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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Olmec Monuments as Agents of Social Memory

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the  
degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Jillian Louise Mollenhauer

Committee in charge:

Professor Elizabeth Newsome, Chair  
Professor Norman Bryson  
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Professor Eric Van Young

2010

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2010

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the colleagues, friends, and family who have supported my studies over the years, to my parents, and most especially to Shawn.

## EPIGRAPH

A memory is what is left when something happens  
and does not completely unhappen.

*Edward de Bono*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The monuments discussed in this dissertation are referenced using the system first designated by Ann Cyphers (2004a) in which the monument number is preceded by a series of letters abbreviating the site where it was originally discovered. For example, Monument 1 from San Lorenzo is referred to as SL-1. The site abbreviations used in this text are as follows:

El Remolino	ELR
Estero Rabón	ER
La Venta	LV
Loma del Zapote	LZ
Los Soldados	LS
San Lorenzo	SL
San Martín Pajapan	SMP
Tenochtlán	Teno

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people contributed to the completion of this dissertation. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of my dissertation committee members and most particularly my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Newsome, for all of their support and assistance. I would also like to acknowledge the outstanding efforts of Dr. Ann Cyphers who acted as an outside advisor and contributed much of the information and insights that made this dissertation what it is. Dr. Rebecca Lauck also gave generously of her time and expertise in meetings over the years. I am further indebted to Dr. Rebecca Peales and the curators at the Museo Regional de Antropología- Carlos Pellicer Cámara, who made special efforts to allow me access to their fine collection of Olmec monuments during the museum's renovations. Many other colleagues and friends gave freely of their advice and support. I would like to thank Natalia Donner in particular, for sharing her knowledge and resources during countless hours of shop-talk.

Financial support for my research came from the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies and the Visual Arts Department at UCSD, and from the Russell Foundation. Dumbarton Oaks also supported my research at their facility. I would especially like to acknowledge Dr. Joanne Pillsbury and the staff there who made my stint in their archives both productive and enjoyable.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the people of Veracruz and Tabasco; the countless good Samaritans who gave directions, advice, and

good wishes while I passed through their cities, towns, and villages. This project would not have succeeded without their assistance and generosity.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Olmec Monuments as Agents of Social Memory

by

Jillian Louise Mollenhauer

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2010

Professor Elizabeth Newsome, Chair

This dissertation contributes to a growing body of literature which considers the problems of redacted histories, re-formed memories, and competing identities in relation to the Olmec societies of Mexico's Gulf lowlands. In this study Olmec monuments are positioned as agentive entities which served to generate and transform the collective memory of Pre-classic populations. Additionally, larger patterns in the praxis of memory, both individual and

corporate, are discerned through the contextual analysis of individual monuments in order to trace the social and spatial milieus of Olmec monumental sculpture.

The archeological contexts of particular monuments, including architectural settings and the associated depositional matrix, demonstrate the heterogeneity of monument display and corresponding ritual practices at different chronological and regional scales. Megalithic sculptures were integrated into Pre-classic monumental spaces and civic landscapes, which served to continually manifest the mytho-historical past in the present. As sites of memory within the urban topography, monuments functioned to naturalize the past and ground it within the spaces of civic and religious ceremony. Practices of re-carving, erasure, re-setting, and destruction may be read as points of disjunction or rupture in the collective memory of a site in response to shifting social and political needs.

Outside of primary centers, hinterland monuments integrated satellite communities into larger spheres of social interaction through the generation of a shared collective mnemonic which connected rural and urban populations. However, the past was also a mechanism for the constitution and contestation of socio-political authority. The appropriation, mutilation, and destruction of monuments could serve to challenge the status quo and could be used by hinterland populations to negotiate or reform their relationships to larger centers of power. Overall, this study aims to re-position the monuments of the Gulf lowland Olmec as social agents which were used and re-used by distinct

corporate entities to manipulate present populations through their collective memories of the past.

## Chapter One: Re-Locating Olmec Monuments

*"Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects..."*  
(Pierre Nora, 1989: 9)

Memory lodges itself in all sorts of objects. Often, the more personal the memory the more personal the object to which it attaches itself, such as a piece of jewelry or clothing. Correspondingly, social memory --the memory of the group or culture-- is often invested in objects of a more public nature. The monument is an entire category of object whose sole purpose is given over to the mnemonic at the social and public levels. However, the function of the monument moves from simply retaining and objectifying memory to its generation and transformation. Monuments are fluid and metamorphic, able to be reconfigured to take on new forms and new meanings to serve new audiences. Monuments may be remade through processes such as re-carving, re-setting, or re-contextualization. They may also accrue new layers of memory and significance over the span of their social lives. Monuments are created and destroyed, re-made and re-used to construct and reify an official version of the past in order to influence the present and the future. In this way they often play a key role in negotiations of hegemony and resistance, particularly at the highest social levels.

The layering of recollections, personal and corporate, allows the monument to serve both individual and group audiences. For example the Vietnam Memorial, located in the Mall of Washington, D.C., functions as an interactive site of remembrance for those who served in that war or for those who find the names of lost loved ones carved into the reflective granite wall. Viewers

make rubbings, touch the engraved surface, and leave roses, letters, pictures, and wooden crosses. Simultaneously, hordes of school children are inculcated into American society by incorporating the monument (and, concurrently, the events and period of time which it represents) into their own sense of identity as citizens of that nation. Each individual viewer shares the space and participates in the production and maintenance of the historical narrative embodied by the monument, simultaneously integrating the history of a nation with their personal experiences and emotions. In the same way, monuments worldwide are employed in the formation of social, cultural, and political identities.

Today, the stone monuments of the Olmec also serve to objectify our memories of the past. However, it is not the past of our own culture or nation. Rather, these monuments --and most particularly the colossal heads of international renown-- stand in for the culture of their origin, which developed along Mexico's southern Gulf Coast between 1500 and 300 B.C. Both the monuments and their makers have been inserted into our collective memory of world history and events, which historians everywhere (both professional and amateur) take as their duty to expand and archive. At the same time, these monuments evoke a panoply of associations generated by popular media and scholarly publications alike; that of the ancient (often "lost") culture of the exotic other. The first writings featuring Olmec monuments frequently emphasized the miraculous discovery of these amazing works, wrest from the steamy jungles of Mexico and brought again to light for the eyes of modern audiences (Stirling, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1943, 1947).



Contemporary societies have frequently remade the monuments of ancient eras and cultures into mnemonic links with the past, while simultaneously serving the political and social needs of the present (e.g. Alcock, 2002; Cyphers and Morales-Cano, 2006; Nelson, 2003; Phillips, 2003). Yet, how these works served their makers in relation to the political and social needs of their own polities may remain unclear. In the case of Olmec sculptural monuments we might ask whether the artworks in question also functioned to construct Pre-classic social identities in relation to past events? Did they serve as mnemonic devices capable not only of carrying memory, but of reifying, transforming, or erasing that memory at need? In short, did they indeed function as monuments for their creators? If so, how did their forms, iconography, and interactions with their audience contribute to the success with which they carried out these roles? How might an examination of their contexts inform us about the construction of social memories and identities by Pre-classic peoples? How would the destruction, mutilation, or re-carving of these monuments work to transform or erase memory at the collective level, and what political or social agendas might these actions serve?

### ***1.1 Monuments versus Monumentality***

While the term “monument” has long been employed in relation to the megalithic sculpture of the Olmec, its use has generally been devoid of critical oversight. Franz Blom and Oliver LaFarge first applied the term in 1926 to describe the stone sculptures discovered by the authors during the historic

Tulane expedition to southeastern Mexico (Blom and LaFarge, 1926). At this juncture the designation of “monument” appears to have been interchangeable with that of “idol.” In the following decades Matthew Stirling continued to use the descriptor and applied it to almost any stone that showed signs of being worked or modified by human agents, as long as it was not an identifiable tool such as a *mano* or *metate*. His publications reporting the findings of the joint Smithsonian-National Geographic Society excavations of the 1930s and 40s, entitled “Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico” and “Stone Monuments of the Rio Chiquito,” firmly cemented the terminology within the discourse of Pre-classic studies (1943, 1955). The label continues to be employed today in the tradition established by Stirling, without regard for distinctions between figurative works, architectural elements, and unidentifiable fragments. Michael Coe and Richard Diehl once pointed out that such terminology was frequently employed because it is “often difficult if not impossible to decide whether a fragment of ground basalt was once part of a large carving” (1980: 293).

This reasoning seems to imply that considerations of a sculpture or fragment’s size, or proportional *monumentality*, rather than functional considerations, were at the root of the term’s usage. By monumentality I mean to designate the formal characteristics which are often applied to create an appearance of grandeur, significance, and durability. These qualities may be conveyed by the medium, size, volume, and/ or style of an artwork and are often linked to the production of official or intentional monuments worldwide.

Based on formal considerations alone, the assumption that these works should be categorized as monuments is not wholly unjustified. The qualities of monumentality, which have frequently been ascribed to Olmec sculptures, work to convey the significance and even splendor of their subject. An emphasis on colossal size serves to equate perceived mass and weight with the ideological weight or importance of the subject. Elements of style may also serve to create an impression of grandeur which allows the work to appear larger than its actual dimensions. This is often the case with even the smaller, portable works of Pre-classic sculpture, whose swelling volumes, proportional harmonies, and “vital repose” have often led scholars to describe their style as “monumental” (Graham, 1989: 230).

Moreover, in order to function as a mnemonic repository, monuments must first and foremost give the impression of stability and continuity over large spans of time. For this reason, the majority of monuments are either sculptural or architectural, the preferred media of stone or metal projecting a message of endurance and immutability. It has been suggested that stone, as a medium for Pre-classic monuments, was significant both for the display of power communicated by the enormous amounts of labor mobilized for its transport and for the possible sacrality of the material itself, associated with the distant peaks of the volcanic Tuxtlas (Clewlow, 1974: 150; Gillespie, 1994: 231; Cyphers, 1999: 167-8; Stark, 1999: 301-307). However, it should be recognized that the permanence of stone would also have provided a material continuity throughout numerous successive generations. Through such continuity stone monuments

would have become what Pierre Nora refers to as “lieux de memoire” or sites of memory, in which memory “takes root in the concrete” (1989: 9). Nevertheless, because of their temporal endurance, monuments may have several lives as their use and significance changes between ages and social groups. Thus the appearance of intransigence is often at odds with the actual mutability and polysemy of many monuments throughout their own histories.

It is clear that both the stylistic qualities and media of Pre-classic sculptural works relate them to a global corpus of monuments. Yet, how do we determine whether these works were intended to function as monuments, rather than simply appearing monumental? This is a question which has not yet been given full consideration in Pre-classic scholarship and yet is essential in order to successfully position Olmec sculptural art within its social contexts.

### **Identifying Olmec Monuments**

In order to distinguish the monument from the monumental it is necessary to define just what is meant by the designation of monument. Monuments fall into two categories: the intentional and the unintentional (Nelson and Olin, 2003: 2; Reigl, 1982). Intentional monuments are public artworks created with the intent to commemorate a socially significant event, person, or narrative. Unintentional monuments, often taking the form of architectural elements, may accrue social memory and significance as a result of their ages, sizes, or histories. In this study I will consider sculptural works, including architectural elements, which may be regarded as monuments on the basis of their subject matter, size, and/ or archaeological contexts.

From the earliest centuries of its inception Pre-classic sculpture represents a developing conception of the commemorative and the historical in a number of its monumental works. The appearance of portraiture, as exemplified by the colossal heads, is accompanied by the representations of specific scenes or actions which most likely draw from the mytho-historical traditions of Pre-classic cultures. The three-dimensional narrative displays of the Early Pre-classic, such as the sculptural grouping from El Azuzul, give way to two-dimensional relief carvings during the Middle Pre-classic, at which time the subject matter of narrative also appears to become more overtly political (e.g. La Venta Stela 3). Like their Classic and Post-classic counterparts, many of the better-preserved monuments demonstrate the concern of Pre-classic societies with inscribed practices of commemorating past events and reifying them through artistic production.

Other sculptural works are difficult to associate with a monumental function through their subject matter alone. Mutilation or destruction often obscures the original subject of the work. Some are difficult to decipher, with little or no cultural information to allow us to interpret their iconography. It is also possible that Pre-classic cultures attached monumental associations to objects that would diverge significantly from our *etic* expectations of appropriate form and subject matter. In such cases archaeological context is of the utmost importance in identifying which works may have been intended to serve as part of the mnemonic record. Treatments including mutilation, re-carving, interment, and display within architectural settings may all serve as indicators that a work was

socially significant. Placement within ritual or socially charged spaces may also indicate where and when sculptural works were integrated into mnemonic environments where the past was manifested in the present through image and performance.

The praxis of memory making and re-making often combines inscribed practices of recording through the creation of mnemonic objects or written documents with incorporated practices, which focus on the corporeal and immaterial (Connerton, 1989). For this reason the settings of monuments are often also the sites of rituals intended to reinforce the messages and memories evoked by the monument itself. Material traces of ritual practices may indicate which monuments were set in sacred or politically significant spaces, which monuments were purposely removed from the task of memory-making through processes of destruction or interment, and which monuments were remade or reused in order to transform the shared recollection of a group.

While a handful of publications have suggested a commemorative function for Olmec monumental sculpture (Covarrubias, 1946: 90; Coe and Diehl, 1980: 293; Clark and Colman: 2008), there has yet to appear a thorough examination these works through the lens of social mnemonic practices. Therefore, it is the primary aim of this study to re-contextualize Olmec sculptural works with respect to their roles as monuments and within the Pre-classic praxis of memory-making. Through a detailed examination of the forms, iconography, and archaeological contexts of Olmec monuments this investigation will seek to understand the

artistic and ritual mechanisms through which Pre-classic societies sought to create and manipulate their own histories and identities.

### ***1.2 Parameters of the Study***

Since the very beginning of Olmec studies monumental sculpture has enjoyed a prominent, even preeminent role in our attempts to reconstruct the cultural milieu of Mesoamerica's Pre-classic Period (1500- 300 B.C.). Hundreds of works --recovered from the swamps, ravines, riverbanks, and hills of Mexico's Gulf lowlands-- have been employed in the definition and geographic delineation of Olmec as a cultural phenomenon. The central role played by the discovery, description, and interpretation of monolithic sculpture in the study of Pre-classic cultures is difficult to overstate. Nearly every general source produced on the Olmec includes an extensive discussion of these works and their iconography. Whole volumes have been given over to the known corpus of monumental sculpture thought to exhibit the stylistic attributes assigned to the Olmec canon (de la Fuente, 1977; de la Fuente and Gutierrez Solana, 2006; also see Coe 1965a for a comprehensive definition of Olmec style). Therefore, it might reasonably be asked why these works merit additional consideration? What can be gained by yet another study devoted to Olmec monumental sculpture?

### **Revisiting the Sculptural Corpus**

Previous writings on the Olmec monumental canon have dedicated the majority of their focus to formal descriptions of the works and complex analyses of their iconography. The latter are often derivative of analytical models and

interpretations developed for later Mesoamerican cultures such as the Maya. Unfortunately, lack of hieroglyphic and/ or ethno-historical sources makes these models less applicable to the Olmec works. A second mode of analysis, examining the formal properties of sculptural monuments, has been particularly useful for developing an understanding of regional styles and possible chronologies. While both types of analysis (formal and iconographic) have contributed widely to our knowledge of Olmec culture, scholars have often been hindered by scanty archaeological information, which has frequently prevented the detailed analyses of these works within their cultural contexts. Thanks to the efforts of several major excavation projects taking place in and around the sites of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and La Venta since the late 1980s, our knowledge of Olmec culture and lifeways has increased exponentially over the last two decades. Subsequently, this would appear an opportune moment to examine the contextual information available for Olmec stone monuments as a holistic body of information, in order to discuss their place within the social lives of Pre-classic communities.

Given the aims of this study, the corpus under consideration will be limited to megalithic sculptures and will be primarily comprised of figural works. However, taking into account the many well-known examples of architectural monuments occurring worldwide, architectural elements will not be excluded from consideration. Nor will certain of the sculptural fragments whose archaeological contexts are suggestive of ritual reuse after being separated from the main body of their original sculptural form. Non-monumental sculptural works, while present



in the larger corpus of Olmec artworks, will not be considered here, as their size and contexts suggest a function and audience more personal than public.

### **Geopolitical and Chronological Boundaries of the Study**

Further limiting my sample of monumental sculpture are several chronological and territorial boundaries that I have imposed on this investigation. While there exist a number of Pre-classic sculptural works from regions beyond the Gulf lowlands (such as Chalcatzingo in the state of Morelos and Teopantecuanitlan in Guerrero), evidence of stylistic and iconographic influences from the Basin of Mexico separate them from their Gulf lowland counterparts. Yet, the prevalence of shared themes and iconographic motifs between Gulf and non-Gulf monuments allows for certain comparisons to be made. I therefore reserve the right to draw upon these works at times where structural relations between the two groups may prove particularly fruitful in the analysis of shared motifs or symbols. However, I would also acknowledge at the outset that this method should be used with caution and the understanding that cultural and temporal disjunctions may exist between two works which appear to employ related symbol systems (Kubler, 1975; Panofsky, 1960: 84). Only when comparable context and/ or numerous links between motifs and themes exist between two works from different regions should comparisons be permitted, and then cautiously.

Within the Gulf lowlands (designated variously as Olman, the Heartland, and the Metropolitan area) there are two major Olmec regional centers: San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, situated in the Coatzacoalcos River Basin of southern

Veracruz, and La Venta, occupying a sandy island in the swamps of Tabasco's Grijalva Delta. The great majority of Olmec monumental sculpture comes from these two centers and their surrounding hinterlands. The combined corpus of these regional centers and their supporting settlement networks will comprise the sample set for this study.

Two other sites, Laguna de Los Cerros and Tres Zapotes were once included as primary centers. However, recent investigation has revealed that the former site was a second tier settlement under the jurisdiction of San Lorenzo, strategically placed to manage the procurement of basalt from the nearby Tuxtla Mountains (Borstein, 2001, 2008; Cyphers, 2005). The site possesses an impressive corpus of Olmec sculptural monuments. However, it appears that Classic period occupants of the site moved and reset the Pre-classic artworks. While an examination of these works would provide an interesting case study of the reuse, appropriation, and manipulation of Pre-classic monuments by a Classic culture, it is beyond the scope of my inquiry here to do so. Likewise, Tres Zapotes did not reach the status of primary center until after 400 B.C. and much of its monumental corpus dates to a period which Pool designates as Epi-Olmec (300 B.C.-A.D. 300) (Pool, 2000: 141-143; 2007b). While Tres Zapotes also offers an interesting opportunity for further investigation of shifts in monument use and context, to do so would go well beyond my aim here, which is to examine a sculptural canon which represents a holistic body of work conforming to regional and periodic styles.

The monumental sculpture of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, La Venta, and their respective hinterlands leaves us with a corpus of over two-hundred individual works to be considered, providing more than enough data to explore diachronic shifts within the regional settlement networks. This sample set allows for comparison between the two regional centers as well as regional networks of outlier sites organized under the jurisdiction of the former. While the monumental production of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and its hinterland is believed to have originated in the Early Pre-classic (1500-c.850 B.C.), the sculptural works of La Venta are typically assigned to the Middle Pre-classic (850-400 B.C.) Thus, diachronic developments of form and use may be observed, both intra and inter-regionally. Additionally, the appropriation of monument forms and iconographic themes between the two primary sites allows for considerations of how social memory might have been shared or translated among Olmec polities.

### ***1.3 Application of Methodologies***

The heterogeneous nature of the Olmec monumental corpus and its preservation necessitates a measure of flexibility in the application of any single or series of methodologies. Numerous monuments were removed from their original settings without the collection of archaeological data, thus eliminating any chance of understanding the material and social contexts of their display. However, many of these same monuments remain in excellent states of preservation, allowing for analyses of their form, subject matter, and symbolism. Other works have been mutilated or weathered past any recognition of their

original forms or subjects. Yet, these examples are occasionally discovered in association with rich archaeological contexts that clearly demonstrate the continued use of the monument after mutilation has effectively erased the original subject of the work. By restricting the methodological approach to such material the researcher significantly contracts the amount of data that may be garnered from these artworks and may distort perceptions of their forms or significance.

Pre-classic scholars already face a dearth of cultural information in the form of texts or ethno-historical accounts, such as are available for the Maya or Aztec. Therefore, it is my contention that no single methodology be applied that would further obscure or limit the data available to assist in the processes of analysis and interpretation of these artworks. While I have chosen to place a primary methodological focus on the examination, analysis, and comparison of archaeological context, I recognize that this context may be elucidated by iconographic or formal elements of the work. However, I would contend that the methodologies applied to the analysis of iconography must be tempered by the limited cultural information available, and therefore archaeological context and formal attributes may be privileged over interpretations of iconography.

George Kubler has warned against the dangers of disjunction between symbols and their meanings over time (1970: 143-144). While Kubler's message is one that all scholars of the Pre-classic should heed, the direct historical approach (sometimes described as "upstreaming") has been a popular method applied to the interpretation of Pre-classic iconography. This tendency reflects a more widely held conviction among Mesoamericanists that a high level of cultural

continuity existed between pre-Hispanic cultures from the Pre- to Post-classic periods (see Willey, 1973; Nicholson, 1976). This belief has frequently led to the misidentification of subjects in Olmec art, the most famous being the so-called “were-jaguar.”

While some sculptures demonstrate clear, convincing relationships to pan-Mesoamerican beliefs and symbols maintained by literate and non-literate societies until the time of the conquest, these are few and far between. Moreover, it is difficult to prove that the significance of symbols remained as constant as the symbols themselves. Therefore, it is my opinion that cross-cultural comparisons with later iconographic systems should be done with caution. In an attempt to minimize the probability of disjunction, my own use of this methodology will be limited to artworks demonstrating strong ties (either cultural or artistic) to Olmec examples.

Structuralist comparisons between the motifs appearing on Olmec monuments and those of contemporary artworks from neighboring regions may also be used to interpret the iconography of Pre-classic objects. Rather than relying on enduring continuities between cultures separated by hundreds and thousands of years and miles, this approach attempts to base the interpretation of iconography on the underlying structural principles which create a coherent representational system. However, disjunctions in signification may also occur between contemporaneous cultures and societies employing in similar styles and motifs. Therefore, a structuralist methodology must also be applied with caution

and only when continuities in symbol systems can be demonstrated through multiple examples.

Along with the analysis of context and the judicious application of iconographic methodologies, formal analysis will also provide an analytical mechanism through which to consider the interrelation between function, meaning, and form. In this way all pertinent elements of the monument are analyzed, avoiding the *pars pro toto* effect of iconographic studies that fail to consider the affective power of formal attributes or the social functions carried out by Olmec artworks.

#### **1.4 Relation to Previous Scholarship**

While the construction of history and, to a lesser extent, memory have provided rich fodder for scholarship in Mesoamerica over the last several decades (e.g. Boone, 2000; Houston, *et al.*, 2006; Newsome, 1996) significantly less has been written about these topics in relation to monuments. This is not to say that memory and history, specifically as they relate to time-keeping practices and calendrical cycles, have not been discussed in association with certain monuments or monument types. Stelae in particular have received a great deal of attention in relation to the commemoration of individuals, events, and ritualized periods of time. However, there has been little discussion of these and other artworks with respect to the growing literature on monuments as a larger category of artistic production and the theoretical frameworks which have been developed around this category. The distinctions made by these frameworks are

to treat the monumental object as an agent which directly participates in the processes of memory-making, as opposed to being a reflection or remnant of these processes. Thus, while a commemorative function may be assigned to objects such as stelae, the larger treatment of the work most often has focused on the sculpture as a “banner stone” (Stuart, 1996) or billboard on which historical information is presented. The interpretation of this information, in the form of text and iconography, is privileged above attempts to theorize the commemorative act itself as a cultural process.<sup>i</sup>

The treatment of monuments in Mesoamerican literature is, by and large, resultant of the general state of art historical theory which has, until recently, bypassed the monument as unworthy of much scholarly attention. This disciplinary disinterest is best understood as a historical product of the modernist era, which devalued the monument as a product of the corporate and hegemonic while simultaneously valorizing the product of the radical individual. Modernism resulted in a lack of scholarly interest in monuments as objects of study after the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the postmodern fascination with memory has resulted in renewed academic interest in monuments, one which has been reflected in a small but significant group of recent publications in the field of Pre-classic scholarship (Nelson and Olin, 2003: 2).

### **Memory Theory in Pre-classic Studies**

In their 2008 article, entitled “Time Reckoning and Memorials in Mesoamerica,” John E. Clark and Arlene Colman address the fields of time and memory as social practices subject to revision and redaction at the hands of

Mesoamerica's elite classes (2008: 93). Beginning with the period immediately preceding the Conquest and working backward in time, the authors examine both specific instances of mnemonic revision as well as general trends in memory-making as they developed from the Archaic to the Post-classic. These trends resulted in the evolution of commemorative practices from group burial and funerary rituals to mound construction, and ultimately to the commissioning of monuments and the inscription of calendrically-oriented texts.

Clark and Colman identify specific classes of permanent memorials which allow them to chronologically order examples and pinpoint the emergence and transformation of commemorative practices. These classes include text and calendrical inscriptions, burial practices, mounds, human representations, bodies, and bones (*ibid.*, 97). The authors particularly draw attention to the use of portraiture as a category of human representation which emerges within the Olmec sculptural corpus (*ibid.*, 96). The mutilation and destruction of elite representations by the Olmec are described as processes of "public un-remembering [which] opened the way for redacted histories and fresh memorials to successful contenders for power" (*ibid.*). Additionally, the authors assign the Pre-classic ceremonial spaces within which these monuments were erected the role of having "memorialized and helped create group identity and changing notions of self" (*ibid.*). It is these issues of identity formation which Clark and Colman believe to be at the heart of early practices of time-keeping and which developed in relation to political maneuverings and evolving technologies of remembrance throughout the history of Mesoamerica (*ibid.*, 98).



Clark and Colman's article represents one of the most developed applications of what might be termed "memory theory" in relation to textual and artistic practices within Mesoamerica. The authors draw out themes which preface much of what I will address in the following chapters. However, the brevity of the article leaves room for individual case studies which may illustrate how these technologies of time-keeping and memorializing were applied at given times in specific places. Thus, the article serves as a prompt, or introduction which may open up a wider field of investigation.

John Graham addresses the re-assignment of value to Pre-classic sculptural works by both pre-Hispanic and modern audiences in his publication "Leyendo el Pasado: la Arqueología Olmeca y el Curioso Caso de la Estela C de Tres Zapotes" (2008). By situating the monuments (and specifically Stela C) in relation to a "sociology of sculpture," in which artworks accrue biographies, the author emphasizes the qualities of mutability, transformation, and re-invention that are foundational characteristics of monuments worldwide. As Graham observes, "Throughout the world many sculptures are known often to have histories of re-setting, re-use, and alteration in contexts of changing 'meanings' to various communities of viewers" (*ibid.*, 43, trans. from Spanish). Graham presents a historiography of Stela C in relation to the state of scholarship at the time of its discovery in an attempt to explicate the historical contexts of Pre-classic artworks which have influenced, and at times misled, contemporary perceptions of cultural development in Mesoamerica. The shifts in the monument's perceived significance reveal the manner in which the agendas of

the audience serve to manipulate how and in what context (social, political, historical) the monument is viewed.

Audience participation and performance is also at the heart of Susan Gillespie's re-examination of the depositional history of Complex A at La Venta, (2008). Here the author takes a practice perspective in her biographical approach to the complex landscape. This landscape is subsequently described as the material result of asymmetrical ritual performances taking place over a period of centuries, during which political and social transformations left their mark upon the ceremonial complex.

Drawing from Barrett's approaches to Neolithic Stonehenge and its surrounding environs, Gillespie's study shares many of the same concerns with landscape, ritual, and mnemonic practices that have become central to the literature on Pre-historic monumental construction (see below) (*ibid.*, 134; Bradley, 1998; Bender, 1993; 1998; Bender, et al., 2007; Tilley, 1994; Tilley and Bennett 2004). Whether applied to the deposition of ritual offerings or to the erection of large stone monuments, the material practices of ancient peoples become "the media for and outcome of social action" (Gillespie, 2008: 110).

Like Clark and Colman, Gillespie emphasizes the interplay of remembering and forgetting in shaping the political history of the site and creating competing or redacted histories. In suggesting that there was a developing need for differing versions of the past, these authors demonstrate a trend towards de-homogenizing the socio-cultural and political landscapes of the Pre-classic. The greater tendency within Olmec studies has been to discuss the

political histories of sites in terms of long periods of stability disrupted only at particular moments which are clearly reflected in the archaeological record (such as the shift from San Lorenzo B to Nacaste phases at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán) (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 188). In their re-imagining of the Olmec political landscape as discontinuous, subject to the struggle between competing groups and individuals, Clark, Colman, and Gillespie open the door for greater dynamism in our models of Olmec civic life.

Likewise, Rosemary Joyce has positioned the practice of mortuary rituals at Pre-classic Tlatilco in relation to the construction of social identities by the members of distinct Houses at that site (2008). Moreover, she asserts that “Burials and the mortuary rituals that accompanied their creation were also intersections of the formation of social memory, media through which social identities gained greater or lesser degrees of shared currency and temporal persistence” (*ibid.*, 12). In her examination of the excavation data from over 200 burials at the site, Joyce notes that distinct groupings of individuals conform to the dimensions of contemporary houses, leading her to suggest that individuals were interred within the spaces designated for certain social groups whose mortuary practices distinguished them from other groups at the site (*ibid.*, 14). Moreover, the manipulation of remains after initial burial was necessitated by the practices of burying multiple individuals within a confined space, so that future interments revealed the remains of older burials, which were subsequently reincorporated as part of an ongoing ritual process that continued past the original interment (*ibid.*). By examining the variation in burial practices, as well as

the patterned repetition, Joyce draws attention to those elements which distinguished individual groups and their production of social memory through the medium of the burial.

Like Gillespie, Joyce emphasizes the dynamics of human praxis that constitute diachronically shifting social relations between kin and non-kin groups of individuals. The studies produced by Joyce, Gillespie, Clark, and Colman all demonstrate a growing concern with the role of social practice and memory as a driving force in the development of Pre-classic polities. Moreover, each of these scholars strives to forge a connection between the material culture of pre-Hispanic societies and larger theoretical frameworks developed in recent art historical and archaeological literature.

### **Art Historical and Archaeological Theories of Monuments**

The general literature surrounding monuments has developed along two distinct, yet interrelated lines of analysis. The first of these contextualizes the monument and its use in relation to the theoretical literature on memory written by authors such as Paul Connerton (1989), Maurice Halbwach (1980), Pierre Nora (1989), and Frances Yates (1966). This branch of monument theory has subsequently influenced certain postmodern art historical trends within the last few years. A second line of analysis discusses the monument in association with the construction of landscapes and the phenomenological experience of the audience with respect to the arrangement of monuments within that landscape. This branch of monument literature has been most thoroughly developed and applied by British archaeologists in their studies of the Neolithic age in Northern

Europe. A subset of these texts has also addressed both issues of memory and landscape; the two frequently interconnected by efforts to locate memory in place through the medium of the monument. The literature belonging to each of these analytical categories has developed rapidly over the last few decades to form a new theoretical framework around the monument as object, artwork, and agent.

*Postmodernism, Memory, and Agency*

Surprisingly, monuments have entered the discourse of postmodernism primarily through the renewed interest in memory (by sociologists) and its relation to history as an archival practice (by historians), rather than through the writings of art historians. Within these fields monuments are positioned as mnemonic loci within which memory becomes embedded through the commemorative ceremonies and ritual performances of social groups. In this way, they comprise what Paul Connerton refers to as inscribed practices of recollection, which result in a physical record being created. At the same time they are set within a network of embodied practices, which are the ephemeral products of bodies moving and interacting in space (1989).

Connerton's attempts to classify the praxis of memory-making is built upon the foundational work of Maurice Halbwachs, who first recognized that this praxis always occurs in relation to other people (1980). Individual memory is dependent on exterior reinforcement, and therefore memory itself is by nature a collective enterprise. Halbwachs's sociological writings on "*la memoire collective*" were to inaugurate a larger field of memory studies which diverged sharply from the classical tradition. The latter treated memory as a stable and unchanging mental

archive from which mnemonic information could be retrieved intact and at will (Alcock, 2002: 22-24). Halbwachs was the first to recognize the dynamic and mutable qualities of memory. He also stressed the importance of physical settings, objects or places, in which memories are localized (*ibid.*; Halbwachs, 1941).

Although Halbwachs's writings generated a new understanding of memory as a cognitive process, his insistence that memories are located in place and image (*loci* and *imagines*) resonates with the long-standing tradition of *ars memoriae*. Originating with the Greek orator Simonides as a series of mnemonic techniques which can aid in recollection, the master of the *ars memoriae* employed symbols, or images, and places within a constructed mental space to trigger memory. In his *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian describes this technique in detail, further asserting, "We require, therefore, places, real or imaginary, and images or symbols, which we must, of course, invent for ourselves...as Cicero says, we use 'places like wax tablets and symbols in lieu of letters' " (11.2.21).

Frances Yates examines the development of these techniques from the time of Simonides and Cicero to the 17<sup>th</sup> century in her book, *The Art of Memory*, (1966). Subsequently, Patrick Hutton's *History as an Art of Memory* expanded this topic to consider the reconfiguration and historicization of memory to meet modern needs (1993). In this way he positions history as a modern *ars memoriae*, a perspective which stands in stark contrast to the writings of Halbwachs. The latter situates these as oppositional practices with distinctive methods, milieus, and aims.

Pierre Nora also developed the theme of rupture between memory and history in his writings on the French representational practices used to construct a national memory. In his *Les Lieux de Mémoire* he is aided by a cadre of 45 French historians in retracing the places of commemoration in which French history, and concomitantly, French identity, is located (1984-92). However, the sense that these places begin to lose meaning in the postmodern era marks a general dissatisfaction with the abilities of memory and history to maintain their traditional roles. As Hutton observes, “The wisdom of the past in which communities once trusted is immaterial to a culture in which today’s improvisations pass quickly into tomorrow’s obsolescence. In a world of future shock places of memory disappear, and history surrenders its mediating role between past and future” (1993: 9). When memory and history fail one is left with an archaeology of memory which can excavate and reconstruct the original *milieux de memoire*, the “real environments of memory” (Nora, 1989: 7).

While Nora’s writings evince a crisis of memory symptomatic of the postmodern age, his writings resonate with the project of archaeologists and art historians throughout the world. We are left with the images and places in which memory was located, the *lieux de memoire*, in the form of the built environment consisting of monuments, architectural elements, and the depositional matrix of objects. From these *lieux de memoire* we then attempt to reconstruct the real environments of memory which have long since disappeared. In this way our project resembles that of Nora and our goals and obstacles mirror each other. Of

history as a discipline Nora remarks, “We no longer celebrate the nation. Instead we study its celebrations” (quoted in Hutton, 1993: 9).

The interest in the politics of commemoration developed by historians since the 1980s (*ibid.*, 2) has found resonance in recent art historical scholarship. Contemporary controversy and public discourse over sensitive subjects for artistic commemoration, such as the Vietnam War and the Holocaust, have also fed into postmodern interest in mnemonics and representation. The result has been a revival in monument studies that range in topic from the general development of the Western monumental tradition (Choay, 2001) to specific examinations of individual monuments in modern and contemporary political settings (al-Khalil, 1991; Hung, 1991; Michalski, 1998). Moreover, the use of theoretical frameworks developed in relation to practices of commemoration, collective memory, and history have been employed in the investigation of public works projects, such as the program of public sculpture commissioned by the city of New York (Bogart, 1989) and urban development of the city as spectacle (Boyer, 1996).

In their volume *Monuments and Memory: Made and Unmade*, Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin provide one of the most comprehensive introductions to the monument as object (2003). Through a series of case studies the contributors to this publication construct a history of monuments and their social roles. The authors address two categories of monuments: the intentional and the unintentional. Their definitions for these classifications follow those set out by Alois Riegl in his notable essay “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character



and Its Origin” (1982). The intentional monument’s “significance is determined by its makers” whereas the unintentional monument is “a product of later events” (Nelson and Olin, 2003: 2). The essays that make up their volume address both types of monuments and are framed in relation to three topics of inquiry --Time, Travel, and Destruction/ Resurrection-- following the three ritual stages first proposed by Arnold van Gennep (*ibid.*, 5).

Particular to this volume is a discussion of the monument as active agent within a network of social relationships. The agency discussed by Nelson and Olin is of a secondary type, functioning only in relation to primary human agents which interact with the monument in a variety of roles; as artists, patrons, viewers, iconoclasts, curators, etc. Within these networks monuments are able to influence the “socio-relational matrix” in which they exist (Gell, 1998: 7). This type of agency, as described by Alfred Gell (1998), views the art object as “a means of acting, a way of transforming the world” (Nelson and Olin, 2003: 7). Art objects, including monuments, are made to act on behalf of their makers and patrons. However, the extended lives of objects and their insertion within interconnected webs of social context allow objects to act upon human agents, as well as to act on their behalf. By positioning the monument in relation to function, rather than aesthetic qualities, this volume opens up discussions of the monument to a wide variety of objects. Contributors to the volume address vastly diverse topics, from Chinese drum towers to the moving landscape, monumental markers of nuclear waste in the U.S., and even the practice of art history itself as a memorial. The approach developed by this and other art historical explorations

of the monument are distinguished by their focus on the social milieu of the work's usage, as well as the ability of the monument to act within that milieu.

*Monuments and Landscape Archaeology*

Archaeology has also taken up the topic of monuments in recent years, particularly in conjunction with the emergence of landscape archeology as a subset of the discipline. Primarily developed by British archeologists specializing in the European Neolithic, landscape archaeology has been more broadly applied by scholars working in heterogeneous cultural areas and periods over the last decade (e.g. Alcock, 2002; Ashmore and Knapp, 1999; Thomas and David, 2008).<sup>ii</sup> The treatment of monuments within this area of study has been diverse, but most particularly has focused on monuments as elements of the constructed landscape. Within this context, monuments serve to influence the phenomenological experience of a landscape by human agents (Tilley, 1994; Tilley and Bennett, 2004). As a construct of human society, imbued with cultural significance and symbolism, the landscape is moved beyond topography to become a palimpsest of human activities and associations (Bender, 1998: 6).

Worthy of note amongst the various publications that fall into the category of landscape archaeology are the works of two investigators of the European Neolithic, Barbara Bender and Richard Bradley. In her diachronic examination of Stonehenge, Bender positions the famed monument in relation to identity formation and contestation (1998). As she asserts, "landscapes are not passive, not 'out there' because people create their sense of identity --whether self, or group, or nation state-- through engaging and re-engaging, appropriating and

contesting the sedimented pasts that make up the landscape” (*ibid.*, 25). By viewing the monument as an integrated part of a larger landscape, Bender emphasizes the power of monuments as places which accrue meaning as they move through history. These places are employed by populations, both present and pre-historic, as sites of memory that serve to locate identity, even as they allow for its negotiation by competing socio-political factions. In this way Bender moves the discussion of pre-historic monuments from the embodied landscape to the “political landscape of unequal power relations” (*ibid.*, 38).

Bradley also addressed issues of identity and landscape formation in his account of monument development from the Meso- to Neolithic (1996). However, Bradley chooses to focus on the emergence of prehistoric monuments in conjunction with agricultural practices. The erection of circular stone monuments, he contends, allowed emergent agricultural societies to form new conceptions of time and space, which facilitated the acceptance of intensive diversified farming as a way of life. Bradley’s assertion that hunter-gatherer cosmologies may have directly conflicted with the practice of agriculture results in his repositioning the erection of megalithic monuments as a product of larger socio-cultural transitions. In his argument, monuments become a technology through which prehistoric populations enacted transformation.

The field of Neolithic archaeology has, I believe, much to offer the study of Olmec society in general, and sculptural monuments in particular. Interpretations of the monuments and culture have often been reliant on upstreaming techniques which directly graft the beliefs, practices, and symbolism of later pre-Hispanic

populations onto the material culture of the Pre-classic. However, the works of Bender, Bradley, and others demonstrate an alternative methodology which draws heavily upon diverse archaeological data to reconstruct the currents and ruptures of prehistoric lifeways. Can Olmec monuments, like those of the Neolithic, be considered “a technology of memory which was inserted into existing social relationships” (Thomas, 1993: 32)? Many of the same issues of memory, landscape, and identity formation, which are examined by pre-historians and landscape archaeologists will drive my own examination of Olmec monuments in the chapters which follow. This is not to suggest that theoretical frameworks developed for the Neolithic will be directly applied to the sculptural corpus of a pre-Hispanic culture wholesale. Rather, these frameworks inform the manner in which I have chosen to approach the monuments and their contexts, both archaeological and social.

### **Conclusions**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the topics, questions, and parameters which will guide the remainder of this study. Additionally, I have endeavored to set this dissertation within its methodological and theoretical contexts, as well as relate it to the current body of literature on monument function in both the art historical and archeological fields of study. The remainder of this investigation will be presented in six chapters. Chapter Two will provide additional information on the Olmec, their origins, societies, geographical settings, and the sites under consideration here. Chapter Three reviews the methodological trends applied to the analysis of Olmec monuments in an attempt

to frame my own study both critically and historically. The investigative chapters of this dissertation, consisting of Chapters Four through Six, will present an overview of the contextual data associated with Gulf lowland monuments in order to reconstruct patterns of use in relation to diachronic practices linked to the production of social memory.

Chapter Four is given over to the monuments of San Lorenzo and the spaces with which they were associated, while Chapter Five is dedicated to the monumental sculptures of La Venta and their settings within the architectural landscapes of that site. Chapter Six examines those monuments located in the hinterland regions surrounding these two sites and their role in the production of geopolitical networks. Taken together, these four chapters are intended to investigate the social and artistic mechanisms through which Olmec monuments served to embody and manipulate the memory of distinct corporate entities. The seventh and final chapter will conclude the dissertation with a discussion of the social agency of stone monuments and their ability to influence the structural networks of Olmec societies.

Although the remains of the Olmec monumental tradition are fragmentary and often without contextual frameworks to aid in our interpretations, what is left to contemporary scholars suggests a heterogeneous development of monument use and display from the Early to Middle Pre-classic. During this time monuments were made, displayed, destroyed, re-carved, and interred as the social memory of corporate groups was generated, contested, and transformed. Primary sites could demonstrate socio-cultural affiliations through the replication of monument

subjects and forms from one site to the next. Likewise, hinterland populations could be incorporated into the social structure of primary sites through the insertion of monuments into the regional landscape. Subsequent efforts to resist or reinforce the socio-political ties linking sites could be achieved through the performance of commemorative rituals held around the monument or its actual physical manipulation.

In examining the archeological record for evidence for both embodied and inscribed practices associated with corporate acts of commemoration, a more complete picture of the Olmec socio-political landscape begins to emerge. This picture is one of dynamic shifts in power through time and space. It reflects recent movements in Olmec studies towards a conception of Pre-classic populations that has been de-homogenized and subsequently re-imagined as a vital collection of societies whose complex interactions resulted in the development of the first Mesoamerican civilizations.

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<sup>i</sup> A notable exception to this approach is that applied by Elizabeth Newsome (1996), and several other Mayanists, who have addressed the ontological status of monuments as beings in Maya metaphysics (see also Houston and Stuart; 1998; Houston, Stuart, and Taube, 2006).

<sup>ii</sup> Although landscape archaeology is mentioned here as though it were a singular trend within the discipline, the term actually refers to a series of heterogeneous methodologies --from settlement patterns to phenomenological reconstructions of past social practices-- all of which take the relationship between human communities and the natural environment as their point of departure. A recent publication, edited by Julian Thomas and Bruno David, has attempted to more fully define the field within a global framework, as well as provide a general reference volume on the subject (2008).

## Chapter Two: Introducing the Olmec

*“As we chugged between mangrove-covered banks, close on our left hand rose the great sand hills which lie behind the seacoast...Our hearts beat a little faster when we first distinguished to the eastward the hazy volcanic peaks of the Tuxtla mountains, at the base of which lay our goal.” (Matthew Stirling, 1939: 192)*

The first decades of Olmec archaeology were primarily dedicated to survey excavations that focused their energies on the discovery and removal of stone monuments (Stirling, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1943, 1947; Stirling and Stirling, 1942). This approach, though lacking in scientific rigor, was necessary to drum up financial support for further exploration of the Gulf lowland region from organizations such as the National Geographic Society, who expected a substantial return on their investment in the form of spectacular discoveries. At first it was supposed by the excavators (Matthew Stirling, Clarence W. Weiant, and Philip Drucker) that the large stone sculptures they encountered were evidence for the expansion of Classic Maya civilization well outside the geographic boundaries of their known territory. However, it soon became clear that what they had uncovered was a civilization entirely distinct from the Maya, which would shortly come to be identified as “Olmec.”

Many of the earliest interpretations of Olmec artworks, sites, and related material data were based upon the assumption that they were either contemporary with or later than the Maya, who were at that time assigned the role of Mesoamerican cultural primogenitor. It was not until the first radiocarbon dates were provided in 1959 that the antiquity of the Olmec was established. During this period very little was known about the culture beyond the

characteristics marking their art style. Indeed, little attention was paid to the most basic facets of Olmec society such as subsistence strategies, settlement patterns, population densities, or the nature of inter-site relations.

The Yale University Río Chiquito Project, led by Michael Coe from 1966 to 1968, was one of the first and most comprehensive attempts to address a broader range of socio-cultural issues relating to Olmec origins and daily life. Since the publication of its double volume excavation report in 1980, scholars have seen a significant increase in the general knowledge of Olmec societies. As Barbara Stark has observed, recent research has provided “a critical transition from Gulf lowland archaeology as an investigation of cultural sequences to Gulf lowland archaeology as an analysis of dynamic societies” (Stark and Arnold, 1997: vii). Since the late 1980s, excavation projects have taken on many facets of Olmec society and daily life that were previously overlooked in favor of monument excavation and the collection of charcoal samples for carbon dating. These projects have resulted in new theories of Olmec life which challenged, and in some cases eradicated, outdated suppositions. In the absence of historical documents, these studies provide the raw data from which conclusions regarding Olmec society are drawn and which assist us in understanding monument use and meaning. It is, therefore, necessary to outline the cultural information on which any analysis of the social and cultural contexts of sculptural monuments must be founded.

This chapter will introduce the Olmec as culture which developed over the course of the Early and Middle Pre-classic (1500-300 B.C.) in parts of what is



today southern Veracruz and western Tabasco (otherwise known as the Gulf lowlands). Four subsections will divide the chapter according to topic. The first section will explore the term “Olmec,” its multiple applications and the reasoning behind my own usage. The second subsection summarizes the literature on Olmec societies pertaining to their origins, subsistence strategies, settlement patterns, political structures, and inter-site relations. The third segment describes the geography of the Gulf “heartland,” hereafter referred to as Olman, from the Papaloapan River of south-central Veracruz to the Barra de Tupilco in Tabasco. Finally, a fourth section will serve to introduce the sites specifically under discussion in subsequent chapters. In sum, the information given here will provide a foundation for further analysis of Olmec sculpture and its relation to the social and political structures of urban and hinterland site populations.

## **2.1 *The Culture***

The term Olmec is frequently characterized as problematic by scholars of the Pre-classic. This is because its application varies from author to author and often does more to indicate the opinions of the user than to clearly designate a cultural group. The manner in which an individual uses the term is dependent upon how he or she defines the Olmec as a unified culture. Were the Olmec unified by geography or by their participation in a set of shared cultural practices which included adherence to a particular art style? Were they unified politically or did they function as distinct polities? To better understand the nuances of this

polysemic terminology it is necessary to provide a limited historiography of the word and its development within the context of Pre-classic scholarship.

### **Defining the Olmec: A Historiography**

When José Melgar y Serrano first viewed the colossal stone head at Hueyapan, discovered by a laborer on the hacienda there, he believed he was seeing clear evidence of contact between the indigenous populations of Mexico and Africa (1871). No pre-Hispanic culture then known could be associated with the monument, which was unique in form and size (figure 2.1). However, when Alfredo Chavero published an image of the head in the first volume of his *México a Través de los Siglos* (1888) he drew attention to the stylistic similarities between its features and those of a stone votive ax originating from the state of Veracruz (*ibid.*, 63). In doing so, he was the first to associate monumental and portable sculptures on the basis of stylistic comparison. This set an analytical precedent for a series of publications over the succeeding decades which came to identify and characterize a style hitherto unknown in the canon of Mesoamerica art.

In 1900 Marshal Saville published a brief account describing an outstanding example of Mesoamerican lapidary work --a jadeite adze from the Kunz collection in the American Museum of Natural History, currently known as the "Kunz Axe" (figure 2.2). In his discussion of the work, its supposed origins, and salient features, Saville related the Kunz specimen to the stone votive ax described by Chavero, as well as a green quartz adze located in the British Museum. This publication, along with a much later article by Saville (1928),

broadened the corpus of known objects exhibiting a shared set of stylistic qualities. During these first years no specific culture, period, or geographic point of origin was associated with this style or its related objects.

In 1925 Frans Blom and Oliver LaFarge led the Tulane University expedition through parts of southern Veracruz, Tabasco, and Chiapas, encountering a number of stone sculptures that would later be connected to the style of the Hueyapan head and Kunz Axe. However, the expedition misidentified many of these sculptures as products of far-ranging Classic Maya populations or their contemporaries (Blom and LaFarge, 1926: 83). Not until Hermann Beyer published his review of the expedition report were the monuments re-designated from Maya to a Post-classic culture known as the Olmec (1927).

In his review, Beyer compared a celt he had once owned to the headdress of a sculpture encountered by the Tulane expedition at the summit of the San Martín Pajapan volcano (San Martín Pajapan Monument 1). He was the first to identify the shared stylistic features of these two works as pertaining to “la civilización olmeca ó totonaca” (*ibid.*, 307), firmly associating the style with the cultures of southern Veracruz. His identification was reiterated by Saville (1928) and George C. Vaillant (1932), each of whom ascribed the style to the Olmeca-Xicallanca, a culture contemporaneous with the Aztec inhabiting parts of Tlaxcala, “southern Veracruz, Chiapas, southern Puebla, and eastern Oaxaca” (Vaillant, 1932: 519). Thus, the group of stylistic attributes that would come to be described as Olmec was located in time and space before any archaeological exploration had taken place. However, it should be noted that most of the objects

associated with this style were un-provenienced and varied widely in their overall form, material, and subject matter.

This was the state of scholarship at the advent of the first archaeological surveys in southern Veracruz by the director of the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), Matthew Stirling. 1932 marked the first BAE expedition to southern Veracruz, during which Stirling excavated the colossal head at Hueyapan. Upon his return to the U.S., Stirling sought to secure additional funding which would allow him to return to the area. This he was able to obtain with the support of the National Geographic Society and in 1938 he returned to the site of Tres Zapotes.

Stirling had chosen the Gulf site in hopes of finding a predecessor to the Maya culture in the region which had yielded the famed Tuxtla Statuette (Stirling, 1939: 183-185) (figure 2.3). This small greenstone sculpture of an anthropomorphic figure wearing a duckbill mask was located at that time in the collection of the Smithsonian, the same institution which housed the BAE. The delicate line of hieroglyphs inscribed on the breast of the figure provided one of the earliest Long Count dates then known (162 A.D.).<sup>1</sup> As this date preceded the majority of dated inscriptions from the Maya area, the belief that the predecessors to that culture originated from the same area as the statuette was not unjustified.

What Stirling encountered was an area rich in archeological remains, but which had received relatively little attention from archaeologists interested in Mexico's Pre-Columbian past. In 1905 Eduard Seler had briefly visited the area

to view the colossal head at Hueyapan and had reported the existence of several undocumented stone monuments (Seler-Sachs, 1922). Twenty years later Albert Weyerstall, an amateur archaeologist, arrived in Tlacotalpan to “plant bananas” and subsequently published an account of the archaeological remains encountered during his explorations of the surrounding region (1932:27). This publication reported a number of monuments from the site of Hueyapan and nearby Tres Zapotes, including the colossal head already known from Melgar’s articles, as well as monuments C, F, G, and Stela B.<sup>ii</sup> Together with the Tulane expedition report of 1926, these publications drew Stirling’s attention to Tres Zapotes, and later to the sandy island of La Venta. The result would be the first archaeological exploration of sites directly connected to the production of “Olmec” style artworks.

### **Culture vs. Style**

With the advent of the 1938 expedition to Tres Zapotes a series of exploratory surveys were launched which would take Stirling and his associates from the heart of the Tuxtla mountains down the Gulf lowlands and into the swamps of Tabasco and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. During his first season, Stirling encountered the monument which would confirm his original suspicions that the region in fact had played host to predecessors of the Classic Maya. This evidence came in the form of a stela fragment bearing part of what Stirling took to be a Long Count date on its posterior face (figure 2.4). By applying the calculations developed by Herbert Spinden to correlate the Maya Long Count with the Gregorian calendar, Stirling and his wife Marion arrived at a date of

November 4<sup>th</sup>, 291 B.C. (Stirling, 1939: 213).<sup>iii</sup> While Stirling was unable to connect the makers of the monument to any known pre-Hispanic culture, he began to suspect that the earliest inhabitants of the site represented a culture that was at least as old as the Maya, and yet distinct from that people.

However, it was not until the 1940 season, which saw Stirling and his associates traveling from Tres Zapotes to La Venta in Tabasco, that he was able to give a name to the culture responsible for these sites. It was at La Venta that Stirling found a number of monuments which he associated with the style already known as “Olmec.” In his 1941 article, written for National Geographic Magazine, Stirling observed:

From time to time, over a wide area in southern Mexico, there have been discovered carvings in jade and stone exhibiting a curious and recognizable art style...The mysterious producers of this class of art have been called the ‘Olmecs,’ a people whose origin is as yet very little known. The site of La Venta...appears to present in almost pure form a number of major examples of this art, and it may well be that the builders of this city represented one of the principle centers of the Olmec civilization (333-4).

Stirling also noted the stylistic similarities between the La Venta monuments, Tres Zapotes Stela C, and the colossal head from Hueyapan, linking the Olmec style to all three sites, and subsequently defining its geographical point of origin. Even today these sites are often positioned as the northern and southern boundaries of the Olmec territory.

Although Stirling was convinced of the early origins of the Olmec, others remained skeptical of its presumed chronology, which was then only suggested by the incomplete Long Count date on Stela C as reconstructed by the Stirlings.

Prominent Mayanists, such as Sylvanus Morley and Sir Eric Thompson, argued vehemently against Stirling's interpretation of the Stela C inscription. Thompson in particular suggested that the column of glyphs should not be read according to the conventions established for Maya Long Count dates (1941). In 1942 a round table discussion was held in Tuxtla Gutiérrez to examine the issue of cultural primacy between the Olmec and the Classic Maya (Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, 1942). Participants came down on both sides of the debate with little immediate resolution of the chronological relationship between the two cultures. However, the conference and its subsequent publication included a number of important contributions that would influence the perceived significance of the Olmec for decades to come.

Foremost among these were the papers given by Alfonso Caso and Miguel Covarrubias, which were the first attempts at a comprehensive description of the Olmec art style. Caso and Daniel F. Rubín de la Borbolla also contributed models for establishing an analytical typology for Olmec style artworks. Covarrubias presented a theory of stylistic evolution which connected the were-jaguar motif identified by Saville (1928) and Vaillant (1932) to later Mexican rain gods, suggesting a level of cultural continuity which originated with the Olmec and continued well into the Post-classic (1942: 46-49). Likewise, Caso presented the Olmec as the *cultura madre* which gave rise to the Classic period civilizations of Mesoamerica (1942: 46). At this time culture and art style were perceived synonymously and the monumental artworks discovered by Stirling were presumed by many to be evidence for the Gulf-lowland origins of both.

It was also during the Tuxtla Gutiérrez meetings that scholars first began to distinguish between the historic Olmeca-Xicallanca of the Post-classic and the inhabitants of the sites excavated by Stirling. An attempt to alter the terminology from “Olmec” to “La Venta culture” was made at that time; however the nomenclature was already so entrenched that the change was never implemented. Over the years several alternative labels for the art style have been suggested, including “X Complex” by David Grove (1989) and “Middle Formative Ceremonial Complex” by F. Kent Reilly (1990: n7), but none has ever been widely employed and it is generally accepted that the term Olmec is now unlikely to be replaced.

The decades following the 1942 round table saw the identification of another prominent Olmec site in the Gulf lowlands --San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán-- by Stirling, along with the continued excavation of La Venta by Philip Drucker, Robert Heizer, and Robert Squier. The report summarizing the findings of the latter project included the first un-calibrated radio-carbon dates for any Olmec site and provided definitive proof that the site, and the style, were in fact Pre-classic in origin (Drucker, Heizer, Squier: 1959: 264-267). While excavations at the sites of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and La Venta continued throughout the 1960s and 70s, archaeological activities at Pre-classic period sites had expanded from the Gulf lowlands to the Basin of Mexico, Morelos, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and the Pacific Coast of Guatemala (Flannery, 1968, 1969; Gay, 1971, 1972; Griffin, 1981; Grove, 1968, 1970, 1974, 1976, 1987; Lowe, 1962, 1967, 1975; Tolstoy, 1971). With new survey and excavation efforts a wider view of the



Pre-classic world was coming into focus. “Olmec” style art objects were recovered from site excavations that took place well outside of the Gulf-Coast. Some scholars believed these objects to be proof of the dominant position of the Olmec within the Pre-classic cultural hierarchy (Bernal, 1969; Coe, 1968b; Piña Chán; 1982). However, others began to view the socio-political landscape of Mesoamerica at this time with an eye to more complex networks of cultural interchange than the top-down model suggested by proponents of the “*cultura madre*.”

A symposium held at the School of American Research in 1983 resulted in the publication of a volume which would provide the point of departure for rethinking older models of social interaction and hierarchy in Pre-classic Mesoamerica. *Regional Perspectives on the Olmec*, edited by Robert Sharer and David C. Grove (1989), reflected back on the preceding decades of Pre-classic research in and out of the Gulf lowlands, while suggesting areas for further study and new theoretical models with which to frame the existing data (e.g. Diehl, Graham, Sharer). It is in this volume that the first true rupture between art style and culture occurred. Grove’s article, “Olmec: What’s in a Name?” pointed to the employment of the Olmec style and artistic motifs by distinct Pre-classic groups which could be distinguished by regional and local variation. Rather than envisioning a radial spread of these motifs and stylistic elements from the Gulf lowlands outward, Grove proposed an alternative model more reliant on processes of interchange which moved in as well as out of Olman.

Additionally, with the boom in information available for Pre-classic sites outside of the Gulf lowlands, scholars such as Joyce Marcus, Arthur Demarest, and Grove began to redress the assumptions of primacy first made by constituents of the *cultura madre* model. The result was a repositioning of the Gulf lowland populations (unified by their distinctive use of free-standing monumental stone sculptures) as one of several emergent civilizations which participated in networks of exchange along which both goods and cultural practices traveled from one area of Mesoamerica to another.

With these new models of socio-political interaction in place it became clear that the term Olmec was serving too many masters. As a style or subset of artistic motifs it could be employed to describe works from widely ranging parts of Mesoamerica. Where these motifs may have originated is often unclear and regional variation in style and use distinguishes even the Gulf lowlands sites from one another. As a cultural designation its use is even more problematic. Questions of cultural affiliation make its application to societies outside of the Gulf lowlands questionable. Did the use of shared artistic elements indicate a concurrently shared subset of cultural activities or beliefs between far-flung populations?

History is full of examples of art styles and iconographic elements which spread between cultures with a great deal of variation between the societies employing them. The Gothic architectural style, which was disseminated throughout Medieval Europe and developed regional variants, might provide one model for this sort of shared artistic tradition. The spread of Buddhist

iconography along the Silk Road from India to China, and later through parts of Southeastern Asia from whence it traveled to Japan, suggests another such example. In both cases the art style in question is associated with particular religious practices (although I'm sure secular examples could also be provided) yet the cultures through which it spread were distinct and often developed the aesthetic tradition heterogeneously. Therefore, it seems difficult to distinguish the nature of cultural interaction solely from the dissemination of artistic elements which may have occurred multilaterally and over an extended chronological period.

Various alternatives to the wholesale application of the term Olmec to both style and culture have appeared in recent publications. Particularly widespread is the reassignment of the terminology to specify only the archaeological culture of the Pre-classic Gulf lowlands. However, few of these move the terminology to one side of the style/ culture divide without occasionally crossing back over. For example, John Clark and Mary Pye suggested the term be applied to "a group of people, or peoples, who shared a suite of cultural practices" (2000: 217-218). However, what these cultural practices might consist of, beyond a participation in a set of representational conventions, remains unclear. Olmec-style artifacts appear at sites which display widely varying architectural patterns, burial practices, artifact assemblages, and even patterns of artifact usage. Olmec motifs appear in distinct contexts and media from site to site, even among the societies of the Gulf lowlands. Clark and Pye point out that the site contexts for Olmec-style artifacts are so geographically distant that there is little chance that

all societies producing such artifacts could have been united either linguistically or ethnically. However, Christopher Pool observed that, "In the end, Clark and Pye's use of Olmec is not so much non-ethnic as it is one that employs a constructivist view in which people create, define, and express their ethnic affiliation through practice" (2007: 13).

In this model, the presence of Olmec artifacts is assumed to reflect the presence of cultural practices based in common religious and socio-political structures that were shared by societies across Mesoamerica during the Pre-classic. This allows for diverse groups, like the Mokaya in Chiapas, to be considered under the cultural umbrella of Olmec through an assumption that practice and representational conventions go hand in hand. However, the archaeological record is at best ambiguous in providing evidence for widespread practices which could be used to construct ethnic affiliation.

Given the many difficulties facing any attempt at hard and fast definitions for the term Olmec which would limit it either to a culture or style, I have chosen to take a conservative position in my own usage. I recognize that the archeological record, along with the monumental corpus for the Gulf lowlands, suggests cultural ties between the sites in this region, including those of a shared mytho-historical tradition as expressed through the repetition of monument forms and subjects between these sites. However, I do not believe that our current knowledge supports a particular theory as to the exact nature of the relations and interactions between the primary sites of this region. Therefore, I will simply frame them as a group of interacting societies which show evidence of shared

cultural practices, which I will refer to as “Olmec.” Recognizing that there is little chance of redefining the style which has carried the same label for so long, I will hereafter designate that particular set of representational conventions with the lowercase “olmec.” The qualities and motifs which characterize this olmec style will be described in greater detail in the following chapter. For now I turn to a brief review of what is known about Olmec societies, their lifeways, environs, and the sites they built and inhabited.

## **2.2 The People**

Archaeologists have made significant headway in understanding Olmec social organization and development in recent years. Projects at major sites such as San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán (Cyphers, ed., 1997), El Manatí (Ortíz Ceballos and Rodríguez Martínez, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2000), Laguna de los Cerros (Borstein, 2001<sup>iv</sup>; Gillespie, 1994, 2000), Las Limas (Gómez Rueda, 1996), La Venta (González Lauck, 1988, 1989, 1990), and Tres Zapotes (Pool, 2000, 2003) have led to a renaissance of Gulf lowland archaeology over the last two decades. In 1989 Robert Sharer observed that more was known about Pre-classic societies outside of Olman than about those sites within its bounds (1989: 4). Thankfully, this is no longer the case. The data obtained by more recent archaeological projects has overturned many previous suppositions about Pre-classic life across Mesoamerica, and the role of the Gulf lowlands within that life. Below I summarize the main points of Olmec culture and society which have been illuminated by this latest round of data collection and analysis in Olman.

## Origins

The first efforts to locate a point of origin for the Olmec took place while culture and style were considered synonymous. As artifacts employing Olmec motifs and modes of representation were widespread throughout many areas of Mesoamerica, from Guerrero to El Salvador, the geographic point of origin was open to debate. Some scholars, Stirling and Caso foremost among them, saw the monumental sculptures of the Gulf lowlands as the most developed expression of the style, leading them to believe that the region was the most probable source of cultural origins. Others looked elsewhere, suggesting Guerrero (Covarrubias, 1957: 76; Gay, 1973; Griffin, 1981: 222), Oaxaca (Wicke, 1971:161-162), Morelos (Piña Chán, 1955: 106) and the Pacific coasts of Chiapas and Guatemala (Girard, 1968; Graham, 1982:9) as possible alternatives (Diehl, 1989:20; Pool, 2007: 18). The possibility that Olmec culture was imported into the Gulf lowlands was further supported by Michael Coe's observation that Olmec culture seemed to appear fully formed at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán during the San Lorenzo phase (1150-900 B.C.) without precedents in the preceding phases (Coe, 1989). If this was indeed the case then it seemed that Olmec art and its attendant cultural elements should have developed elsewhere and then been taken up by the Gulf populations sometime around 1200 B.C., leading to the development of the San Lorenzo phase and the apogee of Olmec culture at that site.

However, in 1988 William Rust and Robert Sharer published the results of their settlement survey in the Tonalá Basin. There they found evidence of a

cultural sequence in the support region surrounding La Venta that dated to the Barí phase (as early as 1750 B.C.) (Rust and Sharer, 1988). The archaeological record suggested a steady progression of cultural development in that area from the Archaic to Middle Pre-classic, establishing a local origin for the Olmec culture at La Venta (*ibid.*, 103). Likewise, work at El Manatí by Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos and María del Carmen Rodríguez Martínez has revealed ritual activities at that site reaching back to 1600 B.C., demonstrating a continuity of depositional practices over a span of 600 years (2000: 75). These findings compliment Ann Cyphers's re-examination of the cultural sequences at San Lorenzo, which shows evidence of gradual processes of development which led from earlier cultural phases to the apogeeal expression of Olmec culture at that site (Cyphers, 1994: 44). Evidence of similar patterns of local development has been documented for the Tuxtlas, as demonstrated by the transition between pre-Olmec and Olmec ceramic sequences (Arnold, 2003). However, as lowland communities furthered their progression towards greater socio-political complexity and sophisticated modes of cultural expression, they were no doubt influenced and aided by contact with emerging regional powers throughout Mesoamerica. These powers would have included Paso de la Amada in Chiapas and San José Mogote in Oaxaca, along with neighboring sites within the Gulf.

While it is now generally accepted that the societies of Olman were the products of local socio-cultural developments taking place over centuries, a process which was probably furthered by inter- and intra-regional contacts, the origin of Olmec style and motifs is still a topic of debate. David Grove has pointed

to the biases influencing the designation of artistic elements as products of the Gulf lowland sites, remarking that the mere presence of motifs or representational modes in Olman has typically led to the assumption that this is where they originated (1989: 9). Even two decades after this observation was made the Gulf Olmec are generally given precedent as the de facto fount of all Olmec aesthetic expression. In part, this is a commentary on the difficulties inherent in separating out the various elements that have been lumped together under the “Olmec” heading and tracing them back to what are probably multiple points of origin. Nevertheless, as greater strides are made in refining chronologies and distinguishing localized traditions across Mesoamerica during the Pre-classic, it may become possible to attempt this project with a greater chance of success.

### **Settlement**

By the Early Pre-classic regional centers emerged across the Mesoamerican landscape at the pinnacle of local, multi-tiered site hierarchies. Settlements in the Gulf lowlands are generally organized along waterways, which facilitated communication and the transport of goods in and out of the area. Both San Lorenzo and La Venta are situated in the midst of riverine networks which connected them to secondary and tertiary sites. These lower-tiered settlements would likely have provided support in the form of foodstuffs and labor for the populations of these primary centers. Recent excavation projects in the Coatzacoalcos and Tonalá River Basins, as well as the Grijalva Delta region, have led to increased estimates of settlement density in the Gulf lowlands, while



also informing our perceptions of how local populations adapted to and made use of the natural environment.

As part of the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project, Stacey Symonds and Roberto Lunagómez conducted a full-coverage survey of the San Lorenzo region, which identified 271 sites over 403 square kilometers on the basis of surface material and/ or architectural remains. These sites exhibited occupational histories which began in the Early Pre-classic and extended through the Early Post-classic periods (Symond and Lunagómez, 1997: 150-153). Their positioning, along waterways and raised above the floodplain as a “series of contiguous elevated mounds,” was undoubtedly intended to take full advantage of the riverine environment (*ibid.*, 154). Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez developed six distinct types of permanent occupations and two types of temporary occupations, which take into account both settlement size and the density of artifacts (2002: 42). As the influence of San Lorenzo waned during the Middle Pre-classic, settlement patterns shifted to reflect the changes in the socio-political landscape. These changes resulted in a de-centralization of the system, with an increase in secondary sites demonstrating greater complexity and size in the outer hinterlands. Symonds has suggested that the rearrangement of settlement patterns during this time is the result of shifts in the trade and travel routes to the north and east (2000: 68). Overall, settlement systems at San Lorenzo indicate a high degree of site development, social hierarchy, and regional control.

In the late 1908s William Rust and Robert Sharer performed the first settlement pattern studies around the La Venta hinterland (1988). Their investigation identified regional networks of raised “islas” situated along an ancient river channel (designated as the Río Bari), much like those found in the Coatzacoalcos Basin. However, the site hierarchy developed by Rust and Sharer was limited to three typological categories distinguished by access to elite goods and architectural platforms. Early Pre-classic, Barí period (1750-1150 B.C.) settlement was sporadic, eventually giving way to denser site populations and sites differentiated by the construction or lack of earthen mounds during the apogee of La Venta’s influence (*ibid.*, 104). Rebecca Gonzalez Lauck (1989) also examined the “support area” directly around the site of La Venta as part of the Proyecto Arqueológico La Venta, which took place between 1985 and 1988. In her report, she remarks on the importance of hinterland settlements in redefining the site of La Venta as a node in complex networks of communication and transport supported by an extensive fluvial system, rather than an isolated island in the midst of a swamp (1988: 137-141).

More recent settlement surveys in the Grijalva Delta along the Pajonal system, undertaken by Christopher von Nagy, show a similar pattern of development as settlements grew in size and complexity from the Early to Middle Pre-classic. This growth resulted in a three-tiered settlement hierarchy which is reflected primarily through site-size, earthen architecture, and a ceramic assemblage that includes finer wares and large serving vessels (1997). Overall, von Nagy notes a similar pattern of dense riverine settlement to that described by

Rust and Sharer for the *islas* of the now-extinct Río Barí (von Nagy, 1997: 269). He particularly emphasizes the dynamism of the deltaic landscape resulting from shifts in geomorphology, which influenced the movement of populations (*ibid.*)

The data on settlement from the Gulf lowlands has had important implications for theories of subsistence and socio-political organization. With increased estimates of population density, questions of how these societies were sustained and structured are more relevant than ever (Stark and Arnold, 1997: 12). Fortunately, several recent studies have shed light on these aspects of Olmec daily life.

### **Subsistence**

The societies of Olman employed a mixed subsistence strategy that relied on the agricultural cultivation of crops --such as maize, beans, squash, and corzo palm nuts-- supplemented with faunal and aquatic resources obtained from hunting and fishing. Faunal remains at lowland sites have included bones from white-tailed deer, domesticated dogs, white-lipped peccary, fish, and crocodiles, as well as clam shells, shark teeth, and the remains of turtles (Diehl, 1989: 25-26; 2000: 20-21). Sites closer to the coast appear to have relied more heavily on aquatic resources, while sites positioned farther inland drew more heavily upon faunal resources from hunting (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 386). It is likely that diet was differentiated between social groups. For example, Rust and Sharer observed that high protein foods, such as deer and dog, were consumed at Barí sites which also possessed earthen platforms and a concentration of elite goods (Rust and Sharer, 1988: 104). As Barbara Stark and Philip J. Arnold have

remarked, reliance on diverse resources would have been necessary to sustain the population densities now estimated for the Gulf lowlands (1997: 12).

Questions still remain about the exact role played by maize agriculture in Olmec subsistence strategies, specifically regarding the importance of the crop within the overall diet of Pre-classic populations (Arnold, 2000; Clark, Pye, and Gosser, 2007:31-38). Maize agriculture seems to have appeared in the Basin of Mexico as early as 3100 B.C. However, the slow development of more productive varieties (such as Nal-Tel) meant that it was not until around 1000 B.C. that maize became an efficient enough cultigen to constitute a true staple of the Mesoamerican diet, even in single-crop environments (Clark, Pye, Gosser, 2007: 32-34).

González Lauck states that there is evidence of maize agriculture at La Venta as early as 1750 B.C. She believes that it was possible to cultivate up to three crops in a single year in that region (Gonzalez Lauck, 1994: 96; Rust and Leyden 1994). Phytolithic analyses recently conducted at San Lorenzo also confirm the presence of maize agriculture there (Zurita-Noguera, 1997). However, the conditions under which samples were collected makes it difficult to tell at what levels it was cultivated. Collection of phytoliths from residential areas at San Lorenzo has also provided the first evidence confirming the presence of manioc cultivation, as originally proposed by Coe and Diehl in 1980 (1980: 388-389; Diehl, 2000: 20). Yet, like the evidence for maize agriculture, little data is available to indicate the overall importance of this crop within lowland subsistence strategies (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 39).

Richard Diehl has called for larger sample sets , which are needed to determine diachronic and hierarchical differentiation at and between sites in order to give a more holistic picture of what Olmec diet was like. He also points to the lack of skeletal remains as a major barrier to isotopic analysis that would lead to a better understanding of the importance of maize in the Pre-classic diet of Olmec populations. “Until they are [recovered], or until other detailed studies of ancient diets are undertaken, we will not be able to assess the relative importance of maize at any particular time or place in Olmec history” (2000: 21).

### **Socio-Political Structure**

Evidence for large-scale construction projects, specialized craft production, importation of elite goods, and artistic representations of probable rulers all suggested to early scholars of the Pre-classic that Gulf lowland societies were far from egalitarian. However, the nature of their hierarchical organization remained, and largely continues to remain, a mystery. Two early models, the empire and the theocracy (proposed by Caso [1965] and Heizer [1960], respectively) are now essentially defunct due to lack of supporting evidence. Proponents of the two remaining models, the chiefdom and the state, have argued vehemently on both sides, with little resulting resolution.

The chiefdom model, first proposed by William Sanders and Barbara Price (1968), is defined as a hierarchically ranked society with the highest office being that of chief. Other members of a chiefdom are ranked based on their relation to the person occupying that office. Chiefdoms can be divided into two categories, simple and complex. Simple chiefdoms are comprised of a few hundred

individuals and only one administrative level above that of the local community exists. Complex chiefdoms may encompass a population of tens of thousands and possess two levels of political administration. Proponents of the chiefdom model have suggested that Olmec societies fell into the latter category of complex chiefdoms (e.g. Flannery and Marcus, 2000). Alternatively, supporters of the state model, as first proposed by Michael Coe (1968b), suggest that the archaeological evidence is more indicative of the formalized class stratification and governmental specialization that separates the state from the chiefdom.

Unfortunately, heated debate has obscured the issue, which is largely conceptual-- stemming from disparities in how one chooses to define either chiefdom or state (e.g. Flannery, 1998). As Christopher Pool has emphasized, the resultant difficulties in distilling the Olmec socio-political organization to a pre-determined typology moves beyond problems of definition to one of epistemology (2007: 23). The criticism of social typologies (such as band, chiefdom, and state) by cultural anthropologists is already half a century old (*ibid.*; Easton, 1959; Smith, 2003: 19, 25). Stemming from cultural evolutionary models, these typologies were intended to rank societies in order of complexity as a measurement of overall development. Egalitarian models, such as the band or tribe, were thought to be less complex, and therefore less advanced in the evolutionary scale of social development, than states. Chiefdoms sat at the median line between the extremes of band and state. However, the model of social evolution that these societal typologies are based in is outmoded and has

been severely critiqued by both anthropologists and archaeologists in the last several decades.

Pool points out that in this light the debate between chiefdom and state as applied to the Olmec seems anachronistic at best, and at worst obscures the distinctions between individual Olmec societies within the Gulf lowlands. Recognizing that the levels of socio-political organization and complexity most likely differed between and within sites diachronically, Pool urges a reconsideration of our use of such terms. Moreover, he points to the wide disparities that such homogenizing labels can obscure, observing that “the term ‘chiefdom’ encompasses societies whose populations vary from a few hundred to a hundred thousand individuals, and whose territorial areas range from tens to tens of thousands of square kilometers” (Pool, 2007: 24).

Richard Diehl (1989) and John Clark (2007) have pointed out that, even if one defines a set of characteristics to identify a chiefdom over state that can be accepted by all scholars, there is not enough data to confirm the resulting hypothesis one way or the other. For example, Clark’s evaluation of San Lorenzo as a potential state points out that previous definitions that have sought to deny the site state-status are based upon a lack of data, rather than the evidence which would disprove that status (*ibid.*, 11-13). Given the mounting problems attached to ascribing typological labels to Olmec societies, the current trend seems to be to leave such pigeonholing practices by the wayside and to instead focus on the particularities of each site. In this light, new goals for research

should include obtaining a clearer picture of heterogeneous organizational structures as they were applied within regional polities.

To this end, Cyphers has suggested two categories of data that can provide evidence for Olmec governmental structures. The first is comprised of the combined products and contexts of organized labor in the form of monumental artworks and architectural forms. Cyphers believes that study and interpretation of these works in their social contexts provides insight into the ideologies of Olmec government. The second line of evidence derives from regional data on economic, social, and political structures in the form of studies on settlement patterns, the physical environment, commerce, exchange, and the mobilization of workers (Cyphers, ed., 1997: 227). As additional information in these areas becomes available, our understanding of the political structures at the individual site and regional levels develops beyond the usefulness or need for outmoded labeling practices which conceal more than they reveal.

### **Intra- and Inter-Regional Relations**

The first models of interregional interaction between the Gulf lowlands and neighboring regions were based primarily on conquest and socio-political domination by the Gulf lowland populations, who were thought to exercise a commanding influence which radiated to all other areas of Mesoamerica. These theories saw the dissemination of the Olmec system of representation from the Gulf lowlands as proof that the Olmec dominated their neighbors, both ideologically and politically. However, with new data suggesting the development of regional styles and patterns of usage, these shared elements seem more likely



to have been passed on through a less totalitarian method than previously imagined (Demarest, 1989). It is now generally accepted that interactions between major Pre-classic sites were multi-directional. Arthur Demarest drew attention to the benefits of complex, lattice-like models of interaction, supported by archaeological evidence from throughout Mesoamerica (*ibid.*). His contribution to the 1989 *Regional Perspectives* volume, entitled “The Olmec and the Rise of Civilization in Eastern Mesoamerica,” became part of a larger project to re-characterize the nature of Pre-classic interaction as more evenly balanced between multiple centers of regional influence. Prior to this, little consideration was given to inter-site relationships outside of the Gulf lowlands, a result of the preeminent status then given to Gulf Olmec culture. To an extent, this situation persists, in that little scholarship on networks of site interaction beyond the bounds of the Gulf lowlands has been published. Jeffery Blomster has observed that studies of interactive networks are generally impeded by an imperfect understanding of the data which might be used to evaluate them. “Before the nature of Early Formative interregional interaction can be assessed, it is vital that the myriad differences and similarities within the related material remains from regional populations participating in this interaction be recognized” (Blomster, 2002:192).

To this end, Blomster, along with co-authors Hector Neff and Michael Glascock, have undertaken an analysis of 725 ceramic samples from across Mesoamerica using instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA) in an attempt to trace their provenience and patterns of exchange (2005). While the results of

this analysis have been hotly debated, preliminary indications are that many of the sampled ceramics bearing olmec motifs originated in the San Lorenzo area of the Gulf Coast and were traded to regional chiefdoms throughout Mesoamerica, where they were copied and modified locally (*ibid.*, 1071; Flannery, *et al.*, 2005). Particularly contested is their assertion that the Gulf Olmec did not import foreign-made ceramics with variants of the style, but were the sole exporters (*ibid.*). As a result, Blomster, Neff, and Glascock position the San Lorenzo Olmec as central to the synthesizing of “a distinct style and associated iconography [and] disseminating it across Mesoamerica” (*ibid.*) More sampling will undoubtedly be required to support this claim. However, the authors of this study make clear that this is not a reassertion of the Mother Culture model, nor is it meant to suggest people in other regions did not exchange pottery and other goods (Neff, *et al.*, 2006: 72-73). Rather, they suggest that specialized exports, such as vessels with olmec-style motifs, were exported as one of the specialized commodities particular to San Lorenzo, just as other regions would have specialized in other exports particular to their geographic and cultural resources (*ibid.*).

At present, insufficient evidence exists to pinpoint the specific mechanisms behind inter-site relationships. Most likely these relations varied a great deal and should be treated on a site-by-site basis. Moreover, shifts in inter-site exchanges may have occurred over extended periods of time, necessitating an approach which considers these relationships diachronically. For example, Clark, along with Michael Blake and Mary Pye, have proposed a sequence of site

influence between the Gulf lowland Olmec and the Mokaya of the Soconusco region on the Pacific Coast of Chiapas which took place between 1200-1100 B.C. (Clark, 1990: 49-50; Clark and Blake, 1989; Clark and Pye, 2004: 234-236). The patterns of influence between these two areas appear to have shifted over time in relation to political and social circumstances which resulted in the *olmecization* of the people in the Mazatán region, paralleling the simultaneous apogeeal rise of San Lorenzo. Clark and Pye have suggested that trade relations functioned as the primary mechanism for interregional communication and interaction in this area, which then evolved into a more dominant interaction over time (2000: 234).

As a catalyst for establishing interregional communication and transmitting both goods and information, trade was undoubtedly one of the driving forces behind interactive networks throughout Mesoamerica during the Pre-classic. The positioning of primary sites at key geographical points along natural paths of movement through the landscape suggests that the largest centers developed as nodes along trade routes (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 41; Grove, 1968; 1996: 106; Niederberger, 2000: 186-187). Both San Lorenzo and La Venta, were ideally positioned between eastern and western trade routes where they could have managed travel between the two areas, as well as taken advantage of imported goods from both regions.

Materials from sites throughout Mesoamerica are indicative of extensive trade networks used to import elite items into the Gulf lowlands. These items included iron ore from Chiapas and Oaxaca, used to produce tons of small,

perforated cubes, as well as polished oval mirrors (Agrinier, 1984: 75-80; Coe and Diehl, 1980; Cyphers, 1994: 61; Di Castro Stringher: 1997; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959; Grove, 1997: 84; Pires-Ferreira, 1975: 48-63; 1976a: 323-325). Green stone from Guatemala (and possibly the Mexican highlands) was also imported in mass quantities to be deposited in ritual offering caches between 1500 and 400 B.C. (Garber, *et al.*, 1993; Grove, 1997: 84-85; Harlow, 1993; Ortíz and Rodríguez, 2000). Additionally, obsidian was brought into the region from the Guatemalan highlands and central Mexico, although blade production seems to have occurred locally (Cobean, *et al.*, 1971, 1991; Cyphers, 1996: 65-66; Grove, 1997: 84; Hester *et al.*, 1971; Pastrana, 1989; Pires-Ferreira, 1975, 1976b). In turn, the Gulf lowlands exported marine and turtle shell, as well as crocodile mandibles, and, perhaps most importantly, the concept of monumental art, which only began to appear outside of the Gulf lowlands during the Middle Pre-classic. It is also probable that their exports included more perishable materials, such as cacao, rubber, feathers, bitumen, salt, and animal skins, although these do not appear in the archaeological record (Grove, 1997: 85).

As early as 1968 Kent Flannery proposed a model of site interaction which was based on trade relationships, noting that the archaeological materials indicated long-distance exchanges between the site of San José Mogote and the Gulf lowlands. At this time David Grove also observed that Pre-classic settlements in Morelos were most likely organized along the terrestrial trade routes, leading him to propose long-distance exchange as a primary factor in the

development of an Olmec presence in Mexico's central highlands (1968).

Although the Gulf sites were still positioned as a dominating influence, Flannery and Grove were among the first to acknowledge the significant role trade must have played in interregional relations.<sup>v</sup> As Ignacio Bernal commented, "their [the Olmec's] existence could only have been made possible by direct commercial contacts" (Bernal, 1969: 86).

In terms of intra-regional interactions, settlement of hinterland sites around San Lorenzo suggests that they were also positioned along trade and communication routes (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 39-41). This probably allowed for faster and surer access to the primary site, as well as a way to transport foodstuffs and other goods produced in the support areas to the regional center. What the exact nature of the relationships between sites within regional settlement hierarchies was remains speculative at this point. However, it seems reasonable to assume some level of dominant regional influence on the part of primary centers which was enacted at lower-level sites. The level of coercion involved in maintaining socio-political hierarchies between sites is, again, speculative and something that may be resolved only by further excavation in the hinterland region. Chapter Six of this dissertation will attempt to address how the placement of monumental sculpture at sites within the hinterland may have allowed primary centers to integrate those populations into the urban socio-cultural sphere. The treatment of these monuments and their contexts may reveal nuances of intra-regional relations between primary and

hinterland sites which would further serve to illuminate the nature of these interactions.

### **2.3 *The Place***

The geography of Olman is characterized by diverse ecosystems and rich natural resources. Stretching from the mouth of the Alvarado Estuary in southern Veracruz to the Barra de Tupilco in northwestern Tabasco, the region is generally described in terms of mangrove swamps, intense heat and rainfall during the summer months, and low riverine plains. However, ecological variations in the landscape belie the tendency towards homogenization often found in earlier descriptions of the region (Arnold, 1994: 216; Grove, 1994: 227-228). General knowledge of the geography of the Olmec heartland is paramount to our understanding of how Olmec societies developed in terms of their economies, settlements, and cosmologies. As Philip J. Arnold III has observed, “the ancient history of southern Veracruz is inextricably linked to the geographic and climactic variation that characterized the area” (Arnold, 1994: 216). Therefore, a brief description of the topography, climate, and ecosystems that make up the larger region of Olman will be given in order to integrate this information into the larger discussion of Olmec societies which is the subject of this chapter.

#### **Upland vs. Lowland**

A general distinction can be made between the lowland areas of the Isthmian Saline Basin, which underlies areas of southern Veracruz and northwestern Tabasco, and the upland areas comprised of the Tuxtla Mountains

and their foothills, which run to the west and south in a series of rolling hills and sloping plains. The major sites of Olman are spaced nearly equidistant within this landscape. David Grove has suggested that this spacing was intended to take advantage of the diverse resources offered by the differing ecological zones (1994: 227-228). For example, La Venta would be optimally positioned to take advantage of coastal estuary products, while San Lorenzo 's system of river levees and oxbow lakes would yield a different set of resources to fill an entirely different niche in the exchange networks. Likewise, the sites of Laguna de los Cerros and Tres Zapotes were more properly positioned to give access to basalt and other upland products only available to residents of the volcanic chain. Grove has termed this system "zonal complementarity" after a similar model proposed for the Andes (*ibid.*, 228).

The uplands extend over an area of approximately 3100 square kilometers (*ibid.*, 227) (figure 2.5). This region is most obviously demarcated by the bulk of the Tuxtlas, which are a low chain of volcanic cones (1600-1000 meters), some of which continue to be active in the present.<sup>vi</sup> The volcanic soils are fertile and seasonal rainfall from June and November results in over 4.5 meters of annual precipitation at the highest peaks. The verdancy of this region is reflected in its flora; it is home to the northernmost tropical rainforest in North America (Arnold, 1994: 216). In the midst of the lush peaks and valleys is Lake Catemaco, which divides the chain into its eastern and western halves (figure 2.6). The lakeshores and islands were undoubtedly populated, albeit sparsely, during the Pre-classic

and today continue to be a draw for local and international tourists, and even Hollywood filmmakers.<sup>vii</sup>

The lowlands are predominantly defined by their hydrology. Located within the Isthmian Saline Basin, this area is characterized by an abundance of water, including four major river systems and their tributaries: the Coatzacoalcos, the Tonalá, the Grijalva, and the Usumacinta (Márquez et al., 1964: 8). As Juan de Medina observed in 1905, “Probably nowhere else in Mesoamerica did rivers so dominate culture as here” (in Bernal, 1969:17). Various microenvironments still exist within this region, which ranges from floodplains to low-lying hills, and therefore caution must be taken not to assume too high a level of geographic conformity for the area. The two areas most significant to this study, the Coatzacoalcos Deltaic Plain and the Tonalá-Blasillo Estuary, are distinct regions. Yet numerous similarities between these areas may offer insight into the sociological and ecological mechanisms that drove the development of civilization in this region of Mesoamerica.

### **The Coatzacoalcos Basin**

The geology of the Coatzacoalcos floodplain is marked by the role of salt domes in tectonic movement, which resulted in rise of the San Lorenzo plateau as the highest point in that part of the basin. The domes currently play a significant role in the local and national economies, as their presence coincides with large deposits of sulfur. The region is also home to Mexico’s booming petroleum industry; the substance occurs in substantial quantities in the formations which overlie the salt domes (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 16). Additionally,



the geology of the basin incorporates deposits of important resources utilized by the Olmec, including beds of specular red hematite, fine kaolin clays, and bitumen (locally referred to as *chapopote*) (*ibid.*, 16-17).

The climate is remarkable for its humidity and heavy precipitation during the rainy season, between late May and November. Cold *nortes* continue to bring frequent rainfall between the months of December and March. During April and May the weather is dry, but these are also the hottest months of the year, with southern winds bringing searing heat from the western side of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The heavy rainfall results in the flooding of the basin during the summer and fall months, leaving rich sedimentary deposits on river levees which allow for multiple crops within a year (*ibid.*, 19). Temperatures range widely from 7.5° C to 42° C, with an annual median of 24° C.

Geographically, the Coatzacoalcos river basin is primarily defined through its numerous waterways, which meander and change channels to create a dynamic riverine environment. Within the deltaic plain, the Coatzacoalcos is joined by the Coachapa, Uxpanapa, Jalepec, Nanchital, Corte, and Chiquito rivers, of which the Uxpanapa and the Jaltepec are the only major tributaries (Ortíz and Cyphers, 1997: 34). Numerous oxbow lakes are produced by changes in the river courses. Sedimentation and water salinity are influenced by the daily influx of tidal waters from the coast, where the mouth of the Coatzacoalcos reaches the sea. Flooding serves as a mechanism of renewal for the ecosystems of these lands, as well as building up river levees which are prized for their agricultural fertility (*ibid.*, 36).

The Ríos Coatzacoalcos, Chiquito, and Tatagapa, the latter a tributary of the main Coatzacoalcos branch, bound San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán on three sides. San Lorenzo stands as an island of high ground on a floodplain formed by the drainage of the Coatzacoalcos and its tributaries (figure 2.7). Two salt domes on either side of the San Lorenzo plateau, El Mixe and El Manatí, rise above the plain and are perhaps the most recognizable topographic features in the immediate vicinity. These two domes were undoubtedly important, perhaps even sacred, features within the Olmec landscape. At the base of El Manatí sits a spring used as a ritual site by the Olmec of that region between 1600 and 1000 B.C. (Ortíz Ceballos and Rodríguez Martínez, 1999, 2000). To the northeast rise the peaks of the Tuxtlas, including Cerro Cintepec, the source of basalt used by the Olmec for their monumental sculptures. Coe and Diehl report that on clear days the cones of San Martín Tuxtla, Pelón, San Martín Pajapan, and Santa Marta could be seen from the top of the plateau (*ibid.*, 16). However, industrial development of regional centers, such as Minantitlán, over the last several decades has thickened the atmosphere and rarely, if ever, is it possible to view these peaks today.

### **The Tonalá Basin**

The Tonalá Basin is also part of the Isthmian Saline Basin and salt domes in this region also contribute to a large petroleum industry, which has been a bane to the site of La Venta and its preservation. The “island” of La Venta itself sits atop one of these salt domes. Very little local stone can be found in this

region and what is there is limited to limestone and sandstone, both of which were used in construction at the site.

The climate of this region can be characterized as humid tropics. The basin sees heavy precipitation almost year-round, with an average annual rainfall of 2 meters. The average temperature here is 26° C (González Lauck, 1996:73). Like the Coatzacoalcos Basin, this is an area prone to seasonal flooding, rich in both aquatic and agricultural resources.

The site of La Venta is situated in a highly diverse area that forms part of the country's largest alluvial plain (González Lauck, 1996:73) (figure 2.8). Four distinct ecosystems are found within a day's walk of the center: mangrove swamps, marshes, tropical forest, and the ocean waters of the Gulf (*ibid.*). Like the Coatzacoalcos Basin, various hydraulic features characterize the region. The site of La Venta is flanked on its north and south sides by the Chicozapote and Blasillo rivers, two tributaries of the Tonalá. The Tonalá itself is located 4 kilometers to the west of the "island." Like the Coatzacoalcos deltaic plain to the northwest, the area is inundated with both permanent and seasonal bodies of water which change as the currents meander and shift course. Oscar H. Jiménez Salas has observed that the site of La Venta may only be considered an island in the sense that it is elevated above an area of floodplains, estuaries, and rivers which circulate in the surrounding environment and which change in depth and course depending on climactic conditions (1990: 12). Deposition of water and sedimentary material originating in mountainous areas occurred along hydraulic channels formed by the Coatzacoalcos, Mezcalapa-Grijalva, and Usumacinta

rivers, resulting in the development of a complex fluvial network of rivers, lagoons, and deltas. These hydraulic features produce an environment of constant fluctuations (*ibid.*, 7).

## **2.4 The Sites**

Within these dynamic environments the settlements of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and La Venta rose to become the premier centers of the lowlands. The hydraulic systems which surrounded the two sites allowed for the control of transportation, trade, and communication in and out of the region. Rich aquatic environments were essential to the support of large residential populations with diverse subsistence practices. While studies of regional settlement patterns have been able to identify hinterland sites and establish the existence of site hierarchies, more excavation is needed to discuss them in any great detail. However, long histories of excavation at the primary centers have provided more substantial information about the sites of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and La Venta than the secondary or tertiary centers which surrounded them. Investigations within the last two decades have contributed new information on site size, residential populations, chronologies, and architectural features. While once believed to have been empty ceremonial centers populated by small bands of theocratic elites, it is now known that these centers were true urban settlements, inhabited by populations numbering in the thousands, with a diversified economy, specialized craft production, a supporting hinterland, and a distinct political hierarchy.<sup>viii</sup> These settlements also possessed public works, elite and non-elite

architectural forms, and transportation routes related to long distance trade relations. Their rise to power would drive change in Mesoamerica for more than a millennium and mark a period of immense socio-cultural development within the Gulf lowlands.

### **San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán**

San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán is located in the modern municipality of Texistepec in the lower Coatzacoalcos drainage. Originally the name San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán was used because it was not possible to define the limits of settlement across three sites: San Lorenzo, Tenochtitlán (previously dubbed Río Chiquito), and Loma del Zapote (incorporating the area designated as Potrero Nuevo).

However, in recent years the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archeological Project (SLTAP) has been able to define the limits of these sites, which form an almost continuous line of settlement along a band of elevated land (Cyphers, ed., 1997: 11). Tenochtitlán sits 2.5 kilometers north-northeast of the plateau, while Loma del Zapote, located in the ejido of Potrero Nuevo, is positioned 2.7 kilometers to the east-southeast (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 23). The largest site, San Lorenzo, is located on the 50 meters high plateau, which is partially natural and partially the result of a massive building project that expanded the area and formed lateral terraces which sloped down from the apex. These terraces have now eroded into ridges that jut, finger-like, towards the floodplain below. The terraces once supported a large residential population, although erosion of the ridges has destroyed much of the material remnants of this occupation (Cyphers, 1997b: 104). It is now estimated that the site supported a population of over 5,000

inhabitants; 5 times the amount originally estimated by Coe and Diehl (1980).<sup>ix</sup> Work by the SLTAP has also suggested that site habitation actually spanned 500 ha, more than twice the size of any other city in Mesoamerica at that time (Cyphers, *et al.*, 2006: 19).

San Lorenzo can be considered the first Olmec regional center. Although it had a fairly continuous occupation during the Pre-classic, from approximately 1500 to 700 B.C., the Olmec florescence at the site can be confined to a span of a few centuries, from 1200-850 B.C. San Lorenzo's architecture, as well as overall site layout, is not comparable to La Venta in terms of either symmetry or general organization. Rather than the arrangements of large mounds around a central plaza, the architectural groupings of San Lorenzo seem to have been more diverse in their styles and construction techniques than was previously envisioned (Cyphers, 1997b). Low platforms appear to have supported perishable structures constructed of wattle and daub, adobe, and packed earth. Local clays, sands, wood, and sedimentary rocks (bentonite, limestone, and sandstone) were the primary construction materials used, although a few architectural elements made of volcanic basalt were employed in elite structures such as the Red Palace (Cyphers, 1997b: 98-101). Major construction projects, such as the expansion and terracing of the plateau and the building of causeways stretching hundreds of meters, demonstrate "careful planning, engineering prowess, and the use of significant amounts of labor in their construction and maintenance" (*ibid.*, 108).

When compared with that of La Venta, the ceramic sequence for San Lorenzo is more complete and better understood. Based on their stratigraphic excavations, Coe and Diehl presented the first chronology for the site, dividing the Pre-classic sequence into seven phases from Ojochi (1500-1350 B.C.) to Remplas (300-100 B.C.). The broadness of the four-phase Pre-classic chronology later published by Ann Cyphers, Stacey Symonds, and Roberto Lunagómez (2002) with regard to the regional settlement study was influenced by the nature of surface materials that could not be correlated with then-known temporal sequences. A more truncated chronology was necessary to address the materials of this survey, corresponding to a sequence of four temporal blocks: Early Pre-classic Ojochi-Bajío (1500-1200 B.C.), Early Pre-classic San Lorenzo (1200-c.850 B.C.), and Middle Pre-classic (850-600 B.C.) and Late Pre-classic (600 B.C.-A.D. 200) (Cyphers, personal comm., 2010; Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, 2002). The final, more detailed, site chronology developed by the SLTAP has not yet been published (Cyphers, personal comm., 2010).

Stirling and Drucker first excavated San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán in 1945 and 1946 under the auspices of the BAE and the National Geographic Society. Their investigations recovered twenty-two stone monuments. The decades following their time at the site were marked by sporadic visitations by individuals who reported the occasional new monument, such as Aveleyra's account of Monument 16 in 1965 (Clewlow, 1974: 17). However, it was to be twenty years before the next full-scale investigations at the site took place.

The Yale excavations were conducted between 1966 and 1968 under the direction of Michael Coe, Richard Diehl, and George “Ray” Kroster. Their work at the site resulted in the establishment of the first full archaeological sequence devised for San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, backed by radiocarbon dating. The Yale project also established the San Lorenzo phase (1150-900 B.C.) as “the apogee of the Olmec sculptural style” (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 23). At this time George Kroster created the first site map which, despite many criticisms, remains the base for all subsequent maps of the site. Moreover, topographic and land-use maps were generated at this time from a program of aerial photography which covered seventy-seven square kilometers around the plateau (Coe, 1974; Coe and Diehl, 1980: 25-32). During this period the sum total of monumental sculptures was increased to fifty-two, partly through the use of a cesium magnetometer to locate magnetic anomalies in the earth’s surface.

Francisco Beverido Pereau continued excavations at the site in 1969, using the magnetometer to locate an additional seven monuments. He also came across a large amount of stone refuse weighing over five tons (comprised of basalt, schist and other stone types) which he believed to be a basalt workshop dating to the San Lorenzo phase (Beverido Pereau, 1970: 174-175; Cyphers, 1996: 64). Jürgen Brüggemann conducted additional excavations in 1970, which were directed by the use of a magnetometer. These investigations resulted in the discovery of several new monuments, including the 8<sup>th</sup> Colossal Head.

Since 1990 the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project, led by Ann Cyphers, has been conducting explorations at the site with an eye to



investigating a range of habitation areas, from single household residences to community and regional settlement. The project has also chosen to focus on the excavation of areas where monumental sculptures had been found “ in order to obtain evidence from the original context regarding the function of the monuments” (Cyphers, 1994: 65). Their efforts constitute the first real attempt to examine context as a mechanism for understanding monument usage.

### **La Venta**

Smaller than San Lorenzo in its heyday, the site of La Venta covered an estimated 200 hectares, not including the settlement of surrounding support areas which extended well beyond the site core. The architectural layout is symmetrically oriented along a centerline that is positioned eight degrees west of true north. Ten architectural complexes are designated A through I, with the exception of the Stirling Acropolis named for the “father” of Olmec studies. All but one of these complexes are arranged along the site axis running from south to north. Complex F diverges from this pattern and also dates to a later period. The architectural complexes (constructed of adobe, sand, clay, and stones imported from distant areas) served widely differing functions, from ceremonial and administrative to residential.

The chronology of the site is difficult to determine, even with the C-14 dating generated from the charcoal samples collected in 1955 and 1967. González Lauck, among others, has pointed to the problematic context of the samples, taken from architectural fill, observing that their dates may not apply to the actual dates of construction or use for the structures whence they came.

Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that, even allowing for the limitations of this data, the settlement at La Venta can be dated to between 1100 B.C. and A.D. 800. Olmec occupation of the site was concentrated between 1200 and 400 B.C., with the site's apogee following the decline of San Lorenzo after 800 B.C. The site chronology is further divided into four phases based on the stratigraphy of Complex A. These phases are spaced every hundred years over four-hundred year period from 800 to 400 B.C., but their exact placement in time is not firmly fixed and their spacing is essentially arbitrary. It is also possible that Phases II and III were contemporaneous, rather than sequential (Grove 1997: 72). Unfortunately, no reliable sequences have been developed for the ceramic, architectural, or sculptural chronologies at the site (González Lauck, 1996: 73).

La Venta was first visited in 1925 by Blom and LaFarge, who had heard reports of ruins near the Tonalá and believed them to be the same ruins referenced by Bernal Díaz de Castillo in his narrative recounting Grijalva's expedition to the area during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (1926: 78-80). The 1926 publication of the Tulane explorations led Stirling to the area in 1940. The BAE director and his team returned several times over the succeeding years, during which they excavated parts of Complex A. These excavations turned up a total of forty monuments (Clewlow, 1974: 15). Philip Drucker and Waldo Wedel continued excavations in 1942 and 1943. The 1952 publication of their findings was the first extended report of the work conducted by Stirling, Drucker, and Wedel at the site. This publication included a detailed description of the ceramics and sculptures recovered by the investigations, along with reporting on the

excavations in Complex A, and the first sketch plan of the “island” (Drucker, 1952).

1955 saw a new project begun by Drucker, along with Robert Heizer and Robert Squier (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959). During this new set of explorations an additional nine monuments were added to the overall total for the site (*ibid.*, 197). The primary purpose of their excavations was to continue explorations of Complex A, which had already divulged an impressive set of monuments, offerings of both greenstone and hematite objects, and elite burials (*ibid.*, 8). They were also able to recover a number of carbon samples that provided the first radio-carbon dates for an Olmec site, as well as establishing a chronology for the main ceremonial complex (A) (*ibid.*, 264-267).

Other, more abbreviated explorations took place between 1958 and 1967. Roman Piña Chán and Roberto Gallegos conducted salvage excavations at the site in 1958 at the behest of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Piña Chán and Covarrubias, 1965: 16-23). Robert Squier also briefly conducted work at the site in 1964, excavating at least three pits during this time (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 129, n1). However, no report was made of these investigations and the location of his excavations is unknown. 1967 saw the abbreviated return of Drucker and Heizer for a ten-day period, the main purpose of which was to collect further carbon samples for C-14 dating (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham, 1968).

In 1968 Heizer returned to the site, together with John A. Graham and a group from the University of California, Berkeley, for an additional two months

(Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968). The new project turned up another twenty-eight monuments which doubled the corpus of artworks believed to have originated from the site (Clewlow and Corson, 1968: 171). The project also produced the first detailed topographic map of Complex C (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 131-139). Additionally, during this time Clewlow created the first map which attempted to incorporate the known locations of monuments which had provenience (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 154).

Fourteen more monuments were discovered at the Parque Museo La Venta during this time (Clewlow and Corson, 1968: 171). Carlos Pellicer Cámara brought these monuments from the site in 1958, along with the majority of the known La Venta sculptural corpus, without any record of their provenience being made (*ibid.*; González Lauck, 1990: 11). While the move was undertaken with the intent to preserve the monuments from the encroachment of modern civilization, the process resulted in damage to the site architecture and destroyed any hope of reconstructing the original contexts of these monuments which were previously unrecorded.

After 1968 the site sat neglected, and facing destruction from the intrusion of settlement and the petroleum industry. Already by 1955 the installment of an airstrip had destroyed the northernmost area of the site (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959). Almost twenty years after the last major excavations were conducted at La Venta, Rebecca González Lauck began work at the site with the dual purpose of determining the nature and extent of site architecture and

attempting a more reliable chronological sequence for the ceramic record than had yet been managed.

Shortly after this, González Lauck, in collaboration with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, began the Proyecto Arqueológico La Venta (PALV). The aims of this project were threefold, focusing on the preservation, restoration, and continued investigation of the site. In terms of investigation, the project tackled a wide range of issues, including the extent and nature of the site occupation, as well as settlement in the support areas, regional geomorphology, clearer sequencing of ceramic and architectural material, and the exact nature of the architectural complexes within the site limits (González Lauck, 1988: 123-125). The PALV has expanded our knowledge of the site beyond Complex A and the site core to include reports on geomorphology, settlement patterns, and residential areas of the site. More recently, monument context has begun to be examined as a key understanding the function and meaning of these works (González Lauck, 2004). New maps have been produced which plot the location of provenienced monuments. These efforts have led to a recognition that monuments and construction were arranged together to create unified architectural-sculptural complexes that were integral to the experience of the site by its Pre-classic inhabitants (González Lauck, 1988: 130).

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter I have attempted to introduce the Olmec as culture which originated and developed within the Gulf lowlands during the Early and Middle Pre-classic periods. As a people and a society much remains to be discovered

about the Olmec, particularly in regards to the exact nature of the relationships they shared with each other and with other emergent societies throughout Mesoamerica. However, the expansion of investigations within and outside of the regional centers of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes has greatly contributed to our overall understating of the Olmec, their sites, societies, and lifeways.

Thanks to projects like the SLTAP and PALV, which have been operating for the last two decades, we now recognize that the Olmec were a local phenomenon, with a continuous record of growth and expansion that began prior to 1700 B.C. Although the first settlements may have been small, population increases and cultural advancements soon led to the formation of regional centers which were situated at the top of tiered settlement hierarchies. The large residential populations at these primary sites were supported by farming, fishing, and hunting activities which allowed them to take advantage of the diverse resources available within the natural environments they inhabited. Although, we are unaware of the exact socio-political structure of Olmec societies, the mobilization of a large labor force, along with material evidence for an elite class manifested in the production of art and luxury goods, suggests a high level of social stratification. Whether San Lorenzo and La Venta constitute Mesoamerica's first states remains to be seen. However, it is certain that both of these sites interacted with rising centers of power across Mesoamerica through networks which would have facilitated the trade of cultural traits and ideologies, as well as luxury items such as shell, obsidian, greenstone, and hematite.

The culture that arose in the Gulf lowlands during the Pre-classic was one well adapted to and reliant upon the natural environment. Upland and lowland areas allowed for resources to be obtained and traded across varying ecological zones. In the lowlands, dynamic aquatic environments allowed San Lorenzo and La Venta to rise as regional nodes within communication and exchange networks created by widespread systems of interconnected waterways. The similarities between the locations of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and La Venta in the Coatzacoalcos and Tonalá Basins hints at the environmental factors that made these centers the primary regional powers of their respective heydays. Yet, the diversity found within the microenvironments of these regions allowed for developments in different directions.

While San Lorenzo and La Venta share some similarities in their environments, regional settlement patterns, and monumental production, they diverge significantly in size, architectural style and layout. Moreover, differing tactics applied to the excavations at these sites, along with site history and preservation, has produced divergent results in the development of cultural sequences at these centers. While the ceramic sequence at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán is well documented and correlates with a strong chronology for the site, the same cannot be said of La Venta. The chronology at the latter site is much less sure and primarily based on charcoal samples taken from architectural fill. The phases developed by Drucker, Heizer, and Squier for Complex A are based on architectural works at the site, while San Lorenzo's architecture has not yet afforded the development of a similar chronological sequence.

Moreover, while San Lorenzo is believed to have been much larger than La Venta, its organizational development shows less overall planning and structure. Alternatively, La Venta foreshadows the architectural structures and arrangements that would be employed in Mesoamerica for centuries to come, including the construction of a pyramid and the creation of open plazas defined by platform mounds. The increased demand for greenstone to use in ritual and elite contexts, as well as the movement towards relief carving on stelae, rather than sculpture in the round, are also trends that would persist in Mesoamerican societies well beyond the Pre-classic.

Knowledge of the society that produced an artwork is essential to grasping the nature of the work itself. Yet, many interpretations of Olmec art occurred without archaeological or contextual data which would allow for informed analysis. The methodologies which were developed and applied to the study of Olmec artworks have been heavily reliant on the contemporary state of Olmec archaeology, as well as trends in the fields of art history and anthropology. The following chapter will trace the treatments and interpretations of Olmec monuments as they evolved relation to the explorations and theories of Olmec sites and society, from the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present day.

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<sup>i</sup> The Long Count is a calendrical system for recording time chronologically through a series of numerical bar and dot signs arranged in a column with each placement standing in for a fixed period of time.

<sup>ii</sup> These monuments were originally numbered 1 through 5 in Weyerstall's publication. The alphabetic system of distinguishing monuments at Tres Zapotes



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originated with Stirling's excavation reports and it still utilized at present to identify the works from that site (Stirling 1939; 1943).

<sup>iii</sup> The Spinden correlation is no longer applied in favor of an alternative system of chronology devised by Goodman, Martínez, and Thompson which gives a date of September 1<sup>st</sup>, 32 B.C.

<sup>iv</sup> The work carried out by Joshua Borstein at Laguna de los Cerros was undertaken as part of the SLTAP's explorations of the San Lorenzo hinterland.

<sup>v</sup> In 1965 Michael Coe also suggested that inter-regional trade was responsible for the Olmec "presence" outside of Olman (1965c: 122-123). However, he did not elaborate on the affects of this exchange on inter-regional relations, choosing to focus more explicitly on the possibility of a *pochteca* class of merchants which would have facilitated trade in and out of the Gulf lowlands.

<sup>vi</sup> Volcanic activity in this region during the Pre-classic has been suggested as a catalyst for changes in site locations and demographics.

<sup>vii</sup> Areas around the lake were featured as the backdrop for the Hollywood blockbuster "Apocalypto."

<sup>viii</sup> These traits are adapted from V. Gordon Childe's criteria of urbanism, which he developed in his discussion of the transition from agrarian to urban settlement in the Old World (1950). Childe's criteria have been modified and filtered by New World archaeologists, such as Kent Flannery, to apply to settlements in North and Latin America (Flannery, 1994; Welch, 2004: 596).

<sup>ix</sup> These are the population estimates as given by the SLTAP. John Clark has applied highland coefficients to the SLTAP settlement data to suggest a population of closer to 10,000 inhabitants (2007: 15).

### Chapter Three: Thinking with Monuments

*“We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life), and in a world a silence which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales” (Roland Barthes, 1957: 88).*

In her treatise entitled *Thinking with Things*, Esther Pasztory has suggested that people think with things as much as with words; that objects are integral to our cognitive processes (2005). The cognitive role of objects has been largely overlooked in academic settings, where primacy is wholeheartedly given to the word, both written and spoken. And yet, it might be argued that in the fields of archaeology in general, and Olmec studies in particular, scholars have long thought with objects. Moreover, Olmec monumental sculpture has often been the primary medium through which to think about Pre-classic society. The forms, materials, and subjects of these works were born out of the need to think about the past and its relation to power, and they provide the vehicle for our own ability to think about these themes as they correspond to the Olmec.

How have Olmec monuments been thought since the inception of their study? The answer to this question is rooted in the historical and personal agendas which drove individual researchers. Many of the earliest conceptions of Olmec culture were conceived in relation to monumental sculpture and its perceived subject matter and chronological placement. These interpretations, however premature, have been remarkably persistent and have led to assumptions about Pre-classic society, politics, and religion, which continue to

influence scholarship in the field. Many of these theories are rooted in the first writings on Olmec art, dating from the 1920s to the 1950s. How these early publications, and those which followed, have influenced our thinking of and about Olmec monuments is the focus of this chapter.

My aim here is to present a focused examination of how Olmec monuments have been analyzed since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This examination will allow me to contextualize my own study and analysis of monuments, which owes much to current and established trends. Within this chapter I introduce a variety of approaches to Olmec monuments, subsumed within three categories of methodological inquiry: iconography, formalism, and contextual analysis.

The Olmec provide us with the most ancient tradition of monumental sculpture north of Peru. This tradition appears to be of their own invention and one of the primary mechanisms through which the Gulf lowland centers were able to influence other areas of Mesoamerica, where monumental sculpture did not appear until the Middle Pre-classic. We may ask why it was necessary for Gulf lowland societies to create monuments as a category of object to think with, but as important is an understanding of how we employ these same works to think about the past. What are the theoretical and methodological approaches used to frame these works? How does our thinking with monuments influence the field of Olmec scholarship as a whole? Pasztory argues that the use of objects in cognitive processes can reveal the social contexts of those objects (*ibid.*). We might ask what our own methods of thinking with and about Olmec monuments

reveal about the social contexts of Pre-classic archaeology in the decades since its inception.

### **3.1 Iconography**

I will begin with an analysis of the methodological approaches which have developed in the field of Olmec iconography. By iconography I refer to the study of meaning in Olmec art, specifically the significance assigned to motifs, symbols, and subjects which allow the viewer to identify and interpret the cultural messages encoded in the work.<sup>1</sup> To decipher the meanings of individual artworks as a key to greater realms of cultural information has been the goal of many Mesoamerican scholars. Images have been used to formulate hypotheses on Olmec religion, cosmology, and political structure. Often these hypotheses have been predicated on readings of fragmented, incomplete works or opaque imagery that bears no relation to later canons of artistic representation. However, lack of supporting data has rarely deterred researchers from attempting to interpret the meanings behind Olmec artworks and symbol systems.

Art historical studies of iconography are typically grounded in the use of texts to illuminate the cultural traditions, beliefs, and mores that are the foundations of visual expression. Although popularized in the United States by art historian Erwin Panofsky and his student Meyer Schapiro in the 1930s and 40s, iconography as a discipline was developed in art historical circles as early as the nineteenth-century by scholars of Christian art. In more general terms, the study of content in artistic representation has existed since the time of Giorgio Vasari,

widely considered to be the first art historian. Since the days of Vasari, scholars have drawn upon historical documents, literary publications, and religious texts to interpret works of art. In the absence of texts, scholars of pre-historic cultures are challenged to find other ways to interpret the imagery of a foreign age or people.

Various methods have been proposed to deal with the iconography of the Pre-classic in the absence of historical texts, some more successful than others. However, the question has rarely been posed as to whether the study of iconography, a term which literally means “image writing,” can be applied to a culture that does not appear to have had any form of text.<sup>ii</sup> It might be asked how writing as a practice influences the presentation of information in other media? How does reading affect a certain mode of viewership? I do not presume to have answers to these questions, nor am I advocating for the abandonment of all attempts to decipher meaning in Olmec artworks. Rather, I wish to introduce a note of self-critical reflexivity into a method of inquiry as old as the study of Olmec art itself, and which is therefore prone to uncritical application.

### **Ethnographic Analogy**

Following on the heels of Hermann Beyer’s 1927 review of *Tribes and Temples*, in which he first noted the stylistic elements which he described as “Olmeca ó Totonaca,” Marshall Saville published a series of axes like the one Beyer compared with the San Martín Pajapan monument (Beyer, 1927; Saville, 1928). In his review, Saville describes several characteristics shared among the axes (or “axe idols,” as he terms them) as feline. Beginning with an account of the Kunz Axe, he reports, “The carving on the front represents the conventional

mask of a tiger, with peculiar slanting almond-like eyes, prominent canine teeth, small nostrils, and an immense flaring upper lip” (1928: 268) (figure 2.2). There is no explanation as to why these features should be read as a tiger mask *per se*. There are numerous examples of animals with similar eyes and teeth which could have provided the model for these characteristics; although a better point might be that there is no reason to assume an intentional reference to any animal at all.

Based on his identification of the idiosyncratic features found across his sample set as those of a tiger mask, Saville assigned the “cult of the votive axe” bearing feline traits to the worship of the god Tezcatlipoca. This Aztec deity was known to take feline forms, such as that of a tiger or ocelot. Saville asserts that the form of the celt was related to the pre-Hispanic belief that “*thunderbolts*, in the form of ‘stones rained from heaven,’ were attributed to his [Tezcatlipoca’s] activities” (*ibid.*, 295). Saville argues that celts and axes were associated with celestial origins, thunder, and lightening, and were converted from utilitarian tools to cult objects associated with the worship of Tezcatlipoca at some point prior to the Spanish conquest. Consequently, he suggests that the series of celts in his sample owe their feline attributes to the deity associated with their production and use (*ibid.*, 295-297).

Only a few years after Saville presented his interpretation of the uniquely stylized features of the “tiger mask,” George C. Vaillant adapted his interpretation to an analysis of a small jade statuette from Necaxa, then-located in the Mexican Hall of the American Museum (1932) (figure 3.1). The identification of the

statuette as a jaguar or ocelot appears to have been decided by adherence to Saville's identification of the tiger mask complex, as well as the posture and teeth, which are the only two features described by Vaillant as naturalistic. Vaillant does note that the arms and face are anthropomorphic, not feline, and that the figure bears a number of adornments such as a headdress, necklace, and wristlets (*ibid.*, 513-515). However, he reads these as evidence for a theological mode of representation, rather than a naturalistic one. By presuming that the absence of all but two features that might be considered feline are evidence of the religious significance of the object, Vaillant again draws upon precedents set by Saville's article.

However, Vaillant believed that the Mixtec god Tepeyollotli was a better candidate for the source of feline religious symbolism than Tezcatlipoca, in part due to the proximity of the Mixtec to the geographical source for many of the objects in question: the Gulf lowlands. Vaillant stresses the importance of tigers and ocelots in Mixtec and neighboring Zapotec religious and artistic practices. He also links the tiger mask complex to another category of representation that he terms "baby-face," which shares the same mouth formation as the tiger mask. Vaillant noted that the baby-face complex was found in the same geographical region as the tiger mask complex, albeit with an even greater range of distribution that extended into areas of Chiapas and Guerrero. However, no argument is presented as to why the distinctive mouth, which was a primary diagnostic element of the feline complex, should be applied to anthropomorphic representations. Nor does Vaillant suggest why it should continue to be

considered a feline feature in light of the new evidence against such an interpretation.

Despite the tenuousness of these iconographic interpretations and the overall lack of chronological or cultural information available to either Saville or Vaillant, these two publications set the tone for much of the scholarship on Olmec art produced during the succeeding decades. Both Saville and Vaillant believed that the artworks they were discussing came from the Post-classic (A.D. 900-1521), and therefore drew upon the ethno-historical information provided by Spanish chroniclers and the post-Conquest accounts of indigenous informants to frame their interpretations. However, even after the chronological distance between the Olmec culture and the Post-classic became evident, scholars continued to base their interpretations of Pre-classic iconography on the traditions of much later cultures by employing a framework of ethnographic analogy.

#### *The Direct Historical Approach*

As a methodology, ethnographic analogy typically utilizes the cultural information of a known society to assist in the interpretation of material from an unknown society of similar development, although the two may be quite geographically and/ or temporally distant. However, a variant of this methodology suggests that some ancient cultures may be interpreted by applying the data from those modern peoples thought to be their cultural descendants. Called “the direct historical approach,” or “upstreaming,” this method works backwards in time to trace cultural traditions along lines of continuity. It has been particularly



avored by proponents of the *cultura madre* model who support the idea of strong continuities between the beliefs and traditions of the Olmec and later Mesoamerican cultural groups.

Eduard Seler first employed the direct historical approach to address indigenous pictorial traditions and archaeological remains from the Basin of Mexico during the Post-classic (Nicholson, 1976: 159). While he appears to have achieved some success with the method in this context, his attempts to apply the same technique to earlier and more distant cultures was notably less effective (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, many scholars believe that the “line of descent” between ancient and contact-period cultures was relatively contiguous, resulting in the preservation of many traditions over hundreds, even thousands of years (e.g. Willey, 1973: 155).

George Kubler argued vehemently against the application of this methodology, invoking the principle of disjunction first set out by Panofsky (1960: 84) to assert that superficial similarities of appearance may mask more fundamental disjunctions of meaning. As he observed, “Continuous form does not predicate continuous meaning, nor does continuity of form or of meaning necessarily imply continuity of culture” (Kubler, 1970: 143-144). H.B. Nicholson rebutted this argument by suggesting that Mesoamerican history did not suffer the same ruptures that one finds in the European tradition, and therefore may have maintained greater levels of continuity from the Pre- to Post-classic periods. However, he also acknowledges that arguments both for and against a great level of overall cultural continuity in Mesoamerican can be supported, “depending

on what aspects of Mesoamerican cultural history one selects and emphasizes in support of one's position" (Nicholson, 1976: 161). Nicholson's examination of the merits of applying the direct historical approach to Pre-classic cultural material was the first and only attempt to investigate the validity of a methodology that had been in play for decades by the time of its publication. While he ultimately concludes that there is enough evidence to suggest a high degree of continuity between Pre- and Post-classic traditions, his conclusions were drawn while Olmec archaeology was still in its nascence. With the advancements made to our general knowledge of Olmec society and culture, his conclusions may have been very different if he authored his assessment today. Yet, no one has since re-examined the methodological validity of the direct historical approach, even as it continues to be employed in recent years.

Matthew Stirling was the first to apply this method to his analyses of the art of La Venta, and later the monuments of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, in which he drew heavily upon the Post-classic interpretations of Olmec art first hypothesized by Vaillant and Saville (1943, 1955). Although he was by this time convinced of the antiquity of the Olmec culture, he continued to be influenced by Saville's description of the "tiger mask complex" (Saville, 1928). His report of the season's findings in *National Geographic* included the discovery of a large sandstone sarcophagus in the shape of a zoomorphic creature. Stirling readily identified this animal as a jaguar, despite the general lack of feline characteristics. Certainly, by his second season at La Venta Stirling was convinced of the jaguar's primacy in Olmec art. In his 1943 article, entitled "La

Venta's Green Stone Tigers," he demonstrates a tendency to label all unidentifiable symbols and subjects as feline. A particularly revealing example is his assertion that the abstract motifs formed by La Venta's buried greenstone pavements are jaguar "masks," a hypothesis that seems directly in line with Saville's tiger mask complex but lacks any iconographic support (Stirling, 1943: 321).

In his BAE reports on the sculptures of La Venta (1943) and San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán (1955) Stirling's interpretations of the monuments continue this precedent, often identifying abstracted or stylized features as jaguar or feline without any archaeological or iconographic data to support his hypotheses. Anthropomorphic representations bearing facial features similar to those that typified the tiger mask complex were subsequently identified as anthropomorphized jaguars, or "were-jaguars." The were-jaguar, an offshoot of Vaillant's baby-face complex, combines the distinctive facial features of the tiger mask complex with the fleshy, infantile appearance of the baby-faces.

These interpretations also led Stirling to speculate that the subject of Monument 1 from Río Chiquito (now Tenochtitlán) and Monument 3 from Potrero Nuevo (Loma del Zapote) were monuments commemorating the mythical copulation of a human woman and a jaguar, leading to the origin of a species of half-human, half-jaguar creatures (figures 3.2 and 3.3) (1955: 8, 19-20). Stirling also suggested that the Olmec people considered themselves descended from these creatures: the were-jaguars (*ibid.*). This theory was intended to explain the prominence of the were-jaguar in Olmec sculpture. However, it may be noted that

for each of the two artworks in question less than half of the original monument remains. Additionally, it was later pointed out by Beatriz de la Fuente that in the case of Monument 3, the identification of the bottom figure as human belies the simian quality of the feet (1977: 105). Moreover, in neither monument is the gender of the bottom figure apparent.

The presence of relief carvings depicting feline-like creatures dominating apparently male figures at Chalcatzingo suggests that the subject matter of these works need not have been sexual in nature (Grove and Angulo, 1987) (figure 3.4). Whitney Davis has presented alternative interpretations of these images, which he suggests may have been ritual or allegorical in nature, possibly related to a warrior cult associated with the jaguar (1978). Another argument, proposed by Karl Taube, suggests that these works represent the sacrifice of individuals by humans impersonating supernatural characters (1995: 100; 2004: 34). More recently, Cyphers has theorized that the subject is related to the mythology of creation and divine conflict (2004: 241).

While Saville's and Vaillant's interpretations of olmec imagery were based on the assumption of a Post-classic origin for the style, Stirling continued to assume the relevance of their arguments to Pre-classic objects, predicating his identification of feline imagery on the "tiger mask" complex first set out by Saville. The prominence of the jaguar in olmec art was treated as fact for decades, despite the relatively small ratio of expressly feline representations (aside from the supposed were-jaguar) to human or anthropomorphic representations. The appearance of feline features on numerous artworks was seen as an exemplar of

the continuity between Olmec religion and the belief systems of later Mesoamerica cultures (Coe, 1970; Covarrubias, 1946a; 1957; Cyphers, ed., 1997; Cyphers, 2004). Stirling's writings established a strong precedent for use of the direct historical approach within the very first days of Olmec archaeology.

Miguel Covarrubias drew from Stirling's were-jaguar hypothesis to argue that the Olmec were the *cultura madre*, the source for many later Classic and Post-classic cultural beliefs and practices across Mesoamerica. This theory provided the line of continuity from colonial to prehistoric past along which themes, symbols, and motifs could be traced in order to give meaning to seemingly opaque Olmec images. Covarrubias saw the were-jaguar as the foundation for many Post-classic traditions, including the prominence of jaguar-related deities.

A noted artist, antiquarian, and art historian, Covarrubias was one of the first visitors to the La Venta excavations. "I fell under the spell of 'Olmec' archaeology in the early days of its determination. Carried away by its tremendous plastic force, I began collecting examples...My interest was intensified by endless discussions with archaeologists and occasional visits to the archaeological camps of Stirling" (1946a: 53-54). From his investigations, Covarrubias developed a highly influential theory of artistic evolution in Mesoamerican religious imagery. He proposed that the were-jaguar, as a category of representation, formed the basis for many later Mexican rain gods. In several publications he presents an evolutionary tree of images which sprout and branch off from the original were-jaguar mask (*ibid.*, 62, figure 22). He also

proposed that the baby-faced infants or dwarves which appear throughout Olmec art were proto-types of the *chaneques*, mischievous dwarves believed to inhabit the coasts of Veracruz and Guerrero and to bring rain, control game and fish, and play unpleasant tricks on the unsuspecting. Modern *chaneques* are the descendants of the Maya *chaacs* and Mexican *tlaloques*, and Covarrubias believed them all to stem from a single ancestral source, the “jaguar-mouthed dwarves of the art of La Venta” (*ibid.*, 57-58; 1954: 98-99).

In 1968 Michael Coe revisited the notion that Pre-classic imagery contained the prototypes for later Mesoamerican deities, suggesting that six distinct Olmec gods could be identified and iconographically linked to their Post-classic counterparts (1968b). However, whereas Covarrubias argued that multiple Mesoamerican deities emerged out of a singular prototype (the were-jaguar), Coe argues that a pantheon of deities existed in Olmec society and were all represented as variations of the basic were-jaguar template (*ibid.*). By distinguishing the individual components that differentiate six were-jaguar images, Coe claimed that it is possible to discern the Olmec rain god, maize god, death god, fire god, feathered serpent, and Xipe Totec, a god of life and rejuvenation. Each of these deities is identified solely by Coe’s interpretation of the motifs inscribed on the face and appendages of the Las Limas monument, as well as the were-jaguar infant it cradles in its arms (figure 3.5). The scope of the publication in which he first proposed these interpretations did not allow for great depth and the analysis was truncated as a result. In 1989 Coe admitted that he

had misidentified the gods associated with these images, but maintained his belief that they could be connected with later Mesoamerican deities.

Shortly following the publication of this theory Coe's student, Peter Joralemon, followed in his footsteps, also arguing that the symbols and motifs in Olmec art could be linked to those associated with Aztec deities (1971). Joralemon's study of Olmec iconography, notable as the first study to attempt a comprehensive overview of the subject, sought to prove the existence of ten distinct Olmec deities by grouping images and motifs into ten corresponding god-categories (*ibid.*). However, many of the god categories first presented shared so many of the same motifs that they appear completely arbitrary. Moreover, Joralemon was forced to create catchall categories (such as God II-F) in order to account for the many representations that did not fit into other groupings. Additionally, some symbols appear only in one or two locations. Therefore, they can hardly be seen to constitute the wide spread, long lasting mythology that Joralemon sought to establish. Later, Joralemon reduced his god complexes to six, suggesting that God I, the Olmec "dragon" "was the most important member of the Olmec pantheon" (Joralemon, 1976: 37). Overall, his study served to demonstrate the difficulties of creating homogenous groupings from the immensely varied canon of Olmec symbolism.

Although Joralemon does not ascribe the same Post-classic identities to these deities that Coe does, he essentially returns to the latter's original idea that the six primary gods of the Olmec pantheon are all present on the Las Limas monument. In regards to the relationship between Olmec and later

Mesoamerican deities Joralemon states, “It is my conviction that there is a basic religious system common to all Mesoamerican peoples. This system took shape long before it was given monumental expression in Olmec art and survived long after the Spanish conquered the New World’s major political and religious centers” (*ibid.*: 59).

Both Coe and Joralemon drew heavily upon Post-classic and Conquest-era material for their interpretations. However, it would appear that the theories proposed by both scholars did not account for the historical circumstances that heavily influenced the Aztec pantheon and made it highly distinct from those which came before it. As a people, the Aztec came from outside Central Mexico and adopted deities from all over Mesoamerica as part of their strategy of conquest. Therefore, one might reasonably ask how such a patch-worked and historically disjointed pantheon could be proof of the levels of cultural continuity required to make Coe’s and Joralemon’s hypotheses viable? Moreover, the political turmoil in the Post-classic Maya societies, such as those of the Yucatán Peninsula, also suggests that major disruptions took place in their religion after the period of Classic collapse. For example, the prominence of the feathered serpent, Kukulcan, at Chichen Itza was a historical phenomenon at that site, and its effect on the religious life there (including changes to the existing pantheon) is well known. These shifts in belief systems, and the concomitant political ruptures that motivated them, call into question Nicholson’s assertion that Mesoamerica did not experience the same level of cultural upheaval as European societies prior to the Conquest.



In 1968 Peter Furst presented a new hypothesis for the interpretation of Olmec were-jaguar imagery, employing a variant of ethnographic analogy (1968). Drawing primarily on the ethnographic work of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, he suggested that the Olmec belief system included jaguar-human transformation as part of a shamanic complex similar to that documented for various contemporary American Indian groups in the Amazon and other parts of South America. “[T]he feline characteristics become a kind of badge of office, the manifestation of the supernatural jaguar qualities inherent in priest or shaman, his spiritual bond and identity with the jaguar, and his capacity, unique among men, of crossing the boundary between animals and humankind by achieving total spiritual transformation” (*ibid.*, 170). Subsequently, he interpreted a number of figurines combining human and feline traits as representations of shamanic transformation. Furst cited numerous cases in which living indigenous peoples from South America view the jaguar and shaman as equivalent (*ibid.*, 158). In many of these cases, the shaman is capable of actually transforming into the great feline at will. However, Furst operated on the assumption that the supernatural or fantastic features of the figurines around which his arguments were constructed, were feline in nature, a premise which seems built upon the foundational scholarship of Coe (1965), Stirling (1943, 1955), and Saville (1928). Moreover, his approach draws upon portable works from many different regions of Mesoamerica, most without archaeological provenience, in order to construct a theory of ritual practices that are de-centralized, timeless, and unchanging.

Furst also proposed that the olmec “spoons,” some of which bear images interpreted as avian or relating to flight, were used in the process of snuffing psychotropic substances to induce ecstatic flight or aid in the actual transformation process of the shaman (*ibid.*, 161-164). However, the use of psychotropic drugs is not necessarily concurrent with all shamanic belief systems. Moreover, Cyphers has observed that these spoons often appear as ornaments on garments in monumental sculpture (2004a: 243). Billie Follensbee has recently proposed that they may have served as weaving battens or half-battens (2009: 96-99). It seems clear that, although pre-historic objects may superficially appear to fit within the framework of modern cultural belief systems, contextual information is essential to inform where the practice of ethnographic analogy is truly applicable.

Furst does not employ the direct historical approach to his arguments regarding the shamanic nature of various olmec artworks. Rather, he uses a more traditional variant of ethnographic analogy to suggest a shared set of beliefs between an ancient group of American Indians and their contemporary counterparts. However, his theories of shamanic transformation were to become the springboard for a number of scholars who drew comparisons between the Classic Maya system of shamanic kingship, as proposed by David Friedel and Linda Schele, and the Olmec elite (Friedel and Schele, 1992). It was posited that if there were indeed shamanic leaders among the Olmec, then perhaps they provided the model upon which Maya rulership was based (Fields, 1989, 1991). This comparison gave way to a new round of publications in the 1990s which

began to draw numerous parallels between the iconographies and cosmologies of the two cultures, infusing the direct historical approach with new life.

This new manifestation of the direct historical approach culminated in the publication of a catalogue accompanying the 1995 exhibition of Olmec artworks at the Princeton Art Museum, entitled *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*. Within its pages, the authors of the volume position the realm of Olmec art as the exclusive domain of elite shaman-kings. The headings under which objects are categorized reinforce the shamanistic focus of the text. These include “Regeneration and Shamanism,” “The Shamanic Landscape and Journey,” “The Shamanic Bundle,” and “The Axis Mundi.” The authors’ essay contributions often seem to work from an assumption that Olmec rulership was based in shamanic practices and move directly to an identification of what artistic elements should be considered shamanic. This volume included a chapter by Peter Furst, in which he reprised his argument in favor of shamanic transformation by elite religious practitioners (1995: 69-82). By and large, however, the contributors were Maya scholars or scholars, such as Michael Coe, who study both the Maya and Olmec. Of necessity, the *cultura madre* hypothesis was resurrected to explain the historical development of shamanic kingship from Olmec to Maya along a single cultural trajectory and once again the Olmec were restored to their former glory and preeminence.

Since the mid-90s a handful of scholars, such as Karl Taube and F. Kent Reilly III, have continued to draw upon Maya culture and religion to interpret Olmec iconographic forms. Taube has frequently argued for the presence of an

Olmec maize god, establishing a Pre-classic precedent for the later Maya maize god (whom Taube had also identified) (1996, 2004). Reilly has likewise employed Maya cosmology and mythology in his interpretations of Olmec art, often drawing upon the Quiche Maya colonial document *The Popol Vuh* for an interpretive framework. His 2002 article, entitled “The Landscape of Creation: Architecture, Tomb, and Monument Placements at the Olmec site of La Venta,” related the cosmological orientation of Maya architectural forms to the principles guiding the layout and function of the architectural complexes at La Venta. Reilly believed these complexes to have been guided by cosmological principles that paralleled those of the Classic Maya (*ibid.*,34-35).

Other scholars have drawn comparative material from the cultural practices of contemporary Mixe and Zoquean speakers, believed to belong to the same linguistic family as the Olmec.<sup>iii</sup> Carolyn Tate has attempted to apply contemporary data from the Mixtec to the study of their (probable) linguistic forefathers (2001). Her study of sacred landscape at La Venta correlates Mound C-1, the mosaic pavements, and massive offerings with contemporary Mixe supernaturals, which she views as analogous to those structures (*ibid.*,150-152). Three Mixe supernaturals, *Ene*, *Higiny*, and *Na swi n*, are discussed as possible divine patrons for these constructions and the ritual performances that Tate believes to have taken place within the spaces they organized(*ibid.*,162-163). Comparing contemporary Mixe rituals to the materials at La Venta, Tate suggests that it is possible to view the construction and artistic practices at that site through the lens of ethnographic information drawn from the modern Mixe (*ibid.*).

Similarly, María Elena Bernal-García conducted a study of seven distinct Mixe-Zoque languages, the language family believed to have been that most likely used by the Olmec, to attempt an interpretation of Olmec iconography based in shared linguistic structures and meanings (1994). Focusing on earth and cave imagery, Bernal-García argued that the tangible source of human and divine speech, and in fact all human needs, was the sacred mountain (*ibid.*, 114). Although her primary data set is linguistically based, she also draws on the ethno-historic traditions of the Maya, the Aztec, and other cultural groups of the Central Mexican Highlands (*ibid.*). Bernal-García was the first to suggest that linguistics may provide an alternative analytical structure for those seeking to apply the direct historical approach.

It is clear that the direct historical approach has provided one of the primary mechanisms by which Olmec iconography has been interpreted. However, the difficulties of applying this method in a responsible and rigorous manner are equally clear. As demonstrated in the accounts above, many of the elements identified for historical comparison were selected without sufficient cultural and archaeological data to permit such comparisons. Foremost among these is, of course, the identification of jaguar imagery as the primary subject of Olmec artworks. From this one premise, a series of hypotheses on the nature of Olmec religious and political structures were formulated which would drive Pre-classic scholarship for decades. Like a house of cards, these theories were built one upon the other beginning from Saville's identification of the tiger mask complex. Although this identification was challenged by various scholars over the

years (Furst, 1981; Bonifaz Nuño, 1988a, 1988b; de la Fuente, 1981) it remained a prominent staple of olmec art scholarship; perhaps, in part, because its removal would bring down the carefully constructed theories assembled by scholars over the better part of a century.

Diachronic and regional variations are virtually absent in studies applying ethnographic analogy, largely because this approach emphasizes continuity and homogenization across the visual field. Lack of specificity as to the time, place, medium, or style particular to these works has limited their broader contextualization and is another significant drawback to this methodology. Yet, ethnographic analogy has remained a staple of olmec art analysis, and many of the scholars applying alternative analytical approaches incorporate this methodology in a more minimal fashion. The temptation of viewing pre-historic artworks through the lens of historical ethnography is, at times, difficult to resist because the material often appears to strongly align along a contiguous path. My own analysis will address cultural continuities only in the most general sense, relating clear iconographic trends (such as the prominence of cave imagery) to widespread Mesoamerican traditions as broadly as possible and refraining from backtracking along the chronological path from later to earlier periods.

### **Ecological Analogy**

Ecological analogy is a methodology primarily derived from the work of Ake Hultkrantz (1966), who proposed that the natural environment is the predominant source from which cultures draw “the individual components of religious belief” (Reilly, 1990: 17). The application of this methodology is based

on a more fundamental assumption that olmec art is essentially religious in nature. However, the conflation of religious and political spheres achieved by the office of the priest- or shaman-king, as promoted by the authors of the Princeton catalogue (Coe, ed., 1995), allowed scholars to argue that olmec iconography acted as the mechanism through which rulers invoked the supernatural origins of their power. Subsequently, F. Kent Reilly III has proposed that olmec iconography invoked a charter for the elite which was employed to justify their right to rule through the use of sacred or supernatural imagery derived from nature (1990).

Ecological analogy was first fully developed as a methodological approach to olmec art by Terry Stocker, Sarah Meltzoff, and Steve Armsey in their 1980 article on crocodilian imagery in olmec iconography. However, earlier publications by Drucker (1952: 194), Lathrap (1971, 1973), and Luckert (1976), suggested that individual motifs or symbols may have been derived from natural forms, such as particular species of animals. Peter Joralemon also expressed a belief that, while the Olmec chose to represent creatures that are “biologically impossible,” the natural world provided a source from which to draw from and then disassociate characteristics that could then be recombined into fantastic composite forms (1976: 33). This gave rise to the *pars pro toto* theory of symbols abstracted from their original representational context which continued to signify the whole while only visually presenting the part.

Most commonly, scholars applying this methodology have done so in an attempt to suggest alternative species, other than jaguars, which may have given

rise to the so-called “were-jaguar” imagery. These species have included the rattlesnake (Luckert, 1976), the crocodile/caiman (Lathrap, 1971; Stocker, *et al.*, 1980), and the toad (Furst, 1981). Many of these arguments are impressionistic, arguing for the primacy of one species over another primarily based on their appearance. However, several have also cited unusual behaviors (such as “water dancing” in the case of crocodilian species or the shedding of skin in the case of toads) to demonstrate how these species may have given rise to their supernatural counterparts and a corresponding system of belief among the Olmec and other Pre-classic peoples.

These arguments also draw upon the direct historical approach to explain how the species continued their role in the cosmologies and mythologies of later Mesoamerican cultures (e.g. Stocker, *et al.*, 1980). Ethnographic accounts of contemporary legends or powers ascribed to the species are also invoked to support these arguments, although these may come from groups as culturally and geographically distant as the Hopi of the American southwest (Luckert, 1976). Occasionally, similar arguments have been employed to reinforce the primacy of jaguar imagery and refute those critiques which have created skepticism of the feline’s role in Olmec iconography (e.g. Furst, 1995: 75-77). Thus, ecological analogy has often been a secondary methodology employed in the service of analyses that are essentially ethnographic, particularly those utilizing the direct historical approach.

### **Structuralism**



Structuralism was first developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand Saussure and was later adapted to various fields of study, including literature, art history, and anthropology. In each of these areas the application of this methodology involves a search for underlying structures of signification that govern the socio-cultural practices that produce meaning. Structuralism is closely allied with the field of semiotics, which focuses on the relationship between signs, signifiers, and their referents. George Kubler was a particular advocate for the application of an “intrinsic configurational iconographic analysis” to pre-historic Mesoamerican artworks in order to better understand the internal structure of Pre-Columbian symbol systems (1973: 165).

Peter Joralemon completed the first attempt at a structural study of olmec iconography, published in 1971. However, Joralemon’s overall focus was on the identification of Pre-classic deities through the categorization of symbols into groups, each identified with a different god. The previous steps incorporated into this larger process of identification are often overlooked in favor of his final stage of analysis, which employed the direct historical approach. Nevertheless, it was these first steps which amounted to the premier effort to analyze the olmec representational canon as a closed symbol system, essentially the first structural study of olmec iconography. In his study, Joralemon reported three steps in his process of decipherment. The first was to break down all known olmec images into their component parts in order to isolate the representational “building blocks” of the artistic canon. The second step involved recognizing the recurrent motif combinations or “character complexes” in olmec art. The third stage was

the relation of these complexes to later Mesoamerican symbolic systems by applying the direct historical approach to the categories of representation identified in step two (1971: 6).

The publication of the study included a dictionary of olmec motifs and symbols, the first ever attempted for olmec iconography. However, it should be noted that Joralemon often resorted to arbitrary labels for the motifs he included. These names are highly suggestive of the subject matter Joralemon believes them to represent, yet seem largely based on visual impressions that lack cultural or contextual data to support them. Examples of this labeling practice include the “Surrender Signal,” the “Blade-like Maize Vegetation,” and the “Dripping Water” (*ibid.*, 13; 16). Despite impressionistic labeling practices, Joralemon’s study represents an important development in the analysis of the olmec representational system’s internal structures.

Twenty years later another structural study of the olmec symbol system was conducted by Anatole Pohorilenko as part of his doctoral thesis, comprising perhaps the single most extensive study of olmec art and symbolism to date (1990). In his examination of olmec representation, he sets out both the basic structural units and motifs, as well as the rules governing their use within a larger visual system. This study takes as its sample set all known artifacts produced in the olmec style. Like Joralemon, Pohorilenko’s study groups the basic, irreducible units of olmec symbolism into representational categories. In his case these are the composite zoomorph, the realistic anthropomorph (including baby-

face representations), and the composite anthropomorph, which combines the baby-face form with features common to the composite zoomorph.

Pohorilenko subsequently examined the contexts and media in which the three categories of representations appear. Realistic anthropomorphs include the colossal heads and seated sculptural figures in stone, as well as baby-face figurines in clay and portable carvings (*ibid.*, 1240-1245). Composite anthropomorphs appear in a great variety of contexts, as secondary representations on votive axes, as the primary subjects of monumental and portable sculpture, and as secondary figures held in the arms of realistic anthropomorphs in both portable and monumental sculpture. They also appear in profile on celts, as insignia on headdresses and elsewhere, and as an iconomorph (an object in the shape of an icon) which appears as both a primary and secondary motif on portable and monumental sculpture and pottery (*ibid.*, 1247). The composite zoomorph appears on pottery as both excised and incised motifs (primary and secondary), in portable sculpture, on stelae as either the primary frontal or secondary top or bottom motifs, and on the top band of tabletop altar-thrones. It is also found as a frontal mask incised around the waist of figures on both portable and monumental carvings. (*ibid.*, 1248)

In his treatise Pohorilenko also sets out a series of guiding principles, or rules, which govern the olmec representational system. These are: abbreviation, complementarity, redundancy, substitution, layering, and those principles governing frontal and side views of a given theme (*ibid.*, 1226-1234).

Abbreviation is mostly clearly manifested in *pars pro toto* representations. It is a

rule which allows a single element or group of elements to refer to the entire conceptual entity from which it is taken (*ibid.*, 1231). The rule of complementarity refers to those images in which two profile representations are brought together or face each other in such a way as to create a single frontal view. Redundancy describes the patterned repetition of a pictorial element on the same field (*ibid.*, 1231). The rule of substitution guides which motif(s) may substitute for another “in its appropriate systematic placement” (*ibid.*, 1228). Layering refers to the placement and/ or interaction of secondary motifs in relation to other motifs, either primary or secondary (*ibid.*, 1228). The rules governing the depiction of frontal and side views are such that when the head is frontal the shoulders must also be shown frontally; when shown in profile the head must be an exact symmetrical half of the frontal view (*ibid.*, 1226). Additionally, designs which incorporate more than one motif or entity in a single composition are often arranged according to predetermined patterns, including tricephalic or tripartite groupings and cruciform patterns (*ibid.*, 1237-1239).

In general, Pohorilenko summarizes the olmec representational system as “essentially a binomial structure whose components interrelate at several levels, but particularly at the level of reality and non-reality, or natural and supernatural” (*ibid.*, 1249). In this regard his analysis resonates with other structural studies, particularly those conducted in anthropology, in which dual, paired categories are often placed in opposition to one another (although they do not necessarily represent extreme opposites). Indeed, Pohorilenko is more inclined to view these pairings as complementary (*ibid.*, 1252).

Pohorilenko offers the most complete study of olmec iconography to date, utilizing a structural methodology that examines the usage of elemental units of representation throughout the entire systematic structure. However, his examination runs a risk common to many structural studies across varying disciplines, which is oversimplification. This particularly applies to his grouping of a highly diverse and heterogeneous symbol system into only three categories of representation. Yet, it may be that our limited knowledge of the works' cultural significance necessitates an oversimplified approach to the study of their iconographic elements. Painting a picture in broad strokes, as it were, may serve us better than trying to specify while simultaneously lacking the necessary cultural or historical details that would allow us to do so. In such circumstances it is better to err on the side of caution, which may lead to oversimplification at this stage in the analysis of olmec artworks. Overall, I believe his groupings to be sound and will employ the three descriptors- composite anthropomorph, composite zoomorph, and realistic anthropomorph- at various times throughout my own analysis.

Among the already existing methodologies at work in Pre-classic scholarship, structuralism offers perhaps the best approach to iconographic analysis if one wishes to eschew the potential pitfalls of ethnographic analogy. However, post-structuralist critiques of this method have pointed to the absence of any consideration of individual agency that would allow for experimentation and change in such a system. This tendency to overlook the agency of single or group entities is shared by all methodologies that have yet been applied to the

study of olmec iconography. Ethnographic and ecological analogy are also prone to emphasizing continuity over change, and therefore analyses that apply these methods to the olmec representational system appears static and homogenizing. If iconography is to remain a viable subject of analysis it would seem that developing alternative methodologies that take into account the dynamic social processes influencing iconographic evolution must become a priority for Mesoamerican scholars.

### **3.2 Formalism**

Formalism, as a methodological approach to art, is founded in the belief that the formal elements of the artwork --its style, composition, medium, etc.-- are intrinsic to the meaning of the work itself. Through a careful analysis of these elements the significance of the work can become known without reliance on historical context or the cultural specifics of its content. Although formalism can be traced as far back as Plato's concept of *eidos*,<sup>iv</sup> Clement Greenberg popularized it as an art historical methodology during the 1940s as a response to modernist abstraction in the visual arts (1940). Beatriz de la Fuente was the first and most prolific scholar to have applied formalism to olmec art. Prior to her 1977 publication, *Los Hombres de la Piedra*, very little formal analysis had been conducted in the study of Pre-classic sculpture. General descriptions of the works were frequently provided in archaeological reports; however, these often overlooked all elements beyond the iconographic, excluding formalistic considerations from the field of inquiry (Drucker, 1952; Stirling, 1943, 1955). Of

the various formal qualities inherent to these artworks, only style was considered worthy of further analysis, and only because its distribution was seen as the key to determining the geographical range of the Olmec cultural phenomenon.

Covarrubias and Caso provided the first definitions of Olmec style in their contributions to the 1942 Segunda Mesa Redonda, which Covarrubias later expanded in his volume, entitled *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (1946a). In this work he described the Olmec style as characterized by solid masses, precise lines, soft curves and rounded corners used to disguise angular shapes, and an overall simplicity of form that stood in direct contrast to the baroque, overly formalized representations of Classic period artworks. Covarrubias thought the latter too “overburdened with religious symbolism and ceremonial functionalism” and lauded the sensual realism of the Olmec forms (1957: 54).

Almost twenty years later Michael Coe followed up with a more detailed exploration of the Olmec style and its distribution (1965). His definition echoes and expounds upon many of the same elements first identified by Covarrubias, including the eschewal of geometric abstraction in favor of a curvilinear naturalism and the sensitive treatment of forms. Coe also observed that Pre-classic artists employed space to create tension between the elements and a rhythm of line, which together could produce the monumental character found even in their portable sculptures (*ibid.*, 748-750). Within his study, Coe claimed that “a precise definition of the style must be limited and not allowed to range over the map, absorbing every known piece which looks the least bit Olmec”

(*ibid.*, 746-747). However, this statement seems to stand in direct contradiction to his own methodology of including objects from all over Mesoamerica in his definitions of the Olmec style and its distribution, essentially skewing the resulting conclusions. Nevertheless, Coe's study and definition of the Olmec style remains the most prominent and oft cited.

With the first book-length study of Olmec monumental sculpture, de la Fuente introduced the formalist methodology into the analysis of Olmec artworks (1977). Taking the corpus of monumental sculpture from the Gulf lowlands as her primary focus, de la Fuente proposed that the harmonic proportions and compositional order of these sculptures were intended to mirror the order found in Olmec cosmogony (*ibid.*, 1981). Through a careful examination of the forms and features of Olmec artworks, de la Fuente believed that their intrinsic significance could be determined. Her conviction that it is through the production of artworks that humans express their most fundamental natures and anxieties led her to seek an understanding of the Olmec worldview through their sculpture and relate it to a wider spectrum of human behavior, thought, and emotion. In this regard she positioned herself in opposition to the majority of Pre-classic scholars who focused their efforts on "defining the style in terms of those external features that resemble the jaguar or are derived from it" (de la Fuente, 1981: 83).

De la Fuente demonstrated that Olmec sculptors employed the golden mean in order to achieve harmonic proportions within their compositions (*ibid.*). From this she determined that the sculptures they created were expressions of the cosmic order. She suggested that the human body was the sacred



embodiment of this order within the natural and supernatural realms. As such, she proposed that the human form in olmec art was neither historical, nor political. Rather, the human body represented fundamental beliefs and principles which could be determined through the careful analysis of the artwork's form and structure. "Olmec man had a perfectly ordered vision of the world of nature and, perhaps, of the supernatural, and wanted to show it in a concrete way in his stone monuments. The ideal measure that he used in his monumental works of art is the same as that which forms our bodies and our universe..." (*ibid.*, 87).

Although de la Fuente's work brought the formal qualities of olmec artworks to the attention of the scholarly community, few other scholars have since employed formalism as a primary methodology in the study of olmec art.<sup>v</sup> Nonetheless, her work is generally acknowledged as a groundbreaking effort to re-present the olmec artistic canon as homocentric, harmonious in proportion, and humanistic in its themes.

### **Chronological Sequencing**

One group of texts, which may be considered a subset of the formalist scholarship addressing olmec artworks, primarily considers the chronological sequencing of monuments. Unlike the works of de la Fuente, these publications do not concern themselves with the inherent meaning conveyed by the formal attributes of the artworks they consider. Nor are they interested in the larger humanistic themes which may be addressed through the production of art. Rather, these studies employ formal analysis to distinguish stylistic elements that may allow for a chronological seriation of olmec sculpture to be established.

Three major studies by C. William Clewlow, Charles Wicke, and Susan Milbrath have attempted stylistic seriations of all Olmec monuments, each utilizing a different methodological framework.

George Kubler was the first to attempt a stylistic seriation of Olmec sculpture by ordering the colossal heads based upon their shape, with the rounder heads considered early and those heads with an elongated form placed later in the seriation (1962). In 1967 a group of scholars from the University of California, Berkeley, produced a more comprehensive study of the heads, based on a stylistic comparison of seven distinguishing features possessed by each of the then-known twelve colossal heads (Clewlow, Cowan, O'Connell, and Benemann, 1967). These features included ear ornaments, headdresses, chin straps, nasions,<sup>vi</sup> eye and mouth forms, the narrow ridges outlining the lips, and head shapes. Additionally, the authors considered stone sources and evidence of purposeful defacement. While the study reported that the heads shared the greatest number of similarities with other heads from their respective sites (San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes/ Nestepe), it also suggested that some heads at San Lorenzo shared more similarities with the La Venta heads. The remaining San Lorenzo heads appeared closer to those from Tres Zapotes and Nestepe (*ibid.*, 57-58). The resulting seriation was, the authors asserted, not intended to fix the colossal heads in time, but rather to suggest stylistic relationships between them (*ibid.*, 58).

In 1974 one of the Berkeley scholars, C. William Clewlow, followed up with a more complete study which attempted to seriate and chronologically orient all

known Olmec monuments (excepting sculptural fragments and works too defaced to analyze stylistically). Clewlow identified three styles, corresponding to three major Gulf lowland sites: Laguna de los Cerros, San Lorenzo, and La Venta. According to Clewlow, the La Venta School is characterized by massive necks, a contrast between the detailed treatment of the facial features and the more general presentation of body forms, utilitarian objects held in hands, crude claws in place of hands and feet, and fewer and more poorly rendered capes worn by the figures (1974: 43). The San Lorenzo School is also characterized by massive necks, and a more even, detailed modeling of both facial features and body forms. Figures often hold unusual objects, thought to be ritual or ceremonial in nature, and capes are commonly worn (*ibid.*, 49). The third school of Laguna de los Cerros shows a much greater tendency towards experimental forms, detailed modeling, and a common set of garments consisting of a genital cover, abdomen wrap, and cape (*ibid.*, 53). Susan Milbrath has pointed out that, although Clewlow claims these schools to be stylistic in nature, many of the traits used to distinguish one school from another are actually iconographic (1979: 6).

In terms of chronological placement, Clewlow suggests that the Laguna de los Cerros School was the oldest, roughly corresponding to the San Lorenzo A phase, while the San Lorenzo School appeared during the San Lorenzo B phase, with the La Venta School emerging sometime around La Venta's Phase II (*ibid.*, 61-62). However, not all sculptures correspond to the style identified for their sites. For example, Clewlow suggests that La Venta Monuments 23 and 73 are in the style of the Laguna de los Cerros School, and that La Venta Altars 3, 4, and 5

are in the style of the San Lorenzo School (*ibid.*, 170; 172; see Tables 11 and 13). Clewlow also believed that within the various categories of representation (seated figures, altars, colossal heads, etc.) the tendency was to move from small and simple to large and complex forms of representation. However, he stresses that simple forms should not denote lack of skill, and that this tendency is not to be generally applied to all sculpture across the board (*ibid.*, 148).

Clewlow stressed that his chronology was likely to be revised with time, owing to the limited amount of data available to him and the likelihood of discovering other monuments which would disrupt the seriations he had laid out. Also, he observed that the “uniformity of trait comparability is not good, even for discussion of the figures from one site or within one style. It is therefore even more difficult to attempt a seriation analysis of all the figures in all three styles” (*ibid.*, 60). Ultimately, Clewlow hoped that his seriation could be chronologically expanded or compressed, “like an accordion,” as more data on the Olmec and their site histories became available (*ibid.*, 148).

Charles Wicke also attempted a seriation of Pre-classic sculpture by applying the Guttman Scale to the Olmec style (1971). This method originated with sociologist Louis Guttman’s 1944 system, created to investigate the morale of U.S. forces in WWII (*ibid.*, 113). Wicke attempted to trace the stylistic drift in Olmec artworks to reverse engineer a chronology by aligning monuments stylistically and noting changing trends between groups. Wicke believed that “stylistic drift,” or the stylistic factor, comprised a single variable which could be used to chronologically “scale,” or seriate, monuments. However, he admitted

that determining the top of the scale (where it starts chronologically) is problematic. Wicke does not address how his approach might be affected by regional variation. He has also been accused of using too few variables in his stylistic comparisons (Thompson, 1975: 44-45) Wicke does, however, try to relate and corroborate his findings with archaeological and contextual evidence.

Susan Milbrath's chronology of Pre-classic sculpture also grouped monuments stylistically. She then suggested a chronology for the groups based upon archaeological data relating to context and shared elements between ceramic decoration and sculptural motifs (1979). In her analysis, Milbrath stressed the necessity of carefully examining the formal qualities of the sculpture --including modeling, detail, composition, etc.-- that can aid in determining stylistic categories that cross-cut figural types, such as seated figures, altars, or heads (*ibid.*, 5). Categorizing sculptures in the round into Groups I-III, and relief carvings into Groups I-IV, Milbrath sees the stylistic development of free-standing sculpture as moving from naturalistic to angular and finally to crude and abstract. Concurrently, relief sculpture moved in an opposing direction from simple to complex compositions with greater detail and modeling (*ibid.*, 40-42). Her stylistic groups are not limited to a single site, although certain styles have a greater presence at some sites than others. For example, Group I sculptures are more prominent at San Lorenzo, whereas Group III sculptures are more commonly found at La Venta. Moreover, Milbrath suggests that the chronological placement of Group I corresponds to the Chicharras and San Lorenzo A phases, whereas

Group II figures date to the San Lorenzo phase (particularly San Lorenzo B) and Group III is aligned with the Middle Pre-classic.

Where Milbrath's approach significantly diverges from previous chronologies is in her attempts to explain the socio-political impetus for the changes in olmec sculptural style. She suggests two primary forces which may have played a part in instituting these changes. The first is the role of economics and long-distance networks of exchange; the second is political upheaval. The former, she suggests, may account for the standardization of Group II sculptures. Also, the possible influx of stylistic elements from Chiapas and Guatemala during the Middle Pre-classic (as seen in Group III) may have been related to the trade of either greenstone or obsidian between these areas and the Gulf lowlands, or from political exchange between the two regions (*ibid.*, 43). For example, Milbrath cites the archaeological sequence at San Lorenzo and Chiapa de Corzo in Chiapas as suggestive of events that disrupted the sites around the end of the Early Pre-classic, possibly involving the displacement of the original population by an outside group. She proposes that these events were the catalysts for the stylistic changes that occurred around the same time (*ibid.*, 44).

Anatole Pohorilenko also addresses the chronological placement of olmec artworks within his analysis of the olmec representational system (1991: 1253-1296). However, Pohorilenko does not incorporate stylistic seriation of monumental sculpture, but rather attempts a periodization of all olmec-style artworks (including pottery, figurines, portable and monumental sculpture) based on the appearance, domination, and decline of particular themes and motifs.

While style occasionally factors into his analysis, iconography is the primary mechanism through which chronological placement is determined. Likewise, de la Fuente defined the stylistic elements particular to the sites of San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Laguna de los Cerros but did not relate these styles to any chronological periods or sequencing (2000). Therefore, although these studies are related to the attempts at chronological sequencing described above, they differ in both methodology and aim.

Although formalism has had only limited application in Pre-classic studies as a primary method of analysis, every student of Olmec art has felt its impact, primarily through the works of de la Fuente. Chronological studies have drawn heavily on stylistic analysis, yet often overlook or minimize their discussion of other formal qualities, such as material, composition, and sculptural treatment. Size, in particular, has often been a neglected feature of analysis in these publications, which is highly unfortunate because it is one of the key elements that significantly impacts the viewer. Nevertheless, discussing the formal elements of Olmec artworks alongside their iconographic features has become more prevalent since the 1970s, when form and style were introduced as key diagnostic elements that could impart the work's intrinsic meaning to contemporary viewers.

### ***3.3 Contextual Analysis***

The last ten years have seen the rise of a third methodological approach to Olmec monumental sculpture; one that carefully examines the physical

contexts of monuments in order to suggest possible functions and patterns of display. This methodology is not new to the study of ceramic vessels and figurines, but was rarely an option for monument analysis in past decades due to the removal of many works from their original contexts without proper documentation of their location or associated stratigraphy. However, better record keeping over the past decades has allowed similar analyses of monument context to be conducted, particularly at the level of primary sites. These analyses fall within one of two modes, the first addressing the archaeological context of the works, including their deposition and any associated materials. The second mode of analysis considers only the location of the work and its proximity to other monumental or architectural features of the site. Both types of analysis have greatly aided in recent efforts to reconstruct the socio-political and ritual landscapes of Olman.

The San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project was the first to explicitly state its intention of employing the contextual information associated with monumental artworks in the analysis of their social function and significance (Cyphers, ed., 1997: 27,167). While previous excavators described the contextual information related to the monuments unearthed during their projects, this information was not utilized as an analytical tool in determining either function or meaning of the works themselves (e.g. Coe and Diehl, 1980; Drucker, 1952; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959; Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968). In her analysis of the Group E and D monuments, SLTAP director Ann Cyphers examined the relation between monumental sculpture and ritual activity



associated with social and belief systems (1999; Cyphers, ed., 1997). She observed that the juxtaposition of monuments with other sculptures and elements of monumental architecture created a network of significance that could be transformed or erased by the re-arrangement, removal, or addition of old and new works. In this light the re-carving and re-use of monuments constituted a process of transforming signification (Cyphers, ed., 1997:192). Cyphers has suggested that monumental sculpture could have been consistently re-arranged in order to respond to the changing needs of the elite patrons to present new and different messages to the viewers (*ibid.*, 1992a).

Cyphers analyzed the stratigraphy of all excavations conducted in Group E in a later publication in which she and her co-authors emphasized the area's construction phases, architectural platforms, and the associated material evidence of ritual activity that defined the use of the space (Cyphers, *et al.*, 2006). Through this analysis the authors conclude that the material discovered in Group E associate the space with themes of rulership, water, ancestry, and the underworld (*ibid.*, 27). They also noted comparisons with later spaces at the sites of La Venta, Teopantecuanitlan, and Chalcatzingo that suggest the spread of certain architectural concepts or configurations from Olman to other areas of Mesoamerica (*ibid.*, 31-32). Like Reilly (2002), Cyphers and her collaborators view architectural space as constituting a cosmological model used to legitimize the ruling elite (2006: 27). Throughout her explorations of specific architectural complexes and their associated monuments, Cyphers makes explicit her definition of context as inclusive of the object of examination, those

materials in its immediate vicinity, architectural elements, and/ or modifications to the surrounding landscape (Cyphers, ed., 1997: 167).

Cyphers has also examined the distribution of monuments in the hinterland areas surrounding the San Lorenzo plateau. In these instances, lack of archeological exploration limits the consideration of the works' contextual milieu to their location and position within the network of site hierarchies. The relationship between the form, iconography, and location of altar-thrones at primary and hinterland sites is a topic that has been particularly elaborated upon in these studies (Cyphers, 2004, 2008; Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006). Cyphers has suggested that the power of certain sites is reflected in the presence and size of its altar-thrones, which were only located at the most prestigious and powerful centers (2004: 59). The presence or absence of ancestral imagery may indicate whether the elite power of that site was rooted in genealogical relationships to the primary center (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 43). Likewise, the presence of monumental sculpture outside the primary site area seems to correlate with strategic locations within the fluvial network. Therefore, Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera suggest that these monuments acted as "manifestations of territorial integration" throughout the Gulf lowlands, although the unification of this landscape would have varied diachronically in its extent (*ibid.*, 48). While investigations of hinterland monuments are limited to available contextual data, Cyphers has been able to utilize the expanded context of the modified landscape in order to determine monument function.

David C. Grove also examined monument location in his analysis of constructed landscapes at three Pre-classic urban centers: San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Chalcatzingo (1999). In his study, Grove determined the “Major Monument Zones” (or MMZs) at each site in order to explore the shared structural templates that governed monument placement. At San Lorenzo and La Venta he suggests that the majority of public monuments addressing themes of rulership were located in the southern sector of the site, while the northern sectors included fewer monuments which were positioned at their outer edge (*ibid.*, 285-286). Grove believes the monuments located in the MMZ to be historical in theme, whereas the peripheral monuments of the northern sector relate to myth and cosmology (*ibid.*, 287). This organizing principle, which Grove suggests is cosmological in nature, would seem to reflect later Mesoamerican beliefs that align the center with civilization, while the periphery is associated with the supernatural and the mythological past.

Comparison with Chalcatzingo suggests a number of similarities, while simultaneously demonstrating a reversal of the Gulf lowland template in which the majority of monuments are located in the southern sector. At Chalcatzingo the majority of monuments are located in the northern sector, although they share the same emphasis on supernatural or mythological themes as the peripheral monuments at San Lorenzo (*ibid.*, 287). While Grove does not address the problems inherent to analyzing the current locations of monuments, many of which were re-positioned at one or more times within their use-life, his

study was the first to attempt a holistic analysis of Pre-classic monumental landscapes.

Likewise, Rebecca González-Lauck also addressed the context of La Venta monuments purely in terms of their final position within the built environment of the site (2004). However, González-Lauck does address the problematic nature of this type of analysis, acknowledging that in many cases, the archaeological data suggests that the work is in a secondary context. Additionally, she points to the contradictory or insufficient information presented in different archaeological reports, which makes contextual analysis based on data provided by these publications difficult. In spite of these obstacles, González-Lauck argues that even secondary contexts are useful for garnering information about the functions of Olmec monuments. Moreover, the relations between the monuments, their spaces, and sizes suggests that their positions were most likely determined by the Pre-classic occupants of the site, rather than a result of post-Olmec activity (*ibid.*, 84). In her examination of four distinct monumental groupings and their associated architectural features, González-Lauck suggests that monument groups were used to demarcate different areas of the site. The colossal heads at the north end of Complex A and the D-7 triad (LV-52-54) likely served to signal the extreme north and south sectors of the site, respectively. The C-1 stelae, positioned on the basal platform below the pyramid on the south side and facing the Complex B plaza, demarcate a middle point between these two extremes. Altar pairs 2/3 and 4/5 occur in two discrete areas of the site, yet both are associated with basal pyramids, which González-Lauck

suggests are related to the position of these structures as emblems of concentrated power (*ibid.*, 99). Like Grove, González-Lauck emphasizes display practices and the configuration of monuments with architectural assemblages above the social functions of the works. However, for both of these authors the display of the monuments is intimately tied to their social roles in ordering and delineating a certain types of spaces, both public and private.

Christopher Pool has similarly suggested that the monuments of Tres Zapotes were integral to the processes of political place-making (2007b). The positioning of the majority of monuments towards the middle of the site, with a cleft serpentine column surrounded by a basalt enclosure at its center, signaled a “concentration of authority at the very heart of the polity” (*ibid.*, 27). However, between the Middle and Late Pre-classic Colossal Heads A and Q were repositioned to face the administrative-residential platforms of Group 1 and the Nestepe Group. These monument-platform pairs formed an administrative axis that complemented the ceremonial axes constituted by pairs of temples and adoratories at each of the architectural groupings (*ibid.*, 26). In his study of monument placement and context at Tres Zapotes, Pool characterizes the display of monuments as a manifestation of Pre-classic socio-political processes and signifying practices.

Contextual analysis of Olmec sculpture is only a decade old, and yet the authors cited above have already demonstrated its usefulness in addressing new aspects of monument function and display. The rise of this methodology mirrors the rise of post-processual trends in anthropology, particularly as demonstrated

in the writings of Ian Hodder, who stressed the importance of examining context to understand meaning. For Hodder, this meant examining both the contexts of social behavior and action that took place around an object, as well as the associative networks in which the object took part (1987, 1992). Contextual archaeology stresses a dialectical relationship between context and object, recognizing that “context both gives meaning to and gains meaning from an object” (Hodder, 1992: 14).

While scholars of the Pre-classic have made a strong start, it seems clear that there remains room to develop our readings of the dialectical relationships between Olmec monuments and their contexts. Although we have begun to theorize about how monuments gave meaning to their environments, little has been said about how these same works *gained* meaning from their contextual milieus. The accrual of meaning through practices of display and social ritual is integral to the nature of the monument and will be more fully addressed in relation to specific works in the following chapters.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear from a review of the literature addressing Olmec art that Mesoamerican scholars have thought with Olmec monuments for much of the field's history. These artworks have been used to conceptualize Olmec belief systems, worldviews, political offices, aesthetics, and landscapes. Likewise, iconography, form, and context have each provided scholars a mechanism for thinking through and about monuments.

Iconographic studies have comprised the dominant method of engaging with Olmec monuments, with ethnographic analogy --and particularly the direct historical approach-- providing the foundation for impressionistic interpretations of motifs and symbols. These interpretations were subsequently explained and justified in relation to ethno-historic data taken from later Mesoamerican and native South American cultural groups. Ecological analogy also drew upon upstreaming methods to validate the incorporation of one or another animal species into cosmologies and belief systems by demonstrating the continued importance of these species to later cultural groups. Similarly, the first structuralist methodologies applied ethnographic analogy to validate and explain motif clusters. However, as Pohorilenko has demonstrated, structuralist analyses are more successful when disassociated from ethnographic analogy altogether, focusing instead on the internal structural rules of a symbol system.

Unlike iconography, which looks for the significance of a monument in the cultural meaning attached to its symbols and subjects, formalist methodology addresses meaning as inherent to the work's formal qualities. De la Fuente used this method to suggest that the harmonic proportions of a work spoke to the representation of cosmic order. Other authors have eschewed attempts to derive meaning from form, instead using stylistic and formal analysis to generate a chronological seriation of works. Among those scholars applying this approach, both Wicke (1971) and Milbrath (1979) have attempted to correlate their stylistic analysis with contextual data to suggest the chronological orientation of the works in their series. However, it was not until the beginning of the San Lorenzo

Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project in 1990 that context was examined to analyze the meanings and functions of the monuments themselves.

In response to post-processual trends in archaeology, current excavators of the Gulf lowlands have recently emphasized the material and ritual contexts of display in order to address the socio-political functions of monuments. These functions included the generation of sacred and civic landscapes through the practices of place-making and the ability objects possess to imbue the surrounding environment with significance. Cyphers in particular has suggested that the re-carving, re-use, and addition or removal of objects constituted a process of transforming environments of signification, as meanings were altered through the rearrangement of monument groupings (1992a).

Each one of these methodologies has its place in the study of olmec artworks and the primary consideration in their application is the nature of the work itself, which may lend itself to one methodology over another. Monuments may have no contextual information to analyze but display well-preserved iconographic elements or unique formal attributes. Likewise, many works which have been mutilated or weatherworn are often encountered in rich stratigraphic positions which suggest a long history of use or pride of place in public or ceremonial displays. The examination of monumental sculpture in the following chapters will examine iconography, form, and context for meaning wherever possible. However, monument context will be the primary mechanism for exploring the construction of social memory through practice and display. The following chapters will utilize Cyphers's analysis of Group E (1999: 159-165;



Cyphers, ed., 1997: 170-180; Cyphers, *et al.*, 2006: 20-27) as a methodological model for drawing inferences of monument function from the contextual milieu.

The form, size, and material of artworks will also be considered in conjunction with their iconography to address the interrelation between appearance and function. Unlike de la Fuente, I am not interested in employing formalism to determine universal themes, but will discuss these qualities as they relate to site-specific trends in representation. In considering the iconography of Olmec works, I favor structuralist interpretations that draw upon the configurational contexts of symbols within a closed system of representation to infer meaning. While these interpretations may lead to observable relationships between the representational canons of the Olmec and later Mesoamerican cultures, they are in no way determined by ethno-historical comparisons between these groups.

In each of the following chapters I wish to emphasize the potential for dynamic processes of change and evolution as enacted by individual and corporate agencies. This is a difficult task, given that the nature of archaeology, from which much of the data for this study is drawn, is to emphasize continuities over time. Rupture does not always lend itself to clear material manifestation, while slow change is even more difficult to pinpoint. All we might be able to achieve is to trace some of these fissures in the representational system. However, if it can be said that people use objects to think with, then such fissures may indicate changes or site-specific distinctions in how and why Olmec monuments were thought by discrete social agents over time.

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<sup>i</sup> Although some art historians draw a distinction between the identification of content and its analysis (the former taking the title of iconography and the latter termed iconology) it is more common to conflate the two under the single heading of iconography.

<sup>ii</sup> Recent publications have asserted that an Olmec writing system did exist, based in the discovery of a stone tablet referred to as the “Cascajal Block” (Rodríguez Martínez, *et al.*, 2006). However, the origin of this block is controversial (see Cyphers 2007a, 2007b), and at the time of this writing I remain unconvinced of either the block’s authenticity or that the symbols on its surface constitute an actual script.

<sup>iii</sup> Campbell and Kauffman were the first to suggest that the Olmec were, at least in part, speakers of Mixe-Zoquean languages (1976). While this view has been widely accepted it is also possible that more than one language was spoken in the Olman. Leonardo Manrique-Casteñeda has recently suggested that the region might have been bi-lingual, home to speakers of both proto-yaché and Mixe-Zoquean languages (2000).

<sup>iv</sup> Plato developed the concept of *eidōs*, or form, as part of his Theory of Forms (or Theory of Ideas) over the course of decades and within the larger structure of his middle-period dialogues.

<sup>v</sup> While formalism in Olmec scholarship has been limited to the writings of Beatriz de la Fuente, the application of this methodology to the study of art in other areas of Mesoamerica has been developed by art historians such as Esther Pasztory (e.g. 2005).

<sup>vi</sup> *Nasion* is used to refer to the “area where the more fleshy skin of the forehead meets the taut epidermis of the nasal bridge, thereby creating a pinched, wrinkled, or folded effect” (Clewlow, 1974: 12).

## Chapter Four: Monuments and Social Space at San Lorenzo

*“[E]ach monumental space becomes the metaphorical and quasi-metaphysical underpinning of a society, this by virtue of a play of substitutions in which the religious and political realms symbolically (and ceremonially) exchange attributes- the attributes of power; in this way the authority of the sacred and the sacred aspect of authority are transferred back and forth, mutually reinforcing one another in the process” (Henri Lefebvre, 1992: 225).*

This chapter will discuss the archaeological contexts of San Lorenzo’s stone monuments in relation to the construction of social space and time.

Following the theories of Henri Lefebvre, the production of space is considered here as a process by which embodied action and the formal structures that define an area come together to produce a socially charged space (1992).

Likewise, Lefebvre also categorizes the production of time as a social process involving human action and lived experience. Thus, space and time together are socially produced by culturally charged activities such as gesture, work, play, and ritual taking place within a designated setting. Each action produces a different sort of space and a different sort of time, particular to the physical setting in which it takes place.

For example, play within a sports stadium marks that space as specific to that activity. Concurrently, the division of time during the progress of the game creates a certain experience of the temporal not found outside of that setting. In an American football game time is divided into quarters, each lasting fifteen minutes. The halftime period lasts twelve minutes. This structuring of time is consistent for every game and necessary to the overall experience of play. Alternatively, in a baseball stadium time (distinguished by innings) is determined

by the action of play rather than predetermined temporal structures. Thus, time in a baseball stadium is flexible and unfixed, whereas time within the football stadium is more rigid. The temporal experience of the game is intimately linked to the structure of play.

Football games are not played in the baseball stadium, nor do baseball games take place in the football stadium. Neither game takes place in cathedrals, nor do formalized religious rituals play out in the sports arena (although plenty of praying on the part of individual players and fans may occur at a tense moment within the game). Prescribed actions occur only in the designated physical spaces to which they are ideologically suited.

Likewise, at San Lorenzo stone sculptures were placed in contexts particular to their use. These contexts reveal a great deal about the spaces constructed by the inhabitants of the site through both social action and the modification of physical settings. San Lorenzo's architecture was constructed primarily of clay, mud, sand, and wood. Few of these construction materials would have endured in the region's climate of scorching sun, heavy rainfall, and persistent humidity, necessitating the constant reproduction and renewal of the site's architecture. Through the repeated remaking of these settings the space and time associated with the monument were also re-made, revitalizing the social memory of the past and making it once again a powerful ideological mechanism with which to influence the present and future. The processes of remaking necessary to maintaining the immediacy of the monument and its spatio-temporal setting also allowed for negotiations, erasures, and transformations of the past.

The construction and re-construction of spaces at San Lorenzo will be considered here in relation to the practices of monument display, interment, mutilation, and the rituals performed in tandem with these practices.

The archaeological record is particularly well-suited to an examination of the production of space because the social actions involved often leave material traces in the depositional matrix. Stone monuments are among the most significant of these; yet, alone, they do not provide sufficient information about the larger processes of spatial production in which they took part. Architectural construction, ritual burning, monument mutilation and destruction all provide material evidence of the actions involved in making and remaking San Lorenzo's monumental spaces.

The first six sections of this chapter will provide detailed descriptions of all the San Lorenzo monuments reported in association with contextual data to date. Each of these sections pertains to a different area of the San Lorenzo plateau, its architectural groups, ridges, or other areas where intense archaeological exploration has taken place (figure 4.1). The seventh and final section will discuss the monuments and their contexts in order to identify patterns of display, use, and re-use that define the construction of space and time at San Lorenzo. The production of monument spatio-temporal milieus will then be considered in relation to social memory as a mechanism of elite power and political contestation.

#### **4.1 Group E**

Group E is located in southwestern region of the plateau, below Groups D and C, extending out along a finger-like ridge through which ran a stone drain-line that at one time transported water from a well located in the Group E architectural complex. This complex, consisting of a sunken patio surrounded by platforms on at least three sides, extends 75 meters on a side and originally rose approximately 4 meters above the ground surface (figure 4.2). In modern times the patio was modified into a *laguna* for agricultural purposes. This *laguna* was designated number 8 by Coe and Diehl during their mapping of the plateau (1980). Group E was the site of various ritual practices and several stone monuments were displayed in the complex, leading Cyphers, *et al.* to associate the area with elite ritual activities, as well as general cultural themes involving “sovereignty, ancestry, water, and the underworld,” (2006: 26).

Jürgen Brüggemann and Marie Areti Hers first explored the Group E complex during the 1970 excavations, which were directed with the use of a cesium magnetometer employed to locate stone monuments through the identification and excavation of magnetic anomalies (1970a, 1970b). At this time Brüggemann and Hers excavated monuments SL-61 and SL-62, but did not recognize that they had been interred in the fill of the eastern mound of this complex. Since 1990 the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project’s explorations at the site have included detailed excavations of the group, resulting in the most complete archaeological record compiled and published on a single area of the San Lorenzo plateau (Cyphers, ed., 1997; Cyphers, 1999; Cyphers, *et al.*, 2006).

The sunken patio and northern platform of the complex appear to have undergone two distinct phases of construction (Cyphers, *et al.*, 2006: 23-24). A red sand-plastered surface layer marked the first phase, while a yellow sandy-clay plaster characterized the second. The first red platform, oriented east-west, was a rectangular structure with at least one inset corner. It measured 7 meters wide and had a length of over 15 meters. The southern talud, facing the sunken patio, rose 1.25 meters from the level of the patio and had three steps. The upper part of the longer, more sloping northern talud supported an earthen column which, like the platform itself, was plastered with red sand. The superstructure was razed and offerings deposited in the adjacent floor of the patio prior to the second phase of construction. This second building phase increased the size of the northern platform, now 9 meters wide and with a height of more than 1.4 meters above the sunken patio. A cached offering of 68 ceramic vessels, whole and partial, and a chert projectile point were deposited below the floor of the second structure. The northern platform shows a record of continuous usage between 1200 and 1000 B.C. (*ibid.*).

The sunken patio also had two building phases coinciding with those of the northern platform. Cyphers, *et al.* have suggested that the patio was once roofed, based on the lack of erosion, despite the apparent absence of a drainage system (*ibid.*, 24). The patio measured approximately 50 meters in length on its northern and southern sides and was raised 4 meters above the ground level outside of the architectural complex, although it would have appeared sunken from within. While the sunken patio at San Lorenzo seems to precede later

examples, analogous architectural features can be found at La Venta, Chalcatzingo, and Teopantecuanitlan. An array of offerings was associated with both the first and second phase patio floors. These included figurines, obsidian artifacts, and ceramic vessels. The yellow floor was also associated with several unusual offerings, including a human mandible, a vessel containing segments of human ribs, and the scattered bones of birds and infants. The red sand-plastered phase of the patio, like the corresponding stage of construction for the northern platform, can be dated to c.1200-1000 B.C., while the yellow sandy-clay phase for both patio and platform dates to 1000-900 B.C. (*Ibid.*, 23-24). Abandonment of the complex appears to have occurred around 900 B.C., coinciding with rites of termination, at which time the aqueduct also ceased to function (*ibid.*, 26). At this time the yellow patio floor was “littered with vessels and figurines” (Cyphers, 1999: 163)

The southern platform of the complex consisted of a low structure which originally supported the subfloor aqueduct and at least two superstructures. One of these superstructures, oriented east-west, was associated with a well, which fed the connecting stone aqueduct. Stretching more than 22.5 meters in length, this structure is marked by a red floor which was plastered more than 25 times, gradually increasing the height of the well's mouth. Cyphers, *et al.*, suggest this was perhaps a strategy intended to contain and control a rise in the water level and prevent structural damage (2006: 25). To the east of the well a second superstructure is marked by a small rise supporting a bentonite floor, measuring 7 meters from north to south (*ibid.*).



The eastern platform was the location of the original explorations by Brüggemann and Hers, although they did not realize that they were excavating a discrete structure. Their investigations were conducted with the sole purpose of exploring a magnetic anomaly, resulting in the excavation and extraction of SL-61 and SL-62. Later explorations by the SLTAP revealed that the platform itself contained a fill identical to that of the northern platform. Associated ceramics date the structure to the San Lorenzo Phase (1150 and 900 B.C.) (*ibid.*). No platform explorations on the western side of Group E have been reported, although a rise on the topographic map might suggest that such a platform indeed existed.

Seven stone sculptures have been associated with Group E and its immediate vicinity. These are SL-9, SL-10, SL-14, SL-52, SL-56, SL-61, SL-62, and SL-77. SL-9 is often described as the “duck fountain” and appears to have been part of the aqueduct. It was discovered on the surface of a “narrow projecting point overlooking a steep ravine west of the central mound” (Stirling, 1955: 13). This position associates the sculpture with the terminus of the drain-line system but is not associated with any additional contextual information. SL-10, a well-preserved composite-figure with “knuckledusters,” was also found near the terminus of the drain-line, overturned at the bottom of a small ravine where the erosion of the plateau had caused it to fall. SL-52 was found near the drain-line, buried atop the southern platform at a depth of 1.4 meters. It appears that the monument was not in its original context but had been disturbed, probably when Laguna 8 was dug (Cyphers, 1999: 162). SL-77 was discovered by the

SLTAP near the aqueduct in the northern part of the Cañada del Mayacal, where it had been displaced through the processes of erosion (Cyphers, ed., 1997: 205). Although the head is missing, its remaining base has an unusual shape which has been likened to the form of the nearby drain-stones. Of the monuments associated with Group E only four retained their original contexts. SL-62 is a fragment of basalt which Coe and Diehl suggested was once part of a circular altar (1980: 364). Lacking the original form, iconography, or function of this work I have chosen not to discuss it. The remaining three monuments (SL-14, SL-56, and SL-61) will be described in greater detail below.

#### *Monument 14*

One of only two remaining altar-thrones known for the site of San Lorenzo, SL-14 takes the form of a large rectangular block of basalt measuring 1.52 meters wide, 1.83 meters high, and 3.48 meters long, (figure 4.3). A wide ledge projects over the lower front and sides, giving the monument the appearance of a table. Thus, the monuments in this category are commonly referred to as table-top altars. Above this ledge, a raised area designates the central section of the throne's upper surface. Although somewhat mutilated and eroded, the frontal niche containing a seated human figure, can still be plainly distinguished. The figure is seated cross-legged, with arms outstretched in front of his torso; one held to his right side and the other positioned in front of his right leg where it crosses over his left. This posture is analogous to that of the niche figure on Altar 4 from La Venta. Like Altar 4, the figure on SL-14 at one time held a rope in his hands, which stretched across the bottom of the monument's front and most

likely extended to its sides. Prior to the breakage which damaged the front corners of the altar, this rope probably led to the figures carved in relief on either side of the monument, as it does on the La Venta altar. These lateral figures, like the one seated in the central niche, have been mutilated so that all or part of their original appearance is now lost to us.

The left side of the monument is the best preserved, presenting a seated male figure with the right arm out-stretched and the other raised and bent at a 90° angle (figure 4.4). Parts of the right arm and legs of the figure have been removed as a result of breakage to the lower left-front corner of the monument. The relief carving is well done and distinctly shows the elaborate ornamentation of the figure, with a collar, pectoral, decorative armbands, and headdress that clearly mark him as a member of the elite class. The pectoral appears similar to the one worn by the SL-34 figure (figure 4. 12). The headdress is unique in the canon of Olmec art. It appears to have the shape of an inverted plate or dish with pendant elements hung along the brim and is topped by the claw of a raptorial bird.

David Grove has associated this claw emblem with the raptorial claw decorating the headdress of Head 4 from La Venta. Based on his suggestion that these emblems are identifying or “naming” glyphs, Grove proposed that these two individuals are the same (1981:66-67). Grove further posits that the rope linking the SL-14 relief figure to the elite individual seated in the frontal niche represents kinship ties between the rulers of La Venta and San Lorenzo (*ibid.*). However, this claw also bears some similarity to the animal paw/claw motif found

on the headdress of SL-98, the 10<sup>th</sup> colossal head (figure 4.5). Therefore, if Grove is correct in his identification of the emblem as a naming glyph, the 10th head at San Lorenzo might also represent the SL-14 figure. It is also possible that the emblem is particular to a dynasty or clan, rather than to a single individual, which would explain its appearance on as many as three distinct monuments. If this is indeed the case, the repeated use of the claw emblem may suggest dynastic ties between the sites of La Venta and San Lorenzo through the lineage of the ruler represented by Head 4 and either, or both, of the individuals presented by the San Lorenzo monuments.

The right side of SL-14 was re-carved at some time during its period of use so that the original figure has been almost entirely removed (figure 4.6). An undulating area comprising approximately half of this side, concentrated on its lower right corner, has been ground or hammered down to remove several millimeters of the surface. Next, a series of quadrangular holes or niches were carved out of the side, a type of mutilation which Grove refers to as slotting (*ibid.*, 50). The purpose of these niches is unknown. Only the upper part of the figure's headdress and profile remain. The result of this mutilation was to effectively remove almost all signs of the figure's presence. However, the primary insignia, in the form of the headdress, was left in place.

The front of the monument has also suffered significant mutilation. Any relief carving on the overhanging ledge has been erased. The niche figure, too, was subjected to mutilation, which removed a part of the head, as well as all features from the face and headdress. However, enough detail was left to identify

particular elements of elite costuming, such as the collar and pectoral, wide belt, and bracelet on the right wrist. Presumably, these ornaments were not specific enough to the individual to be worth removing when all other signs of his identity (facial features and headdress) were erased. Above the central figure four striations and two circular depressions mar the front of the ledge. Additional mutilation occurred in the form of hammering which removed the lower-front and back lower-right corners of the monument prior to its interment around 1000 B.C. (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 320; Cyphers, 2008: 324).

#### *Monument 61*

SL-61 is the site's 8<sup>th</sup> colossal head, measuring 2.2 meters high, 1.65 meters across, and 1.6 meters wide (figure 4.7). It was discovered interred in the fill of the eastern mound of Group E and covered with a red sand cap. SL-61 is remarkable both for the high quality of its carving, as well as for being one of the few colossal heads discovered *in situ*. The large majority of heads were discovered in the ravines of the plateau, apparently having been shifted from their original positions through the processes of erosion. Of the colossal heads which remained atop the plateau, only three (SL-17, SL-53, and SL-61) have been the object of archaeological investigations. Moreover, SL-61 was the only colossal head to be interred below the floor of a platform mound.

The 8<sup>th</sup> colossal head is also unique in that it was probably carved from a large basalt boulder, rather than having been re-carved from a throne. This may explain the odd shape of the base and two irregular, depressed areas at the back of the head. Very little mutilation is found on the head itself, limited to a few

striations and rounded dimples on the upper left side of the headdress. These do not appear intended to mar or disfigure the head in any significant way, since the face and decorative portions of the headdress are left untouched. It may be that these markings were ritual in nature, since they appear on numerous monuments but do not seem intended to deface or destroy the monument. Grove refers to this type of mutilation as “non-specific” or “non-destructive,” while Pohorilenko called these “ceremonial markings” (Grove, 1981: 61). In any case, the majority of the head is well preserved and the details of its features and headdress are skillfully modeled.

The interment of SL-61 is unusual but not unprecedented. At least one other monument from the site, SL-112, was also discovered below the floors of an architectural structure (Cyphers, 2004c) (figure 4.8). This monument, measuring 2.1 meters long, 1.4 meters wide, and .08 meters thick, takes the form of a large rounded boulder carved with a human figure splayed across one side in bas-relief. The figure wears only a scant loincloth which holds a dagger or knife at his waist. The opposite side of the monument was marked with 102 striation marks and 6 circular depressions (Cyphers, 2004a: 191).

SL-112 is unique in the canon of Olmec sculpture. However, its placement below the floor of a structure mirrors the placement of SL-61. It may be that more than these two monuments were interred below the floors of San Lorenzo's platforms but have yet to be discovered, or, like SL-61, were originally removed without the excavators recognizing the full nature of their context. The treatment of these two monuments will be considered in further detail as part of the

discussion section of this chapter. However, it is important that this type of interment within architectural structures be distinguished from the process of encasing monuments in fill, as the monuments of Group D were.

#### *Monument 56*

One of the few stelae to come from the site of San Lorenzo, SL-56 was discovered in Pit 8 during the 1969 excavations (figure 4.9). The monument was located near the end of the Group E drain line, not far from where SL-10 was discovered by Stirling more than twenty years before. The base rested 1.2 meters below ground surface and had been laid over a circle of limestone and turtle carapace fragments measuring approximately 2 meters in diameter (Beverido Pereau, 1970: 182-183). Ceramic fragments were also found deposited in association with this stone circle. However, their state of deterioration prevented the excavator, Francisco Beverido Pereau, from identifying the chronological phase with which they corresponded (*ibid.*, 184).

The monument, measuring 5.35 meters long, is the only example of a stela bearing relief carving known for San Lorenzo. The image of a male struggling with a fearsome-looking zoomorph, baring outstretched claws and fangs, is analogous to the scene represented on SL-63 from La Venta (figure 4.10), although the latter presents a clearly aquatic adversary. Susan Milbrath has compared the theme of struggle between human and zoomorph represented on SL-56 with the relief carvings at Chalcatzingo depicting the domination of human figures by supernatural zoomorphs combining feline and avian features (1979: 37) (figure 3.4). This theme might also be related to that presented by

Teno-1 and LZ-3 (figures 3.2 and 3.3). Notably, large sections of the relief on SL-56 have been erased, including most of the head and torso of the human figure. Like other examples of monument mutilation at San Lorenzo, the erasure here seems directed at removing the identity of the individual, rather than its full presence, since the legs, arms, and general outline of the profile remain intact.

Beverido Pereau reports that SL-56 is made of a greenstone harder than serpentine (1970: 182), while Coe and Diehl classify its material as their Cerro Cintepec type A basalt (1980: 363). Clarification on this matter is needed, particularly in light of the fact that no other greenstone sculptures are known for San Lorenzo, although a number are found at La Venta. If the monument is indeed carved of greenstone, two possibilities arise. The first of these is that the monument was carved later than the majority of monuments known for San Lorenzo, closer to the Middle Pre-classic when greenstone began to be utilized as a sculptural medium for large works. The second possibility is that greenstone was utilized by sculptors earlier than previously indicated. Steps should be taken to identify the material of the monument so as to determine whether or not the issue is a valid one. Additionally, further excavation in and around the area of Beverido Pereau's Pit 8 may help to clarify the monument's placement within the site chronology.

Given that the majority of stone monuments at San Lorenzo were interred or terminated around the end of the site's apogee (between 900 and 850 B.C.), we might assume the deposition of SL-56 to have occurred during or before this period. Yet, the idiosyncratic appearance of the stela within the canon of San



Lorenzo, as well as the material associated with its interment, may suggest that this activity took place at a later time within the site's history. However, the sculptural corpus at San Lorenzo is notable for its idiosyncrasies in monument subject matter and form. Moreover, relatively few contextual settings of monument deposition have been explored with any depth or detail. A more complete record may reveal that the stone circle containing carapace fragments was not unique to the placement of either stone monuments, in general, or stelae in particular. Therefore, additional exploration of the area around Pit 8 and the site core is needed to determine the monument's place within San Lorenzo's chronology and display/ depositional practices.

#### **4.2 Group D**

Continuous occupation of this area since the Bajío phase (1350-1250 B.C.) has been corroborated by a series of explorations beginning in 1967. Coe and Diehl conducted the first of these excavations to explore the areas associated with SL-30 and SL-23, the latter resulting in the discovery of a number of monuments which appeared to have been deposited in a linear arrangement. Francisco Beverido Pereau conducted further explorations of the area in 1969 with the assistance of a cesium magnetometer (1970). This season resulted in the discovery and subsequent excavation of several additional monuments, among them SL-57, SL-58, and SL-59, all located in Group D. In 1991 and 1993 the SLTAP returned to the site of Coe and Diehl's SL-23 excavations (B3-17) to continue explorations of the complex. They also

investigated the adjacent area of B3-5, positioned midway between the SL-30 and SL-23 excavations.

No monuments have yet been reported in conjunction with the B-5 exploration. However, a broken floor associated with Bajío phase ceramics was located at 4 meters below the present day ground surface. Atop this, at a depth of 3.3 meters, a red structure dating to the San Lorenzo phase (1200-900 B.C.) had been constructed. This red structure was covered with a fill of hard clays, apparently as a result of the Laguna 7 construction activities (Cyphers, 1997: 104-105).

The deepest cultural strata thus far located in Group D date to the Bajío and Chicharras (1250-1150 B.C.) phases. The major occupation of the ridge dates to the San Lorenzo phase. During this period the red structure at B-5 was erected, SL-30 and SL-57 were set in place, and a red floor was deposited in the B3-17 workshop area. The workshop itself was later covered by rubble from collapsed or demolished construction, probably near the end of the San Lorenzo phase (*ibid.*, 105).

Three primary areas of the Group D Ridge have been reported as sites of monument deposition and display. The first of these, B3-17, appears to have functioned as a recycling workshop where monuments were re-carved. Numerous stone blocks, columns, and sculptural fragments have been located in the process of excavating this area. The Red Palace, an elite structure associated with the B3-17 workshop, and the site of the SL-30 excavations have

also proven to be rich sources of information regarding the architectural settings of monuments at San Lorenzo.

### **B3-17**

Coe and Diehl first excavated the monument-recycling workshop, otherwise referred to as B3-17, as part of the SL-23 investigations. A plain basalt stela, SL-23 was first observed protruding from the ground by Matthew Stirling in 1946 (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 111) (figure 4.11; see also Cyphers, 2004: 87, figure 43). After Coe and Diehl had opened several cuts around SL-23, SL-34 appeared and additional exploratory cuts were opened around the area surrounding the two sculptures in hopes of further discoveries. In this the excavators were not disappointed; an additional five monuments (SL-37, SL-38, SL-40, SL-41, and SL-43) were located in the immediate vicinity, arranged in north-south alignment (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 111).

When the SLTAP returned to the area in 1991 they uncovered several additional monuments, as well as a proliferation of flakes, abrasives, and tools, which lead to the conclusion that B3-17 had originally functioned as a workshop in which monuments were re-carved (Cyphers, 1999: 167). The linear arrangement of monuments identified by Coe and Diehl were more a result of linear excavation in an area rife with whole and fragmentary monuments than of intentional arrangement by the ancient craftsmen (Cyphers, pers. comm., 2008). The workshop hypothesis was also supported by the proximity of the C3 “basalt workshop,” most likely a discard area where more than 6 tons of lithic waste had been deposited (Beverido Pereau, 1970: 175; Cyphers, 1999: 167). However,

evidence of ritual activity, including the possible caching of offerings and ritual burning, as well as the proximity of the “Red Palace” (a structure with clear elite associations) suggests that the B3-17 workshop was not simply an area designated for craft activities.

The first construction stage in the B3-17 area, consisting of a fill level of brown clay mixed with sand and bentonite (Stratum I), dates to the Chicharras phase, or possibly early San Lorenzo. A floor of red and tan sand (Stratum H) was deposited above this fill and contained a few San Lorenzo A sherds, associating the floor with that phase. This floor contained two distinctive deposits in the form of small black and white river pebbles which Coe and Diehl believed to have been arranged to form two projectile points (1980: 111). Only the first of these was fully excavated, the “base” of the second was discovered in the east wall of Cut 5 but was not uncovered. However, Cyphers observes that no actual projectile points of this shape are known from the site. Instead, she suggests that the “points” are remnants of a gravel floor in this area (personal comm., 2010).

Atop this stratum a fill of brown clay and gravel (Stratum G) was placed to raise the ground level prior to the deposition of a floor series consisting of orange and brown sand and gravel (Stratum F) (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 111). The fill contained a concentration of broken pots identified with Coe and Diehl’s San Lorenzo A phase. Two trenches of unknown function were dug through this stratum before the deposition of the next floor series. The San Lorenzo A phase also saw the deposition of a thick floor of red sand and gravel (Stratum E) atop which sat the monuments left in the recycling workshop (*ibid.*). It would appear

that this is the time when the area was employed in the process of re-carving stone monuments; however, it should be noted that the space had a long history of occupation and use prior to this stage.

With the advent of the SLTAP excavations, the total number of monuments and stone fragments associated with the workshop increased to 6 sculptures, 12 rectangular stones, 11 architectural elements, and 10 fragments of significant size (Cyphers, 1999: 167). Not all of these works have yet been identified in the SLTAP reports. However, Cyphers does describe “an immense broken bottle-shaped column, a large rectangular block, and a peculiar rectangular basalt, slab-like stone with multiple depressions” discovered west of SL-23 and resting on or in the red sand-plastered floor (*ibid.*). These descriptions most likely refer to monuments SL-74, SL-75, and SL-76 (see Cyphers, 2004a: 140-142). Detailed stratigraphic reports on monument context are available for SL-23, SL-34, SL-38, SL-40, SL-41, and SL-43. Their settings will be further outlined here in order to relate evidence of ritual and social activities to the processes of monument use and re-carving carried out in this setting.

### *Monument 23*

The placement of SL-23 required that a pit be dug through the E floors into Stratum F series. This pit was then partially filled with Stratum C soil, which consisted of various soils containing bentonite and decomposed limestone fragments (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 114). The fill was most likely taken from the rubble of a demolished structure (Cyphers, 1997: 105). Small chunks of bentonite were also placed in the pit at the point intended to support the notch of the stela

base. The monument was then placed in the pit and the backfilling process continued with Stratum C soils. The excavators suggest that the monument was intentionally left visible, protruding above the fill that ultimately covered the B3-17 workshop area towards the end of the San Lorenzo B phase (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 114). If this were indeed the case, then the stela in its final form would have been a mnemonic device by which the location of the workshop was marked.

#### *Monument 34*

The most tantalizing of the anthropomorphic sculptures originating from San Lorenzo, SL-34 appears to have at one time possessed articulated arms that could be moved and repositioned (figure 4.12). The arms, whether originally of wood or stone, are now missing, along with the head of the figure, which was neatly removed without any additional damage to the monument. *Sans* head, the figure stands 79 centimeters high, 62 centimeters across at its widest point, and 60-62 centimeters from front to back (Cyphers, 2004a: 94). While it is now impossible to fully realize the original appearance of the work, the high quality of the sculpture, the intricate details of the costume --such as the pectoral, feathered leg band, and loincloth-- and the sensitive modeling of body forms allow us to recognize this work as one of the finest ever produced by Olmec sculptors.

SL-34 was discovered facing east, seated upright on the thick red sand and gravel floor (Stratum E). The base of the monument was encased in a layer of mottled tan and gray clay 4 centimeters thick (Stratum D), deposited after the

monument was already set in place. No Stratum D clay was found beneath the base of the figure. A cache of San Lorenzo B phase potsherds was placed between the legs and around the left foot shortly before the entire monument was covered with the Stratum C fill. At least 30 centimeters of the fill covered the monument towards the end of the San Lorenzo B phase (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 114).

### *Monument 37*

SL-37 represents a beheaded zoomorph holding a rope-like element, probably a serpent, in its mouth (figure 4.13).<sup>1</sup> The sculpture's form and subject analogous to Los Soldados-1 and LV-80, two monuments which appear to depict the same theme (Cyphers, 2004a: 97-99; González-Lauck, 1991) (figures 5.20 and 6.7). However, the San Lorenzo monument may represent a human impersonating the zoomorphic supernatural. Cyphers has drawn attention to the unusual scalloped edges around the front and back feet, which appear to terminate above the base as though concealing a figure underneath (2004a: 98). Moreover, the absence of a tail, along with the contours of back and gluteus, may be further evidence that the work is intended to represent a human impersonator in costume, rather than a supernatural zoomorph (*ibid.*). This would put the sculpture in a category with several other monuments possibly representing supernatural impersonators, including LZ-8, LZ-9, and the monument from San Martín Pajapan (see Chapter Six). However, SL-37 is the only known example in which a zoomorphic supernatural as the object of impersonation. The monuments from La Venta and Los Soldados do not demonstrate comparable

indicators of deity impersonation, distinguishing them from their San Lorenzo counterpart.

Sculpted of basalt, SL-37 stands 60 centimeters high from shoulder to base, and measures 72 centimeters across and 61 centimeters from rear to front (Cyphers, 2004a: 97). Along with the removal of the head, the monument has been broken at the right shoulder and at points around the right side of the base. Breakage is also visible along the cord or serpent at one time held in the figure's mouth, essentially removing the whole of the left side to just above the terminus, possibly the serpent's head.

SL-37 was found in the north wall of Cut 3 resting on a layer of Stratum D clay and facing south-southeast. This clay layer contained charcoal from *in situ* burning. Like the other monuments located in the B3-17 workshop SL-37 was encased in Stratum C rubble at the end of the San Lorenzo B Phase (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 116).

### *Monument 38*

SL-38 is a broken block of basalt measuring 46 centimeters high, 78 centimeters long, and 64 centimeters wide (Cyphers, 2004a: 100) (figure 4.14). Its top and bottom surfaces are smoothed while the others show signs of hammering. Cyphers compares the block form and alternating smooth and hammered surfaces on this monument to those of SL-79, SL-84, and SL-101 (*ibid.*). SL-38 had been broken along one side before being placed on a red clay platform, 4-5 centimeters thick, which was raised atop a layer of Stratum D clay sometime during the San Lorenzo B phase (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 116). Coe and



Diehl mention a hearth excavated directly below the monument in their reconstruction of the B3-17 stratigraphy (*ibid.*, 112). However, their notes on the monuments themselves suggest that the hearth may have actually been located beneath SL-37 (*ibid.*, 116). The excavators also refer to a hearth originally located between these two monuments (*ibid.*, 112).

While neither the form nor the size of SL-38 makes it immediately recognizable as a monument in the sense we are discussing here, its unusual treatment, deposited atop a platform and associated with *in situ* burning, may indicate that it has some greater significance than its present form would suggest. Since form alone is certainly not a strong indicator of cultural import where monuments are concerned, especially after they have been damaged or re-carved, I have chosen to include it based on the evidence of specialized treatment after removal from its primary context.

#### *Monument 40*

Likewise, SL-40 appears to be one of many drain-stones known from the site which were used in the construction of five aqueducts associated with various structures (Cyphers, 2004a: 101, figure 53). However, SL-40 is the only drain-stone recovered from the monument-recycling workshop. The drain-stone is a unique example of a common architectural element treated as a monument slated for recycling after removal from its original context of use. Found between SL-37 and SL-43, the stone was resting directly on the Stratum E floor. Additionally, a separate fragment of the drain was discovered interred in a pit dug into the Stratum E floor 4 meters north of this position (*ibid.*, 116).

### *Monuments 41 and 43*

A large basalt column with relief carving in the form of an anthropomorphic being, SL-41 was discovered lying facedown atop a platform of broken bentonite constructed above the Stratum E floor (figure 4.15). The smiling face and single enlarged left hand of the figure are unique in the canon of Olmec art. Hirokazu Kotegawa has recently suggested that the unusual half-moon smile and semi circular depressions on the face are the result of re-carving. He proposes that the monument once bore the visage of a composite anthropomorph or “were-jaguar,” with the deeply incised, down-turned corners of the mouth becoming the cheek depressions (2009: 4-8). Additionally, Cyphers has observed evidence that the column was re-carved from a larger sculptural work, noting the contrast between the smooth, planar right side of the monument and the rest of its curved, hammered surfaces. This same combination of smoothed and hammered surfaces appears on three different columns at San Lorenzo (SL-41, SL-57, and SL-75). She suggests that these columns are products of recycling, re-carved from larger sculptural works (2004a: 102). In its re-sculpted form the column measures 2.38 meters high, 75 centimeters wide, and 75 centimeters thick (*ibid.*, 101).

SL-43 is a small basalt carving of a curious creature that can best be described as an arachnid (figure 4.16). The thorax and eight legs are all fairly naturalistic; however, the head is replaced by an abstract block bearing a quincunx pattern and showing breakage at the top, suggesting that an additional section once extended above it. Measuring 38 centimeters high, 36 centimeters

long, and 24 centimeters wide, SL-43 is the smallest of all the San Lorenzo monuments (*ibid.*, 104).

The sculpture was positioned with its base resting on the Stratum E floor and its front touching the southeastern corner of SL-41. The Stratum C fill surrounding and encasing these two monuments is remarkable for its inclusion of half a stone bowl found to the northeast of Monument 41, a broken basalt celt located just south of Monument 43, and two fragments of greenschist and a piece of Monument 40 discovered near the top of the C fill (*ibid.*, 116).

### **Red Palace**

The elite structure often referred to as the “Red Palace” was also located on the Group D ridge and appears to have been allied with the monument recycling workshop. A thick rammed-mud wall once ran from the structure to the B3-17 workshop area. Cyphers has suggested that this wall once formed an enclosure for the B3-17 area (1999: 167). The proximal relationships between the Red Palace, B3-17 recycling workshop, and C3 “basalt workshop,” indicate the possibility of strict elite control over the importation, production, and disposal of stone as a resource.

The archaeological material recovered in this area suggests that ceremonial activities took place within the structure, which also showed evidence of daily occupation (*ibid.*). The edifice itself appears to have employed basalt step coverings, as well as bentonite and limestone slabs which were used in the construction of the walls (Cyphers, 1997: 101). The designation “Red Palace” is a reference to the hematite-stained sand that comprised the floor of the structure.

The edifice covered a curving stone aqueduct (SL-87) formed of six sinuous drain stones for which no covers have been found. It is possible that covers of wood were originally employed but have since disintegrated (Cyphers, 2004a: 152).

#### *Monument 57*

SL-57 is a large, smooth column of basalt, measuring 1.8 meters long and 90 centimeters in diameter (Beverido Pereau, 1970: 191) (figure 4.17). Like SL-41, this column shows evidence of having been re-carved from an older work, indicated by the single smooth planar surface which stands in direct contrast to the other curved, hammered sides (Cyphers, 2004a: 122). The monument once supported the roof of the “Red Palace” structure. It was discovered in Pit 10 of Beverido Pereau’s 1969 excavations, dug to investigate a magnetic anomaly located just north of B3-11 (Beverido Pereau, 1970: 191). Beverido Pereau reports that it was set vertically on a red sand floor next to two “benches” (most likely step covers) and ceremonially covered with limestone fragments (*ibid.*). However, since limestone was employed in the construction of the surrounding structure it is not clear whether these limestone fragments were purposely put in place when the building’s use was terminated, or whether the monument was simply buried in the rubble of the edifice it had once supported. Nonetheless, the discovery of this column *in situ* demonstrates that it and other stone columns located at the site were structurally integrated into elite and/ or ceremonial structures by the San Lorenzo phase at the latest.

It is possible that these architectural settings accrued layers of significance, cultural associations, and memories that became attached to the primary enduring element of construction (stone support columns) even after the structure itself fell into disuse. The reuse of these elements in other construction, as a form of *spolia*, could have served to attach the power and legitimacy of past regimes or monument settings to new construction. Likewise, their destruction would have had a powerful psychic affect, contributing to the ideological (as well as physical) destruction of a space.

### *Monument 30*

The SL-30 excavations were conducted under the direction of Coe and Diehl in 1967. Agustín Camaño and Félix Ramírez led the excavators to the site of the monument, which protruded above the ground surface between B3-2 and B3-5 (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 104). Subsequent excavation revealed that the monument had been placed as part of the last phase of activity in an area which had seen a long and continuous history of construction.

The lowest levels of excavation revealed a series of dark and light bands of sand (Stratum K), laid down as a foundation for a platform measuring 1.8 meters in height (Stratum J). This platform, constructed of orange sand and faced with a thin layer of gray sand, had three stepped tiers which were clearly visible in the northern profile of the Cut 1. Remnants of construction to the west also suggested a plaza or fourth tier associated with the platform (*ibid.*, 105). The platform most likely supported a covered structure which protected it from water

erosion. Associated ceramic materials suggest that it was constructed during the Bajío phase (*ibid.*).

The Stratum J platform was eventually covered with a fill level (Stratum I), apparently in preparation for laying down a floor composed of bentonite fragments. This floor was later covered with a fill layer (Stratum G) and capped with a black-gray sand floor (Stratum F). Coe and Diehl date all of these construction activities to the Bajío phase (*ibid.*). A later fill layer (Stratum E) was then covered with a series of colored sand floors mixed with clay (Stratum D).

At least seven of these multi-colored floors were clearly identifiable despite their removal in many areas prior to the placement of Stratum C. The primary colors employed in the series were tan, orange, brown, and red. It is unclear whether they were deposited simultaneously or if each floor construction was separated by a period of use. Coe and Diehl dated the floors and the fill layer on which they rested to the Chicharras phase (1250-1150 B.C.) (*ibid.*, 107). A small greenstone celt, a potsherd, and a basalt fragment bearing a rope pattern were all found embedded in the Stratum D floors. These floors also show *evidence of in situ* burning in a charcoal hearth, which dated to between 1140 and 1120 B.C. (*ibid.*).

The next phase of construction saw the removal of most of the D floors and the excavation of a pit, which was then partially filled with yellow clay mixed with bentonite fragments (Stratum C). SL-30 was placed in this pit at an angle, with the relief carving positioned downwards, and the filling of the pit was resumed. The monument was packed with bentonite, a process which resulted in

the breakage of the work. The excavators suggested that the monument was originally interred fully in the fill, which later eroded away to expose the upper edge (*ibid.*). This activity was dated to the San Lorenzo B phase (*ibid.*).

SL-44 and SL-45, two of the “benches” which appear to have served as step covers, were found in proximity to SL-30, although only a single corner was embedded in the same fill as that of the monument. The rest of the benches lay encased in the upper stratum (B). Likewise, SL-31 (a plain stone slab) was found protruding from the Stratum A ground surface (*ibid.*, 108). I believe that these three monuments were placed later than SL-30 and had no demonstrable association with that monument or its deposition.

A stone slab measuring 1.12 meters high, 98 centimeters wide, and 16 centimeters thick, SL-30 bears the image of a supernatural being carved in low relief (Cyphers, 2004a: 91) (figure 4.18). The figure’s body is undulating and serpent-like, with scales and circles incised on its the upper-half. The face is human in profile, while the cleft head and down-turned mouth are typically features associated with composite anthropomorph. The crossed disc, in place of an eye, is an element found on two striking composite heads from Laguna de los Cerros (figures 4.19 and 4.20). The feline of SL-107 also presents startling, disc-like eyes, although they lack the central cross element (figure 4.21). The ear ornament of the figure on SL-30 is also disc-like, with two pendant elements. Around the mouth is an undulating line that Cyphers suggests might be the outline of a buccal mask (2004a: 92). A split, possibly foliate, element appears in front of the figure, below the head. Superimposed over the figure, and positioned

at almost the exact center of the slab's lower half, is an incised outline similar in shape to several jade objects discovered in Tomb A at La Venta, believed to have been ritual perforators for drawing blood.

As mentioned above, the slab was damaged when it was placed in a pit and covered with a layer of fill. Part of the left side, bearing the relief of the figure's chin, neck, and the foliate element, was broken off during this process. This fragment was discovered by Coe and Diehl during their excavation of the monument but was subsequently lost during its transport to Tenochtitlán in 1986 (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 107; Cyphers, 2004a: 92). The rest of the base and lower right side of the slab was never recovered and likely broke off before the monument was deposited in its final position.

#### ***4.3 Northwestern Ridge (B2 and C2)***

Although the depth of the cultural deposits in the Northwest Ridge is not great, there is evidence of a constant vertical increase of the surface through successive building of floors and structures. Known cultural deposits reach between approximately 4.7 and 3.28 meters, below which appear to be culturally sterile, multicolored sands (Cyphers, 1997: 106). Only two areas of this ridge have been excavated and reported. The C2-10 excavations, conducted by Francisco Beverido Pereau and Ramón Arellanos M., resulted in the discovery of SL-42 (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 85-86). This fragment of sculpted column was encountered in a layer of fill between floors, and appears to have been unceremoniously deposited in this area after losing its cultural relevance



(Cyphers, personal comm., 2010). Therefore, I will not address these excavations here, as neither the fragment nor its context may contribute to our knowledge of monument settings or functions. A short distance away, the excavations surrounding SL-20 took place under the direction of Coe and Diehl during the 1966 and 1967 field seasons of the Yale University Río Chiquito Project (*ibid.*, 94-99).

#### *Monument 20*

The second of the two large altar-thrones from the site of San Lorenzo, SL-20 presents a particularly interesting case because it shows all the signs of mutilation preceding the re-carving process from throne to a colossal head (Porter, 1990) (figure 4.22). The corners of the monument were knocked off in order to create the necessary rounded form. The frontal niche and figure had begun to be ground down, effectively removing all facial features, costume details, and the form originally held by the niche-figure, which is thought to have been an infantile composite anthropomorph similar to those held by the primary figures on Altars 2 and 5 from La Venta. However, after these processes had been carried out the re-carving of the altar-throne was abandoned.

SL-20 was located to a point just east of C2-10, on the edge of the ravine dividing the main plateau from the Northwest Ridge (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 97). It was placed on a floor of unknown dimensions, comprised of mottled orange, yellow, and red clays (Stratum E). Ceramic sherds associated with the surface date primarily to the Ojochi phase (1500-1350 B.C.), with a few Chicharras phase sherds mixed in. Coe and Diehl date the floor to the Chicharras phase, or early

San Lorenzo A at the latest (*ibid.*). The monument was not placed here until sometime during the San Lorenzo B phase. A pit dug through this stratum could have been excavated as the original seat of the monument or could have been used in the process of tilting the monument onto its back, the position in which it was encountered by Coe and Diehl.<sup>ii</sup> A lens of burned material (Hearth 1) was positioned directly in front of this pit, consisting of an “area of gray ashy soil mixed with clay” (*ibid.*). The excavators suggest that this lens, which was later covered with chunks of yellow and red clay mixed with white sand, was created as part of the activity surrounding the deposition of Monument 20 (*ibid.*). If the monument was being re-carved in this location it is also possible that the burning activities were either linked to rituals surrounding the termination of the altar prior to its re-carving or were associated with the actual re-sculpting process (see discussion below).

A layer of tan and brown sandy-clay (Stratum D) was subsequently laid down, and a yellow clay layer was later placed above this stratum. Coe and Diehl report that the altar-throne was encased in Stratum D but then suggest that the monument was re-set atop the layer of yellow clay (*ibid.*). It appears that the stratigraphy in this area is unclear, probably complicated by slippage due to the erosion of the plateau (Cyphers, personal comm., 2010). All this activity occurred during the San Lorenzo phase. Before the end of this period a pit was dug into the D and E strata in order to reveal the raised base of the monument and later back filled with sandy loams (Strata C1 and C2). Two additional hearths (2 and 3) were found in association with this pit. The first, consisting of a “horizontal

layer of bright red burnt earth and large quantities of carbonized wood,” was found at the edge of the pit and appears to reflect burning activity which took place during the process of refilling (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 97). The third hearth was found higher up and consisted only of a thin layer of burnt earth *sans* charcoal (*ibid.*, 98). This pit is associated with San Lorenzo A, Chicharras, and Bajío sherds, suggesting that it can date no later than the end of the San Lorenzo phase, probably not long after the original deposition of the fill covering SL-20 (*ibid.*). The upper strata covering the area were natural soils containing sherds from the San Lorenzo, Nacaste, and Villa Alta phases.

The monument itself measures 1.67 m high, 2.25 meters across, and 1.5 meters wide in its current state, although it must have been considerably larger prior to mutilation (Cyphers, 2004a: 81). Breakage and/ or hammering has removed all details of the central figure, the niche, and any iconographic elements that may have been carved on the sides or table-top ledge of the altar. However, a series of step-like depressions remain at the back of the monument, possibly serving as the means to ascend the throne. Two niches are carved into the right side and the left side bears an odd rectangular depression towards the base, which is clearly the result of careful sculpting. The possible functions of these features and/or the intentions of their makers are unknown.

#### **4.4 Northeastern Plateau (C2 and C3)**

Explorations of this part of the site have been limited to the excavation and removal of SL-2 and SL-53, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> colossal heads (figures 4.23 and

4.24). Matthew Stirling uncovered SL-2 during his 1945-1946 survey of the site (Stirling, 1955: 10). In terms of associated cultural material, Coe and Diehl reported that the sherds discovered during the head's excavation were all of the San Lorenzo and Villa Alta phases (1980: 302). However, no additional information has been recovered from the monument's original location. Fortunately, the explorations surrounding SL-53 have afforded significantly more information than those of SL-2.

West of Group B and just north of the Central Court and Palangana Group lies the site of the SL-53 excavations, conducted as part of the SLTAP in 1991. The 7<sup>th</sup> colossal head discovered at San Lorenzo, SL-53 had originally been uncovered during the 1969 magnetometer survey carried out by Francisco Beverido Pereau (1970) and was later removed to the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa in 1986 by M. Lopez Fierro (Casellas Cañellas, 2004: 205). When the SLTAP excavators returned to the area it was with the dual intentions of locating the monument within the overall site chronology and investigating its original context. Detailed exploration of the area revealed that occupation in this part of the site stretched back to the Ojochi phase, when the primary vegetation and organic material was removed from the area to expose the natural formation of the plateau. At that time the site's inhabitants also excavated a sunken area measuring 20 by 20 meters, leaving a raised area of sterile soil running around the perimeter. This low wall measured 1 meter above the level of the sunken court. Later, a thin layer of grayish-brown clay was deposited above the natural sands of the court (*ibid.*, 436). Weathering of this surface suggests a span of time

during which it was exposed to the elements. This floor (Layer XI) was associated with ceramic material from the Ojochi phase.

The Bajío phase saw the deposition of a red sand floor (Layer X) within the sunken court. This stratum contained a large number of carbon particles which could be the result of leveling a previous occupational layer (*ibid.*, 437). Layer X raised the height of the court, perhaps in response to the needs of the current occupants (*ibid.*, 438). During the next construction phase, the builders laid down a floor comprised of dense, waterproof, dark brown clay with three layers of red sand, which they deposited in the court and around the low perimeter wall surrounding it (Layer IX). The upper levels of this layer clearly date to the Chicharras phase (*ibid.*, 440). The cultural material recovered from this stratum reached greater volumes than encountered in the previous layers.

During the San Lorenzo A phase two large pits were dug into this layer, possibly in the process of preparing the area for new occupation or activity (*ibid.*, 441). The next stage of construction involved the deposition of a series of colored sand floors (Layer VI) in the north-central part of the sunken court. Above these floors --orange, yellow, and red-- sat SL-53 (*ibid.*, 443). Fragments of San Lorenzo A phase figurines were discovered all around the colossal head (*ibid.*, 445).

An oven and an area of discarded baked clay were positioned to the north of the monument. According to Elisabeth Casellas Cañellas, this area was likely roofed over to protect it from sun and rain (*ibid.*, 444). There is also evidence of a collapsed wall, once constructed of clay and colored with red and specular red

pigments (*ibid.*). The nearby circular oven, almost 1 meter in diameter, was constructed of baked clay and surrounded by a structure of bentonite, which would have served to protect and concentrate the heat. This oven was raised 40 centimeters and had an opening, which was probably for loading fuel into the interior (*ibid.*, 445). Evidence of intense pigment-processing was discovered in this area, including stains of pigment on the floor (*ibid.*, 444).

Casellas Cañellas proposes that the oven could have been used to heat water mixed with local sulfur to create sulfuric acid, which could have been used as a corrosive in the process of sculptural carving and re-carving (*ibid.* 449). She suggests that this could have produced the effacement seen on the front of SL-53, and possibly the nearby SL-2 as well. However, her testing of this hypothesis was reported as inconclusive and required additional experiments to confirm whether this is a viable explanation for the mutilation seen on the 7<sup>th</sup> colossal head (*ibid.*, 448-449). No remains of sulfur were detected on the burnt clay recovered from the area (*ibid.*, 449). Moreover, few stone fragments were recovered from this area and when compared to those from the B3-17 workshop they do not appear directly related to the process of stone carving (*ibid.*, 447).

During the San Lorenzo B phase the area seems to have declined significantly in importance. Habitation covered older, eroded structures and the mud-based construction elements were allowed to collapse and disintegrate. A fill of sandy brown earth, ranging between 34 and 100 centimeters in thickness, covered the monument and its surroundings. The volume of cultural material significantly diminished during this time, dwindling to near Ojochi phase levels

(*ibid.*, 452). Stone stools associated with this period are domestic in nature. A large basalt block was also brought into the area during this phase (*ibid.*, 453).

During the Nacaste phase the population of the site declined drastically. Layer III corresponds to this period, at which time the SL-53 area was re-occupied, the perimeter walls were covered, and the oven re-used to suit contemporary needs (*ibid.*, 455). The figurines recovered from this phase are largely of the solid, modeled type typically found at La Venta and Tres Zapotes during the Middle Pre-classic (*ibid.*). After a long period of disuse the area was again re-populated in the Villa Alta phase at which time the oven was once again put to use (*ibid.*, 458-459). This period corresponds to Layer II of the stratigraphic excavations.

#### *Monument 53*

When considering the monument within its context it, becomes clear that SL-53 shares some commonalities with other works from San Lorenzo. Like SL-61 and SL-14, it was associated with a sunken area, which may be the first sunken court constructed at the site. This feature may have served as a prototype for the sunken patio in Group E. Before its final placement, a series of colored floors were deposited in the area. Stains on the floors may indicate that the area had some sort of specialized function associated with pigment production. Like the B3-17 workshop, this area suggests elite control over certain types of craft activities and or/ natural resources such as basalt and mineral pigments.

However, the 7<sup>th</sup> colossal head also poses a particular set of questions for archaeologists and excavators due to a number of irregularities in its appearance that distinguish it from other monuments. Evidence of re-carving from a colossal throne can be observed on the right side, where the niche figure can still be clearly discerned (Porter, 1990). Cyphers has proposed that both SL-53 and SL-2 were abandoned during the re-carving process prior to the removal of the niches (2004a: 117-118). SL-53 is missing the ear and pendant on the left side, which would also be explained if the head were never completed (*ibid.*). Moreover, she suggests that the effacement of the monument's front was part of the re-carving process, which would explain the extreme marring of the facial features on both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> colossal heads (*ibid.*).

The face of SL-53 in particular has been badly mutilated.<sup>iii</sup> Some of these mutilations appear similar to the non-specific mutilations found on many other monuments, such as the striations and rounded dimples. Yet, the effacement of the 7<sup>th</sup> head's features goes beyond these commonly seen practices to actual disfigurement. Originally, it was suggested that water and/ or weathering had caused the damage, since the monument was buried only 40 centimeters below the surface of the plateau (Beverido Pereau, 1970: 170; de la Fuente, 1987). However, Cyphers has observed that, as SL-53 and SL-2 were the only two heads from the site to suffer this unusual type of mutilation, alternative explanations should be sought (2004a: 118).

It appears that the facial features of both SL-2 and SL-53 were already in placed and well-finished by the time the effacement took place. For example, the



nose and mouth of SL-53 have been blunted and removed by the mutilations. Likewise, the ornamentation of the headdress was clearly present and has been marred and erased by the damage. In light of this visual evidence, it seems more probable that the re-carving was in the process of being re-done, perhaps in response to an unsatisfied patron or a change in sculpting plans which necessitated modifications to the facial features and headdress motifs (Cyphers, ed., 2006).

However, this re-carving scenario does not address the problem of the remaining niche forms, which are also unique to SL-2 and SL-53. The carving on left side of each monument extends to the interior of the niche itself, so that the ear, headdress band, and earspool of SL-2 and the headdress band on SL-53 are all carved within the outlines and depressions of the remaining niche (figure 4.25). While it is possible that this was part of the “blocking out” process preceding the final carving, the quality of the sculpting appears far too sophisticated for this to be the case. There is no distinction between the level of carving appearing around and in the niches and the finished appearance of these features on other heads. Removal of the niche would have necessitated re-carving these features, as well as the front and back sides, in order to re-balance the proportions of the head. The facial features and headdress emblems would also have had to be correspondingly repositioned. The sheer difficulty of sculpting the surface of the stone a single time, much less a second, suggests that the niches were never intended to be removed from these heads.

Various socio-cultural factors may have influenced the choice to leave the niche remnants intact. It might be that the sculptors chose to sacrifice concealing the previous form of the monument in order to keep more stone, thereby increasing the overall size of the head. SL-53 is the second largest of all those at San Lorenzo, measuring 2.7 meters in height, 1.85 meters across, and 1.35 meters from back to front (Cyphers, 2004a: 115). However, in light of the incomplete left side it seems most probable that the sculptors were influenced by an abbreviated timeline, which ultimately resulted in the left side being finished *sans* ear and ornamental pendant. Under the pressures of a deadline the artists may have chosen to leave the niche in place, rather than take the time to remove it by hammering and breakage. It seems possible that the death or disempowering of the patron may also have been linked to the effacement of the monument. If the sculpting process was interrupted by a regime change, resulting either from political maneuvering or the death of the former ruler, the effacement may be the result of a new patron requesting that the portrait subject be changed. The primary markers of identity on the colossal heads are the facial features and headdress motifs, which are also the areas targeted for effacement on SL-53. In this scenario, the damage to the head would be the result of intentions to re-carve the features of the previous monument, a process which was never completed.

Alternatively, it may be that the effacement is related, not to the re-cycling process, but to intentional mutilation and removal of the portrait features. This would account for the unusual appearance of the damage, which seems

unrelated to known sculpting techniques such as hammering, chiseling, and abrasion. Effacement of a previous ruler's monument need not signal full-scale political upheaval or revolt, but may be part of the more subtle political maneuverings following a rocky succession or the death of an unpopular ruler. Mutilating political portraits often takes place as part of efforts to stabilize the reign of a present ruler by expressing power over the past. Additionally, if the Olmec, like later Mesoamerican cultures, viewed portraits and their subjects as ontologically linked or equivalent (Houston and Stuart, 1998), then the mutilation of the portrait could have been intended to physically or spiritually harm the subject.

At present, there is no definitive evidence that the head was or was not being re-carved in the location where it was discovered. It is possible that the head was re-carved elsewhere and then raised in the sunken court without being completed. However, lack of tools and debitage may only indicate that these elements were cleared away prior to the decline of the area.

The abandonment of the area and the monument during the San Lorenzo B phase indicates that a once prominent part of the site had lost its ideological and/ or socio-political significance. The need to hasten the re-carving of throne into head, and subsequent damage to the face as a result of socio-political changes leading to its purposeful effacement or modifications to the features, may well be directly linked to the area's waning influence. Cyphers proposed that the colossal heads, as either representations of dynastic lineages or individual governors (Bernal, 1969; Coe, 1972; Stirling, 1955), were used to create a

macro-scene of San Lorenzo's ancestral rulers. This sculptural program was intended to reinforce the declining power of the site (2004b: 59). However, Cyphers believes that it was never completed (*ibid.*; pers. comm., 2010). The mutilation of SL-53 may signal the first major inter-site changes in the socio-political geography, subsequently leading to the abandonment of the sculptural macro-scene and the eventual decline of San Lorenzo.

#### **4.5 Southeastern Ridge (D4 and D5)**

Little reported exploration has been conducted on the Southeastern Ridge. From 1990 to 1993 the SLTAP conducted excavations in the D4 quadrant east of Monument 55. Among the structures unearthed by the excavators were mounds D4-7 and D4-22. Sitting directly east of Colossal Head 1 ("El Rey"), D4-7 consisted of a low platform constructed of river clays, measuring at least 2 meters high, and 50 meters wide by 75 meters in length (Cyphers, 1997:97-98). The D4-22 structure consisted of a terrace on the eastern side of the plateau which supported a small bentonite platform. This was positioned near a habitation that was at one time covered with red pigment brought from the Almagres region 15 kilometers to the west (*ibid.*, 95). This area was also associated with a bentonite aqueduct, with a bentonite floor deposited immediately above it (*ibid.*, 96).

##### ***Monument 55***

Less than 50 meters northeast of D4-7, SL-55 was discovered in Pit 6, excavated during the 1969 excavations (figure 4.26). The monument itself, a

column measuring 3.95 meters long, was discovered lying on a bed of fine red sand. A meter-wide pit was at one time cut through this sand and filled with a layer of yellow clay and gravel, which formed the upper stratum.<sup>iv</sup> Beverido Pereau suggested that this pit was intended to receive the column and may have been where it originally stood (1970: 179). Cultural material associated with the monument included several *tepalcates* dating to the San Lorenzo phase and a nodule or *hacha* in the process of elaboration, which Beverido Pereau compared to examples found under SL-21 and at the site of Arroyo Pesquero (*ibid.*, 180). The area below the monument was excavated to a depth of 2.4 meters, revealing layers of sand in various shades of red, which he suggested were artificial floors (*ibid.*, 179).

#### **4.6 South-Central Plateau and Ridge (C4 and C5)**

Like the Southeastern Ridge, little excavation of the South-Central Plateau and Ridge has been reported. On the South-Central Plateau a north-south trench was dug east of the C4-5 mound by the SLTAP. The trench showed evidence of excavation activity dating to the Villa Alta phase, which disrupted the previous cultural strata (Cyphers, 1997: 107). The SL-AN-10 explorations, conducted less than 50 meters to the west of this mound, resulted in the discovery of SL-51 (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 116-117). No other explorations, structural or otherwise, have been reported for the area.

Excavation on the ridge has also been relatively limited in its scope, mainly occurring in conjunction with the removal of a number of stone

monuments. In 1967 Coe and Diehl excavated the area around SL-17, the 6<sup>th</sup> colossal head. However, older exploratory digging had obscured the original stratigraphic context of the monument (1980: 324). The 1970 magnetometry survey, conducted by Brüggemann and Hers, located SL-63 as a large magnetic anomaly on the eastern side of the South-Central Ridge and a pit was dug to explore the nature and context of the find (1970a: 20). The only structural excavations reported for the South-Central Ridge were carried out in 1993 by the SLTAP, which explored an area south of C5-6, approximately 50 meters from the original position of SL-17. The discovery of two “benches” or step covers, located *in situ*, has been reported in conjunction with these investigations (Cyphers, 1997: 99).

#### **SL-AN-10**

In April of 1968 Paula Kroster excavated the SL-AN-10 area in response to the discovery of a large magnetic anomaly (Anomaly 10) encountered northeast of Laguna 19 (Coe and Diehl, 1980). Her explorations revealed a red sand floor (Stratum D), possibly a plaza floor, associated with San Lorenzo A ceramics (*ibid.*, 116). Above this a layer of mottled clay (Stratum C) 25 centimeters thick was deposited prior to the placement of SL-51. The monument was dragged over a gravel surface before being set into place atop Stratum C, as evinced by the striations on its bottom surface. It was set atop the first layer of clay and more Stratum C was built up around the sides, reaching to a point 20 centimeters below the monument's upper surface. The material associated with this stratum dates to the San Lorenzo phase, with a few possible Chicharras sherds mixed in.

Coe and Diehl suggest that the deposition of the Stratum C clay and the monument took place during the San Lorenzo phase, most likely during San Lorenzo A but possibly as late as the early San Lorenzo B phase (*ibid.*, 117). Subsequently, a gravel floor (Stratum B) was laid over the top of the monument, extending 20 centimeters above its upper surface. This floor contained only Palangana phase sherds, dating the stratum to that phase (600-400 B.C.). Evidence of a burnt hearth was discovered atop this floor, in the southeast corner of the excavation area. However, no charcoal was found which would have allowed the excavators to date this feature. The Stratum A humus accumulated above the Stratum B floor after its use was terminated (*ibid.*). Lack of Nacaste cultural material suggests a hiatus in use of the area and/ or monument between the end of San Lorenzo B and the Palangana phase. However, before the Palangana phase inhabitants of the site constructed the gravel floor they must have cleared off the debris that would have accumulated during this period of disuse, since no soil stratum existed between the C clay and B floor. It is possible to think that such efforts were made to reclaim an area of previous significance, and perhaps even to re-imbue the space with meaning or cultural import.

#### *Monument 51*

The monument itself is a large, rectangular slab of stone, the upper surface of which is covered with striations typical of the non-specific mutilations found on many of the monuments at San Lorenzo (figure 4.27). These striations were most likely made before the monument was covered with a gravel floor during the Palangana phase. The slab measures 2.1 meters in length, 1.81

meters across, and 80 centimeters in width. Its cultural functions and/ or significance is unknown.

### *Monument 63*

SL-63 is an irregular block of stone measuring approximately 82 centimeters high, 1.8 meters wide, and 2.18 meters long (figure 4.28; see also Brüggemann and Hers, 1970a: 22, figure 27 and Cyphers, 2004a: 130, figure 76). Numerous striations and evidence of breakage, resulting in the irregular faceting of the stone, are visible on its upper surfaces. It is possible, perhaps even probable, that this is the final form of a once larger monument which had undergone recycling or destruction, particularly in light of the striking irregularity of the stone's overall shape. It was excavated in 1970 by Brüggemann and Hers in an area northwest of C4-36, but was not removed from this location.

Several features of their exploration make the monument worthy of note. The block was placed in a pit which had been dug through a cultural layer to the natural stratum below. The subsequent backfilling of the pit included the placement of thirteen river cobbles, a deposit which so far appears unique within the documented practices of monument interment at the site (1970a: 20).

The monument was photographed in its original location before reburial; however, it was not raised and the pictures do not reveal the bottom portion of the monument. Brüggemann and Hers mention the appearance of indefinite drawings located on the underside of the block, which may be part of the original decoration (*ibid.*). The position of SL-63 recalls the Monument 112 excavations, where the sculpted side of the stone was positioned face down (see Cyphers,



2004a: figure 127). As Brüggemann and Hers misidentified the fill of the Group E eastern platform as culturally sterile quaternary soil, the same identification they give for the stratum surrounding SL-63, it seems that further excavation of this area might reveal other structural features not recorded by the original excavations.

### *Monument 17*

The only colossal head possibly associated with material data from its original display context, SL-17 was the site of several different excavation operations between 1946 and 1967 (figure 4.29). Coe and Diehl raised the head, clearing away the old excavations and straightening the walls of the trench. In the undisturbed soil adjacent to the head they found large quantities of San Lorenzo phase ceramics and figurines. A cache of seven multi-perforated ilmenite cubes was also discovered north of the monument's base (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 324). Two larger deposits of these cubes were later discovered by the SLTAP, one at the site of Loma del Zapote, and one in the A4 quadrant of San Lorenzo (Di Castro Stringher, 1997: 155). Coe and Diehl suggest that the decorative beads linking the net-like strands of the SL-17 headdress are representations of these cubes (1980: 324). However, Anna Di Castro Stringher argues that the headdress beads are rounded, whereas the iron-ore cubes have a more quadrangular shape (1997: 155). According to the excavators, SL-17 was found encased in a fill similar to the Stratum C rubble that covers the Group D monuments (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 324).

The 6<sup>th</sup> colossal head may have been associated with one or more offering deposits which included different types of ceramic materials and the ilmenite cubes, presumably all dating to the San Lorenzo phase. It seems likely that this type of ritual activity was carried out around some or all of the colossal heads while they were on display. However, as all other examples are either lacking stratigraphic context, interred in platform fill, or were effaced, abandoned, and covered with debris, SL-17 provides the sole source of material data on the ritual practices associated with the display of the heads.

#### ***4.7 Discussion***

Turning now to a broader discussion of San Lorenzo's monumental spaces, a number of trends can be discerned from the archaeological settings of these sculptural works. These settings consisted of discrete groupings of platforms, plazas, and patios which organized the site across the horizontal plane as a series of open and closed spaces. Access or lack of access to these groups would have been an indicator of an individual's social ties and rank. Likewise, the terracing of the plateau also served to create vertical divisions between the various sectors of San Lorenzo society, with the site's elite positioned at the summit. From this vantage point, those privileged individuals would have been able to survey the activities taking place on the terraces and river basin below.

Within these spaces monuments were set and re-set, the latter action constituting a practice so common that among all those monuments which have been discussed here only three seem likely to have been discovered in their

primary contexts (SL-14, SL-17, and SL-57). John Graham observed that the re-setting of monuments at San Lorenzo seemed to be the rule, further noting that Pre-classic sculptures were often re-used in different contexts for different purposes (1989: 229, 234). This process of re-setting would have transformed the significance of the monument and the place in which it was re-located as the space was re-shaped both literally and ideologically in the process.

### **(Re-) Constructing Time and Space**

As evinced by the archaeological data collected through numerous seasons of intensive excavation, the landscape of the San Lorenzo plateau underwent a consistent transformation in the form of various construction activities materializing across its surface. These projects varied from the construction of new spaces and platforms to the refurbishing of existing spaces, the latter sometimes taking place over numerous centuries from the Ojochi or Bajío to the San Lorenzo phase (e.g. Group D). Various fill levels and floor series were deposited, platforms, packed earth walls, and roofed superstructures were raised, and local and exotic stones were imported from sacred topographies, such as El Mixe and the Tuxtla Mountains. El Mixe provided the Olmec with a source of limestone while Cerro Cintepec, located in the Tuxtla range, was the primary source basalt for monuments and elite architectural elements. The use of stone slabs, step covers, and columns, along with red hematite pigments and colored clays, distinguished a space as remarkable even as rituals of offering and monument deposition served to produce the space through social action. Additionally, both construction and ritual activities would have instilled the

ideology of the space in the minds of the site's inhabitants. The amounts of labor used to construct these spaces also signaled the power of both the place itself and those individuals who presided over its construction. Likewise, the prescribed movement and gesture of ritual allowed for the enactment of power on the bodies of the performers who were required to direct their actions according to the guidance of a higher authority.

A number of San Lorenzo's monuments were employed in the construction of these spaces. SL-61 and SL-112 were both interred beneath the floors of platforms during the construction process. SL-30 was put into place just before, and perhaps coincident with, the termination of a space in use since the Bajío phase. Other monuments, such as the megalithic columns, were integrated into the actual architectural structures. Here I consider architectural elements within the category of monuments because they were subject to the same treatments (re-carving, destruction, mutilation, and interment) as representational sculpture. Moreover, several of these works also bear relief carving, allowing them to function on both the representational and structural levels (e.g. SL-41).

Use of architectural elements as monuments is a well-documented practice in many cultures worldwide. One need only call to mind the triumphal arches and columns of Imperial Rome to understand how architectural features may be abstracted from their structural properties to serve as sites of social memory. However, integration into completed constructions can also transform architectural elements into unintentional monuments as the memory of the place begins to attach itself to the monumental, enduring elements of a structure.

While basalt columns seem the most common example of architectural monuments created by the Olmec, the drain-stone discovered in the monument recycling workshop (SL-40) suggests that other, more unusual elements may also have taken on the mantle of monument, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Its treatment within the space of the B3-17 workshop was unique among the sculptures located there; a piece fractured from the stone was buried in a pit dug down through the cultural layer on which the stone sat. Furthermore, no other drain-stone was reported as part of the workshop, nor were any of the others given special treatment. It may be that historical circumstances led to SL-40 accruing special cultural associations not evident in its form alone.

The process of accrual, which comes to bestow unintended narratives and meanings on objects of all kinds, and most particularly monuments, leads to the work possessing dual narratives that may reinforce or contradict one another. The production and re-production of space through human activity leads to memories and associations, created through performance, which may come to rest within the space of that action. This is the unintentional narrative, generated through embodied practice over time. Alternatively, the intentional narrative is generated by the form and iconography of the monument, which may or may not coincide with the unintentional narrative. If the activity within the space subscribes to the prescribed performance, these narratives may indeed coincide with, and even reinforce one another. However, if there are ruptures or discontinuities between the action and the intended narrative then the two may contradict one another.

In such cases it may be necessary to remake the space or the form of the monument. The process of remaking in this case is inherent to transforming the significance produced in the play between action and form. This remaking can be straightforward, achieved through destruction or re-creating the space or monument anew, or it can be achieved by more subtle practices, such as mutilation or erasure.

### **Re-Carving**

Since James Porter's groundbreaking article on the colossal heads as re-carved altar-thrones (1990), it has become increasingly clear that the re-carving and recycling of stone monuments was a common practice amongst the Olmec. In this chapter I have primarily chosen to focus my discussion upon the socio-cultural implications of the re-carving process as a vehicle for changes to or negotiation of the social memory, or perhaps a manifestation of these processes. However, framing the process of re-carving as a socio-political statement does not exclude the possibility of more pragmatic concerns. It is also probable that some of this recycling took place in relation to pragmatic concerns over the expense of procuring new stone, which would have been considerable (Cyphers, 1999: 168). Undoubtedly, there were periods when rulers could have chosen to re-carve pre-existing monuments to suit their needs when they were unable or unwilling to bear the cost of importing additional stone to the site.

The decision to import new stone for a monument or to recycle pre-existing works would have provided multiple opportunities to make social and/ or political statements to the inhabitants of a site. If the choice is made to re-carve

an older work, the pre-existing form and history of that monument will inform the new. Does the patron or sculptor choose to re-carve a work that is no longer culturally significant, designating it as non-essential and rendering it defunct? In such cases the re-carving process would mark shifts in the social or cultural life that led to the diminishing of the monument's import or processes of public forgetting. If the monument to be recycled is still culturally vital another statement is being made altogether. For example, what might be communicated by re-carving an altar-throne into a portrait of its deceased owner? What might be communicated by re-carving the same throne into a portrait of the owner's successor?

Alternatively, while the colossal heads and altar-thrones are both overt cultural symbols of power and influence, the practice of re-carving monuments into non-descript architectural features (such as columns) would carry entirely different connotations. At least three of the columns from the site of San Lorenzo (SL-41, SL-57, and SL-75) are believed to have been re-carved from other sculptures. Re-cycling monuments into support columns seems more likely to have been motivated by practical considerations of cost than the process of re-carving thrones into heads. Nevertheless, the choice of monuments to be de-commissioned and re-cycled would have influenced the site's sculptural corpus and concomitantly reflected shifts in the spatial and social milieus of San Lorenzo. Thus, the re-carving of monuments is never without significance, even when practical considerations of cost and labor serve as primary motivating factors behind the decision to recycle them.

## **Erasure**

Erasure can be defined as the removal of some elements of a monument by hammering or abrading its surface without destroying the overall form or iconography. Examples of this practice are found on SL-14 and SL-56. In the case of SL-14 the central niche figure and the individual carved in relief on the altar-throne's right side were effectively removed, although the monument continued to function as part of the Group E setting. Likewise, the human figure represented in the SL-56 scene was erased so that only his outline remained. Eliminating a single individual or markers of individual identity from a monument appears to have been one way to modify the work without resorting to more drastic methods, such as destructive mutilation or re-carving. Choosing to erase individuals or elements from the sculptural surface may have proved more cost-effective or been a way to modify the social memory while preserving a particularly venerated or efficacious work. Modifying an existing monument would have allowed the Olmec elite to manipulate existing power structures rather than trying to generate new ones.

Erasure and other methods of effacement are integral to the processes of forgetting that must take place if the social memory is to be re-made. As cognitive studies have shown, forgetting is a key element in memory formation (Joyce, 2003: 107-108). Moreover, as John Clark and Arlene Colman observe, "Such public un-remembering opened the way for redacted histories and fresh memorials to successful contenders for power" (2008: 96). Many of San Lorenzo's monuments demonstrate efforts to re-write the past in order to



influence the present and future through the removal of individuals and insignia, which may represent shifts in the political landscapes of the Pre-classic. However, it should be noted that public forgetting may be, and often is, accompanied by the silent memories maintained by marginalized agents as acts of resistance (Catell and Climo, 2002: 28-30). Unfortunately, these silences translate into absences in the archaeological record and we are limited in our ability to identify acts of resistance that do not manifest themselves materially.

Erasure may also be a product of shifting social mores or religious beliefs. While it is common to assume the mutilation of Olmec monuments was linked to negotiations of political authority (Coe and Diehl, 1980; Grove, 1981) it is also possible that some symbols or iconographic elements were removed as a response to changing belief systems or social developments. These changes might lead to shifts in the social identities of the population and a corresponding need for updated mnemonic narratives that reflected those shifts. It is important to acknowledge that forgetting might also occur as a natural result of evolving social needs. In such cases erasure or mutilation may be the product of forgetting, rather than the cause.

### **Interment**

The practice of monument interment within platform structures allowed for the integration of stone monuments into architectural settings as an invisible presence, able to afford a particular type of spatial experience and ideology. Two monuments from San Lorenzo (SL-61 and SL-112) were discovered in the fill of platform mounds within the site core. Notably, these sculptures are distinct in

their forms and iconography, so that no single form or motif can be directly associated with this practice. Therefore, we may assume that socio-cultural factors may have been more important to the selection of monuments for the process of interment.

The interment of these two monuments would only have meaning if their presence were not forgotten. The invisible presence functions as a powerful mnemonic device because the threat of forgetting is stronger and, therefore, the embodied practices of remembering to counter that threat must be that much more potent. Most likely these monuments were not originally sculpted for the sole purpose of being interred within the selected platforms, but were re-set within this context. I base this hypothesis on the idea that a new monument would have been less potent than one that had accrued greater levels of cultural significance over time. The invisible presence would have charged the space with ideological significance, even while the actual process of interment physically generated that space, achieving coherence between action and ideology. Concurrently, maintaining the memory of the hidden monument, employed in the continued generation of meaning, would have been necessary if the space was to retain power within the social landscape. This could have been most effectively achieved through ritual and oral record-keeping, which are the non-literate society's most potent mnemonic techniques.

### **Offerings**

The deposition of offerings would also have functioned to ritually charge San Lorenzo's spaces with significance. Like the interment of sculptural works,

these offerings were sometimes deposited below the floors of previous construction phases and were, therefore, invisible to the site occupants. Nevertheless, their presence and the ritual performance of deposition would have been integral to the construction of meaning within the space.

Occasionally, offering caches may have been directly associated with the monuments themselves. Offerings have been directly associated with hinterland monuments, such as LZ-5 and SMP-1 (see Chapter Six). It seems likely that some of San Lorenzo's monuments would also have been sites of offering deposition. However, archaeological evidence for this practice at San Lorenzo is ambiguous at best. Coe and Diehl described the sherds positioned around SL-34 as offering-like (1980: 116). The ceramics, figurines, and seven ilmenite beads discovered to the north of SL-17 also may have been a product of offering deposition. However, disruption of the strata, resulting from the removal of the monument, obscures the nature of these deposits. Additionally, SL-56 was associated with an offering-like circle of limestone and turtle carapaces. Unfortunately, the practice of re-setting and disruption of stratigraphy makes it difficult to determine whether these objects actually constitute, or were included in, offering caches. Thus, the question remains as to whether offerings were, in fact, directly associated with monument deposition at San Lorenzo.

### **Burning**

A number of monument settings are associated with evidence of burning, which may be related either to burnt offerings or to burning rituals, possibly linked with the termination of the monument or the space it inhabited. In the case of SL-

20, a lens of burnt material (Hearth 1) was created directly in front of the altar-throne and was later covered with chunks of yellow and red clay mixed with white sand. Two hearths were encountered in the back-fill of a pit dug to expose the altar-throne. SL-20 was most probably in the process of being recycled at this point (Porter, 1990), and it is possible that the creation of the hearths was related to termination rites associated with the process of re-carving and/ or the end of the monument's period of use as an altar-throne. The stone sculptures located in the monument recycling workshop were, likewise, being re-carved, which may explain the presence of multiple hearths in this space, including one directly under SL-37.

Burning rituals were commonly included as part of termination rites associated with architecture in later Mesoamerican cultures (specifically among the Maya). It is possible that this represents the continuation and development of an earlier practice established during the Pre-classic. The SL-30 excavations also showed evidence of *in situ* burning associated with a charcoal hearth on the bottom layer of the Stratum D floor series. This stratum was also the site of deposition for a greenstone celt and potsherd. It is possible that both celt and sherd, along with the hearth, were part of the rituals associated with the termination of the floor or with the initiation of a new building phase.

Several structures at La Venta (A-3, D-7, and the South-central Platform) also show evidence of burning. In the cases of both A-3 and the South-Central Platform this appears to have occurred as a large-scale burning activity, resulting in a stratum of black carbon, deposited prior to the beginning of a new

construction phase (Wedel in Drucker, 1952: 40). Drucker, Heizer, and Squier also suggested that burnt offerings of perishable materials were part of the ritual practices at the Middle Pre-classic center (1959:24). Excavations of the D-7 structure at La Venta uncovered evidence of burnt material, which Miriam Gallegos Gómora believes may be related to the deposition of offerings (1990: 19).

It is also possible that the burning associated with the San Lorenzo monuments was related to the actual process of re-carving. However, I am inclined to favor the idea of burnt offerings or burning rituals related to the termination or transformation of these monuments, given the association of burning with architectural termination at La Venta. Further excavation may clarify whether these hearths and lenses were associated with ritual or craft activities.

### **Conclusions**

The spatial settings of monuments serve several important, interrelated functions. First and foremost, they are steeped in cultural significance, which allows them to generate, reinforce, or manipulate new and existing power structures. Power is derived in relation to the ideology of a space and from the activity of its production. As elite forces dictate the physical construction of a space, involving the mobilization of labor and material resources, so, too, do they have the power to dictate the forms of activity occurring within that space. Through these processes the power of the elite is manifested physically as control over subjugated bodies. Simultaneously, this manifestation serves to generate more power and to reinforce the existing structures of that power. As

Lefebvre observes, this process often involves an exchange of attributes between the ceremonial and political arenas, so that the ceremonial power serves to reinforce the political, and visa versa (1992: 225).

Power may have many different faces, forms, and modalities, depending on how and at what social level it manifests. Therefore, it may be best to conceive of the power playing out in the spaces of San Lorenzo in terms of Eric Wolf's fourth modality of power, which he describes as structural (1999). According to Wolf, structural power is the power "manifest in relationships that not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the direction and distribution of energy flows" (*ibid.*, 4). He also observes that built environments of ritual (such as Group E), in which structural power is made manifest, provide the spatial and temporal structure within which bodies and minds are reshaped (*ibid.*, 57).

The spaces associated with San Lorenzo's monuments would also have offered the individual a cohesive vision of his or her identity within Olmec society. The production of a collective memory, of a shared past, was integral to the unification of disparate elements within the social fabric. By presenting each person with membership in a corporate narrative of this shared past, "Monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage," (Lefebvre, 1992: 220).<sup>v</sup>

However, it is important to note that these spaces were not necessarily inclusive or open. For example, Group E at San Lorenzo is a restricted area with

specialized architecture and limited access points. The layout of this space suggests that it was open only to a select, hegemonic group (Cyphers, *et al.*, 2006: 27). Thus, it may be observed that social memory within the sites varied among the inhabitants. Participation in certain mnemonic narratives would have afforded the formation of distinct identities within the site, providing a mechanism through which the individuals who shared in these narratives maintained and reinforced their status.

The construction of space at San Lorenzo allowed for the production of places in which the past was renewed and made present through rituals that evoked mnemonic narratives of the inhabitants' shared history. The production of monumental time, contiguous and enduring, would have allowed for the re-working of the past within these spaces through the medium of the monument, as the reification of social memory. This re-working was carried out through the practices of erasure, effacement, destruction, and re-carving to re-write or redact contentious or out-dated narratives. Ritual performances, perhaps including offering deposition, would have served to reinforce the version of the past previously established by the site's elites. The re-production of spaces and re-setting of the stone monuments allowed for both regeneration and transformation of the social memories and identities of the site's inhabitants as the political and social landscapes of the site shifted and power structures were reoriented. Undoubtedly, competition and dissention between competing factions would have made the settings of stone monuments (and the pasts they made present) an invaluable resource in elite maneuvering for social power.

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<sup>i</sup> Rebecca González Lauck (1991) has convincingly argued that the elongated elements held in the mouths of the SL-37, LV-80, and Los Soldados-1 zoomorphs should be read as serpents. Cyphers later observed that the words serpent and rope may have been homophones in the Olmec language, just as in the Zoquean language of the modern Popluca from San Pedro Soteapan, in which the words for viper and rattan (the material from which they manufacture cord) are homophonous (2004a: 99). The ancient Maya also appear to have visually conflated serpents and cords, as demonstrated by the famous “Birth Vase,” which represents the birthing ropes typically hung from the rafters of a house as part of the labor process. On the vase these cords terminate in serpent heads.

<sup>ii</sup> Both of the large altar-thrones at this site were encountered with their frontal niches facing upward, apparently having been tipped on their backs. The incredible amount of effort required to shift these monuments into such a position suggests that this was not a random act undertaken by later site inhabitants. It seems possible that tipping the monuments face-up was a part of the termination rites associated with these monuments during the San Lorenzo phase, particularly as SL-20 was covered after this period, and therefore not visible to later occupants of the site.

<sup>iii</sup> The effacement of SL-2 is not as extreme as that of SL-53. The circular depressions that mar its features do not come close to erasing them, and for this reason it is difficult to say whether they were intended as non-specific mutilations, specific mutilations, or evidence of re-carving practices.

<sup>iv</sup> In Coe and Diehl’s 1980 publication the authors report that the monument was laid on a floor of yellow clay mixed with gravel and encased in a stratum of yellow clay (363). The discrepancies between their description and Beverido Pereau’s make the monument’s context somewhat unclear. I have chosen to foreground Beverido Pereau’s account since he was the original excavator and his report was published shortly after the monument was discovered, while Coe and Diehl’s publication was further removed in time.

<sup>v</sup> In his theories on the production of space, Lefebvre appears to conflate spaces that are monumental, such as cathedrals, with spaces that incorporate monuments (1992). In the European artistic tradition the spaces of monument display often are monumental themselves. However, at San Lorenzo not all settings incorporating monuments possess monumental qualities. Nevertheless, many of Lefebvre’s theories of monumental space appear applicable, since he uses the concept to address the monument’s role in the production of these spaces.



## Chapter Five: La Venta's Mnemonic Landscapes

*"There is never a landscape, always many landscapes. And landscapes are not passive, not 'out there,' because people create their sense of identity --whether self, or group, or nation state-- through engaging and re-engaging, appropriating and contesting the sedimented pasts that make up the landscape "* (Barbara Bender, 1998: 25).

Already at San Lorenzo we begin to see a certain configuration of space in the primary Olmec centers which will evolve and eventually dominate the Middle Pre-classic site of La Venta. The spaces of monument deposition and display at San Lorenzo are charged with referents to near and distant places in the form of construction materials brought from riverbeds (clays), salt domes and rock outcroppings (limestone and bentonite), low-lying hills (hematite), and volcanic chains (basalt). The incorporation of local and exotic resources would have reflected the networks of social and geographical relationships brought into play during the processes of their acquisition and architectural integration. Concurrently, the physical settings constructed with these materials were often designed to evoke topographic features or locations in the natural and supernatural worlds. For example, the sunken patios of San Lorenzo were most likely associated with the watery underworld, just as they were in later Mesoamerican belief systems (Cyphers, *et al.*, 2006: 30; see also Reilly, 1999). Likewise, the plateau itself integrated the built and natural environments through large-scale modification in the form of terracing and the construction of extensive causeways (Cyphers, 1997). The spaces of San Lorenzo began the Pre-classic development of an

environmental aesthetic predicated upon the juxtaposition of socio-cultural meanings and imagery with natural forms and materials.

At La Venta, monument forms and iconographies were further developed in tandem with architectural innovations to create dynamic urban landscapes which incorporated a host of topographic referents, including mountains, caves, and waterways. These monumental landscapes served to manifest the myth-histories of the site inhabitants as an integral aspect of the urban topography, reifying the past and grounding it within La Venta's ceremonial and civic spaces. Architectural topographies were interspersed with representations of historical events, elite personages of past and present, and the supernatural beings central to the Olmec belief system. Together, these structures and sculptures grafted layers of cultural meaning and memory onto the civic and ritual spaces of the site to create an environment in which the present could come into contact with and renew the past.

La Venta is organized into a series of architectural complexes, each of which is configured differently according to its discrete uses by the site's inhabitants. Five of these complexes are directly associated with the display of stone monuments: Complexes A, C, B, D, and the Stirling Acropolis (figure 5.1). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, parts of these complexes were covered with modern habitation and an oil refinery, which not only damaged the architectural structures, but could also have led to the re-positioning of sculptural works left on the ground surface, particularly in the case of those smaller sculptures and fragments. However, González-Lauck has observed that this not likely for the

majority of monuments when one considers the harmonious relationship between the sculptures, their sizes, and the spaces they inhabit, suggesting that they were encountered in their original locations (2004: 84).

The first five sections of this chapter will describe the complexes and the monuments found within each, emphasizing those works associated with contextual data gathered from archaeological investigations at the site. The sixth section will then elaborate upon the configuration of monuments and architecture within each complex as they relate to the construction of urban landscapes. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of how La Venta's inhabitants exploited the natural qualities of landscape (a common vehicle for social memory and corporate identity) as a mechanism for the presentation of historical narrative. By conflating the built environment with the mytho-historical narratives of their culture, the elites of La Venta were able to naturalize an official version of the past, while simultaneously manifesting that past in the present spaces of civic life where it could exercise power over the site's inhabitants.

### **5.1 Complex A**

Complex A, La Venta's elite ceremonial center, is positioned just north of the site's large central pyramid, C-1. The complex consists of a series of mounds and platforms, arranged bilaterally along the site's centerline, which are interspersed with stone monuments and buried offerings of both portable goods and massive quantities of serpentine blocks (figure 5.2). The structures that make up the complex are surprisingly diminutive when compared with other

architectural groups at the site. Nevertheless, the area is one of concentrated construction and deposition, which took place over numerous centuries, resulting in deep cultural deposits and a complex stratigraphy. The chronology of the complex is based upon four construction phases, each marked by the deposition of distinct series of sand and clay floors in the Ceremonial Court. This sequence became conflated with the chronology for the entire site. The phases (I-IV) mark discrete periods of renovation and ritual activities within Complex A. Shifts in the areas emphasized by ritual practices and construction activities during each phase within the complex are highly suggestive of concurrent, diachronic shifts in the socio-political landscape of the site itself.

Excavations took place in 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, and 1955, making Complex A the most thoroughly investigated of all the La Venta architectural groups (Drucker, 1952; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959; Stirling, 1940; 1943a; 1943b; Stirling and Stirling, 1942). Unfortunately, bulldozing, in connection with urban development and the construction of an airstrip, subsequently destroyed the complex. More recently, Susan Gillespie has been reviewing the field notes and reports from these investigations (particularly those from the 1955 season) in order to recover as much of the original excavation data as possible (2008a; 2008b). Her archival investigations have born fruit in the form of a more clear and accurate map of the area, as well as a reconstruction of the distinct construction phases marking the complex's development. Her reports reveal that, while the architecture of the complex appears symmetrical, that symmetry is the end result of centuries of building activities. Over the course of these activities the

appearance of the complex would have diverged significantly from the final configuration presented in the 1955 map (*ibid.*, 2008a).

The first recorded building phase, Gillespie's Phase I-A, began with the large-scale leveling of the area designated the Ceremonial Court (Gillespie, 2008a: 6). However, excavation data suggests that platforms or painted floors were present in the area of the Northwest Platform and mound A-2 during a time that preceded Phase I, and that this leveling resulted in the razing of these earlier structures (*ibid.*). After this process of leveling, a low wall or ridge of red clay was erected to demarcate the court area. The earliest version of the A-2 mound (a stepped, rectilinear platform) was constructed, as was the Northeastern Platform mound, located within the newly erected walls of the Ceremonial Court (*ibid.*, 7, 12). Four dedicatory caches were incorporated into the fill of this structure, three consisting of a single ceramic vessel (Offerings 15-17), while the fourth (Offering 7) contained a number of jade objects laid out above an oval of orange clay mixed with cinnabar (Drucker, Heizer, Squier, 1959: 124; Gillespie, 2008b: 122). This last offering may have been intended as a pseudoburial, a type offering frequently encountered in Complex A consisting of ornaments and other paraphernalia laid out as though they adorned a human body. However, these deposits are typically devoid of evidence which would indicate an actual burial, such as bones or teeth, leading to their designation as "pseudoburials" (Gillespie, 2008b: 131). It is possible that the South-Central platform was also constructed during this phase, but conclusive evidence is lacking and it may be that its construction dated to Phase II. Phase I-A is associated with a series of light-

brown, tan, and buff “water-sorted” floors, deposited within the Ceremonial Court at the end of this building stage (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 10, 27, 124; Gillespie, 2008a: 12).

Gillespie distinguished Phase I-B from I-A after noting that the constructions in the former phase were deposited atop the water-sorted floors, yet also appear earlier than those designated for Phase II (Gillespie, 2008a: 12). The structures of this period include the A-3 platform, similar in size and form to A-2, and the Northwestern Platform. These two platforms served to give the complex the symmetrical appearance with which it is often associated. However, it should be noted that prior to their construction, the platform structures within the court were distinctly unsymmetrical, suggesting that the symmetry of the complex developed over time, rather than being a starting goal for court architects.

Phase II was initiated with the excavation of two large pits on either side of the southern entrance to the court, which were to serve as receptacles for Massive Offerings 1 and 4 (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 125). These offerings consisted of 28 layers of rough serpentine blocks, above which were constructed the famed serpentine mosaics. The greenstone blocks of the mosaic were outlined with bright yellow and red-purple clays to create a type of offering which combined the artistic with the architectural, and which would never be seen again in the history of Mesoamerica (figure 5.3). After covering these offerings with fill, two adobe platforms faced with basalt blocks were erected

directly above them. These became the Southeastern and Southwestern platforms, which flanked the southern entrance to the Ceremonial Court (*ibid.*).

Interred within the fill underlying each of the adobe platforms was a dedicatory offering of celts. Offering 1943-E was located in the fill above Massive Offering 4, below the Southwestern platform (*ibid.*). This cache consisted of 20 celts arranged in a cruciform pattern, with a concave hematite mirror positioned at its base. Offering 1942-E consisted of a cache of 6 serpentine celts, which Gillespie suggests may have been two arms of a cruciform arrangement that had been incompletely excavated (2008b: 122). Three other offerings are associated with this phase, including two ceramic vessels deposited at the bottom of two pits dug into the Northwestern Platform (Offerings 18 and 19) and a number of jade objects deposited in the eastern half of the South-Central platform (Offering 3). The latter was most likely intended as a pseudoburial, as it included a number of costume ornaments positioned in a bed of cinnabar (*ibid.*).

The clay wall surrounding the Ceremonial Court was also modified during this phase, replaced by a brickwork wall or embankment. The inner part of this embankment (and possibly its outer “toe”) was faced with rectangular blocks of basalt. The interior of the court was refurbished with the white-sandy floor series, deposited above a dense clay fill which raised the overall height of the court. The platforms inside the court and Mound A-2 were also enlarged at this time (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 125).

Like Phase II, Phase III was initiated by the deposition of a massive offering (M.O. 3), positioned astride the centerline between the South-Central

Platform and A-2. Again, the Northeastern, Northwestern, South-Central, and A-2 platforms were enlarged. The brick wall terminating at the Northeastern entryway to the court was faced with dressed basalt and serpentine blocks, which may also have adorned the outside “toe” of the wall. The court itself was raised and paved with the “old-rose”-colored floor series that distinguishes this phase (*ibid.*).

Offerings deposited during this period far out-stripped the numbers encountered in previous construction phases. The majority of these were associated with either the Northeastern platform or the court interior and Massive Offering 3. The latter were mostly located along the centerline, including Offerings 1, 2, 8, 12, 1943-D and 1943-C. Of these 6 offering caches, 1, 2, 8 and 1943-D all contain arrangements of greenstone celts or pseudocelts, while 1943-C consisted of 2 ceramic vessels. Offering 12 is relatively unique among the offering caches at the site, comprised solely of two masses of pigment, one of green malachite and the other red cinnabar. No objects were found in association with these areas. Offering 13 was also deposited in the Ceremonial Court during this phase, but was positioned to the east of the centerline. This offering contained two serpentine, celt-like objects. Three additional offering caches were deposited in the Northwestern platform, consisting of two probable pseudoburials (Offering 5 and 6) and a group of 5 nested ceramic vessels, with a sixth positioned to one side of the group (Offering 14) (Gillespie, 2008b: 122-123).

The most remarkable cache discovered in association with Phase III was Offering 4, deposited west of the Northeastern mound in the fill used to raise the



floor of the court (figure 5. 4). This cache contained a grouping of 16 figurines and 6 pieces cut from whole celts. These objects were positioned to form a tableau in which the single sandstone figurine stands before the cut celts, which are arranged vertically to form a backdrop or architectural setting. Four of the other figurines (all greenstone) file in front of the one individual carved of sandstone, while the rest gather in a half circle before them. The scene is ambiguous and provocative, its meaning unclear. Yet it remained in the minds of the site's inhabitants for many years after its deposition, as evinced by the pit dug sometime after Phase III to expose the tops of the figurines and celts, which was then backfilled. Drucker, Heizer, and Squier make particular note of the precise placement of the pit over the offering and its dimensions, which were only slightly greater than that of the offering itself. Such accuracy in location and size of the pit dug to expose the offering suggested to the excavators that some records detailing the nature and deposition of the cache had been kept (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 154-155).

Phase IV was the most active period in the history of the complex, both in terms of construction and offering deposition. The phase was initiated with the deposition of Massive Offering 2 at the center of the A-2 platform (*ibid.*, 125). Mounds A-4 and A-5 were constructed to the south of the Ceremonial Court, essentially demarcating a second, southern court containing A-3 and a number of offering deposits dating to this last phase. A-2 was also enlarged and a red clay cap was deposited over the Ceremonial Court and the platform structures of Complex A. The brick wall surrounding the court was topped with an enclosure of

basalt columns. More of these columns were set upright along the edges of the Southeastern and Southwestern platforms. Basalt columns were also set horizontally between these two platforms to provide a stepped entryway into the Ceremonial Court (*ibid.*, 126).

More basalt columns were employed in the construction of Tomb A, incorporated in the A-2 platform during this phase (figure 5.5). This tomb, also called LV-7, actually did contain the remains of two or three small individuals (probably children) within two separate bundles. These were placed on the paved floor of the tomb and surrounded by a large number of elite objects made of jade, obsidian, serpentine, hematite, clay, and one necklace of 6 hematite-incrusted stingray tails and 1 imitation tail carved of jade. In addition to the human remains, the bundles appear to have contained large amount of cinnabar (Stirling and Stirling, 1942: 640-642).

Two pseudoburials were also interred in the same platform just south of Tomb A. One of these, Tomb E, consisted of a number of elite ornaments (including jade beads, celts, earspools, a concave mirror, and jade skull) positioned below a pile of horizontally-stacked basalt columns (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 73; Wedel, 1952: 64-65). Tomb B is actually a sandstone coffer, carved in relief to represent the composite zoomorph, and containing the objects of the second pseudoburial, as though it functioned as a monumental sarcophagus (Stirling and Stirling, 1942: 637-641). This coffer, also known as LV-6, has since been lost and it is possible that it was destroyed in the bulldozing of Complex A.

A third pseudoburial at the site (Offering 1942-D) was located between Tombs A and E, while a fourth pseudoburial was interred in a “cist tomb” constructed of massive sandstone slabs incorporated into the A-3 platform (Tomb C) (Drucker, 1952: 27-28; Wedel, 1952: 68). Just to the south of this sandstone cist a fifth pseudoburial was deposited in a bed of cinnabar. Although lacking any architectural demarcation, Wedel chose to label this deposit Tomb D (otherwise referred to as Offering 1943-L) (Wedel, 1952: 73).

Other offerings deposited during Phase IV include a cache of four figurines carved of serpentine just south of Tomb D (1943-M), a series of objects placed on the site centerline between Tomb C and LV-14 (see discussion of LV-14 below), a cache of 12 serpentine celts (1943-B) (also on the centerline above Massive Offering 3) and a second celt cache placed in cruciform arrangement just south of the sandstone coffer (Tomb B). Two caches, each consisting of serpentine celts and a single concave mirror, were also deposited on the east and west sides of the centerline in the fill above Massive Offering 2 (Offerings 9 and 11). The eastern cache, Offering 11, contained an additional 907 jade beads, which served to distinguish it from its counterpart on the western side of the centerline. A fifth Massive Offering was deposited just south of A-3, but cannot be dated to this last phase with any certainty (Gillespie, 2008b: 123).

After Phase IV the complex was no longer expanded and no further construction activities took place. However, several offerings can be dated to post-Phase IV times, including a number of pottery vessels that were left in the upper drift sands which collected above Phase IV's red clay cap (Offerings 20-27

and 1943-A). Two other offerings are ambiguous in their chronological placement, possibly dating to Phase IV or a period shortly after the end of this final phase. One of these (Offering 1943-N) consists of 253 serpentine celts and a single concave mirror. The elite goods contained in this cache suggest that its deposition took place prior to the decline of the site. Offering 1943-O contained between 4 and 5 ceramic vessels which were discovered in the drift sands at the northern flank of the C-1 pyramid. Compared to Offering 1943-N, the nature and placement of the latter cache is more in accordance with the other post-Phase IV offerings (Gillespie, 2008b: 123).

Although structural configuration gives Complex A an overall appearance of symmetry, it should be noted that offering deposition was often concentrated in different areas of the architectural group during each of the four phases. All of the caches deposited during Phase I are associated with the Northeastern platform. However, Phase II's offering activities were distributed among the South-Central and Northwestern Platforms, as well as the newly constructed Southwestern and Southeastern Platform structures. In Phase III the Northeastern Platform was again favored with a number of offering depositions, as was the interior of the Ceremonial Court along the centerline. Offerings during Phase IV were primarily associated with the A-2 and A-3 mounds and were almost all on the centerline, with the exception of Offerings 9 and 11, which were nevertheless placed in reference to this line. Gillespie also points out that the Southeastern and Southwestern Platforms, as well as their respective massive offerings, show significant differences that may be the result of their construction by discrete

groups of individuals (2008b: 127-129). She suggests that the shifts in the concentration of ritual activities to different areas of the complex are likewise reflective of shifts in power between different groups of ritual caretakers competing for dominance (*ibid.*).

A number of stone monuments were discovered within the bounds of Complex A. Several were recovered during the excavations directed by Stirling during the early 1940s, for which no contextual data is available beyond their approximate positions in relation to the architectural features of the complex. Monuments in this category include Stela 1, Stela 3, Stela 4, and LV-5. The colossal heads were discovered to the north of the complex, arranged in east-west alignment progressing from Head 4 at the west end of the line to Head 3 at the eastern end and all facing to the north (Stirling, 1943b: 57) (figures 5.6-5.9). Stela 1 was positioned between A-3 and A-5, in east-west alignment with Tomb C. Stela 3, the largest monument in the complex aside from the colossal heads, was positioned within the Ceremonial Court, near the northwestern corner of the South-Central Platform and possibly on the western edge of the platform itself. These two monuments are quite unlike, even though they are both categorized as stelae. The first presents a kilted figure in high relief standing in a rectangular niche (figure 5.10). Above the niche in bas-relief are earth motifs similar to those appearing on the upper ledges of the thrones, most likely marking the niche as a cave. In contrast, Stela 3 presents a scene in low-relief, composed of two figures garbed in elaborate regalia above which float several smaller figures (figures 5.11 and 5.12). The carving of Stela 3 is much higher in quality and the overall

dimensions are significantly grander, measuring 4.26 meters high and 1.90 meters in width. In comparison Stela 1 only measures 2.51 meters in height by 79 centimeters in width (Stirling, 1943b: 50-52). Stela 4, which Stirling described as a fragment of worked stone measuring 2.3 meters high and 70 centimeters wide, was once located near the northeastern end of A-5, but has since been lost (*ibid.*, 52). LV-5 is the only monument known to have been located on the eastern half of the complex, sitting approximately 3 to 4 meters south of the Northeastern Platform inside the Ceremonial Court (Gillespie, 2008a: 5) (figure 5.13). Sometimes referred to as “la abuela,” this sculpture presents the figure of a composite anthropomorph sculpted in the round. The figure stands 1.42 meters high and holds a box-like receptacle between its hands, a position similar to LV-75 which was located atop the Stirling Acropolis (Beverido Pereau, 1996: 222). Tombs A and B (corresponding to LV-6 and LV-7) were also located during this time, interred in the A-2 platform.

The majority of the other monuments associated with Complex A were recovered between 1942 and 1955. The reports of these later excavations include contextual information for LV-12, LV-13, LV-14, LV-15, LV-22, LV-23, and LV-24 (described below). Three monuments (LV-19, 20, and 21) were encountered during the construction of the airstrip; however, no stratigraphic data was recovered for them and their exact positions are unknown. LV-19 is counted among the finest relief carvings in the Olmec sculptural corpus. The monument takes the form of an irregular slab of stone with one side smoothed and carved with relief presenting a serpent with supernatural features and rattled tail curved

around a human figure (figure 5.14). The figure is male, holds a satchel or bag, and wears a headdress which takes the same form as the head of the supernatural serpent. The composition of the relief carving conforms to the natural shape of the boulder, which measures approximately 95 centimeters in length, 76 centimeters in width and 60 centimeters in thickness (Drucker, Heizer, Squier, 1959: 197). LV-20 is a curious greenstone monument measuring 1.98 meters in length by 56 centimeters maximum width (figure 5.15). The sculpture was most probably intended to represent a cetacean, possibly a dolphin. The third monument found during the airstrip construction is one of only three sculptures at La Venta carved from basalt brought from the La Union volcano to the south. It represents the upper half of a human torso terminating in a rectangular block form resembling a table-top altar (figure 5.16). The arms rest on the table-top surface, the right pulled close to the chest and the other stretched out towards the ledge. The head of the figure has been removed and the break eroded smooth. Post-mutilation, the sculpture stands 54 centimeters high and measures 59 centimeters across.

Local residents later found LV-77 and LV-80 on two separate occasions. No approximate location was recorded for LV-77, sometimes referred to as the "governor." However, accounts of LV-80's discovery indicate that the monument was recovered near the northeastern corner of A-5. The former monument is sculpted in the round, representing a seated figure with ornamented headdress, cape, belt, loin cloth, pectoral, bracelets, and ankle bands (figure 5.17). The stepped sides of the headdress and crossed band pectoral call to mind SL-52

and LS-2 (figures 5.18 and 5.19), both of which bear the features of the composite anthropomorph. LV-77 is more ambiguous in its representation; it is difficult to discern whether the sculptor intended to represent the composite anthropomorph or a human figure. Its regalia are certainly more elaborate than the other two sculptures, yet it is rare to encounter a seated human which was not decapitated in antiquity. Owing to the presence of the head, along with the similarities to SL-52 and Los Soldados-2, I am inclined to identify this figure as a composite anthropomorph, rather than a human lord.

LV-80 also shares similarities with two monuments from San Lorenzo and Los Soldados. The monument represents a zoomorph with a stylized serpent between its jaws (figure 5.20). The subject is analogous to LS-1 and SL-37; however, unlike the other two, LV-80 was not decapitated in antiquity. Additionally, the serpent held in its mouth is distinct from the elongated elements depending from the mouths of the creatures represented in the other two monuments, which appear thicker and more rope-like. González-Lauck observes that the artist appears to have maintained the key elements of the subject and composition, while adapting the style of the monument to La Ventan conventions (1991: 171).

As indicated above, the other monuments from this complex were encountered under the conditions of archaeological excavation. Thus, they are associated with contextual data relating them to various construction and offering activities. Each of these monuments is further discussed below in association with the stratigraphic data pertinent to their display and recovery.



### *Monument 12*

LV-12 was discovered near the centerline between the sunken court and the South-Central Platform (figure 5.21). It is unclear with which (if either) of these two structures the monument was originally associated. The green schist sculpture lay in the upper drift sands which had collected above the red clay cap of Phase IV (Drucker, 1952: 179; Wedel, 1952: 39). The features of the monument appear roughly simian; however, the figure's supernatural nature is clearly indicated by the serrated brows, ornamental collar and belt. The belt or waist wrap has been inscribed with an abstract, zoomorphic face similar to the features carved on LV-6, the sandstone coffer from platform A-2. The face is also analogous to that decorating the front of the table-top throne represented as part of a painted mural from Oxtotitlán (figure 5.22). The bottom left side of the figure has been broken away, but otherwise the monument appears to be well preserved. In its present state, the sculpture measures 1.22 meters high, 26 centimeters wide, and 24 centimeters at its maximum thickness (Beverido Pereau, 1996: 231).

### *Monument 13*

Sometimes referred to as the "messenger," LV-13 was first located in the post-Phase IV drift sands, its base resting on the red clay surface which sloped south from A-2 (Drucker, 1952: 39) (figure 5.23). The monument was set 6 meters inside the northern wall of the Ceremonial Court, directly on the site centerline. When the area was excavated it was discovered that LV-13 had been placed directly over an offering (Offering 1) comprised of 20 serpentine

pseudocelts.<sup>i</sup> Of these 20 pseudocelts, 18 were arranged in three rows of six to form a rough quadrangle measuring between 91 and 104 centimeters on a side. The remaining 2 were positioned at the southern end of the quadrangle and were set vertically, rather than horizontally (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 133-135). A seemingly unrelated small celt was found off to one side of this cache. Offering 1 had been laid out in a pit which was dug prior to the deposition of the old-rose floors during Phase III, while LV-13 was set in the fill of a later pit dug through this floor series, most likely dating to Phase IV (*ibid.*, 133). Subsequently, Drucker, Heizer, and Squier suggested that, since the deposition of cache and monument took place in different phases, the relation between the monument and Offering 1 was circumstantial. They further note that the position of both cache and LV-13 marked the juncture of the southern edge of the A-2 platform and the northern border of the Ceremonial Court (*ibid.*, 40-41). Given the evidence for long-term recollection of offering deposition (e.g. Offering 4), it seems equally plausible that the memory of Offering 1's location was retained and subsequently influenced the placement of the monument.

A curious monument, LV-13 is remarkable for its line of symbols carved in relief, which appear to be among the earliest uses of glyph or rebus writing in Mesoamerica. The monument is a basalt cylinder, possibly a modified section of columnar basalt like those employed in the architecture of Complex A. One end has been smoothed and carved with a low relief of a male figure, wearing a flowing headdress, beaded necklace, sash, and tasseled sandals. This figure clutches a banner in his left hand, while his right hand is flexed towards his chest.

A single footprint is positioned behind him. Later in Mesoamerica the footprint would become an ubiquitous sign used to signify travel. LV-13 appears to be wholly intact, with no signs of mutilation, and measures 80 centimeters in height, and 70 to 80 centimeters wide (de la Fuente and Gutiérrez Solana, 2006: 343).

#### *Monument 14*

LV-14 takes the form of a basalt cylinder measuring 38 centimeters in diameter and 51 centimeters in height. The cylinder is perforated with a circular hole running through its center measuring 9 centimeters in diameter, which was plugged at one end by a fitted planoconvex stone disk 5 centimeters thick (Wedel, 1952: 71). The function and significance of this work is unknown and therefore it is difficult to determine whether this should be considered within the category of monuments. However, the context of LV-14 is provocative, suggesting a possible ritual function for the work; Wedel proposed that the cylinder was dedicatory in nature (*ibid.*, 73). As it is not always possible to identify monuments by their form or iconography alone, I have decided to include this work as a noteworthy and enduring component of the ritual space, despite having no evidence to confirm whether its function was directly related to the production of social memory.

LV-14 was set vertically atop the red clay core of A-3, a stepped platform measuring approximately 32 meters by 24 meters. The construction of this mound began with setting six yellow adobe bricks upright at regular intervals, most likely to serve as grade stakes which could have been used to construct a level, uniform foundation. This resulted in the deposition of a perfectly level floor

of pink and white sandy clays (*ibid.*, 66-67). Later, this floor was covered by a mass of red clay mixed with a rubble of burnt and un-burnt materials consisting of “burnt clay, fire-blackened earth, stones, and an occasional tiny sherd” (*ibid.*, 67). Aside from these sherds, the fill was generally devoid of cultural artifacts (*ibid.*).

A-3 contained the “cist tomb,” Tomb C, which was constructed of dressed sandstone slabs. The “tomb” contained a pseudoburial demarcated by an area of bright red cinnabar which contained a large number of jade beads, 37 celts, pieces of worked rock crystal, jade spangles, a jade awl, an engraved obsidian core, a serpentine figure, two earspools, and three ceramic vessels (*ibid.*, 68). This pseudo-burial was located along the site centerline, as was LV-14.

Between cylinder and cist tomb, just to the north of LV-14, Wedel uncovered a series of offerings which included two serpentine celts, remnants of a jade mosaic, and an amber pendant (*ibid.*, 71-72). These explorations also uncovered fragments of a sandstone object, most likely flat and circular in shape, which appears to have a dressed opening approximately 10 to 15 centimeters across at its center. Given the presumed shape, dimensions, and central opening of this object (as reconstructed by Wedel) it was suggested that this object may have been directly related to the nearby LV-14 (*ibid.*).

The A-3 platform mound also contained a second pseudoburial (Tomb D), located 6 meters south of LV-14. No architectural construction or “tomb” was associated with this cache, which was demarcated solely by a well-defined rectangle of cinnabar, laid down to a thickness of 22 to 25 centimeters. This area contained earspools, jade beads, a triangular piece of jade, a small ceramic pot,

and a convex disk with scalloped edge which, judging from the perforations, was most likely worn as a pendant (*ibid.*,73). One meter south of this deposit was a group of four serpentine figurines resting on the same level as Tomb D. A-3 was also bordered on the southern side by the second massive offering. Given the frequency and richness of the offering deposits around and in alignment with LV-14, it seems reasonable to suppose that the basalt cylinder was part of a complex of ritual activity tied to the creation and possible veneration of pseudoburials, particularly Tomb C. If these pseudoburials were intended to mark the passing of particular individuals, it seems possible that LV-14 was in some way related to the memorials surrounding one or more of the individuals commemorated by the A-3 pseudoburial deposits.

#### *Monument 15*

Discovered by Waldo Wedel during his explorations of the Ceremonial Court, LV-15 consists of only two small fragments presumed to have originally been part of a larger monument (figure 5.24). In 1952 Drucker produced a drawing of the reconstructed monument based on comparisons with similar olmec images (Drucker, 1952: figure 54) (figure 5.25). In this reconstruction LV-15 appears as a flat rectangular plaque bearing a relief carving of a mountain lord (see below) or composite anthropomorph divided into two registers. The bottom register contains the features of the anthropomorphic supernatural, while the upper register has a tripartite element most closely representing sprouting foliage, comparable to similar motifs on the C-3 celtiform stelae. An oval motif decorates the central band separating the upper and lower registers. While

Drucker has taken certain liberties with the features of the composite anthropomorph, adding serrated brows and a triangular brow element not indicated by the bottom fragment, it seems possible that his drawing is a fair approximation of the plaque's original form given its similarities with several of the C-3 stelae.

The two fragments of LV-15 were located at the base of the southern columnar steps giving access to the Ceremonial Court. The larger fragment was discovered south of the lowermost step at a depth of one meter, putting it on the same level as the step. The smaller fragment was located 1 meter to the southwest of the first at the same level of deposition (Wedel, 1952: 60). It is possible that the monument was at one time either erected at the base of the steps leading into the Ceremonial Court or set at the top and later toppled to the base, resulting in the plaque's fracturing.

#### *Monument 22*

In 1955 two fragments of green schist or gneiss were discovered in association with Southeast Platform lying directly atop the Phase IV red clay cap. The larger of the two pieces was positioned at the southeastern corner of the platform, while the smaller lay near the southwestern corner (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 202). The two fragments were determined to be two pieces of a single monument (LV-22) which once bore an elaborate design carved in relief. The two fragments were sizable, with the largest measuring 1.2 meters long by 27 centimeters at its point of maximum width (de la Fuente and Gutiérrez Solana, 2006: 97). The careful positioning of the two monument fragments at the

southern corners of the platform suggests that they were placed deliberately during Phase IV.

### *Monument 23*

LV-23, a well-modeled sculpture of a seated Olmec lord, was re-set on the edge of the A-5 mound after undergoing a process of mutilation involving the removal of the figure's head and arms (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 111, 203) (figure 5.26). The figure's right foot is also missing. All of these breaks were eroded and smoothed by the passage of time. However, the elite ornamentation marking the status of the figure was left intact. These include an elaborate pleated belt with rectangular plaque or buckle, as well as a multi-strand collar from which is hung a concave oval mirror. The belt and collar are among the most extravagant adornments worn by a single figure in the entire corpus of Olmec monumental sculpture-in-the-round, perhaps indicating the power and influence of the individual once represented. Post-mutilation, LV-23 was positioned on the lower terrace of the A-5 platform.

The eastern side of A-5 was partially excavated as part of the 1955 investigations. These excavations revealed that the structure consisted of a long, low platform mound, possibly with rounded ends. A-5 measured approximately 86.86 meters in length and 16.15 meters in width (*ibid.*, 109). The mound was constructed above an irregular layer of brown sand, which lay atop a culturally sterile clay base. The stratigraphy of the structure suggests that it was built in a single construction phase. A-5 was designed with two terraces (upper and lower) which stepped down from the upper surface. At its highest point the clay mound

rose 2.4 meters above its foundation of brown sand. From there it stepped down 38.1 centimeters to the upper terrace and then 40.6 centimeters to the second, lower terrace (*ibid.*).

This second terrace was paved with water-worn slabs of un-worked limestone, the largest pieces each weighing between 300 and 400 pounds (*ibid.*,111). LV-23 was set atop the western edge of this pavement. On its inner side the upper terrace was ornamented with a series of limestone slabs set vertically and roughly parallel to the mound's long axis. A pit, extending from a point west of the vertical slabs to the horizontal limestone slabs paving the lower terrace, was dug down almost to the base of the mound and then backfilled with heavy red and yellow clays into which the limestone slabs (both horizontal and vertical) were set. Drucker, *et al.* noted that these clays are similar to those associated with the Phase IV cap, suggesting that the pit, limestone slabs, and the setting of LV-23 all date to this period (*ibid.*).

LV-23 is one of the few sculptures clearly demonstrating the continued practices of erasure and resetting at La Venta. Moreover, it is the only one of these for which the archaeological context is well-documented. Given the erosion of the sculptural breaks, along with the lack of stone fragments discovered by the excavators that might have once belonged to the work, it seems almost certain that LV-23 was set in place after it had already been mutilated. This occurred in Phase IV, the same phase during which the A-5 platform was constructed. Yet, the monument might have been decades or even centuries old by the time it was placed on the mound's lower terrace. The removal of the head and limbs of the



individual and concurrent retention of costume elements is analogous to the treatment of several other Olmec sculptures, including SL-34 and LZ-5. Clearly the monument was able to retain its significance even after its mutilation, although its original meanings and associations were most likely transformed, re-oriented, or redacted post-mutilation.

#### *Monument 24*

LV-24 is most probably a step cover used in the constriction of the A-2 platform, rather than a proper monument (Gillespie, 2008a: 11). The step is sculpted of green gneiss, measuring 1.16 meters long by 35 centimeters wide, which has been smoothed but not polished (de la Fuente and Gutiérrez Solana, 2006: 99; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 204). It was discovered in the fill of A-2, north of Tomb A, positioned on the centerline. No records were made of the stratigraphy in this part of the mound fill; however, Drucker, Heizer, and Squier believed its placement was most likely associated with Phase IV (1959: 46-47).

## **5.2 Complex C**

Complex C is the designation given to the central basal pyramid of La Venta and its associated platform structures. C-1, the pyramid itself, appears roughly conical, rising to a height of more than 30 meters. The pyramid is primarily an earthen construction. Erosion and wear to its outer surface over the centuries have resulted in much speculation as to the original form of the structure. Heizer proposed that the C-1 pyramid was originally a fluted cone intended as an effigy of a volcano, the source of basalt, presumably a sacred

feature of the Olmec landscape (1968: 17-21; Heizer and Drucker, 1968). Later, John Graham and Mark Johnson suggested that comparison with the forms of the Pre-classic platforms at Uaxactun (E-VII sub) and Tikal (5C-54) could provide an alternative to Heizer's fluted cone hypothesis (1979). Both of these structures have four stairways descending from summit to base. Tikal's 5C-54 was also configured with inset corners which were fashioned as sloping buttresses on the structure's eastern side, probably to retain the bulk of the edifice (*ibid.*, 2). Graham and Johnson observed the similarities between these structures and the current form of C-1, presenting a theory of continuity between the three Pre-classic structures (*ibid.*).

Excavations undertaken by the PALV in the late 1980s encountered the remnants of steps leading up the southern slope of the pyramid, as well as pieces of white limestone embedded intermittently in the sandy clay of the surface, probably to retain the less stable material (González Lauck, 1988: 143). The excavators also encountered evidence of a stepped slope on the southern side with inset corners receding from the central access point. Given the presence of these features, the structural form proposed by Graham and Johnson appears the most probable configuration for the final stage of C-1. A carbon sample extracted from a burned area on the original surface of the pyramid offered a date of  $394 \pm 30$  BC (González Lauck, 1996: 75).

The basal platform (C-3), surrounding the pyramid to the south, east, and west, was enclosed on three sides. The southeastern and southwestern corners of this platform supported two oval-shaped mounds (C-4 and C-5) (*ibid.*). In the

center of the platform's southern side is a projection atop which Blom and LaFarge first encountered Altars 2 and 3 (*ibid.*; Blom and LaFarge, 1926: 84). To the north a small apron projects into the Complex A area (C-2). This apron is distinct from the C-3 platform, which does not extend to the north side of C-1.

In 1955, Drucker, Heizer, and Squier excavated areas of C-3 (designated by them as C-4), leading to the discovery of LV-25/26 and LV-27 (1959: 120-121).<sup>ii</sup> In 1988 the PALV revisited the area under the direction of Miriam Judith Gallegos Gómora, excavating along the southern base of C-1 in order to relocate and excavate the monuments discovered and later re-interred by the archaeologists in 1955. These investigations encountered an additional 4 stelae erected at regular intervals along an east-west axis, now designated LV-87, LV-88, LV-89, and Stela 5 (González Lauck, 1997).<sup>iii</sup>

### *Altars 2 and 3*

Altars 2 and 3 were first reported by Blom and LaFarge, who saw the monuments during their 1925 visit to the site and noted their relative positions on the rough map produced at that time (1926). Matthew Stirling later described the two altar-thrones in his 1943 publication, in which he gave an account of all monuments then known for the site (1943b). However, Stirling neither excavated nor removed the two sculptures, which were brought to the Parque Museo La Venta in 1958 by Carlos Pellicer Cámara.

Although Altar 2 has been badly damaged, enough remains to decipher that the monument once took the form of a table-top altar-throne, complete with frontal niche occupied by a human figure (figure 5.27). The figure itself, most

likely an elite male, holds a smaller figure in his arms while sitting cross-legged within the niche. Comparison with Altar 5 and the Las Limas monument suggests that this smaller figure took the form of an infantile composite anthropomorph. David Grove has identified the niche on the front of the altar-thrones as the mouth of a cave (1973). Almost all of the central figures on these monuments, including the one on Altar 2, are positioned with shoulders framed by the arch of the cave and the upper half of the head (or headdress) out and above its upper edge. This iconic position may be intended to signal the act of emergence from the cave mouth. The left, right, and back sides of the monument appear undecorated.

The upper and lower corners on all sides of the altar have been removed by breaking. The seated figure has been partly erased by hammering, which was especially concentrated around the face and the upper surface of the recumbent being held in his arms. All details of the headdress have also been removed. A strange depression directly above the head of the central figure presents a smooth surface on the monument's otherwise rough and mutilated frontal face. After the extensive mutilation, what was left of the altar-throne measures 1.34 meters in length, 1.29 meters in width, and 99 centimeters in height (Stirling, 1943b: 43).

When first encountered, the altar-throne had been tilted on its back. When in its proper position, Altar 2 would have faced north, towards the C-1 pyramid. The altar-throne originally sat on an east-west axis with Altar 3. During their

centerline calculations, Drucker, Heizer, and Squier observed that the centerline would have passed between the two monuments (1959: 14).

Altar 3 once sat a few feet from Altar 2, facing north on the C-3 platform (figure 5.28). Although more of the original form and iconography has been preserved than those of Altar 2, it too has sustained extensive damage. The entire right side has been broken away, removing any relief carving that might have once been present. However, on the left side of the monument an exquisite relief carving remains clearly visible (figure 5.29).

This scene shows two figures seated within an architectural space designated at the top by a horizontal band above a row of circular elements while a horizontal band above three oval, cartouche-like symbols marks the bottom register. Within this space sit two bearded human figures, one seated above the other atop a low platform. This raised figure is positioned in the center of the composition, clearly referencing him as the dominant individual. Both figures extend a single raised arm, the central individual gesturing with a closed fist while the secondary figure to the left of the scene makes a sign with extended index finger and thumb. Each wears a distinctive headdress as well as garments which wrap around their waists, although these are also distinct from each other. The central figure wears a collar around his neck. Stirling also describes the secondary figure as wearing a necklace, but this detail appears to have eroded away since his viewing of the monument (Stirling, 1943b: 54).

The frontal figure is seated within a rather unusual niche, quadrangular in form, with a step-like projection at the top which was originally overhung by the

upper ledge of the altar. This figure is seated cross-legged, with arms now entirely removed below the shoulders. The general shape of his large, rounded ear pendants and tall headdress remain; however, hammering has erased all details of these ornaments and the facial features. A central motif on the figure's torso probably once decorated a wide belt. Its form can be compared to a similar decorative motif found on LV-77 and a monument depicting a composite anthropomorph from Los Soldados (figures 5.18 and 5.19).

To the left of the niche stands a human figure carved in low relief, garbed in a kilt-like garment with a wide waistband. The figure faces the central niche and holds out his right arm, crooked at the elbow, towards the niche. However, the forearm has been broken away and whatever gesture the figure made is now lost to us. The features have also been erased. Despite the extensive mutilation of the monument it is possible to determine that the high sculptural quality and elaborate imagery would have once counted the work among the most visually compelling at the site of La Venta.

All corners of the altar have been broken off. Additionally, the upper ledge has been removed from all sides. No debitage or large stone fragments have yet been reported in association with the area of the C-3 platform where these two monuments were finally raised, suggesting that they were put into place after the acts of mutilation had taken place. This would imply that the platform served as a secondary setting and that the monuments either retained their significance or were assigned new meaning after the erasure of the central figures and other areas which may have contained relief carving, such as the table-top ledge.

Further investigations of the area around the original monument locations may indicate whether or not this was indeed the case.

*Monument 25/26*

LV-25/26 is the largest of all the stelae on the C-3 platform (figure 5.30). It was originally encountered as two separate pieces, which received separate designations as LV-25 and LV-26, but was later recognized as a single monument which had been broken and the upper part reset near the base. The two halves of the great stela were placed in shallow holes 91 centimeters apart, with the backs braced against a bank cut into the main C-1 structure (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959:120). The base of LV-25 rested 2.41 meters below the modern ground surface and was wedged with several stones, including small pieces of limestone, basalt, and schist. The two stelae halves had been covered by slope wash from C-1 in their entirety prior to excavation. LV-26 was reset in an inverted position and placed in a shallower hole so that its top would have been nearly even with that of LV-25 (*ibid.*). Together the two fragments reached a height of 4.97 meters, while measuring a maximum of 1.83 meters in width and a mere 31 centimeters in thickness (González Lauck, 1997: 88).

LV-25/26 exemplifies a special category of stelae called “celtiform,” first identified by James Porter (1996). Stelae in this category are of greenstone, carved from natural stone slabs which are either unprepared or only minimally prepared, and usually trapezoidal in shape (*ibid.*, 65). Porter includes 4 of La Venta’s monuments in this category (LV-25/26, LV-27, LV-58, and LV-60), along with Stela C from Tres Zapotes and two stelae from the site of Tzutzuculi (*ibid.*,

66). Celtiform stelae are all carved in bas relief depicting the same subject- a supernatural being, believed to be an anthropomorphized mountain or earth lord, hereafter referred to as the “mountain lord” (Grove, 2000: 291). Images in this category are organized into a vertically divided, tripartite composition. The lower third has a lattice-like appearance with three horizontal bands further dividing the space. The middle section is given over to the facial features, which generally subscribe to the composite anthropomorph type, while the upper third is taken up by the “headdress,” a multi-lobed dome with foliage sprouting from the top, separated from the face by a decorative band.

Each of these figures possesses distinctive earflares and headbands. LV-88 also has a unique pendant hanging from its neck. Therefore, it may be that they all represent the same type of being, rather than a single individual. While González Lauck has challenged Porter’s theory that the category of celtiform stelae is related to the portable greenstone celts produced during the Middle Pre-classic, it seems clear that celtiform stelae can be considered a discrete category of object particular to that period (1997: 92).

#### *Monument 27*

LV-27 is also a greenstone (gneiss) stela, conforming to the celtiform type, carved in bas relief with the same mountain lord imagery as described for LV-25/26 (figure 5.31). LV-27 is the smaller of the two stelae discovered in 1955, with a height of 2.27 meters and a width of 1.35 meters (*ibid.*, 86). While having suffered damage to its top and bottom surfaces, LV-27 is all in one piece. However, like LV-26 it was set in an inverted position and placed within a pit dug



79 centimeters into the red clay layer of the platform surface. It seems apparent from the inverted position of the stela that it had been reset into this position, most probably by people who no longer understood the significance of the monument's imagery (Drucker, Heizer, Squier, 1959: 121). This resetting took place 22.86 meters east of LV-25.

### *Stela 5*

Stela 5 was discovered broken in two pieces between LV-26 and LV-27. The main part of the monument lay facedown, while the base was embedded in the clay platform (González Lauck, 1997: 85). Stela 5 is made of serpentine and measures 3.26 meters in height, 1.12 meters in width, and 38 centimeters in thickness (*ibid.*, 86). Its imagery diverges significantly from the other C-3 stelae. Rather than presenting an image of the mountain lord, Stela 5 is carved with a narrative scene involving four figures (figure 5.32).

The figures on Stela 5 are framed by a single ground-line at the bottom and a double-band demarcating the sky at the top. From this sky band a single figure with elaborate headdress emerges, holding a baton-like object before him, to gaze down at the gathering of three figures below. The position of this top figure is strongly reminiscent of later ancestral being half-emerging from sky bands on Classic Maya stelae. Of the three lower figures, two appear to be adult humans with tall headdresses facing one another in a direct exchange. The figure on the right side of the stela has an arm upraised towards the central individual. The latter holds a baton or club in his upraised left hand, while his right is extended towards the other man. This central individual wears a large,

zoomorphic (possibly feline) ornament at his beltline, as well as a long cape. The figure behind him, on the left side of the stela, appears as an elderly figure. This is most probably a supernatural or deity, garbed in an elaborate kilt, large headdress, and with a net hanging down his back. The net and general appearance of this figure is comparable to the Chaac-like water deity found on a Late Pre-classic stela from Izapa (Stela 1). González Lauck also notes similarities between this scene and monuments from Los Mangos, Veracruz and Pijijiapan, Chiapas (*ibid.*, 92).

*Monuments 87, 88, and 89*

Three monuments, LV-87, 88, and 89, were discovered on the southeastern side of the C-3 platform during the PALV's 1988 field season. All were discovered in an upright position with their ends embedded in the clay surface of the platform, leading González Lauck to suggest that this was the last original placement of these monuments (1997: 85). All three stelae are made of volcanic stone. When considering their overall placement in relation to the complete display of C-3 stelae, it becomes clear that the western side of the platform was designated for gray stone monuments (LV-87-89), whereas the eastern side of the platform supported only greenstone monuments (LV 25/26, 27, and Stela 5) (González Lauck, 2004: 92).

LV-88 and LV-89 display mountain lord imagery similar to that of the LV-25/26 and LV-27 stelae (figures 5.33 and 5.34). However, the upper surfaces have been broken off on both monuments. After the breakage LV-88 measures 2.12 meters in height, 94 centimeters in width, and 43 centimeters in thickness

(González Lauck, 1997: 89). Likewise, LV-89 measures 2.03 meters in height, 79 centimeters wide, and 53 centimeters thick (*ibid.*, 90). The PALV excavations did not encounter the upper surfaces of these monuments and it seems likely that they were reset after the breakage had already occurred, particularly as the monuments were positioned upright when discovered, which would not have been conducive to post-setting breakage or mutilation.

LV-87 is unique among the C-3 monuments, in that it is a plain stela with no evidence of surface carving. Its measurements are similar to those of the other western stelae, totaling 2.05 meters in height, 1.3 meters in width, and 36 centimeters in thickness (*ibid.*, 89). It is possible that this monument was once painted; however, no traces of pigment have yet been recovered (*ibid.*). Similar plain stelae have been recovered at Pre-classic sites in Guatemala, Chiapas, El Salvador, and Guerrero, and it seems clear that lack of imagery in this case should not be interpreted as a lack of significance or ideological power (Pereira, 2009: 24). Indeed, a recent study of the subject by Karen Pereira reports that these monuments are only found in primary and secondary regional centers during the Pre-classic and are entirely lacking at smaller sites (*ibid.*). The seeming rarity of plain stone monuments in the Gulf lowlands, when compared to their presence in the Maya area, suggests that this monument type might have been imported from parts south as those regions grew in power and influence during the Middle Pre-classic.<sup>iv</sup>

### **5.3 Complex B**

To date, Complex B remains one of the site's least explored areas. The complex consists of three platforms (B-1, B-2, and B-3) in north-south alignment bordering the western side of the enormous plaza, measuring 42,000 square meters (González Lauck, 1996: 79). The plaza and its central mound (B-4) are also included in this complex. A significant number of monuments were located in the open space of the plaza and atop the B-4 platform. These include one colossal head, a stela, two large stone monuments commonly referred to as "altars" (although their form differs from that of the table-top altar-thrones), several columns, stone fragments, and a zoomorphic sculpture dubbed the "altar of the jaguar."

Blom and LaFarge first noted the complex as part of the rough sketch map they produced in 1925 (1926). During the early 1940s, Stirling and his associates excavated several of the monuments which were originally located in the plaza, including Altar 1, Altar 7, Head 1, and Stela 2 (Stirling, 1947). However, none of these excavations were associated with the architectural features of the complex.

The team from U.C. Berkeley mapped the complex in 1967, noting the size and location of the B-4 platform before its subsequent destruction (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968). The investigators also surveyed and excavated a structure, which they labeled the "Great Platform," that seems to conform in size and location to B-1. The 1968 report describes this platform as "an acropolis-like structure, apparently built of clay and capped with occupation refuse" (*ibid.*, 139). However, the ceramic test pits which the excavators dug into the platform hardly

penetrated the clay construction layers which made up the structure. At this point they were forced to halt work in the area due to a combination of harassment and looting (*ibid.*). Heizer, Graham, and Napton also reference a lower mound in line with this one, which they did not survey. However, they did report that this low mound was associated with the discovery of an andesite boulder, recovered from a well at the southern margin of the structure (*ibid.*, 140). It is possible that this mound corresponds either to the B-2 or B-3 platforms, probably the latter given its position on the 1968 map and the excavators' observations that the second mound was greater in length than the "Great Platform" (*ibid.*)

The platforms in this complex have suffered damage from previous settlement and roadways. Salvage archaeology carried out in the 1980s north of B-1 recovered material evidence linking the area to stone working activities, including debitage and lithic tools (González Lauck, 1996: 80). Other work carried out during this decade included a more thorough survey and mapping of the complex, expanding the number of mounds associated with the architectural group and providing the first measurements of the plaza and platform structures (González Lauck, 1988; 1989). Due to the grand size of the structures and spaces associated with this area, as well as their open configuration which appears better suited to public events with unrestricted access, González Lauck has suggested that the complex can be designated as civic-administrative in function (1996: 75).

The monuments associated with the plaza space surrounding the B-4 platform are Altars 1 and 7, Head 1 and Stela 2, a fragment of relief showing a

human foot (LV-48), and a basalt column (LV-47). However, these works, like those removed from the B-4 platform, lack records of their archaeological contexts and only their relative positions are known. Nevertheless, the altars, colossal head, and stela are among the largest and best-preserved of the monuments at the site. Therefore, it seems worth noting their approximate locations within the plaza, as well as the details of their appearance and dimensions.

#### *Altars 1 and 7*

Although Stirling identified these monuments as “altars” the form deviates significantly from the other altar-thrones encountered at the site. Altar 1 is a rectangular block of stone sculpted with the features of an anthropomorphic being on its frontal face (figure 5.35). The features are marked by serrated brows separated by a prominent nasion, rectangular eyes, and broad, flat nose. Where the mouth should be there is a cavity leading from the front to the left side of the monument, which appears to be a natural feature of the stone. The bottom right portion of the stone has been broken away; however, the trajectory of the break is suggestive of a similar cavity penetrating through the front from the right side. Stirling suggested that the cavity was used in oracular prophecy, with the prophet speaking into the opening on the side while the voice would seem to come out of the mouth of the figure at the front (1940: 327). The sides of the monument are marked with the paw-wing motif, an element associated with the composite zoomorph (figure 5.36). Along with the bottom right section of the monument, the top and back have also suffered breakage. In its present state the sculpture

measures 1.85 meters high, 2.65 meters across, and 2.8 meters front to back. The altar was encountered facing east and almost completely buried near the southeastern corner of the B-4 platform (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 154; Stirling, 1943b: 52).

Like Altar 1, Altar 7 does not correspond to the typical altar-throne form. Rather, it appears as though the sculptor maintained the natural form of a large boulder and grafted onto its surface a series of relief carvings, some of which have been removed through breakage, erasure, or erosion (figure 5.37). However, it is still possible to make out a series of anthropomorphic (possibly human) figures, as well as a series of birds which are most likely intended to be owls. The heads of these birds protrude from the monument in a number of places in higher relief than the anthropomorphic figures positioned between and among them. The front of the monument takes the form of a rounded niche framing a large human head wearing a duckbill mask. Like the niches ornamenting the table-top altars, this was probably intended to signify a cave. The mask worn by the human head is reminiscent of the duckbill mask worn by the Tuxtla statuette (figure 2.3). The niche is flanked on both sides by two figures in low relief which have been badly eroded. Several areas of the monument also show breakage and the upper surface is marked by a series of non-specific mutilations in the form of elongated striations. Altar 7 was located midway between the C-3 and B-4 platforms, east of the site's centerline. The 1968 map shows the altar in east-west alignment with Head 1. Each of the two monuments

sit approximately the same distance from the centerline, Head 1 to the west and Altar 7 to the east (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 154).

*Stela 2 and Head 1*

When considered together, Head 1 and Stela 2 constitute a primary example of monument display related to the generation of social memory at the site. Head 1 is the only colossal head at La Venta which is not located to the north of Complex A. Rather, the head has been set within the Complex B plaza, just to the north of the B-4 platform mound. Stela 2 was erected in an adjacent position to the south of Head 1 (figure 5.38). The placement of both monuments within the plaza is unique, in that no other stela or head is found south of Complex C. Yet these two have been erected in a very public, open space. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the two monuments seems to reinforce a historical narrative of dynastic lineage or other direct connection between the individual represented by the colossal head and the primary figure dominating the scene on Stela 2. The latter is directly centered on the stela face, surrounded by six floating supernatural creatures with the features of the composite anthropomorph (figure 5.39). The central figure wears elaborate regalia, which includes an enormous headdress, cape, earspools, and pectoral, and carries a scepter or ceremonial bar in his hands. The headdress reaches a height nearly equal to the figure wearing it and incorporates a number of recognizable symbols, particularly an inverted U-shape with three comma-shaped elements depending from it, perhaps representing foliage similar to the tripartite elements which sprout atop the mountain lord figures on the C-3 stelae. This same motif is the primary decorative element on



the headdress of the nearby Colossal Head 1 (figure 5.40). Naming devices were often incorporated as part of an individual's headdress throughout the history of Mesoamerican art, a practice which demonstrably began during the Late Pre-classic and most probably was initiated earlier, during the Early or Middle Pre-classic. If, indeed, this motif was a device used to name or identify the individual portrayed by the colossal head, then the same motif incorporated into the headdress of the Stela 2 figure would seem to indicate a dynastic link between the two. The placement of the two monuments within the civic space of the plaza would have advertised the relation between these individuals to a broader public audience than would have been possible if they had been situated in Complex A. The need to overtly broadcast such relationships may be an indication of problems with inheritance or passage of titles between members of a dynasty. Notably, these two monuments are the only sculptures in Complex B which are overtly political in their subject matter.

#### **B-4**

The B-4 platform once sat in the middle of the Complex B plaza, directly positioned over the centerline of the site. During their 1968 survey of the area Heizer, Graham, and Napton described the platform as "a large, low clay mound" which was then serving as the foundation for several modern houses (*ibid.*, 140). At the time of their investigations only the western half of the mound remained. Today the remnants they encountered have been completely obliterated. However, a number of monuments were recovered from atop the B-4 platform,

suggesting that it was a critical site of social memory and civic ritual during the site's apogee.

*Monuments 35, 36, 37, 58, and 59*

While conducting their survey of the site in 1968, the team from U.C. Berkeley recorded 5 monuments which had originally been located on the B-4 platform (Clewlow and Corson, 1968; Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968). The exact positions of these monuments and their associated stratigraphy are unknown. However, it is worth noting the forms and media of these monuments in order to determine the sorts of monuments which were once centrally located in the largest civic space at La Venta.

LV-35 is a green schist column which Clewlow and Corson describe as "un-worked except for a grooved rim 46 cm from the north end" (1968: 174). The column measures 3.53 meters in length and 54 centimeters in diameter (*ibid.*). This is one of three green schist works associated with the platform. The other two (LV-36 and LV-58) take the form of a boulder and a fragment of relief which appears to have been broken from a monument carved with the face of the mountain lord or composite anthropomorph (figure 5.41).<sup>v</sup> All but the mouth of this figure has been broken away or erased. The relief fragment measures 82 centimeters in height, 47 centimeters in width, and 29 centimeters thick (*ibid.*). LV-36, the green schist boulder, was broken into two pieces referred to as 36a and 36b. LV-36a presented an un-worked surface with 21 striations on its eastern face. LV-36b has 25 of these striations and was discovered lying 5.3 meters north of its counterpart (*ibid.*). The two pieces measure 1.63 and 1.62

meters long, 77 and 87 centimeters wide, and 49 centimeters thick, respectively. This suggests that the boulder was broken almost exactly in half (*ibid.*).

The other two monuments located on the B-4 platform consist of a large, very eroded piece of sandstone (LV-37) and LV-59, sometimes referred to as the “altar of the jaguar.” The latter is a well-preserved zoomorphic figure topped with a rectangular slab, giving it the appearance of an altar (figure 5.42). The body of the zoomorph shows breakage on the back right and front right corners. The “altar” top is also broken towards the back right corner, in addition to a number of non-specific mutilations primarily consisting of striations and depressions along the top surface. The monument measures 95 centimeters high by 65 centimeters wide and 1.13 meters in length.

#### **5.4 Complex D**

Complex D is comprised of 20 mounds, oriented north-south, which occupy the southernmost part of the site core. The majority of the structures in this complex are rectangular platforms, although some have circular ground-plans, appearing as truncated cones at least a meter in height (González Lauck, 1988:133). Matthew Stirling’s excavations at the site in the early 1940s resulted in the excavation of two altar-thrones within the bounds of the complex (Altars 4 and 5) but did not explore any of the associated structures. In April of 1942 he also discovered three large sandstone monuments (LV-52, LV-53, and LV-54) “on a sandy ridge near what was then the Blasillo trail” (1968: 35). Excavations were conducted around the monuments but they were not removed and it

appears that Stirling was completely unaware of the architectural features associate with his excavations, which passed through part of the D-7 mound. In 1968 the team from U.C. Berkeley surveyed a few of the Complex D structures but no excavation was reported for the area (Heizer, Graham, Napton, 1968).

Since 1984, limited excavation has been conducted in the area as part of the Proyecto Arqueológico La Venta (Gallegos Gómora, 1990; González Lauck, 1988: 133-134). Structures D-1 and D-7 in particular have been investigated as part of these explorations. D-1 consists of a basal pyramid in the form of a truncated conical structure approximately 7 meters high. D-7, discussed in greater detail below, is the southernmost of the western line of structures in Complex D (González Lauck, 1988: 133). The uppermost surface of the structure was configured as a sunken court surrounded on three sides by a raised, U-shaped area (Gallegos Gómora, 1990: 19). This structure was the original location of the three sandstone monuments located by Stirling. The other structures in the complex have been surveyed and mapped but lack reports of associated excavation. In addition to the D-7 monuments, five other stone sculptures were discovered in conjunction with this architectural group, consisting of three altar-thrones (4, 5, and 8) and two rectangular blocks of decomposed sandstone associated with D-13 (LV-50 and LV-51) (Clewlow and Corson, 1968: 177; Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 205).

### **D-8**

Altars 4 and 5 were originally located on the eastern and western sides of the D-8 platform, respectively. Measuring 150 meters long, 40 meters wide, and

approximately 3 meters in height, D-8 has never been systematically excavated. However, a stone column was discovered lying on the surface of the structure (González Lauck, 2004: 98). D-8 is located just east of the D-1 basal pyramid. Altar 5, positioned on the western side of D-8, faced the pyramid, while Altar 4 faced east. When discovered, both monuments were almost fully interred (*ibid.*).

### *Altar 5*

Sometimes called the “altar of the children” Altar 5 is one of the great works of the Olmec sculptural art (figure 5.43). Stirling encountered the monument during his explorations of the site in 1940. Like the other altar-thrones, Altar 5 presents a central human figure seated cross-legged within the central cave-niche. The subject here appears similar to that once represented on Altar 2, an elite male holding a recumbent infantile composite being in outstretched arms. The former wears a broad collar with oval pectoral, large rounded ear ornaments (like those seen on Altar 3), and a conical headdress decorated with recognizable Pre-classic motifs such as the St. Andrew’s cross. On either side of the altar pairs of adult figures carrying smaller composite anthropomorphs are presented in low relief. The adult figures each wear distinctive, elaborate headgear, garments, ear ornaments, pectorals, and bracelets, clearly marking them as elite. The forms and postures of each of the composite anthropomorphs are also distinctive. The back of the monument, like that of the other altar-thrones as La Venta, is plain.

Mutilation of the monument is concentrated on the front right corners and around the removal of the table-top ledge. The breakage of the front left corner

resulted in damage to the relief carving on that side, effective erasing half of the front-most human-composite pairing. The central composite anthropomorph, held in the arms of the niche figure, also appears to have suffered some damage. However, this looks like it could have been accidental, given its placement. No breakage or erasure mars the features or insignia of the human lord. Even before the mutilation of the monument its size did not compare to that of Altar 4. However, the damage it sustained does not allow for specific overall measurements of the monument to be made (Stirling, 1943b: 56).

#### *Altar 4*

The second of the D-8 altar-thrones, Altar 4 was first encountered by Franz Blom and Oliver LaFarge during their survey of the site in 1925. The monument presents a theme similar to that of SL-14 (figure 5.44). The human lord sits within the frontal cave-niche, grasping a thick rope running along the monument's base. The rope winds along both sides and wraps around the wrists of the adult figure carved in relief on the right side of the altar-throne. The carving is much better preserved than on SL-14 and the relief carving on the upper ledge of the altar-throne is still clearly visible. This relief shows a frontal feline visage with crossed bands between its fangs, flanked by motifs associated with the earth (Cyphers, 2004b: 59; Pohorilenko, 1996: 124-125). The central niche is delicately carved with foliage sprouting around its opening and a feather-like pattern in the interior space surrounding the figure. Feathers also decorate the central figure's avian headdress. This figure wears elite regalia, including an elaborate collar and bracelets.

Mutilation of the monument includes breakage on the back right corner and back left corner as well as the re-carving of the left side, which has been largely removed. This re-carving left an uneven surface interrupted by two rectangular niches. The upper part of the original surface remains, preserving the faint outline of a relief figure similar to the one still visible on the altar's right side (figure 5.45). The back of the monument also shows an uneven surface with several concave depressed areas. Additionally, the right end of the table-top ledge has been broken away. Post-mutilation, the altar measures 1.6 meters high, 3.19 meters across, and 1.9 meters front to back. Like the C-3 platform supporting Altars 2 and 3, no evidence of stone working has been reported for the D-8 area. Therefore, we may question whether the mutilation of Altars 4 and 5 took place before or after they were set in their final positions.

The context of Altar 4 is remarkable for a cache of 99 beads discovered during the excavation of the monument by Stirling. The cache contained a mixture of large cylindrical and spherical jade beads and one spherical amethyst bead with a biconical perforation. These beads were located at the front of the monument. The beads were positioned as though originally strung on a necklace and two bracelets (Stirling, 1943b: 55; Drucker, 1952: 166). Rebecca González Lauck has suggested that the grand size of Altar 4 was intended to indicate the greater importance of the monument with respect to the other altar-thrones (González Lauck, 2004: 99; Stirling, 1943b: 55). The offering of beaded jade ornaments deposited at the front of the altar likewise suggests that Altar 4 was the more significant of the two D-8 altar-thrones.

It should also be remarked that Altar 4 is also the more overtly political of the two altars in terms of its subject matter. While Altar 5 seems to draw its imagery from the mythology of the Pre-classic, Altar 4 presents only human actors. The figures bound with rope on either side of the monument are most likely captives, similarly presented on public monuments from other Mesoamerican areas throughout the Pre- to Post-classic periods to demonstrate the power and triumph of the ruling lord. Alternatively, these might represent individuals with dynastic relations to the central lord, as ropes were sometimes used to denote blood ties between individuals in later Mesoamerican iconographic systems (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 320; Grove, 1973, 1981). In either case, the ruler seems to draw prestige from purely socio-political sources, rather than command over supernatural forces.

It might be observed that often the grandest, most active monuments in the social arena are those attached to the greatest controversy. Examples of this are found later in Mesoamerica's history, such as the magnificent monuments and mortuary memorials of Pakal, whose rule at Palenque was threatened at all times by the circumstances of his dynastic heritage. On the Washington Mall, the center of civic memory in the United States, the Vietnam and Lincoln Memorials are the most active points of socio-political performance and contention. These two memorials are also the most politically charged of all those located within the Mall as a result of their associations with the controversies and socio-political turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. The periods of civic upheaval and unrest surrounding these two events in United States



history continue to be negotiated daily through the ritual and personal interactions between the monuments and their viewers. Perhaps Altar 4 was also a site of contention and contestation, resulting in the need for additional ritual activity to reinforce the intended narrative of the monument or to negotiate the past it represented.

### *Altar 8*

This altar was originally described by Stirling as Stela 4. After it was re-discovered by the PALV it was renamed Altar 8 in congruence with its appearance as a mutilated table-top altar (figure 5.46).<sup>vi</sup> Altar 8 was found half-buried, 30 meters north of the D-8 structure. Stirling had previously reported its location as Complex A (González Lauck, 1990: 173 n.11). Presently, it is unclear whether the monument was moved after Stirling encountered it, or whether the original location was misreported in Stirling's publication (González Lauck, personal comm., 2009). Little remains of the monument's original form; one side of the altar has been entirely destroyed while the others are severely eroded and mutilated. However, enough of the relief remains to suggest that the iconography of this monument may have differed significantly from that of the other altar-thrones at La Venta. The remnants of intricate designs carved in relief do not seem to indicate the presence of either a cave-niche or human figures.

### **D-7**

In 1987 the PALV initiated a series of excavations to explore the D-7 structure, as well as to locate the monuments (LV-52, LV-53, and LV-54) first reported by Stirling in 1968 (Gallegos Gómora, 1990: 17). Stratigraphic

excavation of the platform showed a total of 10 accumulated strata composed of sands and clays of varying colors, textures, and densities. The first two of these, Layer I and II, were culturally sterile sandy earth containing organic materials. Above this was a stratum of sandy clay containing sandstone concretions which appeared to have been washed from the exterior of the structure surface. Subsequent strata consisted of a series of sand and clay fills deposited above a natural elevation of bluish clay (Layer IV) (*ibid.*, 18).

The PALV excavators have noted the difficulty of delineating the exact limits of the architecture. However, they were able to identify a talud of compact clay presenting a straight line to the northeast. This was interrupted in the south by the 1942 excavations conducted under Stirling (*ibid.*, 19). It is now determined that the southern, eastern, and western sides all have taluds reaching a maximum height of 3.5 meters, while to the north there appears to have been a ramp ascending to the highest levels of the structure (González Lauck, 2004: 88).

The upper surface supported a raised, U-shaped area extending along the two north-south sides and connecting along one of the east-west edges of the platform. In the midst of this raised area was a sunken space, comparable to the sunken courts at other Pre-classic sites, including those previously discussed for San Lorenzo in Chapter Four. Miriam Gallegos Gómora has observed that the configuration of the basal platform supporting a central sunken patio is found at several other sites contemporaneous with La Venta (1990:19).

The fill of the structure contained abundant cultural material. Areas to the northeast, east, and southeast accrued concentrations of these materials as a result of the natural run off from upper portions of the structure. Excavators also encountered concentrations of large quantities of sherds, figurine fragments, and lithic material associated with burnt earth and abundant carbon in pits which had been dug into the lower strata. It is possible that these material concentrations were related to practices of offering deposition. On the eastern side of D-7, on the edge of the structure exterior, a horizontal layer of sherds in the form of an L was discovered. The majority of the sherds came from distinct vessels. Gallegos Gómora has remarked that these deposits, which were almost certainly laid down at one time, allow for the dating of associated materials, providing archaeologists with excellent temporal markers (*ibid.*).

Preliminary analysis of the cultural materials encountered in the D-7 excavations suggests that the structure can be dated between 800 and 500 B.C. (*ibid.*). The recovered ceramics correspond to Drucker's fine paste gray black, fine paste buff orange, coarse black, and coarse buff (*ibid.*, 19-23). Figurines are largely anthropomorphic, made of coarse buff ware, and correspond to Drucker's types 1-A and 1-B (*ibid.* 23).

#### *Monuments 52, 53, and 54*

All three of the D-7 monuments take the form of a crouching figure with oversized head and helmet-like headdress, supported by upraised arms (figures 5.47-5.49). The medium of the sculptures, sandstone, did not prove as durable as that of the basalt and greenstone monuments, leading to a great deal of

damage by erosion and weathering; however, it seems possible that human agents intentionally made some of the mutilations, such as the rounded depressions on the face of LV-53. It is impossible to know if these are of Pre-classic origin or the work of later inhabitants.

Enough of the monuments' overall forms are left to determine the basic proportions of the figures, more than half of which is given over to the head and headdress. In comparison, the bodies make up only 25-40% of the figures' overall volume (González Lauck, 2004: 89). The subject of these works appears analogous to a number of portable Pre-classic sculptures from other Middle Pre-classic sites in Mesoamerica, which represent crouching dwarf-like beings with arms upheld to support their oversized heads (figure 5.50). However, the figures were not identical, as indicated by size differences, as well as distinctions in the details of carving which remain visible to the modern viewer (*ibid.*).

When first excavated by Stirling, LV-53 was positioned on the southeastern corner of D-7 and LV-52 on the southwestern corner. LV-54 lay on the northwestern corner of the structure. Two of the monuments, LV-53 and LV-54, were found lying facedown, while LV-52 lay face-up. Given their positions, González Lauck suggests that LV- 52 originally faced towards the southeast, while LV-53 and LV-54 were positioned to face southwest and north, respectively (*ibid.*; Stirling, 1968: 37-39). The three monuments are among the only known works sculpted from sandstone at the site of La Venta. Of the three others, two (LV-50 and LV-51) are also located in Group D. The last is the sandstone coffer or sarcophagus (LV-6) discovered by Drucker and Stirling in the A-2 mound of

Complex A. The cist tomb, which lay nearby as part of the A-3 mound interments, was constructed of sandstone as well. Drucker, Heizer, and Squier state that this material was only utilized during the Phase IV constructions of the complex (1959: 126). If this holds true for the rest of the site as well, then the D-7 monuments can also be dated to this period, the last apogeal phase of La Venta's Pre-classic habitation.

*Monuments 28 and 29*

LV-28 and LV-29 were both located near the northwestern corner of the D-10 mound (González Lauck, 1994a: 294). They were not among those works recovered by archaeological excavations, and so their exact positions and stratigraphic contexts are unknown. Both monuments are fragments broken from larger works. The remaining pieces demonstrate a high degree of craftsmanship. Additionally, both works demonstrate the olmec stylistic tendency towards combining relief with sculpture-in-the-round.

LV-28 is a well-modeled feline head, broken at the neck, measuring 45 centimeters long, 40 centimeters high, and 39 centimeters wide (Clewlow and Corson, 1968: 172) (figure 5.51). The mouth of the creature is opened in a snarl. The eyes are indicated by depressions below the nasion. The ears are sculpted in low relief and flattened against the back of the head. The monument was most likely intended to be viewed from all sides, as the back of the head is also well sculpted.

In contrast, the fragment of LV-29, representing the upper portion of a human head with headdress, appears to have been attached to a flat background

(figure 5.52). The remaining fragment presents the eyes and upper nose bridge of a frontally facing human figure and measures 37 centimeters high, 26 centimeters wide, and 48 centimeters long (*ibid.*, 173). The turban-like headdress is unique among the sculptures at La Venta. This headdress is connected to a flat surface, most probably the flat background from which the head and the rest of the figure projected. Clewlow and Corson speculate that this might be a fragment of niche figure broken from a table-top altar (*ibid.*). However, there is no compelling evidence to support this hypothesis.

### **5.5 The Stirling Acropolis**

The Stirling Acropolis was only briefly explored during the last days of the 1967 U.C. Berkeley excavations led by Robert Heizer and John Graham. Unfortunately, the limited amount of time, coupled with disputes between the excavators and local officials, resulted in an abbreviated exploration of the area. Since then little work has been reported for the acropolis. Nevertheless, a number of interesting architectural features and stone monuments associated with this area merit further discussion.

Four small structures have been identified on the surface of the acropolis. Two circular mounds positioned on the eastern edge, AS-1 and AS-2, measure approximately 1 meter in height. The two other structures are parallel rectangular platforms, AS-3 and AS-4. They measure slightly more than a meter in height and approximately 12.19 meters in width. However, the western mound is 48.76 meters long, while the eastern mound measures only 35.36 meters in length

(Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 141). Once believed to comprise an early ballcourt (*ibid.*), González Lauck has since observed that the space between the mounds is too narrow to have served as a court of play (1988:133). Along with these structures, the excavators found a series of drains, along with basalt columns, limestone slabs, and pieces of greenstone. These specialized materials, as well as construction clays similar to those used in Complex A, may indicate that the acropolis was another ceremonial area within the site core. Carbon samples extracted from the depositional matrix of the acropolis also suggest that both it and Complex A were abandoned around the same time (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 152-153).

*Monuments 39, 40, 41, and 44*

Twelve sculptures were recovered from the acropolis during the 1967 field season. Four of these (LV-39, LV-40, LV-41, and LV-44) were located by the use of steel probes driven through the drift sands that had accrued naturally after the abandonment of the site. Not far to the northwest of the basalt columns, first noted by Stirling in 1940 near the northeastern corner of the acropolis, these four monuments were found below a concentration of buried stones (*ibid.*, 142). The sculptures were resting on and in the upper levels of a gray stratum just below a layer of red and yellow clay construction. The radio carbon dates calibrated from samples extracted from this area place the deposition of the monuments to around 600 B.C. (*ibid.*, 151).

LV-39 is a green schist fragment of a larger monument. The stone is fractured on all sides save one, which still bears the remnants of the original

carving. The sculpted surface shows two hands held close against the figure's chest (figure 5.53). Parts of the forearms and biceps are also visible. The position of the arms and hands, tucked close to the chest, is strongly reminiscent of LV-72 (figure 5.54) and ER-4 (see Cyphers, 2004a: 268, figure 178). Like LV-72, LV-39 probably represented a version of the composite anthropomorph. The remaining fragment measures 25 centimeters high, 40 centimeters wide, and 10 centimeters thick (Clewlow and Corson, 1968: 174).

LV-40 consists of a basalt figure seated on a table-top throne, or possibly a bench (figure 5.55). The figure has been beheaded and the break worn smooth. The surface of the monument is rough, with hammered surfaces and little detail. The body forms are simplified with fingers delineated by incised lines on the hands. The figure wears a triangular cape, also indicated by incising between shoulders. Without the head the entire sculpture measures 74 centimeters high, 46 centimeters wide, and 28 centimeters thick (*ibid.*, 175).

A rounded basalt stone carved in high relief, LV-41 presents the figure of a zoomorph or feline. The monument measures 45 centimeters high, 32 centimeters wide, and 25 centimeters thick (*ibid.*) (figure 5.56). The most remarkable thing about this sculpture is the source of the stone, which Clewlow and Corson report as originating from Cerro El Vigía, near Tres Zapotes. While many of the monuments from that site were carved of basalt originating from El Vigía, LV-41 is the only known example at La Venta to have come from this source (*ibid.*).



Although LV-44 is missing all but the head and headdress, its similarity to San Martín Pajapan (SMP) Monument 1, in both appearance and dimensions, has been noted since Clewlow and Corson first reported on its discovery (*ibid.*, 175-177; also see Clewlow, 1968). The La Venta monument shows a human head wearing an elaborate headdress decorated with the face of the composite anthropomorph (figure 5.57). The figure also wears the face of the composite anthropomorph as ornaments on either side of the head. Of the stone sculptures found on the Stirling Acropolis, LV-44 demonstrates by far the most detail and skill in its execution. The head with headdress measures 55 centimeters in height, 43 centimeters in width, and 50 centimeters in length (*ibid.*). These dimensions conform to those of the head and headdress of SMP-1; therefore, it may be assumed that the measurements of the San Martín Pajapan monument in its entirety are the same as those of LV-44 in its original form. Additionally, the stones from which both monuments were carved are believed to have originated from the same source (*ibid.*).

LV-44 was most likely intended to evoke thoughts of its counterpart, which sat within the caldera of the San Martín Pajapan Volcano. Archaeological evidence recovered at the time of its removal suggests that SMP-1 was displayed at a location serving as a site of pilgrimage and ritual for centuries beginning with the Pre-classic (see Chapter Six) (Medellín Zenil, 1968: 10-12). Travelers who had been privileged enough to visit SMP-1 would have been reminded of their journey upon viewings its counterpart at La Venta, while the

less-fortunate would have been able to ideologically link their viewing of LV-44 with the distant ritual site.

#### *Monuments 42 and 43*

LV-42 and LV-43 were discovered northeast of the basalt columns identified by Stirling in 1940 (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 154). LV-42 is a fragment of relief carving showing parts of the leg, arm, and hand of a human figure, while another figure may be indicated by parts of another leg and body (figure 5.58). Clewlow and Corson suggest that this was originally a portion of a basalt stela carved in the style of La Venta's Stelae 2 and 3. The fragment measures 36 centimeters high by 46 centimeters wide and is 16 centimeters thick (1968: 175). LV-43 is a curious truncated column with a swelling at one end which gives it a mushroom-like appearance (figure 5.59). Clewlow and Corson suggest its form resembles a seat or stool; however, the function is unknown. The sculpture measures 41 centimeters high with a maximum diameter of 30 centimeters (*ibid.*).

#### *Monument 45*

A large stone basin, LV-45 was discovered embedded in the upper part of the red and yellow construction clay, sitting on the eastern edge of a reservoir positioned to the west of Drain 1. A round sandstone disk measuring 42 inches in diameter and 3 inches thick lay on the surface drift sands nearby. The excavators suggest that this disk functioned as a lid for the basin, which was sitting at the edge of the pool of water (Heizer, Graham, and Napton, 1968: 146). Above the clay construction, in the lower part of the surface sands, a ring of stones

comprised largely of half metates was uncovered 2.44 meters east of LV-45. This ring measured 1.52 meters in diameter. Inside it was a thick layer of wood charcoal. Heizer, Graham, and Napton believed this ring to post-date the Olmec occupation at the site, suggesting that its location was fortuitous, rather than purposely associated with the bowl and pool (*ibid.*).

#### *Monument 55*

LV-55 is a stone basin similar to LV-45 but smaller and less well fashioned. Only about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the vessel remains. The basin was discovered resting above the third and fourth drain stones of Drain 2. The drain itself is comprised of four trough stones set in a line descending towards the east. The trough on the line's western end lay on the upper drift sands while the three to the east were covered with construction clay. The drain line is remarkable for the inverted position of its wedge-shaped troughs. It is possible that they were turned base-up over wooden planks and sealed by the cover of dense clay fill, allowing water to flow through with no leakage. These stones were most likely discovered in their original position, as indicated by the solid, undisturbed clays in which they were embedded (*ibid.*, 147).

#### *Monument 57*

Found in the immediate vicinity of Drains 3 and 4, LV-57 is a rectangular block of greenish stone measuring 73 centimeters high, 52 centimeters wide, and 28 centimeters thick (Clewlow and Corson, 1968: 178) (figure 5.60). The stone appears to be re-carved from the torso of a human figure. Remnants of the arms and chest are still visible. Clewlow and Corson note traces of a thin necklace

from which a rectangular pectoral is suspended (*ibid.*); however, no such traces are presently visible. Five striated grooves were incised into the right side of the front lateral surface and a U-shaped niche measuring 20 centimeters in height was cut into the bottom center of this surface. The stone was polished to a smooth sheen, apparently after these marks were applied since they also show signs of polishing, as does the fracture where the head was severed from the neck (*ibid.*).

#### *Monuments 74 and 75*

Both LV-74 and LV-75 were discovered by local workers in 1969 in association with the road-cut excavations which ran along the western edge of the Stirling Acropolis (Clewlow, 1974: 40; González Lauck, 1991: 163).<sup>vii</sup> LV-74 represents a human figure seated on a large stone block or platform (figure 5.61). The body forms are simplified and the head has been broken off at the shoulders. Unlike LV-40, also located on the Stirling Acropolis, the break is still rough, showing little or no signs of erosion. Sans head, the monument measures 61 centimeters high, 35 centimeters wide, and 63 centimeters thick (Beverido Perea, 1996: 252). LV-75 was discovered in two pieces near the northwestern corner of the Acropolis.<sup>viii</sup> The sculpture presents a seated composite anthropomorph with oversized head and helmet-like headdress (figure 5.62). The figure holds a rectangular box between its arms; a composition analogous to that of LV-5. LV-70 is also similar in theme, representing a supernatural figure holding up a small bowl or plate as though in presentation (figure 5.63). United,

the two halves of LV-75 measure 1.10 meters in height, 37 centimeters in width, and 48 centimeters thick (González Lauck, 1991: 165).

### **5.6 Discussion**

Like spaces, landscapes are the product of human agency. Landscapes can only be viewed through the cultural lens which grafts layers of significance onto the *tabula rasa* of topography. The engagement of a people with their environment is the essence of a landscape, which can be created from the natural topography of a place or the built environment of human habitation. In Mesoamerica people seem to have made little distinction between these two categories as the built environment incorporated the natural and made reference to landmarks that were at once mythological and present in the world of the everyday. At La Venta man-made mountains, waterways, and caves alternate with enormous boulders bearing the features of elite individuals (colossal heads) and relief carvings of historical scenes which conform to the natural contours of great stone slabs (stelae). The history of the human elite came to occupy the spaces of world creation and renewal and the urban landscape was imbued with the social memory of a past blending myth and history into a single cultural narrative.

Since the 1970s, landscape has been a cornerstone of the discourse in Mesoamerican studies, following the recognition of its importance to the pre-Hispanic cultures occupying Middle America. The 1990s saw the site of La Venta brought into this discursive arena as a Pre-classic example of the sacred

landscape's incorporation in the built environment (Grove, 1999, 2007; Reilly, 1999, 2002; Schele, 1995; Tate, 2001, 2008). However, the discussion around La Venta as landscape was largely limited to macro-visions of the site as cosmogram or unified mythological narrative (e.g. Grove, 1999; Tate, 2001, 2008). Here I would like to discuss the La Ventan landscape by addressing each complex as a holistic unit in order to examine its construction diachronically, as well as to get a sense of the different types of landscapes that were being formed at the site. These complexes were functioning at different civic and ceremonial levels and were open to discrete audiences of viewers and participants. Moreover, there was most likely no concrete division between the religious and political arenas, so that the sacred landscape was socially and politically charged through an interchange of civic and ceremonial attributes (Lefebvre, 1992). The polysemy of monumental spaces would also have allowed for some flexibility in the usage of the space and the rituals carried out there.

### **Complex A**

Beginning with Complex A, we find a landscape in constant flux between the visible and invisible. The massive offerings are certainly an example of the invisible presence used to sanctify and ritually charge the ceremonial space, marking a shift from the interment of stone monuments to the deposition of monumental offerings. Those incorporating mosaic masks above their layers of serpentine bricks are all configured to incorporate a quincunx design of four stepped elements surrounding a single rectangular area. This pattern is extremely widespread throughout Mesoamerica and appears no later than the

apogee of San Lorenzo, where it was integrated into the upper section of SL-43. In all cases it is read as a cosmogram, with the four motifs representing the four corners of the world, while the central element stands in for the world center or *axis mundi*. Gillespie observes that foundation caches are typically organized as cosmograms with the pattern of objects mirroring the organization of cosmic levels, such as earth, sky, and sea (Gillespie, 2008b: 125). In Maya culture these caches are placed at the foundation and refurbishment of a structure. Likewise, the massive offerings were deposited at every new phase of construction and, like their later counterparts, probably marked the process in terms of world renewal (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the use of greenstone in these massive offerings would have held associations with life, fertility, and water (Taube, 2007). The deposition of enormous quantities of serpentine brick below the surface of the complex may have been intended to reference the watery underworld. Reilly has argued that the massive offerings, along with the sunken Ceremonial Court and repeated interment of actual and pseudoburials, imbued the complex with underworld referents (1994). The appearance of various offerings with aquatic associations, such as a jade clamshell, the necklace of stingray spines, a jade frog, and a shark's tooth, would appear to further support this interpretation. However, it should be noted that the construction and offering activities suggestive of these underworld associations were not static over time but developed to increasingly infuse the area with symbolism, even to the point of incorporating an actual tomb containing human remains during Phase IV.

Some of the monuments displayed within the space also are suggestive of water and caves, the latter serving as entries into the realm of the underworld. For example, LV-20 takes the form of a sea-dwelling animal, a cetacean, carved in greenstone. The curve of the supernatural serpent on the nearby LV-19 was probably intended to represent a cave in which the young lord is seated. David Grove has effectively demonstrated the association between serpent imagery and caves during the Middle Pre-classic, arguing that the relationship is an ancient one in Mesoamerican iconography (Grove, 2000: 279-281). Likewise, the primary figure on Stela 1 stands within a rectangular niche topped by relief carving on the upper panel incorporating earth motifs. These motifs are also found on the upper ledges of altar-thrones such as Altar 4 and LZ-2. Like the altar-thrones, this stela was most probably intended to represent a figure framed by the entrance to a cave.<sup>ix</sup>

In addition to the referential symbolism of caves, water, and the underworld, the monument forms themselves work to create a juxtaposition between natural and cultural forms. The complex is bordered on its northern end by the three colossal heads, which appear as massive boulder forms with human features grafted onto their surface. Although the heads are recognizable as individuals, they retain the general appearance, shape, and size of the boulders from which they were carved. Likewise, the relief composition on Stela 3 appears to have been laid over a relatively natural surface, as though the stela maintained some of its original appearance even after it was sculpted. As previously stated, the artist of LV-19 also took pains to configure the composition of the work to the



natural form of the rock slab on which it was carved. However, the carved surface of this monument is smoothed and even, contrasting with the uneven surface of Stela 3. LV-13 was most likely formed from a section of columnar basalt, which was modified to have four sides rather than the usual five and then carved with relief on one end. The forms of these monuments would all have reinforced the impression of a ritual landscape which blended the supernatural, and the natural, the historical and the mythological.

The placement of the monuments within the complex does not appear to have been determined by subject matter or form. Composite anthropomorphs (LV-5 and LV-77) and supernatural zoomorphs (LV-12 and LV-80) are included amongst monuments of a more political nature, such as the stelae, colossal heads, LV-13, and LV-23, suggesting that there was no concrete division between the historical and the mythological. Some, like LV-12 and LV-13, were located along the centerline, while others were placed around the complex. Likewise, some were associated with platform mounds (LV-13, Stela 2, and LV-23) while others (LV-5 and Stela 1) were located in front or to one side of the platforms. Patterns are difficult to determine in the placement of these monuments and it may be that their locations of their display, like the construction and offering activities, were determined by the actions of competing corporate groups. The monuments were most likely set in place during Phase IV, as were all of the examples documented in relation to their archaeological contexts. However, there is a strong possibility that in some cases this was a resetting of older monuments, since it seems likely that the sculptures would

have to have been removed and replaced during the refurbishing of floors and platforms.

As a whole, Complex A presents a ritual landscape charged with invisible power and presence in the form of offerings and massive serpentine deposits linked to world renewal. Concurrently, the space would have been imbued with memory through the recollection of past offering deposition and the visible presence of the monuments positioned atop and below the platforms of the complex. This mnemonic landscape drew upon natural stone forms onto which mythic and historical imagery was overlaid to create a spatial juxtaposition of topography and myth-history. This landscape was particularly charged with referents to water, caves, and the underworld, reinforced by the placement of actual and pseudoburials throughout the structures of the complex and culminating in the interment of the three individuals located in Tomb A. The tomb would also have been a powerful locator of memory for the ritual elite who were allowed access to the complex.

However, the individuals permitted within the space would have been limited, as indicated by the spatial configuration of the architecture, which is closed and private. The social memories generated and maintained within the space would also have been limited to privileged corporate entities. If the complex was occupied by multiple competing ritual groups it is possible that the social memories generated within the space were also multiple and competing. The unequal distribution of the monuments, with many located west of the centerline, might be best explained by such an arrangement. Yet the natural

polysemy of monuments may also have allowed them to function on behalf of more than one corporate entity, even if they were in competition. Unfortunately, lacking specific chronological information regarding monument display, it is difficult to know what part these sculptures may have played in the shifting constructions and use of space over time.

### **Complex C**

Complex C presents a concentration of mountain imagery, dominated by the C-1 pyramid. The pyramid as embodiment of a sacred mountain is a well-established architectural symbol in Mesoamerica, beginning by the Middle Pre-classic. Placed at the center of the site, the stepped pyramid may also have represented an architectural cosmogram. If, like Structure E-VII Sub at Uaxactun or 5C-54 at Tikal, C-1 had stairways descending on all four sides then, like later Mesoamerican structures of similar form, the four sides would have corresponded to the four cardinal directions. Likewise, the vertical levels may have corresponded to different levels of the cosmos. The central placement of this structure within the site would have reinforced the cosmological symbolism as the four sides converged on the central point at the top, the fifth direction at the center of the world.

Grove has suggested that the four “mountain lord” stelae would also have represented the four world directions, which in later Native American mythologies are marked by world mountains (Grove, 2000: 291). In this interpretation C-1 would be recognized as the fifth, central mountain. However, the two additional stelae, LV-87 and Stela 5, may disrupt this hypothesis. Their placement in the C-

3 stelae alignment seems out of place, and it may be that some or all of the monuments were originally located in other areas of the site and only later placed at the base of C-1. Alternatively, the two additional stelae could have been chosen for their associations with the sky and underworld realms, as a compliment to the four cardinal directions. However, the lack of any imagery of LV-87 makes this difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

Particularly disconcerting is the discovery of LV-27 in an upended position, as though people who no longer understood the iconography appearing on its surface erected it in place. Likewise, Stela 5 seems an odd monument to be placed at the base of C-1, since its narrative scene is highly distinct from any of the other stelae. It may be that by the time the monuments were set in their final positions their material and form were more important than the iconography they displayed. The arrangement of the six stelae by material, with the eastern three made of greenstone and the three in the west carved of a gray volcanic stone, suggests that this was the dominant organizing principle, influencing which monuments were selected for placement on the basal platform. In later Mesoamerican cultures greenstone was associated with the east, life, water and agricultural fertility. Although no direct associations are similarly assigned to the gray volcanic stone, later cultures related the west to death, the underworld, and the color black.

The two altar-thrones reset on the C-3 platform also exhibit associations with mountains. The cave imagery on the front of these monuments most likely coincided with earth-associated motifs like those found on Altar 4 (the only altar-

throne to have retained its upper ledge intact). Earth motifs also appear on the upper ledge of smaller thrones from Estero Rabón (ER-8) and Loma del Zapote (LZ-2) (Cyphers, 2004b: 59). The zoomorphic version of this earth imagery on Altar 4, appearing distinctly feline in form, brings to mind Mural 1 from the caves at Oxtotitlán, where the human figure sits upon a throne with a similar zoomorphic features. In the case of this mural painting the maw of the creature coincides with the actual cave entrance, above which the mural is situated (figure 5.22). Given the pervasive earth and cave imagery associated with the altar-thrones, Pohorilenko has suggested they be read as “collective symbols of nature... and, more specifically, symbols of sacred mountains” (2004: 129). It may be that Altars 2 and 3 were placed on the C-3 platform after their mutilation in part because they continued to be associated with mountains and caves, even after the majority of their subject matter was erased or removed through breakage.

Overall, Complex C appears to have presented a concentration of mountain imagery which may have also served to communicate ideas about the cosmological structuring of the world. The complex has not been fully excavated and it is difficult to determine how it may have developed diachronically. However, by Phase IV it took on the appearance and associations outlined here.

The complex was a curiously private space for so public an architectural scale. The altar-thrones faced north so that their frontal surfaces were not visible from the Complex B Plaza below. Nor would the low relief of the stelae have been visible from so great a distance unless they had been brightly painted.

Certainly only a select few would have been allowed to ascend the summit of the C-1 pyramid. Yet the individuals standing atop the pyramid would have been able to see for kilometers in any direction. Moreover, a person standing on certain parts of the C-3 platform or C-1 pyramid would have undoubtedly been visible to an audience below; however, in other areas of both pyramid and platform they would have been concealed from the view of those occupying the Complex B plaza. Any activity on the northern face of C-1 or the C-5 apron would have only been visible to the select audience allowed to occupy Complex A. Therefore, it would seem that Complex C was constructed around the dual principles of visibility and concealment, which would have undoubtedly played into the performances taking place on such a dynamic stage. The ability to choose to be seen or unseen, and to be able to survey the site and its surroundings certainly would have communicated the power of the elite to those prohibited from ascending either platform or pyramid. The complex also served to separate a public, civic space from a private, ritual arena, and in so doing may have become a liminal space in which civic and ritual life were able to coincide.

### **Complex B**

The western structures of Complex B have not been sufficiently excavated to discuss them in detail here. Nor are they associated with the display of monuments. Therefore, in considering this complex I have chosen to primarily focus on the great plaza and its central platform, B-4. The plaza itself was surrounded on three sides by large platform structures which defined the limits of the space. To the south the plaza opened out towards Complex D and it may

have been that this area provided a main entry point. The open space of the plaza contained four large monuments. Two, Stela 2 and Colossal Head 1, were obviously paired. Each of the larger Olmec monuments commands its own gravitational pull on the viewer as a result of its overwhelming mass and volume. Together the pair would have created a powerful visual draw to the occupants of the space. Moreover, each of the two balances the natural form of the great stone with the imagery grafted onto its surface. The rounded boulder form of the colossal head is not quite concealed by the human features which have been layered over it in the form of high relief. Likewise, Stele 2 maintains the natural undulations of the stone and integrates them with the composition to create a powerful juxtaposition of art and nature.

The other two plaza monuments, Altars 1 and 7, may have been associated with the earth through their iconography. The first of these, Altar 1, shares a number of features with Monument 104 from San Lorenzo (figure 5.64). Although much smaller, SL-104 is also rectangular in form, with anthropomorphic features carved on its frontal face. The features of both monuments incorporate prominent nasions, broad, flat noses, and trough-shaped eyes, although SL-104's eyes are more rounded than those of Altar 1. Cyphers has identified SL-104 as a representation of the Earth Monster (2004a: 177). It seems likely that Altar 1 was intended to represent a similar being. The paw-wing motif carved on either side of the monument may also mark the earth-associations of this being. The motif is typically related to the composite zoomorph, a creature associated

with the earth whose body incorporates the symbols marking the ledges of the altar-thrones just above the cave niches.

Altar 7 incorporates one of these cave niches, while the exterior includes representations of a number of owls. While not unknown in the corpus of Olmec art, neither is the owl a common Pre-classic motif. One of the few known examples is painted in the interior of the Oxtotitlán cave (figure 5.65). The other creatures appearing in the cave's painted interior include the jaguar and the serpent, two animals demonstrated to have associations with caves and the interior of the earth during the Pre-classic. It is possible that, like these two, the owl was also associated with caves and the earth's interior.

Unfortunately, the B-4 platform was obliterated before its dimensions and possible evidence for superstructures could be identified. Of the monuments associated with the surface of the platform, only LV-59 maintains its original form. Two others, LV-36 and LV-37, are amorphous, mutilated pieces of stone. A fourth, LV-58, presents an image of the composite anthropomorph or mountain lord. If intended as the latter, LV-58 might reinforce the earth-based imagery found on Altars 1 and 7. However, the state of the monument is such that any interpretation of its original form or subject is merely hypothetical. The final monument of the group, LV-35, is a green schist column which may have been integrated into a superstructure once erected atop B-4. Of these 5 works, 3 are made of greenstone, a material associated with water, fertility, life, and the earth. One, LV-36, is simply a large boulder marked with non-specific mutilations consisting of multiple striations. The appearance and ritual treatment of this



boulder suggests that the material was of greater import than its form, or that the natural shape was significant in and of itself. While it is difficult to discern the cultural associations of the B-4 platform, it is possible that the greenstone and the natural stone forms reinforced the earth associations of Altars 1 and 7.

It should be noted that the B-4 monuments may have been intended for a more limited audience than the monuments within the space of the plaza. If the B-4 platform supported a superstructure, as suggested by the presence of the LV-35 column, the other monuments may have been located in its interior. This would have created a tension between the public space of the plaza and the private space of the platform structure in its midst. Certainly, the monuments located in the plaza space around B-4 appear directed towards a larger audience than those associated with the platform, which are more diminutive and less visually compelling.

### **Complex D**

Complex D is the largest of the architectural groupings at La Venta in terms of both overall expanse and number of platform mounds. Unfortunately, exploration of this area has been extremely limited and therefore a diachronic examination of the complex's development over the course of the site's history is not possible with the data currently available. However, the layout of the complex and the monuments recovered within its bounds are remarkable on several points. Foremost is the configuration of the structures belonging to complex D, which form two parallel alleys opening out onto a large southern plaza. The platforms flanking both alleys and demarcating the southern plaza are more

widely varied than in other complexes in both shape and size. These structures include the D-7 platform with its sunken court and the D-1 basal pyramid.

The D-7 platform clearly functioned as a ritual structure where the caching of offerings and ritual burning took place. Like the sunken courts in Complex A and at the site of San Lorenzo, this space would have been a closed area accessible to only an elite few. However, the megalithic sculptures marking the southern and northeastern corners would most likely have been visible from below, making them available to a wider audience. The position of the monuments (LV-52-54), each representing a supernatural being, suggests that they might have been set to mark the structure as a ritual space. It is also possible that they signify a particular mythological location reproduced in the site architecture. The sunken court probably indicates that D-7 was associated with the underworld, the realm of the supernatural.

The raised, U-shaped area surrounding the court may have reinforced this reading of the space by marking the area around the court as a cave or opening in the earth which served as an entry to the otherworld. The U-shape is used in later Mesoamerican iconography to signify a cave entrance (Milbrath, 1988). However, Olmec imagery suggests that this association began in the Early or Middle Pre-classic. The downturned U forms part of the body of the composite zoomorph, a creature with strong earth associations. These same U shapes are abstracted to mark the table tops of the altar-thrones as the surface of the earth, as on La Venta Altar 4, LZ-2, and ER-8. The cave niches also take the form of an inverted U. A pair of earspools from the Tomb C pseudoburial is inscribed with a

U-shaped design terminating in zoomorphic heads similar in appearance to the head of the serpent on LV-19. Pohorilenko reads this design as an abstracted cave in which the composite anthropomorph resides (1996: 126). Together, these images suggest that the U-shape in Olmec imagery held similar cave-earth associations as those influencing later Mesoamerican artistic canons. The placement of a raised U form around the D-7 sunken court would, therefore, have reinforced the cultural reading of the space as an entryway into the underworld through the earth's surface. The location of this space at the far southern end of the site core mirrors the Complex A sunken court at La Venta's northern end, serving to bracket the site with two ritually-charged spaces with underworld associations.

The northernmost end of Complex D is demarcated by the D-8 platform, on either side of which sat Altars 4 and 5. González Lauck has pointed out that these two monuments sat in alignment with the D-1 pyramid, perhaps indicating their association with that structure, just as Altars 2 and 3 are juxtaposed with the C-1 basal pyramid (2004: 99). Additionally, each altar is associated with one of the two narrow avenues or alleys which lead southward towards the Complex D plaza. An individual walking down the eastern avenue would only have been able to view Altar 4. Likewise, when traversing the western avenue only Altar 5 would be within sight. Therefore, it seems possible that each altar was associated with a different area of the complex.

Just as Gillespie has suggested that competing groups of elites were at work within Complex A (2008b), it seems possible that Complex D was also

utilized by different corporate entities --perhaps competing dynasties, moieties, or religious sects-- with each assigned to one side of the complex. This would account for the great variation in structure size and layout between the western and eastern lines of the complex. While the westernmost alignment presents an orderly line of quadrangular structures, the eastern alignment is less ordered, with D-11 and D-12 side by side on an east-west axis, rather than running north-south as do the other structures. This eastern alignment also shows greater variation in the size and layout of its platforms. The middle line of platform structures dividing these two sides may have been a joint venture between the two groups or each could have been responsible for a different platform. The greater number and order of the western alignment, along with the D-1 and D-7 structures forming the northern and southern boundaries of its avenue, suggest that if these two sides were the product of two distinct corporate groups, the one in charge of the western development was probably the more influential. A division between groups might also explain why elite offerings were found in association with Altar 4 and not Altar 5.

Like their Complex C counterparts, these two altar-thrones present cave and earth imagery and would possibly have been regarded as symbolic mountains. Along with the D-1 basal pyramid they would have marked the entry to the D complex with mountain imagery mirroring that of Complex C, but on a much smaller scale. If one considers the sunken court incorporated into the D-7 surface in relation to Complex A's Ceremonial Court it would seem that Complex D reproduces the topographic associations of the two northern architectural

groups but in reverse order. It is unclear whether this was done to create a symmetry similar to the principal guiding the overall bilaterally symmetry of the site layout or whether other forces were at work. Preliminary examination of the D-7 cultural material suggests that the structure was in use during the site's apogee at the same time when Complexes A and C were being used and augmented. It might be that discrete corporate groups were allotted use of these areas, resulting in a doubling of symbolism and areas serving the same or similar functions. However, I consider it more likely that Complex D was an elite area in which the most significant sectors of the site were reproduced on a smaller scale for more private use among selected individuals. In so doing, those individuals utilizing the complex would have marked the power and prestige of their domain.

It should be noted that all of the sculptures recovered from Complex D demonstrate a very high degree of skill and craftsmanship. The two altars are regarded as the finest examples of their monumental genre, as well as being counted among the best examples of the Olmec sculptors' art. The two fragments discovered near the D-10 platform are also finely sculpted, although their incomplete form prevents a full appreciation of how impressive they must once have been. LV-52, LV-53, and LV-54 were carved from sandstone, which has severely eroded with the passage of time, marring the original forms. However, if the other works recovered from the complex are any indication, they too must once have been magnificent in their artistry. Even today the sheer size and mass of these monuments impresses the viewer. The quality of the works located in this area of the site clearly demarcates the area as one of prestige.

Each of the sculptures was located on the outskirts of the complex, where they could be seen by passerby not permitted entry to its interior.

### **Stirling Acropolis**

The Stirling Acropolis is the largest single platform structure in the La Venta site core. Its surface supports multiple structures as well as a system of drains and at least one pool or reservoir. Along with its general appearance, these features bring to mind the San Lorenzo plateau. The experience of the acropolis must surely have been reminiscent of a plateau as a wide, raised expanse of land. It seems quite possible that the structure was meant to invoke the topography of San Lorenzo, which had clearly shared deep cultural and social contacts with La Venta and was most certainly seen and visited by La Ventan inhabitants prior to its decline. It has also been suggested that part of the San Lorenzo population migrated to La Venta during the decadence of the former, perhaps in response to environmental pressures (Cyphers, 2007c: 42). The construction of waterworks atop the surface of the acropolis, which is the only known instance of a drainage system at the site of La Venta, strengthens the possibility of this connection.

While no data has yet been recovered which could suggest how the Stirling Acropolis functioned within the civic-ceremonial activities of the site, the presence of building materials similar to those found in Complex A suggests a possible ritual function for the space. The only structures yet documented atop the acropolis are paired round and rectangular platforms of comparably

diminutive size. Like the construction materials, the small, paired structures also call to mind the architecture of Complex A.

The sculptural monuments encountered on the surface of the acropolis are generally smaller in size when compared with those of Complexes B and D. Almost all are fragmented or mutilated, which has caused González Lauck to speculate that the area might have incorporated one or more sculptural workshops (1996: 80). However, it should be noted that LV-40 shows a great deal of erosion at the breakage point where the figure's head was knocked off, possibly indicating that it was displayed for an extended period of time after the mutilation occurred. Moreover, LV-57 was clearly re-set after being re-carved to remove the original form. The surface of this work was marked with a series of parallel striations and then polished to a high sheen. Like LV-23 this is an example of monument re-carving at La Venta, although the sculptors were much more aggressive in their re-making of LV-57, which (unlike LV-23) no longer maintains vestiges of the original form. Consequently, re-carved and mutilated or fragmented monuments should not necessarily be read as evidence of a workshop. More excavation is needed to clarify the contexts of these sculptural fragments.

The presence of LV-44 on the acropolis is of particular interest, as it implies a connection between the sacred peak of San Martín Pajapan and this area of the La Venta site core. However, mutilation of the monument, which is missing the body and upper part of the headdress, might indicate that the sacred

site eventually lost its pull on the La Venta inhabitants, perhaps as a result of changes in social or religious institutions.

LV-41 is also remarkable as the only monument at the site reportedly carved from basalt brought from Cerro El Vigía, near the site of Tres Zapotes, whose sculptors frequently made use of the stone originating there. Both LV-44 and LV-41 may have invoked references to distant locales and the socio-political networks that linked them to the site of La Venta. Nevertheless, further excavation is needed to affirm whether their presence was related to the activities taking place on the acropolis, or whether they were simply brought there for recycling in a sculptural workshop similar to B3-17 at San Lorenzo.

### **Conclusions**

All landscapes become natural carriers of history, evoking memories of the personal, social, and mythical narratives of which they form a part. One cannot think of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania without recalling the Civil War, nor can the landscape of Stonehenge be disassociated from its place in the pre-history and mythology of Great Britain. Similarly, the urban landscape constructed by the inhabitants of La Venta would undoubtedly have reinforced the social memory of historical events and mythological narratives associated with its civic and ceremonial spaces. The juxtaposition of topographic referents with the figures and narratives which formed part of the site's myth-history would have provided a powerful mnemonic experience as individuals moved through the built environment. The inhabitants of La Venta deftly interwove space and time as the past and present came together in the mnemonic landscapes of the site core.



It should not be supposed, however, that the myth-histories presented within the spaces of La Venta were either holistic or uncontested. The possibility of competing corporate groups at the site suggests that there might also have been competing versions of the past. The continuing practices of monument mutilation, erasure, and destruction may be a sign of revisions or redactions of the social memory related to struggles for political, social, and historical dominance between multiple corporate entities. Alternatively, more gradual shifts in socio-cultural belief systems and practices could also have led to certain mytho-historical narratives becoming obsolete, which might also have led to the re-carving, erasure, mutilation, and re-setting of monuments without the pressures of political struggle.

The tensions between public and private landscapes at La Venta suggest that, as at San Lorenzo, different groups within the site population would have had differentiated access to the mnemonic narratives presented within the spaces of monument display. Social identities, which are in part formed by participation in these shared narratives of the past, would therefore have been heterogeneous. Access to mnemonic landscapes, like access to certain corporate memories, would have marked individuals of different class or kinship groups. Some spaces, such as Complexes A and D, may have been shared by multiple groups which imbued that single space with multiple narratives. Simultaneously, the natural polysemy of monuments may have allowed for a single work to manifest more than one version of the past.

Landscapes can also be polysemic, allowing for different individuals to read their personal and social history in the places through which they move and live. The power of landscape is the power to unite personal and corporate narratives of the past, while simultaneously providing a physical anchor for these narratives. The landscape is also a key force in the constitution of power, both locally and regionally. The following chapter will consider how the Olmec elite employed landscapes in their struggle for the consolidation of regional authority. The political landscape is a one of inequalities and shifting powers, where discrete corporate groups construct landscapes and spaces as part of their bid for regional authority. In this process both urban and hinterland monuments were key agents in the constitution of Olmec power structures and the unification of disparate populations.

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<sup>i</sup> Drucker, Heizer, and Squier define pseudocelts as “large, elongated, probably waterworn pieces of serpentine, which had shapes approximating those of finished celts” (1959: 135).

<sup>ii</sup> At this time in the site’s excavation history investigators made a distinction between the area of the C-3 platform running east-west across the southern face, which they called C-4, and the north-south oriented area which extended beyond C-4 to the south, which was labeled C-5 (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, 1959: 120).

<sup>iii</sup> These investigations also turned up two monument fragments, located behind Stela 5, which were labeled LV-86. However, the fragments did not provide any hint as to the original form or size of the monument, nor was any sculptural imagery preserved beyond a section of bas relief representing a single knuckleduster (González Lauck, 1988: 145; 1997: 85). Due to lack of information on the nature of this monument I have chosen not to discuss it here.

<sup>iv</sup> For comments on influx of southern stylistic elements through trade networks during this period see Milbrath, 1979: 43.

<sup>v</sup> Porter identifies LV-58 as a fragment from a celtiform stela like those found on the C-3 platform (1996: 65).

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<sup>vi</sup> The un-worked basalt boulder originally labeled Stela 5 by Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959: 215) was re-named Stela 4. The current location of this stone is unknown (González Lauck, 1990: 173, n. 11).

<sup>vii</sup> In his 1974 publication, Clewlow reverses the numbers designating LV-74 and LV-75 (40). The numbers of these monuments were later changed to the present designations.

<sup>viii</sup> The top half of LV-75 was not immediately recognized as such and was therefore given a separate monument number, LV-81. Later it was recognized that LV-75 and LV-81 were two halves of a whole monument; however, the two pieces currently remain separated. LV-75 is located in the Museo Regional de Antropología-Carlos Pellicer Cámara, while LV-81 is on display at the La Venta site museum.

<sup>ix</sup> It is remarkable that this stela, so unlike the others known from La Venta, draws on the essential iconography of the altar-thrones (an elite figure framed by the niche of a cave marked by a zoomorphic relief on its upper surface) and reconfigures it to the stela format. Moreover, the figure's headdress is reminiscent of those worn by the colossal heads. The composition and imagery of this stela suggest that the artist may have intended to draw on two of the most impressive and culturally significant monument forms, perhaps to add greater ideological weight to the work.

## Chapter Six: The Olmec Political Landscape

*“[I]t is impossible to describe political authorities independent of the landscapes they created: the regions they united, the cities they built, the inspirations evoked in the monuments they raised, and the cartographic desires they inflamed” (Adam Smith, 2003: 29).*

The power to produce spaces and landscapes does not belong to every individual, but is constrained by parameters such as class and wealth, which dictate access to the material and ideological building blocks necessary for their construction. Thus, we return to Wolf’s modality of structural power, which is held only by a select subset of individuals within a society (1999). Just as the dictates of structural power allow some to constrain the practice of others within the settings they organize and orchestrate, so, too, do landscapes work to constrain and control. “The ability to produce landscapes confers significant ability to influence, regulate, delimit, and control daily life” (Smith, 2003: 70). Moreover, the encompassing nature of the landscape allows those agents responsible for its production a much wider sphere of influence than do individual spaces. Consequently, the landscape becomes both a palimpsest of power relations and a mechanism through which the authority within those relations is constituted (*ibid.*, 77). As Adam Smith suggests, the landscapes constructed by the agents of authority are not simply reflective of political organization, but are political order themselves (*ibid.*).

Thus far, I have discussed the place of Olmec monuments in relation to the production of built environments in urban settings, which were the centers of regional political networks. These works were integrated into the spaces and

micro-landscapes of the primary site cores through ritual and display practices which consistently reproduced the authority of political agents and their chosen mnemonic narratives. The vast majority of Olmec stone monuments are found within the bounds of these primary sites, which most probably served as the center of funding and support for the artists and workers producing the sculptures. However, a number of Olmec monuments have been encountered in settings outside the limits of both San Lorenzo and La Venta, in the surrounding areas designated as the hinterlands.

Monuments were erected in secondary centers, large and medium villages, and remote locations that may have functioned as sites of pilgrimage. How did these works function in the hinterland? Did their roles differ from those monuments erected in the site cores of primary centers? How would the viewing experience of a single monument erected in a village have differed from the experience of multiple monuments erected in the architectural spaces of the great regional centers? This chapter will not purport to fully answer all these questions, which would require data beyond what is currently available. Rather, my aim is to simply consider how Pre-classic scholars might begin to think about this subset of monuments in relation to these and similar questions.

Clearly, monumental sculpture in the hinterlands should not be considered within exactly the same contextual frameworks as the urban monuments. As nexus points within the social networks of memory and authority, their presence outside the primary centers would have served to manifest narratives of past and power physically in the spaces of their display. In this way, the erection of

hinterland monuments would have been a key strategy in the formation and negotiation of political landscapes. Concurrently, the destruction, removal, or mutilation of these works could have been a mechanism for the contestation of power relationships between sites.

The political landscape is never stable, but rather is under constant threat as authority waxes and wanes. Adam Smith has emphasized the need for the political landscape to constantly reproduce itself, due to inevitable gaps between authority and landscape (*ibid.*, 109-110). Olmec monuments could have functioned in both processes of production and reproduction, as well as the practices of fracturing and shifting that are inherent to the very nature of authority. Moreover, as generators of memory and identity, hinterland monuments would have been key to the production and contestation of corporate identities, serving to unify disparate groups or to emphasize socio-cultural difference.

At this moment in time, the information on both the Olmec hinterland and its monumental sculptures is extremely limited. However, recent scholarship has begun to take steps to further our knowledge of both. In this chapter I will present the information currently available, first addressing what is known about the place of hinterland monuments in relation to regional settlement networks, as reflective of the political landscape. The second section will discuss the handful of hinterland monuments which have been documented in relation to contextual data from their archaeological settings. The third section will then consider the larger implications of monument form, placement, and context in relation to the

constitution of authority and social identity through the perceptual production of the political landscape. Finally, the chapter will conclude by considering how the collective memory may have served as a prime unifying factor in the construction of political networks throughout the Gulf lowlands. While the information currently published on the hinterland and its monuments is sparse, the data presented by the available reports suggests that these monuments were a significant part of the Olmec socio-political milieu and should not be overlooked, regardless of such limitations.

### ***6.1 Hinterland Monuments and the Political Landscape***

Despite serious gaps in our knowledge of Pre-classic regional development in the Gulf lowlands, surveys of settlement patterns in and around the Grijalva, Tonalá, and Coatzacoalcos fluvial systems have recently allowed for new understandings of site placement in relation to the geomorphology of the area (Borstein, 2001; Lunagómez, 1999; Rust and Sharer, 1988; Symonds, 1995, 2000; Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, 2002; Von Nagy, 1997). The hydrology of the region served to dictated both the flow of people and goods along fluvial networks and the establishment of permanent settlements atop the promontories and raised areas that stood above the flood plains adjacent to the ancient river courses (figure 6.1). Seasonal settlements were likewise established to take advantage of natural aquatic and terrestrial resources through hunting, fishing, and agriculture (Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, 2002: 59).

Stone monuments were erected at select sites within the networks of transport and communication, predominantly at nodal points along fluvial and terrestrial routes (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006). The number of monuments appears to have been dictated, at least in part, by the socio-political importance of the site, determined by geographical location and the position it held within the regional site hierarchy. For example, Loma del Zapote, the largest secondary site within the interior hinterland surrounding San Lorenzo, occupied a strategic position along the river confluence just south of San Lorenzo (Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, 2002: 66). From this position it could control the flow of river traffic and function as a receiving point for goods and people, as indicated by the artificial docking cove and causeways, the latter probably having served both as roads and additional docking points (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 40). This secondary site also contained the largest number of monumental sculptures outside the bounds of San Lorenzo, serving to indicate and reinforce its elite position within the regional hierarchy. Other monuments were placed at similarly influential and strategic settlements within the lowlands, signaling the preeminence of their position in relation to the primary centers.

Fewer hinterland monuments can be directly connected with the support area around La Venta. As Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera observe, the Middle Pre-classic sees a shift away from the erection of isolated sculptural figures within the key settlements of the surrounding region. Rather, the elites of this period commissioned stelae which were erected in more distant locations (*ibid.*, 48). Consequently, Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera suggest that the function of



hinterland monuments may have been reconfigured at some point during this period to address the formalization of long-distance exchange relationships among elites (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, a handful of monuments can be associated with hinterland sites located in the vicinity of La Venta and the riverways of the Tonalá Basin.

An account of the geographical positions occupied by those hinterland sites associated with works of monumental sculpture quickly reveals patterns of monument placement in relation to regional networks of transport and settlement. Undoubtedly, this information is skewed by incomplete and inaccurate data stemming from a fragmentary record of the existing hinterland monuments, a number of which probably remain undiscovered, in combination with post-Olmec activities on the part of local inhabitants and looters, which may affect the overall patterns of distribution (*ibid.*, 44). Nevertheless, the monuments thus far recovered often correspond to known Pre-classic sites, suggesting that many retained their final Pre-classic settings prior to their removal by archaeologists and local populations in the modern age.

The largest number of hinterland monuments comes from the interior hinterlands around San Lorenzo. Defined by the area surrounding the San Lorenzo plateau, and circumscribed by three ancient river courses (the Tatagapa, the Gato-Potrero Nuevo-Azuzul, and the Calzadas), the interior hinterland contained several secondary and tertiary sites which incorporated settings for the display of stone monuments (Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, 2002: 66). In addition to Loma del Zapote (discussed in further

detail below), these included Estero Rabón, El Remolino, Tenochtitlán, and Ahuatepec. The former two sites served as secondary centers, one (Estero Rabón) positioned at the northern river confluence as the counterpart to Loma del Zapote in the south, the other (El Remolino) poised to control the northern point where the ancient Tatagapa river joined the Gato-San Antonio (*ibid.*, 72). Tenochtitlán constituted a large village occupying the same elevation as the San Lorenzo plateau, which was bounded on all sides by rivers (*ibid.* 66). The medium-sized village of Ahuatepec occupied a nearby promontory rising above the floodplains (*ibid.*, 70). The relative significance of these sites within the interior hinterland appears to have partially dictated the number of sculptural monuments displayed there. However, site size and hierarchy were clearly not the only factors determining where these works were installed.

The secondary center of Estero Rabón is associated with 8 possible monuments, including two anthropomorphic figures (ER-1, ER-6), a possible zoomorph (ER-2), a human cradling an infantile figure on its lap (ER-3), a seated human (ER-4), and the head from a composite anthropomorph (ER-5) (Cyphers, 2004a) (figure 6.2). Additionally, two fragments which may have once been a stone seat (ER-7) and the top of an altar-throne (ER-8), analogous to the one from Loma del Zapote (LZ-2), were also discovered at the site (*ibid.*). Although Estero Rabón occupied a position comparable to Loma del Zapote, both geographically and hierarchically, fewer monuments are associated with the northern secondary center. It is possible that more monuments await discovery at this site; however, Loma del Zapote was the larger site, which, in combination

with its sculptural corpus and monumental architecture, may signal its greater importance within the region. Likewise, El Remolino is categorized as a secondary center, yet has thus far been found to lack figural sculpture. Only two monumental stone columns (ELR-1 and ELR-2) were uncovered at this site, reinforcing the probability that not all secondary centers were created equal (Cyphers, 2004a; Stirling, 1955)

Moreover, the site of Tenochtitlán is associated with five monumental stone sculptures, despite the fact that it is designated a large village, rather than a secondary center. Its sculptural corpus includes one of Stirling's "copulating" scenes (Teno-1), a feline figure (Teno-2), a stone column (Teno-3), one unidentified fragment (Teno-6), and a possible armadillo (Teno-7) which has been lost (Cyphers 2004a; Stirling, 1955) (figures 6.3 and 3. 2). The location of the "copulation" scenes here and at Loma del Zapote would seem to have been dictated by the proximal relationship of these two settlements to the San Lorenzo plateau, with which they share a contiguous stretch of elevated land, rather than site size. Concurrently, the grouping of monuments at Tenochtitlán most likely resulted from its proximity to the regional center, since it is the only large village associated with this many sculptural works. Likewise, Ahuatepec may have obtained its small feline sculpture, analogous in form to SL-120, as a result of its proximity to San Lorenzo, in combination with its nodal position in relation to a number of smaller settlements grouped around the promontory (Cyphers, 2004a; Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 45; Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, 2002: 70). Given the number of larger villages lacking monumental sculpture, site

size and position were clearly not the only factors which determined the placement of hinterland monuments. However, the site hierarchy does appear to have influenced which sites became the settings of sculptural works, whether through exterior patronage from the primary site or autonomous agency on the part of their own leadership.

In the exterior hinterland there is a wider dispersal of monumental sculpture, perhaps due to the general underdevelopment of the region in comparison to those settlements immediately surrounding San Lorenzo. Two secondary centers, Laguna de los Cerros and Las Limas, were evenly spaced to the northwest and southwest of the regional center.<sup>i</sup> The former, with its sculptural workshop and proximity to the sources of basalt, is associated with an extensive corpus of monuments (Gillespie, 1994). Laguna de los Cerros was ideally positioned between the upland and lowland regions and most probably sat along the routes of transportation that connected the two ecological zones (Grove, 1994). The site of Las Limas to the south, positioned along the Coatzacoalcos River, is lacking all but a single example of Olmec sculpture.<sup>ii</sup> In his report on the site, Hernando Gómez-Rueda suggests that, while there might yet be undiscovered basalt monuments at Las Limas, these would most likely not approach the quantities associated with Laguna de los Cerros, San Lorenzo, or La Venta (1996: 114).

Additionally, a number of villages and hamlets were dispersed along the major fluvial and terrestrial routes, serving as nodes of settlement within the exterior hinterland. Several among these contained a single stone monument. In

1930 a unique anthropomorphic figure was discovered in a small ravine near Arroyo Sonso (Nomland, 1932) (figure 6.4). The human figure known as the “Wrestler” was also uncovered by local residents near Arroyo Sonso, on the island of Capoacan, which served as a prime river port up until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (figure 6.5). Near the town of Emilio Carranza another ancient island, once surrounded by the Coachapa, Otapan, and Coatzacoalcos rivers, yielded a small supernatural zoomorph (see Cyphers, 2004a: 200; Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 45). A seated male figure was recovered from a stream in the Arroyo Chiqipixta near Jáltipan (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 45), while another seated, elite male was pulled out of a river near Cuauhtotolapan Viejo (Medellín Zenil, 1971: 23) (figure 6.6). Excavation at this site, once located on a curve of the San Juan River, has revealed that it was an important settlement between 1000 and 800 B.C. (Borstein, 2005; Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 45).

Rivers also define the locations of many other hinterland monuments. A decapitated human figure was discovered at Zapotitlán, next to the point where the river drains into the waters of the gulf, while another decapitated human, now just a torso, was found overlooking the Cuitlazoyo River at Loma de la Piedra (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 45-46). At Ojo de Agua a stone disk marked with grooves and depressions was set upon the plateau near a stream connecting to the Coatzacoalcos River (*ibid.*,45). A composite anthropomorph was encountered at the point where the Amayo and Hueyapan Rivers meet, while a small supernatural zoomorph (formerly designated LV-60) was recovered

from Ixthuatlan. At the time of its discovery it sat near the confluence of three rivers: the San Antonio, the Uxpanapa, and the Coatzacoalcos (*ibid.*) (figure 6.7).

As previously stated, the La Venta hinterland has far fewer monuments directly associated with its settlements. Yet those works that have been recovered from this area likewise display the affinities between settlement, sculpture, and the hydrology of the Tonalá basin. Two monuments were discovered at the site of Los Soldados, located upriver from La Venta near the Arroyo Pesquero, where a number of Olmec stone masks and decorative celts have been found. Both monuments show distinct similarities to sculptures from San Lorenzo and La Venta. LS-1 is analogous in form and subject to SL-37 and LV-80 (González Lauck, 1991) (figures 6.8, 4.13, and 5.20). Like the latter, it presents a supernatural zoomorph, seated on all fours, with a serpent dangling from its jaws. Similar to SL-37, the upper portion of the head has been removed by breaking and the serpent element is thicker and more rope-like than that of LV-80. LS-2 represents a seated composite anthropomorph wearing a stepped headdress and rectangular pectoral with crossed bands similar to those found on the SL-52 and LV-77 composite anthropomorphs (figures 5.17-5.19). The figure also wears a wide pleated belt with a decorative plaque which appear to be near duplicates of the belt and plaque worn by LV-77.

The adjacent site of Las Choapas also yielded a single monument in the form of a stone disk bearing a relief showing a contorted composite anthropomorph with arms held crossed against the chest and feet appearing above the head, as though the figure had bent his body into a circular form

(figure 6.9). Similar figures appear among Pre-classic stone and ceramic sculptural works and are typically referred to as “acrobats.” Like the monuments from Los Soldados, the stone disk from Las Choapas is analogous to two monuments from San Lorenzo and La Venta. SL-16 also takes the form of a stone disk with a contorted figure presented in relief (figure 6.10). Although much of the carving has eroded away it is possible to make out the feet of the figure, positioned in the same manner as those appearing on the Las Choapas monument. Although better preserved, the figure on LV-61 differs slightly in the positioning of its limbs (figure 6.11). Nevertheless, the contorted body form and configuration of the monument as a stone disk with relief covering one flat side create strong visual parallels between the three works. Clearly, the Los Soldados-Las Choapas area was an important regional settlement with probable ties to both San Lorenzo and La Venta. Its proximity to the Arroyo Pesquero caches is probably not coincidental, but rather linked to the influence of those sites.

Clearly, the positioning of hinterland monuments, like the patterns of settlement, was dictated in part by the geomorphology and hydrology of the region. Considering hinterland settings of stone monuments on a macro-level gives the impression of a dynamic landscape charged with cultural referents to supernatural creatures, mytho-historical figures, and political leaders. These could have been encountered sequentially by individuals traveling through the political territory demarcated by their presence or experienced in isolation by the stationary inhabitants of single sites. Each viewing experience would have

differed significantly from the other, yet each would most certainly have conveyed impressive messages of power and social significance to their audiences.

## **6.2 Contexts of Hinterland Monuments**

Only a handful of the known hinterland monuments are associated with archaeological data gathered from excavation. The lack of contextual information for these monuments is primarily due to their discovery by the residents of towns and villages in Veracruz and Tabasco through chance and accident, rather than through archaeological exploration. Others were recovered in areas where erosion or other forces deposited them on the ground surface. The rest were encountered and removed during a period in the history of Olmec studies when the documentation of monument contexts was prioritized less than their discovery and quick removal to a secure location away from looters and vandals. Recent efforts by archaeologists are slowly changing this situation, adding to our knowledge of monument contexts in the hinterlands (Cyphers, 1992a, 1992b, 1999; Cyphers and Botas, 1994; Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006). Currently, the reports on seven monuments from Loma del Zapote, Cruz del Milagro, and San Martín Pajapan are the sole sources of contextual data for hinterland monuments. The information on these sites and sculptures, however limited, is provocative, suggesting that future explorations of the hinterland may considerably add to our understanding of Olmec culture and society.

### **Loma del Zapote**



Loma del Zapote once dominated the southern confluence of two ancient rivers in the Coatzacoalcos basin, just 2.7 kilometers south of the San Lorenzo plateau (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 23; Cyphers, 1999: 168). There is good reason to believe that Loma del Zapote was the most significant secondary center in the interior hinterland surrounding San Lorenzo. Aside from that primary center, Loma del Zapote was the only site to cover more than 400 hectares in its heyday (Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, 2002: 66). Excavations at the site conducted by the SLTAP between 1990 and 1993 also revealed monumental architecture and earthworks in the form of causeways and modifications to the natural hillsides (Cyphers, 1994: 296). The explorations during this period also increased the number of monuments associated with the site to 14, by far the most monuments situated within a secondary center, aside from the more distant Laguna de los Cerros.<sup>iii</sup> Exploration of the area's topography by Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez revealed that Loma del Zapote was positioned at a key location in the region's fluvial, transportation, and communication networks (2002). Together with the site of Las Camelias, which sat across from Loma del Zapote on the opposite embankment, the site would have provided a gateway able to control access to the lands and river courses beyond (*ibid.*).

Between 1500 and 1200 B.C. the three smaller sites were established that would provide a foundation for later development of the settlement (RSLT-9, 10, and 273) (*ibid.*, 59). During the San Lorenzo phase, Loma del Zapote grew into a secondary center supporting a large population, several workshops, and public architecture related to transportation (Cyphers, 1999: 168). The layout of

the site, characterized by dispersed patterns of internal activity, may be contrasted with the strong nucleation of settlement at San Lorenzo (Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez 2002: 69).

Matthew Stirling and his associates were the first to encounter a handful of monuments at the site of Loma del Zapote (1955). These include a seated composite figure (LZ-1), small throne with two dwarf figures (LZ-2), one of the “copulation” monuments (LZ-3), a possible serpent (LZ-4), a human head broken from a larger figure (LZ-12), and a stone block with rope design in relief (LZ-13) (figures 6.12-6.15 and 3.3). No contextual information was recorded in association with these monuments. Later, a fragment of a possible rounded altar (LZ-15) and a stone slab (LZ-6), which Cyphers suggests may have functioned as a drain stone cover (2004a: 245), were uncovered at the site. The stone slab bears a relief carving of a serpent winding in and out of two “holes” in the stone, also represented in relief. Again, neither of these worked stones was associated with archaeological material that would assist in determining their place or function in Olmec society.

During the investigations at the site by the SLTAP six additional monuments were documented, including two mutilated human figures (LZ-5 and LZ-11) and a unique sculptural tableau incorporating four figures, two human and two feline (LZ-7-10) (figures 6.16-6.21). Unfortunately, LZ-11 was recovered out of context. However, the other five sculptures were carefully documented within their archaeological settings, providing rare insight into the display and function of hinterland monuments (Cyphers, 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 1999, 2004b).

Moreover, the data recovered in association with the two sites of monument placement suggest that these settings and functions were variable, at least for sites with multiple monuments.

#### *LZ-5*

LZ- 5 was encountered where it had been reset upon a cruciform bentonite pavement after undergoing extreme erasure and breakage (figure 6.16). The monument once depicted a seated or kneeling lord adorned with cape, belt, and pectoral. At some time during the Early Pre-classic the legs, arms, and head of the figure were removed and it was reset on the eastern edge of a structure, facing west. All evidence of the person represented has been erased, including possible identifying insignias, which were removed by hammering (Cyphers, 1992b: 52; Cyphers, 2004a: 244). Post-mutilation, the sculpture stood 1.03 meters high and measured a maximum of 51 centimeters in width (Cyphers, 2004a: 243).

The bentonite surface upon which it sat was placed over an additional pavement, with two secondary burials sandwiched in between. One of these burials had been disturbed by a later intrusion, while the other was undisturbed (Cyphers, 1999: 173). Cyphers observed that the skull and feet of one individual were placed 2-3 meters from the limbs and torso (*ibid.*). The monument was set above the remains of these two individuals, possibly sacrificial victims, who were buried without accompanying offerings (Cyphers, 1992b: 52; Cyphers, 1997: 191; 1999: 173).

Other structural features of the monument's final setting include a series of curious lines and canals in the surface of the lower (first) pavement, as well as a nearby circular feature which Cyphers compares to a ritual bath (1999: 173). A large quantity of ceramic vessels and jade beads were also discovered deposited around the sculpture, which showed evidence of receiving offerings over an extended period of time (Cyphers, 1992b: 51-2; Cyphers, 1997: 191; 1999: 173-4; 2004a: 243-4). Taken together, the architectural and dedicatory features of the monument's final location suggest a ritual space associated with a nearby structure. However, whether the monument was placed in the space to sanctify it, or whether the space already had ritual associations which influenced the decision to place the mutilated sculpture there, is difficult to say. Further excavation may lead to a surer determination of the age and diachronic development of the area associated with LZ-5.

### **El Azuzul**

The El Azuzul acropolis consists of a natural hillside that has been modified to present a series of terraces on its eastern and northern surfaces (Cyphers, 1994: 301-302). The acropolis is one of a chain of hills which forms part of the larger site of Loma del Zapote. Rising 28 meters above the alluvial plain below, El Azuzul is named for the nearby estuary (*ibid.*, 295, 302). Outcroppings of bentonite are found at the base of the rise on both the eastern and northern sides. What remains of the upper architectural construction shows evidence of a squared, sloping northeastern corner, as well as a bentonite ramp ascending the eastern face of the acropolis (*ibid.*, 302). Bentonite was also

employed in the construction of pavements running along the southern face of the acropolis and along the eastern terrace (*ibid.*, 302-303). Moreover, large quantities of worked bentonite were used to erect masonry architecture.

The SLTAP investigated El Azuzul as part of their explorations at Loma del Zapote (*ibid.*, 296). At the base of the acropolis the SLTAP excavators discovered evidence of intense occupation dating to the early Pre-classic (*ibid.*, 303). Additionally, four monuments were arranged to present a sculptural, possibly narrative scene along the southern side of the hill at the point of juncture between the upper and lower architectural structures (*ibid.*, 299). While first designated as sculptures A-D, the monuments were subsequently re-labeled LZ-7-10.

#### *LZ-7, 8, 9, and 10*

The sculptural figures from El Azuzul take the form of two superb human figures (LZ-8 and LZ-9), seated, with arms outstretched to grasp a ceremonial bar lying horizontally along the ground (figures 6.18 and 6.19). These two figures faced east towards a third monument in the form of a feline (LZ-7) (figure 6.20). A second, larger feline (LZ-10) was positioned to the northeast of the other figures in the group (figure 6.21). The sculptural tableau was set upon the southern band of bentonite pavement, which was constructed above a layer of red clay. The two human figures and smaller feline were first encountered in a reclining position in 1987 (*ibid.*, 295). Subsequent excavation in 1992 revealed the fourth monument seated at the edge of the same pavement (*ibid.*, 299). When raised to an upright position LZ-10 would have been set perpendicular to the other three, which were

arranged in approximate east-west alignment, with one human figure positioned behind the other and both facing LZ-7. The larger feline faced the other sculptures, creating a visual link between it and the group, even as it stood apart from the three smaller works. Although associated with what must have been an impressive architectural setting, no offering remains were found in conjunction with the monuments.

Both pairs of felines and humans share marked similarities in their appearance. LZ-8 and LZ-9 are sometimes referred to as “the twins.” In fact, their facial features are quite distinct if compared side by side; however, their ornamentation, approximate size, and posture are the same, leading to a superficial appearance of uniformity. Each figure wears a headdress with stepped or accordion-pleated sides comparable to the headdresses appearing on SL-52, LV-77, and LS-2 (figures 5.16-5.18). A rounded ornament protrudes from the center of the forehead band of each headdress, perhaps bound there by the three cords stretched to either side. The headdress is held on by another cord, which passes under the chin and is attached to the headdress on either side of the face. The figure also wears a rectangular pectoral, as well as a loincloth with wide pleated belt, and arm and leg bands wider than those typically depicted in Olmec monumental sculpture.

Like the stepped-headdress, the rectangular pectoral is also found on SL-52, LV-77, and LS-2. It should be noted that all three of these sculptures depict a supernatural with the features of the composite anthropomorph, yet the two figures from El Azuzul are clearly human. Perhaps the two young male figures

from the acropolis are arrayed to take on the aspects of the supernatural, possibly as part of a ritual performance. Similarly, a Pre-classic mural at Oxtotitlán Cave in Guerrero shows a human male dressed in elaborate costume (probably that of a deity or supernatural), complete with mask, and gesturing widely with his arms, perhaps indicating that he is engaged in some type of performance. Below I will argue that Monument 1 from San Martín Pajapan may likewise be intended to present the ritual performance of a human figure taking on the aspect of a deity or supernatural. Such performances were continually practiced by the elite of Mesoamerica from the Pre-classic to the time of the Conquest.

Each of the human figures from El Azuzul is seated with his right leg bent at the knee and folded along his right side, while the left leg is bent at a 90° angle with the lower leg brought in front of the figure. A veil slopes down from the top of the headdress and over the back of the figures to project approximately a foot behind them, perhaps as a counterbalance to ensure the sculptures' stability. The upper body is bent at the waist, with both arms stretched out to grasp a ceremonial bar held horizontally in front of the figure. The hands of each figure are positioned with the right arm holding the bar in an underhand position, while the left grasps the bar overhand. This is a typical gesture found in Olmec art where the sculptor depicts an object held in both hands, with each grasping the bar in an opposed position with respect to the other. A number of Olmec monuments are similarly positioned with arms held outstretched in front of them, including monuments from Cruz del Milagro, Cuauhtotolapan, San Martín

Pajapan, and LV-8, LV-10, LV-30, and LV-74. However, only the San Martín Pajapan monument (SMP-1) includes a ceremonial bar like those held by the El Azuzul figures.

Both human figures are fairly well preserved, with minimal breakage from mutilation and no major damage from erosion. Both have suffered breaks to the upper part of the headdress, as well as damage to the circular forehead ornament. Cyphers suggests that these breaks were intended to remove insignia related to kinship or status as part of the ritual dedication of the monument (*ibid.*, 300). Additionally, the right foot has been broken off on LZ-8. While the damage to the foot was possibly accidental, the damage to the headdresses is too uniform to be anything other than intentional mutilation. However, the process of breakage was carefully carried out, without disfiguring the rest of the monument. As Cyphers proposes, the mutilation could have been intended to remove identifying insignia particular to the individuals portrayed. Likewise, the breakage could have been intended to remove insignia associated with a religious faction or the veneration of a deity or supernatural whose following lost power or which became obsolete or out of fashion over the course of the site's history. The mutilation in either scenario could have been carried out so that the monuments could continue to function even after political or religious disjunctions necessitated that some aspect of their appearance be erased, enabling them remain relevant. Post-mutilation, the figures measure almost the same in size, but with small differences. LZ-8 is 96 centimeters high by 1.16 meters long and 76 centimeters thick (Cyphers, 2004a: 249). In comparison, LZ-9 is slightly taller,



measuring 99 centimeters high but only 1.12 meters in length. Like LZ-8, it too is 76 centimeters wide (*ibid.*, 252).

The two felines, LZ-7 and LZ-10, are also quite similar in form and posture; however, they are easily distinguished by size. LZ-7, the smaller feline, stands 1.2 meters tall and is 73 centimeters wide, while LZ-10 is 1.64 meters tall and 1.1 meters wide. Scarring, in the form of a deeply incised arc on the right leg, indicates that LZ-7 was re-sculpted from an older monument. The surface of the feline also shows evidence of hammering which gives the overall appearance a rougher quality when compared to the two finely finished human figures. Additionally, Cyphers and Fernando Botas suggest that the process of re-carving may have dictated the compact form of the feline, whose stilted posture is distinct from the open, naturalistic body forms of other Olmec felines, such as the one presented by SL-107 (1994; see also Cyphers, 1994: 301). Although larger, LZ-10 takes on the same stilted posture as its smaller counterpart. Likewise, the surface of the large feline is rougher than that of the human figures, showing signs of hammering similar to the surface of LZ-7.

Cyphers has suggested that the El Azuzul sculptural tableau might be only one example of a more common Olmec practice of grouping monuments to form scenes which could be re-arranged or re-grouped to form new assemblages, which would in turn combine to form new patterns of signification (1992a; 1994: 303). While this suggestion seems entirely possible, even probable, the group at El Azuzul appears highly complementary in their form and layout, with two pairs of monuments arranged in alignment. It is possible that each pair was created

separately and was later brought together with the other; however, it seems just as likely that they were conceived as a group from the outset. Moreover, frequent rearrangement of the Olmec sculptural canon would have disrupted the appearance of endurance and constancy that gives monuments a large measure of their ideological weight. While monuments were obviously transformed or removed at varying times throughout history, a process which may very well have included the resetting of monuments into new group arrangements, such activities were most likely limited to moments when the political or religious milieu required a revision of the site's social memory.

The four sculptures were set among the remains of masonry structures represented by large quantities of worked bentonite to the west and northwest of the tableau. It is possible that they were intended to be viewed from below or from a distance, a perspective that might have allowed the larger feline to appear the same size as the other three monuments. Like the San Lorenzo plateau, the acropolis may have been spatially segregated, with the structures inhabited by the elite incorporated within the upper architectural body, while individuals with less social sway occupied the area around the base of the hill. If this was indeed the case, the arrangement of the monuments might have been intended to address an audience which would have been limited in their access to the upper portions of the site.

### **Cruz del Milagro**

While excavating an area for water storage the residents of Cruz del Milagro Sayula, located just a short distance from the modern city of Acayucan in

southern Veracruz, discovered an exquisite monumental sculpture in the olmec style (figure 6.22). Alfonso Medellín Zenil recovered the monument in 1961 as part of the Universidad Veracruzana's archaeological reconnaissance and recovery efforts, undertaken in cooperation with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. It was later installed in the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, where it remains on display.

When the find was first reported to Medellín Zenil he found that the excavations for the Sayula water tank had dug into a small archaeological mound (Medellín Zenil, 1971: 41). The monument, representing a young male dressed in elite garb, was located in or on this mound. While the site was not fully explored at the time of the monument's recovery, Medellín Zenil made note of a number of potsherds associated with the monument, which he identified as Upper Tres Zapotes. Additionally, a handle from a mold-made anthropomorphic censer of reddish-orange clay was discovered during the process of the monument's removal (*ibid.*). Later exploration by Joshua Borstein revealed that Cruz del Milagro was the location of an important early settlement (Borstein, 2001; Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 45). The site is positioned between two river drainage systems, the Coatzacoalcos and the San Juan. It is possible that, like the other sites where monumental sculpture has been found, Cruz del Milagro's importance stemmed from its position in relation to terrestrial and aquatic routes of transport and travel.

*CM-1 "El Príncipe"*

The only stone monument thus far recovered from Cruz del Milagro, CM-1 is stylistically similar to LZ-8 and LZ-9, the two human figures from El Azuzul. The fine sculptural quality of the figure speaks to the prominence of the site, despite being the sole monument in that location. Given the name of “El Príncipe” because of its youthful appearance and lack of ceremonial bar, the figure wears a beautifully balanced headdress with pendulous cylindrical elements that hang at ear-level, as well as a low-slung kilt. No collar or wristbands are visible and the body forms are well-defined, yet simplified. All visual emphasis is placed on the detailed facial features and headdress. The figure is equally detailed on all sides, suggesting the monument was placed in an area where it could be viewed from every angle.

The back of the headdress bears an emblem or motif in the shape of an upturned U with one line connecting the base horizontally and another dividing the center vertically. It is possible that, like the motifs appearing on the headdresses of the colossal heads, this emblem alluded to the name, title, or lineage of the individual represented. As the facial features and body form are simplified, the headdress was where the identity of the figure could be most easily read.

The figure is seated in a cross-legged position, with torso bent forward and the arms held outstretched to rest on closed fists. This is a well-known posture common to many Olmec monuments, including LV-8, LV-10, LV-30, LV-74, and Monument 1 from Cuauhtotolapan. Likewise, SMP-1 and the two figures from El Azuzul maintain similar postures, diverging only in that they grasp a

ceremonial bar, rather than resting their closed fists on the ground. The monument is slightly larger than life-sized, measuring 1.30 meters in height, 90 centimeters wide, and 1 meter front to back.

### **San Martín Pajapan**

When Blom and LaFarge visited the San Martín Pajapan volcano in 1925 they described the landscape as “mountainous, rainy, and extremely fertile” (1926:49). The rare clearing of the clouds that surrounded the peak on the day of their visit afforded “a most magnificent view of the Coatzacoalcos basin, with the town of Pajápan and the Laguna de los Osiones in the foreground, and a glimpse of the Chiapas mountains far away to the southwest” (*ibid.*, 46). Proceeding to the summit, they encountered a stone monument first reported by Ismael Loya, a Mexican engineer who had seen and documented the sculpture during his survey of the area in 1897 (*ibid.*, 45) (figure 6.23).

#### *SMP-1 “El Chaneque”*

At the time of his survey Loya moved the monument in order to use it as a marker, a process which resulted in the breaking of its arms. He also discovered a number of ceramic vessels containing small objects carved in jade. These he removed and subsequently gave away, with the exception of one --a small rattlesnake of light green jade-- which he kept (*ibid.*, 45). Blom and LaFarge made a point of revisiting the site of the monument during their expedition. In their publication they reported the activities of Loya, along with a newer, more accurate drawing of the sculpture than the one provided by the engineer (*ibid.*, 46). When reencountered by Blom and LaFarge, the monument was found

resting "on a small level in the saddle between the two highest peaks of the crater rim" (*ibid.*).

In 1960 and 1961 Medellín Zenil returned to the area under the auspices of the Universidad Veracruzana with the intent to remove the monument and install it in the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa (Medellín Zenil, 1968). At this time Medellín Zenil found the monument seated on an artificial platform (*ibid.*, 12). He subsequently chose to dig a stratigraphic pit measuring 2 by 2.5 meters through the platform at the point where the monument had been located (*ibid.* 10). In doing so, he discovered that the platform was saturated with cultural material. The pit was dug in artificial layers, each 15 centimeters thick (*ibid.*). The missing fragments of the monument were all recovered within the first 3 layers, allowing for the almost total reconstruction of the monument (*ibid.*, 11). Along with these fragments were paraffin and wax, deposited as part of modern offering practices (*ibid.*).

At a depth of 45 centimeters ceramic material from the Late Classic was recovered, along with the last of the sculptural fragments (*ibid.*). Medellín Zenil believed that this stratigraphic relationship indicated the monument's intentional destruction at some point during the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (*ibid.*). However, if one examines the drawing provided by Loya, it appears that the sculpture was largely intact during his 1897 visit (Blom and LaFarge, 1926: 45). Likewise, SMP-1 is missing little but its arms in the 1925 drawing produced by Blom and LaFarge. (*ibid.*, 46). The documentation produced by these early encounters suggests that

the mutilation of the monument occurred during Loya's survey and after Blom and LaFarge's visit.

Between 75 and 120 centimeters below the surface Medellín Zenil encountered a layer of red clay above a probable platform constructed of small stones (1968: 12). The strata below the clay were culturally sterile. All the ceramics associated with the clay are in the form of plates and bowls which can be dated to the Pre-classic (*ibid.*). Medellín Zenil compares the recovered ceramic material to examples of Drucker's Untempered ware and Weiant's Yellow and Pink ware, leading him to assign the ceramic remains at San Martín Pajapan to Upper Tres Zapotes (*ibid.*). De la Fuente and Gutiérrez Solana later designated the ceramics from this site as Middle Pre-classic in date, which seems probable, given the associated monument's formal connections to LV-44 (2006: 316). Excavations of the Pre-classic strata above the platform also recovered jade and jadeite beads, as well as a jadeite pectoral decorated with an incised face (Medellín Zenil, 1968: 13).

Above the Pre-classic platform sat SMP-1. The monument takes the form of a seated human lord, richly adorned with headdress, ear pendants, wide pleated belt, and bracelets. Like the figure from Cruz del Milagro, the visual emphasis is concentrated on the head and headdress, with a secondary point of emphasis on the hands holding a cylindrical ceremonial bar. The San Martín Pajapan figure holds the bar horizontal at ground level with the overhand, underhand grip displayed by the Loma del Zapote figures. His torso is tilted forward and his left leg is bent under and to the side of his body. The right leg is

propped with the sole of the foot resting on the ground and the bent knee raised high, as though the figure will rise to his feet at any minute. While the posture is similar to that of LZ-8 and LZ-9, the overall effect is more dynamic, evoking the possibility of movement, rather than the stasis that gives the monuments at Loma del Zapote their appearance of tranquility. The shape of the ceremonial bar is also slightly different, with a cruciform incision at one end that divides the bar into four equal segments. A peculiar feature is the section of stone which has been left to connect the arms and lower jaw of the figure, rather than being carved away to reveal the neck and torso. The purpose of this stone section is unclear and is unique within the corpus of Olmec sculpture.

The head of the composite anthropomorph dominates the composition as a motif repeated in the various ornaments worn by the figure. It is the primary ornamental element on the headdress, decorating the anterior surface which overhangs the face of the human figure, leaving it in shadow. This frontal plaque possesses all the key features of the composite anthropomorph, including almond-shaped eyes, down-turned mouth, and centered head cleft. It forms the prime point of visual emphasis, dominating the entire figure. The composite anthropomorph features are repeated in the elaborate ear pendants, which hang below and to either side of the human face, and on the decorative plaque, placed at the center of the pleated belt on the back of the figure.

Other, secondary, motifs and symbols abound, decorating the back and sides of the headdress and forming a vertical axis of ornamentation which leads from the very top of the headdress to the figure's lower back. Again, the



headdress is the clear point of emphasis. From the frontal plaque, a series of striated lines moves along the sides of the headdress to the rear, which is divided into four equal quadrangular sections. Like the end of the ceremonial bar held by the figure, two deeply incised lines section the back of the headdress, one dividing the area vertically, the other horizontally. Topping the headdress is a cruciform foliate element. In conjunction with the frontal plaque, bearing the features of the composite anthropomorph, it brings to mind the mountain lord stelae found at the base of La Venta's C-1. It seems highly plausible that, like the celtiform stelae, the supernatural referenced by the composite anthropomorph on this headdress was related to mountains, and perhaps the peak of San Martín Pajapan specifically. The band running around the base of the headdress is incised with a number of motifs along the sides, the forms and meanings of which are unclear. What appears to be either sections fabric, or possibly hair, depends from the underside of this band on both sides to just below the level of the figure's shoulders. At the back, a roughly U-shaped element is represented at the center of this band. Appearing attached to the bottom of this U-shape is a cruciform element, which terminates at the back belt plaque in the form of the composite anthropomorph. From this plaque an elongated, rectangular object continues down the lower back of the figure, terminating just above the raised gluteus.

Like the human figures from El Azuzul, the San Martín Pajapan monument clearly represents a human figure dressed in ritual regalia, and not an actual supernatural or deity. His actions appear ritual in nature, his garb does not seem

to be everyday wear. This suggests that the image presented to the viewer is commemorative of the ritual activities of human lords, rather than the mythological or supernatural deeds of non-humans. Moreover, elements of the costume --such as the headdress, ear pendants, and back plaque-- visually reference the composite anthropomorph, in this case possibly intended to represent a mountain or earth deity. It seems plausible that the figure here, like those from Loma del Zapote, is intended to represent a human lord engaged in ritual deity impersonation, which would have allowed him to take on the aspect of the deity or supernatural. This is remarkable when considered in conjunction with the archaeological context, which suggests long-term, if not contiguous, use of the site as a place of pilgrimage and offering.

Indeed, Medellín Zenil reported that the monument was still venerated by the local population as “El Chaneque” in modern times. “We never knew it to have been treated as something inert or as a thing; for them it is and continues to be the recipient of a force that can help to conserve life or to destroy it; it is something that is respected, feared, propitiated, and venerated” (*ibid.*, 10). Medellín Zenil also reported that the local inhabitants believed the San Martín Pajapan volcano to be located directly over the realm of Tlalocan, a mythical place in Post-classic mythology where the lord of the animals dwelt (*ibid.*, 16). However, the image erected here in Pre-classic times does not appear to have been that of a deity, but of a human engaged in a codified ritual performance. The choice of subject matter seems strategic on the part of the person(s) responsible for its commission and placement. Quite possibly, the representation

of an elite ritual actor would have been a stronger political message of the supernatural sway held by individual human lords than could have been achieved by a monument representing an actual deity.

### **6.3 Discussion**

While our knowledge of the Olmec political landscape is far from complete, recent investigations of the hinterland have begun to shape an image of Pre-classic geopolitics in the Gulf lowlands. During the Early Pre-classic hundreds of settlements were established in the interior hinterlands surrounding San Lorenzo, which grew from a large village to a major regional center with an area of approximately 500 hectares (Symonds, Cyphers, Lunagómez, 2002: 56, 66). These settlements grew in number, size, and population, stretching along the waterways and points of terrestrial passage. Some, like Loma del Zapote, began as a conglomeration of smaller settlements and expanded over time to become large villages and secondary centers (*ibid.*, 59). The exterior hinterlands were likewise settled and grew in size and population density, but remained considerably underdeveloped when compared to the settlement of the interior hinterland around the primary center (*ibid.*, 66; Cyphers, and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 49). Sites in this area also ranged along routes of transport and communication.

The hinterlands associated with the La Venta area along the Tonalá Basin and Grijalva Delta also began to develop as areas of settlement during the Early Pre-classic. However, during this period the increases in site size and population

density were not as dramatic as that of the settlements around San Lorenzo. It was not until the Middle Pre-classic, concurrent with the apogee of La Venta, that the hinterlands in this region would reach the height of their development (Rust and Sharer, 1988; von Nagy, 1997).

The hinterland was never static or geographically contained. The changing hydrology of the region throughout the year would have caused seasonal flooding in much of the lowlands. Numerous temporary settlements were created to take advantage of the natural aquatic and terrestrial resources at certain times of the year, while at other times these would have been abandoned (Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, 2002: 42-43). Concurrently, many permanent settlements would also have been under constant threat from various environmental phenomena such as changes in the fluvial system, which likely caused some shifting in settlement patterns over the course of centuries. Therefore, we should not consider the hinterland as some monolithic territory, but rather as a network of differentiated power structures which connected discrete sites and regions at varying times throughout the course of the Pre-classic.

The transitory nature of the physical landscape was most likely a significant factor in the development of geopolitical relations among Olmec sites and polities. Adam Smith has noted that the political landscape is constellatory, often shifting across previously established boundaries and always incomplete (2003: 110). This “archipelagic” configuration of authority stems from the dynamic nature of power relationships, and from the transformations of physical landscapes, which may result in the reordering of polities and settlement patterns

(*ibid.*). As a result, the geopolitics of a region may be in a constant state of flux, necessitating the consistent reproduction of power structures. However, this reproduction “hinges not simply on the production and enforcement of relations of authority and subjection as experience --that is, in the movement of people and things across physical space-- but also on the fostering of an enduring perception of geopolitical relationships” (*ibid.*, 135). It is in association with the production of perception that we can consider the role of hinterland monuments.

The perception of the political landscape would have been a key factor in the creation, maintenance, and negotiation of geopolitical relationships and the constitution of authority through the production of these landscapes. Smith proposes three mechanisms by which a built aesthetic could reify the geopolitical relationships which defined a territory: memorialization, emulation, and authorization (*ibid.*, 136-137). Each of these mechanisms suggests possible ways in which Olmec hinterland monuments may have functioned to reflect and reinforce the dynamics of authority and subordination at work within the geopolitics of the Gulf lowlands.

### **Memorialization**

The mechanism of memorialization is central to the discussion of hinterland sculptures as potential monuments, specifically created to evoke the collective recollection of individuals, events, and/ or mytho-historical narratives. Memorialization is often employed in the commemoration of key memories linked to a polity's role within the macrostructures of power and authority at the local and regional levels (*ibid.*, 136). Recollection of the individuals and events tied to

a site's rank within a regional hierarchy may reinforce the superiority or subjugation of that site (*ibid.*).

Although narrative imagery does not consistently appear in the Olmec sculptural canon until the Middle Pre-classic, with the appearance of stelae at La Venta, the Early Pre-classic offers images of individual elites and mythological creatures that must have been related to the myth-histories of the site or region. It is possible that narrative groupings of sculpture, like the four figures from the El Azuzul Acropolis, were also employed to capture a single moment within a larger narrative. Thus far, however, that sculptural tableau is the sole exemplar of this practice. Moreover, the monumental sculptures found outside of San Lorenzo's interior hinterland appear to have been erected singly, rather than in groups. Nevertheless, the individuals and supernaturals they commemorate would have formed an important part of the social memory in the community where they were displayed.

Like the urban sculptural canon, the monuments erected throughout the hinterland primarily represent human subjects. Many of these were probably intended to portray specific individuals, or perhaps a particular dynasty or rank. Emblems like the one decorating the headdress of El Príncipe from Cruz del Milagro would most likely have signaled the figure's identity to local inhabitants, regardless of whether they recognized the individual. The youthful, idealized features did not have to match those of the person portrayed, as long as the headdress served to identify him.

Additionally, the family history of elite individuals or collectives may have been a prime subject for memorialization as a strategy for publicizing claims to local and/ or regional authority. Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera have proposed that the distinct altar-throne forms found at various primary and secondary centers may have been configured to signal the nature of authority at those centers in relation to dynastic linkages between sites and their rank within the settlement hierarchy (2006: 41-44; see also Cyphers, 2008). The outcome of this configuration would have been to formally commemorate the genealogical relationships between primary and secondary centers, recalling the dynastic history of clans or elite corporate groupings.

A secondary category of representation appearing in the hinterlands is comprised of supernatural creatures, either composite anthropomorphs or supernatural zoomorphs. These images diverge from anything found in the natural world, and can thus be connected to the mythological traditions of their audience. However, there is no indication that the Olmec distinguished myth from history, natural from supernatural. Therefore, regardless of whether they present human lords or supernatural creatures, the stone monuments of the hinterland may have commemorated individual elements of a grander mytho-historical narrative integral to the socio-cultural and/ or political identity of their associated site. It is also possible that some supernatural or mythological figures were site or region-specific, perhaps related to sacred features of the local landscape, such as caves, mountains, or springs, which would have reinforced social identities grounded in the local topography.

While many, perhaps all, of the hinterland monuments likely functioned as mnemonic objects, locating the narratives of the past in the spaces of the present, the question remains as to whose memories they served to manifest. Are the memories those of the local community or the larger political and/ or cultural landscape? Were the monuments commissioned to commemorate events or individuals particular to the local community or to integrate near and distant communities into the collective memories of a dominant regime? It is possible that both scenarios existed. Secondary centers such as Laguna del los Cerros, with access to the basalt trade and sculptural workshops, may have possessed the influence and resources to commission their own sculptural works, featuring the social memories specific to that center. Smaller sites, particularly those incorporated into the interior hinterland, are more likely to have obtained their monuments via the regional center. Moreover, several hinterland monuments (e.g. LS-1, LS-2, and Las Choapas-1) demonstrate clear ties to urban sculptures in their form and subject matter, suggesting that these works were intended to evoke mnemonic narratives which would have been shared between two or more sites.

The built environments and ritual practices associated with these monuments would have afforded rural participation in urban cultural practices (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 48). Simultaneously, proscribed rituals linked to dominant narratives would have provided an opportunity to exercise control over the participants regardless of their proximity to the sources of structural power. Concurrently, regional identities could have been created and



reinforced through participation in collective memories shared between sites, as manifested and reified by hinterland monuments. As Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera have observed, “along with the development of transportation systems, organized activities of this nature could forge pathways for dependency relationships, trade, and social interaction” (*ibid.*).

Hinterland monuments and the rituals surrounding them would also have provided mechanisms for the resistance and negotiation of geopolitical interactions. For example, Cyphers noted that the mutilation and destruction of thrones in both primary and hinterland sites would have served to eliminate the identities of past leaders, prior hierarchical structures, and successions to office (2008: 319). The mutilation of monuments, such as those from Loma del Zapote, Loma de la Piedra, and Zapotitlán, could likewise have been linked to measures of resistance against local or regional authorities as the narratives they represented were redacted or transformed.

### **Emulation**

The intentional or unintentional emulation of major centers is also implicit in the display of hinterland monuments. Smaller sites incorporating these sculptural works would likely have viewed the monument as way to mark their standing within the settlement hierarchy by displaying an art form linked to high status and socio-political authority. Regional centers were clearly the preeminent patrons of monumental sculpture and probably held some level of control over the sources of basalt and artist workshops. For a hinterland site to display one of

these works would have signaled its status within the region, as well as its ties to the regional center.

Monuments analogous to those found at primary sites would perhaps have been an even more explicit advertisement of such political ties. Whether this was the intention of the local authorities or the unintentional result of a dominant center choosing to place the monument at a subordinate site, the effect is similar. The ties between sites associated with similar monuments are reified by the placement of these works. Moreover, the shared monumental aesthetic and artistic style reinforces the impression that hinterland monuments were intended to unite an archipelagic arrangement of sites which all functioned within a single geopolitical network.

### **Authorization**

The mechanism of authorization functions as an expression of the site's elevated status within the political landscape by positioning the polity in relation to the natural or cosmic order (Smith, 2003: 137). A prime example comes from La Venta, which incorporates architectural symbols relating the built environment to the landscapes of world renewal (Complex A), cosmic order (Complex C), and the underworld (Complexes A and D). These features of the site core make explicit the significance of the site as a microcosm of the larger universal order. They also work to distinguish La Venta from the surrounding settlements and to reinforce the preeminence of the elite who control the spaces of the site and its inhabitants.

Hinterland monuments may also have presented rhetorical messages of the polity's significance within the geopolitical landscape. The monument from San Martín Pajapan is a unique example within the category of hinterland sculptures, having been erected, not within a settlement, but at the peak of a volcano. This locale was undoubtedly a point of pilgrimage and the impressive collection of offerings, along with the modern folklore of the region, reinforces its long-standing designation as a sacred place. The placement of SMP-1 at this location, in conjunction with the setting of LV-44 at La Venta, reifies the connection between the sacred site and political center, supporting the center's claim to dominance through the mechanism of sacrality. This association recalls Lefebvre's play of substitutions "in which the religious and political realms symbolically (and ceremonially) exchange... the attributes of power," (1992: 225). By erecting a monument at the sacred site, La Venta's elite could have reinforced their own claim to dominance. The choice to represent a human ritualist (possibly a deity impersonator) in this setting further emphasizes the idea of an elite human harnessing the sacred power of the place and transforming it into political authority. Additionally, other mythological or supernatural subjects of monuments may have been intended to communicate the significance of hinterland polities within the cosmologies of Pre-classic societies, perhaps as visible manifestations of sacred or supernatural powers present within the ritual and political spaces of those sites.

## **Conclusions**

The production of political landscapes is partly rooted in the perceptual and partly in the material, with the former working to reinforce the latter. As Smith observes, “The perceptual dimensions of the geopolitical landscape describe the relationships of domination and subjection among polities so as to reproduce these political relationships on the ground- to reinforce sensibilities of defeat or triumph” (2003: 139). While the settlement hierarchy was manifested in site sizes, population densities, distances to major transportation routes, and access to various resources, the production and display of monumental sculpture served to reify that hierarchy.

The mechanisms of memorialization, emulation, and authorization could function through the monuments, which would become vehicles for the assertion and negotiation of political status and interregional interactions. Moreover, the social and ritual practices associated with these works and the spaces of their display may have been a means to integrate the populations of the hinterland with those of the urban centers through their participation in a shared mnemonic narrative and a corresponding corporate identity. The erection of monuments at pilgrimage sites would likewise have served to provide a regional locus of sacred activity, while simultaneously broadcasting the power and prestige of the center responsible for that monument’s production and placement.

However, the heterogeneous nature of the hinterland corpus may also suggest that local myth-histories and identities were at play within the ritual spaces of these sites. Monuments could also have served as loci of contention and negotiation as subordinate polities asserted their independence from

dominate regimes. The political landscape is unstable and monuments could be employed in both its production and reduction.

This chapter has taken us from use of monuments to produce spaces and identities on an intra-site scale to the level of the geopolitical. Elite agents would have erected these works as an act of structural power, which they wielded as the organizers of spaces and inhabitants, both locally and regionally. In turn, those spaces, and the performances occurring within them, constituted and reinforced the authority of their elite producers. However, the praxes which work to constitute authority may also work against that authority. Rituals may fail, ceremonies may backfire, and chaos may ensue. At such times the contestation and negotiation of the right to authority may also have been carried out through the medium of monuments, the spaces of their display, and the practices of human actors.

It is probable that stone monuments would have taken an agentive role in the perceptual production of Olmec landscapes. The inherent qualities of the works --their size, medium, and form-- have the power to influence the human experience of space and time. Moreover, the stylistic and iconographic elements of a sculptural work would have functioned to index the intentions of its makers, allowing monuments to become secondary agents which act on behalf of artists and patrons to affect the perceptions of their viewers. In the seventh and final chapter I will consider how Olmec monuments may have functioned as agents to afford certain perceptual experiences and to influence social developments in Pre-classic communities.

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<sup>i</sup> Gómez-Rueda observes that Laguna de los Cerros is 43.37 kilometers from San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, the same distance between San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and Las Limas (1996: 117).

<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted that Monument 1 from Las Limas, otherwise known as El Señor de Las Limas, is distinct from most Olmec monuments in both medium and size. It is carved from greenstone, has inlaid pyrite eyes, and measures only 55 centimeters in height and 42 centimeters in maximum width. Along with the incised motifs on face, arms, and legs, the use of greenstone and reflective inlaid eyes are highly reminiscent of portable elite sculptures, rather than the basalt monuments considered here. These features, combined with the figure's diminutive size may indicate that it was not for public display, but was intended for a smaller, elite audience that could view it at close range.

<sup>iii</sup> Other sources list 15 monuments; however, one of these is actually a step cover, and is not counted here in the category of monuments (Cyphers, 2004a).

## Chapter Seven: The Social Agency of Monuments

*“Because the attribution of agency rests on the detection of the effects of agency in the causal milieu, rather than an unmediated intuition, it is not paradoxical to understand agency as a factor of the ambience as a whole, a global characteristic of the world of people and things in which we live, rather than as an attribute of the human psyche, exclusively.” (Alfred Gell, 1998: 20)*

In the previous chapters I have considered the place of Olmec monuments in the production of spaces and landscapes, both urban and political. Within these settings the mnemonic associations of sculptural works could be employed in the generation of social identities and the manipulation of power structures. I would now like to conclude by turning to a discussion of the agentic capacities of these works to act within the social networks and structures of which they formed a part. How did stone monuments work to directly influence the constitution of spaces, identities, and power structures as social actors? What parts did they play in the diachronic development of Pre-classic societies?

Throughout this dissertation I have asserted the ability of monuments to generate, transform, and redact the collective memories integral to the functioning and development of Olmec societies. If we consider that social change and development are affected through the actions, both intentional and unintentional, of networks of animate or inanimate agents, it may be argued that an understanding of these processes can only be gained through the recognition of the actors involved (Latour, 2005). Thus, to comprehend the social processes incorporating the presentation and manipulation of the collective memory, a discussion of the agency of monuments becomes indispensable.

To consider the agency of monuments it is necessary to first define the nature of agency itself. Various theories of object agencies have been in development since the 1920s, when anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss first introduced a discussion of the blurred line between persons and things (Hoskins, 2006: 74). Agency may be contextualized within animistic belief systems, relate to fetishistic practices, or serve as a way for human agents to distribute their personhood or intentionality through the vehicle of the objects they produce or commission. The first section of this chapter will discuss what types of agencies are best suited to a discussion of Olmec monumental sculpture. Secondly, I will consider the social networks in which these works acted, including the human agents and patients whose intentionality interacted with and influenced those inherent to the monument itself. Following this I will discuss the aesthetic qualities of Olmec monuments which afforded specific perceptual experiences of memory and monumentality. Finally, the chapter will conclude by considering how the aesthetics and contexts of Olmec monuments might have afforded particular action outcomes and social changes within Pre-classic communities. In considering the agency of monuments, we are able to more fully articulate the nature of their roles within the social constitution of space and time, memory and identity, hegemony and resistance.

### ***7.1 Object Agencies***

The agency ascribed to objects is contextually variable, depending upon the nature of the object and its place in social and cultural networks, such as



systems of religion or economic patterns of exchange. Therefore, in order to clarify and theoretically frame my own application of the term to Olmec monuments, it becomes necessary to outline the distinct modalities of agency which have been proposed by scholars over the past century. These modalities range from animistic and fetishistic practices to theoretical models which incorporate objects as actors within networks of interaction. Yet, each in its own way moves the object beyond the role of passive recipient of human action to suggest ways in which objects influence or afford that action.

Fetishism is perhaps the oldest form of object agency to be recognized in academic discussion. The term is derived from the Portuguese *feitico*, which refers to amulets and holy relics (Ellen, 1988: 214). The Portuguese also applied the term to certain objects of veneration from the coast of Guinea and from this application it was integrated into scholarly discourse, most likely beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (*ibid.*). Originally used to refer to objects of worship, Tylor subsequently re-defined the term to apply to an object which serves as the vehicle through which a deity or spirit is able to work and take form (*ibid.*; Tylor, 1924: 153). Alternatively, Tylor's "animism" became general parlance for the attribution of sentience or souls to inanimate things as an inherent part of their being (*ibid.*). In animism human-like agency is attributed to the object based on the belief that it is roughly equivalent to a human in its abilities to think, feel, and act. Fetishism differs in that it is not the object itself which is able to think and feel, but the spirit which inhabits or acts through the medium of the object.<sup>1</sup> In both cases an inner life, or soul, is a necessary prerequisite for the object's

agency. Thus, both fetishism and animism reposition the object from thing to person, and the agency they afford is the agency of persons, rather than objects.

However, beginning with several anthropological studies of Melanesian exchange systems in the 1920s, scholars began to recognize a type of agency which was not dependent upon the object's reconfiguration to person via socio-cultural belief systems (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1924). Rather, objects were able to have lives, genealogies, genders, names, identities and personalities, yet remain as objects. Over the past century, scholars such as Appadurai and Kopytoff have examined the social lives of objects as commodities within global exchange systems by applying a biographical approach to the study of things (Appadurai 1986; Hoskins, 2006; Kopytoff, 1986). Objects are "born," they exist in time, occasionally taking on new identities, new owners, values, and functions, and they "die" at the end of their life cycle. In this biographical approach to objects, things are positioned within social networks through which they move and are transformed over the course of time. They interact with persons and are acted upon by them.

A second trend in anthropology has been to recognize the ways in which objects are able to affect, afford, and act within these interactive networks. In *The Gift* (1922) Marcel Mauss first suggested that objects exchanged as gifts between people are inextricable from their giver; the object stands in for the person from whom the gift is given. Likewise, Nancy Munn's study of Gawa canoes demonstrates the ability of a *kula* operator to affect positive outcomes through the strategic manipulation of networks of objects which carry his

intentions beyond the sphere of his physical person (1986; Hoskins, 2006: 78). This type of agency, designated as “distributed personhood” by Alfred Gell, allows objects to mediate or stand in for an individual to whom they are linked through ownership, physical likeness, or other associative relationships (1998). The idea of “fractal personhood” comes from Roy Wagner’s attempt to reconcile two notions of personhood; that of the singular, internalized individual with a concept of the person as “an aggregate of external relations,” a product of multiple genealogical relationships which extend the notion of the person in time and space (*ibid.*, 139-141; Wagner, 1994). Gell develops Wagner’s concept to explain how personhood may be expanded beyond the individual through the medium of objects which are linked, or “enchained,” to the individual through structural congruence (Gell, 1998: 141). Thus, the distributed person becomes a mechanism for objects to act as agents on behalf of an individual as a part of that individual’s personhood which has been extended through the medium of the object. For example, in voodoo sorcery the image of the subject is an extension of that person and an attack on the image therefore constitutes an attack on the person herself.

In his seminal work addressing art and agency, Gell argues that objects are a system of social action in which objects, and artworks in particular, embody the intentions of human agents. As a form of technology, an artwork is produced to influence the thought and actions of its audience (Hoskins, 2006: 75). However, the affects of these objects are influenced by their positions within “a texture of social relationships,” and the agency Gell affords them is distinct from

that of humans, as a secondary type that can only occur in relation to their human associates (Gell, 1998: 13, 17). In this sense, artworks become indexes of human agency as exercised by artists, patrons, and recipients (viewers). The networks of social relationships formed between those who act (agents) and the recipients of those actions (patients) may be continually configured and reconfigured through the medium of the artwork, or index.

Art objects may also conceal the nature of their manufacture, appearing beyond the skill of any human to produce, and therefore may be regarded by their viewers as a miraculous act of divine creation or self-generation on the part of the object (*ibid.*, 23). The notion of captivation, as the psychological affect produced when the viewer is faced with an object of unimaginable artistic virtuosity, is a particular kind of agency found only within the art object. Gell describes the result of this affect as the entrapment of the viewer within the object, which embodies an indecipherable agency (*ibid.*, 71-72). This type of agency appears to belong to the work itself, and not to the artist who created it. The object has the power to enchant, to invite detailed inspection through intricate decorative forms and detail, or to confuse and defy perception (*ibid.*, 74-95). Yet, Gell suggests that these responses to the inherent nature of the object are always socially framed (*ibid.*, 7, 82).

Similarly, J.J. Gibson argued for a cognitive psychology of perception in which attributes of the environment (and the objects it incorporates) could directly influence the interaction between environment and subject (1986). In this model, an object's inherent attributes afford a certain receptive interaction that influences

the subject, who is also limited by the circumstances of his ability (the inherent qualities of the subject which contribute to his or her interaction). The environmental attributes, which Gibson termed “affordances,” are relational to the subject’s ability (Greeno, 1994: 338). For example, a window might afford the opportunity to look at a specific scene beyond the enclosure of a single room. However, that affordance is partly determined by the size and placement of the window and partly upon the height and visual acuity of person positioned within that room. If the window is too high for the subject to look through, then the affordance of looking is not perceived, and therefore has no influence on that subject’s actions.

Donald Norman appropriated Gibson’s terminology in his publication *The Design of Everyday Things* (1988) to discuss those action possibilities which are immediately perceivable by the subject. These he called perceived affordances, which are guided by the context of the subject’s past experiences as much as by her physical capabilities. Thus, cultural systems, context, and social milieu may influence which of an object’s affordances are readily perceivable by a human actor. Norman’s definition of perceived affordance is relational, rather than simply innate, and in this sense is more congruent with Gell’s suggestion that response to an object’s inherent nature is always socially conditioned (1998).

Perhaps the most recent discussion of object agency comes from French scholars Bruno Latour (1997, 2005) and Michel Callon (1999), who have developed a theory intended to examine the infrastructures of actor-networks, particularly as they function within the processes of scientific and technological

innovation. Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) asserts that human agents never act autonomously, but rather are enmeshed in shifting networks of relationships with other agentive entities (actants), which may include other humans, as well as objects and corporate organizations. For example, the driver of a car is constantly influenced by myriad agentive bodies outside of herself, including the person who taught her to drive, laws and the judicial bodies in place to enforce them, street signs, signals, speed bumps, crossing guards, and any other people in the car. Latour has stressed that ANT does not address social networks, which he suggests are concerned with social relationships between human actors, but networks of actors (1997). "Whereas social network adds information on the relations of humans in a social and natural world which is left untouched by the analysis, ANT aims at accounting for the very essence of societies and natures." (Latour, 1997). ANT positions objects within agent-networks by focusing attention on the interactions between actants, both human and non-human; the object becomes an agent only when drawn into interactions with other actants, in relation to whom it may act and be acted upon.

Given the varying modalities of agency which have been developed across a number of disciplines --including anthropology, psychology, cognitive science and engineering-- it is necessary to clarify how the term should be applied to the study of Olmec monuments. If one was willing to apply an ethno-historical approach to the problem it would certainly be possible to discuss these works in animistic terms. Elizabeth Newsome has presented research suggesting that Classic Maya stelae were considered ontologically as "beings" (1998).

Likewise, Stephen Houston and David Stuart have discussed the representation of Maya rulers in terms which suggest that royal portraits may have served as a form of distributed personhood (1998). However, lacking textual or ethno-historical sources which would provide insight into the cultural ontology of stone monuments, any discussion of these works in terms of either animism or distributed personhood would be limited to mere speculation.

The agency ascribed to monuments by Gell, as the embodiment of human intentionality which is able to appear autonomous or even to act as a technology of captivation to influence human perception, is more easily attributed to Olmec sculptural works. If we accept that, as Joyce and Lopiparo assert, “everything that persists or changes in archaeological sites is evidence of agency,” (2005: 365) then the contextual information surrounding these monuments, as well as the monuments themselves, provide evidence of Pre-classic agentic interactions. Olmec sculpture can, therefore, be addressed as a system (or systems) of action in which these works could become secondary agents, able to initiate action on behalf of human actors.

Moreover, the affordances of these monuments, as defined by both Gibson and Norman, may be articulated to suggest how these works provided for specific perceptual experiences which influenced human interaction. While Norman is correct in asserting the relational nature of perceptual affordances, I would contend that certain aspects of stone monuments are innate, or at least more readily perceivable to human subjects regardless of nuances in cultural background or personal experience. The formal properties of Olmec monuments

--their medium, size, proportions, style, etc.-- imbue the artwork with properties which may be experienced by human viewers as a sense of grandeur, endurance, and stasis, all of which would have been integral to the ability of the monument to function as a site of memory. These affordances were essential to the functioning of the monument and continue to inform our experience of those Pre-classic artworks now located in the collections of modern museums.

By addressing affordance as well as agency, I recognize that affordance can be a type of object agency, but also that it is not the only type. Human agents may manipulate objects in order to affect action and change, which is entirely distinct from the types of interactions inherently afforded by those objects. The object is able to act in agent-networks in which its affordances may be factors, but not the sum of its interactions.

ANT suggests that an object's agency may be traced when it comes into contestation, particularly during disputes about correct representation (Latour, 2005: 79-80; Martin, 2005: 286). If these points could be identified through the archaeological record then it might be possible to discuss the agency of Pre-classic objects in relation to ANT. However, I would suggest that, in general, the material record is too fragmented to allow for the tracing of agent-networks in the sense that ANT considers productive. Therefore, the structures and social networks with which Olmec monuments can be associated are not strictly agent-networks --in the sense that Latour outlines (1997)-- but are more closely associated with Gell's theories in which the patron, artist, object, and recipients interact in various relational schema in order to affect and to be effected (1998).



These interactions occur in relation to numerous social structures, which include economic, political, aesthetic, and cultural institutions.

## **7.2 Social Networks**

Olmec monuments were embedded within networks of interactions between individuals and corporate entities acting as patrons, artists, and viewers. These interactions took place within structures or institutions that influenced the nature of the exchange and the outcomes of agency, which could have been highly variable and therefore impossible to fully trace or reconstruct. However, certain abductions can be made with regard to some of the agents and interactive networks involved in the creation, display, re-setting, and destruction of monuments over the course of their Pre-classic life-spans. Here I will limit my discussion to four spheres of interaction: the economic, the political, the aesthetic, and the cultural, with the last focusing specifically on cultural productions of history and memory. Each of these structures was integral to the place monuments held within the social development of Olmec sites.

### **Economic Networks**

Perhaps the most recognized and easily traced of the interactive spheres in which Olmec monuments participated is the economic, particularly in relation to procuring basalt and other stones. The very existence of these monuments is the product of many individuals working to locate and transport large basalt boulders from the Tuxtlas and La Union volcano to the lowland centers. The cost of such a process, both in terms of labor and resources (including physical

mechanisms of transportation such as ropes, rafts, etc.) would have been considerable, and can be abducted from the monument itself since its material was clearly imported to the lowlands. Economic transactions would have been negotiated between an elite patron, or patrons, invested in the procurement of basalt, the laborers conducting the transport, and any manufacturers producing tools utilized in the process. The transport of the stone over such a great distance most probably involved crossing territory controlled by other groups, which may have also resulted in economic transactions to permit safe passage during the process of procurement.

Beyond the costs incurred in obtaining the raw material for the monuments, the labor and skill involved in transforming a basalt boulder into a sculptural work would also have required economic exchange between patrons and artists. The quality of the sculptures produced by Olmec artists speaks to years of intensive training, which could only have been achieved with a special class of artisans who were supported financially by wealthy patrons and could dedicate themselves fully to the task. Like the material of the sculpture, the quality of the carving would have allowed viewers to abduct the economic agency of the patron(s) who could mobilize the skill and labor required for the production of basalt monuments.

The place of monuments within this network is that of a mediating agent which registers the economic structures involved in its production, and the concomitant economic power of its patron, by its very presence. The economic sway of the individuals or corporate entities responsible for the production of the

largest sculptural works must have been considerable. The cost of labor, material resources, and artistic skill these monuments represent may be read as one of the most overwhelming displays of wealth and prestige taking place during the Early and Middle Pre-classic. The abduction of economic power is a frequently an integral part of an artwork's function, although it is often secondary and subsumed under more overt cultural messages communicated through its iconography. Nevertheless, the rarity and/ or symbolic value of the material can play a key role in the artwork's ability to index and communicate authority, as well as affect its viewers as an object of admiration, veneration, and/ or captivation.

Given the rapid development of evolving socio-political structures needed to manage the regional centers and settlement networks, it is not unreasonable to suggest that nature of authority was also developing, probably leading to periods of political and social instability. The need for mechanisms to communicate, constitute, and reinforce that authority --whether based on dynastic inheritance, economic power, or social ranking-- could have been a driving force behind the creation of stone monuments. The display of material wealth would have communicated larger structures of control and influence on behalf of Olmec elite, reinforcing their social standing and feeding into those structures.

### **Political Networks**

Olmec monuments have often been positioned in relation to political maneuvering on the part of elite human agents (e.g. Cyphers, 1999; 2006; Cyphers, ed., 1997). The primary way in which these processes played out is

presumed to have been through the imagery they present to the viewer, which was linked to the constitution and legitimation of political authority. In political structures of interaction, the artwork may index either the individual ruler (as in portraiture, where an individual serves as the prototype to be represented by the art object) or it may index the office of the ruler more generally. For example, Cyphers has argued that feline imagery was linked ideologically to the concept of rulership (1999: 165; Cyphers, ed., 1997: 195-225), an indexing of power which can be distinguished from the colossal heads, which directly refer to a particular individual who held that office. In the first instance it is the office of the ruler, which is transferable and yet also a socially constructed constant, that is being presented so that its audience may abduct the ideology of authority and connect it to the context of their viewing (e.g. felines in Group E link that space with the ideology of rulership). In the latter, it is the authority of the individual which is abducted from monument by the recipient.

Like the agency held by monuments within the economic structures of a society, the agency these artworks demonstrate within political networks is generally of a secondary type, in which the monument becomes a mediator between the elite actor(s) responsible for its production and a group of recipients. However, in this case there is a greater probability of resistance on the part of the viewers, who may choose to exercise their own agentic capabilities by refusing to look, by mutilating or destroying the work, or by appropriating it through various social actions, such as changing the context in which it is displayed. The practices of erasure, re-carving, interment, re-setting, and mutilation, such as we

encounter repeatedly within the Olmec corpus, may suggest that at certain times the monument could become a site of resistance or of the re-configuration of the status quo in response to political or social changes over time. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to distinguish between mutilation carried out for ritual purposes and mutilations directed towards acts of resistance or civic unrest. In such cases archaeological context may offer the best evidence for distinguishing the nature of these practices. For example, the post-mutilation re-setting of LZ-5 and LV-23 may indicate that these works were appropriated and re-configured to signify shifts in the social memory of those sites necessitated by changes in the socio-political order.

More ephemeral is the type of agency recipients may exercise solely through the mechanism of the gaze. Gell has observed that in many experiences of art-viewing there is “a sense in which the recipients of a work of art can see their own agency in the index...[A]ny spectator may infer that...the work of art was made for him or her” (1998: 34). The recipient may view their own agency as an enabler of political structures which they believe are beneficial or superior to others. For example, citizens of the United States may view the monuments of the Washington Mall as an index of their own role in the production and preservation of a democratic political system, reinforcing their own sense of pride and patriotism. While it is doubtful that the Olmec political system was democratic in its structure, elite recipients of Olmec monuments may, likewise, have seen in these works a manifestation of their own role in the political development of primary sites and regional centers. The actions of both elite and

non-elite members of Olmec societies allowed that culture to act as a major political and cultural player in Mesoamerica during the Pre-classic, a potential source of civic and cultural pride which could have been indexed by Olmec monuments and reinforced by the actions of their recipients. When one considers that many of these works were located in restricted areas, intended for viewing by a specialized audiences of high-ranking individuals, the probability of recipient investment in the messages of dominance and authority seems high.

### **Aesthetic Networks**

Although aesthetic concerns dominated early discussions of Olmec art, little consideration has been given to the agentive networks which would have influenced the production of a stylistically unified artistic corpus. While the monuments of the Pre-classic Gulf lowlands demonstrate considerable variation in their subject matter, there exists a level of aesthetic coherence that suggests the possibility of guiding social structures constructed around the production of Olmec sculpture. In this network artists, recipients, patrons, and the artworks themselves could all have been contributing actors.

As producers, artists would have had primary responsibility for their output. However, artists are always beholden to the influence of other social forces, such as patrons, recipients, and other artists. The requisite training needed to acquire their artistic skills would have, to a large extent, dictated how Olmec sculptors approached the act of art-making, including what they considered to be appropriate and/ or possible. Presumably, the number of trained artists was a relatively small percentage of the population. In an apprentice or

workshop system the hierarchy between master and pupil will undoubtedly influence what the student believes to be the correct way of doing things. Skills passed down from one person to another will influence what an artist is able to achieve in his practice. If more than one artist is involved in a work's production a single authority is generally needed to organize the work and monitor its outcome in relation to his or her expectations. In such a systems individual artists may have been able to exercise direct influence over the production of art and the evolution of aesthetic trends within a society.

Additionally, artists may collectively validate a style or system production or repudiate individuals that diverge significantly from their own practice. If, like many later classes of Mesoamerican artists, Olmec sculptors came from the upper echelons of society, it would not be unreasonable to expect that they could have exercised a collective agency in directing aesthetic trends. The proximity of the sculpture-recycling workshop (B3-17) to the elite structure known as the Red Palace at San Lorenzo may indicate elite control over the production of sculpture and the resource of basalt. It could also indicate that the sculptors themselves were of elite standing. Of course, these two scenarios are not mutually exclusive, but could have been interdependent.

The agency of patrons and recipients is distinct, yet complementary. Patrons hold economic control over the work and the artist; a patron's demands must be satisfied if either is to succeed. However, the patron's desires may be influenced by function he intends the work to fulfill, the artistic conventions and precedents set by past works, and the needs or demands of the recipients he

wishes the work to address. Likewise, recipients may also be influenced by their own expectations and their knowledge of the existing artistic canon. The nature of their reception of the work is integral to how well the sculpture may carry out its role. Both patron and recipient may more readily accept artworks that incorporate a previously established style, composition, or subject that has already proven efficacious. Therefore, artists may be more likely to repeat stylistic elements or monument forms which already exist. Moreover, the appearance of continuity between monuments would create certain mnemonic linkages that could be used in the construction of a collective memory. For example, monuments SL-37, LS-1, and LV-80 create a visual connection between the sites of San Lorenzo, Los Soldados, and La Venta, suggesting that all three sites shared a certain mnemonic narrative incorporating the supernatural zoomorph holding a serpent in its jaws.

Artistic works may also have been influential to the development of aesthetic structures by establishing a visual canon which served as a precedent for later works. Concurrently, the fame or fascination attained by a particular artwork can influence the reception of another. For example, the recognition of a single work produced by an artist can lead to a positive reception of others produced by that same artist, with the assumption that all his or her output is equal in its standing. The aesthetic precedents set by a single artwork or a group of works may also influence how future art objects are perceived over an extended period of time. Acknowledged or admired works from one site may also set aesthetic standards for artistic production at other sites.



Moreover, the nature of the material from which a work of art is produced can influence its production and, concomitantly, its style. For example, the tools and techniques used to carve stone may limit the style or form of a sculpture. The potential for breakage may cause an artist to choose a closed, compact form with less chance of accidental mutilation or destruction. Likewise, the level of effort and difficulty in carving may lead an artist away from more complex, three-dimensional forms in favor of relief or more simplified compositions. In the case of re-carving, the dimensions and form of the previous work will influence the re-sculpted form, as in the case of the small feline from El Azuzul (LZ-7), whose stilted posture and compact body likely resulted from the limitations imposed by the original monument from which it was re-sculpted (Cyphers, 1994: 301).

### **Cultural Networks of Memory**

To say that Olmec monuments participated in cultural networks of interaction is to say very little of actual substance. Cultural structures extend from the ritual and religious to the banalities of daily life. Therefore, I would like to focus on an interactive cultural sphere specific to the functions of these works: the historical or mnemonic. The social structures responsible for the generation and maintenance of social memory include every person in a group or community who participates in the process of remembering. However, official memory keepers, archivists, or historians may be charged with the task of maintaining socially and politically sanctioned versions of the past. Embodied practices, repeated ritual performances, oral recitations, and the like may provide settings for the presentation and preservation of mnemonic narratives.

Concurrently, physical objects and architecture may become containers of memory that evoke the past through their forms, imagery, or the presence of inscriptions.

The agency of monuments is enmeshed in the interactions between artists, patrons, and viewers. In this case, elite patrons, possibly in cooperation with artists, would have been able to dictate the subject matter represented by the monuments they commissioned, and would therefore have been the controlling force when it came to the presentation of mnemonic narrative through the medium of stone sculpture. However, recipients would have been able to redact or contest the subjects of monumental representation through practices such as mutilation, destruction, and appropriation. The functions of these practices need not be limited to acts of contestation; however, they undoubtedly could have provided one mechanism through which to challenge the narratives or memories indexed by sculptural monuments. In such cases the monument would have become a point of negotiation between competing memories of the past.

The agency of the sculptures themselves, within the social dynamics of memory creation and contestation, should not be discounted. Because monuments not only manifest socially memory, but also accrue it in a consistent (if not contiguous) manner over the course of time, they may often move beyond the intentionality of their makers or recipients to generate and transmit multiple narratives. Monuments are contentious because they can continue to embody memories past the point of social relevance or popularity. In these circumstances monuments incite human actors to rectify the discontinuities between an image

or object and the social milieu of its display. For example, the human figures from El Azuzul (LZ-8 and 9) were carefully mutilated to remove particular elements of insignia, while the rest of the monument was left intact. Such an act of mutilation may have been carried out in order to remove symbols of an outmoded or unpopular ideology, thereby allowing the works to adapt and continue to function in a developing social context. In such a case it is the monument, as an index of social memory, which is the agentive element calling upon human actors to reconcile past narratives with present realities. As an index of past events, peoples, and/ or narratives, the monument affords individuals and communities the opportunity to interact with their histories and to reconfigure them to serve the changing needs of a dynamic society.

The position of monuments as indexes of human intentionality often directed their interactions with various agents within Olmec economic, political, aesthetic, and mnemonic structures. However, the works themselves also had the ability to influence human actants independent from the mandates of artists, patrons, and recipients. This second type of agency may at times emerge as an affect of the physical properties of monuments which resulted in particular perceptual experiences on the part of human agents. These properties are what Gibson refers to as affordances.

### **7.3 Affordances**

It is certainly more than coincidental that Olmec monuments have been re-deployed as sites of memory in the present era. Monuments typically possess

inherent attributes that allow them to efficaciously serve as mnemonic loci. While the culturally informed perception of Olmec sculpture may be lost to time, the natural affordances of these works are still able to speak and to inform present-day interactions between human viewers and Pre-classic monuments. Here I will address the interactions afforded by the material, size, and proportions of Olmec monumental sculpture in order to explicate the formal properties most suited to the purposes of generating and maintaining social memory.

### **Material**

In the first chapter I addressed the enduring qualities of stone which make it a frequent medium employed in the creation of monuments. In an area such as the Gulf lowlands, where humidity and heat contribute to the rapid deterioration of organic material, the permanence of stone would have been particularly striking. The continuity of stone monuments would have stood in direct contrast to architectural spaces constructed of clay, sand, earth, and wood, which were in need of consistent refurbishment. As Joyce has suggested in her study of Pre-classic monumental platforms in Honduras, the social effects of durable architectural structures and stone sculpture may have originally been unintended (2004). However, as monuments persisted over time they would have created visible points of continuity between generations and may have given historical depth to the cyclical patterns of temporality structured by seasonal agriculture and architectural renewal. As material points of trans-generational contact, stone monuments would have provided a locus for action that could persist over decades and centuries. They could be acted upon in irreversible ways, becoming

historical objects through the physical practices of mutilation (both non-specific and destructive) as well as through ritual and ceremonial performances.

A secondary quality of stone, which Olmec artists employed to great effect, is its origin. Stone is a natural substance, quarried from the earth, and varying in its properties based on the location of its source. Stone has a natural form, yet through great effort and skill it can be sculpted to take on the appearance of flesh, fur, feathers, or fabric. However, Olmec sculptors made little or no attempt to conceal the nature of the medium in which they worked, but rather chose to highlight the natural beauty and properties of the stone. At times they retained the original, un-worked surface or shape of a boulder, a practice exemplified by La Venta Stela 2 and LV-19. Other sculptures, such as the colossal heads and SL-112, maintain a boulder-like appearance. The retention of natural forms and/ or dimensions, may have been intended to minimize the abduction of the artist's agency, as though these works were miraculous manifestations of nature rather than the product of elite patrons and trained artists. Concurrently, the stone's natural properties would have reinforced the efforts to produce micro-landscapes within the urban spaces of San Lorenzo and La Venta. Such a practice would have simultaneously served to maximize the amount of stone retained in order to preserve the grand proportions of the boulders and stone slabs from which the monuments were sculpted.

### **Size**

Not every Olmec sculpture is monumental in size. Yet, many do incorporate grand proportions, such as the altar-thrones, colossal heads, and

stelae. Human representations which are less than monumental may still be greater than life-size. The volume and perceived weight of a monument may likewise create a greater visual impact. Size relations are an incredibly effective mechanism by which an artist can convey importance. The larger a figure is the greater its import is perceived to be. For example, the hierarchical relationship between the two figures appearing in relief on the side of La Venta Altar 3 is clearly communicated by the larger size of the central figure. The viewer's perceived visceral relation to a sculpture in terms of its size, volume, and weight influences her interactions with the work. Monuments which are taller, heavier, or have greater volume than the viewer may particularly command attention or convey the significance of their subject. A viewer may feel dwarfed or insubstantial in the presence of a colossal head or towering stela. Moreover, a grouping of smaller works may collectively achieve the affect of a larger work. The relative importance of the subject portrayed is experienced in tandem with a feeling of relative unimportance on the part of the viewer. The visceral and ideological impact achieved by a monument's size is integral to its ability to be remembered and to constitute and communicate the authority of the person or narrative represented.

### **Proportions**

In her study of stone monuments, Beatriz de la Fuente discovered that the majority of the colossal heads, along with numerous other Olmec sculptures, were designed with proportions corresponding to the golden mean (1976; 1977). By applying a structuring grid formed of a golden rectangle (a rectangle

constructed using a ratio of 1:1.6180339887, corresponding the to length of its sides) divided by four internal golden subrectangles, de la Fuente demonstrated that many Olmec monuments conform to this proportional system in their compositional structures. Artists in Europe and the Middle East have applied the golden mean for centuries, perhaps millennia, to achieve the appearance of harmony and beauty in their art and architecture. De la Fuente suggested that, like the artists of the Old World, Olmec artists had chosen to employ these proportions in order to convey a sense of uniformity and harmonious balance in their sculpture (*ibid.*). Whether the use of the golden mean, as a mathematical structuring principle, was intentional on the part of the artists or whether it came about as a result of other compositional conventions, the end result is an impression of balance, stability, and harmony in those works which conform to its proportions. Such works include Heads 1-7 from San Lorenzo 1, 3, and 4 from La Venta, LV-77, El Príncipe from Cruz del Milagro, SL-52, Las Limas Monument 1, and Cuauhtotolapan Monument 1.

The structuring principles which guided the relational proportions of Olmec monuments produces, as de la Fuente observed, an impression of harmony. By harmony I mean the congruence between parts leading to the appearance of a balanced, unified whole. Harmonious proportional relationships, along with the pyramidal compositions particularly favored in the representation of seated figures, create an impression of visual stability, which may be conflated with a sense of temporal stability or endurance. This principle of temporal stability is an integral part of the monument's ability to act as a site of memory. The perception

of continuity over time and intransigence in the face of social change is what allows monuments to draw upon the ideological power of the past and the authority of precedent that transcends a single generation or moment.

The proportional relationships of Olmec sculpture often give the work a sense of monumentality by creating the impression of greater size, as well as the general impression of grandeur which is associated with monuments worldwide. Moreover, harmonious proportions are at the heart of an aesthetic which has been effective in capturing the admiration and attention of modern art elites such as Miguel Covarrubias, and must have likewise drawn the fascination of Pre-classic viewers.

Like the properties of size and material, the proportions of Olmec monuments would have afforded an experience of continuity, grandeur, and harmony. Each of these properties affected the ability of monuments to serve as carriers of social memory. As enduring, persistent objects, able to create a visceral experience of significance, stability, and uniformity, these sculptures would have been ideally suited for the tasks of locating memory, communicating authority, and generating a unified social identity.

As Pre-classic settlements in the Gulf lowlands moved from groups of villages and hamlets to chiefdoms and/ or states, the production and promotion of collective memory could have provided a primary mechanism for socio-political development. The construction of social memories, capable of unifying regions under a single cultural identity or distinguishing corporate groups within a site hierarchy, would have afforded the production of new social relationships and



associations. Moreover, as political structures developed, monuments could be used to suggest the continuity of authority, even where none actually existed. Mesoamerican history is full of examples of elites who re-wrote the past through the medium of stone monuments in order to legitimate their political positions (Clark and Colman, 2008; Martin and Grube, 2000). Monuments were often produced at critical points of political instability as a way to buttress failing systems of authority and re-constituting lost or waning power. Olmec sculptures could, likewise, have been integral to the formation and preservation of shaky or uncertain political regimes. In such cases the affordances of grandeur, endurance, stability, and harmony would have been as essential to the monument's efficacy as its subject or iconography.

#### ***7.4 Actions and Outcomes***

How did the agency of monuments lead to action outcomes and social change within interactive networks? Considering the contexts of Olmec monumental sculptures, it is possible to abduct certain social developments in conjunction with the production and display of these works during the Pre-classic. Olmec monuments would have afforded the development of new forms of memory and space, as well as the constitution of authority, the manipulation of power structures, and the production of social identities. In this last section I will summarize the primary outcomes of Olmec monument production and display during the Early and Middle Pre-classic.

#### **History and Memory**

Perhaps among the most significant of the social developments linked to the production of Olmec monuments would have been the creation of new type of memory, embedded in objects specifically created to commemorate the past. This is the first appearance of inscribed practices in which an official version of the past is presented in the form of artworks representing historic individuals and events, as well as supernatural and zoomorphic creatures which were almost certainly linked to significant cultural narratives. In lieu of written script, stone monuments functioned as an archival practice capable of recording the mnemonic narratives most significant to their patrons and recipients. Through their stone monuments, the Gulf lowland Olmec developed a type of memory which was inherently historical, presenting a version of the past which was both inscribed and sanctioned by those in power.

The production of historical memory is often necessary when competing versions of the past threaten current power structures. Therefore, it may be inferred that Olmec political leaders found it necessary to formalize and promote official mnemonic narratives in order to preserve and legitimate their positions. The historicization of memory solidifies the past, making it more difficult to challenge or redact; allowing it to become an even more powerful mechanism for influencing the present and future.

The development of historical memory would have been inherently transformative, re-shaping the ways in which Olmec people acted, thought, and remembered. Over time, and with the creation of textual systems, Mesoamerican cultures found mechanisms to expand and reinforce the narrative capabilities of

stone sculpture. However, they continued to employ sculptural monuments as primary historical documents throughout the Classic and Post-classic periods.

### **Spaces and Landscapes**

Olmec monuments were also integral to the social production of Pre-classic urban spaces and geopolitical landscapes. The architectural features which structured these sites and regions frequently incorporated monumental sculpture. The interment or display of monuments served to imbue the space with ideological import or to physically manifest its pre-existing significance. The processes of architectural construction and re-construction, in tandem with practices of monument setting and associated ritual performances, would have served to produce spaces as social spheres of activity. As embodiments of social memory, Olmec monuments would also have located the past in the spaces of the present, allowing them to be examined, reinforced, and manipulated through the activities carried out within the settings of their display.

Monumental sculptures were also employed in the production of landscapes at the micro- and geopolitical levels. Within urban centers, monuments could converge with architectural groupings to constitute landscapes through formal and iconographic references to culturally significant topographic features. By incorporating referents to caves, mountains, boulders, and waterways, complexes integrating architectural and sculptural features could reproduce the landscapes of cosmic order, world renewal, life and death. This topography was seamlessly integrated with the mnemonic narratives of myth and

history, blending the practices of memory with the environments of ritual and civic life.

Stone monuments also influenced the production of geopolitical landscapes through mechanisms such as emulation and memorialization. The position of monuments within these practices allowed them to manifest and affect socio-cultural ties between sites through the production of visual networks. Monumental sculptures at hinterland sites could afford the integration of rural populations into the cultural practices and social memories of urban settlements. Less powerful sites could also promote ties to higher-ranking settlements through the emulation of monument forms originating at regional centers. However, they also afforded the opportunity for sites to negotiate existing socio-political relationships or to promote their own authority and autonomy. In these settings monuments became indexes of authority, as well as loci within agentive networks extending across the landscapes of Olman.

### **Authority**

The perceptual production of political landscapes and social spaces was integral to the constitution of local and regional power structures. The authority and ability to organize and control spaces and landscapes does not belong to every member of a society, and therefore serves to distinguish a particular modality of power which Eric Wolf terms structural. Structural power allows an individual or group to control, not simply the production of spaces and landscapes, but the actions of those inhabiting that space. As agents manifesting the intentionality of elite patrons and recipients, monuments functioned to

integrate institutions of authority with the spaces in which that authority could exercise its control.

Monuments could also serve as authorizing mechanisms by representing a site's or individual's significance within larger cosmological structures. For example, the four mountain lord stelae of La Venta's C-3 platform, in combination with the C-1 pyramid, may have been intended to align the center of the site with the center of the cosmos by referencing the four cardinal directions, together with the *axis mundi* represented by C-1. Replicating the structure of cosmic order within the heart of the site would have reinforced the perception of the site's significance and the authority of its rulers in the minds of La Venta's dependents and allies.

Moreover, by reifying the power of their patrons and/ or recipients, monuments could simultaneously function to disrupt that power via the symbolism of their mutilation or destruction. Just as monuments have the power to generate memory, they could be instrumental in redacting histories and in the processes of forgetting. The transformation and termination of monuments would have allowed old narratives of power and authority to be silenced and forgotten in favor of new ones. In this way monuments could interact with human agents in dynamic, diachronically shifting political systems.

### **Identity**

As agents in the production of social memory, monuments were integral to the creation of corporate identities. Access to shared mnemonic narratives can unify a group of individuals and distinguish them from those without access to

those narratives. The spaces of Olmec monument deposition often appear to have limited accessibility, suggesting that the identities derived from or linked to participation in social memories were variable within sites and regional networks. While repetition of monument forms and subjects between settlements may have afforded the production of regional and cultural identities shared by large groups of people, other monuments --unique or distinct within the canon of Olmec sculpture-- may indicate the presence of competing corporate identities within a single site or territory. For example, the nuances of monument placement and architectural development within La Venta's Complex A suggest that multiple groups of ritual practitioners were active within this space (Gillespie, 2008). Participation in group decisions related to monument mutilation, destruction, removal, or re-carving could also have distinguished particular individuals and given them distinct social identities and/ or status. While not the sole mechanism affecting the production of identity in Olmec communities, stone monuments would have constituted an important resource for those wishing to distinguish themselves as a discrete group or for the unification of large, disparate populations within a region.

The action outcomes of monument production and display would have influenced the development of Olmec society on numerous structural levels. The production of new forms of memory would have coincided with the construction of social spaces and geopolitical landscapes. The power structures manifested and manipulated within these spaces and landscapes could have been constituted and contested through the medium of stone monuments. Moreover,

identities integral to the production of social hierarchies and geopolitical networks could have been produced and/ or reinforced by access to the spaces and monuments associated with specific mnemonic narratives. As participants within the agent networks of Olmec societies, stone monuments would have been influential actors in the socio-political lives of Pre-classic communities.

### **Diachronic Shifts from Early to Middle Pre-classic**

The developments in socio-political structure afforded by the agencies of Olmec monuments inevitably shifted from the Early to Middle Pre-classic. The monumental tradition which developed at San Lorenzo during the Early Pre-classic tended towards individual figures sculpted in the round which could be grouped together or juxtaposed with architecture to create more elaborate settings of signification. Many of these works show signs of mutilation, erasure, re-carving, and destruction, suggesting that the social memory of the site fluctuated through time as monuments were removed, appropriated, or re-made to adjust or redact historical narratives. This may have coincided with shifts in authority as the monuments and spaces which functioned to constitute social power were re-configured or destroyed over the centuries.

At San Lorenzo we begin to see the first production of an urban topography which integrated the underlying structure of the plateau with imported and local materials drawn from riverbeds, salt domes, nearby hills, and distant volcanic peaks. Each of these materials could have indexed the site of its origins, creating an urban setting which was a microcosm of the regional landscape. Architectural spaces and monument forms also referenced topographic sites,

such as caves, mountains, and waterways. By integrating natural forms and topographic referents into the urban spaces of San Lorenzo Olmec elites could assert their authority over both the natural and human worlds. Moreover, reproducing ritually and spiritually charges spaces within the site would have served as an authorizing mechanism, communicating the larger cosmic significance of the primary center to the inhabitants of the region.

By 1000 BC Olmec leaders had begun to extend the social production of space and identity to the surrounding area. Monuments were erected at settlements in the interior and exterior hinterlands in order to affect the perceptual production of geopolitical landscapes. The constitution of new forms of authority coincided with new, regionally inclusive identities, which worked to incorporate rural populations into the cultural and political structures of primary centers.

During the Middle Pre-classic the archival potential of stone monuments was further developed with the creation of narrative scenes carved in relief on stelae and altar-thrones. La Venta's monuments are often larger than those at San Lorenzo and do not evince the same frequency of re-carving and destructive mutilation, which may indicate greater political stability at that site. Spaces were still regularly remade, as indicated by the stratigraphy of Complex A. The deposition of the massive offerings in that ceremonial center suggests that La Venta's ritual practitioners may have connected this process of re-making to the concept of world renewal. Many of the architectural-sculptural complexes at this site, including Complex A, are configured to present micro-landscapes of



culturally significant topographies. This production of urban landscapes, which began in the Early Pre-classic, was taken to new heights at La Venta with impressive new architectural and monument forms, such as basal pyramids and stelae. While these landscapes do contain areas of limited accessibility, along with evidence of multiple (possibly competing) corporate entities, they also incorporated larger, more inclusive spaces of civic activity, such as Complex B. These civic spaces would have been integral to the production of social identities which were available to a broad spectrum of the site's inhabitants.

Few sculptural monuments are associated with the hinterland surrounding La Venta, suggesting that these works were no longer employed in the production of political landscapes at the local level. Perhaps such methods were no longer necessary to the unification and dominance of the area immediately surrounding the primary center, again a possible indicator of greater political stability in this region. However, olmec-style monuments were erected at more distant locations in the Middle Pre-classic, suggesting that they now functioned to constitute and reinforce authority at a distance, probably related to long-distance networks of exchange.

Many of the principles which allowed Olmec monuments to function as effective agents of social power and identity in the Early Pre-classic continued to influence their use in later centuries. However, the developing nature of political authority and cultural identity in the Middle Pre-classic resulted in some changes of form and use to enhance the ability of stone monuments to function in a shifting social milieu.

## Conclusions

In this dissertation I have suggested that many of the sculptures labeled monuments by Olmec scholars should be addressed as public objects tied to the production of social memory. As social entities, monumental sculptures were used and re-used by discrete corporate groups to manipulate present populations through their collective memories of the past. These manipulations extended power structures to the spaces and landscapes of the Gulf lowlands through the deposition and display of monuments as loci of authority and ideology. However, by reifying the past as an index of present authority, monuments allowed for the contestation, negotiation, and redaction of the very power they manifested.

Additionally, by repositioning the discourse surrounding these works away from iconographic interpretation and focusing instead on their social contexts and functions, I have suggested that Olmec monuments can be treated as agentive actors within various interactive networks. As indexes of human intentionality, monuments possessed an agency allowing them to act on behalf of their patrons and recipients. Moreover, the formal properties of monuments afforded an experience of continuity, grandeur, and harmony. Through the various social spheres in which they participated, these stone sculptures influenced the development of Olmec society at a structural level.

It is clear that Olmec monuments were and are extremely successful in indexing fundamental social structures. Modern scholars with no knowledge of their makers have been able to abduct social hierarchy, strong economic

systems of exchange, political ideologies, aesthetic conventions, and shifts in social memory through the monumental corpus. As agents, Olmec monuments are able to provoke recollection, even when no memory exists and archaeological inquiry is needed to fill in the gaps.

The trajectory of Olmec studies is perhaps the most potent testimony to the agency of these monuments to act well beyond the designs and expectations of their makers. Upon the discovering the monuments of Tres Zapotes and La Venta, Matthew Stirling was able to abduct the existence of a previously unknown culture. The presence or absence of colossal heads continues to define the boundaries of Olman and the designation of sites as primary centers. As indexes of political power and wealth, monumental sculptures continue to communicate the authority and influence of their makers. The monumental corpus was the primary impetus for the assumption of the Gulf lowlands as the point of origin for the Olmec art style and its associated motifs, as well as the starting point for all Mesoamerican civilization.

Today, recovered Olmec monuments have been appropriated by local, state, and national governments which have chosen to re-present these works as indexes of their own cultural heritage and historical prestige. However, this re-presentation is successful only because the sculptural works already invoke the authority of their pre-Hispanic creators. Thus, Olmec monuments are once again able to function as agents of social memory thousands of years after their creation.

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<sup>i</sup> Here I am concerned with the anthropological definition of fetish, as distinct from Marxist and psychoanalyst usages of the term.

APPENDIX



Figure 2.1 Colossal Head from Hueyapan

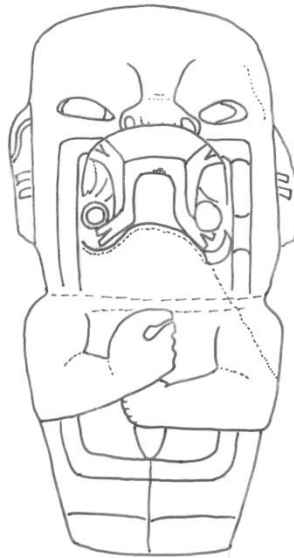


Figure 2.2 Kunz Axe

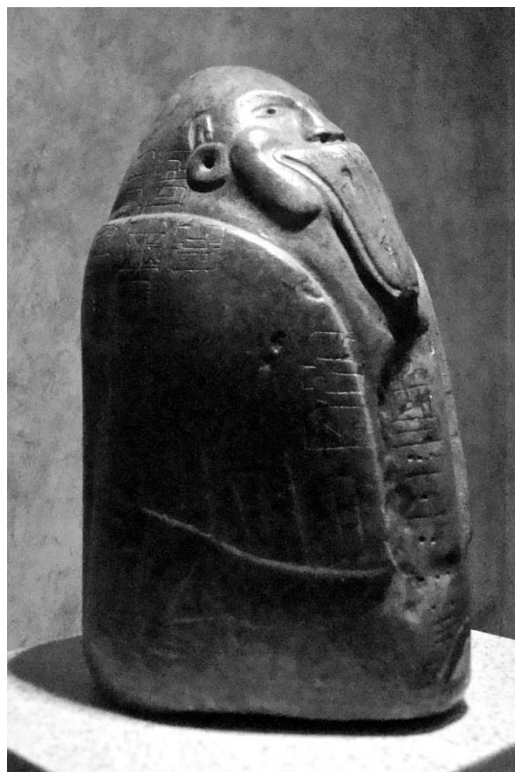


Figure 2.3 Tuxtla Statuette



Figure 2.4 Stela C fragment discovered by Stirling at Tres Zapotes



Figure 2.5 Tuxtla Mountains near Santiago Tuxtla



Figure 2.6 Lake Catemaco and the surrounding region



Figure 2.7 View of the Coatzacoalcos floodplain from San Lorenzo plateau



Figure 2.8 View of La Venta and the surrounding region from the top of C-1





Figure 3.1: Nacaxa Tiger



Figure 3.2 Teno-1



Figure 3.3 LZ-3



Figure 3.4 Chalcatzingo Relief IV



Figure 3.5 Las Limas Monument 1

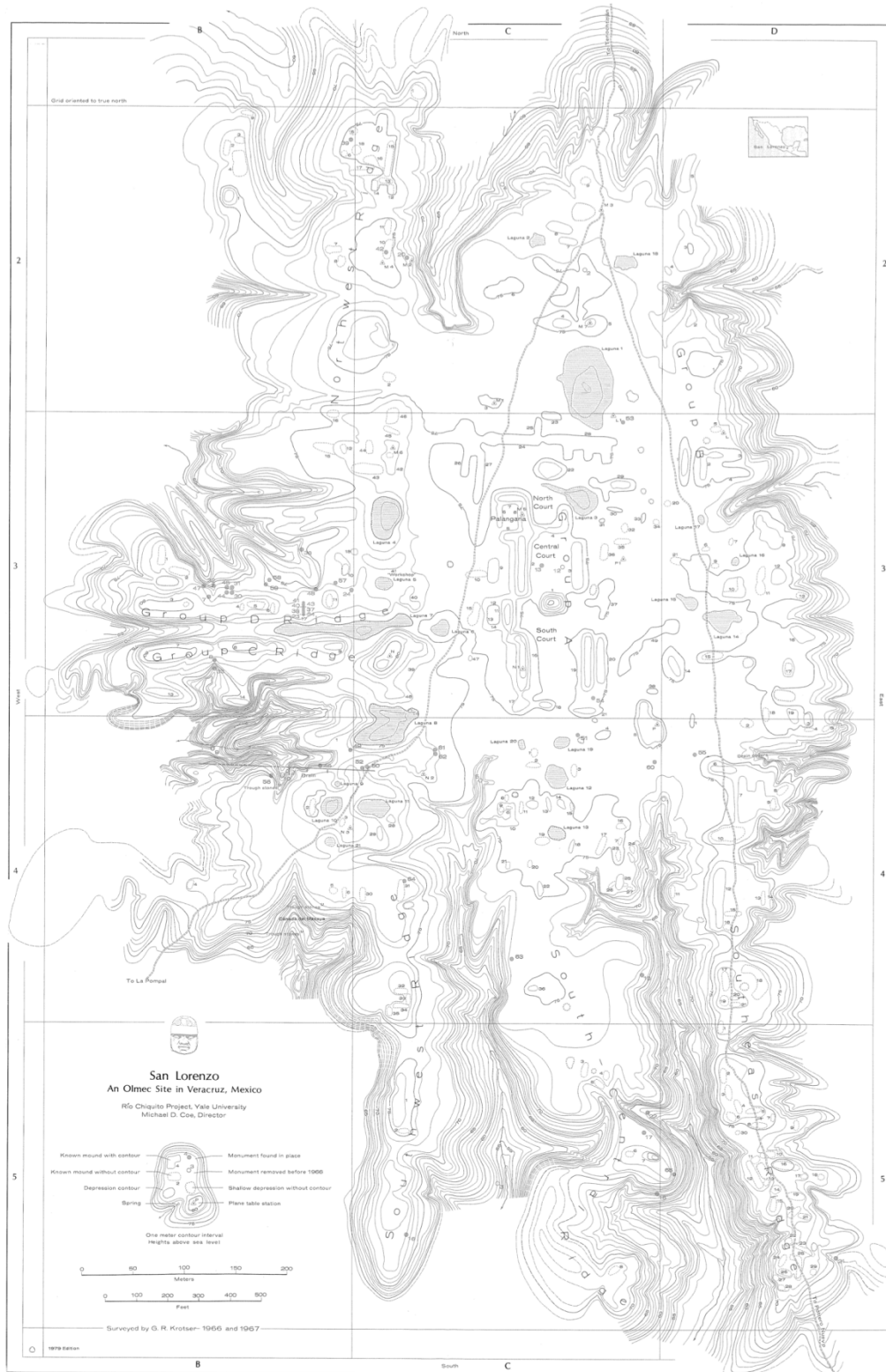


Figure 4.1 Map of San Lorenzo Plateau (Coe and Diehl, 1980)

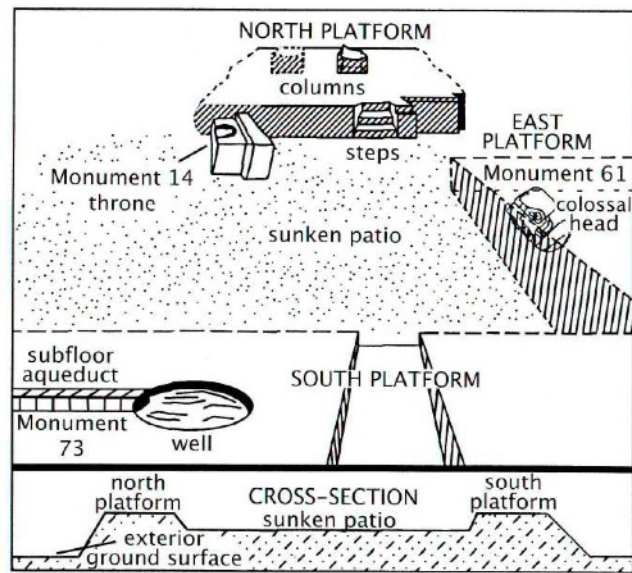


Figure 4.2 Complex E (from Cyphers, *et. al.*, 2006: 23)



Figure 4.3 SL-14



Figure 4.4 SL-14 Detail of Left Side

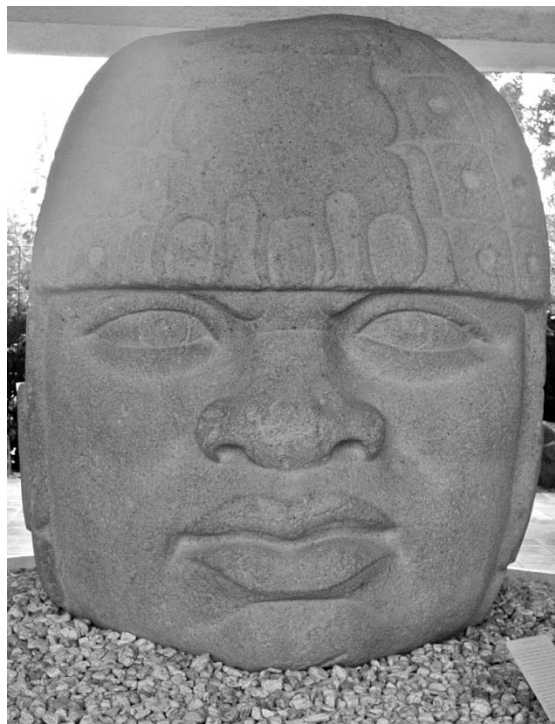


Figure 4.5 SL-89

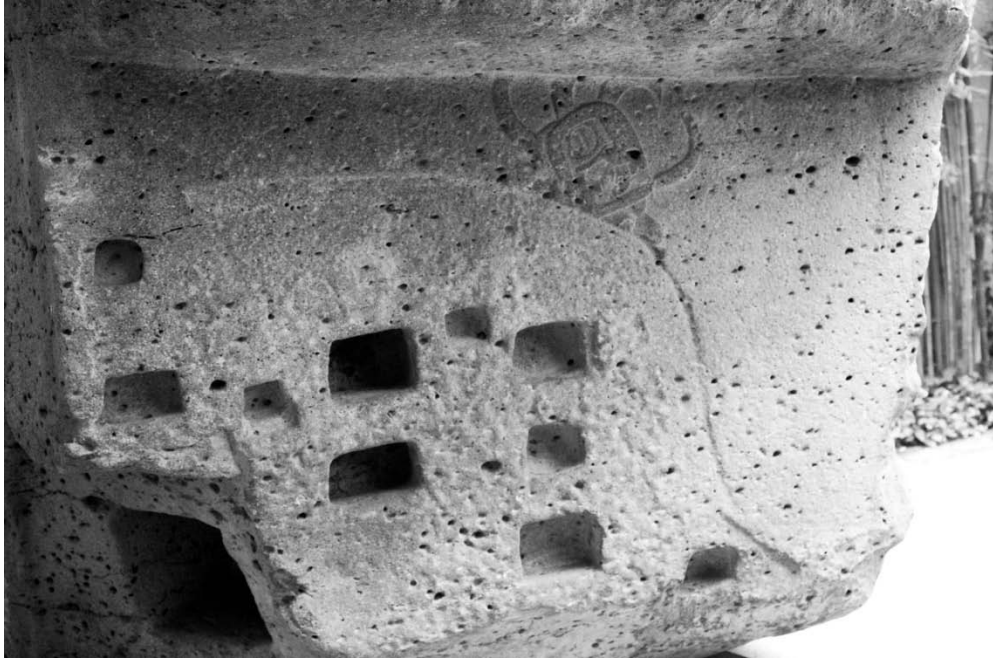


Figure 4.6 SL-14 Detail of Right Side

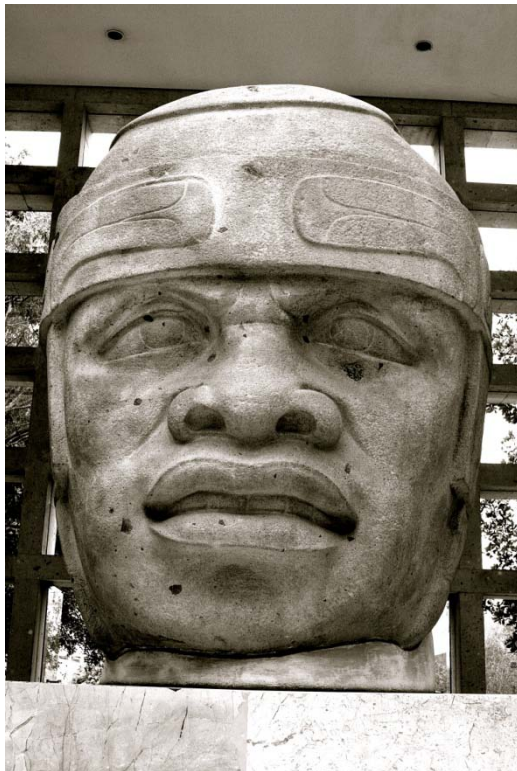


Figure 4.7 SL-61





Figure 4.8 SL-112

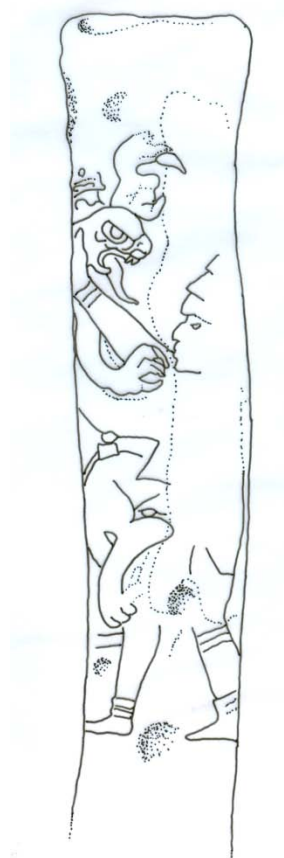


Figure 4.9 SL-56 (after Cyphers, 2004a: 120, figure 68)



Figure 4.10 LV-63

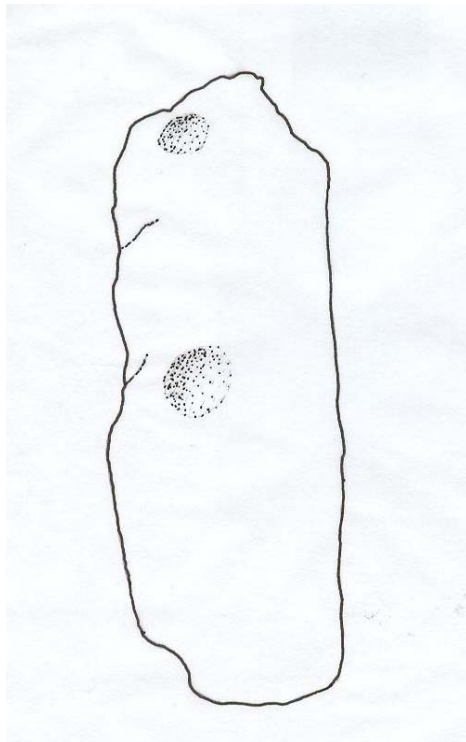


Figure 4.11 SL-23



Figure 4.12 SL-34

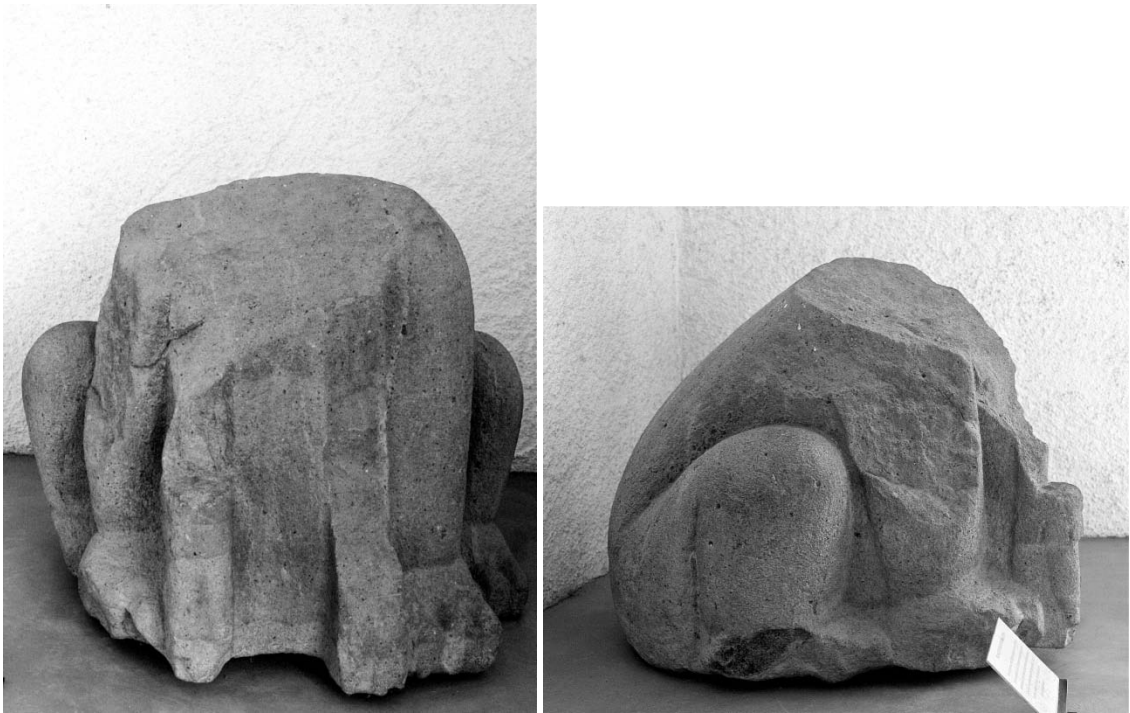


Figure 4.13 SL-37

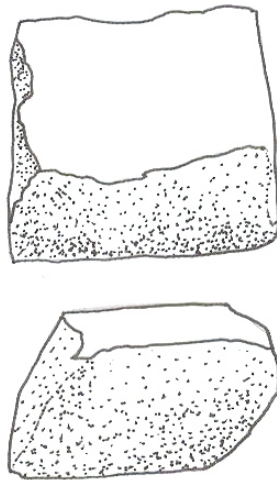


Figure 4.14 SL-38 (after Cyphers, 2004a: 100, figure 51)



Figure 4.15 SL-41



Figure 4.16 SL-43

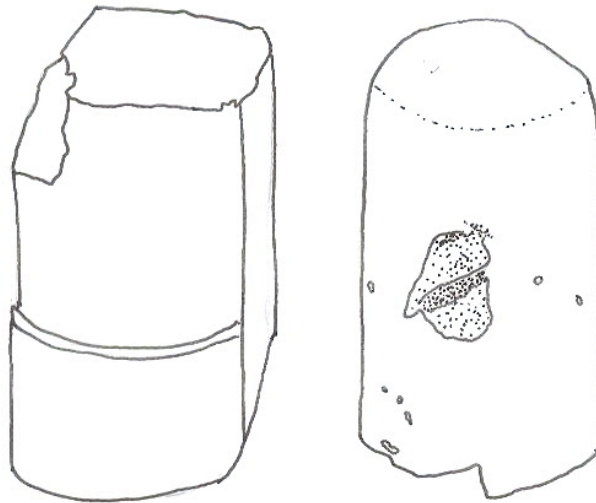


Figure 4.17 SL-57



Figure 4.18 SL-30 (drawing after Cyphers, 2004a: 92, figure 46)



Figure 4. 19 Head from Laguna de los Cerros



Figure 4. 20 Head from Laguna de los Cerros



Figure 4.21 SL-107 showing feline with crossed bands in eye



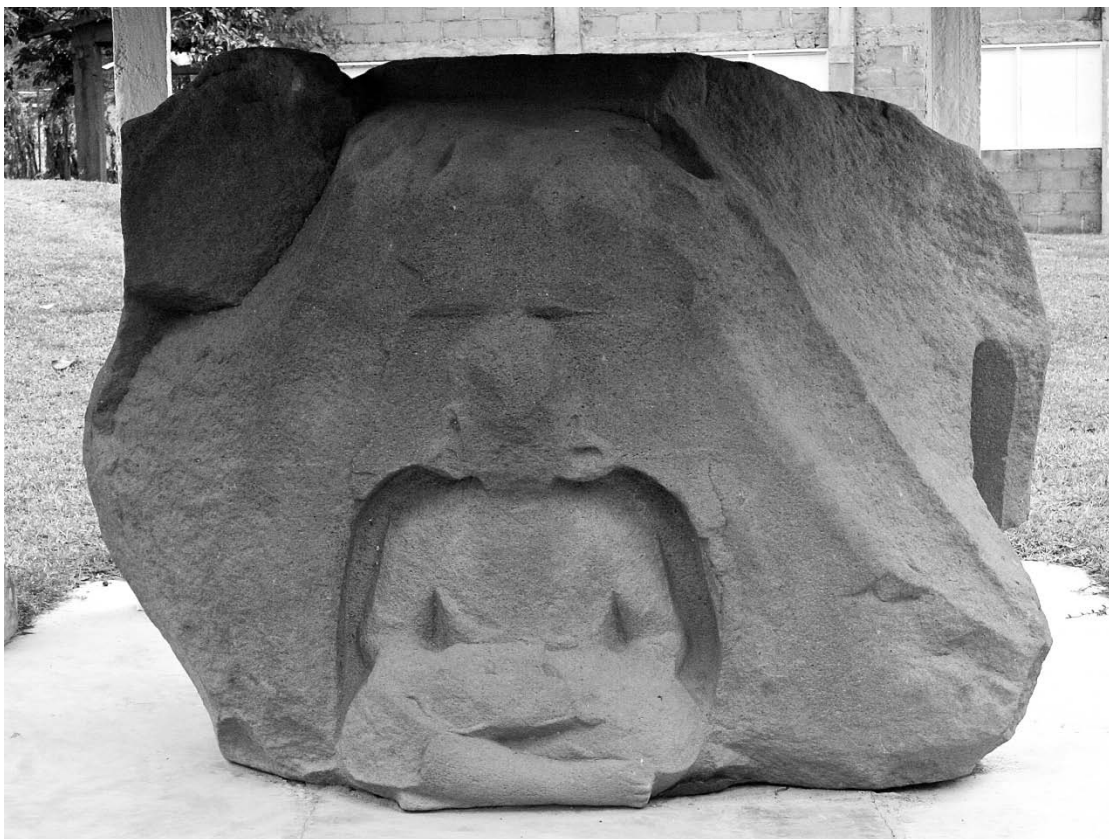


Figure 4.22 SL-20 (top: front; bottom left: back; bottom right: left side)



Figure 4.23 SL-2

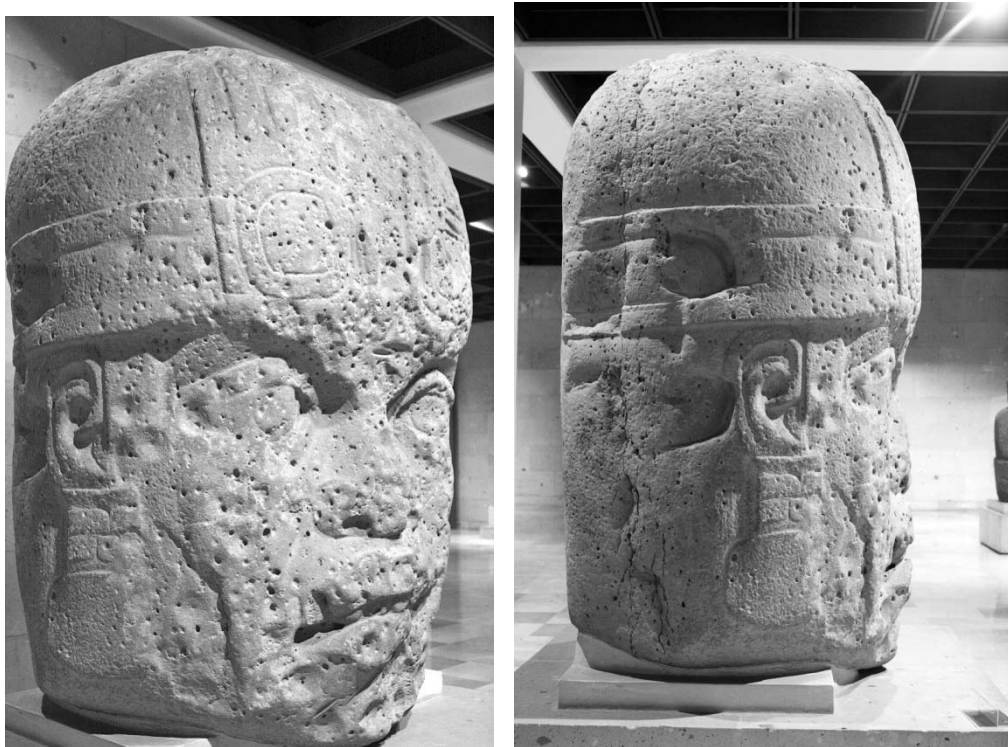


Figure 4.24 SL-53 (Colossal Head 7)

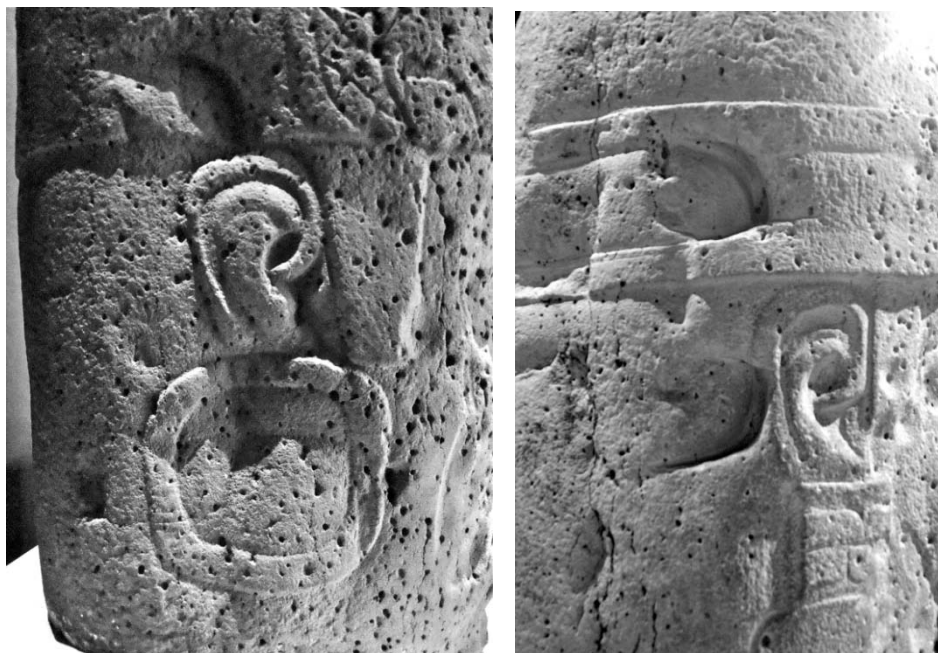


Figure 4.25 Details of niche remnants (left: SL-2; right: SL-53)

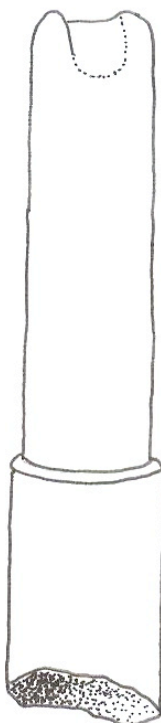


Figure 4.26 SL-55



Figure 4.27 SL-51

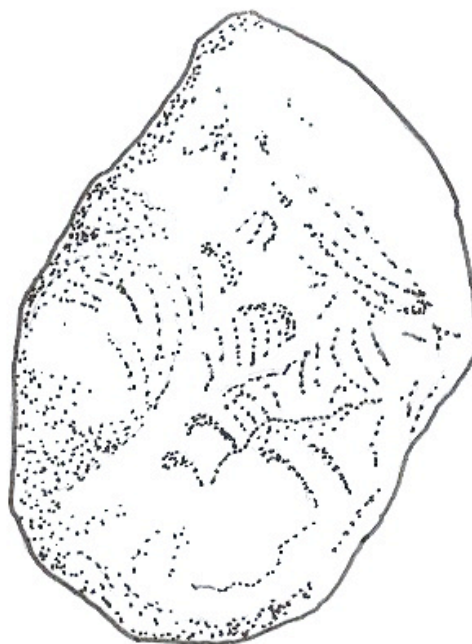


Figure 4.28 SL-63 (after Cyphers, 2004a: 130)

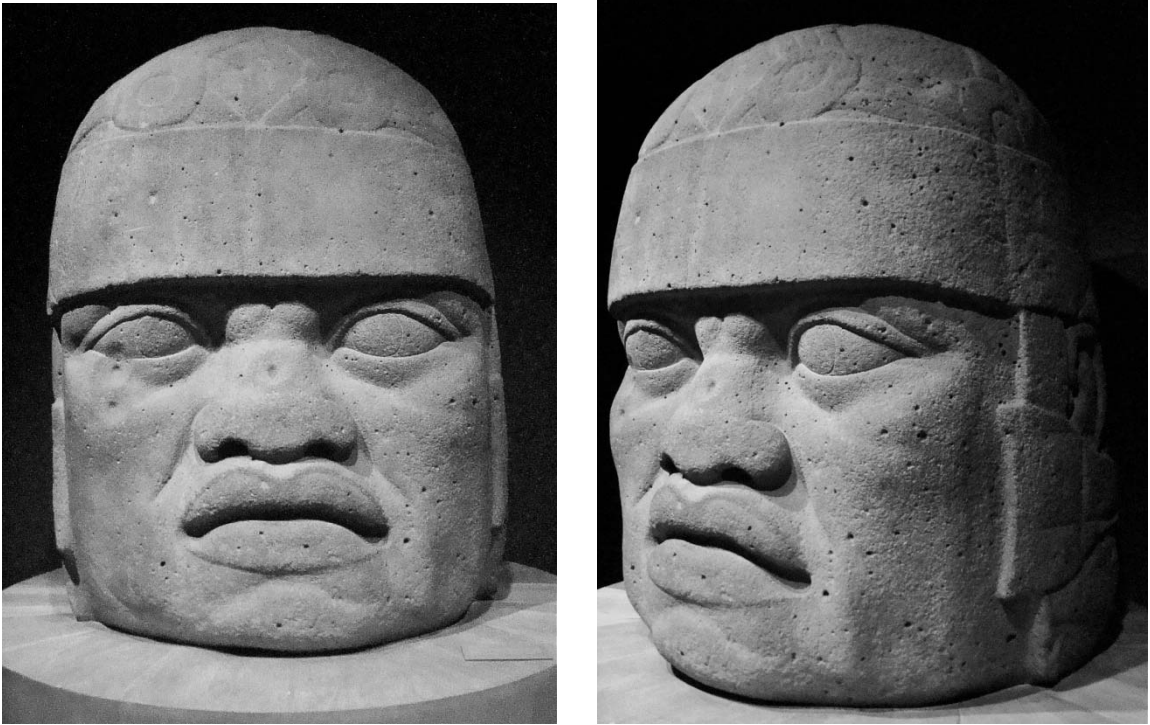


Figure 4.29 SL-17

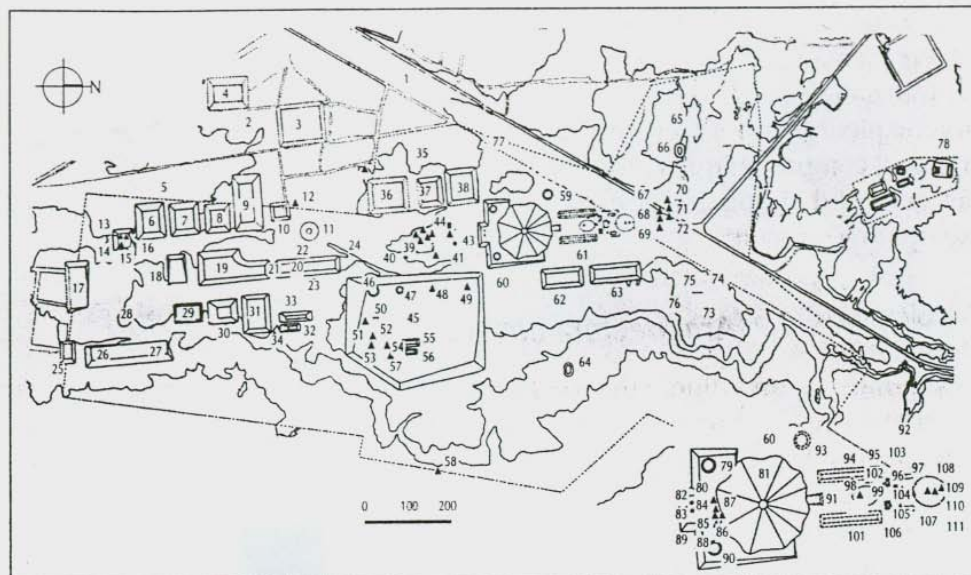


Figura 4. Traza arquitectónica de La Venta, Tabasco  
(tomada de González Lauck 1988; Adams 1991).

1. Pista Aérea	24. 8	47. AS-2	70. 4	93. A-6
2. Complejo H	25. D-18	48. 75	71. 2	94. A-5
3. H-1	26. D-17	49. 74	72. 3	95. 80
4. H-2	27. D-16	50. 57	73. Complejo E	96. A-I-c
5. Complejo D	28. D-19	51. 55	74. E-1	97. A-I-g
6. D-6	29. D-15	52. 46	75. E-2	98. 23
7. D-5	30. D-14	53. 45	76. E-3	99. 14
8. D-4	31. D-13	54. 39, 40, 41, 44	77. 61	100. A-3
9. D-3	32. D-12	55. AS-3	78. Complejo F	101. A-4
10. D-2	33. D-11	56. AS-4	79. C-4	102. 1
11. D-1	34. 50, 51	57. 42, 43	80. C-3	103. 4
12. 28, 29	35. Complejo B	58. 60, 61, 84, 85	81. C-1	104. 3
13. D-7	36. B-3	59. Complejo A	82. 3	105. 15
14. 52	37. B-2	60. Complejo C	83. 2	106. A-I-d
15. 53	38. B-1	61. Complejo G	84. 25	107. A-I-f
16. 54	39. B-4	62. G-2	85. 26	108. 6
17. D-20	40. 1	63. G-1	86. 5	109. 7
18. D-10	41. 7	64. G-3	87. 36	110. 24
19. D-9	42. 48	65. Complejo I	88. 27	111. A-2
20. D-8	43. 27	66. I-1	89. 38	
21. 49	44. 2	67. 19	90. C-5	
22. 5	45. "Acropolis" Stirling	68. 20	91. C-2	
23. 4	46. AS-1	69. 21	92. Complejo A	

Figure 5.1 Map of La Venta with monument locations  
(González Lauck, 1994a: 294)

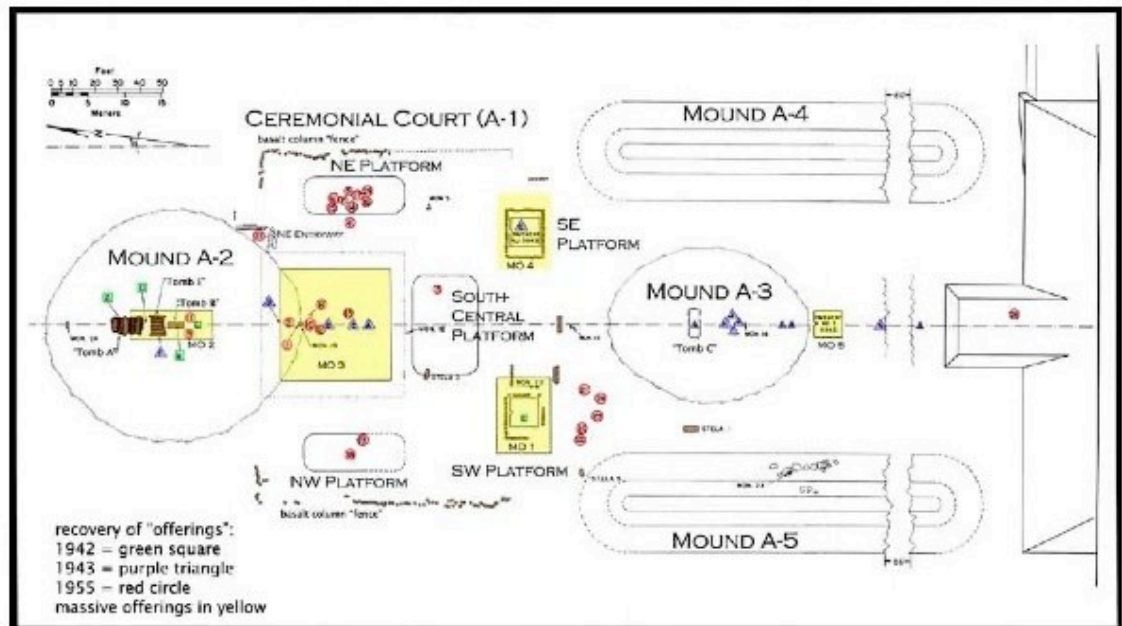


Figure 5.2 Map of Complex A (Gillespie, 2008a: 1)



Figure 5.3 Massive Offering Mosaic from La Venta Complex A



Figure 5.4 La Venta Offering 4





Figure 5.5 Tomb A (LV-7)

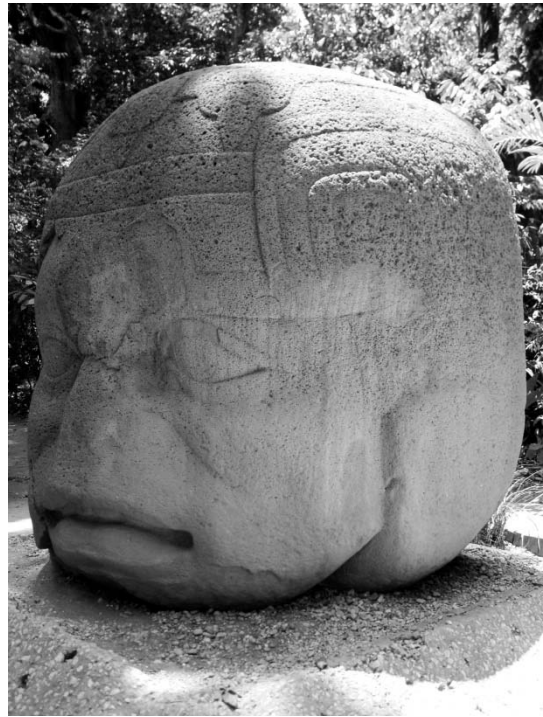


Figure 5.6 La Venta Head 4

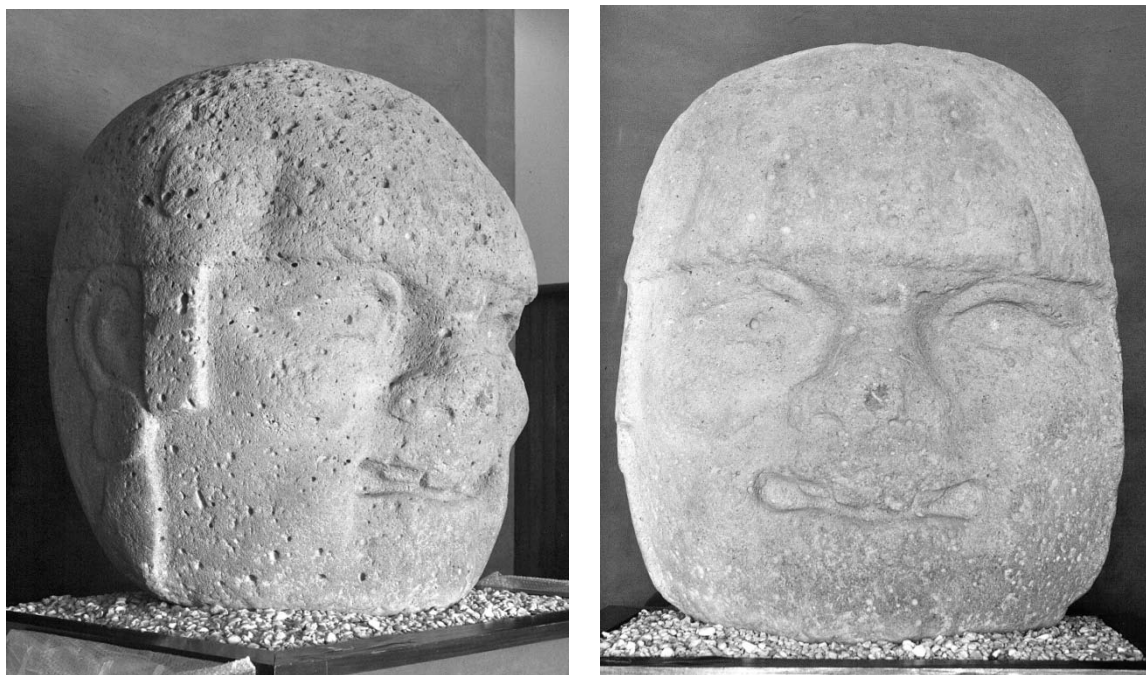


Figure 5.7 La Venta Head 2



Figure 5.8 La Venta Head 3

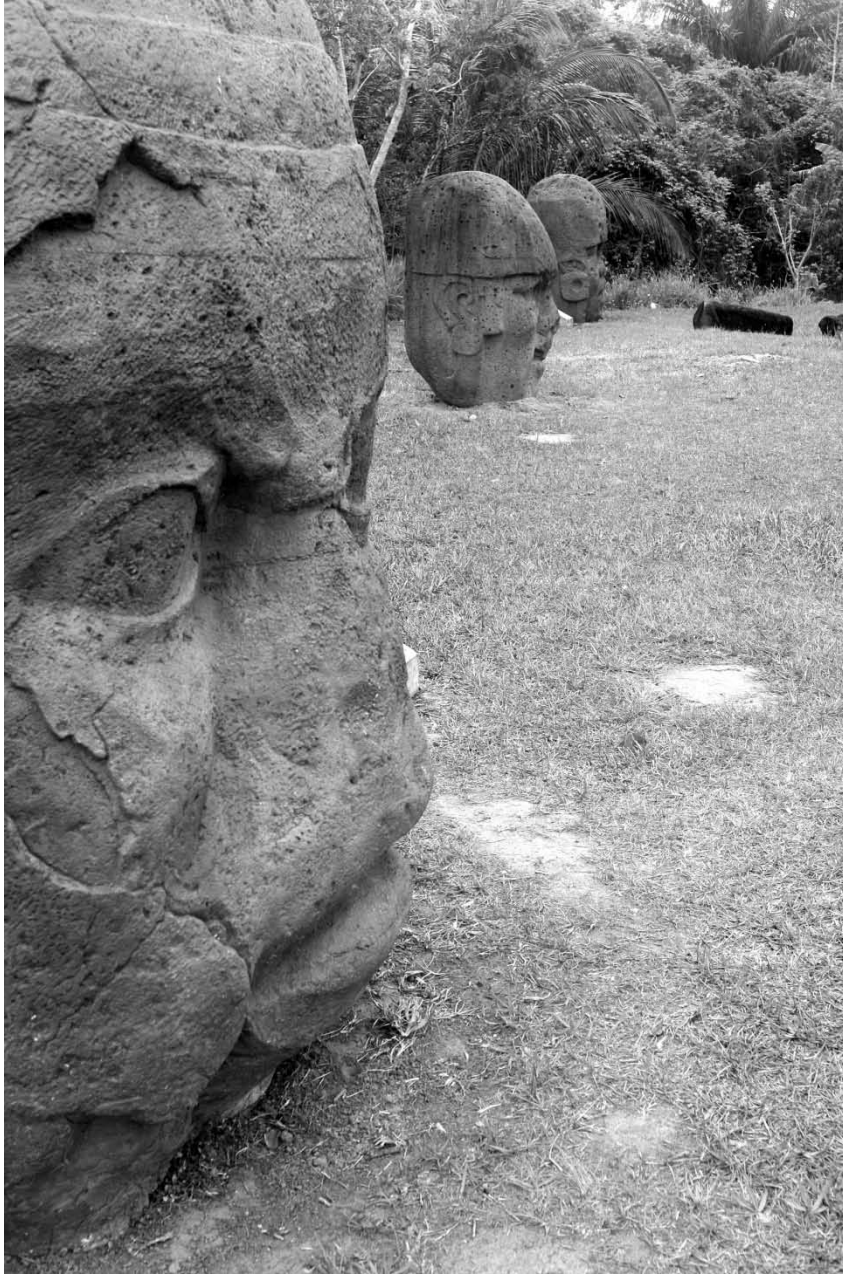


Figure 5.9 Reconstruction of colossal head alignment at La Venta site



Figure 5.10 La Venta Stela 1



Figure 5.11 La Venta Stela 3

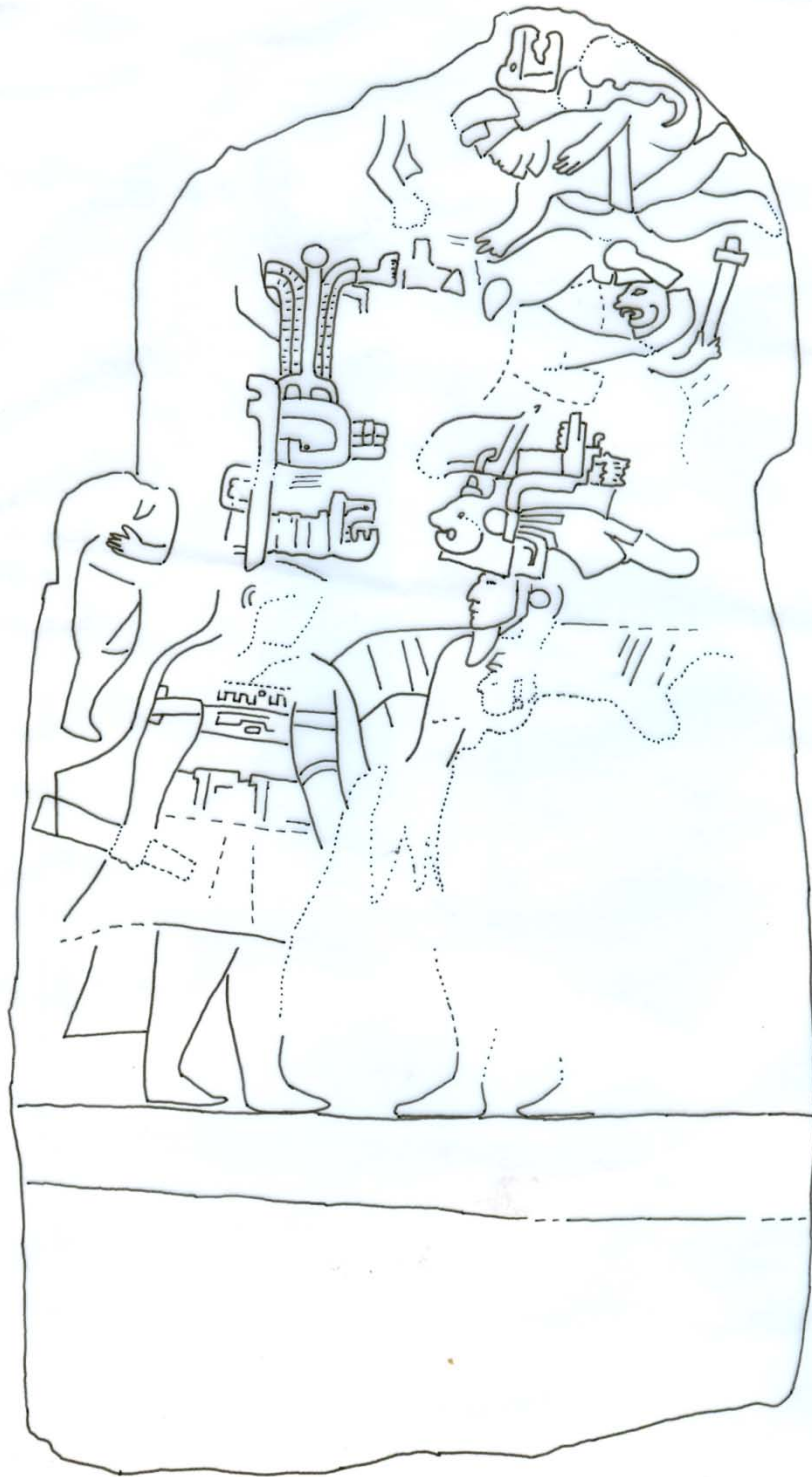


Figure 5.12 Drawing La Venta Stela 3



Figure 5.13 LV-5

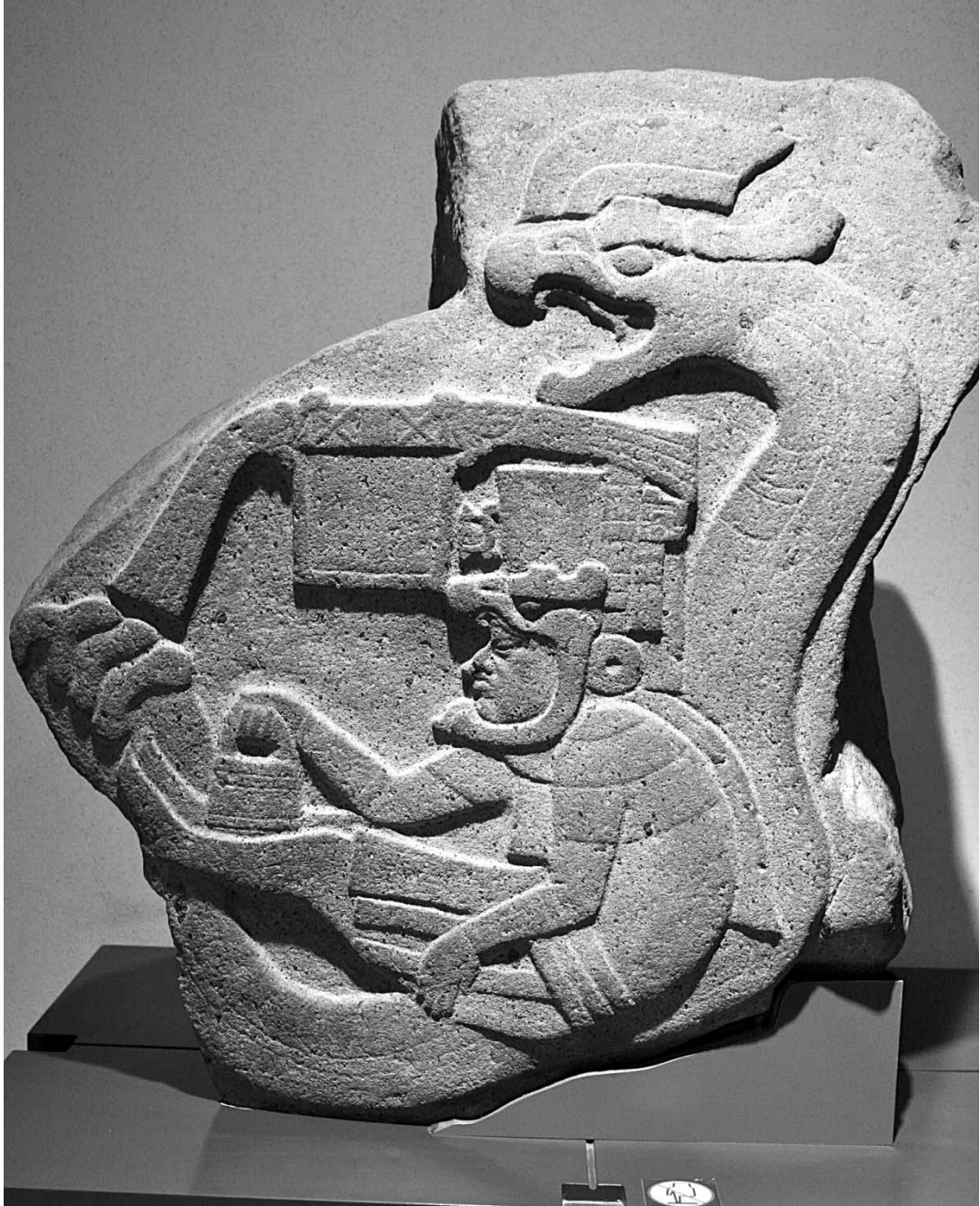


Figure 5.14 LV-19





Figure 5.15 LV-20

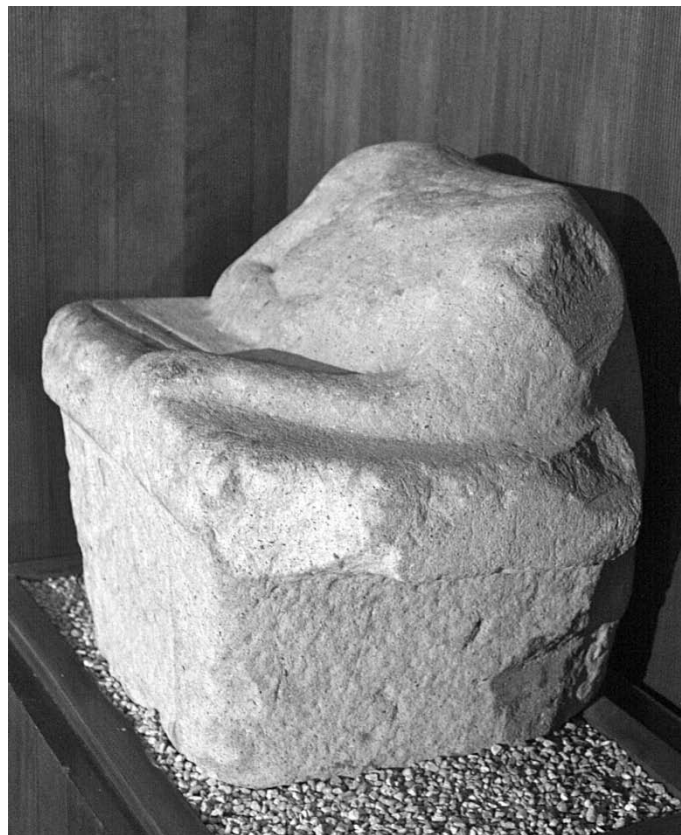


Figure 5.16 LV-21



Figure 5.17 LV-77

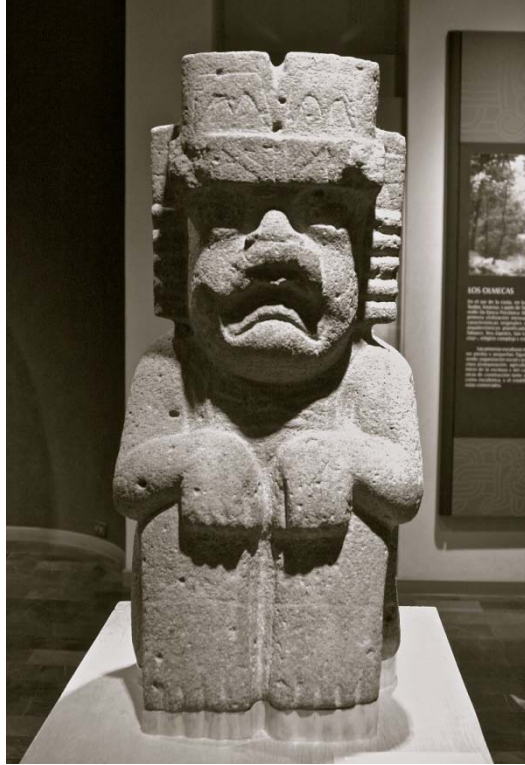


Figure 5.18 SL-52



Figure 5.19 LS-2

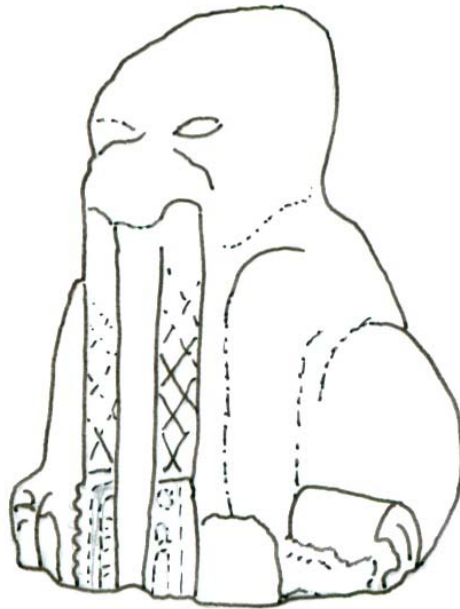


Figure 5.20 LV-80



Figure 5.21 LV-12



Figure 5.22 Oxtotitlán Mural 1 (Grove, n.d.)



Figure 5.23 LV-13

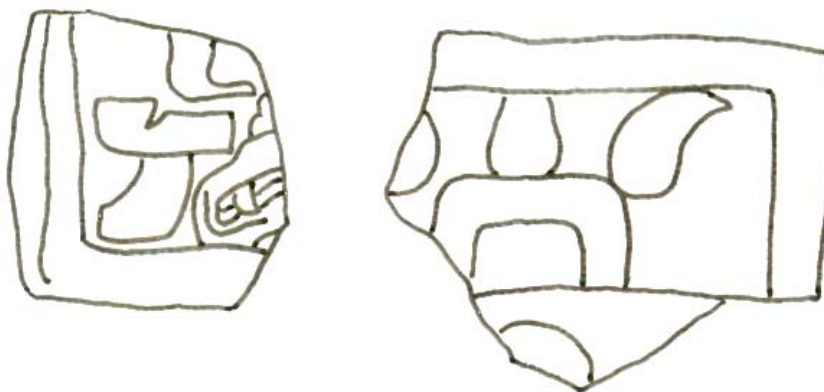


Figure 5.24 LV-15 (after de la Fuente and Gutiérrez Solana, 1973: 74)

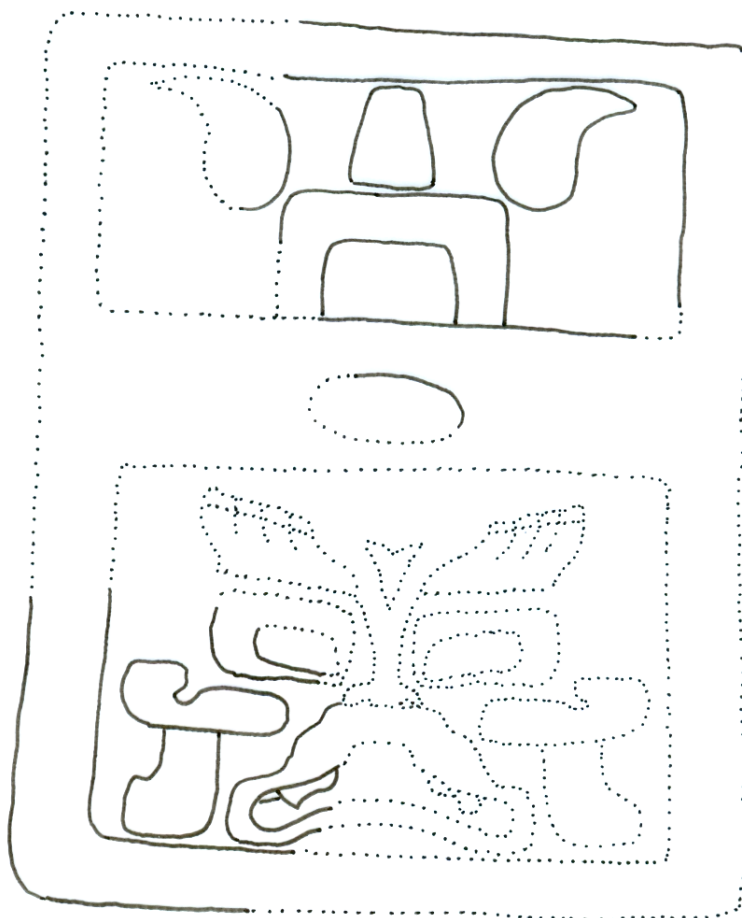


Figure 5.25 Drucker's reconstruction of LV-15 (after Drucker, 1952: figure 54)

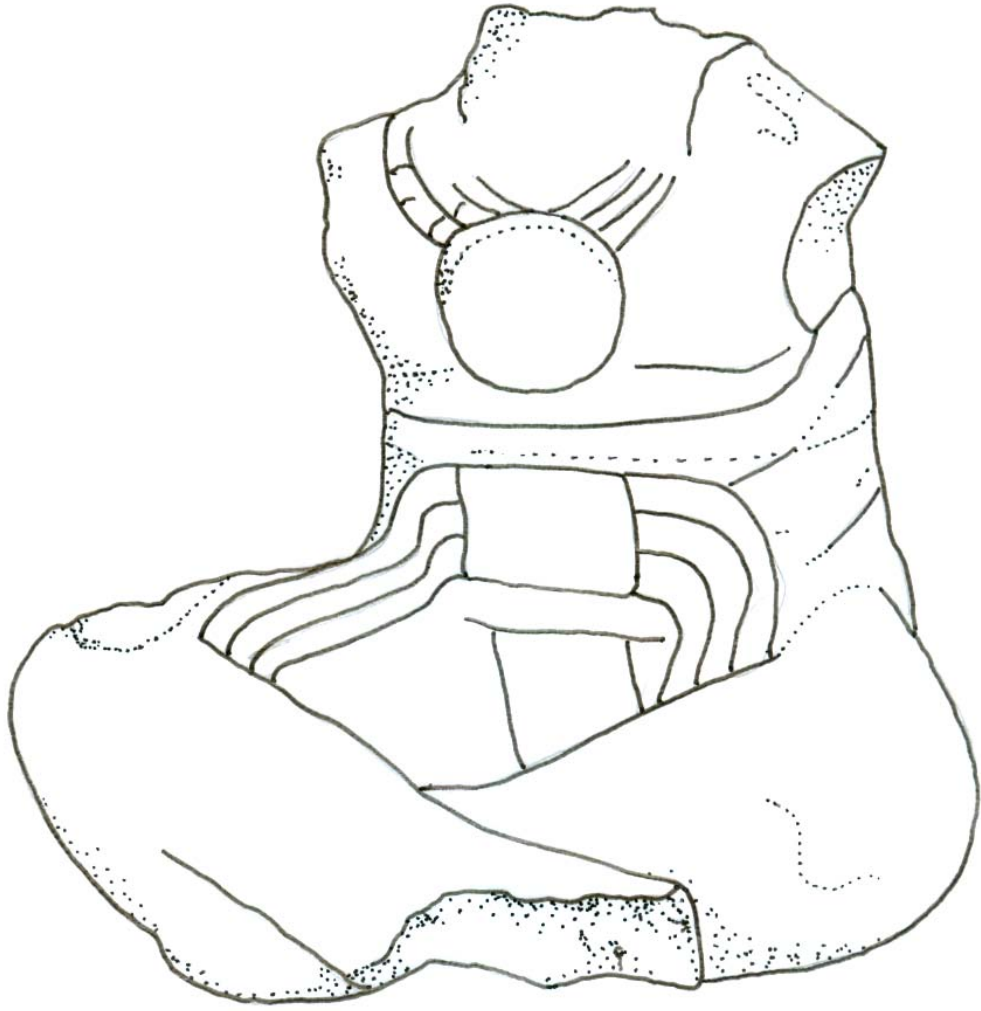


Figure 5.26 LV-23





Figure 5.27 La Venta Altar 2



Figure 5.28 La Venta Altar 3

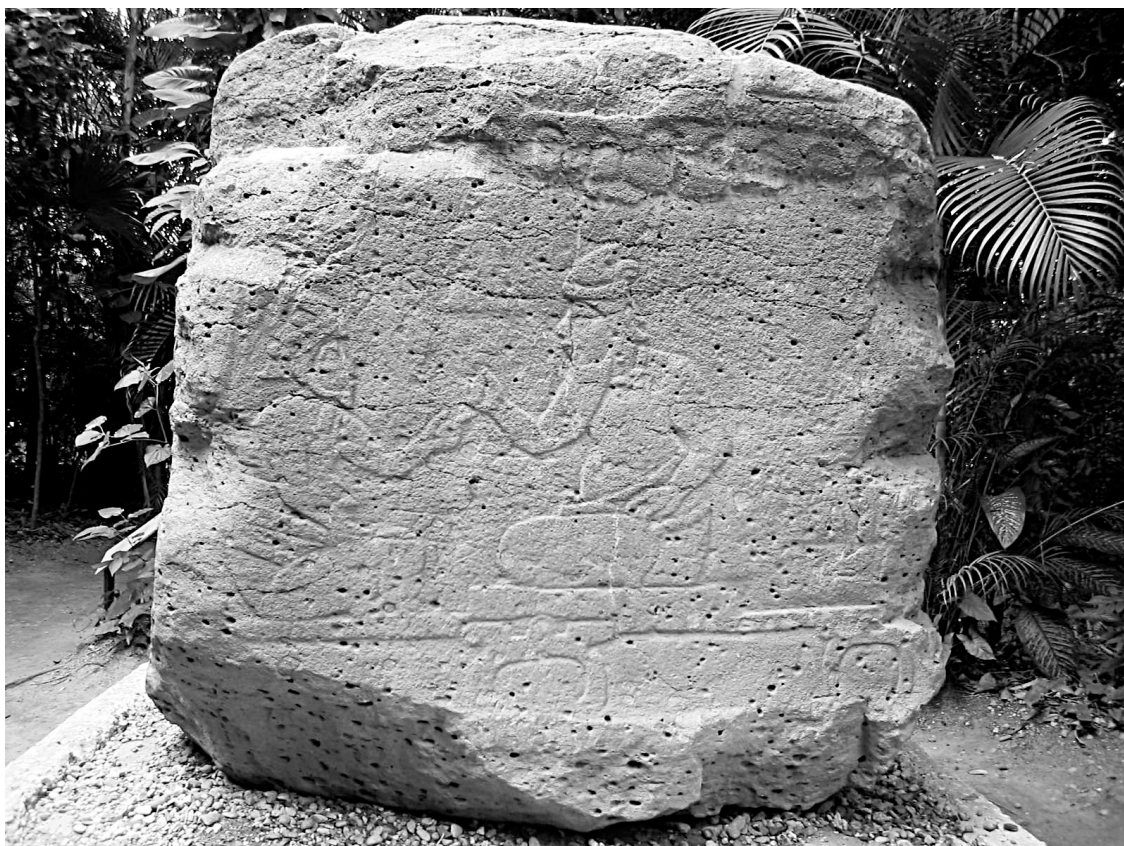


Figure 5.29 La Venta Altar 3 left side relief



Figure 5.30 LV-25/26



Figure 5.31 LV-27



Figure 5.32 La Venta Stela 5 (drawing after González Lauck, 1997: 87)



Figure 5.33 LV-88



Figure 5.34 LV-89



Figure 5.35 La Venta Altar 1



Figure 5.36 La Venta Altar 1 side with paw-wing motif





Figure 5.37 La Venta Altar 7

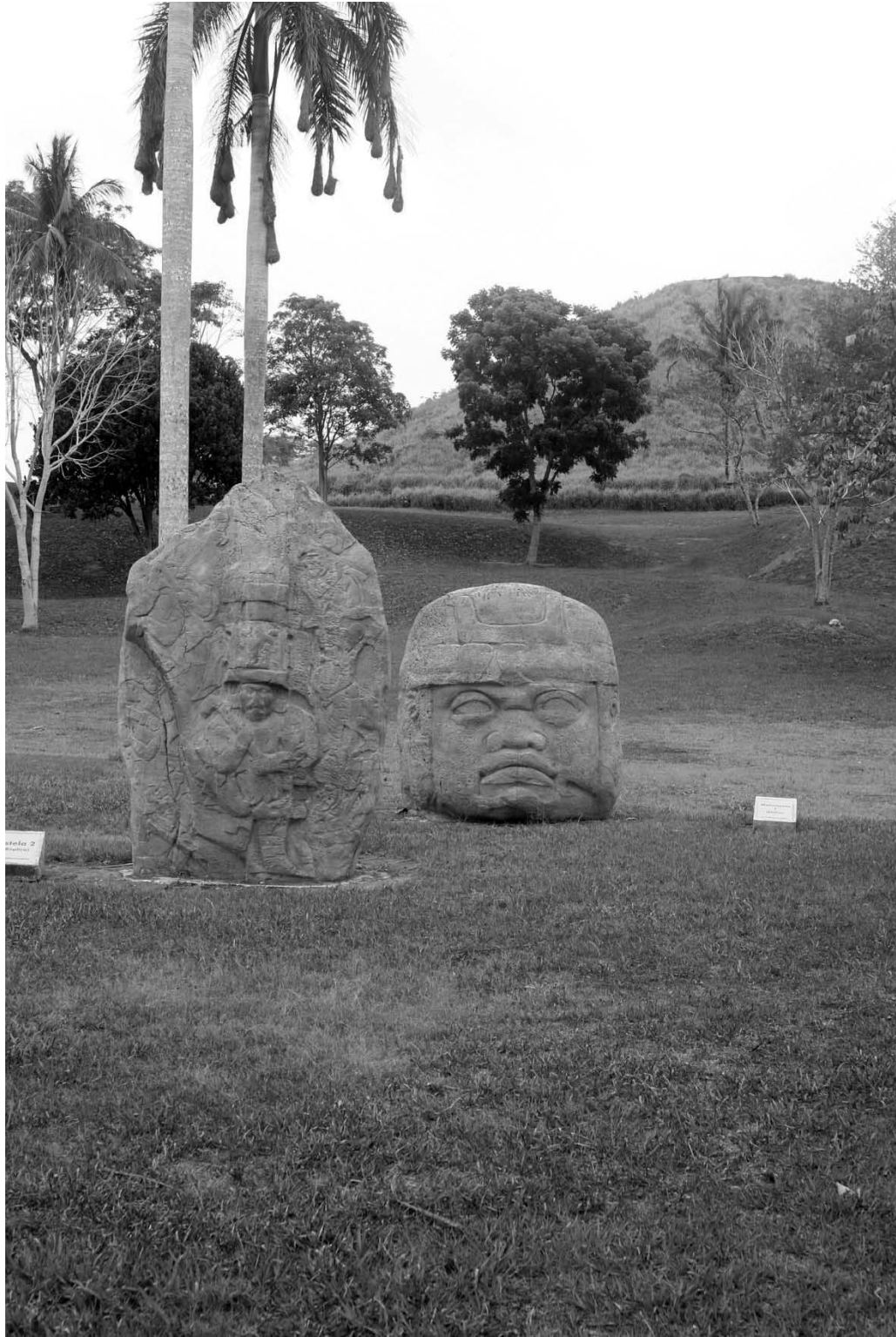


Figure 5.38 La Venta Complex B with reconstructions of Head 1 and Stela 2



Figure 5.39 La Venta Stela 2

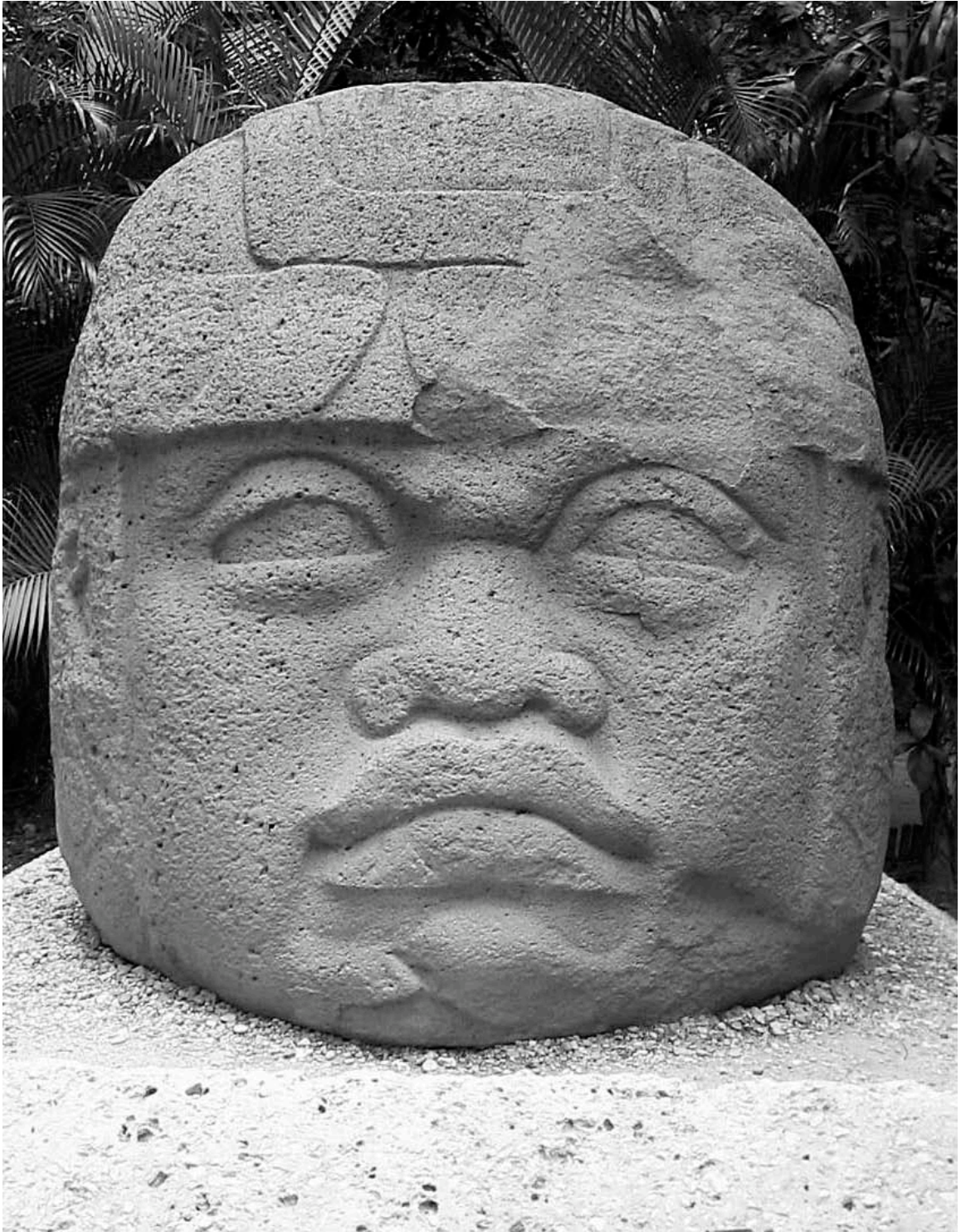


Figure 5.40 La Venta Head 1

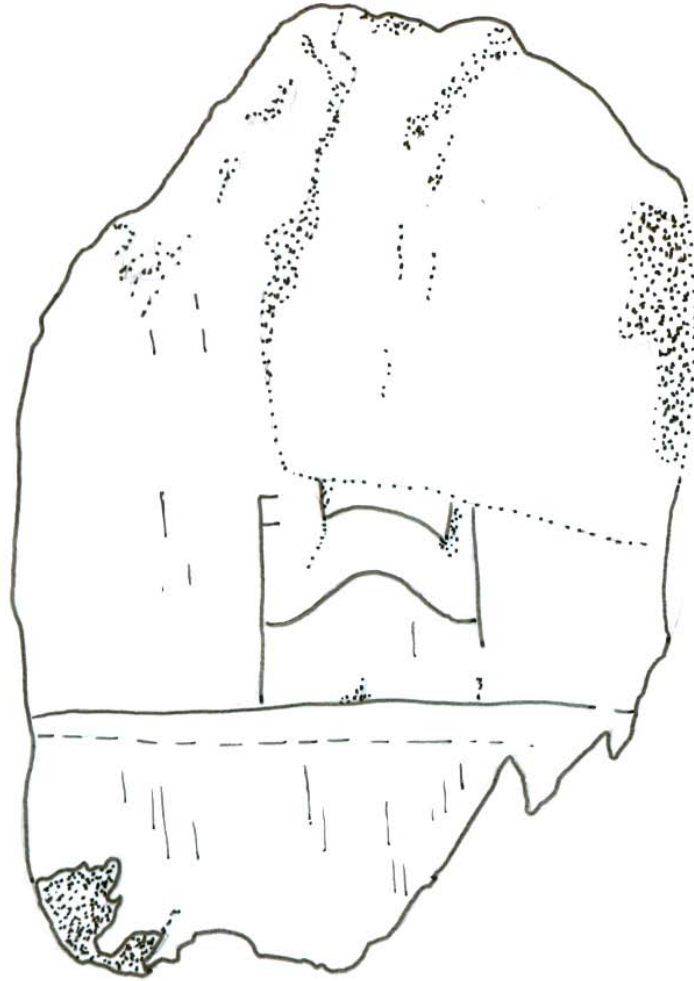


Figure 5.41 LV-58



Figure 5.42 LV-59



Figure 5.43 La Venta Altar 5

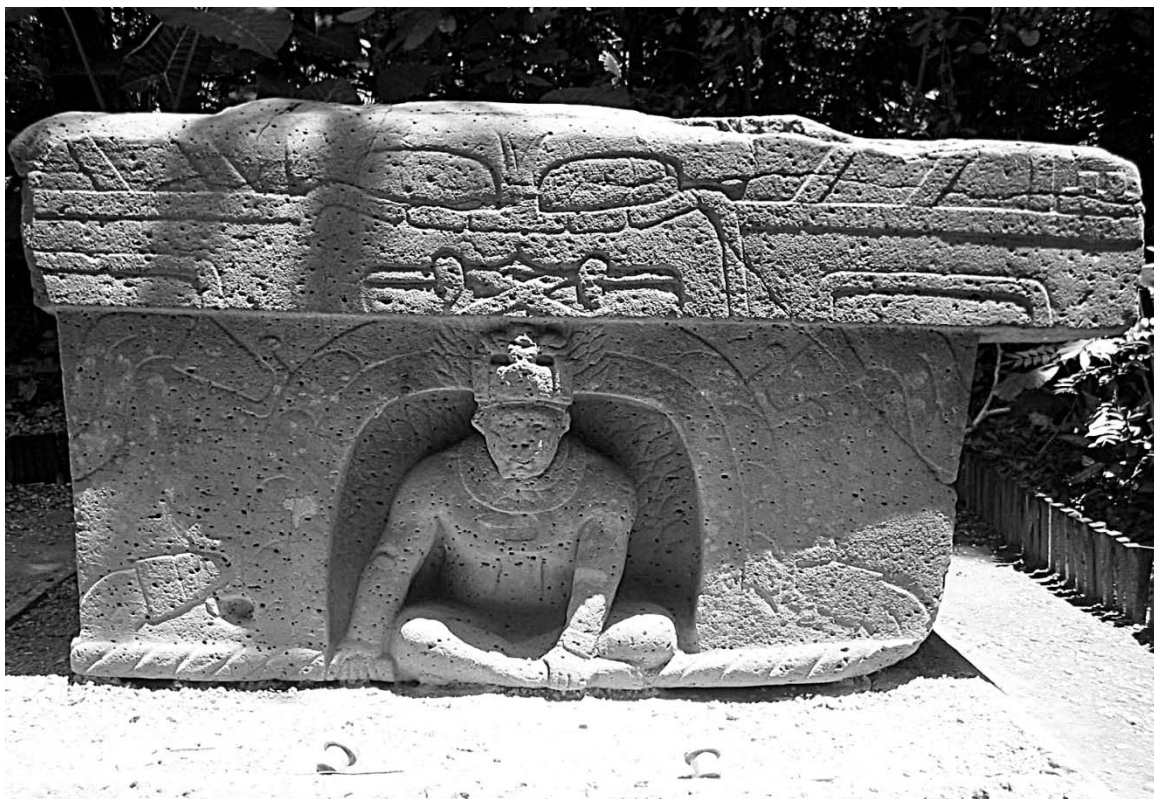


Figure 5.44 La Venta Altar 4 (top: front; bottom: right side)





Figure 5.45 La Venta Altar 4 Left Side (circle indicates evidence of erasure)



Figure 5.46 La Venta Altar 8



Figure 5.47 LV-52



Figure 5.48 LV-53



Figure 5.49 LV-54



Figure 5.50 Crouching dwarf figurine from El Quiché, Guatemala



Figure 5.51 LV-28



Figure 5.52 LV-29

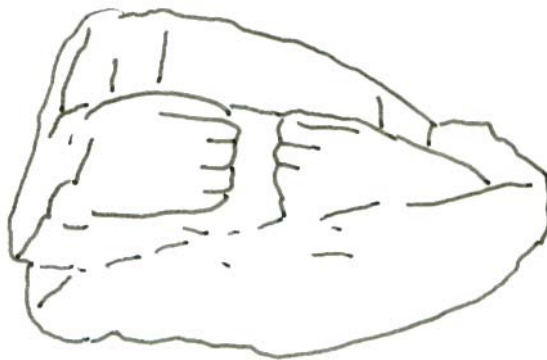


Figure 5.53 LV-39 (after de la Fuente and Gutiérrez Solana, 1973: 92)

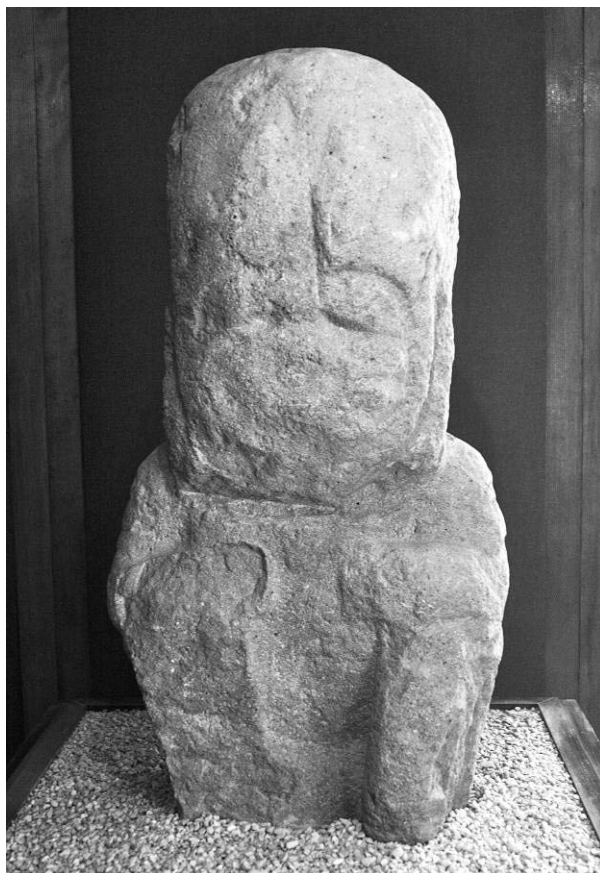


Figure 5.54 LV-72

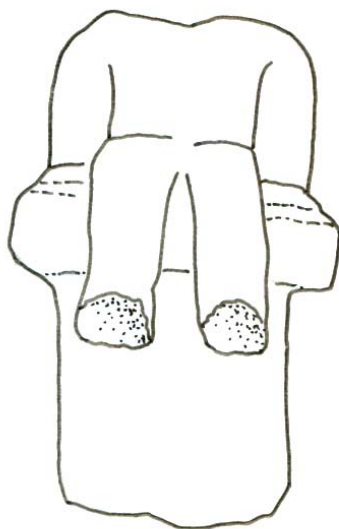


Figure 5.55 LV-40

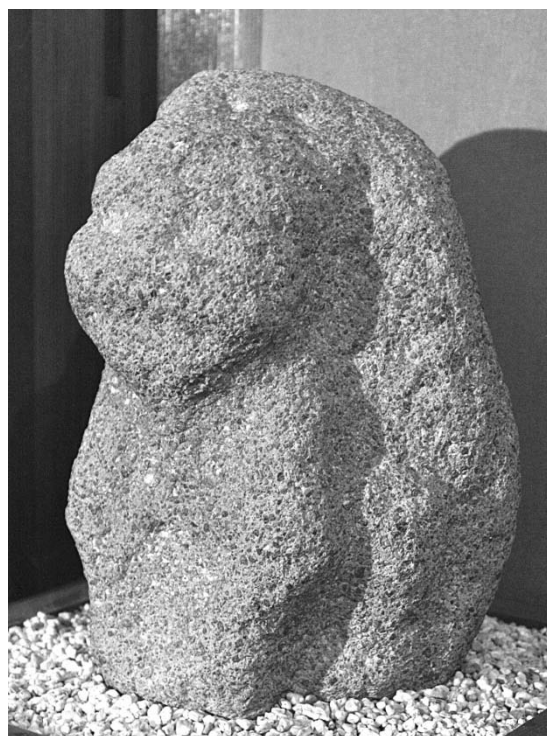


Figure 5.56 LV-41

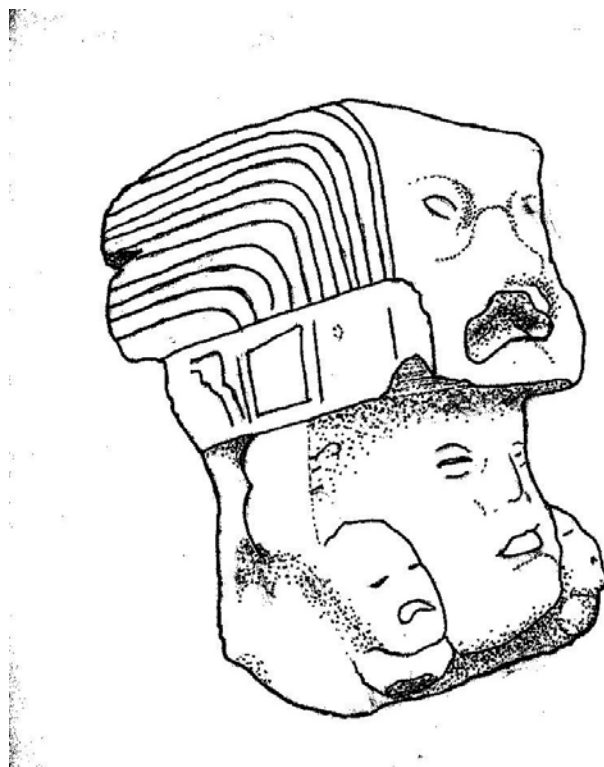


Figure 5.57 LV-44





Figure 5.58 LV-42

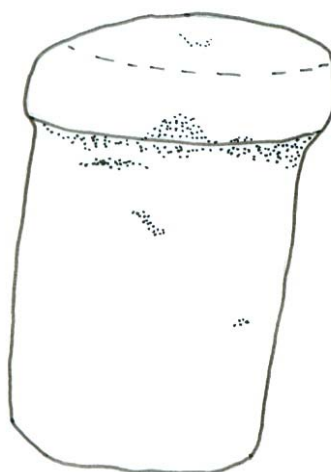


Figure 5.59 LV-43



Figure 5.60 LV-57



Figure 5.61 LV-74



Figure 5.62 LV-75 (left: bottom; right: top)



Figure 5.63 LV-70



Figure 5.64 SL-104



Figure 5.65 Oxtotitlán Owl (Grove, n.d.)

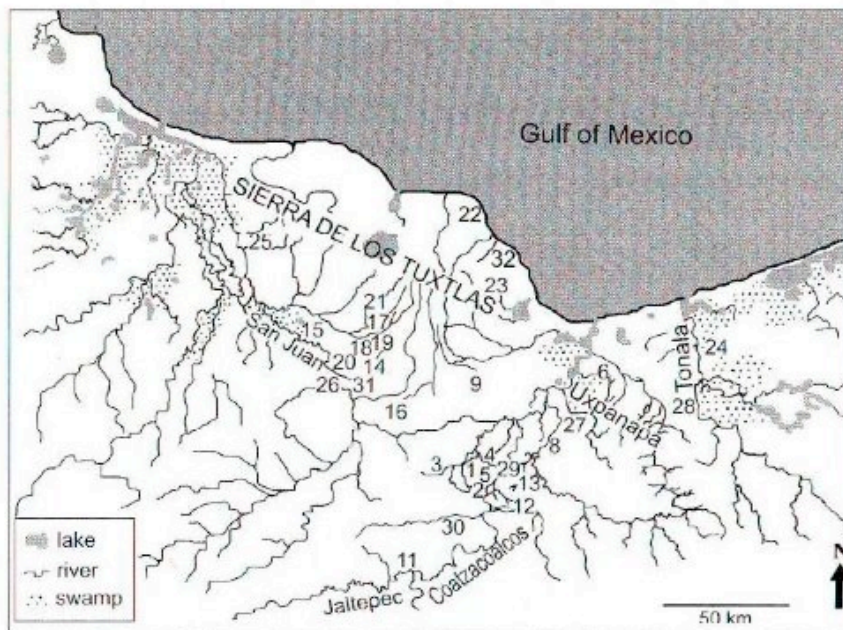


Fig. 2.1 The location of Olmec sites in relation to rivers and other geographical features. The numbers refer to the following sites:

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 1 San Lorenzo           | 17 La Isla                              |
| 2 Loma del Zapote       | 18 El Cardonal                          |
| 3 Estero Rabón          | 19 Loma de la Piedra                    |
| 4 El Remolino           | 20 Llano del Júcaro                     |
| 5 Tenochtitlan          | 21 Los Mangos                           |
| 6 Ixthuatlan            | 22 Zapotitlan                           |
| 7 Arroyo Sonso          | 23 Pajapan                              |
| 8 Emilio Carranza       | 24 La Venta                             |
| 9 Chiquipixta           | 25 Tres Zapotes                         |
| 10 La Oaxaqueña         | 26 El Marquesillo                       |
| 11 Las Limas            | 27 Santa María Uxpanapa (Antonio Plaza) |
| 12 El Manatí            | 28 Los Soldados                         |
| 13 La Merced            | 29 Ahuatepec                            |
| 14 Laguna de los Cerros | 30 Ojo de Agua                          |
| 15 Cuatotolapan         | 31 El Nuevo Órgano                      |
| 16 Cruz del Milagro     | 32 Piedra Labrada                       |

Figure 6.1 Map of Gulf Lowland Olmec Sites  
(Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera, 2006: 34)



Figure 6.2 ER-5



Figure 6.3 Teno-2



Figure 6.4 Proboscis Sculpture from Arroyo Sonso

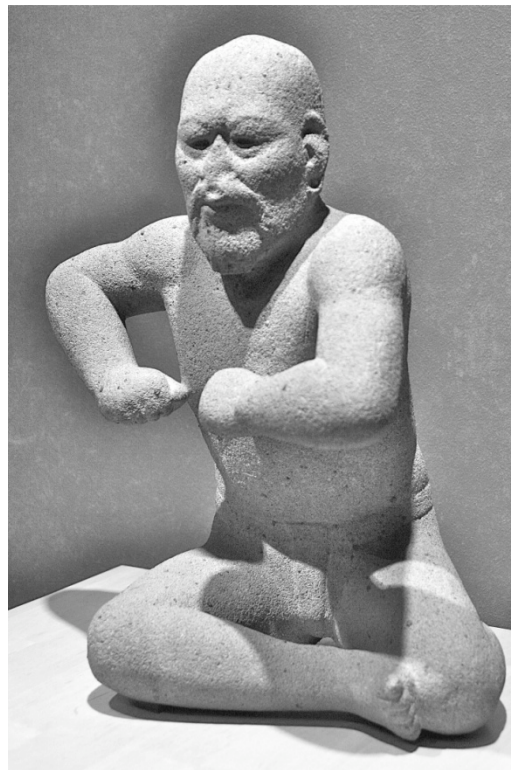


Figure 6.5 "Wrestler" from Capoacan





Figure 6.6 Monument 1 from Cuauhtotolapan Viejo



Figure 6.7 Monument from Ixthuatlan (formerly LV-60)



Figure 6.8 LS-1



Figure 6.9 Monument 1 from Las Choapas



Figure 6.10 SL-16 (after Cyphers, 2004a: 75, figure 34)



Figure 6.11 LV-61



Figure 6.12 LZ-1



Figure 6.13 LZ-2

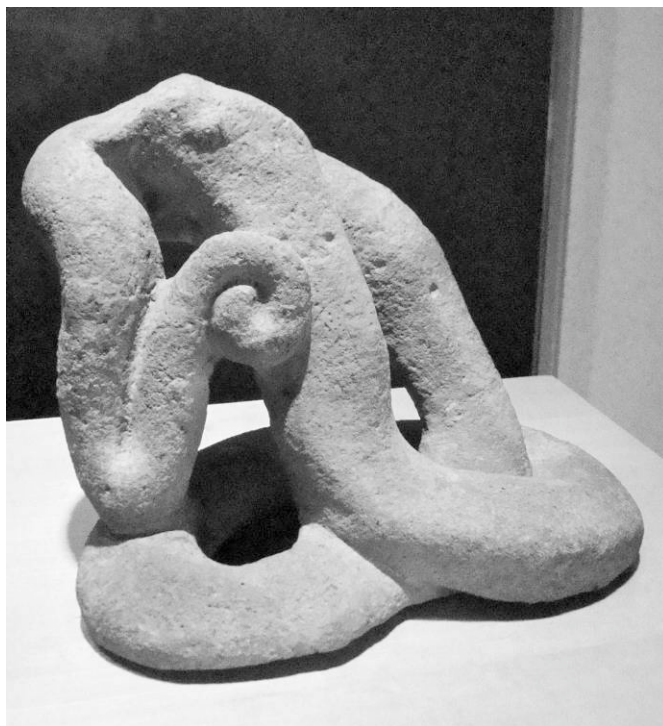


Figure 6.14 LZ-4

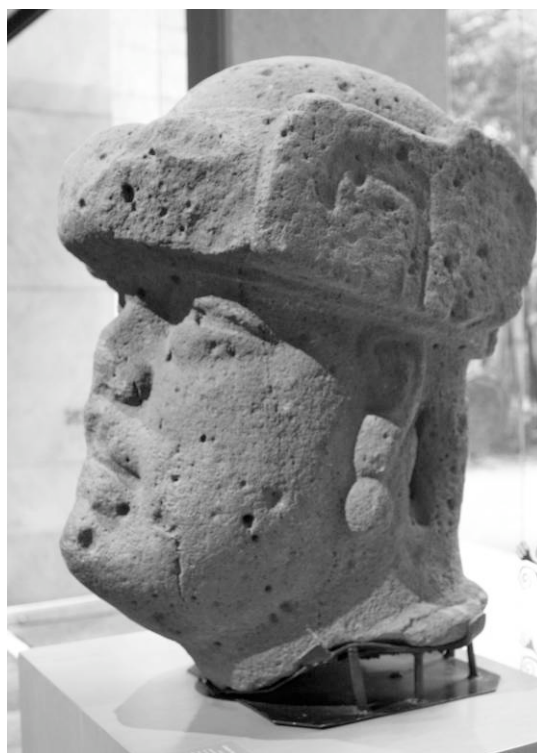


Figure 6.15 LZ-12

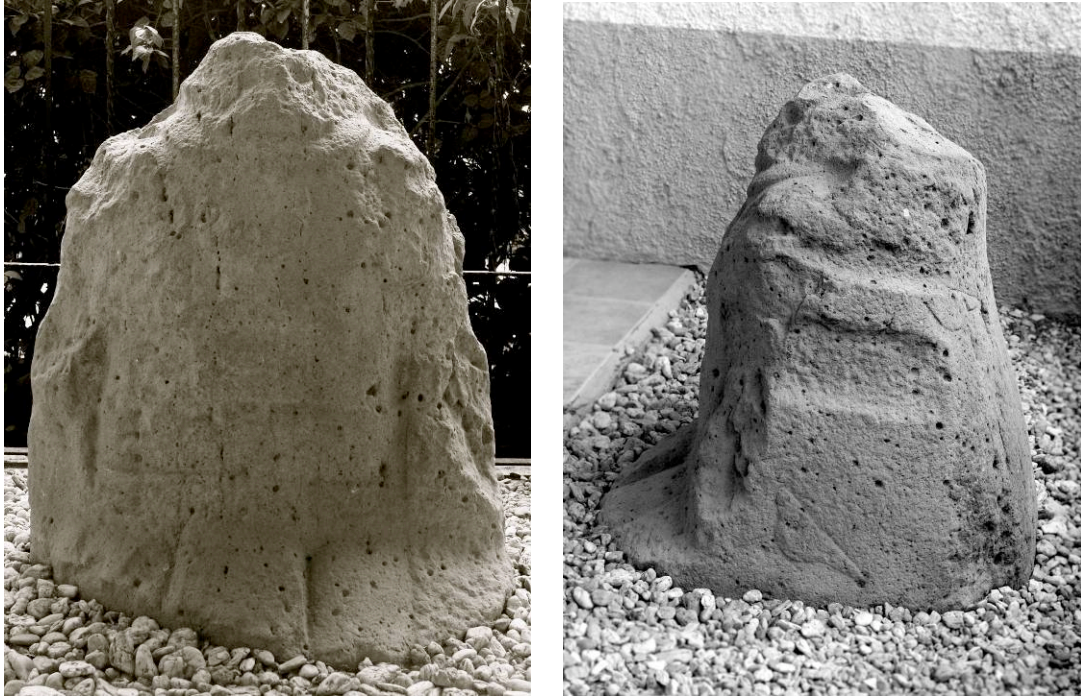


Figure 6.16 LZ-5



Figure 6.17 LZ-11



Figure 6.18 LZ-7



Figure 6.19 LZ-9



Figure 6.20 LZ-8



Figure 6.21 LZ-10





Figure 6.22 Monument 1 "El Príncipe" from Cruz del Milagro



Figure 6.23 Monument 1 from San Martín Pajapan

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