

**COSMOS AND RULERSHIP:
THE FUNCTION OF OLMEC-STYLE SYMBOLS
IN FORMATIVE PERIOD MESOAMERICA**

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ABSTRACT

Iconographic investigations of works of art executed in the Olmec style have produced convincing evidence that rulership during the Early and Middle Formative Period of Mesoamerican prehistory was publicly legitimized by a visual charter. This charter consisted of symbols derived from the natural environment. These naturally derived symbols functioned within a symbol system which stressed the human ruler's access to supernatural power. The same symbol system also described the cosmic stage on which the rituals of rulership were enacted.

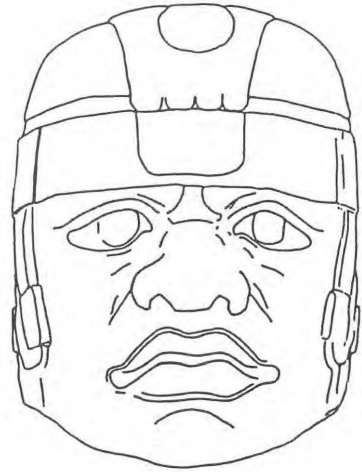
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Olmec civilization, flourishing in southern Mexico, is currently identified as the dominant cultural expression of Early and Middle Formative Period Mesoamerica (1500–500 B.C.). Olmec civilization is of paramount interest to scholars of the ancient Americas because it is viewed as an American equivalent to such primal civilizations in the Old World as Shang China, ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. In order to understand how the Olmec-style symbol system can add new insights to current Olmec and Formative Period research, it is important to determine what is meant by "Olmec." Currently, Olmec is a label applied to both an archaeological culture and an early Pre-Columbian art style. The Olmec archaeological culture was centered in a geographic heartland stretching for some 150 miles along the southern bend of the Gulf of Mexico (*figure 1*). By 1100 B.C., along the many rivers and streams that crisscrossed this heartland, a number of sites had begun constructing the enormous earthen platforms and carving the altars and huge basalt heads that have become the hallmark of Olmec civilization (*figure 2*). The linkage of the archaeological Olmec with any of the ethnic groups existing in Mexico today is difficult. However, linguistic prehistorical reconstruction has recently made much progress in providing that linkage. Largely through the work of Terry Kaufman and Lyle Campbell, a large body of evidence has been compiled supporting the hypothesis that a branch of Mixe-Zoque was the language spoken in the Olmec heartland during the Formative period.¹

In contrast to the geographical limits of the Gulf coast Olmec archaeological culture, objects created in the Olmec art style are found throughout Mesoamerica. The heaviest concentrations of such objects, outside the Olmec heartland, are found in the Mexican highlands. Ongoing linguistic reconstructions by Kathryn Jossarand, Nicholas Hopkins and Terry Kaufman demonstrate that during the Formative period these highland areas were inhabited by a population speaking one of the many branches of the Otomanguan linguistic family.²

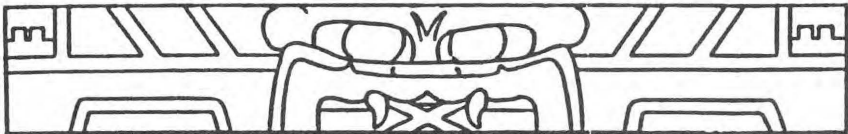
The pioneering Olmec scholar Michael Coe lists the major attributes of this geographically dispersed Olmec-style art as: a complex symbol system “based on a religion of the strangest sort”; a sense of monumentality, even in small objects; a tendency toward realism, and a compositional use of empty space.³ The many themes and motifs that make up the Olmec-style symbol system can be seen on portable items created in the mediums of wood, clay and stone and on monumental sculpture found far beyond the heartland.⁴ The precise mechanisms by which these symbols, and the objects on which they were depicted, spread throughout Mesoamerica are still unknown. Current anthropological thought favors an interaction sphere centered on a long distance trade network which can be archaeologically demonstrated.⁵ Within such an interaction sphere, lowland coastal products—such as marine shells, the feathers of tropical birds, and possibly cotton and cacao beans were exchanged for serpentine, obsidian and other stones from the highlands. Over the years several scholars, including Miguel Covarrubias, Carlo Gay and Gillett Griffin, have challenged the generally accepted heartland origin of the Olmec-style; and David Grove, the most recent excavator of the highland site of



double merlon

jaguar face

crossed bands

gum brackets
(ground line)

cave-like maw

(entrance to the underworld)

Chalcatzingo, has questioned whether artifacts known to originate from highland and Pacific coast Formative Period sites and bearing "Olmec-style" iconography should be classified as Olmec at all.⁶ I propose that such artifacts would be better classified as ritual objects which functioned in a geographically dispersed Formative Period ceremonial complex.⁷ The most concentrated expression of this ceremonial complex was in the Olmec heartland itself.

FIGURE 2

Monument 1, San Lorenzo. Among hallmarks of the heartland Olmec culture are the monumental heads carved from basalt. Monument 1, or "El Rey" as it is more commonly known, from the heartland site of San Lorenzo, is the second largest of this genre, standing 2.85 meters high and weighing some 12 tons.

(After Beatriz De La Fuentent. 1975. "Las Cabezas Colosales Olmecas." *Colección Testimonios del Fondo 34*: 52. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México).

FIGURE 3

Altar 4, La Venta. Olmec altars are another hallmark of heartland Olmec culture. Functionally, these altars were the seats or thrones of Olmec rulers. Currently, the earliest evidence of Olmec-style symbols functioning as a system is on these thrones. On Altar 4, the line of the earth is indicated by the gum brackets of the earth monster. The world mountain, or axis-mundi atop which the living Olmec ruler would have been seated, is the jaguar face whose mouth is marked with a crossed band. Emerging from the cave entrance to the underworld is a portrait of an Olmec ruler carved in very high relief—almost three dimensional—who wears an harpy eagle headdress. This portrait figure was most likely an ancestor of the heartland Olmec ruler who commissioned La Venta, Altar 4.

(After Grove. 1973. "Olmec Altars and Myths," 131.)

As previously stated, the placement of Olmec-style symbols on so many objects—found over so wide a geographical range—is currently explained in terms of an interaction sphere held together through long distance trade. Certainly, trade was a major factor in the geographical spread of the symbol system. However, long distance trade, in and of itself, is insufficient to explain the underlying ideology expressed through the symbol system. As we shall see, the specific nature of that ideology is still a matter of discussion. However, current research demonstrates that within the Formative Period Ceremonial Complex symbols and motifs functioned ultimately as a politically motivated communication system.⁸ Essentially the mission of the symbol system was to convey, define and sanctify the charter for rulership in the non-literate political landscape of early and middle Formative Period Mesoamerica. Functionally the symbol system operated by so ordering the individual motifs that they visually expressed the multi-leveled organization of the Formative Period cosmos or world view, when arranged within the consistent patterns which are analogous to syntax in language.⁹ The consistency of these symbolic patterns allowed individuals who were literate in the symbol system, no matter what their language, to recognize that the rulers who displayed these symbols were publicly proclaiming the supernatural source of their power. These same symbolic patterns also described the supernatural elements contained within the cosmos as the stage on which the rituals of rulership were enacted. Access to this supernatural power allowed these rulers to function both as the *axis-mundi* that united the different levels of the multi-leveled cosmos and as the fulcrum on which the basic oppositions of the cosmos were balanced and renewed.

Though many of the motifs that make up the Olmec-style symbol system probably predate the symbol system itself and may well originate outside the heartland area, the earliest examples where they function within a coherent system are on the altars that are a hallmark of the archaeological Olmec culture (figure 3). Many of these altars are stylistically dated to the Early Formative Period (1500–900).¹⁰ They are now functionally recog-

nized as the seats or thrones of Olmec rulers,¹¹ and it makes sense that these thrones would also be used to convey the iconography of rulership. The fact that these thrones carry this iconography would certainly support a heartland origin for the Olmec-style symbol system. However, recent developments suggest that certain motifs—such as the cruciform shaped quatrefoil (see figure 6a)—that play a prominent role in the symbol system originated in highland areas.¹²

Much of the value of portable objects executed in the Olmec-style in the mediums of jade, green stone, basalt magnetite, shell, clay and wood must have been in their ability to convey the iconography of the ideology represented by the symbol system. The right to publicly display and manipulate this symbol system may have been the motivation for elite participation, throughout Mesoamerica, in the Formative Period ceremonial complex, and in the interaction sphere which the ceremonial complex stimulated.

WERE JAGUARS
AND OLMEC ORIGINS

Currently, the interpretation of Olmec-style symbols is grounded on a series of hypotheses formulated by the Mexican artist and ethnographer Miguel Covarrubias, the American archaeologists Matthew Stirling and Michael Coe, and Coe's student David Joralemon.¹³ Covarrubias saw within the corpus of Olmec-style art, images that appeared to be composites of human and jaguarian features of "were jaguars." Covarrubias interpreted these "jaguars" as ancestral precursors of the rain deities and water complexes of Mesoamerican cultures which had flourished in the Classic (A.D. 200–900) and Post-Classic (A.D. 900–1520) periods.¹⁴ Matthew Stirling postulated that the "were jaguar" images within Olmec-style art were artistic representations of the supernatural offspring of a union between a male jaguar and a human female. Stirling further conjectured that the Olmecs considered themselves to be the descendants of such a union.¹⁵ The Olmecs, he reasoned, immortalized their origin with the use of jaguar-derived motifs in their art. Michael Coe was the first to structurally analyze Olmec iconography with the intent of determining the origin of the belief systems of later Mesoamerican cultures.¹⁶ Joralemon, working from Coe's hypothesis, used motif patterns to construct an Olmec pantheon containing ten major deities.¹⁷

Though several Olmec investigators in the 1960s and 1970s recognized that many of the images that were then identified as "were jaguars" were in fact repre-

sentations of animals outside the feline category, it was an article by Michael Muse and Terry Stoker that first brought this knowledge to a wider audience.¹⁸ In an expanded version of this original article, Terry Stocker, Sarah Meltzoff and Steve Armsey hypothesized an origin for Olmec-style symbols within the fauna of the Mexican Gulf Coast.¹⁹ This hypothesis concluded that Olmec religion was based on the worship of natural phenomena, more specifically the cayman and other saurians that were once a dominant predator and a major food source in the riverine and swampy environment of the Olmec heartland.

POWER SYMBOLS
AND THE NATURAL
ENVIRONMENT

The revelation that symbols of power derive from the natural environment is not unique to the archaeological Olmec—or to the New World, for that matter. The ecological origin of symbols has been recognized as a significant factor in the development of ideologies and their visualizing symbol systems in many areas of the world. The work of Ake Hultkrantz, an anthropologist and religious iconographer, has shown that individual elements of religious belief in such societies derive from the interaction of human groups with their natural environments. Hultkrantz finds that this interaction provides a given human group with the specific visual images, ceremonies and concepts by which the religious beliefs of the community are publicly made manifest: “In enactment of the rites the priests, dancers or other persons often make use of objects associated with purpose in view; i.e., in animal rites, horns, feathers, and hides of the animal which is supplicated....”²⁰ Hultkrantz further hypothesizes that the way the community interprets its mythological base, and the means by which this base is used to interpret the community’s socio-political structure, is determined by characteristics and powers which the community recognizes in its own natural environment.

Abner Cohen, in an essay on power and symbols, suggests that those very same symbols which Hultkrantz identified as the base with which a community combines mythological structure “are nearly always manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, in the struggle for and maintenance of power between individuals and groups.”²¹ As we shall see, within the Formative Period ceremonial complex, Olmec-style symbols serve a similar purpose in that they are purposefully manipulated in providing a rulership charter for the elites in the Olmec heartland and other areas of Formative Period Mesoamerica.

The fauna and flora of the natural environment provided the source from which the heartland Olmec and other Formative Period societies generated the symbolic metaphors with which they described the visual cosmos and the reality of a supernatural otherworld. In other words, Olmec-style symbols, having their source among the fauna and flora of the natural environment, are being aggregated as symbolic elements to express supernatural zoomorphs, deliberately removed from the naturalistic or phenomenological image.

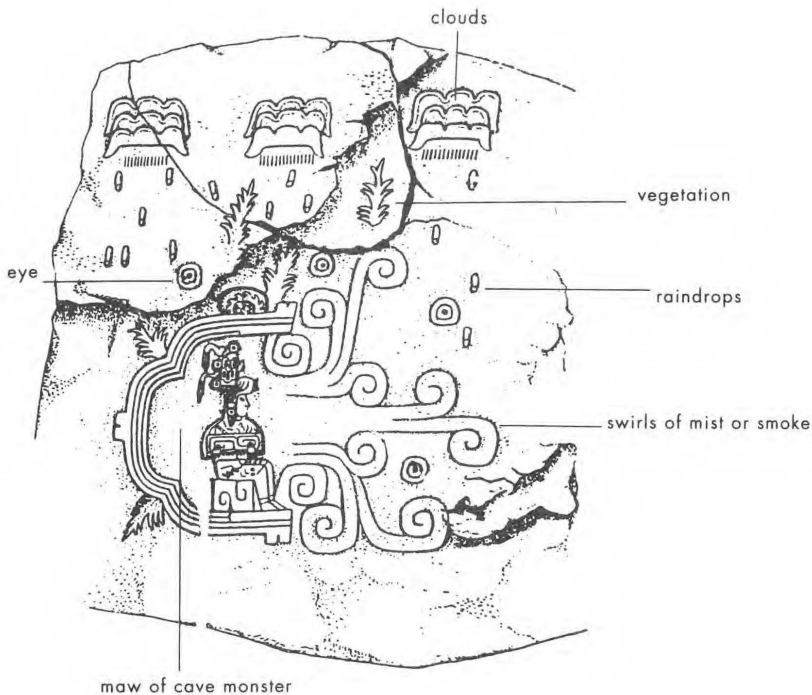
David Joralemon concurs with this concept of the natural symbol used as metaphor, and states, "The primary concern of Olmec religious art is the representation of creatures that are biologically impossible. Such mythological beings existed in the mind of man, not in the world of nature. Natural creatures were a source of characteristics that could be disassociated from their biological context and be recombined into non-natural forms."²² Joralemon was one of the first to identify the Formative Period cosmos as a layered reality consisting of the heavens, the earth and the underworld. He interprets the dragons, which he sees as the principal image of Olmec-style iconography, as biotic supernaturals inhabiting one or another of the three cosmic levels.²³ Because they are supernaturals, Joralemon's "dragons" pass at will from one level of the cosmos to the other.

ROYAL PORTRAITURE
AT THE INTERFACE
OF NATURAL AND
SUPERNATURAL REALMS

The art historian Linda Schele, in her search for the origins of the Maya belief system, has developed a synthesis of phenomena and metaphor which has proved to be pivotal in our understanding of the function of the Olmec-style symbol system.²⁴ Schele, as have Michael Coe, Peter Furst and David Grove, interprets Olmec art as a political statement.²⁵ Like Joralemon and others, Schele sees an iconographic process developing within Olmec-style art which expresses rulership charter in iconographic elements derived from nature, a convention she believes remains fundamentally unchanged throughout the long cultural history of Mesoamerica. Within the Schele hypothesis, the Olmec-style symbols are used to visibly position the Formative Period rulers at the intersection, the ruler becomes the interface between the natural and supernatural realms. Taking this hypotheses to its logical conclusion, Schele suggests that Olmec-style art, when it portrays the images of rulers, often functions dually as

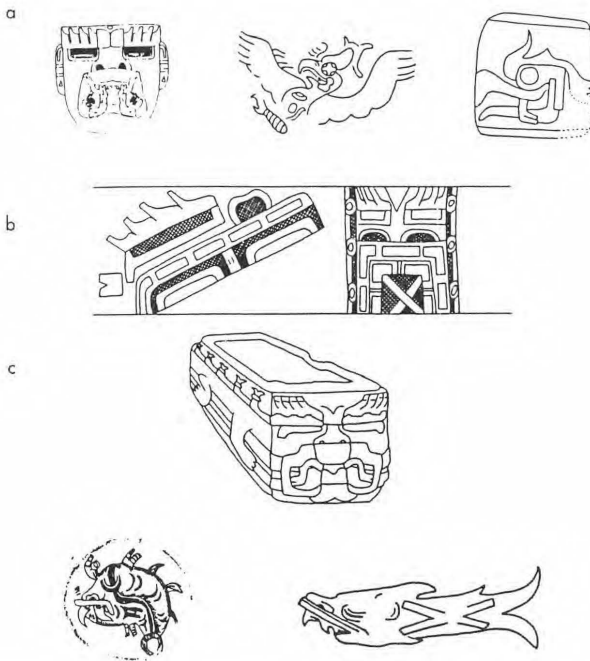
FIGURE 4

Relief 1, Chalcatzingo.
Relief 1 is a bas-relief carved on the slopes of the Cerro Chalcatzingo. Relief 1 depicts an elite personage seated in the mouth of a zoomorphic earth monster. Positioned at the junction of the natural and super-natural realms, it is the ritual action of the seated figure which brings the rain that can be seen falling from the tri-layered clouds above. That rulers functioned as the interface between the natural and the supernatural must have been one of the fundamental ideological tenets of the Formative Period ceremonial complex. (After Coe, 1965. "The Olmec Style and Its Distributions," figure 10.)



royal portraiture and as the visual image of the interface between two realms of perceived reality.

A striking portrayal of a Formative Period ruler in his role as the interface between the natural and supernatural is the subject of Relief 1 at the highland site of Chalcatzingo (*figure 4*). Relief 1, a drastically carved bas-relief in the Olmec-style high in the talus slope of an eroded volcanic core, depicts a personage dressed in a tall headdress and long tunic. This elaborate, costumed figure is seated on a throne incised with a Lazy-S scroll; in his arms, he holds a ceremonial bar also bearing a Lazy-S. The configuration which surrounds this seated elite personage is the cave-like mouth of the zoomorphic earth monster. By placing this human image—most probably a depiction of the founder of the Chalcatzingo ruling lineage—in the mouth of this zoomorphic supernatural, the artist has defined his location as the junction of the natural (represented by the human figure) and supernatural worlds (represented by the zoomorphic supernatural in whose mouth he sits). Above these interacting images of the human ruler and supernatural earth monster, exclamation-point-shaped raindrops fall from triple-layered clouds onto maize plants or other forms of vegetation.

**FIGURE 5**

The Olmec-style cosmic symbols: the symbolic representation of the Formative Period multi-levelled cosmos.

a. For the Olmec as well as other Mesoamericans, the cosmos was structured in three levels: earth, sky and underworld. The sky was symbolized by avian zoomorphic supernaturals.

(After Joralemon. "In the Olmec Dragon," figure 20, a, b and j).

b. The earth was a crocodilian-derived supernatural who was also associated with rulership, water and vegetative fecundity.

(After Joralemon. "A Study of Olmec Iconography," figures 120 and 145.)

c. The underworld, symbolized by shark supernaturals and other underwater zoomorphs, was an underwater location and the source of ancestral power and fertility.

(After Joralemon. "The Olmec Dragon," figures 4f and 5d.)

The great scrolls of smoke or mist that emerge from the open mouth of the earth monster provide, within the Mesoamerican cosmic scheme, the source of the rain and the clouds from which they fall.²⁶ The thematic purpose of this monumental relief is to demonstrate that the central human figure is responsible, through ritual action, for that nourishing rainfall. According to the Schele hypothesis, by recording this ritual in stone, the Formative Period rulers of Chalcatzingo have publicly chartered their right to rule—creating a permanent record of their supernatural ability to ensure those rains which were essential for the sustaining of life in this somewhat arid area of highland Mexico. Stated in another way, Chalcatzingo Relief 1 is a representation of the dyadic concept of oppositions: the ruler, seated at the interface between the natural and the supernatural, is the precisely placed fulcrum on which the rainy and dry seasons are balanced; in other words *the ruler insures natural harmony*. By being the ruler, as well as in order to rule, the ruler must function thus.

In Schele's view, the symbolic representation of a multi-layered Formative Period cosmos reflects not only the physical divisions of reality into the underworld, the earth and the sky but the metaphors which these ancient Mesoamericans chose to visually describe the dyadic oppositions which are inherent in

any comparison of the natural and supernatural worlds. These oppositions of natural and supernatural are constantly overlapping in the iconography of four categories of zoomorphic supernaturals.

As Schele points out, these categories—creatures that swim, that crawl, that walk and that fly—constantly overlap. Supernatural zoomorphs developed from predatory swimming creatures, such as gars and sharks, are metaphors for the silent and underwater realm of death, fertility and ancestral power (figure 5a). The zoomorphic images derived from crawling and slithering creatures, such as snakes or iguanas, can move on the surface of the earth, live in the earth or enter the water—and, thus, are intercessors between the realms. The earth itself is the great saurian-derived earth monster supernatural whose open maw is so prominently displayed on Chalcatzingo, Relief 1 (figure 5b). The earth is also the domain of the human ruler and his most powerful “nagual” or spirit companion, the jaguar.²⁷ As has been discussed above, on the earth the human ruler occupies a dual position as both *axis-mundi* and interface between the natural and supernatural orders. Finally, the domain of the sky is metaphorically defined by zoomorphs derived from powerful raptors such as the harpy eagle and the osprey. Diving out of the sun, these great birds of prey devour fish, inhabitants of an underwater underworld, and monkeys, near-relatives of man and survivors of a previous creation in the Mesoamerican

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FIGURE 6

Monument 9, Chalcatzingo, double merlons and cleft motifs: the symbols of the cosmic portal. Portals between the three cosmic levels and between the natural and the supernatural realms inherent throughout that cosmos could be symbolized by the open maw of the earth monster, by such geometric shapes as the double merlon or by the cleft which was usually shown splitting the heads of Olmec-style supernaturals.

(After Grove. *Chalcatzingo: Excavations on the Olmec Frontier*, figure 8; Reilly. 1989. *Joralemon*. 1971. “A Study of Olmec iconography,” figure 165.)

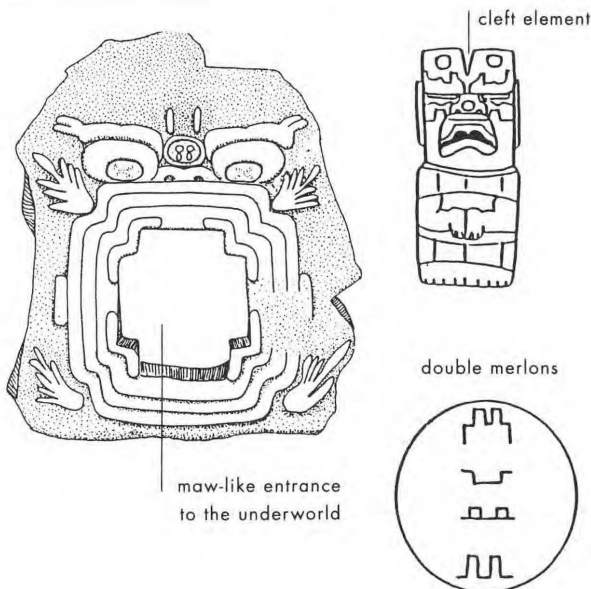
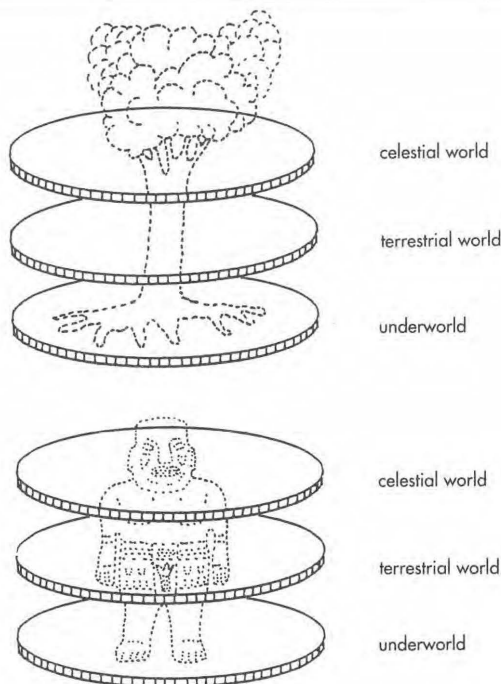


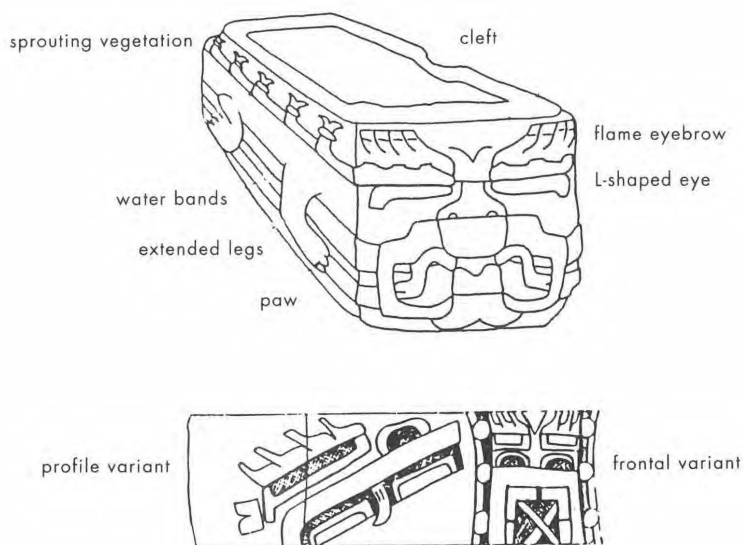
FIGURE 7

The cosmic axis and political charter. The central axis of the tri-leveled Formative Period cosmos was symbolized by a sacred mountain or a world tree. Political charter for the heartland Olmecs and other participants in the Formative Period ceremonial complex was visualized by turning the ruler into the central cosmic axis.



view (figure 5c). Portals between the cosmic levels symbolized by these zoomorphic supernaturals and between the natural and the supernatural realms that are inherent throughout the entire cosmos could be artistically represented as the gaping maw of the Olmec earth monster depicted on Relief 1 at Chalcatzingo, by Chalcatzingo, Monument 9, and by such motifs as the V-shaped cleft and the “double merlon” (figure 6). More often than not, the three levels of the cosmos were linked by an *axis-mundi* (figure 7). This *axis-mundi* took the form of a world tree, a sacred mountain of the Formative Period ruler who presented himself as the *axis-mundi* through the metaphor of the world tree or by incising the cosmic levels on his images and, most probably, tattooing them on his body.²⁸

The manipulation of these zoomorphic themes and symbols endowed the ruler who manipulated them with the visually symbolic motifs that sanction his rulership. In other words, when a sanction of rulership, visually based on the powers of nature, is metaphorically metamorphosed into a supernatural image, the holder of that sanction can then manipulate his person as well as his power into the realm of the supernatural.

**FIGURE 8***The Olmec-style earth monster.*

a. Monument 6, La Venta. On this sandstone sarcophagus, the earth monster is depicted in a posture assumed by floating crocodilians. On this creature's back can be seen the earth's sprouting vegetation.

b. *Tlapacoya Vessel*. The two incised images on this rollout of a pottery vessel from a Formative Period site in the Valley of Mexico depict profile and frontal variants of the Olmec-style earth monster. Both of these earth monster representations present the major identifying motifs of the all-important Olmec-style earth monster theme: L-shaped eyes, flame eyebrows, gum brackets and cleft elements.

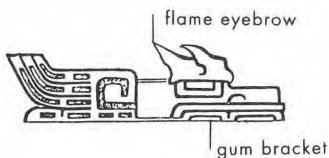
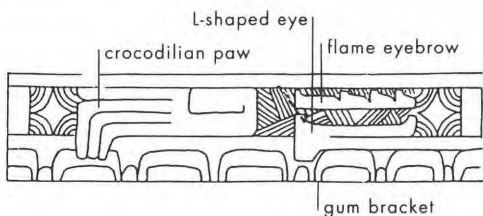
(After Joralemon. 1971. "A Study of Olmec Iconography," figures 145 and 120.)

cosmic model, the terrestrial image or earth monster (Joralemon's Olmec dragon) is ubiquitous. One of the most dramatic artistic depictions of this earth monster is a large sandstone sarcophagus (2.8 m. long, 0.96 m. wide and approximately 0.86 m. high) excavated at the heartland site of La Venta (*figure 8a*). The sides of this sarcophagus (La Venta, Mon. 6) were so carved that the entire monument was to be perceived as a crocodilian-derived zoomorphic representation of the earth. The creature itself is depicted floating on water bands with its legs extended out and down from its body, a posture identical to that of a partially submerged crocodilian. Other crocodilian attributes depicted in this specific sculptural composition include the bifurcated or cleft browline, the flame or flanged eyeridges and the emphasized upper fangs.²⁹ The split-stemmed plants emerging along the back of this zoomorph make certain its identity as the earth monster who functions as the surface of the earth. The forked tongue emerging from this earth monster's mouth emphasizes that the earth monster, like all Olmec-style zoomorphs, is a composite creature, in this instance a by-product of the fusion of the snake and the crocodilian into one supernatural image. The choice of actual creatures from which this zoomorph has been created can probably be attributed to the fact that crocodilian locomotion in the water is provided solely by its massive tail. The crocodilian, seen swimming under

water, resembles nothing so much as a giant swimming serpent.

The behavioral pattern that most closely explains the seemingly bizarre association of crocodilians with earth and vegetation is "water dancing."³⁰ It is common knowledge that the bellowing of male crocodilians is often mistaken for thunder. In fact, thunder can trigger their bellowing; they have even been known to bellow in response to the sonic boom of the space shuttle.³¹ Such an action in itself could associate crocodilians with rain and, thus, vegetative fertility. But the act of water dancing is even more astonishing. The male crocodilian will belly-down in shallow water, arch his head and tail out of the water (sometimes wagging the heavy tail like a dog) and, with his mouth clamped shut, force air into his throat pouch, causing it to vibrate. Then, as Ackerman has described it, "The water suddenly dances high all around his body in an effervescent fountain full of sparkle in the sunlight, and a thundering bellow fills the air like distant war games."³² Another researcher has described the same effect, less poetically but just as accurately, as looking like a struck tuning fork placed into a pan of water.³³ So one of the reasons for associating crocodilians with vegetative fertility is based on what is, in effect, sympathetic magic; crocodilians possess the ability to call thunder and bring down the rain.

I would think that this crocodilian association with the carved image on the La Venta sarcophagus would be most easily challenged, by the casual observer, because of the flat, almost bulldog appearance of the face of the zoomorphic image depicted there. However, an examination of an incised pot dating to the Formative Period and executed in the Olmec-style presents a visual explanation (*figure 8b*). This vessel, excavated at the site of Tlapacoya in the Valley of Mexico, has a frontal-faced zoomorphic image incised on one side and a profile view of the same zoomorph on the other. The craftsman who created this vessel handled what is, in fact, a dual problem in perspective and an uncertainty of viewer recognition by showing the earth monster in both profile and frontal variants. The sculptor who carved the La Venta sarcophagus was restricted from rendering a similar effect by his inability to convey perspective and by the overall purpose of his composition. Both of the images on the Tlapacoya vessel share with the zoomorph from the La Venta sarcophagus similar crested eyeridges (flaming eyebrows), L-shaped eyes and other attributes which Joralemon had carefully analyzed and categorized as attributes of his Olmec dragon, the earth monster of the Formative Period ceremonial complex.³⁴



gum bracket as ground line

FIGURE 9

The bracket gum markings of the Olmec-style earth monster. These two rollouts from pottery vessels from the Valley of Mexico, Early Formative Period site of Tlatilco illustrate the prominent function of the gum bracket in *pars pro toto* representations of the Olmec-style earth monster. These gum brackets would come to symbolize the line of the earth on Middle Formative Period Olmec-style sculptural compositions, as in the rock carving from San Isidro Piedra Parada, El Salvador, at the bottom of the figure.

(After Joralemon. 1971. "A Study of Olmec Iconography," figures 13 and 101.)

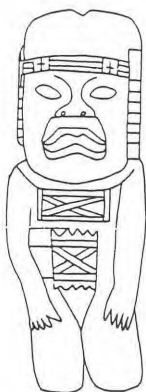


Chalcatzingo, relief 2

FIGURE 10

The crossed bands motif. The crossed bands are a prominent Olmec-style motif often used as a body marking on such supernatural zoomorphs as the one depicted in Chalcatzingo Relief 2 and as belts and pectorals on anthropomorphic figures like the one held in the lap of the Las Limas figure and on San Lorenzo Monument 52.

(Joralemon. 1971. "A Study of Olmec Iconography," figures 244, 202 and 211.)



Las Limas figure



San Lorenzo, mon. 52

Two iconographic motifs that the Tlapacoya and La Venta earth monster do not share are the bracket gum markings and the crossed bands located in the mouth of the frontal-faced image on the Tlapacoya vessel. Bracket gum markings are a standard replacement for all dentition on depictions of the zoomorphic earth monster except for those instances when descending fangs are indicated (figure 9). Crossed bands are a motif that carries over into the Maya iconographic system. The exact meaning of crossed bands continues to be a matter of debate. In Maya iconography, crossed bands are often seen in sky associations. If crossed bands do carry this symbolic meaning, then they would symbolize the center of the sky. However, within the overall corpus of Olmec-style art, the crossed bands have no discernible sky associations. The most frequent depictions of crossed bands in Olmec-style art are humans and supernaturals in the form of a pectoral or as the front piece on a belt or sash worn by humans and anthropomorphic supernaturals, and as a body marking on zoomorphic supernaturals (figure 10).

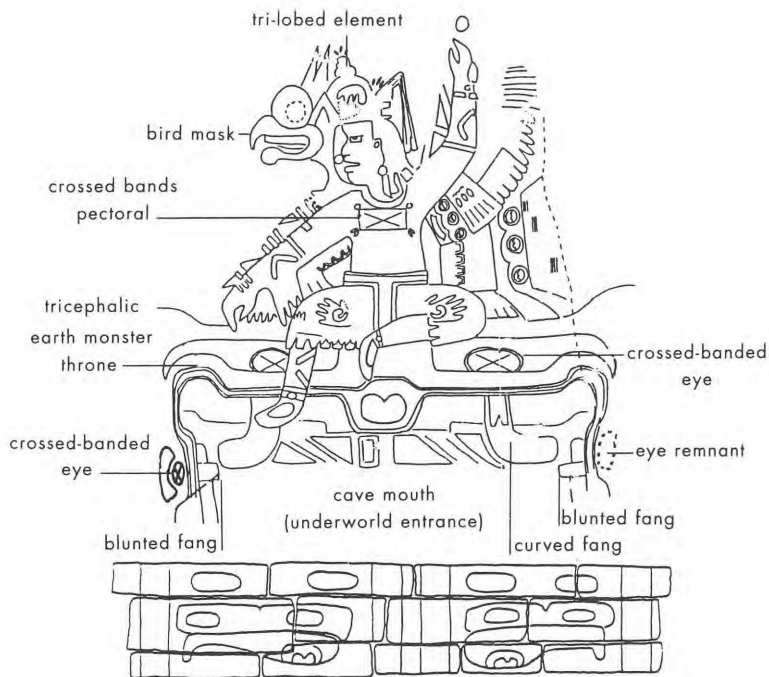
I propose that the crossed bands motif occupies a central position in the iconography of Formative period rulership because it functions as a symbolic locative which identifies the wearer (zoomorph or human) as standing at the center of the cosmic order. To test this hypothesis, it is necessary to structurally examine and compare several of the many Olmec-style works of art on which this motif is predominantly displayed.

Certainly, the elaborately costumed personage depicted in Mural 1 painted on a cliff face above the north grotto at Oxtotitlan cave is wearing a square pectoral incised with crossed bands, the ends of which are marked with what may well be cleft vegetation symbols. Oxtotitlan, Mural 1 falls into one of two classes of art works that display the image of the Formative Period ruler in his role as *axis-mundi*. As previously described, such representations generally take two forms: either the symbols of the cosmic levels are incised on the human image or the human image is displayed as the world tree. Oxtotitlan is an example of the former. The polychromed mural is large (3.8 meters wide by 2.5 meters high) and remarkably well preserved considering that it has been exposed to the elements for some 2,700 years. This mural is one of a series of paintings executed in the Olmec style that are located in what is a series of shallow grottos near the city of Chalpancingo in the Mexican Pacific coast

FIGURE 11

a. Mural 1, Oxtotitlan is an Olmec-style painting depicting an enthroned human figure who wears a feathered costume and an elaborate bird mask.
 b. At Oxtotitlan, the tricephalic zoomorphic throne, on which the masked human figure sits, closely resembles the throne located in the sunken patio at Chalcatzingo.
 The function of Oxtotitlan mural 1, which is strategically positioned over a grotto mouth, is to depict a Formative Period ruler as the cosmic axis: his tricephalic throne functions as both a metaphor for the terrestrial realm and as the framing device surrounding the portal of the supernatural under or otherworld. The grotto, located directly beneath the mural, is the physical manifestation of this portal. The avian mask worn by the ruler functions symbolically as a representation of the sky realm and as public documentation of the ruler's inherent ability to cross the supernatural portal above which he sits. The ruler's pivotal position at the center of the cosmos is symbolically demonstrated by the crossed bands pectoral he wears on his chest.

(After Grove, David C. 1969: figure 2. "Olmec Cave Paintings: Discovery from Guerrero, Mexico." In *Science*, Volume 164, number 3878, pp. 421-423, Washington, D.C., the author, drawn from a photograph.)



proposed reconstruction of the altar (Mon. 22) found in association with the sunken patio at Chalcatzingo.

state of Guerrero, first brought to the attention of the scientific community by David Grove.³⁵ Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca cave, also located in Guerrero, are the only examples of Formative Period compositional paintings to survive the ravages of time.³⁶

CEREMONIAL MARKINGS

Oxtotitlan, Mural 1 has been lovingly reconstructed by the Mexican artist Felipe Davalos. The mural depicts an elaborately costumed human figure seated on a throne which takes the form of the zoomorphic earth monster. The upper and horizontal face, on which the human figure sits, is the best preserved of the three. The other two zoomorphic faces appear to function as the legs of this throne. Originally there may have been a fourth face positioned horizontally at the base of the composition between the two vertical faces. If this was the case, the zoomorphic throne would have been a quatrefoil construction. Unfortunately, time and weather have erased

all traces of it. Each eye of the upper horizontal zoomorphic face is marked by a crossed bands and is framed by a distinct set of "flame eyebrows." The flame eyebrows depicted on the zoomorphic throne in the Oxtotitlan mural are strikingly similar to those incised on the surface of an actual throne uncovered in a sunken patio at Chalcatzingo (*figure 11b*).³⁷ However, no mouth is depicted on the Chalcatzingo throne, while from the upper jaw of the Oxtotitlan zoomorph two outward curving fangs descend.³⁸ Between these two fangs runs a striped horizontal band reminiscent of the upper register of La Venta, Altar Four (*see figure 3*). The two zoomorphic faces that serve as the legs of this throne are obscured through erosion and mineral deposits. However, the face on the mural's right has at least one distinct eye marked with crossed bands and a blunted fang descending from its jaw. The zoomorphic face on the left is even less distinct, but a blunted fang is clearly visible.

The placement of Oxtotitlan, Mural 1 directly above the south grotto indicates that the mural functions as a billboard identifying the ritualistic and supernatural function of the grotto itself. It may very well be that the tricephalic throne monster painted above the grotto is a zoomorphic representation of the grotto as the portal between the natural and supernatural. Certainly, this is an image that corresponds both thematically and visually with Chalcatzingo, Relief 1. At Chalcatzingo, water, after a rainstorm, cascades down from the peak above and flows directly in front of Relief 1 down to the fields below. At Oxtotitlan, Grove reports that in times past, the grotto contained lagoons of water during the rainy season; on occasion these lagoons would overflow the mouth of the grotto and water would, as at Chalcatzingo, cascade into the fields below.³⁹ The occurrence of the same natural phenomenon at both sites would also explain a similarity in their ritual functions. At Chalcatzingo a bas-relief depicts a human figure within a zoomorphic cave performing the ritual necessary to achieve the interface between the natural and the supernatural. The result of that interface is life-sustaining rain. At Oxtotitlan the medium is paint, not carved stone, but the thematic content is the same—only here the grotto itself is identified as the physical location where the rituals necessary to achieve that interface were performed.

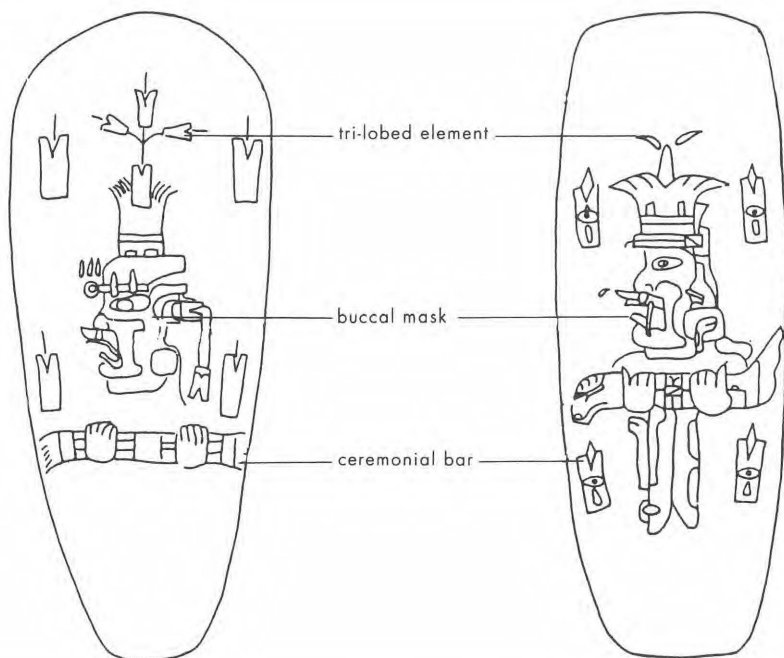
The most striking article of costume worn by the human figure seated on the throne is an elaborate bird helmet or mask which appears connected to an elaborate feather cape. Part of the mask is cut away in order

to give an X-ray view of the human face beneath, thus making sure that the viewer fully understands that he is seeing a human and not a zoomorphic supernatural. The prominently curved beak of the mask identifies the species of bird depicted as raptorial. The iris of the large round eye has been hollowed out, and Grove suggests that it "once held an object such as a piece of jade or a polished magnetite mirror."⁴⁰ The function of Oxtotitlan, Mural 1 is to offer a visual representation of the human ruler as *axis-mundi* in a multi-tiered cosmos and as the interface of dyadic oppositions of the natural and supernatural that are inherent in the composition of that cosmos. The terrestrial realm is symbolized by the human figure whose attributes are clearly distinguished through the use of the cut-away mask. The supernatural underwater or other-world is the frequently water-filled grotto whose zoomorphic representation—the tricephalic throne painted above the entrance—serves as the throne in the composition painted above its mouth. The raptorial bird mask and costume functions doubly as a symbol for the celestial realm and as a metaphor for the human wearer's ability to fly across the portal (the grotto itself) that both links and separates the natural and supernatural realms.⁴¹ The motifs that identifies the human figure as both the central axis of this cosmological construct and as the fulcrum on which the natural and supernatural oppositions balance and interface are the tri-lobed motif emerging from the top of the bird mask and the crossed bands pectoral so prominently displayed on the wearer's chest. The underworld is the grotto which forms the mouth of the earth monster throne and out of which flows life-giving water. The celestial realm is conveyed through the great raptorial bird mask. The motif that identifies the human figure as the central axis and as the centrally placed fulcrum on which natural and supernatural oppositions balance is the crossed bands so prominently displayed on the human wearer's chest.

On Oxtotitlan, Mural 1, the human figure is identified as the *axis-mundi* in a multi-tiered cosmos because he wears costume details and is seated on and above symbolic motifs functioning as the metaphors that describe that cosmos. In Oxtotitlan, Mural 1, the crossed bands are explicitly displayed so that their message is clear and unequivocal. On a jade celt from the site of Arroyo Pesquero in the Olmec heartland, the crossed bands motif is implicit, but its symbolic meaning is just as clear and unequivocal as its representation in Oxtotitlan, Mural 1.

Incised on the surface of the Arroyo Pesquero jade celt is a human figure wearing a tall headdress and a buccal mask, and carrying in his arms a ceremonial bar that appears serpent-like but whose zoomorphic composition is betrayed by its flame eyebrows (*figure 12a*). Around this standing figure are placed four cleft rectangular elements. The headdress worn by the central human figure is topped by a cleft fringe motif—possibly feathers. From this cleft emerges a tri-lobed element identical to the one depicted on the top of the bird mask in Oxtotitlan, Mural 1. From atop the bird mask a three-pronged element also emerges. Virginia Fields has successfully linked this three-pronged element to the jester god—the central element in the Maya royal headband and the single most important symbol of royal power during the Classic Period (A.D. 200–900).⁴² In the same article, Fields has also demonstrated that the origin of the three-pronged element is to be found in the Olmec-style symbol system and that its real-life source is maize vegetation. In many Mesoamerican cultures, maize vegetation was the central tree in a cosmic directional model in which the four corners and center were marked by trees.⁴³ Brian Stross (in this publication) has demonstrated that in the Formative Period maize played a similar role. The fact that the three-pronged maize element in the headdress of the incised human image emerges from the double merlon only serves to support the identification of this three-pronged element as the world tree; symbolically, the double merlon is one of the portals between the natural and supernatural.⁴⁴ When the legs of the standing figure are examined closely, it can be seen that they are inset with the flame eyebrow, L-shaped eyes, protruding nostril and bracket gum markings that are the identifying traits of the earth monster.

Just as with Oxtotitlan, Mural 1, the function of the incised images on the jade celt from Arroyo Pesquero is to offer a visual image of a Formative Period ruler as *axis-mundi*. In Oxtotitlan, Mural 1, this was accomplished with costume elements and a throne that were metaphors for three cosmic levels. On the Arroyo Pesquero celt, the same message is conveyed by costume elements and motifs that identify the human figure as the world tree. The three-pronged element represents the sprouting crown of the world tree, an identification that can be supported by examining another celt from Arroyo Pesquero (*figure 12b*). On this second celt, the incised image is very similar to that on the first; however, the lower body of the central figure is not depicted, and instead of holding a zoomorphic image in his arms, he appears to be holding stalks of bound vegetation. The headdress of the

**FIGURE 12**

a. and b. Two celts from the heartland site of Arroyo Pesquero. These two celts or axes are incised with images of Olmec rulers depicted as the *axis-mundi* world tree. Both the incised figures hold ceremonial bars: one serpent-like, the other bound vegetation. Both figures wear buccal masks and both wear headdresses topped by elements that can be identified as corn; both are flanked by four sprouting cleft rectangles. However, the incised celt on the right is lacking lower body parts. (After Joralemon. "The Olmec Dragon," figures 8e and f.)

figure on the second celt, like that worn by the first, consists of a three-pronged element emerging from a cleft; but in this instance the identification is more explicit. As mentioned, the legs of the first figure are inset with motifs that identify them as the down-turned head of an earth monster. The link between crocodilians and vegetation has been discussed previously. This metaphor is not uncommon in Mesoamerican art and is clearly represented on Stela 25, at the Late Formative Period (600 B.C.–A.D. 200) site of Izapa (*figure 13a*) and on a Classic Period Maya painted vessel (*figure 13b*). The placement of a down-turned, crocodilian-derived earth monster head on the lower body identifies that area as the trunk of the world tree. Certainly, the later Classic Period Maya used the tree metaphor prominently in their iconography of royal power,⁴⁵ and as early as the Late Formative Period, Maya rulers at the site of Kaminaljuyu in highland Guatemala were using costume elements to convert their images into zoomorphic representations of the world tree (*figure 14*).

The snake-like zoomorph held in the arms of the central human figure, as if it were a ceremonial bar, is a more difficult identification. If this were a Classic Maya image, it would most certainly be identified as a unique form of the double-headed serpent bar. The identification of the buccal mask is also uncertain, but if it functions in the same manner as other Formative Period masks with a surer identification, then it surrounds the human figure's mouth in order to turn it into a cave entrance or portal through which supernatural power can manifest itself into this world.

In order to locate the crossed bands on the Arroyo Pesquero celt, it must first be understood that a perspective problem faced the artist who carved and incised this celt, just as it did for the potter who created the Tlapacoya vessel (*figure 8b*). The creator of the Tlapacoya vessel solved the problem by depicting frontal and profile variants of the same image. The artist who carved the Arroyo Pesquero celt was limited by his tools, the hardness of the jade and by the thematic function of the design. But when shadowing is added to the incised images, giving them the dimensionality that the real-life image which they depict actually had, the location of the crossed bands motif, though implicit, becomes obvious running from each of the corners marked by the cleft and sporting rectangles, they cross directly under the human

FIGURE 13

The crocodilian-derived earth monster as world tree, Itzapa, Stela 25, and a figure from a Maya painted vase. The metaphor of crocodilians as world trees is a common representation in Mesoamerica and is clearly demonstrated on this Late Formative (100 B.C.–A.D. 100) monument from Itzapa and on this figure from a Late Classic Maya vase.

(Redrawn from Helmuth 1987: figure 52.)

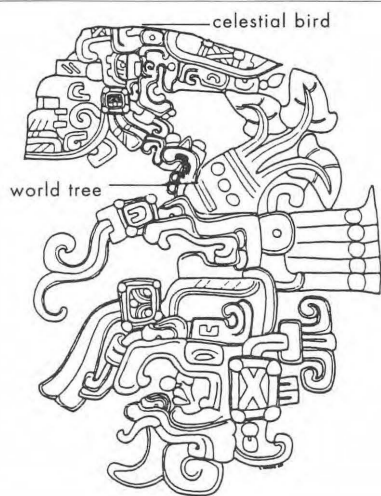
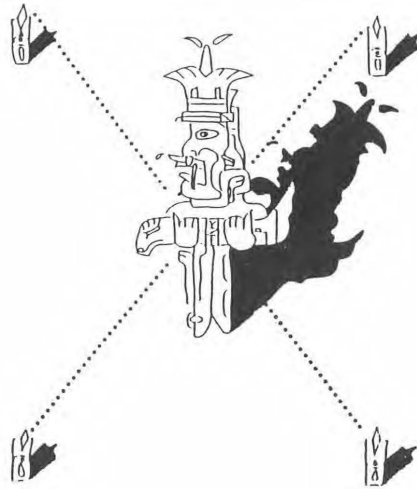


FIGURE 14

*Stela 11, Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, detail of a ruler's head. The headdress worn by this figure is in the form of a world tree with the celestial bird in its branches. Stela 11 dates to the Late Formative Period (100 B.C.—A.D. 100.) (After Linda Schele and Mary Miller. 1986. *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*, figure 11.2, The Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.)*



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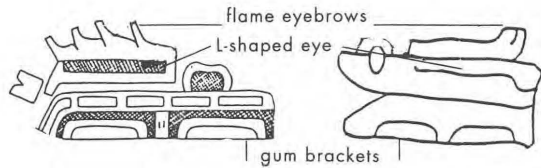


image (figure 15). Since those legs also form the mouth of the earth monster, the implicit crossed bands serve both to center the human world tree and to identify the mouth of the saurian supernatural as a portal for supernatural power. By the implicit use of the crossed bands, the human image on the Arroyo Pesquero celt is identified as the interface between the natural and the supernatural, as the cosmic balance and as the world tree.

As we have seen, the purpose of Olmec-style symbols was threefold: they provided the metaphors by which a non-literate culture could describe the actuality of a multi-leveled cosmos; they visually described the ideological charter by which Mesoamerican Formative Period rulers justified their right to rule, and they described the interface between the natural and the supernatural as the cosmic stage on which the rituals of rulership were enacted. Combining these three functions, the Olmec-style symbol system provided access for different Mesoamerican linguistic groups to a common system of communication. It also provided for those emerging elites who participated in the Formative Period ceremonial complex a supernatural-derived legitimacy of what was in fact a product of social constructs.

FIGURE 15

The Arroyo Pesquero celt enhanced. The image incised on this Arroyo Pesquero celt was a depiction of, what was in the artist's mind, a three-dimensional figure. When shadowing is added to the flat incised image, the three-dimensional image which was intended leaps out at the viewer. The implicit crossed bands which center this figure in the middle of the cosmos are indicated with crossed bands that run from the sprouting cleft rectangles (representing the four directions) at the four corners of the composition. The legs of the figure, when compared to the earth monster profile from the Tlapacoya vessel, are a representation of a down-turned earth monster head. (Adapted from Joralemon. "The Olmec Dragon," figure 8f.; and Joralemon. "A Study of Olmec Iconography," figure 120.)

1. Lyle C. Campbell and Terrence C. Kaufman. 1976. "A Linguistic Look at the Olmec." In *American Antiquity*. Vol. 41: 80-89.
2. J. Kathryn Josserand, Marcus Winter and Nicholas Hopkins. 1984. "Essays in Otomanguan Culture History." Nashville: *Vanderbilt University Publications in Archaeology*, No. 31.
3. Michael D. Coe. 1965. "The Olmec Style and Its Distributions." In *The Handbook of Middle American Indians*. Vol. 3, ed. Robert S. Wauchope, 739-775. Austin: The University of Texas Press.
4. For the purposes of this paper the term "theme" refers to an overall design or a combination of elements and motifs unified in a coherent whole. A "motif" is an element which in combination with other motifs can form a theme. An example of the use of this terminology would be the theme of the Olmec earth monster. An L-shaped eye, gumbrocket, vegetative element, flame eyebrows etc., would be some of the individual "motifs" which, when combined in a certain order, form the earth monster theme.
5. Kent V. Flannery. "The Olmec and the Valley of Oaxaca: A Model for Inter-Regional Interaction in Formative Times." In *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*. ed. Elizabeth P. Benson, 79-117. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.
6. David C. Grove. 1989. "Olmec: What's in a Name?" In *Regional Perspectives On the Olmec*. eds Robert J. Sharer and David Grove, 8-14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. The designation "Formative Period Ceremonial Complex" was a by-product of several long discussions held by the author with David Grove and Susan Gellespie while on a visit to their home in November, 1989. During our discussions we concluded that the archaeological model that seemed most closely related to what was happening in Formative Period Mesoamerica is the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex is a label used to describe the art style, the long distance trade network and the ritual activity associated with dynamic chiefdoms flourishing in the Southeastern United States during the Mississippian Period (900-1500 A.D.).
8. F. Kent Reilly, III. 1991. "Olmec Iconographic Influences on the Symbols of Maya Rulership: An Examination of Possible Sources." In *Sixth Palenque Round Table*, 1986. eds. Merle Greene Robertson and Virginia Fields, 143-166. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
9. *Ibid.* 163-166.
10. Susan Milbrath. 1979. "A Study of Olmec Sculptural Chronology." In *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, No. 23. ed. Elizabeth P. Benson. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.
11. David C. Grove. 1973. "Olmec Altars and Myths." In *Archaeology*. Vol. 26, No. 22, 128-135.
12. In its profile variant, on Chalcatzingo, Relief 1, the quatrefoil was identified by Michael Coe ("The Olmec Style") as the gaping cave monster that frames the seated figure. David Joralemon demonstrated ("The Olmec Dragon") that the quatrefoil shaped mouth of the supernatural carved on Chalcatzingo, Monument 9 (see figure 6a, this article) is a frontal view of the cave monster depicted on Chalcatzingo, Relief 1. Recent excavations at the highland site of Teopantecuanitlan uncovered four upside-down, T-shaped stone monoliths. It is my contention that just as the cave monster on Chalcatzingo, Relief 1 was artistically created by vertical splitting a quatrefoil image similar to Chalcatzingo, Monument 9, then the upside-down, T-shaped Teopantecuanitlan monoliths were artificially created by splitting the same quatrefoil image horizontally. If the vertically split quatrefoil can become the cave monster, then the horizontally split quatrefoil can be demonstrated to be a mountain, through its striking similarity to the generic hill or place sign carved on the conquest slabs at Monte Alban. All known examples of the quatrefoil and its variants, during the early and middle Formative period, occur only in those highland areas that would have been inhabited by Otomanguan speakers. Thus, it may be that the quatrefoil motif can function as a linguistic/ethnic marker in future Formative period investigations.

13. Peter David Joralemon. 1976 "The Olmec Dragon: A Study In Pre-Columbian Iconography." In *Origins of Religious Art and Iconography in Pre-Classical Mesoamerica*. ed. H. B. Nicholson, 27-71. Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles Latin American Publications.
14. Miguel Covarrubias. 1943. "El Arte 'Olmeca' O de La Venta." *Cuadernos Americanos*, vol. 28, no. 4, 153-179.
15. Matthew W. Stirling. 1955. "Stone Monuments of the Rio Chiquito, Veracruz, Mexico." In Smithsonian Institution, *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 157, Anthropological Papers No. 43, 1-23. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
16. Michael D. Coe. 1968. *America's First Civilization*, 123-125. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co.
17. Peter David Joralemon. 1971. "A Study of Olmec Iconography." In *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, No. 7. ed. Elizabeth P. Benson. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.
18. Michael Muse and Terry Stocker. 1974. "The Cult of the Cross: Interpretations in Olmec Iconography." In *The Journal of the Steward Anthropological Society*, Vol. 5, 67-98.
19. Terry Stocker, Sarah Meltzoff, and Steve Armsey. 1980. "Crocodiles and Olmecs: Further Interpretations In Formative Period Iconography." *American Antiquity*, Vol. 45, 740-759.
20. Ake Hulkrantz. 1966. "An Ecological Approach to Religion." In *Ethnos*, Vol. 32, 131-150.
21. Abner P. Cohen. 1974. *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Societies*. London: Rutledge and Kegan.
22. Joralemon, "The Olmec Dragon," 37.
23. Ibid.
24. Linda Schele has never written extensively on the Olmec. The repeated references to her work are from lecture notes 1985-89.
25. Michael D. Coe. 1972. "Olmec Jaguars and Olmec Kings." In *The Cult of the Feline: A Conference on Pre-Columbian Iconography*, 1-18, ed. Elizabeth Benson. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks. Peter T. Furst. 1968 "The Olmec Were-Jaguar Motif in the Light of Ethnographic Reality," 143-178. ed. Elizabeth Benson, in *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.
26. David C. Grove. 1984. *Chalcatzingo: Excavations On the Olmec Frontier*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd..
27. Coe, "Olmec Jaguars"; Furst, "The Olmec Were-Jaguar"; Reilly, "Enclosed Ritual Spaces and the Watery Underworld in Formative Period Architecture: New Observations on the Function of La Venta Complex A." 1991. In *Seventh Palenque Round Table*. eds. Merle G. Robertson and Virginia Fields. San Francisco: The Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute (in press).
28. F. Kent Reilly, III. 1987. The Ecological Origin of Olmec Symbols of Rulership. Unpublished Masters Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin. Reilly. 1990. "The Shaman in Transformation Pose: A Study of the Theme of Rulership in Olmec Art." In *The Record, The Magazine of the Princeton Art Museum*. Vol. 48, No. 2, 4-21.
29. Stocker et al. "Crocodiles and Olmecs," 740-759.
30. Kent A. Vilet. 1989. "Social Displays of the American Alligator." In *American Zoologist*, Vol. 29, 1013-1019.
31. Diane Ackerman. 1988. "Crocodilians, A Reporter At Large." In *The New Yorker*, Oct. 10, 1988, 42-81.
32. Ibid.
33. Connie M. Toops. 1979. *The Alligator: Monarch of the Everglades*. Homestead, Florida: The Everglades Natural History Association.
34. Joralemon, "The Olmec Dragon," 37-40.
35. David C. Grove. 1970. "The Olmec Paintings of Oxtotitlan Cave, Guerrero, Mexico." In *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, No. 6.

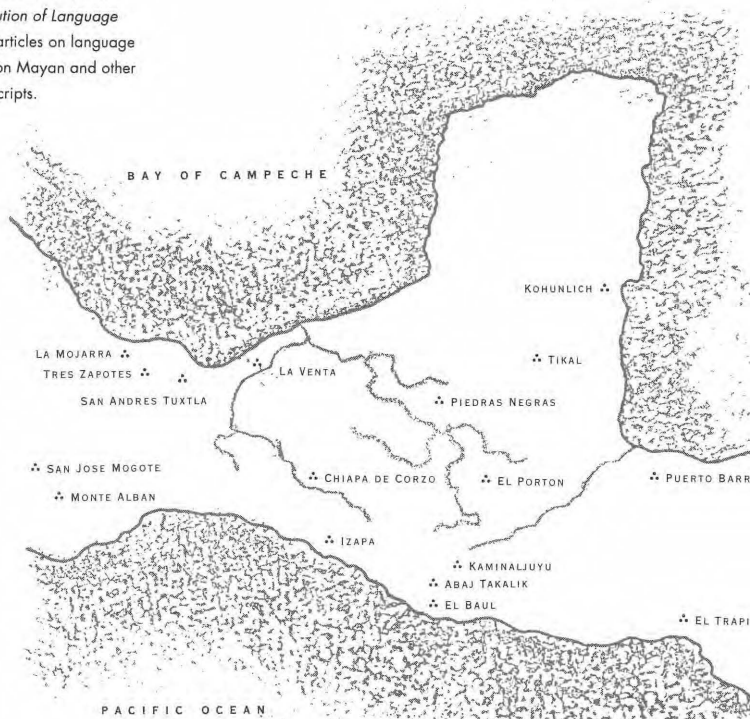
Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

36. Carlo T. E. Gay. 1967. "The Oldest Paintings of the New World." In *Natural History*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 28-35.
37. William R. Fash. 1987. "The Altar and Associated Features." In *Ancient Chalcatzingo*, ed. David C. Grove, 82-94. Austin: The University of Texas Press.
38. One of the puzzling features of the Chalcatzingo altar is that it is incised with eyes but lacks a mouth (see figure 11b in this article). As I have discussed, the entrance to the supernatural under or other world was artistically depicted, and certainly perceived of, as the gaping mouth of a zoomorphic. In ancient Mesoamerica, natural features such as the cleft between mountains and caves were perceived as this supernatural mouth or portal. But such a portal could also be artificially constructed as well (Reilly, "Enclosed Ritual Spaces and the Watery Underworld"). Such artificial portals took the form of sunken courts or patios. Such is the case with the throne and sunken patio at Chalcatzingo where the mouth of the throne zoomorph is not depicted but should be understood to be the sunken patio itself.
39. Grove, "The Olmec Paintings," 31.
40. *Ibid.*, 9.
41. The ritual importance of the artistic renderings of Olmec-style flying figures is only beginning to be understood (Reilly, "The Shaman in Transformation Pose," 16-17). The evidence for defining these figures as flyers is a category of carved, horizontal figures dressed in ceremonial costumes. The most explicit of these flying figures is Chalcatzingo, Monument 12, which is carved on a bolder monument. On Monument 12, the horizontal human figure is flanked above and below by flying birds—an artistic device to identify the medium through which the horizontal figure moves as air. I believe that the Olmec-style flying figures are illustrations of one of the most important principles of Formative period rulership charter—the ability of the ruler to cross the portal between the natural and supernatural realms and thus gain the sanctification that legitimized his right to rule. It may very well be that the bird costume worn by the seated figure in Oxtatitlan, Mural 1 is an accurate rendering of the vestments that the local ruler would wear when enacting these rituals of sanctification and legitimization.
42. Virginia Fields. 1991. "The Iconographic Heritage of the Maya Jester God." In *Sixth Palenque Round Table*, eds. Merle G. Robertson and Virginia Fields, 167-174. Norman: the University of Oklahoma Press.
43. During the long cultural history of Mesoamerica, different cultures used different combinations of plant species to illustrate the five cardinal directions. In the Borgia codex (attributed to the Post-Classic Mixtec culture), the central world tree or axis-mundi is a corn plant (page 53) each of the four other directional trees is a different species. However, for the Classic period Maya, the world tree was a ceiba.
44. Reilly, "Olmec Iconographic Influences," 157-158.
45. Linda Schele and David Freidel. 1990. *A Forest of Kings*, 64-95. New York: William Morrow and Company.

This paper is dedicated to Leroy Cleal.

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**FIGURE 1**

Map of Mesoamerica showing localities of Late Formative Mesoamerican scripts. Four scripts are found here: Oaxacan, as at Monte Alban; Izapan, as at Kaminaljuju; Isthmian, as at La Mojarra; and Mayan, as at Tikal. (After Marcus. "The Origins of Mesoamerican Writing," 42.)