Ceramic figurines and figurine-whistles, numbering just over 200, represent a fairly limited artifact class at the site of El Zotz. Albeit small, this collection nonetheless exhibits remarkable diversity in its iconographic representation as well as notable consistency in its manufacture and deposition. With the vast majority of fragments coming from domestic contexts, the study of these figurines complements ongoing research in the site’s monumental and civic-ceremonial sectors, providing insights into the lives of the ancient city’s residents. This chapter assesses the El Zotz figurine collection recovered during the 2008–2011 field seasons. This is done on three levels. First, an in-depth analysis of the style and iconography of these figurines is provided. Second, the chapter assesses the spatio-temporal contexts from which these figurines were excavated. Finally, it explores in detail aspects of the manufacture and use of these figurines. Because of the fragmentary nature of the collection, this chapter relies on comparisons with other sites in the Maya Lowlands whose collections provide comparable material.

**STYLE AND ICONOGRAPHY**

The iconography of Maya figurines and figurine-whistles, which has attracted scholarly attention for decades, continues to be a common focus for more recent studies of figurines (e.g., Butler 1935; Halperin 2004; 2007:148–258; Hendon 2003:30–32; Ivic de Monterroso

---

**A Tableau in Clay**

*Figurines and Figurine-Whistles of El Zotz*

**Alyce de Carteret**

**and Jose Luis Garrido**
Together, these studies have created an extensive corpus, spanning numerous Classic-period sites across the Maya Lowlands, against which the fragmentary El Zotz collection can be compared. Of the 202 figurine and figurine-whistle fragments, only 11 are complete or partially complete, while many \((n = 68)\) are either too small or too eroded to be identified. Nevertheless, the majority \((n = 134)\) can at least be classified as either anthropomorphic or zoomorphic (table 10.1). In a departure from other figurine studies (e.g., Triadan 2014:12), there is no separate category at El Zotz for supernatural figurines. The reasoning for this is twofold: many pieces are too fragmentary to be able to distinguish between a human and a divine personage with any reliability, and many anthropomorphic personages in figurine collections may in fact be deities rather than elite courtiers, the designation often given to them (Stephen Houston, personal communication, 2016). Thus, for the purposes of this chapter, figurines have been classified as either anthropomorphic or zoomorphic in representation, leaving aside the question of the divine nature of some of the anthropomorphic (and likely some of the zoomorphic) personages.

**Anthropomorphic Figurines**

Three-quarters of the identifiable figurine fragments are anthropomorphic \((n = 102, \text{see table 10.2})\). These fall into one of two categories: either they are modeled in realistic proportions with elegant, if unexpressive, visages, or they take on a more grotesque appearance. This latter category \((n = 6)\), limited to head fragments, corresponds exclusively with representations of dwarfs, discussed below. The former represents an aesthetic category first defined by Mary Butler (1935:641) as *Style X*, noted for its “realistic, finely executed rendering in the round of the human body.” This style is most prevalent during the Late and Terminal Classic periods, with evidence for its continued popularity in the Early Postclassic period; it can also be noted in the southern Maya Lowlands and throughout the Yucatan Peninsula (Butler 1935:644). This same aesthetic tradition has been observed by other scholars working with Late Classic collections at Aguateca (Triadan 2007:273; 2014:9), Motul de San José (Halperin 2007:150), Piedras Negras (Ivic de Monterroso 2000:244), Copan (Hendon 2003:30), and Tikal (Laporte 2009:1022). The figurines of El Zotz, dating primarily to the Late and Terminal Classic periods (see below), fit squarely within these regional patterns. At El Zotz, all non–dwarf head fragments \((n = 33)\) fall into this aesthetic category. None of the anthropomorphic body fragments \((n =
Table 10.1. El Zotz figurine categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Figurines (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthropomorphic</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoomorphic</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>202</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10.2. Anthropomorphic figurines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part of Figurine</th>
<th>Count (n)</th>
<th>Class of Figurine</th>
<th>Count (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Ornament</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dwarf</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>102</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>102</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

50) exhibit the grotesque proportions characteristic of dwarf figurines, so presumably these can also be classified as part of the Style X tradition. Fragments of body ornamentation, usually consisting of headdresses, ear-spools, and other headgear, comprise 12 percent of the anthropomorphic sample (n = 12). Dwarfs can be depicted wearing the same headdresses as other non-dwarf anthropomorphic figurines (Halperin 2007:196). As a result, fragments of bodily adornment cannot be assigned with confidence to either category.

Although anthropomorphic heads in this style at other sites can represent individuals at numerous stages in life (e.g., Copan, Hendon 2003:30–31), the figurines of El Zotz, as at Aguateca (Triadan 2007:286), primarily depict individuals at the prime of adulthood. Only two examples in the collection represent people of advanced age. A head fragment recovered from a midden in a residential group west of the Five Temples Group could depict an elderly woman (figure 10.1a). A number of features can be distinguished—a veil that covers her head, neck, and part of her shoulders, as well as a necklace of circular beads—though most significant are her sagging jowls and puffy eyes. Once the figurine was fired, a hole was drilled through its head, a feature that would have allowed the item to be suspended. Otherwise, the head fragment is solid.

The other fragment, excavated from a Terminal Classic deposit in the Acropolis’s Restricted Patio, pertains to an aged male individual (figure 10.1b). Although the piece is fairly eroded, a number of distinctive features are visible.
Figure 10.1. Figurines depicting elderly individuals at El Zotz: (a) head fragment of an elderly woman (EZ 10B-2-2) (photo by A. Godoy); (b) head fragment of an elderly man with facial hair (EZ 2H-3-4) (drawing by N. Carter); (c) nearly complete figurine-whistle depicting a seated man with moustache and beard (EZ 10B-12) (photo by A. Godoy).

Stylized wrinkles appear on the man’s cheeks, nose, and forehead; a faint beard covers his chin. In other examples of Maya art, beards are almost always associated with elderly individuals. Ancestors, denoted by the *mam* glyph in the ancient inscriptions, are shown with beards in addition to unruly hair and missing teeth (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:49). There are few exceptions. The beard is a noted feature of the young maize god (Taube 1985:179), and the
Terminal Classic rulers of Ceibal often depicted themselves on their monumental stelae with faint beards and other non-Maya characteristics (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:47). One such exception may be present in the El Zotz collection itself (figure 10.1c): a nearly complete figurine-whistle depicts a male individual in a seated position, marked by a full mustache and beard. He wears earspools, a necklace of three beads, and a simple kilt and loincloth wrapped around his waist. A turban, an accessory common in representations of men on figurines from other sites, adorns his head (e.g., Laporte 2009:1024). There is no indication that this individual is of an advanced age, although his seated position with hands over his knees suggests he may be of elite status (see discussion on “ruler” figurines below).

Without lines to cue age or facial hair to show gender, most anthropomorphic faces at El Zotz reveal little else about their identity (see also Hendon 2003:31). Rather, hairstyles, headdresses, other items of adornment, and posture help to distinguish different personages. Gender is one of the primary attributes that can be determined by these characteristics, as a number of other studies have indicated (e.g., Halperin 2007; Hendon 2003; Robertson 1985; Triadan 2007).

Female figurines are often shown wearing simple hair wraps and ties, with hair bound at the top of the head with ribbon, coiled into buns, or left hanging (Robertson 1985:36; Halperin 2007:151). In many examples, women’s hair is tied tightly to the head, with one lock left free (Hendon 2003:31). When a woman’s hair hangs loose, it is commonly parted at the center, a style associated with female figurines at Palenque (Halperin 2007:179–180; Robertson 1985:33). There are two examples of this central part at El Zotz, both from the Northwest Courtyard (excavation lots EZ 12I-1-1 and EZ 12K-10-3). More common in the El Zotz collection is the stepped-cut hairstyle (Halperin 2007:178–179)—defined by Robertson (1985:30–32) as the type A cut—in which the figure wears bangs styled in a stepped pattern across the forehead. In one example, the rest of the woman’s hair has been wrapped on top of her head in the shape of a cone, a common feature of this hairstyle elsewhere in the Maya world (Halperin 2007:178; Laporte 2009:1024). The stepped-cut hairstyle can appear with a number of steps, as well as with an additional central forelock that extends beyond the highest step of bangs. The forelock that is sometimes present in this hairstyle, associated primarily with women with a few divine exceptions (Halperin 2007:178), is only present at El Zotz in one example (figure 10.2a). At Altar de Sacrificios, the cut adorns female figurines who wear elaborate huipils, suggesting the style is associated with elite status (Willey 1972:41). Unfortunately, the fragmentary nature of the El Zotz collection precludes similar observations on the relationship between hairstyle
and dress from being made. In one example of this hairstyle, the woman’s left arm and part of her chest is preserved, yet no clothing is visible (figure 10.2b). Other items of adornment, however, are present: a woven band, embellished in the center, wraps around the head; a pendant depicting an anthropomorphic face hangs around her neck; her flexed arm supports a bracelet with three bands of beads; and, two square-shaped earspools, both inscribed with an “X,” hang from each ear. Notably, this is one of the few figurines at the site that has retained traces of pigment. In this case, “Maya blue” (Arnold et al. 2008).

The broad-brimmed hat, nestled on top of the head or perched atop a hair wrap, is a common item of adornment in female figurines during the Late and Terminal Classic periods. The hat, which may have provided protection from sustained exposure to the sun, was emblematic of traveling merchants: the merchant god, God L, is often depicted wearing a broad-brimmed hat made of woven material (Taube 1992:79). Taube (2003:474) also suggests that it might have been part of the costume of the hunting god. The mural paintings associated with Calakmul Str. 1 of the Late Classic Chiik Nahb complex show both male and female figures wearing these broad-brimmed hats, likely
woven out of vegetable fiber (Carrasco Vargas et al. 2009:19247). In the murals, all figures wearing the hat—two females and one male—are vendors, each with a caption describing his or her wares: “the person of the vases” (Boucher and Quiñones 2007:45), “the tamale person” (Boucher and Quiñones 2007:43), and “the atole person” (Boucher and Quiñones 2007:41).

Although individuals of both male and female gender are depicted wearing these hats in Maya painting, broad-brimmed hats appear to be associated exclusively with women in other figurine collections (Halperin 2007:156). Many of these women wear the stepped-cut hairstyle discussed previously (Halperin 2007:154; Laporte 2009:1024). As noted, the broad-brimmed hat is typically connected to the top of the head. However, in one example from Lubaantun, Belize, the woman holds the hat in her right hand and carries some sort of cargo in her left (Joyce 1933:Plate I-4). Halperin (2007:155) notes two similar examples of hatted figurines with cargo: in one example from Tikal, the woman carries her cargo with a tumpline, her hat hanging on her back; in another from the northern Altiplano of Guatemala, the cargo sits in front of the hatted individual, who holds what may be a tamale in her hand. The female vendor is one of the most common characters among Late and Terminal Classic figurines (Halperin 2011:131). In fact, more than 50 examples have been recovered from Motul de San José, and they are especially common at Tikal (Halperin 2007:155; Laporte 2009:1024). One instance of this character has been found at El Zotz. Stepped-cut bangs are faintly visible at the top of its forehead. As at Motul de San José (Halperin 2007:154), the El Zotz figurine wears only earspools—featuring a distinctive stippled pattern—and no other jewelry. The piece is solid and the neck is not fragmented, suggesting that the piece may have been attached to a non-ceramic body or served as a removable piece in a hollow ceramic body. In addition to this example, there are two broad-brimmed hats in the collection that have been separated from their figurine bodies. Presumably, given the strong association indicated above, these hats once belonged to female vendors.

Other typically female items of adornment include wraps and skirts in combination with earspools and beaded necklaces, the accessories generally associated with elite women (Morris 1985:246; Valdés et al. 2001:659). The huipil, an indigenous women’s blouse depicted in exquisite detail on a number of figurines from Lagartero (Morris 1985:246), does not appear at El Zotz. In addition, the fragmentary nature of the collection means that skirts and wraps are either missing or unidentifiable. In some instances, absent distinctive clothing and hair, the female identification of a figurine can be made on the basis of visible breasts, covered or uncovered. In all, 10 anthropomorphic
heads and three body fragments can be identified as female according to the
traits enumerated above (see table 10.2).

Male personages are most easily identified in figurine collections through
specific forms of dress associated with activities and roles commonly per-
formed by Maya men. One of the most common male characters is what
Laporte (2009:1023) identifies at Tikal as the *gobernante* or “ruler.” These
dignitaries, always seated or kneeling with their hands placed over their knees, are
often shown wearing a feathered headdress with a supernatural or zoomor-
phic face at its center (see the H9 headdress in Halperin 2007:162). Although
complete versions have not been recovered at El Zotz, four *gobernante* heads
and headdress fragments were found in the site’s epicenter (excavation lots EZ
2H-5-4, EZ 3B-1-10, EZ 7A-6-3, and EZ v12J-14-2).

Other members of the royal court may be marked by other types of head-
dress. One of these consists of a large helmet with a rounded opening (see
Courtyard produced one example, a probable flute fragment. Halperin
(2007:166) notes that these helmets adorn the heads of male palace courtiers
in the Early Classic murals of Uaxactun, suggesting that the figurines repre-
sented with these items of adornment may have filled similar roles. Another
type of headdress takes the form of a cone embellished with hand-modeled,
tassel-like elements (see the H7 headdress in Halperin 2007:160–161). One
find from Las Palmitas may correspond with this category (figure 10.3a). The
enigmatic headdress may be related to the costume worn by sacrificial atten-
dants of the scaffold sacrifice (see Taube 1988:figure 12.3). The round, flowery
banners held by attendants in these scenes are also represented in figurine
imagery, as seen on a fragment found in the Northwest Courtyard (figure
10.3b). The scaffold sacrifice is associated with rites of political accession, and
scaffold imagery is commonly employed as a display of political legitimacy,
appearing on the Late Classic niche stelae of Piedras Negras (Taube 1988:fig-
ure 12.12), the Late Preclassic murals of San Bartolo (Taube et al. 2010:figure
39), as well as the Early Classic façade of the Temple of the Night Sun at El
Diablo (figure 13.4; Román and Gutiérrez 2016:figure 1.15). This imagery in
clay suggests that figurines and figurine-whistles at El Zotz depicted elite
individuals fulfilling particular roles and duties associated with the ancient
city’s royal court.

Trophy heads, perhaps belonging to erstwhile captives, comprise another dis-
inctly male personage found among El Zotz figurines. These individuals are
marked by free-flowing hair that hangs straight below their suspended, disem-
bodied heads. At Tikal and Lubaantun, they adorn the belts of warriors (Joyce
One eroded example from El Zotz may be a fragment of a similar figurine (lot EZ 12I-1-1). Another appears on the front of an unusual fragment (figure 10.4). This curious, apple-shaped item consists of two hollow chambers and a hole drilled laterally through its superior portion, suggesting it may have been suspended. The trophy head, in addition to his characteristic free-flowing hair, wears earpools and what may be a cloth binding around the neck. The original function of the item remains enigmatic: if it were suspended, the hair would appear to flow against gravity, and its two chambers have single openings, precluding its use as an instrument.

In addition to the personages described above, some body fragments can be identified as men by the presence of typical male adornment, including loincloths and belts, as well as the marked absence of breasts. Four additional fragments can be identified in this way, with a total of 18 fragments identified as male (see table 10.2).
Fragments of dwarfs, though scarce ($n = 6$), comprise an important class of anthropomorphic figurines. Like those in other media, dwarf figurines usually display the following attributes: “small stature, abnormally short and fleshy limbs, a protruding abdomen, and a disproportionately large head with prominent forehead, sunken face, and drooping lower lip” (Miller 1985:141). Unfortunately, the El Zotz collection does not contain any complete examples; thus, dwarfs are identified on the basis of their facial characteristics alone.
Body fragments by themselves are not sufficiently diagnostic in their proportions to indicate their belonging to a dwarf.

Dwarfs occupy an important position in ancient and modern Maya thought. Ethnographic evidence indicates that dwarfs are thought to have supernatural abilities and connections with the Underworld (Miller 1985:143). For the Classic Maya, dwarfs may have been part of the royal court, serving as court jesters and holding other roles in political ceremony (Houston 1992:527). This “privileged status” is emphasized by the appearance of dwarfs in monumental sculpture in the Late and Terminal Classic periods, including stelae and lintels at Caracol, Xultun, Tikal, Calakmul, Yaxha, Dos Pilas, Yaxchilan, La Florida, Palenque, and El Perú-Waka’ (Miller 1985:148, 152). At El Zotz, representations of dwarfs are limited to six figurine head fragments (see table 10.2), as well as a carved profile noted by Stephen Houston on a jade earspool from the Five Temples Group (Garrido López 2014). Though limited, their presence across media indicates the local importance of dwarfs alongside other elite personages, both male and female.

To review, about one-third \( (n = 31) \) of anthropomorphic figurine fragments have an identifiable gender, and of these slightly more \( (n = 18) \) can be identified as male rather than female \( (n = 13) \). This trend parallels findings at other sites. For instance, male figurines comprise the majority at both Aguateca and Piedras Negras (Ivic de Monterroso 2002:487; Triadan 2014; Valdés et al. 2001:658). Although anthropomorphic figurines can offer scholars insight into personages and labors often unrepresented in other media, especially women and their work (e.g., Joyce 1993:261), most of the identifiable figurines at El Zotz and other sites represent elite individuals or members of the royal court. Even many of the female figurines—with the exception of the hatted merchant class—represent elite, bejeweled women. The fragmentary nature of the collection makes more profound assessments difficult; in most cases, not enough of the figurine fragment remains to evaluate hairstyle, costume, adornment, positions (both bodily and political), and associated activities or duties in conjunction with one another, as has been successfully done for other sites in other studies (e.g., Triadan 2014). What can be said, however, is that the repertoire of individuals represented by El Zotz figurines coalesces around specific characters serving in particular roles, and these same characters appear at coeval sites in the southern Maya Lowlands. It is likely that, across the region, these figurines embodied a shared set of personages with known stories, roles, and duties that could be enacted in play and in domestic ceremony. This suggestion is discussed in greater detail below.
**Table 10.3. Zoomorphic figurines.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>Count (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bird</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owl</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monkey</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodent</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turtle</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Zoomorphic Figurines**

The zoomorphic figurines of El Zotz (n = 32) are more varied in representation; the ceramic menagerie includes monkeys, deer, and a variety of other mammalian, reptilian, and avian creatures (table 10.3). Of the fragments whose species can be identified (n = 24), a plurality (n = 10) depict birds. Two of these (excavated from lots EZ 8B-1-2 and EZ 2H-5-4) belong to a simple form of whistle commonly found in the central Peten, which have handmade, globular bodies, crude feet as supports, circular eyes applied to either side of the head, and a tail that serves as the whistle’s mouthpiece (figure 10.5a, also see Halperin 2007:219; Laporte 2009:1026). Five additional examples of birds can be identified more specifically as owls, based on their well-defined, sometimes slanted eyes, short beaks, and, on occasion, rounded ears (see Laporte 2009:figure 19). In one example from the El Zotz Acropolis, the owl grips prey in its pointed beak (figure 10.5b). A specimen from Motul de San José similarly emphasizes the owl’s hunting prowess, depicting the raptor with a snake in its mouth (Halperin 2007:218). Mold-made owls such as these are popular among Late and Terminal Classic zoomorphic figurine assemblages in the central Maya Lowlands (Halperin 2007:218; Laporte 2009:1026). In other Classic Maya media, owls are often associated with warfare, and can be seen accompanying God L, a deity associated with death and the Underworld (Grube and Schele 1994). In contemporary Maya communities, as noted in numerous ethnographic accounts, the nocturnal owl and its screech presages death, illness, or other misfortunes (e.g., Brinton 1890:169). The residents of El...
Zotz may have evoked these associations in using owl-shaped figurines. The attention to birds may also have stemmed from the similarity between their piercing cries and the sound of the clay whistle (see below).

Outside of birds and owls, only one kind of animal is represented by more than one fragment: monkeys \((n = 2)\). In one example from the West Patio (excavation lot EZ 8B-1-3), two crude ears have been applied to the back of a hand-modeled head. In the other, recovered from excavations in the Acropolis (lot EZ 2A-5-2), a hollow body with a long, curving tail holds its clasped hands toward the mouth, squatting on two flexed legs. There is as yet no evidence at El Zotz for the human adornment and anthropomorphic poses often sported by monkey figurines at other sites (e.g., Halperin 2007:214; Triadan 2007:288); and, proportionally speaking, there are fewer monkeys at El Zotz than documented elsewhere (e.g., at Aguateca, monkey figurines comprise the majority of zoomorphic representations; see Triadan 2007:278; Valdés et al. 2001:657). These differences suggest that certain animals resonated with some Maya cities more than others. Although the reasoning behind Aguateca’s preference for monkeys and El Zotz’s preference for birds and owls remains elusive, these choices point to different moods. Monkeys tend to be involved with gaiety, excess, fun, and feasting, owls with prophecy and the dark night (Stephen Houston, personal communication, 2016).
The remaining identifiable zoomorphic figurines are unique examples of distinct animals: a deer, a dog, a rodent, a snake, and a turtle. Fifteen other fragments cannot be identified.

Though there are certainly some standard zoomorphic forms (e.g., the bird whistle), the representation of animals in these figurines is diverse. Compared with anthropomorphic figurines, zoomorphic figurines at El Zotz are more likely to have been made by hand. Out of 32 fragments, 13 are hand-modeled, 12 are mold-made, six exhibit characteristics of both techniques, and one cannot be identified. This suggests greater flexibility in the production of zoomorphic figurines. Workshops, perhaps grouped around families, may have produced certain animals for their own use, and out of the quite particular, idiosyncratic appeal of those creatures.

**CONTEXT**

As throughout Mesoamerica (see Brumfiel 1996:146; Halperin 2007:286; Hendon 2003:29; Ivic de Monterroso 2002:480; Ruscheinsky 2003:7; Triadan 2007:272), figurines at El Zotz come almost exclusively from residential areas. There are four exceptions to this general trend, all in civic-ceremonial contexts. A fragment of a mold-made dignitary was recovered from the central room on top of Str. L7-11 in a deposit from its time of abandonment (lot EZ 3B-1-10). Another was found on a poorly preserved floor from the final phase of Str. M7-2 in the East Group (lot EZ 7A-6-3); although eroded, it likely represents the headdress of a ruler or dignitary. Two figurines come from the alley of the El Zotz ballcourt, between Strs. L8-2 and L8-3: one is a zoomorphic whistle that may represent a bird (lot EZ 9A-1-3), the other an anthropomorphic fragment in the form of an arm (lot EZ 1C-1-5). The “civic” placement of these figurines, away from domestic contexts, is anomalous.

The rest of the collection shares a number of contextual traits. Almost all can be dated to the Late Classic period or later, with 46 Late Classic fragments, 79 Terminal Classic fragments, and 30 Postclassic fragments. With the exception of three Early Classic (excavated from lots EZ 2B-7-3 and EZ 2F-3-6) and two Late Preclassic fragments (from lots EZ 6F-1-6 and EZ 6J-1-4), some of which may intrude from later deposits, no figurines have been recovered from earlier times. There is no evidence of figurine use at the palatial hilltop groups of El Diablo and El Tejón, both of which had been abandoned by the beginning of the Late Classic period. In terms of context, most figurines at El Zotz occur in middens, construction fill, and general building collapse. This pattern follows observations made elsewhere in the Maya world, where most figurine...
fragments are recovered from trash heaps and other contexts of discard (e.g., Hendon 2003:29). Only rarely are they included in ritual deposits or caches—these exceptions, especially two ritual termination deposits from Str. L7-1, are discussed below.

The rest of this section considers the main architectural groups where figurines have been recovered (table 10.4). These include the Acropolis, the West Patio, the Northwest Courtyard, the Five Temples Group, the Las Palmitas Group, and the La Tortuga Group. Some of these groups have only minimal figurine material. Others, such as the Acropolis, made extensive use of figurines.

### Table 10.4. El Zotz figurines by architectural group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Count (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acropolis</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Patio</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest Courtyard</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five Temples</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Group</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Palmitas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Tortuga</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Group</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballcourt</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>202</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Acropolis

The Acropolis and its environs have the highest concentration of figurines at the site. Of the 202 figurine fragments excavated from El Zotz, 170 (nearly 77 percent) come from the Acropolis and nearby residential groups (including the West Patio and Northwest Courtyard, discussed below). Excavations at the main residential group of the Acropolis yielded 62 figurine fragments, primarily from Strs. L7-1, L7-2, L7-3, and L7-6, which are oriented around the group’s West Patio (figure 4.1).

The majority of figurines appear to have been deposited in construction fill or middens. Two notable exceptions include ritual deposits found at the center of Str. L7-1’s platform, and on the Restricted Patio located just to the south of Str. L7-1 and west of Str. L7-6. In the former, along with 26 figurine fragments,
archaeologists recovered 2,053 fragments of ceramic vessels dating primarily to the Terminal Classic, in addition to pieces of musical instruments, 196 fragments of faunal remains, 150 flakes of worked chert, 14 obsidian blades, three pieces of jade, 55 shell fragments, and grinding stones (manos and metates) (see Newman 2015b). The figurines include 17 anthropomorphic fragments, among them four that can be identified as male, two as female, a broad-brimmed hat (likely separated from a female vendor, see above), and one representation of a dwarf. Four of the anthropomorphous examples can be identified as whistles. Five figurines from this assemblage are zoomorphic, including two owls, two other birds, and an unidentified body fragment—likely all whistles.

In the latter deposit, the project similarly recovered a wealth of material culture, including an abundance of utilitarian and fine ceramics, faunal remains, chert and obsidian blades, dress items made from shell and jade (such as rings and pendants), and fragments of grinding stones (Marroquín et al. 2011). This assemblage included 20 figurines, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, including a dog, owl, bird, and a turtle, two female fragments, a broad-brimmed hat, and a dwarf.

Both of these deposits correlate with the end of occupation at the Acropolis—the materials lay beneath a level of architectural dismantling, probably corresponding with an “interrupted process of remodeling” in the group’s final years (Newman 2015b:210). There does not appear to have been a specific order to the deposits; that is, the artifact classes discussed here did not cluster in meaningful ways. Alongside pieces of jade and obsidian were fragments of utilitarian vessels and cooking utensils. Thus, the ritual involved the general and extensive deposition of both rite and quotidian items as a symbolic cessation or transformation of all activity at Str. L7-1 (see Newman et al., chapter 5, this volume). Figurines comprised a significant, although not principal, portion of the building’s termination, signifying their importance to domestic activity in the complex.

Figurines from non-ritual deposits at the Acropolis similarly appear in association with a wealth of other items of material culture. Excavations in which figurines were found consistently recovered more than a hundred ceramic sherds in a single lot, often alongside lithic fragments and faunal remains. This trend applies to both middens and layers of construction fill, indicating that general discard piles were exploited for use in the construction of new phases of buildings. What this suggests more broadly, however, is that figurines did not face special treatment as a distinct artifact class when it came to their deposition and discard. The denizens of the Acropolis conceptualized figurines at the moment of their discard as belonging to a broad category of
domestic refuse that included ceramics, animal bones, and lithic debitage. The ritual termination assemblages described above emphasize this same point.

The West Patio

Archaeological excavations have recovered five figurines from the West Patio, located just to the southwest of the El Zotz Acropolis. All five of these were found in the uppermost levels of a single unit (EZ 8B-1) near the north façade of Str. L7-16, forming the western margin of the architectural group. The unit corresponds with a midden in use during the final years of the group’s occupation; the three lots with figurines all contained a large quantity of material culture, including, in total, 590 ceramic sherds, 72 pieces of flint, four obsidian bladelets, and a number of unworked animal bones. Excavations of the West Patio reveal sustained occupation of the complex from the Early Classic period until the group was abandoned at the beginning of the Terminal Classic period; yet, the figurines recovered from the group are all associated with the final phase of occupation, layers laden with ceramics dating to the Terminal Classic period. Of the figurines that can be identified, one is a mold-made man and two others are zoomorphic: one bird and one monkey.

The Northwest Courtyard

The richest location for figurines is the Northwest Courtyard, a residential group just to the west of the Acropolis, where 89 figurines and figurine fragments were excavated. Twelve of these figurines come from a trench that abuts the western wall of Str. L7-1, the same building with which most of the figurines excavated from the main group of the Acropolis are associated. (Those of the Northwest Courtyard, however, derived primarily from Postclassic rather than Terminal Classic contexts.) The remaining 76 figurines were recovered from horizontal excavations on Strs. L7-17, L7-18, and L7-20, as well as from test pits in the group’s central plaza. The patterns evident at the Northwest Courtyard mirror the observations made at the Acropolis and the West Patio. In fact, any pattern previously noted is more pronounced here: figurines are associated with contexts of domestic discard; most lots where figurines were found also contained, on average, hundreds of fragments of ceramic vessels, and in some cases they included upwards of 1,500 vessel fragments; the vast majority of figurines pertain to levels of humus and general building collapse stemming from the final phases of the group’s occupation. Notably, the Northwest Courtyard, along with the South Group, comprises the main area
of Postclassic occupation at the site, indicating continued and perhaps even amplified use of figurines into this period. Most \((n = 24)\) of the 28 Postclassic figurines come from this architectural group. These include three representations of women, two dwarfs, and one man, most mold made. Although three zoomorphic figurines were recovered from Postclassic contexts, not one could be identified as to its species. The 12 Terminal Classic figurines associated with this group include one man and a number of unidentified body fragments.

**The Five Temples Group**

Outside of the immediate vicinity of the Acropolis, figurines have been recovered from other architectural groups around the site’s civic-ceremonial center. Excavations in a residential group on the west side of the Five Temples Group, just east of the El Zotz Aguada, recovered 20 fragments of figurines. These excavations focused on Strs. K8-1, K8-2, K8-3, and the platform K8-8. Other test pits associated with the group recovered two additional fragments. As in the Acropolis, figurines often appear in dedicated midden deposits associated with large numbers of potsherds. Though excavations suggest that this residence had two distinct periods of occupation, one Early Classic and the other Late Classic, the figurines are associated exclusively with Late Classic material. Fragments include the nearly complete, bearded figurine-whistle discussed earlier along with two other male fragments and another of an elderly woman. Two owls were also recovered.

**The South Group**

Twelve figurines, including two anthropomorphic and one zoomorphic, have been excavated from the South Group. The patterns observed here mirror those noted elsewhere. The corresponding lots pertain to middens, construction fill, collapse, and general occupational debris. Figurine use at the group appears to be equally divided between the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods.

**The Las Palmitas Group**

Three figurines have been recovered from the palatial complex of Las Palmitas, located about 750 m to the north of Str. M7-2 in the East Group. Two of these figurines, including one zoomorphic representation, pertains to the cleaning of a looter tunnel on the northeast corner of Str. M3-7. Associated
ceramics date to the Late Classic period. The other fragment was found at the base of the posterior façade of Str. M3-1, to the north of the group, in a Terminal Classic midden. This figurine depicts a man wearing the headdress potentially associated with the scaffold sacrifice (figure 10.4).

The La Tortuga Group

Excavations at the small residential complex of La Tortuga, located about a half kilometer to the southeast of Las Palmitas, produced only two Late Classic figurines. Both were recovered from excavations at Str. N6-4, the group’s southernmost building. These consist of two poorly preserved anthropomorphic figurine fragments, probably depicting a ruler’s headdress.

To reiterate the patterns enumerated above, the following holds true across El Zotz: figurines are generally not in use at El Zotz before the Late Classic period; figurines are, by and large, associated with residential areas; and, finally, figurines are most likely to be found in general, non-ritual discard deposits (e.g., middens and construction fill). No burials or caches at El Zotz have figurines.

MANUFACTURE

In general, figurines at El Zotz have fine pastes of pale beige or reddish hues. If inclusions are visible, they are small and relatively few in number, the most common being calcite, mica, and small ferruginous nodules. These same pastes are frequently observed in the site’s ceramics, which are in large part locally manufactured (see Czapiewska-Halliday et al., chapter 8, this volume). The parsimonious explanation would be that the figurines were made locally, too, an observation applicable to other sites in the Maya Lowlands (e.g., Rands and Rands 1965:554; Willey 1972:14).

Figurines are either modeled by hand or formed in a mold. Lumpy shapes and rough seams can often be used to distinguish one technique from the other, although it can sometimes be difficult to tell mold-made faces from the finely crafted originals on which the molds were based (Ivic de Monterroso 2000:244). Many fragments in the El Zotz collection exhibit both techniques ($n = 25$): headdresses and other items of adornment were often shaped by hand and then adjoined to a mold-made head, and mold-made heads were often attached to (sometimes crudely) hand-modeled bodies. In cases where both techniques are present, the head is most commonly the mold-made element, an observation noted elsewhere (Ivic de Monterroso 2000:245; Laporte 2009:1021). Details of the head, the locus of identity, may have needed more
careful crafting, the body constituting a less-identifiable afterthought (Stephen Houston, personal communication, 2016). The sole use of molds is the most prevalent technique \( (n = 100) \), although hand-modeled figurines are also common \( (n = 76) \). One fragment could not be classified. Despite the ubiquity of mold-made figurines, no molds have been found at El Zotz, though they are known from other sites (see Halperin 2014:174–178).

About two-thirds \( (n = 167) \) of all figurine fragments are hollow. Of those that are solid \( (n = 65) \), 21 can be identified as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic head fragments that may have been attached to hollow bodies. As has been documented elsewhere (Triadan 2007:271; Valdés et al. 2001:655), the majority of hollow figurines at El Zotz were mold made. As hollow forms, they likely served as whistles and ocarinas; however, fragments have only been categorized as whistles if there is direct evidence of a mouthpiece, finger holes, or a sound hole. In total, 50 whistles have been excavated at El Zotz, of which 20 are anthropomorphic and nine are zoomorphic, three birds and two owls among them.

In a few instances, remnants of paint and slip are visible on the figurines. White paint is observed on a female head fragment from the Northwest Courtyard (lot EZ 12K-3-3), while traces of blue pigment are visible on a zoomorphic fragment from the Acropolis, likely representing a bird’s wing (lot EZ 2H-5-4). On some fragments, an eroded red-orange slip is present (lots EZ 12K-2-4 and EZ 7A-6-3). Though these examples are few, they do suggest that many of these artifacts were once adorned in brilliant colors that have since chipped away.

USE

As figurines are often found in contexts of general discard, their function prior to their deposition can be difficult to ascertain and needs to be evaluated closely (Triadan 2007:271). The near-exclusive presence of figurines in middens and construction fill, intermixed with other items of domestic refuse, clarifies little for the El Zotz collection other than a strong connection between figurines and domestic activity. Within the houselot, figurines may have enjoyed a variety of uses.

The rapidly abandoned site of Aguateca provides some insight into what kinds of areas figurines may have been associated with before being discarded. As Triadan (2007:285) notes, “they occur in the side rooms that have storage and cooking vessels, manos and metates, and spindle whorls, artifacts that suggest that the space was used primarily by the women of the household.” The association with “female” spaces may indicate their use by both women
and children, who are often in the care of women in Maya communities. Ruscheinsky (2003) argues that figurines may have been used by children as toys, a suggestion strengthened by the discovery of complete figurines and figurine-whistles in Terminal Classic child burials at Ceibal (MacLellan and Cordero 2014:78). El Zotz lacks direct evidence for this association, but it seems a strong possibility given the context of the finds.

As children’s toys, the personages depicted, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, may allude to known historical and mythic characters whose stories would have been enlivened through child’s play. Clay kings, warriors, merchants, and their animal companions became the action figures of the Classic Maya, providing entertainment while teaching young children parables of local importance. That the majority of these items are whistles should not be lost here: sonorous breath, linked to the soul, would have brought the figurines to life (Taube 2004a:74). Similar performances may have been enacted by adults as well. During small-scale domestic rituals and festivals, figurines could have provided music and enlivened tableaus (also see Hendon 2003:30). In such ceremonies, it is possible that the high tone of the figurine-whistle imitated the “creaky speech” associated with deities and oracles in later times (Stephen Houston, personal communication, 2016).

As whistles, the El Zotz figurines likely had other uses. The prevalence of avian iconography suggests they may have been used to summon birds, as suggested by Willey (1972:8). Triadan (2007:287) notes that the sound produced by owl figurines is quite similar to the call of an owl, suggesting that these objects might have caught the attention of wild birds or those tethered within the domestic space. Figurine-whistles may have functioned in a similar way for other animals. In Kantunilkin, Quintana Roo, local groups use whistles to lure deer to the home, as the sound of the whistle imitates the cries of a fawn (Almanza Alcalde, cited in Anderson and Tzuc 2005:75). In addition, the high-pitched sound of Maya figurines may have facilitated communication between humans across long distances or simply across spaces where visibility was limited (e.g., dense jungle vegetation). In an experimental study conducted by King and Sánchez Santiago (2011:397), the authors documented that the sound from clay whistles of similar size and construction could travel at least 350 m. In many Classic Maya cities, this distance could encompass numerous household groups as well as the neighboring forest.

Unfortunately, the evidence from El Zotz eludes concrete conclusions regarding the use of figurine-whistles at the site. There probably was not one “correct” way to engage with the items; rather, there were many functions, both ceremonial and mundane.
CONCLUSION

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the sample of figurine fragments excavated at the site is small. This must be kept in mind when assessing the patterns described above, as continuing research and new evidence could change these observations. Nevertheless, what is evident from these data is that El Zotz fits within broader patterns observed elsewhere in the southern Maya Lowlands. Iconography, context, and manufacture are consistent from site to site, with minor variations. These similarities suggest that, during the Late and Terminal Classic periods, El Zotz participated in a broader tradition of figurine use based in and around the house. Additional excavations will clarify what about figurine use is particular to El Zotz. For now, these findings emphasize the importance of this artifact class for our understanding of quotidian Maya life and foreground the need for further study.

NOTE

1. This analysis does not include figurines from the nearby Preclassic site of El Palmar (for analysis of Preclassic figurines see Doyle 2013b; Doyle and Piedrasanta, chapter 2, this volume).
AN INCONSTANT LANDSCAPE

The Maya Kingdom of El Zotz, Guatemala

Edited by
THOMAS G. GARRISON AND STEPHEN HOUSTON

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO
Louisville