Bone into Body, Manatee into Man

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An extraordinary figurine of a standing man, carved from the dense rib bone of a Caribbean manatee, has been on loan to Yale since 1995 and was recently donated to the Yale University Art Gallery (figs. 1 and 2). Bone of manatee shaped into body of man, this Early Classic Maya figurine is an example of outstanding technical skill in ancient American bone carving and the sculpting of the human form. Rounded buttocks and large thighs make up the mass of the figurine’s body such that the object’s lower half visually outweights the upper and contrasts with the more delicate carving above the waist. The placement of hands resting upon the chest, at the heart of the body along the vertical axis of symmetry, creates an air of stability and repose in the corporeal form, although the face’s open mouth enlivens the composition. On this face are delicately articulated facial features that recall ancient Olmec figurines and masks of centuries earlier, as an artistic gesture to the ancient past.

Similar figurines have been excavated in coastal Belize, including one from an Early Classic burial, ca. A.D. 500, at the Maya site of Altun Ha (fig. 3). Its dimensions and proportions are strikingly similar to those of the Yale figurine, as are its broad, gently curved shoulders, rounded buttocks, and swelling thighs. Its masklike face is of similar shape, although it is further adorned with striated hair masses in front and back. Excavations in a midden (trash dump) of A.D. 400 – 700 on Moho Cay (an island off the Belizean coast) revealed yet another manatee-bone figurine in addition to other finished and unfinished objects — including tools, musical instruments, miniature canoes, and other human figurines — of manatee bone. Archaeologist Heather McKillop has convincingly argued from the presence of both finished and unfinished items that these manatee-bone objects were made at the Moho Cay site. A third comparable figurine appeared in a Sotheby’s sale catalog, but without an archaeological provenience, it is helpful to us only for aesthetic comparisons. The archaeological contexts allow us to hypothesize that the Yale figurine also came from a coastal Maya site in Belize or Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula. Because of its remarkable state of preservation, we can conjecture that it came from an elite burial, like the Altun Ha example.

However, questions remain regarding the stylistic and technical attributes of these bone figurines, for various aspects seem intentionally to invoke the ancient Olmec style. For example, the masklike treatment of the face on the Yale figurine recalls Olmec masks and figurines of 900 – 400 B.C., particularly in its shape and in the articulation of facial features. A greenstone figurine in the

Gallery offers an excellent comparison (fig. 4). At the same time, the curvaceous body of the bone figurine diverges from Olmec renderings, which tend to simplify and abstract the body. Its proportions are also different, with a 1:4 head-to-body ratio that contrasts with the typical 1:3 ratio of Olmec figurines. These proportions correspond more to Early Classic Maya representational systems. Stylistically, then, this figurine does relate to Maya aesthetic traditions and accords with the archaeological evidence suggesting an Early Classic Maya origin.

Even so, how can we understand the apparent allusion to Olmec stylistic and aesthetic traditions? One possibility is that these figurines are part of a "transitional" style from earlier Olmec to later Maya traditions. Such transition appears in monumental architectural masks on Late Preclassic Maya buildings in northern Guatemala and Belize, essentially in the same region as Altun Ha and Moho Cay. Nevertheless, although
these comparisons may be conceptually fruitful, the chronology is problematic, for the architectural masks are dated ca. 200 B.C.—A.D. 200, just after the last moments of Olmec art and contemporary with the emergence of Maya art. In contrast, the excavated manatee-bone figurines are dated ca. A.D. 500, well into the Early Classic and beyond a reasonable time frame for “transition.”

Were these figurines, then, “heirlooms,” cherished for years before interment or discard?²⁹ Perhaps, although the appearance of manatee-bone figurines of this type exclusively in Early Classic contexts suggests otherwise. Moreover, the fact that one figurine was found with unfinished objects of manatee bone strengthens the argument against “heirloom preservation,” for the presence of finished and unfinished objects indicates contemporaneous, localized manufacture in the Early Classic on Moho Cay.¹⁰

These late appearances of Olmec forms need not be part of “transition” nor “heirloom preservation” but instead can be seen as deliberate choices of stylistic retrospection in both form and technique. "Stylistic retrospection, usually known as "archaism," is a phenomenon that appears sporadically throughout ancient Maya art. The practice may be used to depict a specific individual from the past—a deceased ancestor, for example—or to create an image or object that looks older than it is. Motivations for this artistic practice may involve aesthetics, politics, religion, or any combination of these. Through the reuse and recontextualization of an older style, the artist utilizes the arena of material objects to create connections—or even dialogue—between the past and the present. In the case of the Yale manatee-bone figurine, a style of the past is not simply juxtaposed with a style of the present but has been transformed into a style of a new time and place. Even so, although the form is new, its antiquity remains within it, evoking memories and creating new trajectories in ongoing processes of re-envisioning and reconstructing the past.

Fig. 4. Standing Male Figurine. Olmec, ca. 900–400 B.C. Greenstone (jade or jadeite), h. 8.9 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Thomas T. Solley, B.A. 1950. 2002.15.4

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In this figure's representation, the transformation of bone into body, from manatee into man, is fully complete. Nevertheless, residue of the material's original form—the manatee—remains in the object itself, for the particular nature of manatee rib-bone is identifiable by both sight and touch. The symbolism of its biological origin undoubtedly would not have been lost on its producers and consumers, for the bone comes from an animal accustomed to water navigation. Buried in the tomb of a Maya noble, this manatee-bone figurine accompanied the deceased on the journey through the watery underworld.

Knowledge of manatee behavior allows us to push this metaphor further. Following warm-water temperatures, manatees have the ability to travel in both fresh and salt water. Ancient Maya living near the coast undoubtedly were aware of this flexibility and may have considered the manatee a transitional animal, comparable to water birds that live in both water and sky or caimans that traverse both water and land. Such "transitional" animals were favored in ancient Maya art and in burial offerings, for their ability to transcend diverse environments would allow them to aid humans in transitional journeys, both physical and metaphorical. Able to cross from one environment to another, the manatee—called into being by the human figurine shaped from its bone—guided the deceased in his or her journey through the waters of the underworld, the ultimate journey of transition, from life to death, from one world to another.

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1. Standing male figurine of manatee bone, with traces of red pigment, h. 15.2 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Thomas T. Solley, B.A. 1950, 2002.15.8. The outer surface of the bone has been completely carved away, leaving no distinguishing outer characteristics. Nevertheless, the material is identifiable because of the characteristic high density of manatee bone, particularly of the ribs, which are pachyostotic and lack bone marrow. For more information about manatee bones, see the following: K. Ronald, L. J. Selley, and E. C. Amoroso, Biological Synopsis of the Manatee (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1978), 14, 19, 21, 22; Heather I. McKillop, "Prehistoric Exploitation of the Manatee in the Maya and Circum-Caribbean Areas," World Archaeology 16, no. 3 (February 1985): 342.

2. From comparisons with archaeologically excavated figurines of the same type, I hypothesize that this is an Early Classic Maya figurine manufactured ca. A.D. 200–500.

3. Standard periodization in Maya archaeology is the following: Late Preclassic (200 B.C.–A.D. 200), Early Classic (A.D. 200–600), Late Classic (A.D. 600–900). The Olmec civilization, considered by many to be Mesoamerica's "Mother Culture," thrived ca. 1200–400 B.C.


6. "A Mayan Bone Figure, Campeche region, Late Preclassic/Early Classic, ca. 300 B.C.–A.D. 500... Height 3 ½" in (9.2 cm)." Sotheby's Pre-Columbian Art, New York (May 28, 1997), catalog # 175. Another possible manatee-bone figurine was published in an archaeological report from the Maya site of Oxtintok, Yucatán, Mexico (Yolanda Fernández Marquinez, "Nuevos Datos de la Estructura MA-1," Oxtintok 3, ed. Miguel Rivera [Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección General de Bellas Artes y Archivos, 1990], 31–47). Although the determination of its material had not been made at the time of publication, its similarities in appearance, style, and size to the manatee-
bone figurines discussed in this article suggest the Oskintok figurine is of the same material and type. Oskintok archaeologists found this figurine and other objects of bone, jade, and shell inside a ceramic vessel interred as an offering in a building (ibid., 37–38). See figure 8 of Fernández Marquínez’s article for a drawing of the figurine; a color photograph appears on the cover of the Oskintok 3 volume.


9. Examples of Olmec “heirlooms” used by the Maya include three pectorals with added Maya hieroglyphs. See Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art (New York: George Braziller, 1986), pls. 31, 32, 45.


11. Archaeologist David Pendergast notes the presence of other types of “Olmecoid” Maya objects in Early Classic Altun Ha deposits. Most notable is a jade pendant—from the very same burial as the Altun Ha manatee-bone figurine—with Olmec-style drill-holes at the corners of the mouth (David Pendergast, personal communication, September 2002; Pendergast, Excavations at Altun Ha, vol. 1, fig. 13g).

12. Ronald et al., Biological Synopsis, 42–43.