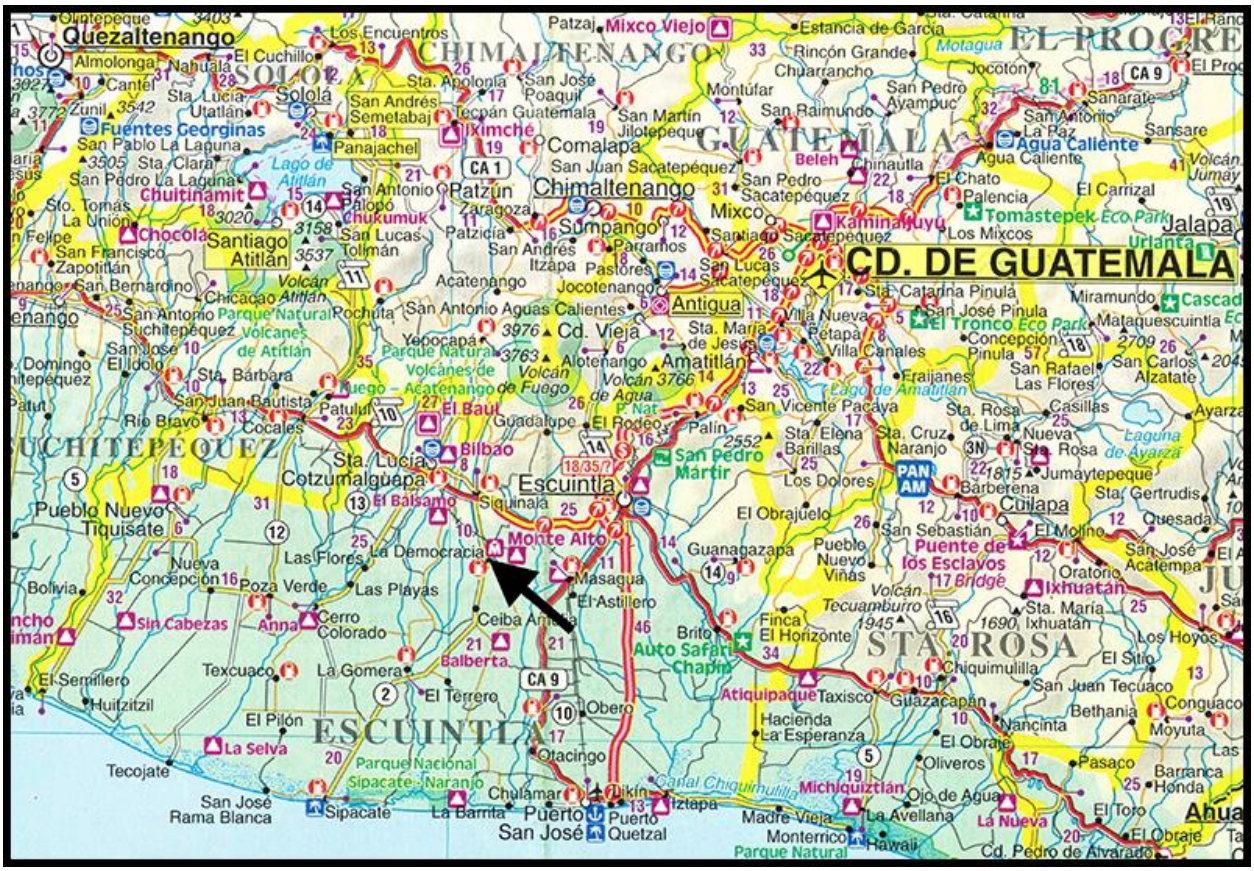
Contributions to Mesoamerican Studies
https://brucelove.com/research/contribution-020/

The "Potbellies" (*Barrigones*) of Monte Alto, Escuintla, Guatemala

Oswaldo Chinchilla and Bruce Love



Vicinity Map: Location of Monte Alto, Escuintla, Guatemala, Source of base map: Mundo Maya, Maya World. Edición Quimera (2007).

Introduction

By Bruce Love and Meghan Rubenstein

Research Contribution 20 presents the "potbellies" of Monte Alto, Escuintla, Guatemala, currently located in the central park of nearby La Democracia, photographed on the nights of March 10-12, 2025 (Fig. 1). We are pleased to have the world's expert on the archaeology of the south coast of Guatemala, Oswaldo Chinchilla, write an introduction and overview for our readers, and we thank museum curator Selvin González for facilitating Love's access to the monuments. We recognize and honor the builders of the park and the museum by presenting their plaques (Figs. 2 and 3).

Sculptures at La Democracia, Escuintla, Guatemala
By Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos

Visitors to the town of La Democracia, in the Pacific coastal plain of Escuintla, are struck by the oversized sculptures that line the central plaza. The majority are *barrigones* (also known as potbelly sculptures), a distinctive sculptural genre that prevailed in Escuintla during the Late Formative period (400 BCE – 100 CE). *Barrigones* were also present in the contemporary cities of Kaminaljuyú, Tak'alik Ab'aj, and other sites in southern Guatemala and El Salvador. The sculptures are part of the collection of the Museo Regional de Arqueología Rubén Chévez Van Dorne, which also houses ceramics and other materials that illustrate the rich archaeological record of Escuintla, including two Olmec-style sculptures from the nearby site of Reynosa.

The impressive *barrigones* in La Democracia originated from the site of Monte Alto, located on the town's eastern rim and progressively encroached by urban growth. Monte Alto was one of about a dozen important centers that grew in the coastal plain of Escuintla during the Late Formative period (400 B.C.E. – 100 C.E.). During its heyday, Monte Alto boasted an imposing group of *barrigones*: obese, naked characters carved on boulders that were minimally modified as human figures. Their arms and legs are simply carved on the sides of the enlarged belly. The head protrudes minimally from the neckless body. The face is stern, with straight mouth, tightly closed lips, and closed eyes covered by heavy eyelids. Their only ornaments are small earplugs. Full-bodied *barrigones* (Mons. 4, 5, 6, 9, and 11) alternate with colossal heads (Mons. 1, 2, 7, 8, 10) that share the same facial traits. The only variation at Monte Alto is the colossal head of a mythical bird on Monument 3.

In addition to the Monte Alto sculptures, whose number designations follow Parsons (1986: Figures 114-123), the collection on display includes items brought from other sites in the region: a mythical animal in the Late Classic style of Cotzumalhuapa, which was most likely brought from El Baúl (Mon. x); a *barrigón* head on a short stump that originated from the site of Los Cerritos Norte, near the city of Escuintla (Mon. y); and a small *barrigón* from the site of Finca Nueva, near La Gomera (Mon. z). (Monuments x and y are in front of the museum; Mon. z is inside the museum.)



Figure 1: Index to the monuments in the central park and museum of La Democracia, Escuintla, Guatemala. The view is to the north from the second floor balcony of the municipal building on the south side of the plaza. Note: Monuments 1-11 are named by Parsons (1986: Figures 114-123); Monument x is a sculpture of unknown provenience, possibly from El Baúl; Monument y is Monument 1 from Los Cerritos Norte (Rodas 1993); Monument z is Monument 1 from Finca Nueva (Rodas 1993).



Figure 2: Plaque commemorating the construction of Parque Arqueológico José Santos Toruño.



Figure 3: Memorial to museum founder Rubén Chévez Van Dorne.

References

Parsons, Lee A.
1986 *The Origins of Maya Art: Monumental Stone Sculpture of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, and the Southern Pacific Coast*. Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, 28. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

Rodas, Sergio
1993 Catálogo de barrigones de Guatemala. *U Tz'ib* 1(5):1-36.

Further reading

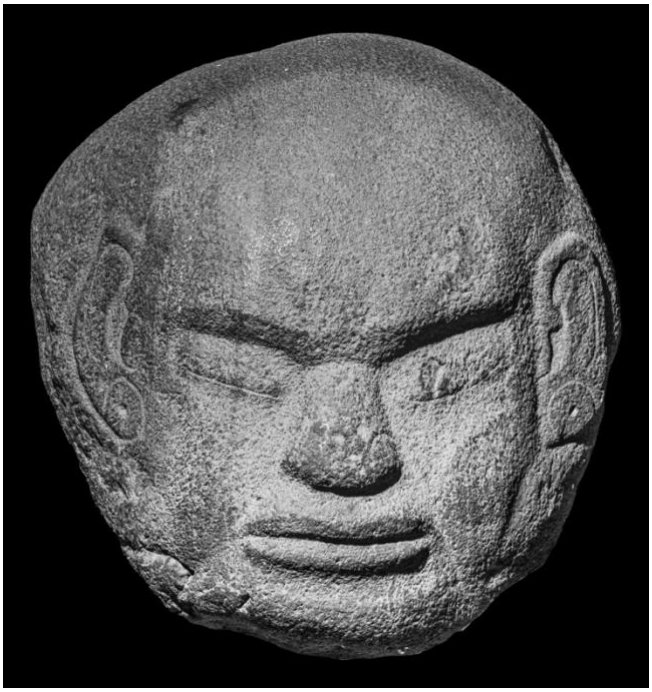
Chinchilla Mazariegos, Oswaldo
2003 Los barrigones del sur de Guatemala. *Precolombart* 4/5:8-23. Pre-Columbian Art Museum of Barcelona, Barcelona.

Guernsey, Julia
2012 *Sculpture and Social Dynamics in Preclassic Mesoamerica*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Photographs by Bruce Love (2025)

Monument 1







Height: 1.11 m
Width: 1.30 m
Front to back: 1.26 m

Monument 2





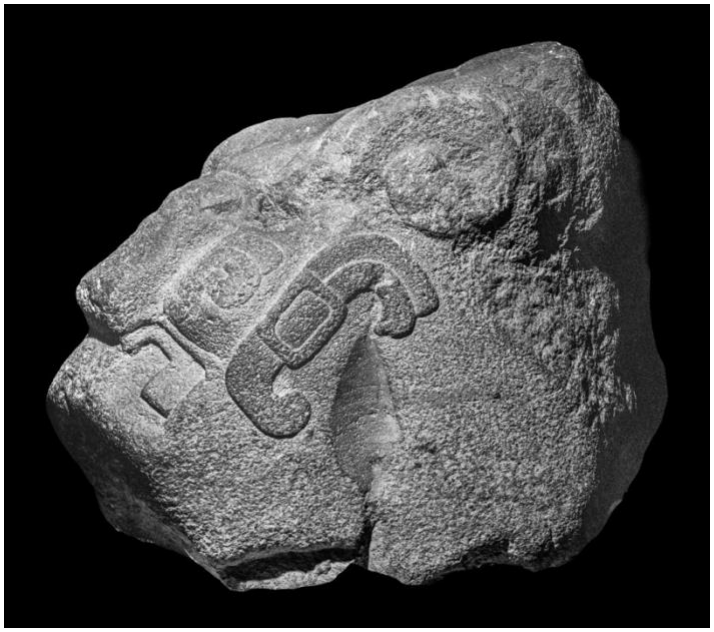
Height: 1.28 m
Width: 1.85 m
Front to back: 1.75 m



Monument 3







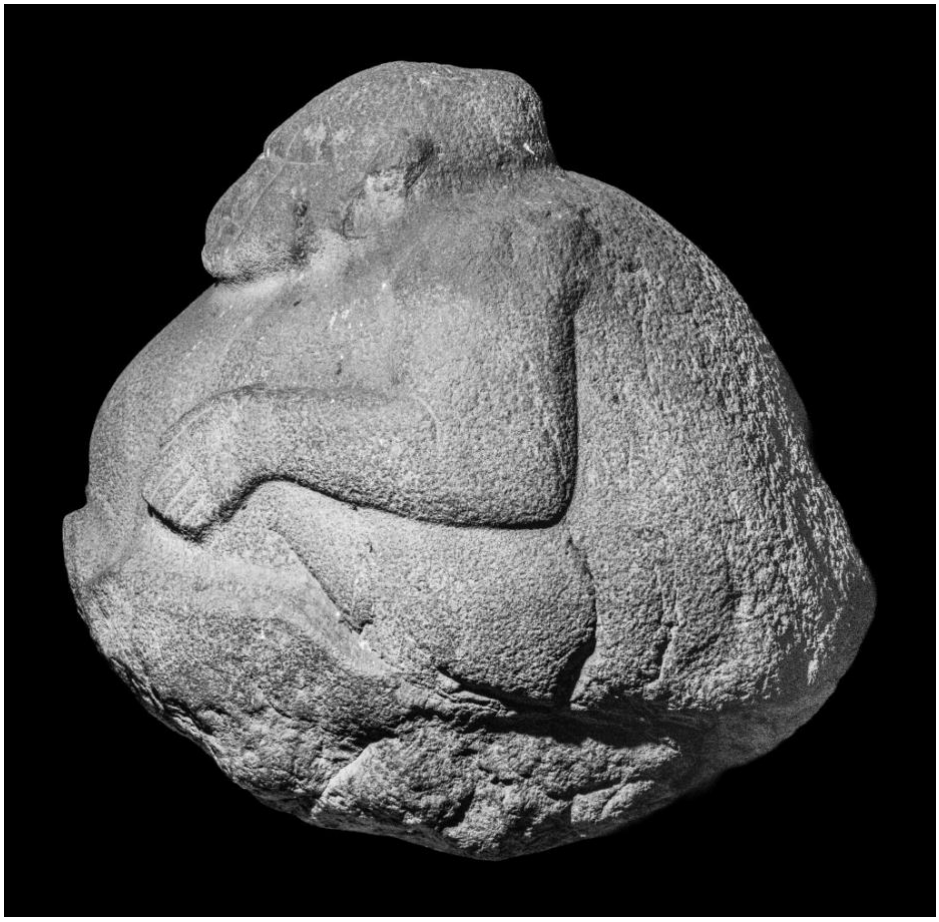
Height: 1.30 m
Width: 1.05 m
Front to back: 1.70 m

Monument 4





Height: 1.43 m
Width: 1.80 m
Front to back: 1.80 m



Monument 5





Height: 1.70 m
Width: 2.18 m
Front to back: 2.28 m



Monument 6



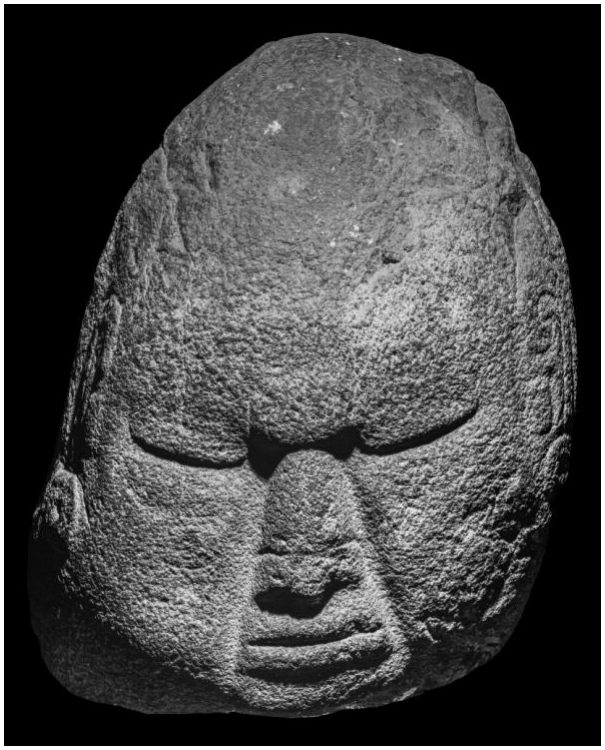


Height: 1.11 m
Width: 1.26 m
Front to back: 1.25 m



Monument 7

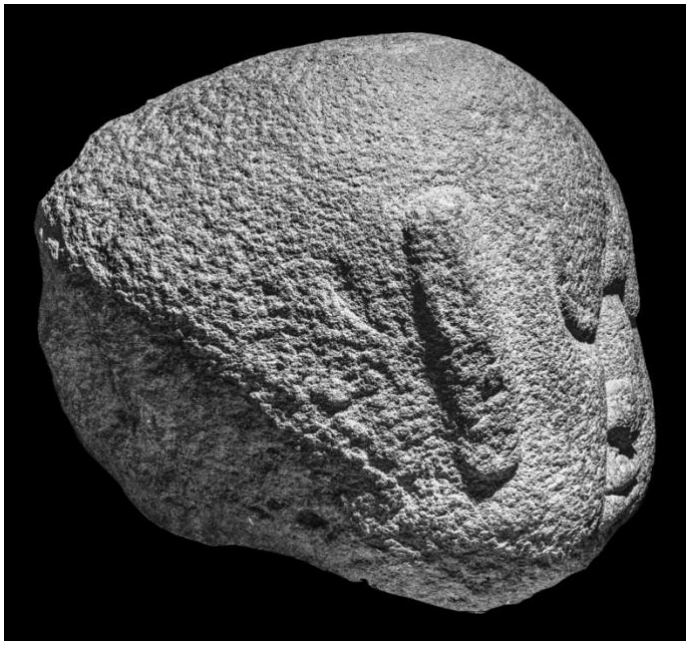




Height: 1.34 m
Width: 0.98 m
Front to back: 1.96 m



Monument 8





Height: 0.83 m
Width: 0.97 m
Front to back: 0.79 m



Monument 9

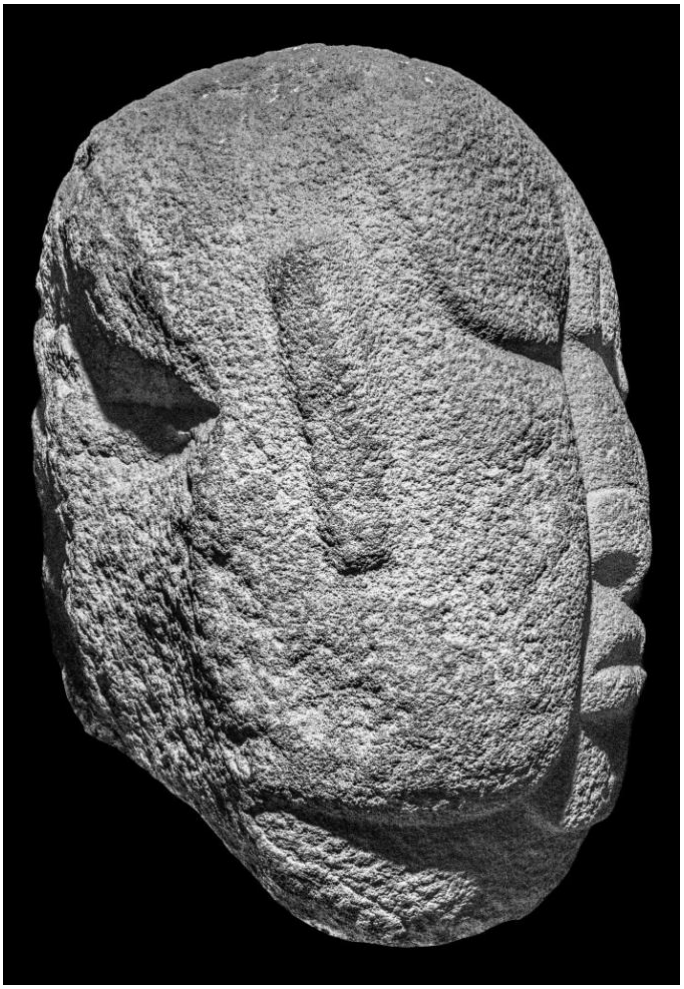


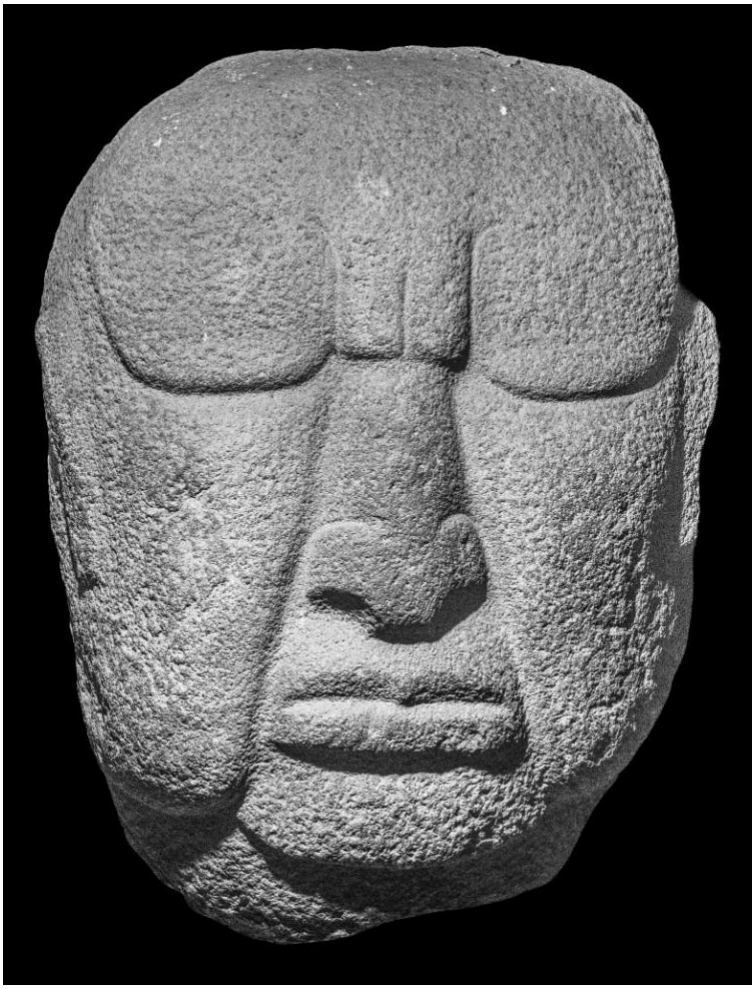


Height: 1.50 m
Width: 1.17 m
Front to back: 1.19 m



Monument 10





Height: 1.33 m
Width: 1.04 m
Front to back: 1.34 m



Monument 11





Height: 1.55 m
Width: 1.45 m
Front to back: 1.64 m



Monument x







Height: 1.36 m
Width: 1.45 m
Front to back: 1.64 m

Monument y





Height: 0.62 m
Width: 0.40 m
Front to back: 0.33 m



Monument z





Height: 0.62 m
Width: 0.35 m
Front to back: 0.36 m



Suggested Citation: Chinchilla Mazariegos, Oswaldo and Bruce Love. "The 'Potbellies' (*barrigones*) of Monte Alto, Escuintla, Guatemala." *Contributions to Mesoamerican Studies*, November 2, 2026.
https://brucelove.com/research/contribution-020



The corpus photographs and drawings may be freely used and distributed in non-commercial use and are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0