

FAMSI © 2006: Michael Love

The Context and Associations of Monument 3 from La Blanca, Guatemala

With contributions by: Julia Guernsey (University of Texas at Austin).



Research Year: 2005

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Pre-Classic

Location: Guatemala

Site: La Blanca

Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Physical Characteristics of Monument 3](#)

[Materials and Techniques of Manufacture](#)

[The Archaeological Context of La Blanca Monument 3](#)

[La Blanca](#)

[Mound 9: An Elite Residence of the Conchas Phase](#)

[The Artifact Assemblage of Mound 9](#)

[Pottery](#)

[Tables: Frequency of Ceramic Wares \(rims only\) in Operation 32](#)

[Non-pottery Artifacts and Ecofacts](#)

[Monument 3 as the Locus of Ritual](#)

[Preliminary Conclusions](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[List of Figures](#)

[List of Tables](#)
[Sources Cited](#)

Introduction

During the 2004 season at La Blanca, Guatemala ([Figure 1](#)) a unique monument of clay and earth was discovered during the excavation of what was presumed to be an elite residence. Monument 3 from La Blanca ([Figure 2](#)) is notable in several respects. First, it is one of a handful of earthen sculptures from ancient Mesoamerica, and the earliest example of such presently known. Second, it provides dramatic evidence of rituals performed during the early part of the Middle Formative period (900-600 B.C.) in ancient Mesoamerica. Third, it is the earliest known example of the quatrefoil motif in Mesoamerican art. Monument 3 also serves to examine the validity of oppositions such as public/private, ritual/utilitarian, and Great Tradition/Little Tradition in the archaeology of Mesoamerica as well as other regions.

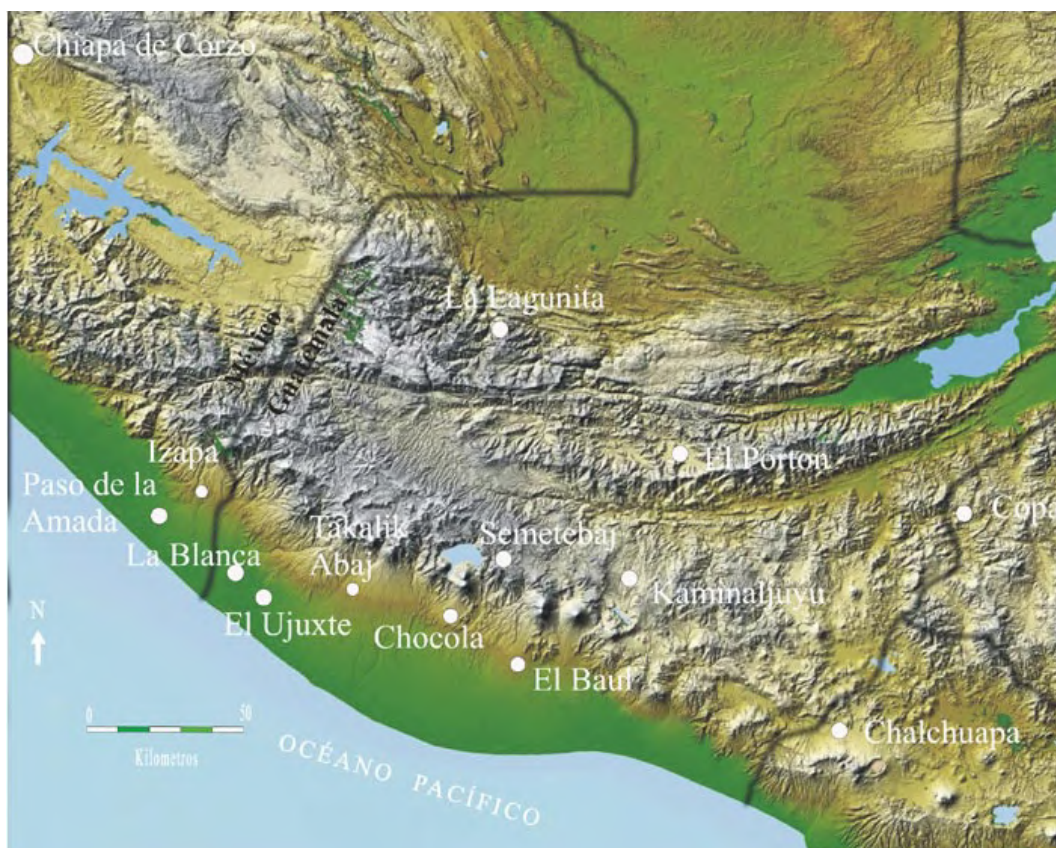


Figure 1. Map of Pacific Guatemala showing the location of La Blanca and other sites.

A grant from FAMSI provided for the analysis of materials associated with Monument 3 and a comparison of those materials with other assemblages from La Blanca. A central

goal of the study was to determine whether the low mound associated with Monument 3 was an elite residence, as initially thought, or a more "public" building.

Before discussing the results of the analysis, we'll first briefly describe the monument and its context. A more complete description of the excavations and discussion of the iconography of the quatrefoil are available in Love *et al.* (2006).

Submitted 06/28/2006 by:

Dr. Michael Love

Department of Anthropology

California State University, Northridge

michael.love@csun.edu



Figure 2. La Blanca Monument 3 Quatrefoil.

Physical Characteristics of Monument 3

Materials and Techniques of Manufacture

La Blanca Monument 3 ([Figure 2](#), shown above) consists of compacted earth and clay. The monument has the form of a quatrefoil, a flower or clover with four petals. The body of the sculpture was formed by sculpting compacted earth, a process observed in other artifacts found in the site. The earth appears to be a loam, consisting of sand, silt, and clay; it is uncertain whether an organic binding agent may have been incorporated. After sculpting, the monument was given a finish coat of fine dark clay, nearly black in color. Finally, the interior ring of the monument was painted red with hematite.

The general form of the monument is circular, with a diameter of 2.1 meters. More specifically, the monument consists of five parts: two rings, a canal, the interior rim and a basin. The outer ring (Ring 1) originally was a complete circle, 10 cm wide. As discovered, however, a large part of the southeastern part of the outer ring is missing. Ring 2 is also a complete circle, but with four points which incline toward the center and which divide the monument into four parts. The canal, which is actually four separate channels, lies between Ring 2 and the interior rim. The highest level of each canal lies halfway between the points and the lowest levels occur where the canals join the basin. The inner rim consists of four arcs that run between the points of Ring 2, forming the interior side of the canals. The interior of the monument is a basin approximately 10 cm deep, measured from the top of the inner rim. The basin is slightly concave, with the center being 3-5 cm deeper than the edge.

The inclination of Ring 2, the presence of the canal, and the concavity of the basin all suggest that Monument 3 was meant to contain liquid. Fluid introduced onto Ring 2 or into the channel would flow into the center of the basin. Marcus (1998) describes the use of water-filled basins in Preclassic period Oaxaca, where they were used in rites of divination. We propose a similar function for La Blanca Monument 3, but more specifically, we propose that it was viewed as a portal to the underworld. Our interpretation is based on three observations, the first of which is the already stated deduction that the monument was meant to contain water, as well as the long-recognized associations between water and the underworld in the Mesoamerican cosmology. Second, the iconography of the quatrefoil in Mesoamerican art indicates that these motifs were viewed as portals that provided access to the underworld. Third, the high density of clay figurines found in the mound associated with the monument suggests that rituals were conducted as part of household activities. After a brief description of the archaeological context of the monument, we will offer a more complete discussion and justification of these assertions.

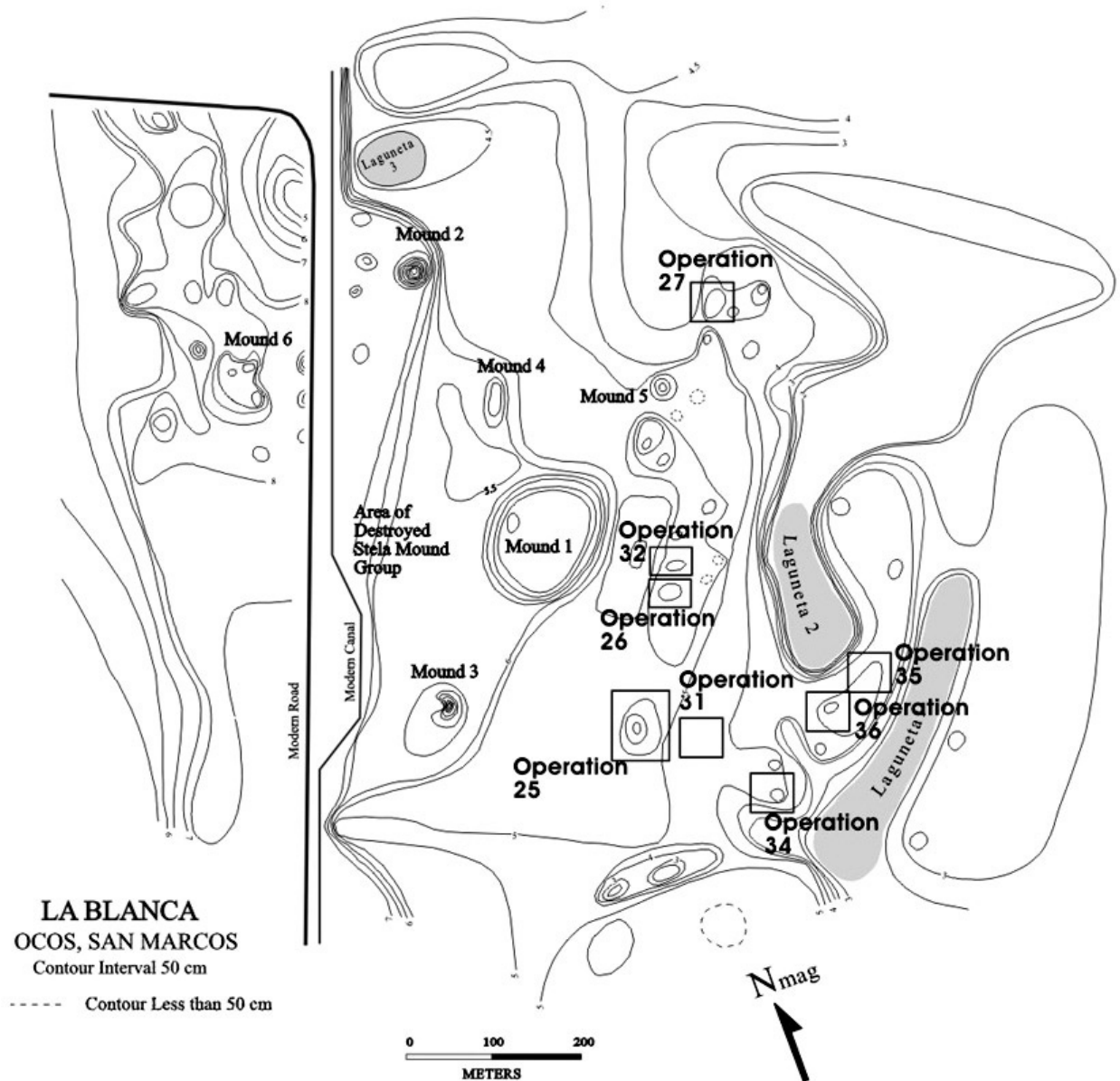


Figure 3. Map of the central portion of La Blanca, showing excavation operations.

The Archaeological Context of La Blanca Monument 3

La Blanca

La Blanca (Figure 3, shown above) was one of the largest Middle Preclassic sites of ancient Mesoamerica. La Blanca rose as a regional center following the collapse of an Early Preclassic polity whose capital was the site of Ojo de Agua, Chiapas. It maintained its prominence for over 300 years, until it declined at about 600 B.C. for unknown reasons. The site covered over 200 ha at its peak and boasted some of the earliest monumental architecture in Mesoamerica. Mound 1, built at around 900 B.C.

(1000 cal B.C.), was one of the first pyramidal temples in Mesoamerica, standing over 25 meters tall and 150 × 90 m at its base (Love *et al.* 2005).

La Blanca's principal occupation falls within the Conchas Phase (900-600 B.C.), which can be divided into four sub-phases on the basis of stratigraphy and changes in pottery (Love 1993, 2002). Radiocarbon dates for these overlap, but dates for the Conchas C and D sub-phases suggest that Conchas A and B are relatively brief periods, falling between 900 and 800 B.C., while Conchas C and D are longer, falling between 800-700 B.C. and 700-600 B.C., respectively.

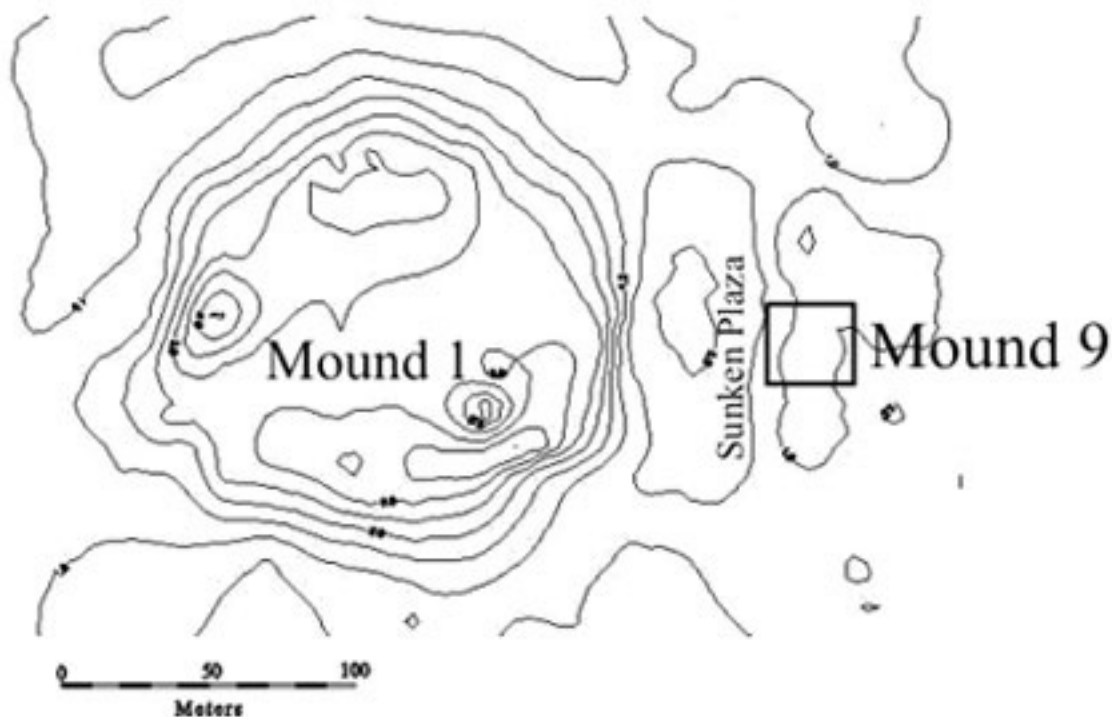


Figure 4. Location of Mound 9 relative to Mound 1 and the Sunken Plaza.

Mound 9: An Elite Residence of the Conchas Phase

Monument 3 was found on the western slope of Mound 9, which is part of an elite residential precinct on a ridge east of Mound 1, the largest monumental construction at the site (Figure 4, shown above). Between Mound 9 and Mound 1 lies a sunken plaza which measures approximately 40 × 100 m. Thus, although Mound 9 appears to be primarily "residential" in nature, it fronts a plaza that might well be considered "public" or "ritual." The location of Monument 3 between a putatively residential structure and a probable ritual plaza only serves to heighten the ambiguity of its context and blur the distinction between the many dichotomies often employed in archaeological analysis.

The series of excavations conducted in Mound 9 were designated as Operation 32. Operation 32 was undertaken as part of a study of household ritual and economy whose goal is to understand the economic and ideological changes that took place during the expansion of social complexity during the Middle Formative. Mound 9 is adjacent to Mound 8, which was excavated in 1985 by Operation 26 and found to contain large numbers of elite indicators, including fine paste pottery and jade jewelry (Love 1991, 2002).

The features found within Operation 32 in general indicate that Mound 9 represents the remains of an elite residence of the Conchas phase. Domestic refuse, burials, and hearths all indicate a domestic function. A preliminary analysis of the ceramics from Operation 32 indicates that the mound was first occupied in the Conchas B sub-phase. Monument 3 was sealed by the Conchas C sub-phase, probably at the beginning of that period, ca. 800 B.C.

The Artifact Assemblage of Mound 9

A comprehensive study of the artifact assemblage of Mound 9 is still underway and comparative data are being gathered in ongoing excavations in other residential precincts. To date we have completed a preliminary analysis of the pottery assemblage by tabulating ceramic wares from five units of Operation 32. All artifacts have been cataloged so that counts and weights are available for all major artifact categories. Here we examine those data as a key to understanding the context of Monument 3.

Pottery

The La Blanca pottery assemblage is being analyzed by an attribute-based system that records data on form and decoration in addition to typological data. The major categorical variable is the ware, defined as a combination of paste and slip. A complete description of the methodology and the coding manual are available in Love (2002).

[Tables 1–4](#), shown on the next page, provide tabulations of ceramic wares for four excavation units within Operation 32. The ceramic assemblage is purely Middle Preclassic, with the admixture of Late Classic Plumbate pottery in the upper levels of only a few units. There is also a small amount of Early Preclassic Ocos/Locona pottery in some units, in a secondary context. The presence of Melendrez Red-on-White and Margarita Fine Red-on-Cream indicates that occupation begins no earlier than the Conchas B sub-phase (Love 2002). We have not yet fully analyzed vessel forms and decorations, but diagnostic forms and decorative motifs of the Conchas C and D sub-phases are present in the upper levels of all units.

The dominant wares in all units are Melendrez White and Melendrez Black. These wares have a wide variety of forms, including serving bowls and storage jars, but can be

broadly described as "domestic" in nature. The incidence of Alamo ware, the principal cooking ware of the Conchas phase, is 4.2% for the entire Operation 32 assemblage. This percentage is comparable to that of other mounds at La Blanca thought to be domestic, suggesting that Mound 9 is also a residential mound. Ramirez wares, which are made from kaolin clay and thought to be linked to elite status, account for 1.4% of the pottery rims. In other residences excavated to date, the mean for Ramirez wares falls around 1%. These data, along with others detailed below, indicate that Mound 9 is a residential mound, but probably occupied by members of the elite at La Blanca.

Tables: Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32

Table 1. Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32, sub-operation 1														
Level	Element	Melendrez White	Melendrez Black	Melendrez Red on White	Ramirez Black	Ramirez White	Cuca	Alamo	Perez	Ocos	Rojo Fugitivo	Other	Margarita	Total
1		46	22	3	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	4	0	80
2		22	6					2				3		33
3		18	5					1				1		25
4		13	5					2			2			22
5		8	9	2								1		20
6		8	4					2				1		15
7		4	5				1	2				2		14
8		6	5									3		14
9		10	6	1				1				1		19
10		12	11			1		1				2		27
11		26	5				1	2			4	2		40
12		17	17				1	2			2	2		41
13		32	25	2		2	1	4		1	2	3		72
14		49	39	4		1	4	3			5	5		110
15		85	57	19			2	9			10	5		187
16		61	67	5			4				16	8		161
17		62	70	15				8			12	3		170
18		38	56	1		7	7	8			20	31		168
19		22	28	4		1		5			6	5		71
20		26	20	6		3		3		1	5	15		79
21		17	23	4	1	4	2	5			2	13		71
22		20	35	3	1	1	3	4			3	20		90
23		17	28	1			4	7				4		61
Totals		619	548	70	2	22	30	74	0	2	89	134	0	1590

Table 2. Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32, sub-operation 5

Level	Element	Melendrez White	Melendrez Black	Melendrez Red on White	Ramirez Black	Ramirez White	Cuca	Alamo	Perez	Ocos	Rojo Fugitivo	Other	Margarita	Total
1		77	48	11	0	0	3	3	0	0	3	7	0	152
2		19	7	1		1		2				6		36
3		12	7	2			1					3		25
4		20	12			1	1				2	2		38
5		14	6	1			1	4				3		29
6		19	14	1				4			2	6		46
7		18	9								1	4		32
8		15	13	1				2			1	2		34
9		10	9				1	1			2	3		26
10		11	14	2		1		1				3		32
11		4	8	2							1	2		17
12		10	7					2				5		24
13		9	11	1								1		22
14		11	12			1	1	1				3		29
15		15	12	3		1						4		35
16	A	10	4	1				2				1		18
16	B	5		1				1						7
17		27	9	2			1	1				2		42
18		20	12	1		3	1	3			1	4		45
19		8	12	3		1		3			3			30
20		5	11			1								17
Totals		339	237	33	0	10	10	30	0	0	16	61	0	736

Table 3. Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32, sub-operation 8

Level	Element	Melendrez White	Melendrez Black	Melendrez Red on White	Ramirez Black	Ramirez White	Cuca	Alamo	Perez	Ocos	Rojo Fugitivo	Other	Margari	Total
1		3	5									2		10
2		1												1
3		16	13	1				1				4		35
4		29	5	2		1						3		40
5	A	16	16	2		1		1				7		43
6	A	10	13	3				3				3		32
7	A	10	8	22										40
8	A	7	4	4		1		1				2		19
9	A	6	5	4		1	1					2		19
10	A	10	1	2			1	1				2		17
11	A	4	12	4								1		21
12	A	13	17	1		1		1				2		35
13	A	4	5											9
13	B	0	1											1
14	A	2												2
14	B	2	2	2				1						7
14	C	0	1									2		3
R59		4	6	1										11
Totals		137	114	48	0	5	2	9	0	0	0	30	0	345

Table 4. Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32, sub-operation 9

Level	Element	Melendrez White	Melendrez Black	Melendrez Red on White	Ramirez Black	Ramirez White	Cuca	Alamo	Perez	Ocos	Rojo Fugitivo	Other	Margari	Total
1		21	13	1				2				2		39
2		24	13					1				5		43
3		34	11	3								1		49
4		13	14	1		1		5				3		37
5		19	8	1		1						2		31
6		13	10				1	1						25
7	A	12	9	3				1				1		26
7	B	4	1	2				1						8
8	A	15	7	3				1				2		28
8	B	3	4	4								1		12
9	A	9	5	2				2						18
9	B	15	9	2		1		1				2		30
10	A	1	1											2
10	B	17	14	5		1	1	4						42
11	A	0						1						1
11	B	13	9											22
11	C	2		1										3
12	A	2	1											3
12	B	22	14	1		1	2	3				1		44
13		14	8	4		1						3		30
14		3	2	1				1						7
15		12	5	1										18
16		1												1
R59		1	4	1		1								7
Totals		270	162	36	0	7	4	24	0	0	0	23	0	526

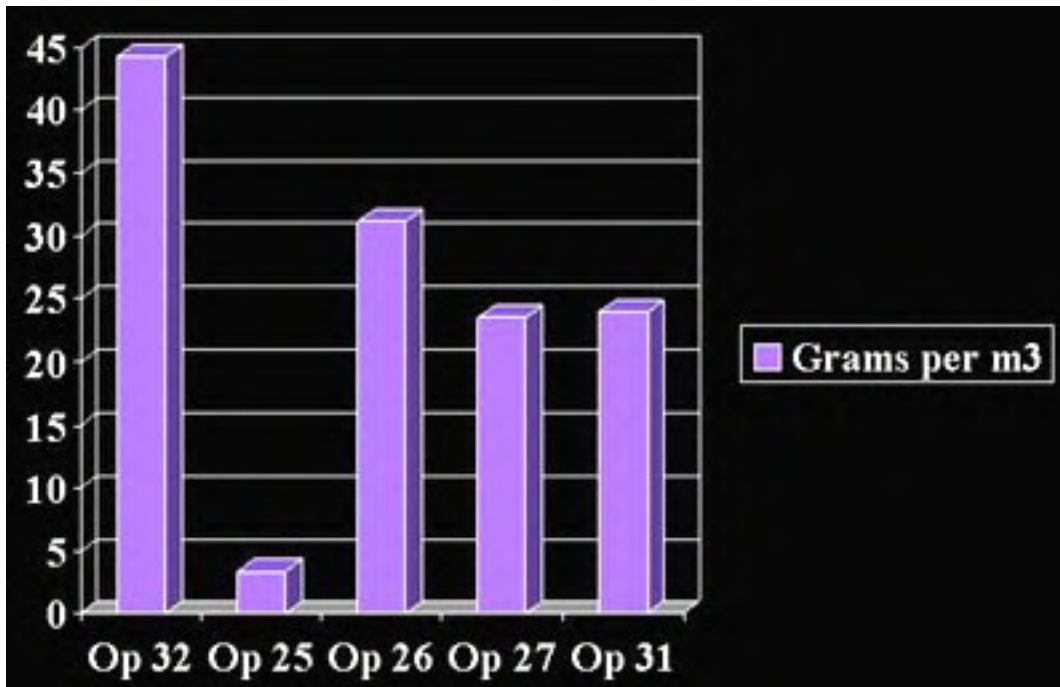


Figure 5. Density of faunal remains in five excavation operations.

Non-pottery Artifacts and Ecofacts

The non-pottery artifact assemblage of Mound 9 seems to be purely domestic, although we hasten to add that we do not have good models of what a non-residential assemblage in the Preclassic period should look like. In addition to the domestic ceramic wares described above, the Mound 9 assemblage has high densities of utilitarian ground stone artifacts and faunal remains. The analysis of paleo-botanical remains is pending. The density of stone artifacts (approximately 19 artifacts per m³ of excavated matrix) is high and suggests that grinding grain was a prominent task, as would be expected of a domestic assemblage.

Mound 9 ranks first among excavated contexts at La Blanca in terms of the density of animal bone, the density of obsidian, the density of jade ornaments, and the density of figurine fragments, as shown in [Figure 5](#), above, and [Figures 6](#) through [Figure 9](#), below. The density of animal bone seems to indicate that food preparation and consumption were taking place at this locale, perhaps in greater frequency than in others. The high density of bone may indicate feasting, but we will await the full analysis of pottery forms before asserting that claim outright.

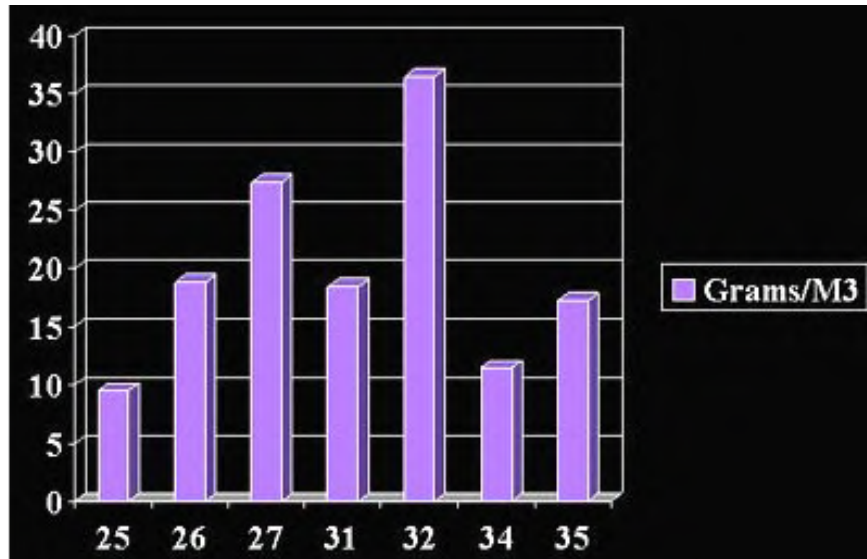


Figure 6. Density of obsidian in seven excavation operations.

Obsidian tools would also seemingly indicate domestic activities. Mound 9 has a high overall density of obsidian compared to other mounds (Figure 6, shown above), which may reflect greater access to material by its residents. Although Mound 9 ranks high in the amount of obsidian of all forms, it falls in the middle of the scale for prismatic blade density (Figure 7, shown below). Blades are important because it has been proposed that they were manufactured by specialists, in contrast to more casual tools made by techniques of direct percussion and bi-polar percussion (Clark 1987; Jackson and Love 1991). We had expected that putatively elite residences would rank high in blade consumption. Without a more detailed analysis of the obsidian assemblage, we cannot at the present time explain why Mound 9 does not rank higher on this scale.

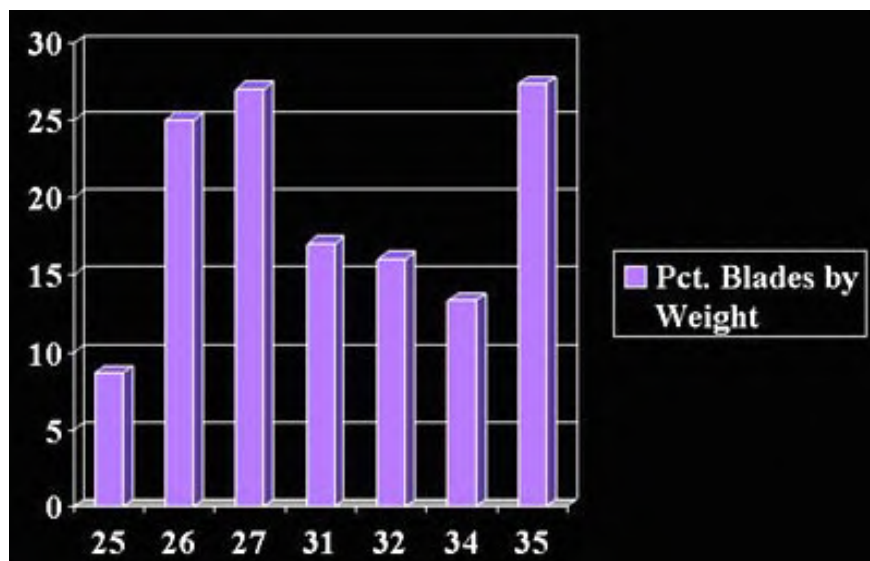


Figure 7. Percentage of obsidian assemblages represented by prismatic blades.

We take the density of jade to be an indicator of household status. All residences at La Blanca have some jade, mostly in the form of very small (under 5 mm) disc-shaped beads, as shown in [Figure 8](#), below. All of these jade pieces may be described as personal adornments. There is a continuum of jade densities among La Blanca households, making it one of the most useful categories of artifact for scaling the socio-economic status of residences. Small jade beads were probably a vital means of preserving household wealth by converting perishable agricultural surplus into durable wealth. The beads, pendants, and earspools would also have been an important means of social display.

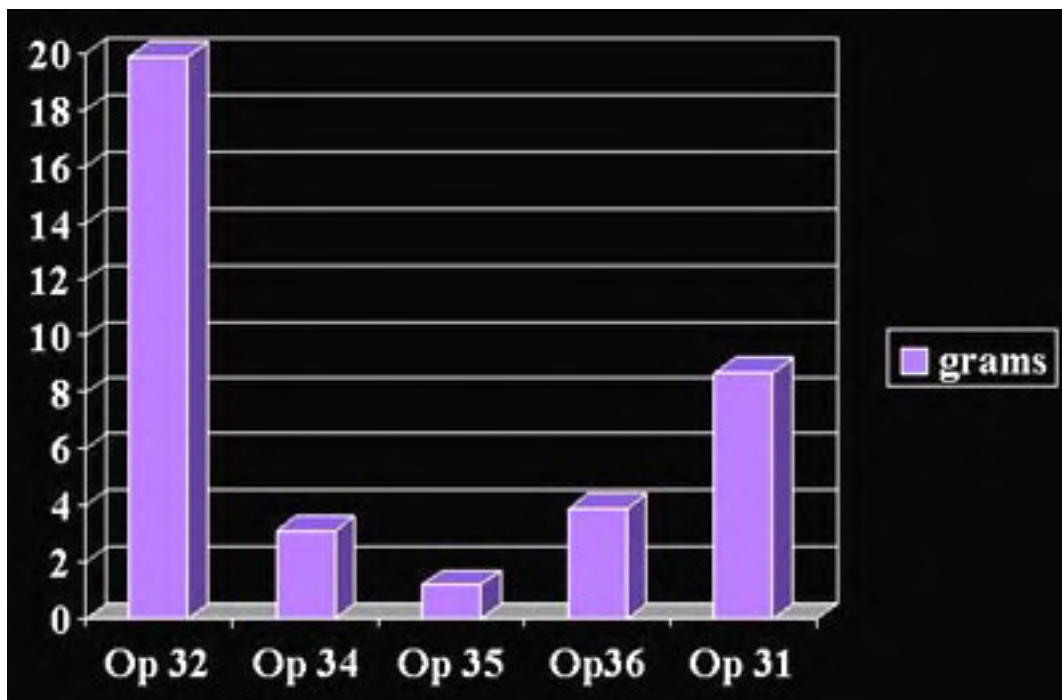


Figure 8. Density of jade artifacts in five excavation operations.

The density of figurines requires some examination. Hand-modeled clay figurines are omnipresent at La Blanca, as in many other Preclassic period households throughout Mesoamerica (Cyphers 1993; Joyce 2002; Marcus 1998). Many interpret these figurines as artifacts used in domestic ritual, especially in rites of ancestor veneration (Cyphers 1993; Grove and Gillespie 2002; Marcus 1998, 1999). Joyce (2002), however, has proposed that figurines were used in other contexts as well, especially in public contexts adjacent to residential zones. She contends that figurines were used to mark important milestones in the life-history of individuals, especially those linked to age grades. So while there is broad consensus that figurines were used in rituals, especially in household rituals, we cannot be certain that they were used only in household rituals, nor that a particular kind of ritual is indicated by their mere presence. Detailed analysis of figurine types and attributes is needed if the context and nature of the rituals is to be elucidated.

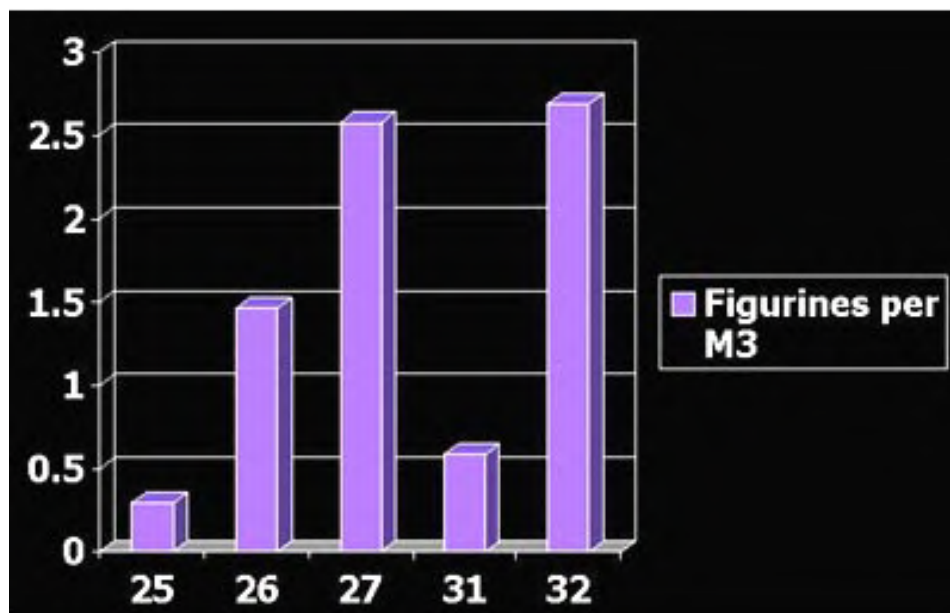


Figure 9. Figurine density in five domestic operations at La Blanca.

[Figure 9](#), above, shows the density of figurine fragments for five contexts at La Blanca. As with other artifact categories, there is a gradient here in which Operation 32 (Mound 9) ranks highest. We cannot directly associate figurine use with Monument 3 as we did not find any significant quantity of figurines in close proximity to it, but it is intriguing to note that Mound 9 did yield the most complete figurines yet found by our excavations at La Blanca. We will need to analyze the figurines in greater detail in order to determine whether the Mound 9 assemblage is qualitatively as well as quantitatively different from other loci at the site.

Another consideration is the type of rituals carried out in association with Mound 9. Again, the literature on Preclassic period Mesoamerica often makes a strong distinction between public and private forms of ritual, and often links these to the Great Tradition/Little Tradition contrast popularized by Robert Redfield (1956). In that dichotomy, the Great Tradition is concerned with cosmology and the ideology of elite power while the Little Tradition is concerned with divination, life-transition events, and the veneration of ancestors. The Great Tradition was ritualized in public places with priests or rulers officiating, while the Little Tradition was performed in household rituals in which elders or lineage heads officiated.

The Great Tradition/Little Tradition dichotomy has been both criticized (McAnany 2002) and defended (Smith 2002) in recent considerations. We believe, however, that Monument 3 and its associated assemblage shows that the dichotomy is not useful and can be spurious, at least in this example. We have an abundance of ceramic figurines (putatively "Little Tradition") in a context where we also find a central icon of the "Great Tradition," a quatrefoil altar.

We believe that the artifact assemblage from Mound 9 indicates that it was a residence in the sense that people lived in the building at the center of the mound and that food preparation, food service, and other quotidian activities were carried out. We do not subscribe, however, to a rigid distinction of ritual and domestic contexts. Nor do we believe that there is necessarily a strong contrast between public and private forms of ritual; it is a matter for empirical investigation. We are presently undertaking a study of Formative period ritual, both "public" and "domestic," in which we hope to be able to offer more substantial comments.



Figure 10. Human head from figurine.



Figure 11. Human head from figurine.

Monument 3 as the Locus of Ritual

There are several types of ritual paraphernalia found in the household assemblages of La Blanca. These include hand-made ceramic figurines, small altars made of ceramic (identified by some authors as ceramic "stools"), and incensarios. Of these three classes of ritual artifacts, it is figurines that are most numerous and offer the best point of entry for analysis. In an effort to determine the kind of rituals carried out at Mound 9, we analyzed all fragments of figurines from Operation 32. We view figurines as the artifact category most indicative of the kind of rituals carried out. Guernsey analyzed 1,179 fragments from Operation 32 and compared the results to those of Arroyo (2002), who analyzed the corpus from Love's 1985 excavations at the site.



Figure 12. Human head from figurine, possibly representing blindness.



Figure 13 & 14. Human head from figurine.

The preponderance of ceramic figurines is composed of representations of humans ([Figures 10](#) through [Figure 14](#), shown above, and [Figures 15](#) through [Figure 21](#), shown below). The heads are naturalistic, with great attention paid to facial characteristics,

headdresses, hair styles, and personal adornment including jewelry, clothing, and tattooing. As Arroyo (2002) observed, the heads are hand modeled and smoothed, with details created by modeling fillets of clay to form earspools, collars, and other decorative elements. Further details include incised designs to indicate hair or headdress components. In some cases, the fragmentary remains of red paint can be seen on various parts of the body and decorative elements. Bodies can also be naturalistic, but some are out of proportion to the heads, with heads being unnaturally large. Arroyo found that a solid majority of the figurines are female (Figure 15, shown below), and a majority of those identified as female were represented as pregnant or, at the very least, with a visibly fleshy or swollen abdomen that may have emphasized their reproductive potential ([Figure 16](#), shown below). Despite this preponderance of ostensibly female figurines, sex and gender are often ambiguous, both in heads and bodies.



Figure 15. Figurine body with breasts and swollen abdomen.



Figure 16. Figurine body with swollen abdomen.

By contrast, another category of apparently human figurines consists of bodies only, without an obvious head ([Figure 17](#), shown below). While a number of these figurines possess breasts and a naturally swelling abdomen—often emphasized by two incised lines at the waist—their upper bodies taper dramatically into a tabular, featureless shape. In some cases, the upper tabular portion has decorative elements that recall those on the headdresses worn by other human figurines, as if the neck and head of the figure have been covered in some sort of shroud, although the contours of the shroud do not define those of a typical head ([Figure 18](#), shown below).



Figure 17. "Tab" figurine with swollen abdomen.



Figure 18. Fragment of "tab" figurine.

This type of figurine occurs with less frequency than its more naturalistic counterparts, and appears to depict a category of human representation that emphasizes the body

rather than the face and connotes an air of anonymity or generic type. Despite this anonymity of form, several examples from the Mound 9 excavations clearly indicate a female body through the inclusion of breasts in addition to the swollen abdomen. As Arroyo (2002: 221) noted, Coe (1961: fig. 58d) reported a similar category of female figurines at La Victoria that he labeled as "tab figurines."



Figure 19. Figurine of seated woman.

Despite the apparent similarity of Operation 32 figurines from those of other contexts, Mound 9 did yield several figurines that are distinctive. [Figure 19](#), above, shows the only complete, or nearly so, figurine found in excavations. It is a depiction of a woman, probably an elder, in a seated position, with arms extended. She wears a collar, presumably of fabric, and a calf-length skirt. She wears a headdress or hair arrangement with two peaks and she wears a solid spherical nose bead, which may be an indication of high rank or a symbol of "breath" or life essence (cf. Houston and Taube 2000).



Figure 20. Representation of avian transformation.

Another very distinctive figurine is shown in [Figure 20](#), above. In this representation, the lower limbs are human and the upper torso is avian. The figurine probably depicts an act of transformation, in which a human is transforming into a bird, an iconographic theme with strong Middle and Late Preclassic parallels (Guernsey 2006; Guernsey Kappelman 2004; Guernsey and Love 2005). The swollen lower body of the figure, which is in strong contrast to the dramatically tapering upper torso, recalls the formal qualities of the "tab" figurines.



Figure 21. Figurine gesturing with hands to mouth.

A third highly distinctive figurine is shown in [Figure 21](#), above. It depicts a human figure holding its hands up to its mouth, with head tilted back and face pointed upwards. The figure's knees are bent and its lower legs and feet, although now lost, probably would have folded back beneath its rear. Although in its present state, without the lower legs and feet, the figure rests upright, its original posture may have been horizontal, so that its arms and knees rested on the ground in a kneeling position, with head arched back. This unusual posture may link the figure, whose unusual gesture must have carried some significance, to other figures in crouching postures as in *The Olmec World* exhibition catalogue (Princeton 1995: fig. 2, p.173). Another figure from the same catalogue (fig. 50, p.176) depicts a standing jaguarian creature with hands lifted to the mouth in a similar gesture. Likewise, a series of dwarf figures depicted in the same catalogue (figs. 114 and 115, pp. 218-219) are portrayed in a similar fashion, with knees flexed, heads upturned, and hands gesturing toward the mouth or on either side of the head. The posture and upturned head of the La Blanca figurine also call to mind two

pedestal sculptures discovered by Eugenia Robinson (2005) at the site of Patzicia in Chimaltenango in the Guatemalan Highlands, not far from Kaminaljuyú, which also date to the Formative period.



Figure 22. Bird figurine with crest and knob on bill.



Figure 23. Dog figurine.



Figure 24. Frontal and profile views of avian figurine with earpools and headdress.

Animal figurines are not as frequent as humans, but comprise approximately 20% of the total at La Blanca. Examples are shown in [Figure 22](#), [Figure 23](#), and [Figure 24](#), above; and [Figure 25](#) and [Figure 26](#), below. [Figure 27](#), below, shows a comparison of percentages of human and animal figurines in Operation 32 compared to other loci at La Blanca. Operation 32 has a slightly higher percentage of animal figurines than other operations, but the difference is small and we lack a sample large enough to say whether the difference is statistically significant.



Figure 25 & 26. Bird figurine with crest.

Several of the animal figurines clearly represent birds ([Figure 22](#), [Figure 24](#), [Figure 25](#), and [Figure 26](#), shown above). As Arroyo (2002:233) aptly noted, many of the birds possess clearly defined crests ([Figure 22](#), [Figure 25](#), and [Figure 26](#)), while others possess a knob-like protuberance above their bill ([Figure 22](#)). However, other types of animals, such as that seen in [Figure 23](#), which probably represents a dog, possess the same sort of protuberance. Natural features, however, are also accompanied by non-natural characteristics in some cases, such as the earspools worn by the animal in [Figure 24](#), who also appears to wear a headdress of some sort. While identifying the specific species represented by these animal figurines is difficult at best, a comparison to the study by Wake and Harrington (2002) of the vertebrates recovered from domestic excavations at La Blanca is useful. Interestingly, dogs were the most abundant species represented, which might explain the dog-like creatures that appear in the figurine assemblages, such as that in [Figure 23](#) (see also Arroyo 2002: figure 132b and c). Likewise, birds from the Phasianidae family, which includes quail and turkeys, were identified by Wake and Harrington (2002: table 35) in the faunal assemblages, as were birds of the Chloroceryle Americana family, which includes Kingfishers. Both of these families of birds are sometimes characterized by dramatic crests, which may explain the bird figurines that depict prominent crests ([Figure 22](#), [Figure 25](#), and [Figure 26](#)).

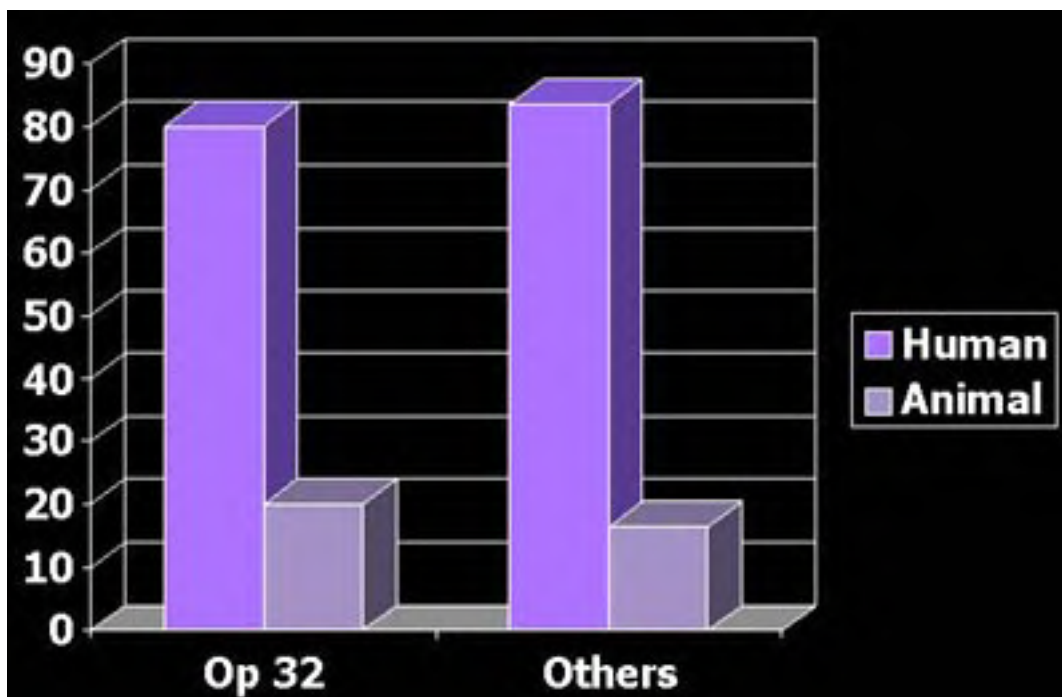


Figure 27. Comparison of human/animal figurine proportions from Operation 32 with those from other locations. Data from operations other than Operation 32 are from Arroyo (2002).

Preliminary Conclusions

We suggested above that the physical characteristics of Monument 3 indicate that it was used in rituals involving water or liquids, and probably associated with supernatural communication. That the quatrefoil was also used in household ritual of some kind is supported by analogy to the basins described by Marcus (1998) for Oaxaca and by the high density of figurines which were found in Operation 32 of Mound 9, a hallmark of ritual during the Middle Formative period in this region. These figurines include some of the most elaborate figurines yet found at the site, and some of the most complete as well.

However, Mound 9 was not just another household and Monument 3 was not just a basin. The iconography of the quatrefoil throughout Mesoamerica (Love and Guernsey n.d.) makes it clear that Monument 3 is linked to rulership and supernatural communication, while the artifact inventory of Operation 32 makes it clear that Mound 9 was an elite residence. Operation 32 recovered higher densities of prestige goods than any other residence at the site. So, while domestic ritual in this elite residence clearly had some similarity to domestic ritual in other households at La Blanca and to those in other regions of Mesoamerica—and may have included the veneration of ancestors (represented by figurines)—the rituals in this elite household were also distinctive in their unique emphasis on powers of elite communication with the supernatural.

Acknowledgements

Investigations at La Blanca were carried out under the auspices of the Instituto de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala. We thank the personnel of the Departamento de Prehispánicos y Coloniales, especially Licenciado Salvador López, for their help and support in realizing the project. Financial support for the excavations at La Blanca in 2003 and 2004 came from the New World Archaeological Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Geographic Society, and the Mesoamerica Center in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin. A grant from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., (FAMSI) helped support the analysis of materials associated with Monument 3. Excavations and analysis in 2005-2006 have been supported by the National Science Foundation. The excavation of Monument 3 was begun by Molly Morgan as unit supervisor and later continued under the supervision of Sheryl Carcuz.

List of Figures

- [Figure 1](#). Map of Pacific Guatemala showing the location of La Blanca and other sites.
- [Figure 2](#). La Blanca Monument 3 Quatrefoil.
- [Figure 3](#). Map of the central portion of La Blanca, showing excavation operations.
- [Figure 4](#). Location of Mound 9 relative to Mound 1 and the Sunken Plaza.
- [Figure 5](#). Density of faunal remains in five excavation operations.
- [Figure 6](#). Density of obsidian in seven excavation operations.
- [Figure 7](#). Percentage of obsidian assemblages represented by prismatic blades.
- [Figure 8](#). Density of jade artifacts in five excavation operations.
- [Figure 9](#). Figurine density in five domestic operations at La Blanca.
- [Figure 10](#). Human head from figurine.
- [Figure 11](#). Human head from figurine.
- [Figure 12](#). Human head from figurine, possibly representing blindness.
- [Figure 13](#). Human head from figurine.
- [Figure 14](#). Human head from figurine.
- [Figure 15](#). Figurine body with breasts and swollen abdomen.
- [Figure 16](#). Figurine body with swollen abdomen.
- [Figure 17](#). "Tab" figurine with swollen abdomen.
- [Figure 18](#). Fragment of "tab" figurine.
- [Figure 19](#). Figurine of seated woman.
- [Figure 20](#). Representation of avian transformation.
- [Figure 21](#). Figurine gesturing with hands to mouth.
- [Figure 22](#). Bird figurine with crest and knob on bill.
- [Figure 23](#). Dog figurine.
- [Figure 24](#). Frontal and profile views of avian figurine with earspools and headdress.
- [Figure 25](#). Bird figurine with crest.
- [Figure 26](#). Bird figurine with crest.

[Figure 27](#). Comparison of human/animal figurine proportions from Operation 32 with those from other locations. Data from operations other than Operation 32 are from Arroyo (2002).

List of Tables

- [Table 1](#). Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32 sub-operation 1.
[Table 2](#). Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32 sub-operation 5.
[Table 3](#). Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32 sub-operation 8.
[Table 4](#). Frequency of Ceramic Wares (rims only) in Operation 32 sub-operation 9.

Sources Cited

Arroyo, Bárbara

2002 "Appendix I: Classification of La Blanca Figurines." In *Early Complex Society in Pacific Guatemala: Settlements and Chronology of the Rio Naranjo, Guatemala*, by Michael W. Love, pp. 205-235. Brigham Young University, Provo.

Clark, John E.

1987 "Politics, Prismatic Blade, and Mesoamerican Civilization." In *The Organization of Core Technology*, edited by J.K. Johnson and C.A. Morrow., pp. 259-284. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado.

1997 "Arts of Government in Early Mesoamerica." In *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26:211-234.

Clark, John E. and Mary E. Pye

2000 "The Pacific Coast and the Olmec Question." In *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, eds. John E. Clark and Mary E. Pye, pp. 217-251. Studies in the History of Art 58. Washington, DC: Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art.

Coe, Michael

1961 *La Victoria: An Early Site on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 53. Cambridge: Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

Cyphers, Anne

1993 "Women, rituals, and social dynamics at ancient Chalcatzingo." In *Latin American Antiquity* 4: 209-224.

Grove, David C. and Susan D. Gillespie

2002 "Middle Formative Domestic Ritual at Chalcatzingo, Morelos." In *Domestic Ritual in Ancient Mesoamerica*, edited by Patricia Plunket, pp. 11-19. Monograph 46, The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology. Los Angeles: UCLA.

Guernsey, Julia

2006 *Ritual and Power in Stone: The Political and Cosmological Significance of Late Preclassic Izapan-Style Monuments*. Austin: University of Texas Press. In Press.

Guernsey, Julia and Michael Love

2005 "Late Preclassic Expressions of Authority on the Pacific Slope." In *Lords of Creation: The Origins of Sacred Maya Kingship*, eds. Virginia M. Fields and Dorie Reents-Budet. London and New Cork: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Scala Publishers.

Guernsey Kappelman, Julia

2003 "Demystifying the Late Preclassic Izapan-Style Stela-Altar 'Cult'." In *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 45:99-122.

Houston, Stephen and Karl Taube

2000 "An Archaeology of the Senses: Perception and Cultural Expression in Ancient Mesoamerica." In *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 10 (2): 261-294.

Houston, Stephen, Karl Taube, Ray Matheny, Deanne Matheny, Zachary Nelson, Gene Ware, and Cassandra Mesick

n.d. "The Pool of the Rain God: An Early Stuccoed Altar at Aguacatal, Campeche, Mexico." In *Mesoamerican Voices*, vol. 2.

Jackson, Thomas L., and Michael W. Love

1991 "Bladerunning: Middle Preclassic Obsidian Exchange and the Introduction of Prismatic Blades at La Blanca, Guatemala." In *Ancient Mesoamerica* 2:47-59.

Joyce, Rosemary A.

2003 "Making something of herself: Embodiment in Life and Death at Playa de los Muertos, Honduras." In *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 13: 248-261.

Love, Michael W.

1991 "Style and Social Complexity in Formative Mesoamerica." In *The Formation of Complex Society in Southeastern Mesoamerica*, ed. William R. Fowler, Jr., pp. 47-76. Boca Raton: CRC Press.

- 1999 "Ideology, Material Culture, and Daily Practice in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica: A Pacific Coast Perspective." In *Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica*, eds. David C. Grove and Rosemary A. Joyce, pp. 127-153. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks.
- 2002 *Early Complex Society in Pacific Guatemala: Settlements and Chronology of the Río Naranjo, Guatemala*. Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, no. 66. Provo: Brigham Young University.

Love, Michael, Donaldo Castillo Valdéz, René Ugarte, Brian Damiata, and John Steinberg

- 2005 "Investigaciones Arqueológicas en el Montículo 1 de La Blanca, Costa Sur de Guatemala." In *XVIII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala*, edited by Juan Pedro Laporte, Bárbara Arroyo, and Héctor E. Mejía, pp. 959-969. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Asociación Tikal, Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., Guatemala City, Guatemala.

Love, Michael and Julia Guernsey

- n.d. "Monument 3 from La Blanca, Guatemala: A Unique Middle Preclassic Earthen Sculpture." Manuscript in preparation, in possession of the authors.

Love, Michael, Julia Guernsey, Sheryl Carcuz, and Molly Morgan

- 2006 "El monumento 3 de La Blanca, San Marcos: Una nueva escultura del Preclásico Medio." In *XIX Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2005*, edited by Juan Pedro Laporte, Bárbara Arroyo, and Héctor E. Mejía. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Asociación Tikal, Fundación Arqueológica del Nuevo Mundo, Guatemala, pp. 51-62.

McAnany, Patricia A.

- 2002 "Rethinking the Great and Little Tradition Paradigm from the Perspective of Domestic Ritual." In *Domestic Ritual in Ancient Mesoamerica*, edited by Patricia Plunket, pp. 115-119. Monograph 46, The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology. Los Angeles: UCLA.

Marcus, Joyce

- 1998 "Women's Ritual in Formative Oaxaca: Figurine-Making, Divination, Death, and the Ancestors." In *Memoirs*, 33. University of Michigan, Museum of Anthropology, Ann Arbor.
- 1999 "Men's and Women's Ritual in Formative Oaxaca." In *Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica*, eds. David C. Grove and Rosemary A. Joyce, pp. 67-94. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks.

Princeton, The Art Museum

1995 *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*. Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University.

Robinson, Eugenia

2005 "Esculturas, asentamiento y paisaje en las Tierras Altas de Guatemala: Una propuesta de investigación." In *XVIII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala*, edited by Juan Pedro Laporte, Bárbara Arroyo, and Héctor E. Mejía, pp. 531-538. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Asociación Tikal, Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., Guatemala.

Smith, Michael E.

2002 "Domestic Ritual at Aztec Provincial Sites in Morelos." In *Domestic Ritual in Ancient Mesoamerica*, edited by Patricia Plunket, pp. 93-114. Monograph 46, The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology. Los Angeles: UCLA.

Taube, Karl

1995 "The Rainmakers: The Olmec and their Contribution to Mesoamerican Belief and Ritual." In *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*, pp. 83-103. Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University.

1998 "The Jade Hearth: Centrality, Rulership, and the Classic Maya Temple." In *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*, ed. Stephen D. Houston, pp. 427-478. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks.

Wake, Thomas A. and Lady R. Harrington

2002 "Appendix II: Vertebrate Faunal Remains from La Blanca, Guatemala." In *Early Complex Society in Pacific Guatemala: Settlements and Chronology of the Rio Naranjo, Guatemala*.