

ARCHEOLOGICAL GUIDE OF THE



# PARK - MUSEUM OF LA VENTA

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GOBIERNO DEL ESTADO DE TABASCO



ARCHEOLOGICAL GUIDE OF THE

PARK-MUSEUM OF  
**LA VENTA**

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México

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**PARK - MUSEUM OF  
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## INTRODUCTION

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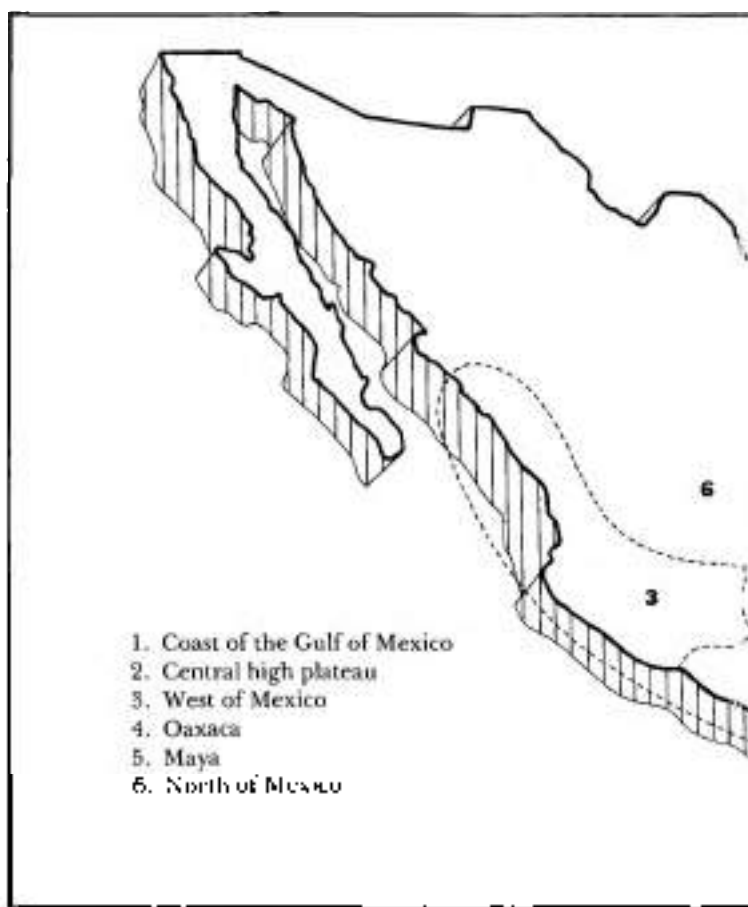
When the Europeans arrived on Mexican shores at the dawning of the sixteenth century, they were impressed by the vast culture of the indigenous groups they encountered. So much so, that in our own good fortune and in spite of the inevitable depredation to which the native people were subjected, many soldiers and friars, at first by their own initiative and later by royal command, gathered some of their experiences in valuable chronicles, frequently including historic and mythic narrations preserved by the indigenous groups by word of mouth or through their own books, called *codexes*. Thanks to these documents and to the study of the cultural expressions which the inhabitants of prehispanic Mexico left us in the form of objects made of clay, stone, seashell, bone, or any other material, we have been able to learn more of the history of the people that made them. These artistic, religious, political, economic and social manifestations were the result of the development which occurred over the course of several centuries, the culmination of all the experience accumulated and transformed by the various groups which had flourished and declined all throughout the vast territory known as Mesoamerica (map 1).

This extensive territory included a large portion of what today is Mexico and all of what at present are the countries known as Belize and Guatemala, as well as a major part of Honduras and El Salvador. Mexicas and Tarascos, Huastecos and Totonacas, Mixtecos and Mayas, among the several other groups that the Spaniards encountered were just the beneficiaries of the cultural legacy of Olmecas, Zapotecas, Teotihuacanos, Toltecas, Otomies, Mayas, Zoques and many other cultures which at different times had originated, flourished and declined several centuries before the Europeans sailed out in search of new territories. While in northern Europe no civilization had yet developed, here in Mesoamerica societies were organized into kingdoms, state cities and even into real states. By that time, the peoples of Mesoamerica had already invented their own writing, numeral systems and calendar; in short, they possessed much knowledge that the European nations would not attain until centuries later, by which time several of the Mesoamerican civilizations had gone from their moments of splendor to their decline.

But the history of those peoples is quite remote. We know now that the first inhabitants entered Mexican territory over 20,000 years ago; that in order to survive they hunted small animals with traps or with arrow heads tied to a wooden handle. In the same manner, whenever it was possible, gathering mollusks and

fishing played an important role in the group's survival. Gathering plants, roots and fruits was also a fundamental aspect of their diet and would continue to be so thousands of years later when the first plants were cultivated some 7,000 years ago. In fact, agriculture became truly important in the economy of prehispanic people just before the appearance of the first civilizations of Mesoamerica, a little under 4000 years ago.

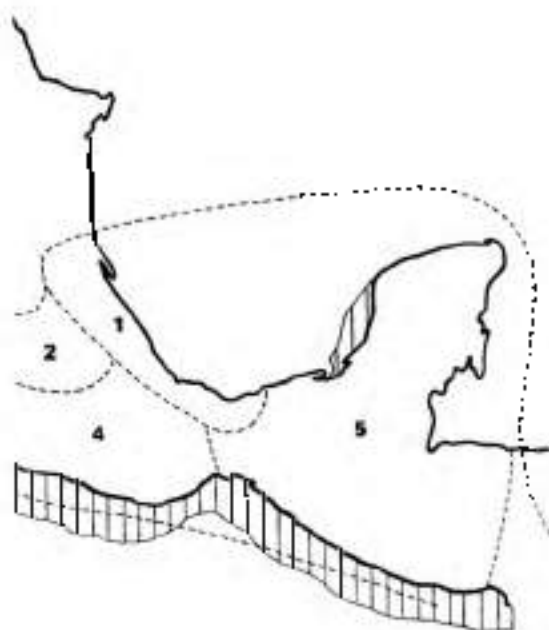
Although the sierras and the valleys, the coast and the jungles had harboured important nuclei of populations for thousands of years, the first steps in the civilizing process would be taken in



*Map 1. Extension of Mesoamerica and cultural areas*

the central plateaus and on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. In the latter region, between 1350 and 1250 B. C., certain characteristics begin to appear in the ceramics, the lifestyles and the technology of the groups, finally resulting in an exceptional culture, the first great civilization of Mesoamerica, that of the Olmecs. This happened 3200 years ago in the territories which are now the states of Veracruz and Tabasco. Creators of an unmistakable artistic style, the Olmecs were the founders of many of the bases for the cultures which later, at different times and in different regions, were part of Mesoamerica.

1)





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# THE OLMECAS

## CULTURAL PERIODS OF MESOAMERICA

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The cultural history of Mesoamerica has been divided into several periods according to the different stages of their development. The most ancient of these periods is called the pre-classic (2000-100 B. C.); the second, the classic (100-800 A. D.) and the last is known as post-classic (900-1521 A. D.). This classification by periods, with some chronological variants, has generally been applied to the history of the best known cultures of prehispanic Mexico. Although the Olmecs was the most outstanding of the pre-classic period, other groups from the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and the valleys of Oaxaca, Mexico and Morelos, achieved important cultural advances that were inherited and put to use by those that flourished during the classic period. During the latter, the cultures of central Veracruz, the Maya, the Teotihuacana, and the Zapotecan were the most outstanding. Later, in the beginning of the post-classic period during the tenth century, a role of great importance was played by the Toltecas, a group which disintegrated towards the twelfth century, making way for others. Subsequently, Mayas, Mexicas, Tarascos, Mixtecas, Totonacas, Omomes, Tlahuirlas and Huastecas, among others, would leave the most recent traces of prehispanic culture. Nevertheless, the Olmeca culture occupies a special place because it is so ancient and because of the development it achieved in artistic manifestations and general knowledge. It became the starting point for the subsequent development of the world of Mesoamerica which the Spaniards encountered in the sixteenth century.

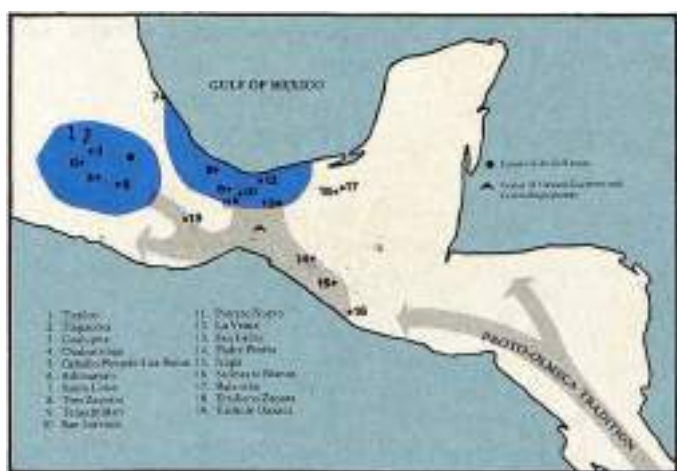
## THE ORIGIN

The word "Olmeca", which means "people of the region of rubber", is applied to an artistic style, since the ethnolinguistic identity of the group that developed it is unknown. This name should not be confused with the one used by the Mexicas to designate the groups that inhabited the coast that extends from southern Veracruz to Tlaxcala-Campeche around the time of the conquest, because they are totally separate. To differentiate them, some authors refer to the former as "archeological Olmecs", who disappeared more than 15 centuries ago. Actually, the expression is used as a generalization, because of the geographical locality of the artistic manifestations which we now know as "Olmeca culture".

Although the Olmecs achieved their greatest development on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, their antecedents can be found outside that area. Everything seems to point out that toward the 15th and 16th centuries B. C., the cultural patterns of the groups who lived on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico were

very different from those observed between 1350 and 1250, when technology, customs and lifestyles changed radically. By studying the pottery, we may observe close ties with the coast of Chiapas and Guatemala, however, the ceramics of the latter area reflect the relation to Colombia and Ecuador. Therefore, it appears that the antecedents of the Olmeca culture can be found in a tradition that spreads from the northern regions of South America to the coasts of Chiapas and Guatemala. The bearers of this tradition, who may be called proto-Olmecas, started going in different directions. While some of them moved towards the coast of the Gulf, others went to the Valley of Oaxaca, and later continued on to Puebla, Morelos, Guerrero, and the Valley of Mexico (map 2). The latter at first maintained their pottery traditions, but little by little assimilated the local ways of life. However, the fact that they shared the same origin with the groups that settled on the coast of the Gulf was useful in the economic and cultural relations later established between them.

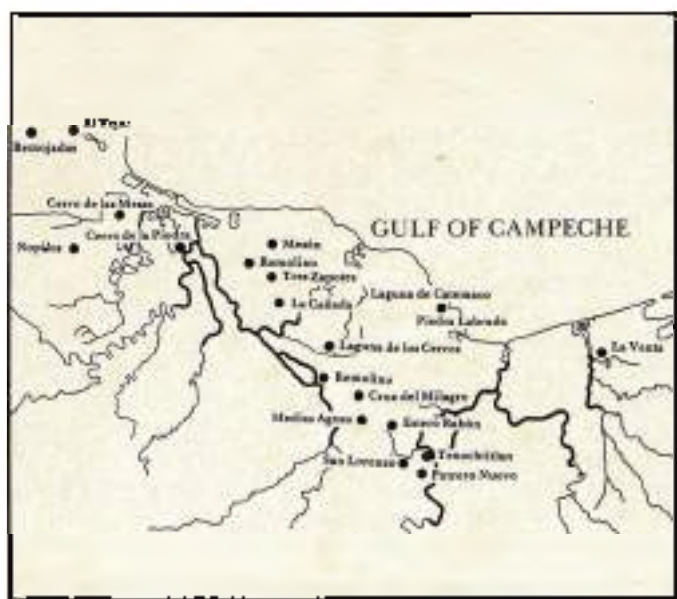
Those who followed the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the central depression of the Grijalva river and arrived at the area of the Gulf made such an impact on the local populations that, in time, new manifestations arose, culminating in what we now call Olmeca culture, which between 1250 and 1200 B. C. exhibited practically all its characteristics. By that time, this group inhabited some sites which are now the territories of Veracruz and Tabasco. In the same manner, they would later spread out from the coastal plains of the Gulf to the first counterforts of the sierra, and from the basin of the Papaloapan to that of Bladillo-Tonalá, about 16,000 square kilometers, known as the metropolitan Olmeca area. In this territory, the most outstanding



Map 2 Origin and expansion of the Olmeca culture (taken from R. J. Shaw, 1982).

vestiges are to be found at the sites of San Lorenzo Teochitlán, Laguna de los Cerros, Potrero Nuevo, Tres Zapotes and La Verita, along with others of lesser importance (map 3).

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Map 3 Olmeca metropolitan area

## LANDSCAPE AND IDEOLOGY

This territory, embedded in the moist-hot tropics, was characterized by a high jungle which little by little gave way to spacious grassy plains. It is irrigated by an extensive hydrological network that, because of the moderate slopes which make drainage difficult, gives birth to numerous swamps, except in the massive mountains of Los Tuxtlas. The landscape, which at first might seem hostile, should not be regarded as a challenge that had to be overcome in order to achieve their development, but rather as a circumstance which was used in an outstanding manner thanks to the knowledge the Olmecs possessed for the exploitation of this kind of environment. However, there is no denying it did influence both artistic manifestations and ideology (figure 1).

Thus, through their representations, one can recognize both the unmistakable style and the constant themes, in which the jaguar plays an important role. The serpent also appears frequently in the iconography. Both animals represent the most important aspect of their religious concepts. In fact, according to certain interpretations, the jaguar apparently was their totem, the common ancestor of the Olmecs. The importance of this animal was so great that its presence is an obsession in Olmeca art. The jaguar could be conceived as the origin: it represented the earth and the underworld. In the same manner, the serpent later was identified as a representation of water. In the world created by the Olmecs, where the marvelous was integrated into reality, the concepts of the jaguar and the serpent, by merger, would give birth to the idea of a sort of "heavenly dragon", a fantastic being possessing the qualities of both these animals capable of taking lives but which, integrated in a mythical image, had the power of giving life. Earth and water formed an indivisible whole in the idea of fertility. It is difficult to list the decorative or symbolic features characteristic of the Olmeca representations because they vary from bust to bas-relief to paintings; however, it is possible to point out some of the most outstanding features which invariably appear in steles, altars, colossal heads, or in any other form of sculpture. These elements can also be found in bas-reliefs carved on rock outcrops or even in paintings on cave walls or rocky shelters outside the metropolitan area, which well may be considered of later construction even though they preserve many of the motifs originated in the main area. These features are repeated in minor

Figure 1



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sculpture done in clay or in hard stones, such as jadeite and serpentine, in votive axes, masks, ceramics, and also in stylized ornamental masks of a jaguar-like aspect made of serpentine mosaics. Human beings with feline masks on their faces or on their headdresses; andropomorphized jaguars and children-jaguars recognizable by the down-turned commissures of the mouth or other elements related to this animal; a forehead in the shape of a "V" and mouths in the form of an "X" which represent the spots on the jaguar's skin. There are also other peculiar elements such as flames instead of eyebrows or "flamiferous eyebrows" as they are sometimes called, fat-cheeked beings, sometimes lacking a jaw, and nearly always with a moon-shaped eyes. Although the human figure is of great importance in Olmeca iconography, serpents, monkeys, birds, fish and fantastic beings, a strange mixture of features pertaining to jaguars and snakes, can also be observed. Decorations also include claws, wings, clouds from which drops of rain are falling, corn stalks, and a "U" shaped element which has not yet been interpreted and that would later appear in representations of other cultures.

## ARTISTIC CONCEPTS, PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND KNOWLEDGE

The steles, altars, animals and fantastic beings carved out of volcanic rock are impressive for their monumentality, although a great quality can also be attributed to the representations of human figures, not only because of the skill with which they were executed but also the proportion of the parts and the realism which characterizes them as a whole, whether in complete forms or colossal heads, or on altars and steles. This same skill may be observed in minor sculpture and other sumptuary objects for which they used clay and semi-precious stones, especially those which are green: jadeite and serpentine; ornamental masks made out of serpentine mosaics were used as offerings or ceremonial centers. Upon observation of human representations it has also been possible to distinguish some physical characteristics which possibly are those of two different types of individuals or ethnic groups, one which may be considered Olmeca and the other perhaps belonging to another group, taking into account the fact that it appears in works that are considered as having been made at a later date. The first has the peculiarity of presenting a short stature, obesity, a short neck, round head, wide nose and thick lips, the other physical type is that of individuals of a thinner body build, aquiline nose, elongated head and finer lips. Moreover, certain customs may be observed in the iconography such as the deformation of the head, the mutilation of the teeth and the shaving of the hair,

sometimes completely, and sometimes leaving tufts. Occasionally the individuals are wearing helmets and turbans, complicated headdresses and masks, loth cloths and capes; their dress may also include necklaces, earrings and bracelets made of clay beads or semi-precious stones, shells and other materials. Some, perhaps to emphasize their lineage and hierarchical importance, bear sceptres, gavellets, torches and staffs indicating power in their hands, and on their chests, mirrors and pectorals. But the representations not only are helpful in recognizing the customs and probable physical type of the Olmecs; the materials used for their sculptures and other objects which have been found were obtained from very distant places, and this means that they necessarily had a well-structured social, political and economic organization that enabled them to transport the raw material and to manufacture the sumptuary objects. Furthermore, certain manifestations of the Olmecs which have reached us indicate their advancement in other fields. Thus, the orientation of the buildings at the site of La Venta reflects a certain knowledge of astronomy, and some of the sculptures indicate that they had a calendar, a numeral system, and perhaps some form of writing. In short, through the study of the artistic manifestations and the extension and characteristics of the archaeological sites, we have been able to learn a great deal about the origins and the stage of development which had been attained by this culture.

## THE OLMECS IN TABASCO

In the state of Tabasco, the Olmecs gave rise to their greatest splendour in La Venta, a site where one may observe many evidences that show each and every one of the aspects characteristic of this culture, both in major and in minor sculpture, in ceramics and in architecture. Although this site came to be the most important, it was not the only one that existed; from that zone up to the basin of the Middle Usumacinta many other settlements with Olmeca characteristics have been discovered.

For example, in La Chontalpa, Olmeca sites have been found in the municipalities of Cárdenas, Huimanguillo and Comalcalco, in the zones of rivers and lagoons, in the municipalities of Emiliano Zapata, Bolandín and Tenosique. Also in Tabasco, more ancient settlements have been discovered that reveal a relation to the proto-Olmeca groups of the Pacific coast, who perhaps arrived at these places by independent entries from the depression of the Grijalva. The characteristics of these settlements were their small size and the fact that they presented certain aspects of an equalitarian and self-sufficient society. The inhabitants lived in huts made of sticks, sometimes lined with mud, and everyone had equal access to the elements that satis-

fied their needs, since they practiced a simple form of agriculture which was complemented by hunting, fishing and gathering fruit. Subsequently, some of these places started to grow and differentiate themselves internally and, once in a while, they accidentally came into contact with other areas. In certain cases, we may observe innovations in the decoration of some of the ceramic production and in the agricultural method which, are a result of influences from the Olmeca culture. However, these contacts seldom were of great importance.

These being their antecedents insofar as relations with other groups, toward 600-400 B. C., some groups from the metropolitan Olmeca zone began moving out and settled in the basin of the Middle Usumacinta, their influence was then felt more clearly, to the extent that the structure of the local cultures was transformed. Places such as Tierra Blanca, Pomona, Emiliano Zapata and El Mirador, to mention a few, are evidence that during those years, by the basin of the Usumacinta and San Pedro Mártir rivers, a corridor was formed which from then on was used in the commercial relations between the coast and the coastal plain of the Gulf and the lowlands further in; this became an important link in the Olmeca antecedents of Maya culture.

## THE ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE OF LA VENTA

Surrounded by water, jungle and swampy lowlands, the Olmecas chose this place to erect the first center in which they applied their knowledge of astronomy to the distribution of the buildings. Today, however, the landscape is completely different. The refinery installations and the opening of a landing strip have not only modified the natural environment, they have also wiped out many vestiges of that culture. Moreover, it was for this reason that the need arose for saving the integrity of the recovered objects by transporting them from their place of origin to the one they now occupy.

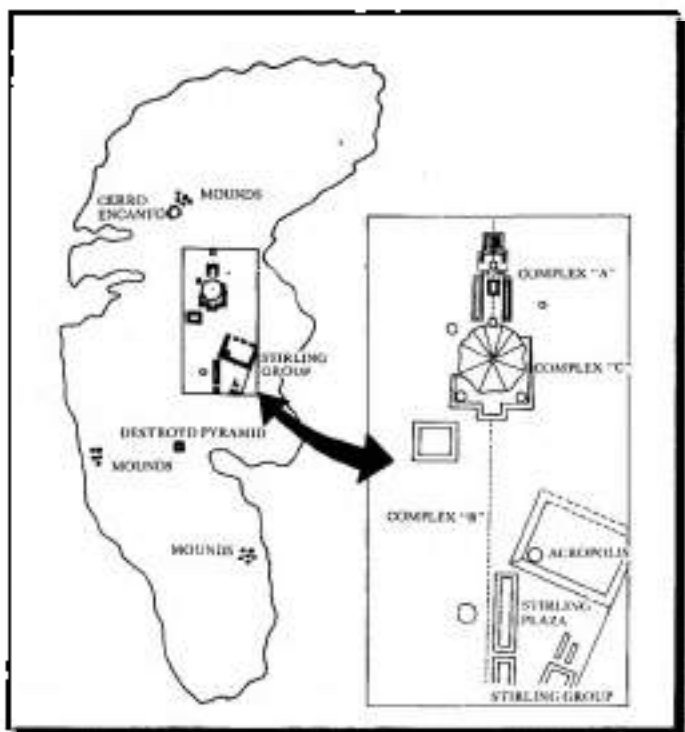
This political and religious center, the most important of its kind, was inhabited during at least six hundred years, from 1200-1000 to 400 B. C., but during the last two hundred years apparently its occupants were a hybrid population. Although it has been known since 1925 and explored on several occasions toward the end of the thirties and after, there are still many unanswered questions. For example, the exact extension of the settlement is unknown, although it was probably not less than one hundred hectares in the central part, with a not much larger surface occupied by several small nuclei of rural population. Of the island's total extension of 5.5 square kilometers only a small part is considered adequate for agricultural purposes, which is insufficient for supplying more than 200 inhabitants. Of the

latter, those who were part of the ruling group were concentrated in the political and religious center or very close to it.

The architectural units of this center were built on a north-south axis, with a deviation of  $8^{\circ}$  west of the magnetic north, a general orientation which would become a norm in Mesoamerican architecture. Other characteristics of the buildings are their elongated form, the fact that they are placed in a parallel fashion and that they are closed off at the ends by square buildings in order to form open spaces known as plazas, a fundamental solution for development of the political, social, religious and economic activities in Mesoamerican urbanistics.

It should be pointed out that in the central part of La Venta, several units known as A, B, and C have been delineated, as well as the one known as Stirling Group (figure 2). In these constructions, with the exception of the tomb made of basaltic columns which may well be considered as sculptural architecture, the foundations, because of the lack of stone in the area, were built of different colored sands. The stones, sometimes carried from as far as one hundred kilometers away were used to carve the great

Figure 2



monoliths. However, there is no real distinction between the rocky materials and the architecture; as in almost all the Olmeca sites, in La Venta sculpture was closely associated to architecture.

In spite of the limited use of stone in the construction of buildings, some of them have resisted the passing of time.

In unit C, we may observe the outstanding Great Pyramid, of an unusual form (figure 3), composed of a series of ten depressions and salients symmetrically built, which run from the top to the base. This construction has been interpreted as an imitation of one of the volcanic cones of Los Tuxtlas, a region from which was brought most of the material used for the carving of the monumental sculptures, several of which were found precisely



Figure 3

in this unit. It has been determined that some had been buried deliberately, when the site was still in full activity. In the same manner large quantities of serpentine mosaics were deposited as offerings (figure 4), a pattern which is repeated with the ornamental masks, also made of serpentine, representing stylized jaguars. Aside from these offerings and the destruction and burial of great sculptures, delicate pieces made of jade, perfectly carved and polished, have also been found in La Venta. On these are carved motifs relative to the jaguar and anthropomorphized felines, serpents and human or semi-human masks, as well as human figures and small stools (figure 5); in all, a wide variety of sumptuary objects belonging to the elite.



Figure 1

All the monumental architecture, the major and minor sculpture, as well as the presence of materials brought from regions as distant as Oaxaca, Guerrero, Morelos, and even Central America, reflect the existence of full-time experts. This group, in order to carry out its trade, had to be supported by a majority of the population which, dedicated to agricultural production, hunting, fishing and fruit gathering, lived scattered in towns and villages surrounding the island. Having a centralized political structure during some four hundred years La Venta was the most important site in the Olmeca region; in later years, perhaps due to the arrival of foreign groups, it began to lose power, and its decadence took place.

The changes in the social, political and religious structures were expressed in the artistic manifestations. Some representa-



Figure 5:

tions such as scenes that appear on altars and tombstones, are examples of this period of activity. Consequentially, when the hegemony of La Venta began its decline, several of the elite groups emigrated in different directions carrying with them the ideology which has been captured in paintings, bas-reliefs and other vestiges to the sites that they occupied. Among others, Las Mangas and El Virgen in the southern part of the state of Veracruz, Oxtotitlán and El Rincón in Guerrero, Chateatzingo in Morelos, Pijonán, Tuxtutuli and Xim and others in Chiapas, and Las Victorias in El Salvador. In those places, although there could have been early occupations, said representations are of a later date than the dismemberment and decadence of the religious and political center of La Venta, the



most important of those founded by the Olmecs on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

## **ANTECEDENTS OF THE PARK-MUSEUM**

In order to safeguard the pieces recovered in the archeological site from which this park-museum receives its name, Don Carlos Pellicer, a great poet from the state of Tabasco and a student of our prehispanic roots, decided to recreate a landscape similar to that which may have existed in the place where the sculptures exhibited here were originally found. It was in the decade of the thirties that he created an atmosphere of jungle and water, and taking advantage of the natural environment, he introduced

tropical flora and fauna, characteristic of the Olmeca area (figure 6). Walking through the park, one can admire a wide variety of plants and some animals such as the jaguar, sarahuato monkeys, deer, wild boars and crocodiles (figure 7). Among the flora, there are several examples of plants that were and are used in the region as construction material for houses and canoes (sabano, maca blanca, escobilla, cedro, chiconapote, macayo, gusno, palma real, ceiba, macul and lucaillo). We can also observe some trees and plants used in medicine (guarumo, coajilote, zapote de agua, ruísimo, chara and zazafrá), ornamental and fruit trees (mance, palmito, anona, lipo elegante, uspi, capulín and jobo) which, among other species, give the park an atmosphere that would be hard to find in any other museum.

However, it should be pointed out that with the knowledge that we have acquired we can say that this was not the predominant landscape in the political and religious center where the pieces shown here were originally found. In the central part of La Venta, the sculptures were in the open air, but not surrounded by vegetation.

For unknown reasons, many of the pieces were partially destroyed and later buried by the Olmecs themselves, which contributed to their preservation. There are several interpretations of this, some more acceptable than others. Certain investigations have suggested that when the Olmecs destroyed and buried the objects that had been used by a dead chief, they symbolically annulled the power that was thought to have impregnated his belongings. They were not necessarily trying to eliminate the chief's image through the destruction of his posses-



Figure 6



Figure 7

sions, but rather the power that might have remained in them, believing that if the rite was not carried out, that power could some day turn against the group.

Although the pieces exhibited here all proceed from the area of Ea Venta, they were made at different times over a period of not less than six hundred years, but there is no chronological order in the way they have been distributed in this museum. Therefore, the purpose of the introduction room is to situate us in time and space. The explanations of each piece will be useful in understanding the importance given by the Olmecs to certain ideas expressed through this means.

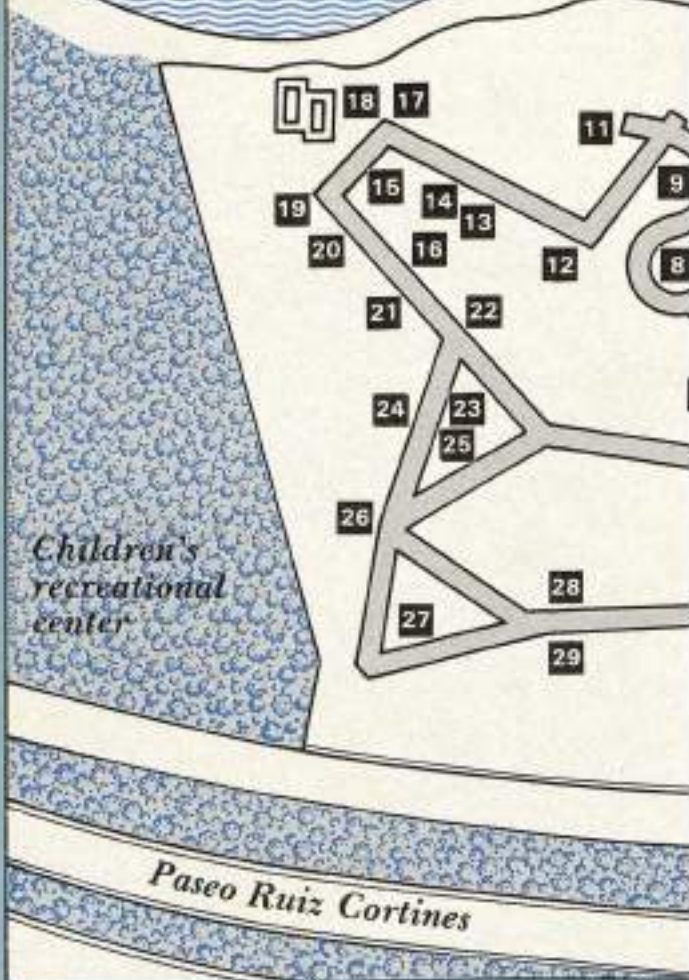


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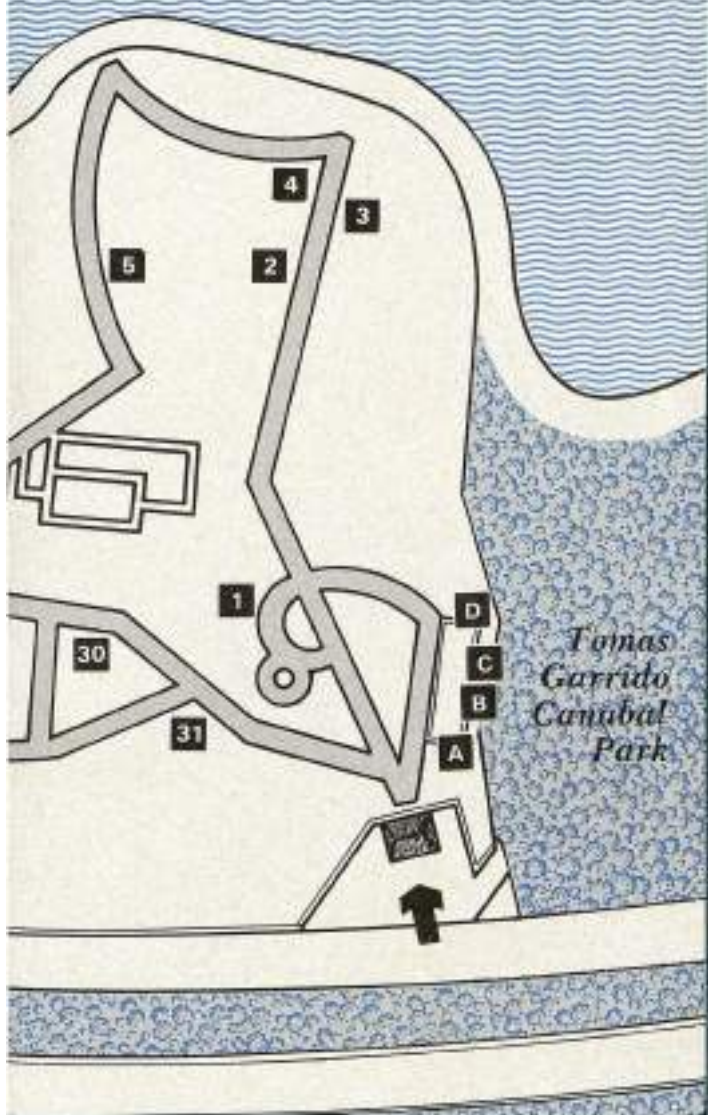
# PARK-MUSEUM OF LA VENTA

# Map of the Park-Museum

*Lagoon of the Illusions*



*f La Venta*



**A** **A MONUMENT 78**  
*Human Head*

30



*Measurements: height 92 cm, width 74 cm.*

Small head carved in basaltic rock. It was discovered between 1976 and 1977 towards the eastern part of the U complex, outside of the monument zone of La Venta.

It is in a bad state of conservation and the features of more than half the face can barely be distinguished. For example, on the right side one may observe that the eye, in the form of a striation, seems to be closed; however, the same manner of representing the eye is also found in monuments that are not as deteriorated and we may therefore suppose that this was simply a technical solution. Also to be noted is the typical Olmec eyebrow in the form of a flame with an incision which runs from the top of the head to the jaw. Some designs engraved on the left cheek complete the decoration.

It seems that this piece was destroyed by the Olmecs themselves and for this reason it is impossible to observe other details. Even so, judging by the vestige of the mouth and even of the nose, it is possible to imagine that it might have been destroyed before it was completed. Finally, we might add that it is not known if there was a body which corresponded to this head, as frequently happens with Olmeca sculptures. Quite often bodies are found without heads, or heads without bodies, as will be seen in other examples of this museum-park.

**B MONUMENTO 61***Relief of a Personage*

32



*Measurements: diameter 36 cm.*

Discovered during the excavations on what is now the landing strip, close to unit A. This monument was carved in bas-relief using a flat basaltic fragment which was given a circular form. On this slab a figure was carved, the body directed forward, and the face in profile, a common solution in Olmeca monuments in which the bas-relief technique was used. The crossed legs also are frequently observed in Olmeca sculpture. The feet are not visible because they are covered by the long cloth which is draped over the front, tied around the waist with a sash. Although this stone is quite eroded and missing a fragment, the opulence of the plumed headdress worn by the personage, who carries a large mirror upon his chest and is wearing a circular ear hoop, may still be observed.

**MONUMENT 43***Stone Plug*

33



*Measurements: height 41 cm, diameter mayor 29 cm, diameter minor 27 cm*

Andesite cylinder discovered in 1968 east of the Stirling Acropolis. One end is wider, giving it the appearance of a stone plug, but it also could have been used as a seat. It has no other special characteristic and up to now, because no other similar piece has been found, it is impossible to determine its meaning.

# **MONUMENTS 45 and 46**

## *Recipient and fragment of drainage system*

34



### *Measurements*

*Recipient: height, 105 cm, diameter, 68 cm, depth, 41 cm.  
Fragment of canal: width, 39 cm, length, 57 cm, channel,  
16 cm*

In political and religious centres of the Olmecs, such as La Venta and San Lorenzo, networks of canals were built of fragments of stone such as the one shown. The water was canalized out of the zone where the buildings had been constructed through the latter and directed to special places where it was stored in water tanks. This recipient and the fragment of a canal were discovered in the Stirling group and are classical examples.

These structures were not built merely for practical purposes; rather, they also had a ceremonial use, as water was a fundamental part of fertility rites, one of the most important aspects of Olmec religion.

Through this kind of pieces we are able to learn about the technical advancements of this culture. They also give us an idea of the complexity of their social, political and economic organization, because they indicate the existence of workers dedicated exclusively to creating structures which demand a high level of specialized knowledge to be planned and carried out.

# 1 ALTAR 1

## *Feline Head*



35

Measurements: height 193 cm, width 263 cm, thickness 280 cm.

Sculpture known as altar 1, it was found south of the main pyramid in La Verita in 1940. The altars have been given this name although their function was not the one implied by the term "altar". Actually, this piece, as will be seen also in altar 4, does not possess the characteristic features of the Olmeca monoliths.

This sculpture is almost destroyed. Its features are both serpent and jaguar, and the size is the same as the other altars, but none of the characteristic elements are to be found in its form.

The jaguar, main god of the Olmecs, represented both the spirit of life and fertility. In some cases, such as this, the features of the feline are merged with those of a serpent, becoming an imaginary animal. These pieces which present the features of both animals, symbolized the mythical union of the earth (the tiger) with water (the serpent), the water which fertilizes the earth.

**2 MONUMENT 56**

*Sculpture with a shank for embedding*

36



*Measurements: height 124 cm, width 54 cm, thickness 43 cm.*

Found west of complex C in La Venta, this piece, characterized by its great force and realism, was achieved by the sculptor by using the natural form of a basaltic column.



Because of its position it has been interpreted as an "observer of the skies", but it is also possible that it was originally embedded horizontally in a building. The face was mutilated before its discovery and it is therefore impossible to ascertain the original representation.

However, this sculpture is interesting not only for its quality but also because it may be the antecedent of other sculptures with a shank which were discovered among the Olmec representations at Tres Zapotes. For this reason, it is worthwhile to quote an observation made by Beatriz de la Fuente in 1977: "Those who contemplate monument 56 of La Venta imagine that it is a monkey or a wise man looking up at the sky, but the truth is that we are far from knowing what the representation was originally intended to be."

### 3 MONUMENT 59 *Humanized jaguar*

38



*Measurements. height 95 cm, width, 66 cm, length 105 cm.*

In Olmeca sculpture we frequently encounter representations of jaguars which have been endowed with human features thus giving birth to the concept of a humanized jaguar, but not of a man jaguar. This sculpture was apparently discovered during the sixties between complex B and C. It represents a humanized jaguar with its legs folded under, supporting a slab on top of its body, from the head to the haunches; this slab may have been



used as a seat or a throne, although thoroughly polished. This sculpture is to be noted for the feline face, where the eyes are represented by grooves carved into the stone, the commissures of the mouth turn down, the fangs are distinguishable, and the hands are folded over the chest.

Although the concept of this sculpture is not unique, it is interesting to note that because of a hole carved out between the back and the slab it gives the impression of being lighter. The face is quite deteriorated but still, together with the volume, the impression is that of a harmonious piece of great quality.

# **4 MONUMENT 20**

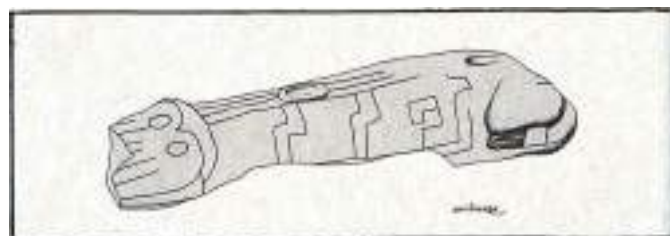
*Cetacean*

40



Measurements: length 187 cm, width 62 cm, height 35 cm.

Discovered in 1959 near the tomb of monolithic columns of La Viena. In spite of having been a group which inhabited the coasts, the Olmecs did not leave many representations of aquatic animals. This sculpture, carved on a slate, represents a cetacean, perhaps a dolphin. Some authors have identified it rather as a manatee, an aquatic mammalian nearly extinct because of its irrational exploitation; these animals are easy prey for hunters and fishermen when the females are drawn towards the river bank during mating season. It is probable that the Olmecs, in the same manner that happened with other groups up to recent years, hunted them for their abundant meat and fat, and because they could use their bones for making tools. However, this would not be an exact image of a manatee or sea cow, as they are also known. This representation has a few features that these animals lack and a series of very fine incise lines or incisions were engraved, forming an etched design.



**5 MONUMENT 60***Anthropomorphized animal*

*Measurements: height 61 cm, width 51 cm.*

Seated sculpture of which, because it is quite eroded and fragmented where its extremities should be, it is impossible to give a detailed description as to its original position. It seems to be an anthropomorphized animal, as this idea was frequently expressed by the Olmecs in their representations, nearly always related to the jaguar cult of which, in this case, we are reminded only because of the vigilant attitude. The face, although deteriorated, does not seem to belong to an adult feline, but is rather that of a pup.

Of the pieces that are in the park, this is the only one that is not originally from La Venta but from Ixhuatlán, Veracruz, where it was discovered in the twenties.

**6 ALTAR 4**

42



*Measurements: height 160 cm, width 319 cm.*

Discovered in 1915, this monument was part of unit B. The altars are an exclusively Olmeca creation and six of them, of different sizes, have been found in La Venta. They are important both because of their size, exceptional in Mexican prehispanic sculpture, and for their meaning. They are all made of stone block ending in a cornice, and in the center, on the front,



a niche that may have represented the cave through which they emerged from the earth. Inside the niche a seated human figure was represented, in some cases with a child upon its lap.

Altar 4 is, without a doubt, the best preserved. The figure that emerges from the niche, almost separated from the stone block, is leaning slightly forward, reflecting the great technical ability



of the artist. The personage represented is wearing an adornment, dress and headdress similar to those that may be observed in other Olmeca sculptures. On the upper part of the niche is a stylized representation of a jaguar and its fauces; in the middle, between the fauces, is the motif of crossed flags which represents the feline's spurs, a feature which appears on other sculptures and in Olmeca ceramics. We can also observe, around the niche, the representation of a cord from which four smooth appendices are projected, as if long tails were born out of a sort of a "U" shaped cartouche.

The central figure is joined by a rope to the characters on the sides. In prehispanic iconography ropes could represent union, submission, or dependence. Here the sculptor may have wished to show the dominant lineage or the union of two different groups, since the features of one of the lateral characters which is still preserved are totally different from the physical type of the Olmecas, and the opposite is true of the one who is emerging from the entrails of the earth through the niche.

**7 MONUMENT 19\****Fantastic Serpent*

45



*Measurements: height 93 cm, width 76 cm, thickness 40 cm*

Discovered near the northeast corner of unit A, it represents a rattlesnake which the sculptor carved in a dynamic position. The undulations of the animal's body are the frame for a masculine figure which may be that of a priest.

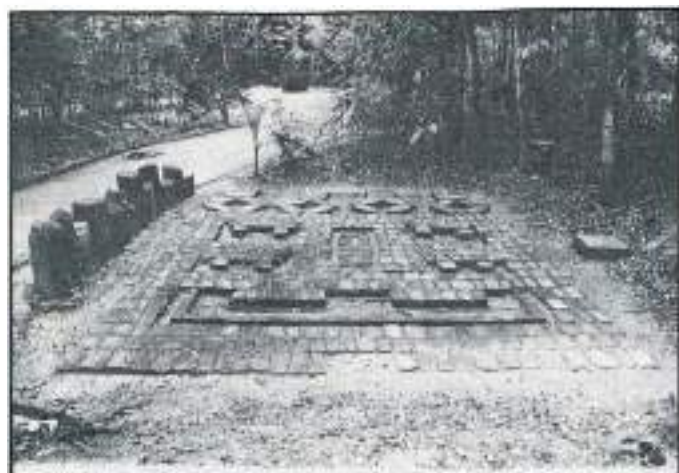
The importance of the personage was emphasized by the richness of his dress and the helmet with the form of an imaginary animal, a combination of a jaguar and a serpent. In his right hand he is holding a bag, possibly for carrying copal. His garb consists of a short cape in three sections, a pendent, and small skirts composed of several sashes which hang on the front.

The serpent has been adorned with an enormous crest and an eyebrow which gives it an impressive and fantastic aspect. The Olmecs were the first groups of prehispanic Mexico to give the rattlesnake a religious sense by associating it with fertility. Later, it would be used by different Mesoamerican cultures.

\* Stone copy of the original piece which is in the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.

# **6 MOSAIC**

46



*Measurements: 467 x 470 cm.*

In La Venta, three units of mosaics of this kind have been found; two of them were discovered in 1942. All were situated in different places and buried several meters underground. All three are similar and represent the stylized face of a jaguar: the mouth can be observed on the bottom and the eyes and the eyebrows are outlined by four rhombus. These mosaics were built with 450 to 500 serpentine fragments, perfectly cut and laid out to form the animal's face according to a previously planned design. The first one was buried on the eastern side of the central plaza of unit A, and the second was situated on the central axis of the plaza of unit A, but close to the Great Pyramid.

The third mosaic was incomplete when found; it was on the side opposite the first one and is still in its original place.

The purpose of these mosaics must have been religious, as an offer to the earth, represented by the jaguar god.

**5 MONUMENT 77**  
*Personage with a Cape*

47



*Measurements. height 104 cm, width 71 cm*

The Olmecas were the first to work on bulk sculpture, using large blocks of stone brought from distant places. They constructed pieces with a profound religious meaning which showed a great mastery of the technique, and they demonstrated an enormous ability in achieving balance in the lines and volumes.

The personage represented in this sculpture is an outstanding example of the above. It seems to have been broken off at one of



the steles shown in this park-museum, which are adorned with similar figures, except that the others were carved in relief. The figure, seated and with its legs crossed, wears a cape on its back and a complicated headdress with adornments that fall over its ears which may have been representations of cotton or folded paper; these materials were frequently used in later prehispanic representations. From the headdress hangs a sort of tail tied in back and reaching down to the waist; in the middle of the chest and of the belt, crossed bands were carved. The latter decorative elements have been interpreted as the jaguar's spots. On the back of the neck is a symbol which has not yet been identified, "U" shaped and with a dot in the middle. The whole sculpture is in the purest Olmeca style: the shape of the mouth, the symbols used to adorn the headdress, cape and body, and also, the posture of the personage, most frequent in the sculpture of this culture.

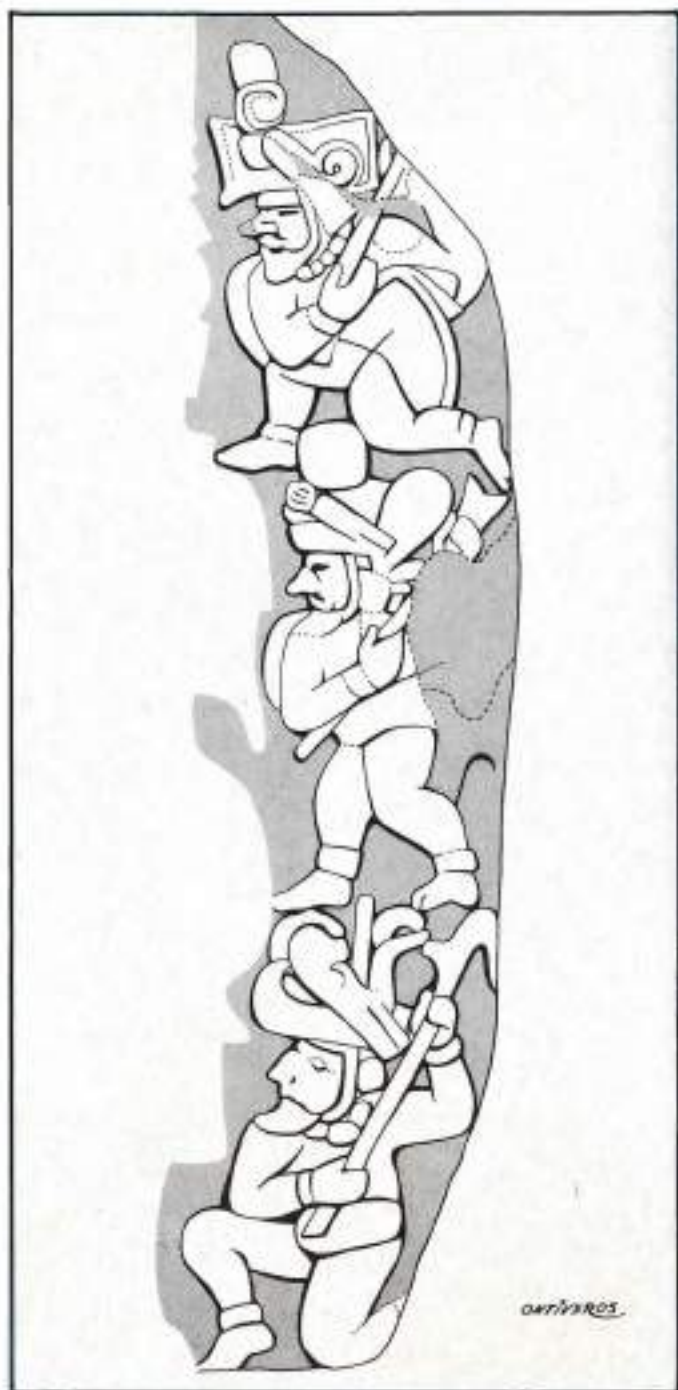
10 **STELE 2**

49



Measurements: height 257 (visible) cm, width 299 cm, thickness 90 cm

Discovered south of the Corral Pyramid in 1925, this monument is of primordial importance, the same as stele 9, because they mark a change in the iconography. It is likely that the events carved on them were religious and political, as well as ceremonial, since the central figures seem to assume an attitude of domination over the other figures.



This manner of representing ideas by means of carved scenes was an innovation in Olmeca religious art and can also be found on certain altars in the metropolitan area, and outside of it, in bas-reliefs or paintings executed on large rocks. It is the way for transmitting an idea when the isolated figure is insufficient to achieve the desired effect. This solution became more and more refined and later was adopted by other cultures.

On this stele, carved in basaltic rock, the identification of the main personage is obvious. It is outstanding not only because of the position it occupies in the scene, but also because of the expression of ancestry represented by the tall headdress, adorned on the front part with what seems to be a turtle—a symbol of fertility—with this head adornment finishing in the form of an ear of corn, a detail which can also be observed on the headdress of one of the personages of stele 5. Aside from all this, the figure can be identified as a high dignitary both by the commanding staff, held in an arrogant manner across the chest, and by the rich garb.

Another characteristic which points out the importance of the personage—precisely marking the change in Olmeca iconography—were the six figures which, full of movement, surround him in a protecting and reverential attitude, giving birth to the scene. The differences between the characters were emphasized by the different rods and commanding staffs they have in their hands.

**11 MONUMENT 1**  
*Colossal Head*

52



*Measurements: height 241 cm, circumference 640 cm.*

Discovered in 1825 south of the Great Pyramid or unit C, relatively close to stela 2.

55

Of the 16 known colossal heads, 4 were found in La Venta. These sculptures express all the genius of the Olmecas as sculptors: their mastery of stone work in order to produce pieces extraordinary for their artistic quality as well as for demonstrating a great knowledge of carving techniques, especially for that remote era.

This head has a more severe expression, the lips are not slightly open as is the case with the other three and the space between the eyebrows is so noticeable that it would appear to have a bulge on the upper part of the nose.

The helmet is adorned by a wide band, on the front, three motifs were carved which could be claws or fangs, and on the upper part of the head a lion's mane drap with a straight base is clearly delineated. The ears are adorned by a motif that appears to be flowers with four petals.

The meaning of the heads has not been completely elucidated, but the possibility has been mentioned that they may be related to the ball-playing rites and the ball game, or also that they could be portraits of chiefs or warriors. Whatever their meaning might be, it must have been of great importance for the Olmecas, considering the amount of work and effort necessary for their elaboration. Lastly, the material of which they are made, was transported from the region of the Tuxtla in Veracruz, probably on rafts, which required a collective and well organized effort due to the enormous weight of the colossal heads. This particular monument weighs approximately 24 tons.

# 12 MONUMENT 63

## *Personage with a Standard*

54



*Measurements: height 2,56 cm, width 75 cm, thickness 45 cm.*

This monument, discovered in 1959, may be considered a stele because of the way the stone was used to represent the scene of a personage in a dynamic attitude. In his hands he is holding a standard, an enormous fish with fantastic features which might have been modeled after a shark.

Barely visible, the human figure, bearded and simply dressed with a sash, loin cloth, and an enormous cap adorned with feathers on the back, has his arms extended towards the front. There are other motifs on the sides and the back of the column which, unfortunately, is very damaged and the relief too worn to be able to learn anything more about this piece, exceptional because of the presence of an aquatic animal. As we mentioned before, this is quite unusual in the representations of this coastal group.

**12 MONUMENT 65**  
*Acrobat*

55



*Measurements: height 66 cm, width 49 cm.*

Representation of an acrobat, the first that clearly (in bulk) can be recognized in the Olmeca culture. Although identification of this piece is difficult because of the poor technique with which it was executed, it is possible to perceive that it is an acrobat leaning on his forearms and with his legs doubled back towards the bottom of his head, which is covered with a helmet which, being wide and flat, could have been used as a seat. The face is very eroded and the features can barely be guessed at. On the sides of the head and covering the ears hang bands finishing in circular adornments.

**14 MONUMENT 64**  
*Human Head with Cleft*

56



*Measurements. height 54 cm, width 42 cm.*

Human head, very eroded on the front. It probably wore a band around the head, and we may observe a "V" shaped cleft which often appears in Olmec representations. It is not possible to discover whether this head was part of a complete body, since it is not unusual to find this kind of sculptures without obtaining a corresponding torso; the Olmecas frequently carved only a part of the human body.

# 16 ALTAR 3

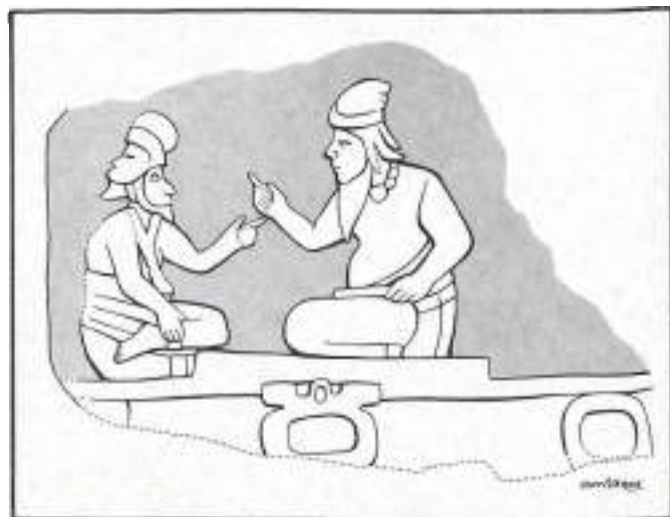
57



*Measurements: height 161 cm, width 166 cm, thickness 166 cm.*

This monumental piece was found on the platform next to the Great Pyramid in 1925.

Following the general form of the altars, it has a niche carved in the front and inside it, a seated personage; next in the central figure another individual was carved and two more on the left side of the altar. The main character was carved in bulk, the body leaning slightly forward and the legs doubled back. The



atlans were mutilated, probably during prehispanic times, so it is impossible to tell what position they were in. According to his importance, the personage is richly dressed with a large coil, circular earhoops, belt and loincloth.

On his left side, in relief, we can distinguish a much smaller figure; on the left side, also in bas-relief and barely perceivable, are the figures of two other personages sitting on a mat, but on different planes in order to emphasize a hierarchical distinction. Judging by the movement of their hands, they are caught up in animated conversation.

The physical type of these three last figures—bearded, with an aquiline nose—is similar to the one represented on stela 2 and monument 65, and is a notable contrast with that of the central figure. However, these two physical types are sometimes found together on some of these Olmeca sculptures which may be classified as belonging to a later period. It is worth noting that, as can be observed in a later period Olmeca relief from Chalcatzingo, Morelos, one of the characters carved on the left side of the altar wears a bearded mask on the back of his head, but we have no knowledge as to the meaning of this detail.

**16 MONUMENT 79**  
*Silueta*



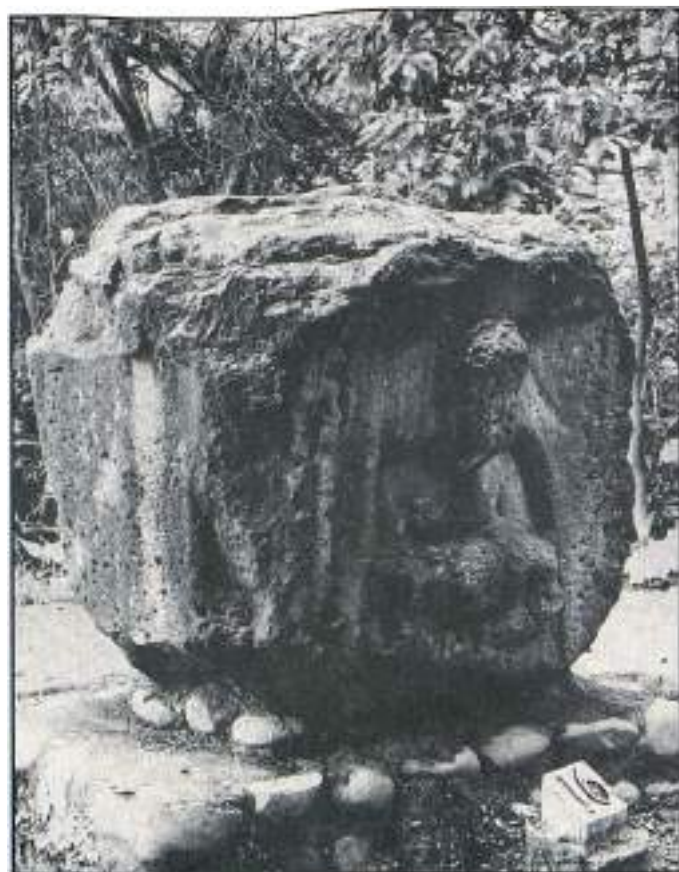
59

*Measurements: height 182 cm, maximum width 75 cm.*

The rocks in no way were determinative of the sculpture, but frequently the natural form of the material was used to achieve the result with less effort. On some occasions the sculptor was not able to complete his work and abandoned it. This is the case with this basaltic column on which only a silhouette was delineated. For this reason, it is impossible to recognize what the sculptor meant to represent. Or should we perhaps think of it as a finished piece?

# 17 ALTAR 2

60



*Measurements: height 99 cm, width 114 cm, thickness 129 cm.*

This sculpture was found in 1925, near the Great Pyramid and altar 9. Its state of destruction prevents us from knowing what the top was like, but, the same as the other altars, it has a central niche in which there is a seated personage. The figure was represented richly garbed with a tall heft and carrying on his knees what would be the silhouette of a child. We should note that the presence of children in Olmeca religious art was very common: they are an outstanding theme in the iconography which, as we shall see, achieves its most notable expression in altar 5.

# 18 MONUMENT 66

## *Representation of a Scale Model*



61

*Measurements. Height 103 cm, width 173 cm, thickness 37 cm*

This piece is very damaged and it is impossible to recognize its original form. Although it was probably part of a larger sculpture.

On the front are a series of incised parallel lines which, judging by the order of their distribution, seem to be a representation of the echelons of a pyramid base. On top and toward the center of the lines, one can perceive the silhouette of what might have been a temple.

**19** *STELE 1*

62



*Measurements: height 231 cm, width 79 cm, thickness 56 cm*



sculpture

Sculpture found in 1925 in the patio of unit A. The steles are sculptures that have a representation on the front of a scene in high or bas-relief or else of a person which in the present case exceptionally appears in a round bulk. These steles may have been made to commemorate a ceremony.

In prehispanic Mexico, it was the Olmeca culture that set a pattern to be followed in manufacturing this kind of pieces, which was later recreated by other groups such as the Mayas and the Zapotecas.

This stele shows one of the few representations of a feminine figure in Olmeca art. The woman in the niche expresses the same idea as the seated personages on the altars, they are all emerging from the entrails of the earth, represented by the fauces of a jaguar whose features are carved on the top part of the sculpture.

We can observe the rigid figure facing forward, naked from the waist up, wearing a small skirt consisting of several strips and, with the exception of a coat and earloops, no other adornment.

## 20 MONUMENT 67

*Seat*

64



*Measurements: height 90 cm, width 207 cm, thickness 90 cm.*

The year in which this piece was discovered is unknown, but by 1968 it was already in the park-museum. This enormous stone block seems to have been carved as a seat, probably using its natural form, without discarding the possibility that it was a project for some other type of sculpture. The only characteristics it presents are some incised lines and a groove on the front, possibly the first strokes for carving a monument.

**21 MONUMENT 5**  
*The Grandmother*

65



*Measurements: height 142 cm, width 100 cm.*

Known as "The Grandmother", this monument was discovered towards the end of the thirties in the patio of basaltic columns, close to stela J and monument 56 in unit A. It is a sculpture that apparently represents an old woman kneeling with her legs to one side, holding a vessel in her hands as if making an offering. On her head something like a tuft does not seem to be hair, but rather a headdress from which a cape hangs over the shoulders and the back. Although it is eroded, this piece can now be considered representative of the best Olmeca sculptures. Like some other pieces, it may have been deliberately buried by the Olmecs.

**22 STELE 3**

66



Measurements height 426 cm, width 190 cm







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**I**n order to safeguard the pieces representing the archaeological site from which this post-vulgarism receives its name, Don García Pellicer, a great poet from the state of Tabasco and director of our prehispanicisms, decided to create a landscape similar to that which may have existed in the place where the sculptures exhibited here were originally found, La Venta, Tabasco in the vicinity of the date of 1,200 B.C., when the natural atmosphere had been modified by progress that has also destroyed many vestiges of our ancient cultural heritage that had established itself there.

It was in the decade of the fifties that the post took advantage of the natural surroundings underlying the "Laguna de las Animas" in the city of Villahermosa, to transfer the pieces made by the olmecs to it, during a time lapse no less than six hundred years and thus create a concrete where originality has nevertheless acquired a solid form.