

THE FIGURINES OF MOTUL DE SAN JOSÉ: PRODUCTION AND REPRESENTATION

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Classic Maya figurines provide a comprehensive representation of society in those times. As pointed out by many authors, they depict a range of human activities and occupations, social affiliations, animals and animal spirits, deities and supernatural entities not observed in monuments and other large scale iconographic media (Goldstein 1979; Joyce 1993, 2000; Rands and Rands 1965; Schele 1997; Taube 1989; Willey 1972). Moreover, both the high and lower ranking groups seem to have used these figurines, as shown by their presence in small and large residences (Ivic 1992, 2002; Moholy-Nagy 2003). However, it is not fully clear whether the elite groups and common people had access to the same type of figurines. In other words, how extensively these small clay objects functioned as a means to integrate the different social groups through a generalized expression –and use- or as a means to establish social divisions.

This document will examine the spatial distribution of the Late Classic figurines of the site known as Motul de San José and its satellite centers as a way to investigate their role in social integration. Both the attributes of production and of iconography in the figurines will be taken into consideration as possible means of expression, cohesion, and social segregation.

THE FIGURINE SAMPLE AND ITS SOCIAL RANK CONTEXT

The figurine sample used for this study is the result of six seasons of excavations conducted by the Motul de San José Archaeological Project (1998-2003) directed by Antonia Foias, of Williams College. The collection consisted of 1800 figurine fragments, 239 of which were heads and/or complete figurines. The initial dating points to the Late Classic period, based on stylistic and contextual data. They were excavated mainly in primary and secondary garbage pits.

	Architectural Volume	Architectural Form	Location
Higher rank	83,796 m ³	Type 6: “Multiplaza” palace groups	Epicenter of Motul de San José
	11,000-6,000 m ³	Types 4 & 5: Groups with ritual structures	Epicenter of Motul de San

			José and La Trinidad
Middle rank	4,500-1,100 m ³	Types 1-5: Informal groups, “plazuela” groups, groups with a basal platform, and groups with ritual structures	Motul de San José, La Trinidad, and Buena Vista
Coger rank	Less than 1,100 m ³	Types 1-3: Informal groups, “plazuela” groups, groups with a basal platform	North and east periphery of Motul de San José
Partly based on Moriarty n/d			

Table 1. General social groups.

The collection includes figurines recovered at the epicenter of Motul de San José, in residential groups located in the north periphery of the site, on a transect that headed east and in the excavation of two satellite sites, La Trinidad and Buena Vista. The rank of the sites was divided in three categories based mainly on their architectural form, volume and localization (Table 1).

The typology of the architectural form was preliminarily established by Moriarty (n.d.), for the region of Motul de San José. Higher ranking contexts were identified through architectural types 4 and 5, whose volumes (detected in the reconnaissance carried out with the Total Station and subsequently calculated with a 3D Analyst in Arc View 3.2), ranged between 11,000 and 6000 m³, and Type 6 –the Main Acropolis- with an architectural volume of 83,796 m³. These architectural groups are located at the epicenter of Motul de San José and La Trinidad, the latter being the major satellite center of Motul de San José. The middle rank contexts comprise Types 1 to 5, whose architectural volumes range approximately between 4,500 and 1,100 m³. These assemblages include some groups located at the epicenter of Motul de San José and in the satellite site of Buena Vista. The lower rank contexts have been designated as Types 1-3, with an architectural volume below 1,100 m³.

These groups are located primarily in the north and east periphery of Motul de San José. The figurines recovered in the test pits around the structures for public rituals (Type 7), were not included in the analysis, due to the possibility that their used involved individuals from different social ranks.

PRODUCTION

The distribution of figurines was examined, in the first place, based on the elaboration and skills involved in their production. The relative elaboration and the skill levels provide an indirect means to ascertain how much specialization was involved in their production. The implication is that the high levels of labor and skills point to a higher degree of specialized production (i.e. full-time production instead of part-time production, and elitist or elite-sponsored production as opposed to

independent production; Costin and Hagstrum 1995; Costin 1991, 2001). In many societies, the elite groups are capable of having an easier or more frequent access to specialized handmade articles than the rest of the society, because they possess the economic, cultural and ideological capital required to purchase, to sponsor the production or to produce their own commodities (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Inomata 2001; Spielmann 2002; Vaughn 2004). Now, the question would be whether the differences in the invested work and the skill shown in the production of Maya figurines were consistent with their differential consumption.

Two methods were used to estimate the invested labor and the skills regarding the figurine production. The first method includes a comparison of four manufacturing types of figurines, based partly on Matilde Ivic's typology (1999, 2002). The relative order of the increase in labor invested and skills includes the fully modeled type, coarse modeling, partially modeled and finely modeled pieces.

Molded figurines

The first type, the fully molded figurines, is the most common one and according to ethnographic comparative data, involves the lesser amount of work and skills of the four types of production (without taking into account the mold production; Arnold 1985, 1999; Reina and Hill 1978; Torres Quintero 1996). They are hollow figurines and function like ocarinas or whistles, and were produced with molds and pressing one of the sides. They are called "fully molded" because the nature of the figurine itself comes from a mold, despite the fact that the rear part and the base are modeled.

In contemporary case studies among contemporary Maya potters from Ticul, Yucatan (Arnold 1985, 1999), adults with little or no experience in ceramic production have easily learned to produce figurines using the vertical-half molding technique. It is observed that the molded products of an amateur could not be distinguished from those of a skilled potter. In contrast, the traditional techniques of rolling and modeling demanded "*a whole set of specific usual patterns that were learned throughout an extended period of time*" (Arnold 1999:64). These abilities were better learnt during childhood and require instruction. In addition to the low level of dexterity in the manufacture of figurines with one of the halves of a vertical mold, less manufacturing and drying time is required than for the modeled types (Arnold 1985: 205-207).

Coarse modeled figurines

The second type identified in the Motul de San José collection is that of the coarsely modeled figurines, fully produced using a hand modeling technique. This type shows no detailed corporal or facial traits. The appendixes have poor outlines and the bodily proportions are unreal. It is difficult to ascertain whether the coarsely modeled figurines involved a similar level of skills or labor, like in the Type 1 or 3 figurines. Skill levels fall into a continuity as opposed to strict categories, and some figurines required more appendixes than others. The coarsely modeled figurines, however,

probably included more steps in production than those of the first type, and almost the same number of production steps than the third type. But because they are plainly made and show no details, the investment in skills and labor were probably lower.

Partially modeled figurines

Type 3, the partially modeled figurines, constitutes a category of intermediate skills and labor. They were made with molded heads that were joined to modeled bodies (one example in the collection, however, suggest that one molded head was adhered to a molded body separately manufactured). The head may have been adhered to the body through three different techniques. Some of the molded heads featured a flat surface at the base of the neck, where the modeled body was added to the flat surface. Other molded heads were assembled with spikes. In this case, a spike in the lower portion of the head was introduced in an orifice created in the neck of the modeled body. A third alternative was observed in the form of a flat molded face adhered to a modeled body.

The production of partially molded figurines probably involved more labor and skills than the fully molded figurines. Additional skills were necessary for the section of the modeled body, which involved the manufacture of several protruding appendices, as opposed to the flat ones, with no outline at the rear part of the fully modeled figurines. They also involved an additional step in production, for the separate manufacture of the head and the body. Thus, once the craftsman finished creating the two parts, he had to wait until they reached the drying stage of “hardened leather”, before assembling them.

Fine modeled figurines

In the fourth type, fine modeling, the figurines involved the greater degree of skills and labor invested in the four types. Some of the modeled heads were assembled with spikes to modeled bodies. The facial and bodily traits were minutely made and featured real proportions. For example, the legs were formed with such a degree of detail that the shape of the knees, calves and ankles could be clearly detected. They contrast with the legs of the coarsely modeled figurines, which feature the shape of a cane. These figurines were frequently decorated with ear flares, parts of headdresses, necklaces, sandals and some costume pieces. The pieces with detailed appliqués demanded both labor investment and a level of skills to grant the successful application of the clay parts during the modeling and the burning processes. For example, a traditional potter from Chinautla, in the Guatemala Highlands, points out that: *“The [modeled] figurines manufactured are freely repeated, and each piece is a different work... we create each form, one needs to think until it happens. For example, thinking precisely about manufacturing a chicken with all its feathers... each single feather is placed on the body and then they can be fixed after baking. This demands patience and a careful control of humidity. Burning is a delicate matter. And by the time one is completing an order, one is beginning to*

decide which will be the next form. Thinking and making a decision is tiring, at times...” (Reina and Hill 1978:262).

The second method in regard to differences in figurine production is “measuring the steps of production”, an analytical method designed for measuring the relative output of energy required to produce ceramic vessels (Costin and Hagstrum 1995; Feinman *et al.* 1981, 1984). One point has been attributed for each step in the manufacturing processes. For example, fine paste, painting (one step per painted color), slip, burnish, smoothening, incisions and appliqué techniques are taken as different steps, because they consumed additional work. When one calculates the number of steps per vessel, one can systematically compare the amount of labor invested from vessel to vessel.

The initial study of the complete and partial figurines of Motul de San José revealed that the quality of each manufactured type varied dramatically. For example, some molded heads had no adornments, while other heads featured highly elaborate appliqué adornments. In this way, the measuring of the steps of production was applied to the figurines with modeled heads (Types 1 and 3), in order to refine the differences in labor invested and degree of skills involved in their production. Fine paste, appliqué parts (5-9 parts = 1 step; 10-14 parts = 2 steps; 15-24 parts = 3 steps; 25-49 parts = 4 steps, etc.), incisions (punches were considered as incisions), and painting (1 step per painted color), were considered like separate steps in production. The steps were averaged based on the contexts of the figurines, and thereafter the contexts were compared.

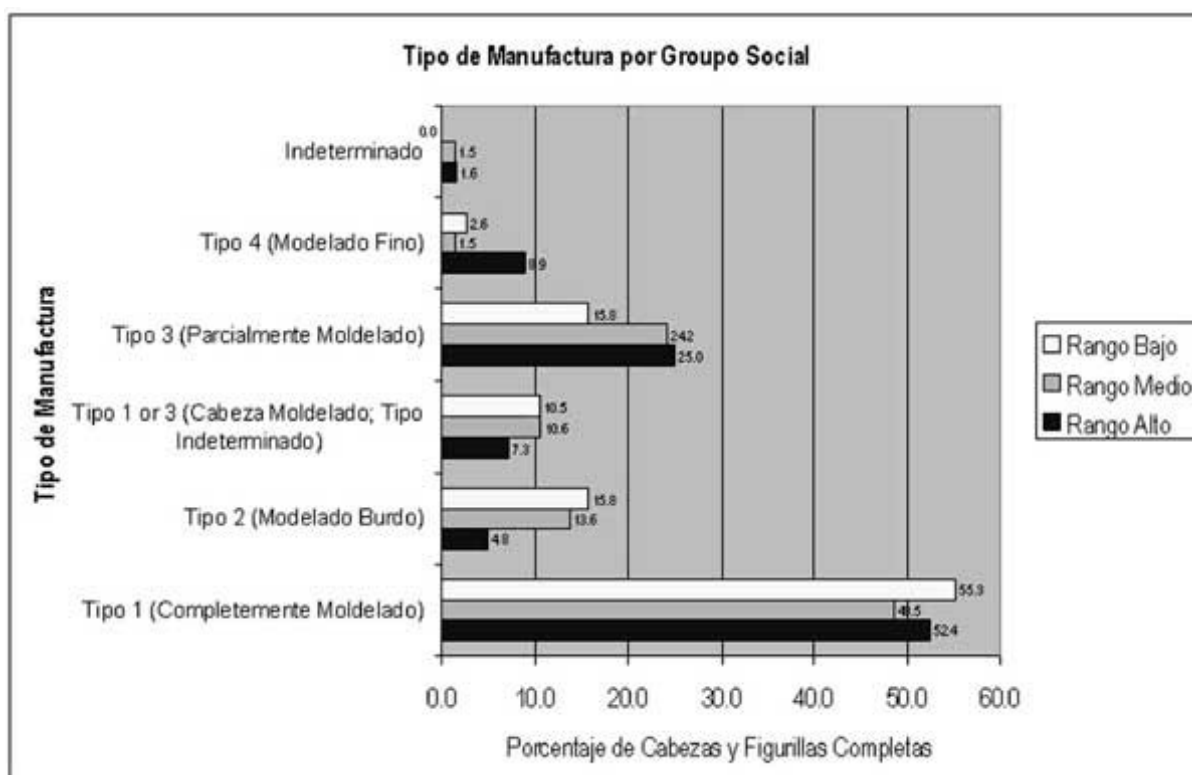


Figure 1. Type of manufacture per social group.

The results of the analyses of labor and skills (derived from the heads of the figurines and from the complete pieces), suggest that a direct correlation exists between higher levels of manufacture and skills, and the figurines corresponding to higher ranking contexts (Figure 1). Although the fully molded figurines (Type 1) are the most common in the three social categories, the higher ranking groups contained high percentages of finely modeled figurines (Type 4), more than the middle or lower ranking groups. Moreover, the higher ranking groups contained the lesser amount of coarse modeled figurines. Both the higher and middle ranking groups present large percentages of partially modeled types (Type 3). In terms of the steps for measuring production, the estimated number of production steps is high in the higher ranking sample, the second estimated corresponds to the middle ranking sample, and it is extremely low in the lower ranking sample (Figure 2).

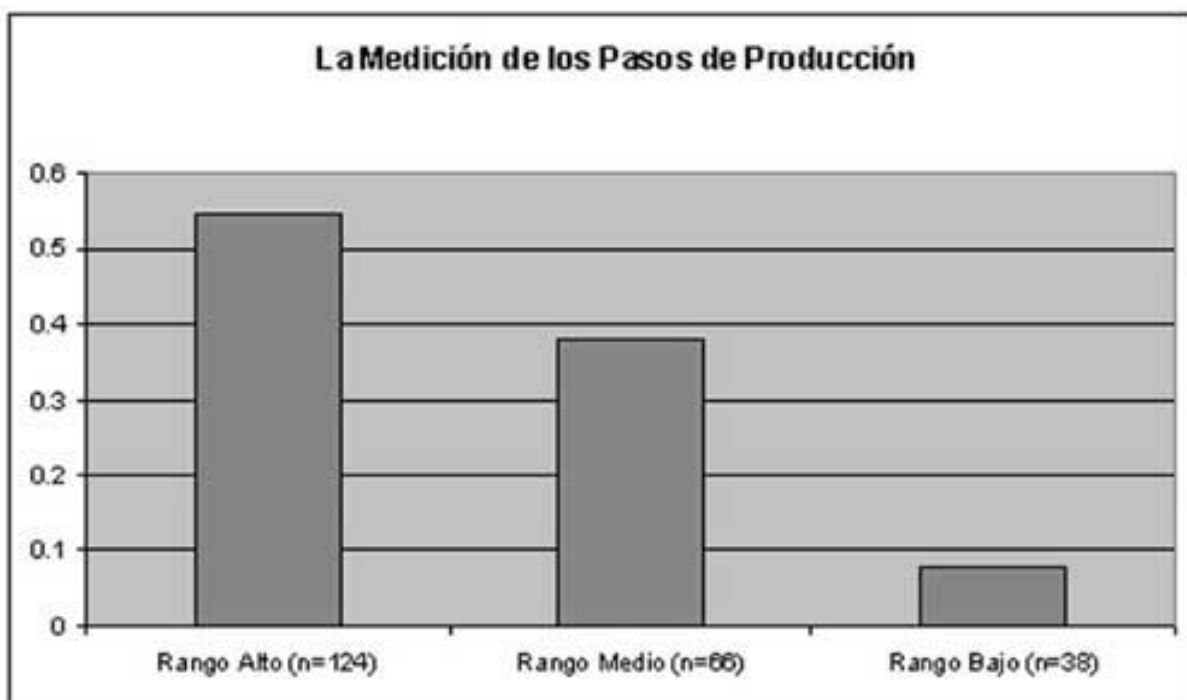


Figure 2. Average measures in the steps of production.

REPRESENTATIONS

In addition to the characteristics of production, this study examined the iconographic distribution of the figurines in relation to social rank. A substantial number of iconographic topics exist in the Motul de San José collection. Due to the lack of time and space we shall only discuss, and briefly, those that are more prominent (those with four examples or more in each category): male rulers, females with wide brimmed hats, females with bands tied on their foreheads, females at work, dwarfs, grotesque figures and animal figures. With just a few exceptions, most of these topics are found within the three contexts of social rank.

The figurines of male rulers included molded figurines (n=23; Types 1 and 3), ornamented with loincloths, jewels, and elaborate headdresses in the shape of fans, similar to those present in Classic monuments. The majority of these headdresses (64%) depict a War Serpent (Figure 3). The distribution of these male ruler figurines is wide. Not only the figurines with the War Serpent and other ones with headdresses in a fan shape appear in one looted royal tomb in Group D and in the more elaborate residential components in the epicenter of Motul de San José, but they are also present in a residential group of La Trinidad, in middle ranking groups in Motul and in several small residential groups in the northern periphery of the site.

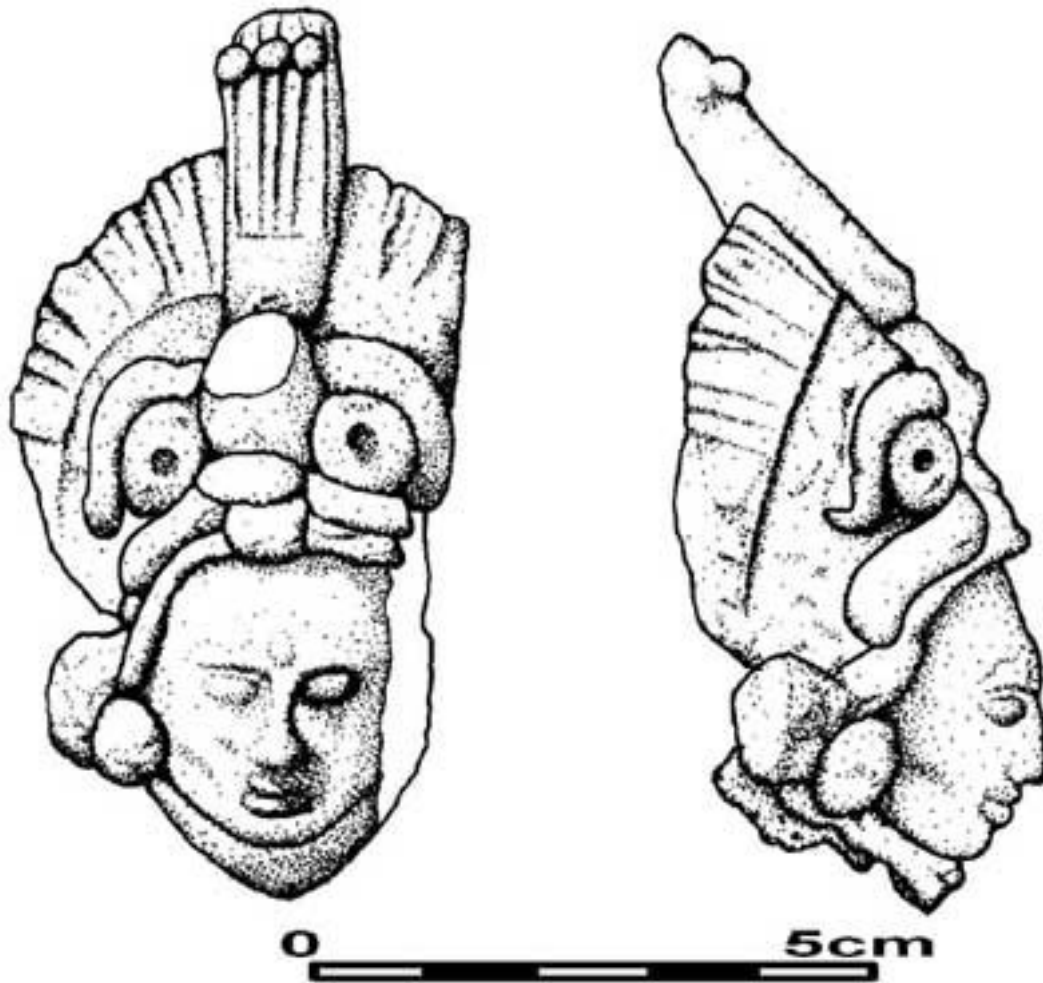


Figure 3. Figurine of ruler with War Serpent headdress. TRI4A-7-2-1 (courtesy of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project; drawing by I. Seyb).

There are also females with wide brimmed hats (n=18), and females with a band knotted on their foreheads (n=13) in the three categories of social rank. Types with wide brimmed hats, however, were found in higher ranking contexts (83%), more than in middle and lower ranking contexts (Figure 4). The females with wide brimmed hats show their hair piled up on top of their heads, with the hats laid on top and tilting forwards, shadowing their faces. They usually feature a stepped cut bang (just one sample found in a lower ranking context showed a hairstyle parted at the middle), with two tassels or hair strands at each side of her head). The other motif is

the use of a knotted ribbon or thin cloth, and the hair wrapped up on the head, in the shape of a cone or a ball. Most of these figurines also featured a hairstyle parted in the middle (except for two). Both types of figurines were made with molds (Types 1 and 3).

The motif of female works included women holding a bowl or a basket with food, thus implicitly linking women with the kitchen or with food services (Joyce 1993, 1996, 2000). Only five examples of this motif were found (Figure 5). The casual costumes of women consist of a garment with naked shoulders, on which they carry their bowls, perhaps suggesting that they are moving them from one locality to another. As opposed to other female topics, one was found predominantly in higher ranking contexts (n=4), and still another one in middle ranking contexts. Due to the limited size of the sample, the distribution thereof could be biased.

Figurines of animals and supernatural beings are widely distributed in residential groups of higher, middle and lower ranks. However, there is no obvious association with any specific type of animals. Some types included dogs, jaguars, frogs, crocodiles, owls and monkeys.



Figure 4. Female figurine with wide brimmed hat. MSJ2A-5-6-13 (photo by C. Halperín).

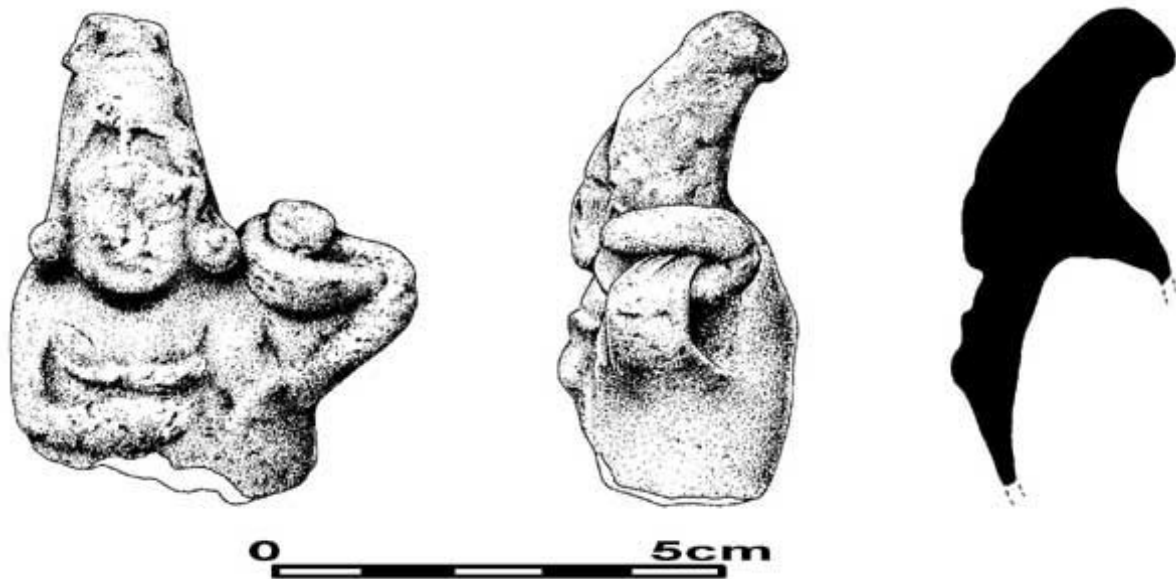


Figure 5. Female figurine holding a bowl or a basket. MSJ2A-3-15-1A (courtesy of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project; drawing by L.F. Luin).

Dwarfs constitute the most prominent iconographic type found at Motul de San José (n=32; types 1, 3, and 4; Figure 6). Some of the figurines defined in the dwarf category, nonetheless, may include characteristics of the Fat God; the first are distinguished by their closed eyes, turned-up jaw, a body with appropriate legs and a fan (Miller 1985:147). They both feature bulky cheeks and sunken eyes, and whenever some parts of the body are missing, to establish a distinction between both of them is not easy. In spite of their localization within contexts of different social ranks, those found in elite contexts feature more elaborate headdresses than those found in common people contexts. The figurine sample included as well few types of grotesque figurines, with disproportioned characteristics, exaggerated bodies, and facial traits that are not consistent with the stylistic parameters of Maya deities. They were also found in contexts corresponding to the three different ranks.

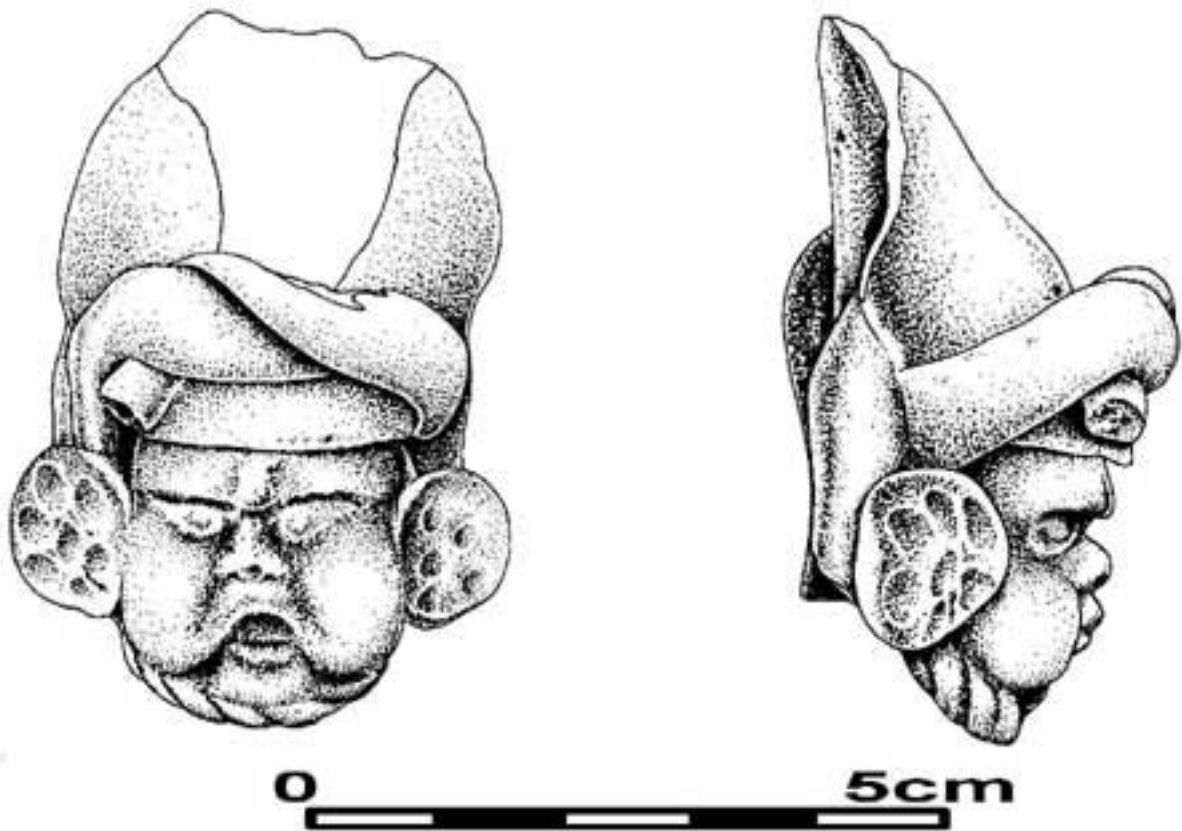


Figure 6. Dwarf figurines MSJ2A-1-7-1D (courtesy of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project; drawing by L.F. Luin).

It is important to mention one sample of a puffed or swollen (or “*bloated male figurines*” according to Goldstein’s terminology, 1979) male figurine, recovered in the excavations conducted in front of the main pyramid at Motul de San José. These male figurines have big bellies, thin arms that rest on their stomachs, and long, thin legs (Figure 7). They are not females because they have no breasts and are wearing a loincloth made with a plain fabric. The samples from Jaina and from the coast of Campeche (Goldstein 1979:88; Schele 1997: Dish 17, 18) show these standing figures with sunken cheeks and elaborate headdresses. These published examples, the one recovered at Motul, and other three figurines stored at the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (MNAE 3588 from Kaminaljuyu, as well as X-10, 4644 and X-1, 1810 from Uaxactun) differ from other types of figurines for having been finely modeled (Type 4), and seem not to have had molded equivalents (close to the dwarf figures). Their distribution may have been more restricted to elite or public ritual context.

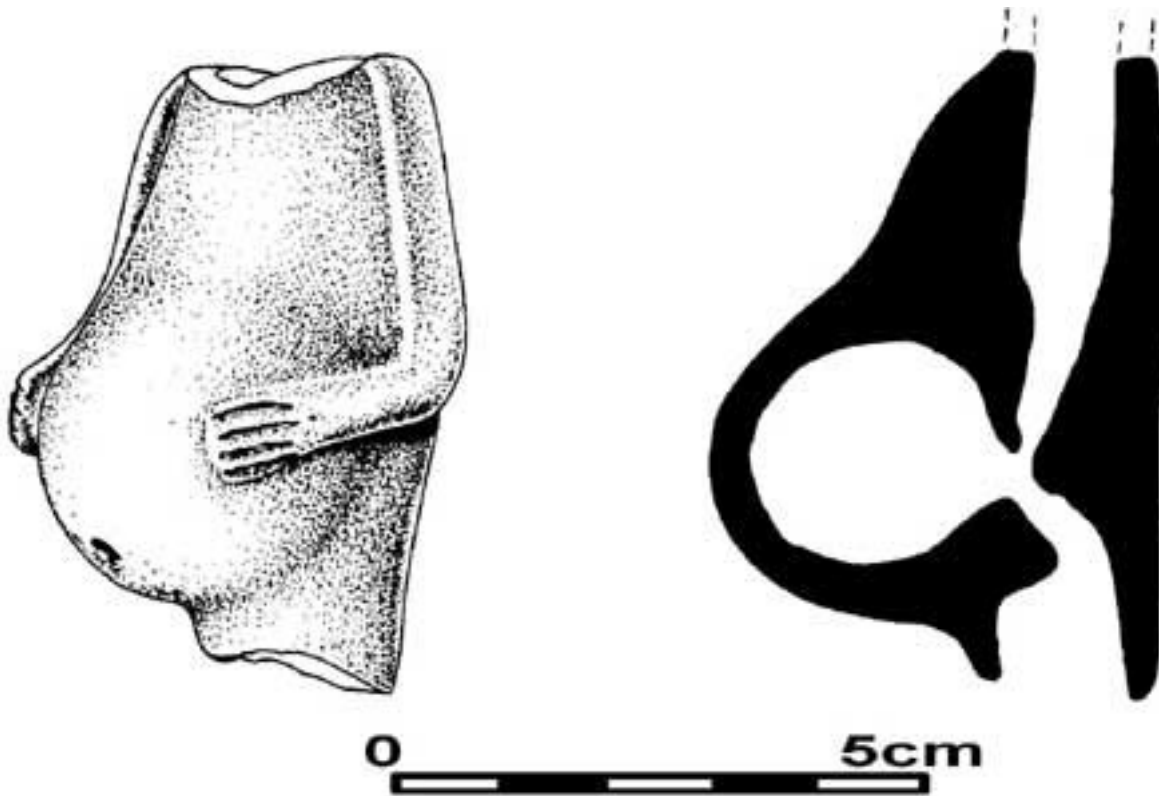


Figure 7. Smoked male figurine. MSJ3A-3-12-1 (courtesy of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project: drawing by L.F. Luin).

DISCUSSION

The distribution of the figurines through the three types of social rank suggest that even though the elite had a greater access to those figurines that demanded a higher investment of labor or skills, those variations based on the iconographically dominant variations are less apparent. In many ways, it should not come as a surprise that higher ranking groups distinguished between articles that involved higher skills and intensive labor. Such items, as well as those manufactured with exotic materials, often had a limited supply and were imbued with some sort of esoteric, sacred or special meaning.

The economic, social and political positions of the elite were created and validated through the control of production and access to the consumption of these articles (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; DeMarrais *et al.* 1996). Subordinate groups may as well have created and reinforced social division by using products and symbols of their own (Galley 1987; Kearney 2001; Sider 1976). Crudely modeled animal figurines may be an example of such types of symbols, as they were found with some frequency in the low ranking contexts of Motul de San José (see also Brown *et al.* 2002, Sheets 2000:224 for an example of plebeian production and use of crudely modeled effigy incense burners).

At the same time, many of the iconographic motifs examined here traversed the three levels of social rank. In particular, some of the motifs showing one single social category were not exclusively found in residential contexts. For example, the figurines of male rulers with War Serpent headdress were recovered both from elite and common people contexts throughout the entity of Motul de San José.

Taube (1992, 2000) argues that in the Maya area, the Serpent headdress is explicitly identified with government and warfare. For example, the stelae and other large scale media in Tikal, Piedras Negras, Lamanai, Bonampak, Copan, Palenque and other sites show rulers ornamented with War Serpent headdresses, at times accompanied by war emblems from Teotihuacan (Taube 1992: 61-64; 2000: 271-272). The imagery of the War Serpent is not restricted to the Maya area. It has its origins in the façades of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl and in the ruler figurines of the Miccaotli phase of Teotihuacan. In addition to the iconography of Central Mexico, it is also present in the Zapotec imagery, and takes the form of *Xiuhcoatl* in the Aztec Postclassic and in the iconography of the Mixtec peoples. It is known that the symbols of remote lands often imbue local leaders with sacred auras and with the power of its more exotic manifestations (Helms 1979, 1993). The data of the figurines from Motul de San José suggest that the symbols of authority and legitimacy penetrated the imagery used, even in the low ranks of society. However, it is unclear whether such symbols necessarily reflect state authority or represent a claim of that authority, although at a small scale, in portable objects.

Moreover, some symbols, like females with their hair parted at the middle and with a ribbon tied up on their foreheads, may be more particular to the middle and lower segments of society, although they were also found in high ranking residential contexts. Both Willey (1972:46), in his analysis of the figurines of Altar de Sacrificios, and Ivic (2000), in his analysis of the figurines of Piedras Negras, suggest that the hairstyle parted at the middle was associated with females of the lower class, because these figurines were not produced with fine pastes (as observed in the collection from Altar de Sacrificios), and were not elaborately adorned with jewelry similar to that used by females featuring a stepped haircut.

Supernatural figurines, such as dwarfs and grotesque beings, are another iconographic motif found in a variety of contexts of social rank. These figurines are often associated with humoristic rituals (Mock 2003; Taube 1989). Due to the fact that they feature exaggerated subnormal representations and deformed traits, they are structurally the opposite of the strong and idealized young men seen in the representations of Maya lords and rulers. They functioned like social critics of the Maya government and of society in general.

The imagery of supernatural characters in monuments and in the finely painted pottery reinforces the insight that the elites were associated with these characters, particularly with dwarfs (Houston 1992; Miller 1985). The figurines of Motul de San José and other sites in the Maya area, however, also present a great variety of supernatural characteristics, especially those typified as grotesque. Many of these characters are not directly associated with large or small scale elites (Taube 1989); they may have been particularly important for the common Maya people as their own sources of social criticism.

CONCLUSIONS

The distribution analysis of the figurines from Motul de San José shows that these small objects played a dual role in the affiliation and borders socially established. The patterns that used the significant attributes of production detected that higher ranking groups had a more restricted access to the figurines to the figurines with a higher level of labor investment and skills, more than those of a middle or lower rank (Ivic 2002). The access and use of finely manufactured figurines may have provided elite groups a means to become distinguished from one another, and perhaps they aligned themselves with those of a similar social position.

On the other hand, the patterns detected in the imagery of figurines reveal that certain prominent iconographic types traversed the designations of social rank. In this way, and at a certain level, the figurines also functioned as a powerful force of integration. In a dialectic analysis of material symbols at Naco Valley, Honduras, it has been argued that if leaders wanted to be successful, they had to inspire both contradictory processes (Shortman *et al.* 2001). The leaders were able to reinforce their privileged role in the social hierarchy through the symbolic manifestations of their esoteric knowledge and by their affiliation with more distant elite groups, while they also consolidated “the local corporative identity” through the community’s symbolic expression.

Nonetheless, the lower ranking groups were not necessarily passive participants in the production and use of such symbols, as they were able to create their own reflection or to copy such forms of social expression. With the purpose of investigating the social dynamics of the symbolism and use of the figurines, it is necessary to explore their production (for example, which groups produced which symbols), and undertake a wide regional analysis regarding the types of figurines.

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Table 1	General social groups
Figure 1	Type of manufacture per social group
Figure 2	Measurement averages of steps of production
Figure 3	Figurine of ruler with War Serpent headdress, TRI4A-7-2-1 (courtesy of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project; drawing by I. Seyb)
Figure 4	Figurine of woman with wide brimmed hat, MSJ2A-5-6-13 (photo by C. Halperin)
Figure 5	Figurine of woman with a bowl or a basket, MSJ2A-3-15-1A (courtesy of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project; drawing by L.F. Luin)
Figure 6	Figurine of dwarf, MSJ2A-1-7-1D (courtesy of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project; drawing by L.F. Luin)
Figure 7	Smoked male figurine, MSJ3A-3-12-1 (courtesy of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project; drawing by L.F. Luin)