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Introduction

Mesoamerican sculpture

When one thinks of Mesoamerican sculpture, one conjures numerous images: the massive Olmec heads of San Lorenzo, the contorted Danzantes of Monte Albán, the fantastically carved stelae of Copán, the hauntingly impersonal stone masks of Teotihuacan, and the regal carved throne, or *teocalli*, of Motecuhzoma. The images include monumental stone sculpture, smaller portable objects, and the artistic production of artists and scribes from the second millennium B.C. through the arrival of the Spanish in 1519. They also hail from a region spanning central, western, and southern Mexico, the Yucatán Peninsula, Guatemala, Belize, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador. Despite the fact that numerous linguistic and ethnic groups flourished throughout this vast territory, they shared a suite of cultural practices that enables us to define, and think productively about, this region known as Mesoamerica and its artistic traditions (Fig. 1.1) (Kirchhoff 1943; also see Clark, Guernsey, and Arroyo 2010).[1]

Mesoamerican sculpture was diverse from its inception – one need only look at the range of forms produced by the Olmec, the first culture to create a remarkable sculptural legacy, which was in full bloom by the early part of the Preclassic period (1500 B.C. to A.D. 250) (Fig. 1.2).[2] Olmec forms include carved stone altars, thrones, stelae, massive heads, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, and smaller-scale objects. This variety of forms was paralleled by equally eclectic content that addressed social, political, and supernatural themes, as well as those drawn from nature. This diversity, in many ways, remained a constant in Mesoamerica, with cultures such as the Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec continuing to expand and experiment with the expressive potential of sculpture in a variety of forms and mediums. While attention has typically focused on the large-scale monuments erected in the central plazas of Mesoamerican cities, smaller sculptural objects designed for personal use, including figurines carved from stone or modeled in clay, plaques, masks, celts, and axes, are also known from the archaeological record. The forms and themes of this corpus of art – already richly varied by the Preclassic period – are perhaps the most striking testament to the critical role that sculpture played in most Mesoamerican cultures: it was a vital form of expression, materialized in an array of scales and materials, and viewed in contexts that ranged from public to private.

Yet an issue rarely addressed in studies of Mesoamerican sculpture concerns the complex relationships that surely must have existed among the different sculptural forms created in ancient Mesoamerican society. Perhaps art historians, such as I, are most guilty of a certain bias toward the monumental works that visually dominated site centers. Monumental sculpture appears to have been, in many cases, the prerogative of rulers: certain types of sculpture were commissioned by them exclusively, and these monuments speak to the concerns of the ruling elite and the messages they saw fit to broadcast in such large-scale, visible form. This type of sculpture was typically of stone, and size appears to have mattered. Or, perhaps better said, size was often an index of power, both political and economic, especially when the stone was procured from a distant region, hauled to a site without the aid of the wheel or beasts of burden, and then meticulously carved without the benefit of metal tools. But size was not always the primary criterion, and elites certainly availed themselves of an impressive array of small exquisite objects crafted from other materials, including greenstone, clay, precious stones, cloth, and paper.

While the issues at play in any discussion of monumental sculpture are many and rich, there are also certain assumptions built into such discourse. A way out of this predicament, and one that I have used to guide this study, is to pose a series of questions. How, for instance, do we define "public" or "elite"? What was the relationship between site centers, sculpture, and elite agendas? Was monumental or large-scale sculpture always commissioned by rulers and elites? Was it necessarily "public"? What about other forms of sculpture, which appear to have occupied spaces at the intersection between the "public" sphere and the more "private" realm of domestic residences? Did ancient Mesoamericans, particularly those of the Preclassic period, differentiate between public and private space, and when did this dichotomy develop? Should public space be correlated directly with

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elites, or were there public spaces reserved for functions and objects that resonated with non-elites or other sectors of society? What can sculpture tell us about these spaces, their uses, and their audiences?

Perhaps even more fundamentally, we need to think about what, precisely, constituted "sculpture" for ancient Mesoamericans (Love 2010). The word "sculpture" refers to objects, figures, or designs that have been carved or modeled or deliberately shaped in some way. Yet in Preclassic Mesoamerica, naturally formed objects were often accorded the same veneration as sculpted objects. At the site of Zazacatla, Morelos, which flourished during the Middle Preclassic period (900–300 B.C.), Monument 4, a piece of natural and apparently unmodified cave flowstone whose shape resembles a seated figure, was given the same reverential treatment as other monuments carved by human hands (Canto and Castro 2010). This natural form at Zazacatla calls to mind the many uncarved altars and stelae that were also displayed in Preclassic centers, only subtly shaped by humans, if at all, and points to an interest in the materiality of sculpture in and of itself rather than its role as a vehicle for modification or decoration. Mesoamerican monuments thus challenge traditional definitions of sculpture and appear to have included both objects that were modified by human hands and those that were not.

Beyond large-scale monuments, archaeology in the domestic sectors of sites has long documented small-scale objects utilized with great frequency, such as the ceramic (or sometimes stone) figurines that are ubiquitous in many elite and commoner households throughout Mesoamerica (Fig. 1.3). Were they also perceived as sculpture by ancient Mesoamericans? Many scholars, whether art historians or archaeologists, exclude such small-scale objects from the category of "sculpture," organizing them instead by medium and grouping them under a heading such as "ceramic objects" (which also include pottery and spindle whorls) or "stone objects," which range from utilitarian *manos* and *metates* to small stone figurines and jade beads. But such categorizations are really a reflection of our Western biases and methods of classification, and we should not presume that, among ancient Mesoamericans, the small-scale and (sometimes) less durable materials of some objects necessarily precluded them from the same considerations and significance assigned to larger-scale "sculpture." In years past, traditional art historical schemes often falsely distinguished between "high" art, which included "masterpieces," and "low" art, which included crafts and utilitarian objects. Yet in ancient Mesoamerica, patterns of ritual accompanied the use, dedication, or veneration of both monuments and small-scale objects, blurring

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Figure 1.1. Map of Mesoamerica with sites mentioned in the text. Drawing by Michael Love.

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Period	Calibrated	Uncalibrated	Western Guatemala Coast	Central Guatemala Coast	Takalik Abaj	Kaminaljuyú	Soconusco	Chiapa de Corzo	Chalchuapa
Classic – Late	900	800	Marcos	Pantaleón	Ralda	Pamplona	Peistal	Paredón	Payu
Classic – Early	700	600		San Jerónimo	Guzman	Amatle	Metapa	Maravillas	Xocco
Preclassic – Late	500	400	Pitahaya	Cojolate	Castillo	Esperanza	Loros	Laguna	Voc
Preclassic – Middle	300	200	Cataluña	Guacalate	Alejos	Aurora	Kato	Jiquipilas	Late Caynac
Preclassic – Early	100	AD	Caramelo	Mascalate	Ruth	Santa Clara	Jaritas	Istmo	Early Caynac
	AD	BC	Conchas D	Guatalón	Rocio	Arenal	Itstapa	Horcones	Chul
	BC	200	Conchas C	Sis	Nil	Verbena	Hato	Guanacaste	Kal
	100	400	Conchas B	Tecojate	Ixchiyá	Providencia	Guillen	Francesca	Colos
	300	600	Conchas A	Coyolate II	Riachuelo	Majadas	Frontera	Escalera	Tok
	500	800	Jocotal	Coyolate I		Las Charcas	Escalón	Vista Hermosa	
	700	1000	Cuadros	Madre Vieja		Arévalo	Duende	Dili	
	900	1200	Cherla			?	Conchas	Jobo	
	1100	1400	Ocos				Jocotal	Cotorra	
	1300	1600	Locona				Cuadros	Ocote	
	1500						Cherla		
	1700						Ocos		
	1900						Locona		
							Barra		

Figure 1.2. Comparative chronology of Preclassic Mesoamerica. Drawing by Michael Love.

the lines between "high" and vernacular art; both were "utilized" in a sense, although context, scale, audience, and materials differed significantly. While many of us continue to differentiate between art and material culture, often with good reason, objects such as small-scale figurines challenge these distinctions, particularly when they bear striking visual relationships to large-scale monuments (Halperin et al. 2009; S. Scott in press). We need to be attentive to the ways in which our categories of "art" and "material culture" obscure potentially dynamic relationships that existed among types of objects, materials, functions, and contexts in the ancient past (see Davis 1993).

This may be particularly true for Preclassic art, the focus of this book. Preclassic sculpture ranged dramatically in scale, form, theme, medium, context, and display. While some monuments portray rulers and are categorized as "art" without question, others render messages that are, at least ostensibly, less focused on rulership – the pedestal sculptures with monkeys or felines come

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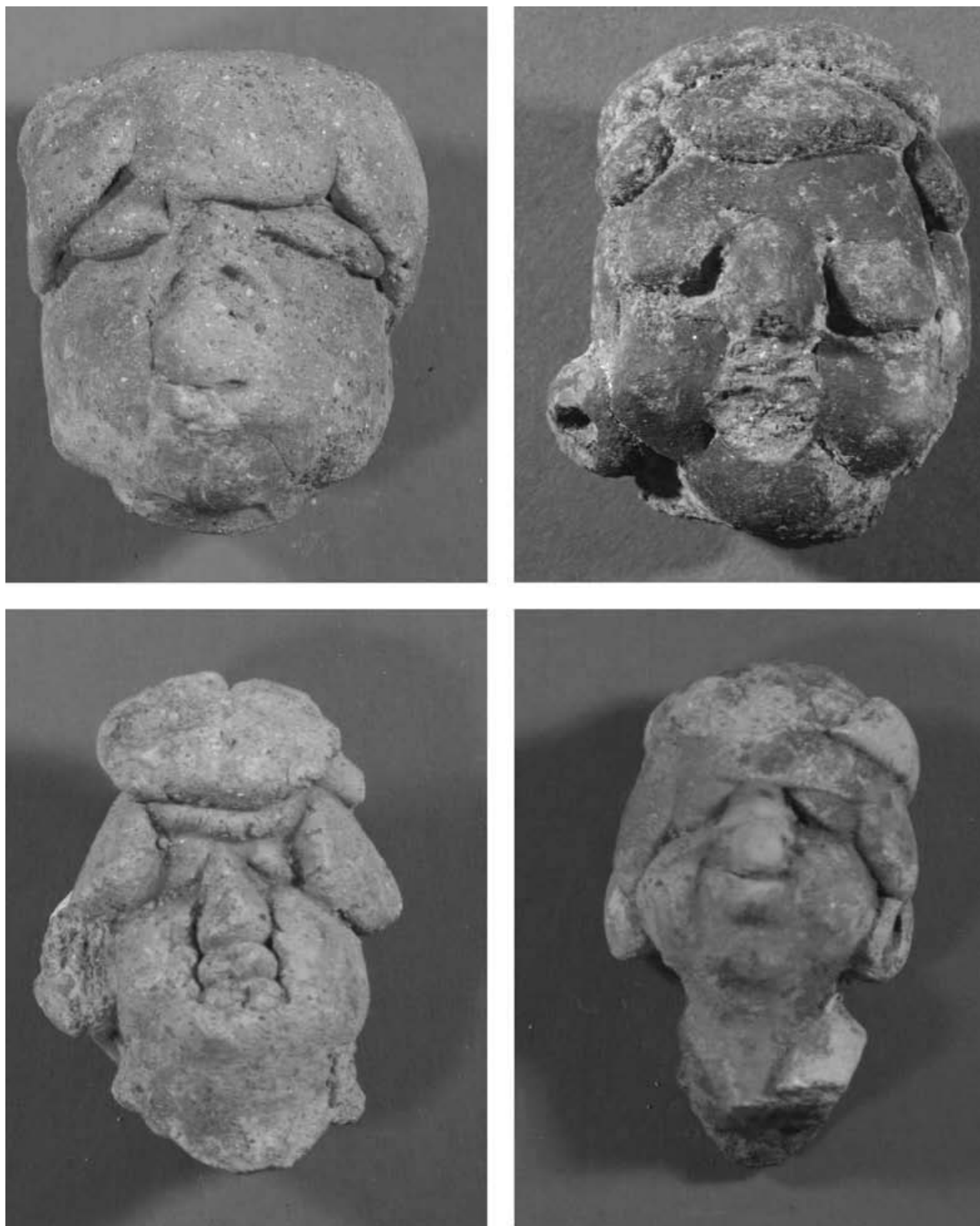

Figure 1.3. Ceramic figurines from the Middle Preclassic site of La Blanca, Guatemala. Photos by author.

to mind, or the mushroom stones with their array of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. Were there categorical distinctions between these forms for ancient Mesoamericans? Was the art of rulers akin to our notion of "high" art, while objects that depicted other themes considered vernacular? Can we determine whether these diverse objects were appreciated, venerated, or utilized in different manners? Did sculptures that represent animals, ancestors, themes from nature, or other broadly shared concerns resonate with sectors of society beyond that of the ruling elite? Or did they employ a more metaphorical language of forms whose significance, elite based or otherwise, is now, thousands of years later, lost upon us? Queries such as these inevitably – and productively, I would maintain – force us to revisit a number of traditional assumptions about Preclassic sculpture and its meaning(s).

Even an understanding of the imagery, however, does not always elucidate the rationale for crafting and erecting the sculpture in the first place. Better questions, I would assert, go beyond issues of iconography and instead engage issues of motivation, inspiration, utility, and changing social circumstances. And they are important to ask, whether answerable or not, because they direct attention to larger discussions of sculpture's social significance. Why was sculpture erected in ancient

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Figure 1.4. Monte Alto Monument 4. Photo by author.

Mesoamerica, and how were these motivations transformed through time and space? What spectrum of issues were addressed through sculptural forms? Why did some sites erect stone sculpture and others eschew it in favor of a different expressive medium such as architecture or mural programs? What are the possible origins of specific sculptural forms, and what does a consideration of their developmental trajectory reveal about message, audience, and function? Who "used" sculpture, and how did these uses shift depending on context or a specific moment in time?

The potbelly sculptural form

It was, in fact, these various inquiries concerning sculpture and its communicative role in ancient Mesoamerica that gave rise to this book, which focuses on a specific type of Preclassic sculpture – the potbelly, or *barrigón* – precisely because it demands investigation of many of these fundamental questions and definitions. Although the dating of the potbelly sculptural phenomenon is riddled with difficulties, a topic dealt with in detail in Chapter 4, the vast majority of scholars agree that its primary florescence occurred during the Late Preclassic period (300 B.C. to A.D. 250), although examples may have appeared already by the Middle to Late Preclassic transition, perhaps as early as the fourth or fifth century B.C.

Potbellies are typically described as rotund human figures, carved in the round from boulders, with distinctive features that often include bloated faces with closed eyes and puffy eyelids. Monument 4 from Monte Alto, Guatemala (Fig. 1.4), carved from a massive rock that lends its monumentality to the sheer bulk of the figure's three-dimensional form, typifies these features. Its head is anchored by heavy jowls and a thick chin that is deeply delineated. The wide, sloping planes of the face are further accentuated by a broad nose and closed eyes whose swollen lids echo the contours of the sagging jowls. The arms of the figure are not cut free from the boulder, but instead wrap around and rest at the front of the figure's corpulent stomach. The legs and feet are handled in the same manner, paralleling the arms in the way they encircle the figure's lower body and meet, soles facing each other, at the base of the figure's stomach. Although fingers are precisely rendered on the hands, the feet are

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Figure 1.5. Two views of Finca Nueva Monument 1. Photos by Juan Pablo Rodas, courtesy of the Dirección General del Patrimonio Cultural y Natural del Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes.

handled much less realistically, creating a palpable tension between naturalism and stylization.

Although Monte Alto Monument 4 embodies many of the recurring characteristics associated with the potbelly form, it is important to emphasize the surprising variation that exists within the larger corpus of potbelly sculptures. For example, a number of potbellies, such as Monument 1 from Finca Nueva, Guatemala (Fig. 1.5), are much less imposing in size and more stout than obese, although their arms nonetheless rest on their stomachs in a manner consistent with Monte Alto Monument 4 (see the detailed regional map in Fig. 4.2 for the locations of sites on the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica with potbelly sculptures). Others, such as Finca Sololá Monument 3 (Fig. 4.10d), possess a prominent navel, a characteristic often attributed to potbellies despite the fact that Monte Alto Monument 4, Finca Nueva Monument 1, and other examples lack this feature, making it clear that prominent navels were not essential to potbelly sculptures at all sites. What is consistent between Finca Nueva Monument 1 and Monte Alto Monument 4 are the facial features, which emphasize heavy cheeks, a broad nose, and closed and bulging eyelids. Other related sculptures from Monte Alto, such as Monument 10 (Fig. 1.6), consist of a head alone, with the same bloated features and closed eyes. Examples such as this, which lack the obese bodies, suggest that the most consistent and critical features of these "potbelly" sculptures could be conveyed by the heads alone, with their distinctly jowly features and heavy-lidded eyes. In fact, on the basis of these examples from Monte Alto and others presented in the following chapters, I suggest that the closed eyes and jowly facial features are more diagnostic than the obese bodies of stone potbelly sculptures, an opinion shared by John Graham and Larry Benson (2005), who cautioned that a "more consistent characteristic" of the potbellies was "fatty or swollen eyelids." Only a small percentage of the stone potbellies and Monte Alto heads have open eyes that diverge from the typically closed, puffy-lidded examples. Of the more than fifty potbellies illustrated by Sergio Rodas (1993), for example, only four or five have open eyes.[3]

If this suggestion, which will be discussed in detail in later chapters, is confirmed, then previous interpretations of the potbellies that have focused primarily on the obesity of their bodies as the primary clue to their meaning should be reconsidered, and greater attention paid to other, more consistent features emphasized in their faces and heads. This is not to say that the bodies carried no meaning; rather, I hope to redirect attention to other salient features that may elucidate more fully the significance of this sculptural form during the Preclassic

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Figure 1.6. Monte Alto Monument 10 with a young David Stuart in front and Roberto Stuart to the left. Photo by George Stuart.

period. This reassessment is in keeping with Graham and Benson's (2005: 349) admonition concerning superficial generalizations about the potbellies:

> [S]everal writers mistakenly conflate all obese images into a "potbelly style." … There exists no more a "potbelly style" than there exists a "toad style," or, by the same coinage, a "Buddha style," a "Crucifixion style," or a "Virgin Mary style." Apparently, it is necessary to reiterate [that] the "potbelly" … constitutes a theme, a subject, an icon, occurring in a great diversity of stylistic expressions. "Style" is a means of representation, a set of solutions to the task of depiction, not what is represented (Ackerman 1963: 164–186). The duration through time of the image and its various adaptations remain to be explored; recognition of the image in varying stylistic expressions is one useful step toward that objective.

By focusing attention on different, recurring, and obviously significant attributes of the potbellies, we can suggest new avenues of investigation for this sculptural form. For example, the bloated facial features and closed eyes of the potbellies appear to trace their antecedents to a type of ceramic figurine produced during the Middle Preclassic period (900–300 B.C.) along the Pacific slope of southern Mexico and Guatemala (Fig. 1.7). At first glance, this is perhaps not terribly interesting, but what it indicates is a certain sharing of traits or fluidity between categories of objects: in this case ceramic figurines and stone sculpture. It also points to a persistence of attributes through time, as the figurines are securely dated to the Middle Preclassic period, while the stone potbellies do not appear until the transition between the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. Also intriguing are the contextual differences between these objects with shared features: the stone potbellies, as a type of monumental sculpture, are associated most frequently with public plazas, while the ceramic figurines are a hallmark of the domestic sphere, where presumably more private rituals took place. It is my contention throughout this study that the careful exploration of the formal and symbolic parallels between the monumental stone potbellies and small, ceramic, hand-modeled figurines associated with domestic ritual informs many of the issues alluded to earlier, including our assumptions concerning sculpture's role within the continuums between public versus private space and elite versus commoner contexts. As I hope to

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Figure 1.7. Middle Preclassic ceramic figurines from La Blanca in the Shook Collection, Guatemala. Photo by Robert Rosenswig, courtesy of Marion Popenoe de Hatch and the Department of Archaeology, Universidad del Valle de Guatemala.

demonstrate, the implications of this evidence also lend insight into how and why certain forms and meanings associated with Middle Preclassic domestic ritual were incorporated and monumentalized into the sculptural programs of Late Preclassic plazas.

Methodological issues and challenges

Although a number of scholars have devoted considerable attention to the potbellies, most have focused on a single site, a circumscribed region, issues of chronology, or the relationship between potbellies and earlier Olmec or later Maya sculptural traditions (Demarest 1986; Graham and Benson 2005; Miles 1965; Parsons 1986; Popenoe de Hatch 1989; Rodas 1993). This study relies heavily on these important earlier works, yet attempts to utilize the remaining gaps in our understanding of this sculptural form to explore issues of formal development, meaning, function, and context. One of the major challenges of this book, or any exploration of the Preclassic period more generally, is the lack of textual data. The rich

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hieroglyphic traditions of the Classic period, which often include dates or references to historical events and people, impart a level of specificity that is sorely lacking for most Preclassic sculpture. Yet I would maintain that the lack of writing does not ensure that the Preclassic period and its body of works will remain inherently unknowable. While it certainly poses challenges, the lack of text can be offset by vigilant iconographic, stylistic, and archaeological analysis that helps situate these objects in time and space and provides data for discussions of form, context, and function.

For example, certain iconographic elements of the potbellies, such as their recurring facial features, present clues that link them to long-standing traditions of representation. For the ancient Mesoamericans who created these monuments, their portrayal – devoid of hieroglyphs as it was – was nevertheless considered complete, and so we must find and utilize methods for their study that recognize and respect their grounding in a system of representation that did not include text. This process is made more difficult by a tendency in Mesoamerican studies to give priority to inscriptions and the objects that they grace. It is further compounded by the fact that the stone potbellies emerged at a moment in Mesoamerican history when some of the earliest known hieroglyphic inscriptions also first appeared. In other words, the potbellies debuted more or less contemporaneously with burgeoning writing traditions, yet the potbelly form was neither inscribed with text nor, presumably, viewed as an appropriate surface for inscription. And the potbellies were not alone in this – the vast majority of Preclassic monuments lack texts. But we should not assume that the patrons and makers of these sculptural forms were illiterate or view the lack of text as a commentary on the literacy levels of any specific site or region. Rather, we must move forward with the conviction that the lack of inscriptions associated with the potbelly form was a deliberate choice and that sculptural forms lacking text and those objects carved with dates or hieroglyphs were equally effective communicators.

This book then, at one level, becomes a case study of how these issues are addressed, what alternative methods exist for meaningful analysis, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. Throughout, I focus on the Preclassic period, its sculptural corpus, and the available archaeological record. However, the long persistence of potbelly sculptures and many of their features throughout the course of Mesoamerican history, as well as their reuse in secondary contexts for hundreds of years, occasionally demands consideration of evidence from later periods. This very situation – the long duration and reuse of potbellies at numerous sites throughout many linguistic and culturally diverse regions – has proved problematic for interpretations of them and has often resulted in assertions of continuity through time that may not have existed, despite superficial resemblances. At stake, then, in this study is whether the evidence gleaned from the potbellies supports the notion of a "unified cultural tradition" in Mesoamerica as articulated by Gordon Willey (1973). As will be demonstrated in later chapters, there do indeed appear to be consistent themes associated with the potbellies throughout much of Mesoamerica, which could be viewed as confirmation of the integrity of a Mesoamerican ideological system. However, a thorough reading of Preclassic evidence – without an undue emphasis on later, Classic-period data or a methodological approach in which meaning is traced backward through time – highlights points of divergence and unique uses of the form. In fact, this very tension between continuity and reinvention calls to mind the famous rejoinder to Willey by George Kubler (1973; also see Kubler 1985), who cautioned that disjunction – or a difference in meaning – could accompany symbols that otherwise bore a similar formal appearance. In order to avoid the pitfalls of disjunction, which have long plagued the interpretation of potbelly sculptures and Preclassic sculpture more generally, this volume does not start with the Classic period and work backward in time, assuming continuity; after all, time does not march backward. Rather it establishes the range of traits and meanings that characterized the potbelly sculptures and their precursors, in ceramic figurine form, during the Preclassic period, while also recognizing the obvious continuities that persisted into later periods. In the end, I believe that it is the points of continuity and divergence, so beautifully crystallized in the form of potbelly sculptures, that provide the most profound clues to understanding this sculptural type as well as some of the social dynamics of the Preclassic period.

Sculpture and social processes

The questions and issues raised by potbelly monuments are far ranging, provocative, and even, perhaps, impossible to answer definitively. But I think that they are important to contemplate, since they foreground sculpture as a vehicle through which we can begin to think about issues of meaning, function, context, space, ritual, performance, audience, and the ways in which these variables intersected or conflicted with each other. When one visits an archaeological site in Mesoamerica, it is often immediately clear that sculpture was integrated with thoughtful consideration into the built environment. But it did

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