

SMITHSONIAN MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTIONS

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LA VENTA

(WITH 6 PLATES)

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Bureau of American Ethnology,  
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(PUBLICATION 3897)

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# SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE CERAMIC COMPLEX OF LA VENTA

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(WITH SIX PLATES)

The investigations of the National Geographic Society-Smithsonian Institution expeditions at La Venta, Tabasco, yielded a quantity of valuable data on an important Meso-American culture which has come to be called "Olmec." This designation, with its shadowy ethnic connotations, is perhaps not the happiest one that could have been selected, but still it is better than the term "La Venta" suggested for the culture at the conference on the Olmec problem at Tuxtla Gutiérrez in 1942, for the site name should more properly be restricted to the particular component or horizon of Olmec culture represented there.

By way of background, the excavations at La Venta were not random explorations, but rather were part of a definite program mapped out by Dr. M. W. Stirling for an attack on the problem of Meso-American culture growth from the peripheries of Maya territory. After the first season's work at Tres Zapotes, Stirling recognized that he was dealing with a culture, which, though it had Mayan linkages, was not simply a pallid marginal derivative, but had some distinctiveness of its own. Among the more impressive discoveries he made was that of a carved date that appeared to refer to Baktun 7. Stirling also was struck by the stylistic similarities between the monumental stone art—particularly the colossal heads—and the mysterious "baby-face" or "Olmec" figurines of jade and of clay which had not at that time been associated with an archeologically known horizon. He reoriented his plan of research to allow for a more intensive study of this new culture of southern Veracruz state. Excavations at Tres Zapotes were continued into a second season, and on the basis of stratigraphic materials I was subsequently able to outline a local ceramic column which substantiated Stirling's conclusions as to the probable contemporaneity of the early date which he had based on a study of the stone monuments in that it revealed an early mono-

chrome horizon which showed sufficient specific typological resemblances—not just vague similarities—to wares from archaic Mayan levels at far-away Uaxactun to warrant assigning it an approximately contemporary dating. Following conformably on this early horizon were two succeeding ones, Middle, and Upper Tres Zapotes. In the course of reconnaissance in the region, Stirling visited La Venta, where he found numerous monuments stylistically akin to those of Tres Zapotes,<sup>1</sup> and he judged the site to be an important one.

The work at Cerro de las Mesas in 1941 proved to bear only indirectly on the Olmec question, for we soon realized that neither in ceramics nor in any other important respect was that site like Tres Zapotes. It proved to represent an intrusive Highland culture, genetically related throughout its history to that of the Mixteca-Puebla area. This meant that the western or northwestern boundary of Olmec territory must have been between Cerro de las Mesas and Tres Zapotes, though the two sites are less than 50 miles apart, airline. The following year Stirling sent me to La Venta to obtain stratigraphic samples of the ceramics and to test the ceremonial structures. In 1943 Stirling and Wedel carried out extensive excavations of the ceremonial complexes, and subsequently, the former extended his reconnaissances of the region to the point of being able to define with considerable exactness the geographical extent of Olmecan culture. Since I was otherwise occupied, the La Venta pottery complexes gathered dust in Washington, and only recently has it been possible to study them. The complete report on the work at La Venta may be delayed for a time, so it seems well to summarize the results of the ceramic study.

La Venta is situated on a small islandlike structure of solid ground surrounded by swamps, a short distance northeast of the junction of the Tonalá and Blasillo Rivers. It lies some little distance inland, but so low is the general terrain that the low Gulf tides flood and ebb in the rivers and sloughs around the island. The habitable area is relatively small, and certainly would not have supported the manpower that must have been utilized to handle the stone monuments and build the massive structures—it seems more probable that the site was a ceremonial center with a small permanent population of priests, or priest-rulers, and their personal servants and perhaps artisans, supported by tribute from neighboring villages located on similar elevated areas among the swamps, from which, as well, the laborers were recruited for major constructional endeavors. If this

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<sup>1</sup> Stirling, M. W., Stone monuments of southern Mexico. *Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull.* 138, 1943.

surmise is true, it indicates considerable centralization of authority and an elaborate organization. A series of 40 test pits was dug to locate the areas of continuous occupation. Thick beds of culture-bearing deposit were found to be few and small, although in many places extensive thin caps of deposit occur. On the basis of the evidence supplied by the test pits, three stratitrenches were put down. One, stratitrench 2, ran into sterile soil a few inches down—a recheck of the nearby deep test pit showed that a little gully or pocket had been filled with refuse, but the areal extent of deep deposit was negligible. The other two trenches had respectably thick layers of sherd-bearing refuse, 4 and 5 feet each, and between them yielded a total of a little over 24,000 pottery fragments.

From the esthetic point of view, La Venta ceramics are disappointing. One would scarcely anticipate finding so drab a lot of wares among the remains of the makers of the great sculptured monuments and the carved jades. Of course, part of this drabness derives from the poor preservation of the sherds, heavily eroded and leached by soil acids; now and again a better-preserved fragment shows a lustrous surface that suggests that the general effect of the pottery may have been more pleasing. Similarly, rare but well-executed bits of modeled ornaments, and occasional examples of graceful vessel forms (pl. 2) demonstrate that the manufacture of artistic wares was not beyond the makers' capacity. It would seem that the people of La Venta had but slight interest in ceramics as a field for artistic expression, not enough to lead them to elaborate the painting of their vessels, or to carve or incise anything but the simplest of designs on them. Painted decoration is extremely infrequent in our samples, and incised ornament, though a little more common, most often consists of a few circumferential lines about the rim or lip of a pot. A number of decorative techniques were known: in addition to modeling and pre-firing incising, heavy pre-firing grooving, punctation, and rocker stamping (pl. 1, *c-e*) occur in the local ware, but were utilized so infrequently that they scarcely show in the percentage tables. The high priest who conceived a monumental theme and chalked the guide lines on a huge block of basalt, and the master artisan who translated the guides into delicately modeled planes, both would seem to have been indifferent as to the appearance of the everyday vessels from which they ate and drank. Even the pieces which must have served ceremonial ends, to judge by the fact that they were placed in the cists in the Ceremonial Enclosure, were of the same rudely made types as the pots in daily use in the occupation areas.

On the basis of thickness of deposit, a most inexact criterion but



one which is probably safe enough in a rough and ready way, we may judge the La Venta occupation to have been of moderate length. The two stratitrenches appear on the basis of ware distributions and trends to have been not contemporary but successive: the deposits of stratitrench 1, with an average depth of about 4 feet, succeed those of stratitrench 3, which had a thickness of about 5 feet, with little if any overlap. Ceramically speaking, there is no major break between the two deposits, indicating that they represent a continuum. Nine feet of culture-bearing deposit, in a tropical zone where so much of the organic refuse is destroyed or washed away completely, is really a fair amount. Fortunately, we are not completely dependent on rough guesses as to deposition rates for a chronological placing of the materials, for typologically they may be related to those of other sites at which ceramic columns have been established, particularly the Tres Zapotes sequence.

This is not the place for a detailed account of La Venta wares, but their general characteristics may be summarized briefly. While painted decoration occurs in simple, not to say crude, patterns, in red or black on one or another of the common slips, it is so infrequent that we may call the pottery essentially monochrome. Several of the major wares are very like certain Tres Zapotes monochrome wares, heavy-walled, not too well fired, with abundant coarse aplastic (which appears to be stream sand with a high proportion of quartz particles), and with about the same range of slip colors within the "brown" and "black" groups. White and red over-all slips occur in small quantities. As at Tres Zapotes, there was in use a firing method which produced dishes and bowls with dark gray and black bodies and nearly white or grayish rims. However it was done, at La Venta it was not so standardized as at the former site, but was practiced with a variety of different pastes. Even more like Tres Zapotes, there occurs an important group of vessels made from a very finely divided paste with no visible aplastic, which fired in some cases from orange to buff in color, and in others, to black and gray.

This is the same kind of pottery which I designated the "Polychrome Group of Wares" in the description of Tres Zapotes ceramics, because they became the chief vehicle for the polychrome decoration of the Upper Tres Zapotes period. However, it cannot be demonstrated that they bore painted decoration throughout their history, and I now prefer to call them Fine Paste wares and differentiate between their monochrome and painted varieties. The history of development of the Fine Paste wares will be of considerable import when completely worked out—I believe them to be ancestral



to the well-known Fine Orange which is such an important time marker through most of central and southern Mexico. At La Venta Fine Paste wares occur in small but gradually increasing amounts in the stratitrench 3 deposit, and achieve a high numerical frequency in stratitrench 1. One important La Venta ware, Coarse Buff, which occurs throughout the combined deposits, did not appear at Tres Zapotes, nor can I relate it to any other described ceramic type.

Vessel forms, expectably enough, show numerous points of comparison with dominant Tres Zapotes types. Flat-bottomed low bowls, or dishes, with flaring sides, and rims which run through a series of variants from a simple direct to flaring to everted, are common in all wares (pl. 2, *b*), and "composite silhouette" bowls, with walls that lean in from an angular break, then recurve strongly to a flaring rim, likewise occur though they are never abundant. With these latter, as at Tres Zapotes, is associated a double, elongate **S** design. Both necked and neckless jars occur, the latter being one of the most frequent of all forms. As for modifications, both solid lugs and loop handles occur, though never in particular abundance. Feet and legs are noteworthy by their absence. There is only one example of a foot in the La Venta collections, and it may be an imported piece. Annular bases, on the other hand, are fairly common (pl. 2, *g*). It will be recalled that at Tres Zapotes heavy annular bases occurred also, although in addition various types of feet and legs, mostly of tripod vessels, were found. The over-all La Venta ceramic pattern is, in short, close to that of Tres Zapotes, and specifically to that of the Middle period.

Clay figurines from La Venta belong in the archaistic tradition of handmade, usually solid, figures, with features indicated by incising or applique or both (pls. 3-6). No mold-made specimens were found. Typologically, nearly all the La Venta pieces fit into the pattern represented by Middle Tres Zapotes, in which the rigidly standardized forms of the Lower period were manipulated and modified into a series of variants, owing in part, perhaps, to certain alien influences, but also to processes of local development and elaboration. At La Venta, some of the self-same types occur as in Middle Tres Zapotes, along with some variant types, the ultimate kinship of which with Lower Tres Zapotes is clear.

For cross-dating purposes, the La Venta figurines are most significant: they point to a very definite time correlation with Middle Tres Zapotes. This, it should be emphasized, is the same dating that the general picture of the ceramics suggests. One factor only suggests a modification: the high frequency of Fine Paste sherds in

stratitrench 1. At Tres Zapotes, these wares, often adorned with painted decorations, attain high frequencies only in the Upper period, at which time a series of alien elements such as mold-made figurines, Teotihuacan-type tripod bowls, "candeleros" and the like suddenly make their appearance on the scene. Since all these latter traits are unknown from La Venta, it seems most logical to assume that the zone of development of the Fine Paste ceramics must have been in or near the La Venta region, and that they, or at least the increased emphasis on them, diffused from there in a westerly direction, that is, to Tres Zapotes, affecting the latter site at the same time as a series of new influences, presumably from the Highland, made themselves felt. The absence of the whole series of Highland elements at La Venta may be attributed to a slight time lag in diffusion, or to local conservatism—perhaps to both. I suggest that chronologically the La Venta occupation likely overlapped the Upper Tres Zapotes period slightly, or to put it another way, that the Middle Tres Zapotes-La Venta period persisted a little longer at La Venta. This slight extension in time need not modify to any great degree the rough equation of this period with the Tzakol of the Petén.

The fact that the ceramic inventories of the Middle Tres Zapotes-La Venta horizon reveals respectably long lists of differences as well as numerous similarities seems to me to be significant. It indicates that the two centers represent well-rooted local manifestations which, though descended from a common ancestral pattern, and though influencing each other throughout their history, nonetheless were sufficiently well established to have developed local specialties to which they clung. I trust it will not be considered unfair to mention that field inspection of sherds from San Lorenzo Tenoxtitlan, between the first two sites, likewise suggests that local specialization had been at work, resulting in another series of related but variant ceramic elements. Had Olmec culture, as we know it, been the result of a rapid but short-lived diffusion, we should find far more uniformity in its component elements.

The foregoing La Venta-Tres Zapotes comparisons have linked the two and have suggested an ancient and firm establishment of Olmec culture in the zone in which these sites are situated. The next step, logically, is to define the areal extent of the culture. In point of fact, our two key sites lie near the boundaries of the civilization they represent. Attempts have been made to delimit the Olmec area on the basis of the distribution of finds of Olmec figurines, particularly those of jade, but objects so portable are less trustworthy markers of the culture than such things as stone monuments in the

characteristic art style, ceramic complexes, and patterns of mound construction. On the basis of these last-named criteria, Olmec culture at its greatest continuous expanse never crossed the lower Papaloapan on the west nor ranged much beyond the Tonalá-Blasillo drainage to the east. Our excavations at Cerro de las Mesas demonstrated that, although a few unmistakably Olmec pieces occurred, particularly among the jade specimens, and certain features suggested a certain kinship with an ancient widespread ceramic pattern which likewise appears to underlie the Olmec pottery complexes, the bulk of Cerro de las Mesas culture—pottery figurines, jade-carving, and stelae—represent transplantations of Highland patterns. A glance at a topographic map of the region shows readily why there are more fundamental points of difference between the cultural inventories of Cerro de las Mesas and Tres Zapotes than between the latter site and La Venta which is more than twice as far away. The lower reaches of the Río San Juan, the Papaloapan, the string of lakes connected by the Río Limón and the Río Cacique, and the innumerable small streams and sloughs emptying into the lower Bay of Alvarado, form a hopelessly uninhabitable morass of swamps which prohibited a westward extension of Olmec culture. While some commerce may have been carried on through the tortuous network of channels that crisscross this no-man's land, intimate contact of the sort that leads to diffusion of entire complexes seems to have been made impossible by this geographic barrier.

Similarly, the swamps of Tabasco restricted any eastward spread. La Venta, on one of the islands near the borders of the swamps, is the easternmost of the major ceremonial centers of the Olmec. The site of San Miguel, a short distance up the Blasillo, was presumably an occupation center tributary to the ritual focus. The southern margin of Olmec territory is more difficult to define precisely but it seems to correspond with the edge of the coastal plain, never extending into the foothills flanking the rugged highlands. La Ceiba, on the Río de las Playas, has been determined by Stirling's investigations to represent an overflow of the Chiapas highland, or "Upper Grijalva" complex, down into the lowland. The only point at which an approximate boundary cannot be set as yet is along the pass across the Isthmus. Perhaps there were Olmec outposts, or even secondary centers, clear across to the Pacific side. The occurrence of reliefs carved in purest Olmec style as far south as San Isidro Piedra Parada in Guatemala suggests strongly that such may have been the case.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, J. Eric S., Stone sculptures from southeastern Quetzaltenango. Carnegie Inst., Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 1, pp. 100-112, fig. a, pp. 104, 111, 1943.

Well up in the Highlands of central Mexico, in the state of Morelos, is the site of Chalcingo, where a series of bas-reliefs on the cliff face present pronounced Olmec characteristics.<sup>3</sup> This, if it proves to be in all respects an Olmec site, is the only one yet known situated definitely in the Highland area. To account for a colony so far detached from its native territory would require far more information than we yet possess. However, the presence of such an outpost might well explain the source of the well-known "baby-face" figurines in the Valley of Mexico Middle Culture. Possibly the site, if it was Olmec, had to do with some trade route, such as those linking the southern Veracruz homeland with Oaxaca and Guerrero.<sup>4</sup>

To summarize: The heart of the Olmec region lay in the coastal lowlands along the Gulf, in the region flanking the Tuxtla Mountains. There were cultural connections, and possibly colonies, to the southward across the Isthmus of Tehuán-tepec, and there may have been a few scattered outposts in the Highlands to the west, but the culture definitely centered in the narrow strip between the Papaloapan and the Tonalá-Blasillo.

The Middle Tres Zapotes-La Venta horizon, in which the art of sculpture reached its zenith, was also the period signalized by marked cultural isolation. That is, the forces producing the artistic climax came wholly from within the culture, and were not the results of external stimuli. Earlier, on the Lower Tres Zapotes level, and possibly even during a hypothetical developmental period in which the unique art style began to take form, there seem to have been lines of influence, particularly to the eastward, along which flowed traits and patterns such as the ceramic styles linking Lower Tres Zapotes with early Petén levels. However, there is no proof that the ancient Olmec only received elements of culture without contributing. On the contrary, there is a strong possibility that a number of complexes, such as the Jaguar Monster cult, had their origin among the Olmec, and spread eastward to the Maya and westward to the early Zapotec.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. figure in lower right, p. 171, in Covarrubias, M., *El Arte "Olmeca" o de La Venta. Cuadernos Americanos, Año V, Julio-Agosto*, pp. 153-179, 1946.

<sup>4</sup> Olmec jades seem to be not uncommon in Guerrero, so that parts of that state have been considered by some writers Olmec territory. Although the region is not well known archeologically, there are, however, no indications that any other remains unmistakably Olmec in type occur there, and it seems more likely that the jades were carried there in trade—perhaps in exchange for unworked jade. Our data are at present too few to settle the question conclusively, of course.

<sup>5</sup> Stirling has outlined a possible line of development of "Jaguar Mask panels" in his paper "An Initial Series Date from Tres Zapotes, Veracruz, Mexico,"

In other words, the Olmec area constituted a dynamic focus of culture from earliest times, until about A.D. 1000, when it mysteriously dwindled away.

The significance of this picture lies in its flat contradiction of the classic appraisal of Meso-American civilization in terms of a single Mayan fountainhead of culture in which were evolved all the higher attainments of the area, and from which in diminishing intensity these complexes were diffused to backward neighbors whose rudeness was directly correlated with their remoteness from the "Mayan focus." The history of the Olmec indicates instead that the culture growth of the area is more likely to have been the result of interchanges between a number of local centers or foci, in each of which inventions, or elaborations of imported traits, were developed in accordance with local standards and then diffused or rediffused to neighboring provinces.

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National Geographic series in Mexican Archeology, No. 1, 1940, which has been amplified and extended to include Monte Albán masks by Covarrubias in his recent contribution, "El Arte 'Olmeca' ó de La Venta," 1946.

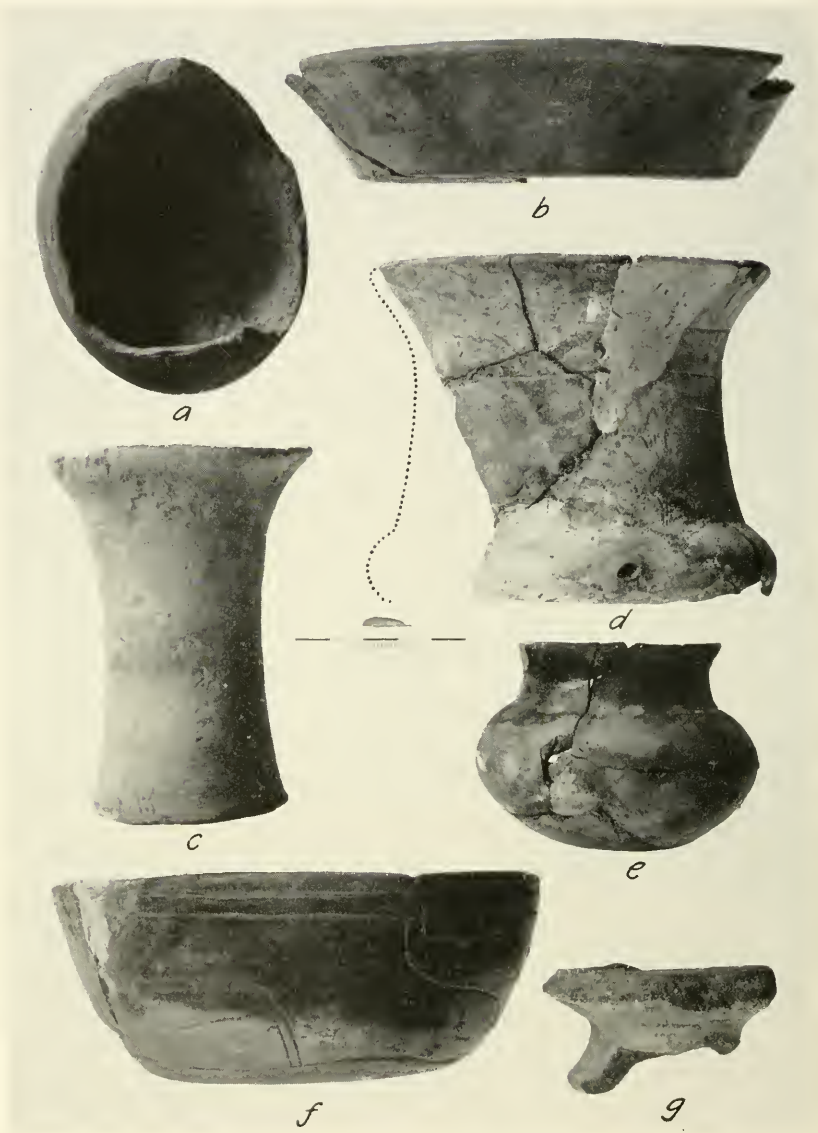






VARIOUS LA VENTA CERAMIC PRODUCTS

*a* and *b* are unusual figurines: *a*, a startled small boy, *b*, a monkey skull apparently served up on a plate; *c*, *d*, and *e*, coarse buff sherds with rocker stamping and pre-firing incised lines; *f*, brown lacquer jar (approximately 35 cm. high).



## VARIOUS LA VENTA VESSEL FORMS

*a*, an elliptical black ware dish; *b*, an example of a very common dish; *c*, the neck of a bottle-like vessel; *g*, an annular support of a small dish or bowl of coarse buff ware.



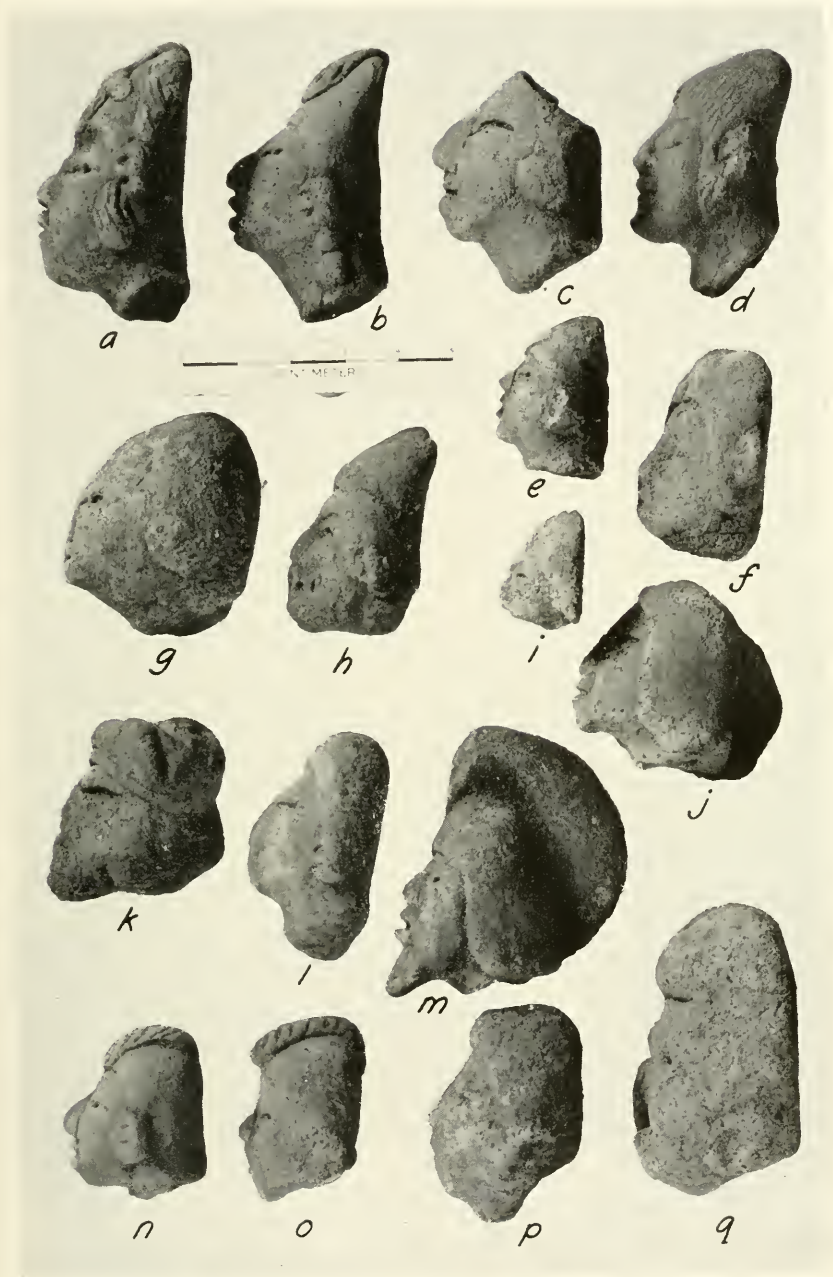
FIGURINES SHOWING CLOSE RELATIONSHIP TO MIDDLE TRES  
ZAPOTES MODIFICATIONS OF EARLY TYPES



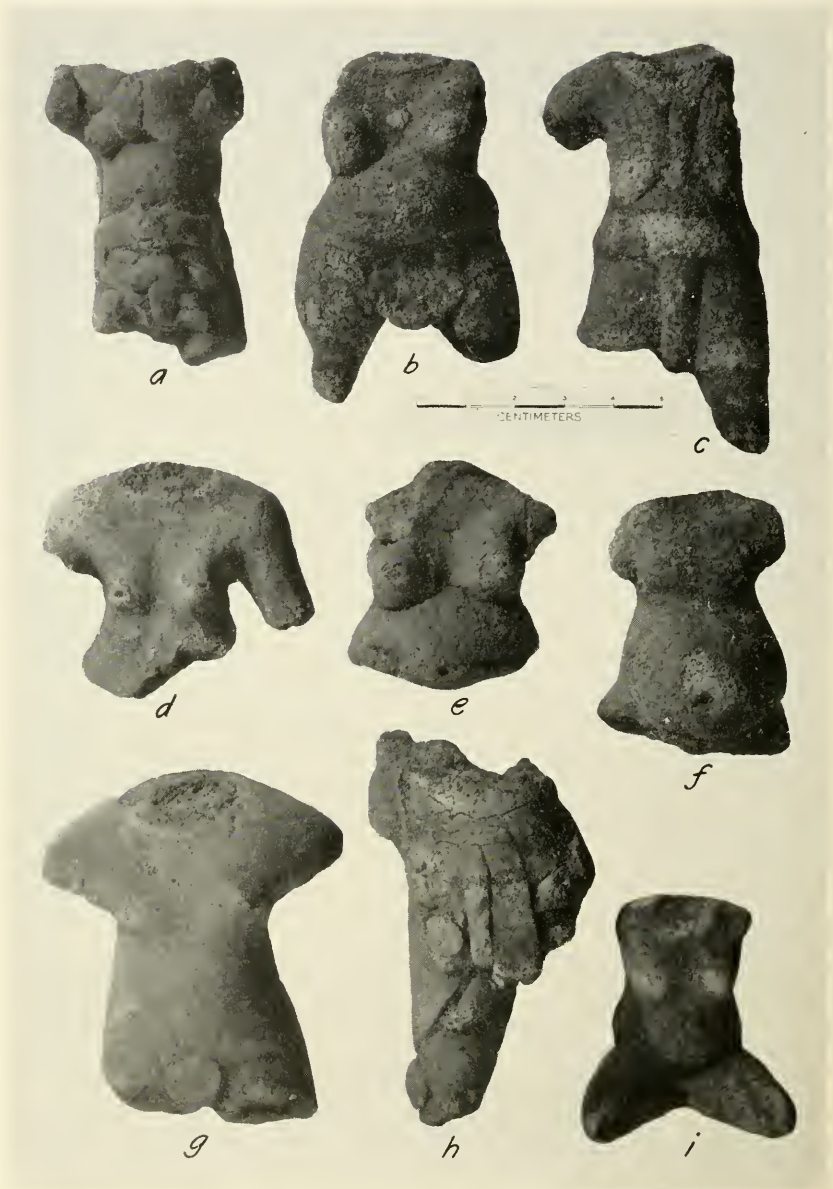
LA VENTA FIGURINE TYPES SHOWING VARIATION OF EARLY PATTERNS

The derivation of these from Lower Tres Zapotes prototypes is apparent.





PROFILES OF FIGURINES SHOWN IN PLATE 4



FIGURINE BODIES FROM LA VENTA

Note the jaguar monster design on the belt of the specimen in the upper left.