AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF

THE OLMEC “ROYAL TOMBS” AT LA VENTA, MEXICO

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La Venta, Mexico, the Middle Formative Olmec regional capital (ca. 1200-400 BC), is thought to have been ruled by powerful leaders based in part on the discovery of several well-endowed tombs dating to the last construction phase of the Complex A ceremonial center. However, their status as graves has been debated since soon after they were excavated in the 1940s, especially because they generally lacked osteological material. What remained was arrangements of costume items as if adorning a body, usually associated with a stone container. Most, but not all, archaeologists assumed that bones and teeth would not survive in tropical environments and accepted both the tomb attribution and their function as individual funerary monuments. Complex A was subsequently badly disturbed, its superficial structures destroyed, so attempts to resolve this debate rely on archived field records.

A detailed review of the available stratigraphic information from the 1940s-1950s Complex A excavations demonstrates that these assumptions are not warranted for two reasons. First, field data indicate the absence of expected taphonomic evidence of bodily decay that would have displaced the carefully arranged costume ornaments. Second, analysis of Mound A-2’s stratigraphy, aided by digitally enhanced profile and plan drawings, reveals its tomb-like features were erected in a single short construction phase, not over a span of decades as individual kings died.

These conclusions call for alternative explanations of these features. They are argued to function as surrogate burials, not simply as “pseudo-burials” or cenotaphs. They are only the last instances of a depositional practice that had a long history at Complex A going back to its first construction phase. By this means multiple generations of Olmec ritual officiants materially rendered absent bodies into “quasi-presences” in a durable form that, unlike a body, resisted decay.

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