

Potbelly Sculptures as False Mortuary Bundles

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ABSTRACT

The present paper investigates the possibility that the potbelly sculptures of southeastern Mesoamerica may have served as false (or effigy) mortuary bundles in public rituals tying ancestor veneration to emerging forms of rulership among the Preclassic Maya. Correspondences between potbelly sculptures and the artistic and archaeological evidence for the use of mortuary bundles among the Classic period Maya suggest that the imagery of ancestors represented through effigy bundles may have been an integral part of the iconography of power deployed by early Maya rulers.

Introduction

Potbelly sculptures are one of the most enigmatic forms of monumental art in ancient Mesoamerica. Often associated with a little-known “fat god” (Scott 1988; Taube 2004), recent work has problematized this widely-accepted interpretation of potbelly sculptures (Thompson and Valdez 2008; Guernsey 2012). In fact, Julia Guernsey (2010, 2012) has done an admirable job of shedding light on the complex relationship between potbelly sculptures, changes in sociopolitical organization, and ancestor veneration; implying that these monuments played a significant role in the invention of new elite rituals during the Late Preclassic period (500 BC – AD 250). Unfortunately, we still lack knowledge of the nature of these rituals, the manner in which potbelly sculptures were incorporated into these ceremonies, and the significance of their imagery. In this paper, my intention is not to cast doubt on Guernsey’s interpretation of the potbelly sculptural tradition of Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica, but rather to add some pertinent observations regarding the ways in which these monuments may have been used to express ancestral power through public ritual. It is my suggestion that potbelly sculptures functioned primarily as false mortuary bundles, i.e. as sculptural effigies of burial bundles. While this contribution does not constitute a new interpretation of the potbelly sculptural tradition in southeastern Mesoamerica (see Boggs 1969:50; Thompson and Valdez 2008:23-24), it does refine these earlier views of their funerary associations in order to lend new insights into the socio-political role of potbelly sculptures.

Potbelly Sculptures and Ancestor Veneration

The potbelly sculptural tradition is characterized by a rich array of forms and images, from colossal heads to full-body portrayals. The full-bodied human figures also display a great deal of diversity, ranging from slender pedestal sculptures to more corpulent forms (Guernsey 2010, 2012;

Parsons 1986; Thompson and Valdez 2008). However, these diverse forms also share a number of morphological commonalities that have allowed for their placement within a distinct sculptural tradition (see figure 1).

These common physiognomic features include a simple tubular or rotund body adorned with schematic arms and legs wrapped around the abdomen or torso of the full-bodied sculptures. Their feet are often outlined without the toes and their fingers are typically rendered in block form. Full-bodied potbelly sculptures are rarely depicted with clothing. Most are portrayed with very minimal forms of body decoration such as a loin cloth or collar. The head of a potbelly sculpture is one of its most characteristic features and consists of the following morphological traits: closed eyes with heavy sometimes puffy eyelids, large pendulous cheeks, a flattened nose, a bald head, and blocky rectangular ears decorated with circular ear ornaments.

Potbelly sculptures have been documented in archaeological sites throughout southeastern Mesoamerica. Their distribution extends from southern and central Mexico (Delgadillo Torres and Santana Sandoval 1989; Navarrete and Hernández 2000; Martínez Donjuán 2010:73-74), to the Maya Lowlands, the Maya Highlands, and the Pacific coast of Guatemala (Guernsey 2012:83-84; Marcus 1987:48, Fig. 16; Richardson 1940:408-409), and into portions of El Salvador (Amaroli 1997:51; Anderson 1978:156; Demarest 1986:138-139). Despite their broad distribution, potbelly sculptures appear to be concentrated along the Pacific coast of Guatemala and the Maya Highlands region with the majority found at three Late Preclassic period sites: Kaminaljuyú, Monte Alto, and Tak'alik Ab'aj (Love 2010; Parsons 1986; Rodas 1993).

Given Guernsey's observations about a possible relationship between potbelly sculptures and ancestor veneration, the present effort is geared towards presenting data demonstrating a connection between potbelly sculptures and mortuary bundles, a common way to honor deceased ancestors throughout Mesoamerica (Barba de Piña Chan 2002:46, 2004:94). In particular, information about burial bundle morphology, bundle decoration and the archaeological associations of mortuary bundles will be explored to determine if any links between this funerary custom and potbelly sculptures can be discerned. It is also hoped that such comparisons may provide insights on the possible ritual uses of potbelly sculptures even though many of these stone carvings have been found in secondary or tertiary contexts. I will begin with an examination of the archaeology of Maya mortuary bundles.

Potbelly Sculptures and Mortuary Bundles in Archaeological Context

The bundling and re-positioning of corpses was a significant aspect of elite Maya mortuary customs during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods. The use of funerary bundles has been noted at a number of Lowland and Highland Maya sites such as Uaxactun, Tikal, K'axob, Cuello, Zacualpa, Chalchuapa, and Kaminaljuyú (Fowler 1984:609-610; Hammond 1999:55-56; Kidder et al. 1978 [1946]:47; McAnany 1998:276-277; McAnany, Storey, and Lockard 1999:132; Weiss-Krejci 2006:80). Among both the Preclassic and Classic Maya, bundle burials appear to have been attempts at passive excarnation or possible mummification (Weiss-Krejci 2006:74, 80). Funerary bundles were created either by wrapping a seated or flexed body in a woven cloth and providing it with a mask or by encasing an extended body in clay plaster. One early example of this practice is Tikal Burial 80, dating to 50 BC (Fitzsimmons 2009:81). Another possible example of bundling was found in Tomb A-1 at Kaminaljuyú but involved the preservation of an extended body on a wickerwork platform (Kidder et al. 1978 [1946]:47). These practices became more consistent over time, allowing mortuary bundles to acquire a fairly uniform set of morphological attributes (e.g. a flexed posture, wrappings in woven

cloths, and masks). These features, in turn, correspond to many of the physiognomic traits seen in full-bodied potbelly sculptures. By being wrapped around the torso and abdomen of the figures, the schematic arms and legs of these potbelly sculptures, for instance, mimic the “seated” posture of flexed bundle burials (Figures 1a-1d). In light of these similarities, the characteristic facial features of potbelly sculptures may have served two purposes. Their closed eyes, slightly open mouths, and corpulent features may not only have referenced death and decomposition (Thompson and Valdez 2008:23-24); but it is also plausible that these standardized traits—seen in both full-bodied figures and colossal heads (Figures 1d and 1f)—referenced the mortuary masks in bundle burials.

While both Late Preclassic and Classic period bundle burials shared many of the same morphological features with potbelly sculptures, changes in their archaeological associations indicate that the customs and rituals connected to mortuary bundles changed over time. While Late Preclassic period (50 BC – AD 250) bundles, such as those at Tikal and Kaminaljuyú, appear to have been associated exclusively with elite tombs and crypts, Classic period mortuary bundles were involved in the widespread practice of ritual caching, either as dedicatory burials (Becker 1993:53-60) or in relation to the curation of body parts and relics from important individuals (Gillespie 2001:89-90). Such bundles contained partially cremated remains or a few parts of the original bodies of the deceased – such the long bones, maxilla, or the mandible -- and it is unclear whether they belonged to elite members of society or to sacrificed prisoners (Hammond 1999:55; McAnany, Storey, and Lockard 1999:131). Other mortuary rituals involving bundles seem to have been intended to help transform deceased lords into powerful ancestors and are associated with the increasing importance of ancestor-related shrines throughout the Maya Lowlands (Gillespie 2001:91-92). And in a few instances, it appears that funerary bundles were used in rituals that consulted deceased ancestors during important calendrical ceremonies (Fitzsimmons 2003:672). In many of these rituals, the “seated” or flexed position of the body in bundle burials was seen as analogous to the seated posture of a living ruler (McAnany 1998:276). For example, in Uaxactun Burial C1, the “seated” and bundled body of a Classic period lord was placed on a low throne outfitted with a stuccoed pillow for a backrest. His facial bones were then removed and replaced with mask made of jade, shell and obsidian. Both Taube (2000:306-307) and Headrick (2007:44-71) have noted a similar pattern for the representation of mortuary bundles at Teotihuacán, suggesting that these ritual associations were fairly common throughout Mesoamerica during the Classic period.

Even though potbelly sculptures do not appear to have been used in dedicatory rituals or to have been placed in crypts, with the possible exception of a potbelly-like ceramic vessel from Cohla (Anthony and Black 1994:50), very little of their primary contexts of use remains intact. Nonetheless, vestiges of their ritual associations to royalty can be gleaned from their sculptural features. The portrayal of some potbelly sculptures on pedestals (Guernsey 2012:70-73; Parsons 1986: Plate 111), for instance, may provide clues to their significance in the Late Preclassic period. Given their overall morphological similarities to masked burial bundles, the pedestals could have served as the functional equivalents of Classic period platforms for elite mortuary bundles (Headrick 2007:57, Fig. 3.10). Further examination of representations of mortuary bundles in Maya art may help to clarify these intriguing links.

Potbelly Sculptures and the Iconography of the Mortuary Bundle in Maya Art

The clearest depictions of funerary bundles in Maya art are found in Postclassic period (AD 950-1540) codices, especially the *Codex Tro-Cortesianus* (1967), as well as Late Classic period codex-style ceramic vessels (AD 672-751) (Reents-Budet et al. 2010) (Figure 2). The primary morphological

features of bundles as depicted in these sources is fairly consistent and bears strong resemblances to both the potbelly sculptural tradition of the Late Preclassic period and archaeologically-attested bundle burials. These features include the deceased individual's arms being wrapped across the chest and their legs placed in a seated position or "flexed" posture with the knees bent near the elbows (See Figures 2a-2b).

Often the features of the body are covered by plain wrappings, giving the bundle a rotund appearance.

The mortuary bundles are sometimes shown decorated with items indicative of elite status such as a cape or huipil (Figures 2c-2f). Necklaces, collars, and other items of jewelry (Figures 2c-2e) are also commonly portrayed on funerary bundles as well as potbelly sculptures (Thompson and Valdez 2008:18). The mortuary bundle is typically decorated with a mask and headdress in Late Classic period examples. Some of these masks are elaborate and refer to deities such as Chaahk and Itzamna (Figures 2c-2f); suggesting that the Classic period rituals associated with some royal bundles linked the deceased ancestor with powerful and sacred forces. On the other hand, masks could also be plain, representing the outline of the deceased individual's face using closed heavy eyelids, a large nose, and a slightly open mouth (Figure 2a) as signifiers of death. In this sense, Classic period representations of funeral bundles had much in common with potbelly sculptures.

In terms of their contexts, artistic representations of mortuary bundles typically show them placed on benches or small platforms, where they appear to have been part of important rituals linking rulers to divine patrons who were referenced by the masks on the bundles. It appears then that the rituals of ancestor veneration that began in the Early Classic period continued to be manifest in the art of the Late Classic and Postclassic periods. In these rituals, mortuary bundles created hierophanies that connected living rulers with the divine through ritual acts related to the dedication of buildings, the apotheosis of ancestors, and the consultation of ancestor bundles on important calendar dates. However, such rituals do not appear to have taken place prior to the Early Classic period. Although bundle burials were associated with royalty they do not appear to have had the same religious and socio-political significance as later bundle burials. It is my contention that the potbelly sculptures of the Late Preclassic period played this important ritual role in the form of effigy mortuary bundles.

Discussion

Both the archaeological and iconographic data discussed so far seem to indicate that potbelly sculptures served as the morphological cognates of Late Preclassic and Classic period mortuary bundles. They depicted individuals in a flexed or seated position with a highly uniform face that not only denoted the physiognomic features linked to decomposition and death but may also have represented burial masks. But whereas Late Preclassic period mortuary bundles do not seem to have been used in rituals of ancestor veneration and consultation, it appears that potbelly sculptures did participate in comparable cultural practices. Like their Classic period burial bundle counterparts, it is likely that the flexed posture of potbelly sculptures recalled the posture of seated rulers. In addition, the use of pedestals as a common base for these monuments bears a strong resemblance to the benches and platforms used to reference the elite status of bundle burials. In the case of Santa Leticia in El Salvador, there is also evidence that potbelly sculptures were placed on small platforms of stone (Demarest 1986:139). In other cases, like Tak'alik Ab'aj, potbellies were placed in front of terraces and mounds near altars and small thrones (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010:179, 184).

Although many potbelly sculptures are relatively unclothed, a significant number are decorated with pendants and collars that recall the highly decorated forms of high status Classic period funerary bundles (Figure 1b). There is also evidence of deity identification in the few potbelly sculptures with elaborate clothing and masks. The potbelly from Copán (PN-46) (Richardson 1940:408), for example, is shown in a feathered outfit indicating a possible association with the Principle Bird Deity (Figure 1c). By contrast, Kaminaljuyú Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61 is depicted wearing a flayed skin on its face and holding a human femur, alluding to a close affiliation with the Preclassic Maya equivalent of the Postclassic god, Xipe Totec (Lambert 2013:4-7). There is even evidence that some of these effigy bundles may have been re-used to dedicate new monuments in the Early Classic period; suggesting that recognition of their ritual equivalence to royal mortuary bundles persisted into the Classic period. This appears to have been the case at Copán, where two potbelly sculptures were deposited underneath Altar X and Altar Y (Newsome 2003:11). The archaeological, iconographic, and morphological correspondences mentioned above suggest that the potbelly sculptures found throughout southeastern Mesoamerica may have played an important ceremonial role as false mortuary bundles. In this role, potbelly sculptures appear to have memorialized and honored elite ancestors at the same time that their monumental nature allowed these carvings to be moved into more visible areas of the civic-ceremonial centers of Maya cities where they were employed in rituals that both symbolically and materially linked deceased ancestors to the power of the emerging elite stratum in Preclassic Maya society (Gillespie 2001:92-93).

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that potbelly sculptures in southeastern Mesoamerica took part in a set of cultural practices and rituals intended to commemorate ancestors and link them to Preclassic Maya rulers. While bundle burials were common in both Late Preclassic and Classic period Maya sites and had a strong morphological resemblance to potbelly sculptures, data from their archaeological contexts as well as Maya iconography indicate that funerary bundles acquired a number of ritual associations linked to ancestor veneration in the Classic period. Although Late Preclassic burial bundles were not linked to such practices, it appears that potbelly sculptures—as false (or effigy) mortuary bundles—were placed in much more public contexts on top or in front of mounds where they could have been used in public rituals linking rulers to deceased and apotheosized ancestors. This link was also explicit in the iconographic features of potbelly sculptures, i.e. their pedestal bases, collars and pendants, and (on occasion) elaborate costumes linked to various deities. In their role as effigy burial bundles, potbelly sculptures played a crucial part in the development of rituals of ancestor veneration that helped ruling groups establish a sense of continuity with their predecessors and thereby legitimize their political authority.

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Appendix

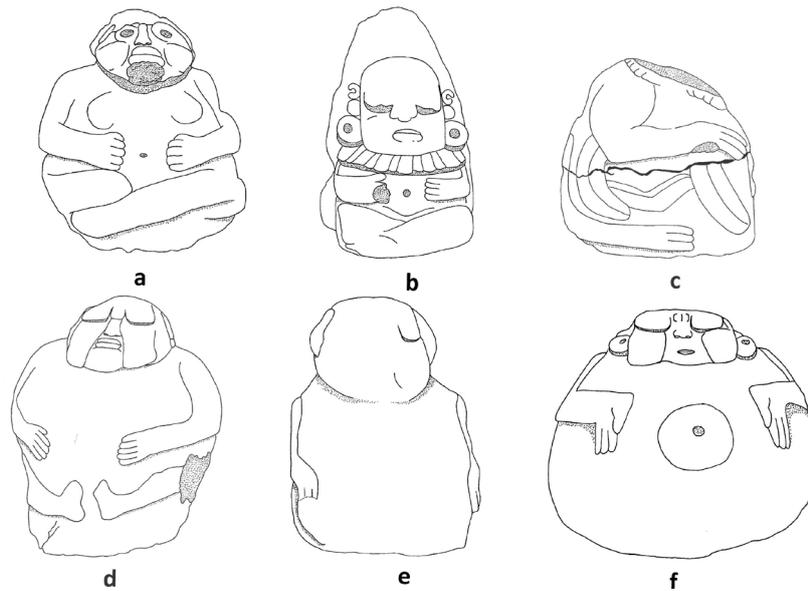


Figure 1: Examples of potbelly sculptures from southeastern Mesoamerica: (a) Teopán potbelly sculpture; (b) Kaminaljuyú Pieza C; (c) Copán potbelly sculpture (PN-46); (d) Monte Alto Monument 4; (e) Tak'alik Ab'aj Monument 109; and (f) Santa Leticia Monument 1 (drawings by the author).

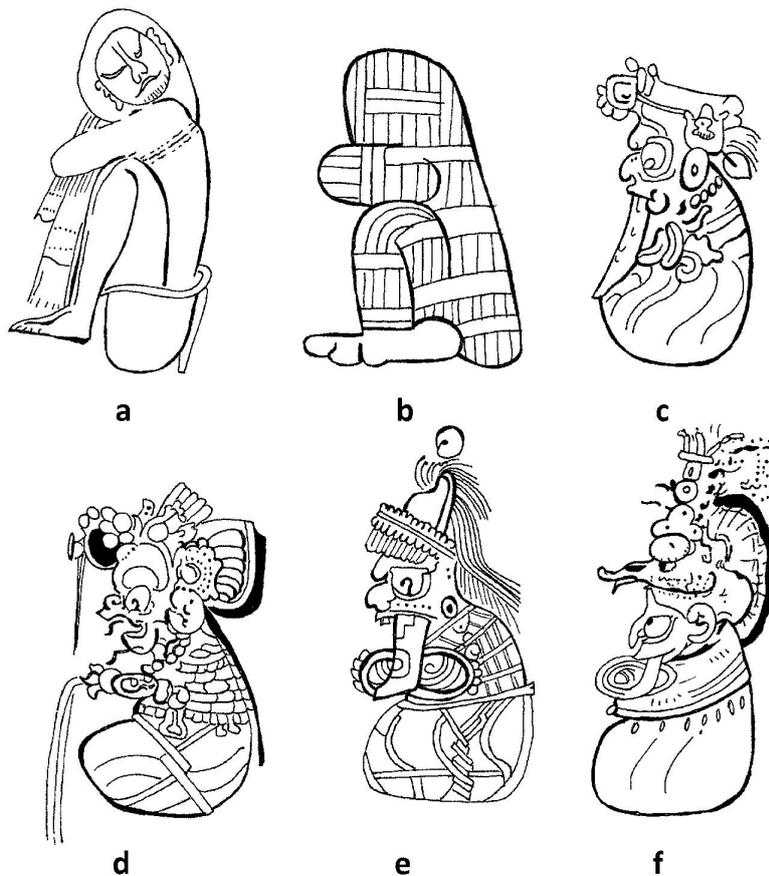


Figure 2: Examples of mortuary bundles in Classic and Postclassic period Maya art: (a) a simple masked bundle from codex-style ceramic vessel Kerr No. K1382; (b) a wrapped burial bundle from page 101 of the *Codex Tro-Cortesianus* (1967); (c) a mortuary bundle with an Itzamna mask from codex-style ceramic vessel Kerr No. K1081; (d) a decorated burial bundle with a Chaahk mask from codex-style ceramic vessel Kerr No. K1081; (e) a decorated funerary bundle with an Itzamna mask from codex-style ceramic vessel Kerr No. K3716; and (f) a decorated mortuary bundle with an Itzamna mask from codex-style ceramic vessel Kerr No. K7838 (drawings by the author).