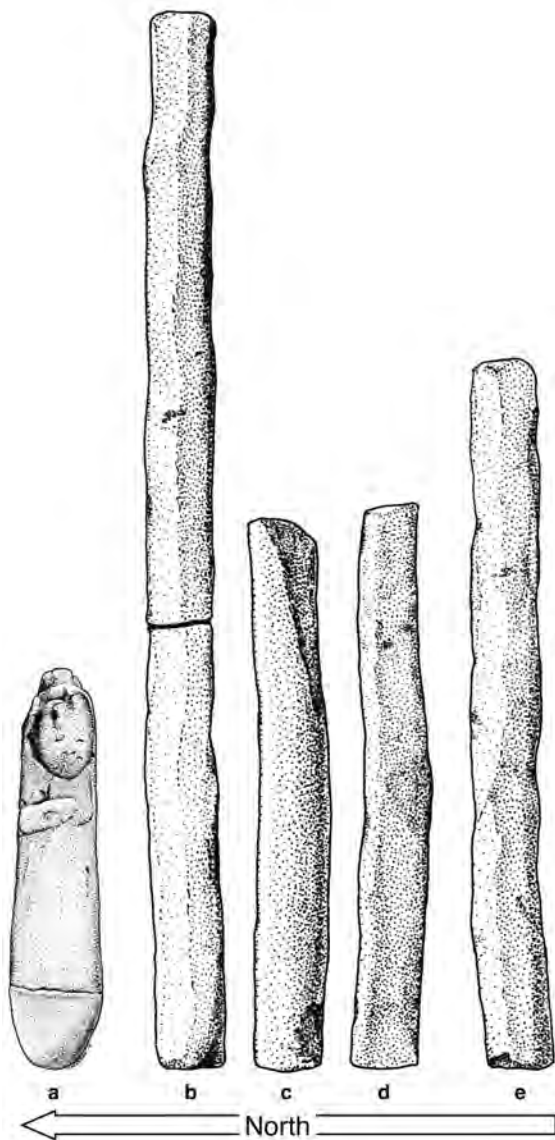
COMPLEX D

STATION ONE

Colossal Fetuses

54
52
53

U- Group



7.5 The columns on La Venta's centerline: *a*, the Cerro Encantado column; *b–e*, Monuments 35, 46, 49, and 62. Drawings by Corey Escoto.

the other five sets of monuments, serving as visual markers that beckoned people from one set to another. In addition to their symbolic penetration of the earth surface—or, in other words, their function as cosmic pillars, world trees, or symbols of the union of sky and earth—the visually prominent columns probably served to keep processions on track and to mark places for the staging of performances. Because the columns were all located near the centerline and were a similar shape, they may be considered as one of the sets.

As mentioned above, at the southernmost

periphery of the site are the three colossal fetus sculptures that comprise a set. Because these blocks were so large, and the sandstone of which they were made was so eroded, Stirling (1968a) noted that they were carved but did not try to turn them over to see what they might represent. Years later, under the direction of Rebecca González, Judith Gallegos Gómora (1990) excavated the mound on which Monuments 52, 53, and 54 were situated. This revealed a U-shaped earthen platform, one of the earliest known in Mesoamerica, although similar platforms faced with stone and of much larger scale were built much earlier in coastal Peru. Radiocarbon assays for Group D-7 suggest a date between 760 and 660 bc (González Lauck 1990:165). As discussed in Chapter 4, La Venta was not the first polity known to have commissioned stone sculptures of fetuses. Smaller fetus sculptures came from San Lorenzo (SL), where they were likely earlier. One fragmentary fetus sculpture, Monument SL 99, is 14 cm in height; another, SL Monument 1 B, which is partially mutilated and possibly recarved, is 17 cm (Cyphers 2004:166, 167, 197, 199) (see also Monuments 131 and 132). The La Venta fetuses were definitely bigger, however, at 2 m, 2.4 m, and 3.75 m in height. Despite their erosion, it is obvious that these crouching fetuses wore helmets and supported their huge heads with their hands.

Of the five large cave/sweatbath thrones that have served as a leitmotif for this book, four were found in or overlooking the Complex B plaza (Fig. 7.6). Situated on the southern extension of the Earthen Pyramid's basal platform, Throne 2 was found with its principal carved surface (the cave-niche) facing up. Slightly to its west on the platform, Throne 3 faced south. At the opposite end of the Complex B plaza, Thrones 4 and 5 faced out of the site from their positions to the east and west of the Long Mound. No one can pinpoint their original locations, but Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959:14) commented that they may not have been too far from the centerline. These four cave/sweatbath thrones with their cave-niches formed a long quincunx that defined the boundaries of the plaza. As the corners of a quincunx, one could say that they represented womb-caves of the four directions.

In the center of the quincunx of cave/sweatbath thrones were three thrones (altars) with distinct imagery. The “find” locations of these are even less



a.



b.



c.



d.

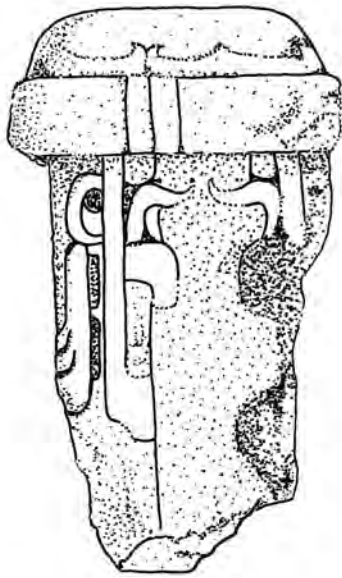
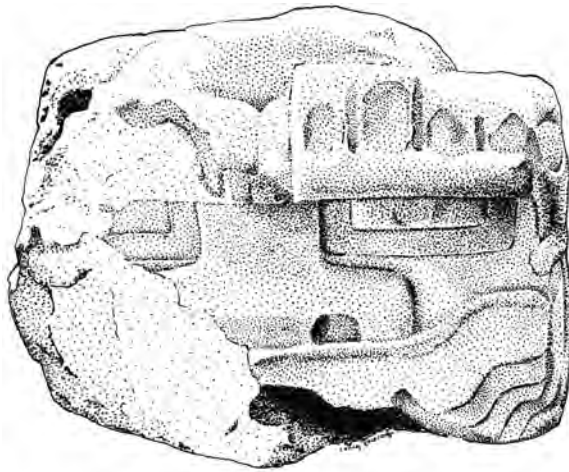


e.



f.

7.6 La Venta Station 2, a quincunx of altar-thrones: *a*, Altar 3; *b*, Altar 2; *c*, Altar 1; *d*, Altar 8; *e*, Altar 5; *f*, Altar 4. Photos by author.



7.7 La Venta Thrones (Altars) 1 (top) and 8. Drawing of Altar 1 by Corey Escoto; drawing of Altar 8 by author.

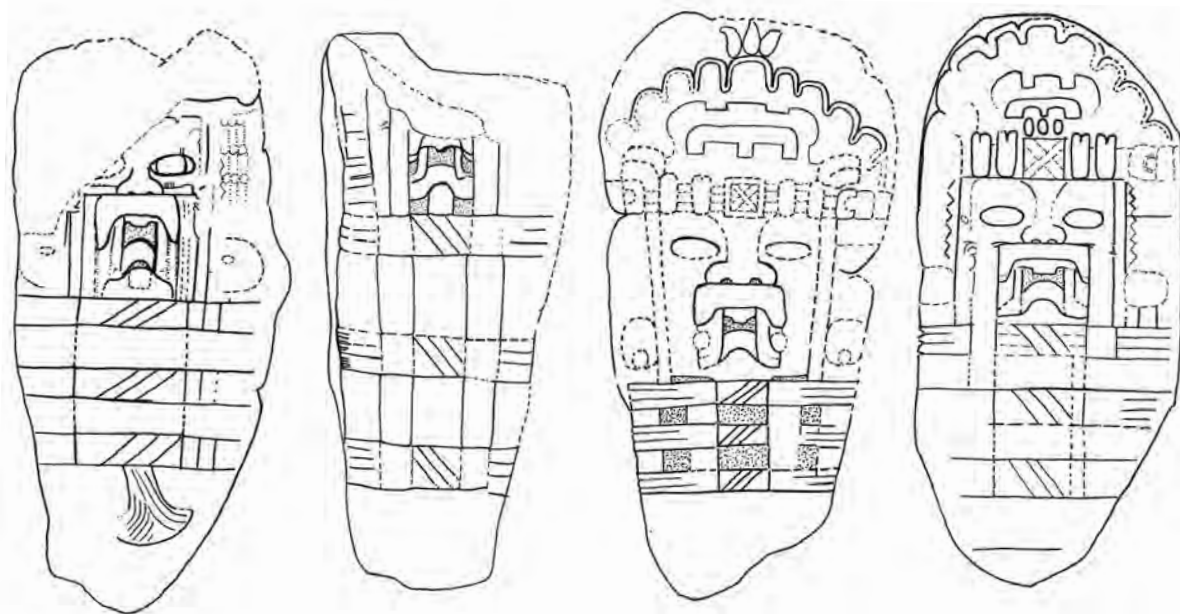


7.8 Front of La Venta Throne (Altar) 7. Photo by author.

well documented, but they ran approximately in a north-south line. In a sense these formed the central “bar” of the quincunx of cave/womb/sweatbath thrones. Throne 1 was in the middle of the space defined by the cave/sweatbath thrones. It portrays a crocodilian or axolotl. Throne 8 was previously named Stela 4 by Stirling (1943:52) and renumbered by González (1990:173). The battered throne depicts a creature with a feline body and broken zoomorphic head holding a double-headed snake that dangles from its mouth (Fig. 7.7). Throne 7 was likely a part of the cluster of monuments surrounding Stela 2. It is an oval boulder, with a duckbill-masked face in a niche the largest image around which walk several male and female figures (carved at a smaller scale) (Fig. 7.8). It is likely a very late monument.

On the same platform as Thrones 2 and 3, at the foot of the Earthen Pyramid, seven stelae arose (Fig. 7.9). Four of these (Monuments 25/26, 27, 88, 89) reveal a nearly identical image of a human embryo-maize seed bundled in the womb, with twisted cords representing the umbilicus or the three sacs of gestation. Two other stelae are plain (86, 87), and another one, Stela 5, bears a unique scene of two anthropomorphic figures. Monuments 25 and 26 actually are the halves of one stela. It and Monument 27 had been found by the Drucker, Heizer, and Squier excavations (1959:204–209). González excavated Monuments 86, 87, 88, 89, and Stela 5 during her work on this face of Mound C. She noted that the stelae on the west side of the centerline were gray in color, and those on the east were green (González Lauck 1997). During her excavations near these monuments, she collected two carbon samples that when tested produced dates of AD 1641 $\pm$ 35 years and one of 394 bc $\pm$ 36 years. The former reaffirms the Postclassic occupation of the region, and the latter probably corresponds to the context of Monument 87 (González Lauck 1997:87–96).

Previous interpretations of these monuments have been varied but related. In concert with the work of her students Virginia Fields and Kent Reilly, Schele (1995:108) interpreted them as the tree at the cosmic central axis that rises from a cleft-headed deity resting on a bundle. Karl Taube (1996) considers them to represent the Olmec maize god, wearing a four-celt headband and related to the world axis. Grove (1999) has argued

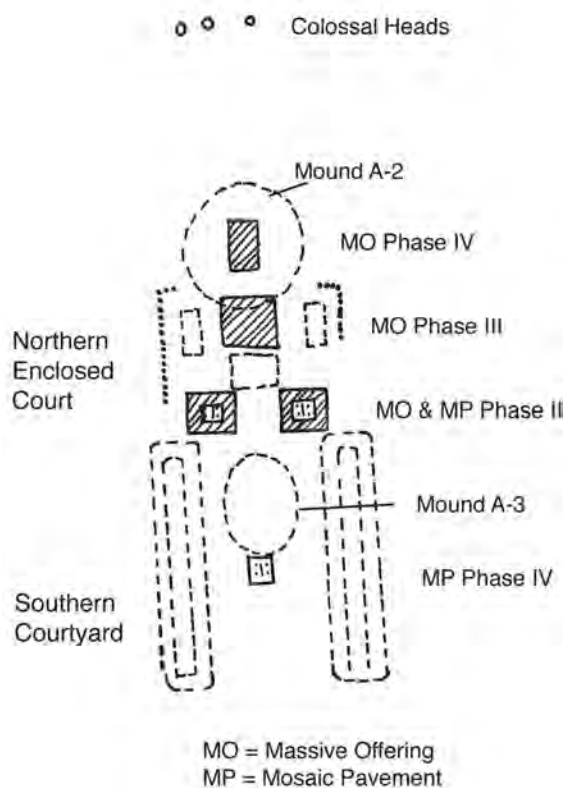


7.9 La Venta Station 3, the embryo-maize stelae (not to scale). Drawings by author.

that they represent the “face of the mountain.” González was reluctant to definitively interpret these figures beyond noting that they serve as guardians or sentinels of Mound C-1. What I have added to this identification of axiality, bundling, “godliness,” and maize is that which makes the image essentially human and representative of the sacred process of metamorphosis that characterizes life: the human embryo. If the image is a human-maize conflation in the seed form of both, and if it anthropomorphizes the power inherent in insemination, gestation, and dawning as an archetypal being, then the interpretation accounts for the image’s human aspect, its maize symbols, its bundling in the womb, its sprouting from the earth, and its presence, as seeds of the human-maize race, in front of Mound C-1, the sacred mountain of sustenance.

North of the Earthen Pyramid, of course, were the two plazas in which people cached the many offerings (Fig. 7.10). The northernmost plaza, the enclosed court, was always defined with at least a low embankment and finally with basalt columns. It contained the multiple lake effigies and two of the Mother Earth Surface pavements. The third pavement was contiguous with the southern end of Mound A-3, on the centerline.

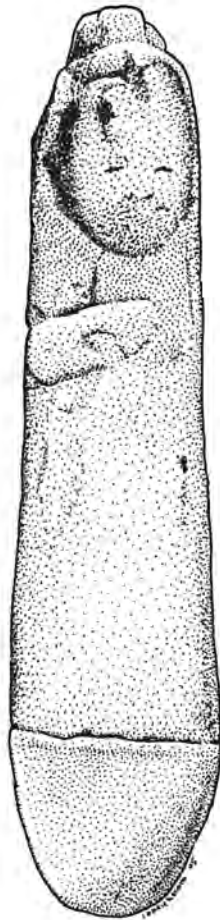
About 50 m north of Mound A-2 (which contained the bundle burials, basalt column tomb, and various caches over a massive offering) was



7.10 La Venta’s Complexes C and A: mountain and lake effigies. The massive offerings and mosaic pavements may have been Station 4. Drawing by author.



7.11 La Venta Station 5, bodiless heads: *left to right*, Monuments 4, 2, and 3, which faced north. Photos by author.



7.12 La Venta Station 6, the elevated phallic column on Cerro Encantado (now missing). Drawing by Corey Escoto.

the triad of colossal heads (Fig. 7.11). West to east, they were Monuments 4, 3, and 2. They faced north (Drucker 1952:9), toward the northernmost column on the conical mound, about 450 m distant.⁵ This was the phallic-shaped column of green schist with the human-seed image incised on its tip. We might consider this elevated phallus with seed as the primal image of a male progenitor or generative force. They also faced the sea, with whatever life-generating connotations that possessed. An individual standing at the colossal heads and looking toward the elevated mound would be looking slightly west of north. At night one would face the dark area that surrounds Polaris. The constellations would seem to circle around the area to which the conical mound and phallic column point. And the other end of the 8 degrees west of north axis points to the nearest mountain to the south.⁶

The northernmost monument was part of the set of columns. Since it was given the shape of a phallus with the symbol for human seed on the glans, it probably did refer to the inseminating capacity of a phallus (Fig. 7.12). The designers opposed the phallus and conical mound on the north to the U-shaped mound on the southern end of the monumental zone, which represented a womb and supported the three colossal fetuses. In this way, the first and last sets of sculpture embraced—or framed—the entire site, extending the concept of “context” for La Venta monuments to the 1.9 km long monumental zone.

Based on these observations, we can conclude

that sometime by Phase IV, if not sooner, the La Ventans placed monuments in a configuration that extended over the length of the site in order to create relationships of meaning among them.⁷ They used several patterns of syntax. One consisted of clusters of disparate monuments (or scenic displays) configured asymmetrically. There were also sets of identical monuments configured symmetrically in relation to a central axis that was prominently marked with towering columns of stone. Except for the colossal heads, the sets were associated with a specific architectural feature, such as a U-shaped platform, the Earthen Pyramid, or a plaza. Furthermore, as we shall see, the subjects and associated symbols of each sculptural set contributed to larger meanings, becoming more than the sum of the individual elements. The following section considers whether the monuments formed a processional visual narrative: a pathway along which a creation and origins story, or other rituals set within such a framework, could be performed.

A Processional Visual Narrative

By *processional visual narrative* I mean a series of three-dimensional sculptures deliberately placed so as to allow people to move among them as a narrative is performed. Art historian Richard Brilliant (1984) has provided some insightful definitions of, and ways to analyze, visual narratives. The imagery he considered consists of two-dimensional graphic images or low-relief sculptures, but his points seem relevant to three-dimensional forms in space as well. He distinguishes between images that illustrate a written text and those that completely bear the burden of narrativity:

A truly visual narrative has no visible [written] text to which it must defer. In visual narratives descriptive detail and compositional devices, such as scene making, substitute for the elements of speech or thought, which figure so largely in oral or textual narratives. Such detail serves to identify the protagonists of the action and set the action in space and time and therefore must be recognizable. Thus, visual narratives . . . must offer enough information to the eye if they are to represent a specific story successfully. (Brilliant 1984:17)

Brilliant developed his discussion of visual narratives by pointing out that they require the same

devices that structure oral or textual narratives. These include a beginning and end, although Brilliant observed that often the artist cannot control where the viewer begins looking at a visual narrative. Hence, a more circular structure functions well, such that “the beginning is connected with the promise of the end, and retrospectively the end is connected with the promise of the beginning.” Close visual descriptions of persons and events help identify protagonists and major elements of plot. “Temporal succession” can be achieved by the “planned dislocation of the principal characters” (Brilliant 1984:18). And elements of setting for the story must be provided, either through representation or by being set in actual spaces. In other words, Brilliant pointed out that successful visual narratives must include duration, protagonists, actions, pacing of dramatic episodes, and setting. These must be “connected by a network of overlapping descriptions bound up in a present that incorporates past and future, experienced together” (18). Let us consider whether—and if so, how—La Venta’s creators deployed these elements. If *all* the elements of a visual narrative were present, we can reasonably assume that one was intended.

Which Came First, the Phallus or the Womb?

Because by Phase IV La Ventans had positioned sculptural groups at intervals along a linear axis, it is obvious that they could control the elements of beginning and end, as well as the pacing or rhythm of the episodes. The narrative path extended about 1,927 m, or about 1.2 mi. The stations occurred at intervals that are between 600 and 700 m apart (Fig. 7.4). One question remains, however: if there was a preferred temporal sequence, did the story begin at the south or the north end? Because the northernmost element was a phallic column and the southernmost a U-shaped platform with fetuses, an imminent connection existed between the phallic column and the womb platform such that the concepts of circularity and timeless repetition were embedded in this sequence. The phallus and womb that frame the site imbue each terminus with the suggestion of the other. Perhaps the story could be told from either point of inception. Alternatively, perhaps it was never performed all at once but over several days or even at specific intervals over a 260- or a 365-day calendrical period. As Boone (2007:178) proposes for the cosmogony in

the *Codex Borgia*, perhaps it was not intended to force time into a linear mode, but instead represented discrete episodes that were not considered to be temporally “fixed.”

Settings, Characters, Action, Foreshadowing

We know that creating a series of “settings,” or symbolic architectural constructions, was so important to La Venta’s designers (whether these were locals or a sort of early ecumenical council) that they negotiated the delivery of exotic stones and colored clays as well as a vast workforce to create the symbolic environment. By Phase IV, the settings had accumulated over several hundred years. The 1,900 m zone was penetrated with stone shafts and several specific kinds of settings for narrative or ritual. The U-shaped platform (D-7) probably served as a metaphoric womb. The quadratic nature of the world was established by the four cave-womb thrones, which faced different directions. Even the open or vertical quality of the corners of quadratic space, seen on such disparate diagrams as the Dallas plaque and the Cross Almanac of the *Codex Féjervary Mayer*, is suggested. On the Dallas plaque, a “frame” running along the four sides of the square plaque breaks at the corners, leaving them open. As Reilly (1995) has shown, the four corners and the central element, a stack of symbolic settings, conceptually rose skyward from a terrestrial quadratic plane. Of course, there were the vast plazas, leveled and surfaced with sand and clay, which simulated the transformation of the earth into habitable space. There may have been an early form of the E group, thought by some to be an observatory for solar positions on the horizon (Clark 2001; Malmström 1997).⁸ They even built a mountain to emulate the actual one to the south and to create the altitude essential for making offerings to celestial powers and beings. Its base was surrounded by a U-shaped platform or apron. Like the one at Teotihuacan that Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (1999) considered to be the earliest example, the platform flanks the pyramid on only three sides. La Venta’s builders constructed two stone enclosures, also in the shape of a U, on the surface of the platform under which were the Phase II effigies of underground waters and the flowering earth. Taking advantage of a small hill to the north of the enclosed court, they built the conical

mound on which they placed the phallic column. So unlike earlier ritual and civic sites, by Phase IV there seems to have been quite a variety of settings in which performances could be staged.

Because this story’s characters are complex—and are defined by their form, regalia, actions, and settings—we will look at them in the context of an imaginary “walk-through” of the site in the next chapter. By way of introduction, the six sets of characters who inspired the creation narrative include statues of humans at specific stages of life, as well as abstract earth forms. Even if they seem relatively naturalistic, as in the case of the colossal heads with their furrowed brows and fleshy cheeks that indicate a mature age, these features are more standardized than individualistic. There are many complex issues regarding representationality in Olmec sculpture that cannot be fully addressed here. I fundamentally agree with Beatriz de la Fuente (1993), who suggested in an insightful essay that these are conventionalized portraits of a character in a story, possibly conflated with just enough specificity of appearance or regalia to overlay the identity of an actual individual with that of the character. Although we do not know the names of the Olmec characters or heroes, their actions resonate with those of actors in many Mesoamerican creation stories, as we will see below. In addition to the multiple images of certain character roles, portrayed in a conventionalized manner, specific individuals were likely portrayed on La Venta’s stelae. I think these stelae, amidst their clusters of unique monuments, were political monuments that were interjected or superimposed on the larger narrative.

Another element that Brilliant (1984) considered essential to a visual narrative is foreshadowing. This was achieved at La Venta by the repetition of certain symbols and visual characteristics on discrete kinds of sculptural subjects. For example, the colossal size of the fetuses and their ballgame helmets were precursive to the colossal heads of adults and their helmets. The embryo medallion on the headdress of the figure on Throne 5 foreshadowed the rise of the embryo-maize beings shown on the stelae of the Earthen Pyramid. The U-shaped platform on which the fetuses stood foreshadows the U-shaped platform surrounding Mound C-1 and the one that surrounds the plaza of the enclosed court.

Finally, we must consider whether the sculptures portray the actions necessary to have propelled a narrative. While the limbs of the human fetuses are symmetrically disposed, their deeply bent legs and upreaching gestures are active. High-relief figures lean out of the cave-niches, and the furrowed brows and curving mouths of the colossal heads give them a sense of liveliness. According to Clancy's study (1999:19–21), such figures exhibit the nearly symmetrical stational mode of representation, in which deliberate asymmetries or gestures supply the actions or distinct identifications necessary for narrative. The subject matter of the fetus inherently implies growth, and the image of the liminal space of the cave, as well as the sky and earth bands above the cave on Throne 4, implies movement from one temporal or spatial realm into another. The low-relief figures on the sides of the thrones are in active poses, with turned heads or reaching arms, and were executed in the mode that Clancy calls "narrative."

Some of the stations include images that are symmetrical. While the compositions of the embryo-maize stelae exhibit symmetry, they include curved and diagonal lines used to indicate the placenta and maize sprouts. These images integrate a sacred or enduring sense of symmetry with the concept of growth and sprouting. The mosaic pavements are the most symmetrical—and probably the most timelessly powerful beings among the sets of sculptures.

In the plazas surrounding the sculptures there was ample space for the performance of rituals involving dance, healing activities, or political pageantry. I suspect that the sculptures embodied specific presences and processes around which human actors provided most of the movement.

Clearly all of the elements that are necessary for the production of a visual narrative are present among La Venta's sculptures and mounds. This early Mesoamerican creation story resurrected many symbolic forms of the past, such as the insemination of celts at El Manatí. It also prominently featured female midwives, and possibly rulers, female supernormal

7.13 The five above-ground narrative stations at La Venta: *top to bottom (north to south)*, the Cerro Encantado column, a colossal head, an embryo-maize stela, a cave-womb altar, and a fetus. Top image by Corey Escoto; others by author.



potencies, babies, and pre-birth humans, along with ballplayers and men with elaborate regalia or masks.

I hope that this chapter has provided some of the settings, the pacing, the narrative tension, and the grand scope of La Venta's sculptural narrative. Its presence is important because it indicates that at this site people came together to share beliefs and knowledge, and to negotiate an answer to the questions "Who are we?" and "Where did we come from?" Some answers were very explicit: "We come from the sexual union of earth and sky. Here stones penetrate the earth. You can see the umbilical cords descending from the sky, the embryos sprout-

ing, and the fetuses growing." Others were more abstract, such as the cyclical return of humans after the decapitated ballgame head inseminated the earth (Fig. 7.13). Those who journeyed to La Venta probably spoke different languages, but the site's visual forms would have served to create a series of symbols that allowed for flexible interpretations and creative performances. Although this visual narrative had a certain structure, and codified beliefs to a greater degree than had been done elsewhere, it was still essentially polysemic and tractable. People could use it for a variety of reasons. In the subsequent chapter we consider the evidence for, and the implications of, these claims.

Chapter 8

La Venta's Creation and Origins Narrative

An Approach to Visual Narratives from Preliterate Societies

The previous chapters have discussed many of the graphic and plastic symbolic forms that Formative period Mesoamericans, from Tlapacoya to La Venta, developed, and how they organized these forms in significant assemblages. This chapter proposes that around 500 bc, the Olmec arrayed sculpture at La Venta in a manufactured environment to codify, in a limited way, a narrative regarding the generation and regeneration of the world and of the human–maize race, the proper modes of behavior of humans toward the earth, and the bestowal and ritual use of regalia for rulers and others. As we consider this ancient process by which certainties were negotiated through visual symbols, we should be attentive to the cultural assumptions that generated the narrative, the norms it promoted, the roles it allowed, and in what ways it attempted to transform those who engaged it.

But first we need a better understanding of the possible meanings generated by each the symbols incorporated in La Venta's sculptural sets. The problem now is somewhat different from the one set forth in Chapter 3. There I sought to interpret hundreds of examples of a single symbolic image—the embryo—with variable associated elements. The current chapter confronts the “narrative stations”: several distinct, complex combinations of solid nuclei and variable symbols on monuments that in turn are given settings and spatial locations within a vast composition. In addition to these visible forms, the objects buried in caches and tombs also formed important referents for the narrators of La Venta's mythistories.¹

For this reason, the chapter weaves together the three strands of visual symbolism: the images on

and forms of the monuments, their architectural settings, and the hidden displays of visual imagery accessible only through memory and oral tradition. However, with no contemporaneous texts to provide any corroboration for an interpretation of the contextualized sculptures, how can we glimpse their significance? Although there is a growing literature on the pictorial communication systems of Mesoamerica, there is very little precedent for interpreting complex arrays of sculpture from societies that did not engage in writing in its narrower sense, as a set of graphic symbols with which persons are capable of recording an “unlimited range of utterances” (Trigger 2004:39). To assist in this task I sought out a number of works that focused on pictorial and textual narratives. Of these, the strategies employed in works by Elizabeth Boone, Claude Calame, and Enrique Florescano offered useful ways to render a more sophisticated structural analysis of several major Mesoamerican creation narratives. First I specify which narratives are involved, and then I discuss how these authors’ works contributed to my approach.

To identify the persistent concepts in Mesoamerican creation narratives, this chapter compares the symbolic forms present at La Venta’s narrative stations to those of six later creation stories. These include two post-conquest alphabetic tales, the Aztec *Leyenda de los soles* and the Quiché Maya *Popol Vuh*; the Postclassic pictorials *Codex Vienna* (Mixtec) and *Codex Borgia* (probably Nahuatl from Cholula); the Maya hieroglyphic-and-visual Cross Group at Palenque; and the Late Preclassic Maya pictorial mural at San Bartolo. It is widely acknowledged that cosmogony and dynastic origins are the topics of the *Leyenda*, the *Popol Vuh*, the beginning of the *Codex Vienna*, and the Palenque Cross Group. Regarding the *Borgia*, Boone (2007) has proposed that an eighteen-page segment forms a cosmogonic and human origins narrative. It is likely that San Bartolo’s sophisticated paintings portray cosmogony and origins because they include, among many other relevant features, cosmic trees, a specific portrayal of birth, and a supernatural sanction of royal accession (Saturno 2006; Saturno et al. 2005; Saturno and Taube 2004; Wichmann 2006). Along with the *Vienna*, these latter two sources are both pictorial, and they share some strategies of visual communication with the sculptural, processional narrative at La Venta.

Of course there are other alphabetic creation

narratives that I could have analyzed, most importantly the Nahuatl *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*, portions of the Yucatec Maya *Books of Chilam Balam*, and works by numerous sixteenth-century authors. There are also fascinating texts recorded by ethnographers working with many peoples, including the Mixe, Zoque, and Zapotec, and many speakers of Nahuatl and the Mayan languages. Much closer to La Venta in time are the pictorial narratives of Izapa (Guernsey 2006b). Various contemporary scholars have explored commonalities among these narratives. María Elena Bernal García studied creation narratives in specific historical and urban contexts. She created a profound and complex analysis of how topographic, political, astronomical, religious, symbolic, and social factors played into the narratives and influenced the founders of civic centers as they chose their sites and as later inhabitants renewed them. Although she dealt with Classic and Preclassic visual narratives, the bulk of her analysis focused on Postclassic ones (Bernal-García 1993, 2002). In his studies of Mesoamerican myths, including those of creation, Michel Graulich (1997) has paid special attention to the alphabetic sources as well, discussing important ethical and sociological themes that run through the stories. And Alfredo López Austin’s many works on the religious concepts of the Mexica and their predecessors have found deep conceptual similarities with countless permutations as fundamental concepts were refashioned for local political and intellectual needs. The present work cannot supersede these valuable studies.² Nor can it accomplish a complete analysis of all the post-Hispanic sources; instead, it aims to explore the unique sculptural antecedent of several well-known Pre-Columbian and sixteenth-century pictorial, hieroglyphic, and textual creation stories. To consider possible meanings for the various nuclear, or core, symbols in the Olmec story, the chapter discusses their significance diachronically, traveling through later creation stories, both visual and verbal. This leaves the reader free, like the ancient narrator, to imagine the narrative within the stated symbolic parameters.

Boone’s description of the capacity of the pictorial manuscript to convey information tells us about what to expect of a sculptural narrative.

Although to the east the Maya had developed a hieroglyphic script to represent words logographically and

syllabically and to reproduce phrases and sentences, the Aztecs, Mixtecs, and their neighbors did not. Instead, their writing consisted of images that are spatially organized in various ways to create visual messages that sometimes parallel spoken language but do not usually record it. The goal was not to fix a spoken text by providing phonetic details but to formulate and store complex information through conventional images. (Boone 2007:33)

We have seen that since a visual symbol system developed in Mesoamerica—going back to the arrays of jade celts and rubber balls at El Manatí, or the graphic system during the Ayotla phase in the Valley of Mexico—local users deployed a limited set of graphic and plastic symbols, presumably to convey agreed-upon concepts. Specialists in visual communication engaged in a process of conventionalizing the salient features of visual referents, such as the embryo and axolotl brow, and devising ways to indicate broader concepts such as earth and womb. Throughout the Early Formative, we see evidence that local artists engaged symbol systems used by others, and by the Middle Formative this system was widespread and had some solid nuclei while retaining local inflection. *Combining* such symbols—as occurred in the Early Formative Manantial phase graphic compositions in the highlands and at San Lorenzo, where graphic symbols in relief were added to three-dimensional significant forms—allows for wider ranges of a symbolic web to be “fixed.” *Arraying* sculptures with significant form and relief symbols in spatial configurations, as was done at San Lorenzo and El Azuzul, provided a syntactic framework for the symbols. Gradually, formats such as carved stelae provided a large field for the juxtaposition of low-relief symbolic imagery. These symbols could be conceptual, such as the embryo-maize stelae at the foot of Mound C, or more political, such as the human encounters shown on Stelae 2, 3, and 5. Because of the long tradition in the southern Gulf Coast region of carving narrative scenes onto sculpture, it is not surprising that the monuments conveyed meaning both independently and in relation to others. But in all these cases, although the meaning of symbols may have been consistent, any spoken version of the broader narrative was not “fixed” except through memorization of the tale. Although the deployment of conventionalized imagery differs from phonetic writing in the kind of information it conveys, it seems to have been an essential stage in

the development of Mesoamerican writing, a topic to which I will return in the last chapter.

An analysis of ancient textual narratives that I found relevant was that of French post-structuralist Claude Calame ([1996] 2003). A scholar who currently directs the School of Advanced Social Science Studies in Paris, Calame’s research focuses on ancient Greek lyric poetry and narrative. In his *Myth and History in Ancient Greece: The Symbolic Foundation of a Colony*, he rigorously applies the approach he calls “semionarrative,” which he bases on the earlier semiotic work of A. J. Greimas (1970), to a series of narratives that describe a single event but that were produced in distinctive literary genres by Greeks from a variety of times and geographic locations.

I incorporate three elements from his work: identifying isotopies, considering the structure of entire narratives, and being aware of the importance of each historically situated performance of a narrative. First, Calame defines the concept of isotopies (from Greek *iso*, “equal,” and *topos*, “place”), as “repeating semantic or figural elements that recur both within specific narratives and across narratives treating the same theme or subject” ([1996] 2003:xvi). These are roughly equivalent to López Austin’s “solid nuclei,” or core symbols. Using this strategy to compare the commonalities of La Venta’s narrative with later Mesoamerican creation narratives allows us to demonstrate a continuity of concepts while allowing for—indeed expecting—many specific details to change as those concepts are adapted to new knowledge systems, historical situations, and political purposes.

A second useful aspect of Calame’s work involves his attention to the structure of entire narratives. As he examines and compares ancient sources, Calame analyzes whole discourses, not just brief passages or sentences, in their temporal, spatial, and historical contexts. That has been my approach to La Venta as well—to identify the entire scope of the visual narrative. He finds that these complete, complex stories are structured by several semionarrative strategies. Among these are the “discursive structures,” the practical elements of narrative production such as characters (also called “actuarial/actantial figures,” geographic and conceptual settings, and temporal structures. We surveyed this terrain in Chapter 7. But Calame ventures further. For the characters and settings to be effective, he writes, they must be anchored to the

audiences' experiences, knowledges, and memories in certain ways. They have to deal with familiar social orders, processes, and people, and at the same time captivate the audience's imaginations. The La Venta story uses something with which all adults are familiar—sculptures of topographic features and human forms—to tell its tale. La Venta's creators also reworked ancient practices such as the caching of jade celts to inseminate a body of water, done previously at El Manatí. They incorporated forms of sculpture fashioned several hundred years earlier at San Lorenzo, or possibly reused the actual sculptures in new contexts.

In the Greek stories that Calame analyzes are actorial figures that are superhuman, infrahuman, or becoming human. Such characters are easily recognizable in the Olmec narrative. The Flowering Skirt Mother Earth and the Midwife-Lake were supernormal powers, probably part of a complex including lightning and rain potencies. The narrative also uses aspects of human life that are clearly "becoming" or metamorphosing. Infrahumans exist in the form of maize-humans and those with nonhuman features.

A story cannot, however, simply rely on populations of interesting characters; Calame ([1996] 2003) points out that it must captivate its tellers and its listeners by confronting contentious issues. A great story causes people to probe their own unexamined assumptions, their corporeal relationships to the world, their ethical positions, and more. We find all this at La Venta. Cosmic unions of male and female bring one's own sexual body into focus. The processes of conception, gestation, and childbirth; the magic of producing food from seeds; the commensuration of temporal cycles in the sky, earth, and body; and the dangerous thrill of the ballgame are all wrested from the personal level to become the topoi for negotiating a shared reality. By monumentalizing common personal experience and making visible its power, the La Venta narrative succeeded in capturing its audience's imagination.

Finally, Calame looks at how the elements of the story and the situation of its telling interact with the goal of reorganizing cultural values. This attention to the purpose for which a narrative is generated or later performed is the third aspect of his work that informs this chapter. One way in which a narrative reorganizes cultural values is through the transformation of the various actorial figures.

For example, a story might begin with an actorial figure who perceives a lack of power or satisfaction. This figure initiates a series of intentions and tries to actualize them. However, rather than succeeding in overcoming the threat to power, the figure might transform by being subdued by a more competent challenger. In such a way, the necessary reversals and reorganizations of relationships can occur. Such a process is easy to see in the *Popol Vuh*. The lords of Xibalbá (lords of death or anti-life) sense a threat from the ballplaying maize-human Hero Twins and drive the action by summoning them to the underworld with the goal of subduing them. They almost kill the first set of twins, but the second set prove their mastery and eventually supersede the level of powers held by the Xibalbans: the twins control life and death, while the Xibalbans do not. The roles are reversed. At La Venta, such detail is absent. We can only imagine how the helmeted fetuses and helmeted heads at La Venta somehow changed roles, how the heads were disembodied, how the adults emerging from caves had to perform great feats of mastery to find those caves and to survive their dangers, or how the "created ones" changed from fetuses to infants to human-maize embryos.

These reorganizational transactions also occur around isotopies. Although the specific actors and circumstances change, isotopies can remain stable across different times and cultures. For example, Calame ([1996] 2003:53–55, 68–74) finds that two persistent isotopies in the Greek narratives are cultivation and matrimonial union—clearly fundamental concerns. We can find some similarly fundamental visual symbols at La Venta that carry through to the later versions of cosmogony and origins narratives. These symbols may refer to metaphoric understandings, for example, that pregnancy is like a cooking of the fetus in the womb. Others refer to cultural loci such as the ballgame. Each of these isotopies provides opportunities for repositioning power relationships.

Similarly, a book by Enrique Florescano (2006) situates many Mesoamerican and Mexican origin narratives within their changing political contexts and demonstrates how they reorganized cultural values. Both Calame and Florescano show that even when the goal is simply instruction, as in the inculcation of children with moral values or knowledge that equips them to interact successfully, the telling of a cultural narrative aims to transform the

receiver. It alters the way that the listeners define themselves and their positions within society and the physical environment. Such stories can shift one's grasp of power relationships or modify one's awareness of the body and its relationship to biological processes and internal energies. Cultural narratives aim to bring about a degree of cohesion among the various beliefs and practices of individuals and communities. From today's perspective, cultural narrations are often thought to be more manipulative than consensus building. Mesoamericanists tend to ask whether the teller wished to stake a political claim or whether the parents, priests, shamans, or rulers sought to manipulate others' attitudes toward a controversial situation. However shrewd were those who crafted La Venta's cultural narrative, they also seem to have had some intention to create an agreement about fundamental beliefs about life on earth. In this chapter, as an Olmec cultural narrative is resurrected after several millennia, we do not know enough about the specifics of Olmec politics to be able to discern the rivalries that must have existed. Nor do we have a single historical record of a performance that occurred there. All we can see are the major elements in the narrative and hints about several influential persons or supernaturals who seem to have operated at La Venta. We are reduced to speculation regarding the purposes and scope of performances on this grand stage.

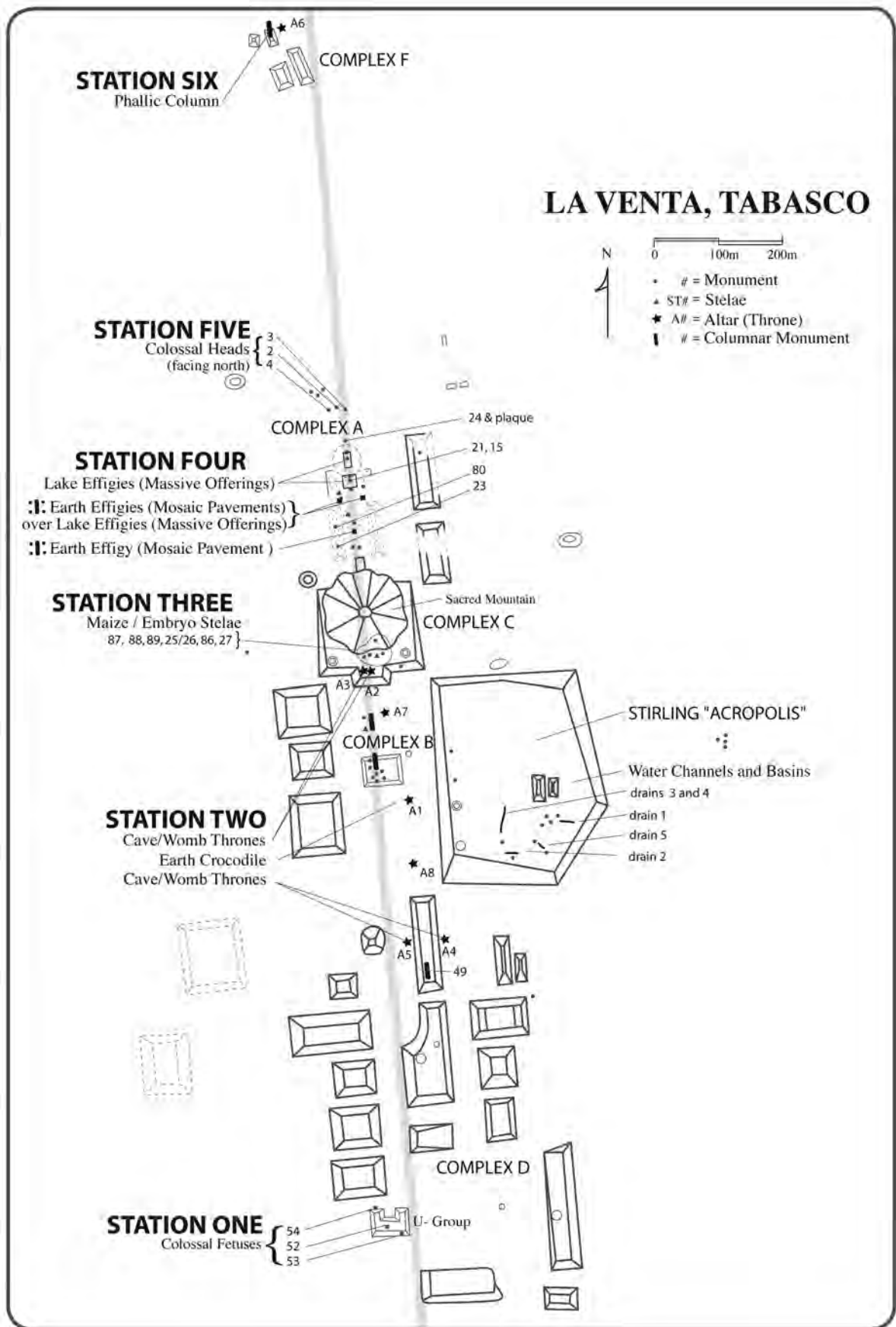
As Calame ([1996] 2003) says about his work and the Greek texts he studies, his analysis is not history, nor was the ancient tale itself history. The ancient storytellers speculated on key historical events and produced a symbolic narrative, one that a community could access through ritual means. The communications among those who defined the narrative (writers or artists), those who narrated it for specific purposes, and those who heard and responded to it generated numerous ideological formations constituted by a relatively coherent set of values, representations, and beliefs. Calame ([1996] 2003:vi-viii) defends his interest in "the dynamism of discourse production, with its capacity to construct a fictional world based on a reference to an ecological and cultural given, and with its power to act, in return, upon this reality, in a precise historical context." Although such a symbolic narrative is partly speculative, partly fictional, he writes, it does include plausible observations. A symbolic narrative "can reformulate events consid-

ered to be foundational in order to restore to the community practices of ideological and pragmatic bearing."

Having pondered the sculptural narrative of La Venta for several years now, I perceive a similar combination of fiction and empirical observation in La Venta's visual display. On one hand, there are colossal severed heads and even bigger fetuses—beings that are clearly fictional in nature. On the other hand, the characters and settings are all based on natural processes and places that the Olmec observed. The sculptural narrative clearly "reformulates [earlier symbols and] events considered to be foundational," apparently to create an orthodox set of community practices and ideologies. What is frustrating for us is the utter lack of historical context for the creation of the visual narrative. To rephrase what Calame wrote, my analysis is not intended to be history, in the sense of a compilation of verifiable facts about events and persons, nor was the Olmec visual narrative intended to be such a history. The ancient creation and foundation narratives of Mesoamerica are poetic in nature. The analysis presented in this chapter is intended to be evocative of possibilities.

As I discuss the iconography and spatial contexts of La Venta's six narrative stations, I will insert numerous "windows" that track La Venta's symbols as they were transformed by later cultures in their own creation narratives. These are some of the symbols that became isotopies—stable symbolic webs, themes, and topics—which were adapted by many subsequent Mesoamerican civilizations. The sections on the different isotopies list a range of imagery and associations, some of which may have been part of the conceptual vocabulary of Formative period people, and some not. They do provide avenues for thinking about the preliterate symbols. Sometimes the correlations are consistent enough to suggest very strongly that it is reasonable to interpret the Olmec symbol in a particular way. If nothing else, I think this strategy provides considerable material for further exploration. It also helps us avoid the urge to reconstruct a single Olmec narrative—in other words, to avoid inventing the earlier story via the later ones.

Each reader of this chapter will bring a certain level of knowledge about Mesoamerican mythology to the visual narrative erected at La Venta and will imagine a slightly different vision of how the story worked. One of my own goals in identifying the



sculptural narrative and exploring its similarities to later stories is to transform the ways in which scholars delimit their frames of reference when looking at the remains of Olmec visual culture.

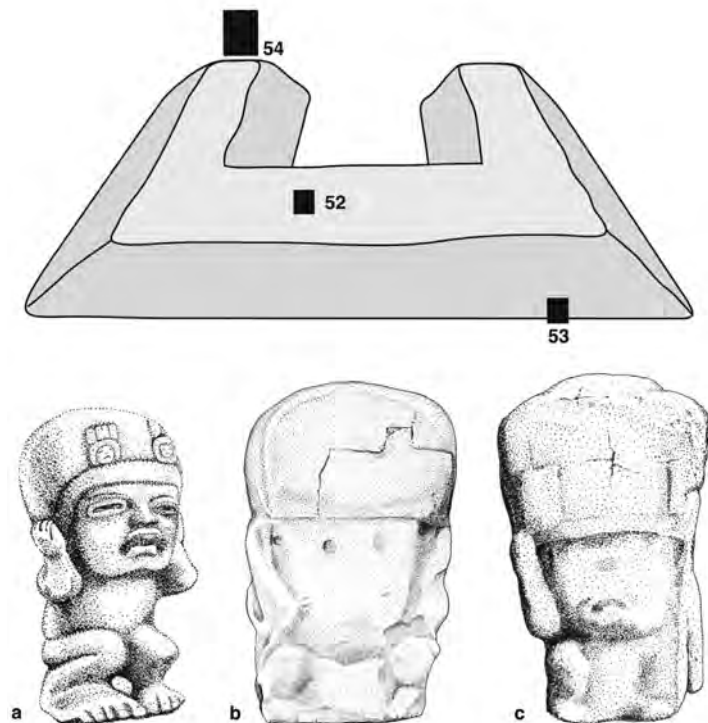
The Narrative Stations

There were probably several sequences in which performers at La Venta could enact or narrate the cosmogony. One of them likely began in the south, at the entrance through which travelers from the rest of Mesoamerica would have arrived (González Lauck 1996:80; Stirling 1940). This is the order in which they are discussed here; however, after looking at the narrative stations in this order, I suggest some alternative sequences of performance (Fig. 8.1).

Station One: A Womb with Three Fetuses

The southernmost feature was a low, U-shaped platform that was probably constructed during Phase IV (Gallegos Gómora 1990). Its east side is on the westernmost of the two parallel 8 degrees west of north axes.³ Its open side faces north. People could have gathered between the arms of the U-shaped platform, where there was a space about 10 x 10 m, or in the adjacent plaza, which at over 200 x 200 m would have accommodated a sizeable number. On the U-shaped platform stood some of the largest sculptures at the site: the three sandstone fetuses (Fig. 8.2). The choice of sandstone for these sculptures was significant. Few Olmec figural monuments were made of sandstone, a sedimentary rock. Most monuments were carved of basalt, an igneous stone, or from a variety of metamorphic rocks. Both igneous and metamorphic stones are “cooked,” or subjected to high heat and pressure. As I outlined in Chapter 1, a widespread metaphor for gestation is “cooking” (Monaghan 2001), and I suggest that making the fetuses of sedimentary sandstone was significant and indicated their “uncooked” state.

Over 2 m high, the colossal fetuses stood upright on deeply flexed legs. Their upright pose and active gesture, arms reaching up and hands grasping their helmeted heads, suggest that they were portrayed



8.2 La Venta Station 1, a U-shaped “womb” with three fetuses: *a*, the small fetus sculpture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which suggests what the others looked like before erosion; *b*, Monument 52, H: 200 cm; *c*, Monument 54, H: 375 cm. Drawing *a* by author; others by Corey Escoto.

as if alive. The grasping position of the arms suggests that they are putting their heads or helmets on—or pushing them off. Similar tight-fitting helmets were also worn at La Venta by a few other figures, most notably the colossal heads.⁴

Several scholars have suggested that their helmets associated the colossal heads, which they assume represented rulers, with the ballgame. A major element of the ballgame, at least the mythic versions, is decapitation (Bradley 2001; Gillespie 1991). If the colossal heads represent the result of decapitation during a mythic ballgame, then the fetuses may be part of a sequence leading to decapitation or even following it, to suggest a replacement of the head and a rebirth. Headgear in Mesoamerica was a major indicator of identity. In some cases, specific headdresses were worn for certain rituals, as in the tall, beaded accession headdress of the Maya. Also, headdresses often contained symbols that identified the name of the wearers. Unfortunately, while the symbols on several of the basalt colossal heads are still visible, those on the sandstone fetuses are severely eroded. It would have

8.1 (*opposite page*) Plan of La Venta showing the six narrative stations. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

been valuable to know if the symbols were related. Nevertheless, their similar style of helmet indicates that the fetuses, the colossal heads, the woman of Stela 1, and a few seated figures were conceptually related, perhaps in terms of ballgame activity, or possibly in terms of specific identity.

Several symbols at the first station also appear in later Mesoamerican creation narratives. We may not know what they meant at La Venta, but we can get a better idea of the range of possible meanings by considering the later versions. The following section explores a single isotopy: the U shape as a visual symbol. We will also consider the concept of creator couples, but the ballgame, to which the colossal fetuses' helmets referred, will be covered below in the context of the colossal heads.

Isotopy: The U Shape

La Venta's U-shaped mound was one of the earliest such constructions in Mesoamerica.⁵ Following is a summary review of U-shaped designs in art and architecture from 1600 bc to AD 1560. This abundance of examples for the function of U-shaped designs throughout Mesoamerica makes it possible to advance an interpretation of the U-shaped



8.3 U isotopy: Chalcatzingo Monument 1. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

platform at La Venta. For this comparison, I range beyond the scope of creation narratives to Mesoamerican visual culture in general.

1600 bc. At Paso de la Amada, Chiapas, the earliest known socially stratified settlement created a U-shaped sequence of structures that flanked a plaza: a ballcourt, a chief's residence, and a series of platform mounds (Clark 2000:42).

1400–1000 bc, San Lorenzo. An elaborate form of the U shape appeared as an ornament on the head-dress of Colossal Head 1. At Las Camélias, near San Lorenzo, archaeologists found some U-shaped earthen constructions located in a strategic pass and near a confluence of rivers (Cyphers 1997c:110).

1000–600 bc, La Venta. Two more colossal heads, La Venta Monument 1 and Tres Zapotes Colossal Head 2, bore a sign similar to the San Lorenzo head. Michael Coe (1965a:17) suggested a similarity of this U sign to the Maya moon glyph. At La Venta, another U-shaped platform supported Mound C-1, the Earthen Pyramid. Like the southern U Group (D-7), this platform (C-2) consisted of continuous earthen constructions on the west, south, and east sides. Both were open toward the north side.

750 bc, Chalcatzingo. Tripled and quadrupled U shapes create "earth maw," or cave (as womb of earth), designs (Fig. 8.3).

700–500 bc, Zazacatla, Morelos. Two andesite sculptures of seated anthropomorphic figures with embryo-related faces or masks, square headbands, and upward-sweeping, cleft rear heads were placed in U-shaped niches. These niches were within the basal strip of a pyramidal platform. The strip was fashioned of pieces of limestone, some set in diagonally (Canto Aguilar and Castro Mendoza 2007).

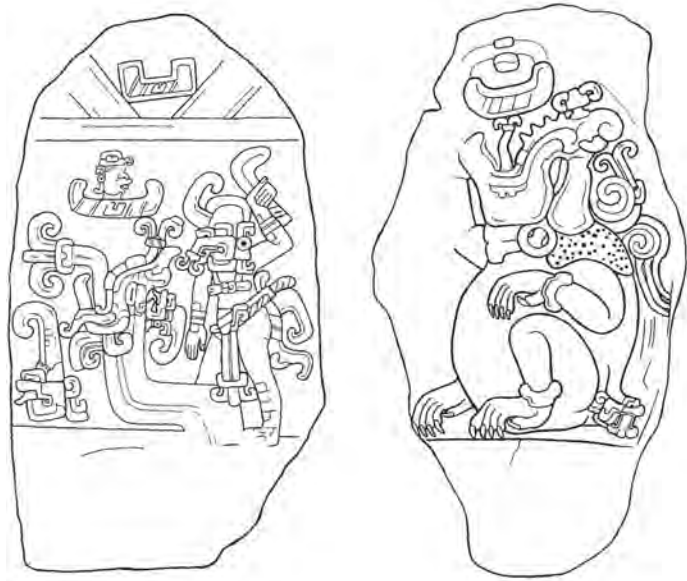
600 bc, La Venta. A third U-shaped enclosure was formed by the walls surrounding the northern enclosed court. First constructed of clay and later of basalt columns, the walls formed a southward-facing U. This framed the zone in which the Phase III and IV massive offerings and most of the other offerings were placed. Of La Venta's three U-shaped platforms and enclosures, the southern platform supported fetus sculptures. The middle platform

supported the Earthen Pyramid and a row of human embryo/maize seed stelae. The northern basalt columned wall contained hundreds of stone celts and other crafted items, which were cached in the earth as if inseminating her.

300–50 *bc*, *Izapa*. The site of Izapa perches on high ground surrounded by a U-shaped bend of the river. Within the U-shaped bend, nineteen rough stone stelae and accompanying pedestals form a roughly north-south line. A twentieth monument exists in the form of a stone fountain placed in a spring. A ramp leads between the row of stelae and the fountain. I wonder if the nineteen stela-altar pairs and the fountain functioned in a zone for bathing and naming infants within a natural watery womb/U in accordance with rituals involving the twenty day names.

The U symbols that have drawn the most attention at Izapa are those on the headdress ornament and the tail of the “Principal Bird Deity” (Bardawil 1976), on the bird costume worn by impersonators of the bird deity (Guernsey 2006b), and those infixed on sky bands in the upper registers of stelae (Quirarte 1974). The academic attention lavished on the mysterious bird deity is thoroughly reviewed by Guernsey (2006b:95–117). We will return to that momentarily, but first we should consider the U in a locative context.

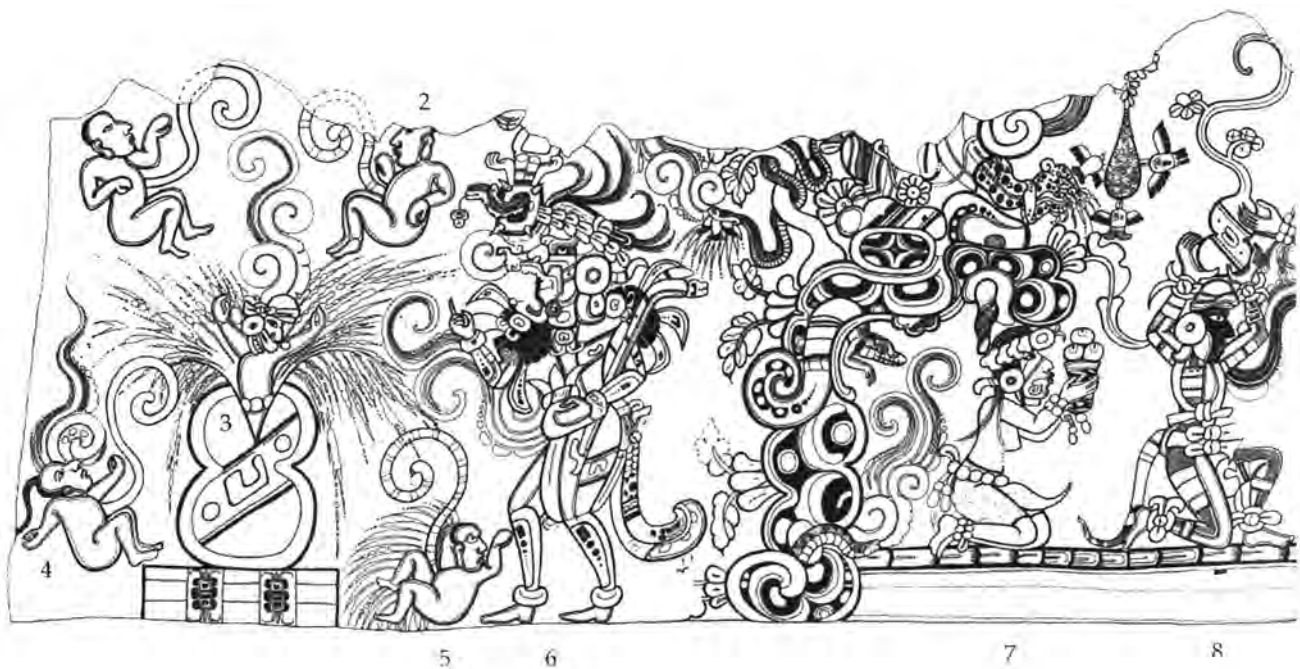
Drucker (1952:194) related the U in the sky band to a feline, but Quirarte (1976) believed that it indicated a compound zoomorph that combined jaguarian with avian and saurian qualities. Because most of these sky bands lack specific zoomorphic traits, neither solution is satisfactory. I suggest a simpler idea—that the presence of the U sign *in the sky band* is revelatory (Fig. 8.4). For example, the three stelae with sky bands and basal indicators in front of Structure 56, and the three such stelae in front of Structure 58 in Group A all display the U sign in the sky band. These six stelae are positioned on what is roughly the north-south axis of the plaza. Guernsey Kappelman (2001) has identified these stelae as portraying episodes in a creation narrative that has parallels to the *Popol Vuh*. The central one on the north side portrays a figure costumed as a bird under a diving bird. The central one on the south side shows a larger diving bird-costumed figure who falls into a tree, the branches of which form a cleft or U. Also, Stela 3 shows a person being carried in a U-shaped canoe



8.4 U isotopy: Izapa Stelae 3 and 6. On Stela 3 (*left*) the sky band is infixed with a U, and a U-shaped canoe holding a long-lipped anthropomorphic face floats high in the scene above the probable rain supernatural. On Stela 6 (*right*) a toad spits a U-shaped canoe, possibly a metaphor for birth. Drawings courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

that is marked with a U. If the Cerro de las Mesas “baby in the boat” refers to birth, then the Izapa canoe may also be a metaphor for birth. On Stela 6, a toad spits up a similar U-shaped object—perhaps another birth canoe. If the U sign indicated “womb” at Izapa, as it did at San Bartolo, and as Milbrath has shown it did for the Mixtec (discussed below), then it conveys the meaning “womb” or “birth transportation.” That the sky could conceptually possess a womb or place of emergence was clearly an indigenous concept in Postclassic regions near Izapa, for it is the phrase that opens the *Popol Vuh*’s cosmogonic sequence: “This is the account of when all is still silent and placid. All is silent and calm. Hushed and empty is the womb of the sky” (Christenson 2003, I:67). Similarly, in the passage on the creation of humanity from maize, the text describes the first humans, while they could still see everything that the creator couple did, as:

*Completed their knowledge everything
They looked at:
Four corners,
Four sides,
Its womb sky,
Its womb earth.
(Christenson 2003, II:159)*



8.5 U isotopy: womb-gourd (second from left), San Bartolo. Rendering by Heather Hurst, courtesy of George Stuart, BEARC.

The phrases referring to the wombs of the sky and earth—"U pam kaj / U pam ulew"—pervade the text. The fact that sky and earth registers serve as locative frames on these Izapa stelae seems to correspond to the separation of sky and earth that occurs in the subsequent *Popol Vuh* passage: "For thus was the creation of the earth, created then by Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth, as they are called. They were the first to conceive it. The sky was set apart. The earth also was set apart within the waters" (73).

To return to the bird deity, the U infixed in the medallion on its headdress seems to refer to it as an aspect of creation narratives. Since Lowe, Lee, and Martinez's suggestion that the principal bird deity (PBD) is antecedent to 7 Macaw, the "false sun" of the *Popol Vuh* who is vanquished by the Hero Twins, most elaborations of the PBD's significance have worked with this as a starting point (Lowe et al. 1982; Cortez 1986; Taube 1987). Because 7 Macaw (Wuqub' Kaquix) has a wife, Chimalmat, and two sons, he is regarded as male. It is worth noting that Chimalmat is named twice, despite the fact that she does not play a role in the narrative. Everyone has assumed the Late Preclassic and Classic period PBD is male as well. However, there are some hints that this might not be the case. For one thing, Dennis Tedlock (1996:237) related that some Quiché speakers refer to the seven stars of the Big Dipper

as Vucub Caquix (7 Macaw) and that they might associate Chimalmat with the Little Dipper. The name is derived from *chimalli matlatl* (shield, net), and Chimalli is a Central Mexican warrior goddess who was a patron of midwives (Klein 1993). Therefore, the earlier PBD may also have been a reference to the cosmic imperatives for birth, midwifery, and warfare. Furthermore, Bardawil (1976) suggested that the PBD might be the avian form of Itzam Na, one of the creators in Postclassic, and probably Classic, Maya thought. There is some evidence that Itzam Na had a female counterpart, Ixchel. Colonial Yucatec sources report that she was patroness of childbirth, fertility, and pregnancy, and probably divination and midwifery (Miller and Taube 1993:99–101). Miller and Taube claim that "The Principal Bird Deity appears to be none other than the celestial aspect of Itzamna" (100). Although this is a loose set of relationships, we can state the following: the PBD appears in contexts of creation and regeneration, often appearing to preside over or instigate the action. The bird often wears a diadem infixed with a U. If it is an antecedent of the Postclassic Itzam Na or Vucub Caquix, both these supernormal entities had dual gender identity or female counterparts associated with midwifery, gestation, and birth. The U motif on the PBD could identify it as a female, or could refer to its generative aspects. Also, the monuments with

U-infix sky bands at Izapa Group A occupy that plaza's north-south axis as part of the creation narrative. And as we will see shortly, male and female beings, depicted in geometric forms as elaborated U shapes, were integral to cosmogonic sequences in the *Codex Borgia*.

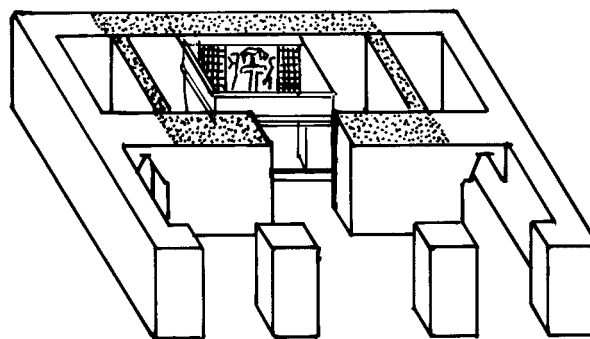
AD 150, Maya. In Mesoamerica, a few hundred years after La Venta's Phase IV, the gourd from which the five infants burst on the San Bartolo murals was prominently identified with a U (Fig. 8.5). This was clearly an image of birth, and I think the U marked the gourd as a womb. A similar U shape and embryo face ("were-jaguar," said Estrada Belli) appeared on a complex at Cival (<http://www.mesoweb.com/reports/cival.html>).

AD 150–700, Teotihuacan. Teotihuacanos used the U shape to symbolize earthly and other wombs. A U-shaped platform, identified by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (1999:201–202) as one of Mesoamerica's first, served as a boundary platform surrounding the Pyramid of the Sun. He described it as delimiting the sacred zone of the pyramid it supports from the surrounding space. In a series of influential articles, Doris Heyden (1973, 1981) suggested that the cave under the Pyramid of the Sun was conceptualized as a place of origins. She compared the four U-shaped lobes of Teotihuacan's cave to a sixteenth-century pictorial version of a cave of origins from the *Historia tolteca-chichimeca*, which features seven lobes (1973, 1981:12–13). The U appears in pictorial form at Teotihuacan as well. An inverted U, which Heyden identified as a cave of origins and Taube (1986) as an inverted vessel, forms the womb area of the "goddess" on the Tepantitla mural. Heyden (1981:17) illustrated numerous examples of single and triple U forms, mostly from Mixtec and Aztec pictorial sources, functioning as "the open maw of the earth," caves, ancestral homes, and rivers. She also commented that "the cave is symbolically the *temazcalli*—'steam bath'—which was called Xochicalli or Xochicalco, 'House of Flowers.' . . . This has been compared to a womb, where women who gave birth were purified."

AD 700, Maya. At Palenque, the three temples of the Cross Group formed a U-shaped arrangement around a central plaza. Such a triadic arrangement of mounds or temples around a central plaza

was a very ancient feature of Maya architecture, as Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1963:14) observed. Within each temple was a "sanctuary," or interior temple, complete with a roof (Fig. 8.6). On the sloping mansard friezes of each roof, stucco decoration formed the image of a caiman. Stephen Houston (1996) has proposed that these refer to a Nahuatl Cipactli-like creature, the primordial earth of a previous creation whose body was torn asunder by her offspring and became the sky as well as the earth and all its features. Within the small interior of the mini-temple, or the body of the Cipactli, the back wall was filled with a stone tablet carved with hieroglyphs and images describing the origin of the cosmos and birth of the Palenque patron deities. The texts call the shrine the *pib-na*. Literally *pib* means "sweatbath," and such structures were used as birthplaces. One text says the sweatbath is the property of one of the Palenque patron deities, "G I," and the other says it belonged to the god of the ruler who sponsored the construction, Kan B'alam (Houston 1996:135–138). One point that archaeologist Houston (1996) makes is that these mini-temples are not functional sweatbaths. Similarly, at La Venta, the U-shaped platform is not a functional womb or sweatbath.

1500 bc–AD 1100, Veracruz and elsewhere. In the Formative period, small, U-shaped stone objects, called *yuguitos*, appeared as early as 1500 bc at El Opeño, Michoacán, as well as in Tlapacoya and Tlatilco. Larger U-shaped objects, approximately 33 x 39 cm, or more than 15½ in. long and 13 in.



8.6 U isotopy: isometric view of the Temple of the Cross, Palenque. The inner rear walls (shown with stippled tops) form a U-shaped enclosure around the sanctuary, or mini-temple. This space is called *pib na*, meaning "oven" or "sweatbath," and is a birth place. Drawing by author after Schele and Freidel 1990: Fig. 6.11.



8.7 U isotopy: a stone yoke from Classic Veracruz in the form of a toad emitting a face. Photo courtesy of Justin Kerr, K 4093c.

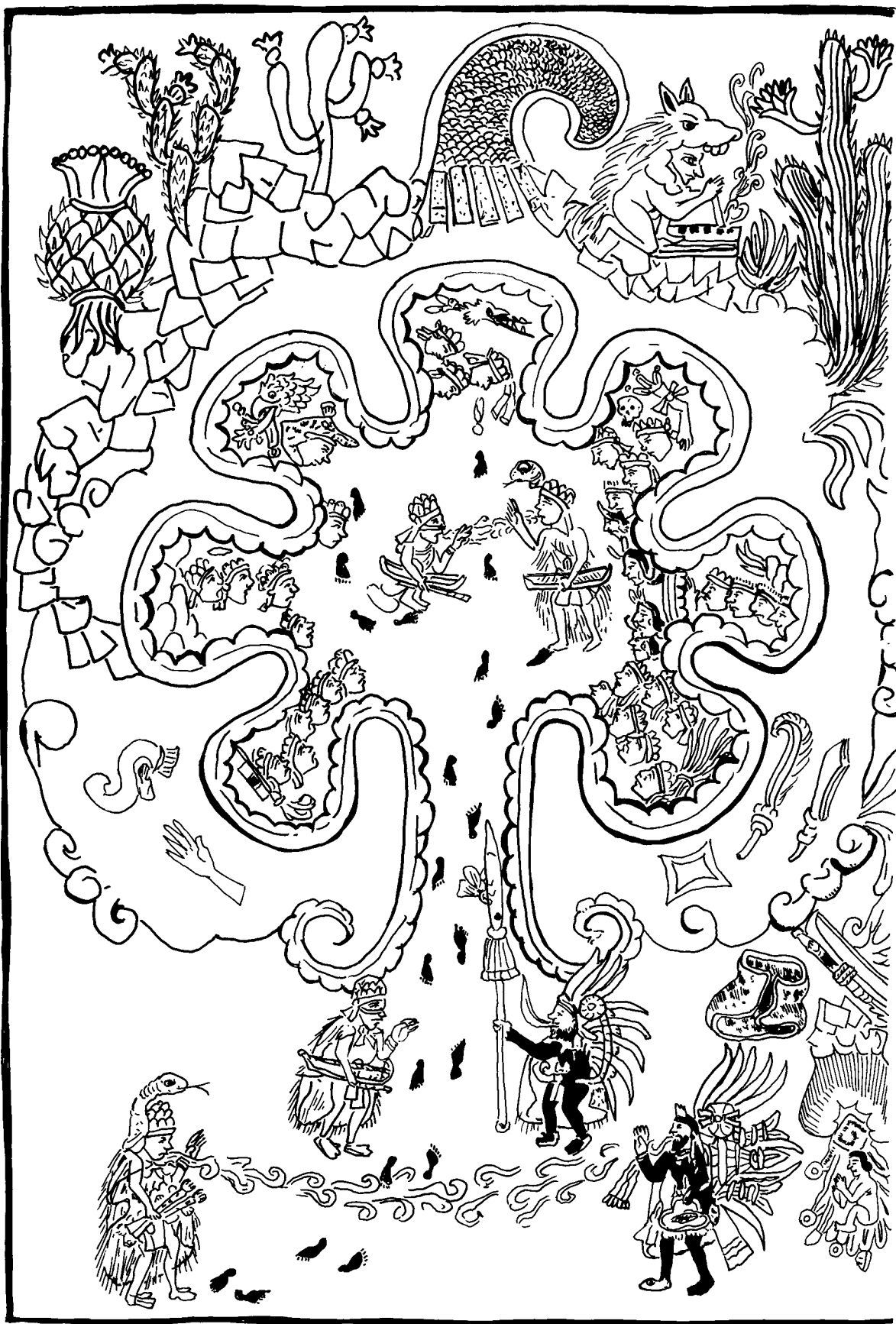
wide, may have been made at El Manatí. These objects, called yokes, are shown being worn around the waist of ballplayers and so have generally been associated with the ballgame (Fig. 8.7). The actual stone yokes were too heavy to wear in a game, so the ones shown as costuming were probably yoke-shaped constructions made of leather or wood. This raises the question of what function was performed by the many stone yokes that have been found. Although several theories have been advanced, we are not sure about their use except as burial furnishings. An Early Classic yoke, decorated with a frog, from El Carrizal in Veracruz, surrounded the head of an extended female burial, as if she were emerging from a watery womb. Another was excavated from Santa Luisa, Veracruz. It surrounded the body of the skeleton of a young male (Scott 2001). These burials are typical of those few in which whole yokes have been found; the yoke seems to surround the body as if giving birth to it. The actual stone yokes were decorated with toads, skeletal imagery, and other symbols that compare closely with the complex of symbols in La Venta Tomb C (see Chapter 5). So, as Rex Koontz has observed, Aztec and Maya narratives and Epiclassic El Tajín ballcourt imagery share a structural similarity regarding the ballgame: “they all locate the place of watery fecundity at the ballcourt and associate that fecundity with severed heads” (Koontz 2008:22). The U-shaped yoke is literally at the center of these tropes—at the center of the body when worn, and as a womblike container for the body after death.

Circa AD 1300, Mixtec. Susan Milbrath (1988) took Heyden’s interpretation of the U shape as representative of a cave a step further. Examining birth imagery in the *Codex Nuttall*, she noted the “wrinkled skin design that probably represents the interior of a womb” on the sweatbath on page 16a. This was in a scene that Heyden had discussed, in which a woman remains attached to the newborn outside her womb via the umbilical cord. Milbrath (1988:155) showed that a V-shaped cleft or a U infixed with folds of flesh were typical ways in which the womb or vagina were shown in Mixtec art, such as in the depiction of the birth of 9 Wind in the *Codex Vienna*. The U-shaped platform or enclosure appeared in the first page of the creation narrative of the *Vienna* as well. One of them holds a rubber ball (see discussion of the insemination complex below).

AD 1400–1570, Aztec and post-Aztec. Wombs could be celestial as well as terrestrial in Postclassic Central Mexican thought. In the same article (1988), Milbrath summarized the research of several scholars who had suggested that Citlalinicue (Stars-Her-Skirt) is related to the Milky Way and may be represented as some of the “border” females that enclose certain pages of the *Codex Borgia* (162), which Boone (2007) identifies as cosmogonic scenes emphasizing birth and emergence. Similarly, in the sixteenth-century pictorial *Codex Borbonicus*, an Aztec creator couple sit in a celestial U-shaped sacred enclosure that represents a cave and a womb releasing the waters of birth. The grandmother casts seeds for divination, and the grandfather holds a sacrificial implement and brazier. Finally, in the image of Chicomoztoc in the *Historia tolteca-chichimeca*, seven U-shaped lobes appear in the chthonic womb (Fig. 8.8). The hand and fontanel, ancient symbols related to insemination and birth, appear in the walls of the earth womb.

It seems that the stone-lined enclosures present in several creation narratives, which have similar, slightly more closed U shapes, are conceptually related to the U isotopy. Here are a few examples.

8.8 (*opposite page*) U isotopy: folio 16r (ms 51–53) of the Aztec *Historia tolteca-chichimeca*. Although the fontanel-shaped object may have been a weapon in Postclassic times, its appearance here with the hand evokes the Ayotla symbol set referring to infants and the scattering of seed. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



Cortez Escoto 03

Isotopy: Stone Enclosures

600 bc, *La Venta*. The basalt column fence that framed the enclosed court formed a closed U (Fig. 7.10).

Postclassic, Codex Borgia. A series of stone enclosures appear as frames in the cosmogony section of the codex. For example, Quetzalcoatl and the four Tezcatlipocas are born in a flint enclosure (32) (Fig. 8.9), and humans are born from a procreating couple in a jeweled enclosure (38).

Based on this consistent set of associations of the U with fetuses, creation scenes, caves, wombs, sweatbaths, females, parturition, midwifery, the ballgame, tombs, and cosmogonic frames, I suggest that La Venta's U-shaped platform symbolized a womb, either of earth or sky or both. As a celestial womb, it may have had one or all of these associations: the moon, the Milky Way, or the zone of darkness surrounding the North Star. On La Venta's primordial womb, three fetuses appeared not in

a line but a triangle, reinforcing the concepts of womb and creation by suggesting another Mesoamerican place of creation, the three hearthstones, or the celestial hearth in Orion (Tedlock 1985).

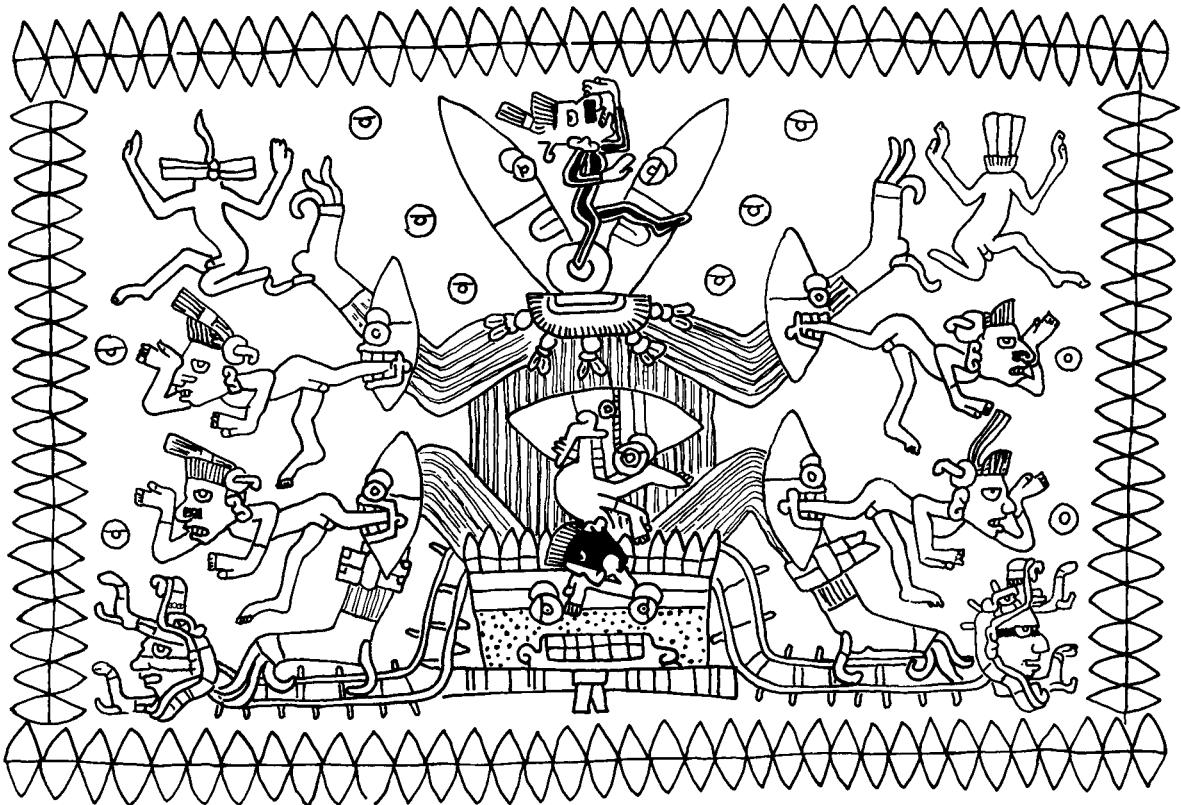
Isotopy: Creator Couples

Since Station 1 may be the opening of La Venta's cosmogonic narrative, it is worthwhile to consider the opening of the *Popol Vuh* and its characterization of the impelling entities behind the creation of the cosmos.

Great is its performance and its account of the completion and germination of all the sky and earth—its four corners and its four sides. All then was measured and staked out into four divisions, doubling over and stretching the measuring cords of the womb of sky and the womb of earth . . . by the Framer and the Shaper, the Mother and the Father of all life and all creation . . . all that exists in the sky and on the earth, in the lakes and in the sea.

This is the account of when all is still silent and placid. . . . Hushed and empty is the womb of sky. . . . All alone the sky exists. The face of the earth has not yet appeared. Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of all the sky. (Christenson 2003, 1:65–67)

8.9 Stone enclosure isotopy: the flint enclosure in which Tezcatlipocas are born. *Postclassic Codex Borgia*, p. 32. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



Christenson explains that although the creators receive a litany of names, they are basically a couple: She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons. The creators of humanity are a couple as well, probably the same entities, now called Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, although the grandmother, Xmucane, acts alone to grind the seeds of maize nine times (for the nine lunations of gestation) to form human flesh (195 nn. 470, 471.) She used *kayala'*, “bitter water,” to mix the dough (193, n. 455), which is the term for the water mixed with lime in the nixtamalization process. It breaks the pericarp of the seed, releases the enzymes that allow the nutrients of maize to be properly utilized, and keeps the toxic fumonins from preventing folic acid intake and causing birth defects.

Most of the major visual cosmogonies (*Codex Vienna*, *Codex Borgia*, and *La Venta*) include male-female creator couples (see Appendix 2). The textual sources do as well. Perhaps the Cross Group rightly belongs in this group, with Na' Sak K'uk and Hun Nal Ye forming a female-male couple, as Schele (1992), Bernal-García (2002), and I (Tate 2002) have suggested, although Stuart (2005) disagrees.

In the Mixtec *Codex Vienna* (obverse 52), the unnamed primordial couple sits facing each other within a starry frame that forms half a U (Fig. 8.10). In the *Borgia* (29, 30, 31), female and male entities form U shapes (or squares with a gap in one side) that enclose fiery, explosive, semenlike energies.

At La Venta, as in the *Codex Borgia*, the male and female creator entities frame the action. On the south is the U Group, with its fetuses, and on the northern extreme is the phallic column elevated on a conical platform. The La Ventans did not euphemize sex; they expressed the creative sexual energy (active and receptive) of their civic/ceremonial center in terms of monumental sexual organs.

Station Two: A Quincunx of Thrones

From La Venta's U-shaped platform (D-7), one could proceed northward about 350 m past some low platforms toward a towering green column (Fig. 8.11) rising from the south end of a long, rectangular mound (approximately 40 m wide x 170 m long.⁶ As one approached the column, a small mound with oval contours (D-1) interrupted the path. It was positioned just west of the Long Mound (D-8) at approximately the center of its



8.10 Creator couple isotopy: the first frame from the Mixtec *Codex Vindobonensis* (*Vienna*), in which a couple sits in a starry realm singing songs and making offerings. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



8.11 La Venta Monument 49, a 467 cm high column of green schist at the southern end of the Long Mound (D-8). Drawing by Corey Escoto.



8.12 La Venta Station 2, Throne (Altar) 5. Photo by author.

length. This interruption signaled the participants to shift their attention away from the Earthen Pyramid, looming on the horizon, to Throne 5, which was a few meters to the east between the oval mound and the Long Mound.⁷ One would not have been able to see Throne 4, on the east side of the Long Mound, without walking over or around the Long Mound. Thrones 4 and 5 were two of four similar tabletop-shaped thrones that formed a set on the periphery of the Complex B Plaza. The other two (Thrones 2 and 3) overlooked the plaza from their position on the platform supporting the Earthen Pyramid (C-1). Each of these four thrones consisted of a large block of basalt into which was carved a U-shaped niche. Emerging from each niche was a seated male figure. On the southwest and northeast thrones (Thrones 5 and 2), the seated figure holds an infant. On the opposite two thrones, the frontally seated figure engages with subsidiary figures. Thus although the set was dispersed on opposite ends of the Complex B plaza, the thrones clearly related to each other across its large space (approximately 350 x 160 m). They formed a long, narrow quincunx. Occupying the central position of the elongated Olmec-style quincunx were two thrones, 1 and 8, without central niches.

The form and iconography of these six thrones have received considerable attention, but rarely have they been considered in relation to one

another as a set. Here I will explore them in pairs from south to north.

Stirling uncovered Throne (Altar) 5 during his 1940 trip to La Venta (Fig. 8.12). From its position on the plaza floor at the central point of the Long Mound's base, its central "niche" figure faced west toward the small, oval mound. The large block of greenish-gray basalt had been heavily mutilated. Only a small portion of the "tabletop," or overhanging projection of stone, remains on the front and proper right side. The nonfigural area of the front is simple, with two low-relief S-shape forms emerging from the lower portion of the deep, inverted-U-shaped central niche. Together they create a shape like a bowl with an outward-curving rim. Another simple, slightly deeper plane takes the form of an oval that extends from the lower curve of the S to the top of the figure's headdress, effectively accentuating the central niche and the figure. The bowl shape is severed on the bottom by the deep niche. It frames the shoulders and face of an adult male figure seated cross-legged. His legs and the infant they support project only slightly from the "platform" around the base of the throne. From the chin to the top of the headdress, the head projects about the same distance. This adult male has shoulders with defined musculature and a typically short, thick neck. His arms rest on his thighs, with the palm of the remaining hand turned upward to support the infant. He wears a tall conical headdress that folds over at the top. A broad band at the base of that headdress is infixed with two medallions containing X designs that flank a larger central medallion. The oval central medallion is larger and represents a jade headdress ornament in the form of an embryo's face. Three "exclamation points" above this may have depicted jade beads, sprouting maize, and/or rain. There was probably a side strap for the headdress that extended under the chin. Two large earspools create a transition from the bulk of the shoulders to the narrower headdress. A wide strap curves from the back of the shoulders and ties in the front. The baby is plump and relaxed, its legs hanging over the adult's knees. Its head is elongated, and its left arm drapes across the chest.

We encountered the adults and infants on the sides of the throne in Chapter 6. They are carved entirely in low relief. On each side are two adults, seated in profile except for frontal shoulders, facing the front of the throne. Each adult wears a distinctive, elaborate costume including a headdress and

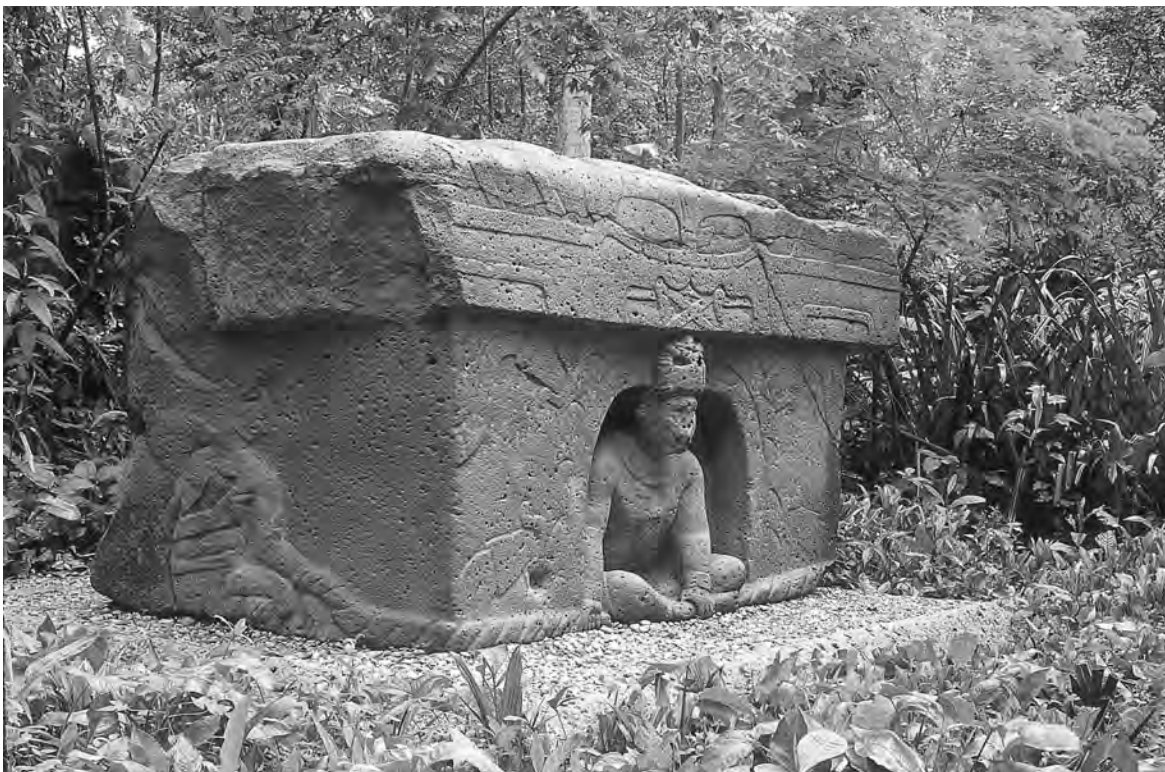
cape, and holds a large toddler. The adult figure nearest the back on each side has the squared pectoral muscles and broad, tasseled belt that Follensbee (2000:260-267) has identified as male; the figures nearer the front seem to be female. The actively moving infants each have distinctive heads but lack specific gender identifications.

Several scholars see the scene of adults and infants as representing an infant sacrifice that formed an essential element of a royal accession ritual. In this scenario, the adult in the central niche is presumed to be a ruler (Coe and Diehl 1980:386; Follensbee 2000; Pool 2007:138; Stirling 1940; Rodríguez and Ortiz C. 1994). Others consider this to represent the birth of a supernatural “were-jaguar” (Grove 1973). In the Princeton Olmec catalogue, while not denying the validity of these hypotheses, I pointed out that there was a high incidence of infant death by natural causes in Mesoamerica, so that even “cannibalized” bones or disarticulated bones in the offerings at El Manatí do not prove infant sacrifice. I tried to explore all the possibilities for the infant’s limp appearance, including epilepsy, which is quite frequent in occurrence and would not at that time have been controlled by drugs (Tate 1995). In the following sections, a new approach to the thrones unfolds.

I consider the possible infant sacrifice within the context provided by the other elements of the pictorial composition. These include quincunxes, sweatbaths, midwives, cave-wombs, and flowering celestial umbilical cords.

Blom and La Farge (1926:87) encountered Throne 4 (Fig. 8.13) on the east side of the Long Mound during their 1925 expedition. It faced east. In an excavation conducted in front of the throne, they found 100 beads—one of amethyst and the rest of jade, of various shapes. It was less damaged than the other thrones and shows how large the overhang of “tabletop” thrones could get. The depth of the inverted U-shaped niche on the front is equally impressive. On the projecting overhang is the flayed, extended face of a jaguarian creature, such that the sides of the skin extend toward the extremities of the monument. Reilly (1995:42) describes it as follows: “The altar’s ledge . . . is incised with five identifiable symbols: a double merlon motif at each corner; a sky band [upper portion with its diagonal bars]; an earth band; and, overlapping both the sky and earth bands, the head of a feline, perhaps a jaguar, who holds the crossed-bands in his open mouth.”

8.13 La Venta Station 2, Throne (Altar) 4. Photo by author.



The figure in the niche is male, and the one on the proper right side is either male or gender neutral (Follensbee 2000:254-259). Although, as Follensbee points out in her discussion, this and several other monuments have received some reconstruction, especially to the faces and heads, there is enough left of the niche figure to see that it wears a headdress with the wings or crest of a raptor, possibly an eagle (Grove 1973; Reilly 1994b, 1995). He wears a broad neckband that passes across the front of the chest, the ends returning to the front to a prominent knot. From under the band a cavity surrounded by a cartouche is visible; the cavity probably once was infixed with a stone mirror. Another knot or bead-and-knot overlaps the mirror to its proper right. A flap emerges from underneath the mirror and extends to the waist, where it meets a broad belt. The man wears wristbands and a chin strap fastening the head-dress. With one palm turned toward his body and the other away from it, he grasps a twisted rope that originates on the proper left side of the throne, passes under the crossed legs of the ruler, and continues to the proper right side, where it attaches to another figure. This figure has been interpreted as representing kinship (Grove 1973) but also as a warfare captive (Follensbee 2000; Proskouriakoff 1961a). The rope that runs along the base is in a middle level of relief, effectively framing the lower border of the monument.

On the front, images in low relief enhance the plane from which the niche is carved. A low-relief twisted rope encircles the U-shaped niche, possibly hanging from the earth-sky band. The four elements emanating from the cave-niche and rope generally had been seen as pots of rain until Guernsey and Reilly (2001) described them as representing the sepals of flowers, with the petals and ovules extending from them. They interpreted the twisted rope and its four flowing flowers as a celestial umbilical cord.

In the following sections I explore several of the visual symbols accompanying the thrones as isotopies or, in other words, as temporally discrete symbolic solid nuclei with variable associated meanings.

Isotopy: Descending Umbilical Cords

On Throne 4, a flowering umbilicus, identified as such by Guernsey and Reilly (2001), framed the U-shaped cave-womb. It descends from the band

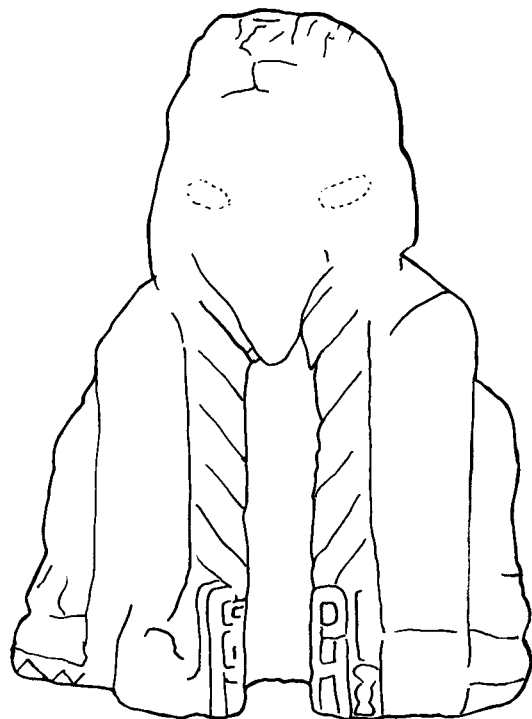
carved on the projecting ledge above the niche. Reilly (1995) identified this band as having an upper half referring to “sky” and a lower half corresponding to “earth.” The flowering cords descend from the mouth of this sky-earth zoomorph and extend around the opening of the cave-niche. I propose that the flowers on the cord may have referred to positive aspects of menstrual blood or the placenta. As Tedlock (2005) notes, some contemporary Maya of Belize and Guatemala use a flower as a metaphor for the placenta. Also, the Aztec *Codex Vaticanus B* illustrates the menstrual blood of the goddess Xochiquetzal, a patron of sexual love and the moon, as a flower emerging from between her legs. Tedlock reports that many feminine shamanic paths celebrate the positive energy of menstrual blood in the form of flowers, which of course are sexual organs and produce fruit (Tedlock 2005:174).

The flowering umbilicus is essentially a cord that descends from the mouth of a zoomorph. A similar motif occurs on La Venta Monument 80 (Fig. 8.14). Each end of this twisted cord terminates in a snake head. This motif of the floating cord terminating in snake heads may prefigure the Maya “serpent bar,” which probably refers to the ecliptic and can be held by rulers or superimposed on, or floating over, another image.

The following selection of examples tracks the celestial cords through several visual narratives of creation.

AD 150, San Bartolo murals. In the “Birth of the Cosmos” scenes of penis bloodletting and animal sacrifice in front of five (a quincunx of) trees, a Principal Bird Deity alights in the branches of each tree, its wings spread wide (Fig. 8.15). Each tree is marked with a U that indicates its generative (womblike) character. Each highly ornamented PBD carries a cord in its beak. The cord twists three times and then separates, each end floating out to the sides of the PBD and terminating in a snake head surrounded by swirls of blood. Here the cord appears in a cosmogonic context and descends from a (possibly female) celestial creature. Perhaps it is emanating from the “womb of sky.” Another section of the narrative includes a flowering mountain (Saturno et al. 2005; Saturno 2006).

AD 690, Palenque Cross Group. Carved in low relief on the tablets of the Cross and Foliated Cross, which form the backdrops of the inner shrines of



8.14 Descending umbilical cords isotopy: La Venta Monument 80. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



8.15 Descending umbilical cords isotopy from San Bartolo: a principal bird deity, in a U-marked tree, holding twisted cords. Rendering by Heather Hurst; courtesy of George Stuart, BEARC.

the temples in which the patron gods of the site were born, two different birds carry slightly twisted cord in their beaks. The birds and cords seem to refer to birth from celestial beings. Additional twisted or descending cords infiltrate the scenes. The birds rest on distinct trees. On the Tablet of the Cross, a jeweled cord terminating in snake heads drapes in an inverted U shape amidst the branches of a flowering tree, reinforcing the idea of a celestial womb. On the Tablet of the Foliated Cross, a human-maize tree is the central icon. At the bottom of each scene, a series of symbols defines the locations in which the scene is set. The scene on Tablet of the Cross is located amidst celestial bodies. The location of the Tablet of the Foliated Cross (the human-maize tree) is the surface of the earth. It is defined by a flowering mountain icon on the left opposed to a foliated shell indicating an underwater or marine environment on the right. A cord stretches from the flowering mountain earth surface, on which the ruler stands, under or through the “waterlily monster” base of the tree to the lacustrine shell on which a younger version of the ruler (as heir apparent) stands, linking the features of the earth surface by means of an umbilical-like cord. In these scenes, the ruler receives—probably as a gift from the PBD—sacred regalia, including a bundled flint, bloodletters, and costume items.

Circa AD 1500, Codex Borgia. Within the eighteen-page cosmogony and origins section appear several birth-related cords. On page 33, a white cord descends from the top of the celestial Black Temple, and along it are items associated with ritual (Fig. 8.16). These include the lunar rabbit, a solar deer, jade, and the down balls and white banners associated with sacrifices. On page 34, a long white cord emanates from a flint atop the Red Temple. On it are spiders painted like the patron of midwives, Tlazolteotl. They apparently accompany the birth of the sun, which occurs via a sacrifice within the Red Temple while another sacrifice occurs outside (Boone 2007:186-189). In these two examples, the celestial cords appear in unequivocal contexts of creation and cosmogony.

Circa AD 1500, Codex Vienna. On page 48, a celestial band splits, creating an inverted U-shaped womb. It emits a feathered sacrificial-umbilical cord upon which the culture hero Quetzalcoatl descends, carrying a quincunx staff and accompa-

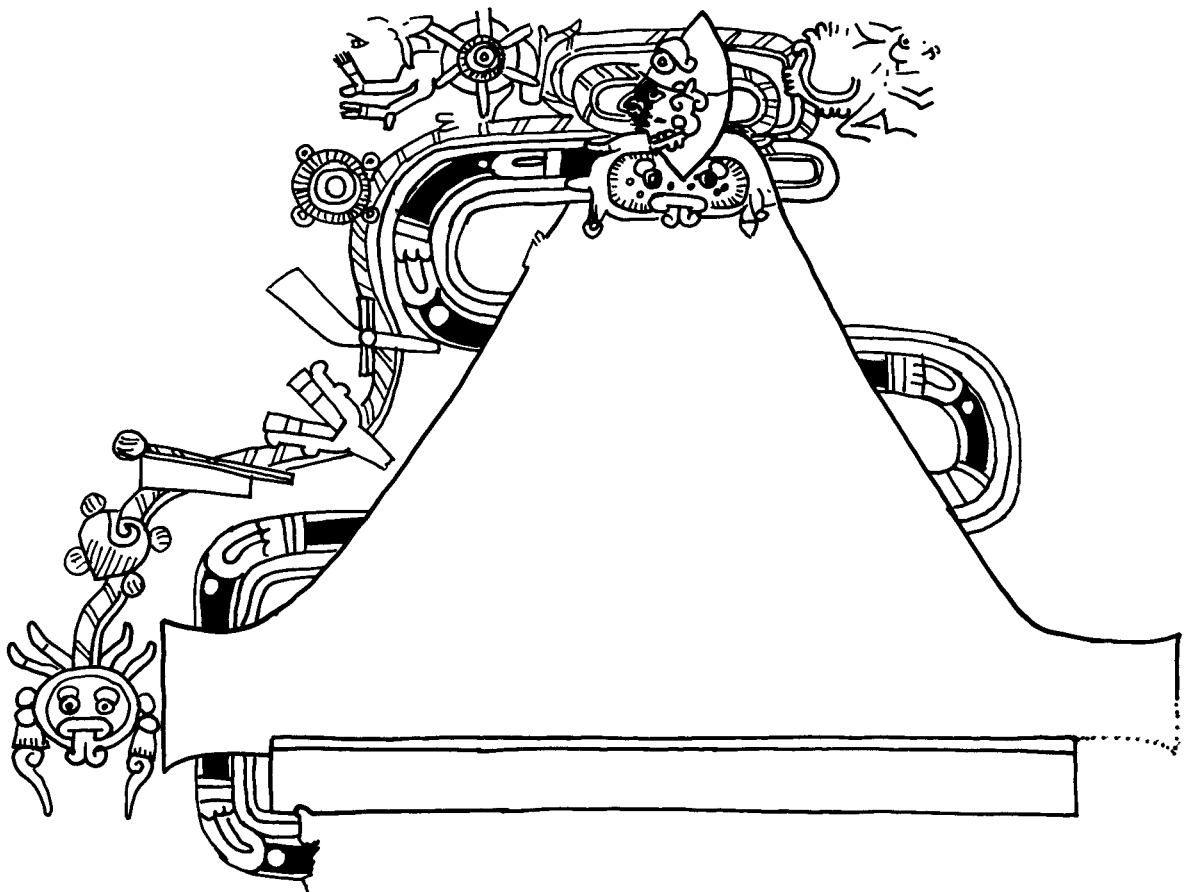
nied by his regalia of rule. In her study of the *Codex Vienna*, Jill Furst (1978:107) relates this downy cord with a celestial mother goddess.

Circa AD 150–1720, Popol Vuh. In the *Popol Vuh*, the creators employed cords pertaining to the celestial realm in their creation of the universe: “Great is its performance and its account of the completion and germination of all the sky and earth—its four corners and its four sides. All then was measured and staked out into four divisions, doubling over and stretching and measuring the cords of the womb of sky and the womb of earth” (Christenson 2003, I:65). In his footnotes, Christenson clarifies that numerous sources discuss how using stakes and cords to mark the four corners is the same action that people perform when laying out a maize field.

AD 1782, Chilam Balam of Chumayel, Yucatán. Descending cords appear along with important beings, their regalia, and fire at times of creation and renewal (Roys 1967:82, 99, 148, 155).

If we take each of the temporal manifestations of the celestial cords in a creation story as a solid nucleus of a web of associations, we see some remarkable consistencies and interesting shifts among the associations across time. At La Venta, two distinct celestial cords fall from the mouths of zoomorphs. One is the flowering (bloody) cord that encircles a womb, and the other drapes in a U shape, terminating in snake heads (Throne 8, see below). The magnificent cords that fall from the birds’ beaks at San Bartolo exhibit all these features. They twist, drape in U shapes, terminate in snake heads, and are surrounded by clouds of blood. At Palenque, the “cord” scenes describe the birth of the gods in a sweatbath, the creation of the earth surface, and the transmittal of royal regalia from the principal bird deity to the ruler, among other things. The *Vienna* describes the birth of Quetzal-

8.16 Descending umbilical cords isotopy from the *Codex Borgia* (p. 33): a white cord emerges from a flint and flows over the roof of a celestial temple, bearing items associated with ritual. Drawing by author.



coat from a celestial flint via an umbilical cord, the bestowal of regalia upon him by celestial gods, and his descent with a quincunx staff via a feathery (celestial, avian) cord. The elements shift but the concepts remain similar: the linking of rulers, gods, and culture heroes to celestial wombs via flowering bloody or feathery umbilical cords and the concomitant creation of the earth surface and ritual. On Throne 4, the ruler emerges from that celestial womb surrounded by the flowering bloody cord and gripping the twisted cord. Seated on this throne, a ruler may have received his regalia.

Isotopy: Sweatbath

The shape of La Venta's tabletop thrones is very much like later Mesoamerican versions of sweatbaths, for example, those portrayed in the Mixtec codices (Fig. 6.14) (Bell 1997). It seems safe to assume that sweatbaths existed at La Venta since the earliest functional sweatbath originated in Teopantecuanitlan and was earlier than or contemporary with La Venta (Martínez Donjuán 1995). The Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec and their descendants all used the sweatbath in association with childbirth, and for marriages as well (Dahlgren de Jordán 1954:256-257; Finsten et al. 1996:33; Ravicz 1965:111). A connection between flowers (as seen on Throne 4) and sweatbaths exists among the modern Mixe, for whom the term for sweatbath, *pihytiik*, means "house of flowers." At least in the past, the Mixe used sweatbaths as an element of treatment for many afflictions (Lipp 1991:182). In fact, sweatbaths are part of typical midwife healing practices around the world (Tedlock 2005:207). On some of the La Venta sweatbath-thrones, midwives actually may have been portrayed, as suggested in Chapter 6.

Because in most later Mesoamerican cultures, sweatbaths are associated with birth and healing rituals, and because two of the La Venta thrones portray infants and Throne 5 may portray midwives, it is likely that these tabletop thrones, as well as the Early Formative ones at San Lorenzo, were given the form of ritual sweatbaths.

AD690, Palenque, Group of the Cross. In his article about symbolic sweatbaths, Houston (1996) proposed that the texts of the creation narrative in the Cross Group refers to the inner sanctuaries of those temples as *pib na*. In the *Diccionario Cordemex*, a compilation of several sources for the

Yucatec (Mayan) language, *pib* is a very hot bath for women, particularly those who have given birth; a sweatbath (Barrera Vásquez 1980:651); or generally, an earth oven. The texts refer to the inner sanctuaries as sweatbaths that are the property of the patron god of the ruler, Kan Balam. Houston's article brings together several sources on midwifery and curing, and his archaeological work with ancient sweatbaths to point out that "the most intensive curative use of the sweatbath is associated with childbirth," at which midwives often provide treatments or assistance at the sweatbath, which in some cases is a place for birthing as well (Houston 1996:139). The metaphor of cooking as gestation is operating here in that the patron gods of Palenque are symbolically gestating, or cooking, in these inner sanctuaries.

In addition to their shape, Thrones 4 and 5 contained many images that referred to the birthing-healing-menstrual-and-marriage symbolic web of sweatbaths (Fig. 8.26). There are the infant emerging from a womb, infants marked with embryo symbols, the flowering (with uterine blood) umbilicus, a greenstone embryo medallion, and two women. The inverted U "gum brackets" on the creature carved on the tabletop ledge of Throne 4 mark the band on that ledge as womblike or generative—as a sky womb, an earth womb, or both. What is important to this book's themes of women and gestation in visual culture is that what seems to be the throne of the Olmec ruler takes the form of a place for birth-related ritual and bears symbols of gestation. Although the figures in the thrones' niches are male, the imagery that sets the scenes for the figures relates to female generative processes.

Isotopy: Caves

The intention of representing males within the niches of these thrones must have been to indicate that they were intimately engaging the gestational processes of an essentially female chthonic realm or being. It united male and female within the sweatbath-cave. The emergence of a person from a cave may also signal the rebirth of a single visitor, a community, or even an entire polity. As Duncan Earle (2008:70) puts it, the shaman who emerges from a cave is "revivified and prepared to heal through the management of holy time and sacred spaces." This anthropologist, who worked among

Quiché Maya daykeepers, points out that an initiation involves two descents into caves, once to a cave in the west and once to a cave in the east. Each cave was a portal for access to different powers and entities. In describing the initiation process, he speaks of entering the cave as leaving the familiar village home and going back in time, or elsewhere in time, to the edge of creation. In the cave, where day is dark, the sun, rain clouds, and wind also “emerge from the innards of the sanctified orifices of the earth” (83). As a result of the dawning of these cosmic fertilizing agents, “The sun returns, the corn seed emerges from the Maya house, the new born child emerges in birth, ending one round of 260 days and initiating a new one. . . . The new initiate emerges from the two house altars to the above and below altars of center and cave at Utatlán, invoking the ancestors and heroes of K’iche’ history, and asking for the power of time from them, there in the midmost location” (88).

In other words, the journey of the Quiché shaman through the cave was part of much larger spatiotemporal cycles and, simultaneously, of the coupling of male and female beings and elements, as well the cycles of gestation, birth, fate, and agriculture. Although the Olmec probably did not conceive of caves quite in this way, on their representations of caves they juxtaposed male and female imagery, and signs for earth and sky, in contexts that included quincunxial caves as loci for healing and the generation of time, space, and the birth—and possibly the death—of infants. On the southern end of the Long Mound, which separated the thrones, a green phallic column rose between the eastward- and westward-opening cave-wombs. The juxtaposition of a column, cave, and infants—or phallus, womb, and their progeny—explicitly expressed a form of cosmic union of male and female principles.

The isotopy of the cave as a place of gestation and renewal is too extensive a symbolic nucleus to cover thoroughly. Of course, just as gestation and childbirth can be dangerous and powerful, there were more negative and ambivalent associations with caves as well. Just to mention a few examples of caves in creation and origin narratives, at San Bartolo, it is to the cave within the flowering mountain that the seeds of the human race are carried in bundles marked by embryo masks. These human seeds in bundles at the right of the

scene are juxtaposed with a bowl of cooked tamales held up by a woman at the left. Adjacent to that scene is the gourd/womb birth scene. In the *Popol Vuh*, all that transpires within the underworld—decapitation through trials, Hunahpu’s skull/head spitting into the hand of Blood Woman, the insemination of the underworld when the pumpkin bursts, the self-sacrifice of the Hero Twins as they grasp the power over life and renewal—is, in effect, occurring within a cave. The cave under the Pyramid of the Sun was a conceptual womb for the Teotihuacan and its patron deities (Heyden 1981). In the *Codex Zouche-Nuttall* (14a), Lord 5 Flower and Lady 3 Flint emerge from a celestial cave-womb surrounded by six more caves. Once they travel to the earth surface, they initiate a new dynasty. Of course, for some Nahuatl speakers the cave at Chicomoztoc was a place of origins and dynastic rebirth. On the *Cuauhtinchan* Map 2, two Toltec lords leave Cholula for Chicomoztoc to petition the Chichimecs who live there for assistance in defeating their enemies. At Chicomoztoc, the Place of Seven Caves, they entreat the Chichimecs to emerge. When the Chichimec leaders issue from the cave, they abstain from food to balance their power as part of a ritual that results in their receiving the status of *tlatoani*, or Aztec leader. They leave Chicomoztoc on the day 1 Crocodile, symbolic of supernatural births. Twenty days later, they arrive at Cholula and defeat the enemies. For this assistance, the Toltecs reward the Chichimecs with the right to establish a new *altepetl*, which is none other than Cuauhtinchan (Boone 2000:174–177).

In many places, people made pilgrimages to caves to hide (Lady 6 Monkey in *Codex Selden*), to petition Tlaloc or other earth-rain gods for revitalizing moisture, or to seek supernatural sanction, as shown in the scene at the Formative period painting at Juxtlahuaca Cave.

Is Infant Sacrifice an Isotopy?

On the northeast and southwest thrones at La Venta (2 and 5), a male adult sits within the cave-womb cavity holding an infant. These thrones, the one at San Lorenzo, and the Las Limas sculpture depicting an adult holding an infant have often been interpreted as representations of infant sacrifice, as mentioned earlier. This could well be the case: the potent little bones of the infants would fecundate the earth’s fiery cave-womb. They could

be sacrifices deposited at a cave for a rain god (Joralemon 1971:21). I think it could make sense within the narrative structure for the fetuses and these infants to represent two initial sacrifices, or failed creations, that preceded the successful creation of human-maize beings. There is definitely archaeological evidence of infant sacrifice at Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan, where skeletons have been found in the principal pyramids (López Luján 1994). López Luján pointed out that many of the children whose skeletons were entombed in the Aztec Templo Mayor showed signs of disease. Also, authors have tended to ignore the high incidence of miscarriage and infant death.⁸ A few infant bones were found amidst three wooden busts representing females at El Manatí, as mentioned in Chapter 4. However, I think we should be wary of taking infant sacrifice as a given in this context because it is not a recurring theme in the cosmogonic origins narratives.

If one thinks about it, one realizes that although infanticide was attempted in the *Popol Vuh*, it failed. The elder brothers of Hunahpu and Xbalanque left them on an anthill, but the boys did not die. The lord of the underworld tried to sacrifice his daughter, who was not exactly an infant, but that failed as well. None of the visual narratives in Appendix 2 include infant sacrifice. The only dead infant I have found among these narratives appears in the *Borgia* on pages 39–40. These pages are part of what Boone sees as Episode 3 of the cosmogonic narrative. The sequence is framed by two large images: a large, red womblike disk that descends toward earth, and a dark ballcourt in which a skeletal human gives birth to a dead baby. Since Tlazolteotl, the patroness of childbirth, and Red Tezcatlipoca, patron of warriors, appear in the ballcourt, Boone (2007:197) thinks the scene refers to the women who die in childbirth as warriors, and whose souls become the Cihuateteo, companions of the sun. This is not a scene of infant sacrifice per se, although the sun undergoes heart sacrifice in the space between the red womb and the underworld ballcourt. I realize that infant sacrifice as part of a creation narrative could have been an element of the Olmec story and then disappeared or transformed. I would simply like to see more evidence before we consider it a factual interpretation of Throne 5. Infant sacrifice is one of the issues that attracts attention and can inspire underin-

formed individuals to adopt a prejudicial view of a civilization.

If the “infant in the cave” scene refers to sacrifice, it is unclear whether the La Ventans would have ritually deposited infants who died of natural causes, seeing them as self-sacrifices, or whether adults sacrificed their most precious fruit to the earth, as the Aztecs did later.⁹ In any case, the limp infants on the La Venta thrones seem to have functioned multivalently. One can continue to explore a range of possibilities. They may have been part of a sequence of sacrifices that preceded the creation of the true maize-people. Adults may have offered infants who died to the earth, or sacrificed precious children to the earth or rain. The children could be wearing embryo masks (as in the case of the Las Limas figure) and, like the Mixe Kondoy, who emerged from a well near a mountain cave (see Chapter 3), became culture heroes. They could represent the children or the ancestors of a ruler, or a ruler as a child as he was found by a priest (like Moses, Sargon, and others). They could be metaphors for the emergence of life from the cave, as in the story of Citlalinicue. Their moribund appearance could be due to a transitory temporal lobe epileptic attack, a disease that might also confer visions (Tate 1995).

Thus fortified with knowledge of the way that the imagery on Thrones 4 and 5 changed and gained in importance over time, we can try to consider these complex monuments. We must recall that they are part of a quincunx of thrones, and that as explained in Chapter 6, the quincunx refers to the intercardinal points where sun and earth cohabitate, and to the annual cycle marked by the solstices. At the same time, the cave-womb-sweatbath-embryo-umbilical cord–infant complex refers to gestation and birth in the 260-day cycle, and probably to the cessation and dawning of temporal eras as well. The central figures on these thrones wear very different regalia. One wears an eagle headdress and a mirror pendant, and the other wears a rain god curving headdress decorated with an embryo medallion. The cave openings face east and west, reinforcing the idea of circumambulatory movement. It seems clear that these thrones illustrated part of a creation and origins narrative that concerned a cosmogonical ordering of space in four directions as well as the establishment of celestial and terrestrial realms, the descent of a hero-

ruler from a celestial womb, the bestowal of regalia from a celestial source via cords, and possibly to the birth of a dynasty (which may have required infant sacrifice).

Thrones 1 and 8

Now it is time to consider the central thrones of the quincunx. The subject of Throne 8 is difficult to discern, but one can detect a tabletop breadth at the top and some cords descending from the upper band and terminating in snake heads (Fig. 7.7). Because of the vestiges of a niche on one side that does not seem to relate to the axolotl gill stalk on an adjacent side, the throne may have been recarved from an earlier format.

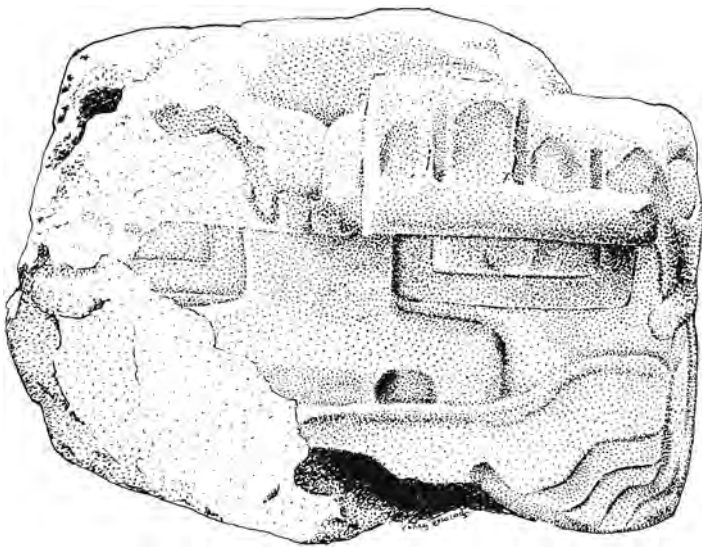
The image on Throne 1 (A1), however, is fairly clear (Fig. 8.17). The throne is carved on three sides. On two sides are paw-wings, and between them is a frontal face with flame brows, rectilinear, U-shaped eyes, a broad, flat nose, and a very wide mouth. The upper lip of this mouth is shaped like a shallow U, or almost like the profile of a Mesoamerican flat-prowed canoe. Under it are several lines that parallel the curve of the canoe shape, but there are no teeth. Most researchers have interpreted the face and its flanking paw-wings as representing a crocodilian or dragonlike earth monster.¹⁰ This brings us to the question of the flame brow and what it denotes. In Chapter 4 I argued that on ceramics from the Basin of Mexico, the flame brow

represents the gill stalk of the perpetually embryonic axolotl. Similarly, on La Venta Throne 1, the flat nose, wide mouth with no obvious teeth, and clawless paw-wings, along with the flame brow, could have referred to the axolotl—except that this creature did not live in the lowlands. Crocodiles were native to this region and could logically have served as inspiration for the design of this image.¹¹ In either case, the carving portrays an aquatic creature. Near the center of this vast space, the monument could have served to mark the plaza as a conceptual body of water, a primordial sea around which earth forms (represented by the mounds) rose. If the image's flame brows do refer to an axolotl, it signaled that creature's perpetual embryhood, or perpetual state of metamorphosis. This concept is not so distant from that of Tlaltecuhltli, the creature who transformed into earth and all its features and plants. Let us see how identifying this image as a crocodilian affects our interpretation of the overall narrative.

Isotopy: Crocodilian

AD 690, Palenque Group of the Cross. Among the Maya, we find a crocodilian in a cosmogony and creation context in the Cross Group Temples of Palenque. In Houston's 1996 sweatbath article, he pointed out that each inner sanctuary takes the form of a small building with a decorated entablature. Low-relief decorations in stucco on each entablature depict caimans. Since it is the identifying image for the wombs, or birth shrines, of Palenque's patron deities, the crocodilian is probably female. As the being in whose womb the primordial patron deities are born, she refers to the pre-existent or previous creation. Houston (1996:133–14) observed that Taube identified the caiman as a primordial creature from which, in Aztec myth, the earth was destroyed and refashioned. For Houston, this mythic isotopy linked the Palenque caimans to a context of creation.

AD 1500–1560, post-Aztec semi-indigenous records. Houston (1996:133–14) was referring to the story of Tlaltecuhltli, Earth Lady, found in the *Histoire de mechique* and the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*. A monstrous female caiman floated in the primordial sea, serving as a primordial earth. Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, taking the form of snakes, coiled around her and squeezed her into two parts. They threw her upper half into the sky



8.17 La Venta Station 2, La Venta Throne (Altar) 1: perhaps the crocodilian earth of a previous creation? Drawing by Corey Escoto.

and left the lower part to serve as earth. In the same sources, a variant of this story appears in which four lesser supernaturals entered the caiman, lifted her upper part to become a sky, which they supported with two trees in the center and with their own bodies at the four corners. Then the gods made her hair into trees and tall grasses, her skin into flowering and smaller plants. Her eyes became springs of water, and caverns were formed from her mouth, and valleys from her nose. The great mountains were simply her shoulders (Jonghe 1905; Olmos 1965).

These stories bear remarkable similarity to the Complex B thrones in terms of their subjects and distribution. The crocodilian is at the center and is dismembered—her head is on the front of the throne, and two of the four-toed feet are on the sides. The cave-thrones at the four directions were supports for human actors, much as the four mythic Atlantean beings separated the sky and earth at their corners in the Aztec myth. Also, the Olmec thrones seem to contain the caves that were created from Tlaltecuhli's parts. Even serpentlike ropes are featured on three of these monuments (A3, A4, A8).

A drama reenacting the dismemberment of the crocodilian creature, the establishment of the four directions and their caves, and the emergence (or sacrifice) of infants from these primordial caves could have unfolded in multiple places in La Venta's vast plaza. It may well have involved a ritual circumambulation. In the Aztec *Leyenda de los soles*, Quetzalcoatl, having retrieved the bones of his ancestors, escapes from the underworld only after circumambulating it four times. Once he mixes the ancestral bones in his wife's green jade bowl with red blood from his penis, "Holy ones, humans, [were] born" (Bierhorst 1992:145-146). Even the colors of this Aztec tale of the creation of humans are present in the La Venta plaza. The north part of the Complex B plaza contains a square platform surmounted by a red column.¹² About halfway between the red column and the base of the Earthen Pyramid is a green column. Both columns are 3.5 m high, forming a pair. The red one is the only one at La Venta of that color, so its presence here seems significant.

In conclusion, perhaps Throne 1 portrayed an earth-surface supernatural who sustained an earlier creation. Throne 8, with its descending snake

cords, presented the celestial womb and its role in emitting the descending umbilical cords. At the center of the four directional thrones were two that referred to earth and sky, forming the vertical direction at the center of the quincunx. The conceptual vertical axis provides a disjunction of the horizontal space-time, allowing the introduction of a distinct temporal dimension.

Thrones 2 and 3 Throne 1 was just southeast of the central platform (B-4) of the great plaza. On and north of the platform were one or two clusters of monuments. About 110 m north of Platform B-4 rose the huge platform (C-3), or U-shaped apron, supporting all except the northern side of the Earthen Pyramid. On the southern flank of the C-3 platform was a projecting apron about 40 m wide at the upper surface. On this projection were two more cave-niche thrones, numbered 2 and 3 (Figs. 8.18 and 8.19). When they were found, Throne 3 faced the Earthen Pyramid (C-1), and Throne 2 lay face up. On the eastern throne (2), an adult wearing a headdress and earspools sits cross-legged in a niche, holding an infant. The details and any carving on the top ledge and sides are eroded. On Throne 3, the cross-legged figure in a niche wears a high headdress, earspools, and a waist ornament. To his proper left is a striding figure that was executed at another scale. On the remaining side of the monument are two figures. These three figures were carved in low relief. The two on the monument's side sit cross-legged in profile, facing each other and making gestures. Both wear beards that seem false—they leave most of the chin exposed and almost seem to attach to the headband. One sits on a higher platform and has a backward-curving headdress that seems to be cleft at the rear. This particular scene is framed by a band containing cartouches at the bottom and another band consisting of plump, curving U shapes at the top. Because of the shift in scale and the striding figures, features typical of the Late Preclassic in Veracruz and the Maya area, Throne 3 seems later than the other cave-niche thrones at La Venta. Thrones 2 and 3 are so damaged that it is hard to make additional comments.

When we consider all four cave-womb thrones, we see that on the northeast and southwest thrones, adults in niches hold infants. The imagery on the northwest and southeast thrones shows a male sitting in a niche without an infant but apparently



8.18 La Venta Station 2: La Venta Throne (Altar) 2. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



8.19 La Venta Station 2: La Venta Throne (Altar) 3. Photo by author.

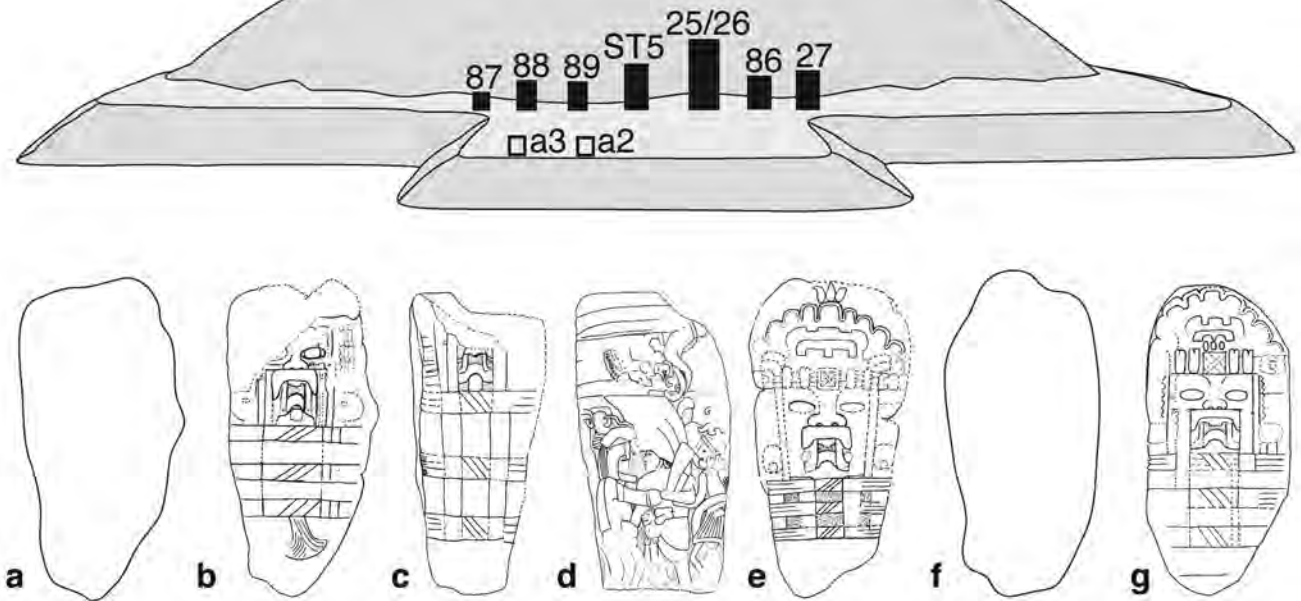
interacting with other adult figures carved in relief. These, therefore, seem to portray specific encounters of individuals.

The four cave-womb-sweatbath thrones occupied corners of a long Olmec-style quincunx. They established the four spatial directions and were places of foundation and creation, each of them a “seat,” or foundation, that would allow individuals to support the sky. On one, a bloody celestial umbilicus has descended and surrounded the sweatbath-birthplace of an adult who is linked to another man. On another, an adult holds an infant in the womb of the earth. The other two echo these themes, while the central thrones interject a temporal disjunction, referring to a previous earth (the dismembered crocodilian) and another era. Because each faced a distinct direction, the four outer thrones established the importance of the quincunx as a way to circumambulate the earth. It is possible that the cave-womb-sweatbath monuments served as thrones upon which individuals received the sacred regalia that descends from celestial sources. If rulers were installed upon these generative wombs, the caves and their infants may have referred to dynastic continuity. Alternatively, the adults emerging from the thrones may have represented the shamans whose chthonic visits balanced male and female powers, thereby generating the 260-day count, as I previously mentioned is the case among the Quiché. When someone mounted the thrones, any viewers would have witnessed a living individual apparently arising from a cave, and it is possible that a source of the living being was a sacrificed infant below. There are many possibilities, and to forefront one, we need greater consensus about the functions of Olmec sites and the nature of Olmec rulership.

Station 3: The Dawning of Human-Maize

On the C-3 platform, at the foot of the Earthen Pyramid, seven stelae faced south toward the plaza (González Lauck 1997). Two were uncarved (86 and 87). On Stela 5, made of green schist, were three figures standing in profile on a ground line and another floating above their heads. The central standing figure faced west, or the viewer’s left, wearing a large, fan-shaped headdress. The figure behind him is that of an aged woman, and the floating figure seems to represent a female as well (Follensbee 2000). The other four stelae, ranging in

8.20 La Venta Station 3: Mound C south platform with human-maize stelae among the others. Drawing of stelae by author; mound drawing by Corey Escoto.



size from 2 m to nearly 5 m in height, were carved with the image of a human embryo adorned with maize regalia. These are Monuments 25/26, 27, 88, and 89 (Fig. 8.20).

The upper edges of Monuments 25/26 and 27 are mostly complete, and enough of the bottom edges remain for us to see that the stones were originally shaped like large celts, as noted by James Porter (1996). The prototypes for these seem to be the La Merced monuments, especially Monument 1, which is similar in terms of the proportion of the carved face to the entire monument, but smaller in scale.¹³ On each of these four La Venta monuments¹⁴ is the conventionalized face of an embryo with lidless eyes, a flat nose, and upper lip ornament. The T shape in the mouth may depict the palate. Outward-curving dentition falls from the upper lip to the lower corners of the mouth. The embryo wears a three-band headdress with four seeds, or celts, affixed to it and flanking a square medallion infixed with crossed bands at the center of the headband. Above the headband is a downward-facing E, or double merlon shape, much like the ones above the quincunxes on the Mother Earth Surface mosaic pavements. Above that form is another line that seems to define the top of a head while echoing the double merlon form below it. At

the top of Monuments 25/26 and 27 are undulating curves that reach the greatest height at the center. These are very similar in shape to the cross-section of a placenta. Above the central curving shape are three sprout forms. These three sprouts typify the germination of a maize seed.

At the outer edges of the headband are junctions at which vertical straps attach to the horizontal headband. The upper portion of the straps curve upward and away from the face, possibly toward the back of the head. The straps fall from the headband along the sides of the face. Ovals occupy the place where one would expect to see earplugs. Below the faces (which occupy a third of the monument, including the butt of stone) are three horizontal bands infixed with diagonal lines that probably refer to the twisting of the bands. Because the embryo form is bundled by the three bands, and because embryos *in utero* are enclosed by three sacs, it seems reasonable to infer that these bands probably referred to the triple sacs that surround an embryo in the womb.

Taken as a whole, the image combines clear references to the embryo (its face, shape, and sacs), clear references to maize (the four-seed headband and triple sprouts), as well as references to the surface of the earth in the form of the double

merlon, the interface between the earth and sky. It represents a human seed, adorned with maize regalia, that is in the process of sprouting from the earth. The headband and earspools may additionally signify rulership, as maize diadems did among the Maya, or may refer to ancestors (as they relate to seeds and jade celts).

Isotopy: The Creation of Humans and Food Mountain

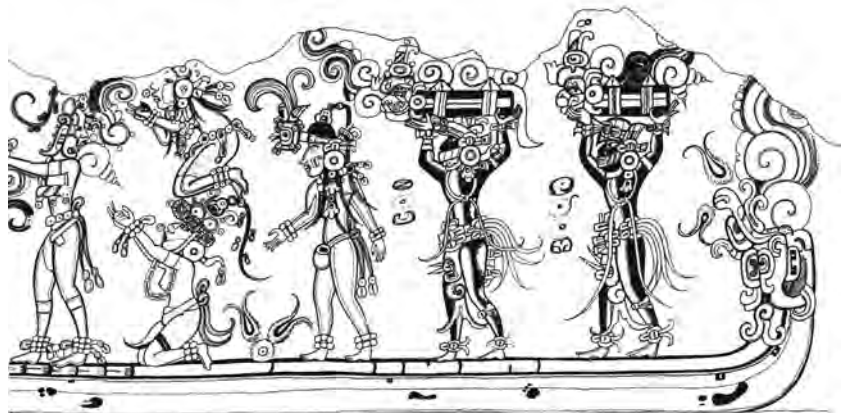
For Appendix 2 I selected and analyzed seven of the narratives that describe the origins of humanity. The variations in that process as different groups conceptualized it over time are quite fascinating. As we wander through the labyrinths of these narratives, we can hold on to the threads of some similarities. In six of the narratives, humans either emerge from plants or are made of ground seeds, with the addition of blood, water, or fat (in the seventh, the ground substance was bone). Whereas there was a creator couple in each case, a female entity takes center stage to engender the humans in five of the seven narratives.

AD 150, San Bartolo. The discoverer and the first scholars to describe San Bartolo—Saturno, Taube, Stuart, and Hurst—initially thought that the north wall, with its procession, Flower Mountain, and gourd-birth scene could be best interpreted as “the taking of water and sustenance out of Flower Mountain” (Saturno et al. 2005:31). They seem to be thinking that “out” meant away from the gourd-birth and Flower Mountain (Fig. 8.21). I suspect that the narrative proceeds from the serpent head

inward, following the direction of the footprints at the bottom. Red and black males with descending cords knotted around their necks carry wrapped bundles with embryo-like masks topped with two kinds of sprout medallions into the cave-womb (Flower Mountain). The maize being at the center accepts a gourd (possibly containing water, as Saturno et al. suggest) from the females and passes it to a man with multicolored stripes. Behind him, a female holds items indicative of civilization: a painted bowl and, inside it, food, possibly tamales. The maize seed (in the embryo bundles) and water brought into the flowering mountain (here also a cave and therefore a womb) seem to have been transformed into food for humans to eat. The fabulous mountain-cave, containing the woman with a net-patterned skirt holding the tamales, appears next. Animals and birds swarm around it, flowers blossom, trees writhe, and stalactites drip.

Outside this paradise appears one of the more enigmatic figures. Apparently male, his body and regalia are marked with at least eleven U signs. He has small, feathered “wings” at his shoulders, like several Olmec striding figures, including the one on the San Miguel Amuco stela. He seems to wear a mask, the lower portion of which looks very much like an embryo face, with a round chin and projecting upper lip ornament. He holds a bundle marked with a U and terminating on top with three sproutlike shapes. Is this a maize seed bundle? What is a maize seed bundle other than a metaphor for a womb? Tucked under his arm is a long tool with a tip that comes to a curved point. Perhaps this feathered, celestial being is the one who penetrated the gourd toward which he gestures, causing it to burst. The shapely, waisted gourd, marked prominently with a U infixed in a

8.21 Food-mountain isotopy from San Bartolo: the cave, food, and creation of humans. Rendering by Heather Hurst, courtesy of George Stuart, BEARC.



slanting yellow band, definitely explodes. Great swirls, streams, and blobs of blood fly out of the deep cleft. Riding on the streams of blood are four naked human infants, still attached to their umbilical cords, while a fifth emerges head first, its arms upraised. This one wears a white head cloth, mouth cover, and earspools, and has a long, unchildlike nose. If the scene was meant to be narrated in this direction, the first five humans were created from human-maize seed (carried in the bundles) and water (from the gourd), which were mixed within a mountain-cave-womb, from which the gourd-womb emerged. This scene is at the corner of the north wall. Immediately adjacent to it, continuing in the same direction (left), the first human king ascends a scaffold throne and is presented with a crown.

Saturno and colleagues (2005) provide an excellent description of the headdresses, but I do want to add one thing. Two of these figures wear a headdress surmounted by a large medallion. One is the sole striding/dancing female in the composition, whom the authors identify as a possible maize goddess (their Figure 12), and the other is the striding figure marked with eleven or more U signs who stands adjacent to the exploding gourd (their Figure 6). On the medallion worn by the female, a bird's head appears on the front. On the one worn by Figure 6, a snake comes out of the center of the medallion, and a bird's feet and tail feathers stick out of the top. Four small flints penetrate the corners of the medallion. Due to the presence of the medallions adorned with the opposite ends of birds, these two figures seem related. As we saw in the "descending cords" isotopy, variable elements include flints, snakes, birds, the U shape, and a flowering mountain. Flints associated with a possibly female bird may be conceptually related to the Citlalinicue story, in which a flint fell from her celestial womb into Chicomoztoc (place of seven U shapes) to initiate creation. Perhaps these two figures form a creator couple who produced a maize child, or a plant child, who helped bring the gourd containing seed and water out onto the earth.

AD 690, Palenque Group of the Cross. According to Bernal-García (2002) and Tate (2002), the cosmogony sequence can be abbreviated as follows. A male maize and sky primordial being is born before summer solstice. A female, earth-related primordial being, whose name refers to a white

bird, is born at the end of the rainy season as the earth emerges from the waters. The present era begins. They order space and time: "made proper Six-Sky Place, Eight-House Partitions was its holy name, the name of the North." Their three children are born during the season when corn is harvested. They are referred to as the "harvest" or "sprout" of the mother. The births happened at First True Mountain White Flower, after which the first *bak-tun* (400 years) was completed. At this point the mother commemorates the first appearance of the earth-turtle at the dawn of the present era. Shortly thereafter, the mother, White Bird, is given the regalia of rulership: a headband.

Circa AD 1500, Codex Borgia. In the *Borgia* cosmogony section, explosions of energy, manifestations of days, terrible wombs of flints, and impressive temples teeming with strange beings completely overshadow the birth of humans. The following synopsis is paraphrased from Boone (2007), except for the parts in parentheses.

Only when Tezcatlipoca and the black Quetzalcoatl obtain the ritual bundle and open it, releasing life, do events turn toward the creation of humans. A character called "Stripe Eye" shoots out of the explosive bundle, is propelled through the darkness by dark winds, and finally emerges from the mouth of Ehecatl, the wind god. Arriving in a light-filled space, he moves toward the Red and Black Temples, where he encounters four Quetzalcoatl and Black Xolotl, as well as sacrificial and ritual implements. Xolotl dances and throws lightning toward the four quarters of the universe, which causes rain gods to appear. Meanwhile, in a jeweled enclosure that is filled with blood, an aged creator couple embraces on a huge disk (or umbilicus) of jade. From the center of the disk emerges a human figure with yellow hair who is flanked by two cobs of maize. The jeweled (jade) enclosure holds a vat of blood and ears of maize. From this, humanity is born (Taube 1986:62). Once outside the enclosure (womb), a rain god pours water on a figure like Stripe Eye but with yellow instead of black hair and light-colored skin. This seems to be the person who was just born, who receives a ritual bath to cool him from the hot state of the womb (Boone 2007:190-195).

Circa AD 1500, Codex Vienna. While creator couples initiate this codex, and more couples appear in the sections leading to the birth of the culture

hero 9 Wind, he is the principal agent in the long section after his appearance. In the year 13 Rabbit, on day 2 Deer, to create humans, he consults with “twelve anthropomorphic stones and plants (the spirits or forces of the earth and vegetation) and the two black priests (7 Eagle and 7 Rain)” (Boone 2000:94). At Apoala, on a plain of smoking incense balls, rose a female tree. The two black priests penetrated it with their staffs, which have curving points (not unlike the one held by the figure next to the gourd birth in the San Bartolo murals), and from a deep cleft stepped a male and a female, as well as fifty-one other people, including lineage heads. Some of those humans marry and have offspring, but meanwhile 9 Wind establishes several important ritual practices: drilling fire, manipulating sacred plants, and founding sweatbaths and temples (Boone 2000:94).

Circa AD 150–1700, Popol Vuh. The spiritual dimension of the creators shines forth in a beautiful passage from the *Popol Vuh*. She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons feel the lack of beings who might be providers and sustainers for the cosmos. They seek children of light to inhabit the earth. In the predawn darkness, the creators contemplate their intentions until their thoughts are clear and full of light. Once they arrive at clarity, events on the earth begin to unfold. Four animals penetrate Split Mountain, called Paxil and Cayala (the latter related to the word *kayala*, the lime-infused water used to make nixtamal). The coyote and fox, and the raven and parakeet show the creators the maize cobs and other sweet foods within the mountain-womb. Xmucane (She Who Has Borne Children) grinds the yellow and white maize nine times (taking great care and the time to emulate the lunations in a human gestation cycle) and adds the water to give them strength. “Thus their frame and shape were given expression by our first Mother and our first Father. Their flesh was merely yellow ears of maize and white ears of maize. Mere food were the legs and arms of humanity, of our first fathers. And so there were four who were made. . . .” (Christenson 2003, I:192–195). Hearers of this story would know that these creators had tried three times previously to make proper humans. Nonetheless, the creators’ actions are unhurried, deliberate, measured, and focused. Their actions arise from clarity of purpose,

yet they know that they cannot completely control the results of their endeavors. They simply set the fourth creation in motion and watch its play. In this story, the creators engage some of the major metaphors and model some of the fundamental principles of Mesoamerican spiritual thought.

AD 1558 Leyenda de los soles. Tezcatlipoca drilled a new fire in the year 2 Reed, smoking the sky. The gods conferred, wondering who (other than dogs) would populate the sky they had created. Quetzalcoatl went to the land that was dead and asked the lord and lady there for the precious bones. The lord did not want to give them up so he set a trial. He asked Quetzalcoatl to walk four times in a quincunx around his realm while blowing a conch horn. Quetzalcoatl summoned worms and bees (decomposing and fertilizing agents) to drill into the horn so it would sound, and the dead lord had to accede to his request. Quetzalcoatl took the male bones from one pile and the female from another and put both into a bundle. The dead lord tried to prevent Quetzalcoatl from taking the bones, and Quetzalcoatl dropped them. Quails nibbled on the bones, but he gathered them together, put them back in the bundle, and took them home. His wife, Quilaztli or Cihuacoatl, ground them and put the white bones into a green jade bowl. Quetzalcoatl added red blood from his penis. The gods all accompanied him in doing penance and then cried, “Holy ones, humans have been born.” Then Quetzalcoatl retrieved seeds of corn from Food Mountain by transforming into an ant. He takes them to the gods, who chewed them (adding essential enzymes to release the nutrients) and put the dough on the lips of the humans. The gods realized that people would need more food. They tried to move Food Mountain with ropes, but it would not budge. So the creator couple asked another god to strike Food Mountain (Bierhorst 1992:145–147).

In these stories, we find a host of variable elements that are present in the La Venta narrative: cords; ropes; seeds; bundles; three, four, or five original human-maize beings; and a food or flowering mountain. In the next station we will find the jade crucible. When I enumerate four, forefronted female engendering entities in the stories above, I include the gourd marked with U signs at San Bartolo, the Palenque bird creator (which was for-

merly known as “Lady Beastie” and whose identity [and sex] are now in dispute), the sacred female tree in the *Codex Vienna*, and Xmucane from the *Popol Vuh*. In the *Borgia* and *Leyenda de los soles*, a couple engenders the creation. At La Venta, the northern phallic column and the southern U Group represent the cosmic copulation. Their offspring, the four sprouting human-maize seed beings, are located halfway between them at the center of the site, but on the side of the mountain that faces their mother/womb.

In the stories above, we saw flowering mountains plus split gourd-wombs (San Bartolo), flowering mountains in larger contexts (Palenque), and two food mountains that were split so that seeds could emerge (*Popol Vuh* and *Leyenda de los soles*). With the human-maize seed stelae at its foot, La Venta’s Mound C-1 is clearly a food mountain. Because maize and humans “flower,” it is probably a flower mountain. Because the massive offerings/lake effigies rest 125 m north of the mound, it exemplifies the *altepetl* concept as well. Mound C-1 is not the first such conceptual construction in Mesoamerica. It derived from Initial Formative traditions of creating enormous mounds constructed partially of live, unopened shells. These must have been considered as mounds of food. We also saw the integration of a mountain and water at El Manatí, at which the spring was seeded with rubber balls, jade celts, and later, with human busts of wood and actual seeds.

Isotopy: Bathing of Infants

Bordering the entire length of the Complex B plaza is a large, elevated platform called the Stirling Acropolis. On it, five long stone drains have been discovered (Heizer et al. 1968). The drains are composed of U-shaped or inverted, wedge-shaped stones laid end to end. Two are associated with very large stone basins (Monuments 45 and 55) (Fig. 8.22), and others seem to carry water to depressions in the surface of the platform. The Berkeley excavations, as well as those supervised by Rebecca González, have uncovered seven and two monuments, respectively (some of which are fragmentary). One of the fragments, Monument 44, closely resembles the head of the Monument from San Martín Pajapan: it is a human face wearing a large embryo mask on the front of a headdress (Fig. 8.23). Another Monument, 75, is like San Lorenzo Monument 52 in that it depicts an embryo head



8.22 Bathing isotopy: La Venta Monument 45, a stone basin from the Stirling Acropolis. Photo by author.



8.23 Monument 44, Stirling Acropolis. Photo by author.

on a body whose knees are drawn up and clasped by the arms. Thus compacted, the proportions are those of an embryo. If the figure were to stand, its proportions would be more like those of an adult. Five other monuments have no heads but do not seem to resemble embryos, and a sixth represents a feline. One of the five fragments, Monument 57, is a unique standing human wearing a draping garment, with arms held across the chest.

What purpose could the large basins and drains have served? Reilly (2002) has suggested that this was an elite residential area. It is also possible that the basins were used in an infant-bathing ceremony. Given the prevalence of imagery of the unborn and of infancy throughout the site, and the widespread Mesoamerican notion that pregnancy “cooks” the fetus in the womb, the concept that babies are born “hot” may have been operative at La Venta. The ritual bathing of the first human was portrayed in the *Codex Borgia* on page 38. In the *Leyenda de los soles*, the five Mixcoa spent their first four days in the water. Bernal-García (1993:96) made a case for the ritual bathing, or baptism, of children being alluded to by offerings in the Templo Mayor. We know about ceremonies in which Aztec midwives held a naming and engendering ceremony for newborns involving a bowl of water that represented the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue, as depicted in the *Codex Mendoza* (folio 57r). The location of the Stirling Acropolis, and its basins and drains, is to the east of the zone defined by the cave-womb altars and the row of human-maize seed stelae. Although this is quite speculative, the southern part of the Stirling Acropolis could have been used for the ritual bathing and perhaps the naming of newborns.¹⁵

To recapitulate, Narrative Station 3 was at the center of the site. At the foot of La Venta’s “mountain,” four human embryo/maize seed beings, still bundled in three uterine sacs, sprouted. They formed emphatic vertical axes in the horizontal stretch of the narrative. To express this using Maya concepts, human-maize had been sown and was dawning. I suggest that the sprouting human-maize seeds were the offspring of the stone phallus and the earth womb. Probably they represented the androgynous seeds of the human race.¹⁶ It is possible that the fetuses and infants to the south referred to two previous sacrifices of life—two previous creations—that regenerated the life-creating process. Now that the true maize-humans had been

born, they had to fulfill their function by revering the female earth and waters from which they sprang.

Station 4: The Female Sources of Life: Earth and Water

To the north of the Earthen Pyramid lay Complex A, consisting of two successive enclosed courtyards, here referred to as the southern and northern enclosed courtyards (Feature A-1) (Fig. 7.10). Each contained surface features, as well as the astonishing arrays of buried objects described in Chapters 5 and 6. Reilly (1999) has identified this zone—with its deeply situated massive offerings, mosaic pavements, celt offerings in the shape of trees, pseudotombs, and small mound (A-2)—as a vertical model of the Olmec cosmos. I think he is correct, and I would like to add several points to this discussion. Among the many sculptures once situated on or under the courts were altars to female generative beings. The pseudotombs commemorated three women and two men. Complex A contained several embryo and skull configurations, as well as the only “scientifically” excavated fetus figurine. And there may have been a ballcourt in these spaces. Before looking at these proposals, we should determine the physical parameters of the two courtyards.

The southern courtyard could have encompassed a ballcourt. The space was defined by the long mounds A-4 and A-5, which were constructed during Phase IV to flank an earlier mound, A-3. The latter had been constructed initially in Phase I, updated during successive phases, and received a huge tomblike offering in Phase IV. John Graham argued that this southern courtyard, flanked by long, low platforms, served as a ballcourt (Graham and Heizer 1971). His proposal has been criticized for several reasons, including the presence of Mound A-3, which occupies nearly half the length of the court. There is, however, room for a ballcourt. The east-west width between the long mounds is about 40 m. The length from the projection that extends northward from the Earthen Pyramid to the southern edge of Mound A-3 is just short of 50 m. Mosaic Pavement 2 was installed on the plaza floor on the centerline, just south of Mound A-3, and it perhaps limited the area available for play to about 40 x 50 m. Little else seems to have occupied this space. In addition to the mosaic



8.24 Monument 63, southern courtyard, depicting raising of the world tree. Photo by author.



8.25 Monument 77. This and other seated figures may have joined Monument 21 on the long mounds surrounding the southern courtyard. Photo by author.

pavement, this plaza contained a stela, Monument 63 (Fig. 8.24) and a large, roughly circular boulder, Monument 68. Monument 63 shows a human raising or supporting a towering, vertically situated crested snake, probably, as Reilly suggests, a variation of the “raising the central axis” theme, seen on San Martín Pajapan Monument 1 and Chalcatzingo Monument 41. It is worth noting that the edges of Mound A-3 and of the northward projection from Mound C-1 create an I- or H-shaped space for the possible ballcourt. On its southern end, A-3 sloped gradually, but toward the center it reached a height of 2-3 m (Drucker 1952:65). Also, the sizes of Mesoamerican ballcourts range from about 16 x 5 m at Tikal (at the foot of Temple 1) to about 95 x 30 m at Chichén Itzá.

The low boundary platforms (Mounds A-4 and A-5) may have supported a series of sculptures. One life-size statue of an adult human, Monument 23 (Fig. 5.5), seated cross-legged, and Monument 80 (Fig. 8.14), which portrays a seated feline holding in its mouth a descending cord terminating in snake heads, were found on Mound A-4. I suspect that some of the other statues of seated adult males, such as Monument 77 (Fig. 8.25), for which the “find” locations are uncertain, presided over this relatively open area.

At the northern side of the “ballcourt” space, a person traversing the site from south to north around 500 bc would first have encountered a Mother Earth Surface pavement at the foot of Mound A-3 (Fig. 5.36). This Phase IV mosaic pavement design consists of a cleft at the north end, under which is a large double merlon. Four smaller, double-merlon “aperture” shapes appear south of the large one, two on each side. The northern portion of the pavement showed signs of wear, indicating that it was exposed and withstood use for some time (Drucker 1952:75; Reilly 1994a). Six meters south of the pavement was a cache of 253 roughly worked serpentine celts, providing quantity if not quality of conceptual “seed” to the court.

Immediately north of the Mother Earth Surface pavement (an earth altar or underworld portal) rose Mound A-3. It contained Tomb C, the largest and most complex single pseudoburial at La Venta, and the associated offerings 1943-H, -I, -J, and -K. As explained in Chapter 5, this seems to have been a memorial to a female whose regalia suggests that she was a midwife. The sandstone cist “tomb” was constructed using nine slabs for the

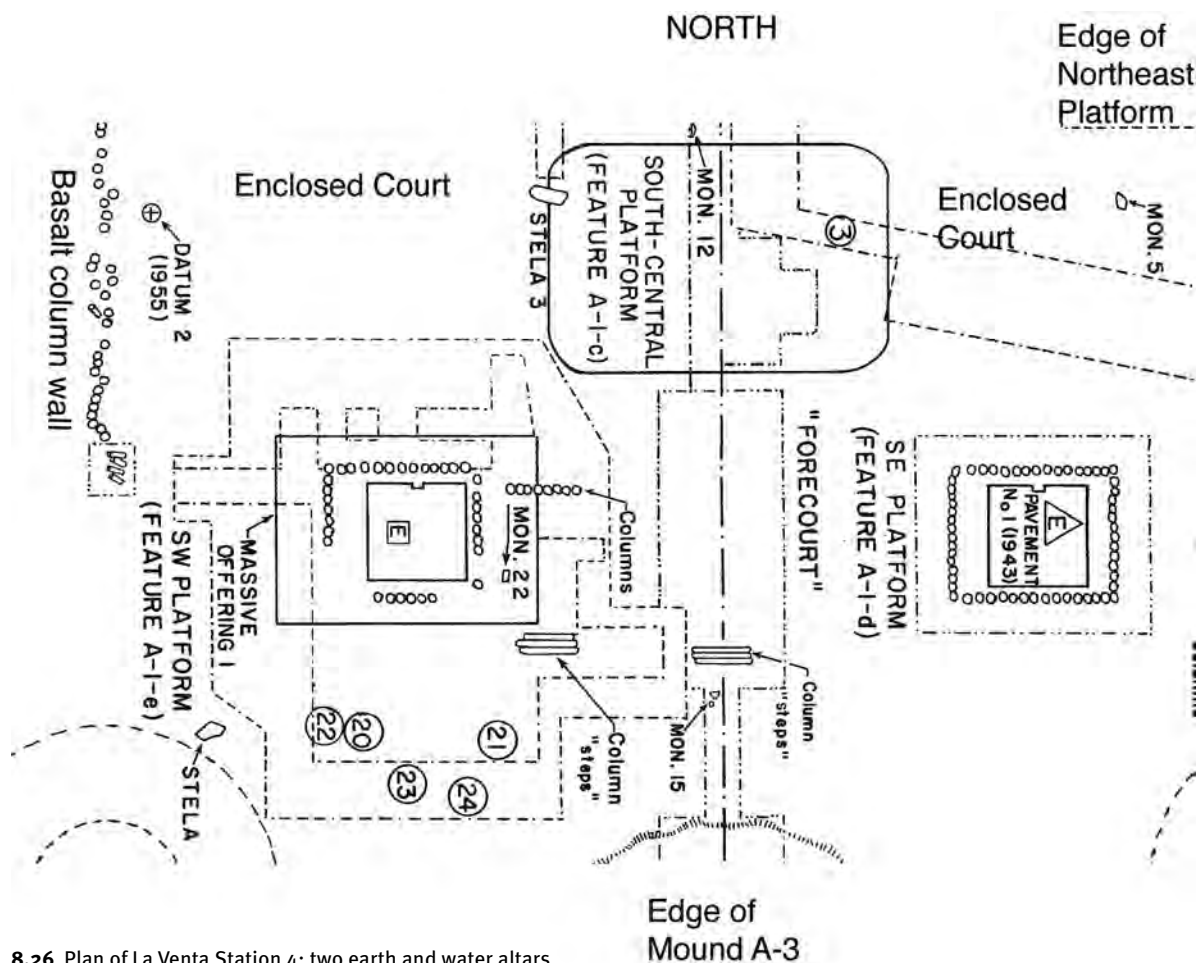
floor. In the tomb was a string of jade beads around her pseudohips. On her pseudo-ears were jade earspools incised with embryo and axolotl images. One hundred and ten jade spangles seem to have been attached to a pelvic garment. In her memorial was La Venta's only incised obsidian core, which bears the image of an eagle, and a tiny rock crystal skull. The incised eagle and embryo images suggest a modern nickname for this person, "1 Eagle, Embryo Woman." Little jade turtle shells refer to the sea and a possible connection between this woman and the Midwife-Lake supernatural. There were 28 celts of serpentine and 9 of jade outside of a huge mass of cinnabar, these numbers of course being suggestive of lunar counts and lunations within a gestation cycle. This pseudotomb was situated near the center of the mound, running perpendicular to the site's centerline. Between it and the mosaic pavement were six offerings. Distributed in a cruciform configuration were two celts, a sandstone vessel, a jade mosaic plaque, and an amber pendant. South of these were the "child's burial," 1943-L, with child-size regalia and a vessel, and Offering 1943-M, which consisted of four stone figurines (Figs. 5.25-5.36). One depicted a fetus, one an infant, and two showed young girls of different ages. Along with the adult female figurine within the sandstone cist, these figurines seem to have depicted the gestation, infancy, childhood, and young adulthood of a woman. Stela 1, the bathtub-shaped monument depicting an adult female reclining in an earth maw, may have originally been on top of this mound, perhaps serving as a portrait of the woman, probably a revered midwife, whose regalia rested within.

If there was a "narrative station" in this court at which people gathered, it may have been on the (abraded) portion of the mosaic pavement, just south of Mound A-3. The pavement, which probably functioned as an earth altar, was the locus of healing rituals that invoked the power of the midwife commemorated by the tomblike offerings within the mound. Another possibility for a gathering place might be more likely: the basalt column steps on the centerline north of Mound A-3. A sprouting maize-embryo stela, Monument 15, marked this centerline location. From this vantage point, participants would have seen the basalt enclosures of the southwest and southeast platforms (Fig. 8.26). Outside the fence, on the southwest platform, another embryo stela (Monu-

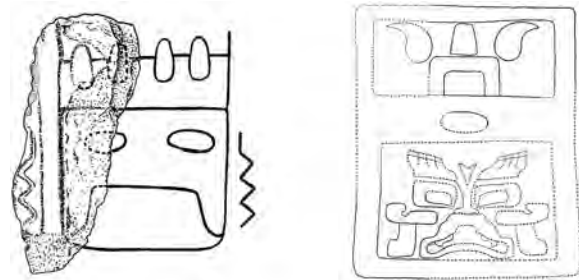
ment 22) stood near another set of basalt steps (Fig. 8.27). These images reiterate the human seed at the previous narrative station at the southern foot of Mound C-1, or Food Mountain. Five caches were placed in the area south of the southwest platform (A-1-e). Each contained a different form of pottery vessel. One had a large, straight-walled vessel (Offering 1955-23) incised in registers with what may have included a possible sweatbath image (Fig. 8.28) (Drucker et al. 1959:222). Offering 1955-22 contained several large jars in which was placed a jade bead. No excavations were made on the south side of the southeast platform (A-1-d).

This possible narrative station, in the forecourt between the tomb of "1 Eagle, Embryo Woman" and the Phase II massive offerings and mosaic pavements (or the life/river/midwife and flowering earth surface altars), may have been the most potent part of the site. Bounded by three mosaic pavements of greenstone, it may have been the antecedent to the "jeweled enclosure" from which humans emerged in the *Borgia* cosmogony. Here a story may have unfolded of how the flowering earth, with its quadripartite divisions, floats on a primordial sea in which the power of life originates. Here the sacred numbers that linked lunar, solar, and human time with space could be explained. To describe the lunar cycle there were the 28 layers of the massive offering plus the twenty-ninth layer, the mosaic pavement. The four directions could be described using the elements around the central bar of the pavement. To explain the day count, the mosaic pavement incorporated 13 (if the Mixe values for a quincunx were operating, 9 for the center, and 1 each for the four corners). Above the southeast mosaic pavement were 20 celts. On each mosaic pavement, 20 long blocks formed the diamond-pattern skirt. By manipulating the 13 and 20 counts, the teller could arrive at 260, the number that links human gestation to 9 lunations. By manipulating the 13 and 28-29 counts, they could approximate a solar year, which could be reinforced by the quincunxial distribution of elements around the pavement's central bar. All this information was buried, hidden from view, and esoteric, requiring a specialist to explain or access it. At this location only the results of the sacred knowledge—the embryo-maize beings—were visible.

Beyond the southwest and southeast platforms, the visible features of the northern enclosed courtyard (A-1) included four mounds. Mound



8.26 Plan of La Venta Station 4: two earth and water altars, also known as the Phase II massive offerings and mosaic pavements, under the southeast and southwest platforms. Note the basalt column steps leading into the “forecourt.” Dot-and-dash lines are excavation cuts. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 54 (public domain).



8.27 La Venta Station 4: left, the embryo-maize stela Monument 22 and 15 were found near the columnar steps that led to the enclosed court’s entrance. Drawing of Monument 15 from Drucker 1952: Fig. 54 (public domain); Monument 22 drawing by Corey Escoto.



8.28 La Venta Station 4, Offering 1955-23, engraved vessel. Drucker 1959: Fig. 69 (public domain).



8.29 La Venta Monument 12, a greenstone column on the centerline in the northern enclosed court. Photo by author.



8.31 La Venta Monument 5, from the northern enclosed court: a kneeling embryo or infant holding a basin. Photo by author.



8.30 La Venta Monument 13, from the northern enclosed court. Drawing courtesy of Cherra Wyllie.

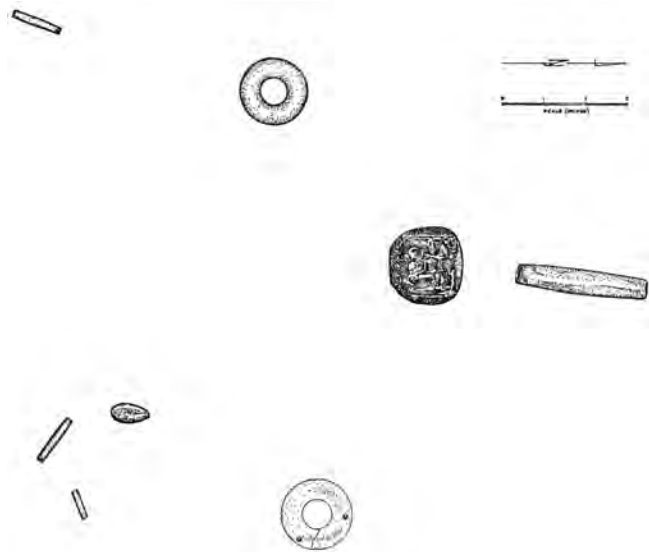
A-2 occupied the center of the northern side. There were two mounds in the shape of rectangles with rounded corners, one in the northeast and one in the northwest. Astride the centerline was the south-central platform. The history of construction in this area is discussed in Chapter 5. Susan Gillespie (2008) has recently published an analysis of the site reports as well as improved drawings of Complex A on the website of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies. During Phase IV, the northern court was a U-shaped enclosure with its opening to the south. The U-shaped boundary was formed of natural basalt columns that penetrated the earth, spaced so tightly that they formed a continuous wall (Stirling 1940).

In terms of monumental sculpture, a carved green serpentine column, Monument 12, stood on the centerline near the north side of the south-central mound (Fig. 8.29). It was the sixth column marking the centerline of the site. The image on Monument 12 has long been interpreted as a monkey, with a buccal mask, a tail coiled in back,

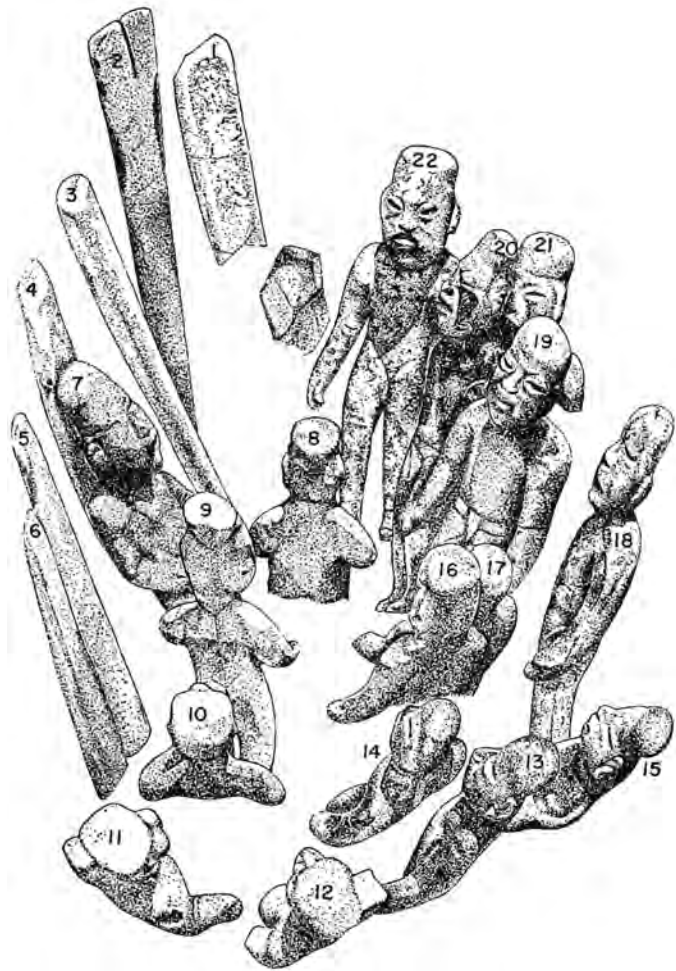
upraised arms, and wearing a decorated band around the torso (de la Fuente 1973:70-72). The incising on the waistband shows a stylized zoomorphic face with trough eyes under unusual brows, a pointed beak, and ophidian fangs. The figure has prominent cheekbones and elongated earlobes, and wears a prominent U-shaped necklace. Monument 13—acylindrical monument with a highly polished upper surface bearing the low-relief image of a striding male carrying a banner and with several glyphlike signs—is probably a late addition (Fig. 8.30). It was on the centerline, at the juncture of Mound A-2 with the surface of the plaza. On the west side of the south-central platform was Stela 3, showing the encounter of a man and a woman, each with several flying figures of the same gender above them (Fig. 5.10). To the south of the northeast platform (A-1-f) was Monument 5, a small basalt carving showing a kneeling embryo or infant with a protrusion from the head and hairlike adornments over the ears (Fig. 8.31). It is usually called a dwarf or “La Abuela” (de la Fuente 1973: 57-59).

In terms of buried arrays, in addition to the Phase II earth surface and life/water altars with their celt offerings, an enormous massive offering (Phase III) of greenstone blocks, about 19 x 20 m, underlay most of the part of the northern court not covered by mounds. Inseminating this lake effigy were many offerings of celts and pigments. Caches contained the following numbers of celts: 6 celts; 20 celts; 20 celts in an upper layer and 31 in a lower layer; 38 celts in a cruciform; three groups of vertically placed groups containing 8, 8, and 5 celts; 12 celts; 2 upright celts; and one offering of balls of malachite and cinnabar. Another smaller lake effigy with massive offerings was placed under the center of Mound A-2 in Phase IV. Over this lake effigy were two offerings, each containing 9 celts, a mirror, and balls of cinnabar, as well as an offering of 37 celts arranged in a cruciform.

The northeast platform (A-1-f) was impregnated with offerings of regalia (Fig. 8.32) and with Offering 4, the scene of sixteen figures, including two females, as well as several figures on which male garments had been added (Fig. 8.33). Their particular pose, with a straight back, bent knees, and loosely hanging arms, is difficult to maintain. I have explored elsewhere the possibility that this was disciplined practice, probably for spiritual



8.32 La Venta Offering 1955-7, one of numerous regalia caches in the northeast platform of the northern enclosed court. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 45 (public domain).



8.33 La Venta Offering 4. Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 38 (public domain).

purposes. This does not rule out the use of this pose in martial arts. Indeed, it is employed in tai chi (which has a combative aspect) and karate, as well as in hatha yoga. It helps to build strength and focus the mind. Proper alignment is essential to achieving the physical and spiritual benefits of such disciplines, and these sculptures illustrate it perfectly (Tate 1996, 1998).

There were numerous pottery vessel offerings here as well. One of these, 1955-14, contained a footed, fluted vessel holding a small waisted, gourd-shaped effigy vessel with a froglike face. Three other vessels, nested together, covered the little effigy in the bowl, and a small, tecomate-shaped bowl with lugs accompanied them (Drucker et al. 1959:187-189). This cache seems to evoke a gestation metaphor, the vessel representing a womb. This northeast platform contained the sacred regalia of La Venta's leaders, along with standing figurines possibly representing individuals from across the region who, through disciplined posture, linked their minds and bodies with the cosmos.

The other figurines and all the tiny stone effigies of marine animals, hands, and the like were in four pseudoburials in Mound A-2 (two in Tomb A, one each in Tombs B and E) (Figs. 5.17-5.23). The two Tomb A bundles, found within the basalt column tomb (Monument 7), each contained a seated female figurine and a standing figurine. In Bundle 1 the standing figure was originally ambiguous but had been given a male loincloth.¹⁷ In Bundle 2, the well-known seated female figurine with the mirror was paired with a standing female figure (Follensbee 2000:90-152). In both bundles, the marine imagery of the regalia suggests that the individuals commemorated were midwives or supernatural patrons of water and childbirth. It has always been assumed that the individuals commemorated in the pseudoburials were rulers. If this is the case, the gendered features of these figurines certainly bring up the issue of whether women were rulers. Or perhaps the roles of ruler and healer were not mutually exclusive, as Reilly (1999) has proposed.

If religious specialists existed at La Venta, access to this northern enclosed courtyard was likely restricted to them (Reilly 1999). I speculate that here they tended a sacred fire, the inseminating power within the goddesses' wombs. Those who participated in the creation story procession may have gathered outside the court to listen to the

sacred mysteries of birth and life. These would have been complementary to the mortuary rituals that Reilly (1999) has proposed were associated with the burials within the mounds.

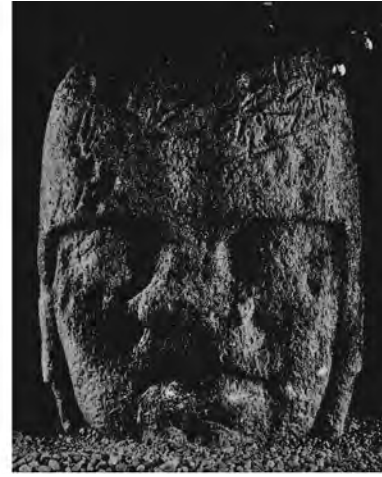
Would the memorials to these important persons have been mentioned in a performance of the creation narrative? It probably depends on the intention for which the story was performed. If ritualists constructed their temporary altars atop the giant quincunx earth altars for specific purposes, they may well have invoked the powers and knowledge of their renowned predecessors. The platforms surrounding the pseudoburials may even have been considered the locations of oracles, much as the McCaffertys proposed for Monte Albán Tomb V (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994).

Finally, the north side of Mound A-2, facing the Gulf of Mexico, was the possible location of the large stone plaque carved in low relief (Fig. 5.24). With its references to the embryo and axolotl, it may have marked the mound with its tombs as a place of regeneration. The embryo plaque would have been visible from the colossal heads that were situated to the north.

A paraphrase of the concepts embodied in the two courts might be the following. North of Food Mountain are the altars to the sources of life itself, the flowering Mother Earth Surface and the Great Lady Life Where the Waters Spring Forth. In this place of potency we have created a portal to the creative spirits of earth and water. Here were born the sacred counts of days, those of lunation and gestation. In the great U-shaped womb/enclosure, we inseminated celts into the life-giving primordial sea, from which the cosmic tree arises. The sacred headdress regalia of our leaders was returned to its source, and placed near it were representatives of spiritual leaders from across the region. To keep them close, the spirits of those who reached across the portal were installed in tombs in these mounds. On the north side of this mound is a sign of their rebirth.

Station 5: The Bodiless Heads

About 60 m beyond the embryo plaque on Mound A-2, three colossal heads formed the northernmost set of similar sculptures (Fig. 8.34). The heads themselves probably date from the Early Formative.¹⁸ Their placement at this location was probably



8.34 La Venta Station 5, the northward-gazing heads: *left to right*, Monuments 4, 2, 3. Photos by author.

made later. At some point they were set in an east-west line running perpendicular to the centerline. Stirling (1943:57) reported that all three heads faced northward, away from Mound A-2. What they did face was the phallic column and the sea.

The heads depict mature individuals with furrowed brows, broad noses, fleshy cheeks, and full lips. All known colossal heads, from La Venta and elsewhere, wear a tight-fitting cap or helmet and some kind of ear ornament. The shapes of the heads vary considerably. Some are trapezoidal, some nearly square or nearly round, some more horizontal, and some more vertical. Some are narrow when seen from the side, and two have been recarved from thrones (Porter 1989). Some are much more naturalistic than others, but I agree with de la Fuente (1992:100) that even these are idealized images of a type rather than portraits of individuals. I suggest that the shapes of the heads are deliberately similar to rubber balls.

Each of La Venta's colossal heads is distinct. Monument 3 was on the west side of the set. It was heavily mutilated: on the helmet area, the nose, and under the right eye are grooves and holes. There has also been considerable erosion. One can see large, circular earflares. Monument 2 was the middle of the three heads and also the smallest. Its chin is prominent and the corners of the mouth turn upward, revealing four upper teeth within the parted lips. Large, curving, paisley-like shapes are visible on the headdress, but they are somewhat amorphous. This head has well-formed ears, "sideburn" elements in front of the ears, and smaller ear

ornaments with curving forms emanating out of them. Monument 4 is very large and has suffered some erosion, particularly on the chin area and the proper left side. On the top of the headdress is carved a gigantic animal paw with three toes, each with a large claw. A strap runs across the forehead. Large oval shapes with double outlines form the juncture of the forehead strap and a vertical strap that runs down the sides of the face. Visible on the proper right is a large earpool infixed with an equilateral cross. The earpools suggest elevated status, as of course does the fact of their portrayal.

Early investigators variously considered the colossal heads as representations of the rulers of La Venta,¹⁹ deceased chiefs or warriors,²⁰ gods of vegetation and fertility,²¹ representatives of a desire for eternal survival of the body,²² astronomical markers,²³ and decapitated ballplayers.²⁴ More recently the decapitated ballplayer idea has received some provocative development.

There are two lines of thinking connecting the colossal heads with the ballgame. One that is less secure is the presence of the helmet. Some ceramic figurines from Tlatilco with the hand and knee protectors associated with the ballgame also have wrapped heads, suggestive of the helmets on the colossal heads (Coe 1965a: Figs. 108, 109, 111). One unprovenienced stone figurine wears a helmet and a ballgame belt (Bradley 2001: Fig. 22). The helmet is the principal feature of every extant colossal head. At La Venta, the colossal fetuses also wear helmets, as do two sculptures of seated males with wide belts (Monuments 9 and 10) and the woman

on “Stela” 1. A woman? In his article on ballgame imagery in Formative period art, Bradley (2001) made the point that several ceramic figurines show women dressed as ballplayers. And Follensbee (2000) questioned whether we should assume the heads represented males, since none has any secondary sexual characteristics such as a moustache or beard. So while the helmet seems to be associated with the ballgame, it is not gender-specific.

The second connection between the colossal heads and the ballgame is that the heads are disembodied. As archaeologist and cultural historian Susan Gillespie (1991) set forth in a cogent article, bodiless heads and skulls are often shown in visual imagery associated with the ballgame in Mesoamerica. Most scholars have assumed that the bodiless heads were obtained by the sacrificial decapitation of a living being, rendering him dead. However, in the *Popol Vuh*, one of the longest narratives concerning the ballgame, the decapitations of the individual from each of the pairs of ballplaying Hero Twins (father and son) do not cause that person’s death. 1 Hunahpu (the father) was already dead when he was decapitated. He and 7 Hunahpu had been asked by the lords of Xibalbá to keep a cigar burning all night in the House of Darkness. However, they used up the fire and cigars. “Then they were sacrificed and buried . . . at the place named Crushing Ballcourt. . . . The head of One Hunahpu was cut off, while the rest of his body was buried with his younger brother” (Christenson 2003, I:125). The disembodied head was placed in a tree, which caused the tree to bear fruit. The calabash fruit attracted a maiden, Lady Blood. It spit into her hand, and she conceived the second set of ballplaying twins. When this second pair, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, descended to the underworld to play ball, they did not use up their torches and cigars, passed the other tests, and faced the lords in a game. Eventually they were tested in the Bat House, in which Hunahpu’s head was severed by a bat and placed on the ballcourt. But Hunahpu did not die. His brother put a squash, replete with seeds, on the body. Both twins then played ball against the Xibalbans, using Hunahpu’s head as a ball until a substitution could be made. When Hunahpu’s head/ball flew off the court, the Twins and their helpers quickly grabbed it, removed the squash head, replaced it with the head/ball, and threw the squash head into play. Xbalanque struck

the squash, and its seeds were scattered all over the ball court (164–176). From these passages, it is clear that for the Quiché, the head was metaphorically a ball, one that could take the form of a skull, a spitting calabash, or an exploding, inseminating squash. I think that in addition to being metaphorical balls, the colossal heads were also metaphorical seeds and agents of insemination.

In her article, Gillespie (1991) focuses on the dismemberment of 1 Hunahpu as a metaphor for the division of time, space, and society into unequal parts. Dismemberment represents the discontinuity of what was once uniform and whole. In the case of time, this initiates the movement of the sun relative to the earth so that the parts of the year are not all the same. There are dry and wet seasons, long and short days, and variations in temperature, and these phenomena affect the germination and maturation of crops. In the case of society, Gillespie provides examples of games that are played during periods of social transition, such as boys into adulthood or the accession of a ruler. In many American societies, when the bodiless head enters a mythic construction, it is animate, and Gillespie cites works that treat the “rolling head” or “rolling skull” theme—in which the disembodied head or skull serves as a ball—in societies from the Arctic to the southern extent of South America. In some stories the head/ball becomes the sun, moon, or Big Dipper. And there is a strong association of the heads and the ballgames with vegetative growth and seasonal cycles of plants. Ultimately, Gillespie sees “the dynamic cyclicity of the movement of the heavenly bodies . . . [as] *itself a symbol* of the segmentation of, and the maintenance of the ‘correct’ distance between, sociopolitical categories” (343). The widespread presence of the metaphor of *the bodiless head*—the result of decapitation of the body—*as a ball* allows us to interpret the colossal heads as anthropomorphized balls decorated with markers of social status.

While I think that Gillespie succeeds in establishing that the trope of bodily dismemberment, as it appears in Mesoamerican visual and written texts, was understood as a symbol for processes of segmentation that called for homeorrheic balancing, she abstains from mentioning insemination or sex. The transactions that occur between purely male and purely female poles of being are also struggles of inequality: between hot and cold, dom-

inant and subservient, birth and death, vitality and dissipation. The sexual aspects of the segmented universe seem to be rather overtly present in the *Popol Vuh* and at La Venta as well. To consider what the Olmec might have intended by portraying disembodied heads, I will investigate a very few of the many later references to heads as seeds, bones as seeds, and decapitated ballplayers.

Isotopy: Bodiless Heads as Seeds

50 bc, Maya, El Arenal. In the Late Preclassic Maya world there was a tradition of assembling a quincunx of jade heads or little fetuslike jade figures and enwombing them in a vessel that would be cached in a ritual space to impart gestational vitality to it. The heads were probably used as headdress regalia. The drawing in Figure 8.35 shows a cache from El Arenal. Another example is the cache at the summit of Structure 6B at Cerros (Freidel 1979; Freidel and Schele 1988; Garber 1983).

AD 150, Maya, San Bartolo. Embryo-like heads are placed as regalia on the bundles that are carried into the flowering mountain. This insemination, plus the actions surrounding the maize being, results in the explosion of a quincunx of humans like seeds from the gourd-womb.

AD 744-750, Maya, Yaxchilan. Several eighth-century Maya monuments referred to decapitations during primordial ballgames and their role in creation. As Linda Schele and David Freidel (1991) have shown, the hieroglyphic text of a carved Classic period Maya stair (Yaxchilan Structure 33, Step VII) recorded three decapitations of young maize-humans that had occurred in the primordial past in a sacred ballcourt.²⁵ Each decapitated being was referred to as a bundled skull or seed. Scribes continued the story by linking the ancient decapitations to a living king's ballgame.²⁶

Sixteenth-century Aztec. One of four sources is the Citlalinicue story, in which bone is the seed for the human race. Enthroned in the Milky Way, Stars-Her-Skirt gives birth to a flint knife that falls to earth, penetrating Chicomoctoc. This insemination produces the 1,600 gods. They ask Citlalinicue for human servants. She tells them to send Xolotl/Quetzalcoatl to the underworld to ask the lord of the dead for the bones of the previous race. Xolotl



8.35 Heads as seeds: a Late Preclassic Maya cache vessel, or bundle offering, from El Arenal containing figurines that are likely later versions of embryo figurines, arranged in a quincunx. Taschek and Ball 1999: Fig. 11. Used by permission.

seizes the bones, but being pursued, drops them, and they are dismembered. After leaving the realm of death, Xolotl brings the bones to the gods, who let red blood on the white bones. As a result, a male and a female child are born from the bone-blood mixture (Brundage 1979:35-36).

AD 150 Maya, Popol Vuh. The fullest surviving text that explains the link between the bodiless heads and creation is of course the *Popol Vuh*.²⁷ Many readers will be familiar with the story, but some of important points are often overlooked.

The story featured several sets of twin brothers, some of whom were Hero Twins. The first generation of Hero Twins, 1 Hunahpu and 7 Hunahpu, were somewhat indolent. They amused themselves with ballplaying and were summoned to the underworld for a match. Once they descended through the western ballcourt, they failed the many tests²⁸ put to them by the lords of Xibalbá (the underworld), whom I call the lords of anti-life. In fact, they did not even think to bring their own ball to the underworld match and were sacrificed before they could play ball. Before their burial, 1 Hunahpu

was decapitated. His head was placed in a tree, where the skull became a calabash fruit. The skull-fruit spit into the hand of a princess of the underworld, impregnating her, and she rose to the earth surface and bore the younger set of Hero Twins.

The younger twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, despite ill treatment as children by their elder half-brothers (who had not gone to the underworld), took their ballplaying seriously. Before they started playing, they had an unusual career as farmers. Their tools worked magically, and plants grew riotously, but each night the crop was destroyed. They had power over planting, life, and growth, but they could not control destruction until they enlisted the aid of a rat. He revealed what had been afflicting them, and also that their true fate was to be ballplayers like their fathers. At this the twins were overjoyed. When called to contest the lords of the underworld, Hunahpu and Xbalanque determined to avenge and resurrect their fathers. They brought with them the rubber ball that their fathers had left behind in their home. After entering the underworld through a ballcourt, they outsmarted the lords in many trials and ballgame matches, and they even survived decapitation. As mentioned above, the story entertains us by likening Hunahpu's decapitated head to a bouncing rubber ball and to a seed-filled squash, which the Hero Twins were able to kick, causing it to burst and its seeds to be strewn over the court. The lords were shocked, asking what the squash was and where it came from. The text specifies that this was the moment of the lords' defeat (Tedlock 1996:104–130; Christenson 2003, I:176 and II:135).

I propose that by scattering seeds in the underworld and by bringing his own ball, Xbalanque introduced life into the realm of anti-life. I call it anti-life because the lords opposed and afflicted those who might gain power over life and death. That the names Flying Scab, Gathered Blood, Pus Demon, Jaundice Demon, Skull Staff, Bloody Claws, Bloody Teeth, Wing, and Packstrap characterize afflictions and diseases is obvious.²⁹ However, the Xibalbans could not really kill anyone. They tried to kill Hunahpu, but he was able to inseminate Blood Woman, even though he was merely a head in a tree. Their plan to kill the pregnant Blood Woman failed. When they decapitated the younger Hunahpu, his body still lived. It was Xbalanque's fecundation of the underworld with squash seeds,

not Hunahpu's survival of decapitation and both of them winning the game, which allowed them to finally kill the lords of Xibalbá.

In Euro-American thought, decapitation is considered a decisive termination of life, but in Mesoamerica, it had other meanings. As Schele and Freidel (1991) explained, the death and rebirth of the younger Hero Twins of the *Popol Vuh* following their ballgame was a metaphor for the cycle of the maize plant: mature tasseling, withering, decapitating or beheading of the seed ears, burning the fields, planting the seed, fertilization by rain, and sprouting again. Decapitation of the maize ear, like burning the field and planting, is a part of the life cycle of maize in which humans intervene, so it is a human cultural construction. When applied to humans, decapitation destroyed the wholeness of the body. However, because animating cosmic forces lodged in the head, decapitation did not produce a lifeless head, but, as Gillespie (1991:333) wrote, one that can “jump, roll, and fly.” As she observed, the segmentation of the body produced periodicity and created cyclical movement, which manifested in agricultural and celestial cycles. The essential requirement of the ballgame was to keep the ball in constant motion, to make it like the sun and planets. The ballgame and its bouncing ball represented astronomical cycles as well as, I suggest, the spurting of semen into the womb and the rhythmic, life-promoting activity of sexual intercourse. Based on the examples explored in the “bodiless head as seed” isotopy, we can define an isomorphic equivalence set of materials that share the ability to inseminate.

The Insemination Complex or Isomorphic Equivalence Set: Semen, Rubber Ball, Seed, Bone, and Stone

The earliest known rubber balls were found at the earliest levels of El Manatí, dated to about 1600 bc. Pilgrims had first laid a layer of sandstone blocks into a spring. On this floor they deposited nine rubber balls (possibly referring to the nine lulations of gestation) along with expertly wrought jade celts. This enacted an insemination of the sacred female waters with rubber (representing male seminal fluid) and the phallic metamorphic (created with heat and pressure) stone celts. In a later phase (1350–1200 bc), the insemination complex

included wooden anthropomorphic busts, plant material and seeds, jade celts arrayed in flowerlike patterns, rubber balls, and bones of infants (Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000). At San Lorenzo, one of the earliest colossal heads was buried (like a seed) within a platform (Ann Cyphers, personal communication, 2006). By 1300 bc, the human seed took the form of the embryo image on San Lorenzo phallic columns and axes from La Merced. Maize seed imagery had developed as well. So the Olmec insemination complex included rubber balls, jade celts, actual seeds as well as images of human and maize seeds, bone, columns, and axes.

By AD 300, the Maya had linked rubber to blood, and used tied balls to substitute for human sacrifices. Of course, self-sacrifice of blood was most potent when drawn from the penis and scattered like seeds onto strips of fiber that would be burned. Similarly, rubber was also ritually spat-tered onto paper and burned (Stone 2002). Thus a conceptual link between rubber, semen, seed, and blood seems to have existed among the Maya.

That skulls and certain stones could produce fertilizing liquid was clearly an element of Aztec thought around AD 1400. A Nahuatl word for semen, *omicetl*, means “coagulated bone substance” (López Austin 1980:176). Chevalier and Sánchez Bain (2003:180) write, “In ancient Nahuatl, semen was fluid from a juicy-stone-testicle, an *ayo-tetl*. The pouring of sperm secreted from male stones are like emissions of juice and seed that may also stand for real children.” A much later parallel to the El Manatí spring offering was recently excavated in the Aztec ballcourt of Tenochtitlan. Ballcourt Offering 4 included a flint knife (for penetration of the earth/womb), a small rubber ball (signifying spurting semen), and objects of shell (from female fecund waters), including a flower (like the jade axe arrangement of El Manatí—the desired life form), hands (for scattering blood, casting seed, or catching semen), and bones (like the infant bones, a metaphor for seed and semen) (Whittington 2001:248).

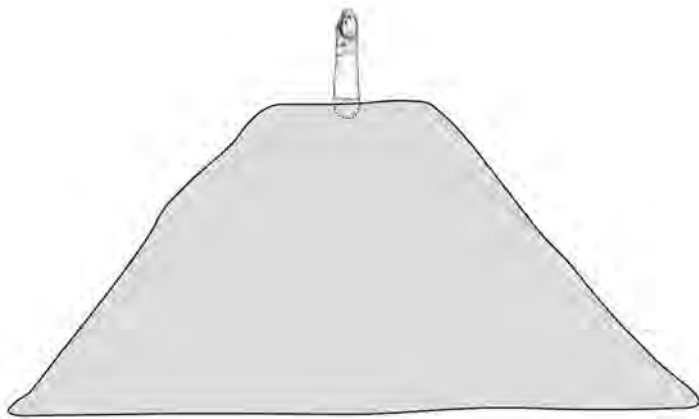
The Hero Twins story in the *Popol Vuh* was replete with fecundating tropes. The ball, made of rubber, the sap of a tree, was metaphorically an agent of insemination and fertilization, likened to human seminal fluid and blood. In the *Popol Vuh*’s ballgames, bouncing rubber balls, skull balls, and seed-filled squashes within the underworld courts

were metaphors for darting semen in the womb.

Thus the ball, from earliest times, functioned on a symbolic level as a visible metaphor for fertilizing, life-giving fluids that fly, spurt, and bounce when stimulated (and drip and sag when not). In addition to the rubber balls, this isomorphic equivalence set included semen, disembodied heads, seeds, and seed imagery. Having explored the tropes for bodiless heads as seeds, we should reflect on the myths mentioned by Gillespie that portray them as celestial bodies.

In the *Popol Vuh*, Hunahpu did a stint as a bodiless head. As a result, the twins were able to inseminate the underworld and to finally leave it by rising as the sun and moon (or sun and Venus). A sequence of events leads to that apotheosis. Although they were victorious in the ballgame, the twins’ task of fertilization and insemination was not finished. They voluntarily entered a fiery pit oven (like a womb)³⁰ in a valiant act of self-sacrifice. They had previously connived to have the lords remove their bones from the oven, grind them, and scatter them into a river. Five days later, they resurrected as catfish-humans who worked as dancers and entertainers.³¹ The Hero Twins entered the fiery earth womb/sweatbath, and their ground bones were scattered like seeds into the river, where they were transformed and revitalized. They finally emerged from the female river as fish-humans with godlike abilities. As a result of their self-sacrifice, Hunahpu and Xbalanque gained complete control over death and birth: they could decapitate or burn things and bring them back, including themselves (Christenson 2001, I:160–18; Tedlock 1996:105–142). Because their self-sacrifice gave them power over the cycle of life and death, one could serve as the sun, who nightly dies and is daily reborn, and the other as the cyclical moon or Venus.

From their position north of the Mound A-2 tombs, the colossal heads gazed northward toward the Gulf of Mexico, the primordial sea. They likely represented ballplayers who were charged with contesting the powers of anti-life. The three heads, like the head of the elder twin in the *Popol Vuh*, were like plump fruits, seeded squashes, or giant rubber balls that would produce the seeds of the next generation of human-maize. Behind them, the embryo plaque signaled the revitalization of the ancestors within the Mound A-2 tombs. The heads faced toward the last station, an elevated phal-



8.36 La Venta Station 6, the elevated phallic column on Cerro Encantado. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



8.37 Unfinished Throne (Altar) 6, near Station 6. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



8.38 La Venta vulva monument. Photo by author.

lic column, which suggested that the hero-heads would explode as head-seeds once more. Whether they were rulers or ballplayers or both, the bodiless heads must have represented the seeds that entered the primordial sea/underworld in order to fecundate it.

Station 6: The Phallic Column

The northernmost phallic column, made of green schist, stood 625 m away (about $\frac{1}{3}$ mile) on a 6.1 m earthen pedestal (Fig. 8.36). Traces of a face and hand suggest that a rudimentary embryo face comprised the top of the column. At the foot of the earthen pedestal was found Throne (Altar) 6, a cave-niche throne, or earth womb, which was left unfinished in a rough state (Fig. 8.37). If the monument was deliberately placed there, it is interesting that its cave-womb was below the phallic column, suggesting a beginning of the cycle of gestation that would produce the fetuses on the womb platform over a mile to the south.³² Or perhaps the vulva monument, discovered in the 1990s, was intended to be the recipient of the seed (Fig. 8.38).

We have seen the columns with embryo imagery at San Lorenzo. In addition to this one at La Venta, there is one from Oaxaca at Huamelulpan, probably Late Preclassic in date (Marcus 1983). Phallic columns survived into the Late Preclassic at Izapa. Three short columns that support ball-like spheres were placed in a triangle at the foot of the Structure 30 platform in Group B at Izapa. In front of the central one is a throne incised with three downward-facing bird heads. Each has a U infixed in its lower jaw area. This womb-of-sky throne is surrounded by the three phalluses, and the group is at the center of a series of narrative stelae that involve imagery of creation and royal ritual (Guernsey 2006: Figs. 2.27, 3.18, 3.19). Sculptures in phallic forms were revived in the Maya Postclassic in the Yucatán, where over 130 such monuments served as elements of cosmogonic statements and to affirm political legitimacy for rulers (Amrhein, in press-a, b).

La Venta's elevated column may have been an astronomical marker as well. From the vantage point of the colossal heads, the column penetrates the northern sky. There is an excellent view of the North Star, about 15 degrees above the flat horizon, and the dipper constellations. From the vantage points of the "heads as ballplayers and seeds," the night sky revolved around the North Star above

that elevated phallic column much as Citlalinicue, the flint-emitting goddess, would later swirl her starry skirt.

This elevated column with its human seed brings us back to the southern monument to which it is opposed, the U Group, with its colossal fetuses.

Back to the Future

We can reconsider La Venta's fetus-ballplayers within a constellation of contexts and draw some inferences about their significance. They emerged from a U-shaped womb-vagina as ballplayers. Their large heads with helmets were isomorphic symbols of rubber balls, which contained their skulls and referred to fecundating semen and seed. They raised their arms deliberately to grasp their heads, either to remove them as a self-sacrifice, or to replace them and restart life with full power over seasons, celestial movements, and life and death. The possibility that the head could be disjoined from the body referred to segmentation of life's continuum, hence of time, creating an inherent periodicity. The fetuses carry the sense of becoming, of transition from one state to another, including the imminent possibility of death, but are produced by an earth-womb of perpetual fecundity. They could refer to an earlier set of ballplaying heroes, to an earlier era of creation, or to an earlier state of the persons portrayed as colossal heads.

Inserting Politics into the Creation and Origins Narrative

Before finishing this study of the narrative stations, we should look at the disparate monuments that seem to be inserted into the pattern. In the middle of the Complex B plaza is a platform, B-4, on which an assortment of monuments, including an embryo stela, were clustered. What do the monuments portray, and why are they here? Between the small platform and the U-shaped apron surrounding the food mountain were a colossal head, Altar 7, and Stela 2, near the red column. Stela 2, in the Complex B plaza, shows a caped man holding a short staff (Fig. 8.39). His headdress is marked with the bar-quincunx, the Mother Earth design. Floating masked figures holding staffs, probably male, surround him. Is this a ruler proclaiming affiliation with the earth, or marking himself as affiliated with the polity of La Venta, with his warriors? Does the



8.39 La Venta Stela 2, depicting a powerful man with floating associates. Photo by author.

quincunx refer to a shaman whose supernatural patron was a Nashwini-type earth supernatural? Overlooking the Complex B plaza, amidst the human-maize stelae, was Stela 5, which displayed a man with an impressive fan-shaped headdress confronting another figure, probably male (Fig. 5.13). Behind the elaborately dressed man was an elderly woman, and another woman floats above the scene. It seems that these unique stelae and other groups of disparate monuments were inserted into the overarching narrative design. It was probably important for the personages portrayed to have their images within the life-supporting, gestational context of the creation narrative.

On the Complex B stelae, male figures predominate, and males emerge from the cave-womb niches. However, within the enclosed court (Complex A), Stela 3 displayed the encounter of a woman with a man, and her figure is slightly larger and more elaborate than that of the man (Fig. 8.40). The only other monuments known to have been located in this court were several embryo stelae, a gestational figure (Monument 5), and Monument



8.40 La Venta Stela 3 (after restoration), depicting a powerful woman and man with floating associates. Photo by author.

12, the column on which a monkeylike creature with a U-shaped belt appears. The stela that forefronts a female is within the enclosed court, the stone womb. This distribution of males and females on the stelae suggests deliberate placement. Perhaps the portrayal of prominent men with some women in the background was more relevant to the green and red columns and quincunxial altars of Complex B. Similarly, perhaps the inclusion of a prominent woman meeting a man on Stela 3 in Complex A related to the presence of the holy Mother Earth Surface and Midwife-Lake altars in that enclosed court.

Alternative Reading Orders

To give a sense of the narrative elements as they appear when walking through the site from the south, I will summarize them here. Although I will incorporate many of the ideas that were introduced

in Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8, I will try not to embellish the elements or make them into a consistent story. Unfortunately, the result is a string of bald statements. I want to reiterate that this is a modern fantasy, not an ancient orthodoxy.

Here in the south is the womb of earth, womb of sky, where three beings gestate. Their helmeted heads are like balls, like seeds. Although they are uncooked, they are growing hotter in the womb.

A phallic column beckons us to the plane of earth where sacred caves create cosmic portals at the four directions. These caves are earth-wombs and places of purification or sweatbaths. Around the caves, the flowering umbilical cords descend from the sky-earth, bringing sacred regalia to those who use the sweatbaths as their thrones. From these cave-wombs was born a new dynasty (or a child was offered in sacrifice). Beyond this creation, in the center of the quincunxial caves, the body of the crocodile-earth was torn asunder, forming the features of the earth and sky, from which umbilical cords descended. From the sky, into the center of this quincunx, have fallen a red column, a green column. At this point we have seen the first two creations, or the first two sacrifices, or the early stages of the “true people.”

At the foot of Food Mountain sprout the true people, the human-maize beings. Beyond the mountain are the altars to the primordial waters. Floating on their green surfaces are the altars of the holy Mother Earth Surface. These are the birthplaces of the counts of days, the count of moons. These are the home of the holy Midwife-Lake. People have brought their polished greenstones from afar to inseminate the lakes and earth so that abundant life will issue from them to our semen, our women, our lakes, rivers, and our seeds. In this ballcourt hundreds of celts inseminate the center, and life springs forth. This is illustrated in the figurines here: embryo, fetus, children, and a young woman named “1 Eagle, Embryo Woman.” She has been a great healer for the afflictions of the true people. Sometimes their wombs are empty, or their children die. 1 Eagle, Embryo Woman and others have been able to help us, and we honor them with offerings in this sacred precinct. A womb of stones and a mound of tombs surround the sacred precinct of earth and lakes. We return our sacred regalia to this stone womb. Within the sacred space we conduct ceremonies of protection, of marriage, and for many other reasons. Our spiritual advisers, whose standing poses connect their bodies and minds with earth and sky, offer their guidance to our ceremonies. Marking the Mound of tombs is a stone that shows the source of the true people, the immature human seed.

To the north of the womb lie the three great head-seeds. These are the mature seeds, the rubber balls, the ballplayers who have learned to control life and death. Now mature, they will be planted between the great sea and the sacred precinct of earth and lakes. As darkness falls again on the face of the earth, we see the great phallus against the northern womb of the sky. The seed that marks it will fall to earth, inseminating the great womb again and again.

It seems equally possible that the visual messages flowed from north to south. For those who arrived at La Venta by traveling across the sea, the elevated column would have served as a beacon, with the Earthen Pyramid looming in the distance.

They would encounter the phallic column and the cave-niche throne below it as an initial coupling of opposites. Continuing southward, the three colossal heads, with their husklike helmets, rest on a plain as though the phallic column had emitted seeds that have grown large and matured. Beyond them the embryo plaque, a seed at the beginning of its cycle, glistens on the northern edge of the small mound. A U-shaped conduit of greenstone, placed beneath the embryo plaque, caught rain or other offerings.

The colossal head-seeds, once planted, would metaphorically enter the sacred precinct of female earth and water generative powers. In this zone of perpetual gestation, the memorials to the great healers or rulers of La Venta assured the regeneration of their knowledge in the hearts of those who entreated them. Many offerings inseminated the sacred precinct. These sacrifices of hard-won materials and the labor of crafting enabled the sprouting and dawning of the human-maize race in the form of four human-maize seed stelae at the foot of the food mountain. In the quincunx altars pilgrims found the birth of human ancestors, as well as the establishment of sweat-baths and thrones in the caves at the four corners of the earth. On these thrones the leaders received their regalia as it descended from the sky. The primordial creation, in the form of the crocodilian throne and the monument with descending umbilical cords, anchored the center of the quincunx of cave-wombs. Passing more columns, visitors finally arrived at the sacred womb that gestated fetuses, whose heads with helmets would form new seed.

Another way in which the story could have unfolded would be outward from the center—in other words, radiating out from the food mountain with its human-maize stelae. This is a common compositional strategy in Mesoamerica. It may

be that the San Bartolo imagery centered around the tree that was directly opposite the entrance. It occupied the center of the west wall and was the only element of the entire mural (and one of few in Maya art) that was situated in an illusionistic space. Similarly, the events portrayed on the “Lady Xoc” lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23 seem to radiate out from the earliest and most politically significant event, the accession of Shield Jaguar on Lintel 25 (Tate 1992). The story on the post-conquest Cuauhtinchan Map 2 unfolds from the pyramid and U-shaped court at the center of the document (Boone 2000:175). One more example is the frontispiece of the *Codex Mendoza*, on which the founding of the Mexica empire occupies the center, while space and place spread out and encircle the eagle, cactus, and rock. Such radial compositions are found in designs around the world, from mandalas to twentieth-century Maya huipils. Finally, as I have already suggested, it may not have been necessary to proceed one way or another through the whole site. It is also possible that people used portions of La Venta for specific rituals of healing, renewal, protection, and the success of crops and lives, as well as for political purposes.

Conclusions and Questions

The concepts conveyed by the imagery of La Venta's sculptural groups (or narrative stations) were precursive to the themes of creation tales in later Mesoamerican cultures. They included features of a sacred, vital landscape such as caves, waters, and mountains of sustenance. La Venta's sculpture provided visual antecedents in the form of phallic columns and U-shaped enclosures to topoi from later stories, such as the penetration of earth with flint knives. At La Venta one also sees the fundamental nature of the ballgame as a metaphor of fecundation, and as a social manifestation of the idea that death leads to rebirth. The story clearly contains several major themes, acts, settings, temporal structures, and isomorphic equivalence sets that appear in later, more concrete stories. We can also see how certain aspects of La Venta's story lost prominence as later cultures transformed them. For example, the emphasis on visual, three-dimensional storytelling was overtaken by Mesoamerican civilizations' uneven shift toward two-dimensional (graphic) notational systems.

Although symbols for wombs, celestial umbilical cords, sacred quincunx altars, and creator couples remained present throughout Mesoamerica's major civilizations, they seem to have eventually become implicit, and their presence was overshadowed in the monumental record by other concerns, such as rights to territory, dynastic succession, and newer heroes and histories. The Formative period focus on gestational beings metamorphosed into other shapes as well. The Late Preclassic Maya made small, embryo-like jade forms that they placed inside womblike cache vessels. In the Classic period, the Maya depicted dwarfs, while in Teotihuacan, butterflies seem to have substituted for transformational beings and taken on the duty of representing the souls of warriors. Yet the isotopies that this chapter identifies at La Venta definitely form the backbone of Mesoamerican ideas about creation and origins. How these ideas were synthesized at La Venta, and how they influenced Late Preclassic groups throughout Mesoamerica, might be a good way to frame another extended study of inter-regional contacts during this period.

However, this initial recognition of an ancient creation narrative in visual form, and my attempt to imagine its themes, pose many more questions than they answer. Did the La Ventans erect five, six, seven, or more narrative stations? Were the "stations" fixed locations, or could a user choose a setting? Were there officially sanctioned narrators, and if so, were they part of a religious institution? Was there a canonic version of the story? So much of La Venta's story existed in earlier places—the ballgame, the concept of cave as womb, the recognition of the embryo and fetus and knowledge of embryogenesis, infant sacrifice or ritual burial of infants who died naturally, the domestication of maize and its conceptual co-identity with humans, and more. What were the mechanisms by which so many disparate, preexisting elements of culture were forged into a visual array? Were several previous creations entailed? How did politics and religions interweave in the creation of the narrative and in the patronage of the site and its sculpture?

Who organized the labor required to conceptualize this vast microcosm of cosmic processes and physical space? At this point, I am unable to address these questions. I can only reflect upon the deployment of symbols—on how the story was conveyed.

La Venta's sculptures, landforms, and offerings told a story without words. I do not claim to "read" this story. In fact, I propose that there was never a single version. The ones I offer are merely sketches of possibilities. I suspect that the strength of the visual narrative was its flexibility. Whoever had license to use it could decide how much of it to tell, how to name the characters and places, how long a performance to give, and at what intervals. At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed Claude Calame's (1996) analysis of "semionarrative strategies" in Greek texts about the founding of Cyrene. Among his analytical goals was to determine how the elements of the story and the situation of its telling interacted to reorganize cultural values.

La Venta's visual narrative allowed generations of interlocutors and audiences to redefine themselves with respect to a sense of the past. In an oral society, the past is never fixed but always subject to the memory, humor, and quirks of those in whose minds and bodies it resides. As such, discourses held in the mind, and performative challenges to the canonic story, even when they are anchored in polysemic visual form by public art works, allow for dynamic social negotiation in a way that written texts do not.

I see the Phase IV display of monument sets as an early synthesis of Mesoamerica's identity, an encapsulation of knowledge. In this form, it serves as an index to the complex ideas that preceded it and prefigures many later narratives of creation. Being near the beginning of Mesoamerica's narrations of social identity, it is more primal, with obvious sexual components, but it still includes the themes that dominate later stories: origins, searching in four directions, the birth of human-maize, the establishment of ritual acts, the bestowal of regalia and the right to rule, contests, death, and regeneration.

Chapter 9

A Scattering of Seeds

In the previous chapters I have attempted to facilitate further study of Formative period visual culture by synthesizing some relevant archaeological and art historical research. Because I think they are crucial to any theories about the formation of society and culture, urban development, and the transmission of knowledge and power, I have especially addressed two aspects of the 1400–400 bc millennium: the beginning and the end. In some detail and in a (still tentative) chronological sequence, I documented the appearance of imagery relating to women and the unborn in the Initial Formative and the consolidation of many ideas, practices, and forms at La Venta in the Middle Formative. During the Initial Formative, people began to codify, negotiate, and transmit knowledge via representational visual forms. They created a gestational environment by caching skillfully crafted jade celts and rubber balls in the water-mountain configuration at El Manatí. People across much of Mesoamerica used figurines to explore status, gender, and identity, and began to give visible form to knowledge about human gestation, first representing the fetus within a female ceramic figure. Before long, concerns about miscarriage, birth defects, eating maize, and a desire to transmit knowledge of the marvelous process of gestation—the generation of life—led to the creation of embryo images. During the Middle Formative, La Venta emerged as a site unusual for the complexity of its visual culture. I hope that this documentation of the caches and monuments of this pivotal site, while still incomplete and tentative, will serve those who wish to build upon it.

Along the way, my focus on visual culture has engaged some of the research questions which, according to Diehl (1989) and Pool (2009), confront Olmec archaeology. Because this book has tried to track knowledge as conveyed through visual

forms rather than by texts, its interpretations are necessarily speculative and fundamentally tentative. Nevertheless, some of my topics and proposals provide new ways of thinking about the old problems. Some of my suggestions are better substantiated than others. Here I would like to review a few key points and to distinguish between ideas that I think are relatively well supported and those for which I was able to marshal only limited evidence.

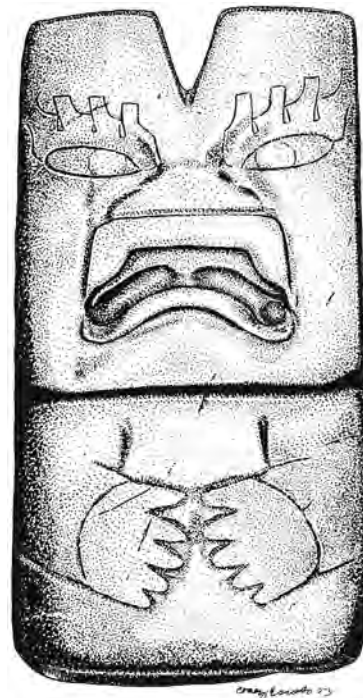
Assessing Arguments for Some Major Points

Obviously I think that there is strong support for the proposal that the Formative period axe-image was a visual expression of people's observations of human embryos that miscarried between the sixth and eighth weeks of gestation. The evidence is multifaceted. Most overwhelming is the remarkable one-to-one correspondence of actual embryo forms with the forms of a few sculptures. From there, one has to understand the mental process of visual stylization in order to perceive that artists selected certain features of the embryo to represent it (Fig. 9.1). They focused on the lidless, widely spaced eyes; the "maxillary prominence," or puffy upper lip, over a downturned oral cavity; the toothless gums; the prominent bulges and fontanels in the head; the series of ridges that form the ear; the webbed fingers; the rudimentary lower limbs; and, most important, the bodily proportions—because together these unequivocally mark an anthropomorphic image as an embryo.

To establish the practicality of the embryo identification, I looked at biological information, exploring the frequency of miscarriage at this stage, and the size and visibility of the embryo and its sacs and placenta. Then I turned to examining the origin of the ancient image, the contexts in which embryo images appeared, and pointed out that other scholars independently have identified gestation-related symbols, from wombs to umbilical cords, in the corpus of Formative visual culture. Finally, I showed that many twentieth-century speakers of Mesoamerican languages incorporate the concepts of a human–maize seed or original seed of the human race into their beliefs, attitudes, and practices. The embryo as a symbol seems to have represented the concept of life or "soul" force, a seed state, or an ontological primordial pluripotentiality (Fig. 9.2).



9.1 A small jade figurine that represents, in a relatively naturalistic mode, an embryo with a maize seed incised on its torso. Private collection. Drawing by Corey Escoto.



9.2 A small jade axe in the form of a stylized maize seed into which is conflated a conventionalized embryo head and upper torso. Axolotl brows are incised over the eyes. Museo Nacional de Antropología. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

If this identification of the axe-image as an expression of the salient features of the human embryo is correct, it helps explain some of the unique characteristics of Mesoamerican cultures, including the 260-day count; the metaphor that humans are made of maize; the regenerative texts and subtexts of the ballgame, caching, and bundling; and even human-animal co-identity.

Some scholars—especially David Joralemon, Karl Taube, David Freidel, and Kent Reilly—have linked the widespread distribution of the embryo image (their “maize deity”), which often is adorned with a maize seed headband or maize sprouts, with an increase in the production and trade of maize. I have taken this a step further by pointing out that in most indigenous stories, the maize being is not something other than human, but the very substance, flesh, and blood of humanity. In Chapter 3 I recorded some of the contemporary narratives that equate infants with maize, and in Chapter 8, the “creation of humans” isotopy, which shows the co-identity of humans and maize in several creation stories.

While the importance of nixtamalization is not new to Mesoamerican studies, scholars do not seem to be aware of the current medical studies that link it so directly with the avoidance of birth defects. Those who are interested in the role of maize in the diet and the economy should not neglect finding ways to determine when nixtamalization evolved, how it was done, how the practice was transmitted, and what effects it had on community structure.

Seeing the origin in the Initial Formative of the embryo symbol, which clearly suggests a 260-day cycle, helps to isolate the early stages in the development of the 260-day calendar. John Clark's (2001) measurements of La Venta's architecture and my counting of elements on the mosaic pavements as relating to calendric cycles provide further insight into the tentative stages by which this calendar evolved.

Building on the work of Billie Follensbee, Kent Reilly, Julia Guernsey, and others, this study also contends that a significant percentage of Olmec monuments include representations of women, the unborn, infants, and gestational symbols. Among the earliest monumental sculptures, La Merced's El Bebé and San Lorenzo Monument 41 depict embryos, not rulers. These facts have ramifications for theories regarding the development of social

inequality, political institutions, and shamanic performance. Because of this, the issue of how rulership was represented has been problematized in this study. Were the women portrayed on La Venta Stelae 1 and 3 rulers? What about the several women on stelae at Chalcatzingo? Did three of the five pseudoburials at La Venta—those that contain figurines of females—commemorate females, and if so, what roles did those females play in their communities and regions? Were the cave-womb thrones used as royal thrones, and if so, why was the imagery of the ruler's throne so focused on wombs, gestation, and birth? What is the complex relationship between the colossal heads, their seedlike and ball-like (seminal) qualities, and the monumental portrayal of the human visage? Did helmets imply rulership in the Early Formative? If so, then the woman of Stela 1 and the woman of Cruz de Milagro were rulers. Does the wearing of a maize seed headband or embryo jewel identify rulers in the Middle Formative, and if so, does the inclusion of earpools with embryo images along with a female figurine in Tomb C imply that the probable female who was commemorated there was a ruler? If the tall headdresses worn by the emergent figure on Throne 5 and the central figure on Stela 5 indicate rulership, then who are all those seated figures—such as Monuments 8, 9, 10, 64, and 77—who wear embryo masks or headdress ornaments but no conical headdress? Were there different conventions in different generations, or was there little consistency because forms of leadership were varied?

One fascinating aspect of this study of human gestation has been that human sexual organs do not develop until after the ninth week—in other words, until after the most risky stage of pregnancy is over. This brings us back to the theories of gender discussed in Chapter 1. How does the portrayal of gender in the Formative period support or challenge this scholarship? I think it is important to note that Formative people chose the human embryo of six to eight weeks, in which sexual organs have not yet developed, as their most prominent visual icon. If the human seed was a symbol of life—as life force, vitality, fecundity, growth—but was ambiguous in terms of gender, then perhaps this accounts for the lack of prominence of primary sexual organs in Early and Middle Formative sculpture. The hollow babies do not exhibit primary gender characteristics at all. In terms of adult

figures, although some Initial Formative traditions, such as at Paso de la Amada, include large breasts and tapering waists to define a figurine as female, in most Early and Middle Formative figurines, as Follensbee showed, the differences that suggest the gender of a sculpture are subtle. Genitalia are rarely portrayed. Only by identifying the clearly pregnant figurines could Follensbee extrapolate the other features that correlate with female figures. Certain adornments and costume elements seem gender-specific, but others do not. In household figurines, gender distinctions are understated, while in public art, we have many symbols that are fairly explicitly wombs, phalluses, and umbilical cords.

What are we to make of the absence of genitalia on human figures but the presence of sculptures of disembodied genitalia? Perhaps a good way to answer this is by looking at later practices. In Postclassic Mesoamerican thought, even the oppositional activities of insemination and fertile receptivity could be performed by either gender. It may be more accurate to say that because each powerful entity had the potential for both male and female aspects, s/he could perform an action we consider as masculine or feminine. For example, the Aztec Citlalinicue, Stars-Her-Skirt, inseminates the earth with a flint knife that emerges from her celestial womb. Formative period people also seem to have conceived of gender as larger than human and—as Rosemary Joyce, Alfredo López Austin, Sylvia Marcos, and Cecelia Klein have proposed—as a fluid process. La Venta's northern phallic column and southern womb were each spaced a long distance from the site center—so far that most investigators have ignored these inconvenient images. They seem to refer to primordial wombs of sky and earth and primordial inseminating elements.

Compared to such vast cosmic processes, human gender, which plays out over a single lifetime, is just an echo. That which fulfils the principal value of society is the life-promoting condition of gestation. As Monaghan suggested, human gestation, with its balance of cool female and hot male fluids, cooks the fetus and parallels the many other productive processes in which humans engaged, such as food preparation and the production of paper and lime. I think a reasonable assessment of gender in Formative period art is that it is not an essential criterion for the representation of every human figure. Many monumental human figures probably

represent types or roles rather than individuals. It may be that when a specific individual is identified and shown as an adult during the reproductive years, the gender is specified. But the processes for which sexual differentiation exists—insemination and gestation—were portrayed in many ways in the built environment, forming a constant condition of becoming.

Less secure than Follensbee's identification of women and men on Olmec monuments is my proposal that the massive offerings represent a female water-childbirth-midwifery potency, and the mosaic pavements a female earth surface supernatural. The principal evidence for these interpretations consisted of the study of the central element of the pavements, the quincunx, in several contexts and also tracking the diamond-patterned, beaded, fringed element at the south end. It appears to be a skirt worn by the Teotihuacan colossal goddess and then by a historical Maya woman from El Zapote who had Teotihuacan connections. Both the actual beaded skirt and the conceptual construction of female earth and water supernatural potencies found expression into the Postclassic era, providing a partial historical link with the other avenue of support, the analogy with Mixe beliefs in two revered potencies, Higiny and Nashwini, each of whose dual genders is female. Among the Mixe, these potencies have the calendar names 1 Fontanel (1/XX) and 1 World (1/VI). Although I have not included it here, there is considerable scholarship regarding the persistent presence of female earth and water supernaturals in many later Mesoamerican societies. These feminine potencies existed in tension, and often conflict, with state religions and deserve further study.

If scholars accept the interpretation of La Venta's massive offerings and mosaic pavements as water/childbirth and earth female potencies as a useful possibility, then the comparison between Mixe and La Venta ritual practice adds another example of similarity. Both practices involve making elaborate altars upon the earth, and both the ancient and modern ritual assemblages include large numbers of slim vertical green objects in bundles with specific numerical counts. Both ritual assemblages also involve references to insemination and gestation, specifically symbols for the womb, embryos, and the phallus. For the Mixe these practices are a means to regenerate life and restore balance,

and thereby to provide healing, protection, and the bestowal of life-generating power. Given the accumulation of literature on Mesoamerican ritual practices, it does not seem too much of a stretch to assume that the La Venta caches were elaborate, expensive, politically motivated versions of similar efforts. Although I pointed out some temporal links in the form of the ritual altars with specific numerical counts in Borgia Group codices, I realize that these connections require further research.

In terms of my focus on La Venta, one major observation is that basalt columns punctuated the approximate centerline(s) of the site, including the missing column decorated with an embryo face. These formed a series of markers that could guide those who participated in performances through the site to several architectural constructions on which sets of similar sculptures were erected. These sets—the three colossal fetuses, four cave-womb thrones, four embryo-maize stelae, two or three earth altars, several lake effigies, three colossal heads—were all erected close to the centerline. Interpreting the four cave-womb thrones as positioned in a quincunx is a bit equivocal, but the positions of the other monuments and their associations with specific shapes of platforms are clear.

Whether the three colossal sandstone sculptures on the U-shaped platform, D-7, represent fetuses seems to be a matter of considerable debate. The dwarf theory does not seem plausible given the restricted movements of arms inherent in achondroplasia. The bird theory needs support through contextualization with the other sets of monuments along the centerline and with Olmec art in general. The idea that these represent adults in trance states has not yet accounted for the proportions of these figures or their position within the larger landscape. Among the existing theories, my assessment that these represent fetuses fits their specific form and works best within the surrounding representations of caves, wombs, infants, and umbilical cords.

There is an interpretive leap between the known locations of the monuments, as they were left between 500 and 400 bc, and my proposal that between the southern womblike U Group, with its three colossal fetuses and the northern phallic column, the sculptures formed stations or markers whose symbolic contexts and content evoked aspects of a narrative of cosmogony and origins, and that this story was, at great effort, given visible

form. There are several repeated subjects that form sets, each associated with a specific setting and spaced at unequal distances. To support my understanding of the three-dimensional sculpture as an element of a verbal or ritual performance, I made a comparison of this to theories about visual narratives in early European art. I think this effort could be improved upon, or tested, by further examination through the lenses of intertextuality and performance studies. Given the allusions that visual culture makes to local oral narratives or myths of creation in many Mesoamerican civic/ceremonial centers, and the existence of such stories in Classic and Postclassic pictorial and textual narratives, it is not surprising that a site as remarkable as La Venta would enshrine such a narrative in some form, as has previously been suggested by others. So again, while not “proven,” this proposal seems highly likely.

Because of the presence of a vast performative space with its variety of symbolic settings, and its elaborate constructions of effigies of female earth and water supernaturals, I have further suggested that La Venta served, on one level, as a shrine to these goddesses or a pilgrimage site, much as Tepeyac in the Basin of Mexico and the shrine of Ix Chel on Cozumel attracted pilgrims in the Postclassic era. While provocative, this idea remains a suggestion that requires further work to solidify.

My work on the hollow baby fragments helped to clarify the broad geographic spread of the sculptures and their relative rarity in any one place in the Early Formative. Blomster's (1998) work in Etlatongo connected them with elite households, as did Niederberger's (1976, 1987) work in the Valley of Mexico, although we still lack sufficient examples of hollow babies in clear contexts to have a good sense of their function. The comparison of the babies with the Niñopa thus remains tentative. The connecting links are (1) the “baby in the boat” imagery that appears in three dimensions with the Cerro de las Mesas jade sculptures, and in two dimensions on Izapa stelae showing birth-related imagery; and (2) the material culture associated with the Etlatongo baby and Niñopa: elite homes, sets of dishes, toys, dogs. The idea that these rare and compelling sculptures could have been the focus of local devotional cults, with different households taking responsibility on annual cycles, is not completely far-fetched. Landa (Tozzer 1941: 59–102) described

the cycling of statues whose efficacy endured a *katon*, after which they were destroyed, and we have other examples that indicate that the effective “life” of a sculpture was limited. This might help explain the fragmentary nature of so many hollow babies and their erratic appearance in the archaeological record. However, again, while this might be a reasonable working hypothesis, more evidence is needed.

I have proposed that a concern with death and regeneration is explicit in Olmec sculpture. This assertion is not proven, but it follows from the proposals summarized above. Beginning with El Manatí’s wooden busts, the acts of bundling and caching were related to both interment and rebirth. The busts were bundled in plant fibers, with seeds and infant bones, and planted, or interred, over special soil in a freshwater spring. The interment of the busts was thus like an insemination or planting of the spring. At San Lorenzo, a colossal head with a helmet like the husk of a seed was buried in a platform, as was the phallic column with an embryo-head tip. With its pseudotombs, skull and embryo complexes, and its vast narrative of regeneration, La Venta addressed that poignant confrontation between human life and its extinction. At La Venta, a fluid, dynamic equilibrium of male and female energies was the balm of death. If balance was ritually observed, rebirth or regeneration was the promised result.

Modes of Communication

As outlined above, the more concrete contributions of this book have been documentary: finding things and putting them in place, either temporally or spatially. This process revealed the sets of similar sculptures along La Venta’s centerline, and I have pursued to some degree how these might have functioned as elements in a creation narrative. I can see that there are many approaches that scholars might take toward La Venta now that its structure is clearer. One involves the importance of nonverbal communication systems. Another involves the shift from three- to two-dimensional systems. The visual prominence of women and the unborn at La Venta emboldens me to reflect on how, as graphic symbols and writing superseded three-dimensional representation, the art focused again on males.

A subtheme of this book has been the validity of visual forms as transmitters of knowledge: not just two-dimensional graphic imagery, which could take the form of incising on a vessel or a celt, but the objects themselves—the celts, the sweatbath-shaped thrones, and the U-shaped forms that created boxes and boundaries for images of gestation and birth. To preserve at least a sense of the dimensionality or shape of objects, most of the illustrations here have been painstakingly rendered to show a sense of volume. A walk through the Parque Museo La Venta provides a better sense of the perception of encounter and interaction we have, even at this temporal and cultural distance, with Olmec monuments.

The three-dimensionality and scale of Olmec monuments allows us to experience the presence of their anthropomorphic forms in a more intuitive manner. While I think that these sculptures were installed with spirit by their makers and in post-manufacture rituals, as were many Maya pieces (Tate 2001a), what I wish to consider next, briefly, as an issue for further study, is the way in which three-dimensional forms might have participated in the transmission of knowledge through performance.

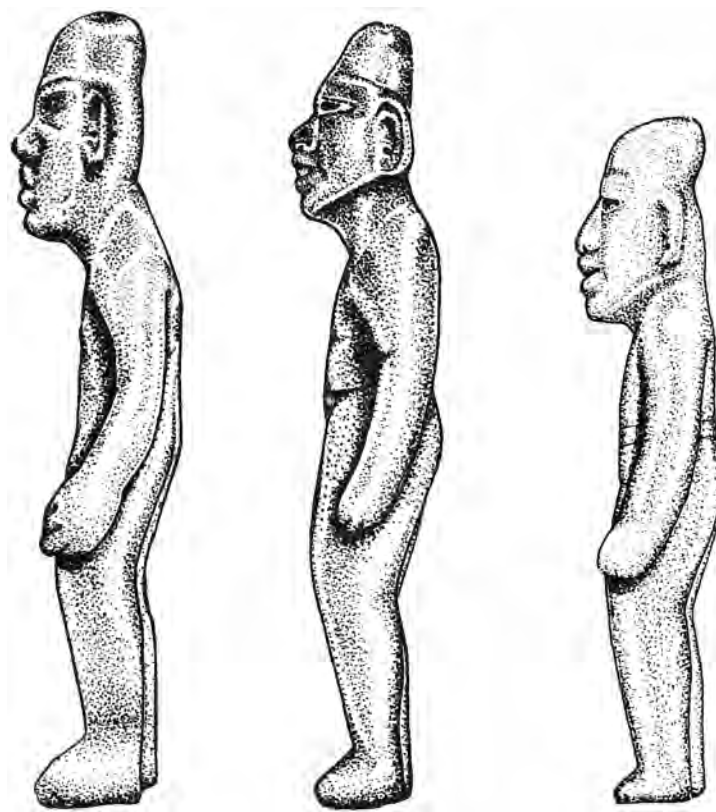
Nonverbal Communication

There have been several situations in which we have been able to glimpse the transmission of knowledge without writing and even without being expressed via a graphic symbol system. Women’s knowledge of the biological processes of conception, gestation, birth, and nutrition were certainly not recorded in any direct way. Figurines of women and later of fetuses and embryos may have served as visual aids to oral transmission regarding how babies are born. But a scrap of verbal utterance, Cosminsky’s (2001) record of a Maya midwife saying, “The hands know,” reminds us that embodied practice—movement, touch, gestures, and corporeal responses and interactions—are ways of knowing that are deeply entrenched in our consciousness. Similarly, we have not recognized any recipes for nixtamal in the visual symbols on pottery, but this vital knowledge clearly was conveyed as people, mostly women, learned to cook. Another example is the pose of Olmec stone standing figures (Fig. 9.3). Modern academics are reluctant to entertain what one might learn from

a bodily discipline. Most of these sculptures bear no incised symbols, and if they do, it is the iconography that is examined for significance, not the shape and pose of the figure. Based on my personal experience with tai chi and yoga, I have described in detail what thousands of humans have experienced by standing in this pose. However, personal experience—embodied knowledge—is not admissible as academic evidence, so scholars can easily dismiss this pervasive aspect of Middle Formative culture. The only way to test this assertion is to perform it. Reading about it will not persuade you. Just stand for five whole minutes with your knees bent and aligned over your ankles, your tailbone slightly tucked so that your back is straight, and keep your shoulders relaxed. You will have to breathe deeply because you will need oxygen to support your quadriceps. Your heart will begin to pound. The trick in this pose is to maintain it for a long time, and to do that you have to keep the mind focused on the breath. It builds physical strength and mental discipline. In addition to making one's body like a cosmic axis, this activity-in-stasis serves the philosopher, the person on a spiritual path of union, and the warrior. Stone figures in this position are the most common format of Middle Formative portable figurative sculpture. The people were communicating what they thought was important nonverbally and without graphic iconography. As we formulate theories about Olmec culture, should we not pay attention to this and other attempts at nonlinguistic communication?

In a riveting book, Diana Taylor (2003) brings the work of Judith Butler and other contemporary theorists to bear on the fundamental role of embodied acts in transmitting knowledge and memory, forging identity, making political claims, and enacting spiritual truths in the Americas, both before and after the arrival of Europeans. She writes,

By taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by “knowledge.” This move, for starters, might prepare us to challenge the preponderance of writing in Western epistemologies. As I suggest in this study, writing has paradoxically come to stand in for and against embodiment. When the friars arrived in the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, . . . they claimed that the indigenous peoples’ past—and the lives they lived—had disappeared because



9.3 Figurines 22, 20, and 17 (left to right) from La Venta Offering 4. Drawing by author.

they had no writing. . . . Embodied expression has participated and probably will continue to participate in the transmission of social knowledge, memory, and identity pre- and postwriting. . . . (Taylor 2003:16)

For one thing, in the last century scholars have made many advancements in apprehending the many graphic methods of storing and transmitting knowledge in Mesoamerica. Much is lost, to be sure, but the evidence of human acts is perceptible everywhere. Even in nonliterate societies, some individuals can be imagined. Both sculptural forms and embodied acts were powerful conveyers of knowledge that were available to more people throughout more of Mesoamerican history than were graphic systems, and many of the sculptural forms inform us today. Creating La Venta, or any site, was a sustained performance in which generations of people, probably elites or religious specialists, renegotiated and reenacted a vision of the setting they needed to generate and maintain society, and then called for the participation of inhabitants, trading partners, and even enemies or captives. At

a given time, the site's configurations of sculptural forms participated in some way as elements in the enactment of creation narratives, ritual acts of rulership, the display of resources, and tools used in the processes of instruction, protection, petition, healing, and more. It seems the sculptures were more than backdrops. They portrayed types of characters and processes, and probably were installed with the presence of some human or supernatural agents. Exploring further the Formative period concept of sculpture embedded in performance should yield interesting comparative material for global studies of visual culture and the dissemination of knowledge.

Whatever their roles as ensouled agents may have been, La Venta's sculptural sets were organized by people into specific arrays. The assertion that their subjects, settings, interconnections, and the intervals between them served narrative or performative purposes raises the issue of how they might have served as an important step in the development of pictorial and textual graphic communication systems.

From Sculptural to Graphic and from Flexible to Fixed Systems

There have been influential studies of Formative period graphic symbols as precursors to textual writing, and studies of narrative in Mesoamerican art, but few of these have involved three-dimensionally sculpted objects. John Justeson has contributed to the discussion of graphic symbols in many ways. He and Peter Mathews looked at sequences of symbols incised on Olmec celts and proposed that these formed "clause-level conceptual structures" (Justeson and Mathews 1990). Reilly (1994b, 1995, 2006) identified some of the iconographic signs as toponyms, or signs for features of the cosmological landscape. He convincingly identified conceptual features such as a cosmic tree, central mountain, the crossed bands as sky, and the four directions. He also worked with the cosmological referents of zoomorphic symbols, showing how the appearance of such symbols on a figure marked that being as an *axis mundi*. He analyzed consistent graphic portrayals of costuming in order to identify certain shamanic rituals. Instead of seeing Formative period symbols as having specific linguistic referents, he considers

them to be more diagrammatic, as I do. During the Middle Formative, objects such as celts and masks incised with these symbols seem to have been traded widely as transmitters of knowledge as well as symbols of status and wealth. Taube (2004b), among others, has taken an epigraphic approach to analysis of preliterate symbols, identifying processes of substitution, infixation and affixation, and personification as ways in which these graphic symbols conveyed meaning.

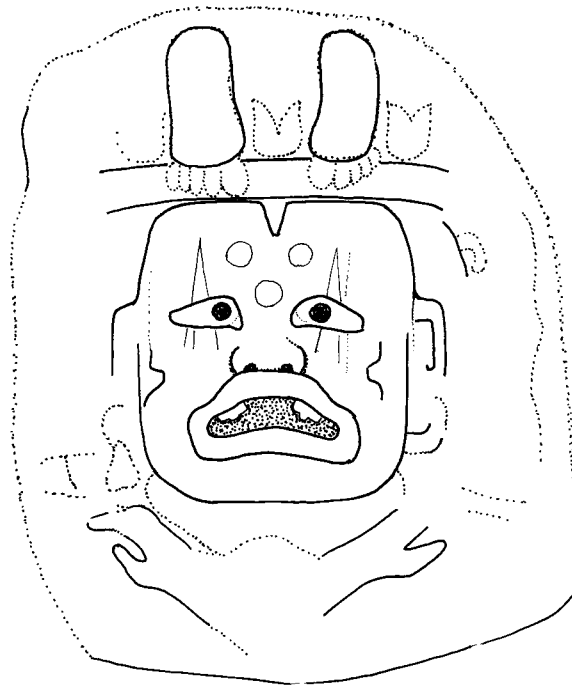
Although there is no true writing from the Olmec occupation of La Venta, one of the monuments that has been identified as an early example was found there, on the centerline at the southern foot of Mound A-2. I suggest that this may indicate the influence of La Venta's sculptural narrative on the development of Mesoamerican communication systems. In a book chapter in which he discussed the development of Maya writing, Stephen Houston (2004:292) pointed out that this early example of writing was made at the *end* of La Venta's occupation as a major center. By "writing" he was referring to "(1) a graphic representation of language, (2) detached from the body of its referent, and (3) disposed into linear sequences that can theoretically expand into greater degrees of syntactic complexity." Monument 13 is a thick, columnar piece of basalt of which one transverse face was flattened and smoothed to serve as a surface for a low relief (Fig. 9.4). From the roughly oval flat surface, a profile figure and some discretely shaped glyphlike elements rise from a background that has been cut away to a depth of only about 6 mm ($\frac{2}{10}$ in.). There is no rim or border, nor is there a ground line or locative bands. This absence imparts to the raised portions a sense of freedom or lack of place. The profile figure, with a male loincloth and a beard and moustache, strides vigorously forward, holding a banner in an outstretched left hand. The styles of his headdress and sandals are not typical Middle Formative gear. Behind the figure is a raised footprint, and in front are three shapes in a column: an oval, a possible tri-lobed blood swirl, and one stylized bird head. The format, costume, glyphs, beard, and pose of the figure all suggest a post-Olmec date. Houston agrees with several other scholars that it must be at least as late as 600–500 bc, but I agree with Taube, with whom Houston spoke, that this is even later. I think it was related to a phenomenon that must have occurred

between 400 and 200 bc in which people visited declining Olmec sites, as well as some western Maya sites, and placed these circular low-relief monuments. The back-bending, embryo-faced figures on circular slab reliefs from San Lorenzo, Río Pesquero, San Antonio Suchitepequez, Emiliano Zapata (Fig. 9.5), and La Venta Monument 61 all incorporate footprints (the soles of the feet of the contortionist) but seem a little earlier because the figures have embryo faces or masks and wear spoon-shaped or other typical Olmec regalia (Tate 1995). And unlike these “back-bender” or “human wheel” reliefs, Monument 13 does have glyphlike elements. Houston suggests that the footprint refers to movement, and the other three elements name the figure. This may well be the case. The footprint is no longer a referent to the feet of the human wheel (so it is detached from its referent), and the figure is striding purposefully.

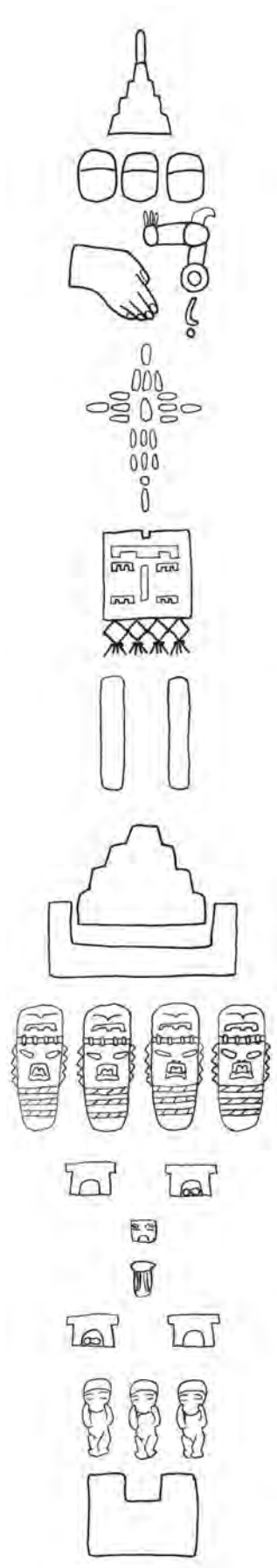
Relative to La Venta’s sculptural narrative, I want to develop two points that Houston made in his chapter (2004). One concerns sequencing of iconic elements, and the other considers the distinction between closed and open systems of communication. In a discussion about the distribution of iconic elements on a celt, he points out that despite the fact that they are often arranged in a vertical line, they do not possess the kind of linearity that can incorporate lexemes in the fixed order that is necessary to recording spoken language. This is clearly a valid point. The Dallas plaque, for example, could be described from top to bottom, with the four directions corners first or last, or from the center to either end, and the interlocutor could still make a cosmological statement. I have proposed a similar range of possibilities for the performance of La Venta’s sculptural sets, and this leads to my point. The three-dimensional shapes of La Venta’s narrative sets function similarly to the icons on Olmec celts. In thinking about the sculptural sequence over the years, I have made several diagrams of it, and partially for fun, I include one here (Fig. 9.6). What this shows is that the graphic forms on celts probably had real three-dimensional referents, including simple earthen forms such as the U platform and Earthen Pyramid, as well as the regalia, such as the hand from the Tomb A bundle and the headdress ornaments from the northeast platform. This fanciful diagram of La Venta’s sculptural sets in graphic form is more complex than



9.4 La Venta Monument 13. Drawing courtesy of Cherra Wyllie.



9.5 Rough sketch of an eroded circular relief in a local museum in Tabasco, reported to have been found near Emiliano Zapata. It is one of a series of monuments showing a figure in a back-bending or contortionist position. Here the figure, with its feet visible above its head, has an embryo-maize seed face, a Late Preclassic Maya-type trefoil headband, and crossed arms. Drawing by author.



most celt compositions, but one can see that interlocutors could narrate or perform both the three-dimensional, tangible objects in the real world and the iconographic diagrams on celts.

This study has discussed some ways in which both three-dimensional objects and low-relief sculptures can relay narrativity. I suggest that the strategies developed at La Venta were a step in the development of later glyphic and pictorial narratives. We saw that through their active poses, gestures, and facial expressions, objects such as the colossal fetuses, San Lorenzo Monument 107, and the colossal heads convey movement, drama, and therefore, events. Striding or gesturing figures rendered in low relief express motion and interaction as well. Earth and sky bands, cave-niches, U-shaped wombs, the presence of ancestral figures in cloud registers, and wrappings on uterine bundles all suggest spatial and temporal realms beyond the present time and place. Many monuments, such as La Venta Throne 4, contain symbols that referred to widely understood networks of associations, such as cave-womb-sweatbath-birthing-flowers-generative power as a source for dynastic legitimacy under the four directions of sky-earth. Such monoscenic narrative statements surrounding the man in the eagle headdress provided referents to potencies, rituals, and supernatural covenants that transported knowledge of other spaces and times into the present and probably the future. This strategy of bringing symbols of primordial events into the visual field can be observed, for example, in the Tablet of the Cross at Palenque, in which the ruler receives regalia from the principal bird deity at the moment of her alighting on the tree, which occurred in that primordial time indicated by shimmering jewels in space and on all the beings, as well as on the ruler's accession day. Although

9.6 An invented diagram of the monuments, earth forms, and offerings of La Venta's sculptural sets: *from top*, the phallic column on its conical mound; the three colossal heads; a jade hand from La Venta Tomb A and an invented headdress using a plaque, earspools, and dangles from La Venta's offerings; a "world tree" made of twenty celts and a mirror; one of the Phase II mosaic pavements; Mounds A-4 and A-5 as a ballcourt; Mound C-1 on its U-shaped platform; the four embryo-maize stelae; the four cave-womb thrones framing Thrones (Altars) 1 and 8; substituting for the three colossal fetuses, tiny sculptures from El Arenal's Late Preclassic Maya cache, just as they are except I added helmets; and last, the U-shaped Mound D-7. Drawing by author.

the *Codex Borgia*, unlike the Maya tablet, does not mention a specific ruler, its cosmogonic sequence provides a series of monoscenic narratives in a linear progression.

Such monoscenic narratives probably existed at San Lorenzo; the contribution that the creators of La Venta's sculptural stations made to narrative development was to array sculptures that individually presented monoscenic narratives along a linear axis that encompassed an entire site. By doing this, they orchestrated several aspects of narrative. Specific sculptures and architectural features fixed some of the characters, actions, and settings of the story. The processional path added another layer to the already complex references to time. As people walked through the three-dimensional architectural features and sculptures, time entered the narrative in an experiential way. Beyond that phenomenological observance of time, the visual (and buried) references to the 260-day gestational cycle, the solar year, and possibly the lunar count and 20 day names allowed performers to introduce these fundamental symbolic aspects of Mesoamerican ritual into their performances. Another impact of La Venta's expansion of the narrative field along a linear axis was to create the possibility of cyclicity, such that, in Brilliant's words (1984:18), "the end is connected with the promise of the end and retrospectively the end is connected with a promise of the beginning." In La Venta's case, the elevated phallic column and the U Group with fetuses embraced the site, serving as symbols of both human and cosmic creation and regeneration. One end definitely implied the connection to the other. Along the path between them, exotic materials pointed to the far corners of the continent, beings and eras were born and destroyed, and human life emerged anew. Similarly, a Maya Period Ending stela portrayed a ruler as wearing symbols of his principal deeds during the past cycle; while the text might specify the closing ceremony of the cycle, the implication was that this was one such series of events and monuments within a cyclical chain. So, to return to Houston's point that iconic elements arranged along a line do not possess the specificity that can incorporate lexemes in the order essential for recording spoken language, it is true that La Venta's sculptural narrative does not record utterances. It does, however, embody a way of narrating that permeates later Mesoamerican hieroglyphic and pictorial writing.

Houston commented that the phonetic writing systems were "closed" to those who did not speak the language in which they were written. Thinking of Isthmian and Maya writing, he stated that these early "closed" systems were "only displaced with the advent of trans-cultural polities such as Teotihuacan" (Houston 2004:308). Generally, however, I think that at La Venta's sculptural narrative stations (as opposed to the stelae in the clusters of monuments), the identities of actors, places, and actions were generic enough to allow any group of people participating in the negotiation of the narrative to arrive and perform the story in its own way and in its own language. Even the order was probably not fixed. It was a flexible story, and although the right to perform there may have been politically contested, it was one that included anyone who gained the right to be there (at minimum, please bring stone). In this sense, the visual narrative had a more inclusive aim than the "true," or logophonetic, written scripts of Mesoamerica, and it preceded them.

This distinction—between flexibility and fixity, inclusiveness and exclusiveness—may help illuminate some of the social transformations that occurred at La Venta, with its reliance on materials from long distances, felled, and civic/ceremonial centers built of predominantly local materials emerged. The earliest known long text, found on the La Mojarra stela (circa AD 150) about 120 km northwest of La Venta, has been interpreted as containing the name, war events, sacrifices, and rituals of a ruler (Justeson and Kaufman 1993). This free translation is contested on several levels, but it is interesting to consider it in this context. There seems to have been a dispute between those who sanctioned "inscribed monuments" and those who wished to overthrow the inscribed monuments and their patron (Kaufman and Justeson 2001:R27–40). "Harvest Mountain Lord," the ruler portrayed on the stela, claimed to be letting blood for others during the dedication or resetting of the stela on a measured, hallowed ground. Once Harvest Mountain Lord of La Mojarra began to fix dates and names in writing, he was clearly fighting for his own version of history and his own right to territory. Similarly, as the Maya states emerged, educated scribes began to write the names of individuals and to concretize their genealogies, locking people into place for many *katuns*. Public writing—on public monuments—referred to the elites, and the deeds and inheritance that legitimized their reigns. By the

Classic period, texts described the rulers' painful and devout participation in calendric ceremonies, which linked elite ancestors and their rites. They celebrated the capture of prisoners as well, presumably to gain prestige for the elite victor, garner captives for sacrifice, and exert control over territory. Writing became a tool that lent a veneer of authority to the ritual and political claims of elite males. It is clear that writing excludes all those who are not speakers of the language or educated enough to read, which excluded most females as well. I see La Venta's visual narrative, which was manufactured from ideas and materials from across Mesoamerica as part of a relatively open exchange, as precursive to the pictorial narratives of the Mixtec and Central Mexican traditions. The Isthmian rulers such as Harvest Mountain Lord and the Maya kings took the route of two-dimensional (low-relief) monuments and logophonic texts, while other Mesoamericans did not—at least not to the same degree.

Where Did Olmec Ideas Go?

As the Olmec era declined, where did their ideas and visual symbols go? How specific forms and practices of Middle Formative visual culture spread to other regions is not well understood. In preparing this book, I became aware of several interesting continuities and disjunctions of visual culture from the Formative to the Late Preclassic. I would like to outline a few of them here as possible fruitful avenues of future investigation.

Mayanists tend to posit that the Gulf Coast Olmec exerted considerable influence over Maya concepts of kingship and the visual symbols that expressed those ideas. Three examples are the stela, the bundle, and the maize-jewel diadem. The stela format seems to have developed at La Venta or another Middle Formative site. There are some bulky, irregular Late Preclassic Maya stelae that may not have incorporated writing—in other words, some that seem derived from those at La Venta. However, within a few centuries Maya stelae featured male rulers and were covered with writing. The sacred bundle, which contains regalia thought to be of divine origin, is another cultural feature that the Maya inherited from the Olmec, as Reilly (1994b) showed. At El Manatí and La Venta we saw the clear association of caches and bundles with

the concept of “enwombing” crafted and natural items in womblike caches or bodies of water to emulate the condition of gestation. It may retain its uterine connotations among the Maya, but this has not yet been proven. And the Maya royal diadem (maize-jewel) in the form of an anthropomorphized trefoil, which Virginia Fields (1991) showed has its antecedent in the Olmec era, is clearly based on the Olmec embryo symbol, which was often worn as a headdress ornament (Fig. 9.7). However, as the examples begin to suggest, I think the Maya substantially transformed many of the Formative period visual symbols and concepts they adopted, and rejected others outright.

One of the features of Formative period culture that was emphatically rejected by most Late Preclassic cultures was the manufacture of hollow babies. While a few hollow ceramic females and infantile figures were made in the Maya highlands, this kind of sculpture is very rare among the Lowland Maya. Infants and even children are relatively scarce in Classic period art, with the exception of a few heirs apparent and the “baby jaguar” figure on codex-style pots. There also are a few Classic pottery scenes in which infants appear in the otherworld, either as sacrifices or in the process of rebirth. However, although mother-and-child ceramic figurines are rare in the Maya area, they constitute a typical form in the Basin of Mexico up through Aztec times.

Similarly, there are few *overt* “goddess” monuments in Maya art prior to the Postclassic. (I think we can argue for the Group of the Cross at Palenque as having a major focus on a creatrix and birth.) However, along the Gulf and in the highlands, there were shrines or sites dedicated to female supernaturals and important personages. One such place was along the Gulf Coast, at El Zapotal. Nelly Gutiérrez and Susan Hamilton characterize the site as the center of an important art style, but not as a major royal center. Large-scale ceramic female figures were found in several contexts. In one they were arrayed in three layers in a north-south trench below a structure. Some of the heads of the sculptures had been removed and were in their laps. In another, the figures were associated with a burial or with an offering preceded by a male deity of the underworld (Gutiérrez Solana and Hamilton 1977).

Dating to the transition between the Middle

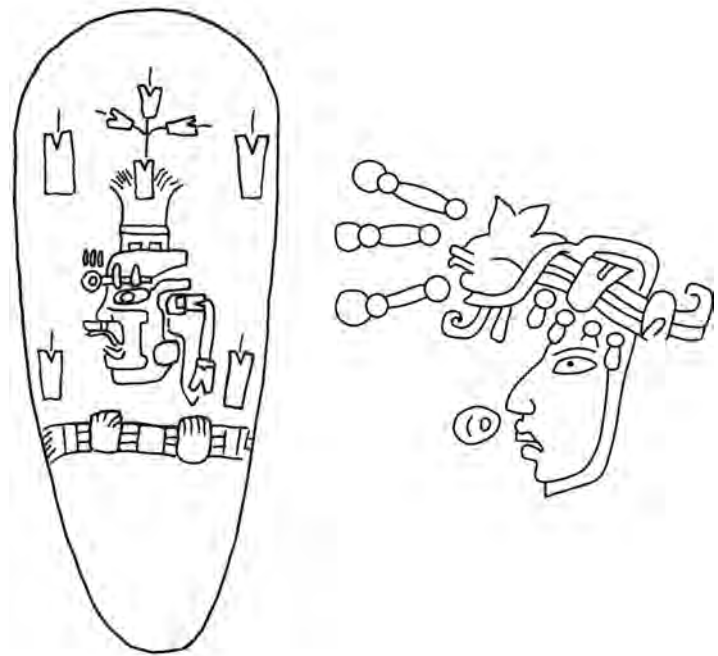
Formative and the Late Preclassic, the Tlaxcalan site of Xochitécatl, adjacent to Cacaxtla, is another example of such a feminine place. The site occupies the top of an extinct volcano that had a cave within its eastern slope. A large, nine-level pyramid at the summit of the natural volcano contained thirty-two burials, mostly of women and children. The many hollow ceramic figurines found in the burials depict women. Some are engaged in worship; others are pregnant, holding children, enthroned, elderly, or shown as well-dressed mature individuals. According to Mari Carmen Serra Puche (2001), they represent actual women or examples of women at different stages of life. At the foot of the pyramid were large stone vats, reminiscent of the huge stone bowls on La Venta's Stirling Acropolis. Xochitécatl's vats contained liquids, and when found, held four stone sculptures, one of which depicted a male. This figure holds its penis, possibly to refer to the act of insemination. As we saw, phallic sculptures, large vats, caves, the prominent use of the number 9, and female figures are all typical of La Venta.

Smaller monuments depicting females are plentiful in the Classic and Postclassic Huastec region. Aztec monumental art portrayed females as well. The Coatlicue/Tzitzimime sculptures emphasize these supernaturals' roles in the Aztec cosmogony and as protectors of the dynastic patron and kings. The Aztec made monuments to female maize goddesses and to women who died in childbirth, and they attempted to show the subordination of certain powerful females, such as Coyolxauhqui, elder sister of the upstart tutelary deity of the Basin of Mexico, Huitzilopochtli. In the case of powerful female beings, then, they were more often portrayed in Central Mexico. Among the Maya, I think female creators and earth goddesses remained powerful in popular conception but were subordinated in most royal texts and iconography.

Stelae appear at La Venta and are practically synonymous with Maya visual culture, but not with Teotihuacan. Other authors—for example, Esther Pasztory (1997:236–237), have looked at this fact and seen a puzzling discontinuity between the Olmec and Teotihuacan. Another disjunction that Pasztory discussed is the notion that Teotihuacan rejected the idea of portraiture deployed by the Olmec in colossal heads. Because I see the heads as images of a type rather than as portraits, the notion

of negation does not follow in this instance. I agree that the choices made at Teotihuacan involved some rejection of individualization, the portrayal of social hierarchies, writing, and dynastic records. But in other cases a reformulation of Olmec practices and form is equally obvious.

Several hundred years after La Venta's decline, Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Sun rested on a U-shaped platform (Matos Moctezuma 1999:201). Also, as is well-known, it was constructed over a long cave with a four-lobed terminus. The lone monumental sculptures of Teotihuacan were two gigantic female figures, found in the plaza of the Pyramid of the Moon, in which the seated and standing greenstone figures were cached. The surviving sculpture is referred to by a Nahuatl name, Chalchiuhtlicue, she of the jade or turquoise skirt. Her diamond-patterned jade bead skirt with fringe is exactly like the diamond-pattern, fringed design on La Venta's Phase II mosaic pavements. Like



9.7 Transformation of an Olmec symbol: *left*, a celt from Río Pesquero showing an Olmec embryo head with a buccal mask and a lip ornament, wearing a maize seed headband and a three-sprout diadem, with a maize bundle and plant growing from its head; *right*, the Maya version of this symbol, conflating the headband and maize seeds with the trefoil embryo-like jewel. The three sprouts on the Olmec diadem become a three-pointed head on the Maya diadem. From an Olmec winged embryo pendant reused and incised by the Maya. Drawings by Corey Escoto.

those pavements, she is huge, her head is cleft at the top, and her shape is rectilinear. From the Formative period, Teotihuacan adopted sacred caves, an axial site plan, the concept of sacred measurements, colossal sculpture, stone masks, and stone figurines.

Among the small-scale stone sculptures of the Formative period, standing figures—the ones I have referred to as holding a disciplined pose—are the most common. In addition to the twenty-three standing adult figures cached at La Venta, standing stone figurines have also been excavated at Chalcatzingo (Merry de Morales 1987) and in Chiapas (Clark and Pye 2000). They are connected to Guerrero and Tlatilco as well—for example, the well-known jade standing figure that holds an embryo-masked infant is from Guerrero. However, the Late Preclassic Maya did not commonly make standing anthropomorphic stone figurines. They do show up in several regions of Mexico in the Late Preclassic: examples have been found in the Basin of Mexico (including the 28 cm high hulking greenstone figure from Puebla), and in Monte Albán, Guerrero, Colima, and in significant numbers at Teotihuacan. That such figures were indeed part of Teotihuacan's inventory of visual forms has been proven by recent excavations at the Pyramid of the Moon (López Luján et al. 2004; Sugiyama and López Luján 2006, 2007). Interestingly, several of the standing figures from the Pyramid of the Moon were also found with seated stone figures, just like the pairs in La Venta Tomb A. However, the standing figures from Teotihuacan have lost the flexed knees that are critical to my interpretation of the Olmec figures as representative of a disciplined, cosmically aligned posture. López Luján has interpreted some of them as sacrificed captives, particularly the one he excavated at Xalla. Its leg is incised with the image of a dart, and the sculpture was ritually destroyed. The significance of the figures may have changed—and the Olmec ones may represent captives rather than practitioners of mind-body disciplines—but whatever their significance, the form of symmetrically standing stone figurine has its origins in the Formative period. The Late Preclassic Maya did not adopt this artistic format, but many other cultures did.

Instead, at several sites the Maya crafted seated, cross-legged anthropomorphic figures with traits of supernaturals. Most of these are considered to embody the “cosmic tree” or the notion of “ruler as tree” because three leafed branches emerge from

the heads of the figures. On Classic era “period-ending” stelae, this “ruler as tree” imagery often appeared on rulers' loincloths (Schele and Miller 1986). Again we see a split between those Late Preclassic cultures that adopted the stone standing figures, and the Maya, who quickly transformed the stone figurine into a unique, culturally specific form. The translation of symbols across cultures involved, not surprisingly, both continuity and change. The Olmec, however, should not be viewed as simply earlier versions of the Maya. Formative period Mexico, and even La Venta specifically, had a profound effect on Late Preclassic cultures throughout Mesoamerica.

Asking and Answering the Fundamental Questions

Earlier in this concluding chapter I summarized the questions that, for me, were generated by the ways in which Formative period visual culture expressed and negotiated forms of knowledge. I have also been aware of the questions that confront Olmec studies generally. As Richard Diehl (1989) and Christopher Pool (2009) have characterized the situation, there are still some basic questions that require better answers in order for the field to make meaningful contributions to comparative studies of how social complexity evolves. A refinement of chronology is an important step, and this study took a new approach to the problem by tracking the embryo symbol. The question of the origins of Olmec culture has also been investigated through considering the appearance of a variety of forms of visual and material culture, from sweatbaths to U-shaped platforms. In terms of relative chronologies of sites, I see some overlap of visual forms of La Venta with those of San Lorenzo and Teopantecuanitlan. To contribute to the debate about whether San Lorenzo and La Venta were chiefdoms or states, I simply raised the problem that there is little consistency in the ways that potential rulers are portrayed in visual form, and that other subjects, not just rulership, were given considerable attention. I have also tried to deactivate the concept of “Olmec style” and separate it into constituent elements, such as modes of representation (abstract or naturalistic?), acts of reduction and simplification, format or shape, subject matter, composition,

manufacture, and materials. Analyzing visual forms this way should clarify just what is transmitted inter-regionally: ideas, things, technology, or aesthetics. And to discussions regarding subsistence, I have brought up the crucial issue of nixtamalization and its ability to help maize consumers avoid debilitating disease and birth defects.

What remains interesting to me is that as civilization arose in Mesoamerica, its visual culture expressed some of the fundamental questions that confront humanity. Formative Mesoamerican visual culture may be the first to explore so thoroughly a “macrobiology.” Not only were people looking at and thinking about conception and gestation, but they related these processes to much larger ones—to agricultural cycles, to specific configurations of the landscape that seemed especially potent, and to celestial cycles (Fig. 9.8). The earliest answers to such questions were grounded in people’s empirical observations of a world in perpetual flux. What is life, and how do humans share that quality with the rest of the shifting world? They wondered about the relationships between humans and other creatures, and what we are to eat. What are the larger forces of the universe that will help us live? How do we engage those forces? Who among us is fit to communicate with them, and who can provide leadership? And what happens to us when we die? It is remarkable that early Mesoamericans developed an iconography that centered on these issues. Not every system of visual culture does, at least not to the extent of exploring knowledge as a system aimed at the regeneration of life.



9.8 A stone plaque from Ahuelican, Guerrero, showing the embryo-maize seed conflation. The shape of the head is that of a conventionalized maize seed, and profile embryo faces decorate the shoulders, one infixed with a fontanel and one with a slit. The embryo holds maize fetishes. Its lower half is incised with a more abstracted image, now transformed into a fanged face with axolotl brows. Dallas Museum of Art. Drawing by Corey Escoto.

Appendix 1

La Venta Monuments by Format

<i>Monument</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Source for Location</i>	<i>Stone</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Source of Measurement</i>
ALTAR/THRONE, ZOOMORPHIC (4)						
A1	Great Plaza, SE of B-4 platform	BdF 1973:16; Stirling 1943:52	B		H 185 W 265 Th 280	BdF 1973:16
A7	B Great Plaza	Bull 153:175	Ande		H 120	RC & CT
A8	Buried 100 ft N of Long Mound	Bull 138:52; change of designation RGL 1990:173	?		H 152.4	Bull 138:52
M59	B Great Plaza	BdF 1973:106; C&C 1968: Map 2	B		H 95 W 65 Th 113	C&C 1968:179
THRONE (ALTAR), CAVE-NICHE (5)						
A2	Mound C platform	Bull 138:52	B	1A	H 99 W 134 Th 129	BdF 1973:18
A3	Mound C platform	Bull 138:52	B	3M, 1F, 1A	H 150 W 165 Th 140	BdF 1973:20
A4	Long Mound (D-8) E side	Bull 138:54-55	B	2M, 1A	H 160 W 319 Th 190	BdF 1973:22
A5	Long Mound (D-8) W side	Bull 138:54-55	B	3M, 2F	H 154 W 190 Th 170	RC&CT
A6	Cerro Encantado, NE corner of F3; with column	Bull 138:56; map RGL 1990	B		H 114 W 137 Th 86	BdF 1973:31
COLOSSAL HEADS (4)						
M1	B Great Plaza, S of Mound C, near S2	Bull 138:56	B	F?	H 241 x 225 x 221 Circ 640 24 tons	RC&CT (W & Th)

<i>Monument</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Source for Location</i>	<i>Stone</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Source of Measurement</i>
M2	180 m N of C-1, middle	Bull 170 Fig. 2 shows it as part of a group N of M19 and the airstrip. Bull 138:57 says 200 yd N of Mound C. RGL map 1995 shows it as SE of airstrip and M19.	B	M	H 163 Circ 424 11.8 tons	BdF 1973:50
M3	180 m N of C-1, E	Bull 138:57; BdF 1973:52; see M2	B	M	H 198 x 152 x 121 Circ 405 12.3 tons	RC&CT (W & Th); BdF 1973:52 (H, Circ, Tons)
M4	180 m N of C-1, W	Bull 138:58; BdF 1973:55; see M2	B-And	M	H 226 x 197 x 203 Circ 650 19.8 tons	RC&CT (W & Th); BdF 1973:55 (H, Circ, Tons)

HUMAN FIGURES SEATED CROSS-LEGGED (9)

M8	A-1-b plaza, A-4 or A-5?	Bull 153:173; RGL 1990:28	B/Ande	A	H 173 W 140 Th 124	BdF 1973:63
M9	A-1-b plaza, A-4 or A-5?	Bull 153:173; RGL 1990:28	B	M	H 117 W 95 Th 65	BdF 1973:65
M10	A-1-b plaza, A-4 or A-5?	Bull 153:173; RGL 1990:28	B	M	H 110 W 97 Th 65	BdF 1973:67
M23	A-5	Bull 170:203	?	M	H 64 W 68 Th 60	BdF 1973:81
M30	unknown		B	M	H 40 W 45 max Th 44	C&C 1968:173
M31	unknown		B	A	H 52 W 66 Th 40	C&C 1968:173
M38	C South Platform	BdF 1973:91	B	?	H 45 W 59 Th 48	C&C 1968:174
M44	E of Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:96	B	A	H 63 W 43 Th 50 (HEAD ONLY)	O&J 2000:61
M73	unknown		?	M	H 32 W 25 max Th 28	C&C 1968:181
M77	unknown		B	M	H 91	

HUMAN FIGURES SEATED, CROUCHING, OR KNEELING BUT NOT CROSS-LEGGED (5)

M5	A-1 plaza east	Bull 138:58; BdF 1973:57	B	F	H 142 max W 100	BdF 1973:57
M11	unknown	Bull 153:179	B	A	H 92 W 62 Th 79	BdF 1973:69
M65	unknown		B	F	H 66 W 43 Th 40	C&C 1968:180
M70	unknown		B	F	H 83 W 56 Th 73	C&C 1968:180
M74	Stirling Acropolis	Clewlow 1974:17	?	A	H 61 W 35 Th 63	BdF 1973:118

<i>Monument</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Source for Location</i>	<i>Stone</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Source of Measurement</i>
HUMANS, STANDING OR SEATED (2)						
M39	Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:92	Sch	M	H 25 W 40 Th 10	C&C 1968:174
M57	Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:105	Serp?	M	H 73 W 52 Th 28	C&C 1968:178
HUMANS, ENTHRONED (2)						
M21	N of A-2	Bull 170:201	Ande		H 54 W 59 Th 55	BdF 1973:80
M40	Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:93	B	F	H 74 W 46 Th 28	C&C 1968:175
HUMAN FETUS FIGURES (4)						
M52	D-7, SW corner	RGL 1990:165; Stirl 1968:35	Sand		H 200	
M53	D-7 face South, S E corner	RGL 1990:165; Stirl 1968:35	Sand		H 380 W 202 Th 150	Weight 35.7 tons, RGL 1988:151; Gallegos Gómora 1990.
M54	D-7, NW corner	RGL 1990:165; Stirl 1968:35	Sand		H 204 W 187 Th 100???	Stirling 1968:35 seems to have con- fused 52 and 53.
M72	unknown		?		H 126 W 70 Th 44	C&C 1968:181
HUMAN EMBRYO EFFIGIES, STYLIZED (4)						
M60	Ixhuatlan	BdF 1973:108	?		H 60 W 45 Th 35	C&C 1968:179
M64	unknown		B		H 54 W 40 Th 31	C&C 1968:179
M75	Stirling Acropolis W	RGL 1997	?		H 67 W 36 Th 50	BdF 1973:119
M76	unsure		?			
MONUMENTAL VULVA (1)						
?	unknown		?			
STELAE (16)						
S1	A-1 plaza	Bull 138:50; BdF 1973:34	B	F	H 251 W 79 Th 66	BdF 1973:34
S2	B Great Plaza, S of C-1	Bull 153:9; BdF 1973:36; C&C 1968: Map 2	B	1A, 6M	H 314 W 193 Th 52	BdF 1973:36
S3	A-1 Plaza	Bull 138:51; BdF 1973:41	B	1F, 1M, 2A, 3M	H 426 Th 190	BdF 1973:41
S4	30 m N of D-8, Long Mound	RGL 1988:153	?		H 156 W 126 Th 88	RGL 1988:153
S5	C-1 South Platform	RGL 1990:52	Serp	1M, 2F, 1M	H 347 W 112 Th 30	RGL 1988:145

<i>Monument</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Source for Location</i>	<i>Stone</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Source of Measurement</i>
Stir S4	~100 m N of D-8	Bull 138:52	?		H 312 W 76	
M19	A-1 plaza NW	Bull 170:197-200; BdF 1973:75	B	1A	H 95 W 76 Th 60	BdF 1973:75
M33	unknown		B	1M	H 41 W 39 Th 32	C&C 1968:173
M63	S of Mound C, near center of Complex B plaza	O&J 2000:118; Piña Chan and Gallegos 1959	B	1M	H 256 W 75 Th 45	O&J 2000:118
M86	C-1 South Platform	RGL 1990:52	?			
M87	C-1 South Platform	RGL 1990	Volc		H 205 W 130 TH 36	RGL 1997:89
EMBRYO-MAIZE STELAE (7)						
M15	A-1 plaza, on centerline	Bull 153:175; BdF 1973:73; Bull 170: Map 2	?		?	
M22	A-1-e SE corner	Bull 170:202	Sch		H 120+ W 17-27	BdF 1973:81
M25/26	C-1 South Platform	Bull 170:204; BdF 1973:83-4	Sch		H 497 W 183 TH 31 3.44 tons	RGL 1997:88
M27	C-1 South Platform	Bull 170:208; BdF 1973:85	Gnei		H 277 W 135 Th 80 3.96 tons	RGL 1997:86
M58	B Great Plaza	BdF 1973:105; C&C 1968: Map 2	Sch		H 82 W 47 Th 29	C&C 1968:178
M88	C-1 South Platform	RGL 1997	Volc		H 212 W 94 TH 43	RGL 1997:89
M89	C-1 South Platform	RGL 1997	Volc		H 203 W 53 TH 79	RGL 1997:89
ZOOMORPHIC FIGURES (6)						
M6	in A-2	Bull 138:59; BdF 1973:58	Sand		L 281.9 W 96.4 Th 82-89	BdF 1973:58
M20	~100 m NW of A2	Bull 170:197: NW of A2 and S of Col Hds; BdF 1973:78: 100 m E of A2; RGL 1995 map: N of Col Hds	Gnei		L 197 max W 55 H 35 Th 45	BdF 1973:78
M28	SW of Complex B	BdF 1973:85	B		L 45 W 39 H 40	C&C 1968:172
M41	Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:94	B		H 45 W 32 Th 25	C&C 1968:175
M48	Great Plaza SW of Complex C	BdF 1973:99; C&C 1968: Map 2	B		H 40 W 35 Th 28	C&C 1968:177
M80	A-5, NWC	RGL 1991:170	B		H 113 W 86 Th 77	RGL 1988:155

<i>Monument</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Source for Location</i>	<i>Stone</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Source of Measurement</i>
CIRCULAR, LOW RELIEF (2)						
M61	Airstrip, near Complex C	C&C 1968:179 says near Complex A but their map places it W of Complex C.	B	M	Th 32 Dia 88	C&C 1968:179
M 13	Mound A-2 southern edge, centerline	Bull 153:39	?	M	H 80 w 72	O&J 2000:70
COLUMNAR FIGURES, HIGH RELIEF (2)						
M12	A-1 plaza ~1 m N of south- central platform, on centerline	Bull 153:179; 170 plan	Serp		H 122 max W 28 max Th 24	BdF 1973:71
M56	W of Complex B	BdF 1973:103; Clewlow 68: Map gives loc ~ 40 ft from SWC of Comp B	B		H 124 W 54 Th 43	C&C 1968:178
MISCELLANEOUS ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURES (4)						
M29	SW of Complex B	BdF 1973:86	B		H 37 W 26 Th 48	C&C 1968:172
M34	unknown		B		H 27 W 54 Th 25	C&C 1968:174
M78	unknown to me		B		H 92 W 74	
M79	unknown to me				H 182 W 75	
MISCELLANEOUS RELIEFS (2)						
M42	E of Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:95	B	1M, 1F	H 46 W 36 Th 16	C&C 1968:175
M71	San Miguel, Tabasco		B		H 83 W 65 Th 67	C&C 1968:181
STONE BASINS (2)						
M45	Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:98	B		H 44 max Dia 109	C&C 1968:177
M55	Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:103	?		H 29 Dia 58	C&C 1968:178
MISCELLANEOUS STONE SEATS (3)						
M14	Mound A-3	Bull 153:71	?		H 51 Dia 38	Bull 153:71
M32	unknown		Tuff		H 64 Dia 33	C&C 1968:173
M43	Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:95	Ande/ horne- blende		H 41 Dia 30	C&C 1968:175
DRAIN FEATURES						
M24	N of A-2	Bull 170:204; BdF 1973:83	Gnei		L 116 W 35 Th 20	BdF 1973:83
M46			?			
D1	Stirling Acropolis		B		L 1188	

<i>Monument</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Source for Location</i>	<i>Stone</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Source of Measurement</i>
D2	Stirling Acropolis		?		L 280 W 33 H 30 each	
D3	Stirling Acropolis		?		L 480	
D4	Stirling Acropolis		?		L 455	
D5	E of Stirling Acropolis	BdF 1973:98	B		L 56 W 38 H 17	C&C 1968:177
COLUMNS, UNCARVED, THAT WERE PROBABLY NEAR CENTERLINE						
M35	B Great Plaza	BdF 1973:90; C&C 1968: Map 2	Sch		L 353 Dia 54	C&C 1968:174
M47	B Great Plaza S of Complex C	BdF 1973:99; C&C 1968: Map 2	B		H 350 Circ 140	C&C 1968:177
M49	S end Long Mound	Bull 138:60; BdF 1973:100; C&C 1968: Map 2	Sch		L 274 Dia 48	C&C 1968:177
M62	unknown		B		L 663 Circ 135	C&C 1968:179
?	Cerro Encantado, north base of mound, near Throne (Altar) 6	Bull 138:60	Sch?		H 236	Bull 138:60
BLOCKS OF STONE (12)						
M16	D Complex (S end of central group?)	Bull 153:175	Lime		massive	
M17	D Complex (S end of central group?)	Bull 153:175	Lime		massive	
M18	D Complex (S end of central group?)	Bull 153:175	Lime		massive	
M36a	B Great Plaza	BdF 1973:90; C&C 1968: Map 2	Sch		L 163 W 77 Th 49	C&C 1968:174
M36b	B Great Plaza	BdF 1973:90; C&C 1968: Map 2	Sch		L 162 W 87 Th 49	C&C 1968:174
M37	B Great Plaza	BdF 1973:91	Lime		H 183 W 78 Th 28	C&C 1968:174
M50	D-13	RGL 1990:64	Sand		L 109 W 80 H 40	C&C 1968:177
M51	D-13	RGL 1990:64	Sand		L 90 W 90 H 70	C&C 1968:177
M66	unknown		Sch		L 173 H 103 Th 37	C&C 1968:180
M67	unknown		B		L 207 H 90 max Th 90	C&C 1968:180
M68	Trench b/t A-5 and A-3	RGL 1990:46 says Piña Chan found it bet. A5 and A3 near M 63.	B		L 185 W 100 Th 65 (RC&CT) Dia 189	C&C 1968:180
M69	unknown		Sch		L 100 W 44 Th 19	C&C 1968:180

<i>Monument</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Source for Location</i>	<i>Stone</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Source of Measurement</i>
MOSAIC PAVEMENTS (3)						
Pave 1	A-1 SE platform					Bull 153:56
Pave 2	1 m from S of A-3					
Pave 3	A-1-e SW platform					Bull 170:93
MASSIVE OFFERINGS (5)						
MO 1	A-1-e SW platform		Serp			
MO 2	A-2-d		Serp			
MO 3	A-1-c south-central platform		Serp			
MO 4			Serp			
Mo	A-1-c south-central platform		Serp			
TOMB-LIKE MONUMENTS						
M6	A-2, sarcophagus	Bull 153:178	Sand		L281 W 96 Th 89–81	BdF 1973:60
M7	A-2, basalt column structure	Bull 138:59; BdF 1973:59	B		L 400 W 250 H 180	BdF 1973:60
Tomb C	A-3, sandstone slabs	Bull 153:67-69	Sand		L 520 W 180 H 120	
Tomb D	A-3, cinnabar layer	Bull 153:70-73	Cinnabar		L 50 W 30	
Tomb E	A-2-b, basalt columns	RGL 1990:39 (Wedel)	B			

Key

BdF = Beatriz de la Fuente 1973

Bull 138 = Stirling 1943

Bull 153 = Drucker 1952

Bull 170 = Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959

C&C = Clewlow and Corson

O&J = Ochoa and Jaime 2000

RC and CT = Measurements by Richard Cavallin-Cosma and Carolyn Tate

RGL = Rebecca González Lauck

Stirl = Stirling

Stone: Ande = andesite

B = basalt

Gnei = gneiss

Lime = limestone

Sand = sandstone

Sch = schist

Serp = serpentine

Volc = volcanic, unknown

Sex: A = ambiguous

F = female

M = male

Column on gender is taken from Follensbee 2000 and represents her analysis.

Measurements (all metric):

Circ = circumference

Dia = diameter

H = height

Th = thickness

W = width

Appendix 2

Comparison of Mesoamerican Creation and Origins Narratives

		OLMEC Middle Preclassic	MAYA Late Preclassic	MAYA Classic
<i>Sta- tion</i>	<i>Major symbols</i>	<i>LA VENTA SITE ca. 500-400 BC</i>	<i>SAN BARTOLO ca. AD 150</i>	<i>PALENQUE CROSS GROUP ca. AD 690</i>
1	U design	U-shaped mound supports three colossal fetus sculptures. U-shaped enclosure of basalt columns around north court. U markings are incised on the female figurine from Tomb C, a probable midwife. Inverted U shape forms the cave-niches on five thrones that are also in the form of sweatbaths.	U marks the gourd from which five infants spring in a gush of childbirth-related blood.	Three-temple designs arranged in a U shape are places of origin and the births of deities.
1	Stone-lined enclosure	North court is enclosed with basalt columns.		<i>Pib na</i> within the Cross Group Temples.
2	Journey to cave or under-world	On thrones, humans emerge from caves. Huge pits dug into earth. People entered them to fill them with precious materials. Also ballgame references.	Rain and maize enter watery, turtle-shaped, quatrefoil earth.	Temple of the Sun may relate to underworld journey.

CENTRAL MEXICO Postclassic	MIXTEC Postclassic	MAYA Post-Conquest	AZTEC Post-Conquest
<i>CODEX BORGIA</i> ca. AD 1500	<i>CODEX VIENNA (Vindobon- ensis)</i> ca. AD 1500	<i>POPOL VUH</i> ca. AD 1550-1700	<i>LEGEND 5 SUNS</i> AD 1558
Boone 2007	Boone 2000	Christenson 2003	Bierhorst 1992
U or C designs mark the skirts of the primordial midwives present at the birth of Tezcatlipoca.	Obverse 52, the first page, includes several U-shaped enclosures; one contains a ball.		Three guardians are called “hearthstones,” and they guard Xiuhtecuhtli, old fire spirit (<i>Annales</i> 1:5-10).
Flint enclosure is place where Q and the 4 Ts are born (B 32). Humans are born from a procreating couple in jeweled enclosure (B 38).		House of Blades in underworld (AC 1:125); Hero Twins jump into a stone pit oven (AC 1:178).	Jade bowl in which bones were ground and blood was poured to make humans.
T and Q visit Yoaltecuhtli, god of darkness, to obtain bundle; journey through ballcourt (B 35-36).		Two sets of Hero Twins travel to underworld. The first set brings no ball (semen) and fails the tests. The second set brings a ball and is successful in controlling life and death.	Q goes to underworld, passes test by circumambulating and blowing conch.

		OLMEC Middle Preclassic	MAYA Late Preclassic	MAYA Classic
<i>Station</i>	<i>Major symbols</i>	<i>LA VENTA SITE</i> <i>ca. 500-400 BC</i>	<i>SAN BARTOLO</i> <i>ca. AD 150</i>	<i>PALENQUE CROSS GROUP</i> <i>ca. AD 690</i>
2	Sweatbath as birthplace	Cave-womb thrones in form of sweatbaths.		<i>Pib na</i> structures within the Cross Group Temples.
2	Descending cords	Altar 4: flowering umbilicus descending from sky band. Altar 8: descending from sky. Mon. 8o: descending from feline's mouth. On Monuments 25/26, 27, 88, 89: cords wrap embryos.	At scenes of penis perforation and sacrifice, twisted cords descend from supernatural birds that alight on sacred trees.	A variety of twisted cords: the "cruller" on the face of the underworld sun (TS); those hanging from birds (TFC, TC); twisted cord and cloth worn by three smaller figures, basal cord pulled through water and mountain into shell (TFC).
2	Birth	Fetuses, embryos. Infants in cave-wombs.	Birth of five infants from gourd marked with U sign for "womb."	Birth of Hun Nal Ye and Mother Earth, of Triad, and long lists of birth dates of rulers (TC).
2	Cooking is pregnancy metaphor	Fetuses are not fully cooked, so are made of sandstone, a sedimentary rock, instead of basalt, an igneous one.		<i>Pib na</i> structures heat the womb of the gods (Houston 1996).
2	Quincunx	The four cave-womb thrones at Station 2; the mosaic pavement at Station 4.	The five sacred trees (the last of which is at the center of the wall that faces the entrance). The quincunx of newborns popping from the U gourd.	
3	Bundle	Bundles of precious ritual objects are buried with red pigment in caches. Embryos are bundled by their three sacs on the human-maize seed stelae.	Two sacred bundles, adorned with embryo masks and maize jewels and brimming with breath and blood, are held aloft by two black-and-red-striped, feathered beings. Twisted cords descend from their necks.	On each tablet Kan Balam holds unwrapped bundles containing sacred statue, flint, weapons, ritual implements.

CENTRAL MEXICO Postclassic	MIXTEC Postclassic	MAYA Post-Conquest	AZTEC Post-Conquest
<i>CODEX BORGIA</i> <i>ca. AD 1500</i>	<i>CODEX VIENNA (Vindobonensis)</i> <i>ca. AD 1500</i>	<i>POPOL VUH</i> <i>ca. AD 1550-1700</i>	<i>LEGEND 5 SUNS</i> <i>AD 1558</i>
	9 Wind creates sweatbaths after (by means of) drilling fire and waving sacred plants (EB 2000:94).		
White cord descends from the top of the Black Temple, bringing elements associated with ritual (B 33). Spiders painted like Tlazolteotl (patron of midwives) descend on white cord (B 34).	Q born from flint, attached by cord (V 49). Q as hero descends to earth on a rope that emerges from a cleft in the sky (V 48). Furst (1978:107) associates downy cord with a “Mother Celestial Goddess.”	The cosmos was “measured and staked out” with the “measuring cords of the womb of sky and the womb of earth” (AC 1:65).	
Births from mouths, flints, bundles, day signs, supernaturals in birth poses. The Cihuateteo, who died in childbirth.	Birth from flint, trees. Birth of towns shown through foundation rituals.	Tz’uk is the term that describes the origin of the sky and earth. It is used for any type of birth, perhaps most frequently as the germination of seed (AC 1:65 n. 38). The conception of the Hero Twins by Blood Woman. Some events during her pregnancy and the birth of her twins.	Iztacchalchiuhtlicue gave birth to 400 Mixcoa and then went into a cave. Gave birth to five more, including Mixcoatl (30-38).
Infants must be bathed as they are born hot.		Hunahpu and Xbalnque throw themselves into an earth oven in order to die and be reborn (AC 1:179.)	
Five Ts are born at corners and center of flinted enclosure in first scene of cosmogony (B 32). In the last scene four Chantico flank the sacred fire during first new fire (EB 2007:46).	9 Wind carries quincunx staff.		Q and X circumambulate underworld in a quincunx, blowing conch, prior to stealing bones of dead humans.
T and Q obtain a sacred bundle from a star-studded temple within the darkness. When they open it, tremendous power and ritual objects are released (B 35-36).		Tohil and Auilix ask tribes to make deerskin bundles as surrogates for their statue forms.	Mimich places his divinely bestowed white flint in a bundle.

		OLMEC Middle Preclassic	MAYA Late Preclassic	MAYA Classic
<i>Sta- tion</i>	<i>Major symbols</i>	<i>LA VENTA SITE ca. 500-400 BC</i>	<i>SAN BARTOLO ca. AD 150</i>	<i>PALENQUE CROSS GROUP ca. AD 690</i>
3	Creation of humanity	Four human embryo-maize seed beings sprout from the mountain near two cave-womb-sweatbath thrones.	Five infants burst forth, like seeds, from a gourd marked with a U. They have bloody umbilical cords. Blood is associated with each; breath emanates from the face of the infant on the lower left (Saturno 2005:10). This scene is witnessed by an adult wearing a mask that has embryo face characteristics. The adult holds a bundle marked with a womb sign out of which three sprouts emerge. Its headdress includes flints, snake, and bird features. Although the body seems male, it is marked by several U signs infixed in bands. Is it a dual-gendered being? Part of a creator couple with the female wearing a similar headdress?	The triad of supernatural males are born to a female earth-surface mother during the maize harvest season. They are referred to as the harvest of their mother. Their births are linked to the birth of first ruler of Palenque (Tate 2002).
3	Mountain of sustenance	Complex C displays the four human-maize seed stelae.	Flowery mountain contains maize being and bundles with embryo-maize masks.	Kan Balam stands on sacred mountain in TFC.
3.5	Bathing of infants	Large basins and pipes found on top of Stirling Acropolis. I suggest these were related to birth rituals.		
4	Stone-lined enclosure	North court is enclosed with basalt columns.		<i>Pib na</i> within the Cross Group Temples.

CENTRAL MEXICO Postclassic	MIXTEC Postclassic	MAYA Post-Conquest	AZTEC Post-Conquest
<i>CODEX BORGIA</i> ca. AD 1500	<i>CODEX VIENNA (Vindobonensis)</i> ca. AD 1500	<i>POPOL VUH</i> ca. AD 1550-1700	<i>LEGEND 5 SUNS</i> AD 1558
In the darkness, Q makes penis blood sac to feed sprits of night and Yoaltecuhtli, who keeps smoldering bundle (cooking?). Y gives bundle to Q, who carries it past creator god and ballcourt (B 35-36). After a ballgame, the bundle explodes, yielding elements essential to life and ritual. Energy carries Stripe Eye into the light (B 37-38). Xolotl dances to bring lightning and Tlalocs to earth. A creator couple gives birth to a first human, who is flanked by twin ears of maize and is washed by a rain god. The creation of humans is from a couple, in an enclosure, using maize and blood (EB 2007:193-193; Taube 1986:62).	9 Wind, upon deliberating with spirits of nature, commands two priest-warriors to pierce the trunk of a ceiba in the Valley Yutsa Tohon. This Holy Mother Tree gave birth to the first human couple (B 37).	First the creator couple observed the lack of “a provider and a sustainer.” Then they “joined their thoughts in the darkness”—they set an intention to have humanity emerge. As a result, events unfolded at Split Mountain. Four animals bring white and yellow ears of maize from Split Mountain, which was filled with delicious things. Xmucane (She Who Has Borne Children) grinds corn nine times, adds water, and alone makes the Fourth Creation people. “Mere food were the legs and arms of humanities, of our first fathers. And so there were four who were made” (AC I:192-195).	The gods wondered who would populate the sky and earth. Q went to the land of the dead and asked its lord and lady for the precious bones. Lord required Q to circumambulate the underworld in a quincunx. Q stole the bones but dropped them in male and female piles. But he bundled the pieces together. Cihuacoatl grinds white bones of previous humans in a jade bowl while Q sacrifices red blood on the bones, causing the Fifth Creation people to be born (145-146). In Nahuatl, <i>tonacoyotl</i> refers both to “our flesh” and “maize.”
Maize-studded and sun-studded enclosure in which lay maize goddess nurturing the gods (B 43).		Paxil and Cayala Mountains were sources of maize (AC I:193).	Q transforms into ant to enter Mountain of Sustenance (146-147).
Infants must be bathed as they are born hot (B 38).		Before being reborn, Hero Twins, in the form of ground bone ash, spend four days in the river.	After giving birth to the 400 Mixcoa, Iztacchalchiuhtlicue went into a cave and then delivered five more Mixcoa. The five Mixcoa spent their first four days in the water. Later they were asked to kill the 400 and in doing so, established tree, earth, mountain, and ballcourt (150).
Flint enclosure is place where Q and the 4 Ts are born (B 32). Humans are born from a procreating couple in jeweled enclosure (B 38).		House of Blades in underworld (AC 125); Hero Twins jump into a stone pit oven (C178).	Jade bowl in which bones were ground and blood was poured to make humans.

		OLMEC Middle Preclassic	MAYA Late Preclassic	MAYA Classic
<i>Sta- tion</i>	<i>Major symbols</i>	<i>LA VENTA SITE</i> <i>ca. 500-400 BC</i>	<i>SAN BARTOLO</i> <i>ca. AD 150</i>	<i>PALENQUE CROSS GROUP</i> <i>ca. AD 690</i>
4	Creation of earth and its features	Mosaic pavement = earth; massive offering = lake; Mound C = mountain; Celt cruciform = tree. Throne (Altar) 1 = crocodilian or Tlaltecuhtli-like earth being who is torn asunder.	Five sacred trees, flowery mountain of sustenance, portal between realms.	Hun Nal Ye partitions the sky by circumambulating. The Female Earth Mother arises from the deluge of rainy season. Kan Balam shows sacred places on TFC tablet: mountain, tree/maize, earth, water (shell). Also Big Dipper and ecliptic.
4	Primordial ancestral trees	Cruciform celts form tree with mirror placed over effigy of life-bestowing sea and flowering earth.	Fifth being makes offerings to a tree + bird in a plain of copal.	
4	Birth of day count	Numerical components of calendar (9, 13, 20, 260) are encoded into caches over Lake Goddess and Mother Earth mosaic pavements. Lunar count notation as well. Annual cycle implied by quincunxes that define intercardinal points.		GI' (jeweled maize man) and Mother Earth create ritual motion, Feb 3112 BC.
5	Ballgame	Fetuses and colossal decapitated heads, also woman on Stela 1, wear ballgame helmets.		
5	Bodiless head as seed for new creation	Bodiless colossal heads face toward the phallic column incised with embryo-seed face.	Embryo heads on the sacred bundles brought into the flowering mountain prior to the birth of humans from a gourd (like seeds). From about the same time, the quincunx of jade beads in the cache at the summit of Cerros Str. 6.	Disembodied human heads as maize cobs on Tablet of Foliated Cross.

CENTRAL MEXICO Postclassic	MIXTEC Postclassic	MAYA Post-Conquest	AZTEC Post-Conquest
<i>CODEX BORGIA</i> ca. AD 1500	<i>CODEX VIENNA (Vindobonensis)</i> ca. AD 1500	<i>POPOL VUH</i> ca. AD 1550-1700	<i>LEGEND 5 SUNS</i> AD 1558
	Lord 1 Deer and Lady 1 Deer make offerings, generate 52 cultural and physical features. For sequence of earth formation see Bernal-Garcia 2001.	Earth with mountains and valleys. Zipacna builds mountains and Earthquake destroys them but cannot consummate sex.	The five Mixcoa try to kill 400. First they establish sacred places: tree, mountain, earth, water, ballcourt.
Within enclosure of flints and flowers, Xochiquetzal gives birth to flowering plants and trees (B 44).	On Y 5 Flint D 5 Flint, figures make offerings to a tree in a plain of copal balls.		
In female enclosure, four black anthropomorphic trees hold copal and pierce the four ringed day signs to “open” or give birth to days (B 30).	Couple generate the twenty days and nights.		Oxomoco and Cipactonal take “responsibility” for the year count, day sign count, and 20-day count (Annals).
Stripe Eye plays against Lord of Darkness (B 36). Multiple games precede the birth of humans.	As part of the foundation of polities, Lord 7 Flower initiates construction of temples and ballcourts.	Hero Twins play ball with lords of underworld and defeat them by scattering seeds in the ballcourt of the realm of death and darkness.	Huemac of Tollan plays ball with Tlalocs, wins, but people get drought.
	In a flint-lined crucible of birth and death, a decapitated body gives birth to Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl via flint knives. Surrounding the scene, within a dark realm of flints, are warriors holding disembodied skeletal and fleshed heads.	Head of 1 Hunahpu is placed in tree, causing it to bear fruit. Fruit-head spits into hand of Lady Blood, inseminating her. Head of Hunahpu is played in the ballgame, switched for a squash which, when played, scatters seeds, inseminating the underworld.	In <i>Historia Tolteca Chichimeca</i> depiction of Chicomoztoc, the cave-womb is filled with disembodied heads. These will serve as seeds of lineages.

		OLMEC Middle Preclassic	MAYA Late Preclassic	MAYA Classic
<i>Sta- tion</i>	<i>Major symbols</i>	<i>LA VENTA SITE ca. 500-400 BC</i>	<i>SAN BARTOLO ca. AD 150</i>	<i>PALENQUE CROSS GROUP ca. AD 690</i>
5	Sacred instruments and regalia	Headdress ornaments are cached in Mound A-3 and the various “pseudoburials.” Monument 19 may portray the bestowal of regalia to a shaman or ruler.	Crown of rulership is offered to first ruler by primordial being.	Kan Balam receives spears, flints, and shield (TS), sacred bundles containing deity statues (TFC).
6	Primordial location	Water-mountain, mirror tree, womb of earth and sky.	Dark water precedes plain with cosmic trees supporting supernatural birds.	TI tablet shows northern void, black hole as womb of sky.
6	Creator couple	Phallic column, womb/U Group (and vulva monument).	The striding figures 12 and 7—who wear headdresses with similar medallions, one showing the head and one the feet of a bird—may be those who walked the four-fold or quincunxial measuring of earth and sky.	Na’Sak K’uk and Hun Nal Ye Hun Ahaw or GI’ and Mother Earth.
6	Multiple creations	Fetuses may refer to a previous creation. The “Cipactli” throne may refer to a previous creation.		At least one previous era.

Key

AC Christenson 2003	Mon Monument	TFC Temple of the Foliated Cross panel, Palenque
B <i>Codex Borgia</i> (followed by a plate number)	Q Quetzalcoatl	TS Temple of the Sun panel, Palenque
EB Boone (followed by year of publication)	T Tezcatlipoca	V Verso
	TC Temple of the Cross panel, Palenque	X Xolotl

CENTRAL MEXICO Postclassic	MIXTEC Postclassic	MAYA Post-Conquest	AZTEC Post-Conquest
<i>CODEX BORGIA</i> ca. AD 1500	<i>CODEX VIENNA (Vindobonensis)</i> ca. AD 1500	<i>POPOL VUH</i> ca. AD 1550-1700	<i>LEGEND 5 SUNS</i> AD 1558
	9 Wind brings quincunx staff and regalia from sky.	Hunahpu and Xbalanque receive an inseminating ball; at Tulan the progenitors of the Quiché receive statues of the patron gods. These were eventually hidden on the mountains among bromeliads and mosses, except Hacawitz, which was within the Quiché settlement. After a journey to the east, Nacxit gives the Quiché the regalia of lordship.	Deer change into women, tricksters. Escaping man enters fire, finds sacred weapons.
Twisted goddess with sacrificial banners in form of U. “Inside” her is a burst of energy.	Sky enclosure.	Silent, empty womb of the sky over tranquil sea. Darkness.	
The four U-shaped quadrilateral frames that form the wombs of creation are alternately gendered male and female (B 29, 30, 31, top and bottom). Within them energetic objects explode or give birth to the universe, its content. An aged couple gives birth to humans in a jade enclosure filled with blood and a jade umbilicus.	Couple initiates world through song and offering, <i>ñuhu</i> , death and priests, water and mountain (<i>altepetl</i>).	Xmucane and Xpiyacoc or Midwife and Patriarch (AC 62). Names include She Who Has Borne Children, He Who Has Begotten Sons (AC 60). Described multiple/one creators as enlightened beings who want “bright praise.”	Oxomoco and Cipactonal (<i>Annals of Cuauhtitlan</i>).
	Lady 4 Dog and Lord 8 Croc make offerings, generate stones.	Animals and earth were created, but don’t speak, become food.	First people were food for jaguars.
		People made of mud, made no sense, no multiplication.	Second people destroyed by wind, changed to monkeys.
		Diviners advise third try, but wood people fail, destroyed by flood, breaking, are eaten.	Third people destroyed by fire, “baby children.”

Appendix 3

Shape-Shifters and Werewolves to Were-Jaguars: A Brief Chronology

- 1894 Daniel G. Brinton, *Nagualism: A Study in Native American Folklore and History*. Macalla and Co., Printers, Philadelphia. (Cited in Covarrubias, *Mexico South* [1946].)
- 1909 Caroline T. Stewart, *Origin of the Werewolf Superstition*. University of Missouri, Columbia.
- 1915 Theodore de Booy, "Certain West-Indian superstitions pertaining to celts," *Contributions from the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation* II (3). (Cited in Saville, "Votive Axes" [1929].)
- 1924 Theater cartoonist Al Hirschfeld shares Covarrubias's studio on West 42nd Street. That year Henry Hull appeared in 104 performances of *The Youngest* by Philip Barry at New York's Gaiety Theater. At some point, Hirschfeld drew Hull.
- 1929 Marshall H. Saville, "Votive Axes from Ancient Mexico, parts 1 and 2." *Indian Notes* 6:266-299, 335-342. Cited in Covarrubias, *Mexico South* [1946].)
- 1933 Guy Endore, *The Werewolf of Paris*. Farrar and Rinehart, New York.
- 1933 Paul Radin, "Mixe Texts." *Journal de la Société des Americanistes, Paris* n.s. 25. (Cited in Covarrubias, *Mexico South* [1946].)

- 1933 Montague Summers, *The Werewolf*. K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, London.
- 1928 Charles L. Swem, *Werewolf*. Publications for the Crime Club, Doubleday, Doran and Co., New York.
- 1932 *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, film with Frederic March.
- 1935 *Werewolf of London*, film starring Henry Hull.
- 1935 Covarrubias begins work on *Mexico South*.
- 1938 Willard Z. Park, *Shamanism in Western North America: A Study in Cross-cultural Relationships*. Northwestern University (Evanston, IL) Studies in the Social Sciences, no. 2.
- 1938 Director John Huston visits the Covarrubias home in Mexico.
- 1939–1941 Covarrubias collaborates with René d'Harnoncourt on the exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* for the Modern Museum of Art, New York.
- 1940 Covarrubias and Stirling meet at Cerro de la Mesas.
- 1940s During trips to their home in Mexico City, Covarrubias and his wife entertain writer Bruno Traven (author of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*), actor Sam Jaffe, and Orson Welles.
- 1941 *The Wolf-Man*, film starring Lon Cheney Jr.
- 1942 Conference: Tuxtla-Gutiérrez, Mayas y Olmecas: Segunda Mesa Redonda sobre problemas antropológicos de México y Centroamérica, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas.
- 1943 *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*, film starring Bela Lugosi and Lon Cheney Jr.
- 1944 George Foster, "Nagualism in Mexico and Guatemala." *Acta Americana, Revista de la Sociedad Interamericano de Antropología e Geografía* 2 (1.2):8–108 (cited in Covarrubias, *Mexico South* [1946]).
- 1946 Miguel Covarrubias, *Mexico South*. Knopf, New York. Coins the term "were-jaguar."
- 1955 Matthew Foster, *Stone Monuments of the Río Chiquito*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 157. Contains "the Stirling hypothesis" of jaguar-human copulation.

Notes

Preface

1. The Mixe of Oaxaca may be the distant descendants of the ancient inhabitants of the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico.

2. The tale involves a primordial male being, Wood Duck, who sings a song to attract a wife. He attracts many females, but the one he chooses rejects him. In a fight over this female, her lover cuts Wood Duck in half. His sisters renew his life, so like heroes in many Mesoamerican tales, he is reborn (Jacknis 2003:239-255).

3. While he was living in Berkeley, Ishi was a well-known public figure. A boy named Matthew Stirling, from Salinas, California, met Ishi and claimed to be very impressed by him (Stirling 1968c:12). Stirling attended the University of California at Berkeley, studying with Kroeber and graduating with a major in anthropology in 1920. While in school, he had become interested in the Olmec when he saw a photograph of a jade mask attributed to that culture that depicted “a crying baby.” After working as an anthropologist and archaeologist in different parts of the world, he turned to Mexico and the Olmec in 1938. With the support of the National Geographic Society he excavated at Tres Zapotes, La Venta, and other sites, producing numerous valuable documentary publications for the Bureau of American Ethnology as well as popular articles for *National Geographic* magazine. He, too, was interested in creation stories and, based on his ethnological work, published a monograph on the origin story of the Acoma of Arizona (“Origin Myth of Acoma and Other Records,” *Bulletin* 135, Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington, DC, 1942). After excavating a badly broken monument that seemed to show a jaguar on top of a woman, he formulated an origin myth for the ubiquitous crying babies of the Olmec in which a sexual union between the jaguar and woman produced a race of jaguar-human beings. Stirling and his hypothesis are discussed further in Chapter 2.

Chapter One

1. For the history of the discovery of the Olmec, see, for example, Soustelle 1985; Benson 1996; Tabarev 2005.

2. In a 1973 article, David Grove showed that the monu-

ment format that Blom and La Farge called “altar” most likely served as a throne. In subsequent chapters I will refer to these as thrones.

Chapter Two

1. Author translation: “It is an art impregnated with jaguars, elements of jaguar and other ideas derived from the jaguar. Thus, we have true jaguars with great fangs, or anthropomorphic jaguars in attitudes that are half-human and half-jaguar, with regalia and the costumes of men. . . . This obsession with felines must have had an essentially religious motive, practically totemic, or it may have been related with a cult of jaguar gods of the earth or rain, with which the jaguar is intimately related.”

2. Historian of religions Raimundo Pannikar, among others, has explored the problematics of the term *deity*. If by using the term we intend it as “a generic name connoting all those forces, energies, entities, ideas, powers, and the like that come from ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ the human realm,” better choices might be “the divine,” “the sacred,” or a term indigenous to the group being discussed. A “deity” is an agent of action, not a quality, and one that generally transcends the human being. In using the term *deity*, one allows readers to universalize the concept to which one refers. This is a common tendency in the West, where we tend to assume that the God of Abraham is an absolute value, and that other cultures are more “advanced” if they exhibit knowledge of the technologies that have been important to the West. I agree with Pannikar’s (1987:266) statement that “The word deity cannot encompass all that other traditions have said about what in one group of cultures can be rendered by deity. Were we to use the term *brahman* or *kami* instead of deity, our meaning would change.” That said, Pannikar describes three ways in which deities have been constructed. One is meta-cosmological, in which the deity is a prime mover in creation, or sets the world into motion. Its salient feature, he says, is infinity. The meta-anthropological deity is a symbol for the desire of humans for a just, peaceful, happy society. The deity is perceived as having (or being the source of) human emotions such as love. The meta-ontological deity is beyond the limitations of human nature and even beyond being. When most writers treat Mesoamerican deities, they describe them as having power over some aspect of nature, such as rain or maize, or pulque, or over an aspect of culture, such as warfare, trading, or midwifery. It seems to me that the fundamental principles guiding the construction of such categories as gender and the sacred involved fluidity rather than fixed categories or correspondences. The discourse in the Formative period focused on understanding processes rather than revering anthropomorphic entities that controlled fixed domains. In other words, I see no evidence for a jaguar deity or even a maize deity.

3. In a 2004 class on Olmec art at Texas Tech, I discussed the sculpture El Bebé, which dates to around 1350 bc. Kyle McQuilkin, a graduate student with a background in biology, began to research whether it represented an anencephalic fetus (images of which are easily found on the Internet), and if so, whether the advent of maize as a staple food could have caused a high incidence of births exhibiting neural tube defects. His paper drew the connection between fumonisin mold, its effects on folic acid intake, and the axe-image. Furthermore, he explored whether such images could have been intended as memorials to lost fetuses and infants. McQuilkin has made a very important connection between maize consumption and the portrayal of possible birth defects in embryos; however, I see only one of the axe-images—the earliest, El Bebé—as an image of an infant or fetus with neural tube defects.

4. Similarly, Covarrubias (1946:125) wrote, “The Pre-Olmecs cultivated the principle of fertility with an awed intensity and saw magic in the idea of birth.”

Chapter Three

1. I thank Wendy Bacon for pointing out to me that dwarfs may have trouble raising their arms, and for sharing her article in *Codex* (Bacon 2004).

2. For an entry into the literature on Maya dwarfs, see Foncerrada de Molina 1976; Miller 1985; Houston 1992; Meyer 1986; Prager 2001; and Bacon 2004.

3. James Porter (1996) likens these to celt shapes, and Joralemon (1988:38) identifies celts with maize ears. Taube (1996:56–57) sees the celtiform stelae as the Olmec maize god.

4. Regarding the double merlon as an element for the opening between the flowering earth surface and the watery underworld, Reilly (1991:57) interprets it as an entrance to the underworld and sacred mountain. Taube (1996:57) sees the double merlon as “green.” Elsewhere (Tate 1999, 2002) I have suggested that the La Venta mosaic pavements, made of greenstone and containing a double merlon and fringed diamonds, represent an Olmec version of the Mixe concept of Naswin, the female earth surface power (Lipp 1991). Holy Mother Earth, as I call her, like Naswin, is associated with a green skirt of vegetation (the netted jade bead skirt also on the mosaic pavements) and is the interface (like Reilly’s entrance) between the earth surface and the underworld. I also think this is the origin of the “flowery world” metaphors in Teotihuacan and Aztec thought.

5. Joralemon (1974:63) convincingly related the three bands, a frequent symbol in Maya art, to bloodletting. Reilly (1991:56) proposed that a similar motif of three bands in Olmec art is also related to bloodletting. Again, I think these interpretations are correct, and that their origin in embryogenesis and birth explains why these three bands represent bloodletting.

6. In a recent study, art historian Annabeth Headrick

(2007) proposed that in Teotihuacan's Tepantitla Portico 2 murals, the central figure, often called "Great Goddess," represents a personified mountain-tree effigy with a natural mountain below it, thus showing both ritual and earthly versions of a sacred mountain. She further uses an analogy with the modern Zinacantan Maya to suggest that this mountain-tree was one in which the ancestors kept the spirit companion souls of the unborn (49). This and the fact that it controls life-giving waters reiterate its womblike qualities. Similarly, the reliefs on La Venta Stelae 25/26, 27 and others show embryo, mountain, and tree in the form of corn. They also suggest a bond between the unborn, who personify the vital force, and the ancestral mountain-tree.

7. In an article of 2005, Sandstrom provided a footnote about these intriguing boxes. He said he had been unable to locate much discussion of them in the ethnohistorical literature, "so their origin has remained a mystery." He discussed recent excavations of Offering 102, a sealed stone box in the Templo Mayor, the main temple of the Aztecs. On the "Tlaloc" side of the temple, the box contained a paper costume, paper figures, and little statues of the rain/fertility god, Tlaloc, made of stone, rubber, and copal. Their presence in the Aztec offering indicates that caches referring to a fertilizing principle existed in late Pre-Hispanic times. I suggest that caches of Olmec celts such as those at El Manatí, accompanied by seeds and balls, and at La Venta (see Chapters 4 and 5) were large-scale antecedents of the later seed boxes.

8. Saville (1929) connected axes with Tezcatlipoca and thunderbolts that rained from heaven. Taube (1996:54) argues that the celt represents the world tree holding up the sky. Focusing on the sexual metaphor only adds a level of meaning to the tree, cosmic axis, and thunderbolt connections.

9. Brian Stross (1994:22) reports the Mayan belief that "the spirit of maize is kept in the heavens, descending when it is time for communion with maize in the milpa, . . . just as in reality the maize kernel falls from the planter's hands into the hole that can be seen as a miniature 'maw' of the underworld monster"—or, as I have shown, the womb of the earth.

10. See www.xochimilco.df.gob.mx/tradiciones/ninopa.html.

11. Several Pre-Columbian canoes have been discovered recently, all associated with burials. In 2004 three skeletons accompanied by jade instruments were discovered lying in two canoes in adjacent tombs in Chiapas. These are estimated to date to 1000 bc. Keith Prufer found a canoe from the Classic Maya period in a cliff-top cave in Belize near Uxbanka (www.ascribe.org).

Chapter Four

1. Unfortunately there are many impediments to a clear chronology for the Formative period. The results of that

potentially useful tool, radiocarbon dating, are debated on a date-by-date basis, with archaeologists differing on which to accept as accurately associated with an object or phase. Archaeologists also hold conflicting opinions about extra-local relationships based on ceramic cross-ties. There has been a long-standing polemic about the origins of Formative period societies, including debates about the origins of the widespread symbol system, about whether increased uniformity in the symbol system was due to the influence of the Gulf Coast Olmec on their trading partners, or whether certain aspects of Formative period "culture" developed in certain regions and were differentially adopted by the other regions. There are also misconceptions about a putative "style" that many authors confuse with the subjects and formats of sculpture. Due to these and other problems, the chronology presented in this chapter is tentative.

2. According to linguist Brian Stross, contemporary Mayan words for the coccyx usually relate the sacrum to notions of "god" and "sacred." On one end of the spine, the sacrum resembles the skull on the other end. More than the skull, the sacrum has associations with creation and procreation. He interprets the Middle Formative to Classic period images of the sacrum as part of a larger set of visual references to a cosmic portal or an opening through which consciousness can enter another "cosmic realm" (Stross 1996).

3. Regarding the early (armless, somewhat androgynous) figurine from Zohapilco, Niederberger (1976:213) mentioned its similarity to others from Ecuador, Japan, the Near East, Western Europe, the Sahara, Chile, and Ecuador. She also said that some authors had seen such mouthless figures as mute, and perhaps funerary in nature.

4. Pool 2007:184.

5. Pool 2007:186.

6. For any non-Mesoamericanists, 52 cycles of 365 days, or about 52 solar years, is equivalent to 73 cycles of 260 days. The permutation of these two cycles (the 365-day solar and the 260-day gestational) in which each day is uniquely named for 18,980 days, or about 52 solar years, comprised a Calendar Round in Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerican societies. The 260-day cycle was composed of 13 numbers and 20 named days. The 365-day cycle consisted of 18 named months of 20 numbered days plus a named period of 5 days. These numbers—13, 20, 52, 260, and 365—and a few others were highly significant in Mesoamerican thought, serving to link the human body and human life with celestial cycles.

7. Given the existence of so many mountains near lakes or springs in Mexico and Central America, it is not surprising that this topographic configuration played an important role in cultural concepts of *city*. Indeed, the Nahuatl (or Aztec; AD 1325–1521) term for a village or city was *altepetl*, literally "water-hill." Certain hills or mountains were the seats or homes of patron deities or important ancestors associated with the origins of lineages and which served as

protectors of communities. Conceptually (and sometimes actually), such mountains contained bodies of water in caves that served as the sources of the rain that fertilized crops. The mountain-with-water thus played a role in the germination of crops. The Aztec period cities in the Basin of Mexico nestled along the lake that shimmered among the surrounding mountains. While the Nahuatl (or Aztec) term *altepetl* referred only to towns of that culture, the concept that an urban construction should relate to a geographic configuration of mountain and water seems to have been present from the earliest stages of urban development at El Manatí and, even earlier, in the huge mounds (mountains) of shells (water-filled and water-dwelling creatures that serve as food) from the west coast of Mexico.

8. Dates given in the text are from Pool 2006:95–96. The dates were calculated by the comparison of ceramics with those from other sites, particularly San Lorenzo and the Mazatán region (around Paso de la Amada), and by radio-carbon dating.

9. In the several publications of archaeological excavations at El Manatí, the numbers of balls from Manatí A varies. In a publication of 2000, the archaeologists wrote, “Until the 1992 field season, we had encountered three rubber balls. . . . During the 1996 field season, a group of six balls of various sizes was found. . . . These rubber balls are impressive evidence of the ballgame in this early period (c. 1600 bc)” (Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000:79).

10. Rocks heated in a fire were dropped into tightly woven baskets or ceramic vessels full of liquid.

11. Visible on an infant cranium would be the seven fontanelles, the anterior one in the form of the four-pointed star.

12. Accompanying the “busts” were other cedar wood objects: scepters and stone knives with wood handles. One of the scepters, or staffs, was 1.1 m long and had a shark’s tooth fixed onto one end. It is worth pointing out that this length is similar to the *vara*. In some Zapotec communities today, this is the length from one shoulder to the opposite finger tip and is used for hoe handles. Although it is impossible to know how maize was planted at 1200 bc, it is not unlikely that this length may have related to planting. Nowadays, 80 cm is the appropriate spacing for planting maize along with beans and squash in the northern Sierra of Oaxaca (González 2001:143). Coe and Diehl (1980, II:77) reported that near San Lorenzo today, rows are about a meter apart, and hills along one row are spaced at about 50 cm. Planters used a digging stick made of a wood appropriate to the soil type. Some have metal points on the end.

13. Making the humans of wood may prefigure the Nahuatl correlation between human bodies and trees (López Austin 1980:350). Perhaps this more general metaphorical relation between humans and plants preceded the more specific one between humans and maize.

14. It is interesting to think of this basically unoccupied ritual site in light of John Monaghan’s observations on the taboos associated with pregnancy in contemporary Oaxaca

(see Chapter 1). If at this early era pregnancy was considered a “hot” state of “cooking” the fetus, and if taboos on the proximity of pregnant women to other “hot” activities had been developed, this might explain why there were few inhabitants and little craft activity at El Manatí. It was dangerously full of ritual heat.

15. See Pool 2007:134–144 for a discussion of the debates surrounding the processes by which rulership developed in the Gulf Lowlands.

16. I thank a doctoral student in Fine Arts, Kyle McQuilkin, for this connection between maize, its fungus fumonisin, and neural tube defects in embryos. McQuilkin wrote a convincing research paper suggesting that at least one Olmec image of the human embryo—and possibly the earliest—portrays anencephaly, a neural tube defect (lack of brain development). That image is El Bebé, the compacted stone axe from La Merced. The paper went on to explore how, prior to the widespread adoption of fermentation and nixtamalization, the Formative period people might have connected eating maize with disastrous consequences for childbearing, both for the infant and the mother.

17. An earlier court than Paso de la Amada may exist: the Middle Archaic open-air site of Gheo-Shih in Oaxaca was occupied seasonally by foraging bands who cleared a field 7 by 20 m (23 by 66 ft) and edged it with small boulders. They also manufactured ornaments from pebbles and made oval rings of stones that may have been foundations for hut walls.

18. I think the generally held opinion has been that the graphic symbol system of the Basin of Mexico is from late in the Early Formative. However, it is difficult, given the available information, to sustain this placement. From my point of view as a historian of visual culture, between 1350 and 1300 bc the graphic symbol system of the Basin as it appears on pottery and incised objects is more complex than the graphic system on pots or on monuments from the Gulf Coast. At least in this regard the Ayotla phase ceramics of the Basin seem to have priority, so I will treat this graphic system before the monuments of San Lorenzo. The two may well have developed simultaneously and in relation to one another.

19. Pool 2007:7, 206.

20. Due to the intensive ransacking of the site during the construction of the highway from Mexico City to Puebla, a number of pieces have no specific provenance. While the pieces illustrated here were not found archaeologically, the archaeologist who excavated at Tlapacoya considers them to conform to ceramic types and motifs on shards she did recover.

21. By *metamorphosis*, which I use to describe the embryo’s meaning, I think the Basin of Mexico inhabitants referred to a human when it is barely distinguishable from other creatures but is becoming human. It reinforces the interconnectedness and fluidity of sexual identity (embryos do not exhibit sexual identity, but fetuses do) and between

humans and other creatures. *Regeneration* refers to the formation of new life from the preexisting life inherent in semen, blood, bone, and the uterus. The axolotl, if that is what the “flame brow” refers to, is a creature that can “regenerate” a limb in the contemporary sense of the word, an ability that surely would have been noticed by basin dwellers. *Gestation* refers to the process of transformation of life in the womb from a glob to a baby. *Transformation* is involved in all these processes and can refer to the adult human’s capacity for shifts in gender, social, and species identity. In all these processes, the life force, for which English has no adequate term (but various Mesoamerican languages do), was a central concept. I think early knowledge systems in Mesoamerica centered on responding to these biological processes as a means to explain observable phenomena on individual, community, environmental, and celestial levels.

22. Schele (1995) suggested that striding profile figures in the White Patio at Atetelco, Teotihuacan, may represent rulers. Her argument was based on the fact that they hold staffs and wear large conch shell pectorals. She related these to the smaller “maize bundle” staffs held by some Olmec figures whom she and Reilly identified as “rulers.” However, some of the figures holding “maize bundle” staffs (see Taube 1995) are clearly embryo figures and not likely to be rulers. Nevertheless, Headrick (2007:22–43) has made a case for the possible portrayal of rulers at Teotihuacan.

23. See Paulinyi 2006:2–5 for a discussion of the various interpretations of the “bestowing hands.”

24. Although they were looted, these hollow babies were studied by Niederberger, who considered them authentic and from Tlapacoya.

25. Wikipedia’s entry on anencephaly has good illustrations of this neural tube defect.

26. This tabulation differs from that of Ann Cyphers (2004). Hers is more detailed and presents more categories. It also covers four surrounding sites. My purpose in creating this limited analysis is merely to give a context for the number of portrayals of women and the unborn.

27. Using the terms *proper right* and *proper left* is an attempt, often on the part of curators of objects, to eliminate confusion when referring to one side of an object. It takes the object’s point of view. “Proper right” means the object’s right side as if consciousness dwells in the object and looks out the front.

28. The pair of lions at Hattusas in Turkey, which date to about 1400 bc, are also frontal, symmetrical, and not portrayed in a position of attack. These probably descend from a long tradition of lion thrones for human figures, ranging from Çatal Höyük (6500–5000 bc, Turkey) through Old Kingdom Egypt and beyond.

Chapter Five

1. Regional surveys of the San Lorenzo area show that by 900 bc only a medium-sized village remained where the largest civic center of its era in Mesoamerica had once been (Symonds et al. 2002). Outlying villages were reduced in number and in inhabitants as well. Christopher Pool (2007:156) suggests that the inhabitants may have lost faith in the elite and considered that the effort of supporting the city’s construction was not worth the benefits, and that they may have “joined the growing number of followers at Tres Zapotes and La Venta.”

2. Various authors have proposed that La Venta was consolidated through pilgrimage. In an article whose chronological assertions were hotly challenged, Grennes-Ravitz and Coleman (1976) suggested that La Venta was created through contributions of rock brought by individuals attracted to the site’s tutelary deity. Earlier, René Millon (1967) had suggested that Teotihuacan drew pilgrims for religious purposes, that they may have been influential in the construction of the Pyramid of the Sun, and that the arrival of pilgrims to visit the cave beneath the pyramid was a factor in the city’s economic growth.

3. What to call these places known to us today as archaeological sites vexes archaeologists and art historians. Were the Formative period (1400–400 bc) sites of Mesoamerica truly urban, so that they can be called “cities”? Most specialists have developed their own positions. Because it is not the focus of this book, I use the generic terms *ceremonial center* and *civic center*.

4. Heizer, Graham, and Napton (1968) presented a case that the prototype of Mound C was Cerro Cintepec in the Tuxtlas.

5. It should be noted that the mountain behind Teopantecuanitlan is to its south, and that from Chalcatzingo, Popocatepetl is visible to the west. From San Lorenzo, one could see San Martín directly to the north.

6. As Stirling (1943:49) pointed out, Désiré Charnay (1887) published the first mention of “caryatids, columns, and statues” at a site that must have been La Venta. He had heard about them from a local “montañero.”

7. Archaeologist Rebecca González Lauck (1997) has established the basic shape and dimensions of the Earthen Pyramid, which she found is a rectangular, stepped platform with radial stairways and inset corners. She thinks it is similar in form to the later E VII-sub at Uaxactun. She argues against it being an effigy of a volcano, as was first proposed by Heizer (1968:19) and frequently described since. I would point out that pyramidal platforms in Mesoamerica are conceptual models of pyramids even though they are not formal copies of them.

8. I make no pretense at presenting the construction of time as an impartial act. With “Before Christ” (BC) and “Anno Domini” (AD), at least the reader knows the historical and political bases for the temporal nomenclature.

9. Near Offering 5 (in the northeast platform), in which some regalia was interred within a rectangle bordered by pieces of tuff, were three ceramic vessels. Drucker placed Offering 5 in Phase III, dated from 600 to 500 bc. Drucker et al. (1959:164) noted that this group of vessels “might have been considered a separate offering, except for the fact that a small piece of tuff . . . also lay to the southwest of the bowl.” Several archaeologists have used one of these bowls—which resembles Early Franco ceramics from western Tabasco, considered to date to 700–500 bc—to date Phase II (or II and III combined) from 700 to 500 bc (von Nagy 2003:633,835). According to my proposal, an Early Franco ceramic which might have been made about the end of that phase could easily appear in a Phase III (which I date 750–600 bc) offering.

10. Phase I dates are 1040–900 bc per Berger et al. 1967 (as in Pool 2007:303); 800–700 bc per von Nagy et al. 2003; 900–800 bc per Pohl 2004.

11. Milbrath's (1979) argument consists of several sequential analyses which are cross-confirming. Her basic analytical category addresses the conventions of carving figures, such as the degree of naturalism versus stylization in such areas as musculature, the complexity of planes of relief, and the relation of a figure to the block of stone. At this point she also considers pose and costuming. This provides her with three groups which she sees as having been produced in distinct eras. She sought archaeological context for all the monuments. What little evidence there is confirms to her the validity of her groupings. To bolster this “scientific” chronological evidence, she also compares specific motifs on the monuments to those on pottery, considering both the symbols and the style in which they were rendered. She sees this evidence as confirming her initial grouping as well. She also factors in the changing materials with which La Venta sculptures were made. The chronology seems generally right, but it should be checked by tracking individual subjects of representation, as I did for the embryo symbol. For example, one small detail calls a great deal into question. La Venta Thrones 4 and 5, like their cave-niche counterparts at San Lorenzo, are placed in Group I, which Milbrath dates 1250–1150 bc. Even if that were extended to 1000 bc, there is a problem. On Throne 5, the figure emerging from the cave wears a headdress plaque that represents the embryo. If this is a greenstone plaque, such objects do not appear at La Venta until the Phase III caches, which probably date somewhere between 800–600 bc. It should be pointed out that the earliest celt-form object (a small axe) with embryo imagery at La Venta is also in a Phase III deposit. So, could Throne 5 date to Phase I? Or could it be a Phase III monument made in an archaic style? On the other hand, a greenstone plaque depicting an embryo appeared in the late San Lorenzo B or Nacaste phase at San Lorenzo, and this would be approximately the same time as my dating of Phase I.

12. Phase II dates are 900–800 bc per Berger et al. 1967

(as in Pool 2007:303); ca. 900–800 bc per González Lauck 1990; 700–500 bc per von Nagy 2003; and 800–650 bc per Pohl 2004.

13. Soren Wichmann (2006) and other scholars think it is possible that the Gulf Coast Olmec spoke proto- or pre-proto-Zoquean.

14. Another site that reportedly contained over thirty cached life-size, wearable jadeite masks of the human face and numerous jadeite and greenstone celts, among other items, was Arroyo (Río) Pesquero. The exhibition *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* (Guthrie 1995) united quite a few of these masks, which had been dispersed into private and public collections.

15. In a thought-provoking dissertation, Billie Follensbee has closely scrutinized for indication of gender more than 1,500 clay figurines from San Lorenzo (Yale collections) and Tres Zapotes and La Venta (Smithsonian collections), as well as small stone and monumental sculptures from the Gulf Coast Olmec. First she looked at the clay figurines that obviously portrayed females in a way easy for us to recognize: large female breasts or clearly pregnant. She looked at the bodily forms and accoutrements of those figures and gathered a set of additional female traits. Female bodily forms have pronounced Y or V shapes in the pubic region, pinched waists, and often limbs that taper toward the lower joints. Well-defined buttock cleavage is another characteristic, although breasts we would consider obviously female are not that common. Instead, breasts are often subtly swelling with incised W or U shapes below them. Costume elements of females typically include a “pubic apron” held from a low-riding cord, belt, or sash, and surprisingly, upper armbands. Male bodies have squarer, harder pectoral muscles and more cylindrical limbs. Male costumes include a wrapped loincloth and high-rising belt, as well as upper body straps. She defined this figurine as female.

16. Phase III dates are 800–700 bc per Berger et al. 1967 (as in Pool 2007:303); possibly 800 to 600 bc per González Lauck 1990; 700–500 bc (or same as Phase II) per von Nagy 2003; and 650–500 bc per Pohl 1994.

17. Important regalia from many parts of Mesoamerica and beyond were “terminated” by being offered to the Chichén Itzá cenote. One example of thousands has been tied to a specific ruler. A jade pendant bearing the date of an astronomically tied ritual, recorded only by Kan Balam II of Palenque, was taken all the way to Chichén and burned before being flung in the water. It is not unlikely that the offerings at La Venta were brought to the massive offerings and deposited over these “lakes” just as these later pieces were deposited in the cenote.

18. Milbrath (1979:29–30) describes “Group III” style monuments, which she estimates to date to about 700–550 bc, as “rather atypical.” The “blocky carving style, angular shoulder pads, blank eyes and triangular noses” share many features with monuments in Tiltepec, Chiapas, estimated to date in the same range. Reliefs of her Group III differ from

those she sees as earlier because their figures “are more massive and the relief composition is complex, with a rhythmic repetition of lines, numerous overlapping forms, and little negative space . . . [with] ‘crisp and planar’ relief” (34).

19. Phase IV dates are 700–580 bc per Berger et al. 1967 (as in Pool 2007:303); possibly 600–400 bc per González Lauck 1990; 500–350 bc per von Nagy 2003; and 450–350 bc per Pohl 1994.

20. This was one of three skull sculptures excavated at the site. In addition to this jade skull, a ceramic skull, placed in a bowl, was dredged with cinnabar (Offering 1955-4), and one was in Tomb C.

21. Certain birds are associated with women and used as women’s names, including the first wife of the *Popol Vuh*’s Hun Hunahpu, and the primordial woman in the Palenque creation text in the Cross Group. I am not convinced by David Stuart’s recent argument (2005) that Maya creation occurred without females.

22. For Lady 1 Eagle, see Caso 1977–1979; Furst 1978; and Jansen 1982.

23. The existence of two tiny crystal skulls archaeologically excavated from Middle Formative and Classic period contexts calls into question the recent assertions that the Mitchell-Hedges crystal skull and others of its ilk had no Pre-Columbian precedents.

Chapter Six

1. Astronomical bases for the 8 degrees west of north orientation have also been proposed. An interesting one is that La Venta’s alignment is actually 82 degrees east of north, with the north-south axis being perpendicular to that east-west orientation. Peeler and Winter (1992) relate the 82 degrees east orientation to the setting of Alnilam (the central star in Orion’s belt) around November 12 in the era between 1000 and 900 bc. Such observations may well have been part of the decision for the site plan, but are not as concrete to us today as the fact that people moved hundreds of tons of stone past the mountain to La Venta’s south.

2. Another recent theory is that those who became the Gulf Coast Olmec had migrated from coastal Chiapas. When they left Chiapas, they spoke pre-proto Mixe-Zoquean, but after diverging, their language transformed into proto-Zoquean (Josserand [2007] n.d.).

3. David Mora-Marín (2010) published a cogent analysis of Kaufman and Justeson’s 2001 work that substantially supports their finding that the La Mojarra text was composed by Mixe-Zoquean speakers.

4. Another version of Mixe origins, told by some Mixe, is that their ancestors came from South America. This is especially intriguing because recent work by the late linguist Kathryn Josserand ([2007] n.d.) hypothesizes (1) that pre-proto-Mixe-Zoquean entered Mesoamerica from an unidentified southern region contemporary with the

appearance of Barra phase ceramics in the Pacific Coast Chiapas region; (2) that some pre-proto-Mixe-Zoquean speakers diverged, settling along the southern Gulf Coast and becoming the Gulf Coast Olmec; and (3) that the physical divergence resulted in the distinction of proto-Zoquean (spoken along the Gulf) and proto-Mixean (spoken along the Pacific, but also northward into the Valley of Mexico).

5. I have adapted the International Phonetic Alphabet spelling of the name of the (Mother) Earth Surface, given by Lipp, for a more general readership. In discussions with linguist and anthropologist Brian Stross (2007), he clarified that *nax* (pronounced “nash”) is “earth” in Mixe, while *wiñ* is “surface.” We thought Nashwini would approximate the sound yet be less intimidating for nonlinguists.

6. Another scholar who thinks that solstice sunrise and sunset points were encoded at La Venta is Malmström (1997:83–84), who suggested that from the column on Platform D-8, one could look over Platform D-1 to the San Martín Pajapan volcano and see the sun set on summer solstice. Near the top of the volcano is Monument 1, which shows a man wearing an embryo and maize-tree headdress raising a cleft bar. Interestingly, Yaxchilan Late Classic rulers claimed to “raise the sky” on summer solstice while holding a staff with quatrefoil (cosmic portal-shaped) cutouts (Tate 1992).

7. Actually, a layer of yellowish-olive clay enveloped the mosaic pavements. The pavements were only visible during their creation or for a short time, until the clay that covered them could be installed.

8. Reilly (1994) argued further that the fringed diamonds represent waterlilies. I agree with that as well. Mesoamerican symbols always function on multiple levels. I have proposed that the Earthen Pyramid, the massive offerings, and mosaic pavements are indexical to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, with its mountains in the south and seas to the north, and the abundant vegetation of the deltaic region in which La Venta is situated.

Chapter Seven

1. I first presented my observations regarding the sculptural sets, or stations, at La Venta at a public lecture at the Mexican Embassy in Washington, DC, in 2002. This material was later published in my article of 2008. Rebecca González (2010) has made a similar analysis of the sculptural sets, which she calls “clusters.” She presented her findings at a Dumbarton Oaks conference in 2007, the proceedings of which were published in 2010.

2. Cyphers (1997c) now thinks that the ponds, or *lagunas*, on the surface of San Lorenzo are modern cattle stock ponds.

3. I suspect that the ten or so seated anthropomorphic figures once formed a set that, in its last configuration, may have been atop Mounds A-4 and A-5, but there is no hard evidence for this idea other than the discovery of Monument 23, a seated human figure, on A-5, a Phase IV mound.

4. Actually, there seem to have been two central axes during the site's history. They are parallel to each other, so both are oriented 8 degrees west of north. The northernmost and southernmost monuments, the lost phallic column on its conical mound and the U Group and its fetuses, respectively, are on one axis, and the rest of the site's monuments and structures are on the other. Given the published archaeological data, I'm not sure which was older. Spatially, however, they are rather close, and both are integrated into the fabric of the site in such a way that they are seldom noticed by other scholars.

5. Stirling directed the excavation of the heads. His report in *National Geographic* said that the three northern heads were "in a line about thirty yards apart" (Stirling 1940:329) and that all three faced east (333). This statement is curious because Drucker and others who saw them in situ clarified that they faced north.

6. Aveni (2001:248) discusses the "aberrant" orientation of La Venta in the same paragraph in which he notes that other Preclassic sites seem to be oriented to important mountains.

7. It is difficult to ascertain how many years the monuments had been in this configuration. Some of the sets, such as the heads, could have been in place since the early phases. If we are right about the shift in types of stones used to create monuments, the sandstone fetuses and green schist stelae were likely introduced late in La Venta's occupation.

8. The purported E group, or solar observatory, is on the Long Mound (D-8). The theory is based on the discovery of one of the columns, Monument 49, on the southern end of the long, low mound. Clark postulated that two more such columns served as a set of three markers. The observer would have stationed him- or herself on a small, roughly square mound, D-1, to the west of the Long Mound, from which point the sun would have interacted with the columns on the equinoxes and solstices. The problem is that the other two columns do not exist.

Chapter Eight

1. While it may seem contradictory to incorporate the cached carvings, which would have been invisible, into a visual narrative, we know that the individuals using La Venta had some knowledge of their existence and placement. As Offering 1955-4 was excavated, the archaeologists remarked that in Phase IV a pit had been dug directly over the offering to the level of the sixteen standing figures' heads. None of the figures was disturbed, and the pit was filled in (Drucker et al. 1959). It seems safe to assume that at least the massive offerings and mosaic pavements were known because modifications were made to the platforms covering them. As I have said, I think their presence was related to the site's identity as a pilgrimage site and center

for ritual, especially for the performance of creation narratives.

2. To a limited extent, I also explored Mesoamerica's creation myths relative to those from other parts of the world. Key in this phase of investigation were several works, especially a book by Marta Weigle, *Creation and Procreation: Feminist Reflections on Mythologies of Cosmogony and Parturition* (1989). She identified numerous metaphors from sources on various Native North American and European peoples that frame creation in terms of procreation, midwifery, gestation, and birth. These contrast with the Judeo-Christian tradition of the singular male creator who fashions life *ex nihilo* and provide an interesting basis of comparison with Mesoamerican stories.

3. Several scholars have noted that the alleyways running north-south between the southern mounds at La Venta resemble the north-south Avenue of the Dead at Teotihuacan (Proskouriakoff 1971:42; González Lauck 1996:79).

4. Other human images at La Venta portrayed wearing helmets are the woman on Stela 1; males on Monuments 9, 10; the figure in the niche of Throne 2; and the columnar embryo monument 75.

5. Allan Maca, who was excavating a U-shaped structure at Copán, first pointed out to me this U-shaped platform on the plan of La Venta.

6. Scholars have proposed that this column and mound were part of an astronomical architectural group. There is a small mound (D-1) to the west of the center of the Long Mound (D-8). If there had been two columns on the Long Mound, one on the north in addition to the one on the south, they may have marked the solstitial sunrise points on the eastern horizon, although the accuracy of the assemblage would be a function of the distance between the western mound (D-1) and the columns. However, this proposal remains unsubstantiated simply because only one column was found on Mound D-8. As the archaeologists complained, it takes teams of men to move these columns, so it is unlikely that a column of this size was looted.

7. As David C. Grove (1973) showed, these large blocks with overhanging upper edges like tabletops probably functioned as thrones. There are several such sculptures that include human figures seated on similarly shaped blocks. However, on the maps in this chapter, these thrones are labeled as Altars A1–A8. This is to retain consistency with all earlier maps of La Venta.

8. For infant mortality and miscarriage at Teotihuacan, see Storey 1992.

9. For the significance of Aztec child sacrifice, see Arnold 1991.

10. Donald Lathrap (1971) saw caiman in the category of Olmec images that Peter David Joralemon called "God 1." Joralemon agreed but thought his category was more "polymorphic" and should be referred to as a dragon (Joralemon 1976:37, Fig. 10e.) Reilly provided further information on

the crocodilian and its habits, and also related this image to a polymorphic being, largely crocodilian (1994:94). Reilly (1995) sees a “sky dragon” and an “earth dragon.” He sees teeth or their absence as setting up a dichotomy between “tamed” and “uncontrolled” earth (1994:98).

11. At La Venta the other crocodile was on a sarcophagus. It emitted flowers, suggesting the rebirth of the person symbolically buried within.

12. A cluster of different monuments surrounds this column on the platform. With the exception of Monument 59, a small throne composed of a jaguar wearing an embryo mask, the monuments are in poor condition. Around the next column to the north, also 3.5 m high but green, were clustered a colossal head (Monument 1), Stela 2, and a large oval stone bearing a variety of relief carvings, referred to as Altar 7. In my opinion, both clusters were associated with individual rulers, or told a story that was not inherent to the site-length narrative. Such clusters may have been commissioned by rulers or lineages who wished to place their political monuments within the scope of the creation narrative.

13. La Merced Monument 1 measures a maximum of 40 cm in width; the carved face is 63 cm in height plus an uncarved area of 9 cm (the existing monument is broken below the face). The maximum thickness of the stone is 9 cm (Rodríguez and Ortiz 2000:158).

14. In addition to these four, there are three other similar monuments of which only fragments remain. These are Monument 15, found on the centerline in the A-1 plaza; Monument 22, a green schist stela found on the southeast corner of platform A-1-e; and Monument 58, a green schist stela found near the green schist column on Platform B-4 in the center of the Complex B plaza (the “Great Plaza”). Each portrays the stylized face of a human embryo.

15. Similarly, on the east side of the site center at Izapa, Chiapas, a Late Preclassic Maya site, was a row of nineteen boulder stelae and accompanying pedestals. These uncarved, or “plain,” monuments were situated in the bend of the Río Izapa. I suspect that either there were once twenty stela-pedestal pairs, or that the stone basin to the south of this row of stelae formed a part of the same ritual group. The twenty standing stones (or nineteen and a basin) could have embodied the twenty day names. The whole group, segregated as it is from the sacred and political precincts to the west, could have been used for infant bathing and naming.

16. Embryos inherently appear androgynous because until the ninth week (when the embryo becomes a fetus), the “external genitalia of the two sexes are similar in appearance” (England 1996:160).

17. Apparently the bundles in Tomb A were not placed over the Phase IV massive offering.

18. Scholars tend to think that most of the seventeen known colossal heads date from the Early Formative. Those from Tres Zapotes and Cobata, while similar to each other,

are very different from the others and could be later (Clark and Pye 2000; Clewlow 1974; Milbrath 1979) or earlier (Kubler 1975:71).

19. For early interpretations of the significance of the heads as rulers, see Stirling 1955 and 1965:733,755.

20. For interpretations of heads as deceased chiefs or warriors, see Bernal 1968a.

21. For interpretations of heads as gods of vegetation and fertility, see Westheim 1965.

22. For interpretations of heads as manifestations of “a pharaonic desire for eternity,” see Kubler 1975:74.

23. For interpretations of heads as astronomical markers, see Covarrubias 1946:97.

24. For interpretations of heads as decapitated ballplayers, see Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964.

25. See Schele and Friedel 1991. The authors report that several Maya ballcourts were called Ox Ahal Em, or “thrice-made descents,” possibly a reference to the previous primordial eras mentioned in the *Popol Vuh*.

26. Of interest to this discussion are two small infantile beings that accompany the king in this scene. They have always been interpreted as dwarves, and indeed, they exhibit the bodily proportions caused by achondroplasia. They are amusing characters, with Pinocchio-like noses and star signs tucked behind their arms. They emit foliated gas from their rear ends. They also wear helmets much like those on the La Venta fetuses and are in a ballgame setting. I think these figures demonstrate that while in Olmec culture fetuses played an important role, that role passed to dwarfs in Classic Maya culture, in which fetuses were no longer depicted. The accompanying inscription related that the decapitated head (or skull bone) of a ballplaying hero of an earlier era became the seed for the next generation or the next era of creation. If the small figures on the Yaxchilan step were fetuses, they could represent the next generation. As dwarfs, their meaning is unclear to me.

27. Several translations of the *Popol Vuh* into English exist. The two most recent are by Christenson (2003) and Tedlock (1996). The plot as I describe it is similar in both, but each translation pursues different tropes.

28. One of the tests given to both sets of Hero Twins in the underworld was to keep their cigars lit all night without burning them up. This seems to me like an obvious isomorphic reference to sexual prowess.

29. The journey of the Hero Twins to learn the names of diseases so they could control them—in other words, their quest to have power over life and death, and over disease and affliction—is less widely discussed. The elder twins were unable to learn the names of the afflictions (the “lords”). The younger twins figured this out quickly. Hunahpu and Xbalanque tried to learn about the processes of life by hoeing and clearing a field. Their tools were magical. “They merely stuck the hoe into the ground and it truly began to plow the earth.” But they ate the food their grandmother

brought without deserving it. This was a grave ethical error. The game animals resented it and caused the vegetative earth surface to keep regrowing its weeds and briars. Then a rat offered to tell them their destiny in exchange for being allowed to eat better food. The rat did as he was asked and then got his food, the leftovers from human meals.

30. Monaghan (1998:50) reports the following isomorphic parallelism among the contemporary Mixtec of Oaxaca: “Just as the fetus is transformed in a woman’s womb, or limestone is transformed into lime, or clay into a pot, a building is similarly something that is the result of the combination and transformation of materials—a dish that

has been cooked, to follow the Mixtec metaphor.” Cooking and gestation are seen as similar kinds of metamorphosis.

31. The rebirth of the Hero Twins from a river as fish is similar to the belief of the modern Mixe in the female supernormal power Higiny, who rules rivers, fishing, and midwifery, and brings the spirit of the child to its mother’s womb (Lipp 1991).

32. In the 1990s, a large monument depicting a vulva was excavated at La Venta by Rebecca González. I have seen no publication of it, and I wonder if it was adjacent to the northern column.

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