
Olmec Iconographic Influences on the Symbols of Maya Rulership: An Examination of Possible Sources

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Ever since the 1926 discovery of the quintessential Olmec site of La Venta, there has been considerable academic speculation as to the relationship between Middle Formative Period Olmec art and iconography and the art and iconography of the Classic Period Maya. The opinions expressed within that often heated debate have varied from a hesitant identification of the La Venta monuments as products of Maya culture (Blom and La Farge 1926:85) to the conclusion that “no linear scheme of stylistic development originating in the Olmec culture can fit the varieties of sculpture that we can now observe in the two Maya areas” (Proskouriakoff 1968b:128). However, with the advent of new and intensive archaeological and iconographic research methods and the shrinking of the temporal distance between the Olmec and Maya, it has become obvious that strong iconographic analogies *do* exist between the two cultures and that these analogies reflect the survival of certain Olmec beliefs and their incorporation into the political and religious systems of the later Maya.

The Function of Olmec Iconography

To isolate Olmec holdovers within the complex iconography of the Maya, it is important first to determine exactly what we mean by “Olmec.” For the purpose of this paper, Olmec refers not only to the first inter-Mesoamerican art style, but also the belief system that is reflected in the iconography associated with that style. Between 1200 B.C. and 500 B.C. portable objects rendered in the Olmec style and bearing a complex iconography spread throughout Mesoamerica (Coe 1965b). The actual mechanism by which these objects spread is not known, but current anthropological theory favors some form of trade network. Within such a network works of art, enhanced with symbols derived from the natural environment (Reilly 1987), functioned as valuables exchanged for services and commodities (Flannery 1968:105–108). Such art objects, with their accompanying iconography, could be displayed and manipu-

lated for political purposes by emerging power elites outside the Olmec “heartland” in imitation of Olmec rulers who used the iconography as a pictorial “royal” charter. This charter functioned as a public justification for the hereditary and perhaps divine status with which Olmec rulers were vested in their “heartland” polities.

Facade Masks and Paired Oppositions

The identification of elements of the Olmec iconographic system within later Maya art should be predicated on the testable hypothesis that certain elements of the Maya system can be visually identified in the Olmec system and that these elements perform similar functions in both systems. One obvious link between these two systems is the use of large stone and/or plaster masks as billboards for the display of symbolic information. The Maya were constructing architectural facades that displayed such masks between 150 B.C. and 50 B.C. at the Late Formative Period sites of Mirador, Uaxactún, and Cerros. On the Pacific Coast at Tzutzuculi, a Middle Formative site with strong iconographic links to the Olmec “heartland,” similar facade masks, executed in the Olmec style, were erected by 650 B.C. (McDonald 1983:37). At the above-mentioned Maya sites large, multitiered buildings were constructed with elaborate zoomorphic masks placed on either side of a central staircase. At the site of Cerros, in particular, four zoomorphic masks, two of which are blunt-snouted and two long-snouted, are so positioned on Structure 5c-2nd that they symbolically replicate the daily course of the sun (fig. 1a). Linda Schele and Mary Miller have demonstrated (1986:106) that this pyramid with its facade masks served as a stage for the public demonstration of the supernatural power of the Cerros ruler.

The two facade masks at Tzutzuculi (Mons. 1 and 2) depict zoomorphic heads incised on stone slabs measuring approximately 1.5 m high by 1 m wide. Like the masks at Cerros, those at Tzutzuculi flank a wide staircase (fig. 1b). Also, as at Cerros, the Tzutzuculi masks

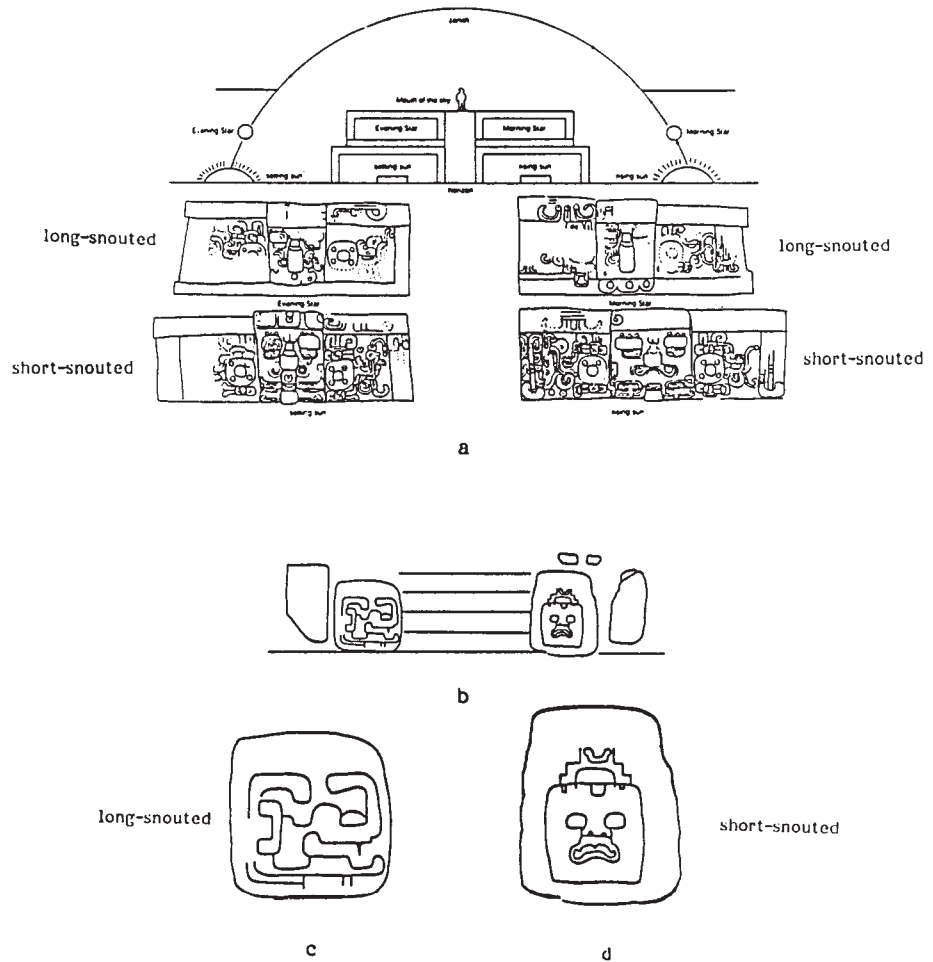


Fig. 1 Facade masks from Cerros and Tzutzuculi: (a) Facade of Structure 5c-2nd at Cerros with a pair of short-snouted and long-snouted zoomorphic masks placed on either side of the central staircase (drawing from Schele and Miller 1986: fig. 11.1); (b) facade of Mound 4 at Tzutzuculi with a long-snouted mask placed on the right of the staircase and a blunt-snouted mask placed on the left (redrawn by Kent Reilly from McDonald 1983: fig. 12); (c) Monument 2, Tzutzuculi (redrawn by Kent Reilly from McDonald 1983: fig. 31); (d) Monument 1, Tzutzuculi (redrawn by Kent Reilly from McDonald 1983: fig. 29).

are rendered as a paired set of short-snouted and long-snouted oppositions. The only difference, besides that of style, is that at Cerros a long and a short-snouted mask are paired and placed on either side of the staircase and at Tzutzuculi the long-snouted mask (fig. 1c) is placed on the right and the short-snouted mask (fig. 1d) on the left side of the staircase.

The Late Formative Period Maya were manipulating long-snouted and blunt-snouted architectural masks for religious and political purposes. The erection of such masks on a similar structure 550 years earlier at Tzutzuculi implies that the origins of such paired oppositions and the artistic canon by which they were manipulated is found in the art styles of the Middle Formative Period. In order to test this hypothesis, other examples of Olmec and Middle Formative Period art depicting paired oppositional iconography should be scrutinized for their political implications. Information gained from such an analysis will shed light not only on Olmec iconographic usage and political structure but on the specifics of the iconography and political structure of the Classic Maya as well.

“Slim”: A Middle Formative Period Sculpture Executed in the Olmec Style

Within the corpus of Olmec-style art, no single piece of sculpture is more relevant to the above hypothesis than “Slim,” a green stone statue from the Pacific Coast of Guatemala (Reilly 1987). Standing 65.5 cm tall and measuring 11 cm at its widest, “Slim” is a depiction of a thin, and probably adolescent, Middle Formative elite personage (fig. 2a). Dressed only in a fringed belt and apron or penis sheath, the statue cannot be called a portrait in the strictest “western” sense, because the head and facial features are hidden behind a mask and under a bell-shaped hat. Clues to the function and ritual use of the statue are offered in the symbols (fig. 2b) incised on the body and on the two scepters held in the crook of either arm (it has been reported that a looted burial, on the Mexican Gulf Coast, contained scepters identical to those held by “Slim”). Many of these “secondary” symbols can be interpreted outside this specific sculptural context but they were intended by the artist to be viewed (and read) as a compositional whole. In the case of

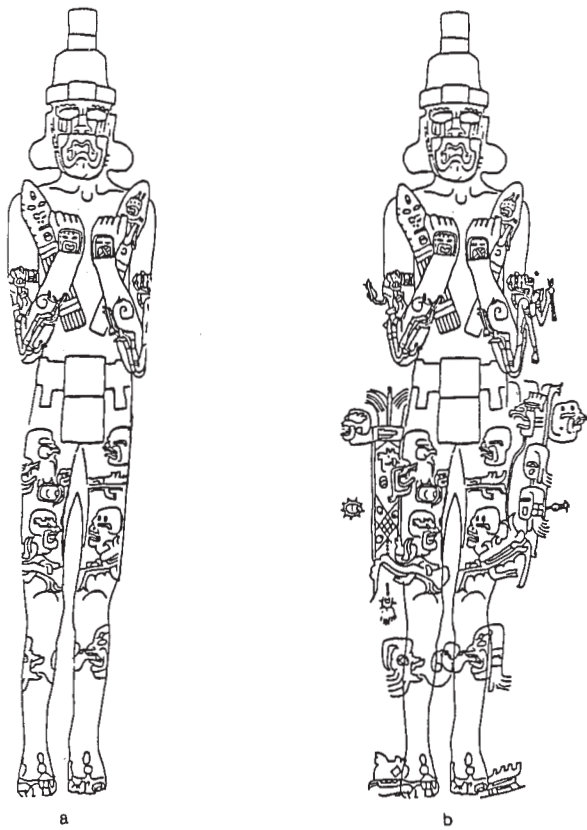


Fig. 2 (a) "Slim": a greenstone statue, executed in the "Olmec Style" from the Pacific Coast of Guatemala (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985); (b) "Slim": with the incised, secondary iconography "rolled out" (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985).

"Slim," the totality of the iconographic information is best recovered by dividing the statue into three units—the head, torso, and lower limbs. Within these three divisions the symbols that make up the iconographic units are examined here for a natural origin and/or a specific ritual action. The interpretations from each division are viewed together to understand the totality of "Slim."

"Slim": The Headdress

As previously stated, the facial features of "Slim" are hidden from view by an elaborate mask and under a bell-shaped hat or headdress (fig. 3a). This headdress, with its blocklike projection, resembling nothing so much as the business-end of a "plumber's helper," is surprisingly unadorned for an article of apparel that most probably functioned as an important piece of ritual attire. Like the later Maya, the Olmec used headdresses as billboards for the display of names, titles, and ritual information. Since there are no incised symbols on this headpiece, we must assume that the information it was designed to convey is displayed in its shape. There are several depictions of Olmec headdresses with projections extending above their crowns. The three that most closely resemble "Slim's" hat are the two on the left side of San Lorenzo Mon. 14 (fig. 3b), the right side of La Venta Altar 5 (fig. 3c), and a third carved on the summit of the Cerro Chalcatzingo Mon. 10 (fig. 3d). The exact meaning of "Slim's" hat is not easily discernible, but one may hypothesize that its function may be unique to the ritual in which "Slim" is participating.

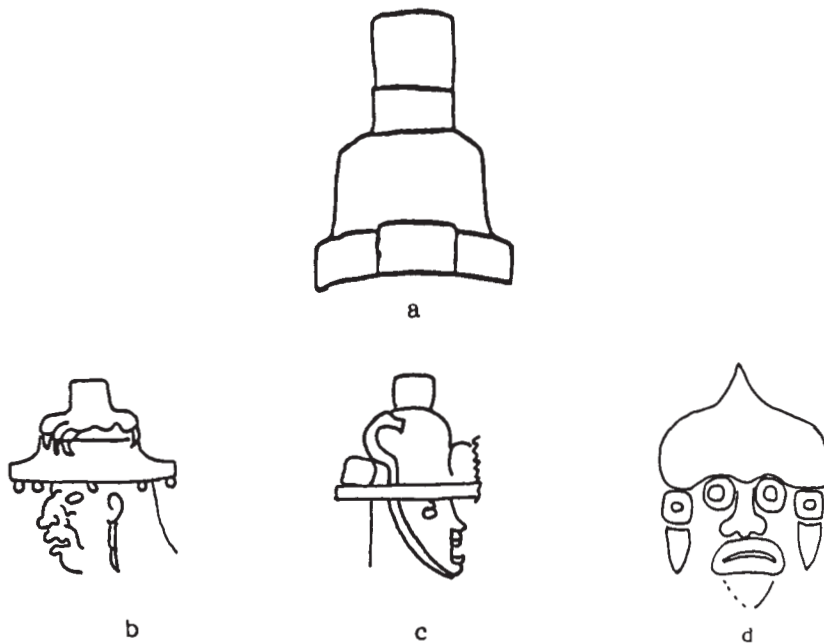


Fig. 3 (a) "Slim": the hat or headdress (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985); (b) head of relief figure on the left end of San Lorenzo, Mon. 14 (redrawn by Kent Reilly from Coe and Diehl 1980: vol. 1, fig. 438); (c) head of relief figure on right side of La Venta Altar 5 (drawing by Kent Reilly 1986); (d) head of Chalcatzingo Mon. 10 (redrawn by Kent Reilly from Gay 1972: fig. 34).

“Slim”: The Mask

Positioned below the front brim of “Slim’s” headdress and flanked by large, unadorned earflares is an elaborate face mask (fig. 4a). The mask is secured to the head by tie-ribbons located on either side of its mouth. The mouth itself is drooping and contains two fangs that descend from an otherwise toothless upper gum. The upper lip, topped by a pug nose, extends beyond the mouth in a triangular overhang. From each ovoid eye (perhaps once inlaid with obsidian or magnetite) descend three stripes, each of which ends at the top of the U-shaped mouth bracket. The crenellated elements, above the eyes, are commonly referred to as flame eyebrows. The different elements that make up this elaborate mask appear to be a fusion of the traits that define the two raptorial-beaked, avian-zoomorphic images incised on the shoulders of the Las Limas Figure (fig. 4b). These Las Limas Figure shoulder images were interpreted by Joralemon as a symbolic depiction of the celestial realm of a trilevel cosmos (personal communication, 1983).

The supernatural status of these avian-zoomorphs is emphasized by their cleft-heads and the split-ended serpent’s fangs that descend from their beaks. The avian-supernatural on the left shoulder (fig. 4c), may derive from the harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*). The harpy eagle’s most prominent feature, a distinctive erectile crest, can be seen as the flame eyebrow of the zoomorph on the left shoulder of the Las Limas Figure and correspondingly on “Slim’s” mask. Both the mask and the left shoulder image also have a mouth bracket. The avian-zoomorph on the right shoulder (fig. 4d) is distinguished from its counterpart on the left by three stripes running through the eye and by three dots, which I believe function as a water symbol, positioned behind those stripes. Similar striping can be seen below the eyes of “Slim’s” mask. I believe that this right shoulder zoomorph, like its counterpart on the left shoulder, is also derived from a bird of prey. Candidates would be either the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*; Reilly 1987:71) or a member of the falcon family (*Falco*). It is a bit difficult to turn the overhanging upper lip of “Slim’s” mask into the cruelly hooked beak

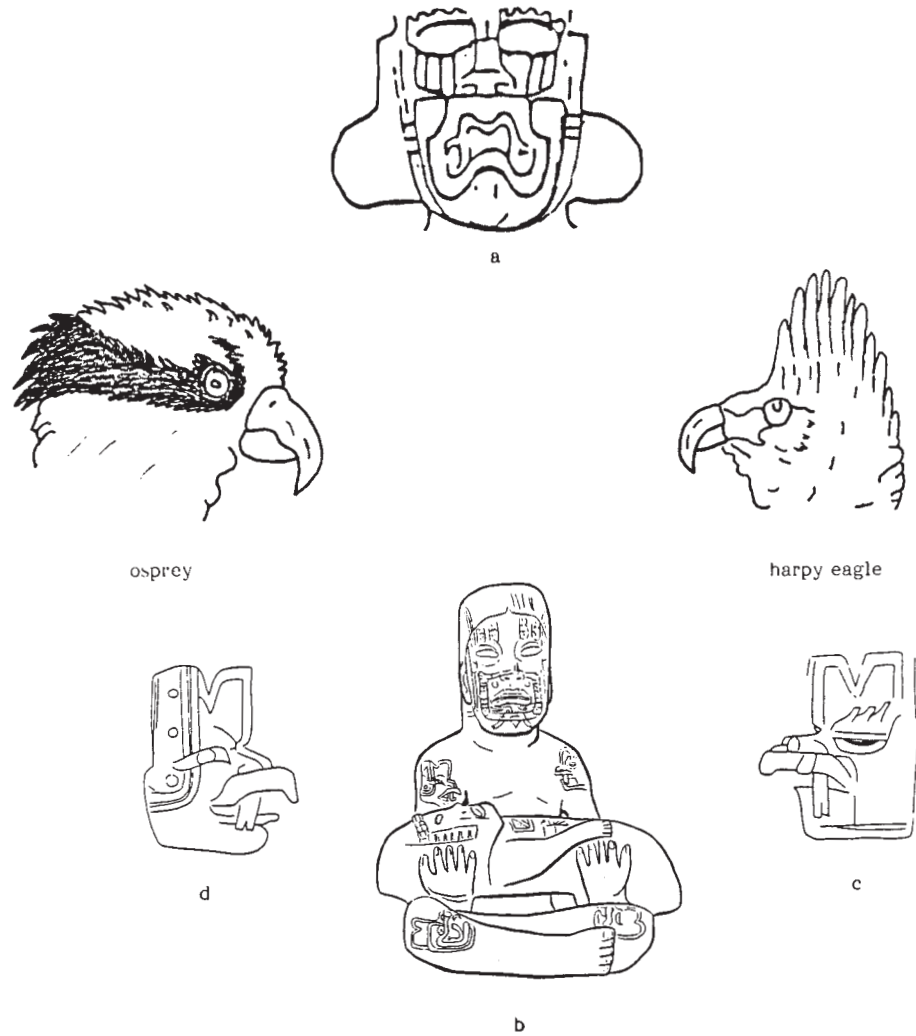


Fig. 4 “Slim”: the mask with accompanying illustrations showing the natural sources of the incised elements. (a) “Slim”: the mask (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985); (b) the Las Limas Figure (drawing from Wicke 1971: title page [11]); (c) the left shoulder image from the Las Limas Figure (drawing from Joralemon 1976: fig. 3c); (d) the harpy eagle (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988); (e) the osprey (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988).

of a raptorial bird. However, when one takes into consideration that the other motifs on the mask are a conflation of avian imagery, then the argument can be made that the mask depicts an avian supernatural and, as Joralemon proposed, the celestial level of the trilevel Mesoamerican cosmos.

“Slim”: The Torso

If the iconography on “Slim’s” head and mask relates that part of his body to avians and the celestial realm, the incised iconography on the two scepters and bent arms associates the torso of the statue with the rituals of rulership that are performed in the earthly realm (fig. 5). Examining the incised imagery on the right arm, we find, on the back of the right hand, a cartouche containing the frontal view of a noseless face (fig. 6a). Three dots are positioned above the almond-shaped eyes of this face and the outlined mouth contains what, at first sight, seems to be a single descending fang. Once again the three dots motif leads me to associate this image with a watery liquid (in this case blood). Below this right hand image can be seen the feet of the human figure that arcs around the bent arm (fig. 6b). Between the soles of the feet and the back of the hand is an elegantly

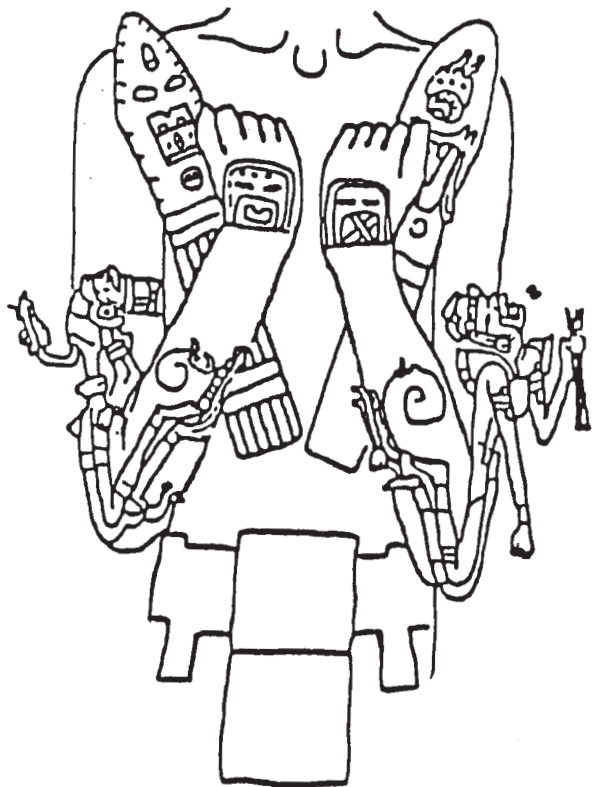


Fig. 5 “Slim”: the incised secondary iconography on the torso (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985).

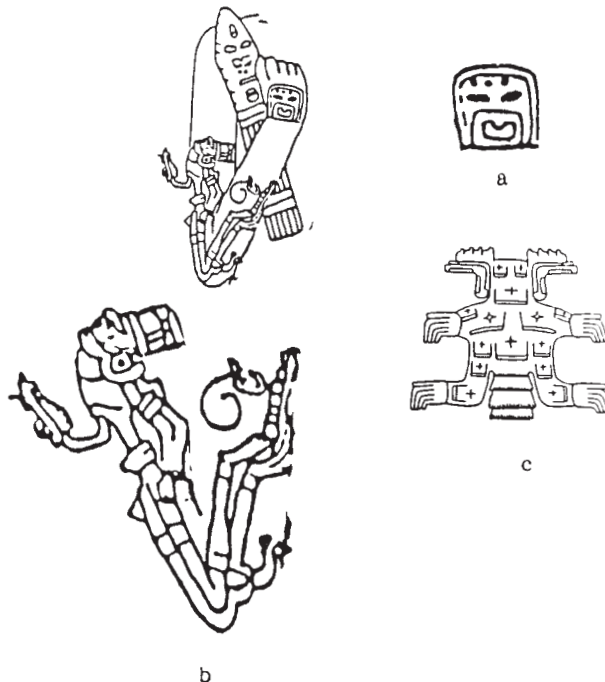


Fig. 6 “Slim”: the incised iconography on the right arm. (a) The frontal-facing zoomorph incised on the back of the right hand (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). (b) The arcing, bound, and sacrificed captive figure incised on the right arm (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). Note the head drawn with a “whip-lash” line above the feet and the element that resembles a tail emerging from the feet. (c) The pelt worn by the “Blind Shaman Of Atlihuayan” (drawing from Joralemon 1976: fig. 4a). Note the resemblance of the layered tail of this pelt to the tail emerging from the feet of the bound captive that arcs along “Slim’s” right arm.

incised head whose occipital region has been depicted with a single whip-lash line. From the feet themselves projects an element, difficult to decipher, that bears some resemblance to a profile view of the layered tail of the zoomorphic pelt worn by the Atlihuayan “Blind Shaman” (fig. 6c). The figure to whom these feet belong is equipped with earflares and wears a bowler-shaped hat with either a knot or a bone tied to the crown. His fore-arms are tied together behind his back (an act not only painful for the captive but with the advantage for the captor of thrusting the victim’s chest forward), and his legs are tied below the knees. He is most likely a depiction of a bound sacrificial victim.

This tragic captive has his eyes closed in death and his belt and loincloth wrenched aside in order to reveal the cause of death—a large cavity in his abdominal area. That the death wound was inflicted in a ritual is implied by the long-necked, flame eyebrowed zoomorph emerging or released or torn from the thoracic cavity of the captive. In Mesoamerica the ritual of human sacrifice was practiced in order to sustain the gods who had shed

their own blood and mixed it with maize to create humankind. The gods created man and sustained him with the fruits of the soil; Mesoamerican rulers, as Oscar Wilde said, returned the favor, and in turn nourished the gods with human blood. If sacrificial acts were not performed, then the gods, and in turn the world, would die. Sustaining the gods was one of the primary functions of Maya rulers. The presence of a slaughtered captive, and, as we will see, other bloodletting iconography on a Middle Formative Period statue implies that, early in Mesoamerican history, *capture and sacrifice* (Schele and Miller 1986:209–226) was one of the two great ritual acts on which rulership was visually chartered.

The ritual instrument that has dispatched the bound captive may very well be the scepter held in the crook of the right arm (fig. 7a). I have previously identified this scepter (1987) as belonging either to a group of objects identified by Coe as “torches” (1965b:762) or to a vegetative symbol set where it functions as a bundle of bound maize stalks (V. Fields, this vol.). I am currently convinced by arguments presented by Joyce et al. (this vol-

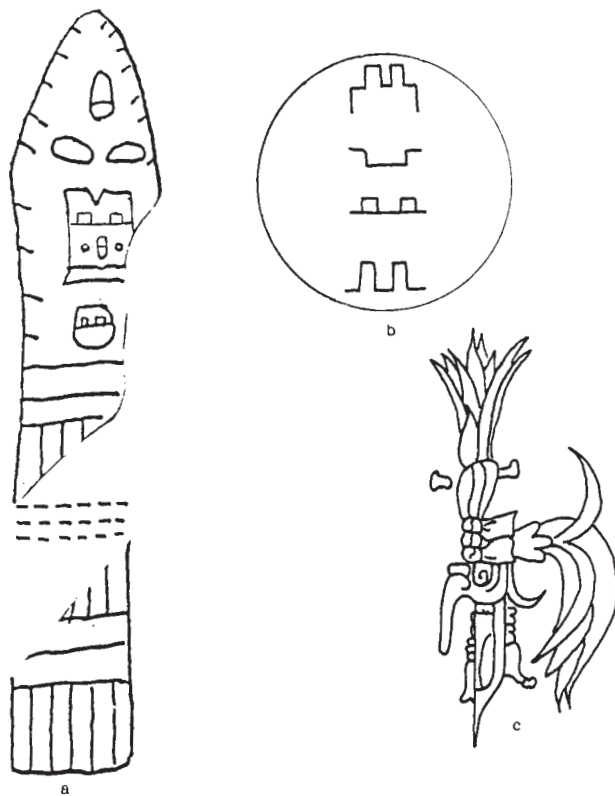


Fig. 7 “Slim”: the scepter carried in the right arm. (a) The right arm scepter/bloodletter (redrawn by Kent Reilly after Griffin 1985). Note the face on the blade, which identifies this ritual instrument as a personified supernatural and the dotted lines that indicate where the third set of bindings should be located. (b) Four examples of elements that function as “double merlons” (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988). (c) The Classic Maya personified bloodletter (redrawn by Kent Reilly from Schele and Miller 1986: fig. IV.1).

ume), David Grove (1987b), and Brian Stross (1986) that many of the objects previously identified as “torches” are in fact bloodletters. An examination of the edges of the “business-end” of the scepter/bloodletter reveals the incised lines that indicate the fractures caused by pressure flaking along a flint or obsidian blade. Among the Classic Period Maya, ritual objects, such as bloodletters, were considered to embody the supernatural power of the ritual in which they were used (Schele and Miller 1986:176). That a concurrent belief was held in the Middle Formative Period is indicated by the engraved face on the surface of the blade (see fig. 7a). The face, consisting of two almond-shaped eyes surmounted by a “pendant dot” (Joralemon 1971: motif 128), has a squared open mouth with a single descending fang. Positioned within the mouth is a double merlon symbol (fig. 7b; Benson 1971:10) and a motif consisting of an oblong element flanked by two circles. Below the mouth and just above the top double-band, which secures the handle at the base of the blade, is an incised circle that also contains a double merlon. The handle of the bloodletting knife consists of a bundle of short sticks secured around the shaft of the blade. Two of the double bindings that hold these sticks in place (the knots that secure these bindings must be located on the other side of the handle) are visible above and below the cradling arm. I suggest that besides the two explicit bindings a third implicit binding is to be understood as in place behind the arm of stone. Three knotted bands were identified by Joralemon (1974:63) as a crucial motif within the Maya bloodletting symbol set. A prominent Maya bloodletting symbol was the personified bloodletter (fig. 7c). The three knotted bands form the headdress of that deity. This motif of three knotted bands has been shown to have its origin as an Olmec bloodletting symbol set by Joyce et al. (this volume) and D. Grove (1987b). Now it can be demonstrated that a precursor to the Maya personified bloodletter also existed within the Olmec bloodletting symbol set.

The iconography incised on “Slim’s” left torso (see fig. 5) appears, at first glance, to mirror the themes of capture and bloody sacrifice we have seen depicted on the right side. This, however, is not the case: the placement of the engraved symbols may be the same, but the thematic message has taken a different direction. On the back of the left hand (fig. 8a) is once again incised a cartouche containing a noseless face. The features of this face include trough-shaped eyes (Joralemon 1971: motif 6b) and a wide-open mouth containing a crossed-bands motif. Below the right-hand face, and in contrast to the slaughtered victim on the right arm, we see a living unbound arcing figure (fig. 8b). As we saw on the bound captive, a profile head consisting of a single spiral line is also attached to the feet of this left arcing figure. From under these feet emerges a jawless and zoomorphic head with a fish-fin element behind its upper jaw. The arcing figure is positioned so that his right arm extends downward and his left arm is bent upward at the elbow. In his

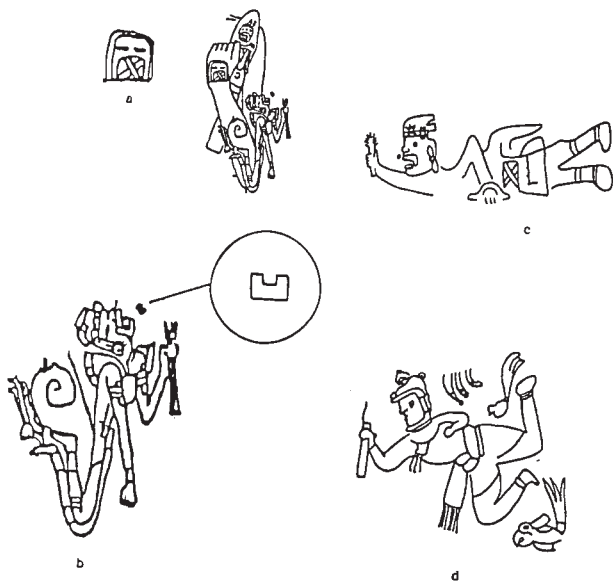


Fig. 8 "Slim": the incised figures on the left arm. (a) The frontal-facing zoomorph incised on the back of the left hand (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). (b) The arcing "flying torchbearer" incised on the left arm (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). Note the double merlon above the chin. (c) El Volador, the "Flying Olmec," Chalcatzingo, Mon. 12 (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988). (d) An Olmec "Flying Figure" incised on a jade celt of unknown provenience (redrawn by Kent Reilly after Grove 1984: fig. 33).

left hand the figure holds either a "torch" or some other ritual object. On the chest hangs a pectoral, and his limbs bear wrappings or jewelry. The waist is covered by a short skirt and around his shoulders hangs a short fringed cape. The fringed edges of this cape seem to move, as if the wearer is facing a strong breeze. On his thrown-back head this "torchbearer" wears a cap equipped with flaps that hang down to the level of his earflares. The crown of this cap is cleft and surmounted by an element that can best be described as a pitched roof. Around his forehead the "torchbearer" wears a headband; the individual parts consist of an oval center element flanked by four rectangular elements (only two of these flanking elements can be seen since the head is rendered in profile). Virginia Fields (this vol.) demonstrated that similar Middle Formative Period headbands carrying vegetative symbols are ancestral to the Jester God headband worn by Maya rulers. This Jester God headband was functioning as the "royal" crown for the Maya rulers as early as the Late Formative Period (Schele and Miller 1986:53). There is no known reason to doubt that an identical headdress was performing a similar function in the Middle Formative Period (Fields, this vol.). By wearing such a headdress the "torchbearer" on "Slim" is identified as a ruler.

If the costuming and posture identify the figure on "Slim's" right arm as a captured sacrificial victim, then

one might assume that the "torchbearer" on the left arm is doing the capture and sacrificing. This may very well be the case. But the question then arises as to the identity of the ceremony involving the capture and the sacrificial blood. Our only hope for making that identification is by linking the "torchbearer" to a symbol set having a clear ritual association. In this case, the comparable symbol set would be the one containing the Olmec Flying Figure (fig. 8c). The individual sculptural composition, within the Flying Figure symbol set, that most resembles "Slim's torchbearer" is Chalcatzingo Mon. 12 (fig. 8d).

Olmec Flying Figures, "Double Merlons," and Ancestor Communication

The elaborately costumed figure on Chalcatzingo Mon. 12 is commonly known as El Volador, the Flying Olmec. Several symbolic devices, within the overall composition of Mon. 12, identify him as both "flyer" and ritual participant. The Quetzal and parrot, carved above and below the flyer, serve as symbolic locatives, identifying the location as air and the action as flight. The ritual nature of that flight is indicated by both costume elements (Angulo V. 1987:148) and the shaft held in the right hand. This shaft is badly eroded and could be one of several symbolic objects—torch, bloodletter, or scepter—that are standardly held by Olmec flyers. Several motifs and the thrown-back head posture of "Slim's torch bearer" indicate that he is also a flyer. These motifs are the outheld torch, which if functioning as a bloodletting symbol indicates that the act of flight was initiated with bloodletting, the fringed cape blown back from his shoulders by the rush of fast flowing air, and the double merlon or cleft symbol incised slightly in front of his head. The meaning of this last iconic element has long been an open question.

I now feel certain that both the double merlon and the cleft element function as symbolic entrances to the Olmec sacred mountain and the underworld that the mountain contains (Reilly 1988). The cleft motif has long been recognized as functioning in some such fashion because of the many depictions of vegetative motifs sprouting from clefts. Grove reasoned that the importance of the Highland site of Chalcatzingo derived from the cleft (underworld entrance) between its two guardian mountains (Grove 1987a:431). The difference in the shapes of the cleft element and the double merlon (fig. 8d) is simply a variation of the same function. I propose that the puzzling geometric shape of the double merlon is in fact a cross-sectional rendering of one of the walled and enclosed courts or sunken patios that form important architectural units at Middle Formative Period sites. Such cross-sectional renderings are present in Maya art in the depiction of architectural units, ball courts, and pyramidal fronts. They also can be seen in Mixtec codices, where they represent valleys and riverbeds. The shape, then, of the double merlon is determined by the

enclosing wall and the flat surface of the court itself. The function of the double merlon was symbolically to represent the ritual function of the enclosed court. In my opinion, the plazas within such delimited spaces were intended as a focus for ancestor communication and lineage ritual activity (Reilly 1988). This premise is supported by the presence within these courts (Drucker 1952) and patios (Fash 1987) of elaborate burials equipped with elite-status grave goods. Today's elite are tomorrow's ancestors; since the dwelling place of the ancestors is the underworld, the site of any elite interment becomes an important locus for access to underworld power and the Middle Formative Period location for the second great ritual that chartered Mesoamerican rulership, *ancestor communication* (Schele and Miller 1986:175–196).

The exact sequence of the ritual performances enacted in these enclosed courts and sunken patios may never be known. One can postulate that they revolved around bloodletting. Among the Classic Period Maya, the moment that was chosen to symbolize the entire ritual of ancestor communication artistically (in much the same way that a Renaissance artist would represent the entire Mass with a depiction of the elevation of the Host) was the act of “royal” autosacrifice. It was this act of royal bloodletting that opened the portal to the supernatural (Schele, personal communication, 1988) in the same way that, at the moment the Host is consecrated in the Mass, the veil between heaven and earth parts and the divine is made manifest here on earth. Because the Middle Formative Period is lacking in depictions of autosacrifice (though not in depictions of sacrificial ritual), I believe the ritual event chosen to represent ancestor communication artistically was the flight across the open supernatural portal by the central agent (the ruler) of the ritual. This hypothesis is supported by the many Middle Formative Period depictions of human figures holding torches and positioned in the human-flight posture. While for the Maya ancestor communication was achieved by bloodletting and earthly manifestation (Schele and Miller 1986:175), for the Olmec bloodletting also opened the supernatural portal, but it was the living ruler who was perceived to journey to the ancestors.

Crossing into the underworld was an action fraught with danger. The numerous depictions of transformation figures within the Middle Formative Period sculptural record tell us that overcoming those dangers rested on the ruler's ability to transform himself into magical animals, such as the werejaguar. Because of the widespread presence of shamanic activity in both North and South America (Hoppal 1987:85–86), I suggest that actions such as transformation and underworld travel had, in an earlier period, been the province of charismatic shamans. The survivals of shamanistic paths to power in Olmec rulership rituals indicate, that, by the Middle Formative Period, such powers were also being exercised by political rulers in much the same way they were exercised by the Late Formative Maya (Freidel and Schele 1988:547–

567). The personal charisma that was so important in shamanistic ritual would still perform an important role in the functions of rulership. However, the source of that charisma would now derive as much from the office of ruler as from the personality of the individual who held that office. The enactment of similar ancestor communication rituals, for similar purposes, by both Olmec and Maya rulers indicates that the Olmec ruler, like the kings of the Classic Maya, gained his office through a blood relationship to those lineage ancestors with whom he communicated in order to rule.

In these ancestor and underworld rituals what, if any, would be the function of the left arm scepter (fig. 9)? Certainly such an object would relate to the “flying torch bearer” in the same way that the right hand scepter/bloodletter relates to the arcing disemboweled captive. The left scepter has the same size and shape as its right arm counterpart, but it lacks the pressure flaking marks that would identify its “business-end” as a cutting edge. The left scepter like its right counterpart is also personified, but with a profile face rather than a frontal presentation. Unfortunately, this profile is difficult to describe because a great deal of it is hidden by the unbreakable grasp of a stone hand. We can discern that this profile face has a cross-banded, flame-fringed eye that is almost identical to that of the eye of the personified cave depicted in Relief 1 at Chalcatzingo (fig. 9a). Since the

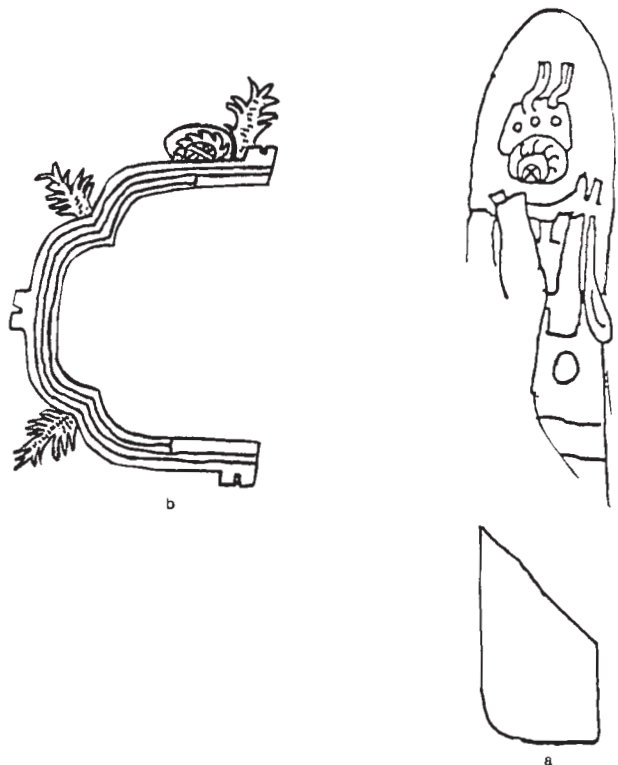


Fig. 9 (a) “Slim”: the left arm scepter (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). Note the profile face with the cross bands in the eye. (b) The personified cave from Chalcatzingo, Mon. 1 (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988).

Chalcatzingo cave supernatural is an underworld entrance, one can assume that if the rest of the face on the left scepter were visible it would function similarly. I believe the personified right arm scepter must have functioned symbolically like a shaman's baton and served as a key to the door of the underworld. If so, the function of some of the ritual objects held by Olmec flyers is explained.

"Slim": The Double Merlon Belt

As noted, the iconography incised on "Slim's" torso represents the two great ritual acts of the Mesoamerican "royal charter": *capture and sacrifice* and *ancestor communication*. Such rituals were of course performed within the second and earthly level of the cosmos. In this Mesoamerican cosmic view, the surface of the earth was seen as a thin membrane, punctured with supernatural portals, separating the terrestrial realm from the underworld. The belt worn by "Slim" (fig. 10a), symbolically performs the same function as the surface of the earth. Tied with an elaborate knot, above bare buttocks (fig.

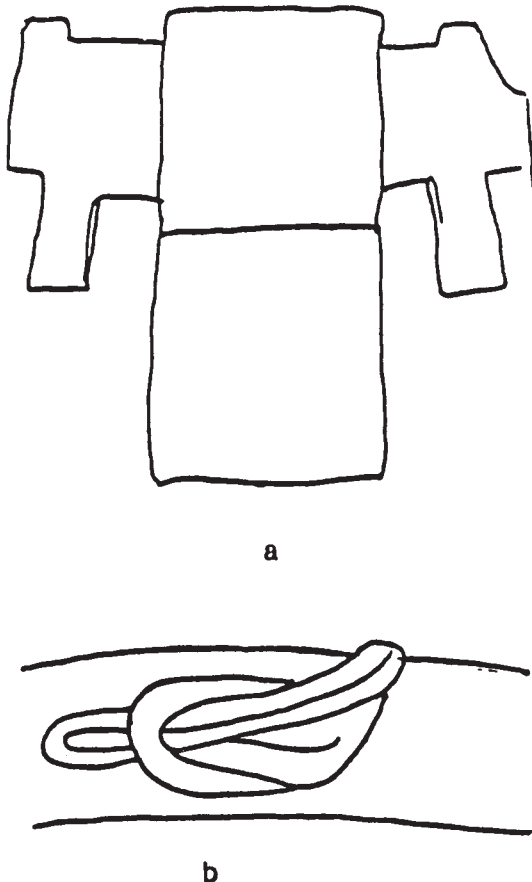


Fig. 10 (a) "Slim": the belt and apron (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988). Note the double merlon pattern cut in the bottom of the belt. (b) "Slim": the elaborate knot, at the small of the back, with which the belt is tied (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988).

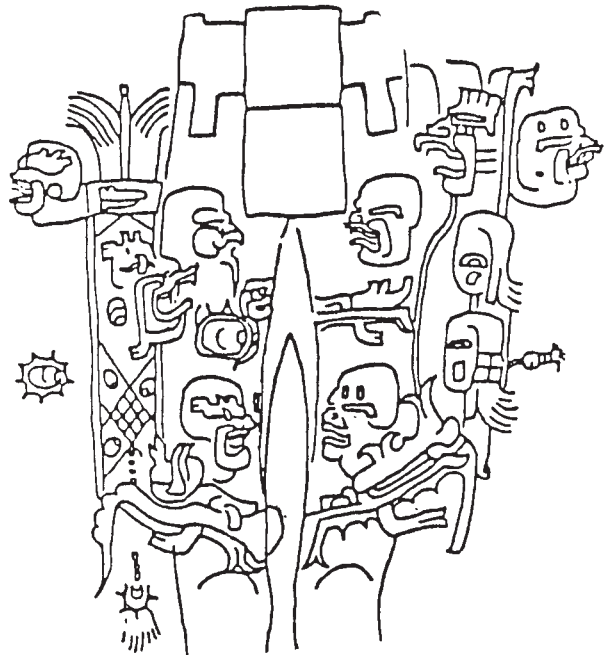


Fig. 11 "Slim": the incised secondary iconography located on the left and right thighs (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985).

10b), this scanty but important item of ritual costume divides the iconography of the torso (the earth) from that of the lower body (underworld). The lower border of the belt is cut to form double merlons and thus replicates the underworld portals, both natural and constructed, that are to be found on the surface of the earth.

"Slim": The Lower Body Iconography

Beneath "Slim's" belt, as beneath the surface of the earth, lies the underworld. As we shall see, the two biphalic zoomorphs (fig. 11) incised on the left and right thigh are symbols of the underworld power—water and vegetative fertility—that the earthly ruler ritually ensures in order to sustain the life of his people. Both of these creatures are postured with their long-snouted heads pointed downward, while on their tails they carry blunt-snouted heads or masks. The zoomorph on the right thigh (fig. 12a) is open-mouthed. Within that mouth can be seen a bifurcated tongue and a split-end, backward-turning fang. The three dots and bryozoan-covered *Spondylus* shell (*Spondylidae*) that emanate from the mouth function as symbolic locatives placing this supernatural in the waters of the underworld. Similar images of the *Spondylus* shell (without the algaelike bryozoans) can be seen below the zoomorph and above the mask he carries on the upper end of his barlike body. The *Spondylus* shell, above the back, is attached to a banded snakelike creature. Functioning as an abbreviated symbol for the full-figured zoomorph below it, the

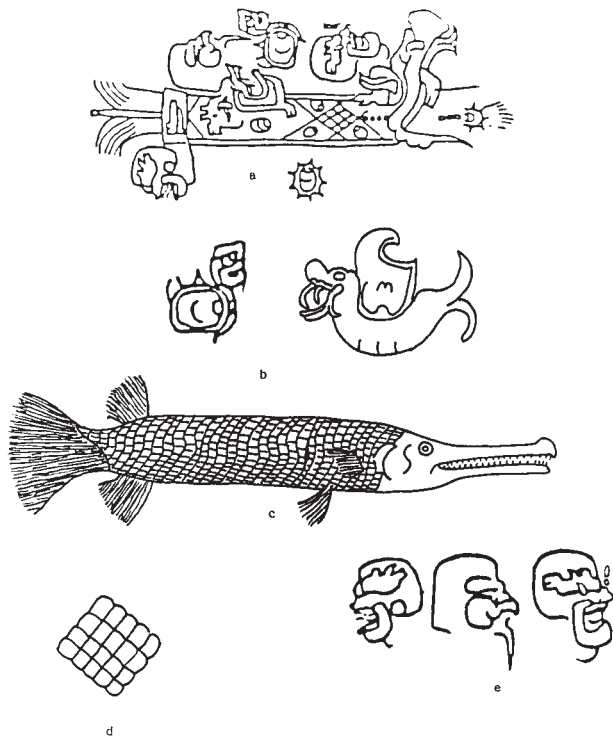


Fig. 12 (a) "Slim": the piscine-zoomorph and accompanying motifs incised on the right thigh (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985); (b) "Slim": the snake-shell motif positioned above the mask on the back of the right-thigh piscine-zoomorph and the Classic Maya Shell Wing Dragon (drawings by Kent Reilly, 1988); (c) the tropical alligator gar (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988); (d) the cross-hatched pattern formed by a gar fish's ganoid scales (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988); (e) "Slim": the three profile heads located above and below the body of the piscine-zoomorph (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985).

snaky *Spondylus* resembles the shell-wing dragon of the later Maya (fig. 12b) too strikingly to be accidental.

The upper jaw of this underwater supernatural ends in a distinctive bulbous projection. The nose atop the jaw appears humanoid, while the eye behind the nose is topped by a flame eyebrow very different in shape from those seen on "Slim's" mask. Besides carrying a mask, the elongated body of this zoomorph is marked with a large crossed-bands motif. The arms of the crossed bands are marked with small ovals that resemble nothing so much as a seed or acorn. The diamond-shaped cartouche formed by the crossing bands is incised with cross-hatching. The eye of the head or mask, positioned behind the cross bands, is indicated by a wavy cross band and is surmounted by a distinctive flame eyebrow. The mouth of the mask is bordered by a framing device. At least two fangs descend from the upper jaw and an elongated upper lip.

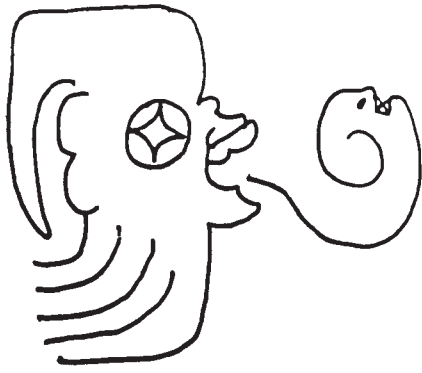
The zoomorph's tail assemblage begins in a rectangular frame that contains an "L-shaped element with a square

drooping corner" (Joralemon 1971: motif 6). Above this frame is a configuration consisting of a bifurcated fish tail supported by a central shaft. Since symbolic locatives function as both locaters and definers of action, the motif of the fish tail functions as a symbolic locative, placing this zoomorph in a watery habitat and identifying the action as swimming.

The actual creature from which this supernatural zoomorph derives is difficult but not impossible to discern. I once believed it to be a shark (Reilly 1987:96) but following a suggestion by Linda Schele I am now convinced it is the giant tropical alligator gar (*Lepisosteus tristoechus*). The tropical alligator gar (fig. 12c), often seen for sale in the fish markets of Tampico and Vera Cruz, has been known to reach lengths of up to twenty feet (Norman and Greenwood 1963:96) and, like the famous bull shark, can pass from fresh to salt water (Herald 1964:58). I have noticed the featherlike construction of the gar's fins and tail. The length of the jaws is noticeable in even the most casual of examinations. Certainly the bulbous projection on the end of the upper jaw of this piscine zoomorph is so configured as to resemble the bulbous beak on the end of the upper jaw of the tropical gar. Another feature of the tropical gar that might be depicted on the zoomorph is the ganoid or diamond-shaped scales (fig. 12d). These ganoid form patterns are suggestive of the cross-hatching seen at the transepts of the crossed bands so prominently displayed on the body of the right thigh zoomorph. Interestingly enough, the gar's vertebrae are reptilian in construction (Herald 1964:58), each vertebra having a ball and socket joint at either end. Such a feature allows the gar to float up on prey, looking like a log. Then the gar's body coils into a S-shaped spring from which he launches himself, in a snakelike motion, at unsuspecting prey.

Three profile heads are positioned around the gar-zoomorph (fig. 12e), one under the tail, one lacking a flame eyebrow but equipped with a beard, and one above the mask carried on the gar-zoomorph's back. All three of these heads have humanlike qualities, but they have enough compositional variation not to be considered identical. Taking into consideration their placement in the underworld and the fact that two of them have flame eyebrows, I suggest that these three profile heads, and the three on the left thigh, function as ancestor images.

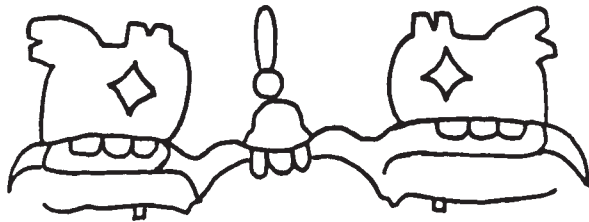
Below the right knee, an incised blunt-snouted supernatural face (fig. 13a) displays elements that link it iconographically with the symbolism displayed on the right torso and thigh. Issuing from the open mouth, a speech scroll terminates in a human head with crossed bands in its mouth. Projecting from the head is what appears to be a perforator blade, an association with the capture and sacrifice themes of the right arm and scepter. The eye is prominently marked with a diamond/star-shaped iris. From behind the mouth a fish fin emanates, thus linking the profile head to the gar-zoomorph immediately above him. My feeling is that we are seeing another depiction of a personified perforator—an identi-



a



b



c

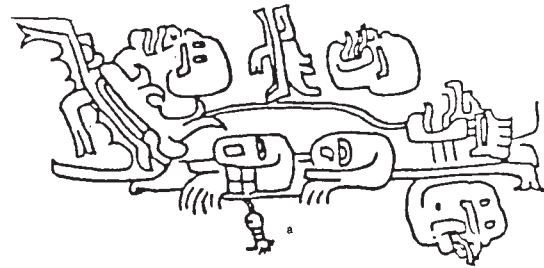
Fig. 13 (a) "Slim": the profile incised below the right knee (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988). (b) "Slim": the incised image on the right foot (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). The spaghetti-like appearance of this image is caused by lines cut into the foot to represent the toes. (c) "Slim": the reconstructed right foot image (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988).

fication that makes sense when one remembers that needle-sharp gar teeth make excellent bloodletters.

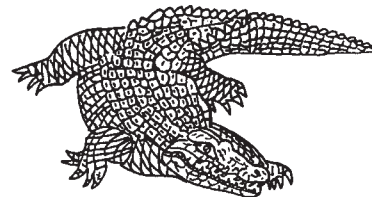
The far from clear incising on the right foot (fig. 13b) leads me to deduce that we are dealing with an image similar in function to the profile head directly above. In this case we see the frontal view of a supernatural head. The image has been so constructed that it wraps around the foot. Since the space between the feet is too narrow

to complete the incising, we must visualize the missing half as a mirror image to the completed half (fig. 13c). What is depicted is an abstract rendering of a zoomorphic head with diamond-shaped eyes and flame eyebrows. Either a perforator blade or a claw or beak curls out from under each eye. The mouth appears open and a trilobed element supports a pendant dot at the forehead.

Moving from the right to the left thigh, we are presented with another supernatural creature (fig. 14a) whose gaping toothy jaw, squared projecting nose, heavy eye ridges (flame eyebrows), and saurian tail identify him as a crocodilian-derived zoomorph (fig. 14b; Reilly 1987:101). The legs of this zoomorphic crocodilian also function as a symbolic locative, identifying the locomotive action as walking. In the water a crocodilian moves only with his tail. His legs are stretched back along his body. I might add that this legged zoomorph paired against the legless zoomorph on the right thigh sets up a legged and legless iconographic opposition first proposed by David Grove (personal communication, 1987). Fastened on the tail of this "Olmec dragon" (Joralemon 1976) is a mask



a



b



c

Fig. 14 (a) "Slim": the crocodilian-zoomorph and accompanying motifs incised on the left thigh (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). (b) The real-life crocodilian from which the crocodilian-zoomorph on "Slim" is constructed (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1986). Three species of crocodile—*Crocodylus moreletti*, *Crocodylus actus*, and *Caiman crocodylus fucus*—are indigenous to the Olmec climax zone. (c) "Slim": the mask on the back of the crocodilian-zoomorph's tail (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). Note the similarities—flame eyebrow, striping under the eye, overhanging upper lip, and the tie-ribbons that hold the mask in place.

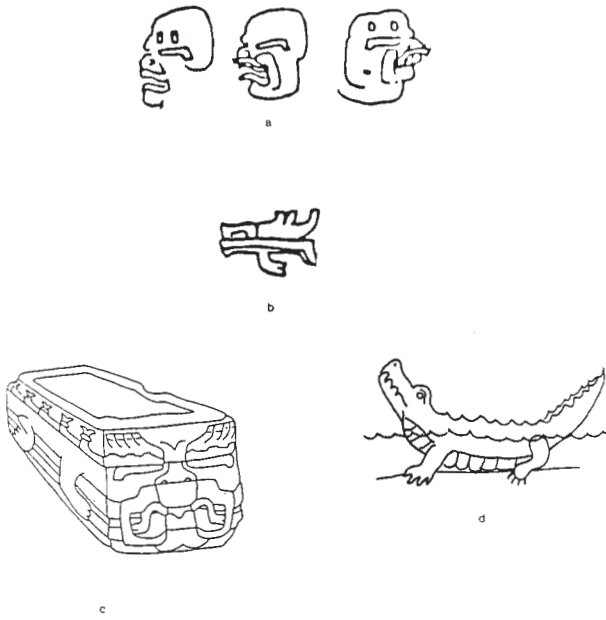


Fig. 15 (a) "Slim": the three profile heads located above and below the body of the crocodilian zoomorph (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). (b) "Slim": the "glyphic" element incised above the back of the crocodilian-zoomorph (drawing by Kent Reilly). This "glyphic" element is a head variant of the zoomorphic image carved below it. (c) La Venta, Mon. 6 (drawing from Joralemon 1976: fig. 9c). This large sarcophagus is carved in the likeness of a crocodilian-zoomorph. This supernatural hangs unmoving on the surface of the water; from his back sprout vegetative elements whose shape is reminiscent of the squash plants depicted at Chalcatzingo. (d) A crocodilian posed for water dancing (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988).

equipped with a blunt snout placed over the curving beak of a raptor bird (fig. 14c). This mask resembles in every way the raptor bird mask worn by "Slim." An abbreviated rendering of the head of the saurian supernatural on the left thigh (fig. 15b) mirrors the positioning of the abbreviated snake-shell, gar supernatural motif on the right thigh. As with the gar supernatural, the saurian supernatural is bracketed by three ancestor profiles (fig. 15a). A vegetative element emerges from beneath the saurian-zoomorph's belly plate, serving as the symbolic locative that identifies this supernatural as a representation of the earth itself, a common Mesoamerican belief. An examination of La Venta Mon. 6 (fig. 15c), a large stone sarcophagus, amply demonstrates that the Olmec shared that belief. Wrapped around the sides of the sarcophagus, a supernatural animal with many of the above described saurian attributes floats in the water (Muse and Stocker 1974). Split-stemmed plants emerging from the back plates (scutes) of the sarcophagus image demonstrate that his back was the surface of the earth and that he had strong connections with vegetation and fertility. Why a supernatural derived from a crocodilian should be vested with such an

attribute can only be determined by investigating the natural history of crocodilians.

Crocodilians, Vegetation, and Water Dancing

Among the most bizarre abilities of crocodilians is *water dancing*. It is common knowledge that the bellowing of male crocodilians is often mistaken for thunder. In fact, thunder can trigger the bellowing of crocodilians. They have even been known to bellow in response to the sonic boom of the space shuttle (Ackerman 1988:64). 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, lift his head and tail high out of the water (sometimes wagging the heavy tail like a dog), and with his mouth clamped shut puff up his throat (fig. 15d). Then, as Ackerman 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" (1988:65). Another researcher described the same effect, less poetically but just as accurately, as looking like a struck tuning fork placed into a pan of water (Toops 1979:28). So the reason for associating crocodilians with vegetative fertility is based on sympathetic magic: they can call the thunder and bring down the rain!

Below the left knee, as below the right, is incised a profile head (fig. 16a). But this time it contains thematic elements of the left torso and thigh. In front of the image's blunt snout is positioned an incised tear-shaped element. From the open mouth a speech scroll emanates. Around the forehead is tied a headband similar to that worn by the arcing "torchbearer" on the left arm. Attached to the back of the head is a crocodilian paw identical to the ones that can be seen on the saurian supernatural above. Wrapped above this paw is some form of bracelet incised with either a double merlon or a cleft device, perhaps symbolizing the supernatural-saurian's ability to create an underworld portal in the same way that his natural counterpart can dig a nest.

Wrapped around the left foot is another incised frontal-facing image similar to the one on the right foot (fig. 16b). The individual elements of this supernatural head are not clear, but appear to duplicate at least the eye shape and flame eyebrow of the mask tied to the tail of the saurian supernatural. Nostrils are indicated and once again a pendant dot can be seen in the forehead (fig. 16c).

"Slim": The Iconographic Message

As with many compositions executed in the Olmec style, we have seen that "Slim" is divided into primary and secondary information. The primary information is that "Slim" is the portrait of a ruler, costumed for what I believe is a bloodletting ritual. The secondary information is carried by incised symbols and long-snouted and

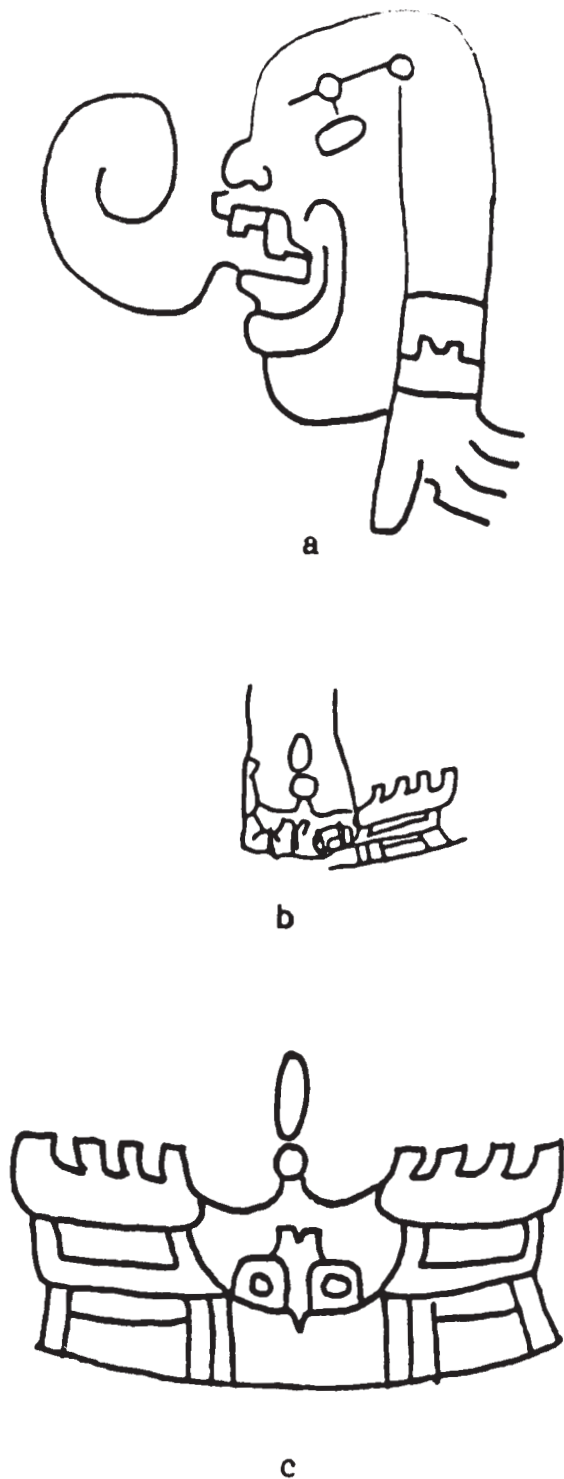


Fig. 16 (a) "Slim": the profile head incised below the left knee (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988). (b) "Slim": the incised image on the left foot (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). The spaghetti-like appearance of this incised image is caused by lines cut into the foot to represent the toes. (c) "Slim": the reconstructed left foot image (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988).

blunt-snouted zoomorphic oppositions. What these secondary symbols describe is the ruler's axial position within the trilevel cosmos and the nature of the public ritual that charts his rule. All this information taken together tells us that by the Middle Formative Period the charter of "royal" power proclaimed the ruler to be the axis mundi and the cosmic fulcrum, which held the opposing forces of nature in balance. Certainly the Classic Period Maya defined the charter of their rulers in a similar way (Schele and Miller 1986). "Slim," however, is not the only iconographic depiction of the charter of Middle Formative rulership. Certainly the bas-reliefs at Chalcatzingo proclaim the same "royal" charter but in a much larger and thus more public way.

Chalcatzingo

The sculptures at Chalcatzingo have been classified by David Grove (1987b) as either mythico-religious or public. The mythico-religious monuments are carved on the talus slopes of the largest of the two volcanic cores that mark the archaeological site of Chalcatzingo. Marie Elena Bernal and I suggested to Grove that Chalcatzingo should be laid out in relation to the Cerro Chalcatzingo in the same way that La Venta Group A is laid out to its volcano-shaped pyramid. Grove, after checking his maps, concurred with our view and determined that a north-south axis did exist. The axis determined by Grove extends from approximately the highest point on the summit of the Cerro Chalcatzingo down through the middle of the archaeological site at its base (Grove, personal communication, 1988). When I ran Grove's axis line across the mountain's talus slope, I saw that it divided the mythico-religious monuments into two complementary groups, each of which reflects one half of the secondary iconography on "Slim."

Dividing the mythico-religious bas-reliefs into three groups or stations was first proposed by Carlo Gay (1971: 37). Since Gay's proposal, several more of the "boulder sculptures" have come to light, expanding the total number of reliefs. On the summit of the Cerro Chalcatzingo is the single carving Mon. 10, which in the Gay system is labeled Station C. Mon. 10 (discovered by Gillett Griffin in 1969), is a boulder carved with the image of a frontal-faced, goggle-eyed head and a raised and braceleted left arm with outward-facing palm. The similarity of the hat worn by this figure to the headdress worn by "Slim" has been noted earlier (see fig. 3d). The headdress similarities and the location of this single goggle-eyed human head on top of the Cerro suggest that, like the masked head of "Slim," Mon. 10 functions as a celestial metaphor.

The Iconographic Relationship of "Slim" and the Chalcatzingo Bas-Reliefs

The bas-reliefs on the talus slopes to the right (Station A) and left (Station B) of Grove's axis line (fig. 17) also

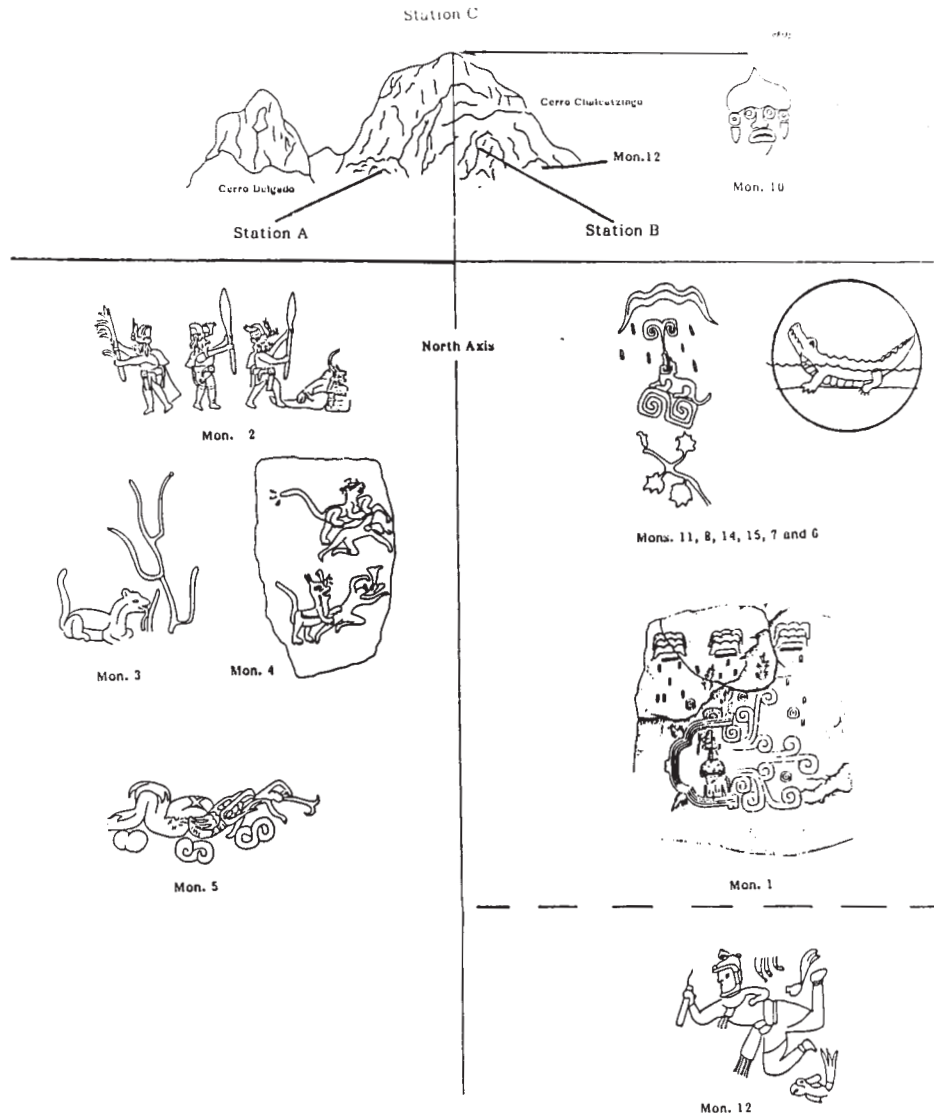


Fig. 17 Chalcatzingo: the Cerro Chalcatzingo and the arrangement of the bas-reliefs into three groupings or stations (drawings of the Cerros Delgado and Chalcatzingo by Kent Reilly, 1988; Station C: Mon. 10 by Kent Reilly, 1988; Station A: Mons. 2-4 from Grove 1968: figs. 3 and 4, and Mon. 5 from Joralemon 1971: fig. 244; Station B: Mon. 14 by Kent Reilly, 1988, Mon. 1 from Coe 1965b: fig. 10, and Mon. 12 by Kent Reilly, 1986).

have their counterparts in symbols incised on the right and left sides of "Slim." The right body themes of bloodletting and capture and sacrifice are certainly reflected in the several bas-reliefs of Station A. Within Station A, Mon. 2 (fig. 18a), with its obvious depiction of a human sacrificial ritual, is certainly a counterpart to the bound and sacrificed captive and the personified sacrificial knife on "Slim's" right arm (fig. 18b). Mon. 5 (Angulo 1987:147-148) is a depiction of a supernatural "peje lagarto/alligator gar" who is furiously biting the left leg off a supine human (fig. 18c). Mon. 5 is certainly the pictorial counterpart of the gar-supernatural incised on "Slim's" right thigh (fig. 18d). Figure-eight water scrolls positioned below the supernatural "peje lagarto" perform the same symbolic locative function on Mon. 5 that the *Spondylus* shell and water dots did on "Slim." The subject matter of Mons. 3 and 4 (fig. 18e) is more difficult to

equate with the iconography on "Slim's" right side. Yet these two monuments, with their depictions of attacking supernatural felines dominating supine humans, continue the overall right-of-axis theme of bloodletting and may very well be transformation (werejaguar) images associated with the ritual journey into the underworld.

The monuments of Station B, Mon. 1 and Mons. 11, 8, 14, 15, 7, and 6, are positioned to the left of the axis line. Mon. 1 (fig. 18f) is a depiction of an elaborately costumed personage, seated in the mouth of a personified cave. Commonly identified as "El Rey," Mon. 1 is the best known of all the Chalcatzingo reliefs. Given that "El Rey" is seated on a bench and carries a ceremonial bar, both of which are marked with figure-eight water scrolls, and that water or cloud scrolls issue from the personified cave/underworld entrance in which he is seated, a ritual can be assumed to be taking place. The

function of that ritual is reflected in the symbols carved around the personified cave. Consisting of rain-clouds, !-shaped raindrops, and maize vegetation, these symbols bespeak water and agricultural fertility. The symbolic locative that tells us that the ritual takes place in an underworld entrance is the personified cave itself. Being able to identify this symbolic locative also allows us to identify "El Rey" as a portrait of either a Chalcatzingo ruler who has obtained the rain through ancestor contact or the ancestor (perhaps the progenitor of the Chalcatzingo ruling lineage), who is contacted in order to ensure the rain. One way or the other, by rendering this ceremony in stone, the Middle Formative rulers at Chalcatzingo have frozen the ritual in time and space. Ancestor contact is a theme we have seen on "Slim's" left arm. The placement of Chalcatzingo Mon. 12 (fig. 18g) on the left of the site axis further emphasizes that within

the Middle Formative Period artistic canon the portrayal of underworld flight and ancestor communication was on the left side of sculptural compositions (fig. 18h).

I am convinced that Mons. 11, 8, 14, 15, 7, and 6 were meant to be understood as a unified composition (fig. 18i). Taken together, they are the earliest depiction of a natural phenomenon (crocodilian water dancing) in Mesoamerican art. Located across a drainage gully from Mon. 1, this monument group consists of a series of squash plants in various stages of development. Atop the squash plants are a series of figure-eight water scrolls. Atop the water scrolls perch saurian zoomorphs. Over these saurian zoomorphs float rain clouds from which !-shaped raindrops fall.

Many of the elements that make up this composition are badly eroded, but at least three of the saurians (Mons. 14, 15, and 8) are depicted in the crocodilian water

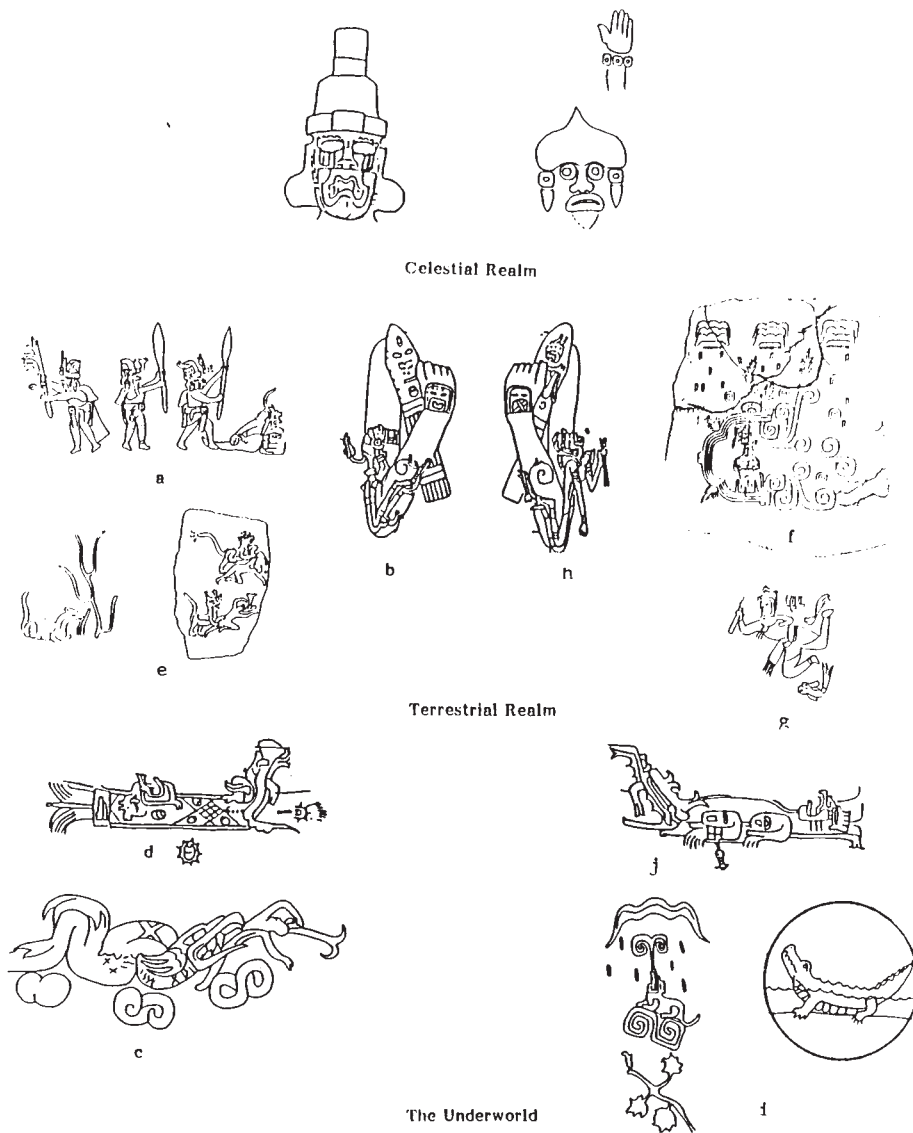


Fig. 18 "Slim" and Chalcatzingo: a comparison of the thematic content of the iconography. Celestial Realm: the head of "Slim" (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985); Chalcatzingo, Mon. 10 (redrawn by Kent Reilly after Gay 1972: fig. 34). (a) Chalcatzingo, Mon. 2 (drawing from Grove 1968: fig. 3). (b) "Slim," the right torso iconography (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). (c) Chalcatzingo, Mon. 5 (drawing from Joralemon 1971: fig. 244). (d) "Slim," the piscine-zoomorph (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). (e) Chalcatzingo, Mons. 3 and 4 (drawing from Grove 1968: figs. 4 and 5). (f) Chalcatzingo, Mon. 1 (drawing from Coe 1965b: fig. 10). (g) Chalcatzingo, Mon. 12 (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988). (h) "Slim," the left torso iconography (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985). (i) Chalcatzingo, Mon. 14, compared to the crocodilian water dancing posture (drawing by Kent Reilly, 1988). (j) "Slim," the crocodilian-zoomorph (drawing by Gillett G. Griffin, 1985).

dancing posture. As they sit upon water scrolls with their heads and tails arcing high out of the water, bifurcating scrolls of liquid eject from their closed snouts in a stylized representation of the upside-down rain that forms around their bodies when they water dance. From overhead, in answer to their stony bellowing, clouds form and rain falls. Depicted in water dancing posture, this grouping of Station B monuments performs the identical symbolic function as the saurian-supernatural on the left thigh of “Slim” (fig. 18j).

Not only is the placement of the mythico-religious monuments at Chalcatzingo similar to the placement of the secondary information on “Slim,” but the axial position of the Middle Formative ruler is also indicated. Just as the primary information on “Slim” was the portrait of a young ruler who is the axis mundi within a trilevel cosmos, the primary information proclaimed at Chalcatzingo is, as Townsend observed in his study of the pyramid and sacred mountain, that “the mountain monuments were places where the integration of polity and physical environment was ritually established, where the memory of kings was consecrated. . .” (1982:61). With the carved portrait on the summit and the charter of rulership carved on its flanks, Cerro Chalcatzingo became the axis mundi and the ruler of Middle Formative Chalcatzingo metaphorically became the mountain.

As we have seen, in the Middle Formative Period, the two great ritual functions of Mesoamerican rulership—*capture and sacrifice* and *ancestor communication*—were symbolically depicted in an artistic canon that required their placement on the right and left side of a compositional axis. The symbol sets used to represent these charter rituals contained, among other elements, zoomorphic images that functioned as paired oppositions. Such paired opposition could be expressed as long snoutedness/blunt snoutedness or legged/legless. It is also apparent that these oppositions can be characterized as the elements of the religious equation blood sacrifice enacted by the ruler = ancestor communication and vegetative fertility, which was seen to charter Middle Formative Period rulership ritually and thus visually.

The Survival of the Middle Formative Artistic Canon

As the symbolic expression of Olmec “royal” power, the placement of similar symbols in the same compositional form had lost little of its graphic meaning by Classic Maya times. On the sarcophagus lid in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque (fig. 19a), Pacal falls down an axis mundi tree into the geometrically shaped jaws of the underworld maw. In the branches of the axis mundi tree is hung a bicephalic celestial serpent. From the serpent’s open mouth on the right of the compositional axis emerges the torch-pierced head of God K, deity of royal office and royal bloodletting; from the serpent’s open mouth on the left of the compositional axis emerges the vegetatively-derived Jester God. The compositional placement of

these gods echoes the positioning of their precursors on “Slim” and on the Cerro Chalcatzingo.

The Dumbarton Oaks panel (fig. 19b) displays the same imagery and positioning as the sarcophagus lid. As Kan-Xul, the son of Pacal, emerges from Xibalba, his progenitors offer him the symbols of charter and power. On Kan-Xul’s right the Lady Ahpo-Hel offers up the image of God K. On his left Pacal holds the image of a vegetative-headed personified world tree.

It seems certain that the Maya rulers at Palenque were manipulating these symbolic power complexes very much to the same purpose and within a similar artistic canon as their Middle Formative predecessors. Thus, it can be said that both Olmec and Maya rulers chartered their rule by symbolically manipulating the power of nature within a similar cosmic view.

If my assessment is correct, emerging elites in the Mesoamerican Middle Formative Period were encoding and manipulating the rhythms of nature in their ritual and art to breathtaking effect. In other words, derived from a Middle Formative Period matrix, the power of later Maya rulers was the power of the oppositions perceived within the cosmos itself. What balanced and controlled these oppositions was, for both the Olmec and the Maya, “the Blood of Kings.”

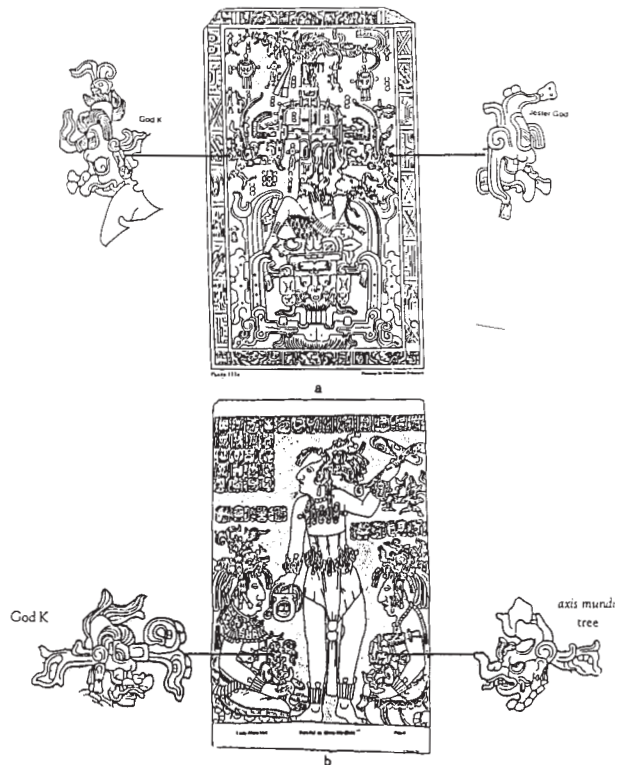


Fig. 19 (a) Palenque: the sarcophagus lid from the Temple of the Inscriptions (drawing from Merle Greene Robertson 1983: fig. 99); (b) Palenque: the Dumbarton Oaks Panel (drawing from Schele and Miller 1986: fig. VII.3).