

Chapter 7

Emulating Olmec Gods Through Head Form. Origins and the Preclassic Period

This chapter explores the early evidence of infant head modeling in the broader Mesoamerican sphere, where the skeletal record testifies to cultural skull modifications for almost 10,000 years. This information is complemented by drawing insights from figurative head representations. The remote origins of cradleboard, wrapping, and head-splinting practices in Preceramic and Preclassic times are reviewed briefly for sites with documented cranial series that exemplify the preferences in the different cultural territories of Mesoamerica. The skulls from the Preclassic period of Monte Negro and Monte Albán (Mexican state of Oaxaca), Tlatilco, Cuicuilco y Tlaltenco (Mexico City), in particular, make the increasing cultural embedding of the practice apparent, along with its growing medley of regional and local preferences and, with it, a growing diversity in forms. Additional skeletal information comes from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Maya area. Although Gulf Olmec head traditions have not preserved well in the material record of the harsh tropical environs, its rich iconographic patrimony clearly illustrates the crafting of specific pear-shaped head forms to emulate the sacred forces of Olman. High and narrow silhouettes were also adopted outside the Olmec coastal plains and practiced in tandem with a host of increasingly diversified modeling forms. The last part of this chapter discusses the evolving social and possibly religious roles of Preclassic body modifications in Mesoamerica, arguing that the appearance of Olmecoid pear-shaped head styles most likely reflected syncretic ideological adoption among those populations that dwelled outside or past Gulf Coast Olman occupation.

7.1 Origins of Head-Compression Practices in Mesoamerica and Beyond

If we believe the archaeological record, infant head modeling has been known in the broader Mesoamerican territories for almost 10,000 years now (Fig. 7.1). Six early cases of clear tabular erect modification have been dated as 8,800–7,000 years B.P. (Anderson 1965, p. 496, 1967; Lagunas 1989, p. 33; Romano 1974a, p. 210). The findings were made during an archaeological exploration in the Central Highland



Fig. 7.1 Map of Mexico showing sites of Archaic and Formative skull findings described in the text. (Map by B. Ceballos and V. Tiesler)

Basin of Tehuacan (Mexico). This area was at that time foraged by hunters-and-gatherers with strong signs of dental attrition due to their abrasive diets. Anderson reports a slightly asymmetric occipital flattening of one skull, likely to have stemmed from cradleboard use.

Another pre-ceramic specimen (Burial 1/65-1) with cranial modification, presumed to be cultural, stems from the Texcal Cave in the Valley of Valsequillo, Puebla (Mexico). Burial 1 was attributed an antiquity of around 5,000 years B.P. by the on-site archaeologists Noemí Castillo and Roberto García Moll by its stratigraphic association (Romano 1972a, 1974a). The individual is described by Arturo Romano as a relatively robust and probably female adult. Her skull cap displays almost symmetrical lambdic flattening, a distinct bulging of the lower occipital portion with a horizontal sulcus towards *inion*. According to Romano, the craniometric polygon measurements confirm the cultural origin of the morphological changes by manifesting shifts in the natural balance of various cranial measurements. From here, the author suggests that a cradleboard was used as the principal compression device in the early times and infers from the sulcus below the occipital prominence that the head had been tied to the apparatus below the nuchal crest. Apart from the above specimens, there are no convincing documented cases of cultural change in cranial vaults dated before the onset of agriculture. The well-preserved Mexican Tepexpan

skull, the crania from Tlapacoya and Santa María Astahuacan, the skull of the so-called “Woman of El Peón” and from San Nicolás, the findings from San Vicene Chicoloapan or the Cave of the Tecolote are not noted for any artificial modeling according to Romano (1970, 1974a, b, 1978).

Further south, in Ecuador, Juan Munizaga (1973) screens a large series of crania, which include eight restored pieces belonging to the Vegas Complex, dated around 6000 B.C. None of these bore any signs of artificial flattening. It is only in the following phase (Chorrera), dated to the first millennium B.C. that cultural changes are evident in the heads of early Americans. In another study (Munizaga 1965), he documents the earliest confirmed cases of flattening for Ecuador in the site of Machalilla. The cranial vaults are dated around 3,400 B.P. and presumed to belong to formative agricultural folk. It is noteworthy that the compression apparatus of these pristine cranial modification was not a cradleboard but a head-compression device. Its application did not flatten lambda but instead led to the complete elimination of the occipital bun below lambda, generating a sulcus in the middle of the compression plane. Comparatively less expressed is the forehead, which almost retains its convex surface. Munizaga coins this type of cranial transformation “cuneiform type”.

Still further south, along the Chilean coast, Juan Munizaga (1974) and Patricia Soto-Heim (1987) explore the onset of cranial modifications for northern Chile. Apparently, preceramic head modeling in South America was, at best, scarce; the cranial vaults of five specimens described for the site of Pisagua Vieja, dated to some 5,000 years before present, do not appear to be transformed culturally in any of their segments. Also, Soto-Heim (1987, p. 135) estimates the earliest case in the skeleton of a child somewhat late, at around 3,000 years ago. It was recovered at the site of Camarones 15 (Chinchorro complex) among other remains that had been radiocarbon dated around 1,100 years B.C. This subadult vault showed both frontal and occipital flattening. Much earlier is the evidence reported by Cardich and Bórmida for the Peruvian Highlands for the so-called “Man of Lauricocha”, dated over 4,500 years B.P. Of eleven recovered skeletons, Burial 6 displayed clear signs of tabular erect cranial shortening (Yépez 2009, p. 527). Barrientos (Barrientos and L’Heureux 2009), Pérez and colleagues (2009) and Béguelin et al. (2006; see also Menéndez 2010), have complemented the panorama of early head practices for northern Patagonia. They find the first traces of head flattening by constriction for the Arroyo Seco 2 Phase of the Middle-Late Holocene, dated around 7,000 years B.P.

From the above review, we can cautiously presume that head modifications appeared in the cultural territory that later became Mesoamerica roughly around the same time as in South America. The seminal cases, documented from Texcal and Tehuacan (Mexico) also suggest that cradleboards were the first implements used in this process and that head shaping was still isolated, given the many unmodified preceramic crania recovered from the area of Mesoamerica. But what was the role of cradleboards back then? What practical advantages did the tight baby carriages have for their mothers? How were they used during foraging? These and other questions still await scrutiny by the academic community. Unfortunately, the lack of suitable skeletal evidence and the absence of detailed head portraiture (or really any figurative imagery) before the onset of the Preclassic period, translates into persisting

gaps in our understanding of the pristine uses of cradleboards and the roles of cranial flattening in the preagricultural societies that occupied the Mesoamerican territories before becoming sedentary.

7.2 Cranial Modification Turned Tradition: The Preclassic Period

With the advent of the Early Preclassic era (1400–1000 B.C.), probably many native populations already practiced cradleboarding as an established daily routine in Mesoamerica. I presume that, by then, the predominant technique must have been related to body devices, perhaps effected by wraps or bandages, applied to the child's head while it rested inside the crib. These procedures should have produced a variety of slight lambdic and frontal flattenings, most of them leading to asymmetric results (see Sect. 3.3). The following centuries comprise the Mesoamerican Preclassic Period. It saw population growth and an increasing cultural regionalization in the cultural areas that encompass its territory; some of its territories experienced a rise in social complexity and hierarchy.

Although the following sections are not intended to provide a complete review of the many studies or mentions of local Preclassic cranial modification, I will provide rough trends by surveying published information on large skeletal series from different sites and areas. Unfortunately, most publications do not provide systematic listings of attributes that are relevant for making comparisons, such as presence vs. absence of cultural change, of variety, secondary bands and degree of morphological modification. The combined results from each site testifies to a diversification of artificial head shapes, especially during the first millennium B.C. The proportion between erect and oblique modification types and the evidence of horizontal circular and sagittal wraps on skulls from some territories, but not from others, appear to reflect upon locally diverse and also some regionally specific preferences. It is noteworthy that, unlike some of the territories north and south of Mesoamerica, the overwhelming majority of Mesoamerican skulls do not exhibit true annular forms during the Preclassic era. When used, compression bands or wraps were attached to tablets or boards.

7.2.1 The Mexican Highlands

The first millenium B.C witnesses a diversification of artificial head shapes in the Central Highlands (Tlatilco; Ecatepec) and further south (Bautista 2004, 2005; Peña and López-Wario 1989; Romano 1972b, 1973, 1974a, 1979). Arturo Romano (1972b; see also Faulhaber 1965) analyzed a large skeletal series from the Tlatilco site, in the Valley of Mexico, after four field seasons of burial recovery. This important collection encompasses some 500 individuals, dated between 1200 and 200 B.C.

and mostly derived from Middle Preclassic contexts. Of the 232 preserved cranial vaults, some 95.6 % showed tabular erect shaping, with some additional few described as tabular oblique and mimetic. Importantly, Romano notes that some of the rigid anteroposterior flattening was complemented by annular wraps. These bipolar constrictions elongated visibly the few tabular oblique vaults that have been documented and heightened and also narrowed many of the common tabular erect shapes. No mention is provided as to whether the latter looked like the pear-shaped heads described for the Olmec Gulf Coast plains; a question that awaits scholarly attention in view of the ideological relevance this peculiar variety should have held in eastern Mesoamerica (Sect. 7.3). Faulhaber (1965, pp. 87–89) adds information on Tlatilco's skeletal series in a separate study by specifying that the forms and degrees of artificial head modeling appear equivalent in men and in women. She also notes that only some 15 % of the series (43 of $N = 232$) did not show any culturally induced morphological change, thereby testifying to its almost generalized practice already during the first Preclassic phase.

Slightly more recent is the chronological sequence of Cuicuilco (700 B.C to 150 A.D.), another important Preclassic site, nestled in the southern part of the Mexican capital. The skeletal collection from Cuicuilco was examined by Patricia Sánchez (1971) under the supervision of Arturo Romano. Among other analyses, she scored and measured some 68 of the 150 individuals for cranial shape. All of these specimens from Cuicuilco displayed cultural modification. Again, tabular erect shapes predominate (90 %), albeit to a slightly lesser degree than recorded in Tlatilco (Fig. 7.2). Again, different oblique variants complement the range of erect head looks among Cuicuilco's settlers who also combined circular wraps with rigid compression devices (Fig. 7.2).

Close to Cuicuilco, in the southern part of the Central Mexican Basin lies the Late Preclassic site of Tlaltenco, reported by Mari Carmen Serra, Magali Civera, and Arturo Romano (Serra et al. 1982; Fig. 7.3). Here, both tabular oblique and tabular erect shapes occur. Case studies of the two measured crania from Tlaltenco highlight the severity of the morphological change and conclude for both skulls that different constriction and compression devices were combined to transform the shape of the cranial vaults, noticeably a deep horizontal sulcus that visibly divides the inferior and superior portion of the skull cap. Equally, Late Preclassic and possibly Early Classic is two other cranial series from the site of T-358, Tlaxcala, and Jalapasco, Puebla. Here, Rosa María Peña (1982, p. 352) documents seven additional artificially modified cranial vaults from that period, two being tabular oblique, five others erect. Comas et al. (1981) report 19 skulls which evince a variety of different degrees and varieties of tabular erect and oblique shapes, confirming, once again for the Central Highlands the trend toward diversity and inclination of head form towards the Classic period.

In Preclassic western and northwestern Mexico, oblique cranial-vault shapes from head splinting appear in similar—possibly even higher—proportions than in the aforementioned Central Highland series. Arturo Oliveros (1971) documents this type in the Early Preclassic community of El Opeo, in the present-day Mexican state of Michoacán. Grégory Pereira (1999, pp. 165–169) describes Late Formative period skulls for Guadalupe (also in Michoacán), which show equally erect and

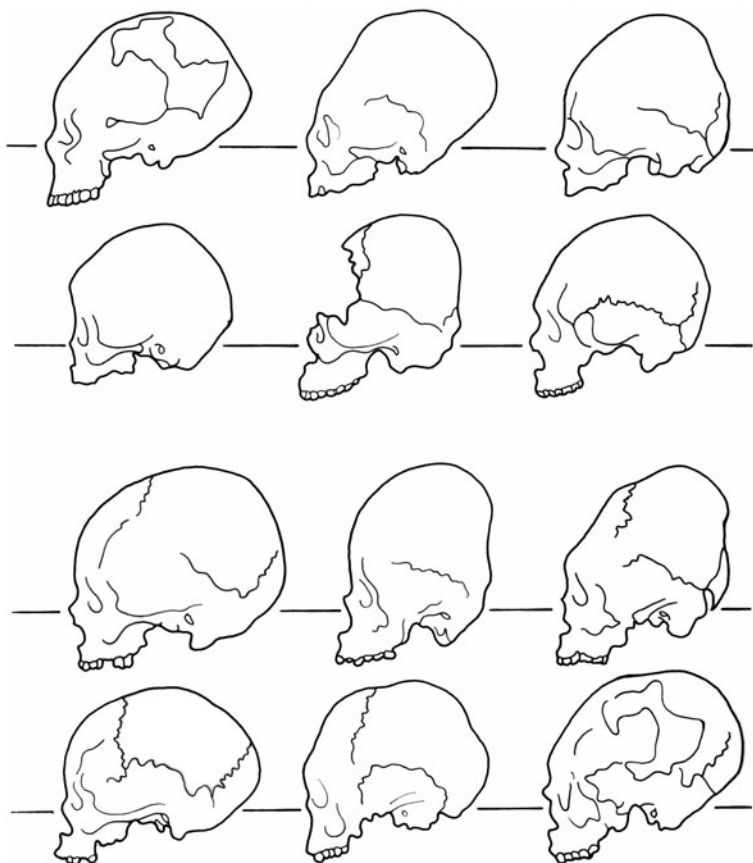


Fig. 7.2 Set of representative cranial profiles from the site of Cuicuilco, Mexico City. (Adapted by B. Ceballos from Sánchez 1971, Figs. 6 and 7)

oblique head forms. The author argues that for the six tabular oblique specimens, a rigid head compressor must have been employed and infers in analogy to figurine representations that the boards had been fastened over the top of the head with a strap or buckle, possibly leaving a sagittal groove.

North of Michoacán lies the important Late Formative site of Chupicuaro, Guanajuato, presumed to be an early Chichimeca center that evolved on the shores of the Lerma River, on the northern fringes of Mesoamerica. Several well-preserved skulls have been documented from its monumental area, which was excavated during the 1940s. The precise dates of these burials are uncertain but in all probability accord with the peak in occupation that Chupicuaro experienced between 500 B.C. and 300 A.D. (Darras and Faugère 2010). Regarding the preserved cranial assemblage from Chupicuaro, lambdic flattenings and also some inclined, elongated pieces make up this collection (Dávalos 1951). A recent reexamination of this series by Cybèle David (2000, p. 58) specifies some 23 individuals of which 87 % bear the effects of cultural flattening, of which sixteen display an erect form, and four more an oblique form.



Fig. 7.3 Different views of cranium of Late Preclassic Burial 1A, Tlaltenco, Mexico City. (DAF/INAH; photo courtesy of A. Romano and J. Gómez-Valdés). The calotte displays a straight frontal plane and marked lambdic and occipital flattening. The posterior view reveals clear signs of annular constriction that left a horizontal sulcus, which divides the skull in a superior and an inferior lobe. (See also Serra et al. 1982)

On the other side of the Mexican Central Plateau lies today's state of Oaxaca, an area that had already become one of Mesoamerica's main cultural hubs (Winter 1989) by the Early and Middle Preclassic period. San Mateo Etlatongo in Oaxaca's Nochixtlan District counts among the early local developments to be archaeologically explored. From here, Romano (1987) reports two unmodified crania and another three that display different degrees of erect shaping from cradleboard use. As with the settlers of the Valley of Mexico, Etlatongo's practitioners used to combine the effect of annular constriction frequently with rigid cradleboard compression. Its constricting effects on the skull recall the peculiar, narrow Olmec head profiles excavated towards the Gulf coast. Javier Romero (1950, 1951, 1983) provides additional information for those cranial series that were recovered from Preclassic Monte Albán contexts and the Late Preclassic site of Monte Negro. In both skeletal assemblages, the author confirms abundance and diversity in artificial cranial shapes, albeit tabular erect varieties appear to prevail. In the Zapotec capital of Monte Albán, which, by the Late Preclassic period had turned into the preeminent Zapotec sociopolitical and economic center, head splinting appears to make its debut at the onset of the Early Classic period, during Monte Albán IIIA phase (A.D. 200–500). From then on, the material record testifies both oblique and erect head silhouettes in burial remains (Romero 1983, p. 102).

In synthesis, head modification practices among Mesoamerican Highland settlers became almost generalized in the course of the two millennia that breach the Preclassic era. At the beginning, its women probably used standard cradleboards that led to erect fronto-occipital and lambdic flattenings in their infants. The great majority of Preclassic period crania from the Mesoamerican Highlands still bears these erect forms; at least, this is the tendency in the combined record of the Preclassic period series curated by the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, which make up some 95 % of 221 individuals surveyed (Romano 1974a, p. 213). Chronological comparisons among Highland collections also indicate subtle shifts in formal

preferences and in the use of compression kits over the two Preclassic millennia. Towards the Late Preclassic period, distinctive forms of head splints and wraps were increasingly incorporated in some areas, possibly functioning as part of the cradleboard kit. This diversity is upheld by the finely modeled small-scale figurines from Tlatilco, Chupicuaro, and other pre-Hispanic Highland sites, which display babies predominantly in cribs or carriages. The top of the head usually appears either covered by a little slab or a cushion or may appear as wrapped in cloth. Other foreheads seem to be actively manipulated by a female caretaker (see Chap. 4). Less frequent among the ceramic imagery than the crib scenes are representations of women carrying a baby in their arms. In many of these pair scenes, the adults' head style is curiously mirrored by that of the little one; when covered, semirigid rings or broad circular bands circle their heads. Naturally, we cannot be sure if the infants' headwear was put on purely for adornment or was used as a constricting tool as well.

Among the insipient signs of diversification and regionalization, the combination of tight wraps and cradleboard compression stands out. Romano documents its outcome in a number of individuals from Tlatilco and Cuicuilco in the present-day urban area of Mexico City, and from Tlaltenco and Etlantongo in Oaxaca. The appearance of these high and narrow vaults comes close to Olmecoid head portraiture and technically qualifies as the tabular erect pseudocircular variety (Sect. 4.3), although Romano is careful to clarify that the horizontal constrictions do not appear as expressed as in the Middle Preclassic skull from Pampa el Pajón, in the present-day state of Chiapas. The latter, which appears extremely narrow and rounded, with a bulging, towering forehead and a noticeable horizontal separation between upper and lower neurocrania, will be referred to extensively in the following paragraphs and Sect. 7.3 of this chapter. For the sake of flow, we will also discuss other series that surround the Mesoamerican Isthmus area in the context of the Formative Maya period, although, strictly speaking, these belong to the Mexican Highlands that are under review here.

7.2.2 *The Maya Area*

East of Oaxaca, the terrain descends and opens towards the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a transition zone between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific. This natural strait instituted major Mesoamerican merchant routes between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Coast and specifically towards the Soconusco area, wedged between the Sierra Madre mountain ranges of Chiapas and the ocean. This was formerly a prime spot of Mesoamerican long-distance exchange and trade. From remote times onward, the Isthmus was also an important transit area between the Central and Maya Highlands. Further east and towards the Yucatecan Peninsula lie the vast territories that during the Preclassic period saw the rise of complex hierarchical political units that encompassed the Maya Lowlands and Highlands.

During the last part of the second millennium B.C. and the first millennium B.C., the agricultural settlers of these diverse territories shared some elements of their cultural repertoire with the neighboring Olmec hegemonies of the Gulf Coast, although

there are controversies on the form and extension of the exchange and influence (Clark 1990; Pool 2007). According to recent interpretations, Middle Preclassic Maya society already looked back to a culture and sociopolitical tradition of its own that was relatively independent of the Gulf Coast hegemonies to its west. Architectural monuments in early sites of northern Yucatán, such as Poxilá, Xocnaceh, and Xtobó, with their *sacbeob* (white roads), acropolis, ball courts, triadic, and type E groups, already then denote the presence of an elite that had the capacity to mobilize a collective labor for public works (Diehl 2004; Pool 2007). In any event, expansive networks from the lands of Olman, regional and long-distance exchange, and redistribution must have also catalyzed a mutual understanding and adoption of ideological elements throughout the Preclassic period, probably in a similar fashion as happened with the Mesoamerican Highland development west of Olman.

In these evolving cultural landscapes of the Mesoamerican east, the earliest evidence for modeling dates at least to the Middle Preclassic period, but should have appeared still earlier in the settlers' cultural repertoires. Unfortunately, Preclassic period skeletal remains are very reduced in numbers and suffer from poor preservation due to the erosive soil and the harsh environmental conditions that prevail in a large part of the Maya sphere. Those early cases of cranial modification that are positively identified correspond in part to artificially elongated, inclined head profiles and intermediate tabular erect forms, along with the "Olmecoid" pseudocircular erect shapes (Romano 1977; Saul 1972; Saul and Saul 1991, 1997; Tiesler 2010, 2012). Frank and Julie Saul (1997; Saul and Saul 1997) record the earliest Maya evidence of cranial modification in a Phase Xe individual from the site of Altar de Sacrificios, along the shores of the Río Usumacinta, and for Swasey/Bladen phase crania from Cuello, Belize. The latter date to the Early Middle Preclassic period and display both elongated and erect head shapes. Further east, another pristine example of Soconusco head modifications is published by Arturo Romano at Pampa el Pajón, in the present-day state of Chiapas (1977, 1980; see also Salas 1980). We will take up his case study again in the next section of this chapter. A second early culturally modified specimen (in the form of pseudocircular tabular erect flattening) integrates the material record of Caucel, a major Preclassic settlement from the northern Yucatecan Peninsula, recently excavated by Fernando Robles (INAH) near the city of Mérida (Tiesler 2009; Tiesler and Rodríguez 2009; Robles and Ligorred 2008). This individual was recovered from Structure 52 of the site and was accompanied by the Early Nabanché phase (800/700–400/300 B.C.) ceramics.

It is noteworthy that the above described pristine cranial modifications appeared at roughly the same time as dental modifications in the Maya archaeological record. Saul and Saul (1997, pp. 45–46) document some of these primeval dental alterations for the Early Bladen Phase (900–800 B.C.) of Cuello, in Belize. The early tooth decorations consist of deep grooves that had been filed into the maxilla dentition of a female adult. Also, Javier Romero (1958) describes early material evidence of Maya dental practices such as inlays in the drilled teeth of an individual who lived at the central Lowland site of Uaxactún (Petén, Guatemala) during the Mamón Phase (600–350 B.C.)

Upon integrating the information documented by different authors for Preclassic skeletal assemblages, we can cautiously intend some regional generalizations on

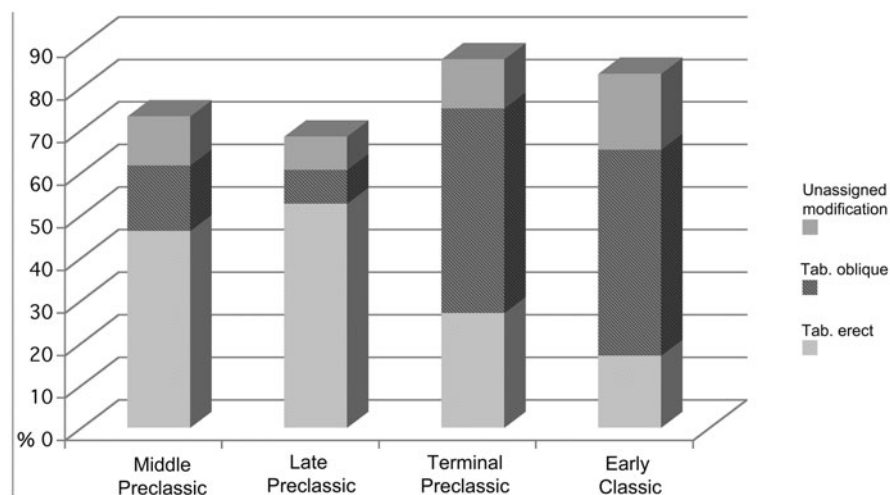


Fig. 7.4 Preferences (erect, oblique, unspecified) and overall frequencies of head morphologies during the Middle and Late Preclassic, the Protoclassic, and Early Classic in the Maya area. (Histogram by Vera Tiesler; see also Tiesler 2010, 2012)

early Maya head practices and their preferences. Unfortunately, these trends are heavily biased towards the information that comes from those archaeological sites with preserved cranial vestiges. Most of these places line the Caribbean coastline or come from the northern part of the Yucatán Peninsula, the Maya Highlands, and the central and southern Maya Lowlands. At least here, after making its appearance during or before the Maya Middle Preclassic period, the modeling was carried out by employing both compression cribs and head devices. As in the Highlands, back then, compression splints still appear to have been used relatively less among Maya practitioners than later, during the Classic period. On the regional level, the increase in frequency and diversity appears to be accompanied by a gradual change in techniques. In those Preclassic Maya samples of skulls that were systematically scored by the author ($N = 49$), the custom still appears to be less varied and less severe than later, Early Classic cranial assemblages express. During the Preclassic era, head shaping not only seems less diversified but also less common, with a proportion of less than 70 % of the crania shaped during the Middle Preclassic ($N = 17$) and the Late Preclassic periods ($N = 22$), compared to over 80–90 % during the Classic period (Fig. 7.4).

The full range of artificial cephalic shapes that would later characterize Classic Maya society apparently was still unknown during the first millennium B.C. This situation is evident for the Maya Highlands, for example, as an assemblage from the large Formative site of Kaminaljuyú, nowadays part of Guatemala City, illustrates. Two individuals that date back to its early occupational phases during the Middle Preclassic period exhibit an isolated frontal flattening. The flat planes probably stem from tumpline use during early age, as its position is untypically high for being the product of cradleboarding. There is also no evidence for complementary flattening

on the back (Gervais 2001; Tiesler 1999). The third cranium, dated to the same period as the first two, shows no sign of cultural change at all. Further west, none of the four individuals from the Middle Preclassic period of San Mateo in the Chiapanecan Angostura basin exhibited artificial manipulation, indicating in principle that the custom was not yet used in this area.

Beyond these broad trends, Preclassic Maya site assemblages are less informative than comparisons on a regional scale, principally for lack of sufficient sample sizes. This is because the early dated crania tend to represent only small proportions of the overall skeletal series from important Maya sites, such as Copán, Tikal, or Calakmul, where the majority of individuals are invariably dated to the Late Classic period. Possibly a welcome exception for the purposes of reviewing local head-shaping practices is the archaeological urban site of Chiapa de Corzo on the eastern fringes of the Maya region with its relatively large Preclassic series (Agrinier 1964; Lowe and Agrinier 1960). Here, the five earliest of 23 examined crania date to the French Phase (450–250 B.C.). Two of these had been artificially reclined by use of headsplints, combined in each case with compression bandages, probably to accentuate inclination and elongation. Later, during the Protoclassic period (Guanacaste and Ismo Phases, 300 B.C.–200 A.D.), some 15 of 18 evaluable skullcaps show signs of artificial transformation, indicating its widespread use already in those centuries. Both head splints and cradleboards were common then and both were often reinforced with constricting bandages, including the “Olmecoid” shapes, to be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

The first two centuries A.D. closed the Preclassic period in the Maya area, and among the settlers of Chiapa de Corzo, the advent of the Classic era was accompanied by a visible change in head form that followed the elimination of narrow “Olmecoid” shapes and that of head inclination and elongation. At the end of this process, the only implement that seems to have remained in use among practitioners was the compression crib. Classic era inhabitants of Chiapa de Corzo showed uniformly erect and broad head forms. This style is in inverse proportion to the trends observed in the remainder of the Maya area, where the compression crib seems to have been gradually replaced by head presses adjusted directly over the calotte of the infant and thereby leading to the collective look of back-bent heads, portrayed in Classic imagery and evident in the cranial record. This was especially true in the Usumacinta Basin which borders the Chiapanec highlands. In sites such as Yaxchilán or Palenque, over 90 % of the population displayed mostly severe oblique and narrow head models. The discrepancy in head form of Chiapa de Corzo’s settlers in the east invited questions regarding the cultural and possibly ethnic borders of this area, which is presumed to have been settled not by Western Maya but by Mixe-Zoque-speaking folk, who maintained close cultural ties with the Isthmus and the coastal plains (Lee 1969, 1993).

In synthesis and viewed from a pan-regional perspective of the Maya culture, it seems that the cultural head modeling became a generalized body tradition in most parts of Mesoamerica during the Late Preclassic period. As for the Maya, it is then that the formal diversity and average degrees of modification (around or exceeding ‘2’, Sect. 4.3.) would have reached high levels of collective acceptance by the population, with a frequency of above 80 % of the population showing artificial

modeling. Similarly high frequencies would be retained in the cultural repertoire during the next millennium, at least speaking for the Maya (Tiesler 2012). Practically all facets of the head-shaping practices of the later Classic period were already present here during the Protoclassic, with a single exception: the tabular erect pseudocircular or “Olmecoid” form, which appears to emulate the cephalic imagery of the Olmecs. If we believe the skeletal record, this modality was abandoned altogether in the Maya sphere during the first two centuries A.D.

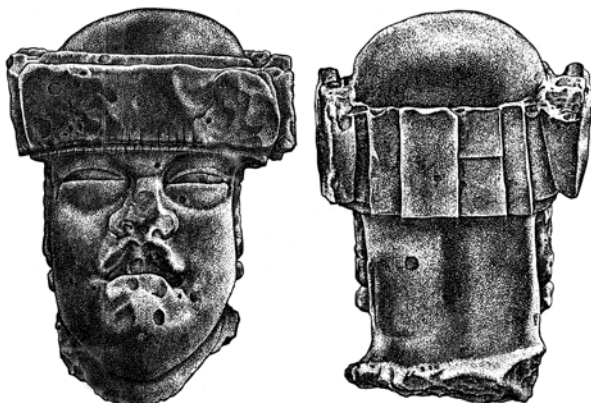
7.3 Olmec and “Olmecoid” Head Forms

The Olmec characterize the earliest large hierarchically administered society in Mesoamerica. Known for its rich artistic legacy and permanent city–temple complexes with ball courts, such as those at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes, Olmec culture flourished from around 1400–400 B.C. In that time, it dominated much of the Early and Middle Formative periods in Mesoamerica and lay the precedent for much of its subsequent cultural development. Although, strictly speaking, the archaeological remnants left by the Gulf Coast Olmec folk of Olancho is geographically limited to the Gulf Coast territories of lower Veracruz and Tabasco, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and maybe the Soconusco area, Olmec objects and Olmec-style artifacts and symbols came to circulate through most of Mesoamerica during the Middle Preclassic period (900–400 B.C.; Coe and Diehl 1980; Diehl 2004). The form and time sequence of pan-regional interaction and the driving forces behind the assimilation of Olmec cultural elements have been the subject of ongoing scholarly debate, commonly identified with the “sister cultures” vs. “mother culture” controversy (see, for example, Stark 2000, pp. 35–43; Pool 2007, pp. 12–17; Cheetham et al. 2009). By all accounts, exchange between the Olmec (or their intermediaries) with populations east and west of the Soconusco must have been intense by the Middle Preclassic period and was most likely accompanied by a rich material and intellectual exchange; a dynamic cultural tapestry of direct or syncretic religious and life-style adoptions (Diehl 2004, pp. 135–136).

7.3.1 *Distribution of Pseudocircular Erect Head Shapes*

The pervasive nature of this interaction is illustrated by a highly visible tradition that physically embodies Olmec heritage: infant head modeling. Richard Diehl (2004) describes the anthropomorphic Olmec head sculptures found on the Gulf Coast as distinctly pear-shaped, narrow, and high (Fig. 7.5). Considering this shape, the predominant technique should have been cradleboard use in combination with tight circular head wraps, apt to produce a variety of narrow and heightened head profiles. Unfortunately, no well-preserved skeletal record allows us to witness this custom directly from the highly erosive coastal stretches once occupied by Olman’s people (Villamar 2009).

Fig. 7.5 Colossal Olmec head, Monument 6, San Lorenzo. (Adapted from Coe and Diehl, 1980, Fig. 429, 311, and drawn by M. Sánchez)



In fact, the first association between the past living custom of artificially changing head form and the cephalic morphology of the Olman heartlands outside the Gulf area were noted by Arturo Romano in his seminal case study of Burial 1 from Pampa el Pajón, dated to the Middle Preclassic Encanto Phase (750/700–600 B.C.; Paillés 1978; Romano 1977, 1980; Fig. 7.6). At that time, Pampa el Pajón functioned as a thriving estuarine center on the Soconusco coastal plain of Chiapas with direct ties to La Venta (Paillés 1978, p. 93). Romano describes the skull of a young male with an extreme tabular erect modification. Its morphology displays the constrictive action of the band, which increases the upward projection of the compressed head, while effectively limiting its bilateral expansion. This form characterizes pseudocircular fronto-occipital modifications according to Imbelloni’s scheme, achieved by a combination of rigid and bland compression materials. Romano specifically notes a tight horizontal headband that constricted the child’s head while resting in a compression cradle device, constraining any backward inclination of the infant skull. In the case



Fig. 7.6 Skull from Pampa el Pajón, Chiapas, Mexico, in different views. (Photo by A. Romano)

of Burial 1 from Pampa el Pajón, the deep horizontal groove left by the band visually separates the cranium into an inferior and a superior lobe, quite similar to the formation of the heads of the anthropomorphic sculptures in the heart of the Olmec lands which encourage Romano to speak of an “Olmec” cranial modification in his work.

Other modifications of this type have been described over the years in the series from the coastal mountain ranges of Veracruz (Carlos Serrano, personal communication, 2001), and for the Mexican Highland series, some of which have been reviewed in this chapter. Although no collection has been systematically scored for pseudocircular erect shapes, many are characterized by the same attributes described for the skull from Pampa el Pajón. Specifically, Romano notes the artificially reduced width of many tabular erect skulls from Tlatilco, the horizontal grooves in the two detailed case studies on the Late Formative Tlaltenco skulls, and in more cases from the Preclassic period Oaxaca.

An additional nine specimens with this peculiar cranial-vault shape come from Chiapa de Corzo in Chiapas and the Maya Lowlands; namely, from Caucel and Dzibilchaltún (Mexican state of Yucatán), Seibal, and Altar de Sacrificios (Río de la Pasión, Guatemala; Tiesler 2010, 2012; Fig. 7.7). In all cases, these are associated with the Preclassic period. The pseudocircular tabular erect modifications of these skull vaults were produced in all cases by combining a cradling device with a horizontal wrap. It is noteworthy, however, that none of the cranial pieces described for the broader Maya area come close to the extreme degree of morphological transformation that the youngster from Pampa el Pajón displays; all of these appear higher than simple tabular erect forms and are narrow, not broad. All show horizontal circular constriction in the form of lateral grooving and many display additional bulging towards the occipital foramen (pseudo-xifobasia). Chronologically, the nine cases span almost a millennium (from the Middle Preclassic to the Protoclassic periods), before being eliminated from the cultural repertoires of ancient Maya practitioners at the onset of the Classic period (Fig. 7.4). Geographically, the pseudocircular erect shapes come from different sectors of the Maya region; namely, the northern stretches of Yucatán, the Maya Southern Lowlands, and Chiapanec fringes. At the time, these sites functioned as political or exchange centers. Most of them show evidence of interaction with Highland Guatemala and contact with the Olmec region.

Considered jointly with other information on the Preclassic Maya repositories for the dead, it is evident that Maya enactment of “Olmecoid” head shaping was performed equally on both boys and girls. The contextual indications also suggest that it was one shape out of many different shapes with no distinct consideration given to individuals with this head form in terms of grave structure, offerings, or corpse treatment. This aspect, together with the fact that cranial-vault shaping was already a deeply ingrained family tradition at the onset of the Maya Middle Preclassic era, speaks against a restrictive application of this body practice. This conjecture gains still further support from the idea that head shaping was enacted by female practitioners within a domestic domain and the notion that heads of female and male babies were equally the objects of Olmecoid shaping. Considering the above, I advocate rather—at least for the territories east and south of Oman—that the



Fig. 7.7 Regional distribution map of Olmecoid (pseudoannular tabular erect) head shapes in the Maya area. (Map by V. Tiesler)

emblematic meaning(s) ascribed to artificially molded heads must have been in any case inclusive of all segments of society. A similar view is expressed by Cyphers (2009, pp. 12–16; see also Cyphers and Villamar 2006), who examines the pseudoannular erect modification in figurines from Mesoamerican territories outside the Gulf Coast (specifically the Basin of Mexico, Chalcatzingo, and Oaxaca), as social identifiers with affinities to the Isthmian cultures. She also sees the formal heterogeneity as an expression of political decentralization in view of social renovation and adoption.

Regarding the chronological association of the Olmecoid crania from the Maya territories and their distribution, it is noteworthy that the earliest cases of this sort of cranial modification occurred not during but after the flourishing hub of Olmec society, especially of the earlier San Lorenzo and La Venta hegemonies. In fact, most of the specimens with this shape postdate the fall of the Olmec by centuries. I therefore believe that the peculiar head forms in the Maya territories must have

identified a custom that was either disconnected altogether from specific emblematic connotations or have identified post (epi)-Olmec ideological attributes. This perspective raises question as to the potential purpose and meanings that caused the Mayan communities of the Peninsula and further south to emulate the anachronical head silhouettes formerly displayed by the Olmec.

7.3.2 The Role of Olmecoid Head Forms in Mesoamerica

Olmec art expresses the relationship between humans and the supernatural world through visual resources. Although no Olmec skeleton has been found from the Southeastern plains of Veracruz and Tabasco to confirm ancient head looks, realistic images sculpted from ceramic and stone monuments show a natural, even individualistic portrayal of Olman's people (Cyphers 2009; Cyphers and Villamar 2006; Diehl 2004). Their heads, usually depicted bald or shaved, are almost invariably narrow and high vaulted, suggesting artificial cranial shaping in a similar fashion to that of the head morphology documented by Romano for the youngster from Pampa el Pajón and those analogous head styles perpetuated in the skeletal record from many Preclassic cultural Mesoamerican territories, as described earlier in the chapter.

Also, the more esoteric Olmec iconography follows this format. Illustrations of metamorphic creatures and supernatural forces such as the jaguar and the Rain God are almost exclusively represented with unnaturally high and narrow heads, as the posterior portion of the vault appears reduced or eliminated altogether with the ear lobes delineating the back of the head (Tiesler 2010). Within this artistic convention, other possible cranial characteristics are also introduced, such as the crevice in the form of a sagittal groove cut into the vertex of the heads of the Gods of Maize and of Rain, or the foliated head of the God of Maize, as described by Taube (1996). Prominently placed bands commonly tie the heads of both anthropomorphic images of the supernatural and venerated rulers, leading some authors to grant importance to the headband as a symbol of politically and religiously conferred power (Reilly 2006). Some investigators even affirm that artificially transformed heads are an indication of status (Clark 1993; Diehl 2004; Hansen 2005). Although there are no clear arguments to confirm or deny this affirmation for the Olmecs because of the lack of evaluable material, at least for the areas outside the Olmec heartlands, any connotation of prestige in the pear-shaped Olmec heads should be considered doubtful, given their lack of relevance in the burial record. I conclude that the artificial form in itself, which was probably the common denominator in modification techniques within the core territories of the Olmecs of the Gulf Coast, would not have held any prestigious connotation.

Still another notion to be considered concerns those cultural processes, which led to the apparent embodiment of Olmec ideology in the cultural repertoires of greater Formative Mesoamerica, as documented for crania from the Maya area, the Tehuantepec straight and the Soconusco, as well as for some of the Central Mexican series. The sociocultural dynamics and processes that led to the adoption and practice of head

constriction in cradleboard devices across the Mesoamerican cultural landscape was surely as complex as it is multifold. In terms of the local adoption of the artificial Olmec forms, these would have added most probably to already embedded family traditions with their preexistent, more autochthonous meanings (Tiesler 2010). This situation speaks more of syncretism and reinterpretation of Olmec heartland ideology than direct imposition.

One aspect that strengthens this reading of the skeletal registry is the fact that Olmecoid head forms continued to be used in Central Highland sites, as documented at the Late Formative site of Terremote-Tlaltenco or the Mayan territories long after any direct Olmec influence had languished. The visible reproduction of these models by many generations of women over a span of at least a millennium provides a unique view on the many ways in which Olmec and Epi-Olmec cultural elements, just like any other ideological traits, were adopted and incorporated into daily life. This dynamic also highlights the active role of the female practitioners in conferring family and group identity through this visible practice, an aspect that we will return to when discussing Classic period dynamics in Chaps. 8 and 9.

One last aspect concerns the possible emblematic meanings of Olmec head morphology, especially its potential role as emblematic personifiers of the supernatural. To what extent did the Preclassic Olmec heads project any clear connotation such as signifiers related to venerated deities (Taube 2000)? We will discuss this point briefly for the Mayan world here, where more nuanced statements are possible thanks to its naturalistic iconographic corpus (see Sect. 6.5; Tiesler 2010). As we have argued already in Sect. 6.5, beyond quotidian and organoplastic motives, the artificial head forms could have also borne visible testimony to the cosmovision of their practitioner groups. This association becomes more palpable in those cultural areas that fostered realistic imagery. Karl Taube (1996, pp. 54–62) has made a case, for example, for the evolving veneration of the Olmec Maize God in southeast Mesoamerica, arguing that many Mesoamerican maize deities would have originated in Olmec Maize God “prototypes”. In his argument, the Classic period profiles of the Isthmian Maize God still represent this Maize God with an erect cranial vault and a vertical forehead contour, similar to earlier Preclassic representations from the area (Taube 1996, Fig. 19a–d). These conventions still appear to imitate anachronously the Olmec prototypes described earlier.

Centuries later, the Maya Maize God would be represented not as erect but with a reclined, elongated head profile by the generations of Classic Period artists (Taube 1992, Figs. 20 and 21). The tonsured version of this young deity makes this new convention still more obvious, considering the transverse postcoronary sulcus that Classic period artistic rendering places on the top of the god’s shaved head (see Fig. 9.6). From an anatomical perspective, this groove appears to be the physiological side effect of severe and prolonged head splinting, which suggests that the Maize God’s artificial head rendering was inspired by the observation of human infant head modeling (see Chap. 3). It is noteworthy in this regard that the inclined tubular head forms that characterize most Maya Maize God representations during Classic period do not really appear until the onset of this era. I conclude this line of thought by assuming that the shifting display of head looks during the final stages of the

Preclassic, must have accompanied and promoted ethnogenesis and forged Maya kin group identities during times of social change (Tiesler 2010).

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