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Edited by

John A. Graham

Archaeological Research Facility
Department of Anthropology
University of California
Berkeley

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THE GREAT MOUND OF LA VENTA

by

John Graham and Mark Johnson

One of the great architectural features of the La Venta site is the great mound, Structure C-1, marking the south terminus of Complex A. Long thought to be a rectangular platform of the truncated-pyramid type, its unusual present form was not accurately perceived until it was cleared of vegetation and carefully mapped during brief field seasons in 1967 and 1968. ¹ Although we now know the present form of this great construction, interpretation of its ancient aspect is uncertain and controversial.

Exposure and inspection of the surface of Structure C-1 during the 1967 and 1968 field seasons revealed the approximately 30 meter high mound to have a subrectangular base plan and to support a series of alternating prominent ridges and valleys or "ravines" which slope from the small platform at the summit of the construction to the mound's base. The long ridge formations, which number ten in all, separate an equal number of "ravines" which vary somewhat in width and depth. Quite regular in their form with the exception of obvious disturbances, particularly on the west and north sides, the ridges and ravines are sufficiently symmetrically distributed around the structure that there seems to be little doubt as to their reflecting intentionally made features of the original structure. ²

Our late colleague, Robert F. Heizer, believed the structure to have been a truncated cone and argued that it might be an effigy of a volcanic cone. ³ The series of ravines leading down from the summit of C-1 were believed by Heizer to be an intentional effort to replicate the eroded cinder cones which are to be seen in the neighboring Tuxtla highlands.

The nature of the "ravines" is obviously of primary significance in interpretation of the ancient form of the structure. During the 1968 season when the mound was mapped and most thoroughly examined, the question of erosion, its extent and effect, was repeatedly discussed. Heizer and Graham, together with our surveyor, Lewis Napton, and our colleague in geology, Howel Williams, all agreed that the ridges could not be fully accounted for solely by evoking erosion. Although some irregularities were clear, it was equally clear that these were at least partly to be explained by the intensive use of a foot path on the north side and by "treasure" digging there and elsewhere on the mound. Otherwise, the regularity of the surface was impressive and inconsistent with the notion of a purely naturally induced erosion. Attempts were made to estimate the amount of mound structure that would have been removed had the "ravines" been entirely the result of erosion, and it was concluded that such erosion would have produced sufficiently great "alluvial fans" at the base of the mound which could be detected. Not only were such features not in evidence but the basal platform upon which the mound rests still preserves a regularity of outline. While considerable erosion has surely occurred, we did not, and

we still do not, think it even remotely likely that erosion has totally transformed the original aspect of the mound so that no clues survive as to its original form. ⁴

Some measure of the extent of erosion at C-1 might be gauged if better data were available on Monuments 25, 26 and 27 which were found positioned along the south base of C-1. Apparently, the tops of these jaguar mask reliefs, whose thinness suggests to us that they were wall panels, were only slightly beneath modern ground surface (Drucker, Heizer and Squier 1959: 120; 206-209). Since their excavators believe these monuments were "braced" against C-1, being set into a "shelflike" bench cut along the base of the structure, we conclude it is surprising that they were not more deeply buried by slope wash from the mound. However, since two of the monuments were inverted, it is unlikely that the monuments occupy their original positions, and how great an interval of time between completion of C-1's construction (and perhaps abandonment of original use) and the positioning of the monuments cannot be determined on the basis of data presently available. ⁵

When the present nature of C-1 was first revealed, we were impressed by the resemblance of the structure's plan to that of the famous Preclassic platform from Uaxactun, Structure E-VII sub, with its four stairways, one descending each side of the construction. That plan is not unusual in Maya architecture, and we are tempted to compare La Venta C-1 with the great 100 foot high Preclassic Tikal Structure 5C-54, described by W. R. Coe as one of the greatest platform structures of its time (W. R. Coe 1967: 90). Like Uaxactun E-VII sub, Tikal 5C-54 possesses a stairway on each of its four sides. The structure also has inset corners which, on the structure's east side, are fashioned as sloping buttresses, an engineering device which may have been employed to assist in the attainment of the structure's great height. The form and distribution of the "ridges" and "ravines" of La Venta C-1 seem quite reminiscent of the latter features and may well have had a similar function. The hypothetical reconstructions we offer in Figure 1 are based upon this resemblance, real or fancied. The fact that Monuments 25, 26, and 27 are positioned in a straight line along the base of La Venta C-1 may lend weight to our view that C-1 was not circular in plan as is often stated (e. g. Heizer, Drucker and Graham 1968: 12); the force of this argument is weakened by the fact that the monuments may have been positioned long after abandonment of the structure's original function.

Our Figure 1 was first prepared a good many years ago. It should be noted that we showed our hypothetical reconstructions to Heizer. Although he acknowledged the possibility that the reconstructions might have some validity, he preferred to hold to his original interpretation. In support of his view, one can cite the great circular platform at Cuicuilco, almost in the shadow of nearby volcanic cones. And, in addition to the great mound, there were other circular or elliptical structures of Preclassic date at the site. Furthermore, the astonishing buried jaguar mosaic masks at La Venta can plausibly be suggested to be offerings to a subterranean force, and since earthquakes and volcanic activity are often related, the building of a volcanic effigy is not entirely

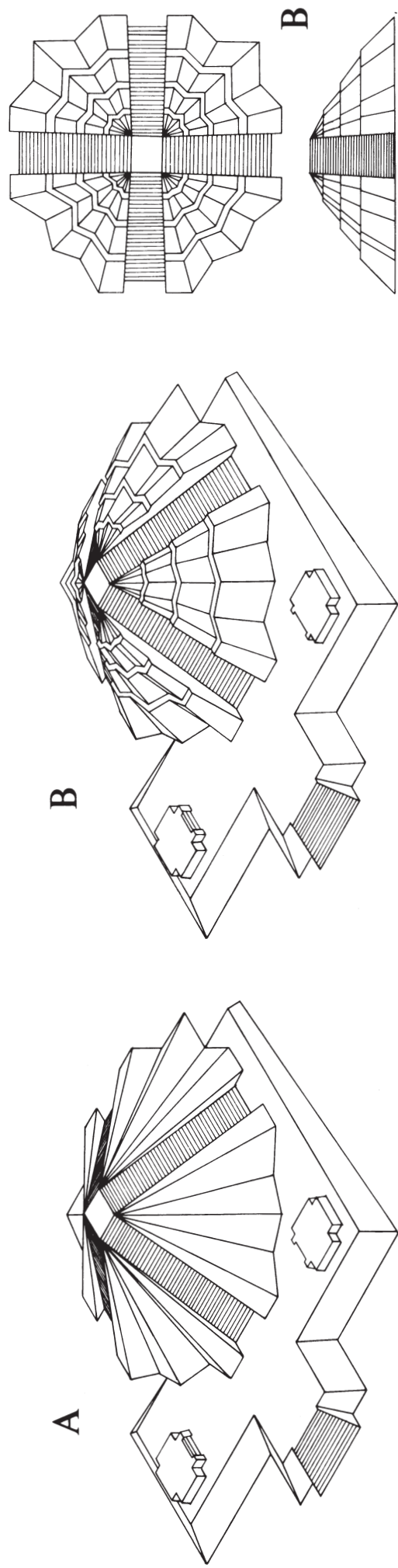
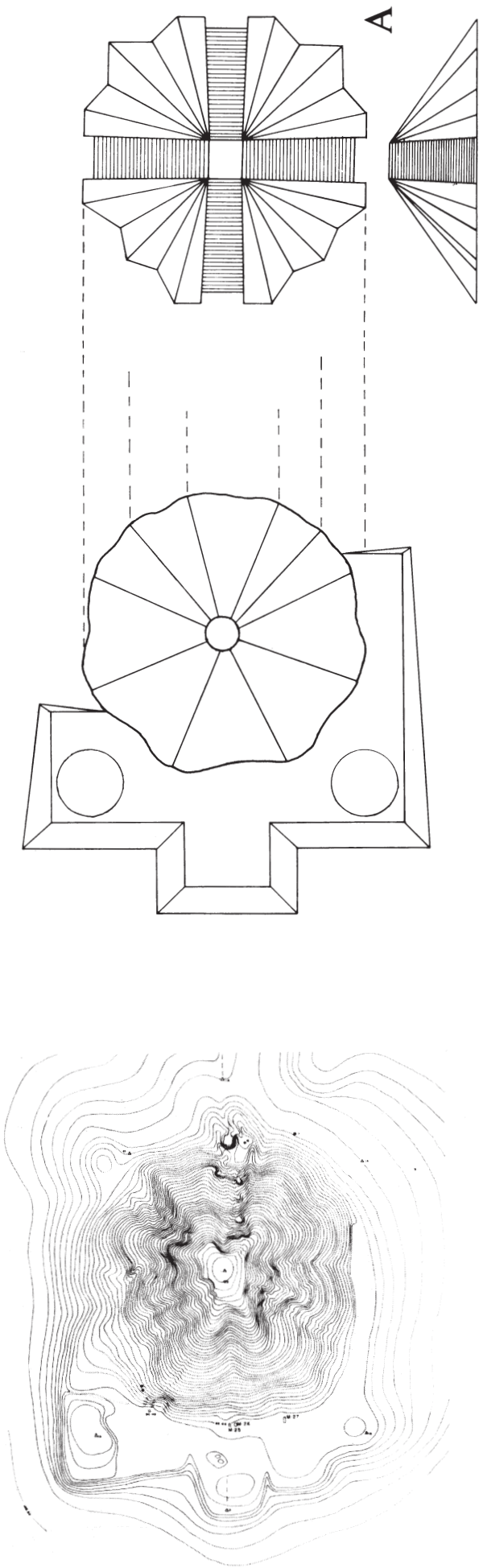
farfetched. We feel, however, that precedence more greatly favors our suggested reconstructions. But until that remarkable edifice is subjected to careful excavation further speculation may be idle.

NOTES

1. The University of California, Berkeley, investigations at La Venta in 1967 and 1968 were made possible by the generous support of the National Geographic Society which has made possible so much of our present knowledge of the ancient Olmec. Unfortunately, it was not possible to fully realize the objectives of the 1967 and 1968 field explorations because of constant harrassment, threat of bodily harm and imprisonment, immediate confiscation of newly discovered sculptures and all stone of a greenish hue, and other unpleasant difficulties instituted by the local political authority.
2. A contour map at 2 foot intervals is provided in Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968.
3. The notion of architectural effigys at Olmec sites has been entertained by others as well. There has been some speculation that Complex A at La Venta might have been intended to represent a jaguar mask while M. Coe has expressed his belief that the plateau and ridges of the San Lorenzo site represent "some kind of gigantic animal effigy -- a huge quadruped as seen from above" (Coe 1967: 6).
4. We thus disagree with Beverido who views the "ravines" as entirely the work of erosion. Beverido also believes that the San Lorenzo ravines are the product of erosion, and he cites several arguments in support of the view (Beverido 1972: 84). Lacking first hand knowledge of the San Lorenzo situation, we withhold judgment on this controversy. We would point out, however, that the situations are hardly comparable. For one thing, there are springs and permanent streams in most of the San Lorenzo ravines (Coe 1968: 44).
5. The practice of positioning monuments in an inverted position is best documented in the Maya area where it has been interpreted as possibly reflecting the acitivites of later people who have lost contact with the old traditions. Although modern archaeologists have occasionally inverted ancient sculptures through a failure to understand ancient art forms, we are not persuaded, on reflection, that this is a satisfactory explanation of all ancient monument inversions.

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