

OLMEC ALTAR THRONES AND POWER: A CROSS-COMPARISON OF THE  
NICHE MOTIF IN GULF COASTAL OLMAN, THE MEXICAN HIGHLANDS,  
AND PACIFIC COAST OLMEC SITES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIONS OF  
POWER

by

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## **DEDICATION**

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this thesis to both the Adams and the Garrett families. I am the first one from either family to get my M.A. and I want this thesis to represent and honor the people I came from. I also dedicate this thesis to two of my heroes that are no longer here, who forever changed my life by teaching me to respect the past and learn from it. Here's to you Larry Dewitt Garrett aka 'Nanapa', and Sam Spritzer, if only you could know what an influence you were.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history there has always been a fascination with manipulating the natural world for one reason or another. One method of manipulation is stone carving, which is present in almost all forms of societies and cultures. These manipulations can dramatically range in size and scale from small, portable pebbles, to massive monoliths, and even entire mountain faces. When the medium of choice is stone, and the intent is to create monumental architecture or artwork a number of requirements must be met by the group intending to build such monument. To achieve such feats requires large amounts of disposable labor and resources, which can drastically increase depending on how far the source material is from its destination. The ability to commission, make, and move monumental stone architecture is demonstrative of a society's social status and wealth; nowhere else in the world does this apply more to than the Olmec.

The name Olmec is the label given to the culture group that occupied an area of Mesoamerica known as Olman (Figure 1). During the Early Formative and into the Middle Formative, between 1600 B.C. and 400 B.C. the Olmec flourished in Olman which encompasses the present-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Oaxaca (Figure 2) (Joyce 2004: 15). However, their influence spanned a larger area than just Olman as Olmec style art and artifacts are found far outside these large Gulf Coast centers from Veracruz to Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas and through to Guatemala (Figures 3 and 4). The name Olman was derived from the Nahuatl word "Olmecatl", which translates to "inhabitants of the rubber country," is not what the Olmec would have called themselves but instead what sixteenth century groups called the people inhabiting the region flush with rubber and cacao trees (National Geographic Society). The area that encapsulates

Olmec is known as Mesoamerica which is a generalized term used to describe a specific grouping of geographic regions within Central America. Mesoamerica's core geographic feature that separates it bilaterally into its eastern and western portions is the Isthmus of Tehuantepec which is a natural choke point where the country of Mexico is at its narrowest point (Joyce 2004: 11). East of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec are the other countries that make up Mesoamerica including Eastern Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras whereas the western portion of Mesoamerica is exclusively Mexico (Joyce 2004: 11). The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is not only a physical geographic feature that constricts the landscape, but it also served as somewhat of a socio-cultural boundary for the people that occupied the area.

Linguistics has provided us with three major language families that arise from Mesoamerica which include Mixe-Zoque, Totonac, and Mayan (Joyce 2004: 9). When language groups are compared to Mesoamerican geography we see that people living East of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec are predominantly Mayan speakers whereas groups living to the West, such as the Olmec, had more diverse language groups which included Zapotec, Mixtec, Totonac, Otomi, and Mixe-Zoque (Joyce 2004: 11). Although these were the primary language families in Mesoamerica there are other languages that are spoken by groups that neighbor one another including Oto-Manguean spoken by some in Central America, Nahuatl which was spoken by the Aztecs and spread into North America, and more isolated languages such as Huave, Tarascan, Xincan. And Lenca (Joyce 2004: 10). Although most Mesoamerican languages developed within a limited geographical area it is surprising that they can be so different they equate to comparing Chinese to German, and at the same time have some loan words with shared grammar,

sound, and meaning (Joyce 2004: 10). Finding loan words helps trace back the evolution of some languages, for example some features of Nahuatl are found in northern Mexican cultures which would have come about due to intensive interactions between the groups (Joyce 2004: 10). However, it is currently believed that the Olmec probably spoke a form of Mixe-Zoque due to the large number of Mixe-Zoque words that the Maya adopted to describe elites and positions of power.

The Olmec are known archaeologically for their massive corpus of stone carvings and structures. Because the Olmec either did not develop a writing system or one that has yet to be discovered, we are left to determine meaning from the content and context of the iconographic archaeological remains. The importance of these stone artifacts to the Olmec is evident by the geographic reach of their styles and themes, sheer number of artifacts, and advanced level of craftsmanship required for their construction. These socially and culturally powerful artifacts were commissioned and created for a reason, although beautiful, the artifacts alone are insufficient for a complete interpretation, and require cultural context. This is because Olmec rulers would often times manipulate the artifacts to produce political narratives on public landmarks in the form of tableaux (Reilly Personal Communication). These four-dimensional narratives are necessities for the Olmec elite as they allow constant and consistent manipulation of public memory to reinforce their position and legitimize their rule. Olmec society is defined as either an advanced chiefdom or a proto-state, however you define a society, they were a highly organized, socially stratified people with a kin-based ruling class (Cite Binford). The importance of these kin connections is routinely displayed in various forms throughout Olmec art, it is the contextual and spatial manipulation of these artifacts to obtain and

cement social status which I believe is the driving force for the creation of the majority of Olmec art.

The definition of style as it will be used in this thesis is “the formal qualities of a work of art that links that work of art to other works of art” (Reilly 1995: 31). Olmec art style is defined by its four formal qualities which are 1) representations appear to be self-contained and emblematic; 2) artists favored three-dimensional forms rendered in the round and finished on all sides; 3) the human form is the focus of Olmec art, and 4) Olmec art is monumental or monumental in nature (Reilly Personal Communication). An aspect of Olmec art that is recurrent through many artifact mediums is the niche motif. The niche motif is present on a variety of Olmec structures and in multiple forms including altar-thrones, colossal heads, stelae, murals, reliefs, and statues. The focus of this paper will be an examination, iconographic analysis, and cross-comparison of the niche motif present on artifacts from Gulf Coastal Olman, The Mexican Highlands, and the Pacific Coast. An attempt to determine the effects that regionality has on the creation, representation, and use of the artifacts relative to the geographic origin and context.



## **II. METHODOLOGY**

There are a few fundamental theories and concepts used by anthropologists to interpret art that include: 1) Erwin Panofsky's method for iconographic analysis; 2) the paradigm of the periphery; 3) direct historical approach or 'upstreaming'; and 4) the concept of cultural continuity. Together these concepts form the foundation for what is the primary theory I will be using for this thesis known as the San Marcos four-field approach to iconographic interpretation (Reilly and Garber 2007: 6). I will briefly describe how these four concepts will aid me in my research and then I will describe in detail each concept.

The San Marcos four-field approach uses Panofsky's iconographic exercise, a review of historic and ethnographic literature, consideration, or engagement of archaeological context, and conducts a stylistic analysis and the acknowledgment of geographic distribution of styles. Using the Panofsky three level method for structural analysis will be possible due to the combination of this approach with upstreaming. The information gathered relating to the Olmec material world is recovered through the archaeological record. Furthermore, the information necessary to achieve a level two or three understanding of the Panofsky method are obtained through historical and contemporary ethnographies. This method will be used for the iconographic analysis and interpretation of the before mentioned sites to better understand the variation in motif representation.

The iconographic analysis will be supported by the concept of cultural continuity and the paradigm of the periphery. I will be using the concept of cultural continuity, which is a theory that there is a continued use of certain cultural concepts through time

(Reilly 2022: PC), as a foundation that supports the comparison of ideas developed by later cultures in Mesoamerica. This will reinforce the paradigm of the periphery theory, which argues for a multi-regional approach to the ways cultural ideas and influence are developed through trade and exchange.

#### *San Marcos four-field approach*

The first step in the San Marcos school of iconographic interpretation revolves around Panofsky's iconographic exercise, which was initially based on Franz Boas and Clause Levi-Strauss's structural analysis method (Panofsky 1972). In this step, archaeologists are able to identify two things: artistic style, and the geographic origin of the style. The second step in the San Marcos school is the review of historical and ethnographic literature. Ethnographic sources come from the codices created by various Mesoamerican cultures, hieroglyphs, and firsthand accounts from post-contact Europeans that recorded oral histories and mythologies. The third step of the San Marcos school considers and engages the archaeological context. When dealing with the Olmec this part of the approach gives us a little trouble.

For the most part, Olmec art is either small and portable, or massive and immovable, and therein lies the problem. A large portion of the Olmec archaeology has been disturbed, looted, and distributed to private collections around the world. We are fortunate that this is not the case for every site, but we must take this into account during any form of interpretation or analysis. That being said, because we can trace artistic style and materials we are able to connect these pieces to specific sites and times. The fourth and final step of the San Marcos approach is conducting a stylistic analysis and the acknowledgement of geographic distribution of styles. It is necessary to have a large

corpus of art for this step as it uses the variation within the artwork to delineate stylistic groups. Thankfully, in the 1940's, Miguel Covarrubias, a recognized artists, and student of pre-Columbian art took it upon himself to take steps towards creating this corpus via a systematic study and analysis of Olmec art (Diehl 2004: 18).

### *Iconographic analysis*

The process of studying an image by breaking it down into its simplest components and then applying historical and cultural contexts to the image to extract meaning is known as an Iconographic analysis/interpretation and is a method of studying Iconology that was proposed by Erwin Panofsky in 1972 (Panofsky 1972: 3). Depending on your preferred terminology there are three levels or strata of information that Panofsky argues can be extracted from an image (Figure 5).

The first level of understanding is the *primary or natural subject matter* which is subdivided into either factual or expressional meanings, a process referred to as a pre-iconographic description (Panofsky 1972: 4). During the pre-iconographic descriptive process, the factual or expressional meanings are derived from identifying the *pure forms* which consist of certain configurations of lines, color, shapes, representations of natural objects (humans, animals, plants, houses, tools), mutual events, poses or gestures, and atmosphere are identified as an assemblage of artistic motifs (Panofsky 1972: 5).

The second level of meaning is where the iconographic analysis begins and is known as the *secondary or conventional subject matter* which aims at connecting the previously identified artistic motifs and combinations of motifs (compositions), with known themes or concepts (Panofsky 1972: 6-7). Any of the identified motifs that can be

confirmed to carry either secondary or conventional meaning are considered images and often are associated with stories and allegories (Panofsky 1972: 6).

The third and final level is known as the *intrinsic meaning or context* which is where the motifs, images, stories, and allegories are synthesized into a manifestation of their underlying principles called *symbolic value* (Panofsky 1972: 8). In order to perform a proper iconographic analysis, it is important to have sufficient historical and cultural information, specifically relating to style, themes, forms, or concepts that can be expressed by objects or events (Panofsky 1972: 11-12).

As part of the foundation for my iconographic analysis and interpretation I will provide thorough background information on each archaeological site and niche motif associated artifacts. The primary focus of the iconographic analysis will be the niche motif, I will identify all other iconographic elements and motifs directly associated with the niche motif. I will do this for all artifacts on the Gulf and Pacific coast that contain the motif and compare. The majority of the niche corpus comes from coastal areas, but two central highland sites will also be used as part of the analysis (Chalcatzingo and, Oxtotitlan) as they contain important niche motif iconography that demonstrates the ideas leaving Olman and outward to the rest of Mesoamerica.

### *Paradigm of the Periphery*

Ideas and beliefs are transmitted frequently over time as is one of the driving forces of cultural change and expansion. How these ideas move across landscapes and into the minds of others is through the intersection of interaction spheres. These interaction spheres radiate outward from a cultural center, and in time either expand to absorb other groups or collapse (Figure 6). These spheres of influence interact with one

another via a process known as the Paradigm of the Periphery which serves as an ideological model that accounts for the movement of symbolism, sacred traditions, and rituals through an environment (Bolfing 2010: 107). Based on the socio-economic World Systems Theory, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein who viewed developed countries as “core countries” who’s adaptation to a capitalist system drove the rest of the world to follow suit in order to remain relevant and competitive (Wallerstein 1974: 387). Wallerstein believed that countries went through different “stages” of development and part of understanding these stages is to have them well defined as to make them easier to compare with others, and failure to have sufficient definitions can lead to creation of false concepts and non-problems (Wallerstein 1974: 389).

The Paradigm of the Periphery functions in two ways, one geographically and the other ideologically. Geographically, the paradigm of the periphery it is able to account for and trace the movement of both sacred traditions and their symbolism from the major core centers where they originated, to the periphery areas where these symbols and traditions have the means for cultural survival (Bolfing 2010: 107). Compared to the geographic function, the ideological function is similar as symbols and traditions are traced from the original cultural bearers to the peripheral groups that not only maintained these symbols and traditions but also prolonged their use by intern passing them to other groups via interactions and trade (Bolfing 2010: 107).

In total there are six recognized phases to the Paradigm of the Periphery interaction model. It begins in phase 1 where a charismatic individual (elite) gains power and influence. In phase 2 these charismatic individuals then use this power to gain influence over other environmental areas for either horticultural or subsistence use. Due

to the increase in subsistence and horticultural areas, a surplus is created which intern allows for population growth, and once again as the population increases so does the elite's power. Phase 3 is where the centralization beings to take shape as a hegemonic technique begins as periphery areas provide a tribute to the core in order to be associated with the core centers elite status and take part in their rituals and gain political power (Bolfing 2010: 108). During phase 4, the population continues to increase, and existing elites are separated into two groups: the ruling and the lesser elite. This stratification is necessary to assist in and lead the rituals needed for cores that are growing into more diverse and socially complex centers (Bolfing 2010: 108). As the population and center increase, so does the need for more ritual space, as a result elites build their residences in these central areas to cement their association with both ritual and political power. In doing so, the center becomes an enlarged ritual and political space, and the non-elites who also inhabited this central area are now forced out to the periphery regions (Bolfing 2010: 109). In phase 5 the lesser elites choose to leave the core centers in favor of establishing their own minor centers within the existing hegemonic system (Bolfing 2010: 109). In phase 6 the lesser elites that chose to leave and form their own minor centers being paying tribute to the major core centers as part of the hegemonic system to gain access to sacred rituals, knowledge, items, interregional trade networks, and access to elite bloodlines through marriage alliances (Bolfing 2010: 109).

#### *Direct Historical Approach "Upstreaming"*

The Direct Historical Approach is a methodological approach to studying the past that uses the theoretical basis of cultural continuity alongside the logic of moving from the known to the unknown (Feinman 1997: 304, 310). The fundamental aspect of this

approach is associating an analogy with a source which in turn is used to identify the unknown property (Feinman 1997: 304). It was first deliberately used as an archaeological methodology was in the American Southwest in 1915 by Nels C. Nelson, Alfred Kidder, Leslie Spier, and Alfred Kroeber (Steward 1942: 337). A total of three steps form this methodological approach, starting first by locating and historic sites, second the sites are then identified and have their cultural complexes determined, and third the sequencing is carried back to both protohistoric and prehistoric cultural periods (Steward 1942: 337). Sapir argues that there are three kinds of direct evidence that can be used in the direct historical approach which are: evidence from historical documents, statements made by tribal members about their history, and the stratified monumented that archaeologist's study (Feinman 1997: 309). Understanding the origin of the information presented in these analogies and how such ideas traveled is a critical part of interpretation. What makes it possible is a process known as cultural transmission, which identifies overlapping cultural traits that are similar if not the same as other historically and ethnographically documented cultures and the present archaeological data (Feinman 1997: 310). If used properly, the direct historical approach can be used as a tool for three analytical purposes: either an ethnic identifier, chronometer, or a warrant for specific historical analogy (Feinman 1997: 333).

### **III. PREVIOUS STUDIES AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The history of Olmec archaeology begins in 1862 when Jose Melgar unknowingly came upon one of the colossal heads at Hacienda de Hueyapan or Tres Zapotes, Veracruz (Clewlow 1974: 1). The first discussions of the area are centered on Melgar's belief that the creators of the colossal heads were from Ethiopia, and shortly after their discovery Alfredo Chavero would publish on the physical characteristics and similarities of the sculpture's racial features (Clewlow 1974: 1). However archaeological interest in the Olmec didn't begin until 1925 when Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge began their "ethnological exploration" of Mexico's southern Gulf Coast (Grove 1997: 56). During their journey, Blom and La Farge would record an Olmec statue on top of San Martin Pajapan, passed the colossal head at Tres Zapotes, and be led by locals to the site that would change the course of Olmec archaeology, La Venta, Tabasco (Grove 1997: 56). Their initial beliefs were that the monuments were Maya, and although wrong Blom and La Farge's descriptions sparked an interest which helped not only to discover new Gulf Coast sites but drew future research to the unique stone monuments (Grove 1997: 56-57).

A vast majority of the archaeological study of the Olmec was sponsored by five institutions: the National Geographic Society, the Smithsonian Institution, the University of California at Berkley, Yale University, and the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa (Diehl 1989: 19). The first official Olmec archaeological research started in 1938 when Matthew Stirling, an archaeologist working for the Smithsonian Institution, visited Tres Zapotes, and conducted two field seasons of research; the first between 1938 and 1939 where he was aided by Clarence Weiant, and the second between 1939 and 1940 where he was aided by Philip Drucker (Grove 1997: 57). The first field season had excavations



primarily focused at Tres Zapotes that produced Stela C which had a nearly complete Maya Long Count date, whereas season two included explorations of other sites including Cerro de las Mesas and La Venta (Grove 1997: 57-58). Both Drucker and Weiant made monographs from Tres Zapotes's ceramics but were unable to produce a definitive chronology of the site (Grove 1997: 57). Stirling, and Drucker would continue to publish on Olmec research, Stirling focusing on stone monumental art while Drucker focused on the archaeological aspects, and both had a large majority of their fieldwork funded by The National Geographic Society which ultimately brought the Olmec to audiences across the globe (Grove 1997: 57). In 1941 Stirling and Drucker returned to Cerro de las Mesas, Stirling had previously recorded over 20 Classic period carved stone monuments at the site and began their excavations with the intention of then moving to La Venta the following year (Grove 1997: 58). However, the advent of World War II created a multitude of problems including dramatically limiting their research scope for La Venta and having Drucker out on military service (Grove 1997: 58).

After their first field season at La Venta, Stirling attended the "Mayas y Olmecas" conference in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas where he told Mexican scholars of the discoveries he and Drucker had made at La Venta, among these scholars were Alfonso Caso and Miguel Covarrubias (Grove 1997: 60). Stirling, Caso, and Covarrubias all believed that the Olmec were Archaic and older than the Maya but were unable to prove it at the time (Grove 1997: 60). In 1945 Stirling visited San Lorenzo, Rio Chiquito or Tenochtitlan, and Potrero Nuevo he would then return with Drucker after his military service was complete in 1946 to conduct excavations, and although the actual excavations yielded little to nothing the team was able to document twenty-three Olmec

stone monuments (Grove 1997: 61). With Drucker's return, the final reports of La Venta were finally able to be finished in 1948 but it wouldn't be published for another four years in 1952 and would include a chapter by Waldo Wedel and an appendix by Anna Shepard; unfortunately, the 1946 excavations at San Lorenzo were never published in a detailed report (Grove 1997: 61).

Work continued throughout the southern Gulf Coast when in 1953 Henrich Berlin visited central and eastern Tabasco and the several dozen sites there, and Drucker and Eduardo Contreras located 80 sites in their survey of the eastern and southern border sites (Grove 1997: 61). Drucker returned to La Venta in 1955 alongside Robert Heizer and Robert Squier where they did intensive excavation at Complex A, the "Ceremonial Court," and produced a major chronological breakthrough by obtaining the first Olmec radiocarbon date that dated Complex A between 2750 – 2350 B.P (Grove 1997:62). Unfortunately, Petroleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) discovered oil at La Venta and in 1958 an airfield was constructed a portion of which ran against Complex A's northwest corner, and even more damage to Mound A-2 and the Ceremonial Court occurred when the airfield was widened and when a pipeline was installed on the sites west side (Grove 1997: 62). Luckily most of La Venta's major stone monuments were spared as they made their way to Villahermosa sometime in 1958, meanwhile Roman Pina Chan and Roberto Gallegos continued documenting the site (Grove 1997: 62).

Alfonzo Medellin Zenil an archaeologist working for the Universidad Veracruzana brought Laguna de los Cerros, the third major Olmec center to be discovered to the archaeological spotlight in 1958 (Grove 1997: 63). Zenil's excavations began in 1960 and they produced twenty eight stone monuments and unknowingly came

upon the workshop site Llano del Jicaro which he initially believed to be a part of Laguna de los Cerros (Grove 1997: 64). Around the same time as Zenil, Robert Heizer and geologist Howel Williams searched for possible basalt sources and sampled two Tuxtla volcanos Cerro El Vigia and Cerro Cintepec (Grove 1997: 65). From this study it was found that a number of San Lorenzo and La Venta monuments were made from Cerro Cintepec (east side) basalt whereas monuments from Tres Zapotes was made from basalt quarried from Cerro El Vigia (west side) (Grove 1997: 65). Because so much of Olmec archaeological knowledge was based on the La Venta excavations Michael Coe and Richard Diehl began a 3 year project in 1966 at San Lorenzo and Tenochtitlan which would ultimately forever change the worlds perspective on the Olmec (Grove 1997: 66). Coe and Diehl's excavations included Group A (previously excavated by Drucker and Stirling), Group D, magnetometry, and produced more radiocarbon dates which again pushed the Date of Olmec antiquity farther back (Grove 1997: 67). Drucker, Heizer, and John Graham returned to La Venta in 1967 to excavate nine pits in nine days with the goal of obtaining more charcoal for radiocarbon dating, and the following year Drucker and Graham would produce a topographic map of the La Venta pyramid accompanied by a magnetometer survey in 1969 (Grove 1997: 67-68).

The 1970's yielded no major sites excavations but instead two significant regional surveys; the first done by Edward Sisson where he recorded over 200 sites in the Chontalpa just east of La Venta, and by Robert Squier and Francisco Beverido who ran a 3 year project investigating the Tuxtla mountains via reconnaissance and excavations (Grove 1997: 68). These reconnaissance investigations included the sites of Tres Zapotes, Matcapan, and later between 1977 and 1978 Gomez Rueda would document the site of

Las Limas. (Grove 1997: 68). In 1984 the INAH, state of Tabasco, and Rebecca Gonzalez Lauck took action to help protect La Venta from further destruction by PEMEX and other modern settlement projects by creating a research program that focused on protection and restoration (Grove 1997: 69). New excavations discovered more stone monuments and levees in La Venta's periphery which show evidence of maize agriculture in the area as far back as 3450 B.P. (Grove 1997: 69). Meanwhile, Robert Stanley and Ponciano Ortiz began a survey and excavation project focused on the Tuxtla mountains, starting in 1982 and lasting six years, and were able to identify Early and Middle Formative period plainware ceramics (Grove 1997: 69). In 1987 a major discovery occurred in the Coastzacoalcos Basin where Carmen Rodriguez and Ponciano Ortiz discovered the watery site of El Manati (Grove 1997: 70). Excavations at El Manati continued for years starting in 1988 and continuing almost every year until 1996, and would produce numerous wooden busts, greenstone celts, and a dozen rubber balls (Grove 1997: 70). Three different stratigraphic levels were identified, Manati A, Manati B, and Macayal and the most recent deposits, the wooden busts, were not only wrapped in woven reed mats but were also associated with disarticulated human infant bones (Grove 1997: 70).

Ann Cyphers restarted archaeological investigations at San Lorenzo through six field seasons starting in 1990 and were focused on both domestic and non-domestic areas which included workshops and "drain lines" (Grove 1997: 70). Part of this project was a reconnaissance of San Lorenzo's hinterlands and excavation of the periphery sites Potrero Nuevo and El Azuzul, but during the reconnaissance it was revealed that San Lorenzo was much larger than previously thought going from 53 ha to an estimated 690

ha (Grove 1997: 70-71). Separately from Cyphers, Robert Kruger conducted a surface survey of the Coatzacoalcos Basin in a 25km<sup>2</sup> area between San Lorenzo and El Manati in 1992 (Grove 1997: 71). David Grove and Susan Gillespie had been working in the Western part of Olman at a hinterland site of Laguna de los Cerros called La Isla in 1991, and during their time there Grove and Gillespie were able to document numerous unreported Olmec stone monuments as well as continued work at Llano del Jicaro where Zenil had previously explored thirty-one years prior (Grove 1997: 71). In 1995 Christopher Pool began surface surveys at Tres Zapotes in an attempt to identify any relationship between it and its hinterland sites which revealed a mound cluster settlement pattern (Grove 1997: 71). Between 1995 and 1996, Philip Arnold excavated the Tuxtla mountains' two largest middle Formative sites, La Joya and Teotepec (Grove 1997: 72).

There has been a number of works that have come out over the last 50 years regarding Mesoamerican iconography, and one of the most influential of these is Peter David Joralemon's *A Study of Olmec Iconography*. Here Joralemon develops the first dictionary used to define various motifs present in Olmec art and iconography and is a foundational piece of literature for the field. From this he was able to identify ten major Olmec mythological gods and create an analytical approach to understanding Olmec religion (Joralemon 1971: 90).

### *San Lorenzo*

San Lorenzo or San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan as it was named by Stirling, is a large site in Olman that not only demonstrated a total Olmec-style artform but dominated the region with this style during the Early Pre-Classic between 1200 – 900 BC (Cyphers 1990: 158). Located just 60km southeast of the Santa Marta and San Martin mountains

within the municipality of Texistepec Veracruz, the site of San Lorenzo is positioned on the highest point of the Coatzacoalcos River drainage (Figure 7) (Cyphers 1996: 61-62). Earliest evidence of San Lorenzo's formation starts around 1800 B.C. when the inhabitants created the first villages on the defensible high ground (Cyphers 2010: 3). Between 1800 and 1400 B.C. the people of San Lorenzo moved 2.2 million tons of earth to create an earthen platform and sunken plateau (Cyphers 2010: 3). San Lorenzo would peak between 1400 and 1000 B.C. when its size grew to more than 1700 acres with the final size of the great plateau containing roughly 9.4 million tons of earth (Cyphers 2010: 3).

Beginning in 1938, archaeologist Matthew Stirling visited San Lorenzo and by 1945 he had started the first excavations sponsored by The National Geographic Society and Smithsonian Institution (Cyphers 1996: 63). During excavations Stirling would discover the largest Olmec colossal head "El Rey" alongside his wife, Philip Drucker, and Richard Stewart. Mistakenly, Stirling would group two other sites, Tenochtitlan, and Potrero Nuevo with the San Lorenzo site calling the conglomerate San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan (Cyphers 1996: 63). While studying the twenty-two monuments from San Lorenzo Stirling was the first to propose the idea that the colossal stone heads were in fact portraits of prominent individuals as well as document some of the major artistic themes (Cyphers 1996: 64). Stirling documented the prevalence of jaguar, snake, eagle, and stingray images as well as the fact that many of the monuments unearthed at San Lorenzo had been deliberately deposited into ravines (Cyphers 1996: 64).

Coe would return to San Lorenzo between 1966 and 1968 with the Rio Chiquito Project where he not only conducted extensive excavations throughout the site but was

also able to create the first detailed topographic map of the heights of San Lorenzo with Ray Kroster (Cyphers 1996: 64). Luckily for Coe and Kroster, new archaeological technical advancements allowed them access to new tools during their excavations which included using a cesium magnetometer which aided in discovering seventeen more stone monuments at San Lorenzo (Cyphers 1996: 64). The project's final publication included detailed cross-sections maps of both the excavation and stratigraphic features from the site and is one of the best examples of a thorough site report available (Cyphers 1996: 64). From these excavations and investigations, Coe and Diehl produced a publication citing their opinions on what they believe happened at San Lorenzo including the earliest occupations indicating that the Olmec developed in the Gulf Coast lowlands and appeared between 1500-1350 BC during the Ojochi phase (Cyphers 1996: 64).

The archaeological evidence at San Lorenzo is indicative of a highly developed society that at the very least was organized at a chiefdom level but could have reached statehood (Cyphers 1996: 64). The primary reasoning for this claim is the colossal heads themselves, weighing tens of tons, transportation of the raw materials from the Tuxtla Mountains would have required a highly efficient and strong centralized organization (Cyphers 1996: 64). The leaders of San Lorenzo are believed to be part of a secular hereditary lineage that gained their political status via controlling food surplus from the river levee lands, and then gained their economic power through both the control and distribution of basalt, greenstone, hematite, magnetite, ilmenite, and obsidian (Cyphers 1996: 64).

After the Rio Chiquito Project finished, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia had Francisco Beverido go to San Lorenzo in 1969 in order to explore several

magnetic anomalies one of which was Colossal Head 7 (Cyphers 1996: 64). Jurgen Bruggeman discovered Colossal Head 8 as well as several other monuments in 1970 when checking other anomalies, unfortunately work wouldn't pick back up at the San Lorenzo until twenty years later when Ann Cyphers began the San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan Archaeological Project (Cyphers 1996: 65). Cyphers chose to focus on habitation areas which she believed were more often than not ignored that included domestic, productive, and ceremonial areas (Cyphers 1996: 65). Stacey Symonds and Roberto Lunagomez conducted the extensive regional surveys of San Lorenzo's 400 km<sup>2</sup>'s of hinterlands during which Lunagomez discovered that surface remains from the Early Formative period covered almost 690 hectares (Cyphers 1996: 65, 67).

What makes San Lorenzo different than the other Olmec sites of its time is that it is the first site to have an incredible increase in stone sculptures in an Olmec style, so much so that it dwarfs any site in comparison by hundreds of artifacts. Another interesting element of San Lorenzo is that it contains the highest concentration of Olmec Colossal Heads (10) known to exist at a single site, and the heads appear to be oriented North to South creating a processional way. Combined with it is the fact that there are also altar thrones present as well as evidence for altar thrones being re-carved into Colossal Heads (Head 7/Monument 53).

### *La Venta*

Discovered by Blom and La Farge in 1925 during their explorations for Tulane University, La Venta is the largest Olmec site and is located on a salt dome formed island between the Tonala river in the lowland areas just 12 miles from the Gulf Coast in Tabasco, Mexico (Figure 8) (Clewlow 1974: 15). During their journey Blom and La



Farge located, sketched, and photographed eight of La Venta's stone monuments as well as encountered Stela 1 (Colman 2010: 14-15). Between 1750 and 1400 B.C. La Venta started its foundation with occupants settling north of the site core along Rio Bari's silted levees, between 1400 and 1150 B.C. the site core itself was occupied, from 1150 to 800 B.C. La Venta developed into a major temple-town complex, and finally peaking between 800 and 500 B.C (Rust and Sharer 1988: 102).

In 1931 H. A. Knox accidentally came upon La Venta during a shooting expedition where his crew accidentally struck stone when cutting a path through the brush, upon clearing the area Knox and his crew would see "curious objects" including Stela 1. (Colman 2010: 15). Blom and La Farge documented their journey in *Tribes and Temples* which ultimately inspired Matthew Stirling and Philip Drucker to begin excavations at La Venta (Colman 2010: 17). Between 1940 and 1943 Stirling and Drucker's excavations, funded by the National Geographic Society and Smithsonian institution and believe the site to have been occupied from 1200 - 400 BC (Clark 2014: 15).

Drucker, Heizer and Squier's extensive explorations in 1955 documented 53 different offerings including singular ceramic vessels and a giant mosaic mask made from smoothed blocks of serpentine that was buried under a 1000 ton pile of serpentine stone (Clark 2014: 15). During their excavations at Complex A, Drucker's team was able to identify four major construction phases during La Venta's Middle Formative period (900-400 BC) and although no human remains were identified each artifact grouping was given an offering and burial number then assigned to an associated building phase (Clark 2014: 16). Drucker's team also identified nine monuments, Monuments 20 and 21 were found by a crew of oil company workers during the airstrip's construction, whereas

Monuments 22, 24, and 25 were found in situ which was the first stratigraphic clue from La Venta and dated the monuments to Phase IV (Clewlow 1974: 16). Unfortunately, after archaeologists left in 1959, the Mexican government failed to protect the site and as a result much of the site was illegally excavated or looted removing much of the site's archaeological integrity. Furthermore, because of the site's unique location on a salt dome, oil companies like Pemex have been vehemently fighting to remove or destroy portions of the site in order to access the large oil deposits that are indicative by its geology.

During the field season of 1968 a group of stone monuments was discovered, before this group there were 27 known monuments, 28 unknown monuments, and 14 un-numbered monuments (Clewlow 1974: 16). What is important about these discoveries is that Drucker and his team took extreme caution to accurately record exactly where each individual monument was discovered in an attempt to identify possible geometric alignments within La Venta (Clewlow 1974: 16). It was during this field season that researchers realized that there were probably a lot more stone monuments buried at La Venta, some of which were ritually recurved/defaced then buried between 950-510 BC during the Preclassic, unearthed Monuments 74, 75, and an elaborate drainage system within the Stirling Group (Clewlow 1974: 17).

Morrison, Clewlow, and Heizer would return in 1969 to conduct magnetometer surveys on Complex 1, and the next year Heizer and Wyshak would conduct excavations on a possible ballcourt within the Stirling Group (Sandoval 2004: 14). Starting in 1986, Rebecca Gonzalez-Lauck has been dedicated to mapping, protecting, restoring, and researching La Venta for the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, or INAH

(Figure 9) (Colman 2010: 35). That majority of her research was focused on mapping the full extent of the main site combined with limited excavations that are focused on ceramic and architectural sequences, magnetometer surveys, lithic analyses, and geomorphological studies in hope of not only clarifying but confirming the results of these previous studies (Colman 2010: 35).

In 1986 William F. Rust conducted survey and testing in complexes E, G, and H that produced numerous signs of domestic and residential use of the site which disproved earlier beliefs that La Venta was left vacant except during ceremonial use (Colman 2010: 39). Surface reconnaissance conducted between 1986 and 1987 showed that there were more than an additional 100 pre-Hispanic settlements surrounding La Venta which included both simple and elaborate platforms, of which 58 date to 1000 BC (Gonzalez-Lauck 1996: 80; Rust 1987, 2008). In total there have been over 90 stone monuments recovered from La Venta, and more than half of those are considered offerings from Complex A and D (Gonzalez-Lauck 2001: 800; 2004: 2010). However, the artifacts from La Venta that pertain to this thesis are its seven altar thrones, Colossal Heads, and Stela 1.

### *Tres Zapotes*

Located on the Olmec heartlands western margin, the archaeological site of Tres Zapotes rests in present day Veracruz between the Sierra de los Tuxtla's to its east and the Rio Papaloapans alluvial plain to its west (Figure 10) (Pool 2000:138). Earliest accounts of Tres Zapotes or Hueyapan as it is also known as, come from Jose Melgar in 1862 when he 'discovered' a Colossal Head (Stirling 1967: 2). Between 1869 and 1871, Melgar published articles that described the unique physical types depicted on the

sculpture as those coming from a “Negro race” that had previously occupied the region. It was almost sixty years when archaeological observations of the site began starting with La Farge and Blom visiting the region between 1927 and 1928 and writing a publication, Albert Weyerstall also commented on his accounts with Hueyapan’s Colossal Head in 1932 (Stirling 1967: 4). The same year Matthew Stirling became the director the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnology where he initiated a project, led by Duncan Strong, with the goal of surveying the eastern Maya region (Stirling 1967: 4).

Major archaeological efforts began at Tres Zapotes in 1938 when Matthew Stirling picked up where Strong left off and began surveying the western Maya region, during which Stirling photographed the Colossal Head and several other monuments (Stirling 1967: 4). The pictures from this visit made their way into the hands of the National Geographic Society which sparked their immediate interest as the head was found *in situ* and positioned in a court that was surrounded by four mounds (Stirling 1967: 4). Funded by The National Geographic Society, work at the site continued in two seasons (1938-39, 1939-40) until 1940 alongside the assistance Mexican Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Alfonso Caso, and Ignacio Marquina (Stirling 1967: 4).

During season 1 of field work Stirling was accompanied by Clarence Weiant and together they uncovered Stela C, but in season 2 Weiant was replaced by Philip Drucker where excavations showed Tres Zapote’s antiquity which further fueled next sixteen years of research for the National Geographic Society/Smithsonian Institution. (Stirling 1967: 4-5). From their excavations, Drucker and Stirling were able to create a general chronology using ceramics, but this was later revised in 1965 by Michael Coe and then in

1975 refined by Ponciano Ortiz (Pool 2000:138). Over forty stone monuments have been discovered at Tres Zapotes which prompted Howell Williams and Robert Heizer to produce their landmark petrographic analysis using physicochemical means to characterize the sites obsidian assemblages (Pool 2000:138).

### *El Marquesillo*

Located in the Juan Rodriguez Clara municipality, the site of El Marquesillo was initially believed to be comprised of a 32 m high earthen mound known locally as *Cerro de Moctezuma* (Hill of Montezuma) and the earliest accounts of the site come from a nineteenth century map (Figure 11) (Doering 2007: 65). The map shows that there was construction in the middle of the San Juan River on its west bank, and this same structure is again mentioned by Aguirre-Beltran's "Pobladores del Papaloapan" in 1992 (Doering 2007: 65). Aguirre Beltran claims that after the Mexica conquest in 1457 Emperor Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina or Montezuma I sent troops into the Papaloapan River Basin which could be the reason for the mounds name (Doering 2007: 98).

The first official account of Cerro de Montezuma was in *Proyecto Rescate Arqueologico Autopista La Tinaja-Acayucan* by INAH archaeologist Lino Espinoza Garcia, who claimed Senora Cruz Reich Pitalua of El Marquesillo visited him in 1994 and informed him of looting at the site (Doering 2007: 98). Espinoza would revisit EL Marquesillo later that year and again in 1998, during the first trip he would sketch a partial map that documented some architectural structures as well as submitting some of his professional input regarding the sites being vulnerable to damage or destruction from the nearby San Juan River (Doering 2007: 99).

In 2001 residents from the modern village that surrounds El Marquesillo discovered a basalt altar throne which prompted archaeologists Lourdes Hernandez to enter the field within a week to document the monument in 2002 under the direction of the Centro INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) Veracruz (Doering 2007: 100). During INAH's excavations and recovery of the altar throne, they were able to acquire enough archaeological evidence to allow them to determine that the throne was ritually buried between the Middle to Late Formative (900-300 BC). (Doering 2007: 65) The altar itself weighed over 12 tons and sat 8m above the San Juan River atop an embankment that made recovering the monument difficult, but Hernandez and her team were able to excavate while simultaneously creating an inclined ramp that they used to remove the altar (Doering 2007: 101).

During excavations a topographic map was created that directed a pedestrian reconnaissance of the area that documented a series of Late Classic to Postclassic architectural complexes which included the 71.43 ha Villa Alta-type Cerro de Moctezuma Complex and its ballcourts, plazas, and pozos. (Doering 2007: 102-103). The Cerro de Moctezuma Complex is oriented on a north-south axis with the south and southwestern portions of the central plaza containing the most associated construction (Doering 2007: 103). The Northwest Complex is positioned 100 m west of the ejido's residential zone and consists of 2.8 ha with a main plaza very similar to the Cerro de Mctezuma Complex but on a much smaller scale, and unlike its larger counterpart, the Northwest Complex is oriented to the northwest southwest (Doering 2007: 103).

Between November 2002 and December 2003, Hernandez continued both surveys and excavations at El Marquesillo for the El Marquesillo Archaeological Project

(Doering 2007: 103). During this time, she had 35,000 ceramic artifacts excavated from the Northeast Complex via seven 1.5m x 1.5m test units as well as conducted a 5,500 m<sup>2</sup> survey and collection of the site (Doering 2007: 104-105). The Marquesillo Archaeological Survey Project picked up where Hernandez left off and was tasked with determining occupations sequences, identification of spatial patterns, and assess evidence for sociopolitical development during the sites Formative period (1500-100 BC) (Doering 2007: 113).

### *Laguna de los Cerros*

Considered an “upland” Olmec site, Laguna de los Cerros is located on the southwestern flank of the Tuxtla Mountains amidst rolling hills, upland plains, and plateaus separated by valleys (Gillespie 2000: 96). The site itself is 5 kilometers south of Corral Nuevo which is a town off of Highway 180 between Juan Diaz Covarrubia and Acayucan and is oftentimes mislocated on Olmec region maps (Figure 12) (Gillespie 2000: 96).

Some of the earliest archaeological work at Laguna de Los Cerros comes from Zenil when from March 13 to May 8, 1960, he conducted test excavations and produced the publication *Monolitos ineditos olmecas*, which documented the sites twenty seven stone carvings (Gillespie 2000: 96, 98). Six of the monuments at Laguna de los Cerros were analyzed by Williams and Heizer in 1965 and were determined to have been made from Cerro Cintepec basalt, but Monument 8 actually came from llano del Jicaro (Gillespie 1994: 232). Later in, 1971 Zenil would say there were twenty eight stone carvings, but unfortunately there were only fourteen of which that were photographed

and had information published on them due to the fact that many of the stone carvings were either mutilated or in very poor condition (Gillespie 2000: 98).

The site is comprised of a major ceremonial center that is surrounded by 5 smaller groups of mounds, and Zenil's map made during excavations show a total of ninety-five mounds which not only span over 40 hectares but also range in height from 1 to 30 meters (Gillespie 2000: 97). However, one problem with Zenil's map is that it is unclear if the 5 mounds groups are documented on the map as part of the ninety-five mounds, but Frederick Bove later asked Zenil about this, and they were considered secondary mound groupings not included on the map (Gillespie 2000: 97). In 1989 and 1991, Susan Gillespie, Ponciano Ortiz, and David Grove returned to Laguna de los Cerros where they observed fragments of four carved objects within the site's main plaza, two of which appear to be stylistically Olmec (monument C and D) whereas the other monuments are post-Olmec (Gillespie 2000: 101).

Laguna de los Cerros chronology is also a bit problematic as Zenil believes the monuments date between Early Formative to the Early Postclassic period which Tatiana Proskouriakoff initially disagreed with but would later agree in 1968 when a comparison of two sculptures that bore a striking resemblance to carvings from the Classic Maya site Tonina were uncovered (Gillespie 2000: 97). Evidence for Early Formative period activity is based on the deepest excavations which produced ceramic sherds and figurine heads dating back to the San Lorenzo phase (1150 – 900 BC), and Early Postclassic evidence comes in the form of a fine orange pottery found in the upper levels of the mounds which is contemporaneous with the Villa Alta phase (AD 900 – 1100) (Gillespie 2000: 97). However, the chronological debate continues as many of the monuments from



Laguna de los Cerros have little information on them, and the full list of sculptures isn't even in print, let alone published (Gillespie 2000: 97).

### *Llano del Jicaro*

Located only 7 km northwest of Laguna de los Cerros (Figure 13), Llano del Jicaro was initially investigated by Alfonso Medellin Zenil in 1960 where he observed that there were many unfinished monuments that littered the surface of Llano del Jicaro alongside numerous basalt boulders (Gillespie 1994: 232). Because of the site's proximity to Laguna de los Cerros and the presence of Monument 8, Zenil posited that Llano del Jicaro served as a monument workshop that was controlled by Laguna de los Cerros elites (Gillespie 1994: 232). Evidence that reinforces the idea of a workshop site comes from the fact that there are multiple unfinished stone monuments at the site, including monument 8, so it is believed that workers at Llano del Jicaro would carve the monuments until a specific stage when they would then be transported elsewhere to be finished (Gillespie 1994: 232). Three other large monoliths were discovered by Zenil and documented in his unpublished field notes that Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos from the Universidad Veracruzana was allowed to study in 1986 (Gillespie 1994: 232). Prior to this, Ceballos had visited the site in 1979 to help reestablish its location and during this trip discovered two more unfinished monuments in the form of tabletop altars (Gillespie 1994: 232).

Dave Grove and Susan Gillespie would make subsequent visits to Llano del Jicaro where they would learn that portions of the site had been destroyed when a ranch was built between 1989 and 1990 (Gillespie 1994: 232). However, in 1991 the La Isla-Llano del Jicaro Project launched a program aimed at collecting data from site surrounding

Laguna de los Cerros, so archaeological investigations began at Llano del Jicaro starting with a preliminary examination of the site during the first field season (Gillespie 1994: 232). The three goals of the project were 1) systematically survey the area in search for any new stone monuments while plotting known ones; 2) excavate test pits around some of the carved stones in hope of finding evidence of production/manufacturing; 3) Study the habitation areas of the stone carvers and the immediate area instead of focusing on Laguna de los Cerros (Gillespie 1994: 232). The program determined that the total carved stone artifacts that come from Llano del Jicaro are a tabletop altar, two large slabs, five channel stones, a stela, and the monument 8 that Zenil removed (Gillespie 1994: 233).

The site itself rests on a raised plain that is bordered by small valleys whose runoff drains south into the San Juan River, and during the rainy season pools water in an area known as the *potrero* zone which is now predominantly used as cattle pastures (Gillespie 1994: 233). The sites southeastern corner contains areas called *lomas* zones which consist of low ridges that are raised 2m above the plain and surface artifacts such as Formative and Classic period ceramic sherds, obsidian chips, and ground stone implements were discovered (Gillespie 1994: 233). What is probably most interesting is that the basalt boulders used for carving were found either on the surface or partially buried in both types of zones, and the sites boundary was well defined by the presence of these carved stones (Gillespie 1994: 233).

### *Chalcatzingo*

Chalcatzingo is an Olmec highland site located in the Amatzinac River Valley in present day Morelos, Mexico that was continuously occupied from 1500 – 500 B.C. (Figure 14). Occupation consisted of three main phases: the Amate 1500 – 1100 B.C.,

Barranca 1100 – 700 B.C., and Cantera 700 – 500 B.C. with the most amount of construction occurring during the Barranca phase (Grove and Guillen 1987: 56-59). Nestled at the base of two mountains, the site is rich with Olmec iconography and consists of multiple terraces and a central plaza. The first documented accounts of the site come from a letter to the Secretaria de Educacion Publica on February 23, 1934, which included the accounts of explorers who believed they had found hieroglyphs on Cerro de la Cantera or Cerro Chalcatzingo (Grove 1987: 1). A month later, archaeologist Eulalia Guzman working for the INAH visited Chalcatzingo where she documented “El Rey” and four other carvings (Grove 1987: 1).

Archaeological excavations at Chalcatzingo began in 1952 under Roman Pina Chan where he excavated eleven trenches on the sites terraced hillside (Grove 1987: 1). Based on the ceramics gathered during excavation, Chan argued that Chalcatzingo started as a small farming community which coexisted with an archaic Olmec group during the Middle Preclassic whereas he believed the carvings to date to the Late Preclassic period (Grove 1987: 1). Between 1966 and 1967 Grove was conducting doctoral research and came upon surface collections from Chalcatzingo which he used to produce his own preliminary analysis of the site (Grove 1987: 1). Luckily for Olmec archaeologists, researchers would return to Chalcatzingo in 1972 thanks to Grove and work would start up again through the Chalcatzingo Archaeological Project run by David Grove, Jorge Angulo, and Raul Arana which ultimately laid the foundation for most of what we know about the site (Grove 1987: 1). Further work was done by Grove and F. Kent Reilly III to help interpret the iconography of the site and associate its central themes with those that originated in Olman. Of most interest to this thesis is the group of bas-relief carvings

found on the upper terrace of the site known as the “Water Dancing Group”, and in particular monuments 1 and 9. Although it was occupied for a millennium, Chalcatzingo did not produce Olmec-style artwork until 900 BC and didn’t make their bas-reliefs until 700 – 500 BC.

### *Oxtotitlan Cave*

Located along a hillside just two kilometers east of Acatlan, and twelve kilometers north of Chilapa, Guerrero, Oxtotitlan is a westward facing cave that overlooks both the Rio Atentli and the inhabitants of Acatlan village and is decorated with incredible Olmec style artwork (Figure 15) (Grove 1970: 6). The people of Acatlan named the cave Oxtotitlan as it is Nahuatl for “place of the caves,” however the people from Chilapa refer to it as “the cave of Acatlan.” (Grove 1970: 6). Early archaeological work at the site was conducted by David Grove, Paul Schmidt, Sandra Cruz Flores, for the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) as well as the Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia (INAH). Separated into three grottos (Central, North, and South), the paintings are clustered by type/content (Figure 16) (FAMSI). The North grotto is comprised of nine paintings with the majority of the images being small, monochrome (black pigment), and containing images representative of humans, animals, or zoomorphs (Grove 1970: 16-24). The southern grotto’s paintings consists of a central group named Area A that consists of over fifteen small paintings, Area B which has a single polychrome and small black painting, and Area C that is similar to Area A as it has a cluster of small individuals designs (Grove 1970: 24-27). Oxtotitlan’s central group contains two of the most impressive pieces of artwork at the site, Mural’s 1 and 2, Mural 1 will be used for this thesis as it is the only one that contains a niche.

### *Tiltepec*

Located in Chiapas between Tonalá and Arriaga on the Pacific Slope (Figure 17), the archaeological site of Tiltepec is named after the Tiltepec River and is first referenced in 1586 journal by Fray Alonso Ponce (Navarrete 1959: 2). During this initial visit Ponce documented that the Indians that greeted him spoke a language similar to Zoque, and that the town of Tiltepec was part of the Xoconusco province which was famous for its high quality cacao (Navarrete 1959: 2).

Almost 300 years later in 1845, Emeterio Pineda wrote of a deserted village named San Juan Tiltepeque that existed within the Tonalá district which not only had ancient ruins but served as a line that separated the neighboring properties (Navarrete 1959: 2). The site was mentioned again by Daniel Brinton in 1897 where he reports that Dr. C. H. Berendt visited Tiltepec and during this time recorded various mounds, platforms, and stone altars that were decorated with images of men and fruit (Navarrete 1959: 4). Unfortunately, Tiltepec is separated into two zones by the highway, and eastern side with 2 fallen worked stones, 5 large mounds that range between 2 and 4 meters in height, and small mounds less than a meter in height (Navarrete 1959: 4). The west side of Tiltepec has a plaza that is partially enclosed by two platforms, each platform served as the base for three mounds but much of the upper plaza was destroyed during the coastal highway's construction (Navarrete 1959: 4).

### *Los Cerritos Sur*

Split into North and South sites via a modern railroad, Los Cerritos Sur is actually a single archaeological site that is located between the Escalante and Rios Guacalate atop 120m of gently sloping and well-drained soils (Figure 18) (Bove 1981: 219, 221).

Located 10m km east of Monte Alto, 10k m southwest of Escuintla, and is part of the Department capitals lands that are owned by Finca Los Cerritos (a large sugar cane producer) as well as Ingenic Santa Ana which is controlled by the Botran family (Bove 1981: 219).

Some of the earliest accounts of the site comes from Shook and Heizer in 1976 when they describe an extensive Pre-Classic and Classic archaeological occupation, and an Las Bocas and Olmec style figurine was turned up when a farmer was plowing the area (Bove 1981: 220). The northern portion of the site consists of a major acropolis type site that contains two Cotzumalguapan style stelae, one of which had been broken apart and was rediscovered and the pieces reunited again thanks to a farmer's plow (Bove 1981: 221). The southern portion of the site is made up of a mixture of 19 mounds that range from large mounds up to 12 meters high with one having a 70 x 70 m footprint to some that are barely recognizable.

### *Izapa*

Located in the Soconusco region of Chiapas and neighboring Guatemala (Figure 19), the site of Izapa began during the second millennium B.C.as evidence of Early Formative activity appear in the Mazatan zone in the Soconusco region (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 255). The best known of these early centers is Paso de la Amada which formed a network between the locally chiefs and kings which by 1400 B.C. had made the Soconusco elites apart of a long-distance trade relationship with the Gulf Coast Olmec (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 255). By 1000 B.C. the Mazatan zone had been abandoned and the site of La Blanca had emerged on the other end of the Soconusco region as the new regional center, this shift corresponded to the increase in commitment

to maize agriculture as well as the construction of large conical mounds appearing in political centers (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 255). Archaeological evidence indicates that the site of La Blanca was the most hierarchical polity in the Soconusco region where new levels of social and political stratification were created but after a few centuries it too would collapse (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 255). This all set the stage for Izapa who adopted the same mounded architecture sometime around 800 B.C. and would become one of the longest lasting centers that flourished over the next millennium and a half (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 255).

Early accounts of the site come from Ignacio Marquina from between 1939 and 1940 when he mentioned the isolated sculpture, mounds, burials, and ceramics in his *Atlas arqueologico de la Republica Mexicana* (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 256). Karl Ruppert from the Carnegie Institution visited the site in 1938, and both Alfred V. Kidder and Carlos Culebro visited the site in 1939, however it wasn't until 1941 when Miguel Covarrubias sparked Matthew Stirling's interest that archaeological work began (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 256). Stirling went to Izapa as the director of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institute to excavate and photograph monuments with the help of National Geographic Society photographer Richard Stewart (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 256). Matthew, his wife Marion, and Richard spent only one week in April 1941 at Izapa but during that time they were able to locate more than thirty stone monuments and published their findings in *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico* in 1943 (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 256).

As interest in the site continued to grow, Philip Drucker visited and excavated 12 trenches in 1948 where brown and black slipped sherds and Plumbate pottery were

uncovered. It wasn't until 1956 that the New World Archaeological Foundation had Gareth Lowe collect ceramic samples from an undisturbed drainage canal which allowed for an archaeological breakthrough at Izapa by identifying two major occupation periods at Izapa; the first ranges from the Late to Terminal Formative while the second is during the Late Classic period (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 256).

The NWAf conducted four field seasons during the first half of the 1960's where Susanna Ekholm published a M.A. thesis on Mound 30a's ceramics which defined the Early and early Middle Formative periods chronological sequence at Izapa (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 257). However, after the NWAf's excavations work at Izapa stopped until the 1990's when Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia discovered more than two dozen new monuments (Rosenwig and Guernsey 2018: 257).

When work resumed at Izapa in the 1990's it was under the watchful eye of the INAH's Hernando Gomez Rueda who focused on the investigating Izapa's hydraulic system (Mendelsohn 2018: 242). Rueda spent a total of four field seasons at Izapa between 1992-1996, between 1992 and 1994 his work was centered on Group H's plaza and its hydraulic system which he posited served a ceremonial function that was probably associated with elaborate rituals either hosted or conducted by Izapa elites (Mendelsohn 2017: 61).

Another breakthrough would occur in 2011 when Robert Rosenwig initiated his Izapa Regional Settlement Project (IRSP) which produced extremely detailed maps via the newly implemented light detection and ranging (lidar) imaging technology (Mendelsohn 2018: 242). These new maps revealed two previously unmapped mounds in Izapa's southern sector which prompted the Izapa Household Archaeology Project



(IHAP) to begin excavations on mounds 255 and 260 in 2014 with hopes of documenting Formative period domestic occupations (Mendelsohn 2018: 242-243). Although no Middle or Late Formative period deposits were uncovered during the IHAP's excavations there were unexpected deposits from the Hato (100 BC – AD 100), Istapa (AD 100-250), and Jaritas (AD 250-400) phases that were recovered (Mendelsohn 2018: 244).

### *Takalik Abaj*

Just 40 kilometers north of the Pacific Ocean and 45 kilometers east of Chiapas, Mexico in southwest Guatemala (Figure 20), lies the once bustling, socioeconomic, and political center of Takalik Abaj. The now archaeological site is part of the Department of Retalhuleu and located in the Al Asintal municipality and is believed to have begun taking shape during the Early Formative period but gained its recognition and notoriety during the Middle Formative period 900 – 400 BC (Doering, Collins 2011: 3). The name Takalik Abaj comes from K'iche' Maya and is a term that means “Standing Stone” so it's no surprise that the majority of the research conducted at Takalik Abaj during the last century has been focused on the 326 stone sculptures (124 of which were carved) present at the site (Doering, Collins 2011: 1). The corpus of carved monuments from Takalik Abaj depict a range of topics including social complexity, political interaction, and ideological practices which portrays the dynamic developmental sequence that evolved from symbolic elements into elite ideological expressions of rulership, power, and authority during the Middle Formative period (Doering, Collins 2011: 1).

Archaeological interest in the site began in 1888 when German researcher, Gustav Brühl, wrote about its unique assemblage of carved stone monuments. Following Brühl, Karl Sapper described Stela 1 in 1894, and later in 1913 artist Max Vollmberg sketched

Stela 1 as well as commenting on other monuments, which in turn sparked Walter Lehmann's interest in 1926 who was keen enough to be the first to recognize the antiquity of the site's sculptures (Doering, Collins 2011: 3). However, Lehmann's chronological assignments for the sites' stone carvings challenged other scholars' ideas, and J. Eric Thompson was one who argued against Lehmann's early date. Unfortunately for Thompson, on his 1942 visit to the site where his intent was to prove his chronology, he challenged Lehmann's chronology citing his identification of Stela 2 that unbeknownst to Thompson, had already been documented by Lehmann as "Piedra Schlubach" and used for his chronology (Doering, Collins 2011: 4).

Almost twenty years later in 1965, Susanna Miles visited the site and published articles on two of the monuments: 3, 6 (Doering, Collins 2011: 4). Between the 1970's and 80's Edwin Shook and Lee Parsons also published on the site, specifically commenting on the site's sculptures. The first long-term investigations at Takalik Abaj took place between 1976-1980 when the University of California at Berkeley conducted both survey and excavations under the direction of John Graham (Doering, Collins 2011: 4). The articles produced from this study focused almost entirely on the sculptures from an art historian's perspective, and the site wasn't revisited until the early 2000's when Guatemalan archaeologists Miguel Orrego Corzo and Christa Schieber de Lavarreda began extensive work for the Takalik Abaj National Project (Doering, Collins 2011: 4).

Tasked with preservation and conservation, the Takalik Abaj National Project also permitted some new excavations, one of which in 2004 uncovered one of the earliest royal Maya graves (Doering, Collins 2011: 4). However, there are a couple problems with completing this task at Takalik Abaj; the site spans six square kilometers and was

coated in volcanic ash from a 1902 eruption, terraformed from commercial agriculture, is covered in dense natural vegetation, and there are five privately owned farms that house up to eighty percent of the archaeological sites. (Doering, Collins 2011: 4).

#### **IV. ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE NICHE MOTIF**

I will now describe the niche motif as well as present the artifacts from each site that is known to have an Olmec style niche motif. Starting with the Gulf Coast sites, radiating outward towards the highland, and ending with the Pacific Coast sites. My primary interest for this thesis is the niche motif and the various artistic representations of it, so the majority of the Iconographic Analysis will be focused on identification and comparison of unique elements.

In general, a niche is a cavity or hollowed out space that is typically bracketed on all sides, however I will argue that this is not always the case, and niches are often associated via similar themes that include human figures performing actions within the niche. The niche motif in Olmec art is routinely associated with two themes: caves and mouths/maws that act as portals to the beneath world, which I believe is a correct association and one that I will be referencing throughout this thesis. Niches can be found on numerous artifacts in various forms including carved in the round on sculptures such as altar thrones, stelae, on colossal heads as well as in low and high bas reliefs or painted on murals. The maw that is often associated with the niche is most likely the earth deity or earth monster that represents the surface of the earth, however some altars such as La Venta Altar 4 and Oxtotitlan Mural 1 also contain the crossed band motif which is often associated with the sky or above world. I also include artifacts with quatrefoils into the niche corpus as I believe them to be locatives that represent a specific time or place and their routine association with caves and maws throughout Olmec artwork furthers their connection.

I believe conducting a thorough structural analysis of the niche motif will provide more information on what the artists were trying to tell us. Some of the elements I am choosing to focus on which I believe to be important are the position of the figure(s) within the niche (seated, standing, kneeling, and crawling), the action they are performing (presenting, holding, bracing, and reaching), size and shape of niche relative to the figure (fully encased vs. emerging), and maw (framing) ornamentation/design.

*San Lorenzo*

#### **Monument 14**

San Lorenzo Monument 14 is one of two tabletop altars from San Lorenzo and is similar to La Venta altar 4 as it too has a seated figure within a niche who is holding a rope that connects to the left and right sides of the monument (Figure 21) (Clewlow 1974: 119). The altar itself is 4.38m long, 1.5m wide, and 1.8m tall whereas the seated figure is 109 cm tall, 93 cm wide, and 25 cm thick (Clewlow 1974: 65, 119). SLM 14 has substantial damage throughout the monument, some due to natural processes but others appear to be intentional. The head of the seated figure is badly eroded, and the backside of the monument has been broken off, but interestingly enough the right side has deep rectangular shaped niches bored into it (Clewlow 1974: 119). It is possible that this altar was in the stages of being recarved or it was ceremonially destroyed.

Although badly damaged, a large amount of detail can be pulled from the iconography on the monument. The seated figure is positioned cross-legged with its arms stretched out in front of its torso, with its right arm held down beside its right side and its left arm crossing over its legs in front of it (Mollenhauer 2010: 140). More detail went into the chest of the figure as it is rounded with pectoral muscles and has a flattened

abdomen whereas the arms are rounded and lack bicep definition (Milbrath 1979: 14).

The costume consists of a low-relief belt with four squared panels and the niche the figure is seated in only covers his shoulders which is uniquely shallow when compared to other altars (Milbrath 1979: 14).

The left side individual is wearing a wide-brimmed headdress, the headdress's brim has drop-like pendants hanging from it, being clutched by a bird of prey's talon (Figure 22) (Stirling 1955: 15). Curved ornaments hang from the individuals ear lobes and a star shaped gorget with a circle in its center hangs from a double string of beads off the individual's neck (Stirling 1955: 15). The individual's right arm is extended outwards and is grabbing its left arm, arm bands are worn on each upper arm, and a broad belt is worn across its waist (Stirling 1955: 16). Unfortunately, the stone is broken right at the right hand which is closest to the base of the monument and the seated figure which leads Stirling to believe that they would have been also holding the rope the seated individual in the niche is holding, as the La Venta Altar 4 shows (Stirling 1955: 15-16).

## **Monument 20**

San Lorenzo Monument 20 is a badly mutilated altar throne that is 1.4 m tall, 2 m wide, and 1.8 m long with a cross-legged figure seated within a central niche who is emerging with a baby held in its lap and although mutilated it appears the figure is wearing circular earrings and a headdress (Figures 23 and 24) (Clewlow 1974: 66, 119). Almost all the identifiable features of the altar have been damaged including the frontal niche, figure within it, and the presumed infant anthropomorph held by the niched figure have all been ground down (Mollenhauer 2010: 163). Unfortunately, the side, top, and back panels have been intentionally mutilated to the point where it's impossible to

discern if there were any low relief previously carved on them (Clewlow 1974: 119). The intentional destruction of San Lorenzo Monument 20 is similar to other altar thrones that Porter argues are the initial steps for recarving the altar thrones into Colossal Heads (Mollenhauer 2010: 163). One of the more unique attributes that San Lorenzo Monument 20 has is the step-like cut outs on the back of the altar throne which could possibly have served in aiding a ruler to ascend the throne (Mollenhauer 2010: 163). As I mentioned with La Venta Altar 2 and El Marquesillo Monument 1, San Lorenzo Monument 20 was ritually buried on its back with the seated figure facing up and holding the baby towards the surface (Clewlow 1974: 123).

### **Monument 53/Colossal Head 7**

This next monument is technically two different monuments therefore it has two names: San Lorenzo Colossal Head 7 and San Lorenzo Monument 53, it was discovered in 1969 via a magnetometer survey and is one of ten Colossal Heads present at the site (Figure 25) (Clewlow 1974: 24). The face of the Colossal Head has a puffy jowl, large eyes, an open mouth that's showing off three of its teeth, and a headdress decorated with two paws that have their fingers pointed towards that back (Clewlow 1974: 24-25). Colossal Head 7 is unique because not only was it recovered but when it was excavated it was found with ceramics that directly associated it with the San Lorenzo Phase (Clewlow 1974: 25). We know the statue comes from an altar throne from two attributes of the carving: the first is the flat base on the back which corresponds to the flat bottoms of the altars, and the second is the niche with a figure positioned in the center that makes up the statue's right ear. James Porter argues that San Lorenzo Colossal Heads 1, 2, and 7 were all once altar thrones that were Recarved into Colossal Heads (Porter 1989: 24). Of these

three, Colossal Heads 2 and 7 have the most defined niches (Figures 26 and 27), however Colossal Head 7 is the only one with the figure still partially intact so I will be focusing on it. Porter argues that there are two types of Colossal Heads: round or spherical, and two types of altars: square or cubical, and when the square or cubical altars are recarved they create round or spherical Colossal Heads whereas the elongated rectangular altars create elongated Colossal Heads (Porter 1989: 24). Evidence for recarving comes not only directly from San Lorenzo Monument(s) but also from La Venta Altar 4 and 5 which have had the sides of the tabletop knocked off while also being rounded off (Porter 1989: 26).

### *La Venta*

#### **Stela 1**

La Venta Stela 1 stands 2.33 m tall, 89 cm wide, 71 cm thick, and is a large rectangular slab with a high relief human figure standing within a central niche that measures in at 1.46 m tall, 72 m wide, and 18 cm thick (Figures 28 and 29) (Clewlow 1974: 76). The human figure is well modeled with puffy breasts, arm musculature, and a wide belly which makes it probable that the figure is a partially nude female (Clewlow 1974: 76). Another characteristic that supports the belief that the figure is female is the short skirt its wearing, which has four channels running vertically, and is a piece of clothing that females in Olmec are often depicted in such as at La Venta Altar 3 (Clewlow 1974: 76). Both the hands and feet of the figure are incised and squared off, the figure itself it not completely three dimensional as it is still a part of the stone background (Milbrath 1979: 15). Some of the figure's features such as the mouth and nose are difficult or impossible to determine due to heavy erosion damage, but we can tell that the



eyes are incised, and its ears realistically carved with suspended tassel decorations (Clewlow 1974: 76). The niche in Stela 1 that the human figure is standing in is referred to as an “open doorway” by Heizer and “the open mouth of a jaguar” by Stirling (Clewlow 1974: 76). Stirling based his interpretation off of the stylized jaguar mask that is carved in a low relief which would make the niche a maw similar to Chalcatzingo Monument 1 and 9 maw niche.

## **Altar 2**

La Venta Altar 2 is a rectangular block that measures 1.35 m long, 1.29 m wide, 99 cm tall, and contains a seated figure within an 8 cm deep frontal arched niche that is holding a baby (Figures 30 and 31) (Clewlow 1974: 63, 117). The altar throne’s overhanging ledge is cramping the figure which makes the niche smaller than usual, and the figure is carved in relief instead of a three dimensional model such as La Venta Altar 4 and 5 (Milbrath 1979: 14). Believed to be male, the figure is seated on the ground with both of its legs crossed in front of it with what appears to be a baby that is being cradled in its outstretched arms (Clewlow 1974: 63). Decorative features of the figure are difficult to distinguish due to intensive erosion however they include a helmet-type headdress, complete with a chinstrap that circumvented the head and connected back under the chin, ears with 7 cm earpools, recessed eyes, and what Stirling believed was an overall “primitive” altar similar to La Venta Altar 5 (Clewlow 1974: 63).

Two of the three side panels lack any decoration but have been flattened and smoothed whereas one was left rough which is probably a result of the altar being left unfinished (Clewlow 1974: 117). A note of interest regarding La Venta Altar 2 is that when it was recovered it was found buried with the seated figure facing upwards, which

not only indicates that ritual burying of altar thrones occurred as San Lorenzo Monument 20 was also found in a similar orientation, but I believe the action was also emulating the planting of corn (Clewlow 1974: 123).

### **Altar 3**

La Venta Altar 3 contains a seated male figure within a central niche who is badly eroded much of the detail on the headdress and face being destroyed (Figure 32) (Clewlow 1974: 63). Both the left and right arms are broken off; however, a part of the right hand is still present which is grasping the right legs calf and the left leg is extended backwards into the niche (Clewlow 1974: 63). The niche itself is rectangular, similar to LV Stela 1 and El Marquesillo Monument 1, and instead of the niche being flush with the bottom of the altar it is actually raised on 17 cm tall platform so that the figure is framed within the niche (Clewlow 1974: 64). Above the niche is a 20 cm high panel which protrudes out from the back wall of the niche, connecting the figures headdress to the back and making the carving a high relief and not three dimensional in the round (Clewlow 1974: 64).

The side view of La Venta Altar 3 depicts two figures in bas relief (Figure 33). Both figures are facing each other. seated cross-legged with the central figure being larger than the other and interacting with one another with their arms. The larger figure is lacking definitive clothing however there is some ornamentation on the individual's head, including a possible beard. The smaller figure has a definitive headdress and what appears to be clothing draped over his chest. The smaller figure is grabbing its left leg by the ankle with its right hand (almost identical to La Venta Altar 4's figures hand positioning), whereas the large figure is holding something in their left hand by its waist.

#### Altar 4

La Venta Altar 4 (800 – 400 BC) is one of the seven altar thrones present at the site. It is located in La Venta's Complex D on the eastern side of the northern mound, opposite Altar 5 (Figure 34). It is carved in a bas relief style and depicts one of the two altar throne themes known as the "rope theme". Covering the altar are numerous motifs that associate the altar throne with the above and beneath world. Starting with the seated central figure who is depicted wearing a feathered headdress, likely represents *Haripa harpyja* or the Harpy eagle, an elaborate neck ornamentation which is either a jade pectoral or a concave mirror and is emerging from a niche that has feather incised on the inside of the niche cavity (Figure 35) (Grove 1973: 130). Decorating the figure is a skirt-like piece of clothing and in its hands is a rope that snakes around the sides of the altar, physically connecting the scenes from the side panels with the frontal one, and is believed to represent either kinship relationship, the cosmic umbilicus, or axis mundi that connects all three worlds (Grove 1973: 130).

Moving outward from the central figure, we see the niche is surrounded by two concentric circles, one of which has diagonal markings and has four bloodletting bowls spewing smoke (Figure 36). Each bloodletting bowl is positioned in corners opposite one another which forms a quincunx around the central figure. Directly above the central figure is a zoomorphic image with a sky banner/cross band motif in its open mouth. To the right and left of the sky banner are the gum brackets of the Olmec Dragon, a zoomorphic being that is often associated with a caiman and is believed to be the foundation of the earth but is not limited to the earth. Above each gum bracket is a flared eyebrow, another motif that is iconic of the Olmec Dragon. Finally, in the farthest corners

of the top right and left of the altar, there are double merlon motifs present. This motif is associated with corn and fertility, which helps show the juxtaposition of the motifs presented on the altar as depicting a zoomorphic creature and figure in a scene with both above world and our world motifs (Reilly: Personal Communication).

### **Altar 5**

La Venta Altar 5 depicts a cross-legged figure sitting within a central niche, it was found on the western side of the northern mound in Complex D at La Venta and was first encountered by Stirling in 1940 (Figure 37) (Mollenhauer 2010: 239). Like Altar 4 the central figure is carefully carved with rounded shoulders, hands, and bicep muscles and is wearing an elaborate headdress that contains sky banners, maize motifs, bird motifs, but the theme is dramatically different from Altar 4 as the figure in Altar 5 is holding a supernatural infant in its outstretched arms (Milbrath 1979: 13). The headdress itself is a very different style when compared to Altar 4 however the neck adornments the figure is wearing seem very similar. Positioned in the central figure's arms is an infant which many believe to be a representation of the Olmec maize god due to the downward curved jaguar/serpent mouth the baby has. The niche the central figure emerges from is the cross section of a bloodletting bowl, but any other motifs on the front have been broken off, possibly due to reshaping efforts.

Finally, the left and right side panels of the altar depict six full figures and two broken figures. Although a large portion of the left panel is missing, some details can still be made out. Starting with the right panel there are two figures in headdresses and capes holding supernatural infants, each have a different hat with the one closest to the central figure wearing a multi-tiered brimmed hat, similar to Slim, whereas the figure farthest on

the right wears a conical hat similar to the central figure (Figure 38) (Milbrath 1979: 33). The left panel also depicts two figures with headdresses and capes holding supernatural infants however the closest figures are cut in half from the top right to the bottom left due to the Altars mutilation or recarving, however a figure holding an infant with a large pectoral can be seen (Figure 39) (Milbrath 1979: 33). The intact figure on the left panel wears a distinct brimmed hat and the supernatural infant appears to be wearing a buccal mask as well as holding something in its arm over its head. It is also important to note that excavations carried out by Stirling at Altar 5 produced a cache of 99 beads, the majority of which were large cylindrical or spherical jade beads however one spherical amethyst bead was also recovered, which he believes were part of a necklace and two bracelets (Mollenhauer 2010: 241).

## **Altar 6**

La Venta Altar 6 is another squared off and narrow tabletop altar similar to La Venta Altar 3, with a figure seated within a central niche that is on a platform 30 high that also protrudes 5 cm from the front (Figure 40) (Clewlow 1974: 65). Measuring in at 1.15 m tall, 1.38 m long, and 87 cm wide, La Venta Altar 6 is one of the poorest carved altar thrones from La Venta as it lacks the same level of sculptural workmanship the rest of the altars have (Clewlow 1974: 118). Although there are no visible genitalia the figure is believed to be a naked male that is only wearing a headdress and ear decorations (Clewlow 1974: 65). The figure has both its legs crossed, arms resting on its knees with the hands hanging down from them, and no fingers or toes (Clewlow 1974: 65).

## **Altar 7**

La Venta Altar 7 is one of the more recently discovered altar thrones and Drucker describes a total of six individual figures appearing in either high or low relief (Figure 41) (Clewlow 1974: 80). The large boulder is minimally shaped and measures 110 cm tall, 115 cm long, 145 cm wide, and features a high relief carving of a large, bearded face on that is recessed within an oval shaped frontal niche (Clewlow 1974: 118). Most of the central figure is eroded but its beard and teardrop-shaped earring are some details that are discernible (Milbrath 1979: 40). Figures 2 and 5 are low relief figures of standing humans, figure 2 has a chin beard and is wearing a mitre-like cape while pointing above it and is located right of the face within the central niche whereas Figure 5 is so badly eroded that only its protruding headdress is identifiable (Clewlow 1974: 80). The other figures on La Venta Altar 7 are also badly eroded but one is described by Drucker to clearly be an owl's head (Clewlow 1974: 90). A small portion of the rear of the altar shows a possible connection to Izapa through the use of similar short lived stylistic elements such as the pointed knee and grotesque foot that is seen at Izapa and Kaminaljuyu (Milbrath 1979: 39-40).

### *Tres Zapotes*

## **Stela A**

Tres Zapotes Stela A is included in this corpus because although the figure is not fully incased in a niche I consider it at least partially niched due to the top and bottom bracketing surrounding the recessed figures (Figure 42). What is interesting about this Stela is that it incorporates multiple art forms into a single piece, specifically the central figure and top mask that are carved in the round, and the bas relief images surrounding

them (Pool 2000: 149). The central figure stands erect upon what appears to be an altar throne and is wearing an Olmec style headdress very similar to “Slim” (Figure 43). Flanking the central figure on either side are two slightly smaller figures carved in bas relief who both face the central figure, both wearing unique costumes. The right figure wears anklets, shorts, shoulder covering, ear fare, possible nose ornamentation, is holding a long thin object in its left hand, and a possible celt in the right hand. The left figure has its upper left torso and head missing, but the clothing visible differs somewhat from the right figure as although they both share the same anklets the left figure is wearing what appears to be a ball player yolk, no upper torso clothing is present, but they are holding a long thin object in their right hand. Both the left and the right figures are pointing at the thin objects at the central figure’s feet, the object in the right figures hand looks similar to the object held by the central figure in Takalik Abaj Monument 67.

The right and left sides of the stela that bracket the scene contain low-relief carvings, the right side containing feline and serpent imagery whereas the left depicts a damaged human figure. (Pool 2000: 149). Above the central figure is an Olmec style mask that resembles the Olmec Dragon carved on the sandstone sarcophagus known as La Venta Monument 6 and floating around in the background are two small dwarf figures that are very similar to those seen on La Venta Stelae 2 and 3 (Pool 2000: 149).

### **Stela D**

Tres Zapotes Stela D is the other Olmec style niched monument from the site that contains three figures, and a fourth overhead figure carved in bas relief positioned within the central niche of a feline’s maw (Figure 44) (Pool 2000: 149). Two of the three central figures are standing, the middle and left one while the right figure is kneeling on both

knees and is grabbing the middle figures hand. All three figures have unique clothing and headdresses, indicating specific people and events are being represented. The kneeling figure on the right appears to have only a cloth wrapped around his torso and a headdress but nothing covering him below the waist. The central figure wears a patterned skirt, a belt, something partially covering its torso, possibly a mask, and a headdress. The left figure wears a loincloth, chest pectoral with a circular center, arm bands, a mask with an elaborate headdress, holds what looks like a spear or staff in the right hand, and is holding something down by its left leg with its left hand. Above all three figures attached to the roof of the niche is the fourth figure which appears to be a large Olmec mask with ears spools The Felines jaws and snout protrude outwards similar to the mask from Tres Zapotes Stela A, and it has a horizontal cartouche shaped recessed bar on its head, and along the left and right of the maw are possibly vegetative motifs.

### *El Marquesillo*

#### **Monument 1**

Discovered by the El Marquesillo Archaeological Project in 2007, El Marquesillo Monument 1 was found in situ and is believed to have been intentionally buried 245 cm deep lying face down (Figure 45) (Doering 2007: 244). El Marquesillo Monument 1 is a basalt tabletop altar with a figure seated cross legged within a central niche (Doering 2007: 238). The overall altar measurements are 255 cm x 125 cm x 115 cm with the tabletop portion being 35 cm thick, and both vertical trapezoids encasing the seated figure are 89.5 cm x 45.5 cm with the seated figure being 75 cm for a total base of 166 cm x 103 cm and weighing in at 12.17 metric tons (Doering 2007: 238-239).



Most of the iconography carved onto the figure has been intentionally smoothed away similar to San Lorenzo Monument 14 (Doering 2007: 241). The seated figure is completely enclosed within the niche and is leaning forward with both arms resting on his upper knees; however, the hands have been severed, he is wearing a headpiece with faint traces of iconographic elements, a rectangular pendant with a cross band design, crenulated ear ornaments, a belt, and a rectangular loincloth (Doering 2007: 242).

Although some attributes were intentionally removed from El Marquesillo Monument 1 there were some areas that show how much detail was initially put into the piece.

Looking at the figure's left foot we see distinct features on the ankles, toes, toenails, and its arms show well defined *Capri ulnaris* muscles (Doering 2007: 242).

#### *Laguna de los Cerros*

#### **Monument 5**

Laguna de Los Cerros Monument 5 is smaller than other altars, measuring 61 cm tall, 85 cm long, 58 cm wide, and depicts a figure emerging from its central niche (Figure 46) (Clewlow 1974: 120). Both sides of the altar and its end panels are broken but don't appear to have been carved beforehand (Clewlow 1974: 120). The niche within Laguna de Los Cerros Monument 5 is 48 cm tall, 36 cm wide, 20 cm deep, and contains a squatting figure that is emerging from the niche (Clewlow 1974: 66). Although damaged it appears that squatting figure is wearing an abdomen wrap, a chest plate suspended from his neck, and a turban-like headdress (Clewlow 1974: 66). Both arms are damaged with the left arm being severed at the shoulder and the right arm hangs down past the raised knee and is broken just past the elbow (Clewlow 1974: 66). The most interesting aspect of this niche is that the underside has been hollowed out which accentuates the

niche theme, removes weight, and could create possible ritualistic storage space (Clewlow 1974: 66).

### *Llano del Jicaro*

#### **Altar (Unfinished)**

Llano del Jicaro altar is also called Worked Stone 1 and it is an unfinished tabletop altar which had been partially buried at Llano del Jicaro amongst other smaller stones (Figures 47 and 48) (Gillespie 1994: 233). The altar was initially found broken in half horizontally on its back but was refit by Zenil in 1960, unfortunately the front had been exposed to the surface and is therefore badly eroded (Gillespie 1994: 233, 237). Measuring in at 202 cm x 130 cm x 128 cm, the unfinished altar has each one of its sides roughed out and smoothed, presumably in preparation for further carving, and multiple unique attributes (Gillespie 1994: 233-234). The top portion of the tabletop altar has a raised area, the front has part of the upper ledge formed, and a partially hollowed section on the front with a figures roughed out head can be seen which is most likely the beginning of the seated figure in the niche being carved (Gillespie 1994: 234). One final note is there is a rectangular tab that extends from the back right corner of the altar which would probably have been removed when the carving was finished but was well rounded even for what would become waste (Gillespie 1994: 234).

### *Chalcatzingo*

#### **Monument 1**

Chalcatzingo Monument 1, or “El Rey” as it is often referred to, is a large bas-relief carved into Cerro Chalcatzingo’s face on the upper terrace of the site (Figures 49 and 50) (Grove 2000: 279). The relief depicts a cross section of an animated cave with a

central figure sitting and holding a cloud in their arms with scrolls of clouds or mist leaving the opening (Grove 1968: 486). Surrounding the figure is a quatrefoil-shaped or “U-shaped” niche that represents the supernatural maw Olmec Earth Monster. The seated central figure is holding a ceremonial bar in his arms that has a muyol symbol on it (Figure 51) (Clewlow 1974: 71). Atop of the figure’s head is a very elaborate headdress that is occupied by quetzal birds and six eyes, which Grove notes is more typical of Gulf Coast Olmec (Clewlow 1974: 71). Above the entire scene there are multiple motifs related to water and plant growth; at the top are trilobed elements identified as rain clouds with “pendent dot” rain drops that were identified due to their striking similarity to Maya depictions of rain and scattered throughout the cloudy breath are concentric circles that look similar to water representations in the Codex Borgia (Grove 1968: 486).

Directly above the quatrefoil is what Grove called a glyphic element that is a composite of an oval eye surrounded with a flamed eyebrow with a “St. Andrews cross” or crossed bands sky banner in the center (Grove 1968: 486). However, Cook de Leonard argues that the glyphic element represents the “House of the Sun of the Underworld” and thus the cave being the underworld which is supported by Coe due to the termination of the quatrefoil niche being an Olmec fang motif (Grove 1968: 487). Whereas Guzman argues that the scene is linked to agricultural fertility with the central figure being a rain god instead of an elite (Grove 1968: 486). I believe Coe and Leonard to be correct that the cave is the underworld however I disagree with Leonard’s interpretation of the glyphic element as well as Guzman’s theory that a rain god is being depicted and instead argue that the figure within the niche is an elite or ruler. Grove argues that too much attention has been put on the figure within the niche and believes the best way to extract

more information from the image is to focus on the motifs that are associated with the earth monster, such as the vegetation and the niche itself (Grove 2000: 279).

It is important to note that the reliefs on the upper terrace at Chalcatzingo are arranged in a series known as Group A and Group B that form a tableaux. All together the images in Group A are known collectively as the “Water Dancing Group,” however two of the other reliefs, VI and VIII (Figure 52) add more to the narrative that is occurring in Chalcatzingo Monument 1. Relief VI is only 15 feet northeast of Monument 1 and depicts an extremely well carved flora which is believed to be a squash vine (Grove 1968: 487). The final image in Group A, Relief VIII depicts what Reilly identifies as a bellowing caiman who is creating a rain cloud that are stylistically similar to those depicted on Chalcatzingo Monument 1. The start of the rainy season is also the caimans breeding time, where male caiman do their mating call or “boom” in the water which makes the water around them dance on their backs. Observing this it can be assumed that the artists who made Chalcatzingo Relief VIII associated the boom of the caiman with the coming rains.

## **Monument 9**

Chalcatzingo Monument 9 or Relief IX is believed to have been located in front of an actual cave opening on the same terrace as Chalcatzingo Monument 1, however after it was discovered in the 1960’s it was stripped from the site and put into a private collection (Figures 53 and 54) (Grove 1968: 490). Luckily, after its illegal removal Chalcatzingo Monument 9 was recovered and placed in art institution within the United States (Grove 2000: 285). The relief represents a large open mouth, that Grove initially argued depicted a jaguar’s face and open mouth, but then later identified the face as a

supernatural serpent based on the discovery of the Las Limas Figure and cosmological model (Figure 55) (Grove 2000: 280). Grove based his identification on the incised image on the Las Limas Figures right knee that he claims to have serpentine elements, however Reilly argues the right knee image represents a caiman which I am inclined to agree with (Reilly Personal Communication) (Grove 2000: 280).

The supernatural's mouth is formed by a double bracketed formalized quatrefoil motif that is surmounted by a set of flamed eyebrows and goggle eyes (Grove 1968: 490). Both nostrils are wider and more out flaring than other examples of Olmec jaguar reliefs and the eyes and nose of the supernatural look similar to those on La Venta Monument 15 (Grove 1968: 490). Of all the Middle Formative monuments with a formal quatrefoil motif, Chalcatzingo Monument 9 is the most unique as it has an actual physical niche that passes through the entire stone slab, which if positioned on the terrace above the site, would have been visible to onlookers below as well as anyone entering the supernatural portal it represented (Grove 2000: 285). Above the eyes, just like with Chalcatzingo Monument 1, is a glyphic symbol that Grove argues looks most like the bar and four dot motif which is often seen as a cosmological model (Grove 1968: 490). The quatrefoil mouth forms four corners of which have vegetation sprouting from them which is believed to represent sprouting maize which draws Grove to the conclusion that there is a definitive connection between the jaguar-earth monster-cave motif and agricultural fertility (Grove 1968: 490).

Chalcatzingo Monument 9 is the only image in Group B that is related to Group A and it is believed to be Chalcatzingo Monument 1's frontal view (Grove 2000: 283). This is because not only are the eyes and vegetation present but now a true quatrefoil is

formed in the place of the creature's mouth. Further connecting this piece to Monument 1 are rain drops that are located between the eyes and above the nose of the creature. Another attribute that associates this creature with the Olmec Dragon are the flared eyebrows which is a staple in Olmec artwork. Unfortunately, the piece was broken at some point in time and what was once a trefoil motif was restored improperly to show two vertical lines instead of three (Reilly Personal Communication). What is perhaps most interesting about this monument is that the hole for the mouth of the creature would actually allow a person to sit on the other side and communicate, possibly impersonating El Rey.

### **Monument 13**

Found on the lower slopes of Cerro Chalcatzingo, Chalcatzingo Monument 13 is an incomplete rock slab that has a bas relief carving that appears to be a stylized version of Chalcatzingo Monument 1 (Figure 56) (Grove 2000: 283). Although broken we can see the profile of a supernatural figure, presumed to be supernatural due to the clefted head and serpentine mouth, seated within a formalized quatrefoil maw with vegetation decorating the outer bracket of the quatrefoil (Grove 2000: 283-85). The figure is seated on both its knees with its arms reaching forward and is facing to the left, which is opposite the figure in Chalcatzingo monument 1, and on the very top on the outside of the quatrefoil there are elements that Grove argues to be a large, flamed eyebrow and a narrow eye (Grove 2000: 285).

## *Oxtotitlan Cave*

### **Monument 1**

Oxtotitlan Mural 1 is a 5 feet by 7 feet painting located above the entrance to the rock shelter overlooking the valley of the Rio Atentli at the site of Oxtotitlan near Chilapa, Guerrero (Figure 57) (Grove 1969: 421). The mural is an intricate polychrome containing primarily red, ocher, and blue pigments that depicts a figure sitting on an Olmec-style altar throne which is dressed in a bird costume with headdress, feathered cloak, jade pectoral, and jade ornamentation on its arms, legs, feet, and fringed skirt (Grove 1969: 421). The figure, seated in partial profile, has a unique pose consisting of rising the left arm with the right arm extending diagonally towards the knee and its right leg dangled in front of the jaguar-monster's maw which is not typical of large-scale Olmec art and instead is characteristic of Late Classic Maya art and other stone or clay Olmec figurines (Grove 1970: 9).

Grove argues the costume worn by the figure is clearly one of an owl and could be a *moan* bird or a screech owl as it is frequently used in Maya glyphs (Grove 1970: 9). The eyes of the owl mask are formed via a large green circle that surrounds a yellow cavity that has the depth and form indicative of an intentional man-made cavity which could have held either a piece of jade or a magnetite mirror (Grove 1970: 9). In the center of the green owl headdress mask is a red motif that Grove argues is a water symbol that is similar to the headdress at Chalcatzingo and on a duck vessel from San Lorenzo (Grove 1970: 9). Hanging from the headdress on Oxtotitlan Mural 1 are long blue-green plumes that Grove argues are similar to the plumes hanging from Chalcatzingo Monument 1

which I agree and further this association with plumed feathers on the headdress of Takalik Abaj Altar 48's figure (Grove 1970: 9).

Adorning the seated figure are numerous pieces of green stone which are probably jade that include a circular green element on its nose, earspool, hanging pendant, arms, back of hands, legs, ankles, plaques on each foot, and a blue-green rectangular pectoral with the cross-bands or St. Andrew's cross motif with jade beads hanging down (Grove 1970: 9-10). Elaborate pectorals like the ones worn by the figure in Oxtotitlan Mural 1 having been found on seated Olmec statues from both La Venta and Chalcatzingo (Grove 1970: 10). The owl headdress continues down the figures back until it forms a colored feathered cloak made up of ocher, red, and blue-green pale-tipped feathers that covers the entire back and hangs down from its arms (Grove 1970: 10). Under the left arm is a large motif that contain "step" elements and the figures blue-green belt and loincloth that is decorated with a red fringed skirt (Grove 1970: 10). Most striking is the motif that appears on both sides of the skirt that is known as the "paw-hang-wing" motif which is depicted via the outline of a hand with scroll elements within the palm that is believed to be associated with water (Grove 1970: 10). On both of the arms are what appear to be symbols or proto glyphs that could help provide context to their mural, specifically an event or perhaps naming the individual.

Grove identifies the altar throne as having a jaguar-monster head which he associates with the niched altars from the Gulf Coast, specifically La Venta Altar 4, whose niches represented the open mouth of a jaguar (Grove 1969: 421). The Altar Throne from Oxtotitlan Mural 1 has some unique stylistic elements that include its right eye being covered by the seated figures right leg that dangles just in front of it (Grove



1970: 10). However, unlike other Gulf Coast representations of jaguar-monsters the nose on Oxtotilan mural 1 is heart-shaped and occurs within the maw, bracketed by two large curving fangs that protrude just below the jaw with the left fang containing a small, notched rectangle, a stylized Olmec fang motif (Grove 1970: 10). Between both the fangs is a green area with two horizontal bands of ocher and white pigment, similar to the motifs on the top right side of La Venta Altar 4, that run diagonally from top left to bottom right (Grove 1970: 10).

Grove interprets the general themes of Oxtotilan Mural 1 as rain, water, and fertility all of which are also being associated with a jaguar-monster's maw and cave (Grove 1970: 11). Citing J. Eric Thompson's correlation between the before mentioned *moan* bird that the Maya associate with rain, Grove argues that the green color, jade decorations, and overall owl elements depicted in Oxtotitlan Mural 1 strongly suggests an owl-rain-water relationship (Grove 1970: 11). Unfortunately, the mural has been subject to both natural weathering and human destruction as rainwater has eroded portions of the mural while locals deface them due to the belief that they are associated with the devil.

### *Tiltepec*

#### **Unnumbered Monument**

Believed to be the only niched monument from Tiltepec, the unnumbered monument depicts a figure within a central niche that is framed by the maw of what some believe to be a feline or serpent, but I believe it to be a bird's maw (Figure 59) (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 25). Although eroded some distinct detail is still left such as eyes of the creature being bracketed by flamed eyebrows and its almost perfectly circular eyes, however the individual within the niche isn't as lucky and has sustained extensive erosion

(Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 25). What can be made out of the figure is that they are either seated with their legs crossed or on an altar throne and they are both wearing a headdress and emerging from the niche (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 25).

### *Los Cerritos Sur*

#### **Monument 2**

Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2 is one of three of the most interesting, niched monuments to me out of the ones I will be discussing, the others are Takalik Abaj Monuments 15 and 25. It was discovered by Frederick Joseph Bove and his team during their 1979 field season at the site (Bove 1981: 391). Measuring 80 cm tall, 72 cm wide, and 24 cm thick, this piece depicts a crudely carved figure who is squatting with both his hands on its knees all of which is framed within a shallow niche (Figure 60) (Bove 1981: 252). The shallow niche appears to have been decorated with what initially was thought to be a glyph band on its right side but is believed to be teeth of the Olmec Dragon however they face backwards, and after using raking light on the left side Bove was able to identify the lightly incised profile of an Olmec face mask (Bove 1981: 252-253). Although the picture shows Monument 2 with eyes and a mouth, the stone itself has no carved eyes or mouth and instead someone more recently painted these details in with blue paint (Bove 1981: 252).

### *Izapa*

#### **Misc. Monument 2**

Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 is unique as it was found in situ and first described by Stirling in his “Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico” book. The monument depicts what Stirling believed to be a full relief carving of an open jaguar’s

mouth with a larger than life human figure seated within a central niche (Figure 61) (Stirling 1943: 68). Both the arms and the legs of Misc. Monument 2 are broken off, the head was either intentionally smoothed down or left unfinished, and there were opening carved under the knees and behind the head of the figure which could have been an attempt to make the figure more three dimensional (Stirling 1943: 68). The niche itself is decorated along its edge and above it is a set of what were previously thought to be eyes with floral elements as well as a snout but now Clark and Hodgson argue the eyes are actually paws that flank the snout (Clark and Hodgson 2008: 76). At the bottom of the niche moving upwards are plantlike motifs which were interpreted by Ajax Moreno as waterlilies and beneath this is the base of the monument or the lower jaw of the creature that is decorated with triangular motifs which represent a liminal space that separates our world and the beneath world (Clark and Hodgson 2008: 76). The figure also has some distinct feline attributes which further reinforces the association of jaguars using caves as portals to the beneath world (Norman 1976: 291).

### *Takalik Abaj*

#### **Altar 48**

Takalik Abaj Altar 48 was discovered in March 2008 by Guatemalan archaeologists Miguel Orrego Corzo and Christa Schieber de Lavarreda during their excavations at the site for the Takalik Abaj National Project (Figures 62 and 63) (Lavarreda and Corzo 2009: 456). The altar depicts elements of rulership as well as containing some glyphic text, and what makes it relative is the quatrefoil relief which I argue can be used as a locative to substitute for a niche when reptilian elements are attached to it. If you compare Chalcatzingo Monument 1 and 9, Izapa Stela 8, with

Takalik Abaj Altar 48 we see the same quatrefoil whose brackets form a niche where in Chalcatzingo Monument 1 is frames the figures in profile view and in Chalcatzingo Monument 9 the quatrefoil frames an actual hollowed out niche, in both Chalcatzingo cases the quatrefoil is presented as being the maw of an earth supernatural where as in Takalik Abaj Altar 48 we see far less focus on the earth supernatural elements and more on the individual within the quatrefoil (Figure 64). Like Chalcatzingo Monument 1 the figure within is sitting cross-legged in profile on what appears to be a stone slab which could be interpreted as an altar. The figure has multiple clothing elements including ear flares, a sash or loincloth with sequences and tassels at the bottom, but by far the most important is the elaborate headdress with two feathers hanging from it.

When you compare the headdress of the figure in Takalik Abaj Altar 48 with Chalcatzingo Monument 1 you see that although stylistically different, both figures have elaborate headdress containing two hanging feathers. Both arms can be seen, the left arm is reaching down towards the legs while the right arms is reaching outwards with an open cupped hand. Another interesting note is the figure is position leaning forward like so many other figures seated within niches. Possible floral elements similar to those on Chalcatzingo Monuments 1 and 9 can be seen to the left and right of the figures head which would associate the niche with the earth supernatural's maw that indicates to me the same or very similar story is being depicted on Chalcatzingo Monument 1 and Takalik Abaj Altar 48. However, the similarities between Takalik Abaj Altar 48 and Izapa Stela 8 are staggering. The niche in both monuments is a quatrefoil that encases a sitting individual with the bottom of the niche being bracketed by the same reptilian leg and tail elements (Figure 65).

## **Monument 15**

Takalik Abaj Monument 15 was part of a group of monuments placed in three verticals row found atop Structure 7 and was located at the bottom of the central row amongst similar Monuments 14, 16, and 17 (Lavarreda and Corzo 2010: 179). This niched monument is unlike most others and is similar in form to Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2 as the monument itself is the niche as opposed to carving into something and creating the niche. The central figure is badly eroded however many distinct characteristics are still discernable including the position which indicates the figure is crawling, details on the head such as large ear flares, shoulder definition, and arms with hands/paws (Figure 66). On its backside. Takalik Abaj Monument 15 compounds my interest due to the jaguar elements carved into its backside which include coiled bent legs that are splayed out and what appears to be a tail that wraps around the right leg (Figure 67). Due to the figures on either side being proportional Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo argue that the figures are the same individual, which is transforming from jaguar to man as they leave the cave (Lavarreda and Corzo 2010: 193). I agree with their interpretation which further cements the association between niches, caves, portals, and transformation.

## **Monument 23**

Takalik Abaj Monument 23 is a stone monument with a seated cross-legged figure positioned in a central niche which due to carvings on the left and right sides of the monument have led some to speculate that Monument 23 is a recarving (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 32). Although badly eroded some details can be observed such as both arms are positioned tight to the figures body and appear to be grabbing the knees (Figure 68).

Three interesting components of this niched figure immediately grab my attention; first is how large the niche itself is with the figure sitting inside it, second is the platform the figure is seated upon which could possibly be an altar throne, and third the individual is not entirely encased by the niche as the bottom section (the throne) protrudes outwards. The motif on the left side (Figure 69) is badly damaged but appears to be the upper portion of an ear whereas the right side (Figure 70) is an intact ear. What's interesting is that if these ears are jaguar ears then there would be a strong stylistic and thematic correlation between Takalik Abaj Monument 23 with Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 which could use its waterlily motifs as a locative for the jaguar.

### **Monument 25**

Takalik Abaj Monument 25 is carved into the bedrock along the western bank of the Ixchiya River and is the only niched monument carved into mother rock (Figure 71) (Corzo 1990: 82). A niche was created by the artists in order to portray the emerging squatting figure, who although is carved much cruder than other examples contains all the elements which I believe are important for understanding the message that is trying to be conveyed. Although limited the included features are wide open eyes and mouth, shoulder and arm definition that are separated from the figure and reaching outwards onto its knees, as well as partial torso, foot, and toe features. This is the only example of a squatting figure emerging from a niche that I have seen which again sparks my intrigue and I believe Takalik Abaj Monument 25, Takalik Abaj Monument 15, and Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2 each hold part of the answer to understanding the story in the niche.

## **Monument 67**

Takalik Abaj Monument 67 measures in at 1.5m x 1.3m x 0.7m and is stylistically similar to Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2, and the unnumbered Tiltepec monument both of which show a figure emerging from a niche that is framed by a supernatural jaguar's maw (Figure 72). The figure in Takalik Abaj Monument 67 appears to be standing and also has something clutched in its hand. Interestingly, whatever the figure is holding overlaps on top of the niches frame, indicated that at least some of the figure's actions are taking place outside the niche. The figure itself is badly eroded and the face is largely indistinguishable, a headdress could be present, but it is hard to tell, only the upper portion of the left shoulder, right arm, right oblique, and right leg remain. Framing the figure is the supernatural jaguar with teardrop shaped eyes and a distinct nose, but the bottom portion of the frame is broken off. Although it has an interesting relationship to the previously mentioned monuments, Takalik Abaj Monument 67 was found in a tableau sequence among Monuments 68, 66, 65, and 9 which are all thematically associated with water creatures (Corzo 1990: 52, 96).

## V. DISCUSSION

Now that we have the corpus of niche motifs laid out and broken down via structural analysis it's time for the iconographic interpretation and cross comparison. First things first, we must talk about the actual function symbols had within the Olmec culture, and how the symbols and features they left behind are able to tell us about their thoughts and beliefs. We have already discussed the process of cultural diffusion associated with the Core and Periphery theory that acted as a driver for this long distance trade and exchange of Olmec style artifacts. Reilly argues that long distance trade itself lacks an explanation of the symbol systems ideology and the Olmec style artifacts found throughout Mesoamerica are probably ritual objects that functioned within a network of geographically dispersed centers known as the Formative Period ceremonial complex (Reilly 1990: 15). The system of symbols and motifs used on Olmec style artifacts throughout the Formative Period ceremonial complex are currently thought to have functioned as a politically motivated communication system used among the majority of non-literate Mesoamericans that occupied the early and middle Formative Periods that served to convey, define, and sanctify rulership (Reilly 1990: 15).

### *Iconographic Interpretation*

The current interpretation of Olmec style symbols is based on the works of David Joralemon and his before mentioned dictionary, Mexican artist and ethnographer Miguel Covarrubias's, Matthew Stirling, and Michael Coe (Reilly 1990: 16). Within the corpus of Olmec symbols Covarrubias and Stirling both hypothesized an interpretation for the frequently occurring "were-jaguar" motif, however it wasn't until Terry Stroker, Sarah



Meltzoff, and Steve Armsey brought the question to a broader audience was it believed that the motif represented natural animals such as the caiman (Reilly 1990:17). The Olmec elite commissioning, creating, and distributing these artifacts which were used as a catalyst for their socio-political gain deliberately chose symbols associated with the flora and fauna within their natural environment to act as metaphors that not only visually represented their cosmological realm but also their belief in a supernatural world (Reilly 1990:17). Joralemon agrees and argues that Olmec art is primarily occupied with creating representations of biologically impossible creatures, which is done by dissociating a creature's natural characteristics from its biological context and recreating them into non-natural forms that allows them to transcend their multi-tiered cosmos (Reilly 1990:18).

Art historian Linda Schele also saw the Olmec-style iconographic system as inherently rooted in the natural world which she believes is a fundamentally unchanged convention present throughout Mesoamerican culture history that was used by the rulers participating in the Formative Period ceremonial complex the ability to visibly position themselves between the natural and supernatural worlds (Reilly 1990: 18). Schele makes the argument that it is then logical to assume that the figures being depicted on altars, and in association with royal altar motifs, could serve as both a royal portrait as well as a visualization of the multi-tiered reality such as in Chalcatzingo Monument 1 (Reilly 1990: 19).

It is currently accepted that the altar thrones were in fact the seats of the Olmec rulers and thus any iconographic motifs associated with the altars is thought to be used to specifically convey rulership (Reilly 1990: 16). The mural at Oxtotitlan reinforces the idea that the figures in the altar's niche were associated with kingship as it depicts the

figure who would normally be occupying the niche sitting atop the altar pointing its arm. This correlation is particularly interesting because Grove argues that the quatrefoil motif that represents the cave and thus niche likely originated in the Mexican Highlands which indicates that sites such as Chalcatzingo and Oxtotitlan were not only participating within the Formative Period ceremonial complex but were influential enough that they were actively manipulating the symbol system that drove the interaction sphere (Reilly 1990: 16).

Although the majority of the artifacts I have discussed are large monoliths, I would consider them generally nonportable with the exception of Los Cerritos Monument 2. That being said there is one more artifact with a cave/portal, which keeping with my definition of a niche, should be considered to have a niche which is the Dallas Plaque (Figure 73). Reilly posits that the Dallas Plaque is a depiction of an open ritual bundle, with each corner representing a portion of the opened knotted bundle, which contains an incised cosmological model (Reilly and Freidel 2009: 656). The model is oriented vertically from the bottom up contains the three stones of creation, C-bracket which represents the animated earth, a cosmic mountain (possibly the first mountain of maize), with two cave portals that connects the mountains to the beneath world, an axis mundi of fertilized sprouting maize which is pointing in the cardinal directions, cleft maize seeds (possibly represented by greenstone celts) that occupy that intercardinal directions, and topped with an crossed band sky symbol that is surrounded by thirteen petaloids which represent the levels of the above world (Reilly and Freidel 2009: 656). The Dallas Plaque is important not only because of its contents but due to its size, as it is a highly complex cosmological model that would have been a highly portable political or religious device.

As previously mentioned the figure in the center of Tres Zapotes Stela A has a very similar, if not the same, headdress as the “Slim” figure, which indicates that the figure in Stela A is either the “Slim” character or another individual performing a ritual which prescribes the multi-tiered plunger shaped headdress be used. Because the headdress lacks any identifiable design elements Reilly argues that the platformed shape of the hat itself must then be the primary identifier which makes sense as both the Maya and the Olmec routinely used headdresses to display important information such as names, titles, and ritual activity (Reilly 1991: 153). Another similarity between the two is the position of the figures arms in Stela A which appear to either be crossing the chest or out in front of the chest. Unfortunately, the state of preservation of Stela A makes it difficult to discern this and it’s unclear if the figure is holding anything in its arms similar to “Slim.” Reilly argues the “Slim” figure is connected to Chalcatzingo site by pointing out that both the incising all over “Slim’s” body and the site structure and artwork at Chalcatzingo can be separated thematically into three distinct sections which are representative of the three-tiered cosmos (Reilly 1991: 164). Both “Slim” and Chalcatzingo Monument 1’s “El Rey” give us insight into Olmec ritual dress and possible performance, and excavations of elite burials by David Grove at Chalcatzingo produced large amounts of a cinnabar based red pigment (Reilly 1989: 15).

This red pigment is believed to have been exclusively available to the elite which makes its presence on the figure Dunbarton and Oaks “Shaman in transformation pose” even more interesting as it suggests the individual undergoing a transformative process, that is part of a series of five figurines (Figures 74-77), is an elite that has probably consumed a hallucinogen derived from the *Bufoto marinas* toad in order to ritually

transform (Reilly 1989: 15). Two major ritual themes prevalent with the Maya were sacrifice, and communicating with ancestors, and it is thought that the Olmec also partook in bloodletting rituals however the iconography indicates that unlike the Maya whose ancestors did the traveling, the Olmec rulers would themselves travel as a Were-Jaguar to the beyond world by accessing a portal they opened via bloodletting and made possible through a hallucinogenic aided transformation ritual (Reilly 1989: 16).

A great example of the niche being directly associated with this same transformative concept is Takalik Abaj Monument 15 which I argue shows an individual within a niche, whose legs are that of a jaguar, and torso is human. Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo argue that it represents a jaguar entering a cave and a man leaving which indicates he is transforming, and I agree and would add that the figure is most likely performing ritualistic transformation into his *way* as seen with Shaman in Transformation Pose. Two other points of interest reinforce this idea with the presence of “toad altars” at Takalik Abaj which bear the marks of the *Bufo marinus* toad (Figure 78), and the fact that in the Mixe-Zoquean language the word for either frog or toad is *nakak* which means a flat object, bench, or stone (Guernsey-Kappelman 2000: 82). Although these altars are from the Late Formative period the association between the *Bufo marinus* toad as seen with shaman in transformation pose and the Olmec rulers ritualistic transformation means the practice was widespread throughout Mesoamerica, and most likely originated with the Mixe-Zoque speakers of Olman.

The niche motif is almost certainly representing a cave, which for the Olmec and Maya, serve as a portal to the water beneath world as well as representative of the Supernatural Earth Monster’s mouth or ‘maw.’ So, I argue that all niches are attempting

to emulate an actual cave which is perceived to be the mouth of the Earth Monster, which is either depicted as an actual cave, a negative space with a figure inside occupying a spectrum of the niches space, the space that the niche itself occupies, or a stylized version of the niche that brackets the scene in a quatrefoil that when earth and reptile motifs are applied create a locative representing the earthen monsters maw or cave. Caves themselves are what all Olmec niches are trying to emulate, whether it be a physical cave at Oxtotitlan, a 3-Dimensional recreated cave at Chalcatzingo, or reliefs with stylized quatrefoils. Because niches are directly associated with elite altar thrones it can be assumed that they are directly associated with rulership and thus control of the motif would have held political and socio-economic weight.

Although also portals, I do not believe niches to be associated with vaginas or birthing due to two specific reasons. The first being all the recognizable figures associated with niches, either emerging or sitting, are adults which can sometimes be accompanied by clearly unhuman, supernatural were-baby as seen in the La Venta Altar 5. The second is that the borders that surround the majority of the niches are all clearly creatures' maws, except for La Venta Altar 5 which is believed to be the profile view of a bloodletting bowl.

### *Figures and their Niches*

#### **Niches**

I believe that the borders which compose the frame of the niches are representative of a mythological creatures' maw that is influenced by a regions socio-political stance where symbols are selected based on their preferred natural elements as

niche borders range from the earth monster, Were-Jaguar, serpentine, animated quatrefoils, floral elements, and some remain undefined or indistinguishable.

The most explicit cases of the niche motif representing a maw come from Chalcatzingo Monuments 1 and 9, La Venta Stela 1 and Altar 4, Tres Zapotes Stela D, Izapa Misc. Monument 2, Tiltepec Unnumbered Monument, Takalik Abaj Monument 67, and Oxtotitlan Mural 1. All of these monuments animate the niche by attaching eyes above the opening, thus having the niche naturally represent the space of an open mouth.

### **Quatrefoils**

The motif dates back to the Preclassic and is typically depicted as a four-lobed flower-shape which is often depicted throughout Mesoamerican iconography, but there are stylistic and regional variations one of which I argue is the niche (Guernsey 2010: 75). Between the Early Preclassic and Middle Preclassic the quatrefoil motif coalesced into a formal symbol which could be expressed in a variety of ways including curvilinear or rectilinear, complete, or partial, horizontal, or vertical, and just as with the niche it could be represented in almost any medium (Guernsey 2010: 75). The simplicity of the quatrefoil allowed the artists to take a lot of stylistic liberty when creating their works which allowed each site to tailor the motif to serve their unique historical and ideological agendas (Guernsey 2010: 75). As we know it the quatrefoil is associated with everything the niche motif is which are watery portals, animal mouths, caves, elites, supernatural communication, and as time progressed the motif became controlled and was associated with a specific codified narrative (Guernsey 2010: 75).

One of, if not the earliest example of a formalized quatrefoil (Figure 79) comes from the Pacific Coast site of La Blanca in Guatemala, where clay was compacted into a

3Dimensional representation of the motif called La Blanca Monument 3 that dates to between 900 and 800 B.C. (Guernsey 2010: 76). La Blanca Monument 3 was part of an elite precinct and consist of two concentric outer rings and an interior channel that's's rim was painted with red hematite, and which would have likely been deliberately filled with water (Guernsey 2010: 76). The red pigment is similar to the red cinnabar found on the shaman in transformation pose and the elite burials from Chalcatzingo. No formal examples of the quatrefoil appear on monumental sculptures in Olman, however there are two examples from La Venta where ceramics are either shaped in the form of a quatrefoil or have the motif associated with it (Figure 80) (Guernsey 2010: 77). A very interesting representation of the quatrefoil comes from the site of Piedras Negras where Stela 40 (Figure 81) has a quatrefoil that is placed on what appears to be an altar throne in the exact same spot where a niche would be, and it is accompanied by a figure within the quatrefoil (Guernsey 2010: 77). This shows that the niche and quatrefoil are interchangeable and essentially a regional convention and within one region there were multiple ways to express the motif as seen on Izapa Stela 14, 27, and Miscellaneous Monument 38 (Figure 82).

Reilly and Grove identified some unique attributes of the U-shaped quatrefoil on Chalcatzingo Monument 1 that indicate first and foremost that Chalcatzingo Monument 1 is a profile view of Chalcatzingo Monument 9 which is a frontal view of the same monument. Second they found that if you face the front of Chalcatzingo monument 9 and bury or cut in half the bottom portion of the monument then it depicts a glyph ichnographically similar to the Monte Alban II period glyph (Figure 83) for mountain or place (Grove 2000: 283). Due to the association with the Monte Alban glyph Grove and

Reilly argued that the quatrefoil that represents the supernatural maw in Chalcatzingo Monument's 1 and 9 symbolized both a sky serpent cave and a mountain cave (Grove 2000: 283).

## **Figures**

Of all the niched artifacts only the figure in Oxtotitlan Mural 1 occupies the area outside the niche, which is very abnormal due to the high number of fully or partially niched figures. La Venta Altar 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, San Lorenzo Monument 14, Laguna de los Cerros Monument 5, and Takalik Abaj Altar 48 all have figures that are partially niched with the majority of them having only the head or headdress outside the niche. Out of the partially niched figures the one that stands out the most stylistically is La Venta Altar 6, while it is an altar with a niched figure the bottom portion of the niche juts out farther than the tabletop to support the seated figure that fully occupies the space which is only made discernable by the small space at its shoulders. Figures that are fully enclosed in a niche include La Venta Stela 1, Tres Zapotes Stelae A, and D, El Marquesillo Monument 1, Chalcatzingo Monument 1, Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2, Tiltepec Unnumbered Monument, Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2, and Takalik Abaj Monument's 23, 25, 67.

The figures associated with the niches are almost all definitively clothed with unique headdresses with the exception of Takalik Abaj Monument 25 and Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2. As previously discussed, headdress were used as identifiers throughout Mesoamerican cultures so it would make sense that figures associated with royal motifs were given unique headdresses which likely served to announce identify themselves. However, these two have minimal detail put into their clothing or headdress and instead the majority of the work was put into creating the niche and the figure. It's worth noting



that the figure in Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2 appears to be sitting on a tabletop altar, if true that makes Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2 the only other niched artifact besides Oxtotitlan Mural 1 to depict the figure sitting on an altar throne. In total that makes three figures associated with a niche who are actively interacting with an altar throne as opposed to solely occupying the niche, the third being the “Slim” figure from Tres Zapotes Stela A who is standing on the altar throne.

Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 stands out from the Gulf Coast sites as the figure within its niche appears to be holding a serpent-like ceremonial bar very similar to the ones held by the Olmec rulers incised on the Arroyo Pesquero celt (Figure 84). Reilly argues the rulers in the Arroyo Pesquero celts are depicting themselves as the axis-mundi world tree (Reilly 1990: 31). Using the same logic, I argue that the figure in Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 is replicating this idea by associating themselves with the ceremonial bar, making them the center of the world or axis-mundi.

Variation in the figures position and overall form makes interpretation of what’s happening inside the niche even harder. As we have seen there are examples of whole figures, partial figures, only the figures head, and in the cases of Llano del Jicaro unfinished Altar Throne and Chalcatzingo Monument 9 no figures at all. Figures can either be sitting, standing, squatting, or unknown in cases where only the upper torso of the figures is present. At the same time figures can be performing numerous different actions with their arms including grabbing, reaching, holding, cradling, pointing, relaxed by the side, rested on the legs, and in the case of Takalik Abaj Monument 15 crawling. This leads me to believe that the actions the figures are performing within the niche isn’t something that is prescribed by the artists cultural formalities but rather portray an event

or act that was associated with the figure depicted in the niche. I cannot confidently say what actions are being performed however there is one thing that is certain, whatever the action is it is happening in a cave. While in the cave the actions are being done by either an elite, shaman, ruler, or all of the above.

Olmec society is believed to have been a Chiefdomesque-State where elites controlled the production and distribution of socio-political and religious ideas, symbols, and objects to solidify their power. I argue the same elites were probably performing bloodletting rituals or ceremonies, under the influence of the *Buffo marinus* toads' hallucinogenic effects in order to spiritually transform, while inside of physical caves. Aspects of whatever journey these individuals experienced were then documented as a way to reinforce that elite's status as an active participant of the religious and political system.

### *Regional representations*

When you separate the corpus of niched artifacts by their respected regions you can see some clear similarities and differences between them. The regions include Olman the Gulf Coast heartland of the Olmec, the Mexican highlands of Guerrero, and the Pacific Coast of Guatemala. Here we will compare how each region represents the niche motif.

### **Gulf Coast and Olman**

Starting in Gulf Coast the site with the greatest number of niched artifacts is La Venta with a which has six altar thrones and one stela. All the altar thrones except for La Venta Monument 4 have been either badly weathered, intentionally defaced, or partially recarved as the tabletop portions have been removed. The recarved altar thrones appear

not only smaller but more spherical and if they are in the process of converting these to Colossal Heads as seen with San Lorenzo Monument 53/Colossal Head 7 but the only problem is La Venta Altars 2, 3, 6, and 7 seem to have too much material removed to form the Colossal Head. In all the examples of recarved altar thrones at La Venta the niched figure is either always the last thing to be removed or the stopping point for defacement as every example still retains the niched figure, and it is important to note that La Venta Stela 1 is the only niched figure from La Venta that was not recarved. Of all the altars, La Venta Altar 7 stands out the most both stylistically and thematically as although it is an altar throne with a niched figure it is the only niched figure that is contains just the figures head.

When you compare artifact type and quantity between San Lorenzo and La Venta we see that San Lorenzo had a much larger number of Colossal Heads with ten whereas La Venta only had four. However, when you look at the number of altar thrones between the sites we see that San Lorenzo only has two altar thrones with niched figures while La Venta has six. Because San Lorenzo is older than La Venta dating to the Early Formative period it is clear that they were practicing recarving altar thrones into Colossal Heads hundreds of years before it was happening at La Venta. There are a couple of possibilities that could account for this, either the represented power is no longer controlling the symbols and motifs associated with the artifact so therefore the subjects are free to change it, or the stones were indeed being intentionally recarved by the elites to relieve themselves of the intensive labor that went into obtaining the basalt. I argue that by the Middle Formative period when La Venta was peaking as a cultural capital they had

stopped recarving altar thrones into Colossal Heads and instead were more focused on recycling the stone.

Looking back at Tres Zapotes Stela A I would like to point out that both the top and bottom brackets of the niche appear to be altar thrones that are topped with a mask which could represent the three tiered cosmological model with the elite “Slim” inside the top altar’s maw performing a ritual. If oriented vertically the bottom altar would represent the beneath world, the top altar the natural world, and the mask representing the above world.

### **Mexican Highlands**

The two main sites of Chalcatzingo and Oxtotitlan in the Mexican Highlands contain some of the most interesting and important niched monuments that provide insight into what the altar thrones were and how they were used. Chalcatzingo Monument 1 and Oxtotitlan Mural 1 both depict what appear to be elite figures associated with the niche performing some form of action. One of the more obvious differences of these sites when compared to the Gulf Coast is that absence of the traditional niched altar throne. Although Chalcatzingo was established in the Early Formative period it didn’t begin producing Olmec style artifacts until the Middle Formative, around the same time as La Venta, meaning they adopted the style and theme of the niched figure from San Lorenzo but took the artistic liberty to stylize the niche from a 2 dimensional bas relief to 3 dimensional monolith. Oxtotitlan Mural 1 confirms this as it is another 2 dimensional painting that overlays an existing 3 dimensional cave mouth, which could have been the inspiration for the artists at Chalcatzingo who had to create two monuments in order to fully replicate Oxtotitlan. It is important to note that Chalcatzingo Monument 1 is part of

a series of bas reliefs which enables it to act as part of a tableaux. By making the monument a part in a series the artists further animate the scene by providing a narrative that the figure functions within.

I argue that Oxtotitlan Mural 1 is part of a series of images that forms a tableaux with the other paintings in the nearby grottos, which depict either what has, will, or is what is intended to happen once inside the cave. These images are similar to stain glass windows in a Catholic Church that use images to represent and communicate fundamental aspects of the belief system through imagery, one of which in particular at Oxtotitlan is Painting 1-d (Figure 85). Although not a niche, Painting 1-d is associated with Oxtotitlan Mural 1 and I believe it is depicting an individual, likely an Olmec Shaman, ritualistically transforming into their Jaguar Way while within the niche or cave, similar to Takalik Abaj Monument 15, which reinforces the idea of ritual transformation within caves as a fundamental component of the cave rituals.

Another example of an interior cave painting showing an individual ritualistically transformed into their Way comes from Juxtlahuaca Cave in the highlands of Guerrero. The figure in Painting 1 (Figure #) shares an almost identical posture as the figure from Painting 1-d, however the figure in Painting 1 is fully transformed and has some distinct differences. Because the figure in Painting 1 is fully transformed, we are seeing the next step in the transformation narrative. Painting 1-d shows the individual connected to the jaguar via his penis and umbilicus, whereas Painting 1 shows a much smaller individual, possibly the baby maize god, some other supernatural, or next in line for succession in place of the jaguar. Both the penis and the jaguar are removed when the transformation is

complete, however the umbilicus remains, connecting the smaller individual with the fully transformed figure.

### **Pacific Coast**

Takalik Abaj Monument 15 and Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2 are what I believe to be the most unique and abstract representation of the Olmec-style niche out of all the artifacts in the corpus. Both recreate the niche motif by occupying its negative space either fully in the case of Takalik Abaj Monument 15, or partially in the case of Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2. To clarify, instead of hollowing out a niche from a parent material, the creators of these artifacts took the artistic liberty to essentially reverse the perspective, and like the quatrefoil niches from Chalcatzingo, redefine the motif through regional preference. Although not specifically niched, I do include Izapa Stelae 8 as niched monument worthy of note due to the animated quatrefoil motif which is almost identical to the ones found at Takalik Abaj and Chalcatzingo.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I hypothesized that the niche motif, expressed differently based on region, was a fundamental aspect of the Olmec cosmological model, used by elites to explicitly express their socio-political status. I obtained my data through analyzing a large corpus of artifacts containing the niche motif from the three regions of the Gulf Coast, Mexican Highlands, and Pacific Coast of Central America. From this analysis I was able to use the San Marcos four-field method of iconographic interpretation to explain that the niche motif represents a cave, mouth, portal, and that the figures associated with the niche are in fact elites that I argue are also associated with hallucinogenic ritual transformation while in the caves.

In Chapter 2 I described my methodological approach which is largely based on the San Marcos four-field approach, a four step method that combines multiple theories into a comprehensive approach to analyzing artwork. It uses Irwin Panofsky's iconographic exercise to identify the artistic style and its geographic origin, applies historical and ethnographic literature reviews in conjunction with archaeological context, and finally conducts a stylistic analysis to determine the art styles geographic distribution patterns. Supporting the San Marcos four-field approach is the direct historical approach or "upstreaming" which uses confirmed historical examples to make guided assumptions of earlier examples. Finally, the Paradigm of the Periphery model describes how cultural influences rises, falls, and spreads throughout time and space.

In Chapter 3 I gave detailed background information on each site that contained a niched artifact starting with the earliest accounts, earliest excavations, and most recent studies. I provided the earliest maps I could find for each site in an attempt to see what

the first people documenting the sites saw. Looking at the earliest accounts allows us to better understand how each monument's placement and condition contributes to our interpretation. As stated the vast majority of Olmec sites have been looted, destroyed by Oil & Gas industries, artifacts sold off into private collections, or are in areas currently inaccessible due to their political instability.

In Chapter 4 I performed an iconographic analysis on each niched artifact from the entire corpus. In total 27 artifacts were analyzed using Panofsky's iconographic exercise, I provided previous iconographic analysis and combined them with my own observations.

In Chapter 5 I discussed my interpretation of the data collected from the iconographic analysis. I used the San Marcos four-field method in combination with the Paradigm of the Periphery model, and the direct historical analogy to explain how the niche motif spread throughout Mesoamerica.

The first step in the San Marcos method was identifying the artistic style of the Olmec, define the niche motif, and pinpoint its geographic origin. I used Joralemon's Olmec iconography dictionary to identify elements and stylistic attributes associated with the niched figures (Joralemon 1971). Because the earliest example we have of the niche is the sunken quatrefoil from La Blanca in Guatemala, I believe that the niche motif originates in the Pacific Coast. However, when Olmec elites from San Lorenzo and La Venta adopted the symbol they not only began reproducing it on a larger scale than the creators, but also embodied the association between elites and the transformative cave narrative.



The second step was to review the historical and ethnographic literature on the Olmec. The foundation for this step was laid in Chapter 3 where I provided detailed background information on each site. To support this foundation, I provided iconographic interpretations from prominent Olmec Archaeologists and Iconographers: Miguel Covarrubias, Matthew Stirling, Michael Coe, F. Kent Reilly III, and Linda Schele, regarding the general themes in Olmec cosmology and art.

The third step involves considering and engaging the archaeological context. Finding Olmec artifacts with the niche motif in situ is something that isn't common, however the recent work at Takalik Abaj and El Marquesillo show there is still work to be done. Sites such as Chalcatzingo, which had good integrity when it was excavated but have since been victims of looting makes physically studying artifacts like Chalcatzingo Monument 9 impossible. So, we must rely on initial reports on some sites and then compare them to what is found during new excavations. One commonality among altar thrones is that there are at least three confirmed accounts of the altars being buried on their backs: San Lorenzo Monument 20, La Venta Altar 2, and El Marquesillo Monument 1 all of which come from different sites and time periods. Monuments that are prominent features of the site such as Oxtotitlan Mural 1, Chalcatzingo Monument 1, and Takalik Abaj Monument 25 provide even more archaeological context as they have been able to stand the test of time. Oxtotitlan Mural 1 and Chalcatzingo Monument 1 both directly associate themselves with caves and the earth monster's maw. Caves' natural association with water is repeated with the placement of Takalik Abaj Monument 25 directly next to the Ixchiya River.

The fourth and final step consisted of putting everything together into a comprehensive stylistic analysis of the niche motif. This analysis was then used to compare and contrast the niche motif between three geographic regions: Gulf Coast and Olman, Mexican Highlands, and the Pacific Coast. Sites from Gulf Coastal Olman rarely use the quatrefoil motif and almost exclusively use the formal niche on altars thrones as seen at San Lorenzo and La Venta. Exceptions come from Tres Zapotes where stelae become the dominant form of expression. The two main sites from the Mexican Highlands are Chalcatzingo and Oxtotitlan. Chalcatzingo had three examples of niched monuments, however none were associated with altar thrones, one emulated a cave, and all depicted the motif as a quatrefoil. Oxtotitlan on the other hand used the Gulf Coastal Olman style altar throne theme and a physical cave as its niche, essentially combining aspects of the Pacific Coast and Gulf Coast styles. Pacific Coast sites appear to favor the formal and stylized quatrefoil early on but later adopt the Gulf Coastal Olman style with a large number of the monuments being spherical altars as opposed to tabletop altars.

If we look at everything I have presented as a whole regarding the niche motif there is one thing that is for certain, niches are simple yet complex. Niches are cave-mouth-portals, the motif can range in form from stylized quatrefoils, animated creatures to physical as well as an inversed perspective of negative space. The figures associated with these niches are rich with cosmological and political artistic elements, strongly suggesting not only that they were either powerful or influential, but that their power was directly associated with monuments and images they were displaying. I argue that the Olmec elites gained and held their power through associating themselves with the axis-mundi or center of their universe. Part of their method for achieving higher sociopolitical

status was to perform shamanistic rituals, and I believe one of the fundamental components of these rituals was hallucinogenic fueled ritual transformation. These rituals would have happened in a cave or possibly with an altar throne in the absence of a cave as the altars could serve as a substitute. By cementing these events into stone, the elites were able to routinely reference these scenes, a process that undoubtedly reinforced and legitimized their power.

## APPENDIX

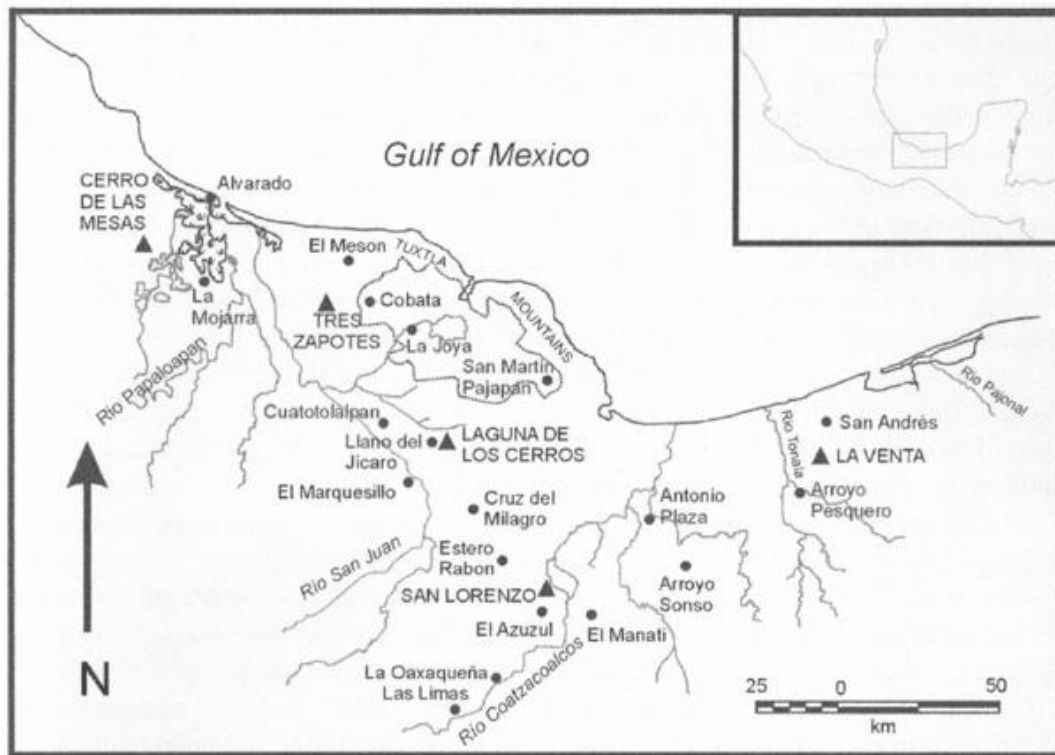


Figure 1. Map of sites within the Gulf Coast lowlands or Olman (Pool & Loughlin 2017: 232).

<i>Dates in years</i>	<i>Period</i>
8000–1600 B.C.	Archaic
1600–900 B.C.	Early Formative
900–400 B.C.	Middle Formative
400 B.C.–A.D. 250	Late Formative
A.D. 250–600	Early Classic
A.D. 600–1000	Late Classic
A.D. 1000–1521	Postclassic

Figure 2. Chronological framework for Mesoamerica (Joyce 2004: 15).



Figure 3. Map of Highland sites with Olmec influence

[https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/olmec/Olmec\\_Formative\\_Period.jpg](https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/olmec/Olmec_Formative_Period.jpg)



Figure 4. Map of Pacific Coast sites with Olmec influence

<https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/olmec/Olmec-southern-maya-map.jpg>

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION
I— <i>Primary</i> or <i>natural</i> subject matter— (A) factual, (B) expressional—, constituting the world of artistic motifs.	<i>Pre-iconographical description</i> (and pseudo-formal analysis).
II— <i>Secondary</i> or <i>conventional</i> subject matter, constituting the world of <i>images</i> , <i>stories</i> and <i>allegories</i> .	<i>Iconographical analysis</i> in the narrower sense of the word.
III— <i>Intrinsic meaning</i> or <i>content</i> , constituting the world of 'symbolical' values.	<i>Iconographical interpretation</i> in a deeper sense ( <i>Iconographical synthesis</i> ).

EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CONTROLLING PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION	HISTORY OF TRADITION
<i>Practical experience</i> (familiarity with <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i> ).	History of <i>style</i> (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i> were expressed by <i>forms</i> ).	
<i>Knowledge of literary sources</i> (familiarity with specific <i>themes</i> and <i>concepts</i> ).	History of <i>types</i> (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific <i>themes</i> or <i>concepts</i> were expressed by <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i> ).	
Synthetic <i>intuition</i> (familiarity with the <i>essential tendencies of the human mind</i> ), conditioned by personal psychology and 'Weltanschauung.'	History of <i>cultural symptoms</i> or 'symbols' in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, <i>essential tendencies of the human mind</i> were expressed by specific <i>themes</i> and <i>concepts</i> ).	

Figure 5. Panofsky's three tiered model for structural analysis (Panofsky 1972: 14-15).



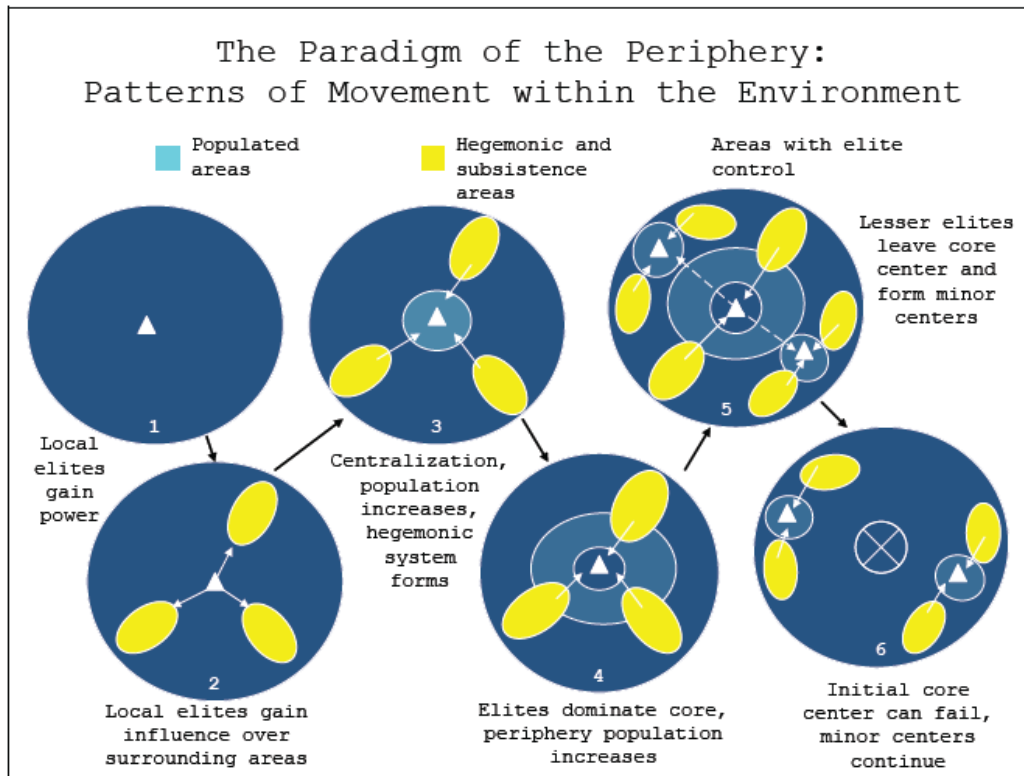


Figure 6. Paradigm of the Periphery flow chart showing the six phases. (Bolfing 2010: 108).

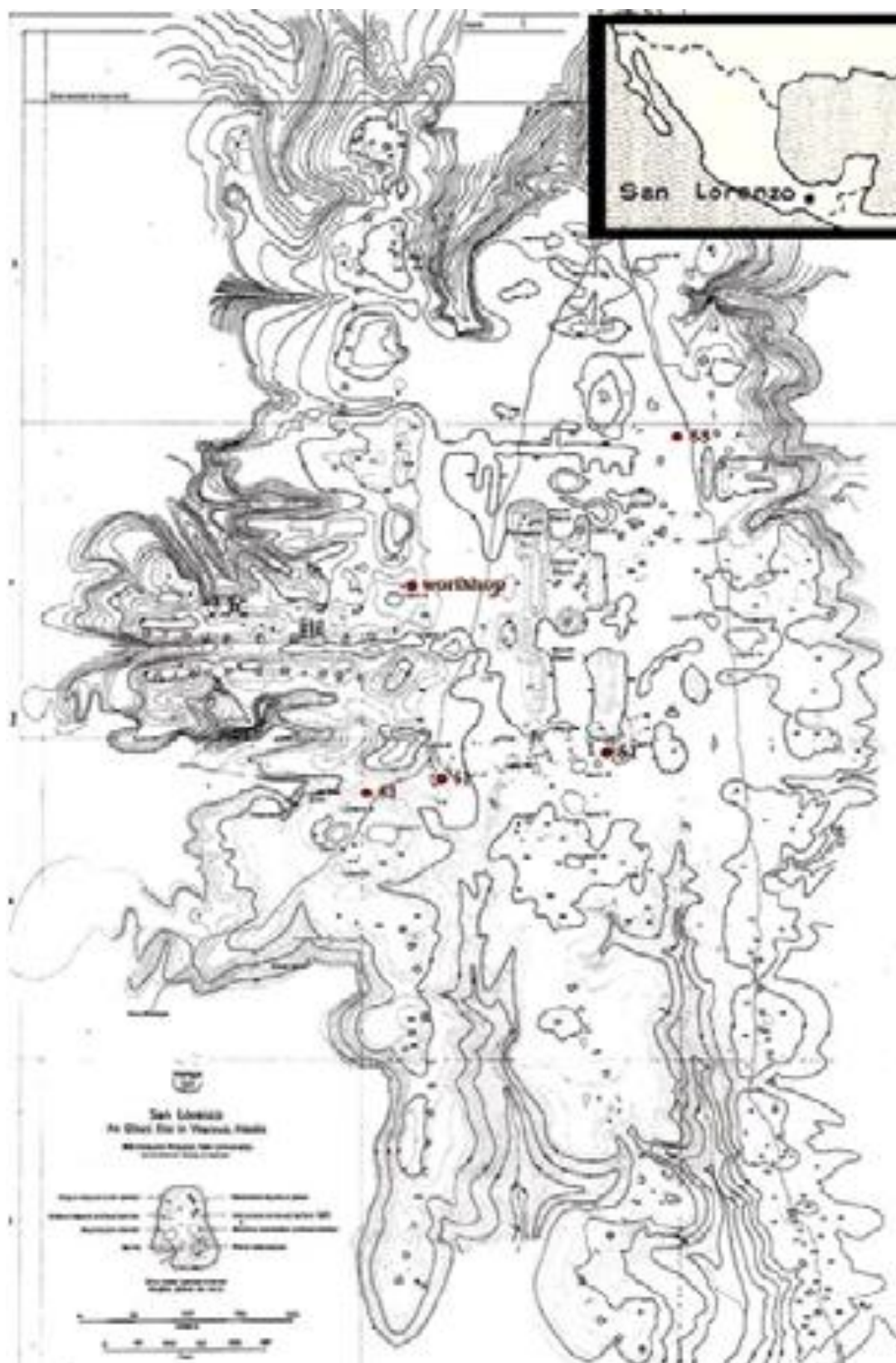


Figure 7. Site map of San Lorenzo that shows the elevated central plateau, ridges, and ravines (Coe 1972: 1).

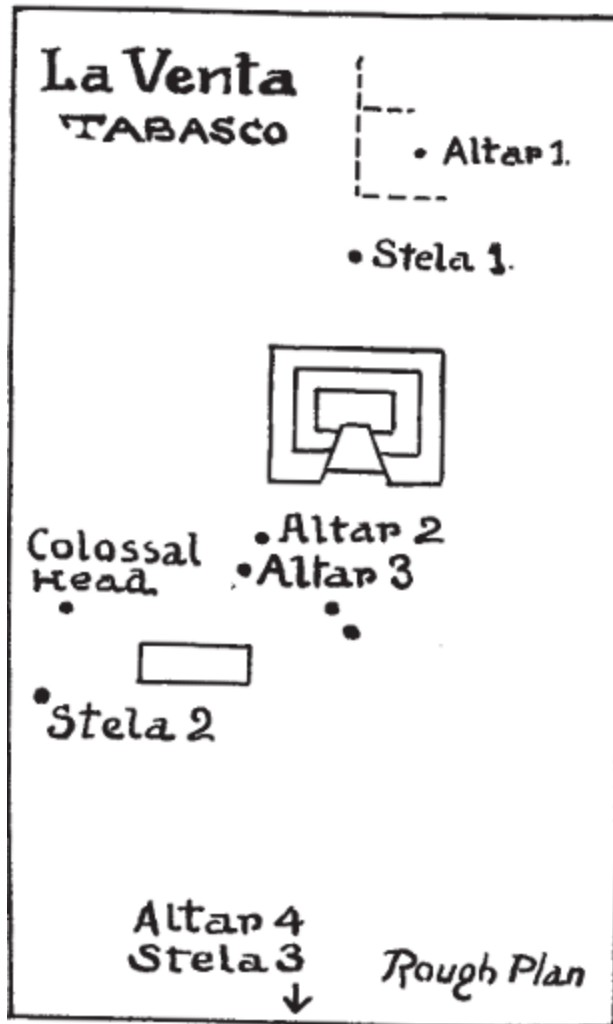


Figure 8. Sketch of La Venta made during Blom and La Farge's exploration (Blom and La Farge 1926: Fig. 68).

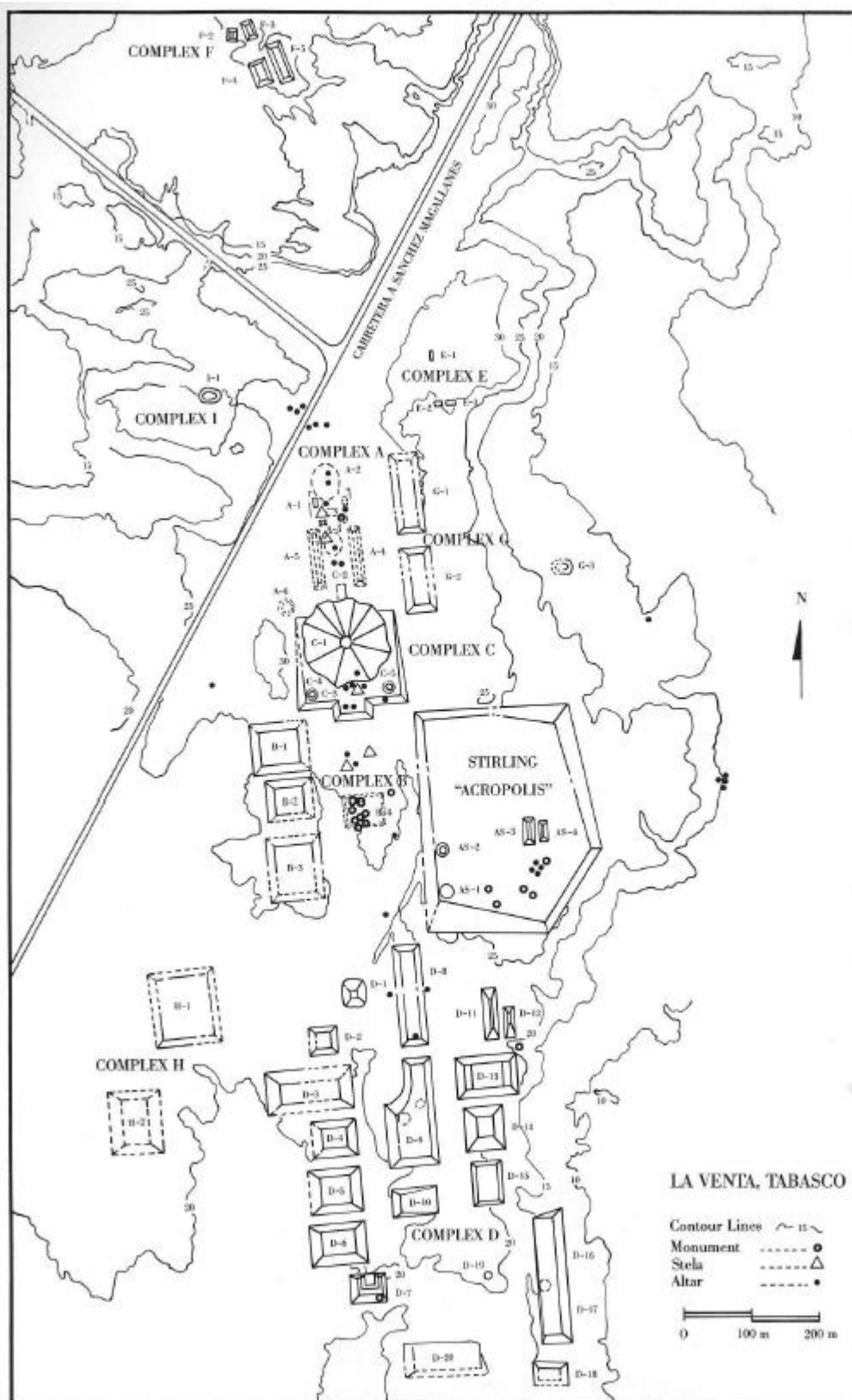


Figure 9. La Venta site map (Gonzalez-Lauck 1996: 74).

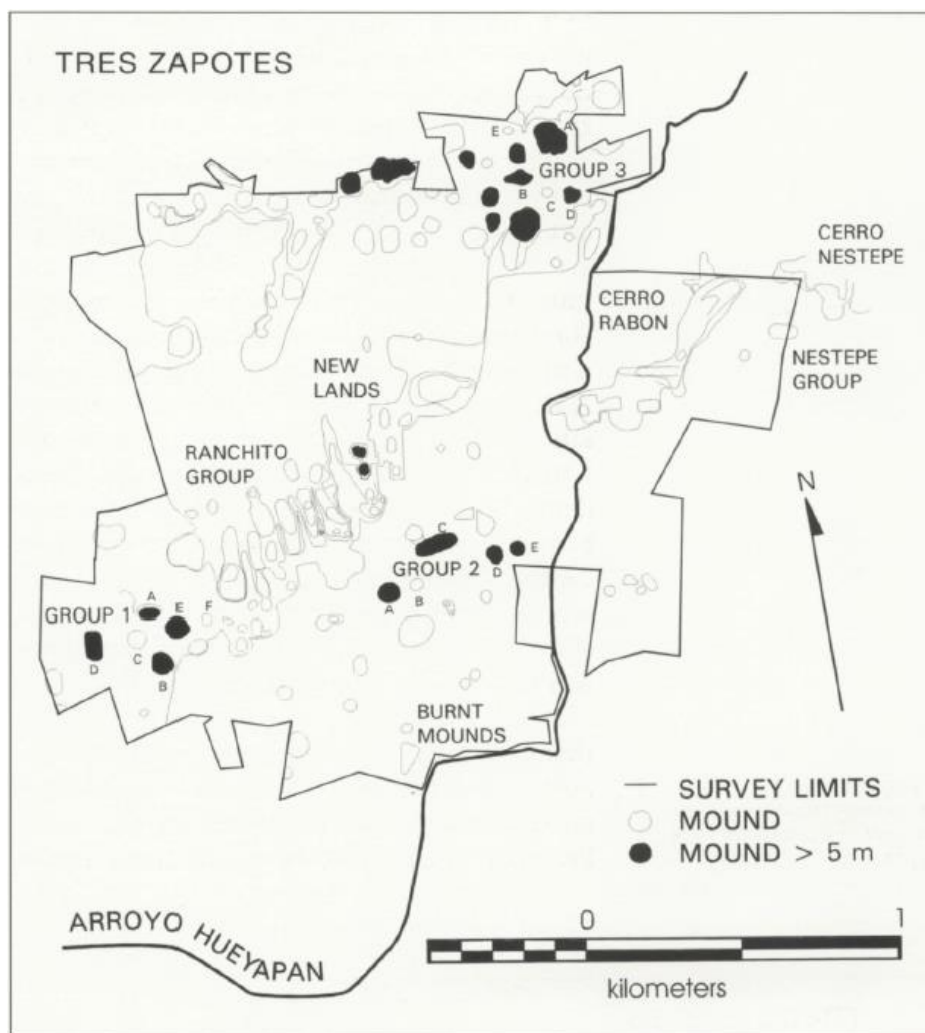


Figure 10. Site map of Tres Zapotes based on 1995 survey (Pool 2000: 140).

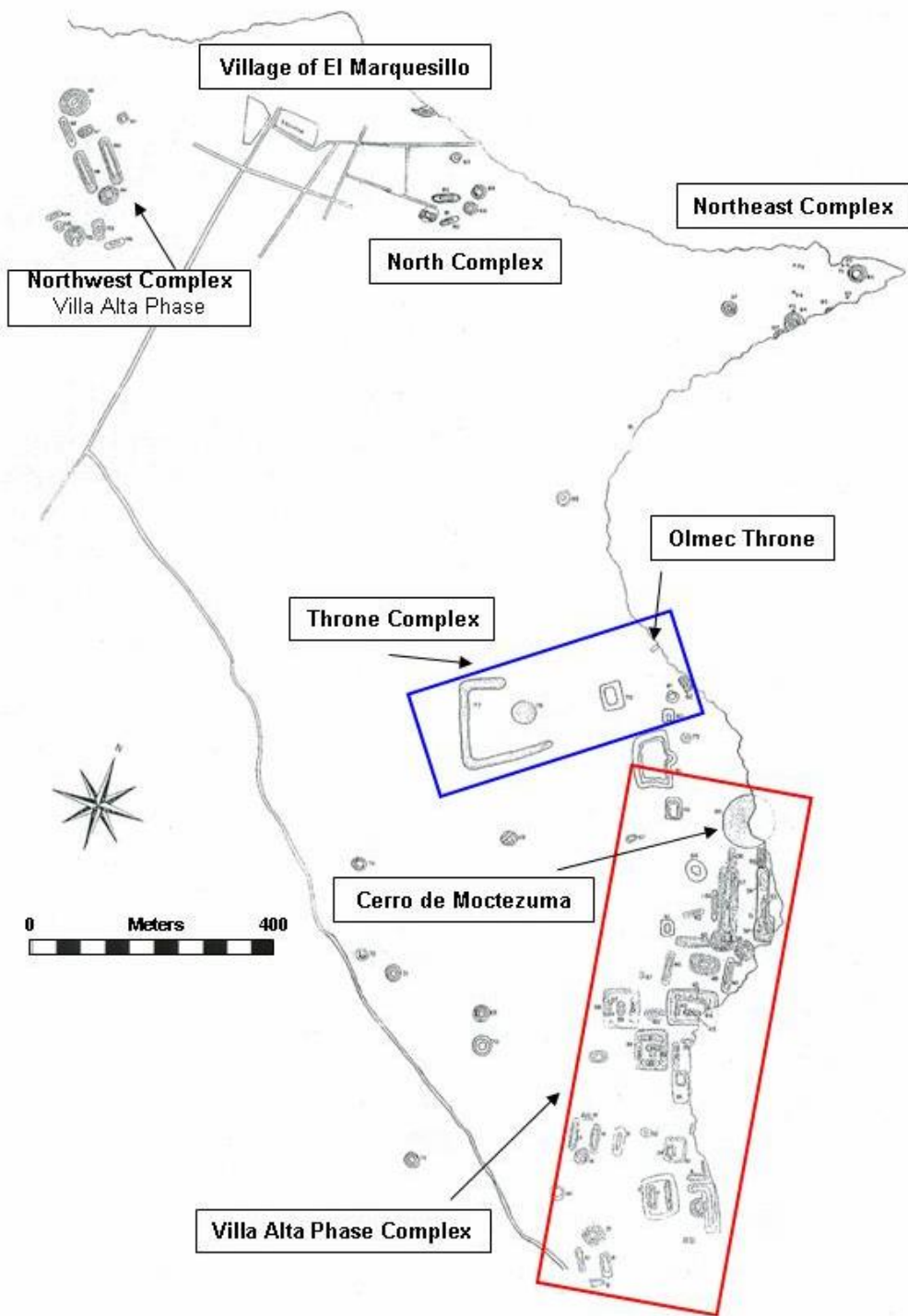


Figure 11. Map of El Marquesillo highlighting the various complexes and where the Altar Throne was found (Doering 2007: 80).

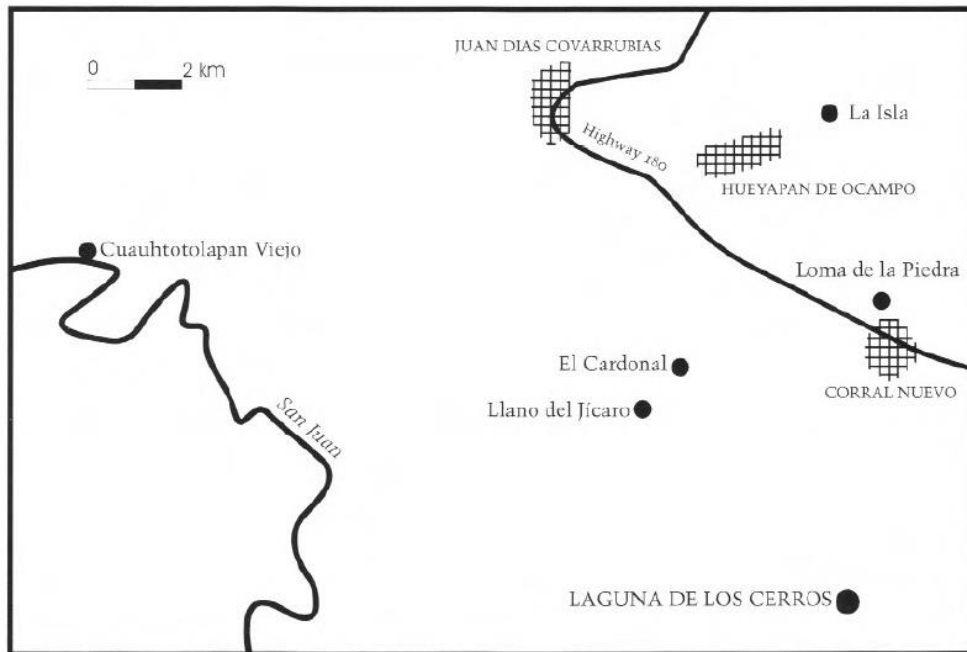


Figure 12. Map showing the site of Laguna de Los Cerros in relation to other sites (Gillespie 2000 :97)

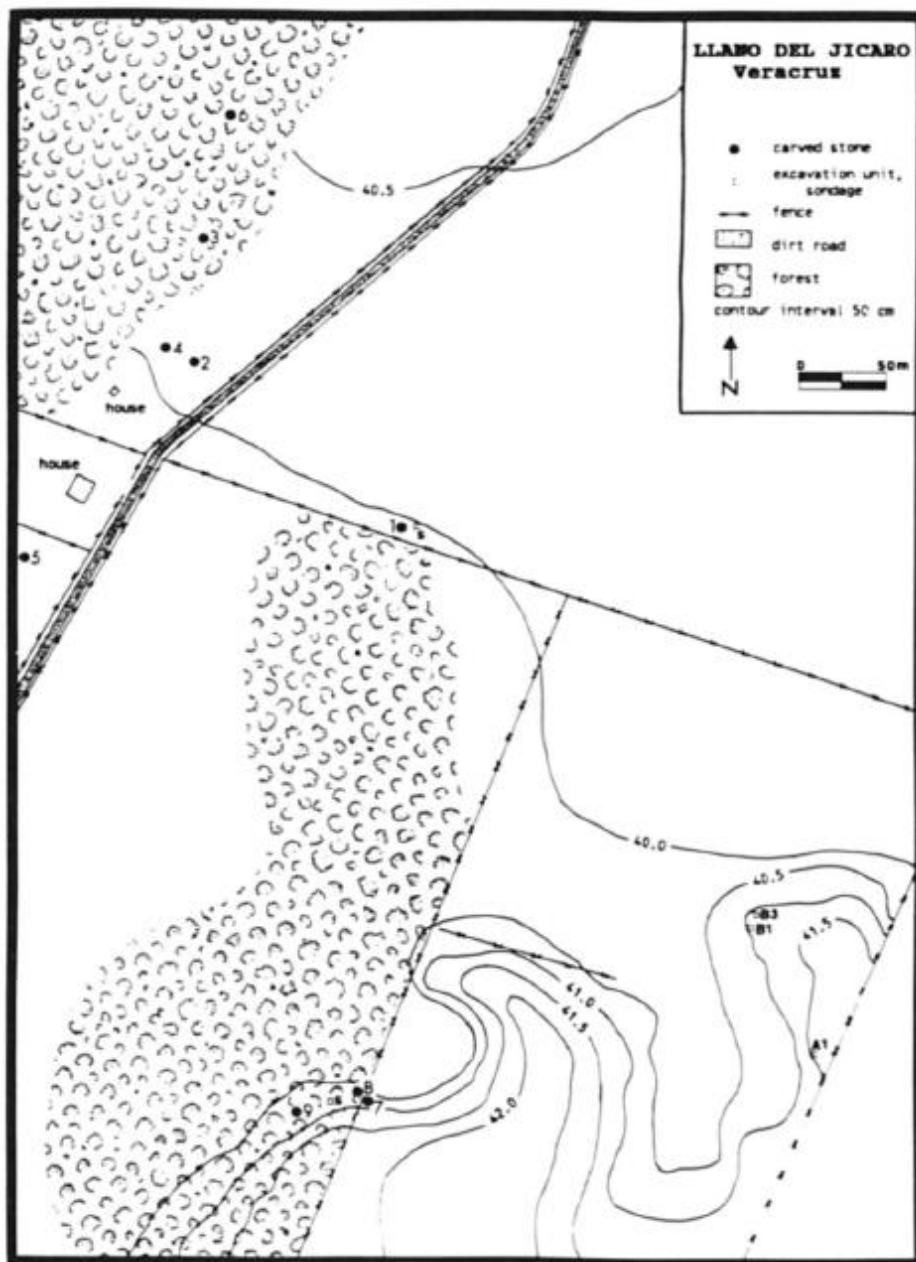


Figure 13. Llano del Jicaro site map (Gillespie 1994: 233)



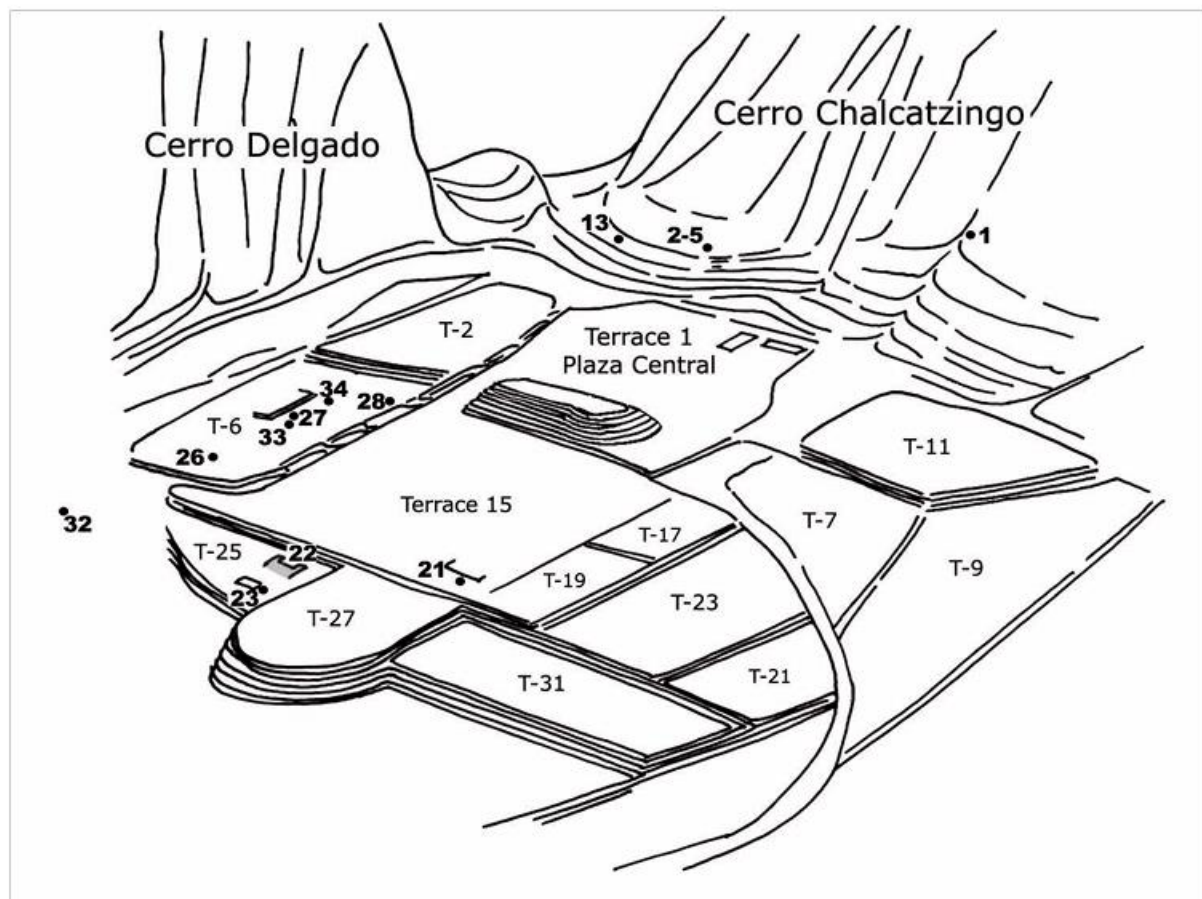


Figure 14. Map of Chalcatzingo with monument numbers and location (Gillespie 2008: 9).



Figure 15. Photograph of Oxtotitlan Cave and its northern grotto (David Grove 1970: 7)

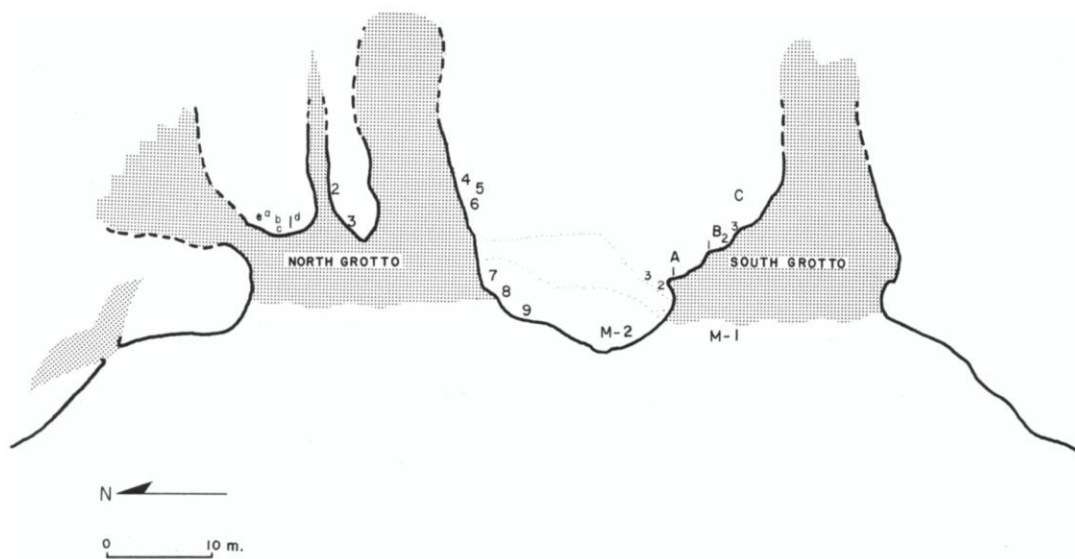


Figure 16. Drawing of Oxtotitlan Cave's painting's locations (David Grove 1970: 7)

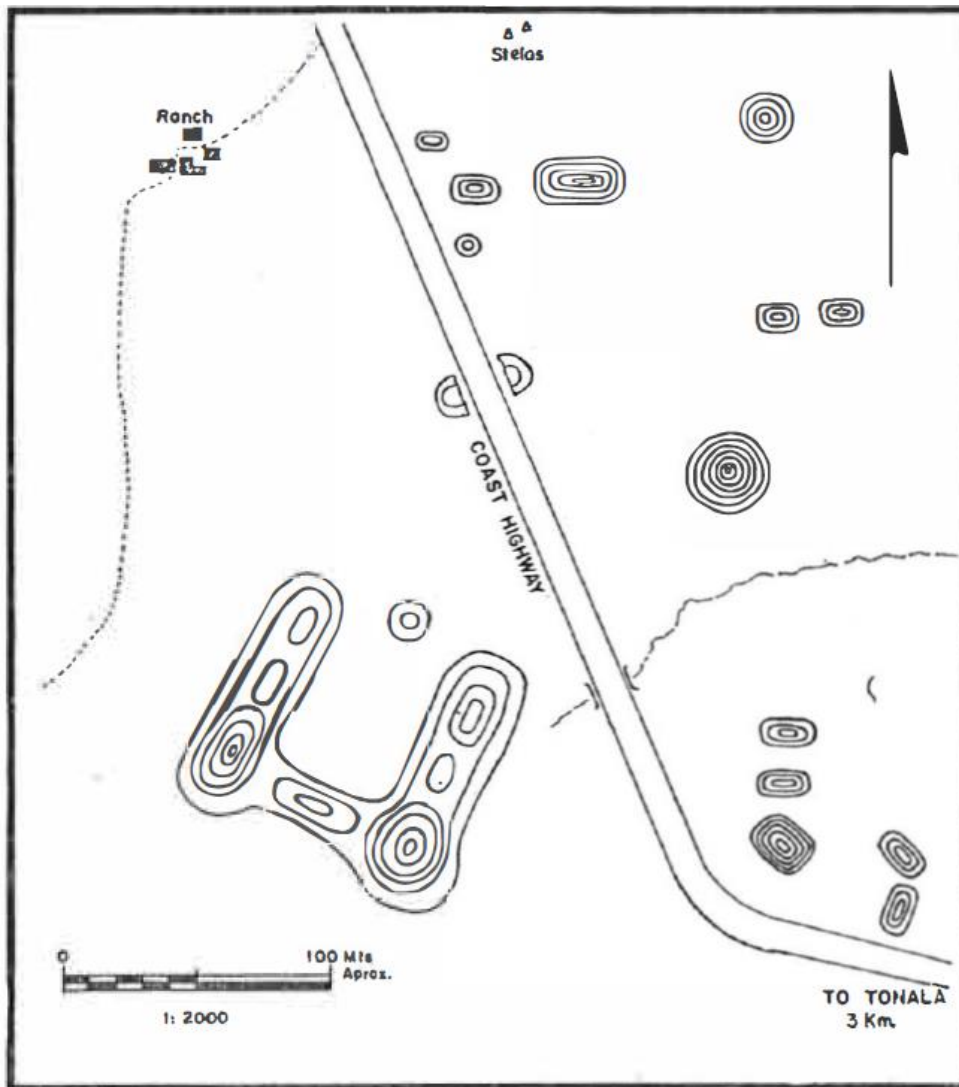


Figure 17. Tiltepec site map (Navarrete 1959: 4).

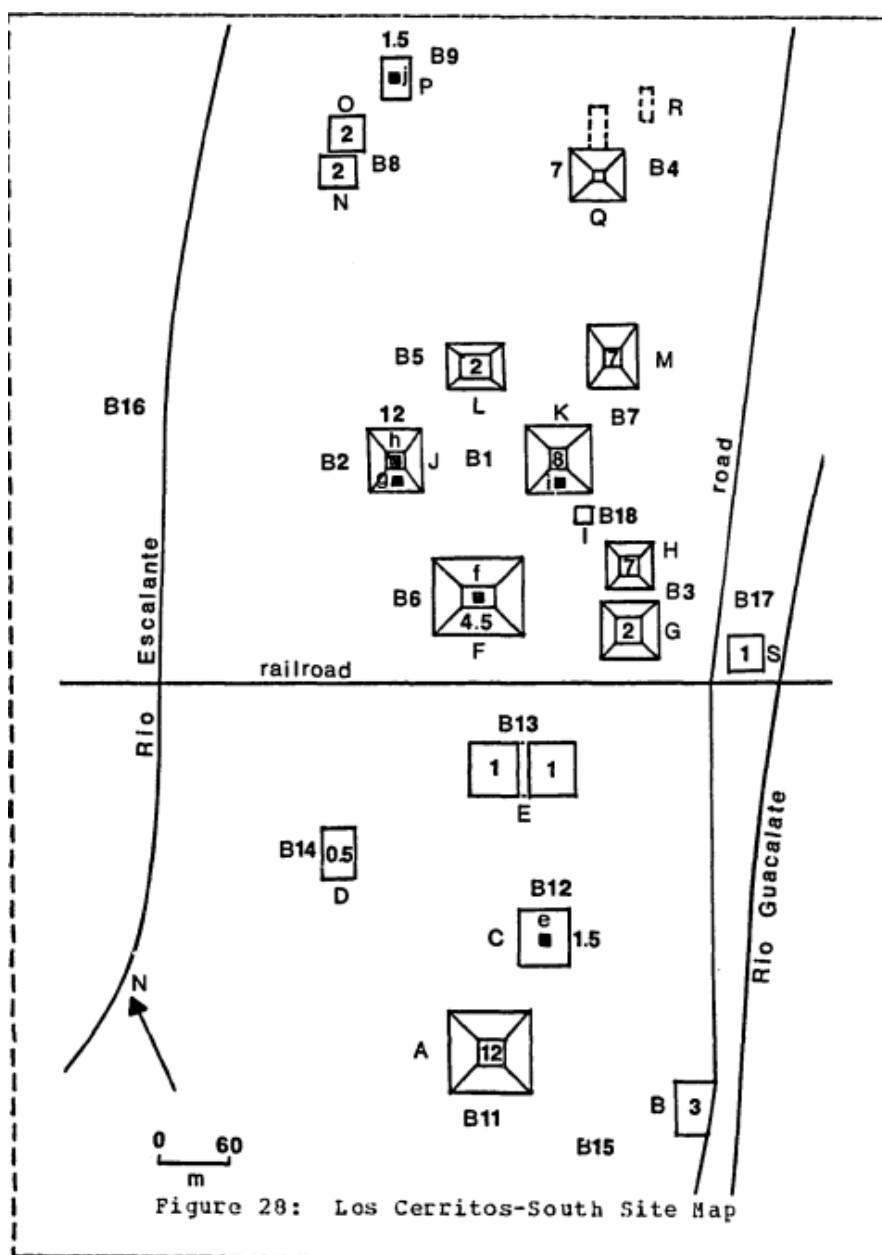


Figure 18. Los Cerritos Sur South site map (Bove 1981: 223).

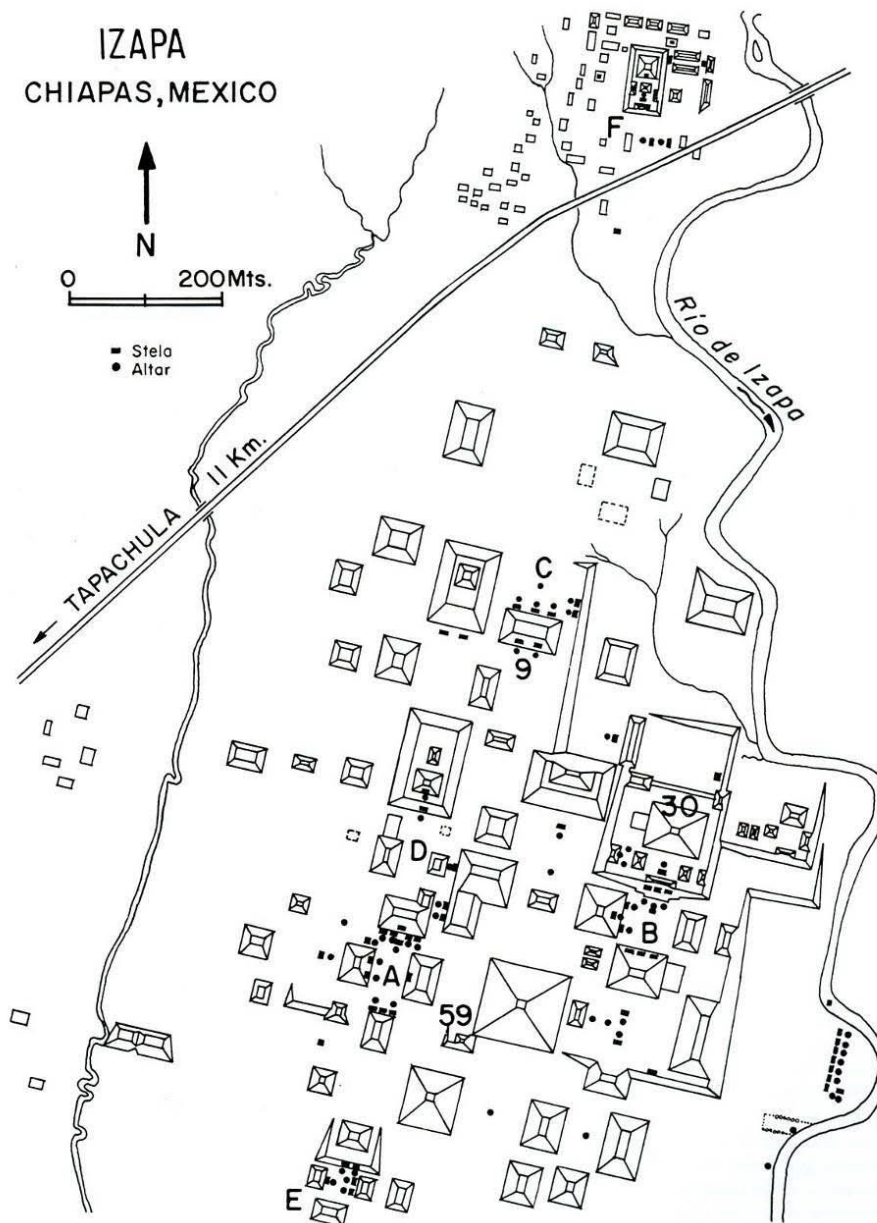


Figure 19. Izapa site map (INAH 2007: 5).



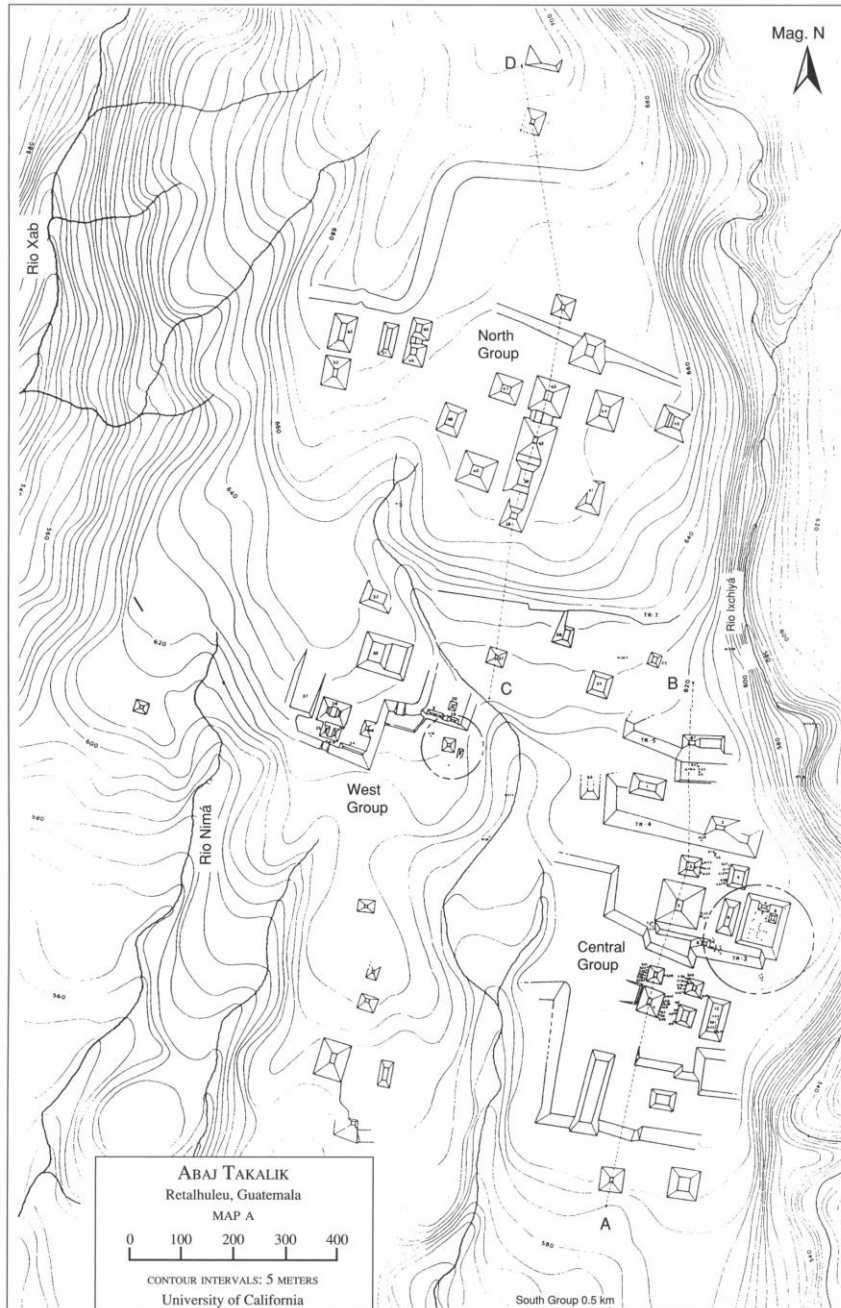


Figure 20. Takalik Abaj site map (Lavarreda 1994: 79).



Figure 21. Photo of San Lorenzo Monument 14 (Mollenhauer 2010: 368).





Figure 22. Photo of San Lorenzo Monument 14's left side (Milbrath 1979: 59).

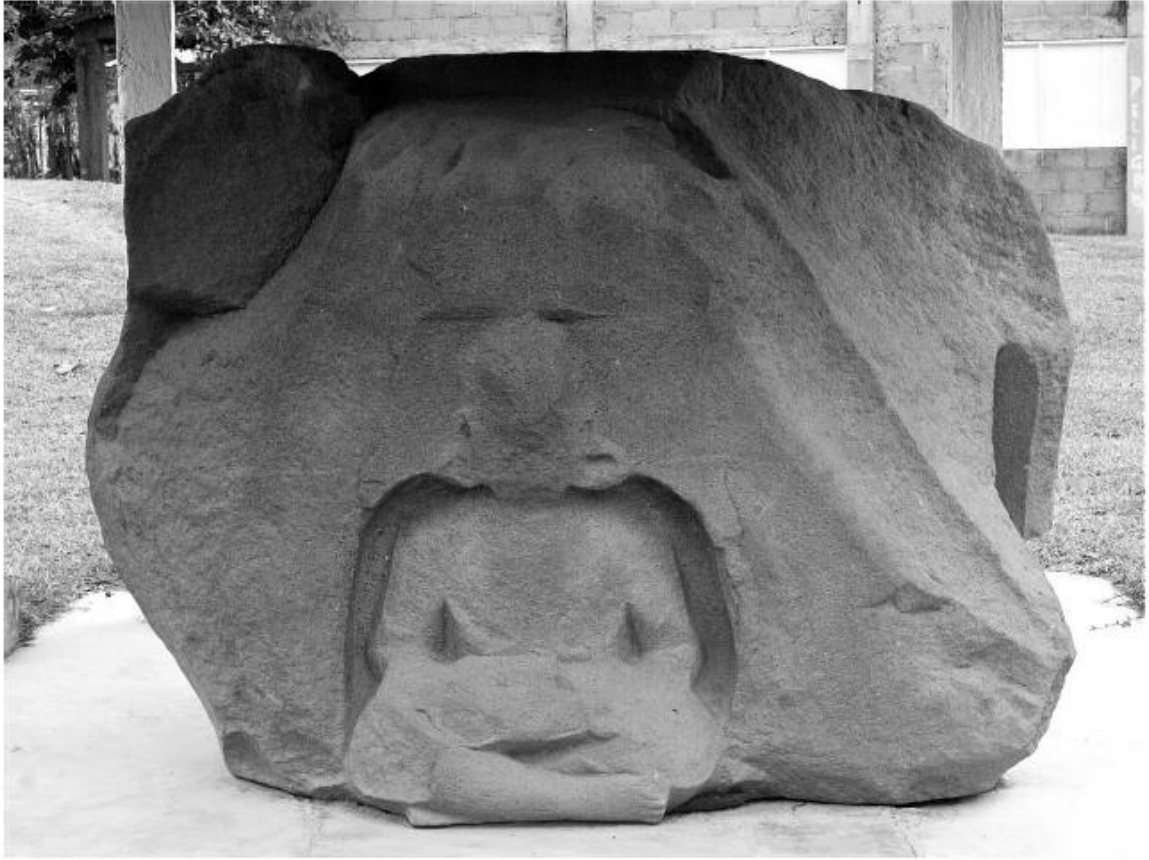


Figure 23. Photo of San Lorenzo Monument 20 (Mollenhauer 2010: 379).

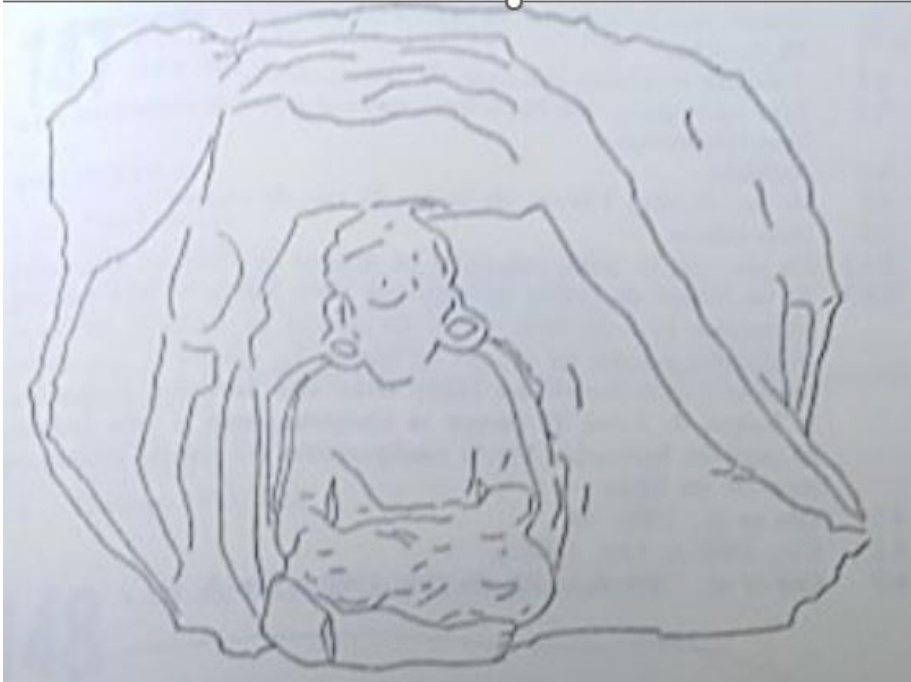


Figure 24. Line drawing of San Lorenzo Monument 20. (De la Fuente 1973).



Figure 25. Photos of San Lorenzo Monument 53/Colossal Head 7, partial front and right profile view showing niche remnants. (Mollenhauer 2010: 380).



Figure 26. Photos of San Lorenzo Monument 2, front and right profile view showing niche remnants (Mollenhauer 2010: 380).



Figure 27. Close up photos to view the niches from the recarved Altar Thrones on San Lorenzo Monument 2 (bottom), and San Lorenzo Monument 53 (top) (Mollenhauer 2010: 381).





Figure 28. Photo of La Venta Stela 1

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127021.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127021.jpg)



Figure 29. Photo of La Venta Stela 1 (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: Pl 56).





Figure 30. Photo of La Venta Altar 2

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127068.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127068.jpg)



Figure 31. Photo of La Venta Altar 2 (De la Fuente 1973: P1. 2).



Figure 32. Photo of La Venta Altar 3

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127026.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127026.jpg)



Figure 33. Photo of La Venta Altar 3's side view

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127031.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127031.jpg)





Figure 34. Photo of La Venta Altar 4

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127032.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127032.jpg)



Figure 35. Close up photo of La Venta Altar 4's niched figure

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127039.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127039.jpg)



Figure 36. Line drawing of La Venta Altar 4 (Grove 1973: 131).



Figure 37. Photo of La Venta Altar 5

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127044.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127044.jpg)





Figure 38. Photo of La Venta Altar 5's right side

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127053.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127053.jpg)



Figure 39. Photo of La Venta Altar 5's left side

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127057.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127057.jpg)



Figure 40. Photo of La Venta Altar 6

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD127/IMG127070.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD127/IMG127070.jpg)





Figure 41. Photo of La Venta Altar 7's rear (a) and front (b) view (Drucker 1952: Pl 65).

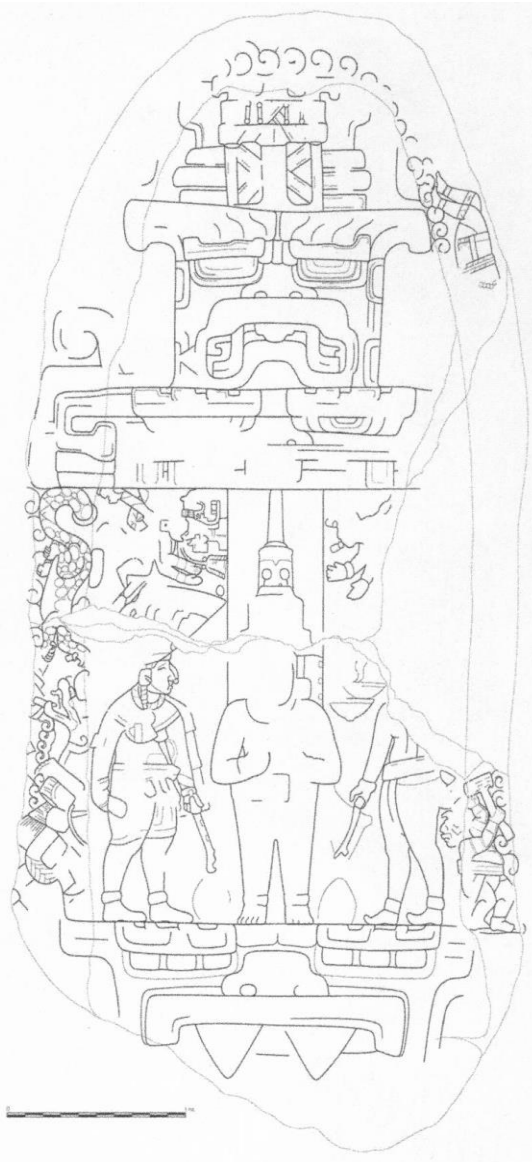


Figure 42. Tres Zapotes Stela A. Photo by Christopher Pool and drawing by Ajax Moreno (Pool and Loughlin 2017: 249).



Figure 43. Photo of Young Lord aka “Slim” green serpentine figure.  
<https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/olmec-rulers-2.htm>



Figure 44. Photo of Tres Zapotes Stela D by Charles Knight (Pool 2000: 148).



Figure 45. Photo of El Marquesillo Monument 1 (Doering 2007: 2).





*Límite Núm. 19.—El monolito Núm. 5 de Laguna de los Cerros. 0.85 m. de longitud.*

Figure 46. Photo of Laguna de los Cerros Monument 5 (Zenil 1960: Figure 20).



Figure 47. Photo of Llano del Jicaro unfinished Altar throne (Gillespie 1994: 234).

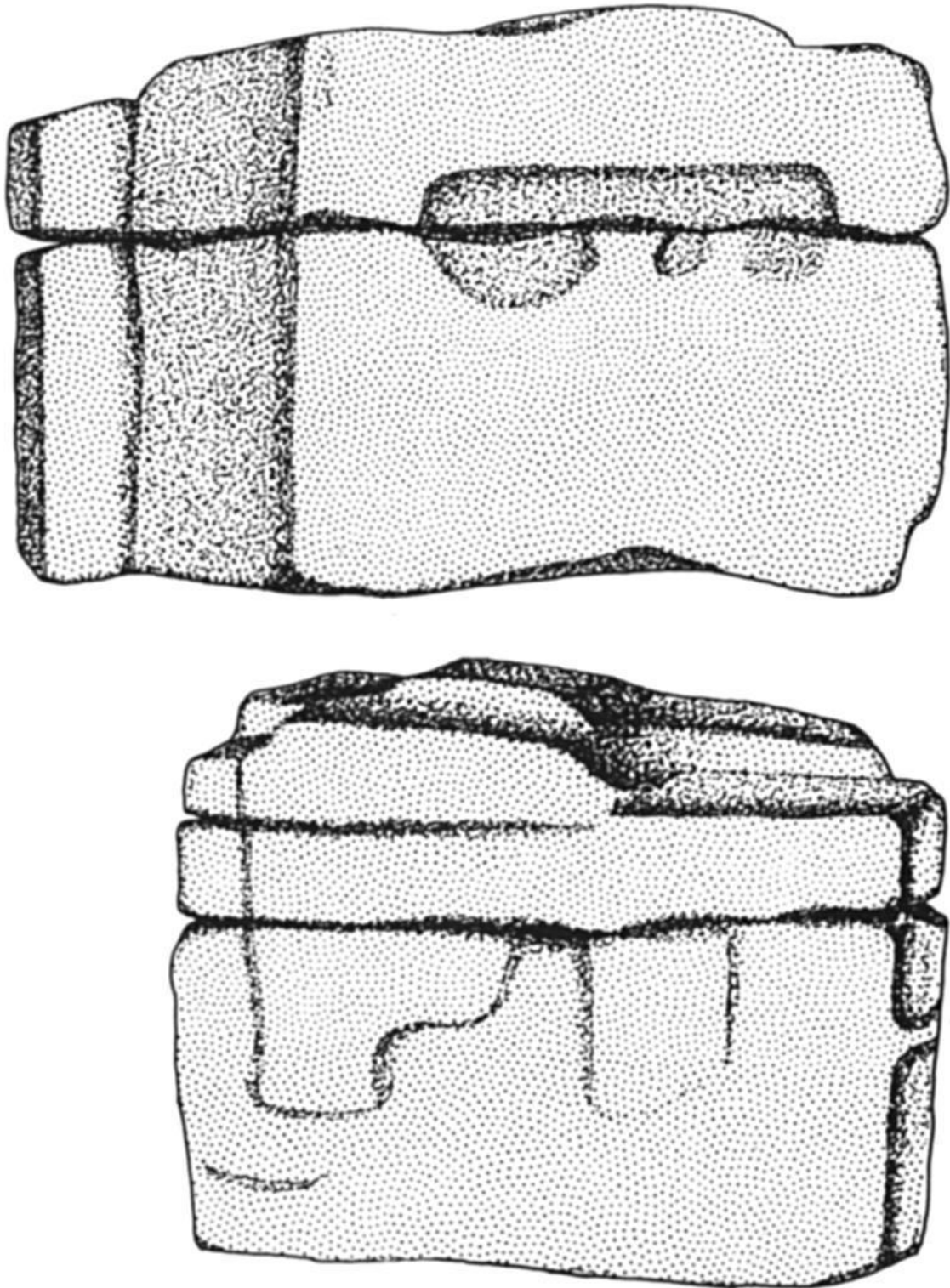


Figure 48. Line drawing of Llano del Jicaro unfinished Altar throne (Gillespie 1994: 234).



Figure 49. Photo of Chalcatzingo Monument 1, bas relief of “El Rey”.

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD125/IMG125046.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD125/IMG125046.jpg)

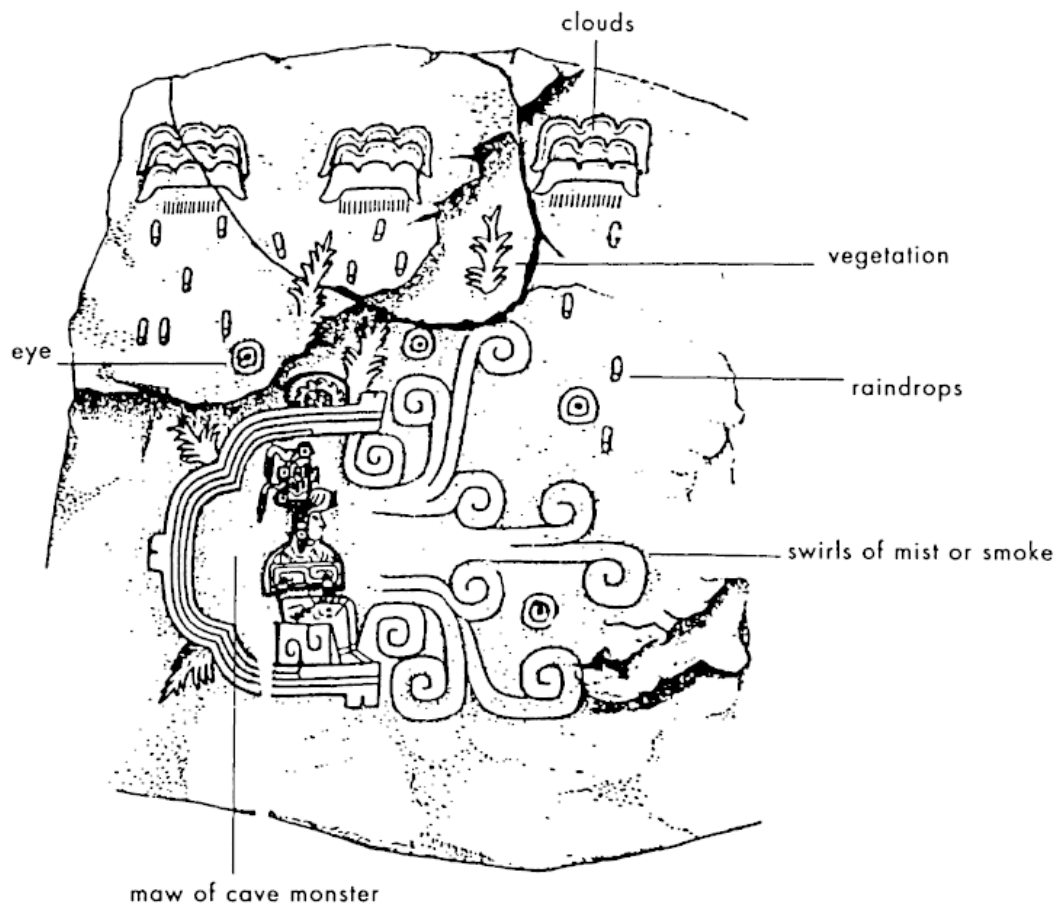


Figure 50. Line drawing of Chalcatzingo Monument 1, bas relief of "El Rey," with water motifs identified by F. Kent Reilly III (Reilly 1990: 19).





Figure 51. Close up photo of “El Rey” from Chalcatzingo Monument 1  
[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD125/IMG125053.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD125/IMG125053.jpg)



Figure 52. Drawings of reliefs from Chalcatzingo (a) relief VI, and (c) relief VIII (Grove 1968: 487).



Figure 53. Photo of Chalcatzingo Monument 9.

[http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele\\_photos/CD126/IMG126004.jpg](http://research.famsi.org/uploads/schele_photos/CD126/IMG126004.jpg)



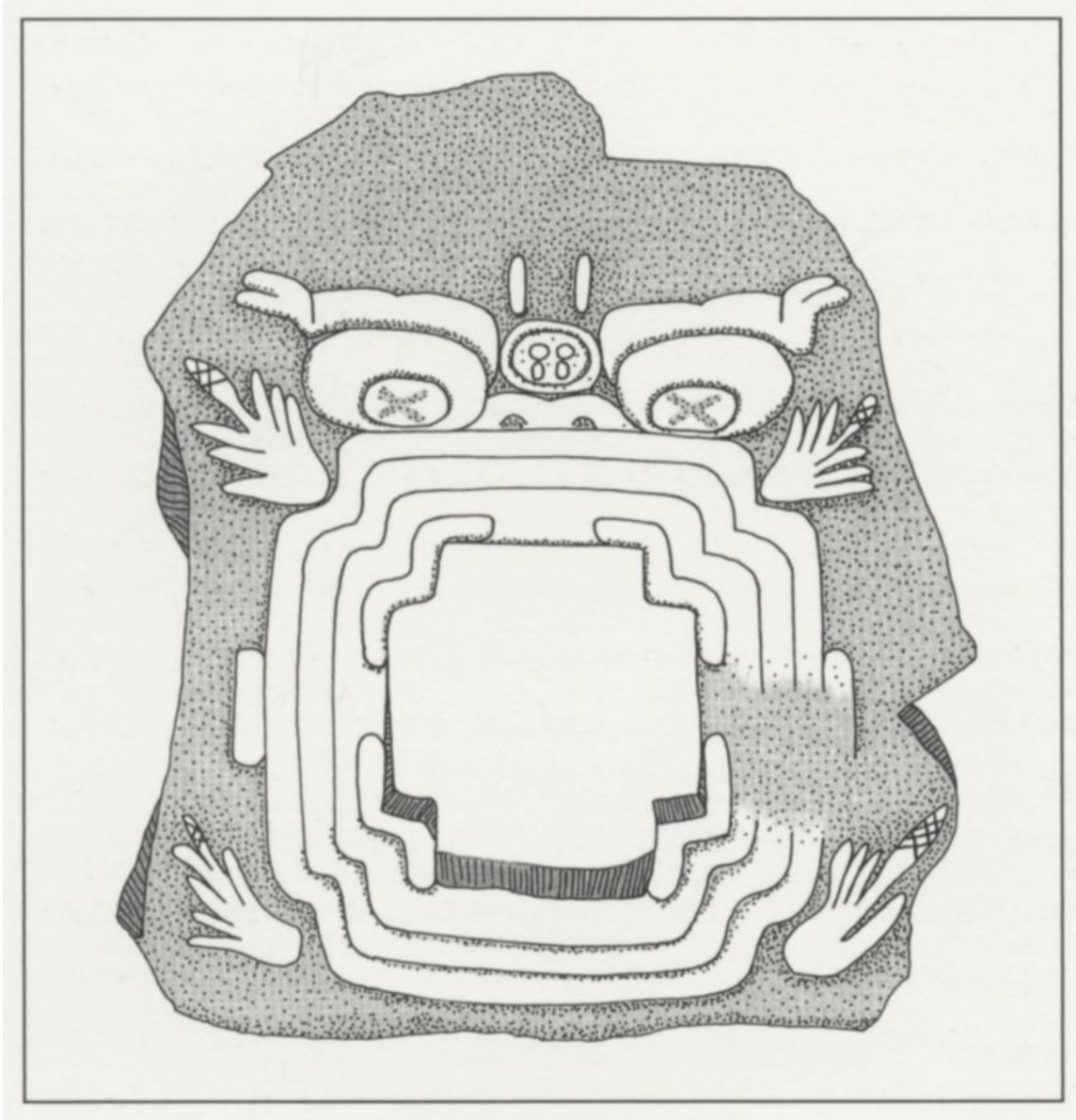


Figure 54. Drawing of Chalcatzingo Monument 9 (Grove 2000: 284).

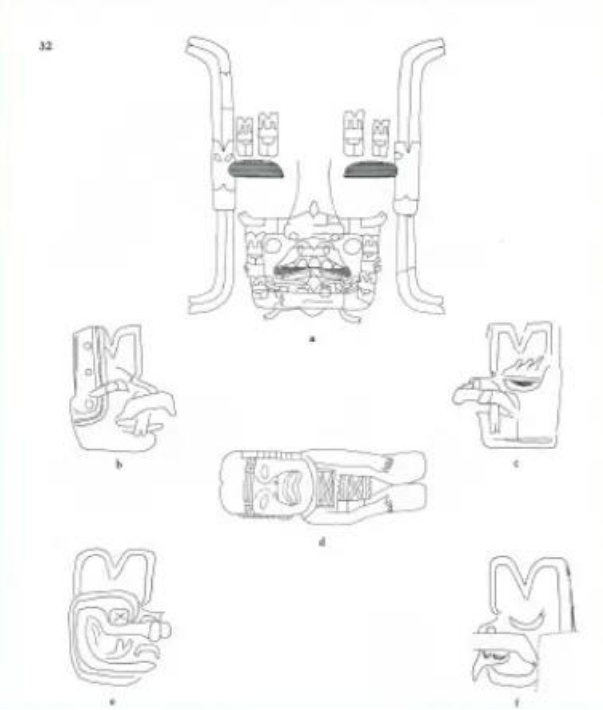


Figure 55. Photo of Las Limas figure (left), line drawings of the incisions on the head, shoulders/upper torso, baby, and knees/legs (right), and drawing of the motif presenting 3Dimensionally using Reilly's "Cut-out-and-fold-up" technique (Reilly and Stauffer PP).

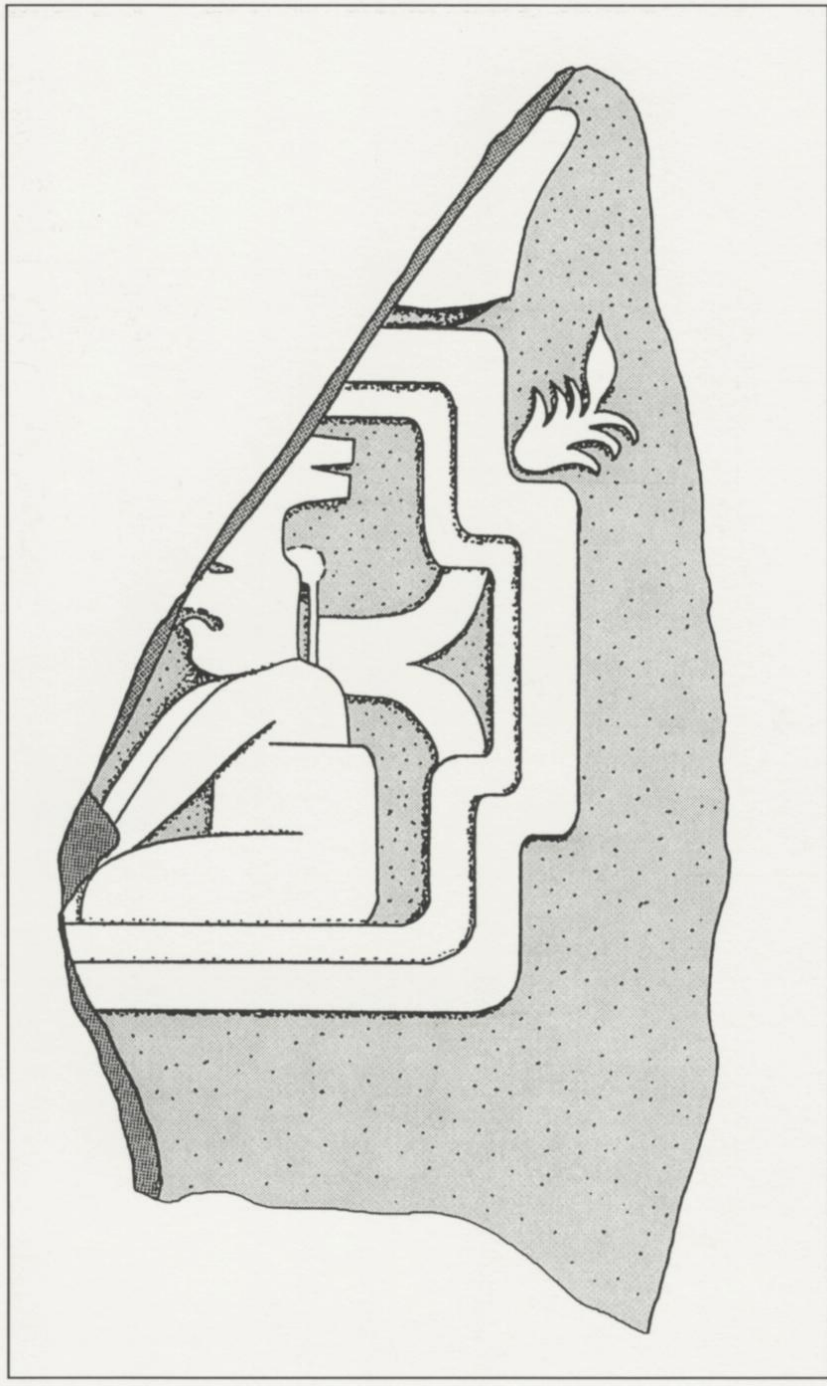


Figure 56. Drawing of Chalcatzingo Monument 13 (Grove 2000: 285).



Figure 57. Photo of Oxtotitlan Mural 1.

<http://www.famsi.org/research/grove/images/fig03c.jpg>

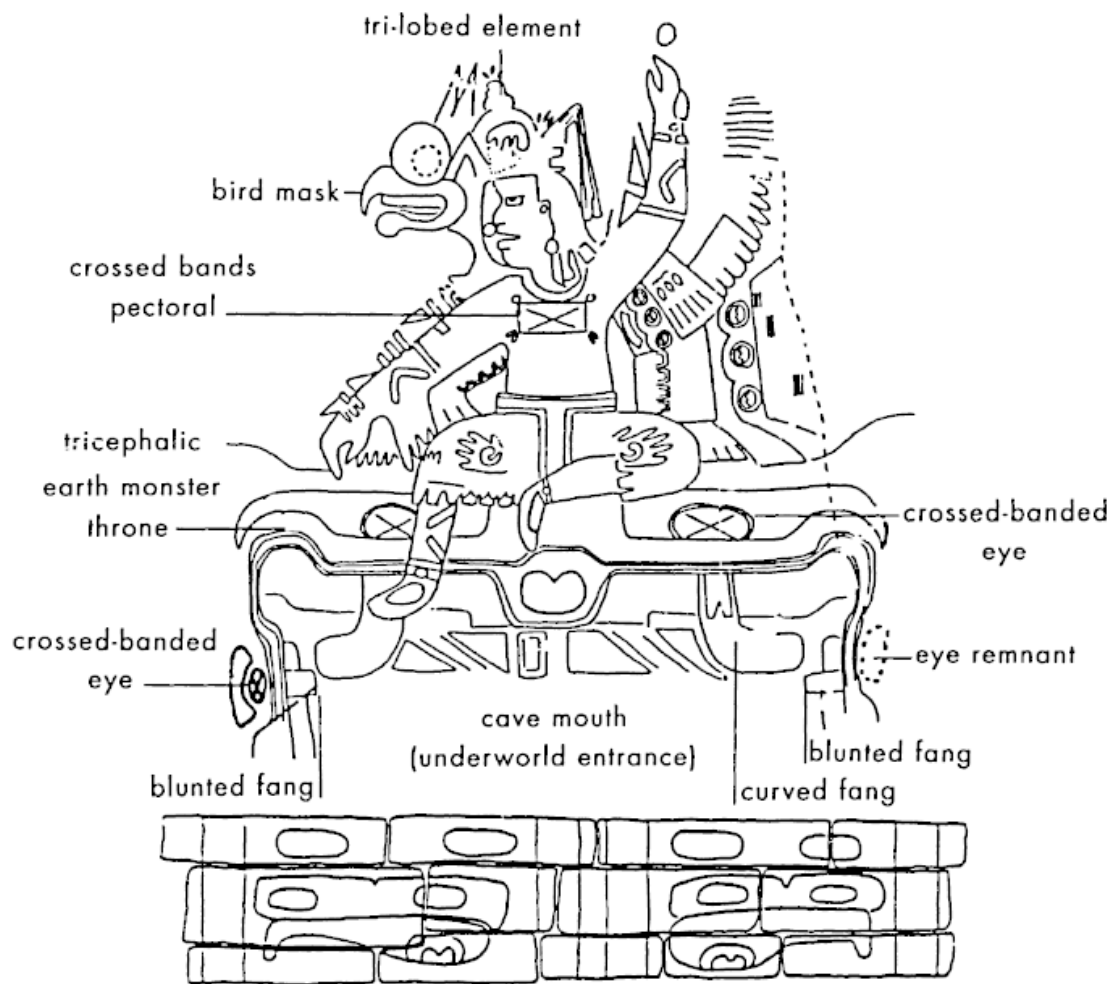


Figure 58. Line drawing of Oxtotitlan Mural 1 by David Grove with its various motifs identified by F. Kent Reilly III (Reilly 1990: 27).





Figure 59. Photo of Tiltepec Unnumbered Monument (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 85).



Figure 60. Photo of Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2 (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 85).





Figure 61. Photo of Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 84).





Figure 62. Photo of the top of Takalik Abaj Altar 48 (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 107).

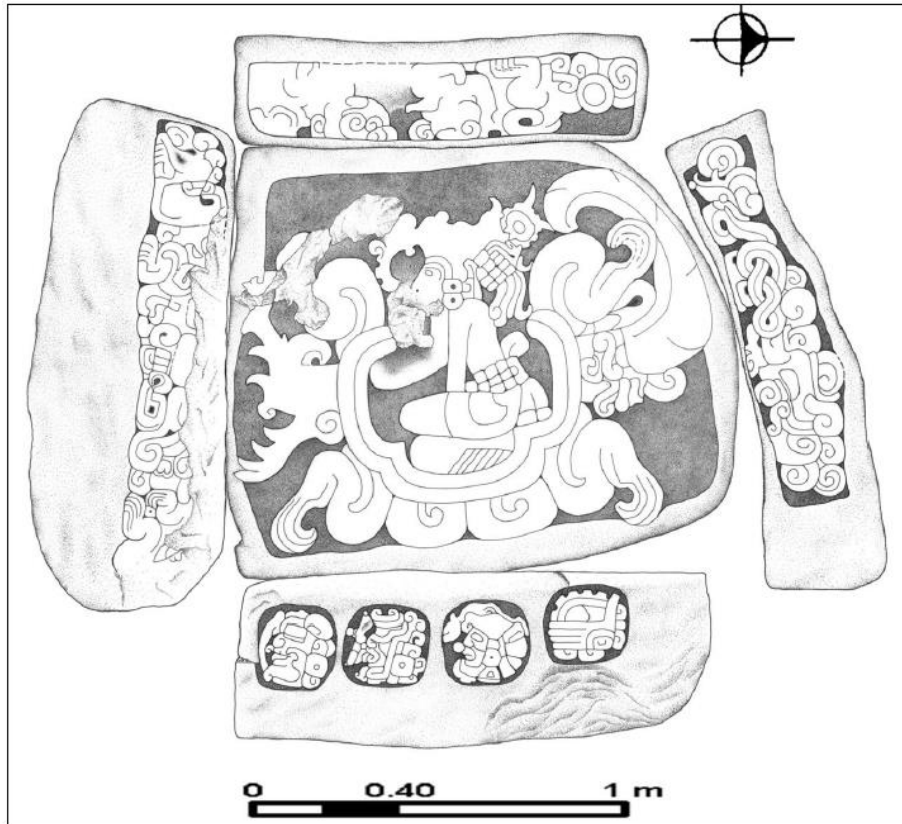


Figure 63. Drawing of Takalik Abaj Altar 48 (Schieber de Lavarreda and Corzo: 2009: 463).

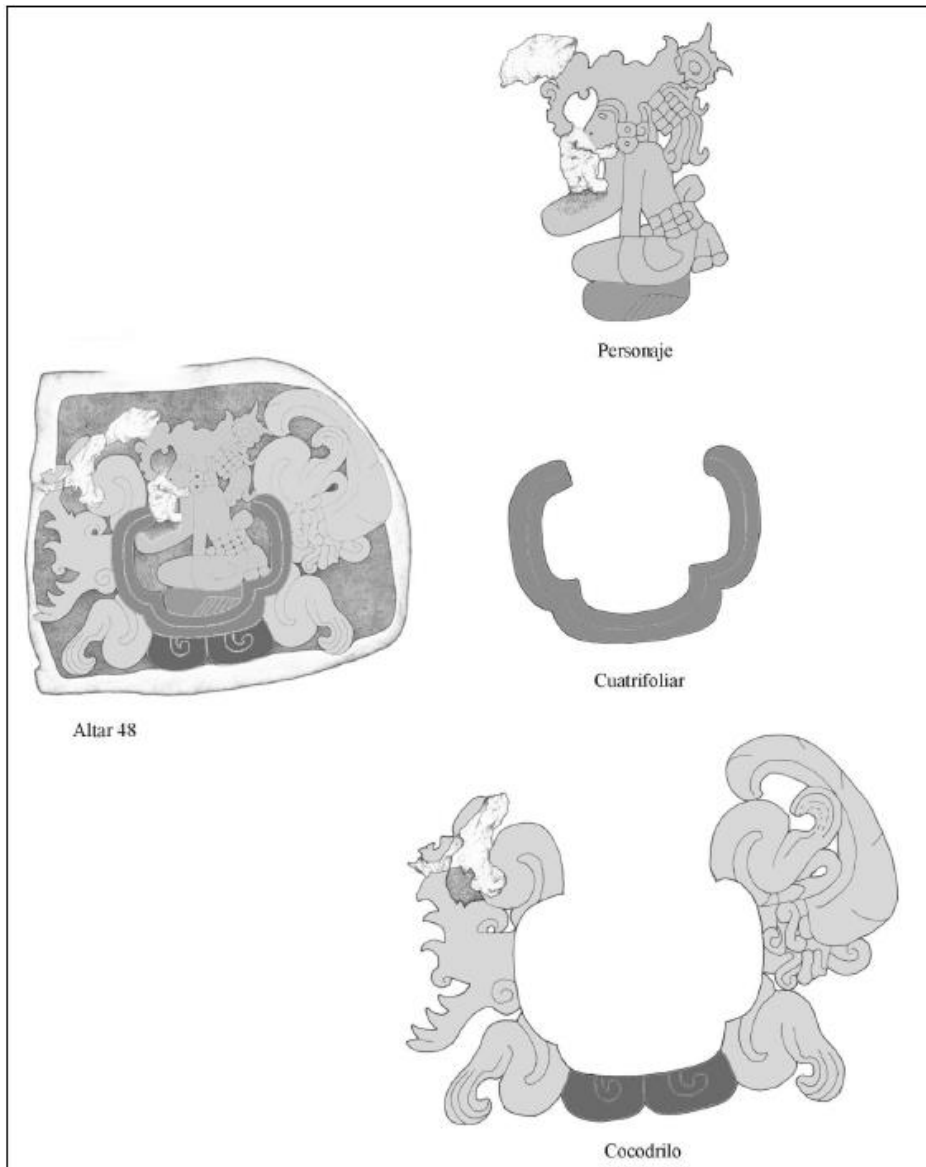
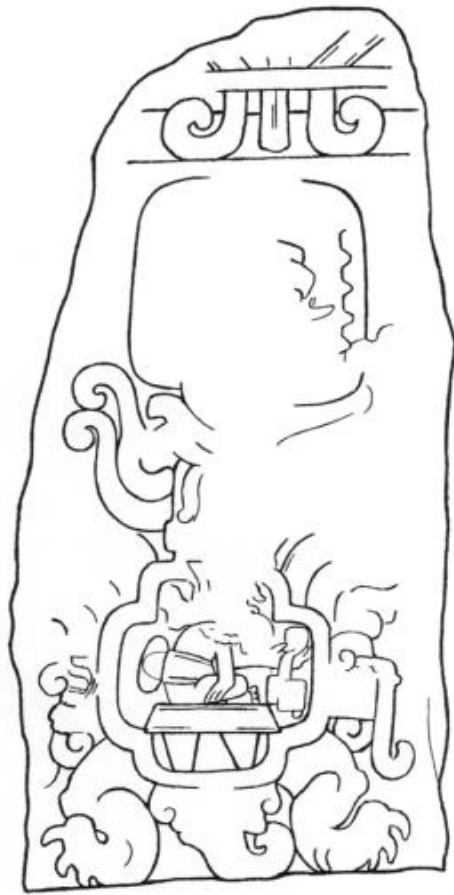
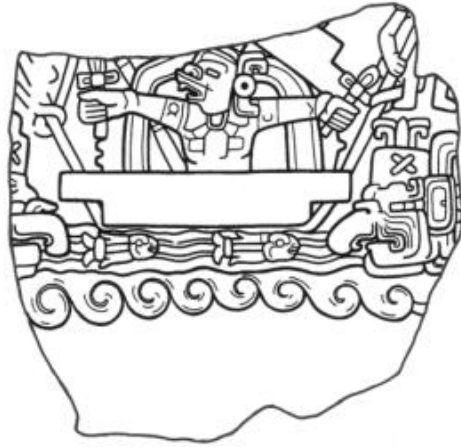


Figure 64. Drawings of Takalik Abaj Altar 48's motif breakdown (Schieber de Lavarreda and Corzo: 2009: 467).



**a**



**b**

Figure 65. Drawings of different representations of the quatrefoil motif at Izapa. a. Izapa Stela 8; b. Izapa Stela 67 (Guernsey 2010: 83).



Figure 66. Frontal view of Takalik Abaj Monument 15 (Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1976: 108).



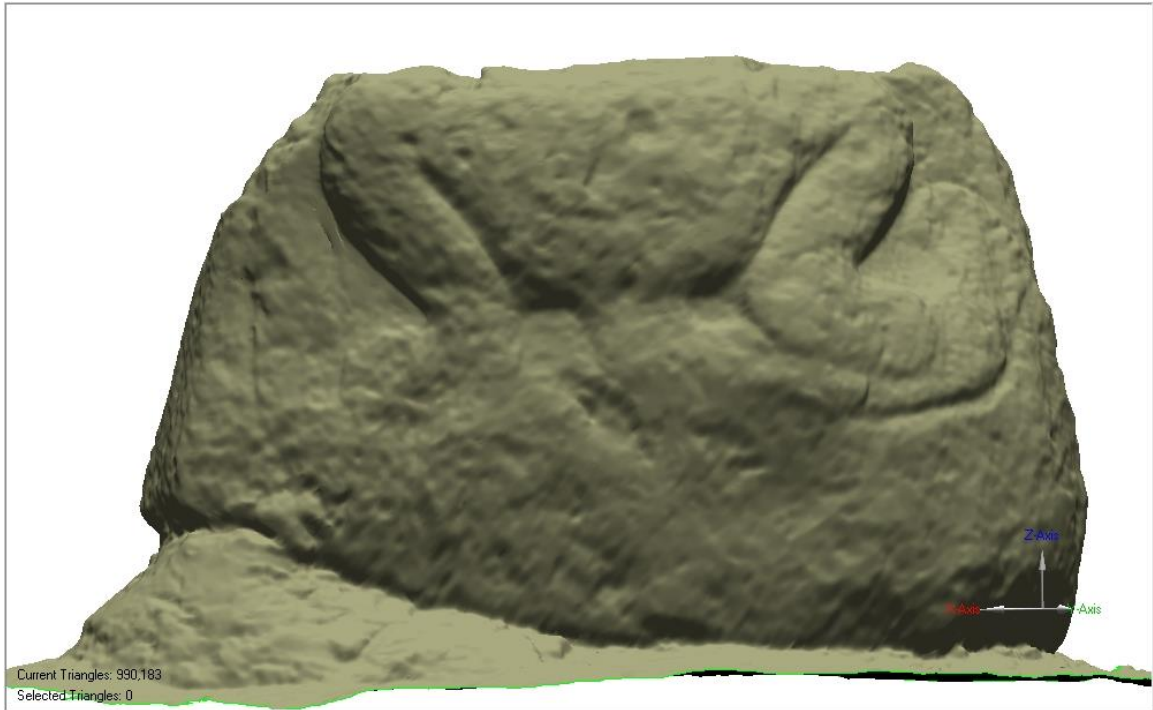


Figure 67. 3Dimentional image of the rear view of Takalik Abaj Monument 15  
[http://research.famsi.org/3D\\_imaging/uploads/SCAN\\_M3D0112\\_6.JPG](http://research.famsi.org/3D_imaging/uploads/SCAN_M3D0112_6.JPG)



Figure 68. Photo of front view of Takalik Abaj Monument 23

[http://research.famsi.org/3D\\_imaging/uploads/M3D0118\\_2.JPG](http://research.famsi.org/3D_imaging/uploads/M3D0118_2.JPG)





Figure 69. Photo of left profile of Takalik Abaj Monument 23 (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 91).





Figure 70. Photo of right profile of Takalik Abaj Monument 23

[http://research.famsi.org/3D\\_imaging/uploads/M3D0118\\_3.JPG](http://research.famsi.org/3D_imaging/uploads/M3D0118_3.JPG)



Figure 71. Photo of Takalik Abaj Monument 25 (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 87).





Figure 72. Photo of Takalik Abaj Monument 67 (Nuckols-Wilde 2019: 88).

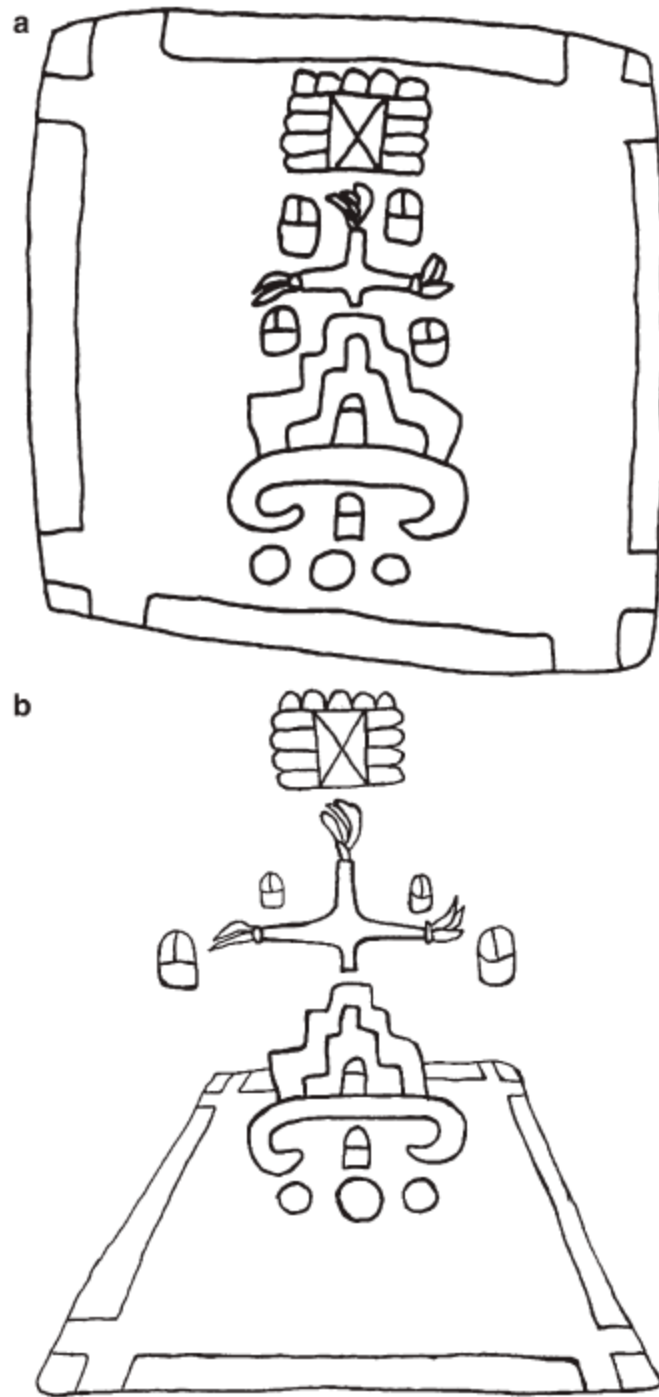


Figure 73. (a) Line drawing of The Dallas Plaque and (b) The Dallas Plaque in Cut Up and Fold Out by F. Kent Reilly III (Freidel and Reilly 2009: Figure 14).

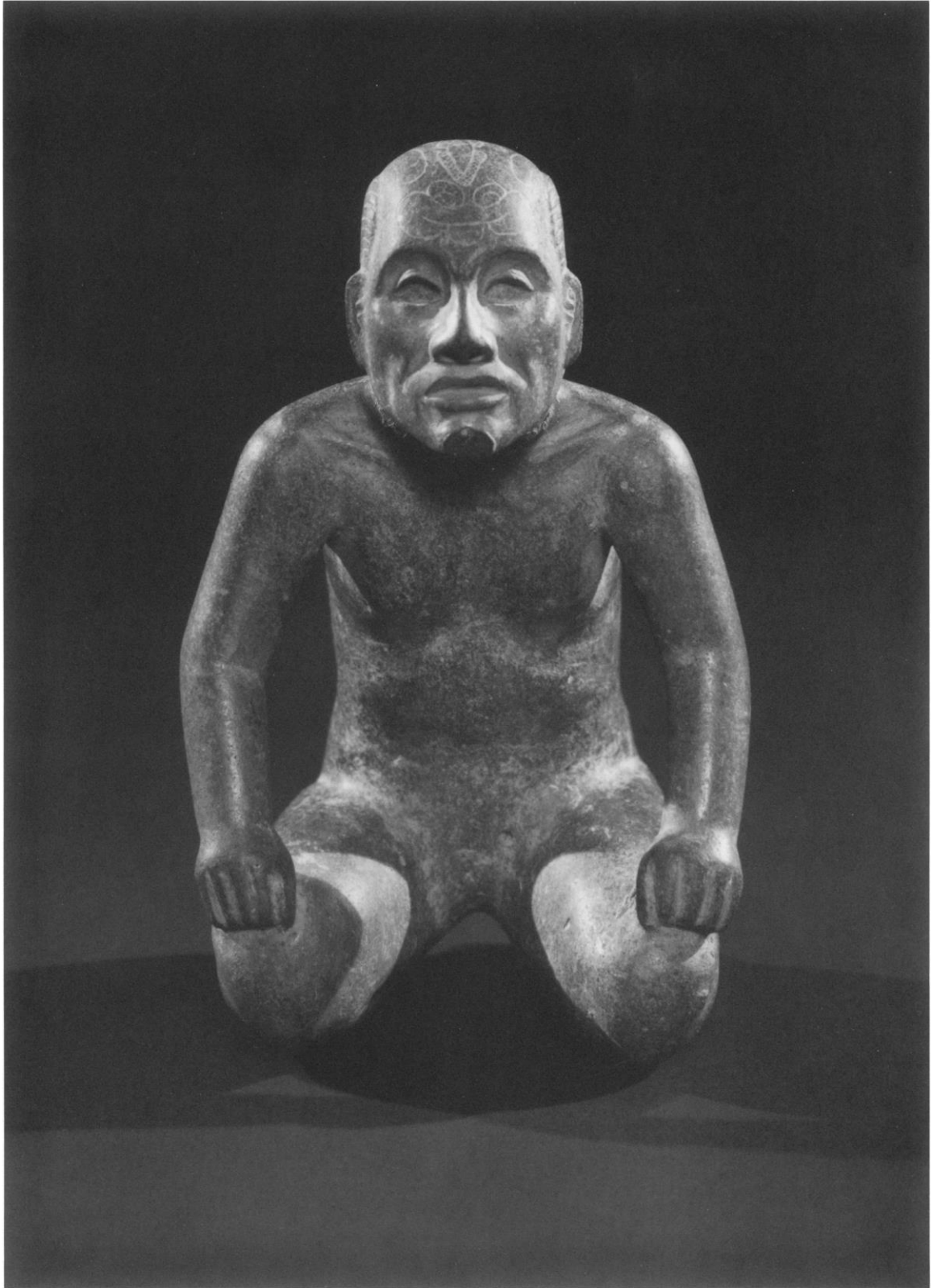


Figure 74. Photo of “Shaman in transofmratio pose” (Reilly 1989: 5).



Figure 75. Photo of a kneeling were-jaguar man with tearing skin at the shoulders from the Hauberg-Dumbarton Oaks collection (Reilly 1989: 12).





Figure 76. Photo of Olmec style jade figurine depicting a kneeling Were-Jaguar that had traces of red pigment on it (Reilly 1989: 14).



Figure 77. Photo of Olmec style jade figurine depicting a standing Were-Jaguar (Reilly 1989: 15).





Figure 78. Drawing of Izapa Altar 2 by Ramiro Jimenez Pozo that shows the markings of the *Bufo marinus* toad (Guernsey-Kappelman 2000: 81).



Figure 79. Photo of compacted clay quatrefoil that forms La Blanca Monument 3 (Guernsey 2010: 76).

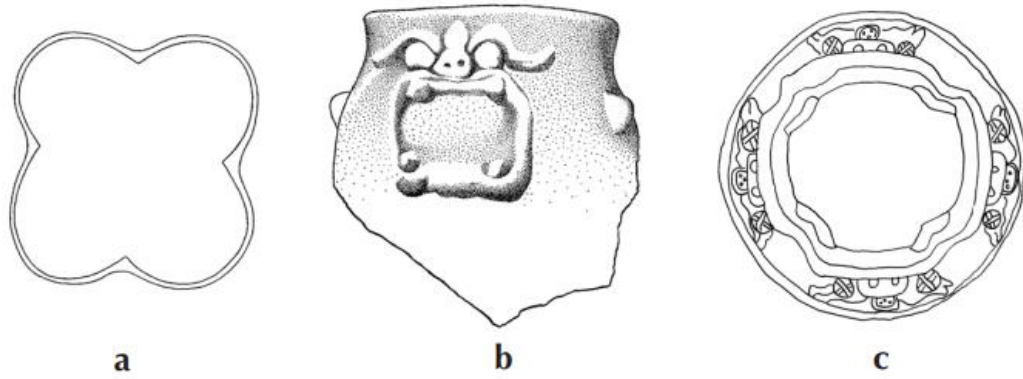


Figure 80. Drawings of various examples of the quatrefoil motif on ceramic vessels (a) quatrefoil-shaped ceramic vessel from La Venta, (b) quatrefoil-shaped maw on a ceramic vessel from La Venta, (c) Formal quatrefoil motif on the rim of a ceramic vessel from Xochipala (Guernsey 2010: 77).

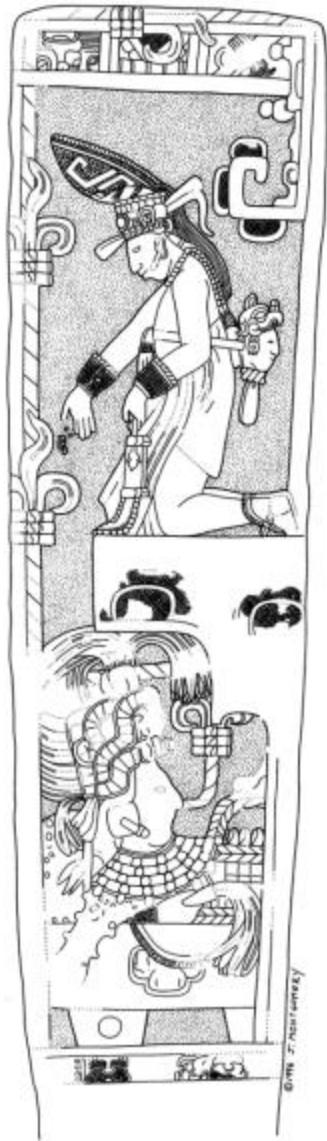


Figure 81. Line drawing of Piedras Negras Stela 40 by John Montgomery (Guernsey 2010: 77).

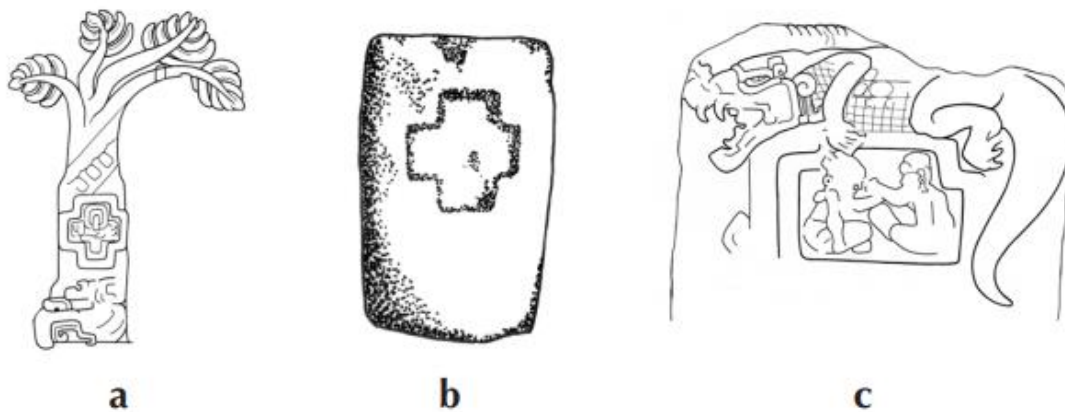


Figure 82. Variations of the Quatrefoil motif at Izapa (a) line drawing of Stela 27, (b) drawing of Miscellaneous Monument 38 by Garth Norman, (c) Drawing of Stela 14 by Alex Moreno (Guernsey 2010: 84).

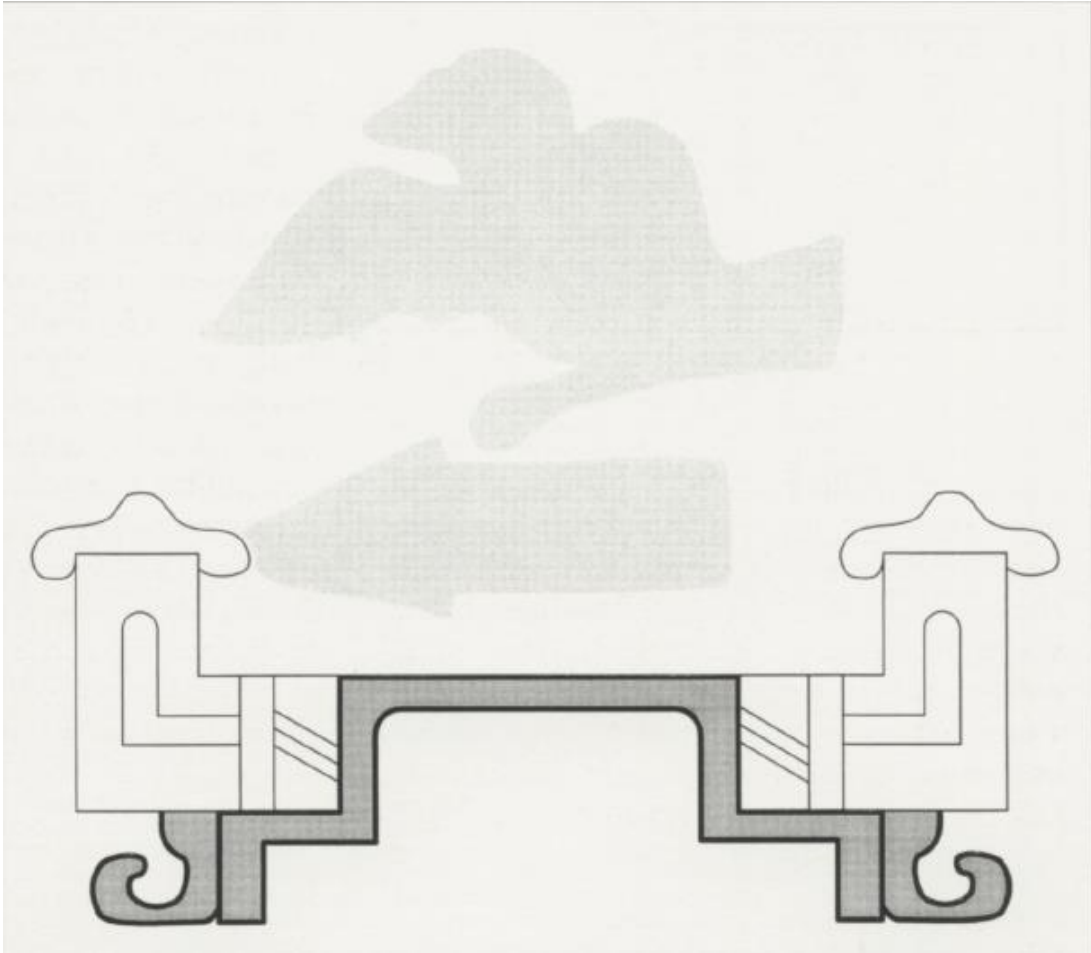


Figure 83. Drawing of Monte Alban II period glyph for mountain or place (Grove 2000: 284).



Figure 84. Drawing of the Arroyo Pesquero Celt that depicts the ruler as the axis mundi.  
(Reilly 1990: 31).

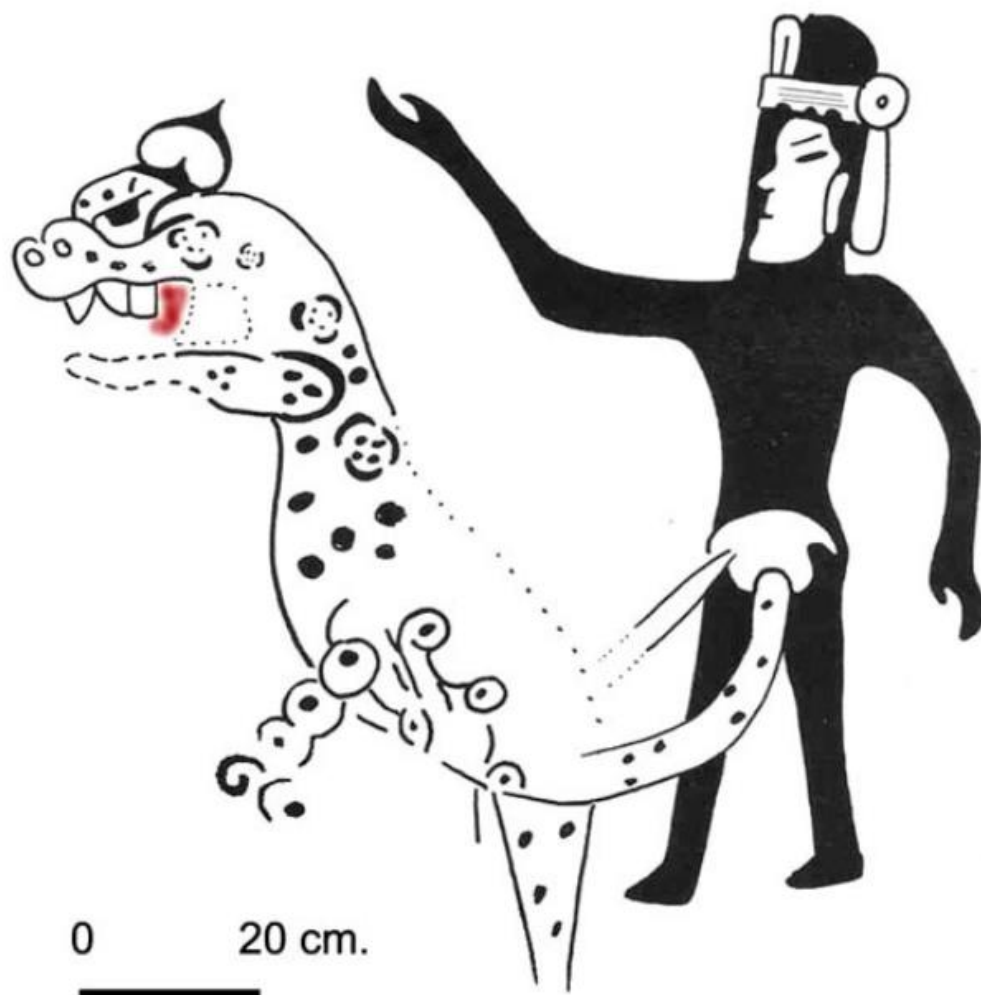


Figure 85. Drawing of Painting 1-d from Oxtotolian cave depicting “The Founder.”

<http://www.famsi.org/research/grove/images/fig05j.jpg>





Figure 86. Photo and artist rendition of Painting 1 from Juxtlahuaca Cave.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juxtlahuaca>)

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