

# The Shaman's Stance: Integration of Body, Spirit and Cosmos in Olmec Sculpture

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## Introduction

For the back cover of the recent catalogue, *Tesoros Artísticos del Museo Nacional de Antropología*, author Felipe Solís selected as an appropriately important image the well-known yet enigmatic group of stone figures standing in what is obviously a ritual situation (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The group of sixteen figures and six halved celts was discovered in 1955 by Smithsonian archaeologists at the heartland Olmec site of La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, and was dated between 750 and 650 B.C. It was designated Offering 4. The Offering (minus three figures presented to the Smithsonian) was brought to the Museo Nacional for its inauguration in 1964, and is now considered one of the most precious of its many treasures, having rarely—if ever—been allowed to leave on loan (fig. 2).

This paper focuses on Offering 4 and its archaeological context as the best means for interpreting the original significance of a ubiquitous genre of Olmec portable sculpture, the Standing



Fig. 1 La Venta Offering 4 on the cover of *Tesoros Artísticos del Museo Nacional de Antropología* by Felipe Solís, Mexico D. F.: M. Aguilar, Editor, S. A. de C. V. 1991.

Figure. The figures are examined to determine what clues their forms offer about their meaning. Their most significant feature, the pose, is compared to a similar pose found in spiritual practices of China and India. Then the archaeological context of all the La Venta stone figurines is reconstructed with attention to chronological changes in patterns of their deposition. The form and context of the only other Middle Formative Standing Figure found archaeologically in its original location, that from Chalcatzingo, is compared to the La Venta figures. Painted standing figures found in Olmec rupestrian art offer additional clues to the meaning of the pose. Finally, I briefly show how the Maya adapted this image for their own purposes.

This paper discusses portable stone sculpture from Mesoamerica's central and southern highlands as well as that from the Gulf Coast. For that reason, I shall use the term Formative Period Ceremonial Complex (FPCC), coined by Kent Reilly (1989:6) to refer to the art style and political system generally called "Olmec." The FPCC includes the Formative Period ceremonial centers throughout Mesoamerica with large-scale earthen platforms oriented with respect to astronomical phenomena; the objects carved of hard

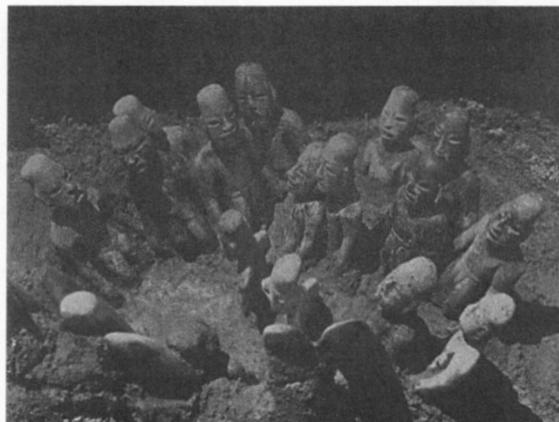


Fig. 2 Offering 4 at the time of its discovery. From *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 170, Plate 30*. Used by permission of the Smithsonian Institution.

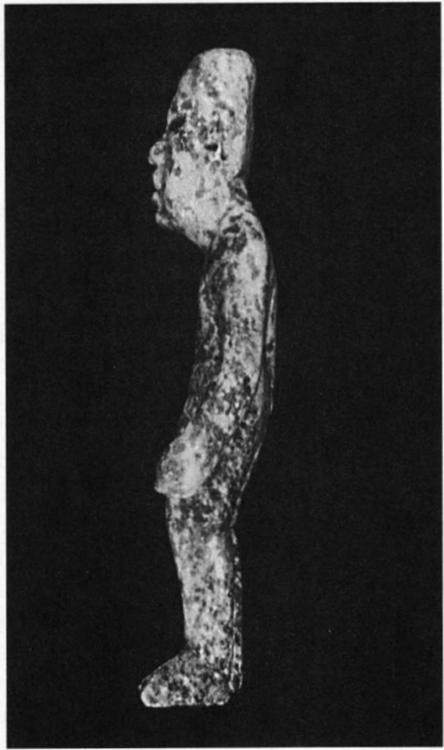


Fig. 3 Standing Figure from La Venta Offering 4. Smithsonian Institution. Photo by John Verano.

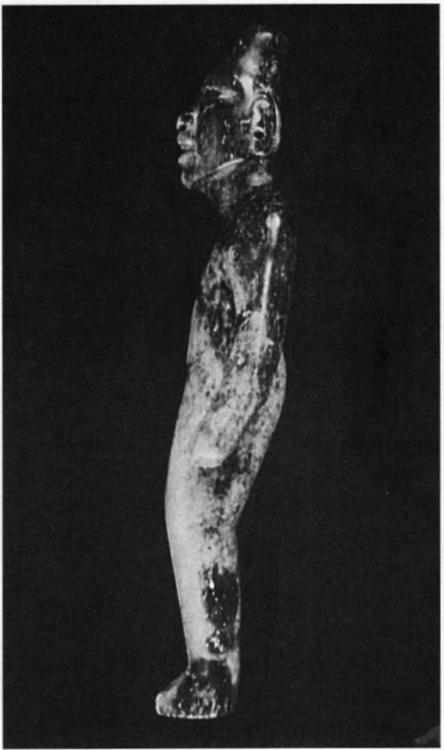


Fig. 4 Standing Figure from La Venta Offering 4. Smithsonian Institution. Photo by John Verano.

stones or modelled of clay with two and three-dimensional imagery most noted for its representations of fantastic creatures with both human, animal, and plant features and of humans in a variety of specific positions; shrines with rupestrian art in caves and mountains sacred to the FPCC culture; and the less tangible political and social system of shamanic kingship<sup>2</sup> that was both defined and served by the art and architecture. The FPCC culture was not homogeneous but strongly regional; nevertheless the sites share many symbols and practices that make the FPCC definable as a widespread system of religious and political practice and management.

#### The Mountain Pose

Previous interpretations of Offering 4 are based on the perception of a sense of ritual activity that pervades the apparently motionless figures. Drucker, Heizer and Squier's report of the 1955 field season at La Venta says the offering is of particular interest because it represents a scene (1955:152). The authors initially stated that four figurines face south toward a single spectacular figurine of bright green jade with black inclusions. However, they said, "There is nothing about them to indicate whether they are priests who are performing some ritual, or whether they are dancers, or perhaps candidates for some sacrificial rites" (ibid:156). In accordance with the archaeological discourse of their era, these authors sought among the figures an expression of political authority. That discourse has persisted until recently. In the previously mentioned book by Felipe Solis, he amplified this suggestion, including reference to shamanic transformation and sacrificial rituals: "...el simbolismo enigmático

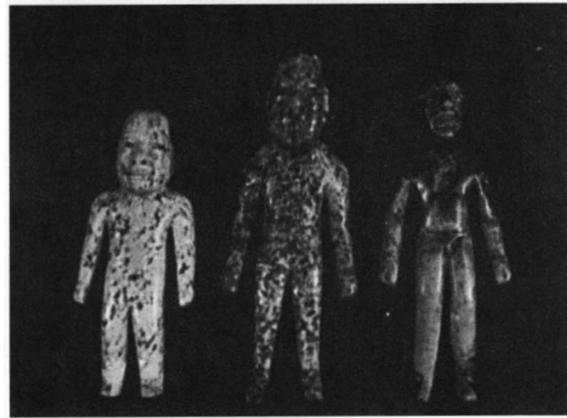


Fig. 5 Three Standing Figures from La Venta Offering 4. Smithsonian Institution. Photo by John Verano.



Fig. 6 "Beginning Posture" of Tai Chi. Drawn after Jou 1981:fig. 2-5b.

del conjunto estaria relacionado al culto del hombre jaguar y al sacrificio frente a las estelas," (Solis 1991:21). The interpretation I suggest emerges from my own interests: to elucidate the spiritual practices and beliefs of Mesoamerica.

A close examination of the sculptures reveals the most profound clue to their significance. La Venta's excavation reports noted the cranial deformation shared by all the figures and that the heads are proportionally large compared to the bodies, and that a high degree of individuality exists in the shape and size of the figures and their faces (Drucker 1952:153-158; 186; and Drucker et. al. 1955:152). However, a few characteristics that are very specific and must be significant features were not commented upon (figs. 3 and 4). Every single Standing Figure known has flexed knees so that the spine is as straight as possible. The arms usually hang loosely by the sides, although in later sculptures the hands may meet at the navel or hold a bar, scepter or rain-god baby. The eyes gaze as if at some distant, or some inner, phenomenon (fig. 5). The mouths are open and sometimes have an indication of teeth, suggesting attention to the breath. The deformed heads probably represent actual cranial deformation; in

both art and life, this adds verticality to the figures. In sum, the figures represent persons who seem very relaxed, breathing with the mouth open as they concentrate on a straight spine and maintain an inward focus.

The flexing of the knees to straighten the spine is a very specific position that in ancient China is the beginning of the Tai Chi exercise, a position of meditation and of union of the body with the cosmic axis (fig. 6). In China, this is called Hun-Yuan Kung or "Beginning Posture." The Tao of Tai Chi Chuan instructs a practitioner to assume this position:

...stand straight, placing the feet parallel and shoulder-width apart. Feel comfortable and easy without tension or strain. The head is held as if suspended by a string from above. Keep the shoulders low and loose so that the neck and back are free of tension. The chest is neither pushed up nor hollowed out. The abdomen must not protrude or over contract. The arms hang naturally with the elbows loose and the palms facing downward. The legs are straight with

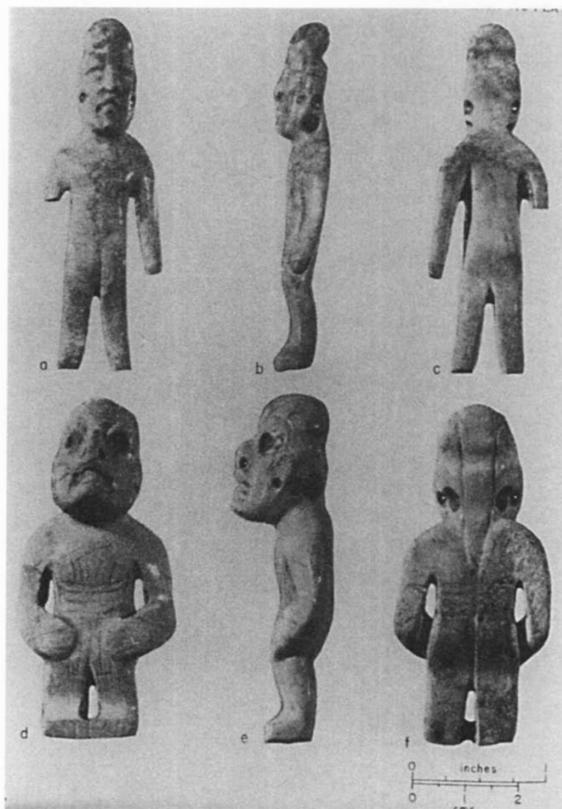


Fig. 7 Standing Figures from La Venta Offering 3. From Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 170, Plate 26. Used by permission of the Smithsonian Institution.

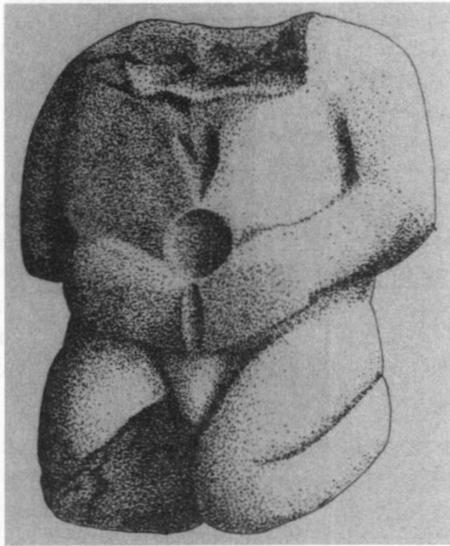


Fig. 8 Kneeling Figure of basalt. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 170, Plate 63. Used by permission of the Smithsonian Institution.

flexible knee joints....Breathe naturally through the nose, and keep the lips and teeth tightly shut....The eyes are to look forward and focus with a quiet and steady gaze on something green, such as a tree or a hill....think of how firmly you are standing. After a long period of practice, one will eventually feel the pre-birth Chi begin to flow....The starting stage of Tai-Chi Chuan can be compared to a seed being planted in the ground

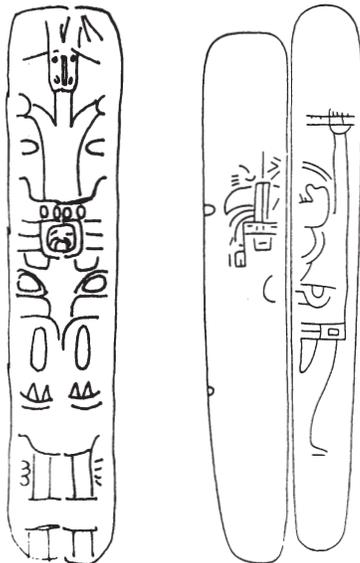


Fig. 9 Flying through the underworld entrance illuminated with a torch of spiritual fire. Reconstruction drawing of the incised celts in La Venta Offering 4, based on the work of Kent Reilly.

in the spring. Something inside this seed is changing to a sprout....one must be rooted to the ground....One's head and spine should be straight." In this position, it is said that the earth is invoked by the rootedness of the feet, the sky by the verticality of the spine, and humanity by the sinking of the energy to the Tan-Tien, an energy center below the navel (Jou 1981:141-142, 112-113).

With the exception of the closed mouth, this passage perfectly describes the posture of the Olmec figures.

In the ancient discipline of Hatha Yoga, this position is also a fundamental posture. It is called Tadasana, the mountain pose. Briefly, one stands with feet hip-width apart and weight perfectly balanced from right to left and front to back. Starting with the feet, the body is firmed, balanced and lifted, with the vertebrae consciously stretched and stacked into a vertical column. The breath is steady and one imagines energy spiraling up from the feet through to the top of the head (Zable 1993:49). Assiduous practice of this pose teaches the qualities of endurance, steadiness,



Fig. 10 A Figure with Avian Costume. San Miguel de Amuco Stela, after Grove and Paradis 1971: figs. 2 and 3.

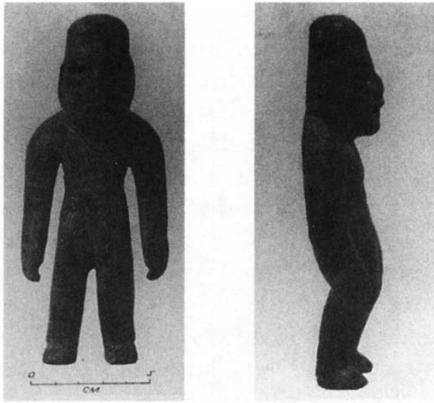


Fig. 11 La Venta Tomb B Standing Figure of serpentine. From Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 153, Plate 49. Used by permission of the Smithsonian Institution.

contentment, and stillness. Within the discipline of Hatha Yoga, the goal of this practice is to align the body, mind and spirit.

The mountain pose embodies the qualities of sacred mountains. Their symbolism as loci of sacred power and as spiritual centers is nearly universal. Thus, in China and India respectively, this position is compared to a seed within the earth and immanent action from within the stillness of the void and to the permanence, firmness, and power of the sacred mountain. In both traditions, practicing it devotedly brings steadiness, strength, and contentment. These qualities are compared to those of the mountain, an object of devotion in Mesoamerica as well as India and China. Recently, Lama Anagarika Govinda, author of several books on eastern philosophy, described the relationship between sacred mountains and human leaders in eastern thought:

There are mountains which are just mountains and there are mountains with personality....Personality consists in the power to influence others, and this power is due to a consistency, harmony, and one-pointedness of character. If these qualities are present in an individual in their highest perfection, he is a fit leader of humanity, be he a ruler, a thinker, or a saint; and we recognize him as a vessel of supra mundane power. If these qualities are present in a mountain, we recognize it as a vessel of cosmic power, and we call it a sacred mountain (Govinda 1981:xxix-xxxi).

Considering the obvious importance of mountains in FPCC iconography, from the replication of a mountain in the form of the artificial mountain or volcano constructed at La Venta, to

the use of volcanic stone for monumental sculptures, to the use of mountains as an optimum location for several important monuments such as Monument 1 of San Martin Pajapan, discovered at the summit of a volcano, it is appropriate to consider that the Standing Figure's pose might represent a deliberate exercise performed to gain or enhance spiritual power and other qualities appropriate to human leaders.

After an extensive inquiry, I conclude that there are no other Tai Chi postures represented in Mesoamerican art, and I do not suggest that this very highly refined spiritual and martial art was practiced in the Americas. As for the more ancient practice of yoga, the possibility that certain positions in Mesoamerican art reflect this knowledge remains to be thoroughly explored.

However, it seems quite possible that even without proof of the retention by Native Americans of a possibly very ancient Asian practice, that of maintaining a balanced, erect posture while reflecting or meditating as a way to gain spiri-

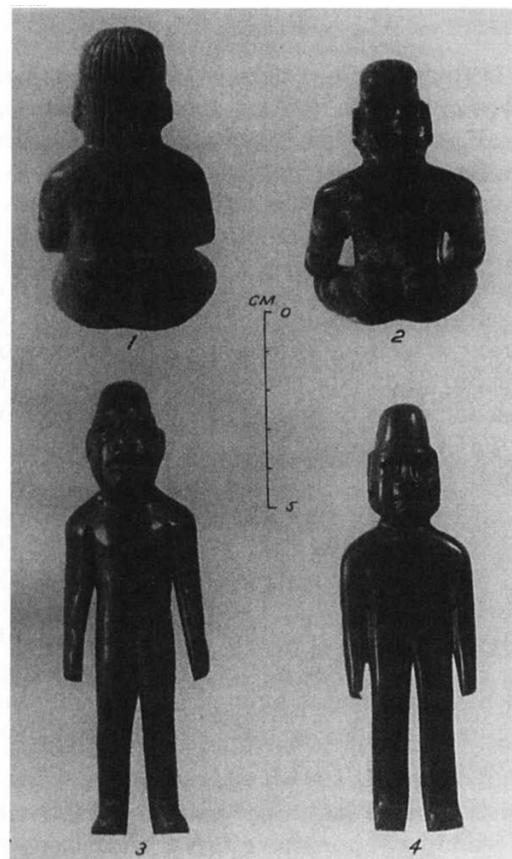


Fig.12 A Standing-and-Seated-Figure Pair from La Venta Tomb A. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 153, Plate 47. Used by permission of the Smithsonian Institution.

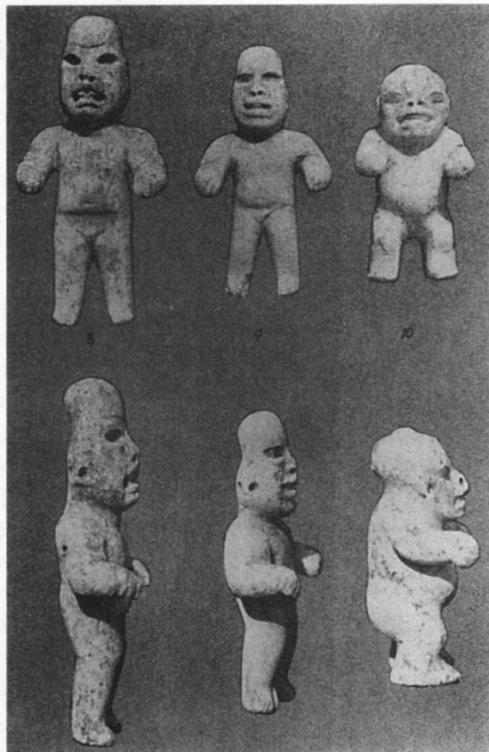


Fig. 13 Three Standing Figures including a dwarf from La Venta Offering 1943-m. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 153, Plate 50. Used by permission of the Smithsonian Institution.

tual insight, such a position could have been discovered independently by Mesoamericans. For the purpose of defining this pose in terms of the current discourse on the spiritual aspects of rulership among the Olmec and Maya, which is framed in terms of shamanism, I call the pose of the FPCC Standing Figures the “shaman’s stance.”

Having suggested that the pose of the figures is specific and represents an attempt to heighten spiritual awareness by linking body, sky, and earth, I should elaborate on my previous statement that the Standing Figure is a ubiquitous genre of FPCC portable sculpture, after which I return to an examination of the Offering 4 figures, considering their material and their placement at La Venta.

#### Distribution of Standing Figures in FPCC Art

Standing Figures have been found wherever the Formative Period Ceremonial Complex is known through archaeology or rupestrian art to have existed. There are dozens in private and public collections, most, unfortunately, accompa-

nied by only verbal testimonies that point to a provenience. However, one can be fairly secure in attributing a wide distribution for Standing Figures, which was first noted by Elizabeth Benson (1981:98). Stirling excavated one near Piedra Parada, Chiapas (Stirling 1947:140-142.) Others have been found in Chiapas (Navarrete 1974). The largest is a 65.5 cm high by 11 cm wide greenstone incised standing figure from near the Formative Period site of Ocos, Guatemala (this figure is the focus of a thesis by Reilly 1987). From Puebla comes the very large, blocky Standing Figure wearing a kilt decorated with a torch and bloodletters, published recently by Pina Chan (1989:fig. 56). From Guerrero are many Standing Figures in public and private collections, including one in the Dallas Museum of Art.

One of the few outside La Venta reported in its archaeological context is a Standing Figure of gray, mottled serpentine rubbed with red hematite, excavated from Burial 33 in the ceremonial precinct at Chalcatzingo, Morelos under the direction of David C. Grove (Thomson 1987:297 and fig. 17.1). The placement of this piece at Chalcatzingo echoes the contemporary placement of Standing Figures at La Venta.



Fig. 14 Crouching Figure (fetus?) from La Venta Offering 1943-m. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 153, Plate 51. Used by permission of the Smithsonian Institution.



Fig. 15 La Venta Phase IV Standing Figure. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 170, Plate 63. Used by permission of the Smithsonian Institution.

Of the sixteen figures of Offering 4, thirteen are serpentine, two jade, and one granite or sandstone. Colors selected are green, gray or blackish. Other known Standing Figures were made with similar materials. The well-known figure holding a "were-jaguar" infant in the Guennol collection, on loan to the Brooklyn Museum, is highly polished green jade, as is the large Standing Figure in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks. There are some of blue jade, chloromelanite, diopside jadeite, and many more of serpentines. The hard stones selected for these sculptures made permanent their actions and their presence. Jade and other hard stones were first used for non-utilitarian objects in Mesoamerica by the people of Formative Period Ceremonial Complex. Such stones were acquired from mountains and river beds in areas with a tendency to vulcanism.

Having been transformed by earth's fire they were then laboriously fashioned by humans into images of themselves and at some point returned to the earth, placed in specific and obviously significant contexts.

Excavations at La Venta concentrated on Complex A, a series of two ceremonial courtyards on a north-south axis. The apparent concentration of offerings in this area could be a result of lack of investigation elsewhere. Despite this cautionary note, a pattern of offering placement that changes across the Complex's four construction phases seems to emerge.

#### A Chronological Examination of Figurine Caches at La Venta with Discussions of Spiritual Flight and Dwarfs

No Standing Figures are known from Phase I, which corresponds roughly to the beginning of the Intermediate Olmec period or the Nacaste Phase at San Lorenzo. Two offerings containing stone figurines from Phase II were found in the sunken courtyard. The first, Offering 3, was found accidentally by a Pemex bulldozer east of the south central platform of the northern courtyard. Three small standing figures had been deposited along with a water bird pendant, stone objects grouped in batches of four and five and many jade beads (fig. 7). The Standing Figures are both of jade. The taller one is only 2 9/16 " high and is a slender fellow in the rubbery relaxed pose. The other one is slightly smaller, but much chunkier in stature, has a head disproportionately large for his body. His hands rest on his pelvic region. A third figurine was represented only by an arm fragment (Drucker et. al. 1955:147).

The other La Venta Phase II stone figurine doesn't fit our category of standing precious stone pieces. It is a 7" high figure of basalt, kneeling, with hands on midsection and a drill hole where probably a hematite mirror was inlaid (fig. 8). This was cached in the current headless condition at the completion of the installation of the southwest mosaic mask offering (Drucker et. al. 1955:95). At the last Mesa Redonda, Kent Reilly (n.d.) convincingly demonstrated that these mosaic masks, green like the sea and in the form of monster faces sprouting waterlilies, represent the jaws of the watery underworld being. Above the other, southeast, mask was a cache of 20 celts in the shape of a cross rising from an iron ore mirror, and Reilly showed that these represent the world tree springing from the Underworld. Ac-

cepting Reilly's interpretation, this assemblage in the southwest also represents the waterlily-monster face of the underworld sea, from which springs a world tree composed of six celts. The kneeling, decapitated human figure wearing the mirror may have represented a deceased person placed in association with the westernmost area of the courtyard.

Phase III probably began about 750 BC. This was a time of much construction and caching activity as well as several elevations of the level of the ceremonial court. Initiating the construction era was the deposit of the 18.9 x 19.8 meter and 1 meter thick massive offering of serpentine blocks in a pit dug nearly four meters below the floors of the enclosed court. Over it was placed a group of 38 stone celts representing the world tree in the central axis of the court.

Offering 4 was part of this initial construction during phase III. In the east side of the court, at the center of the interior side of the east long platform, a hole was dug into the newly laid layers of white sand and colored clays. Into a bed of white sand were placed carefully the sixteen figures, some which showed signs of previous use,

and six recarved celts (Drucker et. al. 1955:152 - 161). The images incised on the celts offers an additional clue to the meaning of the Standing Pose (fig. 9). The excavators realized that these slim celts had been sawed in half from whole incised celts. Kent Reilly put the parts together and reconstructed a few lines. He found that one originally bore the image of a flying figure holding a torch, like the image on the incised "spoon" in MNAH, and the other is a frontal monster like the mosaic pavements from whose head sprouts a trilobal tree, analogous to the cruciform celt offerings (Reilly n.d.).

There are a number of images in Formative Period Ceremonial Complex art that can be construed as possible "flyers" (Reilly 1989:16). More flying figures holding torches appear on Chalcatzingo Monument 12 (Angulo 1987:fig. 10.19) and the tall incised jadeite Standing Figure known as "Slim" is included here (Reilly 1987). What may be "wings" appear on the shoulders of figures on two pieces from Guerrero: a crocodilian one on the San Miguel Amucó Stela (fig. 10) published by Grove and Paradis (1971) and little fringed ones on a standing figure in-

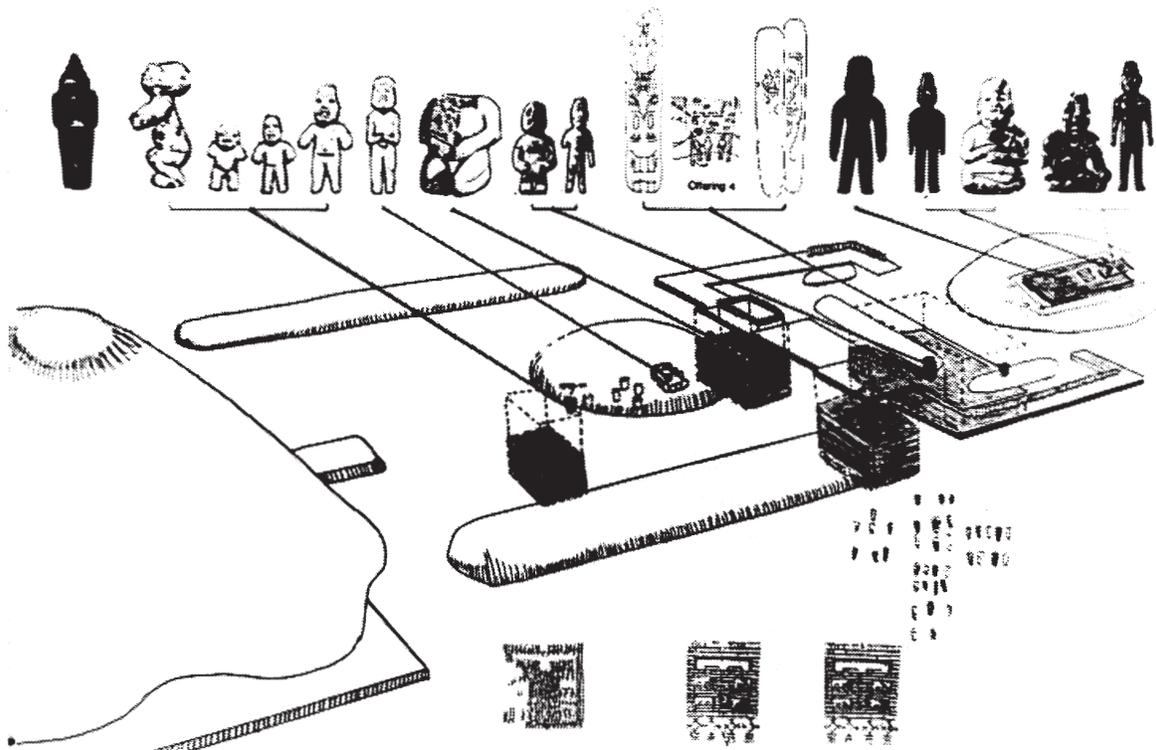


Fig. 16 Diagram of the excavated La Venta stone figurines showing their original locations.



Fig. 17 A Standing Figure raising the world tree. La Venta Monument 63.

cised on a jade in the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA 1970.18, see Joralemon 1971: page 25, figure 33). Supporting the interpretation of this motif as wings is the presence of an unequivocal bird-beak mouth mask on the San Miguel Amuco Stela figure's face. Full or partial masks in the form of birds or crocodilians are diagnostic of several so-called supernaturals in FPCC art and also are worn by figures depicted with elaborate regalia, who must have held political or spiritual authority, such as the figure on the San Miguel Amuco stela, the club-wielding figures on Chalcatzingo Relief II, the missing relief from Xoc, Chiapas

(Eckholm 1973:18) and La Venta Monument 19 (the small stela with the profile seated figure surrounded by a crested serpent). The presence of wings and bird masks alludes to the practice of some kind of flight among the FPCC shamans, which Reilly (1989:16) characterizes as "the flight of the ruler through the otherworld portal" and that we must assume is spiritual rather than physical.

The celts in La Venta Offering 4 showing the flyer and the face of the monster guarding the portal to the Otherworld seem to form a backdrop of dreamworld or supernatural activity experienced by the figures standing in trance. Simply put, the message seems to be "flying into the Otherworld illuminated by a fire."

Until Aztec times the concept of a fiery flyer persisted in central Mexico. Alfredo Lopez Austin points out that among the Aztec, one's prestige was perceived as an inner fire. Some sorcerers of the eighteenth century were said to turn into fire in their dreams, then fly to the known

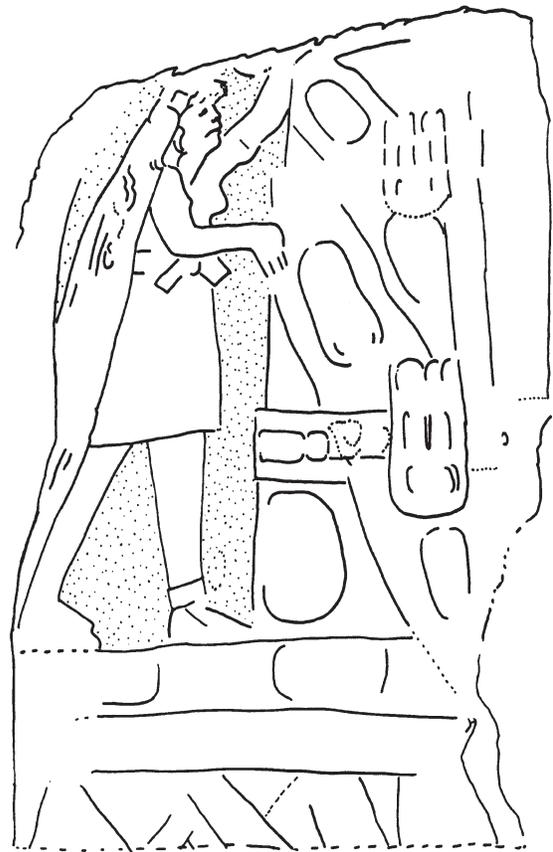


Fig. 18 A Standing Figure raising the world tree. Chalcatzingo Monument 21, after photo in Grove and Angulo 1987: fig. 9.21.



Fig. 19 Standing as the pose of superior authority. Juxtlahuaca Cave Painting 1. Photo by author.

world and imaginary places, during which journeys they would interact with other beings (Lopez Austin 1988:370).

Patterns of caching and burial in Complex A changed considerably in Phase IV, roughly 650 BC, as did art, iconography, and presumably, Olmec society. This Phase also began with a Massive Offering of serpentine blocks. For the first time, however, important personages of La Venta were buried in tombs along the central axis of the court. In Mound A-2 Drucker and Weiant found several features that appeared to be tombs despite the absence of skeletal material. Tomb B contained the sandstone box decorated as an "Olmec Dragon" as defined by Joralemon (1976) and interpreted by Reilly to be symbolically floating over the primordial sea represented as the serpentine blocks of Massive Offering 2 underneath the Mound (Reilly n.d.). In Tomb B, at what would have been the midsection of the body (whether or not there actually was a body—there is still uncertainty as to whether this is just the effigy of a burial) was a Standing Figure of serpentine (fig. 11) with his hands over his own midsection (Drucker 1952:27).

In Tomb A, the basalt column tomb, there were two bundles consisting of skeletal material accompanied by much amazing regalia. Included in each bundle, among the jade and real stingray spines and other items were a pair of jade figurines, one standing and one sitting (fig. 12). The seated figure in Bundle 1 is a seated version of the Standing Figures: an unadorned figure in a meditative posture. The seated figure in Bundle 2 has a neat hairdo, wears a skirt, and like the headless basalt figure deposited over the Phase II mosaic mask, has its hands over its navel, and wears a stone mirror as a pendant.<sup>3</sup>

After these modifications were made to the north court, the entire area was sealed with a thick layer of red clay and apparently, burial activity moved south to Mound A-3. In Tomb C, the sandstone cist burial aligned east-west within Mound A-3, the Olmec placed an elaborate set of offerings including earflares, the beautiful obsidian core incised with the eagle, worked rock crystal, 37 celts, pottery, and a Standing Figure, again situated at the midsection of the supposed (but unverifiable) body of the deceased. Also near the groin were a jade punch and the incised obsidian core, suggesting penis perforation rites (Drucker 1952:71. The assignment to Phase IV is found in Drucker et. al. 1955:118).

South of the sandstone cist was another apparent burial (Tomb D) so small in size that



Fig. 20 A royal Standing Figure with his animal alter ego. Oxtotitlan Painting 1-d. After illustration by Ontiveros, in Grove 1970: fig. 13.

Drucker suggested a child had been buried (1952:72). A meter south of that was Offering 1943-m in which small-scale ear spools, other offerings, three Standing Figures and one Crouching Figure were placed (figs. 13 and 14). Two of the Standing Figures are similar to the ones deposited in other offerings, with the exception that Figurine 8 has four “vegetative motifs” upon his chest.<sup>4</sup> The one designated as Figurine 10 was shorter, squatter, had more distinctly bent knees, eyes inlaid with iron pyrite and a “froglike” appearance (Drucker 1952:159). In proportion this is similar to the magnificent blue-green jade dwarf from Cerro de las Mesas cache, and I believe the La Venta one also represents a dwarf. Drucker called this figurine, with head tilted back, knees strongly flexed, and arms folded across his chest, a “dancer” (1952:159). I have seen a half dozen Olmec figures of this type that come from all regions of Mesoamerica with Olmec phenomena. Two are from Guerrero and now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología. They are illustrated in Ignacio Bernal’s *The Olmec World* (1969:fig. 61 a and b). One is nearly identical to this one and the other is a slightly different type, the “listening” figure. To me, they seem like fetuses, the unborn, still in communication with the spirit realm. In view of the four diminutive figurines, one clearly a dwarf, cached south of the small scale burial, I think that Tomb D may have held a ritually important dwarf rather than a child.

Very late in the occupation of La Venta, the Standing Figure lost its simple monumentality and became a less fluidly conceived, elaborately dressed figure who now gives the impression of having achieved the trancelike stance of the spiritual practitioner. A jade figurine, 16 cm in height, was found on the island but south of the main portion of the site (fig. 15). It wears a pointed helmet and other regalia. Similar figurines exist, one in the Universidad de Veracruz Museo de Antropología de Xalapa and others in private collections.

Earlier I mentioned a Standing Figure from Chalcatzingo. In size, material, and pose, it is similar to the figurines of La Venta. It has the physiognomy commonly associated with the Olmec, including a mouth with drooping corners. The tomb dates to the Cantera Phase, 700-500 B.C., closely corresponding to the Phase IV burials at La Venta, which date to approximately 650-400 B.C. Like the La Venta Phase IV figurines, it was found near the chest or abdominal area of

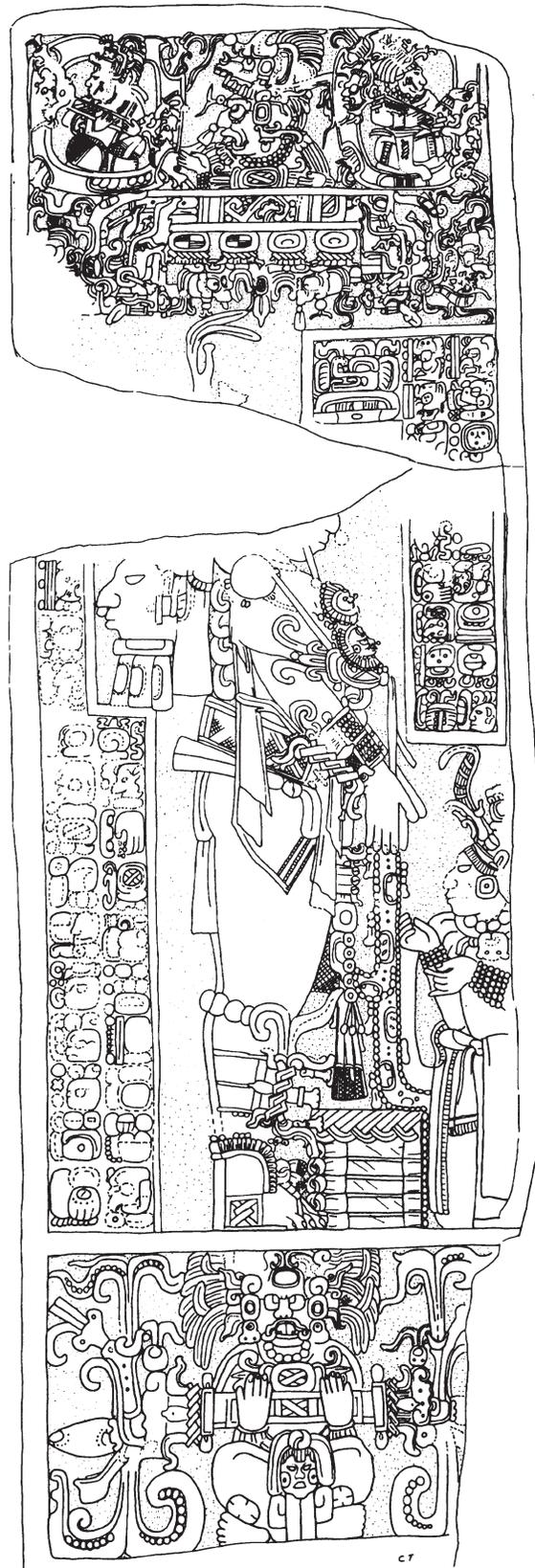


Fig. 21 A Maya Standing Figure: Yaxchilan Stela 1, temple side.

the body as can be seen in the illustration of the tomb contents (Merry de Morales 1987:fig. 8.9).

The above survey accounts for all the published, scientifically excavated stone figurines from La Venta (fig. 16). Reviewing the contexts of the figurines, two jade Standing Figures were cached in Phase II in an offering on the east side of the court. A basalt Seated Figure was placed over the western subterranean mosaic pavement. In Phase III, sixteen Standing Figures of various materials were deposited in a cache on the east side of the northern ceremonial court, below the center edge of the long platform. In Phase IV, single figurines or pairs of them were placed (in actual or pseudo-burials) along the central axis of the site. Some Standing Figures were either placed on the groin of extended burials, suggesting an emphasis on dynastic lineage or male potency, or near the navel as a source of the *axis mundi*, recalling the Palenque Sarcophagus Lid imagery and the concentration of spiritual energy in the *tan tien* during the Tai Chi Beginning Posture. Some of the Standing Figures were paired with Seated Figures, suggesting a duality of function: perhaps the Standing Figures are those whose trance enables them to fuse with the spiritual energy of the cosmic axis and the Seated Figures are those who rule (although the two jade seated figures from Tomb A are markedly mystical in focus). Others, also dating to Phase IV, represent hitherto unknown characters in the spiritual cast: the dwarf and a hunchback. This pattern suggests that the practice of the shaman's stance (or mountain pose) as a means to obtain spiritual or political rewards was most widespread in Phase III, and by Phase IV, the access to power relied more on dynastic inheritance than personal achievement.

### **The Portable Standing Figures in Relation to Monumental Sculpture**

The next step in this inquiry is to ask how the small greenstone standing figures relate to the standing pose on monuments. No monuments of which I am aware depict a person in the shaman's stance. However, clearly the act of standing held a range of meanings. First consider La Venta Monument 29 (fig. 17), which shows a profile human with an elaborate headdress touching a very broad serpent-like object whose head is the uppermost element in the composition. One of the human's arms is raised and the other extends downward in an apparent effort to stabilize the serpent-like columnar object.

A nearly identical pose is found on Chalcatzingo Monument 21 (fig. 18), although this figure's very feminine breast suggests she is female (Grove and Angulo 1987:fig. 9.21). Reilly (personal communication, 1991) suggested that this act is the completion of that whose initial position is seen in the San Martin Pajapan Monument 1: the raising of the world tree with one arm while supporting it with the other. Here again the Standing Figure is associated with the central axis of the cosmos, this time physically manipulating it. There are many standing figures on free-standing monuments and rock art, some of which were mentioned above in the discussion on bird masks and flying figures.

Two more which demand mention are the cave paintings from Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca, Guerrero. In Painting 1 from Juxtlahuaca Cave (fig. 19), a standing caped man confronts another man who kneels or sits in the alert position of San Martin Pajapan Monument 1, with one knee raised. He wears earspools, a headdress, necklace, and is bearded. He also holds a staff that seems to me, upon close personal inspection on a trip in 1990, to be a crocodilian creature or a thick bar like the one on Chalcatzingo Relief 1, the king within the cave. I suggest this is also a king within a cave, obtaining authority from the Standing Figure, who wears a jaguar pelt and an elaborate headdress with faces of FPCC supernaturals on it, unfortunately smudged. The Standing Figure here is literally within the earth, holding what is probably a sacred bundle and a magical weapon and an odd trident. Whether he is ancestral, an Earth Lord, or a repository of spiritual power is not possible for me to conclude.

The other painted standing figure is Oxtotitlan Painting 1-d (fig. 20), the Standing man and jaguar (Grove 1970:fig. 13). This image has generally been interpreted as depicting a sexual or generative connection between an elite human and a jaguar. However, an alternative should be considered. The jaguar clearly does not depict a flesh-and-blood creature. Its outline is incomplete and its feet are non-functional. It has several scrolls and emanations that give it a distinctly ethereal appearance. The jaguar's tail emerges from the testicle area of the standing figure, whose penis and testicles are shown in an unprecedented three-quarter view. The penis is not fully erect, but its distention suggests latent potential. The standing figure's gesture seems to be one of command; neither fighting, embracing, suggesting birth nor a sexual act. The gesture of

both jaguar and man are similar, as if the ephemeral jaguar carries out the will of the human, as would an animal alter-ego or nagual. The scene may be one of confrontation between the “flying” serpent immediately to the left of the jaguar and the standing shaman and his animal alter-ego.<sup>5</sup>

On La Venta Stelae are images of what are obviously powerful political figures, standing, with supernatural helpers or attendants. Thus the range of meanings for monumental images of humans standing runs from the shaman in a cave commanding his animal alter ego to a powerful source of supernatural and political authority conferring it on a worthy ruler, again in a cave, to authority figures raising the world tree, to elaborately attired figures wearing symbols of supernatural power, and animals brandishing weapons and confronting one another. I believe that if we see a FPCC figure standing and wearing any kind of regalia, we can assume some sort of supreme authority is implied.

In terms of form, the Standing Figures and the stone celts, incised or plain, are analogous to the stelae of Olmec and later cultures. On most stelae, the figure is standing and comprises most of the pictorial plane of the stone shaft. Any negative space between the figure and the edge of the stone is filled with works or dates but not with any kind of natural landscape. Verticality and alignment with the cosmic axis is the essence of the form of both kinds of sculptures. Some Maya stelae with proper names are named *te-tun*, stone tree, or *witz'*, mountain. A parallel identification between the human body and the tree persisted in Mexico long enough to be expressed by the Aztec elders and recorded by Sahagun. [The term *tlac*, tree trunk]

has come from people; it

resembles people;

it derives from people;

it proceeds from people;

it is a continuation. (Book XI:113)

Alfredo Lopez Austin, in *The Human Body*, reports that Nahuatl used words for the parts of trees to name parts of the body. *Tlac*, trunk, is the upper body, the branches of the tree are hands, the top of the tree is hair, the bark is skin, and wood is flesh (Lopez Austin 1988:347).

Papers by Fields (1991), Joyce et al. (1991), and Reilly (1991) demonstrate continuity between Olmec and Maya thought and the iconography of rulership. At the risk of explaining the obvious, I wish to discuss a single example. At La Venta, the recreation of the cosmos was more lit-

eral, certainly more three-dimensional, and I would argue, the spiritual experience was more of a focus in art. Offering 4 was placed directly at the juncture of underworld and ceremonial space, meters over the Underworld Seas and roots of the World Trees and in the east. In Maya art, as on Yaxchilan Stela 1 (fig. 21), it is not the spiritual experience that is emphasized, but the religious trappings of political events. The ruler is portrayed with the symbols of spirituality: the mirrors, the God C holy axis loincloth, standing over the underworld sun. All these symbols also mark the world tree, as discussed by Schele and Miller (1986). The ideal FPCC spiritual practitioner or shaman (those portrayed by the Standing Figures during the periods corresponding to La Venta Phases 2 and 3 and early in Phase 4) derived insight from actual integration of body and cosmos. The ideal Maya ruler relied upon his divine descent—his blood—to integrate the two realms.

### Conclusion

I suggest that Offering 4 represents a gathering of spiritual seekers in a trance state. Their bodies, aligned with the cosmic axis, enjoy the stability of their “mountain pose” while their spirits enter the dreamlike clarity and omniscience of the Otherworld by flying through the portal portrayed on the split celts, illuminated by their torches of spiritual fire. The discipline of standing in this pose allows the individual to draw energy from the earth up to the head. The Offering 4 Standing Figures stand above the Underworld/Otherworld sea on the east side of the symbolically sunken ceremonial court. Like the sun before dawn, they are just underneath the surface of the earth in the east. Perhaps their task was to gather strength to raise the sun above the horizon and propel it across the sky, which is a duty some Maya kings claimed to perform (Tate 1992:94-96).

Other Standing Figures seem to represent spiritual seekers as well, and may represent those individuals on whom the shamanic kings of the new FPCC polities relied for knowledge and advice. They may represent the shaman-kings themselves, engaged in spiritual practices that enhanced their clarity of mind, their singleness of purpose, their understanding, and ultimately their charismatic personalities. Offering 4 is indeed one of the treasures of Mexico's *patrimonio nacional*. These figures, and others like them, express the spiritual core of Mesoamerican kingship.

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tual dimension in Olmec art and introduced me to persons and literature who have made the subject of this paper come alive for me.

2 The discussion of shamanism as the system of beliefs and practices which served as a source for political power among the earliest Maya kingdoms appears in an article by Freidel and Schele (1988). The role of the FPCC ruler as "chief shaman" and some of the rituals he underwent in order to achieve his own personal power and authority are first described in Reilly (1989).

3 The presence of the mirror points to the spiritual or otherworldly significance and powers of the figure. When one gazes into a mirror, one sees not the mirror itself but the world behind the viewer, or the viewer in reverse. Karl Taube's studies of mirrors interpret it as the reflective surface of subterranean water (summarized in Miller and Taube 1993). Following that line of reasoning, when one gazes into a mirror, one gazes into the membrane of the opening to the Underworld or the spiritual realm, and sees oneself as an actor there, reversed from normal perspective.

4 See Joralemon (1971:66) for an interpretation of this Standing Figure as God II-f. According to that author, the four elements represent vegetation. To that hypothesis, I would add that the elements frequently appear in sets of four on a headband which has a maize plant at its center, held by a crossed-band device. This is probably not merely vegetation, but four plants at the four corners of the cosmos.

5 See Lopez Austin (1988) *The Human Body and Ideology*, for a discussion of the most relevant literature on nagualism in central Mexico.

#### NOTES

1 This paper grew out of several years' work on an Olmec exhibition. During that time, Kent Reilly shared freely his ideas on Olmec iconography during many exciting discussions. We also benefitted immensely from collaboration with David C. Grove, who, with Reilly, was to author a comprehensive catalogue. Gillett Griffin introduced me to many Olmec objects and their custodians and also shared his profound insights into the materials and meanings of Olmec sculpture. Unfortunately, the exhibition was not realized. My debt to those scholars is deep. More recently, Rick Dingus has enhanced my understanding of the spiri-

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