

COSMIC VENTURES OF THE OLMEC DWARF: AN ANALYSIS OF
THE DISPERSAL AND TRANSFORMATION OF DWARF
IMAGERY WITHIN OLMEC ICONOGRAPHY

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout time, dwarfs have made appearances in the art of ancient societies spanning from the Old world to the New. Their perceived abnormalities made them the subject of much interest, often placing them in an esteemed position in proximity to the elite class. For the Olmec, the dwarfs were no different; they appear alongside elites and supernaturals in settings reserved as sacred space. Why the Olmec were so enthralled by dwarfs is yet uncertain, but I hope to elucidate the answer to this question through an analysis of the dispersal and transformation of dwarf imagery in the Olmec style. The dwarf imagery will be shown to have a long history during which their meaning transformed to function as signifiers of rituals to be enacted and, much like the Maya dwarfs, they become abstract renderings of liminality. This transformation occurs across geographic space as a result of extensive trade networks between the heartland of Olman, along the Mexican gulf coast, and the periphery regions of the Pacific coast and the Highlands (Figure 01). The purpose of this paper is to examine the dwarfs from an iconographic and spatial perspective in order to determine where the imagery occurs and how it functioned within society.

The Olmec have long drawn the attention of both archaeologists and the public alike. Renowned for their impeccable jade craftsmanship and amazing construction of monumental sculpture, the Olmec have made the cover of countless journals, magazines, and documentaries. Their art immortalized their world view; despite the absence of a written language, the cosmology of the Olmec can be interpreted based on the exceptional art they left behind which depicts the way they viewed the world and their place within it. While typically not seen as being as fantastic as the iconic colossal heads

and supernatural deities, the dwarfs will be shown to have been important actors within this society. They occupy a role central to countless ceremonies and possess abilities that others can only achieve through ritual or magic. I will discuss who the dwarfs were, where they occur, and why they were immortalized alongside elites, supernaturals, and Other-worldly beings.

The world of the Olmec is both fascinating and enlightening. Predating the Maya, they are perhaps the Americas' first established civilization. To this day, little is known about the Olmec in comparison to the antecedent cultures in the region. Pioneering work by Matthew Stirling (1940a, 1940b, 1946, 1947) opened the scholarly world's eyes to this untapped civilization. However, he was not the first to encounter the material remains of the Olmec.

It was an explorer by the name of Jose Maria Melgar who upon coming across a colossal stone head in 1862, now known as Monument A at Tres Zapotes (Figure 02), realized that the style was unlike any he had seen before (Reilly 1987:6). The facial features appeared to him to be characteristically negroid and he concluded that the artists must certainly be from Ethiopia (Melgar, 1869). Although this would later prove to be a misconstrued assumption, Melgar's work was published and became the first of many to attempt to interpret the art of this culture. It would be another 46 years before the culture was given the name Olmec during the Tulane Expedition to southern Mexico in 1925 headed by Franz Blom and Oliver La Farge (Blom and LaFarge 1927, Reilly 1987).

Even the term Olmec is problematic itself, for the contemporary Olmec who occupy the region today are in no way related to the Olmec of prehistory. The correct nomenclature would likely be Mixe-Zoque, but Olmec is now too entangled in the

literature to be changed. Thus the term 'Olmec' is used to refer to an archaeological culture and art style, but it is not to be inferred that they relate to the Olmec of today.

At the time of the Tulane expedition, there was still very little to be said about the Olmec, and it wasn't until Matthew Stirling's expeditions into La Venta, San Lorenzo, and Cerro de las Mesas that scholars began to piece together just who the Olmec had been (Stirling 1940). Having proposed early on that the Olmec had existed prior to the Maya, Stirling became the first proponent of the hypothesis of the Olmec as the mother culture of Mesoamerica. In the summer of 1942 the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropologia hosted a round table and this hypothesis began to gain acceptance in the scholarly world (Reilly 1987:16).

Eventually, archaeological expeditions would prove that the Olmec developed sometime around 1250 BC (Coe 1968); while some scholars argue for the Olmec as the Mother culture (Grove 1997, Blomster 2005, Diehl and Coe 1995, Clark 1997, Hammond 1989) there are also those that argue the Olmec are more of a sister-culture to other Mesoamerican cultures (Demarest 1989, Flannery and Marcus 2000, Graham 1989, Grove 1981, 1989, 1997). Still others take a more neutral stance, believing that the Olmec influenced their neighbors in diverse ways and to different degrees (Pool 2007:17, Lesure 2004:79). Their art and ideology likely stems from an ancient cosmology that predates organized civilization. This cosmology regionally intensifies to create varying world views, but nonetheless, trade networks that exchange ideology and commerce led to an interconnected cosmovision within the Americas. The Olmec sister culture influences later Mesoamerican cultures, but is not necessarily the origin of this wide spread cosmology.

While scholars used to believe that Olmec culture was centered in the highlands region of Mexico encompassing the states of Morelos, Guerrero, and Puebla (Coe 1965), archaeological evidence seems to support the idea that the culture developed in the gulf coast region (Diehl, 1989). This region is firmly dated at 1250-500 BC (Reilly 1994), with some sites occurring at even earlier dates, and as such this region is the location of some of the oldest dated Olmec sites. Yet, there are sites dating to the same time period located in periphery regions in the west and the highlands, begging the question of from whence and where Olmec culture arose. The fact remains that there is still much to be explored, and as such it is possible that earlier evidence of Olmec inhabitation may be discovered elsewhere.

Accepting for now a Gulf Coast origin, the Olmec culture would have expanded via trade or long distance economic alliances as necessitated by a growing need for status goods in the Gulf Coast after the year 900 BC (Flannery 1968, Grove 1984). Olmec art occurs upon two corridors leading to resources valued for their aesthetic as opposed to utilitarian qualities, and which were controlled by the ruling elite (Grove and Gillespie 1992). The adoption of this art phenomenon by Gulf Coast elites and subsequent regions was most likely an attempt to verify their relationships within this economic alliance (1992). The monumental art complex would have permeated surrounding regions in a similar manner, with ideological information being a major trade good.

It is through these exchange networks that ideology evolved, manifesting in different styles depending on the regional aesthetic. The ideas regarding and representations of the Olmec dwarfs would have undergone this same process. The portable figures and accompanying myths traveled the exchange corridors and took root

throughout the Olmec region. Their stories would have passed between travelers, explaining how they fit into the cosmogenic myth and the larger world in which the Olmec existed. Their importance is evidenced by their ability to permeate Olmec art. They pop up from the gulf coast to the pacific coast, in the highlands and the lowlands, from the early formative far into the post classic. But, where did the Olmec dwarfs originate, what do they mean, and why did they persist throughout Mesoamerican prehistory? It is these questions which this paper will focus on. I will (1) illuminate the geographic spread of the corpus of dwarf imagery, (2) identify the power of dwarfs derived from their inherent nature as cosmic travelers, and (3) discuss how the Olmec representation of dwarfs compares to those seen in later Mesoamerican cultures.

However, to begin, one must first understand the function of art for the Olmec. Olmec art is recognized by its fluidity and realism (Coe 1965). Artists were heavily influenced by the natural world and human interaction with it. Covarrubias describes the Olmec art tradition as follows:

[Olmec Monuments] include colossal heads of basalt, powerful and sensuous, admirably realistic; great stelae and enormous altars, with strange personages carved in high and low relief; vigorous statues of snarling jaguars; squat, chubby dwarfs and infants and dignified men, Mongoloid and Negroid at the same time, statues often endowed with the magic breath of life of great art. Some of these are clearly human; others have a fantastic, haunting mixture of human and feline characteristics in varying degrees. It is often difficult to guess whether a given carving was intended to represent a man disguised as a jaguar or a jaguar in the process of becoming a man.

(Covarrubias 1966: 50)

Within the corpus of Olmec art found on stone monuments Beatriz de la Fuente has identified three pervasive themes (2000). These themes are (1) mythic images, (2) effigies of supernaturals, and (3) human figures, or any combination thereof. Human figures are among the most important motifs recognizable in Olmec art. This is probably due to the fact that art was ritually used in order to represent the role of the ruler-class in their society. Depicting the human engaging in rituals of sacred importance allowed specific people to claim the rights to an elite status. As such, the focus of these monumental sculptures seems to be politically motivated to immortalize the connection between man and supernatural.

The realism that Coe (1965) asserts as a definitive trait of Olmec art is observed in the fact that the Olmec were depicting beings which they truly believed existed despite their fantastical nature. The ‘monstrous’ form of the supernaturals may be visually grotesque, but it is depicted in a realistic fashion that is never reduced to abstraction (Coe 1965: 748). Joralemon builds on Coe’s ideas and states that 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” (1976: 33). Joralemon also realizes that the basis for these supernatural creations lies in the natural world, deriving from a variety of species that coexisted with the Olmec (Joralemon 1973). Important species include jaguars, the harpy eagle, the tropical green rattle snake, the bull shark, the osprey, the caiman, and numerous others. Much of the imagery relates a conflation of one or more of these animals combined with locative motifs to depict a specific being.

Moreover Coe realized through his studies that the Olmec had mastered the art of using the given space to create a sense of depth and proportion (1965), lending to the realism and monumentality of Olmec art. Reilly (1987) provides us with a neat summary of the qualities of Olmec art:

It can be said that the Olmec style tends towards a sense of the monumental, and that its contours are defined by the material from which it is constructed, i.e. basalts and jade or clay. Realism is a hallmark of the Olmec style of representation. We shall see that even when the Olmec represented complex ideas and relationships in the form of supernatural composites, the creatures, while compounded of realistic body parts representing individual abstract qualities, are still rendered as a naturalistic whole.

(Reilly 1987: 44)

Within the Olmec heartland the pervasiveness of religious constructs in the art occasionally allowed for more abstract renderings due to the fact that those people were already familiar with the concepts (Grove 1984). This is visualized by the idea of *pars pro toto*, or “a part taken from the whole”, which allows specific motifs to represent an entire entity, place, or idea. Conversely, on the fringes of Olmec civilization, such as along the Pacific Coast, more literal depictions were necessitated in order to portray similar concepts (Reilly 1987).

Having established the style that the Olmec tended towards, we must now realize why they created specific phenomenon. The answer, as seen with government funded art today, appears to be political propaganda. The presence of a monumental art complex in which megaliths are prominent is telling; Heine-Geldern points out, “wherever

megalithism is found flourishing, a well-developed ancestor cult is always present” (1959: 164). Although it must be noted that Heine-Geldern’s definition of a megalith is narrow unto the point of almost absurd exclusion, his link between megalithic complexes and ancestor worship does appear to be substantiated (Riesenfeld 1950).

These megaliths are hypothesized to have been intended as a form of political propaganda. Their looming nature and the care by which their placement was chosen support this hypothesis. This use of megaliths to convey political messages was by and large a construct of the elite class. As Reilly states:

One way the elite may have gathered more power was by usurping shamanistic powers -- like communication with ancestors -- which were not hereditary; and institutionalizing them as powers reserved to their own hereditary ruling class. Such a staggering usurpation must have required that public art be used as political propaganda to instruct the general population in the new social order, and to justify what had traditionally been an untenable position.

(Reilly 1987: 114)

Understanding Olmec art as a form of political propaganda is incredibly important; this argument substantiates the claim that the figures and beings immortalized in the art must have had a specific, important role within society. The counter argument may be that art was simply created to be aesthetically pleasing. This is where context comes into play, when located in a domestic setting, or removed from its original context, art may not be considered as significant on a population level scale. But place that same piece in the context of a ritualized ceremonial precinct, and the meaning behind it is drastically changed. Ceremonial centers were laid out in a purposeful manner to create a

sacred space within which rituals could be performed (Cyphers 1992, 1996: 68, Diehl 2008, Ortiz and Rodriguez 1989, 1994). When having an established provenience, dwarfs appear to almost always be found in a ceremonial context. This aids in the fundamental identification and interpretation of dwarf imagery.

The dwarf has to be defined and differentiated from two other phenomenon, the baby maize god (Figure 03) and the hollow baby figurines (Figure 04). While sharing some similar attributes, these three categories have different meanings and are found in different contexts. However, due to their similar physical appearance they have previously been identified as part of the same thematic group; I believe that, while related to a certain extent, these three groups have specific identifiers which allude to varying positions within the cosmology.

Once the Olmec dwarfs have been defined I will compare them to that of the Maya (Figure 05). While the Olmec are best understood through an art historical approach, the Maya have explicit descriptors for much of their works. Through the concept of cultural continuity we are able to upstream from the Maya in order to better understand the Olmec. For the Maya, dwarfs held an esteemed position, often shown accompanying either elites or the maize god.

What we will learn is that dwarfs, both for the Maya and the Olmec, occupy a place of liminality; that is, they exist in a plane between realms, a space of transition where the natural state is less tangible than the terrestrial realm. I will show that the dwarfs were seen by the Olmec to exist in a perpetual state of transformation due to their physical attributes. They retain a childlike stature while maturing into old age; identifying human growth as transformational, we are able to discern that the dwarfs

never pass out of this stage, but rather become ‘stuck’ in transformation. This gives them the ability to access the Other more easily than other members of society, making them prime candidates to act as guides for cosmic travel. And further, they were seen as seeds - marking the beginning of the mythological cycle of maize.

Therefore, the figurines and monuments of dwarfs appear to represent liminal space. They act as signifiers, identifying the ritual to come. They are found in ritual contexts, they stand in a trance or dance-like pose, and they bear the accoutrements for the maize god upon their backs. They prepare the viewer and the actor for the ceremonies to be enacted. The dwarfs occupy a space that allows them to aid in the preparation and enactment of rituals concerning travel between the realms.

However, at times their meaning is more convoluted. Evidence at San Lorenzo and Portero Nuevo hints at a slightly different role; that being earth bearers (Figures 06 and 07). I believe that their role of earth bearers is due to their more abstract general interpretation as liminal beings. It does not negate the connection to the seed and maize, but rather, as we will come to see, it strengthens this relationship.

It is in the peripheries that I hypothesize the dwarfs became concerned with liminality in general. It appears that the dwarf figurines originate in the periphery regions, perhaps providing some of the earliest evidence of dwarfs existing in a state of liminality, or transition. A spatial analysis and examination of raw materials may allude to this potential origin. If, as some scholars believe, the highlands region acted as an important center for trade and exchange, then symbols moving through this region would likely have been exposed to and reinterpreted by a variety of different peoples. I believe that this is the process which transformed the meaning behind the dwarfs.

The dwarf imagery manifests in the heartland at the site of La Venta. Here, there are three monumental dwarfs marking the southern entrance to the site (Figure 08). Due to their in situ context, these monuments provide invaluable information concerning the role of the dwarfs to the Olmec. This will be the subject of a later chapter which explores where the dwarfs fit into the larger processional narrative at La Venta.

The dwarfs have been the topic of many different studies by a number of scholars. They have at times been called were-jaguars, rain deities, babies or fetuses, ball players, and achondroplastic dwarfs (Bacon 2007, Covarrubias 1957, Taube 1988, Joralemon 1976, Kubler YEAR, Miller 1985, Ortiz and Rodriguez 1999, Tate 1995, 2006, Tate and Bendersky 1999, Tedlock 1982). However a general theme links each of these identifications; they all pertain to aspects of transformation and the Other.

Analyzing the dwarfs requires a holistic approach that incorporates art historical methods, ethnographical research, and anthropological concepts. In order to understand their meaning I will do structural analysis where necessary, comparative analysis between the corpus, and upstream from later Mesoamerican cultures that incorporate dwarf imagery into their art. In order to construct a hypothesis regarding the geographic spread of dwarf imagery, I will perform a spatial analysis according to the theory of exchange known as the paradigm of the periphery.

II. ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHODS FOR INTERPRETING ART

This analysis will be three-fold in its approach. I employ art historical, anthropological, and ethnographical methods in order to illuminate the dispersal and transformation of dwarf imagery in the formative period. The major theories/practices upon which this analysis is based are as follows; (1) cultural continuity, (2) the paradigm of the periphery, and (3) iconographic analysis. To begin with, the theoretical concept of cultural continuity is important as it allows for deductions to be made regarding the intended message of Olmec art through a comparison to that of later Mesoamerican cultures. The paradigm of the periphery explains how trade throughout the region influences the spread and evolution of thematic concepts that may be represented in a variety of different media and styles. Iconographic analysis is used to break down symbols and motifs within the corpus that allude to an overall significance when viewing the body of work as a whole. What follows is a brief explanation of these theories and practices and how they will be applied to Formative period dwarf imagery.

The eventual purpose of this discussion will be to illuminate how the geographic spread of a unique icon can inform the researcher of different aspects of its meaning. Moreover, I will show that when an icon pervades throughout time and is present in later cultures, one is able to make claims regarding the nature of the icon; in this case, the Olmec dwarfs.

The Concept of Cultural Continuity

To better understand the Olmec, scholars have proposed a concept of continuity which links the Olmec to the Maya, Aztec, and later cultures, and subsequently allows later ideals to be postulated back upon the Olmec. Proponents of this theory include Michael Coe (1968, 1972, 1977), Miguel Covarrubias (1946), Virginia Fields (1989), Linda Schele (1993), and Cortez (1986) amongst many others. The Olmec Maya connection is epitomized in the iconography at the site of Itzapa, dated at 400-1 BC (Reilly, 1994). This classic Maya creation complex illustrates iconographic patterns that are strikingly similar to those seen in the Middle Formative iconography of the Olmec (Reilly 1994).

The continuity theory, as proposed by Covarrubias (1946), is explained by Joralemon as follows:

It is my conviction that there is a basic religious system common to all Mesoamerican peoples. This system took shape long before it was given expression in Olmec art and survived long after the Spanish conquered the New World's major political and religious centers. Like all mythological systems it presents an interpretation of reality. On the one hand, it explains the origins and organization of the world and the birth of the gods and creation of mankind. On the other hand, it establishes the relationship between the gods and man, between man and his fellows, and between man and the natural world. This Mesoamerican weltanschauung exists at the level of deep structure. Although its occurrence in time and space makes it subject to the usual historical processes of innovation and change, its systematic nature allows it to remain relatively stable.

(Joralemon 1976: 58-59)

Michael Coe has determined that there is strong evidence for cultural loans from the Olmec to the Maya in at least seven regions- sociopolitical, warfare, deities, religious paraphernalia, bloodletting paraphernalia, the ball game and symbol systems (1977). Moreover Fields has demonstrated that the Maya borrowed many stylistic elements central to Olmec art including seated rulers, jaguarian imagery, and icons of rulership (1989). The transference of symbolic structure and its associated meaning can be seen in at least two forms as identified by Reilly (1994: 67), those being the “transference of symbol and adoption of meaning and transference of category of meaning and its adaptation of different symbols”. There is an abundance of evidence that supports this concept of continuity using Itzapa as a “bridge between two cultures” (Reilly 1994: 68, Coe 1977, Cortez 1986, Schele and Miller 1986).

Insight into Maya cosmology is provided via four different methods as defined by Coe (1971:1). The first is a structural analysis of individual pieces of Maya art, the second is a thorough knowledge of the ecological history of animals depicted on those works, the third is an examination of Conquest-era ethnohistorical sources for information on the interactions between man and the animals, and lastly the fourth is a search for the sources of Mexican and Maya pre-Conquest art focusing on their common denominators. These methods can similarly be used to better understand the Olmec cosmology. The aforementioned common denominator between Mexican and Maya Pre-Conquest art has been determined to be the Olmec (Reilly, 1987). Being that much of the Maya cosmology appears to have been borrowed from that of the Olmec (Grove 1987, Joralemon 1996, Reilly 1990, 1991, 1995, Schele 1995, Taube 1995, 1996, Diehl 2000),

we can take Coe's fourth step and reverse it such that hypotheses taken from Maya iconography can be applied to that of the Olmec and visa versa.

This can be explained in part by the hypothesis that these two cultures shared a similar language stemming from Zoque (Campbell and Kaufman 1976). Since there is no clearly defined written language for the Olmec their spoken language is hard to determine. However evidence mobilized by Campbell and Kaufman suggests that their language was mixe-zoquean and as such would have enabled them to interact with the later Maya culture (1976). Other scholars have argued that the Olmec spoke a proto-mayan or an altogether different language (Diehl 2004).

If this Olmec-Maya connection could be decisively proven, it would strengthen the argument that the Maya were borrowing critical ideas regarding their world view from the Olmec. In turn, this would further validate the concept of cultural continuity wherein we are able to upstream from the Maya in order to make deductions regarding the Olmec.

The Theory of the Paradigm of the Periphery as it Relates to Spatial Analysis

The Olmec were major contributors to the culture and political structure of Mesoamerica. In order to achieve that status, they had to be advanced enough to establish a trade center which would have had far reaching influence. The intense agricultural practices employed by the Olmec allowed for them to acquire sufficient surplus for the creation of a specialized class of artisans (Clark 1997, Drucker 1981, Reilly 1987, 1994). These artists were some of the finest in the region. In terms of jade work (or greenstone), they excelled, far surpassing any preceding and subsequent

traditions. As Carolyn Tate explains, the value of greenstone appears to have originated in Chiapas where it was used as beads used as burial offerings around 1500 BC, or in Oaxaca around 1150 BC, or possibly in Guerrero (1995: 49). Greenstone is hypothesized to relate to either the primordial waters of creation (Reilly 1994, Tate 1999, 2006) or vegetation such as maize (Taube 1996, 2000). Acquiring and working greenstone has significance related to the shamanic journey. The raw material is literally transformed into something else, a work of art, during the artistic process. Therefore, even the procurement and type of raw materials are indicative of ritual values.

The paradigm of the periphery is a theory concerning the nature of trade of art and ideology based on the explanation of Olmec Culture as a part of the Formative Period Ceremonial Complex (Reilly 1989).

The individual motifs of the symbol system expressed the organization of the Formative period world view. When displayed on the images of rulers, they were arranged within consistent patterns analogous to syntax in language. This consistency allowed people who were literate in the symbol system, no matter what their language, to recognize their rulers' public proclamation of the supernatural source of their power.

(Reilly 1989: 6)

The basic premise is that the capitol, or heartland, in this case Olman, becomes highly developed from both a political and cultural standpoint. As it grows, villages begin to develop in the outskirts of the region; for the Olmec, this means that centers were cropping up in the highland areas and along the Pacific coast that expressed solidarity with the heartland. Through cyclical trade routes, ideas and art are introduced into these

periphery regions. The art is incorporated to show unanimity with the strong cultural centers in the heartland, or to mimic themes that validate power (Reilly 1989). Upon the eventual collapse of the center, the surrounding areas retain the same cultural ideas. Therefore, when trying to understand the ideology of a people, the periphery sites often retain some of the purest forms of culture in the area.

However, trade is always a two way, reciprocal relationship. Meaning, when something is traded, something is always given in return, be it a tangible object or an idea; goods that either enhanced status or were of high quality were the most valuable trade items (Flannery 1968). Thus, certainly there are aspects within the heartland that originated in the periphery zones. As per the origin of dwarf imagery, the majority of these figures are portable objects. Currently they reside in private collections and museums. However many of these figurines are surmised to have been found in Oaxaca or Guerrero, the current Mexican states located on the Pacific coast of the Isthmus. The typical stance, knees bent and arms extended towards the head with the eyes peering upward to the sky, is only ever seen in monumental art at one place; the site of La Venta. Here, three massive sandstone dwarfs, standing approximately seven feet tall, greet those who enter the site from the south end. I propose that these three dwarfs were greatly influenced by the portable figurines from the periphery zones.

This would provide evidence counter to the traditional view that culture originates in the heartland and spreads outward. Instead, more along the lines of cyclical trade, ideas are going both ways. While it is possible, even probable, that the gulf coast region of Olman does in fact represent the cultural and political center of the Olmec style region,

it is crucial that we understand the trade and borrowing of trends between the regions in order to recognize the socio-political relationship which is reflected in the art.

Iconographic Analysis and the Structural method

The process of analyzing art of ancient societies is varied and often difficult, especially when a written language is lacking. This paper will rely heavily on the Iconographic and Structural Analytical methods to determine the meaning being represented by the Olmec dwarf imagery. Erwin Panofsky is known as the father of both iconology and iconography. He uses an art historical approach in order to analyze the meaning behind art forms which would otherwise be untenable. The approach is a three step process, called iconographic analysis (Mannheim 1923, Panofsky 1939).

The first step is to (1) identify the primary subject matter, meaning the elements and motifs that comprise the work of art. This is the most basic division of form, it includes colors, lines, shapes, etc. These are universals, they do not require cultural knowledge nor do they consider artistic intent. These elements are combined to create symbols and motifs.

Symbols and motifs are identified in the second step of Panofsky's approach; (2) identify secondary, or conventional, subject matter. These are recognizable objects. Some cultural knowledge is necessary when dealing with highly stylized representations, however an extensive knowledge is not necessary at this point. Symbols and motifs can be excised from their surroundings to begin to identify patterns which may appear when viewing the entire artistic corpus. These objects are then combined to create themes.

Themes are the core component one is concerned with in the third step of Panofsky's method; (3) identify intrinsic meaning or content. This step does require an extensive knowledge of the culture from which the art comes. Context and artistic intent become important during this stage. More complex than the previous two stages, this third step is often not possible when dealing with ancient cultures, or only results in hypotheses. However, it can certainly be useful when art is employed to understand culture.

Levi Strauss, the primary champion for the anthropological structural method explains that:

On the observational level . . . all the facts should be carefully observed and described, without allowing any theoretical preconceptions to decide whether some are more important than others. This rule implies, in turn, that facts should be studied in relation to themselves (by what kind of concrete process did they come into being?) and in relation to the whole (always aiming to relate each modification which can be observed in a sector to the global structure in which it first appeared.)

(Strauss 1963:280)

It is warned, and rightfully so, that the viewer must be able to set aside any preconceptions based upon their own world view in order to be able to accurately interpret the art of another culture. Imposing one's own cultural bias upon another would result in an erroneous analysis. This is why the third step in Panofsky's structural analysis is important, art cannot be estranged from the culture from which it comes. In order to understand the intrinsic meaning behind what is being represented, one must have an intimate knowledge of the worldview being expressed. When interpreting art, it

cannot be separated from its context. Kaschnitz conceives of art as a kind of total symbol of the cosmos:

If one understands works of plastic art as human images of the world and the divine and human realities obtaining within it, then structure is the mode of action of that energy which in art stands symbolically for those cosmic or divine forces as they reflect themselves in our conceptions and in our imagination.

(Kaschnitz 1933:8).

It is from this field of thought that a structural analysis must be performed on the imagery associated with dwarfs in the Olmec style. Incising and related contextual clues advance our understanding of what the dwarfs symbolically represent. Further, the world view of the Olmec must be taken into consideration in order to accomplish this analysis without hindering it with a modern, Western, biased perspective.

In summation, the Olmec style pervades both geographically and temporally. While the loci is represented in the gulf coast heartland, the Olmec artistic style was traded throughout the entirety of the Isthmus and even north into the Valley of Mexico and south into the Yucatan (Coe 1965, Flannery 1968, Reilly 1989). In these regions, the style is more explicit in what it is attempting to show, making these periphery sites crucial to our understanding of the Olmec culture. Temporally, the Olmec style greatly influenced the Maya. Mesoamerica is stylistically varied and thematically conservative (Kent Reilly Personal Communication 2016); meaning, that while the style may change, the ideas being conveyed are very similar throughout time and space. And this idea

extends up through North America as well, perhaps alluding to a shared core belief system that predates regionalized cultural centers.

Ultimately I intend to use these concepts to explore the Olmec dwarf figures and to answer the proposition outlined above. Who were the Olmec dwarfs; how did they spread both temporally and geographically; and how has their significance pervaded throughout time? An understanding of these core concepts is essential to this analysis. Both cultural continuity and the paradigm of the periphery explain the theory behind how culture and ideology spread across time and space. These theories underlie many of the studies done on Olmec art. They illuminate aspects of the culture that would otherwise be lost, and they assist the researcher in developing a theoretical basis for the interpretation of an art style that has no clearly explicit explanation. Using cultural continuity and the paradigm of the periphery, the Olmec are understood to have been a culture with far reaching impacts- both geographic and temporal- which enables us to broaden our understanding of this exceptionally influential culture.

III. PREVIOUS STUDIES

The phenomenon of dwarfs within the Olmec style art has long been the source of many questions. Whether these are explicit portrayals of dwarfs and what their more abstract meaning may be is debated amongst scholars up to the present day. In the past, Olmec dwarfs have been identified as ball players, as fetuses (Tate and Bendersky 1999, Tate 2012), as conveyors of heavy loads (Taube 2004, Kubler 1986), as related to maize (Joralemon 1976), and as intermediaries (Taube 1988, Tate 1995). Trying to define the dwarfs always seems to result in more questions rather than answers. In this chapter I will discuss previous work done on the Olmec dwarfs in order to illuminate a reasonable response to this question; that dwarfs have an inherent ability to access the Other, and therefore they are able to act within the realm of the Supernatural.

The first suggestion is that the dwarfs are related to the ball game. The strongest line of evidence for this argument is the tight-fitting ‘helmet’ that many of the dwarfs appear to be wearing (Figure 09). This headgear is very similar to those worn by the colossal heads which has been hypothesized to be ball playing gear (Cyphers 1999, Hill 2001, Scott 2009, Blomster 2012). Later, within Maya culture, we see dwarfs shown in explicit context with ballplayers and the ball game. This is exemplified on Structure 33 at Yaxchilan (Figure 10). Here, we see two dwarfs accompanying the main figure that is playing the ball game. What is most interesting about this argument is the relationship the ballgame has to general Mesoamerican cosmology. In the Quiche Maya book of the Popol Vuh, the ballgame is the precursor to the story of creation and the story of the Maize God (D. Tedlock 1985; M.E. Miller 1989; Blomster 2012). It is the act of playing

the ball game that sets the rest of the subsequent events in motion, which eventually result in the creation of the world. Moreover, the ball court will later become the center of the cosmos, the place of the resurrection of the Maize god, and the location where the axis mundi is raised to create time and space (D. Tedlock 1985; M.E. Miller 1989; Blomster 2012).

While the details may have changed throughout time, this story seems to reflect a general Mesoamerican cosmology that existed well before the Olmec recorded it and continued to exist into the Post-Classic, intensifying various features of the story in disparate regions (Austin 2004). Identifying the dwarfs with different aspects of this story provides clues as to why they were significant. If they are indeed related to this initial act of playing the ball game, then the possible ballgame helmet may act to place them in primordial space and time.

There are also a significant number of dwarfs that appear to be in a pose reminiscent of figures holding tump lines (Figure 11) (Taube 2004, Kubler 1986). These dwarfs have their hands raised to the side of their heads, as if to steady a heavy load. There are at least two portrayals of dwarf figures with what appear to be sacks incised on their backs, giving credence to this proposition. While at first thought, being delegated the task to carry a heavy load on ones back may seem to hint at a lower status, the opposite may hold true depending on what it is that the individuals are carrying.

Both of these examples appear to have maize insignia inscribed on, or in, the sack (Figure 14). Maize was far more than a simple means of sustenance for the Olmec, it was their life source, and as such it has incredibly important connotations when represented in the art (Stross 1994, Taube 1996, 2000, Diehl 2000). This brings us to another possible

relation for the dwarfs - that being that they were in some way tied to maize (Joralemon 1976). Other than the two dwarfs with maize-filled sacks upon their back, there have been a number of others that are hypothesized to have maize related imagery inscribed upon them. The life cycle of maize is reflected in the story of the maize god, wherein a seed is planted in the earth, it sprouts, grows, matures (Stross 1994, Just 2009). It then comes into fruition with an ear of maize at the top. That head is cut off to harvest, and the crop is then regrown from the kernels (Clampitt 2015). Similarly, the maize god travels to the underworld, is decapitated, and later resurrected to carry out the act of raising the world tree (Tedlock 1985, Miller 1989, Stross 1994, Blomster 2012). Again, we are seeing themes relating to episodes that predate creation being reflected in the imagery incised on the dwarfs, perhaps furthering this assertion that they have some significance for events occurring in primordial time and space.

It has further been hypothesized that the dwarfs act as intermediaries, or messengers between this world and the Divine (Tate 1995). They have been grouped with other 'disfigured' individuals such as humpbacks, who also seem to have some sort of supernatural affinity (Covarrubias 1957, Taube 1988). There are those who believe that the Olmec, and later Mesoamerican groups, saw physical ailments and deformities as markers of shamanic power; within ancient and contemporary Maya beliefs, these deformities are caused by lightening, imbuing the affected individual with shamanic and rainmaking abilities (Taube 1988). Again, this relates to the inherent ability to access the realm of the Other through powers associated with specific beings. And in this case, it is their physical appearance which grants the dwarfs these special abilities. So rather than

shunning so-called ‘deformed’ individuals, it is possible that the ancient Mesoamerican cultures were placing them in high esteem (Covarrubias 1957, Taube 1988, Tate 1995).

An interesting, though perhaps far-fetched, idea regarding the dwarfs is that they are related to fetal imagery, specifically that they represent embryos at six to eight weeks of pregnancy (Tate 2012, Tate and Bendersky 1999). This argument likens the dwarfs’ enlarged heads, short limbs, distended stomachs, and relative positioning to that of embryos (Figure 13). In fact, Carolyn Tate goes so far as to suggest that this embryo imagery reflects a much larger cult of insemination and gestation which permeates the majority of art in the Olmec style (2012). Due to the general lack of explicit representations of embryos within a context that relates to the human womb (excepting one figurine discovered at Tierras Largas (Figure 14)), I am fairly loath to accept this explanation. However, Tate does bring forth an interesting argument, that is, that human growth and development may be a transformative process related to the cycle of maize (Tate 2012). While I do not believe the dwarf imagery is related to embryonic stages of development, I do believe that this abstract concept of human growth as a transformative process is reflected in the images of dwarfs; an idea which I will further develop in a subsequent chapter.

While the Olmec dwarf has been discussed previously by scholars, the only extensive work appears to be the aforementioned book by Carolyn Tate, the vast majority of which I do not tend to agree with. However her introduction of the human life cycle as a transformative process (Tate 2012) does factor into my later analysis. Her idea for conflating the human form with the maize seed did influence parts of my argument as

well. Though the Olmec dwarf has not received very much scholarly attention, the Maya dwarf has been extensively studied (M.E. Miller 1992, V. Miller 1985, Bacon 2007). And it is through upstreaming from the Maya that we are able to further illuminate the role, and abstract meaning represented by the dwarfs.

Perhaps the most intriguing portrayal of dwarfs in Maya art is that on the Holmul-style vases (Figure 15). Here, we see dwarfs shown in explicit context with the Maize god, engaging in dance or perhaps offering something to him (Reents-Budet 1991, Just 2009). While the glyphic text may identify the maize god figures as specific rulers (Reents-Budet 1991), this does not detract from their identification as the maize god, for Maya rulers tend to represent themselves as manifestations of the maize god himself (Just 2009). The dwarfs on the vase accompany the maize god during a ritual in which dance is involved. Dance is often used as the ritual means to achieve a state of ecstatic trance that enables the participant to access portals between the realms (Friedel et. al. 1993, Christenson 2000,Looper 2009).

Maya dwarfs are also shown in context with water birds and aquatic creatures, perhaps relating them to water and fertility (V. Miller 1985, Bacon 2007) (Figure 16). Representations of water and rain may act as a form of sympathetic magic, the intended result of which is water to fertilize the crops and provide sustenance to the people. The association with water may also place the dwarfs as actors in the watery realm of the Beneath world. Or perhaps, they are in primordial time when the earth lay flat on a horizontal plane and there was no differentiation between sea and sky.

While Maya dwarfs are represented in a wide variety of different contexts (V. Miller 1985, Bacon 2007), they all seem to have one common theme; that of liminality

(Bacon 2007). Wendy Bacon compared the corpus of Maya dwarfs and realized that there are a number of prevalent associations including: (1) water birds and plants, (2) ball courts, (3) caves, (4) the K'awiil scepter, and (5) calendric rituals. And while they may have different meanings depending on which theme they are a part of, all of the dwarfs appear to be shown in a space pertaining to liminality, a state where the division between the terrestrial realm and the realm of the Other is less tangible than the normative experience (Bacon 2007).

Among the contemporary Quiche Maya, dwarfs still hold a prominent role in their cosmology; for instance, the C'oxol dwarf summons shamanic powers through his lightening axe (B. Tedlock 1982). Further, at the Formative period site of El Manati, during the course of excavation Panciano Ortiz and Maria del Carmen Rodriguez found a greenstone celt with a miniaturized footprint on it (Ortiz and Rodriguez 1999). The Mixe-Zoque natives who were aiding at the site immediately exclaimed that it must be the footprint of a Chanéque. The cultures along the Gulf Coast and in Guerrero believe in the *chaneque*, old dwarfs with the face of children who “hide treasures in caves, where they keep the best corn, and in their hands they carry bolts of lightning in the form of serpents” (Covarrubias 1957: 57). This myth in particular is intriguing in its capacity to encapsulate a number of themes that other scholars have picked up on through both Olmec and Maya art. The *chaneques* reside in caves, portals to the other; they hide the best corn, relating them to maize; and they carry lightning bolts in the form of serpents, showing their ability to access the supernatural and shamanic power.

However, perhaps the most famous dwarf in Mesoamerica is the dwarf of Uxmal. Uxmal is an ancient Maya city located in what is now recognized as the Puuc region of

Mexico (Gutierrez 1974). This legend, related by Carrillo y Ancona, describes the coming of power of a dwarf through a series of tricks that resulted in the death of the king of Uxmal (Gutierrez 1974). After coming to power, the dwarf became so vain that he made a clay likeness of himself and placed it in the fire; not only did this figure survive the flames, but its reverberations caused the people of Uxmal to worship the dwarf as a god. The other gods were not pleased with this, and as punishment they burnt the city and the inhabitants within it (Gutierrez 1974: 96-97). Here, again, we see dwarfs associated with trickery. Interestingly though, this myth alludes to the power of figurines, only those deserved individuals, supernatural and elites, have their likeness immortalized in stone or clay. Firing clay objects appears to have been a shamanistic ritual of transformation itself (Kent Reilly Personal Communication 2015); in this case, as the figurine was made, the dwarf was mistakenly transformed into a god in the eyes of his people.

In the Central Highlands, the Tlatilco style existed contemporaneously, or perhaps even prior to that of the Olmec (Tolstoy and Paradis 1970, Griffin 1972). The most recognizable objects in the Tlatilco style are the so called ‘pretty lady figurines’. These figurines can be described as “stout, punchy, and short” with “goggle eyes, flat noses, and stumped arms and legs” and “extremely wide hips and very thick upper thighs” (Orellana 1973: 86). If it were not for the special attention paid to the breasts and genitalia of these figures (Orellana 1973), this description could very well be applied to the Olmec dwarfs. I have pondered the possibility that these two phenomena may be linked – that perhaps within the corpus of pretty ladies lies hidden a dwarf or two. Or maybe the dwarfs could

in some regard be linked to what appears to be the early Mesoamerican version of a Venus figurine. However, the more I look through the Tlatilco figures, the more I am convinced that the two phenomena are separate altogether.

The distinction between the Olmec dwarfs and the Tlatilco pretty ladies seems to be one of aesthetics. Whereas the Olmec favor humanoid figures with more typical indigenous Mexican or Mongoloid traits, the Tlatilco craftsmen were exaggerating both the primary and secondary sex organs of females, resulting in figures that often take on dwarf-like characteristics. While many of the icons recognizable in Olmec art appear in the Tlatilco style as well, including the baby maize god (Niederberger 1976) and the earth dragon (Joralemon 1971), I am erring on the side of caution when identifying the dwarf imagery. Due to my conservative definition of what may be deemed a dwarf, I am loathe to include the Tlatilco figures, for their aesthetic preference leads them to represent many humans with characteristics similar to the Olmec dwarf figures. Ergo, as of now, I have only identified one figure in the Tlatilco style that I believe to be a dwarf. Even this figure is contentious, for the distended belly may be that of a pregnant woman. However, due to the lack of exaggerated breasts, and the incredibly short limbs, I have opted to include it in the general theme of Formative period dwarf imagery; this could potentially illuminate some of the earliest occurrences of dwarf imagery, but further studies are necessary to create a clear division between the pretty ladies and the dwarfs of Tlatilco.

All of the aforementioned scholars, and numerous others, have in some way assisted in building a corpus of material aimed at identifying the role dwarfs played in Mesoamerican cultures, and how their representation in the art helps illuminate this role.

And while the arguments vary in their specifics there is a central theme that they all relate to- this idea of liminality, or a transitional state. Wendy Bacon identified that Maya dwarfs appear to all have this one commonality (Bacon 2007), and I believe the same holds true for the Olmec. While the dwarfs appear in a range of different contexts they are all found in an area pertaining to ritual or ceremonial activity. The associated iconography inscribed unto them often relates to supernatural qualities or the realm of the Other. I do not think that any one scholar holds the answer, but rather that a conflation of the synthesized arguments may elucidate the motivation behind incorporating the dwarfs into their art and their sacred spaces. Moreover, a structural analysis of the incised iconography when possible helps distinguish their importance and their role within the context which they are placed.

Building upon the works of previous scholars I will show how the dwarfs are established as significant actors in the cosmology. The dwarfs will be shown to incorporate numerous aspects (some mentioned above) relating to primordial space and time such as to leave little question as to their inferred relationship with the events enacted there. They will be linked to the mythological cycle of maize, for they are likened to the seeds that begin it all.

IV. DIFFERENTIATING THE OLMEC DWARF

Within Olmec-style art, there are two separate, albeit related, phenomenon that confuse the distinction of which figures represent dwarf imagery. These include baby maize god imagery (Figure 03) and the hollow baby figurines (Figure 04). While both of these themes are distinct from that of the dwarf, they have similar attributes and similar abstract meanings that can result in less clarity when defining the three themes. As far as physical similarities these three groups all represent individuals with proportionally large heads and short limbs. However contextual and iconographic clues lead to differentiation between the groups. Here, I will clarify the distinction in order to avoid confusion in discussing the dwarf phenomenon.

The hollow babies are ceramic figurines that are relatively realistic representations of infants (Robicsek 1983; Flannery and Marcus 2000; Niederberger 1996; Blomster 1998, 2002; Tate 2012). The bodies of the vessels have been hollowed out and the figures are seated. The differentiation between the typical representation of slimmer human figures may be what creates the distinction between youth and adult. However these figures do have one atypical trait when compared to contemporary infant forms; that is, they all have a slightly elongated head (Blomster 1998, 2002). While the argument for cranial modification is rather strong (Taube 1996, 2000; Tiesler 2010), the lack of skeletal evidence makes this a difficult assumption to prove. Within the later Maya cultures, we know that cranial modification was done in order to elongate the skull such that it represented an ear of maize - linking certain individuals to the maize god (Just 2009, Tiesler 2010) (Figure 17). It is likely that a similar practice was undertaken by the

Olmec as well. Therefore these hollow babies may represent an attempt to link a child to the supernatural, conflating the infant with maize characteristics.

Interestingly, the hollow babies are the only of the three themes that is found primarily within a domestic context (Blomster 1998, 2002, Coe 1965, Vaillant and Vaillant 1934, Piña Chán and López González 1952). This is an important clue that helps in drawing a distinct line between hollow baby and dwarf imagery. While the hollow babies are a wide spread phenomenon, they do not appear to have had a significant ritual importance, or were perhaps constrained to ritual within elite domiciles (Blomster 1998). An intriguing idea regarding the hollow babies is that they may have functioned as soul catchers (Reilly Personal Communication 2016), however this hypothesis requires further work to be done. If true, this would imbue a greater sense of sacredness to the objects. It may even further relate them to this same concept of the Other that is seen thematically with the baby maize god and dwarf figures, as well.

The baby maize god (Figure 03) has been defined in numerous ways throughout the history of Olmec archaeology (Taube 1996; Tate 2012; Robicsek 1983; Joralemon 1971 Just 2009). However the most common characteristics of this figure include a proportionally large head, a cleft head, and the typical Olmec-style down turned mouth(Taube 1996; Joralemon 1971). Often they have other imagery incised on them that may include maize fetishes, maize seeds, zoomorphic attributes, and supernatural symbols that function as indicators of the Other (Taube 1996). These figures are carved on celts, or votive axes, or shown being cradled in the lap of an adult figure (Joralemon 1971; Robicsek 1983; Tate 2012). They are almost always found in a ritual or sacred context (Tate 2012). Many of them are carved from jade or greenstone, which has been

hypothesized to represent maize (Taube 1996, 2000) and growth, or primordial space (Reilly 1994; Tate 1999, 2006).

The baby maize god can be distinguished from dwarf and hollow baby imagery based primarily on complex incised designs and contextual clues. The baby maize god is a supernatural, it represents a conflation between the growth cycle of maize and humans (Robicsek 1983; Taube 1996, 2000; Tate 2012). These deities are carried out of underworld niches and ascend into the above. The life cycle of maize includes; (1) planting, (2) sprouting, (3) growth, (4) harvesting/ decapitation, (5) death, and (6) regrowth. The baby maize god represents the second and third stages of this cycle, sprouting and growth, and imply a later death and subsequent resurrection. This all relates to the telling of the death and resurrection of the Maize god, a common theme within Mesoamerican cultures that prepares the world for creation; as Schele and Freidel state, “the manifestation of death, the necessary prelude to life” is a primary ritual objective (Schele and Freidel 1991: 309).

The dwarf figures sort of sit in a position between the baby maize god and the hollow babies. They are literal representations of dwarfs, likely those with a condition known as achondroplasia (Figure 18) (Bacon 2007; V. Miller 1985; Houston 1992; M. Miller and Taube 1993). This condition results in proportionally large heads, short limbs, and distended bellies (See Bacon 2007 for in depth description). However, they go beyond a simple literal representation, as they have a very abstract meaning. While dwarfs undergo the same aging process as the rest of the population, they do not grow in a similar fashion; they retain a child-like stature. What I propose is that this phenomenon

gave them a special status in the eyes of the Olmec elite. To understand this, we must first talk about human development as a transformative process (de la Fuente 2000).

The process of human development and growth is universal - it is perhaps the only universal journey that every human undertakes. However, not everyone reaches the expected termination of this journey. Humans literally transform from infant to adult; they grow in height and girth, they attain the ability to speak and externalize their consciousness, and a select few gain access to a form of knowledge we call wisdom. This natural process occurs everywhere around us; plants, animals, and even the landscape grow and change throughout time. This transformation links everything together, the life cycle that every human embarks upon is mirrored in the world around them. Dwarfs, while undergoing this same transformation, do not reach the expected terminus. Instead, they retain this child-like stature; as such they may have been perceived as stuck in a stage of this natural transformation. Transformation is what enables individuals to travel between realms (Reilly 1989, Freidel et. al. 1993). It could be that being seen as stuck in transformation, dwarfs were thought of as retaining the ancient lost ability to commune with the Other. They are always in a state of liminality, a state in which they are readily able to access the Other. The state of liminality has been described as such, “their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, ... a realm of pure possibility ... secluded, partially or completely, from the realm of culturally defined and ordered states and statuses” (Turner 1972 [1964]:340-341).

This characteristic is what defines the Olmec dwarf. They are not simple literal representations of a physical phenomenon, they are abstract portrayals of liminality and the Other. In this sense, they are thematically similar to the concepts portrayed both by

the baby maize god and the hollow babies. They combine the concept of human growth, supernatural abilities, and access to the Other. These are human actors who took on a specific role of ritual significance for the Olmec. As we will see, contextual clues and iconographic incisions further supplement this status, and help refine the position held by dwarfs within the grander Olmec Cosmvision.

V. FORMATIVE PERIOD DWARF IMAGERY

The Olmec dwarfs are primarily found in the form of portable objects, ranging from small figurines to larger statuettes. The raw material from which they are created varies from greenstone to basalt to ceramic, amongst others. While no two are identical, they all share some general characteristics that allow for the researcher to recognize them as a particular thematic group. The most defining attribute, and the most easily recognizable is their large head. However, it must be noted that Olmec art tends to exaggerate and focus on the qualities of the human face, often rendering it as the most complete aspect of a work of art (de la Fuente 1981). While it is true that the focus on the human face is a defining characteristic of Olmec art in general, the fact remains that the proportionally large heads of the dwarfs are exaggerated to the point of requiring recognition as a purposeful attribute intended to convey a specific meaning. The body of work I have collected is composed of these individuals whom have been termed dwarfs. While the corpus may not be complete, meaning some individual artifacts that fit into this definition have been unintentionally left out, it encompasses a variety of different types of dwarfs, creating a sample which allows for the viewer to get a sense of what falls within this definition.

The corpus of portable objects is comprised of photographs from collections from both Universities and Museums around the world that have Olmec dwarfs in their facilities. While some of these photographs have been included in publications, the majority have been left relatively unresearched, or at the very least, no major publications have attempted to determine their significance or relation to other works. This chapter will serve to organize these objects into subgroups of dwarfs; (1) those that are squatting

with hands raised to either side of their head (Figure 19), (2) those that are squatting with arms crossed in front of them (Figure 20), (3) those that are seated or crouched with arms extended (Figure 21), (4) those portrayed at a monumental scale (Figure 22), and (5) the outliers who, while often conforming to the aforementioned positions, have some defining attribute that sets them apart from the others (Figure 23). While the subgroups are clearly visible, all of the objects serve a similar function; however the variation may relate to minor differences in their individual purpose.

The typical dwarf is squatting, knees either bent or touching the ground. Their arms are raised so that their hands touch or grasp the sides of the head at about ear-level. Their heads are tilted upward so that their gaze appears to be pointed towards the sky. These dwarfs have been compared to other objects depicting human figures holding tumplines (Figure 24) (Taube 2004, Kubler 1986). A tump line runs around the forehead of an individual and is often connected to a pack, or sack, upon the person's back - it is used to steady a heavy load (Taube 2004, Kubler 1986). Interestingly, at least two of the dwarfs in this position have what appears to be a sack inscribed upon their backs, lending credence to the theory that their arms are raised as such in order to aid in carrying a burden. But not all of these dwarfs have obvious loads, in fact the majority do not have any incising that would indicate they are carrying something. Some have even hypothesized that the load these dwarfs are carrying is their own oversized head (Coe and Taube 1996).

The second variety is closely related to the first. Their knees are bent so that the figure is either squatting or crouching. Their chins are tilted upwards so that their gaze is also directed up towards the sky. However instead of having arms raised to their heads,

these dwarfs have their arms crossed, either extended in front of their body or hugged tight towards their chest. This position is reminiscent of a dance pose. Other humanoid figures have been depicted as such to show their involvement in rituals that use dance to induce a state of trance, or as a theatrical instrument (Reents-Budet 1991, Just 2009, Friedel et. al. 1993, Christenson 2000, Looper 2009).

The third category are those dwarfs who have their arms extended straight in front of them. These, too, may be referencing some sort of dance position (Figure 25). Or perhaps they are making an offering to the elites or supernaturals. They can be compared to dwarfs in Maya art that are portrayed in a similar position (Figure 26) (Miller 1985, Reents-Budet 1991, Just 2009, Bacon 2007). These dwarfs, as well as those with their arms crossed, are most similar to those from later cultures; upstreaming from the Maya allows for specific deductions to be made in regard to their importance.

The dwarfs portrayed at monumental scale may fit into one of the three aforementioned categories. However, their monumentality is their defining attribute and their locations allude further to their significance. At La Venta the monumental dwarfs are positioned with crouched knees and hands raised towards the side of their head (Figure 08) (Gonzalez Lauck 2010). At Portero Nuevo the monumental dwarfs have their hands raised up to support the earth band above their heads (Figure 07) (Coe and Diehl 1980). And at San Lorenzo they are kneeling, and they hold torches, or knuckle dusters (Figure 06) (Stuart 1962, Coe 1985, Joyce et al. 1983, Grove 1987, Stross 1986).

Lastly we have those dwarfs that have some characteristic that sets them apart from the others. These may be incisions, contextual evidence, or added features that distinguish them from the rest of the corpus. These dwarfs, those who diverge from the

norm, contain some of the most important information pertinent to figuring out the importance and purpose behind the dwarf imagery. Therefore, each of these will be described in full, and structural analysis will be applied when relevant.

The first of the outstanding dwarfs is from Tlatilco, is currently housed in the Princeton University Collections facility (Figure 27). It has the proper proportions to be a dwarf; it sits with its legs extended in front of it and though its arms are broken at the shoulder, they were likely stretched in front of it, either crossed or straight away from the body. It wears a cap similar to other dwarfs in the Olmec style, but this one is decorated by circular punctations that cover either side of the cap and extend across the back of it. This figure is a portable object made of ceramic and found in the Tlatilco Valley of Central Mexico. All of the artifacts from the Princeton collection have been dated to the Formative period based on style and general location (Brian Just Personal Communication 2016). Due to the lack of explicit provenience, none of these objects have specific date ranges.

Next we have another object from the Princeton collection, a crouching dwarf likely from the gulf coast of Veracruz - however the true provenience is unknown (Figure 28). What is particularly interesting about this figure is it appears to be fully costumed, and has a mask resting on the top of its head. This is typical Olmec in style, however no other dwarf has been found as of yet that is costumed in this fashion. The mask extends down the figures back, almost like a pelt or a creature clinging to the dwarfs shoulders; perhaps a way - a spirit companion associated with cosmic travel (Brian Just Personal Communication 2016, Eliade 1951). It is possible that this figure is alluding to some sort of supernatural capability, or power, that the dwarf has. This figure is crouched, its arms

are crossed and rest on its knees, and its chin is tilted up such that its gaze reaches toward the sky. The form and overall appearance of this object is very similar to a second dwarf, however that dwarf has its hands extended up towards either side of its head and it is lacking the elaborate costuming of the Princeton object.

Another costumed dwarf is the brownstone figure published in the *Olmec World* (Figure 29) (Coe 1996). This dwarf is kneeling and it too has arms broken at the shoulders, though they likely extended forward based on the trajectory of the broken limbs. Its head gazes upwards and incisions adorn its entire body. Vegetative motifs decorate the shoulders, hips, and knees. A sack is etched on its back, filled with more vegetation, perhaps maize sprouts. It wears a hood carved with animalistic characteristics. His bulging eyes, posted towards the sky, are shut tight. There are holes drilled into his ears where the figure may have been adorned with jade or obsidian jewelry, bringing the figure to life (Clark and Colman 2014, Hepp and Rieger 2014). This costume could function similarly to that of the black steatite figure from the Princeton Collection. They both have certain aspects that relate them to beings with the ability to transcend realms.

There is a third costumed dwarf that may be transformative. It is costumed in vegetative and sky motifs. This figure is from a private collection (Figure 30). It is standing with bent knees and arms in front of it bent at the elbows. Its position almost looks like one of supplication. It has the classic Olmec downturned mouth, and hollow eyes that were at some point in time likely inlaid with obsidian or another decorative material. This figure's costume, similarly to the others, begins as a cap or hood on the head and extends down the back. Intriguingly, the cap on this figure is clefted, similar to

maize god imagery (Taube 1996, 2000). Along the cap are incising reminiscent of the previous costume; animal motifs including the flame brows, but unlike the previous figure this dragon has fangs. Down its back it is incised with what appears to be maize fetishes (Reilly 2006, Taube 1996) or venus motifs. The cape is similar to a figure found at La Venta, a monumental sculpture of an elite costumed in a cape with designs very reminiscent of this dwarf (Figure 31) (Reilly 2006, Taube 1996, Lytle and Reilly 2014). This object appears to have been burnt or exposed to high heat at some point. It is possible that this was an intentional artistic technique meant to indicate transition or change, though it may also be the result of slash and burn agriculture in the region. Some way imagery relies on such techniques as change in color or texture of the material to show that the being depicted is in a state of transition (Reilly Personal Communication 2015).

The reason the last two dwarfs are set apart is not so much because they themselves are outstanding, but rather the context in which they were found, the objects which they were found with, are incredibly enlightening. The first of the figures is an alabaster dwarf from a private collection (Figure 32). This figure is depicted almost in a reclining position, with very typical dwarf proportions. While partially degraded, it appears that he may have a similar cap to the other dwarfs. But what is so interesting about this figure, is that it was found located in a small dish, or bowl, filled with red hematite (Tate 2012). This can be directly related to bloodletting imagery, and rituals that allow the participant to transcend realms to either be resurrected or to communicate with Other worldly beings (Reilly 1989). The bloodletting bowl is a widespread recognizable theme and relates the scene to the watery Underworld and to the ritual of

bloodletting. Red hematite is often used to represent blood, and the color red itself is hypothesized to relate to the vertical south (Coggins 2015), the direction which the Underworld is located.

The other dwarf that was discovered with distinctive contextual clues is from the site of Las Bocas (Figure 33) (Stirling 1941, Drucker 1955). This dwarf was found with an effigy canoe with a shallow depression in the center which the dwarf can stand snugly upon (Stirling 1941, Drucker 1955: 48, Tate 2012). The canoe is incised with maize god imagery, cleft heads adorn either extreme of the boat. Again, this provides a link to water, to the Other, and perhaps to the tale of Creation in which the maize god, accompanied by the paddler gods, prepares for resurrection and travels upon a cosmic canoe to the center of the Universe (Figure 34) (Schele and Vilella 1993). Both of these dwarfs, based upon their accompanying instruments, are placed in a space other than the terrestrial realm, they are in the Other; a space reserved for elites, supernaturals, and deities. Yet it seems that the dwarfs were also welcome there, for they often appear equipped with the necessary tools to travel the cosmos.

All of the dwarfs have some sort of attributes that would link them to the Other; be it costume, positioning, context, or some other aspect, these figures are either within or allude to a realm outside our own. They are Other dimensional beings, and for some reason, it appears that the Olmec regarded dwarfs similarly to supernaturals who have the ability to cross the realms at will. While the portable figurines have been of extreme importance in developing the thematic importance of dwarf imagery, the monumental dwarfs located at the Formative period site of La Venta offer further evidence that links the Olmec dwarf to the Other, to liminality, to the time before time; and these monuments

illuminate the potential position of the dwarfs within the overall cosmovision of the Olmec.

VI. ANALYSIS

The Olmec dwarfs have a ritual significance, they are beings related to the Other with cosmic significance. But the question remains as to why dwarfs were chosen as these representatives of liminality. It has been suggested by Mary Miller that the dwarfs were seen as seeds; more specifically, that the dwarfs were related to maize seeds (M.E. Miller 1992). This argument ties into the hypothesis that dwarfs were regarded as being in a perpetual state of transformation. As seeds they would represent a specific stage of transformation, of growth, of transition. The dwarfs would signal the beginning of the life cycle of maize, symbolic of the life force which sustained civilization.

Others have suggested that the dwarfs may be compared to the stunted ear of maize that often grows on the same stalk of the larger, healthy ear (M.E. Miller and Martin 2004). Thus, the dwarf, particularly for the Maya, is often shown accompanying the maize god (V. Miller 1980, M.E. Miller 1993, M.E. Miller and Martin 2004,Looper 2009). This may even carry over into courtly life, wherein elite rulers are shown with dwarfs by their side. They have been suggested to be close confidants, held in an esteemed position close to the Lord because, due to their physical deformities, they were unable to engage in direct competition with the elites (V. Miller 1980). This relationship is likely inspired by the mythos which tells the story of dwarves accompanying the maize god on his journey to resurrection (M.E. Miller 1993).

According to Creation myths, the resurrection of the Maize God is two-fold (Schele and Vilella 1993). There are the events preceding resurrection during which

preparations are enacted and the Maize god is ferried to the center of the cosmos. Then, later, the Maize god is resurrected, he lifts the sky from the earth to create space and sets the sun, moon, and stars in motion to create time (Schele and Villela 1993). This later event is typically the focus of creation stories, for it is during this time which the world comes to be the way it was viewed by Mesoamerican peoples. However, none of it would be possible without the primary creation events, the time during which the Maize god dies and undergoes the processes which would allow for his later resurrection. It is during this time that the dwarfs accompany him.

One of the most well-known examples of dwarfs accompanying the maize god is on Holmul style vases (Figure 15) (Coe 1978; Hellmuth 1982; Reents-Budget 1985, 1991;Looper 2004). These classic Maya vases, believed to have been crafted in the Holmul-Naranjo region, show the maize god in ritual poses sequencing his journey to the center of the Cosmos. Often, he dances with one or more companions. While these secondary figures are typically depicted as smaller in comparison to the maize god, there are clear instances where the secondary figures are dwarfs (Looper 2004, Reents-Budget 1991). Intriguingly, the Maize god on these vases wears a backrack, similar to that seen on some of the Olmec dwarfs (Coe 1978; Just 2009), a theme which will be discussed shortly. According to Reents-Budget, “The cosmographic backrack worn by the dancers depicted on the Holmul-style pottery appears frequently in Classic Maya art and is an integral part of royal Maya costuming” (1985: 219).

Moreover, the link between the Olmec Dwarfs and maize is accentuated in the explicit renderings of maize plants and maize motifs upon them. Of importance to this determination is the detailed maize filled sack upon the back of one figure, as well as other more abstract representations of maize iconography (Figure 35). The sack of maize is not unique to the Olmec dwarfs, in fact it has a critical and sacred role within Maya iconography. The sack is most often associated with the Young Lord, an aspect of the Maize god, and with the headband twins whom often accompany the Young Lord (Figure 36) (Taube 1983). This sack, or bundle, is shown to contain maize seeds, but it is also understood to stand for much more than that. The maize plants can stand in for ritual objects such as jade and blood (Taube 1983). The bundle itself contains sacred paraphernalia often associated with shamanic practices. It is possible that not only the one bundle overflowing with maize, but also the dwarfs positioned as if to steady a heavy load using a tump line were understood to be carrying such a bundle. These bundles contained paraphernalia, costuming, and accouterments for specific ritual activity. The dwarfs, as the bearers of these burdens were imbued with a special role in these activities. They carried the load which enabled the maize god to be resurrected, the elites to travel between the realms, and the shamans to perform rituals of sustenance, healing, and fertility.

The Olmec Dwarf maize sack is best seen on the figure from the Olmec World (Figure 35). It can be directly compared to those depicted in Maya art including those seen at Xnucbec and Dzibilnecoc and on a vessel detailing the carapace emergence theme (Figure 36) (Taube 1983). For the Maya, this maize sack is often shown in the hands of a supernatural or elite, or it is being poured such that the seeds are spilling out (Taube

1983). It appears to be directly related to the sequence of events leading up to the resurrection of the Maize god; The sack is seen with one of the headband twins during two separate scenes when the Maize God is receiving his regalia prior to resurrection (Taube 1983, Coe 1973, Robicsek and Hales 1981). The bag has been identified as a bundle owing to its characteristic ‘topknot’ (Taube 1983). The same can be said for Olmec bundles, the strapping and knots identify them as ritual bundles; they contain the sacred objects critical to accessing the portals to supernatural power (Lytle and Reilly 2014, Guernsey and Reilly 2006, Reilly 2006). According to Lytle and Reilly, there are four motifs within Olmec iconography that can be used to identify the act of bundling; (1) simple horizontal binding, (2) binding in a crossed-bands pattern, (3) binding with the use of knots, (4) and binding with knots in groups of three (Lytle and Reilly 2014:357). The bundling on the dwarfs, when it is present, falls within that first category of horizontal banding.

Maize and bundling was combined to emphasize the relationship to the sacred sustenance of maize. Maize itself was deified; it symbolizes some of the most important and powerful Mesoamerican gods, and it literally provides life giving sustenance to the people (Diehl 2004, Taube 1995, Reilly 1994). Therefore, when regalia incorporates maize elements it is imbuing this same power, or in some way connecting the ruler to the supernatural qualities of maize. For the Olmec, this is most often seen carved on celts where the maize god is bound with three knots to denote sacred bundling (Lytle and Reilly 2014). However, I believe the sack upon the back of some of the Olmec dwarf figures, and the hypothetical load that is associated with the position necessary to steady a tump line, is referring to this same bundled maize regalia.

Interestingly, there are artistic renderings of this same regalia. For instance, the Humboldt celt, which can be divided into three registers (Freidel and Reilly 2009), explicitly depicts both the tools for planting and sowing maize and the regalia associated with ascension, the ritual manifestation of resurrection (Figure 37) (Kent Reilly Personal Communication 2016). Upon the upper register of the Humboldt Celt there are clear depictions of a digging stick, the maize god crown, and other ritual paraphernalia (Kent Reilly Personal Communication 2016). These are all related to the life cycle of maize, and have been shown in scenes representing both literal planting and the mythological life cycle of the maize god. For instance, Monument 2 at Chalcatzingo (Figure 38) shows a figure in the act of planting a vegetative stalk. Behind him, two soldiers carry weapons very similar to the pointed paddle which has been compared to a digging stick in Maya iconography (Taube 1983: 175). In this image, there is a captive bound to be sacrificed, perhaps using the digging sticks, and the planting of the vegetative stalk is the result of this act. This can be compared to the act of beheading, and ‘planting’ the head of the maize god such that he is later resurrected (Grove 1987; M.E. Miller 1993; Reilly 1991). This digging stick, is thus both a metaphorical representation of the actions necessary for resurrection, and simultaneously may be identified as the literal tool used in maize agriculture practices.

While the depictions of sacks, or backracks, worn by the Olmec dwarfs do not have literal depictions of these specific tools, I believe that the presence of maize iconography implies that such regalia would have been carried in them. As conduits to the Other, the dwarfs provided the tools which the elites relied upon to participate in sacred rituals.

Another dwarf wearing a backrack carries what appears to be a maize fetish (Figure 39). This, too, has the horizontal banding indicative of sacred bundling. In this figure, the head represents the upper portion of the maize fetish (Taube 2004). Upon this section the artist inscribed a double merlon-clefted element and crossed bands. Both of these motifs are symbolic of portals, the access way to the Other (Reilly 1991). This further accentuates the probable role of ‘maize bringer’ that a number of these dwarfs held (Taube 2004). Though as I stated before, the bringing of maize, or of these maize sacks, may have been symbolic of other objects as well. Including the accouterments necessary for rituals concerning agricultural fertility and the life cycle of the maize god.

But notably, not all of the dwarfs wear backracks. Nor are they all positioned as if to imply the presence of a load on their backs. Therefore, it would be decidedly inaccurate to present all dwarfs in such a light. Yet the obvious tie between the corpus of dwarf imagery is still the relation to the Other, their ability to occupy liminal space; the specifics of this role may vary substantially, but thematically they all relate to ritual engagements connected to accessing the Other. And more specifically, the dwarfs have some relation to the life cycle of maize and the mythological life cycle of the maize god. Regardless of their costuming, these characters play an important role within the mythos.

There are other adornments worn by the Dwarfs that allude to this role, and may provide further insight into other attributes imbued upon them. One particular dwarf appears to be wearing a caiman skin which extends up over its head, in hood-like fashion. This specific costume is very similar to two others, worn by figures that are not within the dwarf corpus. The first is Monument 77 at La Venta (Figure 40). Again, we see the banding indicative of bundling (Lytle and Reilly 2014). As noted before, this ritual act

denotes an object as sacred. Thus, when elites, or other individuals, are wearing regalia that is literally acting to bundle themselves, one can assume that they are engaged in, or related to, a sacred act or ritual (Guernsey and Reilly 2007).

Both Monument 77 and the costumed dwarf may have celestial connotations as well. Upon their bundled garments are motifs that have been hypothesized to symbolize the planet venus, or some other celestial body of importance to the Olmec belief system similar to those on the hollow figure, the Shaman, from Atlihuayan, Morelos (Figure 40). These motifs may act as locatives, placing the individual in the sky realm, within the sacred Other. Or perhaps it is marking a specific time of year, when venus reaches a certain point upon the ecliptic, a time of ritual significance during which these actors would engage in practices related to the cosmos.

Or these motifs may be maize fetishes upon their bundled costumes indicative of a relationship with a specific stage in the maize cycle (Lytle and Reilly 2014).

Monument 77 has previously been compared to Monument 1 at San Martin Pajapan, a figure who is in the act of raising the world tree during creation (Lytle and Reilly 2014). They wear the same headdress and the sculptures are so similar that some even believe they were carved by the same artist (Kent Reilly Personal Communication 2015). If they do represent the same being, and the costume which Monument 77 is wearing is in some way tied to this act of raising the world tree, then perhaps the dwarf has a similar function. While I do not believe the dwarf himself would have carried out such a task, it is certainly possible that he was present to aid the elite or supernatural responsible for this action. Or he is in some other way tied to the planting and growth of maize, the symbolic inference of which links him to the sacred act of raising the axis mundi.

Moreover, the dwarf's head is clefted, a characteristic strongly related to maize, and particularly to the maize seed which has a cleft from which the plant sprouts (Taube 1996, 2000). This being said, I believe the primary identification of this particular dwarf lies in its relationship with maize seeds. Bundled with sacred wrappings, adorned with maize fetishes, and his clefted head all indicate that he is associated with this mythic cycle of maize. Though, the maize imagery is not all that this being wears. His costume extends over his head creating a hood with the face of a caiman, or perhaps a dragon. Due to the vegetation on his back, I am inclined to believe that this is an earth dragon, a being often depicted in Olmec art within the context of the supernatural (Figure 41) (Joralemon 1971, 1976). As David Joralemon describes:

The Olmec Dragon is a mythological beast with cayman, eagle, jaguar, human, and serpent attributes. His characteristic features include avian headcrest, flame eyebrows, L- or trough-shaped eyes, bulbous nose, jaws and dentition of a cayman, bifid tongue, hand-paw-wings, and either a mammalian, saurian, or serpentine body. God I [the Olmec Dragon] is a mythological hybrid par excellence!

(Joralemon 1976:37)

The fact that this dwarf is being associated with, or even taking on the persona of an earth dragon, indicates that he has extreme sacred significance. The earth dragon symbolizes the surface of the earth as it was perceived in Olmec cosmology. From the primordial sea, the dragon is lifted to the surface, its spines upon its back become the mountains upon the earth. Its maw is the cave to the Beneath world. Its brow ridge forms the cleft, much like that of the maize seeds, from which the axis mundi is raised. As Kent Reilly appropriately sums up

In the beginning was a saurian supernatural who, like Lathrop's great cayman (1977), was the master of the fishes. This saurian supernatural emerged from a primal sea, the domain symbolized by the shark-supernatural. The saurian-supernatural became the earth, a metaphor that may have arisen from the nest-building process of many saurian species. Raptor birds such as the osprey and harpy eagle came to symbolize the sky. The surface of the earth was represented by jaguar supernatural the dominant four-footed jungle predator. The jaguar has no aversion to water often swimming the broadest streams, and is known to frequent caves which are believed to be entrances to the underworld. It is up from the underworld that the jaguar brings the werejaguar-infant, an action depicted on a remarkable jade already discussed. This same infant, seen in the lap of the Las Limas Figure is the elite progenitor who represents in his person not only the divine origin of the Olmec ruler but also the sacrificial bloodletting necessary for ancestor communication.

(Reilly 1987: 116-117)

The saurian supernatural, also referred to as the earth dragon, was often used to identify a specific realm of the cosmos (Joralemon 1976, Reilly 1994). It could act as a locative, a spatial definer that lets the viewer know where an action was taking place.

The same dwarf mentioned earlier, with the sack filled with maize upon its back (Figure 29), has a similar headdress to the dwarf costumed as an earth dragon. But there are certain aspects to the costume that are different, and worth noting. For instance, the head upon the earth dragon dwarf has the typical u-shaped eyes and flame brows. It has flaring nostrils, and two fangs extending from its lips. Arranged as such, these motifs are indicative of an earth dragon association. On the other hand, the dwarf with the maize backpack may be more likened to a raptorial creature, perhaps a sky dragon of sorts.

Upon his head are the same u-shaped eyes and flamed brows. But instead of the gum brackets and two fangs, the headdress has a curved beak that extends over the eyes down towards the nose of the figure. The beak appears to have gum brackets, upon which is what looks like a blunt fang with a horizontal band across it. Interestingly, this blunted fang is reminiscent of a maize kernel. While the gum bracket is generally associated with the earth realm, the raptorial beak is associated with the sky realm (Reilly 1994). Due to the other vegetative motifs covering this figure, I am inclined to believe that the beak, rather than placing the dwarf in the sky, is showing his ability to access the Other through cosmic flight.

Furthering the argument for maize association, there is the jade dwarf from another private collection (Figure 42). This figure is explicitly showing a conflation of the dwarf with the maize seed. The dwarf is positioned in the typical fashion with knees bent and arms raised towards the side of his head. But what makes this figure so exemplary is its head. While this dwarf does not wear the typical tight fitting helmet that is so characteristic of other dwarfs, his head is elongated and clefted. Incised upon it are lines accentuating a possible trefoil motif, a motif that is almost always seen as symbolic of maize growth (Fields 1986); this motif often adorns the headdress of the elites, it functioned to show their connection to the maize god, and to solidify this relationship was to solidify their rulership (Figure 43) (Fields 1986). The dwarf being adorned as such may not necessarily be showing his elite status, but may be asserting a relationship with the elite class and the maize god.

Moreover, the tripartite element protruding from the cleft is symbolic of the maize cycle- the sprouting plant grows from the cleft in the seed (Fields 1986, 1989). This

dwarf is showing a stage within the cycle of maize, the sprouting growth, the result of the earlier harvest/decapitation and planting of the seed. The elongated head has been shown to relate to the cob of maize (Tiesler 2010). Often, the maize god himself is depicted with an elongated head and trefoil headdress (Figure 44) (Taube 1996, Tiesler 2010). Although the lack of skeletal remains prevents us from making any concrete assertions regarding cranial modification during this period, it is quite possible, given the artist depictions of people as such, that these people were engaging in the practice of cranial modification to create a physical resemblance to the maize god.

Perhaps the most intricately costumed dwarf from this corpus is the black dwarf figurine from the Princeton collection (Figure 28). This figure deserves a far more in depth analysis than this paper includes, but even a brief analysis of it offers incredible insight into the function of costume for these dwarfs. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this dwarf has what appears to be full regalia covering its body, and either a pelt or an animal riding upon its back (Personal Communication Brian Just 2016). It has an enlarged and elongated head, however the elongation extends backwards as opposed to up, giving it a blocky appearance. This differs from the appearance of the cranial modification intended to give the effect of a maize cob. Whether this be a deformity associated with the dwarfism, or an otherwise artistic method for conveying a message is yet undetermined. However, there is one other dwarf with a similarly shaped head, though this one lacks the intricate costume of the Princeton dwarf.

The costume on the Princeton dwarf engulfs the figure, such that its face looks almost to be emerging from within another being. It has a mask upon the top of its head,

teardrop shaped, with the hint of what may have originally been a trefoil sprouting from its head. The damage sustained by the figure makes this a difficult determination.

Hanging from the mask is what looks like a backrack such as the maize fetish rack on the Olmec World dwarf. The hatch marks give it the appearance of a maize effigy, however it may in fact be an animal pelt. For at the bottom of this backrack two legs cover the dwarf's legs, as if it is wearing the skin of an animal. From the sides of the backrack are the arms of this animal either grasping, or wrapping around the sides of the head of the dwarf. This almost gives it the appearance of having a creature climbing upon it, the characteristics of which can be clearly distinguished from those of the dwarf. Another possible explanation, is that the dwarf is in the process of transformation, the animal upon its back being its way (Personal Communication Brian Just 2016), and the backrack holding the tools necessary to complete the transformation. Unfortunately, this figure has undergone some post depositional damage that makes any complex incisions difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

At first glance, this dwarf appears to be grasping something in its hands. With both hands clenched in fists, and the right on top of the other, it looks almost as if it could be holding a torch similar to those seen held by the dwarfs on the bench from San Lorenzo. However, the positioning of the hands is not quite right; while the right hand, on top, is positioned such that a vertical object may have been held in it, the left hand, underneath, is horizontal, meaning that any object held in the right hand would have simply rested on top of the left. Therefore, I am not certain if this dwarf is meant to be interpreted as holding an object, or rather as in a position related to some other activity. Perhaps this is a position associated with dance, or another similar ritual activity.

What can be ascertained from this dwarf is that it is costumed in as intricate of regalia as any shaman, and it is rendered with such attention to detail that it is likely depicting a very important figure. The dwarf may well have been as respected as any other religious figures, perhaps even regarded as supernatural beings. This dwarf in particular, alludes to the ability of the figure to engage in transformative processes accompanied by a spiritual companion, or way.

Two other dwarfs offer contextual clues that place them within the realm of the other. The first of these is an alabaster dwarf placed within an alabaster bowl filled with cinnabar, or red hematite (Figure 32) (Tate 2012). The dwarf is similar to others in the Olmec style, it has slightly bent knees and its arms are bent such that its hands are resting on its hips. It has classic Olmec facial features, and a slightly elongated head which is the proper proportion for these figures. While the dwarf figure itself is not comparatively rich in information, the fact that he was found placed in a bowl filled with red hematite is both unique and important.

The bowl is symbolic of a blood bowl (Stross 1992), and the red hematite of blood (Coggins 2015). Blood bowls are common not only in Olmec art, but also in the art of other cultures across Mesoamerica. The implication of bloodletting and its associated iconography is that capture and sacrifice (Schele and Miller 1986: 209-226) was one of two primary functions of Olmec rulers, the second function being ancestor communication (1986: 175-176). Bloodletting was ritually practiced in order to sustain the gods who had created humans out of maize and their own blood (Reilly 1989, 1991: 156). As Reilly states, “It was this act of royal bloodletting that opened the portal

(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” (Reilly 1991: 158).

The dwarf within the blood bowl may then be indicative of a ritual in which bloodletting allows for that particular being to cross between the realms into the Other. Here, we see a clear connection between the Olmec dwarf, shamanic ritual, and access to the Other. Interestingly, maize iconography is often associated with bloodletting (Fields 1991: 4). Scholars have identified that bloodletting is a primary responsibility of Mesoamerican rulers (Joralemon 1974, Schele 1984, Stuart 1982). Just as the rain fertilizes the earth to bring forth new harvests of maize, so too does the blood fertilize the ground to allow for the resurrection of the Maize God. For the Maya, these offerings of blood are often shown placed in shallow bowls after either auto-sacrifice, or the sacrifice of a captive (Joralemon 1974).

The second dwarf which offers contextual clues is the Cerro de las Bocas dwarf (Figure 33). This dwarf, found during Stirling and Covarrubias excavations at the site, was excavated in a cache of 782 jade pieces, mostly from the Classic era (Stirling 1941). The cache was found beneath a carved stone covering the sherds of an incense vessel and a circular disk of polished jade. Along with the Olmec dwarf was another Olmec-style object; a jade effigy-canoe with maize god imagery incised on either end (Stirling 1941:291–302, Drucker 1955, Tate 2006: 21). A shallow basin in the middle of the canoe is the perfect size for the dwarf to stand upon. Again, the dwarf in this instance is not as intricate or detailed as some of the previously described, but the context in which it was discovered allows for extrapolations regarding the nature of the dwarfs. What is

particularly interesting is that the canoe and the blood bowl can be synonymous within iconographic contexts, with one often standing in for the other. A profile, or cross section view of each produces the same image, a u-shape that may have flared terminations. There may be figures or objects within this shape and it can be interpreted as either the bowl or the canoe. The canoe is not simply a wooden creation to traverse rivers, it is a cosmic canoe that delivers the maize god to the center of the universe (Schele and Vilella 1993, Wertime and Schuster 1993, Friedel et. al. 1993).

As such the canoe can be thought of as a locative for liminal space, and more specifically for primordial time. For the canoe journey taking the Maize god to the Center occurs prior to the lifting of the sky from the primordial sea, before the earth was created (Schele and Vilella 1993, Freidel et. al. 1993). The dwarf, in association with the canoe, can therefore be realized as existing in this alternate dimension. Finding it within the same context as classic period artifacts may mean that this symbolic meaning lasted well beyond the time of the Olmec and perhaps influenced the way in which the Maya perceived dwarfs. Again, the theory of cultural continuity allows us to extrapolate such connections. Moreover, other iconographic clues that have been previously discussed imply a very similar role played by the dwarfs for the Olmec and Maya cultures.

This canoe, the canoe upon which the Olmec dwarf is situated, is even more interesting because it has these two maize god images incised on either end. They are the typical maize god face with a downturned mouth, almond shaped eyes, and cleft head. The canoe thus has strong associations to maize, furthering the assertion that the dwarfs have a significant relationship to the mythological sequence of events leading up to the resurrection of the maize god.

So far, the Olmec dwarfs have been shown to vary considerably in their overall physical appearance, with no two being exactly alike. The simplest characterization of these figures is a squat humanoid being with proportionally enlarged head and short limbs. The majority of these figures wear a tight-fitting helmet upon their head, but this is not ubiquitous. Some have incised imagery carved upon them, but they are outnumbered by those that do not. When imagery is present, it is often maize-centric, but there are instances where the qualities are more animal than vegetative. These portable figures are rarely found in a provenienced context, but when they are, they offer valuable insight. The raw material from which they were created varies across the corpus. Their position differs, the style in which they are rendered differs, and they occur across a large geographic area, persisting through numerous cultural periods. But what ties them all together, the central theme which dominates in the corpus of Olmec dwarf imagery, is this relationship to liminality, to the sacred Other, to the mythological life cycle of the maize god.

VII. THE MONUMENTAL DWARFS OF LA VENTA

The formative period site of La Venta (Figure 45) was first brought into the public eye by Franz Blom and Oliver La Farge in their 1926 book entitled *Tribes and Temples* (Blom and La Farge 1926). In 1940, Matthew Stirling led a project at the site which resulted in the extensive excavation of Complex A (Stirling 1940). Due to the presence of petroleum beneath the natural salt dome upon which La Venta is built, much of the northern and western portions of the site have been destroyed to accommodate a growing town, a highway, and the petroleum industry (Drucker 1955). Rebecca Gonzalez Lauck began excavations again in the 1980's and has carried on into the present, working to uncover that which still awaits discovery at this important cultural site (Gonzalez Lauck 1988).

La Venta is located in the Olmec heartland on the gulf coast. Just within the border of the modern day state of Tabasco, this great city is a mere ten kilometers, or six miles, from the gulf coast. At its height, the Tonala river, now extinct, would have flowed past it among a web of interconnected creeks and rivers, creating rich agricultural areas surrounding the ceremonial precinct (Rust 1992). Originally believed to be a vacant ceremonial center, La Venta is now known to have supported a large contingent population.

It has been convincingly argued that La Venta is a religious pilgrimage site, attracting hundreds if not thousands of people each year to attend the rituals which would play out there (Reilly 2010, Gonzalez Lauck 2010). The site itself appears to be laid out with specific cosmological references, similar to the way the Maya would later approach the construction of their ceremonial sites. Moreover, evidence for this occurring

elsewhere within Olman has been found at the site of San Lorenzo (Cyphers 1992, 1996: 68). Ceremonial centers appear to be arranged such that a procession may walk through the telling of a narrative – an interactive tableaux of sorts (Gonzalez Lauk 2010).

Sculptural groupings, found in situ, illuminate the stories being told. Though the aim of this paper is not to explore the cosmological significance of La Venta, a basic understanding of its layout is necessary to fully comprehend the significance behind placing three monumental dwarfs at the southern end of the site; for it is their physical placement here that alludes to their figurative placement within the larger creation myth.

Imagine, if you will, approaching the southern gates of La Venta in the year 400 BC. It is mid-February and hundreds of people from the surrounding region are traveling to La Venta for the same reason - to witness the re-creation of the world. As you arrive, you are greeted by three monumental sculptures- dwarfs of colossal size (Figure 08). Each grips its large head, trance-like, and gazes towards the sky, the realm where creation originally took place. Carved from sandstone, they come from water, the primordial sea which existed before time was set in motion. Three signifies the place of creation, marked by three stones at the center of the world (Schele 1992, Vail and Hernandez 2013). The dwarfs themselves were known for their role in assisting the maize god in his journey to the center, where he would raise the world tree – an action which creates three dimensional space and sets time in motion through the cyclical journey of the sun, moon, and constellations along the path of the ecliptic (Friedel et. al. 1993, Vail and Hernandez 2013). The three dwarfs at La Venta greet you for this very reason. They beckon you forward, and they say, through their looming presence, “*So it begins*”.

The La Venta Narrative

La Venta can be divided into three general registers, in the south is the entrance to the street following the north-south orientation of the site (Gonzalez Lauck 2010, Reilly 2010). In the middle lies the central plaza, bordered on the north by Mound C which reaches 30 meters high (Gonzalez Lauck 2010). This mound separates these two public registers from the Northern-most area, the enclosed court, secluded for private rituals, to be viewed only by the elite (Reilly 2010). This theme of public versus elite space is important when considering La Venta as a pilgrimage site. While the visitors would be privy to the rituals occurring along the procession-way and within the central plaza, they were excluded from that which was occurring north of Mound C in the enclosed ritual space.

Here, I will briefly describe the sculptural groupings which would be encountered upon passing through the southern entrance and proceeding beyond the monumental dwarfs. The first grouping is Altar Thrones 4 and 5. While this may not have been their original placement, by the time La Venta fell we can be certain that this was their final resting place (Gonzalez Lauck 2010). These altar thrones epitomize the two themes represented on thrones in La Venta. Altar 5 shows a ruler emerging from a niche located below a jaguar face and grasping a rope (Gonzalez Lauck 2010). The rope extends around the corner of the altar where it wraps around the wrist of another figure, proposed by some to be a captive, and by others to be an ancestor. This altar was found on the west side of Mound O. Altar 4, found on the opposite side of Mound O, shows a ruler emerging from a niche overlaying a blood bowl and cradling a baby (Gonzalez Lauck 2010). On either side of this altar are four adult figures carrying four distressed babies

with cleft heads. Together these thrones may relate either to sacrifice, or to kinship and the presentation of the heir apparent (Gonzalez Lauk 2010, Reilly 2010, Grove 1973).

Past this group you quickly enter Complex B, the central plaza, which was likely the focus of the public arena (Gonzalez Lauk 2010). Within the plaza lies colossal head 1 and stela 2 as well as Monument 77. Here, monument 77 is incredibly important. This figure shows an elite ruler dressed in regalia containing maize imagery (Lytle and Reilly 2014). It was almost certainly part of a larger sculptural group, and likely had to do with the act of raising the world tree (Gonzalez Lauck 2010). When comparing the figure to that found in the cleft of the volcano San Martin Pajapan, they appear to be nearly identical (Lytle and Reilly 2014). They wear the same headdress and regalia and they are positioned the same, linking them to the maize god and therefore to resurrection and the raising of the axis mundi to create space and set time in motion (Stirling et. al. 1981, Lytle and Reilly 2014).

At the northern edge of Complex B is Complex C, the La Venta pyramid. The pyramid is an earthen, ridged, conical form. While the ridges may have formed due to erosion caused by rainfall (Reilly 2010), it is believed by some to represent a volcano, or the first true mountain of maize where man was created (Bernal-Garcia 1988, Reilly 1999, 2002). It is built atop a three-lobed platform, perhaps related to tripartite maize elements seen elsewhere in Olmec iconography (Reilly 2010). At the southern base of the pyramid, facing the central plaza, are two more thrones and six stela. Thrones two and three appear to be the counter parts of thrones 4 and 5, carrying the same message. Of the six stela, four portray nearly identical images - monumental, personified, maize entities (Figure 46) (Taube 2000, Gonzalez Lauck 2010, Reilly 2010). I believe they act

in a similar fashion to the four maize seeds often portrayed on elite headbands which act to center the ruler. If they are meant to be read as centering devices, they may in fact be telling the viewer that this space is the center of the cosmos.

North of the great pyramid is Complex A. This ritual space was enclosed, intended to be viewed solely by the ruling elite (Reilly 1994). Here is where the majority of excavation efforts have been expended. Carbon samples place the use of the court around 1000-600 BC (Heizer et. al. 1968:14; Reilly 2010:51). There were four major construction phases, each initiated with a massive offering of serpentine blocks (Reilly 1994). Within this space are the three great mosaic masks, believed to convey ideological information for initiates (Figure 60) (Reilly 2010: 50). They mark the entrance to the court as being primordial space (Reilly 1994). Buried here is offering 4 containing 16 anthropomorphic figures and 6 celts (Figure 61). It appears to portray a sort of procession scene (Reilly 2010; Follensbee 2014). At the Northern side of the court, restored to secrecy by a basalt column fence atop an adobe wall, is mound A-2 and tomb A. Tomb A, the basalt column tomb, may be an ancestral tomb of sorts (Reilly 1994, 2010). It contained a sandstone sarcophagus, since disappeared, shaped in the likeness of an earth monster perceived to be floating upon the sea of creation (Reilly 1994). La Venta conveys a distinct thematic message. This was a place where rites of renewal and elite validation were reenacted within the supernatural landscape (Reilly 2010: 52). The site mirrors the landscape of primordial creation, within which Olmec lore has been encoded in the art and architecture contained within the ceremonial precinct.

The Olmec cosmos is a three tiered world, the above world, the earthen world, and the below world (Reilly 1994). Connecting the three, at the center of everything, is the axis mundi. Often represented by a tree or a maize stalk, the axis mundi extends below the earth and reaches up towards the sky (Reilly 1994). It is centered by both the cardinal and the intercardinal directions. Traveling along the axis mundi one encounters portals which allow access – given the proper rituals – to the Other realms (Reilly 1994). To better understand this layout we may look at the Dallas Plaque (Figure 47) (Freidel and Reilly 2009, Reilly 1994). The Dallas Plaque can be three dimensionalized to represent a cosmic model (Figure 47). From bottom to top it shows three stones, the three stone place, over which is a upside down crescent-shape which is believed to mean earth. Upon this symbol is a pyramid. Both on and under the pyramid are two ‘doors’ that are likely portals to the above and the below. On top of the pyramid is a trefoil tree surrounded by four maize kernels. This represents the axis mundi, centered by the maize kernels which are the inter cardinal directions (Freidel and Reilly 2009). Most agricultural societies associate the inter cardinal directions with the northern and southern most setting and rising of the sun on the winter and summer solstice (Aveni 2001). The upper-most motif is a crossed bands surrounded by 4 lobes on each side and topped by five more lobes. The crossed bands place the object in the above world, it is likely the ancestral house, or the north house of first father (Freidel and Reilly 2009, Reilly 1994). These motifs are all surrounded by linear designs meant to show that the object is to be perceived as an unwrapped bundle (Reilly 1994, 2006).

The Olmec cosmos, as perceived by the people of that era, can be interpreted using this model. However, there was a time when the axis mundi laid flat upon the

earth, a time when the sky blended into the primordial sea, and the human race had not yet come into existence. It is during this time, the time before time, that the story of creation unfolds. While the exact events of creation remain unknown for the Olmec, the Quiche Maya left behind a rather explicit text detailing their version of creation. Known as the Popol Vuh, this story has been used by scholars to understand the world view of ancient Mesoamerican peoples (D. Tedlock 1985).

Fitting the Dwarfs into the Narrative

The monuments at La Venta clearly exhibit anthropomorphic traits, representing humanoid figures. However, they are not quite anatomically correct when considering how humans are typically configured within the Olmec art style. Their heads are proportionally very large to their bodies, approaching a 1:1 ratio, as opposed to the fairly accurate 7:1 ratio of most olmec figures (Coggins 2007, Gonzalez Lauck 2010). As such, their limbs are smaller than what would be expected as well. Such an obviously exaggerated trait is certainly not accidental, but rather must be significant, especially considering it is not an isolated phenomenon. The fact that their body proportions, positioning, and regalia are nearly identical to some of the portable figurines discussed earlier, places them well within the realm of the Olmec dwarf phenomenon.

Working under the hypothesis that these are indeed dwarfs, what more can be discerned about them based upon the context in which they were found at La Venta? After three attempted excavations, the monuments were finally revealed during Rebecca Gonzalez-Lauk's 1987 excavations (Gallegos and Gomora 1990, Gonzalez Lauck 1988:150-152). First discovered by Blom and La Farge, the large sandstone blocks were

originally considered too eroded to contain significant information and as such were left in situ (Blom and La Farge 1926: 89). Later, Stirling and Drucker tunneled under the blocks and were able to identify that they did indeed portray three humanoid beings (Stirling 1968, Drucker 1952). However, it was decided that they did not warrant the time and effort required to move them, and they were once more left where they had been deposited thousands of years before. A brief description of the monuments by Rebecca Gonzalez Lauck follows;

At the southern end of the site, three monumental human figures carved in reddish sandstone were located...Because these sculptures were left in site (whereas most were removed from the site in 1957) and this part of the site was not disturbed in the three subsequent decades of residential havoc, it was possible to ascertain that they were found on the surface of Structure D-7... The earthen platform can be described as U-shaped and is almost 50 m square... All the monuments were found lying on their side: Monument 53 was found at the southeast corner of D-7, Monument 52 at the southwest corner, and Monument 54 at the northeast edge of the same platform (Gallegos Gomora 1990)... They are massive representations of crouched or squatting human figures with arms raised to touch the bottom edges of their helmets and elbows resting on bent knees... it is possible to determine that between sixty and seventy-five percent of each figure consists of the representation of the face and helmet... if these massive monuments marked the southern entryway of the site, it would have been awe inspiring to approach by canoe or enter on foot into this ancient Olmec city.

(Gonzalez Lauck 2010:134-135)

Despite their degraded state, the three monumental dwarfs do contain a significant amount of information. Perhaps their most striking characteristic is their sheer size-

believed by some to indicate their relative status; meaning, the larger the monument, the more important the message it conveys. While I would not argue against the importance of these arguments, much of Olmec sculpture tends to be realized in colossal size (de la Fuente 1996), making it difficult to make an assertion regarding relative importance based on size alone. Yet the awe-inspiring size of the La Venta dwarfs is not an accident, they were meant to be a striking site to those entering the complex from the south. Approximately three meters tall (Gonzales Lauck 2010), they would have towered over the people who had travelled there, drawing their eyes first up to the sculptures and then beyond to attempt to see what it was that the sculptures appeared to be fixated on; perhaps to the stars where creation would be reenacted as well, as the constellations moved along the ecliptic and interacted with the milky way (Freidel et. al. 1994).

Besides their size, one immediately notices the red, rusty coloring of the sandstone from which they are carved (Gonzalez Lauck 2010). The color red has been hypothesized to relate to the direction south (Stross 1992, Coggins 2015). Moreover, red has often symbolically been used to represent blood (Coggins 2015). Prior research has shown that bloodletting has played an important role in Olmec ritual and cosmology (Joralemon 1974; Schele 1984; Stuart 1982, Stross 1992, Reilly 1989, 1991; Coggins 2015). But it may have another significant purpose. For the Maya, the underworld is bloody water, perhaps tying the color red to blood, water, and the Other realm (Stross 1987; Friedel et. al. 1994; Coggins 2015). The underworld is neatly located in the south, or rather a vertical south below the face of the terrestrial realm (Stross 1987; Friedel et. al. 1994; Schele and Miller 1986). Brian Stross explains the Mesoamerican cosmological poles as follows:

Sometimes the road of souls passing into the spirit world leads to the Pole Star (or North Star), which is at the highest point of the celestial canopy, at the top of the World Tree. We may note the implications of this equation of the top of the world tree with the direction north for Bricker's (1983) demonstration that "zenith" rather than "north" is intended by the Classic Maya glyphs for the direction previously thought to be north. One can infer that the direction north for the Classic Maya might have been the equivalent to zenith, just as nadir and south are the same, to the extent that south was identified, at least in post-Classic times, with the underworld.

(Stross 1987: 474)

Therefore, it is likely not a coincidence that these sculptures, located at the southern entrance of La Venta, were crafted from a red material. I believe that this was intended to convey that the statues were representative of a watery location, perhaps the primordial sea, during a time when this world, the Above, and the Below were still located on the same plane, the time before time, which predates the creation of the world. However, it must be noted that like most Olmec monumental sculptures, these three dwarfs were likely painted; thus, the color of the raw material may not have been as significant as the colors they were painted.

Moreover, if we view La Venta as a narrative, that is, it is laid out to tell a story, and the three dwarfs mark the southern entrance, then it seems to be a logical conclusion that they exist at the beginning of this story. The monuments signify the ritual to come, the reenactment of the story of creation. They tell the viewer that he/she is being taken back to the time before time, and they are about to embark on a journey through time during which they will view the creation of the world enacted through ritual and dance;

becoming a part of the very rhythm that drives the universe, they were able to escape the bounds that bind one to the earthly realm and transcend into the Other.

Intriguingly, there are three dwarfs where perhaps one might have sufficed. The number three is incredibly important in the Mesoamerican story of creation (Schele and Vilella 1993, Friedel et.al. 1994, Vail and Hernandez 2013). Three is the number of stones that mark the place of creation, and contemporaneous cultures still represent this today with the three central stones in their hearths (Schele and Vilella 1993, Friedel et.al. 1994, Milbrath 1999, Vail and Hernandez 2013). The three monuments designate La Venta as the three stone place, the place of creation where the maize god will be resurrected, space will be created, and time will be set in motion through the cyclical trail of the sun, moon, and stars across the ecliptic. Often, the translation of the Popol Vuh describes the setting of the three stones at the place of creation as having been ‘planted’. I hypothesize that the stones were alive, they were animate beings, likely seeds. The general relationship of the dwarfs to maize provides the final link for the dwarfs at La Venta to have functioned just as these seed-stones did; they were planted in the southern end of the site to mark the place of creation from where the world would be grown. So these dwarfs, monumental in both size and significance, are red to denote the Other, located in the south to show their temporal placement in the time before time, and number three to mark the three stone place of creation.

Dwarfs are able to access the Other. They are trapped in a perpetual state of transformation, giving them the inherent ability to cross between the realms. This right establishes them as useful aids in rituals involving cosmic flight. This, along with their position and composition, leads me to believe these three monuments were intentionally

placed to signify that the ritual to come involves creation; as if to say, *“We are here to guide you, and here we begin in the primordial sea, in the time before time, at the three stone place. And here we prepare for our journey to the center of the world where the maize god will resurrect, where the axis mundi will be raised, where the sky is lifted from the sea and time is set in motion, creating the world as we know it to be.”*

Their stance is typical of that represented by dwarf figurines. Their hands are raised to grasp or support their head gear while their elbows rest on their bent knees. I have hypothesized that this stance is related to a trance state, perhaps accompanied by music and dance. With their heads tilted back, their eyes look upward towards the sky, towards the Other. They invite the visitors to participate – to dance, to trance, to transcend into the realm where neither time nor space exists, where the creation of the world is impending. It is an invitation to take a journey through time in order to understand how things came to be the way they are. To reiterate, the dwarfs are signifiers, they are guides, they are the seedlings that begin the ritual reenactment of creation, and they welcome all to participate in the ceremonial recreation of the world.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This theme of liminality dominates Olmec dwarf imagery. Regardless of their specific attributes, each one has this same connection to liminality. Similar to Wendy Bacon's argument regarding Maya dwarfs (Bacon 2007), Olmec dwarfs differ individually within their thematic complex, but have a greater symbolic meaning when looks at as a larger corpus. But even beyond this concept of liminal space, the dwarfs occupy a role within the mythos in regards to maize imagery. The dwarfs are seeds, they are symbolic of the primary stages of the maize cycle, they accompanied the maize god on his journey during primordial time just as they later aid and accompany the shaman on his journey through the cosmos.

While there are certainly distinct characteristics that create variability within the corpus of Olmec dwarf imagery, they can all, in some way or another, be related back to this concept. Be it through incised maize imagery, the implication of a load being carried, costumes, regalia, body positioning, or some other artistic tool, every dwarf shows some decisive link to the mythological maize story.

The monumental dwarfs at La Venta offer further evidence of their cosmic role. At the southern end of the site they are the precursors to the narrative to be enacted there. But their meaning goes beyond that. The north south directional plane is not necessarily referring to the poles, but rather it also can be visualized on a vertical axis (Stross 1987). Thus, that which is located in the south, is also down; and that which is located in the north, is also up. The dwarfs, in the south, at the beginning of the mythology of the maize god, are also in the downward direction. They are the seeds, planted in the ground,

which allow the maize to grow. Likewise, the three heads at the northern end of the site are in the upward direction, they are in the north house of first father where the ancestors reside.

Turning the site on a vertical axis gives an almost three dimensional rendering of the narrative (Figure 48). Almost like the concept of dream time itself, the La Venta narrative can be viewed as events happening cyclically, simultaneously, and retrospectively. The seeds are planted in the south, after which they travel to the center, where at, they will grow into maturity. The site of La Venta, in its vertical state, can be likened to the Dallas Plaque. Three monumental stones in the south, carved in the likeness of dwarfs, here they are the three stones of creation. But more than that, they are the seeds that enable life. Aspects of the same things, the seeds, the stones, they are just the beginning. One marks the beginning of the creation of the world, the other marks the beginning of the maize cycle, both mythologically and in reality.

The other two instances of monumental dwarfs tell a similar story. On the Portero Nuevo altar throne we see two dwarfs with arms raised above their heads to support the band that runs above them (Blomster and Cheetham 2017, Cyphers 2004, Taube 2004). Upon the band are gum brackets, which have been shown by previous scholars to be signifiers of 'earth' (Joralemon 1971, 1976, Di Castro and Cyphers 2006). Some have hypothesized that these dwarfs be interpreted as earth bearers, supporting the earth from below (Taube 2004). While I find this to be an apt deduction considering this monument as an isolated event, when looked at in comparison to the analysis I have performed, there may be a further significance to their placement. I believe that yes, the dwarfs on this particular monument are earth bearers, but that this is because they are also the seeds

planted below the surface of the earth. Their existence beyond this realm is realized through a conflation of supernatural abilities with a mundane being who, due to their physical appearance, has become intrinsically tied to the life transformation of maize. Interestingly, during a conversation with my colleague Brendan Stanley, he realized that the ruler sitting atop this throne would have been idealized as the maize god; thus the dwarfs are not only supporting the earth, but literally supporting the maize god as well (Personal Communication Brendan Stanley 2017). They were the seeds from which the maize would grow.

The San Lorenzo Bench is degraded, but there are clearly two dwarfs carved upon it (Taube 2004). These dwarfs are interesting because they hold torches, or knuckle dusters. Of all of the images implicit in the bloodletting corpus, what Coe has described as the torch is perhaps the most compelling (1965: 762). Later work by Joyce et al. (1983), David Grove (1987), and Brian Stross (1986) has identified these torches as bloodletters and subsequently the torch/scepter/bloodletting corpus of motifs (Stuart 1982) has been acknowledged as a prevalent theme throughout Olmec iconography (Figure 49). These devices are indicative of cosmic flight, due to the ability of bloodletting to open portals to access the Other (Reilly 1996). Interestingly, this may be the only example of the dwarfs explicitly holding the tools necessary for cosmic flight.

Both at San Lorenzo, and Portero Nuevo, the dwarfs seem to have more literal depictions of their role than the typical dwarf figurine. Due to the relative dating of these sites, I hypothesize that these are some of the earlier depictions of dwarfs, the explicit renderings indicate that their meaning was less ingrained in the culture and thus they had

to be represented in a more pure fashion. Their meaning appears to have been refined and abstracted throughout time, likely in the periphery regions.

At the onset of this paper I had hoped to be able to identify the region in which dwarf imagery originated in the Olmec style, but this has proven to be more difficult than I had thought. To start, there is very little reliable information regarding the provenience of most of the dwarf imagery, in fact besides a couple of the figurines, only the monumental sculptures can be definitively tied to a specific site. There is one figure, from the Princeton Collections, that is sculpted in the Tlatilco style and dates to the Formative period. This indicates that the dwarf theme was present in the Mexican Highlands as early as 1000 B.C., but that timeframe is pure hypothetical. Moreover, that does not negate the fact that there could be earlier occurrences elsewhere, perhaps even within Olman. There are other dwarf figurines that are dated to approximately the same time coming out of Veracruz and even Guatemala. Still others, we can only surmise the dates, thereby giving us a broad range (sometimes over 1000 years) during which they could have been made based upon stylistic qualities.

To refine the estimates of the origins of dwarf imagery will require extensive work, the likes of which exceed the potential of this paper. Sourcing the raw material may give us a clearer idea of where the objects come from, though again, we must remember that extensive trade of both raw materials and finished goods complicates matters further. Further research may aid in providing the evidence for my hypothesis that the dwarf was an important actor in the periphery, and that this idea was brought into the heartland from there. But for now, this remains a surmise.

However, what can be said about dwarf imagery is that by 1000 B.C., and likely far earlier, it was already a prevalent theme that had spread across a vast geographic region. It is possible that this is further evidence of an underlying belief system in the region that would have influenced the world views of these peoples, or it may have arisen independently throughout different cultures in Mesoamerica. Due to the theories of cultural continuity and the paradigm of the periphery, I find the latter hypothesis to be more likely; that being that dwarfs were part of a far reaching, antiquated belief system that predated the rise of Olmec culture and existed well into the Post Classic.

Whether they held the same meaning to all of these peoples is yet undecided, but what is apparent is that the dwarfs always relate to the idea of liminality. And for the Olmec, this is in part due to specific attributes imbued upon them due to their physical appearance. They had an inherent connection to maize and the mythological journey of the maize god. This could be due in part to them being viewed as in a perpetual state of transformation, for as they mature into old age they retain the stature of a child; thus they are the seeds that enable the growth of maize. And since they do not leave this transformative stage, they are able to access the Other more readily than the average member of society.

Every dwarf figure has a story to tell, a story that fits into the grander cosmovision of the Olmec peoples. They may be placed in a specific setting to indicate the rituals that will be enacted there, likely rituals pertaining to the retelling of creation as it pertains to the maize god. They were the harbingers of maize; not only did they bring the tools necessary for planting and sowing, they brought the regalia meant to costume the maize god such that he could be resurrected. As such they were understood, in an

abstract sense, to be the seeds that marked the beginning of life, of creation, of sustenance. Or they were used to further validate the role of dwarfs within society. They were guides who knew how to navigate the Other, they could aid the shamans and the elites on their quests through the cosmos just as they once aided the maize god to the center of the Universe.

But there are still many questions regarding the dwarfs that need to be answered, still a number of gaps in the story that must be filled. Where did the dwarf imagery originate? Or are they simply part of a much older cosmovision, adopted by the Olmec culture and other peoples in Mesoamerica to explain the natural phenomenon occurring around them? The unfortunate lack of provenience is problematic when looking for contextual information; therefore a more decisive argument regarding the nature of dwarfs requires further excavations with the hope of discovering more of these figures in situ. For the time being, I cannot speak to the origin of dwarf imagery in the Olmec style.

Incised maize imagery marks some dwarfs, others are positioned to carry a burden, still others seem to be dancing. Some wear intricate costumes, marked with transformative motifs, some are only adorned by a tight fitting cap. They vary stylistically, they occur across vast expanses of geographic space, and when found in context they are most often in a sort of ritualized setting.

I have offered a hypothesis that recognizes the validity of a number of previous theories regarding the Olmec dwarf to reach the conclusion that the dwarfs were abstract renderings of maize seeds, they existed on a liminal plane, and they were likely viewed as in a state of perpetual transformation. They are the realized conflation of the human and

the maize seed. They played an important, prominent role in ritualized activity. Their inherent ability to access the Other made them invaluable as guides to aid on cosmic journeys. At La Venta, the great pilgrimage site, dwarfs greet the weary traveler, marking the entrance to the site and the beginning of the story of creation. They tell the people that this is where the journey to the center of the Universe begins, that this is where the maize god will be resurrected, and that this is where the world will come to be realized.

APPENDIX SECTION

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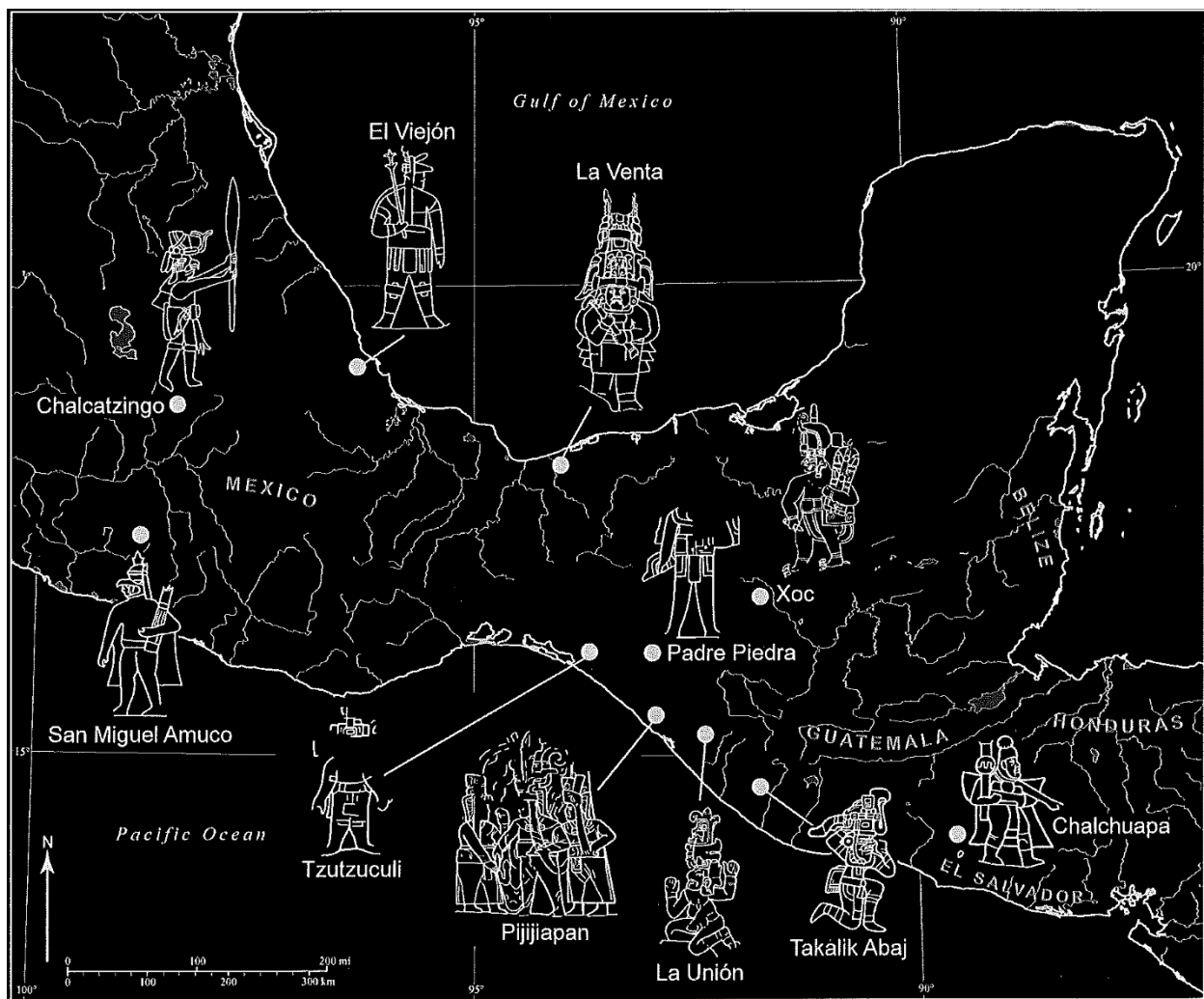


Figure 01: Map showing range of art in the Olmec style from The New World Archaeological Foundation



Figure 02: Monument A at Tres Zapotes (Stirling 1943: 16-17, plate 4ab)



(a.)

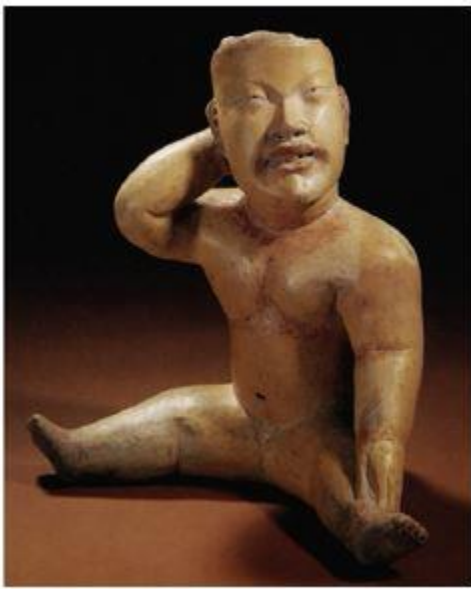


(b.)

Figure 03: The Baby Maize God Imagery: (a) The Dumbarton Oaks Figure (Taube 1996: Fig. 8a, Drawings by Karl Taube); (b.) Olmec Baby Maize God (Taube 2004: Fig. 14a).



(a.)



(b.)



(c.)

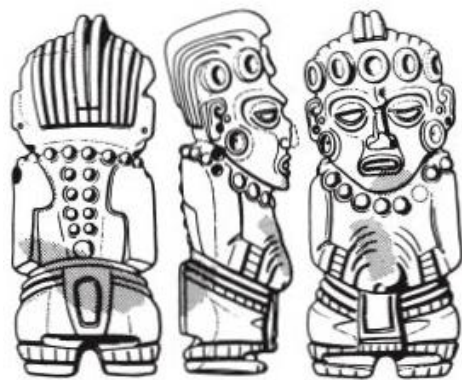
Figure 04: Ceramic Hollow Baby Figurines in the Olmec Style; (a.) Hollow Baby (Blomster 2002: Fig.2), (b.) Front view of seated hollow baby figurine (Princeton 1995: Fig. 10), (c.) Detailing of iconography on back of Seated hollow baby figurine (Princeton 1995: Fig. 10)



(a.)



(b.)



(c.)

Figure 05: Maya Dwarfs; (a.) Maya dwarf figurine from the Princeton Collection (photograph by author), (b.) Jaina dwarf (V.E. Miller 1985: Fig.1); (c.) Late classic jade figurine from the Sacred Cenote, Chichen Itza (V.E. Miller 1985: Fig. 13).

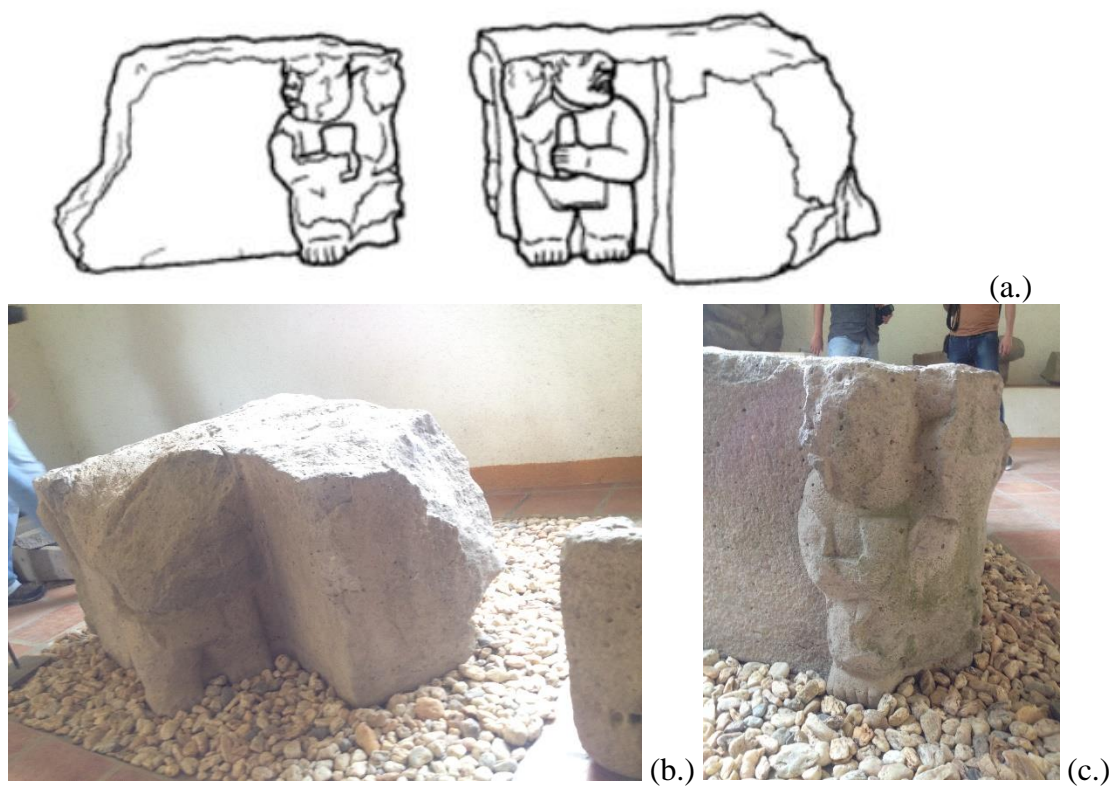


Figure 06: San Lorenzo Dwarf; (a.) Dwarf Bench (line drawing by Elizabeth Wahle after Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 446), (b.) Dwarf Bench (photograph by author), (c.) Dwarf Bench, alternate view (photograph by author)

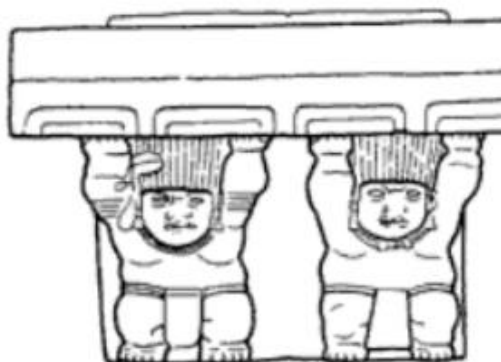


Figure 07: Portrero Nuevo Dwarf; Dwarf Altar Throne (line drawing by Elizabeth Wahle after Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 449)

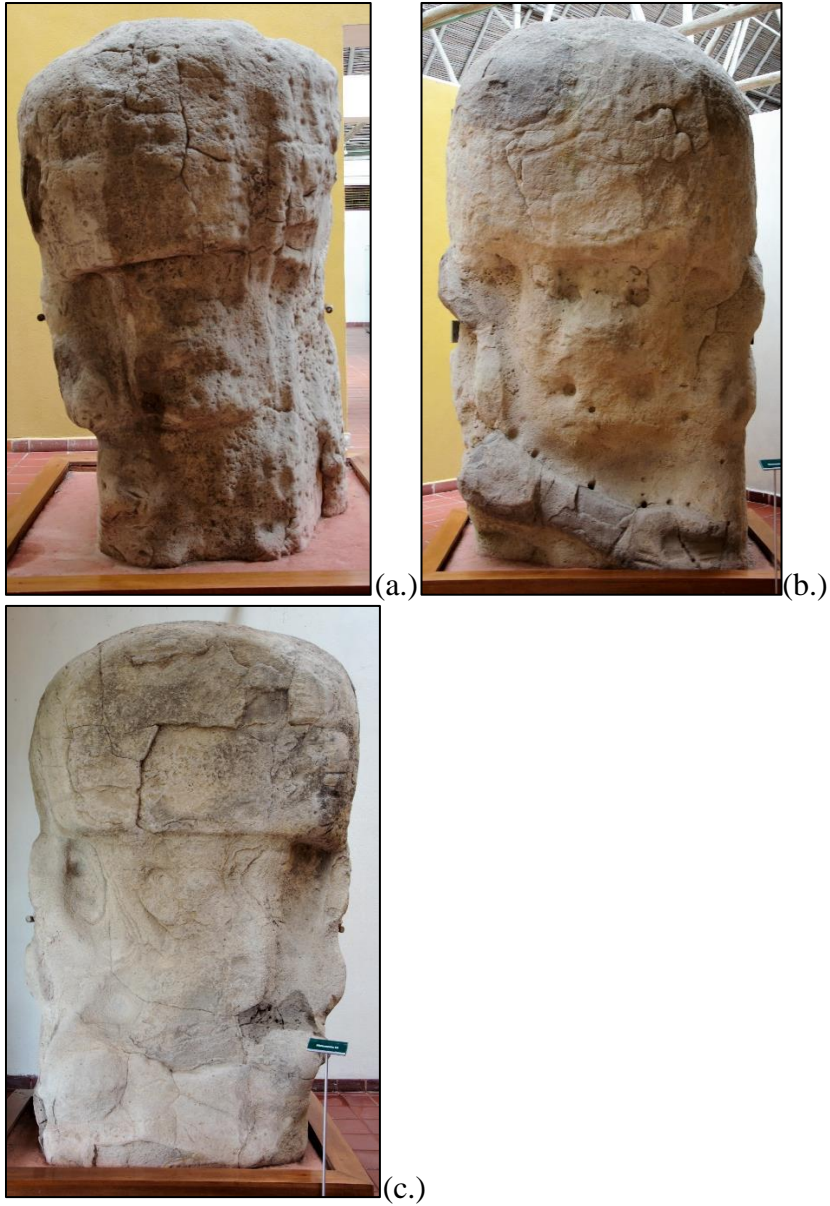


Figure 08: La Venta Monumental Dwarfs (photographs by Alberto Ortiz Brito & Pablo Ortiz Brito 2016); (a.) La Venta Monument 52, (b.) La Venta Monument 53, (c.) La Venta Monument 54



Figure 09: Dwarf with tight fitting helmet (The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

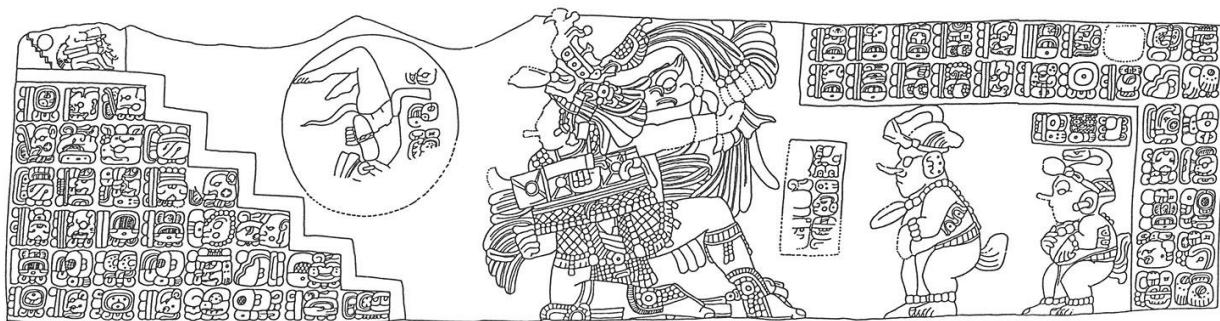


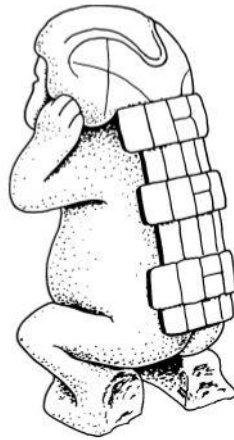
Figure 10: Structure 33 at Yaxchilan; (Drawing by Linda Schele from Famsi Resources: The Linda Schele Drawing Collection).



Figure 11: Dwarfs holding tump lines: Olmec dwarf with clefted head (Tate 2012: Drawing by Corey Escoto)



(a.)



(b.)



(c.)

Figure 12: Dwarfs with maize sacks or related insignia (a.) Incised Dwarf from Private Collection (Tate 2012: Drawing by Corey Escoto), (b.) Olmec Dwarf carrying a Maize Fetish (Taube 2004: Fig. 28), (c.) Olmec dwarf with complex incisions (Coe 1996)



(a.)



(b.)



(c.)

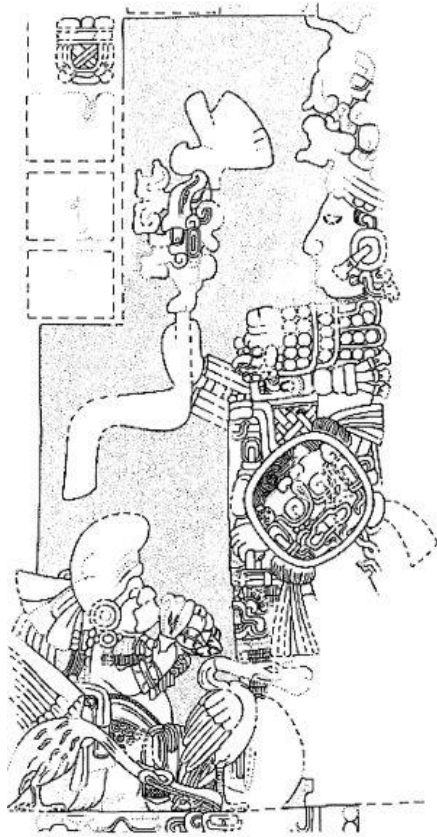
Figure 13: Dwarfs compared to embryonic stages of development (Tate 2012); (a.) Carnegie Stage 22 or 54-55 days (Tate 2012: Photograph courtesy Bradley Smith. Drawing by Corey Escoto), (b.) Carnegie Stage 23 or 56-57 Days (Tate 2012: Photograph courtesy Bradley Smith. Drawing by Corey Escoto), (c.) Week 14 (Tate 2012: Photograph courtesy Bradley Smith. Drawing by Corey Escoto).



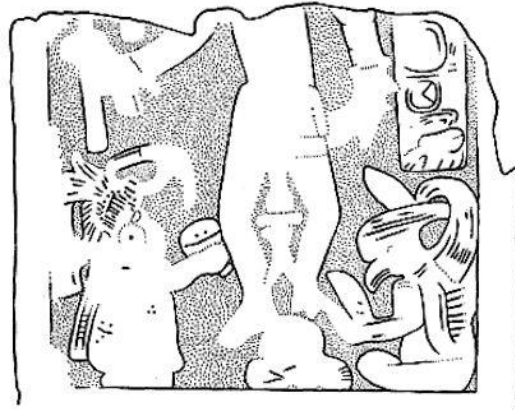
Figure 14: Tierras Largas phase pregnant figurine from Oaxaca and the fetus figure it contained (Tate 2012: Fig. 4.5, Courtesy of Joyce Marcus.)



Figure 15: Holmul Vase (ms1374) showing the maize god dancing with dwarfs (Looper 2009: Fig.8, Photograph © Justin Kerr k633)



(a.)



(b.)

Figure 16: Maya dwarfs with water birds, (a.) Tikal Structure 5D-52 lintel Detail (Bacon 2006: Fig. 30, drawing by William R. Coe, Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Figure 75); (b.) Tzum Stela 5 detail. (Bacon 2006: Fig.32. Drawing by Eric von Euw: *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*, VI. 4, Part 1, p. 59).

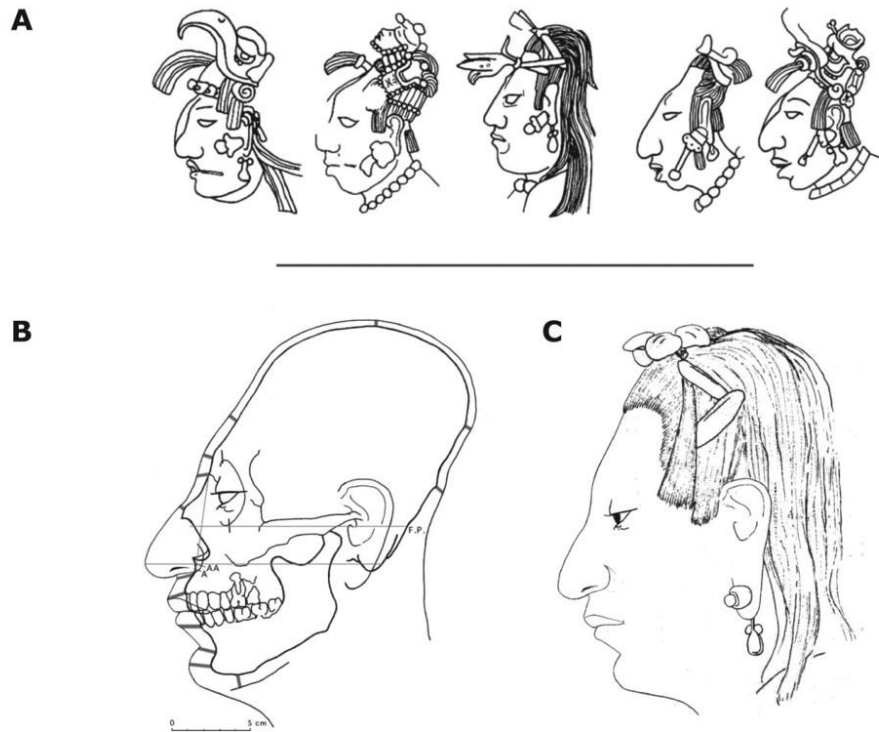


Figure 17: Maya cranial modification (Tiesler 2012: fig. 7); (a.) dynastic ruler Janaab' Pakal (redrawn by M. Sanchez from Greene 1991); (b.) Profile of female dignitary from Palenque with schematic reconstruction of bland tissues and (c.) artistic rendering of facial profile (drawings by V. Tiesler).

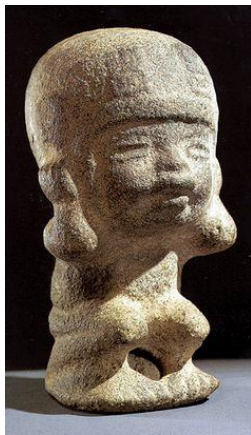


(a.)



(b.)

Figure 18: dwarf images compared to achondroplastic dwarfs; (a.) Dwarf Figurine with Forward Thrusting Head (Notre Dam University), (b.) Medical photograph of individual with anchondroplasia (Parikh, Shital and Batra 2016)



(a.)



(b.)

Figure 19: dwarfs with hands raised to side of head; (a.) Crouching Dwarf with Helmet (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), (b.) Dwarf with clefted head (Tate 2012: Drawing by Corey Escoto)



Figure 20: dwarfs with arms crossed; (a.) Crouching Dwarf Figure with hands crossed on chest (Notre Dame University), (b.) Dwarf with crossed arms from the Princeton Collection (Photograph by author), (c.) Costumed dwarf from Princeton Collection (Photograph by Author), (d.) Squatting dwarf from Guerrero, housed in El Museo Nacional de Antropologia (photograph by author), (e.) dwarf from Mexican Gulf Coast, housed in El Museo Nacional de Antropologia (Photograph by author).



Figure 21: dwarfs with arms extended in front of them; (a.) Tlaticlo dwarf from the Princeton Collection (photograph by author) (b.) Crouching Figure (American Museum of Natural History), (c.) Crouching Figure (American Museum of Natural History), (d.) Crouching Figure (The Cleveland Museum of Art), (e.) Incised dwarf from the Olmec World (Coe 1996), (f.) Seated Dwarf with arms extended (de la Fuente and Benson 1996), (g.) Incised Dwarf from Private Collection (Tate 2012: Drawing by Corey Escoto), (h.) Las Bocas dwarf housed in El Museo Nacional de Antropologia (Photograph by Author)



(a.)



(b.)



(c.)



(d.)



(e.)

Figure 22: monumental dwarfs; San Lorenzo Dwarf Bench; (a.) (Photograph by author), (b.) alternate view (Photograph by author), La Venta Monumental Dwarfs (photographs by Alberto Ortiz Brito & Pablo Ortiz Brito 2016); (a.) La Venta Monument 52, (b.) La Venta Monument 53, (c.) La Venta Monument 54

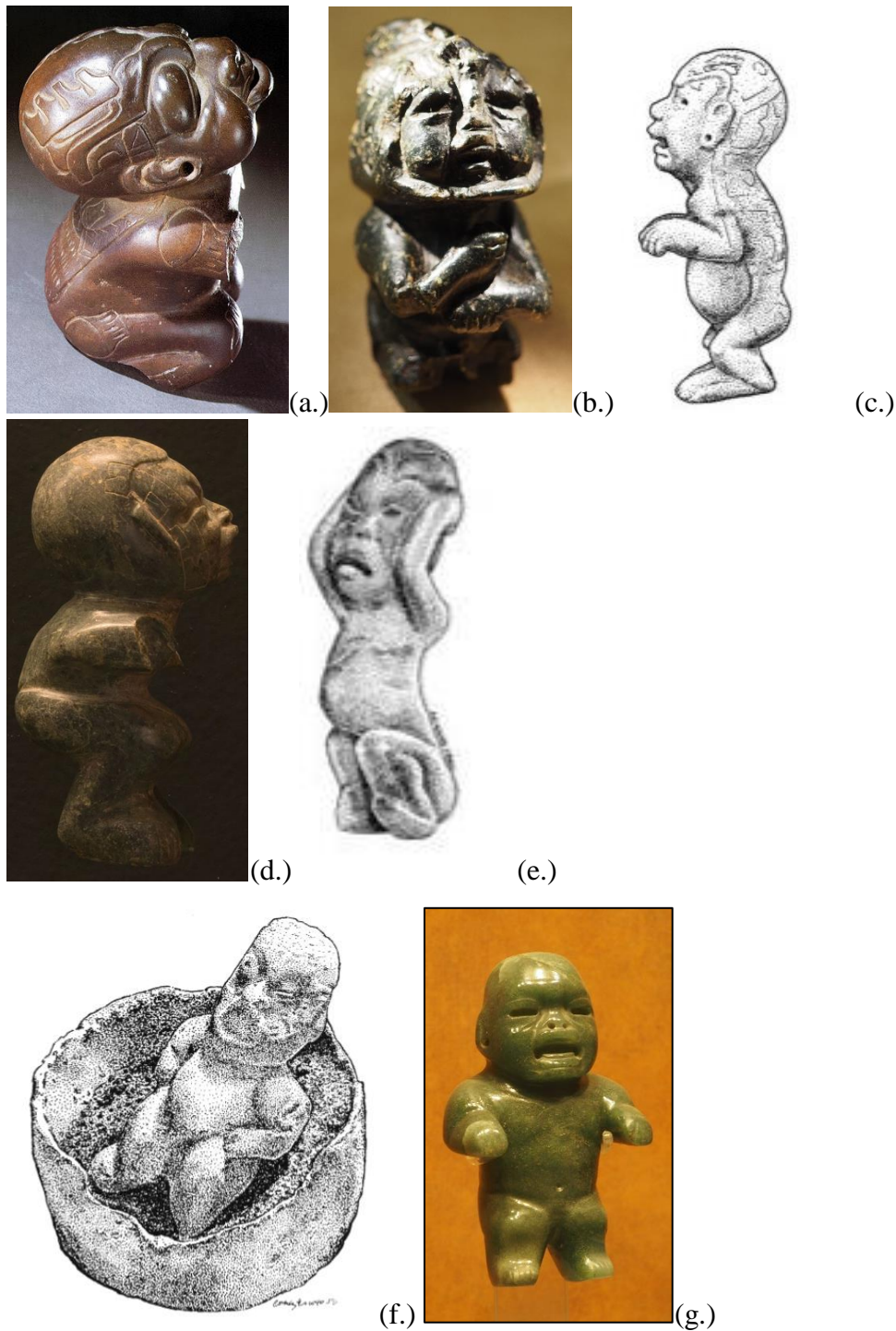


Figure 23: outlier dwarfs; (a.) Dwarf with complex incisions (Coe 1996), (b.) Costumed dwarf from the Princeton Collections (Photograph by author), (c.) Incised dwarf from private collection (Tate 2012: Drawing by Corey Escoto), (d.) Crouching Figure with Incisions (American Museum of Natural History), (e.) Dwarf with clefted head from Private Collection (Tate 2012: Drawing by Corey Escoto), (f.) Alabaster dwarf in bowl from Private Collection (Tate 2012: Drawing by Corey Escoto), (g.) Las Bocas Dwarf (Photograph by author).



(a.)



(b.)

Figure 24: examples of tumplines; (a.) Olmec figure holding tumpline (Taube 2004: Fig. 41b, after Benson and de la Fuente 1996 no.74), (b.) Codex Mendoza folio 62r (detail)



Figure 25: dance poses with arms extended in front; Dancing couple, cylinder vase. Maya, Late Classic period, ad 650–800. El Petén, Guatemala, Lake Yaxhá region. Private collection. (Looper 2009: Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 403.1985. Photograph © 2008 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

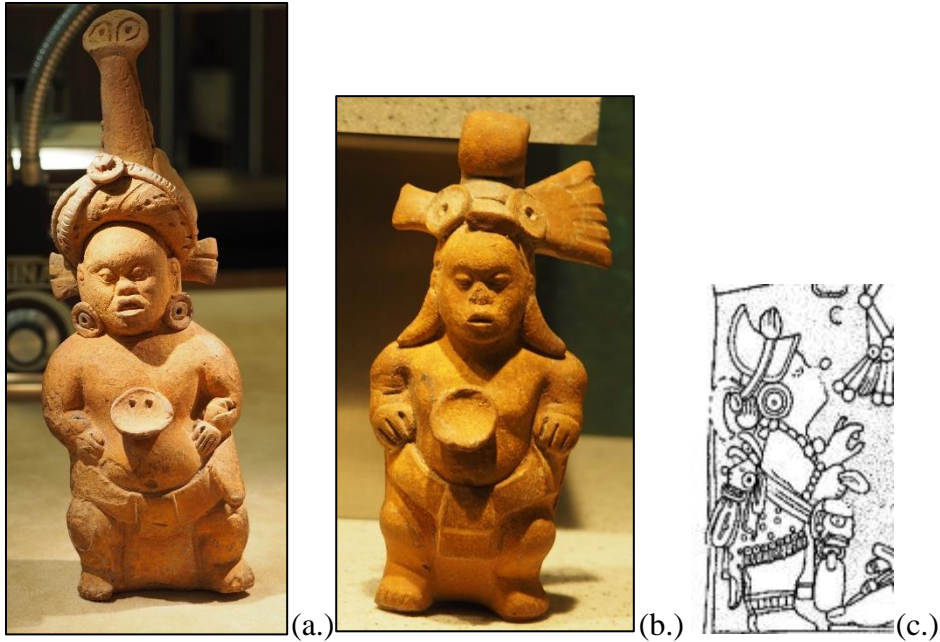


Figure 26: Maya dwarfs with arms extended out; (a.) Maya dwarf figurine from the Princeton Collection (Photograph by author), (b.) Maya dwarf figurine from el Museo Nacional de Antropologia (Photograph by author), (c.) Caracol Stela 1 detail, (Beetz and Satterwaite 1981: Fig.1, detail of drawing by Carl P. Beetz).



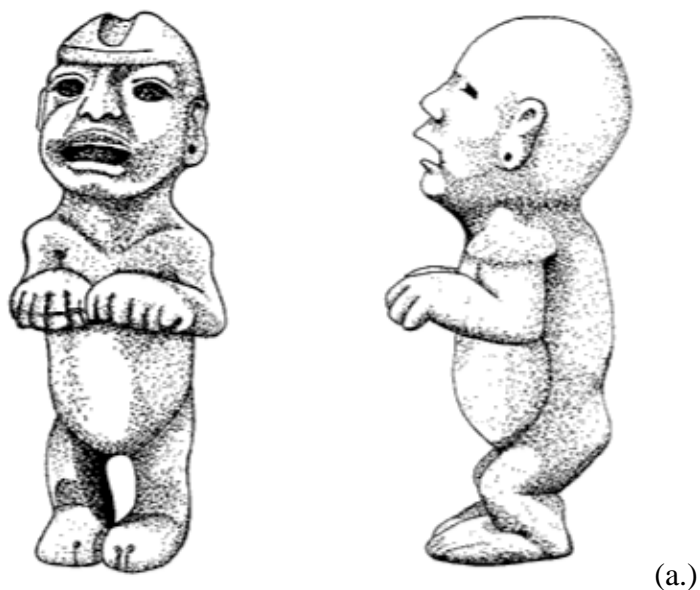
Figure 27: Tlatilco dwarf from Princeton collection (photographs by author)



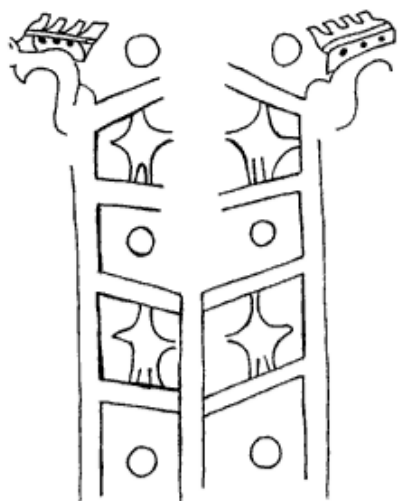
Figure 28: Costumed dwarf from the Princeton Collection (photographs by author)



Figure 29: Costumed Dwarf from Olmec World (Coe 1996)



(a.)

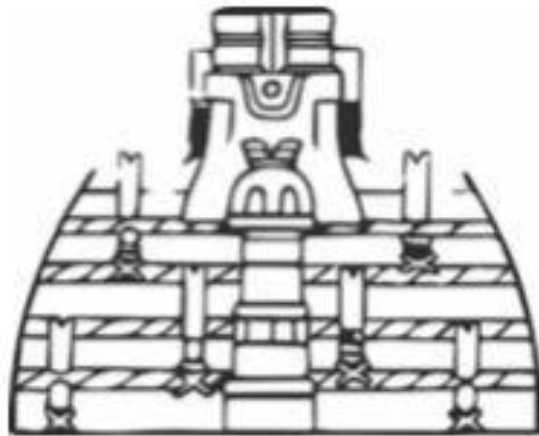


(b.)

Figure 30: (a.) Costumed Dwarf from Private Collection (Reilly 1999: Fig 27, Drawing by F. Kent Reilly III), (b.) Detail of incisions on figure Collection (Reilly 1999: Fig 28, Drawing by F. Kent Reilly III)



(a.)



(b.)

Figure 31: Monument 77 from La Venta; (a.) La Venta Monument 77 Seated Figure (ARTstor Collection Source: University of California, San Diego), (b.) Illustration of La Venta Monument 77, rear view. (Lytle and Reilly 2014: Redrawn by Eleazar Hernandez after Kent Reilly).



Figure 32: alabaster dwarf in blood bowl, Private Collection (Tate 2012, Drawing by Corey Escoto)



Figure 33: Las Bocas dwarf and canoe, from El Museo Nacional de Antropología (photographs by author)

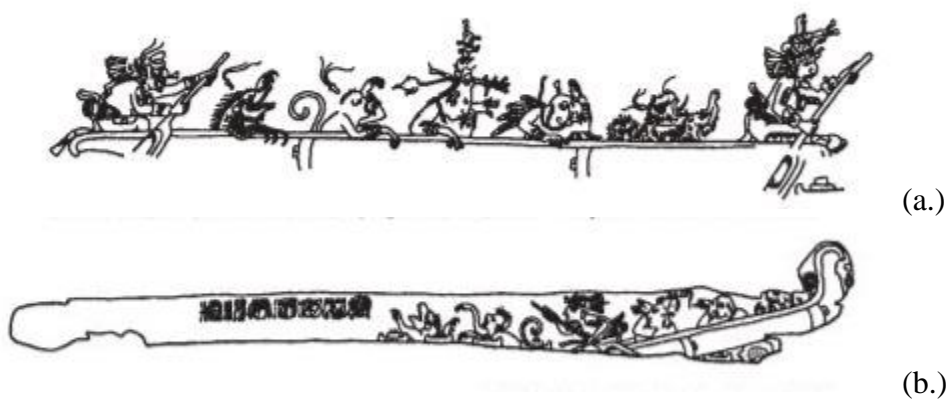
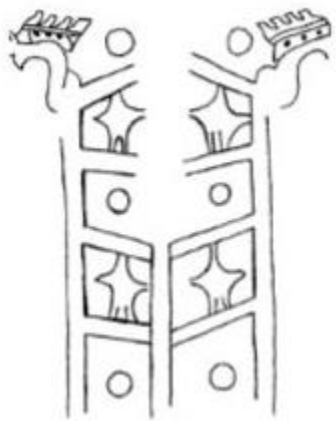


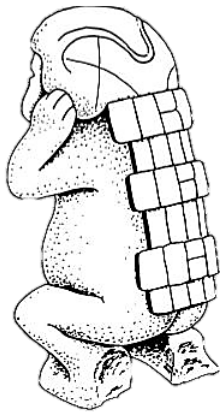
Figure 34: Maya Canoe episode; (a.) The canoe carrying the Maize God to the place of Creation (Schele and Vilella 1994: Fig. 6b), (b.) The canoe sinks into the Primordial Sea (Schele and Vilella 1994: Fig. 6c).



(a.)



(b.)



(c.)

Figure 35: Dwarfs with maize sacks; (a.) incised image of cape from dwarf figurine, Private Collection (Reilly 1999: Fig. 28), (b.) incised imagery from dwarf (Drawing by author after Coe 1996), (c.) Olmec Dwarf carrying a Maize Fetish (Taube 2004: Fig. 28)

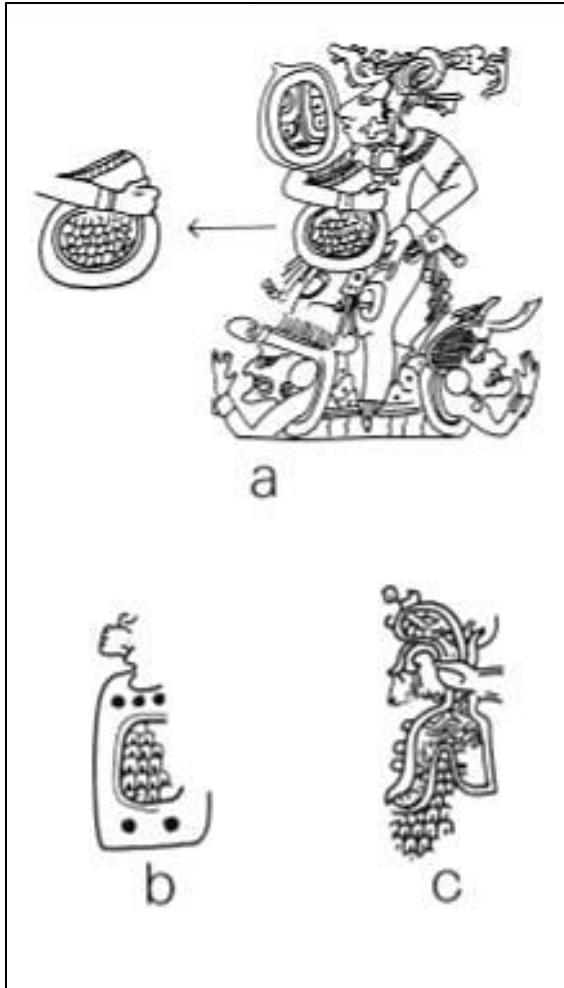


Figure 36: Maya representations of maize sacks; (a.) Detail from vessel representing carapace emergence theme, (Taube 1983 after Robicsek and Hales 1981: fig.59), (b.) Chenes Capstone, Xnucbec (Taube 1983), (c.) Dzibilnecoc Capstone (Taube 1983 after Bolz 1975: Plate 36).



Figure 37: The Humboldt Celt (Freidel and Reilly 2004: Drawing by F. Kent Reilly III).



Figure 38: Monument 2 at Chalcatzingo (Photograph by author)

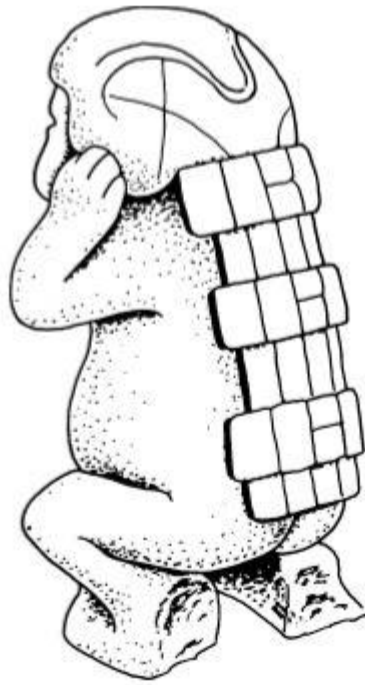


Figure 39: dwarf with backrack, head appears to be maize fetish (Taube 2004: Figure 28).

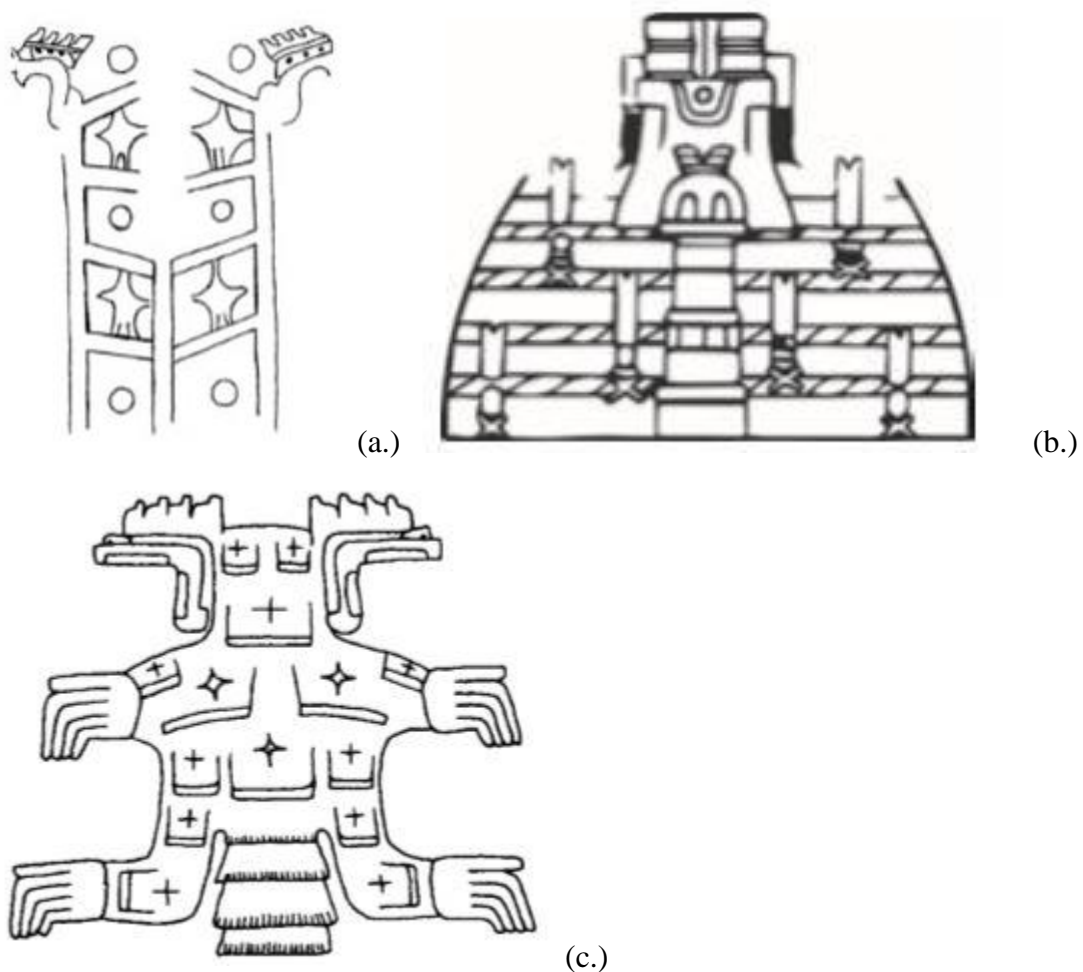
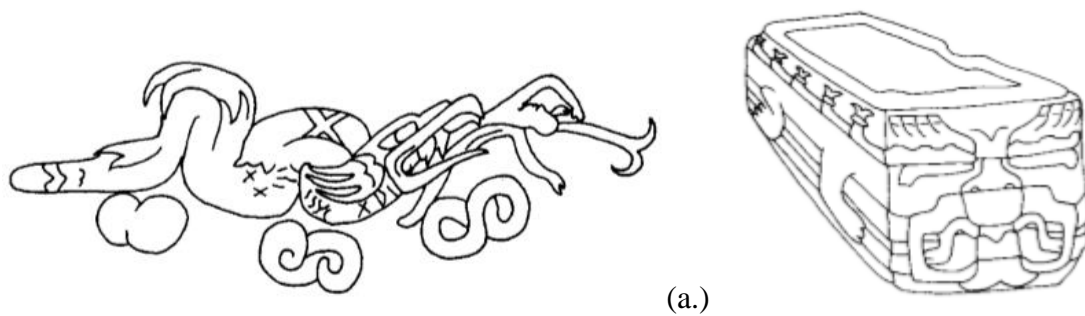


Figure 40: detail comparison of motifs on costumed dwarf to La Venta Monument 77: (a.) detail of incisions on costumed dwarf (Reilly 1999: Fig. 28); (b) La Venta Monument 77 (Lytle and Reilly 2014; drawing by Eleazar Hernandez after Reilly); (c.) Hollow clay figure, Atlihuayan, Morelos (detail) (Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 21 (lower), drawing by PDJ).



(b.)
 Figure 41: The Olmec Dragon; (a.) Chalcatzingo Monument 5 (Joralemon 1976: Fig. 5g, Drawing by PDJ from Cook de Leonard 1976: Fig.4), (b.) La Venta Sandstone Sarcophagus (Joralemon 1976 Fig. 9c, Drawing by PDJ from Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 30).



Figure 42: jade dwarf with maize head, Private Collection (Tate 2012: Drawing by Corey Escoto).

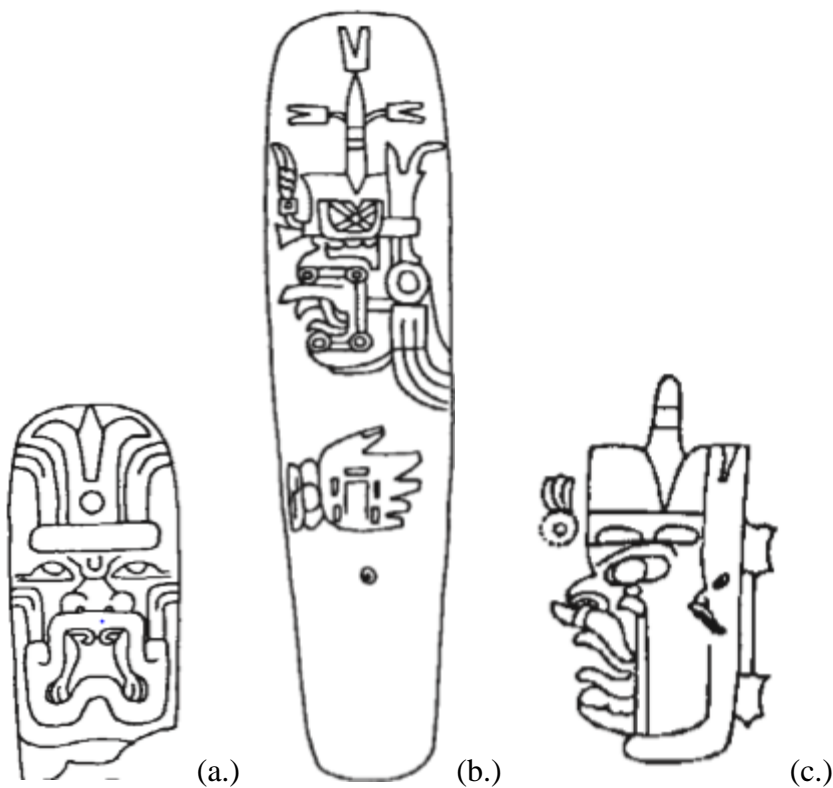


Figure 43: trefoil motif on elite headdresses; (a.) Celt of unknown provenience (Fields 1991: Fig. 3a), (b.) Celt of unknown provenience (Fields 1991: Fig. 7a, after Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 33), (c.) detail of Celt from La Venta Offering 2 (Fields 1991: Fig. 5a, after Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: plate 25).



Figure 44: maize god with elongated head and trefoil headdress (Just 2009: Fig. 4)

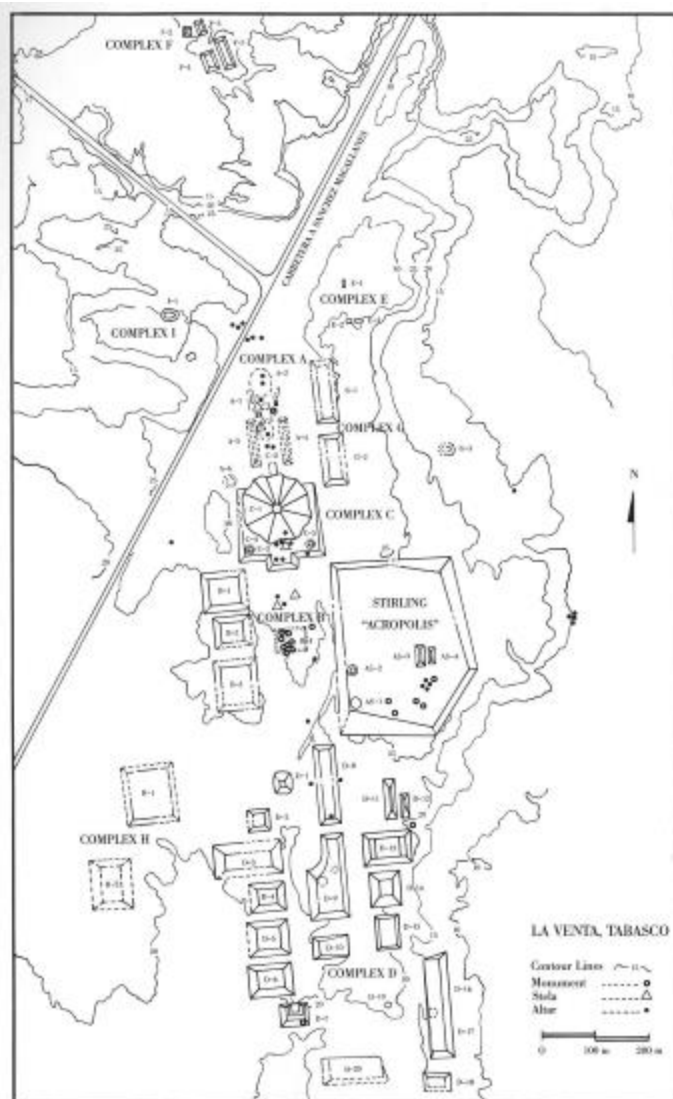


Figure 45: Structural Layout at the Site of La Venta (Gonzalez Lauk 2010: Fig. 1)

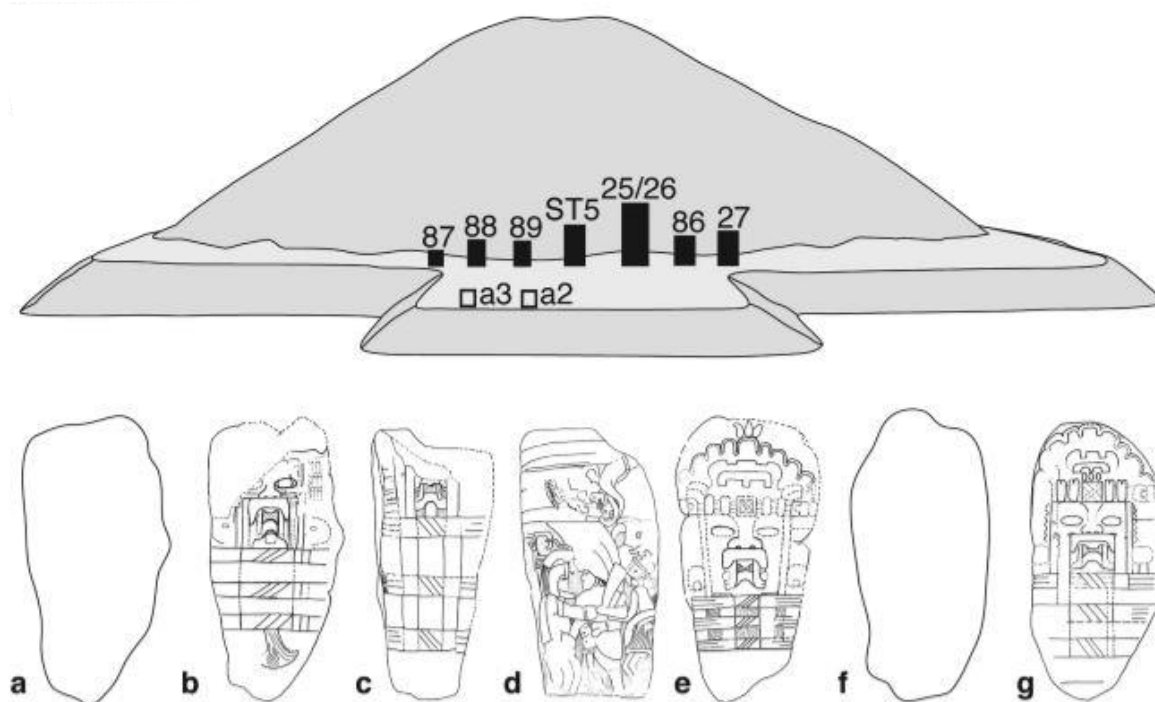


Figure 46: stela at base of La Venta Mound C (Tate 2012: fig. 8.20. Drawing of Stela by Carolyn Tate. drawing of mound by Corey Escoto.)

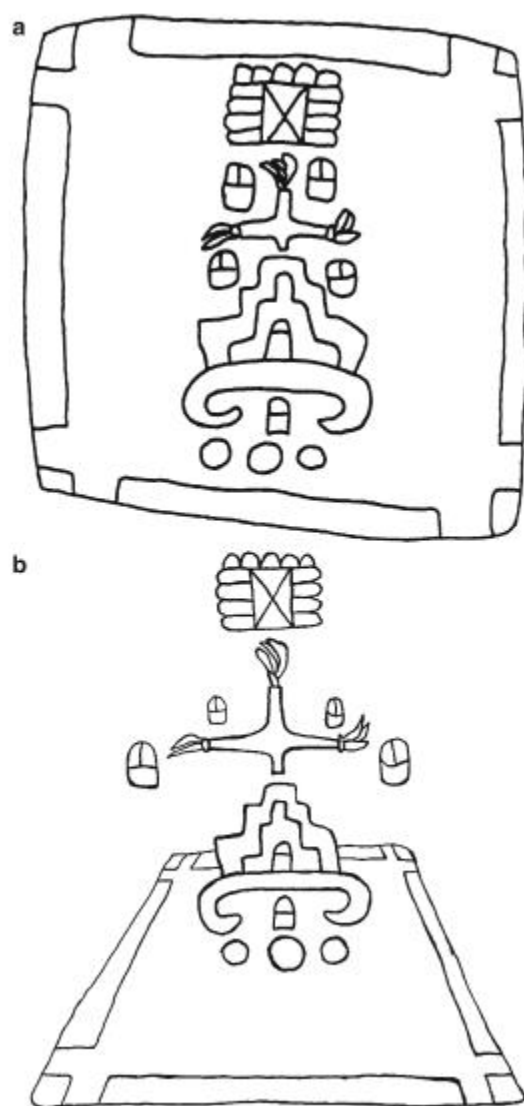


Figure 47: Dallas Plaque (Freidel and Reilly 2009: Fig 14); (a.) The Dallas Tablet (drawing by F. Kent Reilly III), (b.) The Dallas Tablet rendered in three dimensions (Drawing by F. Kent Reilly III)

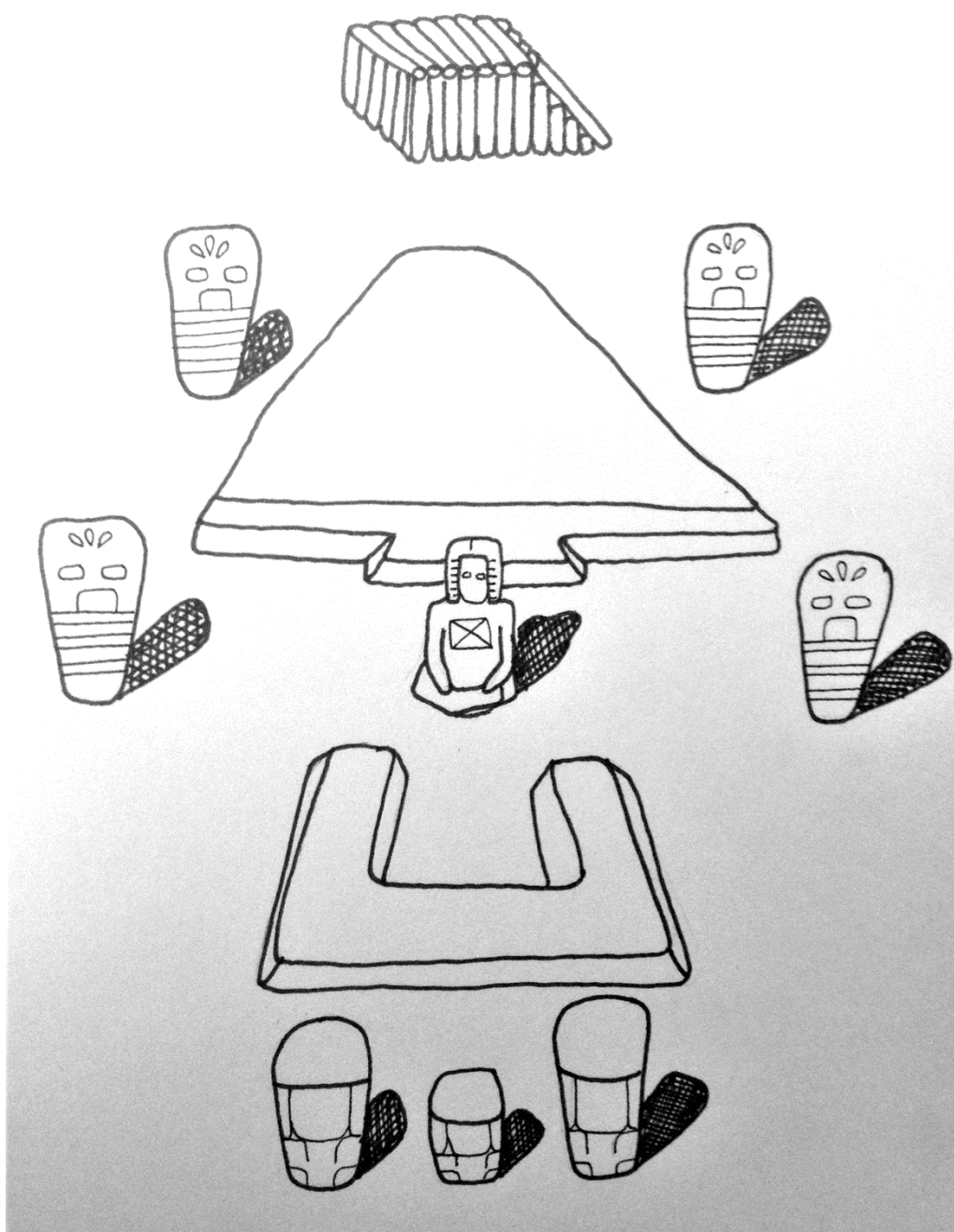
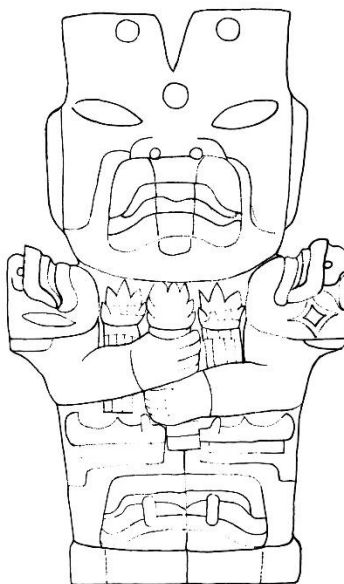


Figure 48: La Venta vertical narrative (drawing by author)



(a.)



(b.)

Figure 49: torch/scepter/bloodletting motifs; (a.) Figure holding torch and knuckle duster (Drawing by Schele, from the Famsi Collection), (b.) infant miaze god holding vegetative bundles/torches (Drawing by Schele, from the Famsi Collection).

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