



Fig. 21. Side view of same.



Fig. 22. Rear view of same.

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A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE:
INTERMEDIATE AREA SCULPTURE
IN THEMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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Stone sculptures which bear little resemblance to the monuments of the major Mesoamerican artistic traditions have long been noted in the Maya area. The greatest concentration of these is in sites which cluster along the Pacific piedmont and adjacent highlands of southern Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Figure 1). In 1940 Francis Richardson summed up what was then known about these sculptures and noted that they bore certain resemblances to stone monuments from lower Central America, suggesting that the Central American sculptures might well be due to successive intrusions of Mexican peoples or ideas into Central America. Although there has been, since Richardson's study, a great increase in information concerning these sculptures and their cultural context, his preliminary hypothesis has remained current and most syntheses regard it as given that the Central American sculptural traditions were offshoots of those of Mesoamerica. Even with the resurgence of interest in possible contacts and influences between Mesoamerica, Central and South America there has been little reconsideration of the basic nature of these sculptural traditions or formulation of alternative hypotheses concerning their origins and relationships. Partly this is because one of the basic problems of any such reconsideration has remained essentially unchanged since Richardson wrote: the near total lack of precise chronological placement for these sculptures, wherever they are found. This is not the fault of the researchers, necessarily. In any situation involving long occupied areas in which rebuilding and remodeling of sites has taken place there exists the very real possibility, and often the certainty, that monuments have been moved and/or re-set. To such ancient disturbance may be added modern movement and, often, actual removal of sculptures. Hence there are doubts about the original context of sculptures in the majority of sites. The result is that in both Mesoamerica and Central America the temporal placement of these sculptural traditions is quite vague and, at best, is within a period or phase of some centuries. This is not a situation which lends itself to any rigorous study of origin, function or extra-territorial relationships (Figure 2).

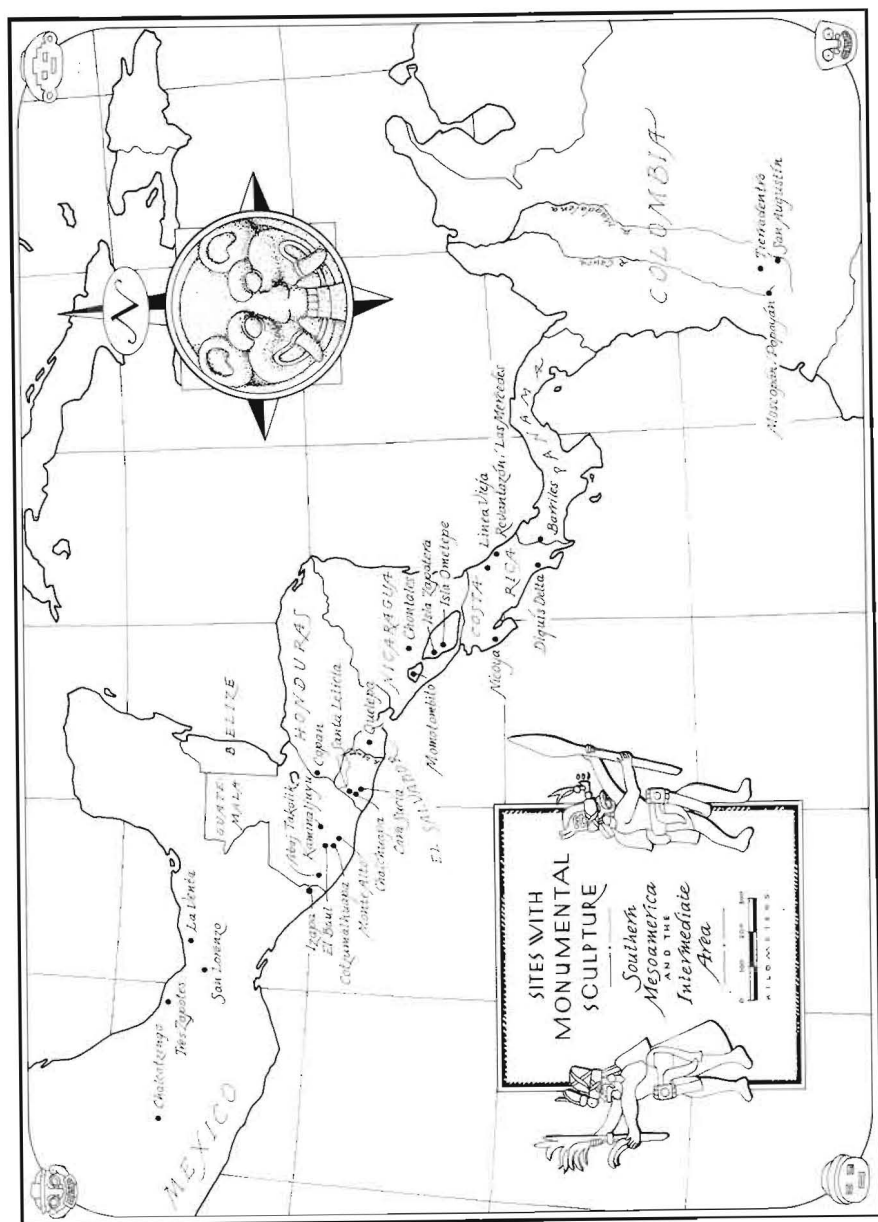
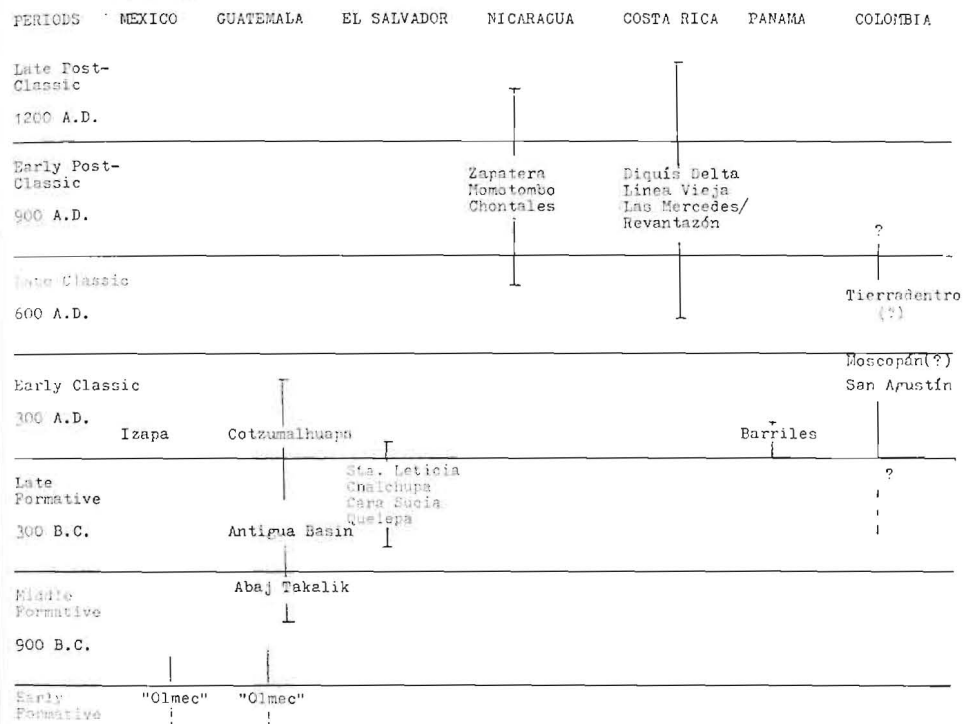


Fig. 1. Distribution of sites with monumental sculpture in the Intermediate Area and those with sculpture in non-Maya traditions of southern Mesoamerica. Compass rose: jaguar head sculpture from Cara Sucia, El Salvador. Legend figures: from relief 2, Chalcatzingo, Morelos, Mexico. Corner faces: masked and supernatural figures from San Agustín, Colombia.

FIGURE 2 RELATIVE CHRONOLOGY OF INTERMEDIATE AREA AND SOUTHERN MESOAMERICAN "NON-MAYA" SCULPTURE



Yet another problem is the multiplicity of styles found in both areas. There are unsolved problems with the definition of even the major styles of southern Mesoamerica in either the synchronic or the diachronic sense. Nowhere is this more of a problem than in the sites of the Pacific piedmont, where examples of stylistically diverse sculptures, perhaps representing many diverse cultural strains, are known. These often occur within the same site or locale and were rather obviously also re-used and re-set many times.¹

¹ cf. Graham 1978 and 1982, Norman 1976, Parsons 1969, inter alia.

It is, however, possible to side-step this latter problem by turning to a consideration not of style but of theme in an attempt to delineate relationships among the various cultures which erected these monuments. Thematic analysis of archaeological art is not new in either Mesoamerica or South America, although it is undergoing a new popularity. This is especially true in the Central Andes where the work of Donnan, Sharon, Cordy-Collins, Lyon and others in the area of thematic analysis has led to a more profound understanding of ancient religions and their history.² In Mesoamerican studies the thematic approach has not been as popular, even though it was a thematic analysis (combined with associational evidence) of Piedras Negras sculptures that was instrumental in a major revision of thought concerning the essential character of Mayan civilization.³ A thematic approach has also been used by Michael Coe in studying Classic period Mayan vase painting, yielding new insights into Mayan history and religion and, in West Mexico, Peter Furst has begun to unravel the enigma of prehispanic ceramic tomb sculptures in much the same manner.⁴ However, a more general trend in studies of Mexican and Mayan art has been a concern with style, treating this together with theme as though the two were entirely intertwined. But style and theme are not the same, nor are they necessarily dependent variables. Style can be seen as the expression of ideas in a local mode of representation, the screen through which all depictions, whether of local origin or not, are passed. Stylistic analysis is in itself extremely useful in the delineation of a given cultural tradition and can be a crucial methodology for arriving at fine chronological distinctions and, through these, a true culture history.⁵ This type of stylistic analysis, however, has hardly begun in either Mesoamerica or Central America. Theme, which may be defined as the reflection of the purposes and concerns of the art itself, what is being portrayed rather than how it is portrayed, can be used alone in situations in which there is a great areal extension of whatever is under consideration and where there is little in the way of precise archaeological data to help. Theme and style can, in one sense, be seen as two separate aspects of any artistic tradition or set of traditions and thematic analysis, especially, can be a valuable first step in the decipherment of cultural inter-relationships.

² Donnan 1976, 1978, Sharon and Donnan 1974, Cordy-Collins 1976, 1977, Lyon 1979, *inter alia*.

³ Proskouriakoff 1960.

⁴ Coe 1973, 1975, 1978, Furst 1965, 1975.

⁵ cf. Menzel 1964, 1976, Rowe, Menzel and Dawson 1964.

When one turns to the cultures of lower Central America and northern South America, the so-called Intermediate Area, it is apparent that a common element in many of these cultures was the production of representational stone statuary. Within this vast region there are numbers of sites which exhibit a series of characteristics which both set them off from other sites of the area and from the sites of Mesoamerica. In general these sites exhibit earthen or earthen and stone mounds associated with free-standing stone sculptures and with burials. Sites of this type which have been investigated by archaeologists also show that there is a considerable amount of living refuse and, often, the remains of domestic architecture as well. Thus it would appear that these were not vacant ceremonial centers or necropolises but were, initially at least, villages or towns with civic/religious architecture, domestic architecture and quarters for the dead as well as for the living. Sites such as this are quite common and are all rather similar, allowing, of course, for variation in size and local differences in the arrangement of the larger, non-domestic, platforms. It is difficult to make any definite statements about site planning since so few of these sites have been mapped in any detail, but the plaza arrangement typical of Mesoamerican ceremonial centers does not seem to have been well developed.⁶

The statuary, which differs immensely in style from region to region, is generally associated with the larger mounds or platforms. These very often contain tombs and graves and are associated with cemeteries containing both rich, well-furnished, and simpler or poorer graves. The specific type of interment varies from site to site, but there is a consistent association between the large mounds, burials in or near these and sculpture.

The sculptures associated with the mounds and cemeteries are usually free-standing and three-dimensional, that is, meant to be viewed from all sides (although there is a tendency to place less emphasis in detail on the back in

⁶ General descriptions and very partial maps are available for only a few sites. The number of sites which have been thoroughly mapped is infinitesimal. Small sites with only a few platforms and statues are almost entirely unstudied, but seem to be in the great majority. It is very likely that the variation in size of sites and numbers of statues reflects the history of a given political entity. One might well consider the situation that Helms (1979) describes for 16th century Panama as a model, where the fluctuating importance of the various chiefdoms was directly related to the personality and ability of the person occupying the chiefly office. Such a model would also partly account for both absolute variation and, in a long occupied site, fluctuation in activity through time, correlating here the erection of statues to chiefly importance and display.

many styles). They may occur as markers on top of platforms (perhaps originally screened by a perishable building), flanking or encircling the platform, buried in caches or in tombs with human remains, or placed at the entrance of such tombs. Typical of such sites are San Agustín, Tierradentro and Moscopán in Colombia (each consisting of a series of sites), the sites of the Diquís Delta, the Línea Vieja, Las Mercedes and the Revantazón regions of Costa Rica, and those of the Pacific watershed of Nicaragua (encompassing both sites on the islands of Lakes Managua and Nicaragua and on the adjacent mainland). Similar, but almost completely unknown, sites exist in the Popayán region of Colombia, are rumored to exist in the Cordillera Central and the Venezuelan Andes to the north, and are found in Chiriquí in Panama and in the rest of lower Central America.⁷ The present-known distribution of sites of this type runs from near the headwaters of the Magdalena and Cauca rivers in southern Colombia to the northwestern border of modern Nicaragua (Figure 1). They are apparently not found either to the south of this area or to the northwest in those regions which have been traditionally considered to be the southern frontier of Mesoamerica.

As mentioned above, few of these sites can be securely dated. This is due both to extensive looting of many sites and to the problems of associating sculptures securely with the ceramics which have formed the basis for most chronologies. Radiocarbon dating too, with its rather large standard deviations, has not proven particularly useful in obtaining the kinds of small units of contemporaneity needed to seriously talk about cultural interchange. For example, there exists a series of radiocarbon dates from excavations at San Agustín. These span almost 2000 years, from approximately 500 B. C. to the 16th century A. D. None can be used to date an particular piece of sculpture more closely than within 300—400 years.⁸ Again, the sites of the Nicaraguan lakes are known to contain abundant ceramics of the Middle and Late Polychrome periods, but movement and re-use of the sculptures combined with the very real problems of dating through fill and the relatively rough ceramic chronology (the Middle Polychrome is dated

⁷ Bruhns n. d., Cubillos 1980, Duque Gomez and Cubillos 1979, Graham 1982, Haberland 1960, Long and Yángüez B. 1970—1971, Lothrop 1963, Mason 1945, Myers 1973, Nachtigall 1955, Preuss 1929, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972, Squier 1856, Stone 1972, 1977, Zelaya Hidalgo, Bruhns, Dotta 1974, inter alia.

⁸ There is some reason to think that much of the sculpture of the "expressionistic" style pertain to the Isnos period (ca. 100—300 A. D.) This still leaves the majority of the sculptures unaccounted for chronologically (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972a).

ca. 800—1200 A. D. and the Late Polychrome from 1200 A. D. to an unknown time after the European invasion and colonization) precludes any close dating of the monuments. Even single component sites such as those of Ometepe Island cannot be dated closer than to within 300 to 500 years.⁹ The best that can be said at the present is that the practice of erecting large platforms associated with burials and stone statuary seems to have been commonest between approximately 500—1200 A. D. and that, on present evidence, the southern sites seem to have earlier initial occupations.

A pattern which emerges from those sites which contain quantities of statuary is that the figures seem to have been erected over a considerable span of time. In many of these sites one can see the development and ramifications of a single style. The forms change, the details change, but the themes remain constant. What one sees in fact is a situation analogous to that so brilliantly detailed by Erwin Panofsky in his study of European tomb sculpture: stylistic change through time, differing by site and clearly related to local developments and contacts, but an overall continuity of themes.¹⁰ With better temporal control one might also be able to delineate other patterns such as changes in thematic preference through time, although this is not now possible save in the most general manner.

On one level at least it would seem that these widely separated sites are all related. From both archaeology and ethnohistory it is evident that lower Central America and the northern Andes were closely connected through trade and through political relationships, sharing a number of cultural traditions and elements.¹¹ In the protohistoric period it can be demonstrated that lower Central America and Colombia formed a cultural area very distinct from either Mesoamerica or the central Andes. Archaeological evidence indicates that this was a pattern of long standing. Within the "Intermediate Area" the local cultures shared (and share) many of the same features of subsistence, social and political structure, art and religion. These varied in local details, but were all essentially related. It would appear that the mound/statuary/cemetery complex and the idea set that this is a visible remnant of was, at one time, another shared element.

The sculpture of the Intermediate Area reflects a complex of religious ideas which owes very little to the religious systems of either post-Formative

⁹ Haberland, personal communication.

¹⁰ Panofsky n. d.

¹¹ Helms 1979, Willey 1971: 307—348.

Mesoamerica or the Andean region. Contact with or influence from these latter regions can be seen in the sculpture, but is almost entirely restricted to the incorporation of minor motifs used in such a way as to suggest that they were exotic elements, items used perhaps in much the same manner as protohistoric Panamanian chiefs used foreign objects, i. e. to distinguish themselves still further from ordinary people.¹² For example, there are a very few figures in the Chontales (Nicaragua) style which wear masks resembling Mesoamerican deities. These figures are completely within the local tradition and the exotic elements conform to the canons of depiction of masked figures in that tradition. There is little indication that Mesoamerican deities are intended.¹³ At San Agustín, on the southern border of the Intermediate Area, there are two statues which show a similar borrowing of a foreign motif, in this case the Peruvian Moon Animal, a minor, though persistent deity of the central Andes. However, the Moon Animal of San Agustín is transformed into a local theme, in this case a reptilian alter ego figure.¹⁴

The themes which characterize the sculpture of the Intermediate Area evidence a religion which, far from celebrating political elites or a series of deities with astral/fertility/creator functions, is centered around shamanism, transformational (perhaps hallucinogen assisted) contact with the supernatural, special human/animal relationships, and a set of beliefs about death which led to the placement of statues within and about burial areas as markers for sepulchers and, perhaps, as guardians of the graves and of the dead. Although local variants of this religion are legion, the large number of shared themes in the sculpture provides a most telling argument for the basic similarity of religious ideas (Figure 3).

In all styles the majority of statues represent human beings, usually male (Figures 4—6). Female figures do appear, but are definitely in a minority.¹⁵ Most of these human figures are naturalistic within the conventions of a given style. Of the figures a greater or a smaller number (depending on the site and the size of the sample) represent supernaturals: deities, spirits, or

¹² Helms 1979.

¹³ Zelaya Hidalgo, Bruhns, Dotta 1974.

¹⁴ Bruhns 1982.

¹⁵ The initial means of determining gender in these styles was to work with those statues which portrayed nude humans and which showed the genitals in an unmistakable manner. It was then possible to correlate, in some styles, details of hair or ornaments with sex and so arrive at gender determination for a number of clothed figures.

Figure 3 MAJOR THEMES OF INTERMEDIATE AREA SCULPTURE

THEME	DICUIS DELTA	E. COSTA RICA	CHONTALES	ZAPATERA & MOMOTOMBO	BARRILES	SAN AGUSTIN	TIERRA-DENTRO
human male	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
human female	X	X	X			X	X
supernatural	X	X	X	X		X	X
alter ego figure:							
reptile		X	X	X		X	X
feline			X	X			
monkey			X	X			
warrior		X	X	X	X(?)	X	X
masked figure:							
animal	X	X	X	X		X	X
other	X	X	X	X		X	X
staff dancer	X		X	X		X	
musician	X	X	X	X(?)		X	
shaman		X				X	
master-slave					X	X	
"offering":							
cup	X	X			X	X	
shell	X(?)	X			X(?)	X	X
trophy head:							
holding in hand(s)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
on neckalce	X	X	X			X	
hanging down back	X	X				X	
trophy head eaten	X					X	
table/metate/alter with trophy head edging	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
head as complete sculpture	X	X		X(?)		X	X
animals:							
reptile	X	X	X	X		X	X
toad/frog			X	X		X	X
feline	X	X	X	X		X	X
monkey?	X		X	X		X	X
bird						X	X

1: Monkeys seem to be anthropomorphized and the identification is tentative.

perhaps the dead who have attained supernatural status of some sort. Supernatural status is commonly indicated by the inclusion of fangs within the mouth of an otherwise human figure (Figures 7—8). No portraiture, in terms of a lifelike representation of an individualistic human being, is evident and most figures, natural or supernatural, are somewhat idealized, anonymous representations, at least as regards facial features.

The human figures are shown in a series of standardized poses, whatever the style. Usually they are standing, although a general tendency in many styles to give little attention to the legs, makes differentiation of standing from squatting figures difficult at times. A fewer number of figures are seated, either on the ground or on a bench or stool (Figure 9). Arm positions are limited, most occurring in all styles, although a given style will exhibit a preference for one or two arm positions: arms may hang at the sides, be held with elbows bent and forearms held horizontally over the chest or abdomen, be bent at the elbows and held crossed over the chest, or one arm may be held horizontally or hanging and the other held over the chest or abdomen. The high degree of standardization of arm positions, especially within a given group, suggests that these may have had some significance as poses of respect or devotion.

Many of the humans and supernaturals hold an object or objects. Among those objects which can be clearly identified and which have a wide areal spread are cups, shells, animals, trophy heads and weapons. There are also numbers of less detailed artifacts, some of which may be crystals or coca paraphrenalia.¹⁶

Aside from these generalized figures, some of which may possibly be offering bearers, all styles show humans wearing masks. The masks are often clearly shown as such, sometimes being held in front of the face on a staff, other times covering the face or even the entire head (Figures 9—10). Masks represent both animals and supernaturals, but some are abstract face covers made of leather (?) or metal.¹⁷ Persons holding staves, probably dancers, are

¹⁶ The cultivation of *Erythroxylon coca* and/or *E. novogranadense* and its use in religious ceremonies is documented throughout the Intermediate Area. In historic times the northern boundary of coca cultivation was in Nicaragua, although other species of coca (e. g. *Erythroxylon mexicana*) grow wild in much of southern Mesoamerica.

¹⁷ Metal working and/or use and trade in metal ornaments was common in the Intermediate Area after approximately 500 A.D. The knowledge of metal working and the use of metals is another feature which sets this area off from Mesoamerica.

also shown and musicians likewise commonly appear, holding or playing flutes (and trumpets?), panpipes, whistles and rattles (Figures 11—12).¹⁸

Another major thematic category is that of animals. The total number of species represented is not large and seems to be basically limited to those animals which historically and ethnographically are known to feature in myths and legends. Reptiles (both caymans and lizards, it is often difficult to tell which) are the most common, both as subsidiary motifs and as individual sculptures (Figure 13). Amphibians, frogs or toads, are the second most common species represented, usually as free-standing sculptures unassociated with humans. Felines and monkeys are also fairly common and there are a very few birds and snakes, mainly in the southern styles. An occasional unidentifiable quadruped and the rare fish also appear.

Animals are most commonly seen in those guises which show some sort of animal/human relationship. Although they may appear as masks and as "offerings", their most common role is as "alter ego" figures: as a headdress on a human, as a figure crouched on top of the head or headdress, or crouched along the back of the main figure, peering over its head (Figures 14—16).¹⁹ Not all styles have alter ego figures; they are very common in Colombia and Nicaragua, whereas they seem to be rather rare in Costa Rica. Here, however, there is a concomitant rise in the number of representations of humans with animal heads or masks, which may well be the local convention for the same general idea. Very often the alter ego is associated with a warrior figure, either human or supernatural. Warriors appear in most styles, being identified as such because they hold weapons: a club or spear and, occasionally, a shield. Throughout this region the most common alter ego figure is a reptile.²⁰ The others are felines or monkeys. These alter ego

¹⁸ Dancing with stamping tubes or staves as a part of religious ceremonies in which a shaman takes part and which he and the assembled company ingest hallucinogenic substances is known historically from Central America and survives today among the Tukanoan tribes of the northwest Amazon (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978, Figures 6 and 7).

¹⁹ The depiction of the animal alter ego is quite different from the common Mesoamerican animal headdress in which the face of the wearer is seen peering out of the jaws of an animal hood. The Mesoamerican headdress could be a re-working of the alter ego idea in more directly representational style, perhaps with some disjunction. Certainly the sculptors of Zapatera Island in Lake Nicaragua saw the Mesoamerican headdress as analogous and used this motif for a number of alter ego statues.

²⁰ Absolute frequencies of themes are impossible to state because of the extremely variable nature of the sample available. For this reason Figures 3 and 23 indicate

figures are usually interpreted as being graphic representations of the guardian animal or animal soul of the human/supernatural who forms the main figure. It is also possible that beliefs related to the animal aspect of a supernatural or to concepts of the master of animals are being shown, and it has been suggested (in other contexts) that such representations refer to the familiar spirit of a shaman.²¹ Beliefs about these types of animal/human relationships abound in the Americas and are often linked with transformational shamanism.²²

Although many of these themes can be linked indirectly to beliefs or practices associated with shamanism, there is also a series of sculptures which are more direct in their reference. These are representations of humans wearing or holding shaman's paraphernalia and people being attacked by felines. The paraphernalia can be identified by comparison with ethnographic and historical accounts of Central and South American shamans and includes such items as whistles, cigars (?), lime flasks and small bags for coca, quids in the cheek (either coca or tobacco), feline skin headdresses, etc. The attack statues feature a human being being overpowered by a feline. Although these statues have often been identified as scenes of copulation between a human female and a jaguar, this identification would appear to be erroneous.²³ The feline is shown grasping the figure or sitting upon it in position which do not suggest the more tender sentiments (Figures 20—22). A recurrent belief in South and Central America is that shamans do their struggling with others (shamans, spirits, human enemies) in the guise of a feline. A related motif is that a person receives the call to shamanistic status by surviving a feline attack, thereby showing his power over a feared supernatural (the feline being believed to be another shaman or an animal sent to do another shaman's bidding). Statues showing feline attack are the only ones in the Intermediate Area which approach a group or narrative theme.

Elements which show social relationships or the result of bellicose activities are also common. A sporadic theme, so far clearly identified only in Panama (Barriles) and Colombia (San Agustín), is the "master-slave" motif: one person carrying another on his shoulders. Aside from warriors (and

only presence or absence of a theme or motif. With alter ego figures there does seem to be a preference for one species of animal in any given style.

²¹ Furst 1965.

²² See especially Furst 1965 and 1968 and Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971 and 1972 for discussions of this set of beliefs.

²³ Furst 1968, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972, Davis 1978.

prisoners, these being especially common in the Costa Rican styles), a recurrent theme is that of trophy heads. Figures hold trophy heads, they wear them suspended around their necks hanging down on their chests or between their shoulder blades, they have trophy heads attached to their belts and, occasionally, trophy heads are represented alone as a complete sculpture. A peculiar element also appears, the trophy head eater: a supernatural figure who has a trophy head emerging from his mouth as a tongue (Figures 17—18). Trophy heads also feature in another sculptured object which is common to all these cultures: stools, altars, tables, or metates (they are called different things by different people), flat topped round or rectangular footed objects which are edged with sculptured trophy heads (Figure 19).

Within certain limits all of these sculptural styles are very realistic and show clearly details of dress, ornaments, and other objects. There is a great similarity in costume and certain items, such as a conical hat, are widespread, suggesting that they may have had some special significance (Figure 23). Often representations are detailed enough that materials (i. e. tapestry, netting, beadwork, feathers, fur) are suggested. Many of the ornaments figures wear are identical to archaeological specimens. One San Agustín figure, for example, wears a flask suspended around his neck. This flask is identifiable as being made of metal and as being of the Quimbaya style, a style which centered some hundreds of kilometers to the northwest.²⁴ Some Nicaraguan figures are shown wearing large nose pendants of a type which was apparently manufactured in northern Colombia.²⁵ Beads, pectorals, and other ornaments can also be matched by archaeological specimens. Perishable items such as feather and animal headdresses are likewise shown in some detail. The closest analogues of the types of clothing, ornaments, and objects shown on and with the statues are those which exist or existed among the lowland tribes of South America, especially those of the northwest Amazon. There is, in fact, a definite lowland flavor to all of the sculptural depictions. This may well be emphasized because native culture only really survives, even in a quasi aboriginal form, in Amazonia. However, the prevalence of animals such as the cayman, the monkey, and the feline, the frequency of elaborate feather ornaments, the types of weapons and offerings held, details of clothing such as the penis string, etc. suggest that these cultures were more closely related to those of the Amazonian low-

²⁴ Bruhns 1969—1970, 1982.

²⁵ Zelaya Hidalgo, Bruhns, Dotta 1974.

FIGURE 23 SHARED MOTIFS OF INTERMEDIATE AREA SCULPTURE

	DIQUIS DELTA	E. COSTA RICA	CHONTALES	ZAPATERA & MOHOTOMBO	BARRILES	SAH AGUSTIN	TIERRADENTRO
conical hat	X	X	X		X	X	X
feather crown		X	X	X		X	
headband	X	X	X	X		X	X
beanie	X	X	X	X		X	X
ear plugs		X	X			X	X
earrings		X	X(?)			X	
nose ring			X			X	
nose hanger			X			X	
bead collar			X			X	X
multi-strand necklace			X			X	X
pectoral: zoomorphic cruciform "metal"	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
skirt			X			X	X
loin cloth		X	X	X		X	X
penis string				X(?)		X	X
nude	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
nude:erect							
penis	X	X	X	X		X	X
belt	X	X	X		X	X	X

1: These are variable in form but are all closely analogous to metal ornaments found in the specific area in which the statues occur.

lands than to the very different highland civilizations.²⁶ Considering their environmental setting some similarities of this type could be expected. But there is also growing evidence of close interchange between many of the lowland groups and trading relationships usually imply other sorts of information exchange.²⁷ It is also worth considering that the lowland cultures, far from being the barbarian outliers of the, perhaps, more complex civilizations of the highlands, were highly organized and complex cultures in

²⁶ The prevalence of nude figures in Intermediate Area sculpture is another trait which sets these cultures off from either Mesoamerica or the central Andes. In these latter areas nudity was generally considered to be shameful and nude figures in art are largely restricted to prisoners or other socially disgraced persons.

²⁷ Renfrew 1975.

their own right, not merely passive borrowers and incompetent re-interpreters of what was passed on to them from above. It seems also that some of these cultures played important roles in the development of the early non-tropical forest civilizations of nuclear America. No one today seriously questions the lowland origin of either the Olmec or the Maya and convincing arguments for the lowland origins of or lowland influence on the subsistence and religion of Chavín have been presented.²⁸

To date inspection of themes shown in the sculptural art of the Intermediate Area and the associations of this art suggest that these pieces are a visible manifestation of a coherent system of religious beliefs which center around shamanism, special relationships to animal species, perhaps the use of hallucinogens or other drugs in contacting the supernatural, and transformation, especially as these relate to beliefs and practices concerning the dead. There is little reason to associate these sculptures with overt power politics or to see them as somehow being pale reflections of other "higher" cultures from without. The closest parallels in theme and placement of this sculpture are, in fact, not with the monuments of the civilizations to the north and south, but with the ceramic tomb figures of West Mexico, sculptures for which Furst has convincingly argued much the same meaning and function.²⁹

When we turn to Mesoamerica and, particularly, to those areas which have a certain amount of "non-Maya" sculpture, we see a very different situation. Temporally the "non-Maya" sculpture of Mesoamerica seems to be rather earlier than the full development of the Intermediate Area styles (Figure 3). Where there are sufficient associations to allow for something other than guess dating, most of these pieces would seem to be Middle to Late Formative in date. The sites with which these pieces, as well as others in more obviously Mesoamerican styles, are associated are ceremonial centers, consisting of a series of platforms in formal, usually quadrilateral, arrangements. The Mesoamerican pattern of arranging structures around a plaza or a series of interconnecting plazas is present, even in the earliest sites and the figures appear to have been erected in the open plazas, either singly or in rows, or placed at the base of platform stairs. Few, if any, were placed as center markers on platforms and, although many of these statues have been found buried, either as caches or as fill, none seems to have been associated with a tomb or cemetery in the Central American

²⁸ Lathrap 1973.

²⁹ Furst 1965, 1975.

manner.³⁰ The ceremonial centers of Mesoamerica were often residential centers as well, but the Intermediate Area practice of placing the cemetery within or contiguous to the main ceremonial constructions is not present. Many platforms in these centers do contain tombs, but there is little reason to identify the ceremonial centers as necropolises. The dead in southern Mesoamerica were usually buried within the house, with the more important dead having elaborate burials in either their houses (the "palaces") or in religious structures. This latter practice, in the Late Classic, was further elaborated into the construction of large, primarily mortuary, structures such as those at Palenque and Tikal, but the ceremonial centers themselves were definitely multifunctional and members of all social classes did not find their final resting place within them.

Functionally Mesoamerican sculpture is very different from that of the Intermediate Area. Although a number of different, perhaps regional, stylistic trends can be seen, primarily it is relief sculpture for architectural embellishment or on free-standing monuments (stelas) which are associated with buildings or building complexes. Sculpture in the full round does occur in some styles, but has the same sets of associations as the relief sculpture. In the Intermediate Area, in contrast, relief carving is secondary to free-standing monuments and in no case is primarily architectural embellishment. Functionally there is very little overlap between Mesoamerican and Intermediate Area sculpture.

Within the general Mesoamerican tradition of relief sculpture there appear to be a number of stylistic traditions which are thematically linked. Beginning in the Late Formative (at the latest) throughout Mesoamerica sculpture which celebrates political/dynastic themes appears. Within the Maya tradition the themes are definitely political and a series of standardized scenes are found on stelas, lintels, wall panels, etc. which commemorate events in the lives of rulers and their close kin. Despite the sophistication of style there is, on the thematic level, an awful sameness as each ruler celebrates events such as accession, coronation, marriage, the birth of heirs, notable victories and diplomatic events. Within this framework diety depictions and religious motifs are largely restricted to the association of rulers with the insignia of the major dieties in scenes which suggest that some special relationship, such as status validation, was envisioned. In the slightly

³⁰ The only monument for which such a placement is surely noted is Monument 4 at Izapa, which may have been placed in the center of Early Classic Mound 113 (Norman 1976: 261–262).

different traditions of Izapa and Cotzumalhuapa a more narrative style is present and a somewhat different series of scenes appears. Many of these scenes too can be related to political events; others would appear to concern mythical genealogies of the elite and/or specific acts or ceremonies within a reign. Certainly, as in the Maya area proper, there is recognizable portraiture of individuals. There is also reason to think that the Late Postclassic (Mixtec) idea of diety impersonators or re-incarnations was present and that this played a potent role in the local political scene. The sculptural art of the southeast can be shown to have been open to influences from a number of areas, but there is no reason to think of it as being basically different in function from the art of the rest of southern Mesoamerica.

The differences in subjects and functions of Intermediate Area and Mesoamerican sculpture is doubtless related to differences in culture and society, differences which have an extremely long history. During the Early Formative Mesoamerican society, like early farming societies in much of the Americas, would appear to have been characterized by small groups practicing more or less extensive agriculture and having a religion based on the natural elements, fertility, and shamanistic control or manipulation of the supernatural. Peter Furst has documented a number of beliefs that are extremely widespread in the Americas and has suggested that these beliefs are extremely ancient.³¹ Transformational shamanism, magical flight, concepts of the masters of animals and special man/animal relationships and the origins of species are linked ideas in this complex. Although the case can best be made for those cultures which were not part of the mainstream Mesoamerican tradition (such as the Late Formative/Early Classic cultures of West Mexico), elements which seem to be related to this set of beliefs are present in the art of many Mesoamerican societies and, I would argue, are paramount in the monumental art of the Intermediate Area.

In Mesoamerica itself, however, changes in the orientation of religion and society are evident by the end of the Early Formative. The best example of this change in focus and function is from the earliest known culture with monumental art, the Olmec. Although the role, and even the identity, of the Olmec is much disputed, a presence which might best be termed Olmec-related is seen throughout much of Mesoamerica and is quite marked in the sites of the Pacific piedmont and the southern periphery. It has been suggested that this presence is related to the establishment of long distance trade networks and that these, in turn, have a close relationship with the rise of elites and

³¹ Furst 1968.

the growing complexity of society over southern Mesoamerica.³² It now seems that by the end of the Early Formative some Mesoamerican societies had made a transition from being simple tribal groups to a more hierarchically organized society with a clearly distinguishable elite who were actively expanding their authority and importance through control of the manufacture and trade of, largely, sumptuary items. Whether one wishes to view Olmec society at this point as being a chiefdom of some sort or an early state is not particularly relevant. There was obviously an entrenched elite, however recruited and legitimated, who were in business for themselves.

In the Olmec heartland of Tabasco and southern Veracruz these people built a series of impressive centers embellished these with monumental sculptures. Away from this homeland a series of other sites such as Chalcatzingo in Morelos, Oxtotitlán in Guerrero, Abaj Takalik in Guatemala, and Las Victorias in El Salvador show that there was enough of an Olmec presence, physical or intellectual, to be celebrated in the construction of monuments in an Olmec style. Many of these monuments were prestigious enough to be reused by succeeding polities.

When the look at Olmec art thematically we can see a number of interesting features. Echoes of a series of shamanistic beliefs are certainly present in both monumental and small scale sculpture. Monuments like those of Río Chiquito and Portrero Nuevo which show a feline attack theme are definitely conceptually related to the feline attack sculptures of San Agustín. Other shamanic themes are present as well, although these are most prevalent in the mobiliary, not the monumental, art.³³ The discovery of quantities of *Bufo marinus* bones at San Lorenzo suggests one method of arriving at transformation.³⁴ But by the time the Olmec or an Olmec presence can be identified archaeologically it is evident that this society had radically changed in its concepts of the supernatural. In the place of shamans, alter-ego figures, guardians of the dead, masters of animals, etc. we see portraits of rulers and a series of themes which have their closest analogues not in the celebration of shamanic concepts, but in the themes of the later, politically oriented, art styles. These themes include the ruler seated on a monster mask throne or seated or standing within the open mouth of a serpent or feline (cf. painting C-1, Oxtotitlán, Stela 1, La Venta, relief 1, Chalcatzingo), the ruler associated with the insignia of dieties (cf.

³² Coe 1965, Flannery and Marcus 1976, Pires-Ferreira 1976.

³³ Furst 1968.

³⁴ Coe 1968.

San Martín Pajapán statue, Stela 2, La Venta), and diplomatic scenes of the sort found in Classic Maya art (cf. Stela D, Tres Zapotes, Stela 1, Viejón, Stela 3, La Venta). That is, political themes, themes which celebrate the elite, their power, and their special relationship with the supernatural are coming to the fore. If this special relationship and power was based upon shamanistic manipulations, it is not specified in the public art.

The change in the focus of the public art suggests some fundamental changes were taking place in Olmec society. Here, ethnographic parallel may be pertinent. A study of religion in contemporary Africa indicates that as a society grows more complex and hierarchical, ecstatic states, which may have been central to religious practices, become increasingly less important and restricted to full-time religious practitioners. Although elements of possession may linger on in a religious system and, indeed, find a new popularity in times of stress, one aspect of what some archaeologists call the change from a tribal society or simple chiefdom to a more complex chiefdom or early state is the institutionalization of religion, the limitation of direct access to the supernatural and the increasing subordination of religion to the needs and desires of the elite.³⁵ This would appear to be what Olmec public art is showing. Along with the emergence of political themes and the celebration of the prestigious individual through portraiture, we see the appearance of specific dieties and elaborate cosmologies which relate these dieties to each other, the world and the elite.³⁶ Remnants of older religious forms and practices linger on, but in a much reduced manner and are largely absent from the public art of later Mesoamerican cultures.³⁷ The success of these new formulas is evident. By the Middle Formative they appear in monumental art throughout southern Mesoamerica on the monuments associated with public constructions which evidence the power and wealth of the society as reflected in its upper echelons.

³⁵ Lewis 1971.

³⁶ Joralemon 1971, 1976.

³⁷ Both Joralemon (1974) and Furst (1976) have documented practices relating to blood sacrifice and the attainment of ecstatic states among the Late Classic Maya. The evidence at this time suggests that these practices were a part of elite culture, important (and rare?) enough to be publically recorded as in Lintels 17 and 34 at Yaxchilán or to be subjects of funerary art such as the vase reputedly from southern Campeche illustrated by Coe (1975, plate 15). There is also good reason to think that Late Classic Maya society was undergoing mounting social and economic stress, which would correlate with Lewis's hypothesis.

One important aspect of Mesoamerican societies from the Early Formative through the Late Postclassic was extensive trade with other cultural groups. We can see from Late Classic Maya monuments that this trade also included the movement of people, not just traders, but marriage partners and diplomats as well. In this light the presence of non-Maya monuments in the southeastern sites might well be analogous to the Teotihuacán style building at Tikal or to the Oaxaca *barrio* at Teotihuacán, evidence of the presence of important foreigners or foreign groups resident for some purpose.

On the other hand, the non-Maya sculpture of the southern Mesoamerican sites is not particularly typical, thematically, of the Intermediate Area, and could just as well be evidence of purely local developments in art. For example, pillar statues, figures in the full round on top of a column, are frequently cited as evidence of Mesoamerican infiltration into the Intermediate Area. Most pillar figures known are from Guatemala. Their major southern extension is only as far as northwestern Nicaragua where they are associated with pieces which show other Mesoamerican motifs, worked, however, into the local style.³⁸

The "jaguar" head sculptures of the Pacific piedmont (especially El Salvador) would appear to be a localized or regional theme (Figure 1, compass rose). They are not found in the Intermediate Area and, although they can perhaps be related to the full head sculptures of the south, the idea of a sculpture which is a head alone is so widespread as to be valueless in determining contact or influence on that basis alone.³⁹ The much discussed boulder or "pot-belly" sculptures of the same area would again appear to be a later, provincial, development of the Late Formative and definitely have no analogues to the south.⁴⁰

One of the most discussed subjects in this context is that of trophy heads. Stone has suggested that the practice of taking trophy heads was of Central

³⁸ The local *style* of Zapatera Island sculpture is such that figures on columns would fit into local ideas of form and function. Many of the purely local style figures are on semi-columnar bases and the pillar figures simply utilize a higher base.

³⁹ Full head jaguar and were-jaguar representations are known in Olmec art, but are not particularly common in monumental sculpture (cf. Altar 1, Laguna de los Cerros).

⁴⁰ Demarest 1980. However Graham (1982) has argued for a reverse chronological placement.

American origin, spreading from there into Mesoamerica.⁴¹ However, there is every indication that removal of peoples' heads was associated with a number of very different activities, being common in both Mesoamerica and Andean South America long before the appearance of trophy heads in Central American monumental art. Trophy head figures are known from Late Formative or Early Classic contexts in the Pacific piedmont and decapitated burials start to make their appearance in Maya sites in Early Chicanel times, if not before.⁴² Decapitation of sacrificial victims was an integral part of formal religion in many Mesoamerican cultures, apart from occurring in raiding and warfare. The habit of head removal is so widespread and so variable in motivation that it is best considered, not as a specific cult, but as a reflection of a series of beliefs and practices which may not be linked at all save in the most obvious way.

Free-standing figures of reptiles and amphibians are another shared theme which may have only the most distant relationship. These figures are known from many Intermediate Area sites where they are found in the same contexts as other statues. In southern Mesoamerica these figures tend to serve as altars or offering tables associated with stelas or architectural features. The altar/stela grouping is not found in the Intermediate Area and, considering the number of variant beliefs about reptiles and amphibians in both areas, free-standing sculptures with this theme may be a parallel evolution; similar forms with quite different meanings.

This is not to say that there was no significant interchange between Mesoamerica and the Intermediate Area. There most certainly was and echos of this can be seen in the incorporation of Mesoamerican motifs in the sculptures as well as in the numbers of imported artifacts found in both areas and at many time periods. But the basic form of aboriginal Mesoamerican and Intermediate Area society was very different and the culture histories of the two areas show different courses. Such themes as are shared by the two areas can be explained better on the basis of continuing contact, remnants of an earlier set of beliefs (in Mesoamerica) or as parallelism than by hypotheses of migration and the imposition of religion from without. Throughout history each of these regions followed its own path and the essential nature of their public art is thematically and functionally distinct.

⁴¹ Stone 1972: 83—84.

⁴² Parsons 1969.

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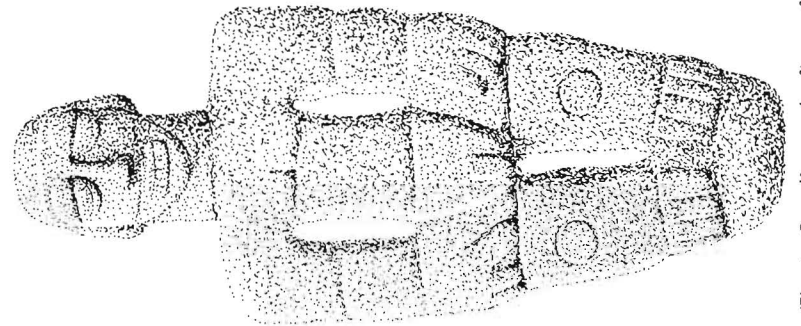


Fig. 4. Standing male figure from the Disquis Delta, Costa Rica.



Fig. 5. Standing male figure from the Tierradentro, Colombia.



Fig. 6. Back view of same figure. Note the double "skirt" and streamers on the headdress.



Fig. 8. Supernatural male figure, Disquis Delta, Costa Rica.



Fig. 7. Supernatural male figure, Alto de las Piedras, San Agustín, Colombia. The figure holds a cigar or univalve shell and a coca bag. From Preuss, 1929, plate 77.



Fig. 9. Seated male wearing leather or metal mask. Chontales style, San Pedro de Lovago, Nicaragua.



Fig. 10. Male figure with leather or metal masks on staff held in front of the face. Ullumbe, San Agustín, Colombia. Preuss, 1929, plate 6. This figure served as a carytid and the projection on the top of the head is to support a

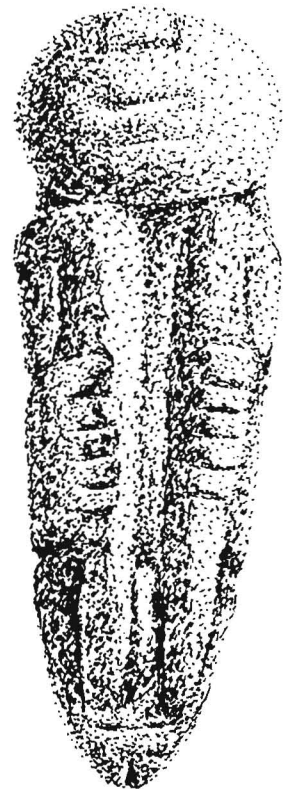


Fig. 11. Dancer with staves, Sierpe district, Diquís Delta, Costa Rica.

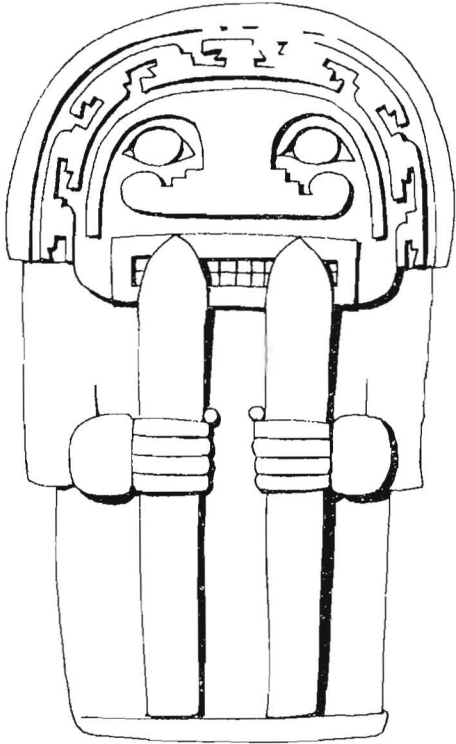


Fig. 12. Supernatural dancer with staves. Mesita C, San Agustín, Colombia. The figure wears an elaborate headdress (with a back panel) and a stylized nose ornament of metal.



Fig. 13. Reptilian figure. Reputely found covering a sarcophagus. Alto de Lavapatas, San Agustín, Colombia.



Fig. 14. Warrior figure, Chontales style, Juigalpa, Nicaragua. A much eroded feline(?) alter ego figure is on top of the head.



Fig. 15. Warrior with reptilian alter ego. Meseta B, San Agustín, Colombia. Note the tasseled headdress similar to that of Fig. 7.



Fig. 16. Supernatural figure with reptilian alter ego. Punto de las Figuras, Zapatera Island, Nicaragua.



Fig. 17. Trophy head eater figure. Farm 2 corral, Diquis Delta, Costa Rica.

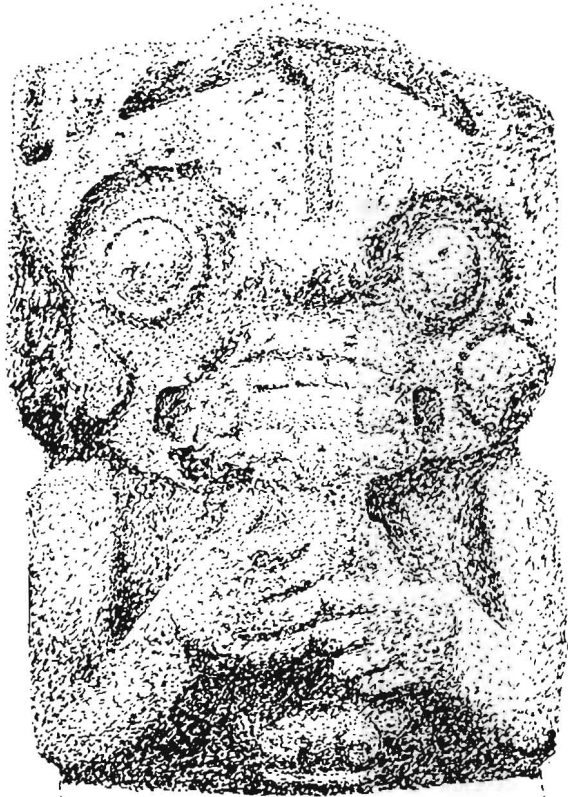


Fig. 18. Trophy head eater, Ullumbe, San Agustín, Colombia.



Fig. 19. Stool with pendant trophy heads. Alto de los Idolos, San Agustín, Colombia.



Fig. 20. Feline attack figure, La Candela, San Agustín, Colombia. Note the anthropomorphized paws holding the head of the small, limp figure. The second figure, which may be that of a female, is shown in the standard pose of respect or devotion.



Fig. 21. Side view of same.



Fig. 22. Rear view of same.

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