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Contributions

Late Formative feline pedestal sculptures and an iconography of cacao

Julia Guernsey, Michael Love, Rebecca Mendelsohn, Sergio Romero, and Andrew Turner

This paper considers an enigmatic but recurring motif – a large, jutting headdress or cranial element – exhibited by well over a dozen feline pedestal sculptures that date to the Late Formative (300 BC – AD 250) period and are found throughout a region that extends from the Pacific coast of Mexico and Guatemala into the Guatemalan Highlands. In order to contextualize this unusual motif, we first discuss the larger corpus of pedestal sculptures (Fig. 1), addressing issues of dating, context, and significance. We then focus on those feline pedestals that bear this unusual headdress/cranial element, summarizing previous interpretations that have linked them to a conceptual domain revolving around rain, maize, and agricultural fertility. Having situated these objects within the extant literature, we offer a new interpretation that connects their unique symbolic features to an enduring iconography of cacao.

Pedestal sculptures: dating, context, and taxonomic issues

Although best known from the Pacific coast, piedmont, and adjacent highlands (Miles 1965a; Parsons 1981: 268, 1986; Shook 1965), pedestal sculptures are also found in Veracruz (Stirling 1943: plate 15b), the Comitán region of Chiapas (Weeks 2003: figs. 276, 277), the Motagua valley (Sharer 1990: figs. 48 and 49), and Honduras (Richardson 1940: fig. 36a) (Fig. 2).¹ The small scale of some of these stone objects, which renders them relatively portable, may have contributed to the lack of good archaeological context that plagues them as a group; this same issue aggravates attempts to pinpoint their temporal florescence as well. Nevertheless, contextual data exist for a handful of examples, indicating that the pedestal sculpture form emerged by the end of the Middle Formative period and flourished throughout the Late Formative, probably enduring for sometime thereafter as well.²

Edwin Shook (1951: 240–244; Parsons 1986: 23) encountered the bases of two pedestal sculptures (whose tops were missing) in a cache in Kaminaljuyu Mound C-III-6 along with Stela 9, plain basalt columns, ceramic vessels, and a variety of greenstone objects. He dated this cache to the Majadas phase in the Middle Formative period, or roughly 700–500 BC. However, many scholars now doubt the existence of the Majadas phase as a distinct time period; a more parsimonious phase assignment would be Providencia, although scholars continue to debate the placement and span of that phase (Inomata et al. 2014; Love n.d.; Shook and Popenoe de Hatch 1999). Nevertheless, a rough temporal placement for the Mound C-III-6 objects that most scholars could agree upon would be approximately 500–300 BC. This context, thereby, confirms that pedestal sculptures appeared at least

by the transition from the Middle to the Late Formative period. One can, however, find earlier, potential antecedents to vertically-tenoned monuments like the pedestals, such as San Lorenzo Monument 130 (Cyphers 2004: fig. 144) and La Venta Monument 56, as Beatriz de la Fuente noted (1977: 185–186).

Many pedestal sculptures focus on themes that are drawn from nature. Quite a few portray monkeys and felines, although others, fewer in number, depict coatimundis and birds; a reptile and two undulating snakes are also known. Some pedestal sculptures appear to engage with sociopolitical themes and feature human figures that appear to be captives or assume postures associated with deference. Others depict supernatural creatures, such as skeletal anthropomorphs accompanied by serpents.

The story of the discovery of three pedestal sculptures from the site of La Argelia, Guatemala (Fig. 1) demonstrates the challenges to assembling any finite or exhaustive corpus of these objects. As recounted by Michael Love (2010: 166–167), three pedestal sculptures were documented in a barn on an estate near the large Late Formative site of La Argelia, which was initially recorded by Shook (n.d.). La Argelia is located approximately 10 km north of the Middle Formative site of La Blanca and 10 km east of the border of Mexico in the modern department of Quetzaltenango. Along with the three pedestal sculptures – two of monkeys and the third of a feline – the barn contained a number of other Late and Terminal Formative artifacts including a Pitihaya phase urn that was serving as a water trough for chickens. According to the current owner, the objects had been removed from agricultural fields now surrounding the ancient site of La Argelia, which was likely a subsidiary center within the political orbit of El Ujuxte (in Retalhuleu), the site which rose to power in this region following the decline of La Blanca towards the end of the Middle Formative period (Love 2011).

Love (2010: 167) noted a relationship between pedestal sculptures and secondary political centers in the Pacific slope region. Several pedestals, for instance, come from a cluster of sites located within the political orbit of El Ujuxte: the three attributed to La Argelia, a headless and tenon-less example from the Champerico region of the south coast of Guatemala documented by Mary Pye (1995: 166–167, fig. 7.11), and a more complete feline example in the Museo Horacio Alejos, Retalhuleu (Fig. 3a). Beyond El Ujuxte, a feline pedestal sculpture has been attributed to the site of El Sitio, Malacatán (Fig. 3b), which was likely in the political sphere of the site of Izapa, in Chiapas, Mexico (Lowe et al. 1982; Shook 1965). More recently, in 2012, the Izapa Regional Settlement Project (Rosenswig et al. 2014) discovered yet another feline pedestal

sculpture in a survey of the low hills area located between Izapa and the Pacific coast (Fig. 4).

Pedestal sculptures are also documented at primary regional centers, including Izapa, Kaminaljuyu, El Baúl, and Tak'alik Ab'aj. Such evidence suggests that pedestal sculptures served purposes deemed appropriate for sites of varying scale and levels of regional authority. In this sense, pedestal sculptures permeated certain sociopolitical boundaries, something that not all sculpture did during the Late Formative period. As we have discussed in detail elsewhere (Guernsey 2010, 2012; Love 2010; also see Bove 2011), certain types of monuments in southeastern Mesoamerica are associated with only first tier sites, especially stelae carved with elaborate imagery that featured rulers or mythic narratives and, sometimes, hieroglyphic texts. Other categories of sculpture, including pedestal sculptures, potbellies, and plain stelae, were erected by elites at sites across the sociopolitical spectrum, regardless of size or relative authority. In other words, although certain types of monuments were restricted to only the most powerful political centers, stone sculpture in general was shared by most sites in the region.³

The La Argelia seated feline pedestal sculpture (Fig. 1) compares to feline pedestal sculptures found at sites in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. Based on this evidence and the striking similarities shared among the examples, Love (2010: 166–167) suggested that the sculptures may have been produced by the same individual artist or a group of artists trained in similar concepts:

The pedestal sculptures are highly portable and, if made by independent specialists, could have been objects of exchange. The idea of sculpture as a trade item may seem radical, but the idea seems more plausible than to assume that the small sites of the Champerico region, a locale that lacks local stone and has few works of sculpture, would have had skilled resident sculptors who precisely copied works from sites in the piedmont zone. We often think that sculptures were produced at the place where they were displayed, even if both the rock and the sculptor were brought from a distance, but we should entertain the idea that some small forms of sculpture may have been produced at centralized workshops and traded.

Although questions of inspiration, authorship, circulation, and context continue to characterize any consideration of pedestal sculptures, certain examples reveal subtle clues as to their meanings. For instance, the coatimundi that appears on a pedestal originally illustrated by Eduard Seler (in Weeks 2003: fig. 277) and now in the Regional Museum in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas (Fig. 5a), is indebted to Middle Formative figurine traditions. Clarence Weiant (1943: plate 50) illustrated several coatimundi figurine whistles from the region of Tres Zapotes, which, like the pedestal sculpture, grasp their snout. The gesture may have connoted the making of some sound: in the wild, coatimundis can be heard emitting huffing, woofing, or clicking sounds, especially when surprised or disturbed in some way. Pedestal sculptures of coatimundis likely referenced the sounds of the animate environment, as the figurines before them had done for centuries (Hepp et al.

2014). Coatimundis also make an appearance in the corpus of mushroom stones (see Ohi and Torres 1994: 86, fig. IV-2b), underscoring the permeability between themes, mediums, and categories of objects from ceramic to stone (Parsons 1981: 268–269; 1986: 22–24).

In fact, any attempt to articulate a neat taxonomy for pedestal sculptures is plagued by the fact that they share key features with other categories of sculpture. For example, silhouette sculptures, although formally quite distinct from pedestals, share a vertical tenon and a similar degree of portability, as do peg sculptures (for discussion see Henderson 2013: 149; Parsons 1981: 268, 1986: 64, figs. 35–37; Shook 1971: 74). Caution must also be paid to differentiating between vertically-oriented pedestal sculptures and other sculptures whose tenons facilitated a horizontal orientation, likely as part of an architectural structure. Horizontally tenoned monuments have an equally lengthy history, emerging during the Formative period as in the case of those documented by Christopher Pool (2010: figs. 5.16–5.19) at Tres Zapotes. They also persisted into the Classic period along the south coast as evidenced by the El Castillo Monument 9 serpent from Cotzumalguapa (Chinchilla 1996: fig. 6.19), or a deer now in the collection of the Museo Popol Vuh (catalog number 2007-0002). Exploring these points of intersection and departure – formal, material, and iconographic – stands to inform our understanding of the complex webs of meaning in which pedestal sculptures functioned.

The fragmentary nature of many of the pedestal sculptures further complicates the situation. Many lack their tenons, which were snapped off in the ancient past, while others preserve only the tenon, leaving one to wonder what form was once featured at the top. The relationship between the tenon and the sculpture at the top is also quite variable: at times the featured animal or individual perches on a short base or “capital” that marks the transition to the tenon below.

In some cases, this capital is quite plain (Fig. 1). In others, the capital is highly decorative (Fig. 3c) and resembles the seats upon which so-called “Bench Figures” (see Navarrete 1972; Parsons 1986: figs. 31–34) rest, or calls to mind the four-legged stone thrones that appear in the archaeological record during the Late Formative period (Clark et al. 2010: 13–15). Similar decorative benches also make an appearance on mushroom stones (see Parsons 1986: fig. 42). These parallels suggest that the pedestal sculpture “capitals” carried some significance, perhaps like that of thrones, which quite literally elevated the individual seated upon them. In one example, the bench is inverted (Fig. 7b); this, too, finds a parallel in the corpus of bench figures (see Parsons 1986: fig. 33). Not all of the characters on pedestal sculptures rest on a “capital” or base, as a skeletal/serpent example photographed by Philip Drucker (Fig. 5b) and now in the Regional Museum in Tuxtla Gutiérrez makes clear. In other cases, as with the feline on a pedestal sculpture from Tecpan (Parsons 1986: fig. 41), or the one rendered on Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 41 (Norman 1976: fig. 5.66a), the base is minimal.

Feline pedestal sculptures

A consideration of one particularly notable and recurring theme – that of a feline – provides a productive avenue of investigation into the unwieldy corpus of pedestal sculptures. To date, we are aware of forty examples of feline pedestal sculptures:

- 1) La Argelia, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala Monument 3 (Figure 1).
- 2) Horacio Alejos Museum, Retalhuleu, Guatemala, attributed to the Champerico region (Figure 3a).
- 3) Attributed to the vicinity of El Sitio, Malacatán, Guatemala, and illustrated in Shook (1965: fig. 1c) (Figure 3b).



Fig. 1. Pedestal sculptures from La Argelia, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, from left to right: Monument 1, Monument 2, and Monument 3. Photograph by Michael Love.

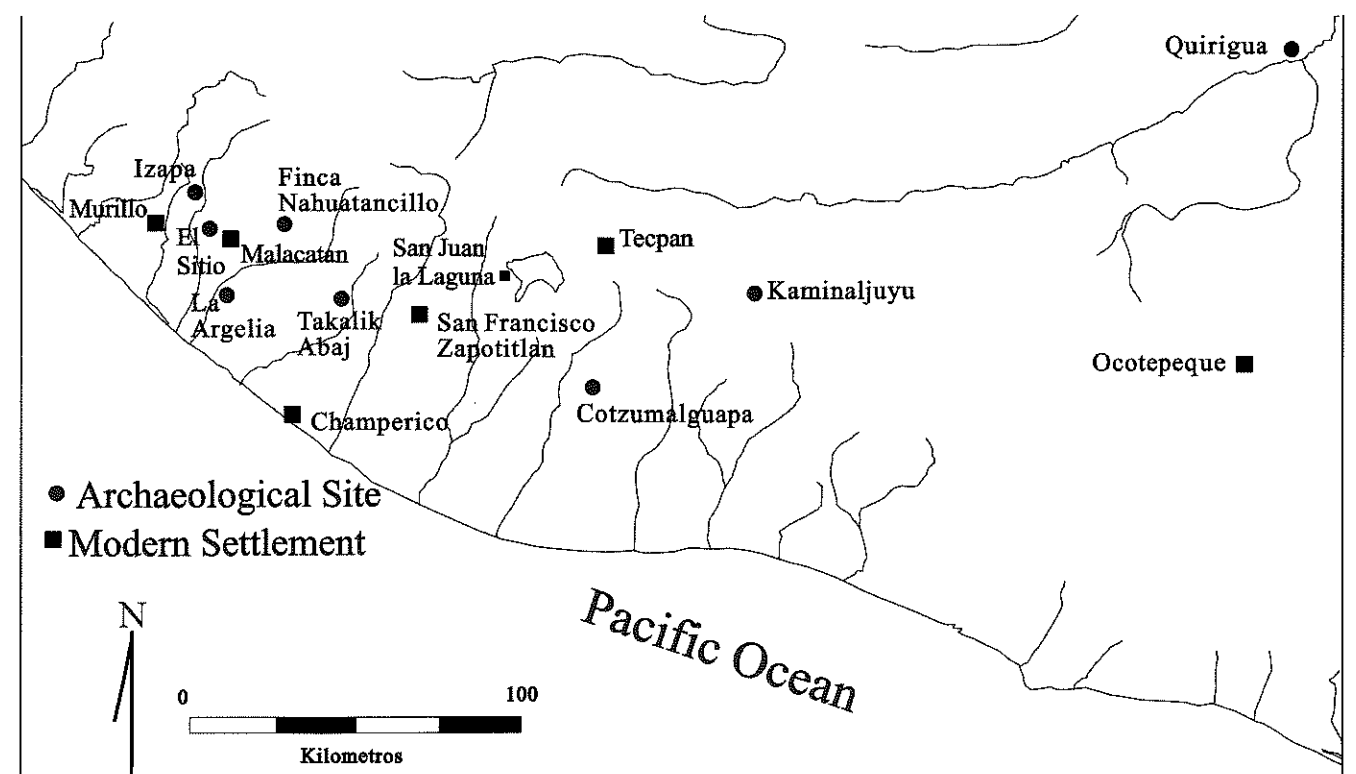


Fig. 2. General distribution of pedestal sculptures in southeastern Mesoamerica. Map by Michael Love.

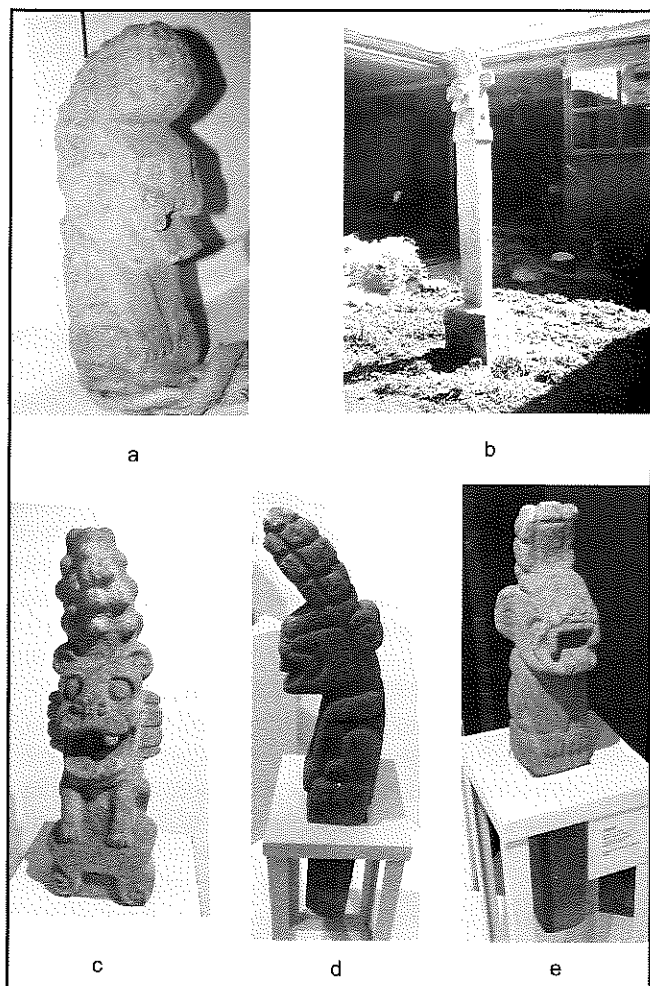


Fig. 3. Feline pedestal sculptures. (a) Example in the Horacio Alejos Museum, Retalhuleu, Guatemala. Photograph by Michael Love; (b) Example attributed to the vicinity of El Sitio, Malacatán, Guatemala, photograph gift of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1958 © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 58-34-20/35685 (digital file # 42-15-124); (c) Museo Popol Vuh (no. 0599), attributed to the south coast or Guatemalan Highlands. Photograph by Julia Guernsey; (d) Museo Popol Vuh (no. 0787) attributed to the south coast. Photograph by Julia Guernsey; (e) Museo Popol Vuh (no. 0789) attributed to the south coast. Photograph by Julia Guernsey.

- 4) Recovered in 2012 in the low hills region between Izapa and the Pacific coast by the Izapa Regional Settlement Project (Rosenswig et al. 2014). Mendelsohn observed that the pedestal possessed evidence of red pigment original to it (Figure 4).
- 5) Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala, attributed to the south coast or Guatemalan Highlands (cat. no. 0599) (Figure 3c).
- 6) Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala, attributed to the south coast (cat. no. 0787) (Figure 3d).
- 7) Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala, attributed to the south coast (cat. no. 0789) (Figure 3e).
- 8) Example photographed by Philip Drucker and listed as coming from Finca El Descanso (now Colonia Murillo) near Tapachula, Mexico in his (1947) papers at the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (Figure 5b).
- 9) Regional Museum, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas (CMRCH-00653), illustrated by Norman (1976: fig. 5.66b) and the

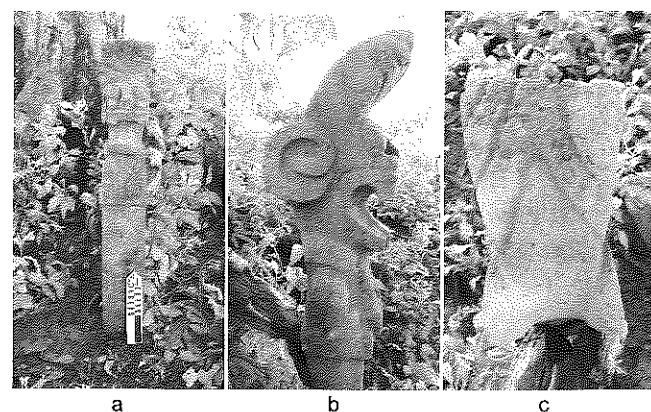


Fig. 4. Jaguar pedestal sculpture found in the low hills south of Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico. (a) front; (b) side; (c) view of top of headdress. Photographs courtesy of Robert Rosenswig, Director of the Izapa Regional Settlement Project.

Metropolitan Museum of Art (1990: cat. no. 16, left) (Figure 6a).

- 10) Regional Museum, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas (CMRCH-000654), illustrated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1990: cat. no. 16, right) (Figure 6b).⁴
- 11) Example published by Miles (1965a: fig. 11d) and included as a drawing in Richardson (1940: fig. 36b); Miles attributed it to the Pacific slope while Richardson attributed it to the Guatemalan Highlands (Figure 6c).
- 12) Example recently discovered in the southern part of Parque Arqueológico Kaminaljuyu, approximately 400 meters south of the Palangana, in a Late Formative period context. The monument was discovered as part of the ongoing work of the Kaminaljuyu Archaeological Zone, under the direction of Bárbara Arroyo (Figure 6d). According to Arroyo (personal communication, March 2017), the red coloration of the pedestal is paint and original to it.
- 13) Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Theodore N. Kaplan and Henry Tobin, 2015.136.1 (Figure 7a).
- 14) Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, cat. no. YPM ANT 24871 (Figure 7b).
- 15) University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Simon Martin, personal communication, 2017).
- 16) An example listed for sale in 2011 by Bonham's Auction House online (<https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/19412/lot/201/>), accessed 14 November 2016, and listed as coming from a "private American collection, acquired prior to 1980."
- 17) An example listed for sale by Sotheby's (Sotheby's Important Pre-Columbian Art, New York, November 27 and 28, 1984, entry no. 334, listed as coming "purportedly from the Earl Parker expedition to Mexico and Guatemala in the 1880's").
- 18) An example attributed to the vicinity of San Juan Laguna, Guatemala, illustrated in Lothrop (1933: fig. 64), which, stylistically, appears late or possibly reworked, and has several anomalous features including "a hollow receptacle partly broken away" projecting from its back (Lothrop 1933: 100–101).
- 19) Proyecto Arqueológico Kaminaljuyu Monument 193, or Pedestal 3 in Parsons' (1986: fig. 38, left) numeration.

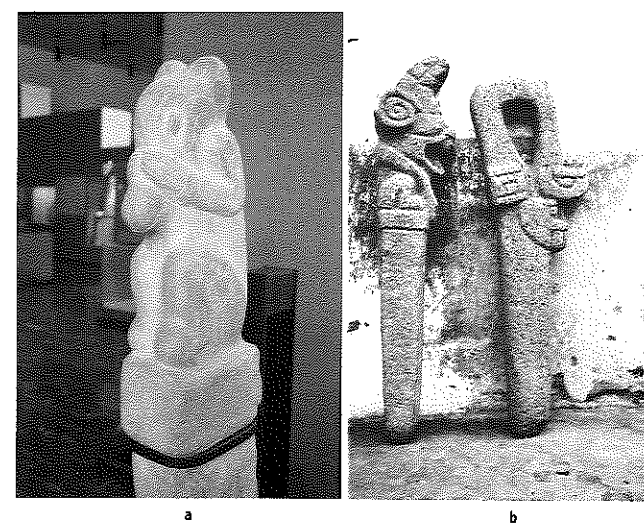


Fig. 5. Pedestal sculptures. (a) Coatimundi in the Regional Museum in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. Photograph courtesy of Caitlin Earley; (b) Photograph by Philip Drucker of two pedestal sculptures attributed to Finca El Descanso near Tapachula, Mexico. Photograph courtesy of David Stuart and the archives of George Stuart.

According to Miles (1965a: 248), this "headless jaguar seated on a scroll-ended bench (P3) came from deep in the fill of Mound E-III-3." Now located in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala (cat. no. 2378).

- 20) Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 41 (Norman 1976: fig. 5.66a).
- 21) A headless example, missing most of its tenon, from Cotzumalguapa. According to Thompson (1948: fig. 18d, upper right corner of photo), it was found in a pit in front of El Baúl Monument 3.
- 22) Bilbao Monument 75 (Parsons 1969: fig. 49a, b).
- 23) An example now in the "Sala de Cultura" in San Francisco Zapotitlán, Guatemala, and originally published by Grube (1994).
- 24) A headless and tenon-less example from Site 920801 in the Champerico region of the south coast of Guatemala, documented by Pye (1995: 166–167, fig. 7.11), who suggested that the irregular base of the fragment might indicate that it had been broken off of a tenon.
- 25) An unusually naturalistic example from Tecpan, Chimaltenango illustrated by Parsons (1986: fig. 41) and currently in the Nottebohm collection in Guatemala.
- 26) An example illustrated by Richardson (1940: fig. 36a) and attributed to the Department of Ocotepeque, Honduras.
- 27) An example illustrated by Richardson (1940: fig. 36c) and attributed to the Guatemalan Highlands.
- 28) A fragmentary example, illustrated in Figure 8b, missing its tenon, attributed to the Finca Miraflores/Kaminaljuyu, now in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología of Guatemala (cat. no. 5857), with a distinct curling element projecting from the top of its head.
- 29) An example attributed to the Finca Nahuatancillo, San Marcos, Guatemala and illustrated in the Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (PM# 58-34-20/40375, digital file # 46-9-48) (Figure 11a).

- 30) Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala, attributed to the south coast (cat. no. 0815).
- 31) Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala, attributed to the south coast (cat. no. 0785).
- 32) Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala, attributed to the south coast (cat. no. 0809), with a fragmentary crest that includes a small curled motif on the front; the feline also wears a pendant on its chest (Figure 8c).
- 33) Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala, attributed to the south coast (cat. no. 0598), with a prominent vertical crest whose sides are marked with a volute (fig. 8d).
- 34) Another example listed for sale by Sotheby's (Sotheby's Pre-Columbian Art, New York, Wednesday, June 2, 1999, entry no. 151, listed as from "a Florida Private Collection").
- 35) Pedestal of a feline with an iguana on its back illustrated in Magdalena et al. (2011: 110) and attributed to Izapa for unknown reasons.
- 36) Tak'alik Ab'aj Monument 61, a pedestal fragment consisting of only a vertical tenon that portrays the bottom of a long tail, like those on other feline pedestal monuments.
- 37) A fragmentary feline pedestal sculpture – missing its head and the lower portion of the vertical tenon – at Casa Blanca, El Salvador (Ito 2000: 196, fig. I-9-1).
- 38) A fragmentary feline pedestal sculpture missing most of the body and much of the tenon, but preserving the dangling tail intact at the rear of the sculpture. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala (cat. no. 10230).
- 39) Tak'alik Ab'aj Monument 181, missing its head and much of its tenon, compares closely to Proyecto Arqueológico Kaminaljuyu Monument 193 (Kaminaljuyu Pedestal 3 in Parsons' numeration).
- 40) A somewhat damaged example illustrated by Clark and Parady (1975: plate 27) and photographed at the Hacienda Las Animas Melimar, located not far from Mazatenango, Guatemala.

This inventory of feline pedestal sculptures is surely incomplete; other examples undoubtedly exist in private collections, the storage rooms of museums, or other locations we have been unable to access. So, too, the absolute boundaries of any "feline pedestal sculpture" corpus are as difficult to define as those of pedestal sculptures more generally. For example, if one includes any vertically-tenoned feline, then the sculpture illustrated by Matthew Stirling (1943: plate 15b) from Tlapacoya Arriba in the vicinity of Tres Zapotes might logically be included, in spite of the fact that it is stylistically distinct from the feline pedestals listed above. Other felines bear a close formal relationship to those on pedestal sculptures, but never appear to have possessed tenons. For instance, a feline seated on its haunches from the Late Formative coastal site of El Balsamo, Guatemala (Shook and Popenoe de Hatch 1978: fig. 2e) shares its posture and other key attributes, including an open mouth and naturalistic ears, with many on pedestals. Yet according to Marion Popenoe de Hatch (personal communication, November 2016), the El Balsamo Sculpture 1 feline is not a fragmentary pedestal missing its base. It never appears to have possessed a tenon and, in spite of its formal similarities to felines on pedestals, calls to mind other free-

standing feline sculptures erected by various groups throughout Mesoamerican history, such as Late Classic Monument 14 from El Baúl (Parsons 1986: fig. 138) or Early Formative Loma del Zapote Monuments 7 and 10 as well as a small feline with a cranial projection and decorative headband from Emilio Carranza (Cyphers 2004: figs. 137, 163–165, 171).⁵ Our point here is that, while one can certainly isolate feline pedestal sculptures into a separate and meaningful topic of inquiry, one should likewise acknowledge that intriguing and potentially significant formal and thematic continuities were certainly shared with other categories of objects throughout time.⁶

Although many scholars have used the term “jaguar” to describe the animals on the pedestal sculptures, we prefer the more neutral term “feline.” Michael Coe (1972: 2), many years ago, declared that Mesoamerican art refers “almost exclusively [to] the jaguar, with only a few possible representations of the puma...” While it is quite likely that jaguars served as the inspiration for felines portrayed on sculptures such as El Baúl Monument 4 (Fig. 10a) and Izapa Stela 12 (Fig. 8a), it is also true that the regions from which many pedestal sculptures hail would have been home to an impressive variety of felines. Jaguars, margays, ocelots, jaguarundis, and pumas would have moved between stands of primary forest, orchards with the high canopy trees necessary to shade them, and farm plots. Even within the corpus of pedestal sculptures, particular attributes of the felines vary considerably: ears and eyes differ, one possesses projections that jut out from the sides of its face (Fig. 3c), and others reveal a row of teeth in addition to jutting canines (Figs. 3b and 6a). One example documented by Edwin Shook on the property of the Finca Nahuatancillo, San Marcos, Guatemala (Fig. 11a), reveals a body and posture nearly identical to other felines, but with exaggerated ears.⁷ Perhaps the ears invoke those of the margay, known for its disproportionately large ears, or perhaps they are not based in nature at all, and carry meanings and associations now lost upon us. We doubt that naturalism was the primary criterion for these feline representations, as our discussion below, concerning the unusual projections from the crania of a significant percentage of them, makes clear.

Unique attributes and previous interpretations: maize and rain

Rather than contemplate the entire inventory of feline pedestal sculptures in all of its variety, we choose to focus on the first seventeen listed in our inventory, all of which have been attributed to the Pacific coast, Pacific piedmont, or Guatemalan Highlands although, to be clear, none of them possesses good archaeological context. These seventeen share an interesting attribute: an element that projects upwards from their cranium or sloping forehead and is given prominence due to its sheer size, which dwarfs the bodies below.⁸ Suzanne Miles (1965a: 248) described this attribute as “a high, loaf-shaped headdress.” In all cases, the projecting attribute is incised or modeled to display seed-like segments although the manner in which this is indicated is not consistent. While the segments on an example in the Museo Popol Vuh (Fig. 3c) are bulging, rounded, and almost grape-like, those on other examples (see Fig. 6a–c) are flat, quadrilateral, and strikingly regular in shape.

We are not the first to call attention to this attribute. Garth Norman (1976: 277) linked it to the maize cob on the forehead of the supernatural with feline or were-jaguar attributes on the El Sitio celt (Navarrete 1974: fig. 25). He also pointed to Izapa Stela 12 (Fig. 8a), which portrays a jaguar with a

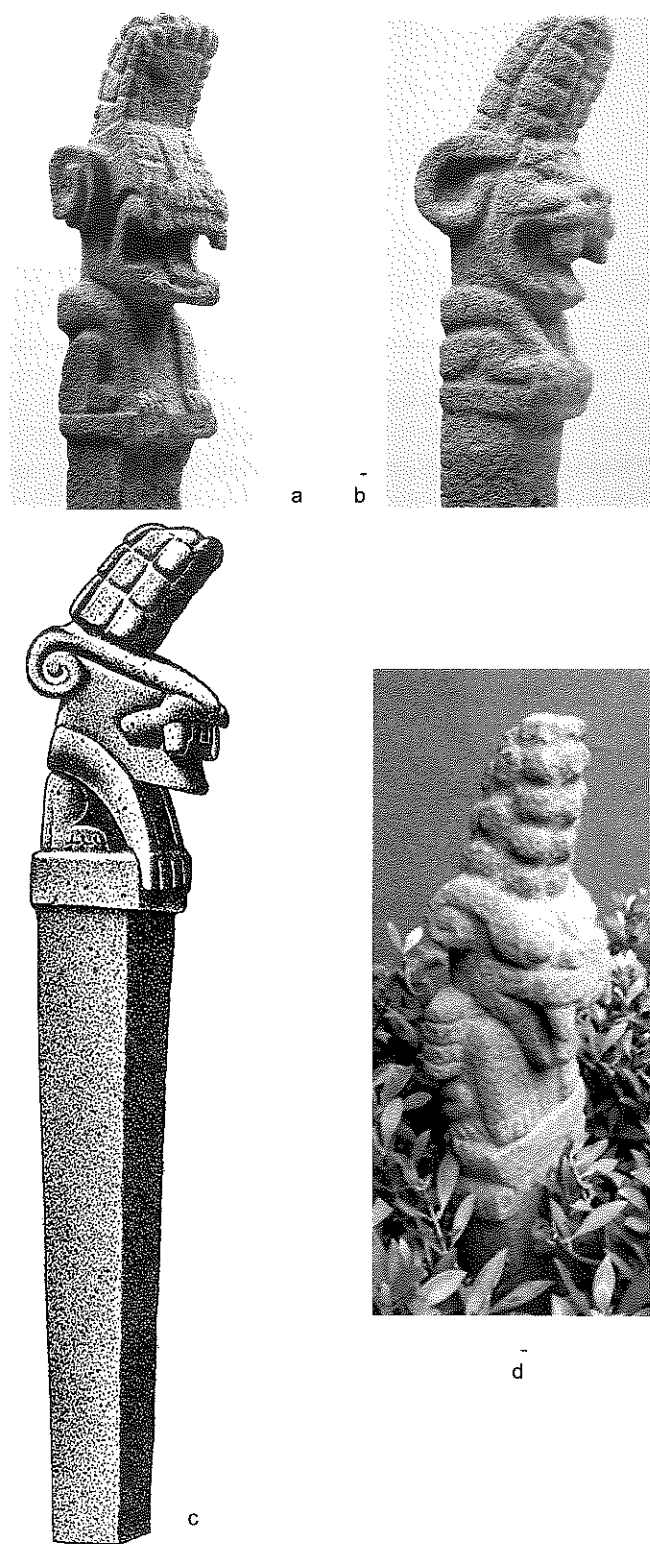


Fig. 6. Feline pedestal sculptures. (a) Regional Museum, Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas (CMRCH-00653). Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (b) Regional Museum, Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas (CMRCH-000654). Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (c) Drawing of feline pedestal after Richardson (1940: fig. 36b), attributed to the Guatemalan Highlands; (d) Example from Kaminaljuyu. Photograph courtesy of Bárbara Arroyo.

curling ear not unlike those on some pedestal sculptures (see, for example, Fig. 4). A series of curling water scrolls issues from the mouth of the Stela 12 jaguar, while above vegetation springs from another set of volutes (Norman 1973: plates 23–24, 1976: fig. 3.12). In making these connections between jaguars, rain, and agricultural fertility, Norman was following the lead of Miguel Covarrubias (1957: fig. 22), whose evolutionary flowchart of rain deities emerging out of an Olmec jaguar prototype was enormously influential and, later, expanded upon by Karl Taube (1995). In particular, Taube (1995: 95–102, figs. 18, 19) called attention to the curling cranial elements that are a characteristic not only of some Formative felines, but also contemporaneous (and later) rain and lightning gods; Taube linked this curling cranial element to an enduring and broadly shared iconography of rain-bearing clouds in Mesoamerica.⁹ This iconography is explicitly attested in the corpus of feline pedestal sculptures, as demonstrated by three monuments. The first, in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología in Guatemala City (Fig. 8b), displays a forward-spiraling volute projecting upward from the skull of the snarling feline while, below, backward curling ears are visible. The second, in the Museo Popol Vuh (cat. no. 0809) (Fig. 8c), bears a small, incised curl in the front of what, before it was damaged, appears to have been a projecting crest. The third example, also in the Museo Popol Vuh

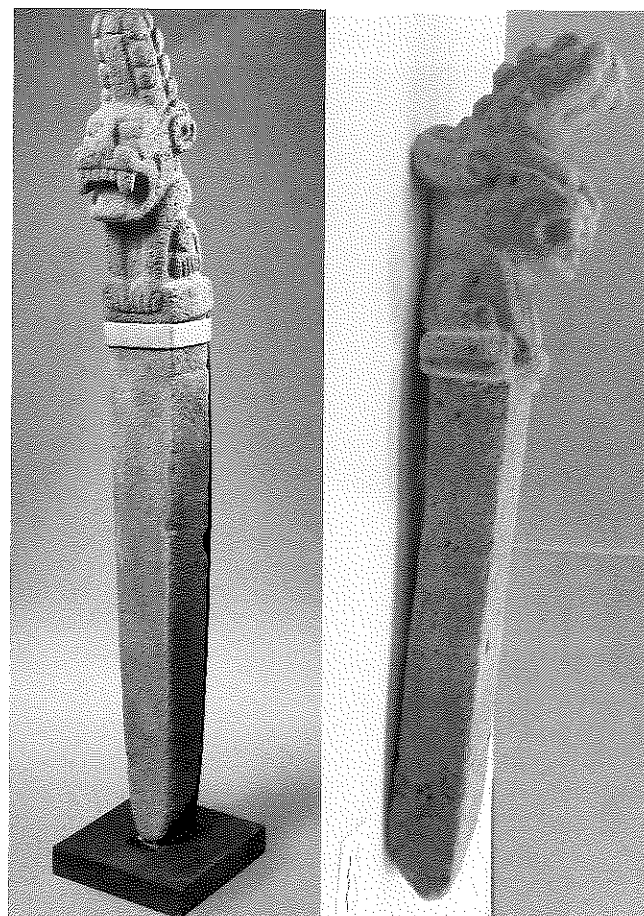


Fig. 7. Jaguar pedestals at Yale University. (left) Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Theodore N. Kaplan and Henry Tobin (no. 2015.136.1). Image courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery; (right) Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, cat. no. YPM ANT 24871. Image courtesy of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History.

(cat. no. 0598) (Fig. 8d), displays a prominent crest (narrower than the “loaf-shaped” versions) whose sides are marked with a large volute. This feline, like the one in the Museo Nacional, is rendered with its mouth agape.

The extraordinarily curled ears of a number of felines on pedestal sculptures may reference a similar iconography of rain. In at least three cases (Figures 3b, 6c and d), the curled ears of the felines are not distinct from their sloping foreheads; instead the ears are portrayed as if part of a supraorbital ridge that extends to the rear and terminates in curling ears at the back of the head. These attributes – curling ears and/or crania – appear to have been key to the meaning of a significant number, but not all, of the feline pedestals. Moreover, even in the cases where the felines’ ears/crania display an impressive volute, the most prominent attribute is, nevertheless, the loaf-shaped projection, much as it is on those felines whose ears curl more subtly (Fig. 6b) or are rendered quite naturalistically (Fig. 3c).

An iconography of cacao

We agree with Norman’s suggestion that the feline pedestals carry associations with the larger Mesoamerican iconographic complex concerning rain and lightning, but diverge from his interpretation of the loaf-shaped element as a symbol of maize. For one, the motif consistently lacks the “cleft bracts,” which often accompany representations of maize cobs (Joralemon 1971: 13, motif 83; Taube 2000: fig. 2). On the pedestal sculptures, the loaf-shaped motif springs directly from the surface of the felines’ skull, rather than from a cleft, as is more typically shown for maize vegetation. Instead, we suggest that the motif represents a cacao pod or drupe, opened or peeled to reveal the pulpy cluster (mucilage and seeds) inside the pod (Fig. 9).¹⁰ At times, the seed cluster is represented quite naturalistically: compare, for example, the cacao seed cluster in the Figure 9 photos to the projecting element on the felines in Figures 1 and 6d. In some of the sculptures, the seeds are rendered much as they are in the pod, in keeping with the fruit’s axile placentation, while in other cases the contents of the cacao pod are depicted much more schematically. Regardless, the imagery is inconsistent enough to make a determination about the specific type of cacao portrayed – *Theobroma cacao* L. or *Theobroma bicolor* – impossible.¹¹

The schematic nature of the cacao seed clusters on several of the feline pedestal sculptures merits more discussion. The individual seeds are clearly delineated across the sides and backs of the cranial projections in Figures 3e and 6a, but the fronts of the clusters reveal a prominent, squared cartouche that lacks any incised design or representation of individual seeds. These two clusters, while clearly comparable to other more naturalistically rendered versions, also reveal distinctly flattened and rectangular contours, especially when compared to the more tapering, conical shape of the others. An even narrower rectangular cartouche or panel likewise interrupts the otherwise precise arrangement of seeds on the example in the Yale University Art Gallery (Fig. 7) (Turner 2017).

Marked schematization also characterizes the pedestal from the low hills region south of Izapa (Fig. 4). In this example, the artist chose not to represent an opened or peeled pod: no seed cluster is visible, and the entire motif is highly schematic, flattened, and somewhat trapezoidal in shape. In fact, if it were not for the examples in Figures 3e and 6a,

which serve as a bridge between stylistically naturalistic seed clusters and abstract extremes, it would be difficult to argue, convincingly, that the example in Figure 4 belonged in this same thematic grouping and, indeed, alludes to cacao in any way. Yet closer inspection of the top of the cranial element reveals incised lines that arc around from the sides, converge at the top, and curl around the corners in the front (see Fig. 4a and c). Comparable lines, sometimes curving to indicate an ellipsoid shape, are used to delineate the exterior of cacao pods in later periods, especially during the Classic period (see Figure 10a as well as images in Chinchilla 2016 and Martin 2006). These four Late Formative pedestals with more schematically rendered cacao pods or seed clusters speak to a certain amount of interpretive freedom on the part of the artists who carved the objects: although some design sensibilities were obviously widely shared, variability was also acceptable and, perhaps, valued. This variation was, nevertheless, mediated by an adherence to other strikingly stable conventions, such as the consistent postures of the felines or their curling ears and/or brows. As a result, even these more unusual examples can be logically grouped along with other feline pedestal sculptures that reference a shared Late Formative symbolic domain referencing cacao, rain, and agricultural fertility.

Given the geographic concentration of these sculptures along the south coast and in the highlands of Guatemala – two regions whose histories are inextricably intertwined with the production and/or distribution of cacao – iconographic references to cacao should not be terribly surprising. The Pacific coastal plains and hills above them are renowned for their production of cacao, which flourishes in the rich volcanic soils that receive ample annual rainfall. During the Postclassic period, this region – known as the Soconusco or Xoconochco – represented the most southeasterly extension of the Aztec Empire and stretched from Tliltepec, in modern Tonalá, Chiapas, to the Río Tilapa just east of Ayutla, Guatemala. Late Postclassic tribute records record the annual payment of more than 10,000 pounds of cacao beans to the Aztec capital from the Soconusco (Bergmann 1969: 90–94; Gasco 2006: 322–323; Gasco and Voorhies 1989; Millon 1955; Thompson 2011 [1956]; Voorhies and Gasco 2004). Yet the history of cacao production in the region appears to well predate the Postclassic period: Janine Gasco (2006: 325) asserted that “cacao production played an important role in the Soconusco economy for most of the pre-Columbian era” and, echoing Gareth Lowe et al. (1982: 43–52), suggested that the florescence of the site of Izapa during the Late Formative may

have been linked, at least in part, to its role in a burgeoning cacao industry.¹²

The significance of cacao within the sociopolitical history of the Guatemalan Highlands is well attested among a number of Maya groups, whose wars to establish domination of the region often involved the contestation of cacao tribute. Miles (1965b: 279–280) noted that highland Maya leaders often “created and broke alliances with each other in apparent attempt to control the great chocolate-producing areas,” while Sophie Coe and Michael Coe (2007: 56) described the primary military objective of the K’iche king Quicab, which was to control the cacao-producing region of the Boca Costa where highland Maya groups maintained enclaves and exacted heavy tribute. Cacao continued to be an important currency into the colonial period; the chronicles of the Kaqchikel Maya (Maxwell and Hill 2006: 16) document the donation of cacao beans to defray the costs of various events or penalties from the 1560s through the 1590s.

Cacao and felines

There is also, in these regions celebrated for cacao production or exchange, an enduring iconographic tradition of associating cacao with felines. This is expressed particularly clearly at the site of Coztumalguapa during the Classic period (Chinchilla 2016). Following initial observations by J. Eric S. Thompson (2011 [1956]) and Johanna Kufer and Cameron McNeil (2006: 97, fig. 4.6), Oswaldo Chinchilla (2016: fig. 8) addressed the cacao pods dangling from the body of a feline on El Baúl Monument 4 (Fig. 10a).¹³ Chinchilla dated the monument to the San Jerónimo phase, 450–650 AD, and linked its iconography to a larger symbolic sphere concerning

cacao, agricultural fertility, and human sacrifice. Thompson (2011 [1956]: 101) had early on recognized the conceptual overlap between cacao and sacrifice in both the iconography of Coztumalguapa as well as in later colonial accounts, noting that a general resemblance between cacao pods and human hearts may have accounted for their iconographic interchangeability. Chinchilla (2016: 362, 367) further explored this relationship, focusing on the “bodily” nature of cacao pods, which could substitute for hearts and heads during the Classic period or sprout directly from bodies (also see Martin 2006 and Miller and Martin 2004 for discussion of cacao emerging from the body of agricultural deities or patrons). On El Baúl Monument 4, the feline with cacao pods springing from its body is one of four sacrificed beings sprawled at the feet of an executioner clasping a bleeding heart (Chinchilla 2011: 61–62, 2016: 366). A distinct feature of the cacao tree is that its flowers and fruit grow directly from the trunk, rather than from the ends of its branches. In this regard, the body of the El Baúl Monument 4 feline is analogous to a fruit-laden cacao tree. We suggest that the cacao pods emerging directly from the skulls of the felines on the pedestal sculptures represent an early manifestation of similar ideas, in which cacao pods are rendered as bodily components.¹⁴

Another object, a Classic-period ceramic mold now in the collection of La Ruta Maya Foundation, may be related to these themes (Fig. 10b). Mark Van Stone and Paul Johnson (2017: cat. no. A-50) suggested that it portrays personified cacao: a seedy and pulpy cacao pod rises up from a head with zoomorphic attributes that are, perhaps, feline or related to those of rain and lightning deities. Although only the mold exists, the “virtual cast” created by Van Stone and Johnson

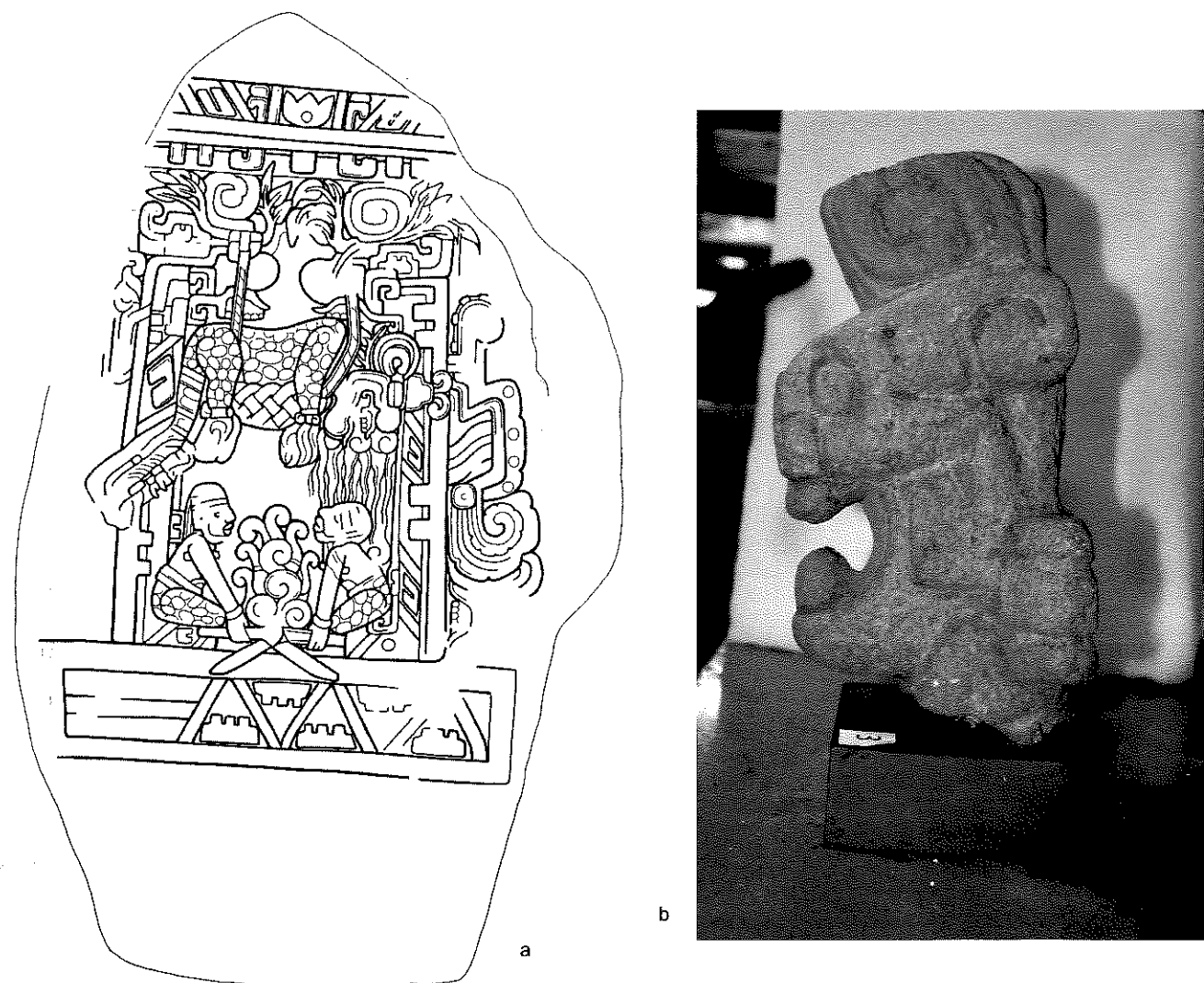


Fig. 8 a/b. Felines and rain-related iconography: (a) Izapa Stela 12. Drawing by Ajax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation; (b) Pedestal sculpture in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología of Guatemala. Photo by Michael Love



Fig. 8 c/d. Felines and rain-related iconography: (c) Pedestal sculpture in the Museo Popol Vuh (cat. no. 0809). Photo by Julia Guernsey; (d) Pedestal sculpture in the Museo Popol Vuh (cat. no. 0598). Photo by Julia Guernsey.

provides a likeness of the object that was once produced by it. As can be seen in the “virtual cast,” the cacao pod takes on bodily properties, merging with the zoomorphic form below, and calls to mind Classic period imagery in which anthropomorphized “World Trees” sprout cacao pods (see Martin 2006: fig. 8.2b, for example). Interesting, too, is that the form of the cacao pod on the mold is like those of the Late Formative jaguar pedestal sculptures, opened to reveal the pulpy, seedy cluster within. In this sense, it contrasts with both the Coztumalguapa and Lowland Maya representations from the Classic period, which typically feature unopened cacao pods. The mold also confirms that this iconographic suite referencing the “bodily” nature of cacao was not limited to the domain of public or monumental sculpture, but also resonated within the more private realm where such small, ceramic objects were likely used.¹⁵

Chinchilla (2016: 365) called attention to an incensario that portrays a feline with two unopened cacao pods in its collar from Chitomax, a Classic period site located adjacent to the Río Chixoy (Ichon and Grignon Cheesman 1983: 121–124, fig. 120a; another potentially related fragment of a different incensario appears in fig. 120b).¹⁶ The open mouth of the feline on the Chitomax incensario recalls those of most of the felines on the pedestal sculptures, which are also agape. Lowe (1990: 76–77) commented on two such pedestals, stating that the felines’ open mouths “surely indicate that the beasts are roaring to keep away intruders and any natural (or supernatural) threats to the crops.” Perhaps the felines on the pedestals served an apotropaic function, serving as symbolic protectors of cacao plots, warding off threats and predators.¹⁷ The fierce and nocturnal nature of jaguars, in particular, continued to be associated with cacao into the colonial period: Thompson (2011 [1956]: 548) observed that, in the Chilam Balam of Chumayel, the “period of darkness before the creation of light and the setting up of the world-directional trees” invokes both jaguars and *Theobroma bicolor*.

Associations between felines and cacao may have been grounded in ecological realities. Johanna Kufer and Michael Heinrich (2006: 402–404; also see Kufer and McNeil 2006: 97) noted that cacao trees flourish in shady, humid environments, not unlike those that make prime cat habitat; the arboreal nature of some felines, particularly the margay, may have also contributed to these associations. Moreover, both jaguars and cacao share a conceptual domain concerning the

night, caves, the Underworld, and elite status.¹⁸ Furthermore, Kufer and McNeil (2006: 91) observed that as *Theobroma bicolor* pods dry “their surface comes to resemble the pattern on a jaguar’s pelt” which “has likely led to one of the common names for *T. bicolor* in Mesoamerica, *balam te*’ (the Jaguar Tree).” They also reiterated Thompson’s (2011 [1956]: 548) observation that, in the Chilam Balam of Chumayel, *Theobroma bicolor* is referred to as *balamte* or “the jaguar tree” (Kufer and McNeil 2006: 97; also see Thompson 2011 [1956]: 548).

Especially interesting for our arguments is the fact that the fruit of the *Theobroma bicolor* or “jaguar tree” was called *cacao balam* or *balam te* in other colonial documents as well. The Q’eqchi’ *Calendario de Lanquín* – an almanac that records both Latin and Q’eqchi’ texts, Maya and Gregorian calendrical information, *tzolk’in* dates and prognostications as well as scheduled agricultural tasks – explicitly identifies days appropriate for the sowing of *cacao balam* “pataxte” (Romero 2000). Antonio de Ciudad Real’s *Calepino de Motul* (Yucatec Maya) also lists *balam te* as a species of cacao (Ciudad Real 2001: 75). These colonial documents attest to the use of the term *balam* to refer to the fruit of the *Theobroma bicolor* as well as to the significance of ritual calendars in determining auspicious dates for its planting and harvesting. What is particularly fascinating is the parallel between the term *cacao balam*, which pairs cacao and jaguars, and the visual coupling of cacao and jaguars (or felines more generally) that appears in the iconography of the Formative period pedestal sculptures. The antiquity of this conceptual pairing is noteworthy.

It is impossible to know whether the cacao represented on the Formative period pedestal sculptures refers to *Theobroma bicolor* or *Theobroma cacao*; Kufer and McNeil (2006: 93) wisely cautioned scholars that the morphological similarities between the two likely preclude any ability to make a more explicit identification of the species in iconographic representations. Yet some distinctions are worth noting. Of the two *Theobroma* species, Kufer and McNeil (2006: 94) suggested that *Theobroma bicolor* (also referred to as *pataxte*), which is capable of growing at higher altitudes, “is certainly the one which better represents the wild space, the forest.” Such distinctions may be preserved in the language of modern rituals of the Highland Maya, where couplets often pair the two types of cacao, as if both together formed a conceptual whole. The Rab’inal Achi’s Dance of the Trumpets, for example, invokes both: “Under the golden *pataxte*, under the golden cacao...” (Tedlock 2003: 49). Interestingly, Kufer and McNeil (2006: 103) contrasted the consistent ritual significance of *Theobroma bicolor* among the Highland Maya to its reputation in botanical literature and certain colonial Nahua sources, where it is sometimes referred to “as an adulterant and inferior substitute for *T. cacao*...” They postulated, based on this evidence, that colonial documents tended to prioritize Nahua perceptions over Maya ones, and that these same documents failed to recognize the significance of *Theobroma bicolor*, which was documented as a ritually and economically significant plant on the west coast of Guatemala and Honduras until the early decades of the twentieth century (Popenoe 1919; Wisdom 1940: 61).

Our identification of cacao iconography on pedestal sculptures also sheds new light on the significance of cacao im-

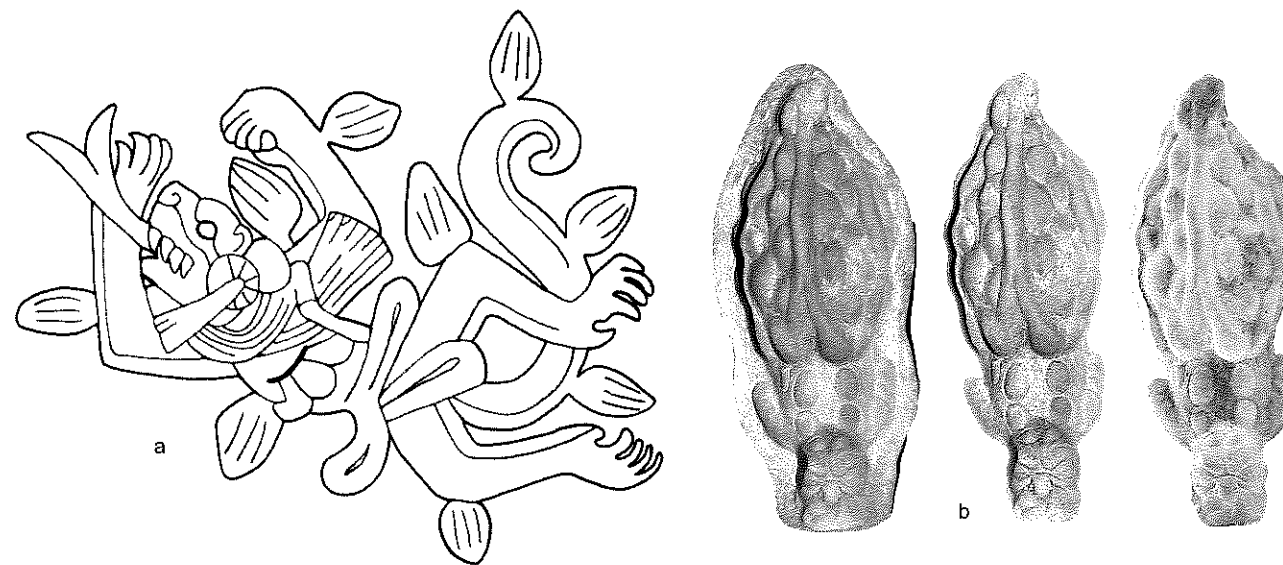


Fig. 10. The “bodily” nature of cacao. (a) El Baúl Monument 4. Drawing by Oswaldo Chinchilla; (b) “Virtual cast” of Classic period ceramic mold. Image from Van Stone and Johnson (2017: cat. no. A-50), courtesy of Mark Van Stone.

agery during the Late Formative period. In Mesoamerica, the iconography of cacao is generally understood to begin during the Early Classic period with inscriptions on ceramic vessels (Reents-Budet 2006; Stuart 2006: 188–189; McNeil (2006: 10), in fact, declared that “images of cacao in Mesoamerican art and material culture are unknown before the Classic period (A.D. 250–900).”¹⁹ However, archaeological evidence of cacao use, based on vessels that carry its chemical signature, predates any iconography of it by centuries. Evidence extends back into the Early Formative period at Paso de la Amada in Chiapas, El Manatí and San Lorenzo in Veracruz, and Puerto Escondido in the Ulúa Valley of Honduras (Henderson et al. 2007; Powis et al. 2007, 2011), into the Middle Formative period at Colha, Belize (Hurst et al. 2002; Powis et al. 2002), and to between 600–200 AD at Chocóla, Guatemala (Kaplan et al. 2017). More recently, Chinchilla (2016: 362) suggested that Ocós phase (1250–1100 BC) figurines (see Lesure 1997: fig. 3 and Rosenswig 2010: fig. 6.5b), interpreted by John Clark (1991: 21) and Richard Lesure (1997: 235–241) as representations of village chiefs or respected elders, might evidence a far earlier iconography of cacao. The ceramic figurines, which pair anthropomorphic bodies with zoomorphic faces, wear oblong and striated objects around their necks/upper torsos that Chinchilla suggested might represent cacao pods; both Lesure and Robert Rosenswig, however, described the objects as tassels. Regardless, Chinchilla’s (2016: 362) point was that, if these figurines do actually display cacao, their iconography foreshadows much later associations between cacao, wealth, and status. While we do not discount Chinchilla’s suggestion, we are also well acquainted with the difficulties in determining what, exactly, such motifs signify on Formative figurines: the striated, globular shapes, some more elongated than others, might represent cacao pods, but they might just as likely portray other amorphous forms of bodily adornment. If indeed they do represent cacao, it is important to note that the pods are, as in later periods, unopened, in contrast to the majority of examples on Late Formative pedestals, which are opened to reveal the fruit inside. Regardless, we take Chinchilla’s (2016: 363–366) point that there is a long-lived iconography of “strings of cacao around the

neck” that perhaps makes its first appearance with these Early Formative figurines.²⁰

More interesting with regards to our argument, however, is Chinchilla’s (2016: 236) claim that “representations of cacao are conspicuously absent from the Late Formative sculptures of Izapa, Tak’alik Ab’aj, and other coastal sites.” He argued that, although cacao may have made an early iconographic appearance with the Ocós phase figurines, it did not reemerge in the artistic repertoire of Mesoamerica until the Early Classic period, as best illustrated by the Teotihuacan-style censers from Escuintla (see Chinchilla 2016: 362–363, fig. 2). In our opinion, the feline pedestal sculptures indicate that, contrary to the arguments of previous scholars, an iconography of cacao was not only present during the Late Formative period, but significant to statements of elite identity along the south coast and adjacent highlands. This iconography also corresponds well to archaeological evidence from the site of El Ujuxte, Guatemala, where cacao seeds (awaiting further analysis) were found in a trash pit located between two mounds within an elite residential cluster dating to circa AD 100 (Love 1997). So, too, cacao has been documented at Kaminaljuyu in Formative period contexts. Marion Popenoe de Hatch (1997: 48) and C. Earle Smith (1997: 53) suggested a relationship between large Monte Alto Rojo vessels – which disappear from the archaeological record of Kaminaljuyu by the Early Classic period (Popenoe de Hatch 1997: 122) – and the storage of cacao; more recently Bárbara Arroyo et al. (2015: 20) confirmed an association between Monte Alto Rojo vessels and carbonized cacao seeds (among other types of seeds) at Formative period Kaminaljuyu.

The El Ujuxte evidence, from an elite precinct at the site, calls to mind John Henderson and Rosemary Joyce’s (2006; also see Joyce and Henderson 2010) appeal to pay heed to the social implications of cacao cultivation, preparation, presentation, and consumption. They argued that, by the Middle Formative period, evidence suggests that there was “an element of performance to serving cacao that would have helped to underline publicly the social debt assumed by those to whom these beverages were served” (Henderson and Joyce 2006: 152). Although at Puerto Escondido, Honduras,



Fig. 9. Opened cacao pods. Photographs by Michael Love (left) and Frans Pieters (right).

where there is evidence of cacao consumption by 1000 BC, the society does not appear to have been stratified, Henderson et al. (2007: 18939) argued that members of the community, like later elites throughout Mesoamerica, were nevertheless engaged in distinguishing themselves socially and in creating social obligations that would eventually be the basis of political power. Before cacao beverages were used by lords to reinforce their status, they contributed to the emergence of elites.

By the Late Formative period, with the advent of a pedestal sculpture tradition featuring felines with cacao pods emerging from their heads, we see the marriage of cacao iconography to stone sculpture, the erection of which – whether at a monumental or smaller, more portable scale – appears to have been a privilege of elites (Guernsey 2012). This Late Formative evidence, in other words, anticipates later imagery in which cacao appears on elite objects and is defined as a beverage of only the most privileged classes (see McNeil 2006: 12–17 for discussion). Moreover, like cacao, felines – and jaguars in particular – became a hallmark of the symbolism of kingship in later periods, carrying with them an array of meanings ranging from darkness and sacrifice to martial prowess, with their pelage even featured on the clothing and courtly furniture of kings (Turner 2017). The Late Formative pedestals successfully – and innovatively – wed together an iconography of felines and cacao, combining a set of symbolic references and markers of elite status that would endure in Mesoamerica for centuries.

These feline pedestals featuring cacao pods may not have been isolated examples of a Late Formative iconography of cacao, and may very well have shared a domain of meaning with monkey pedestal sculptures, which constitute another recurring pedestal theme (see Love 2010: fig. 7.17a, b; Parsons 1986: fig. 41).²¹ Although the monkeys on Late Formative pedestal sculptures do not reference cacao directly, monkeys are well known for their role in the dispersal of cacao seeds (Ogata et al. 2006: 87; Thomas et al. 2012: 2; Young 2007: 49, 106–107). This reputation likely accounts for a number of Classic period Mesoamerican ceramics featuring monkeys

and cacao (for one particularly vivid example see Miller and Martin 2004: plate 40). Nisao Ogata et al. (2006: figs. 3.10, 3.12) noted that in some Classic period representations, the cacao pods appear to grow out of the monkeys' bodies, much as they do on the feline on El Baúl Monument 4, or – centuries earlier – on the Late Formative felines on the pedestal sculptures. A sculpture fragment (Fig. 11b) published by Thompson (1943: fig. 17.3g, i), which he described as a “palma-like head” from Finca La Concepción, in the Cotzumalguapa region, may fuse these domains of meaning: the back of the monkey's head transforms into an upward projecting object that resembles the opened cacao pods on the Late Formative feline pedestals.

Concluding thoughts

It is difficult to make sense of the range of meanings communicated by pedestal sculptures: as noted at the beginning of this paper, they portray a diverse range of animals and anthropomorphic figures. Perhaps it is ill advised to assume that they should cohere thematically as a group. It may be just as likely that, similar to other sculptural forms, they served a variety of purposes dependent upon context. The lack of archaeological context for most certainly aggravates the problem, making suggestions of function speculative at best. Nevertheless, we think it worthwhile to suggest some possible meanings for the objects.

The feline pedestals, sprouting what we are interpreting as cacao, would have been, by extension, imbued with economic significance: their imagery references agricultural fertility and its implications for the exchange of elite commodities like cacao. Similar economically-laden messages may also be conveyed by an unusual pedestal sculpture from Kaminaljuyu, Pedestal Monument 4, which depicts an aged, likely supernatural being, hoisting a tumpline to his head as if bearing tribute (see Doering and Collins 2008: fig. 12). The tumpline wraps around his forehead and then twists down his back while, above, the burden carried by the individual terminates in an array of curling volutes.²² Similar scrolling elements appear along the base and sides of the pedestal, some of which recall the curling volutes associated with the iconography of rain throughout much of Mesoamerica. That these messages, with their potential economic significance, were articulated in the form of stone sculpture – in and of itself a privileged domain of representation – suggests that they were key to Late Formative expressions of authority. The pedestals that portray bound captives or individuals whose postures and gestures communicate deference (Guernsey n.d.; Kidder 1959: fig. 9; Norman 1976: fig. 5.31; Weeks 2003: fig. 276) certainly confirm the role of Late Formative pedestal sculptures in articulating socio-political messages.²³

Other pedestal sculptures, which display humans or anthropomorphs in a bewildering variety of postures (see, for example, Dieseldorff 1926: figs. 205–207; Easby and Scott 1971: cat. no. 195; Parsons 1969: plate 48g, h, 1986: figs. 38–40), are more difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, the fact that so many pedestals repeat images and themes, and are dispersed throughout a wide region, indicates that they – like stelae, altars, and potbellies – were viewed as expedient vehicles of expression by rulers at many sites (Guernsey 2010, 2011, 2012). Even the more unusual pedestal sculptures – such as the snakes or snake/skull combinations, coatimundis,

birds, and a single known crocodilian reptile – played some role, albeit one not well understood, within the larger spectrum of Late Formative sculptural innovation. A similar menagerie of animals shows up in later periods in the form of lineage names, military orders, and toponyms (Ruud van Akkeren, personal communication, 2016; also see van Akkeren 2006, 2012: 48–50), and perhaps we should be less inclined to write off these pedestal sculptures featuring animals and other representational motifs as purely vernacular, or related only to the natural world, and instead entertain the idea that they served some role(s) within emerging strategies of elite identification or territorial, economic, and political control (not unlike those of later Classic period emblem glyphs; see Gronemeyer 2012).²⁴ To wit, many of the animals portrayed on the Formative period pedestals are verbally invoked in colonial-era and modern records where they signify patronyms or refer to specific social classes of individuals. For example, to this day, Balam “jaguar” is still a common last name throughout the Maya region, as is Batz “monkey,” Sis “coatimundi,” and Chan “snake;” “House of Bird” also appears as a family name. So, too, Cacao is still a prominent name among the Q'eqchi' and Poqomchi' as is Bak “bone/skull” and Jolom “head.” The fact that on at least six of the pedestal sculptures the animals perch on woven mat designs, which appear to substitute for the throne-like “capitals” of other pedestals, may lend further support for the idea that this imagery carried associations with elevated social status.

While we are asserting that the suite of pedestal sculpture imagery may, indeed, suggest that the sculptures played a role in emerging economic, political, and territorial statements during the Late Formative period, it is nevertheless prudent to remember that animals played any number of mythological roles in ancient Mesoamerica as well: the stone form of the pedestals brings to mind a passage in the 16th century K'iche' *Popol Vuh* in which animals – pumas, jaguars, and snakes – are turned to stone (Christenson 2007: 215–216). Other possible meanings for the menagerie of animals featured on the pedestals have been proffered: Andrew Turner (2017) noted that felines, monkeys, coatimundis, reptiles, and skeletal beings appear in later Classic period iconography as representations of supernatural *nauals*, co-essences, or *wahy* figures (see Calvin 1997; Grube and Nahm 1994; Houston and Stuart 1989).

In truth, any potential interpretations of the pedestal sculptures will remain the stuff of conjecture until better contextual data emerge. Nevertheless, in our opinion, what the sub-group of feline pedestals discussed here suggests is that cacao may have been central to their meaning. Moreover, the objects indicate that references to cacao were deemed pertinent to a burgeoning Late Formative tradition of stone sculpture put into the service of elite social, economic, and political agendas (Guernsey 2016). This iconography also emerged, unsurprisingly, in a region famed for its cacao production and distribution. Cacao requires a significant investment in production, from the maintenance of sensitive growing conditions to a multi-staged process of harvesting, fermentation, drying, and roasting, before eventual preparation into its final comestible form (Coe and Coe 2007: 19–25; Young 2007). It became central to religious and ritual expression in Mesoamerica and signified wealth and power. The feline pedestals suggest that an iconography of cacao was

viewed as vital to the dramatic sculptural innovations that characterized the Late Formative period, which also ushered in an era of increasing urbanism and burgeoning political, economic and subsistence-related innovations.

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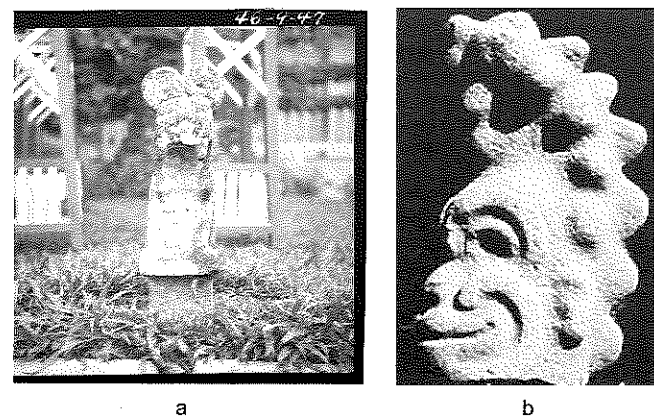


Fig. 11. Feline and monkey imagery. (a) Feline pedestal attributed to the Finca Nahuatancillo. Photograph gift of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1958 © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 58-34-20/40374 (digital file # 46-9-48); (b) “Palma-like” monkey head with possible cacao-related iconography from Finca La Concepción, Cotzumalguapa region, Guatemala. Photograph after Thompson (1943: fig. 17.3g, i).

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Endnotes

- 1 For connections between pedestal monuments and comparable sculptural forms in lower Central America, see Bruhns (1982), Hirth (1988), Lothrop (1921), and Richardson (1940).
- 2 Shook (1971: 74) maintained that “pedestal sculptures persist with stylistic changes beyond the Pre-Classic and through the Classic and conceivably into the Post-Classic.” See, for example, a pedestal illustrated by Navarrete et al. (1993: figs. 25, 26) that displays Teotihuacan influence.
- 3 In spite of its wide distribution at sites of varying scale during the Late Formative period in southeastern Mesoamerica, sculpture was, nevertheless, an elite prerogative, and not a vehicle of expression accessible to all social classes (Guernsey 2012).
- 4 This pedestal sculpture also appears in the Photographic Archives of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, listed as part of the Robelo Collection, Tuxtla Chico (PM# 58-34-20/42318, digital file # 44-15-92).
- 5 See Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera (2006: 44–46) for discussion of other feline sculptures in the San Lorenzo region, some lacking archaeological context; they note that the small scale of many “regrettably facilitates removal and sale.”

- 6 A late, probably Classic period, peg sculpture now in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala, portrays a standing feline and underscores the fluidity between themes and categories of sculpture. Its standing posture is remarkably distinct from that of felines on Formative period pedestal sculptures, yet its existence demonstrates that tenoned felines, as a sculptural form, persevered into later periods. The feline's overall appearance compares most closely to a “rampant jaguar” documented by Mata (2011: fig. 1) in Chimaltenango, Guatemala.
- 7 Also see the exaggerated ears of felines on effigy incensarios from Chitox (Ichon and Grignon Cheesman 1983: fig. 120a) and Lake Amatitlán (Mata Amado and Medrano 2011: fig. 88).
- 8 Felines with vegetal elements projecting from their crania, like the Waterlily Jaguar of the Late Classic Maya, appear in later iconography, although the foliating element takes a very different form from that emerging from the heads of the Late Formative pedestal jaguars. See Turner (2017) for discussion. The small feline from Emilio Carranza, in the outskirts of San Lorenzo, also possesses a prominent, yet stylistically distinct, cranial projection (see Cyphers 2004: fig. 137).
- 9 See Turner (2017) and Houston and Taube (2010: 241) for discussion of a figure in the collection of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History that blends both rain god and feline attributes; Turner argued that its iconography links it to that of the feline pedestal sculptures. Also see Paredes (2012) for potentially related feline iconography, replete with dramatically curling cranial elements, in El Salvador.
- 10 Ogata et al. (2006: 84–86, see figs. 3.10c and 3.11) noted that, occasionally in the corpus of Mesoamerican art, cacao is represented with a calyx, but its form differs from the cleft associated with maize. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there is clear iconographic and conceptual overlap between maize and cacao in later periods; see Chinchilla (2016), Martin (2006), and Miller and Martin (2004: 62–63) for discussion.
- 11 Kufer and McNeil (2006: 93) cautioned that, “because of its morphological similarity to *T. cacao*, it is not possible to definitively document the presence of *T. bicolor* in iconography.”
- 12 See Fowler (1987) for discussion of cacao production and exchange throughout southeastern Mesoamerica and into El Salvador during the Precolumbian era.
- 13 But see Chinchilla's (2016: 366) assertion that the feline is, in fact, a composite being with reptilian aspects.
- 14 Chinchilla (2016: 367, fig. 11) noted that on Late Classic El Baúl Monument 12, a cacao pod appears in the headdress of a lordly individual; on the nearly identical Pantaleón Monument 1, a fruit with a human face substitutes for the cacao pod. Although the cacao pod in the headdress of the individual is portrayed very differently than on the pedestal sculptures – it is rendered horizontally and unopened – it is interesting to note that during the Late Classic period cacao was inserted into headdresses or associated with the head.
- 15 See Martin (2006) for censers and ceramic vessels that illustrate the significance of cacao imagery to courtly rituals and feasts in which the conspicuous consumption of cacao was a sign of economic status.
- 16 Also see McNeil et al. (2006: 246, fig. 11.13) for a stone censer lid from Copán portraying a diving god with jaguar paws and cacao pods growing from its body. Although the imagery in this case invokes the pax god as a tree, it underscores the persistence and complexity of an iconography linking felines to cacao.
- 17 See, for example, Hanks (2000: 204, 234) for jaguar spirits who stand at the center and corners of the earth and assist farmers in protecting their agricultural fields by controlling the winds, but only if they have been properly cared for.
- 18 Christenson (2001: 84) described a mountain, Paq'alib'al, which is the home of saints and ancestors for members of the Santiago Atitlán community in Guatemala. Its “entrance is guarded by two pumas and two jaguars and is adorned with abundant fruits such as *corozos*, bananas, *melacotones*, plantains, *zapotes*, cacao, and *pataxtes*...” See Chinchilla (2016), Kufer and Heinrich (2006: 403), Martin (2006), Miller and Martin (2004: 63), and Taube (2004) for discussion of these mountain places associated with jaguars, cacao, and abundant vegetation. Similar associations, albeit without direct reference to cacao, may be implied by Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 (Norman 1973: plate 64), whose central niche invokes a cave and is framed by stacked feline visages and flowering vegetal tendrils.
- 19 In South America, the iconography of cacao appears far earlier: Ogata et al. (2006: fig. 3.9) observed that a 2500 year old Peruvian vessel portrays what appears to be a cacao tree, replete with a spider monkey and dangling cacao pods.
- 20 See Chinchilla (2016: 365, 369) for further discussion of these cacao necklaces and their relationship to Classic period cacao goddess effigies well known from the Pacific coast. Also see Thompson (2011 [1956]: