

OLMEC ALTARS AND MYTHS

By DAVID C. GROVE



La Venta Altar 4. A human figure seated in a niche holds ropes which pass to figures carved upon the altar's sides. A carved jaguar-face dominates the area above the niche.

The lowland jungles of the Gulf Coast plains of Tabasco and Veracruz, two states of modern Mexico, abound with remnants of the Olmec culture which flourished in that region from 1200 to 600 B.C. The Olmec not only launched Mesoamerica on the road that led to the high Prehispanic civilizations but even strongly influenced the direction some of these cultures, such as the Maya and Aztec, would take. The Olmec centers on the Gulf are rich in monolithic carved monuments executed in basaltic stone which was transported great distances through the lowland swamps, giving testimony to an amazing expenditure of human labor and materials. The largest and in many ways the most beautiful of these monuments are those which archaeologist Matthew Stirling labeled "altars."

In appearance, these so-called altars closely resemble gigantic stone tables with solid bases. In each, the massive lower rectangular section is crowned by a thick projecting "top," and a shallow niche in the front face of this base usually houses a seated figure, carved in the round. These figures are human, roughly life-size, and constitute some of the finest Olmec statuary known. Additional carved motifs and scenes in low relief adorn the front and sides of the base as well as the edges of the projecting "top."

What function did these altars serve? What is the meaning of their often beautiful art work? Until now these questions have largely gone unanswered. Archaeologists have suggested that representations on certain altars depict infant sacrifice; the Aztecs, we know, sacrificed young children to their rain-god, and such practices prevailed in other Mexican cultures prior to the Spanish conquest. There is little evidence however that the Olmec practiced sacrifice, and these large monolithic altars are too large to have served as sacrificial stones. In fact, I am unconvinced that they were altars at all.

A curious event occurred about 900 B.C. at lowland Olmec centers. Within an apparently short time these large stone altars were purposely mutilated, most likely by the Olmecs themselves.

The mutilation, moreover, was not restricted to the altars, but seems to have been directed at almost any sort of anthropomorphic representation; heads were broken off statues, bas-relief carvings were wholly or partly disfigured, and the colossal stone heads for which the Olmec are so famous were defaced. Then, having been disfigured, many of the monuments were ceremonially buried. We cannot yet say why this happened, but the damage was widespread. Perhaps some social situation brought in its wake a political-religious revolution. The evidence speaks for itself, however: the size of the fragments missing from some of the altars would have required a destructive force far greater than clubs or axes, something more in the nature of a prehistoric pile driver. Needless to say, the defacers of these monuments, whoever they were, obviously meant business. Since that time nearly 3000 years ago, the destructive forces of nature have also been at work. Yet, in spite of this, several of the altars remain in sufficiently good enough condition to be analyzed artistically.

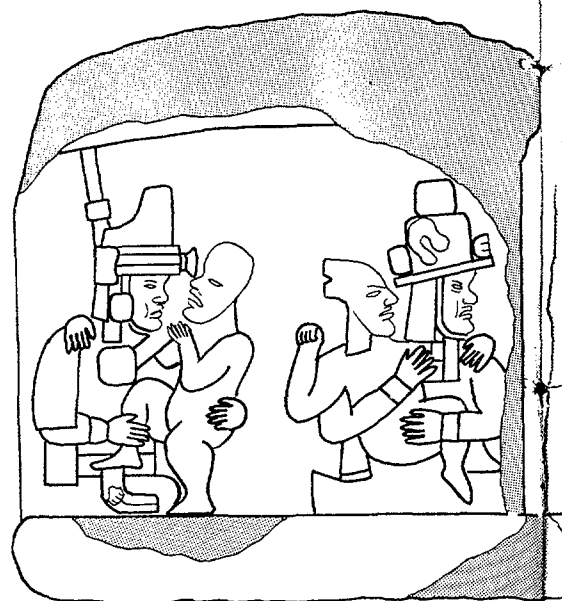
A careful look at the art on Olmec altars provides a possible solution to what these monoliths may represent. In the comments that follow I will focus on two of the best-preserved altars. These are both from the site of La Venta, one of the major Olmec ceremonial centers; they have been previously given identification numbers 4 and 5. La Venta has a total of seven such altars known today; in addition, there are two at San Lorenzo and one at Laguna de los Cerros—other major centers of Olmec culture.



The motifs and images that decorate these altars are recurrent ones, found not just on sculptural monuments, but in recently discovered Olmec cave-paintings as well; that these paintings are situated purposely within caves is of special importance. The paintings and their placement clearly echo the subjects of the altar carvings—subjects obviously part of Olmec mythology. The interconnections among the altars and paintings are intricate ones and will take a bit of patience as I spell them out. But to do so, I believe, may enhance our understanding of Olmec mythology and clarify the nature of the Olmec altars themselves.

La Venta's Altar 4 is perhaps the finest of all known Olmec altars. The concave niche in the altar's face holds a beautifully carved seated figure which is only slightly defaced and which, I believe, is a portrait carving of a specific individual. I believe that it is portraiture because it is finely executed and contains none of the more simple, generalized representations common in much of Olmec art. While the figure's face has suffered some damage and is difficult to reconstruct precisely, the headdress which it wears is relatively undamaged and has a pair of interesting features. One is a set of motifs which several scholars have previously construed as representing a jaguar's face; it represents, in fact, the head of a large bird, most likely a Harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*), a powerful monkey-eating predator whose habitat range extends from the Gulf Coast of Mexico to the Brazilian tropical forest and eastern Peru. At the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, eagles were generally associated with the sun, priests, human sacrifice and a special class of warriors, the "eagle knights." According to Donald Lathrap, the Harpy eagle was also depicted by the ancient Chavín artists of Peru, whose culture roughly dates to the same period as the Olmec. The beak of the eagle on Altar 4 is missing, a casualty of the mutilation 3000 years ago, but the feathered crest which forms the rear of the headdress is clear enough to allow such identification.

The other notable feature is a glyphic device that appears on the front sides of the headdress. This glyph consists of interlocking scrolls and was common in the art of the Post-classic period immediately preceding the Spanish conquest. It is identifiable with a central Mexican symbol known as *ollin*, associated with motion or earth-

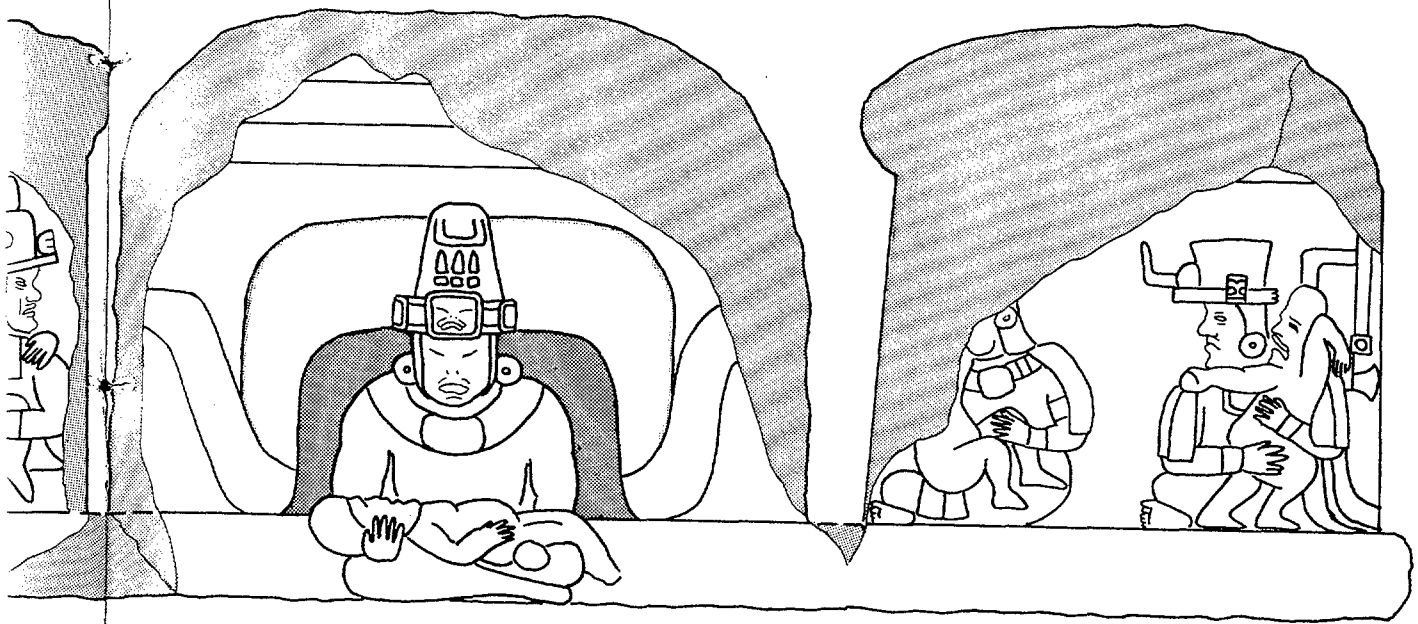


La Venta Altar 5,

quakes and also the sun. An identical glyph occurs in Maya art from southern Mesoamerica, where it is known as the *Pop* glyph. J. Eric Thompson suggests that for the Maya this glyph sometimes symbolized chieftainship and authority. The same motif again is common on the headwear of the famed "Smiling Heads" of the Classic period in Veracruz—a fact that may not be coincidental but may relate to an evolving cultural tradition in the Veracruz region, with Classic period Veracruz culture being a cultural descendant of the Olmec.

The niche figure in Altar 4 wears an elaborate breast ornament which may represent a large jade pectoral or perhaps a concave mirror made of magnetite or ilmenite of the kind found during the excavations at La Venta. The figure is also wearing a skirt-like garment and grasps in his hands the end of two ropes which pass along the base of the altar to bas-relief human figures on the altar's sides. The right side is badly defaced, but the left is largely intact and shows a seated figure, apparently a woman, whose left wrist seems bound by the rope. I believe that this rope does not represent captivity as some scholars have thought, but rather, as we shall see, it seems to link the figures in a kinship relationship.

The top of Altar 4 has a somewhat stylized jaguar face carved on its front lip. The face is situated directly above the niche and its seated



Altar 5, showing the altar's sides and front. The lightly shaded areas indicate mutilated portions.



Reconstructed front view of La Venta Altar 4.

figure. The surface of the altar top includes a raised area which Matthew Stirling once likened to "a jaguar skin thrown across the altar" and which is a common feature on nearly all Olmec altars. The jaguar face on the altar's front lip very possibly belongs with such a pelt. It is interesting that both jaguar and eagle appear on this monolith, for in the centuries just prior to the Spanish conquest "jaguar knights"—like "eagle knights"—comprised an important warrior

class in the central Mexican region.

Altar 5 at La Venta likewise features a well-carved human figure seated in the altar's concave niche and bas-relief carvings along its sides. The iconographic theme appears to be different from that of Altar 4. The seated figure, with more generalized features and thus probably not a portrait carving, is wearing a helmet-like headdress that is not zoomorphic, although it too contains a glyphic motif. This figure holds an

Polychrome mural at Oxtotitlan cave. A man is seated upon a jaguar-monster face, which is indicated by dark shading.



infant in his extended arms, an infant of the sort which Olmec scholars describe as "were-jaguar," a child whose face has both human and jaguar features. The sides of the altar show four human adults, each with helmet-like headgear holding a naked, pudgy "were-jaguar" infant; one infant has a flattened cleft head of the type commonly associated with "were-jaguar" carvings on Olmec jade axes. This bas-relief scene of adults and "were-jaguar" infants has previously been interpreted as possibly representing infant sacrifice. There is, however, no present archaeological data to suggest that infant sacrifices did or did not exist among the Olmec.

If we look now at the Olmec cave-paintings and some other evidence, we can see a number of interesting patterns emerge. Although the Olmec heartland lies adjacent to Mexico's Gulf Coast, Olmec manifestations occur from central Mexico south to Costa Rica and El Salvador. Olmec-style ceramics and small "portable" stone carvings have long been known from central Mexico, but until recently the only monumental Olmec art known in that region was the group of bas-relief carvings at Chalcatzingo, in the state of

Morelos. Then, in 1966, several paintings in Juxtlahuaca cave in the mountains of Guerrero were identified as Olmec.

Other Olmec paintings were discovered two years later. The find was an exciting one; Juan DuBernard, a close friend of mine, told me of seeing some paintings in a large but shallow cave twelve miles north of Juxtlahuaca cave. We visited the site with Professor Hector Leon and his student Edmundo Mendez from the nearby town of Chilapa, who had frequently visited the cave, known locally by its *Nahuatl* (Aztec) name: Oxtotitlan. The Oxtotitlan paintings were situated in two shallow grottoes on a broad cliff face. There were also some paintings on the cliff face itself. Exposure to the elements had taken a heavy toll of the Oxtotitlan art work; smoke and dirt did some further harm and more damage had been done by local farmers who had defaced several paintings which they thought depicted the devil. The dirt and smoke, ironically, in obscuring other paintings, saved them from a similar fate.

Several Oxtotitlan paintings were astonishingly similar to the art work on Olmec altars found at La Venta, and these similarities, which can hardly be fortuitous, deserve detailed discussion.



Painting of a man and jaguar in Oxtotitlan cave.

One of the most impressive Oxtotitlan paintings is a large polychrome mural located high on the cliff face above the mouth of the south grotto. It represents an elaborately attired human figure seated upon a stylized jaguar-monster face. This jaguar-face is very much like the one on Altar 4 and echoes other carved works from the La Venta site. A bluish pectoral, perhaps suggesting jade, hangs on the chest of the seated figure, and other jade-like ornaments adorn his ears, arms, legs and feet. He is seated with his left arm raised and his right leg dangling casually over the right eye of the jaguar-face beneath.

A second important painting, within the cave's north grotto—an area in which all the paintings are executed in black—depicts a standing human male figure with a typical Olmec baby-face. Edmundo Mendez, who originally showed me this figure, called it “the Apache” because of the simple headdress it wears; but he could not explain the scroll-like designs in front of the figure. Later, while studying the details of this painting, I dampened the scroll area for the purpose of taking photographs. A more complete painting slowly emerged from beneath the encrusted calcium deposits. The scrolls, it turned out, comprised the stomach area of an elaborate snarling

jaguar—and the jaguar, in turn, was positioned in such a manner as to be copulating with the standing human figure.

Matthew Stirling has reported similar scenes from Olmec carvings found near San Lorenzo. If we add to this the notion, long suggested by scholars, that the Olmecs might have considered themselves “the people of the jaguar” or “the jaguar’s children,” we begin to see that both the altars from La Venta and the Oxtotitlan paintings reflect an important feature of the Olmec myths of origin. The Olmecs’ belief that they sprang from a union of man and jaguar finds mythological parallels in cultures outside the Mesoamerican Indian groups. The Colombian anthropologist G. Reichel-Dolmatoff has written that several tropical forest Indian groups believe that they are “jaguar people,” and that neighboring Indians accept this belief and treat them with fear and respect. In the case of the Paez Indians, their myth involves a fancied sexual union between a jaguar and a Paez woman; though this is a contemporary and not an ancient Indian group, its progenitive legend is strikingly similar to the assumed Olmec myth and to Olmec artistic scenes.

In Prehispanic Mexican codices caves are usu-

ally represented by the glyphic device of a jaguar's or earth-monster's open mouth. Historically, this was a period during which jaguars were considered the animal of the night sky (their spots represented the stars) and more importantly were associated with the underworld, the heart of the earth. Because caves give entry into the earth they too were associated with the underworld; hence the glyphic connection between caves and the jaguar's mouth. Black was the color which in the codices stood for the underworld. Since all the paintings in Oxtotitlan's north grotto are executed in black, including the human-jaguar union, I am led to believe that in the Olmec myth of creation caves, the underworld and the act of procreation were meaningfully related. For the Olmecs, the underworld was doubtless very different from our conception of hell. Nor is the notion of cave origins a theme unique to Mexican prehistory. The migration myths of the Aztecs and other Nahuatl-speaking groups who settled in central Mexico speak of their journeys as having been launched from a series of caves. These mythical connections may have been rooted in the past and originated with the Olmecs.

It remains to relate the myths and the paintings to the so-called Olmec "altars." In the Oxtotitlan polychrome mural, as we noted before, the figure's right leg dangles over the jaguar-monster face, indicating that the stylized face is meant to represent a three-dimensional object—such as an altar. The entire polychrome painting is *above* the mouth of the cave; and the jaguar-face on the front lip of Altar 4, likewise, is directly above the altar's niche. The iconography of Mesoamerican codices, with its use of jaguar or earth-monster mouths to represent caves, and the association of the polychrome jaguar-monster face with the cave-mouth at Oxtotitlan, leave little doubt in my mind that the niches at Olmec altars represent jaguar-monster mouths, and thus caves, and hence entrances to the underworld. This interpretation would apply to all niched altars, whether a jaguar-monster face is specifically depicted or not. This interpretation is at least implied in the iconography by the presence of the niche itself.

I mentioned before that in most altars the seated figure who occupies this niche is depicted holding an infant with "were-jaguar" features. This infant, presumably the result of that under-

world human-jaguar union, is shown with the adult as emerging from the underworld. This motif is reinforced in the bas-relief of Altar 5 where, again, normal humans hold "were-jaguar" infants. What do these infants represent? Prehispanic beliefs related infant-like dwarfs to agricultural fertility and rain. The idea of the rain-dwarf is still current, in fact, in some rural areas of Mexico. The Paez Indian myth, too, involves children with jaguar features who are associated with thunder and rain and are born of the union of jaguar and woman. The headdress on the figure seated in the niche of Altar 5 has three marks like exclamation points in its center. These are doubtless stylized raindrops, as witnessed by their appearance directly under rain-clouds in Relief 1 at the Olmec site of Chalcatzingo. Thus one of the themes of Altar 5—in fact, of most Olmec altars—is the theme of fertility, the assurance of good crops in addition to cave-mouths and origin-myths. I see no reason to think that this art records infant sacrifice—though the Aztecs did make a practice of offering children to their rain-god. In Altar 5 the origin myth may involve the birth of rain-dwarfs as well as much more. Obviously the whole work is thematically complex. The Oxtotitlan polychrome mural also appears to deal with fertility and rain.

We pass now to the ropes that appear on Altar 4, which connect the niche figure to the bas-relief figures on the altar's sides. This motif is repeated on an altar from San Lorenzo, labeled Monument 14. If the niches in the altars are linked to the origin-myths and underworld, does it make much sense to see the roped figures as "captives"? They may indeed be captives, but there is another possibility, one that relates to the origin-myths and an ancient notion of kinship.

From ethno-historical data we know of the *tlacamecayotl*, the Aztecs' conception of the "human rope" of kinship. Olmec altars may indicate that the human niche figure has a mythical underworld origin and is bound by kinship to the bas-relief figures on the altar's sides. The altars are hardly likely to have glorified common people, but might have served a ruler as a means of confirming his right to rule. The Olmec, like a great many peoples, probably thought of their rulers as divine—a divinity in this case associated with mythical underworld origins. The Harpy eagle on the Altar 4 headdress may in turn have been the

ruler's mortal, as opposed to divine, insigne. The interlocking scroll motif that decorates this headdress may, in some way, represent the sun; but Thompson suggests that among the Maya this glyph denoted leadership, and this possibility suits my hypothesis that the figure in Altar 4 is the portrait of some actual Olmec ruler.

Altar 4 also carries the theme of fertility: the niche has four stylized plant motifs placed along its outer border, a trait found as well in the highland Olmec bas-reliefs at Chalcatzingo, where the plant-motifs again occur in association with the jaguar-monster and cave-mouth motifs. A similar association of plant motifs and jaguar mouths occurs in the Prehispanic art of the Chavín in highland Peru.

There still remain some significant questions. First, is it purely coincidental that myths of modern peoples like the Paez reflect the mythic motifs recurring in Olmec art? And second, what function or functions did these Olmec works serve? The answer to the first question is that, of course, it is possible—the connections *are* fortuitous, the myths unrelated. I believe, however, that the Paez myths are the remnants of an ancient and widespread system of beliefs which was current among New World tropical forest cultures around 1000 B.C. As to the function (or functions) of the monolithic Olmec altars, I think the polychrome mural at Oxtotitlan cave affords us the answer. That mural depicts a seated human figure and the seat beneath him is the jaguar-monster's face. Likewise, the altars have that raised "pelt" area on their top surface. I suggest that this raised area functioned as a seat, and the altar is actually a throne, a throne which in its very art confirms the divine right of rulership. Jaguar thrones were a common feature of rulership in the later Maya civilization, and since Olmec altars are essentially stylized jaguar-monsters (or at least stylized jaguar-faces) they certainly could have served in such a capacity for the Olmecs. The Oxtotitlan mural may depict an Olmec ruler seated in his regalia on his throne.

It has recently been demonstrated by Dr. Tatiana Proskouriakoff that some groups of Maya stelae deal with both kinship and dynastic succession. Certain of these stelae include interestingly carved human figures seated within niches. There is a growing body of evidence that many Maya beliefs evolved from the earlier Olmec

belief systems, and it may just be that the confirmation of rulership by means of the monolithic thrones evolved into the analogous use of stelae during the Classic period.

Scholars still disagree as to whether Olmec worship was theocratic or secular. In either case the plant motifs which occur on the Olmec altars deal in some manner with the assurance of good crops and plant fertility, and this assurance somehow derives from the power of a priest-ruler, a secular ruler with religious obligations, or possibly, in a figurative sense, from the Olmec's divine progenitor, the jaguar himself.

One may still wonder why the Oxtotitlan paintings occur so far away from the Olmec heartland. On the basis of present archaeological data, the most acceptable explanation is that Olmec trade exploited distant natural resources and carried not only traders but occasionally artists to distant places. It might be possible that a member of the Olmec elite was transplanted to the Guerrero region to facilitate this exploitation and the Oxtotitlan mural records his rulership. It is equally possible that a local ruler borrowed Olmec symbols to confirm his own status and rulership.

FOR FURTHER READING: David C. Grove, "The Olmec Paintings of Oxtotitlan Cave, Guerrero, Mexico," *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* 6 (Washington, D.C. 1970); Donald Lathrap, "The Tropical Forest and the Cultural Context of Chavín," *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on Chavín* edited by Elizabeth Benson (Washington, D.C. 1971) 73-100; Tatiana Proskouriakoff, "The Lords of the Maya Realm," *Expedition* 3 (1961) 14-21; G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, "The Feline Motif in Prehistoric San Agustín Sculpture," *The Cult of the Feline* edited by Elizabeth Benson (Washington, D.C. 1972) 51-64; Matthew Stirling, "Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle," *National Geographic* 78 (1940) 309-334, *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico* (Washington, D.C. 1943); J. Eric Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Norman, Oklahoma 1960).

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