

# **WEARING CULTURE**

**DRESS AND REGALIA  
IN EARLY MESOAMERICA  
AND CENTRAL AMERICA**

EDITED BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

Perishable remnants of ancient dress and ornamentation are frequently lost in Mesoamerican archaeological assemblages. Taking this reality as a point of departure, numerous authors (Joyce 1998, 2000, 2002; Kellogg 2005; Marcus 1998) have interpreted iconographic depictions of bodily adornment as preserved in such materials as ceramic, stone, and codices to assess social interaction according to categories of gender, age, community or subcommunity affiliations, and social statuses that became increasingly hierarchically differentiated beginning in the Formative period. Our research continues this tradition of iconographic analysis regarding ancient Mesoamerican sociality. We focus on the Late and Terminal Formative period (ca. 450 BCE–250 CE), along with some evidence from Early and Middle Formative deposits (ca. 1900 BCE–450 CE) in coastal Oaxaca, Mexico. One of the basic assumptions of our research is that, while iconographic analysis may bias interpretations toward specific members of a social group, it nonetheless provides glimpses, sometimes our only glimpses, of how people in past societies dressed, adorned themselves, and interacted (see also Blomster, this volume).

Through our analysis of ceramic figurines, carved stone monuments, and burial offerings such as jewelry, we explore evidence for bodily adornment and modification as it related to social interaction in ancient coastal Oaxaca, Mexico. Though many factors of ancient social life may be explored through iconography, we are specifically interested here in the performance and societal constructions of gender as expressed by adornment and modification of actual

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human bodies and in iconographic representation. We argue that variables of social differentiation such as gender were explicitly expressed in patterns of dress and ornamentation in Formative coastal Oaxaca, but not as strict determining factors for dichotomous masculinity and femininity. For example, elaborate hairstyles and pendants occur in identifiably gendered patterns. Earspools, however, transcend these boundaries, suggesting fluidity between constructions of gender. Our identification of patterns in Formative period iconography represents an attempt to infer actual aspects of past social life while considering the important qualification that artistic expression is not always directly representative of real-world practices.

While we do not assume direct correlations between artistic expressions and everyday life, we contend that representations of adornment, as seen on artifacts such as stelae, vessels, and figurines, do bear some relationship to actual styles of dress and bodily modification in the past. This relationship may at times be one of accurate representation and at other times be one of proscription of social ideals. We contend that assuming a degree of realism in depiction, at least as it relates to iconography of clothing, adornment, and body modification, is an appropriate method for inferring elements of social interaction and bodily comportment that might otherwise be impossible to study in ancient Mesoamerican societies. Such interpretation is especially useful for the material culture of Formative period Mesoamerica, which has left us little in the way of written records. We suggest that, in the absence of other lines of evidence, iconography may be cautiously “read” like a “text.”

### THE BODY AND GENDER IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

Marcel Mauss (2007 [1935]:56) considered the body “man’s first and most natural instrument.” Because we agree that the body is the “interface between the individual and society,” we define adornment as an act of inscriptional and embodied performance that represents individuality or group affiliation, shares cultural values, sociopolitical status, age, and connections with the divine in both life and death (Schildkrout 2004). The Mesoamerican body exhibited a variety of cultural meanings through the display of material objects on its canvas. Various authors (Blomster 2009:120–21; Joyce 1998:156, 2000, 2003; Marcus 1998; Wolf 1959:57) have argued that ancient Mesoamericans conceived of the body as a raw material that could be molded in socially meaningful ways by augmentation of hairstyles, clothing, jewelry, and even the permanent alteration of skulls, ears, teeth, and skin. Following Butler (1993), Joyce (1998; this volume) in particular has argued that the human body and its gendered social

identities are not so much determined by biology as they are socially constructed entities forged out of a relatively plastic raw material. Taken with the caveat, suggested by authors such as Geller (2008), that both biology and culturally inscribed meanings shape human bodies and social identities, we may delicately proceed in attempting to reconstruct gendered identities in the past. Gender, however, must be kept conceptually distinct from both biological sex and sexuality in order to study its relationships with past social identity. In addition, researchers must remain cognizant of the dangers of attempting to read every aspect of past social life through a gendered lens, specifically one informed by overzealous adherence to strict dichotomies. As Donna Haraway (1988) suggested, gendered depictions in academic analysis often rely too heavily on binary oppositions between categories of “male” and “female.” Instead, Haraway (1988:581) argued that using *human* vision as an analytic lens could dispel this dialectic and reveal how differential knowledge is embodied within artistic representations of the human form. Therefore, using our “vision” and following authors such as Scott (1989) and Conkey (2001), we define gender as both a social interpretation of perceived biological difference and the performed identities that result. Gender may also shift throughout one’s life on the basis of interacting social variables, including broad modulations in social organization and the age of the individual in question (Joyce 2000:35–37).

Specific elements of dress or ornamentation may have been indicative of different gendered identities in ancient Mesoamerica. Scholars have become increasingly comfortable, however, with the notion that styles of adornment overlapped genders, that androgynous or neutral human forms were sometimes subjects of depiction, and even that gender may have been intentionally left unemphasized in certain circumstances (Blomster 2009; Follensbee, this volume; Joyce 2000). When the body is modified, it becomes both a subject and an agent that can be shaped by cultural forces but that also possesses the potential to subvert social norms (Reischer and Koo 2004). Ornamentation represented on the body, figurines, and stelae has been recorded at Mixtec and Zapotec sites in various regions of Oaxaca, and at Chatino and Mixtec sites on the Pacific coast throughout various time periods. The sites on which we focus here (Figure 5.1) were likely populated by the ancestors of the modern Chatino people, or what some linguists refer to as “Proto-Zapotecan” speakers (Arnaud Bustamante 2003; Barber 2005; Blomster 2004; Brockington 1969, 2001; Fernández Pardo 1993; Hepp 2009; Nicholas Hopkins, personal communication, 2007; Jorrián 1974; Joyce 2010; Marcus 1998; Urcid 1993; Urcid and Joyce 2001; Winter 1992).



FIGURE 5.1. Map of coastal Oaxaca showing most of the sites mentioned in the text.

### FORMATIVE PERIOD COASTAL OAXACA

Between the Middle Formative (ca. 850–450 BCE) and the Postclassic (ca. 900–1521 CE) periods, many Mesoamerican populations transitioned from the village-based sedentism introduced at the beginning of the Early Formative to a more integrated and hierarchical settlement system that included regional and local centers. These settlement transformations coincided with the establishment of a highly developed concept of public ritual space, an increase in monumental construction, more pronounced hierarchical social inequality,

and greater dependency upon maize agriculture (Arnold 2009; Clark 1991, 1994:203–12, 2004; Clark and Blake 1994; Clark and Cheetham 2002; Joyce 2004, 2005; Michaels and Voorhies 1999; Santley and Arnold 1996; Symonds 2000).

Various regions of coastal Oaxaca, Mexico, underwent archaeological reconnaissance and excavation during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, largely under the supervision of the late Donald Brockington of the University of North Carolina (Ball and Brockington 1978; Brockington 1957, 1965, 1969, 2001). After a hiatus during much of the 1970s and 1980s, archaeological attention again turned to coastal Oaxaca, and especially to the lower Río Verde Valley on the western coast (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Goman et al. 2005; Hepp 2009; Joyce 1991a, 1991b, 1994, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2013; Joyce and Mueller 1997; Levine 2011; Levine, Joyce, and Glascock, 2011; Workinger 2002; Zeitlin and Joyce 1999). Since the mid-1980s, this recent phase of investigation has included extensive survey, excavation, and paleoenvironmental reconstruction at numerous sites in the lower Río Verde Valley (Joyce 2005, 2010). This research has allowed for significant strides in reconstructing the cultural history of this circum-coastal region of western Mesoamerica. The pattern emerging from this ongoing investigation is that the lower Río Verde region was likely sparsely populated before the Late Formative period, then underwent significant population increase contemporaneous with major depositional events of fertile topsoil eroded from the Oaxacan highlands and redeposited on the coastal floodplain (Goman et al. 2005, 2013; Joyce and Mueller 1997). Though current research does not assume direct correlations between ancient environmental changes and dynamics of human social interaction, it is increasingly apparent that these largely anthropogenic depositional events, verified through paleoenvironmental analysis including coring in various ancient channels of the Río Verde itself, had significant implications for local communities.

### COLLECTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

To analyze Formative period adornment, we compiled data on 117 discreet artifacts and artifact types from sixteen coastal Oaxacan sites (Figure 5.1). This data set is composed of nine examples of carved stone (including stelae, statuary, and pendants), eighty-seven ceramic figurines (Figures 5.2–5.10), three figurine types, two effigy vessels, stone beads (recovered by the hundreds in burials and in caches), ceramic earspools, shell pendant or sash burial offerings, shell and dog tooth necklaces, an iron ore pectoral mirror, and a single



FIGURE 5.2. *Feminine figurine fragment demonstrating specific attention paid to the head and hair as a probable marker of identity, Terminal Formative Corozo.*

instance of dental modification on human remains. Some of the items in the collection are fragmentary, only hinting at elements of ornamentation, while others display clothing, jewelry, and other accoutrements in meaningful ways. Of the ninety total figurines and figurine types, eighty-six were previously recorded by several researchers at ten sites on the Oaxacan coast, but have not yet been thoroughly described in light of evidence for adornment (Barber 2005; Barber and Hepp 2012; Brockington 2001; Hepp 2009; Hepp and Joyce 2013; Joyce 1991a, 1999; Joyce and Levine 2009). Though most of our sample dates to the Late and Terminal Formative periods, four figurines and one element of jewelry come from the initial Early Formative (ca. 1900–1500 BCE) site of La Consentida, which is currently under investigation and is beginning to provide evidence for the earliest sedentary occupation of the lower Río Verde Valley (Hepp 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Figures 5.3, 5.10).

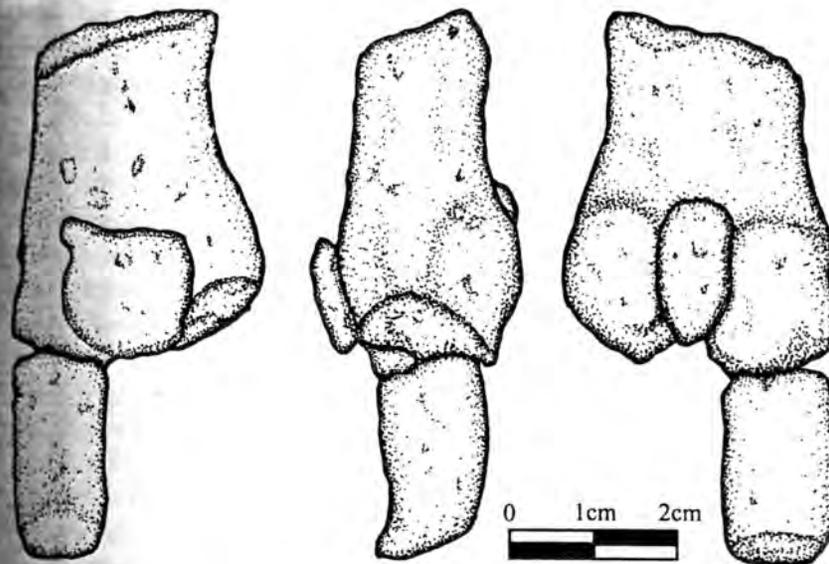


FIGURE 5.3. *Female figurine from Early Formative La Consentida.*

We analyzed three ceramic figurine “types” because early archaeological investigators of the Oaxacan coast (Brockington 1969, 2001; Brockington, Jorrín, and Long 1974; Brockington and Long 1974) frequently recorded small-scale objects such as figurines not in their absolute numbers but instead in typological categories organized according to patterns of common features that fall along dichotomous gendered definitions. Two of these types are described as “often female,” while the other is “often male” in representation (Brockington 2001). Where only heads were preserved, “feminine” and “masculine” are likely more appropriate designations, as direct evidence of biological sex would not be present in such cases. While we acknowledge that these figurine types complicate our analysis, we also believe that to overlook them would unnecessarily impoverish the collection of artifacts studied here. Therefore, we attempted to analyze them in as detailed a way as possible using these predetermined classifications. For the purposes of comparison and some statistical analyses in this chapter, then, we discuss each of these artifact types as if it were a single item, which is the most conservative estimate possible. Unfortunately, most of Brockington’s collections have been lost and exist today only as photographs and written records. If we could establish the actual numbers of artifacts represented by Brockington’s figurine types, it would almost certainly serve only to further emphasize some of

the conclusions we reach here, particularly regarding the predominance of feminine imagery and instances of bodily modification in small-scale inscriptional media. Comparative analyses and measures of statistical significance presented in this chapter may thus be considered conservative estimations.

Because gender is one of our primary concerns in this study, it is worth discussing how we identified it in iconographic representation. We considered articles of clothing, jewelry, or body modification to be “gendered” both when iconographically represented on artifacts with characteristics suggesting biological sex and when interred with human remains sexed through physical-anthropological methods. In some cases, we then extrapolated these patterns of gendered adornment to figurine fragments lacking indications of biological sex (see Figure 5.2). In other cases (see Figure 5.5a), objects were too fragmentary for confident attributions of gender. We differentiate “female” from “feminine” representation, for example, on the basis of the presence or absence of secondary sexual characteristics. Primary sexual characteristics appear to be absent from the iconographic depictions in the collection. Among the sexed or gendered elements in the collection, feminine and female examples dominate the sample with thirty-four instances, compared to twenty for male or masculine-gendered representation, and a few examples of children buried with jewelry but whose sex could not be determined.

We recognize the subjective nature of our categorizations, but suggest that interpreting gender as related to bodily adornment is one of many informative avenues for studying ancient social interaction. We also recognize the significance of not adhering to a Western philosophy of two-gendered and two-sexed dichotomies (see Blomster 2009; Conkey and Gero 1997; Cyphen Guillén 1993; Geller 2008; Joyce 2000, 2002; Marcus 1998; Nanda 1999; Stephen 2002; Tedlock 2005; Whitehead 1981) but conclude that we find no clear indication of genders besides those we recognize as feminine, masculine, and undetermined. We agree with authors such as Nelson (1997:126) and Joyce (2000:35–37) that age and social status likely complicated gendered paradigms to produce multivalent and shifting identity throughout one’s life. In order to explore associations between different adornments and ancient social interaction, we now move to discussions of a few of the specific types of accoutrements we found meaningful in the collection.

## HEAD ADORNMENT

Many elements of iconography from the Formative period emphasized the head and torso of the human body at the expense of limbs, which are often

represented in a simplified fashion (Blomster 2009:136–37; Figure 5.4). Fifty-six elements of the data set showed identifiable ornamentation of the head. Many examples of artifacts with head adornment included either headgear or hairstyles in isolation, or some combination of these elements. Headdresses, which we define as larger, more fan-shaped head accoutrements in contrast to the form-fitting caps or cloth strips we define as headgear, were less common though present on as many as eleven examples in the data set (Figure 5.5a). Hairstyles varied but appeared more carefully depicted on female and feminine artifacts than on male or masculine ones and were often combined with a type of headgear we identify as a strip of cloth tied about the head, perhaps decorated with shells and/or feathers (Figures 5.2, 5.5b).

Analyzing headgear according to sex and gender indicated some intriguing patterns. Feminine examples that bore head adornment were most common, which in part is due to the bias toward female and feminine representation in the collection in general. Feminine artifacts more frequently showed combinations of headgear and hairstyle, while masculine artifacts commonly bore depictions of one element in isolation, such as hairstyle, headgear, or a headdress. The overall sample of headgear is biased toward depictions of feminine characters, and we may thus infer an interest in women’s heads as a location on the body for marking identity by use of adornments.<sup>1</sup>

We find that jewelry varied widely in Formative coastal Oaxaca and was often shared across identifiable sexes and genders. Among seventy-two cases of iconographically depicted or actual jewelry, we identified twenty-eight separate categories. Of those examples, earspools accounted for thirty instances, and this number increases when one includes figurines that likely wore removable jewelry (Figure 5.4). Though raw counts are complicated by ritual caches of hundreds of beads (Workinger 2002:192–94), we estimate that roughly half of the instances of jewelry in Formative coastal Oaxaca incorporated earspools. Although it is difficult to infer from a figurine what sort of jewelry might be represented, the few samples of actual earspools (recovered at the site of Yugüé by Barber [2005] and also at Río Viejo by Joyce [1991a]) indicate that ceramic spools (sometimes called “napkin rings”) were most common (Figures 5.5, 5.6). Several other types of jewelry identified in the collection, including necklaces, ceramic beads, and pendants, were recovered in context with human burials. The earliest example, a single ceramic bead from the site of La Consentida, indicates the use of necklaces incorporating ceramic and possibly perishable beads during the Early Formative period. Other burials from Late and Terminal Formative contexts produced direct evidence of Formative period jewelry. Minizundo and Miniyua phase Late and Terminal Formative burials

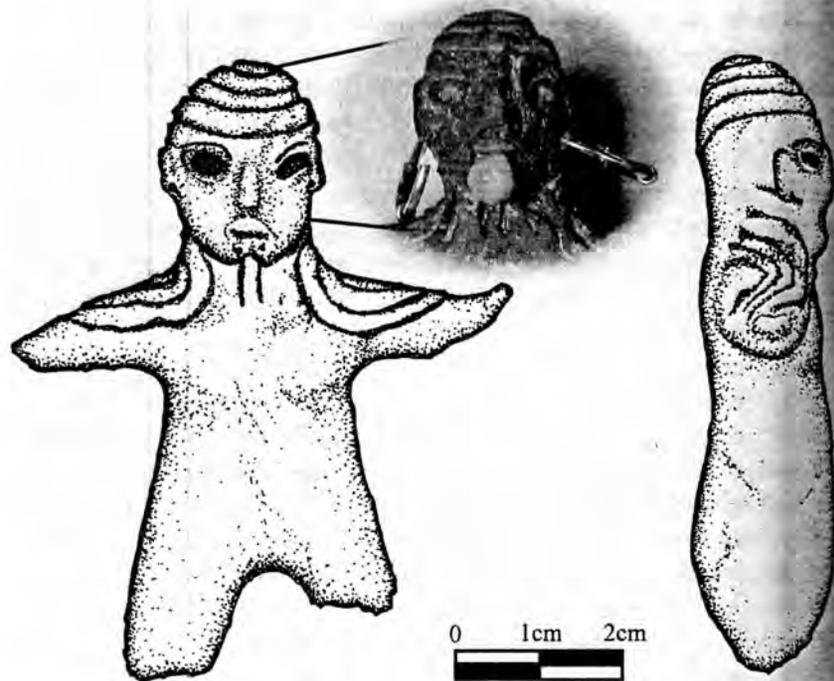


FIGURE 5.4. Figurine capable of wearing removable jewelry, Terminal Formative Yugué.

from Cerro de la Cruz produced several burials from a high-status domestic context that bore jewelry fashioned from faunal remains, such as marine bivalves and canine teeth from dogs (Joyce 1991a:723, 756, 759, 770–71, 781).

Feminine imagery bearing earspools was the most frequent co-occurring type in the analysis, revealing tangible connections between conceptualizations of gender and specific kinds of jewelry during the Formative period (Figure 5.5b). Earspools also occurred on masculine artifacts in different combinations and on some images combining human and animal characteristics (Figure 5.6d). Pendants, unlike necklaces, occurred only on masculine or unidentified figurines, with several adult male burials, or in ritual caches. A shell sash and a mirror were recovered with adult male burials at Cerro de La Cruz and Yugué, respectively (Barber 2005:186–88, 395; Joyce 1991a:756). Mirrors do not appear to have been exclusively masculine and were possibly represented on three feminine or female figurines. We found no evidence of pendants co-occurring with female or feminine representation.

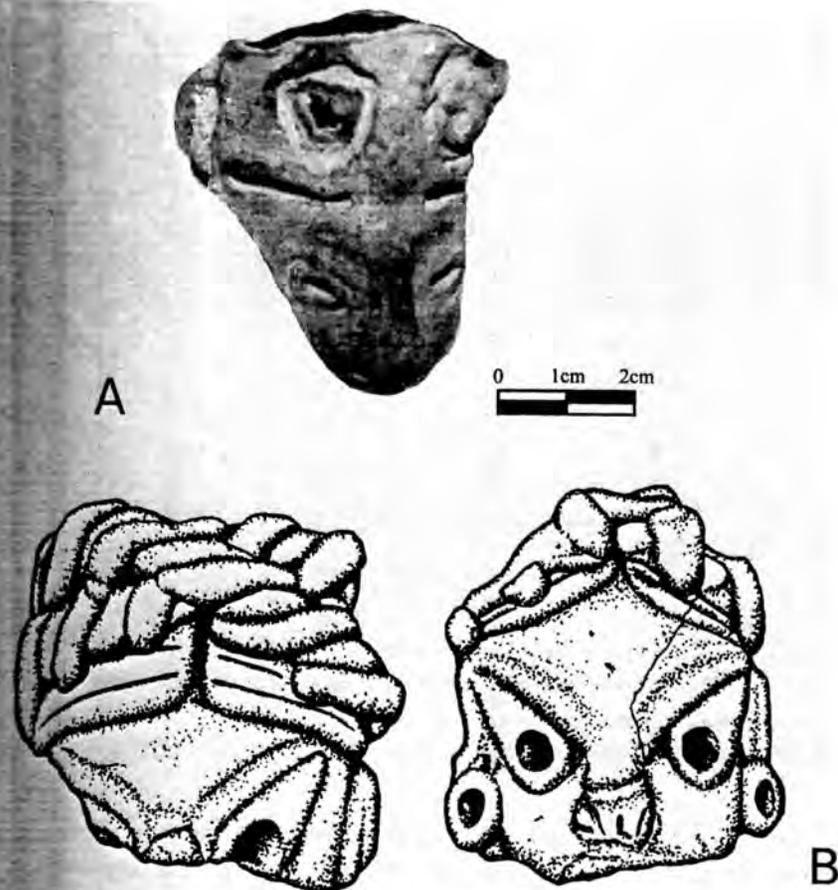


FIGURE 5.5. Figurines with head adornment: (a) headdress from Terminal Formative Yugué; (b) banded headgear over hairstyle from Bajos de Chila (redrawn from Brockington 2001:12)

#### CLOTHING

We differentiate clothing from jewelry in the collection for heuristic purposes rather than as an argument about meaningful indigenous categories. Elements of adornment that we identify as “clothing” tend to be iconographic indications of woven textiles. Several figurine fragments studied for this analysis bore indications of textiles, but could not be specifically identified in terms of sex or gender. Some artifacts, however, bore elements of clothing in what we identify as specific, gendered patterns. These representations of

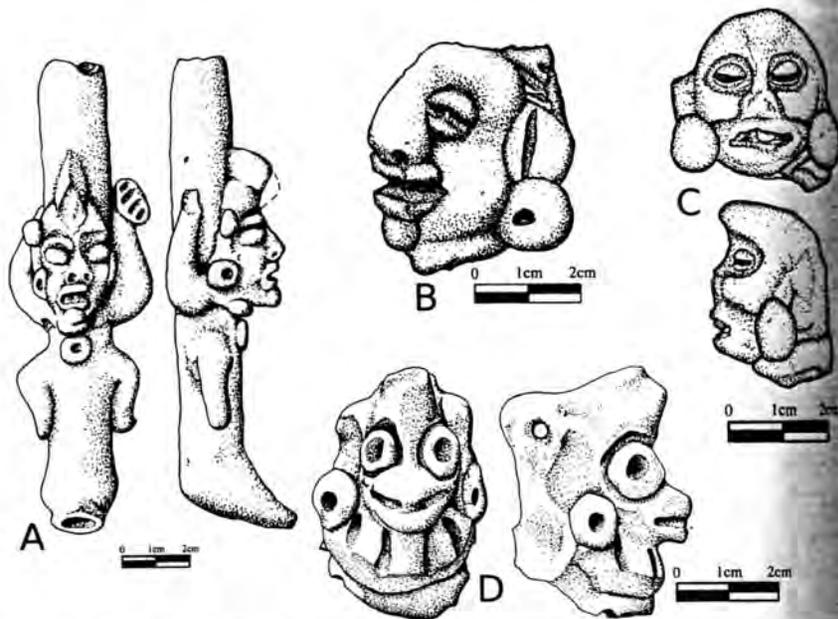


FIGURE 5.6. *Figurines with earspools: (a) anthropomorphic flute from Terminal Formative Cerro de la Virgen; (b) anthropomorphic flute fragment from Terminal Formative Yugué; (c) possible human/animal transformational figure from Terminal Formative Río Viejo; (d) human/animal transformational figurine from Terminal Formative Yugué.*

clothing include a skirt and a triangular garment worn over the upper torso, which is similar in form to those identified in ethnographic contexts as a *quechquemiltl* (Anawalt 1981:841, 844; see Figures 5.7, 5.8). Ethnographic analyses regarding clothing and adornment among modern indigenous peoples of the Americas generally identify skirts, huipiles, and *quechquemiltl*s as feminine dress (Brumfiel 2006; Guzmán Flores 2005; McCafferty and McCafferty 1994; Nájera-Ramírez et al. 2009; Sayer 1988). Although much more recent than the Formative period clothing discussed in this study, these ethnographic examples of gendered adornment provide continuity for our interpretation of some ancient garments as feminine.

Though ceramic *malacates*, or spindle weights, definitely occur in coastal deposits by the Postclassic period, it is likely that smoothed ceramic disks served as weaving implements by the Formative period, though this issue requires more research (Arthur Joyce, personal communication, 2009; Zárate Morán 1995). As more archaeological contexts are excavated in coastal Oaxaca

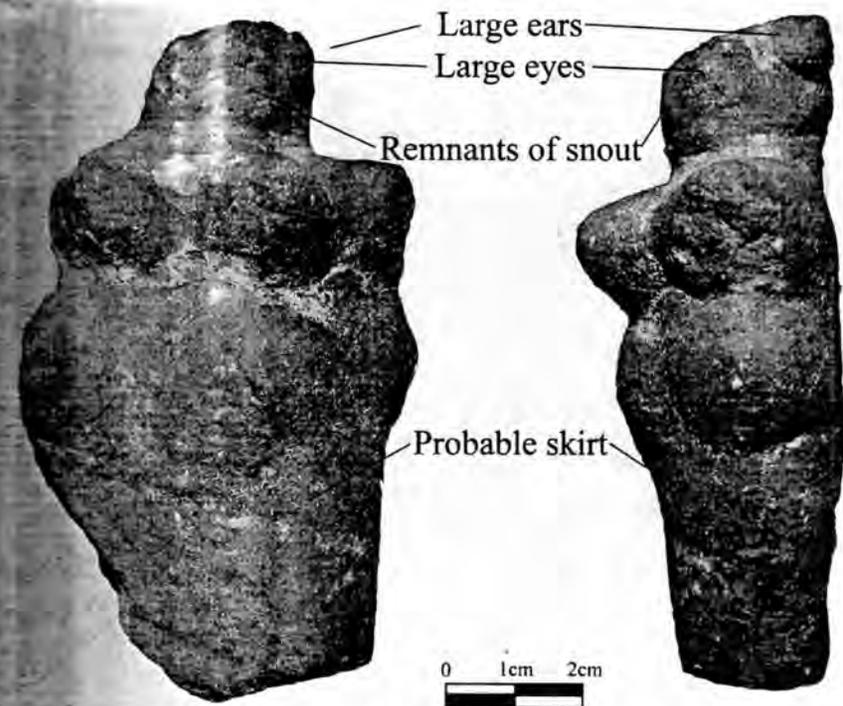


FIGURE 5.7. *Female human/animal transformational figurine with skirt, Late Formative Río Viejo.*

and as our understanding of the development of ancient textile production improves, archaeologists may more successfully employ material culture analyses to understand the way people in the past dressed themselves. One way to undertake such research may be to employ ethnographic analogies, though studies such as ours will need to grow to encompass more diachronic evidence in order to validate the use of many modern and historical inferences.

Clothing elements in the collection were diverse and accounted for twelve different categories when identified both in isolation and in different combinations. When discussed according to inferred categories of sex and gender, clothing demonstrates little in the way of discernible patterns. Though skirts and *quechquemiltl*s may be considered “feminine” while capes and breech cloths are often glossed as masculine based on ethnographic analogy, the low number of artifacts in each category suggests both that further research needs to be done on potentially gendered patterns of dress and that gendered

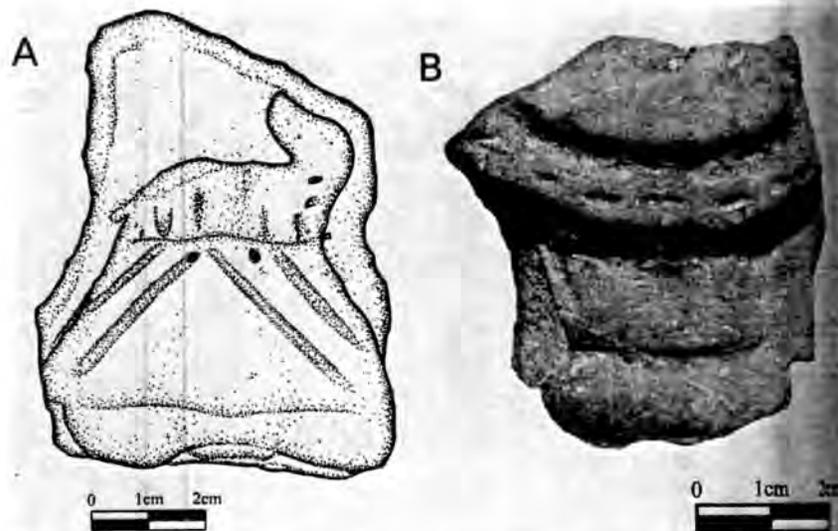


FIGURE 5.8. *Feminine figurines: (a) wearing a woven skirt, from Terminal Formative Cerro de la Virgen; (b) wearing a possible quechquemiltl, from Late Formative Río Viejo.*

overlap in bodily ornamentation was likely typical of Formative coastal Oaxacan society.

### BODY MODIFICATION

One of the most intriguing results of our analysis was the high degree of body modification identified in the coastal Oaxacan sample. In corroboration with our previous discussion of jewelry, ear gauging was our most frequently identified evidence for modification of the body (Figures 5.5b, 5.6). This outcome is likely related to the ease of inferring ear gauging in comparison to other, less well preserved practices of body modification. We differentiate ear gauging from piercing as a process whereby plugs of increasing diameter are placed in pierced ears to expand the size of the hole over time. Plugs or spoils in gauged ears may range from small glass plugs the size of a pencil eraser to huge stone or ceramic disks the size of a canning jar lid. Such gauging may be witnessed today in the boardroom, the classroom, the shopping mall, the Amazonian rain forest, or the African savannah (Turner 2007). In fact, the florescence in recent decades of what is known in North America as the “modern primitive” body modification movement has revived, at least in pastiche,

many of the prehispanic body modification practices found in our collection (Pitts 2003; Rosenblatt 1997). We consider earspools found in caches, figurines with earspools or with holes indicating they once wore removable jewelry, and empty vessels depicting earspools as evidence for piercing and gauging. Other methods of permanent body modification that we identified included dental modification in mortuary remains, nose, lip, and cheek piercing or gauging represented on figurines, potential “buccal deformation,” or reshaping of the mouth on figurines, and several instances of probable tattooing represented on figurine faces and torsos. These forms of body modification seem not to have been restricted by sex or gender, although feminine characters with ear gauging were the most abundant type.

Several authors (e.g., Blomster 2009; Boone 1999; Joyce 1998; Klein 1994) have argued that the literal or figurative decapitation and segmentation of the human body was a common theme throughout ancient Mesoamerica. Adornments to individual parts of the body may emphasize the importance of those corporal elements in the “intercommunicative and active” social activities of the body (Lyon and Barbalet 1994:56). We find that the coastal Oaxacan iconographic collection generally supports these interpretations. Marking the body through tattooing, painting, scarification, or even the wearing of jewelry may have been avenues of individualizing body parts and segmenting the body (see Blomster 2009:136–37). As a permanent form of body modification, tattooing can be seen as a status-affirming or transformational practice that has the potential to indelibly alter the individual’s relationship with the world and with the society in which she or he lives (Rosenblatt 1997). Though differentiating between these practices in iconography is difficult, tattooing is our preferred interpretation in several cases due to the decorative motifs depicted.

Figure 5.9 demonstrates the segmentation of the body by probable tattooing using a variety of patterns separated by solid lines. Such a design would perhaps be less successfully executed by scarification, which is often practiced among ethnographically studied populations by the raising of patterns of bumps on the surface of the skin with a hook or nail (Bohannon 1956:120). Incisions and lines can also be made by use of a sharp implement such as an obsidian blade. Bohannon (1956:118) recorded ethnographic accounts in which different methods of marking the body were used either in conjunction or at different stages of life to produce designs with varying degrees of permanence and visibility. The practice of scarification can be the result of concerted artistic expression and/or of religious acts intended to create connections with the divine through physical pain or marking of the body, as in the case of the

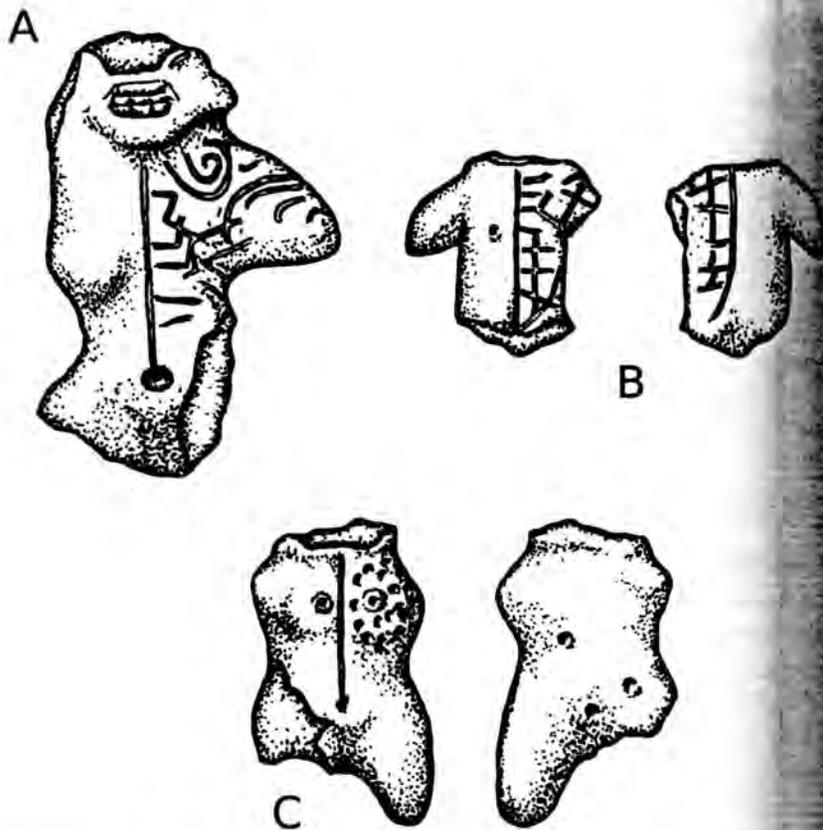


FIGURE 5.9. *Body segmentation: (a) probable tattooing, La Guayavera; (b) probable tattooing, Lagartero; (c) Probable tattooing/scarification, Lagartero (redrawn from Brockington 2001:21).*

ethnographically observed Lakota (Dakota) Sun Dance (Deloria 2009). One figurine in the collection we discuss here, recorded by Brockington (2000a) at the site of Lagartero, may represent the combination of both tattooing and scarification to achieve a specific design (Figure 5.9c). Regarding body painting as a potential confounding factor for tattooing, we suspect that such temporary decoration might be better depicted on a figurine by ephemeral means such as painting (in agreement with likely removable clothes and jewelry worn by some of the artifacts we analyzed) rather than by permanent incisions into the artifact's surface (Marcus 2009:45).

## THE NUDE HUMAN BODY

One way to put Formative period iconography of bodily adornment into perspective is to discuss what is *not* represented in this data set, namely depictions of the human body in the absence of decoration or augmentation by means of clothing or jewelry. Just as some ancient Mesoamerican artifacts appear to have worn removable jewelry (Figure 5.4), many may also have worn removable clothing (Marcus 2009:45). In the absence of direct evidence for this practice, however, one must infer patterns of depiction as precisely as possible with the materials at hand. In addition, the depiction of specific body parts such as belly buttons under areas that might have borne perishable cloth coverings reminds us that some bodies may be intentionally represented as nude. Also, because many elements of iconography studied here bear representations of clothing directly molded, carved, or applied, it appears that clothing was often a permanent rather than temporary element of depiction (Jeffrey Blomster, personal communication, 2010). With these important caveats about perishable clothing in mind, it seems safe to argue that the human body, both clothed and nude, was an important part of the symbolic lexicon of Formative Mesoamerica. Imagery of nude or barely clothed human bodies seems to have been particularly prevalent in earlier periods on the Oaxacan coast. At Early Formative period La Consentida, for instance, several figurines representing both adorned and unadorned human females were found near a group of human burials (Hepp 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Figure 5.10). Though a few of the La Consentida figurines show bodies dressed in what might be called a loincloth (Figure 5.3), imagery of mostly nude female human bodies suggests that a central focus of Early Formative coastal concepts of the body revolved around female identity formation, or what might be termed feminine social roles.

Figurines depicting feminine and female imagery have been found in diverse contexts across early Mesoamerica and have, through decades of research, raised the question: why do the female figurines consistently outnumber the male figurines (Drennan 1976; Lesure 2011:2, 32–33, 76–79, 155; Wolf 1959)? Some researchers (Joyce 2000; Lesure 2011:155; Marcus 1998:3) have suggested that this demographic imbalance indicates an environment of gendered activity in ancient Mesoamerica. Women likely made most Formative period Mesoamerican figurines, according to this argument, and figurines (in addition to their other uses, such as in children's games) were central to rituals carried out in private, domestic contexts. These domestic feminine rituals counterbalanced practices in the public arena of masculine ritual and symbolic discourse. Others (e.g., Cyphers Guillén 1993; Tedlock 2005) have proposed



FIGURE 5.10. Nude female figurines from Early Formative La Consentida.

a related argument in which women practicing midwifery or didactic ritual (intended to instruct audiences in proper progression through life history rites of passage) may have produced a material record biased toward female and feminine representation. Though we agree that the above interpretation should be included among the diverse canon of probable Formative period figurine uses, we are uncomfortable with both the public/private and masculine/feminine dichotomies such interpretations presuppose (see Blomster 2009:140).

Both highland and coastal Oaxacan archaeological contexts have demonstrated that figurines were ubiquitous in early Mesoamerican sites and thus not restricted to the “hidden” context of the domestic sphere (Blomster 2009:124; Drennan 1976; Hepp 2009). It therefore appears that, to the extent figurines were a domestic and potentially often feminine ritual item, the domestic sphere was patently public because it tied households together and produced a relatively consistent, rather than idiosyncratic, pattern of iconographic depiction and use for human imagery as exemplified by ceramic figurines. We also strongly suspect that it was not altogether uncommon for men to participate in activities involving figurines and other iconography of the

body. It is not known exactly why female and feminine figurines outnumber male and masculine examples in Formative period deposits, but it is increasingly apparent that figurines and other early iconography of the human body were part of a set of overlapping practices that likely included domestic ritual, ancestor remembrance, performative (even *public*) ritual, mimetic cooption of symbolic power, religious symbolism, life history commemoration, and perhaps children’s games. Figurines may also have been material symbols forming a commentary on social constructions of gender, age, and kinship (Blomster 2009; Follensbee 2009; Hepp 2009; Hepp and Joyce 2013; Joyce 2010:183, 2000; Lesure 2011:152–55; Marcus 1998; Winter 2002:69, 74).

## CONCLUSION

Some authors (e.g., McCafferty et al. 1994:149) have argued that jewelry, at least as depicted in Postclassic codices, was not a good indicator of gender. Other researchers (e.g., Joyce 2000:30, 2002:82–83; Marcus 1998) have suggested that lip plugs, loin cloths, and elaborate hairdos depicted on Mesoamerican figurines may indicate some gendered patterns of adornment. Carballo (2009) argued that ornaments such as earspools, in addition to marking status, might have identified kinship, gender, and age. Other authors (Grove and Gillespie 2002; Plunket and Uruñuela 2002) have noted that head adornment may distinguish lineage founders in anthropomorphic figurines. In general, we conclude that overlap in adornment styles (such as ear gauging among both women and men) in the coastal Oaxacan Formative period collection precludes facile assessments of gender, though some patterns do exist. Stone pendants worn by men, an interest in feminine head adornment, and a bias toward feminine representation in general serve as examples. In addition, Rosemary Joyce’s (1998) discussion of the compartmentalized Mesoamerican body is supported by our analysis, at least as it relates to the delineated figurine torsos suggestive of tattooing, scarification, or body painting (Figure 5.9).

The composite approach we have adopted in this study, which has included the analysis of numerous types of artifacts, iconography, and mortuary data, permits the discussion of traditions of bodily adornment and modification as related to gender in Formative coastal Oaxaca. Another interpretation our results suggest relates to the social status of individuals depicted in Formative period iconography and perhaps the status of those who used artifacts such as figurines. Because decorative elements generally indicative of high status, including mirrors and headdresses (see Ashmore 2004:184–85; Blomster 2004:85, 186; Clark 1994:126; Heyden 1991:195; Saunders 2001), were present

in numerous media in the sample, it appears that the production and consumption of anthropomorphic iconography was a communal affair marked by permeable boundaries between domestic and public spheres, social class, and gendered identities. We thus suggest that figurine use (and perhaps activities related to the other elements of iconography studied in this chapter) in Formative period coastal Oaxaca took place across the spectrum of status differentiation. This contradicts some models in which figurines have been viewed as predominantly private, domestic, feminine, and even *commoner* artifacts in contradistinction to the public, elite, and largely masculine nature of large-scale objects such as carved stone stelae (Joyce 2000; Marcus 1998, 2009; Taube and Taube 2009). In general, though some figurines representing nobility may have occurred in commoner households, the ubiquitous contexts of figurine recovery in Mesoamerican archaeological sites contradict an argument of status restriction regarding figurine use (Blomster 2009:123; Drenth 1976; Hepp 2009; Jorrín 1974).

In future research we hope to expand our inquiries to encompass evidence for coastal Oaxacan adornment in both earlier and later time periods. Such research would be informative for several reasons. First, archaeological remains from the Early Classic Coyuche and Late Classic Yuta Tiyoo phases have produced evidence from burials frequently containing more elements of adornment than those from the Formative (Christensen 1999:488; Joyce 2010a:246; Joyce et al. 1998). The comparison of such Classic period burials with those from the Formative period may help to promote understanding of the ways in which traditions of dress and adornment changed through time. Such comparisons may also suggest ways in which historical traditions were upheld despite broader social changes (Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2005, 2010a:243). Second, Classic period stelae from coastal sites such as Río Viejo, Río Grande, and Nopala bear depictions of dress and adornment in a manner that promotes interpretation of full costumes rather than elements in isolation (Arnaud Bustamante 2003; Jorrín 1974; Urcid 1993; Urcid and Joyce 2004). Though a few of the Formative period artifacts bore similar sets of related adornment, having more such costumes at our interpretive disposal may illuminate patterns we have not identified thus far. Finally, expanding the collection to include evidence of Classic and Postclassic dress and ornamentation may permit more sound ethnographic inference regarding change and continuity in cultural practices than is possible with discussions of the Formative period alone (see Bartolomé and Barabas 1996). Such a temporal expansion of observations about Oaxacan dress would better allow us to explore the ways in which points of historical tension might have led to the active selection of

traditional or novel adornment practices as representative of identity, belief, and degrees of acquiescence or resistance by individuals or groups to atmospheres of cultural change. The data set from which we have developed our preliminary arguments is small but will grow as more investigation is undertaken in coastal Oaxaca. We feel that continuing to compile information on ancient dress, bodily modification, and adornment is a worthwhile goal of study.

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#### NOTE

1. The sample of anthropomorphic iconography bearing headgear is biased toward feminine representation: 62 percent of female and feminine images bear headgear, while 55 percent of masculine examples do so.

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