

FINAL REPORT

of the Project No. 09I03-03-V04-00234

Preclassic Maya Potbelly Sculptures in Petén, Guatemala, and
Their Connection to Ancestor Cult

Project implementation period:
1 July 2024 – 30 June 2026

Funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU through
the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Slovakia under Project No.
09I03-03-V04-00234

Prepared by
Prof. Mgr. Milan Kováč, PhD.



Introduction

The sculptural art of Mesoamerica is one of the richest and most unique, characterizing the cultures that inhabited this vast territory throughout the centuries, from the beginnings of the first settlements during the Preclassic period. When we speak of monuments from this period, we immediately think of simple, plain, and rudimentary monuments; in other words, “archaic” ones. It is precisely these terms that have been used to define the sculptural style known as “barrigón” or, in English, “potbelly.” From the beginning, it was thought that, due to their particular features, these represented one of the oldest cultural manifestations, even preceding the Olmec between 2500 and 1200 BC (Drucker 1952: 222; Miles 1965; Girard 1969).

The first officially recorded mention was at Santa Ana, El Salvador, in the Sonsonate area, with two colossal carved heads (Habel 1878). This was followed by other publications on sculptures of this type (Bastian 1876, 1882; Villacorta and Villacorta 1927; Richardson 1940). During these early stages, they began to be classified as “pebble sculptures” or *boulder sculptures* (Parsons and Jenson 1965; Graham 1981). According to Parsons, the first accessible publication on the Monte Alto potbelly sculptures was Richardson’s article, in which four of the six sculptures known to the author at that time were illustrated (Parsons and Jenson 1965).

As with any archaeological research, defining, classifying, and delimiting the material under study is fundamental for exploring its meaning and use in greater depth. In fact, based on these early classifications, this sculptural corpus began to be associated with the style characteristic of the Olmec area, particularly the sites of La Venta and Tres Zapotes (Richardson 1940: 397).

Richardson definitively recognized them as a distinct and “non-Maya” group of sculptures: human figures carved in the round, seated with crossed legs (1940: 396). In his general division of stone sculptures, he included colossal heads carved in the round; crude human figures carved in the round, generally seated with crossed legs, a category to which the potbellies belong; and, finally, stone slabs in low relief. In this case, he distinguished the heads from the full-body figures, although other authors include both heads and bodies within the same “potbelly” category.

Regarding these relationships, an intense cultural exchange between the Gulf Coast of Mexico and the Pacific Coast of Guatemala and Mexico has been proposed for a very early period. On the other hand, some type of relationship must have existed in the development of Monte Alto sculpture and that of the Olmec area (Parsons and Jenson 1965: 144).

The archaeological site known as Monte Alto, located in the municipality of La Democracia, Escuintla, Guatemala, has been by far the most emblematic and representative site of the “potbelly” style. It is a Preclassic settlement that housed up to 10 sculptures of this type, found accidentally on the plantation bearing the same name. Rafael Girard (1969) was one of the first scholars to define this group of sculptures as belonging to a “Pre-Olmec” style, as well as those identified at Takalik Abaj (Graham 1981, 1982).

Piña Chan (1972: 13), for his part, refers to these as “short, obese beings,” whose incised eyes give the impression of representing the dead. He proposed that they may have derived from clay figurines and likewise considered that, due to the rudimentary nature of their style, they represented a tradition preceding the Olmec, although they may have originated in this region. This was because Olmec art is much more developed and refined in comparison. Covarrubias (1957: 80) also discussed the Olmec or Pre-Olmec affiliation of these figures. One distinctive feature, for example, is that most are pieces that were not completely carved, with only the front part being worked.

This sculptural style began to be recognized far beyond the Monte Alto site, and its distribution extends throughout the Pacific Coast of Guatemala to Chiapas, Mexico, the Guatemalan Highlands and Petén, as well as El Salvador and Honduras. The corpus is extensive, with some isolated examples outside the aforementioned areas. Most pieces are not found **in situ**; they have been transferred to museums, and several are part of private collections. Many other sculptures that were reported many years ago cannot currently be located, and the continuation of research in different regions has made it possible to identify new examples. In each case, the basic features are shared, although each site appears to have given them its own distinctive character, meaning, and sculptural style.

The southern coast of Guatemala and Chiapas is a unique region due to its fertile soils, water sources, and ideal environmental and climatic conditions for the development

of agriculture. It is within these vast territories, near the coastlines, where important pre-Hispanic settlements were established from the phases known as Ocos and Locona (1500–1150 BC).

This topic has been the subject of research for many years, relating it to the processes of sedentarization in the area and the study of the first agricultural societies. Researchers have examined how these groups formed their economic networks, their regional interaction routes, the process of social hierarchization, their integration as political entities and systems of organization, their settlement patterns, specialized labor, and the exploitation of resources and exchange (Bove 1989: 1; Clark and Blake 1985; Clark et al. 1987).

Evidence of a hierarchical system and social organization from very early periods has been a subject of interest for many years (Bove and Heller 1989; Heller and Stark 1989). It is within this framework of development of one of the most interesting regions of Mesoamerica that several sculptural traditions also developed, including the potbelly tradition.

At the beginning of research, most authors agreed that this represented an expansion of the Olmec-area style into other regions: the Pacific Coast of Chiapas, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Clark and Pye 2000; Clark et al. 2010), along with niche altars, zoomorphic sculptures, and other styles. Love (1986) suggests that Olmec motifs in Guatemala are found exclusively in Middle Preclassic contexts (the early Las Conchas phase).

The debate during the early stages of research on this topic focused on the perception of the Olmec area as the cradle from which everything emerged. Others, however, consider these to be local styles that developed in the Pacific Coast area and have no relationship with Olmec art (Bove 1989).

Bove emphasizes the existence of non-Olmec settlements and artifact assemblages that are not derived from or influenced by the Olmec. This author is one of the principal researchers who dedicated his life to the study of the settlements of the Southern Coast of Guatemala, identifying a large number of Middle to Terminal Preclassic settlements that, according to him, provide evidence of complex hierarchical societies or “proto-

states.” These underwent major changes at the end of the Preclassic period, with most being abandoned during the transition to the Early Classic, with some exceptions.

Recently, Inomata and Henderson (2016: 463) have addressed that, although this type of sculpture may have a close connection with its Middle Preclassic Olmec-area predecessors, there must have been an innovation or a distinct local style in each region until the Late Preclassic period. During this time, the potbelly tradition reached greater popularity, and its associated cult became related to themes of the local landscape connected with the political and religious organization of cities.

There is only one example corresponding to this style at the Tres Zapotes site. This is Monument L, which would represent the most specific evidence of links with the Southern Highlands and the Pacific region (Pool et al. 2018: 413). On the other hand, Monument F from the same site, although it is not a potbelly sculpture, presents similar facial features: closed, swollen eyes and thick lips (Parsons and Jenson 1965).

Parsons' Catalogue

Parsons (1986) produced an important study on sculptures from Guatemala and the Pacific Coast. This book compiles a fairly comprehensive catalogue of sculptures that also includes full-body potbelly sculptures and head examples. In addition, he establishes a chronological division of the different styles.

Division I: Early Olmec, before 900 BC; Division II: Late Olmec, 900–700 BC; Division III: Late Olmec, post-Olmec transition, 700–500 BC. The latter is associated with the disappearance of La Venta and San Lorenzo, and Parsons refers to these as “provincial Olmecoid” styles.

It is within this last subdivision that Parsons places what he calls the “Monte Alto substyle,” “a specialized class of sculpture,” which he subdivides into relatively small potbellies, massive rock sculptures with human effigies, and colossal rock heads. During the same period, he places the production of plain stelae, zoomorphic altars, effigies, pedestals, mushroom stones, anthropomorphic felines, and other animal figures. He indicates that the smaller figures are the earliest and that the larger ones were produced later. He also points out that the style must have originated at Monte Alto and later reached Kaminaljuyu.

How Many “Potbelly” Sculptures Exist?

Since the report of the first examples, the number has increased over the years with new research and discoveries, even in places far from what has been considered the core area of this tradition on the Pacific Coast. Parsons (1986) presents 48 sculptures belonging to the so-called Monte Alto substyle. In the article by Thompson and Valdez (2008: 13–27), a total count of 92 potbelly-style sculptures is provided for Guatemala, Chiapas, El Salvador, and the Maya Lowlands.

For his part, Rodas counted a total of 52 sculptures, although his study is restricted only to those from Guatemala (1993). Finally, Guernsey (2012) prepared a general table listing all locations with 130 examples; however, this number cannot be considered final, since the style appears to have been distributed much more widely than was originally thought. A recent publication by Navarrete (2023) focused on a catalogue of Preclassic monuments from Soconusco, Chiapas, Mexico, under the title “Representations of Obese Individuals.”

Characterization of the Potbelly Sculptural Style

Throughout the history of research on the “potbellies,” these sculptures have been assigned different definitions and characteristic features, since at each site the style presents distinctive elements in terms of form, iconography, and associated elements. In general, they are stone sculptures with a corpulent appearance, a prominent belly, faces with closed eyes, swollen cheeks, seated postures, and hands placed over the abdomen.

It is also important to emphasize that, in some cases, these are potbelly heads, although most are full-body pieces. Many other examples were found decapitated, so that only the belly of the figure is preserved, an issue that will be discussed later. In general, they are asexual sculptures, although there is one example from El Salvador that shows breasts (Amaroli 1997: 51). Comparisons with the colossal heads of the Olmec area are inevitable, and several authors have addressed this relationship over the years, although, obviously, they are not identical.

Below, we present a list of features identified in different studies (Lothrop 1926; Miles 1965; Shook 1971; Parsons 1986; Rodas 1993; Guernsey and Love 2008; Chinchilla 2001; Orrego and Schieber 2001: 791; Lambert 2015):

- Large belly, prominent abdomen.
- Corpulent bodies.
- Protruding navel.
- Arms encircling the belly.
- Arms resting on both sides of the stomach with bent elbows.
- Heavy or robust shoulders.
- Small, crossed legs.
- Legs surrounding the belly in different positions, giving the impression of being seated, or with legs almost absent. The toes cannot be distinguished.
- Features indicated through incised lines.
- Robust and crude facial features.
- Swollen or “chubby” face.
- Wide and flattened nose.
- Fat and drooping cheeks.

- Closed eyes.
- Thick and straight lips, some with downward-curving corners.
- Swollen and drooping eyelids.
- Bald head.
- Sometimes only the head is represented, with a swollen face, closed eyes, and swollen eyelids.
- They are found seated, and some do not have legs.
- They lack sexual organs, with some exceptions.
- Mouth constricted in a circular shape, as if performing a blowing action.
- Carved in low relief, with a smooth back and a straight cut, perhaps intended to be placed against a façade or wall.
- Ears commonly shaped as vertical bars.
- Absent or short and thick neck.
- Heavy shoulders.
- They are nude, although they sometimes wear ornaments such as pectorals, diadems, earspools, necklaces, headdresses, loincloths, among other elements.
- Estimated weight (in the Monte Alto examples): from 300 kg to 16 tons.

Regarding the pectorals, it is thought that they were used for grinding or processing some type of food or paint for ritual use (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: 479), as in the case of Monument 11 from Monte Alto and Monument 2 from La Perseverancia, which may have been placed face up like the dead; for the second piece, traces of use on the concavity have been mentioned.

Two potbelly sculptures that were transferred to Berlin and Paris present a different feature: a type of crest on the head, “sagittal crests,” a characteristic occasionally found in Olmec figures, such as colossal heads and curved dorsal spines (Parsons and Jenson 1965). In addition, they appear to resemble human fetuses, with a prominent and marked navel.

There are also smaller-format figures than those from Monte Alto. According to Parsons (1979), they have infant-like faces, with closed and heavy eyes; both the lower and upper limbs meet below the large bellies and may present more decorative elements, medallions, navels, clothing, and others. There are also some examples with pedestals,

which were likely used to place them in a specific location for their intended function. Weaver (1993: 111) added avian features to the descriptive characteristics included in his definition of these sculptures.

Navarrete, for his part, considers that the sculptures are not homogeneous and that they present a wide variety of regional features, which are often associated with stelae, altars, and other types of monuments (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: 471). He also considers that they may not represent a tradition preceding the Olmec, as some authors have suggested due to their more “rustic” carving, but rather a style with different techniques, with some exceptions showing certain “Olmecoid” traits (2000: 481).

There are many other types of sculptures that may be quite similar, but that correspond to different styles. In this regard, Navarrete (1984, 1996) has been one of the principal researchers who, over the years, has focused on defining the different types of human figure sculptures.

Navarrete (1977) conducted an analysis of “post-Olmec iconography” in Guatemala, in which he opened the discussion on the earliest studies concerning the subject (Girard 1969), where potbelly sculptures were considered a Pre-Olmec tradition without sufficient evidence. He addressed that, although Preclassic sculptures display particular characteristics, they show the persistence and survival of “Olmec traits” that reached the coast and highlands of Guatemala.

Navarrete defines full-body human figures as “obese individuals” in a seated position (1977, 2023). The elements used for their characterization are varied and also include other sculptures that display similar features, such as the four-faced monument and others from Kaminaljuyu.

In an effort to define the characteristics of these pieces, studies were also conducted on the magnetism of the stones. It has been proposed that the Monte Alto sculptures are magnetized in their faces and stomachs. This publication mentions that Nicholas Carter was one of the archaeologists who analyzed the sculptures and that, according to his analysis, they could represent ancestors, whose associated rituals must have been related to the consolidation of elite power at the site (Jason 2019: 36).

In this study, an analysis of the sculptures was conducted using magnetometers, which are generally used for rock outcrops. The results showed that the rocks had been

struck by lightning before being carved, which caused their magnetism. Therefore, it is assumed that ancient sculptors detected the magnetic points using natural magnets or lodestones.

They also refer to a magnetized stone bar from the San Lorenzo site, dated between 1400 and 1000 BC, which may have served as a magnet. Carter again proposes that this magnetic capacity may have been carefully observed by the inhabitants of the site and that they incorporated this feature into rituals, in which the population may have believed that an ancestral spirit inhabited the interior of the stone.

Regarding the analysis of the stone used by the sculptors, Parsons and Jenson (1965: 132) determined that the sculptures were carved from medium-grained, dark gray boulders of porphyritic basalt available in the region.

The Chronological and Contextual Problem of the Sculptures

The dating of “potbelly” style sculptures has been a subject of constant discussion and debate. In its early stages, dating was based on their Olmec affiliation. The recurring question was whether they were created before or after the development of this culture, which would represent a difference of more than 2,000 years. Although there were

different opinions, there was some consensus that these figures were indeed produced during the Preclassic period.

Miles (1965) made one of the first proposals for their dating, placing this style within "Division 1" of the Early Preclassic and identifying similarities with Olmec figures. Subsequently, Piña Chan (1972: 12) proposed that they began around 1200 BC.

Graham et al. (1978: 96–97), for their part, proposed the use of Miles' chronological framework for the case of Takalik Abaj and its boulder sculptures, which in this case could be Proto-Olmec, following the line of research that had been maintained since the beginning of investigations.

For his part, Lee A. Parsons (1979: 262; 1986) defined this potbellied sculptural style within his Division III, Post-Olmec, known as the Monte Alto Style (500–200 BC), that is, within the Middle and Late Preclassic periods, and even the Terminal Preclassic. This is a period that the author defines as the transition from the Olmec to the Izapan tradition, in which many specialized and regional stylistic elements were combined and in which the persistence of Olmec concepts could also be observed.

Both Shook and Hatch assign all of these sculptures to the flourishing period of the Terminal Preclassic (1971: 75). Even Popenoe de Hatch published a study on the stylistic seriation of the Monte Alto sculptures (1989: 25), proposing a Late–Terminal Preclassic date, following the proposals of other researchers (Parsons 1981, 1986; Demarest et al. 1982; Lowe et al. 1982).

Susan Milbrath places the potbelly sculptures from Tiltepec and Tzutzuculi as part of Group III, dating from 700 to 400 BC, relating the style to the monuments of La Venta (1979: 27). This corresponds to the Chiapas III Phase (700–550 BC) or Olmec Group III. Like other authors, she considers that the coastal groups must have had direct contact with the Olmecs and that, after the decline of power in this area at the end of the Middle Preclassic, movements of migrating groups occurred, bringing and carrying ideas. Therefore, artists also began to adopt elements from other styles and apply them to older Olmec concepts (1979: 30).

The problem lies in the fact that, in most cases, these are out-of-context pieces, and this circumstance has made it difficult to define their use and chronology. Although they are considered one of the earliest representations of art in Mesoamerica (Rodas 1993),

today, and with a certain degree of consensus, it is thought that the tradition may have begun during the Middle Preclassic and continued into the Late Preclassic, a period when public architecture experienced significant growth in ceremonial platforms and plazas.

After Rodas' thesis (1993), the most comprehensive study on this type of sculpture was conducted by Julia Guernsey (2012). For the author, the style may have begun during the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic, meaning that it had a long duration. Previously, other researchers had also proposed that the style dates to the Late Preclassic (Shook 1971: 70; Parsons 1986: 40; Demarest et al. 1982), as did jaguar heads and other sculptural types that developed in parallel.

The research of Parsons and Jenson (1965) included the collection of ceramics at the Monte Alto site, materials associated with the potbelly sculptures from this site. According to the analysis, the entire sample is related to Preclassic styles, mostly from the Late Preclassic, specifically the Kaminaljuyu style. Some Middle Preclassic samples were also recovered, including a complete bowl. Based on the results of an additional excavation season at this site, Parsons concluded that the sculptures were carved during the Early Late Preclassic period (1976: 329).

Monument 11 from Monte Alto, which has a rectangle on its chest, was excavated on a platform north of the site's mound group. The associated ceramics were identified as Terminal Preclassic, and some fragments correspond to the Providencia style (Parsons 1986). Two charcoal samples were recovered from these excavations, dating the platform between 500 and 70 BC (Stipp et al. 1976), which also corresponds to the dates obtained at Santa Leticia (Demarest et al. 1982). At Chalchuapa, El Salvador, Sharer reported a potbelly sculpture associated with a mound dated to around 600 BC; this would also approximately correspond to the dates from Santa Leticia.

Edwin Shook (1971) classifies the potbellies as "Monte Alto Style, belly sculpture" and places them in the Late Preclassic, Arenal Phase (300 BC–AD 0). He defines that this style extended from the Monte Alto site along the coast to Chiapas and toward El Salvador, as well as to the Guatemalan Highlands, at sites such as Kaminaljuyu, which contains many more examples. He also emphasizes the difference that the Monte Alto examples are truly crude carvings made on natural boulders, unlike those from other sites, where the carving is more detailed and includes additional elements of clothing and ornaments.

In conclusion, the most recent studies consider that the site reached its peak during the Middle to Late Preclassic, although some researchers also propose that the boulders may have been carved much earlier, around 1000 BC (Bernal 1968; Soustelle 1979). In any case, and according to stylistic comparisons, they prefer to place this style as post-Olmec, emphasizing that the concept of the Monte Alto sculptures may have originated on the Gulf Coast, although the presence of the Olmec on the coast should be demonstrated through some “pure” samples of this culture.

We consider that one of the most significant studies on the subject was conducted at the Santa Leticia site, since the sculptures were found *in situ*, and radiocarbon samples were also obtained. Although the data do not allow for a secure date for the production of the sculptures, they at least date the moment when they may have been placed in front of the platform, that is, around the first half of the Late Preclassic (400 BC) (Demarest et al. 1982).

For this reason, and up to the present, it is considered a post-Olmec phenomenon. This interpretation has also been based on historical-artistic and stylistic studies of the figures, as well as of other sculptural types, such as jaguar heads, which have been found associated in several cases (Demarest 1981, 1982; Demarest and Sharer 1981).

Recently, greater emphasis has been placed on the persistence of the potbelly tradition, as well as other types of sculptures, into the Terminal Preclassic period, when Maya-style iconography was increasing (Inomata and Henderson 2016: 467).

Recent investigations into the dating of the Preclassic period have led to further studies regarding its application, for example, in sculptural art (Inomata and Henderson 2016: 459). According to the new proposal, the so-called Middle Preclassic, Providencia phase, is much later than originally proposed. This would imply shifting the date from 700 BC to 400 BC. If this chronological revision is accepted, sculptures assigned to the Verbena-Arenal phase (400 BC–AD 100) would be dated later, within an approximate range of 100 BC–AD 150.

However, this proposal is difficult to verify, since many of the sculptures lack a clear archaeological context and, in numerous cases, the analyzed charcoal samples come from secondary deposits or reused materials. Likewise, Inomata’s chronological proposal

is relatively recent, and therefore, in practice, the chronology established by Shook and Popenoe continues to be applied.

Among the sites where sculptures have appeared in context are Takalik Abaj, Monte Alto, Kaminaljuyu, and Santa Leticia. In the case of Takalik Abaj, they have been found in Late Preclassic contexts (Orrego and Schieber 2001: 791), although we do not know whether they remained there throughout that period or whether they were relocated at some point for an important reason.

Over the years and with the advancement of archaeological research, new examples have been discovered, and according to their association with ceramic samples, they correspond to the most recent proposed dates. For example, at the La Nueva site, on the coast of Jutiapa, potbelly sculptures were identified associated with materials from the well-known Miraflores sphere of the Guatemalan Highlands Preclassic period (Estrada 2000: 142).

Graham and Benson (1990: 78) have proposed that the style must have remained in use until the Classic period and even into the Postclassic.

Function and Interpretation of the Sculptures

Although the potbelly style has been extensively researched, there is still no consensus or certainty regarding the function these sculptures fulfilled within early societies. While most researchers agree on their importance within ritual practices, the articulation of the political system, and social cohesion, only a limited number of

examples have been found in context. Those that have been documented appeared in central areas, in front of platforms, and associated with one another and with other sculptures displaying prominent elements of great significance. This fact highlights the relevance these pieces may have had, as well as their reuse during later periods.

Decapitation is another interesting phenomenon, since it may represent the desacralization of the sculpture for another use or the transfer of its power. Grove (2008: 139, cited by Rice 2015) discusses ritual decapitation, for example, in the act of breaking figurines. He mentions that colossal heads and other sculptures were often mutilated in “acts of ritual violence to eliminate essential forces.”

One of the first studies to analyze the entire corpus of sculptures was Rodas’ thesis (1992), which presented an extensive catalogue containing data on most of the known examples at that time. In his definition, he refers to the simple, plain, and crude style of carving on large boulders, with minimal modifications. In his conclusions, he emphasizes the connection between the sculptures and religious practices due to their location in ceremonial centers with long traditions, as well as their reuse during later periods.

For her part, Guernsey (2012) identifies them as ancestors, whose iconography developed from an early system of domestic ritual traditions that may have continued into the Classic period through small ceramic figurines and other monuments. Ancestors played several roles in the process of social formation and the legitimization of power roles within society (McAnany 1995, cited by Guernsey 2012).

In this way, Guernsey (2010, 2012) has approached the phenomenon of potbelly sculptures through the study of the structure and sociopolitical organization of Late Preclassic elites (500 BC–AD 250). This work addresses the complexity of the subject in detail from the perspective of the sculptural development of each region.

Barrientos et al. (2024) emphasize the relative homogeneity of the physical features of the sculptures and argue that their purpose was not to portray specific individuals, but rather to represent individuals without a specific gender or social position, referring to them as representations of the deceased and ancestors that expressed a general or collective idea.

A pattern identified as common among potbelly sculptures found *in situ* is their relationship with jaguar head sculptures, as, for example, at Kaminaljuyu, in La Palangana

(Monument 5); at Monte Alto (Monument 3); and also at Santa Leticia (Demarest 1986: 10; Demarest et al. 1982).

Some researchers consider them to be representations of pregnant women in the act of giving birth (Amaroli 1997); others relate them to representations of fat gods, which also display closed eyes, heavy eyelids, and prominent navels (Hasso von Winning 1987: 141).

At the same time, the fat god has been associated with the hearth supported by three stones, since groups of three potbelly figures aligned in the same location have been documented. This has been reported at the sites of Santa Leticia, Finca Sololá, and Takalik Abaj (Parsons 1986; Rodas 1993; Taube 1998: 436). Parsons (1986) also refers to the “fat gods”; however, he notes that these styles did not begin until the Classic period.

Although Popenoe (1989) refers to a head from Kaminaljuyu (Monument 38), which was reused in an Early Classic context and, therefore, may have been related to this interpretation. On the other hand, she also suggests that these types of representations of fat faces were ideas that were carried from the Pacific Coast and Kaminaljuyu to Teotihuacan.

Potbelly sculptures have also been associated with a supernatural being, *way*, or supernatural co-essence, identified in hieroglyphic texts as *sitz winik* and *sitz kimi*, “gluttonous man” or “gluttonous death” (Houston and Stuart 1989; Grube and Nahm 1994; Miller and Taube 1993: 86).

Henderson (2015), for his part, proposes that they are ancestors who personify sacred mountains and volcanoes, due to the corpulence of the sculptures, which appear as “fat and hungry” mountains demanding tribute. According to the Tzotzils of Chiapas, the lord of the earth has the appearance of a fat lord who awaits offerings (Vogt 1993: 93).

Others suggest that they are representations of the dead and that the colossal heads correspond to sacrificed individuals and trophy heads (a post-Olmec cult, according to Parsons 1986). They also propose that they may have represented rulers or special individuals who had died (Parsons and Jenson 1965: 132; Parsons 1986: 45). A similar interpretation is proposed by Lambert (2015: 105), who suggests a relationship

between potbelly sculptures and mortuary bundles, which constituted a form of ancestor worship throughout Mesoamerica (Barba de Piña Chan 2002, 2004).

In summary, Lambert (2015: 108–109) addresses the importance of the treatment of corpses within the mortuary customs of the Maya elite, as a form of transformation of the deceased into powerful ancestors who were later consulted during important ceremonies from the Early Classic onward. He proposes that during the Late Preclassic, the potbellied sculptures fulfilled this function as mortuary bundles in the form of effigies.

He associates the Copán sculpture with the Principal Bird Deity due to the feathers observed on the figure. In addition, he emphasizes the reuse of Preclassic potbelly sculptures during the Classic period as a form of consecration of new monuments, an issue also proposed by Fash and Fash (2006: 105) in relation to Copán's foundation rituals.

Finally, Lambert proposes that, as a type of “mortuary bundle,” potbelly sculptures were placed in public locations, on or in front of mounds, for public rituals, as a way of linking rulers with their deceased ancestors, with the aim of legitimizing their political authority before the community.

Regarding mortuary bundles, Thompson and Valdez (2008) propose the idea of swollen beings, that is, deceased individuals, and suggest that they may have been funerary markers. In general, they emphasize the idea that the sculptures present characteristics of dead individuals: swelling, distended belly and navel, closed eyes, and swollen faces; furthermore, that their bodies may represent the form of bundled bodies in flexed burials. They also support this theory due to the association of some examples with burials, although there is no certainty because of the limited number of cases.

In any case, as with other interpretations, they highlight the meaning and use of the sculptures as representations and as forms of legitimizing power, due to their bodily posture and the elements occasionally observed, such as necklaces, crowns, and others, as well as the location of several examples in political-ceremonial centers, sacred places, and monumental settings. Therefore, they conclude that there is a possibility that the potbellied sculptures are representations of rulers who reflected power, but also a connection with ancestors (Thompson and Valdez 2008: 25).

For Amaro (1997), the potbelly sculpture found on Teopán Island, which he identifies as female, suggests that these sculptures are representations of women due to their large bellies and prominent navels. For the author, they represent women in the act of childbirth and, therefore, may correspond to a concept associated with fertility and an earth deity whose cult existed during the Late Preclassic.

Regarding this topic, Girard (1975) had already proposed that they represented pregnant women associated with human and agricultural fertility, as a form of “mother goddess” and as a predecessor of the moon goddess among the Maya.

Pacific Coast of Guatemala

The most emblematic site regarding potbelly sculptures is Monte Alto. Its first report was made in 1938 (Richardson 1940), and since then it has constituted the basis for the analysis of this type of sculpture at other sites, serving as the fundamental model of what a “potbelly” should be. According to ceramic analysis, the site was occupied from the Middle Preclassic (800 BC) until the beginning of the Early Classic (AD 300) (Popenoe 1989), and therefore it is assumed that the figures should correspond to this chronology.

The site was first mapped by Robert Burkitt in 1931, who also photographed the monuments. Later, in 1969 and 1970, an excavation project funded by the National Geographic Society was carried out, directed by Parsons and Shook (Shook 1971; Parsons 1976; Shook 1981: 257–288). According to Shook, the sculptures were probably not found in their original locations and had been relocated. They were found in Middle and Late Preclassic fills, without direct association with any construction. The only one found on a low platform, with some Late Preclassic sherds, was Monument 11.

In 1965, Parsons and Jenson published an article dedicated to the sculptures of the Pacific Coast of Guatemala and their research at sites in this region. They determined that Monte Alto extends 1,150 m from north to south and 850 m from east to west, and that it contains 10 or 11 buildings irregularly arranged in two parallel rows, enclosing a long plaza oriented northeast–southwest, a layout they compared with that of the Kaminaljuyu site.

At this settlement, Monuments 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 were found, placed in a north–south row along the eastern margin of the site, also including a jaguar head known as Monument 3. Monuments 1 and 2 were located 200 m apart, and Monuments 2 through 6 were arranged in a line extending for 98 m.

Four other potbellies were aligned in an irregular east–west row on the western side of the site, near the central plaza: Monuments 7, 8, 9, and 10. Monument 11 was found on an isolated platform north of the central plaza.

An experimental stylistic seriation study of these monuments was conducted by Popenoe (1989), who made comparisons with Kaminaljuyu, where she mentions that they are related to Late Preclassic contexts, as well as at Santa Leticia. For the author, they are also related to the distribution of Usulután ceramics in the same region during this period.

According to her method, the sculptures present a progressive scheme from naturalistic to stylized forms: “from heads to bulging bellies and back to heads.” Monuments 1 and 2 are heads with closed eyes, with a naturalistic style “that may have been inspired by the famous Olmec colossal heads or may have been copies of them.” However, Popenoe emphasizes that “they are not of Olmec style,” but rather similar due to the realistic manner of their carving. She places both monuments at some point in the Middle Preclassic or the beginning of the Late Preclassic.

She continues with Monument 5 as the first of a series of sculptures with prominent bellies, also related to Monument 4. Monument 6 is placed after Monument 4 and before Monument 11; it is characterized by a collar hanging on its chest. Monument 11, more stylized than the previous ones due to the presence of a rectangle on the chest, is related to Monument 6 and is also similar to Monument 9, which is later because of its more clearly defined features; the author positions it as the final figure of the series. Then, a new series begins: the first is Monument 7, which is again a head, followed by Heads 8 and 10; the latter concludes this second series.

Therefore, if Monuments 1 and 2 are dated to the Late Middle Preclassic, this would mean that the remaining examples would correspond to the Late Preclassic, coinciding with the period of increased population, activity, and the flourishing of the site. Finally, “The ceramics of Monte Alto demonstrate that throughout its history, the center maintained strong connections with the Guatemalan Highlands, particularly with Kaminaljuyu” (Popenoe 1989: 41). In comparison, the head found on Platform B-4 of Kaminaljuyu (apparently reused during the Early Classic, Monument 38) is also related, as it presents a style similar to Monte Alto Heads 10 and 8.

For Parsons (1986), the site developed from the “post-Olmec” phase, since its layout follows a typical pattern of the Terminal Middle Preclassic, with parallel plazas oriented north to south. For this author, both Izapa and Kaminaljuyu had greater development, reflected in the production of a more elaborate sculptural style in low relief.

Regarding Monument 3, Parsons and Jenson (1965) classify it as an “Olmecoid” style and suggest that it represents the Olmec man-jaguar motif of the Middle Preclassic, which resembles Late Preclassic stucco masks, for example, those of E-VII-Sub at Uaxactun. The authors also discuss the stylistic similarities of Sculpture 3 with others from Tres Zapotes, Izapa, and Kaminaljuyu.

Another important site where several “potbelly” examples have been identified is Takalik Abaj (Graham and Benson 1999), a very early occupied settlement, dating approximately from 1000–800 BC. Since the beginning of research, strong Olmec influence has been discussed, evidenced in the sculptures, altars, and iconography characteristic of the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Therefore, the potbelly sculptures found there correspond precisely to this period, which led to discussions about whether the style originated from or was related to the Olmecs.

The research of Graham et al. (1978: 85) argues that the potbelly sculptures from Takalik Abaj are evidence of a connection with the Olmec style and that they cannot postdate the Middle Preclassic. On the façade of the access to Terrace 3 at Takalik Abaj are Monuments 100, 107, 108, and 109, which are potbelly sculptures, with the exception of Monument 108, which corresponds to an altar. Excavations conducted by García in Terrace 3, Suboperation 3 (1997: 171), indicate materials dated to the Ixchiya complex of the Late Preclassic.

Other examples from the Pacific Coast of Guatemala have been reported at different sites, each with its own characteristics. Bove (1989), in 1983, identified a site that he named Giralda, after the name of the farm from which a potbelly sculpture originated, although Richardson (1940) had previously reported it as coming from Obero, Escuintla. According to the author, it was located in front of the house of Hacienda Las Victorias. However, this and other monuments had previously been reported by Dorion and transferred to the same farm (Bove 1989: 85).

Bove (1989) also mentions the potbelly sculpture found at the San Antonio site (No. 541501) and other examples from the Bonanza site (No. 629701). His research and surveys throughout all the sites of the Pacific Coast have been important for the identification of settlements and monuments; his reports are significant and constitute a foundation for the study of the region.

SOUTHERN COAST OF GUATEMALA

REFERENCE CODE	No. Monument and site	Current location	Notes	Photograph
CZ-1	Monument 58 of Bilbao	Museum of Cotzumalguapa Culture	Reused in front of staircase F-14 of the monumental plaza during the Late Classic period (Parsons 1969: 61). Dimensions: height 122 cm; width 64 cm; thickness 68 cm.	
CH-1	Monument 30 of Chocólá	In the courtyard of the estate's main house.	Associated with the south façade of Mound 6. Associated with an altar with concavities, possibly related to water rituals (Paredes 2006: 96–105). Dimensions: height 89 cm; width 30 cm; thickness 36 cm.	
MN-7	Monument 1 of La Nueva, Pasaco, Jutiapa	Museo Nacional de Arqueología (MUNAE 2020), unrecorded.	Reported by Termer in 1948. Dimensions: height 98 cm; width 50 cm; thickness 38 cm.	

MN-3	Monument 2 of La Nueva, Pasaco, Jutiapa	Museo Nacional de Arqueología (MUNAE 2019), unrecorded.	Discovered in 1938. Dimensions: height 53 cm; width 38 cm; thickness 28 cm. It is assigned to the Miraflores sphere (Estrada 2000: 142).	 A photograph of a dark, rounded stone monument with a small, carved face on its upper portion. It is placed on a light-colored surface next to a ruler for scale.
MN-4	Monument 3 of La Nueva, Pasaco, Jutiapa	Museo Nacional de Arqueología (MUNAE 2021), unrecorded.	Discovered in 1938 during the construction of a public road in Pasaco, Jutiapa, and sent to the Museum in 1940 together with Monument 2. Dimensions: height 52 cm; width 60 cm; thickness 30 cm.	 A photograph of a large, rounded stone monument with a small, carved face on its upper portion. It is placed on a light-colored surface next to a ruler for scale.
MR-1	Monument 3 of San Sebastián	Museo de Arqueología y Etnología Horacio Alejos L. In Retalhuleu.	San Sebastián is a site located 20 km southeast of Takalik Abaj. Dimensions: height 82 cm; width 42 cm; thickness 25 cm.	 A photograph of a large, rounded stone monument with a small, carved face on its upper portion. It is placed in a wooden frame filled with gravel, with a ruler for scale in front.

MR-2

Monument 4 of San
Sebastián

Museo de Arqueología y
Etnología Horacio Alejos
L. In Retalhuleu

Dimensions: Height: 62
cm; Width: 21 cm;
Thickness: 27 cm.



MR-3

Monument 6 of San
Sebastián

Museo de Arqueología y
Etnología Horacio Alejos
L. In Retalhuleu

Dimensions: Height: 76
cm; Width: 35 cm;
Thickness: 18 cm.



MR-4

Monument 5 of San
Sebastián

Museo de Arqueología y
Etnología Horacio Alejos
L. In Retalhuleu

Dimensions: Height: 68
cm; Width: 56 cm;
Thickness: 62 cm.



TA-1	Monument 109 of Tak'alik Ab'aj	Archaeological Site Tak'alik Ab'aj	Excavations at the access to Terrace 3. Dimensions: height: 75 cm; width: 52 cm; thickness: 38 cm. Three potbelly sculptures aligned in front of the stairway leading to Terrace 3 were dated to the Late Preclassic period (García 1997).	
TA-2	Monument 100 of Tak'alik Ab'aj	Archaeological Site Tak'alik Ab'aj	In front of the façade and access stairway to Terrace 3. Dimensions: height: 78 cm; width: 38 cm; thickness: 51 cm.	
TA-3	Monument 107 of Tak'alik Ab'aj	Archaeological Site Tak'alik Ab'aj	In front of the façade and access stairway to Terrace 3. Dimensions: height: 67 cm; width: 54 cm; thickness: 42 cm.	

TA-4

Monument 113 of Tak'alik
Ab'aj

Archaeological Site
Tak'alik Ab'aj

In front of the façade and
access stairway to Terrace
3, further to the west.
Dimensions: height: 63 cm;
width: 36 cm; thickness:
53 cm.



TA-5

Monument 99 of Tak'alik
Ab'aj

Archaeological Site
Tak'alik Ab'aj

Head, facing east.
Dimensions: height: 95 cm;
width: 120 cm; thickness:
90 cm.



TA-6

Monument 94 of Tak'alik
Ab'aj

Archaeological Site
Tak'alik Ab'aj

Northwest corner of
Structure 13. Dimensions:
height: 113 cm; width: 74
cm; thickness: 108 cm.



TA-7	Monument 69 of Tak'alik Ab'aj	Archaeological Site Tak'alik Ab'aj	In front of the southern side of Structure 12. Dimensions: height: 118 cm; width: 85 cm; thickness: 89 cm.	
TA-8	Monument 40 of Tak'alik Ab'aj	Archaeological Site Tak'alik Ab'aj, at the sculpture ranch	It was located in the main house of the San Isidro Piedra Parada estate. Dimensions: height: 153 cm; width: 72 cm; thickness: 73 cm.	
TA-9	Monument 3 of Tak'alik Ab'aj	Entrance to the Santa Margarita farm, located along the highway.	Described by Thompson in 1943. Dimensions: height: 128 cm; width: 75 cm; thickness: 48 cm.	

TA-10

Monument 58 of Tak'alik
Ab'aj

Archaeological Site
Tak'alik Ab'aj

It was found on Terrace 3,
Structure 7, adjacent to
Stela 50, excavated by Love
in 1980.
Aproximado: Alto 100 cm,
Ancho 70 cm, Grosor 80
cm



TA-11

Monument 2 of Tak'alik
Ab'aj

Private property, San
Isidro Piedra Parada
farm.

It is known as "La Meca."
Dimensions: height 138
cm; width 72 cm;
thickness 73 cm.



TA-12

Monument 46 of Tak'alik
Ab'aj

Housed in the
archaeological site's
storage facility.

Monument 46, reported by
Graham (1981a: fig. 10)
and Guernsey (2012).
Decapitated. Dimensions:
58 cm high, 42 cm wide,
and 40 cm thick.



TA-13	Monument 41 de Tak'alik Ab'aj	Housed in the archaeological site's storage facility.	This is a small potbelly sculpture discovered northeast of Monument 40. Decapitated.	
TA-14	Monument 111 de Tak'alik Ab'aj	Housed in the archaeological site's storage facility.	Decapitated.	
DM-1	Monument 8 of Monte Alto	Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla	Head. Dimensions: height 85 cm; width 102 cm; thickness 90 cm.	

DM-2

Monument 1 of Monte Alto

Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla

Head. Dimensions: height 128 cm; width 196 cm; thickness 188 cm.



DM-3

Monument 1 of Los Cerritos Sur, Escuintla

In the front garden of the Rubén Chévez van Dorne Museum, La Democracia, Escuintla.

Monte Alto-style head featuring a tenon that may have been used to mount the sculpture in an upright position in a plaza or architectural structure. According to informants, it was found near Calle K (Bove, 1989: 84). Dimensions: height 62 cm; width 40 cm; thickness 27 cm.



DM-4

Monument 2 of Monte Alto

Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla

Head. Dimensions: height 116 cm; width 130 cm; thickness 146 cm.



DM-5	Monument 1 from La Nueva Plantation, La Gomera, Escuintla.	In the inner courtyard of the Rubén Chévez van Dorne Museum, La Democracia, Escuintla.	Dimensions: height 65 cm; width 30 cm; thickness 35 cm.	
DM-6	Sculpture with no catalog number or known provenance.	In a display case at the Rubén Chévez van Dorne Museum, La Democracia, Escuintla.	Miniature figure not previously recorded in our inventory. Dimensions: height 27 cm; width 11 cm; thickness 9 cm.	
DM-7	San Juan Bosco Plantation, no monument number assigned.	In the storage facility of the Rubén Chévez van Dorne Museum, La Democracia, Escuintla.	Head, not previously recorded in our inventory. Dimensions: height 52 cm; width 47 cm; thickness 45 cm.	

DM-8

Monument 5 of Monte Alto

Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla

Dimensions: height 150 cm; width 168 cm; thickness 222 cm.



DM-9

Monument 9 of Monte Alto

Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla

Dimensions: height 153 cm; width 117 cm; thickness 118 cm.



DM-10

Monument 6 of Monte Alto

Central Park, La Democracia, Escuintla.

According to Parsons (1986), this monument is the earliest known example of the local type. It is also described as the only one featuring elongated open eyes and a medallion.

According to Parsons and Jenson (1965: 132), unlike the other monuments, this sculpture has a broad, smooth neck, as well as bands across the upper portion and a medallion on the chest that may represent a serpent jaw motif, possibly an early symbol of rain.
Dimensions: height 114 cm; width 108 cm; thickness 132 cm.



DM-11	Monument 4 of Monte Alto	Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla	Dimensions: height 147 cm; width 170 cm; thickness 175 cm.	
DM-12	Monument 7 of Monte Alto	Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla	Head. Dimensions: height 123 cm; width 95 cm; thickness 182 cm.	

DM-13	Monument 11 of Monte Alto	Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla	Only this monument was excavated from some type of original platform along the north-south central axis of the mound group. The small quantity of sherds dated to the Terminal Preclassic period, with some from the Providencia phase. The two charcoal samples indicate a date of 500–70 BC (Parsons 1986: 40). Dimensions: height 153 cm; width 135 cm; thickness 175 cm.	
DM-14	Monument 10 of Monte Alto	Central Park of La Democracia, Escuintla	Head. Dimensions: height 136 cm; width 103 cm; thickness 135 cm.	
QB-1	Monument 3 from Concepción	Concepción, Escuintla. Potbelly Sculpture at the Quai Branly Museum, Paris	Chinchilla and Fauvet (2018). Dimensions: height 90 cm; width 112 cm	

Guatemalan Highlands

One of the principal sites with the presence of potbelly sculptures in the Central Highlands is Kaminaljuyu, whose occupation began around 1200 BC in a fertile valley with abundant water resources, where Guatemala City is now located. From this settlement alone, there are a total of 15 sculptures, although the number may vary because the provenance of some pieces is uncertain; however, they can be associated with the site due to their characteristic style.

Well known is the photograph by Maudslay (1889–1902: 39), in which two “potbellied” sculptures can be seen decorating the entrance to Finca Árevalo. Subsequently, Samuel Lothrop (1926) conducted research at the site and prepared a classification of 18 sculptures, which he designated with the letters A through R; of these, four are potbelly sculptures. Two of the sculptures are the same ones photographed by Maudslay, while others were found in situ in the lower plaza of La Palangana.

There were three sculptures at La Palangana. Monuments 3 and 4, or F and G (in Lothrop’s nomenclature), correspond to potbelly sculptures. Monument 5, or H, is a sculpture with a feline head (Lothrop 1926: 149). The three figures were aligned from east to west, facing south, and are believed to have been placed there during the Classic period, as in the cases of Takalik Abaj and Santa Leticia, where three potbelly sculptures were also aligned. The La Palangana area may have been a public ceremonial space where several monuments had been placed since the Middle Preclassic for commemorative rituals (Ajú 2017). According to Guernsey (2012: 151), the La Palangana potbelly sculptures may have been associated with ancestors and formed part of group identity.

Guernsey and Love (2008: 1167) note that some sculptures accompanying the potbelly figures represent animals, a type of human-animal hybrid. Other potbellied animal sculptures have been found in the Highlands region. Eugenia Robinson (2005: 517–524) discusses two sculptures with pedestals from Finca Pacaño, Patzicía, Chimaltenango. These figures have pedestals and their heads are bent backward, looking toward the sky; their stomachs are large, and they are associated with Middle and Late Preclassic materials. The author proposes that they may represent fetuses or stillborn children or alternatively dwarfs or aluxes.

Another potbelly sculpture is Kaminaljuyu Monument 41, which is decapitated and associated with Mound C-III-I. Nearby is Sculpture 42, known as “La Muñecona,” an anthropomorphic being with a serpent around its neck. This sculpture bears certain similarities to the potbelly sculptures and may have been reused (Ajú 2017).

There is also a square block with four faces, designated Sculpture M, which Lothrop (1926) classified within the category he called “sculpture in the round” (“potbellies”) because of its facial features. The features of all four faces are very similar to those of a potbelly sculpture. Likewise, Monument L has the entire body of a potbelly sculpture, although its face is formed by three circles, possibly representing the eyes and mouth. Interestingly, the front of the sculpture displays a large circle, resembling a type of pectoral. Although these two sculptures are not complete potbelly sculptures, they are of interest for comparison because of several shared features.

Examples of this style also exist in the Lake Atitlán basin, although they incorporate distinctive local elements, such as long hair arranged in braids and the use of clothing, including loincloths or skirts. In general, they are considered to represent a more realistic style, especially in their facial features (Barrientos et al. 2004: 398).

About chronology, these examples come from sites with Late Preclassic occupations. Therefore, the authors of the study consider that the style reached the region after it had developed on the Pacific Coast, through commercial interaction and political relations among the regions. It is possible that “the emerging political entities of the Lake Atitlán basin, which did not attain the levels of complexity of early states such as Kaminaljuyu or Tak’alik Ab’aj, used the potbelly style as an innovative tool for legitimizing new elites” (Barrientos et al. 2004: 398).

Another interesting point is that the potbelly sculptures from the Lake Atitlán basin were mutilated, and the evidence suggests that they were placed in termination deposits during a period of demographic and political change.

Many other examples belong to private collections both within and outside the country. One example is in a private collection in Austria. According to Krejci (1996), the piece was acquired by its owner during the 1970s. It measures 22 cm in height and “represents a fat, seated man with his hands crossed over his chest.” The author notes that the base is not flat enough to allow the sculpture to stand upright, a characteristic

also observed in pieces from other sites. She further suggests that it represents a style earlier than the Late Preclassic of Kaminaljuyu and even earlier than that of Monte Alto, based on its crude carving and its larger, open, and more prominent eyes. She therefore assigns it to the Middle Preclassic, following Parsons' chronology (approximately 700–500 BC).

More recently, Chinchilla and Luin (2021: 65) published another potbelly sculpture that had been part of a private collection and was donated to the Popol Vuh Museum of Universidad Francisco Marroquín in 2020. The piece displays all the characteristics of a potbelly sculpture, with one particularly notable feature being a type of collar. The authors propose that, based on its stylistic characteristics, the piece may be closely related to those from Kaminaljuyu, since several sculptures from that site display the same type of collar around the neck. It also has a concavity on its base, which, they suggest, is evidence that it was reused at a later time.

GUATEMALAN HIGHLANDS

REFERENCE CODE	No. Monument and site	Current location	Notes	Photograph
PV-1	Possibly from Kaminaljuyu.	Popol Vuh Museum, Guatemala City.	Dated to the Late Preclassic period, possibly from Kaminaljuyu. Dimensions: height 71.5 cm; width 40 cm.	
PV-2	Monument 66 from Kaminaljuyu.	Popol Vuh Museum, Guatemala City.	Located at the entrance of the museum.	

PV-3	Sculpture 58 from Kaminaljuyu.	Popol Vuh Museum, Guatemala City.	This sculpture is paired with piece 57, which is located at the Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	
ZO-1	Monument 7 from Kaminaljuyu.	La Aurora Zoo, Guatemala City.	Registration No. 1.3.6.13. Provenance: Arévalo Plantation. According to Parsons (1986), it was found southwest of Mound C-IV-10, together with Monument 6. Dimensions: height 76 cm; width 62 cm; thickness 63 cm.	
ZO-2	Monument 39 from Kaminaljuyu.	La Aurora Zoo, Guatemala City.	Registration No. 1.3.6.18. Provenance: Central Highlands. Dimensions: height 45 cm; width 46 cm; thickness 53 cm.	

ZO-3	Monument 8 from Kaminaljuyu.	La Aurora Zoo, Guatemala City.	Registration No. 1.3.6.1. According to Parsons (1986), this monument was located next to Monument 9 near the Trébol interchange, southeast of Kaminaljuyu. It was also reported southwest of Mound C-IV-10. Dimensions: height 103 cm; width 76 cm; thickness 58 cm.	
AN-1	Monument 38 from Kaminaljuyu.	MUNAG Museum, Antigua Guatemala.	Mound B, F-VI-2 (above Early Classic Tomb B-I, AD 400–500) (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946). Its original position was apparently on Platform B-4a, which later collapsed, causing the sculpture to fall to the level below. According to Parsons (1986), the figure may have been a reused relic that reminded its users of the Teotihuacan "Fat Gods." Dimensions: height 24 cm; width 25 cm; thickness 19 cm.	
KM-1	Monument 41 from Kaminaljuyu.	Kaminaljuyu Archaeological Park, Guatemala City.	Mound C-III-1. Dimensions: height 63 cm; width 66 cm; thickness 66 cm.	

MN-1	Pieza "d" Kaminaljuyu	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	Decapitated sculpture (MUNAE 2380). Donated to the museum by H. Pirir in 1953. No registration number. Dimensions: height 20 cm; width 17 cm; thickness 11 cm.	
MN-2	Monument 57 from Kaminaljuyu.	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	Private collection of Jorge Castillo Valenzuela. (MUNAE 12826). Registration No. 1.1.1.743. The other matching sculpture is housed at the Popol Vuh Museum. Dimensions: height 38 cm; width 24 cm; thickness 13 cm.	
MN-5	Monument 6 from Kaminaljuyu.	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	Former entrance marker from Arévalo Plantation (MUNAE 2064). Registration No. 1.1.1.775. Dimensions: height 103 cm; width 60 cm; thickness 45 cm.	

MN-6	Monument 4 from Kaminaljuyu.	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	Southern end of the lower plaza of La Palanga (Lothrop 1926:149). (MUNAE 2073), no registration number. According to Parsons (1986), the sculpture features "Olmecoid eyes" with a rounded rectangular shape. It appears to hold a plaque over its abdomen, suspended from the neck by a pair of straps. Dimensions: height 106 cm; width 63 cm; thickness 56 cm.	
MN-8	Monument 3 from Kaminaljuyu.	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	Southern end of the lower plaza of La Palanga (Lothrop 1926:149). (MUNAE 2075), no registration number. Dimensions: height 110 cm; width 56 cm; thickness 50 cm.	

MN-9	Pieza "C" Kaminaljuyu	On display at the Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	MUNAE 2179. Registration No. 1.1.1.9997. Dimensions: height 32 cm; width 22 cm; thickness 14.5 cm.	
MN-10	Pieza "B" Kaminaljuyu	On display at the Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	MUNAE 5033b. Registration No. 1.1.1.1978. Dimensions: height 19 cm; width 12.5 cm; thickness 9.5 cm.	
MN-11	Pieza "A" Kaminaljuyu	On display at the Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala.	Donated by Diesseldorff to the National Museum in 1942. MUNAE 5033a. Registration No. 1.1.1.9996. Dimensions: height 19 cm; width 11.5 cm; thickness 11 cm.	

NEWLY DOCUMENTED POTBELLIED SCULPTURES FROM THE HIGHLANDS

REFERENCE CODE	No. Monument and site	Current location	Notes	Photograph
SJ-1	Potbellied from San José Chacayá, Chigojom Site, Caserío Las Minas.	On private property. Caserío Las Minas, Sololá.	Reported by Bruches, 1944. Local name: Jolom Achi, Waq Xaqui Imox. Dimensions: height 114 cm; width 59 cm; thickness 63 cm.	
SP-1	Potbellied from San Pablo La Laguna	San Pablo La Laguna	Local name: Xepajp. Dimensions: height 100 cm; width 76 cm; thickness 65 cm.	

UT-1

Potbellied Santa Lucía
Utatlán

Indigenous
Municipality of Santa
Lucía Utatlán.

Mutilated.

Dimensions: height
83 cm; width 63 cm;
thickness 50 cm.



MF-1

Possibly from Kaminaljuyu.

Museum Miraflores

Donated by the
Minondo family to
the Miraflores
Museum.

Dimensions: height
33 cm; width 13.5
cm; thickness 14.5
cm.



MF-2

Possibly from Sacatepéquez.

Museum Miraflores

Donated by the
Minondo family to
the Miraflores
Museum.

Dimensions: height
85 cm; width 46 cm;
thickness 42 cm.



RM-1

Alta Verapaz Region

Ruta Maya, Guatemala
City

It was part of the
Prince Maya
Collection.

Dimensions: height
33 cm; width 21.4
cm; thickness 17.9
cm.



El Salvador

At a plantation called Santa Leticia, in 1965, the owner of the coffee-growing property reported the existence of potbelly sculptures. During the excavations, Monument 1 was uncovered, followed later by Monuments 2 and 3, carved from basalt and measuring 1.5 to 2 m in height and diameter, which remained in situ because of their weight (Demarest et al. 1982).

Stanley H. Boggs observed that the three monuments were aligned in a north-south direction on a large terrace which, according to the excavations, measured more than 70 m in width (Boggs 1969). Although the author notes that the charcoal samples are not 100% reliable, the dates suggest a Preclassic chronology for the platform fill: 390–392; 2400 ± 60 B.P.; 2460 ± 130 B.P.; and 2780 ± 210 B.P., uncalibrated (Eldridge et al. 1976: 116).

Following these initial studies, Demarest returned to conduct excavations at the site, discovering the base on which Monument 3 had been set, a kind of basin containing stones and burned earth. The three potbelly sculptures were located 17 m apart from one another. According to the ceramic study, a relationship is proposed with the Providencia (500–200 BC) and Verbena (200 BC–AD 200) complexes of Kaminaljuyu. It is also believed that the construction of the large terrace took place between 100 BC and AD 200 (Demarest et al. 1982).

The new dates obtained by Demarest's project (1982) indicate that the initial occupation of the site belongs to the Chul phase, corresponding to the Providencia phase, between 500 and 400 BC, and that it ended between 100 BC and AD 100. In the Chalchuapa area, Sharer (1978: 172) reported a small potbelly sculpture associated with a mound that is believed to have been occupied around 600 BC.

Although the sculptures generally do not display any defined sexual characteristics, in El Salvador there is one example that has female breasts, a feature that has led to a reinterpretation of the question of the figures' gender. The site is called Teopán and is located on an island in Lake Coatepeque, in the western part of the country.

It is located in the municipality of Coatepeque, Santa Ana Department. The lake covers an area of 24.8 km^2 and is a volcanic lake. According to the researchers, the site consists of two mounds approximately 2 m high (Escamilla et al. 2006: 287).

Paul Amaroli (1997: 51) analyzes this case and proposes a reinterpretation of sculptures of this type, suggesting that they represent pregnant women in the act of giving birth or a Late Preclassic earth goddess. The figure was discovered on the island in 1996, the same year in which several construction projects exposed the archaeological site recorded under the name Teopán. The author states that the sculpture was buried beneath one meter of soil.

The site's ceramics correspond to the Chul (400–100 BC) and Caynac (100 BC–AD 250) complexes of the Late Preclassic, dates that coincide with those from Santa Leticia, located 30 km away. These ceramic complexes are related to groups from the Guatemalan Highlands and to sites such as Kaminaljuyu.

This study mentions that, in 1576, the Spaniard Diego García wrote a letter describing the existence of a stone idol in the form of a woman on the island, which was worshipped by the Pipil people and therefore suggests that they were the ones who reused the sculpture.

The sculptor depicted wide hips and the division between the buttocks; the breasts are clearly shown, the navel is visible, the back is flattened, and at the center beneath the legs there is a small concavity measuring 10 cm. Apparently, during the Postclassic period the eyes were re-carved, as evidenced by the irregular holes made over the original carving (Amaroli 1997: 52). The interpretation of the figure suggests that it represents a female deity associated with fertility.

POTBELLIED SCULPTURES FROM EL SALVADOR

REFERENCE CODE	No. Monument and site	Current location	Notes	Photograph
SL-1	Monument 3 from Santa Leticia.	Finca Santa Leticia	The three potbellied sculptures were placed on concave stone surfaces on a terrace, dated to the Chul phase (500–400 BC) (Demarest et al. 1982: 567–568). Dimensions: height 110 cm; width 135 cm; thickness 130 cm.	
SL-2	Monument 2 from Santa Leticia.	Finca Santa Leticia	Dimensions: height 140 cm; width 166 cm; thickness 110 cm.	

CH-1

Monument 7 from
Chalchuapa.

On display at the
Tazumal
Archaeological Site
Museum.

Possibly published in
Sharer (1978: 67).



IT-1

Potbellied Sculpture
from Teopán Island.

On private
property, in front of
the Teopán Island
Social Club.

Dimensions: height 100
cm; width 80 cm;
thickness 57 cm.



Pacific Coast of Chiapas, Mexico

On the Chiapas coast, in Tonalá, there is a site called Tiltepec, which Navarrete surveyed, reporting the fragment of an “obese” figure (Navarrete 1960: 2–5). Throughout his investigations, the number of sculptures increased, both at the site itself and on private properties and in the surrounding area. Several of these pieces were transferred to the museum in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. In his symposium paper, the author states that, as a result of the investigations carried out in 1968, a total of 36 monuments were recorded, of which 10 correspond to potbelly sculptures or “fat figures” (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: 472).

At the sites of Tiltepec and Tzutzuculi, the style acquired distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from other examples: elongated stone blocks, tall semi-spherical headdresses, arms and legs projecting forward, the presence of a maxtlatl or loincloth, more rigid lines emphasizing the face, a flattened nose, and thick, annular or circular lips, as if blowing. The headdress band bears a triangle and two curved designs resembling feathers or leaves, in addition to a small face (Navarrete and Hernández 2000: 480).

POTBELLY SCULPTURES FROM THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC COAST OF CHIAPAS, MEXICO

REFERENCE CODE	No. Monument and site	Current location	Notes	Photograph
TX-1	Monument 26 / Sculpture 18 from Tiltepec	Regional Museum of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas	From the archaeological site of Tiltepec, Chiapas, Mexico. It was aligned in front of the south side of Mound 10 together with Sculptures 20 and 21 (Navarrete 2000: 471; 2023).	
TX-2	Monument 33/Sculpture 17 from Tiltepec	Regional Museum of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas	From the archaeological site of Tiltepec, Chiapas, Mexico. Reported in 1967 by engineer Eduardo Martínez, who found it lying on the roadside (Navarrete 2000: 471; Navarrete 2023).	

TX-3	Monument 27/ Sculpture 19 from Tiltepec	Regional Museum of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas	From the archaeological site of Tiltepec, Chiapas, Mexico. It was aligned in front of the south side of Mound 10 together with Sculptures 20 and 21 (Navarrete 2000: 471; Navarrete 2023).	
TN-1	Unidentified Monument	Patio of the House of Culture, Tonalá, Chiapas, Mexico.	Monumento atribuido al sitio Tiltepec. Referencia en Guernsey 2012.	
TN-2	Unidentified Monument	Patio of the House of Culture, Tonalá, Chiapas, Mexico.	Según Ricardo López Vasallo puede ser de los sitios Tzutzuculi o Tonála. Referencia en Guernsey 2012.	

TN-3

Unidentified Monument

Patio of the House of
Culture, Tonalá, Chiapas,
Mexico.

Según Ricardo López
Vasallo puede ser de los
sitios Tzutzuculi o Tonála.
Referencia en Guernsey
2012.



TN-4

Monument 1 from Tiltepec

Patio of the House of
Culture, Tonalá, Chiapas,
Mexico.

En sitio Arqueológico
Tiltepec, Chiapas. Se
encontraba botada a un
lado del antiguo camino
peatonal a Tuxtla Gutiérrez,
cerca del Montículo 11.
Navarrete (2000: 471;
2023).



TN-5

Monument 21 from
Tiltepec

Patio of the House of
Culture, Tonalá, Chiapas,
Mexico.

Hacia pareja con la
escultura 23 frente al
Montículo 8 (Navarrete
2023).



TN-6

Monument 10 from
Tzutzuculi

Patio of the House of
Culture, Tonalá, Chiapas,
Mexico.

Se encontraba en una
empacadora de pescado y
trasladado posteriormente
a la Casa de la Cultura de
Tonalá (Navarrete 2000).

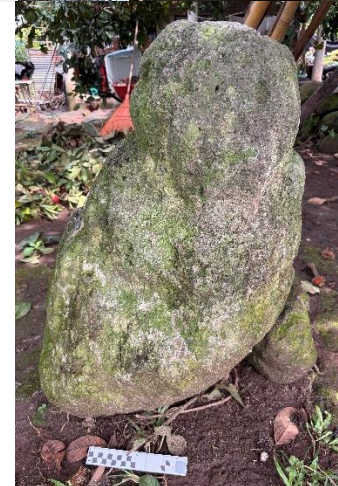


IZ-1

Unidentified Monument

Potbelly Sculpture from
the Izapa Archaeological
Site

Located in the courtyard of
a private residence at the
entrance to the Izapa
Archaeological Zone.
Dimensions: height 85 cm;
width 17 cm; thickness 40
cm.



Maya Lowlands

Because the study of potbelly sculptures has been conducted primarily through constant comparison with the Olmec style and the relationships between this culture and the southern coast of Guatemala and Mexico, little has been mentioned about possible interactions with the Maya Lowlands. Although only a few examples have been found in this region, they are present at several sites, including not only potbelly sculptures but also other types of sculptures recognized as characteristic of the Preclassic period that can be compared with sites on the southern coast.

Rice (2015: 1–47) specifically addresses the isolation of the Maya Lowlands within the broader exchange network and points out that comparisons have been made mainly at the level of iconographic studies due to the lack of more concrete evidence. Thus, it is assumed that interactions were rather indirect and that the Maya adopted some elements from the Middle Preclassic complex.

The figure from Tikal, designated Miscellaneous Sculpture 167, was discovered by Larios and Orrego in 1977 in the Santa Fe Group, a satellite settlement of Tikal located 3 km east of the center, from which Stela 36 also comes, possibly the oldest stela at Tikal. The piece was looted and abandoned near Structure 426 (Jones and Orrego 1987: 129–133; Jones 2001: 923). The characteristic feature of this sculpture, approximately one meter in height, is a shield or plaque hanging on the back; inside the plaque there is a flint hand axe or the glyph “yax.”

Another sculpture, designated Miscellaneous Sculpture 82, was found in a Preclassic context in the North Acropolis of Tikal, on Floor 9, as construction fill, and was published by William Coe (Coe 1965: 1401), although the figure had been decapitated. At the nearby site of Uaxactun, Sculpture PNT-22 was identified in Group H. This sculpture also lacks a head, has crossed legs, and presents four glyphs on the back (Jones 2001).

At the archaeological site of San Bartolo, a potbelly figure was reported in Structure 63, located in the site's Main Plaza. According to Craig's excavations (2005: 267), the figure was found in a deposit or offering with evidence of burning on the building, and, according to the stratigraphy, it was part of multiple ceremonies that took place there. Most of the activities associated with the use of the building correspond to the Late Classic period, indicating the reuse of the sculpture.

Fialko (2005) reported two potbelly sculptures in one of the residential groups of the site known as Chanchich II, one of the sites that make up the Holmul River basin. In addition to the potbelly sculptures, the site also contains important Preclassic features, including a mask associated with an E-Group complex. In this publication, he also mentions other sculptures of this style at the sites of La Tractorada and El Jobal, in the same region; although he does not provide further references for them, he makes an additional mention of the example from Bajo El Jobal (Fialko 2022).

In another publication, Fialko (2021) also presents the discovery of “a possible potbellied effigy” at the site of Naranjo-Sa’aal. The figure was found associated with an offering, located within a circular enclosure containing three altars, a stone vessel, and a fragment of a scepter. This entire assemblage was found on the floor sealing the platform of the Royal Palace, East Courtyard, in the Central Acropolis. The potbelly sculpture (NREM-058) was oriented toward the east, where an E-Group complex is located. It is a rough sculpture with the head, arms, and front portion mutilated; the shoulders and a belt can be observed on the right side. On the back, part of a loincloth and the right buttock are visible.

Through new investigations at Uaxactun in previously unexcavated areas, new discoveries have been identified, including potbelly figures in Groups M, E, and D, dated between the end of the Middle Preclassic and the Terminal Preclassic. The analysis of their context and meaning is relevant for continuing research on the function of these figures in the past and constitutes important evidence of the interaction networks that connected distant regions.

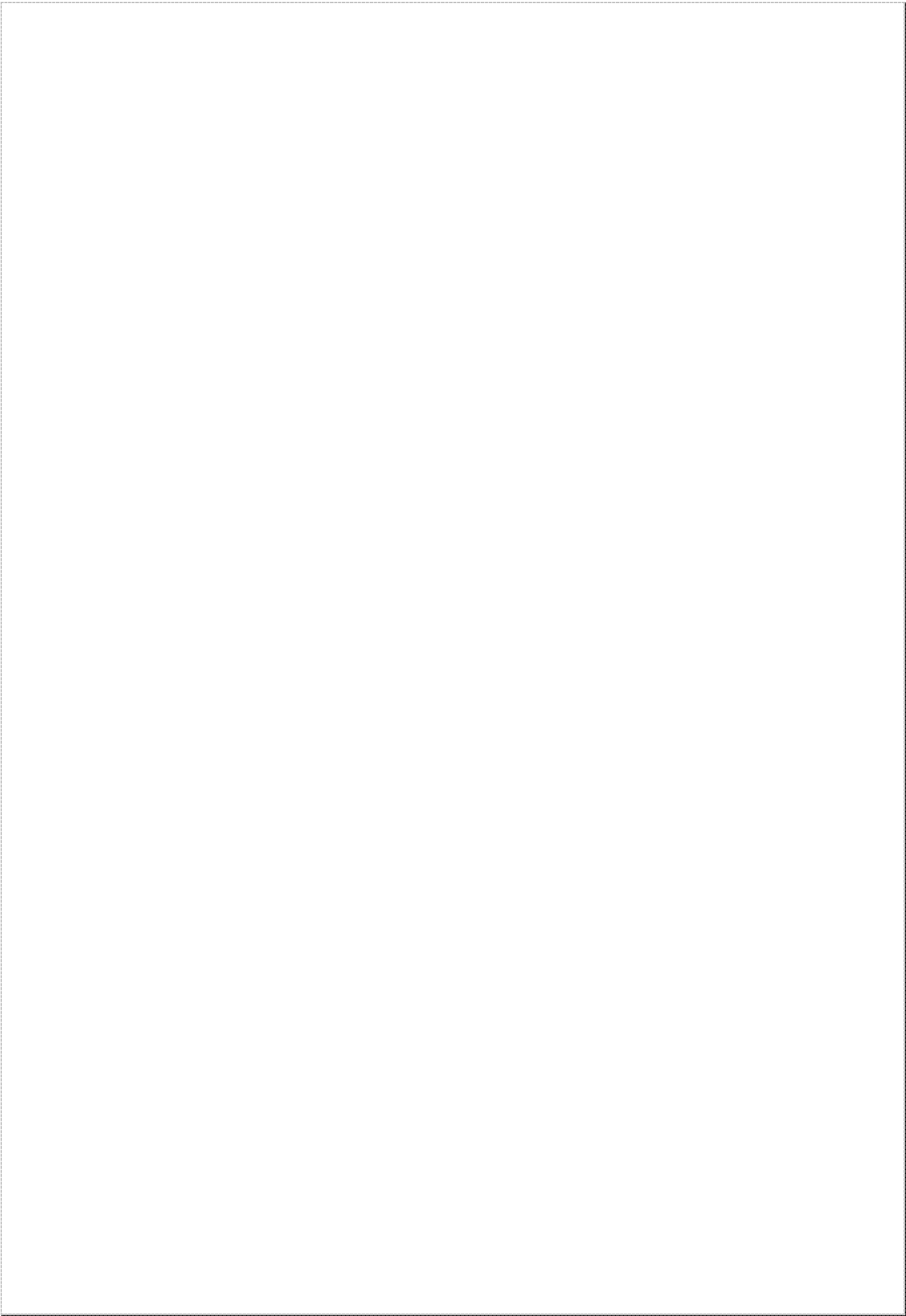
The first potbelly sculpture from Uaxactun was identified during the excavations conducted by Juan Antonio Valdés (1989: 609; 1993: 39–40). It is a limestone sculpture measuring 59 cm in height, which was found within the plaza fill in front of Structure H-XI, in Group H South, designated PNT-22. The fat figure, with its hands placed on the chest and in an upright position, was deposited at the end of Stage 6 or the beginning of Stage 7, without any offering, according to Valdés, during a period of transformation in the Late Preclassic.

“The sculpture represents an obese figure in a seated position, with crossed legs and arms flexed forward. The head and hands were mutilated” (Valdés 1989: 609). In

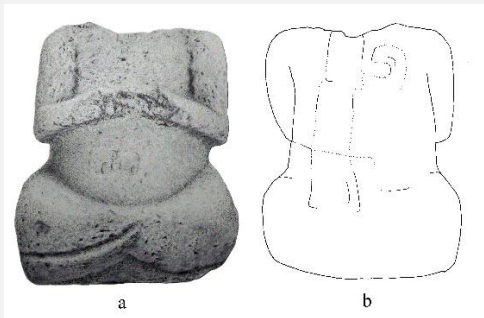
addition, bifurcated volutes can be observed on the back, which, according to the author, were part of the figure's ornamentation.

During the 2015 field season, two potbelly sculptures were identified at Structure M-XII (Drápela et al. 2016: 486). Monument 1 measures 80 cm × 50 cm, and Monument 2 measures 60 cm × 45 cm. Radiocarbon samples indicate a date around 600 BC. The interesting aspect of this case is the evidence of ritual continuity from the Middle Preclassic to the end of the Late Classic. Despite being a relatively small and not very tall building, it demonstrated the importance it held within the group and the site. On the other hand, the original location of the figures is unknown, but it is clear that they were relocated to the top of the building during the Late Classic period.

During recent investigations, a miniature potbelly figure was found on the western façade of Structure E-XIV, lying on a plaza stucco floor at the base of the first platform level. It was found face down, with the head oriented toward the east. The piece measures 9.5 cm in height, 5.5 cm in width, and 6 cm in thickness (Cotom 2020: 56). A figure of the same type was also found during the survey and rescue program. The piece was discovered along the edge of the road in the village of Uaxactun, exposed after rainfall. The object was located approximately at the base of Structure 2089 (Drápela and Rašova 2020: 264).



POTBELLY SCULPTURES FROM THE MAYA LOWLANDS

REFERENCE CODE	No. Monument and site	Current location	Notes	Photograph
TB-1	Sculpture PNT-22 from Uaxactun	Located in the storage facility of Tikal National Park.	Documented by Juan Antonio Valdés (1989:609; 1993:39–40) at Structure H-XI, Group H South. Decapitated figure deposited between Stages 6 and 7 as an offering during the Late Preclassic period. Dimensions: height 59 cm.	 a b
TB-2	Miniature sculpture, Structure H-XIV, Uaxactun	National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology	Miniature potbelly sculpture on the western façade of Structure E-XIV, on the plaza stucco floor at the base of the first platform level; it was found lying face down, with the head oriented toward the east. Dimensions: height 10.5 cm; width 5.5 cm; thickness 6 cm.	
TB-3	Miniature sculpture, Group D Uaxactun	National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology	The piece was found along the edge of the road in the village of Uaxactun, where it was exposed after rainfall (Drápela y Rašova 2020: 264).	

TB-4

Monument 1, Group
M, Uaxactun

Project storage
facility in the
village of
Uaxactun

Relocated on top of Structure
M-XII, Group M. Dimensions:
height 80 cm; width 50 cm



a



b



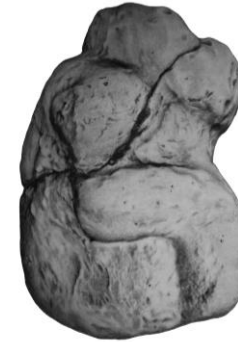
c

TB-5

Monument 2, Group
M, Uaxactun

Project storage
facility in the
village of
Uaxactun

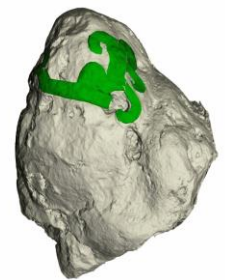
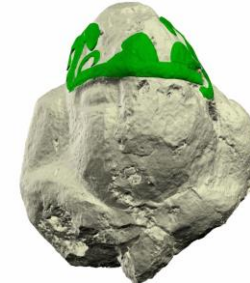
Relocated on top of Structure
M-XII, Group M. Dimensions:
height 60 cm; width 45 cm



TB-6

Potbelly from
Cambrayal

In situ, east of
Structure B-I,
Group B.



TB-7

Miscellaneous
Sculpture 167 of
Tikal

Located in the
storage facility of
Tikal National
Park.

Discovered by Orrego 3
km from the center of
Tikal, near Tikal Stela 36,
Santa Fe Group
(Christopher y Miguel
Orrego
1987). Dimensions:
height 70 cm.



TB-8

Sculpture 63 of San
Bartolo

Buried at the site

Structure 63, Main Plaza,
San Bartolo (Craig 2005).
Dimensions: height 120
cm; width 100 cm;
thickness 50 cm.



Potbelly Sculptures of Unknown Provenance

As part of the research, it was possible to identify new pieces from the collection of the National Museum of Archaeology of Guatemala. Although they lack provenience, as well as additional contextual information or records regarding their arrival at the museum, they display the characteristics attributed to “potbelly” sculptures.

NEWLY DOCUMENTED POTBELLIED SCULPTURES FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM

REFERENCE CODE	No. Monument and site	Current location	Notes	Photograph
MN-12	Unknown provenance.	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Guatemala.	It has no registration number or associated data; it is only identified as an anthropomorphic sculpture with crossed legs. Dimensions: height 27 cm; width 19 cm; thickness 9 cm.	
MN-13	Unknown provenance. MUNAE Registration No. 2124.	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Guatemala.	It has no IDAEH registration number; it is only identified as an anthropomorphic sculpture. Dimensions: height 44 cm; width 31 cm; thickness 25 cm.	

MN-17	Unknown provenance. MUNAE Registration No. 1912.	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Guatemala.	Identified as an anthropomorphic sculpture with hands flexed over the chest, without an IDAEH registration number. Dimensions: height 23 cm; width 19 cm; thickness 12 cm.	
MN-20	San Marcos, Tacaná. Registration No. MUNAE 4010.	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Guatemala.	Identified as an anthropomorphic sculpture, without an IDAEH registration number. Dimensions: height 11 cm; width 9 cm; thickness 11.5 cm.	
MN-22	Procedencia desconocida, Registro MUNAE 1919	Storage facility of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Guatemala.	Identified as a fragment of an anthropomorphic sculpture, without an IDAEH registration number. Dimensions: height 14 cm; width 38 cm; thickness 40 cm.	

Living Potbellies

The term *potbelly* (*barrigón*) refers to a sculptural tradition depicting corpulent individuals with distinctive formal attributes. Although local variants occur across regions, suggesting community-specific meanings, these monuments share a recognizable set of features: a voluminous body, pronounced abdomen, swollen cheeks, closed eyes, a broad flattened nose, thick lips, and puffy eyelids. Most figures are seated with their limbs v rôznych pozíciách, and generally lack clear sexual characteristics, although some display ornaments such as earspools, pectorals, headdresses, diadems, or loincloths (see Lothrop 1926; Miles 1965; Shook 1971; Parsons 1986; Rodas 1993; Chinchilla 2001; Orrego and Schieber 2001, Guernsey and Love 2008; Guernsey 2012; Lambert 2015).

Carved from large boulders, potbelly sculptures are widely distributed along the Pacific piedmont of Mesoamerica, from Chiapas through Guatemala to El Salvador. Examples also occur in the Guatemalan Highlands, including Kaminaljuyú, as well as at Copán and several sites in the Petén region (McInnis Thompson and Valdez 2008). Monte Alto remains the best-known concentration of these monuments and has often been regarded as the principal expression of the tradition (Parsons 1986). Nemenej významným centrom však bol aj Takalik Abaj, kde sa identifikovalo až 15 potbelly sculptures, vrátane veľmi archaických foriem (XXX).

The chronology and origins of potbelly sculpture have long been debated (Habel 1878; Villacorta and Villacorta 1927; Drucker 1952; Richardson 1940; Parsons and Jenson 1965; Shook 1971). Earlier interpretations proposed either a pre-Olmec origin (Drucker 1952; Miles 1965; Girard 1969) or a post-Olmec development derived from Gulf Coast traditions (Graham 1981; Parsons and Jenson 1965; Parsons 1986). Other scholars suggested that the style emerged from local Preclassic figurine traditions (Piña Chan 1972; Guernsey and Love 2008; Guernsey 2012). Because of formal similarities to Olmec art, many studies emphasized interaction with the Gulf Coast during the Middle Preclassic (Inomata and Henderson 2016: 463), while others argued for an independent regional development (Bove 1989; Popenoe 1989).

Most of these interpretations reflect earlier stages of scholarship and were often based on limited contextual evidence. Establishing a precise chronology has been difficult because most monuments lack secure primary archaeological contexts and were frequently reused in later periods.

Current research places the emergence of the potbelly tradition during the transition from the Middle to Late Preclassic (ca. 500–300 BCE). Los detalles del Monumento 58 de Tak'alik Ab'aj, como el tocado, un pie de las piernas cruzadas doblado hacia abajo, y que no tiene su espalda esculpida porque todavía emerge de la roca, sugieren que esta escultura puede ser una de las primeras y más antiguas representaciones de la tradición escultórica barrigón (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego 2010). V každom prípade táto tradícia s pôvodom na konci stredného predklasického obdobia pokračovala až do Terminal Preclassic (ca. 200 CE) (Parsons 1981; Popenoe 1989; Demarest et al. 1982; Lowe et al. 1982). Evidence from sites such as Tak'alik Ab'aj, Kaminaljuyú, and Santa Leticia indicates that potbelly sculpture was a long-lived and regionally widespread phenomenon of the southern Maya area and Pacific

piedmont (Demarest 1981; Orrego and Schieber 2001: 791; Inomata and Henderson 2016). Rather than being understood primarily through diffusionist models tied to the Olmec Gulf Coast, recent studies, whose conclusions we agree with, increasingly emphasize its development within local and interregional networks of the Preclassic southern Maya world (Guernsey 2012; Navarrete 2022).

Such developments should not be interpreted as evidence of direct diffusion. While potbelly sculpture constitutes a phenomenon defined by broadly shared chronological, geographic, and iconographic characteristics, it simultaneously exhibits substantial regional variation. Consequently, formal resemblance should not automatically be equated with semantic equivalence, since analogous visual forms may have been embedded within different local systems of meaning, ritual practice, and sociopolitical discourse. Mora-Marín argues that the dissemination of iconographic concepts should not be understood as the straightforward copying of forms, but rather as a process of selective adoption and local transformation in which receiving communities actively reshaped imported symbolic templates according to their own aesthetic traditions and ideological concerns (Mora-Marín 2016).

Interpretations of the Use and Function of Potbelly Sculptures

The meaning and function of potbelly sculptures remain subjects of debate, and no single interpretation has achieved broad consensus. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that these monuments were associated with ritual and religious practices, as indicated by their recurrent placement within ceremonial spaces and their continued significance in later contexts, *aj ked' priama evidencia stále chýba*.

One of the most influential interpretations views potbelly figures as representations of ancestors. Guernsey (2012: 131–143) argues that their veneration may have emerged from early forms of household ritual practice, later becoming integrated into broader public and political spheres. Within this framework, ancestors would have served as powerful symbols for the legitimization of authority, the construction of social hierarchy, and the organization of emerging elite groups (Rodas 1992; Barrientos et al. 2024). From another perspective these ancestors were able to bring prosperity from the underworld (Beliaev 2021).

Other scholars have proposed that potbelly sculptures depict pregnant women in childbirth (Amaroli 1997: 53), deceased individuals, or rulers and other high-status persons. Several interpretations connect them to funerary symbolism and ancestral cults, including the possibility that they represent mortuary bundles (Lambert 2015). These arguments are supported by formal attributes such as closed eyes, swollen facial features and bodies, and flexed postures, which have been compared to mortuary practices documented elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Parsons and Jenson 1965; Parsons 1986: 45; Lambert 2015: 105; Thompson and Valdez 2008). In some cases, associations with isolated sculpted heads have also led to interpretations involving sacrifice and death-related ritual activity.

A different line of interpretation emphasizes the supernatural dimensions of these monuments. Potbelly sculptures have been linked to the so-called “Fat God” deity and to concepts of spiritual co-essences or *wahy* known from later Maya traditions (Hasso von Winning 1987; Taube 1998; Rodas 1993; Houston and Stuart 1989; Grube and Nahm 1994; Miller and Taube 1993: 86). Henderson (2015) further suggests that some examples may have

functioned as personifications of sacred mountains, entities that possessed their own cultic significance within local ritual landscapes.

These interpretations are not mutually exclusive and largely reflect different attempts to explain a monument type that lacks clear contextual evidence in many cases. While earlier scholarship often focused on identifying a single referent—whether ancestors, deceased rulers, fertility figures, or supernatural beings—more recent approaches emphasize the broader ritual roles these monuments likely played within Preclassic communities (Guernsey 2012: 144–160).

In summary, there is broad agreement that potbelly sculptures formed part of an enduring ritual tradition. Their consistent association with ceremonial spaces, together with their deliberate reuse in later sacred contexts, suggests that they functioned as powerful symbols of memory, ancestry, authority, and sacred place. Current evidence indicates that this tradition developed from the Late Middle Preclassic through the Terminal Preclassic, a period marked by major social and political transformations across the southern Maya area and adjacent Pacific piedmont, including the emergence and expansion to several important centers in Petén.

Reinterpretations Through Time

Although the original referents of potbelly sculptures remain uncertain, archaeological evidence demonstrates that their meanings were not static. Rather than preserving a single significance throughout their history, these monuments underwent repeated processes of relocation, modification, and reinterpretation. Yet scholarship has largely concentrated on questions of origin and original meaning, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to the ways in which their cultural and ritual significance changed over time.

Relocation and Changing Ritual Landscapes

Only a small number of potbelly sculptures remain in their original locations. Many were displaced through construction activities or deliberately repositioned within evolving ceremonial landscapes. In several cases, monuments were relocated to settlement margins or oriented toward cardinal directions and prominent mountains, reflecting cosmological frameworks that likely developed over centuries.

Although elements of the Preclassic potbelly cult persisted into the Classic and, in some regions, even the Postclassic period, it is difficult to speak of an uninterrupted *longue durée* tradition. The end of the Preclassic was marked by major demographic, political, and ideological transformations across much of southern Mesoamerica. During the transition to the Classic period, a process of miniaturization may have occurred, with potbelly imagery appearing in portable figurines, such as Monument 249 from Tak'alik Ab'aj (Flores 2012) or two examples documented at Uaxactún (Cotom 2020: 77; Drápela and Rášová 2020: 274; Kováč and García Patzán 2026). Subsequent migrations, shifts in ceramic traditions, changing settlement organization, and new funerary and ritual practices further altered the cultural environments in which these monuments were understood (Grube 1999; García Patzán 2024).

Ritual Modification and Semantic Expansion

Reinterpretation was frequently expressed through physical interventions. Among the least destructive are cup-marks—small cavities carved into the surfaces of sculptures—which were probably used for offerings or libations and may have enhanced the monuments' ritual efficacy. Examples are known from Monte Alto Monument 6 and Santa Leticia Monument 1 (Lambert 2015: 189). Such modifications appear to have intensified ritual engagement without fundamentally changing the monuments' symbolic role.

Other alterations suggest attempts to expand or redefine meaning. The potbelly sculpture from Cambrayal, for example, was later reworked with vegetal motifs carved over previously damaged areas (Kováč and Šilhán 2026). These additions may have introduced associations with fertility, regeneration, or agricultural abundance while preserving the monument's earlier significance.

Deactivation, Transformation, and Resculpting

More dramatic interventions involved deliberate fragmentation and decapitation. Examples have been documented at Tak'alik Ab'aj (Graham 1981a: 163 -176), Kaminaljuyú, El Ujuxte, Pasaco, Copán, and Tikal (Lambert 2015: 189). Particularly illustrative is the case of Los Abuelos, where a decapitated potbelly head was placed before a paired male–female set of potbellies (monuments 5A and 5B), while the remainder of the body was absent (Kováč and García Patzán 2024: 33). The head was likely transported from another location as a trophy. Although decapitation may have symbolically deactivated the monument, it did not necessarily erase its significance in general; rather, it transformed the sculpture into a subordinated ritual object within the same semantic framework.

Facial modifications provide further evidence of changing interpretations. The deliberate effacement of facial features, documented for example at Kaminaljuyú, may have removed individual identity or ritual power (Lambert 2015: 189). Even more revealing are cases of resculpting. Amaroli (1997: 52) argues that the potbelly from Teopán originally possessed closed eyes that were later recut as open eyes, potentially marking a conceptual shift from a deceased ancestor to an animate supernatural being. Aj potbelly sculpture zo skupiny M z Uaxactunu bola najskôr dekapitovaná a neskôr, vo fragmente jej hlavy bola vytesaná obeťná miska, ktorá svedčí v kontinue kultu s torzom, ktoré už mohlo zmeniť svoj pôvodný význam (Kováč and García Patzán 2026). A comparable intervention, ako uvedieme ďalej v texte, is visible on the potbelly from San Pablo La Laguna, where eyes and a mouth were added at a later date, maybe to imbue the figure with renewed vitality.

From Archaeological Monument to Living Heritage

The reinterpretation of potbelly sculptures did not end in antiquity. Their meanings continued to evolve over centuries as communities adapted them to changing historical circumstances (Guernsey 2012: 143). Some transformations occurred within broadly continuous cultural traditions, whereas others accompanied profound social and ideological change.

With the emergence of archaeology and museum collecting, potbelly sculptures acquired yet another layer of meaning. Many were removed to museums in Europe and the United States, where their monumentality and enigmatic appearance inspired early speculative interpretations. In 1886, the Baron de Baye suggested that they represented lesser spirits charged with governing the world under a supreme deity (Chinchilla and Fauvet-Berthelot

2018). Such interpretations now belong to the history of scholarship rather than to current archaeological understanding.

Importantly, not all sculptures entered museum collections. Many remained in territories inhabited and managed by Indigenous communities, where they continue to participate in local systems of knowledge, memory, and belief. These contemporary relationships have received far less scholarly attention than archaeological interpretations, despite their considerable ethnographic value. Understanding how present-day Indigenous communities engage with potbelly sculptures therefore represents an important avenue for future research. It is precisely this gap that the present project seeks to address.

Research Objectives and Methods

This study emerged from an effort to understand the significance of potbelly sculptures for those Indigenous communities that continue to maintain relationships with them, venerate them, perform rituals associated with them, or preserve narratives connected to their presence.

The first objective was to investigate whether contemporary rituals and narratives might contribute to a better understanding of the functions these monuments fulfilled in the past. Equally important, however, was the question of how these stone sculptures reflect contemporary Indigenous conceptions and what kinds of social and religious roles they play today. We also sought to understand the historical dynamics of relationships between people and sculptures and the ways in which these relationships have been transformed through time.

Given that the study encompasses a relatively large region inhabited by ethnolinguistic groups with distinct cultural traditions, an additional objective was to assess the degree of heterogeneity in contemporary engagements with potbelly sculptures. Specifically, we asked whether different forms of interaction have developed independently in different communities or whether a degree of convergence can be observed despite geographical, linguistic, and cultural differences. Where such convergence exists, we sought to identify the processes that account for it.

Fieldwork Context and Documentation

The research was conducted within a project dedicated to documenting all known potbelly sculptures of Mesoamerica. Originally, this initiative aimed to incorporate recently discovered seven potbellies documented by the PARU project (Proyecto Arqueológico Regional Uaxactun) in Petén (Kováč and García Patzán 2024; Kováč and Šilhán 2025; Kováč and García Patzán 2026) into a new regional catalogue, using a broader comparative perspective.

During the first phase of fieldwork in 2025, we focused on the Pacific coast of Guatemala, the Guatemalan Highlands, and the Pacific region of El Salvador. Within this area, we identified and documented sixty-five potbelly sculptures using multiple recording techniques. Each monument was documented through photogrammetry and handheld LiDAR scanning, resulting in two complementary sets of three-dimensional models. These datasets were

supplemented with conventional photography, physical measurements, and archaeological descriptions.

Identification of Living Relationships with Sculptures

As fieldwork progressed, our attention increasingly shifted toward monuments located outside museums, archaeological parks, and storage facilities. A number of sculptures remained in agricultural fields, plantations, forests, private properties, or other locations where they continued to exist in direct interaction with local populations. In several cases, these monuments were regarded as possessing supernatural agency and remained integrated into contemporary ritual life. Although this phenomenon was not part of the original research design, it became an important secondary outcome of the project.

Four particularly significant cases of active engagement with potbelly sculptures were identified. These were geographically dispersed across the department of Santa Ana in El Salvador (Teopán Island) and the Guatemalan departments of Sololá (San José Chacayá; San Pablo La Laguna) and Retalhuleu (Tak'alik Ab'aj), while representing four distinct ethnolinguistic contexts: Pipil, Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, and Mam. This distribution provided an exceptional opportunity for comparative qualitative research (Figure 1). By examining communities separated by considerable geographical, linguistic, and cultural distances, we sought to distinguish local specificities from broader recurring patterns and to identify possible shared features in contemporary relationships with these monuments.

Methods and Theoretical Framework

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The methodological approach was therefore predominantly anthropological, complemented by archaeological documentation techniques and by an effort to reconstruct the historical trajectories and interpretive layers associated with each monument. Archaeological, ethnographic, linguistic, historical, and oral-historical data were considered jointly in order to contextualize each case study as comprehensively as possible.

The research was partially framed within an ontographic approach associated with the broader ontological turn in anthropology and archaeology (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Alberti et al. 2013). Ontography was selected because it offers a practical methodological framework (Holbraad 2009) for investigating the ways in which realities are constituted through relationships, rather than treating ontological claims as merely symbolic representations of a shared external world (Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

This perspective enables us to move beyond conventional subject–object distinctions and to take Indigenous understandings seriously (Ingold 2018) as analytical propositions rather than as cultural beliefs requiring external explanation (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Ingold 2011).

Consequently, instead of asking what potbelly sculptures represent for contemporary Indigenous communities, we ask what these sculptures are within the relational worlds in which they participate. They are approached not as passive objects whose meanings are determined by human interpretation, but as active participants in social and ritual life.

Following Latour's proposition that the identity of any entity emerges through the network of associations in which it is embedded (Latour 1999, 2005), we assume that the most productive way to understand these monuments is through a detailed examination of the relationships that constitute them. Accordingly, each case study seeks to reconstruct as fully as possible the network of humans, places, narratives, ritual practices, offerings, landscapes, memories, and supernatural agencies through which a particular sculpture acquires its contemporary existence.

We acknowledge that the theoretical framework of the ontological turn encounters certain limits that may approach epistemological relativism (Hornborg 2020). For this reason, we do not seek to fully engage with its more stringent implications, nor to extend the associated theoretical debate beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, we consider this framework particularly useful for exploring relationships between contemporary Indigenous populations and archaeologically derived stone objects, albeit primarily as an expansion of analytical perspective. We attempt to integrate archaeological and ethnographic approaches, while remaining aware of the epistemological and methodological tensions between the two lines of inquiry. At the same time, our approach remains attentive to the multi-layered nature of interpretation, incorporating linguistic perspectives, local histories, and comparative readings of both colonial and pre-Hispanic sources. Drawing loosely on the ontographic approach, rather than applying a single theoretical model, our aim is to outline non-obvious relationalities and perspectives that may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex entanglements between past and present, the living and the non-living, and human and non-human domains.

The objective of the following case studies is therefore not merely to document surviving beliefs associated with potbellie sculptures, but to trace the configurations through which these sculptures continue to act as meaningful and efficacious participants in contemporary Indigenous worlds.



Figure 1. Places incorporated into case studies of contemporary veneration of potbelly sculptures. Map by Dora García Patzán.

Waq Xaqui Imox (Kaqchikel)

Discovery and Archaeological Context

Under the designation *Waq Xaqui Imox*, we identified an anthropomorphic sculpture measuring 114 cm in height, 59 cm in width, and 63 cm in thickness (Figure 2). The monument is located within the territory of the Kaqchikel community of San José Chacayá, department of Sololá, Guatemala.

The sculpture was discovered in 2022, by agricultural laborers at the locality of Chuijolom Achí (“In Front of the Man’s Head”) in the hamlet of Las Minas (formerly San Antonio Las Minas). According to the landowner, the find was received positively by most local families, who regarded it as a sacred relic representing their culture and origins (Petzey 2022). The monument was subsequently analyzed by Barrientos et al. (2024), who noted similarities with Monument 30 from Chocóla.



Figure 2. Potbelly sculpture from San José Chacayá. Drawing by Luis Fernando Luin based on photographs and 3D models by Milan Kováč and Dora García Patzán.

Site Description

San José Chacayá was first recorded as an archaeological site by Edwin Shook in 1943, although the sculpture itself was not mentioned. Under the toponym Chuijolom, Bruches and Carlson (1994) documented an archaeological settlement (recorded as Chigojom), possibly corresponding to the forest of Chigojom or Chi Q'ojom mentioned in the *Annals of the Kaqchikels* (Otzoy 1999: 171).

The site extends over an area of approximately 100 × 200 m and contains a platform and eight mounds constructed of stone and earth, ranging from 1 to 12 m in height. Petrographs were also documented, including an anthropomorphic face known locally as “San Isidro” and a rock bearing multiple depressions. Davies and Corado (2015: 27) suggest that the architectural pattern may have originated during the Preclassic period, while also exhibiting Classic and Postclassic features, including a circular structure.

At the summit of the promontory, presently occupied by maize fields, architectural remains remain visible as low elevations interpreted as platforms, temples, or small pyramidal structures. Adjacent to these remains, at the edge of the cultivated area, stands a shrine where the sculpture is currently housed, directly linking it to the pre-Columbian occupation of the site.

Description and Dating of the Sculpture

The monument displays formal characteristics associated with the Pacific Coast potbelly tradition and may tentatively be assigned to the Late Preclassic period. Unlike the more canonical examples from Monte Alto, however, it demonstrates a different level of modeling and anatomical detail. For this reason, it seems unique and its chronological placement is not clear.

The figure differs substantially from classic Monte Alto examples. Rather than resting its hands on the abdomen, the arms are crossed over the chest, and the body exhibits a largely cylindrical morphology without a pronounced belly. In this respect, it shows closer affinities to a smaller sculpture from Chicolá.

The sculpture displays bracelets on both wrists and upper arms, representations of long hair in the cranial area, broad shoulders, and a dorsal incision suggesting the spinal column. A wide belt with a quadrangular frontal element encircles the waist. The posterior thighs are carefully modeled, creating a volumetric representation of buttocks that transition into an annular lower structure terminating in a quadrangular frontal projection. A perforation in the region of the right scapula passes through the body and emerges beneath the right axilla.

The upper facial portion is not preserved. Nevertheless, the head is massive and elongated anteroposteriorly. The mouth is prominent, the nose flattened, and the cheekbones strongly pronounced. The left eye is missing, while only a fragment of the right eye survives.

The monument may represent a female individual, although breasts are not depicted. The strongly emphasized thighs (Figure 3) recalls Bolinas-type ceramic figurines from the Guatemalan Pacific Coast, generally interpreted as female and characteristic of the Middle and Late Preclassic periods (Szymański and Prejs 2025), aj keď takáto analógia môže byť povrchná. Totiž at the same time, the annular lower structure bears a belt with quadrangular elements that may represent a loincloth, suggesting a possible male identity. Therefore, determining gender is not entirely clear. The overall posture appears to represent a seated or kneeling position with flexed legs.



Figure 3. Detail of the back of the sculpture showing the protruding thighs. Photograph by Milan Kováč.

Contemporary Ritual Use and Indigenous Interpretations

The sculpture currently functions as an active ritual object. During our visit on December 23, 2025, the shrine was decorated with yellow and white flowers, while numerous candles—primarily light blue, dark blue, green, yellow, and red—together with melted wax deposits were observed in front of the monument (Figure 4). Sesame seeds and rice had been placed on the head of the sculpture, and Christmas garlands had been arranged around the figure in connection with the upcoming holiday celebrations (Figure 5).

Among local Indigenous ritual specialists, including *aj q'ijab'*, the monument is known as *Waqxaqui(b) Imox* or *Waq Xaqui Imox*. The name corresponds to the day-sign “8 Imox” in the 260-day ritual calendar (*Cholq'ij*). Imox (Imix) constitutes the first of the twenty *nawales* recognized in contemporary Maya calendrical practice.

Within present-day Kaqchikel ritual discourse, Imox is associated with primordial water, rain, divination, communication with ancestors, and the tension between madness and wisdom (Tedlock 1992; Christenson 2001; Vallejo Reyna 2004). The numeral eight is understood to emphasize balance and the harmonization of opposing forces. Consequently, the day 8 Imox is considered particularly favorable for rituals concerning water, healing, and spiritual equilibrium.



Figure 4. Shrine and altar with a potbelly sculpture known as Waq Xaqui Imox. Photograph by Milan Kováč.

Local Folk Beliefs and Comparative Perspectives

A distinction must be made between the interpretations promoted by contemporary *aj q'ijab'*, which are often influenced by broader pan-Maya and neo-Maya currents, and beliefs circulating among local farmers. Despite the monument having become widely known only within the last three to four years, narratives have already emerged describing it as an elderly woman who must continuously receive floral offerings. According to these accounts, neglecting the monument may result in excessive rainfall, landslides, and crop loss.

Such beliefs suggest a conceptual association between the sculpture and female supernatural beings connected with rain and destructive water. In comparative perspective, this figure recalls the goddess commonly designated as Goddess O or *Chak Chel* in the Dresden Codex (Vail 2012), whose manifestations are also documented throughout the Guatemalan Highlands (Miller 2013). Comparable figures include *B'atzb'al* among the Tz'utujil (Tarn

and Prechtel 1986) and *Xkitza* among the Q'eqchi' (Braakhuis 2001). Kaqchikel traditions likewise describe a powerful and potentially malevolent adoptive grandmother of the Hero Twins who is ultimately destroyed in a *temazcal* (Redfield 1941).

The relatively rapid emergence of these ideas demonstrates that the monument is not merely an archaeological remain but an active participant in contemporary processes of meaning-making. Its significance continues to be negotiated through ritual practice, local memory, and Indigenous cosmological frameworks, generating new layers of significance more than two millennia after its original creation.



Figure 5. Potbelly sculpture from San José Chacayá adorned with Christmas garlands around the neck and waist. Photograph by Milan Kováč.

Itzqueye (Pipil)

Discovery and Archaeological Context

The sculpture known as *Itzqueye* (or *Iztqueye*) measures 100 cm in height, 80 cm in width, and 57 cm in thickness (Figure 6). It is a potbelly-type monument located on Teopán Island in Lake Coatepeque, department of Santa Ana, El Salvador.

The sculpture was discovered in 1996 during construction activities, buried beneath approximately one meter of sediment. Archaeological investigations associated the monument with Chul ceramics dated between 400–100 BCE and Caynac ceramics dated between 100 BCE and 250 CE. These contexts closely parallel those documented for the well-known potbelly sculptures from the nearby site of Santa Leticia. Additional finds included mushroom stones and Bolinas-type figurines (Amaroli 1997: 52).



Figure 6. Potbelly sculpture from Teopán Island (Lake Coatepeque). Drawing by Luis Fernando Luin based on photographs and 3D models by Milan Kováč and Dora García Patzán.

These associations indicate that the original monument belongs to the same cultural and chronological horizon as other Pacific Coast potbelly sculptures, with its production and primary cult likely spanning the transition from the Middle to Late Preclassic through the Terminal Preclassic or the Late Preclassic–Early Classic transition.

Although archaeological investigations at Teopán have been limited and no comprehensive ceramic sequence has been published for the island, it lies within a region that was occupied by Pipil populations during the Postclassic period. Archaeological evidence from nearby Chalchuapa and the wider Santa Ana region documents substantial Pipil settlement and associated ceramic traditions, suggesting that Teopán formed part of a broader Postclassic cultural landscape (Fowler 1981, 1989).

Site Description and Cultural Setting

Teopán Island occupies a central position within Lake Coatepeque. The island is relatively small, measuring slightly more than one kilometer in diameter and rising approximately 80–100 m above the lake surface. Geologically, it represents a lava dome formed after the volcanic processes that created the lake basin.

The island's name derives from Pipil *teopan* (< *teotl-pan*), meaning “place of the deity” or “temple,” a meaning preserved in the local Nahuatl variant (Cuisnahuatl), where the form *Teupan* is also attested. The toponym itself suggests that the island possessed ritual significance during the Pipil occupation after the tenth century CE.

The surrounding lake likewise bears a Nahua-derived name. *Coatepeque* originates from *coatl-tepetl-co* (“serpent–mountain–place”), meaning “at the serpent mountain” or “mountain of the serpent.” As discussed below, this toponym may have carried important cosmological associations within broader Nahua religious traditions.

Today, Teopán is privately owned and contains luxury residences and recreational facilities. Lake Coatepeque, covering approximately 26 km² with depths reaching 115 m, was declared a protected natural reserve in 2023.

Description, Modification, and Dating of the Sculpture

The monument represents a classic example of the Monte Alto potbelly tradition as described by Parsons (1986: 39–40). Carved from volcanic stone, it displays a prominent abdomen, marked navel, folded legs, and arms extending toward the belly. Particularly unusual is the presence of clearly defined breasts, making it one of the few known potbelly sculptures with explicit female attributes.

The head is rounded and slightly tilted upward. The face displays a rounded chin, geometric mouth, triangular nose, and relatively small eyes. Deep incisions surrounding the eyes and cheeks create an appearance of advanced age. An eroded element on the forehead may once have represented a diadem, while a protruding feature on the posterior portion of the head may correspond to a headdress.

Amaroli suggested that the eyes were modified during a later, maybe Postclassic phase and originally resembled the swollen, closed eyes characteristic of potbelly sculptures from Santa Leticia (Amaroli 1997: 52). To evaluate this hypothesis, we produced both LiDAR and photogrammetric models of the monument.

Our analysis revealed no clear evidence for selective modification of the eyes alone. Rather, the entire face looks like it bears traces of rework. Besides, the flattened morphology, geometric treatment, deeply incised wrinkles, and overall rare facial composition might resemble Postclassic artistic conventions. In contrast, the body retains all essential characteristics of the original potbelly tradition.

We therefore propose that it is possible that the sculpture underwent substantial re-carving during the Postclassic period. Rather than modifying only the eyes, it is possible that Pipil sculptors may have reshaped the entire facial region in order to transform an ancient monument into the image of a deity consistent with their own cosmology. The asymmetrical

and partially non-corresponding posterior section of the head (Figure 7) may represent a remnant of the original sculpture that survived this intervention.



Figure 7. Detail of the head: the head emerges directly from the torso and, at the back, resembles an unusual headdress, which may instead be a fragment of the original head that was re-carved at the front. Photograph by Dora García Patzán.

Possible Pipil Reinterpretation and Mythological-Historical Parallels

The island's name, Teopán ("place of the deity"), together with the sacred toponym Coatepeque ("serpent mountain"), suggests that the monument became integrated into a broader Nahua cosmological landscape.

The name Coatepec occupies a central position in Central Mexican mythology. It is the sacred mountain associated with the birth of Huitzilopochtli and the death of Coyolxauhqui, serving simultaneously as a cosmic center, a place of creation, and a locus of divine conflict (López Austin and López Luján 2009). Although the surviving Aztec narratives postdate Pipil migration into present-day El Salvador, both groups likely inherited elements of older Central Mexican mythological traditions.

The female character of the sculpture may have encouraged its identification with one or more Nahua goddesses. The most direct candidate is Itzqueye (also Iztqueye or Izqueye), a name used for this statue by the local population, likely derived from *itztli-cueitl* ("obsidian-skirt"), literally "Lady of Obsidian." The linguistic construction parallels names such as Chalchiuhtlicue ("Jade Skirt"), although no exact equivalent of Itzqueye is known from Central Mexican sources.

The symbolism of obsidian in Nahuatl sources suggests associations with darkness, sacrifice, death, power, and the underworld (Pastrana and Nichols 2014). The aged appearance of the monument recalls deities such as Huehueteotl, Tezcatlipoca, and Mictlantecuhтли, indicating a symbolic sphere distinct from fertility-oriented female divinities.

Several mythological parallels may be considered. The sculpture evokes aspects of Coyolxauhqui as a lunar and nocturnal deity. Another possibility is Coatlicue, “She of the Serpent Skirt,” whose association with lake Coatepeque/Coatepec may be relevant. According to Nahua traditions, Coatepec possessed transformative powers capable of rejuvenating those who ascended it and aging those who descended (González Torres 1991: 43). Surviving depictions of Coatlicue frequently emphasize earth/chthonic and regenerative dimensions rather than maternal benevolence.

A further parallel may be found in Itzpapálotl, “Obsidian Butterfly,” the only major female Nahua deity whose name incorporates obsidian symbolism. As one of the Tzitzimime, she combined associations with death, sacrifice, ancestry, and cosmic regeneration (González Torres 1991: 95). Although no direct identification is possible, these parallels suggest a broader symbolic field through which Pipil communities may have understood the monument.

Colonial and Contemporary Indigenous Interpretations

Itzqueye may represent the only known Preclassic potbelly sculpture whose cult was recorded in colonial documentation. During his visit in 1576, Diego García de Palacio described a female stone idol venerated by Pipils on an island (García de Palacio 1982: 273). He further referred to name Itzqueye as an important Pipil female deity (Squier 1860: 66).

Although the colonial descriptions lack sufficient detail to permit definitive identification, both, modern scholarship and contemporary local traditions has consistently associated these accounts with Teopán Island and the monument discussed here.

Following its rediscovery in 1996, the monument again entered local religious discourse. Informants report that fishermen regard the figure as a protective being capable of preventing drowning and influencing fishing success. Others attribute to her control over earthquakes and volcanic activity, including both destructive and protective powers.

During our fieldwork, all elderly residents familiar with the sculpture expressed considerable respect toward it. Although we observed no evidence of candle burning or fire rituals, large obsidian cores and flakes were arranged around the monument (Figure 8), suggesting the continued relevance of obsidian symbolism in local interpretations.

Transformations of Meaning Through Time

The history of Itzqueye illustrates at least three major episodes of religious reinterpretation.

First, the monument was created during the Late Preclassic as part of the broader Pacific Coast potbelly tradition. In accordance with current interpretations, it likely functioned within an ancestral cult and may have represented a female founding progenitor or revered ancestor. According to the circumstances of discovery and ceramics, this original cult appears to have persisted for approximately five to six centuries before ending during the second century CE.

Second, after its rediscovery by Pipil populations, most likely around the tenth century CE, the sculpture was transformed physically and conceptually. Through the re-carving of its face and its incorporation into a sacred island landscape, it became identified as a female deity

associated with obsidian, the underworld, death, and regenerative forces. This second religious life endured until the Spanish conquest.

Third, the rediscovery of the monument in 1996 initiated a new phase of meaning-making. Contemporary interpretations draw simultaneously upon local oral traditions, colonial accounts, Pipil ethnic heritage, archaeological knowledge, and modern heritage discourse.

The sculpture's present context reflects this complexity. Restricted access prevents the development of a large-scale popular cult, yet the monument continues to function as a symbol of Pipil identity, a discreet object of veneration among local workers and residents, and an archaeological artifact embedded within elite heritage landscapes. Rather than representing a simple continuity of belief, Itzqueye demonstrates how a single Preclassic monument has repeatedly acquired new meanings across more than two millennia of cultural transformation.



Figure 8. Shelter on Teopán Island featuring a potbelly sculpture identified as Iztqueye (Itzqueye), the goddess of Teopán. Large pieces of unworked obsidian are arranged on the base. Photograph by Milan Kováč.

La Meca (Mam)

Description of the Sculpture

Under the name *La Meca* is known a potbelly sculpture officially recorded as Monument 2 of Tak'alik Ab'aj, a major Guatemalan archaeological site located in the department of Retalhuleu (Figure 9). Its dimensions are 184 cm in height, 94 cm in width, and 121 cm in thickness. It is a massive sculpture with no preserved facial features, while the left side of the head is partially detached. According to local testimony, this fracture is relatively recent (approximately mid-20th century) and occurred during a failed attempt to move the sculpture using a tractor by the estate owner.

Overall, the sculpture presents a disproportionately large head projecting forward and slumping relative to the body. In profile, a hump is visible a bit higher than at shoulder level. The arms are robust, hanging along the sides of the body and resting on a prominent abdomen. The fingers are carefully carved. Beneath the torso, the legs are disproportionately miniaturized and folded in a cross-legged position.



Figure 9. Monument 2 from Tak'alik Ab'aj, known as *La Meca*. Drawing by Luis Fernando Luin based on photographs and a 3D model by Milan Kováč and Dora García Patzán.

Archaeological Context and Dating

Monument 2 was formally documented as part of the extensive archaeological inventory of Tak'alik Ab'aj particularly during investigations conducted between 1976 and 1981 under the direction of the University of California, Berkeley. It had already been recorded during the systematic archaeological investigations carried out by John Graham, Robert Heizer, and Edwin Shook in the report *Abaj Takalik – Exploratory Investigations* (1976), which included the cataloging and formal registration of the site's monuments.

John Graham initially dated this monument to the Middle Preclassic period, 600–400 BCE, “based on stratigraphic context and comparative Olmec-style features” (Graham 1981: 46). At present, scholars no longer refer to a strictly “Olmec style,” but rather to a local sculptural tradition only loosely inspired by Olmec models. Furthermore, dating cannot be precise due to relocation in the ancient past. Nevertheless, there is broad agreement that this corpus of sculptures dates between Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic period and formed part of an early ideological system linked to rulership and the expression of authority (Orrego Corzo and Schieber de Lavarreda 2010).

Location and Cultural Landscape

El Monumento 2 se ubica en el Grupo Oeste de Tak'alik Ab'aj, donde hay un conjunto de 8 estructuras, lugar de procedencia de unas de las esculturas más icónicas de Tak'alik Ab'aj, como las Estelas 1, 4, y el notorio barrigón Monumento 40, entre otros, actualmente exhibidos en el Parque Arqueológico Nacional Tak'alik Ab'aj (Schieber de Lavarreda et al 2024). The monument remains at the location where it was originally discovered, the only 2 m from the rural access road connecting the various plantations located within the archaeological site.

Its position outside the protected archaeological zone has had important consequences for its social life. The sculpture is freely accessible to local inhabitants and Indigenous visitors, who continue to venerate it, whereas researchers must obtain permission to enter the private property. During our visits, the monument was frequently decorated with fresh flowers, while traces of burned ceremonial candles were visible directly in front of it.

Today, the monument is widely known throughout the surrounding region under the name *La Meca* (Figure 10), and its ritual significance extends well beyond the immediate locality.

The Name “La Meca”: Etymologies and Local Explanations

The meaning and origin of the name *La Meca* remain uncertain. Given the monument's association with Indigenous ritual practices, it is reasonable to explore possible etymologies in Mam, the principal Indigenous language of the area. Consultations with dictionaries and local speakers indicate that the word *meca* itself does not exist in Mam, although it may represent a Hispanized form derived from an Indigenous root.

One possible source is the Mam root *mek'/meq'*. In Mam, *meq'* means “heat,” while *mek'el* means “embrace.” Comparable forms are found in neighboring Maya languages; for example, K'iche' *meq'in* means “hot.” Throughout the region, cognate forms tend to be associated either with warmth or embrace. Such an adaptation could imply that the sculpture was perceived as a being that either “embraces” or “radiates heat.” The latter interpretation is especially plausible given the widespread perception that the figure represents a pregnant

woman and the association between pregnancy and healing warmth documented in Maya traditions (Kováč and Podolinská 2017: 145). Our informant Don Jeremías noted that the sculpture was widely believed to possess a strong “energy,” a notion that may reinforce such interpretations. Nevertheless, no evidence confirms that the name *La Meca* originated from an Indigenous term of this kind.



Figure 10. Potbelly sculpture known as *La Meca*, right-side view, decorated with flowers. The head is damaged on this side, but the hand is well preserved. Photograph by Dora García Patzán.

According to Don Jeremías, whose father administered the San Isidro Piedra Parada estate during the second half of the twentieth century, the sculpture was already known as *La Meca* when his family arrived in 1966. He considers the designation modern rather than Indigenous in origin. One explanation he recalled attributes the name to an early visitor who, impressed by the monument, exclaimed “¡la meca!”—a reference to the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia—which subsequently became popularized. A related explanation links the name metaphorically to Mecca as a sacred pilgrimage destination. Researchers, visitors, and local inhabitants may have adopted the designation because of the Indigenous rituals performed at the monument.

A different explanation concerns regional social terminology. According to the same informant, Indigenous Mam laborers from San Martín Chile Verde (today San Martín Zacatepéquez) were often called *mecos* (men) and *mecas* (women) when they arrived at coffee plantations seeking work. The terms carried pejorative connotations and were frequently applied to individuals perceived as unable to speak Spanish fluently or unwilling to comply with plantation discipline.

Additional insight is provided by the dictionary of the Real Academia Española, which identifies *meco* as a shortened form of *chichimeca*. In colonial usage, *chichimeca* frequently

signified a “savage” or non-assimilated Indigenous person (Lockhart 1992). The abbreviated form *meco* (feminine *meca*) consequently acquired meanings such as Indigenous, wild, backward, or uncivilized. Given the proximity of the region to southern Mexico, this semantic field likely circulated widely across the borderlands. In this context, the name *La Meca* may have originally signified “the Indigenous woman,” thereby associating the sculpture with the ancestral Indigenous population of the region.

Contemporary Ritual Practices and Local Beliefs

The cult of *La Meca* remains active and highly visible. Although there is no formal altar, offerings are deposited directly before the monument. During our fieldwork, we documented candles in glass containers, bouquets of red flowers placed in improvised bamboo vases, palm leaves, and pink orchids (Figure 11). A crown of wildflowers had been placed upon the sculpture’s head.



Figure 11. Potbelly sculpture known as *La Meca*, left-side view, decorated with flowers. The head is preserved on this side but the hand is damaged. Photograph by Dora García Patzán.

Don Jeremías recalled that ritual activities were already taking place during the 1960s:

“The Sanjorines (Mam from San Martín Zacatepéquez) were already performing their rituals in front of it, during which we, as children, would stay somewhat at a distance. They left burned copal, charcoal, colored flowers, and candles in front of the sculpture, although these

practices were not very frequent. We had enough space to play regularly in front of that sculpture. Our usual game was that La Meca was our mother, and we would ask her permission to gather edible herbs, *maxán* leaves, bananas, and even firewood.”

This testimony suggests that La Meca functioned not only as a ritual focus for adults but also as a socialized figure integrated into children’s everyday understanding of the landscape. Through play, children reproduced patterns of interaction with the monument analogous to those practiced by adults.

The monument is also associated with narratives of agency and miraculous power. Don Alberto recounted repeated attempts by estate owners to move the sculpture using tractors and heavy machinery, all of which failed. According to his interpretation, “La Meca was very special and had powers from elsewhere because they could not move her.” Don Jeremías similarly reported local beliefs that La Meca was “the mother of the other monuments” because of her extraordinary energy.

He also related a story told by Doña Lucia:

“When I went to gather banana leaves to wrap tamales, it was already getting dark, but I saw a pair of mecos approaching the sculpture. When they got very close, they disappeared into it.”

Such narratives (the term “mecos” in this case refers to the Mam people of San Martín Zacatepéquez) portray the sculpture as a liminal being capable of mediating between two cosmological levels of the world, and between human and non-human realms. According to local accounts, La Meca performs miracles, heals illnesses, promotes fertility, and maintains a special relationship with the surrounding environment.

Interpretative Framework and Mythological Parallels

Contemporary interpretations consistently identify La Meca as a pregnant woman and maternal figure. She is perceived as the mother of the other stone monuments of Takalik Abaj, a source of healing power, fertility, and life-giving energy. Rather than functioning as a discrete deity with a fixed mythology, she appears as a highly relational being whose efficacy derives from her position between the human community, the landscape, and the ancestral past.

For this reason, it would be problematic to identify La Meca directly with any specific pre-Hispanic deity. Nevertheless, the beliefs surrounding her resonate strongly with concepts documented among Mam-speaking populations concerning animate earth beings and female powers associated with fertility and the land.

Possible analogues include concepts such as *ix ruux* as a female spirit, *ix q’anil* as the female aspect of cosmic fertility, or *k’ayil ix ja’* and *rutzil k’ayil*, figures associated with lunar and terrestrial generative forces (Oakes 1951; England 1983). These should not be understood as direct identifications but rather as conceptual parallels within a broader Mam cosmology. Likewise, the contemporary expression *Qtxutx’otx’* (“Mother Earth”) is primarily documented in recent discourse (Mash-Mash and Gómez 2014), although earlier ethnographic studies describe comparable understandings of the earth as an animate and agentive presence (Cosminsky 1978).

Viewed in this light, La Meca functions less as the representation of a specific mythological character than as a localized manifestation of enduring Indigenous conceptions of fertile, animate, and powerful earth beings. Her contemporary significance lies precisely in this capacity to mediate between ancestral monuments, living communities, and the landscape itself.

Yawa Ixoq Ab'aj (Tz'utujil)

Description of the Sculpture

This is the only sculpture among the four studied for which no prior scientific data exist. It can be stated that our description likely constitutes the first academic presentation of this monument. The sculpture measures 100 cm in height, 76 cm in width, and 65 cm in thickness (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Newly identified potbelly sculpture *Yawa Ixoq Ab'aj* from San Pablo La Laguna. Drawing by Luis Fernando Luin based on photographs and a 3D model by Milan Kováč and Dora García Patzán.

The monument has a large head inclined forward, with a broad collar-like element surrounding the neck; in the ear area, traces of eroded earspools remain visible. Along the body, the arms rest on a prominent abdomen. Only the left arm is preserved, while the right has suffered substantial damage. Beneath the torso, very small schematic legs are indicated. The mouth and eyes are carved in a notably crude manner (Figure 13).

There are no precedents for such a representation of eyes and mouth among known potbelly sculptures. Their form appears to result from a secondary and technically unsophisticated

intervention. The stone surface around the mouth and eyes is noticeably lighter in color than the remainder of the monument, suggesting later modification. Although the date of this intervention remains uncertain, it may belong to the Postclassic, Colonial, or even modern periods. Given its naïve execution, it is possible that these features were carved only a few decades ago.



Figure 13. Head of a potbelly sculpture with subsequently and crudely carved eyes and mouth. Photograph by Milan Kováč.

Location and Archaeological Context

We discovered the monument fortuitously while inquiring about other monuments in the community of San Pablo La Laguna, situated on the shores of Lake Atitlán. The monuments we were originally seeking, reportedly more than one, were described as being located “in the courtyard of a certain house in the village.” However, our initial informant misunderstood the location and directed us toward the northern edge of the settlement, outside the inhabited area, to a stone object he referred to in Spanish as a *mujer embarazada* (“pregnant woman”).

At the edge of the settlement, we encountered a household inhabited by several women who communicated exclusively in Tz’utujil. One of them agreed to guide us to the monument, which they called *Yawa Ixox Ab’aj*, literally “pregnant woman of stone.”

The sculpture is situated on the western side of the Lake Atitlán, on the southern slopes of the hills Batz’bal Juyu and Chuwaraqan Tzi and on the western slope of Chuwa Portrello, above the community of San Pablo La Laguna. A nearby landmark is a water reservoir located several hundred meters downslope that supplies the community.

The monument is not associated with visible remains of pre-Hispanic architecture, terraces, or other archaeological features, although the area would require systematic archaeological investigation before any definitive conclusions could be reached. The slope is relatively steep

and presently covered with trees managed for coffee cultivation through periodic pruning and burning.

The isolation, inaccessibility, and overall character of the locality differ markedly from previously documented contexts of potbelly sculptures. Nevertheless, the setting shows certain similarities to the context of the sculpture from the nearby location San José Chacayá, despite substantial differences in the monuments themselves.

Toponymy and Historical Significance of the Place

A possible indication of the monument's earlier significance may be preserved in the local toponym *Xepojp*. The name *Xe-pojp* literally means "below the mat." According to local informants, it refers to a place where old mats were discarded. They further stated that the original settlement center was not located at the present-day community center (Batz'bal Tinamit) but rather near Chu' Tinamit, close to this locality.

The term *poj*p (equivalent to *pop* in other Mayan languages) is closely associated throughout the Maya area with authority, rulership, and political power. Consequently, the explanation of the place as merely a refuse area for discarded mats may reflect a later folk etymology that emerged after the original meaning of the toponym had been forgotten.

Hypothetically an alternative interpretation would understand the "place of mats" as an ancient seat of authority or political center, with *Xepojp* referring more broadly to a locality situated "below the mat" or "below the seat of power." The position of the sculpture at the foot of a hill and outside the present-day settlement would correspond well to such an interpretation. However, only archaeological intervention could shed more light on this.

Contemporary Ritual Practices and Local Interpretations

Local inhabitants stated that *Yawa Ixq Ab'aj* functions as a guardian of water sources essential to the entire community. Evidence for an active cult is provided by a hearth containing charcoal situated on a square stone block, possibly itself a modified monument, currently serving as an improvised altar for offerings (Figure 14).

Unlike the other monuments discussed in this study, we found no traces of ceremonial candles. This absence may indicate that the site is not regularly visited by *aj q'ij* who practice contemporary Maya ritual forms. Instead, the cult appears to be maintained through more localized and private practices.

The exact purpose of these rituals may be connected to the nearby water reservoir, with the sculpture understood as both a provider and protector of water. At the same time, the monument is consistently referred to as a "pregnant woman," both in Spanish and Tz'utujil usage. The persistence of this designation suggests that fertility and maternity constitute central dimensions of its contemporary ritual significance.

Interpretive and Mythological Perspectives

Among Highland Maya communities, and specifically among the Tz'utujil, childbirth is understood not merely as a biological process but also as a ritual and cosmological event. Traditional midwives (*comadronas*) mediate between local knowledge systems and

biomedical practices, integrating pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care into broader spiritual frameworks (Hinojosa 2004).



Figure 14. Potbelly sculpture from San Pablo La Laguna with an improvised altar in front of it, where private rituals are performed. Photograph by Milan Kováč.

Similarly, Carlsen and Prechtel (1988) describe Tz’utujil understandings of childbirth through the symbolic language of weaving, in which the loom and threads metaphorically represent gestation, creation, and the generation of life. Such associations underscore the central cosmological importance of female reproductive capacities.

Within this interpretive framework, *Yawa Ixq Ab’aj* may be understood as a patroness of pregnancy, fertility, and water. Its contemporary role as a guardian of springs and water resources further reinforces this association. Although direct continuity with pre-Hispanic beliefs cannot be demonstrated, the sculpture evokes attributes commonly associated with female supernatural beings in the Maya world.

One possible comparative framework is provided by the complex of beliefs surrounding *Ix Chel*, a female deity associated with water, healing, weaving, fertility, and childbirth (Ardren 2006). While it would be inappropriate to identify the sculpture directly with *Ix Chel*, the

convergence of water symbolism, maternity, healing, and female creative power suggests that similar conceptual associations may inform contemporary interpretations of the monument.

At present, *Yawa Ixoq Ab'aj* appears to function as a localized protective being whose agency is rooted in the landscape itself. Rather than representing a specific remembered deity, it occupies a liminal position between ancestral monument, guardian of water, and patroness of fertility, illustrating how ancient sculptures can acquire new meanings through ongoing interactions between communities, environment, and material remains.

Discussion

Archaeological Background and the Problem of Original Meaning

The original meaning of the analyzed potbelly sculptures did not constitute part of the research question. Nevertheless, both archaeological evidence and current scholarly debate provide an important point of departure for understanding their contemporary significance. Based on our recently excavated examples from Uaxactun, Los Abuelos, and Cambrayal (Kováč and García Patzán 2020; Kováč et al. 2025a, b), as well as on the most influential interpretations of the corpus (Guernsey 2010, 2012), we are inclined to view potbellies primarily as representations of deceased rulers or lineage founders who became objects of ancestor veneration.

The four sculptures examined here do not appear to constitute exceptions. Their particular significance lies elsewhere: contemporary Indigenous populations, who are in some measure successors to ancient Mesoamerican traditions, continue to engage with them as active ritual entities. Yet contemporary beliefs cannot be used straightforwardly to reconstruct original meanings. The societies that produced potbellies underwent profound transformations already during the first and second centuries CE, after which both the sculptures themselves and the iconographic tradition to which they belonged largely disappeared. Consequently, nearly two millennia separate the original contexts of production from contemporary practices of veneration.

This temporal depth does not necessarily preclude continuity, but it does imply substantial semantic discontinuity. It is therefore plausible that many potbellies had already lost their original meanings by the Classic period, when some were ritually reactivated and incorporated into new cultural contexts.

Potbellies as Contemporary Relational Beings

Across all four case studies, local communities display a remarkable degree of sensitivity toward these monuments. Archaeological interest is often viewed with suspicion, and the sculptures are generally not conceived as heritage objects intended for tourism or public display. Instead, they function as sacred beings whose powers are understood to benefit primarily the local community.

Offerings, flowers, candles, and other ritual practices establish reciprocal relationships between people and sculptures. Community members assume responsibility for protecting these monuments and maintaining relations with them through ritual attention. Such relationships are motivated not only by expectations of protection, fertility, health, or

prosperity, but also by concern that neglect or inappropriate treatment might provoke negative consequences.

From this perspective, the question of whom exactly the sculptures originally represented becomes secondary. The anthropomorphic stone itself constitutes a powerful ritual presence. Whether understood as ancestor, saint, guardian, or spirit, its efficacy derives less from stable identity than from its capacity to participate in social and ritual relations.

This observation recalls David Stuart's argument that stone occupied a unique position within Maya thought as a material simultaneously earthly and transcendent, durable and animate (Stuart 2010: 285–286). The pre-Hispanic character of these sculptures further enhances their potency. Their antiquity allows them to function as tangible links to ancestral time, transforming them into material bridges between present communities and a distant, partially mythologized past. In this sense, the sculptures embody what Patricia McAnany (2020: 79) describes as the importance of “deep time” within Maya historical consciousness.

Ontographic Perspectives: Agency, Context, and Reconfiguration

An ontographic perspective suggests that the significance of these monuments does not reside primarily in what they represent but in how they participate in networks of relationships. Their identities emerge through interactions among people, landscapes, offerings, memories, narratives, and ritual practices.

Comparable observations emerge from Kováč's (2020) discussion of the Lacandon category *hach b'iram* (“true holiness”), applied to both unworked stones and ancient sculptures. These objects may simultaneously function as mediators between humans and deities, embodiments of gods or sacred forces, and living stones in their own right. Their meanings remain fluid and contingent upon context.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the four potbellies discussed here. Their ritual efficacy cannot be reduced to a single ontological category. They are at once archaeological objects, ancestors, sacred places, sources of protection, and participants in local social worlds. Their identities are therefore relational rather than essential.

This interpretation resonates with broader approaches associated with the ontological turn. Rather than treating the sculptures as passive representations of culturally shared beliefs, an ontographic approach focuses on the concrete assemblages through which they become active beings. The monument, the altar, flowers, water sources, local narratives, memories of ancestors, ritual specialists, and community concerns together generate the phenomenon that local people encounter as a powerful sacred presence.

Comparable insights emerge from studies of the Pascual Abaj shrine among the K'iche'. Cook (2000) shows that the monument is not approached primarily as the representation of a specific deity but as a focal point of ritual interaction linking humans, ancestors, landscape beings, and other supernatural powers. Potbellies appear to operate in a remarkably similar manner. They are not merely images of someone; they are participants in relationships.

Contemporary ritual engagements with potbelly sculptures may be understood within a relational framework in which ritual practice is not confined to a discrete domain of religious action, but constitutes a mode of ongoing social practice through which relations among

human and non-human actors, ancestors, and place are continuously produced and reconfigured. In this sense, archaeological objects are not approached as inert material residues or as static references to past belief systems, but as elements that may be activated within situated practices of engagement, in which relational ties are enacted and sustained through performance and action (Astor-Aguilera 2020).

From this perspective, the analytical distinction between ritual and everyday practice becomes increasingly untenable, as both are embedded within a continuum of social activity in which relations are continually negotiated. Contemporary forms of engagement with potbelly sculptures can thus be situated within this continuum as practices through which relationships between living communities, ancestral presence, and landscape are materially and performatively maintained.

Discontinuity and the Production of New Meanings

The case studies further demonstrate that reinterpretation has been a recurrent feature of potbelly biographies. Changes in location, physical modification, and shifting ritual contexts indicate repeated processes of re-signification.

The most explicit example is *Itzqueye* on Teopán Island. Archaeological evidence suggests that the sculpture originated within a Preclassic ancestral cult, yet it was later rediscovered and incorporated into Pipil religious traditions, where it became associated with a female deity. Significantly, this reinterpretation probably involved physical modification of the monument itself. By the Postclassic period, the sculpture effectively functioned as an archaeological relic whose original context was no longer understood.

A similar process may also have taken place in the case of *Yawa Ixoq Ab'aj*, whose face appears to have been re-carved relatively recently in order to give new life to an ancient sculpture that had become damaged and eroded.

Consequently, contemporary forms of veneration should not be interpreted as survivals of unchanged ancient traditions but as products of successive historical reconfigurations. The biographies of these monuments are characterized less by continuity than by repeated acts of reinterpretation.

From an ontographic perspective, such transformations do not represent distortions of an original meaning. Rather, they constitute moments in which new relationships emerge and new configurations are produced. The sculptures become different beings because they become embedded within different networks of people, places, narratives, and practices.

The Feminization of Potbellies in Contemporary Indigenous Ontologies

The most striking pattern emerging from all four case studies is the consistent feminization of the sculptures within contemporary Indigenous interpretations.

This tendency appears despite the fact that only one sculpture, *Itzqueye*, clearly exhibits female anatomical characteristics, while *Waq Xaqui Imox* only weakly suggests them. The remaining monuments possess no explicit markers of gender. Nevertheless, local communities consistently interpret their corpulent forms as signs of pregnancy and maternity.

Because the sculptures originate from distinct cultural and linguistic settings—Pipil, Kaqchikel, Tz’utujil, and Mam—and are separated by hundreds of kilometers, the recurrence of this pattern requires explanation. We do not believe that it reflects preservation of an original cult centered on a female deity. Archaeological evidence and current scholarly consensus continue to favor interpretations emphasizing ancestors and lineage founders rather than a dominant female divinity.

Instead, the feminization of potbellies appears to be a contemporary cultural process. The sculptures increasingly function as protective maternal beings associated with fertility, healing, water, agricultural productivity, and community well-being. Such interpretations may respond to contemporary social concerns, particularly those surrounding the position of Indigenous women.

Studies have demonstrated the persistence of structural inequalities affecting Indigenous women, including poverty, gender-based violence, restricted access to services, and limited institutional support (Wands and Mirzoev 2022; Rogg and Pezzia 2024). Within such circumstances, spiritual resources frequently become important mechanisms of resilience and protection.

The attribution of feminine qualities to powerful ancestral sculptures may therefore be understood as a means of producing symbolic balance within contemporary social worlds. In this respect, the sculptures occupy a position comparable to other protective female figures, including the Virgin Mary, whose significance has often been linked to ideals of care, mediation, and protection (Warner 1976).

At the same time, these developments intersect with broader currents associated with neo-Maya spirituality and New Age influences. Concepts such as Mother Earth spirituality, sacred feminine energy, healing, and spiritual feminism have become increasingly visible within contemporary Indigenous and neo-Indigenous religious discourse (Starhawk 1999; Kapusta 2020; Banach 2024; Crowley 2011). Although these ideas frequently employ Maya terminology and symbolism, they often emerge through complex processes of reinterpretation and recontextualization.

The resulting figure of a powerful maternal being does not derive directly from ancient Maya religion. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of traditional beliefs, global spiritual movements, decolonial discourses, and contemporary concerns regarding gender and social justice (Castañeda 2021). The feminized potbelly thus represents not the survival of an ancient goddess but the creation of a new relational being capable of responding to present-day needs while drawing authority from the material presence of the deep past.

Conclusion

This study has examined four Preclassic potbelly sculptures from the Pacific region of Mesoamerica that remain objects of contemporary Indigenous veneration in four distinct ethnolinguistic settings: Pipil, Kaqchikel, Tz’utujil, and Mam. Archaeologically, all four monuments belong to a broadly shared sculptural tradition that flourished between approximately 500 BCE and 200 CE within the cultural sphere of the Pacific coast. Their original significance was most likely linked to ancestor veneration and the commemoration of lineage founders, as suggested by recent archaeological discoveries from primary contexts

Kováč and García Patzán 2024; Kováč et al. 2025a, 2025b; Kováč and García Patzán 2026) and by current interpretations of Preclassic monumental sculpture (Guernsey 2010, 2012). Yet the central finding of this study lies not in reconstructing their original meaning, but in understanding how these monuments continue to exist as active participants in contemporary social and ritual worlds.

An ontographic perspective shifts analytical attention away from the question of what these sculptures originally represented and toward the relations through which they acquire reality in the present. Following approaches associated with the ontological turn (Latour 2005; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Alberti et al. 2013), the sculptures can be understood not as stable objects carrying a fixed symbolic content, but as nodes within evolving networks of humans, places, memories, ritual practices, narratives, ancestors, landscapes, offerings, and supernatural agencies. Their identities emerge through these associations rather than preceding them. What persists across two millennia is therefore not a specific meaning but the capacity of these monuments to gather and organize relations.

The four case studies demonstrate that this process operates through successive ontographic reconfigurations. The sculptures first existed within Preclassic ancestral cults. Some were subsequently reinterpreted during the Postclassic period, as in the case of *Itzqueye*, whose face was likely remodeled and incorporated into a Pipil religious landscape. Something similar also occurred in the case of *Yawa Ixoq Ab'aj*, albeit in the Colonial or modern period, when she was given a new face that reflected a new mode of engagement with the contemporary community.

In the present-day they have again entered new relational configurations, becoming protectors of water sources, guardians of agricultural fertility, mediators of healing, ancestors, female spirits, embodiments of local history, or focal points of communal identity. None of these interpretations should be regarded merely as symbolic projections imposed upon an otherwise passive object. Rather, the sculpture itself acts as a stabilizing centre around which these heterogeneous relations are assembled.

The concept of deep time is particularly important for understanding this process. As McAnany (2020) has argued for Maya worlds, the past is not a completed temporal domain but a persistent dimension of social existence. The power attributed to these sculptures derives precisely from their material capacity to bridge temporal discontinuities. Their antiquity is not simply known; it is experienced. Stone, as Stuart (2010) observed, possesses unique qualities of permanence and transcendence. Through its durability, it allows relations with ancestral time to remain materially accessible. The sculptures therefore function simultaneously as archaeological remains and as living participants in contemporary ritual life.

The comparison of the four cases further reveals a striking pattern. Despite their separation across considerable geographical, linguistic, and cultural distances, all are currently interpreted through predominantly feminine frameworks. They are perceived as mothers, protectors, guardians of fertility, custodians of water, bringer of destructive storms or powerful elderly female beings. Archaeological evidence does not support the conclusion that potbelly sculptures originally represented a female cult. Rather, the recurrent feminization of these monuments appears to be a contemporary phenomenon emerging from the intersection of local ritual practice, Indigenous concepts of care and protection, neo-Maya spirituality, spiritual feminism, and broader social transformations affecting Indigenous communities.

This process illustrates how ontographic networks are continuously reorganized in response to changing historical circumstances while remaining anchored to materially persistent objects.

The evidence presented here therefore suggests that contemporary potbelly cults should not be interpreted through models of simple cultural continuity. What survives is not the original semantic content of the monuments but their relational efficacy. Across multiple historical ruptures, these sculptures have repeatedly become centres around which new constellations of meanings, practices, and social needs crystallize. Their persistence lies not in preserving an unchanged message from the Preclassic past, but in their enduring capacity to participate in the production of new networks.

From this perspective, potbelly sculptures are neither merely archaeological artefacts nor merely sacred images. They are enduring ontographic nodes that connect people, places, memories, ancestors, and landscapes across radically different historical periods. Their significance resides precisely in this ability to mediate between temporalities, communities, and ontological domains. Rather than representing the past, they actively produce relationships with it. The continuing veneration of these monuments thus demonstrates that archaeological objects may remain socially alive long after the disappearance of the societies that created them, continually generating new forms of agency, belonging, and sacred presence.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Fidel Tuyuc, Miguel Medina, Ernesto Arredondo, and Marielos Corado, for their guidance, valuable informations and collaboration in the field; to Jakub Špoták for processing the 3D models of the potbelly sculptures; and to Luis Fernando Luin for their drawings. We are also deeply grateful to the Indigenous communities of San José Chacayá, San Pablo La Laguna, these around Tak'alik Ab'aj, and these around the Lake Coatepeque for their warm hospitality, with special thanks to Jeremías Claudio Pérez for to retrieve and save old local narratives.

This research was carried out within the framework of the research grant Recovery and Resilience Plan 09I03-03-V04-00234, P.A.C.T.: Preclassic Maya Potbelly Sculptures in Petén, Guatemala, and Their Connection to Ancestor Cult.

Bibliography

- Alberti, Benjamin, Andrew Meirion Jones and Joshua Pollard (eds.)
2013 *Archaeology after Interpretation: Returning Materials to Archaeological Theory*.
Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Amaroli, Paul
1997 A Newly Discovered Potbelly Sculpture from El Salvador and a Reinterpretation of the Genre. *Mexicon* 19(3):51–53.

Ardren, Traci

2006 Mending the Past: Ix Chel and the Invention of a Modern Pop Goddess. *Antiquity* 80(307):25–37.

Astor-Aguilera, Miguel

2020. Maya Rites, Rituals, and Ceremonies. In *The Maya World*, edited by Scott R. Hutson and Traci Ardren, 648–668. London and New York: Taylor & Francis.

Banach, Monika

2024 Dreaming with the Mountains: Maya Spirituality and Sacred Landscapes in the Ixil Region of Guatemala. Universitas, Krakow.

Barrientos, Tomás, Ernesto Arredondo Leiva, Julia Guernsey, Luis Fernando Luin and Diego López García

2024 La presencia del estilo escultórico “barrigón” en la cuenca del lago Atitlán. In *36 Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala 2023*, edited by B. Arroyo, L. Méndez S. y G. Ajú, pp. 391–408. Asociación Tikal, Guatemala.

Beliaev, Dmitri

2021 Potbelly Sculptures and Ancestor Worship on Pacific Coast of Southeastern Mesoamerica in the Late Formative (400 BC – AD 100). *Journal of Historical, Philological and Cultural Studies*, (2) 2021, pp. 7-30.

Bove, Frederick J.

1989 Formative Settlement Patterns on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala: A Spatial Analysis of Complex Societal Evolution. BAR International Series 493, Oxford.

Braakhuis, H. E. M.

2001 Xbalanque’s Marriage: A Commentary on the Q’eqchi’ Myth of Sun and Moon. *Anthropos* 96(2):395–409.

Bruchez, Margaret and David L. Carlson

1994 Proyecto de Investigación Arqueológica Departamento de Sololá, Guatemala, C.A. 1993: Los informes finales. Archaeological Surveys Number 10. Archaeological Research Laboratory, Texas A&M University.

Carlsen, Robert S., and Martín Prechtel

1988 Weaving and Cosmos Amongst the Tzutujil Maya of Guatemala. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 15:123–126.

Castañeda, Quetzil Eduardo

2021 Spiritually Seeking the Maya: Toward a Decolonial Approach to New Age Maya Spiritualities. *Ciencias Sociales y Religión* 23:1–37.

Chinchilla Mazariegos, Oswaldo, and Marie-France Fauvet-Berthelot

2018 De barones y barrigones: el periplo de las esculturas de Concepción, Escuintla. *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 52:77–104.

Chinchilla Mazariegos, Oswaldo

2001–2002 Los barrigones del sur de Mesoamérica / The Potbellies of Southern Mesoamerica. *Precolombart* 4/5:9–23. Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Guatemala.

Christenson, Allen J.

2001 *The Burden of the Ancients: Maya Ceremonial Specialists in Highland Guatemala*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Cook, Garrett W.

2000 *Renewing the Maya World: Expressive Culture in a Highland Town*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Cosminsky, Sheila

1978 Midwives and Cosmology in Highland Guatemala. *Medical Anthropology* 3(2):141–164.

Cotom, Julio

2020 Excavaciones en el Grupo E-Estructura E-XIV (Operación 36C). In *Nuevas Excavaciones en Uaxactun X*, edited by M. Kováč and D. García Patzán, pp. 45-87. Chronos, Bratislava.

Crowley, Karlyn

2011 *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*. State University of New York Press, Albany.

Davies, Gavin R., and María de los Ángeles Corado Mena.

2015 *Reconocimiento en la Orilla Oeste del Lago Atitlán, Proyecto Arqueológico Lago de Atitlán, Temporada 2015*. Electronic document.

https://www.mesoweb.com/resources/informes/PALA-2015_1.pdf?utm

Demarest, Arthur A.

1981 Santa Leticia and the Development of Complex Society in Southeastern Mesoamerica. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University.

Demarest, Arthur, Roy Switsur, and Rainer Berger

1982 The dating and cultural associations of the “Potbellied” sculptural style: new evidence from western El Salvador. *American Antiquity* 47(3).

Drápela, Tomáš, and Alexandra Rášová

2020 Recorrido y rescate en Uaxactun y sus alrededores dentro del polígono LiDAR. In *Nuevas Excavaciones en Uaxactun X*, edited by M. Kováč and D. García Patzán, pp. 258-275. Chronos, Bratislava.

Drucker, Philip

1952 La Venta, Tabasco: A Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 153, Washington, D.C.

England, Nora C.

1983 A Grammar of Mam: A Mayan Language. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Fowler, William R., Jr.

1989 The Cultural Evolution of Ancient Nahua Civilizations: The Pipil-Nicarao of Central America. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press

Fowler, William R., Jr.

1981 The Pipil-Nicarao of Central America. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Calgary.

Frühsoerge, Lars

2015. Sowing the Stone: Sacred Geography and Cultural Continuity. Economy among the Highland Maya of Guatemala. *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 45: 171–18.

García Patzán, Dora Maritza

2024 Cerámica Preclásica de Uaxactun: Una Revisión Tipológica y Propuesta Cronológica. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Comenius University, Bratislava.

García de Palacio, Diego

1982 *Carta al Rey Felipe II sobre la provincia de Guatemala (1576)*. San Salvador: Dirección de Publicaciones.

Girard, Rafael

1969 Descubrimiento reciente de esculturas pre-olmecas en Guatemala. In *Verhandlungen des XXXVIII Internationalen Amerikanistenkongress, Stuttgart-München*, pp. 203-213. Vol. 1. Munich: Kommissionsverlag Klaus Renner.

González Torres, Yolotl

1991 Diccionario de mitología y religión de Mesoamérica. Larousse, México.

Graham, John A.

1981 Investigations at Takalik Abaj. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Graham, John A., Robert F. Heizer, and Edwin M. Shook

1976 Abaj Takalik: Exploratory Investigations. *Studies in Ancient Mesoamerica* III: 85–109.

Grube, Nikolai (editor)

1999 The Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization. Verlag Anton Saurwein, Bonn.

Grube, Nikolai, and Werner Nahm

1994 A Census of Xibalba: A Complete Inventory of Way Characters on Maya Ceramics. In *The Maya Vase Book*, edited by Justin Kerr, pp. 686-715, Volume 4. New York: Kerr Associates.

Guernsey, Julia

2010 Rulers, Gods, and Potbellies, A consideration of sculptural forms and themes from the preclassic pacific coast and piedmont of Mesoamerica. In *The Place of stone monuments, Context, Use and Meaning in Mesoamerica's Preclassic Transition*, edited by J. Guernsey, J. E. Clark and B. Arroyo. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D. C.

Guernsey, Julia

2012 Potbellies and Social Identity in the Preclassic. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Guernsey, Julia and Michael Love

2008 Cerámica y Piedra: Relaciones entre alfarería, figurillas y escultura en el Preclásico de la Costa Sur. In *XXI Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2007*, edited by J.P. Laporte, B. Arroyo and H. Mejía, pp.1167-1192. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

Habel, S.

1878 The Sculptures of Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa in Guatemala. Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, Washington, D.C.

Houston, S., and David Stuart

1989 The Way Glyph: Evidence for Co-essences among the Classic Maya. Center for Maya Research, Washington, D.C.

Henare, Amiria, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (eds.)

2007 Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically. London and New York: Routledge.

Henderson, Lucia R.

2015 Donde hay humo, hay fuego: la búsqueda de la imagería de volcanes en las Tierras Altas y la Costa Sur. In *XXVIII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2014*, edited by B. Arroyo, L. Méndez Salinas and L. Paiz, pp. 731-746. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

Hinojosa, Servando Ortoll

2004 Parteras, comadronas y médicos: saberes y prácticas en torno al embarazo, parto y posparto en comunidades indígenas. México: CIESAS.

Holbraad, Martin

2009 Ontology, Ethnography, Archaeology: An Afterword on the Ontography of Things. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 19(3): 431–441.

Holbraad, Martin

2012 *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Holbraad, Martin and Morten Axel Pedersen

2017 *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ingold, Tim

2011 *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ingold, Tim

2018 *Anthropology: Why It Matters*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Inomata, Takeshi, y Lucia Henderson

2016 Time Tested: Re-thinking Chronology and Sculptural Traditions. *Antiquity* 90:456–471.

Kapusta, Jan

2020 *Oběť pro život. Tradice a spiritualita dnešních Mayů*. Argo, Edice Capricorn, Prague.

Kováč, Milan

2020 The Worshipers of Stones: Lacandon Sacred Stone Landscape. *Ethnologia Actualis* 20(1):1–18.

Kováč, Milan, and Tatiana Podolinská

2017 Maya Female Taboo: Menstruation and Pregnancy in Lacandon Daily Life. *Contributions in New World Archaeology* 11 (special issue): 143–148.

Kováč, Milan, and Dora Maritza García Patzán

2024 Una vista arqueológica al Petén Noreste desde Uaxactun. *Antropología e Historia de Guatemala*, pp. 11-41. *Revista de la Dirección general del patrimonio cultural y natural*.

Kováč, Milan, Dora García, Iveta Puchovanová, Jakub Špoták, Enrique Zambrano, Fidel Tuyuc, Gabriela Meléndez, Marek Bundzel, Ladislav Šilhán y Tomás Drápela

2025a Sitio Arqueológico Los Abuelos en el Petén Noreste. Nuevas investigaciones del Proyecto Arqueológico Regional Uaxactun (PARU). In *37 Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala 2024*, edited by G. Ajú, L. M. Salinas and L. Paiz, pp. 455-470. Museo de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala.

Kováč, Milan, Dora García, Iveta Puchovanová, Jakub Špoták, Enrique Zambrano, Fidel Tuyuc, Gabriela Meléndez, Marek Bundzel, Ladislav Šilhán y Tomáš Drápela

2025b Nuevas investigaciones en Petnal y otros sitios adyacentes. In *37 Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala 2024*, edited by G. Ajú, L. M. Salinas and L. Paiz, pp. 373-386. Museo de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala.

Kováč, Milan and Ladislav Šilhán

2026 Barrigón de Cambrayal – un estudio iconográfico. In *Excavaciones en el Petén Noreste. Temporada de campo 2025*, edited by Kováč Milan and Dora M. García Patzán. Chronos, Bratislava.

Kováč, Milan, and Dora Maritza García Patzán

2026 Potbelly Sculptures of Uaxactun: Context and Meaning of Early Monumental Tradition. In press with *The Mayanist*.

Lambert, Arnaud F.

2015 Extraneous Markings and the Modification of Potbelly Sculptures. *Antrocom* 11(2):187–198.

Latour, Bruno

1999 Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno

2005 Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

León-Portilla, Miguel

1956 La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes. UNAM, México.

Lockhart, James

1992 The Nahuas after the Conquest. Stanford University Press, Stanford.

López Austin, Alfredo and Leonardo López Luján

2009 *Monte Sagrado–Templo Mayor: El Cerro y la Pirámide en la Tradición Religiosa Mesoamericana*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Lothrop, Samuel

1926 Stone Sculptures from the Finca Arevalo Ruins, Guatemala. *Indian Notes* 3:147–171.

Lowe, Gareth W. Lowe, Thomas A. Lee Jr. and Eduardo Martínez E.

1982 Izapa: An Introduction to the ruins and monuments. Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation 31. University Provo, Utah.

Mash-Mash, and José Guadalupe Gómez

2014 Two Views of Consulta Previa in Guatemala: A View from Indigenous Peoples. *Americas Quarterly*, April 17. Electronic document.

<https://www.americasquarterly.org/fulltextarticle/two-views-of-consulta-previa-in-guatemala-a-view-from-indigenous-peoples/>

McAnany, Patricia A.

2020 Soul Proprietors: Durable Ontologies of Maya Deep Time. In *Sacred Matter: Animacy and Authority in the Americas*, edited by Steve Kosiba, John Wayne Janusek, and Thomas B. F. Cummins, pp. 71–104. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

McInnis Thompson, Lauri and Fred Valdez Jr.
2008 Potbelly Sculpture: An Inventory and Analysis. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 19 (1): 13–27

Miller, Carolyn A.

2013 *Earth, Water, Sky: Cosmology and Ritual in Tz'utujil Maya Tradition*. Virginia Tech.

Miller, Mary E. and Karl Taube

1993 An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya. Thames and Hudson, Londres.

Miles, Suzanne W.

1965 Sculpture of the Guatemala-Chiapas Highlands and Pacific slopes, and Associated hieroglyphs. In *The Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica*, part 1, edited by Gordon R. Willey, pp. 237-275. Vol. 3 of Handbook of Middle American Indians, edited by Robert Wauchope. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Mora-Marín, David F.

2016. The “Charlie Chaplin” Silhouette Figural Theme: A Pan-Middle American Ritual Performer Theme. *Cuadernos de Antropología* 26 (1): 9–45

Navarrete, Carlos

2022 Monumentos esculpidos preclásicos del Soconusco Occidental, Chiapas. Las representaciones de obesos. UNAM, México.

Oakes, Maud

1951 The Two Crosses of Todos Santos. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Olsen, Bjørnar

2010 In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Orrego Corzo, Miguel, and Christa Schieber de Lavarreda

2010 *Preclassic Olmec and Maya Monuments and Architecture at Tak'alik Ab'aj*. In *The Place of Stone Monuments: Context, Use, and Meaning in Mesoamerica's Preclassic*

Tradition, edited by Julia Guernsey, John E. Clark, and Barbara Arroyo, pp. 177–205. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Otzoy, Simón (editor)

1999 Memorial de Sololá: Anales de los Kaqchikeles. Guatemala: Cholsamaj.

Parsons, Lee Allen

1981 Post Olmec Stone Sculpture: The Olmec-Izapan Transition on the Southern Pacific Coast and Highlands. In *The Olmec and Their Neighbors*, edited by Elizabeth Benson, pp. 257-288. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington. D.C.

Parsons Lee Allen

1986 The origins of Maya art: Monumental stone sculpture of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, and the southern pacific coast. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D. C.

Parsons, Lee A. and Peter S. Jenson

1965 Boulder Sculpture on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala. *Archaeology*, 18-132-144.

Pastrana, Alejandro and Deborah L. Nichols

2014 "The Symbolism of Obsidian in Postclassic Central Mexico." In *Obsidian Reflections: Symbolic Dimensions of Obsidian in Mesoamerica*, edited by Marc N. Levine and David M. Carballo, 75–110. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

Petzey, Diego

2022 *Agricultores hallan pieza arqueológica en San José Chacayá, Sololá*. Prensa comunitaria. March 15/2022. Electronic document.
<https://prensacomunitaria.org/2022/03/agricultores-hallan-pieza-arqueologica-en-san-jose-chacaya>

Piña Chan, Román

1972 *Historia, Arqueología y Arte Prehispánico*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México.

Popenoe Hatch, Marion

1989 A Seriation of Monte Alto Sculptures. In *New Frontiers in the Archaeology of the Pacific Coast of Southern Mesoamerica*, edited by F. Bove and L. Heller, pp. 25-42. Arizona State University, Anthropological Research Papers No. 39.

Redfield, Robert

1941 *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Rogg, Magda C., and Carla Pezzia

2024 Victimization and Distress in Indigenous Maya Women: A Qualitative Investigation of Gender-Based Violence and Mental Health Outcomes in Rural Guatemala. *Journal of Family Violence* 39(2):193–207.

Rodas, Sergio M.

1993 Catálogo de Barrigones en Guatemala. *Utz'ib* 1 (15). Guatemala.

1992 Un análisis de los barrigones del sur de Mesoamerica y las implicaciones culturales. Dissertation of Arqueology, Escuela de Historia, USAC, Guatemala.

Richardson, Francis B.

1940 Non-Maya Monumental Sculpture of Central America. In *The Maya and their Beighbors: Essays on Middle American Anthropology and Archaeology*, edited by C. L. Hay et al., pp. 295-416. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company Inc.

Shook, Edwin M.

1971 Inventory of Some Preclassic Traits in the Highlands and Pacific Guatemala and Adjacent Areas. In *Observations on the Emergence of Civilization in Mesoamerica*, edited by Robert F. Heizer and John A. Graham, pp. 70-77. Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility 11. University of California, Berkeley.

Squier, Ephraim George

1860 *Diego García de Palacio, Carta al Rey sobre la provincia de Guatemala (1576)*. New York: Charles B. Norton.

Starhawk

1999 *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. Harper SanFrancisco, San Francisco.

Stuart, David

2010 Shining Stones: Observations on the Ritual Meaning of Early Maya Stelae." In *The Place of Stone Monuments: Context, Use, and Meaning in Mesoamerica's Preclassic Transitions*, edited by Julia Guernsey, John E. Clark, and Barbara Arroyo, pp. 283–298. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks.

Szymański, Jan, and Gabriela Prejs

2025 Of Puppets and Puppeteers: Preclassic Clay Figurines from San Isidro, El Salvador. *Antiquity* 99, no. 405 (2025): 780–796.

Taube, Karl

1998 The jade hearth: Centrality, rulership and the classic maya temple. In *Function and meaning in classic maya architecture*, edited by S. D. Houston, pp. 427-478, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D. C.

Tarn, Nathaniel, and Martín Prechtel

1986 *Scandals in the House of Birds: Shamans and Priests on Lake Atitlán*. New York: Marsilio Publishers.

Tedlock, Barbara

1992 *Time and the Highland Maya*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Thompson, L. M. And Valdez F., Jr.

2008 Potbelly Sculpture: An Inventory and Analysis'. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 19, 13-26.

Vallejo Reyna, Alberto

2004 *Dialogando con los antepasados: Identidad étnica y discurso nawal entre los mayas tz'utujiles de Guatemala*. Master dissertation, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Vail, Gabrielle, y Christine Hernández

2012 Rain and Fertility Rituals in Postclassic Yucatan. In *The Ancient Maya of Mexico*, pp. 285–305.

Von Winning, H.

1987 La iconografía de Teotihuacan: los dioses y los signos. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas.

Villacorta C., J. A., y C. A. Villacorta

1927 *Arqueología Guatemalteca*. Tipografía Nacional, Guatemala.

Wands, Zoë Elspeth, and Tolib Mirzoev

2022. Intimate Partner Violence Against Indigenous Women in Sololá, Guatemala: Qualitative Insights into Perspectives of Service Providers. In: *Violence Against Women* 28 (1): 150–168.

Warner, Marina

1976 *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Oxford University Press.