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From Stone to Symbols: Olmec Art in Social Context at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán

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In this chapter I address certain questions concerning the reconstruction of Olmec ideology by focusing on an emerging body of data in which context, in a number of its various senses, is unusually well controlled. The specific archaeological contexts of monuments dating to the Early Pre-Classic (1200–900 b.c.), situated within larger spatial settings on the San Lorenzo plateau and at the hinterland site, Loma del Zapote, are the data to be examined. The ideology in question is clearly elite: the objects used in the inference are numerically quite rare, and their distribution within the sites is limited. The empirical basis of the definition of elites (Marcus 1992; Chase and Chase 1992) is the large-scale control of large quantities of imported rock, specialized production technologies, and the restricted manipulation of objects embodying ideological concepts.

The contexts and settings presented illustrate the mutual involvement of ideological legitimation and economics as a basis of elite interests. The display of rulership may be directly associated with the control of two resources, water and stone. The use and regular reuse of exotic materials reflects Olmec pragmatism in making important decisions affecting the display of ideology and its transformation through recycling.

An intense *in situ* focus on monument erection physically associated with a constructed water channel, as yet not fully excavated, suggests control of water sources as one potential power base in a clearly nonegalitarian social context. Moreover, I suggest that an elite monopolized the use of exotic stone in its own monuments. Such limitation of the distribution of exotic stone, combined with the consistent evidence of reuse and reworking of old pieces, may well indicate that such materials were themselves sacralized.

The settings under consideration will show how, on a piece-by-piece basis, Olmec sculptures provide the individual strands of a conceptual framework about the earth and the cosmos; yet when the sculptures are organized into visual displays, the symbols and concepts they evoke can be arranged and rearranged to achieve a variety of messages and effects. Stone monuments, arranged in groupings, thus constitute statements about ideology, statements that permitted considerable variation in symbols and concepts.

Artistic manifestations, analyzed mainly from the intrinsic meaning of the images, have from the beginning provided the characterization of the Olmec of southern Veracruz and Tabasco, the area from which the first large corpus of stone monuments was derived. Originally proposed rather casually by Stirling (1955), a "central Olmec myth" (Coe 1965) stood for many years as an unquestioned reconstruction of elite ideology. Much of this reconstruction was necessarily based on the comparative analysis of individual monuments, most recovered almost by chance as they eroded out of the banks of ravines, or located by other fortuitous means without archaeological context. The reconstructed elite ideology was enhanced by ethnohistoric and ethnographic analogy. Interpretations have been in effect imposed upon the Olmec, with no consistent methodology for testing any of them against each other or against a body of data beyond that of often individual objects widely separated in time and space. In a recent synthesis of major hypotheses regarding Olmec iconography, Coe shows how some interpretations have been modified and changed, and highlights the speculative quality of what he hesitatingly calls "Olmec ideology" (1989).

The focus on an "Olmec ideology" has remained central and has provoked debate on, first, what is Olmec, and second, what is ideology. If the "Olmec phenomenon" is geographically diverse, with its contexts varying from one area to another, it has also proven to be chronologically variable through its presumed span of at least one thousand years (among others, Berger, Graham, and Heizer 1967; Coe and Diehl 1980; Graham 1989; Grove 1984, 1989; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968; Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968; Lowe 1977, 1989; Piña Chan 1958; Sharer 1978). Isolated finds, and even controlled survey and excavation at single sites, because of their relative rarity, have not provided a sample size adequate for broad, comparative generalization. Furthermore, Olmec studies have been significantly influenced by both the theoretical perspectives and the substantive findings of research in other Mesoamerican areas and time periods. In consequence, earlier and later investigations and their respective conclusions may not be entirely comparable, and the "Olmec phe-

nomenon” comes to look increasingly elusive. Like Stark (1991), I believe that a fine-grained analysis is necessary to eliminate temporal depth as a possible cause of distress about “Olmec.”

Unfortunately, ideas are not directly recoverable from archaeological remains, but must be reconstructed or inferred from the by-products or remnants of human behavior that presumably are generated or influenced by ideology. As Demarest (1989: 96) has pointed out, many explanations automatically assign chronological or causal priority for economic, social, and political institutions over ideology. Certainly this is true for interpretations of Olmec art that derived from an explicit Marxist perspective. Regardless of theoretical orientation, the impact of ideology and its attendant rituals must be explored with scrupulously accurate chronological controls in order to establish sequentiality and to infer causality. Basic to this approach is rigorously defined archaeological context as a necessary point of departure.

A major problem has been one of context or, more specifically, its absence. Like *Olmec and ideology*, *context* is a surprisingly ambiguous term with many, not entirely comparable, referents. It is a hierarchic term with a range from broad and general to highly specific; as such it is difficult to operationalize. Clearly an isolated monument, a chance find, has no context. Objects demonstrably or ostensibly from the same geographic location share at least that context, but if chronology is not simultaneously controlled, the context is of limited analytic utility. Objects comprising elements in a controlled sample will share that as a context, depending on how the sample was constructed. Ideally a “context” implies not only the single object, but those objects found together with it, including constructed architecture and/or modified landscapes, immediate or more remote. It also implies association with some individuals or groups: is the object widely distributed, with a variety of other objects, in numbers of differentiated spaces, or is its distribution restricted? Especially in nonegalitarian societies, such questions address the nature of sociopolitical differentiation, including that of how we recognize and define an elite—the necessary first step in explaining how, perhaps, an elite comes into being (compare Love, this volume).

The problem arises, in the particular case of ideology because symbols cannot be interpreted in isolation; they necessarily derive their meaning as parts of a network or web of contrasts. For Olmec, the consistent identification of such complexes of symbols has been difficult, as noted above: it is often context, both archaeological and sociological, that provides the necessary network, which the investigator can then use to suggest some potential readings as more probable, as having more internal support, than other readings.

When specific contexts become available, the evidence from the specific location of objects is best situated in yet broader settings. Rapoport defines a setting as “a milieu which defines a situation, reminds occupants of the appropriate rules and hence of the ongoing behaviors appropriate to the situation defined by the settings, thereby making co-action possible” (1990: 12). Setting is indispensable for discussing the interplay of function and meaning and for defining social context. In reconstructing how activities are conducted and the way in which they are ordered on a larger scale, the study of very specific context leads to the definition of activities and activity systems that have key facets such as order or sequence, nature, and participation. Activities give shape to space (Rapoport 1990).

SAN LORENZO TENOCHTITLÁN AND ITS HINTERLAND

Located in the municipality of Texistepec in southern Veracruz, the site called San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán by Stirling (1955) encompassed the plateau of San Lorenzo, the high ground of Tenochtitlán, and the community of Potrero Nuevo. Stirling implicitly recognized the difficulty in establishing site boundaries in this area because of the type of soil accumulation and ground cover. Stirling did not define individually bounded sites but rather a broad area where archaeological remains were evident but not visually continuous on the surface. Today, on the basis of recent research, I would modify Stirling's definition slightly, as the visibility problems have improved somewhat in the last 50 years. The great plateau of San Lorenzo, the Early Pre-Classic regional center, has evidence for habitation spilling down onto the terraced sides and into the lower lands. Evidence for Olmec occupation under the later period occupations of Tenochtitlán certainly exists but is highly inaccessible at present, leaving the magnitude or importance of this focus unknown. Another important focus of population in the immediate hinterland is Loma del Zapote, located on the narrow band of elevated lands between two branches of an ancient river located 4.5 km south of the San Lorenzo plateau. Loma del Zapote includes the contemporary community and ejido of Potrero Nuevo, some private lands, and the Tenochtitlán ejidal annex. With monumental architecture and stone monuments, Loma del Zapote newly proclaims its importance as an Early Pre-Classic site.

The San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project has benefited from work previously conducted in the area by Stirling (1955), Coe and Diehl (1980), and Beverido (n.d.). Basic to the explorations since 1990 are the detailed topographic map, the regional aerial photographs and restitutions (Coe and Diehl 1980), as well as detailed presentations of excavations and stratigraphy (Coe and Diehl 1980; Beverido n.d.).

The San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project was developed on the basis of a theoretical focus differing significantly from those of previous explorations in the region. The emphasis from the beginning was explicitly on settlement pattern at both regional and community levels of analysis, that is, the documentation, and eventual explanation, of the differentiated use of space through time by a human population. Thus the goals have been the delineation and excavation of domestic, workshop, storage, and ceremonial areas of sites. Moreover, extensive regional surveys were designed to suggest, eventually, how center and hinterland were functionally interrelated. Investigation of the ancient environment will facilitate explanation of landscape utilization for subsistence and other purposes—again, a focus on space as context, as shaping and being shaped by, differentiated human behavior.

Several excavations therefore explored the contexts of monumental sculpture in order to date monuments and define the specific localities in which they were situated. These explorations have been highly productive and in one place were well guided by the detailed stratigraphic descriptions published by Coe and Diehl (1980). Fortunately, the contexts of several newly discovered monuments at Loma del Zapote were able to be explored with controlled archaeological excavations. Observations beyond what is possible solely from the style and iconography of the individual monuments can be submitted as evidence of how the Olmec may have perceived and expressed a conception of cosmic and earthly order.

MONUMENT CONTEXTS AND SETTINGS

Two areas on the San Lorenzo plateau will be examined here. The Group E setting of monumental features provides specific contexts from the central area of the plateau which may be related to rulership. Monument recycling activities in Group D show evidence for stoneworking and sculptural transformation. In the hinterland, the Loma del Zapote site provides two contexts of monuments excavated *in situ* as well as a newly discovered monument.

The Group E Setting

The area designated Group E is marked by the intersection of the B3, B4, C3, and C4 quadrants of the San Lorenzo plateau topographic map (Coe and Diehl 1980, 1: map 1), a clear hotspot of elite activity manifested in the vicinity of Laguna 8 (Fig. 1), and may be defined by the presence of the following features:

(a) *Monument 14*, the largest tabletop throne (Grove [1973] modified the concept of altars to thrones) known in the corpus of Olmec art; it bears a

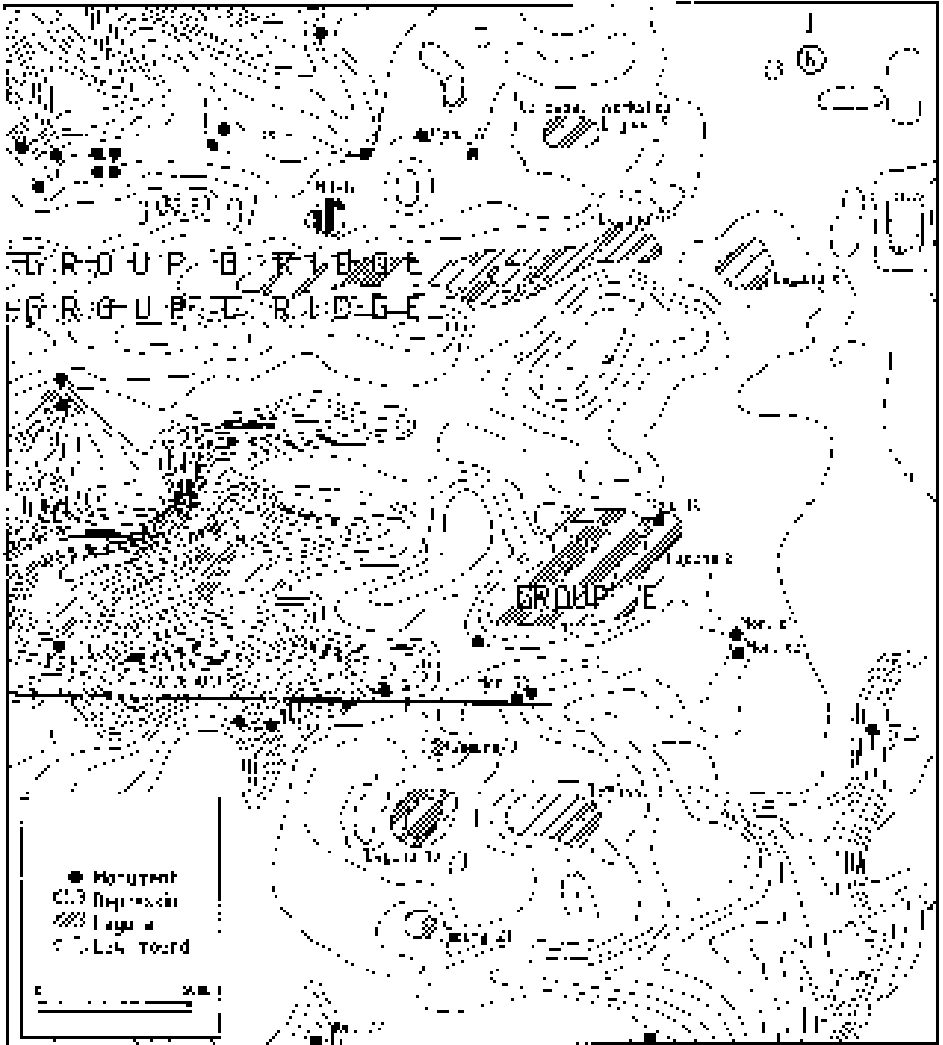


Fig. 1 Topographic map of the west central portion of the San Lorenzo plateau showing the location of Groups E and D and other features mentioned in the text. Drafted by Cesar Fernandez, based on Coe and Diehl 1980, 1: map 1.

central figure within a niche on the front, a right lateral figure with jaguar paw headdress insignia, and a left lateral partial human head removed by a broad erasure and rectangular coffers (Stirling 1955).

(b) *Monument 61*, a colossal head (Brüggeman and Hers 1970) situated approximately 46 m southeast of Monument 14.

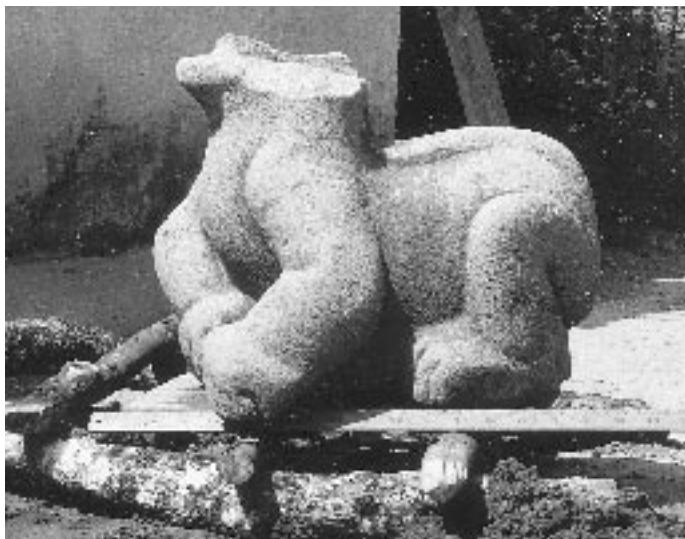


Fig. 2 Monument 77, a human-feline sculpture found in a ravine south of Group E.

(c) *Monument 62*, found next to *Monument 61*; this is a fragment of a possible circular monument (Brüggeman and Hers 1970).

(d) *The possible origin point of the 171 m long basalt aqueduct line* (Coe and Diehl 1980; Krotser 1973); several other monuments were associated with it at one time (such as *Monuments 9, 52, and 77*).

(e) *Monument 9*, the duck fount (Stirling 1955).

(f) *Monument 52*, an alleged rain deity with a hollowed troughlike interior (Coe and Diehl 1980: 361–363).

(g) *Monument 77*, a human-feline supernatural sculpture recently discovered near the aqueduct and probably related to it (Cyphers 1992b, n.d.c) (Fig. 2).

This particular area provides a special study case since archaeological excavations on the aqueduct (Coe and Diehl 1980; Krotser 1973; Cyphers n.d.d), on *Monuments 61 and 62* (Brüggeman and Hers 1970), and at the *Monument 14* location (Cyphers 1992b, n.d.d) provide archaeological information on specific context.

Any consideration of this area immediately raises the question of the antiquity of *Laguna 8*, a prominent central surface feature. Although Krotser proposed it as a source of water for the aqueduct (1973: 48), recent explorations in and around *Laguna 8* show that this large pond postdates the Early Formative

occupation and may, in fact, have altered some Early Pre-Classic features such as the context of Monument 52. Placed directly on the ancient ground surface, the main aqueduct line is located at 2.65 m below surface at Station 0+65, near Monument 52, which was reported at a depth of 1.4 m (Coe and Diehl 1980: 361 and fig. 83). Even though the hollowed-out form of Monument 52 may seem morphologically related to the trough stones of the aqueduct, this sculpture itself was not found in primary context when discovered in 1968, but had been disturbed either when Laguna 8 was dug out after the Pre-Classic period or at some time subsequent to this.

The reconstruction of the ancient topography shows that the aqueduct and Monument 61 were at the same level. This ancient surface rises north of Monument 14, dipping slightly to the level of Monuments 61 and 62 and the aqueduct, and then rising again immediately south of the main aqueduct line where the proposed feeder lines, or possibly overflow drains, were found. As we see it today, the ground surface does not resemble its Pre-Classic configuration mainly because of the large-scale alteration represented by Laguna 8.

In the Group E setting, several key contexts were clustered together within a maximum distance of 75 m of each other. The first of these is the aqueduct. East of the final trough located by Krotser, a ditch, designed to hold the troughs as they neared the water source, became apparent and was followed 18 m eastward. Even though the 1993 expedition did not locate the origin point of the aqueduct, the change in width and depth of the ditch indicate that explorations are undoubtedly close to it. A spring or well might be the ultimate source of sweet water for the aqueduct (Cyphers 1992b). Another season of exploration should confirm or disprove this as well as Krotser's proposal of an ancient buried laguna (1973).

Curiously, the newly discovered continuation of the aqueduct line, as an orange clay-filled ditch without trough stones, may never have been finished and dedicated. Or perhaps the missing section was removed for other reasons, including possible termination rites causing the cessation of the system. I hope that future excavations can clarify these questions.

Through the diligence of Coe and Diehl (1980), the original location of many monuments already removed from the site were marked on their map 1. One of these, Monument 14, was plotted in the northeastern corner of Laguna 8. Stirling (1955: 15) reports that during most of the year, the piece was submerged and became visible during the dry season when the water level in the laguna dropped. In 1993 explorations at the Monument 14 location revealed that, despite both Stirling and Medellín's work there in exposing and removing the estimated 28-ton throne, large portions of the ancient context remained

intact. The throne may originally have rested on the floors described below.

Explorations found the edge of the floor and penetrated well into Laguna 8. Nevertheless, the presence of a red sand-plastered standing mud wall at the north of the excavations defines one side of a construction, possibly a walled patio, in which the throne was situated. Photographs in the National Geographic Archives suggest that the base of the throne faced south-southeast toward the water source of the aqueduct and Monument 61, the colossal head. Numerous vessel offerings were found on the yellow sand floor. Below it, resting on a red sand-plastered floor only a few centimeters below, were numerous vessels, broken figurines, and evidence of burning of human and animal bone. Of particular interest are burnt secondary bone offerings identified as human infant and bird, perhaps suggesting some kind of sacrifices.

In the Group E setting, several characteristics of the contexts suggest the existence of dedication and termination rituals (see Freidel and Schele [1989] on the Maya). The resurfacing of the red patio with yellow sand was preceded by the placement of objects such as vessels and ritual sacrifices; perhaps one day it will be possible to define these past actions as accession or enthronement rituals, offerings to the ancestors or calendrical ceremonies. At the time of abandonment, the yellow floor was littered with vessels and figurines. Monument 14 may have been turned on its back as part of the same event, but unfortunately we have no way of knowing this because the piece was removed from context.

In a similar fashion, Monument 61, the colossal head, was found resting on its left side and facing west toward the aqueduct. Monument 62, found next to it, may have been utilized in the levering and maneuvering operations when it was tipped over. Because of the mottled stratum it was found in, Brüggeman and Hers (1970) suggested that the head was deposited in a large pit, but stratigraphic maps provided by Hers, photographs from the 1970 excavations, and recent tests do not show the existence of such a feature. The head may have rested on the original Early Pre-Classic ground surface.

Proposed as ancestors, rulers, shamans, warriors, and ballplayers (Bernal 1969; Clewlow et al. 1967; Clewlow 1974; Coe 1965, 1972; de la Fuente 1975; Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964; Stirling 1955; Westheim 1963; Wicke 1971), the colossal heads from San Lorenzo have never before been considered in context. Monument 61 is a unique colossal head for two reasons. First of all, its stratigraphic position is known, and second, unlike Monuments 53 and 2 from San Lorenzo which are clearly recarved from thrones (Porter 1989), it seems to have been originally sculpted from a boulder. Although not without cupping, it is the most perfectly conserved head known from San Lorenzo, a fact that,

when considered in conjunction with the setting in which it was found, points to a possible first phase carving located *in situ*. Following Stirling's original evaluation of these heads as portraits (1955), Monument 61 located only some 45 m from the throne (Monument 14), suggests that this may indeed be a portrait perhaps of a ruler, his predecessor, or ancestor. The consistency of the colossal head category, despite the individuality represented in each one, and the repetitive form of rectangular tabletop thrones with frontal niches and personages, reinforce the belief that the office of ruler was institutionalized.

This description of the Group E setting shows the interpenetration of felines, water, and rulership. Monuments 52 and 77 have morphological feline-like traits, and their shape indicates a relationship to the aqueduct system. Child and bird sacrifices, as seen between red and yellow floors at Monument 14, are known ethnohistorically for Central Mexico and for the Maya (Broda 1971; González 1985; Márquez and Schmidt 1984; Román Berrelleza 1990; Ruz 1968; Thompson 1970). Several Olmec monuments relate children and dwarfs with water, rulership, and felines. In La Venta Altar 5, the niche figure with three raindrops in his headdress holds an inert infant; lateral narrative relief shows adults holding active infants. The highly mutilated Monument 20 from San Lorenzo has a central niche figure holding a child. Monument 18 from San Lorenzo and Monument 2 from Potrero Nuevo show dwarfs, fantastic beings related to water (Covarrubias 1957).

Further archaeological evidence for this association comes from burials. Even though a possible burial, now entirely disintegrated, may have been present in front of La Venta Altar 4 (Drucker 1952: 23–26), the closest comparison can be made with the table-top throne of Chalcatzingo excavated *in situ* with associated architectural patio and sacrificial burials (Fash 1987). This monument fulfilled a dual function, that of throne and mortuary monument. Of a total of 16 Cantera phase burials, five are children and one is an infant. Fash relates the child sacrifice there to later period rites of rain, water, fertility, and mountains. Consistent and recurrent evidence for child burials near thrones points to sacrifice, a repetitive ritual event associated with rulership and the patron supernatural. The Chalcatzingo throne is located approximately 100 m west of the El Paso stream and its 7 m high diversion dam (Grove and Cyphers 1987: 41). The proximity of the monument to a water control structure parallels the context described for Monument 14 at San Lorenzo with its proximity to the aqueduct.

Based on the context discussed, the rituals and symbolism of rulership were intimately linked to the figure of a patron water supernatural. It is not unreasonable to infer that these rulers regulated water control systems and, by exten-

sion, the water itself. The so-called were-jaguar symbolism and the syncretic feline-human metamorphosing bodies thus express a link between water, ruler, and patron supernatural.

It is misleading to assume, even implicitly, that given San Lorenzo's location in the humid tropics, its inhabitants would have faced a relatively uniform physical environment in which considerations of water would not have been especially challenging to survival. Preliminary analyses of the Olmec period topography have strongly suggested that comparatively slight differences of land elevation and water table may have significantly affected the settlement pattern, almost certainly because such differences account for variation in productivity and/or security. The rhythms of the Olmec environment have to do with water in all its manifestations. Rain, fluvial systems, and the water table were all aspects that the elite sought to control one way or another. The prediction of rain may have been the most difficult aspect of their job, but control of groundwater was well within their grasp. Pure water was important for ceremony (Krotser 1973) as well as for drinking purposes.

The existence of multiple drain systems at San Lorenzo suggests that the position and depth of the water table were highly variable, making any high point in the water table a circumscribed resource. This is true in the region today where the *norias* are the prized source of drinking water. The implications of the control of drinking water are obvious and multiple. Beyond the initial labor investment to procure the material, manufacture the troughs, and build the channels, subsequent social relations had to be organized for its continued maintenance. As a probable source of pure drinking water used not just for ritual purposes but also, more significantly, for generalized human consumption, the aqueduct was an integral material component of an economic, social, and political mechanism for the distribution of water. Water distribution systems often function with stipulations of maintenance responsibilities for participants and, for nonparticipants, the creation of debts in exchange for water. Water debts can form the basis for the control of social labor, as exists in the region today.

Group D Setting

Located west of the central area of the plateau, Group D is well known as the site of the explorations conducted by Coe and Diehl (1980), which discovered seven *in situ* monuments at the B3-17 location. Their investigations around B3-17 concentrated on the exposure and definition of the stratigraphic position of these monuments, an extraordinary discovery of datable Olmec monuments. In 1991 the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project examined this area as a possible locus for additional stratigraphic excavations. As testing



Fig. 3 View of the 1992 excavations of B3-17 on Group D showing two new large stones awaiting recycling. Previous excavations by Coe are located to the right.

proceeded, the structural features noted by Coe and Diehl were noted to have been associated with suggestive evidence of stoneworking. Accordingly, I decided to explore this structure more extensively in the following field season. These 1992 excavations revealed not only the extent of the edifice but also four additional large worked stones, numerous fragments, small debitage, and tools.

Excavations were conducted on all sides of the seven monuments (23, 34, 37, 38, 40, 41, 43) bringing to light several more worked stones. West of Monuments 34 and 23, an immense broken bottle-shaped column, a large rectangular stone, and a peculiar rectangular basalt, slablike stone with multiple depressions were found resting on or inserted into the red sand-plastered floor, along with abundant flakes, medium-sized fragments, and tools (Fig. 3). Along the east side of Cut 2 of Coe and Diehl's Monument 23 Excavations, the continuation of the red floor and more sculpture fragments were found. To the north, a large stone in process of reduction and reshaping was found outside the structure and associated with numerous by-products, tools, and abrasives. Numerous whole vessel offerings, including pots with Calzadas motifs, were interspersed among

the rocks and may be interpreted as evidence of the continued sacredness of the rock, even as it was being recycled.

On Group D alone, a total of 39 broken “monuments” have been located (Stirling 1955; Coe and Diehl 1980; Beverido n.d.; Cyphers 1992b, n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.d). There are six sculptures in-the-round, 12 flat rectangular stones (stelae, lápidas, flat broken pieces), 11 architectural elements (columns, troughs, benches, and slabs of sedimentary rock), and ten sizable fragments. Monuments were stored here while awaiting their recarving. The amount of workshop material, such as flakes, abrasives, and tools, suggests that reworking was conducted at this locality, less than 100 m west of the C3 “Basalt Workshop” (as labeled on Coe and Diehl 1980, 1: map 1), most likely a discard area where more than 6 tons of largely basalt with some metamorphic waste has been recovered.

The architectural context of the monuments discussed above is particularly important because three separate structures, located about 25 m apart, seem to form a group of related dwellings. West of B3-17, where the sculptures and fragments were found, is a red-floored, mud-walled structure carefully delimited by a lightly sloping cobbled pavement. East of B3-17 is the Red Palace, located at the site of Monument 57. Even the limited exposure of about 60 sq m of the red floor, including only one edge to the structure, shows that a sculpted basalt column must have functioned as a roof support. Step-coverings and limestone and bentonite slabs found collapsed in the structure seem to indicate their architectural use. This structure, based on its construction features, is clearly elite. Interestingly, there is a probable thick rammed-mud wall running from the western edge of the Red Palace toward B3-17, forming a possible enclosure for the sculpture workshop. The C3 Basalt Workshop is found just 50 m east of the Red Palace. These data seem to indicate that the recarving activity and specific kinds of stoneworking were “attached” both physically and socially to elite patrons (Brumfiel and Earle 1987).

There is at present no evidence of where primary carving of monuments took place—whether stone would have arrived at San Lorenzo in partially or even in completely finished form. The elite group that consumed, and presumably commissioned, these sculptures would have dictated their contents. The presence at Group D of large rocks and of sculptures, in process of or awaiting recarving, implies that the restricted contexts, physical and sociological, of stone sculpture in exotic materials were retained even when individual pieces had “outlived their usefulness” and were destined for recycling. As noted above, the association of monumental stone sculpture—necessarily in exotic materials that would have incurred high transport costs—with a sociopolitical elite evidently sacralized the stone itself.

The convergence of the pragmatic—a scarce resource, obtainable only at a distance (Coe and Fernández 1980) and enormously demanding of labor in its transport—with the symbolic is both striking and not expected. Quite obviously, given its relative expense, such materials would have been systematically reused and fragments hoarded. At different levels of inclusiveness—from grinding and pounding stone conserved in most households excavated on the plateau, through smaller sculptural pieces reworked in another workshop in the southwestern A4 sector, to the large pieces recarved at Group D—the recycling of this resource seems to have been consistent within the community.

Loma del Zapote Settings

Located about 3 km south of the San Lorenzo plateau, Loma del Zapote is the secondary settlement focus in the San Lorenzo hinterland (Fig. 4). The site includes the ejido of Xochiltepec y Anexos, the private ranch “El Azuzul” and others, and the ejidal annex of Tenochtitlán. It is characterized by extensive habitation, monumental public and transportation architecture, large-scale workshops, and monumental sculpture.

The archaeological site overlies the elevated lands north of the juncture of two ancient river courses. The present-day estuary, known as El Azuzul, is part of an ancient river course that once pertained to the Coatzacoalcos River system. Early Pre-Classic occupation follows closely along this ancient course in a linear fashion, as evidenced by the monumental earthworks at Loma del Zapote and Potrero Nuevo. The Loma del Zapote site is strategically located at the fork of two rivers to take advantage of transportation and communication.

The following discussion touches upon monumental sculpture from three areas on the Loma del Zapote site. Two contexts were archaeologically investigated, and a third is a fortuitously discovered key sculpture. These monuments form an important basis for interpretation, and the fact that this is hinterland site of the regional center at San Lorenzo makes the contrast even more interesting.

The first case is a new monument from Loma del Zapote (Cyphers 1992a, 1992b) (Fig. 5). Although it has no context, it is important for clues it gives about function. It is a decapitated and dismembered human sculpture, seated with one leg crossed and the other one hanging down, and therefore had to be positioned on an elevated surface. With one arm held up and the other forward, the sculpture is strikingly similar to the highly adorned figure of Painting No. 1 of Oxtotitlán cave, which is seated upon the stylized earth-monster immediately above the cave mouth (Grove 1970). Perhaps this monument was designed to be placed atop a stone throne. The position of the arms recalls the

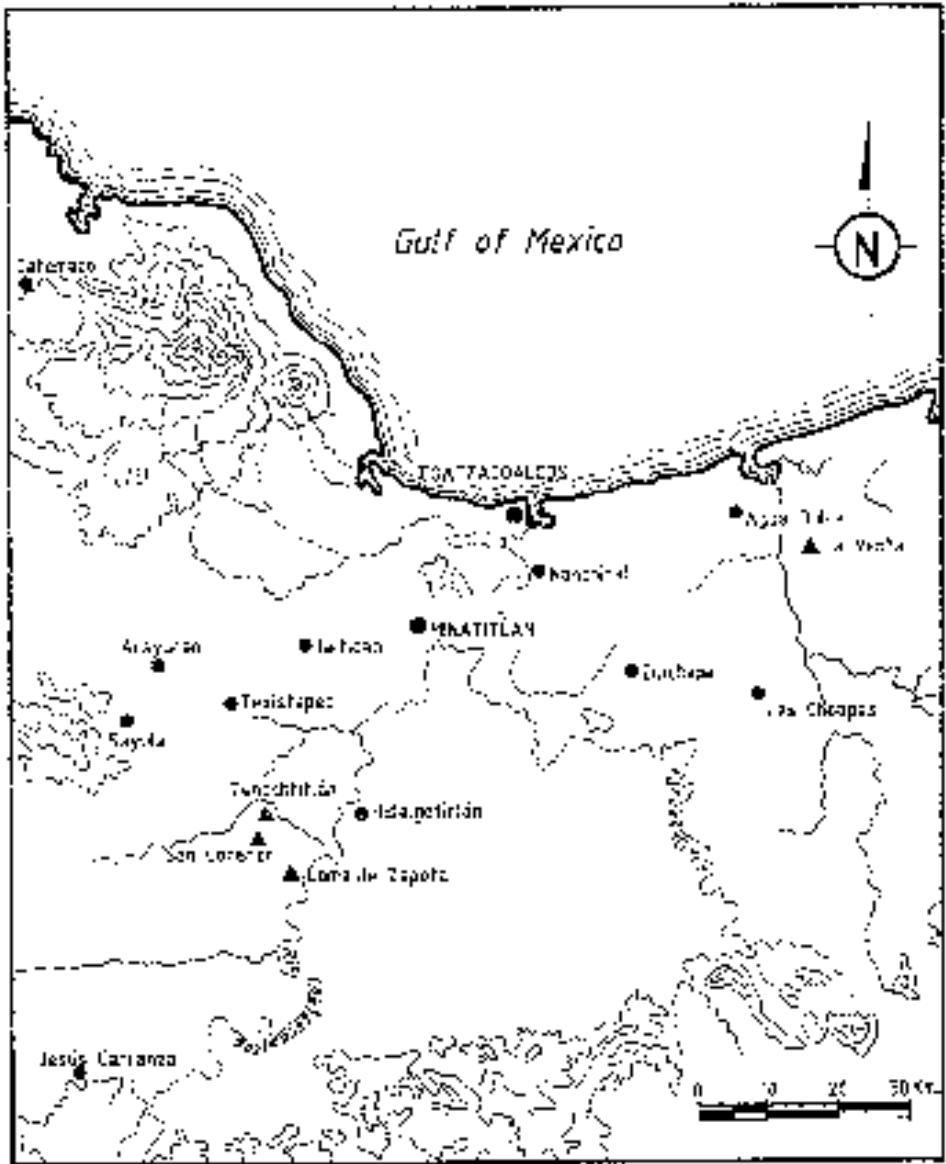


Fig. 4 Regional map showing the location of Loma del Zapote in relation to the San Lorenzo plateau. Drafted by Cesar Fernandez.



Fig. 5 Monument 11 as it was found, Loma del Zapote.

possibilities suggested for the ratcheted articulations of Monument 34 from San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980: 343).

Second, the discovery of the Rancho Azul sculptures on the Loma del Zapote site (León and Sánchez 1991–92) provides convincing evidence that Olmec sculptures were arranged in ensembles to display themes and events scenically. Four monumental sculptures occur on the southern side of the Azul acropolis at the juncture of the upper and lower stages of the man-modified hillside. Two distinct types of monuments occur here. To the west, positioned one behind the other and facing east, are two nearly identical human figures (Figs. 6, 7). To the east and northeast of these are two nearly identical felines. All these monuments were originally positioned on a pavement at the corner of monumental public architecture.

Each and every monument on the Azul Acropolis is spectacular because they are all largely intact and extraordinarily well preserved, making the an-



Fig. 6 The twin human sculptures and small feline of the Azuzul Acropolis, Loma del Zapote.



Fig. 7 Oblique view of the large feline located just a few meters from the twins and small feline, Azuzul Acropolis, Loma del Zapote.

cient setting in this place of incalculable historic value. As they must have been viewed in ancient times, they undoubtedly formed a spectacular sight when seen by people disembarking at the nearby river. Each human figure with classically Olmec features measures one meter tall. Both sculptures are identical in size and form, with only a slight difference evident in the facial characteristics, to the same degree that “identical twins” are really exact copies of each other. Representing young males, each figure is similarly mutilated to erase probable identifying insignia on the headdress. Holding a short bar, each twin stares ahead in a forwardly inclined seated position that gives the impression of imminent movement.

More differences between the two felines can be described than between the human twins. Nevertheless, the overall form and shape of both felines obey the same concept or canon. The differential sizes of the feline sculptures are the most notable contrast between them (1.20 m and 1.64 m high respectively), with details of the mouth and teeth as well as finely engraved lines marking minor differences. Several traits, such as the stilted posture, hammer marks, and vestiges of remnant surfaces, indicate that these felines are recarved monuments (Cyphers and Botas 1994; Cyphers 1992b). Unfortunately, there is no good hint to the nature of the earlier phase sculptures. Recalling Furst’s treatise on human-to-jaguar transformations—“the jaguar beneath” (1968)—recarving monuments into felines may be viewed as a metaphor for shamanistic animal transformations, a perception in accord with animistic interpretations of Pre-Classic religion (Pohorilenko 1977; Marcus 1989).

The physical arrangement and characteristics of human figures and felines bear uncanny symbolic resemblances to later period myths from the Maya and Central Mexican cultures about twins and jaguars. Like the young heroic twin gods of the *Popol Vuh* (Edmonson 1971) who are associated with sun and light, these twins face east, the direction of sunrise and the first source of light. The jaguar associations with Quiché kingship seem to be echoed by the felines and are reminders that feline-ruler connections have been documented throughout Mesoamerican prehistory (among others, Coe 1972; Matos 1984; Thompson 1970; Schele and Freidel 1990).

Perhaps the parallels are mere coincidence, or perhaps this scene represents a very ancient myth that dates to the Early Pre-Classic. Associated with public architecture, the scene may be interpreted as a vestige of a ritual reenactment in which monuments were utilized to portray a possible historical or mythical event with astronomical significance or symbolism. The lack of dedicatory offerings with the four sculptures may indicate that this is an abandoned visual display, an explanation that does not negate the possibility that it is a ritually dedicated offering.

The third case is the excavation of a monument *in situ* on the western edge of the Loma del Zapote site (Los Treinta locality). Decapitated and dismembered, the human torso was at one time seated or kneeling. As found, it was facing directly west toward the setting sun (Fig. 8). Propped on a pedestal of sedimentary rocks, it was located on the eastern edge of a structure. The first bentonite pavement, a well-made surface with curious faced stones forming lines and canals, was covered by a later bentonite pavement. Between the two pavements, two secondary burials without offerings were recovered. One was partially disturbed by a later intrusion, but the other was completely sealed between the pavements. Perhaps that of a sacrificial victim, the burial includes skull and feet that are 2–3 m from the flexed limbs and articulated bones of the torso. Evidence for other associated rituals comes from a nearby shallow circular feature 3 m in diameter which is reminiscent of ritual baths. Interestingly, later period intrusions of pottery vessels around the monument show that it



Fig. 8 Front view of Monument 5, a decapitated and mutilated human torso wearing a cape and pectoral, excavated at the Los Treinta locality of the Loma del Zapote site.

was subject to periodic offerings through time.

This monument and its specific context add another note of diversity to settings and at the same time shows the multidimensional aspects of monument mutilation (see also Grove 1981; Porter 1989). In contrast to the display at Rancho El Azuzul, this monument was brutally mutilated, sacrificed to, and then set in its final display where it was subject to continuing ritualistic activities through time.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

To summarize, scenic display, recycling, and rulership revolve about a general concept of transformation. The specific processes of material and symbolic transformation discussed here point to a changing, fluctuating, or cyclical milieu in San Lorenzo society. The transformation of objects and concepts, a time-consuming and labor-intensive business, entailed work in planning, production, and redistribution. Recycling and scenic displays went hand in hand to create definite social obligations and organizations. Because transformed symbols used repetitively in rites were relocated for celebrations, ceremonies and their accompanying labor obligations were likely predictable events, even though their ideological content may have varied according to the needs perceived by the elite. Scenic display fomented the integration and participation of all sectors, creating a reproductive Olmec social identity. Ritual reenactment of mythical or historical dramas using sculpture and architecture permitted the Olmec successfully to combine ceremony, rulership, and cosmology.

This chapter has offered a broader and more precise concept of context for the analysis of Olmec monumental sculpture in relation to postulated ritual behavior and the associated social and belief systems. In contrast to the frequently *faute-de-mieux* attempts to reconstruct an underlying ideology through the iconography of single objects often only loosely anchored in time and space, I suggest, in however preliminary a form, a potential methodology for generating interpretative statements that can be tested against each other and against an enormously expanded body of data.

It is apparent that the spatial context of monumental sculptures regularly included other such sculptures. This observation raises the probability that the "meanings" of each piece may have been multivocal, modifiable in terms of what other pieces were placed where and in what association with it. An isolated piece would thus convey one set of possible symbolic significances; that same piece relocated to an architectural setting could acquire a different set of meanings. Associated offerings, moreover, may help to differentiate meanings—

are they, for instance, apparently one-time or repetitive?—and potentially shed light on conceptions of history. It is one thing to plug in the ethnohistorically documented (for other peoples and much later times) view of history as cyclical and repetitive, quite another to point to a series of offerings or repeated architectural modifications as direct material evidence of such a conception.

Attention to spatial context similarly permits interpretation of other aspects of Olmec culture. The restriction of monumental sculpture to only certain areas within a site not only documents and helps to confirm the nonegalitarian nature of society (a long-standing interpretation clearly based on other evidence as well), but suggests a specific elite power base that can be investigated. Control of water, in this case drinking water, is implicated in the association of sculptural groups with a carefully fashioned canal line with troughs of imported stone. This point may be important especially in view of the conventional assumption that, in the human Gulf Coast environment, water is seldom, if ever, a limiting factor.

Chronological context, from the perspective of this chapter, may also influence meaning and must be taken into account as we attempt to infer or reconstruct such meaning. If the symbolic significance of any monument is modifiable by its association with other monuments, it then follows that a piece may “mean” one thing at one time, something quite different at another. The San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project has documented the regular, systematic reuse, recarving, and recycling of stone sculpture. Understandable intuitively—the necessary raw materials are exotic and their procurement was relatively expensive in direct labor costs and the more indirect costs of maintaining certain types of sociopolitical institutions—this observation has still wider implications. The storage spaces and workshops involved in such undertakings are also spatially restricted, associated physically and by extension socially with elite buildings. There would clearly have been a supporting, justifying ideology in association with this behavior. Less directly perhaps, I imply that the material itself was in some sense sacralized and thus conserved and curated for reuse. Because any such recarvings would have altered symbolic meaning, one wonders about the specific histories of particular monuments and speculates on the extent to which such meanings may have been cumulative.

Persistence of a single belief system over a time span of some one thousand years and across an enormous and diverse geographic expanse would be unlikely. Within even any single Olmec site there would have been a distinctive history of social, political, economic, and religious changes, and, accordingly, variation would be expected in the relative size and status of social groups and institutions at any site. Whatever sort of interrelationship between social groups

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and belief systems or ideologies that existed seems predictably variable at the intrasite as well as intersite levels. It becomes fruitless to attempt to reconstruct a single overarching “Olmec ideology”; the stylistic and formal variability that makes it so difficult to specify an “Olmec style” is in fact telling us something. In view of these considerations, the increased attention to context as advocated here could help to detail this variability and thus eventually help to explain it.

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