

# The Iconographic Heritage of the Maya Jester God

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The Jester God, a primary icon of power in Classic Period Maya art, was first defined by Schele (1974:49) in her analysis of the accession iconography of the Group of the Cross at Palenque. The Jester God, named for the resemblance of his tri-pointed forehead to the cap of medieval court jesters (Schele and Miller 1986: 53), is one of the earliest symbols associated with Maya rulership and is primarily found attached to the ruler's headband or, in its full-bodied form, held as a scepter.

Freidel and Schele (1988) discussed the appearance of the Jester God's prototype during the Late Preclassic, where it developed as the personification of a three-pointed shape worn on a headband. Throughout Maya history the Jester God is closely associated with royal portraiture, especially on those monuments commemorating a ruler's accession to office.

The Oval Palace Tablet at Palenque (fig. 1), for example, features the accession of Pacal, a prominent seventh-century ruler at that site. In this scene, Pacal's mother, Lady Zac-Kuk, offers her son a symbol of his newly acquired authority, the drum major headdress. Lady Zac-Kuk wears a version of the Jester God headband more characteristic of the Early Classic Period, where the deity is depicted in an anthropomorphic form. Pacal, who is seated on a double-headed jaguar throne, wears a typical Late Classic form of the

headband in which the Jester God is shown as a zoomorph with serrated, *xoc*-like teeth.

An accession monument from Bonampak, Sculptured Stone 1 (Mathews 1980: fig. 9), shows a ruler in a posture identical to Pacal's on the Oval



Fig. 1. The Oval Palace Tablet (from Robertson 1985: fig. 91).

Palace Tablet. A seated nobleman presents the ruler with a Jester God headband, and the seating glyph at A2 records the ruler's accession to power at the site (Mathews 1980:72).

A complex of maize iconography that originated among the Olmec appears to have given birth to the Maya Jester God. The central maize stalk, the maize ear, and flanking leaves are represented in a variety of forms on Olmec-style portable objects and monumental sculpture. In Olmec sculpture, maize imagery is consistently found on the foreheads of, or emerging from the cleft heads of, supernatural beings, identified as such by the presence of various nonhuman features such as snarling downturned mouths and flame eyebrows. When the stela format became the predominant mode for royal portraiture, maize imagery was adopted and featured in the headdresses of human rulers, signifying both the power of the icon and the ruler's own powers to ensure continued agricultural fertility. The icon was of such importance to the Lowland Maya that it became the semantic equivalent of the highest royal title, *ahaw* (Fields 1989).

Various renditions of the maize iconographic

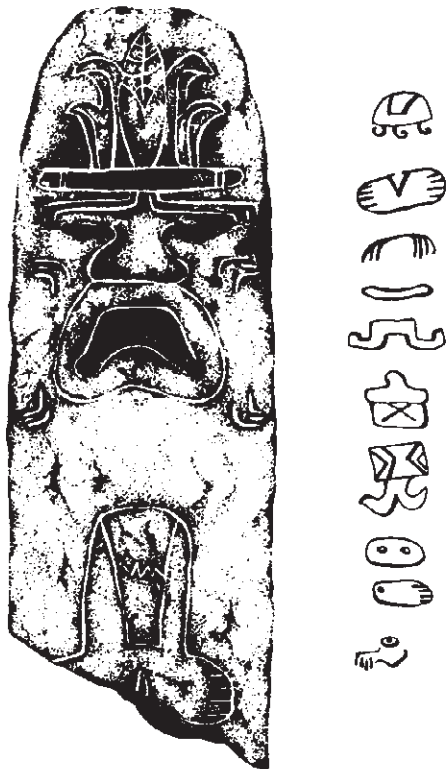


Fig. 2. The El Sitio hacha (after Navarrete 1971: fig. 5).

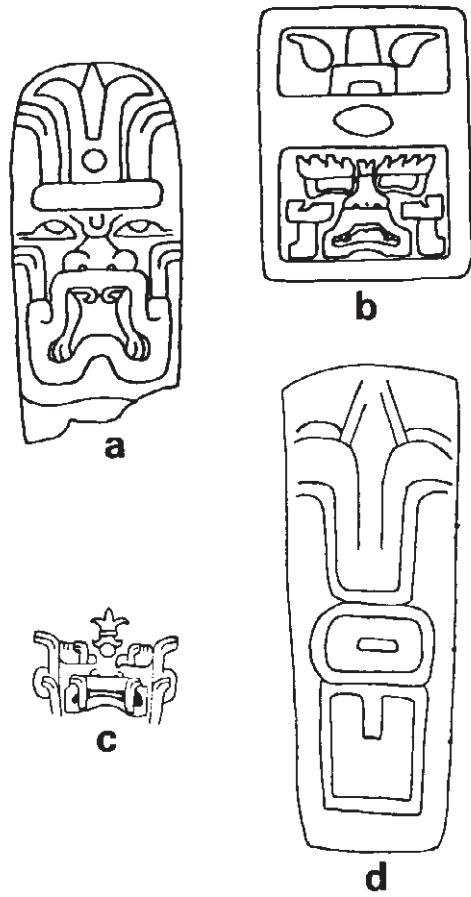


Fig. 3. (a) celt of unknown provenience (after Covarrubias 1957: fig. 34); (b) lower portion of Monument 15 from La Venta (after Covarrubias 1957: fig. 19); (c) celt of unknown provenience (from Joralemon 1971: fig. 171); (d) celt of unknown provenience (from Jorlemon 1971: fig. 173).

complex are manifested throughout a widespread area of Formative Period Mesoamerica, from Guerrero to El Salvador. Although this area is culturally diverse, features characteristic of the art style ascribed to the Olmec are common. The presence of Olmec-style ceramic vessels and figurines, finely carved jades, and monumental stone carving in the far-flung reaches of Mesoamerica, however, does not necessarily imply an actual Olmec presence at these sites, according to Grove (1984:17). Grove suggested that Olmec-style art outside the Gulf Coast heartland may represent a symbolic repertory shared by a number of contemporary societies in southern Mesoamerica around 1000 B.C.

The presence of such exotics as pyrite mirrors and obsidian at Gulf Coast sites indicates that trade was a factor in spreading the concepts and

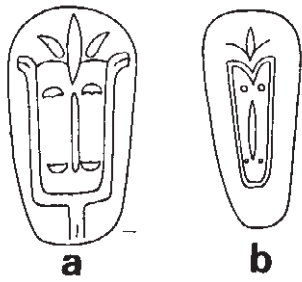


Fig. 4. (a) and (b) celts from La Venta Offering 1942-c (after Drucker 1952: fig. 47b and c).

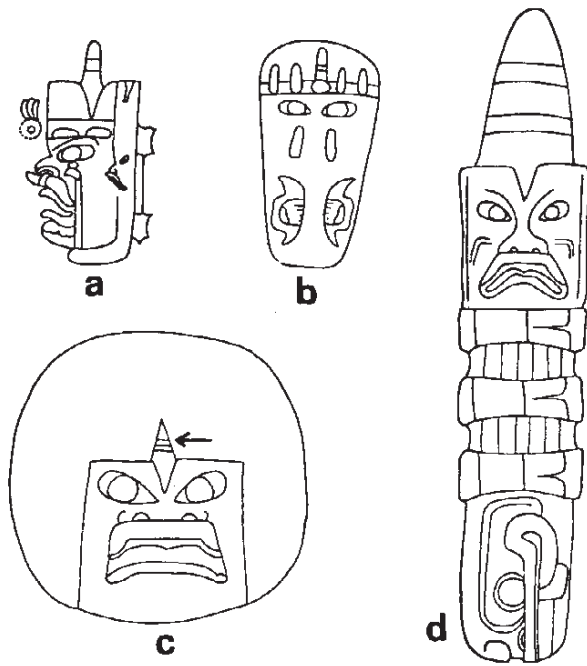


Fig. 5. (a) celt from La Venta Offering 2 (after Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: pl. 25); (b) celt from La Venta Offering 1942-c (after Drucker 1952: fig. 47a); (c) a round plaque from Guerrero (from Joralemon 1971: fig. 185); (d) celt from Ejido Ojoshal, Tabasco (after Nicholson 1967: 70).

artifacts of elite behavior. In terms of the maize complex, archaeological, botanical, and iconographic evidence can be drawn upon to illustrate how a powerful symbol was adopted by rulers throughout Mesoamerica who wished to demonstrate their role as intermediaries between their people and the forces of nature.

The most realistic depiction of maize, whose form gave rise to the Maya Jester God, is found on a jadeite hacha (fig. 2) discovered near El Sitio, Guatemala, by a farmer while clearing his *milpa* (Navarette 1971). The cob is oval and clearly

marked with kernels and is flanked by leaves. The presence of hieroglyphs implies a late or "epi-Olmec" date for the object, although Ekholm-Miller (1973) has cautioned that the image on the front and the inscription may not be contemporaneous. Joralemon's (1971:13) cleft-ended vegetation appears around the figure's mouth.

Figures 3a-d illustrate more geometricized forms of the maize cob motif. All four images depict the cob as a tripartite element: a central pointed or rounded cone, flanked by "leaves" and situated above a circular element known as a "seed corn dot" (Joralemon 1971). Cleft-ended vegetation frames the faces in figures 3a and c. Two celts from La Venta Offering 1942-c (fig. 4a-b) show the maize motif sprouting from and

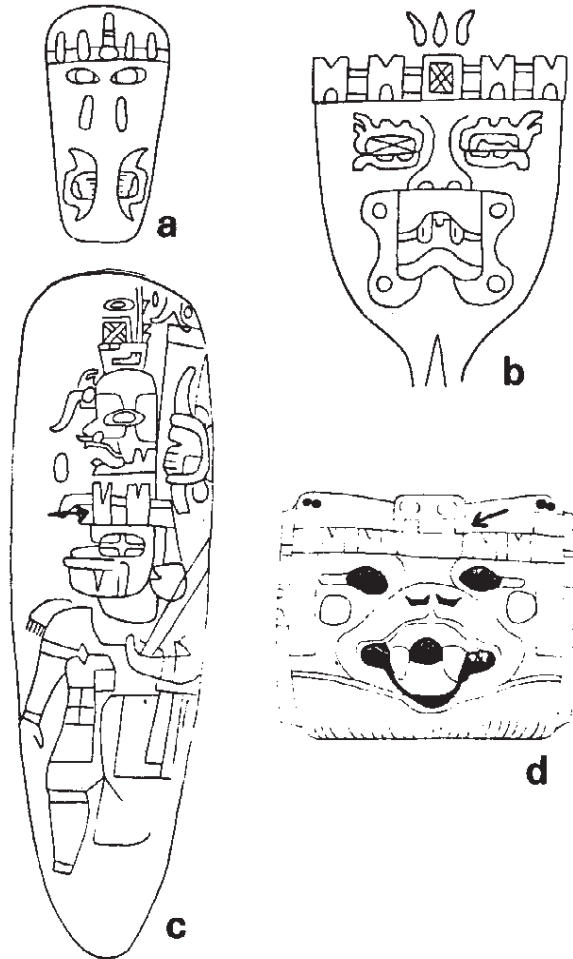


Fig. 6. (a) celt from La Venta Offering 1942-c (after Drucker 1952: fig. 47a); (b) celt from Los Tuxtlas, Vera Cruz (after Pina Chan and Covarrubias 1964: fig 1); (c) celt of unknown provenience (from Joralemon 1971: fig. 33); (d) jade object from Oaxaca (from Joralemon 1971: fig. 254).

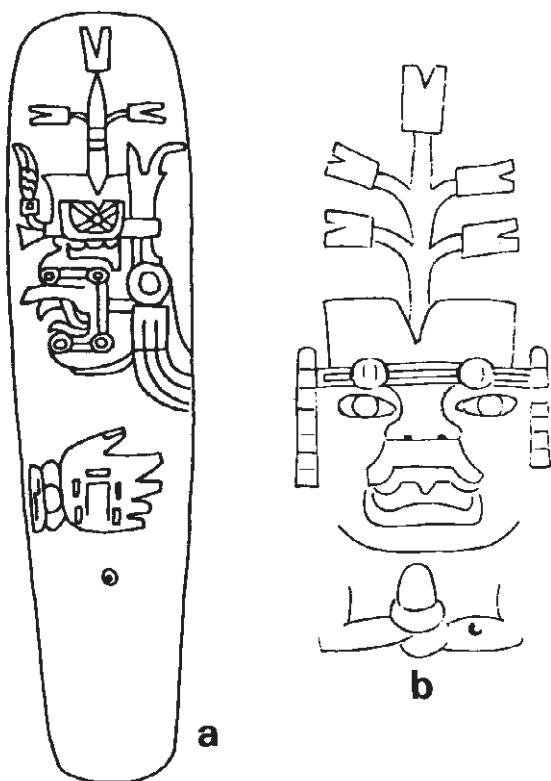


Fig. 7. (a) celt of unknown provenience (after Covarrubias 1957: fig. 33); (b) celt from Arroyo Pesquero (from Nicholson 1976: fig. 20).



Fig. 8. La Venta Stela 2 (after Drucker 1952: fig 49).

above a cleft in the figures' foreheads, flanked by "leaves" as well as by cleft-ended vegetation in figure 4a.

The maize icon in figures 5a-d is banded, as in figure 3c. The image emerges from a forehead cleft in figures c, and d, and is the central icon of the headband in figure 5b. Joralemon's (1971) "feathered corn dot" appears on figure 5a, while the banded maize element in figure 5b sits atop a seed corn dot. Headbands featuring a central image flanked by pairs of clefted elements are found on a variety of objects from Vera Cruz to Oaxaca (fig. 6). These clefted elements most likely represent vegetation, as Joralemon (1971:13) suggested: in figure 7, the cleft elements appear to substitute for leaves.

Maize imagery appears in both supernatural and human contexts on monumental sculpture. A relief carved on a rock near Xoc in east-central Chiapas (Ekholm-Miller 1973) depicts a striding figure, probably a human in costume. Grove (1984:57-58), who discussed this figure and the San Miguel Amuco stela in the context of frontier Olmec-style carving, described the distinctive face coverings on these figures as bird-serpent masks.

The Xoc figure's headdress is topped by a banded cone maize motif, as seen in figure 5, and he clutches a tablet, which Ekholm-Miller (1973: 17) suggested is a stone celt with vegetal motifs.

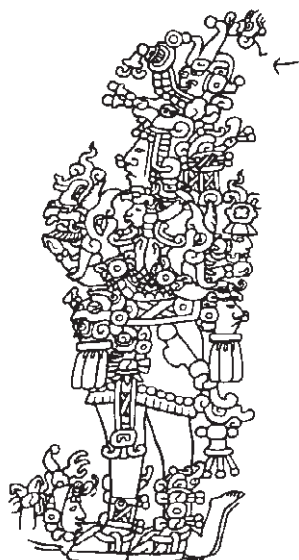
A similarly posed figure can be seen on the San Miguel Amuco stela, a carved sandstone slab found near the Guerrero-Michoacan border (Grove and Paradis 1971). A tripartite element is attached to the top of his headdress, and a vertical cleft-ended element appears at the back of his head. In his left arm he clutches a bundle, generally identified as a torch, which Joyce et al. (1991) found occasionally depicted in association with Olmec bloodletting paraphernalia. Bloodletting has been identified as a primary responsibility of Mesoamerican rulers (Joralemon 1974; Schele 1984a; Stuart 1984e), and the association of maize iconography and bloodletting is also found on such Late Classic monuments as Palenque's Temple of the Foliated Cross wall panel.

The clearly human central figure on La Venta Stela 2 (fig. 8) wears a complex headdress whose lower portion features the cone and flanking leaves of the maize icon. The maize shape emerges from





**Fig. 9.** Low-relief panel from the South Coast of Guatemala (from Shook and Heizer 1976).



**Fig. 10.** The Leiden Plaque (from Schele and Miller 1986: fig 12).

a cleft in an element that resembles the bar and dot arrangement found on the celts from La Venta Offering 1942-c (see fig. 4).

The widespread occurrence of the maize icon is illustrated by its appearance in the headdress of a Monte Alban I figurine (Bernal 1969: fig. 27),

described as a deity with a serpent mask. The headdress is similar to the one worn by the ruler on La Venta St. 2 (fig. 8).

On a low relief panel from the South Coast of Guatemala (fig. 9), described by Parsons (1986:121) as Late Olmec (900 to 700 B.C.), the cone flanked by leaves motif has acquired a zoomorphic representation. Both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms appear in the Maya Highlands and Lowlands. On the lower right side of the Late Formative Stela 5 from Izapa (Schele and Miller 1986: fig. III.6), a seated figure wears a headdress whose central element is an anthropomorphic head wearing a tripartite cap. Schele and Miller (1986:140) described the seated figure as a spangle-turbaned scribe, who is in the process of shaping a human body at the time of creation, but that appears to be the task of the smaller figure adjacent to the armless human form. The presence of the Jester God on the front of the larger figure's headdress, as well as the jaguar-eared zoomorph atop the parasol held by a retainer, suggest that the larger figure may well represent a ruler. The implement in his hand may be a bloodletter rather than a scribal tool, since the act of bloodletting was crucial to the generation of life.

The Dumbarton Oaks jade pectoral (Coe 1966; see also Schele and Miller 1986:119-120), carved on one side with the image of an Olmec supernatural, is incised on the reverse with the portrait of a Late Preclassic Maya ruler. The seated ruler's headdress features the zoomorphic Jester God as the central element on a headband, whose paired flanking elements resemble the cleft-ended vegetation seen in figure 6b-d. The accompanying glyphic inscription was described by Schele and Miller (1986:120) as the earliest historical text and the first royal accession record to have been deciphered in Maya inscriptions.

The ruler portrayed on a greenstone pectoral found in Tikal Burial 85, which dates to ca. A.D. 1 (W. Coe 1967:43), wears a similar headband, as pointed out M. Coe (1966:14). The central element is tri-pointed and situated above what has been described here as a seed corn dot. The paired flanking elements are again cleft-ended.

The rulers depicted on Tikal Stela 2 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: fig. 2) and on the Leiden Plaque (fig. 10), ascribed to the site of Tikal, wear the anthropomorphic version of the Jester God, that is, a little head wearing the tri-pointed cap. A similar image appears on a huge Early Classic cache vessel in the Duke University Museum collection (Dorie Reents-Budet, personal communication).

Later Early Classic monuments from Cerro de las Mesas and San Miguel Chapultepec (Stirling 1943) depict the tripartite motif above an *ahaw*-like image, affixed to the front of the ruler's headdress. The Jester God motif on Cerro de las Mesas St. 8 is identical to the tri-pointed element on the Tikal greenstone pectoral.

The Maya Jester God clearly arose from an Olmec iconographic complex, identified here with maize vegetation. To explain how such a phenomenon occurred, it is necessary to explain briefly the role maize played in Mesoamerica and to describe the process whereby natural symbols are adopted by those in authority and used to enhance their personal power, as well as to describe how such powerful symbols may be adopted and utilized in contexts similar to but divorced from their original contexts.

As Michael Coe (1968:26) stated, "The key . . . to the understanding of Mesoamerican civilization is corn. Where it flourished, so also did

high culture"; this statement is supported by both archaeological and botanical evidence. The Olmec heartland is generally recognized as occupying the rich riverine lowlands of southern Vera Cruz and western Tabasco, and such sites as San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, and Tres Zapotes flourished between 1500 and 500 B.C. Rivers appear to have played a key role in the development and maintenance of Olmec society, serving as the principal routes of communication and commerce, and the annual floods left rich levee deposits where a variety of crops could be planted (Grove 1984:14). The archaeological record indicates that the Olmec had advanced social and economic systems with commercial networks extending throughout Mesoamerica.

Rich alluvial soils as well as a temperate climate well-suited to maize agriculture also characterize the broad mountain valleys of Central Mexico, where the important Formative Period site, Chalcatzingo, is located on the terraced hillside of the base of two peaks adjacent to the Amatzinac River in Morelos (Grove 1984:19-21). By 700 B.C., monumental architecture and bas-relief carvings are found at Chalcatzingo, as well as throughout the "Olmec frontier," extending to the south and east as far as western Honduras and El Salvador (Bernal 1969:186-187).

The origins and subsequent development of Olmec civilization were a source of debate among archaeologists and art historians until excavations at San Lorenzo on the Gulf Coast established a long, continuous stratigraphic sequence (Grove 1984:136). The origins of domesticated corn in the New World have been a similar source of debate among botanists, who have proposed a number of theories to explain the phenomenon. One prominent theory, espoused by Beadle (1977, 1978), has long held that the grass, *teosinte*, which is of the same species as corn (*Zea mays*), was ancestral to domesticated corn. Beadle's extensive cytological and genetic studies have reportedly demonstrated this relationship.

Beadle's primary adversary is Paul Mangelsdorf (1974, 1986), who, in his most recent publication, proposed that both modern corn and annual *teosinte* are descended from the hybridization of perennial *teosinte* with a primitive pod-corn. Paleobotanical studies have demonstrated

that Formative Period corn is not standardized and is genetically diverse with a wide range of phenotypes. A recent explanation for corn's origin, proposed by Iltis (1983a, 1983b), does much to explain the appearance of corn in the archaeological record, which apparently led to the establishment of permanent villages in Mesoamerica by 2000 B.C.

In the taxonomic classification proposed by Doebley and Iltis (1980), the annual *teosintes*, still locally prevalent in Central Mexico valleys, gave rise to maize. *Teosinte* is a weedy pioneer that colonizes natural scars in the landscape, such as the temporary living sites of hunting and gathering peoples (Flannery 1973:291). As Flannery has noted, *teosinte* grows in stands up to 2 m in height and is also associated with naturally occurring wild runner beans and wild squash, giving rise to the Mesoamerican dietary triumvirate. Although corn and *teosinte* hybridize and there are no apparent chromosomal disparities or gene differences between them, there is a structural difference (Gould 1984:14). As explained by Gould, *teosinte* has a central stem and many long lateral branches of comparable length and strength, each branch ending in a male tassel. The female ears grow laterally; the kernels are encased in a stony outer covering and can be used as food only if popped. *Teosinte* kernels are self-dispersing, unlike modern ears of corn, which are totally dependent on human intervention for their propagation.

According to Gould (1984), corn has a central stem with a male tassel, and the female cob occurs at the terminal end of stout branches – that is, the *teosinte* ear, sprouting laterally, and the corn ear, sprouting terminally, are not homologous structures. The corn ear's structural equivalent is the *teosinte* male tassel, and what Iltis (1983a, 1983b) proposed is that a catastrophic sexual transmutation occurred, whereby the male tassel spikes were abruptly transformed to small and primitive versions of the modern ear of corn, which proved a useful food. As larger kernels were continuously selected by horticulturalists to propagate, ordinary selection built a bigger and fuller ear from the "initial runty but useful condition" (Gould 1984:18).

An association between *teosinte* and the origin of corn is also found in the oral tradition

of the Pocomam-speaking village of San Luis Jilotepeque, Department of Jalapa, Guatemala (Smith-Stark 1978). Smith-Stark (1978:57) suggested that the story is traditional and not recently introduced, because there is no Spanish translation for *silak'*, the Pocomam word used to describe *teosinte*, and confirmed by Smith-Stark to be that plant.

Smith-Stark (1978:59-60) provided a free translation of the discussion between two Pocomam men, in which one man recalls that his grandfather said "corn appeared on *teosinte*." The second man confirms that after seven years, *teosinte* plants "become" corn, ". . . corn appears after seven years. . . Until we complete the seven years, we plant it [i.e., *teosinte*], and then it yields corn." Coe and Diehl (1980 [v.2]:43) discovered in the course of their ethnological investigations at Tenochtitlán that native and domesticated corn is sown deliberately by local farmers, a practice that strengthens native breeds. Iltis has also stated (1983a) that Mexican farmers still cope with invading *teosinte* plants, which interbreed with their corn plants, producing an incredible array of maize varieties.

### Maize and the Mesoamerican Lifestyle

In 1973, a productivity experiment among Zapotec farmers by Anne Kirkby yielded information that the cultivation and clearance of land was not considered worthwhile unless yields of at least 200 to 250 kilograms of shelled maize per hectare were produced (Flannery 1973:298). Flannery related that Kirkby discovered a linear regression relationship between mean corn cob length and yield in kilograms per hectare for fields in the Valley of Oaxaca and used this relationship, as well as figures on mean length of corn cobs from archaeological excavations, to calculate estimated yields for various periods in prehistory. She discovered that maize did not cross the critical threshold of 200 to 250 kilograms until sometime between 2000 and 1500 B.C., and it is at this time, according to Flannery (1973:299), that "permanent villages on good alluvial agricultural land became the dominant type of settlement in Mesoamerica."

This date coincides with the "pre-Ojochi" phase at San Lorenzo, which is characterized by

semi-sedentary villages and the possible use of river levees for some agricultural activity (Coe and Diehl 1980 [v. 2]:139) Although Coe and Diehl (1980 [v. 2]:150) suggested that the ceramic inventory of the first fully Olmec component at the site, the San Lorenzo phase (1150-900 B.C.), implies the arrival of an immigrant group, Grove (1984:154) disagrees. He suggested that the traits identifying the appearance of Olmec civilization (monumental architecture, carved monuments, characteristic ceramics and ceramic motifs, and the use of jade) do not appear as a full-blown complex but rather appear individually as aspects of a gradual *in situ* development. Regardless of the nature and timing of the processes that resulted in Olmec civilization, the important points for this discussion are that San Lorenzo is located at the optimum point in the river system for the maximum agricultural exploration of the rich levee soils (Coe and Diehl 1980 [v. 2]:147), and that San Lorenzo appears to be the site where monumental sculpture first appeared (no later than 1150 B.C., according to Coe and Diehl 1980 [v. 1]:294).

The maize plant proved to be a potent symbol of the social order that developed around the production and management of the crop. Initially depicted on portable objects and monuments with supernatural associations, the symbol was adopted by rulers who identified themselves as crucial to the process that resulted in such abundance.

The widespread occurrence of the maize iconographic complex most likely is a byproduct of extensive Formative Period interregional exchange networks, in which trade in obsidian, shell, and iron ore was documented by Cobean et al. (1971) and Pires-Ferreira (1976). Jade has also been commonly cited as the primary motive for trade among the Olmec (Paradis 1981:206).

Henderson (1979:87) suggested that a major jade source for the Olmec was probably located in the highlands of Guerrero, in the Middle Balsas region, and he stated that more Olmec jade objects have been found in Guerrero than in all the rest of Mexico. It may also prove significant that monumental sculpture from Guerrero depicts both the "maize headband," found on a cleft-headed supernatural from the site of Teopantecuanitlan (Martinez Donjuan 1982), and the tripartite maize

motif on a human figure (the San Miguel Amuco stela).

The sudden biological transformation of the corn plant and its revolutionary impact on the early Mesoamerican lifestyle lent potency to maize as a symbol representing the powers of nature. Initially depicted on portable objects and monuments with ritual or ceremonial associations, the symbol was adopted by human rulers, who recognized that by identifying themselves as in control of such powers of the universe, their own power to rule would be validated. The widespread occurrence of the maize iconographic complex most likely reflects the extensive Olmec economic network. It is possible that, as Henderson (1979:85) suggested, either the elite at regional centers were Olmecs from the Gulf Coast, or local elites adopted the symbols and status trappings of the more prestigious group with which they had economic ties, an idea first proposed by Flannery (1968). The power of the symbol was such that, from its origins on ritual and ceremonial paraphernalia, it was adopted as a secular symbol over a widespread area of Mesoamerica.

The processes whereby symbols are transformed and manipulated have been defined by political anthropologists, who normally work with ethnographic populations but whose theories have applications for archaeological cultures. As stated above, the emergence of monumental sculpture in Mesoamerica is generally credited to the Olmec, who were also the first to depict political themes on their monuments. The continued primacy of political themes in later Mesoamerican monumental art suggests a parallel continuity in the way symbols were manipulated.

In describing the derivation and manipulation of political symbols, Cohen stated that symbols, while they can be said to be "phenomena *sui generis* existing in their own right and observed for their own intrinsic values . . . are nearly always manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, in the struggle for and maintenance of, power between individuals and groups" (1974:xi). He suggested that most symbols that are politically significant are overtly nonpolitical, and that these symbols are most efficacious since their potency is derived from their ambiguity. In Cohen's interpretation,



the ambiguity of symbols may derive from the fact that symbolic forms and patterns of symbolic action that serve to develop, maintain, and express power relations are frequently adapted from the symbolism associated with ritual. Freidel (1981) has also pointed out that in hierarchical societies, the symbols of cosmic order that form the basis for religion and ideology are often the same as those that signify power relationships.

When the Maya underwent their significant cultural transformation during the Late Preclassic period, they found it necessary to develop symbols to express their new hierarchical social and political order. As detailed by Freidel and Schele (1988), the new social order found its expression in enormous pyramidal structures adorned with huge sculpted masks, found at the sites throughout the Maya Lowlands. The Maya were able to draw from a symbol system that had existed for many generations and that expressed the elite concepts that now applied to them. An important component of that symbol system was the "maize headband," a central tripartite motif flanked by cleft elements, found on the upper masks on Cerros Str. 5C-2nd, and recognized by Freidel and Schele (1988) as the prototype of the Jester God headband.

According to Thompson (1960:8), Maya civilization was based primarily on maize, and subsequent investigations have reiterated not only the important role of maize in Maya subsistence but also the sophisticated intensive agricultural techniques practiced in the Maya region as early as 600 B.C. (Matheny 1978). Maize also carried enormous cosmological significance for the Maya. Humans were created from maize by the gods, who wished to be honored and sustained by their creations (Tedlock 1985:77-80), acts that were accomplished by ritual bloodletting.

Taube (1985, 1989) supplied further evidence of the significance of maize by documenting the prominence of the maize god in Classic Maya vessel scenes and by providing glyphic and linguistic evidence of the importance of the tamale as the principal maize product of the Classic Maya. Taube (1989) identified an association of the tamale with various Maya deities, and possibly with a particular supernatural region as well.

The relationship between humans and maize, the source of their existence and sustenance,

accounts for the significance of maize as a royal symbol. The quintessential Classic Maya expression of the intimate relationship between kingship, maize, and the ritual act of bloodletting is found on the tablet from the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque. The tablet, one of three documenting the royal accession of Chan Bahlum, also celebrates the birth of God K/GII, who is primarily associated with royal lineages and bloodletting as well as with maize (Taube 1989:46). The iconography of the tablet appears to represent the birth of humans from maize (Schele 1976:24). Schele (1976:23) also notes that the iconography on the Foliated Cross tablet links the life cycles of humans and maize, and that blood sacrifice is involved with the perpetuation of these life cycles.

The various representations of maize as a tripartite motif, which originated among the Olmec, crossed cultural and chronological boundaries and eventually assumed the identity of the primary icon of Maya rulership, the Jester God. The importance of the symbol lies both in its meaning as related to maize and in its power as an object to express royal authority.

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