Construction of Complex A at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico: A History of Buildings, Burials, Offerings, and Stone Monuments

Arlene Colman

Brigham Young University - Provo

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The Construction of Complex A at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico:

A History of Buildings, Burials, Offerings,

and Stone Monuments

Arlene Colman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

John E. Clark
Alan J. Christenson
Donald W. Forsyth

Department of Anthropology
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

The Construction of Complex A at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico:
A History of Buildings, Burials, Offerings, and Stone Monuments

Arlene Colman
Department of Anthropology
Master of Arts

In 1969, Paul Tolstoy commented that archaeological investigation at La Venta had become “a fairly long and at times tortuous story of excavation, interpretation, re-interpretation, and depredation at the famous site found by Stirling.” This thesis adds to the torture by describing and illustrating the architecture, burials, offerings, and stone sculpture of La Venta Complex A in an effort to reconcile data into an accurate sequence of meaningful cultural events. The details derive from excavation reports, field notes, maps, photographs, and correspondence of the early investigators of the site. This study addressed three myopic perceptions regarding La Venta: (1) the secludedness of Complex A, in particular the Ceremonial Court, from its inception to its termination, (2) the classification and identification of real human burials in Complex A, and (3) the analytical decontextualization of objects, offerings, and monuments from connected ritual activities there.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. John E. Clark holds my largest debt of gratitude. Dr. Clark sparked my interest in Olmec studies and introduced me to the wonders of La Venta. Like Boaz in the Old Testament, Dr. Clark let me glean among the sheaves and “let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them” (Ruth 2:16). I greatly appreciate the time Dr. Clark spent working his editing magic on my sleep-deprived prose. I am glad he deigned to be my thesis committee chair.

I thank the New World Archaeology Foundation (NWAF) artists, particularly Megan Wakefield and Kisslan Chan, for assistance with the illustrations and Mary Pye for her helpful comments.

I am grateful to Dr. Allen Christenson and Dr. Donald Forsyth for being on my thesis committee and for being tolerant of my last minute, up to the deadline presentation and submission. I thank Evie Forsyth in the Anthropology Department and Fred Nelson for making sure I did not lose my way.

My appreciation is offered to NWAF: first, for providing me a paid position and interesting work, and second, for supporting my research into the site of La Venta. Grants from the Grace Shallit Memorial Fund, the Brigham Young University Anthropology Department, and NWAF also helped fund much of my research.

I thank the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institute, for allowing me to search their tremendous collections and for providing photocopies and scans of numerous documents, photographs, and maps. I know my requests required considerable time and effort. Also, the Human Studies Film Archives, Smithsonian Institute, allowed me a glimpse into the excavation of La Venta by providing copies of Uncovering Mexico’s Forgotten Treasures and Exploring Hidden Mexico.

All research paled in the light of my three boys, Xavier, Fawkes, & Kian; but ultimately they made the work worthwhile. Lastly I bow to Quint, without whom I could accomplish little.
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Speculation and theorizing have generally outpaced basic analytical studies of the fundamental material of Olmec archeology with respect to many realms of Olmec culture. Until a sufficient number of such basic studies are carried out, much interpretation must remain tentative and founded upon an inadequate groundwork.


Introduction

Ever since its discovery in the swampy jungle of southern Mexico in 1925, La Venta has been the key archaeological site for understanding Olmec civilization, the earliest civilization known in Middle America (Figure 1). Intensive excavations at La Venta in the 1940s and 1950s revealed the presence of large carved stone monuments, including colossal heads and table-top thrones, modest clay platforms flanking a 30 m high pyramid, and impressive offerings of jade, serpentine, and jewelry in the area north of the pyramid. Because of extremely poor viewing conditions in the tropical rainforest, different parts of La Venta were discovered piecemeal, and it was decades before scholars realized that all the platforms and stone sculptures found in the vicinity were part of a single site, an ancient city that was occupied from 900-400 BC (González Lauck 2001).

The discontinuous history of archaeological investigation at La Venta led to the central irony that I address in this thesis: La Venta is the best known city of Olmec culture and central to understanding the history of Mesoamerican civilization, but it is still poorly known. How can contributions of La Venta to Olmec civilization be recognized if the basic history of the city is first not accurately represented? Like most early Mesoamerican cities, La Venta was founded, built, flourished, diminished, and died—a biography well-attested in the sequence of platform and building constructions, votive offering and burial placements, and carved stone sculpture arrangements. Because of how the site has been investigated, the most detailed information for construction and caching events is for the area north of the great pyramid—a sector of the site known as Complex A. This sector constitutes less than one-fifth of the total
Figure 1. Map of Mesoamerica showing the location of La Venta.
area of the site. Clay platforms and stone sculptures are known for the southern part of La Venta, but little
detailed information is available on the relative or absolute ages of construction events. Consequently, the
history of La Venta told in narratives is essentially the history of Complex A. This is problematic for two
reasons. First, Complex A was clearly a specialized portion of the site and probably not representative of
events at the rest of La Venta. Second, the history of Complex A has not been properly or completely told.
I address this second problem here.

This thesis is an exercise in reconciling the La Venta Complex A data into a sequence of
meaningful cultural events. I rearrange and reorganize the known data into a more accurate description
of the temporal and spatial relationships of different described features at the site. The data involved
in my reconciliation project comprise the early excavation reports, field notes, maps, photographs, and
correspondence of the early investigators of the site. My discussion is limited to giving a clear account of
the construction history of Complex A in regards to its earthen platforms, offerings, burials, and carved
monuments.

La Venta is an ancient city viewed through archaeology. The first portion of my thesis presents an
archaeological context for the site. I give a general picture in Chapter 2 of the different archaeologically
defined areas of the site, followed in Chapter 3 with a history of site exploration. I next discuss the
problem of determining La Venta's chronology (both relative and absolute) using ceramic analysis and
radiocarbon dating (Chapter 4). Once the archaeology side of La Venta is contextualized, I depict
the city's past by piecing together the excavation results from Complex A. Chapter 5 delineates the
construction sequence of platforms, offerings, and burials, as well as monument placement in Complex A.
Next, I describe the offerings and burials by phase in Chapter 6, followed by a description of the carved
stone sculpture associated with Complex A's platforms and a comparison with groups of monuments
associated with earthen platforms in the other main portions of the site in Chapter 7. I summarize my
picture of Complex A in the final chapter.
However one defines “civilization,” in actual practice there is often no choice but to recognize it by the monumentality of its remains. Massive constructions indicate a technology and an organization that could concentrate human energies and talents on pursuits other than subsistence activities. More significantly, they testify to a concern with permanence: an awareness of the past and a purposeful regard for the future beyond the immediate interest of the living.

Tatiana Proskouriakoff 1971: 141

The Site of La Venta

The city of La Venta was built on an island surrounded by swamps. The swamps are remnants of rivers that once flowed past the island. The geography of its location is considered a purposeful placement of the prehistoric city for various reasons: abundance of subsistence resources, access routes for trade and transportation via the rivers, and metaphysical beliefs (Clark 2010; González Lauck 1988, 1996, 2001; Grove 1992; Pool 2007).

The central axis for the city is a centerline that runs 8 degrees west of true north. The main pyramid, low platforms, burials, offerings, and carved stone monuments were positioned in relation to this axis (Clark 2008: 554-555). North of the pyramid, the architecture is placed in “perfect bilateral symmetry” (Pool 2007: 157). To facilitate discussion and reporting, the site excavators segregated the platforms, plazas, and pyramid into different complexes (Figure 2). The more than 30 m high pyramid with a basal platform1 was christened Complex C. The area directly to the north of this pyramid is Complex A. This includes the section known as the Ceremonial Court, a rectangular area demarcated by basalt columns. Complex B lies south and southwest of the pyramid and includes an extensive plaza in addition to earthen platforms. East of Complex B is a large platform named the Stirling Acropolis.2

1 The body of the pyramid is a formidable large mass of clay which amounts to about 3.5 million cubic feet (Heizer 1971:54; Heizer and Drucker 1978: 243). Its round base rests on a raised platform and is in the form of a cone whose outer surface consists of a series of 10 alternating ridges and valleys (Heizer 1974). The pyramid is commonly considered to be a symbol of a sacred mountain (Grove 1999: 265).

2 The Stirling Acropolis measures approximately 200 by 215 m and rises 11 m above the original ground level. Its mass is slightly in excess of 16.5 million cubic feet (Heizer 1971: 54).
Figure 2. La Venta map showing Complex and platform designations (NWAF drawing based on González Lauck 1988: fig. 1).
the Complex B plaza is Complex D, which includes an E-group (Mounds D-1 and D-8). Complexes E, F, G, H, and I are positioned around the nucleus of the site. These five complexes were discovered and delineated while mapping the site in the 1980s (González Lauck 1988).

Within each Complex, structures were assigned further designations (i.e., B-1, B-2, etc.) (Fig. 2). The Ceremonial Court in Complex A is unique in this naming game. The whole court is considered A-1. The interior elements of the court are then designated with an additional letter (i.e., A-1-c). However, within the court, the features are mainly referred to by descriptive appellations (see Figure 3). An additional snag with Complex A is that the denomination of features was not entirely set until the 1955 excavations (Drucker et al. 1959). Earlier excavation reports occasionally use different names, such as West Bastion instead of Southwest Platform. Table 1 correlates the various labels for mounds.

The entire site is estimated to cover some 200 hectares (494 acres) although little more than half of the ancient city survived modern disturbances enough to map accurately (González Lauck 1989:84; 2001:799). Rebecca González Lauck (1989:83; 1996:75) defines Complex C as a civic-ceremonial structure, Complexes B, D, G, H, and the Stirling Acropolis as civic-administrative structures, and Complex A as a small but impressive ceremonial precinct. Residential areas were present within Complexes E and I and outside of the city limits on nearby sites on river levees (i.e., the sustaining area) (González Lauck 1989:83; 1996:75; 2000:382). Complex F is considered to have been a Late Classic settlement in the area (González Lauck 1989:83-84).

Richard Diehl (2004:61-70) gives a colorful description of La Venta with a slightly different take on the functional use of each complex. Diehl (2004:61) considers La Venta to be a “Regal-Ritual City where ritual and ideology dominated the lives of the inhabitants.” Thus, royalty and religion reigned as opposed to civic administration. Complexes A, B, C, and the Stirling Acropolis constituted an “integrated Royal Compound” connecting the ruler and his subjects to the supernatural world through both private and public rituals. The south apron of Complex C was a stage for performing to thousands of spectators gathered in the large plaza below. The interpretive variation between Diehl’s and González Lauck’s descriptions is perhaps only semantic, but word choice elicits different backdrops of the reconstructed past.
### Table 1. Feature Designations in Complex A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Designations</th>
<th>Other Designations</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Associated Offerings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-1</td>
<td>Ceremonial Court</td>
<td>Court</td>
<td>Area within vertical basalt columns</td>
<td>listed by subfeature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-a</td>
<td>Court Wall</td>
<td>Fence, Palisade, Corral</td>
<td>Enclosing basalt column wall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-b</td>
<td>Court Floor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fills, floor levels, drainage systems, etc. of general Court area</td>
<td>1943-A, 1943-B, 1, 2, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-c</td>
<td>South-Central Platform</td>
<td>Stile, entryway</td>
<td>Stepped platform just inside the southern border of A-1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-d</td>
<td>Southeast Platform</td>
<td>East Bastion, East Platform</td>
<td>Rectangular column-enclosed structure projecting southward from the fence of the Court on the southeast</td>
<td>Pavement No. 1 (Massive Offering 4), 1943-E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-e</td>
<td>Southwest Platform</td>
<td>West Bastion, West Platform</td>
<td>Rectangular column-enclosed structure projecting southward from the fence of the Court on the southwest</td>
<td>1942-E, Massive Offering 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-f</td>
<td>Northeast Platform</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-g</td>
<td>Northwest Platform</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-h</td>
<td>Massive Offering 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 pavement-like levels of serpentine blocks</td>
<td>2a, 8, 10, 12, 13, 1943-C, 1943-D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1-i</td>
<td>Northeast Entryway</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-2</td>
<td>Mound A-2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Platform mound north of the Court</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-2-a</td>
<td>Monument 7</td>
<td>Tomb A, Basalt Tomb</td>
<td>Tomb of basalt columns</td>
<td>1942-A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-2-b</td>
<td>Tomb E</td>
<td>11 Horizontally placed columns</td>
<td></td>
<td>1943-F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-2-c</td>
<td>Monument 6</td>
<td>Tomb B, stone box, sarcophagus, stone tigre</td>
<td>Sandstone coffer with carved end</td>
<td>1942-B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-2-d</td>
<td>Massive Offering 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Single pavement-like layer of serpentine slabs</td>
<td>9, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-3-a</td>
<td>Tomb C, Stone Cist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1943-G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Feature designations in Complex A (based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 4).
Excavation in Complex A, particularly work in 1955, determined that the construction history of this complex consisted of four main episodes, labeled Phases I-IV by the excavators—much to their later chagrin (Drucker et al. 1959; Heizer 1971: 51). A description of each phase detailing the structural constructions and associated offerings is presented in Chapter 5. Robert Heizer (1960, 1961, 1962) speculated that each phase lasted a century. He later stated that he was trying to approach the idea of organization and motivation of the actors at La Venta by following the advice of his teacher, Alfred Kroeber:

Now and then it seems permissible for the student to leave off his daily association with specific facts and rise above them on the gyroscope of his imagination...The requirement which integrity imposes on these ventures is that knowledge and fancy, fact and fabrication, be kept as distinct as possible, lest one come to pass for the other. (Kroeber 1923: 125)

Heizer admitted, “I see now in the cold glow of criticism that which I did not in the warmth of enthusiasm, namely that I failed to observe the proper measure of ‘integrity’ which Kroeber recommended in not making it sufficiently clear where I was quoting fact and where I was interpreting it” (Heizer 1964: 49). Heizer emphasized that his suggestion of renewal periods based on the Mesoamerican calendar ritual were “sheerest guesses” (Heizer 1964: 50). The construction phases are still viewed as periodic episodes, each initiated with a massive offering event, instead of a continuous sequence of activity.

To date, over 90 stone monuments have been attributed to La Venta. These are labeled Monuments 1-92, Stelae 1-5, Altars 1-8, and Plaque 1. These interpretative names are not necessarily accurate. For example, Monuments 25/26, 27, and 86-89 are considered stelae associated with Stela 5.3 These seven sculptures were placed on the south apron of the pyramid facing the Complex B plaza (Figures 4 and 5). Four sculptures are colossal heads. Three heads (Monuments 2, 3, 4) were positioned during some point in the site’s history north of Complex A, considered by many as the northern boundary and entryway.

3 Stela 5 was assigned to two different monuments. The original Stela 5 named by Stirling (1943b) was located in Complex A. The second Stela 5 was assigned to a monument discovered on the south side of the pyramid (González Lauck 1988: 145). González Lauck (1988: 153) renamed Stirling’s Stela 4 as Altar 8. Then Stirling’s Stela 5 became González Lauck’s Stela 4. In my figures I follow the latest designations (González Lauck 1988).
Figure 4. La Venta map showing discovery locations of stone sculpture (based on maps in Drucker et al. 1959; González Lauck 1988, 1989, 2007; Heizer, Drucker, and Napton 1968; Ochoa and Jaime 2000; Wedel 1952).
to the city (Figure 6; Diehl 2004; González Lauck 2009; Grove 1999). The fourth head (Monument 1) was found in the Complex B plaza near Stela 2 (Figures 7 and 8). Four tabletop thrones were recovered (Altars 2, 3, 4, 5), two on the south face of the pyramid and two on platform D-8 (the long mound of an E-group) (Figure 9). Three other colossal sandstone monuments (Monuments 52, 53, 54) were situated on Mound D-7 and are considered the southern boundary of the site (Figure 10; Stirling 1968b). Figure 4 gives the closest approximate location of where stone sculptures were uncovered. Unfortunately, location information is not available for all of the sculpture discovered.

The discovery of carved stone monuments brought archaeological attention to La Venta (see Chapter 3). They helped identify the original occupants as being part of the Olmec culture. Monumental sculpture, however, does not easily lend itself to historical interpretation. Sculptures are often shuffled about, reused, or defaced, and the original stratigraphic associations are usually lost. In contrast, the offerings and burials at La Venta can be related to relational time and placed accurately in space. Absolute time is difficult to specify for the events in Complex A, for reasons described in Chapter 4. This is due to the nature of radiocarbon at La Venta, not for want of trying to accurately date the construction phases. Attempts to understand the site through excavation are detailed in Chapter 3.
Figure 5. Drawing of the stone sculptures on the south face of the pyramid (NWAF drawing, adapted from originals by Hermelando Ramírez Osio and Alfredo Arcos Rivas).

Figure 6. The three colossal stone heads marking the north boundary of La Venta (NWAF drawing based on originals by Hermelando Ramírez Osio).
Figure 7. Monument 1 (Robert F. Heizer Papers: National Anthropological Archives [NAA], Smithsonian Institute).

Figure 8. Stela 2 found near a colossal stone head (Mon. 1) in the plaza south of the pyramid (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute and NWAF drawing).
Figure 9. Altars 4 and 5 discovered on each side of the long mound of an E-group (D-1 and D-8). (Altar 4: Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute and NWAF drawing; Altar 5: Philip Drucker Papers, NAA Smithsonian Institute, and NWAF drawing).

Figure 10. The three colossal stone heads marking the south boundary of La Venta (NWAF drawing based on originals by Hermelendo Ramírez Osio).
I have been struck by the number of individuals who after becoming involved with a single fine specimen of Olmec art, spent the rest of their careers as Olmec enthusiasts... I think all of us felt that it must have taken a remarkable culture to produce art objects with such a powerful effect and that something should be done to find out more about it.

Matthew W. Stirling 1968a: 1

History of Exploration at La Venta

The history of exploration at La Venta is outlined here for two main reasons. First, reviewing the intermittent investigations reveals how the archaeological perception of the city expanded with each excavation. Second, the history of excavation elucidates the limited portion of the site investigated. Both reasons add an important perspective to the many narratives on the history of Mesoamerican civilization which use La Venta as their data set.

After its initial discovery, early investigations at La Venta were aimed at defining aspects of the then recently identified Olmec culture and putting it in its proper temporal and physical place. Later work focused on delineating the physical boundaries and past functions of the city itself. This chapter reviews the different inquiries at the site in chronological order.

1925

Published explorations of La Venta began in 1925. Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge (1926) visited La Venta for one day as part of the Tulane University expedition to Middle America. With the aid of several

1 It appears they were in search of the “houses of idols on hills” described by Bernal Diaz (Blom and La Farge 1926: 79-80; Diaz 1904). It is interesting that the site was already known as La Venta before Blom and La Farge’s reconnaissance. I could not find where the name was first implemented prior to their publication. Blom and La Farge seem to match Diaz’s description with some previous information available about La Venta’s location. Stirling (1943b: 49) remarks that the first mention of the La Venta site is by Charnay (1887) who, in 1883, heard about it in an inaccurate way from a native in Comalcalco, “…I hear from a montanero, who first discovered them, that an important Indian City formerly existed there, whose monuments, like those of Comalcalco, consist of caryatides, columns, and statues.”
local guides they were able to locate, sketch, and photograph eight stone monuments on site and to trace
the history of two ‘idols’ displayed in Villahermosa back to the ruins of La Venta.

Blom and La Farge first encountered Stela 1 and noticed a row of pillars to the northwest set close
together “forming something like a fence” with Stela 3 near the center (Blom and La Farge 1926: 82).
They then continued along a path leading south to the other side of the pyramid. There, Stela 2, Altars
2, 3, and 4, and a large, fallen sandstone block on the side of a small hill reported to release smoke on
occasion were located and marked on their rough plan (Figure 11; Blom and La Farge 1926: figs. 68,
73-75, 77-78). The explorers also uncovered “the most amazing monument of them all—a huge bell-
shaped boulder. At first it puzzled us very much, but after a little digging, to our amazement, we saw that
what we had in front of us was the upper part of a colossal head” (Figure 12; Blom and La Farge 1926:
84-85).

Inquiries into the location of available rock to quarry material for these large works of art revealed
the closest source to be over 100 kilometers away. This information led the explorers (Blom and La Farge
1926: 84) to pose the first of La Venta's many riddles—how did the ancient inhabitants transport large
blocks of stone to the island from such a great distance, “across swampy ground or along the rivers?”

1931

In an apparently uninformed and unrelated incident, H. A. Knox stumbled across La Venta during a
shooting expedition (Joyce and Knox 1931; Stirling 1943b: 49). While cutting a path through the bush,
his hunting crew struck stone. A larger area was subsequently cleared exposing a carved slab (Stela 1) and
statues. Knox hoped to return to the area to recover “these curious objects” but the wish was never fulfilled.

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2 These two sculptures have been included in the monument numbering system of La Venta: Idol 1 – Monument 8, Idol 2 – Monument 70.
3 Stirling (1943b: 49) comments “to avoid confusion, the numbers given by Blom to the monuments discovered have been retained, with the exception of the one he calls Altar 1, which on excavation turned out to be a stela; this has been designated Stela 3.”
4 This block is apparently labeled Stela 3 on their sketch map. This is not the same monument currently designated as Stela 3, which Blom called Altar 1 (Stirling 1943b: 49, 51-52). It is unclear if the large sandstone slab was ever relocated or relabeled. González-Lauck (2004: table 1, 2009) states that it is one of the three large sandstone monuments on D-7 (Monument 53). Blom and La Farge attribute the mysterious smoke to evaporation.
5 Blom and La Farge’s luck in locating the monuments did not extend to the development of their photographs. Much of their film came out blank (Wicke 1971: 10).
Figure 11. 1926 sketch of the La Venta ruins (NWAF drawing based on Blom and La Farge 1926: fig. 68).

Figure 12. Photograph of Colossal Head in *Tribes and Temples* (Blom and La Farge 1926: fig. 76).
A partial sketch of the niche figure on Altar 4 is included in a published article of the short event, along with two photos of Stela 1 and two figurine fragments (Joyce and Knox 1931: Plate B).

1940

It was the 1926 publication of the colossal head in *Tribes and Temples*, later labeled Monument 1, that aroused the interest of Matthew W. Stirling and spurred the joint expedition of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society in 1940 (Stirling 1975: 305). While planning reconnaissance trips in the area to be taken amid the excavation season at Tres Zapotes (Stirling 1940, 1943b, 1957, 1968a), Stirling remembered the photograph of the upper part of a huge head, with one eye exposed (Fig. 12), and recognized a similarity to the colossal head unearthed at Tres Zapotes. La Venta was thus included in Stirling’s 1939-40 fieldwork because, “the presence of large monuments such as the colossal heads suggested the existence of important sites where the mysterious art style [Olmec art] could be found in its cultural context” (Stirling 1968a: 4).

Stirling and his entourage, including wife Marion Stirling, archaeologist Philip Drucker, and photographer Richard Stewart, uncovered 20 stone monuments during ten days6 of exploration at La Venta (Stirling 1940: 332)7. Among the 20 were seven of Blom and La Farge’s discoveries. Stirling almost despaired of relocating the colossal head, but he finally stumbled across it, and he recognized Stela 2 nearby. After brushing off the first head, a small boy led the company to three other colossal heads about a half-mile north (Stirling 1940: 329).

Perhaps Stirling’s greatest discovery of the ten days, at least in relation to this thesis, was the only known offering (Offering 1940-A) located outside Complex A. While excavating in front of Altar 4,

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6 There is no clear statement of what days Stirling and company were at La Venta. On the Smithsonian web exhibit—*Olmec Legacy*—a letter to Alexander Wetmore on March 11, 1940, from Tres Zapotes informs him that the party returned to Tres Zapotes last Tuesday from La Venta. Apparently Drucker contracted Malaria at some point during or immediately after the trip to La Venta (http://anthropology.si.edu/olmec/english/expeditions/1939/livingField.htm). Cerro de las Mesas was visited right before the trip to La Venta (Stirling 1940). In 1940 it took the Stirlings five days, part of it on foot trekking on muddy paths, to go from their camp in southern Veracruz to the site of La Venta just across the border to Tabasco. Two years later it took them 12 hours to travel all the way from Mexico City to La Venta (http://anthropology.si.edu/olmec/english/expeditions/1939/gettingThere.htm)

7 In a different publication, Stirling (1943b: 49) lowered the number of sculpted stone monuments found: “not counting the stone columns, we located 17 carved monuments at La Venta. With the 2 at Villa Hermosa, this makes a total of 19 now known from the site. To these might be added the unique stone sarcophagus and tomb of basalt columns discovered by Dr. Drucker during the 1942 excavations.”
a clay floor of mixed burned material was encountered. Altar 4 (Fig. 9) rested on this floor, on top of a foundation of white limestone nodules. On this floor level, approximately five feet in front of the altar’s niche lay 99 large jade beads and one amethyst bead (Drucker 1952: 166; Stirling 1940: 325). These were positioned in series, as if they had been strung on a necklace and two bracelets (Stirling 1943b: 55).

1942

Drucker and Stirling returned in 1942 to determine La Venta’s temporal placement in Mesoamerican history. With this aim in mind, Drucker excavated 40 test pits and three stratigraphic trenches (Drucker 1952: 10-22). Profiles of the pits and trenches were not published and only general locations of the testing recorded (Grove 1997: 58). Stirling arrived for the third phase of the 1942 excavations—structural investigations aimed at recovering data on the ceremonial and artistic aspects of the Olmec culture (Drucker 1952: 10). Stirling’s brief visit to the site fortunately coincided with the work in Mound A-2 wherein the sandstone sarcophagus, basalt tomb, and associated burial offerings were revealed (Drucker 1952: 23-28, figs. 9, 10, pls. 1, 2a; Grove 1997: 58-60; Mason 1943; Stirling and Stirling 1942). Stirling took charge of the excavation of these features (Drucker 1952: 2; Drucker and Heizer 1965: 57). He then left to attend a round-table conference in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, on “Mayas y Olmecas” where he described the remarkable finds just uncovered (Stirling 1942: 184, 1968: 5). Drucker continued excavating in Mound A-2 and exposed Offering 1942-C, a cache of 37 celts placed in a cruciform arrangement; the three largest celts were engraved (see Chapter 6; Drucker 1952: 27, figs. 9, 10b, 47; Stirling and Stirling 1942: 643).

Three other structures were test-trenched after Stirling’s departure: the South-Central Platform, the Southwest Platform, and the “fence” of basalt columns in the northwest corner (Figure 13; Drucker 1952: 22, figs. 11, 12, 13). The South-Central platform proved to be a complex structure; “the complete profile of the west wall shows what appear to have been four enlargements of an original low stile-like entryway” (Drucker 1952: 28, fig. 11). Here, the complex stratigraphy of sequential colored clays floors used in Complex A was first noted (Drucker 1952: pl. 2 right). Work in the Southwest Platform revealed an abode brick platform of 16 courses beneath the visible stone columns that incompletely fenced the
Figure 13. Excavated areas in Complex A (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 4).
top of the structure (Drucker 1952: 31, pl. 3; Mason 1943). Offering 1942-E was recovered beneath the bricks, originally described as two caches of serpentine celts: two on the north side and four on the east side. The excavators did not find the actual bottom of the Southwest Platform until they renewed digging in 1955 and exposed a mosaic mask resting on 28 layers of serpentine further below (Massive Offering 1). The small trench exploring the Court’s column-fence only removed dirt from the inside of the enclosure. The vertical columns were found embedded into a wall of compact orange-red clay. Moving inside the court 55.8 cm east, the wall dipped at a step angle. On the inside of the wall was a horizontal row of seven neatly squared basalt blocks laid end to end, and inclined to rest firmly against the slanting face of the wall. Below these were three serpentine blocks (Drucker 1952: 32-33, fig. 13). Just beneath the serpentine was a horizontal layer of the same orange-red clayey soil, later identified as equivalent to the red cap of Phase IV construction (Drucker et al. 1959). All of the 1942 excavation season was accomplished within three weeks aided by an 8-10 man crew (Drucker et al. 1959: 1).

To some degree, surface reconnaissance was done in 1942. In April, Stirling found, incompletely excavated, and photographed three large reddish, sandstone monuments (Stirling 1968b). He was unsure how they related to the main complex of La Venta; therefore, he labeled them with letters as Monuments A, B, and C. These are now Monuments 52, 53, and 54. Drucker knew of their existence and reserved numbers 16, 17, and 18 for them (Drucker 1952: 175; González Lauck 1988: 151).

Stirling and Drucker appear to have taken Alfred L. Kroeber’s one critique of *Tribes and Temples* (Blom and La Farge 1926) to heart: “Its outstanding defect may be mentioned at once: an attempt to combine the popular aspects of expeditionary travel with solid scientific description… The days of Stephens and Squier are over for Central America; separation of narrative which appeals to the layman’s sense of adventure, and of scientific text, is not only indicated but most likely to meet with approbation” (Kroeber 1928: 134). Accordingly, Stirling (1939, 1940, 1941, 1943a, 1947; Stirling and Stirling 1942; cf. Drucker and Heizer 1956) authored the romantic side of the explorations and left much of the scientific description for Drucker (1947, 1952, 1961; Drucker and Heizer 1960, 1965; Drucker et al. 1959; cf. Stirling 1943b, 1955, 1961, 1965, 1968b).
Since military service prevented Drucker’s participation, Stirling included Waldo Wedel in the 1943 excavation season at La Venta (Wedel 1952). Their labor force included 18-20 men (Drucker et al. 1959: 1). The three months of investigations “consisted of a series of connected trenches directed basically at further study of features on and near the north-south axis line bisecting Complex A” (Fig. 13; Wedel 1952: 36). The length of the main trench ran northward from the base of the pyramid about 150 m, bisecting Mound A-3, the Ceremonial Court, and up to the south half of Mound A-2 (Figure 14; Drucker 1952: pls. 4, 5, 12). The width of the cut varied, as did the depths based on what was uncovered (Figure 15). In addition to the main trench, they also explored the basalt fence, the Southeast Platform, and the north end of the east embankment (A-4) (Drucker 1952: pl. 6)\textsuperscript{8}

Excavations in Mound A-2 uncovered another burial offering (1943-F) beneath 11 horizontal basalt columns exposed in 1942 (Drucker 1952: pl. 13). Two other offerings, 1943-G and 1943-L, recovered from Mound A-3 also appear to be burials, albeit without the remnants of a skeleton (Drucker 1952: pls. 14, 115b). The centerline trench also exposed a mosaic pavement of serpentine blocks (Pavement No. 2) south of Mound A-3 (Drucker 1952: pl. 16). A second mosaic was found buried beneath the Southeast Platform (Pavement No. 1/ Massive Offering 4) (Drucker 1952: pls. 7, 9-11). The 1943 excavations also revealed the presence of stratified colored floor surfaces (Grove 1997: 60), similar to the varying use of colored floors exposed in the South-Central Platform test trench. Work along the basalt fence in the 1943 test trench (Wedel 1952: fig.14) gave additional information as to the presence of exterior, as well as interior, facing blocks and a stepped rampart of sun-dried brick underlying the reddish clay cap (Wedel 1952: 47-48, fig. 16).

Almost all of the offerings unearthed by Stirling and Wedel were later assigned to Phase IV construction based on the stratigraphy of the 1955 excavations. The 20 jade and serpentine celts and mirror arranged in a cruciform shape (Offering 1943-E) associated with the Southeast Platform

\textsuperscript{8} Snippets of the 1943 excavations, as well as earlier finds, are part of two films stored at the Human Studies Film Archives of the Smithsonian Institution: Exploring Hidden Mexico and Uncovering Mexico’s Forgotten Treasures. Both are in color. The first is silent. Marion Stirling Pugh narrates the second.
Figure 14. 1943 Sketch Map (NWAF drawing based on Wedel 1952: fig. 14).
exploration dated to Phase II (Drucker 1952: pl. 8). Two pottery vessels (Offering 1943-C) and six serpentine celts (Offering 1943-D) aligned in a row transverse to the centerline were assigned Phase III, probably based on depth.

1955

After serving in World War II and excavating at San Lorenzo with Stirling in 1946 (Grove 1997: 61; Stirling 1955), Drucker returned to La Venta in 1955, accompanied by Robert Heizer, Eduardo Contreras, Robert Squier, Pierre Agrinier, and sufficient funding to hire “a labor force adequate to move enough dirt to yield some conclusive results” (Drucker et al. 1959: 1; Heizer and Drucker 1962). The force amounted to 50 men for 100 working days (Drucker et al. 1959: 2). This extensive excavation plan was again centered on Complex A, particularly the Ceremonial Court. None of the previous excavations had, with absolute certainty, reached the subsoil of the site (Heizer 1958: 102). The excavators had three main tasks in 1955: (1) to carry out extensive stratigraphic excavations in order to trace the construction history of La Venta, (2) to make an accurate map of the “whole site complex,” and (3) to illustrate the
activities of the site’s occupants from the cultural data discovered (Heizer 1958: 103). The excavation did help the archaeologists establish a structural sequence of four distinct phases in Complex A, which was based primarily on vertical sections of trench walls (Figure 16; Drucker et al. 1959: 3). Complex A was carefully mapped, but the rest of the site received only a cursory sketch, and most of the platforms present went unnoticed and unrecognized as cultural features that marked a significant portion of the city. Similarly, the reconstructed past of the original occupants was limited to evidence uncovered in Complex A.

Figure 13 shows where dirt was removed in 1955. Nearly all of the structures present in Complex A were investigated to differing degrees. Only Mound A-4 and the Southeast Platform were excluded. The digging commenced with the exploration of the Southwest Platform (Heizer 1958: 103). In addition to mounds and platforms, large sections of the Court floor were trenched, as was another portion of the Court’s basalt palisade. Heizer (1968: 12) estimated that 50 percent of Complex A had “either adequately

9 Portions of this excavation are captured in the film The Excavations at La Venta published by University of California, Berkeley.
or inadequately” been examined by archaeologists, or disturbed by monument removing or destroyed for fill.

Twenty-seven finds were designated as offerings; 1-19 were determined to be associated with the construction of Phases I-IV (Drucker et al. 1959: 133-191). Massive Offerings 1, 2, and 3 were discovered and explored (Drucker et al. 1959: 128-133). More than 2500 artifacts of jade and related materials were collected (Drucker and Heizer 1956: 375). Previously collected artifacts by Stirling were “restudied” at the Museo Nacional de Antropología by Squier and Heizer in January 1957 (Heizer 1972: 91). This information was incorporated into the 1955 excavation report.

Nine additional monuments were located in 1955, bringing the known examples of large stone sculpture up to 40 (Drucker et al. 1959: 197, appendix 2). The 1955 excavations also provided the first radiocarbon dates for La Venta and Olmec culture, thus ending nearly two decades of chronological speculation (Grove 1997: 62). Interpretation of the radiocarbon dates by the excavators indicated that Complex A was constructed and used between approximately 800 – 400 BC (Drucker and Heizer 1975:388-389; Drucker et al. 1959: 267). Also, the excavations revealed that La Venta was oriented on an axis 8 degrees west of true north (Drucker et al. 1959: 13-15).

In 1955, the known site of La Venta encompassed Complexes A, C, and portions of Complexes B and D (Figure 17; Drucker et al. 1955: fig. 2). Vegetation obscured most of the site. Only the “larger-than-life” stone sculpture and pyramid stood out among the trees. This camouflage, combined with the striking offerings unearthed in Complex A, highlighted ceremonial aspects of the city. The presence of the residential areas within the site and the sustaining area along its outskirts were unknown at this time. Midden areas were also unrecognized. It is little wonder that the site was initially interpreted as a vacant ceremonial center (Drucker 1961; Drucker and Heizer 1956, 1960; Heizer 1960, 1961, 1964).

1958

Román Piña Chan and Roberto Gallegos carried out a reconnaissance of La Venta and dug a few stratigraphic trenches in 1958 (Grove 1997: 62). A short commentary on this work is published
Figure 17. 1955 map of La Venta Island (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 2).
in a book on the Olmec (Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964: 16–22). The description lacks maps and profiles. Evidence of unfilled trenches were seen on the south edge of the pyramid platform in 1967 and considered possible locations of the 1958 testing (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: 11–12). Marcia Castro-Leal (1996: 142) relates that Piña Chan and Gallegos recovered materials from leveled and partially destroyed mounds and from test pits placed after the removal of the demolished constructions. Castro-Leal comments that the majority of the material consisted of fragments of small figurines; however, six exceptional large figurines were also found.

Other, non-archaeological, excavations occurred in 1958 as well. Petroleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) expanded their airfield which originally ran diagonally past the northwest corner of Complex A (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 2). The widening of the airstrip destroyed sections of Mound A-2 and the Ceremonial Court (Heizer et al. 1968: map 1; González Lauck 1988: map 1). Many monuments were therefore moved to Villahermosa for their protection (González Lauck 1988, 1996; Grove 1997: 62).

1964

In response to the William Coe and Robert Stuckenwrath’s (1964) critique of the 1955 excavation report (Drucker et al. 1959), Squier conducted test excavations during June–July 1964 at La Venta. One test pit was placed south of the pyramid, wherein he collected three charcoal samples (Berger and Libby 1966: 474). Except for the radiocarbon dates, the work was not reported. The testing did little to refute the critics or to aid Heizer’s (1964) and Drucker’s (Drucker and Heizer 1965) clarifying responses to the critique (Coe and Stuckenwrath 1964).

1967

After the first carbon samples were analyzed from La Venta, radiocarbon dating achieved significant improvements in accuracy and reliability (Berger et al. 1967: 1–2). This happy occurrence, and perhaps the surprising Early Preclassic placement of San Lorenzo through radiocarbon dating published in March (Coe et al. 1967; Grove 1997: 66), induced Heizer to reanalyze samples run by the University of Michigan.

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10 See also Heizer’s correspondence with Robert Squier and Philip Drucker in the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Papers of Robert Heizer, Box 1.
laboratory ten years earlier (Berger et al. 1967; Crane and Griffin 1958; Drucker et al. 1957; Heizer 1974). Included in their August report (Berger et al. 1967) were Squier’s two 1964 samples (Berger and Libby 1966) and two samples from the 1955 collections rerun two years earlier (Berger et al. 1965). Based on the re-examined samples (calculated using a half-life of 5730 years, but otherwise uncorrected), the dates of La Venta were pushed back 200 years. Construction Phase I was thought to fall more towards the Early Preclassic, with an average date of 1000 BC. Post-Phase IV carbon now placed the abandonment of Complex A around 600 BC. Both dates are uncorrected radiocarbon years (Berger et al. 1967: 5).

Apparently the re-examination of original carbon samples did not satisfy the investigators. In 1967, Heizer and John Graham returned to La Venta with Drucker in tow in search of more and better carbon samples (Heizer 1974). They were in the field 13 June – 22 July and collected 35 carbon samples with the help of seven local laborers (Heizer, Graham, and Drucker 1967: 1, Addendum A). By this time, Complex A had been “completely destroyed by bulldozers operated in a large-scale search for ‘treasure’” and the stone monuments removed to the Parque Olmeca in Villahermosa (Heizer and Drucker 1975:389). Since “no undisturbed surface feature could be found” (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: 3) it was difficult for the 1967 investigators to re-establish the site’s centerline and main datum. The 1967 team excavated nine trenches; four were considered unuseable since they were used to relocate layers or features defined in 1955. Only seven trenches are detailed in their report (Trenches T-Z; Figure 18). A series of small test pits were placed along the east side of Complex A to hunt for refuse deposits. Two other test pits (Nos. 3 and 5) were excavated on high ground 100–200 hundred yards southwest of the pyramid. Drucker composed a draft paper (“La Venta Ceramics Re-visited”) based on the ceramics found in these two pits.11

Although their work was quick and concentrated on finding charcoal, some new aspects of Massive Offering 2 were discovered. In Trench X, the Heizer’s team encountered the ancient cut line of a large pit, anticipated as being the edge of Massive Offering 2. Digging to the bottom of the pit their expectations were realized when they uncovered a single layer of dressed serpentine paving blocks. Five rows of blocks were exposed. Two blocks were lifted up revealing seven small, globular, jade beads (Heizer, Drucker, and

11 The unpublished, handwritten copy can be found in the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Philip Drucker Papers-Mesoamerica-Box 18, Folder 1: Notes on La Venta Ceramics.
Graham 1968: 7-8). In Trench Y, new and interesting information regarding the massive offering pit on its north wall was acquired: the interior surface of the pit had been “plastered” with a yellowish sandy-clay and then painted in bands of varying colors (see Chapter 6; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: 10-11, fig. 8). The west wall exposed in Trench X also showed signs of painting.

The fluted nature of the pyramid first became apparent in 1967 due to a recent clearing of trees and brush (Figure 19). It is essentially circular at the base instead of being a four-sided rectangle as illustrated.
in the 1955 excavation report’s frontispiece (Drucker et al. 1959). A difference in the pyramid’s platform was also observed. The platform leveled out major surface irregularities making its height on the south side much higher than on the north side. These observations were documented in three preliminary reports (Heizer 1968; Heizer and Drucker 1968; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: 12).

1968

The newly observed riddle about the precise shape of the pyramid led to another field season conducted in January and February of 1968. The work was again led by Heizer and backed by a generous grant by the National Geographic Society. Drucker and Contreras returned to dig alongside a group of graduate students. The plan was to make a detailed topographic map of the pyramid, complete a map of mound structures and monument locations of Complex B, and excavate ceramic test pits. All of the aims were realized, although not as completely as intended (Figure 20; Hallinan et al. 1968; Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968: fig. 1, map 1, pyramid contour map, site map). Satisfactory completion was hindered
because of hostile harassment and interference from the Delegado Municipal of the village and his associates—“nightly tearing down of the walls of our ceramic test pits, confiscation of eleven of the Olmec sculptures which we discovered, removal of survey stakes each night, and continual confrontations and threats of arrest and bodily harm—all go to make the recollection of the attempt to carry out our mapping and exploration project something like a bad dream” (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968: 130).

Despite the nightmare conditions, the investigators were rewarded with the discovery of the Stirling Acropolis, as well as plotting the E-Group associated with Altars 4 and 5 and a possible ballcourt south of the acropolis or “Stirling Group” (Wyshak et al. 1971), among other architectural features (Figure 21).
Figure 21. 1968 sketch map of La Venta (NWAF drawing based on Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968).
Using T-shaped metal probes to penetrate the drift sand overburden on the Stirling Acropolis, the team was able to identify buried stones and mark their locations (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968: 142-143). After one day of probing, the investigators were faced with a maze of stakes. Only then did they decide to explore the nature of the buried stones, despite the local political risk. In addition to 23 new monuments (Clewlow and Corson 1968; Heizer 1968: 36), the work revealed the presence of stone drains similar to ones found at San Lorenzo (Figure 22; Coe 1968: 57; Drucker, Graham, and Napton 1968: figs. 2, 3; Paddock 1968: 124).

1969

The new and improved version of the shape of the pyramid at La Venta led to increased interest in the structure itself and questions about what it might contain. In May of 1969, the pyramid was surveyed
with a high-sensitivity difference magnetometer (Heizer and Drucker 1978; Morrison, Benavente, et al. 1970; Morrison, Clelowl, et al. 1970). Due to the precedent of stone being buried beneath clay in the ceremonial complex and knowing that most of the monuments and natural basalt present were highly magnetic, it was hoped that “had the Olmecs buried any large stone monuments or built any structures of basalt within the pyramid,” they could be detected by the instrument (Morrison, Benavente, et al. 1970: 167). This non-intrusive investigation was in response to the pervasive local belief that the archaeologists were looting for buried treasure. The Delegado Municipal was determined to prevent any excavations in the pyramid, despite authorization from INAH to do so (Heizer and Drucker 1978: 243).

Two main findings emerged from the 1969 season. The outer surface of the pyramid is a mantle of unknown thickness of red clay, which was notably magnetic (Heizer and Drucker 1978: 244). The data implied the structure was resurfaced on occasion and is not the result of a single-event construction. The pyramid was likely enlarged at least once and probably several times since its creation. The second finding from the survey data was a definite magnetic anomaly lying 1 to 2 meters below the surface at the top of the pyramid. A computer model indicated buried basalt as the possible culprit (Clewlow et al. 1970: 16). The magnetometer data also strongly suggested more stone lying at a greater depth, but the investigators warned “whoever undertakes to verify the magnetometer survey findings will have to be a brave man with plenty of protection” since many locals believe a great treasure lies hidden within the pyramid (Heizer and Drucker 1978: 244).

1970

In March and June of 1970 the two uneven, parallel mounds thought to represent a possible ball court were explored (Heizer 1971). The mound on the west is 55 m long and the other 39 m long. Each measures about 14 m wide (Wyshak et al. 1971: 650). A sample of charcoal (UCLA-1630) from the uppermost clay construction was retrieved and dated to 760 BC using the newer half-life (5730±30). No definitive features were uncovered that supported the ballcourt interpretation (Heizer 1971: 51).

12 The measurements given in the Nature article are slightly larger than the original dimensions laid out in Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968: 141—“That on the west is 160 feet [48.8 m] long, the other is 116 feet [35.4 m] in length. Each is about 40 feet [12.2 m] wide.”
1979

The theme of postulating the original shape of La Venta’s pyramid was continued in 1979 with the publication of figures showing stairways on four sides of the structure (Figure 23) (Graham and Johnson 1979: fig. 1). This hypothetical reconstruction was based on a perceived resemblance of the eroded La Venta pyramid to a Preclassic platform at Uaxactun, Structure E-VII sub, as well as the Preclassic Tikal Structure 5C-54 (W. Coe 1967: 90; Graham and Johnson 1979). Both of these rectangular buildings have a stairway on each of their four sides. Tikal 5C-54 also has inset corners, presumably an engineering device possibly used to assist in attaining the structure’s 30.5 m (100 ft.) height.

The reconstructed plan was prepared many years before this publication, probably soon after the mapping season of 1968. It was shown to Heizer, but he preferred his original interpretation of the structure as a truncated cone, possibly an effigy of a volcanic cone (Graham and Johnson 1979: 1-2; Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968).

1980s TO PRESENT

In 1984, Rebecca González Lauck with the help of INAH and the state of Tabasco, ended and reversed the urban encroachment on the archaeological site of La Venta and created a program of protection, restoration, and research (González Lauck 1988: 122-128, 1989; González Lauck and Solís Olguín 1996). The research included determining and mapping the extent of the main site area (Figure 24) (González Lauck 1988: fig. 1, 1994: fig. 6.6, 1996: fig 1), as well as limited excavations to clarify earlier ceramic and architectural sequences, magnetometer surveys, lithic analyses, and geomorphological studies (Barba Pinagarrón 1988; Gallegos Gómora 1990; González Lauck 1988; Grove 1997: 69; Jiménez Salas 1990; Rojas Chávez 1990).

The south face of the pyramid was one of the places systematically investigated, permitting the discovery of the last phase of its construction. Two small oval-shaped mounds are on the southeast and southwest corners of the pyramid’s platform and in the center of the southern side is a central projection or ramp on which Altars 2 and 3 were first discovered (Fig. 2). Excavations where the mound joins
Figure 23. The changing conceptions and depictions of the main pyramid at La Venta (NWAF drawing based on González Lauck 1997: fig. 1).
Figure 24. 1988 map of La Venta (NWAF drawing based on González Lauck 1988: fig. 1).
the apron exposed white limestone slabs intermittently embedded in the sandy clay mass forming an abutment to retain the construction material (González Lauck 1996: 75, 1997: 84-85). No stone was found within the central projection across a space of approximately 8 m wide where steps would have climbed to the summit. González Lauck appears to have justified the plan depicted by John Graham and Mark Johnson (1979)—a pyramidal structure with a series of stepped taluses and inset corners (Fig. 23; González Lauck 1996, 1997: fig. 1, 2006: 17).

Seven monumental stone sculptures were found distributed east and west of the central projection along the southern foot of the pyramid: Monuments 25/26, 27, 86 and Stela 5 were found east of the stairway and Monuments 87, 88, and 89 were found on the west (Fig. 5; González Lauck 1988, 1996: 76, 2009). Except for Monuments 27 and 86, all of the sculptures were found with their basal ends embedded in the ground. Monument 86 was found in two fragments associated with Stela 5. All four of the sculptures placed on the east side of the pyramid’s stairway are green in color and the three on the west side are gray colored (González Lauck 2010).

Little is yet known about Complex B. The 1968 investigations explored platform B-4 and found a concentration of sculptural fragments (Monuments 35, 36A, 36B, 37, 58, and 59). The investigators also placed a group of ceramic test pits in B-1 in 1968 before realizing it was a platform (Heizer, Drucker, and Napton 1968: map 1). The only other work in Complex B was salvage archaeology north of Platform B-1 carried out in the 1980s. The excavations here uncovered materials relating to the stone carving process: different types of lithic instruments, the reuse of utilitarian objects, and debitage (González Lauck 1996: 80). González Lauck (1989: 83) considers Complex B, along with Complexes A and C, to have been the heart or core of the site because the majority of monuments were located there and it was part of the grand plaza.

The locations of areas that indicate permanent residences for a large number of inhabitants have been established (González Lauck 1989: 83). The first detection of residential areas was in 1984 within Complex E, northeast of the ceremonial court (Fig. 24; González Lauck 1996: 80). Surface reconnaissance
here discovered low-lying platforms. A chemical evaluation of the soil revealed unusual concentrations of phosphate, indicating the possibility it had been a residential zone (Barba Pingarrón 1988: 198).

Other survey and testing conducted by William Rust in 1986 in Complexes E, G, and H (Rust 2008: figs. 3.2-1, 3.3-1, 3.8-1; Rust and Sharer 1988: fig. 2) found evidence of "numerous domestic and residential features within 200–500 m of the Great Mound (Complex C)" (Rust 2008:1397). Excavations in Complex E revealed packed earthen household floors, storage pits, urn burials and large pottery offerings, a sandstone stela, and a serpentine artifact workshop associated with Middle Preclassic ceramics and other artifacts (Rust 2008; Rust and Sharer 1988: 242). These finding contradict the earlier supposition that La Venta was an empty ceremonial center.

The three reddish sandstone monuments discovered by Stirling (1968b) were positioned in Complex D on Platform D-7 (Fig. 4). More recent excavations in D-7 (Gallegos Gómora 1990; González Lauck 1988: 150-152) resulted in more details about these highly eroded sculptures. The three represent squatting human figures with arms raised to touch the bottom edges of their helmets, and elbows resting on bent knees (Fig. 10; González Lauck 1996: 80, 2010: fig. 6.3). These sculptures appear to have marked the southern entryway to the site.

Determination of the use of Complex I is problematic due to its dreadful state of conservation. Abundant surface ceramics link the area to Complex E (González Lauck 1989: 83). Complex F materials correspond to a Late Classic placement. The newest map of La Venta is still incomplete since it is impossible to determine the extent of the main part of the island due to urban and industrial expansion. There is evidence that the original site extended 200 hectares (Fig. 24; González Lauck 1989: 84; 1996: 75).

Surface reconnaissance around La Venta in 1986 and 1987 located a little more than 100 pre-Hispanic settlements (González Lauck 1996: 80; Rust 1986, 1987, 2008). Many of these sites were found along the margins of the river drainages (some of these are now silted in). Tentative dates based on surface material and test pits place 58 of the sites in the first millennium BC (González Lauck 1996: 80; Rust 1992, Rust and Sharer 1988). Two types of settlement were identified: those with only simple
Table 2. Stone sculpture at La Venta listed by year of discovery.

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Altars/Thrones</td>
<td>1 [Stela 3], 2, 3, 4</td>
<td>1, 5, 6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela</td>
<td>1, 2, 3 [Mon. 53]</td>
<td>4 [Altar 8], 5 [Stela 4]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monuments</td>
<td>1, idol 1 [Mon. 8], idol 2 [Mon. 70]</td>
<td>2, 3, 4, 5, and four columns [one of these later named Mon. 49]</td>
<td>6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16/a/A [Mon. 52], 17/b/C [Mon. 54], 18/b/B [Mon. 53]</td>
<td>19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25/26, 27</td>
<td>47, 56, 60, 62, 63, 66, 67, 68</td>
<td>28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36/a/b, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 55, 57, 58, 59, 61, 64, 65, 69, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75</td>
<td>76, 77, 78, 79</td>
<td>80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Taken from González Lauck 2004: table 1

residential platforms and those with more elaborate platforms in addition to simple ones. Preservation at the nearby riverine sites appears to be better than that at the La Venta core site, thus providing better evidence of subsistence remains (Rust 2008: 1398).

**SUMMARY OF DISCOVERIES**

Over 90 stone monuments have been uncovered at or traced to La Venta since 1925 (Table 2; González Lauck 2004: table 1, 2010). More than 50 finds described as offerings were discovered in Complex A and one in Complex D (González Lauck 2001: 800). The perceived appearance of the 30 m high pyramid has shifted over time (Fig. 23; González Lauck 1997: fig. 1)—the current interpretation imagines that it was a stepped structure with inset corners and a stairway on each of the four sides. Complex A has received the most intense and most complete archaeological investigation. The temporal placement of the city and the different structural phases are mainly derived from work in the Ceremonial Court. Initially, this excavation preference for the small sacred space obscured early interpretations of site use and function. It narrowed the scope of what constituted the city. More recent reconnaissance surveys, mapping, and testing have cleared up the misconception that La Venta was a vacant ceremonial center. Residential areas, some possibly reserved for elites, public spaces, possible workshops, and other sites nearby on the river levees have been identified. However, a clear picture of the history of Complex A needs to be established before the other areas of La Venta and outlying sites can be correlated.
La Venta’s temporal place in Mesoamerican prehistory was one of the first questions addressed by excavation. After the initial brushing off of a few large stone monuments by various visitors to the site (Chapter 3, Blom and La Farge 1926; Stirling 1940), Stirling and Drucker planned and executed test trenches, stratigraphic sections, and structural explorations in 1942. Two of the three types of excavation were aimed directly at determining relative dating based on the ceramics present.

The test trenches were dug in order to locate and probe refuse beds containing pottery….

The stratigraphic sections were laid out on the basis of information from the test trenches, and designed to collect controlled lots of ceramic material. The structural investigations were aimed at recovering data bearing on the ceremonial, and it was hoped, artistic aspects of the culture. (Drucker 1952: 10)

Building a ceramic chronology at La Venta was and is difficult because preservation of ceramic surface treatments and decoration that assist in distinguishing types and varieties in traditional classifications are poor (Pool 2009: 242). This is due to the high rainfall and acidic soils at the site.

Absolute dating of the site was attempted during the 1955 season (Drucker et al. 1959). This excavation occurred after Willard Libby and associates demonstrated the application of radiocarbon dating for archaeological contexts (Arnold and Libby 1949; Libby et al. 1949). Consequently, care was taken to retrieve and analyze carbon samples. The excavation emphasis in 1967 was to collect new radiocarbon samples. Both radiocarbon and ceramics samples were also taken during the 1968 work. More recent
excavations at La Venta and its sustaining area also included radiocarbon sampling (González Lauck 1989; Raab et al. 2000; Rust 2008; von Nagy 2003).

This chapter outlines the data retrieved from La Venta for relative and absolute dating. Considering the concerted effort taken to place La Venta in its proper time, the uncertainty that remains is surprising. Other investigators have tried to dispel the confusion by using ceramic and radiocarbon data from contemporaneous sites in Chiapas that demonstrate connections to La Venta (Lowe 1977, 1978, 1989; Sanders 1961; Warren 1960) and from sites in the immediate vicinity to inform La Venta's history (Raab et al. 2000; Rust 2008; Rust and Sharer 1988, 2006; von Nagy 2003). Once the question of time is examined, the next endeavor is to tie the temporal data to the building phases for Complex A described briefly in Chapter 3 and with greater detail in Chapter 5.

**RELATIVE DATING—CERAMICS FROM LA VENTA**

**1942 Excavations**

Drucker authored the first analysis of La Venta ceramics (Drucker 1952). His assemblage consisted of 25,742 sherds and 416 figurine parts recovered from two of the three 1942 stratigraphic sections (Drucker 1952: tables 7–11; Rust 2008: 31). The third stratigraphic section, Str-2, was a disappointment and excluded from his analysis. Material unearthed from the 40 test trenches dug in eight areas across the island (Drucker 1952: fig. 1, Rust 2008: fig. 1.3) was used to determine where to place stratigraphic test sections, but Drucker did not incorporate the ceramics from the 40 trenches into his analysis (Drucker 1952: 10, 20).¹ A few whole vessels recovered in the 1943 excavations (Wedel 1952) were included, however. Ceramic deposits were difficult to discover at La Venta. Once found, they were also challenging to classify due to their pitiable state of preservation and fragmentary nature. Drucker thought the pottery poorly standardized and was uncomplimentary about the assemblage:

> One would scarcely anticipate finding so drab a lot of wares among the remains of the makers of the great sculptured monuments and the carved jades…. [they] would seem to

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¹ William Rust (2008: 30, table 1.1) examines clues present in Drucker’s notes on the individual test units to reveal “the location of primary deposits with charcoal lenses, pits, and mano and metate fragments, in addition to pottery and figurines, all of which, in combination, probably indicate settlement features.”
have been indifferent as to the appearance of the everyday vessels from which they ate and drank. Even the pieces which must have served ceremonial ends, to judge by the fact that they were placed in the cists in the Ceremonial Enclosure, were of the same rudely made types as the pots in daily use in the occupation areas. (Drucker 1947: 3)

It is almost as if he could not believe such boring pots existed elsewhere and is rather apologetic that he had to base classifications on plain wares (Drucker 1952: 80). Only 25 sherds had some trace of painted decoration (Drucker 1952: 104), a possible consequence of surface deterioration. However, many of the sherds exhibited exterior decoration via rocker stamping, incising, grooving, punctuating, etc.

The first stratigraphic area, Str-1, was placed west of the pyramid in sherd area 3 (S-3) between test trenches 17 and 19 (T-17 & T-19) (Drucker 1952: 20, fig. 4). It was 13.7 by 3 m and reached a depth of 1.5 m. Str-3 was placed at the south end of the island close to T-40, apparently in sherd area 8 (S-8). Str-3 was 12 m by 3 m wide and went down 1.5 m. In both Str-1 and Str-3, a 3 by 3 m pit was excavated on one end of the trench a little over 3 m deep. Each trench was excavated in 30.48 cm (1 foot) levels numbered from top to bottom. The uppermost two levels in both stratitrenches had modest yields of potsherds, partly due to the destruction of sherds by roots, root acids, and humic acids (Drucker 1952: 127). In addition, approximately two-thirds of the sherds recovered in the first two levels were not included in Drucker’s analysis since they were too badly preserved for him to classify. Robert Squier (1964: 201-220) provided a stern critique of Drucker’s methods and assumptions for analyzing ceramics.

Drucker defined nine wares from approximately 24,000 pottery fragments (Drucker 1947: 3): Coarse Buff, Coarse Brown, Coarse Black, White-Rimmed Coarse Black, Coarse White, Coarse Red, Brown Lacquer, Fine Paste wares, and Painted wares (Drucker 1952: 81-107). The range of vessel forms was limited; simple bowls, dishes, and jars were the most frequent forms. Flat-based dishes with flaring sides and simple direct rims were abundantly represented (Drucker 1952: table 6). Another dish form, the open curved to slightly incurved sides with a simple rim, was also common. No vessel shape was restricted to a single ware, and no vessel shape was found to occur in every La Venta ware (Squier 1964: 206). Decorative

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2 There is not a sketch map of T-40 or a direct reference to the S-8 area—only a description of it being at the extreme south end of the island on a low knoll about 50 m across (Drucker 1952: 19).
techniques consisted mainly of incised lines, usually as parallel lines just below rim on the interior or exterior. Some examples of more complex incised patterns exist. Rocker stamping, punctuating, hachuring, grooving, and impressing were also used to create designs. Decoration was rare on the Fine Paste wares. A sample of 32 fine-paste sherds from Str-1 was submitted to Anna O. Shepard for petrographic analysis. She reported that all of the submitted samples were tempered with volcanic ash (Drucker 1952: 239-240). Squier (1964: 205) noted that some Fine Paste vessels were possibly untempered.

Drucker found that all of his defined wares, vessel shapes, and decorative techniques persisted throughout each stratitrench. He determined there was a continuity of tradition within a single cultural horizon. He thought that Str-3 represented a somewhat earlier time frame. Str-1 appeared to overlap but was considered to mark a successive period. This conclusion rested on the frequency of wares and a supposed shift over time. Drucker concluded that Fine Paste wares increased over time. In Str-3 Fine Paste was infrequent in the lowest level and increased to modest abundance in upper levels. In Str-1, Fine Paste pottery was abundant in the lowest levels and even more frequent in upper levels (Drucker 1952: 131). Coarse Brown ware exhibited the opposite pattern: it diminished over time.

Drucker considered the wares of La Venta to be contemporaneous with Middle Tres Zapotes deposits (Drucker 1952: 147). Tying La Venta to Tres Zapotes allowed Drucker to give an approximate temporal position relative to other Mesoamerican complexes. He determined that La Venta was coeval with Tzakol culture or Early Classic. Unfortunately, connecting La Venta to Tres Zapotes took Drucker in the wrong direction. If he had left Tres Zapotes out of the picture, he might have guessed the correct age of La Venta sooner:

It must be owned that if the La Venta materials formed an isolated segment their deceptively simple appearance might mislead one into suggesting an earlier chronological position than fuller facts permit. That is to say, since they are essentially monochrome wares, with only the simplest sort of painted decoration, and accompanied as they are by

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3 Michael Coe (1957:11) and John Sorenson (1955:52-53) rejected Drucker's Early Classic designation before the radiocarbon dates were published on the grounds that all the ceramic ties of La Venta were with those such as Tlatilco in the Valley of Mexico.
handmade figurines of archaistic types, we might have been tempted to regard them as representing a ceramic complex of Middle Culture order, and from that have proceeded to an erroneous Middle Culture dating. (Drucker 1952: 148)

According to Michael Coe (1960: 119), Drucker’s ceramic analysis at La Venta and his previous study at Tres Zapotes gummed up the relative dating of the Olmec culture: “…the Olmec culture seems to have been the first civilization of the New World. Its temporal position in Middle American prehistory was long seriously misunderstood, perhaps not in spite of but because of the faulty and confused reports by Drucker on Tres Zapotes (1943) and La Venta (1952).” Coe’s (1960) review of the 1955 excavation report happily relays that the confusion was by then cleared up, perhaps due more to the nine radiocarbon dates than to redemptive reconsideration of the ceramic assemblage.

**1955 Excavations**

Few pots or potsherds were encountered during the 1955 season. Excavations focused on the Ceremonial Court and is structures. Clean clays were used in platform constructions, so potsherds were conspicuously absent. A few vessels were recovered from offerings (Nos. 5, 14-19) placed in the Northeast and Northwest Platforms (Fig. 3). Ceramic vessels discovered in offerings uncovered in earlier excavations (1943-C, 1943-G, 1943-L, 1943-O) by Stirling and Wedel were subsequently assigned to construction phases based on the 1955 structural investigations (Drucker et al. 1959: Appendix 1). Table 3 describes the vessels discovered in Complex A’s offerings.

Phase IV ceramic vessels are represented in burial goods: Tomb C (1943-G) and Tomb D (1943-L) in Mound A-3. Phase III vessels were found on the centerline above Massive Offering 3 (1943-C) and in a likely burial (see Chapter 6) in the Northeast Platform (Offering 5/ Burial 3). The ceramic cache (Offering 14), also in the Northeast Platform, likely dates to Phase III. Two other probable Phase III vessels, a Coarse Brown ware and White-Rimmed Coarse Black ware, were recovered from the same pit within the Northwest Platform (Offerings 18 and 19, see Chapter 5). Three Phase I Coarse Brown bowls were also found in the Northeast platform (Offerings 15, 16, 17).
1967 Excavations

The ten days of carbon collecting in June of 1967 included samples from within the structural component of Complex A and from occupational deposits in the vicinity. The pottery unearthed in connection to the recovery of charcoal was systematically washed, dried, classified, and discarded (Drucker ca. 1967). This included from two test areas: 3 and 5. Test 3 was located approximately 183 m (200 yards) west-southwest of the top of the pyramid and about 6 m (20 feet) north of the location of charcoal sample UCLA-1253 that gave a date of 3140 ± 90 BP (1100 BC). About 300 sherds were recovered here. Test 5 was on a ridge estimated to be 229 m (250 yards) south-southwest of the top of the pyramid.

Table 3. Ceramics in discovered offerings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offering No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1943-A</td>
<td>Several pottery vessels in the upper drift sands in Ceremonial Court. One is a Coarse Brown ware.</td>
<td>Post-IV</td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1952: 38; pls. 5a, 19d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943-C</td>
<td>Two pottery vessels in the upper clays in Complex A: a cylindrical flat-bottomed clay vessel with an inverted, shallower vessel over it.</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>Wedel 1952: 39; pl. 4b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943-G</td>
<td>Three pottery vessels were among the contents of the Stone Cist (Tomb C). On the east end were two poorly preserved but restorable pottery vessels. One was small and bottle-shaped with a 10 cm diameter and a loop handle. The other was a vessel approximately 20 cm in diameter, with raised annular base and a rim curiously reminiscent of the lip form of an abalone shell (Coarse Brown ware). Near the west end, about on the midline of the cist, were the remains of an effigy vessel (“jaguar face” with wide open mouth), very soft and badly broken (Coarse Buff ware).</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Wedel 1952: 70, pls. 19f, 18b, fig. 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943-L</td>
<td>One pottery vessel, a small unsalvageable clay pot, was with the contents of Tomb D.</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Wedel 1952: 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943-O</td>
<td>Four or five pottery vessels were found in the sands at north flank of Pyramid. The pots were found at the end of the day and consequently left in situ, covered with leaves and sand, for further study and removal the next day. Unfortunately, they were pulled out of place and badly broken up before the archaeologists’ return the following morning.</td>
<td>IV or Post-IV</td>
<td>Wedel 1952: 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 5</td>
<td>Two vessels, a Brown ware bowl and a small, Fine Paste Buff-orange bottle, were placed in this likely burial. Drucker’s Brown ware bowl is defined by Christopher von Nagy as a Guapacal Punctate, which is an Early Franco phase type (ca. 700-500 BC).</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 164, figs. 41, 42a von Nagy 2003: 633, 835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 14</td>
<td>Six vessels found together in the NE Platform. Five were nested together: three inverted bowls (Fine Paste Orange) placed over an effigy jar (Black ware) sitting inside a spouted vessel (Fine Paste Buff ware). The sixth vessel touched the nested group (Fine Paste Black ware).</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 187, fig. 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 15</td>
<td>A single, white-slipped Coarse Brown ware bowl with flat base and out-leaned walls terminating in a simple direct rim found upright in the NE Platform.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 189, fig. 42b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 16</td>
<td>A small, rectangular Coarse Brown ware bowl found upright in the NE Platform.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 17</td>
<td>A small, rectangular Coarse Brown ware bowl found upright in the NE Platform.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 18</td>
<td>A flat-based Coarse Brown ware dish or bowl with nearly vertical walls and slightly flaring simple direct rim found upright in the NW Platform.</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 190, fig. 42c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 19</td>
<td>A white-rimmed, flat-based Coarse Black ware dish or shallow bowl with flaring sides and simple direct rim found upright in the NW Platform.</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 190-191, fig. 42e</td>
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Approximately 1200 sherds were unearthed and examined. Drucker (ca. 1967) concluded that the ceramic material recovered in 1967 conformed in all major respects to the overall pattern of the 1942 collections.

1968 Excavations

In 1968, a series of ceramic test pits was excavated south of La Venta’s pyramid (Hallinan et al. 1968). Six of these pits were placed in what the investigators originally thought were natural ridges on the east and west sides of the centerline (Fig. 17; Heizer, Graham, and Napton: map 1). During a helicopter ride on the next to last day of the field season, they recognized that the pits were instead on enormous rectangular earthen platforms—Platform B-1 (pit nos. 1, 3, 5, 7) and the Stirling Group (pit nos. 2, 4). Additionally, these soundings had barely penetrated the surface of these structures. Test pit no. 9 was also positioned in the Stirling Group near Monuments 39-41 and 44 (Fig. 17). Test pit no. 8 reopened a pit from February 1967 (Test 3) (Berger et al. 1967: 4; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968) from which a radiocarbon sample was taken (UCLA-1253) that returned an 1100 BC date. The last pit (no. 6), situated near Monuments 28 and 29 in a bulldozer clearing, failed due to extraneous circumstances and only reached a depth of 60 cm beyond the 150 cm of removed overburden.

The 1968 samples did little to clarify the nature of La Venta’s ceramic assemblage. It did reveal that, unlike Complex A, refuse was incorporated into platform construction in Complex B and the Stirling Acropolis. Similarities persisted between Drucker’s original analysis (1952) and this later one: Fine Paste ware increased over time; the most frequent form was the flat-based bowl with flaring sides and simple direct rim; Coarse Brown ware predominated. No apparent difference in the shapes and wares were noted between the 1942 and 1967 collections and the 1968 ceramics from B-1 and the Stirling Group.

Ceramics from Chiapas

A close resemblance of La Venta pottery to vessels recovered from the site of Chiapa de Corzo (Fig. 1) was recognized early on (Sanders 1961: 51-52; Warren 1960). In his unpublished progress report, Bruce Warren correlated two published La Venta vessel shapes (Drucker 1952: fig. 42d, f) with specimens found at Chiapa de Corzo that dated to the Chiapa III period (Table 4, Lowe and Agrinier 1960: table 1). The paste and temper were also similar. Warren further noticed that ceramics recovered in post-Phase
IV contexts at La Venta were identical with some Chiapa IV burial vessels in color, surface finish, size, crazing of the slip, and the wide everted rim with three broad, shallow grooves encircling the upper rim surface. Warren (Sanders 1961: 51) identified the chronological problem: “The La Venta Complex A ceramics must be earlier than the Chiapa III-IV and most of the Lower Tres Zapotes and Mamon ceramic complexes.” He considered practically all of the Coarse wares described by Drucker (1952) to be like Chiapa I and especially Chiapa II sherds. The temper was similar. Surface treatment also corresponded: smooth-finished with a coat of clay similar to the paste and the presence of rocker-stamping. The La Venta Coarse White ware has two encircling incised lines near the rim, a diagnostic feature of Chiapa II pottery. The Coarse Red ware paste and finish color wash or paint also match Chiapa I and II wares. Warren cited the La Venta illustrated vessel shapes paralleling Chiapa I and II examples (Drucker 1952: fig. 38a, b, 39a, b, c, 41c, e, pl. 17b, pl. 19c, d, pl. 21i-o; Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 42a, b, c, e, 53b, d, e).

Coe (1965) refined Warren’s initial assessment and stated without hesitation that the pottery of La Venta is Middle Preclassic. He also summarized the attributes of the La Venta ceramic sequence.

The complex as a whole is related to Tlatilco, Chiapa II, Mamom, and Conchas; nothing exactly comparable to the early Preclassic phases of Chiapa I and Ocos has yet been published. The commonest vessel is a flat-bottomed dish with flaring sides and simple rims. Just under the rim on the interior or exterior, and encircling the vessel, are usually engraved or incised two parallel lines, the bottom of which may be turned up to meet the upper (“double-line break,” a horizon-marker for the Middle Preclassic, see M. D. Coe, 1961, p. 133). This dish can also have a thick, beveled rim. Next in frequency are tecomates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chiapa de Corzo Phases</th>
<th>Chiapa Ceramic Periods</th>
<th>Generalized Cultural Periods</th>
<th>Estimated Absolute Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Francesa</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Late Preclassic B</td>
<td>450-250 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalera</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>Late Preclassic A</td>
<td>550-450 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dili</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Middle Preclassic</td>
<td>1000-550 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotorra</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Early Preclassic</td>
<td>1400-1000 BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taken from Lowe and Agrinier 1960: Table 1
of coarse brown ware, followed by dishes with slightly incurved sides in coarse red, black or fine paste ware. (Coe 1965: 690)

Coe (1965: 692) refuted Drucker’s claims for a later date for the La Venta complex by commenting that the La Venta ceramic complex was quite different from anything known at Tres Zapotes, where rocker-stamping and the double-line break are apparently absent.

Gareth Lowe (1977, 1978, 1989) also took up the gauntlet, endeavoring to temporally place La Venta in Eastern Mesoamerica. Lowe (1978: 359) considered La Venta’s Complex A construction as marking the beginning of a new historical era, the Middle Preclassic Period. He used the convenient and simplified date of 1000 BC to start this period of marked cultural change ostentatiously seen in Complex A, but he emphasized that artifact and ceramic complexes were better known elsewhere. Only three vessels at La Venta can be linked to Phase I (Table 3). Lowe considered these three as related to the earliest Middle Preclassic complexes such as Dili at Chiapa de Corzo.

Lowe thought there was a marked shift in ceramic styles in the La Venta offerings from Phases III and IV (Lowe 1978: 360, fig. 11.8; 1989: 57). These two final phases were coeval with Escalera (Chiapa III) and Early Francesa (Chiapa IV) complexes at Chiapa de Corzo (see Table 5) (Lowe 1977: 222, 1978: fig. 11.3; 1989: table 4.1). In addition to the ceramics in offerings, “distinctive, though highly eroded, polished-orange-ware flaring-wall and composite-silhouette bowl sherds are common at La Venta” (Lowe 1977: 223). This “Cloudy-resist orange” ceramic tradition ties La Venta to the “Chiapas Modified Olmec-Zoquean region affiliation” (Lowe 1977: 224) among other cultural elements such as site layout (Clark and Hansen 2001; McDonald 1974), axe offerings (Bachand et al. 2008), and sculpture (Clark 2010;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chiapa de Corzo Phases</th>
<th>Chiapa Ceramic Periods</th>
<th>Generalized Cultural Periods</th>
<th>Estimated Absolute Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Francesa</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Middle Preclassic</td>
<td>500-400 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalera</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>Middle Preclassic</td>
<td>600-500 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quequepac/Duende</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Middle Preclassic</td>
<td>800-600 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dili</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Middle Preclassic</td>
<td>1000-800 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotorra</td>
<td></td>
<td>Early Preclassic</td>
<td>1400-1000 BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Chiapa de Corzo Archaeological Sequence as Understood in 1970s

Taken from Lowe 1978: fig. 11.4 and 1989: table 4.1
Clark et al. 2010). Lowe stated (1989: 57) that there was an increased preference for necked ollas (rather than tecomates) by Phase III. Drucker’s (1952) report on vessel forms, however, does not identify any particular vessel form to a time period. Drucker’s frequencies of vessel forms (1952: figs. 38–40), and their accompanying descriptions do not even give an approximate depth or general location of recovery from the stratigraphic trenches. I gather Lowe was extrapolating temporal changes from other regions onto La Venta; “This evolution, however poorly understood it may be at the La Venta site, is rather well known in several other regions...” (Lowe 1978:358). Or he could have been referencing a type collection from La Venta given to the New World Archaeology Foundation. Except for the few vessels found in the offerings, none of the ceramics at La Venta are linked to a particular construction phase.

**Excavations in Complexes H, F, E, and G at La Venta**

In 1986–1987, Complexes H, F, E, and G and periphery sites in the La Venta sustaining area were tested under INAH’s Proyecto Arqueologico La Venta (PALV) project (Rust 2008: 192-193). The excavations in these locations are reported in William Rust’s dissertation (2008). For a more detailed depiction of the data, I refer the reader to his volume. Rust creates a new type/variety classification of the ceramics recovered at La Venta and the surrounding sustaining area along the rivers, and he correlates these ceramic assemblages to Drucker’s more general types (Rust 2008: table 4.02). Rust, along with Robert Sharer (1988), also designates new time periods: Early La Venta: subphase 1 (1150-900 cal BC) and subphase 2 (900–800 cal BC), and Late La Venta: subphase 1 (800-650 cal BC) and subphase 2 (650–350 cal BC). The correlations of the ceramic sequence with the new temporal phases are based on radiocarbon dates (Rust 2008: table 4.03). Rust’s data do not tie in cleanly with the construction phases of Complex A. He roughly equates his four periods to the four La Venta construction phases. Christopher von Nagy and associates (1998, 2002) assert that their research at the La Venta hinterland site of San Andrés shows Rust’s chronology to be flawed.

After examining 250 whole and partial vessels and about 100,000 sherds from the 1986-1987 test area at La Venta (Complexes E, G, and H) and on several outlying sites (Isla Alor, Isla Yucateca, San Andrés, and Isla Chicozapote) Rust (2008) identifies a significant relationship between fine paste wares and coarse paste wares at La Venta. The quantity of decorated fine paste ware and its distinction from
coarse paste ware in vessel forms, as well as paste, points to fine paste pottery as having definite links to ritual and elite use (Rust 2008: 571). At least half of the sherds in deposits at La Venta Complexes E, G, and H were of fine paste wares. The clays used for La Venta fine paste ware were local to the Gulf Coast volcanic region and appear to have been an innovation based on the local clay sources (Methner 2000). After 900 BC differential firing became a standard method of making fine paste ceremonial or elite pottery (Rust 2008: 572). Sharer and Rust (1988, 2006) define a settlement hierarchy in the outlying sites based on the dichotomy between the functions of fine-paste versus coarse-paste pottery.

Ceramic groups of Rust’s Late La Venta period were found in Complex H (Rust 2008: 198). The ceramics of Complex F demonstrated that the occupation of this area falls into the Terminal Classic period (Rust 2008: 325-326). Complex E is interpreted as representing an Early La Venta 2 deposit as its initial occupation, although a smaller Early La Venta 1 component occurred there also (Rust 2008:1420). This first occupation was overlain by a series of urn burials and ceramic offerings from Late La Venta 2. Rust (2008:262, 1423) considers the northeastern edge of Complex E a ceremonial area during the Late La Venta phase. Later, a Late Postclassic occupation (ca. 1350-1520 cal BC) is present on the Complex E ridgetop (Rust 2008: 241-242). Complex G also has Early La Venta 2 ceramics (Rust 2008: 1423) along with Late La Venta 1 and 2 ceramics. Complex G shows similarities to Complex E’s assemblage for the same time period (Rust 2008: 316). It also presents the possibility that the city of La Venta continued to be inhabited after the end—or possible decommissioning—of Complex A as an active area.

**Other Ceramic Studies at La Venta**

Besides Rust’s fieldwork, other test excavations on and around La Venta were carried out under INAH’s PALV project, directed by González Lauck. L. Mark Raab and associates (2000) reported on explorations at Isla Alor. They identified two periods of occupation based on the ceramics. The first coincides with the beginning of González Lauck’s (1990: 167) La Venta Phase I (1000 to 900 BC). The high sherd density present is related to a well-defined Olmec living surface dated to about 1000 BC.

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4 Brett Methner’s analysis demonstrated that Isla Alor was an area where ancient Olmec potters were selecting their clays. It also revealed the presence of a small, non-local ceramic technology during the earliest occupation of La Venta. This implies outside interaction; however, there is not a known source to explain where the pottery is from or who the occupants of La Venta were interacting with. It is clear that it was not a San Lorenzo source.

5 Only one of the urn burials had “a few tiny fragments of bone and teeth” (Rust 2008:235).
second period is a Postclassic occupation with correlating ceramic types for the Tabasco region (Raab et al. 2000: 263).

San Andrés is another La Venta hinterland site tested (von Nagy et al. 2000, 2002). In contrast to Rust, Christopher von Nagy (2003:165) found that the ceramic material from San Andrés, La Venta, and others sites in the sustaining area showed insufficient difference from Edward Sisson's 1976 modified type-variety descriptions and Pajonal materials to justify a completely new taxonomy for the La Venta area. Consequently, von Nagy's descriptions and time periods adhere to the historical precedent set by Sisson when possible: Early Puente (950-800 BC), Late Puente (800-700 BC), Early Franco (700-500 BC), Late Franco (500-400 or 350 BC). In regards to the history of Complex A at La Venta, von Nagy (2003:1081) concludes, “there is still little good data to place the initial development of ceremonial and elite architecture at La Venta in the Early Puente phase.” Instead, Early and Late Franco pottery “represents the bulk of material recovered at La Venta associated with Phases II, III, and IV there” (von Nagy et al. 2002).

**ABSOLUTE DATING—RADIOCARBON FROM LA VENTA**

Radiocarbon dating is a bit of a muddle at La Venta. This is partly due to the difficulty of accurately tying radiocarbon dates to real time since fluctuations in atmospheric carbon-14 that occurred within the “Hallstatt Plateau” between about 800 and 400 BC cause radiocarbon years not to vary uniformly with calendar years (Pool 2007: 160; 2009: 242). It is also due to the fact that the dates are not tied to artifact assemblages. For La Venta, radiocarbon achieved one significant and accurate truth: the city was much older than first imagined. “Nearly all American archeologists…assumed until the radiocarbon dates were obtained that the Olmec culture in the Gulf lowland dated from somewhere within the Classic Period whose time span is about A.D. 300 to 900. The size and complexity of the site, together with its abundant and highly developed art, made this conclusion almost inescapable” (Drucker and Heizer 1975:389). Unfortunately, the clarity of carbon dating falls short in refining the temporal sequence at the site.

Based on radiocarbon samples taken during the 1955, 1964, and 1967 excavations (Chapter 3), the Olmec occupation of the site is generally bracketed as beginning between 1200-1000 BC and lasting until 500-400 BC (González Lauck 1996; Heizer 1971: 52; cf. Bernal 1971), with the floruit of Complex
A falling between 1040-580 cal BC. (Pool 2007: 52, note 2). Despite decent attempts to collect samples linked to construction phases in Complex A, the carbon only securely dates one sealed context (González Lauck 1996:73), and the construction phase lengths remain ambiguous. Heizer’s (1960, 1961, 1962, 1971) division of Complex A into equal lengths of time for each construction phase is difficult to shake, particularly when the carbon returns an approximate 400 year period of use for the area. However, neither the stratigraphy nor the radiocarbon necessarily back the equal division hypothesis.

Table 6 lists the radiocarbon samples taken from Complex A in 1955 excavations and later re-sampled in 1967 (see Chapter 3; Heizer 1974). More radiocarbon samples were dated from the 1955, 1964, and 1967 excavations at La Venta (Berger and Libby 1966; Berger et al. 1965, 1967; Drucker et al. 1957, 1959; Heizer 1968; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968), but the ones listed in the table are considered the most acceptable (Sorenson 2000). The table also adds the radiocarbon dates known from excavations in Complex E and Complex G (Rust 2008) and the Stirling Group (Wyshak et al. 1971). All of these dates use the half-life of 5730 ± 30 years. A carbon sample is reported by González Lauck (1996: 75) from a burned area on the main pyramid that returned a date of 394 ± 30 BC. The radiocarbon pushes the beginning and end of La Venta about 200 years earlier than the ceramic data support.

**SUMMARY**

Basically there are two camps when it comes to placing La Venta in real time (Pool 2007: 160). The first camp follows the ceramics and the second follows the radiocarbon dates. The ceramic camp disputes the presence of a major occupation prior to 1000 BC due to the absence of the diagnostic Calzadas carved and Limon carved-incised types (Clark 2001; von Nagy 2003:1081). The carbon camp uses the handful of radiocarbon dates, a few other diagnostic ceramic types, and some sculptural similarities to San Lorenzo monuments to claim the presence of an Early Formative center at La Venta (González Lauck 1990: 159-167, 1996:73; Hallinan et al. 1968; cf. Coe and Diehl 1991: 35). I think that Coe’s (1989: 69) assessment of “two great periods or cultural successions within the Olmec civilization of the heartland”

6 González Lauck (1996) does not elucidate which particular sample she considers secure. I believe it is M-530 which was taken from the bottom of a pit in the Northwest Platform that had Offerings 18 and 19 (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 12). The 1955 excavators designate this pit as Phase II. In Chapter 5, I give reasons for thinking it is a Phase III pit. The charcoal returned a date of 801 cal BC (2625 ± 60) (Rust 2008: table 6.2).

7 The half-life of this date is not stated and not calibrated.
Table 6. Radiocarbon dates from La Venta

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Sample No.</th>
<th>Radiocarbon years BP</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>cal BC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complex A</td>
<td>charcoal from leveled base sands underlying Phase I construction of Mound A-2</td>
<td>UCLA-902 (re-sampled M-531)</td>
<td>3030 ± 80</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>1295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex G</td>
<td>LV33-TP1/140</td>
<td>B-17488</td>
<td>3020 ± 10</td>
<td>Late Barí (1450-1150 cal BC)</td>
<td>1262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex A</td>
<td>charcoal from Mound A-2, Phase I platform</td>
<td>UCLA-1285</td>
<td>2905 ± 60</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>1090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex G</td>
<td>LV33-TP1/120</td>
<td>B-54993</td>
<td>2720 ± 100</td>
<td>Early La Venta 2 (900-800 cal BC)</td>
<td>865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex G</td>
<td>LV33-TP2/100</td>
<td>B-55083</td>
<td>2700 ± 120</td>
<td>Early La Venta 2</td>
<td>830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex E</td>
<td>LV29-TP1/160</td>
<td>B-17484</td>
<td>2680 ± 90</td>
<td>Early La Venta 2</td>
<td>820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex G</td>
<td>LV33-TP2/100</td>
<td>B-17489</td>
<td>2640 ± 80</td>
<td>Early La Venta 2</td>
<td>805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex E</td>
<td>LV30-TP1/140</td>
<td>B-18200</td>
<td>2630 ± 90</td>
<td>Early La Venta 2</td>
<td>802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex A</td>
<td>charcoal from bottom of pit in NW Platform that contained Offerings 18 &amp; 19</td>
<td>UCLA-1284b (re-sampled M-530)</td>
<td>2625 ± 60</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex G</td>
<td>LV33-TP1/100</td>
<td>B-233835 (AMS)</td>
<td>2590 ± 40</td>
<td>Late La Venta 1 (800-650 cal BC)</td>
<td>790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex E</td>
<td>LV30-TP1/140</td>
<td>B-55082</td>
<td>2560 ± 100</td>
<td>Late La Venta 1</td>
<td>780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex E</td>
<td>LV28-TP5/120</td>
<td>B-235245 (AMS)</td>
<td>2540 ± 40</td>
<td>Late La Venta 1</td>
<td>770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stirling Group</td>
<td>charcoal from the uppermost clay construction layers of the possible ballcourt floor</td>
<td>UCLA-1630</td>
<td>2710</td>
<td></td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex A</td>
<td>charcoal from burned area on Phase IV surface west of limestone slab pavers near NE entryway</td>
<td>UCLA-1287 (re-sampled M-533)</td>
<td>2490± 60</td>
<td>Post-IV</td>
<td>642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex A</td>
<td>charcoal from lower margin of post-Complex A occupation windblown sands lying on Phase IV surface</td>
<td>UCLA-1283 (re-sampled M-528)</td>
<td>2450 ± 40</td>
<td>Post-IV</td>
<td>530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex E</td>
<td>LV29-TP1/130</td>
<td>B-235246</td>
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<td>Late La Venta 2 (650-350 cal BC)</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex G</td>
<td>LV33-TP3/220</td>
<td>B-54993</td>
<td>2420 ± 40</td>
<td>Late La Venta 2</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex E</td>
<td>LV29-TP1/110</td>
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<td>2390 ± 40</td>
<td>Late La Venta 2</td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex G</td>
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<td>2380 ± 40</td>
<td>Late La Venta 2</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex E</td>
<td>LV29-TP1/180</td>
<td>B-55081</td>
<td>2250 ± 70</td>
<td>Late La Venta 2</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information listed in this table is based on Rust 2008: table 6.2. The radiocarbon BP dates are calculated with the 5730 ± 30 year half life. The intercept point as calibrated years BC is from the Calibration curve: IntCal04 (Reimer et al. 2004). The content information for Complex A carbon is from Berger, Graham, and Helzer 1967. Highlighted rows represent the dates from Complex A excavations.
remains the more accurate for both the ceramic and carbon camps. The first period is associated with San Lorenzo and the second corresponds to the height of La Venta. As much as the carbon camp tries to push back La Venta to be contemporary with San Lorenzo, there are significant differences. One striking one is that jade appears to be lacking in the first period whereas it is abundant in the second. “In fact, when La Venta was flourishing, jade was available and used on a scale never to be equaled by any subsequent Mesoamerican civilization, including the Classic Maya” (Coe 1989: 69). Another significant difference between the two periods is the proportion of three-dimensional monumental sculptures to flat, narrative reliefs or stelae. In San Lorenzo, sculpture in the round far outnumbers low-relief carvings; in the La Venta period, the proportion is reversed. It seems that the floruit of La Venta must fall after or at least at the very end of San Lorenzo’s cultural height.

The question of La Venta’s floruit is significant in determining whether or not it had a “horizon” at the beginning of the Middle Formative that significantly influenced a social transition involving “the rise of cities in many different regions and the creation of different sculptural forms and styles by different peoples” (Clark et al. 2010). More excavation at La Venta may help demystify its age and influence. Other excavations at related sites such as Chiapa de Corzo may also dispel some mist. I do not think it will be possible, however, to ever date the separate construction phases in Complex A accurately. Besides the destruction of the area, there seems to be too few ceramics and too few “acceptable” carbon dates to achieve the feat. It is possible, however, to get a clearer sequential picture of activities and construction in Complex A. Chapter 5 presents that picture.
Olmec architecture... however you interpret it, is a kind of gigantic outdoor sculpture, in which exterior space is far more important than interior space (if, indeed, the latter ever existed).

*Michael D. Coe 1989: 80*

### The History of Construction in Complex A

This chapter sketches a picture of each construction phase in Complex A. Within the picture I include the sequence and size of platforms; the colors of fills, floorings, and facings; the description of the enclosing court wall; and the locations of offerings and burials. Sculpture discovered in Complex A is also discussed. Each description is based on the excavation and expedition reports available, as well as original field notes (Drucker’s Papers [National Anthropological Archives (NAA), Smithsonian Institute], Drucker 1952; Drucker and Heizer 1965; Drucker et al. 1959; Heizer’s Papers [NAA, Smithsonian Institute]; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968; Stirling 1940, 1941, 1943a; Stirling and Stirling 1942; Wedel 1952). Although the 1955 team (Drucker et al. 1959: table 1) correlated the different elements of each construction phase in Complex A, it is difficult to envision the phases as a whole since the excavation data are described by individual trench profiles. Similarly, it is challenging to clearly recognize changes over time.

The illustrations I generated to depict each phase are based on the published 1955 map of Complex A (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 4) and the original plot by Squier (NAA, Smithsonian Institute, Heizer maps, drawing 2). The sizes for the platforms, mounds, and walls of each construction phase are derived from descriptions in the texts and depictions in plan and profile drawings.¹ Many of the profiles include the pit for Massive Offering 3, and I used it as a key datum from which to measure. When the size of a platform or mound for a particular phase was smaller or larger than plotted on the 1955 map of Complex A, and no

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¹ Susan Gillespie (2008a, b) has also researched and published a detailed analysis of the history of Complex A. My work is independent of her efforts and can be considered a separate check of the data.
reference point was available on a corresponding profile drawing, I used the original plotted center-point of the mound as my baseline to measure from. This follows an assumption that enlargements of a structure involved equivalent increases north-south and east-west. Of course, this is not necessarily an accurate assumption, but unless otherwise described in the excavation report, this was my default assumption.

My descriptions of the architecture and associated offerings in each construction phase are not chronologically ordered. The investigators did not tie each element together enough through excavation to make that feasible. Where possible I point out sequential events within each construction phase.

The following phase-by-phase narrative of Complex A sounds rather devoid of human agency—as if architecture and subsequent changes just appeared. This is a conventional way of writing when the true participants and inputs are unknown. Of course, actual human actors carried and placed the clay fills, laid the flooring, created the platform facings, deposited the offerings and burials, and positioned the monuments. Either different agents or the same workers planned and prepared for these actions. In addition to participants in the construction process, human spectators may also have played a role. For example, Complex A has typically been depicted as a backdrop for furtive priests conducting secret and sacred activities behind enclosed walls, particularly within the Ceremonial Court. As described below, this portrayal of their furtiveness is not realistic, at least for the first three phases. The Court was quite visible for most of its history. Only in the last construction phase did the basalt columned wall effectively block ground-level observation of the inner court. Many hands fashioned the different elements of Complex A over time, and many eyes watched it grow and likely thought of the area as part of their group identity.

**PHASE I**

*Preparation, Embankment, and Flooring*

Excavations in the Ceremonial Court revealed that Phase I was instigated by preparing a level area to build on. Within the southeastern area this first involved removing loose sand that overlaid clay subsoil approximately 30.5 m east—and hypothetically also west—of the centerline (Drucker et al. 1959: 20-21, 27, figs. 6, 7). After clearing the sand, a buttress of heavy red and white clay was built on the east side of the future court (and possibly all the way around the perimeter). This wall foundation was smooth and
the corners well shaped and squared. It measured 3.7 m wide, 50.8 cm thick at its eastern edge and 43.2 cm thick at the west edge (Figure 25). The 1955 excavators (Drucker et al. 1959: 20) reasoned that this support ran the whole length of the eastern side of the Court and perhaps around the other three sides, but they did not verify this guess. Next, a fill of brownish sand and clay was placed inside and level with the top of the clay block retaining wall. Other excavated areas of the Ceremonial Court added evidence of the leveling of the construction area; high areas were removed and low areas built up. It is likely that several thousand tons of material were shifted in preparing a uniform foundation to build on (Drucker and Heizer 1965: 41).

With this preliminary work finished, the Court was outlined with a low, triangular embankment built above the clay foundation (25.4 cm high by 45.7 cm wide): the beginnings of the Court enclosure (Figures 26 and 27). A series of light brown, tan, and buff sandy flooring (termed “water-sorted” by the 1955 investigators) was then laid inside the court. These stratified floors were around 13 cm thick at the red clay embankment and about 23 cm thick near the centerline.

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2 The embankment shown on Figures 26 and 27 is located in reference to the profile of the east wall (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 6). The inner edge of the embankment is shown as 3.2 m east of the middle of the trench dug presumably for the later basalt columns. I measured 3.2 m out from the columns drawn on the 1955 map (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 4) to estimate the placement of the embankment.

3 The bulldozer trench that provided this information (Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 3, 6) ran through the projected area of the enclosure on the southeast side; columns were absent from this section. The excavated trench attests to the reality of the enclosure existing here from Phase I and continuing through Phase IV.
Figure 26. Plan of Phase I construction.
South-Central Platform

From the centerline east a little over 15 m, a cinnamon-brown colored floor was placed over the water-sorted flooring (Fig. 27). The South-Central Platform was built on top of this colored floor and then a second flooring of the same color was laid over the first and up the platform face (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 7). The height and surface color of this platform in Phase I is unknown since later disturbance cut off the upper surfacing (Drucker et al. 1959: 21). It was over half a meter high; 51 cm of the Phase I orange, reddish, and white sandy clay fill remained. The platform may have been stepped from its beginning as it definitely was in later additions. The east-west dimension of the platform is estimated to have been about 16 m based on the measurement from the centerline to the eastern edge of the platform (Drucker et al. 1959: 21). The north-south dimension is obscure. In 1942, one of Drucker's trenches, P-2 (1952: 28, fig. 11), cut through the platform. Wedel (1952: 39-44, fig. 15) also described it since the 1943 trench bisected the platform. The 1955 excavation report attempted to correlate all the various information (Drucker et al. 1959: 30-34). The Phase I platform is depicted as being approximately 9 m north-south (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 9).

A stone monument may have been placed on the north side of the platform on a heavy tan and pink clay pedestal (Drucker et al. 1959: 31, fig. 9). Three stones (two basalt pieces and one dressed serpentine slab) were embedded in this clay and visible in the trench cut (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 4a). It is unknown whether they were part of a feature that extended into either of the test trench’s sidewalls. Similar clay was also found below the Northeast and Northwest platforms. The clay could also be a grading block used when leveling the Court area.

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4 From the centerline-east, the cinnamon floor is an accurate dimension (15.24 m) on Fig. 27. The rest of the illustrated floor is a guess. I mirrored the distance from the centerline-west. The north-south length is pure supposition. The floor is not shown on the north-south reconstructed profile (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 9).

5 The South-Central Platform is the only structure in Complex A in any phase where the platform facing continues onto the floor surrounding it.

6 The exact size of this clay block is unknown. The cut for Massive Offering 3 in Phase III removed the north portion of the block. The south end of the block is seen in Figure 41. The width must be at least the width of the trench since it is in both walls. Figure 26 gives an approximate location for the three clay blocks found.
Figure 27. Plan of Phase I construction, showing colors used.
Northeast Platform

The Northeast Platform was built on top of a brown sandy fill that leveled the area (Figure 28). This platform was created before the water-sorted floors were laid down (Drucker and Heizer 1965: 43; Drucker et al. 1959: 58). Prior to the platform's creation, a rectangular pit was cut into the grading fill near the center of the future platform's western edge. This 76 cm square and 23 cm deep cut with sloping sides was filled with heavy red and yellow clay (Figure 29) (Drucker et al. 1959: 57-58, fig. 16). The clay ended slightly higher than the brown fill. The 1955 excavators speculated the red and yellow clay may have served as a pedestal for a monument or a “grade level” block. The earliest platform fill of pink mottled clay covered the clay block and extended about 15 m north-south (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 18) and 5 m east-west. Its height was a little over 50 cm (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 15). After forming the Northeast Platform the builders plastered it with thin colored surfacing layers: (earliest to latest) white, red, yellow, yellow.
Four offerings were set in this platform’s first clay fill: Nos. 7, 15, 16, and 17 (Fig. 26). All four appear to have been placed in the fill; no evidence of pits was recorded. Three of these (Nos. 15-17) were ceramic bowls. Offering 7 was likely a burial (see Chapter 6). These four caches in the Northeast Platform represent the only offerings recovered in the Phase I construction.

**Northwest Platform**

The Northwest Platform, “mate” of the Northeast Platform, does not appear to have been constructed at the same time or for similar purposes. It is questionable whether the Northwest Platform had a substantial beginning in Phase I (Drucker and Heizer 1965: 43-44). Susan Gillespie (2008b: figs. 4 and 5) created Phase I-A and I-B maps and placed the Northwest Platform in Phase I-B. I do not see any evidence on the profile that the platform was started in Phase I and think it more accurate to view the platform as a Phase II construction. Activity in the area included the deposition of brown sandy fill (2 m deep). A clay block or pedestal with sloping sides of pink and white clay was created and surfaced with
several red and purple layers on top of the sandy fill where the north end of the Northwest Platform eventually rested (Figure 30) (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 20). Eventually, the fill continued up to the top of the clay block, covering the paint layers. This clay structure may have been a pedestal for a monument. Its top was sheared off and a layer of soft brown sand placed over it. Then the builders laid the watersorted brown sandy flooring over the area.

The purple/red surfaced clay block may be associated with the other clay blocks below Phase I platforms (Northeast Platform and South-Central Platform) (Fig. 26). If so, it may signal that the Ceremonial Court area was first marked by at least three stone monuments before major construction began. This would point to the location for the Court as being designated an important locale before being demarcated by the enclosing embankment/wall and platforms.

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7 The exact dimensions are not given for the block. Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959: fig. 20) showed it extending north past where the edge of the Northwest Platform would eventually be built and running under the platform to an undetermined distance south. A little less than 2 m length (north-south) is shown in the 1959 profile (Figure 30).
**Mound A-2**

Two large pits for massive offerings disrupt the stratigraphic history of Mound A-2 which is just north and outside the Court. The cut for Massive Offering 3 removed some of Mound A-2’s later features and layers at this tiered-platform’s southern edge, and the cut for Massive Offering 2 removed its middle. Also, the buldozing of the airstrip in the 1950s removed the northern toe of the mound and disturbed the upper levels between the airstrip and the basalt tomb (Monument 7).

The excavations in 1955 (Drucker et al. 1959 37, fig. 10) and in 1967 (Heizer, Drucker and Graham 1968: 9) both demonstrated that the area around Mound A-2 had grade fill laid down to raise the base level for the water-sorted floors and the platform. The first platform fill consisted of mottled white sandy clay and was laid before the court flooring (Drucker and Heizer 1965: 43). This first fill was not “clean”; it contained charcoal and palm-sized fragments of clay flooring. The fill was capped with brownish-gray flooring bands that covered the top and vertical front of the platform. The Phase I platform dimensions are difficult to determine; the 1955 Berkeley team reconstructed it as approximately 20 m north/south and 60 cm high (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 11); they also showed the southern edge of the platform starting about 4 m north of the Massive Offering 3 pit (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 10). This makes the platform’s southern edge start on the same estimated line as the red clay embankment defining the northern border of the Ceremonial Court.

**Mound A-3**

Mound A-3 was positioned south and outside of the Ceremonial Court. It lay directly in line with Mound A-2 to the north and the pyramid to the south. Its history has a similar beginning to the platforms within the Court; the original ground surface was first leveled. Wedel (1952: 67, fig. 21) described six sun-dried adobe bricks as possible “grade stakes” used in this process (Figure 31). Then layered clayey sands were laid down, on top of which was build an 86 cm high platform of yellow and

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8 The Phase I north-south length of Mound A-2 is nearly equivalent with north-south Phase I dimensions of Mound A-3 (see below). Consequently, for Figures 26 and 27 I estimated the same east-west dimensions for Mound A-2 as given for Mound A-3. I measured 4 m north of the massive offering pit cut line on the 1955 map (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 4) to place the south edge of Mound A-2 in Phase I. That the south edge lines up with my estimated placement of the embankment seems rather fortuitous, especially since the two rely on different pieces of information (see footnote 2 above).
Figure 31. Section through a portion of Mound A-3 (NWAF drawing based on Wedel 1952: fig. 21).
reddish clay about 12 m wide (east-west) and 20–22 m long (north-south) (Drucker et al. 1959: 113, fig. 31). The clay was surfaced with an orange and white sandy clay floor series. The 1955 team (Drucker et al. 1959: 113) correlated Wedel’s (1952: 67, fig. 21) “level bed of colored sands and clays” or “tierra bonita” (beautiful earth) to the Phase I water-sorted flooring within the Court. 9

**Summary of the Architecture in Phase I**

A great deal of effort went into leveling the natural ridge beneath Complex A. The labor involved in the preparation would have been substantial and included many participants, likely of the non-elite status. A low, red clay embankment was created demarcating the area of the Ceremonial Court. The Northeast Platform and Mound A-2 were constructed after the leveling but before the light brown, tan and buff water-sorted floors were laid. Four offerings (Nos. 7, 15, 16, and 17) were placed in Phase I while constructing the Northeast Platform. Three of these were ceramics and one was a possible burial (see Chapter 6). The South-Central Platform was built on top of the water-sorted floors and above a cinnamon-brown colored floor. The Northeast Platform had a pink clay block beneath it, and the South-Central platform had a pink/tan clay block directly north of it. Another pink clay block surfaced with red and purple floors was found in the grading fill where the north end of the Northwest Platform would stand (Fig. 26). There is no evidence of a Phase I platform in the Northwest Platform’s stratigraphy. Mound A-3 was also constructed on floors that appear equivalent to the Phase I floors described for inside the Court and was the tallest platform constructed in this phase. Mound A-3, the South-Central Platform, and Mound A-2 were placed in a line considered the site’s main axis. The summit of the “Great Mound” or pyramid also falls in line with this centerline. Each platform had a different colored fill of clay and different colored surfacing (Fig. 27). All of the platforms were built taller than the bordering clay embankment—over twice as high (Fig. 26). It seems the wall defined the area but did not conceal any of the structures or activities undertaken there. From its beginning, Complex A appears to have been

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9 Gillespie (2008b: fig. 5) places Mound A-3 in Phase I-B with the Northwest Platform construction. The Northwest Platform, Mound A-3, and the South-Central Platform were built after Mound A-1 and the Northeast Platform since all three were built on the water-sorted flooring and the other two were built before the floor was laid. If Phase I-B is based on floor placement, then the South-Central platform is also Phase I-B. However, the South-Central Platform has a definite Phase I construction whereas the Northwest Platform does not.
constructed for a desired shape instead of for concealment. In plan view, the outline roughly resembles the stylized cave at Chalcatzingo—Monument 1, El Rey (Figure 32) (Grove 1984: fig. 5, 2000: 276, fig. 2).

**PHASE II**

**Diagnostic Flooring**

Phase II in the Court was marked by the “white sandy floor series” (Drucker and Heizer 1965: 45). These layered floors consisted of compact clay mixed with a large quantity of sand. The various colored floorings were alternated with bright white clay mixed with white sand. Most of the colored floorings were in shades of browns and tans. Some floor areas of unknown extent were surfaced with dark purple clays, and two separate locations visible in the test trenches of 1955 had expanses of serpentine fused with
bright yellow facings (Drucker and Heizer 1965: 46) or white flooring. This floor series was encountered at the approximate same vertical level in all of the 1955 profiles inside the Court, except beneath platforms and where removed by later pit intrusions. It is considered a temporal diagnostic surfacing layer associated with the second construction phase.

Wall

In Phase II the border surrounding the Court was enlarged. Unfired red and yellow adobe bricks set in a red clay mortar were laid up against the red clay embankment on its inside facing into the Court (Drucker et al. 1959: 21, figs. 6, 8). The adobes were set in horizontal courses to a width of 4.5 m at the wall's base and about 1 m high (Figure 33). Excavation in 1955 at the Northeast entryway discovered that the top of the adobe brick wall had a thin purple-brown plaster surfacing (Drucker et al. 1959: 73). Pedel (1952: 49, fig. 16) described the wall exposed on the west side of the Court as “stepped on its west face [outside] and seems to have a flat top.” At the bottom of the west adobe wall facing outside the Court were stone facing blocks in a horizontal band. Wedel's 1943 west wall exploration left an unexcavated block and did not unearth the inside adobe wall, so the presence of facing blocks inside is undetermined there. It does appear that in Phase II, facing blocks were on both the inside and outside of the adobe wall at its base. The white sandy floor series inside the Court was laid up against the inside facing blocks (about 10 cm thick here and 20 cm thick at the centerline) (Drucker et al. 1959: 22).

Southeast Corner

Wedel (1952: 60) placed a test pit in search of the southeast corner of the Ceremonial Court. The visible east wall of Phase IV basalt columns stopped after 20 or so meters from the northeast corner. The columns on the west side appear to have spanned the entire western length. Typically, the wall is shown

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10 The purple-brown plaster could have been a special treatment of the wall for the Northeast entryway area only, similar to the unique facing blocks of Phase III (see below). I chose to show the entire wall as plastered with purple (figure 34) but the evidence is only present at the entryway. Other excavation descriptions of the adobe wall state the top was heavily eroded.

11 Wedel (1952: 49) did not specify whether these are basalt or serpentine; he described them as “shaped stone blocks set on edge.” I assume they were basalt blocks similar to the basalt blocks uncovered on the inside in 1955 (Figures 33 and 34).
Figure 33. Plan of Phase II construction.
as bracket-shaped on both the east and west sides. I could not find any evidence in excavation reports for the small east-west segments of the bracket-shape on the south end. No columns are mentioned on the southern east-west line in Wedel’s meticulous description of the appearance of the Ceremonial Court in 1943 (Wedel 1952: 36-37), and no columns were drawn heading east from the southwest corner on Squier’s detailed map (Drucker et al. 1955: fig. 4; NAA, Smithsonian Institute, Heizer maps, drawing 2).

With tape and compass, Wedel computed the probable location of the southeast corner. The 1943 test only went down 1.5 m. He was searching for evidence of basalt or other stone. The pit was devoid of stone, but Wedel did find evidence of adobe construction in the north face of the pit. From this slightly vague description of the southeast corner, I think the adobe wall did not turn in on either the southeast or the southwest corners (Fig. 33). Wedel’s estimated corner and pit were extrapolated from the visible columns. The columns were placed on the inside of the Phase II adobe wall. If the wall had turned inward (west) at the corner, Wedel’s test would have come down on top of the adobes instead of only seeing them in his north profile. Of course it is possible that Wedel missed the corner and wall too far south, but the thickness of the adobe construction means he had to have been off by more than 3 m at least.

South-Central Platform

The South-Central Platform was also enlarged in Phase II. Mottled pink sandy fill (43 cm thick) loaded on top of the early platform raised the overall height to 94 cm (Drucker et al. 1959: 22). The additional material created a definite stepped platform. The platform’s east-west dimension was extended to 28 m. Offering No. 3, a possible burial, was placed within the pink fill on the east side approximately 8 m from the east edge and above the earlier platform (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 7). The north-south dimension actually shrunk from 9 m to 8 m (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 9, Wedel 1952: fig. 15). The first colored surfacing of the Phase II platform was a reddish/buff-to-orange. This facing extended onto the floor around the platform on the east side, similar to its cinnamon-colored facing of Phase I. This colored flooring is considered an early section of the white-sandy-floor series. Later in Phase II, a white sandy clay layer was laid on the flat Court floor area and the South-Central Platform was raised 36 cm with yellow clayey sand, capped with a burned layer, and then re-faced with successive thin coats of bright yellow fine
clay (Drucker et al. 1959: 22-23, 32, pl. 3). The third and fourth alterations were similar: white Court floor resurfacing laid at the same time the platform’s yellow painting was renewed. The surface of the uppermost and latest of the white sandy floor series here was covered with a thin layer (1.5-3 mm) of fine, green serpentine dust (Drucker et al. 1959: 23, fig. 7). This green dust was on the Court floor and the South-Central Platform. The floor was green-on-white and the platform facing green-on-yellow (Figure 34).

**Northeast Platform**

The enlargement of the Northeast Platform in Phase II consisted of adding yellow and red clay over and around the earlier platform (Figs. 28 and 29). This increased the length about 60 cm and the height 30 cm, making the platform approximately 16 m north-south and 6 m east-west (Drucker et al. 1959: 58, figs. 15, 16, 18). The top surface of the Phase I facing was scraped off before the additional clay was added. The platform was painted at least 3 times with bright yellow clay (6 mm thick). The white-sandy-floor series was laid before the Phase II platform surfacing (Fig. 28). The pulverized serpentine evident on the South-Central Platform and around the Northwest Platform (see below) was not present on the Northeast Platform. No offerings were located in the platform that date to Phase II.

**Northwest Platform**

The initial construction of the Northwest Platform was built of yellow sandy clay and on the water-sorted floors of Phase I (Fig. 30). The sides were sloped and painted with a series of thin yellow clay washes (Drucker et al. 1959: 66, fig. 20). After the platform was built, the white-sandy-floor series was laid up to its toe. The colors of the floor series represented near the Northwest Platform are white, purple, and brown. The floor renewals and platform re-facings coincided. The final layer of the floor series around the platform is marked by green serpentine dust, similar to that on the South-Central Platform. Unlike the South-Central Platform, the serpentine was not incorporated into the Northwest Platform’s facing (Fig. 34). At the end of Phase II the Northwest Platform was “bright yellow and the Court floor a soft green color” (Drucker et al. 1959: 71).

On the Court floor near the northeast edge of the Northwest Platform were two large pits: each were about 60-90 cm wide and nearly 120 cm deep (Fig. 33). No evidence pointing to their intended function
Figure 34. Plan of Phase II construction, showing colors used.
was uncovered; however, their function was limited to Phase II. The pits remained in place while the purple/white floors accumulated but were filled in before the serpentine floor was laid. White sand was laid on top of the green serpentine dust (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 22). The 1955 team speculated that large wooden posts had been placed in the pits for a portion of the Phase II period. (Drucker et al. 1959: 70). If so, the poles were there only as long as the time between floor resurfacings. The pits were cut through the floor prior to the laying down of the serpentine dust layer (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 22).

Overlapping pits in the middle portion of the Northwest Platform obscure its stratigraphy (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 21). Offerings Nos. 18 and 19 were recovered in one of these pits (Figure 35). Although in the same pit, the two pottery vessels were close to a meter apart and at slightly different elevations, so they were given individual offering numbers. Drucker and his associates assigned these two offerings to Phase II. In the profile (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 21) the pit appears to have originated after the Phase II floors, suggesting a Phase III designation. Apart from the temporal confusion, it is interesting to note that over time this particular area was used repeatedly. The ceramic offerings were in pit no. 3 which intruded into the earlier, pit no. 2. A layer of charcoal was found at the bottom of pit no. 3 and another charcoal
layer toward the top. Olive colored clay was laid in the same area, a little higher up. The olive clay was not mentioned in the 1959 text. From the profile, it is apparent that the olive color was positioned before the Phase IV red clay fill, but it is unclear whether this was a Phase IV or Phase III activity. The dimensions of the Northwest Platform were not given. I think it was assumed that the length and width matched those of the Northeast Platform, or the 1955 investigators determined that it did match but neglected to so specify in their excavation report. The profiles of this platform do not allow deduction of its size (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 19). The only dimension given in relation to the Northwest Platform was that the two pits on the Court floor were about 4.5 m from the platform’s centerline. The Phase II height of the Northwest Platform was lower than all the other Phase II structures. It was approximately 60 cm high (Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 20, 21).

**Mound A-2**

Mound A-2 was expanded with the addition of compact white sandy clay mixed with loads of pinkish-red and gray clay. On top of this construction fill a large series of very thin, bright purple floors was laid (Fig. 34). This series was about 7.5 cm thick and included at least 100 separate colored layers (Drucker et al. 1959: 38, fig. 11). Three more successions of fill and purple flooring occurred on Mound A-2. Altogether, the entire platform was raised an additional 2 m (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 10). The last addition corresponds with the end of the white-sandy-floor series. The overall platform dimensions are unknown, but the south face was stepped with low terraces. The south face also had a possible apron, extending south of the platform, made of a series of colored sandy layers; an enormous pit excavated in the next construction phase obliterated most of it. The color series in this apron were “mixed purple and brown; tan; orange yellow; yellow; purple and white; tan; yellow” (top to bottom). The north-south dimension at the end of Phase II was estimated to be approximately 26 m (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 11), not including the colored apron.¹²

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¹² Since the pit for Massive Offering 3 cut off the apron’s southern edge, and the trench did not extend to its eastern and western edges, there is no way to know the apron’s original area. In Figure 33 I placed the apron’s south edge in line with the inner edge of the adobe wall simply because the Phase I south edge of the platform lined up with the red embankment. I extended a similar appearance for Phase II.
Mound A-3

Mound A-3 was not amplified in Phase II (Drucker et al. 1959: 116). Traces of purple coating were visible along the top of the platform surface. Based on the creation of purple surfaces in other locations during Phase II, the 1955 investigators suggested that the purple resurfacing was the only evidence of Phase II modification at Mound A-3.

Southeast Platform

The Southeast Platform was excavated in 1943 by Wedel and Stirling. Its temporal construction sequence was not as clearly defined as its mate’s, the Southwest Platform, excavated in 1955. It is clear that the first stage of both platform constructions was in Phase II, based on complementary evidence recovered in the Southwest structure (Heizer 1964: 47; Drucker and Heizer 1965: 54-55).

In Phase II, the Southeast Platform was a 2.25 m high structure created by coursed adobe bricks (Wedel 1952: 55). The bricks were olive-gray to greenish and yellowish in color set in reddish clay; “when freshly exposed, they formed a rather striking pattern of colors” (Wedel 1952: 55). The 1943 crew did not extend their work to the edges of the adobe platform. The dimensions of the platform likely mirrored its western twin: approximately 8 m north-south and 10.5 m east-west (Fig. 33).

The adobes were the surface component of one of La Venta’s massive offerings (known as Pavement No. 1 and Massive Offering 4). Before the bricks were laid, the inhabitants dug a large pit, placed layers of serpentine rubble and clay capped with a mosaic pavement, deposited a pink mottled fill, and positioned a cruciform cache (Offering 1943-E) in the fill nearly 20 cm below the bricks (Wedel 1952: figs. 18, 19, 20). The details of each element of this Massive Offering are described in Chapter 6.

Southwest Platform

The 1955 investigators probed the Southwest Platform with a clear expectation of its contents based on the 1943 excavations of the Southeast Platform (Drucker et al. 1959: 80). They expected to find a pavement but did not know whether it would be similar to or distinct from Wedel's Pavement No. 1. As a result of their care, the 1955 work revealed more information and uncovered new features associated with
the Phase II construction. It is cautiously assumed that observed aspects of the western platform were equivalent to undescribed attributes of the earlier explored eastern platform.

In Phase II the Southwest Platform was also an adobe brick creation. The bricks in the west are described as “a variety of clays of yellowish colors. They were not all alike; some being light and some dark yellow, others tending to yellowish brown, and a few having a yellowish-orange tone” (Drucker et al. 1959: 90). Since the east and west adobe platforms were excavated by different archaeologists, it is difficult to know whether the colors for them were actually distinct or just described differently based on individual perception (Clark and Colman 2010). The bricks were laid in red clay mortar 2.5 -7.5 cm thick.

This western platform was the surface manifestation of Massive Offering 1. Beneath the Southwestern Platform's bricks lay a large pit, layers of serpentine rubble set in clay, a mosaic pavement, pink mottled fill, and celts positioned in the fill. There were a few differences between the “twin” offerings. The color scheme associated with each mosaic pavement varied, and the western mosaic was enveloped in olive clay while the eastern pavement was not. The celt arrangement in the eastern offering’s overlying fill formed a cruciform whereas the arrangement in the western offering consisted of two lots of celts embedded in olive clay (Offering 1942-E). Additional information discovered in the western offering included a colored marker wall around the mosaic pavement, the number of serpentine layers below the mask and particular aspects of its construction, the entire depth and width of the offering pit, a clay retaining wall along the upper portion of the pit, a stone figurine in the southwest corner of the mosaic, and facing blocks around the outside base of the adobe structure (Figure 36). This extra information was a result of a more comprehensive exploration of the platform. Chapter 6 discusses the details of Massive Offering 1.

The positioning of facing blocks around the platform's base related to the sequence of events in Phase II. Sometime after the adobe platform was formed a U-shaped trench was dug around all sides of the platform that cut through an early portion of the white-sandy-floor series and the some of the adobes. This trench was filled with yellowish-red clay. The fill continued up the exposed faces of the adobe brickwork to an undetermined height (Drucker et al. 1959: 88). It is possible that the fill covered the

13 Heizer (1968: 10) calculated “the two mosaic masks and their stone and clay fills each amounts to about 22,800 cubic feet.”
Figure 36. North-south profile through the center of the Southwest Platform showing Massive Offering 1 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 26).
entire platform, but later disturbances to the platform made it impossible to know. Along the north, east, and west sides of the lower slope of the platform, near the top of the trench, a long row of very carefully squared basalt blocks was placed, with blocks end to end in this yellowish-red clay fill. On the south side, the row of basalt blocks continued. However, behind the row, carved rectangular blocks of green polished serpentine were placed on end, tilted back at a slight angle. Roughly shaped basalt blocks were then also placed on end on top of the outer layer of well-shaped and finished basalt blocks. The rough basalt blocks covered the top of the inner serpentine blocks, and the finished basalt blocks covered the lower half of these same green blocks (Figure 37) (Drucker et al. 1959: 88-89, figs. 26, 28, pls. 12, 13). A brown, yellow, and orange floor series laid on a narrow terrace south of the main platform appears to have been another feature constructed in connection with the placement of the facing blocks (Drucker et al. 1959: 89, 108). Similar facing blocks and unique southern flooring were thought to have been present on the Southeast Platform as well. The pattern of facing blocks may have been different, as suggested by the known, different patterns of facing blocks implemented in Phase IV on the twin platforms (see below).
Summary of the Architecture in Phase II

Phase II construction in Complex A consisted of the enlargement and resurfacing of the existing Phase I platforms, the augmentation of the bordering Ceremonial Court wall, and the creation of three new platforms (NW, SW, SE Platforms). The color scheme of the earlier platforms also changed. At the end of Phase II, Mounds A-2 and A-3 were surfaced with purple; the Northeast and Northwest Platforms were covered in yellow; the Southeast and Southwest Platforms were yellowish/greenish adobe bricks in red mortar; the bordering wall was also yellow adobes set in red clay with a purple plaster on the top; and the South-Central Platform went through four color transformation—the last one a layer of green serpentine dust on yellow clay (Fig. 34). It appears that platforms considered “mates” of each other received similar color treatments. This would make Mound A-2 and Mound A-3 a pair as well, but on a north-south line instead of east-west. The colors of clay fills used to enhance and create platforms were different for each individual construction.

The Southeast and Southwest Platforms were surface markers of massive offerings. The mosaic pavements or masks of Massive Offerings 1 and 4 were nearly identical, with some interesting distinctions (see Chapter 6). Offering 3, a possible burial, was placed in the fill that expanded the South-Central Platform. The 1955 excavators assigned two other offerings (Nos. 18 and 19) to Phase II. From the associated profile they appear to have been deposited in Phase III instead (Fig. 35).

The two massive offerings represented a great amount of energy expended in both their preparation and creation. Tons of rock had to be procured, serpentine blocks shaped, adobe bricks fashioned, and axes and celts created. Figure 38 shows the 1955 workers hauling the serpentine rubble out of Massive Offering 1. A similar scene must have occurred when the serpentine blocks were originally placed in the pit. The massive offerings marked joint efforts of many people, as did the wall, flooring, and other construction elements in the Court.

The augmentation of the wall did little to occlude the activities within the Ceremonial Court. Most of the existing platform additions made their height similar to the wall’s height. Only the Northwest Platform was noticeably lower (around 40 cm). Hence, the colors, activities, and any stone monuments
in the Court would have been visible to bystanders outside the Court. The Southeast and Southwest Platforms were the tallest constructions in Complex A and more than twice the height of the wall. The elevated, twin adobe platforms were the visible extension of the masks and stone pyramids buried beneath them. The height of Mound A-2 eventually superseded slightly the height of the Southeast and Southwest Platforms, but only near the end of Phase II. If the adobe platforms were created at the beginning of the phase, they would have been over a meter taller than all other platforms in the Court.
PHASE III

Diagnostic Flooring

The flooring associated with Phase III constructions is labeled the “old-rose floor series” (Drucker et al. 1959: 23). In the southeast of the Court, this flooring was laid on top of a thick layer of red, purple and pink clay that raised the general elevation of the Court floor area approximately 38 cm (Fig. 25). This fill created a sort of acropolis or platform out of the entire Ceremonial Court. The surface level of the floor was now close to the height of the encompassing adobe wall, at least on the eastern side (Drucker et al. 1959: 25, fig. 6). Other areas of the court were raised using brown sandy clay fill (middle area between South-Central Platform, Mound A-2, and Northeast Platform), reddish-yellow sandy clay with small white clay particles (near Southwest Platform), and heavy mottled red and yellow clay (Northwest Platform). Most of the added fill raised the floor close to the height of the individual platforms’ Phase II heights within the Court interior. Definite drainage slopes and shallow open gutters are aspects of the old-rose floors and surface (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 8).

Massive Offering No. 3 Pit and Fill

Phase III construction activity appears to have been initiated with the placement of Massive Offering 3. The cut for the offering pit dates to the end of the white-floor series and the fill of the pit was covered by rose colored floors. The square pit (23.5 m on each side) excavated to hold six layers of serpentine pavement (19 by 20 m)14 encompassed the entire northern area of the Court between the South-Central Platform and Mound A-2 (Figures 39 and 40). The pit went down nearly 4 m from the then current surface of the Court (Drucker et al. 1959: 130).15 After the pit was completed but before the serpentine was laid, a thick sloping retaining wall of heavy red and yellow clay was built up against the northern wall (Drucker et al. 1959: 39).16 Then the green blocks were positioned and the thin clay mortar used to

14 The aggregate weight of the six layers of carefully finished green serpentine blocks was estimated as 50 tons (Heizer 1968: 10).

15 Heizer (1958: 104) estimated that “the cubic content of this single pit is over 60,000 cubic feet. This extensive project... was a single-phase job which had been carried straight through to its completion once it had begun.” Later, he recalculated the volume to equal “77,000 cubic feet, which is equivalent to about 4000 tons of sandy clay fills” (Heizer 1968: 10).

16 The southern wall is steeper than the northern wall (Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 9 and 10). Consequently, the pavement was not centered in the cut (Figure 39).
The listed dimensions for the platforms are their heights above the old-rose floor. In Phase III, the court floor was raised nearly 40 cm. The surface of the floor was close to the height of the adobe walls, making the area a sort of acropolis.

Figure 39. Plan of Phase III construction.
Figure 40. Plan of Phase III construction, showing colors used.
cover the blocks was continued up the edges of the pit. A gray and brown sandy fill followed (60-75 cm) (Drucker et al. 1959: 39, 59). Next, a trench was formed nearly a meter wide and 76 cm deep around the entire perimeter of the pavement and subsequently filled with jumbled, finished serpentine blocks (Figure 41).

With the serpentine offering in place, the work of filling the pit commenced. The fill was not homogenous (Drucker et al. 1959: 40-41; fig. 10). First, a sloping bank of heavy sandy clay fill was put over the north face of the cut. This was followed by about 1.2 m of gray and brown sandy fill in the main depression. At this level, a cruciform celt cache (Offering 10) was placed on a bed of reddish clay and plastered over with yellow sandy clay (Fig. 41). Drucker and his associates (1959: 40) believed that after Offering 10 was in place, the pit remained open for a long period of time, perhaps an entire rainy season. This reasoning is based on a 7-15 cm thick stratum of waterwashed sands and fine clays deposited by surface waters collecting in the depression. It is doubtful that an entire rainy season was necessary to create the stratum described; a few rains would account for the layer (Clark, personal communication 2009).

The east-west profile (Figure 42) outlined a little different stratigraphy in regards to the pit fill. Toward the east wall of the pit, the fill over the serpentine pavement was called “brown sand with some clay loads” (Drucker et al. 1959: 59, fig. 17). This fill continued up to the top of the cut. Here, the brown sand was intermixed with a high content of fine clay. This fill rose about 36 cm higher than the cut and spilled over to the east, covering the Phase II white sandy floors, to abut the face of the Northeast Platform. A smaller pit within the larger offering pit was left open toward the centerline. Offering 10 was positioned within this inner pit that was approximately 4.6 m from the east edge to the centerline at its bottom and was 1.7 m deep (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 17). It is likely that the inner pit extended around 4.6 m to the west as well (Fig. 42). From the north-south profile, it appears that the inner pit was left open to the northern and southern edges of the larger, original pit cut, thereby creating an open trench.

After a bout of rainy weather, filling resumed in this inner trench. A new layer of fill, ginger-colored clayey sand, covered Offering 12 (Fig. 41) (Drucker et al. 1959: 40). At about the same level but some 4.5 m south of Offering 12, Offering 1943-C was placed in a pocket of soft gray sand and covered over
Figure 41. Profile of Massive Offering 3 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 9 & 10 with adjustment of their vertical scale to match the horizontal scale).
with mottled clay (Wedel 1952: 39). Another layer of sandy clays, yellow and brown colored, was the last of the trench fill, on top of which rose-colored floors were laid. Three offerings, 1943-D, 8, and 13 were placed in this upper clay layer. Offering 13 was right at the top, just under the rose-colored flooring (Fig. 42). This fill also raised the floor south of the massive offering cut and met with a “buttress” of mixed sandy clay laid up against the stepped northern face of the South-Central platform (Fig. 41) (Drucker et al. 1959: 32). To the north, this same fill covered the Phase II apron of Mound A-2 and continued up and north over the entire Phase II structure (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 10). Offering 2a appears to have been a disturbed offering that originated in this fill. Offering 1 was placed in a pit (directly below Monument 13) dug into this last fill before the floors were laid at the foot of Mound A-2 (Drucker et al. 1959: 133). The pit for Offering 2, also near Mound A-2, cut through an early Phase III floor and was then covered with
additional old-rose flooring. The numerous offerings within the pit fill of Massive Offering 3 were all part of the same event, except Offering 2 and perhaps Offering 1.

In the east-west profile of Massive Offering 3 three sizable “flat-lying lenses of clean white sand” in the brown fill are marked (Drucker et al. 1959: 59, figs. 16, 17). One of the lenses ran east above the massive offering pit cut toward the Northeast Platform. Offering No. 4 was positioned in this white sand (Fig. 42). Also, the western edge of the Phase III extension of the Northeast Platform rested on this same lens (Fig. 29).

South-Central Platform

The Phase III court floor’s fill layer of red, purple, and pink clay was laid up against the steep eastern and southern slopes of the South-Central Platform. This clay covered and protected the Phase II yellow facing on its edges (Drucker et al. 1959: 23-24, 33). Apparently the height of the platform projected above the old-rose floors, but at the end of Phase III the platform was planed off (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 7). Consequently the exact east-west dimensions of the Phase III structure are unknown.

On the platform's northern face, clay sloped over the steps. The fill of Massive Offering 3 continued up past the initial cut for the pit and leveled the court floor to the top of this “buttress” (Drucker et al. 1959: 33, fig. 9). A thin gray sand layer slightly enlarged the structure, and the platform was then faced with light-red clay. The Phase III platform was a little over 7 m long, north-south, and projected 50-70 cm above the rose floors (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 9).

A large pit dug anciently into the fill of the South-Central Platform was assigned to Phase III. This pit cut off the east facing on the Phase I structure (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 7). The diameter of the pit could not be determined because a later pit cut away the Phase III pit’s eastern half. At the bottom of the Phase III pit was a 2 cm thick layer of charcoal.

Northeast Platform

As mentioned above, the western edge of the Phase III enlargement of the Northeast Platform rested on a clean white sand lens within the brown sandy fill that raised the level of the court floor west of the
platform (Figs. 29 and 42) (Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 16, 17). Offering 4 was in this same white lens just west of the platform's edge. Phase III construction was minimal on the platform. About 60-90 cm were added to the north-south extension and even less to the east-west width (Drucker et al. 1959: 60). Heavy yellow clay encapsulated the earlier platform and raised its height a little over 60 cm (Fig. 28). But with the surrounding court floor height also raised, the platform was a little over 55 cm higher than the Court floor. The brown fill and rose colored floors overlay this yellow clay fill slightly on its western edge. The color of the platform's facing was not given.

Two possible burials, Offerings 5 and 6, and a ceramic offering (No. 14) were discovered within the Northeast Platform and assigned to Phase III (Fig. 39). A schematic sketch of the platform (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 18) and the offerings' descriptions (Drucker et al. 1959: 162, 167) both indicate that Offerings 5 and 6 were placed in pits that started from the Phase III yellow clay fill and penetrated earlier platform fills. In Heizer's field notes (NAA notebook #1), he showed the pit for Offering 5 beginning near the bottom of the Phase III platform, right above Phase II flooring. Offering 6 was depicted as starting higher in the Phase III fill but not at its Phase III top (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 18). Therefore, Offering 5 was likely placed first and near the beginning of Phase III activity on the platform.

It is possible that the Phase III amplification of the Northeast Platform followed a history similar to that of the Northwest Platform (see below). In the western platform, two episodes of additions raised its height in Phase III. In the eastern platform, parallel activity may have occurred but would not have been obvious if the same yellow clay had been used for both additions. This may explain why the pit for Offering 6 started in the upper portion of the Phase III fill. If accurate, Offering 6 would be somewhat later than Offering 5.

**Northwest Platform**

Around the Northwest Platform, the Court floor was raised in Phase III to the platform's Phase II height by a thick layer of heavy mottled red and yellow clay (Drucker et al. 1959: 66). The Northwest Platform was then raised with a 20 cm thick layer of brown clay (Fig. 30). The Phase III dimensions had
the exact same northern extent as the earlier Phase II platform (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 20). The brown clay platform fill was painted with a yellow wash. The old-rose flooring ran up to the yellow facing. Later, in the same construction phase, an additional 35 cm of light brown clay was added to the top of the platform and the fill extended slightly past the edge onto the old-rose flooring (Fig. 30). The sides of this addition were faced with a brown and a yellow wash, and another floor layer in the old-rose series abutted against the wash (Drucker et al. 1959: 71). The additional clay layer raised the Northwest Platform to approximately the same 55 cm level above the floor as its eastern mate.

**Mound A-2**

The Phase III pit for Massive Offering 3 removed a portion of Mound A-2’s south apron. The upper fill of this pit, a mixture of yellow and brown sandy clays, continued north over the apron and up on top of the stepped platform (Fig. 41). A light tan surfacing layer capped this platform fill. Two more additions were made to Mound A-2 during Phase III. A fill of yellowish clay with red and white clay inclusions was laid over the first Phase III fill. This second resurfacing increased the north-south dimension of the platform. It was capped with a red sandy clay floor purposely baked hard (Drucker et al. 1959: 42). The final Phase III addition was a reddish-yellow sandy clay fill (some charcoal and black sherds were mixed in). This fill was surfaced with thin gray sandy floors. There appears to have been an apron of 13 colored floors on the south side of the Mound A-2 associated with this last Phase III surfacing (similar to the same platform’s Phase II apron of colored floors). The stratigraphy of the mound and apron, however, is rather unclear (Fig. 41). Monument 24 was found on the northern side of Mound A-2 and looks like a stone step associated with the second or third addition in Phase III (Drucker et al. 1959: 49-50).17

The first Phase III addition actually shortened the north-south dimension of Mound A-2. The floor/pit fill covered the previous apron and part of the bottom Phase II tier (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 10). The Phase III construction created the first step of the platform about 2 m north of the earlier stage’s southern edge and about 60 cm above the new floor level. This made the north-south dimension approximately

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17 The temporal designation for Monument 24 differs between the 1955 excavators’ discussion of stratigraphy (1959: 49-50) and the Monument itself (1959: 204). In the monument description they place it in Phase IV. In the stratigraphy section it clearly states that the stone was found under the red clay blanket diagnostic of Phase IV. If true, then the green gneiss step was placed in Phase III.
22.5 m (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 11)\textsuperscript{18}. The east-west dimension is approximated at 18 m (NAA, Heizer La Venta maps, Drawing #2). The two later additions enlarged the southern edge at least 5.5 m, not including the apron, and raised the height nearly 90 cm (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 10). Mound A-2 was then approximately 1.5 m higher than the floor at the end of Phase III.

**Mound A-3**

Nothing in Mound A-3 appears to represent Phase III activity (Drucker et al. 1959: 117).

**Southeast and Southwest Platforms**

Evidence of activity in Phase III is sparse for the twin Southeast and Southwest Platforms. The 1943 excavation of the Southeast Platform did not go to the edges so any possible enlargement to the platform were not exposed. The 1955 excavation of the Southwest Platform revealed that the outer edges of the platform were covered by fill used to raise the Court floor. Here the fill included reddish-yellow sandy clays with small white clay particles (Drucker et al. 1959: 87). There is no evidence of any augmentation to the platform itself. The old-rose colored floor series surrounded the western platform as part of a continuous level extending across the Court. The Southwest and Southeast Platforms were likely about 1 m higher than the floor.

**Northeast Entryway**

The Northeast Entryway is the area between the east side of Mound A-2 and the end of the adobe wall enclosing the Court (Fig. 39) (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 23). Excavations in this area uncovered an interesting Phase III decorative element placed against the slope of the west-facing wall terminus: three rows of carefully dressed basalt and serpentine blocks (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 7). The three rows consist of the same three types of blocks used to enhance the south face of the Southwest Platform in late Phase II times; however, the entryway arrangement was slightly different. Here the serpentine blocks were angled, leaning lengthwise against the slope of the wall. A row of the squared basalt blocks was placed below the

\textsuperscript{18} Squier’s 1955 field map labeled Drawing #2 housed at the NAA in the Heizer collection shows a dashed line within the eroded Mound A-2 oval designated as the Phase III platform dimensions. This outline matches the first Phase III construction activity with a north-south length of 22.5 m.
Figure 43. Schematic plan of the Northeast Entryway (not to scale) (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 23).

Figure 44. Northeast Entryway Phase III facing blocks (Photo looking northeast; Figure 49 is a matched photo taken from a different direction, Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
serpentine. These blocks were perfectly upright and placed end-to-end. A third row of chipped basalt blocks was positioned on the floor, end-to-end, and adjacent to the dressed basalt row (Figure 43). On the Southwest Platform the chipped basalt blocks rested on top of the dressed basalt blocks, tilted on end, covering the serpentine row (Drucker et al. 1959: pls. 12, 13). At the Northeast Entryway 11 serpentine blocks, 11 dressed basalt blocks, and 16 chipped basalt blocks were uncovered. Near the center of the lowermost row, one of the chipped blocks was raised about 20 cm above the rest (Figure 44) (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 7).

During Phase III, the Court floor in this area was elevated with a layer of yellow and brown sand fill. The old-rose floor series capped this fill. After the fill and floors were laid, a narrow trench along the west face of the adobe wall was dug, possibly to salvage three rows of blocks that may have been positioned below at the Phase II floor level. There is evidence that rectangular dressed basalt blocks were used to adorn the inside and outside of the adobe brick wall in Phase II. A pattern of three rows of the same three block types was also present in Phase II on the south face of the Southwest Platform; the other three faces of the platform had a single row of the dressed basalt blocks. It is very likely that three rows existed on the Northeast Entryway in Phase II as well.

The trench was filled with red clay mixed with charcoal and plain sherds. The fill continued up the adobe wall’s western face to the top. The rows of facing blocks were set on the surface of this fill. The Phase III wall here was about 60 cm higher than the Court floor (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 24).

The Northeast Entryway section of the adobe wall may not have been the only portion of the wall ornamented with facing blocks in Phase III. In 1942, Drucker excavated a portion of the wall in the northwest corner (Fig. 13) (Drucker 1952: 32-33). In his small trench, he uncovered three serpentine blocks on the inner facing wall that would date to Phase III times based on the depth of their discovery (Fig. 40). What Drucker (1952: 33) called “a sort of step or platform along the inside of the wall” made

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19 Drucker (1952: 33) listed “1.9 m below present ground level” as the depth of the 3 serpentine blocks. This would include the drift sand over the site. On the previous page he gave the dimension of 106 cm for the sand overburden above the Phase IV red clay cap. Using the profile of the adobe wall in the Northeast Entryway (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 24) as a reference, 84 cm below the Phase IV clay cap is the location of the Phase III basalt dressed facing blocks. It follows then that the serpentine blocks in Drucker’s northwest corner exploration likely date to the Phase III construction.
of orange-red clayey soil was likely the Phase III floor fill in that area, as described for the Northeast Platform.

**Summary of the Architecture in Phase III**

Phase III began with the excavation of an enormous pit on the centerline between Mound A-2 and the South-Central Platform. Approximately 4 m down, six layers of serpentine paved a 19 by 20 m area (Massive Offering 3). A short wall of jumbled serpentine blocks traced the pavement edges. Seven smaller offerings were placed within the fills above the pavements (Offering Nos. 2a, 8, 10, 12, 13, 1943-C, and 1943-D). Two other offerings (Offering Nos. 1 and 2) were placed in pits dug into the last fill of Massive Offering 3 (Fig. 41). Offering 1 was placed before the rose-colored flooring and directly under where Monument 13 was found in 1955. Offering 2 cut through an early Phase III floor. Eventually the apron for Mound A-2 covered the locations of Offerings 2a, 2, and 1943-D (Fig. 40).

The fill of the massive offering pit continued up past the initial cut and extended north, south, and east as part of the court floor fill (to the north, this fill went up over Mound A-2 as well). Different colored clay fills raised other areas of the Court floor. The entire Court was surfaced with the rose colored floors. The general elevation of the floor was nearly level with the top of the Phase II adobe wall and the Phase II height of the inner-court platforms.

Excavation at the Northeast Entryway in 1955 demonstrated an additional 38 cm of red clay was added to the top of the adobe wall in Phase III, thereby covering the purple plaster on its top and is west-facing terminus (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 24). Three rows of facing blocks, two of basalt and one of serpentine, were positioned in this fill on the wall’s terminus (Figs. 43 and 44). The 1955 bulldozer trench that cut the eastern wall did not expose any Phase III addition to the brickwork. The adobe wall may have been left untouched in sections and only certain areas such as the Northeast entryway wall terminus may have been covered with red clay and decoration, or any clay addition and ornamentation was removed prior to Phase IV construction work. A Phase III addition could also have been indistinguishable from the Phase IV red clay. The Phase IV trench excavated to hold the basalt column removed the inner portion of the adobe wall (Drucker et al. 1959: 26, fig. 6). Excavations into the Court wall in 1942 and 1943 were
too cursory to verify the state of the wall in Phase III; however, Drucker’s small trench revealed three serpentine inner-facing blocks that appear to have been of this phase (Drucker 1952: 32-33, fig. 13; Wedel 1952: 46-47, fig. 16).

Mound A-2 was augmented three times in Phase III. Its last resurfacing made it rise 1.5 m above the Court floor. The first flooring color was light tan, the second burned red, and the third gray. These additions made the mound slightly taller than the paired southern platforms. Monument 24, a stone step, may have been associated with its northern face.

The South-Central Platform projected 50–70 cm above the old-rose flooring. It was enlarged with gray sand and faced with light-red clay. Much of the platform was apparently removed before the Phase IV additions, particularly on its east side.

The Court fill in Phase III leveled the floor to the Phase II height of the Northwest Platform. This platform was built up twice in Phase III, both with brown clay faced with yellow washes. The first was a 20 cm thick fill layer followed by a second layer of fill 35 cm thick.

The Northeast Platform was elevated by adding a layer of yellow clay to an approximate height of 55 cm above the Court floor. This platform likely experienced two additions within Phase III, similar to its western mate, as gauged from the pits made for Offerings 5 and 6. Offering 14 was also placed in this platform during Phase III times. Offering 4 was placed just off the western edge of the Northeast Platform in the same white sand lens that the Phase III platform construction rested on and in the same east-west line as Offerings 5 and 14.

The Southwest and Southeast Platforms do not appear to have been amplified during Phase III. Without additions, their brickwork would have been about 1 m higher than the old-rose flooring.

By the end of Phase III, the entire Ceremonial Court had become an elevated platform. The wall was about 60 cm higher than the inner floor. The tops of the contained platforms were nearly the same height as the surrounding wall (Fig. 39). Mound A-2 stood the tallest. The outer surface of Mound A-2 was gray, the South-Central Platform was light red, the enclosing wall may have been red, the Northwest
and Northeast Platforms were likely yellow, and the flooring was rose colored (Fig. 40). The southern platforms and Mound A-3 do not appear to have been modified from the previous construction phase. The raised flooring covered the facing blocks around the Southwest and Southeast platforms.

**PHASE IV**

*Diagnostic Fill*

Phase IV construction was attested by a massive red clay fill that blanketed all previous architecture in Complex A. Two new constructions, Mounds A-4 and A-5, were partially created with this same fill. If different floorings ever covered the red clay, no evidence of their existence remained to be detected by archaeologists. The 1955 excavators commented, “we may suppose that it was originally finished or topped off with colored floors, but of these no trace was discovered” (Drucker et al. 1959: 25). The red clay blanket marks the last construction activities of Complex A (Figures 45 and 46).

*Mound A-2*

After the third Phase III surfacing was in place, a large pit (15 m north-south, 6 m east-west, and 4.95 m deep) was excavated through the southern half of the Mound A-2 to place Massive Offering 2, a single-layer serpentine pavement (Drucker et al. 1959: 128, fig. 12). The pit had nearly vertical walls that cut through earlier constructions and the underlying base sands to reach a clay subsoil (Drucker et al. 1959: 42). The steep walls would have made the laying of the offering and the placing of the pit-fill rather hazardous.

At the bottom of the pit “a blood-red clayey sand was laid down, and upon it a thin wedge, which tapered off to the north, of reddish-brown clays sand was put down” (Drucker et al. 1959: 43). The serpentine pavement was placed on this red colored bed. Over the shaped blocks was laid a thick blanket of dense, olive and yellowish-brown clays (Figure 47). Then two offerings, Nos. 9 and 11, were placed directly opposite each other (east-west) above the pavement in a layer of brown sandy fill. This fill was followed by yellowish-brown sandy clay with loading lenses of heavy colored clays and clean sand.

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20 Heizer (1968: 10) determined the pit’s “capacity can be calculated to be about 15,000 cubic feet, and its content to comprise about 675 tons of sandy clay fills.”
The listed dimensions for the platforms in the Ceremonial Court are their height above the red clay fill on the floor.

Figure 45. Plan of Phase IV construction.
Figure 46. Plan of Phase IV construction, showing colors used.
Figure 47. North-south profile of Massive Offering 2 and part of Mound A-2 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 127 with adjustment of their vertical scale to match the horizontal scale).
Offering 1942-C (a cruciform axe cache), Offering 1943-F (a likely burial), and a rough sandstone block were positioned in this upper fill. The sandstone block was “similar in color, hardness, and texture” to the sandstone sarcophagus (Monument 6) material (Drucker et al. 1959: 49). The block measured 53 by 36 by 15 cm. The sandstone was placed in nearly the exact position of the midpoint, vertically and horizontally, of the massive offering cut (Drucker et al. 1959: 49, fig. 12).

The uppermost level of this final fill was heavy red and yellow clay that merged almost imperceptible into the overlying “diagnostic” red clay cap. A thin layer of grayish-tan sandy clay distinguished the top of the pit fill from the cap (Drucker et al. 1959: 43). This thin dividing line did not cover the entire top surface of the pit, possibly due to disturbance when Monuments 6 and 7 were placed. It is also possible that the dividing line was not an intentional surface but instead was created as an incidental by-product from positioning the large monuments (Drucker et al. 1959: 49).

Monument 6 was situated on the site’s centerline directly over the midpoint of the massive offering pit—a clear indication of a connection between the likely burial and the offering itself (Drucker et al. 1959: 49). The southern half of Monument 7 (the basalt column tomb) rested on the fill of the massive offering pit, and the north half sat on undisturbed stratigraphic layers. The south half of Monument 7 is where the burial bundles were positioned, so they also could be linked to the massive offering symbolism. The base of Monument 6 was just slightly higher than the floor of the basalt tomb (Drucker 1952: 26).

After the basalt tomb and stone sarcophagus were in place, the massive red cap was packed around and over them. This clay layer had to be at least 2 m thick to cover the basalt tomb, making the platform over 3 m higher than the Court floor (approximately 48 cm was added to the floor south of Mound A-2). As this red clay was deposited, 11 horizontal basalt columns and Offering 1942-D (a possible burial) were positioned in the fill between Monuments 6 and 7. The 11 columns were laid with their long axes trending north-south and the row running east-west across the centerline. The basalt columns overlaid Offering 1943-F (another burial) located nearly a meter below the columns (Fig. 47).

Massive Offering 2 appears to have marked the beginning of the Phase IV construction of the Ceremonial Court. It was definitely placed before the red clay fill blanketed Mound A-2. The question
arises whether or not the massive offering was earlier than the red clay fill over the rest of the Court. If it was earlier and the monuments placed on top of it were temporally close as well, then placing these burials was among the first activities of Phase IV. It would follow that the basalt columns used for the tomb and the horizontal row (Offering 1943-F) were not scavenged or “raided” from the Court wall, as some scholars have speculated (Matthew Stirling letter to Heizer, July 29, 1965). Wedel (1952: 65, 78) suggested the columns used for both features were taken from the southern half of the east wall of the Court. His impression based on a rough calculation was that almost the exact number of missing columns was used in the structures within Mound A-2.\textsuperscript{21} It is possible that the plan was initially to surround the court with columns and that something intervened causing the inhabitants to use some of them in Mound A-2 instead. On the other hand, it is also possible that the structures and offerings in Mound A-2 represented the primary and principal activity and that all the other aspects of the Phase IV Ceremonial Court were linked to these interments.

Monument 13—called “the Messenger” by the 1943 explorers and “the Ambassador” by the 1955 excavators—was associated with the red clay layer over Mound A-2. Monument 13 is basalt and looks rather like a thick drum (Figure 48) (Drucker 1952: pl. 4a). The stone was positioned at the southern edge Mound A-2 directly south of the Phase III colored apron (Fig. 41). The red layer of clay covered Mound A-2’s apron and the monument was placed above a pit filled with sandy yellow clay.

Three large, steep-sided circular pits were dug through the red clay blanket on top of Mound A-2. Each was filled with gray sandy clay. There was also an unexplained trench running east–west across the platform’s upper surface that was later filled with red clay (Drucker et al. 1959: 36, 43, fig. 10). The columns along the wall did not align with this trench. It is possible that a row of monuments were once placed here.

\textit{Court Wall}

Approximately 30 cm of the red clay covered the adobe wall enclosing the Court. A narrow and fairly deep trench was excavated down into this clay to erect basalt columns. The basalt columns at La

\textsuperscript{21} Some of the columns Wedel considered missing had actually been broken off at the top and buried under the drift sand (Drucker et al. 1959: 16).
Venta averaged between 2 to 3.5 m in length and 30 to 45 cm in diameter (Wedel 1952: 36, footnote 9). In the bulldozer cut that transected the east wall, the ancient trench was about 1 m wide and 84 cm deep (Drucker et al. 1959: 26). This section of the east wall did not have stone columns (Fig. 13). The 1955 excavation made it clear that either columns were planned for but never situated, or removed for a different purpose. There is also the possibility that this section of wall had wooden posts. No indication of wooden columns was detected, but, as the excavators pointed out, once the wood rotted away the red clay packing would have settled in the trench and obliterated the evidence of their existence (Drucker et al. 1959: 26). The preliminary trench for the columns reached the bottom of the adobe platform, cutting off its inner wall (Fig. 25). The ancient trench did expose the basalt facing blocks of Phase II; they were left in situ. When buried in the trench, the columns would have risen from 1.2-2.2 m above the red clay, making the top of this stone palisade about 2.5 m higher than the Court floor.

22 The calculated weight per column varies between 1500 and 2300 pounds.
Wedel (1952: 36-37) described the state of the Ceremonial Court wall in 1943. The area defined by the columns was approximately 58 m east-west and 40 m north-south. Along the west side, beginning at the southwest corner, 53 columns were visible above the drift sand; then there was a gap of about 8 m where no columns were evident, followed by another series of 12 columns and then a corner column. The palisade turned east here and was marked by another series of 12 columns in a continuous row. On the east side of Mound A-2 a separate series of 12 columns was apparent. The two short (east-west) rows terminated about 6 m from the northwestern and northeastern corner columns (Drucker et al. 1959: 16). Turning southward from the northeast corner, there were 34 visible columns along the east wall, plus gaps that would accommodate 3 to 6 more columns. These east wall gaps actually had broken columns in place below the drift sand (Drucker et al. 1959: 16).

The basalt columns were smoothed on the widest surface to accentuate flatness. The flat surface faced the Ceremonial Court. The wall around the court is typically shown in publications as two brackets facing each other. As far as I can tell, the southeastern and southwestern sections of the proposed palisade were never verified. Wedel’s 1943 sketch of Complex A (Fig. 14) put two columns heading east from the southwestern corner, but he did not list them in his description. The 1955 excavators drew three columns for this same location on one map (1959: fig. 3) but no columns on their more detailed map (1959: fig. 4). There may have been some evidence that this was an actual corner, but the evidence for them was not provided.

**Northeast Entryway**

A red clay layer covered the Phase III entryway’s decorative rows of facing blocks. The Phase IV ornamentation consisted of a double row of six large stone slabs resting on the red clay floor fill: five were white limestone and one was gneiss or green schist (Figures 43 and 49) (Drucker et al. 1959: 76). The row was 1.2 m north-south and 2.7 m east-west. The gneiss stone was the northwesternmost slab. It measured 56 by 36 by 13 cm and may have been part of Monument 22 (a broken monument found in two parts on the two southern corners of the Southwest Platform, see below) based on the material and the carving on one surface (Drucker et al. 1959: 77). Immediately west of the flat stones toward Mound A-2 was a heavy
bed of charcoal (undetermined size) resting on the red clay which was burned brick orange from an open fire. Just south of the stone row, the surface of the red clay dropped about 30 cm (Drucker et al. 1959: 77). The red clay fill was apparently laid thicker here in line with the columned wall.

**South-Central Platform**

In Phase IV, the entire Phase III and part of the Phase II South-Central Platform’s eastern side was planed down before laying down the red clay cap. The 1955 excavators (1959: 29) estimated that the Phase IV platform was 60-90 cm high, 10.7 m north-south and 15.8 m east-west. A round pit on the east side of the platform, measuring about 0.75 m in diameter and 1.5 m deep, was dug from the top of the red clay. It penetrated below the Phase I water-sorted flooring and intersected the eastern half of the Phase III pit described above. The earlier pit had charcoal at the bottom. The Phase IV pit had a 10 cm thick layer of charcoal at its top. Another pit was placed on the top of the platform, near the centerline. No charcoal was associated with it.

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23 The text lists the pit as 5 ft. in diameter and 60 inches deep but the profile has it drawn as approximately 2.5 ft. in diameter (Drucker et al. 1959: 26, fig. 6).
In 1943, Wedel and Stirling uncovered Monument 12 and limestone slabs, found lying on the red clay just north of the South-Central Platform (Wedel 1952: 38). Monument 12 is a serpentine or light-green schist statue resembling a monkey (Drucker 1952: 179; Wedel 1952: 39). Several pottery vessels (Offering 1943-A) were found in this same area but recovered from the lower portion of the sand overburden and so are considered post-Phase IV. Stela 3 was found on the western side of the South-Central Platform (Fig. 45) (NAA, Heizer La Venta maps, Drawing #2). Monument 5 was on the same east-west line as Stela 3, between the South-Central Platform and Northeast Platform corners (Fig. 45).

**Northeast Platform**

The Northeast Platform's red clay covering had nine visible pits dug into it: three in the center, three on the east side, and three on the west side of the platform (Figure 50) (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 14; Heizer’s notebook 1). Two of the center pits seem related to each other based on the mathematical precision of their placement and identical size. One was 5.5 m from the northern edge and the other was 5.5 m from the southern edge. Both were 76 cm in diameter and 60 cm deep. The third central pit was on the northern edge. It was also 76 cm in diameter but only 1 m deep (Drucker et al. 1959: 52). It was filled with red clay. There is a possibility that it had a mate on the southern edge. The southern 3 m of the platform was left unexcavated.

The three pits on the east side and the three on the west are shown as fairly uniform in their size and placement in the published version of the platform's plan map (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 14). Heizer’s field sketch of the platform gives a different appearance, and with some detailed dimensions (Fig. 50; Heizer notebook 1, page 45). All three of the western side pits were 1.2 m in diameter. One was noted to be about
60 cm deep. On the eastern side, only one pit was labeled with a dimension; the middle pit was 91 cm in diameter. The 1955 excavation report (Drucker et al. 1959: 52) summarized the pits as being either 1.2 m or 91 cm in diameter at the top and tapering to their bottoms about 60 cm below the Court floor. The three pits on top and the six side pits that cut into the platform's sloping edges were filled with drift sand. It seems likely that some type of structure of perishable poles was present on the Northeast Platform in Phase IV and that the postholes filled with sand after they rotted away.

The final size of the Northeast Platform during Phase IV was 16.5 m, north-south, and 6.7 m, east-west. It is described as about 1 m tall above the Court floor (Drucker et al. 1959: 51-52), but the associated profiles show its Phase IV height as much lower, less than 50 cm tall (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 15, 16, 18).

**Northwest Platform**

Before the red clay layer was placed over the Northwest Platform (at least 30 cm thick, making it nearly 50 cm above the floor), dense olive clay was laid against its northern sloping front (Fig. 30). The purpose of this olive clay is unclear. The 1955 excavators (Drucker et al. 1959: 66) guessed it was meant to preserve the platform front\(^{24}\) or to cover a perishable offering. A few non-perishable offerings (Massive Offering 1, Nos. 9 and 11) were covered with olive clay. Olive clay also covered the area of a pit in the center of the Northwest Platform (Fig. 35). The center of the platform seems to have been a significant location since multiple pits were in the same area and lenses of charcoal marked the bottom and top of a pit that had two ceramic vessels (Offerings 18 and 19). A large pit was dug just north of this olive clay lens, apparently before putting down the Phase IV red clay. There was also a shallow unfilled pit off the northern platform edge of the platform (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 20).

**Southwest Platform**

The Phase IV red clay cap was from 25 to 50 cm thick over the top of the Southwest Platform (Drucker et al. 1959: 82). On the smaller inner-Court platforms, the red clay appears to have been more

\(^{24}\) Perhaps the clay is similar to that used for the Phase III buttress on the South-Central platform’s north face before the fill of Massive Offering 3 covered it.
like a covering; however, on the Southwest Platform the red clay was obviously used to enlarge and refurbish it. The amplified mound was approximately 10 m square and nearly 1 m high. Basalt columns were placed vertically on top of the platform marking off a rectangular area approximately 5.8 m north-south and 7 m east-west. In 1955, 34 columns were present: 13 on the north side, 8 on the east, 7 on the west, and 6 near the center of the south side (Drucker et al. 1959: 78, fig. 25).

The remodeling with vertical basalt columns created a similar look for the Southwest Platform as apparent for the Court wall. Unlike the wall, the columns were placed in individual pits dug with depths specific to the lengths of individual columns. By this method, a level top was created. The deepest recorded column hole was about 1.2 m. Most of the holes cut into the Phase II adobe brickwork, particularly on the northern and eastern edges. The columns were set close together but not touching. The flat, smoothed side of each column faced outwards towards the Court. Corner columns had two adjoining flat faces (Drucker et al. 1959: 80).

On the outside of the vertical columns a row of horizontal columns, two high, was placed near their bases (Figure 51) (Drucker et al. 1959: 84, fig. 27, pl. 10). These were considered by the excavators as ornamental rather than stabilizing. The deep holes into the heavy clay were sufficient support for vertical columns, as evidenced by the Court wall.

White limestone was also used to embellish or add meaning to the platform's architecture. It looks like limestone was used for risers between steps on the south face (Drucker et al. 1959: 84). At the southeast corner, three stair-like arranged horizontal basalt columns were also incorporated into the steps (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 25, pl. 9b).

On the platform, just inside (south) the northern row of columns, seven large waterworn pieces of limestone were placed below the red clay, close to or touching the columns (Heizer's 1955 Field Notes, Notebook I: 17). A piece of limestone lay directly under the first column in the north wall (northeast corner). The largest limestone piece uncovered was 50 cm long by 30 cm wide and 15 cm thick (it was by the 6th column, counting from the northeast).
Another decorative element consisted of dressed or squared basalt facing blocks and rough-shaped or chipped basalt facing blocks (Fig. 51). The facing blocks were set above a trench (60 cm wide and 60 cm deep) excavated around the east, north, and west sides of the Southwest Platform. The purpose of the trench is unclear but it did expose the lower facing blocks of Phase II (Fig. 36). On the south side of the platform this trench was only a wide, shallow depression (Drucker et al. 1959: 86, figs. 26, 27). The trench was filled with the same red clay that blanketed the platform and Court.

On the platform’s north side two rows (one of each type of block) were set above the trench’s clay fill (Drucker et al. 1959: 85, fig. 26, pl. 10). The 1955 excavators could not find a surface line associated with the rows and concluded that the stones were embedded in the fill and covered up almost immediately. On the platform’s east side, there were two rows of the chipped blocks laid horizontally, one on top of the other. Dressed blocks were set in a single row on their edges along the inside of the flat row (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 27, pl. 11). These blocks were on the surface of the red clay and therefore visible. On the south side, a few of the dressed blocks formed a single row about 30 cm from the outside edge of the column row and were buried about 30 cm below the red clay (Drucker et al. 1959: 86). On the west side, erosion
muddled how the facing blocks were originally positioned. It was evident that both types of basalt facing stones were present, but their configuration was not clear.

Two fragments of Monument 22 were found on the Southwest Platform. Monument 22 is of green schist or gneiss and carved with a “very elaborate design” in low relief (Drucker et al. 1959: 202). One piece was found in the southeast side lying on the eroded surface of the platform (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 51b). It is 64 cm long with a maximum width of 28 cm. The other fragment was on the southwest side (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 25). A possible third fragment was part of the limestone flagstones arrangement in the Northeast Entryway (see above).

**Southeast Platform**

Wedel (1952: 50) described the Southeast Platform as measuring roughly 6.5 by 8 m and surrounded by incomplete rows of upright basalt columns (Drucker 1942: pl. 7). The columns ranged 2.25 to 2.75 m in length and enclosed an area 6.3 m north-south by 7.8 m east-west. This bracketed area was slightly larger than that at the Southwest Platform, a difference the 1955 excavators suggested was due to slippage of some columns from erosion (Drucker et al. 1959: 78). The north and south sides of the Southeast Platform each had 16 columns in place in 1943, and the east and west sides had 12 and 14 respectively. Horizontal columns graced this platform as a single row instead of the double row of basalt columns present on the Southwest Platform. Three horizontal columns were on the north and south sides and two on the east and west sides.

Wedel uncovered facing blocks on the north and east sides of the Southeast Platform. The north arrangement description sounds as if it were identical to the north side of the Southwest Platform (Fig. 51) (Wedel 1952: 50, figs. 17, 18, pl. 7b). The east side configuration was different on the eastern platform. There was only one row of 13 dressed basalt blocks instead of three rows (Wedel 1952: fig. 19, pl. 7a). The south and west sides were not excavated thoroughly enough to know whether they had facing blocks there as well. Wedel did not mention any limestone pieces on the top of the platform. Since his excavation went through the center of the basalt enclosed area, and the northern portion of the platform was the area explored the most, he would have hit limestone pieces if they had been present.
Forecourt

This area of the Ceremonial Court is only described by Wedel (1952: 59-60). The 1943 excavations uncovered a level surface of compact reddish clay in their main north-south trench 1 m south of the South-Central Platform. Wedel’s description does not detail any deep deposits so it is unclear whether or not the forecourt only existed in Phase IV times or was present earlier. Wedel traced the reddish clay layer south some 10.5 m reaching a line that connected the south front of the Southeast and Southwest Platforms. Here, 27 m south of the center of the Ceremonial Court, “the red clay gave way abruptly to a soft sandy fill of undetermined depth and extent” (Wedel 1952: 59). In this fill about one meter south of the clay surface were three basalt columns arranged like steps, similar to the ones discovered on the southeast corner of the Southwest Platform.

Between the top step and the edge of the clay were short fragments of two or more columns moved from their original location implying that the steps were either once higher or that between the steps and the forecourt there was a sort of landing made of basalt column sections (Wedel 1952: 60). Beneath the columns, mainly on the west end, was a scattered mass of limestone boulders and fragments. These may possibly have created an entrance to the Court in an earlier phase or had a different sort of significance associated with the cardinal direction of west; the Southwest Platform in Phase IV times had limestone beneath the basalt columns on top of it but the Southeast Platform apparently did not.

Immediately south of the lowest basalt step “lay the corner of a broken carved table altar; another smaller fragment lay about one meter to the southwest at the same level” (Wedel 1952: 60, pl. 64). Stirling (14 February 1943 letter) described this monument as “a very well carved four legged stone table altar with carved sides and a ‘tiger mask’ panel design on top.” Both pieces were in the soft sandy fill that began at the step and ran to the edge of Mound A-3. Drucker (1952: 182, fig. 54) labeled the pieces as Monument 15 and referred to them as plaques. I think Wedel’s and Stirling’s designation is more correct. There is a short foot on the underside of the larger piece with the trefoil element (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 64). The monument was likely a low throne similar in shape to ones found at Izapa (Clark et al. 2010: fig. 1.8, see Chapter 7).
Mound A-3

Phase IV in Mound A-3 began with the building of the stone slab cist. The cist was built on a “chaotic mass of burnt clay, fire-blackened earth, stones, and an occasional tiny sherd—in short, a rubble of burnt and unburnt materials…most strikingly apparent below the highest portion of the mound, but it could be traced southward over a maximum horizontal extent of 18 to 20 m” (Wedel 1952: 67). The cist floor and sides were set in this clay rubble and Offering 1943-G, a likely burial, placed inside (Fig. 31). Then, the area around the stone cist was build up with close to a meter of the same rubble (Drucker et al. 1959: 113, 116). Nearly 60 cm of the stone cist protruded above this mixed layer. Into this same rubble layer a number of pits were dug, some extending well into the preconstruction sandy layer beneath the mound (Drucker et al. 1959: 116-117, fig. 31). The pits were filled with red and yellow clay containing lots of charcoal and ash.

After the pits were filled and the cist covered with five sandstone slabs, red clay was placed over the entire platform deep enough to cover the stone cist by several centimeters. Six additional offerings, 1943-H through 1943-M, were positioned in the red clay fill (see Chapter 6). One of the offerings at the northern end of Mound A-3 was possibly a child burial.

Monument 14, a well-made stone cylinder, was found 7 m south of the cist at approximately the same level as the top of the cist (Wedel 1952: 71). The stone cylinder stood upright on the clay directly on the site’s centerline. A finished circular hole, 9 cm in diameter, ran through its length. This hole was plugged at its lower end by a fitted stone disk 5 cm thick.

Less than a meter south of the eroded edge of the platform, Wedel uncovered Pavement No. 2, another mosaic mask of serpentine blocks similar to the Phase II pavements beneath the Southeast and Southwest Platforms (Fig. 31) (1952: fig. 24, pl. 16). This mask on the site’s centerline was missing some of its blocks on its west edge. The northern part of the pavement was on a bed of clay and the blocks appeared more worn; the south part of less worn blocks rested directly on sand. The description of its location makes it difficult to know whether the mosaic was left as a pavement visible to all or whether it was covered. Also, the date of the mask is not clear. The pavement was found 50 cm below Wedel’s “tierra

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bonita” level of Mound A-3, a level Drucker and his associates (1959: 113) determined was equivalent to the Phase I water-sorted floors. On Wedel’s simplified profile (1952: fig. 21), the tierra bonita is only marked as underlying Mound A-3 and not extending south above Pavement No. 2. Sand appears to have been the only material covering the Pavement in 1943. Six meters south of the pavement, the 1943 crew unearthed a deposit of 253 serpentine celts and a hematite mirror (Offering 1943-N) that was determined to have been a Phase IV or post-Phase IV offering (Wedel 1952: 75-76; Drucker et al. 1959: 275).

According to Wedel’s 1943 map (1952: fig. 14) and Squier’s field map (NAA, Heizer maps, Drawing #2) Stela 1 was found directly west of the stone cist. This sculpture portrays a ‘female’ lying in what looks to be a stone box (see Chapter 7). Stirling (1940:332) observed, “It is not known whether this monument is a fallen stela or a representation of a coffin.” Perhaps Stela 1 was a gravestone memorializing the individual buried in the adjacent stone cist.

**Mounds A-4 and A-5**

The construction histories of Mounds A-4 and A-5 on the east and west sides of Mound A-3 are vague, to say the least. Mound A-5 had two terraces forming three steps on its east-facing slope and appeared on the basis of a small trench excavated in 1955 to have been a single episode construction (Drucker et al. 1959: 111). Based mainly on the use of red clay on the top of the platforms and limestone slabs on the lowermost terraces in Mound A-5, the two long, parallel mounds have been tentatively dated to Phase IV (Figure 52).

Mound A-5 rose 2.4 m above the base sand it was built on. It stepped down 38 cm from an upper terrace and an additional 40 cm to a lower terrace (Drucker et al. 1959: 109). Unworked slabs of white, waterworn limestone paved the lower terrace. Six large pieces interspersed with smaller one were visible in the 1955 trench (Drucker et al. 1959: 111, pl. 20a). Each large piece was nearly one meter long, about 20 cm thick, and weighed 300-400 pounds. Monument 23, a near life-size statue of a sitting person (missing arms and head) was found resting on the limestone paving (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 30).
Figure 52. Plan of entire Complex A Phase IV construction.
Limestone was also present on the upper terrace, but set vertically instead of horizontally. These risers were set in dense red and yellow clays, and above a large pit, similar to the facing stones set around the Southeast and Southwest platforms.

The 1943 excavators cut a trench into the northern end of Mound A-4 (Wedel 1952: 76), but little information was gained. Tough whitish sandy clay was at the bottom covered with a variable thickness of red clay that resembled the red clay in Mound A-3. A few sun-dried bricks of reddish to yellowish clay appeared randomly in the fill. These were single inclusions or only two or three placed side by side.

Approximately 5.3 m separated the east and west edges of Mounds A-5 and A-4 from the edges of Mound A-3. These long, linear mounds were both 16-18 m wide. Wedel (1952: 34) states, “to the south, they merged into the basal platform of the Great Mound.” The 1955 excavators give 87 m as their lengths (Drucker et al. 1959: 109). Their north edges were 10-12 m from the southeast and southwest corners of the Court wall. The centerlines of the two terraced platforms align with the basalt columns on the Ceremonial Court wall. The heights of the columns and the platforms were nearly equal. Mounds A-5 and A-4 were clearly built with the Ceremonial Court in mind, and perhaps as a spatial extension of it. It appears that the ceremonial enclosure was extended south in Phase IV times to the main pyramid’s basal platform (Fig. 52). This would have more than doubled the size of this enclosed space.

**Summary of the Architecture in Phase IV**

One of the striking changes in Phase IV was the fill used to modify the Ceremonial Court. Previously, individual platforms and the floor were built up using different colored sands and clays. Each platform had a unique colored fill for its phase, and pairs of platforms shared the same color code. It is possible that the facings and floorings retained distinctive coloring in Phase IV, but the fill was consistent over the entire area. It is as if the court was considered as a single feature at this time instead of a combination of smaller parts with separate functions. The entire Ceremonial Court became a raised platform or acropolis. The inner edge of the original enclosure was marked with basalt columns but the wall beneath them was level with the Court floor (Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 6, 8).
The treatment of the Southwest and Southeast Platforms belie the idea of blended individuality to a certain extent. Red clay was used to enhance both, but the pattern of basalt facing blocks, horizontal columns, and limestone flagstone maintained subtle distinctions between the two platforms. The columns tracing the platform’s tops, and other decoration, show that the memory of the Phase II serpentine masks and rubble layers beneath them may still have burned bright in Phase IV times. Pavement No. 2 points to the recollection of the buried mosaic masks (if it was indeed a Phase IV creation).

Limestone was a new construction material implemented in Phase IV. The amount of basalt used in the relatively small area increased dramatically, both in the number of columns and monuments present. Fragments of monuments were either incorporated into the architecture, or broken and positioned later before the drift sands accumulated. Green stone monuments were present in Phase IV as well.

Offerings in this phase were only placed on the centerline. The serpentine pavement placed beneath Mound A-2 was linked with five possible burials, and four of these used stone as part of their interment. The other significant burial associated with stone was in Mound A-3, the mate of A-2. A second burial, possibly of a child, was found south of the stone cist. West of the cist was Stela 1. This sculpture may portray a woman in a stone coffin—perhaps a memorial to the individual interred in the adjacent stone box. A stone sculpture of a seated figure looked down on Mound A-3 from Mound A-5, or would have looked down if it had kept its head.

The two long platforms flanking Mound A-3 essentially extended the walled area of Complex A to the basal platform around the pyramid. Mound A-5 is known to have had three tiers, and it is assumed Mound A-4 did as well. Although they enclosed the area, the two mounds also provided a venue for large numbers of people to get a good view of action occurring below (stadium-like seating). The new enclosed space could well have functioned as an enclosed ballcourt.
Ritual Activity– Offerings & Burials

The previous chapter indicated where all but one of La Venta’s discovered offerings and burials were located and demonstrated the relative sequence in which they were placed within Complex A’s construction. This chapter provides a sketch of each offering and burial, ordered by phase association and ritual activity. The only offering found outside of Complex A is described at the end.

The 1955 investigators assigned previously excavated offerings and burials a number-plus-letter designation based on the year of discovery (e.g., 1940-A) and allocated a phase designation for each by correlating the earlier finds to the 1955 stratigraphy. Offerings and burials located in 1955 were simply given a number, starting with 1. Every single object or collection of objects grouped in a close area was designated as an offering, regardless of stratigraphic context. For example, two ceramic vessels were found in the same ancient offering pit but were given different offering numbers (Nos. 18 and 19, Fig. 35). Similarly, the excavators would have assigned the ceramic bowl and bottle near the jade artifacts in Offering 5 (Burial 3) their own number if a piece of tuff had not been near the vessels (Drucker et al. 1959: 164, fig. 41). These vessels were in the same offering pit and less than 12 cm away. The fact that the vessels were not in the exact line with the jade artifacts does not detach them from the same activity that placed them together. They obviously represent a single interment event, with them all placed in the same dedicatory pit. Drucker and his associates’ numbering method is important to keep in mind because the individual numbers often separate artifacts or features from the same event and can impede reconstructions and interpretations of La Venta ritual activity. This interpretive challenge is particularly true for the larger events called massive offerings, but also for smaller offerings. The 34 offerings from
Phases I-IV in Complex A (including the massive offerings), the offering found in Complex D, and the 10 burial placements in Complex A represent 19 ritual activities or events (Table 7).

OFFERING CLASSIFICATION

Two offerings types were differentiated at La Venta: Massive Offerings and Small Dedicatory Offerings (Drucker et al. 1959: 128, 133). Massive offerings had two defining characteristics: a large, deep pit and a great quantity of stone. Three massive offerings were found and explored in 1955. Two large offerings of stone uncovered in 1943 were also considered massive offerings, despite the fact that one of them was not in a deep pit (Pavement No. 2/Massive Offering 5) (Drucker et al. 1959: 128). Small dedicatory offerings were purposefully placed lots of small objects of pottery, jade, serpentine, or other materials. Interestingly, no ceramic figurines were found among the dedicatory offerings of Complex A.

Within the dedicatory offerings, I distinguish here between celts and axes. Celts are longer and narrower than axes. Axes were found more frequently in La Venta offerings. Occasionally, the celts are perforated at the poll end.

BURIAL CLASSIFICATION

Organic materials do not preserve well in the acidic soils of La Venta. The only organics recovered at the site include traces of long bones, a burned skullcap, a few milk teeth, a shark's tooth, and stingray spines—all found in the basalt tomb (Stirling and Stirling 1942). Stirling reasoned that the preservation of these items were due to the protective, heavy red clay packed inside the tomb (Stirling’s letter to Heizer–July 26, 1965). Because preserved bone is nearly nonexistent at La Venta, identifying a cache of objects as a burial cannot be definitive. With qualifications, I separate likely human burials from non-burial offerings. Specific attributes of cached artifacts in Complex A indicate that a few “offerings” were really human burials. I specify my criteria for distinguishing so-called burials from offerings and then

1 Rust (2008: tables 5.4.2-5.4.3) reports a few faunal remains from his test excavations in Complexes E and G. Similarly, the “urn burials” uncovered by Rust in Complex E lack skeletal remains: “Analysis of the contents of the large urn revealed only a few tiny fragments of bone and teeth” (Rust 2008: 235). From the small amount of skeletal remains, Rust suggests it represents an infant or child burial and possibly a secondary burial. The fill immediately around this large urn was clean, yellow sand, and the urn was covered with an inverted fine-paste orange bowl with flaring walls; the bowl’s interior was painted red and incised with the double-line-break pattern on the inside rim.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ritual Event</th>
<th>Offering No.</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>white-slipped Coarse Brown ware bowl lying inverted at a slight angle, possibly covering burned material</td>
<td>original mottled pink fill of the NE Platform in Phase I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>small, rectangular Coarse Brown ware bowl placed upright</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>small, rectangular Coarse Brown ware bowl placed upright</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Burial 1 (Offering No. 7)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>South-Central Platform (east side) enlargement fill in Phase II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Massive Offering 1 (MO 1)</td>
<td>7.5 m deep pit; ~1,000 tons of serpentine, gneiss, &amp; schist rubble laid in 28 layers in blue &amp; olive clays; colored wall around perimeter of serpentine mass (N, W, S=red, E=green); 485 dressed serpentine blocks creating a mosaic pavement: cinnamon-colored sand in reclining “E” and yellower clay in appendages; dark yellowish-olive clay envelope over mosaic; small basalt stone figure in mosaic’s SW corner; mottled pink pit fill; yellowish adobe bricks set in red clay mortar at least 16 courses (2.24 m high) constructing the SW Platform; basalt and serpentine facing blocks. (mate of MO 4)</td>
<td>starting below SW Platform in a very large pit in Phase II; centers of the twin east and west mosaics were 20.6 m apart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Massive Offering 4 (MO 4 or Pavement no. 1)</td>
<td>6 serpentine axes</td>
<td>in prepared clay beds within the mottled pink fill above MO 1 &amp; directly under the SW Platform of adobe bricks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1943-E</td>
<td>starting below SE Platform in a very large pit in Phase II; centers of east and west mosaics were 20.6 m apart</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1942-E</td>
<td>20 axes (3 jade, 17 serpentine), 1 hematite mirror, and a circular wooden plaque covered with red pigment arranged in a cruciform shape</td>
<td>the mottled pink fill above MO 4 &amp; under the SE Platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual Event</td>
<td>Offering No.</td>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Massive Offering 3 (MO 3)</td>
<td>6 superimposed pavements of serpentine blocks bordered by a “wall” of jumbled serpentine blocks placed at the bottom of a large (23.5 by 23.5 m) and deep (3.9 m) pit</td>
<td>large pit between South-Central Platform and Mound A-2, excavated at the beginning of Phase III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38 axes (4 jade, 34 serpentine) arranged in a cruciform shape</td>
<td>fill of MO 3 on a bed of reddish clay &amp; plastered over with yellow clay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2 small masses (lens-shaped in cross section) of bright pigments: green malachite to the west and very bright purplish-red cinnabar to the east in a pit plastered over with yellowish clay</td>
<td>fill of MO 3 in a small elliptical pit 50 cm south of Offering No. 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>1943-C</td>
<td>cylindrical flat-bottomed clay vessel with a shallower vessel inverted over it as a lid</td>
<td>~4.5 m south of Offering No. 12 and at about same level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>1943-D</td>
<td>6 serpentine pseudo-axes standing upright, polls down, with edges touching to form an east-west row 50 cm long</td>
<td>intersecting the centerline in mottled yellow clay in the upper fill of MO 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21 serpentine axes standing upright with polls embedded in prepared beds of clay, separated into 3 groups, placed in a row transverse to the centerline</td>
<td>upper fill of MO 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2 serpentine axes standing upright, polls down, and spaced 68.5 cm apart</td>
<td>upper fill of MO 3, east of centerline, right below Phase III flooring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>2A</td>
<td>5 axes (2 jade, 1 sandstone, 2 possibly schist)—4 in a row with the bits to the north and 1 axe immediately south of the row</td>
<td>disturbed offering? upper fill of MO 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16 figurines (2 jade, 13 serpentine, 1 granite) placed in a scene in front of 6 jade celts</td>
<td>immediately west of NE Platform below the Court floor in white sand lens fill over MO 3 in Phase III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6 pottery vessels: 3 inverted bowls (Fine Paste Orange) placed over an effigy jar (Black ware) sitting inside a spouted vessel (Fine Paste Buff ware). The sixth vessel touched the nested group (Fine Paste Black ware)</td>
<td>western edge of NE Platform directly west of Burial 3 (possibly a connected event) in Phase III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Burial 3 (Offering No. 5)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>in a pit initiated at the Phase III construction level of the NE Platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20 large, serpentine pseudo-axes and 1 small serpentine axe—18 in 3 rows of 6 each, bits to the north roughly forming a 1 m square; 2 placed upright 10 cm south of last row; 1 small axe positioned to the east</td>
<td>on the centerline in a pit within the fill of MO 3 &amp; directly below Mon. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual Event</td>
<td>Offering No.</td>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>51 axes (14 jade, 20 serpentine, and 17 of other materials) laid out in two superimposed layers, 5 axes were incised</td>
<td>in a pit cut through the rose-colored flooring directly north and 45 cm higher than Offering No. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Burial 4 (Offering No. 6)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>in a pit within the NE Platform, possibly marking a second Phase III enlargement of the structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>a 18</td>
<td>1 flat-based Coarse Brown ware dish or bowl with nearly vertical walls and slightly flaring simple direct rim placed upright</td>
<td>shallow pit near the center of the NW Platform with Offering No. 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b 19</td>
<td>1 white-rimmed, flat-based Coarse Black ware dish or shallow bowl with flaring sides and simple direct rim, placed upright</td>
<td>shallow pit near the center of the NW Platform with Offering No. 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Massive Offering 2 (MO 2)</td>
<td>A single layer, serpentine pavement with colored pit walls, 7 small jade beads beneath two of the serpentine pavers</td>
<td>large Phase IV pit below Mound A-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>a 9</td>
<td>9 jade axes, 1 magnetite mirror, 997 jade beads</td>
<td>in the fill of MO 2, 1.4 m west of centerline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b 11</td>
<td>9 axes (6 jade, 3 serpentine), 1 ilmenite mirror, 1274 jade beads</td>
<td>in the fill of MO 2, 1.4 m east of centerline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d 1942-C</td>
<td>37 jade axes arranged in a cruciform shape, with bits to the north, 3 are engraved</td>
<td>in the fill of MO 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e Burial 5 (Offering 1943-F)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>in the sandstone sarcophagus centered over MO 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f Burial 6 (Offering 1942-B)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>in the fill of MO 2 beneath the 11 horizontal basalt columns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>g Burial 7 (Offering 1942-A)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>in the basalt tomb, the offering equals 2 or 3 individuals placed in the south end of the tomb over MO 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>h Burial 8 (Offering 1942-D)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>in the fill between the 11 basalt columns and the basalt tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual Event</td>
<td>Offering No.</td>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Burial 9 (Offering 1943-G)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>in the middle of the Phase IV enlargement of Mound A-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>1943-H</td>
<td>2 serpentine axes set on end with bits up</td>
<td>in the fill of Mound A-3 between the cist and Mon. 14 (stone cylinder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>1943-I</td>
<td>fragments of a large, curiously shaped sandstone vessel that appears to match the hole in the stone cylinder (Mon. 14)</td>
<td>in the fill of Mound A-3 between the cist and Mon. 14 at same level as Offering 1943-H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>1943-J</td>
<td>several small scattered rectangular bits of jade with one flat and well-polished surface on one side and a rough, uneven surface on the other, often with some back adhesive remaining, considered by Wedel to be tessarae.</td>
<td>in the fill of Mound A-3 between the cist and Mon. 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>1943-K</td>
<td>1 pear-shaped, amber pendant</td>
<td>in the fill of Mound A-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>Burial 10 (Offering 1943-L)</td>
<td>see Table 8</td>
<td>in the fill of Mound A-3, south end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>1943-M</td>
<td>4 small serpentine figurines oriented along the centerline: 2 standing, 1 dwarf-like, and 1 is crouched with its head tilted back and arms folded across its chest, knees flexed</td>
<td>1 m south of Burial 10 in Mound A-3 fill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pavement No. 2 (MO 5)</td>
<td>serpentine mosaic pavement: 4.8 m long and 4.35 m wide, its long axis coincided with the centerline; 399 rectangular dressed serpentine blocks in place (75-90 blocks missing); northern part on a bed of clay &amp; southern part on sand; north stones more worn and smoothed.</td>
<td>south of Mound A-3 on the centerline (possibly connected to Ritual Event 14, if created in Phase IV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>1943-N</td>
<td>253 serpentine pseudo-axes (bisecting the centerline approximately 1.5 m across [east-west]); in the southern portion the individual pieces lay flat but closely spaced; in the northern portion they were lapped; 1 ilmenite mirror was beneath 3 of the largest pseudo-axes in the north</td>
<td>6 m south of Pavement No. 2 on the centerline, thought to be a Phase IV offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>1943-O</td>
<td>4 or 5 closely grouped pottery vessels</td>
<td>~27 m south of Offering 1943-N at the main pyramid’s north base, considered a Phase IV or post-Phase IV offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j</td>
<td>1943-B</td>
<td>12 or so serpentine pseudo-axes scattered at various depths and found lying at all angles. Wedel suggested it was not an orderly cache.</td>
<td>~4 m south of Monument 13 in the Ceremonial Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>1940-A</td>
<td>99 large jade beads and 1 amethyst bead</td>
<td>in front of Altar 4 in Complex D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
discuss each as sequential events at La Venta. The main problem is that human skeletal remains have not preserved at La Venta, so the distinction between offering and burials cannot be made on the presence or absence of bone. The types of artifacts, and their patterning, provide the critical clues as to whether or not they were interred with a human body.

The first indicator of a burial is the pattern of objects present in an offering. Most of the archaeologists who excavated at La Venta thought it reasonable to suppose that when ornaments were arranged as if they had once graced a body, that a body had once been present (Stirling’s letter to Heizer–July 26, 1965; Heizer 1964; Wedel 1952). Heizer’s opinion that the offering in the sarcophagus (1942-B) represented a burial slipped past the final edits of the excavation report (Drucker et al. 1959: 127)—a speculation he felt obliged to apologize for in later publications and to propose the obfuscation of “surrogate interments” for the offerings with naturally-positioned ornaments (Heizer 1964: 50; Heizer and Drucker 1965: 56). In this move, I think he deferred to his more experienced colleague Drucker.

From the La Venta literature, only Drucker (Heizer and Drucker 1965: 56) is adamant that if there was no trace of bone present in an offering then no body had been interred. Here I think he was tripped by the assumption that the “absence of evidence is equivalent to negative evidence” (Proskouriakoff 1968: 119). According to this same reasoning, Drucker should have deduced that only a few bones and teeth were placed in the basalt tomb. He left out the skull cap in his description of the offering. Drucker inferred that the scarce, splintered bones “were the remains of two bundle burials, each probably containing at least one individual. Little remained of the acid-leached bones save for a mass of splinters, stained a dark chocolate-brown color. They appeared to be remnants of long bones mainly, and gave the impression of small light bones, probably of juveniles, as did the deciduous teeth found in Bundle 2” (Drucker 1952: 23, [my emphasis]). To surmise whole bodies and to acknowledge the possibility of more than one body from so few bone splinters is inconsistent with Drucker’s claim that even in the “highly acid clay soils of the region…osseous material is attacked by soil acids until it becomes putty-soft, but it apparently never completely dissolves to the point of total disappearance. Harder areas—the surfaces of long bones and portions of the skull—even retain a sheen. Tooth caps are practically indestructible. If
osseous remains had been deposited, enough evidence could have been noted of them to affirm the fact …” (Heizer and Drucker 1965: 57).²

To be fair, Drucker later rescinded or perhaps clarified his position,

Among the nonjade materials were…two small assemblages of vestiges of what appeared to be human bone (principally the outer layer of long bones and possibly ribs) that suggested incomplete “bundle burial” remains…The bone was too fragmentary and too badly decomposed by long exposure to soil acids for measurements. No skulls, or skull parts, vertebrae, pelvises, or hand and foot bones, could be recognized among the osseous remains. A small lot of human tooth caps…were found near one of the bundles.

While there have been several published references to this material as representing a burial (or burials), reconsideration suggests that the osseous materials should probably be interpreted as parts of the offering. (Drucker 1975: 103-104)

In 1975, Drucker emphasized that the bundle burials were incomplete (what remained was what was put in) and that the bones were not of individuals but pieces used as part of the offering. Although he attempted to clean up his logic, he only succeeded in making the situation more confusing. The bones, which were extremely affected by the soil (on his own admission), were, in his thinking, now simply equivalent in importance with the figurines and stingray spines. By removing the bodies, Drucker removed the purpose of the other objects in the basalt structure, as well as the reason for the structure’s existence itself, without supplying a suitable alternative or even leaving it as a pseudo or surrogate interment.

Drucker’s opinion regarding burials, despite his earlier contrary interpretation of Offering 1942-A, was imposed in publications. Stirling maintained his own view: “…I feel pretty positive in my own mind that the so called tombs were just that…” (Stirling’s letter to Heizer–July 26, 1965). In his correspondence Stirling cited excavations in Linea Vieja and Panama where obvious graves were empty of bones and he concluded that “in a very humid climate where all burial conditions exist except for the presence of bones, I think it unreasonable to assume that these were not true burials.” Until a grave with sufficient bone

² The reader knows this is in fact Drucker’s voice and opinion, “Drucker wishes to note...” (Heizer and Drucker 1965: 57).
(or bone-putty) is recovered at La Venta or the immediate vicinity, Drucker’s assumption is not tenable. Surely people built this site, lived and died there, and were buried there.

Rosemary Joyce (n.d.) stated, “it is actually immaterial if these contexts contained human bones, since the contents were laid out in such a way as to represent stylized individual costume.” In her analysis of the ornaments, she looked for gender, status, and roles played out at La Venta and considered that the costumed offerings provided the same data, with or without the bones (Joyce 1999). I think the present or absence of bodies is significant in reconstructing the history of La Venta. The ornaments in the bundle burials in the basalt tomb were not described as if they adorned a body. Instead the ornaments appear to have been included with the burials—more like mortuary offerings. They still could have been personal possessions, but if the bodies were indeed of juveniles, the ornaments may have objects that were included because of ascribed status and not actual ownership. In Middle Formative burials with better organic preservation, such as at Chalcatzingo (Merry de Morales 1987), there are clear parallels to La Venta’s interments of ornaments, costume, and offerings, thereby strengthening the likelihood that the objects there were interred with bodies as well.

I infer cached objects at La Venta to have been part of a burial if a pair of earspools was present close to the same level but distanced approximately the breadth of a human head. Other jewelry in the right locations for having been worn on a body likewise supports this view. Another marker of human burials is a bed of cinnabar or other red material purposely placed in direct association with the personal ornaments. Cinnabar is tied to the only attested bones from the site, and Stirling mused that cinnabar was likely used to cover the bodies before interment (Stirling and Stirling 1942). I consider the fragmentary bones in the basalt tomb as evidence of interred individuals. A prepared architectural context, such as a stone cist, stone box, stone tomb, or appropriate-sized pit, also supports a burial interpretation.

The 10 offerings I classify as probable burials contain a combination of these elements (Table 8). One of the offerings, 1942-A (Burials 7a, 7b, 7c), has at least two and possibly three or more buried individuals inside its associated basalt structure (Monument 7).3 I find the placement of jewelry the most

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3 Joyce (n.d.) identified 10 burials in her study. She counts Offering 1942-A in the Basalt Tomb as two burials. I designate the multiple burials inside the structure as 7a, 7b, and 7c? (in reference to Stirling’s account). My classification is similar to Joyce’s
<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Offering 7</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>1st fill of NE Platform (mottled pink)</td>
<td>bed of cinnabar mixed with clay</td>
<td>primary extended, adult north-south/north</td>
<td>2 large jade yellowish-green pseudo-earspools 1 long tubular jade bead 1 jade maskette 2 cylindrical jade beads (matched pair) 1 small cylindrical jade bead 1 jade “clamshell” pendant 2 large light green jade beads (bracelet)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 61, 171-174 figs. 14–16, 18, 43b, 45, pl. 4</td>
<td>—2.5 cm thick cinnabar= 38 cm N/S by 33 cm E/W (under head); 2 beads 71 cm south of cinnabar (probably bracelets); 109 cm N/S to wrists</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Offering 3</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>enlargement fill of the SC Platform (mottled pink)</td>
<td>cinnabar bed, covered with bright yellow clay</td>
<td>burial type n/a east-west ?/?</td>
<td>2 (or 3) perforated jade figureines 1 jade, rectangular water bird pendant 4 concave, rectangular jade objects 5 jade spangles 5 small amethyst ornaments (turtles) 200 jade beads</td>
<td>1 Coarse Brown bowl 1 Fine Paste Buff-Orange bottle (the bottle was placed in the bowl)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 22–23, 146–152 figs. 7 &amp; 37; pls. 3, 26–2</td>
<td>dimensions n/a-disturbed by bulldozer</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Offering 5</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>shallow pit, outlined by 2 rows of volcanic tuff</td>
<td>cinnabar bed, covered with yellow clay yellow clay cap= ~125 cm E/W by ~60 cm N/S</td>
<td>primary extended, child east-west/ west</td>
<td>2 jade earspools 1 jade maskette 2 cylindrical jade beads (matched pair) 1 jade pendant 1 scalloped jade ornament 13 spangles (some represent birdheads) 1 strand of 95 jade beads 2 large circular jade beads 6 jade beads (bracelet)</td>
<td>35 jade axes (1 carved)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 65, 162-167 figs. 14, 18, 41, 41a, 43c pl. 37</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Offering 6</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>large pit</td>
<td>cinnabar bed 110 cm N/S by 80 cm E/W at the bottom of a 66 cm deep pit</td>
<td>primary extended, child north-south/ north</td>
<td>2 jade earspools 1 long tubular bead 2 jade maskettes 2 cylindrical jade beads (matched pair) 2 jade pendants 2 strands of 88 jade beads 1 large circular jade bead 1 large squarish jade bead</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 63, 167-171 figs. 14, 18, 43c-d, 44, pls. 38-39</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Offering 1943-F, Tomb E</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>fill of Massive Offering 2 (red) under 11 basalt columns used as a roof of burial plot</td>
<td>cinnabar bed 210 cm E/W by 70 cm N/S (~75 cm below columns) column roof= 3-5 m E/W by 2.5 m N/S</td>
<td>primary extended, adult east-west/ east</td>
<td>2 large jade earspools 2 cylindrical jade beads (matched pair) 2 blue jade pendants 2 green oval jade pendants 1 concave mirror (2 fragments) 1 jade disk 1 tiny jade skull 49 subspherical jade beads</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Offering 1942-B, Tomb B, Monument 6</td>
<td>IV Carved Sandstone Sarcophagus</td>
<td>red clay</td>
<td>primary extended, adult north-south/south</td>
<td>2 jade earspools, 2 jade pendants</td>
<td>1 jade perforator, 1 serpentine figurine</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stirling &amp; Stirling 1942: 638-641, pl. 1</td>
<td>Drucker 1952: 23-26, 154-157, 162-163, 164, 167-170, figs. 104, 55 (1-4), 59a, 60b, pls. 1, 46-48, 53, left and right, b, d, 54a-d, 56, right, d, 57a-g, r, 1975</td>
<td>cavity of box = 240 cm N/S by 68.5 cm E/W by 58 cm deep outside of box = 2.8 m long (N/S), 96 cm wide (E/W), 89 cm high</td>
<td>2 jade earspools, string of beads (Drucker 1975: 103)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 a</td>
<td>Offering 1942-A, Tomb A, Monument 7</td>
<td>IV Columnar Basalt Tomb</td>
<td>cinnabar</td>
<td>secondary burials</td>
<td>2 clay earspools painted blue</td>
<td>1 pair of oval-shaped obsidian pieces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Basalt Tomb</td>
<td>(3 \text{ persons placed with their head to the south} ) (Stirling &amp; Stirling 1942: 640)</td>
<td>limestone platform extended 1.4 m from the south end of the tomb</td>
<td>1 jade clamshell pendant with small oval mirror inside</td>
<td>2 engraved jade rectangular ear ornaments incised with “eagle-heads”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c (?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tomb = 4.0 m long (N/S), 2.5 m wide (E/W), 1.8 m high</td>
<td>1 jade frog, 1 jade leaf, 2 jade hands</td>
<td>1 magnetite mirror</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1943-D</td>
<td>IV Mound A-2 fill (red)</td>
<td>red clay</td>
<td>primary extended, adult east-west/east</td>
<td>2 incised jade earspools</td>
<td>1 jade perforator (broken)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stirling and Stirling 1942: 643</td>
<td></td>
<td>found “over an area of 2 m, or so,” south of the basalt tomb (Drucker 1952: 27)</td>
<td>1 long tubular bead</td>
<td>1 small pot</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drucker 1952: 27-28, 157, 161, 166-168, pl. 56 right a, d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 jade “animal jaw” pendants</td>
<td>1 burned human skullcap</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pl. 56 right c, d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 cylindrical beads (matched pair of “duck heads”)</td>
<td>milk teeth</td>
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<tr>
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<td>figs. 104, 55 (1-4), 59a, 60b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>110+ jade spangles on headdress</td>
<td>long-bone splinters</td>
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<td>pls. 1, 46-48, 53, 54, 56, 57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>several rock crystal objects</td>
<td>large shark tooth</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 272</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>64 globular beads in 2 strands</td>
<td>2 seated jade figurines</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gulberg 1959: table 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 large jade beads in the form of turtle carapaces</td>
<td>2 standing jade figurines</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14 beads in a bracelet</td>
<td>traces of organic material</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 block of serpentine</td>
<td>1 jade perforator handle</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37 axes (9 serpentine, 28 jade)</td>
<td>1 serpentine figurine</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 jade perforator handle</td>
<td>1 engraved obsidian core</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 bottle-shaped ceramic</td>
<td>1 ceramic vessel with a rim like</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 ceramic vessel with a rim like</td>
<td>an abalone shell</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>an abalone shell</td>
<td>effigy bowl: face of a jaguar</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with wide-open mouth</td>
<td>1 diamond-shaped mirror</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 diamond-shaped mirror</td>
<td>1 slab of metallic ore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 obsidian knife blade</td>
<td>1 triangular piece of worked jade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Offering 1943-G, Tomb C</td>
<td>IV Stone Cist Tomb</td>
<td>cinnabar</td>
<td>primary extended, adult east-west/east</td>
<td>2 jade earspools</td>
<td>1 clay pot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stirling 1942a: 333-335, pl. ii</td>
<td>Drucker 1952: 159-160, 162, 163, 164, 166, 167, 168, 169-170, 170-171, figs. 14, 180, 191, 22, 29, 41b, 41c, b, 48, 53, 59, 60, pl. 14, 18, 19, 52, 53, 55, 57, 58, 64</td>
<td>cinnabar = 225 cm E/W by 105 cm N/S</td>
<td>1 long tubular bead</td>
<td>1 serpentine figurine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drucker 1952: 68-71</td>
<td>Wedel 1952: 212, 214</td>
<td>cist = 5.2 m E/W by 1.8 m N/S</td>
<td>2 jade “animal jaw” pendants</td>
<td>1 jade perforator handle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drucker et al. 1959: 212, 274</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 cylindrical beads (matched pair of “duck heads”)</td>
<td>1 engraved obsidian core</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Offering 1943-L, Tomb D</td>
<td>IV Mound A-3 fill (red)</td>
<td>cinnabar</td>
<td>primary extended, infant east-west/east</td>
<td>2 incised jade earspools</td>
<td>1 bottle-shaped ceramic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wedel 1952: 72-73, pl. 57</td>
<td>Wedel 1952: 72-73, pl. 57</td>
<td>50 cm E/W by 30 cm N/S</td>
<td>1 long tubular bead</td>
<td>1 ceramic vessel with a rim like</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 jade “animal jaw” pendants</td>
<td>an abalone shell</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 cylindrical beads (matched pair of “duck heads”)</td>
<td>effigy bowl: face of a jaguar</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>110+ jade spangles on headdress</td>
<td>with wide-open mouth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>several rock crystal objects</td>
<td>1 diamond-shaped mirror</td>
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<td>64 globular beads in 2 strands</td>
<td>1 slab of metallic ore</td>
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<td>2 large jade beads in the form of turtle carapaces</td>
<td>1 obsidian knife blade</td>
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<td></td>
<td>14 beads in a bracelet</td>
<td>1 triangular piece of worked jade</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 clay pot</td>
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compelling evidence for burials and the other evidence corroborative. A few of the inferred burials were covered with a cap of yellow clay. In Table 8 I give each proposed burial a number reflecting the temporal sequence of interment. There was a clear temporal sequence for the burials from Phases I-III. Phase IV burials were centered in two different platforms, Mounds A-2 and A-3, so there is no way to connect their relative sequences. I gave the burials in Mound A-2 lower numbers since they are connected to the Massive Offering 2 activity (Ritual Event 13).

Table 8 lists the size of the areas marked out by jade ornaments and prepared beds as possible indicators of burial type, either primary or secondary, and of burial occupant, either infant, child or adult. My estimate is gaged to extended burials, the known preferred form for elite burials coeval with La Venta.

My criteria for identifying boneless burials can only capture interments with some kind of importance, either in the effort put into the tomb facilities or the objects associated with them. Obviously, boneless burials without durable offerings would be archaeologically invisible. Recourse to burial furniture limits burial identifications to elite status graves and/or burials used to dedicate a significant place for a particular purpose. Despite this obvious limitation for identifying La Venta burials, notable changes are still evident in burial practices between Phases I-III and Phase IV, as evident in the following narrative of ritual events at La Venta.

PHASE I

There is evidence for one ritual event in Phase I (Figure 53, Table 7).

Ritual Event 1

The first ritual activity discovered at La Venta occurred in association with the construction of the Northeast Platform in Phase I (Fig. 53). Three ceramic vessels (Offerings 15, 16, and 17) and a burial (Burial 1/Offering 7) were placed in the platform's initial, mottled pink fill and likely mark a connected event (Chapter 5; Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 18).

except I include Offering 3 in the South-Central Platform as a burial and designate Offering 7 in the NE Platform as a Phase I burial, based on Drucker and Heizer’s (1965) rebuttal to Coe and Stuckenrath (1964) wherein they apologize for implying a degree of doubt that Offering 7 was a Phase I activity. They affirm its Phase I placement.
Offerings found in 1955

NE Platform

Ritual Event 1

“water-sorted” flooring

red clay embankment

Figure 53. Ritual Event 1 in Complex A.
Burial 1—Offering 7

The ornaments of Burial 1 (Offering 7) were found on a prepared bed of orange sandy clay mixed with very small amounts of cinnabar (Figure 54) (Drucker et al. 1959: 171). This bed was thin, a little less than 2.5 cm thick, shaped into an irregular oval approximately 38 cm north-south and 33 cm east-west (Figure 55). On the cinnabar and clay mixture rested eight jade articles: one large tubular bead, a maskette, two large perforated pseudo-earspools, a matched pair of cylindrical beads, one small cylindrical bead, and a small pendant in the form of a clam shell (Figure 56) (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 40). Off to the
Figure 56. Ornaments of Burial 1 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
south (71 cm) were two large, light green jade beads (Heizer’s field notes–Notebook I: 67). The beads are recorded in the field notes but were not considered part of the offering. Burial 1 was not placed in a prepared pit. Instead it was positioned in the pink clay during the initial Northeast Platform construction. The layout of the jade jewelry and the prepared bed signal a probable burial.

The dark-green jade maskette in Burial 1 is the largest of four maskettes recovered in burials from the site. It is roughly square with rounded corners, whereas the others are circular (Figure 57b; cf. Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 43). It measures 4.3 cm high, 4.8 cm wide, and 1.7 cm thick. This thin, highly polished carving is defined as the face of a jaguar (Drucker et al. 1959: 171-172). A flat flange framing the face is perforated with nine holes, two on each side and five across the bottom. Another hole perforates the area of the snout or nose in the center of the maskette. The back of the carved face within the area of the flange was hollowed out. The thinness emphasizes the translucent qualities of the jade used.

Figure 57. Sketch of maskettes found in burials at La Venta: a. Burial 3, b. Burial 1, c-d. Burial 4 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al.1959: fig. 43b and NAA, Smithsonian Institute photographs).

4 The beads were considered to be too far south. They were not on the mixed cinnabar/clay bed. The jade beads are likely part of a bracelet associated with the interred body.
The two large, opaque yellowish-green pseudo-earspsools with white and buff spots lay on either side of the maskette. The 1955 excavators speculated that, “they were imitation earspools made to be mounted on the retaining straps of some large ornamental headdress” (Drucker et al. 1959: 173). There are two perforations on each flat-backed disk. The earspool on the west was found with its flat side down and the earspool on the east was found with its flat side up (Figure 58) (Heizer’s field notes–Notebook I: 66).

Associated with the pseudo-earspsools was a pair of thin, cylindrical jade beads. Pairs of cylindrical beads were found closely associated with each pair of earspools found at La Venta. A long (7.6 cm) tubular jade bead rested north of the maskette. A small cylindrical jade bead and a carved jade clamshell pendant were found near one of the paired cylindrical beads. The two light green jade beads were south and off of the prepared bed. As mentioned above, the 1955 excavators suggested that this arrangement belonged to a headdress. If so, the prepared clay and cinnabar bed only lay under the head and its adorning gear. The body was oriented north/south with the head to the north.
The maskette and other accouterments match headdresses carved on Olmec axes and monuments (Drucker 1952: fig. 47a; Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 35b, e; Stirling 1940: 327). The Burial 1 maskette, in particular, resembles part of the headdress on the main niche character on Altar 5 (Fig. 9) and possibly the other figures’ headdresses on the sides of the altar (Stirling 1940: 320; Covarrubius 1957: fig. 26). It also resembles the elaborate headdress gracing an Olmec dignitary depicted on Stela 3 (Figure 59), presumably carved later in La Venta’s history. La Venta Monument 77 may also have had a maskette, there is a circular area on the front of the headdress, but the details are broken off (Figure 60).

Figure 59. Headdress with mask-like face on the Olmec dignitary of Stela 3 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).

Figure 60. Headdress on La Venta Monument 77 (Photo from Benson and de la Fuente 1996: 173).
I consider Burial 1 as representing the interment of an actual person and suggest the Northeast Platform was formed, in part, as a memorial event associated with the burial. The other three Phase I offerings described below (15, 16, and 17) could have been burial goods associated with the interment event. They were at least part of the same activity—the building of the platform. The headdress possibly signified a particular supernatural or a particular rank or status. The first colored surface facing on the Northeast Platform (white) could also be significant. All subsequent discernible facings of this mound were yellow.

**Offerings 15, 16, and 17**

All three of the remaining Phase I offerings were ceramic vessels placed in the original fill of the Northeast Platform. Offering 15 was a white-slipped Coarse Brown ware bowl placed inverted at a slight angle (Drucker et al. 1959: 190). The bowl diameter is 30.5 cm, and the walls are 5.4 cm high (Figure 61b). Due to the large amount of charcoal found in association with this vessel, it is possible that the bowl covered charred remnants of some organic material. Offerings 16 and 17 were located near and approximately at the same level and as Offering 15 and Burial 1. Both vessels were small, rectangular bowls of Coarse Brown ware.

![Figure 61. Ceramics in offerings: a. Offering 5 (Burial 3), b. Offering 15, c. Offering 18, d. Offering 19 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 42).](image)
PHASE II

There are three ritual events known for Phase II (Figure 62, Table 7). Two of them, the mosaic mask and associated features, are perhaps the most well-known from the site.

Ritual Event 2

Ritual Event 2 was a burial (Burial 2/Offering 3) connected to the enlargement of the South-Central Platform in Phase II (Fig. 62). Burial 2, like Burial 1, did not appear to be placed in a pit. It was positioned in the mottled pink sandy clay fill that enlarged the South-Central Platform during Phase II times (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 7). With this addition, the platform's dimension nearly doubled along its east-west axis, and the burial was placed on the east side. It is unclear whether the offering was positioned north-south or east-west. My guess is that the burial was aligned east-west since the east-west trending bulldozer trench removed most of the offering. The platform's first surfacing after its modification was reddish/buff-to-orange that ran onto the floor surrounding the platform (Chapter 5). The last platform surfacing in Phase II times was green serpentine dust. It is not clear whether the enlargement of the South-Central Platform occurred before the creation of the Southeast and Southwest Platforms which represent Ritual Events 3 and 4.

Burial 2—Offering 3

Burial 2 (Offering 3) was disturbed by a bulldozer while excavating a sectional trench in the southeastern section of the Court (Fig. 13, Chapter 3; Drucker et al. 1959: 146). Consequently, its exact layout was not recorded; however, the northern part of the burial remained in situ within the trench wall. The intact portion revealed its location in the east half of the South-Central Platform by the presence of a bed of cinnabar and a bright yellow clay cap. All of the artifacts recovered were likely placed on the cinnabar bed and appear to have been costume elements. These three aspects (cinnabar, ornaments, and yellow clay cap) point to the likelihood that the described offering was part of a burial.

The objects of Burial 2 include two (or possibly three) jade figurine pendants, one jade pendant in the form of a long-beaked water bird, four concave, rectangular jade objects, five jade spangles, five small
Figure 62. Ritual Events 2, 3, and 4 in Complex A.
amethyst ornaments, and 200 beads of various types (Figure 63) (Drucker et al. 1959: pls. 26-29). All of the objects are perforated and thus either intended for suspension or attachment to an article of clothing.

Two of the jade figurine pendants are pictured in Figures 63 and 64 and described in detail by the original excavators (Drucker et al. 1959: 147-148). Both are about 6.5 cm tall. The possible third figurine is represented by an arm only. The 1955 excavators initially thought the arm belonged to the figurine missing a limb; however, since the arm did not fit at the break and the jade differed in color and cross section, they determined it must be from a separate specimen. I think it is possible that the arm represents a replacement limb and was attached to the original figurine in some manner. The arm is just a slightly darker jade and must be the right length since the excavators comment “the two figurines must have been very nearly the same size” (Drucker et al. 1959: 148). The two complete figurines are perforated through the back of the neck for suspension as pectorals.

There are 15 objects of adornment separated into three groups of five: five concave, rectangular pieces of jade, five spoon-shaped jade spangles, and five amethyst pieces of similar shape. The most
Figure 64. Figurine pendants and rectangular jade objects from Burial 2 (Heizer's Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
outstanding piece is the carved jade pendant of a “crested cranelike bird with trailing wings” (Figure 65) (Drucker et al. 1959: 148). It is rather rectangular in its stylization and appears to match the four rectangular jade objects creating the group of five listed above (Fig. 64). There are five perforations on its edge and one in the center. It was called a pendant, which implies suspension in a necklace ensemble; however, it could have been easily sewn to cloth instead. The other four rectangular jade objects have two holes at each end. These could have been linked together with a double strand or sewn to cloth. Each rectangular object measures some 3 cm long and 1.4 cm wide. There are also three drill marks in the middle of the pieces—one near the center and two toward the edge laid out in a triangular shape. Some of these perforated the jade and others were left as depressions. The center was consistently perforated (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 27). The five small T-shaped pieces have numerous small holes and were also considered sewn ornaments (Figure 66) (Drucker et al. 1959: 149). Each is less than 2 cm long. The five amethyst pieces each had three points of attachment and are considered sewn embellishments also. These are also quite small, about 1.3 cm long and 1 cm wide. Three of the specimens have finely incised designs (Figure 67) likely representing turtle carapaces (John Clark, personal communication 2009). The two plain pieces were not without beauty: “When placed with their central flat side down, the angles of the other two flat surfaces transmit the color of the background in such a way as to create a multicolored effect on the convex surface” (Drucker et al. 1959: 149).

Four of the jade beads appear to have been matched pairs. The first two are cylindrical, each with a row of five small holes drilled down one side, suggesting simple flutes (Fig. 66) (Drucker et al. 1959: 150). The second pair has eight circumferential grooves on each bead, thereby creating a series of irregular, small round sections (Fig. 66) (Drucker et al. 1959: 151). Both pairs are just under 4 cm long. The 1955 excavators suggested that these likely formed parts of earspool assemblages since this size and type of bead were typically found associated with earspools. Nonetheless, the 1955 excavation report does not mention finding any earspools with Burial 2.5 The other 196 beads consist of 54 whole and 13 fragments.

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5 In Figure 63, there are two pseudo-earspools in Heizer’s photograph of the objects in Burial 2. These are the pseudo-earspools from Burial 1 and not part of Burial 2.
Figure 66. Ornaments from Burial 2 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
of subspherical shaped beads, 27 small subspherical beads, 26 flat disk-shaped beads, 58 cylindrical shaped beads, nine lobed or gadrooned pieces, and nine small beads that look like pottery vessels (globular, short-necked pots and tall, long-necked jars perforated from base to mouth of the vessel) (Figures 66 and 68) (Drucker et al. 1959: 151-152). All of these are jade except for 27 small beads crafted from a hard, dark purplish-brown material. Burial 2 is the only La Venta burial without earspools.

**Ritual Event 3**

The third defined ritual activity was the creation of Massive Offering 1 and placement of Offering 1942-E (Fig. 62). It was also connected to Ritual Event 4, the creation of Massive Offering 4. It is unknown whether the east or west massive offering was built first or whether they were created simultaneously.

**Massive Offering 1**

Massive Offering 1 was discovered in 1955 under the Southwest Platform. As defined by the excavators, Massive Offering 1 includes the mosaic mask, serpentine base, and very large pit. I see Offering 1942-E (six serpentine axes set in clay) as another feature of the ritual activity since it was placed...
Figure 68. Beads from Burial 2 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
in the fill over the mosaic. I also consider the anciently excavated and filled-in pit, the serpentine base, the mosaic pavement, the six positioned axes, and the adobe platform erected overhead as components of the same ritual event (Figure 69). Separating the elements diminishes the true picture.6

The Pit

The exact size of the preparatory pit was apparently difficult to measure accurately. The 1955 excavators estimated the upper dimension as approximately 15 m north-south by 19 m east-west (Drucker et al. 1959: 100). The total depth of the pit through both the upper sand and lower clay subsoil was about 7.5 m. The sides of the pit were sloped 70 to 80 degrees. A red and white clay retaining wall was built to prevent cave-ins. Once the clay subsoil was reached, the retaining wall was no longer necessary for the remaining 4 m of soil. The bottom of the pit was approximately 13 m by 9.5 m.7

As the near vertical walls of the serpentine base were constructed, the area between the sloped edge of the pit and the rock layers was filled in with a variety of clays and backdirt. Unlike some clays chosen for their colors and composition, this fill was a heterogeneous mass. Once the stones and mosaic were covered with olive clay, a mass of pink mottled clay filled the remaining open portion of the pit.

The Serpentine Base

The bottom of the pit had a 6 mm layer of hard, dark-gray calichelike material (Drucker et al. 1959: 97). Placed on this material was 33 cm thick layer of compact blue clay. Then the first of 28 layers of irregular, rough stone was laid. Most of the stones in all layers were serpentine, but a few pieces of gneiss and schist were also observed (Drucker et al. 1959: 95). Heizer noted that the serpentine layers “are really a stone-rubble pyramid” (Heizer’s field notes, Notebook I: 71). Clark considers the platforms green-stone pyramids constructed in the underworld (Clark and Colman 2010).

Not all of the serpentine base was removed in 1955. A stratigraphic control wall was left in the middle of the pit. At first the top eight of the 28 layers were excavated on both the west and east sides of this bulk. Seeing that the rock continued lower, the new plan consisted of digging only on the west side. After

6 Heizer (1958: 104) commented, “What is most remarkable about this whole feature is that it was a one-shot job—once begun it was carried straight through without interruption to its conclusion.”
7 Measurements derived from Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 26 and 27.
Ritual Event 2

Figure 69. Ritual Event 2: North-South profile, Massive Offering 1 and Offering 1942-E (NWAF drawing from Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 26).
removing another ten layers without seeing an end, the excavation was reduced to a 2.4 by 1.2 m cut in order to reach the bottom (Figure 70) (Drucker et al. 1959: 96, pls. 17, 18).

The 1955 excavators counted from the top down, making the layer at the bottom of the pit the 28th. Here, I count the layers in the order they were laid down. The first stones in the first layer were closely packed together edgewise, whereas the rocks in the other 27 layers were laid flat. On the southern edge of the flat layers, rocks with one relatively straight edge were laid evenly to produce a neat line, with their long axes running north-south. The rest of the stones were laid with their long axes east and west. Although the layers were not placed in complete or regular rows, a regular appearance was planned and created out of the irregular chunks. The first and second stone layers contained the largest stones of all. Many weighed from 30 to 40 kilograms. The sizes of the stones decreased from bottom to top, and stones were positioned farther apart with more clay between them in the succeeding layers. The first 13 layers of stone were set in “gun-metal” blue clay containing bits of vegetable material, possibly from a swamp (Figure 71). The remaining layers were placed in olive clay. In the twenty-first layer (or twentieth based on

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8 Drucker listed the number of layers as 27, “Total levels of stone =27 (+ mask = 28 = lunar mo. ???)” in his 1955 field notes, 4 May (NAA, Smithsonian Institute, Drucker’s Papers).

9 Drucker also commented that the large, irregular chunks weighed between 70-100 pounds and were set in 40 to 50 cm of blue swamp clay in his 1955 field notes (NAA, Smithsonian Institute, Drucker’s Papers).
Figure 71. Ritual Event 2: east-west profile, showing colors used (NWAF drawing from Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 27).
Drucker’s field notes, there was a small, level area created with squared blocks of serpentine visible in the northwest corner of the excavation cut; the shaped stones continued into the west and north walls (Figure 72). Altogether, the serpentine base was a little over 5 m tall (Drucker et al. 1959: 95-98).

Associated with the clay and stone base was a low vertical wall of brightly colored clays considered a “marker wall” by the excavators (Figs. 69, 71) (Drucker et al. 1959: 98-99, pl. 19). This colored wall enclosed the mosaic mask around the perimeter of the serpentine foundation and measured approximately 1.6 m tall. The north, south, and west sections were predominantly bright red clay with chunks of dark green clay. The east segment was green clay with only a few bits of red clay (Fig. 71).

**The Mosaic Pavement**

Approximately 30 cm of dark yellowish-olive clay formed “an envelope” around the mosaic pavement (Drucker et al. 1959: 93). It also created a bed on top of the serpentine base on which to set the blocks of the mosaic. The same clay was used to cover the pavement upon completion. This pavement consisted of 485 cut and squared blocks of serpentine, all with one flat and likely smoothed and polished surface. The mosaic encompassed an area 4.7 m east-west by 4.68 m north-south plus an additional 1.61 m for the

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10 In his 1955 field notes, Drucker referred to the envelope as “greenish-yellow” in color.
appendages making it nearly 6.3 m north-south (Figure 73) (Drucker’s 1955 field notes). It possessed an eastern counterpart deposited under the Southeast Platform discovered in 1943 (described below).

The two mosaic pavements were initially interpreted as stylized “jaguar” masks. However, the image is abstract rather than zoomorphic, and, in fact, the central elements of the masks constitute the standard Olmec quincuncx, with a vertical bar flanked on both sides by two horizontal elements (Clark 2010). Kent Reilly (1990: fig. 15) interprets this quincuncx design as a symbol of the central world tree (vertical element) flanked by smaller trees or sprouting maize plants in the four quarters. On a more general level, this design is a cosmogram of the earth, its center, and its quarters (Clark and Colman 2010). The same
design is found inscribed on jade axes in Phase III and IV offerings (Drucker 1952: fig. 47; Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 35c, d) and four times on a serpentine figurine said to have been found at La Venta (Coe 1967: figs. 1, 3, 4). The rectangular-shaped masks have a lower fringe of four diamond-shaped elements with possible “tassels” associated with them, probably a representation of vegetation (see Reilly 1994: 134, fig. 10) and an upper element, just below the cleft, that looks like a recumbent “E.”

The reclining “E” (also known as a double-merlon) of the west mask was filled in with a 2.5 cm thick layer of cinnamon-colored sand (Figure 74). The other five open areas within the mask were not given a different color besides the yellowish-olive clay bed; however, the centers of the diamond-shaped appendages at the bottom were filled with clay “slightly more yellowish in color” (Figure 75) (Drucker et al. 1959: 94).

At the southwest corner of the mosaic, embedded in the clay envelope (Drucker et al. 1959: 95) or in the fill immediately overlying the olive clay (Drucker et al. 1959: 211), was a small, kneeling human figure of fine-grained basalt (Figure 76). The stone figure is approximately 18 cm tall. The head is broken off and there is a large shallow depression on the lower chest—possibly representing a concave mirror ornament.

Six Serpentine Axes (Offering 1942-E)

In 1942, Drucker placed a test trench, 1 by 2 m, in the center of the Southwest Platform (Drucker 1952: 31). He discovered six axes positioned in two lots: two axes on the northeast corner and four east of the center of his test pit, just under the adobe brick platform (Drucker’s 1942 field notebook). The axes were enveloped in masses of very hard, dark olive-brown clay that showed grass or straw impressions.

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11 The incised mask motifs are on the front surface of the figurine’s four limbs. Coe (1967) compares the style of the figurine as “virtually identical with Figurines 8 and 9” which were discovered in Mound A-3 near Burial 10. Figurine 8 also has four incised marks (Drucker et al. 1959: 212-213, fig. 64). These are on the chest and resemble axes. In Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico (Benson and de la Fuente 1996:240) a jade human face mask with incised designs is pictured. It also has the same quincunx mask motif: 3 small ones directly under the lips and 1 large one between the eyes.
Although Drucker recalled that the lots were at the approximate same level and not far apart, he did not see a pattern (Drucker and Heizer 1965). In his 1942 field notes, Drucker records that the lot of 4 axes were in 2 rows with their bits to the east. One row had 3 axes and one row had 1 axe. The axes were found just below the adobe bricks (Fig. 69). Drucker was unsure whether the six axes were made from serpentine or schist. His field sketch shows the axes nearly touching the overlying bricks.
The Adobe Platform

The adobe platform was placed directly on top of the pink mottled clay pit fill. The adobe bricks were hand-molded, sun-dried, and of yellowish clays (Figure 77). They varied in appearance: some light, some dark, some with brownish hues, and others with orangish tones (Drucker et al. 1959: 90). The brick were laid in distinctly different patterns between the east and west halves of the platform (Heizer’s 1955 Notebook I: 27-28). Adobes were set in well-defined courses separated by layers of red clay mortar (2.5-7.5 cm thick). The adobe platform was at least 16 courses high (Drucker 1952: 31; Drucker et al. 1959: 91). The resulting structure measured approximately 8 m north-south, 10.5 m east-west, and 2.24 m high.12 It is unknown whether the yellow/red face of the structure was plastered over. It would have been striking in appearance, but as the initial investigators caution, this “line of evidence is not to be relied upon too heavily at the site of La Venta” (Drucker et al. 1959: 91).

Later in Phase II, a U-shaped trench was dug around the perimeter of the platform (Figs. 69, 71) (Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 26-28) as part of an architectural embellishment. Facing blocks were set to surround the structure. These were carefully squared basalt blocks placed lengthwise, lined up, and leveled (Fig. 77) (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 12 and 13). The row of blocks was continuous around the east, north, and west faces. On the south side, a different arrangement was constructed. Two other sets of blocks

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12 Drucker’s 1942 field notes lists the bricks as being 88 inches high, which equals 2.24 m. Drucker (1952: 31) also gives this dimension, but Drucker et al. (1959: 91) estimated that the bricks were approximately 6 ft (1.8 m) above the white court floors.
were added. Polished serpentine blocks were set upright and at a slight angle above the rectangular basalt row. Then another row of chipped basalt blocks was set upright and tilted back to cover completely the serpentine row (Figures 77, 78). A light-orange colored sandy clay floor is associated with the facing blocks. The 1955 excavators speculated that a similar series of floors and facing blocks existed around the corresponding Southeast Platform (Drucker et al. 1959: 89).

**Ritual Event 4**

The fourth ritual activity was associated with Ritual Event 3. It was the placement of the twin massive offering (no. 4) found in 1943 beneath the Southeast Platform, and the cruciform axe offering (1943-E) found in the fill above the mosaic mask (Fig. 62). The Southeast platform was not as thoroughly excavated as its mate. Many features found as part of Massive Offering 1 are cautiously transposed onto Massive Offering 4. As mentioned above, the relative timing of the two events is unclear. Both happened in Phase II times.
Massive Offering 4

Massive Offering 4, also known as Pavement No. 1, was discovered in 1943 by Wedel beneath the Southeast Platform. It is complementary to Massive Offering 1 in construction, placement, and theme. Similar to Ritual Event 3, Ritual Event 4 involved digging a deep pit, laying a serpentine base, creating a mosaic mask, loading a specific fill, placing a cruciform axe cache (Offering 1943-E), and building an adobe platform.

The depth and breadth of the pit for Massive Offering 4 is unknown since it was not investigated in 1943. The existence of a compact, serpentine rubble base below the mosaic pavement is documented; however, it was explored only 60 cm down (Wedel 1952: 56, figs. 18 and 19). The centers of the east and west masks were 20.6 m apart.

The Mosaic Pavement

The main section of the mosaic, labeled Pavement No. 1 by Wedel, was within a few centimeters of being perfectly square. The four sides varied between 4.63 and 4.7 m in length. The mosaic contained 443 dressed serpentine blocks (Wedel 1952: 56, fig. 20). The four appendages on the south added another 44 blocks to the count making a total of 487 (Heizer 1964). The pavement is nearly identical in form to the west mosaic in Massive Offering 1 (Figures 79 and 80). The colors differ slightly. Wedel (1952: 59) summarized the striking colors of the east pavement as follows: “The blocks of green serpentine set in asphalt [sic] on a yellow clay bed, with a purplish-red veined background for the appendages along the south, presented a most striking picture, particularly so when the entire surface was cleaned with water and the colors came out in all their richness.” This description glosses over his earlier detail that the area within each diamond-shaped element was filled with “greenish-gray clay mottled and streaked with purplish red” (Wedel 1952: 59). Stirling (1943: 322) presented a slightly different picture of tamped blue clay in the upper, open elements. Striling’s verbal picture is likely the account used in Felipe Dávalos’s

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13 Drucker et al. (1959: footnote 11) have the count as 497, which is likely a typographic error. Wedel does not state how many blocks are in the appendages. The bottom of two appendages are speculated and the count of 44 is likely derived from the plan map and must include two very small stones.

14 The 1955 excavators (Drucker et al. 1959: 93) claimed that this black color is a chemical precipitate of manganese rather than asphalt.

15 Covarrubius’s (1944: 30) description followed Stirling’s account, “The open spaces within the mosaic that stood for the jaguar’s eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth, were filled with blue clay, while a border of yellow ochre framed the green mosaic, setting it off against the reddish soil of La Venta.”
Figure 79. Mosaic mask in Massive Offering 4 (Photo from Drucker 1952: pl. 10; NWAF drawing based on Wedel 1952: fig. 20).

- yellow clay bed
- blue (greenish) clay
- greenish-gray clay streaked with purplish-red

1 meter
portrait of the ritual activity published the National Geographic Magazine (Stuart 1993). The image leaves off Wedel’s published detail of purplish red color in the appendages. Combining the two separate accounts reveals that the southern elements were filled with green and red, which contrasted with the yellow background and blue/green interior of the northern elements.

**Cruciform Axe Cache (Offering 1943-E)**

About 1.8 m above the pavement in the mottled pink, sandy clay fill, a cruciform was created by the careful placement of 20 axes, a hematite mirror, and a circular wooden plaque (Figure 81) (Wedel 1952: 55-56, pl. 8). The axes were arranged so the upright of the cross pointed north.\(^{16}\) It measured 1.1 m east-west and 1.25 m north-south. Two or three of the axes may have been jade and the others serpentine. The axes were positioned in the fill, but not on a prepared bed.

\(^{16}\) The published photo was taken from north to south (Drucker 1952: pl. 8b) so most people show the cross pointing south.
The blackened area between the two large axes where the upright and horizontal arms of the cross intersected was slightly concave and measured 17 cm in diameter. Near the center were traces of charred or oxidized wood covered with red pigment. Wedel (1952: 56) believed it represented the remains of a circular wooden plaque painted with red ochre or cinnabar.

The hematite mirror placed on top of the cross was irregularly oblong, 8.8 by 6.0 by 0.5 cm. It has two small perforations 5 cm apart on one of the longer sides. It is markedly concave, with a wide border formed by a bevel that sloped outward (Drucker 1952: 164; Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 46e).

The Adobe Platform

The pink fill continued another 15 to 20 cm above the cruciform offering. Then the first course of the adobe platform was laid. The bricks here were similar to the ones in the Southwest Platform. Wedel (1952: 55) described them as olive-gray to greenish and yellowish in color set in a reddish clay. The differing colors of adobes used in the Southwest Platform and the Southeast Platform could be a consequence of archaeological perception or a purposeful difference based on cardinal directions. Other evidence supports the idea that the east was associated with the color green at La Venta (Clark and Colman 2010; González
Lauck 2010). The height of the two adobe platforms coincided; the maximum height of the coursed brickwork on the southeastern structure was 2.25 m.

**PHASE III**

I identify eight ritual activities for Phase III (Figure 82, Table 7). Some of them may have been connected events. Stratigraphy is my evidence for determining related events, but not the only evidence.

**Ritual Event 5**

Ritual Event 5, the creation of Massive Offering 3, appears to have initiated Phase III. This event included Massive Offering 3 (an enormous pit, a retaining wall, six layers of serpentine pavement blocks, a trench filled with blocks circumscribing the pavement, and the different fills of the pit) and overlying Offerings 8, 10, 12, 13, 1943-C, 1943-D, and possibly 2a, all positioned in the construction fill above the serpentine pavement (Figure 83).

**Massive Offering 3**

The pit for the serpentine pavement of Massive Offering 3 was perfectly square at the top, 23.5 by 23.5 m, and approximately 3.9 m deep. The north-south dimension included nearly all of the area in the Ceremonial Court between the Mound A-2 apron and the northern edge of the South-Central Platform. This huge hole removed evidence of any earlier offerings in this area, if they were present.

The north side of the pit was given a retaining wall of heavy, red and yellow compact clay to contain the upper layer of gray drift sand. At the bottom of the pit, six layers of serpentine blocks were placed as superimposed pavements. Thin layers of green clay separated these pavements. The serpentine blocks used were carefully shaped and polished (Figure 84). The block size varied in each layer; however, in each east-west row, all of the blocks were of the same length, thus creating a regular appearance. The lowest and uppermost pavements were made of larger blocks than used for the middle pavements (Figure 85). A thicker layer of clay was placed between the third and fourth layers; thereby separating the pavements into two sets of three layers each (Drucker et al. 1959: 130, fig. 17, pls. 21, 22). The pavement area covered by the serpentine blocks was estimated as approximately 19 m north-south by 20 m east-west. The entire pavement was not exposed in 1955.
Figure 82. Ritual Events 5 – 12 in Complex A.
Figure 83. Ritual Event 5—north-south profile of Massive Offering 3 and Offerings 10, 12, 1943-C, 1943-D, 8, 2a, and 13 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 10 & 12 with adjustment of their vertical scale to match the horizontal scale).
After the serpentine blocks were in position, the pavement was covered with a 75 cm thick layer of heavy clay. A trench was then dug through the edges of this clay mantle to trace the pavement’s perimeter. This trench was then filled with small, dressed serpentine blocks. In contrast to the horizontal layers, these blocks were jumbled with many in a vertical position (Fig. 83). The top blocks in the trench appear to have been placed horizontally (Drucker et al. 1959: 131, pl. 23a). The filled trench created a “wall” around the pavements, similar to the “marker wall” around the serpentine base of Massive Offering 1.

Seven small offerings were placed within the fill overlying the six serpentine pavements, five directly on the site centerline (Fig. 83) (Drucker et al. 1959: 132). Offering 10 was placed first. Apparently, work on backfilling the offering pit stopped for an indeterminate time after it had started (see Chapter 5). When backfilling re-commenced, Offerings 1943-C and 12 were put in place. These were followed by Offerings 1943-D, 8, 2a, and 13 in the upper layer of fill. Offerings 1 and 2 were also placed above the Massive Offering 3 pavements, and on the centerline. But, these were later intruded into the fill rather than being placed in the fill as the offering pit was being filled in. The placement pit for Offering 1 was dug before the Phase III flooring was laid, and the pit for Offering 2 was cut through an early floor.

**Offering 10**

Offering 10 was an axe cruciform created by placing 38 serpentine and jade axes. The axes were laid out on a prepared bed of reddish clay and plastered over with a layer of yellow sandy clay, colors and treatment applied to the offerings that may have been burials (Figure 86). At the extreme south end of the cruciform, a small area was covered with deep-purple material, probably cinnabar.
Figure 85. Serpentine pavement in Massive Offering 3 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).

Figure 86. Offering 10—cruciform axe cache above the serpentine pavement of Massive Offering 3 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
The cruciform was irregular rather than symmetrical (Drucker et al. 1959: 185, pl. 47a, fig. 51). One very large axe of jade, twice the size of the others, was in the center and an unequal number of axes comprised the arms of the cruciform (Figure 87). Some of the axes show heavy wear on their bits (Figure 88) (Drucker et al. 1959: table 8). These objects were laid with their long axes north-south, bits to the north, and positioned 1.5 m above the uppermost serpentine pavement.

Figure 87. Plan view of Offering 10 (NWAF drawing based on photograph in Figure 86, Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian).

Offering 12

Offering 12 consisted of two disks of bright pigment placed in a small elliptical pit, 36 cm north-south by 127 cm east-west and 13-15 cm deep. The pit “penetrated a layer of fill consisting of yellowish clays, and whose base lay in the underlying layer of sandy fill” (Drucker et al. 1959: 186). This description sounds as if the pit may have cut through the same yellow clay that covered Offering 10 and the pigments placed in fill below. Offering 12 was placed about 50 cm south of Offering 10.
Each disk of mineral pigment was lens-shaped in cross-section: 20 cm in diameter and 1 cm in thickness. One was bright green malachite (to the west) and the other was very bright purplish-red cinnabar (to the east). Drucker suggested in his 1955 field notes that the form of the two colored materials indicate “two loosely tied, very flexible pouches.” No other objects were present. The offering pit was plastered over with a layer of yellowish clay.

**Offering 1943-C**

At about the same level as Offering 12, but about 4.5 m south, was found Offering 1943-C. It was placed in a pocket of soft gray sand and entirely surrounded and covered by mottled clay (Drucker 1952: 39). It consisted of a flat-bottomed, cylindrical ceramic vessel with a shallower vessel inverted over it as a lip-to-lip vessel cache.

**Offering 1943-D**

In 1943 Wedel (1952: 39) found six serpentine pseudoaxes set upright, polls down, with edges touching, that formed an east-west row 50 cm long that transversed the site’s centerline (Drucker 1952: pl. 5b). The pseudoaxes were set in mottled yellow clay.
Offering 8

Offering 8 included three groups of axes or axe-like objects of serpentine placed in a row perpendicular to La Venta’s north-south axis (Drucker et al. 1959: 174, fig. 46, table 5, pl. 41a). The polls of each group were embedded in prepared beds of clay. Eight pieces were placed on the centerline in three rows: 3, 3, and 2 (Figure 89). Eight pieces were also placed in a group 93 cm east of the centerline. These were two rows of four axes each. The third group was placed 140 cm west of the centerline. Only five axes were recovered in 1955; however, the corner of a deep trench excavated in 1943 passed close to this offering and may have removed some pieces from it (Drucker et al. 1959: 176). Alternatively, Offering 8 as recovered by archaeologist may be complete and represent deliberate asymmetry (8:8:5).

Offering 13

Offering 13 was located east of the centerline. Two axelike objects of serpentine were set upright, polls down, and 68.5 cm apart. The objects garnered an offering number, but the 1955 excavators thought these two serpentine artifacts were markers rather than offerings (Drucker et al. 1959: 187). They also speculated that the two pieces could have been remnants of a larger offering removed in 1943, referred to as Offering
1943–B. For this offering, Wedel (1952: 39) uncovered a dozen or so axes of serpentine scattered at various depths and laying at all angles, “in no way suggesting an orderly cache deposit.”

**Offering 2A**

The axes of Offering 2a looked like the remains of an offering disturbed by Offering 2 (Drucker et al. 1959: 146, fig. 33). There were 4 axes in a row with the bits to the north and one axe immediately south of the row in a similar position (Figure 90). Two of the axes are jade, one is likely sandstone, and the other two are possibly of schist (Drucker et al. 1959: table 3).

**Ritual Event 6**

**Offering 4**

Offering 4 was placed in a white sand lens on the Court floor immediately west of the Northeast platform and along its transverse axis. The white sand was part of the fill placed over Massive Offering 3 that spilled over the edge of the pit and raised the court floor (Fig. 42). It is possible that Offering 4 was part of Ritual Event 5. At the least, it was placed before the last fill was deposited over Massive Offering 3 and the Phase III floors laid down (Chapter 5). As seen in Figure 82, Offering 4 lines up (east-west) with Offerings 13, 14, and 5 (Burial 3). Offering 13 was in a separate fill and higher up (Fig. 42). Offering 14 and Burial 3 were placed in the Phase III enlargement of the Northeast Platform. It is conceivable that Offerings 4 and 14 and Burial 3 were connected events.

Offering 4 appears to show a ritual activity frozen mid-action by creating a scene using 16 figurines (2 jade, 13 serpentine, 1 granite) assembled in front of six jade celts (Figure 91). The long slender celts stood upright edge to edge along the east and southeast edge of an ellipse, measuring 51 cm north-south by 36 cm east-west (Figure 92). The six celts may represent stelae. One of the figurines of an unusual dark buff
Figure 91. Offering 4 in situ (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).

Figure 92. Six celts from Offering 4 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
material was positioned with its back against the celt row and facing the other 15 figurines clustered to the west (Figure 93). Initially, Drucker and Heizer (1956) described this polished granite figurine as the main character of the action. Two other possibilities were realized later from photographs and field notes. In the first alternative explanation, instead of one principal figure, there were six: the granite fellow, four figurines (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 38, Nos. 8-11) apparently aligned facing south, and the primary figure (No. 22) facing the line of four. The remaining figurines set in a semicircle are the spectators. Figurine No. 22 was apparently the most spectacular in appearance—bright green jade with numerous black inclusions (Figure 94). In a second interpretation, instead of random viewers, the figurines are paired (Nos. 8-9, 10-11, 12-14, 13-15, 16-17, 18-19, and 20-21). The granite figure (No. 7) and the speckled figure (No. 22) stand by themselves and are the central personages in the scene.
Figure 94. Offering 4 figurines. Numbers match Figure 93 labels (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
The figurines were set in reddish sand up to their knees, and then the white sand that was part of a long lens heaped over them (Heizer’s field notes, Notebook I: 49) and subsequently covered by the Phase III flooring. Since the offering was positioned in the reddish sand, perhaps the scene was visible for a short time while the work of filling the Massive Offering 3 pit continued. The white sand lens is in the second to last pit fill (see Chapter 5, Fig. 42). The modification of the Northeast Platform occurred after the white sand covered the offering. The toe of the platform’s enlargement rest on the same white lens.

Some of the figurines and celts may have been heirlooms—not originally fashioned for the scene itself (Figs. 92 and 94). At least four of the celts were made by cutting axes lengthwise (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 40). A few of the figurines were also missing appendages. Many of them retained traces of bright red cinnabar paint: some had it on the feet and legs, others on the face, and a few may have been painted all over (Drucker et al. 1959: table 4).

Offering 4 was apparently inspected at the very end of Phase III. After the final layer of the Phase III floor had been placed over the Court, a hole nearly the exact size of the offering was cut through the floors and excavated down to the level of the heads and the tips of the celts. It was then re-filled with lighter colored material (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 39).

**Ritual Event 7**

**Offering 14**

Offering 14 was recovered from the western edge of the Northeast Platform near its transverse axis and east of Offering 4. Offering 14 consisted of six pottery vessels, five of them nested together and one nearby (Drucker et al. 1959: 187-189, fig. 52). The solitary vessel was a small bowl of Fine Paste Black ware with an incurved rim and three small, flat projecting lugs. The three inverted vessels were shallow bowls of Fine Paste Orange ware; their sides were decorated with small, semi-circular “punch” marks (Drucker et al. 1959: 188; Heizer’s 1955 field notes, Notebook II: 14). The three bowls are identical to the shallow bowl found with Burial 3 in color, shape, and decoration. Beneath the three inverted vessels was a small Black ware effigy jar (Figure 95). These four pots rested on a Fine Paste Buff spouted vessel. Its sides were fluted and it had a ring base and open spout. The effigy jar was upright, within the spouted vessel.
Figure 95. Ceramic vessels from Offering 14. a. Vessels in original position, b-e. individual vessels (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 52).

Figure 96. Offering 14 ceramic vessels (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
The body of the effigy jar had four equally spaced vertical creases that gave it a lobed effect. The face on the effigy jar was described as "froglike" (Drucker et al. 1959: 189). The vessels were badly deteriorated and could not be restored. Heizer noted (Notebook II: 14) “there is a possibility that this offering may be connected with the pottery vessels at the east end of Offering No. 5 by reason of the fact that the bowls are identical in color, shape, decoration.”

Ritual Event 8

Burial 3—Offering 5

Burial 3 (Offering 5) was found in a shallow pit dug into the Northeast Platform (Fig. 82) (Drucker et al. 1959: 162-167). As described in Chapter 5, it appears to have been placed immediately prior to the Phase III modifications of the platform. The offering was outlined by two rows of stones, each with four small pieces of volcanic tuff (Figure 97). The rectangle defined by the rocks measured 69 cm east-west by 33 cm north-south. Within this area a considerable amount of cinnabar had been sprinkled and numerous jade objects placed: a pair of jade earspools, a set of cylindrical beads, a maskette, a pendant, a scalloped ornament, 13 spangles, a row of 97 beads, and six other beads (possibly a bracelet) (Figures 98 and 99).

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17 The dimensions of the shallow pit were not given in the 1959 report or noted in Heizer’s field record of the offering. There is a rough profile sketch (Notebook I: 60) that pictures the pit as larger than the yellow clay envelope.
Figure 98. Front view of ornaments from Burial 3 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
Figure 99. Back view of ornaments from Burial 3 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
At the southeast corner was placed a small bowl of Coarse Brown ware in which lay a small Fine Paste Buff-Orange bottle along with another piece of tuff south of the bowl (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 41). The entire ensemble was capped with yellow clay. The head of the burial that once accompanied these objects was oriented west.

The maskette lay west of the earspools. It is fairly round, 3 cm in diameter, with a carved face (Fig. 57a). It is perforated in the center and around the top and side edges. It was discovered face down (Heizer’s field notes, Notebook I: 61). It is possible that this maskette was part of a headdress that had a mask on the back. Monument 44 depicts a headdress with a maskette/face on the back (Figure 100).

The earspools of Burial 3 were found 23 cm apart. The cylindrical beads (2 cm long) were ringed to give them a nodal appearance, and they appear to have been part of an earspool assembly. This pair is similar to ones found in Burial 2 (Offering 3). The scalloped-edged jade ornament is also 2 cm in diameter. It has a large perforation near the center and four smaller holes around the rim. It was centrally located east of the earspools. Two similar ornaments were found in La Venta’s Phase IV burials (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 54c and e); one was in the basalt tomb (Burial 7/Offering 1942-A), and the other was in a possible child’s

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18 Heizer recorded in his field notes (Notebook I: 63) that the ceramic bowl lined up with Offering 4.
Figure 101. Plan view and photograph of Burial 3 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute; NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 41).
burial in Mound A-3 (Burial 9/Offering 1943-L). A large, opaque, light-green jade pendant was directly east of the scalloped ornament. The spangles from this offering have one or two holes each, and some obviously represent birdheads. One, in particular, is clearly the head of a duck and has two small bits of crystal set in the perforations. The birdhead spangles resemble ones found in the stone cist in Mound A-3 (Wedel 1952: 70, pl. 58). In Burial 3 the spangles were found scattered between the earspools, cylindrical beads, and scalloped ornament (Figure 101). Six short, tubular beads were found together near one of the stones on the north row. These could represent pieces of a bracelet. A longer alignment of beads had 74 round and 21 cylindrical beads. At each end of the beadstring was a large circular bead (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 37). The large beads at both ends of the line of beads seem an odd arrangement for a necklace. Perhaps it was a different kind of costume embellishment. The two large beads could have been fasteners attached to a cape, with the strands of smaller beads acting like a decorative chain. This interpretation could account for the more linear position of the beads present. Reilly (1999: 32) also suggests this possibility: “This string of beads may have functioned as the clasp for the cloaks that Olmec heartland rulers are so frequently depicted wearing.” Monument 47 from San Lorenzo portrays a man wearing a cape, and on the figure’s back are two squarish shapes carved at the shoulders that perhaps denote large beads as clasps (Figure 102) (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 487; Cyphers 2004: fig. 59-60)

Two of the bordering tuff pieces in Burial 3 actually fit together. The 1955 excavators considered it possible that the rock represents a broken, small figurine; one fragment suggests a knee or elbow and the two fitted pieces resemble a topknot (Figure 103) (Drucker et al. 1959: 167).
Figure 103. Volcanic tuff pieces that bordered Burial 3 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
At Chalcatzingo, there were two Middle Formative burials—Burial 39 and Burial 40—that are very similar to La Venta Burial 3. Each individual was laid out in an extended, supine position with the head to the west and each was wearing jade ornaments, an attribute that is in “sharp contrast to other burials on the site” (Merry de Morales 1987: 100). Red pigment covered both skeletons. Each tomb had piles of stone over or around the body. The earspools in Burial 40 probably had a shell mosaic covering the flared openings. Both burials in Chalcatzingo had a shallow ceramic bowl with a “cantario” or small bottle placed inside. Merry de Morales (1987:99) correlated these ceramic offerings with the ones found in La Venta Burial 3.

**Ritual Event 9**

**Offering 1**

This offering was found on the centerline north of Offering 8. It consisted of 20 large, serpentine pseudoaxes placed in a pit directly below Monument 13. The serpentine pieces varied from 23 to 36 cm long, 13 to 18 cm wide, and 6 to 10 cm thick. A few individual pseudoaxes weighed between 4.5 to 6 kilograms. Eighteen of the 20 pseudoaxes were placed in three rows of six each with their axes north-south and bits to the north (Figure 104). These roughly formed a 1 m square (Figure 105). The other two were axes set vertically 10 cm south of the last row (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 23b). Within the pit, but off to the east side and without apparent relationship to the main offering was a small serpentine axe. Although

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Figure 104. Offering 1 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
the 1955 investigators (1959: 135) were persuaded that the small axe was dropped in by accident, there
could have been a significant reason that the small axe was present and offset.

Despite the center of the pseudoaxes being exactly below the center of Monument 13, the 1955
excavators viewed the pseudoaxes as temporally disassociated with the monument. According to the
profile of their excavations (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 10) the pseudoaxes were placed earlier in a Phase III
context and the monument was positioned in Phase IV times. Heizer (1971: 52) believed that Monument
13 originated in Phase III and was raised and repositioned in Phase IV.

**Ritual Event 10**

**Offering 2**

The base of Offering 2 was directly north, but 45 cm higher than the pit base of Offering 1 (Figure
106). Offering 2 was positioned in an elliptical pit 1 m by 70 cm above the serpentine pavement. Fifty-one
celts and axes (14 jade, 20 serpentine, and 17 of various other materials) were used to create a unique pattern in two superimposed layers laid out in two north-south rows (Figure 107). The 1955 excavators considered it likely that a mat or other perishable material originally separated the two layers (Drucker et al. 1959: 135).

The lower layer had 18 axes and 2 celts arranged poll to poll, bits outward, in four groups of five (Figure 108) (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 34, pl. 25). The upper layer had two groups of 5 laid poll to poll bordering a center triangular arrangement of axes laid 4, 3, 2, 1 (Fig. 107) (Drucker et al. 1959: 135, pl. 24). An axe fragment was present near the row of two. The lower lot had a long, narrow jade celt with a notch that stands out in the offering photographs and two of the serpentine axes in the upper layer have biconical perforations at their polls (Drucker et al. 1959: table 2). Twenty of the axes exhibited evidence of extensive use (Drucker et al. 1959: 139, table 2). Five axes were decorated: one in the upper layer and four
Figure 107. Photograph and plan view of Offering 2 and 2a (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute; NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 33).
Figure 108. Lower layer of Offering 2 in situ (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute) and plan view of lower level axes and celts (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 34).
The incised serpentine axe in the upper layer had two differing designs. The image on the bit end appears to have been cut or ground away, but the remaining portion looks like a partial profile of a face (Fig. 109a). The poll end has a quincunx bordered by a rectangle with three lines crisscrossed at the center. One of the incised serpentine axes in the upper layer also has a quincunx design with two reclining E’s on the bit end pointing down (Fig. 109c). It is roughly similar to the mosaic masks found beneath the Southeast and Southwest Pavements and the incised designs on the figurine at Dumbarton Oaks reported by Coe (1967). Another of the carved axes is mottled-gray jade that is concave in the center with a simple figure etched on the bit end and four shapes on the poll end (Fig. 109b). The other two incised axes have more elaborate designs. One is carved from brownish tuff and appears to show a figure wearing a bird mask (Fig. 109d). The face is in profile but the body is a front view showing the individual seated with crossed legs. The other is only a face in profile, also carved from brownish tuff (Fig. 109e). This axe is nicked, broken, and battered. The workmanship of the design surpasses that of the other axes.

Figure 109. Incised axes from Offering 2: a. upper level, b-e, lower level (NWAF drawing based on NAA photographs).

19 San Lorenzo Monument 52 has nearly the exact same down-turned, E motif design (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 494; Cyphers 2004: fig. 63).
Ritual Event 11

Burial 4—Offering 6

Burial 4 (Offering 6) was also uncovered in the Northeast Platform in a large, roughly elliptical pit possibly placed during a second modification of the platform in Phase III (see Chapter 5). The 66 cm deep burial pit was oriented north-south and measured approximately 80 cm east-west and 110 cm north-south at its bottom. Jade objects were found on top of a 2.5 cm thick layer of cinnabar. (Figure 110) (Drucker et al. 1959: 167-171). The jade objects included a large tubular bead, a set of earspools, a pair of cylindrical beads, two maskettes, two pendants, and two strands of beads (Figure 111). These were covered with a layer of clay mixed with cinnabar, and over this was a 5 cm thick blanket of compact yellow clay. This was likely another burial with the head oriented to the north.

The earspools were 18 to 20 cm apart (Figure 112) (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 44). The earspool assemblages included two cylindrical beads, two “jaguar” fang pendants, and two maskettes. The fangs appear to have been fashioned from an earlier earspool. There is an incised line across each piece to mark the line of enamel. Two small holes are present and a large perforation on the body of both fangs. The

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20 The original plan view figure’s scale does not match the written description. Figure 112 replicates the 1959 published figure so the scale is off on it as well.
Figure 111. Ornaments from Burial 4 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
Figure 112. Plan view and photograph of Burial 4 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute; NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 44).
maskettes both look like faces; one is more conventionalized than the other. Both are just over 2 cm in diameter. Based on their size, one way the maskettes could have been worn was to secure them over the flared openings of the earspools (John Clark, personal communication 2010). The long tubular bead was north the earspools (Fig. 112).

In Burials 1 and 3 (Offerings 7 and 5), the maskette was positioned above the earspools. Burial 1 also had a long tubular bead above the maskette. In Burial 4, the two maskettes appear to have been parts of the earspool assembly instead of being placed at the top of a headdress. In this placement of the two maskettes over the center holes of earspools would have replicated the carved faces on earspools depicted on Monument 44 found in the Stirling Acropolis (Clewlow and Corson 1968: 175-177, plate 11e) and the San Martín Pajapan Monument 1 (Figure 113) (Benson and de la Fuente 1996: 162-163; Blom and LaFarge 1926: 45-47).

21 Reilly (1999: 32) refers to the two maskette of Offering 6 as part of a headdress, but they were clearly parts of earspool assemblages.
About 30.5 cm south of the earspools were two strands of 88 small beads with a large bead at each end, similar to objects found in Burial 3. Fifteen of these beads were disk beads. The other small beads included 72 roundish and one jar-shaped beads. One of the large beads was circular with gadrooned sides and the other was squarish with rounded corners. Again, I think this configuration of beads may have represented trimming associated with a cape (see Burial 3 description).

**Ritual Event 12**

**Offerings 18 and 19**

Both Offerings 18 and 19 are pottery vessels located in the same shallow pit near the center of the Northwest Platform. The 1955 excavators assigned these two offering to Phase II, but, as discussed in Chapter 5, I think they should be ascribed to Phase III. The top of the pit appears to have been above the Phase II floor (Fig. 35).

Offering 18 is a flat-based dish or bowl of Coarse Brown ware with “nearly vertical walls and a slightly flaring simple direct rim” (Drucker et al. 1959: 190) (Figure 61c). Small areas of possible black or dark-brown paint remain on its surface. This dish is 19 cm in diameter and 8.3 cm tall.

Offering 19 lay approximately 13 cm above and 68.5 cm south of Offering 18. This second ceramic vessel is a “flat-based dish or shallow bowl with flaring sides and simple direct rim” of White-Rimmed Coarse Black ware (Drucker et al. 1959: 191). The rim diameter is 31.6 cm; it height is 6.5 cm (Figure 61d).

Although the two pots were given separate offering numbers, they were obviously related to the same event. Both were in the same pit and not far apart. At the bottom of the pit was a layer of charcoal; another lens of charcoal was found above the two vessels.

**PHASE IV**

Two complicated and momentous ritual activities took place during Phase IV times in Complex A (Ritual Events 13 and 14). Other activities included the creation of a large mosaic pavement (Ritual Event 15) and three smaller offerings (Figure 114). It is possible that Ritual Event 15 was connected to event 14.
Figure 114. Ritual Events 13-17 in Complex A.
The stratigraphy is insufficiently clear for a definite connection to be made between them. The two large events included burials.

**Ritual Event 13**

Ritual Event 13 left evidence as Massive Offering 2, Offerings 9, 11, 1942-C, and Burials 5, 6, 7, and 8 (Figure 115).

**Massive Offering 2**

Phase IV construction in Complex A seems to have been initiated by the creation of Massive Offering 2, a single layer, serpentine pavement placed in the bottom of a deep pit. As with the other massive offerings, there was more to the event than just placing serpentine blocks in a hole. Offerings 1942-C, 9, and 11 were placed in the fill above the pavement as the pit was backfilled (Fig. 114). A rough sandstone block was positioned in the fill near the pit’s exact vertical and horizontal midpoint. Monument 6, a sandstone sarcophagus (and Burial 6/Offering 1942-B inside), was set on the top of the pit fill. Burial 5 (Offering 1943-F) was deposited in an intrusive pit within the upper pit fill and 11 basalt columns were placed horizontally in an east-west row above it. The south half of Monument 7, the basalt tomb (and Burial 7/Offering 1942-A inside), rested above the serpentine pavement. Burial 8 (Offering 1942-D) was positioned between the horizontal columns overlying Burial 5 and Monument 7. Burial 8 was encased in the red clay used to cover these other burials and to enlarge Mound A-2. Burial 8 was also above the serpentine pavement (Fig. 114).

The pit for Massive Offering 2 cut through the Phase III surfacing on the southern half of Mound A-2. This pit measured 15 m north-south, 6 m east-west, and 4.95 m deep. It cut through all of the Mound A-2’s construction layers and into the grading fill. The walls of the pit were steep (between 74 to 80 degrees). At the bottom, a blood-red colored clayey sand, with a thin layer of reddish-brown clay, was laid down to prepare a bed for the serpentine pavement. During text excavations in 1967 (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: 7-11), the west end of the offering pit and its serpentine pavers were relocated. Two of the serpentine blocks exposed were lifted up and underneath and in immediate contact with them were found seven small, globular jade beads. The 1955 excavations did not find or notice any
Figure 115. Ritual Event 13 in Mound A-2 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker 1952: fig. 9 and Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 12 with adjustment of their vertical scale to match the horizontal scale).
artifacts beneath the blocks exposed in the north-south trench. The bright red bed was present on the west side of the pavement, but it thinned to a thickness of 6.3 cm (it was noted as 15 cm thick in the center).

A second discovery noted in 1967 (but unnoticed in 1955) was that the sides of the massive pit had been given a smooth, flat finish using a yellowish, fine-grained sandy-clay plaster (Heizer 1968: 14). The walls were then painted in horizontal bands. Only the top 1.67 meters of the 4.95-meter-deep offering pit were exposed in 1967, so information is only available for the upper third of the northern wall. The upper band was 40.6 cm high and painted purplish-red (Figure 116). The band below it was 38.1 cm high and lacked paint. Perhaps this stripe was painted with an organic pigment that disappeared or the yellow color of the clay plaster was the desired color. Below this non-painted strip was a 45.7 cm thick band of

Figure 116. Painted walls of Massive Offering 2 (NWAF drawing based on Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: fig. 8).
black (or deep brownish-black), and below this was a 45.7 cm band of purplish-red, the same color as the uppermost band. The extent of the painted walls is unknown, but there are indications that the west wall of the pit was also painted (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: 11, fig. 8). The color sequence from top to bottom was red, yellow (color of the clay walls), black, and red (Clark and Colman 2010). It would be interesting to see whether each wall had the same bands of colors, and in the same sequence.

The slight crowding of the serpentine blocks along the south and west margins of the offering pit suggests that the number of blocks used to make the pavement held some significance. Excavators in 1955 noticed that the pavement seemed to have been laid down from north to south. The south wall of the pit had to be extended slightly to accommodate the last row of blocks (Drucker et al. 1959: 128-129). Exploration of the pit in 1967 noted that the westernmost row was “tipped or lapped as though the pit as originally dug was slightly too small for the number of blocks which were intended for it” (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: 8).

Once the blocks were in place, a thick blanket of olive clay was placed over the pavement.22 Then the pit was filled-in and offerings were included at different depths. The last layer of fill put over the offering pit merged imperceptibly into the red clay blanket that covered the mound and the Ceremonial Court. All of the related offerings (9, 11, 1942-C, and Burials 5-8) and associated monuments (Monuments 6 and 7) positioned above the serpentine pavement are described in detail below.

**Offerings 9 and 11**

Offering 9 was found while cutting a shoveling platform back from the main trench on the site axis. “Since by itself it was so obviously off center, we put our centerline hypothesis to the test by measuring off a corresponding point on the opposite side of the trench and excavating down to the level of Offering 9. Offering 11 was found exactly where measurements predicted it should be. This, we decided, is the way archeology ought to turn out all the time” (Drucker et al. 1959: 177). Each offering was placed 1.4 m from the centerline. The excavators recognized the offerings as a pair and described them together (Drucker 22 In the 1959 report, this clay blanket is described as “dense olive and yellowish brown” (Drucker et al. 1959: 43). In the 1967 report, the clay is described as simply “olive” and it clearly states that the greenish clay was both on top of the blocks and beneath them (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968: 8). This would have created a green envelope similar to the mosaic in Massive Offering 1.
et al. 1959: 176-184), a break from their usual method of analytical decomposition. They called the two offerings obvious “duplicates” based on location, layout, and content. I suggest they were a complementary pair in the same way as the two mosaic masks. Offerings 9 and 11 are nearly identical, but not exactly so. Object pairing appears to have been a significant practice at La Venta, as seen in offerings, architecture, and stone sculpture.

Offerings 9 and 11 were both placed in small pits (about 13 cm deep) within the second major fill (brown sandy material) overlying Massive Offering 2. A polished hematite mirror was placed at the north end of each pit. Both concave mirrors were perforated along one edge. They are the largest mirrors found at La Venta and are considered “exceptional specimens” made with a “remarkable degree of precision” (Drucker et al. 1959: 181: pls. 43, 44). Directly south and centered on each mirror were three rows of axes (Figure 117). The first row had only one axe, and the following two rows had four in each. They were oriented north-south, with the bits pointed north. South of each group of the axes was an area of clay mixed with cinnabar. In each offering a large, rounded lump of purplish-red cinnabar was present in this clay. An incredible number of jade beads (over 2000) was present—985 complete and 12 fragmentary beads in Offering 9 and 1180 complete and 94 fragmentary beads in Offering 11. These beads appeared to have been scattered as if thrown into the area instead of having been strung together as necklaces. In Offering 9 some beads were scattered over and between the axes, but in Offering 11 the beads were all south of the axes. The layout of each offering encompassed approximately the same sized area, 1.2 m north-south by nearly one meter east-west. The axes, mirror, cinnabar, and beads of each offering were covered with a 2-5 cm thick layer of “olive and yellow” clay.23

There are likely many levels of meaning attached to these offerings. Combining the numbers of artifacts in the two may be significant. As mentioned above, there is evidence that specific numbers were important. Each offering had 9 axes and 1 mirror, for 20 items (Figure 118). The extremely high number of beads was likely meaningful, particularly since different quantities were placed in each offering. The numbers for each offering may have meant something specific—and their combined total may have also

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23 The clay seems to have been a different color than the one that covered the pavement below since the color yellow was used. I admit I dislike trying to use Munsell color charts in the field, but I often wish that one had been present and used in the early excavations at La Venta.
Figure 117. Offerings 9 and 11 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 47 and 48).
Figure 118. Axes and mirrors from Offering 9 (upper) and Offering 11 (lower) (Heizer's Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
been significant. Also, the colors used in the offerings may be telling (Clark and Colman 2010). There was purple/red to the south and a black/white mirror on the north. Cinnabar or red soils combined with objects of jade covered by yellow clay mimics the pattern seen in possible human burials. The mirrors were likely ornaments worn on the chest, as portrayed on Monument 23, Altar 5, the small stone figurine from Massive Offering 1, and the female figurine in the basalt tomb.

**Offering 1942-C**

Drucker found 37 polished jade axes arranged in a cruciform shape (Offering 1942-C) in the 1942 excavations at La Venta within a test trench south of a sandstone sarcophagus (Drucker 1952: 27, fig. 9; Stirling and Stirling 1942: 643). The axes were located in the third fill overlying the serpentine pavement and embedded in a 7 to 10 cm thick layer of compact olive-brown clay (Drucker 1952: 27; Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 12). The long axes of these objects ran north-south, with their bits to the north, except for two which were placed vertically, bit-end up (Figure 119). Workmen removed five axes while digging. Drucker (1952: fig. 10b) indicated their possible locations but he did not record his reasoning for their placement. The published drawing has the north arrow pointing the wrong direction since the bits of the horizontal axes supposedly pointed north (as typical for most axe offerings a La Venta). Three of the 37 axes were engraved (Figure 120). Drucker only marked the location of two of the engraved axes. These were in the third row from the south.

Two of the incised axes portray an obvious quincunx pattern with possible vegetation sprouting from a top cleft (Fig. 120b, c). The third incised axe (Fig. 120a) looks like a frontal view of the axe discovered in Offering 2 (Figure 109e). The headband shown on the 1942-C axe has a circle flanked by two axe-shapes on each side. Above the circle is a longer element with a horizontal bar across it. On the axe in Offering 2, there is a similar long element at the top of the head with a horizontal bar across it, and a headband has a circle in front with two rectangles on the band. The eyes drawn on the two axes also look similar. The long oval along what would be the nose on the axe in Offering 1942-C could represent the long shape

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24 Mesoamerican calendar numbers may have been implemented in some configuration. The combined total of whole beads is 2,165 and the total of whole and broken beads is 2,271.

25 The two axes are likely examples of the same image shown as profile and frontal variants (Coe 1989: 74) even though they are from different offerings in different construction phases.
Figure 119. Offering 1942-C in situ (Drucker’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).

Figure 120. Incised axes from Offering 1942-C (NWAF drawing: a. based on photograph; b-c. based on Drucker 1952: fig. 47).
attached to the nose on the axe in Offering 2. The nasal comparison is perhaps a bit of a stretch, but the top portions of the two axes look like the front and side views of the same headband or headdress. The 1942-C axe (Fig. 120a) also appears to have knuckle-dusters incised on it. These resemble the objects in the hands of the San Lorenzo Monument 10 figure (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 434; Cyphers 2004: fig. 22).

In the 1955 excavation report, some additional details of three of the decorated axes are described (Drucker et al. 1959: 213, 299, fig. 65). The obverse surfaces of two of the engraved axes have three facets (Figure 120b, c), and the engraved surface of one of the axes has three facets on the front (Figure 121) (Benson and de la Fuente 1996: 265). No other axes or celts discovered at La Venta have this attribute. The 1955 excavators suggested that these three specimens may have been of foreign origin. In the photograph of the offering (Fig. 119), one of the faceted axes is distinguishable (fourth row from the top).

Figure 121. Incised axes from Offering 1942-C showing facets (NWAF drawing: a. based on photograph in Benson and de la Fuente 1996: 265; b-c. based on Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 65) (not to scale).

26 In the 1959 report addendum, the investigators mentioned that they could not locate the third decorated axe in the Museo Nacional in January 1957 but note that Miguel Covarrubias (1957: fig. 34 center) shows it with concave faceting (Drucker et al. 1959: 299). Covarrubias’s drawing shows the faceting as on the same side as the engraving. Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico has a good photograph showing the facets and engraving (Benson and de la Fuente 1996: 265).
Burial 5—Offering 1943-F

Burial 5 (Offering 1943-F) is a collection of artifacts discovered beneath an east-west row of 11 horizontally placed basalt columns (each column oriented long axis north-south) between the sandstone sarcophagus and the basalt tomb (Fig. 114). Wedel referred to the offering as Tomb E, and he stated that although there was no evidence of bone, the impression that it was an actual burial was a strong one (Wedel 1952: 64). Drucker and Stirling noticed the 11 columns in 1942, but the deposits beneath them were not explored until Wedel joined Stirling in 1943 (Drucker 1952: 27; Wedel 1952: 63-64). The columns roofed an area approximately 3.5 m east-west by 2.5 m north-south. The middle columns appeared to have collapsed or settled. The columns were 2.2 m to 2.9 m long and had smaller diameters than the column used in the basalt tomb (Monument 7) (Drucker 1952: 27).

Once the columns were removed, the 1943 excavators started an exploratory pit 2.5 m square. About 75 cm below the columns, brilliant cinnabar constituted a large portion of the fill (Figure 122). This depth puts the offering in the sub-column pit fill lower than the original cut for Massive Offering 2 (Fig. 114). It is likely that an intrusive pit was excavated for Burial 5 after the sandstone sarcophagus was put in place. Wedel (1952: 63) described the dirt beneath the columns as a “mottled lumpy-looking clay of very compact character.” Drucker (1952: 27) recounted the 11 columns when they were discovered in 1942: “they were all laid more or less north-south, and varied in depth from the mound surface at that point form 0.68 m to 1.49 m, some being considerably titled. Those in the middle averaged deeper than the outer ones. The intervening spaces varied; some of the columns nearly touched and some were far apart.” Beneath and in the lower part of the cinnabar-rich clay, ornaments, mirrors, and jade axes were discovered.

Thirty-five axes were scattered across a rectangular area measuring 2.1 m east-west by 0.7 m north-south (Wedel 1952: pl. 13b). This is nearly the same-sized rectangle as represented by the interior of the adjacent sarcophagus. The sandstone coffer’s length was placed north-south along the site’s centerline, and Burial 5 (Offering 1943-F) was placed perpendicular to this line, oriented east-west and crossing the centerline directly north of the sarcophagus, with the head of the burial oriented to the east (Fig. 122).
Figure 122. Burial 5: top, Matthew Stirling excavating burial in 1943; bottom left, close-up of Burial 5 around earspools; bottom right, carved jade axe (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
One axe in the southwest corner of Burial 5 was carved and laid facedown (Wedel 1952: pl. 56, left). The carving is striking but simple. It is a carved votive axe with jaguar mien, flame eyebrows, and a cleft head. There is an oval carved just below the chin that suggests a pendant, possibly a mirror (Fig. 122).

Amid the greatest concentration of cinnabar and axes were two very large green jade ear spools which lay about 12 to 15 cm apart (Fig. 122). Near each ear spool were two pairs of pendants, “rectangular with markedly rounded-off corners of green jade and two slim, curved, rodlike pendants of dark blue jade” (Drucker 1952: 161; Stirling 1943a: pl. IVa). The elliptical, clamshell-shaped plaques of light green jade have slightly concave faces and a single perforation at one end (Figure 123). The dark blue pendants are slender and curved with slightly bulbous lower ends and single perforations at the top (Drucker 1952: pl. 57d). There appears to have been a strong pairing of blue with green.

27 Drucker (1952: 162) mistakenly identified these two pendants as being from the Stone Cist in his descriptions on pendants for earplugs.

28 The rodlike pendants are also mislabeled in Plate 57d (Drucker 1952). They are described as being from “Tomb D” which is the possible child burial in Mound A-3 instead of Offering 1943-G. Plate 57a is also mislabeled. The pendants pictured here are the pendants from Tomb D and not from the offering with four figurines. That offering did not have pendants. They are shown with the figurines in a National Geographic photograph, which likely caused the confusion (Stirling 1943a: pl. IV lower).
West of the earspools, in a curved discontinuous line, rested 35 large green jade beads. A little distance away 14 medium sized beads lay in a small circle with a tiny carved jade skull (6-7 mm) beneath them. These arrangements suggest a necklace and a bracelet. Some of the beads were fluted or gadrooned: and in one case Wedel and Stirling noted a pattern (1-3-1-3-1 sequence) of “three globular centrally perforated beads followed by a single bead with a right angle perforation” (Wedel 1952: 64). Partially encircled by the 35 beads was a mirror fragment with one perforation. Another fragment of the same mirror lay about 60 cm east of the earplugs. Between the necklace and the earplugs lay a circular jade disk and a tubular jade bead. Other scattered items were 11 long tubular beads.

Burial 6—Offering 1942-B

Burial 6 (Offering 1942-B) is the contents of Monument 6, the sandstone sarcophagus. It is rather odd to separate the two, content and box, but that was the system. Stirling and Drucker discovered the sarcophagus in 1942 (Figure 124). Stirling considered its contents to have been the remnants of a burial. Ornaments were found in “proper position” on the floor of the box (Stirling and Stirling 1942: 638). These consisted of two paper-thin, mottled-green jade earspools; two jaguar claws (Stirling) or jaguar teeth (Drucker) pendants (one with each earspool); one jade perforator (Stirling) or punch/awl (Drucker); and one complete serpentine figurine (Drucker 1952: 27, 162; Stirling and Stirling 1942: 638-639). Later, in 1975, Drucker reported that a string of beads was also among the objects: “Contained within the fill was a pair of jade earspool assemblies, spaced about the width of a human head apart, transverse to the long axis of the coffer, and below them a string of beads, end to end, in a slight curve, regularly positioned as though still strung together (no cordage remained, of course).” There was no mention of the beads in his 1942 notes.

The perforator is of pale blue jade, 20 cm long, spatulate at one end and pointed on the other (Figure 125) (Drucker 1952: 169, pl. 53a). Each “jaguar” pendant is deeply hollowed on the inside making it translucent (Drucker 1952: 162, pl. 57b). The colors of the earspools differ; one is light white/green and

29 Stirling (23 March, 1943) writes, “With the burial were a very large pair of green jade earplugs, 2 emerald green gem jade jaguar fangs, 2 jade concave spoon-shaped pendants 3” long, 1 jade skull, 1 circular jade gorget, 11 long tubular beads, 39 large green jade beads, a bracelet with 14 medium sized ditto, 1 large oval hematite mirror. Scattered throughout the burial were 35 jade axes. 108 specimens in all.”
Figure 124. Burial 6, the sandstone sarcophagus (Stirling and Stirling 1942: 641).

Figure 125. Objects found in Burials 6, 7, and 8 (Stirling and Stirling 1942: plate I, upper).
the other is a darker green (Drucker 1952: 161, pl. 56 f, g). Each has four evenly spaced, small perforations in the flare. The figurine is of pale green serpentine (Drucker 1952: 157, pl. 49). The head of the buried individual had been placed on the south end of the box—based on the earspool and pendant placement. The figurine was found at approximately the hip area. Next to the figurine was the perforator. The box was filled with sandy dirt towards the top and then light red clay (Drucker’s Field Notes, 1942). Drucker (1952: 27) thought this fill was intentional and not an effect of erosion. The cavity of the box was 2.4 m long by 68.5 cm wide and 58.4 cm deep. The sides and bottom of the interior were smoothed, and the corners were very nearly square. The box had a slab lid with a carved, rectangular depression on its upper surface (Figure 126). The sarcophagus’s exterior was carved. Drucker noted that the stone was apparently once very elaborate but now badly eroded. A “face” was carved on the north end of the box and on the

Figure 126. Burial 6, the sandstone cover above the sarcophagus (Stirling and Stirling 1942: 640).

30 Covarrubias (1944: 30) imagined the bloodletter and the figurine on the thighs “probably held originally in the corpse’s hands.”
east side were remnants of carvings suggesting a body (see Chapter 7) (Drucker’s Field Notes, 1942). The head of the human burial was located near the tail of this creature. Early interpretations thought the image represented a “crouching tigre” or jaguar. Later interpretations suggested it represented a crocodile-like creature, with vegetation growing out of its back (Covarrubias 1957: 70, fig. 30; Drucker 1952: pl. 2; Grove 1992: 160, fig. 10; Reilly 1990: fig. 8, 1994: 128, fig. 4, 1999: 33, fig. 1.11). The sarcophagus floated on the fill over the center of the green pavement below and appears to have been part of the same event.³¹

**Burial 7—Offering 1942-A**

Burial 7 (Offering 1942-A) is the contents of the basalt tomb, Monument 7 (Figure 127). Stirling took “personal charge” of excavating within the basalt tomb during his brief visit in 1942. Drucker states that as an onlooker he cannot recall any significant details of the arrangement of the artifacts inside except that the human bone remains were definitely within the cinnabar and in association with the jade artifacts

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³¹ Reilly (1999: 33) also suggested that the sarcophagus, Massive Offering 2, and the other offerings in the overlying fill were part of the “same construction episode.” He thought the offerings were associated with the burial of “a paramount rule of La Venta” within the sandstone box. The ritual event, in his eyes, was to associate the buried ruler with the act of cosmic creation and “thus with world renewal and agricultural regeneration.” Massive Offering 2 was considered by Reilly (1999:34) to have represented the primordial ocean and the sarcophagus with the dead ruler inside represented the terrestrial Olmec dragon or the floating earth on top.
(Drucker and Heizer 1965). With Drucker’s admission in mind, Stirling’s description of the offering should be privileged as more accurate, even though some of Stirling’s claims are difficult to substantiate. Here I detail the two excavators’ descriptions and point out some differences (Drucker 1952: 23–26; Stirling and Stirling 1942: 640–643).

Stirling claimed that three burials (Burials 7a, 7b, 7c) were placed on a clay platform about 30 cm high at the rear 2.4 m of the basalt tomb. The platform was covered with large, flat pieces of limestone coated with a thin layer of blue clay (Figure 128). Over the blue was an irregular, 15 cm thick layer of brilliant cinnabar in which lay “the traces of the bones of three persons placed with heads to the south” (Stirling and Stirling 1942: 640). He found an oval mirror at the edge of the platform but did not assign it to any of the burials represented.

![Figure 128. Burial 7, looking south into the basalt tomb. Note Burial 6 in background (Stirling and Stirling 1942: 636).](image-url)
With one of the bone fragment clusters were found two jade figurines: one seated and one standing (Fig. 125). The seated figure, made from a vivid green jade, depicts a male with his hands on his knees. The standing figure is also male and of translucent blue jade.

About 60 cm beyond the two figurines Stirling found a realistic looking jade clamshell pendant about 25 cm long and heavily polished (Fig. 125) (Drucker 1952: pl. 53, left). Inside the pendant was a small oval mirror. Lying under the pendant was a seated female figure of very light jade covered with cinnabar. She has a circular mirror attached to her chest. It is a beautiful figurine (Figure 129), the Mona Lisa of La Venta. Unlike the seated male figurine, her hands are on her chest under the mirror.

About 45 cm from these two items the excavators found a jade frog, a green jade leaf, a jade flower, and two rectangular ear ornaments of dark-green jade engraved with “eagle-head” designs (Fig. 125) (Stirling and Stirling 1942). The eagle faces are mirror images, one looks left and the other right (Figure 130). Also present were long jade beads carved like jointed sections of bamboo. With these items were a pair of clay ear spools painted blue, as if in imitation of jade, accompanied by two pieces of green jade carved as a pair of human hands (Figure 131). Also in the same area were two oval-shaped pieces of obsidian and two similarly shaped pairs of green jade, probably eyes set in wooden masks or figures.

Near the southwest corner of the clay platform within the tomb was a necklace or headdress rolled into a bundle. It consisted of six stingray spines (each about 15 cm long) inlaid with several rectangular pieces of glittering crystalline hematite (Stirling 1961: 54) and one stingray spine replica made from
translucent bluish-green jade (Fig. 131) (Drucker 1952: 162, pl. 53, right). Drucker (1975: 103) reported that “minute designs were engraved” on the stingray spines. Each spine was perforated at the base. Near the stingray tails was a blue jade awl or bloodletter with a broken tip (Fig. 131). Beside it was a small pot placed against a burned human skullcap.

In the southeast corner was another standing human figurine of blue jade resting on an unusually large shark tooth. Beads were scattered around. The milk teeth of a child were also in this southeast area.

Stirling also mentioned that the layers of cinnabar had copious un-restorable traces of organic material, and the red cinnabar lay in a fashion which gave the impression that it had been inside of wrapped bundles. He also noted finding a grass-green jade pendant that looked like a jaguar tooth in the front area of the tomb. In Stirling’s narrative I get the sense the artifacts were exposed in a rush of excitement.

32 Stirling in 1942 called the jade stingray tail green, but in 1961 described it as blue. I put Drucker’s description here since he used both colors.

33 The stingray spines appear to have been ornaments, but they could also have been used in ceremonial bloodletting or auto-sacrifice. “Stingray spines, known from La Venta in both in their original form and replicated in jade, were one of the instruments used, but jade punch-like perforators are also known from La Venta…. The ritual offering of blood extracted from the penis, tongue, and ears was an important feature of all later Mesoamerican religions, and must here [La Venta] have its origin” (Coe 1989: 79).

34 Coe (1989) comments that shark teeth may also have been used for bloodletting.
In contrast, Drucker’s (1952: 23-26) description is decidedly staid. He described the limestone paving stones as on the floor instead of up on a platform, and characterized the clay covering them as “heavy olive-brown clay or swamp muck.” In his 1942 field notes, Drucker recorded the “blue-gray swamp” colored soil as 5-15 cm thick and that the color was markedly different from the red-yellow clay fill. He claimed there were only two bundles heavily coated with red cinnabar powder. He described the bone remnants as being long bones that gave the impression of belonging to juveniles, as did the teeth. Drucker placed the teeth in Bundle 2 with the seated female figurine, a standing figurine, the two jade hands, the awl, a scalloped disk (Stirling’s “flower”), the jade frog, the jade stingray spine and other stingray spines, a jade heart-shape (Stirling’s leaf), 4 tubular jade beads, and the shark tooth.

In Bundle 1 Drucker included the male seated figurine, a standing figurine, the clamshell pendant, the engraved rectangles of jade, three small D-shaped jade objects, two obsidian disks (eyes?), a mirror with three perforations, 5 cylindrical jade beads, and a rectangular block of serpentine 23.5 cm by 18.1 cm by 7.9 cm thick, squared and polished on the sides and one face.

Drucker’s description of the tomb contents is cleaner than Stirling’s, and Drucker showed two marked out areas on his plan map of the tomb floor for the two bundles (see Chapter 7, Drucker 1952: fig. 10a). This illustration does not match up with Stirling’s narrative of the discovery. Stirling described that the stingray array as in the southwest corner of the tomb. Also, Stirling clearly indicated that the female figurine was found below the long clamshell pendant, but Drucker’s description placed them in separate bundles. Drucker added a serpentine block to the list of items but left out the “jaguar tooth” pendant, the small pot, the human skullcap, and the jade “eyes” (unless these are his three “D-shaped” objects).

There is no way to reconcile these details of these rival descriptions of the tomb. However, for the most part, the objects present are the same. It is not clear why Stirling claimed there were three individuals or how he knew their heads were to the south. In the same vein, it is equally unclear why

35 In his 1942 field notes, Drucker called the soil blue-gray swamp clay. It is my impression that Drucker liked to play down colors, perhaps in reaction to Stirling’s overt use of color. Olive is attached to almost all of his published color descriptions. It is hard to see how one man could see blue and the other olive-brown. I think it is common to take Drucker’s word since he is often considered the more “scientific,” but downplaying is the flipside of going over-the-top, only in a different direction. Both exaggerations misrepresent reality.
Drucker thought there were only two individuals or why he considered them as secondary burials. Further, I cannot reconcile how one archaeologist saw a platform at one end of the tomb and the other did not.

Whether on a platform or on the floor, the limestone flagstones and burial goods were positioned over refilled pit of Massive Offering 2. The 1955 excavators identified a vague circle for the offering location within the basalt tomb (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 12). This is not a correct rendition, even in its vagueness, because the earlier descriptions point out that Offering 1942-A was at the back of the tomb in the southeast and southwest corners of the tomb. Placing the burials above the serpentine pavement appears to have been intentional.

**Burial 8—Offering 1942-D**

Burial 8 (Offering 1942-D) was represented by a scatter of artifacts located in the fill of Mound A-2, between the 11 basalt columns and the basalt tomb (Figure 114). Two jade earspools, one serpentine figurine fragment, and about 34 jade beads were found while digging to clear the basalt tomb (Fig. 125). A metate fragment and a mano appear to have been in the same area (Drucker’s Field Notes, 1942). Drucker (1952: 27) claimed that there was no indication that the artifacts had been purposely placed. This seems an odd claim to make since later he and his 1955 associates repeatedly expressed how the clay architecture at La Venta was free from midden or other random artifacts. The location of the artifacts in between the other burials points to intentionality about the deposit, more than just mound fill. The headless figurine and lower quality beads and earspools found (Drucker 1952: 157, 161, 166-168) could point to a burial of a sacrificial victim. It is also possible that a previous burial was exhumed during the digging of the massive offering pit and that the objects from it were kept together and later mixed in with the fill packed around Burials 5 and 7 (Offerings 1943-F and 1942-A).

**Ritual Event 14**

Ritual Event 14 demarked a large group of offerings and burials placed in Mound A-3 during its modification in Phase IV (Fig. 114). The largest offering in the mound was the stone cist tomb. It appears to have been the primary offering, with the others connected to it. All of the burials and offerings in
Mound A-3 were placed in the mound fill rather than in individual pits; thus, they were part of one event. These consist of Burials 9 and 10, Monument 14, and Offerings 1943-H, I, J, K, L, and M.

**Burial 9—Offering 1943-G/ Tomb C**

Burial 9 (Offering 1943-G/Tomb C) is a likely burial encased in the Stone Cist (Figure 132). There is a sense of grandeur to this interment, but the ornaments included had a surprisingly similar layout to those in earlier burials in the Northeast Platform. The head of Burial 9 would have pointed to the east.

**Cist**

The cist was walled, floored, and roofed with shaped sandstone slabs and was the principal feature in Mound A-3 (Figs. 31, 132) (Wedel 1952: 67, pl. 14). Unlike the sandstone sarcophagus or basalt tomb, the cist was not given a monument number. The sandstone was completely surrounded, underlain, and covered by the red clay used to construct the mound (Chapter 5 details the fill activity around the cist). The cist measured 5.2 m east-west and 1.8 m north-south (Figure 133) (Wedel 1952: 68). Large slabs marked the east and west ends, one large and five small slabs were on the north side, and one large and two small slabs on the south side. The floor was constructed of nine dressed sandstone slabs varying considerably in size and shape. The edges and corners of the floor pavers were “painstakingly shaped and
carefully fitted to one another so as to form a comparatively smooth even floor” (Wedel 1952: 68). The largest slabs were used in the discontinuous walls. If wood or other material had filled these wall gaps, no evidence remained. The cist had been covered with 5 large slabs. Only one was intact upon discovery in 1943. Three had broken in the middle and the fragments sagged downward deeply in the cist fill, suggesting that the tomb had not been entirely filled with clay when it was roofed over. The broken ends of the roof slabs rested on 30 cm of interior fill. The depth of the cist from the upper end of the vertical wall slabs to the floor was uniformly about 1.2 m.

Cinnabar was abundant in the central part of the floor of the tomb, about 20 cm thick, forming in places “an almost pure bed of pigment of a thick, puttylike consistency” (Wedel 1952: 70). The bed was elliptical-shaped, approximately 2.25 m east-west by 1.05 m north-south. Outside the cinnabar zone red-clay fill covered the rest of the tomb floor.

**Ornaments and other objects**

Within the cinnabar ellipse, ornaments were found in the natural position expected for jewelry on a human body. On the east end (slightly more than one meter from the sandstone slab edge) almost exactly on the cist’s east-west midline, was a well-polished jade tubular bead 7.5 cm long. Two incised jade
earspools lying about 15 cm apart were found some 18 cm west of the tubular bead (Wedel 1952: fig. 46b and pl. 52). Their decorated surfaces were face up. Drucker (1952: 160) described the incised images as being conventionalized human profiles curved around to fit the spool shape. Stirling (letter: 21 February, 1943) called each an “Olmec” face in profile with additional decorations in the form of eagle heads. The heads are mirror images, one faces left and the other right (Figure 134).

With each earspool was a jade pendant carved to resemble an animal jaw (Figures 135 and 136) (Drucker 1952: pl. 57c). These pendants have three small perforations, one at each end and one about the midpoint (Drucker 1952: fig. 46). They were also found with their incised lines facing up. The two pieces are of different colored jade; the darker shaded pendant was broken off at one of the perforation and the edges of break were ground smooth. Wedel ended his description of the earspool assembly with the one pendant.

Drucker (1952: 160) related that with the “pendants carved to represent deer jaws” was found a pair of tubular beads as though part of an earspool assembly. Later in the text, he (Drucker 1952: 168) described

36 Drucker (1952: 162) claimed that they represented halves of a deer mandible. Four molars are indicated on each with incised lines.

37 Drucker (1952: 162) stated that two additional pairs of pendants “were found with the earplugs engraved with the stylized profiles.” That would place them in the Stone Cist but they are obviously from Offering 1943-F, as seen in the National Geographic photograph (Stirling 1943a: pl. IV lower).
two cylindrical beads as coming from the cist tomb. He did not specify from what area of the tomb the beads were recovered. These could be the tubular beads he mentioned earlier. No other beads that match the tubular shape are described. The cylindrical beads are a matched pair carved into realistic “heads of what appear to be crested ducks” (Drucker 1952: 168). The two are likely the beads Wedel described as being 2 cm or so long and “carved into faithful representations of duck heads” (Wedel 1952: 70).

Scattered through the thick cinnabar surrounding the earspool assemblies were over 100 tiny beads, spangles, and other objects made of jade and rock crystal (Drucker 1952: pl. 58). Many were less than 1 cm long, but all were polished and perforated with two or more holes. The spangles are extremely varied.
in shape; a few with bulges at one end suggest stylized duck heads in form (Drucker 1952: 170-171). The two most common forms were these stylized duck heads—slim, rod-like forms with a round bulge at one end—and an ellipse with a tab, usually rounded, on one side. The ellipse-shaped spangles are identical to the five spoon-shaped spangles discovered in Burial 2 (Offering 3). The edges and one face are highly polished. The small rod-like types are polished all over. Many of the spangles were made of clear transparent green jade. Wedel and Stirling did not notice a pattern to the spangles. Wedel told Drucker they were found during a rainy period and could not be cleanly exposed in the sticky clay in which they lay (Drucker 1952: 171). Stirling provided a few details in one of his letters:

Apparently a large headdress had been worn, covered with pieces of miniature jade and crystal ornaments in dozens of different shapes—duck heads, bird heads, ...spoons, pendants, etc. All were perforated with holes about as fine as a hair and all well-shaped and polished. There were about 130 of these in all. In addition to these in the same area were 19 slender tubular jade beads, ..as a central hair ornament a large green jade tube, probably to hold plumes. Also scattered in the headdress area were some 65 small and medium sized jade beads. (Stirling letter: 21 February, 1943)

The spangles sound as if they were confined to adorning a headdress. This is similar to Burial 3 (Fig. 101) wherein the spangles were scattered only between the earspools.

Approximately 50 cm west of the earspools, also on the midline of the cist tomb, was a small serpentine figurine (Figures 136 and 137) (Drucker 1952: pl. 52). It stands 11.5 cm tall and has obsidian insets in the eye sockets (Wedel 1952: 70). Drucker (1952: 159) compared its general shape and carving to the standing figurines discovered in the basalt tomb. More details and a better illustration are given in the 1955 excavation report (Drucker et al. 1959: 212, fig. 64). There are engraved ellipses on each cheek and both upper thighs, engraved armbands on the upper arms, an engraved circle at a point just above the navel, and an engraved
teardrop-shaped element on the upper chest, possibly representing a pendant or mirror (Fig. 137). There is also a shallow drilled pit just under each shoulder on each side.

Another 15 cm west of the figurine was a likely bloodletter or “jade punch” with a broken tip (translucent blue jade), similar to the ones found in the sarcophagus and basalt tombs (Fig. 136). The bloodletter was in the center of a 90 cm irregular line of 64 globular beads (Fig. 133). Stirling (1943a: 325) referred to these as a double strand of pumpkin-shaped jade beads. Four to eight grooves were cut vertically in the sides of circular beads in opposite pairs to create the gadrooned shape. Drucker (1952: 166) provided some details, “Thirty-eight beads have four groves (and lobes), six have six, and two have eight grooves. There is in addition one bead in which the reverse effect has been given, by cutting five (?) wide ellipses to uniform depth, leaving the same number of slender raised bans running form pole to pole.” Nine of this type of gadrooned beads were found in Burial 2.

At each end of the line of beads were small, flattened elliptical objects that Stirling (1943a: 325) considered jade turtle carapaces. They are flat on one side, with a very low ridge down the long axis on the other. One has a perforation in the center of one end. The other is perforated with an oblique hole on the underside (Drucker 1952: 163). A small circular pendant from the vicinity of the turtles has two holes near the margin and a larger hole at the center.

Between the bloodletter and southern turtle was a 12.5 cm long obsidian core with an incised outline of a “crested eagle with outspread wings” (Wedel 1952: 71, fig. 22, 48). Drucker (1952: 169-170) was impressed with the forcefulness and precision of the design incised on such an irregular shape. The bird’s eye is rectangular with a cross inside (Figure 138). Stirling (letter: 21 February, 1943) described the core as being “of the iridescent variety with the figure of an eagle with outstretched wings so done as to cover the entire surface of the core.”

Figure 138. Incised obsidian core from Burial 9 (NWAF drawing of Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 48)
Also in the cist were five circular beads with double perforations whose axes were approximately at right angles to each other. They were found in a small strand alternated with nine gadrooned beads that suggested a bracelet or anklet (Drucker 1952: 163). Stirling mentioned a few other objects that did not make it into any publication: “Among other incidental objects embedded in the red paint were a diamond shaped mirror of crystalline hematite and a slab of some heavy metallic ore with a silver lustre, and a single knife blade of obsidian” (letter: 21 February, 1943).

The ornaments in the Stone Cist were positioned similar to those in Burials 1, 3 and 4 (Offerings 3, 5 and 6) in the Northeast Platform. A long tubular bead was found where the top of the head would have been in Burials 1 and 4 (Figure 139). A chain of beads attached on either end to a larger bead was present in Burials 3 and 4. Burial 1 had a maskette of a carved face around the forehead area, and Burial 3 had a maskette likely positioned on the back of the head, but Burial 4 had two maskettes that appear to be have been part of the earpool assemblies. The carved faces on the earpools in Burial 9 (Offering 1943-G) could represent a similar meaning. Instead of a maskette of a face, the significant faces were inscribed directly onto the earpools (Fig. 139). The distance between the earpools and the string of beads is much closer in Burials 3 and 4 than in Burial 9. The string of beads in Burials 3 and 4 would have ran across an upper chest. I suggested that the line of beads represented a cape embellishment. The string of beads in Burial 9 would have corresponded with the waist area. The 1943 excavators referred to these beads as a girdle that may have represented a belt or sash. The ornaments in Burial 9 are also similar to jewelry in Burial 2 (Offering 3): the numerous spangles, the gadrooned beads, the figurines, the water-bird motif, and the turtle representations. Burials 2 and 3 are the other likely burials with spangles, and these were oriented east-west. The head was pointed west in Burial 3. Burial 5 (Offering 1943-F), Burial 10 (Offering 1943-L), and Burial 9 were also oriented east-west, with the heads to the east. Burial 5 lacked spangles, but it did have 35 jade axes, comparable to the 37 axes in Burial 9.

**Axes and Pots**

Bordering the cinnabar bed along the inside edges of the cist were 37 axes (Fig. 133). Nine were of serpentine and 28 were of light gray jade. The axes were not located within the cinnabar bed, although
Figure 139. Changing loci of “faces” in burials (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute, and NWAF drawing).
two on the north and one on the south touched the pigmented area (Wedel 1952: 70). In contrast, the axes in Burial 5 were found within the cinnabar zone.

Also on the outside edges of the cist were three ceramic vessels. On the east, 30 cm from the end slab, were two poorly preserved ceramic vessels about 50 cm apart. The northern one was a bottle 10 cm in diameter. The other vessel was a bowl about 20 cm in diameter with a raised annular base and a rim “curiously reminiscent of a lip form of the abalone shell” (Wedel 1952: 70, pl. 19f). Near the west end of the cist around the midline of the cist were the remains of an effigy bowl, very soft and badly broken. A face was modeled on one side in bold relief. Wedel (1952: 70) described it as “the face of a jaguar with wide-open mouth and exaggerated canine teeth” (Figure 140) (Drucker 1952: fig. 29, pl. 18b). Drucker defined it as Coarse Buff ware (Drucker 1952: 89).

**Stone Cylinder—Monument 14**

Seven meters south of the cist tomb and approximately on a level with its apex was Monument 14—a well-made stone cylinder standing upright with a hole through its long axis and plugged at its lower end by a stone disk 5 cm thick. It was placed directly on the north-south axis of Complex A. The other small offerings within Mound A-3 are described in reference to the cist tomb and Monument 14.

**Offering 1943-H**

Two serpentine axes were found 3 m north of the stone cylinder. They were taken out by workmen before their exact position was noted, but an imprint from one axe showed that it had been set on end with the bit upward (Wedel 1952: 71). Both were very close to the axis line for Complex A.
Offering 1943-I

Near the serpentine axes, and on the same level, the 1943 investigators found fragments of a large, curiously shaped sandstone vessel. They inferred dimensions for the diameter and central opening, and the shape seemed to match the size of the ends of the cylinder. They argued for a direct association between the two objects (Wedel 1952: 71-72).

Offering 1943-J

Also between the cist and the cylinder the 1943 excavators found several small rectangular pieces of jade, each measuring about 6 by 19 mm. One surface was flat and well polished on each piece, and the opposite face was rough, uneven, and had remnants of black adhesive. In one instance, three or four of these jade pieces were stuck together, edge to edge, with their polished surfaces in one flat plane. Wedel (1952: 72) argued that the bits were tesserae that had once formed a jade mosaic. They may also have been a jade mosaic mirror (John Clark, personal communication 2010).

Offering 1943-K

A pear-shaped pendant of dark amber was uncovered nearby without any direct associations. It was unperforated and measured 4.5 cm in length and 1.5 cm in maximum diameter.

Burial 10—Offering 1943-L/Tomb D

Six meters south of the cylinder and 13.2 m south of the cist was Burial 10 (Offering 1943-L/Tomb D), a likely child burial. The ornaments of the offering were found in a well-defined area marked by cinnabar, 30 by 50 cm and some 22 to 25 cm thick (Figure 141) (Wedel 1952: 72-73). The long axis of this feature was oriented east-west, and the head of the burial to the east. Surrounding the rectangular area of cinnabar and ornaments was a 10 cm wide zone of soil streaked with more cinnabar. Two undecorated jade earspools lay at the bottom of the cinnabar deposit, 12.5 cm from the east end and 15 cm apart (Wedel 1952: pl. 15b). Each ear ornament is 3.7 cm in diameter. One of them had been repaired (Stirling: 23 March, 1943 letter). Beside each were a jade pendant and a cylindrical jade bead (3.2 cm long) (Drucker 1952: pl. 57a, Stirling 1943a: pl. IVb). There was a small concave disk with 13 sharp-

38 Stirling (23 March, 1943 letter) described the pendants as a pair of jade jaguar fangs.
Figure 141. Plan map and photograph of Burial 10 (NWAF drawing based on Wedel 1952: fig. 23 and Drucker 1952: pl. 15b).

Figure 142. Burial 10 ornaments and Offering 1943-M figurines (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
pointed scallops, a central opening, and two small perforations (Figure 142) (Drucker 1952: 164, pl. 54e). Near the west end of the bed was a small, curved triangular piece of worked jade. An unsalvageable clay pot less than 8 cm high was found in the southeast corner of the rectangular area, outside the main bed of cinnabar. Wedel referred to this offering as Tomb D.

**Offering 1943-M**

Another meter south of Burial 10, and at the same level, were four small serpentine figurines (Fig. 142) (Stirling 1943a: pl. IV upper). Wedel (1952: 73) was unable to describe their position in situ.\(^\text{39}\) They were oriented along the centerline. Drucker (1952: 157-159) provided a description of each figurine: two are standing, one is a baby or dwarf-like, and one is crouched in a very different position. One of the standing figurines had four engraved “subtriangular” elements on its chest (Figure 143) (Drucker et al. 1959: 213). The two standing figures and the dwarf are all in a similar stance: knees slightly bent, lower arms outstretched (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 50). One of the standing figurines had obsidian inset eyes, and the dwarf-like one had iron pyrite eye insets.\(^\text{40}\) The fourth figure’s head is upturned and his arms are folded across the chest with knees strongly flexed—“so made so he can stand upright on his feet looking upward or can rest on his knees, toes and elbow looking straight ahead” (Stirling: 23 March, 1943 letter). It is about 11 cm high and its eyes are inlaid with pyrite or “fool’s gold” also. Drucker called it a dancer.

**Ritual Event 15**

**Pavement No. 2**

Just south of Mound A-3 was a mosaic serpentine pavement, Pavement No. 2 (Figure 144). It was similar to the masks in Massive Offerings 1 and 4 (Pavement No. 1) under the Southeast and Southwest Platforms. Sometimes Pavement No. 2 is referred to as Massive Offering 5, but since “a large deep” pit

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39 In a letter dated 23 March, 1943 from La Venta, Stirling considered the figurines as part of the burial.
40 “… until the moment of their discovery their presence was totally unexpected. Unfortunately, these were turned up by the workmen while I was temporarily engaged in another part of the diggings, and during a period when no other professional member of the expedition was on the scene” (Wedel 1952: 73).
41 Stirling (23 March 1943 letter) described the inset eyes on three of the figurines as crystalline hematite.
Figure 144. Drawing and photograph of Pavement No. 2 (NWAF drawing based on Wedel 1952: pl. 16 and fig. 24; photograph from Wedel 1952: pl. 16).
and a “very great quantity of stone” are part of the published definition of a massive offering (Drucker et al. 1959: 128), I prefer the designation of “pavement” to that of “massive offering” for this feature. The temporal placement of Pavement No. 2 is questionable. Most often it is considered a Phase IV offering. It is also unclear whether the pavement was left exposed or buried. If it was a Phase IV construction, I think it was closely associated with the cist tomb and subsequent enlargement of Mound A-3.

The pavement was found only 1.8 m below the drift sands in 1943. Wedel’s (1952: 74) description of its location is rather vague. He placed the pavement less than a meter beyond the edge of the “prepared colored base sands” and approximately 50 cm below their level (Fig. 31). This is the level that the 1955 excavators equate with Phase I construction. Whether this means the pavement was connected to the Phase I construction is unclear. Wedel’s description sounds like the pavement was lower than the Phase I construction but only covered with sand. Some of the reasoning behind its Phase IV placement was the shallowness of its placement (Drucker et al. 1959: 118) and the “sloppy job” of laying it out compared to the other masks (Stirling’s letter to Heizer, July 29, 1965).

Wedel (1952: 74) also noted that the pavement was somewhat cruder and simpler than the others and pointed out how it deviated from the other two mosaics. Pavement No. 2 was missing many stones on its west edge (Wedel 1952: fig. 24, pl. 16). It was 4.8 m long and 4.35 m wide, with its long axis paralleling and coinciding with the centerline (Fig. 144). There were 399 rectangular dressed serpentine blocks still in place. Wedel calculated that between 75 and 90 blocks were missing. Its northern part was laid on a bed of clay and the southern part on sand. The north stones were also more worn and smoothed in appearance than the southern stones.

Pavement No. 2 did not have an open central portion. The lower appendages present on the other two masks are missing on this one. It did have a notch on the top, very square. The other open areas are present (the recumbent E and the four quarters) but they were not as neatly and cleanly defined as on the other masks.
Ritual Event 16

Offering 1943-N

Offering 1943-N was found six meters south of Pavement No. 2. It is a group of worked serpentine objects: axes, flattish blocks, and cobbles (Wedel 1952: 75-76). There were 253 serpentine pieces in an area 1.5 m east-west, bisecting the centerline of Complex A. In the southern portion of the group the pieces lay flat and close together. In the north they were set in a slanting position, with each row of serpentine blocks lapped over the next (Figure 145). Beneath three of the largest axes in the north was a hematite mirror (Drucker et al. 1959: pl. 46a). There were no other artifacts present or evidence of a prepared bed.

Ritual Event 17

Offering 1943-O

Offering 1943-O, a group of 4 or 5 ceramic vessels, was discovered at the end of the work day approximately 27 m south of Offering 1943-N. Because it was quitting time, the closely grouped pottery
was covered with leaves and sand for further study and removal the following day; however, the cache was pulled out of place and badly broken up before the vessels could be examined the next morning. They were located at the foot of the pyramid (Mound C-1), 2 m below the surface.

Ritual Event 18

Offering 1943-B

In 1943, Wedel (1952: 39) uncovered “a dozen or so” serpentine pseudoaxes scattered at various depths and laying at all angles approximately 4 m south of Monument 13 in the Ceremonial Court (Figure 114). The pseudoaxes were between 1.5 and 2.5 m below ground. Wedel did not think the deposit was an orderly cache.

Complex D

Ritual Event 19

Offering 1940-A

So far, only one offering has been located outside of Complex A. Stirling discovered it while digging in front of Altar 4 in 1940 (Figure 146) (Stirling 1940: 325). While clearing the area he encountered a clay floor of mixed burned material. The altar rested on this floor on top of a foundation of white limestone nodules. At this floor level, about 1.5 m in front of the altar’s niche, 99 large jade beads (18 cylindrical and 81 round) and one amethyst bead were uncovered. These beads appeared to be a necklace and two bracelets (Stirling 1943b: 55).42 No temporal placement has been ascribed to these items, but if the offering was connected to the white limestone, it was probably deposited in Phase IV times.

42 To see pictures of some of these beads you can visit the Smithsonian Olmec Legacy website: http://anthropology.si.edu/olmec/cfm/artifacts/olmec_Result.cfm
SUMMARY OF BURIALS & OFFERINGS

One of the critical aspects to remember about La Venta's burials and offerings is that they represented about 18 ritual events within Complex A and one in Complex D. These events were often elaborate and must have taken a great deal and resources to prepare for—not just the massive offerings of pavements and buried stone, but also the numerous smaller offering placed in the fills above them.

Based on this evidence, there was a definite shift to the placement of offerings and burials along the site’s centerline in Phase IV (Fig. 114). However, it is possible that the pits for Massive Offerings 2 and 3 removed earlier offerings. Ritual Events favored different locations in each phase. In Phase I, activity was restricted to the Northeast Platform (Fig. 53). In Phase II the activity centered on the south end of the Ceremonial Complex (Fig. 62). In Phase III, offertory activities favored an east-west axis (Fig. 82). Only the Northeast Platform received attention in two different phases (I and III).

All the identifiable burials known so far were associated with the creation of or enlargement of platforms. There also appears to have been a connection between east-west oriented burials (Table 8). In three of them, Burials 2, 3, and 9, there was a water-bird motif and spangles. Two of the east-west burials in Phase IV (Burials 5 and 9) had over 30 axes; both also had “jaguar” objects—a carved axe and an effigy pot. Burials 3 and 4 were both placed in the Northeast Platform during the same construction phase (III) but with different orientations (Burial 4 was north-south). They both had similar cape ornaments (a string of beads with two large beads on each end). There was a slight difference between the string of beads; Burial 3 had a single strand with two circular terminal beads whereas Burial 4 had a double strand with two square terminal beads. Burial 1, the earliest burial, was also in the Northeast Platform in a north-south grave. The only other north-south burial was Burial 6 in the sarcophagus. Burial 7 (a, b, ?c) may be considered to have been oriented north-south since the remains were in the southern half of the basalt tomb that trended in this direction, but since the bones were so fragmentary there is no solid evidence for any direction. Burials 1, 4, and 9 each had a large tubular bead at the top of the head. These three burials may also illustrate the evolution of the maskette: first on the forehead, then on the ears, and then on the earspools (Fig. 139).
Burial 9 appears to have been the culmination of La Venta burial evolution (Figure 147). The cist tomb incorporated nearly all of the previous aspects dispersed within the other burials (regardless of orientation): jade and rock crystal ornaments, earspools, water-bird, eagle, and turtle motifs, spangles, animal jaw-shaped pendants, “jaguar” face, gadrooned beads, long tubular bead, maskette/face, crystalline hematite mirror, string of beads with two larger beads on ends (belt, instead of cape however), bracelet, bloodletters, figurines, ceramics, stone sepulcher, cinnabar, and axes. Burial 9 lacked a serpentine block, but had a slab of silvery metallic ore. It also lacked analogous jade hands, leaf, flower, clamshell, and frog (Burial 7) but had obsidian—a blade and an incised core. Other burials had some particularly beautiful grave goods (especially Burial 7 in the basalt tomb), but no other burial included so many of the different types of burial goods in direct association with one human body. The cist tomb was also connected with another burial (possibly of a child) and probably a serpentine pavement (Pavement No. 2). Stela 1 appears to have been placed directly west of Burial 9. In addition to the modification of Mound A-3 at the time of Burial 9’s interment, two long mounds (A-4 and A-5) were also created sometime in Phase IV times. Mounds A-4 and A-5 flanked the burial mound. Both were 2.4 m tall and nearly 90 m long with three tiers—two platforms that would have allowed the accommodation of many spectators (or mourners).
For the Olmec, there are two ways to present reality: one perceptible, the other imagined.  
Beatriz de la Fuente 1996: 41

**Stone Monuments**

The stone sculpture once placed in Complex A represented a hodgepodge of themes and forms. Some pieces were sculpted in the round and others were carved with low relief. A few show signs of mutilation, while others escaped this destructive treatment. There is no evidence for the pairing of monuments in Complex A as seen elsewhere at the site in the tabletop throne pairs (Altars 2/3 and 4/5) and the three colossal heads positioned at the north (Monuments 2, 3, and 5) and south (Monuments 52, 53, and 54) ends of the city. There was little obvious association between monuments present in Complex A, unlike the stelae on the south face of the main pyramid in Complex C. Even the few stone monuments hurriedly uncovered at the Stirling Acropolis appear to have represented a more coherent lot: stone drains, large basins, and human figures nearly all carved in the round. Some monuments from Complex A draw one’s attention with their realism while others mystify with coded symbolism (Pasztory 2000: 271-272). This lack of sculptured uniformity in Complex A is somewhat surprising considering the consistent symmetry and pairing of its clay platforms and the common themes reproduced in the area’s offerings throughout its history. Complex A appears to have been a very structured location, planned and created with precision. The known corpus of stone monuments from Complex A does not seem to reflect the same premeditated precision.

This chapter provides a brief sketch of the monumental stone sculpture discovered in Complex A (15 pieces) (Figure 148, Table 9). One of the stones (Monument 24) may have been placed in Phase III, but the others were found in Phase IV contexts (Chapter 5). This temporal placement does not necessarily relate to the age of their carving; their Complex A context represented the monuments’ last positioning in
Figure 148. Location of stone monuments in Complex A (Benson and de la Fuente 1996; Drucker 1952; Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute; NWAF photograph; Stirling 1940, 1943b).
### Table 9. Stone sculpture discovered in Complex A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sculpture</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monument 5</td>
<td>basalt</td>
<td>kneeling figure with a headdress and cape holding a rectangular shaped box with a depression in the top found in the Ceremonial Court south of the Northeast Platform and in a rough east/west line with Mon. 12 and Stela 3—Stirling (1943b) thought the figure represented a kneeling “baby-face” figure with a median crest hanging over the forehead.</td>
<td>1.42 m high 1.00 m wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“La Abuela” or the Grandmother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monument 6</td>
<td>sandstone</td>
<td>sandstone slab cover (with shallow depression) on top of carved sandstone box in Mound A-2 placed on the site’s axis directly over the fill of Massive Offering 2—The north face of the box was carved with a crocodilian earth monster. The sides were also carved but more deteriorated. There is a forepaw with 3 long claws &amp; bracelet and ribbonlike bands with vegetation growing.</td>
<td>outside: 2.8 m long 96 cm wide 89 cm high inside: 2.4 m long 69 cm wide 58 cm high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sarcophagus</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument 7</td>
<td>basalt</td>
<td>structure made of basalt columns oriented north-south on the site’s axis in Mound A-2: 9 vertical columns on east &amp; west sides 9 horizontal columns = roof 5 vertical columns on south (back) under the 9th roof column 5 inclined columns on north (entrance/door) 3 short columns on east &amp; west sides filling in triangular space between walls and slanted door</td>
<td>1.8 m high 2.5 m wide 4.0 m long column lengths: 2.97 to 3.55 m column diameters: 33-43 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basalt tomb</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument 12</td>
<td>serpentine</td>
<td>monkey-like figure found in the Ceremonial Court on the site’s axis directly north of the South-Central Platform; the sculpture has a broad incised collar or necklace and a wide belt; the base, one leg, and the feet are broken off</td>
<td>94 cm high 20 cm wide 24 cm thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Monkey man”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monument 13</td>
<td>basalt</td>
<td>drum shaped stone with 1 individual and 4 “glyph-like” elements carved in low relief on flat, circular area—The carved figure is of a striding male holding a pennant. He wears elaborate headgear, a nose bead, necklace, wristlets, sandals, and abdomen wrap found on the south edge of Mound A-2 on the site’s axis.</td>
<td>87 cm high 86 cm wide 92 cm deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Messenger” or “Ambassador”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monument 14</td>
<td>stone (basalt ?, not specified)</td>
<td>“well-made” stone cylinder with hole through long axis and plugged at lower end by a stone disk (3 cm thick) found standing upright in Mound A-3 south of the cist tomb</td>
<td>51 cm high 38 cm diameter 9 cm diameter hole through center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Monument 15</td>
<td>stone (basalt ?, not specified)</td>
<td>2 fragments of a likely four legged low throne with carved sides and a “tiger mask” panel design on top found near the entrance to Ceremonial Court at the base of the Forecourt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
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<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument 22</td>
<td>green schist</td>
<td>2 fragments found on Southwest Platform and 1 possible fragment found at Northeast Entryway— These pieces are the remnants of a very elaborate design carved in low relief.</td>
<td>1 piece = 64 cm long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument 23</td>
<td>basalt (?) not specified</td>
<td>nearly life-sized cross-legged male figure carved in the round, missing its head, arms, and 1 foot— This sculpture was found in Mound A-5 resting on limestone slabs. He wears a 3-strand necklace with a possible mirror pendant on his chest. He also has a breechclout and a wide belt or sash with a rectangular object on the front and an intricate knot on the back. Part of the sash flows onto his thighs.</td>
<td>63 cm high 74 cm wide 63 cm thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument 24</td>
<td>green gneiss</td>
<td>rectangular block with L-shaped cross section— The stone appears to have been a step placed on the north side of Mound A-2 at a right angle to the site’s centerline. It was smoothed but not polished.</td>
<td>1.16 m long 35 cm wide 22 cm thick across the foot of the L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument 77</td>
<td>basalt</td>
<td>cross-legged male figure with arms bent at the elbows and fists rest on knees— He is wearing a headdress, pectoral, cape, wide sash with squarish clasp or buckle, bracelets, and anklets; the cape and headdress are carved with great detail.</td>
<td>91 cm high 73 cm wide 77 cm thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument 80</td>
<td>basalt</td>
<td>seated feline sculpture found immediately west of Complex A (similar to San Lorenzo Monument 37 but Mon. 80 still has its head)</td>
<td>1.13 m high 86 cm wide 77 cm thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 1 “the woman in the box”</td>
<td>basalt</td>
<td>rectangular box with standing figure carved (almost in full relief) in a niche— The figure is typically considered female due to the curved waist, chest detail, and skirt. Interpretations vary whether the monument represented a coffin, the open mouth of a jaguar, or a doorway/cave.</td>
<td>2.33 m high 89 cm wide 71 cm thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 3 the “Uncle Sam” stela</td>
<td>basalt</td>
<td>narrative stela with two main personages (each 5 ft. 7 inches tall &amp; wearing different costumes and elaborate headdresses) carved in low relief; six additional, smaller figures are arranged above them</td>
<td>4.3 m high 2.0 m wide 91 cm thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 4 (originally Stela 5)</td>
<td>basalt?</td>
<td>worked stone with no remaining carving but Stirling thought it appeared to be a piece of what was once a large stela; several large limestone slabs were found just south of its base (the limestone might have been part of Mound A-4)</td>
<td>2.1 m high 76 cm thick</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
La Venta’s history. Some displaced stone monuments similar in appearance or theme to La Venta’s art in neighboring towns were thought to have once graced Complex A (Blom and La Farge 1926), but these are not included here. The basalt columns surrounding the Ceremonial Court are not considered to be stone monuments per se but as construction elements. The one tomb (Monument 7) is designated as such because of how the columns are put together. Table 9 provides the basic details of each stone monument. In the following discussion, I separate the stone sculpture into six general categories: burials, narrative, realistic, supernatural, construction, and other. Perhaps one reason the stone monuments in Complex A do not seem to be a coherent collection is because individual works were used for different purposes. Carved stone monuments in Complex A appear to have had diverse functions.

**BURIALS**

One of the easier purposes to ascertain for monuments in Complex A was their use as sepulchers. Two of the stone monuments in the Ceremonial Court contained burials (both located in Mound A-2). Monument 6 held the remains of Burial 6 (one individual) and Monument 7 housed the remains of Burial 7 (two or more individuals). The sandstone cist in Mound A-3 that contained Burial 9 is another example of stone sepulcher, but it was not given a monument number (the general details of the cist tomb...
are given in Chapter 6). Similarly, Burial 5 in Mound A-2 had 11 basalt columns laid horizontally over the burial plot, but the columns were not designated as a monument.

Monument 6 is the sandstone sarcophagus carved as a crocodilian earth monster or “Olmec dragon” (Figures 149 and 150) (Reilly 1999:33). It was carved in low relief with an apparent supernatural theme. Due to its placement over the serpentine pavement of Massive Offering 2, Reilly (1999:34) considered the sarcophagus the terrestrial dragon or earth monster floating over the primordial sea. Placing a body (or ruler) inside this cosmic scene could then possibly have represented a reenactment of the creation story. The carved sandstone sarcophagus could also have been a table top throne used as a sepulcher, similar to Chalcatzingo Monument 22 (Clark et al. 2010: fig. 1.8)

Monument 7 is the tomb created from 37 full and 6 short basalt columns (Figure 151) (Drucker 1952: 23). Nine columns were used as the east and west walls and the roof (Figure 152). Five columns created the south wall (back) and five inclined columns were placed over the north opening. Three short
columns were positioned under the slanted columns on the northern end of the east and west walls (Figures 153 and 154). Drucker noted the presence of low, irregular mounds on the east and west sides of the Monument 7, barely lower than the height of the basalt walls (Drucker 1952: 26). He believed these mounds represented a bracing method for supporting the columns. If clay were packed around the outside of the stone structure first, the opening of the tomb may have resembled a cave. Only the southern portion of Monument 7 was positioned over Massive Offering 2. Reilly (1999: 35) presented the idea that Monument 7 represented a portal between the natural world and the otherworld. In Mesoamerica, caves were considered entrances to the underworld.

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Drucker (1952: 23) clearly stated that 9 columns created the roof. The 5 vertical columns in the back wall are said to be under the 9th horizontal roof column. Stirling’s description only includes the 9 vertical columns on each side and the 5 vertical columns on the south end (Stirling and Stirling 1943: 539). The published profile view (Drucker 1952: fig. 9) is incorrect. It shows 10 horizontal roof columns on the top and 10 vertical columns on the side. The plan view (fig. 9) is partially correct—it shows 9 vertical columns on each side—and partially incorrect—it has ten horizontal columns as the roof. Another plan view (Drucker 1952: fig. 10a) is accurate, but it does not indicate the roof columns. Drucker’s sketch in his 1942 field notes is rough but clearly indicates 9 columns on top, 9 on the sides, and three stepped columns under the inclined columns. Figure 153 is based on the 1952 published figures with corrections. Similarly, the 1959 drawings (Drucker et al. 1959: figs. 4, 12) that depict Monument 7 have the incorrect number of horizontal and vertical columns (Drucker et al. 1959: fig. 4 also has the incorrect number of horizontal columns over Offering 1943-G).
Figure 152. Monument 7, showing number of columns on roof (Drucker 1952: pl. 1a).
Figure 153. Plan and profile views of Monuments 6, 7, and the 11 horizontal columns (NWAF drawing based on Drucker 1952: fig. 9—with corrections).

Figure 154. Plan of Monument 7 (NWAF drawing based on Drucker 1952: fig. 10a).
**NARRATIVE**

Two monuments appear to have been narrative scenes: Monument 13 and Stela 3 (Figures 48, 59, 155, 156). They are also the two sculptures at La Venta considered to represent foreign influence (Clewlow 1974: 80; Covarrubius 1957: 77; Heizer 1967: 28-32; Proskouriakoff 1968: 122-123). Interestingly, Complex A is often considered an area meant to be viewed and accessed only by the elite of the city. If true, the two narratives stones would have been directed to that specific group and not to the general public, in contrast to the stelae on the south face of Mound C-1 which looked over the grand plaza of the city. The pyramid's stelae are considered to have conveyed supernatural themes. It is ironic that Complex A, thought to have been the ritual heart of the city, had the most historical narrative monument, Stela 3, positioned within its walls.

Monument 13 was directly associated with Mound A-2 and possibly with Ritual Event 13, during Phase IV times (Fig. 115, Chapter 6). Heizer (1971) thought it was first placed in Phase III and later repositioned in the same location, thereby separating it from the large ritual activity of Phase IV. Monument 13 is a low-relief carving depicting a striding male holding a pennant. Three glyph-like elements run vertically below the pennant, and one glyph-like foot is behind the individual (Fig. 155). The male is thought to be non-Olmec looking.

![Figure 155. Monument 13 photograph and drawing (NWAF).](image-url)
Figure 156. Stela 3 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
Figure 157. Stela 3 (NWAF drawing).
Stela 3 was found on the western edge of the South-Central Platform with its scene facing north. It was leaning forward at a steep angle when discovered. Some scholars think the face of one of the two key figures was intentionally mutilated while leaving the “foreign” face unscathed (Figures 156, 157). Heizer (1967: 28) considered the scene’s destruction “not due to the hand of man but to natural weathering.” The two main characters and the six smaller figures arrayed around them were carved in low relief. Beatriz de la Fuente (2000: 257) commented: “the final expressions of the La Venta style, the narrative historical scenes depicted on enormous stone slabs such as Stelae 2 and 3, were a sort of bridge between mythical and historical narratives...”

REALISTIC

Three monuments carved in the round appear natural or realistic: Monuments 23 and 77, and Stela 1. All three were outside and south of the Ceremonial Court (Fig. 148). Monument 23 depicts a cross-legged figure wearing a mirror pendant and wide belt or sash (Figures 158, 159, 160). This sculpture was intentionally beheaded and mutilated. It was found resting on limestone slabs on the second tier in Mound A-5 facing east overlooking the extended court (Figure 158).
Figure 159. Monument 23 (NWAF drawing, hatched areas show ancient breaks).

Figure 160. Four views of Monument 23 (Heizer's Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute).
Stela 1 was discovered with the figure supine and the monument resting on its longest flat surface (west of Mound A-3 and the cist tomb). It is unclear whether this flat position is the correct orientation or whether the monument was originally placed upright as currently exhibited in La Venta Park (Figure 161). The open rectangle framing the human figure on Stela 1 has been interpreted as the open maw of a jaguar, an open doorway, or an open coffin (Heizer 1967: 27, Stirling 1940: 332, 1943b: 50). C. William Clelowl (1974: 76-77) favored the jaguar interpretation because the panels are inscribed with a “stylized jaguar mask.” If the monument’s opening is a niche, and the figure is standing on the threshold, the mouth of a cave may be another possibility. Typically, the human figure is considered to be female based on the skirt. Grove (1981: 60) commented that it might as well be a Scotsman by that reasoning; however, the figure’s narrowed waist and rounded chest are other features that support the female identification.
Figure 162. Monument 77 (NWAF photographs).
Monument 77 was found near the northern face of the main pyramid, close to Mound A-4. The figure appears to depict a male dressed with a beautifully carved cape and intricate headdress (Figure 162). The monument looks like a realistic depiction of an individual; however, the mouth may incorporate “features of a supernatural being” (Benson and de la Fuente 1996: 172).

SUPERNATURALS

Three other monuments (Nos. 5, 12, and 80) were also carved in the round but seem to have supernatural—or at least unnatural—features. Although called the “Little Grandmother,” Monument 5’s features are massive (Figure 163). The statue looks like a much larger version of San Lorenzo Monument 131 (Cyphers 2004: fig. 145) which is only 15 cm high. La Venta Monument 5 is carved in the round but not in realistic proportions. The figure is shown kneeling and holding a small box with a depression on top. Monuments 12 and 80 are both animalistic figures. Monument 12 is monkey-like and wears an inscribed necklace and belt (Figure 164). Monument 80 depicts a feline with a double-headed rope/snake hanging from its mouth (Figure 165 and 166). This carved feline was found on the west side of Mound

Figure 163. Monument 5 (Heizer’s Papers: NAA, Smithsonian Institute and Stirling 1940: 326)
Figure 164. Photograph of Monument 12 (Stirling 1943a: 327) and drawing of incised necklace and belt (NWAF drawing based on Drucker 1952: 53).

Figure 165. Monument 80 (NWAF photographs).
Figure 166. Monument 80 (NWAF drawing).
A-5. Monuments 5 and 12 were uncovered in the Ceremonial Court, the monkey figure was located just west of the centerline, and the “grandmother” sculpture was north of the Northeast Platform.

CONSTRUCTION

Four sculptures were incorporated (by different methods) into the architectural features of Complex A: Monuments 14, 15, 22, and 24. Monuments 15 and 22 appear to have been broken before they became part of Complex A architecture.

The two fragments of Monument 15 were found near the lowermost (southern) column steps leading to the forecourt of the Ceremonial Court (Wedel 1952: 60). These two fragments were likely a footed throne (Chapter 5, Figure 167). Each fragment had a foot (visible in the film stored at the Human Studies Film Archives of the Smithsonian Institution: Exploring Hidden Mexico). The sides of both fragments are also carved.

Figure 167. Monument 15 (Drucker 1952: pl. 64) and NWAF reconstructed drawing of legged throne (based on Drucker 1952: fig. 54).
Monument 22 may be represented by three broken pieces (Figure 168). Two fragments were on the Southwest Platform. The 1955 excavator thought the broken monument there was a post-Phase IV activity (Drucker et al. 1959: 202); however, if the piece with the Northeast Entryway limestone pavers was also from Monument 22, then the broken sculpture was associated with a Phase IV construction feature. This could point to the other two pieces as deliberate additions to the Southwest Platform in Phase IV times as well.

Monument 24 appears to have been used as a green step on the north side of Mound A-2 (Figure 169). From the stratigraphy, it seems to have been a Phase III architectural embellishment (Chapter 5).

Monument 14 is the stone cylinder found between (nearly in the middle of) Burials 9 and 10 in Mound A-3 (Figure 170). Monument 14 was found standing upright with a hole through its long axis and plugged at its lower end by a stone disk 5 cm thick (Figure 171). It may have had a supernatural function if used as an “offertory cylinder” (Wedel 1952: 71). It appears to have rested on top of Mound A-3. It would have functioned well as a base to hold a flagpole.
One monument falls outside of the other general categories: Stela 4 (Figure 172). Stela 4 is only a possible remnant of a stela. No relief carving remains. It was originally called Stela 5 by Stirling (1943: 52) and was labeled as an “unworked boulder” on the 1943 excavation map (Wedel 1952: fig. 14). The possibility that is was once a carved monument is strong since it was found resting on several large limestone slabs on the north edge of Mound A-5, and it was a very large rock in an area surrounded by
swamp. When González Lauck (1988) changed Stirling’s Stela 4 designation to Altar 8, this monument was bumped up to become Stela 4.

As apparent, even from this abbreviated depiction, stone monuments were placed in Complex A for diverse purposes. Many of the monuments span my general categories. For example, the sandstone sarcophagus encased a body, but it also depicted a supernatural creature. This stone coffer may also be considered realistic if it represented a table-top throne. Although these works of monumental art appear to have had unique characteristics, their final placement remains important. Stela 3 may indeed have related an actual historic event between Olmecs and non-Olmecs, but the prodded memory of that occasion appears to have been restricted to elite contemplation rather than materialized public viewing. Monument 13 could have been associated with Ritual Activity 13. If the person depicted on Monument 13 was not Olmec, would that have influenced the interpretation of the associated burials and offerings of the ritual activity with which it may have been involved? If Monument 13 was positioned earlier in Phase III, it would have been connected to Offering 1 and perhaps even to Ritual Activity 5 (which included Massive Offering 3). As should be clear, there is still much to be done with the stone monuments of Complex A to decipher their history and meaning for the inhabitants of and visitors to La Venta.
Summary

The preceding descriptions and illustrations of architecture, burials, offerings, and stone sculpture represent my effort to reconcile the La Venta Complex A data into an accurate sequence of meaningful cultural events. I restricted my account to the construction history of Complex A. The details derive from excavation reports, field notes, maps, photographs, and correspondence of the early investigators of the site. I consider the details of the data to be the building blocks for better narratives of what happened at La Venta.

This study addressed three myopic perceptions regarding La Venta: (1) the secludedness of Complex A, in particular the Ceremonial Court, from its inception to its termination, (2) the classification and identification of real human burials in Complex A, and (3) the analytical decontextualization of objects, offerings, and monuments from connected ritual activities there. In the process of creating a clearer picture of past activities in Complex A, other interesting possibilities concerning city layout and the use of symbols there were noticed.

Complex A has commonly been construed as a religious area hidden from public view with highly restrictive access to its platforms and associated activities. That the area was demarcated from the very beginning as an important location appears to be true; however, the supposed exclusive nature of the Complex A is questionable. The adobe brick walls around the Ceremonial Court effectively defined a specific quadrangle but could not have veiled the actions undertaken therein until Phase IV times when the palisade of basalt columns was put in place. The extensive ritual activities that involved deep pits and enormous quantities of stone and clay fills would necessarily have involved many hands and eyes—both
in preparation and in construction. The corps of workers at La Venta must have known of the massive offerings and their ostensive purposes.

Public works can be viewed as concrete evidence of planned and anticipated projects, of cognitive maps of an ordered cosmos, of motives for the project, of realization of the project, of its scale and energetic requirements, of mobilization, sponsorship, motivation, and direction of a labor force, of social relations of construction between overseers and workers, of accumulation and allocation of social surpluses, of technical and organizational imperatives needed to accomplish projects within specific time frames given finite resources of labor, materials, and food, and of imbuing locations with power and meaning, thereby creating a powerful social landscape. (Clark 2004: 67)

By the end of Phase II times, Complex A appears to have been a completed configuration. The colored floorings used on the platforms, and the symmetry seen in their construction, delineated three sets of pairs: Mounds A-2/A-3, Southeast/Southwest Platforms, and Northeast/Northwest Platforms. The pairings were oriented both east-west of and parallel to La Venta’s central north-south axis. Although nearly all the Complex A platforms appear to have had a mate, the activities and meaning associated with each were likely distinct, particularly for the northern east-west pair of platforms in the Ceremonial Court. The massive offerings and architectural ornamentation of the southern east-west pair appear to have been complementary rather than identical. In Phase II, Mounds A-2 and A-3 were given the same colored facings, but it was not until Phase IV times that their paired nature was evidenced by the interment of richly endowed burials in stone tombs (basalt in the north and sandstone in the south—analogous with the colossal heads at the northern and southern margins of La Venta).

Amid the pairings, the platforms remained individual in some ways. From Phase I to Phase III times, each platform within Complex A was created and later modified with different colored fills and surfaces. The flooring around some of the platforms used different colors. Purple floors were part of the flooring around the Northwest Platform in Phase II—this color floor was not identified elsewhere in the Court. Green serpentine dust was also used in Phase II constructions and was found on top of the South-Central Platform and on the floor around the South-Central and the Northwest Platforms. This
individual treatment of platforms within the Ceremonial Court shifted in Phase IV times. Then, the entire compound was blanketed in red clay.

La Venta's north-south axis was a virtual reference for shaping Complex A. As described in Chapter 5, the finished plan of the Ceremonial Court resembled the stylized cave carved on the cliff face at Chalcatzingo (Monument 1, El Rey; Fig. 32).¹ The La Venta representation would have the cave opening up towards the south and the great pyramid. Viewing the court's layout in plan view as a cosmic symbol provides one likely reason that the Court was built the way it was. Using a centerline reference to construct a symmetrical design shows its practical importance, but this need not mean that this virtual line was sacred in its first use as a reference line. This may have changed as the city acquired its own history. Later in Complex A's history, the centerline became a key focus of ritual activity and may have indeed been sacred.

In Michael Coe's review of the 1955 excavation report, he stated that "the Olmec culture seems to have been the first civilization of the New World. Its temporal position in Middle American prehistory was long seriously misunderstood, perhaps not in spite of but because of the faulty and confused reports by Drucker..." (Coe 1960: 119, original emphasis). I would add that the burial of human bodies within Complex A has also been seriously misunderstood because of Drucker. Stirling maintained the position that La Venta was older than Drucker thought, and Stirling was proved to be correct. Stirling also held onto the belief that the offerings called tombs once contained human bodies. My "boneless" burial classification does not prove Stirling correct, but it does strengthen his argument. Tracing the history of burials from the earliest interment in Phase I times within Complex A reveals the continued use and evolution of particular symbols over time (e.g., maskette).

By Phase IV times, burials and offerings were centered on the site's main axis. This shift to axial events appears strong. As a caution, it is possible that the large pits for Massive Offerings 2 and 3 removed evidence of earlier ritual activities along the centerline. The 34 known offerings and the 10 archaeologically visible burials in Complex A from Phases I-IV, plus the offering discovered in Complex D, represent 19 ritual events. These ritual events favored different locations in each phase. In Phase I, activity was restricted

¹ I also think the U-shape incised on the earspools in Burial 9 portrayed a stylized cave.
to the Northeast Platform (Fig. 53). In Phase II the activity shifted to the south end of the Ceremonial Complex (Fig. 62). In Phase III, offfertory activities favored an east-west axis through the Court (Fig. 82), and in Phase IV, the northern and southern ends of the complex received ritual investment centered on the site’s axis (Fig. 114). According to available evidence, only the Northeast Platform received major attention in two different phases (I and III).

In the written correspondence between Drucker and Heizer regarding how to proceed with their 1955 excavation report, Drucker agreed with Heizer that the profiles should be described individually and that the archaeologists should not attempt to describe the entire Complex A by construction phases. The task was considered too daunting. Here, I have attempted to bring their work to a more synthetic conclusion by taking up the gauntlet and presenting the Complex A data in a more meaningful and useful manner. By rearranging and reorganizing the known La Venta data into an accurate description of ancient temporal and spatial relationships among the earthen platforms, offerings, burials, and carved monuments within Complex A, it is my hope that the contributions of the La Venta Olmecs to Mesoamerican civilization can more clearly be understood and appreciated.

“We do know the Olmec had a bona fide civilization. They had imagination and energy and delighted in the unusual and the difficult” (Marion Stirling 1971:31).
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