

EARLY REPRESENTATIONS OF MESOAMERICA'S FEATHERED SERPENT:  
POWER, IDENTITY, AND THE SPREAD OF A CULT

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A Thesis

Presented to the

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

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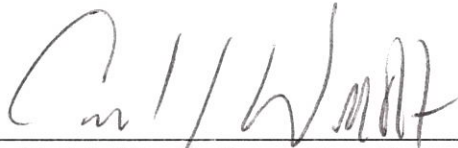
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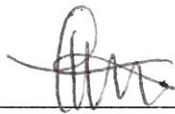
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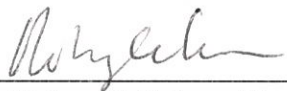
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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, an analysis of the earliest representations of a serpent with avian-like features reveals that Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent appeared first during the Formative period (1500-400 B.C.), and played a more important role in Formative society than scholars have previously held. I argue that pottery of the Early Formative period (1400-900 B.C.), carved with the following motifs: "St. Andrew's cross," "hand-paw-wing," "flame-eyebrow," and "U-gum bracket," referred to here as "Earth & Sky" (or "Earth & Sky imagery"), depict an Avian Serpent (e.g., Cheetham 2010; Taube 1995). Individuals from the site of San José Mogote (the Valley of Oaxaca), and the site of Tlatilco (the Basin of Mexico) used this pottery in burials and households to mark status and identity (Marcus 1989; Tolstoy 1989). Similar pottery from the site of San Lorenzo (the Gulf Coast of Mexico), does not appear to have been used as a status item, but might have been used in local household activities, display, or ritual. Additionally, Avian-Serpent imagery on monuments from the Gulf Coast links the Avian Serpent to the legitimization of some members of the Olmec hierarchy, which might have been rulers or religious leaders. Taking this a step further, an analysis of Avian Serpents varied style and different uses across the region suggest that members of a religious network may have propelled the wide appearance of Avian-Serpent imagery during the Early Formative period. The Avian Serpent could have been the symbol of a regional cult, like the regional cult described by Blomster (1998, 2010), which he believes was responsible for the use and/or invention of hollow-baby figurines and the spread of religion and

cosmology during the Early Formative period. During this period, complex society in Mesoamerica was in full swing, and a foundation for later advancements was built.

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*This paper is dedicated to the memory of Juan Angel Garcia  
and his father John ... just two of many who fought the good fight*

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This paper, I dedicate to the memory of my cousin Juan Angel Garcia and his father (my uncle John), both who past away after battling cancer but not before leaving behind a legacy of artisanship. Run some strings you two and have my marshalltown ready—I’m not far from home.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The area of Mesoamerica (Figure 1) and its Early and Middle Formative period (1500-400 B.C.) inhabitants are the focus of this thesis. Of all Formative groups, the Olmec of the Gulf Coast of Mexico are the most popular, though, the most studied societies of this large area are the Aztecs that occupied Central Mexico between 1300 and 1521 A.D., and the Maya of Southeastern Mesoamerica (now within the confines of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador). Researchers have been able to learn much about the Classic period Maya (200-900 A.D.) and the Postclassic period Aztec (1300-1521 A.D.). They continue to learn through the examination of their architecture and cultural material (artifacts), those, for the most part, preserve well in the ground where these societies flourished generations ago.

Much information with regard to Aztec and Maya society stems from the study of European–Indigenous contact documents written by Spanish friars and conquistadores. Additionally, native-speaking populations, Aztec, and Maya descendants, still live in parts of Mesoamerica, allowing researchers the chance to study some aspects of ancient traditions still existing today. Unfortunately, the same is not true of Formative period cultures like the Olmec (1500-400 B.C.) of the Gulf Coast of Mexico (Figure 3), or their neighbors outside the Gulf Coast. In the case of the Olmec, very little information regarding their social, economic, and political organization is currently known. Scholars



do agree that the Formative period was a time when the New World's first complex societies took shape, distinguished for their contributions in art, architecture, writing, and religion<sup>1</sup>. Arguments, however, that focus on how and why these cultural firsts occurred and the impact of Formative societies on one another continuously face criticism and revision as new research becomes available.



Figure 1. The area of Mesoamerica identified by 21st century countries.

<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I define “religion” as the onset of new ideas and/or pre-existing beliefs. Typically, varied motifs or symbols on different artifact classes, expressed these social values (Blomster 1998:323).

There are many reasons why investigations offer relatively little information with respect to the Olmec. For instance, archaeologists working at the Gulf Coast seldom encounter organic materials such as food remains, textiles, wood, and intact skeletons in their excavations. The type of evidence that archaeologists working in other periods and regions are accustomed to finding, quickly break down under the continuously wet and acid conditions of the Gulf Coast soil (Coe and Diehl 1980:130-133). Formative scholars also do not have as a source of information ancient written documents (codices), specific to the Formative period that could provide clues of Formative society. Only recently have archaeologists considered the mundane but important aspects of commoner life (see Wendt 2010).

Despite not having a clear picture of what life was like during the Formative period, some basic questions have been answered. It is certain that on the Gulf Coast, the Olmec built a stratified society (Clark 1997; Coe and Diehl 1980; Cyphers 1996). They had a political structure in place, strong enough to command the extraction and transport of ton-heavy basalt from the Tuxtla Mountains to the site of San Lorenzo, forty miles away. There artisans carved the stone into architectural features, human body forms, and supernatural creatures (i.e., serpents and jaguars) (Cyphers 1996).

In other cases for example, like at the site of San José Mogote (see Figure 3), outside of the Gulf Coast in the Valley of Oaxaca, archaeologists know what type of structures people lived in, their diet, craft activities, and the types of objects they received from far away places in exchange for goods made locally (Flannery 1968). Researchers can also presume a great deal of information regarding the cultural identities of people

buried at the site of Tlatilco, in Central Mexico, where the examination of group burials revealed a wealth of craft items, such as finely produced and decorated pottery, associated with gender and status (Joyce 1999; Tolstoy 1989).

### Current trends in the study of Formative societies

A steady flow of new research is beginning to shed light on the interregional interaction between Early and Middle Formative period societies. Scholars are certain groups from different regions were trading, sharing ideas, and linked through social and political networks. Moreover, archaeological studies that focus on the commoner (or household archaeology), promise to reveal what day-to-day society might have been like during the Formative period.

Approaches dealing with the individual actions, or *agency* of people (see Bourdieu 1977), reflect an area long-championed in the study of Mesoamerica. However, this has only recently been emphasized by Jeffrey P. Blomster (2010:146) as a way to approach the study of Formative societies (e.g., Pool 2009:250-251; Wendt 2010:120) mainly in the arena of interregional interaction, where, according to Blomster (2010:141, 146), agency perspectives consider negotiations of status and power between individuals or groups. To continue with a study area, focused on individual and group contributions, this thesis will focus on a small but unique set of data: early representations of Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent (or Avian Serpent) (Figure 2). Specifically, of how people, in their attempts to differentiate themselves and further legitimize their identities, may have used a serpent with avian-like features (i.e., small wings, feathers, and feathered tufts) carved on pottery and stone monuments.



Figure 2. Early representations of Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent (or Avian Serpent) shown in a variety of styles. See Table 1 for context, comments, and references.

Table 1. Early representations of Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent (see Figure 2).

Representation	Period and Site	Media, Context, and Comments	Reference
a	Early Formative Tlatilco	Earth & Sky imagery on pottery; from burial, RP.	Covarrubias (1957), Flannery and Marcus (1994)
b	Early Formative San José Mogote	Earth & Sky imagery on pottery; from household area, RP.	Pyne (1976), Marcus (1989), Flannery and Marcus (1994)
c	Early Formative Tlatilco	Avian-Serpent bowl; from burial, RP.	Piña Chán (1958), Joralemon (1971)
d	Early Formative San Lorenzo	Figurine from household context. Back of head decorated with Venus star, RP.	Blomster (1998, 2002)
e	Early Formative of unknown provenance	Jade/greenstone figurine; with Earth & Sky imagery. Persona emerging from serpentine coils. Unknown context, RP.	Joralemon (1971)
f	Early Formative Las Limas	Greenstone monument, unknown context. Compare with j and l, RP, P.	Coe (1968), Grove (2000)
g	Early Formative San Lorenzo	Pottery with Earth & Sky imagery, household deposits, RP.	Coe and Diehl (1980)
h	Early Formative San Lorenzo	Pottery with St. Andrew's cross, household deposits, RP.	Coe and Diehl (1980)
i	Early Formative Tlapacoya	Avian Serpent vessel, unknown context.	Joralemon (1971), Grove (2000)
j	Early Formative San Lorenzo	Basalt Avian-Serpent monument. San Lorenzo Monument 30. Notice the crossed-band eye and perforator, P, RP.	Coe and Diehl (1980)
k	Early Formative San Lorenzo	Basalt Avian-Serpent monument. San Lorenzo Monument 47. Coupled with Olmec leadership, P, RP, R.	Coe and Diehl (1980) Taube (1995)
l	Early Formative Juxtlahuaca	Avian-Serpent painting with Earth & Sky imagery. From the Juxtlahuaca cave site. Notice crossed-band eye element, C.	Gay (1967) Grove (2000), Joralemon (1971)
m	Middle Formative Oxtotitlán	Avian-Serpent painting from Oxtotitlán grottos. Notice the crossed-bands juxtaposed with body, C.	Grove (1970) Joralemon (1971)
n	Middle Formative Chalcatzingo	Avian-Serpent relief carving with Earth & Sky imagery from Chalcatzingo. Carved on exposed boulder. Notice its "devouring" a human, C.	Cook De Leonard (1967), Joralemon (1971), Grove (2000)
o	Middle Formative Oxtotitlán	Avian-Serpent mural from Oxtotitlán, C.	Grove (1970, 2000)
p	Middle Formative Oxtotitlán	Avian-Serpent mural from Oxtotitlán with Earth & Sky imagery. Notice the "Bird Man," C, R.	Grove (1970, 2000)
q	Middle Formative Chalcatzingo	Chalcatzingo Monument 9 showing Sky Serpent, P, RP.	Grove (2000)
r	Middle Formative La Venta	Avian-Serpent sculpture from La Venta with Earth & Sky imagery, P, RP, R.	Joralemon (1971)

**C** cave site, grotto, or water spring; **P** portable monument; **RP** ritual paraphernalia; **R** rulership

This focus differs from previous studies of Formative iconography (e.g., Arnold 2005; Coe 1965; Covarrubias 1957; Grove 2000; Joralemon 1971, 1976; Taube 1995) that deal primarily with the decipherment of symbols, and their historical relevance, in that it emphasizes how symbols (i.e., icons, motifs) might have been used regionally, and interregionally by individuals and groups.

### Thesis question

I ask two primary questions in this thesis: *One*, how did people from the Early Formative period (1500-900 B.C.) sites of San José Mogote (the Valley of Oaxaca), Tlatilco (the Basin of Mexico), and San Lorenzo (the Gulf Coast of Mexico) (Figure 3), use pottery carved with the following motifs: “St. Andrew’s cross,” “hand-paw-wing,” “flame-eyebrow,” and “U-gum bracket” (Figure 4)? In this thesis, I collectively refer to these motifs<sup>2</sup> as “Earth & Sky” (or Earth & Sky imagery); following the argument that such depict an Avian Serpent (e.g., Cheetham 2010:171-175; Taube 1995:84).

Mesoamerican scholar Karl A. Taube (1995) first used the term “Avian Serpent” to describe the ancestor of the Feathered/Plumed Serpent. I shall also use the term Avian Serpent in this thesis, to avoid having to use the term “Feathered” Serpent, since not all of Feathered Serpents’ supposed forerunners in the Formative period had feathers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A motif is a combination of elements that depicts a more complete image (Rice 1987:248). In this case, the elements are the St. Andrew’s cross, hand-paw wing, flame-eyebrow, and U-gum brackets—considered in this paper to represent an Avian/Sky Serpent, following Cheetham (2010), and Taube (1995).

<sup>3</sup> While I argue in this thesis that the Feathered Serpent had an ancestor in the Formative period, in the form of an “Avian” Serpent, it is noted that Avian-Serpent symbolism might have also been associated with *earth* themes such as caves and the underworld, in addition, to the celestial themes of the sky, wind, and rain (Taube 1995).



*Two*, what is the association between serpents and Olmec leaders, deployed together on San Lorenzo monument 47 (Figure 2k), Laguna de los Cerros monument 19 (Figure 16), and La Venta monument 19 (Figure 2r). What can these monuments, carved in a natural, round form, tell of the Olmec identities/people revealed in stone?

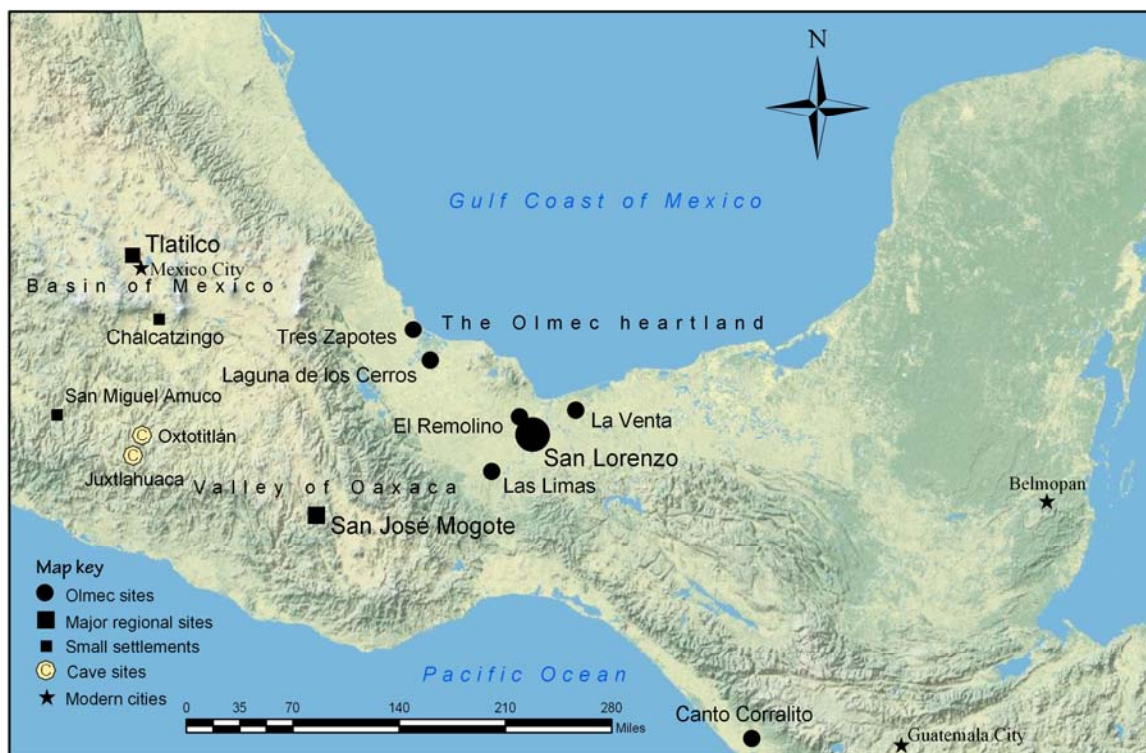


Figure 3. Map of Early and Middle Formative Mesoamerica (1500-400 B.C.) showing sites mentioned in this thesis.

The Earth & Sky imagery further correspond to one of many Early Formative themes that make up part of the “Olmec” problem (see Blomster et al. 2005; Diehl and Coe 1995; Flannery et al. 2005; Neff et al. 2006a, 2006b; Sharer et al. 2006; Sharer 2007; see also Sharer and Grove, ed. 1989) that has divided scholars over the origins of the motifs. There are two schools involved. The “mother culture” school which argues that

Earth & Sky imagery is Olmec in origin, contra to the “sister culture” school that argues that Earth & Sky imagery is the focus of a Pan-Mesoamerican art-style, that developed independently in each major region without influence; Olmec influence, that is, according to the “mother culture” school (Blomster et al. 2005).

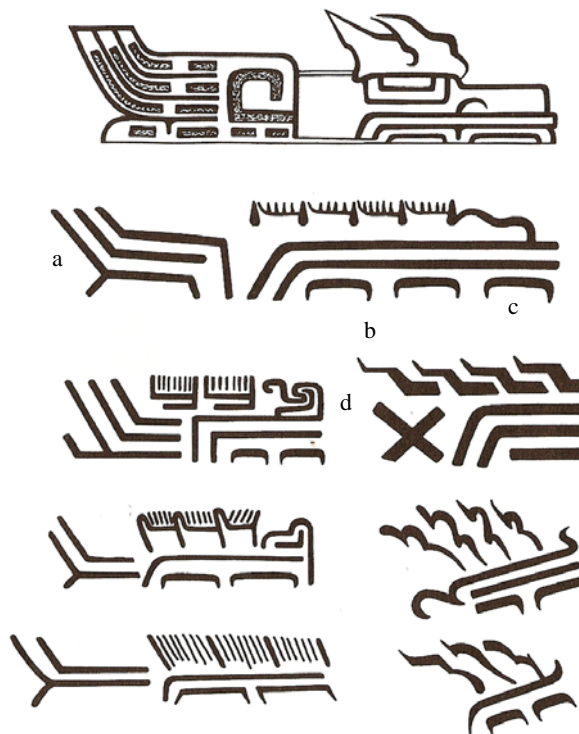


Figure 4. Avian Serpent on pottery from Tlatilco: (a) hand-paw-wing; (b) flame-eyebrow; (c) U-gum bracket; and (d) St. Andrew's cross. (After Flannery and Marcus 1994: Fig. 12.1; see also Covarrubias 1957).

In this thesis, I am not concerned with the motifs' supposed origins, but instead interested in how people deployed the motifs in different social settings. The motifs are worth looking at because during the Early Formative period, people carved them on ceramics, primarily pottery that had different purposes; used in burials and households to



mark differences among members of society (e.g., Lesure 2004). Noteworthy is the fact that the motifs do not have any known antecedents. They appear without warning in the archaeological record of the Early Formative period, and quickly disappear in Middle Formative period contexts, with the exception of some motifs appearing on monuments, rock carvings, and cave paintings, as the research here will demonstrate.

In any case, a study of the contextual information associated with pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery and stone monuments depicting serpent imagery can shed light on how people used Formative symbols, and possibly describe activities associated with the movement of carved pottery, and monuments depicting Avian-Serpent imagery.

#### Thesis organization

This thesis is organized into seven chapters.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the data, method, and approach used in this thesis.

In Chapter 3, I outline the social and political organization pertinent to Early Formative societies. Sites are introduced, their initial stages of development discussed, and the major archaeological features that define them are highlighted.

In Chapter 4, I introduce the reader to Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent. I describe how the Feathered Serpent appears in the form of a serpent (snake) with bird and/or "avian" features such as small wings, feathers, and feathered tufts. I discuss past arguments that have examined the imagery, symbolism, and supposed meaning of the Feathered Serpent. Additionally, I argue why I believe that Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent had a predecessor during the Early and Middle Formative period, in the form of an Avian Serpent, despite some views that it was absent or unimportant.

In Chapter 5, I re-visit Michael D. Coe's (1968:114) arguments regarding the supposed ancestor of the Feathered Serpent. I bring attention to Coe's early work, since I believe it was instrumental in encouraging later studies that would argue that the Avian Serpent was a significant supernatural entity among Formative societies. Moreover, I advance some ideas regarding the earliest representations of the Feathered Serpent by comparing these with relevant serpent representations, arguing that it was a prominent supernatural entity dating back to the Early Formative period.

In Chapter 6, I argue that pottery of the Early Formative period, carved with the St. Andrew's cross, the hand-paw-wing, flame-eyebrow, and U-gum brackets (Figure 2a), was used by people from the site of San José Mogote, and Tlatilco, to mark social status and identity. I argue that similar pottery from the site of San Lorenzo, had no equivalent significance, but perhaps people used it during one-time household events, or when San Lorenzo Olmec had guests over for eating and drinking.

Tentatively, I suggest that pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery may have been part of a larger collection of cult ceramics (refer to Table 2), used by a regional cult, to spread new ideas, or pre-existing beliefs, define here as religion.

In this thesis, I follow in the footsteps of Jeffrey P. Blomster (1998, 2010), and William M. Ringle and his colleagues (1998), by making use of Richard Werbner's (1977) definition of a "regional cult." According to Werbner (1977), regional cults are middle range in size, limited numbers varying within a region, but less inclusive in belief and membership than a world religion. Adding to this definition, Blomster (1998; 2010) argued that highly crafted goods, such as decorated ceramics, might be those used by a

regional cult, as it spreads religion. Working towards a more robust definition, here I define a regional cult as a network of individuals involved in the spread of religion, aided by “cult ceramics” (see Table 2) laden with messages of religion and cosmology, *earth* and *sky*. Membership is not particular to one Formative Mesoamerican culture, elite, or non-elite group, but inclusive of many cultural identities.

In Chapter 7, I conclude (1) the symbolism behind Avian-Serpent imagery is linked to *earth* and *sky*; (2) members of the Olmec hierarchy utilized serpent imagery for purposes of legitimization; and (3) Earth & Sky imagery (the St. Andrew’s cross, hand-paw-wing, flame-eyebrow, and U-gum brackets) carved on some pottery was used by people to mark social differences and identity, in different settings.

As a tentative argument, I propose that early representations of Mesoamerica’s Feathered Serpent (Figure 2) best fit into a model that characterizes their appearance on different artifact classes, and media. The Avian Serpent may have been the main symbol of a regional cult, explaining the diversity of its appearance, and use.

### Summary

This thesis comprises not only of a study of what I found to be a long-ignored topic in Mesoamerican studies, but also of a response to a call by archaeologists invested in the study of Formative period societies. As I will emphasize in the next chapter, researchers are being challenged to ask questions (see Cheetham and Blomster 2010:93; Diehl 1989:30-32; Pool 2009:250-252; Wendt 2010:119-120) that deal with how goods (i.e., pottery, greenstone, etc.), many that are decorated with motifs and symbols expressive of new ideas or pre-existing beliefs (religious values), were spread, circulated,

and emulated. I strongly believe, though, that for this to be thoroughly attempted all lines of evidence must be studied. Avian-Serpent imagery is particular, widespread, and meaningful. The data is one that deserves modeling and testing for clues of regional and interregional significance.

## CHAPTER 2

### THESIS DATA, METHOD, AND APPROACH

In this chapter, I discuss briefly the sources of data used in this thesis, the method carried out to analyze the data, and the approach used to interpret the papers foremost arguments, points, and ideas.

#### Data

The archaeological information on the pottery, stone monuments, murals, and other archaeological evidence examined in this thesis (Figure 2) derived from scholarly publications made available through university libraries and research databases. The data came primarily from research completed by archaeologists working in Mesoamerica, schooled in a mixture of anthropological theories.

#### Method

In this thesis, I use a qualitative method to help me answer the question(s) of how Avian-Serpent imagery (Earth & Sky imagery/Avian Serpent) was used to differentiate social differences, and enhance the status of elite Olmec identities. This strategy involves using different information (e.g., texts, images, personal communication, and theory) to generate hypotheses (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) regarding the questions posed. This method ideally fit the study, because the analysis did not require the cataloging of a large amount of information. Instead, the focus centers on delineating the important uses of

pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, and the interpretation of stone monuments carved with Avian-Serpent imagery.

A way in which to question the significance of the data (see Figure 2) in this thesis can be accomplished by (1) considering and examining the archaeological context where the material in question was found. In this case, in what context was pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery excavated (in association with what features and other cultural material); (2) making analogies between the data and secondary forms of data from the equivalent period. An example of this would be the comparison of incised images found on the Las Limas figure, a greenstone monument, with similar imagery manifested in cave paintings, and carved on monuments; (3) considering the data in its possible historical context. Is there evidence to suggest that Avian-Serpent imagery of the Formative period served as an example for later representations known in the Classic, or Postclassic period; and (4) the use of anthropological theory to better understand the use and meaning of the data. In the case of this paper, how can previous arguments, and/or interpretations with respect to the use of objects and symbolism, help to build and support a testable argument, with regard to the thesis questions posed?

### Approach

In this thesis, I follow the idea that the Earth & Sky imagery, and/or Avian Serpent, is not merely representational of a supernatural creature, with attached celestial/religious meaning, but also a symbol used in the construction of culture, and ritual activity. Saburo Sugiyama (2005:12) recently used this approach, following Clifford Geertz's (1973) argument that symbols play a significant role in the performance

of ritual (or religion) within societies<sup>1</sup>. According to Sugiyama (2005), artifacts (i.e., obsidian projectiles fashioned in the shape of serpents) excavated from under the Temple of the Feathered Serpent in the Classic period site of Teotihuacan (150 B.C.-650 A.D.) were used in human sacrificial rituals that played an important role in the development and legitimization of the Teotihuacan government.

Geertz's (1973) theory of religion, which suggests how symbols might have resonated with people's beliefs, and Hodder's (1985) theory of how material objects are used to shape people's activities, are revealing when contextualizing how societies of the Early Formative period became complex. This becomes more relevant when considering the large amount of time and effort invested in creating, using, and combining material objects with motifs and symbols (see Clark 1997:216-220; Flannery 1968; Pool 2007:10-11, see also Benson, ed. 1981). For instance, Kent V. Flannery, in 1968, argued that Formative people used ornaments, implements, and symbols in profound ways to secure status. According to Flannery (1968:100, 106), exotic materials (e.g., earrings, lip-plugs, stone beads) and widely shared symbols (e.g., the St. Andrew's cross) were used by

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz (1973), while examining chiefdom societies, noted that a "system" of beliefs was somehow embedded in symbols, which encouraged people to act and behave in a certain manner. This behavior, strengthened over many generations, Geertz's (1973) believed resonated with people's beliefs and subconsciously guided their actions. For some people of "pristine" tribal cultures, Geertz (1973:89-96) argued that religion was an interest in a symbolic world that motivated them to act annually, weekly, daily, and sometimes on an hourly basis. Geertz (1973:127), however, argued that for a symbol to transmit its meaning it must occur in some physical or supernatural form; anything visible such as a cross, a crescent, or a Feathered Serpent. Only then, could symbols favor people's beliefs and further allow their subconscious minds a sense of order that guided and justified their ritual practices (Geertz 1973). In a familiar tone regarding the use of artifacts, Ian Hodder (1985:5-15) argued that certain goods allowed people to settle their ideas under their own terms. In other words, people could control their environment by moving or changing everyday objects to suit their liking. Hodder argued that during the spread and use of material goods, relationships articulate in ways that allow new norms and values to take shape. In different contexts, objects and their meanings allow their owners power and control, seemingly over other's (Hodder 1985). Hodder argued that through the arrangement of the material world, the social world is produced, and reproduced over, and over again.

people of the Early Formative period to distinguish their identities and newly created ranks. David Grove and Susan Gillespie (1992:15) also found Geertz's definition of religion (a symbolic system that motivates people and helps them understand the general order of their world) helpful in interpreting cultural material of the Early Formative period and their attached symbolism. According to Grove and Gillespie (1992), to have knowledge of the link between human perception and behavior allows for a better understanding of the changes that occur in society, over time. They note that change(s) in how people interpret their environment, and its effect on future human behaviors, are an integral part of how cultures evolve (e.g., Marcus and Flannery 1996).

The argument that symbolically loaded objects of the Formative period are important in the legitimization of individual rank and status (Flannery 1968), and the construction of social institutions (Grove and Gillespie 1992; Sugiyama 2005) is useful in this thesis, because the argument moves away from the generalized idea that motifs, in this case, the "St. Andrew's cross," "hand-paw-wing," "flame-eyebrow," and "U-gum bracket," referred to here as "Earth & Sky" (or "Earth & Sky imagery") are the result of a Pan-Mesoamerican style of art with regional variations (Grove 1989; Flannery and Marcus 1994; Marcus 1989).

The drawback with the above explanation is that it falls short of describing in length possible social mechanisms responsible for the spread of the Earth & Sky imagery. Furthermore, the notion does not emphasize the motives, nor does it consider the identities of the people who are typically part of the social process involved in the spread of symbols. This is a concern that recently drew consensus from the participating



scholars that contributed to the most recent treatment of the Olmec Problem in a special section of the journal *Ancient Mesoamerica* (Fall 2010). Blomster (2010:135) stated that the implications surrounding the widespread use of symbolism, in terms of interregional activity, are not well understood. Likewise, Wendt (2010:120) noted that while research has tracked the movement of raw materials and finished goods (see Blomster et al. 2005); studies have not adequately described the mechanism, or circumstances surrounding the movement of goods during the Early Formative period.

Additionally, pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, had uses not yet considered. Bypassed, I believe, by discussions that focus either on the symbolic nature of the motifs, local function, and arguments of where the pottery originated first.

This comes as a surprise when considering that some research with regard to decorated (Mesoamerican) ceramics (e.g., Blomster 1998, 2002, 2010; Ringle et al. 1998; Rice 1999; Boone and Smith 2003:192) suggests that pottery of this type was used in ritual activities, part of the goods carried by religious groups. Regional cults are ideal to consider with regard to interregional interaction because they integrate well into the local pre-existing structure where they work (Werbner 1977). According to Werbner (1977: IX, XI), when spreading their beliefs, regional cults surpass political and ethnic borders. In the process of interaction, regional cults encourage the flow of specialized crafted goods (ritual paraphernalia), by making, transporting, or using them.

Following the notion that Avian-Serpent imagery was symbolic, questions can now be asked with regard to how it was used, spread, emulated, and by what people or groups, and under what social, political, or economic circumstances? In this thesis, the

first part of this broader question “how it was used,” is addressed. At the same time, the findings here suggest that a regional cult may have been involved in the spread of Avian-Serpent imagery. Specifically, I argue here that the Avian Serpent was the primary supernatural, venerated and materialized by a regional cult, thereby explaining the wide appearance of Avian-Serpent imagery, as it appears (see Figure 2).

Recently, Blomster (2010) argued that a regional cult might have been part of the interregional activity that played out between the site of San Lorenzo on the Gulf Coast and other important sites in the Oaxaca region. According to Blomster (2010:146), because San Lorenzo was more politically organized than its contemporaneous neighbors were, it was in a position where it had an obligation to advance religion, and cosmology via skillfully crafted goods, of which would have included carved pottery and its associated symbolism. This, though, is not the first time that the idea of a religious/regional cult has been proposed. More than a decade ago, Blomster (1998:323) argued that a regional cult might have been responsible for the spread of hollow-baby figurines, throughout Mesoamerica during the Early Formative period. Blomster (1998) argued that hollow-babies figurines, made of fine-white clays formed part of a larger repertoire of iconic ritual paraphernalia (i.e., obsidian blades, stingray spines), used, and sought, by emerging elites with foreign ties (e.g., Flannery 1968).

New research, of course, is beginning to shed light on the people and groups involved in the sharing of goods, ideas, and religion, during the Early Formative period. With regard to regional cults of the Early Formative (Blomster 1998, 2010), I argue in this thesis that such a mechanism may have been responsible for the wide appearance of

Avian Serpent imagery on different artifact classes; the Avian Serpent, likely venerated by a wide audience for its cosmological meaning, of *earth* and *sky*. This argument, along with other lines of evidence, could provide a glimpse of interregional interaction during the Early Formative period, and will be strengthened in the later chapters.

Prior, though, to ending this chapter, I would like to make a few points. Models outlining interregional interaction, and the spread of symbols, vary in their approach. Still, all aim towards a better understanding of the people and places that characterized Mesoamerica during the Early Formative period. With regard to *emulation*, I agree with the argument that symbols (motifs and iconography) can be adopted by “less sophisticated” groups, which choose to imitate the style of their more superior influences (Flannery 1968). Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, proponents of the emulation model, have since modified Flannery’s 1968 argument to include a more balanced exchange between Early Formative groups. In a revised model, Flannery and Marcus (1994:389) place more emphasis on widely exchanged items, such as jade and magnetite (used to make mirrors), arguing these to have served as a conduit for new ideas. Thereby, the two suggest an equal flow of influence between Oaxacan and Gulf Coast cultures. *Migration*, can also account for the spread of symbols, particularly when a foreign group is successful in establishing an enclave/colony, far from their homeland. David Cheetham (2010) recently made a strong case for the presence of an Olmec enclave, at Canto Corralito, a site on the Pacific Coast of Chiapas, 450 km far from Olmec San Lorenzo, on the Gulf Coast. By identifying unique distinctions in form, and symbolism, in carved pottery, and figurines, from San Lorenzo and Canto Corralito,

Cheetham provided good evidence that Canto Corralito at one time was home to a sufficient number of Olmec settlers that brought their pottery.

### Summary

In this thesis, I follow two major points of reasoning. One, Avian-Serpent imagery was a symbol referent to cosmological meanings of *earth* and *sky*, used by Early Formative people and groups to substantiate their beliefs (religion), and legitimize their status, and identity. Two, Avian-Serpent imagery was part of a religious network, a regional cult tied to the spread and veneration of this imagery and its cosmology.

Following the above reasoning allows the discussion from here on after to consider the Avian Serpent in contexts where questions posed can focus on the cultural activities and details regarding the identities of people possibly tied to the spread of Avian-Serpent imagery during the Early Formative period. This differs from past studies in that it deals primarily with how the Avian Serpent, as a symbol, was used regionally and interregionally, by people; as opposed to a study of its integrated symbolism. This is not a study of the iconography of the Avian Serpent. This is a study of how Avian-Serpent imagery resonated with people and groups while transmitting, and legitimizing their place in society, since the Early Formative.

### CHAPTER 3

#### SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN EARLY FORMATIVE MESOAMERICA<sup>1</sup>

The discussion in this thesis shall focus on the area of Mesoamerica (Figure 1) prior to the arrival of Spanish conquistadores on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, sometime around 1519—a region now encompassing the modern countries of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

The Prehistory of Mesoamerica is divided into three primary periods, the Formative period (1500-400 B.C.), the Classic period (300 B.C.-900 A.D.), and the Postclassic period (900-1521 A.D.). There is further an “Archaic period,” (8000-2000 B.C.) predating the Formative period, however, it was not until after 1500 B.C. that archaeologists studying the Formative period begin to see strong evidence of complex societies in the archaeological record.

Geographically speaking, Mesoamerica stands divided by large mountains, the land is home to multiple environments, i.e., lowlands, highlands, valleys, dry deserts, and tropical forests. Within these sub-territories lie fresh water lakes, rivers, and streams. Moreover, the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf Coast of Mexico, and the Caribbean seas enclose Mesoamerica. This unique setting insured interaction between the regions’ native

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<sup>1</sup> Readers already familiar with the social and political organization of Early Formative Mesoamerica may choose to bypass this chapter, and move onward to Chapter 4.

populations and the vast cultural and geographic diversity distinguishes Mesoamerica from other cradles of civilization.<sup>2</sup>

In the following paragraphs, I introduce the major sites of Mesoamerica's Early Formative period (1400-900 B.C.) (Figure 3) discussed in this thesis; emphasized since they are the first known in Mesoamerica to have evidence of a stratified/complex culture, home to some of the earliest representations of the Feathered Serpent. Chalcatzingo and La Venta, sites that did not reach their peak until the Middle Formative period, but still mentioned in this thesis, are discussed also.

#### San Lorenzo and the Olmec heartland

The site of San Lorenzo and its immediate hinterland grew to an estimated 500 hectares (ha) (Cyphers 1996), and during its height, the Gulf center stood at the forefront of a multiple-tiered hierarchy that included villages, craft workshops, and ritual locations (Symonds et al. 2002). John E. Clark (1997) has argued that on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, San Lorenzo was the "capital city" of the Olmec heartland, and that within the Gulf Coast, *secondary* centers like La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, Las Limas, and Tres Zapotes, comprised the Olmec culture.

Olmec culture further corresponds to some distinctive Olmec-style elements described as (1) chubby faces with broad lips (some in a downturned posture), evident on monuments from the Gulf Coast, sculpted in round fashion; (2) hollow-baby figurines, again with chubby faces, and baby-like appearances; and (3) motifs like the St. Andrew's

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<sup>2</sup> Researchers know of only six world "cradles of civilization." Mesoamerica, the Andean area, the Nile Valley, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and the Hwang-ho Valley in North China. These comprised of areas where civilization developed independently of outside influence (Evans 2004:22).

cross, hand-paw-wing, flame-eyebrow, and U-gum bracket that appear on ceramics and basalt monuments. It is important to note, however, that not all portable Olmec-style objects found in places outside of the Gulf Coast should be assumed to have been made in the Olmec heartland, but rather might have been regional variations of the Olmec style (Blomster 2010:136).

Archaeological evidence demonstrates that La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, Las Limas, and Tres Zapotes all had earth-mound architecture, long periods of occupation, and impressive three-dimensional monuments sculpted in round fashion. At the same time, while these sites may have been under the control of elite Olmec from San Lorenzo, the sites had their own sovereignty. Recent research shows that Tres Zapotes was a Gulf Coast site with its own set of unique cultural traits (Pool et al. 2010), in addition to those considered as Olmec. Carl J. Wendt (2010) has also argued that many of the artifacts (i.e., Calzadas Carved pottery and hollow white-ware figurines) that researchers consider Olmec are not common at most Olmec sites.

Alternatively, San Lorenzo was by far more complex in scope than other contemporaneous sites outside the Olmec heartland.<sup>3</sup> This is reflected in the substantial number of basalt stone monuments that elite San Lorenzo Olmec were able to procure, transport (from 40 miles away in the Tuxtla Mountains), and craft in a style and liking

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<sup>3</sup> A list of evidences that stack San Lorenzo Olmec and sites of the Gulf Coast region above their contemporaneous neighbors of Central Mexico are described in detail in the work of Richard A. Diehl and Michael D. Coe (Diehl and Coe 1995:23). For a thoughtful discussion on Olmec social/political complexity, Olmec achievements, and the contributions of regions outside of the Olmec heartland see Christopher Pool's latest book (Pool 2007). From an economic/materialist perspective, see Robert Rosenswig's new book (Rosenswig 2010). A more technical discussion, but important contribution to Early Formative studies has been published in a special Olmec section of the Cambridge journal *Ancient Mesoamerica* (2010).

that fit their beliefs and political structure. The most famous of the monuments are the colossal Olmec heads (Figure 5), of which seventeen have been found so far (eleven of them found in San Lorenzo), believed by most Formative scholars to depict the facial profiles of Olmec rulers (Clark 1997:213; Cyphers 1996:64; Pool 2007:10).

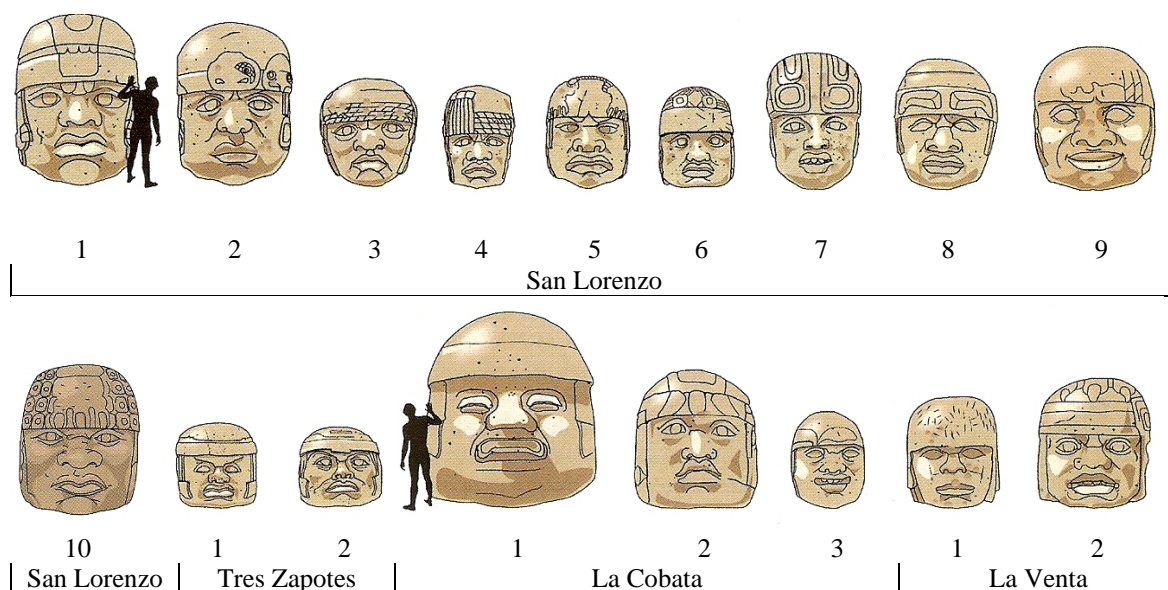


Figure 5. Olmec colossal heads and their distribution by site (after Diehl 2004: fig. 72).

Basalt stone was further used in San Lorenzo's "Red Palace," where it was sculpted in the form of columns, drains, and household furnishings (Cyphers 1996). According to Ann Cyphers (1996:65-66), only wealthy San Lorenzo rulers could afford to use basalt, a scarce resource in the area, in their homes. A re-examination of San Lorenzo's Group D ridge, where Michael Coe and Richard Diehl found basalt stone monuments (i.e., San Lorenzo monument 47 [Figure 15]) in the late 1960s, reveals that the area served as a monument workshop, evident by the discovery of additional unfinished monuments, tools, and stone debitage (waste).



Speaking of Olmec religion, a consensus does exist among scholars that San Lorenzo Olmec had strong beliefs towards a layered world. A cosmology defined by *underworld*, earth, and sky elements, that was expressed on different media (i.e., pottery, greenstone, basalt stone), and represented by supernatural entities made up of features emulated from jaguars, snakes, and crocodiles (Arnold 2005; Coe 1965; Grove 2000; Joralemon 1971, 1976; Taube 1995, 2004).

This rationale forms the basis of thought on San Lorenzo Olmec either having venerated the supernatural through some form of ritual, and/or of them having held these animals in high regard as deities (or gods). In many cases, elite Olmec identified with the supernatural creatures as a way to legitimize their authority (e.g., Coe 1972; Clark 1997:216-224; Pool 2007:112), a point discussed further in this thesis.

Archaeological evidence so far demonstrate that Olmec society in San Lorenzo was stratified; upper hierarchical echelons would have included elite lineages (i.e., rulers), religious leaders (e.g., Clark 1997:217), perhaps a military, and commoners would have included artisans, skilled labor, teachers, people that practiced medicine, and the general population. In terms of food and diet, the Olmec consumed a number of wild and domesticated plants (i.e., beans, squash, corn, chili, root crops, avocado) (Pool 2007:73-78; VanDerwarker 2006:87-88), and meat as well (i.e., deer, peccary, dog, fish, reptiles, birds, small mammals) (Pool 2007:73-78; VanDerwarker 2006:87-88).

New research has also provided concrete evidence that San Lorenzo had a particular influence on sites outside of the Olmec heartland. One site, Canto Corralito, is arguably an Olmec enclave (Cheetham 2010), based on the number of Olmec-style

pottery and figurines that have been recovered there. Also, the detection of provincial data that traces the production of some carved pottery from the Basin of Mexico, and the Valley of Oaxaca, to San Lorenzo (Blomster et al. 2005), is evidence that elite Olmec had some say in the transport of symbolically charged pottery.

La Venta, the other known Olmec center of the Gulf Coast of Mexico, is not considered to have been equal in size and political complexity to San Lorenzo (Clark 1997:217), however, it did have an Early Formative component, evident by the settlement data from San Andres and Isla Alor (Pool 2007:127). Pool (2007:128) has also noticed that many of the basalt stone monuments from La Venta are similar to the colossal heads and thrones of San Lorenzo, and, therefore, suspects that La Venta quickly became a regional capital after the demise of San Lorenzo.

At its height, La Venta had grown to an estimated 200 ha. Its ceremonial complex consisted of specialized centers, administrative structures, small precincts, and domestic residences (González Lauck 1996). Sometime during its prime, La Venta elite participated in a program that imported material goods such as basalt stone, jade, obsidian, and greenstones of all types to the center of their city. These wealth objects were placed at the core of Complex A. In one well-known example, a tribute pit measuring 15 by 19 m was filled with one-thousand tons of serpentine block laid out in a manner that depicted a supernatural cosmogram, which was later permanently covered with fine sands and clays of different color. Recently, Pool (2007) entertained the idea that the assembly and elaborations of Complex A were not only labor intensive, but one-

time events that were intended to bring local and regional leaders together for a show that would have demonstrated the royalty, and strength that was the La Venta polity.

### San José Mogote and the Valley of Oaxaca

At its height, the site of San José Mogote, in the Valley of Oaxaca, is estimated to have grown to 70 to 79 ha in size with a population roughly the size of about 700 to 1,000 people (Pool 2007:198; Marcus 1989:165). Similar to San Lorenzo, San José Mogote had an immediate hinterland with 25 to 30 sites—predominantly small villages of 3 ha or less (Marcus 1989:165). According to Joyce Marcus (1989:168), San José Mogote was divided into at least four residential wards that showed, to some degree, differences in status and occupation. Houses 16 and 17 of Area “B” of the site, for example, worked more greenstone (“jade”) than any other group of households. Other houses of Area B, Marcus points out, could have served as workshops where chert-rock was heated and worked, evident by the small hearths and larger than average fire-pits found, and the large amounts of chert bifaces and debitage found scattered throughout the site. Houses of Area B also produced an assortment of basketry making tools such as bone needles of various sizes, and in some houses people may have participated in rituals such as auto-sacrifice, suggested by the stingray spines, fish spines, turtle drums, and ceramic masks recovered.

In contrast to houses of Area B, different forms of craft activity also distinguished houses of Area A. One particular type of debitage material, magnetite, and related iron ores, used to manufacture mirrors, was found in subsurface collections in high quantities (Marcus 1989:185). According to Kent Flannery (1968:89, 101-102), magnetite mirrors

were exported by Oaxacan artisans to sites across Early Formative Mesoamerica, including San Lorenzo, in exchange for exotic raw materials such as turtle drums and shell from the Gulf Coast. Leaders of most major Early Formative sites, Flannery (1968) argued, sought after these types of exotic goods, as they began to recognize the importance of ritual materials to legitimize their new ranks in the sphere of emerging social complexity.

### Tlatilco and the Basin of Mexico

At its height, the site of Tlatilco grew to an estimated 50 ha, and was probably one of four major villages (others are Tlapacoya, Coapexco, and perhaps Cuicuilco) that combined to form part of a four-tier hierarchy in the Basin of Mexico (Tolstoy 1989:87). Archaeological evidence (i.e., bell-shaped storage pits, trash pits, clay platforms, and terraces) suggest that Tlatilco was indeed a regional center of importance (Niederberger 2000:173). Despite the fact that it was a considerable site, Tlatilco is better known for its burials, of which an estimated 500 have been documented (Pool 2007:207). During the 1930s and 40s, Tlatilco was frequently looted by “pot hunters,” and Mexico’s top art intellectuals, such as Miguel Covarrubias and Diego Rivera, frequently visited Tlatilco to buy ancient Mexican artifacts from brick makers, that inspired their paintings and drawings, and filled their impressive antiquities’ collections.

The brickyard, only twenty minutes by automobile from the heart of Mexico City, has a surprisingly fitting Indian name: *Tlatilco*, meaning “Where Things are Hidden” (from the Nahuatl *tlatia*, “to hide”), and going to Tlatilco with a pocket full of cash and returning with an archeological puzzle or artistic masterpiece became a weekly habit [Miguel Covarrubias 1957:17].

Tlatilco flourished during the Ayotla phase (ca. 1450-1150 B.C.), and social ranking is evident in the quality and quantity of “offerings” interred in burials, and how people were buried, such as their body positioning and depth (Tolstoy 1989:102, 109). The most prevalent indicator of high status, according to an examination of the burials by Paul Tolstoy (1989:109), are iron-ore mirrors of different sizes, necklaces, greenstones or “jade,” and crafted shell.

Another line of evidence that Tolstoy believes may have marked social differences among the people of Tlatilco, but not necessarily of high status, is the amount of pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery. The carved pottery includes cylindrical vessels, flat-based bowls, *tecomates*, “milk bottles” with tall necks, joined also by an assortment of small cylindrical stamps and figurines. The ceramics are from Tlatilco’s Early Phase I and II, more or less between 1400 and 1000 B.C. Paul Tolstoy (1989) accounted for this pottery from excavation reports, and found that 37 of the 375 burials he examined had at least one vessel with the Earth & Sky imagery.

Pottery from Tlatilco carved with the Earth & Sky imagery is a primary focus of this thesis, discussed more in-depth in Chapter 6.

Eighty miles southeast of Tlatilco, in the southern-most part of the Basin of Mexico, the site of Chalcatzingo (Figure 6, see also Figure 3) was established (Grove 1989:122). The site was constructed on earthen terraces, on the base of two mountain ranges, the *Cerro Chalcatzingo* and the *Cerro Delgado*.

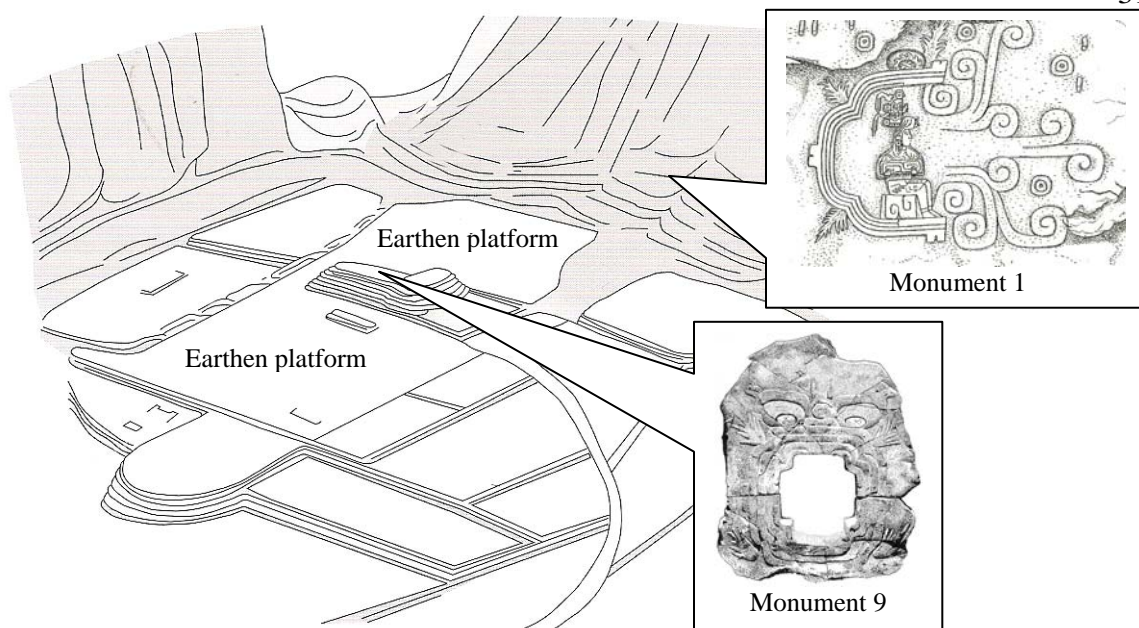


Figure 6. Chalcatzingo's Major Monument Zone showing locations of monuments discussed in this thesis (after Diehl 2004, fig. 124, photo-shopped to fit text).

During the Amate phase (ca. 1400-1150 B.C.), Chalcatzingo was an estimated 4 to 6 ha in size (Hirth 1987:350). During this period, a series of earthen platforms lined with stone were constructed. According to David Grove (1989:124-127), this was Chalcatzingo's major public structure, and areas located south of the platforms, the sites' public areas. It was not until the Barranca (ca. 1150-800 B.C.) and Cantera (ca. 800-450 B.C.) phases that Chalcatzingo reached 43 ha in size, and had a settlement hierarchy of villages and hamlets—the largest center in Central Mexico at the time (Hirth 1987). The rulers of Chalcatzingo built over the earlier constructed platforms, a 70-meter long ceremonial stage (Grove 1989:128), topped with stone monuments.

During the Cantera phase (Middle Formative period), Chalcatzingo's 30+ stone monuments were sanctioned (Grove 1989:130-138). In this thesis, attention will only be

given to monuments 1, 9, and 5, and in this section only a brief introduction to Chalcatzingo's Major Monument Zone (MMZ) is discussed.

Chalcatzingo's MMZ consisted of royal structures, mounds, and sunken courts (Grove 1999). It was in the MMZ that 31 of Chalcatzingo's known monuments were found. Grove (2000:278) has argued that many of the carvings (including monument 1 and 9) found on the southern mountain walls convey mythical religious themes and identified supernatural entities. In contrast, he believes that the monuments found in the northern portion of the site, in the public areas, portrayed elite identities, and depicted imagery that was associated with rulership. Furthermore, Grove (2000:277) is convinced that many of Chalcatzingo's monuments display Olmec-style elements, common only to monuments found at Chalcatzingo, and the Olmec site of La Venta.

Indeed, although Chalcatzingo is situated more than 250 mountainous miles west of the Olmec center, there are specific iconographic motifs that occur on monuments only at Chalcatzingo and La Venta (Grove 1989), suggesting that significant interaction took place between the two centers, yet the form of that interaction remains to be determined [David C. Grove 2000:277].

A key argument of Grove (2000:279) is the idea that many of the "earth monsters," considered by some scholars to appear carved on Chalcatzingo's monuments, are, in fact, representations of a serpent supernatural (or *Sky Serpent*). Of the five examples from Chalcatzingo that Grove believes are Sky Serpents, I believe most, if not all, can be considered as early representations of the Feathered Serpent.

In this thesis (Chapter 4), I will discuss the Sky Serpents depicted on monument 1, 9, and briefly refer to monument 5 (see Figure 2n).

### Guerrero's cave paintings

In this thesis, the Oxtotitlán and Juxtlahuaca caves are relevant and important because they are sites where the earliest Feathered Serpents appear painted on rock. The village of San Miguel is also briefly mentioned, since it is the location where the San Miguel Amuco Stela, a monument discussed in Chapter 4, was found.

The Oxtotitlán cave site is located on a hillside, one mile east of the village of Acatlán (Grove 1970). David Grove (1970:6), who examined the location, believes the cave could have served as a shrine to water and fertility.

In Grove's published study, the Oxtotitlán paintings are broken up into three primary groups, the central group paintings, the north group paintings, and the south group paintings. The cave paintings manifest images of flowers, owls, Feathered Serpents, *cipactli*-type creatures, zoomorphed human profiles, and painting I-C (Figure 12) of an "angered" jaguar being born from the groin area of a male persona that appears in the Olmec style (Grove 1970:16). This male and his supernatural counterpart will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Moreover, only mural 1 (Figure 2p), from the central group, and painting 1-D (Figure 2o) from the south group will be mentioned in this thesis. It is also important to note that many of the Oxtotitlán paintings manifest many of the elements and motifs considered Olmec in style.

The Juxtlahuaca cave is located about 20 miles south of the Oxtotitlán cave. The cave has been known since the 1920s; however, it was first explored and reported on by Princeton's art historian Gilbert Griffin and Italian businessperson Carlo Gay in 1966. In Gay's (1967) published account, he describes the "Hall of the Dead," a crevice littered



with the remains (skeletons) of long-deceased people. There, both men encountered the painting of a male figure, which they believed was an Olmec ruler (e.g., Coe 2005; Diehl 2004). Farther down the cave, in the “Hall of the Serpent,” Gay describes a bright red serpent (Figure 7 *top*), squaring off with what seems to be a “baby” jaguar (Figure 7 *bottom*) (e.g., Coe 1968:100). Gay (1967:34) and Coe (1968:100) believe the serpent is the Plumed/Feathered Serpent, and according to Grove (1970:30-34), the cave paintings may be related to mythical stories (e.g., Pool 2007:227), further corresponding to beliefs shared by people of the Early and Middle Formative period.

According to Christopher A. Pool (2007:227), it is difficult to ascertain the ages of the Guerrero cave paintings. However, there is a consensus that the paintings appear in the Olmec style, and therefore, date no later than the Middle Formative period (Grove 1970:32; Pool 2008:227), but possibly, the Juxtlahuaca painting may date to the Early Formative period (Coe 1968; Diehl 2004:170).

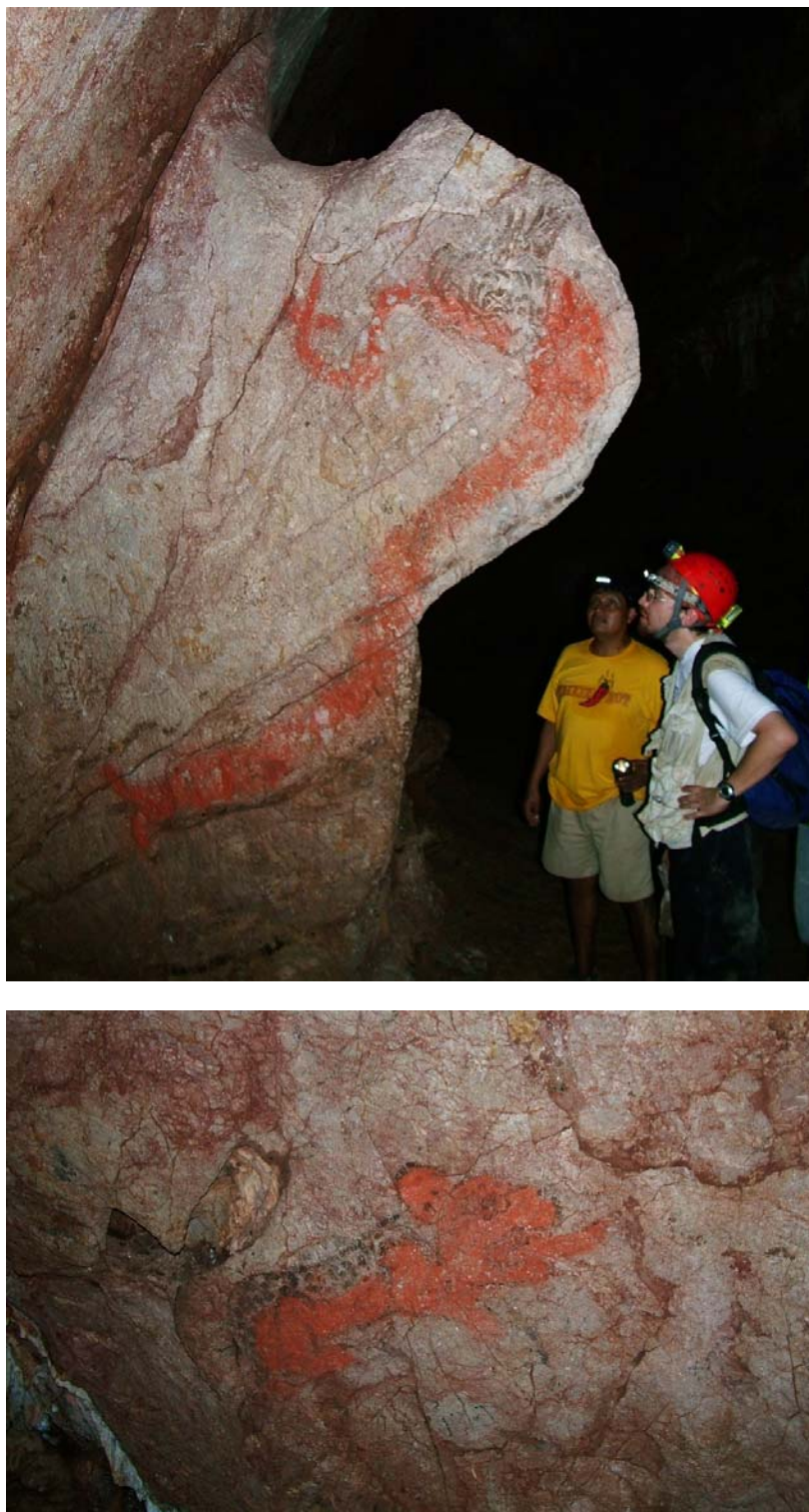


Figure 7. The Avian Serpent and the jaguar of Juxtlahuaca. *Top* The Avian Serpent with tri-forked tongue, crossed-band eye, flame-eyebrows, and paw-wing. *Bottom* Jaguar with black pelts (Photographs by © Matt Lachniet).

### Summary

In this chapter, I recognized the social and political organization of Early Formative period sites discussed in this thesis. It is safe to say that San Lorenzo Olmec society was made up of an elite group that was able to mobilize enough labor to complete large tasks. They did this in a large area with the support of many site types, with San Lorenzo standing as their capital city. The Olmec, however, were not alone in their achievements. In the Valley of Oaxaca complex societies also existed. The site of San José Mogote is one of these, where there is evidence of an elite hierarchy and specialized workgroups that manufactured goods such as iron-ore mirrors, which were exported throughout Mesoamerica. On the other hand, from the site of Tlatilco in the Basin of Mexico, it is understood from the investigation of burials that people there were involved in producing some of the finest pottery of the Early Formative period, and this ware was further associated with status and identity. Ritual locations also existed throughout Mesoamerica, and we gather from the Oxtotitlán and Juxtlahuaca cave sites that Early Formative Mesoamericans visited these sacred locales to pay homage to their ancestors and venerate the supernatural.

As I move forward with the main topic of this thesis (the Avian Serpent), it is important to realize that Early Formative Mesoamerica was complex not only because of the achievements of one society over another, but rather because of the interaction that took place between the different groups of the regions; allowing each group, regardless of their political or economic might, to contribute their advancements, and to equally influence one another.

## CHAPTER 4

### MESOAMERICA'S FEATHERED SERPENT

In the opinion of some scholars, the Feathered Serpent (Figure 8) was one of the most revered supernatural entities of Mesoamerica (see Nicholson 2000:145; Sugiyama 2000:117). Images of this supernatural were carved of hard stone to manifest the natural features of both a bird and a serpent (snake).

In Teotihuacan for example, a Classic period (150 B.C.-600 A.D.) site in Central Mexico, artisans integrated basalt Feathered-Serpent heads into the façade of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. Here, the Feathered Serpent manifests its own journey through the underworld, as the creator of human life (Sugiyama 2005).

In the Epiclassic period (700-1100 A.D.) sites of Tula and Chichen Itza, the Feathered Serpent was carved on basalt balustrades, functioning as roof supports. In this case, the circular/square columns signified the sacred spaces of the cosmo world (the earth and sky) where common people seemingly dwelled (Kubler 1982).

In Aztec society (1300-1521 A.D.), Feathered Serpents, retained much of the same meaning. Henry Nicholson (2000) took notice of a handful of Feathered-Serpent carvings that adorned the surfaces of elite Aztec architecture. According to Susan G. Gillespie (1989:176), Aztec Feathered Serpents must have served as a boundary marker, since the carvings marked the edges of base reliefs, stairway entrances, and temple doorways, themes that again, manifested “sacred” levels of space.

Recent research has further demonstrated that the Feathered Serpent was associated with human sacrifice and warfare (Sugiyama 2000:118-130, 2005), religious cults (Ringle et al. 1998; Ringle 2004), and the legitimization of elite Mesoamerican identities (Gillespie 2008; Nicholson 2000; Ringle 2004; Sugiyama 2005). As Gillespie (2008:372) argued, the Feathered Serpent was a powerful image symbolizing cosmology, fertility, and authority (translated from Spanish text), used by certain people of Mesoamerica to legitimate their identities (Gillespie 2008:372).

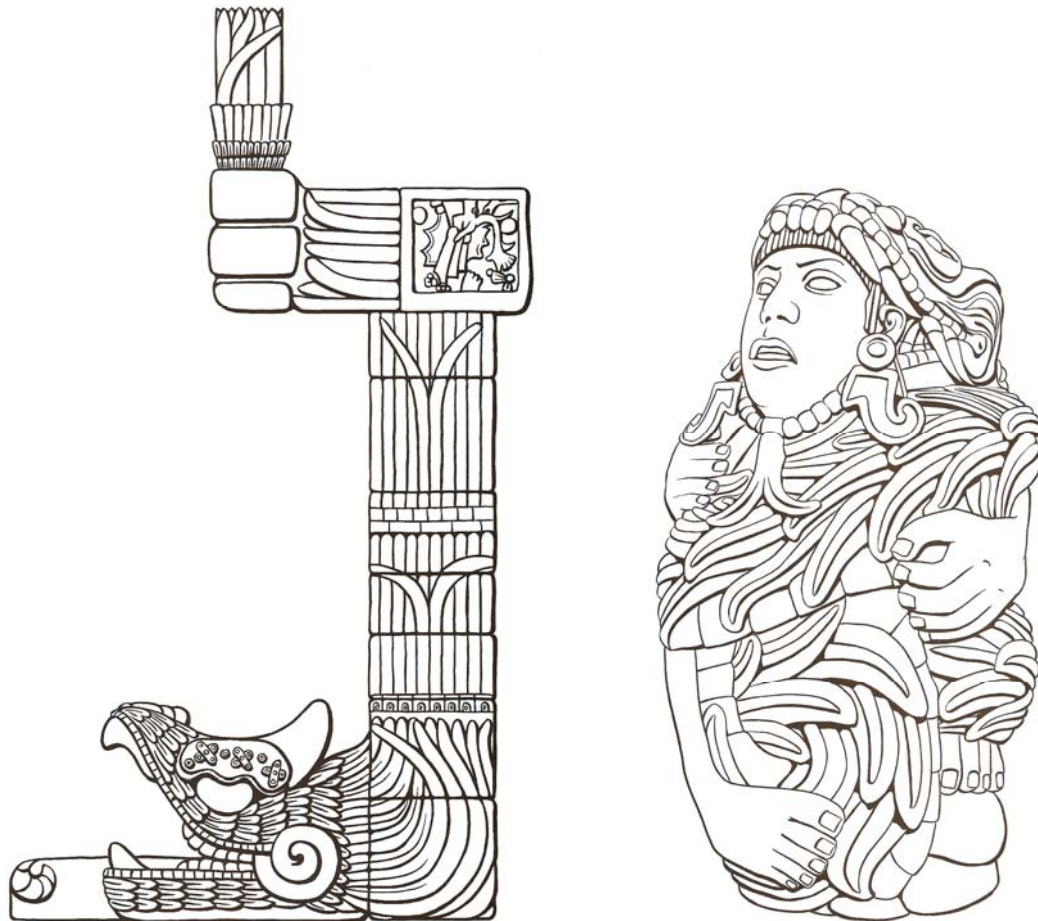


Figure 8. The Feathered Serpent. *Left* stone balustrade from the site of Chichen Itza. *Right* Aztec circular stone monument (from Turner 2005).

### Feathered Serpent ancestry

Serpents with avian-like features (small wings, feathers, and tufts) can be traced to the beginning of complex society in the New World. Archaeological evidence of the Early Formative period (1400-900 B.C.) reveals that people materialized the Avian Serpent in a variety of styles (Figure 2), of which it appeared thinly incised, widely carved, and painted on different media including basalt stone, greenstone, bedrock, and pottery. The different representations, however, remained consistent through time in their appearance of a serpent with avian-like features.

Some Avian Serpents also appeared with a crossed band (the St. Andrew's cross) the symbol of the Feathered Serpent (Coe 1968:114), either on their bodies or eye sockets (Figures 2a, 2f, 2i, 2j, 2l, 2m, 2n, 2p, 2q). Appearance and body wise, Avian Serpent had an elongated body sometimes shown in a surreal "flying" posture (Figures 2j, 2l, 2m, 2n, 2o, 2r). Sometimes, Avian Serpent was shown with a small "wing," known as a "hand-paw-wing," or "paw-wing" (Figures 2c, 2e, 2k, 2l, 2n, and 2r) affixed to its head/neck area (Taube 1995:83). Avian Serpent does not have limbs (hands or feet), but it is noted, that in some cases it can be seen with shark-like teeth (Figures 2m, 2n, 2o).

It is also arguable that on different ceramic forms (i.e., bowls, dishes, incense burners) of the Early Formative period (1400-900 B.C.), Avian Serpent can be witnessed as a cluster of motifs known as "flame/ing-eye-brows," "hand-paw-wings," and "U-gum brackets" (see Figure 4). According to David Cheetham (2010:172), on carved pottery, Avian Serpent can be shown in a horizontal or diagonal pose that may suggest movement or flight. At times, these motifs may appear vague and difficult to make out (e.g.,

Cheetham 2010:171-175) because the size and style of the decorative lines always vary. An argument, however, by Taube (1995:84) is convincing that the motifs depict a supernatural serpent, a precursor of later Feathered Serpents, an “Avian-Serpent,” as it has, and will be considered in this thesis. In this case, the ceramics may form part of a social code (e.g., Blomster 2010:137), as I will argue in this paper.

Considering that the Avian/Feathered Serpent is associated with an influx of themes, one should ask, why such a serpent of its kind elicit such a positive/revered response from its creators and admirers (Gillespie 2008:371). As opposed to a negative, and/or polluted response, possibly a dangerous one, typical when there is a conjuncture between two impossible components (Douglas 1984). On the other hand, in this case, when the animal is the *coatl* (snake), the most dangerous of all creatures primordially built in the human mind (Mundkur 1976:429; see also Buss 2008:92-97).

To answer such a question, Susan Gillespie (2008:371) argued that such a *hors catégorie* of two completely different animals (bird and snake) conceptualized a meeting between the levels of the cosmos, earth, and sky. This, she argued, was the natural that transformed into the supernatural, and any composition of a Bird-Serpent or Serpent-Bird acted as a “mediator” between the earth-underworld and everything above it. Feathered Serpents served as a portal for people of the common middle-world (Gillespie 2008:372), allowing them a presence among the layered realms of the cosmo world, perhaps even the universal realms of the galaxy, the stars and the planet Venus (Sáenz 1962).

A closer look at Formative “Feathered”/Avian Serpents

Early and Middle Formative representations of the Feathered Serpent (Figure 2) have received the least amount of attention compared to those of later periods. Only Coe (1968), Joralemon (1971, 1976), Taube (1995), and a recent study by Susan Gillespie (2008) have examined the antiquity, imagery, and supposed continuity between Avian Serpents of the Early Formative period and those of later periods (e.g., Pool 2009:247). Gillespie (2008), on the other hand, has examined the link between early serpents and rulership, arguing that Bird-serpents or Serpent-birds played a significant part in legitimizing the identities of Middle Formative rulers.

No studies, however, that I am aware of, have studied Avian Serpent’s regional and interregional use and association with elite Olmec of the Gulf Coast.<sup>1</sup> These particular themes will be discussed and examined in this thesis. However, before moving forward, it is important to discuss some arguments that have “cautioned” against such studies. Only then can the researcher and the reader appreciate the challenge involved in sorting through a topic like the one discussed in this thesis. Admittedly, interpretations with regard to the Avian/Feathered Serpent vary.

In their examination of the Avian/Feathered Serpent, Henry Nicholson (2000:146), Saburo Sugiyama (2000:138), and Richard A. Diehl (2004:104) did not discuss any social or political themes that might have been associated with some of the earliest known representations of the Feathered Serpent. Sugiyama (2000:138), for

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that in 1987 David C. Grove delivered a paper at the 86<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association titled “Olmec Serpents as Symbols of Rulership.” I was, however, unsuccessful in obtaining a paper copy of this discussion. I gather, though, from Susan Gillespie’s (2008) *Acknowledgements*, that Grove (1987) had a stern but appropriate challenge to the interpretation of “Feathered” Serpents of the Formative period as “Quetzalcoatl” (Coe 1968:114; Joralemon 1971:90).



example, took notice that “Feathered” Serpents from major Olmec sites did not have the proper spatial or chronological information required to explain their social and political relevance. Sugiyama (2000) was referring to the small number of Olmec sculptures (i.e., La Venta monument 19) missing contextual data. The monuments, admittedly, are without the proper documented archaeological information that helps archaeologists hypothesize function and meaning.

In the same volume, Nicholson (2000:146) also noted that “fully developed” Feathered Serpents were more common during the Classic period and not so common during the Formative period. Nicholson (2000:146) was referring to the iconographic detail of non-abstracted feathered imagery that is specific to Feathered Serpents of the Classic and Postclassic periods (Figure 8), not common in Early and Middle Formative Avian Serpents, only two recognized in this thesis (Figure 2m, and 2o).

In a similar tone, Diehl (2004:104) wrote in his book *The Olmecs*, that the few existing examples of a “Feathered” Serpent from Olmec times suggests that it was indeed a minor entity of the cast of Olmec gods. Although, Diehl (2004:75,104) did consider Olmec serpents like the one shown on La Venta monument 19, to be the ancestor of later Feathered Serpents, that played an important role in Post-Formative societies.

The above observations are not new. David Grove (1984:112, 1987), stressed similar arguments more than twenty years ago. Grove (1984:112, 1987) argued that the “Feathered” Serpents identified by Michael Coe (1968:114) and Peter David Joralemon (1971:82-83) were not feathered, and so these supernaturals could not possibly share a connection with “feathered” ones of later times, like those of the Aztec.

“Although some archaeologists feel that the pointed scales on the creature’s body identify it as “feathered serpents,” there is really little reason to believe that the ‘feathered serpent’ so important in the beliefs of many later Mesoamerican civilizations had its roots in the formative period” [David C. Grove 1984:112].

Grove (cited in Gillespie 2008:373) also argued that Coe’s argument (1968:114) and Joralemon’s (1971:90) that somehow linked early “Feathered” Serpents with *Quetzalcoatl*, the highest ranked priest(s) of Aztec lore, should not be published without well-documented research, as Coe and Joralemon had apparently done in some works. In many ways, I agree with Grove. Coe’s early arguments have at times stood out as slightly enthused and without support. However, as it will be discussed in Chapter 5, many of Coe’s arguments, often considered outdated, have stood up well against critique, and yet are still overlooked.

Recently, Susan Gillespie (2008:373) reemphasized points that were made by Grove in a 1987 symposium on the Feathered Serpent, warning researchers of the presumptions that may occur when lumping together “bird” and “serpent” iconographic representations under one term (e.g., “Avian Serpent” [Taube 1995], “Feathered Serpent,” this paper). As Gillespie (2008:373) wrote, “*no podemos concluir que todas estas representaciones de pájaro-serpiente tuvieron un equivalente de significados, funciones y contextos específicos en cada sociedad en la cual fueron producidos.*” [English translation: “we cannot conclude that all of these bird-serpent representations had equivalent specific meanings, functions, and contexts in every society in which they were produced”].

I agree with some of the points made by Gillespie (2008). As argued in this thesis, pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, found throughout Mesoamerica during the Early Formative period (Blomster et al. 2005; Cheetham 2010; Lesure 2004; Stark 2007; Taube 1995) was not used in the same manner, nor was the pottery recovered from the same context. This variability, however, differences in how people used the pottery can be attributed not to a difference in the symbolism behind the imagery, but *instead*, I believe had something to do with the universal meaning of the imagery, that allowed people to use it, as the imagery best fit their needs.

Despite the fact that Early and Middle Formative representations of Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent are few (e.g., Diehl 2004:104; Nicholson 2000:146; Sugiyama 2000:138) and some concerns that many are not "feathered," and/or non-existent (e.g., Gillespie 2008:377; Grove 1984:112), the Avian Serpent is significant because it does reveal a wide range of themes on different media. Early representations of the Feathered Serpent were carved on bedrock (Figure 2n), carved on monuments (Figure 2j, 2r, 2q), sculpted out of basalt stone (Figure 2k), painted on the interior, and exterior walls of caves (Figure 2l, 2m, 2o, 2p), incised on greenstone (Figure 2f), and carved on pottery (i.e., jars, dishes, bowls) (Figure 2a, 2b, 2c, 2g, 2h, 2i).

Since Avian-Serpent imagery occurs contemporaneously on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, the Basin of Mexico, and the Valley of Oaxaca, a number of explanations for their manifestation, are possible. Avian Serpent could have been the main image behind a shared art-style, or part of a religious network, something along the lines of a regional

cult (e.g., Coe and Diehl 1980:357), like the ones recently described by Jeffrey P.

Blomster (Blomster 1998:323-324, 2010:146).

Considering the above themes, helps paint a better picture of Early Formative culture. Carl Wendt (2010:108) recently made the point that when testing a hypothesis of interregional interaction, researchers must take into consideration the full range of material variations in a variety of contexts in both the foreign and local regions. Because early representations of Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent are stylistically varied and widespread throughout Mesoamerica, their appearance on different media can be modeled to test interaction between people and groups. As far as style is concerned, not all Avian/Feathered Serpents identified in the archaeological record are feathered (e.g., Gillespie 2008), nor should researchers expect to examine them in this way. As Prudence Rice (1987:245) points out, style, and variations in style are important to the places where they occur manifested.

Further convincing is the idea that this variation was a chiefly attribute of the Avian Serpent during the Early and Middle Formative period, where, according to Barbara Stark (2007:50), there was enough land space in Mesoamerica for abstract symbols with similar meanings to occur throughout region. It is a possibility than that the stylistic variation that set apart early representations of the Feathered Serpent might have been the key to its historical permanence in Mesoamerica. Henry Nicholson (2000:146) identified this attribute in Aztec Feathered-Serpent sculptures, "What is most remarkable about the imagery of this icon in this final pre-Hispanic period is the range and variety of its manifestations, significantly greater than in any of the earlier traditions out of which it

evolved.” Apparently, the Aztec Feathered-Serpent, an icon varied and widespread in Aztec society, had ancestry going back to the Formative period (e.g., Taube 1995), this paper argues in the forthcoming chapters.

### Summary

In this chapter, I introduced Mesoamerica’s Feathered Serpent by pointing out a number of Classic and Postclassic sites (i.e., Teotihuacan, Tula, and Chichen Itza) where Feathered Serpents appear carved in stone. It was emphasized that because of Feathered Serpent’s dual nature, that brought together bird and serpent imagery, Feathered Serpents were symbolic of space, *earth*, and *sky*.

I also pointed out that some recent studies argue that Feathered Serpent was tied to human sacrifice, religious cults, and the legitimization of rulership. Taking it one-step further, I argued that the Feathered Serpent began with the emergence of complex society in the New World but in a less abstracted form.

Despite some opposition to this idea and some ambiguity in the literature, I made the point that the earliest representations of the Feathered Serpent present a wide body of evidence throughout a broad area of Mesoamerica and that these could and should be considered for clues of regional and interregional interaction.

## CHAPTER 5

### EARLY AND MIDDLE FORMATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FEATHERED SERPENT

In this chapter, I examine the imagery and antiquity of some of the earliest Feathered-Serpent representations that date to the Early and Middle Formative period (1400-400 B.C.). In doing so, the argument that Feathered Serpents of the Classic and Postclassic period did not have ancestry in the Formative period (Grove 1984:112), is challenged, and so is the argument that “major” serpent imagery first made its appearance in the Middle Formative period (Gillespie 2008:375). To accomplish this, I call attention to the few, but identifiable representations of a serpent with avian-like features. Also by examining a number of Early and Middle Formative monuments (i.e., San Lorenzo monument 47, San Lorenzo monument 30, Laguna de los Cerros monument 19, and the Las Limas figure) that depict Avian-Serpent imagery, thereby drawing a link between Avian Serpents and elite Olmec hierarchy on the Gulf Coast.

I make two points in this chapter. One, serpents with similar and distinctive features depicted on different Formative monuments, demonstrate that the Feathered Serpent of Classic and Postclassic times had ancestry going back to Olmec times in San Lorenzo, in the form of an Avian Serpent. Two, to legitimize their identities, members of the Olmec hierarchy, used the Avian Serpent, as witnessed on Gulf Coast monuments.

The Las Limas hypothesis and the St. Andrews cross

Michael D. Coe's (1968:114) Las Limas hypothesis was the first argument to examine the antiquity of the Feathered Serpent with some success (Taube 1995:85). Coe (1968:114) theorized that the Feathered Serpent of Postclassic times was one of five "deities" depicted on the Las Limas figure (Figure 9), a greenstone monument carved in round-like fashion that dates to the Middle, perhaps Early Formative period (Diehl 2004:74). Two local boys discovered this Olmec "Rosetta Stone" in the village of Las Limas, in 1965. The village is believed to have been an independent site under the San Lorenzo "kingdom" (Clark 1997:217). Coe (1968) believed that incised on the shoulders and knees of El Señor Lima were the heads of four Postclassic gods, known as (1) Xipe Totec, the god of Springtime; (2) the Fire Serpent God; (3) Quetzalcoatl the Feathered Serpent God of Wisdom and Life; and (4) Mictlantecuathli the Death God. According to Coe (1968:114), the "were-jaguar" baby in the arms of El Señor Lima was the predecessor to the rain deity Tlaloc. These four deities, Coe (1968:114) was convinced, expressed the Aztec concept of "dualism," which paired contradicting gods: Xipe and the Feathered Serpent represented *life*, while the Fire Serpent and Mictlantecuathli represented *death*, and Tlaloc the balance of these two phenomenon.

Since making his argument regarding the Las Limas figure, Coe (1989:72) has since withdrawn a part of his interpretations, citing a degree of difficulty in attempting to trace certain deities of the Classic and Postclassic period to the Formative period (see Coe 1989:72). However, Coe's (1968:114) argument that traces the Feathered Serpent to Olmec times, despite Grove's (1984:112) argument that a supernatural entity as important

as the Feathered Serpent cannot possibly have ancestry dating that far back in history, is convincing for the following reasons.

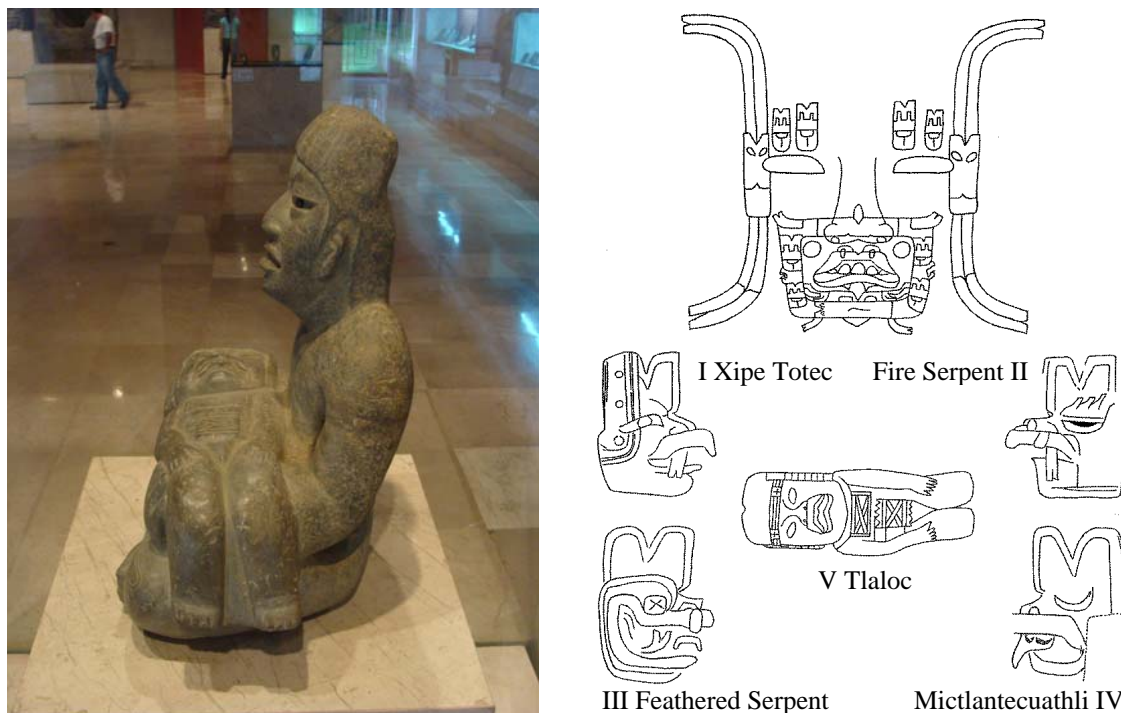


Figure 9. *Left* Las Limas figure, Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico (Photograph by Santiago Andres Garcia). *Right* Olmec deities found on the Las Limas figure (from Joralemon 1976).

The supposed Feathered-Serpent head (Figure 9-III) incised on the right knee of the Las Limas figure appears on two other monuments of the Formative period. One of these, San Lorenzo monument 30, dates to the Early Formative period and a number of Monuments from the site of Chalcatzingo date to the Middle Formative period. On San Lorenzo monument 30 (Figure 2j), for example, the serpent appears to be in a “flying” motion. It has on its body small circular-like scales, sports a crossed-band eye, has a perforator “embedded” on its saurian corpse, the top of its head in the form of a “V”



cleft, and it has a “downturned mouth.” The serpent head found carved on San Lorenzo monument 30 resembles the serpent head found carved on the Las Limas figure. Both share the V-cleft head, a crossed-band eye, and a downturned mouth. The similarities between these two profiles are almost identical, suggesting that they might be referring to the same serpent supernatural entity.

If such is the case, then the deities on the Las Limas figure, and the monument itself, also supports Diehl’s (2004:74) notion that some Middle Formative monuments may date to the Early Formative period.

In a second example, the serpent head on the Las Limas figure is also similar to the head of the serpent painted inside the Juxtlahuaca cave (Figure 2l). The Juxtlahuaca serpent has a tri-forked tongue, and like the serpent head that appears on the Las Limas figure and on San Lorenzo monument 30, it too sports a crossed-band eye. The serpent also has an elongated corpse that lines the exposed bedrock surface where it was painted, reminiscent of the serpent carved on La Venta monument 19. It also has a hand-paw-wing motif, a common trait of the Avian Serpent, on its head.

The Juxtlahuaca serpent represents just one of a few number of cave paintings (Figures 2m, 2o) that date possibly to the Early Formative period (1400-900 B.C.) (Diehl 2004:170), an argument based on their manifested art style that falls in line with the stylistic convention of the period (see Coe 1965; Joralemon 1971). The Juxtlahuaca cave was most likely a pilgrimage site where people paid tribute to past ancestry and/or the supernatural world (Diehl 2004:172).

David Grove (2000), without the mention of an Avian/Feathered Serpent, also made comparisons between the Las Limas serpent head, and a handful of Middle Formative monuments from the site of Chalcatzingo (Figure 2). Grove (2000:289) took note that the heads/profiles of the “Sky Serpents” depicted on Chalcatzingo’s monument 1, and 9 (Figure 6), resembled the supposed serpent head on the Las Limas figure. In addition, Grove (2000) argued that Chalcatzingo’s Sky Serpents were associated with caves, and for that matter *earth* and the *underworld*. These were the same themes that Coe (1968:114) argued were associated with “Feathered” Serpents of the Early Formative period. It is noteworthy to mention that Chalcatzingo’s Sky Serpents appear without feathers, unlike those of the Classic and Postclassic period. However, they do not need to be this way in order to suggest that they “evolved” into ones that were feathered, since symbols do vary in style from one period and region to another (Grove 2000:289; Rice 1987:245; Stark 2007:50). As I mentioned earlier, style and variations in style are important to the sites and areas where they occur. This is particularly true in Chalcatzingo, where Sky Serpents appear in both front and side views, depending on the shape and location of the media they are depicted on. In any case, Chalcatzingo’s Sky Serpents may have depicted a fusion of universal concepts manifested in the art style of both Gulf Coast and Central Mexican thinking (e.g., Grove 2000:277).

To support his argument that a serpent with avian-like features was a part of Formative society, Michael D. Coe (1968:114) pointed out that in Maya society the glyph for *sky* and for *snake* is an X, which he termed the “St. Andrew’s cross.” Seemingly, in the Mayan languages, sky (*kaan*) and snake (*kan*) are near-homonyms (Coe 1968:114),

and in the supposed language of the Olmec (Mixe-Zoquean), the words serpent (*tsan*) and sky (*tsap*) might have come from a word denoting serpent and sky (Taube 1995:87). Because the Olmec predated the Maya, it is possible that one of their contributions to later cultures was the name for snake. It might have been the case that when speaking of serpents, Olmec, and therefore the Maya, associated serpents with core levels of the cosmo realm: *the earth* and *the sky*—the earth aspect, denoted by the serpent, and the sky aspect, denoted by the serpent’s tree-climbing “arboreal” nature (Campbell and Lamar 1989:191,192). For that matter, Coe (1968:114) was convinced that the X by itself was a symbol, signifying serpent.



Figure 10. Fer-de-lance snake (*Bothrops asper*). Note the crossed-band patterns found on the snake’s body (from Campbell and Lamar 1989).

The correlation between crossed-bands and serpents stands out easy. Coe (1968:114) pointed to this detail when he noticed the X markings on the spines of fer-de-lance snakes while excavating in San Lorenzo. Herpetologists Jonathan Campbell and William Lamar (1989:191,192) also observed that the different colored scales on the species *Bothrops asper* (Figure 10) native to the tropical environments of Mexico and

Middle America, are embedded as triangular forms, with their wide bases opposite to the spinal line. Looking at them from above, an asper's body illustrates a series of Xs in horizontal appearance (Campbell and Lamar 1989:191,192.). Additionally, by natural design, the fer-de-lance species of snake is habitually an earth-dweller with arboreal-like abilities. Young *lean* species are particularly semi-arboreal, and in the wild, the snakes hang off the branches of bushes and trees (Campbell and Lamar 1989:191,192).

Their arboreal nature might have been a behavior of the snake that people were aware of, since it was a poisonous species, and furthermore, a feature of the fer-de-lance that some Olmec ceramists may have felt compelled to emulate in their pottery.

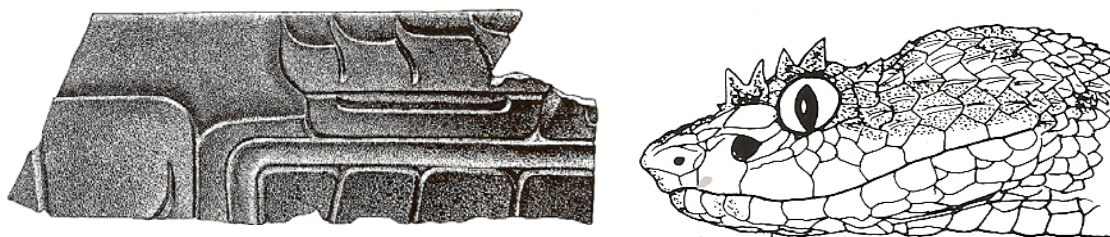


Figure 11. *Left* Calzadas Carved pottery of San Lorenzo (from Coe and Diehl 1980). *Right* *Bothriechis schlegelii*, the fer-de-lance snake (from Campbell and Lamar 1989).

A good example showing crossed-bands on the body of a serpent appears on a rare vessel from the Australian National Gallery (see Feuchtwanger 1989: Figs. 94-97). The vessel is in the form of a three-dimensional jaguar with a double-headed serpent dangling from the jaws of its mouth. The serpent's elongated body is decorated with a series of crossed-bands that, without much guesswork, mimic those observed on fer-de-lances. Speaking of the same vessel, Karl Taube (1995) also took notice of the "flame-eyebrows," above the serpent's eyelid, further comparing this element with an actual

anatomical trait found on the fer-de-lance species *Bothriechis schlegelii*. This particular species, native to the tropics of Mexico and Middle America, has a supraorbital brow ridge; four scales that project well above their eyes. This natural feature of the species *B. schlegelii* may have been duplicated on the Feuchtwanger serpent, as argued by Taube (1995), and it can be further indicated that it resembles the “flame-eyebrows” depicted on Calzadas Carved pottery of San Lorenzo (see Figure 11), and the serpent on Laguna de los Cerros monument 19 (see Figure 17).

Historian of religions, Karl Luckert, has also taken into account the supposed serpent representations of the Formative period. Luckert (1976:99-107) was convinced that the La Venta mosaic mask made of green serpentine, excavated by Phillip Drucker in the mid-1950s, was better depictive of a profile that belonged to a *cascabel* rattlesnake (*Crotalus durissus durissus*), a pitviper native to the tropics of Mexico and Middle America. This is opposed to popular ideas that it depicted a *feline* species, an “earth monster” (e.g., Grove 2000:278). Luckert (1976) compared the profile of the serpentine “mask” and the facial profile of the *cascabel*, taking note of similar traits in both. Like Coe (1968), Luckert took note that the green serpentine blocks laid out below the mask in a horizontal and diamond-like fashion appeared to depict a naming convention derived from the dorsal features of the *cascabel* pitviper. Despite a convincing argument, Luckert’s (1976) work often gets overlooked by scholars of the Formative period. While researching for this paper, he was found to be cited only two times in relevant works, briefly in Pool (2007:59), and Grove (2000:279).

### Olmec monuments of the Avian Serpent

In this section, I examine the imagery of La Venta monument 19, San Lorenzo monument 47, and Laguna de los Cerros monument 19 from the Olmec heartland. The monuments are noteworthy, linking Avian Serpents with elite male identities, carved on stela, or carved in the round, three-dimensional Olmec style (Blomster 2002:175).

A description of the imagery on La Venta monument 19 (Figure 12) opens this section, from here on referred to as “LVM-19.” The serpent carved on LVM-19 appears in its full form (head, body, and tail) and the character enclosed by its coils is obviously a person of status. The head area of the serpent consists of a cleft eyebrow, abstracted feathers visible on its head, and a hand-paw-wing that borders the head and neck area. The jaws of the serpent are open and the fangs are visible. The profile resembles the pose of a snake that is about to strike and the rattles and elongated body is observable with relative ease. In his first study, Joralemon (1971:82) placed LVM-19 in the God VII category—a “serpent deity” with avian-like features, “the Feathered Serpent.” The persona shown accompanying the serpent is masculine (male) and possibly the same character (name?) depicted on Chalcatzingo’s monument 12 “El Volador” (see Grove 1987b:429). His “helmet” resembles the head of the serpent harboring its body. He is wearing a “fancy” loincloth, cape, and holds a “medicine bag” in his hands. Drucker and his colleagues (1959) and Soustelle (1984) believe that the pouch in his right hand is an incense bag, a *copal* bag, used to carry hardened tree sap that people burned during ceremonies in Mesoamerica (Rice 1999:25-26). His left hand is in an anatomically awkward position (Drucker et al. 1959), a marker of one’s status perhaps? Right above

his right shoulder is a “basket,” and what appear to be ritual objects of some sort.

Another box-like object in front of these articles is topped with a “naming banner” (Taube 1995) composed of two birds facing one another. The two birds, Grove (1984) believes, are depictions of the *quetzal* species of bird, found in the tropics of the Gulf Coast of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and South America.

Compelling is the question of identifying the identity depicted on LVM-19, or what can be learned from its imagery. It might be the reenactment of an Olmec ruler, a religious leader, *curandero* (healer) or perhaps a combination of all of these. Coe (1968:114) suggested once that the serpent’s coils “harbored” the historical priest-king Quetzalcoatl, drawing comparisons of this monument with those found in Chalcatzingo and the paintings from the Juxtlahuaca cave that also depict prominent males with serpents and jaguars. It is premature to draw upon any labels of this persona, but it is possible that it makes reference to an important figure, perhaps a historical one, as argued by Coe. This may be a possibility considering the regalia worn by this male figure (i.e., serpent-helmet, cape, and loincloth), and his association with a serpent is evident on other Early and Middle Formative monuments (next section). In any case, the association between rulers of the Formative period and the supernatural, primarily animals, evidently was a common theme. Coe (1972:5) has argued that Olmec rulers probably ascended the elite ranks in a hereditary manner, soon after Olmec society superseded a “tribal” hierarchy characterized by leaders with “shamanistic-jaguar-type” identities. By 1200 B.C., Olmec society was no longer tribal but fully stratified, a society based on royal cult lineages, Coe (1972), suggested. To defend his argument, Coe highlighted evidence that

demonstrated the connection between jaguars, rulers, and their associated ritual paraphernalia.

One of the examples that Coe (1972) pointed to was a mural from the Oxtotitlán cave site that shows a male persona with black painted skin. The priest-ruler is wearing a four-piece headband, and emanating from his groin area (testes), is a spotted jaguar deity (Figure 12). According to Coe (1972:10), the painting was referring to Olmec lineages, which he further believed were based on earlier associations between rulers and jaguars. Olmec kingship was consequently a religious cult with history in a period when elite males venerated supernatural creatures (Coe 1972:11).

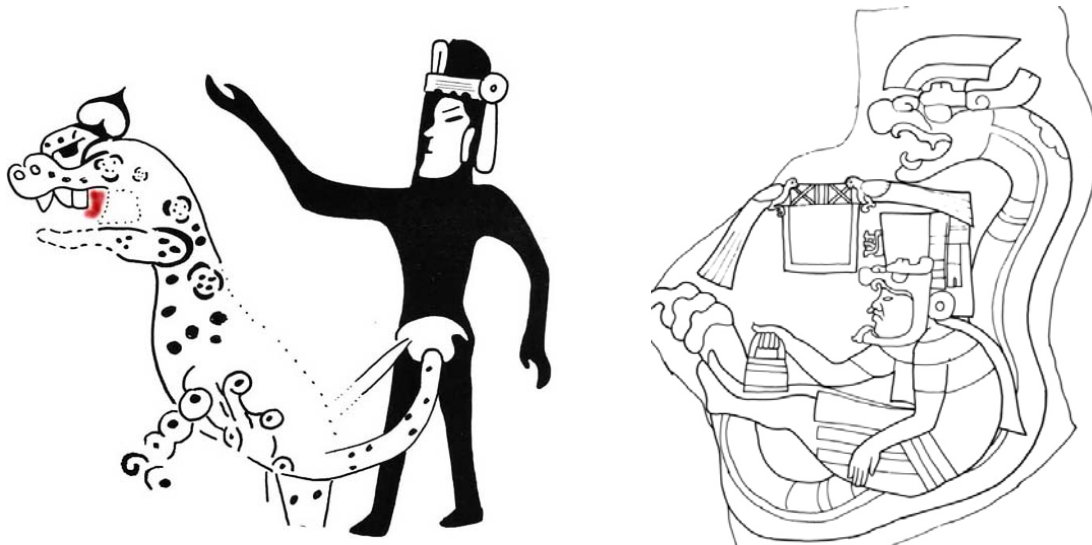


Figure 12. *Left* Oxtotitlán painting 1-C (drawn by David Grove, [www.famsi.org](http://www.famsi.org)). *Right* La Venta monument 19 (from the *Linda Schele Drawings Collection*, [www.famsi.org](http://www.famsi.org)).

Likewise, Kent F. Reilly III (1989) argued that Olmec “flyers,” like the one seen juxtaposed with the serpent on LVM-19, embodied leaders with “shamanistic” qualities, in their attempts to transcend into “otherworld” realms (Reilly 1989:16). He put forward



the idea that Olmec rulers resembled “high-priests,” and through their personages allowed commoners a gateway to the godly world (Reilly 1989). Reilly (1989) did acknowledge though that Olmec rulers would have not practiced shamanism (generally exercised by individuals who practice medicine and attempt to connect with the spirit world using hallucinogenic foods and drink [Klein et al. 2002]) periodically. Instead, their associations with serpents stemmed from the charismatic personas that rulers often adopted as they accepted the task of governing people (e.g. Clark 1997:216-217, 222).

This should not come as a surprise. The combining of leaders with Feathered Serpents was a familiar theme during the Classic and Postclassic period (Gillespie 1989:176-177). Moreover, the concurrence of elite identities and “curled” serpents (Figure 13) was not only witnessed in La Venta, but was also evident in Maya, Toltec, and Aztec times. William Ringle (2004) argued that such themes were associated with the political practice of superseding one’s title (accession). Since Feathered Serpents were “vehicles” of the “mortal realm,” their placement behind leaders validated their newfound status (Ringle 2004:174). In other words, leaders could ascend one another after a “re-embodiment,” with a Feathered Serpent, a “kingly” rebirth (Ringle 2004:175).

If such was the case, that to identify with serpent imagery was part of the ritual drama that accompanied rulership, then the Avian Serpent was not limited to legitimizing only one branch of the Olmec hierarchy but multiple sectors of their government. In the Olmec heartland, it seems that Avian Serpents worked in such a way at San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Laguna de los Cerros. At these sites, monuments carved with serpents, in conjunction with elite identities, existed in situ, at one time.



Figure 13. Avian/Feathered Serpents and elite identities of Mesoamerica: (a) San Lorenzo monument 47 (from Coe and Diehl 1980); (b) La Venta monument 19 (from the Linda Schele Drawing Collection); (c) Oxtotitlán mural (from Joralemon 1971); (d) Temple of Jaguars (from Morris 1931); (e) Priest-lord Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl (from Kristan-Graham and Karl Kowalski 2007); (f) Aztec Quetzalcoatl (from Turner 2005).

This elite-serpent experience was not restricted to leadership of the Olmec heartland. Recently, Susan Gillespie (2008) took note of the juxtaposing of “bird-serpents” with elite male identities on a number of monuments from Guerrero, La Venta, and Chalcatzingo. One of the monuments that she cited, the San Miguel Amuco Stela (Figure 14), found in the village of San Miguel Amuco, in the Mexican state of Guerrero, depicts a male figure dressed in avian-like attire. The figure has on a bird-mask, a long cape, a serpent “baton” pitched to his shoulders, and appears to be carrying a “feathered” bundle, identified as quetzal plums (Taube 1995:88). The character is very similar to the one shown on LVM-19, and it might be possible that these two characters refer to the same identity (Taube 1995:88).



Figure 14. The San Miguel Amuco Stela (from the *Linda Schele Drawing Collection*, [www.famsi.org](http://www.famsi.org)).

If Olmec rulers did rise to power from an earlier Pre-Olmec practice that called for people of status to link themselves with creatures like jaguars, and serpents, and later these traditions transformed into ruling lineages, another branch of the elite may have been a religious cult that choose to identify with the imagery of a serpent. Leadership and active membership would have recognized and/or venerated the serpent in a number of ways—of which there is plentiful evidence in the form of carved monuments, ceramics, and a number of other material representations (see Figure 2). Therefore, there is another possibility to consider. If the character carved on LVM-19 is not a priest-king like the one that Coe (1968) describes, than he might be an “aggrandizer,” like those discussed by John E. Clark and Michael Blake (see Clark and Blake 1994), that later transformed into religious aficionados.

According to Clark and Blake (1994), aggrandizers were innovative people that partook in feasting activities, encouraged craft activity, exchanged exotic objects, and sponsored communal projects, when social and political institutions developed during the first part of the Early Formative period. Aggrandizers are thought to have competed with each other, while at the same time influencing hierarchies (higher elite), which caused changes in the stratum of society (Clark 2004:47). Aggrandizers in the Gulf Coast may have followed in the footsteps of these, choosing to identify with serpents and jaguars to legitimize their status among people that they sought to influence. A religious leader, a cult leader, might have first started his/her career as an aggrandizer and later been given charge of cult “hot spots” in and around the Gulf Coast and its hinterland. This I believe might have occurred prior to 1200 B.C.

Additional evidence demonstrates that an elite branch of the Olmec hierarchy relied on some form of serpent imagery to enhance status. One particular monument, San Lorenzo monument 47 (Figure 15), from here on after “SLM-47,” suggests that elite Olmec used Avian Serpents with the sole purpose of governing and/or swaying people to win-over their support. SLM-47 has received minimal attention despite it being a good indication of the linkage between serpents and elite Olmec. The research behind this thesis found SLM-47 discussed only once to a small degree in the work of Karl Taube (1995) and its not mentioned in Gillespie’s (2008) most recent work, which focuses on the topic of “Bird-Serpents” and power.

Similar to LVM-19, SLM-47 depicts a person of heighten status. The character depicted on SLM-47 is wearing a long cape, armbands, and identified with the profile of a snakehead. Its gender is masculine (male), evident by the anatomical shape of its body and chest profile. The cape is long in length, extending from the top of the shoulder to the waistline. The cape also has a knot in the front that in real life would have kept the cape in place. The elite male is taming in its hand the head of a snake and the body of the serpent appears as if it wrapped around his waistline (Coe and Diehl 1980:356-357). His head was broken off and both of his knees fragmented by pounding (Coe and Diehl 1980:356) that appears to have been intentional.

On the contrary, the head of the serpent does not appear to be damaged, supporting the notion that perhaps during the demise of SLM-47, the serpent carried a greater, more sacred meaning than its handler. John Clark (1997:221) has also noticed this phenomenon, suggesting that Formative sculptures with “cosmological power” were

spared from damage, while others with more politized meaning were destroyed (Grove 1981). Karl Taube (1995:84) made a good observation concerning SLM-47. He called attention to the “feathered tufts” on the head of the serpent, comparing them to the hand-paw-wing found on contemporaneous Olmec Dragons. Also, by rotating this feature to a 40-degree angle, the similarities in style between this design and the hand-paw-wing motif on some carved pottery from the site of San Lorenzo, Canto Corralito, and Tlatilco, are noticeable.

Once again, the question posed: who or what might have been the personage depicted on SLM-47. Coe and Diehl (1980:357) believe the sculpture is a representation of the “God” Quetzalcoatl, a religious leader they suspect was present in the Olmec realm but absent in the Maya world. For the most part, Coe and Diehl are probably correct about this figure being an important one, and it is even more convincing that his identity is represented on LVM-19 and Laguna de los Cerros monument 19 (see Figure 19), however, labeling this monument with a particular name is not so straightforward. The names of Olmec rulers are not manifested anywhere in the archaeological record, like is known for some Maya kings. Alternatively, Bachand and her colleagues (2003) have argued that Olmec human sculptures are the material embodiments of bodily practice and ritual. According to these researchers, the Olmec did not use monuments to mark elite lineages or victories as the Maya did (Bachand et al. 2003), but rather the monuments identified the personal attributes of people (Bachand et al. 2003). While carrying out the research for this paper, most Olmec human sculptures looked at showed people in seated positions, wearing sashes, armbands, capes, and loincloths (e.g., Bachand et al. 2003).

Moreover, Bachand and her colleagues (2003) have argued that Olmec human sculptures mocked the physical characteristics of people, and therefore confirmed the sub-conscious activities of the living Olmec (Bachand et. al 2003). These scholars also point out that Olmec sculptures were typically placed in proximity to residential spaces—leaned against architecture in areas where individuals partook in different activities (Bachand et al. 2003). Whatever the case may be, convincing is the idea that the male identity depicted on SLM-47 was a member of the Olmec hierarchy. This person likely had the skill level of a healer, perhaps a cross between a ruler and a person who practiced medicine. The serpent surely served to legitimate the identity of his elite male character.

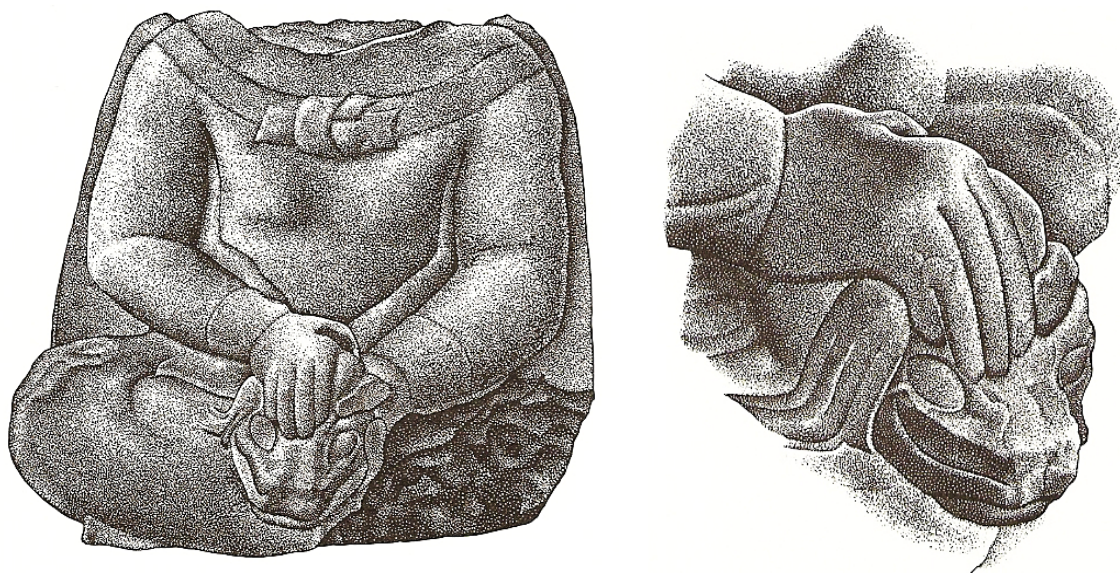


Figure 15. San Lorenzo monument 47 (from Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 487). Elite male figure “gently” grasping a serpent with a plumage/feathered feature above its head.

Another line of evidence from the Olmec heartland, Laguna de los Cerros monument 19 (Figure 16), from here on after “LCM-19,” further supports the idea that

some elite Olmec bore serpent imagery in “badge-like” style. A carved in the round monument, LCM-19, depicts an Olmec male standing in an upright “authoritative” position, with crossed forearms. The figure is wearing a long cape, loincloth, and three serpent-like heads decorate the right side of his cape. The three serpents, one of which was redrawn (Figure 17) from the actual monument in the Xalapa Museum (Mexico) are particularly interesting because they are similar in style to those that appear carved on pottery from Tlatilco and San Lorenzo (Figure 7, 14). Clark (1997) has argued that during the tenth and twelfth centuries B.C., Laguna de los Cerros co-existed with San Lorenzo, Las Limas, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes. The site might have stood as an independent center (Clark 1997:217), or a “satellite” center (Borstein 2001) established by San Lorenzo elite to administer the extraction of basalt from local deposits at Llano del Jicaro (see Gillespie 1994).

If Laguna de los Cerros did indeed function as a key site in the Gulf Coast, it is possible that the figure depicted on LCM-19 represents a local ruler, since the carved monument surfaced buried at Laguna de los Cerros. It is also important to point out that even this character met his demise; the head of LCM-19 was broken off. Not a surprise, the serpent evaded damage, a phenomenon that reveals to some extent, the esteem that people had for supernaturals of the serpent type.





Figure 16. Laguna de Los Cerros monument 19. Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico (Photographs by Santiago Andres Garcia).

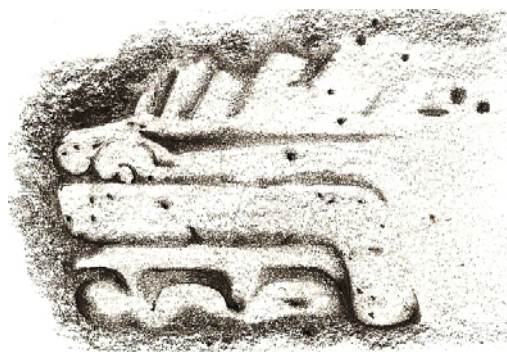


Figure 17. Avian Serpent carved on Laguna de los Cerros monument 19. Drawn by Santiago Andres Garcia.

### The Avian Serpent and the Olmec Dragon

In 1971, Peter David Joralemon published an influential paper that supported Coe's (1968) argument that Olmec religion was a polytheistic pantheon, further supporting the idea that the Las Limas figure could serve as a key for identifying Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerican deities. Joralemon (1971) collected pictures and drawings of Olmec-style artifacts from private collections and museums. Comparing these images with those incised on El Señor Lima, Joralemon (1971) found obvious similarities between both, convincing himself that Olmec "gods" did in fact derive from the animal world (i.e., snakes, raptorial birds, caymans, and jaguars) and were recreated in the minds of people as biologically impossible composite/supernatural entities.

The focus of Joralemon's (1971) study was the classification of ten "Olmec" Gods. God VII was the Feathered Serpent, a serpent that Joralemon (1971) identified as having avian-like features. Ten variants of the Feathered Serpent under the God VII category made the list, and although this was a small list, the examples correctly depict a serpent's elongated corpse either with feathers, tufts, or in some cases scales. Many of these early variants had the symbol of the serpent, the St. Andrew's cross (Coe 1968:114), affixed to their bodies.

Later in 1976, Joralemon built on his contributions in a work titled *The Olmec Dragon: A Study in Pre-Columbian Iconography*. The study was a carry over from his 1971 piece with revisions and a revamped glossary of six major "Olmec" deities, minus four from his original ten. While this work and the one prior to it did better our understanding of Formative icons and symbols, it might have steered the attention away

from the Feathered Serpent, and its own variants (e.g., Taube 1995). Joralemon (1976:33, 42, Fig. 9) integrated the Feathered Serpent into the Olmec Dragon category of God I, identifying the Feathered Serpent as a variant of the Olmec Dragon, eliminating the previous 1971 God VII group.

The merging of the Feathered Serpent and the Olmec Dragon was perhaps a questionable arrangement, considering that the Feathered Serpent best represented a unique serpent with avian-like features, better suited in a class of its own. “Feathered” Serpents of the Early Formative period do not appear in the archaeological record with feline traits (limbs), a common characteristic of the Olmec Dragon. Early representations of the Feathered Serpent do sometimes appear with shark-like teeth but never with claws. Joralemon’s (1976:37) Olmec Dragon (a mythological beast with cayman, eagle, jaguar, human, and serpentine attributes) seems to have overshadowed the Feathered Serpent’s unique symbolism—a serpent with avian-like features. Michael D. Coe (1989:76) shared a similar reaction to the 1976 “declassification” of the Feathered Serpent.

“God VII Joralemon would now subsume this image, a feathered serpent, within the God I complex, but I am not so sure. On Monument 19 from La Venta, for instance, the creature is depicted as an unmistakable rattlesnake with a feathered crest; if this were an Aztec sculpture, I would have no hesitation in identifying it as Quetzalcoatl. I feel equally confident about the Feathered Serpent of Relief 5 at Chalcatzingo, in one of the Juxtlahuaca cave paintings, and in painting I-C from Oxtotitlan” [Michael D. Coe 1989:76].

### Summary

Avian Serpents discussed in this chapter suggest that the Feathered Serpent of Mesoamerica had an ancestor during the Formative period (1500-400 B.C.), contrary to Grove’s (1984:112) argument that there was no reason to believe it did. The Feathered

Serpent not only had ancestry in the Formative period, evident by the serpent profiles on the Las Limas figure, San Lorenzo monument 30, San Lorenzo monument 47, and Laguna de los Cerros monument 19, but had been part of a growing complex society in Olmec San Lorenzo, extending its roots into the Early Formative period, contrary to the argument that major serpent imagery first appeared in the Middle Formative period (Gillespie 2008:375).

Evidently, Gulf Coast leadership relied on Avian-Serpent imagery to legitimize their authority, and in this regard, the Feathered Serpent of Mesoamerica was a symbol of prestige and rulership since Olmec times in San Lorenzo. I would like to stress, however, that this was only *one* form of legitimization, others ways were certainly present.

## CHAPTER 6

### CARVED POTTERY OF THE EARLY FORMATIVE PERIOD

In this chapter, I focus my attention on the carved pottery of San José Mogote, Tlatilco, San Lorenzo, and Canto Corralito. Researchers best know this pottery for its “Olmec-style” motifs that included the “St. Andrew’s cross,” “hand-paw-wing,” “flame-eyebrow,” and “U-gum brackets,” sometimes also referred collectively as the “X Complex” (see Grove 1989:10; Pool 2009:241). In this thesis, however, these motifs are referred to as “Earth & Sky,” (or Earth & Sky imagery); partly because the name identifies the motifs supposed associated symbolism. Alternatively, the argument by Karl A. Taube (1995) that some form of stylized serpent with avian-like features, present on certain carved pottery, I follow here. Recently, David Cheetham (2010:172-174), following Taube (1995) also took note that Avian Serpent was a dominant creature on Calzadas Carved pottery of Canto Corralito, and San Lorenzo.

The research in this chapter examines the use of carved pottery deployed in households, villages, and burials. The information on the pottery came from publications that discuss its archaeological context. Since the pottery consisted of motifs associated with a shared style of art (Lesure 2004:79; Stark 2004; Grove and Gillespie 1992:25), and since some of the pottery ceramists exported outside of the Gulf Coast, after being made in San Lorenzo (Blomster et al. 2005; Cheetham 2007), how the pottery might have spread will be examined in this chapter.

In this chapter, I am not concerned with the technical variation of the motifs (differences in width and length of lines [for a good discussion on these, see David Cheetham 2010, and Carl Wendt 2010]), since researchers agree, the motifs are a marker of the Early Formative period (1400-900 B.C.) (see Coe and Diehl 1980:159-187; Flannery and Marcus 1994:135; Tolstoy 1989:117-119). The motifs are almost absent and non-important during the Middle Formative period (900-400 B.C.) (Grove and Gillespie 1992:29; Stark 1997:287). On the other hand, variation among the motifs *is* expected to appear differently, in different regions (Stark 1997:287, 2007:50). As I have already mentioned, style, and variation in style are appropriate to contexts where they occur (Rice 1987:245). Instead, I consider here how people and groups might have used pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, in a regional and interregional setting.

Three points are made in this chapter: One, carved pottery from the sites of San José Mogote, the villages of the Tlacolula region (the Valley of Oaxaca), and the site of Tlatilco (the Basin of Mexico) was used in households, and in burials to mark status. Two, carved pottery (Calzadas Carved) from the site of San Lorenzo (the Gulf Coast) and Canto Corralito (Pacific Coast of Chiapas) was used in “ordinary” household activities, display, or ritual, but not in ways to mark social differences. Three, carved pottery of the Early Formative period might coincide with a larger collection of cult ceramics—ritual paraphernalia belonging to a regional cult whose main symbol was a serpent with avian-like features, the Avian Serpent.

First defined in Chapter 1, but again here, a regional cult in the context of the Early Formative period may have comprised of a network of individuals invested in the

spread of religion and cosmology, aided by skillfully crafted goods (e.g., Blomster 1998; 2010), ceramics being one type of item, from one region to another. To characterize the spread of religion and the use of ritual ceramics in Mesoamerica, some Mesoamericanists have taken this approach. For example, William M. Ringle and his colleagues (1998) have used the term regional cult, first used by Richard Werbner (1977), to explain the spread of ceramics associated with the Quetzalcoatl cult, which according to these scholars involved a network of traders, professional merchants, and religious leaders, acting during the Epiclassic period (700-1100 A.D.). Jeffery P. Blomster (1998), also following Werbner (1977), made use of the term to argue that a regional cult may have been responsible for the spread of hollow-baby figurines by carrying these as a primary good, expressive of new beliefs, during the Early Formative period. More recently, Blomster (2010:146) again was for the idea that a regional cult was fixed within the confines of the Early Formative region, this time arguing that San Lorenzo may have been the cults homeland (Blomster 2010:146).

#### Carved pottery of San José Mogote

Earth & Sky imagery, carved on San José Phase (ca. 1400-950 B.C.) pottery (Figure 18) from the site of San José Mogote is referred to as “Fire-Serpent” pottery by researchers of the ancient Oaxaca region (see Flannery and Marcus 1994:136; Marcus 1989). According to Flannery and Marcus (1994:136), the imagery is not linked to any particular species of snake, but is instead a representation of *lightening*, or “fire in the darkened sky,” which Flannery and Marcus argue originated when the ancient people of Oaxaca perceived lightening in the sky as “angry,” and to be in the form of a serpent that

on occasion caused fire. Without much argument however, the motifs that make up the Fire-Serpent are similar enough to draw comparisons with the Earth & Sky imagery that I discuss in this paper to portray early representations of a serpent with avian-like features. The Fire-Serpent, like the Sky Serpent in Chalcatzingo, may have manifested a blend of overlapping symbolism specific to the people and regions of Mesoamerica (e.g., Blomster 2010:145). Therefore, its significance may have extended beyond a local one.

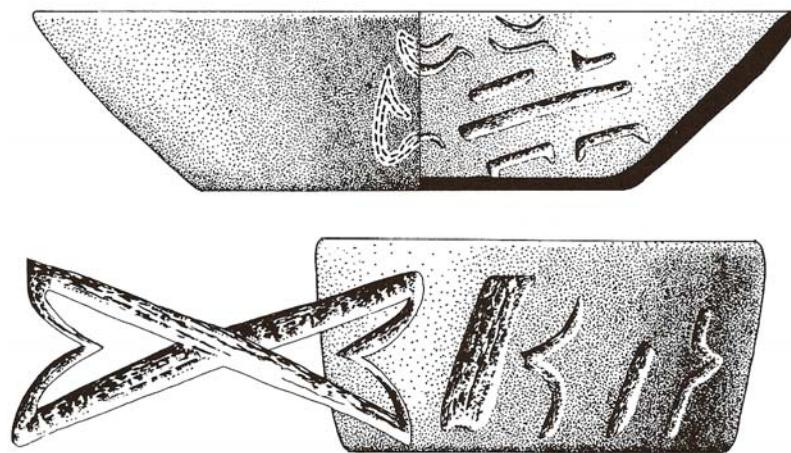


Figure 18. Leandro Gray pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery from Structure 1 of San José Mogote – San José Phase (from Flannery and Marcus 1994: Fig. 12.4).

Much of the San José Phase pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery is made from local clays, temper, and slips; native materials of Oaxaca (Blomster et al. 2005: Table S3. p. 22-23, Table S3. p. 27; Flannery and Marcus 1994:157). However, chemical evidence (see Blomster et al. 2005:1071, Table S3. p. 1, 10) now demonstrates that some carved pottery made in San Lorenzo was exported to San José Mogote where people used it alongside similar productions. Yet, in contrast with pottery carved with were-jaguar



imagery (Avian Serpent's adversary), the pottery was "antagonistic" (Marcus 1989:190; Pyne 1976:278).

Pottery that was carved with Earth & Sky imagery was seldom mixed with pottery that was carved with were-jaguar imagery. Instead, the two supernatural entities on pottery represented the identities of one of two, perhaps more supposed groups present at San José Mogote (Marcus 1989:169). Take, for example, the part of San José Mogote referred to as the "downtown" area by Joyce Marcus. During excavation, areas "A" and "C" produced higher percentages of pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, as apposed to area "B," which produced higher percentages of pottery carved with were-jaguar imagery (Marcus 1989:170; Flannery and Marcus 1994:136). The spatial distribution of the pottery (Figure 19) suggests that different households distinguished themselves in San José Mogote with different pottery.

The pattern also occurs outside of the site of San José Mogote. In the nearby valleys, different villages also made use of pottery carved with opposing symbolism. In the Tlacolula region, people from the site of Abasolo and Tomaltepec used pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery. On the other hand, to the north, in the Etla region, people from the site of Tierras Largas and Huitzo used pottery carved with were-jaguar imagery (Marcus 1989:170; Flannery and Marcus 1994:136). As it appears to have been the case at San José Mogote, the pottery's distribution likely marked two dissimilar groups. In this scenario, however, *entire* villages used different motifs to identify their social status as opposed to *single* households. This does not suggest that some people of the above sites

were richer or poorer than others but that they chose different symbols with which to relate their identities to.

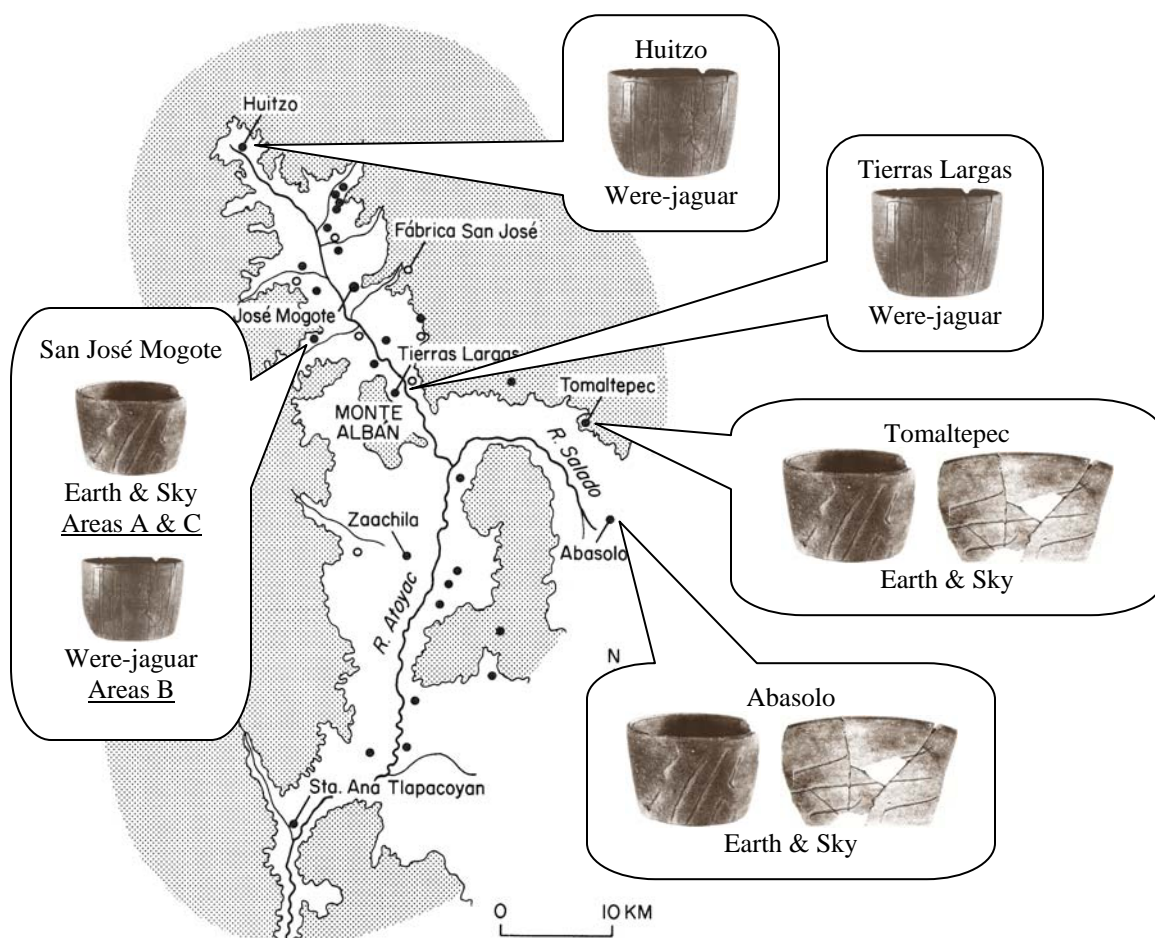


Figure 19. Diagram showing local and regional distribution of pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery and were-jaguar pottery (After Flannery and Marcus 1994: Fig 12).

In addition to marking social differences among people and groups, pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery also served a ritual purpose. People placed the pottery in both male and female burial sites. In this case, the pottery may have marked the lineages of certain matrilineal or patrilineal groups.

Both Kent Flannery, and Joyce Marcus (1994:136, see also Winter 1972) took notice that San José Phase (ca. 1400-950 B.C.) burials identified by male remains, contained higher percentages of pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, as opposed to burials with female remains, which contained a lower percentage. Similar pottery also comes from the burials of infants to young for identification by sex (Marcus 1989:169; Pyne 1976:278). However, if these burials continued the same pattern as those of the adults (if they belong to young males) then membership in the group identified by certain carved pottery types would have been passed via the male lineage (Marcus 1989:169; Pyne 1976:278, see also Lesure 2004:84).

The discovery that some pottery from Oaxaca's San José Phase came from the San Lorenzo area (Blomster et al. 2005) is also a matter to consider. Was the carved pottery limited to only marking differences among people, or were additional themes tied to this pottery? It is possible that the pottery came in exchange for raw materials native only to Oaxaca. Still, even the idea of trade presents little information to develop a testable hypothesis regarding the interregional activities between the ancient people of Oaxaca and their neighbors (e.g., Blomster 2010:146). "Trade" in Mesoamerica is not easily definable under general concepts of reciprocity (Flannery 1968:105), which under normal circumstances occurs between two parties whom are more-or-less equal (Rice 1987:191). Trade during the Early Formative period was a complex system arising with the social and economic ambitions of people and inequalities of the period (Flannery 1968:100). It is also well known that the flow of exotic goods, gifts, and raw materials

used many of the same routes that facilitated the movement of migrants, traders, and religious groups (Blomster 2010:146, see also Ringle et al. 1998:215).

Therefore, it might have been that pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery was incorporated into these particular themes. One possible scenario, that may further explain the arrival of pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery in Oaxaca, could be Flannery's argument that people of the Early Formative period sought certain symbols to legitimize their activities. Flannery (1968:100) argued that the exchange of "exotic raw materials," ornaments and implements, during this early period in Oaxaca, served the emerging elite, because the objects they sought for status (Flannery 1968:100).

In one model, outlining interregional interaction between people of Oaxaca and the Gulf Coast of Mexico, Flannery (1968:105) highlighted a series of ethnographic and ethnohistorical scenarios of which he drew themes from to model what perhaps could have been occurring during the Early Formative period.

*First*, it seems that the upper echelon of each society often provides the entrepreneurs who facilitate the exchange. *Second*, the exchange is not "trade" in the sense that we use the term, but rather is set up through mechanisms of ritual visits, exchange of wives, and "adoption" of members of one group and so on. *Third*, there may be an attempt on the part of the elite of the less sophisticated society to adopt the behavior, status trappings, religion, symbolism, or even language of the more sophisticated group – in short, to absorb some of their charisma. *Fourth*, although the exchange system does not alter the basic subsistence pattern of either group, it may not be totally unrelated to subsistence [Kent V. Flannery 1968:105].

Applying the above themes as "guidelines" to the supposed interaction between the people of Oaxaca and the Olmec, Kent Flannery (1968:105) argued that Oaxacan leaders from San José Mogote were linked with the more "sophisticated" Olmec leaders of San Lorenzo, who sought iron ores (magnetite and ilmenite) to make mirrors in

exchange for precious shells from the Gulf Coast. In the process of exchange, Flannery (1968:106) supposed that the Oaxaca elite eventually began to emulate the religion, symbolism, and character of the Olmec to enhance their own identities among those they sought to govern. They might have adopted the St. Andrew's cross, U-gum brackets, and hand-paw-wings without any changes to their elite structure (Flannery 1968:106).

Noteworthy, Flannery and Marcus (1994:389-390) amended the earlier 1968 "emulation" model for a more all-encompassing "peer-polity" model where the Earth & Sky imagery was considered the result of a widespread Pan-Mesoamerican art-style (i.e., Marcus 1989), rather than the result of Olmec influence. Despite this revision, Flannery's 1968 model is practical and makes good points regarding interregional interaction. It identifies the structural dimensions that make up the distribution process (producers and consumers [Pool and Bey 2007:13]), and the motives behind the process—in this case, exotic goods for legitimizing status. Moreover, understanding distribution is important because it defines the means by which goods, in this case pottery, got from point A to point B, considering not only the pottery makers and pottery users, but also middle users, such as traders, heirs, and thieves (Pool and Bey 2007:13). One might further add religious groups (or regional cults) to the intricate working of the distribution process, since these groups likely carried and used pottery during rituals (e.g., Blomster 1998, 2010:147) to further legitimate their social status.

Flannery, however, did not apply his "theory of exchange" to the scenario(s), which he argued might have occurred between emerging leaders of Oaxaca and those of

the Olmec. Flannery's (1968:105) second point(s), that exchange is not trade, but is rather made up of ritual visits, exchange of wives, and the adoption of members of one group by another, were legitimate themes that perhaps could have further been explored. Flannery (1968:105), it seems, appropriately began to describe the social mechanisms fixed within the distribution process; however, refrained from identifying them under one particular label. Flannery's (1968:105) definition of *exchange*, a system that is set up via "ritual visits," "adoption of members," and "exchange of wives," coincides with themes that some researchers believe are pertinent to regional cults.

For example, among the Mwali, a widespread "high-god" cult in Africa, Richard Werbner (1977:180) describes a cult territory composed of regions with scattered congregation locations, bordering locals (enclaves), and a "heartland," where all *oracles* (stories or prophecies) are recited. During periods of interaction, congregations, or people of the cult consult with one another (Werbner 1977:180)—these I surmise are the "ritual visit" aspect of cults. Membership within the cult is highly diversified—made up of priests, messengers, and followers (or general membership) (Werbner 1977:189). And, since cults are open to expansion, they invite new members of different ethnicities, which after they "assimilate," claim a common ethnic identity (Werbner 1977:192).

In making the point, the pottery of Oaxaca carved with Earth & Sky imagery might not only have been the material objects of status but more so the religious articles belonging to a religious network, like that of a regional cult, operating in Mesoamerica. If such a mechanism were in motion during the Early Formative period, the adaptive pressures of the cult to change throughout time and space would have also influenced the

cult's repertoire of goods—including the style of motifs on ceramics used by the cult.

Werbner (1977:179) does point out that the more a cult breaks ethnic lines, the more its rituals and symbolism will have to vary.

An active regional cult moving about might have been a contributing social mechanism that linked Early Formative sites of the Mesoamerican region together. Since archaeologists can now point to the site of San Lorenzo as an exporter of some of the carved pottery found throughout the Early Formative region, it might be useful to suggest that the Olmec were responsible for the spread of a Mesoamerican religion outside of their own region. Blomster (2010:146) does point out that when a “superordinate” center exists, San Lorenzo in this case, it has the obligation to spread cosmic order across regions via skillfully crafted goods. Moreover, San Lorenzo and its support centers could have served as a “cult heartland,” a land of mass gathering, like those described by Werbner (Werbner 1977:180). Farther away from the Gulf Coast of Mexico, in the Valley of Oaxaca, sites such as San José Mogote might have facilitated smaller enclaves (and also shrines), where cults competed for membership or had a lively presence. Blomster (1998:323), citing Colson (1977:121), points out that a cult can coexist with pre-existing beliefs and/or local cults.

#### Carved pottery of Tlatilco

The site of Tlatilco, in the Basin of Mexico, famously known for its burials; was popular amongst “pot hunters,” and Mexican art intellectuals of the 1930s and 40s for the wealth of Ancient Mexican artifacts it provided (see Covarrubias 1957). Research, however, shows that Tlatilco was a site of regional importance at one point during the

Early Formative period (Niederberger 2000). Since its discovery by brick-makers in 1936 an estimated 500 burials have been documented. The human remains found inside these burials and their associated objects (e.g., iron-ore mirrors, green stones, shells, ceramic seals, and decorated pottery) were buried sometime between 1500 and 1200 B.C., some interred more richly than others (Tolstoy 1989:109).

Of these “offerings,” pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery (Figure 20) was placed inside a small number of these burials (Tolstoy 1989:117). Only 37 of the 375 burials that Tolstoy (1989) accounted for had at least one vessel with the Earth & Sky imagery. It is important to note, however, that the pottery was mainly used in female burials, compared to male graves, at a ratio of 2:1 (Tolstoy 1989:102). This represents a difference in how the pottery was used in contrast with Oaxaca, where similar pottery arguably identified household groups and the burials of mostly males. A possibility, then exists, that descent groups in Tlatilco (matrilineal or patrilineal) are recognizable by pottery placed alongside the buried. However, it is unknown if the deceased in this case were those of an elite local group (Tolstoy 1989:120) or of one “foreign” to Tlatilco. So what differences among the Tlatilco people did the carved pottery represent?

Since Tlatilco’s carved pottery does come from burials, they are considered here remnants of the mortuary ritual. In Formative Mesoamerica especially, the mortuary ritual reflected not only the buried dead but also the social events and identities that once surrounded the living (Joyce 1999:15). In Tlatilco’s case, Rosemary Joyce (1999:41) has argued that the spatial and varied distribution of rare and exotic materials used in burial practices could be telling of the processes by which different households competed with



one another. According to Joyce (1999:41), it was how a particular group or family lineage marked its presence. If such was the case in Tlatilco, then some carved pottery did mark the identities of different people, or in the words of Joyce (1999:41), “the wealth of the house and its members.”

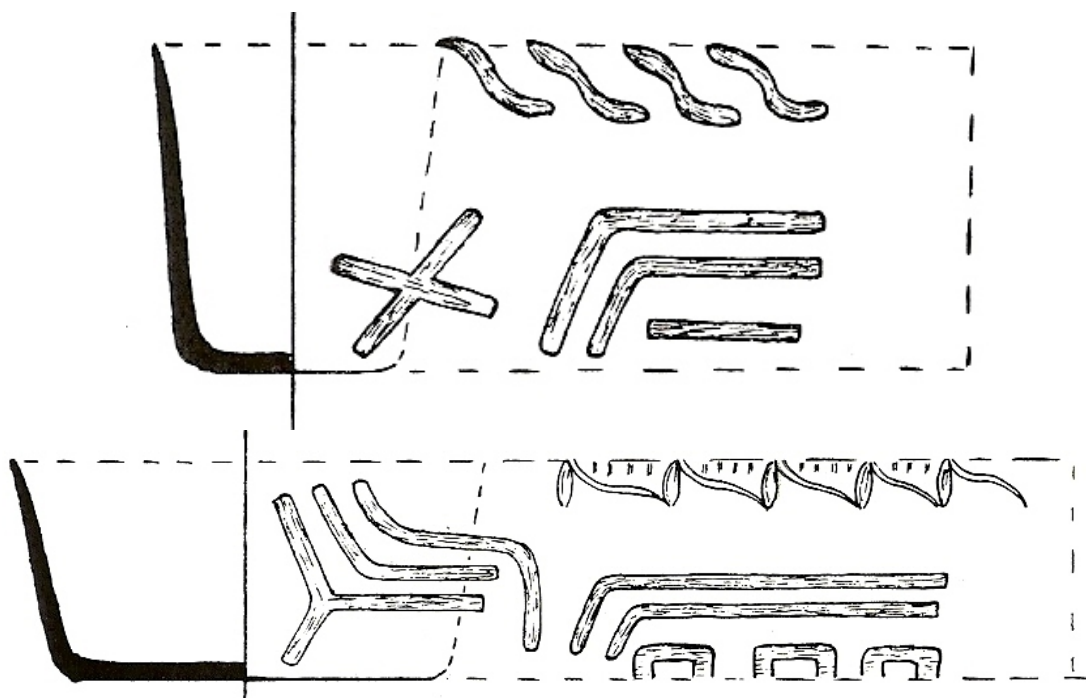


Figure 20. Tlatilco pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery. *Top* cup. *Bottom* dish (from Piña Chán 1958a: Fig. 49).

Five decades ago, Román P. Chán (1958b) in “*Las Creencias*” took note of the use of personal “cult-like” objects, figurines in particular, in Tlatilco burials that according to him were referent to a cult dedicated to the *fertile* serpent-feline. At that time, the idea of a “cult” perhaps did not convince enough researchers so it has remained skeptical. New evidence, however, demonstrates that San Lorenzo Olmec exported carved pottery to sites outside of the Gulf Coast (Blomster et al. 2005). Because of this,

the suggestion that a cult operated within the Basin of Mexico (Roman P. Chán 1958), the Valley of Oaxaca (Blomster 1998:323, 2010:146), and the Gulf Coast (Coe and Diehl 1980:357), may be worth looking at. A regional cult, like the one arguably behind the use of hollow-baby figurines in Oaxaca (Blomster 1998), may have also been behind the spread, and emulation of carved pottery in the Basin of Mexico.

In the case of Tlatilco, it could have been that some of the female residents participated in marriage alliances, where either they or their spouses, male aggrandizers (see Clark 2004:47), held some type of leadership role in a regional cult. To further identify these associations, and to further legitimize the status of living family members, it is possible that people placed pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery in the burials of woman, or men, who held a position in the cult at one point in their lives. In one of Roman Chan's (1958b: "*Indumentaria y Adorno*") line figurine drawings showing a Tlatilco female, a serpent can be seen on the hairpiece running the length of her temple and forehead area. This is reminiscent of the male identities, for example the one hollow figurine from San Lorenzo that sports the Venus star on its baldhead (Figure 21) (Blomster 2002:190-191). During the Classic period, Venus imagery was associated with the Feathered Serpent (Sugiyama 2005:67, see also Ringle et al. 1989:196), and there is one example that I know of, an Early Formative vessel from Tlatilco, linking serpent imagery and the Venus star (see Covarrubias 1957 Color plate 78; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 101). Other portable objects, like small basalt metates of the Formative period carry the Venus Star (Figure 22) and these could be the ritual articles particular to a regional cult.

Going back to the female figurine with the serpent headpiece and the male figurine with the Venus star on its head—could these two characters at one time during the Early Formative period have shared a long-distance relationship? Who was this female, and what claim did she have with the serpent? Or, for that matter, the selected males in Tlatilco, buried with serpent pots. Their numbers in Tlatilco were few, as I mentioned earlier, 37 of the 375 burials that Paul Tolstoy examined had pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, and like any small group existing within a population, their identity surely came across as radical, foreign, or religious.

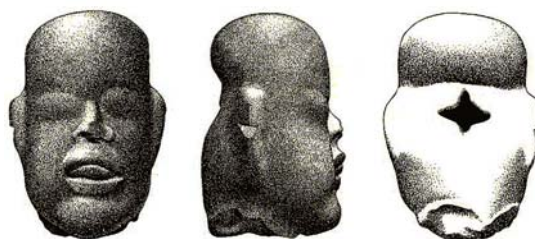


Figure 21. San Lorenzo figurine with Venus star (From Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 326).

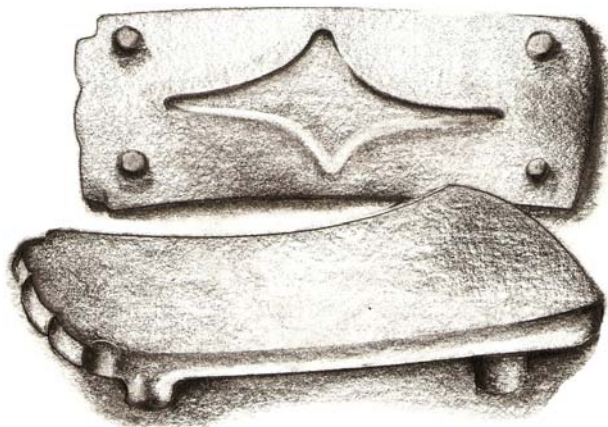


Figure 22. La Venta “portable” basalt metate with Venus star (Drawn by Santiago Andres Garcia from Guthrie 1995: cat no. 201).

This is an area that new research should take into consideration to better understand the identities, differences, and likes of the Tlatilco people (at least some of them) and their ties to the rest of Mesoamerica. As Carl J. Wendt (2010:120) points out, “evaluating differences between intragroup and intergroup (or private and public) displays of identity are good ways to approach the study of migration, colonies, and enclaves.” One may further add religious proselytizing (or religious/regional cults) to the social mechanisms, mentioned by Wendt that require further attention.

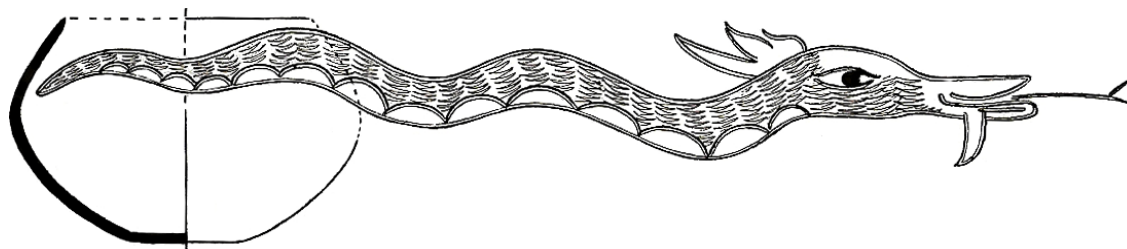


Figure 23. Avian Serpent bowl from Tlatilco (from Piña Chán 1958a: Fig. 48).

Before moving to the next section it is worth discussing a bowl with a particular serpent (Figure 23) not mentioned by Tolstoy, which Roman P. Chán (1958a:94) described as a “Water Serpent.” The supernatural decorated on the outer-inward-leaning wall depicts a non-abstracted Avian Serpent. Peter Joralemon’s (1971) study of “Olmec” icons identified the supernatural entity as the “Feathered” Serpent, though later in the author’s 1976 study, it was not cataloged. Both Joralemon (1971) and Taube (1995) independently noticed that the serpent has the paw-wing motif attached to its head. In making a comparison, both serpents found on San Lorenzo’s monument 47 and La Venta’s monument 19 (Chapter 4, this paper) depict this feature affixed to their head and

neck area. Additional serpents with the paw-wing motif include the one shown on the Juxtlahuaca mural (Figure 2l), Chalcatzingo's monument 5 (Figure 2n), and a jade-coiled serpent (Figure 2e) from Joralemon's (1971:82) study of Formative icons.

Unfortunately, the context of this bowl is unknown. However, I focus on this example since it demonstrates the different expressions articulated in early Feathered-Serpent representations.

### Calzadas Carved pottery of San Lorenzo

Calzadas Carved pottery<sup>1</sup> of San Lorenzo is found mostly in the form of small bowls, cups, and serving dishes with broad excisions on their exterior walls. The decorations appear as single-line breaks, opposed-lines, and crossed-bands (Coe and Diehl 1980). The pottery is a time marker for San Lorenzo Phase A and B (ca. 1150-950 B.C.), making it roughly contemporaneous with the variety of dark-black and dark-gray pottery from Tlatilco's Early Horizon I and II (ca. 1450-1000 B.C.) and Oaxaca's San José Phase (ca. 1400-950 B.C.) Leandro Gray pottery. During the San Lorenzo Project, Michael D. Coe and a Yale team excavated Calzadas Carved sherds (broken pieces of pottery) from household debris and calculated that no single household could have owned more than a small number of Calzadas Carved types at one time. Coe and Diehl (1980) considered their low percentages in the household an indication that it was in addition to household ware—pottery used during special events; Coe and Diehl (1980) do not provide support for this idea, however, other researchers have reinforced this possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> In this section, "Calzadas Carved" is equivalent to the pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery. I follow David Cheetham (2010) and Carl J. Wendt (2010) in their continued use of this term, since it was first proposed by Michael D. Coe and Richard A. Diehl (1980), to describe pottery that was carved with the St. Andrew's cross, the hand-paw-wing, flame-eyebrow, and U-gum brackets.

For example, Richard Lesure (2004:82, 83) believes some meals were “formal events” which initiated, strengthened, or weakened bonds between local households and distant ones. In other words, pottery decorated with Earth & Sky imagery may have been present on tabletops during meetings (Lesure 2004:83) between Olmec people and their more distant neighbors.

Recently, Carl Wendt (2010:119) took note of an ethnographic example (see Bowser 2002; Bowser and Patton 2004) where members of the Ecuadorian-Amazonian Conambo, in the context of house visits, were observed conveying social and political messages with bowls that were filled with fermented liquid (beer), painted with symbols. In Wendt’s (personal communication, 2011) view, the act of drinking from decorated containers might have been a manner by which people linked themselves to ancestors, or for that matter a supernatural or cosmological entity.

Anna Di Castro and Ann Cyphers (2006) have also argued that Calzadas Carved pottery of San Lorenzo did have a symbolic purpose. The scholars have pointed out that the wide grooves, excised on Calzadas Carved pottery, contained traces of red pigment. These painted crosses reflect a “sacred emblem,” similar to those seen in Maya art forms that show opposing birds in a sky realm (Di Castro and Cyphers 2006). Crossed-bands in their horizontal form served as symbolic metaphors between the earth and the sky, or between the sun and the heavens (Di Castro and Cyphers 2006).

It is also striking to mention that Calzadas Carved pottery is not the only pottery that has carved crossed-bands filled with a red-pigmented surface. Leandro Gray pottery from the Valley of Oaxaca also had red pigment (hematite) rubbed into the carved area

(Flannery and Marcus 1994:164, 166), and so did the carved pottery of Tlatilco (see Covarrubias 1957:21) from the Basin of Mexico.

With regard to context, and in comparison with carved pottery from Oaxaca and Tlatilco, San Lorenzo Calzadas Carved pottery appears slightly “ordinary.” It has not been found (not yet at least), in settings such as burials or linked with different household groups. This appears to be the case at the site of El Remolino, a small Olmec settlement located 5 km outside of San Lorenzo (see Symonds et al. 2002; Wendt 2005a, 2005b). Excavations on the bank of the Rio Chiquito yielded only a fraction of Calzadas Carved pottery and less than one percent of 76,000 classified sherds might have depicted Earth & Sky imagery (Wendt 2010:110). Thus, it could be possible that Calzadas Carved pottery and its attached symbolism originated in the Olmec heartland (e.g., Cheetham 2010:174-175) and so it was more advantageous for Olmec ceramists and their sponsors to export the pottery into other regions. Chemical studies show that San Lorenzo Olmec exported Calzadas Carved pottery and other ceramic forms to regions far from the Gulf Coast (Blomster et al. 2005; Cheetham 2007), including the Basin of Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca. By what social mechanisms did the pottery arrive there involves questions that need to be addressed (Cheetham and Blomster 2010:93; Wendt 2010:120).

What did the Gulf Coast Olmec receive in return? What “pay” and benefits did the process entail? Prestige, exchanges of wealth, religion? What themes were involved? The establishment of enclaves (Cheetham 2007, 2010), the spread of a cult (Blomster 1998, 2002, 2010; Diehl and Coe 1980; Piña Chán 1958), trade and emulation (Flannery 1968), or a complex network that involved all these themes?

### Calzadas Carved pottery of Canto Corralito

Recently, an abundance of Calzadas Carved pottery was recovered from the site of Canto Corralito. Findings based on the intrasite distribution of excavated potsherds, suggests that Calzadas Carved pottery at Canto Corralito was not used in special contexts, like is known in San José Mogote, or Tlatilco.

Calzadas Carved sherds were recovered from middens, fill-layers, and mundane household debris (Cheetham 2010:167). As was the case in San Lorenzo, carved pottery from Canto Corralito appears to be “ordinary,” and there may be an obvious reason for this. Fifteen percent of the Calzadas Carved sherds excavated at Canton Corralito (up until the writing of this paper), chemically trace to the San Lorenzo area (see Cheetham 2007). Estimates suggest that the people of Canto imported 400 to 500 Calzadas Carved vessels per year from San Lorenzo (Cheetham 2007). Canto Corralito could have been the Gulf Olmec enclave described by David Cheetham (2006, 2010:182-183). If so, reasons would be minimal for the pottery to have a “special” function in Canto Corralito, other than arriving there as typical household ware.

Another possibility, however, is that Canto Corralito could have been a popular congregation area of a regional cult, and the Calzadas Carved pottery found there could have been the ritual articles of religious practices possibly taking place there. Cheetham (2010:183) does take note that along with the volume of pots and other objects coming in, so were people arriving as immigrants and traders. If this was the scenario, surely it was, than religious groups also made the voyage back and forth between San Lorenzo and Canto Corralito, along with their own collection of ceramics.



## Discussion

During the San José Phase, people from San José Mogote used pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery to mark membership in one of the standing household groups (e.g., Marcus 1989). On a larger political scale, entire villages also associated with one supernatural entity or another, as was the case in the Etla and Tlacolula regions, where the two supernatural entities were used to mark group membership. During this time, the carved pottery was also placed in the burials of unknown descent groups, but likely those of the male line (e.g., Lesure 2004:84), again as markers of status at time of death.

In Tlatilco's case, pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery also marked status among people. However, the identities of these Tlatilcans, it seems, distinguished them from the rest of the Tlatilco population. Therefore, it is possible that this carved pottery belonged to an external group, "foreign" to Tlatilco, possibly a regional cult.

At San Lorenzo, Calzadas Carved pottery lacked a "special" function, not deployed in burials or in the telling of a certain identification code. At best, the pottery served to welcome guests and likely people used it in household events and local ceremonies. At the site of El Remolino, people did not use Calzadas Carved pottery in substantial numbers, yet in Canto Corralito, people did use Calzadas Carved pottery, though with no distinctive purpose, as was the case in San Lorenzo.

To move beyond a regional interpretation of pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, the following model is offered as a tentative argument. It is possible that pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery was part of a larger collection of ritual vessels, or *cult* ceramics (Table 2). The collection, I believe, would have restricted its types to

those with a ritual function, as opposed to those with a culinary one; used only when consuming medicinal plants and drinks, burning incense, venerating the supernatural through worship, and/ or when status and identity became the focus of the activity (e.g., the burying of the deceased and the accession of rulership).

Early Formative ceramics falling under the cult type, might have manifested in the form of (1) figurines depicting male and female identities in various dispositions; (2) pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery; (3) Olmec-style hollow babies (see Blomster 1998, 2002); (4) *incensarios* and *candeleros* (see Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 396; Guthrie 1995: Fig. 209); and (5) pestles and roller stamps (see Guthrie 1995: Fig. 202-203). The “hallmark” of these ceramics would have reflected the Earth & Sky imagery (the St. Andrew’s cross, the hand-paw-wing, flame-eyebrow, and U-gum brackets).

The notion of ritual or cult ceramics serving the needs of a regional cult is not a new argument in Mesoamerican studies. Ringle and his colleagues (1998:214-218) have argued that ceramics associated with the Quetzalcoatl cult of the Epiclassic period included four main forms: a “frying pan” or ladle censor, open censors, *incensarios*, and Tlaloc pots. Cult ceramics they argue may spread or be imitated by wider segments of society as the cult in question grows in popularity. Ceramics with serpent imagery are also well known in Classic period contexts. In Teotihuacan, for example, ceramic vessels, stamps, and plaques had Feathered-Serpent imagery decorated on them. These, according to Sugiyama (2000:119) might have identified social differences between people. Prudence M. Rice (1983) has also identified serpent representations and abstract serpent elements on Late Postclassic pottery of Central Peten in Northern Guatemala.

These pottery, similar in style to contemporaneous “serpent pots” from Central Mexico (Rice 1983:871), she believes were deployed in local and regional networks, an “international style” per say, and served as “easily” recognizable visual codes among those participating in the supposed interaction (Rice 1983:875-877). According to Elizabeth Boone and Michael Smith (2003:192), the far-reaching Late Postclassic international symbol set, might have been the work of a Mesoamerican religion, which first started in the Epiclassic period with the spread of the Quetzalcoatl cult.

If indeed members of a regional cult were involved in the spread of goods and religion during the Early Formative period, I do not believe that the cult would have gained ground via force or conquest (e.g., Blomster 2010:146), like it has been argued by Ringle and his colleagues (1998) for the Quetzalcoatl cult during the Epiclassic period. Rather, I believe that an early cult would have been subject to cult values, leadership, and gender roles. More specifically, members of the cult would have probably interacted unbiasedly with the elite hierarchy and local peoples, in the areas where the cult operated. After all, the cult possibly could have resembled a “network,” of *mechanisms* not a *mechanism* that connected various groups together. Richard P. Werbner (1977:180) does make the point, that among the Mwali cult of Africa, members go back and forth on an *ad hoc* basis, between the staff of various regions, and different cults.

If such was the scenario during the Early Formative period, the cult surely collaborated with corresponding traders and merchants—anyone associated with the ceramics. Since San Lorenzo artisans manufactured some of the carved pottery found in


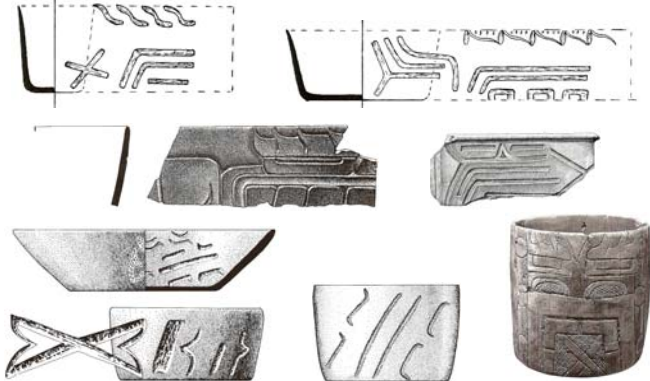
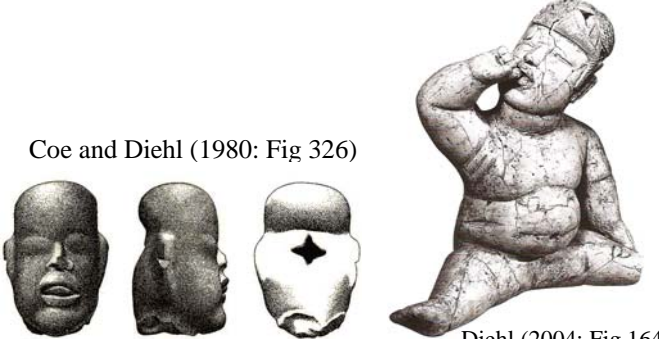
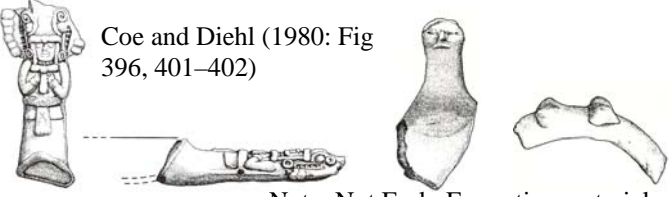
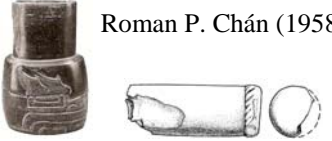
regions outside of its own, it is possible that the Gulf Coast served as some sort of a “Mecca” where the cult congregated (see also Blomster 2010:146-147).

It is also possible that the cult was a branch of the Olmec hierarchy, since Calzadas Carved motifs were carved on elite Olmec monuments (Chapter 5, this paper) connected with rulers of some type, used in their legitimization.

The carved pottery was in circulation for a long enough period, 1400 to 900 B.C., that certain family lines could have had an extended history of participation in the cult—allowing ascription to the cult at birth. Motives for new members to “enlist” may have been encouraged by factors such as mating opportunities, religious enlightenment, and possibly a way of escaping iron-fist rulership. After all, this was a period when major regions of Mesoamerica experienced an increase in population and a rise in the “haves” and “have-nots” (Clark 1997).

This may also explain why pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery is not associated with one particular social, ethnic, or specific group of people, but is instead encompassing of a wide range of social identities. This is a characteristic that Werbner (1977:179) notes in describing the nature of some cults. Presence of a cult may also explain the different stylized Earth & Sky imagery on pottery, and other ceramics made of local and non-local media in different regions. As Werbner (1977:215) notes, regions that participated in the cult maintained their own rituals and autonomy and this appears to have been the case in San José Mogote and Tlatilco, where pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery was used by local people, integrated with non-local symbolism, and used alongside other forms of cultural material.

Table 2. Tentative model showing cult ceramics of the Early Formative period.

Description	Forms (not drawn to same scale)
<p><b>1. Figurines</b> Common in all major sites of Early Formative Mesoamerica. Tlatilco figurines are the most distinctive since they are found in burials and mostly depict female identities in dancing like postures (Bernal 1969: Plate 54).</p>	 <p>Bernal (1969: Plate 54)</p>
<p><b>2. Carved pottery</b> Bowls, dishes, cups incised or widely carved with Earth &amp; Sky imagery on their exterior walls. Found in the Valley of Oaxaca, Central Mexico, the Gulf Coast of Mexico, and Canto Corralito. In the Gulf Coast and Canto Corralito, the pottery was associated with public ritual and/ or feasting activities. In Oaxaca, and Central Mexico, the pottery is link to status and/ or identity, found in both burials and households.</p>	
<p><b>3. Olmec-style hollow babies</b> Typically non-sexed portrayals of adults with infant-like features (Blomster 1998). Found in the Valley of Oaxaca, the Basin of Mexico, the Gulf Coast of Mexico, and Canto Corralito. Mainly associated with public ritual, not a primary burial item (Blomster 1998). Hollow on the inside, some found with red pigment on their heads, sometimes charred, and with the Venus star.</p>	 <p>Coe and Diehl (1980: Fig 326)</p> <p>Diehl (2004: Fig 164)</p>
<p><b>4. Incensarios</b> (incense burners) Containers used to burn different kinds of aromatic resins (also known as <i>copal</i>) produced from various species of trees. <i>Incensario</i> handles like those pictured, sometimes display idols with serpent supernatural entities (e.g., Rice 1999).</p>	 <p>Coe and Diehl (1980: Fig 396, 401–402)</p> <p>Note: Not Early Formative material</p>
<p><b>5. Stamps and pestles</b> Stamps may have been used to decorate body (Guthrie 1995: cat no. 210). Some, like the one shown depict Earth &amp; Sky imagery. Pestles used to grind minerals.</p>	 <p>Roman P. Chán (1958: Lamina 25)</p> <p>Coe and Diehl (1980: Fig 403)</p>

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis, I analyzed some of the earliest representations of Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent (also known as the Avian Serpent), known to scholars. Since I found out quickly that Avian-Serpent imagery was common in the Basin of Mexico, the Valley of Oaxaca, and the Gulf Coast of Mexico, the questions in this thesis asked how people in different social settings used Avian Serpent imagery.

I was further interested in understanding the association between Avian Serpents and the Olmec hierarchy, since Gulf Coast monuments revealed serpent imagery together with what I argue depict elite male Olmec identities.

In addition, I took into consideration one social mechanism, a regional cult that may have been responsible for the varied representations, and wide appearance of Avian-Serpent imagery throughout the Early Formative period. I did so well aware that other mechanisms such as *emulation* (see Flannery 1968), and *migration* (see Cheetham 2010), likely also played a part in the spread of symbols and goods.

#### The Avian Serpent as a symbol of rulership

Avian-Serpent symbolism of *earth*, and *sky* might have derived from the natural behaviors and markings of snakes. One species in particular, the fer-de-lance (*Bothrops Asper*) that was native to the Olmec heartland and Mexico's tropical environments, might have been the responsible model, and it is convincing to me that a number of Early and

Middle Formative motifs, on different types of media (refer to Figure 2), make an explicit reference to snake features and behavior.

Since Avian Serpents symbolized celestial power and the natural prowess of snakes, some members of the Olmec hierarchy, to confirm their authority and legitimize their identities, within the ruling class and common members of society, coupled their personas with serpent imagery. Some of them may have held “priestly” titles, and some possibly “shamanistic” roles as healers, and/or “doctors.” There also appears to be a connection between some of these elite personas of the Gulf Coast and pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery. Laguna de los Cerros monument 19, San Lorenzo monument 47, and La Venta monument 19, which display the Earth & Sky imagery, draw the link between elites and carved pottery. If these personas are not Olmec rulers, they might be the leadership, and/or sponsorship responsible for the spread of carved pottery, during the Early Formative period.

#### A regional interpretation of the Avian Serpent

Members of the Olmec hierarchy were not the only people that used the Avian Serpent to enhance their identities. Outside of the Gulf Coast, it is arguable that some of the earliest representations of the Feathered Serpent appear on ceramics, mostly pottery linked to households, villages, and family lineages.

The site of San José Mogote is one example where Earth & Sky imagery, or Avian Serpent, is associated with one of two groups of people who lived at the site. For instance, people from areas “A” and “C” of the site differ from the people in area “B” of the site in that they choose to use pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery as opposed to

pottery carved with were-jaguar imagery (e.g., Flannery and Marcus 1994; Marcus 1989). More to the south, outside of the site of San José Mogote, the villages of the Tlacolula region also choose to side with antagonistic symbolism in order to distinguish themselves from others. People from the site of Abasolo and Tomaltepec, for example, were predominately associated with pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery, as oppose to people from the site of Tierras Largas and Huitzo, who were predominately associated with pottery carved with were-jaguar imagery. A possibility to consider is this. Status identified by the Earth & Sky imagery in San José Phase Oaxaca might have been passed down via the male lineage (e.g., Lesure 2004; Marcus 1989). Higher percentages of pottery carved with Earth & Sky imagery found in male burials in comparison with lower percentages of similar pottery found in female burials support this possibility.

Another example of carved pottery deployed in a way to communicate status comes from the site of Tlatilco. There people used the pottery to fill the burials of mostly women, though, in half the cases, men also. In this case, the carved pottery surely indicated a particular social standing, a “foreign” affiliation possibly (e.g., Tolstoy 1989). The notion that considers members of this group indicative of a regional cult is only tentative. However, the cult theme does fit well into the ceramic model talked about in Chapter 6, which does describe interregional interaction.

On the other hand, contemporaneous Calzadas Carved pottery from the sites of San Lorenzo and Canto Corralito did not seem to identify status among people. Instead, it seems people used the pottery during local events, or when guests visited to eat and drink. It is also important to emphasize that in the site of El Remolino (a non-elite Olmec



settlement), similar pottery did not have a significant use, found in minute percentages.

One possible reason for this trend could be that Earth & Sky imagery was an Olmec invention and so makers and sponsors of the carved pottery preferred to import the ware to locations outside the Gulf Coast, and not poor Olmec sites like El Remolino.

### Beyond a regional interpretation of the Avian Serpent

The work of Blomster and his colleagues (Blomster et al. 2005) demonstrates that some of the carved pottery found in sites of the Valley of Oaxaca, the Basin of Mexico, and Canto Corralito was brought over from San Lorenzo. This detection of provincial information connected to certain carved pottery allows researchers to speculate specifics that may have surrounded the movement, and/or exchange of this good. It is most certain that there were, in motion, a series of themes “driving” the carved pottery of the Early Formative period from one area to another. As Carl Wendt (2010:120) notes, “was the receiving area seeking foreign objects (pull)? Was the host area imposing the items (and beliefs) on the receiving society (push)? Or was it some of both?”

Most certainly, multiple operating social mechanisms such as trade, emulation, and migration, drove the appearance of carved pottery. *One* mechanism, however, that I argued for here may involve the presence of a regional cult (e.g., Blomster 2010:167) whose symbol was the Avian Serpent. Participants of a regional cult could have carried the pottery as their main repertoire of goods, during their travels, or simply could have been transporters of the pottery, on behalf of San Lorenzo artisans and their sponsors. In Chapter 6, I even went as far as considering the identities of those in charge, referring to the identities on some Olmec monuments as “cult leaders.”

A tentative argument of this thesis emphasizes the following. Early representations of the Feathered Serpent (see Figure 2) put on display a full range of material variations in a variety of contexts throughout Mesoamerica, during the Early Formative period.

For example, early representations of Mesoamerica's Feathered Serpent, those shown as a cluster of motifs (i.e., the St. Andrew's cross, the hand-paw-wing, flame-eyebrow, and U-gum brackets, as shown in Figure 8), or carved in a round-like fashion are (1) found in diverse ritual settings (i.e., in households marking status, burials, near water, and in cave sites); (2) found depicted on a wide range of media (i.e., ceramic, greenstone, basalt stone, exposed bedrock), and in mural form—manifested on local and non-local media; (3) excavated in association with other ritual articles (i.e., figurines, *incensarios*, *candeleros*, iron-ore mirrors, pestles/grinders, perforators, and stingray spines)—Tlatilco burials put forward the best case of this scenario; (4) associated with a wide range of social, possibly ethnic identities, *not only* associated with elites, or richer or poorer groups; (5) carved on Olmec monuments juxtaposed with leaders (i.e., rulers, religious leaders, and medicinal practitioners); and (6) at times identified by the St. Andrew's cross, the symbol of the serpent.

The above scenarios are only tentative, but they do have the following advantages. The model (1) outlines a full range of archaeological scenarios where Earth & Sky imagery (i.e., the St. Andrew's cross, the hand-paw-wing, flame-eyebrow, and U-gum brackets) is manifested; (2) describes a wide range of artifact classes, with an emphasis on ceramics mainly used in ritual practices; (3) does not have Gulf Olmec, or

Olmec missionaries as the inventors of the Earth & Sky imagery or its attached symbolism; only the idea that Gulf Olmec might have been charged with *overseeing* the spread of these symbols (possibly new to Mesoamerica). And that places like San Lorenzo, because of the regions wealth and space, supported larger congregation areas and investment for members of the cult hierarchy.

A possibility to take into consideration is that Early Formative religious leaders could have been of any ethnic/regional background, however preferring to call the Gulf Coast home, for the riches it offered.

These are my final comments. Early representations of the Feathered Serpent, I do not suppose were an Olmec invention. Examples of the Avian Serpent outside of the Gulf Coast exist that could date prior to the rise of San Lorenzo. However, it might be that the elite Olmec were the first to make use of its full potential. At best, this composite supernatural creature, so often associated with power and rulership, was further engaging of common peoples needs to legitimate their own status and identities, primarily through some form of ritual.

At the same time, early representations of the Feathered Serpent best fit into a model that describes the work of a regional cult and its members. The Avian Serpent just might have been the symbol belonging to a religious network that arose with the start of complex society in Mesoamerica; a cult involved in the spread of new ideas, beliefs, and cosmology, through its ritual activities and interregional interaction, since the Early Formative period (1400-900 B.C.).

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