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The Rainmakers: The Olmec and Their Contribution to Mesoamerican Belief and Ritual

As the earliest Mesoamerican civilization based on agriculture, the Olmec developed an elaborate ideology devoted to water and rain and, in addition, religious rituals of sacrifice and supplication designed to ensure agricultural abundance. This precocious and innovative religious complex centered on rain and agricultural fertility profoundly influenced contemporaneous and later Mesoamerican cultures. As the first great “rainmakers,” the Olmec created a lasting legacy of deities and rituals devoted to water and agriculture.

The Avian Serpent

In Olmec iconographic studies, considerable attention has been paid to the chthonic forces of the earth, sea, and underworld. However, relatively little interest has been paid to sky symbolism and its attendant imagery. The strongly terrestrial and underworld focus may partly derive from the clear importance in Olmec ideology of jaguars, which in later Mesoamerican religions are widely identified with the earth and dark, nether regions. In addition, the Massive Offerings and other impressive caches in La Venta Complex A suggest a major Olmec orientation to the earth and underworld. Nonetheless, it should be noted that equally impressive expenditures of effort went into the creation of the great, lofty pyramid that dominates the site of La Venta. Just as the Massive Offerings are oriented to the earth, so the La Venta pyramid offers access to the heavens. In this portion of the study, I will focus on a particular denizen of the Olmec sky, a creature I term the Avian Serpent. Although this composite being is ancestral to the plumed serpent of Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerica, I prefer to use the term Avian Serpent, since it is not simply plumed, but frequently possesses such other bird traits as a beak and wings. While this entity has often been identified as the caiman earth, I will argue that it is primarily a celestial being associated with wind and rain.

The Avian Serpent and the Olmec Dragon

In two influential studies Peter David Joralemon (1971, 1976) isolated a major deity of the

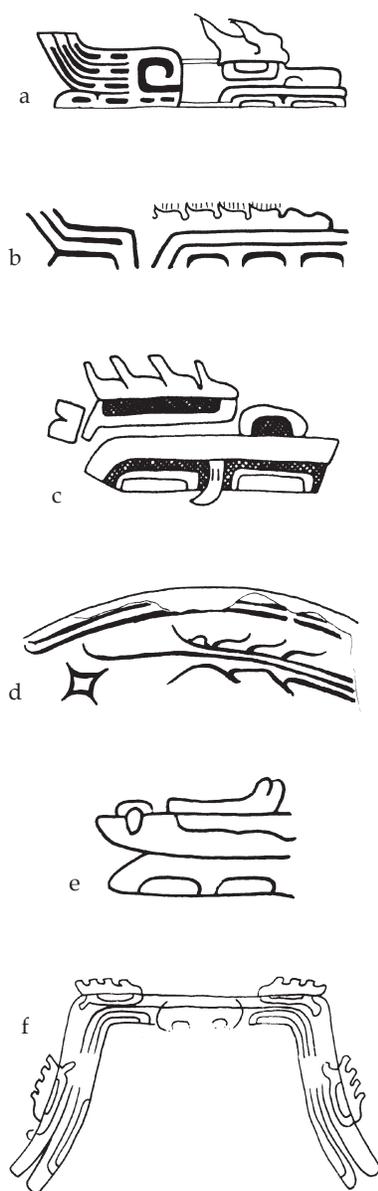


Figure 1. The Olmec Avian Serpent: (a–b) Early Formative examples with paw-wing, Tlatilco (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 101); (c) Early Formative Avian Serpent; (d) Middle Formative example on interior of dish with double-line-break rim (after Niederberger 1987:Fig. 514); (e–f) Middle Formative Avian Serpent on incised jadeite objects attributed to Río Pesquero (after Joralemon 1976:Fig. 8).

Olmec pantheon (Figure 1), describing it as a highly composite creature, or “dragon,” an amalgamation of many creatures of the natural world: “The Olmec Dragon is a mythological beast with cayman, eagle, jaguar, human, and serpent attributes. His characteristic features include avian headcrest, flame eyebrows, L-or-trough-shaped eyes, bulbous nose, jaws, and dentition of a cayman, bifid tongue, hand-paw-wings, and either a mammalian, saurian, or serpentine body” (Joralemon 1976:37). Composed of many creatures, the Olmec Dragon also has a wide range of associations, among which Joralemon (1976:58) listed: “earth, maize, agricultural fertility, clouds, rain, water, fire, and kingship.” Joralemon suggested that this all-encompassing god may have been ancestral to such high gods as the Maya Itzam Na and the Aztec Omoteotl. Joralemon (1976:61) acknowledged that this Olmec all-encompassing saurian being is quite similar to the Itzam Na or “Iguana House” model of the Maya cosmos proposed by J. Eric S. Thompson (1970b). However, it is now clear that Thompson grouped a great number of quite distinct saurian beings under this single category, and his “Itzamnaization” of the Maya universe is now being critically reassessed (see Freidel et al. 1993:46-47, 410-412). Similarly, the question remains whether all forms grouped under the Olmec Dragon category constitute the same being. It is beyond the scope of this study to trace or refute the many suggested permutations of the Olmec Dragon. Instead, I will be concerned with the essential, primary characteristics found in the head region, the most diagnostic area for Mesoamerican deity identification. I will note that the head of this creature is essentially a combination of snake and bird features, in other words, an avian serpent.

Among the Olmec Dragon features that Joralemon listed are a crenelated brow resembling flames or feathers, pawlike wing, and mouth or gum brackets similar to a series of inverted U’s. Some of the earliest and most consistent forms appear on the sides of Early Formative incised bowls (Figure 1a–c). For many Early Formative examples, the paw-wing is situated directly behind the head, as if it were an appendage of the cheek or neck (e.g., Figure 1a–b). The faunal make-up of the Olmec Dragon head has been the source of much debate. Although Joralemon initially favored a jaguar-dragon identification, he subsequently noted caiman attributes, and prefers to consider it more reptilian than jaguar (Joralemon 1971:35,

1976:37). Whereas Joralemon was careful not to link the Olmec Dragon to one specific creature, subsequent researches have identified this entity as a caiman.

In addition to noting caiman attributes, Joralemon also suggested that the Olmec Dragon is associated with the earth, water, and, secondarily, with fire (Joralemon 1976:37, 1988:11). The caiman is indeed a well-known earth symbol in Mesoamerica, and is also represented in several fire rituals recorded for Postclassic Yucatan (see Selser 1902-1923:4:646-653; Taube 1989b). Although the documented association of caimans with the earth and fire seems to support the caiman identification, it is by no means certain that the Olmec Dragon is a terrestrial fire deity. Instead, the head of this creature will be seen to serve as an Olmec sign for the heavens and can be readily related to later Mesoamerican sky imagery.

The Avian Serpent and the Plumed Serpent

Both Román Piña Chan (1958) and Miguel Covarrubias (1957:31, 60, 63) initially identified the entity now known as the Olmec Dragon as a combination of jaguar and serpent characteristics, an early, ancestral form of the plumed serpent of Classic Mesoamerica. Michael D. Coe (1968:114) was the first to cite several Olmec depictions of serpents with avian characteristics, creatures that he considered as early forms of Quetzalcoatl. In this early analysis, Coe distinguished the plumed serpent from a creature with flamelike crests above the eyes, an entity he regarded as a serpent of fire and drought antithetically opposed to Quetzalcoatl. Among the plumed serpent examples cited by Coe were La Venta Monument 19, Chalcatzingo Petroglyph 5, and a mural from Juxtlaahuaca Cave, Guerrero. In a later study, Piña Chan (1977:19) also contrasted the creature with brow crests, his terrestrial jaguar water serpent, with a sky-dwelling, feathered rain serpent. Although Joralemon initially placed the Olmec plumed serpent under the specific deity category of God VII, he subsequently noted that it was probably but an aspect of the Olmec Dragon (Joralemon 1971:82-84, 1976:33). The suggested contrast between the entity with eye crests and the plumed serpent is a false dichotomy; Olmec plumed serpents often have both the crested brow and the paw-wing (see Figures 2, 4d-e, 6a). The Olmec plumed serpent and dragon are the same being, a serpent with a range of avian attributes, including a crested eye, beak, and wings as well as body

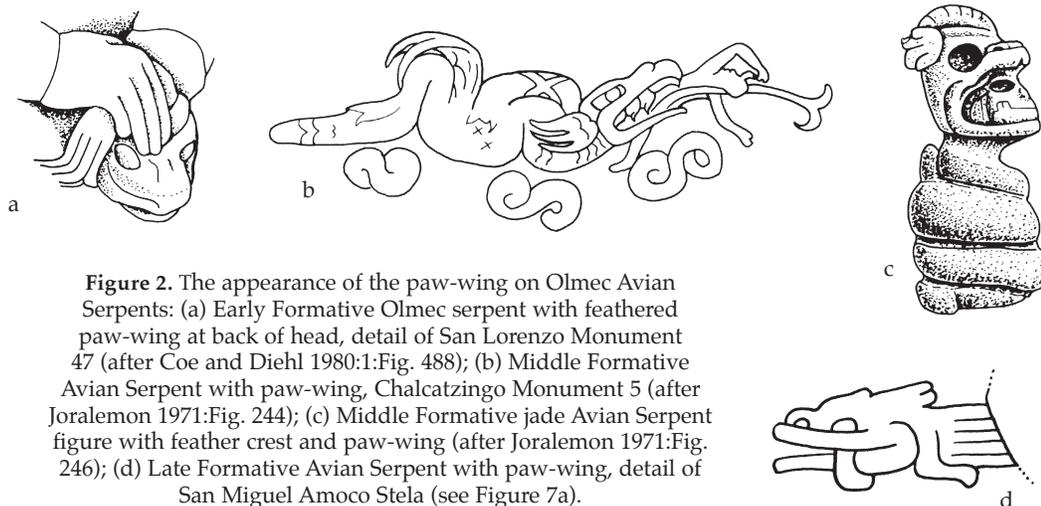


Figure 2. The appearance of the paw-wing on Olmec Avian Serpents: (a) Early Formative Olmec serpent with feathered paw-wing at back of head, detail of San Lorenzo Monument 47 (after Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 488); (b) Middle Formative Avian Serpent with paw-wing, Chalcatzingo Monument 5 (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 244); (c) Middle Formative jade Avian Serpent figure with feather crest and paw-wing (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 246); (d) Late Formative Avian Serpent with paw-wing, detail of San Miguel Amoco Stela (see Figure 7a).

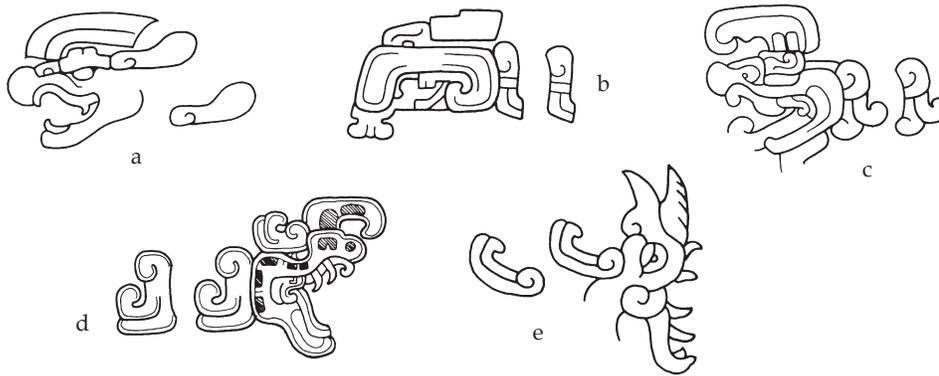


Figure 3. The transformation of the paw-wing motif in southeastern Mesoamerican iconography: (a) Middle Formative attenuated paw-wing, La Venta Monument 19; (b) Protoclassic simplified paw-wing as cheek appendage, Tres Zapotes Stela D; (c) Protoclassic crested serpent with feathered brow and cheek appendage, Izapa Stela 7; (d) Protoclassic Maya stone bowl with crested serpent with feathered brow and simplified paw-wing (after Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 67); (e) Early Classic Maya serpent with cheek appendage, detail of Leiden Plaque (after Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 31).

plumage.

A number of researchers have noted that San Lorenzo Monument 47 portrays a person holding an Early Formative plumed serpent (Coe and Diehl 1980:1:356-357; Joralemon 1976:Fig. 9). The fanlike feather tufts at the rear of the head are identical in positioning and form to the paw-wing found on contemporaneous depictions of the Olmec Dragon (Figure 2a).¹ During the Middle Formative period, plumed serpents continue to have versions of the paw-wing immediately behind the head (Figure 2b–d). On La Venta Monument 19, the paw-wing has become increasingly attenuated, and clearly relates to the saurian cheek elements appearing on Protoclassic sculpture of the Isthmian and nearby Maya regions (Figure 3). Even in these later instances, the cheek element retains the large curl occurring with the earlier Olmec paw-wing motif.

The paw-wing of the Olmec Dragon (hereafter referred to as the Avian Serpent) is primarily an avian wing, rather than a jaguar paw. The majority of Early Formative examples have paw-wings turning upward to represent feathered wings, not quadruped limbs. Explicit birds with similarly upsweeping paw-wings occur on Laguna de los Cerros Monument 13 and Early Formative aviform effigy vessels.² On the Olmec Avian Serpent, the paw-wings are immediately behind the head, like the pectoral fins of fish. But here the feathered wings are not for eel-like transport through standing water, but through the sky, much like contemporary Huichol conceptions of a winged serpent: “the serpent of the Corn Mother has only wings, and ‘flies in the rain’” (Lumholtz 1900:73). The modern Mixtec of

¹ As the final version of this paper was being prepared for publication, I obtained a copy of Patricia Ann Garbe’s Master’s thesis (Garbe 1971). Garbe independently arrived at many of the same conclusions regarding the paw-wing and an Olmec winged serpent. For examples of serpents with paw-wings, Garbe cited San Lorenzo Monument 47, Chalcatzingo Relief 5, and the San Miguel Amuco Stela. In addition, she also noted that the Olmec Dragon commonly appearing on Early Formative incised vessels is the same winged serpent. However, as far as I am aware, her early insights were not entertained by other researchers.

² For effigy vessel examples, see Feuchtwanger (1989:Figs. 98, 101).

Nuyoo have a similar concept of a crested or winged rain serpent, the *koo savi*: “When a *koo savi* flies, it is surrounded by rain clouds, which it is said to bear on its back” (Lumholtz 1900:73; Monaghan 1989).

The Olmec paw-wing evidently serves to transport the Avian Serpent through the heavens, a function that may reveal its underlying meaning in Olmec iconography. In Mesoamerican thought, the wind is recognized as the essential way to carry clouds and rain through the atmosphere. According to the contemporary Huichol, the blue sky serpent is a rain-bringing wind: “When clouds gather from the west, this is one of the serpents, or winds, that bring them along” (Lumholtz 1900:41). In Postclassic central Mexican belief, Ehecatl—the duck-billed wind aspect of Quetzalcoatl—is the bringer of the fructifying rain: “Quetzalcoatl—he was the wind; he was the guide, the roadsweeper of the rain gods” (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 1:9). The Olmec paw-wing motif may be the Olmec sign for wind, the means of transporting the Avian Serpent—and by extension clouds and rain—through the firmament.

Researchers have interpreted the Avian Serpent as a sky serpent, although in this case identified with fire, not rain, due to the so-called flame eyebrows typically displayed by this being (Coe 1968:114; Marcus 1989:170, 172; Pyne 1976:273). However, no one has provided an argument as to why these brow elements represent flames. In fact, no explicit sign for fire or flames has yet been identified in Olmec art. According to Philip Drucker and Donald W. Lathrap, flame eyebrows are actually plumes, such as occur on the feathered crest of the harpy eagle (Drucker 1952:160, 169, 194-195; Lathrap, cited in Joralemon 1976:40). Throughout Olmec iconography, sharply beaked raptorial birds display flame eyebrows (Figure 4a–c). Although conceivably such feathers could also refer to flames, it should not be taken as an a priori assumption.

Aside from these bird elements, Olmec serpents also display the crested brow (Figure 4d–g). These reptilian feather-brows probably refer to an intentional blending of bird and

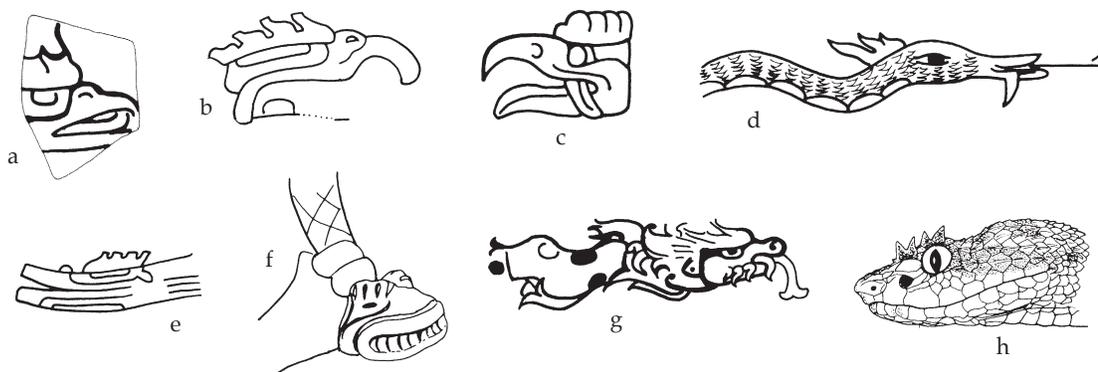


Figure 4. Avian and serpent imagery in Olmec iconography: (a) Early Formative raptorial bird with crested brow, San Lorenzo (after Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 140); (b) Middle Formative raptorial bird with brow crest and inverted U-shaped elements under jaw (after Guthrie 1995:Cat. no. 118); (c) Late Formative raptorial bird with brow crest and curving fang, Shook Panel (after Miller and Taube 1993:39); (d) Early Formative tecomate, detail of crested serpent, Tlatilco (after Piña Chan 1958); (e) Middle Formative Avian Serpent with brow crest (see Figure 1e–f); (f) Early Formative serpent with brow crest, detail of jaguar effigy vessel (after Feuchtwanger 1989:Pl. 94); (g) Middle Formative Avian Serpent with brow crest, Oxtotitlan (after Grove 1970:Fig. 12); (h) palm viper, or arboreal fer-de-lance *Bothriechis schlegelii* (after Campbell and Lamar 1989:Fig. 165).

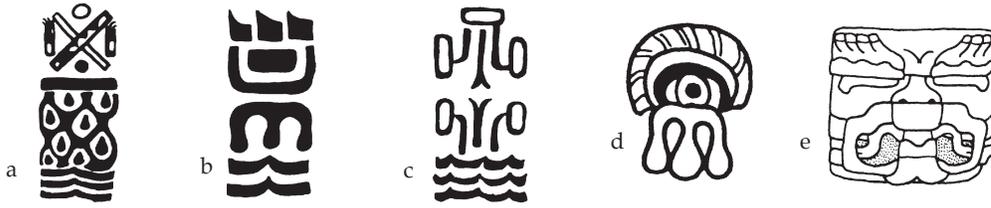


Figure 5. Avian Serpent and sky iconography: (a–c) Early Formative roll-out designs of three roller seals attributed to Las Bocas (after Joralemon 1976:Fig. 7h–i, n); (d) Classic feathered serpent eye with blue trilobate tear, Teotihuacan (after Berrin 1988:Pl. 1a–f); (e) face from La Venta Monument 6.

serpent, but there is a remarkable snake in the lowland Olmec region with supraorbital crests in the form of several long scales projecting immediately above the eye (Figure 4h). This creature is the much-feared arboreal fer-de-lance (*Bothriechis schlegelii*) known under such epithets as the eyelash, horned, or palm viper.³ Ranging from southern Mexico to northern South America, this creature is dreaded not only for its terrible venom, but also for its unnerving habit of striking from above at upper portions of the body.⁴ Olmec serpents with crested brows are accurate portrayals of the arboreal, “sky-dwelling” palm viper. Although another form of pit viper, the rattlesnake, dominates later Mesoamerican plumed serpent imagery, it is possible that the Early Formative prototype of the feathered serpent is the arboreal palm viper.⁵

The Avian Serpent as the Sky

According to Lathrap (cited in Joralemon 1976:40), the feather-crested eye is a celestial attribute. Three Early Formative ceramic roller seals from highland Puebla confirm that the feather-browed eye and the Avian Serpent symbolize the sky, and by extension, rain (Figure 5a–c). Each seal has an undulating, chevronlike form at one end of the scene, which clearly serves as a sign for waves and standing water in the iconography of Teotihuacan and other later Mesoamerican cultures. Along with the wave sign, the first cylinder seal (Figure 5a) also portrays crossed-bands accompanied by paw-wings. Coe (1968:114) suggested that in Olmec and later Maya iconography, the crossed-bands simultaneously refer to sky and serpent. Just as the undulating chevron represents the sea and standing water, the crossed-bands and paw-wings depict the sky. Between the crossed-bands sky and the wave motif are teardrop-shaped elements. These devices probably depict falling rain as a mediating force between the overarching heavens and the sustaining sea.

³ In Mixe the arboreal palm viper is termed *tsoxc vaj*, meaning “green horn” (Schoenhals and Schoenhals 1965:120).

⁴ For descriptions of the arboreal palm viper, see Alvarez del Toro (1982:211–212) and Campbell and Lamar (1989:162, 168–169).

⁵ To the Aztec, *quetzalcoatl* could refer not only to the god or the historical king of Tollan, but also to a particular, small venomous snake from the Totonac area, the former region of the Olmec heartland. Although it is unlikely that the creature described can be identified with a specific species, its toxicity and mode of attack are similar to the arboreal palm viper’s: “As soon as it appears, it bites one, it strikes one. And he whom it strikes dies suddenly; it is not an hour when he dies—only a very little time. And in order to bite one, first it flies, quite high up; well up it goes; and it just descends upon whom or what it bites. And when it flies or descends, a great wind blows. Wherever it goes, it flies” (Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 11:85).

The second roller seal (Figure 5b) also represents the three regions of heaven, falling rain, and standing water. The sky is indicated by the feather-crested eye, below which is the trilobate rain sign of Olmec, Teotihuacan, and later Mesoamerican iconography.⁶ Falling from the crested eye, this sign reveals that, like the contact period Aztec, the Olmec compared rain symbolically to tears.⁷ The same identification of rain with tears occurs in the recently reported murals at Techinantitla, Teotihuacan. In these murals, which depict a plumed serpent atop a series of glyphically labeled trees, one plant is designated by a blue trilobate tear falling from a feather-crested eye (Figure 5d). Ringed with green feathers, this same crested eye appears with the plumed serpent immediately above the mural scene (see Figure 10d); the eyes are identical in color as well as form—the red eye is topped with a band of yellow and, finally, a green-feathered fringe. In the same way the plumed serpent eye and trilobate sign allude to rain, the great overarching feathered serpent has multicolored raindrops falling from its body and a stream of water pouring from its mouth. Clearly, the Teotihuacan plumed serpent is here portrayed as the celestial rain-bringer.

The crested eye on the Olmec roller seal probably refers to the Avian Serpent ancestral to the plumed serpent of Teotihuacan and subsequent Mesoamerican cultures. However, since only the feathered eye is depicted, it is difficult to determine whether it alludes to a serpent being or simply a bird. On the third roller seal (Figure 5c), the upper sky region obviously possesses serpentine attributes. Directly above the basal waves are two virtually identical, opposed images. In the more intact upper example, the motif can be seen to be of three curving devices bracketed by rectangular forms on three sides. The rectangular bracket enclosure is a specific motif, which Joralemon describes as the rectangular jaw markings of the Olmec Dragon (Joralemon 1971:9). Once these brackets are identified as a maw, the interior elements are recognizable as the curving fangs and cleft tongue of a serpent. La Venta Monument 6 portrays a flame-browed head with a similar forked tongue and outcurving fangs (Figure 5e). This Avian Serpent face, like the serpent maw on the roller seal, represents the heavens from which the rains come.

One of the finest depictions of the Olmec Avian Serpent appears on La Venta Monument 19 (Figure 6a). A great rattlesnake arches above a seated male wearing a headdress in the image of the same creature. A feather crest projects from the top of the serpent head, which is sharply beaked and displays a simplified form of the crested brow. I have previously noted that the horizontal device immediately below the serpent head is an epigraphic reference to the plumed serpent (Taube 1986:59). The sign is composed of two quetzal birds facing a central sky band represented by crossed-bands (Figure 6b). It is well known that in Mayan languages the words for sky and snake are generally homophonous, tending to be either *chan* or *can*. In the related Mixe-Zoquean languages—the probable language family of the Olmec—the words for serpent (*tsan*) and sky (*tsap*) are similar enough to suggest that both they and the Maya terms may have originally derived from a single Macromayan word denoting both serpent and sky. However, aside from this linguistic possibility, it will be subsequently noted that the Olmec Avian Serpent is a symbol of the sky.

The pair of quetzal birds probably refers not only to the quetzal serpent, but to a particular Olmec artifact, a bound feather bundle, such as the one held in the arms of the

⁶ For a discussion of the trilobate sign in Mesoamerican iconography, see Stocker and Spence (1973).

⁷ According to Aztec belief, the tears of children destined for sacrifice signified the coming rain (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:44).

standing deity on a Middle Formative celt attributed to Río Pesquero (Figure 6c). The ends of this tied object are not stiff like wood, but hang down, like the quetzal tail feathers on the La Venta Monument 19 sign. A third example occurs on the Olmec-style stela from San Miguel Amuco, Guerrero, on which a striding figure holds the bundle in his left arm (Figure 7a). A glyphic version of the same bundle occurs near the head of the figure, with one end outflaring and tufted, recalling the La Venta and Río Pesquero devices. David C. Grove and Louise I. Paradis (1971) described the head at shoulder height as a “feathered serpent head”; the paw-wing, brow crest, and large, curving fang identify it as the Avian Serpent. The same authors also suggested that the figure wears a “bird-serpent mask” with a probable curving fang. This individual then, like the human figure on La Venta Monument 19, is dressed as the Avian Serpent. The feather bundle signs on La Venta Monument 19 and the Amuco stela are probably rare epigraphic references to this Olmec supernatural.

The bound feather bundles are related to the late Olmec crossed-bands sky signs such as appear on the top of Tres Zapotes Stela A and the square incised jadeite tablet in the Dallas Museum of Art (Figure 7b–c). Another crossed-bands sky sign—again in the uppermost portion of the scene—occurs on the large incised vessel attributed to Chalcatzingo (Figure 7d). Curved and outflaring, the vertical lines resemble flexible long and narrow feathers. A related form, similarly topped with a projecting feather tuft, appears on the Humboldt Celt (Figure 7e). The crossed-bands motif, flanked on either side by triple raindrops, is evidently denoted as a celestial source of rain. On one Protoclassic Maya fuschite vessel (Figure 7f), the crossed-bands appears above an undulating sign for standing water, recalling the Early Formative Puebla roller seals; we will note below that this scene also portrays celestial rain falling upon standing water. This Protoclassic sky band is flanked above and below by feathers, as if the crossed-bands lashes the celestial plumage. The same can be said for the long parallel elements and crossed-bands of the Middle Formative sky sign—all are based on feather bundles secured with cloth and binding.

An incised vessel attributed to Tabasco offers an example of an Olmec feather bundle in which six feathers project from the handle bound with crossed-bands lashing (Figure 8a). A seated albitite figure in The Cleveland Museum of Art holds a three-dimensional version of this feather object (Figure 8b). These two Olmec examples are identical to later bound feather bundles found widely in Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerica, including Tikal, Cacaxtla, and Aztec documents (Figure 8c–i). The cloth, paper, or basketry wrappings secure the bases of

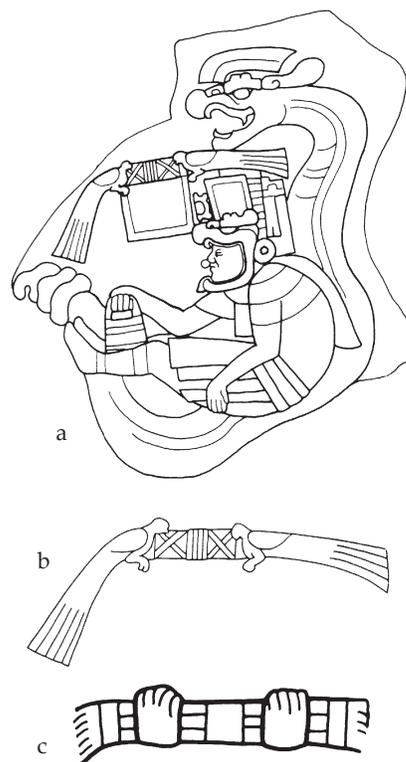


Figure 6. La Venta Monument 19 and the Olmec feather bundle sign: (a) figure with Avian Serpent headdress seated against beaked Avian Serpent, La Venta Monument 19; note quetzal bird and crossed-bands sign at upper left; (b) quetzal birds flanking crossed-bands, a probable reference to the Olmec Avian Serpent, La Venta Monument 19; (c) feather bundle, detail from incised jadeite celt attributed to Río Pesquero (after Joralemon 1976:Fig. 8e).

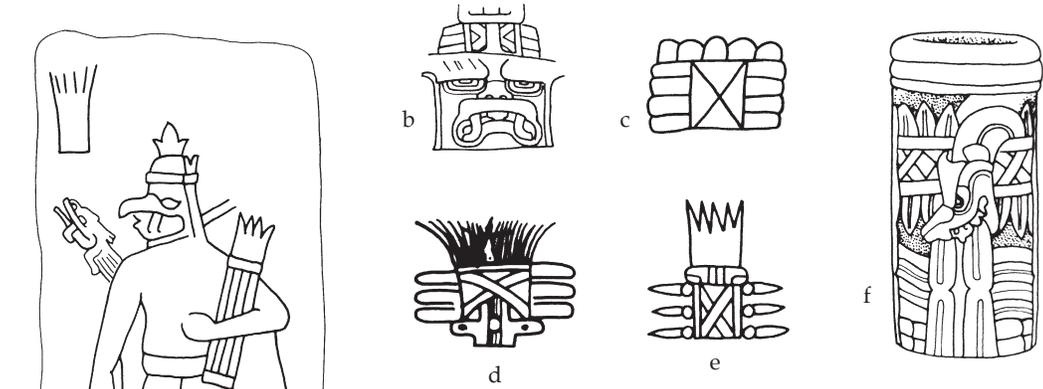


Figure 7. Early Mesoamerican feather bundles and sky signs: (a) Late Formative striding male with Avian Serpent headdress and figure in region of shoulder, San Miguel Amuco Stela; note bundle sign at upper left (after Grove and Paradis 1971:Figs. 2, 3); (b) Late Formative figure with brow crests and feather bundle sky sign atop Tres Zapotes Stela A (detail of drawing courtesy of James Porter); (c) Middle Formative feather bundle sky sign, detail of greenstone tablet, Dallas Museum of Art; (d) Middle Formative sky sign from incised ceramic vessel attributed to Chalcatzingo; (e) Middle Formative feather bundle flanked by triple raindrop motifs, detail of Humboldt Celt (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 32); (f) Protoclassic Maya fuchsite vessel depicting celestial fish-serpent spewing rain upon standing water (after Berjonneau et al. 1985:Pl. 316).

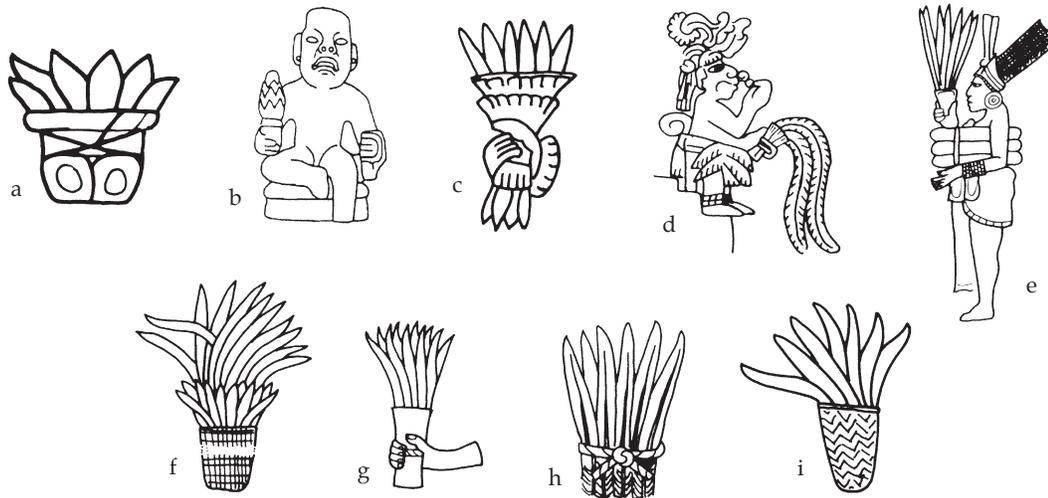


Figure 8. Feather bundles in ancient Mesoamerican trade and tribute: (a) Early Formative Olmec feather bundle with crossed-bands lashing on handle (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 143); (b) Middle Formative jadeite statuette holding feather bundle, The Cleveland Museum of Art (drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (c) Early Classic Maya stucco vessel with feather bundle rendered in Teotihuacan style, Tikal (after Culbert 1993); (d) Early Classic Maya incised vessel, detail of figure with quetzal bundle greeting Teotihuacanos, Tikal (after Culbert 1993); (e) Late Classic Maya vase, detail of figure holding quetzal feather bundle and probable manta tribute cloth (after Kerr 1992a:456); (f) Late Classic mural, detail of feather bundle on God L merchant pack, Cacaxtla (after Coe 1993:109); (g) Postclassic feather bundle, Mendoza Codex, f. 46r; (h) Postclassic quetzal feather bundle, Matricula de Tributos, f. 13r; (i) Postclassic feather bundle placed with Aztec merchant mortuary bundle, Magliabechiano Codex, f. 68r.

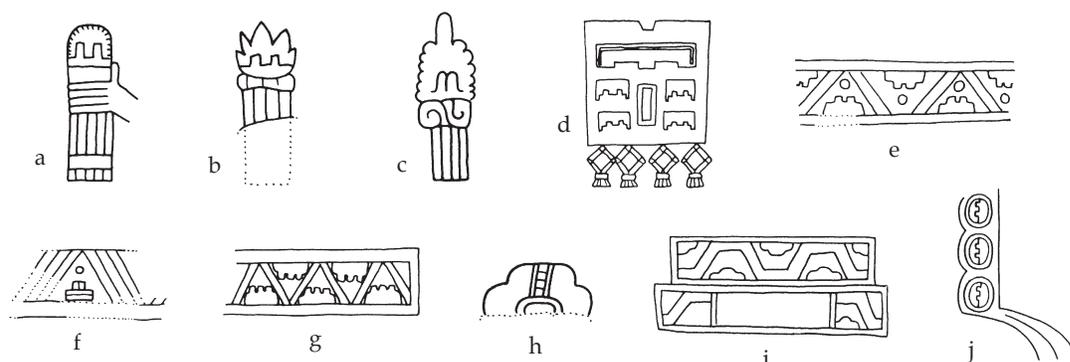


Figure 9. Elongated feather bundles and the double merlon sign: (a–b) Middle Formative bundles with double merlon sign (after Grove 1987:Fig. 2c–e); (c) Middle Formative bundle with S-curve cloud form and double merlon sign, Teopantecuanitlan (after drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (d) Middle Formative double merlons appearing in serpentine mosaic pavement, La Venta (after Coe 1968:63); (e) Late Formative double merlons in earth band, Alvarado Stela; (f) Protoclassic double merlon in earth band, Chiapa de Corzo Stela 7; (g) Protoclassic double merlons in earth band, Izapa Stela 12; (h) Early Classic Maya *yax* sign, Tikal Stela 31; (i) Late Classic Maya *yax* sign in earth bands, detail of monument (drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (j) double merlon cartouches painted in two shades of green, detail of feather cape from Oxtotitlan Mural 1 (after Grove 1970:Frontispiece, watercolor by Felipe Dávalos).

the feathers and provide a means to hold the delicate, precious feathers with a minimum of handling.

Along with serving as an Olmec symbol for the Avian Serpent and the blue diurnal sky, quetzal feather bundles seem to have provided a range of associative meanings, symbolically overlapping with tender green growth, such as grass, shoots, or rushes.⁸ The identification of quetzal plumes with green plants is well-documented in Mesoamerica. Thus quetzal feathers are commonly worn in the costume of Mesoamerican maize deities; the Holmul Dancer, a form of the Classic Maya maize god, is an especially developed example. In Yucatec Maya, *k'uk'* signifies sprouts or shoots, and *k'uk'um*, the quetzal (Barrera Vásquez 1980:420). The Aztecs also associated the long quetzal plumes with growing plants: “Those [plumes] which are on its tail are green, herb-green, very green, fresh green, turquoise-colored. They are like wide reeds: the ones which glisten, which bend” (Sahagún 1950–1982:Book 11:19). Olmec quetzal bundles probably allude to new green growth, a striking, virtually immediate result of rain.

The ambiguity between vegetal growth and quetzal plumes is reflected in the “torch” bundles commonly paired with shell “knuckle-dusters” in Olmec iconography (Figure 9). Whereas I believe that many of these forms represent feather bundles, Linda Schele (1992b, 1995) considers them green vegetal cuttings. The double-merlon or double-step sign, which commonly occurs at the tufted end of these long bundles (Figure 9a–c), also appears

⁸ During the climax of the involuntary kiva initiation of children at Zuni, New Mexico, an image of the plumed serpent Kolowisi is carried from a spring and placed in the kiva entrance. As water actually spews through the mouth of this serpent image, rolls of long green grass are thrown down into the kiva. Led to believe that this grass also comes from the plumed serpent’s mouth, the children carry the bundles away as tokens of their initiation (Stevenson 1904:101). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to belabor the similarities between this Zuni being and the Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl, it should be pointed out that in the Zuni initiation ceremony the conch, which is the voice of Kolowisi, and the morning star, which plays an important ceremonial role, are both significant attributes of Quetzalcoatl (Stevenson 1904:95).

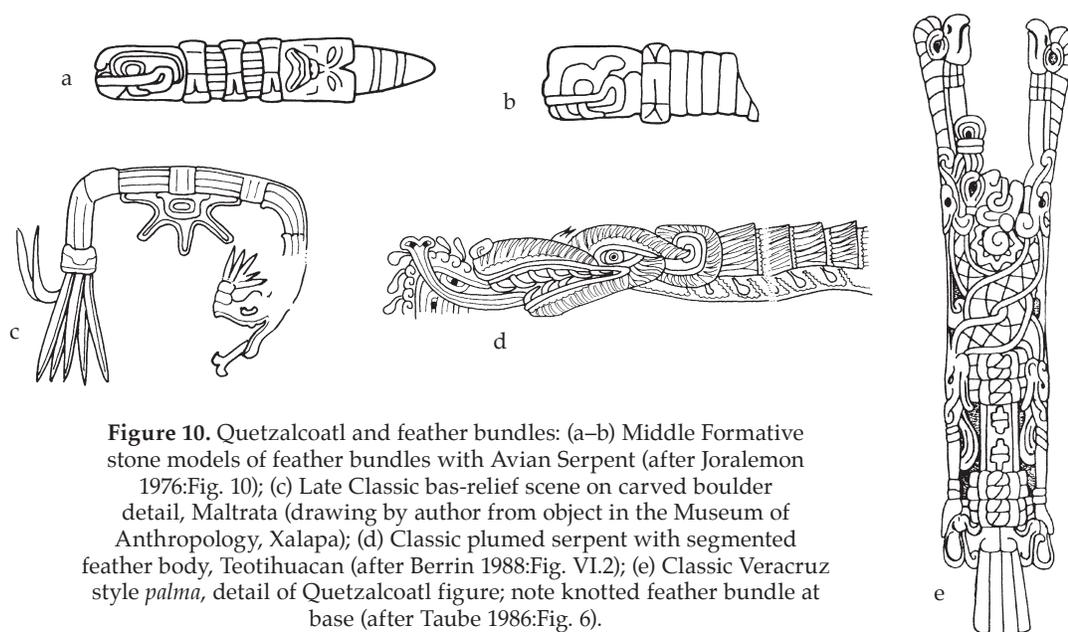


Figure 10. Quetzalcoatl and feather bundles: (a–b) Middle Formative stone models of feather bundles with Avian Serpent (after Joralemon 1976:Fig. 10); (c) Late Classic bas-relief scene on carved boulder detail, Maltrata (drawing by author from object in the Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa); (d) Classic plumed serpent with segmented feather body, Teotihuacan (after Berrin 1988:Fig. VI.2); (e) Classic Veracruz style *palma*, detail of Quetzalcoatl figure; note knotted feather bundle at base (after Taube 1986:Fig. 6).

repeatedly in the serpentine mosaic masks of the La Venta Massive Offerings (Figure 9d) and in the series of triangular devices often serving as Protoclassic baseline registers, probable representations of the earth (Figure 9e–g). It is difficult to reconcile the appearance of the double merlon with fiery torches, serpentine mask mosaics, and earth signs, but once the reputed “torches” are connected with quetzal plumes and plant growth, the three contexts share a single quality: all are green.

During the Protoclassic period, the double-merlon tabs merge closer together, at times becoming a single unit transected by a vertical line (Figure 9f). With this central division and upside-down T-like form, the Protoclassic double-merlon resembles the Maya *yax* sign for green (Figure 9h). A Late Classic monument in the Dallas Museum of Art portrays a Maya version of the Protoclassic diagonally banded earth sign with *yax* signs in place of the double-merlon motif (Figure 9i). However, Oxtotitlan Mural 1 provides the best evidence for the meaning of this sign. A series of double-merlon cartouches appears on the feathered costume of the seated figure (Figure 9j). In the color rendition of this mural, all six cartouches are in two shades of *green*: a bluish green and a darker shade of green.⁹ Rather than depicting dry, fiery torches, the long bound bundles depict feathers and, by extension, verdant growth.

Two Middle Formative stone examples of the long feather bundles have Avian Serpents placed at the ends, as if this creature is a personification of the bundle (Figure 10a–b). The use of feather bundles to represent plumed serpents is not restricted to the Formative Olmec. One Late Classic Veracruz *palma* depicts a flying anthropomorphic Quetzalcoatl with hands that double as quetzal heads; his body is partly covered by his cut conch wind jewel and a pair of twisted bicephalic serpents (Figure 10e). Projecting below his legs is a probable Late Classic form of the long “torch” bundle—a narrow knotted object containing four long plumes descending to the *palma* base. A roughly contemporaneous Late Classic relief from Maltrata, Veracruz, represents the serpentine form of Quetzalcoatl (Figure 10c). Along with

⁹ For a color representation of this image, see the frontispiece to Grove 1970.

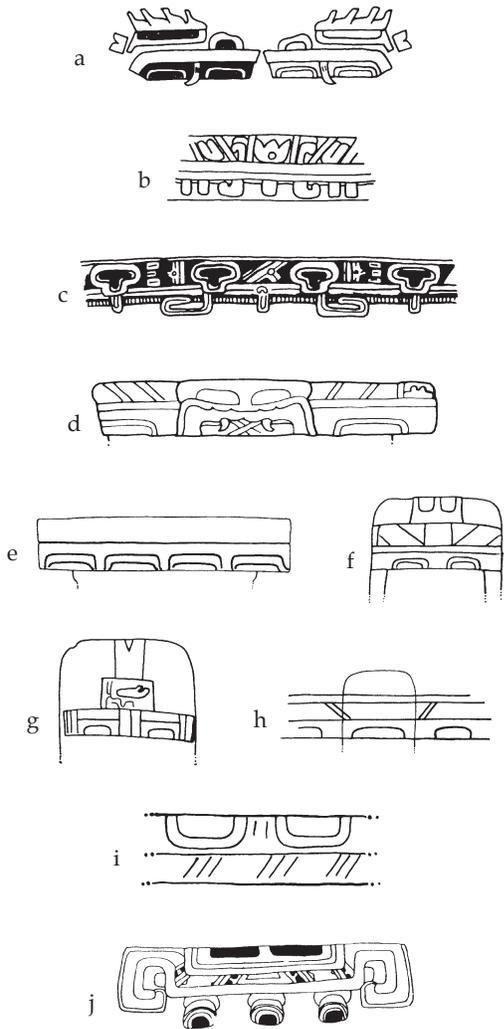


Figure 11. The Avian Serpent and early Mesoamerican sky bands: (a) Early Formative Avian Serpent with mirror image (after Quirarte 1981:Fig. 2d); (b) Protoclassic Maya sky band, Izapa Stela 12; (c) detail of Protoclassic Maya sky band (after Coe 1973:27); (d) Middle Formative sky band atop throne, La Venta Altar 4; (e) Early Formative sky band atop throne, Potrero Nuevo Monument 2; (f) Middle Formative Zapotec sky band at top of La Venta Stela 1; (g) Middle Formative sky band in upper portion of scene incised on Simojovel celt (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 148); (h) Late Formative sky band at top of Alvarado Stela, Veracruz (drawing by author after object in the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City); (i) Middle Formative Zapotec sky band on neck of urn (after Boos 1966:Fig. 202a); (j) Classic Zapotec “fauces de cielo,” detail of mural from Tomb 105, Monte Alban.

displaying a single large star, the body of the plumed serpent is bound by three bands placed at regular intervals, much like the Olmec feather bundle depicted on the Río Pesquero celt. The Maltrata relief also recalls the plumed serpent of Teotihuacan, which is often portrayed as if it were a segmented series of feather bundles placed in line (Figure 10d).

Avian Serpent Sky Bands

Jacinto Quirarte (1981) noted a striking similarity between the Olmec Avian Serpent and horizontal band motifs appearing in Protoclassic Izapan-style art, citing as an example the profile depiction of an Avian Serpent from Tlapacoya (Figure 11a). By placing a mirror image of this creature at the tip of the snout, a frontal image with a pair of outcurving fangs is created, a face notably similar to horizontal bands found in Protoclassic Maya art (Figure 11b–c). Garth Norman (1976:26) rightly identified the Izapan-style motifs as early sky bands, noting that they occur in the upper portions of scenes, at times with clouds and falling rain.

Norman (1976:23) traced the origins of Protoclassic sky bands to as early as the Middle Formative Olmec, observing their presence on Pijijiapan Stone 1 and La Venta Altar 4. The Middle Formative examples, like the Izapan-style sky bands, contain a pair of outwardly leaning diagonal bands, creating a form of truncated V. Overlooked by Norman were the inverted U devices on the La Venta monument running along the lower edge of the celestial band (Figure 11d). They are identical to the inverted U-shaped elements commonly accompanying the Olmec Avian Serpent (e.g., Figure 1). Although Joralemon (1976:37), *après* Lathrap, suggested that the inverted U-shaped element derives from the jaws and teeth of the caiman, the meaning of this device is more complex. This sign can also occur *below* the maw, in the region of the

lower chin or belly (e.g., Figures 1e–f, 4b). For the Olmec, this sign clearly had a meaning beyond the dentition of a single species.

Potrero Nuevo Monument 2, an Early Formative San Lorenzo throne, portrays dwarfs supporting a band marked with a series of the inverted U's (Figure 11e). Much like the Palace Throne from Late Classic Palenque, this sculpture portrays atlantean figures supporting the sky. The inverted U elements appear in other Olmec sky bands, again in the uppermost portions of the scenes (Figure 11f–g). Like La Venta Altar 4, the sky band atop La Venta Stela 1 portrays the outwardly leaning diagonal bands above the inverted U-shaped elements. An almost identical program occurs on the uppermost portion of the Alvarado Stela, a Veracruz monument dating to the Late Formative or Protoclassic periods (Figure 11h). For the Zapotec of Oaxaca, the Olmec sky band becomes entirely inverted. Thus, on the upper rim of a Middle Formative effigy vessel representing Cocijo, there are U-shaped elements *above* the diagonal bands (Figure 11i). This may also be seen in the Classic period Zapotec motif labeled as the “fauces de cielo,” or “jaws of the sky,” by Alfonso Caso (1928). In this clearly celestial motif, a pair of U-shaped elements again appears atop the diagonal bands (Figure 11j).

The series of inverted U-shaped elements are commonly found in Middle Formative Olmec iconography. One of the diagnostic motifs of Middle Formative ceramics, the double-line break, is probably a version of this sky sign. Kent Flannery (cited in Plog 1976:272) first suggested that this rim motif is based on the mouth of the “fire-serpent,” the figure I identify as the Avian Serpent. The use of sky bands on vessel rims is not restricted to Middle Formative bowls; two examples of early sky bands appear on the rims of the Middle Formative Zapotec Cocijo urn and a Protoclassic Maya bowl (Figure 11c, i). Of course, it is entirely apt that sky bands occur on bowl rims since they are the uppermost portion of the vessel.

The Olmec Avian Serpent seems to be ancestral to later sky serpents of the Maya and other Mesoamerican cultures. La Venta Altar 8 (formerly termed Stela 4 by Matthew W. Stirling) displays a late example of the Avian Serpent (Figure 12a). Possessing feather-crested brows, these fanged serpents have a long rectangular lip, quite like later Maya examples of sky serpents (e.g., Figure 12b). Another sky serpent appears on an unprovenanced incised stone statuette (Figure 12c). A human figure occurring in the same incised design recalls

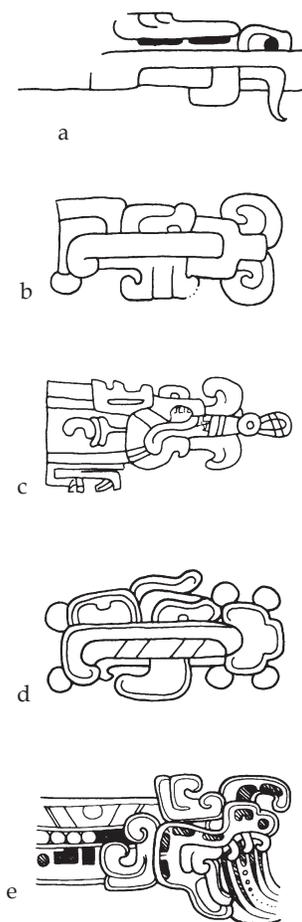


Figure 12. Sky serpents in early Mesoamerican iconography: (a) Middle Formative Avian Serpent, La Venta Altar 8 (after González Lauck 1988:Fig. 4); (b) Protoclassic Maya sky serpent, Abaj Takalik Stela 1 (detail of drawing courtesy of James Porter); (c) Late Formative sky serpent with brow crest, detail of incised stone figure (after Pahl 1975:Fig. 3); (d) Protoclassic Maya sky serpent; note diagonal bands and curving tooth appearing with early Maya sky bands (after Quirarte 1981:Fig. 1e); (e) Protoclassic Maya crested serpent with sky band body; note water spewing from mouth (after Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 67).

the Monte Alban II stone reliefs from Mound J, and it is possible that the carving is Late Formative Zapotec. The serpent displays both the feather-crested eye and a flowerlike form at the tip of the snout. Although the meaning of this form is still unknown, sky serpents from Abaj Takalik, Izapa, Cerros, and other Protoclassic Maya sites display similarly tipped snouts (Figures 12b, d, 13c).

An excellent example of the Protoclassic Maya sky serpent appears twice on the sides of a carved stone vessel in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. (Figure 12e). The cylindrical vessel displays two essentially identical serpents with forward-projecting feather crests as well as late versions of the feather-crested eye and paw-wing of the Olmec Avian Serpent. Moreover, the serpent bodies are marked with the diagonal bands and hooked elements typically found with Protoclassic Maya sky bands, thereby labeling these creatures as sky serpents. Gouts of water pour from their mouths, recalling the streams of water spewing from the mouths of Teotihuacan plumed serpents. The head carried on the back of each serpent reinforces the allusion to rain (see Figure 16e). It will be subsequently noted that this is the Protoclassic form of Chac, the Maya god of rain and lightning. Thus much like the Olmec Avian Serpent and Quetzalcoatl of central Mexico, the snake is portrayed as a celestial rain-bringer.

Although sky serpents constitute an essential element of Olmec and Protoclassic Maya sky bands, references to the jaguar also often appear. Stirling (1943:14, 62-68) suggested that the upper portions of Tres Zapotes Stela D and Izapa Monument 2 portray frontally facing jaguar heads, with the Izapan sky bands also representing a highly stylized, frontally facing jaguar "mask panel." The upper portion of a number of Izapan sky bands portray a pair of outwardly curving forms flanking a central element (Figure 13a). These probably refer to jaguar whiskers and are virtually identical to those flanking the jaguar snout on Tres Zapotes Stela D (Figure 13b).

Following the initial insights by Stirling, both Quirarte (1976:77-78) and Norman (1976:28) noted that the Izapan "topline," or sky-band, motifs contain both serpent and jaguar imagery. The sky-band motifs concern a single major theme: a great cosmic jaguar holding a bicephalic sky serpent in its maw. Izapa Stela 23 portrays a bicephalic serpent hanging from a sky band (Figure 13c). The same basic format appears on Tres Zapotes Stela D, where a pair of profile serpent heads hang down below the frontally facing jaguar face (Figure 13b). Like the Izapa monument, the undersides of the flanking serpents face toward the central scene, just as in Olmec iconography pairs of serpents are portrayed hanging in a similar fashion; for example, the throne appearing in Oxtotitlan Mural 1 displays the fanged frontal face with profile serpents hanging down at the corners of the mouth (Figure 13d). In the Olmec heartland, La Venta Altar 8 also portrays two Avian Serpents facing downward, again with the bellies oriented inward (Figure 13e), as does the recently discovered La Venta Monument 80, although here the Avian Serpents appear as rope-like forms (Figure 13f). According to Rebecca González (1988:155), the monument represents a seated jaguar holding a bicephalic serpent in its maw. With its crested brow, the snake probably represents the arboreal palm viper.

González compared La Venta Monument 80 to Los Soldados Monument 1 and San Lorenzo Monument 37. Both of these monuments portray seated jaguar figures with rope-like elements hanging down from the sides of their mouths. Although the head of the San Lorenzo monument is missing, the mouth of the Los Soldados sculpture has the same huge pointed tooth or beak element found on the La Venta Monument 80 creature. In the case

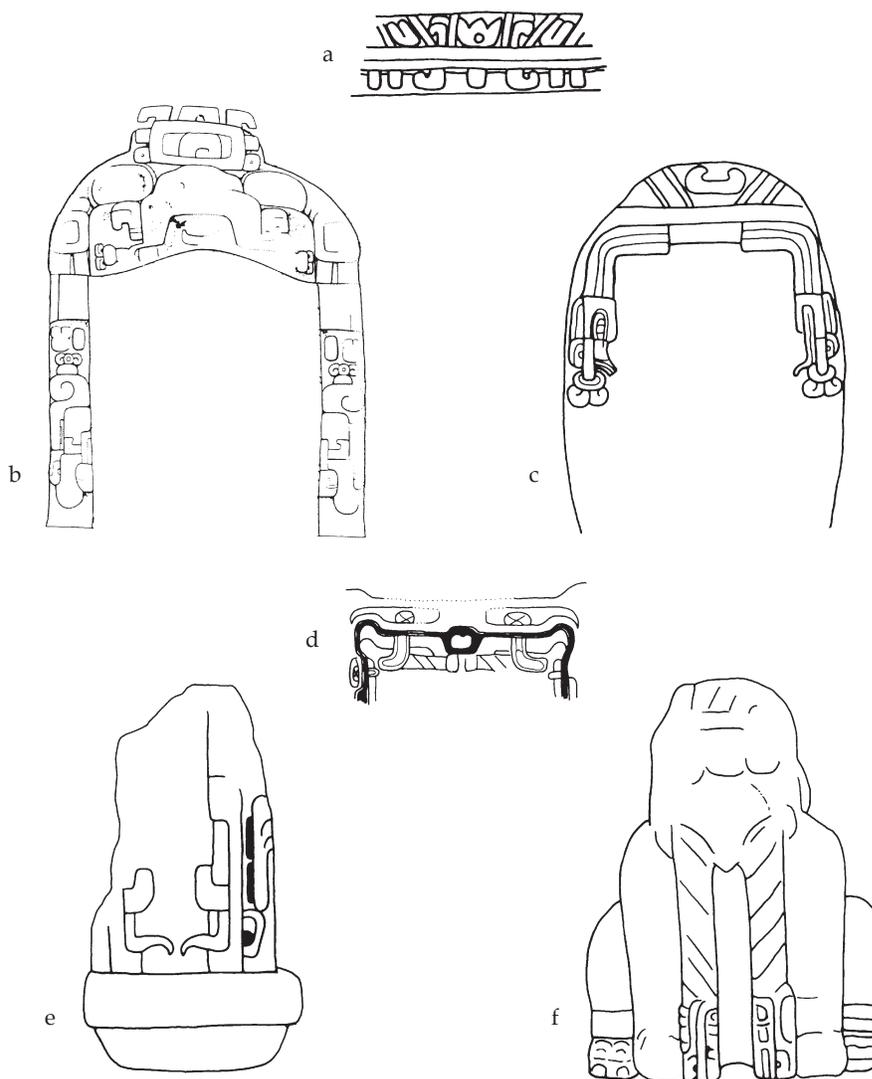


Figure 13. Profile sky serpents and frontal faces in early Mesoamerican iconography: (a) Protoclassic sky band with outcurving teeth and “whiskers” flanking central trefoil device, Izapa Stela 12; (b) Late Formative sky serpents hanging below great jaguar face, Tres Zapotes Stela D; note whiskers flanking central snout (detail of drawing courtesy of James Porter); (c) Protoclassic bicephalic sky serpent hanging from sky band, Izapa Stela 23; (d) Middle Formative celestial throne with serpent heads hanging from sides of central face, detail of Oxtotitlan Mural 1 (after Grove 1970:Frontispiece); (e) Middle Formative pair of hanging Avian Serpents, La Venta Altar 8 (after González Lauck 1988:Fig. 4); (f) Late Formative jaguar holding bicephalic serpent rope, La Venta Monument 80 (after González Lauck 1988:Cover).

of the Los Soldados and San Lorenzo monuments, the pendant elements are of ropelike material with no overt indication of serpent attributes. The aforementioned Early Formative Las Bocas-style effigy vessel portrays a jaguar grasping a crested serpent in its mouth and clasping the snake tail and head below by its talons (see Feuchtwanger 1989:Figs. 94-97). The similarity of this sculpture to the three Olmec monuments is immediately obvious, and, as in the case of La Venta Monument 80 and Los Soldados Monument 1, the ceramic jaguar

has a central pointed tooth, probably that of a shark (Figures 4f, 20). The theme of the jaguar grasping the sky serpent must have had profound significance for the Formative Olmec. As we shall see below, this cosmic act performed by Olmec gods also may have been performed in actual rites by the Olmec.

Rather than designating the earth, the inherent composite nature of the Avian Serpent suggests that it represents the overarching sky. Although the Classic and Postclassic plumed serpent appears in fairly standardized form as a rattlesnake with a plume-covered body, the form of the Avian Serpent is more varied. Nonetheless, the primary underlying meaning of the Olmec being appears to be the merging of snake and bird, two creatures widely identified with the heavens in Mesoamerica.¹⁰ Transporting the Avian Serpent through the sky, the paw-wing sign may constitute an Olmec wind sign. Like the feathered paw-wing, the crested eye, or “flame eyebrow” serves as a reference to birds and, by extension, the sky. In addition, the arboreal fer-de-lance has similarly crested brows, and may well be the Olmec prototype of the later plumed serpent of Mesoamerica. Frequently displaying the long, curving fangs of vipers along with a serpent body, the Avian Serpent can appear hanging in bicephalic form, much like later Protoclassic sky serpents. Certain Avian Serpent traits, such as the inverted U-shaped elements and curving fangs, occur in Olmec and later Mesoamerican examples of sky signs.

With the recognition of this extensive sky symbolism, Olmec iconography needs to be reappraised in a different light. For example, David C. Grove (1973, 1981:64, 1992:156-157) identified Olmec thrones with the earth and underworld, but I have noted that such thrones as Potrero Nuevo Monument 2 and the one in Oxtotitlan Mural 1 contain explicit references to the sky (Figures 11e, 13d). The figure atop the Oxtotitlan throne, I should like to add, is a feathered birdman in flight. Similarly, La Venta Altar 4 portrays a sky band and, in the niche below it, a man wearing a bird headdress. Ringed with feathers and four quetzal plumed maize ears, this central niche may refer to the later Maya “heart of heaven” concept.¹¹ However, only to focus upon sky imagery again misses the whole picture. The hybrid animals of the Olmec are a reflection of their and later Mesoamerican peoples’ fascination with the interaction and junctures among the sky, earth, and underworld. It is through the passage or exchange among these cosmic realms that rain, the diurnal sun, and other forces of fertility are created.

The Olmec Rain God

In an oft-cited and reproduced diagram, Covarrubias traced the evolution of Tlaloc, Chac, Cocijó, and other Mesoamerican rain gods from an Olmec jaguar prototype (Figure 14).¹²

¹⁰ The quadruped aspect of the Avian Serpent described by Joralemon could be a cosmic being encompassing both earth and sky. In this case, the quadruped form may refer to the caiman earth, the head serving as the Avian Serpent. The actual faunal identity of the quadruped is still uncertain, but it is entirely possible that it represents a caiman, or else a jaguar or toad. In addition, Linda Schele (personal communication, 1994) called my attention to one of the animal burdens carried by the Classic Maya Holmul Dancer. Bearing the celestial name *wak ka’an*, or “raised up sky,” this entity is essentially a quadruped serpent.

¹¹ The Olmec niche figure holds a rope, recalling the sky rope cords of Maya iconography. For a discussion of the Maya celestial conduit, or “heart of heaven,” see Freidel et al. 1993:59, 99, 103, 105, 425.

¹² Although this diagram is best known from Covarrubias 1957, it was previously published in Covarrubias 1946.

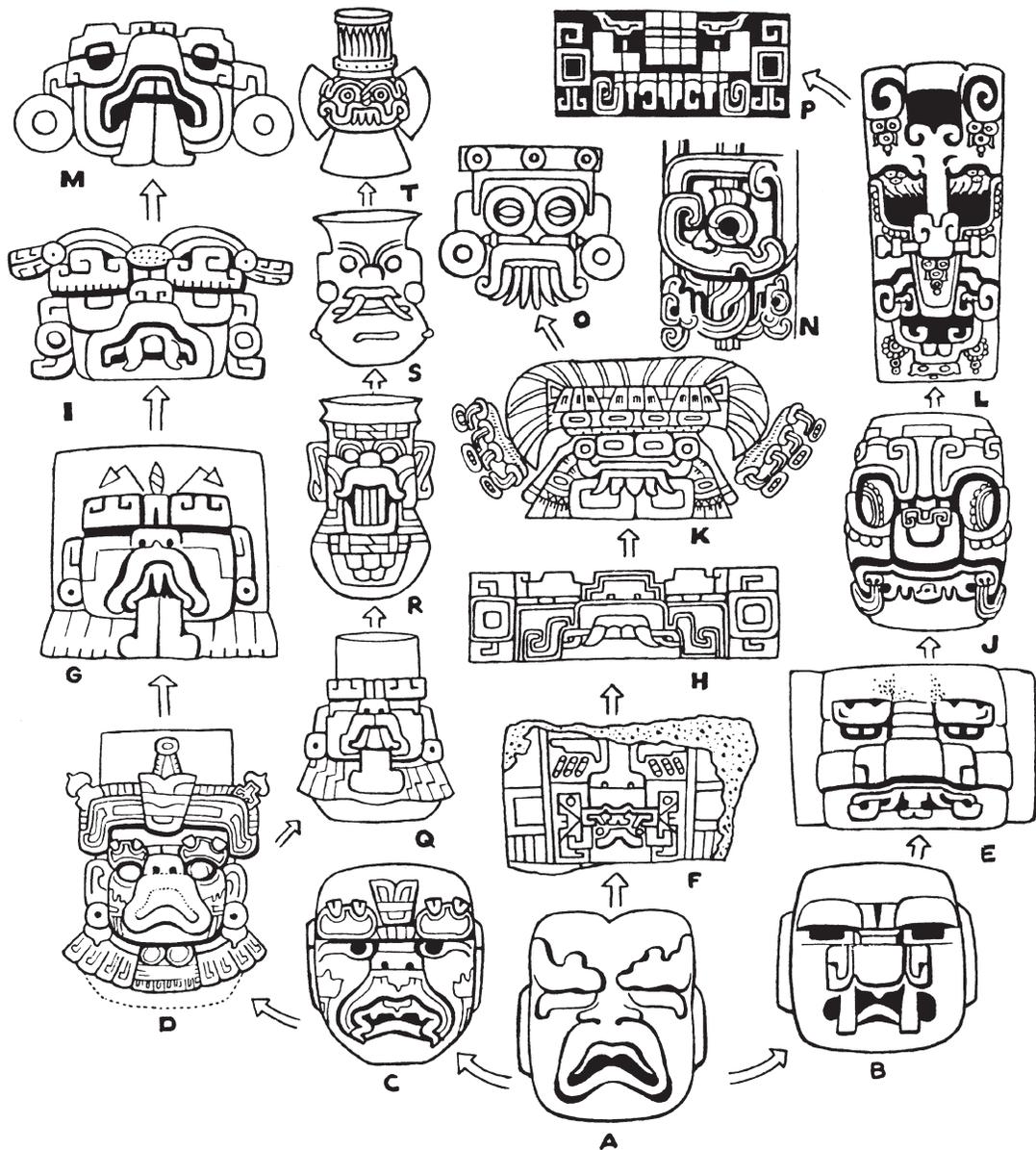


Figure 14. Diagram by Miguel Covarrubias illustrating the origin and evolution of Mesoamerican rain gods (from Covarrubias 1957:Fig. 22).

While a tacit agreement remains among many researchers that later Mesoamerican rain gods may have evolved from an Olmec jaguar being, the Covarrubias diagram has fallen into some disfavor. Subsequent analysis of the Las Limas Figure and other Olmec objects has revealed that the Olmec had an array of distinct gods, not simply a were-jaguar rain god. The infant or dwarf held in the Las Limas Figure's lap has also been identified as the actual Olmec Rain God—not the mature, squinting entity at the base of the Covarrubias diagram (see Coe 1968:111,114; Joralemon 1971:71-76, 90, 1976:29, 33). Nonetheless, the initial insights of Covarrubias do appear to be correct. Chac, Cocijo, and Tlaloc all derive from

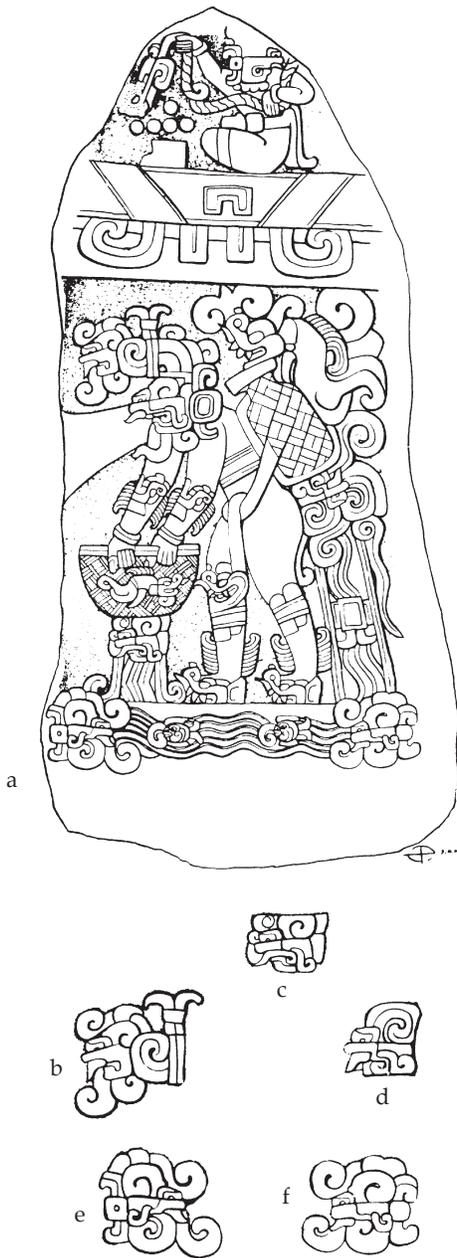


Figure 15. Protoclassic representations of Chac: (a) Izapa Stela 1 (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (b) Chac head worn as Jester God diadem by principal Chac on stela; (c) Chac head in water falling from net; (d) inverted Chac head in water falling from creel; (e–f) Chac heads in standing water at base of scene.

an Olmec jaguar rain god that is essentially the figure Covarrubias originally placed at the bottom of his evolutionary chart.

Due to epigraphic and iconographic advances provided by David Stuart, Coe, and others, it is now possible to trace the iconography of Chac from the Protoclassic period until the time of the Spanish conquest (see Coe 1978:76-78; Stuart 1987:17-23; Taube 1992b:17-27). The Protoclassic Chac provides a crucial step in tracing the evolution and transformation of the Formative Olmec Rain God. Izapa Stela 1 has been recognized for several decades as a Protoclassic representation of the Maya rain god (Coe 1962:99; Girard 1966:17-27). The principal theme of this monument concerns rain-making: a gout of water spews from the mouth of Chac, and two other streams fall from his fishing net and the creel slung over his back. It appears that the act of fishing—that is, raising fish into the sky—constituted a form of rain magic.¹³

Norman (1976:91) noted that Izapa Stela 1 contains not simply one but multiple representations of Chac (Figure 15a). A Chac with a ring-tailed fish body occurs as a diadem worn by the principal rain god, evidently an early form of the piscine Jester God jewel (Figure 15b). Other Chac heads occur in the streams falling from the net and creel and flanking the terrestrial water at the base of the scene (Figure 15c–f). This series of Chac heads provides an excellent means to discern some of the basic traits of the Protoclassic Maya Chac. All the heads have a blunt, at times slightly down-curving, snout with a single, pointed tooth, quite possibly a shark's, and a curling whisker or fish barble at the back of the mouth near the sides of the snout. Especially striking is the tendency of the upper portion of the head to merge into the flanking volutes illustrating clouds and rain. Like our "thunderheads," these Chac heads are probably

¹³ On Izapa Stela 5, a seated figure holds a ring-tailed fish with an S-curve cloud hovering immediately above (see Norman 1976:Fig. 4.21, Individual 7). Citing unpublished epigraphic research by Nikolai Grube, Freidel et al. (1993:436, n. 65) note that the Classic Maya "fish-in-hand" glyph denotes the term *tsak*, a Mayan word that signifies 'to conjure clouds.'

personifications of great nimbus clouds. Chac's long hair and even his entire upper cranial region blend into the curling cloud volutes; with his eyes shut, his brow area turns into a curling cloud volute.

Protoclassic depictions of Chac are relatively common, and, as in Izapa Stela 1, frequently have the head merging into cloud volutes. This can be seen on El Baul Stela 1 (Figure 16a) and two similar Protoclassic monuments, Kaminaljuyu Stelae 4 and 19, which both portray Chac heads within curling cloud volutes (Figure 16b–c). Both Kaminaljuyu heads have the characteristic blunt snout, pointed tooth, and whiskers at the corner of the mouth, with the eyes and

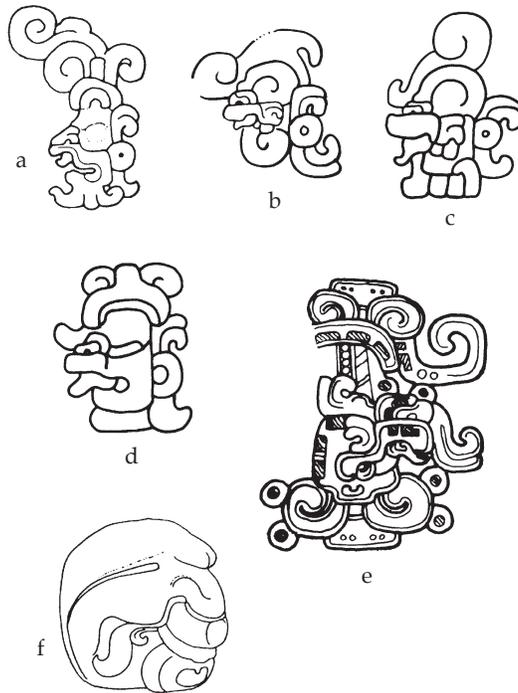


Figure 16. Protoclassic representations of Chac: (a) Chac head in sky, El Baul Stela 1 (after drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (b–c) Chac head in clouds, Kaminaljuyu Stelae 4, 19; (d) Chac head on serpent tail, Structure H-X-Sub-3, Uaxactun; (e) Chac head on sky serpent tail, detail of carved stone vase in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks (after Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 67); (f) greenstone carving of Chac, Santa Rita, Campeche (after Ochoa 1983:Fig. II.4.2b).

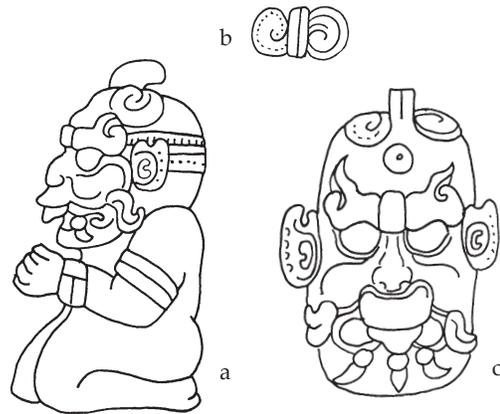


Figure 17. Late Protoclassic stone figurine representing Chac (after sketches courtesy of Linda Schele): (a) profile of kneeling figure; note probable *yax* sign capping top of head; (b) *muyal* cloud curls flanking central *yax* sign; (c) detail of figurine head.

upper heads converted into cloud scrolls. In the case of Stela 19, the head is affixed to a serpent tail, a device that appears in other Protoclassic examples. A Protoclassic stucco facade from Uaxactun depicts a Chac head on the tail of a snake belching cloud volutes, quite probably a form of the sky serpent (Figure 16d). A similar scene occurs on the aforementioned stone vessel representing a pair of crested sky serpents spewing water; in both cases, a Chac head rides on the serpent tail (Figure 16e). When the Protoclassic Chac appears frontally or in the round, a bulging and deeply furrowed brow is evident (Figure 16f).

Schele has called my attention to an important late Protoclassic stone carving of Chac (Figure 17). The top of the head contains scrolls much like those appearing on other Protoclassic examples. However, in this instance, the scrolls clearly swirl in opposite directions, and together form the S-curve sign, a device epigraphically identified as *muyal*, or “cloud” in Maya languages (Houston and Stuart 1990). I suspect that the widespread depiction of the upper head

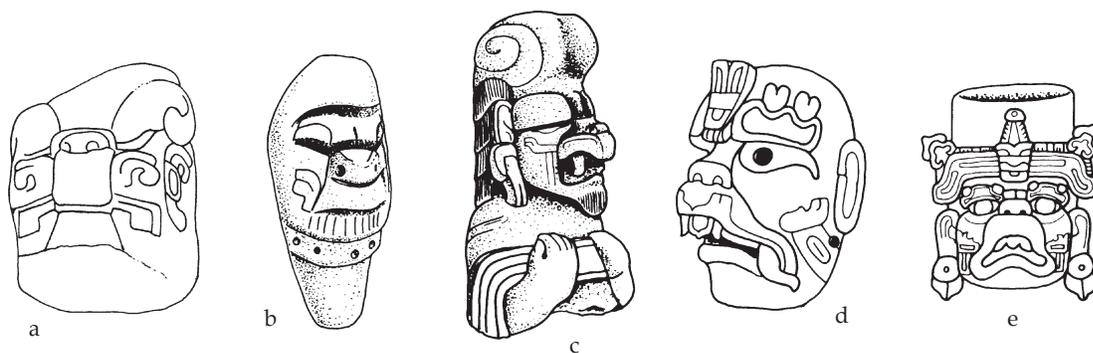


Figure 18. Rain Gods of Formative and Protoclassic Mesoamerica: (a) Monte Alto Monument 3; (b) serpentine carving of bearded rain god with slitted eyes, furrowed brow, bulging cranium, and whiskers at sides of mouth (after Parsons et al. 1988:No. 19); (c) Rain God holding long bundle, stone figure attributed to Tuzapan, Veracruz, in the American Museum of Natural History (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 255); (d) stone mask of early Zapotec Cocijo, Monte Alban I; note cheek markings and pointed central tooth (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 180); (e) Monte Alban II urn representing Cocijo (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 179).

with cloud scrolls concerns a metaphoric comparison of nimbus clouds to the gray, convoluted contortions of brains. In this regard, David Freidel has reminded me of an illuminating passage in the Yucatec *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* that refers to copal—the incense from which rain-making clouds of smoke are created—as the “brains of the sky” (Roys 1933:96). With the three drops in the region of the chin or beard, the statuette head is notably similar to a series of massive stone censers at Kaminaljuyu, Monuments 16, 17, and 18. Placed in the hollowed top of the head, the burning copal and smoke would literally serve as the “brains” of the censer.

A massive, early boulder sculpture of Chac, Monument 3 at Monte Alto, Guatemala, has the distinctive curling brow and slitted eyes, as well as the thick snout and flanking whiskers (Figure 18a). A possibly Late Formative serpentine artifact attributed to Guerrero depicts a figure with similar slitted eyes and blunt snout flanked by whiskers (Figure 18b). Immediately above the snout is the furrowed brow topped by a bulging cranium. The furrowed brow and swelling cranium also appear on one of the most diagnostic portrayals of the Olmec Rain God, reportedly found near Tuzapan, Veracruz (Figure 18c).¹⁴ This Middle Formative figure displays the heavy slitted eyes, large cranial cloud curls, and whisker elements of the Protoclassic Maya Chac. The whisker devices are important, as well, because they are virtually identical to the whisker and cheek markings of early representations of the Zapotec rain god, Cocijo (Figure 18d–e), who also typically has the furrowed brow and, in many early instances, the central pointed tooth.

An especially elaborate portrayal of Olmec rain gods appears on the late Olmec serpentine statuette of the Young Lord (Guthrie 1995:Cat. no. 193). Four cloud-scroll Olmec rain gods are incised on the statuette’s upper arms and knees, each god identified with a

¹⁴ This remarkable statuette seems to have had, even in recent times, a rather convoluted history. Reportedly taken in 1918 from a Veracruz household where it was being used for a handy punch block, it subsequently served as a Packard automobile hood ornament. After the car had a major accident in British Columbia, the piece was removed and eventually became part of the Guennol Collection (Martin 1975).

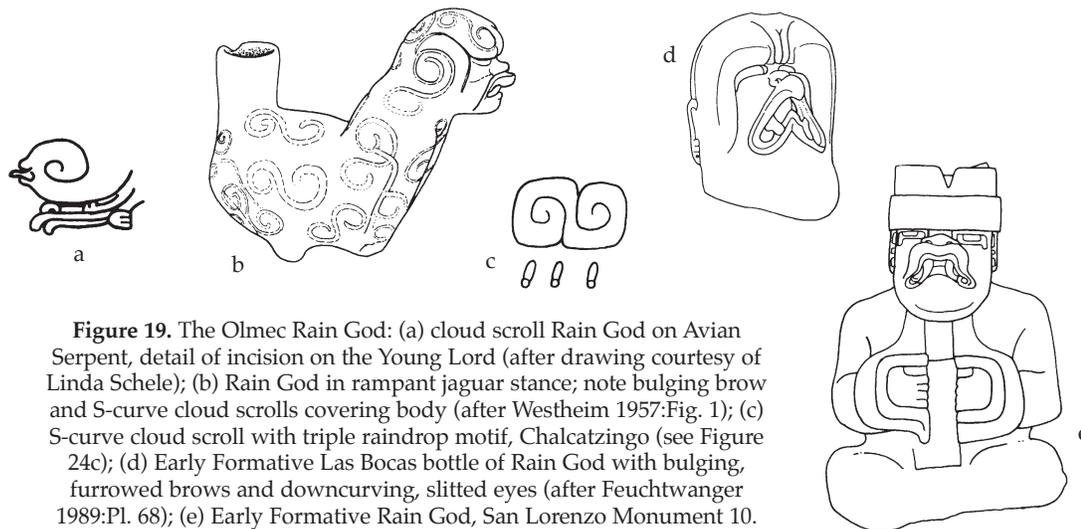


Figure 19. The Olmec Rain God: (a) cloud scroll Rain God on Avian Serpent, detail of incision on the Young Lord (after drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (b) Rain God in rampant jaguar stance; note bulging brow and S-curve cloud scrolls covering body (after Westheim 1957:Fig. 1); (c) S-curve cloud scroll with triple raindrop motif, Chalcatzingo (see Figure 24c); (d) Early Formative Las Bocas bottle of Rain God with bulging, furrowed brows and downcurving, slitted eyes (after Feuchtwanger 1989:Pl. 68); (e) Early Formative Rain God, San Lorenzo Monument 10.

particular creature, presumably referring to specific sources of rain. Of special interest is the example on the right arm representing the Olmec Rain God atop the Avian Serpent (Figure 19a), which is conceptually identical to the Protoclassic Maya Chacs atop sky serpents (e.g., Figure 16d–e). In all these cases, the serpentine figures are bringers of clouds and rain. Four other Olmec Rain God heads, each different, appear on the inner thighs, with the lower pair repeating in the buttocks region of the statuette. The two series of four deities probably concern the quadripartite nature of the Olmec Rain God. It is well known that the Maya Chac, Zapotec Cocijo, and central Mexican Tlaloc are strongly quadripartite, a common trait that probably originated in Formative Olmec ideology.

A ceramic effigy vessel, quite possibly dating to the Early Formative Olmec, portrays the Olmec Rain God in a rampant feline stance, with the upper body raised on its forelegs (Figure 19b). Along with having a deeply spiraling and bulging cranium, the vessel figure is covered with S-curve cloud scrolls. A recently discovered relief from Chalcatzingo demonstrates that the S-curve motif signified clouds among the Olmec as well as the Maya.¹⁵ Placed in the upper scene above an avian jaguar, the sign sheds three exclamation-point-shaped raindrops, explicitly denoting it as a rain cloud (Figures 19c, 24c).

In addition to the Avian Serpent, the Rain God is among the more common supernatural beings found in Early Formative Olmec iconography. The Early Formative form also tends to have slitted or downcurving eyes and a deeply bulging, furrowed brow (Figures 19d–e, 20a). Since the Early Formative period, the Olmec Rain God displays the typical Olmec “snarl,” with the upper lip pulled up to the level of the nostrils, exposing a pair of large curving canines and sometimes a central pointed tooth.

A fragmentary Early Formative figurine from Tlatilco, probably a masked ballplayer, depicts the Olmec Rain God with the furrowed brow, heavily lidded eyes, and the central

¹⁵ In 1992, Kent Reilly first mentioned to me the cloud and rain significance of this Middle Formative relief.

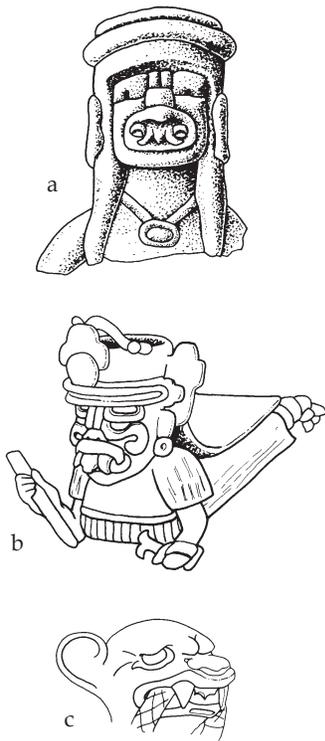


Figure 20. The ophidian jaguar and Olmec and Zapotec rain gods: (a) Early Formative Olmec Rain God with furrowed brow and pointed central tooth, ceramic figurine, Tlatilco (after Feuchtwanger 1989:Fig. 9); (b) Monte Alban II Cocijo with furrowed brow and pointed central tooth, San José Mogote (after Marcus 1992:Fig. 9.9); (c) Early Formative effigy vessel of serpentine jaguar with furrowed brow and pointed central tooth grasping crested serpent, Las Bocas (after Feuchtwanger 1989:Pl. 94).

pointed tooth flanked by outwardly curving fangs (Figure 20a). The face is very similar to a remarkable Protoclassic Cocijo from San José Mogote, Oaxaca (Figure 20b). In this ceramic sculpture, the Zapotec rain god is portrayed in the rearing position of the Las Bocas feline and Olmec Rain God effigy vessels (Figure 19b, 20c). This posture recalls both rearing felines and serpents, and it should be noted that the Las Bocas feline has a serpent belly flanked by the celestial U-brackets (see Feuchtwanger 1989:Fig. 94). The same combination of jaguar and serpent has been noted in connection with the Zapotec rain god (Caso and Bernal 1952:25).

Like the major Olmec iconographic theme of a jaguar holding one or a pair of avian serpents in its mouth (see Figures 13f, 20c), Tlaloc also grasps serpents in his jaguar maw. A Classic vessel from Zacuala, Teotihuacan, portrays Tlaloc with a pair of plumed serpents emerging from the corners of the mouth (Figure 21a). A Classic Veracruz palma depicts two intertwined serpents descending from the mouth of a profile Tlaloc (Figure 21b). The raising of celestial rain serpents also occurs in Protoclassic and Classic Maya art. In the upper portion of Izapa Stela 1, a probable Chac holds a serpent rope of twisted fiber (Figure 15a) similar to those clasped in the mouths of Olmec jaguar figures (e.g., Figure 13f). Kaminaljuyu Stela 19 portrays a dancing figure holding a writhing snake marked with a Chac head and rain clouds (Figure 22a). The Classic Maya Chac often clasps a serpent in its mouth, reminiscent of the aforementioned scenes of the Olmec Rain God and Tlaloc (Figure 22b–d).

The Classic Maya Cauac Monster, epigraphically identified as *wits* or “mountain” by David Stuart, frequently holds a pair of serpents in the corners of its mouth (Figure 22e). The Cauac Monster and Chac appear to be related; not only do they share similar profiles, but the Cauac Monster can also wear the *Spondylus* shell earpieces commonly worn by Chac. Chac and the Cauac Monster may both derive from the Olmec Rain God. The Chacs, Tlalocs, and other Mesoamerican rain

gods are widely identified with mountains. The Olmec theme of the jaguar biting the Avian Serpent may portray the Olmec Rain God as the pivotal, cosmic mountain integrating the regions of the underworld, earth, and sky.¹⁶

As Covarrubias suggested, the form and physiognomy of the Olmec Rain God are largely based on the jaguar. Along with its snarling jaguar mouth, the Olmec Rain God has deeply

¹⁶ Karl Lorenzen pointed out to me that the common Postclassic convention of feathered serpent balustrades might involve the concept of the cosmic mountain. Since pyramids were widely considered symbolic mountains in Mesoamerica, the pair of descending feathered serpents flanking the central stairway could depict celestial serpents raised by the pivotal sacred mountain.

furrowed brows and frequently slitted eyes, perhaps crying tears of rain. Although the feline Olmec Rain God is ancestral to Cocijo and Tlaloc, the latter gods commonly display a lolling, bifurcated serpent tongue. The tendency of the Olmec Rain God cranium to transform into cloud volutes continues with Protoclassic examples of the Maya Chac. However, the faunal makeup of the Protoclassic Chac is somewhat ambiguous. The thick, blunt, often slightly downcurving snout and whiskers at the corner of the mouth suggest the jaguar, but the probable central shark tooth indicates piscine attributes, a trait that continues into the Classic period. The principal Chac on Izapa Stela 1 has fish on its arms and legs (Figure 15a), and the Classic Chac frequently has long fish barbels at the corners of its mouth. The Classic Chac's barbels and Spondylus shell earpieces evoke jaguar whiskers and ears. Just as the Maya GI is like an aquatic counterpart of the jaguar sun god, or GIII, so the Classic period Chac appears to be a translation of the jaguar into a fishlike water being.

Olmec Rain Rituals

The layout and orientation of many Formative sites reveal the Olmec concern with the ritual management of rain and water. The elaborate systems of stone drains found at San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Laguna de los Cerros, as well as the highland site of Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero, probably reflect this ritual orientation. Coe and Richard A. Diehl noted the probable ceremonial use of the drain system at San Lorenzo: "the lagunas, drains, and associated monuments must have been part of a larger system of

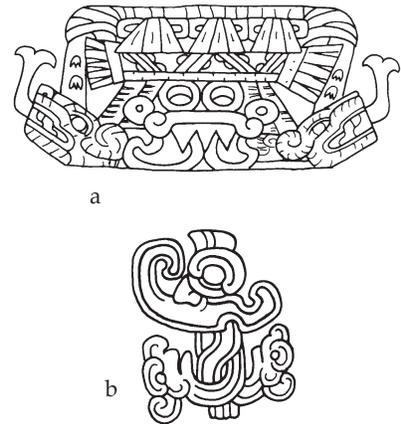


Figure 21. Classic period representations of Tlaloc holding serpents in its mouth: (a) Teotihuacan Tlaloc with pair of plumed serpents at corners of mouth, detail of incised vessel from Zacuala compound (after Séjourné 1959:Fig. 127a); (b) Tlaloc with intertwined snakes in mouth, detail of Classic Veracruz palma, American Museum of Natural History (see Figure 14n).

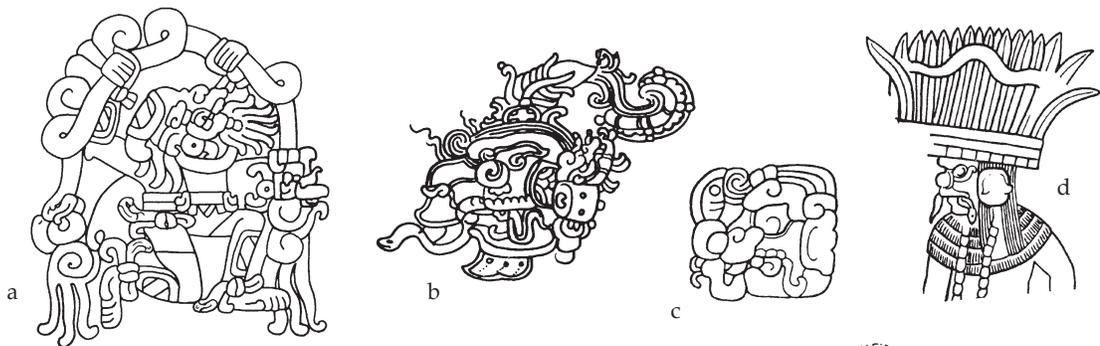


Figure 22. Serpents held by Maya supernatural figures: (a) Protoclassic figure holding celestial serpent; note inverted Chac head to right, Kaminaljuyu Stela 19; (b-c) Early Classic Chacs, each with serpent in mouth (after Taube 1992b:Figs. 6c, e); (d) Terminal Classic Chac with serpent in mouth, Chichen Itza (after Taube 1992b:Fig. 5d); (e) Early Classic Cauac Monster with serpents in mouth, stucco facade from Structure 5D-33-2nd, Tikal.

ritual bathing and rain making involved with Olmec water gods" (Coe and Diehl 1980:1:393). Citing the importance of caves in Aztec rain lore, Grove suggested that Oxtotitlan Cave was used in Olmec rain and fertility ceremonies (Grove 1970:31). This and the sites of El Manatí and Chalcatzingo appear to have been loci of rainmaking rites oriented to natural bodies or movements of water. Elaborate Olmec offerings were placed in a spring at the base of Cerro Manatí, Veracruz, and at Chalcatzingo, Morelos, where the bas-relief figure known as El Rey, or Monument 1, is situated beside the principal runoff channel of Cerro Chalcatzingo. Portrayed with clouds, cloud scrolls, raindrops, quetzals, and growing plants, the seated figure is presented as a provider of rain.¹⁷

It is surely no coincidence that the materials most coveted by the Olmec and later Mesoamerican elite—quetzal plumes and jadeite—evoke the verdant, life-giving qualities of water and vegetation. In the Aztec Chimalpopoca Codex, the true "jades" and "quetzal plumes" of the Tlaloque are rain and green husks of tender corn (Bierhorst 1992:156-157). Bedecked in these precious materials, the elite are the controllers of rain and agricultural fertility as well as of abundance and wealth. Although it is doubtful that the remains of quetzal birds, much less their feathers, will soon be discovered at Olmec sites, explicit portrayals of these exotic birds occur at La Venta and even Chalcatzingo. In contrast, not only is jade depicted in Olmec art, but is found widely at Middle Formative Olmec sites. As one of its Olmec symbolic referents, jade signified precious rain and water. In fact, the aforementioned Olmec exclamation-point-shaped rain sign is probably based on two strung jade beads, the upper being cylindrical and the lower, spherical.

Grove noted that the beaded raindrop motif, here repeated three times, appears on Olmec masks worn on the brow (Figure 23a), and is ancestral to the Classic Maya Jester God jade diadem, a major

¹⁷ In the Chalcatzingo scene, the figure sits in a cave represented as the profile face of the Avian Serpent. Cloud volutes emanating from the cave mouth may portray the breath, or wind, of the Avian Serpent. In Late Postclassic Central Mexico, the wind temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl was marked with a serpent mouth doorway (see Taube 1986:68).

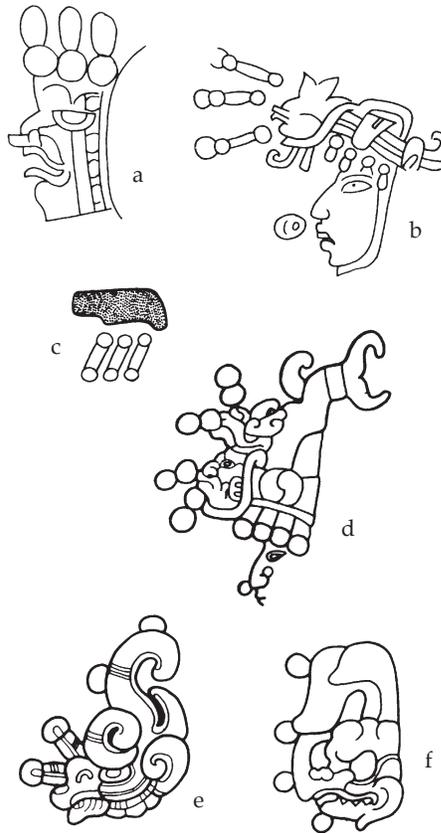


Figure 23. Forms of the Jester God rain jewel in Isthmian and Maya iconography: (a) Middle Formative face with triple raindrop motif worn on brow of Olmec figure (after Grove 1989:Fig. 7.7); (b) Protoclassic Maya ruler wearing sky band headband with Jester God (after Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 32a); (c) Late Formative beaded tears from right eye of face, Tres Zapotes Stela C; (d) Protoclassic Jester God as ring-tailed fish, Loltun Cave (after Miller and Taube 1993:104); (e) Early Classic piscine Jester God, Tikal Stela 31; (f) Late Classic piscine Jester God, Palenque.

symbol of Maya kings. Grove is entirely correct: one form of the Maya Jester God was a symbolic “rain jewel” identified with water and growth (Grove 1989:134; see also Fields 1991). On the recarved back of an Olmec plaque at Dumbarton Oaks, a Protoclassic Maya king wears a Jester God that emanates three beaded elements (Figure 23b). These beads also refer to rain and are virtually identical to the triple tears pouring from the eyes of the frontal face on Tres Zapotes Stela C (Figure 23c). The fishing Chac on Izapa Stela 1 wears an early form of the Jester God, here a combination of Chac with a ring-tailed fish (Figure 15b). The Protoclassic bas-relief at Loltun Cave portrays an explicit ring-tailed, piscine Jester God combined with an anthropomorphic mask, and once again beaded drops emanate from the device (Figure 23d). The piscine Jester God continues into the Classic period, usually with droplets on the face and body (Figure 23e–f). It has been noted that the raising of fish into the sky was a symbolic rain-making act among the Protoclassic Maya, and the piscine Jester God rain-jewel would appear to relate to this magic act. By wearing this item on the brow, the Maya king assumes the duty of rain-maker, the engenderer of water and growth. As Grove and Virginia M. Fields indicated, the ultimate origins of this Maya device derive from Olmec traditions of jade regalia, rulership, and agricultural ritual.

Aside from inorganic artifacts and the ongoing excavations at the wet site of El Manatí, relatively little information is available regarding the types of offerings presented in Olmec rain rituals. It is tempting to associate Olmec bloodletters with imitative rain magic through the sprinkling of blood or burning it to create fertile clouds of smoke. However, no known Olmec scenes illustrate the ritual significance of bloodletting. Copal or other incense may also have been ritually used to create symbolic rain clouds. Coe notes that the seated figure on La Venta Monument 19 holds an early version of the copal incense bag widely found in Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerica (Figure 6a). On close inspection, his left hand is seen to present its palm outward, the typical position for scattering blood, incense, and other offerings in Classic Mesoamerica (Coe 1968:114).

Although the ritual significance of blood and incense offerings remains poorly known among the Formative Olmec, human sacrifice was a component of Olmec rain-making rites. Coe and Joralemon suggested that infants were sacrificed to the rain gods, a tradition well known among the later Aztec (Coe 1965b:14; Joralemon 1971:91; for Aztec child sacrifice, see Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 1:68, Book 2:1-2). Recent excavations at El Manatí spring provide striking corroboration; among its offerings are the disarticulated bodies of infants (Ortiz and Rodríguez 1993). Adult captives were also sacrificed in Olmec rain rituals. Reilly noted that the figure incised on the right arm of the Young Lord is an executed bound captive (Reilly 1991:156, 1995). The figure on the other side is evidently a male holding atlatl darts. Both figures are accompanied by cloud scrolls personified as the Olmec Rain God, indicating that at least by the Middle Formative period, ritual warfare and captive sacrifice served as important means of insuring rain and agricultural abundance.

As with later Mesoamerican peoples, the Olmec performed human sacrifice in conjunction with the ritual ballgame. Although widely cited as a depiction of jaguar and human copulation, Tenochtitlan Monument 1 probably depicts a costumed ballplayer atop a bound

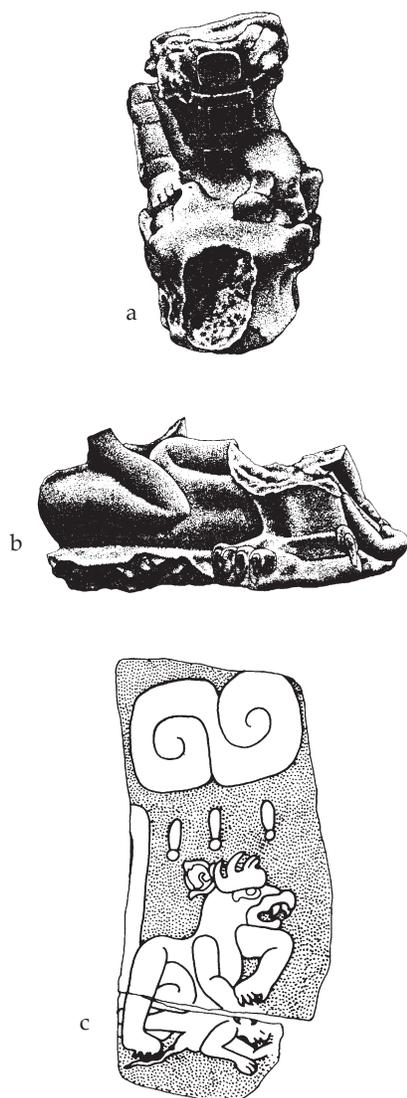


Figure 24. Olmec human sacrifice: (a) Middle Formative ballplayer atop bound victim, Tenochtitlan Monument 1 (after Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 499); (b) Middle Formative jaguar atop supine victim, Potrero Nuevo Monument 3 (after Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 497); (c) Middle Formative Avian jaguar dismembering human victim; note cloud and rain signs above, new monument from Chalcatzingo (drawing by author from on-site observations).

victim (fig 24a).¹⁸ Although the head of the ballplayer is missing, contemporaneous ballplayer figurines from both San Lorenzo and Tlatilco frequently wear the mask of the Olmec Rain God (e.g., Figure 20a).¹⁹ For both the Classic Maya and Postclassic central Mexico, ballcourts were regarded as dangerous but also fertile places identified with water and agricultural abundance.

Potrero Nuevo Monument 3 from San Lorenzo concerns the sacrifice of a supine victim by a jaguar complete with talons and a tail (Figure 24b). Similar scenes of humans devoured or attacked by monstrous creatures occur within a specific area on the northern portion of Cerro Chalcatzingo: the bas-relief Monuments 3 and 4 depict felines attacking supine humans, Monument 5 portrays the Avian Serpent devouring a person, and a recently discovered relief from this area depicts an avian jaguar dismembering a human victim with its talons (Figure 24c). Directly above this bloody scene, rain falls from an S-curve cloud, indicating that the Olmec theme of supernatural beasts devouring human victims had a fertile, rain-making significance.

Human victims were clearly not fed to supernatural rain beasts at Chalcatzingo. Instead, such human sacrifices were surely performed by individuals impersonating these sacred characters. Such an impersonator in jaguar garb menaces a smaller bound person with a clawed instrument in Painting 1 at Juxtlahuaca Cave (see Reilly 1989). However, the term impersonation may not demonstrate the extent to which the participant identified with the supernatural being. It is likely that shamans, who through trance ritually became the supernatural force, performed such sacrificial rain-making rites. In contemporary Mesoamerica, shamans are widely associated with rain and lightning powers.

In his now classic study of 1968, Peter T. Furst demonstrated that a number of Olmec sculptures portray the transformation of shamans into jaguars (Furst 1968). But the question remains, just what did these jaguar shamans *do*? They may have performed the important shamanic

¹⁸ The ballplayer identification has been recently proposed by Mary Miller and Karl Taube (1993:158), and independently by Douglas E. Bradley and Peter David Joralemon (1993:21).

¹⁹ For examples of ballplayers wearing Olmec Rain God masks, see Niederberger (1987:Fig. 282); Bradley and Joralemon (1993:Illus. 1b); Coe and Diehl (1980:1:Fig. 334).

acts of divination and curing, but they were probably also the preeminent Olmec rainmakers. Following the original insights of Covarrubias, I have noted that the Olmec Rain God is essentially a jaguar being. Thus it is not surprising that the more feline of the shamanic transformation figures display the deeply furrowed brow and snarling mouth associated with the rain deity. Certain transformation figures display veinlike, forking brow markings, a trait found on the very example Covarrubias presented as the prototypical Olmec rain deity (Figure 14). In addition, the conventional kneeling position of the transformation figures—arms outstretched to the knees—recalls the rearing stance of the Olmec Rain God (Figures 13f, 19b). The identification of jaguar shamans with the rain deity is best seen in the Tuzapan statuette, which has the same tufted beard and tonsured coiffure typically found on jaguar transformation figures (Figure 18c). In other words, the rain deity is portrayed as a shaman.

The cited sculptures from San Lorenzo and Chalcatzingo suggest that human sacrifice was a component of rainmaking rituals performed by Olmec shamans. Another fertility rite seems to have been the lifting of water symbols into the sky. The Tuzapan Olmec Rain God with the shamanic coiffure holds a bundle of quetzal plumes or vegetal growth in his arms (Figure 18c). As I have explained, this long bundle can be transformed into the Avian Serpent, and as such, in referring to the lifting or supporting of the sky, may have cosmic significance. But it may have more immediate meaning as rain magic, with the serpents denoting celestial rain. Two Early Formative monuments from San Lorenzo probably depict this shamanic rainmaking rite: San Lorenzo Monument 47, representing an apparently fully human figure holding the Avian Serpent, and Potrero Nuevo Monument 1, depicting the shaman partly transformed into the jaguar, his clawed hand grasping the undulating serpent.²⁰ The Las Bocas jaguar effigy vessel seems to represent the same rite, with the viper now grasped in the mouth of the jaguar shaman (Figures 4f, 20c). These scenes immediately recall Protoclassic and Classic rain or lightning serpents held in the hands or mouth of Tlaloc, Chac, and other figures, including actual human individuals (Figures 21, 22).²¹ A number of researchers have compared Maya snake dances to similar rainmaking rites of Postclassic central Mexico and the contemporary American Southwest (Baudez 1992; Lothrop 1929; Taube 1989c). It would appear that this rite, still performed by the Hopi in the arid regions of the Southwest, has its origins in rainmaking ceremonies of the Formative Olmec.

Conclusions

By the Early Formative period, the Olmec had developed a complex system of ritual and belief pertaining to rain and agricultural fertility. Two major beings of this fertility complex are the Avian Serpent and the Olmec Rain God. Identified with the sky, wind, and rain, the Avian Serpent seems to be ancestral to the plumed serpent of central Mexico. The Avian Serpent compares closely to the Classic Maya Bearded Dragon, an essentially serpentine and frequently plumed being associated with the sky, water, and lightning.²² The Olmec Rain God readily relates to the Chac, Cocijo, and Tlaloc rain gods of later Mesoamerica. Aside

²⁰ For views of Potrero Nuevo Monument 1, see Coe and Diehl (1980:1: Figs. 487, 495).

²¹ Nikolai Grube (1992:212) notes that in one Late Classic Maya snake dance scene from the Usumacinta area, the serpent is epigraphically labeled a “sky snake.”

²² On Uaxactun Stela 7, a Late Classic Bearded Dragon appears atop a plumed sky band, recalling the celestial feather bundles of the Formative Olmec.

from the strongly feline origin of these rain gods, it is likely that some of the secondary characteristics of Mesoamerican rain deities, such as their quadripartite nature and identification with mountains, also derive from the Olmec Rain God.

Olmec ceremonies pertaining to agricultural fertility were undoubtedly numerous and complex. Like later Mesoamerican peoples, the Olmec performed rainmaking rites at natural caves, mountains, and springs. Sculpture and monumental architecture at such sites as San Lorenzo and La Venta indicate that rain ceremonies were also enacted in the centers of major communities in the Olmec heartland. Impersonation was an important component of Olmec rainmaking rites, and the many stone masks of the Olmec Rain God probably derive from this phenomenon.²³ It is noteworthy that the later Aztec major masked deities are the fructifying gods of wind and rain—Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc. Certain individuals not only impersonated but personified the Olmec Rain God through shamanic trance. Among the rainmaking rites performed by Olmec shamans or priests were human sacrifice and the lifting or carrying of the Avian Serpent, which could be symbolically represented by long bundles of quetzal feathers or vegetation, or by live vipers, such as arboreal fer-de-lances and rattlesnakes.

In terms of Olmec influence on contemporaneous and later Mesoamerican religion, in no area is it more profound than in the propitiation and manipulation of forces of agricultural fertility. Centered in the humid and fertile Gulf Coast lowlands, the Olmec must have been the Formative models of agricultural success. The power and wealth accrued by their agricultural base is readily seen even today in their monumental art, architecture, and fine objects exquisitely worked in precious and exotic materials. The horticultural knowledge of the Olmec—both real and attributed—was surely coveted by incipient agriculturalists in other areas of Mesoamerica. The situation may be analogous to Mesoamerican influence in the American Southwest during the Postclassic period. By at least Toltec times, Mesoamerican peoples were securing turquoise from the Cerrillos region of northern New Mexico (Harbottle and Weigand 1992:78-85). Although inhabiting only a marginally agricultural area, the Puebloan peoples seem to have readily adopted rain ritual and beliefs of their affluent southern neighbors; as examples, the plumed water serpent and the masked mountain rain spirits, or *katsina*, readily come to mind.

For Classic and Postclassic peoples of Mesoamerica, concepts of rulership and wealth were inextricably tied to rain and agricultural fertility. The piscine Jester God, a major emblem of Classic Maya kings, was a symbol of water and growth derived from Olmec regalia. The Aztec Chimalpopoca Codex describes the fall of the Toltec and the rise of the Aztec, the two great empires of Postclassic central Mexico, in terms of the mastery of rain ritual and symbolism. Because the king Huemac refuses the winnings offered by the Tlaloque—green maize husks and rain (their forms of quetzal plumes and jade)—Tollan is destroyed by drought. However, by sacrificing a maiden to the Tlaloque, the Mexica ensure the growth of the Aztec empire (Bierhorst 1992:156-157). The recognition that power and material wealth ultimately derive from rain and agricultural fertility was not a recent Postclassic innovation, but originated in the interdependent developments of agriculture, ideology, and statecraft among the Formative Olmec.

²³ For examples of Olmec Rain God masks, see Deletaille and Deletaille 1992:Figs. 84, 85; Joralemon 1971:Figs. 152-158.

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