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## CHAPTER 3

# The Olmec Maize God: The Face of Corn in Formative Mesoamerica

In both ancient and contemporary Mesoamerica, no other foodstuff has had a more profound role in social and cultural development than corn, or *Zea mays*. Although a great deal is now known about the importance of maize in Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerican economies and religion, there has been surprisingly little iconographic interest in its significance in the earlier Formative period (the Mesoamerican equivalent of the Old World Neolithic) despite the fact that the Formative marks the initial widespread appearance of food production. In this study, I will argue that the Formative Olmec developed an elaborate system of belief and ritual surrounding maize. Moreover, I will suggest that much of the Olmec influence noted for Formative highland Mexico and the Maya region revolved around this ritual agricultural complex and served as a means to integrate distant regions into the Olmec economic network.

In his seminal analysis of Olmec iconography, Peter David Joralemon (1971:32-33) was the first to systematically identify maize motifs in Formative Olmec art. Among the more diagnostic signs that Joralemon (1971:13) describes are Motif 88, “banded maize,” Motif

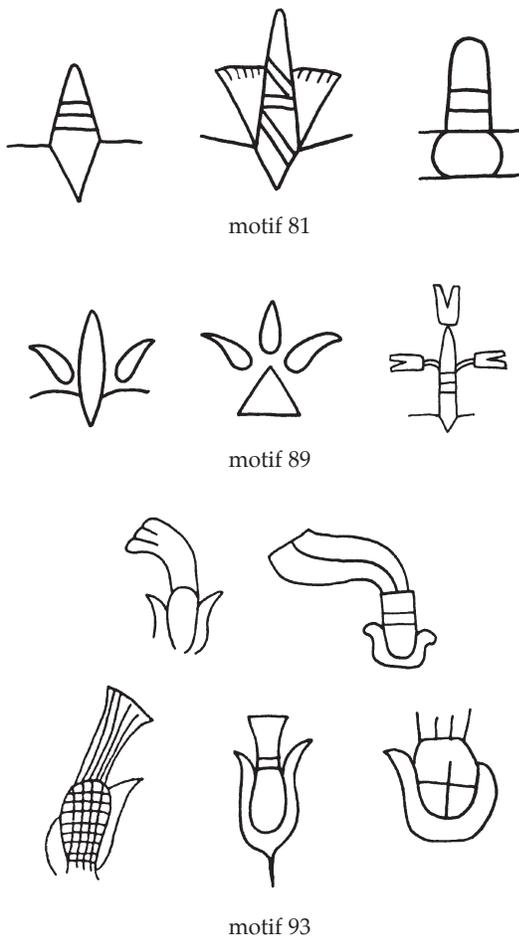


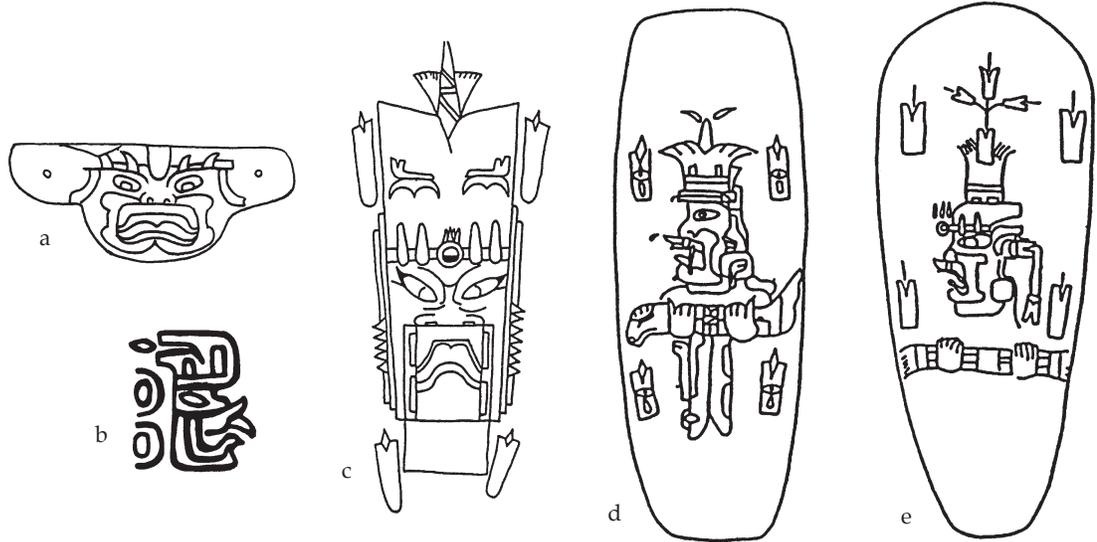
Figure 1. Olmec maize motifs identified by Joralemon (1971). Drawing: Karl Taube.

89, “tripartite maize,” and Motif 93, “maize with flowing silk” (Figure 1). Whereas Motif 93 represents a silk-tipped cob within a U-shaped husk, Motif 81 depicts the exposed cob alone. For Motif 89, the central cob is flanked by outwardly curving vegetation creating a form resembling a fleur-de-lis. Coe (1968:111) and Joralemon (1971:59-66) note that one Olmec entity commonly displays maize signs emerging from its cleft head (Figure 2c-d). In view of the prominent corn imagery, Coe and Joralemon interpret this being as a maize deity, labeled God II in the Joralemon (1971:59-66) classificatory system. However, the maize identification of God II has received only limited acceptance. In her excellent discussion of maize iconography in Olmec and early Maya art, Virginia Fields (1991) makes no mention of an Olmec maize deity, although she includes many examples of Joralemon’s God II. Similarly, in his recent doctoral dissertation, Reilly (1994b:181-182) relates this being to maize and the *axis mundi*, but he does not identify it as a maize god. Moreover, Joyce Marcus (1989:173-174) has reasonably argued that Formative depictions of maize growing out of cleft heads serve to qualify the cleft head not as maize but as the earth from which corn grows.

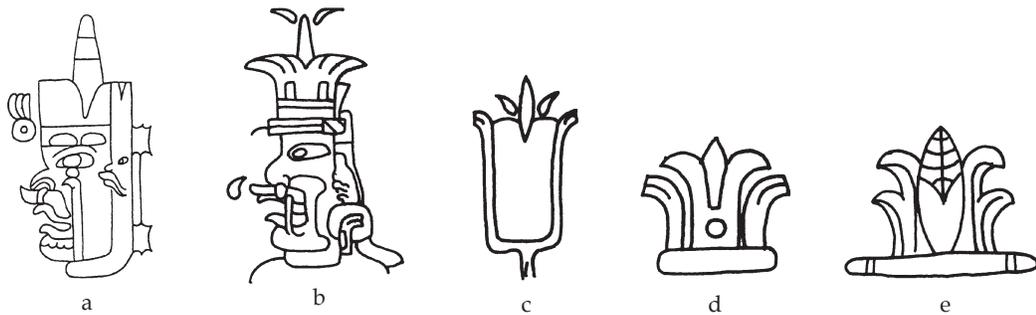
The uncertain identity of God II largely derives from the puzzling lack of discussion or analysis of this important being after the original insights of Coe and Joralemon. Neither these researchers nor other investigators have provided a detailed argument of why this being is the Olmec Maize God. In view of recent developments in Olmec and Maya iconographic research, a reappraisal of God II is clearly in order. This paper provides direct support for the maize identity of God II, although I also suggest that three other beings of the Joralemon (1971) system of deity classification—Gods IV, VI, and X—are also aspects of the Olmec Maize God as phases in the growth cycle of corn.

### The Green Maize Ear

It has been noted that God II, the Olmec Maize God, commonly has an ear of corn emerging from his cleft head. Rather than representing maize sprouting out of the earth, this convention depicts the mature ear projecting out of the green, surrounding husk. The cleft evidently is created by two overlapping husk leaves, or bracts, enclosing the lower portion of the maize ear. In one representation of the Olmec Maize God from Arroyo Pesquero, the V-shaped cleft is clearly composed of outcurving bracts, here marked with parallel striations (Figure



**Figure 2.** The Olmec Maize God: (a) Olmec Maize God wearing a version of four-celt headband, note vertical celt substituted for central cob (after Berjonneau et al. 1985:Pl. 25); (b) Olmec Maize God with cob emerging from backward-projecting cranium (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 135); (c-e) depictions of the Olmec Maize God incised on jadeite celts attributed to Arroyo Pesquero (drawings courtesy of Linda Schele).



**Figure 3.** The head of the Olmec Maize God as an ear of maize: (a) profile head of Olmec Maize God with projecting cranial cob, note foliated head bracket with face of maize god, incised celt from La Venta (from Drucker et al. 1959:Fig. 35e); (b) head of Olmec Maize God with cob projecting out of separating bracts, see Figure 2d (after Medellín Zenil 1971); (c) maize ear surrounded by U-bracket foliation, compare with personified profile version in *a*, incised jadeite celt, La Venta, see Figure 6a (after Drucker 1952:Fig. 47b); (d) trefoil maize ear projecting out of separating bracts, note cleft foliation at sides (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 170); (e) Epi-Olmec maize ear with cob projecting out of enclosing bracts with maize foliation at sides, detail of celt from El Sitio, Guatemala (after Fields 1991:Fig. 2).

3b). With the cleft cranial husk, the entire head of the Olmec Maize God can be regarded as a maize ear. This convention immediately recalls the Maya Maize God, who has a cranium rendered as the maize cob (Figure 16f). It would appear that in both cultures, the act of harvesting was equated with decapitation, the severing of the maize head from the growing stalk.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As in later Classic Maya art, the cranial deformation observed in Olmec art probably alludes to the form of the maize cob (see Drucker 1952:Pls. 46:2, 47-48, 50:8-9; Drucker et al. 1959:Pls. 33-36).



**Figure 4.** Stone celts and cobs in Mesoamerican iconography: (a) hanging-feather back element with celt, rooted cleft celt, and tasseled maize motifs, detail of Dumbarton Oaks statuette (after Benson 1971:Fig. 14); (b) Olmec flying figure with hanging belt celt, La Venta Stela 2 (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (c) figure wearing banded belt celt, Cerro de las Mesas Stela 6 (detail from Stirling 1943:Fig. 11b); (d) Glyph J, a Zapotec maize sign (after Caso and Bernal 1952:Fig. 125b); (e) mask and three-celt pectoral assemblage, Epoca de Transición, Monte Alban, see Figure 11a; (f) Early Classic Maya Maize God with banded cranial cob (after Hellmuth 1987a:Fig. 634g); (g) Early Classic mask and three-celt belt assemblage, note diagonal banding on celts, Tikal Stela 31 (after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Fig. 51c); (h) Quetzal-feathered maize ear with diagonally banded cob (after Reents-Budet 1994:314).

In Olmec art, it is possible to see the transition from the schematic cleft cob form to realistically depicted maize ears. On one jadeite celt from La Venta, the maize ear, central cleft, and projecting cob are surrounded by a U-shaped element that is bifurcated at the upper ends (Figure 3c). This same cleft bracket appears in profile flanking the head of the Olmec Maize God, in this case personified with another face of the corn deity (Figure 3a). According to Joralemon (1971:58), these cleft elements denote vegetal growth, and thus the celt examples could depict leaves surrounding the mature ear. This same motif is repeated on a late Olmec celt, although here the bifurcated elements are now separate from the central ear and cob (Figure 3d). In a still later scene, quite possibly Late Formative, the flanking forms are explicit maize leaves (Figure 3e). The central maize ear is clearly portrayed as a mature cob projecting out of a V-shaped cleft created by the enveloping bracts.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The convention of a V-shaped cleft to represent the cob-enclosing bracts is not limited to the Olmec but occurs independently in Nazca iconography of south coastal Peru (see Mosely 1992:Fig 86).

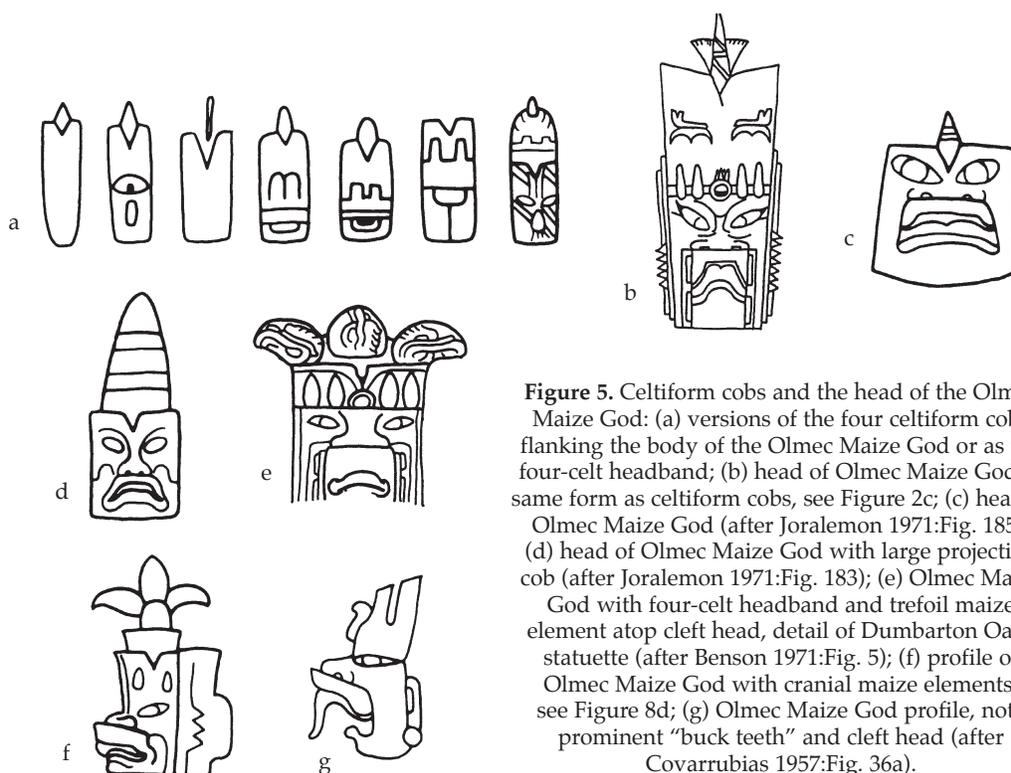
### The Maize Ear and Green Celts

Joralemon (1988:38) notes that a great many examples of the Olmec Maize God appear on jadeite celts and that such green celts probably represent ears of corn. The Arroyo Pesquero seated jadeite figure in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks wears a pendant back element formed of five hanging feathers with three simple celts, two cleft examples, and finally, three tasseled maize cobs (Figure 4a). The cleft forms appear to be supplied with long, twisting roots and, like the bifurcated elements described by Joralemon (1971:58), probably allude to green, growing maize. It appears that this back assemblage represents the transition from jade celt to growing, foliated cleft celt and finally to the tasseled cob. Benson (1971:13) suggests that the hanging back elements could be jade ornaments and indeed, for the Classic Maya, this is the preferred region for wearing jade belt celts, which typically hang in groups of three from a mask worn in the small of the back. The Dumbarton Oaks figure seems to wear an early version of the belt celts that commonly appear on Late Preclassic and Classic elite costume.

Pendant belt celts occur among the Middle Formative Olmec and can be identified by their thin, slablike forms and the presence of a single drilled hole for suspension (for example, Figure 8d). Two of the flying figures on La Venta Stela 2 wear such celts hanging from their belts (Figure 4b). The standing figure from the Early Classic Stela 6 of Cerro de las Mesas wears a similar celt in a virtually identical position (Figure 4c). In this case, it is marked with the diagonal bands known in Maya iconography as “mirror markings,” a means of depicting a shining, reflective surface such as would appear on mirrors and polished jade.

Among the Classic Zapotec, maize cobs were depicted as if they were shining celts. The Zapotec day name known as Glyph J is a vertical maize cob supplied with foliation (Figure 4d). The cob is typically rendered with the aforementioned diagonal band mirror marking, which commonly appears on celts. On one Epoca de Transición urn from Monte Alban, the seated figure wears a pectoral mask with three pendant celts (Figures 4e, 11a). Provided with diagonal bands, the celts are identical to the element serving as the central maize cob of Glyph J. The Classic Maya also depicted maize ears as shining celts. Thus in one Early Classic representation of the Maize God, the green maize ear is shown with precisely the same mirror markings appearing on pendant belt celts (Figure 4f–g). Similar banded cobs continue in Late Classic Maya iconography (Figure 4h). Rather than representing a shining mirror, the vertical oval sign commonly appearing in the name glyph of the Maya Maize God probably represents a polished stone celt (see Taube 1992b:Fig. 17a).

Among the most distinctive traits of the Olmec Maize God is a complex headband formed of four vertical elements and a circular disk in the center of the brow (Figures 2c, e, 5e, 8a). On several Arroyo Pesquero portrayals of the Olmec Maize God, the four vertical elements are positioned in four corners around the central deity (Figure 2c–e). Reilly (1994b:179) astutely notes that by donning the five-part headband, the figure is portrayed as the pivotal *axis mundi*. Marcus (1989:172-173) and Reilly (1994b:227-228) suggest that the Olmec bar-and-four-dots motif is simply an abstract version of the upright world axis



**Figure 5.** Celtiform cobs and the head of the Olmec Maize God: (a) versions of the four celtiform cobs flanking the body of the Olmec Maize God or as the four-celt headband; (b) head of Olmec Maize God in same form as celtiform cobs, see Figure 2c; (c) head of Olmec Maize God (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 185); (d) head of Olmec Maize God with large projecting cob (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 183); (e) Olmec Maize God with four-celt headband and trefoil maize element atop cleft head, detail of Dumbarton Oaks statuette (after Benson 1971:Fig. 5); (f) profile of Olmec Maize God with cranial maize elements, see Figure 8d; (g) Olmec Maize God profile, note prominent “buck teeth” and cleft head (after Covarrubias 1957:Fig. 36a).

surrounded by the four directions as is illustrated on the three Arroyo Pesquero celts (Figure 6).<sup>3</sup> Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993:73-74) note that in Classic Maya thought, the Maize God serves as the world axis by which the heavens are raised.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it appears that one of the major Classic Maya acts of creation was the donning of a triple-stone headband by the Maize God. This was tantamount to raising the central, three-stone hearth into the heavens (Taube 1998c). Much of this Classic imagery probably derives from the headband of the Olmec Maize God, although, in the case of the Olmec, the reference was to the four corners rather than the pivotal hearth.

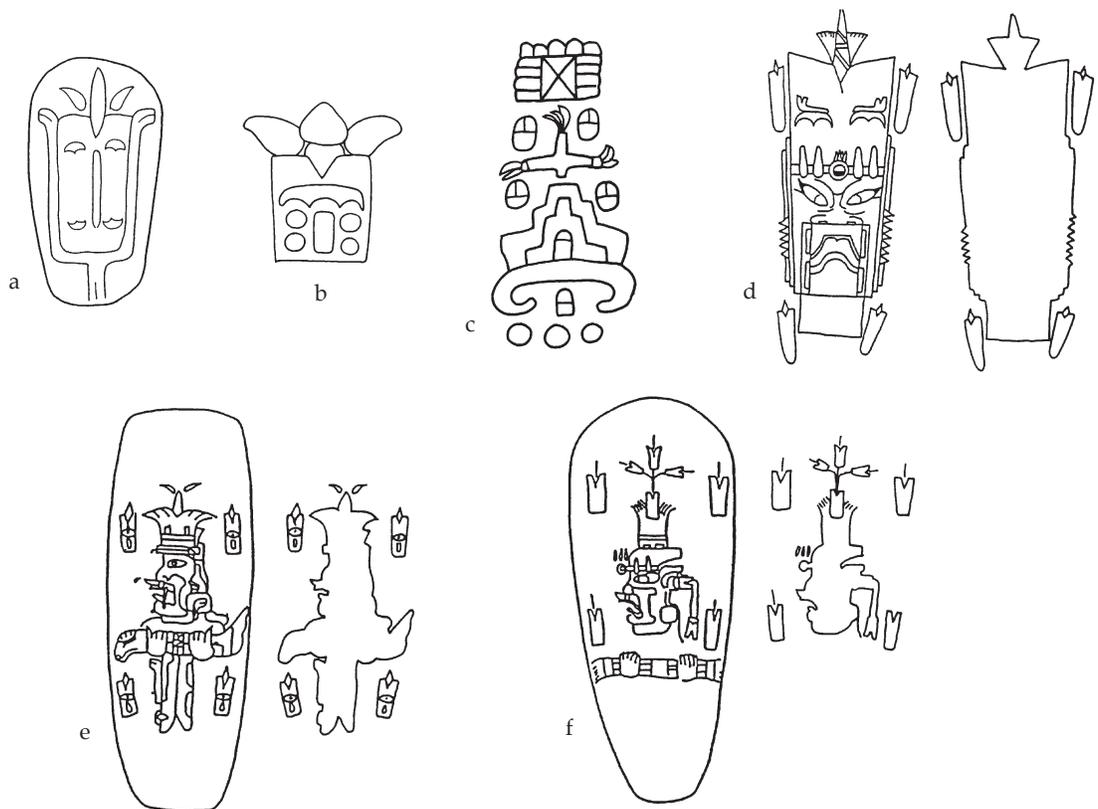
The four vertical elements appearing in the headband and surrounding the Olmec Maize God are cleft maize ear celts typically with the mature cob projecting out of the splitting husk (Figure 5a). Of course, these elements are essentially simplified versions of the Olmec Maize God head, which usually has a cob emerging out of a central cranial cleft (Figure 5b-d). At times, the maize celts are supplied with the eyes of the Olmec Maize God,

<sup>3</sup> By being placed on its side, the central axis becomes the marked focus of the bar-and-four-dots motif. However, this placement also results in presenting centrality as a linear arrangement with the dots symmetrically flanking the central element. This would explain the elaborate concern with bilateral symmetry observed at La Venta Group A. As in the case of the bar-and-four-dots motif, the linear arrangement at Group A portrays the essential theme of centrality and the world axis through bilateral rather than quadrilateral symmetry.

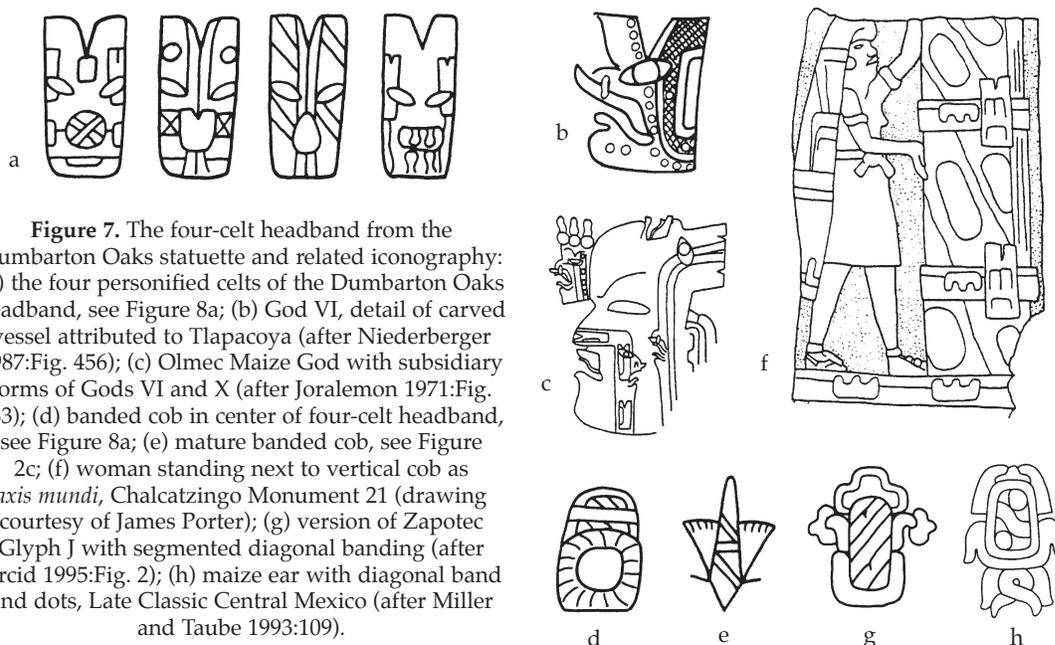
<sup>4</sup> Brian Stross (1992:102) also argues that the Maize God served as the *axis mundi* among both the Olmec and later Classic Maya. The concept of maize as the central world axis was also present in Late Postclassic Central Mexico. In the year bearer and world directional passages on pages 49 to 53 of the *Codex Borgia*, the fifth and central world tree is portrayed as a mature maize plant.

which tend to slant upward at the outer corners (Figures 5a, 7a). In addition, the celts and the brow of the maize god frequently display the double-merlon motif, a device that I (Taube 1995:91) have recently identified as the Olmec sign for green (Figure 2b, d–e). The use of the Olmec Maize God and the four-celt cobs to represent the four directions and the center suggests that the four-sided cosmic milpa model known for the later Maya was present among the Middle Formative Olmec. Like the related house metaphor for the universe, the milpa model signifies culturally constructed and ordered space.

The seated Dumbarton Oaks jadeite figure wears an especially elaborate form of the four-celt headband, each celt seemingly personified with the face of the maize deity (Figure 7a). Debra George (personal communication, 1995) has made the fascinating observation that the four varying elements occurring on the lower face of the personified celts may indicate distinct stages in the annual cycle of corn. She suggests that one begins at the viewer's left with the circular crossed band sign as the seed that develops into a cleft celt for growing corn, then a lanceolate-like form for the mature cob, and finally, the harvested maize. Although the fourth and last element remains poorly understood, the other three examples do appear to represent distinct aspects of the Olmec Maize God as phases in the annual cycle of corn.



**Figure 6.** The Olmec Maize God and the bar-and-four-dots motif: (a) bar-and-four-dots motif on maize ear (after Drucker 1952:Fig. 47b); (b) bar-and-four-dots motif topped by trefoil maize sign, back side of Olmec Maize God in headdress of Dumbarton Oaks statuette; for front, see Figure 5e (after Benson 1971:Fig. 7); (c) Olmec cosmogram with world tree surrounded by versions of the four celts (after Reilly 1994b:Fig. 3.49); (d–f) depictions of the Olmec Maize God with schematic outlines showing the bar-and-four-dots motif (drawings courtesy of Linda Schele; schematic outlines: Karl Taube; see Figure 2c–e).



**Figure 7.** The four-celt headband from the Dumbarton Oaks statuette and related iconography: (a) the four personified celts of the Dumbarton Oaks headband, see Figure 8a; (b) God VI, detail of carved vessel attributed to Tlapacoya (after Niederberger 1987:Fig. 456); (c) Olmec Maize God with subsidiary forms of Gods VI and X (after Joralemon 1971:Fig. 233); (d) banded cob in center of four-celt headband, see Figure 8a; (e) mature banded cob, see Figure 2c; (f) woman standing next to vertical cob as *axis mundi*, Chalcatzingo Monument 21 (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (g) version of Zapotec Glyph J with segmented diagonal banding (after Urcid 1995:Fig. 2); (h) maize ear with diagonal band and dots, Late Classic Central Mexico (after Miller and Taube 1993:109).

With its crossed-bands cartouche across the lower face, the first form may well allude to the infant figure labeled as God IV in the Joralemon (1971:71-76) system of deity classification. Along with wearing folded-paper ear strips and a headband marked with two elements, this figure commonly displays prominent crossed bands on his pectoral and belt. Whereas Coe (1968:11, 89) and Joralemon (1971:90) identified this infant as the Olmec Rain God, I have recently suggested that the Olmec rain deity was actually a mature, anthropomorphized feline with prominent canines, deeply furrowed brow, and eyes turning downward at the outer corners (Taube 1995). Moreover, the infant God IV overlaps considerably with the mature Olmec Maize God, or God II. Along with displaying the slanted eyes and cleft brow of the Olmec Maize God, God IV can also have maize growing out of the center of the head (for example, Figure 22c). In addition, God II also occurs with the paper ear ornaments and crossed-bands pectoral of God IV (Figures 13a, c, 27c). Although it is beyond the scope of this study to provide an in-depth analysis of this important being, the infant God IV may represent seed corn used for planting.<sup>5</sup> The use of human development to represent phases of corn growth coincides with contemporary Gulf Coast belief and is reflected in the Sierra Popoluca conception of the corn god Homshuk “who passes from childhood through maturity to old age each year during the cycle in which the maize sprouts, grows tall, ripens, and then withers” (Foster 1945:180).<sup>6</sup>

Whereas the first form of the Dumbarton Oaks headband may represent the fertile seed, the second example exhibiting the cleft celt on the lower face probably personifies young, growing maize, a being appearing as God VI in the Joralemon (1971:79) classificatory system, which notes that God VI typically has a cleft head and a band passing through the eye. Quite

<sup>5</sup> In one Late Classic Maya scene, an infant Maize God appears in a bowl affixed to a large, vegetal bundle, quite probably labeling the contents as harvested corn (see Clarkson 1978:Fig. 10).

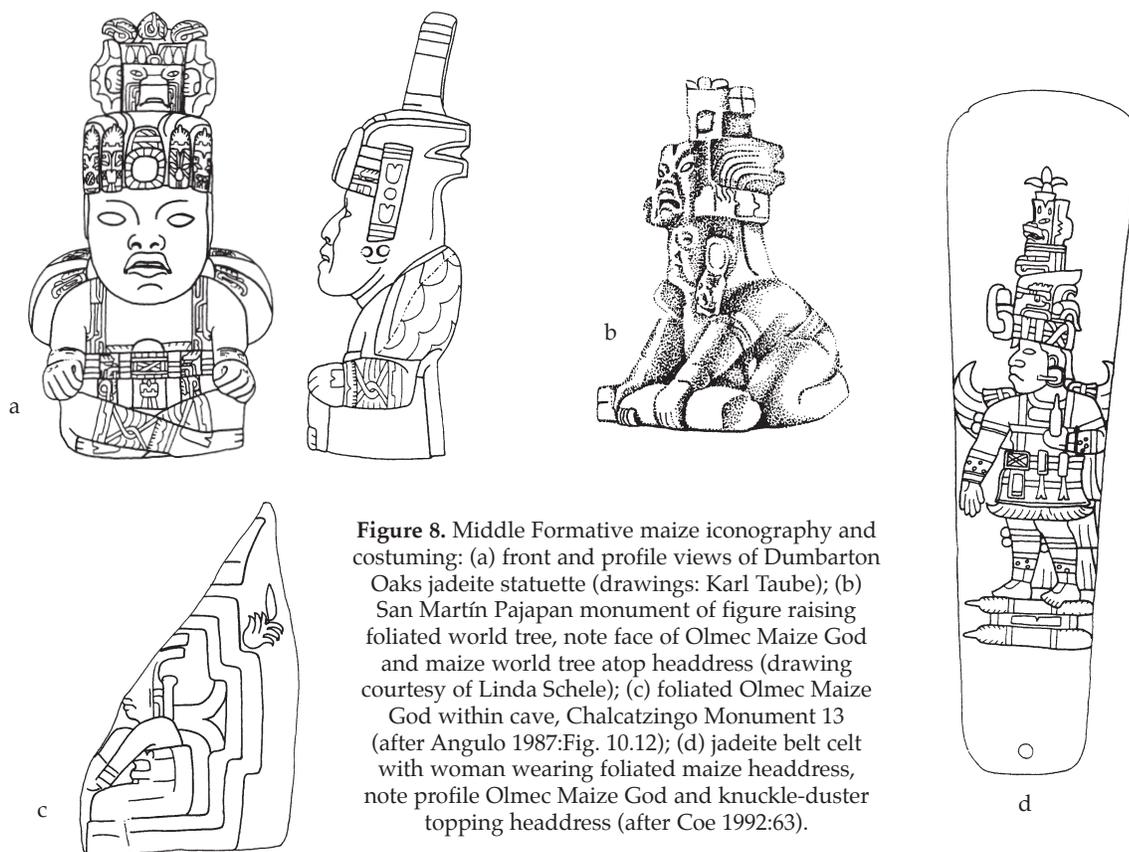
<sup>6</sup> In a like manner, Gillett Griffin (1981:215) identifies the child held in the lap of the Las Limas Figure—one of the most diagnostic examples of the infant God IV—as “a baby corn god.”

frequently, the cranial cleft turns sharply backward resembling a modern hammer claw in profile (Joralemon 1971:80-81). A series of dots often line the sides of the facial banding (for example, Figure 7b–c) and in this regard it should be noted that both the vertical facial banding and the flanking dots appear on the headband example marked with the cleft celt (Figure 7a). Rather than constituting an entirely distinct being, this figure also merges with God II and the infant God IV. Thus La Venta Monument 77 portrays a figure with the backward-projecting cleft head flanked with the dots of God VI as well as the folded-paper ear-pieces and crossed-bands pectoral and belt-piece of God IV (see de la Fuente 1973:Illus. 59-60). Moreover, the four sculptures lining the sunken courtyard at Teopantecuanitlan display the four-celt headband of God II, the crossed-bands pectoral of God IV, and on the sides, the backward-sweeping “hammer-claw” cranium of God VI (Figure 27c). An example of God II attributed to Arroyo Pesquero also displays the backward-projecting cranial cleft (Figure 2e).

When vertical, the cranial cleft of God VI is essentially identical to that of God II except that it lacks the central ear of mature corn. Quite probably, the lack of the central cob and often backwardly projecting cleft head of God VI allude to the young, flexible stage of tender growing corn. Nonetheless, in one instance, the backward cleft contains an ear of corn quite like that appearing on the lower face of the third headband example (Figures 2b, 7a).

It appears that the central cranial cob is an important but not essential trait of the Olmec Maize God. For the four-part brow-piece, the cleft celtiform ears can also lack the central cob (Figure 5a). Moreover, in his examples of God II, Joralemon (1971:Fig. 186) includes one figure that simply has a prominent cleft head with no central cob. This example is identical to God X in the Joralemon (1971:86) system of deity classification: a figure displaying the typical cleft head, slanted eyes, and mouth of the Olmec Maize God. This figure can also appear with the facial lines of God VI, which in some instances occur as schematic facial profiles of the corn deity (Joralemon 1971:Figs. 26-27, 257). Coe (1989b:76) notes that the God X figure commonly has a pair of vertical, mucus-like nostril elements that tend to pass down to the lip. This curious feature is by no means limited to God X but is also commonly shared with Gods II, IV, and VI (Figures 2d–e, 3a, 7b–c, 27b–c; see also, Joralemon 1971:Figs. 174-175, 211, 233-234, 237, 239). Although evidently an important trait of the Olmec Maize God, it is difficult to relate this nasal element to any natural feature of corn.

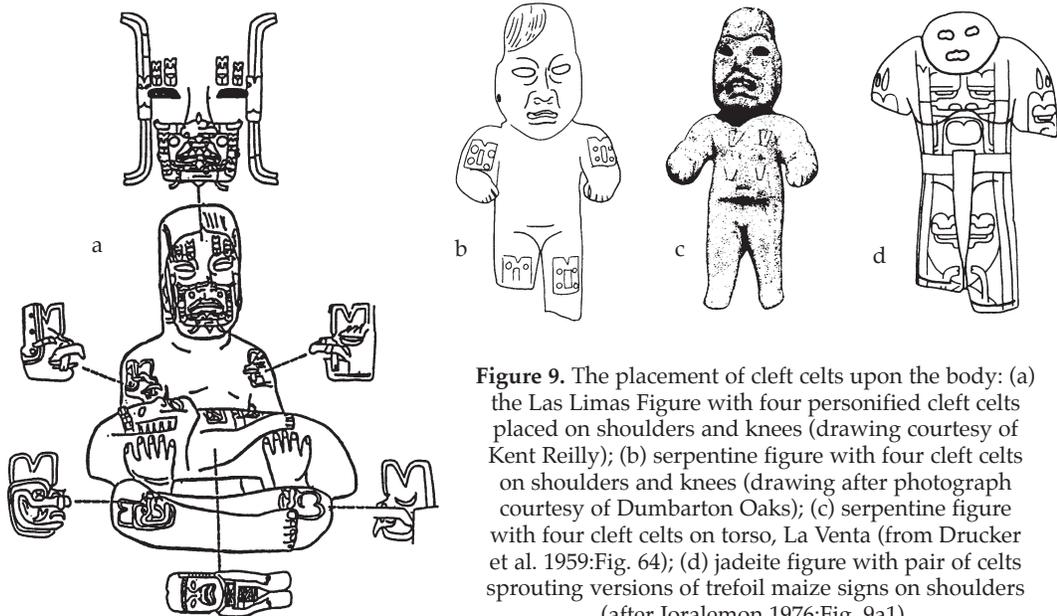
The lower face of the third headband celt is marked by the outline of a mature cob (Figure 7a). This plump and pointed form is much like cobs appearing in the cranial cleft of the mature Olmec Maize God and the central cob in the Olmec trefoil maize sign, including an example on the same Dumbarton Oaks figure (Figures 2b, 6b, 13b, 26e, 27b). Moreover, the Olmec Maize God topping the Dumbarton Oaks statuette wears a series of these lanceolate-shaped cobs as his four-celt headband (Figure 5e). The diagonal banding found with the third celt face also occurs with the mature, naked cob marking the middle place between the four celts (Figures 7d, 8a). Displaying horizontal as well as diagonal banding, this central cob is very similar to one sprouting out of the head of an Olmec Maize God attributed to Arroyo Pesquero (Figures 2c, 7e). This third celt probably represents God II, the personification of mature corn. Reilly (1994b:189, Fig. 4.81) compares the central cob and third celt to the world tree appearing on Chalcatzingo Monument 21 (Figure 7f). With its horizontal and diagonal banding, the Chalcatzingo tree could best be identified as a great cob serving as the central *axis mundi*. The curious lozenge-like forms on the diagonal bands could well refer to maize grains. One Classic Zapotec example of Glyph J portrays the maize ear similarly marked with segmented diagonal banding (Figure 7g).



**Figure 8.** Middle Formative maize iconography and costuming: (a) front and profile views of Dumbarton Oaks jadeite statuette (drawings: Karl Taube); (b) San Martín Pajapan monument of figure raising foliated world tree, note face of Olmec Maize God and maize world tree atop headdress (drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (c) foliated Olmec Maize God within cave, Chalcatzingo Monument 13 (after Angulo 1987:Fig. 10.12); (d) jadeite belt celt with woman wearing foliated maize headdress, note profile Olmec Maize God and knuckle-duster topping headdress (after Coe 1992:63).

Both Elizabeth Benson (1971:17-19) and Kent Reilly (1994b:186) note that the Dumbarton Oaks statuette is very similar to a stone sculpture from San Martín Pajapan (Figure 8b). Reilly (1994b:186-187) interprets this monument as a ruler in the act of raising the world tree. The heads of both figures are marked with long, parallel lines suggesting hair or feathers as well as the backcurving, cleft cranium denoting young, growing maize. On the Dumbarton Oaks figure, a pair of lines formed of U-brackets and lozenges runs down the back of the head (see Benson 1971:Fig. 12). This pattern in precisely the same position appears in a profile representation of the Olmec Maize God (Figure 2b). This banding strongly resembles the later Classic Maya star sign and is quite probably a version of the dotted band commonly found on the God VI aspect of the Olmec Maize God. Angulo (1987:141) notes that Chalcatzingo Monument 13 is very much like the San Martín Pajapan monument and may have also originally represented a figure with a bar in its hands (Figure 8c). Whereas the Dumbarton Oaks and San Martín Pajapan sculptures seem to be living individuals impersonating this being, the Chalcatzingo monument may represent the foliated Olmec Maize God raising the world axis.

Along with the four-celt headband, the Dumbarton Oaks figure wears a skirt, suspenders, and a feather cape and tailpiece. Michael Coe (1992:62) notes that this costuming is very similar to that appearing on an incised, late Olmec, jadeite belt celt (Figure 8d). In addition to the four-celt headband and other costume elements, the figure also wears the backcurving, foliated headdress. A diminutive breast is depicted in profile revealing that, like the skirted



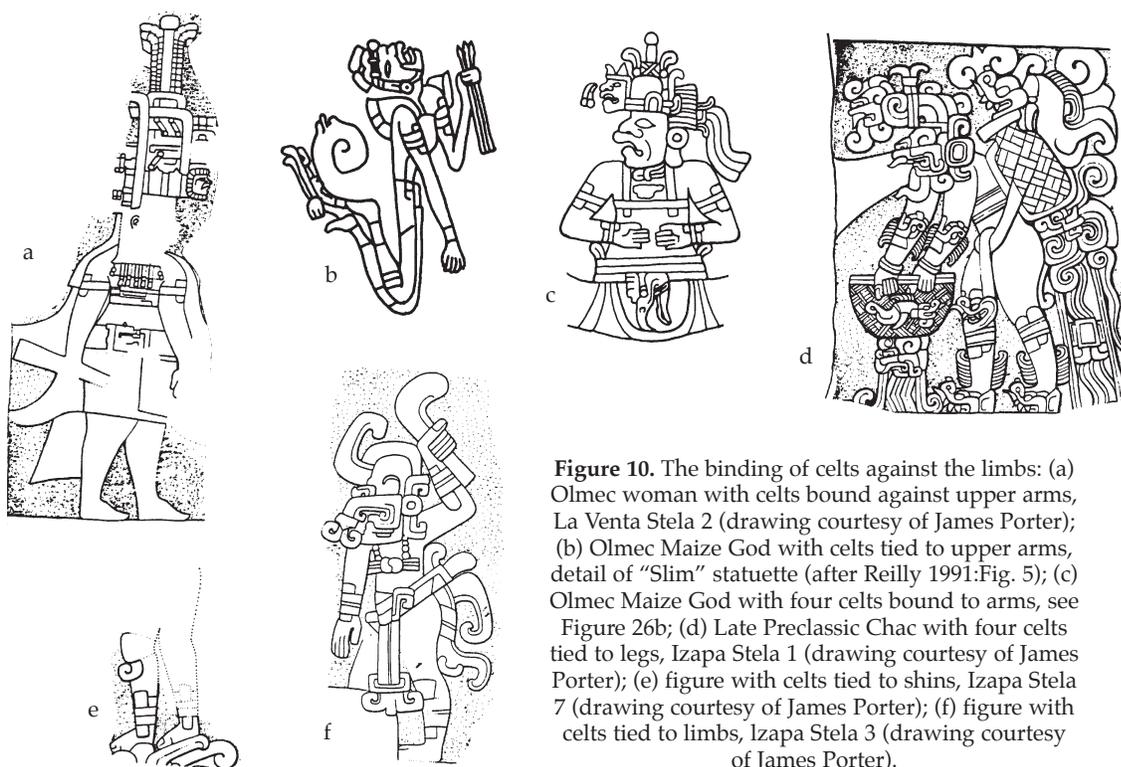
**Figure 9.** The placement of cleft celts upon the body: (a) the Las Limas Figure with four personified cleft celts placed on shoulders and knees (drawing courtesy of Kent Reilly); (b) serpentine figure with four cleft celts on shoulders and knees (drawing after photograph courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks); (c) serpentine figure with four cleft celts on torso, La Venta (from Drucker et al. 1959:Fig. 64); (d) jadeite figure with pair of celts sprouting versions of trefoil maize signs on shoulders (after Joralemon 1976:Fig. 9a1).

figure on Chalcatzingo Monument 21, this individual is a woman (see Figure 7f). In view of the skirt and other shared costume elements, the Dumbarton Oaks figure probably is also female, perhaps even the same individual. The headdress of the Dumbarton Oaks sculpture is topped by an Olmec Maize God flanked by cut-conch “knuckle-dusters” (Figure 8a). The celt figure wears a profile view of essentially the same image in an identical position, again with a flanking knuckle-duster and a trilobate maize growth sprouting out of the cleft head (Figure 8d).<sup>7</sup>

With its central cranial cleft and slightly out-flaring brow, the Olmec Maize God atop the celt figure closely resembles a personified celt, although here with the face projecting out of the flat contour of the stone. This image can be readily compared to the Las Limas Figure, which has four similar personified cleft celts upon the shoulders and knees (Figure 9a). Series of cleft celts frequently appear on the bodies of Middle Formative Olmec figures, including the Dumbarton Oaks sculpture, which has simple cleft celts on the ankles and arms (Figures 8a, 9b–d). Although uncleft, celts also appear on the ankles and probably hands of the aforementioned incised celt figure (Figure 8d). I suspect that like the four celts placed around the Olmec Maize God or upon its brow, these body celts cause the wearer to become the world axis, a vital conduit of divine power from the quarters of the world.

Aside from the cleft celts appearing much like tattooing directly on the body, the Olmec also lashed actual celts to their limbs. On La Venta Stela 3, a skirted woman with the four-celt headband also has a pair of simple celts tied to her upper arms (Figure 10a). The flying, caped Olmec Maize God on the right arm of “Slim” also displays bound celts on his upper arms (Figure 10b). The late Olmec acrobat in the center of the Shook Panel has celts on his wrists

<sup>7</sup> An Olmec-style stela from Tiltepec, Chiapas, displays a frontal figure also wearing a headdress topped by the Olmec Maize God flanked by “knuckle-dusters.” As in the case of the other examples, a trefoil maize sign sprouts from the top of the deity head (see Milbrath 1979:Fig. 51).



**Figure 10.** The binding of celts against the limbs: (a) Olmec woman with celts bound against upper arms, La Venta Stela 2 (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (b) Olmec Maize God with celts tied to upper arms, detail of “Slim” statuette (after Reilly 1991:Fig. 5); (c) Olmec Maize God with four celts bound to arms, see Figure 26b; (d) Late Preclassic Chac with four celts tied to legs, Izapa Stela 1 (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (e) figure with celts tied to shins, Izapa Stela 7 (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (f) figure with celts tied to limbs, Izapa Stela 3 (drawing courtesy of James Porter).

as well as upper arms (Figure 10c). Wearing an early form of the three-stone headband as well as a tasseled ear of corn at the back of his head, this figure can be identified as the Olmec Maize God. In the Late Preclassic art of Izapa, a number of deity figures wear axe heads bound to their limbs (Figure 10d–f). In these scenes, the celtiform shape is clearly evident with a widening bit and narrow poll. On Izapa Stela 1, Chac has pairs of celts lashed to each of his legs whereas on Stela 3 the blades are tied to the lower arms and shins (Figure 10d, f).

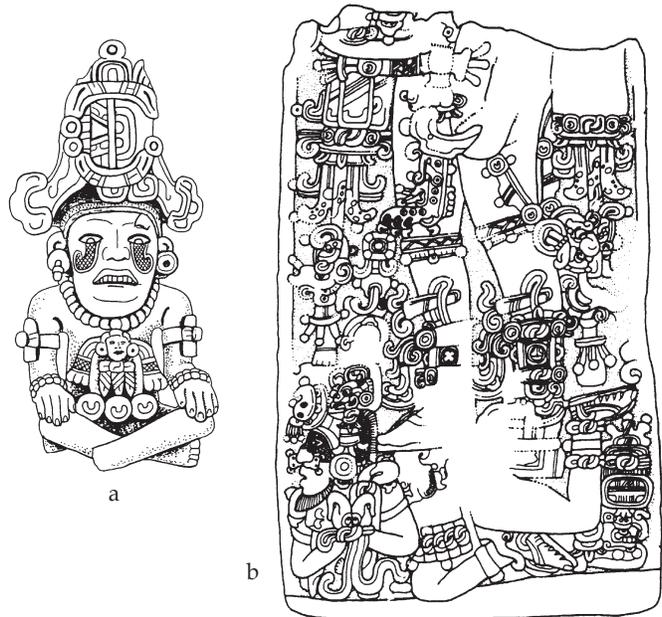
The placement of celts on the limbs of figures continues into the proto-Classic and Classic periods. On one Epoca de Transición urn from Tomb 41 at Monte Alban, the seated figure has celts bound to his upper arms (Figure 11a). His distinctive facial markings identify him as a proto-Classic form of the God of Glyph L, the Classic Zapotec Maize God (see Caso and Bernal 1952:94). Tikal Stela 39, a late-fourth-century Maya monument, portrays king Jaguar Paw with smoking and shining celts bound to his anklets (Figure 11b).

The presence of shining celts on the legs of Jaguar Paw is to my knowledge a unique Classic Maya example. Indeed, it appears that by the Classic period, this Olmec tradition of celts against the body generally had transformed into the shining “god-markings” appearing on Maya deities. First noted by Michael Coe (1973:13), these markings are oval forms placed on the limbs and torsos of supernaturals (Figure 12c–d). They are usually rendered with shining “mirror” markings that appear on mirrors, celts, and other polished stones. Both body celts and god-markings appear in the art of Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu. On Stela 21, the principal figure has a celt lashed to his arm (Figure 12a). With its interior parallel line and elliptical profile, this example closely resembles god-markings despite the fact that it is clearly bound across the arm. However, the dancing figures upon Kaminaljuyu Stela 19 and the closely related Stela 4 display similar limb elements directly upon the skin as god-markings (Figure

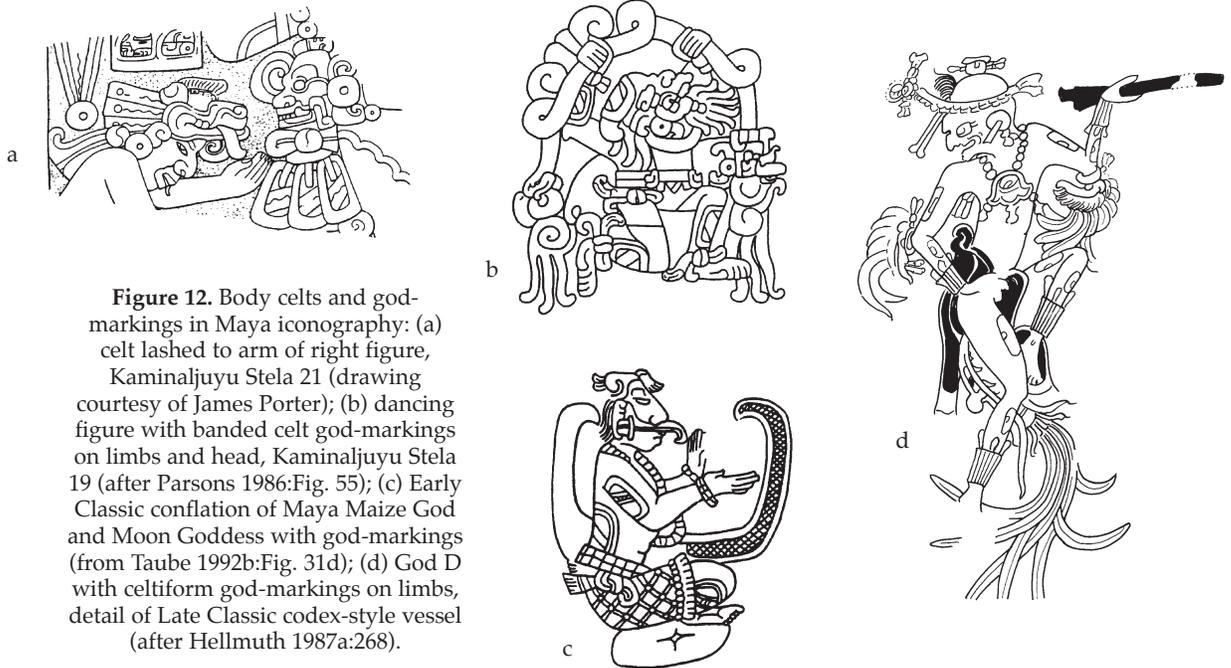
12b). Like the Olmec placement of celts upon the body, the Maya god-markings delineate divine figures as charged sources of supernatural power.

**The Celt as the World Axis**

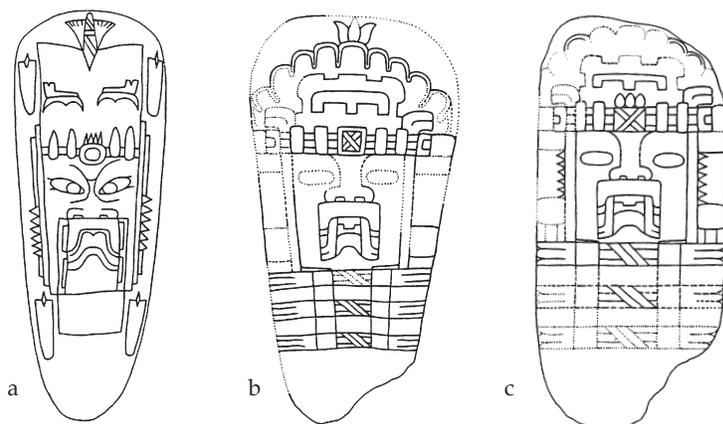
For the Middle Formative Olmec, representations of the Olmec Maize God are not limited to small, portable objects of jade or ceramic. At La Venta, a number of stelae were erected as monumental portrayals of this being. James Porter (1996) notes that there are four similar La Venta stelae, Monuments 25/6, 27, 58, and 66. Of these, Monuments 25/6 and 27 are the best preserved (Figure 13b-c). Both are clear representations of the Olmec Maize God complete with the four-celt headband. Noting the similarity of these monuments to a frontal depiction of the Olmec Maize God



**Figure 11.** The binding of celts against the limbs in proto-Classic and Early Classic Mesoamerican iconography: (a) proto-Classic version of Zapotec Maize God with celts tied to upper arms, note vertical version of the “jaws of the sky” as headdress medallion (after Caso and Bernal 1952:Fig. 394); (b) Great Jaguar Paw with smoking celts bound to shins, Tikal Stela 39 (drawing courtesy of Linda Schele).



**Figure 12.** Body celts and god-markings in Maya iconography: (a) celt lashed to arm of right figure, Kaminaljuyu Stela 21 (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (b) dancing figure with banded celt god-markings on limbs and head, Kaminaljuyu Stela 19 (after Parsons 1986:Fig. 55); (c) Early Classic conflation of Maya Maize God and Moon Goddess with god-markings (from Taube 1992b:Fig. 31d); (d) God D with celtiform god-markings on limbs, detail of Late Classic codex-style vessel (after Hellmuth 1987a:268).



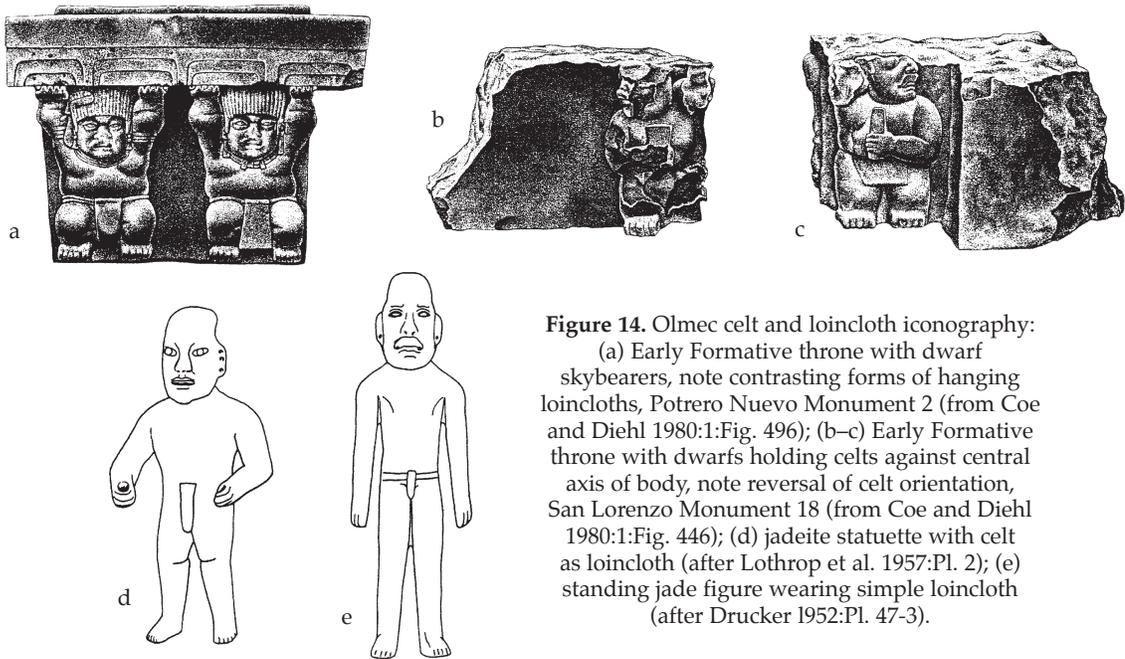
**Figure 13.** The Olmec Maize God and celtiform stelae at La Venta: (a) Olmec Maize God incised on jadeite celt; (b) Olmec Maize God wearing four-celt headband, note topping trefoil maize sign, La Venta Monument 25/6; (c) Olmec Maize God with four-celt headband and folded ear ornaments typical of God IV, La Venta Monument 27 (drawings courtesy of James Porter).

incised on an Arroyo Pesquero jadeite celt (Figure 13a), Porter argues that the Olmec compared these upright monuments to celts. In support, Porter notes that both were carved from green stone: Monument 25/6 of green schist and Monument 27 of green gneiss. In addition, Porter (1996) points out that the six miniature stelae in the La Venta Offering 4 group are actually jadeite celts (see Drucker et al. 1959:142-158). A similar argument can be made for La Venta Offering Number 8 in which three groups of celts were planted blade upright across the central axis of Group A (see Drucker et al. 1959:174-176, Pl. 41a). Aside from the La Venta monuments, Chalcatzingo Monument 4 is also a celtiform stela with a strongly tapering butt resembling the narrow poll of a stone axe (see Grove and Angulo 1987:Fig. 9.22). The four celts placed around the maize deity are also typically planted poll-downward in the ground (Figure 6d-f).

According to Reilly (1994b), La Venta Monuments 25/6 and 27 are world trees. With their representations of the Olmec Maize God, these celtiform stelae probably denote the trees that raised the sky, if not the *axis mundi* itself. However, rather than simply being trees, their form and iconography also suggest that they are upright celts as if planting the axe blade also signifies lifting the sky. Two thrones from San Lorenzo suggest that this concept existed among the Early Formative Olmec (Figure 14a-c). It has been recently noted that Potrero Nuevo Monument 2 depicts two dwarfs lifting the sky (Miller and Taube 1993:155; Taube 1995). Coe and Diehl (1980:1:368) note that this monument is very similar to San Lorenzo Monument 18. Although heavily damaged, Monument 18 was clearly another throne with two Atlantean dwarfs supporting the now-missing seat with one arm apiece. With the other arm, each dwarf holds an upright celt in the center of his body. It would appear that in this scene both the upright celts and the dwarfs support the sky.

Coe and Diehl (1980:1:327) note that the celts on Monument 18 are held in opposite positions, one clasped bit-upward and the other poll-upward (Figure 14b-c). A similar pattern can be discerned on the two loincloths of the Potrero Nuevo Monument 2 dwarfs (Figure 14a). Whereas one loincloth flares upward, the other flares down. This subtle distinction is neither casual nor fortuitous. These loincloths, like the Monument 18 celts, occur on the central axis of the bodies. Moreover, it is clear that the Olmec compared the form of loincloths to celts. A fine jadeite statuette in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks portrays the loincloth simply as a prominent projecting celt (Figure 14d). Although this celt also suggests a phallus, similar forms on jadeite and serpentine figurines from La Venta occur with a horizontal waist band revealing that it is the central part of the loincloth (Figure 14e).

For the Olmec, the central, hanging loincloth apron was compared metaphorically to



**Figure 14.** Olmec celt and loincloth iconography:

(a) Early Formative throne with dwarf skybearers, note contrasting forms of hanging loincloths, Potrero Nuevo Monument 2 (from Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 496); (b–c) Early Formative throne with dwarfs holding celts against central axis of body, note reversal of celt orientation, San Lorenzo Monument 18 (from Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 446); (d) jadeite statuette with celt as loincloth (after Lothrop et al. 1957:Pl. 2); (e) standing jade figure wearing simple loincloth (after Drucker 1952:Pl. 47-3).

the celt and the world axis. A similar pattern is known for the Classic Maya. Schele and Miller (1986:72) note that Classic Maya rulers commonly wear loincloth aprons displaying images of the world tree, thereby denoting the king as the *axis mundi* (Figure 15a–b). It should also be noted that the triple-celt belt assemblages are most commonly suspended directly atop the loincloth in the same region as the celt on the Dumbarton Oaks statuette.<sup>8</sup> In one Late Classic scene illustrating the defeat of Vucub Caquix, the deified world tree has three fruits in its branches, one placed in the region of the forehead (Figure 15c). Supplied with the mirror markings commonly found on celts, these fruits are probably the symbolic analog of the three belt-celts worn atop the loincloth with the entire tree alluding to the loincloth and celt assemblage.<sup>9</sup>

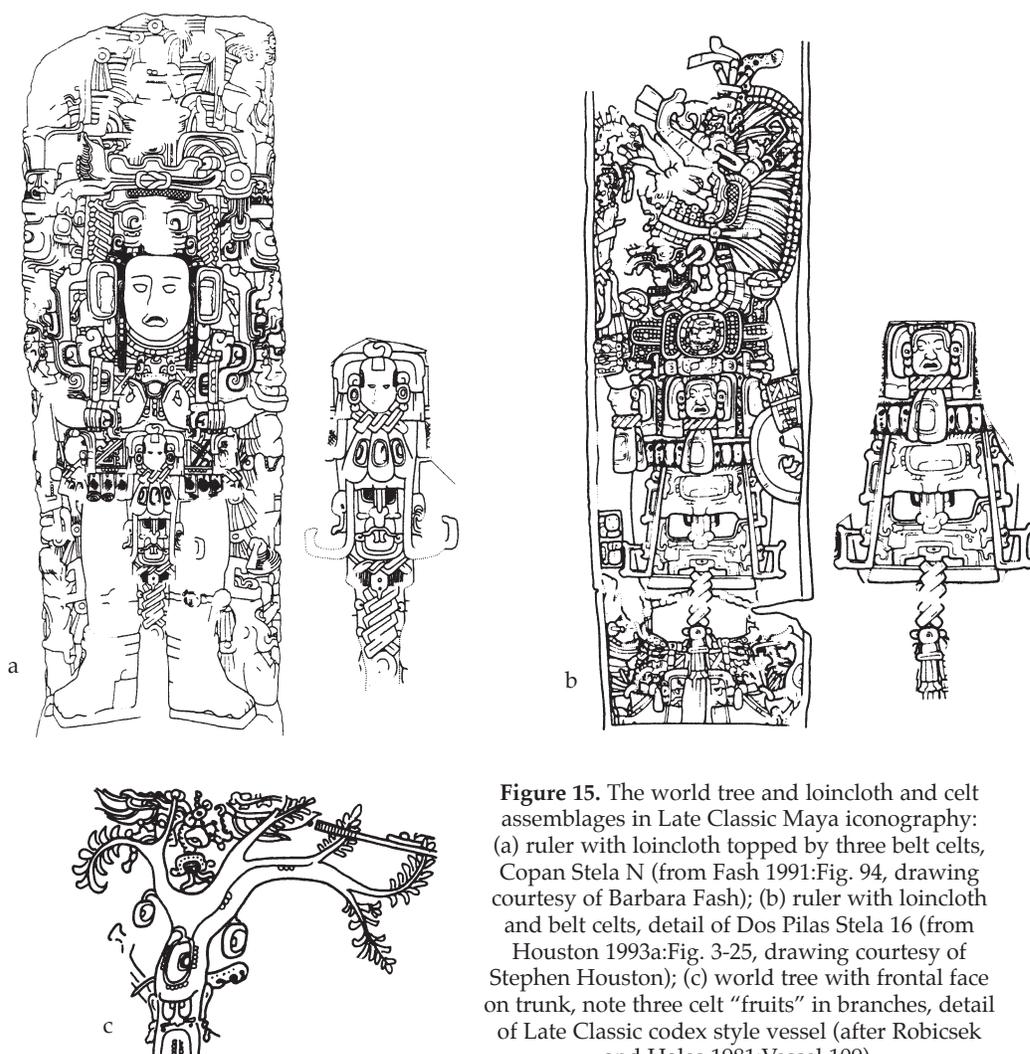
Among the Olmec and later Classic Maya, vertical celts were identified with centrality and the *axis mundi*. A similar concept is known for the Postclassic Mixtec. An early colonial creation account recorded by Fray Gregorio García describes the old creator couple 1 Deer living in a palace atop a mountain near Apoala. At the highest point of this palace, there was a copper axe with its bit supporting the heavens:

Y encima de los más alto de la casa y habitación de estos dioses, estaba una hacha de cobre, el corte hacia arriba, sobre la cual estaba el cielo. Esta peña y palacios estaban en un cerro muy alto, junto al pueblo de Apoala. . . . Esta peña tenía por nombre “lugar donde estaba el cielo.” (León-Portilla 1984:91)

Alfonso Caso (1960:23) and Jill Furst (1978:58) note that this mythical place is depicted in the pre-Hispanic *Codex Bodley* as a vertical axe with its blade turned up toward the sky (Figure

<sup>8</sup> In more elaborate versions of belt assemblages, the triple celts occur in four groups around the body, thereby delineating the ruler as the central place (for example, Figure 15a–b).

<sup>9</sup> The three shining fruits probably also allude to the lifting of the three precious stones of creation symbolizing centrality and the hearth (see Freidel et al. 1993; Taube 1998).



**Figure 15.** The world tree and loincloth and celt assemblages in Late Classic Maya iconography: (a) ruler with loincloth topped by three belt celts, Copan Stela N (from Fash 1991:Fig. 94, drawing courtesy of Barbara Fash); (b) ruler with loincloth and belt celts, detail of Dos Pilas Stela 16 (from Houston 1993a:Fig. 3-25, drawing courtesy of Stephen Houston); (c) world tree with frontal face on trunk, note three celt "fruits" in branches, detail of Late Classic codex style vessel (after Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 109).

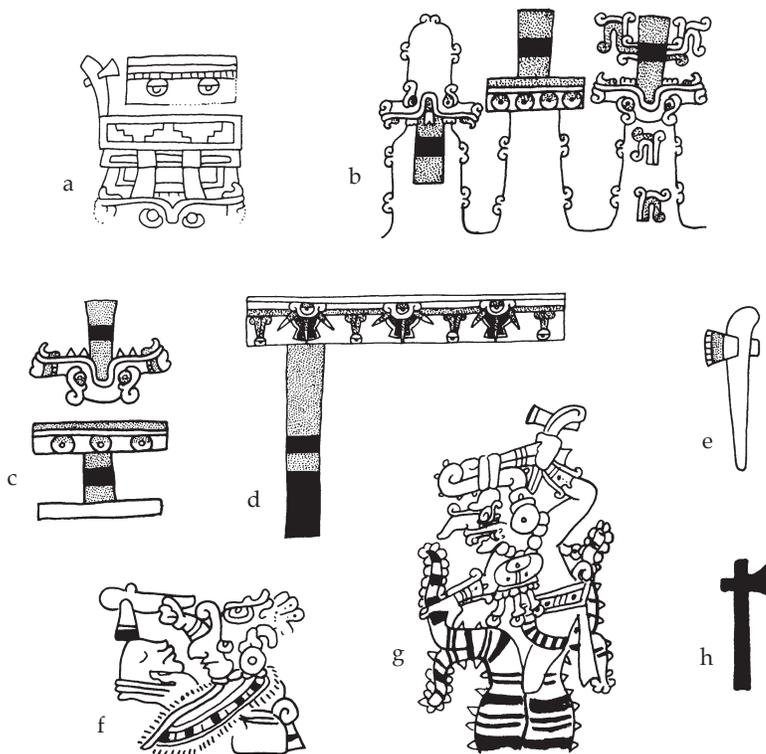
16a). Furst (1978) suggests that Vienna pages 38 and 47 may also depict the same place but states that the sky-supporting element is not an axe blade but a black and red post (Figure 16b–d). However, this black and red element is actually the naked blade without the handle, much like the García description. The strait-edged bit, the banding, and the frequently out-flaring outline resemble axe heads appearing in both pre-Hispanic Mixtec and Maya codices (Figure 16e–g). This form is quite unlike pointed or curving axe blades of chipped stone. Fray Diego de Landa illustrates an axe with a virtually identically shaped blade (Figure 16h) along with a valuable description: "They had little hatchets of a particular metal, of this form, which they fitted to a wooden handle, and it served them as a weapon and in turn for carving wood. They gave an edge by blows with a stone, since the metal is soft" (Tozzer 1941:121). This malleable metal was surely copper, which was widely traded in Postclassic Mesoamerica. The strait-edged axe heads seen in the Maya and Mixtec codices, including the Mixtec toponym, are probably of copper.

The sign for "the place where the sky was" in the Vienna obverse and the *Codex Nuttall*

is formed of a banded black and red axe blade accompanied by a starry sky band, which usually occurs atop the axe (Figure 16b–d). This sign appears on pages 9, 38, 45, and 47 of the strongly mythological Vienna obverse and each time is paired with another black and red axe placed in the open mouth of the serpent (Figure 16c). This same pairing of sky and serpent maw also occurs in the aforementioned Bodley scene where a serpent mouth appears at the base of the temple below the sky band. In the Mixtec codices, such serpent mouths represent cave entrances to the underworld, and this pairing probably refers to the regions of sky and underworld accessed by the *axis mundi*. On page 9 of the Vienna obverse, three copper axe heads are placed on mountains (Figure 16b). Whereas the central blade is marked with the sky sign, both flanking axe heads are in serpent maws, one blade pointing up and the other down, recalling San Lorenzo Monument 18, which was carved over two thousand years before the Vienna was painted. The concept of a sky-bearing axe, still present among the early colonial Mixtec, seems to have had its origins in Formative Olmec religion.

### The Transformation of the Olmec Maize God: Later Maize Gods of Southeastern Mesoamerica

It has been noted that a great deal of maize symbolism and iconography associated with the Olmec Maize God continued with later Mesoamerican peoples. This continuity appears not only in the secondary associations of this being but also in the physical attributes and qualities of the deity itself. According to Miguel Covarrubias (1946, 1957), the rain gods of Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerica derived from an Olmec prototype, a theory which has recently received some support (Taube 1995). In a similar vein, later maize deities known for the Zapotec, Isthmian, and Maya cultures owe much of their origins to the Olmec Maize God.



**Figure 16.** The copper axe as the Postclassic Mixtec *axis mundi*: (a) axe on temple platform between signs for cave and heavens, *Codex Bodley I-V* (after Furst 1978:Fig. 19); (b) three copper axe heads placed on mountains, central axe head with sky band and flanking axes in serpent cave maws, *Codex Vienna*, p. 9; (c) copper axe heads supporting sky band and in mouth of serpent cave maw, *Codex Vienna*, p. 38; (d) copper axe supporting sky band, *Codex Nuttall*, p. 75; (e) hafted copper axe, *Codex Nuttall*, p. 57; (f) Maya Maize God carving mask with banded copper axe, *Codex Madrid*, p. 96d; (g) Chac with banded copper axe, *Codex Dresden*, p. 69a; (h) hafted copper axe (after Tozzer 1941:121).



**Figure 17.** The development of the Zapotec Maize God: (a) flying Olmec Maize God with bifurcated headdress element, compare with Figure 17b, also see Figure 10b; (b) Late Classic Zapotec Maize God on central axis of Tomb 104, Monte Alban, note slanted eyes and upturned upper lip (after Caso 1938:Pl. 1, Fig. 99); (c) personified Glyph J carved on paw effigy vessel, Monte Alban (after drawing courtesy of Javier Urcid); (d) proto-Classic depiction of Zapotec Maize God (after Caso and Bernal 1952:Fig. 394); (e) depiction of Zapotec Maize God with strong Olmec features, Monte Alban I vessel (after Scott 1978:Fig. 8); (f) jadeite plaque of Olmec Maize God attributed to Oaxaca (after Covarrubias 1947:Pl. 7).

### *The Zapotec*

Kent Reilly (1994b:191) compares the bifurcated headdress of the Olmec Maize God on the left arm of “Slim” to a similar example appearing in the Early Classic murals of Tomb 104 at Monte Alban (Figure 17a–b). Both headdresses have a central beadlike element flanked by down-sloping bands. On closer inspection, it is apparent that the Tomb 104 figure is essentially a personified form of the maize sign, Glyph J (see Figures 4d, 7g, 17c). Like the earlier Olmec Maize God, this figure occupying the position of the cob has eyes slanting upwards at the outer corners and an Olmecoid pouting upper lip exposing prominent incisors. Directly above this figure, there is the Zapotec sky sign the “jaws of the sky,” suggesting that like the Olmec and later Classic Maya, this maize figure constitutes the world axis lifting the sky. An Early Classic vessel discovered in System M at Monte Alban portrays another personified Glyph J, here with outstretched arms holding probable maize plants (Figure 17c). Caso and Bernal (1952:59) note that the device immediately above this personified maize cob is a sky element containing two “star eyes.” Thus like the Tomb 104 mural, this vessel seems to depict maize as the world axis lifting the sky. In this regard, it should also be noted that the brow element of the Epoca de Transición maize deity is an early vertical version of the “jaws of the sky” motif (Figures 11a, 17d).

The personified Glyph J in Tomb 104 appears on the back wall of the chamber occupying the central, pivotal portion of the Tomb 104 murals. However, the tomb contains an even clearer reference to the maize god as the world axis. At the feet of the deceased, on the central axis of the tomb, a large urn was placed between four smaller urns of identical form and size (Caso 1938:Fig. 101). Caso notes that the central urn represents Pitao Cozobi, the Zapotec Maize God (Caso 1938:82). With the central maize deity and four accompanying urns, this

group is notably similar to the scenes of the Olmec Maize God surrounded by the four celts (Figure 6d–f). Like the backing central mural, the urns depict the Zapotec Maize God as the pivotal *axis mundi*.

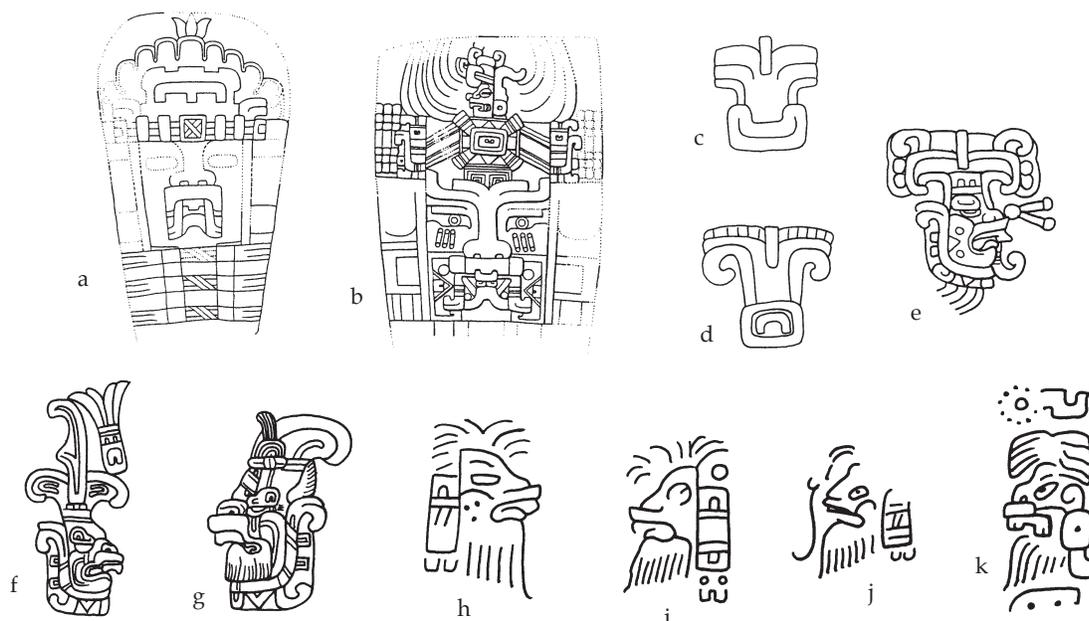
In Classic Zapotec burials, identical urns of the Zapotec Maize God can occur in groups of five, probably once again alluding to the four directions and center (see Caso and Bernal 1952:Figs. 152, 154). Among the Classic Zapotec, the maize deity appears either with a fully human face, or more frequently, with a serpent-lipped buccal mask, as in the case of the Tomb 104 urn (Figure 23). It would appear that the anthropomorphic form is of considerable antiquity and mention has been made of an *Época de Transición* example (Figures 11a, 17d). However, some of the earliest urns known for the Zapotec—corresponding to Monte Alban I—depict the same god (Figure 17e). With little justification, aside from the fact that they may have functioned as braziers, Caso and Bernal (1952:326) identify these vessels as youthful versions of the old fire god, Huehuetotl. As Caso and Bernal (1952:330) point out, the urns typically display an Olmec-like upper lip pulled back to display the incisors, a convention recalling the Tomb 104 mural as well as the Olmec Maize God. In one case, the figure bares serpentlike fangs recalling a fine jadeite plaque of the Olmec Maize God attributed to Oaxaca (Figure 17f; see Bernal 1969b:Pl. 71, center).

According to John Scott (1977, 1978:17) the Monte Alban I urns represent the youthful Zapotec Maize God; he also notes that a maize sign typically appears in the center of the headband. Although in most instances this is a trefoil element formed by a diagonally banded mature cob flanked by leaves, one example has a celtiform maize cob lashed sideways to the headband (see Bernal 1969b:Pl. 71, right). The trefoil element, resembling a fleur-de-lis, is virtually identical to the Late Preclassic Maya trefoil Jester God, which Fields (1991) identifies as a maize sign. Rather than youthful fire gods, the urn figures are early versions of the Zapotec Maize God. Despite the fact that these urns were fashioned well after the Olmec demise, they are perhaps the most striking examples of Olmec-influenced art from Oaxaca. It would appear that for the Late Formative Zapotec, the face of corn was Olmec.

### *The Isthmus*

James Porter (1996) compares the aforementioned celtiform stelae at La Venta to Tres Zapotes Stela C, a Late Preclassic monument bearing a Long Count date corresponding to 31 BC (Figure 18a–b). He notes that the upper portion of Stela C is beveled much like the blade of a celt. Although making no assertions as to the identity of this being, Porter notes that the figure is strikingly similar to La Venta Monuments 25/6, 27, 58, and 66. Among the shared traits that Porter cites are the frontal face with buccal “mask,” cheekbands, rectilinear ear ornaments, headband with central medallion, and a tabbed or U-shaped element above the eyes, essentially the double-merlon Olmec sign for green.

Tres Zapotes Stela C can be identified as a Late Preclassic Isthmian version of the Olmec Maize God. In addition to the shared traits mentioned by Porter, the figure has eyes turning upwards at the outer corners and prominent upper incisors, common features of the Olmec Maize God. The curiously bifurcated brow probably refers to the enclosing bracts with the upper head and topping “hair” alluding to the actual cob and capping silk. The bifurcated brow element resembles a maize sign incised on a Middle or Late Formative Olmecoid stone figure in the Saint Louis Art Museum (Figure 18c). In this case, the cob is rendered as a vertical stick or celtlike object in the center of the bifurcated husk. A version of this maize



**Figure 18.** The Isthmian Maize God: (a) Olmec Maize God on celtiform stela, note double-merlon element on brow, La Venta Monument 25/6 (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (b) Late Preclassic representation of Isthmian Maize God, Tres Zapotes Stela C (drawing courtesy of James Porter); (c) maize sign incised on Olmec-style serpentine statuette (after Parsons 1980:No. 52); (d) Late Preclassic Maya maize sign, La Lagunita Sculpture 6 (after Ichon 1977:Fig. 17a); (e) Isthmian Maize God occurring as Jester God, note double-merlon on brow (after Winfield Capitaine 1988:7, 34); (f) Isthmian Maize God with feather bundle on brow, Bone 3, Chiapa de Corzo (after Agrinier 1960:Fig. 17b); (g) Isthmian Maize God, Bone 1, Chiapa de Corzo (after Agrinier 1960:Fig. 17a); (h–j) glyphs of Isthmian Maize God, La Mojarra Stela 1 (after Winfield Capitaine 1988:7); (k) Isthmian Maize God glyph, Tuxtla Statuette (after Winfield Capitaine 1988:23).

motif appears on a Late Preclassic monument from La Lagunita, Guatemala (Figure 18d). In addition, it also appears as a Jester God brow piece on La Mojarra Stela 1, an Isthmian monument bearing two Long Count dates corresponding to the mid-second century AD (Figure 18e). As has been previously mentioned, Fields (1991) provides a compelling case that the Late Preclassic and Classic trefoil Jester God represents corn. Along with the central vertical cob and bifurcated husk, the La Mojarra example also has the double-merlon green sign on its brow, a convention seen for the Tres Zapotes figure as well as numerous examples of the Olmec Maize God (Figures 2b, d–e, 18b, e). In addition, the La Mojarra Jester God has the same triangle-and-dot cheek markings appearing on Tres Zapotes Stela C. Although slightly later, the La Mojarra example can be regarded as a profile representation of the Tres Zapotes figure, a Late Preclassic Isthmian Maize God.

Fernando Winfield Capitaine (1988:22) compares the La Mojarra Jester God to the long-lipped zoomorphic head from Bone 3 of Tomb 1 at Chiapa de Corzo (Figure 18f). Like the La Mojarra example, the Chiapa de Corzo head is bifurcated, with the central vertical element denoting the cob. In addition, it appears that the double-merlon sign is incised both on the upper brow as well as on the feather bundle placed next to the erect cob. Agrinier (1960:16, 19) notes that this figure is clearly related to the profile head appearing on the accompanying Bone 1 scene (Figure 18g). According to Gareth Lowe (1990:84–85) these two figures represent aspects of the Maize God with the head on Bone 3 referring to young, green corn and that on

Bone 1 to the mature maize cob. Like the Isthmian and Olmec corn deities, there was a similar Classic Maya distinction between tender, growing corn and mature maize (Taube 1992b:46). Both the La Mojarra and Chiapa de Corzo Maize Gods are placed in U-shaped brackets with a bifurcated upper rim (Figure 18e–g). An earlier form of this device flanks the head of an Olmec Maize God appearing on a jadeite celt from La Venta (Figure 3a). The face on versions flanking the corn deity faces on La Venta Monuments 25/6 and 27a can be readily compared to the aforementioned bifurcated foliation flanking the sides of Olmec maize cobs, all serving to label the entire head as the maize ear (Figures 3c, 13b–c, 18a).

The proto-Classic Isthmian Maize God also occurs as a distinct hieroglyphic sign in the La Mojarra writing system, appearing under the categories of signs 179 and 180 in the Macri and Stark catalog (1993:33–34) (Figure 18h–k). Although Macri and Stark (1993:34) regard the example from the Tuxtla Statuette as a distinct sign, Motif 180, it has virtually the same characteristics as the three examples from La Mojarra Stela 1. Like the Jester God on La Mojarra Stela 1, the face is rendered with a long upper lip, prominent incisors, and a beard. The cranial hair is split into two outcurving clumps, recalling the La Mojarra Jester God and Tres Zapotes Stela C, as well as depictions of the Olmec Maize God (see Figures 2d–e, 18b–e). In one example, a long hank of hair hangs before the face, a feature also found with other forms of the Isthmian Maize God and numerous Early Classic examples of the Maya Maize God (Figures 19a, c–d, 20i–m). In these epigraphic examples of the Isthmian Maize God, the outer corner of the eye has a tendency to slant upward, much like the Tres Zapotes Stela C example and the earlier Olmec Maize God.

The Isthmian Maize God continues well into the Classic period. An unprovenanced stela portrays a probable Early Classic example of this being, again with the framing vegetal bracket around the head (Figure 19a). Like forms of the Zapotec Maize God, he displays a buccal serpent mask and a simple trefoil Jester God on his brow. The crook of his right arm

**Figure 19.** Classic examples of the Isthmian Maize God: (a) Isthmian Maize God wearing version of trefoil Jester God and holding a possible digging stick in left hand (after Bolz 1975a:Pl. 69); (b) Isthmian Maize God or impersonator holding probable digging stick, Cerro de las Mesas Stela 5 (from Stirling 1943:Fig. 10a); (c) Isthmian Maize God with buccal mask and long lock of hair in front of face, note feather bundle projecting from back of head, detail of Río Blanco style bowl (after Von Winning and Gutiérrez Solana 1993:VI-9a); (d) Isthmian Maize God with foliation emerging out of mouth (after Von Winning 1971:Fig. 4).



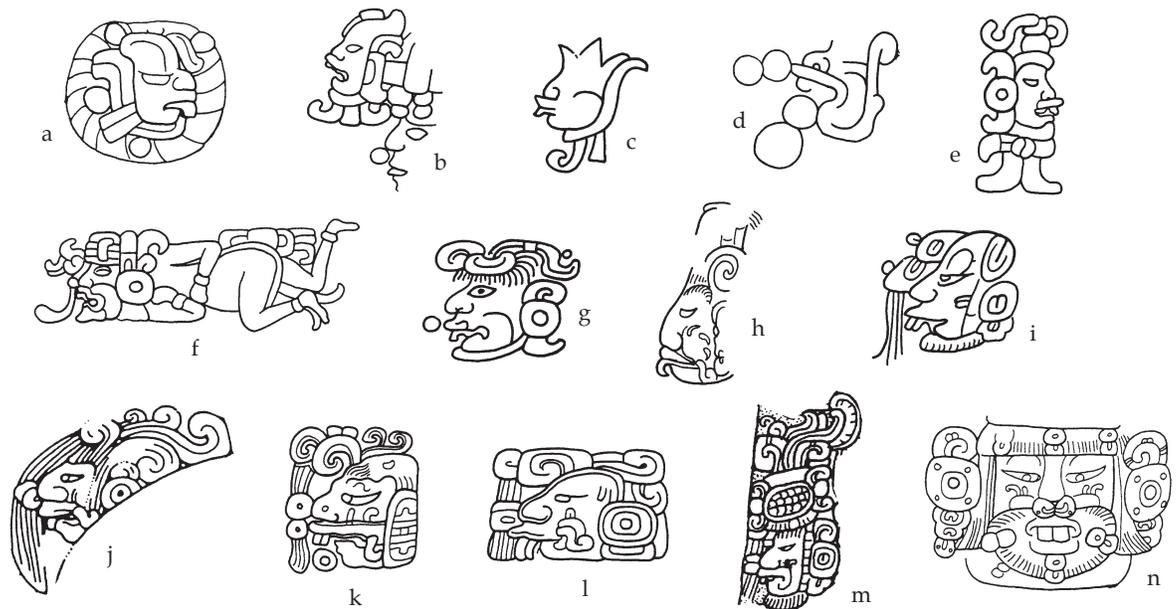
holds a sinuous element, quite possibly referring to the feathered serpent or a tender stalk of green corn. In a detailed analysis of Classic period Río Blanco ceramic vessels, Hasso Von Winning and Nelly Gutiérrez Solana (1993:Chap. 4) note that this stela figure is identical to that appearing on Chiapa de Corzo Bone 1, an entity defined by its long buccal mask or lip (see Figure 18g). They also note that this long-lipped figure also appears on Classic Río Blanco vessels as well as on Early Classic monuments from Cerro de las Mesas (Figure 19c–d). Although the authors (Von Winning and Gutiérrez Solana 1993:47) identify the buccal mask as an attribute of the rain god, the Gulf Coast version of Tlaloc typically has a sharply upturning and outwardly curving upper lip as well as large canines (see Taube 1986:55–56). Rather than representing the rain deity, this being constitutes the Classic version of the Isthmian Maize God. Along with the buccal mask, projecting incisors, and frontal shank of hair, the Isthmian Maize God appearing on Classic Río Blanco vessels can also have vegetation growing out of the mouth, a convention also known for the Olmec Maize God (see Joralemon 1971:Figs. 170–171).

### *The Maya Maize God*

For the ancient Maya, the Maize God is well represented in both the Classic and Postclassic periods, and the evolution of the Maya Maize God can now be readily traced for over a thousand years from the Early Classic period to the Postclassic codices (see Taube 1985, 1992b:41–50). The Early Classic form tends to be bearded with a long lock of hair falling before the face, recalling the examples of the Isthmian Maize God (Figure 20i–m). In addition, I have noted that the Early Classic Maize God has a long “Olmecoid” upper lip and projecting upper incisors (Taube 1992b:48). Of course, both of these features are also found with both the Olmec and Isthmian Maize Gods. In addition, the Early Classic Maya Maize God tends to have narrow eyes that slant upward at the outer corners, another common feature of the Olmec and later Isthmian Maize God. It is quite probable that, like the Isthmian Maize God, the features of the Early Classic Maya Maize God ultimately derive from the Olmec god of corn.

For the Late Preclassic period, the Maya Maize God commonly appears as the Jester God worn on the brow of Maya kings (Figure 20b–d). In many cases, the head of the deity appears in the same foliated bracket appearing with the Isthmian Maize God (Figure 20a, c–d). According to Virginia Fields (1991), the trefoil Jester God represents growing corn and can be readily compared to maize elements commonly appearing in the central portion of Olmec period headbands. The trefoil brow piece worn by the early Zapotec Maize God lends direct support for the maize identity of the three-pointed Jester God, as it is clearly a diagonally marked cob flanked by outcurving leaves (Figure 17e). In a similar vein as Fields, Richard Hansen (1992:143–145) notes that a Jester God appearing on Nakbe Stela 1 is a Preclassic version of the Maya Maize God (Figure 20b). Hansen (1995) compares this example to the pair of downwardly facing heads on the stucco cornice of Structure H-sub 2 at Late Preclassic Uaxactun (Figure 20e). Like Early Classic forms, the Late Preclassic Maya corn deity also tends to display a beard and a long, upturned lip exposing prominent incisors.

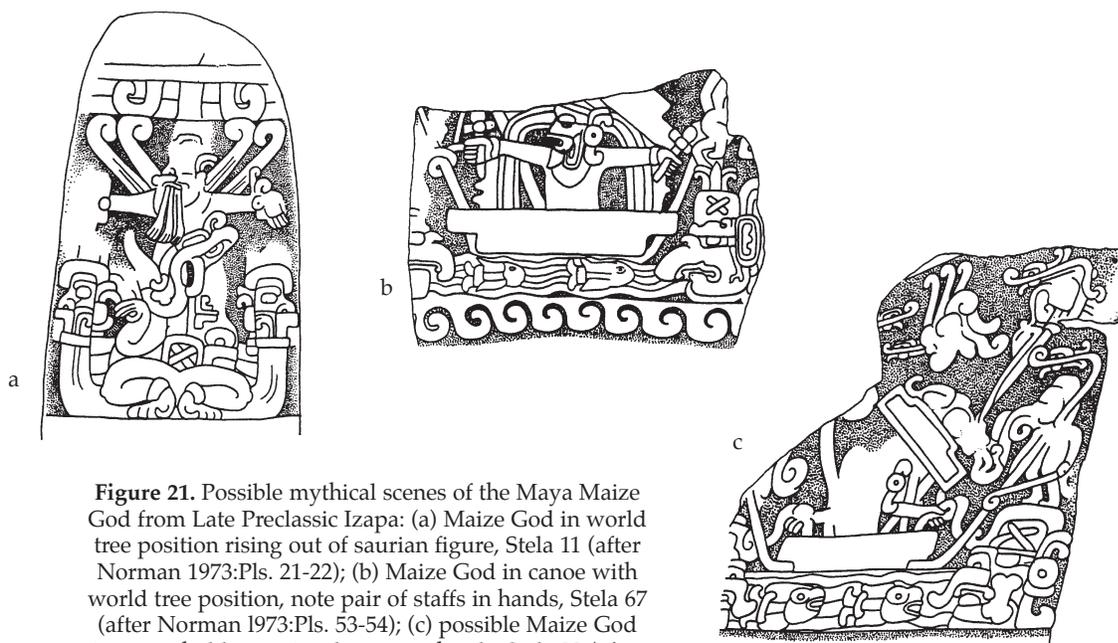
The Late Preclassic Maya Maize God is not limited to isolated heads and inanimate items of jewelry. Whereas one of the two full figures between the two downwardly facing Maize God heads on Uaxactun Structure H-sub 2 appears to be Chac, the other figure can be identified as the bearded Maize God, complete with a long lock of beaded hair hanging



**Figure 20.** The Maya Maize God in Late Preclassic and Early Classic art: (a) Maize God stucco medallion, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; (b) Maize God as Jester God headpiece, Nakbe Stela 1 (after Hansen 1992:Fig. 113); (c) Late Preclassic trefoil Jester God (after Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 32a); (d) Late Preclassic Maize God as Jester God, Loltun Cave (after Norman 1976:Fig. 6.24b); (e–f) Late Preclassic depictions of Maize Gods, Structure H-Sub 2, Uaxactun (after Laporte and Valdés 1993:Fig. 50); (g) Maize God from Pomona Flare (from Taube 1992b:Fig. 20d); (h) Maize God, Yaxchilan Lintel 48 (from Taube 1992b:Fig. 20e); (i) Maize God from incised vessel (after Coe 1973:No. 50); (j) Maize God, Copan Stela 63 (after Fash 1991:Fig. 37); (k–l) Early Classic Maize Gods (from Taube 1992b:Fig. 20b-c); (m) Maize God, detail of incised Tikal vessel (from drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (n) frontal view of Maize God (from Taube 1992b:Fig. 20h).

before the face (Figure 20f). In a number of Late Preclassic scenes, the Maya Maize God appears in probable episodes of sacred narrative. The aforementioned Kaminaljuyu Stela 19 figure displays the long lip, large pointed tooth, and prominent beard found with early forms of the Isthmian and Maya Maize Gods (Figure 12b). In addition, the figure has the same backward-turning cranial form appearing with the Isthmian Maize God on Chiapa de Corzo Bone 1, although in this case marked with a probable shining celt (Figure 18g). The Kaminaljuyu figure raises a serpent marked with clouds and an inverted Chac head above his head recalling the Early Classic Tikal scene of the Maya Maize God lifting the celestial serpent (see Freidel et al. 1993:73). Kaminaljuyu Stela 19 and the closely related Stela 4 may well represent Late Preclassic versions of the Maize God as the world axis supporting the heavens.

At Late Preclassic Izapa, there are several probable examples of the Maya Maize God engaged in mythological episodes. On Izapa Stela 11, a long-lipped and possibly bearded figure emerges from a probable toad squatting in a pool of water (Figure 21a). Three leafy appendages hang from the mouth recalling the oral foliation often found with the Olmec and later Isthmian corn deities (Figures 18a–b, 19d). With his arms outstretched at right angles to his body, this figure may well depict the emergence of the Maya Maize God as the *axis mundi*. In later Maya scenes illustrating the resurrection of the Maize God, he can appear in a similar crosslike position, quite possibly as the world tree (see Selser 1902-1923:5:317;

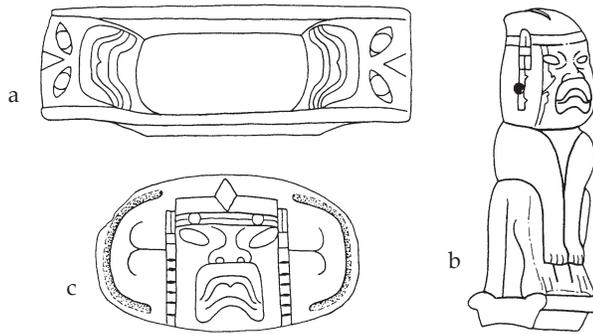


**Figure 21.** Possible mythical scenes of the Maya Maize God from Late Preclassic Izapa: (a) Maize God in world tree position rising out of saurian figure, Stela 11 (after Norman 1973:Pls. 21-22); (b) Maize God in canoe with world tree position, note pair of staffs in hands, Stela 67 (after Norman 1973:Pls. 53-54); (c) possible Maize God in canoe holding twisted serpent chords, Stela 22 (after Norman 1973:Pls. 35-36).

Robicsek and Hales 1981:Fig. 58a). Izapa Stela 67 depicts another example of the long-lipped and bearded figure with outstretched arms (Figure 21b). In this case, he grasps a pair of scepters, recalling the maize scepters held by the Olmec Maize Gods from Teopantecuanitlan and the personified Glyph J from Monte Alban (Figures 17c, 27c). Riding in a canoe, the figure is surrounded by a large crenelated cartouche, a probable early form of the crenelated shell *yax* sign known for the proto-Classic and Early Classic Maya. Denoting the color green, this sign often encloses Early Classic celtiform god-markings (see Taube 1992b:Fig. 35a). The sinuous, ropelike elements surrounding the canoe occur as twisted serpents in the canoe scene appearing on Izapa Stela 22 (Figure 21c). Although the face of the central figure is entirely eroded, the similarity of this scene to Stela 67 suggests that both depict a well-known theme in Classic Maya art, the Maize God riding in a canoe (see Taube 1985).<sup>10</sup>

The tentative identification of the travels and resurrection of the Maya Maize God in Late Preclassic iconography provides intriguing insights into the origins of Classic Maya mythology. However, it is possible that some of these episodes were even present among the Middle Formative Olmec. Mention has been made of Reilly's (1994b) identification of the Olmec Maize God as the world tree raising the heavens, a role also known for the Maize God in Classic Maya creation mythology (Freidel et al. 1993; Taube 1998c). Among the most striking items from the remarkable jade cache at Cerro de las Mesas is a jadeite canoe marked with a pair of faces at the ends (Figure 22a). With their cleft heads and slanted eyes, these faces can be identified as the Olmec Maize God recalling Classic Maya scenes of the corn deity

<sup>10</sup> According to Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993:94-99, 105), the Classic Maya Maize God was transported by canoe to Na Ho Chan, the place of resurrection and creation. As these authors note, Na Ho Chan is marked by twisted serpentine chords immediately recalling the canoe scenes on Izapa Stelae 22 and 67.



**Figure 22.** Possible mythical episodes of the Olmec Maize God: (a) pair of Olmec Maize Gods on ends of jadeite canoe, Cerro de las Mesas (after Covarrubias 1947:Pl. 7); (b) Olmec Maize God seated in canoe (after Covarrubias 1947:Pl. 8); (c) jade pectoral depicting underside of turtle carapace with Olmec Maize God, La Encrucijada, Tabasco (after Gómez and Courtes 1987:76).

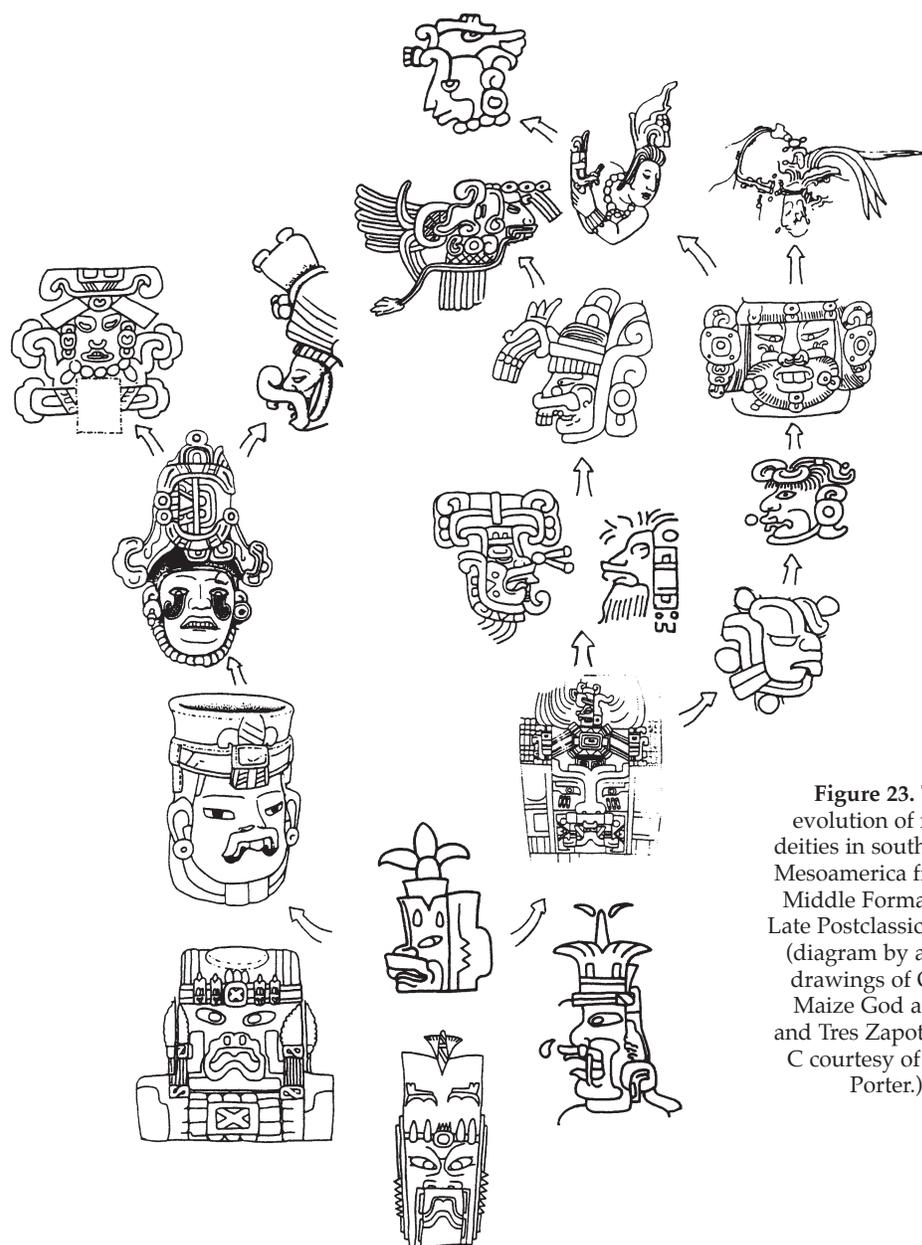
traveling in a canoe.<sup>11</sup> A jadeite sculpture formerly in the collection of Miguel Covarrubias represents the Olmec Maize God seated in a canoe quite like the example from Cerro de las Mesas (Figure 22b).

A jadeite pectoral recently discovered at La Encrucijada, Tabasco, provides still more compelling evidence for the Olmec origins of some Classic Maya maize mythology. The pectoral bears the face of the infant aspect of the Olmec Maize God, or God IV, sprouting an ear of corn (Figure 22c). The backing oval form of the pectoral is marked by a pair of fine, curving, Y-like designs and two broad grooves running parallel to the narrow curving ends. This oval form depicts the underside of a turtle shell, with the deep grooves illustrating the two openings and the fine lines illustrating the plastron sutures. Along with the canoe journey, the emergence out of the turtle shell is among the most important mythological themes found with the Classic Maya Maize God. Although the turtle shell episode of the Maize God is not documented for the later contact period, colonial, or contemporary Maya, contemporary versions do exist in the former Olmec heartland region of Veracruz. In a Sierra Totonac myth of the Maize God recorded by Ichnon (1973:74-75), the deity is born from a grain of green corn sprouting on the back of a turtle. A related Popoluca myth describes the young corn god crossing the ocean on the back of a turtle (Foster 1945:193). It would appear that certain mythology as well as iconography of the Classic Maya and later corn gods derives from Formative Olmec traditions.

### Agricultural Surplus, Wealth, and the Olmec Economy

Rather than developing from entirely different sources, the Classic corn deities known for the Zapotec, Maya, and Isthmian areas all appear to be “genetically” related to the Formative Olmec Maize God. It is thus possible to create a chart illustrating the development of later Maize Gods of southeastern Mesoamerica out of an Olmec prototype (Figure 23). Of course, such a diagram is strongly evocative of the oft-reproduced chart by Miguel Covarrubias (1957:Fig. 22) illustrating the development of Mesoamerican rain gods out of an Olmec were-jaguar being. The continuity of Olmec maize and rain iconography in later Mesoamerican cultures is by no means a coincidental accident of history. As a response to a developing

<sup>11</sup> Among the contents of Offering 3 from Group A at La Venta were five rock crystal pendants carved in the form of turtle shells, four jadeite canoe effigy pendants, and a jadeite long-beaked water bird (Drucker et al. 1959:148-150, Pls. 27-28). All three of these motifs—the canoe, turtle shell, and long-beaked water bird—are major themes in the journey and resurrection of the Classic Maya Maize God.



**Figure 23.** The evolution of maize deities in southeastern Mesoamerica from the Middle Formative to Late Postclassic periods (diagram by author; drawings of Olmec Maize God at base and Tres Zapotes Stela C courtesy of James Porter.)

surplus economy, the Olmec actively and intentionally exported an elaborate subsistence ideology into other regions of Formative Mesoamerica. In so doing, the Olmec were able to ensure the participation of foreign groups in the Olmec economic network.

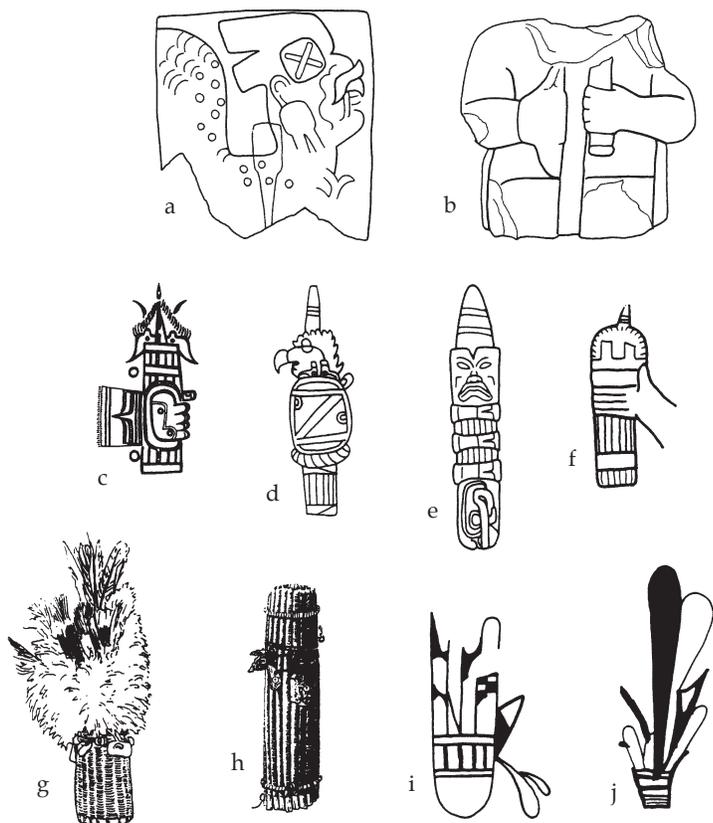
Although it is generally recognized that domestic maize originated in the arid highlands of Mexico, *Zea mays* was present in the tropical lowlands by the Early Formative period. Rust and Leyden (1994:187) note that macrobotanical remains of cobs are present in the La Venta region by the beginning of the Early Formative. In the neighboring Soconusco region of south coastal Chiapas, maize is well documented in pre-Olmec, Locona phase sites (Blake et al. 1992:89; Clark and Blake 1994:28). However, in these Early Formative contexts, corn does

not appear to have been a major part of the local diet. The analysis of human bone collagen samples from the Soconusco region indicates that corn does not appear to be a major dietary component until around 850 BC, that is, during the Middle Formative period (Blake et al. 1992:90-91). Similarly, Rust and Leyden (1994:181) suggest that although maize was present in the La Venta region by the beginnings of the Early Formative period, it was not a principal staple until the Middle Formative period, especially during the apogee of La Venta.

The apparently minor importance of maize in the Early Formative lowland diet raises interesting questions regarding the role of corn among the Olmec of Early Formative San Lorenzo. However, it is important to distinguish between the dietary, cultural, and economic roles of this food. In a cross-cultural discussion of maize in the pre-Hispanic New World, Hastorf and Johannessen (1994:436) note that “corn appears to have had a special significance in many cases *before* it became a staple, thus indicating that its unique cultural importance did not stem primarily from any dietary prominence.” Moreover, the storage capabilities of dried maize, particularly when smoked, must have made it an especially attractive tribute food even in Early Formative times. As a readily stored item, maize would have obvious advantages over abundant but difficult to preserve aquatic fauna.

Iconography from San Lorenzo and contemporaneous sites indicates that much of the complex maize symbolism known for the Olmec originated during the Early Formative period. At San Lorenzo, monumental sculptures suggest that the Olmec were already concerned with the symbolism of maize and agricultural fertility. Mention has been made of San Lorenzo Monument 52, which may represent an infant or seed aspect of the Olmec Maize God (see Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 494). Another San Lorenzo sculpture, Monument 30, depicts a profile representation of the Olmec Maize God as God VI, probably a personified aspect of growing corn (Figure 24a). Along with the typical mouth of the Olmec Maize God, the figure has the backward-sweeping cleft head and a series of dots on his sinuous, serpentine body, quite probably the same seedlike elements frequently flanking the face of this being. It is also clear that celts had a major symbolic role at San Lorenzo. In addition to the aforementioned throne depicting celt-wielding dwarfs (Figure 14b–c), Monument 8 bears the carefully carved outlines of six celts on its upper surface (Coe and Diehl 1980:1:313). However, like the widespread occurrence of grinding stones at San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980:1:213-231), it is difficult to determine whether this Early Formative celt iconography is specifically associated with maize. Instead, as in the case of the beautifully worked celts of Neolithic Europe, these stone axes could be identified with more general activities of agriculture and field preparation. The same concern could also be raised for the deities represented on San Lorenzo Monuments 30 and 52. Since neither figure displays overt maize imagery, it could be argued that they embody not simply corn but rather generalized concepts of agricultural fertility.

Despite its heavily battered condition, San Lorenzo Monument 26 provides one of the strongest indications of corn symbolism and ritual among the Early Formative Olmec (Figure 24b). The seated figure holds two objects commonly paired in later Middle Formative Olmec iconography, the “knuckle-duster” and the so-called “torch.” I (Taube 1995:89) recently suggested that the torch motif represents a bound bundle of precious feathers. The feather identification does appear to be correct, and in one instance a quetzal head replaces the capping feather tuft (Figure 25d). However, these items are not simply feather bundles but maize fetishes. Quite commonly, a maize ear projects out of the feathers quite like a cob emerging from the enclosing husk (Figure 24c–d, f). Moreover, in a number of cases, the feather-tufted

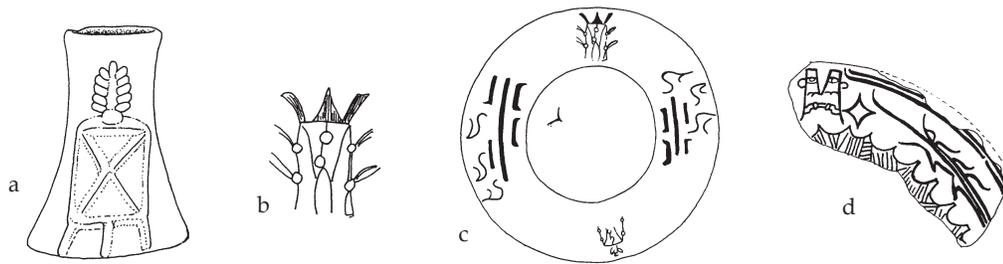


**Figure 24.** Early Formative maize iconography and Olmec maize fetishes: (a) Early Formative Olmec Maize God with God VI cranium, San Lorenzo Monument 30 (after Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 461); (b) figure holding “knuckleduster” and “torch” maize fetish, San Lorenzo Monument 26 (after Coe and Diehl 1980:1:Fig. 459); (c) maize-ear fetish with triadic maize sign, detail of Chalcatzingo vase (after Gay 1972:Fig. 43); (d) maize fetish with quetzal head substituting for feather tuft (after Joralemon 1976:Fig. 20c); (e) maize fetish with head of Olmec Maize God (from Taube 1995:Fig. 10a); (f) maize fetish with projecting banded maize (after Lothrop et al. 1957:Pl. 1); (g) Sia maize-ear fetish with macaw plumes (after Stevenson 1894:Pl. 9); (h) contemporary Sia fetish without feathers (from White 1962:Fig. 47); (i) Pueblo IV maize fetish, Awatovi (after W. Smith 1952:Fig. 14d); (j) Pueblo IV maize fetish, Pottery Mound (after Hibben 1975:Fig. 5).

end is simply replaced with the head of the Olmec Maize God (Figure 24e).

Feathered maize-ear fetishes are among the most revered and precious items of Pueblo peoples of the American Southwest. Known as *mili* among the Zuni, *tiponi* among the Hopi, and *iariko* among the Keresan speakers of Sia, these sacred items are formed of long plumes of the Mesoamerican macaw and other precious feathers placed against a perfect ear of corn with the cob and lower portion of the feathers held by cotton thread, bound sticks, or basketry (Geertz 1987:17-18; Stevenson 1894:40-41, 1904:417-420). These maize fetishes, particularly the Sia examples, are strikingly similar to the Formative Olmec “torch” motif (Figure 24g-h). Feathered corn fetishes are well documented in the archaeological record and commonly appear in protohistoric Pueblo IV murals (Figure 24i-j).<sup>12</sup> An actual example of a maize-ear fetish dating to late Pueblo III (ca. AD 1200-1300) was supplied with macaw feathers, pieces of turquoise, and a finely worked hematite cylinder, items denoting its precious as well as sacred quality (Hall and Dennis 1986:125, Fig. 47). The San Lorenzo monument suggests that such feathered ear fetishes, still widely used by Puebloan peoples to this day, may have had their origins among the Early Formative Olmec. It will be seen that portrayals of these fetishes are extremely widespread in Mesoamerica during the Middle Formative period and appear on Olmec-style monuments ranging from El Salvador to Guerrero, Mexico, a distance

<sup>12</sup> The Pueblo IV representations of maize fetishes are very similar to the feathered item worn on the brow of the Isthmian Maize God from Chiapa de Corzo Bone 3 (see Figure 18f). Occurring on the corn deity, the object may be a Late Preclassic version of the feathered maize fetish. As in the case of the Olmec examples, it is also supplied with the double-merlon sign.



**Figure 25.** Maize iconography in Early Formative highland Mexico: (a) Early Formative vessel with probable version of maize-ear fetish, Puebla (after Bonifaz Nuño 1993:No. 2); (b) detail of corn cob topped with triadic maize sign depicted in c; (c) reconstructed interior of Early Formative bowl from San José Mogote depicting vertical maize cobs flanked by Avian Serpents (after Flannery and Marcus 1994:Fig. 12.39); (d) fragmentary bowl from Tlapacoya depicting Olmec Maize God flanked by Avian Serpent (after Flannery and Marcus 1994:Fig. 19.2).

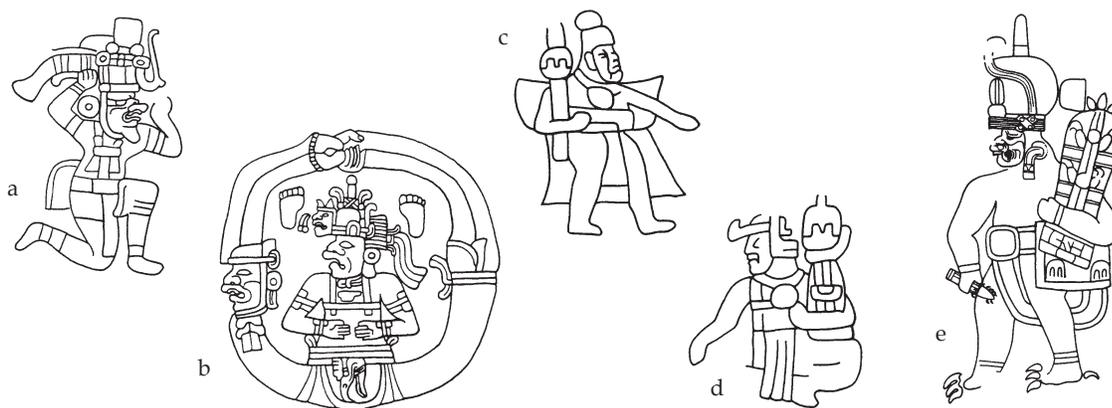
of over 1,000 kilometers.

Although the Mesoamerican feathered maize-ear fetishes are especially common in Olmec iconography, probable versions also appear in Early Formative highland Mexico. A ceramic vessel attributed to Caballo Pintado, Puebla, portrays a maize ear atop an element formed of crossed bands above vertical elements, quite probably an early version of the sticks and lashing appearing with Olmec maize-ear fetishes (Figure 25a). An Early Formative Olmec style vessel from San José Mogote, Oaxaca, portrays two erect maize cobs, one topped by the trefoil maize sign (Figure 25b–c). With their diagonal banding and series of dots, these cobs are strikingly similar to forms two and three of the aforementioned Dumbarton Oaks four-celt headband (Figure 7a). In addition, the better preserved of the two Early Formative examples displays a lanceolate form near its base, immediately recalling the cob outline appearing on the third celt of the Dumbarton Oaks headband (Figures 7a, 25b). The dots on this particular example appear to sprout foliage, suggesting that the dotted elements found on God VI do represent seeds.

The San José Mogote bowl probably constitutes an Early Formative Olmec cosmogram. The two cobs are interspersed by stylized representations of the Olmec Dragon, an entity interpreted as a sky serpent by a number of researchers (for example, Flannery and Marcus 1994:136; Pyne 1976:273; Taube 1995). Much like the diagonally banded cob of Chalcatzingo Monument 21, the vertical cobs may represent the *axis mundi* supporting the heavens. A slightly later version of the same composition appears in the interior of an Olmec style bowl from Tlapacoya, in the Valley of Mexico (Figure 25d). Although fragmentary, the bowl seems to have also depicted *axis mundis* flanked by Olmec Dragon sky serpents. In this case the vertical cobs are replaced with the cleft head of the Olmec Maize God. In both of these early Olmec style vessels, corn is portrayed as the *axis mundi* projecting into the overarching heavens.<sup>13</sup>

The vast expenditure involved in the creation of monumental sculpture at San Lorenzo

<sup>13</sup> An Early Formative multichambered vessel attributed to Tlapacoya portrays a human figure flanked by a pair of Avian Serpent heads. The figure holds two staffs in his outstretched arms, recalling both the Olmec maize fetishes and a pose found with the Olmec Maize God. Unfortunately, due to the angle of the photograph, it is impossible to discern whether this figure is in fact the Olmec Maize God (see Feuchtwanger 1989:Pl. 143). It is possible that four circular chambers found on this vessel were to hold four vertical ears of corn, in other words, maize fetishes.



**Figure 26.** Olmec Maize iconography from the Maya region: (a) bas-relief depicting Olmec Maize God with plumed cob projecting from back of head, Abaj Takalik, Guatemala (after Parsons 1986:Fig. 2; Sharer 1994:Fig. 3.1); (b) Olmec Maize God as acrobat with plumed cob behind head, the Shook Panel (from Miller and Taube 1993:39); (c–d) Olmec figures holding maize-ear fetishes, Monument 12, Chalchuapa, El Salvador (after Anderson 1978:Figs. 8–9); (e) striding supernatural figure carrying maize fetish and probable stela marked with maize plant, Xoc, Chiapas (after Ekholm-Miller 1973:Figs. 9, 14).

indicates that by the Early Formative period, the Olmec elite controlled an extensive social surplus obtained through forms of taxation and tribute. Although it remains uncertain whether maize was an important item in the Early Formative Olmec surplus economy, it surely was by Middle Formative times when maize constituted a major staple of the local diet. In the humid Olmec heartland, a major food surplus, even in the form of maize, must have created problems of transportation and storage. D’Altroy and Earle (1985) describe the transformation of the Inca economy from a system based on maize and other staples to one incorporating items of wealth, such as shell beads, fine cloth, and metals. The increasing importance of jadeite, precious feathers, and other exotic goods among the Middle Formative Olmec probably reflects a similar transition from a staple finance to one of wealth using rare materials that are more readily transported, stored, and converted. It is especially intriguing that two of the wealth items chosen—jadeite and quetzal plumes—were symbolically equated with maize among the Middle Formative Olmec and later peoples of Mesoamerica.<sup>14</sup>

Following the original insights of Joralemon (1988:38), it has been noted that jadeite celts were widely identified with maize ears among the Middle Formative Olmec. The Olmec also compared quetzal feathers to green maize, and it is likely that the Olmec feathered corn fetishes were sheathed in “husks” of verdant quetzal plumes (Figure 24).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in

<sup>14</sup> Although the economic role of cacao remains poorly known among the Olmec, cacao clearly was an important rare commodity for the Classic Maya and later peoples of Mesoamerica. Like jade and quetzal plumes, cacao was also symbolically equated with maize among the classic Maya. In a number of scenes, the Maya Maize God is shown as the personification of the cacao tree (see Coe 1975a:Vessel 2; Taube 1985:Fig. 4c). For the Maya, the source of comparison is not the verdant quality of the plant but rather the shape and seed arrangement of its pod, which closely resembles a maize ear. Moreover, just as the Maya commoner drank such ground maize drinks as *pozole* and *atole*, the Maya elite drank cacao, the gruel of kings. It is probably for this reason that the Classic Maya Maize God is so commonly found on Classic Maya cacao vases.

<sup>15</sup> The identification of maize with quetzal plumes and jade also appears on page 53 of the *Codex Borgia*. In the scene, the *axis mundi* is portrayed as a maize plant marked with jade jewel signs and topped by a quetzal bird.

Olmec iconography, maize silk can be rendered as long, undulating plumes, as if the cob were tipped with precious feathers (Figures 1, 26a–b). This same convention occurs with maize ears portrayed in Classic Maya art (Figure 4h). Feathered maize ears are often held by the backrack figures carried by the Holmul Dancer, a Classic Maya form of the Maize God richly dressed in jade and quetzal plumes. Much like individuals offering tribute, the backrack figures present foliated heads of the Maize God tipped with long quetzal plumes (see Houston et al. 1992:Fig. 4). In these scenes, feather bundles and jade beads can also substitute for the personified cob (Houston et al. 1992:Fig. 4d–e). Jadeite and quetzal plumes were also the most valued precious items among the Postclassic Aztec, who regarded them as symbolic forms of maize and agricultural abundance. Thus in the *Codex Chimalpopoca*, green corn husks and rain constitute the “real” quetzal plumes and jades of the rain gods, that is, the ultimate sources of surplus and wealth. Because the Toltec ruler Huemac did not grasp this basic equation—agricultural abundance being equivalent to items of wealth—Tollan was destroyed by famine and drought (Bierhorst 1992:156–157).

A major concern of the Olmec elite was the securing of rare, exotic goods, not simply as indicators of social rank but as easily manageable wealth. In order to obtain these valued materials, the Olmec participated in extensive networks of exchange with highland Mexico and the Maya region. It is noteworthy that much of the Middle Formative Olmec influence observed in both the Maya region and highland Mexico concerns maize and associated valuables. Quite often, Olmec ritual and iconography pertaining to maize occur at strategic areas associated with trade routes and the procurement of rare materials. Among the regions to be discussed are the Grijalva drainage basin and southern piedmont areas of the Maya and the highland Mexican sites of Chalcatzingo and Teopantecuanitlan.

In the Maya region, Olmec-style celt caches and burial offerings of jade and other materials are known from the Grijalva basin, Seibal, and Copan (see Fash 1991:67–71; Lowe 1981:242–252; Smith 1982:243). The discovery of jade celts and other Olmec-style artifacts at Copan is especially noteworthy as this site is in close vicinity to the Motagua jade source. In all three cases, the celts display strong directional orientation recalling celt caches at La Venta and the positioning of celts around the Olmec Maize God (Figure 2c–e). In view of the elaborate identification of greenstone celts with maize ears, the burial of these precious items could be regarded as an Olmec form of agricultural ritual.<sup>16</sup>

Along with the burial of greenstone celts, Middle Formative representations of the Olmec Maize God and corn iconography are widespread in the southern Maya area. A boulder sculpture from the piedmont site of Abaj Takalik portrays a bearded Olmec Maize God in dynamic pose with a plumed cob projecting out from the back of the head, a convention often found with the Formative corn deity (Figures 2e, 26a–b). The face of this being is notably similar to the Late Preclassic Isthmian Maize Gods appearing on Chiapa de Corzo Bones 1 and 2 (Figure 18f–g). The Shook Panel, another Middle Formative piedmont sculpture, portrays the Olmec Maize God wearing the foliated Jester God headpiece as well as a plumed cob at the back of the head (Figure 26b). The Olmec-style boulder sculpture from Chalchuapa, El Salvador, portrays three people holding maize-ear fetishes. Along with the projecting cob, they display the Olmec “double-merlon” sign for green, an element

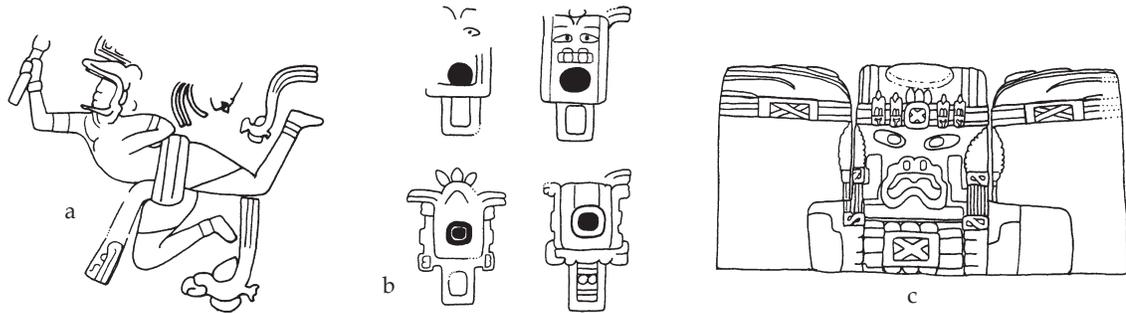
<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that for the Grijalva site of San Isidro, the great majority of celts were of roughly fashioned tuff rather than of precious jadeite. Nonetheless, an exceptionally large and finely worked greenstone celt was discovered atop a pavement of smaller celts (see Lowe 1981:248, Fig. 12a).

commonly found on the Olmec maize-ear fetishes (Figure 26c–d).

Along with the southern piedmont area, the Olmec style relief at Xoc borders the native habitat of the quetzal, near a tributary leading to the Jatate and ultimately the Usumacinta rivers. This bas-relief carving portrays a striding supernatural figure wearing a vertical maize cob, or Motif 81, atop his head (Figure 26e). In his right arm, the figure holds the maize-ear fetish. His other arm grasps a large, paddlelike object. Susanna Ekholm-Miller (1973:13) identifies the four curving forms atop the item as silk-tasseled cobs affixed to a central corn stalk. The stalk is also topped with the trefoil maize sign, reaffirming the identity of this plant. Because of the cross-lashing, this object has been frequently interpreted as a bundle despite the fact that no bundles of this shape are known for ancient Mesoamerica. With its tabular form and rounded top, the object closely resembles a stela. The aforementioned La Venta stelae depicting the Olmec Maize god are of similar form and are also marked with cross-lashing (Figure 13b–c). Moreover, La Venta Monument 25/6 displays the same topping trefoil maize sign found with the Xoc example (Figure 13b). It appears that the Xoc figure is carrying essential items of Olmec maize ceremonialism: the corn fetish and a stela portraying maize iconography.

Aside from the Maya region, Middle Formative Olmec-style monumental carving also occurs at the highland Mexican sites of Chalcatzingo, Morelos and Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero, both of which occur on strategic trade routes (see Grove 1989; Hirth 1978). The famed bas-reliefs from Chalcatzingo are filled with allusions to maize, wealth, and agricultural fertility. Mention has been made of Chalcatzingo Monuments 13 and 21 that show scenes concerning maize as the world tree (Figures 7f, 8c). Another Chalcatzingo carving, Monument 12, depicts a flying figure holding the maize-ear fetish. He is accompanied by a pair of quetzals and a parrot, exotic birds prized for their precious feathers (Figure 27a). The Chalcatzingo relief designated as Monument 1 contains the most elaborate scene pertaining to riches and agricultural abundance (see Gay 1972:Fig. 11). The scene depicts a woman seated within a zoomorphic cave in a setting of clouds, rain, and growing maize. Beaded raindrops appear on the headdress as well as falling from clouds on the woman's skirt (see Angulo 1987:Fig. 10.8). Along with two maize plants on the brow and headdress, the figure also wears a pair of long-tailed quetzal birds. In addition to the representations of exotic birds, actual artifacts of precious jadeite and serpentine are known from the site including beads, earspools, celts, bloodletting awls, and statuettes (Thompson 1987).

Although some 400 kilometers from the Olmec heartland, the recently discovered site of Teopantecuanitlan contains one of the most ambitious portrayals of Olmec maize iconography. Four elaborate representations of the Olmec Maize God holding pairs of the feathered maize fetishes appear on opposite sides of a sunken courtyard faced with travertine stone. Reilly (1994b:226–227) notes that with their heads projecting above the courtyard, the outlines of the four travertine sculptures create the double-merlon motif on the eastern and western sides of the enclosure. The Olmec sign for green, the double-merlon motif commonly appears with the Olmec Maize God including on the previously mentioned green La Venta stelae (Figure 13b–c). Like the La Venta monuments, the Teopantecuanitlan sculptures also wear the four-celt headband marked with the central crossed band. However, the Guerrero monuments also display attributes of Gods IV and VI. Thus like the infant God II, the figures wear prominent crossed-band element pectorals, as well as a pair of crossed bands on the sides of the headband (Figure 27c). In profile, it can be seen that the four sculptures have the backward-sweeping, cleft head of God VI. It thus appears that the four Guerrero sculptures



**Figure 27.** Olmec maize and agricultural symbolism from Middle Formative highland Mexico: (a) flying male holding maize fetish in right hand with a flying parrot below and a pair of quetzals above (after Angulo 1987:Fig. 19.19); (b) maize symbols behind heads of Olmec Maize Gods, Teopantecuanitlan (after Martínez 1985:Figs. 7-10); (c) Olmec Maize God with traits of Gods II, IV, and VI, Teopantecuanitlan (after Martínez 1985:Fig. 10).

simultaneously embody several aspects of the Olmec Maize god.

At the back of each of the four Teopantecuanitlan sculptures, facing out from the sunken patio, there are four stafflike forms all pierced by circular holes (Figure 27b). Although each element is slightly different, all portray vertical maize ears. The example with the best-preserved upper portion clearly portrays the trefoil maize sign. Moreover, the examples on the eastern wall appear to be personified with the heads of the Olmec Maize God complete with cleft heads and in the case of the better-preserved example, the hanging nasal elements atop the lip. A pair of outcurving cleft elements flank the upper portions of the four ears, clearly a version of the U-shaped bracket foliation on the sides of maize ears in La Venta iconography (Figure 3c). It has been noted that this same cleft bracket flanks the frontal faces of the Olmec Maize Gods appearing on the La Venta stelae (Figure 13b–c). In other words, the two personified maize ears appearing on the eastern wall are essentially schematic forms of the Olmec Maize God appearing on the La Venta stelae. Although some five hundred kilometers distant, the maize iconography at Teopantecuanitlan is strikingly similar to that appearing at Middle Formative La Venta.

The Middle Formative sites exhibiting Olmec maize iconography and ritual in the Maya region and highland Mexico are all strategically located on major trade routes or in areas of precious resources. Although writing before the discovery of Teopantecuanitlan, Hirth (1978:12) notes that many of the cited Maya-area sites with Olmec sculpture and the highland Mexican site of Chalcatzingo could be considered as gateway communities serving as pivotal intermediaries in the extraction of valuable resources from the hinterlands. According to Grove (1989:146), the Middle Formative Olmec were actively concerned with securing elite goods from other regions of Mesoamerica:

Around 900 BC a restructuring of the exchange networks seems to have begun, apparently in response to the increasing regional demands. As competition for imported elite resources reached a critical limit, the Gulf Coast centers apparently took steps to insure and enhance their supplies by establishing alliances with distribution centers having access to the desired resources. In the beginning such alliances may have been informal and became more formal as time and competition progressed.

The scenario described by Grove is very similar to the concept of core outposts discussed by Algaze (1993) for ancient developing states including Uruk-period Mesopotamia. Created to

secure rare and essential commodities, such outposts tend to be located on strategic routes in foreign polities outside of direct political control. Even with state level societies, the distant nature of these outposts mitigated against direct physical coercion. Instead, Algaze (1993:320-321) notes that local leaders appear to have participated voluntarily to consolidate their own political power as well as to secure exotic commodities. Much like the core-outpost model described by Algaze (1993) for incipient states, the Olmec ensured the participation of distant trade partners not through the impractical use of force but by persuasion, that is, by presenting the advantages of contact and exchange. To local leaders outside of the Olmec heartland, the immediate benefits could well have been in terms of increased power and wealth. However, the presence of Olmec ritual and monuments in distant areas indicates that ideology also played a powerful role. In contrast to the later iconography of Teotihuacan, Tula, and the Aztec, this ideology was not focused on warfare and military power but rather on the generation of agricultural abundance and wealth: themes of immediate interest to essentially all Formative societies. It is this cult of agriculture and associated riches that served to attract foreign peoples into the Olmec economic network. In both distant regions and the Olmec heartland, access to wealth and ultimately power was portrayed in terms of an elaborate religious complex pertaining to maize and agricultural fertility.

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