

Chalcatzingo's Portrait Figurines and the Cult of the Ruler

by DAVID C. GROVE and SUSAN D. GILLESPIE

From at least 1500 B.C. until after the Spanish Conquest in A.D. 1521, the indigenous peoples of Mexico manufactured a remarkable quantity and variety of small clay figurines. In the latter part of the Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1521), some of these figurines were clearly duplicates of much larger stone carvings of specific deities. However, such a definite correspondence between figurines and deities is lacking for the earlier Formative (1600 B.C.-A.D. 300) and Classic (A.D. 300-900) periods. Exactly what these older figurines represent or symbolize has been uncertain, although it is generally believed that they were used in some type of public or private ritual. Now new evidence from the site of Chalcatzingo in Morelos state, about 100 kilometers southeast of Mexico City, suggests that certain figurines during the Middle Form-



Almost half of all the ceramic heads recovered from Chalcatzingo were these so-called C8 figurines, which are distinguished especially by the eyes. They appear to represent attempts at realistic portraiture.

ative period (900–500 B.C.) were actually portraits of rulers and were used in cult activities devoted to the person of the ruler.

Chalcatzingo has long been famous for its sophisticated bas-relief rock carvings, the earliest known in the Mexican highlands. Archaeological excavations carried out at the site in the 1970s have demonstrated that Chalcatzingo may have been the major political and religious center of central Mexico during the Middle Formative period. Its importance seems closely linked to its trade ties with Olmec centers on Mexico's Gulf Coast. In fact, the artifacts recovered during the excavations exhibit a curious mixture of Gulf Coast and central Mexican features.

Among the artifacts from the site are over 4,000 figurine fragments—one of the largest collections known from Mexico and certainly one of the best assemblages in terms of control over the archaeological context. Almost all of the figurines had been intentionally broken sometime in the past. The heads had been snapped from the bodies, apparently an important action during the final ritual function of these small artifacts.

The Chalcatzingo figurines can be divided into two major groups. The first and larger group consists of stylized and generally nondescript human figures which are typical of the Middle Formative period throughout central Mexico. In contrast, the other group is of well-made figurines with carefully executed faces and headdresses which most likely represent attempts at realistic portraiture.

The significance of the Chalcatzingo portrait figurines cannot be fully realized without comparing the figurine assemblage from this site with its contemporaries in central Mexico. During the Early Formative period (1600–900 B.C.), Chalcatzingo's figurines were much like those in the rest of the region. Central Mexican culture at this time was characterized by small agricultural villages and hamlets whose inhabitants depended primarily on rainfall and natural humidity to water their crops. At sites such as Tlatilco in the Valley of Mexico, many figurines have been found as burial offerings. They usually depict females with heavily emphasized hips and thighs and only stylized facial details. Some figurines from this period have a few additional bits of costuming which suggest they may represent people dressed in ritual garments. But most are relatively plain and give no hint of a particular role or function. It is generally believed that these figurines were related to the promotion of agricultural fertility.

Middle Formative figurines, like their predecessors, usually have highly stylized features but exhibit greater variety. Facial features were often created by adding fillets of clay to the face and by punctation and simple incising. The hips remain emphasized, but the head and hair ornamentation received more attention.

Archaeologists classify Formative period figurines according to a typology established by the preeminent central Mexican archaeologist George Vaillant over 50 years ago in his reports on excavations at the sites of Zacatenco and El Arbolillo.

These were Middle Formative villages on the west side of the large lake which covered most of the Valley of Mexico. Vaillant's typology remains little changed today. Major types are designated by letters (A, B, C, etc.), and subtypes by a numerical affix. D2 and K figurines were common during the Early Formative period, while C1, C2, C3, and C5 figurines are the major subtypes at Zacatenco, El Arbolillo and other Middle Formative sites in the Valley of Mexico as well as in the state of Morelos to the south.

The most frequent figurine type during the Early Formative at Chalcatzingo was D2, which was also the major type found in the Valley of Mexico. By the Middle Formative, however, although C1, C2, C3, and C5 figurines were common, almost half of the figurines recovered at Chalcatzingo were type C8, a very rare type at other sites. These are the figurines we believe are portraits.

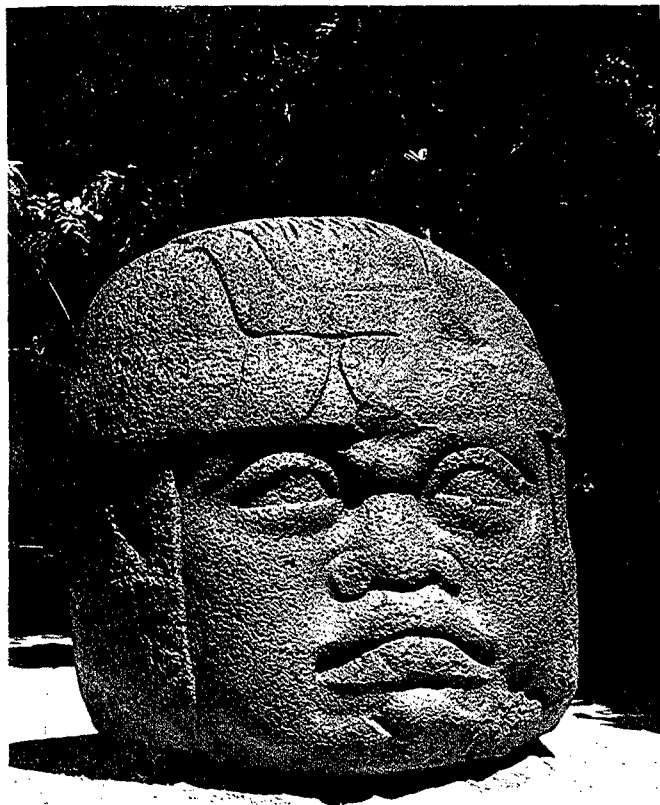
The C8 figurines are very realistic in facial detail, and there is a great deal of variation among the faces depicted. Initial analysis revealed that there are numerous repetitions of many of the specific faces in the sample. In other words, specific "people" can be identified. At the same time, each distinct facial type has an equally distinctive and repetitive headdress. Because these figurines were hand-modeled, this repetition suggests that the ceramic artisans purposely created a large number of figurines with specific face and headdress combinations. Thus, a portrait figurine personage can be identified by both facial features and headdress form.

While the headdress form is consistent, there are some minor variations in decoration within the headdress among almost all of the C8 figurines. The significance, if any, of these variations is still unknown, and a much larger sample with even tighter chronological control may be necessary to arrive at an understanding of such a decorative variation.

The identification of these figurines as portraits, however, rests not only on their intrinsic characteristics but also on other evidence for portrait art both at Chalcatzingo and at Olmec sites such as La Venta and San Lorenzo on Mexico's Gulf Coast. Specific individuals are portrayed on some Gulf Coast monuments and in the Olmec-influenced stone art of Chalcatzingo, probably the chiefs or rulers of the centers at which their monuments occur. The individuals depicted on monuments seem to have been "named" by the particular motifs carried in their headdresses. It surely is not a coincidence that the very human portrait faces on C8 figurines are combined with distinctive headdress forms in the same way.

Over 20 individuals have been identified among the Chalcatzingo C8 figurines for which we have multiple examples, and each has been given a letter designation for easy reference. Person B is one of the most striking and easily identifiable. He has a long, tapered face and pointed chin, and his mouth is always shown slightly open. His headdress is tall and has a slight outward flare which complements and emphasizes his tapering face. It hides

The colossal heads carved by the Olmec, such as Monument 1 from the site of La Venta, portrayed individual rulers. Each ruler was identified by certain facial features and by the naming motif carried in his headdress.



"El Rey," Chalcatzingo's famous bas-relief carving, depicts a person seated within a cave, source of both water and supernatural power. "El Rey" is located above the site on the main rain-water channel, and the torrent of water rushing down the mountain would have seemed to come directly from this revered ancestor.



his ears but not his earspools.

In contrast to Person B's tall headdress, Person A has a close-fitting headdress, perhaps little more than a skullcap, and his face is more diamond-shaped than tapered. Both his ears and his earspools are depicted, unlike those of Person B and some other individuals.

Person H is perhaps the most unusual of all the individuals portrayed. Although the figurine heads of this individual in our sample all have broken headdresses, making it impossible to ascertain headdress form, the facial features leave no doubt of the identification. Person H has wide, protruding eyes—a condition known as exophthalmia—with only tiny punctations for pupils. This eye treatment is completely at variance with the portrayal in other C8 figurines, and might result from a thyroid condition known as Grave's Disease from which this individual may have suffered. Such depictions of physical deformities are not rare in Olmec portrait art. For example, several of the colossal heads and

bas-relief carvings at La Venta and San Lorenzo show persons with prominent buck teeth.

One facial type usually matches only one headdress form, although there are exceptions. Persons C, D and E are identical in facial features but are distinguished by their different headdress forms. Interestingly, their facial characteristics are quite distinctive from those of other C8 individuals. The face is pudgy, with a slightly pointed chin and puffy, triangular eyelids. The features convey the impression that the person depicted is elderly, in contrast to the more youthful appearance of the other C8 personages.

The headdress of Person C is basically rectangular in form and of medium height. Person E's headdress has the same basic shape but is composed of two separate lobes, almost like turban wrappings. Each lobe is decorated with a small ball of clay incised with striations, perhaps depicting a tuft of feathers. The third headdress type, worn by Person D, is completely different, for it is tall



These stylized and generally nondescript human figures from Chalcatzingo are typical of figurines made in central Mexico during the Middle Formative period. Facial features were often created by adding fillets of clay to the face and by punctuation and simple incising.

and conical with a knob-like top. Since these figurines may not be completely contemporaneous, they may well depict the same person, and the differences in headdress forms may have been associated with new statuses or roles the person assumed at various stages of his life.

Person F is distinguished by his headdress form, a turban which is pinched on both sides to form a point at the top. In some examples, this head covering is decorated with incised lines. Round ear-pools, a drooping mouth and small pupils also mark this personage. He is represented in one of the very few whole figurines recovered from Chalcatzingo, giving us a rare glimpse of a complete person which clearly shows that details of portraiture were confined to the head, while the rest of the body is plain.

Since many of the Chalcatzingo monuments, as well as the C8 figurines, were portraits of various rulers or elite individuals who lived there, some figurines obviously should match the people depicted on the monuments. This, at least, is the ideal situation, but there is a major problem. Portrait monuments at Chalcatzingo (like those at Gulf Coast Olmec sites) were decapitated and the portrait faces were removed from the area of the mutilated monument. This action is probably analogous to the breakage or decapitation of the figurines. But unlike figurine heads, which are frequently recovered

during excavations, monument portrait heads are seldom found, making matches difficult. Nevertheless, two such figurine-monument correspondences have been discovered.

During excavation of a residential structure which apparently housed Chalcatzingo's rulers around 600 B.C., a monument head was recovered from a subfloor burial. The head probably was removed from a stone portrait statue of the individual who was interred in the stone crypt. The statue had to have been decapitated very soon after the person's death for the head to be included with the grave offerings. Unfortunately, the stone portrait's headdress is plain and nondescript, and does not clearly match any of the C8 figurines. However, the headdress of figurine Person A is also plain, and although we cannot be certain of a correlation, the Person A figurine heads and the statue head may represent the same person.

A more certain correspondence occurs between the figurine heads of Person D and one of Chalcatzingo's most unusual monuments, Monument 10. Monument 10 is carved on a boulder at the very peak of Cerro Chalcatzingo, a sheer mountain which dominates the site. This carving depicts the frontal view of a human head and headdress, above which is a left arm and open hand. Its facial features are identical to those of Person C-D-E — the face is pudgy and the eyes are puffy. The headdress is conical in form with a knob-like top, identifying this face with figurine Person D. This monument's unique location, far above the site and the other carvings, suggests that it was much



The features of Person C (three heads, far left), Person D (two heads, upper right) and Person E (two heads, lower right) have identical features but different headdresses. These differences may be associated with new roles the person assumed at various stages in his life.

more than a commemoration of rulership as expressed in the portrait monuments at the base of the mountain.

Recognition of portraiture among the monuments and figurines provides evidence of a theme previously unknown for Formative period Mesoamerica—the cult of the ruler. The “cult of the dynastic ruler” has been described by art historian Esther Pasztory of Columbia University for the subsequent Classic (A.D. 300–900) art of the lowland Maya and the peoples of Oaxaca in southern Mesoamerica. In this later, more complex iconography, ruling dynasties are linked with the supernatural, the source of their right to rule, and such events as rites of accession, marriage, death, and conquest are represented.

The art and iconography related to the cult of the ruler during the Formative period, however, is less developed and is also more difficult to recognize because no writing systems had yet evolved. This cult had its earliest expression in Gulf Coast Olmec culture. There, it is first apparent in Early Formative Olmec monuments such as the well-known colossal heads and elaborate monolithic altars. The colossal heads portrayed rulers, each identified by certain facial features and by the motif carried in his headdress. The altars depicted rulers seated within niches which symbolize cave entrances to

the underworld, thus linking the ruler with that all-important source of supernatural power.

During the Middle Formative, Chalcatzingo had significant commercial ties with the Gulf Coast. Not surprisingly, it was at this time that the cult of the ruler appeared at the site as part of a complex of Gulf Coast traits, now found in the archaeological record. This complex, which includes the bas-relief monuments and portrait figurines, is unique to Chalcatzingo and is virtually lacking at other Formative sites in central Mexico. C8 portrait figurines are found in high percentages only in subordinate sites surrounding Chalcatzingo, which had become a major regional center by the Middle Formative. In fact, the few C8 figurines found at other Middle Formative sites in the Valley of Mexico and in Morelos most probably can be related to social and/or trade interactions between Chalcatzingo and these other regions.

Like the Gulf Coast Olmec centers, Middle Formative Chalcatzingo possessed both stylized monumental bas-reliefs, on the slopes of the mountain above the site, and portrait stelae on its elite residential terraces. These are the highest terraces at the site located immediately adjacent to the mountain. This monumental art, like its Early Formative Gulf Coast counterparts, was restricted to the elite areas of the site, and was probably the focus of ritual activities directed by the elite.

Yet the portrait figurines reveal that by the Middle Formative the cult had become more public. At Chalcatzingo, over 700 C8 portrait figurines were found randomly scattered across all the resi-



Person A (top row) wears a close-fitting headdress, perhaps little more than a skullcap. His face is diamond-shaped, and both his ears and his earspools are depicted. Person B (center row) is one of the most striking Chalcatzingo portrait figurines. His face is long and tapered with a pointed chin, and his mouth is always shown slightly open. The tall, flaring headdress conceals his ears but not his earspools. The facial features of Person H (bottom row) are the most unusual of all. His wide protruding eyes and tiny pupils suggest that he suffered from a thyroid condition.

dential areas of the site—both elite and non-elite—and they were also found at other sites in the vicinity which were dominated by Chalcatzingo. This spread suggests that everyone in the community was allowed to participate in cult rituals instead of serving as mere spectators.

What can be said about this cult? It clearly placed a special importance on the person of the ruler, both in life and in death. Particular attention was paid to his head, the focus of his identity. At his death, his supernatural powers—which still apparently posed a threat to the living—were neutralized by decapitating his statues and effacing the head and naming motifs from bas-relief portraits. The portrait figurines may also have been decapitated and disposed of at this time. Although we cannot be sure from the present data when this figurine breakage occurred, it seems a logical act on the part of the Chalcatzingo commoners in acknowledging, in a very dramatic way, their community's change in leadership. These household figurines were thus used in domestic rituals having political as well as ideological aspects.

The cult of the ruler appears to have been in part an ancestor cult, since in some Gulf Coast monuments genealogical ties to ancestors were communicated in the iconography and by the placement of monuments. The individual depicted in Stela 1 at

La Venta, for instance, carries his ancestor's identification symbol in his headdress, and in fact his ancestor's colossal portrait head had been re-erected beside his stela. The communication of dynastic ties—"I am ruler because my ancestor was 'so-and-so,' a previous ruler"—was obviously a significant aspect of this cult art.

Another important development of this ancestor worship was the apotheosizing of deceased rulers. They were elevated to a divine status and were conceived of as mediators with supernatural powers, especially those powers concerned with the control of rain and fertility. The ancestor-mediator role is exemplified at Chalcatzingo by Monuments 1 and 10. Monument 10 is the elderly puffy-eyed individual—Person D—depicted in bas-relief at the top of the mountain. This person had apparently been an important ruler in life, and after his death had become a revered ancestor. The placement of his portrait on the very peak of the mountain suggests a relationship with rain—in Prehispanic Mesoamerican belief systems, mountaintops commonly were associated with rain. The Aztecs, for example, believed that moisture formed on the tops of mountains through the actions of the rain deities who lived in the mountain caves.

This linking of rain-making with caves was also part of the Formative ideology, as revealed in

Person F, one of the rare whole figurines found at Chalcatzingo, includes two variant headdress forms, although the shape is the same, one plain and one with incised lines. The one complete figurine shows the lack of care and detail, although the position of the arms may have some significance.



Monument 1, "El Rey," Chalcatzingo's most famous carving. This bas-relief depicts a person seated within a cave, the entrance to the underworld and a source of both water and supernatural power. Rain clouds are shown above the cave, and raindrops are falling down upon it; there are also drops of rain on the person's clothing. The monument is located alongside the mountain's main rainwater runoff channel and is grouped with other reliefs depicting rain clouds and growing squash plants, factors which also indicate the personage's relationship with rain and fertility. The presence of a probable naming motif in the headdress and the particular form of a ceremonial bar he holds convince us that he was a revered ancestor rather than merely a generalized "rain god."

Comparison of other Formative figurines with Chalcatzingo's portrait figurines thus reveals that both seem to be concerned with rain, and hence with fertility. However, the shift from the more stylized figurines with heavily emphasized hips and thighs—the abstract female as fertility personified—to portrayals of rulers who are descendants of divinized ancestor-mediators indicates a significant socio-political development at Chalcatzingo. The elite, who were probably members of a ruling lineage, began taking over control of agricultural fertility both in rituals, as demonstrated by the figurines

and monuments dedicated to themselves as well as to fertility, and in the management of the site's simple but effective water control system. It is surely no coincidence that Monument 1 is adjacent to a man-made channel cut into the rock which lies at the head of the mountain's natural drainage system leading down onto the site. Violent rainstorms would have produced a torrent of water rushing down the mountain, apparently from "El Rey" itself, which was channeled into a large artificial ditch at the bottom of the hill to prevent it from flowing onto the residential terraces.

The cult of the ruler most likely played a strong supporting role in the rising socio-political complexity of Chalcatzingo during Middle Formative times. As represented in the monumental art, it demonstrated the ruler's links to the underworld and ties to a source of supernatural power and highly valued rain and confirming his right to rule. Interestingly, Chalcatzingo's development of this Gulf Coast-influenced cult never significantly affected highland central Mexican culture. Later political systems there were based on more abstract conceptions of rulership, and state cults focused on patron deities rather than on the personal power of a divine ruler. Instead, the cult of the ruler received its greatest elaboration over 1,000 years later far to the south, among the Classic Maya. □