A Newly Discovered Potbelly Sculpture from El Salvador and a Reinterpretation of the Genre

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A previously unreported potbelly sculpture has recently been discovered at the Teopán site situated in western El Salvador. In addition to being only the fifth such sculpture found in that country, this example clearly depicts a woman and supports a reinterpretation of potbelly sculptures in general as depicting pregnant women, perhaps in the act of giving birth. They may be representations of a Late Preclassic earth goddess.

Location and Discovery

The potbelly sculpture under discussion was found in early 1996 near the shore of Teopán Island in Lake Coatepeque, situated in western El Salvador (Fig. 1). Lake Coatepeque is a striking volcanic lake within an oval caldera. Its single island is a partially submerged cone rising approximately 180 meters above the lake to an altitude of 929 meters above sea level. Construction on the island in early 1996 exposed an archaeological deposit now recorded as the Teopán site. A potbelly sculpture was uncovered and remains at the site (Figs. 2, 3); the only information reported concerning its context was that at least one meter of soil covered its somewhat battered head. Inspection of sherds remaining on the site surface established the presence of several ceramic groups belonging to the Chul and Caynac complexes of western El Salvador (as defined by Sharer 1978 and refined by Demarest 1986). Demarest’s revision dates the Chul complex to about 400 – 100 B.C. and Caynac to 100 B.C. – 250 A.D. The Late Preclassic Chul and Caynac complexes are also represented at Santa Leticia where are found three other potbelly sculptures. Sharer and Demarest both accept these ceramic complexes as products of an unspecified Maya group that covered a large area in the Late Preclassic, including Kiamaluyu and western El Salvador.

Santa Leticia is located approximately 30 kilometers from the Teopán site. Evidence from Santa Leticia (Demarest 1986) and from several Guatemalan sites where potbellies have...
been found (Parsons 1986) strongly supports a Late Preclassic dating for this style of sculpture, as does also the preliminary ceramic dating of the Teopán site. Other materials reported from the Teopán site accord with a Late Preclassic dating, including four mushroom stones and several Bolinas figurines (also known as Alvarez Tripunctate-eye figurines – see Dahlin 1978 and Demarest 1986).

The Teopán Potbelly
The Teopán potbelly conforms to the Monte Alto style of boulder sculpture as defined by Parsons (1986:39-40). This style includes the four Salvadoran sculptures from Santa Leticia and El Trapiche, and around 50 others from different sites located on the Pacific coast and highlands of Guatemala. Typical Monte Alto traits present in the Teopán potbelly are its neckless head, the use of grooves to define parts of the nose and mouth, “puffy” closed eyes (later reworked, as noted below), wrap-around arms, and demarcated naval (here a pecked circle 5 cm in diameter). In addition, the Teopán potbelly has several traits rarely present or previously unreported for the Monte Alto style, including the following:

- Breasts are clearly shown.
- Insofar as was possible given the limitations of a rounded boulder, the sculptor indicated wide hips and the division between the buttocks.
- The back of the sculpture is flattened.
- There is a small concavity (approximately 10 cm in diameter), crude but deliberate, located on center below the legs. This would normally not be visible when the sculpture is at rest on the soil surface.
- At some point in time after the potbelly was sculpted, its puffy closed eyes (typical of the Monte Alto style) were “opened” by carving two oval and rather irregular concavities in the center of the large eyelids. As discussed below, this may have occurred in the Postclassic period. The Teopán potbelly without doubt represents a woman.

A Possible Sixteenth-century Reference to the Teopán Potbelly
In his 1576 letter, the Spanish official Diego García de Palacio described his inspection of the jurisdiction of the Audiencia of Guatemala. His visitación included Lake Coatepeque where, as he gives to understand, the Pipil continued to venerate a “large stone idol in the form of a woman” on the lake’s island (García de Palacio 1982:273; my translation). The Teopán potbelly is the sole Prehispanic sculpture known to date from El Salvador that in any way fits his description, and given its location on the very island cited by García de Palacio, there can be little question that it is the same object mentioned in the sixteenth-century. It may have been the Pipil who carved the two concavities that “opened” the eyes of this potbelly. There is, of course, ample precedent for the reuse of monumental sculpture in Mesoamerica.

A Reinterpretation of Potbelly Sculptures
Parsons (1986:45) has suggested that potbelly sculptures, with their closed eyes, were portraits of the dead, perhaps “departed dignitaries or worthy captives”. Other investigators have usually abstained from discussing the function of potbelly sculptures (e.g. Demarest 1986).
The clear representation of a woman provided by the Teopán potbelly gives occasion to reconsider the genre as all depicting women. The major traits consistently shared by potbelly sculptures are their rotund aspect, conspicuous and often extruded navel, closed eyes, and hands placed on the belly. Although the Teopán potbelly is the first to be noted with breasts, a partial review of previously published sculptures reveals at least three other examples. In any case, it is a rare trait, just as is so among the contemporaneous Bolinas figurines which also display wide hips and a bulging to large belly; almost all known Bolinas figurines are accepted as representing women. Evidently, it was not considered essential to indicate breasts or genitalia in order to identify these sculptures (and figurines) as female. Potbelly sculptures appear to specifically represent pregnant women at full-term, as indicated by their huge bellies with large (stretched) or protruding navels (not normal among the simply obese). As a further suggestion, potbelly sculptures could in fact represent the very act of birth. This may be supported by the closed eyes, navels (not normal among the simply obese). As a further potbelly sculptures are their rotund aspect, conspicuous and suggestion, potbelly sculptures could in fact represent the ed by their huge bellies with large (stretched) or protruding extensive corpus if Monte Alto style sculptures sugge sts can be associated with labor. The general posture of potbellies called an earth goddess related with fertility. In this vein, it (classic) could in many cases be household images of this almost all known Bolinas figurines are accepted as represent­ cant portion of southeastern Mesoamerica, including kaminaljuyu, western El Salvador.

If this interpretation is correct, then potbelly sculptures may be considered as representations of females embodying the concept of fecundity – at the very least by their overt pregnancy, and probably by actually depicting the act of birth. The consistency of features present throughout the extensive corpus if Monte Alto style sculptures suggests that a specific female personage is represented. It would appear that potbelly sculptures are images of what could be called an earth goddess related with fertility. In this vein, it is interesting to note that a regional variety of the Monte Alto style (limited to the type site; see Parsons 1986:45) consists of colossal heads with the same puffy closed eyes and plump appearance of the full-figure potbellies. As originally displayed on the ground surface, it is possible that the earth itself was considered to form the body of these large heads, in what would be a most literal depiction of an earth deity.

Accepting the foregoing, this putative goddess would have been a principal deity among the Late Preclassic ethnic group, generally agreed to have been Maya, that occupied a significant portion of southeastern Mesoamerica, including Kaminaljuyu and western El Salvador. It would also seem possible that the almost invariably female Bolinas figurines (and perhaps other related figurine types of the Late Preclassic) could in many cases be household images of this deity. Among the questions raised by this interpretation is what correlates might exist between this goddess and later Maya cosmology.

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Parsons, Lee

Sharer, Robert

Notes
1. In addition to the three examples from Santa Leticia, the corpus of Monte Alto style sculptures from El Salvador includes a small potbelly excavated at El Trapiche and designated as Chalchuapa Monument 7. Although its affiliation with other potbellies was not originally recognized (Anderson 1978: 156), it possesses characteristic Monte Alto features (see op. cit.: fig. 6b).
2. Monument 58 from Bilbao (Parsons 1986:fig.107) and Monuments 4 and 5 from Monte Alto (op. cit.: fig.117, 118). The potbelly from Obeso (Escuintla) also appears to share this trait (op. cit.: fig.110).
3. Many potbellies display their legs as wrapped around below the belly, with the feet almost touching. Given the difficulties of rendering details on boulder sculptures, this could be meant to indicate a squating position.


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Vol. 61, No. 4, October 1996

AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Official Publication of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, Wiley-Liss, 605 3rd Ave., New York, NY 10158, USA, ISSN 0002-9483

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