

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **FIGURINE STUDIES IN MESOAMERICA**

#### **Introduction**

A comparison of Formative period figurines from other sites in Mesoamerica helps to define the characteristics of the San Andrés figurines. Although the figurine styles may differ from site to site, the contextual data provide clues to figurine use and functions. This comparison includes Formative period figurine data from the following areas (Figure 6.1): the lowland Gulf Coast area of Veracruz (San Lorenzo and Tres Zapotes); the central Grijalva River depression of Chiapas (Chiapa de Corzo); the Pacific slope of Mexico (Mazatán region); the early Maya site of Cuello in Belize; the Basin of Mexico (Zacatenco, Gualupita, and Tlatilco); the highlands of Morelos (Chalcatzingo); and the Valley of Oaxaca (San José Mogote). The figurines from these areas range in date from the Early Formative to the Late Formative periods. These areas were chosen because they offer well documented archaeological contexts contemporaneous with San Andrés, as well as throughout the Formative period in general. By looking at the similarities and differences in figurines and figurine contexts from surrounding areas outside of the La Venta polity, one gains a better sense of the significance of Mesoamerican figurines through space and during the Formative period timeframe.

#### **San Lorenzo**

San Lorenzo was the most prominent Early Formative period center in the Gulf coastal lowlands of Veracruz in Mexico. The center had monumental architecture and a dense

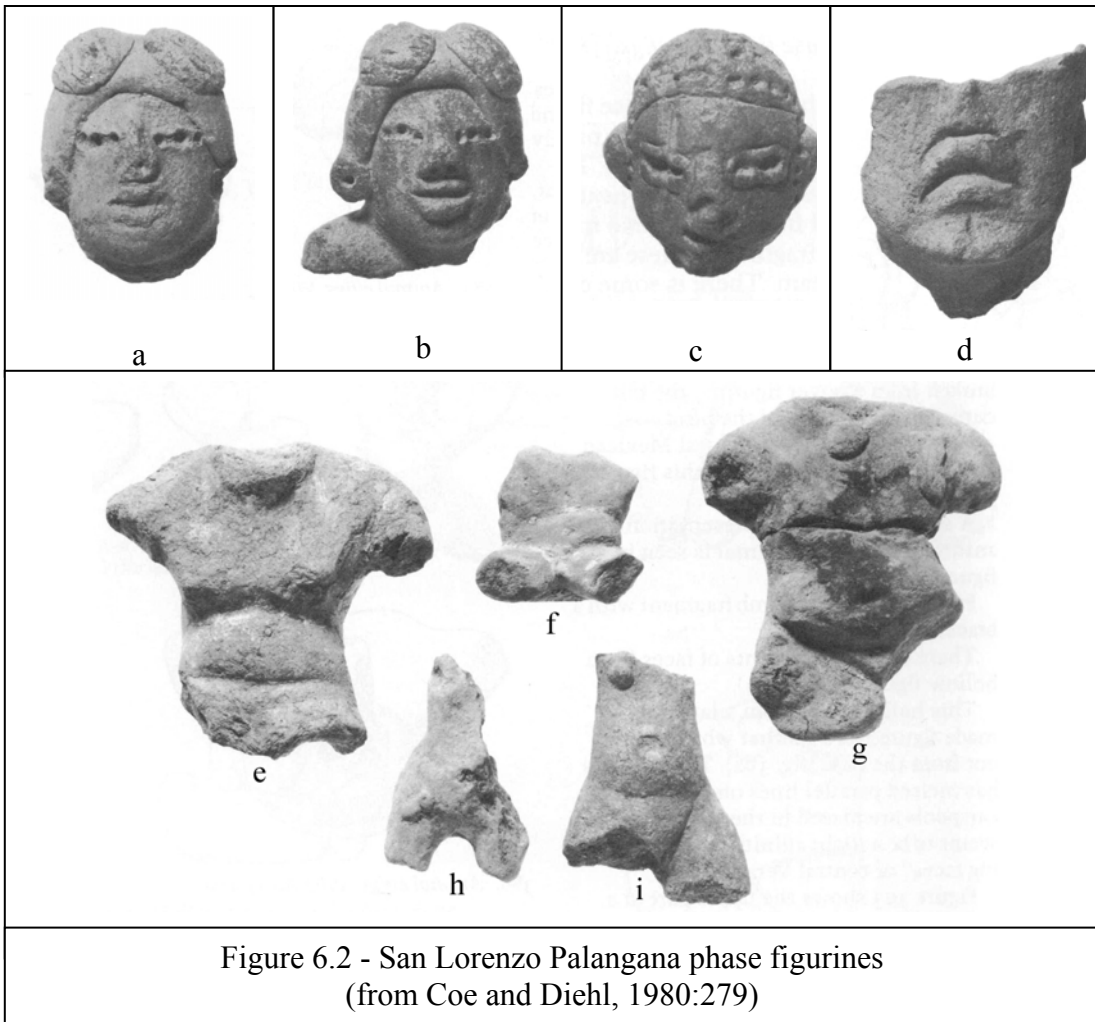


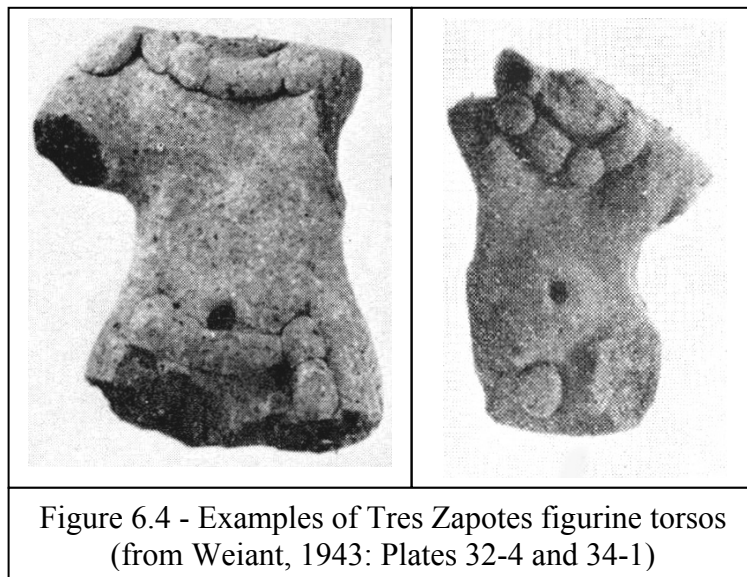
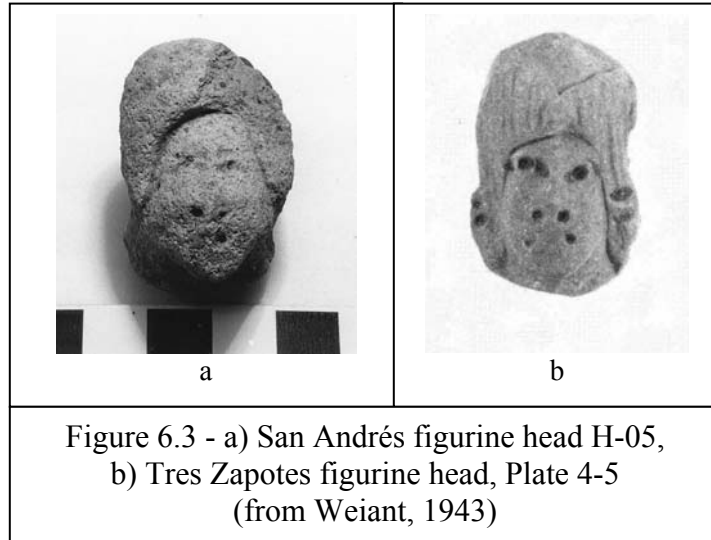
population that flourished from approximately 1300-900 B.C., before the rise of La Venta. Almost all of the figurines at San Lorenzo were found in construction fill, originally obtained from household midden refuse (Coe and Diehl, 1980:260). During the Early Formative period, the San Lorenzo figurines featured ballplayers. The representation of female figurines increased throughout Mesoamerica during the Middle Formative period, including at San Lorenzo.

The San Lorenzo figurines (Figure 6.2) most similar to those from San Andrés are from the Middle Formative Palangana phase (600-400 B.C.), contemporaneous with San Andrés. The San Lorenzo female torsos, some with mirror pendants, are particularly similar to those at San Andrés. The small solid heads from this phase have round face shapes, prominent noses, earspools with central punctations, and double bun hairstyles, as opposed to the single buns at San Andrés. The technique used for eyes is different as well, with three punctations for each eye. The downturned "Olmec" mouth, such as that on Figure 6.2d, is also found on San Andrés figurines (see Chapter 5, Figures 5.1a,c).

### **Tres Zapotes**

The site of Tres Zapotes, in southern Veracruz, Mexico, northwest of the La Venta region, flourished during the Middle to Late Formative periods, as La Venta declined. Precise contextual information for Tres Zapotes figurines is lacking, but the figurines generally occurred in mounds and burials. Weiant's (1943) work at Tres Zapotes provides examples of figurines that share some similarities with figurines from San Andrés and La Venta, but the Tres Zapotes figurines have a punching or punctation style for representation of facial features that is infrequent in the San Andrés collection. Nevertheless, San Andrés Figurine H-05 (from mixed Late Puente and Early Franco phases, dating approximately 750-550 B.C.) resembles those from Tres Zapotes, particularly the heads in Weiant's Plates 4, 5, and 8 (Figure 6.3). Tres Zapotes torsos share some overall similarities with San Andrés torsos. Neck ornamentation, which includes many beads, is more elaborate (Figure 6.4) compared to the single round pendant common on San Andrés torsos (see Chapter 3-Figures 3.8a-d).





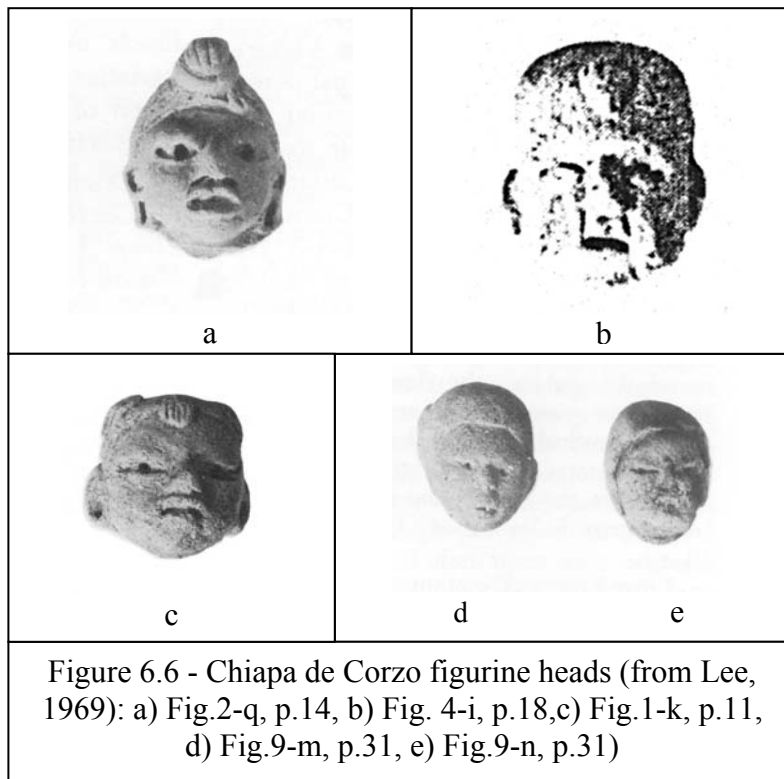
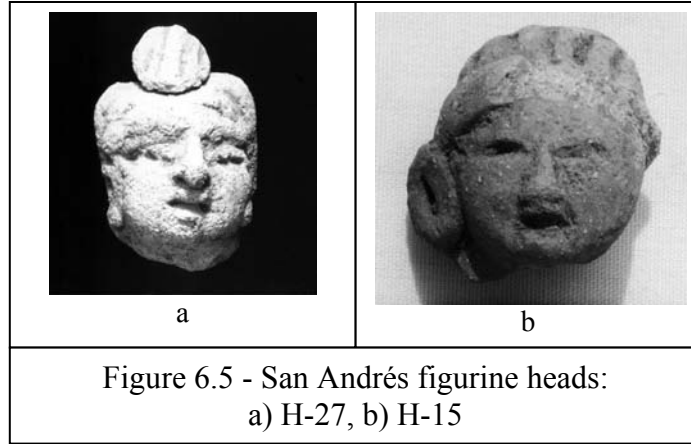
## Grijalva River: Chiapa de Corzo

Chiapa de Corzo is located on the east bank of the Grijalva River in the lower end of the Central Depression of Chiapas (Lee 1969). Figurines were found in open primary plaza deposits or areas that may have been residential in nature before the Guanacaste (ca.300-100 B.C.) and Horcones (ca.100 B.C.-A.D. 100) phases. Lee (1969: 12-13) notes the strong similarities of the figurines with those from La Venta.

The round, full face shapes of Chiapa de Corzo figurine heads are similar to some of the face shapes at San Andrés. The major difference between the collections is in the eye treatments. The common techniques for fashioning eyes at San Andrés are an incised stroke, sometimes with a light punctation for pupils, or an almond-shaped incision to outline the eyes. Chiapa de Corzo techniques during the Middle Formative Dili phase (900-600 B.C.) involve a deep punctation in pupils.

Despite the fact that the site is farther away from San Andrés and the La Venta region than San Lorenzo, the Chiapa de Corzo figurines appear more similar to the San Andrés figurines than Middle Formative figurines from San Lorenzo. This fact reflects trade connections extending from the La Venta region to the Grijalva drainage (Agrinier 1984, Benson 1996, Lee 1989). Both obsidian (Doering 2002) and ground stone (Du Vernay 2003) artifacts at San Andrés attest to these exchange patterns.

San Andrés figurine H-27 (Figure 6.5a) from the Early Franco Complex is similar to the Chiapa de Corzo figurine shown in Lee's Figure 2-q (Figure 6.6a), which dates to the Dili phase (900-600 B.C.). The Chiapa de Corzo figurine in Figure 4-i (Figure 6.6b) somewhat resembles San Andrés Figurine H-15 (Figure 6.5b) and dates to ca. 300 B.C. Figures 6.6c, d, and e display Chiapa de Corzo heads recovered from surface and fill that closely resemble the San Andrés style. In addition to the heads, the torsos from both sites are similar. Lee (1969:42) mentions the frequent presence of an "appliqué, flat, plain, round, button necklace" on the torsos, also present on the San Andrés torsos.



## **Mazatán Region on the Pacific Slope**

The Mazatán region includes Pacific coastal sites in Mexico and Guatemala dating from the Late Archaic through the Late Formative periods. One site, Paso de la Amada, has a large figurine assemblage that spans the Early Formative period. Richard Lesure (1997:233) analyzed these figurines, focusing on those dating from the Ocos phase (ca. 1400-1250 B.C.). In general, the figurines were found in trash deposits in household contexts. Lesure found that two main images were present in the collection: young women and elderly men. The female torsos (Figure 6.7) are somewhat similar in appearance to the San Andrés torsos, including round pendants on the chests, which may be evidence for continuity between the Early and Middle Formative periods. The hips on the Paso de la Amada figures flare out more than those of San Andrés figurines, and the breasts appear larger on the Paso de la Amada torsos. Nevertheless, they are more similar than torsos from other areas of Mesoamerica, such as Oaxaca, Tlatilco and Chalcatzingo.

Two disks are present on the top sides of San Andrés figurine head H-18 (Figure 6.8). They are similar to those found in figurines from the Mazatán region (Blake et al. 1995:170, Clark, 1991:21) during the Ocos phase (1400-1250 B.C.) and Cherla phase (ca. 1250-1100 B.C.). Clark (1991: 20-21) states that the round shapes may represent mirrors that were parts of helmets or headdresses. Clark cites archaeological evidence found in burials at El Vivero and Paso de la Amada in the Mazatán area for forehead mirrors. Figure 6.9 shows a range of figurine heads from the Mazatán region spanning from the Barra phase (ca. 1650-1550 B.C.) to the Cuadros phase (ca. 1100-1000 B.C.). Some heads have two knobs on the top and sides of the head (Figure 6.9f, h, i), which may be hair buns. The heads from the Cherla (ca. 1250-1100 B.C.) and Cuadros phases appear similar to those from the Gulf Coast.

## **Cuello**

Cuello is an early Maya site located in northern Belize. Excavations (McSwain et al.



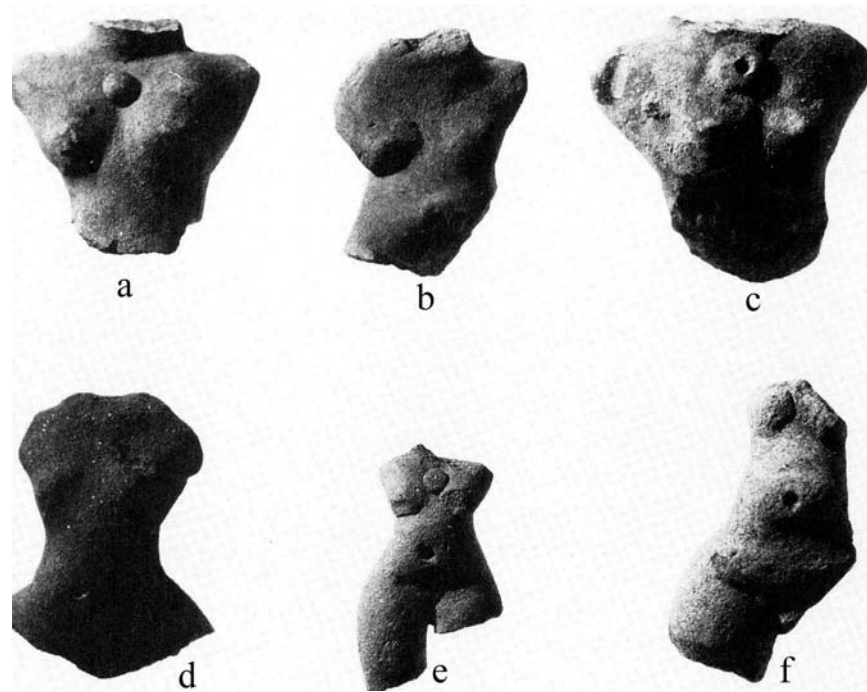


Figure 6.7 - Figurine Torsos from Paso de la Amada,  
 Ocos phase (ca. 1400-1250 B.C.)  
 (from Lesure 1997: Figure 1)



Figure 6.8 - Figurines with possible mirrors on heads,  
 a.) Mazatán region, Ocos phase ca. 1400-1250 B.C. (from Clark 1991:21),  
 b.) San Andrés H-18, Early Franco phase ca. 700-500/550 B.C.

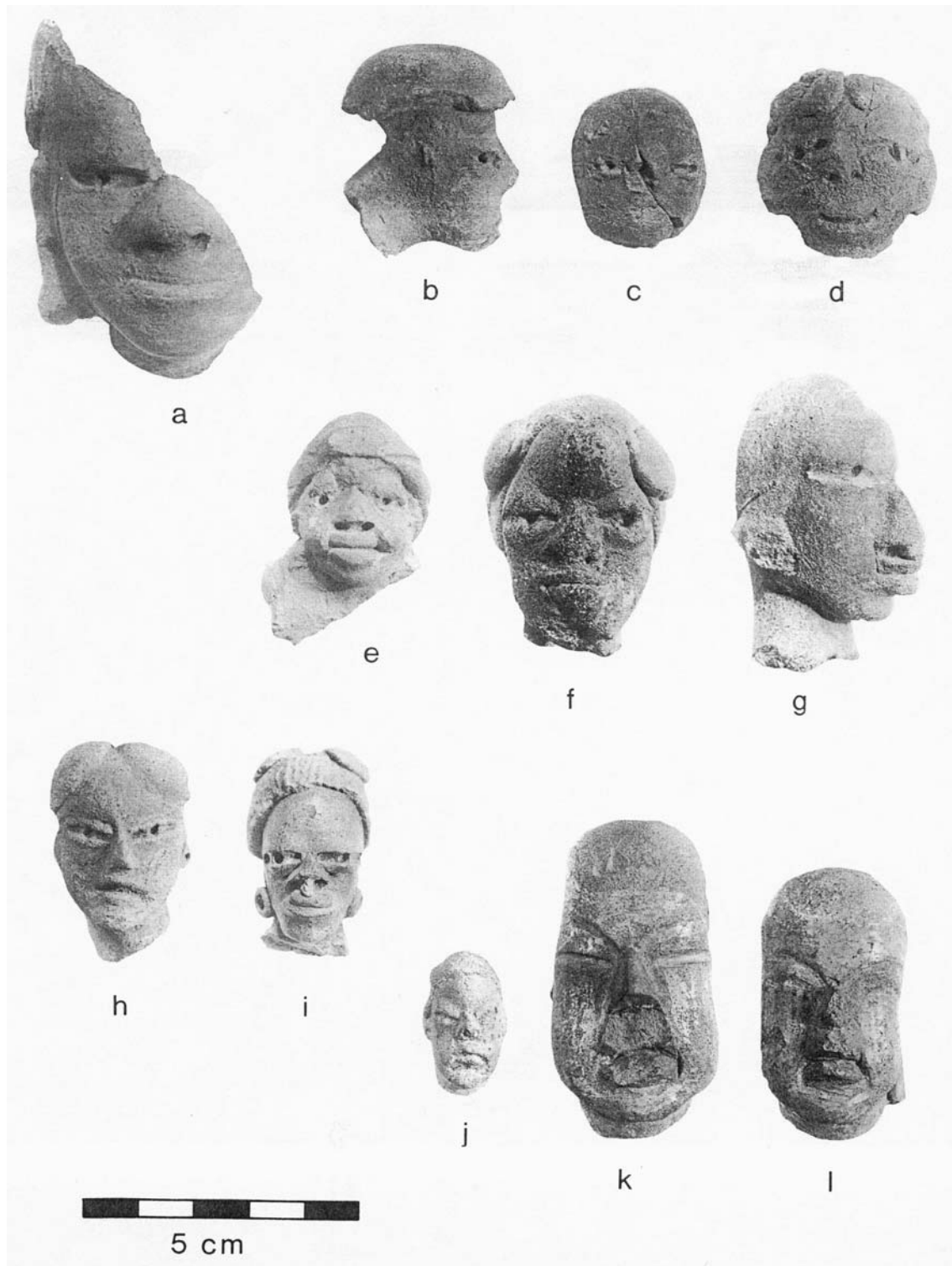


Figure 6.9 - Ceramic figurine heads from the Pacific Coast:  
 a) Barra/Locona phases (ca. 1650-1400 B.C.), b-d) Locona phase (ca. 1550-1400 B.C.),  
 e-g) Ocos phase (ca. 1400-1250 B.C.), h-i) Cherla phase (ca. 1250-1100 B.C.),  
 j-l) Cherla/Cuadros phases (ca. 1250-1000 B.C.), (from Blake et al. 1995: Figure7)

1991) revealed a ceramic sequence dating from the late Early Formative period up to the beginning of the Classic period (approximately 1200 B.C.- A.D. 250). Anthropomorphic figurines were used for almost the entire Formative period, although they were an uncommon occurrence (McSwain et al. 1991: 177). The earliest human figurines appear in the Swasey complex (ca. 1200-900 B.C.) and are described as generally small in size. The succeeding Bladen phase follows (ca. 900-600 B.C.), when naturalistic anthropomorphic figurines, zoomorphic figurines, and roller and flat stamps make their first appearance. Large figurines occur during this phase, as well as small ones.

The Cuello stamps are parallels to the Olmec roller stamps found at La Venta and San Andrés (see Chapter 4, Figure 4.7b). The use of marine shells at Cuello is documented from the Swasey phase onwards, and may be Olmec-related. The use of ocher, which may be another Olmec-influenced trait, is found in the late Bladen phase and onwards. The Olmec "U" glyph, found on the San Andrés roller stamp (see Figure 4.7b), may be found at Cuello on a ceramic sherd with a complex design from the Lopez phase (ca. 600-400 B.C.) (McSwain et al. 1991:177, Figure 8.17a, SF909), and on a limestone cylinder with a U-shaped design on the end of it (McSwain et al. 1991:191, Figure 8.52, SF 164).

The figurine torsos at Cuello (Figure 6.10 top) may be similar to San Andrés torsos, but more examples are needed to make a better comparison. A bird ocarina (Figure 6.10 bottom) from Cuello is similar to one in the San Andrés collection (see Figure 4.4b, Figurine A-05). The number of figurines in the Cuello collection is not clear. The contexts are generally from trash or fill. An infant burial containing a bird-shaped ocarina (similar to the Classic period example in Figure 6.10 bottom) is the only primary context found (McSwain et al. 1991:178).

## **Basin of Mexico**

### **Zacatenco and Gualupita**

The sites of Zacatenco and Gualupita are close to Mexico City, in the Basin of Mexico. George Vaillant's (1930, 1934) early work at these sites produced an extensive figurine typology that became a reference for comparing figurines from other areas in Mesoamerica. The figurines

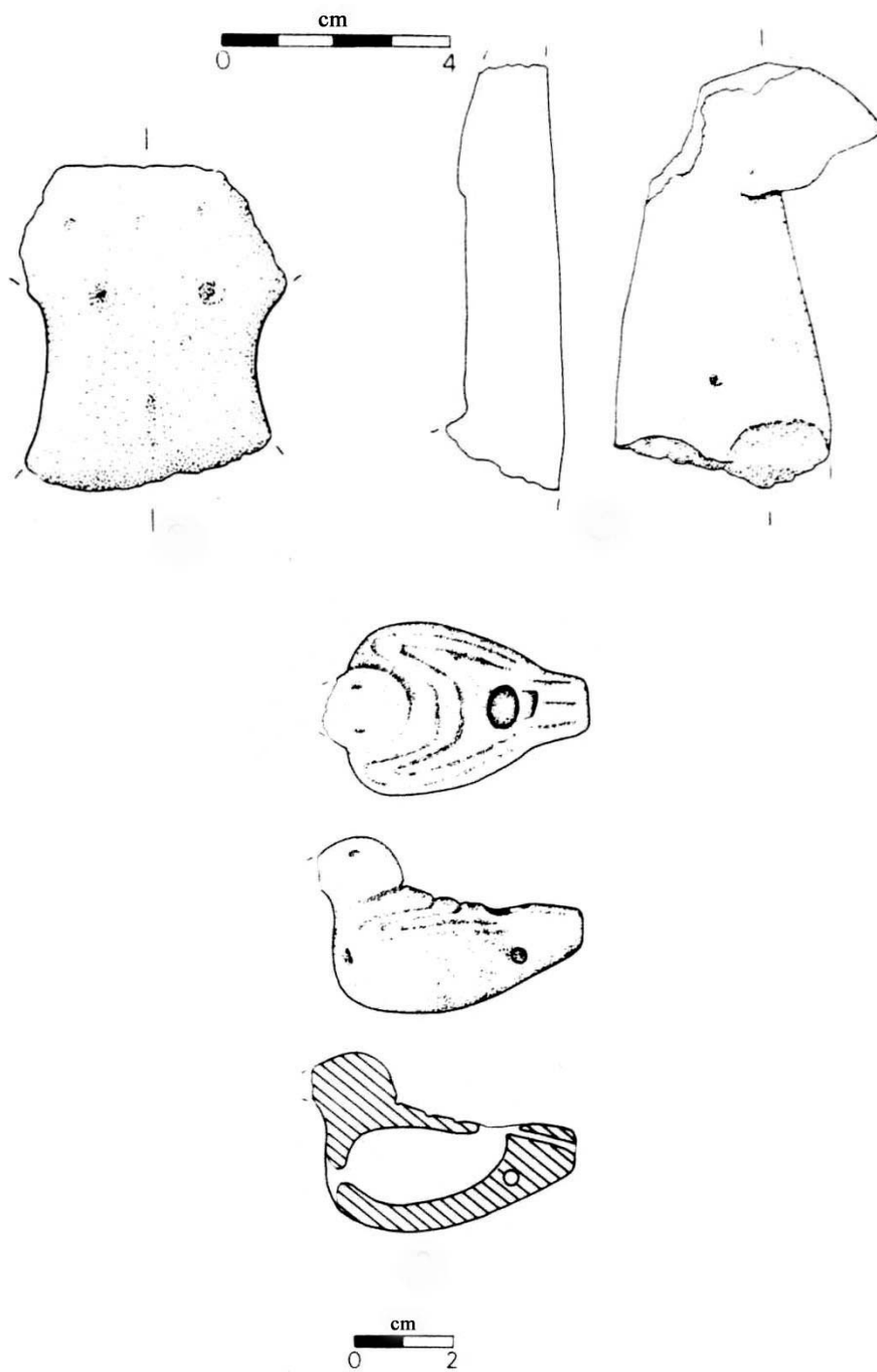


Figure 6.10 – Examples of ceramic figurines from Cuello  
(from Hammond 1991:178 & 179)



Figure 6.11 - Vaillant's Types D1 and D2 figurine heads from Zacatenco  
(from Vaillant 1930: Plate XIX)

were found mostly in house “debris” (Vaillant 1930: 36). The dates for these sites are unclear, but may be from the Middle to Late Formative periods. The figurines most similar to those from San Andrés are Vaillant’s Type D figurines (Figure 6.11). The D1 and D2 figurines have a groove or plough stroke, or thin fillets for the eye and mouth treatments. The head shapes are almost rectangular. The female form predominates in these collections, as it does at San Andrés.

### **Tlatilco**

Tlatilco is an Early Formative site dating from approximately 1400-950 B.C. (Tolstoy 1989:85). It is situated just outside of present day Mexico City, in the Río Hondo Valley. The site is mostly known for the large number of burials uncovered, though it probably was a residential area, where burials were placed under or near dwelling spaces (Tolstoy 1989:101,102). Ceramic figurines were found within these burials (see Figure 6.12 for examples). Porter (1953:23) describes the figurines being so abundant that “they are one of the most outstanding cultural characteristics of the site.”

The figurines were identified under Vaillant’s types D1, D2, D3, K and C5. Most of the figurines are female. One Early Formative figurine (Figure 6.12b), from Burial 172, was covered with red pigment and had a hematite mirror on the chest similar to one on the greenstone figurine from Middle Formative La Venta (see Chapter 3 - Figure 3.6). Figurines with iron ore mirrors attached to them were found at Tlatilco (Piña Chan 1971:175, Tolstoy 1989:109). Some figurines appear similar to those from the Gulf Coast (Figure 6.12 a, b) and may even have been attempts to copy them. The Tlatilco figurines differ from the San Andrés figurines in eye treatments, face shapes, and torso shapes. The Tlatilco eye treatments are done with plough strokes or the use of fillets. The Tlatilco face shapes appear longer and less round, and the torsos are exaggerated.

### **Chalcatzingo**

Chalcatzingo is situated in eastern Morelos, about 100 km southeast of Mexico City (Grove 1987). The site flourished during the Formative period, with initial occupation dating from 1500 B.C. (Cyphers 1993). Investigations at Chalcatzingo uncovered over 8,000 figurine

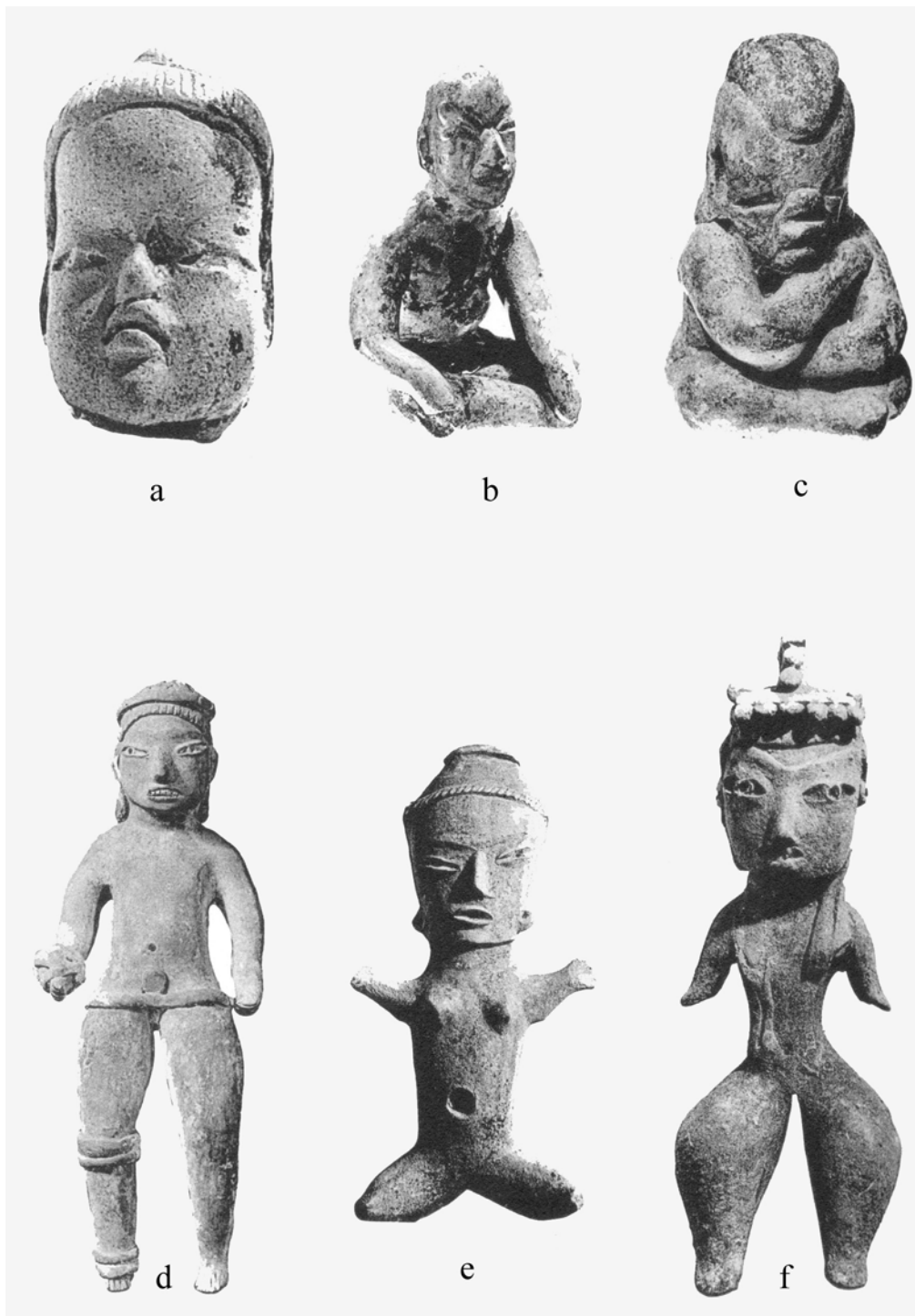


Figure 6.12 - Examples of Tlatilco figurines  
(from Porter 1953: Plate 4)

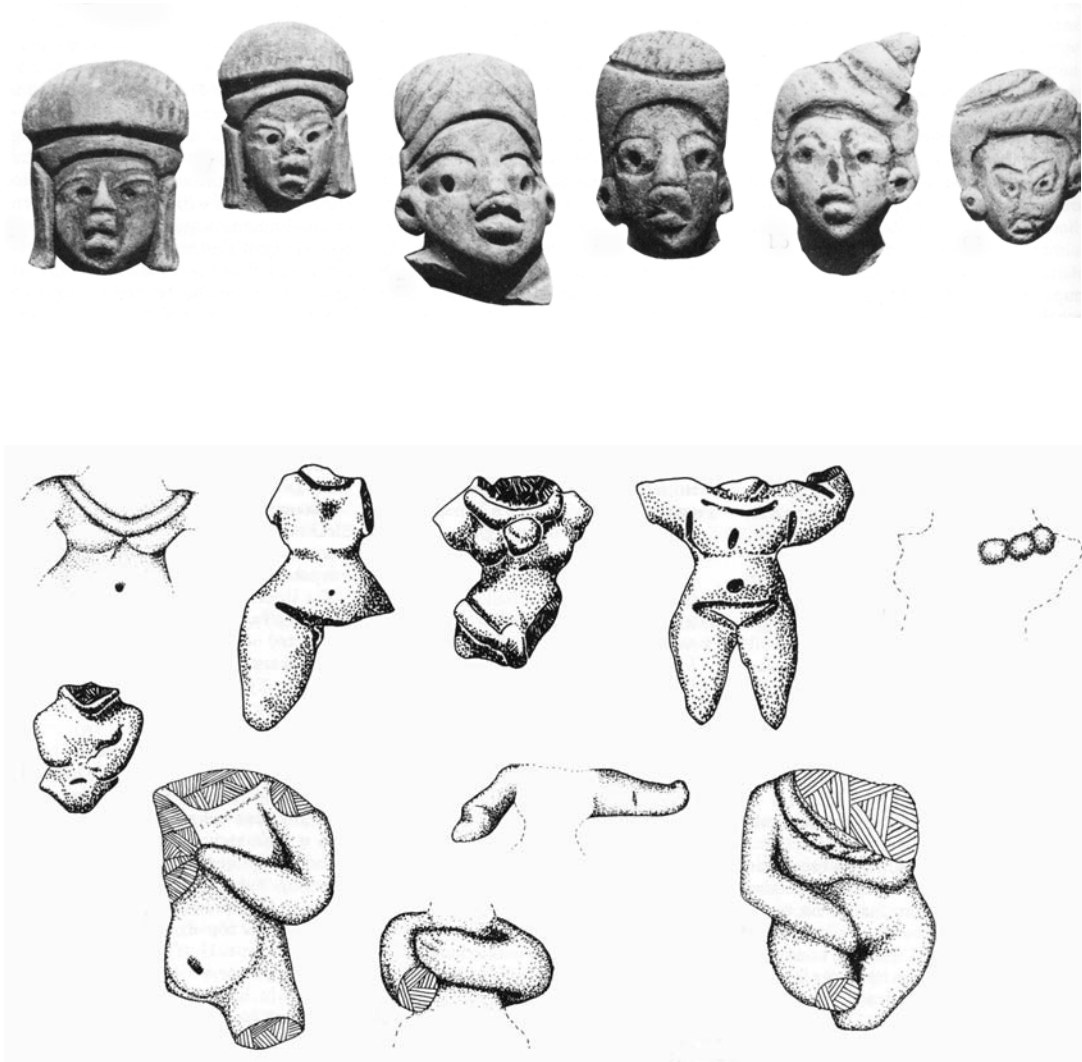


Figure 6.13 - Examples of Chalcatzingo C8 figurine heads and figurine torsos  
(from Grove 1987:424 & 496)



fragments, 4,000 of which date to the Cantera phase (700-500 B.C.), contemporaneous with San Andrés. Cyphers (1993:213) suggests that a lack of clear evidence for ritual breakage may indicate that breakage on the figurines is due to an inherent weakness in the manufacture of the figurines. Figurines were most abundant in domestic spaces where evidence for food production took place, indicated by the presence of carbon in association with hearths, braziers, domestic pottery, and ground-stone artifacts (Cyphers 1993:216). In two cases, figurines were found with infant burials representing possible offerings.

The typology of the Chalcatzingo figurines is based on Vaillant's 1930, 1931, and 1935 typology of figurines from Zacatenco, Ticomán, and El Arbolillo in the Basin of Mexico. Head types present at Chalcatzingo were identified as C2, C5, C8, and Ch types of Vaillant's classification. Cyphers (1993:214) identifies the C8 figurines as similar to those from Olmec sites, such as La Venta and Tres Zapotes. This similarity implies increasing contact with the Gulf Coast area during the Cantera phase (700-500 B.C.).

The C8 heads (Figure 6.13) differ from the San Andrés figurines mainly in head and eye treatments. The headdresses are more elaborate and taller on Chalcatzingo figurines than on San Andrés figurines, a fact that indicates variation in clothing in the two areas. The eye technique at Chalcatzingo appears to involve deep punctations for pupils, rounder shapes of the eye in general, and incisions above the eyes to depict eyebrows. The Chalcatzingo figurine torsos have more pronounced breasts, hips, and thighs than the figurines at San Andrés. Similarities between the torsos are that some figurines show indications of the *linea gris* and pubic triangles, and some wear round pendants.

## Oaxaca Valley

Joyce Marcus' (1998) work on the Early and Middle Formative figurines from Oaxaca examines a large, diverse collection. Her focus on men's and women's activity areas has produced contextual data that has greatly aided in understanding Oaxacan figurine use. Oaxacan figurines occur in primary contexts, such as residences, burials, and deliberately arranged scenes in households (Marcus 1998:3). Figurines also occur in secondary contexts, such as household



Figure 6.14 - Oaxaca figurine heads,  
Top row: San José phase (ca. 1200-900 B.C.),  
Bottom row: Guadalupe phase (ca. 900-750 B.C.)  
(from Marcus 1998:94, 97 & 255, photographs by Chris Moser)

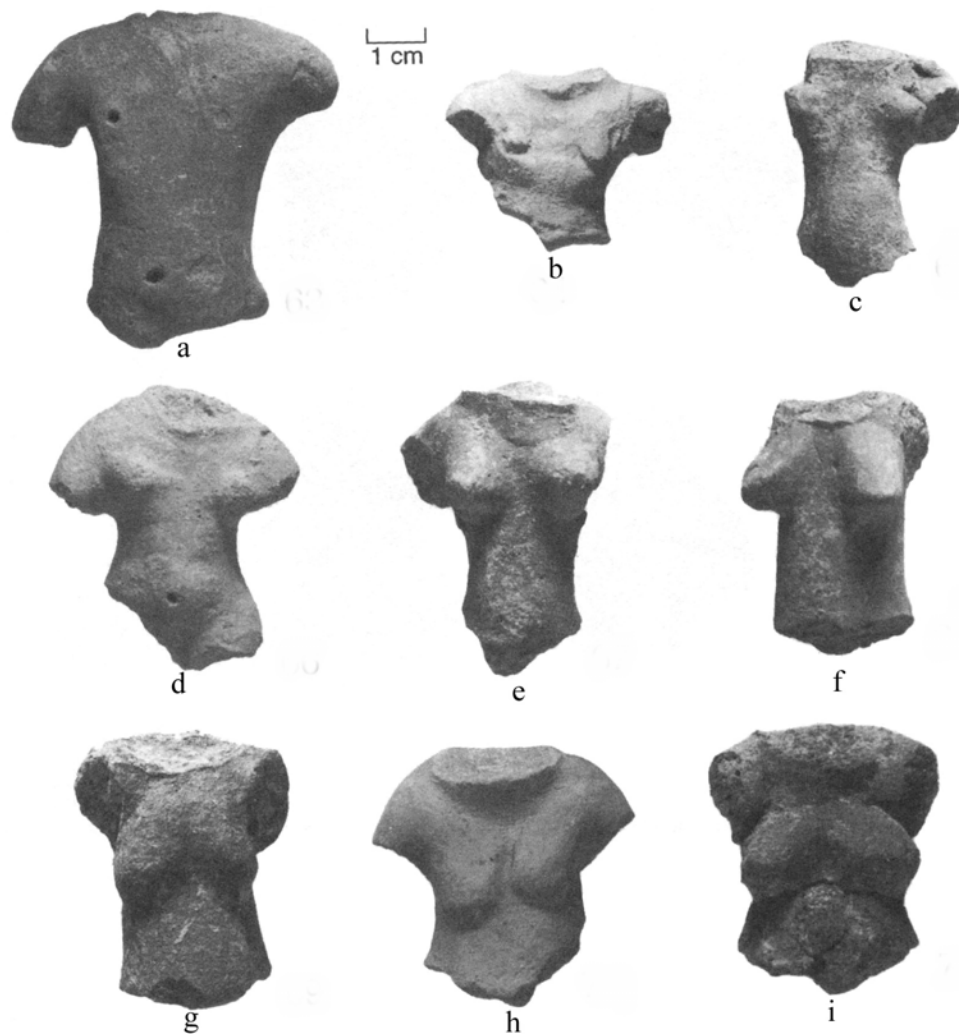


Figure 6.15 - Oaxaca figurine torsos, San José phase (ca. 1200-900 B.C.)  
(from Marcus 1998: Figure 10.17, photographs by Chris Moser)

midden debris. Tertiary contexts include surface collection, redeposited mound fill, and cleaning of profile walls.

The figurines from Oaxaca, particularly during the San José phase (ca. 1200-900 B.C.) and the Guadalupe phase (ca. 900-750 B.C.), resemble figurines from San Lorenzo during the San Lorenzo phase (1150-900 B.C.) and the Nacaste phase (ca. 900-700 B.C.). Female figures predominate in Oaxacan collections, as they do at San Andrés, but San Andrés figurines do not share many stylistic similarities with Oaxacan figurines. The eye treatments at San Andrés and La Venta demonstrate a light incising technique with minimal or no punching to indicate pupils, in contrast to Oaxacan figurines. The technique of using ploughing strokes around the eyeball and the use of fillets to shape the eyes on Oaxacan figurines also differentiates them from San Andrés figurines (Figure 6.14). San Andrés figurines show more subtle indications of brow ridges and eyelids than in the Oaxaca Valley. Oaxacan figurines from the Rosario phase (ca. 750-550 B.C.), in particular, show minimal resemblance to those from San Andrés due to the heavy fillets or deep incisions used around the eyes.

The figurine torsos (Figure 6.15) from the Oaxaca Valley have more pronounced breasts, hips and thighs than those from San Andrés. They were made in seated or standing postures. Marcus (1998:47-48, 177-185) states that the seated postures probably reflected positions of authority. Some of the standing figurines were in an "obedience posture," with arms folded in front, and probably represented a subordinate status. Ornamentation consists of earspools, necklaces, and noseplugs. Necklaces could be beaded or have a pendant made of shells or possibly magnetite mirrors.

## Summary

A comparison of Formative period ceramic figurines from sites surrounding the La Venta area provides a better idea of how Mesoamerican figurines were similar to, and differed from, each other. In the most general terms, the use of these anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations throughout Mesoamerica during the Formative period demonstrates that ideas were being exchanged. During the Middle Formative period, the majority of the figurines in the

collections from San Lorenzo, the Basin of Mexico, Chalcatzingo, and Oaxaca are female.

We see a change in figurine context at Chalcatzingo. Figurines were used in burials during the Early Formative, and later changed to being used in household areas during the Middle Formative period. The figurines were found in food production areas and household debris. At Tlatilco, Early Formative figurines are found in burials, although the burials may have been under residential spaces. At Zacatenco and Gualupita, figurines from the Middle to Late Formative periods are found in house debris. Figurines from Oaxaca are found in primary contexts such as residence areas, burials, and scenes; in secondary contexts such as household midden debris; and in tertiary contexts such as surface collections. The Mazatán region figurines emerged from household contexts and large residential areas during the Early Formative period. In particular, the Paso de la Amada figurines were found in trash deposits in household areas. The Chiapa de Corzo figurines were uncovered in a plaza, which may have been residential before the Late Formative period. In Yucatan, Cuello figurines from the late Early Formative and Middle Formative periods were found in trash and fill contexts, although one figurine was found in a burial. On the Gulf Coast, Tres Zapotes figurines came from mounds and burials. At San Lorenzo, the figurines were found in household midden refuse during the Early and Middle Formative periods. In general, the figurines may have been used for burials before the Middle Formative period. After that time, figurines are mostly found in household midden contexts.

Overall, the female depiction in figurines is the predominant form during the Middle Formative period in Mesoamerica. At the same time, we see an increasing occurrence of figurines found in secondary contexts such as household middens and fills. This coincides with a more widespread distribution of Olmec imagery (Clark 1996). Together, these changes contribute to the body of evidence of long-distance exchange networks being established in the Formative period, which co-occurred with increasing political and social complexity throughout Mesoamerica (Grove 1996:105-117, Grove and Gillespie 1992:15-36, Niederberger 1996:83-93).