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*Art-Tools and the Language of Power in the Early  
Art of the Atlantic Watershed of Costa Rica*

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ART-TOOLS IN THE ATLANTIC WATERSHED REGION OF COSTA RICA

The metate, the milling stone upon which so many of the agricultural peoples of aboriginal America ground their maize, has failed to receive its just share of the attention of archaeologists. Metates, as a rule, do not make attractive museum exhibitions. (Stromsvik 1931: 143)

**H**OW IRONIC THAT GUSTAV STROMSVIK, participating in perhaps the greatest historically oriented research program in the history of Middle American studies—the Carnegie Institution of Washington's project at Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico—calls for more attention to *metates* and yet does not acknowledge the famous carved *metates* of Lower Central America. Even before Stromsvik wrote, some Middle Americanist archaeologists were puzzled by the importance and elaboration of *metates* and other tool forms in regions from Honduras to Panama, and especially in Costa Rica (Hartman 1901, 1907; Lothrop 1926). Carved *metates* have long been displayed in natural history museums, and more recently have even been featured in such "blockbuster" art exhibitions as *Before Cortes: Sculpture of Middle America* (Easby and Scott 1970) and *Between Continents/ Between Seas: Precolumbian Art of Costa Rica* (Benson 1981).

More than any other region of the Intermediate Area, the Atlantic watershed region of Costa Rica maintained such a distinctive hybrid notion of art-tools, or tool-symbols, in which figural images were integrated with still-functional instrumental forms such as blades, staff heads, grinding stones and seats (see map, Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The Atlantic watershed is the climax

<sup>1</sup> I want to stress that, in the main, these elaborate tools still retained some functional potential. Some of the most elaborate *metates* have wear marks, and axe blades are often chipped. Pre-Columbian art generally has a much stronger functional component than we are

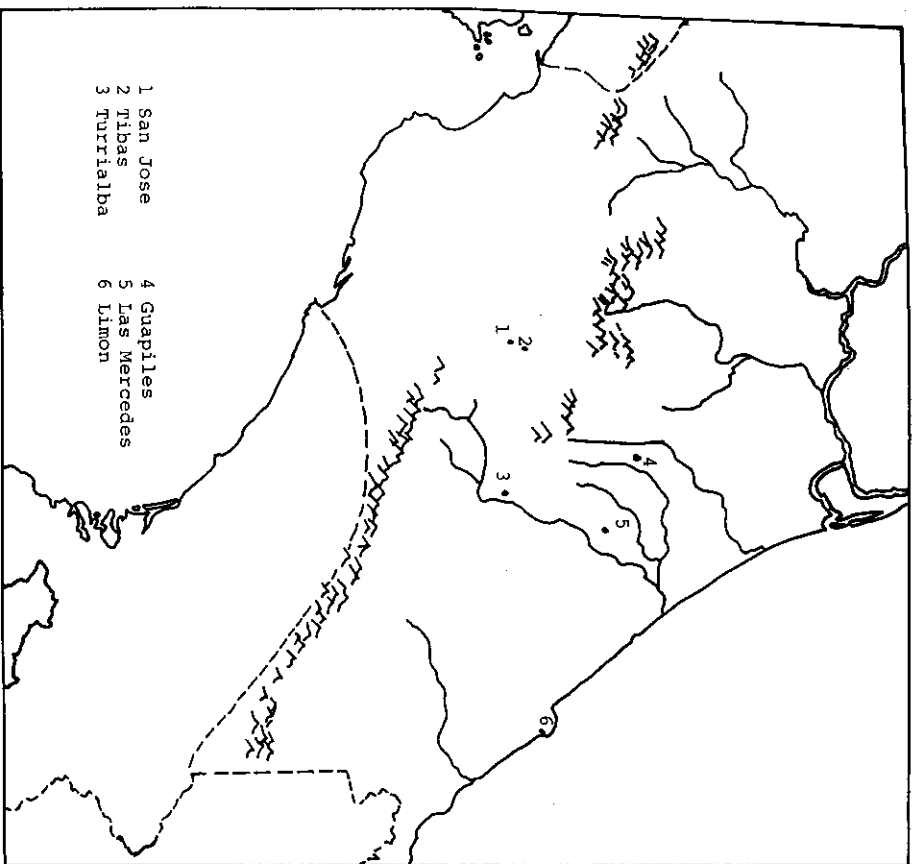


Fig. 1 Map of the Central Highlands-Atlantic watershed region of Costa Rica (after Snarskis 1981a: fig. 12). Drawing by Cynthia Kristan-Graham.

region of this phenomenon in the Intermediate Area: here art-tools have the longest continuous time-span, at least 1,500 years, and they may also be more numerous here than anywhere else. It is perhaps worth considering that art-tools may be a concomitant or diagnostic trait of early rank societies in much of Lower Central America.<sup>2</sup> This study is an attempt from art

accustomed to seeing (or allowing) in Western art. What seems to distinguish so much of the art of Lower Central America is thus not the functional component per se, but its prominent foregrounding and privileging in an emic ("experience-near") sense, as an ethno-category.

<sup>2</sup> Although working almost in a chronological vacuum, Samuel Lothrop clearly saw the elaboration of *metates* as a unifying factor—or consequence—of much of Lower Central American culture. Witness the comments in his monograph on the archaeology of Veraguas, Panama (Lothrop 1950: 27):

history to determine how and what this unusual mode of aesthetic and symbolic expression signified about the development of wealth, rank, and hierarchy in the Atlantic watershed of Costa Rica (for culture geography of this region, see Snarskis 1984, and this volume).

Some Middle Americanist scholars had early on seen such elaborated tool forms as important repositories of value and meaning. For example, elaborated stone axes, which were among the most important personal symbols of power for the Olmec and affiliated Pre-Classic civilizations of Mesoamerica, were instrumental in the initial perception of a distinct Olmec art style (Saville 1929). More recently, the concern among Mayanists such as Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller (1986) with the symbolism of royal regalia has led to a new appreciation of tool forms such as polished celts precisely because of their iconography of power. Elaborated *metates*, however, are relatively rare in Mesoamerica, whereas they are virtually a defining trait of Lower Central American civilizations, and consequently remain largely unknown to Mesoamericanists.<sup>3</sup> Because the Chichen Itza *metates* descend from the same long tradition that provided the models for the spectacular elaboration of *metates* in Lower Central America (Graham n.d. b), my invocation of Stromsvik here is an attempt to dissolve this artificial frontier.

The Atlantic watershed region of Costa Rica (customarily including the Central Highlands also) has long been considered culturally distinct from the other two archaeological regions of Costa Rica, Guanacaste-Nicoya in the northwestern part of the country (called Greater Nicoya when adjacent southwestern Nicaragua is included), and the Diquis region along the southern Pacific coast (similarly, called Greater Chiriqui when combined

Elaborately carved *metates* or mealing stones are characteristic of all Costa Rica and of western Panama, including the Provinces of Chiriqui and Veraguas. This entire region, except for the Province of Guanacaste, must be regarded as a single *metate* area. Why this unity of *metates* exists over an area which exhibits sharp contrasts in pottery, metalwork and other aspects of material culture is an unsolved problem. The Costa Rica-Panama *metate* [area?] is one of two regions in the Americas in which the *metate* reached its greatest complexity. The other is the Chorotega area, embracing the Nicoya Peninsula and Guanacaste in northwestern Costa Rica and the Pacific coast of Nicaragua. Although in geographic contact with each other and although the Chorotega traded jade [sic] and pottery to the Gueter [a Contact period dialectal group], the *metates* are completely unlike.

Despite the powerful limitations, especially chronological, of his data-base, Lothrop deserves some credit for isolating the "*metate* problem" so clearly.

<sup>3</sup> I again note Lothrop's (1950: 27-31) attempt to explain the unique density of *metates* in Lower Central America. As one of the great pioneers of Middle American archaeology, his search for comparative material ranged from central Panama to Central Mexico. Lothrop's Paul Kirchhoff's (1943) ideological-linguistic reduction of Middle America to a high culture-specific Mesoamerica, but there is no indication that Lothrop was affected by Kirchhoff's new perspective. Unlike the Middle Americanists of yesterday, the Mesoamericanists of today would probably not as a rule look to Lower Central America for comparative material.

with the Chiriqui region of western Panama). By the 1970s, it had become common to divide Costa Rica into meta-regions, with Guanacaste-Nicoya seen as a zone of Mesoamerican influence and the Atlantic watershed and Diquis regions as a zone of southern (epi-Andean) influence (see especially Bauder 1970). The nominal truth of this construct actually masks a major diachronic break in the form of a significant cultural reorientation or disjunction occurring in the Atlantic watershed in Period V (A.D. 500–1000). Michael Snarskis (1984: 219–220) has suggested just how fundamental this break was:

During the first two or three centuries after A.D. 500, drastic changes in material culture, from house forms to ceramics, occurred in those regions of lower Caribbean Central America that had until this time kept fingers on the Mesoamerican cultural pulse, however faint. Most evidence suggests that these changes were the result of undefined southern influence, especially from Colombia.

Among the most notable of these changes are the gradual replacement of rectangular building plans by circular ones and, in elite regalia, of lapidary by metalwork. In stone sculpture, the changes are no less significant, as tripod *metates*, including the large flying-panel versions, are replaced by retrapod types, common among them feline effigies, in a supraregional tradition extending from the Atlantic watershed of Costa Rica south and east as far as the Veraguas region of west central Panama. This invasion of feline iconography is first seen in the figural sculpture of the Diquis region in early Period V, where its closest and most plausible sources are in the tradition known best around San Agustín in southern Colombia (Graham n.d.b). Before this reorientation of Period V—that is, during the period of concern here—both Guanacaste-Nicoya and the Atlantic watershed were characterized by complexes of functional stone sculpture centered on tripod *metates* that were formally and functionally related to Pre-Classic Mesoamerican types. Thus, the flat synchronic picture of culturally distinct zones of influence really applies only to Period VI (A.D. 1000–1550).

The focal artifacts of this study are greenstone (“jade”) axes, celts, and other ornaments, and carved *metates* or maize grinding stones of the early tradition of lapidary work and stone sculpture in the Atlantic Watershed, dated ca. A.D. 1–700/800.<sup>4</sup> Since the greenstone blade tradition of Guanacaste-Nicoya is also fundamentally congruent with that of the Atlantic watershed, and since there also appears to have been considerable exchange between the two regions, the bladed components of these two early

traditions of lapidary work will be treated as one for the purposes of this study.

The focus here is limited to the early tradition because it marks the emergence of early rank societies from their egalitarian ancestors, and thus allows us to glimpse the creation of a new language of power by a new social formation. The objects that bear these new symbols are among the most distinctive and most densely encoded of Atlantic watershed artifacts, and they suggest one question at the outset: why did these specific tool-forms become the objects of sustained aesthetic and ideological elaboration? In other words, why was so much labor, which can be considered a form of wealth, invested in their production?

Since this symposium explicitly paired wealth and hierarchy, some comment regarding their relations to art is required. Art in the normative sense is first of all an investment of human labor in a specific kind or realm of production, making the art object itself (or any other artifact) a concrete index of the devotion and direction of past human labor. Although what we call art may not always represent wealth in our limited Western sense of having economic value in the form of convertibility or exchangeability, Pre-Columbian art surely is a representation of wealth in the ontologically fundamental sense that it is invested labor, the sign of a past possession of power over human activity, the evidence of a decision to make *this* and *not* something else. In our context here of unstratified societies, it may be more accurate to see art as the evidence of past wealth in the form of power over the labor process, including materials, rather than as wealth in the sense of convertibility.<sup>5</sup>

The relation of art as past wealth to hierarchy is, on the other hand, evidently less problematic, assuming some logical and predictable correlation between hierarchy and the authority to direct human activity. In the Pre-Columbian world generally, hierarchical authority over (art) production ranged from the outright appropriation of labor by superordinate ranks or classes, to exclusionary rules that served in effect to sacralize art production by restricting certain types of labor to superordinate ranks or classes. For example, among the Aztecs (Mexico) of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico, artists—the famous *toltecayotl*—in feathers, jade and greenstone, and gold were the highest in status, and exempt from state-mandated personal service and corvée labor (Soustelle 1961: 69, 265 n. 71). Soustelle adds, citing the Post-Conquest *Cronica Mexicayotl*, that Motecuhzoma I's sons who were

<sup>4</sup> In general, the sources of the archaeological data employed here are to be found in Benson (1981), Lange and Stone (1984), and Snarskis (n.d.). Graham (n.d.b) presents an expanded description and iconographic analysis of the lapidary and stonework of Costa Rica and western Panama.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Kent Flannery (1968: 107–108) argued two decades ago with reference to the buried offerings of greenstone at the Gulf Coast Olmec site of La Venta, Tabasco, “the underlying *function* of burying such offerings may have been to take the materials themselves out of circulation.” This would be, in effect, deliberately to preclude the possibility of convertibility, a sort of total consumption by the elite that leaves behind only more demand, and thus more opportunities for the assertion of elite power.

not in line of succession as king (*tlatoani*) learned these so-called minor arts. Thelma Sullivan (1974) studied the orations of parents to their children collected by Fray Sahagún (1950-82, 6: 91) in Book 6 of his *Florentine Codex* wherein a royal or noble father urges his son to take care that his subjects learn such status arts as feather and gold working as a hedge against economic distress, apparently because of the surplus potential in the exchange-value of such commodities. Most recently, Reents-Buder (1987) has presented evidence that there was a similar association between Classic Maya junior nobles out of the line of succession and a favored art profession, in this case the production of painted and inscribed codex-style ceramics. Although we do not know the precise forms such hierarchical relations of art production took in Costa Rica, a plausible inference would be that central place heads exercised significant power over the production and distribution of elite regalia and ritual furnishings.

#### FROM REAL TOOLS TO ART-TOOLS: A MATTER OF PERCEPTION

In the earlier literature, any concern with the problem of why art-tools were so predominant in this part of the Intermediate Area was hindered by the lack of a firm chronological framework.<sup>6</sup> A pioneering North American figure of this era in Lower Central American archaeology has been Doris Zemurray Stone (1938, 1941, 1961, 1972, 1977; Stone and Balser 1957, 1965), who was one of the first scholars to take a strong interest in the forms and functions of stone sculpture. Although the major portion of Stone's research preceded the rapid archaeological progress of the 1970s, her work remains a vital chart of the concerns and problems of Lower Central American archaeology from before World War II into the 1980s, a record of sustained focus matched by few other scholars. However, beyond the supposition that the Costa Rican "axe-god" or *dios-hacha* category was in some way Olmec inspired (Easby 1968), there had been no sustained analysis of the art-tool phenomenon. Indeed, Wolfgang Haberland (1973: 136), who seems to have been the first scholar to apply the term *functional stone sculpture* to such artifacts as *metates* and staff heads, ironically did so only to exclude them from his consideration of Lower Central American stone sculpture.<sup>7</sup>

Within a very few years, however, two North American archaeologists working with the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica (MNCR), Lange and Snarskis, had put the problem on a new level. Lange (1971), having excavated in the Guanacaste-Nicoya region of northwestern Costa Rica,

and helped by the first stratigraphic excavations there of Claude Baudez and Michael D. Coe (1962), reexamined the early work of the Swedish archaeologist Carl Hartman (1907) and determined that the regional type of carved tripod *metates* frequently occurred in burials accompanied by greenstone axe-gods and fine stone mace heads. Lange had thus made a crucial explanatory advance by identifying a tripartite mortuary complex composed of art-tools, associated with high status (and probably male) burials. Around the middle of the decade, Snarskis (1975, n.d.), surveying and excavating in the central Atlantic watershed, discovered contextual data showing that the famous Flying-panel *metates* of this region were contemporaneous with Lange's Guanacaste-Nicoya mortuary complex, even to the inclusion of axe-gods and mace heads of similar style. Snarskis further argued that the elaborate flying-panel *metates*, with their frequently explicit imagery of decapitation and death, indicated a basic concern with territorial aggression linked to agricultural productivity and competition. In the 1970s, then, refined excavation strategies coupled with close analysis of museum collections provided chronological-developmental data that for the first time gave the northern regions of Costa Rica a temporal framework approximating that of some regions of Mesoamerica. It is probably not coincidental that the archaeological research sponsored by the MNCR during this period produced differently oriented data from the 1960s era frontier-definition work sponsored by the Institute for Andean Research, whose goal was to draw high culture boundaries (e.g., M. Coe 1962).

In the 1940s Paul Kirchhoff (1943) published his influential essay defining a Mesoamerican culture area, followed by Bennett's (1948) definition of a Central Andean culture area, his Peruvian co-tradition. These two works together carved out parallel high culture realms that by definition excluded Lower Central America and northern South America (and the Caribbean as well). The paradigmatic authority of the essays by Kirchhoff and Bennett was not instantly achieved, however. For example, the vast project for the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (HMAI) (Wauchope 1964-76) declared by its title a certain equivocation regarding the exclusion of Lower Central America, but the one volume devoted (in minor part) to Lower Central America was tellingly called *Archaeological Frontiers and External Connections* (Wauchope, Ekholm, and Willey 1966). The covering title was retained throughout the project, but when the time arrived for a treatment of Lower Central America with major synthesizing essays written by Samuel K. Lothrop (1966) on archaeology and Stone (1966b) on ethnohistory in the early 1960s, the area had already become marginalized into a residual grab bag of disconnected "frontiers and external connections" ranging from the North American Southwest to northern South America to the question of trans-Pacific contacts. In actuality, as the supplement volumes of the 1980s continued to confirm, at some point early on the project agenda had become

<sup>6</sup> See discussion of Lothrop (1950) in note 2.

<sup>7</sup> In fairness, however, it should be noted that Haberland's (1973) essay was the last attempt at a synthesis without benefit of the mass of new radiocarbon dates that became available in the 1970s.

Mesoamerica more or less as defined by Kirchhoff.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the precise contours of such a Kuhnian remapping of the disciplinary landscape will be complex and subject to divergent readings.<sup>9</sup> What matters for us here is that in the space of one generation, Lower Central America was transformed from phenomenon to epiphenomenon, from a mainstream constituent of Middle America to something resembling a sclerotic frontier zone negatively defined by the absence of states (on the latter point, see Sheets, this volume).<sup>10</sup>

The concern in some recent literature on *not* perceiving Lower Central America through lenses pejoratively tinted by the high cultures, as understandable as it may be, has, however, also worked to isolate and parochialize certain material culture and behavioral traits that might better be seen with a wider point of view. To take one example, at the 1980 School of American Research Advanced Seminar on the archaeology of Lower Central America (Lange and Stone 1984)—a landmark in the process of reversing the “hardening of the frontiers” syndrome—none of the discussions of the carved *metates* related the Costa Rican types to any Mesoamerican *metate*

<sup>8</sup> That a high culture agenda did, in fact, win out in the HMAI project is clearly evident in the four volumes devoted to ethnohistorical sources, the final substantive volumes (Wanchope and Cline 1972–76, 12–15). In the first article of the first of these volumes, volume editor Howard Cline (1972: 17–18) stated very clearly that most of the emphasis would be on Mesoamerica as defined by Kirchhoff, and that the cultures so encompassed were of “principal historical interest in Middle America.” The criterion for “principal historical interest” here can only be the possession of writing, or political subjugation to those who have it.

<sup>9</sup> The reference is to Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) notion of paradigm shift as the marker of fundamental reorientations in scientific thought. Kuhn’s idea became very popular in the New Archaeology, but this is merely an instance of a much broader twentieth-century intellectual problematic centered on the explanation of unpredictable change. In art history, e.g., Erwin Panofsky’s (1939) notion of disjunction, while ostensibly about the problem of iconographic continuity from Classical to Christian culture in Europe, came on stage during the rise of National Socialism in Germany, which he fled for the United States. George Kubler (cf. 1973 versus Willey 1973) later asserted the operation of disjunction in Pre-Columbian history against the archaeologist’s reliance on analogy. In one guise or another, such notions as paradigm shift, disjunction, break, or rupture pervade much twentieth-century disciplinary theorizing and political philosophy. One could argue, with some justification, that the modern obsession with the language and reality of inextricable separation is a fundamentally semiotic affliction: it is the radical realization that the sign is not the same as that to which it refers, that the signifier is the mark of absence, and ultimately, through the influence of the French neo-Freudian Jacques Lacan, that the individual unconscious is a signifying system beyond our control.

<sup>10</sup> George Kubler (1973: 166) offers a somewhat different perspective on the Middle America-to-Mesoamerica contraction in the exchange with Gordon Willey (1973) in the essay volume that accompanied the estimable *Bojone Cortes: Sculpture of Middle America* (Easby and Scott 1970). Kubler argues that the attempt to define Mesoamerica as an ideologically unified culture area with time depth necessitated the contraction in scope, even though long-term evidence would call for the inclusion rather than the exclusion of “western Mexico and lower Central America.” His lower-case “western” and “lower” are revealing signs that he may not have been fully convinced of the categorical validity of Mesoamerica. The retention of “Middle America” in the titles of the exhibition, catalogue, and conference essay volume was presumably a signal of support for the wider cultural category.

typologies, even though Mesoamerica is the only plausible source of the various Lower Central American traditions of elaborately carved *metates* (Graham n.d.b).

A second example: when seen from a Mesoamerican perspective, the Atlantic watershed tradition of carved greenstone axes and celts appears as another manifestation of an aesthetic-ideological complex found among the Middle Pre-Classic Olmec and the Early Classic Maya, namely, the elaboration of greenstone axes and celts as lordly regalia and signs of power (Graham n.d.a). I would agree with Elizabeth Easby (1968), against Anatole Pohorilenko (1981), that the Costa Rican greenstone blade traditions are descendants of the earlier Olmec tradition, whether they be the product of direct stimulus as Robert Sharer (1984: 70–72) appears to favor, or of some indirect, ramified mechanism. The Costa Rican traditions may also have been influenced by the Early Classic Lowland Maya traditions of greenstone belt celts, as exemplified by the famous Leiden Plaque, actually a thin celt skeuomorph that was an important item of lordly regalia and symbolism

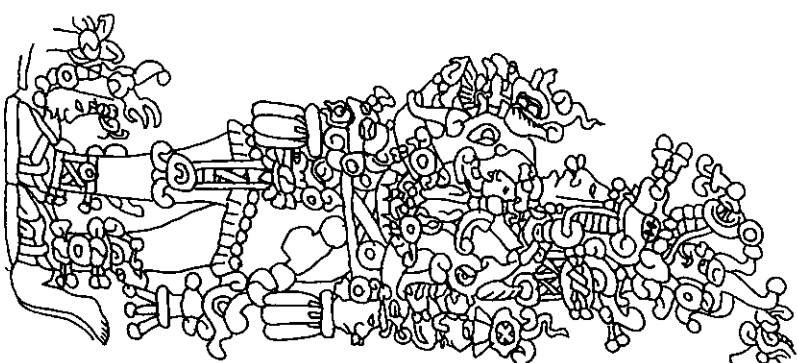


Fig. 2 Greenstone celt, the Leiden Plaque (obverse). Found in 1864 at Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, Holland (after Morley and Morley 1939: fig. 2).

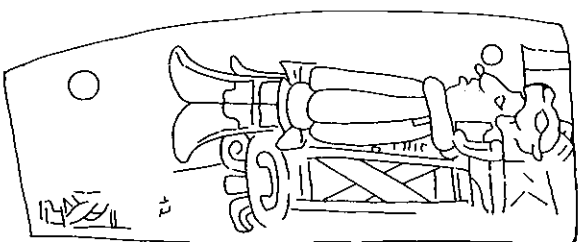


Fig. 3 Grenstone celt fragment depicting belt celts. Reportedly found near Bagaces, Guanacaste-Nicoya region of Costa Rica. Museo del Jade, San Jose, Costa Rica (after Balsler 1974: pl. XVII). Drawing by Cynthia Kristan-Graham.

(Fig. 2). This Maya tradition was partly contemporaneous with those in Costa Rica and was apparently known there, because reworked and split (a laborious task, certainly) Early Classic Maya belt celts have been reported via salvage excavations from near Bagaces in Guanacaste-Nicoya; one such celt fragment is nearly identical in iconography to the corresponding part of the Leiden Plaque itself, the depiction on the celt of such celts being worn by named lords (Fig. 3; Balsler 1974; see further discussion in Greenstone Blades and Other Elite Regalia).

In attempting to account for these various aesthetic-ideological complexes, it is crucial that art-tools in Costa Rica not be seen in isolation from their analogues elsewhere, nor from the functions and associations of their mundane prototypes, the real tools. After all, the "prime objects" here, to use George Kubler's (1962: 39-53) famous term from *The Shape of Time*, are not so much the elaborated "ceremonial" blades and *metates*, but the everyday tools that resonate with powerful referents of gender-specific labor performed under the mounting inequalities of emergent rank societies. It was the everyday tools that ultimately inspired the production of their symbol-laden ceremonial counterparts, ripped out of the context of economic production to function within a new context of hierarchical ideological production. This was no disinterested aesthetic decision. For the Gulf Coast Olmec, who apparently originated the symbolic axe and celt complex, archaeological data suggest that the elite had achieved some control over peasant access to cutting and grinding tools; the lithic sources

were rather far away from the major sites, and there appears to have been a *metate* workshop at San Lorenzo itself (Coe and Diehl 1980; Graham n.d.b: 49-55). Such pragmatic and instrumental linkages between elites and their control of the tools that literally were a means of production certainly ought to be considered in any attempt to account for their subsequent aesthetic and ideological elaboration into art-tools.

The process of transforming real tools into art-tools can be seen (to use a term not yet common in archaeological discourse) as an essentially semiotic one—a change in signification paralleling the evolution from egalitarian to rank society—in which bladed tools and *metates* were treated from the outset as *signs*, as potential signifiers to be used in the creation of a distinctively Lower Central American language of elite power. From such a perspective, it is possible to argue that these mundane tools were aesthetically and ideologically elaborated precisely because of their signifying potential.

As did Barbara Tedlock and Dennis Tedlock (1985) in their recent analysis of intertextuality in Quiche Maya aesthetic expressions, I have preferred the more pragmatic semiotics of Pierce over the Saussurean tradition that insists on the arbitrariness of the sign. In terms of Pierce's sign paradigm of icon, index, and symbol, such mundane tools can be classed as indexical signs, because they point to or reference not just other signs, but actual social realms.<sup>11</sup> For our purposes here, such social realms would logically have to include a sexual division of labor, since men used bladed tools in agriculture, war, and sacrifice, and women used *metates* for domestic food preparation; implicit references to agricultural fertility and to the production and consumption of food; and, of course, the production and distribution of the tools themselves. Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector (1984) have rightly criticized the normative "androcentric" mindset that always and everywhere sees an invariable sexual division of labor, especially in terms of the sex-linkages of artifacts. However, it does not seem likely that new data or new approaches will materially affect the pervasive association in Middle America of mundane *metates* with the domestic labor of women, nor that of ground stone blades with such predominantly masculine tasks as forest clearing, woodworking, and warfare. It seems rather obvious, in fact, that one reason why archaeologists have often devalued the study of mundane *metates* is because of their association with women's work.

The aesthetic and ideological elaboration of these tool forms may be

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to the "semiotic" of Pierce, see Greenlee (1973); more generally, see Blonsky (1983) and Culler (1981). In brief, Pierce's simplest and most enduring sign typology is as follows: icons are signs that represent the referent of the sign, as do pictures or maps; indices are "pointers" or directional signs, as weather vanes and certain gestures, or as "trowel" signifies "mason" or "archaeologist"; symbols are signs in which the relation between the sign and its referent is arbitrary, as a red traffic light signifies "stop." On the value of the indexical sign in art history and criticism, see the important essay by Krauss (1985 [1977]).

projected as having begun in the context of such associations, assuming that the social uses of the tools in some way determined their elaboration. One should not, however, assume that such a process was consciously planned. Indeed, it is almost axiomatic that semiotic and ideological actions are more powerful and more effective when their codes are unconscious or latent, as one normally uses language without at the same time being conscious either of the rules that govern its use, or of the latent factors underlying choices of syntax and vocabulary. One explanation for the differentness, with respect to Mesoamerica, of emergent complex societies in Lower Central America might be found precisely in their visual representations of new languages of power. We can now look more closely at the material dimensions of these actions.

THE EARLY TRADITION IN THE ATLANTIC WATERSHED: FLYING-PANEL METATES

The elaborated *metates* of the early tradition of stone sculpture in the Atlantic watershed of Costa Rica are among the most extraordinary artifacts made anywhere in Lower Central America, or even in Mesoamerica. The so-called flying-panel *metates* of this region represent a flamboyant sculptural elaboration of a mundane maize grinding stone, in which animal forms are shown climbing up and down each of the three supports, often bearing human corpses or decapitated heads. Upright masked anthropomorphs occupy the septum or "flying panel" suspended lengthwise beneath the grinding plate, like high-wire artists in a world made of stone (Figs. 4, 5). Even the most casual observer will seldom fail to be intrigued by the seemingly compulsive treatment of the volcanic stone from which they are carved in a single block, as if stone were elastic rather than brittle. Indeed, it often seems as if the artists thought they were string-sawing greenstone rather than pecking and grinding basalt. These strange objects of near-monumental scale present numerous problems of approach and interpretation, of which probably the most important for art history concern their instrumental prototypes and the process of elaboration and their iconography, function, and meaning.

There are no Mesoamerican or any other high culture *traditions* of elaborately carved maize grinding stones comparable to those of Costa Rica and western Panama. Even so, however, the two early traditions of functional stone sculpture in Costa Rica, in the Atlantic watershed as well as in Guanacaste-Nicoya, distinctly and presumably deliberately preserve and elaborate the footed *metate* format that was a marker of wealth in Mesoamerica from the Early Pre-Classic Period until the Conquest.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> In Yucatan, at least, *metates* continued to be items of wealth long after the Conquest. The archive of legal records from the town of Eburn shows that *metates* were regarded as the legal property of men, and important enough to be mentioned in wills along with other contestable

Perhaps the earliest dated context for footed *metates* is at the great Gulf Coast Olmec site of San Lorenzo, Veracruz. In all of the Pre-Classic occupation at San Lorenzo, from the Chicharras through Nacaste Phases dating 1250-700 B.C., footed *metates* (both bipod and tripod) accounted for only 10.5 percent (23 of 220) of the excavated sample (Coe and Diehl 1980, 1: 227-231). Since the great majority of the Pre-Classic *metates* found at San Lorenzo are simple, unfooted basin *metates*, and since footed *metates* obviously require more labor to make, footed *metates* at the outset represent some differential wealth factor operating even within the already elite context of the San Lorenzo site and/or polity. Mineralogical analyses of the basalts recovered at San Lorenzo are interpreted by Coe and Diehl (1980, 1: 397-404) as indicating that carved monuments and *metates* came from different sources in the same general region, and they further suggest that there may have been a *metate* workshop at the site, in contrast to the absence of any evidence for the presence of a sculpture workshop. Because the contexts at San Lorenzo apparently did not allow for any further discrimination between footed and unfooted *metates*, it is not clear why footed *metates* were in such a minority there. Greater labor cost is inherent in footed *metates*, but we do not know, for example, if they were further associated with certain statuses or functions. The San Lorenzo data are important because they show the minority occurrence of the footed *metate* in the Mesoamerican Early and Middle Pre-Classic Periods.

In the Valley of Mexico, footed *metates* do not appear until the Middle Pre-Classic Zacatenco Phase, 850-400 B.C. Some examples have a rimmed grinding plate indicating their design for use with non-overhanging *manos* or mullers (Tolstoy 1971: 288). The Zacatenco rimmed *metate* provides a formally suitable ultimate prototype for the tripod *metates* of the Atlantic watershed, which nearly always have a low rim surrounding the grinding plate (Fig. 6). This is in contrast to the unrimmed *metates* of Guanacaste-Nicoya, based on a mundane prototype intended for use with an overhanging rolling-pin-type *mano*.<sup>13</sup>

From this point on, essentially, Mesoamerican grinding stones continue to be divided into the majority unfooted basin type, and the always-property as late as the early nineteenth century (Rois 1939: 57, 335-337, 347-349). They were bequeathed to both sons and daughters. The relevance of these documents to other parts of Middle America may be problematic, but they support the view that men normally held power over the labor of women. I thank Cynthia Kristan-Graham for bringing this reference to my attention.

<sup>13</sup> Elaborated rolling-pin *manos* have been found with elaborated *metates* in Guanacaste-Nicoya (Sharitski 1981b: no. 72). Evidence of grinding wear on the *metates* confirms the importance of retaining the functional potential of the grinding stone. However, there are no direct data available concerning the substances ground: maize, of course, is an obvious candidate, but drugs or other substances may have been prepared for a variety of ritual occasions. The fact that the wear marks often take the form of relatively small, circular depressions, may suggest a sporadic or token use.

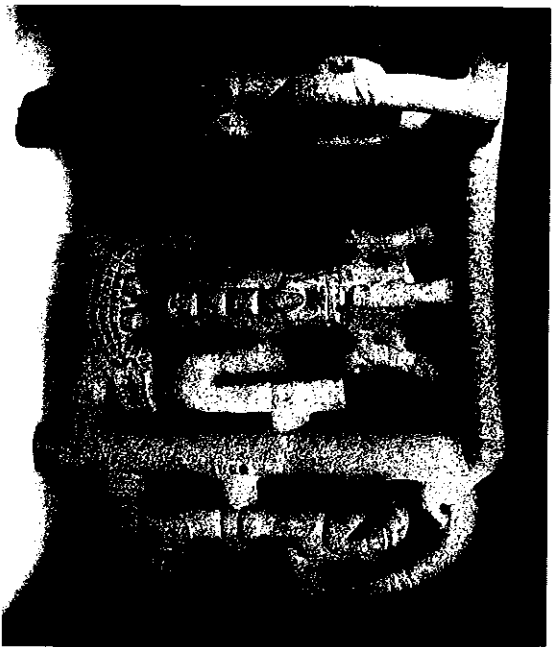


Fig. 4 Flying-panel *metate* with central crocodilian masked figure standing on a bicephalic crocodilian. Reportedly from San Rafael de Coronado, Central Highlands region of Costa Rica. Length 77 cm, height 70 cm. Museo Nacional de Costa Rica 15.150, San Jose. Photograph by the author.

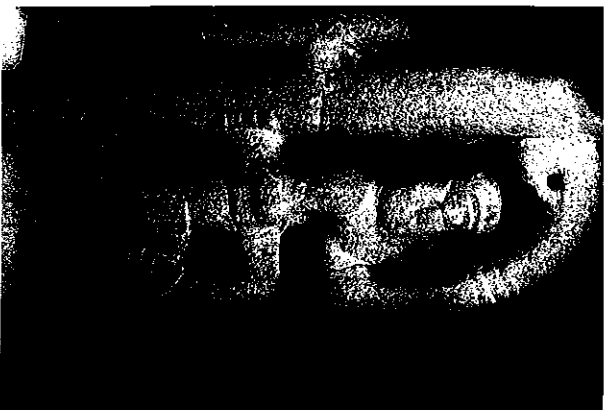
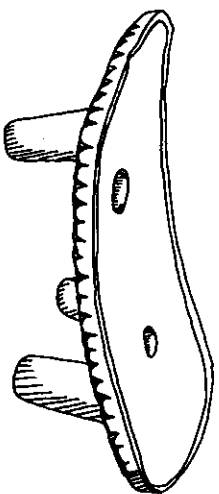


Fig. 5 Detail of the support figures of the *metate* in Fig. 4. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 6 Tripod *metate* with notched grinding plate border and "kill" holes. From Las Mercedes, Atlantic watershed region of Costa Rica. Length 75 cm (after Mason 1945: pl. 130). Drawing by Cynthia Krizan-Graham.



minority footed and usually tripod type. It is the footed type that is consistently, if not frequently, found in wealthier or higher-status burials in Mesoamerica, as for example in the Teotihuacanoid Esperanza Phase Early Classic graves in Mounds A and B at Kaminaljuyu in the Guatemala Highlands (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946: fig. 158; Woodbury 1965: 165-166). Stephan Borhegyi (1965: 26-27) plausibly suggests that the well-made tripod *metates* (and their rolling pin *manos*) were included in these rich graves as provision of nourishment for the elite dead in the afterlife. At Kaminaljuyu, even simple-shaped *metates*, as opposed to unworked, use-modified boulder *metates*, have been seen as general indicators of relative household wealth (Michels 1979: 113, 122-125).

More recently, at Copan, Honduras, near the southeastern frontier of Mayaland, *metates* have been studied as indices of differential wealth and status by Mary Louise Spinks (n.d.). Although again footed *metates* are not always factored out from unfooted *metates*, Spinks finds a small degree of differential access correlated with wealth: at Copan, wealthier households had larger and better-made *metates* than poorer households. Significantly, perhaps, the ratio of footed to unfooted *metates* at Classic Period Copan was almost the same as at San Lorenzo a millennium earlier, 10.3 percent (45 of 436). Spinks also attempts to explain why footed *metates* are both so greatly outnumbered by unfooted ones, and yet so persistent through the archaeological (and ethnographical) record: on the basis of some local ethnographic investigation, she concludes that the unfooted *metates* were used for initially crushing the maize kernels, while the more costly and more fragile footed *metates* were used for the fine grinding of the *masa* or maize flour.

In all these cases, *metates* have been studied within contexts that were already differentiated as elite or high status, and even then, footed *metates* are rare; they are, additionally, rare as burial furniture, and almost always literally marginal compared to other elite grave goods. The ideological elevation of *metates* in Costa Rica can be seen instantly in their movement from the periphery to the center of graves.



The simultaneous adoption and elaboration in two regions of Costa Rica of the footed *metate* as a principal item of burial furniture can be explained, up to a point, by comparative data from Mesoamerica. The footed *metate* already embodied more labor than other types, and it was already technically a work of sculpture. If Mesoamerica was thus the ultimate source of the basic tripod *metate* format that was elaborated in the two early traditions in Costa Rica, it is also likely that a set of referents accompanied the initial ideological elevation of the grinding stone in Costa Rica. Functioning as an indexical sign, the Mesoamerican footed *metate* would already have carried the following referents: the domestic labor of women and their subordinate, unprivileged position in the simple hierarchy of the sexual division of labor; the association of women's domestic labor with food processing and the reproduction of the conditions of production; and a wealth factor in the set of Mesoamerican *metates* (footed vs. unfooted) in which the footed *metate* was the privileged term. The stage is thus set for the simultaneous elaboration of tripod *metates* in the two early traditions of stone sculpture in Costa Rica.

When viewed simply as a problem in typology, without necessarily implying any chronological value, elaborated *metates* in the Atlantic watershed can be divided into the relatively small and simple, and the relatively large and obviously complex.<sup>14</sup> At the first extreme are well-made tripod *metates* without any sculptural elaboration. The simplest elaboration focuses on the grinding plate itself, as if to underline—literally, as we shall see—the functional origin and value of *metates*. The plate border is carved into vertical grooves or ovoid bumps that clearly stand for the human trophy heads fully and laboriously carved on some *metates* (cf. Figs. 6, 7). Similarly simple and usually co-occurring with the border elaboration is the “addition” of knobs or tabs running lengthwise along the underside of the grinding plate (Stone 1966a: fig. 2c, e). These underside motifs have been interpreted by Snarskis (n.d.: 156–157) as schematic representations of the dorsal scutes of crocodilians.

Two conclusions can be reached from these simplest forms of elaboration: the decapitation of human heads is rhetorically likened to the grinding of maize kernels; and the grinding plate itself assumes crocodilian qualities and thus apparently represents the fertile surface of the earth, as crocodilians commonly do in Mesoamerica, where such traits were attributes of power as early as the Middle Pre–Classic Period (e.g., Puleston 1977). The well-

<sup>14</sup> These terms are relative, but there is clearly a large difference in the amount and quality of labor invested in making a plain tripod *metate* 70 cm long, 35 cm wide, and 35 cm high, and a flying-panel *metate* 70 cm long, 35 cm wide, and 70 cm high (both typical dimensions). Not only did the artists of the latter have to locate a block of stone (probably in the form of a boulder) twice as large and heavy, but they also had to subtract much more material, a process that must have become increasingly tedious and risky as the figures began to be freed from the block.

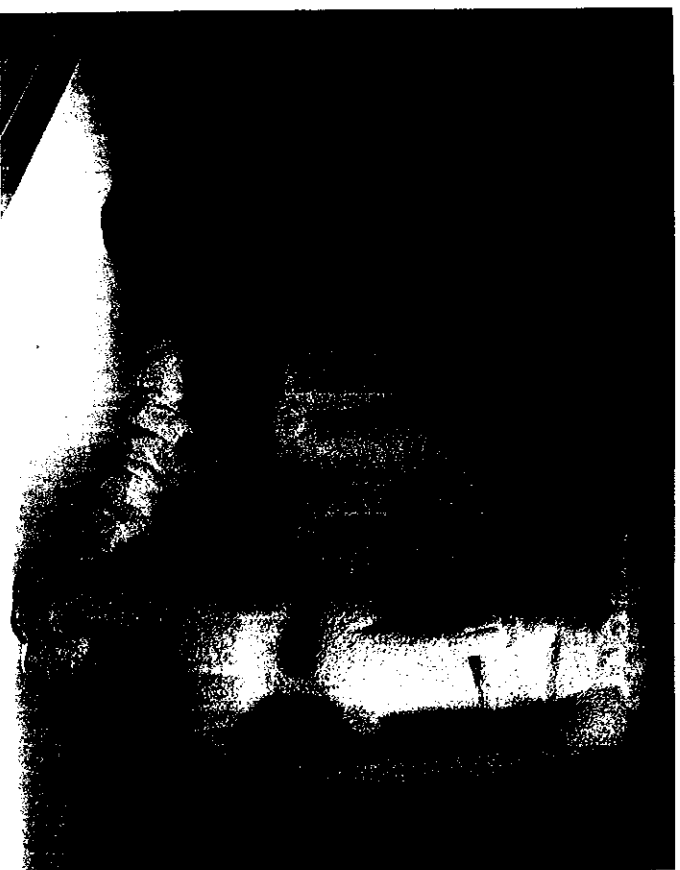


Fig. 7 Flying-panel *metate* with central anthropomorphic beak-bird standing on two recumbent (dead?) humans. Reportedly from Azul de Turrialba, Atlantic watershed region of Costa Rica. Length 77 cm, height 54 cm. Museo Nacional de Costa Rica 20.788, San José. Photograph by the author.

known Olmec-style ceramic figure from Atlahuayan, Morelos, represents a seated person, probably a lord, wearing a crocodilian skin with prominent “flame eyebrows” derived from the bony tubercles over the eyes of a crocodilian (Joralemon 1971: fig. 90). The same crocodilian brow is a common feature of Olmec or Olmecoid greenstone “spoons,” many of which reportedly have been found in the Atlantic watershed (Easby 1968; Pohorilenko 1981). At the outset, then, these simple elaborations transform the *metate* into an iconic sign with ritual and cosmological referents, which are further elaborated in the series of large flying-panel *metates*. We can begin to see here something of the ideological nature of this aesthetic transformation, as the tool of women's domestic labor for sustaining life comes increasingly to be associated with aggression and death on a cosmic scale.

The flying-panel *metates* continue this elaboration in two ways. The *metates* become larger and more like monuments, and figures invade the structure at strategic points. The longitudinal rows of crocodilian scutes

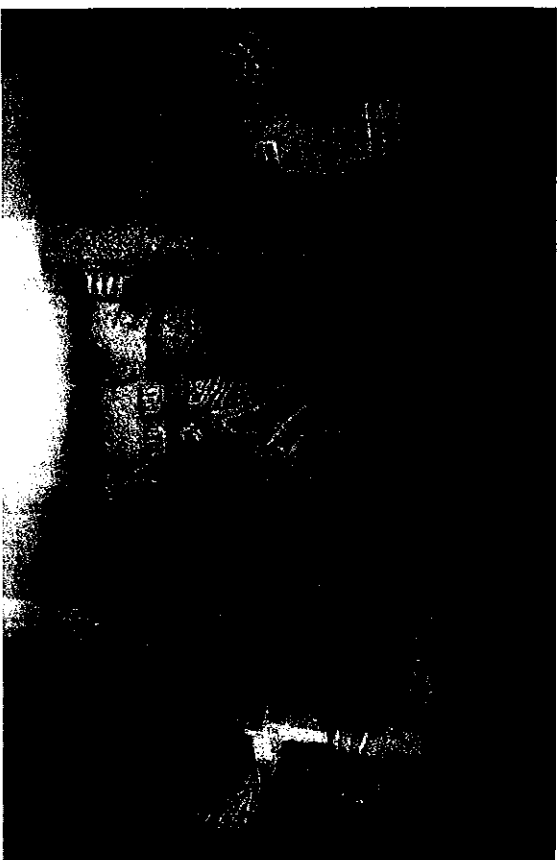


Fig. 8 Flying-panel *metate* with central crocodilian masked figure standing on a jaguar. Reportedly from La Unión de Guapiles, Atlantic watershed region of Costa Rica. Length 82 cm, height 46 cm. Caja Costarricense del Seguro Social/Museo Nacional de Costa Rica 77.981, San José. Photograph by the author.

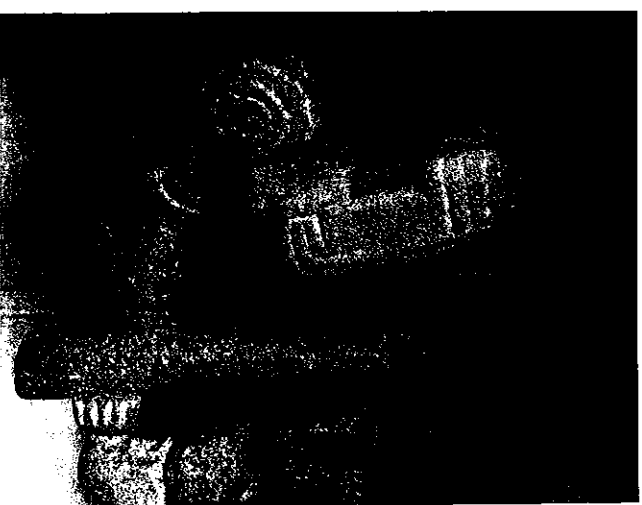


Fig. 9 Detail of the support figures of the *metate* in Fig. 8. Photograph by the author.

are extended downward to become a septum for the support of the central figure, and the three supports become routes for the implied vertical movement of figures projecting outward perpendicularly from the plate sides. No two of the large *metates* are identical, but each adheres to a strict compositional syntax as regular as in any Levi-Straussian myth. Because the grinding plate already has crocodilian qualities in the simpler *metates*, the suspended flying panel should therefore also relate to the surface of the earth itself, or more literally, be an extension below the surface of the earth. In some cases, the horizontal portion of the septum is represented by figures; among those known are a bicephalic crocodilian (see Fig. 4), a jaguar (Fig. 8), a crab (Easby and Scott 1970: no. 212), and two recumbent humans placed head to head and apparently dead (see Fig. 7).<sup>15</sup> Functioning as a pedestal for the upright figures of the flying panel, the septum figures correlate well with Mesoamerican personifications of the earth and underworld, and the bicephalic crocodilian clearly indicates that these are not "natural" beings but what might be called "mythemes" or mythic entities, deployed according to a visual syntax of the cosmos. The horizontal septum figures are thus representations or attributes of the watery earth and underworld according to their various mythic personifications.

The central figures standing on the septum-pedestal are always anthropomorphs with zoomorphic traits, most frequently those of the mythical beak-bird or crocodilian. The *metate* in the Jiménez Alvarado collection in Costa Rica (Ferrero 1977: fig. III-91) shows the central figure clearly to be a human wearing a crocodilian helmet headdress, and I would conclude that all central figures are in fact costumed humans, whether they represent a living or recently deceased lord, a deified ancestor, or a putative lineage founder. The narrow iconographic range and axial position of the central figures also suggest that they have a similarly restricted frame of reference, specifically power, and perhaps to chiefly titles or titular metaphors of chiefship. In several cases, smaller human figures holding unidentifiable objects flank the central figure in a simple hierarchical composition (Fig. 9); such a triadic symmetrical and hierarchical composition recalls those of Mesoamerican monuments of rulership such as La Venta Altar 4 (de la Fuente 1984: pl. 49) and Tikal Stela 31 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: figs. 51, 52).<sup>16</sup> The central figure standing on recumbent and probably dead

<sup>15</sup> A tubular greenstone bead in the Museo del Jade in San José repeats the bicephalic crocodilian of the *metate* septum, with the addition of "flame" brows, and incised mat designs that commonly denote rulership in Mesoamerica (Baser 1974: pl. XXVI, 4). Among the Maya, the Ah-Po or "Lord of the Mat" title was equivalent to the *Akhu* title. Kubler (1984) early on referred to the central figure of this same *metate* as standing on a "Mesoamerican earth monster."

<sup>16</sup> Traditionally referred to as altars, these huge Olmec monuments are now identified as lordly thrones (Grove 1973). La Venta Altar 4 has a jaguar mask and pelt carved as if draped

humans also echoes similar compositions in Maya art, such as the Leiden Plaque lord standing in front of his bound captive (see Figs. 2, 7). As we shall soon see, bound captives apparently were an important ingredient in the rituals associated with these *metates*.

The lateral figures carved on the three *metate* supports are always zoomorphic, except, of course, for the human corpses and decapitated heads. On the more complex examples (Fig. 10), it is clear that the zoomorphs function to carry the dead downward into the underworld: in this *metate*, a bound human corpse is lowered by one vulture beak-bird attached to the grinding plate, to another vulture below. Several *metates* clearly show the prominent caruncle on the vulture's beak (Figs. 10, 11). In one of the most complex *metates* of all, a monkey with a long curving tail (compositionally resembling the curved beak of a beak-bird) stands on the rump of a jaguar who is head downward with a decapitated head between its forepaws (see Fig. 5). The *metate* in New Orleans has a similar composition, with a beak-bird clutching the decapitated head in its talons and standing on the back of a descending crocodilian (Easby and Scott 1970: no. 212). Others depict descending and ascending beak-birds without corpses or decapitated heads (Ferrero 1977: fig. III-91; Snarskis 1981b: no. 144). Whether heads or corpses are actually present, it would appear that all of the support figures refer to events following the sacrifice of captives, who presumably were victims of aggression against other groups.

The Atlantic watershed beak-bird is the principal actor in these events, but it is unique only because of its place in the strange world of these *metates*. In the so-called Cotzumalhuapa style of the Late(?) Classic Period around Bilbao on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, Lee Parsons (1969) has identified a Sun Vulture iconographic theme that has important parallels with the probably somewhat earlier beak-bird complex of the Atlantic watershed. Like the beak-bird, the Sun Vulture is a transporter of human sacrifices (to the sun rather than the underworld), and there is also an equation of decapitated human heads with seeds (cacao pods rather than maize) (Parsons 1969: 114-119). Parsons suggests that the Bilbao avian theme depicts human sacrifices associated with rituals of the ball game.

The so-called Principal Bird Deity of the Maya is an ancient mythic being with roots in the Pre-Classical and possible echoes in the Quiche Maya mythological book known as the *Popol Vuh* or Book of Counsel. Karl Taube (1987) has recently argued that the Maya avian being is related, in ways not yet clear, to the vulturine *ave de pico ancho* of the Late Pre-Classical

over the cave mouth entrance to the underworld, suggesting that the jaguar represents the Night Sun in the Underworld. Lordly thrones in Mesoamerica are frequently depicted covered by a jaguar pelt, or in the form of a jaguar (the jaguar effigy *metates* of the late tradition in the Atlantic watershed apparently belong to this iconographic complex). It may be only a coincidence that the flying-panel *metates* have also been called altars.



Fig. 10 Flying-panel *metate* with central figure wearing upturned crocodilian helmet headdress. Reportedly from Azul de Turrialba, Atlantic watershed region of Costa Rica. Height 61 cm. Museo Nacional de Costa Rica 20.786, San Jose. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 11 Detail of the support figures of the *metate* in Fig. 10. Photograph by the author.

and Classic Zapotec of Oaxaca.<sup>17</sup> Taube also notes that the hooked beak of the Maya avian being is similar to that on the bloodletters depicted in Classic Maya art, and that the Principal Bird Deity of the Classic Period accompanies scenes of sacrifice and lordly accession. In the Classic and Post-Classic Periods, such scenes are also occasionally accompanied by bound animals such as crocodilians laid over the throne of office (Taube 1987: figs. 6, 7). If, as suggested below, the large flying-panel *metates* of the Atlantic watershed also functioned as thrones of office, the bound captives sometimes depicted on them may have had similar references, and may even have been so treated in reality. Additionally, the somewhat puzzling greenstone tubular beads from the Atlantic watershed carved in the form of bound crocodiles may be an intriguing echo of similar practices in Costa Rica (Snarskis 1981b: no. 159). Finally, it is likely that the pervasive Mayan linguistic and textual interchangeability of vulture and *Akhu* or lord was echoed in Costa Rica, especially in the Atlantic watershed where the vulture beak-bird is so prominent in *metates*, mace heads, and greenstone staff-bearer ornaments (Snarskis 1981b: nos. 139, 174).

Domestic *metates* are purely indexical signs: they do not represent or resemble anything other than themselves. They are, as it were, mute. However, in the flying-panel *metates* the three fields of decoration—grinding plate, septum or flying panel, and supports—together transform the *metates* into icons and symbols. As icons, these *metates* are cosmological maps of what clearly seem to be rituals of sacrifice. Because the grinding plate was either first or most simply decorated with decapitated human heads and crocodilian scutes, it represents both the surface of the earth, the stony place where human heads are like maize kernels and where maize is transformed into *masa* for human nourishment, and as well the boundary between the middleworld and the underworld. Beak-birds and other mythic beings move up and down from earth to underworld as bearers of the sacrificed dead, while costumed lords stand on the pedestals signifying the earth or the underworld.

As symbols, the flying-panel *metates* are the rhetoric of a new language of power. The mundane *metate* as a sign of women's domestic labor was appropriated and transformed by an elite into a sign of a different kind of labor, the production of ideology in ritual.<sup>18</sup> The simple gender hierarchy of egalitarian societies is transcended in complex societies by the addition of a third term, the chiefly elite whose power transcends that of the household and local group. As the mundane *metate* provides for the nourishment and reproduction of the household, the ceremonial *metate*

provides for the symbolic, ideological nourishment and reproduction of the polity.

As the elite add a third term to the egalitarian binary hierarchy of gender, so does a triadic symbolic notation pervade the art of the early tradition.<sup>19</sup> The ritual-mortuary complex of axes, mace heads, and *metates* is itself a triad. The flying-panel *metates* have tripod supports and three fields of decoration, and the flying panel and support compositions within them often have a triadic composition. As cosmic maps, the flying-panel *metates* denote the earth and the underworld, and if they were used as thrones the siter would add the third level as he merged with the vertical axis *mumdi*. And, in the exceptionally rich burial at Tibas in the Central Highlands, the deceased was interred extended on three simply elaborated *metates* (one oblong and two round), having only the notched plate border and the underside motifs. The ritual-mortuary triad is beautifully demonstrated at Tibas, with three *metates*, an avian axe-god, and avian mace heads, along with tall-legged tripod ceramic vessels, and an extraordinary reworked Olmec greenstone shell pendant (Snarskis 1979; 1981a: fig. 18; 1981b: no. 26).

Because none of the complex flying-panel *metates* was excavated scientifically, there is little that one can say with certainty about their specific terminal contexts and distribution. We know from the work of Snarskis (n.d.) that simply elaborated *metates* (and even *metate* fragments) were common grave furnishings, and it has been inferred that the terminal contexts of the complex flying-panel *metates* were also graves, as was the case with both simple and complex *metates* in Guanacaste-Nicoya (Hartman 1907). The Tibas burial was probably typical of middle- and high-rank interments, although the use of three relatively simple *metates* to make a bier may have been an expedient substitute in the absence of a more complex *metate*.

While the data are very sparse, they suggest that the terminal contexts of elaborated *metates* were graves, and there probably was a gradient in funerary rank correlating with descent from the chiefly line to the middle ranks and commoners. The large numbers of relatively small and simple *metates* might indicate, for example, that most households or household heads owned one or two special-purpose *metates*. However, the great flying-panel *metates* of the kind discussed here are rare—perhaps no more than a dozen or so are known today—and therefore probably were the property of politics, lineages, or very powerful lords. It is also likely that the most complex *metates* were used as thrones of office.

<sup>17</sup> The term used in Costa Rica for beak-bird is *ave pito*.

<sup>18</sup> The notion of ideology employed here is mostly that of Althusser (1977), which, whether acknowledged or not, has achieved a sort of hegemonic status in the human sciences.

<sup>19</sup> Notation of this type would fit Jacques Derrida's (1976) idea of "writing in the broad sense," discussed further in the next section.

As the largest and most complex symbol of power in the early rank societies of the Atlantic watershed, flying-panel *metates* bore an especially heavy ideological function: they claim a relation of equivalence between the domestic labor of women and the political power of men. The work of the chiefly elite is aggression to provide victims for rituals of sacrifice: as ground maize nourishes the household, sacrificed bodies nourish the polity. As in any binary set, however, one term is always privileged.<sup>20</sup>

THE EARLY TRADITION IN THE ATLANTIC WATERSHED:  
GREENSTONE BLADES AND OTHER ELITE REGALIA

In *Of Grammatology*, the French philosopher of deconstruction Jacques Derrida (1976: 121) uses the metaphor of the axe to illustrate how Western ethnocentrism, "inspired by the model of phonetic writing," values literate cultures above all others. In Derrida's hands, the axe is the mark of a violent separation between speech and writing, between oral tradition and traditional notions of literacy. In this radical and essentially non-Western philosophical critique or deconstruction of the normative logocentric elevation of phonetic-alphabetic writing—what Derrida calls "writing in the narrow sense"—over other modes of expression and marking, we are reminded of the pervasive implication of writing in power. It is intriguing, I think, that elaborated axes in Costa Rica seem to occupy Derrida's metaphorical space between speech and writing, not to privilege writing of the phonetic kind but to avoid it, perhaps even to show contempt for it (or for those who use it) by dismembering its representations, while in Mesoamerica, as we shall see, axes are a bridge between an increasingly abstract pictorial mode and phonetic writing.

Axes and celts belong to an early tradition of art-tools in the Atlantic watershed, temporally embracing most of the regional El Bosque Phase (300 B.C.–A.D. 500) of Period IV and continuing into the La Selva A Phase (A.D. 500–700) of Period V. (After this period, of course, gold replaces greenstone.) The preferred materials are true jade and similarly colored greenstones, largely quartzites, aesthetic and ideational preferences that almost certainly are indicative of a fundamental sharing in the associations of jade in Mesoamerica, from Olmec to Aztec.<sup>21</sup> Because for all practical

<sup>20</sup> I am following here the thinking of Maurice Goddard (1981), whose theoretical clarification of the problem of male dominance seems to me superior to the orthodox structuralist and Marxist positions. An articulation with post-structuralism still lies ahead.

<sup>21</sup> Some recent scientific test results indicate that many of the artifacts traditionally identified as jade are not actually true mineralogical jade. Assuming that this is so, the significance for an understanding of the prehistoric artifacts in what Frederick Lange has aptly called "social jade" seems to me to have been somewhat mistread. A recent *National Geographic* article (Ward 1987) manages to confuse the issue with near perfection, reducing an important scientific problem essentially to one of commercialism. Much is made of a few tests of spectrometry and specific gravity that determine whether or not an artifact is of jadeite or another rock of

purposes, there are no greenstone carving traditions between the frontiers of the southern Maya region and northern Costa Rica and likewise little or no worked greenstone in Mesoamerican styles reported from that area, it would appear that the rather numerous examples of greenstone in Olmec and especially Maya styles reported from northern Costa Rica must have reached there fairly directly from Mesoamerica.<sup>22</sup>

The question, of course, is when. It could hardly be argued that the early complex societies in Costa Rica independently invented their elaborated blade traditions, and the time-span of the two traditions of lapidary work there corresponds almost exactly with the Maya Late Pre-Classic through Early Classic Periods, 300 B.C.–A.D. 600. Before this time, there were no complex societies in Costa Rica that could have responded to any foreign influence, whether Olmec or Maya, and by 400–300 B.C., the archaeological Olmec culture and its ecumenical art style had ceased to exist. Thus, while other scenarios may be imagined, I am taking the position that the Maya were the effective source of Olmec-style lapidary work found in Costa Rica, and the source as well of any Olmec influence on Costa Rican lapidary work and of any associated ritual-symbolic knowledge. The Maya "recycling" of Olmec "heirloom" greenstone, as in their reworking of an Olmec-style winged pectoral discussed below, illustrates their penchant for appropriating Olmec antiquities. In terms of geographical and chronological logic, and in the high proportion of Maya to Olmec-style greenstone artifacts found in Costa Rica, this scenario seems more economical than any other.<sup>23</sup>

In Mesoamerica, of course, the symbolism and uses of greenstones are well documented, linguistically, pictorially, and contextually. Fray Sahagún has left perhaps the most complete literary record, for the Late Post-Classic Aztecs of Central Mexico. Among the qualities and referents of various greenstones are rulership, nobility, moral purity, preciosity, exchange-value, fertility, moisture, and vegetation (Thouvenot 1977). For example,

lesser commercial value today, but the article does not make clear what bearing this has on anything other than the contemporary commercial value of Pre-Columbian artifacts, since these tests themselves cannot determine the authenticity of an artifact. More helpful is the report of an earlier study of greenstone artifacts from Costa Rica that suggests that true jadeite is more likely to be associated with higher-status burials, and that some of the Olmec- and Maya-style greenstones in Costa Rica were carved from jadeite matching the so-called Motagua Valley source group in Guatemala, as also were some artifacts carved in the local Costa Rican styles (Lange, Bishop, and van Zels 1981). John Henderson (personal communication, 16 June 1988) cautions that "pre-Columbian ethnominalogies might not have lent themselves to any categories equivalent to our notion of 'true' jade." From here on, I will simply refer to all such materials as greenstones unless a specific situation warrants otherwise.

<sup>22</sup> The greenstone axe-gods from Playa de los Muertos, Honduras, may represent the southeasterly limits of any Middle Pre-Classic Olmec-like or-derived blade "presence" (I would not call it a tradition). See Easby (1968).

<sup>23</sup> This position follows, with some modifications, the arguments of Easby (1968) and Lange (n.d.).

in Book 10 of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún (1950–82, 10: 17) uses these tropes to describe a noble: “[He is like] a precious green stone, a bracelet of fine turquoise, a precious feather.” And in Book 11 (1950–82, 11: 222, 223), he says of emerald-green jade or *quetzalitzilitl*: “It is one’s lot, the lot of the rulers, of the old ones. . . . It attracts moisture, becomes wet, has dew.” The standard Nahuatl rhetorical associations of greenstones with moisture, fertility, and nobility may not be unrelated to the similar tropes used for semen as “seed,” “seed of man,” “our moisture,” and “nobility” (Sahagún 1950–82, 10: 130).

The Maya appear to have shared these general associations, and, if anything, greenstone was for them even more a marker of nobility than among the Aztecs. To judge from the amount of greenstone depicted in Maya art, they simply appear to have had more of it, including, apparently, greater access to Olmec-style “heirlooms,” which they incorporated into their own lordly regalia (Schele and Miller 1986; Thompson 1971). Thus, given the obvious importance of greenstone in Costa Rica—evident simply in sheer quantity—and the presence there of greenstone artifacts in Olmec and Maya styles, it seems safe to conclude that the symbolism of greenstone in Costa Rica during the early tradition was essentially akin to that in Mesoamerica.

Before continuing, it may be useful briefly to consider the culturally specific expressive modes characteristic of worked greenstone of Olmec, Maya, and Costa Rican styles. In the Olmec style, sculpture and incision are largely exclusive modes, with sculpture appearing generally to precede the incised or graphic mode, as sculpture in the round generally precedes relief in stone sculpture. Among the Maya, the preference is generally for two-dimensional modes over truly sculptural expression, as again is the case in stone sculpture; in bladed forms specifically, incision and glyphic writing coexist in what might be called a “writerly” mode. The Costa Rican preference is generally for sculpture over incision, although the Atlantic watershed reveals an increasing attraction to string-sawing, a technique that was treated somewhat like a mode of “graphic cutting” or “see-through sculpture” (Lothrop 1955).<sup>24</sup>

It may also be instructive to look at the contrasting attitudes in Mayaland and Costa Rica toward foreign-style greenstone acquisitions. The Maya typically added glyphic writing and incised, writerly-like images, frequently

<sup>24</sup> String-sawing (also called cord-sawing) is a lapidary technique employing an adhesive-coated fiber and sand, and is often used to make interior cuts in hard rocks or minerals. For this it requires “starter holes” and typically produces rather wobbly channels that are frequently apparent in Atlantic watershed lapidary work. String-sawing was also used by artists working in the Olmec style, who usually ground and polished away the obvious signs of the technique. It is typical that in Costa Rica string-sawing should be handled as if it were an extreme mode of incision, a cutting-through rather than a marking-on, as if to avoid the possibility of developing what Derrida calls a “graphic rhetoric.”

invaded by glyphic signs, to Olmec artifacts, while in Costa Rica foreign greenstones were often reworked by cutting and string-sawing. A useful comparison here is the Maya treatment of a flanged or winged Middle Pre-Classic Olmec-style pectoral at Dumbarton Oaks, on the reverse of which were later incised a Late Pre-Classic Maya text and the image of a seated lord (Schele and Miller 1986: pl. 32). In Costa Rica, Olmec heirlooms were reworked in different fashion; in one example, an Early Classic Maya belt celt of the Leiden Plaque type was dismembered so that only the vertical portion displaying the depicted belt celts has survived, with new holes for horizontal suspension, while the text on the reverse was effaced (see Fig. 3).<sup>25</sup>

Schele and Miller (1986: 119) suggest that the Olmec supernatural infant face with V-shaped head cleft on the Dumbarton Oaks pectoral “is often associated with historical portraits of Olmec rulers.” Thus, in this case, there is an apparent symmetry of meaning between the Olmec winged pendant and the Maya additions, holding out the possibility that the new Maya owners had some understanding of the Olmec sign system. Whether this can be said about the ancient owners of Maya artifacts in Costa Rica remains problematic, and I suspect that many would think not.<sup>26</sup> In both cases, however, the receivers permanently marked foreign lordly regalia in culturally specific ways.<sup>27</sup>

The two contemporaneous Costa Rican traditions of axe-gods, in Guana-caste-Nicoya and in the Atlantic watershed, may best be understood in relation to their Olmec and Maya analogues. For those not familiar with the bladed art forms of the Olmec style, there are two basic configurations: the

<sup>25</sup> I am not sure what to make of the fact that the common reorientation of Maya celts in Costa Rica from vertical to horizontal corresponds to the normal figurative mapping by literary theorists of metaphor as a vertical operation of condensation and metonymy as a horizontal chain of displacement. Perhaps metaphor and metonymy truly are the master tropes of all writing, whether narrowly or broadly conceived.

<sup>26</sup> There are other instances of Maya belt celts altered in Costa Rica, including a celt split vertically (only the right side of the figure is preserved) and again drilled for horizontal suspension as a winged pendant (Balsler 1974: pl. XIV). The common practice of reorienting foreign-style greenstone regalia in Costa Rica suggests that an Early Classic Maya belt celt in Dumbarton Oaks (Schele and Miller 1986: pl. 22) was actually reworked in Costa Rica: the lord’s head was cut off, the break ground and polished, and the remaining portion drilled for horizontal suspension; the belt celts with T-shape cut-outs depicted being worn by this lord actually existed (Balsler 1974: pl. IX), again redrilled for horizontal suspension. The metaphorical or symbolic decapitation of a foreign lord accords, apparently, with the treatment given local lords or captives in Costa Rica, at least to judge from much of the Atlantic watershed *metate* imagery.

<sup>27</sup> In Mayaland, of course, foreign lordly regalia were marked with phonetic writing accompanied by a stylistically identical graphic rhetoric that often includes glyphic signs as polyvalent pictorial elements, while in Costa Rica such regalia were marked with what Derrida would call “writing in the broad sense,” meaning among other things a sort of rhetorical language not tied to a linear or even two-dimensional format, and often becoming an un-writing in the form of a literal de(con)struction of Maya images and texts.

so-called votive axe in sculptural form and the so-called celt with predominantly incised representations on a flatish ground (Coe 1965). Evidence in the votive axes themselves, such as the famous Kunz Axe in New York, shows the frontal supernatural axe-being holding "a miniature version of himself," in Mary Miller's (1986:18, 19) words, and thus clearly indicating that the votive axes as a category were hand axes, and not meant for hafting. In Olmec-style incised celts, on the other hand, frontal figures are largely replaced by profile figures, as sculpture is largely replaced by incision.

The tradition of incised celts survived longer than the sculpted axe tradition in Mesoamerica, and was ancestral to the Early Classic Maya tradition of greenstone belt celts. Such famous Olmec-style incised celts as the now-destroyed Humboldt Celt actually adopt an abstract columnar format for the display of graphic signs in a manner that comes very close to being true writing (Joralemon 1971: fig. 32). As Michael Coe (1965) noted long ago, some of the signs on the Humboldt Celt are formally comparable to Maya glyphs, and since he wrote more signs can be related to Maya glyphs. My own attempt to read the Humboldt Celt suggests that it records—and does not simply depict—a ritual of lordly sacrifice that may involve the burning of copal incense, the offering of cacao, or bloodletting, as part of a Maya-type "scattering" ritual (Graham n.d.a; Schele 1986; Stuart 1984). It now seems likely that such late or even post-Olmec artifacts as the Humboldt Celt significantly inspired the Early Classic Maya tradition of belt celts. John Justeson (1986) regards the Olmec-style incised celts as a key step in the emergence of an incipient or proto-writing in Mesoamerica, in which iconic signs are gradually liberated from their depictive, representational matrix. He adds that this process occurred "during the era of state formation" in Mesoamerica, and that these initial graphic signs are translinguistic, a feature that clearly correlates with the multi-ethnic audience of the Olmec art style (Justeson 1986: 440).

The later Maya belt celts explicitly recall the stela-like arrangement of incised celts in the famous Offering 4 at La Venta, repeating in regalia the stationary format of Early Classic Maya stela such as Tikal Stela 1, 2, 10 and 27 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: figs. 1, 2, 14, 46; Miller 1986: 114).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The relation of equivalence or substitution that links Olmec-style and Early Classic Maya celts with stelae is based on archaeological and compositional evidence, and linguistic evidence further suggests a Mayan association among stelae, male genitalia, and blades. John Justeson and Peter Mathews (1983) have reconstructed a Proto-Mayan *ton* denoting both "year" and "stone" and they argue that the basic meaning of "stone" or "stone monument" acquired the meaning "year" only when stelae were erected at *ton* endings. They also note a "persistent lexical association" in Mayan languages of the words for "stone" and "male genitalia" ("testicles; scrotum; penis") (Justeson and Mathews 1983: 587). Many years earlier, Ralph Roys (1933: 56, 156; 1965: 3, n. 6) had noted a similar substitution pattern in late Yucatecan texts in which flint blades were equated with the male genitalia, *ta*, "flint blade," and *ton*, "male genitalia." The roots of these associations may be truly ancient, since axes are held in the place of the male genitalia on several Olmec style votive axes, and La Venta Offering 4

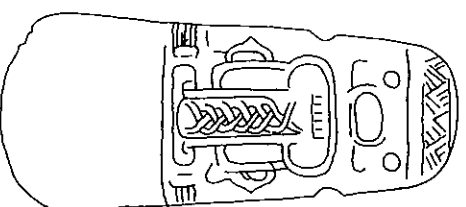


Fig. 12 Olmecoid greenstone "axe-god" with incised knuckledusters and woven mat motifs. Reportedly found near Bagaces, Guanacaste-Nicoya region of Costa Rica. Museo del Jade, San José, Costa Rica (after Balsler 1974: cover). Drawing by Cynthia Kristan-Graham.

Thus, the obverse of the Leiden Plaque depicts a ruler in the standard Early Classic three-quarter view with a bound captive at his feet, and the text recording his accession on the reverse (Morley and Morley 1939; Schele and Miller 1986: 120–121, pl. 33).

Among the Olmec-style artifacts reported from Costa Rica, there are neither axes nor celts, but a number of axe-gods of what Easby (1968) calls the Olmecoid type, one of which (Fig. 12) has a long, protruding tongue incised with the woven mat motif, a widespread sign of rulership in Mesoamerica, flanked by schematic "knuckledusters" incised on the torso.<sup>29</sup>

Other evidence indicates that Olmec and Maya rituals may possibly have been known in Costa Rica. The only Olmec-style artifact ever scientifically excavated in Costa Rica is the large greenstone skeuomorph of a bivalve shell from an elite burial at Tibas in the suburbs of San José (Snarskis 1979). The Tibas shell is similar to others excavated at La Venta, but unlike any other Olmec greenstone shells it has a delicate low-relief depiction of a human right hand grasping a supernatural being that is part feline and part insect or reptile. Stylistically, the wrist knot firmly links the scene incised on the Tibas shell to the Late Pre-Classic Miraflores phase at Kaminaljuyu,

employs incised celts as if they were stelae. Thus, the Nahaut tropes equating semen and greenstone with moisture and nobility may be a distant echo of a pervasive Middle American association expressing the fertility of rulers through certain classes of monuments and regalia.

<sup>29</sup> The knuckleduster is a mysterious object long known in Gulf Coast Olmec stone sculpture and in Olmec style portable art, but never encountered as an artifact. David Grove (1987) has recently argued that knuckledusters are one of a standard pair of ritual items, along with torches or torch-bundles, employed in or signifying a lordly ritual that he thinks is bloodletting.

Guatemala, and specifically to the famous Stela 11, which has identical knots on wrists and ankles (Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985: no. 19). I have suggested (Graham n.d. b) that this unique iconography can be understood as an early hand-grasping event of the type interpreted by Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1973) as related to lordly sacrifice, especially inaugural bloodletting.<sup>30</sup> There is thus evidence to suggest at least the possibility that specific lordly rituals of the Olmec and early Maya were known in Costa Rica, although there is no evidence that they were actually practiced there.

How, then, does the Atlantic watershed greenstone blade tradition relate to these seminal Mesoamerican traditions? Initially, Atlantic watershed axes and celts are similar to those in Guanacaste-Nicoya. Sculpture or carving predominates over incising; evidence of string-sawing is minimal, and the figural compositions are insistently frontal. The figure, whether anthropomorphic or zoomorphic, is almost always at the narrow end of the tool, with the bit end rendered wide, plain, sometimes rather sharp, and often chipped. From this base-line approach to lapidary work shared with Guanacaste-Nicoya, the Atlantic watershed tradition increasingly diverges in the direction of more formal and iconographic categories, including many small effigies such as beak-birds and staff-bearers, more obvious signs of string-sawing, and a much closer iconographic relation with stone sculpture. Little is known yet about the behavioral-functional contexts of axes, celts, and other greenstone artifacts beyond the common assumption that they were worn as ornaments by elite individuals, presumably mostly men, and the evidence that they were finally placed in elite graves (Easby 1968; Hartman 1907; Snarskis 1979, 1981a).

The increasingly common avian imagery in Atlantic watershed axes and in unbladed pendants frequently juxtaposes the symbolic associations of greenstone—preciousness, fertility, life-giving liquids, elite status—with birds with large, pointed beaks, such as king vultures, harpy eagles, and toucans (Snarskis 1981b: nos. 23, 26, 154, 156; Graham n.d.b); quetzals,

<sup>30</sup> The Mayan glyphic affix T160 resembles the Tibas and Kaminaljuyu knots. Linda Schele (in Justeson 1984: 320) suggests that this affix is an allograph or sign equivalent for the T684a knotted chin strap that signifies lordly accession. Knots of various types are generally recognized as standard items of Maya lordly dress for certain rituals of sacrifice, and also often decorate the sacrificial instruments, as on the famous vessel with bloodletting scenes from Huehuetenango, Guatemala (Thompson 1961; Joralemon 1974). The avian "beak-bird" celt from Cerro de las Mesas bears some resemblance to the knotted perforators on the Huehuetenango vessel, and likewise, of course, to numerous beak-bird celts from the Atlantic watershed of Costa Rica (Coe 1965: fig. 40; Drucker 1955: pl. 36f). Additional glyphic evidence suggests that bivalve shells may also have been associated with bloodletting, since the Post-Classic Madrid Codex depicts bloodletting from the ear, accompanied by a pictorial use of the affix T149a in the place of a bloodletting receptacle, iconically resembling both halves of a bivalve (Kelley 1976: fig. 49); however, James Fox (in Justeson 1984: 327) thinks that this affix iconically represents testicles, and functions logographically to denote "testicles, penis." At this point the data are contradictory, and it is not clear whether this is a fault of interpretation, or if this is an example of symbolic and linguistic polyvalence.

whose association with elite status and precious materials has already been noted, also appear (Snarskis 1981b: no. 150). The feeding behavior of these birds who consume carrion, flesh, and fruit may thus have been used to ramify the symbolic associations of the axes, whose use in cutting the forest and in territorial defense and acquisition made them important tools for human subsistence. Other categories of Atlantic watershed lapidary work, such as beak-birds, staff-bearers, and winged pendants, further associate fertility with death and aggression (Easby 1968). It is apparent that the expansion of iconographic categories in Atlantic watershed greenstone carving functions on a very important level to draw lapidary work into the iconographic orbit of the complex flying-panel *metates*, on which are frequently depicted beak-birds with human corpses or decapitated heads, as we have seen.

Although we do not know the linguistic affiliation of the culture corresponding to the early tradition of functional stone sculpture in the Atlantic watershed, the culture corresponding to the late tradition was of Chibchan affiliation. Snarskis (1984) has detailed the archaeological argument for locating the sources of the so-called southern influences of the late tradition in Colombia, and this can further be specified in iconographic terms, especially with regard to the sudden influx of feline imagery (Graham n.d.b). Because the sources of the early tradition artifacts are, conversely, to be found in the north, in Mesoamerica, one might suspect that the first complex societies in northern Costa Rica were, in fact, linguistically related to Mesoamerican outliers. In this eventuality, then, we might also suspect that the symbolic and linguistic connotations of Mesoamerican-derived artifacts were also shared in Costa Rica.

The Mesoamerican referents of axes and celts have an obvious relevance here. There is abundant evidence to suggest that in Mesoamerica, stone axes, celts, and other bladed forms were principally associated with elite power, fertility, war, and sacrifice (Freidel and Andrews, n.d.; Graham n.d.a). Olmec-style blades were associated with and in some cases depicted rulers and their rituals, a tradition that continues into the Early Classic Maya belt celts that commonly depict themselves being worn by rulers in accession events. Glyphic and linguistic evidence further support a pervasive and perhaps determinant link between axes and rulership. Mayan glyphs of the T1030 group, especially those designated T1030l-n, were long understood simply as denoting *bat'ab*, a subordinate lord or war captain, on the basis of the axe icon. Yucatecan *baat*, and ethnohistoric data from the sixteenth century. Recently, however, Peter Mathews and John Justeson (1984: 211) have pointed out that one of the T1030 signs, T1030l, only names Classic Maya rulers "of the highest order," and is equivalent to the more common title of *Ahau* or lord. There is thus in southern Mesoamerica a long tradition of the axe as a sign of rulership, and I would conclude that



the spectacular eruption of greenstone blades in Costa Rica is attributable directly to commercial or other contact with southern Mesoamerican groups after ca. 300 B.C., groups who were, by all indications, either of Mayan affiliation or in very close touch with Mayan groups.

Perhaps the strangest manifestation of Costa Rican attitudes toward their Mesoamerican contemporaries is to be seen in the treatment of imported Mayan belt celts, the blades typically worn over the ruler's loins as shown on the Leiden Plaque: in Guanacaste-Nicoya, as we have seen, some of these imported Maya celts were cut-up, sectioned, and quartered (Balser 1974). Were they aware that they were literally dismembering (pun intended) one of the primary symbols of Maya elite male power? As the Humboldt Celt and other late Olmec-sphere incised celts reveal, axes in Mesoamerica serve in effect to link speech to writing, as the site of important developments bridging Derrida's graphic rhetoric and true writing.

In both Guanacaste-Nicoya and the Atlantic watershed, it would appear that their bladed forms were essentially a synthetic reworking or reformatting of the Olmec-style axes and celts. Perhaps correlated with this inversion of format, Costa Rican bladed forms abandon the Olmec infantile supernatural in favor of avian and anthropomorphic subjects. However, the large, unwearable, and monument-like size of Olmec axes (and often celts, too) is drastically scaled down in Costa Rica to an easily wearable size, with appropriate perforations for suspension. On this point the Costa Rican bladed forms are obviously more akin to the Maya belt celts, for which we know much about the wearers and the manner of wearing. The Costa Rican bladed forms thus continue to occupy an intermediate position between the two seminal Mesoamerican traditions, retaining the sculptural medium of Olmec axes in the wearable scale of the Maya celts, but without any trace of the writing and graphic signs of Olmec and Maya celts. This could be seen in one sense as a sort of intertextual balancing act, articulating a distinctively Costa Rican tradition along a series of points between the Olmec and Maya traditions. I am inclined to see an intellectual sensibility at work here, whether consciously or not, that is not at all like Claude Lévi-Strauss' rather pejorative notion of *bricolage*, but rather a cognitive process recalling the implications of Payson Sheets' (this volume) "avoidance of the state."

THE LANGUAGE OF POWER IN THE ATLANTIC WATERSHED:  
ENGENDERED SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS OF REPRODUCTION

Even after the decline of the early tradition in Period V, the ceremonial maize grinding stone (tetrapod, however, not tripod) remained a vital symbol of elite wealth and power in the Atlantic watershed, aesthetically

and ideologically re-elaborated into the core of another complex of art-tools. In spite of the clear evidence for a fundamental cultural break during Period V, the concept of the ceremonial *metate* was preserved; its survival under conditions of otherwise extensive change probably reflects the compelling hold this tool had on the peoples of the Atlantic watershed. Why this should have been so remains very problematic, and for the sake of argument, I will propose three premises requisite to any further consideration. First, any understanding of the *metate* as an art-tool must start with the virtually universal association of mundane *metates* with female domestic labor. Second, the equally universal sexual division of labor can be seen as an embedded structure of dominance in egalitarian societies, where such power as exists adheres to men and the sphere of public action. Third, this elaboration of gender as a code of power can be seen as a widespread concomitant of the emergence of rank societies, in Costa Rica and elsewhere.

With these premises in mind, we can consider the problem of the formation of ideologies of power in the emergent rank societies of the Atlantic watershed. There can be little doubt that the social formation corresponding to the early tradition of stone sculpture in the Atlantic watershed is both quantitatively and qualitatively more complex than that which preceded it. Furthermore, this new social formation has the characteristics of a simple complex society, that is, a lower order chiefdom or rank society, especially obvious with regard to the wide distribution of craft specialization and differential treatment of the dead.<sup>31</sup> In this general context, then, the explicit elaboration of tools that index the sexual division of labor justifies the inference that tools and labor were primary components in the representation of a new language of power.

I have argued that the mundane *metates* were perceived as signs, and a crucial referent here was that of transformation. The mundane *metate* points to the domestic labor of women who transform maize into *masa* for human consumption. This association with agricultural fertility, with the domestic work of women to transform maize for human nourishment, is the root of a series of further associations between *metates* and the ideological concerns of emergent elites. The normative sexual division of labor that identified *metates* with the domestic work of women was symbolically appropriated and redefined so that the ceremonial *metates* came to be associated with elite men. In semiotic terms, the mundane *metate* almost is

<sup>31</sup> Among the most recent theoretically oriented discussions of rank societies are Creamer and Haas (1985), Drennan and Urbe (1987) and Earle (1987). Gender has not as yet emerged as a major consideration in treatments of rank societies, with few exceptions (e.g., Ortner 1981). In art history, it would not be unfair to say that prehistoric rank societies are presumed not to exist.

"natural" indexical sign, but the ceremonial *metate* breaks that simple relation and becomes both an icon and a symbol of elite power. The normative sexual division of labor is therefore transcended, as if the signs of the new elite represent a higher symbolic order.

Whatever the reason for its ideological elevation, the ceremonial *metate* created "new facts" or "true fictions," new associations that give us a prehistoric text about the nature and qualities of elite power. Perhaps chief among these new referents are death and sacrifice. Through its incorporation, as it were, of the mundane *metate* as the place of transformation where maize becomes *masa*, the ceremonial *metate* became a useful metaphor, productive in the linguistic sense and variously inflected: *metates* as burial furnishings, especially as the actual place of burial, may have the Mesoamerican denotation of the fertile earth as the place of new life for maize and men. However, the figural elaboration culminating in the great flying-panel *metates* is oriented toward the visual symbolic equation of food processing with elite rituals of human sacrifice and burial. Trussed-up victims hang from *metate* supports or are held by a variety of natural and supernatural carnivores. The border of decapitated human heads around the grinding plate equates human heads with seeds, but what is "processed" on these *metates* is not maize, but the power relationships of the elite who claim a role in the reproduction of society.

We might, finally, reflect on the deeper meaning of the selection of *metates* and axes as signs of power. Because real axes and *metates* point to the beginning and end of the process of agricultural production, the art-tools based on them must have been chosen because they convey, in a new language, the claim of an emergent elite to extend its power over the essential base of material production, from the men who work in the fields to the women who grind maize in their homes.

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*The House and the Territory: The Organizational Structure for Chiefdom Art in the Diquis Subregion of Greater Chiriqui*

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INTRODUCTION

THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES two coexisting artisan industries that characterized the Diquis subregion of Greater Chiriqui from the Formative through the Precontact Period (Table 1). One is a household industry, oriented toward the production of domestic tools and utensils for everyday use. The other is a special industry or advanced school of craftsmanship geared toward the expression of symbolic art, the production of luxury goods, and the manufacture of special household tools. The appearance of this second industry and its product assemblage accompanies a pattern of territorial settlement integration in the subregion and provides a basis for assessing how the two coexisting industries were structured during early chiefdom formation and expansion within a single tropical basin in Lower Central America.

*The Village Sequence in the Diquis Subregion*

Pacific southern Costa Rica constitutes one of four subregions of Greater Chiriqui. Nearly a century of archaeological literature about this portion of the Isthmus (Haberland 1984; Lothrop 1963; MacCurdy 1911; Pittier 1892; Stone 1977) along with western Panama (Haberland 1961c; Holmes 1888; Linares de Sapir 1968; Linares and Ranere 1980) has generated information linking Contact Period chiefdom societies with earlier periods of prehistoric settlement. The discovery of gold industries, a sculptural tradition in stonework, and sophisticated ceramic wares constituted the first evidence that demonstrated considerable antiquity of the sixteenth-century polities and their artisan industries. Investigations over the past forty years