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Figurine no. 9:

An Example of Olmec Feminine Power at La Venta

By

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THESIS

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Abstract

The small female jadeite “baby-face” *Figurine no. 9* spent almost seventy years as a man in the eyes of the world after her in situ 1955 discovery at the ancient Olmec capital of La Venta in Tabasco, Mexico. Now understood to be female, a close examination reveals visual and physical cues that showcase *Figurine no. 9*’s advanced age, high status, and power. Rank and influence have traditionally been conferred to male Olmec representations. As part of the elite La Venta *Offering no. 4*, which contains sixteen figurines and six celts that are uniquely organized to display a culturally relevant event, the lack of scholarship focused solely on *Figurine no. 9* is understandable. However, *Figurine no. 9*’s distinguishing traits, including her idealized “baby-face” traits that proclaim her association with the Olmec supernatural, distinctive body that marks her advanced age, physical positioning and entitled movement, and the presence of star-like motifs on her that suggest the presence of a mask, are strong indicators of her prominence, even within the offering. By identifying *Figurine no. 9* as a powerful, influential, elderly female, this thesis contradicts early, and current, Western ideologies, and foments the reconsideration of interpretations concerning gender, age, and power.

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Introduction

Influential women are slowly being written into history. A fact confirmed by performing an internet search of ancient history's most powerful women. The search yields a short list starting with such well-known names as Cleopatra, Theodora, Hatshepsut, Agrippa the Younger, and Catherine the Great. Towards the end of such a list, the names of a single Chinese empress, Wu Zetian, and a Chinese pirate, Ching Shih, appear amongst the famous *Western* ones mentioned above. Reading the list makes it clear that the presence of powerful women in history can be accepted. However, this acceptance appears to extend only to the West and the cultures that the West has enfolded into its historical narrative – including ancient Egypt, and certain parts of Asia. The order, and more importantly, the absences, suggest that the power of women from cultures considered to be peripheral are dampened or non-existent. This ideology, however, is contradicted by archaeological excavations. The 2005 unearthing of the Peruvian Mochica *Lady of Cao* from ca. 450 A.D., who was buried with the implements of rulership, is one example. The noteworthy tomb of *Lady Fu Hao* from ca. 1200 B.C.E., discovered by Chinese female archaeologist Zheng Zhenxiang in 1976, and who was a queen, priestess, and military general, is another. The female *Figurine no. 9*, from ca. 900–700 B.C.E., initially labeled male and found in 1955 in the Olmec heartland of Mesoamerica, is still another instance (Figure 1).¹

The scholarship of Mesoamerican scholars, such as Billie J. A. Follensbee, Joyce Marcus,

¹ The title “Olmec” refers to an observable shared artistic aesthetic that appeared across Mesoamerica’s archaeological sites. Among Olmec specialists it is understood that Olmec still refers to an aesthetic style as there is no definitive proof that from city to city the “Olmec” people spoke the same language or even practiced the same religion. However, the term has proven too convenient to easily replace. The uncertainty of the “Olmec” title was compounded by its posthumous application. “Olmec,” was not assigned by the Olmec people, rather it was derived from the Aztec. The word came from the Nahuatl root *olli* meaning rubber and once translated referred to the “citizen of Olman” or “citizen of the rubber country.” Blom and La Farge, “Tribes and Temples,” 1–16; Covarrubias, *Mexico South*, 82.

and Carolyn E. Tate, has revealed the consistent presence of women in pre-Hispanic imagery. The appearance of the female imagery, marked by figural effigies and monuments, established a previously unknown gender balance within the Mesoamerican cultures they represented.² The respective assertions of Follensbee, Marcus, and Tate challenged traditional gender assumptions for ancient Latin America. As a result, their comprehensive, rigorous work is slowly being incorporated into the historical narrative. Renewed focus on their literature is supported by increasing conversations about sex and gender over the last twenty years. Nonetheless, it can be easier to disregard discourse about sex and gender, a situation that too often leaves females marginalized, or excised entirely. Considering this continuing marginalization, it remains imperative to continue examining, writing, and publishing on the female presence in ancient Mesoamerica, and beyond. Until the absence of female gender within the historical narrative is remedied, until stories of women with, and without power, are taught within the academic fold, projects aiming to rebalance gender narratives remain needed. This thesis supports this goal by illuminating the feminine power evident in the captivating female *Figurine no. 9*, found within the Olmec La Venta *Offering no. 4* (Figure 2).

Up until the completion of American art historian and archaeologist Billie J. Follensbee's dissertation in 2000, the genders of *Offering no. 4*'s figurines, including *Figurine no. 9*, were summarily labeled male. *Figurine no. 9* was just another male amongst the rest of the figurines, the whole offering having garnered the majority of scholarly interest rather than the individuals

² Follensbee focused on figural effigies across the Olmec region and highlighted misidentified genders including females, like the four figurines within La Venta *Offering no. 4*, as well as gender ambiguous figurines lacking clear biological sex markers and thus evading normal binary gender labels. Marcus' work focused on the numerous ceramic female figurines found in middens across the Oaxaca region. She suggests that the female figurines, which were initially "interpreted as male figurines...used as 'portraits of rulers,'" were village offerings from domestic settings most likely linked to female home rituals and/or rites of passage. Tate's research concentrated on Olmec iconography and highlighted the presence of women through secondary indicators such as neonates and birth imagery. Follensbee, "Sex and Gender"; Marcus, *Women's Ritual*, 3; Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture*.

within it. No special attention was paid to *Figurine no. 9*'s apparent sexed physical traits – a w-shaped chest with rounded breasts, pubic ‘Y,’ and the suggestion of rounded buttocks with a deep cleft – or the extraordinary characteristics that make her noteworthy regardless of her gender – material, position, and enhanced “baby-face” features

Follensbee’s dissertation clarifies the sometimes-minute differences that reflect sex in *Offering no. 4*. Although many of the traits of the small stone “baby-face” figurines found in *Offering no. 4* are gender neutral – bald heads, tabular-erect cranial modifications, arms and legs held in Vs away from the body – there are clear indicators of sex. For females, sex markers include pubic Y’s and triangles, a clearly rounded chest above W’s or two U’s, and defined buttocks with “strong cleavage,” all traits present on *Figurine no. 9*. For males the indicators are limited to loincloths and belts that sit above or on the natural waist and inverted U’s or straight lines below the pectorals.³ These distinct female and male sex traits allowed Follensbee to identify instances of figurines produced without the markers of sex or gender, and several whose initial sex appeared to have been either gender neutral or female, but bore hastily scratched loin clothes and codpieces, suggesting their sex was changed post production. This thesis accepts Follensbee’s argument but seeks to refocus attention on *Figurine no. 9* as more than simply a female within the assemblage. Rather, this thesis presents *Figurine no. 9* as representative of an elderly Olmec woman of immense power and influence, a condition marked by the figurine’s highly conventionalized aesthetic design, unique decorations and movement.

³ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 144–148.

Previous Research

The general resistance of scholarship to apply female gender to figural representations believed to be depicting characters of high status – conclusions based on costumes and the size of the artifact – has its roots in the research of founding figures of Olmec scholarship.

Archaeologist Frans Blom's and ethnologist Oliver H.P. La Farge II's description of La Venta's *Stela no. 1*, during their 1925 explorations, is exemplary of this reservation.⁴ *Stela no. 1*'s main figure has prominent breasts, a pinched waist and flaring hips, just like the *Seated Female Figurine* also from La Venta, and yet, they hesitated in declaring her female (Figure 3). They catalogued no physical traits for the figure, despite the inclusion of breasts in their survey drawing. The few sentences they afforded to the “human figure carved crudely in deep relief” are frustratingly brief, and do not address gender.⁵

Blom and La Farge's reticence to applying female sex is mirrored by archaeologist Matthew Stirling. Upon encountering *Stela no. 1*, Stirling suggests that the character only “possibly represents a female.”⁶ Similar to Blom and La Farge, Stirling's description avoids her physical traits, instead focusing on her costume which includes a “ball cap.” Given that the Olmec colossal heads, which have been suggested to be portraits of male chiefs or cult leaders, wear such “ball caps,” the appearance of the helmet on this female allowed Stirling to sidestep questions of gender.⁷ The dubiety of these early scholars continues to affect contemporary scholarship. In archaeologists Arlene Coleman and John E. Clark's 2016 conference essay, “La Venta Offering 4: Representation of an Olmec Ritual,” they refer to all *Offering no. 4*'s figurines

⁴ Blom and La Farge, “Tribes and Temples,” 82.

⁵ Blom and La Farge, “Tribes and Temples,” 82.

⁶ Stirling, *Stone Monuments*, 50.

⁷ Westheim and Coe as quoted by de la Fuente, “Homocentrism,” 48.

as male.⁸ Even the critical examination of *Offering no. 4* by art historian Diana Magaloni-Kerpel and archaeologist Laura Filloy Nadal in 2017 pays scant attention to issues of sex and gender, opting instead to perform an in-depth review of materials, aesthetics, and other conditions of the offering and its artifacts. Their work is the most comprehensive done to date on *Offering no. 4* and has been an invaluable resource to this research.

Re-gendering ancient Mesoamerican cultures remained a largely unrecognized topic in academic literature despite the presence of gendered theory, feminist theory, and the burgeoning sector of female archaeologists and art historians. However, the last twenty years has seen a marked shift in this pattern. Although the selection remains slim there are now a number of vibrant examples to learn from. The work of archaeologist Joyce Marcus and art historian Carolyn E. Tate are examples. Marcus's work has focused on the presence of ritual within the Mesoamerican household as evidenced by the accumulation of small ceramic figural votive offerings, usually female, found in domestic middens; her discourse illuminates possible correlations with La Venta *Offering no. 4*. Marcus's work also proposes that the presence of elite artifacts marks a shift from private, personal family ritual to public ceremony in the newly formed monumental public spaces created under the direction of a ruling elite class in ancient Mesoamerica. Tate's scholarship has been equally useful in establishing the presence of women in the Olman region by helping to reveal pregnant women, juvenile girls, children, infants and possible neonates in Olmec imagery.

The clarity Follensbee lends to her re-gendering of figural Olmec artifacts was achieved by performing an exhaustive examination of available provenanced ceramic figurines. In identifying distinguishable sexed traits, gendered garments, and details for the ceramic figurines

⁸ Colman and Clark, "La Venta Offering 4."

she created a comparative baseline. Key female-male differences include narrow waists flaring to wide female hips rather than straight male waists, and distinctive hairstyles and clothing. Once cataloged, she applied her observations to stone sculptures. Despite apparent differences in the gender details from medium to medium, time to time, and place to place, Follensbee consistently identified repeating attributes. Small stone figurines, while almost indistinguishable in their figural dimensions, are sexed and gendered by slight body shaping and defining incised lines. Inverted etched U's indicate pectorals for males, while double U's or W's with occasional protrusions mark female breasts. Male loincloths are positioned at natural waistlines, as opposed to female low slung, hip-hugging skirts, bikini bottoms, pubic Y's, and defined buttocks. Because of Follensbee's exhaustive scholarship, this thesis does not need to establish *Figurine no. 9*'s female sex. Rather, Follensbee's research opens the door for this thesis to ask a complementary question: How does *Figurine no. 9* represent feminine power and influence in ancient Mesoamerica? Answering this question will further balance the current androcentric historical narrative of the Olmec culture, possibly clearing the path for a formidable Olmec woman to add her name to the internet's list of 'powerful women in ancient history.'

Visual Analysis

The Olmec and La Venta

Olmec aesthetics have fascinated the public and academics alike since 1869 when José María Melgar y Serrano published images of a colossal head from the Tres Zapotes site of Veracruz, Mexico, in the *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística de la República Mexicana*. The publication spurred numerous explorations of the various known Olmec sites and pushed for the discovery of more.⁹ Instances of the Olmec's aesthetic presence were witnessed throughout Mesoamerica and were marked by scores of stone monuments of exceptional sophistication, and captivating imagery that focused on the human form and “highly imaginative impressionistic... supernatural beings,” as well as monumental building campaigns at three city capitols (Figure 4).¹⁰ Interestingly, the capitols' individual erection and power in the region appears to have passed from one city to the next in a hereditary-like succession. San Lorenzo was the first major Olmec center and thrived during the Formative Period (ca. 1200–900 B.C.E.). Its decline heralded the construction of the Middle Formative Period (ca. 900–400 B.C.E.) city of La Venta, and with its decline, the Late Formative Period (ca. 300 B.C.E.– 250 CE) Tres Zapotes arose.¹¹ Each of these three metropolises was able to act as a beacon broadcasting Olmec power, prosperity and stable social organization to the rest of Mesoamerica. Consistent archaeological explorations and documentation of the La Venta site in Tabasco, Mexico, began in the mid 1920s with Blom and La Farge's Tulane University sponsored exploration of Mesoamerica.¹²

The Gulf Coast Olmec metropolis La Venta proved to be a site with an abundance of

⁹ Taladoire and Walsh, “José María Melgar y Serrano,” 184.

¹⁰ Stirling, “The Olmecs,” 48.

¹¹ The San Lorenzo and Tres Zapotes sites are located within of Veracruz, and the La Venta site is in Tabasco.

¹² Stirling, *Stone Monuments*, 49.

stone artifacts and monumental architecture. Blom and La Farge's early exploratory drawings, along the sketches of other early archaeologists including anthropologist Phillip Drucker, archaeologist Robert F. Heizer, and ethnologist Robert J. Squier, produced the first map of La Venta.¹³ The drawings showed La Venta atop a small "island" surrounded by rivers and swamps amid a large alluvial plain (Figure 5).¹⁴ The solid swath of the island's habitable land measured no more than three miles in length, and less than a mile in width.¹⁵ In 1955 the first in-depth excavation, performed by Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, resulted in a comprehensive map of La Venta's elite area, Complex A, which they named the Ceremonial Center due to its wealth of elite offerings and burials (Figure 6). Their excavations revealed that La Venta began as a small settlement ca. 1200 B.C.E., four hundred years earlier than expected. At this early date, evidence showed the heart of the Ceremonial Center, a Ceremonial Court, was present; it was demolished to make way for the updated version.¹⁶ The Ceremonial Court was a mound separated from Complex A with the erection of columnar basalt walls along its east and west sides; small wing walls tipped the northern and southern sides of both. The twin walls were reinforced with adobe bricks and "embellished with rows of facing stones."¹⁷ Set between the smaller pyramid-like Mound A2, Complex A's northern edge, and the bulk of the Great Pyramid in Complex C, its southern edge, Drucker, Heizer and Squier's map shows the area is home to ten separate mounds.

¹³ Blom and La Farge visited La Venta in 1925 for only one day and took cursory notes. Stirling visited in 1941 but only dealt with surface level, or protruding, artifacts. Drucker worked at the site in 1942 documenting ceramic stratigraphy and did encounter stone artifacts. In 1943 Stirling and Wedel performed more extensive testing of the visible structures. Drucker, Heizer and Squier did some excavation and mapping of Complex C and its great pyramid in 1955 but archaeologist Rebecca González Lauck's follow-up work in the mid-eighties, completed their sketches by adding to the middle and southern portions of La Venta, areas that she speculates included the economic-industrial center and lower-class housing. Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 1; Lauck, "The 1984 Archaeological Excavations."

¹⁴ Lauck, "La Venta," 74; Coe, *Mexico*, 73.

¹⁵ Gillespie, "The Architectural History," 4; Coe, *Mexico*, 73.

¹⁶ Fragments of painted platforms pre-dating La Venta's first phase of construction were found. Milbrath, *A Study of Olmec Sculptural Chronology*, 21; Gillespie, "The Architectural History," 6.

¹⁷ Gillespie, "Archaeological Drawings," 11.

Most of the mounds were formed as identical twins laid out bilaterally along a central north-south axis which was tilted to the west by approximately eight degrees. The remaining structures sit directly atop the canted axis. The careful alignment orientated La Venta to “the summer-solstice sunset over Volcán San Martín, the highest peak in the Tuxtla mountains,” asserts Malmstrom.¹⁸ Despite the extensive work performed at the site, the 1955 in-situ discovery of the Olmec La Venta *Offering no. 4* in Complex A of the Middle Formative Period (900–400 B.C.E.) city, was chance.¹⁹

Offering No. 4

No above ground marker for *Offering no. 4* was apparent at the time of excavation. However, evidence seen by Drucker, Heizer and Squier positively attested to the offering’s unearthing roughly one hundred years after its burial, indicating that some form of map or marker was available to the Olmec.²⁰ The later excavation process was done with the utmost care causing no damage to the assemblage, and only went as far as the uppermost tips of the artifacts, an act that would confirm the offering’s continuing assemblage despite the passage of time. Nonetheless, the presence of Phase III’s rose colored court floor particles within the reburied pit told the tale. Given the very precise nature of the excavation, it was clear to Drucker, Heizer and Squier that the exact location of the offering was known to the La Ventans, proving that this offering continued to have relevance far beyond its internment.²¹

Complicating its potential discovery, the offering’s placement outside the edge of the Northeast platform, rather than within it, was atypical (Figure 7). Most of the Complex A’s

¹⁸ San Lorenzo was aligned to the winter-solstice sunset over Zempoaltepec in the Oaxaca Mountain range despite the city’s overall resistance to bilateral symmetry. Malmstrom, “The Spatial Dimension,” 424.

¹⁹ When *Offering no. 4* was buried, the Ceremonial Court was the center of the area, and the long bracketing twin mounds, Mound A-4 and A-5, did not yet exist. Gillespie, “Archaeological Drawings.”

²⁰ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 116.

²¹ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 152–155.

offerings had been found under its structural mounds as previously noted. The discovery resulted from a final eastward cut from the bulldozer at the end of a long day from the central axis to the middle of Northeast platform's western edge. The cut revealed a roughly circular patch of soil in a dark brown color incongruent to its surroundings. The anomalous location of the offering may very well have allowed it to remain permanently undiscovered. However, Drucker, archaeologist Heizer, and Squier did notice the disturbance and dug down to investigate.

Nestled on the western edge of the Northeast platform's tapered sides, previous excavation cuts showed that *Offering no. 4* had been buried beneath several layers of differently colored soils, clays and sands (Figure 8). Based on the presence of the separated layers in an array of distinct colors throughout Complex A, Drucker, Heizer and Squier established a timeline for the city, broken into four phases, which allowed them to date the offering to La Venta's Phase Three construction program – their ascribed timeline continues to dominate understandings of the city and its architectural building programs.²² Drucker, Heizer and Squier estimated a date of ca. 900-700 B.C.E based on the two distinct period layers on top of the offering. A red clay cap, applied in La Venta's Phase Four of construction, was the topmost layer. The dense pack of the "Old-rose" floor coats from Phase Three was the second layer, and followed by a "brown sandy" back fill, apparently meant to level the ground after the offering was deposited.²³ Finally, the team encountered a broad reaching mound of white sand that the Olmecs had sorted and cleaned leaving only the whitest grains; it was this last layer that encapsulated the offering.²⁴ The slow removal of the sand first revealed the tips of six stone artifacts and a few inches later the tops of another sixteen stone artifacts, the numbers already

²² Evidence of earlier construction in Complex A, mentioned above, was disregarded when crafting La Venta's phases. Gillespie, "The Architectural History," 7; Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 34.

²³ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 57.

²⁴ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 57, 153–154.

heralded the offering's value. The full removal of over a foot of the sorted sand, revealed almost the entirety of the twenty-two artifacts; an astonishing sixteen were figurines.²⁵ Previously discovered deposits within the La Venta complex mostly consisted of large numbers of non-utilitarian ritual ax heads – celts – along with jewelry. Examples of small stone figural artifacts within Mesoamerica were minimal and dated to a period later than the burial of *Offering no. 4*; of these later offerings no single one held more than three figurines.²⁶ However, it was not the number of elite artifacts, or the offering's position in the sacred center of La Venta, that has held public and academic attentions for the last seventy years: it was the offering's organization. All twenty-two artifacts stood upright – with the assistance of a shallow substrate of “reddish brown sand” – and were arranged to create a circular arena that held a scene.²⁷

The first artifacts unearthed, six celts, were the tallest of the artifacts (Figure 9).²⁸ The Olmecs had positioned them in loose pairs and staggered semi-circle that created an architectural wall along the eastern edge of the offering, closest to the Northeast platform. The celts are all crafted from valuable jadeite in an array of pale greens and creams that contrast with the redder tones of the soil behind them (Figure 10). Interestingly, the Olmec had cut down the celts until they were almost as slim and narrow as modern-day tongue depressors (Figure 11). La Venta's celts are mostly teardrop shaped. In this instance, the pared down celts resemble stelae but examples that were so slim that they would have been poor palettes for the Olmec's low relief

²⁵ The remains of a twenty third artifact was only discernible from a few remaining broken pieces identified during the excavation; those pieces were lost. Drucker, Heizer, Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 156.

²⁶ One offering containing thirteen figures along with pearls, rough stones and other artifacts, was found at the Formative Period La Lagunita site in El Quiché, Guatemala. The figures were placed upright, facing one direction, in a tight bundle. It does not appear to be an attempt to record a social memory. Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 129; Drucker, Wedel and Shepard, *La Venta Tabasco*, 69, 152–162.

²⁷ This type of assemblage is not typical and yet, Tate seeks to establish a pattern for this recording of cultural memories by arguing that the sculptural layout at La Venta is meant to relay a historical-creation narrative. Tate, “Landscape and a Visual Narrative,” 31–65.

²⁸ The celts average 9 5/16 to 10 3/4 inches in height; the figurines range from 5 1/16 to 7 15/16. Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavation at La Venta*, 156–158.

carvings typically found on La Venta's stelae.

The Figurines

The sixteen stone figurines are part of the “baby-face” genre, first mentioned in the work of anthropologist George Clapp Vaillant in 1932, are an emblematic style within the Olmec oeuvre (Figure 12).²⁹ Furthermore, the “baby-face” is a subset genre within the broader Olmec small stone figural tradition.³⁰ Therefore, its features are not limited to the “baby-face” genre. The small stone “baby-face” is typified by the use of common features associated with Olmec supernatural figures including “almond-shaped eyes, wide flattened nose, and mouth with flaring upper lip and drooping corners.”³¹ The “abstracted human” stone figurines are almost flat and most stand with their bent arms and legs held apart from the body facilitating the post-construction addition of clothing.³² They have smooth, bald heads “showing tabular-erect cranial modifications,” a “triangular nose, and conically drilled nostrils. The ears are often large but squared and narrow against the side of the head.”³³ The ears are also typically pierced indicating the probable addition of jewelry.³⁴

Markers of biological sex on the “baby-faced” stone figurines are limited and are not among the features listed above. Males are defined by the presence of a broad inverted U or straight line under their pectorals, “simple, wrapped loincloths and belts on the natural waist, or

²⁹ There is a consensus among scholars that Vaillant coined the term “baby-face” in his 1932 publication, *A Pre-Columbian Jade: Artistic Comparisons Which Suggest the Identification of a New Mexican Civilization*. At this early stage, the Olmecs as a culture did not exist in the scholarly imagination; early archaeologists believed they were exploring subsets of the Maya culture rather than an altogether unrelated, far older one. This has led to some confusion surrounding the “baby-face’s” meaning. Grove, “Olmec archaeology, 53.”

³⁰ Covarrubias, *Mexico South*, 79–101.

³¹ Joralemon, “A Study of Olmec Iconography,” 7–9.

³² Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 13.

³³ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 90–93.

³⁴ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 13.

above,” and celt shaped codpieces (Figure 13).³⁵ Females can be ascertained by two U’s or a W under the breasts, with or without the protrusion of breasts, clearly carved pubic Y’s and projecting buttocks with deeply defined cleavage, all features visible on *Figurine no. 9* (figure 14).³⁶ Although some of these features do appear in other Olmec styles, the entire spectrum of these traits only appears on the small stone “baby-face” figurines, allowing for solid identifications.³⁷

Although *Offering no. 4* contained twenty-two artifacts in a variety of stones, and its location within the Complex A was unusual but also heralded the offering’s elite status, these are not the conditions that held the archaeologist team’s attention. They were entranced by the figurine’s behavior within the offering.³⁸ Ten of the figurines had been placed to form an opposing half circle, or western wall, to the celt’s eastern architectural one. These ten are crafted from serpentine and schist, and their colors are an array of light to dark greens, or mottled tans to pinkish salmons speckled with black inclusions that reflected the natural environment of La Venta, as seen in Figure 12. Most are decorated with a belt set high on their waists attached to a tapering celt-shaped cod piece, but a few appear to be wearing bikini-like-bottoms. The pierced ears, clean shaved heads, and limbs held loosely to the sides would facilitate the addition of clothing to the figurines; if clothing was applied it has long since disintegrated leaving no remains.³⁹ All had been placed to face inwards, much as an audience might when seated around a semi-circular stage. There is no clear order to their arraignment. Rather they were loosely clustered in a natural, casual fashion, and yet, their positions allowed them to focus on the

³⁵ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 147.

³⁶ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 147–149.

³⁷ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 147–149.

³⁸ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 152 and 161.

³⁹ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 77.

assorted primary characters of the offering, discussed below.

A few audience members looked at the “spectacular” appearance of *Figurine no. 22*, who stood at the south edge of the offering gazing inwards to the center (Figure 15).⁴⁰ His vibrant apple green body speckled with brown spots, a color scheme reminiscent of a jaguar’s spotted pelt, is the result of a mixed stone composite. Despite his not being the valuable jadeite the team initially deemed him to be, his is nonetheless, captivating.⁴¹ Between his exceptional coloring and his sentinel-like position, the audience’s attention seems warranted.⁴² Besides these two factors, however, *Figurine no. 22* is not exceptional. His body and limbs are in line with the proportions and shapes present on the other figurines; his cranial modification is not nearly as pronounced as *Figurine no. 9*’s; and his downturned mouth is on the smaller side. His slightly slanted, almond shaped eyes in puffy lids are similar to *Figurine no. 9*’s with deep cut lines above and below the eye sockets. His short wide nose is unevenly drilled from the front, giving him two different sized nostrils, and eliminating the potential placement of nose jewelry. *Figurine no. 22*’s sex is not clear. While he wears an incised loin cloth and codpiece, there are deeper bikini cuts at his groin, which makes gendering him troublesome. Follensbee suggests that this figure may have begun as gender ambiguous and was only gendered male at a later date.⁴³ Outside of his coloring and position, *Figurine no. 22* conforms to the stylistic conventions of the offering with limited indications of his primacy.

Fewer still audience members seemed attentive to another solitary figurine, *Figurine no. 7*, who stands before the two central-most celts. The “very unusual” choice of granite for badly

⁴⁰ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 156, 161.

⁴¹ Figurine no. 22’s composite is composed of zoisite, chlorite, cordierite, and chromite. Magaloni-Kerpel and Nadal, *La Ofrenda 4*, 199; Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 161.

⁴² Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 156.

⁴³ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 127.

degraded red-grey *Figurine no. 7* is a notably distinct material when compared with the rest of the figurines in Figure 12. Along with its sequestered position against the celts, but facing the audience, it has been suggested that he acts in a leadership role for the central activity.⁴⁴

Therefore, the archaeological team initially ascribed primacy to him. Later, based on a careful examination of the archeological photos that seem to suggest the audience was more attentive to *Figurine no. 22* and the central procession, they lowered *Figurine no. 7*'s importance to a potential "captive or another important personage."⁴⁵

The physical position of the audience's western wall combined with the celt's eastern one effectively created a gap, a north-south axis of sorts, down the center of the offering. Along this pathway a procession of four figurines advanced towards the important "central personage," *Figurine no. 22*, who gazes towards them. The column of four figurines, moving southwards in a stately parade, garnered most of the audience's focus. The leading figure of the procession, *Figurine no. 8*, is an emerald-green color slightly pitted with pinkish inclusions (Figure 16). The true color of the inclusions is indecipherable due to the red pigment, cinnabar, filling them and resulting in the pink hue. The cinnabar, left over from the figurine's previous, highly likely ritual uses, fills all the incised lines, mouth, nose, and eyes on the figurine.⁴⁶ *Figurine no. 8* has no modeling of the chest, and minimal sculpting to the buttocks to suggest one sex or the other. The very lightly scratched in waist belt and cod piece support the perception that this figure may have begun as a blank, with no sex or gender markers, who was sexed when needed.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 161.

⁴⁵ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 155.

⁴⁶ Despite the appearance of the cinnabar on the figurines, no traces of cinnabar were found within *Offering no. 4*. However, its presence does suggest that even in their previous lives, the offering's artifacts were associated with elite activities due to the mineral's presence in high status locations at La Venta. Beds of red cinnabar beneath offerings, and "burials," were documented by the archaeological team. Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 11, 46, 162, 167, 171, 179.

⁴⁷ Follensbee suggests that figurines displaying lightly scratched clothing may have begun life as blanks, and were sexed as needed, or more interestingly, they may be gender ambiguous. Follensbee, "Sex and Gender," 126–127.

Likewise, the third figure in line, *Figurine no. 10*, displays sex and gender ambiguity (Figure 17). The salmon-colored figurine dappled with black inclusions has no overtly male traits nor is there an indication of breasts or strongly cleaved buttocks. Yet, there is the slightest tapering at the waist leading to the barest flaring of the thighs.⁴⁸ This female trait coincides with the deep grooves that begin, but do not complete, a pubic Y. However, a waist belt and loin covering are lightly scratched over those lines, confusing sex identification efforts. The combination of traits, like *Figurine no. 8*, suggest sex and gender ambiguity in *Figurine no. 10*. This combination of bikini lines and cod piece are repeated on the fourth-in-line, the black spotted, cream-colored figure, *Figurine no. 11* (Figure 18). In this instance, the bikini lines, belt and cod piece are all deeply carved. The presence of a gentle inverted U under slightly modeled pectorals suggests *Figurine no. 11* is sexed male, despite the gender ambiguous costume. The three figurines described above, *Figurines no. 8, 10, and 11*, create a clean line connecting their procession to the waiting *Figurine no. 22* and highlighting the central north-south axis of the offering.

Figurine No. 9

The second figure in the line, *Figurine no. 9* and the focus of this thesis, was crafted from jadeite. Her creamy white coloring is noticeably distinct from the rest of the offering's figurines but comes close to matching the celts, a featured noted in the description above. However, her jadeite has a crystalline matrix. The small, semi-translucent crystals become visible upon close inspection; this condition is not visible on any other artifacts from *Offering no. 4*. The presence of the crystals allows for the thinnest parts of *Figurine no. 9*'s body to become translucent under bright light such as in the deepest crevice of her left armpit (Figure 1). The individual crystals

⁴⁸ Follensbee, "Sex and Gender," 147–149.

almost appear to be separated by the light webbing of rust-colored inclusions that spider across her body like blood-filled veins. Her coloring is further enhanced by undertones of sky blue that seem to come from within her core, making the jadeite to appear to glow subtly. Notably, *Figurine no. 9*'s masterful high polish, and light tones, allows the jadeite to reflect the colors around her, thus *Figurine no. 9*'s color seem to fluidly shift from one tone to another. How this chameleon-like façade would have been received, and potentially employed, by the Olmec is difficult to determine.

Like the offering's other figurines, *Figurine no. 9* stands atop crude, flattened feet with shallow cuts to indicate toes. Regardless of the carver's concern to depict the feet and toes, neither she, nor the other offering's figurines can stand upright on their own. This condition explains the thick "red-brown sand" substrate she, and the other artifacts, were placed in.⁴⁹ Without that cementing agent they would all have toppled, eradicating the carefully assembled scene. Thus, if she had a purpose prior to her inclusion in the offering, she would have needed to be held, strung up, laid down, or similarly stood upright in a supportive substrate.⁵⁰

Figurine no. 9's large trapeziuses create steeply sloping shoulders, and when combined with barely tapered limbs and a complete lack of a waist, her body gains a boxy androgenous shape. This perception is banished by her profile, it reveals a sinuous thinness, bordering on delicacy (Figure 19). Within the offering, her thinness is only replicated in the equally thin celts,

⁴⁹ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 152.

⁵⁰ No evidence belies the practicalities of the figural artifacts' prior usage. Interestingly, four of celts appear to have been recycled from several pectorals given the appearance of corresponding incised designs; recycling is a common Olmec practice. Drucker, Heizer and Squier were unable to determine the original design, but later scholarship identified a "flying Olmec" on Nos. 3 and 4. There has also been speculation that all the six celts were carved from a single stone. Others hypothesize that the six celts were meant to act as effigies for the stelae placed at the base of the Complex C's Great Pyramid which brackets the southern edge of the Ceremonial Center. The theory was based on a measurement of their celt's proportions. Coleman and Clark noted that the proportions of *Offering no. 4*'s figurines and celts may reflect the real-world objects they act as place holders for; *Offering no. 4*'s figurines measure one-ninth the size of an average Mesoamerican adult during the Middle Formative period. Likewise, the offering's celts are one-ninth the scale of the Great Pyramid's stelae. Coleman and Clark, "La Venta Offering 4," 133; Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 157; Coleman and Clark, "La Venta Offering 4," 125.

earlier described as ‘almost as thin as tongue depressors’ and seen in Figure 11. However, in sharp contrast to the flat celts, *Figurine no. 9*’s body undulates in an extended S curve created by her forward thrusting head and knees; her exaggerated curves are not replicated in the offering (Figures 20).⁵¹ While the other figurines all have heads set slightly forward on their shoulders – a very naturalistic feature – hers is pushed so far forward that it gives her a hunch-back. The forward thrust of her upper body is contrasted and accentuated by the bend of her knees. Although all the figures have bent knees, *Figurine no. 9*’s knees have been moved upwards. So much so, that her knees are closer to her hips than feet, giving the impression that her hips are the apex of her knee’s bend. A glance at her backside also reveals that her heavily cleaved buttocks – an indicator of her female gender – sit unusually high on her back as seen in Figure 14. The incised Y line delineating her buttocks from her back almost aligns with middle of her arms’ humorous. It is clear from this rear view, and her profile, that her knees are in fact the bend point. However, the position of her knees is too high up, leaving her with incredibly long shins, and hips that have no choice but to slant forwards to balance her weight. Although the excavation team remarked that “the slightly bent knee or slouching stance, which is characteristic of all La Venta stone figurines, is greatly exaggerated in this specimen,” they did not suggest a reason for the enhancement, such as age or deformity.⁵²

Adding to the confusion surrounding *Figurine no. 9*’s sinuous form, the recent scholarship on *Offering no. 4* by Magaloni-Kerpel and Nadal, identified her as a young adult in their comparative chart of the offering’s figurines, and then later, describe her as an old man.⁵³ Given *Figurine no. 9*’s distinctive body type and enhanced facial features, the scholars

⁵¹ Unfortunately, no one measurement of *Figurine no. 9*’s thickness was available. Magaloni-Kerpel and Nadal, *La Ofrenda 4*, 135.

⁵² Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 159.

⁵³ Magaloni-Kerpel and Nadal, *La Ofrenda 4*, 100, 147.

vacillation is understandable, and yet it is hard to look at her body and see youth. *Figurine no. 9* looks like a grandmother bent with age and imagining her as such is no struggle. *Figurine no. 9*'s missing left hand clutches a cane, her head sits on shoulders severely bent by age, and to counterbalance her hunched back, her pelvis is thrust forward as she gingerly makes her way across the street. With these conditions in mind, the grandmotherly interpretation is difficult to dismiss. As a grandma in Mesoamerica, she would be an elder during a period when life expectancy was much shorter than today.⁵⁴ Thus, it can be inferred that she reflected a female character held in esteem within ancient Mesoamerica. This in turn, helps to explain her presence, not only within the high-status offering, but at the very heart of it.

The portrayal of advanced female age at La Venta is not limited to *Figurine no. 9*. A clear example can be seen in the elderly woman, *Figure 2*, on the right side of *La Venta Stela 5* (Figure 21). Her age is defined by skinny bent knees, emaciated looking arms, a possible “large, pendulous breast,” and sunken cheeks.⁵⁵ Rebecca Gonzalez Lauck and Follensbee suggest the protruding lower jaw may indicate that the figure wears a supernatural mask.⁵⁶ This essay posits the lack of a strong upper lip and thrusting lower jaw also strongly resembles of countenance of a very old person without any teeth. Lauck was more inclined towards the figure being an “animalistic supernatural” but Follensbee identified it as an “aged ancestor wearing an animal mask.” Her statement buttresses this thesis’ claim that *Figurine no. 9* is an elderly woman of influence and high status with connections to the Olmec supernatural that are confirmed by the mask she wears.⁵⁷ Either way, the inclusion of the elderly female *Figure 2* on the stela with two

⁵⁴ Determining life expectancy for the Olmec is hard due to lack of human remains, instead data has been utilized from the later Mayan culture knowing that the numbers may vary from the earlier Olmec. Steckel and Rose, *The Backbone of History*, 319.

⁵⁵ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 191.

⁵⁶ Lauck as quoted by Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 191.

⁵⁷ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 194.

central high-status males – indicated by their grand headdresses and primary positions – proves that elderly women were active partners in the political fabric of La Venta.⁵⁸

Excluding her serpentine curvature, *Figurine no. 9* has the same bent, slightly spread arms and legs as the offering's other figurines. Her feet are rudimentary, a pattern repeated in her hands which show minimal distinction between wrist and her mitten-like hands. Notably, the break that resulted in her missing left forearm, has been softened by consistent handling, a condition which speaks to her long use prior to inclusion in *Offering no. 4*.⁵⁹ Softening of the stone by physical contact alone would take a considerable amount time, insinuating that *Figurine no. 9* acted as an heirloom. Clark, Coleman, and Jaime-Riverón, seconded this notion noting that recent investigations have made it possible to differentiate between stone artifacts that served as wealth markers, like jewelry, versus those intended as “inalienable possessions” meant to be kept as “important identity objects...inherited for generations.”⁶⁰ The traces of cinnabar, a material linked to La Venta's elite offerings and burials, on *Figurine no. 9*'s body confirm that her prior uses were important, perhaps even ritualistic, not menial.

Though flattened, *Figurine no. 9*'s female sex is clearly defined by her slight breasts, pubic Y, and deeply cleaved buttocks.⁶¹ The rear's cleavage shallows as it moves upwards before becoming a spinal line. Two lines split from the central trunk to spear outwards before they terminate over the left and right buttocks, adding definition. However, the lines do not curve, instead they are straight dashes. The spinal line continues upwards before again forking outwards to define her scapulas. Like those above the buttocks, this detail adds natural definition to her

⁵⁸ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 190–195.

⁵⁹ No remnants of the broken limbs or other parts of the offering's figurines were found during excavation indicating that the breaks occurred prior to burial. Brittenham, “The Art Assemblage,” 839.

⁶⁰ Coleman and Clark, “Olmec Things and Identity;” Jaime-Riveron, “Olmec Greenstone,” 124.

⁶¹ Follensbee, “Sex and Gender,” 144–151.

back. Notably, the two scapula lines run over the shoulders where they appear to connect to another pair of lines descending from a four-pointed star on the back of her head. The confluence of the lines creates a secondary star on the nape of her neck and forces one to consider the stars, visible on *Figurine no. 9*'s back side in Figure 20, as if they are symbols. In actuality, the twin descending lines of the head's star wrap out and under her ears, and then down under her chin before traveling up around her face to connect with the line demarcating her tabularly modified cranium. These lines and stars are absolutely unique to *Figurine no. 9*.

All the figurines within *Offering no. 4* fall within the scope of the "baby-face" genre, however, it is *Figurine no. 9* that embodies the entire scope of the "baby-face." This condition is especially visible in her cranial and facial features which are larger than her counterparts. Her head constitutes forty percent of her body rather than thirty percent, and her facial features are all enhanced "baby-face" traits.⁶² Her large bald head has long triangular geometric protrusions meant to indicate ears; they are neither the most natural nor the most stylized within the offering and can be compared with the others in Figure 19. Despite the unnaturalistic shape, her ears have been carefully drilled to allow for earrings; pierced ears are a consistent trait of all the offerings figurines although no earrings were recovered during the excavation. Her face is a long oval topped by another un-natural feature: an erect tabular cranial modification. The modification is separated from her forehead by a gently curving incised line that frames her face and subtly insinuates a disconnection between head and face. The cranial modification, when viewed from the front, is a smooth extruded cone ending in a gently rounded top as seen in Figure 1. The grand size of her manually shaped cranium is a contributing factor to her head's large size and is unmatched within the offering. Viewed from the side, the modification loses its extruded

⁶² Magaloni-Kerpel and Nadal, eds. *La Ofrenda 4*, 148.

appearance, and instead follows the body's curvature that was noted in Figure 19. The backwards tilt of the top half of her head manages to look conspicuously like a hitchhiker's thumb. An illusion further separates the molded head from the face making it even more distinct: the curving top lines of the cranial star slightly wrap the sides of her head, causing the tips of the star's points to almost connect with the line running between her forehead and cranium. The result is that a viewer looking at *Figurine no. 9*'s profile may mistake the lines for an indent at the back of the skull when the transition is actually smooth. Nonetheless, the upper portion of the cranium has the feel of an addition rather than a natural occurrence like it does on the other figurines within the offering.

Her pronounced, highly conventionalized facial features are as captivating as the delicate waves of her body. Her almond-shaped eyes within their puffy lids are the most tilted of the offering; they are "baby-face" eyes. While some of the figurines' puffy-lidded, over-large eyes suggest child-like proportions and unfocused attention, hers are neither too large nor too small, and are realistically direct. Where on her counterparts, the puffy lids around overly large, horizontal eyes evince the swollen features of boxers after a fight, *Figurine no. 9*'s eye sockets and lids feel balanced in proportion to her face (Figure 22). Similarly, the choice to drill through her septum rather than drilling two nostril holes from the front has removed the slightly piggish look present on some of the others. The most realistically unlikely of her features is her over-accentuated, toothless mouth. One of the largest in the offering, it still manages to fit her face without appearing aggressive or swollen despite its obvious link to Olmec supernatural's snarling mouths, such as those seen on the Kunz axe's were-jaguar (Figure 23). Moreover, *Figurine no. 9*'s puffy, steeply sloping upper lip seems neither fake nor abnormal, rather it adds an exotic cast to her face that compliments her slanting eyes. Her enhanced "baby-face" features distinguish

her within the offering, and subtly suggest she necessitates closer examination, but do they not separate her entirely; she is still a member of the sixteen “baby-face” figurines of La Venta *Offering no. 4*.

Although second in the processional line, a position which might suggest she is a lesser member of the *event*, the elderly female *Figurine no. 9* distinguishes herself with an unexpected movement: she breaks protocol by stepping to the left and out of the clean line connecting the procession to the waiting *Figurine no. 22* (Figure 24). This liberty allows her an unobstructed view of the enigmatic *Figurine no. 22*, but more importantly, the move can only result from an independent agency that implies high status and power; she is unconcerned with repercussions for her action. Moreover, the move and ensuing connection to *Figurine no. 22*, forged through a gaze, sets these two figurines apart from the whole offering. *Figurine no. 9*'s establishment of the tie, elevates them to a separate realm populated by them and them alone. Significantly, as these two connect, the whole assemblage becomes about the conversation between them, one important male and one powerful elderly female, relegating everyone else to secondary. With her breach of etiquette, the elderly female *Figurine no. 9*, broadcasts her status: she is a primary character to the activities enacted within La Venta *Offering no. 4*, and her powerful role within ancient Mesoamerica's La Venta, may be one of leadership.

Interpretations

When Drucker, Heizer and Squier examined *Figurine no. 9*, they commented that she was “in no way set apart from the others by special characteristics” and her overall conformation aligned to the “general stylistic pattern” of the “baby-face” mode evident in the offering’s figural artifacts.⁶³ And yet, they also noted that she was visually “outstanding” with a “very high polish,” was the most “highly conventionalized” of the small stone figurines recovered from La Venta, and exhibited a “greatly exaggerated” posture – that we now understand as indicative of her advanced age.⁶⁴ Her sexed physical traits, not yet established when she was discovered, decorative detailing, and entitled movement within the procession, were not noted.⁶⁵ However, a few of these distinctions – her ideal Olmec “baby-face” features, and unique decorative markings – impart supernatural significances that support *Figurine no. 9*’s noteworthiness in a high status offering containing fifteen other stone “baby-face” figurines, all of which were found in the religious heart of La Venta.

Baby-Face: The Jaguar and Supernatural

The importance of *Figurine no. 9*’s enhanced “baby-face” features is understood from their connection to the Olmec supernatural, an association established early on in Olmec studies. Initial publications on the “baby-face” by mineralogist George F. Kunz, anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, and archaeologist Matthew W. Stirling claimed the style was an anthropomorphic cross between a baby and a jaguar.⁶⁶ The jaguar, and its traits were clearly visible to scholars working within the Olman region due to the discovery of numerous examples

⁶³ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 155.

⁶⁴ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 155–159.

⁶⁵ Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 159.

⁶⁶ Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff as quoted by Fürst, *The Olmec Were-Jaguar Motif*, 152; Stirling, *Stone Monument of Rio Chiquito*, 19.

like the El Azuzul-Loma del Zapote's *Monument 7* – composed of two twins facing a jaguar – and ceramic vessels like the Monte Albán's *Clay Jaguar*. So prevalent was the jaguar and its traits on Olmec imagery that Mesoamerican scholars began to believe that the Olmecs considered themselves to be the children of jaguars. This hereditary status meant that the Olmec believed that they “sprang from a union of man and jaguar,” according to anthropologist David C. Grove, not that the jaguar was simply a supernatural patron to the Olmec.⁶⁷ Therefore, the Olmec felt compelled to depict themselves as “a race of infants combining the features” of both man and jaguar, stated archaeologist Michael D. Coe.⁶⁸ Miguel Covarrubias even named the subsection of his chapter on the Olmec people “Colossal Heads and Jaguar Babies” as the evidence of aesthetics populated by babies and jaguar imagery continued to appear across the Mesoamerican Gulf Coast and farther abroad.⁶⁹ These assertions have since been disregarded, or recanted, as overly-imaginative misinterpretations fueled by visual evidence like the “copulation” scenes of Rio Chiquito's *Monument 1*, Potrero Nuevo's *Monument 3* and Laguna de los Cerros' *Monument 20*.⁷⁰ Barring the idea of the Olmec as the children of jaguars, it is clear that “in one way or another, the concept of the were-jaguar is at the heart of the Olmec,” as Coe so keenly states.⁷¹ Therefore, scholarship continues to explore the supernatural elements of Olmec figural representations placing emphasis on the jaguar traits and theorizing about the potential presence of a jaguar cult in the early Mesoamerican culture.⁷²

Figurine no. 9 has no feline characteristics, no round ears, no tail, no claws or fangs. Nor does she have the corpus of the supernatural were-jaguar traits: eyes that are “narrow slits

⁶⁷ Grove, “Olmec Altars and Myths,” 133.

⁶⁸ Murdy, “Congenital Deformities,” 861–71.

⁶⁹ Covarrubias, *Mexico South*, 79.

⁷⁰ Davis, “So-Called Jaguar-Human Copulation,” 453.

⁷¹ Coe as quoted by Davis. Davis, “So-Called Jaguar-Human Copulation,” 456.

⁷² Davis, “So-Called Jaguar-Human Copulation,”

between puffed-eyelids,” “heavy jowls,” a “snarling” open mouth that reveals fangs, toothless gums, or a single pointed “milking tooth,” and a V-shaped cleft on the top of the head.⁷³

However, *Figurine no. 9* does have a large, protruding, downturned mouth that can be described as snarling or grimacing, heavy jowls, and almond shaped eyes set in puffy eyelids, all features seen on supernatural were-jaguars, suggesting that she, and the “baby-face” figurines, have a connection to the Olmec supernatural. Moreover, according to anthropologist Peter D. Joralemon, her type of small stone “baby-face” figurines, which rely on a simplified but otherwise naturalistic human forms, though coupled with more common Olmec features such as “almond-shaped eyes, wide flattened nose, and mouth with flaring upper lip and drooping corners” of which all – except the nose – can be linked to the Olmec supernatural.⁷⁴

An alternate argument, but one not supported by most Olmec scholars, is the idea of that figurines with facial traits like the “baby-face” may be shamans mid-transformation to jaguar, a condition which accounts for their anthropomorphic features. Early proponents of this shamanism theory were anthropologists F. Kent Reilly, III, and Peter T. Fürst who asserted that various jade figurines, including several kneeling and combat stance stone figurines found at Dumbarton Oaks, were shamans in various stages of transformation. A contemporary scholar, Tate, has taken up their theory and suggests that La Venta *Offering no. 4*’s “baby-face” figurines’ bodies are in poses indicative of “spiritual seekers in a trance state.”⁷⁵ The loosely bent knees, relaxed arms, straight spines, open mouths meant to facilitate deep breathing, and far away gazes, were all signifiers of meditative disconnection with the here and now and a re-alignment with the universal axis mundi, proposes Tate. She supplies evidence through

⁷³ Pool, “Mesoamérica – Olmec Figurines,” 247.

⁷⁴ Joralemon established a guide to supernatural iconography used by the Olmec. Joralemon, “A Study of Olmec Iconography,” 7–9.

⁷⁵ Tate, “The Shaman's Stance,” 437.

comparison to other spiritual practices. The bent knees she likens to “Beginning Posture” from Chinese Tai Chi, and the loose limbs and open mouth are demonstrative of the ancient Indian Hatha Yoga discipline’s “Tadasana” or “mountain pose.”⁷⁶ While Tate’s theory is intriguing, it does not take into account that *Offering no. 4*’s figurines could not stand on their own. If they were intended to replicate upright standing Olmec shamans, why not create figures that could stand like the *Transformation Figure in Combat Stance* at Dumbarton Oaks (Figure 25)?

Although the Olmec possessed only rudimentary tools, Stirling noted that “the Olmec jades were never surpassed either in workmanship or quality of material.”⁷⁷ Rather, the masterful Olmec crafters were able to produce work that astonished early Mesoamerican scholars and continues to awe contemporary lapidarists. Covarrubias described Olmec jadeite samples as “so beautifully carved and polished that it was difficult to believe they had not come from China.”⁷⁸ His comment holds true for *Figurine no. 9* whose polish is so refined that even her lips, and the hard-to-get-to inside of her thighs, easily reflect light, turning her into a precious gem rather than a stone. It seems apparent from this evidence that creating balanced figurines capable of standing was well within Olmec capabilities.

Within *Offering no. 4*, the six celts and *Figurine no. 9* are the only jadeite artifacts and thus the most difficult to carve.⁷⁹ This means that the Olmecs would have had to utilize a harder

⁷⁶ Tate, “The Shaman’s Stance,” 427–428.

⁷⁷ Stirling, “The Olmecs,” 44.

⁷⁸ The skill of the Olmec carver is showcased by comparing jadeite to nephrite. Chinese Imperial Jade, the most valuable of the so-called jade family, was historically the softer nephrite. Only in the mid eighteenth century with the discovery of jade from Burma did China begin to craft from harder jadeite. Arem, *Jadeite Value, Price, and Jewelry Information*; Covarrubias, *Mexico South*, 81.

⁷⁹ According to the Mohs hardness scale that tracks stone hardness, by utilizing a scale of one to ten with diamonds being a ten, jadeite’s hardness falls between a six and seven; serpentine falls between a three and six and schist ranges from a four to five. The Mohs scratch test scale was invented by Friedrich Mohs in 1822 and has been consistently used by meteorologists and geologists since. For more information on the Mohs scale, see Mineralogical Society of America, “Mohs’ Scale of Hardness”: http://www.minsocam.org/msa/collectors_corner/article/mohs.htm

material to carve and polish the jadeite.⁸⁰ The difficulty carving and polishing the brittlely hard jadeite for early carvers possessing rudimentary tools is compounded by the material's slipperiness. Jadeite has a slick nature due to the high level of silica in its matrix which results in a natural glass-like surface even prior to polishing. Furthering the problem, polishing stones can cause heating to occur, which in turn produces a shell of harder material to form on the rock being worked. This is why cutting and polishing are often done with a combination of wet and dry materials, with the hope that the wet will disperse the heat and prevent the harder shell from forming. The issue of slipperiness has not been solved by the use of contemporary diamond drill bits, they still tend to skip or slide about when drilling the hard, slick rock. These skips lead to scratches or worse yet, breakage.

At just over seven inches in height, less than two and half inches in width, and less than ten ounces, *Figurine no. 9* is small, thin, and prone to breaking, as evidenced by her missing left forearm.⁸¹ And yet, there is absolute precision in her drill holes; there are no small chips around the edges of her nostril and septum piercing, nor her earring holes, features visible in Figures 1 and 19. Further testament to the Olmec's skills with the stone can be observed in the six incredibly thin jadeite celts, and yet, *Figurine no. 9's* jadeite body transcends this level of expertise. To carve and polish her undulating curves without shattering the thin form is masterful; to cut the tiny precise holes for her earrings, is almost unbelievable.

⁸⁰ Jones, Jones and Jones suggest the Olmec were using corundum to carve. It rates nine on the Mohs hardness index, almost comparable to modern diamond bits. However, a lapidary's tool kit was recovered from the later Maya site of Kaminaljuyu containing an abrasive composed of "angular quartz sand and ground-up jade," according to Stirling, reopening speculation about how the Olmec achieved such spectacular results. Jones, Jones, and Jones, "Archaeometry," 137; Stirling, "The Olmecs," 59.

⁸¹ *Figurine no. 9's* measurements are 7.07 inches in height, 2.48 inches in width, and having a weight of 280.3 grams. She is neither the largest nor smallest of the figurines within the offering. The offering's tallest figure, Figure no. 19, is 7.94 inches in height while the shortest, *Figure no. 14*, is only 6.94 inches. The mean average weight of *Offering no. 4's* figures is roughly 274 grams (excluding *Figure no. 22*). Magaloni-Kerpel, Nadal, eds., *La Ofrenda 4*, 135.

The “greatly exaggerated” curvature that evinces the elderly woman in *Figurine no. 9*, means that she is more sinuous than the offering’s other figurines.⁸² Regardless, her body still conforms to the parameters of the “baby-face” with a flattened simplistic design readily identifiable as human. Given the narrow scope of *Figurine no. 9*’s supernatural features, labeling her a supernatural deity is unfounded and problematic. Instead, what can be inferred from the presence of her supernatural traits is this: *Figurine no. 9* acts as a reflection of an elderly woman of high status at La Venta, and the enhancement of her ideal Olmec “baby-face” traits acts as an advertisement, and confirmation, of the woman’s non-physical, but still solid, connection to the Olmec supernatural which is an inherent aspect of her clout within the capital of La Venta.

Baby-Face: The Star and Mask

When Fürst examined the Chalcatzingo *Petroglyph 2* he noted the right-most character had a were-jaguar mask on the back of its head, in lieu of the were-jaguar features seen on the other figures, (Figure 26).⁸³ Thus, he described the “baby-face” as being an added mask which could be removed.⁸⁴ Likewise, Kunz used the term mask while describing Olmec figures.⁸⁵ This thesis asserts that physical evidence present on *Figurine no. 9* – her enhanced features and unique decorations – supports the notion of a mask as an explanation for her exaggerated, or idealized Olmec features especially with the inclusion of her decorative star. Several conditions buttress the idea of the mask: the size of her head, which is larger than her counterparts, and the carved lines demarcating her face from her head by, traits noted by Magaloni-Kerpel and Nadal. Additionally, the star on the back of *Figurine no. 9*’s head may be evidence of the insertion point

⁸² Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 155–159.

⁸³ Fürst, *The Olmec Were-Jaguar Motif*, 149.

⁸⁴ Fürst, *The Olmec Were-Jaguar Motif*, 149.

⁸⁵ Kunz, “Sur une hache votive gigantesque en jadeite de l’Oaxaca,” 517-523; Kunz, *The Mystical Lore*, 30.

for the mask. The presence of a mask insinuates that both the elderly visage and the supernatural one are both vital representations to La Venta's ritualistic practices. The recovery of a wooden Olmec mask inlaid with jade from Canon de La Mano in Guerrero, Mexico in the mid twentieth century proves that lightweight masks capable of being worn were present in the Olmec culture (Figure 27).⁸⁶ The presence of numerous jade masks in public and private collections corroborates Olmec production of masks, even if the heavy weight some and small size of others suggests they were not made to be worn. However, two alternate theories have been proposed to explain *Figurine no. 9's* facial and cranial differences. Notably, these theories do not address the demarcation lines or star shaped decoration on the back of her head.

The first theory posits that the strange cranial shapes seen on *Figurine no. 9* and other Olmec figural representations are a result of medical deformity. This theory has gained little traction with Mesoamerican experts because gleaned the presence of disease from artistic imagery is problematic due to its unreliability and assumptive nature.⁸⁷ The second theory posits that *Figurine no. 9's* cranial differences are a condition of an actual emulative, transformative process practiced by the Olmec. Thus, the size increase to *Figurine no. 9's* head, visible in her high forehead and erect tabular cranium, is believed to reflect a practice of cranial modification in the Olmec region. Similar smaller and less commanding projections are found on all the offering's figurines and visible in Figure 22. However, due to the acidic nature of the alluvial soil

⁸⁶ The American Museum of Natural History dates the Olmec mask from between the end of the Early Formative and the beginning of the Middle Formative period. They list the date 1949 but do not specify if this is an acquisition date for the museum or a discovery date.

⁸⁷ Archaeologist Carson N. Murdy offered an intriguing medical-mythical theory to explain the formation of the were-jaguar motif. He argued that the mythos of the jaguar was already in place when a rare congenital defect – multifactorial neural tube brain and spinal cord deformity – affected the children of either the highest ranked family, or those vying to be the leaders. When the children presented with the deformity, Murdy suggests that the family took advantage of the situation by claiming the children were hybrids: half jaguar and half human. In this way the idea of the formidable jaguar as a close protector of the Olmec culture could be realized. Murdy did not suggest that the occurrence of the deformity was widespread, its occurrence in one location was all that was needed for the story to spread to the other Olmec communities where it could act as a unifying legend. Murdy, "Congenital Deformities and the Olmec Were-Jaguar Motif," 861–871.

in Mesoamerica, no Olmec bones have been recovered. Thus, we can only look to later cultures for reference. Anthropologist Vera Tiesler, who examined the types and procedures of cranial modification practiced in later Mesoamerica, suggested that the cranial modifications were common across Maya territory and were meant to be an emulation of a supernatural; the Olmec Maize God exhibits various cranial modifications (Figure 28).⁸⁸

Interestingly, Tiesler's study of Maya skulls indicated that cranial modification was a practice not linked to economic status. This constraint in the later Maya, does not mean Olmec cranial modifications were widespread; they may have been limited to those of high social standing, or those intended for a particular role. Tiesler was also convinced that the modifications were part of the female realm, suggesting that it was mothers and sisters who performed the modifications. Extrapolating from Tiesler's research, we might consider whether *Figurine no. 9*'s bent frame, and advanced age, suggests that she represents the most knowledgeable, expert cranial *modifier* for her city, making her instrumental in the transformation of babies from simply human to supernaturally touched.⁸⁹ This would allow her most defining feature, her enhanced cranium, to become a flag heralding her esteemed function and unique skill set within the community; the addition of a mask would serve the same purpose.

The practice of "emulation can be identified by the presence of actual imports or imitations in high-status households since foreign symbols and styles are often held in high regard by local elites, and they are particularly subject to local emulation by high-status individuals" states anthropologist Carl J. Wendt, lending credence to Tiesler's theory.⁹⁰ *Figurine*

⁸⁸ Tiesler, "Olmec Head Shapes;" Murdy, "Congenital Deformities."

⁸⁹ Alternate theories citing medical deformity to explain the were-jaguar features and modified craniums spring up from time to time, they are not generally accepted. For further discussion see: Murdy, "Congenital Deformities and the Olmec Were-Jaguar Motif," 861–871.

⁹⁰ Wendt, "A San Lorenzo Phase Household Assemblage," 107.

no. 9's valuable jadeite, and the lengths the Olmec went to acquire the material, may bolster this interpretation. To date only one source of jade has been identified near the Olmec region: the Motagua Valley in Guatemala. It is roughly four hundred and seventy-six miles from La Venta. Surprisingly, Wendt's definition of emulation also speaks to the presence of the star on the back of *Figurine no. 9*'s head. While the star is not unseen in the Olmec oeuvre, it is also not particularly common.

The limited appearance of star motifs within Olmec imagery suggests that the symbol does not relate to larger Olmec belief structures. Thus, anthropologist Jeffrey P. Blomster theorized that the "baby-faced" figurines bearing star motif, which he calls a "Venus Star," resulted from imagery crafted for a small, secretive, elite Early Formative Period cult.⁹¹ However, he examined ceramic hollow babies, not solid stone figurines, of which only a handful appear to bear these star motifs. Examples of Blomster's "Venus Star" appears on an unprovenanced reclining hollow female clay figurine decorated with multiple "Venus stars" from Las Bocas in modern-day state of Puebla (Figure 30).⁹² That the figure is female establishes a solid link between it and *Figurine no. 9*. Another similar unprovenanced ceramic male figurine was scrutinized by Garcia and Márquez (Figure 31).⁹³ The cross-over of the star symbol from ceramic to stone does occur and one example can be seen on the large stone Cruz del Milagro *Monument no. 1* (Figure 29).⁹⁴

Establishing the presence of Quetzalcoatl's imagery, along with his associated "Venus

⁹¹ Blomster. "Context, Cult, and Early Formative."

⁹² Guthrie, *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*, 314.

⁹³ This male figure appears to have breasts, a pinched waist and thick thighs that taper to refined ankles, all indicators of female sex. Possibly the figurine's sex needs to be reconsidered. Garcia and Márquez, "Cultivating Positive Health, Learning, and Community," 7–8.

⁹⁴ Coincidentally, the Cruz del Milagro *Monument no. 1*, also known as "The Prince," has been re-gendered as female by Follensbee, meaning the large stone sculpture should be called "The Princess." Follensbee, "Sex and Gender," 321–325.

Star” motif in the early Olmec culture was the goal of Garcia and Márquez’s research. To do so they turned to the two most notable Olmec examples: the San Lorenzo *Monument 47*, which features a man holding both snake and bundled feathers, and the La Venta *Monument 19*, in which a male figure they identify as Quetzalcoatl sits holding a medicine pouch surrounded by the curled form of a feathered serpent (Figure 32).⁹⁵ If theirs and Blomster’s theories are correct then it might be extrapolated that the Olmec secret cult worshipped an early version of Quetzalcoatl and the “Venus Star” was an associated symbol. By accepting this ideology, Garcia, Márquez and Blomster’s scholarship serves to emphasize *Figurine no. 9*’s connection to the Olmec supernatural through the “Venus star” and its association to Quetzalcoatl. Tangentially, one of the hollow figurine heads recovered from the early San Lorenzo site has a four-pointed star cut into the back of its bald head.⁹⁶ In light of this information, and Coleman and Clark’s assertion that certain figurines within *Offering no. 4* appeared to adhere to the styles from several centuries before, the potential link between *Figurine no. 9*’s star motif and the supernatural Quetzalcoatl, is buttressed.⁹⁷

The depiction of supernatural characters in Olmec imagery is firmly established and evidenced by the large number of supernatural figures found at Olmec sites. Reshaping babies’ heads to appear like Olmec supernatural beings would be one permanent way to emulate them; another method might be donning costumes and masks that reflect supernatural attributes. This thesis continues under the belief that *Figurine no. 9*, represents an elderly, influential La Ventan who is wearing a mask with supernatural features that link her to the powers of the natural world around her.

⁹⁵ Garcia and Márquez. “Cultivating Positive Health,” 7–8.

⁹⁶ Coe and Diehl, *In the Land of the Olmec*, 267.

⁹⁷ Coleman and Clark, “Olmec Things and Identity,” 23.

Conclusion

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,” stated philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in 1953.⁹⁸ This is particularly true for *Figurine no. 9* who spent almost seventy years as a man in the eyes of the world. Now understood as female, this thesis’ examination of *Figurine no. 9* has revealed a robust set of elite indicators that clearly reflect feminine power. By showcasing the assortment of visual and physical cues – including her material, positioning, idealized aesthetics, and incised elements – this discourse points to how they convey *Figurine no. 9*’s esteem, advanced age, and connection to the Olmec supernatural in ancient Mesoamerican. Based on the information gained from these various signals it seems appropriate to reconsider *Figurine no. 9*’s status in the Olmec historical narrative, and subsequently add her to the growing list of ancient history’s most powerful women.

The first signal of her intended esteem is her material. From the abundant resources available to them, the Olmec chose to carve *Figurine no. 9* from valuable jadeite. Known locations of jadeite mines utilized in ancient Mesoamerica are few with the closest to La Venta being no less than four-hundred and seventy-five miles away. Thus, *Figurine no. 9*’s production was contingent on La Venta’s established, extensive, lucrative networks of travel and trade. These networks imply the capacity to spare citizens from food production and send them in search of valuable materials suggesting La Venta had a measure of economic stability and wealth. A fact confirmed by the presence of the valuable *Offering no. 4*, and others elite deposits unearthed in the Ceremonial Court.

Due to the hard, slippery nature of the jadeite, *Figurine no. 9*’s carving process could only have been accomplished by master artisans. This is another clue to the figurine’s value

⁹⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, vii.

because commissioning the highest caliber of lapidarists from across Mesoamerica, like those capable of creating *Figurine no. 9*'s sinuous, incredibly thin form from the glass-like jadeite, would have been expensive. Therefore, *Figurine no. 9* foregrounds La Venta's metropolitan nature and again, speaks to the city's prosperity. Clearly, *Figurine no. 9*'s significance to La Venta is established by the various steps, efforts and money required for her production.

Figurine no. 9's discovery location, and the active primary role she served in *Offering no. 4*, are another clue to her high-status and ritualistic import in La Venta. That *Figurine no. 9*'s offering was found in the Ceremonial Court, an area believed to be the spiritual locus of the mega city, cannot be ignored. The ritualistic gravity of the area is compounded by evidence indicating the Ceremonial Court's presence, and use, began prior to the city's transformation into a capital. Although this thesis stresses *Figurine no. 9*'s reflection of a high-status elderly female, the offering's placement in the Ceremonial Court insinuates that *Figurine no. 9* was more than an aesthetic ornament, and more than a marker of individual or familial affluence. Instead, she signals her ritualistic connection to the Olmec supernatural, a condition confirmed by her idealized Olmec supernatural features and decorative motifs.

As if her inclusion in the elite, ritualistic *Offering no. 4* in the Ceremonial Court was not sufficient to declare her influence and power, *Figurine no. 9*'s aberrant action within her assemblage confirms it. She breaks the processional line and forges a new center line between herself and *Figurine no. 22*. The ensuing connection between the two, fashioned from a gaze, allowed her to establish a new power structure within the offering. Specifically, her independent agency reshaped the offering's events from an assemblage about the whole collection of artifacts, to a conversation between her and *Figurine no. 22*, rendering the remaining figural artifacts of *Offering no. 4* as secondary. These actions are recognizable as the prerogative of an elderly

woman, especially one who associates with the supernatural. This power play suggests her status sits above the characters in her own offering, allowing this thesis to conclude that her stature within La Venta may have been of the highest caliper.

Figurine no. 9's association with the Olmec supernatural has been clearly established by visual cues. The enhanced, idealized features of the Olmec “baby-face” – large erect tabular cranial modification, almond shaped eyes in puffy lids, heavy jowls, and protruding downturned mouth – are intimately linked to Olmec supernatural characters such as the were-jaguar and Maize deity. If *Figurine no. 9* is wearing a mask, as this thesis suggests, then the figurine has donned the supernatural features. The action insinuates a pre-established link to the Olmec supernatural and La Venta’s expectation that this elderly woman would don the supernatural features. The trace remains of red cinnabar found on *Figurine no. 9's* body, but not in the offering, confirm her ritualistic significance; the mineral was primarily found in elite burials and offerings in the Ceremonial Court of La Venta. Given this understanding, it seems apparent that this old woman and her connection to the supernatural appear may have been representative of a reoccurring character vital to La Venta’s ritual practices and narrative.

In summary, *Figurine no. 9's* level of power, as a reflection of an elderly influential female at La Venta, was so great that it necessitated the construction of a supernatural touched “baby-face” figurine from valuable, imported jadeite. Moreover, her advanced age was not downplayed, it was advertised. Therefore, it seems appropriate to give *Figurine no. 9* a name other than the clinical archaeological label applied during her discovery. This thesis forwards the title *Figura Reina*, a Mexican name that refers to a woman of high status, or even royalty, who is influential within her community. This renaming will firstly, remove her Western scientific tag given to her by an all-male team in 1955. Secondly, and most importantly, it will erase her

ambiguous nature and allow *Figura Reina* to become an animated, forceful female within the modern imagination allowing her to easily take her place as one of ancient history's most powerful women.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Olmec, *Figure no. 9* in *Offering no. 4* at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, height $7 \frac{7}{100}$, width $2 \frac{12}{25}$ inches, 280.3 grams, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of the INAH)



Figure 2: Olmec, *Offering no. 4* at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, excavations photo (1955), ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, greenstones, colored clays, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of Claudia Brittenham & National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #0079)



Figure 3: Olmec, *Stela no. 1* from La Venta, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Basalt, height $8 \frac{1}{5}$, width $2 \frac{8}{10}$, thickness $2 \frac{3}{10}$ feet, Parque-Museo La Venta, Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.org)

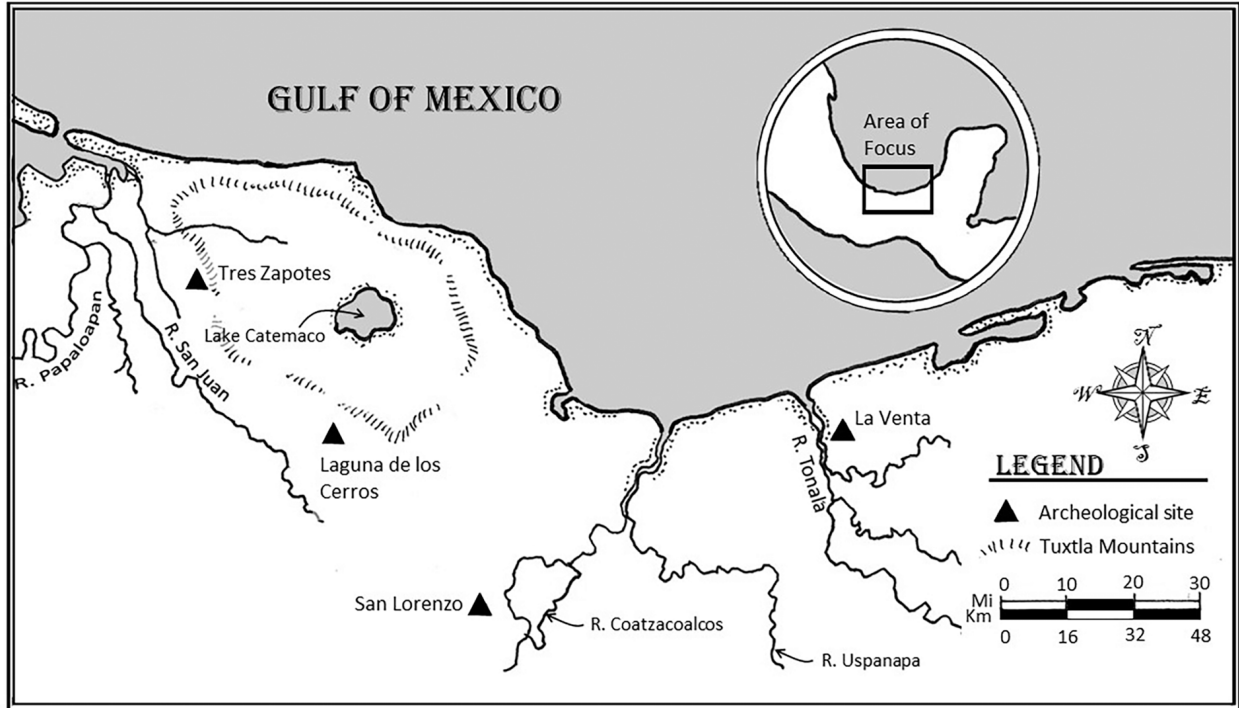


Figure 4: Map of major Olmec centers on Mexico's Gulf Coast within the Mesoamerican culture area in the Early to Middle Formative periods. Drawing by M. Volk. Susan D. Gillespie and Michael Volk. "An Archaeological Evaluation of the Olmec "Royal Tombs" at La Venta, Mexico." (*Ancient Mesoamerica* 34, no. 3, 2023), 2.

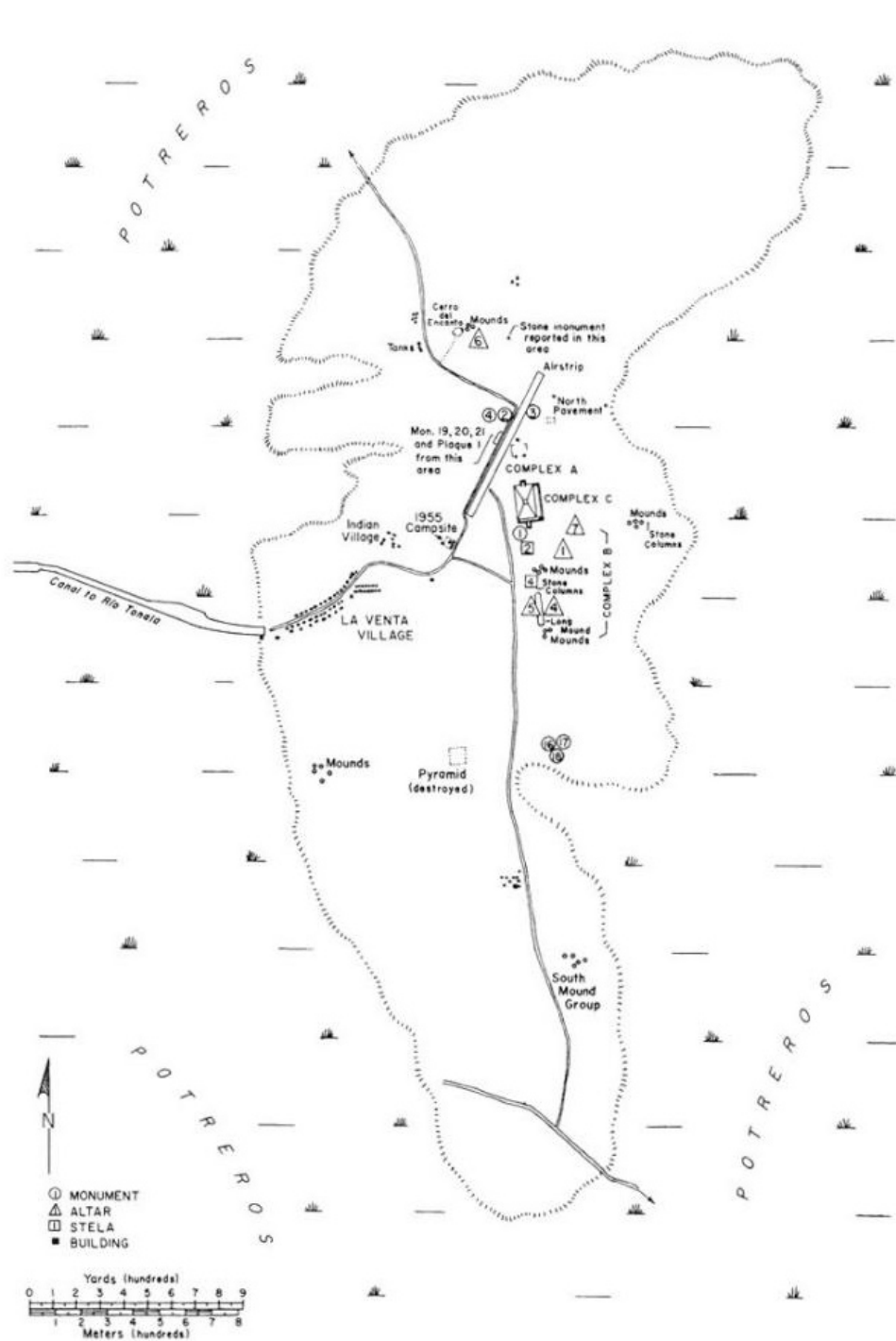


Figure 5: La Venta “island” amid coastal swamps (labeled potreros) with some site features from 1942 and 1943 excavations. Drawing by Drucker et al. 1959: Figure 2. Reproduced from Susan D. Gillespie, “Archaeological Drawings as Re-Presentations: The Maps of Complex A, La Venta Mexico.” (*Latin American Antiquity* 22, no. 1, 2011), 7.

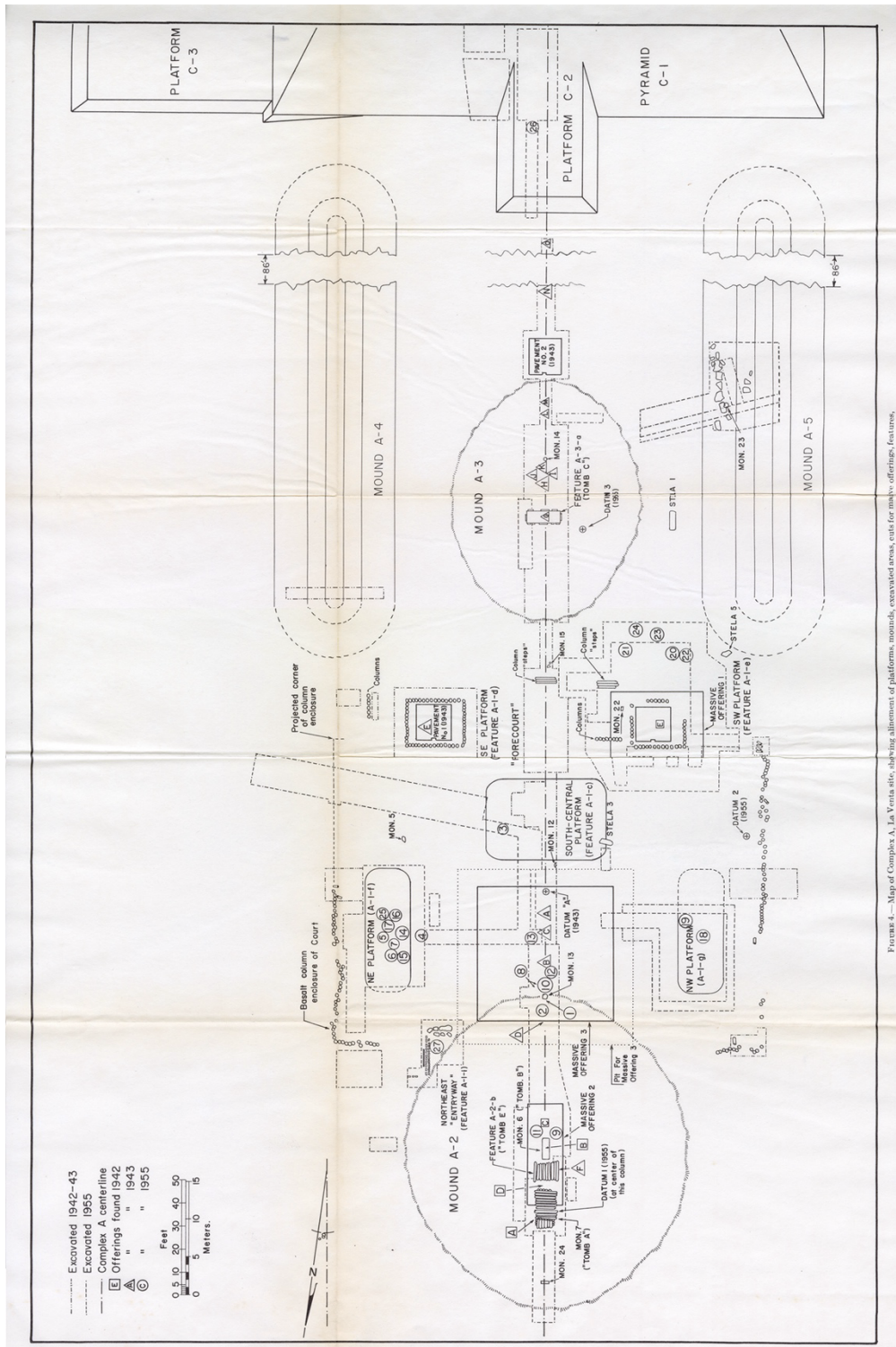


FIGURE 4.—Map of Complex A, La Venta site, showing alignment of platforms, mounds, excavated areas, cuts for massive offerings, features.

Figure 6: The Plan map of La Venta Complex A, dashed lines indicate bulldozer and excavation trenches. Reproduced from Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955* (Washington D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1959. Fig. 4), 10–11.

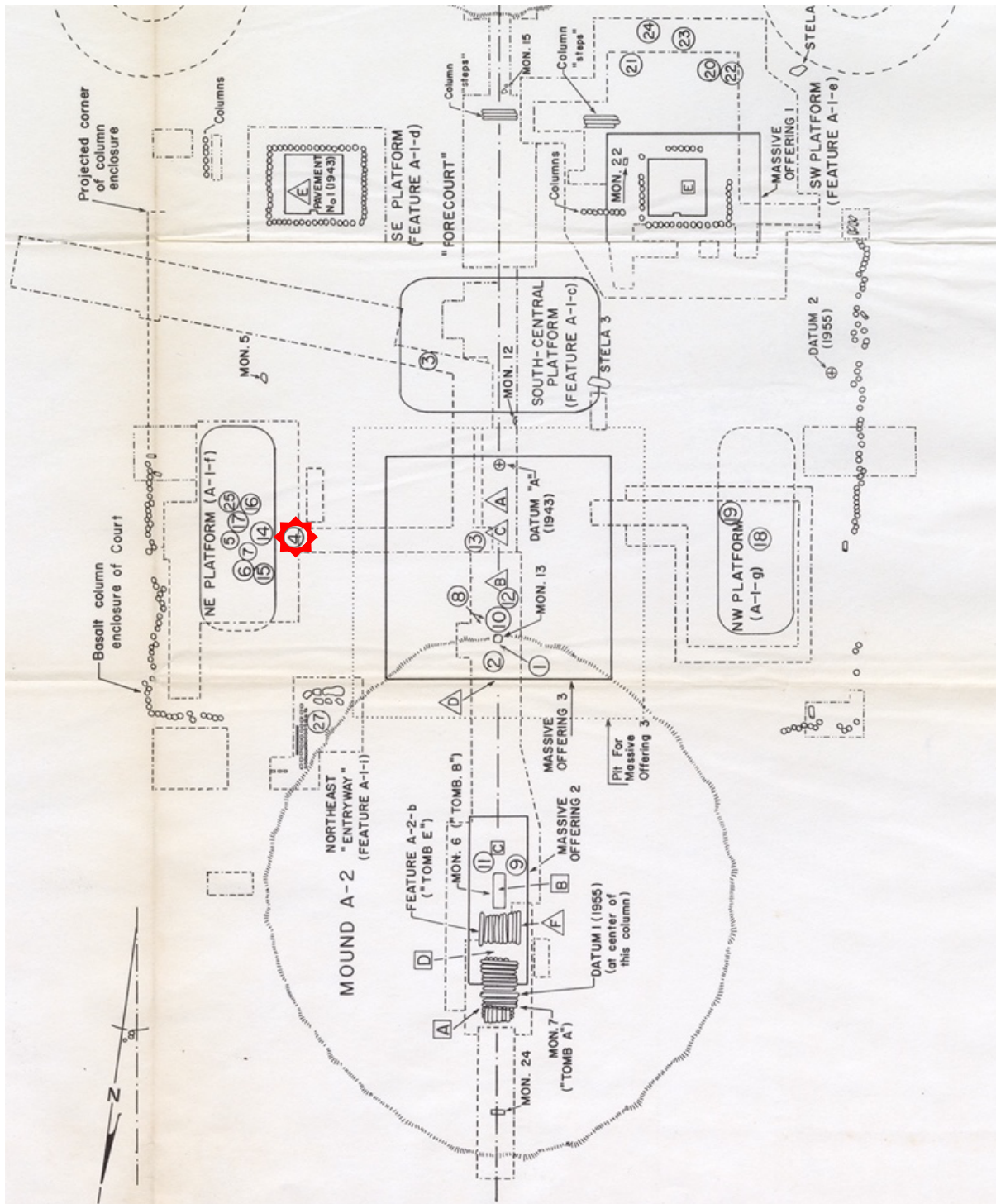


Figure 7: Ceremonial Court in Ceremonial Center, detail of Complex A at La Venta site, red star marks La Venta Offering no. 4, dashed lines indicate bulldozer and excavation trenches. Reproduced from Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*. (Washington D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1959. Fig. 4), 10–11.

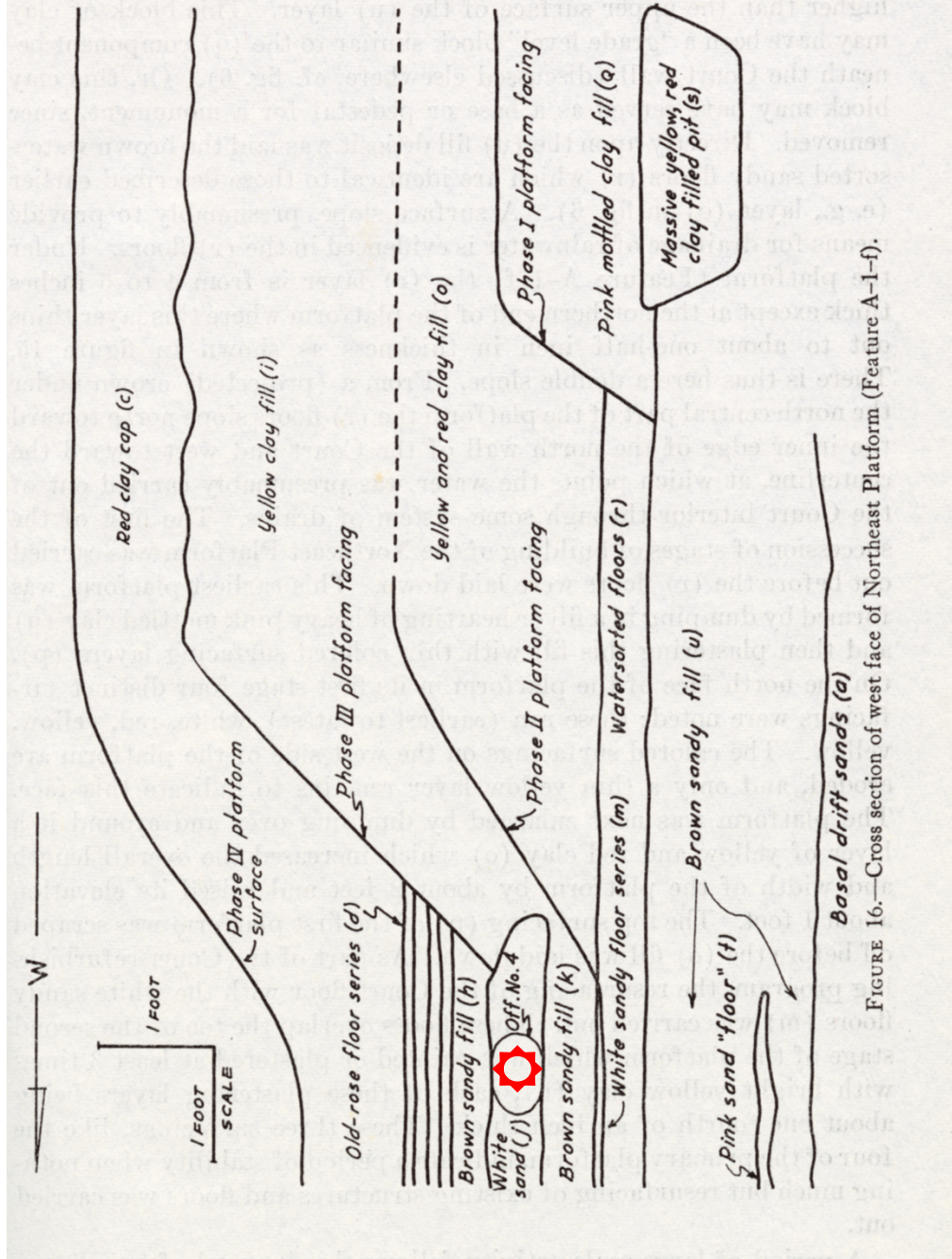


FIGURE 16.—Cross section of west face of Northeast Platform (Feature A-1-f).

Figure 8: Cross section of west face of Northeast platform, red star marks La Venta Offering no. 4. Reproduced from Drucker, Heizer and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco*, 1955 (Washington D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1959. Fig. 16), 57.



Figure 9: Olmec, Celts in *Offering no. 4* from. La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, height 9 5/16 to 10 3/4 inches, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of R.F. Heizer collection, National Anthropological Archives, catalog ID: [heizer_0131](#) & [SmartHistory.org](#))



Figure 10: Olmec, *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, excavation photo of in situ view from south at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico (left), drawing with artifacts numbers included (right), view from north, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, granite, serpentine, composite, colored clays, figures height 6 $\frac{5}{16}$ to 7 $\frac{15}{16}$ inches, celts height 9 $\frac{5}{16}$ to 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of Claudia Brittenham & National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #1145)



Figure 11: Olmec, Celts in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, length $9 \frac{27}{100}$ – $10 \frac{83}{100}$, width $1 \frac{27}{100}$ – $1 \frac{53}{100}$, thickness $\frac{9}{25}$ – $\frac{21}{25}$ inches, 219.4–478.6 grams, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (Photo courtesy of the INAH)



Figure 12: Olmec, Figurines from *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, 900–400 B.C.E. Areas of damage and repair highlighted with red circles. Jadeite, serpentine, granite, height 6 5/16 to 7 15/16 inches tall, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photos courtesy of National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution. Heizer #114, #118, and #123, with modifications by Claudia Brittenham)



Figure 13: Olmec, *Figurine no. 14* in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Serpentine, height 6 $\frac{57}{100}$, width 2 $\frac{67}{100}$ inches, 284.2 grams, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of the INAH)



Figure 14: Olmec *Figure no. 9* in La Venta *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, $7 \frac{7}{100} \times 2 \frac{12}{25}$ inches, 280.3 grams, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of Magaloni-Kerpel & Nadal)



Figure 15: Olmec, *Figurine no. 22* in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Composite, 7 4/25 x 2 87/100 inches, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of the INAH)



Figure 16: Olmec, *Figurine no. 8* in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Serpentine, 6 13/20 x 2 1/4 inches, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of the INAH)



Figure 17: Olmec, *Figurine no. 10* in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Serpentine, 7 x 2 87/100 inches, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of the INAH)



Figure 18: Olmec, *Figurine no. 11* in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Serpentine, 7 x 2 18/25 inches, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of the INAH)

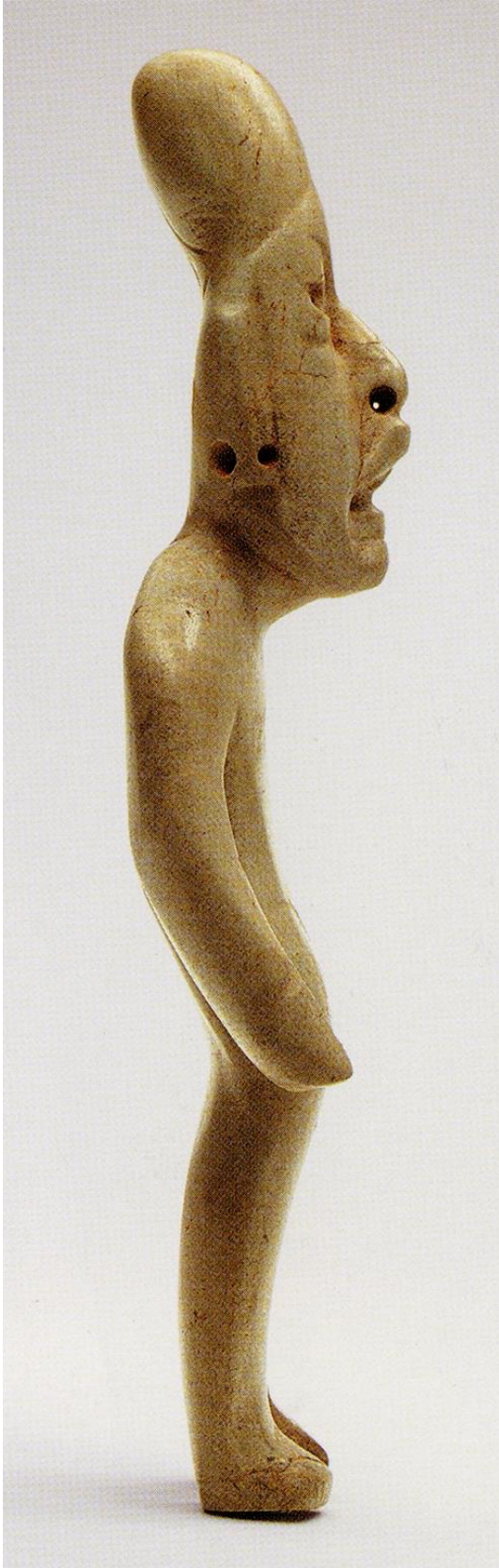


Figure 19: Olmec, *Figurine no. 9* in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, 7 7/100 x 2 12/25 inches, 280.3 grams, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of Magaloni-Kerpel & Nadal)



Figure 20: Olmec, Figurines in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, side views, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, serpentine, schist, granite, composite, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of Magaloni-Kerpel & Nadal)

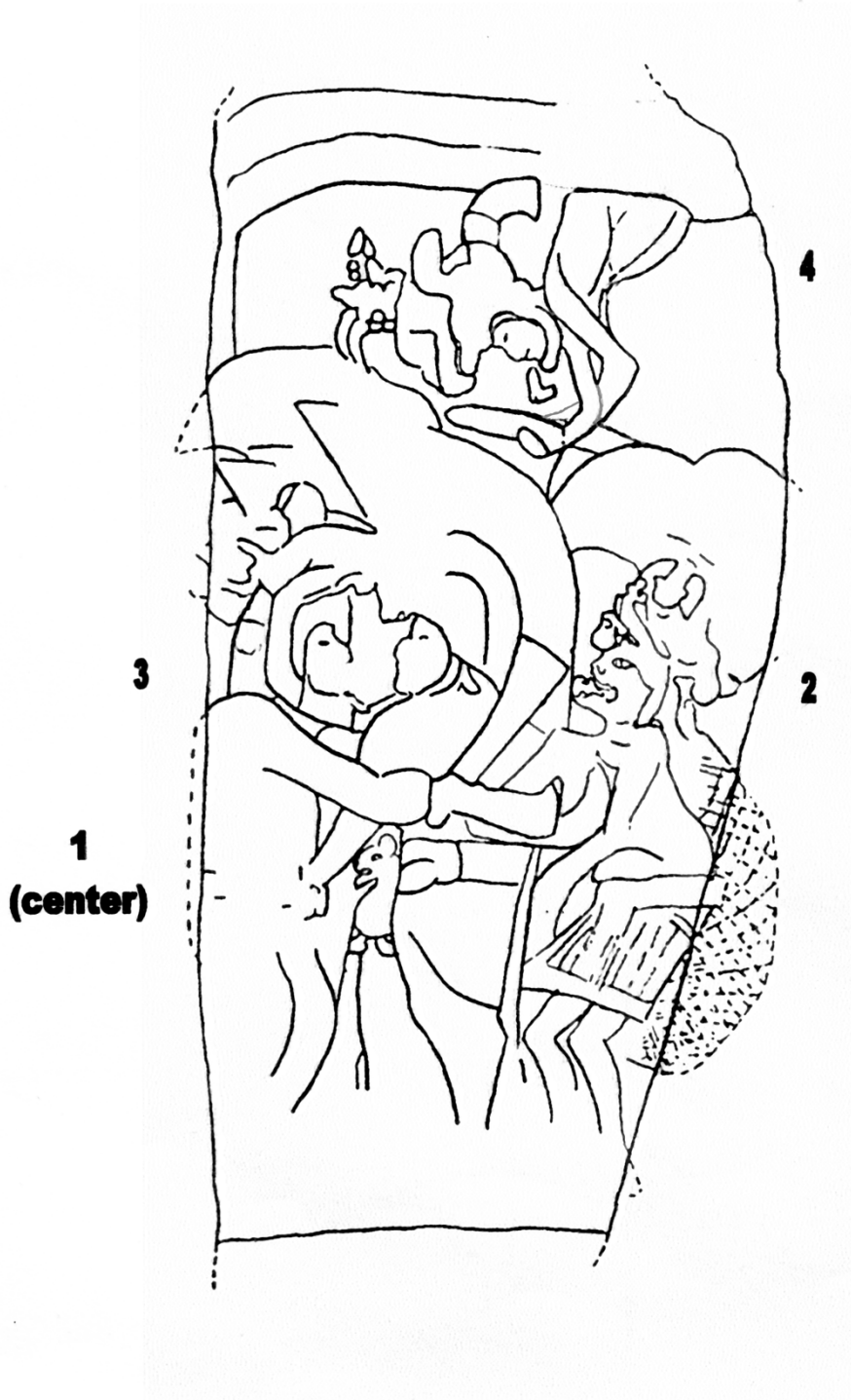


Figure 21: *Figure 2, La Venta Stela no. 5* (Line drawing by Billie J. A. Follensbee)

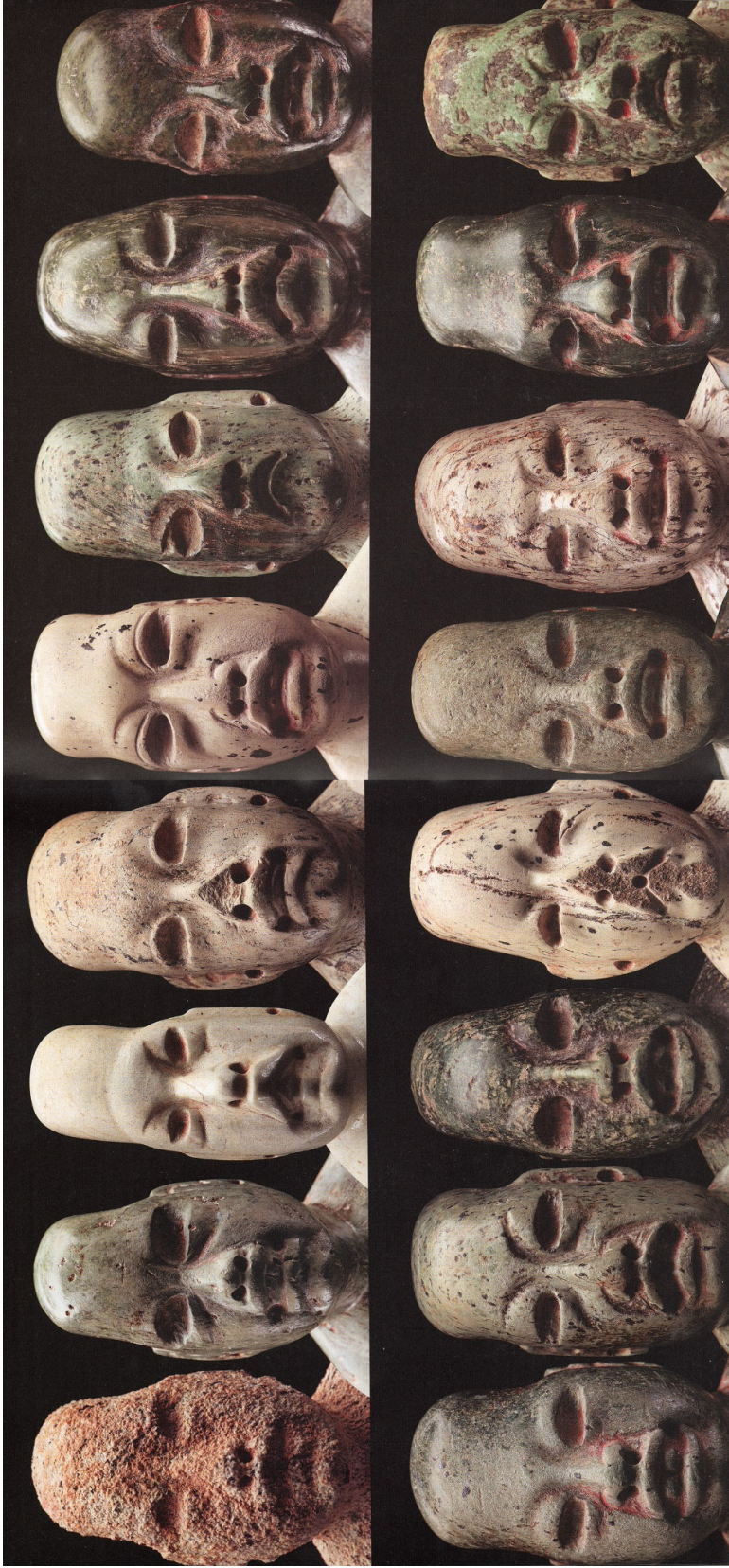


Figure 22: Olmec, Figurines in *Offering no. 4* from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, detail of heads, during excavations in 1955, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, serpentine, schist, granite, composite, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of Magaloni-Kerpel & Nadal)



Figure 23: Olmec, *Kunz Axe*, ca. 900–400 B.C.E. Jadeite, height $12 \frac{3}{16}$, width $6 \frac{5}{16}$, thickness $4 \frac{5}{16}$ in., Oaxaca, Mexico, American Museum of Natural History, Washington D.C. (Photo courtesy of The MET)

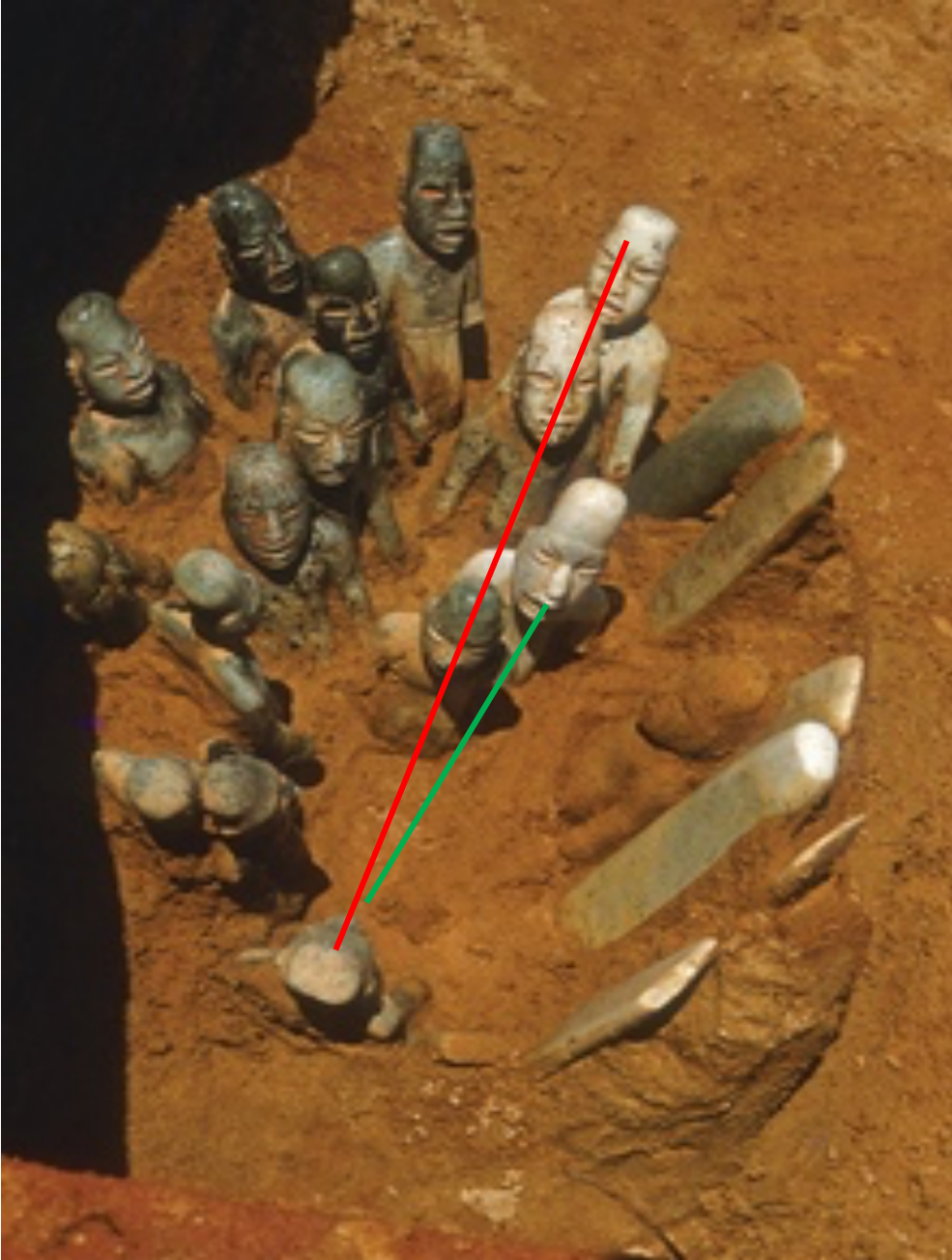
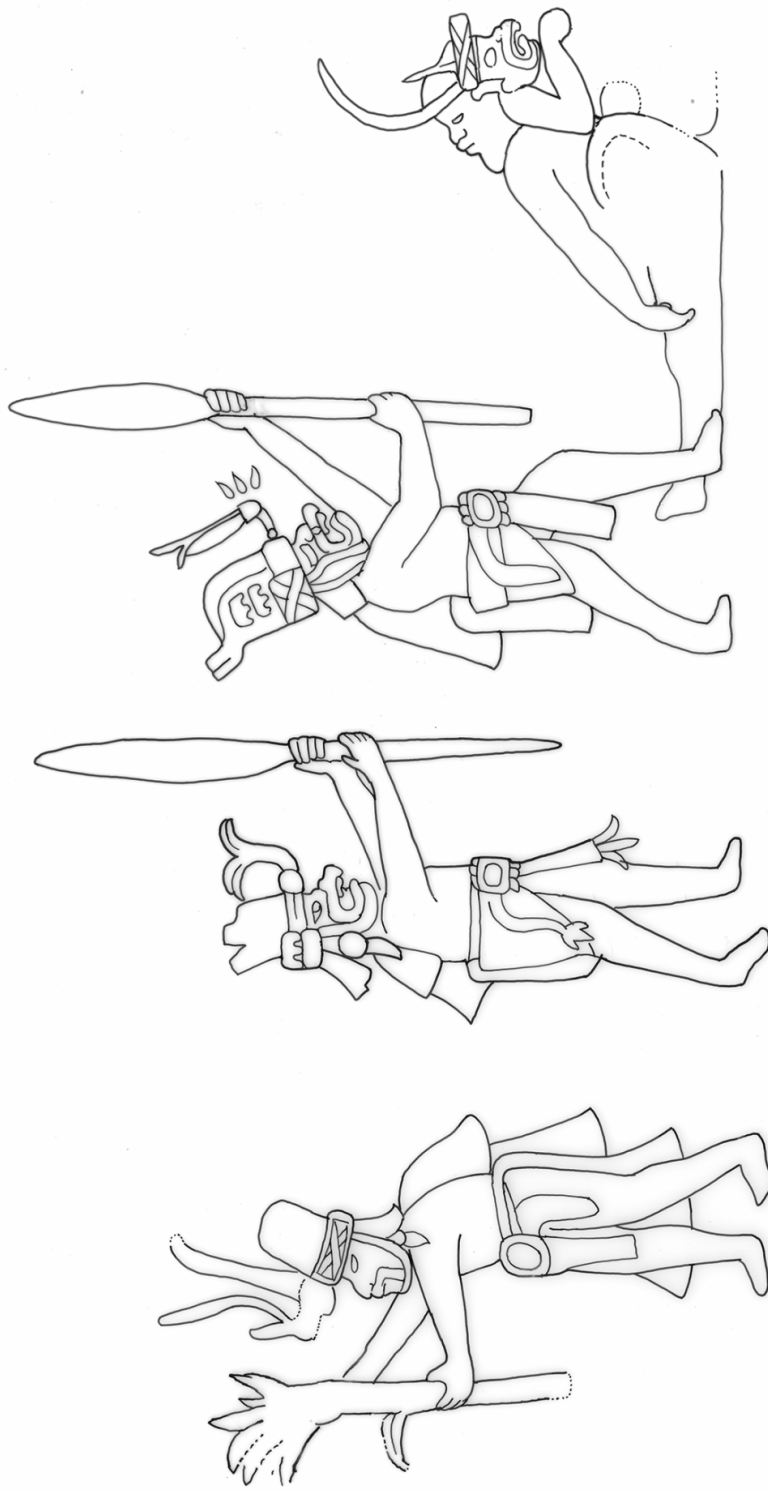


Figure 24:
Olmec, *Offering*
no. 4 from La
Venta, Tabasco,
Mexico,
excavation
photo, view
from south, ca.
900–400 B.C.E.
Jadeite, granite,
composite,
serpentine,
colored clays,
figures height 6
5/16 to 7 15/16
inches, celts
height 9 5/16 to
10 3/4 inches,
(Photo courtesy
of Claudia
Brittenham &
National
Anthropological
Archives,
Smithsonian
Institution,
Heizer #1145)



Figure 25: Olmec,
*Transformation Figure in
Combat Pose*, ca. 900–400
B.C.E. Serpentine, 7 $\frac{12}{25}$ x 3
 $\frac{81}{100}$ x 4 $\frac{17}{100}$ inches,
Mexico. (Photo courtesy of
Dumbarton Oaks)



SD 4524

MONUMENT 2, CHALCATZINGO, MORELOS

Figure 26:
 Drawing of
 Petroglyph 2
 from Olmec site
 Chalcatzingo,
 Morelos, Mexico,
 ca. 1500–900
 B.C.E. Drawing
 by Osvaldo Barra
 Cunningham.
 (Image courtesy
 of LACMA)



Figure 27: Olmec, *Wooden Mask* from Canyon de la Mono, Guerrero, Mexico, ca. 1500–800 B.C.E. Wood with jade inlay, height $7 \frac{12}{25}$, width $8 \frac{7}{100}$, depth $4 \frac{3}{10}$ inches, American Museum of Natural History. (Photo courtesy of Reddit#lonelyjelly)

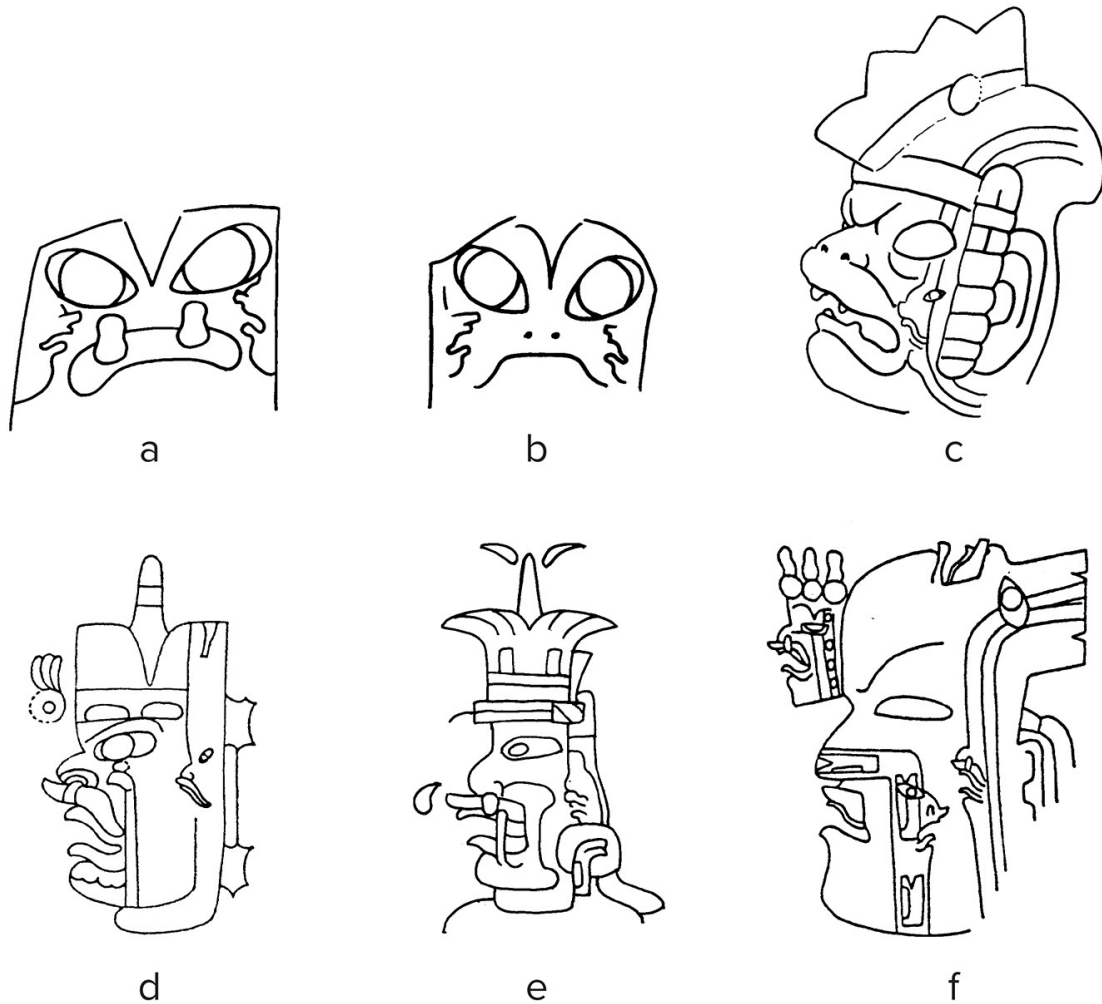


Figure 28: The Olmec maize god with various cranial modifications and smaller faces of the same deity on its cheek: (a–b) Olmec maize gods with cleft heads and profile deity faces on their cheeks (drawing by Karl A. Taube, after Covarrubias 1957: fig. 35); (c) figure blending attributes of the infant and foliated aspects of the corn deity, Necaxa Statuette (drawing by Karl A. Taube, after Covarrubias 1957:color pl. 2); (d) Olmec maize god with a foliated aspect of it flanking its cheek, incised jade celt from La Venta (drawing by Karl A. Taube, from Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: fig. 35e); (e) Olmec maize god with the face of the deity flanking its cheek, incised jade celt from Arroyo Pesquero (drawing by Karl A. Taube, after Medellín Zenil 1971: no. 67); and (f) foliated aspect of the Olmec maize god with secondary heads of the deity on its brow and cheek (drawing by Karl A. Taube, after Covarrubias 1957: fig. 35). (Image courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks)



Figure 29: Olmec, *El Príncipe o La Princesa*, Monument 1 from Cruz del Milagro, Veracruz, Mexico ca. 1200–900 B.C.E. Basalt, height 50 ¼, width 31 ½, depth 30 inches, 1300 lbs., Museo de Antropología de Xalapa (Photo courtesy of Kim Richter and Billie J. A. Follensbee)



Figurine 30:
Olmec,
*Reclining
Hollow Figure*
from Las
Bocas, Puebla,
Mexico, ca.
1200–900
B.C.E. Buff
clay with red
pigment,
height 2 $\frac{11}{20}$,
length 5
 $\frac{11}{100}$, depth 1
 $\frac{24}{25}$ inches,
Private
Collection
(Image
courtesy of
The Olmec
World: Ritual
and Rulership)



Figurine 31: Olmec, *Standing Male Figure*, ca. 1000–500 B.C.E. Beige slipped earthenware, height 10.62 inches, Mexico, Private Collection (Image courtesy of *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*)

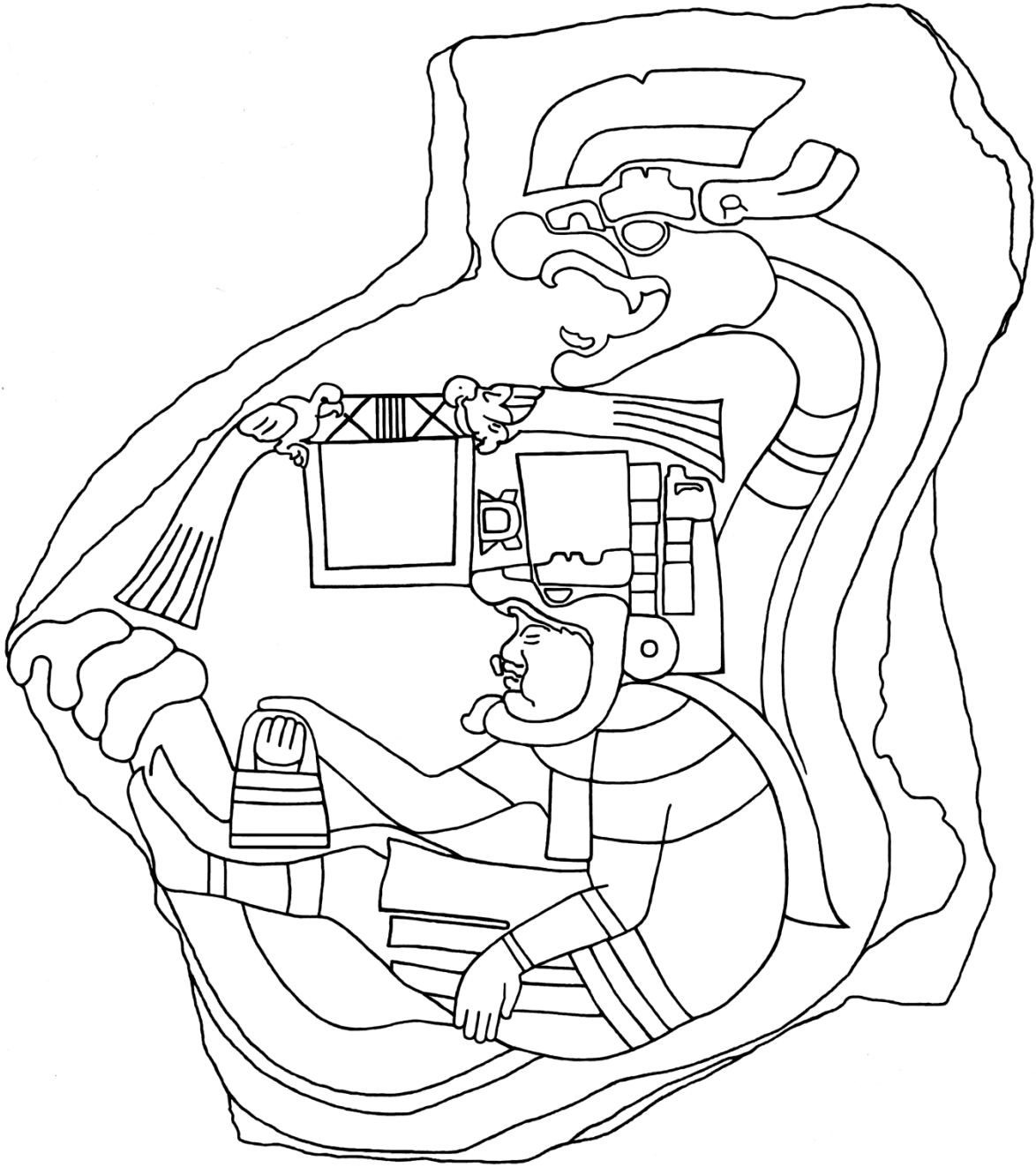


Figure 32: Drawing of Olmec La Venta Monument 19, *Seated Figure in the Coil of a Snake*, possible representation of Quetzalcoatl, drawing by Schele (Image courtesy of LACMA)

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