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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsa/12586>

DOI: 10.4000/jsa.12586

ISSN: 1957-7842

Publisher

Société des américanistes

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 September 2013

Number of pages: 7-43

ISSN: 0037-9174

Electronic reference

Nathan J. Meissner, Katherine E. South and Andrew K. Balkansky, "Figurine Embodiment and Household Ritual in an Early Mixtec Village", *Journal de la Société des américanistes* [Online], 99-1 | 2013, Online since 01 March 2016, connection on 03 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsa/12586> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/jsa.12586>

FIGURINE EMBODIMENT AND HOUSEHOLD RITUAL IN AN EARLY MIXTEC VILLAGE

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An excavated collection of 3000-year-old fired-clay figurines from the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, Mexico, provides evidence for household practices of embodiment at a time of emerging social differences. A holistic interpretation of the figurines, including their unique archaeological associations, mortuary, faunal and ethnographic information illuminates key aspects of the life-cycle termination of both human and non-human subjects. The archaeological contexts at Tayata allow for an integrated application of embodiment theory with cross-field anthropological data, and reveal a deep-seated Mixtec worldview concerning the animism of corporeal objects. [Key words: figurines, embodiment, animism, Mixtec, Formative Period.]

Processus d'animation de figurines et rituels domestiques dans un ancien village mixtèque. L'étude d'un ensemble de figurines en céramique, vieilles de 3000 ans et provenant d'une fouille dans la Mixteca Alta (Oaxaca, Mexico), prouve l'existence de rituels d'animation de celles-ci au niveau des maisonnières, ce dans un contexte d'apparition des hiérarchies sociales. L'interprétation de ces figurines, en tenant compte de leurs contextes de provenance, des données funéraires, archéozoologiques et même d'informations ethnographiques, met en lumière des aspects essentiels des fins de vie, autant humaines que non humaines. L'examen des contextes archéologiques à Tayata, combinés à des données anthropologiques multiples, autorise l'application d'une théorie de l'incarnation et établit l'enracinement ancien des conceptions animistes mixtèques relatives aux objets. [Mots-clés : figurines, incarnation, animisme, Mixtèque, Préclassique ou Formatif.]

Procesos de animación de figurillas y rituales domésticos en un antiguo pueblo mixteco. El análisis de un conjunto de figurillas de cerámica, de unos 3000 años de edad y descubiertas en la excavación de un pueblo de la Mixteca Alta (Oaxaca, México), atestigua la existencia de rituales de animación de dichas figurillas en el seno de las unidades domésticas en el momento de aparición de las jerarquías sociales. La interpretación de esas figurillas toma en cuenta el contexto de procedencia, datos

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Journal de la Société des Américanistes, 2013, 99-1, pp. 7-43. © Société des Américanistes.

funerarios y arqueozoológicos y aun informaciones etnográficas, y pone de manifiesto aspectos esenciales des fines de vida, tanto humanas como no-humanas. El examen de los contextos arqueológicos en Tayata, combinados con datos antropológicos múltiples, autoriza la aplicación de una teoría de la incarnación, y establece el arraigo de las concepciones animistas mixtecas concerniendo los objetos. [Palabras claves : figurillas, incarnación, animismo, mixteco, Preclásico o Formativo.]

INTRODUCTION

The widespread presence of fired-clay figurines throughout the Early and Middle Formative periods in Mesoamerica (ca. 2000-200 B.C.) provides archaeologists with a complex, symbolically-charged avenue for understanding household-based religious practices and broader changes in society. Mesoamerican figurine studies from these periods of initial sedentism and early villages have produced a vast literature, focusing on the relationship between ceramic figurines and ancestral ritual (Marcus 1998) emerging social hierarchy (Clark 1991, 1994; Drennan 1983; Gillespie 1987); economic production (Lesure 1999); stylistic exchange in regional networks (Blomster 1998; Cheetham 2009); embodiment (Joyce 2008); and in early processes of gender construction (Blomster 2009; Cyphers Guillén 1993; Follensbee 2009; Joyce 2000; Lesure 1997; Marcus 1998). Drawing from these works, we propose an emerging analytical perspective on figurines that integrates bioarchaeological, faunal, ethnographic, and ethnohistoric information. This conjunctive and contextual approach (e.g., Marcus 1998, 2009) is applied to late Early Formative and Middle Formative figurines from Tayata (Figure 1, Table 1), leading to interpretations concerning the end-of-life-cycle treatment of figurines that reflect notions of animism, embodiment, and corporeality in Formative Mixtec cultures. These interpretations are supported archaeologically through the ritual cremation and disarticulation of actual human and animal bodies at Tayata that parallel the general treatment of figurines.

Through various ritual activities, certain anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines appear to have been intentionally broken, scattered, and burned prior to their discard near house foundations – attesting to their special animistic status and the symbolic protection of the dead. As part of our interpretive program, we outline strong cultural continuities of Mixtec artifact embodiment and corporeal termination practice through time and among contemporary populations. Our research suggests that figurines should be understood through a holistic approach to anthropological and archaeological data. Although belonging to different research domains, these integrated data sets are critical in understanding Formative period figurines, where meanings and functions are at times unclear and elusive.

FIG. 1 – Map of the Mixteca Alta region and the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico including sites mentioned in the text (Redrawn from Balkansky 1998b, p. 40, figure 1).

Years *	Period	Major Sites	Cultural Characteristics
300 B.C. to A.D. 200	Late and Terminal Formative	Monte Albán, El Palenque, Huamelulpan, Monte Negro, Cerro Jazmín, Yucuita, Río Viejo	Monte Albán’s expansion, urbanization, state formation
900 to 300 B.C.	Middle Formative	San José Mogote, Tayata, Charco Redondo	Competing chiefdoms, earliest writing, Monte Albán founded (500 B.C.)
2000 to 900 B.C.	Early Formative	San José Mogote, Tayata	Early villages, ranked societies, Pan-Mesoamerican or « Olmec » Horizon
8000 to 2000 B.C.	Archaic	Guilá Naquitz, Gheo-Shih	Foraging, incipient cultivation

* Uncalibrated dates are approximate.

TABLE 1 – Oaxaca’s chronological sequence.

TAYATA EXCAVATIONS AND THE FORMATIVE PERIOD MIXTEC

Ancient Mixtec societies occupied a mountainous environment with dense populations supported through intensified terraced-field agriculture, elaborate systems of exchange, and complex – though small-scale – sociopolitical structures (Spores and Balkansky 2013). The pre-urban site of Tayata is located in the Mixteca Alta region of Mexico in the state of Oaxaca, northwest of Monte Albán (Figure 1). The region is best known for its late Prehispanic polities (Dahlgren de Jordán 1954; Spores 1967), and most of what we know about the Mixtec comes from ethnographic observations and a vast but problematic proto-historic and ethnohistoric literature. Archaeological data, especially for the earliest periods of occupation in the region, have lagged behind, giving a distorted picture of the Mixtec as a late Prehispanic phenomenon, but with few known antecedents. Scholars recognize the Mixtec as a distinct ethnolinguistic group from 1500 B.C., around the onset of village life in the region (Winter *et al.* 1984); the long-term cultural continuity within the Mixteca Alta since that time (Spores 1984) suggests that use of the name « Mixtec » is appropriate for the period under discussion. This characteristic continuity allows for an integrative approach, using excavations, ethnohistory and ethnography, paired with complementary studies of writing and regional surveys, to generate interpretive frameworks (Marcus and Zeitlin 1994; Pohl 2004; Spores and Balkansky *ibid.*). This conjunctive approach stemming from the writings of Alfonso Caso remains one of our most productive archaeological research methods and has inspired considerable research (summarized in Balkansky 2013).

Tayata was identified in 1994-1995 during a regional settlement survey (Balkansky 1998a; Kowalewski *et al.* 2009) and excavations began in 2004 (Balkansky *et al.* 2009). The site is located on a crescent-shaped hill overlooking the Río Achiutla, just south of the modern towns of Santa Cruz and Santa Catarina Tayata (Figure 2). Excavations were designed to locate the remote archaeological precursors of the Mixtec civilization and trace their development over time. Tayata was among the earliest complex societies in the region, contemporary with the Gulf Coast Olmec and antecedent to the first-generation cities (Balkansky 1998a, 1998b). Excavations at Tayata uncovered: several elite burials including human and animal cremations (Duncan *et al.* 2008; Lapham *et al.* 2011); public structures of various kinds including a one-room temple (Balkansky *et al.* 2009); and five houses with evidence for a range of craft activities including worked obsidian and shell ornament production, and the firing of gray ware pottery (Balkansky and Croissier 2009). Both locally and foreign made pottery also appeared bearing the pan-Mesoamerican symbolic complex long associated with the Gulf Coast Olmec. All of this occurred within a relatively narrow time span, and co-occurred with the elaboration of figurines that we discuss below.

FIG. 2 – Map of Tayata including excavation areas and contexts mentioned in the text (Redrawn and modified from Amadio 2010, figure 2).

Tayata is almost unique in being a major pre-urban center with its earliest levels directly accessible to archaeologists. Mixteca Alta surveys have identified hundreds of sites that were contemporary with Tayata (e.g., Byland 1980; Kowalewski *et al. ibid.*; Spores 1972), but large-scale excavations in this period have not occurred. There are suggestive results from surveys and excavations at Etlatongo (approximately 30 km NE of Tayata) (Blomster 2004; Spores 1972, 1983; Zárate 1987), but basic data on residential contexts and public buildings of the time remain unknown. Etlatongo, like many early centers in the Mixteca Alta, has a massive overburden from later periods limiting access to its earliest levels.

Other prominent towns from early village times, although identified from archaeological survey, are likewise buried deeply (e.g., Yucuita) or severely damaged from subsequent occupations, erosion and modern farming. There are, therefore, few comparative cases from within the Mixteca Alta relevant to understanding whole sites and their surrounding regions, but we do reference San José Mogote, in the Zapotec-speaking Valley of Oaxaca, that emerged during the same period and like Tayata was an important precursor for later urban centers (e.g., Marcus and Flannery 1996; Flannery and Marcus 2005).

The Tayata Project has thus far uncovered approximately 1,000 sq. meters of Formative deposits, mostly in contiguous blocks with entire structures exposed, showing the spatial relationships among houses, middens, public areas and other features. Nearly all of the figurines described in this article are linked to specific and clearly-dated archaeological contexts rather than surface finds. Most of the pottery identified from Tayata corresponds to the Early and Middle Formative period, or the Cruz phases for the Mixteca Alta (Spores 1972; see further descriptions in Kowalewski *et al. ibid.*, pp. 360-368). Mixteca Alta pottery has strong cross-ties with the Valley of Oaxaca sequence (Drennan 1976; Flannery and Marcus 1994), making it possible to identify archaeological contexts to the level of phase within longer periods (see also Zárate *ibid.*). Our chronology is augmented with radiometric dates from known contexts, several of which are reported here (Table 1). We focus this study largely on contexts dating to ca. 1000 B.C., a time when ranked and chiefly societies were emerging throughout Mesoamerica (Grove 1981).

FIGURINES AS BODIES: EMBODIMENT AND ANIMISM

As early as the 19th century, anthropologists have recognized the body as an important locus of signification intimately tied to complex cultural issues of ritual, gender, experience, agency, and identity. John Robb (2009, p. 163) nonetheless observes that, despite much academic attention to archaeologies of the body, relatively little archaeological research has focused explicitly on representations of the body. Instead, most archaeological studies « have been concerned with the “real” body – the lived, experienced, body – rather than representations of it » (*ibid.*). Recent approaches to the topic of bodily representations in the archaeological record have moved toward a modified definition of relational and agent-centered embodiment (Joyce 2008) and the revived concept of animism (see Alberti and Bray 2009; Groleau 2009; Hill 2008). Rosemary Joyce (*ibid.*, p. 37) suggests that Mesoamerican figurines can be approached as useful instruments through which embodiment was explored. Rather than being entirely passive in nature or simply a representation of reality, figurines may have functioned as « instruments of experience », indexical to the

bodily understandings of their makers (*ibid.*, pp. 37-40). Further, Joyce (2005, p. 142) suggests that embodiment should be understood not simply at the level of the individual, but rather how embodied agents related to one another within a given society.

The notion of figurines as embodied agents coincides nicely with recent theoretical discussions of animism. The term « animism » has fallen into disfavor with researchers largely because of derogatory connotations associated with the early writings of Edward Tylor (1913). These writings characterized the belief in souls or spirits of seemingly inanimate objects as marking a « primitive » and erroneous way of perceiving the world (*ibid.*, p. 500). Recent reinterpretations of animism have moved beyond the « belief in spirits » definition of animism to a relational approach (Harvey 2006; Hill 2008; Mills and Ferguson 2008; Nieves Zedeño 2008; Sillar 2009), emphasizing how human and non-human persons relate to one another and the social challenges of engaging non-human persons that « demonstrate intentionality and agency » (Harvey *ibid.*, p. xvii). One important aspect of this « new animism » is that it avoids the pitfalls of traditional embodiment theory by sidestepping its human exceptionalism – an undercurrent of embodiment that tends to ignore the possibility of relational metamorphosis between different categories of human, non-human, animate and inanimate beings (Borić and Robb 2008, p. 4). Such emphasis on metamorphosis is particularly characteristic of Otomanguan religions, including the Mixtec and Zapotec populations in Oaxaca (Marcus 1978, 1989; Marcus and Flannery 1978).

Animate objects can be considered to hold transformative powers to alter human lifestyles, while inanimate objects may be considered replaceable or substitutable especially in ritual practice (Mills and Ferguson *ibid.*, p. 340). Following the work of Alfred Gell (1998), Tamara Bray (2009, p. 362) suggests that object animacy should not be confused with « living » in the biological sense of the word. Instead, animism might be better understood through object *efficacy* – the imbuing of objects with the « ability to effect » (*ibid.*). In sum, we suggest that the reformulated theoretical perspectives of animism and embodiment are entirely appropriate, if not necessary, for the study of both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines that have often been interpreted as living (effective) beings (Joyce 2008, p. 43; Marcus 1998, p. 5; see also Groleau *ibid.*).

FIGURINE DATA FROM TAYATA

For this article, we focused on 179 fragments and partial figurines from Tayata (Table 2), all with a spatial provenience to the two-meter level both within and outside of house foundations. Such foundations are defined at Tayata as linear floor-level stones that form a base for wattle-and-daub bricks, and are not typical « foundations » in the sense of a sub-floor construction or ballast. While

the size of the Tayata sample is not as large as other Formative period sites (see Gillespie 1987; Lesure 1997; Marcus 1998), it remains one of the largest Formative samples of its kind for the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca. Because of the sparse nature of Mixteca Alta settlement and archaeology, researchers have made considerable efforts to interpret Formative figurines based on limited sample sizes (see Blomster 2002, 2009 and 2012). Thus, we feel that the current sample is appropriate to help interpret general social processes at the village level, despite its limits for conducting statistical procedures.

Fragment Identification			Representation		
Type	Count	% Total	Human	Count	% Identified
Head	20	11,2 %	Female	27	65,9 %
Arm	26	14,5 %	Pregnant Female	3	7,3 %
Torso	21	11,7 %	Male (?)	10	24,4 %
Leg	58	32,4 %	Child ^c	1	2,4 %
Foot	2	1,1 %	Unidentified sex	113	
Partial ^a	25	14,0 %			
Complete ^b	3	1,7 %	Non-human		
Unknown/Other	24	13,4 %	Dog	6	75,0 %
Total	179	100,0 %	Bird	2	25,0 %
			Total	8	100,0 %

^aIncluding two or more body parts.

^bFigurine A032 was classified as complete despite a missing cranial area and left arm; Figurine A165 was missing the upper left portion of the face and forehead but was otherwise complete.

^cExcluding « Hollow Baby » fragments due to the ambiguous nature of representation.

TABLE 2 – Summary of figurine data from Formative contexts, Tayata.

All figurines recovered from Tayata appear in domestic contexts around house foundations and in associated house middens, which means that no figurines were recovered from ceremonial or presumably public zones. Similar patterns have been documented to the southeast among contemporaneous Zapotec villages (Marcus 1998, p. 3). The Tayata sample included 173 solid figurine fragments and 6 hollow fragments. The sample contained 31 figurine heads in total: 20 were unattached to the body and 11 were attached to necks and classified as « partial » fragments (Figures 3 and 4). A pink paste, white-slipped « hollow baby » leg and one dark paste, white-slipped, imitation hollow baby foot were recovered during the 2004 excavation. Such hollow whiteware figurines are found at major Early and Middle Formative sites throughout Mexico (Coe 1965; Blomster 2002); despite their considerable craftsmanship, they are often found in households and middens (Blomster 1998; Coe and Diehl 1980, pp. 261-279; Marcus 1998).

FIG. 3 – Anthropomorphic female and male figurine heads from the Early Formative and Middle Formative transition, Tayata, Oaxaca. Example A 168 likely represents a fetus or bundled child.

FIG. 4 – Human figurine heads with distinct hairstyles and headgear recovered from Early Formative contexts, Tayata, Oaxaca.

Overall, sex identification of Formative period figurines is notoriously difficult due to their often fragmentary and abstract nature. We identified the Tayata figurines based on secondary sexual characteristics because primary sexual characteristics were generally absent. Females dominated the sample ($n=27$, or 65,9 %), with few males positively identified, although at least ten (24,4 %) were identified as potentially male due to a complete lack of breasts and unique headgear (see A147 in Figure 3). Among females, a variety of differing hairstyles were noted, which may have served to communicate social information about status (see Marcus 1998, pp. 31-38). The unique and elaborate head wraps found on the figurines are typically thought to identify females (Cyphers Guillén *ibid.*, pp. 213-215), although there is a distinct possibility that male figurines could have similar types of headgear that might be indistinguishable by archaeologists. At least three female figurines (11,1 %) were identified as pregnant with extended, rounded stomachs and enlarged belly buttons.

The figurines from Tayata appear in several broad categories: abstract human representations; naturalistic human representations; dog and bird effigies; and representations of children. Of the identified animal figurines, six of eight (75 %) were dogs and the remaining two (25 %) were birds including one anthropomorphic example with a central crest and earflares (Figure 5). We have suggested elsewhere that status-marking adornment and realistic portraiture has a tendency to increase at Tayata during the Middle Formative transition, although a larger sample is needed to adequately explore this hypothesis (South and Meissner 2006; Meissner *et al.* 2010).

BURNING AND BREAKAGE OF FIGURINES

The ritual practice of breakage, disarticulation, or burning to deactivate animistic objects is widespread throughout Mesoamerican cultures at a variety of different times and places. Brian Stross (1998, p. 31) suggests that «for Mesoamericans the process of creating and animating cultural artifacts was and is analogous to the birth process, while abandoning or destroying such artifacts was akin to death». Archaeologically, the intentional breakage of artifacts to mark life-cycle events is well documented across Mesoamerica from the Formative period to Spanish contact. Objects thought to hold a life force – particularly those in the shape of living entities – are subject to termination through breakage including stelae, sculptures, ceramic effigies, incensarios, pottery, and jade (Walker 1998; Pendergast 1998). The contemporary Huastec, Nahua, and Tzotzil break, burn, or cut inalienable objects at the end of their social lives – often when an owner dies (Vogt 1993; Sandstrom 1991; Alcorn 1984 [cited in Stross 1998]) This practice is generally witnessed during funerals, and includes the breaking of personal items such as dishes, clothing, machetes, and other objects.

FIG. 5 – Dog and bird figurines from Tayata. The crested bird head with earflares (A089) is of an unknown species, but similar in form to Specimen 10, Zone F Midden, San José Mogote (Marcus 1998, p. 86) and a Cruz B example from Etlatongo (Blomster 2009, figure 5.8).

Archaeologists have been increasingly concerned with depositional behavior that indicates deliberate breakage or termination of animate objects (see Chapman 2000; Lucero 2008; Pollard 2008). To infer deliberate breaking and scattering, archaeologists often consider: (1) a patterned behavior of fragmented deposition throughout time (e.g., Pollard *ibid.*, pp. 58-59); (2) a « consistent reoccurrence » of unreconstructable artifacts from the same provenience (Walker 1998, p. 86); (3) a repeated deposition of broken deposits that occur site-wide or regionally (e.g., Makkay 1983; Masayoshi 1974); and (4) a unique treatment of a particular artifact class or type (Walker *ibid.*, p. 85). The animism of objects is manifested in the material record through a series of habituated behaviors. Objects ascribed with animistic qualities are expected to have « very different genealogies, biographies, and ultimately, depositional histories than objects lacking in animate qualities » (Mills and Ferguson 2008, p. 340). If an object is involved relationally with other persons or embodied objects, it can be viewed archaeologically through the special treatment of objects including offerings, contextual associations and architectural contexts (Bray 2009; Groleau 2009).

We suggest that the depositional patterning of Tayata figurines meets many of the criteria listed here to infer that at least some figurines may have been broken as a product of ritual practice. In the case of Tayata figurines, nearly all were recovered in fragmentary form in both the Early and Middle Formative periods, and it was impossible to piece fragments back together even when recovered from the same context or midden. There were two Early Formative figurines that were nearly intact, but still had damage to the head and face that may have been intentional. Both figurines appeared to have been broken despite excellent midden preservation, and missing pieces of the head and face were not recovered from their respective midden deposits. An unusual, tiny figurine (A168 in Figure 3) was recovered whole and appears to be a representation of a child – likely either a fetus or a bundled newborn. The overall fragmentation of figurines contrasts to the depositional patterns of other artifact classes like pottery. For example, numerous ceramic vessels at Tayata could be reconstructed or, at least, partially refit from the same midden that included non-reconstructable fragments of figurines.

Several figurine heads appear to have been separated from the body and discarded elsewhere prior to their disposal. Researchers have suggested that this decapitation/defacement may be a natural form of post-depositional processes for figurines (Bailey 2005, p. 112; Cyphers Guillén *ibid.*, p. 213; Hammond 1989, p. 112). However, even in the rare case of one partially reconstructable Tayata figurine (A013, shown in Figure 6), the face and limbs could not be recovered – suggesting a discard in another location. This patterning of figurine breakage prior to discard is consistent with the site of Etlatongo in the Mixteca Alta (Blomster 2009, p. 124) and elsewhere in Formative Mesoamerica, including: Cantón Corralito, Chiapas (Cheetham 2009, p. 152); Puerto Escondido and Las Honduritas, Honduras (Joyce 2008, pp. 43-44); and Chalcatzingo, Morelos (Ángulo 1987; Grove 1987; Grove and Gillespie 1984; Harlan 1987). Middle Formative figurines recovered from the Pacific Coast site of La Victoria, Guatemala, show evidence for the intentional removal of mouths prior to discard (Coe 1961, p. 92). Although some Formative figurines may have simply been broken accidentally, Marcus (1998, p. 312) suggests that « defacement and intentional battering » may have occurred to prevent the improper manipulation of figurines by outside households.

Overall, Tayata figurines were not associated with certain types of ritual behavior such as dedicatory caching for buildings, ritual caching, or in architecture with special functions like the steam bath, or cobbled plaza. Despite the presence of elaborated grave offerings at Tayata that include greenstone, shell beads, dog bone, and whole pottery vessels, no whole figurines have been found as intact primary offerings in a mortuary context. However, there are at least two instances of burials dating to the Middle Formative transition and Middle Formative period that contained broken figurine fragments that were included

with the burial matrix. This includes Burial 1, House 4, Excavation 4 (both described in detail below), and a burial feature (Burial 3) located in Excavation 2, Unit D1. At least six fragments were recovered from this burial feature (four legs, one arm, and one unidentified leg). These figurines do not appear to have been primary offerings, although it is possible that the fragments were present during the burial rituals. Another potential interpretation is that these figurines were unintentionally included in the burial fill. However, these fragments appear in higher frequency in the context of the burial matrix in comparison to the surrounding fill associated with House 4, and were associated with cremated dog bones and marine shell (Duncan *et al.* 2008, p. 5317).

Some figurines – especially those located around House 4 – were encountered in middens that contain evidence of food processing activities (a high percentage of animal bones in the matrix) in addition to potsherds, obsidian blades, and fine serving vessels which may suggest a ritualized role in household feasting. The general confinement of Tayata figurines to domestic spaces is consistent with other figurine assemblages in the Oaxaca region (Marcus 1998; Flannery and Marcus 2005, p. 95) and contrasts greatly with the site of Tlatilco, where many whole figurines were recovered intact in association with interments (García Moll *et al.* 1991, pp. 27-84). Although the practice is not found at Tayata, the deliberate burial of whole figurines is found in other areas of Mexico, including the Valley of Oaxaca. At Hacienda Blanca, a burial of unknown sex was discovered dating to the Tierras Largas phase, and included four whole figurines. Two of the figurines were identified as a male and a female, and one extraordinary representation was a hollow depiction of a pregnant female; in the interior of her body, a small figurine in the form of a fetus was discovered (Ramírez Urrea 1993 [cited in Marcus 1998, p. 26]). Michael Whalen (1981, pp. 130-131) documented a San José phase (late Early Formative) burial of an adult female (Burial 35) at Santo Domingo Tomaltepec that contained a male and female figurine pair. Another burial from the site (Burial 21) contained a seated hollow female figurine with five pottery vessels (Whalen 1981, pp. 130-131). At Tayata, the fragmentation of figurines and subsequent discard processes cross various archaeological contexts including house foundations, associated house middens, and burial matrices – providing a snapshot of their use lives in contrast to the special deposits mentioned above.

Several Tayata figurines ($n=18$ or $\sim 10\%$) show signs of charring prior to and after breakage. This is especially prevalent in the area around House 4, where human, dog, and bird figurines were both broken and burned. Such burning was likely intentional, as artifacts directly associated with the figurines did not show similar signs of charring. Our analysis distinguished between two types of burn patterns on figurines: (1) fire clouding (a by-product of the production sequence), which produced a hazy, light grey pattern with no traces of residual carbon; and (2) post-firing burning (a product of ritual activity), which produced

a sharp-edged, dark grey to black pattern and left small amounts of carbon that rubbed off easily. We also noted that several figurines had carbonization extending across original surfaces and throughout broken areas, suggesting that they may have been broken first and then burned. Charring was not limited to one area of the body, but rather extended across faces (A137), arms (A020), legs (A086), torsos (A074), backs (A048) and even pregnant torsos (A174). Such patterns were encountered on two examples of well-crafted figurine heads (A137 from the Early Formative; A013 from the Middle Formative transition) with status-marking adornment including head wraps, earflares, and a mask.

FIGURINES AND BODY-CENTERED RITUAL

Archaeological data at Tayata suggest a conceptual link between the end-of-life cycle treatment of figurines and the mortuary treatment of individuals, lending support for the interpretation of figurines as animistic agents. This applies to both human and non-human figurines whose treatment does not appear to differ between these two categories. The 2004 season uncovered fourteen burial contexts representing twenty individuals at Tayata – dating to the Middle Formative transition through the Postclassic period. The earliest burials at Tayata (Burial 1, Burial 2, Burial 3, and a skull deposit) date to the Middle Formative transition (ca. 1000 B.C.) and the Middle Formative period, and display evidence for cremation and disarticulation. Later burials dating to the Classic period show some signs of continuity in the disarticulation or removal of skeletal elements, but also include full inhumations typical of Mixteca pit burials. An excavation of a Classic-period *temazcal* (steam bath) in Area B encountered three adult burials in flexed positions and three child burials in extended positions. Dating to the Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1521) based on an accompanying offering, a burial of a young female was encountered in Excavation 2, Unit A4. This individual was buried in a seated position, with the head tightly tucked down in between the knees and the hands placed near the ankles (Bedard 2007, p. 49).

Since the focus of this article is on the Formative Period, we concentrate more explicitly on four burial contexts critical to the current discussion. This includes two human cremations located near and beneath a house foundation (Figure 6). Both burials were cremated *in situ* in a presumed act of veneration, and large amounts of ash and carbonization were found across the bones and in the burial cut (Duncan *et al.* 2008, p. 5316). Their placement within or near a house foundation is consistent with contemporary Mixtec ideals of the protection of deceased souls within the household (Monaghan 1995, p. 161). These cremations may have been important individuals within the community, and their special mortuary treatment through burning may have been crucial in their life-cycle

transition to ancestors. Other complementary data suggest that these persons were relatively high status, including the relatively high proportions of obsidian, marine shell, deer, and fish bones in household middens (Duncan *et al. ibid.*, p. 5315). We suggest that these burials and others from Tayata provide an important microcosm of ritual activity during the Middle Formative transition, and are useful for understanding the Tayata figurine assemblage.

FIG. 6 – Plan view of excavations around House 4, Tayata, showing the location of cremated burials and respective location of several human (female), dog, and bird figurines (Redrawn and modified from Duncan *et al.* 2008, p. 5317, figure 4).

Burial 1 (found in the units N4302/E4488 and N4302/E4490) was a primary intrusive interment discovered beneath a wattle-and-daub House 4 (Figures 6 and 7). The burial was placed face-down within the burial cut and cremated

in situ as evidenced by a thick ash layer surrounding the skeletal remains, and the reddening of fired soil inside the burial cut. The term « cremation » has considerable linguistic baggage, and everyday use of the term implies that bones were reduced to a state of ash. This is not the case at Tayata, as fires set to bodies and accompanying offerings was not hot enough to reduce bones to ash. However, fires set to both Burial 1 and Burial 2 were certainly hot enough to produce a thick layer of gray ash covering over 90 % of the internal surface of the bones – resulting in considerable longitudinal cracking, warping, and splitting of bones (*ibid.*, p. 5317).

FIG. 7 – Excavation of *in situ* cremation Burial 1, House 4. Photo by Liz Farmer. Courtesy of INAH.

Osteological analysis indicates that Burial 1 was a female approximately 18-25 years of age and the individual had status-marking adornments of a shell bead necklace and a reconstructable offering of a halved broken plate (*ibid.*, pp. 5316-5317). Modern soil disturbance may have affected the preservation of the pedal phalanges, which were missing from the skeleton. Faunal analysis indicates that the burial fill contained scattered pieces of dog bone (skull, maxilla, mandible, humeri, tibia, metapodial, and phalanx) that were likely from the same individual – covered in the same ashy concretions as the human burial. These ashy concretions are not consistent with carbonization and calcinations of cooking events, and instead appear to have been part of the cremation ritual as an

offering (*ibid.*, p. 5315). In addition, there was evidence for marine shell production materials within the burial fill, along with figurine fragments including an arm, a finely crafted head of a female and a goggle-eyed dog (A090, A091, A092).

Another nearby interment, Burial 2 (N4302, E4484) (Figure 6) was also burned *in situ*, and was placed in a shallow intrusive burial cut 20 centimeters west of the stone foundation of the house. The burial was encountered in a seated position, and although the sex could not be determined due to disturbance of upper postcranial bones from the plow-zone, this individual was around 15-25 years of age at death. The burial was found with loose beads and a pottery vessel as a primary offering, and domestic materials such as metate fragments, potsherds, and burned adobe brick were recovered within the burial cut. Faunal data indicate that the burial fill included two canine teeth from a dog (*ibid.*, p. 5316). A radiocarbon date from Burial 2 provided a calibrated date of 1000-890 B.C., placing it on the cusp of the Early Formative to Middle Formative transition.

To the west of House 4, a slightly later burial feature dating to approximately 900 B.C. was encountered in unit N4302/E4472 slightly above the living surface area of Structure 3 (Figure 8). This interment was unique as it contained a human skull where the occipital bone was intentionally removed from the back of the skull and placed over the face prior to burial. Osteological analysis indicates that the skull belonged to a young adult – likely a female based on a gracile mastoid process and supraorbital margin. Evidence of a cutmark was found on the right parietal, and the overall shape of the cross-section shows it likely resulted from a biface tool and not a flake tool (Duncan 2007, p. 20). While the exact nature of this deposit is yet to be fully interpreted, it is possible that the skull was placed as a dedicatory offering prior to the construction of a plaza. Its overall form of disarticulation (removal and replacement of the occipital over the face) is unique for the region and time period, although post-mortem modification of skulls continued into the Late Formative period in the Mixteca Alta (Gaxiola 1984; Christensen and Winter 1997). Several figurine fragments in the form of limbs and torsos belonging to different figurines were recovered in the vicinity of the burial feature, scattered across the living surfaces of Structure 3. Also, a « hollow baby » figurine fragment was recovered beneath the living surface in the interior of the structural foundation (Figure 8).

Burial 3 was found in Unit D1, located near House 1 in Excavation 2 (Figure 2). The burial cut contained jumbled, but well-preserved human remains including a single mandible, several ribs, and multiple humeri, found disarticulated to one another at varying depths in the deposit (168-211 cm below datum). The cut itself was located beneath a stone feature constructed in a later episode that contained a high proportion of ash. The depositional contexts of this feature were complex, and the burial cut itself showed evidence for later mixing of stratigraphic levels. Closely associated with the human remains were two nearly

FIG. 8 – Structure 3 showing the location of a post-mortem modified skull (ca. 900 B.C.) and approximate location of several figurine fragments.

intact vessels belonging to the Cruz C phase, including an Atoyac Yellow-White vessel, a well-crafted greenstone earspool, and several figurine fragments (discussed below). Given the abundance of unarticulated and missing skeletal elements, it is possible that the feature was used multiple times, and that human remains « were removed and possibly reinterred in another location, or simply taken out for ritual purposes » (Bedard 2007, p. 51). Such reasoning is consistent with later Zapotec practices in the Valley of Oaxaca, where tombs were often re-entered for the purpose of retrieving skeletal elements of ancestors (Feinman *et al.* 2010, p. 1099).

The practice of dislocating and modifying corporeal elements continued at Tayata into later periods, including the Early Classic period (A.D. 200-600). In one example, a burial feature involved four individuals – three males and one female. This feature contained one cranium and several mandibles belonging to different individuals (Duncan 2007). The cranium showed evidence for pre-mortem modification in the form of lamdoid flattening, and the cranium and several of the longbones and ribs were potentially exposed to the elements prior to interment based on sun-bleaching and rodent gnaw marks. In addition, a small v-shaped cutmark was found on one of the ribs, which may have occurred post-mortem (*ibid.*, p. 17). Although the post-depositional processes of this burial are not entirely clear, there is no evidence for disturbance of the pottery offerings associated with the burial. Thus, it is plausible that the omission of

skulls was an intentional act performed for ritual purposes given the contexts of mortuary treatment at Tayata.

Aside from the cremated dog remains bearing similar post-mortem treatment as humans, there is also evidence for the burial or caching of dog skulls at Tayata. In Unit N4302/E4466, a skull was encountered that belonged to a juvenile dog that dates to the early Middle Formative period. The skull was found approximately 30 cm from a well-crafted stone lined pit and there was no additional evidence of faunal material at the same level, suggesting it may have been part of a ritual event and not simply household refuse. Interestingly, a greenstone bead was placed as an offering near the mouth of the dog skull, attesting to the special nature of this deposit (Lapham *et al.*, 2011). Such practice is typically uncommon for animal burials in Oaxaca (see Drennan 1976), and instead, the placement of a greenstone bead resembles some of the human burial customs of humans found at Formative period San José Mogote and Tomaltepec (Marcus 1998, p. 47; Whalen 1981). Flannery and Marcus (2005, p. 218) encountered a late Early Formative burial of a female in House 17 that had two jadeite beads and one jadeite earspool placed within the mouth prior to a face-down burial.

FIGURINE DEATH

Given the context of mortuary ritual at Tayata, archaeological data suggest that aspects of the figurine assemblage parallel corporeal treatments of both humans and dogs. Midden 1 (N4306/E4486; N4306/E4488) and Midden 2 (N4306/E4490) were associated and contemporaneous with House 4 and Burials 1 and 2, and contained several examples of human and non-human figurines (Figure 6). Within these middens, there were three human figurines, three dog figurines and one bird figurine. One exceptionally well-preserved figurine, A013 (Figure 6), was partially reconstructable and recovered in two pieces, but missing its arms and lower part of the face. This figurine is female based on secondary sexual characteristics, and was seated in a cross-legged position similar to Figurine 4 from the cached figurine scene from Feature 63 at San José Mogote (Marcus 1998, p. 183). This pose is thought to signify a position of authority (*ibid.*), and the figurine also has several status-marking adornments including earflares, a headdress or braided hair, and appears to be wearing a rounded mask around the eyes. The belly of this figurine is extended with an exaggerated belly button – potentially indicative of pregnancy. A013 also shows evidence of burning across much of the face and of the upper right leg, similar to the excavated human and dog cremations. Another figurine, A014 was well-executed and finely crafted with a high level of detail much like the figurines suggested to

be portraitures from the contemporary site of Chalcatzingo, Morelos (Grove and Gillespie 1984).

Several red-slipped dog figurines were recovered from Midden 1 labeled A150, A158 and A176 (Figure 6). These dog figurines all appear to be broken in half at the torso, and no additional fragments were recovered that refit one another. Figurine A176 was covered with eroded red slip and burned along the left side of the body. Unlike the other dog figurines, A158 was also missing its front limbs. All of these dog figurines have exaggerated goggle eyes, and one has an extended tongue. These dogs were found alongside another female figurine (A175), which was a more abstract representation with earflares that was limbless, broken at the torso and had appliquéd « coffee bean » eyes and mouth.

Mixed throughout the Burial 3 human remains were several figurine fragments including four legs, an arm, and one possible leg. This included a white-slipped imitation hollow baby leg that was manufactured from a dark local paste, contrasting with the pink-paste hollow baby fragment recovered from Excavation 4. Unlike the reconstructable pottery vessels found alongside the figurines, these fragments could not be refit to one another and several body parts were missing. Throughout the deposit, numerous faunal remains were found in conjunction with the human remains, including a specialized sharpened fish spine that was likely used in body-centered ritual bloodletting activities (Amadio 2010, p. 41; Lapham *et al.* 2011; see also Flannery and Marcus 2005, p. 178). Other fish remains were not recovered from the deposit, but at least 13 other fragments of animal bone were recovered belonging to dogs, white-tailed deer, rabbits, and other small mammals (Amadio *ibid.*, p. 41), indicative of a feasting event.

Tayata figurines indicate aspects of embodiment of figurines as evidenced by their parallel treatment to human and animal bodies. The symbolic treatment of burning and breakage of figurines at the end of their life-cycle suggests that these figurines were imbued with animistic qualities similar to actual living human and non-human beings. Although rare, such linkages between ceramic figurines and actual bodies are found elsewhere in the Formative period Mixteca Alta. Excavations at Etlatongo have uncovered a dog figurine head located above a bell-shaped pit that contained a dog skeleton and a nearly intact hollow baby (Blomster 2004, p. 88-89). Jeffrey Blomster suggests that both the dog figurine and the dog sacrifice may have related to one another in a ceremony to « close » the storage pit (*ibid.*, pp. 88, 95). At Tayata, the symbolic removal or obstruction of faces of the deceased (as evidenced by the disarticulated skull deposit and repeated face-down burials) is conceptually consistent with the removal of figurine heads and the occasional removal of figurine faces. Whether depicting actual individuals, ancestors, or mythic founders, we suggest that the ritualized termination of figurines reflects decisions related to the socially appropriate treatment of animate bodies.

CONTINUITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN MIXTEC EMBODIMENT

Throughout time in Oaxaca, the cultural notions of embodied objects transformed with changes in social structure and complexity. However, fundamental aspects of embodiment and the animism of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic objects remained, emphasizing disarticulation and occasionally burning as a socially appropriate means of « deactivating » the animate. The widespread use of figurines in household rituals decreased drastically in the Mixteca Alta during the late Middle Formative through the Terminal Formative (500 B.C.-A.D. 200). In the Valley of Oaxaca, a decrease in household figurine use is attributed to an increasing reliance on full-time priests to execute ritual ceremonies, particularly in the late Middle Formative (Marcus 1998, p. 301). In excavations of Tayata's successor site, the urban center of Huamelulpan, very few figurines were recovered in Huamelulpan I (400-100 B.C.) and Huamelulpan II (100 B.C.-A.D. 200) phases, despite intensive household excavations near the site core by Margarita Gaxiola González (1984). Of the few fragments recovered (n=11), several were identified as female including one pregnant female, one male, and one individual that appears to be wearing a mask (*ibid.*, p. 38, figure 38).

Despite this de-emphasis on figurine ritual, an extraordinary feature at Huamelulpan known as the « Altar de Los Craneos » represents the critical juncture between domestic figurine embodiment and what Marcus (1998, p. 302) labels the « great tradition » in the Valley of Oaxaca, where royal ancestors were represented through anthropomorphic incense braziers, funerary « urns », and effigy bridgespout vessels (Marcus 1983, p. 144; Marcus 1998, p. 313). Dating to the Terminal Formative period, the altar reveals how specialist-produced anthropomorphic urns may have been used in body-centered rituals – bearing a similarity to earlier figurine embodiment practices at Tayata (Figure 9). The Altar de los Craneos contained three skulls – two in a vertical position and one resting on its side. Nearby, a cranium fragment was recovered from the floor near the altar in association with a lone human femur. Osteological analysis indicates the skulls belonged to a young female, two young males, and an older male (Gaxiola *ibid.*, p. 51). All skulls showed evidence for post-mortem modification in the form of intentional drilling of the frontal bone, and the nearby skull fragment contained evidence of red paint. No cut marks were noted on the skulls, suggesting that defleshing may have occurred through burial and subsequent exhumation, or through boiling prior to modification. Depositional evidence suggests that the altar may have been deliberately buried immediately after a ritual event (Christensen and Winter 1997, p. 471).

Complementing the human skulls, five reconstructable seated anthropomorphic urns executed in the Monte Albán II style were found south of the altar. Two of the urn effigies had buccal masks in the form of birds, and at least three

FIG. 9 – Altar de los Craneos at Huamelulpan, Oaxaca, showing the proximity of anthropomorphic effigy urns to body-centered ritual space (Redrawn from Gaxiola 1984, figure 40).

had red paint on the face or body (Gaxiola 1976, p. 89; Gaxiola 1984, pp. 37-38). Importantly, one of the urns (Objecto 15) shows evidence for intentional decapitation and removal from the body prior to its burial in the feature (*ibid.*, p. 52). Additional remains of the ceramic body were not recovered despite the excellent preservation of the other urns (Gaxiola 1976, p. 91). Other ritual paraphernalia was recovered from the altar including a broken shell object, and a greenstone celt. Interestingly, the altar included items typically considered to be domestic or non-ritual in nature, including storage jars, large cooking vessels, and ground stone manos (*ibid.*). Such data are similar to figurine and burial contexts at Tayata, where the divisions between « ritual » and « domestic » items are frequently blurred. A high diversity of symbolism in Huamelulpan urns appears to contrast with Monte Albán (Gaxiola 1984, p. 38), suggesting that these urns could represent individual ancestors or deity impersonators. The direct association of urns with human skulls and disarticulated human bone may represent a key transition of figurine embodiment to the widespread

« great tradition » of ancestral urns – similar to the rise of Zapotec funerary urns at Monte Albán. Such urns were long thought of as representing « gods » (Caso and Bernal 1952), but were subsequently interpreted as receptacles for the spirit of deceased ancestors (see Marcus 1983, pp. 144-148; Sellen 2002, p. 3).

Later in time during the Mixtec Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1521), there were various forms of ritualized treatment of the body, including the disarticulation and cremation of skeletal remains, and the burning of anthropomorphic urns. Depictions of disarticulating and repositioning skeletal elements are found in plate 82 of the Codex Nuttall. A human skull is shown resting on top of wrapped femora and longbones (Figure 10). The bones are accompanied by two priests: Twelve-Ollin sets fire to the body, while the other priest, One-Water, offers a bird as an accompanying sacrifice (Bellas 1997, p. 182). Elsewhere on the same page, there is a depiction of an anthropomorphic wooden funeral effigy – adorned with a blue face, headdress, earflares and dressed in a ceremonial garment. This effigy was temporary in nature, and was constructed to hold the previously cremated remains of Lord Nine-Ollin. The codices suggest that funerary services were held for four years, and included ritualized offerings to the embodied urn, including « the drink of life » or *pulque* from a priest. Eventually, the wooden effigy along with the cremated human remains was burned again prior to their final burial in the ground (Nuttall 1902, pp. 25-26). The Mixtec codices also depict the burning of mummy bundles in plate 20 and plate 81 of the Codex Nuttall. Plate 81 depicts Lord Ten Rain communicating with several bundles as he sets them on fire. Interestingly, the smoke from the bundles forms speech scrolls (Bellas *ibid.*, p. 187), attesting to their animistic nature and active relationship with the living.

During Spanish contact in the sixteenth century A.D., there is strong evidence that the Mixtec created stone figures of recently deceased individuals and kept them within households for ancestral veneration. This practice was reserved particularly for noble ancestors after death, as documented in the town of Yanhuítlan around A.D. 1540. According to a Spanish Inquisition document (AGN Inquisición 37, exp. 5), following the death of the Mixtec cacique Don Francisco's wife, a « stone figure » was made of her along with other ritual activities including a dove and quail sacrifice, the removal of a portion of her hair for an offering, and the attaching of sacred stones to the body for the « gods » (Spores and Balkansky *ibid.*). According to Spanish chronicles, Don Juan (another high-ranking Mixtec noble) and Don Francisco also « had *demonios* in their houses, and that among those belonging to them were [images of] his father and mother » (*ibid.*). In these cases, there is a clear connection between death and the production of durable anthropomorphic figures to embody ancestors.

FIG. 10 – Postclassic Mixtec mortuary ritual featuring human cremation and bird sacrifice (Redrawn from Nuttall 1902, plate 82).

The notion of animism and object embodiment has a critical role in the worldview of contemporary Mixtec-speaking populations, and is especially evident during ritual activity. At a fundamental level, the Mixtec believe that the world contains a life force that can manifest itself in various objects, food, structures, natural features, natural forces and even social relationships (Monaghan 1995, p. 357). This view has considerable time depth and is shared among Otomanguan peoples, including the Mixtec and Zapotec (Marcus *et al.* 1983). A typical ethnographic example concerns *pulque* – a fermented beverage made from the sap of the maguey plant – that can hold the life force of the *yüi* (translated as « the heat of life » residing in human and non-human persons), which can be transferred from humans to cornfields for fertility (Monaghan *ibid.*, pp. 221, 357). Offerings of flowers are frequently juxtaposed with imagery of human children, where pregnancy is equated to the blooming of flowers, and a child's growth stage is often equated with the opening of petals (*ibid.*, p. 222). Flowers also act as containers for human *ánima* – a supernatural force associated with the human heart and blood (*ibid.*, pp. 128, 221). During funerals, flowers

placed around the deceased absorb the *ánima* of the dead, and are thereby said to represent « the body of the deceased » (*ibid.*, p. 22).

The practice of using material items to substitute as a proxy sacrifice, or to inflict harm on specific individuals is widespread throughout Mesoamerican cultures. Among the Lacandon, anthropomorphic rubber figurines are burned as a proxy sacrifices to the gods, albeit only after animacy is transferred to the object through religious chants and by the smearing of human blood onto the figurine body (McGee 1990, pp. 91-92). In other Mesoamerican cultures like the Cora, human figurines have been used to « kill » a living person by mutilating the figurine's head or stomach with thorns (Frazer 1911, p. 56). At the Mixteca Alta town of Nuyoo, Oaxaca, sacrificial objects are often metaphorically linked to corporeal features of humans, and frequently serve as proxy sacrifices to the gods. Candles and incense are used to represent the body and lifespan of individuals, where the light of the candle is thought to represent the « light of the human mind » (Monaghan 1995, p. 221). According to Monaghan (*ibid.*), « a candle offered in sacrifice stands for the life span and body of a specific individual » and are thought to embody « the heat of life ». When used in acts of witchcraft, a victim's name is inscribed on the candle, then burned and given a mock funeral. This ritual can take place in graveyards, adding to the metaphorical notion of death associated with the destruction of the candle by fire (*ibid.*, p. 220).

Similarly for the Mixtec, the destruction of the body transposed onto objects qualifies as a human sacrifice for the gods, and serves as a metaphorical proxy for supernatural communication (*ibid.*, p. 224-225). Notions of embodiment and animism among contemporary Mixtec people are far too complex and lengthy to succinctly describe here (*ibid.*, pp. 127-130, 225); it is likely that the animistic force of the *yü* and *ánima* and their association with life-cycle events (namely birth and death) have implications for Formative Mixtec populations and their treatment and use of figurines. Archaeological, ethnographic, and ethnohistoric data thus suggest that social rules governing the treatment of bodily remains and human effigies have a significant time depth in light of Formative Tayata figurines and burials. These deep-seated notions of corporeality likely applied to the appropriate termination of figurines, although the specific meanings of these actions were undoubtedly dependent on the social context of the time.

DISCUSSION

Researchers stress the multiplicity of meanings connected to figurine use and ritual in cross-cultural prehistoric contexts (Faust and Halperin 2009; Nanoglou 2008). We doubt that Formative Mesoamerican figurines had a single meaning, but, rather, may have been manufactured for a variety of purposes to communicate an array of context-specific messages to particular audiences.

Although Formative figurines may have been widespread on a macroregional level, their specific meanings undoubtedly varied according to village and ethnopolitical affiliation. Whether certain figurines were used in domestic ancestor rituals, as proxy sacrifices, to construct gender identities, or to reenact origin stories, the complexity of these relationships – *the perception of figurines as animistic agents* – likely played an important role in the organization and execution of early household rituals. These social relationships were likely highly gendered and may have been related to corporate group identities. Thus, certain figurines may have served as inalienable possessions and objects of memory where bodies acted as « repositories of memory because they materialize histories and social relations » (Mills 2004, p. 240). Embodiment of figurines potentially established hierarchal rank and validated a group's legitimacy in terms of unequal access to ritual goods and knowledge; however, it is important to recognize that figurines may have paradoxically served to defeat hierarchy when used to promote communal identity through body-centered ritual (Weiner 1985; Mills 2004).

As mentioned above, archaeologists have used a variety of criteria to interpret the deliberate deactivation or termination of embodied objects (Bray 2009; Chapman 2000; Groleau 2009; Lucero 2008; Pollard 2008; Walker 1998). A spatial-contextual analysis of Tayata material reveals that figurines are encountered most frequently near houses – often in close proximity to human and non-human burial features. The refitting of such figurines is impossible despite the nearly complete excavation of structures and their associated middens. Disarticulated figurines are often found alongside reconstructable vessels, as encountered in middens in Excavation 2 and Excavation 4. Such data suggest that the dispersal or scattering of figurines may have occurred over an area even wider than the house or specific midden. We have attempted to argue that particular figurines also show a site-wide patterning of breakage that focuses at the neck, mouth, face, or forehead. These breakage patterns would be consistent with larger concepts of Mesoamerican termination that tend to focus on decapitation or the removal of the mandibles to deactivate or reappropriate an individual following death (Duncan 2005, pp. 261-262; Spence *et al.* 2004).

Although figurine termination and human mortuary ritual represent two ritual systems (e.g., Bell 1997, p. 173), animism and embodiment provide an interpretive lens to clarify their relationship – illustrating the overlapping, yet subtle differentiation among human, non-human, and animate crafted bodies. Embodiment practices at Tayata reveal one important distinction in the end-of-life cycle events: while skeletal remains were buried post-disarticulation or cremation, there is little evidence to suggest that figurines were treated in this way. Tayata's lack of figurine caches or scenes suggest that the actual performance of breaking, burning, or defacing certain figurines provided the socially appropriate means to complete the rite of passage of figurine « death ». Upon completion,

the placement of certain body parts in midden areas or house foundations may have marked the conclusion of a proxy sacrifice, imitative magic rite (Frazer 1911, p. 52), or served to deactivate the animate. For figurines used for ancestral communication, these actions of decapitation or defacement may have prevented the unwanted return or manipulation of particular ancestors, and served to keep them out of the hands of competing households (Marcus 1998, p. 25). Regardless of figurine function, we infer that these actions demonstrate the importance of viewing figurines as animated objects, imbued with the ability to significantly change or alter social relationships through ritual performance.

Overall, the miniaturization of objects creates different scales that are ultimately contingent on culture, and not a truly precise like a model (Bailey 2005, p. 29). At Tayata, both dog and bird figurines are not manufactured to the same proportional scale as reality, as non-human figurines appear to be approximately the same size as human figurines. Although this may be to manipulate objects more easily, it may also reflect Mixtec religious views of animals and animal spirit companions as embodied persons in both the spiritual and material world. One bird figurine from Tayata (A089, Figure 5) was crafted with earflares – an overwhelmingly human accessory – crossing the boundary of what can be considered « human » and « animal ». This illustrates the importance of integrating both human and non-human figurines in analysis, as culturally important information may be overlooked from the analysis of only one object class in isolation. Undoubtedly, the dichotomy between human and animal was far less rigid among Mesoamerican peoples, and the embodiment of objects was likely instrumental for negotiating relationships between humans and animals.

CONCLUSION

Studies of artifact embodiment are instrumental in understanding the ideological basis of early Mixtec religion, and provide critical data concerning body symbolism through household ritual practice. Such rituals likely served a crucial role in establishing and altering social status, and provide new insights concerning human and non-human relationships in the life of early Mixtec villagers. We have argued that interpretations based on archaeological context and multiple lines of data can illuminate interpretations of the ritual uses and meanings of figurines in Formative Mesoamerica. Through the integration of mortuary and faunal data at Tayata, a patterned corporeal treatment of the body emerges that likely governed the socially appropriate termination of animistic human and non-human fired-clay figurines. This process involved the deactivation of figurines that parallels ritual behavior associated with burials and ritual caching at Tayata. The materialization of the body represents an important aspect of the religious practices of the Formative, and the animism ascribed to

figurines likely provided an important, cosmologically-charged avenue for conceptualizing the regenerative cycles of life and death. *

* Manuscrit reçu en août 2010, accepté pour publication en décembre 2012.

NOTE

Acknowledgements : We are grateful to the people of Sta. Catarina and Sta. Cruz Tayata for the opportunity to study their past. We thank Bill Duncan, Heather Lapham, and Ayla Amadio for their identification of human and faunal remains from Tayata. Rosemary Joyce gave us advice for collecting figurine data and its categorization. Jo Day and John McCall read previous drafts and clarified theoretical issues concerning embodiment and ancestors. Rémy Corbet, Carlos Batres, and Teresa Palomares provided editorial help with the abstract translations. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers and *JSA* editors for their helpful criticisms and insightful comments on previous drafts. A version of this paper was presented at the meetings for the Society for American Archaeology in St. Louis, Missouri in 2010. Fieldwork was supported by National Science Foundation Grant #0431390, and institutional support came from the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México, and the Centro Regional de Oaxaca.

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