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NATURALISM AND SUPERNATURALISM IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA: AN
ANALYSIS OF OLMEC ICONOGRAPHY

By

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Naturalism and Supernaturalism in Ancient Mesoamerica:
An Analysis of Olmec Iconography

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Olmec iconography was a product of close observation of the natural world as well as shamanic trance visions. The Olmec transmitted their knowledge of the natural world in their naturalistic imagery and their knowledge of shamanism in depictions of precise ecstatic trance postures and supernatural composite imagery. Inherent to both artistic traditions is an understanding of the transformative processes of both the natural world and of the shamanic visionary experience. Additionally, the Olmec used their carving technique to inform and educate their intended viewers about the performance of transformative shamanic practice.
INTRODUCTION

The Olmec (1400 – 400 B.C.E.) are considered the first great civilization of Mesoamerica and were unique among ancient civilizations in having developed in what Carolyn Tate (2012) called a “primordial sea,¹” on the humid swampy Gulf Coast of Mexico. They also developed in complete isolation from the rest of the known world. ² Known primarily for their multi-ton basalt colossal heads and the anthropomorphic ‘were-jaguar,’ Olmec iconography has been extensively studied and yet continues to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. This thesis reviews the archaeological, anthropological, and art historical research on the Olmec and attempts to understand the true meaning of their enigmatic iconography. The paper will focus primarily on three well known objects that represent much of the Olmec œuvre: La Venta Throne 4 (Figure 1), the so-called Kunz Axe (Figure 2) and the Kneeling Transformation Figure in the Dumbarton Oaks collection (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Olmec, Throne 4 La Venta, 1200 B.C.E., basalt, Tabasco, Mexico.
Olmec art functions as a visual expression of the “relationship between humans and the supernatural world,” claims Tate. This iconography is at once naturalistic and abstract, real and surreal. The extant visual culture of the Olmec is likely only a small fraction of what once existed as the humid, tropical climate and acidic soil conditions of the Mexican Gulf Coast destroyed any objects made with perishable materials such as wood, bone, rubber, or clay. As a pre-literate culture, the Olmec are mute on the subject of where they derived their imagery, leaving scholars to speculate. There are many possible sources for Olmec imagery and this paper will focus on shamanic practice as a primary source, extrapolating from what is known of contemporary Mesoamerican shamanic practice. The validity of extrapolating from contemporary behavior in order to analyze prehistoric behavior is supported by anthropological evidence that religious rituals are generally stable and long-lasting. Mayan culture, for example, is considered to have “remarkable tenacity and resilience,” and is possibly descended from the Olmec.

Figure 2. Olmec, Kunz Axe, 800 B.C.E., jade, American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York.

Figure 3. Olmec, Kneeling Transformation Figure, 900 – 300 B.C.E., serpentine, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.
The shamanic nature of ancient Mesoamerican culture has been recognized by twentieth-century scholars and was extensively explored by anthropologist Peter Furst in the 1960s. In recent decades, however, there has been an effort to bring a more "empirically based" interpretation to Olmec iconography. For example, researchers such as Roberto Gonzalo and George Milton (1974) have noted the similarities between some Olmec "hollow baby" figures to children with Down’s syndrome. Augustín Delgado (1965) has noted the similarity between Olmec figures and adult dwarfism, while Carson N. Murdy (1981) has investigated the similarity between Olmec infant figures and the conditions caused by neural tube defect (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Olmec, Dwarf Statuette, 900 – 300 B.C., talc, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.
It is important to consider both the visual content of ordinary reality as well as the visual content of the non-ordinary or transcendent reality. In addition, recent research has revealed striking similarities between Olmec iconography and the human fetus. While all of these comparisons appear to have validity, it is also the case that another type of empirically-based imagery is possible. Since empirical knowledge is derived from experience, it would be wrong to dismiss four millennia of shamanic experience when interpreting this imagery. The Olmec conveyed their understanding of the empirical experience of shamanism through their use of low-relief carving techniques, visually representing the fact that this type of experience takes place on a different plane of reality.

According to art historian Rebecca Stone-Miller (2004), shamanism is a “spiritual stance and a set of practices based on flux.”  

Shamanic practice is flexible, dynamic, and effective and the “advantage it offers for human adaptation to stressful situations have helped shamanism preserve for millennia.”  

Stone-Miller points out that the shamanic practice can be “terrifying and distressful,” and is only undertaken as “a solemn duty to help solve the problems of the human condition.”  

The role of the shaman is considered vital to the survival of the community because the shaman performs healing rituals for the sick and injured as well as rituals to aid in hunting and crop production. Due to their importance in the community the training of future shamanic practitioners is paramount.

In addition to providing imagery based on shamanic visionary experience, the importance of shamanic practice can inform our understanding of the purpose for these objects. Indeed, while much has been written about the interpretation of Olmec iconography, less has been said about the ultimate purpose of these funerary objects.
Why did the Olmec go to great lengths to create objects of meaning? In addition to the belief that Olmec imagery was based both on shamanic, visionary and empirical knowledge as well as on observable, naturally-occurring phenomena, it also appears that the Olmec were documenting their empirical knowledge of shamanism and transmitting it to both their contemporaries, their descendants, and perhaps forces in the afterlife and/or underworld and their carving techniques were integral to this process.

Among the earliest scholars of Olmec iconography, anthropologist Peter Furst relied on shamanism as the basis of his interpretations of the seemingly transforming image of the human and feline. A review of much of the literature about the Olmec from the last fifty years makes it clear that this iconography was not the result of any single factor, but rather a product of multiple influences with shamanism primary among them. The Olmec, like other Mesoamerican cultures both ancient and contemporary, were a shamanic culture. Shamanic practice was intrinsic to their way of life, to their world view, and to the imagery they produced. Further, the Olmec were also naturalists, and accurately depicted the human fetus, the human heart, and possibly the conditions of dwarfism, Down’s syndrome and neural tube defect. It seems clear now that the Olmec drew both from the imagery available in everyday reality as well as imagery from the mind of the shamanic practitioner to create their visual culture. They were both naturalists and super-naturalists, depicting the natural world of the human fetus and the jaguar as well as the supernatural world of shamanic visions. This unique blend of imagery resulted in their visionary iconography. In addition to the imagery itself, the Olmec developed certain sculptural conventions and used their varied carving techniques to create the iconography in order to inform and educate the intended viewers. Olmec
naturally was depicted using three-dimensional carving techniques such as carving in the round or deep relief, while Olmec super-naturalism was depicted using two-dimensional techniques such as cave painting and somewhat two-dimensional techniques such as incising and low-relief carving.

The terms ‘shaman,’ ‘shamanism,’ and ‘shamanic practitioner’ are used advisedly in this paper, with the full understanding of the vagueness and potential for misunderstanding which is inherent in their uses. In their paper calling on scholars to cease using these terms when interpreting pre-Columbian artwork, \(^{13}\)Cecelia F. Klein, Eulogio Guzmán, Elisa C. Mandell, and Maya Stanfield-Mazzi (2002) pointed out several ways in which they believe references to shamanism are demeaning and belittling of ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. These writers correctly point out that the labeling of figures on ancient Mesoamerican artwork as ‘shamans’ or ‘shaman kings’ is too vague and serves to put them in the category of ‘other,’ when juxtaposed with the dignity and majesty historically afforded European monarchs. In reality, the roles played by leaders in ancient Mesoamerican civilizations were analogous to roles played by their counterparts in other parts of the world: they were indeed complex leaders in complex hierarchical societies governing complex polities. There is no bias intended in references to Olmec figures as shamanic practitioners and there is a thorough understanding of the high regard ancient Mesoamericans likely had for them.

In the decade since this paper was published, no other term has emerged to replace ‘shamanism’ among Mesoamericanists and this admittedly vague and unscientific term is still in use. It should also be noted that this is far from the only academic term that suffers from vagueness. Semanticists have discussed the issue of vagueness in language
and while it may not apply to all “linguistic expressions and concepts,” it is nonetheless, “extremely widespread.” Vagueness when discussing enigmatic iconography produced by a preliterate ancient culture such as the Olmec is to be expected. If this iconography originated at least in part during altered states of consciousness, as proponents of shamanic interpretations believe, then the Olmec were necessarily alluding to the very complex and abstract nature of consciousness itself. Antony points out that consciousness is an either/or proposition, a person is either conscious or s/he is not and the conscious person can attain different degrees of consciousness analogous to dialing “a rheostat.” Olmec iconography appears to reference abstract and somewhat vague ideas about consciousness without the benefit of written language and they carved that information on a shallow plane to as a signifier of these abstract concepts. Ultimately this is a problem of semantics and instead of trying to replace a term with no good substitute, there needs to be more emphasis on adequately defining it and ameliorating its vagueness. It appears that some scholars unnecessarily view the term ‘shamanism’ as a pejorative when, in fact, it can be viewed as neutral.

There is ample evidence that the Olmec were sophisticated people and that they fully understood that shamanism takes place primarily in the mind of the practitioner. In fact, their knowledge of the different levels of consciousness and the power of the human mind may well have exceeded our own, and their ability to communicate such an abstract concepts without the benefit of written language appears unique among pre-literate and pre-historic cultures. Further, shamanic practice among contemporary Mesoamericans has been systematically demonized and marginalized by practitioners of western medicine, giving the term more pejorative connotations than it may otherwise have had.
It is important to recognize that in spite of the attacks against contemporary shamanic practice by those who potentially stand to gain from its disuse, it is still popular, and according to Frank J. Lipp (2001), is practiced by an estimated 20 million Mexicans. Some scholars have argued that the prohibitions against shamanic practice may have helped spread European disease epidemics. Although Mexican shamanism has been dismissed by Western medicine as the product of a “lonely, socially marginalized person who believes he can transform himself into an animal,” there is evidence that the shaman is accorded the same respect by rural Mexican communities that medical doctors enjoy in the United States. Contemporary shamanism is practiced in the Olmec regions of the Gulf Coast and Central Mexico and has “ancient roots in pre-Columbian cultures.” Mesoamerican shamans also lead pilgrimages to “cave shrines in the sacred mountains” which they consider to be their “mythic locus.” It seems logical, based on the known stability of rituals in general that the rituals and mythology of contemporary Mexican tribes, who may be descendants of the Olmec, are analogous to or perhaps derivative of Olmec belief systems.

It is also interesting to note that in these contemporary belief systems there is no one spirit animal but, a constellation of animals and that each individual is assigned his or her own. The highly stylized zoomorphic or anthropomorphic Olmec iconography which has been the subject of so much interpretation and re-interpretation may be deliberately ambiguous. Just as a contemporary Mexican shaman may call upon different spirit animals to help different individuals, the Olmec shamanic practitioner may have done the same. The ambiguous morphology of the Olmec imagery may simply be read as a universal spirit animal – it may not be species-specific because the imagery was intended
to document different ritual acts in the same location. Olmec spirit animal iconography may have depicted one universal animal or several different animals, but these images all have in common that they are deliberately depicted in either two-dimensional cave paintings or in shallow, somewhat two-dimensional low-relief carving. Further, although the actual animal may differ for different individuals, the ritual performed by the shaman is essentially the same. 22

Klein et. al. complain that the term shamanism is unscientific and they specifically target art historians and scholars of religion for what they perceive as overuse. This complaint may have merit but it may also be beside the point. The intent of this paper is to analyze imagery and it is important not to discount decades of research into the phenomenon of shamanic visionary experience when interpreting ancient, biologically impossible imagery. When art historians discuss the work of surrealist painters such as Georgio de Chirico, Marcel Duchamp, or René Magritte, the validity of the dream imagery that some of this work is based on is not called into question. Most people accept that it is possible to “see” imagery in dreams which does not exist in ordinary reality. Indeed, according to Richard Noll (1985) “the ability to experience mental imagery in some form appears to be an innate capacity in human beings.” 23 Noll goes further and argues that “phenomenological data about mental imagery in traditional, non-literate societies” demonstrate that such societies developed the ability to actually cultivate mental imagery, including the ability to deliberately enhance the “vividness and controlledness” of the imagery. 24 The Olmec were one such ‘non-literate society’ and ingeniously developed carving techniques to communicate information about this phenomenon which is necessarily abstract and intangible. The technology does not yet
exist that would scientifically verify the existence of shamanic visionary phenomenon and until it does it is necessary to rely on the decades of research by anthropologists, ethnographers, and art historians which appear to confirm Mircea Eliade’s (1964) view that there is a “substratum of primitive … beliefs and techniques” which has influenced the production of imagery throughout the ancient world. The term ‘shamanism’ is not used here because of its vagueness, as suggested in the article by Klein et al, but in spite of it.

OLMEC HISTORY

The primary cultural centers of the Gulf Coast Olmec, referred to as the Olmec heartland, were La Venta, San Lorenzo and Tres Zapotes (Figure 5). The ‘Olmec style’ however, was transmitted to other areas of Mesoamerica and has also been found throughout Eastern and Central Mexico as well as Belize and Guatemala. This paper refers to works from these major Gulf Coast centers as well as paintings and relief carvings from the Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca caves near Guerrero, Mexico as well as Chalcatzingo cave near Morelos, Mexico.

![Figure 5. Map of Olmec Heartland.](image-url)
The study of Olmec iconography began with the late nineteenth century discovery of the first colossal head on a farm in Veracruz, Mexico. Subsequent discoveries began with the expeditions of archaeologist Matthew Stirling in the 1930s and continued through the twentieth century, eventually yielding dozens of multi-ton basalt monuments. Seventeen colossal heads have been discovered to date, along with seven multi-ton thrones, numerous stelae, columns and other large carvings – ninety of which were found at La Venta alone. In addition to the large monuments and the cave paintings, scores of smaller greenstone and serpentine objects have been discovered, some in caches of grave goods found during archaeological excavations and others of less certain provenance.

Some scholars question the use of the generic term ‘Olmec’ being applied to the production of artifacts spread over a thousand year time frame (1400 to 400 B.C.E.), in a topologically diverse area of hundreds of thousands of square miles by peoples from multiple, distinct language groups. Despite the controversy of using one term to describe a large and diverse population, there is a remarkable consistency that gives cohesiveness to Olmec imagery. In addition to colossal heads, the Olmec are known for anthropomorphic figures of infants carved in greenstone and serpentine as well as large basalt thrones that feature carved niches with emerging or crouching figures.

There is also disagreement among scholars about whether these artifacts represent the product of one “mother culture” which transmitted a codified system of symbolic representation throughout the region or whether they are the product of several contemporaneous “sister cultures.” 26 A review of the current literature of the Olmec reveals that there were multiple groups living in the Gulf Coast region during the thousand year span of Olmec civilization, and that these different groups developed trade
and cultural relationships with each other and cooperated in the building of monumental artworks. Although they developed separately from other ancient civilizations, the Olmec did not rise from a vacuum and were themselves part of thousands of years of pre-historic cultural development in Central America which included the cultivation of maize and the development of pottery.

At the time of European discovery Mesoamerica was characterized by “an astounding variety of regional traditions and ethnicities” and “more than 200 languages were spoken in Mesoamerica when Cortes landed on its shores in 1519.” The term Olmec is used generically, in reference to the artistic output of what was likely a linguistically and ethically diverse collection of settlements in and around large cultural centers spread throughout the Gulf Coast region. While these groups may not have shared a spoken language, it appears that they shared a ritualized, shamanistic belief system and a codified and conventionalized visual and artistic language for the expression of those shared beliefs. The degree to which the Olmec codified their artistic output into a visual language reflects the degree to which they established a cohesive belief system with agreed upon ideas about their origins and destiny.

Scholars have long been intrigued by Olmec iconography which features a ‘baby-faced’ personae with a ‘down-turned mouth,’ round, multi-ton basalt heads, large, carved stone thrones with narrative scenes depicting imagery of posed figures, ropes, caves, infants, and incised or low-relief depictions of supernatural anthropomorphic or monstrous faces. Iconographers have yet to reach a consensus on how best to interpret Olmec imagery. In general, interpretations have been imaginative and usually include a human/animal hybrid creature with human and feline characteristics.
One early Olmec scholar, Mexican artist and collector Miguel Covarrubias, coined the term “were-jaguar” to describe the iconic image often seen on two-dimensional cave paintings and on numerous small, low-relief carvings which he interpreted as part human and part jaguar (Figures 6 & 7). If this is a true man/jaguar composite it is most unlike other composite images from the ancient world in that it more closely resembles a transforming image. There are no easily identified features that are distinctly human or feline as are seen in other composite images such as the Asian dragon, the Egyptian sphinx or the centaur from ancient Greece.

Figure 6. *Panthera onca* (Jaguar) from www.reidparkzoo.org.

Figure 7. Olmec, *La Venta Jaguar Celt*, 1000 B.C. E., greenstone, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Mexico.

The were-jaguar concept was later embellished by Matthew Stirling when he proposed that monument 3 from Potrero Nuevo (Figure 8) depicted sexual intercourse between a male jaguar and a female human, resulting in the mythical birth of a human/jaguar hybrid. This fragmentary monument is difficult to interpret and is a weak image on
which to postulate a theory. As Whitney Davis (1978) and others have pointed out, the image does not show genitals and is “primarily nonsexual and perhaps aggressive.” Davis compares monument 3 from Potrero Nuevo to the relief carvings of Chalcatzingo. Chalcatzingo relief IV (Figure 9) also depicts an aggressive non-sexual scene between jaguars and humans and although it is difficult to say what is taking place between the figures, they are “definitely not copulating” according to Davis. Stirling’s interpretation of this aggressive but non-sexual imagery is no longer considered valid but the term “were-jaguar” is still in use. It is interesting to note that both the Potrero Nuevo monument and the Chalcatzingo carvings are more three-dimensional than Olmec depictions of supernaturals and they appear to represent biologically possible beings (jaguars and humans) in what may be shamanic visionary scenes.

Figure 8. Olmec, Drawing of Monument 3 Potrero Nuevo, Anonymous from Pre-Columbian Art: Investigations and Insights by Hildegard Delgado Pang, Potrero Nuevo, Veracruz, Mexico.
As noted above, some scholars have written compellingly that the Olmec were depicting physically deformed humans. Roberto Gonzalo and George Milton (1974) suggested that the Olmec baby figurines resemble children with Down’s syndrome, while Carson N. Murdy suggested that the Olmec down turned mouth and other facial features of the were-jaguar are actually depictions of children born with neural tube defects such as encephalitis. Still other researchers such as Agustín Delgado postulate that the Olmec were depicting human dwarfism as one of their main iconographic subjects. One recent study by Carolyn E. Tate made a compelling argument that the Olmec were-jaguar image is actually an anatomically accurate depiction of a human fetus. (Figures 10 and 11) It seems likely that the highly stylized and abstract were-
jaguar or jaguar baby iconography is a combination of several different influences both from the natural world of jaguars and fetuses and from the alternate consciousness of shamanic visions and supernaturals. These diverse influences became codified into an abstract and symbolic transformative creature which was incised on portable as well as highly valued power objects and which represented the abstract idea of altered consciousness and mental visions.

Another unusual feature of Olmec iconography is the preponderance of figures of ambiguous gender, females, some of which are gestating, and infants. The emphasis on gender ambiguity, gestation and infancy, relative to that seen in other ancient civilizations, suggests to Tate that the Olmec had “understandings of biological processes” and suggests a focus on the “mysterious process of gestation and birth” and is considered to be “empirically based biology.” The ambiguously gendered figures alongside the colossal disembodied heads, for which the Olmec are primarily known, suggests a de-emphasis on the body and an emphasis on the head. The single most significant thing about any particular body is the gender and when that is obscured it
indicates that the body is less important. The anthropomorphic figure lacks not only genitalia but also legs, feet and other major body parts. Olmec figures with ambiguous genders often have intriguing and unusual poses (Figures 12 and 13). If the Olmec were primarily transmitting cultural information through their artwork to a diverse and widespread population, it may simply be that gender was an irrelevant distraction. In the case of fully human but ambiguously gendered figures displaying deliberate postures, detailing the gender of the figure would distract from the message. Additionally, since the practice of shamanism was typically gender neutral in Mesoamerica, displaying gender may transmit inaccurate information, giving the intended viewer the idea that a particular posture is gender specific. Although a discussion of the colossal heads is beyond the scope of this paper, they are consistent with a culture that emphasizes the primacy of the mind and depicts the body as a mere tool which must be posed correctly in order to reach the desired mental state during shamanic transformation. These deliberately posed and ambiguously gendered figures are represented three-dimensionally using either deep relief or sculpting in the round as a signifier that the Olmec were depicted real humans who existed in our ordinary three-dimensional reality.

Figure 12. Olmec, *Hollow Figure*, 900-300 B.C.E., ceramic, The Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado

Figure 13. Olmec, *Seated Figure*, 900 – 300 B.C.E., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York
LA VENTA THRONE 4

Sixty years after the first colossal head was discovered, researchers looking for Mayan artifacts in the Gulf Coast region unearthed several more colossal heads, along with other large stone monuments in what turned out to be the Olmec cultural center of La Venta. In all, four colossal heads and four thrones (formerly known as “altars”) were found at La Venta. All the thrones depict cave-like niches, containing seated or crouching figures, one of whom holds an infant.

La Venta was the most important and advanced civilization in ancient Mesoamerica from about 900 B.C.E. until about 500 B.C.E. It was a cultural center situated near a “complex network of rivers, streams and elevated ridges” which provided transportation routes as well as abundant food supplies. Richard Diehl (2004) calls it a “regal ritual city where ritual and ideology dominated the lives of inhabitants.” F. Kent Reilly III (1998) argues that La Venta was the location of ritual involving creation mythology. The site has north and south entrances as well as dozens of mounds and basalt sculptures. The mounds may have been the foundations of houses belonging to local farmers and craftsmen. La Venta’s architectural complexes have been the subject of much speculation about their possible ceremonial uses. Many of the sculptures at La Venta were found badly eroded or were deliberately mutilated in ancient times.

The Olmec were practical and ingenious as evidenced by the fact that La Venta was an engineered landscape which included drainage systems and aqueducts. They had access to abundant, high quality protein from their aquatic environment, and were able to engineer solutions to the seasonal flooding that was part of life on the Gulf Coast. In addition to being an engineered landscape, La Venta was a “ritual landscape” as well as a
“ceremonial center.” Extrapolating from knowledge of later Mayan belief systems, there is a consensus that La Venta represents a monumental cosmic tableau possibly depicting a widely held Mesoamerican creation myth. According to Lars Fogelin (2007), religion is “a particularly stable and long lasting cultural phenomenon” and “if religion is a relatively stable phenomenon and ritual is the enactment of religious principles, then rituals must also be relatively stable over time.” It is precisely this long lasting stability of Mesoamerican shamanic ritual that informs our understanding of Olmec material culture. Additionally, our understanding of the purpose of ritual can inform our analysis of Olmec monuments. In the case of the North American Klamath and Modoc tribes, Fogelin observes that ritually recited histories are employed to preserve and impart vital “survival strategies so that younger generations can employ them when famine strikes.” In order to make sure the information is not “corrupted through repeated retelling,” the tribes developed precise and elaborate ritual mechanisms through which the stories are told. Much of Olmec material culture can be interpreted as a function of this same impulse - to preserve the integrity of vital information about the practice of shamanism through a means which cannot be corrupted. The Olmec went beyond ritual and preserved their shamanic information by carving it in stone and their carving conventions were a vital part of this process.

Man-made pyramids divide La Venta into two sections with one end devoted to public rituals, possibly involving fertility and creation, and the other end devoted to a more private mortuary complex and royal court. There are multiple interpretations about the types of rituals that were performed at La Venta and exactly how each monument may have functioned in the Olmec cosmic scheme, but most scholars agree that affirming the
status and supernatural powers of the rulers was a primary concern. Based on knowledge of later Mesoamerican societies, archaeologist Richard Diehl suggests that the Olmec rules were “considered living participants in the eternal universe.”

At 33 metric tons, Throne 4 (Figures 14 and 15) is the largest of the La Venta thrones and was discovered in a grouping of three monumental thrones. Lacking metal tools of any kind, ancient artisans used stone hammers to carve this monument in both high and low-relief. It is unknown how the multi-ton boulders used in this and other monuments ended up at La Venta as they originated in the Tuxtla mountains over 100 miles away.

Ancient Mesoamericans didn’t have the wheel or domesticated draft animals and are thought to have relied primarily on river transport, but a recent study by Leslie C. Hazell (2012) was unable to reenact possible megalith movement via water. Another study by Hazell and Graham Brodie (2012) using geographic information system technology to analyze possible overland transport routes also failed to discover a scenario by which the Olmec moved the boulders. It seems likely that these boulders arrived in the area naturally via volcanic activity and seasonal flooding, and were possibly carved in situ.

Figure 14. Drawing of Throne 4 Anonymous from Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica with notes by the author.
In any case, the central figure on *Throne 4* is life-sized and carved in high-relief. He is usually described as sitting cross-legged in a niche or cave which is shaped like a horseshoe or upside-down “U.” Above this central figure is a supernatural, zoomorphic or anthropomorphic monster face which is carved in low-relief and flower imagery attached to a vine or rope surrounds the niche. Lastly, the central figure wears a headdress with possible avian imagery along with a cape which has possible feather imagery. His left hand rests on his right ankle while his right hand grasps the rope or vine which winds around to the sides of the monument and links to two subordinate figures in low-relief. (Figure 16).
There are several separate motifs worthy of consideration on Throne 4: the high-relief central figure, the high-relief niche/cave, the rope, the flower imagery, the side figures and the supernatural face. Throne 4 presents a monumental and mysterious narrative, intricately carved and possibly deliberately defaced. It is important to consider each part of the narrative individually and together in order to discern its possible meaning.

Olmec imagery is considered by some scholars to be a pre-cursor to Mayan imagery and monuments such as Throne 4 are believed to be a cosmic portal “channeling supernatural power into the human community.” Iconographer Beatríz de la Fuente (1996) considers Throne 4 a narrative work that portrays creation events which are “mythic images.” She classifies this monument as a mythic image because it depicts a human emerging from an interior space which references the widespread Mesoamerican origin myth that marks humankind’s emergence from the cave at the beginning of life.
Further, human figures, such as the central figure on *Throne 4* are considered by de la Fuente to be “men under supernatural protection” because they are depicted beneath the image of a supernatural creature.  

There is a general consensus that La Venta is a sacred landscape, but there is disagreement about the meaning of *Throne 4* iconography. Tate considers the flower and rope motif on *Throne 4* to be “a flowering cosmic umbilicus or the flowery menstrual flow of the primordial earth.” According to Tate, the high-relief figure on *Throne 4* emerges from a ‘cave-niche’ and is seen holding a “thick umbilicus” which links him to engraved figures on the sides of the monument. She describes the central figure’s headdress as having eagle imagery and asserts that it signifies his status as a shaman.  

Due to the difficulty of manufacturing these monuments, from the scarcity of basalt boulders in the Gulf Coast region (there is evidence that some monuments were re-carved and that the same boulder was used more than once) to the rudimentary nature of the tools, it seems safe to say that every choice on the part of the sculptor was deliberate and meaningful. The decisions to represent the cave and the central figure in high-relief, the supernatural face and the flower imagery in low-relief, and the open mouth of the supernatural as possibly part of the niche border are deliberate and meaningful. The imagery on *Throne 4* reflects deliberate and meaningful choices made by a practical and ingenious people.  

Although it is possible that the flower motif represents menstrual blood and references the “primordial earth,” it also seems possible that it very deliberately and straightforwardly represents a flower. The fact that this flower motif is also attached to what appears to be a rope may actually mean that the image is a flowering vine. In view of the
shamanic nature of ancient Mesoamerican civilization it is worth considering the possibility that this flower motif, which appears to be attached to a rope or vine, in fact represents an important part of shamanic ritual.

In addition to Bufo Marinus toad venom, peyote cactus, and several different species of mushroom, Mesoamericans also used parts of hallucinogenic flowers to induce shamanic journeys. In fact, studies support “favoring strong Palaeolithic and Mesolithic roots for the use of psychotropic plants among the Old World and New World shamans,” according to Michael Ripinsky-Naxon (1969). Due to the acidity of the soil in Olmec territory there are scant skeletal or other biological remains, precluding our knowledge of which hallucinogens they may have used. Absent this information we must extrapolate from what we know about later civilizations. The Aztecs were known to use seeds from the morning glory flower and also had a flower deity known as “Xochipilli” (Figure 17). In addition, the Aztecs are known to have used the sinicuichi flower and the flowering piule plant as an entheogen. According to Albert Hofmann, Christian Rätsch and Richard Evans Schultes, (2001) Mexico has “the world’s richest area in diversity and use of hallucinogens in aboriginal societies” and “the seeds of the Morning Glories, represents another hallucinogen of great importance in Aztec religion and is still employed in southern Mexico.” The morning glory plant is also a vine, quite possibly similar to the image on Throne 4. There are hundreds of species of morning glory, some of which naturally occur in or near La Venta. Interestingly, the low-relief flower imagery suggests a possible deviation from Olmec carving convention in that flowers exist in ordinary reality and yet are depicted on Throne 4 in low-relief. This seeming iconographical contradiction may simply be a reference to the fact that flowers are
ephemeral paper-thin objects lacking the concrete three-dimensionality of humans or caves, and it may also reference the fact that flower-based hallucinogens are closely associated with shamanism and non-ordinary reality. Lastly, in addition to being a hallucinogenic flower which the Olmec may have used in shamanic rituals, the vine may also be a metaphor for the axis mundi providing a shamanic link between the upper and lower spirit worlds. Just as spires of Gothic Cathedrals were an axis mundi in medieval Europe, the vine may well have been the axis mundi in the tropical environment of the Olmec. The issue of the axis mundi is discussed in greater detail as it relates to the rope motif on *Throne 4*.

Figure 17. Aztec, *Xochipilli*, 1500 BCE, basalt, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Mexico.
It is also interesting to note that the four flowers sprouting from the corners of the niche on *Throne 4* may be a reference to the four cardinal directions. References to the cardinal directions are present in other aspects of Olmec art. According to Karl A. Taube, Olmec sites “contain celts oriented to the four directions, indicating their close identification with these cardinal points” which “thereby delineate the world center.”

Further, Taube points out that the “Olmec identified celts not only with the directions or inter-cardinal corners but also the pivotal axis mundi.”

The niche motif is present on all the La Venta thrones and is generally thought to represent a cave, with the ‘U’ shape being ubiquitous in Mesoamerican symbol systems. According to Doris Heyden (1975),

> The cave is the symbol of creation, of life itself; the religious history of Mesoamerica is impregnated with this theme. Representation of caves abound in the pictorial codices, both historical and religious, and the large number of place glyphs containing the symbol for cave indicate that they constituted an important element.

Mesoamericans consider the cave to be the ‘womb’ of the earth in which all life began and often represent it as an upside-down ‘U’ similar to the niche on *Throne 4*. (Figure 18)

The fact that similar Olmec thrones have deeply carved niches, some of which include a figure holding an infant (Figure 19), lends credibility to Tate’s interpretation of this element as representing the womb in a global gestation narrative. It also seems possible that this high-relief niche/cave with a high-relief shaman figure sitting inside it actually does, very straightforwardly represent a cave. In fact, in addition to a long history of association between shamanic practice and caves, Holley Moyes, Jaime J. Awe, George A. Brook and James W. Webster (2009), state that at times of stress such as droughts, contemporary Mesoamericans use caves for important rituals. In addition to the
reference of caves as wombs, the top of the niche also forms what can be seen as part of the open mouth of the supernatural creature on the upper section of the monument. An important aspect of shamanic practice is the act of being spiritually “eaten” by the power or spirit animal, thereby becoming one with the animal and completing the transformation. This visionary experience is sometimes represented by open-mouthed supernatural cosmic portal images such as this image from Chalcatzingo (Figure 20) and the iconographically similar imagery framing the cave on Throne 4.

The clever use of the niche on Throne 4 as not only representing an actual ritual cave, but also the open mouth of the supernatural cosmic portal through which the practitioner has entered or is emerging or sitting give the iconography multiple layers of meaning. The shamanic practitioner physically enters the cave and assumes his trance posture and once in the altered state of consciousness known as non-ordinary reality “enters” the cosmic portal through the open mouth of the supernatural which is also part of the niche, albeit carved in low-relief. The figure is in a liminal zone or threshold. It is through the three-dimensional everyday world that we enter altered states of consciousness. Two significant Olmec caves near Guerrero, Mexico known as Juxtlahuaca and Oxtotitlan, have been the subject of recent research since their discovery in the 1960s. Considered some of the most ancient paintings in the Americas, they depict humans and snakes as well as the jaguar and add two-dimensional figurative work to the Olmec oeuvre of colossal monuments, small jadeite carvings and ceramics. The fact that this imagery was found deep inside of the cave is thought to be indicative of shamanic practice and mirrors the imagery of other Olmec artwork.
Figure 18. Aztec, *Selden Roll Manuscript*, 16th Century, amaté, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, England.

Figure 19. Olmec, *La Venta Throne 5*, 1200 B.C.E., basalt, Tabasco, Mexico.
The cave at Oxtotitlan has imagery which is similar to the supernatural face on Throne 4 and on other La Venta monuments (Figures 21 and 22). In addition, one image depicts a human figure sitting on top of the rectangular monument leading researchers to conclude that what were previously considered “altars” at La Venta were actually used as thrones. This particular image is also significant in that its placement above the mouth of the cave mirrors the placement of the supernatural imagery above the niche of Throne 4 and “demonstrating the equation of caves with altar (throne) niches.”  

Further, David C. Grove (1968) believes this imagery is positioned above the cave mouth because it represents a “stylized earth monster’s mouth.” The relationship between the supernatural imagery on Throne 4 and in the Juxtlahuaca cave seems clear: the cave
image references the La Venta throne image and vice versa. This iconography likely also references the shamanic portal to non-ordinary reality. Decades of archaeological and iconographic studies of Mesoamerican cave use have established the fact that caves were considered a “sacred space” and were “ritual venues by pre-Columbian people.”64 The fact that the deep relief carving of the cave on Throne 4 is dominated by the incised image of the supernatural enhances the idea that caves are a physical environment which, in shamanic cultures, are dominated by visionary experience.

In addition to being a sacred ceremonial site for the reenactment of creation stories, La Venta can also be seen as an educational center with the very practical purpose of transmitting vital shamanic instruction and knowledge to current and future inhabitants. In his analysis of contemporary shamanic practice in Southern Mexico and Guatemala, Frank J. Lipp states that the “aspiring Mazatec shaman repeatedly ingests morning glory seeds” which induces a vision where “the neophyte is transported to the Cave of the East at the end of the world,” where “Principle Beings….teach him or her how to cure with plants and rituals…” 65
The fact that contemporary Mesoamericans are known to ingest morning glory seeds and to retreat to caves in order to perform sacred rituals during times of stress, along with our knowledge that the Olmec left artifacts such as pottery shards in the Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca caves which had no population centers nearby, all suggest a more practical interpretation of Throne 4 and of La Venta. It seems likely that the Olmec also retreated to caves to perform sacred shamanic rituals and that they also ingested plant-based hallucinogens and that the imagery on their monuments documents those practices.

Shamanic practice involves accessing what Michael Harner (2013) refers to as “non-ordinary reality” which is entered into by using the “shamanic state of consciousness.” The most common ways to practice shamanism is through drumming and/or the ingestion of hallucinogens. Shamanic drumming is the same tempo as the human heartbeat and the acoustic properties of caves serve to enhance the experience, creating a transformational, womb-like environment in which to access a shamanic state of consciousness. Perhaps the Olmec understood the analogy between shamanic transformation in a womb-like environment which gives birth to supernatural imagery and the fetal experience of gestational transformation and actual birth.

In the view of Tate and other scholars, the Olmec were attempting to answer the question “who are we?” and “where did we come from?” Although it is possible that Mesoamericans in 1000 B.C.E. were pondering these sorts of existential questions, it also seems likely that they were focused on more prosaic concerns. Indeed, the visual narrative at La Venta may have been transmitting essential knowledge about the practicalities of life. Specifically, La Venta monuments such as Throne 4 may have been part of an ancient Mesoamerican instructional tableau on how best to perform shamanic
rituals for healing the sick or for insuring adequate crop production or how to best defeat the enemy, for example. Shamanic knowledge must be passed down from one practitioner to another and even contemporary Central American and South American shamanic societies have intricate systems of educating the next generation of shamans.

In keeping with her embryo interpretation, Tate identifies the rope imagery on Throne 4 as a “flowering umbilicus” which could reference the placenta, menstrual blood, feminine shamanic paths, sexual love, and the moon. Like all the imagery on Throne 4, the rope motif is open to interpretation and may well have had primary, secondary and perhaps tertiary meanings for the Olmec. In keeping with their practical mindset and the primacy of shamanism in ancient Mesoamerica, it seems likely that the Olmec rope is actually a signifier of shamanic ritual. In fact, it would be in keeping with world-wide shamanic practice for the rope motif on Throne 4 to actually represent a rope. Rope and cord imagery is associated with ancient shamanic societies from Africa to Asia to South America and it would not be unusual to find it in Mesoamerica as well. The rope motif is found in South American Chavin-style textiles which portray flying shaman figures holding ropes. According to Karl A. Taube, “Lucy Salazar Burger and Richard Burger compare the rope motifs of early horizon Chavin and Cupisnique both to concepts of shamanic transformation and to a creation myth from the Chavin de Huantar region featuring a pair of siblings and a rope as a conduit to the heavens (Figure 23).” The Jomon culture of ancient Japan (10,500 – 300 B.C.E.) used the rope motif in their pottery and the Igbo Ukwu people of the Ivory Coast (900 A.D.) used it in their bronze castings. Contemporary shamanic practitioners in Africa and the Caribbean also use ropes or cords.
in the symbolic ritual creation and destruction of their shamanic power objects. (Figures 24 and 25)

Figure 23. Chavín de Huantar, Flying figures holding ropes, drawing of a detail of the Tello Obelisk, Anonymous from Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks by Karl A. Taube, 1200 B.C.E., Chavín de Huantar, Peru.

Figure 24. Jamon, Deep bowl with sculptural rim, 1500 B.C.E., ceramic, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.
The ways in which shamanic practitioners actually used ropes in their practice was probably as varied as the ways in which different ancient civilizations used it as a motif in their artwork. The rope on Throne 4 winds around the side of the monument and connects to secondary figures carved in low-relief. David C. Grove speculated that these figures represents a captive since the rope appears to be attached to the figure’s wrist. It may also refer to a shamanic or spiritual connection between the figures. Indeed, there may be layers of meaning to the side figures just as there are for other aspects of the iconography. There is a contemporary shamanic ritual practiced in parts of Mexico in which the shaman attaches a cord to a particular image in order to apprehend a thief. In this case, the cord represents a shamanic linkage which creates a spiritual link. This spiritual link will cause the thief to surrender. It is unknown exactly what the Olmec
were attempting to illustrate with this motif, but in all likelihood it was another reference to shamanism.

The actual carving techniques used in Throne 4 also bear discussion although they haven’t been the subject of as much scholarly discourse as the imagery has been. It seems likely that just as the imagery was deliberately chosen, so too were the methods by which that imagery was depicted. It turns out that the Olmec used high-relief such as with the central figure and the cave in Throne 4, as well as sculpting in the round primarily in depictions of human figures in specific poses which are attainable by the average person. There are dozens of interesting examples of the phenomenon (Figures 26 – 30) of fully formed figures sculpted in what are likely shamanic trance postures.


Figure 27. Olmec, *Seated Figure*, 1400 - 900 B.C.E., ceramic, de Young Art Museum, San Francisco, California.

Figure 28. Olmec, *Wrestler*, 1200-600 B.C.E., ceramic, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Mexico.

In fact, researchers have found that Mesoamericans still use some of these same postures during shamanic rituals in the belief that different postures achieve different results. Sculpture in the round and high-relief have also been used to depict normal animals such as the jaguar as seen in figure 31. Interestingly, Olmec high-relief and sculpture in the round is almost exclusively used to depict either biologically possible animals or shamanic trance figures holding specific poses. The choice to show the central figure on *Throne 4* in high-relief, holding what is probably a specific trance pose, is consistent with Olmec visual convention in which people and objects that exist in everyday reality are shown in three dimensions. According to this schema the central figure on *Throne 4* represents a real shaman inside a real cave holding a real pose.

Figure 31. Olmec, *Monument 107 (Jaguar attacking descending man)*, 1400–1000 B.C.E., basalt, Museo Comunitario de San Lorenzo, Mexico.
The low-relief iconography on Throne 4 is consistent with low-relief iconography on other types of Olmec artwork and usually depicts biologically impossibly shamanic trance imagery and imagery closely associated with shamanism such as the flower motif. The Olmec recognized that the transformative shamanic visionary experience did not take place in our three-dimensional reality and used low-relief carving to transmit their understanding of that phenomenon. This deliberate choice to carve supernaturals in low-relief belies any idea that the Olmec somehow believed that shamanic transformation was ‘magic’ and that people somehow transformed themselves into biologically impossible creatures in real life. If something existed in our time/space reality – such as a cave or a person – it was depicted in three dimensions. If it only existed on the thin veil of altered consciousness, it was usually incised lightly or carved in low-relief. Analyzing the exceptions to these carving conventions is beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be noted that similar to most other ancient cultures, the Olmec used masks in their rituals and some of the extant artwork that appears to represent a biologically impossible anthropomorphic creature may in reality be representing masked humans. Nevertheless, it seems that the Olmec understood that shamanic transformation takes place at a different level of consciousness and that the proper use of shamanic techniques would ‘dial the rheostat’ of consciousness in such a way that they achieved important insights. High-relief and sculpture in the round also allowed the Olmec to transmit important information about the exact poses and postures that the shamanic practitioner should take in order to achieve the desired results. There is ongoing research into the effects of different body postures on our hormones and state of mind and there is evidence that as little as two minutes of one particular pose will measurably increase testosterone and
cortisol levels and affect our state of mind. There has been some research into the body postures depicted in some of the Olmec artwork and correlations to similar body postures practiced by contemporary Mesoamericans during trance rituals. There is a large body of Mesoamerican artwork that depicts specific body postures and more investigation is needed into what effects, if any, these postures have on our physiology especially during shamanic trance states.

The last iconographic motif that must be considered on Throne 4 and other La Venta monuments is the possible ritual defacement and partial destruction which occurred in antiquity. It has been suggested that these sculptures were damaged by rival groups or when a new leader took over, especially when the previous leader was no longer in power or had been discredited. In fact, ritual destruction of power objects is routine in many shamanic societies and has nothing to do with rival groups or deposed leaders. In some African tribes, the shamanically-inspired artwork – sometimes known as a power object – is destroyed and buried once it has served its purpose or because it has been deemed too powerful to be kept around. Peter T. Furst (1967) speculated that the ritual destruction of Olmec monuments was parallel to “removing heads from figurines in the smiling head figures in Remojadas Veracruz” adding that in that case “the killing of pottery” would release the “spirits.” There is little doubt that the Olmec monuments were deliberately destroyed, and according to Matthew Stirling (1967), “considerable effort” was put into the mutilation of these objects and that the thrones in particular were “pretty badly beaten up.” The La Venta ritual defacement and/or burial of the monuments may be analogous to practices in other shamanic cultures.
THE KUNZ AXE AND RELATED OBJECTS

Figure 32. Olmec, Kunz Axe, 800 B.C.E., jade, American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York.

Figure 33. Olmec, Celt, 900 – 400 B.C.E., jade, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico.

Figure 34. Olmec, Celt with Diety, 1000 – 300 B.C.E., stone, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio.

Figure 35. Olmec, Spirit Axe, 900–500 B.C.E., stone, Dallas Art Museum, Dallas, Texas.
In addition to the suppositions that Olmec iconography was developed primarily as a means of transmitting vital information about shamanism and that Olmec figures were deliberately posed in shamanic trance postures, this paper also focuses on the interpretation of Olmec carving conventions. There is a plethora of low-relief and lightly incised handheld greenstone and serpentine “axes” or celts with abstract anthropomorphic were-jaguar imagery. This highly stylized imagery is similar to the supernatural images on *Throne 4* and other monuments which Diehl describes as being ‘earth monsters’ or possibly ‘sky monsters.’ In the mid twentieth century most scholars agreed with Covarrubias that the imagery represented a transformed human/feline were-jaguar. During the later half of the twentieth century some scholars disputed the feline interpretation of the Olmec anthropomorphic figure and suggestions were made that it was actually reptilian or amphibian or simply other-worldly. Subsequent researchers have put forth other theories: that the imagery represents a crocodile or a frog or a bird of some kind. The most provocative and compelling alternate explanation is Tate’s recent comprehensive study which concludes that the imagery depicts a human fetus of about eight weeks gestation. Tate’s theory is the most comprehensive and compelling of the various conflicting theories and it will be the focus of this discussion of the so-called *Kunz axe* iconography.

In the last eighty years there have been many interpretations of Olmec iconography and it could be argued that the various interpretations say as much or more about the mindset of the interpreters as it does about the objects’ creators. Indeed, as contemporary scholars are beholden to their particular world view, so too were the Olmec. It may well
be that the anthropomorphic figure represents a stylized human fetus, but it is impossible to say what this fetus meant to the Olmec.

Tate characterizes the Olmec anthropomorphic figure as the stylized depiction of a human fetus and rejects the twentieth century interpretation known as the ‘were-jaguar.’ According to Tate the “image was interpreted as a monstrous thing” and cast the Olmec as “makers of biologically impossible creatures…which were essentially jaguar-like.” 77 Tate considers the iconography of the Kunz axe and related objects to be an abstracted and stylized depiction of a human fetus at eight weeks gestation. In addition to pointing out that the Kunz axe iconography lacks the fangs, claws and spots that one may expect to see on a jaguar image, she also analyzes in exacting detail the similarities between what she calls the “axe-image” and the first trimester fetus. It turns out that the most common time for miscarriage in modern times is at about eight weeks gestation. Assuming that this phenomenon was similar in ancient Mesoamerica, it is also the most likely stage of gestation for the Olmec to have seen and possibly depicted the fetus in their artwork. Although the Olmec were certainly capable of naturalistic rendering of infants, toddlers and adults, accurately depicting the eight week fetus was more difficult due to the fact that the fetus at this stage is only about one inch in length.

Figure 36. Fetus 9 weeks gestation, from www.ivillage.com.

Figure 37. Kunz Axe, 800 B.C.E., jade, Museum of Natural History, New York.

Figure 38: Panthera Onca (Jaguar) from www.reidparkzoo.org.
In her lengthy analysis, Tate compares the lidless eyes of the Kunz axe imagery, along with the general morphology and proportions of the axe-image face and body to the general morphology of the eight-week human fetus and finds uncanny similarities. Indeed, Tate’s comparison is compelling and may provide one more piece of the puzzle, even if it doesn’t completely resolve the enigma of Olmec were-jaguar iconography.

However, just as the were-jaguar concept was unacceptable to Tate due to the fact that the ‘axe-image’ lacks spots, fangs and claws, so to the fetus theory is not without inconsistencies. The general shape and morphology of the Kunz axe may more closely resemble the fetus, but the general demeanor of the figure much more closely resembles the jaguar. Looking past the generalities is it important to note that the human fetus lacks the characteristic flame eyebrows and down-turned mouth that are standard in Olmec iconography. Furthermore, it could be argued that the “lidless eyes” which Tate believes are key to analyzing the image actually resemble the eyes of the jaguar as much as they do the eyes of the fetus (Figures 36 - 38). There is a reason that generations of scholars thought this imagery depicted either a were-jaguar or some other anthropomorphic supernatural creature: because the overall visage is one of a fierce, snarling creature which appears to have some human traits.

Still, the idea that the Olmec were referencing the fetus in their distinctive iconography is fascinating and opens an entirely new line of discourse for scholars to pursue. According to Tate, the use of fetal imagery by the Olmec is evidence that women played a leadership role in ancient Mesoamerica. While analysis of Tate’s theories about the roles of women in Olmec civilization is beyond the scope of this paper, it is
interesting to note that fetal imagery does carry powerful symbolism. The fetus represents the next generation, and it references the line between consciousness and unconsciousness, between ordinary reality and non-ordinary reality. The unconscious state of the pre-born human can be seen as paralleling the trance state of the shamanic practitioner and according to Sara Dubow (2011), “it is the one phase of life we all have in common” since once born, no two individuals are the same.

Tate interprets this imagery from our twenty-first century vantage point and seeks the assistance of neonatologists and embryologists to help “diagnose” these ancient carvings and engravings. The application of modern scientific concepts to the analysis of 3,000 year old art historical objects may be valid, but it is also important to understand that they are part of a societal construct of “metaphysics and epistemology that support the authority of medical and other professionals.” In reality western science gives us one “particular way of understanding truth” and insists that their authority is not open to question. In order to maintain scholarly objectivity, especially when one is ‘diagnosing’ 3,000 year old iconography, it is important to remember that, in the words of Kathryn Pyne Addelson (1999), “there is not one universal and objective truth and those who claim there is and who claim to know it are attempting to have unquestioned authority over others.”

The embryo or fetus as we understand it through modern science is a pre-born human going through certain predictable stages of gestational development. One does not have to be skeptical of the authoritative constructs of modern science in order to note that the Olmec likely did not have this understanding. In fact, one does not have to go back three thousand years to see that people have held very different interpretations of what we now
accept as pre-born humans in a fetal or embryonic state. Tate’s interpretation of La Venta as a narrative about fertility, sexuality, gestation and birth and her interpretation of the axe-image are informed and shaped by the underlying narrative constructed by modern science. Fetal images may represent incipient personhood to us but even in early twentieth century America, fetal personhood was unknown and according to Lynn M. Morgan (1999), the fetus did not “imply the coming into being of a new person.” It would be wrong to “colonize the past” and use our contemporary understanding of fetal development to interpret imagery from 75 years ago, much less from 3,000 years ago.  

Hollywood movies influenced artist Miguel Covarrubias when he coined the term “were-jaguar” (Tate dismissively suggests,) but they can also inform our understanding of how the pre-born human may have been viewed in the not too distant past. Hollywood movies in which “women give birth to monsters” (Rosemary’s Baby, Demon Seed, etc…) indicates “the popularity of such images of the fetus as monster…” Clearly the fetus has been regarded as the original unseen monster within and the fetal image can be seen as a monstrosity. Indeed, the fetus exists in an unseen, unconscious, and not fully human state until it is transformed at the moment of birth and may exemplify the transformational potentiality seen in Olmec iconography, which is the basis of all human civilization.

The interpretation of the fetus as non-human has a long and well documented history. The eighteenth century German physician Wilhelm Gottfried von Poucquet wrote that “not everything that comes from the birth parts of a woman is a human being,” while another eighteenth century German physician, Dr. Johannn Storch, wrote that the miscarried fetus of one of his patients was in fact a “mole.” Dr. Storch, writing in his doctor’s notes, pondered how it happened that such things as moles and “moon-children,”
which he noted have been known since “Aristotle and Galen,” could find their way into a woman’s womb. Twentieth century anthropological research revealed that native people in Africa and New Guinea believed there was a non-human element to human pregnancy. The Uduk tribe in Sudan believed that women could give birth to hoofed animals and the Abelam people of New Guinea believed women could be made pregnant by nature spirits. All of this is to say that if the Olmec were depicting the human fetus in their imagery, it is possible that they didn’t perceive it as human or entirely human. Perhaps the Olmec saw the fetus as non-human as well. To say that the Olmec could not have been depicting an anthropomorphic biologically impossible creature even if they did base their iconography on the fetus, is to assume that they saw the fetus as human. It is important to point out that prior to modern imaging techniques all depictions of the fetus necessarily represented the dead fetus. The fetus we are familiar with as depicted in Life magazine and on NOVA specials is a delicate pre-born human, sucking his thumb and floating peacefully in his private primordial sea. The fetus the Olmec would have seen was monstrous, revolting and dead – closer to the deliberately frightening imagery on anti-abortion posters.

Instead of looking to modern medicine to ‘diagnose’ this iconography it may be better to use art historical methodologies. The carving techniques used to create the *Kunz axe* and related objects is consistent with the formal analysis of the low-relief carving on the La Venta thrones as depicting supernatural creatures. Obviously the Olmec were capable of sculpting in the round as well as high or low-relief. They deliberately chose to depict the axe image in the same manner they used to depict the supernatural iconography on their monuments. If they were trying to depict a human fetus as part of a grand gestation
narrative then they most likely would have carved these figurines in high-relief to transmit their intention to show these were humans from ordinary reality. They did not. They carved them in the same way that they carved their other supernatural images: lightly incised or in low-relief. The Olmec may very well have depicted the pre-born human in their iconography, but they did so as part of a transforming human/animal construct which is as close to Miguel Covarrubias’s were-jaguar as it is to Professor Tate’s fetal imagery.

Regardless of how they perceived the fetus and what it meant in their iconography, it is remarkable that the Olmec were able to depict fetal imagery at all in 1,000 B.C.E. Western culture through the renaissance had a visual bias against seeing the human fetus despite their perceived technological superiority to the Olmec. Seventeenth century European anatomists were able to accurately depict animals in their fetal state but the human fetus was depicted as a little boy of about three months and Leonardo da Vinci depicted the fetus in utero as “a little boy sitting in the centre of the spheres of the matrix” which represented the universe (Figure 39). Perhaps the visionary shamanic culture of the Olmec led to more realistic depictions than European Christian culture did. The European could only comprehend humanity as fully formed and was unable to see or appreciate the transformative nature of life. To the Olmec the mysterious interiority of pregnancy may be analogous to the mysterious interiority of shamanic visionary experience. The embryo transforms into a human hidden in the womb just as the shaman transforms into an animal hidden in the vision of his mind’s eye.
Figure 39. *Embryo Study*, Leonardo da Vinci, 1510 – 1512, chalk and ink on paper
Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, London, UK.

THE KNEELING TRANSFORMATION FIGURE AND RELATED OBJECTS

Figure 40. Olmec, *Kneeling Transformation Figure*, 900 – 300 B.C.E., Serpentine,
Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.
The last image under consideration is the so-called Dumbarton Oaks *Kneeling Transformation Figure* (Figure 40). There are conflicting theories about its possible meaning as well as authenticity. Like many other portable Olmec objects, this figure has poor provenance. La Venta and the other Olmec sites were not adequately protected throughout much of the twentieth century and art works have been systematically looted and destroyed. There is remarkable consistency among the greenstone and serpentine celts such as the *Kunz axe*, even if some of those objects have turned out to be fakes. The Olmec oeuvre is well established and worthy of scholarship. The transformation figure does not have that advantage.
A similar figure in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Figure Undergoing Transformation* (Figure 4.1), was recently declared to be “of recent manufacture” and Professor Tate states that she has personally examined the Dumbarton Oaks *Kneeling Transformation figure* and determined it to be inauthentic. Formal analysis of this figure shows that it is inconsistent with other Olmec iconography primarily because it deviates from the convention of showing ordinary animals and humans carved in the round or in high-relief, and transformational shamanic figures carved in low-relief, incised or painted. It is possible that *Kneeling Transformation Figure* depicts a human subject in a shamanic transformation pose while wearing an animal mask as his limbs and body appear to be mostly human, but that would be inconsistent with known Olmec mask imagery which mostly depict human faces. A third figure *Standing Muscular Figure* (Figure 4.2), also depicts a biologically impossible creature with both human and feline features.

![Figure 43. Olmec, *Kunz Axe*, 800 B.C.E., jade, Museum of Natural History, New York.](image1)

![Figure 44. Olmec, *Shaman in Transformation Pose*, 800-600 B.C.E., ceramic, Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey.](image2)

![Figure 45. Olmec, *Miniature Mask*, 900-400 B.C.E., jade, The Cleveland Art Museum, Ohio.](image3)
The large saucer eyes of the *Kneeling Transformation Figure* (Figure 40) are unlike the depiction of eyes on either the Olmec axe figures, which tend to be rectangular or almond-shaped, the human posed figures or the transformation mask both of which are almond-shaped (Figures 43 – 45). The Olmec jaguar both carved in relief or in the round have large eyes, but they are not depicted as round sunken eyes such as in the Dumbarton Oaks figure – rather they are depicted as elevated from the face and on a separate plane (Figures 9 & 31). The likelihood that we only have a small fraction of the artistic output from the thousand year history of the Olmec certainly makes it possible for a singular object which is unlike the rest of the oeuvre to survive. It may be that the carved in the round or relief carvings of human figures displaying a jaguar face or mask with large round sunken eyes represented a standard Olmec motif and that the others were destroyed by the environment or by looters or have yet to be discovered. However, based on the fact that it is inconsistent with most other Olmec iconography, along with the facts that it is of poor provenance and that a similar object at LACMA was recently deemed inauthentic, it would not be surprising if Dumbarton Oaks removed *Kneeling Transformation Figure* from public view. It may turn out that the Dumbarton Oaks figure was indeed transformed, not in the mind of an Olmec sculptor, but rather in the hands of a twentieth century counterfeiter.

**CONCLUSION**

The Olmec were a visionary shamanic civilization whose iconography was based on the natural environment of ordinary reality as well as the supernatural environment of trance and transformation. Olmec civilization consisted of a constellation of different
linguistic groups living in the humid wetlands area of present day Mexican states of Tabasco and Veracruz between 1400 – 400 B.C.E. They were organized and ingenious and had a diet rich with marine and animal protein as well as cultivated maize. There are few biological remains of the Olmec due to the tropical humidity and the acidic soil conditions, but known hallucinogens such as morning glory seeds and Bufo Marinus toads were present in the Olmec heartland. Knowledge of hallucinogenic use by later shamanic cultures such as the Aztec, the Maya and the Mixtec inform our understanding of Olmec shamanic practice since it is known that religious and ritual practices in general are stable and long-lasting. Furthermore, Olmec artwork discovered in the Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca caves near Guerrero, Mexico along with Chalcatzingo near Morales, Mexico, illustrate the long-standing Mesoamerican tradition of conducting shamanic rituals in caves – a documented tradition practiced by the Maya in more recent times. The linguistic diversity of the Olmec likely precluded the use of a universal oral story telling tradition for the preservation of their shamanic rituals and may have helped to instigate the vigorous development of their extensive visual culture.

Olmec iconography includes images, the methods of presenting them as well as their ritual destruction and was intended to transmit vital knowledge of shamanic techniques to future generations. The extant artwork of the Olmec consists primarily of monumental, multi-ton, basalt carvings, small hand-held greenstone ritual objects and two-dimensional cave paintings and low-relief carvings. The Olmec employed different carving techniques such as low and high-relief, incising, and carving in the round as a way to impart important information about the subject of their artwork. High-relief and carving in the round seems to impart information about everyday reality while low-relief carving,
incising and two-dimensional images impart information about supernatural shamanic subjects. Olmec imagery also reflects their precocious knowledge of human gestational and other biological processes as well as their experience of shamanic transformational processes. Their most distinctive iconography, centered on images of the were-jaguar, represents an anthropomorphic being which is part human fetus and part animal.

Lastly, based on what is known of Olmec iconography, it seems likely that what was once considered one of the premiere examples of Olmec artwork, the Kneeling Transformation Figure at Dumbarton Oaks, may in fact be a twentieth century creation, as Olmec scholar Carolyn E. Tate claims. This artwork deviates from the sculpting conventions seen in other Olmec work because it is a carved-in-the-round figure depicting a biologically impossible creature.

ENDNOTES

2 Ibid.
5 Tate, 4.
10 Ibid.
11 Rebecca Stone-Miller, 50.
15 Ibid., 40.
17 Ibid., 96.
19 Ibid., 70.
20 Ibid., 73.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 Ibid. 444.
29 Ibid.
32 Agustin Delgado “Infantile and Jaguar Traits in Olmec Sculpture,” Archaeology. Vol. 18, No. 1 (March 1965, 58.
33 Tate, 4.
34 Ibid.
35 Diehl, 60.
36 Ibid.
38 Tate, 135 – 136.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Diehl, 77.
43 Ibid.


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