

Chalcatzingo Monument 34: A Formative Period “Southern Style” Stela in the Central Mexican Highlands

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It is a little known fact that the Mesoamerican Middle Formative site with the most carved stone stelae is not the major Olmec center of La Venta, but Chalcatzingo in the highland state of Morelos, Mexico (Grove n.d.) (Figure 1). Chalcatzingo (Grove 1984; Grove, ed. 1987) is justly famous for its stone carvings dating to the Cantera phase, c. 700-500 bc (uncalibrated radiocarbon years). These mostly bas-relief sculptures—carved on the face of the Cerro Chalcatzingo, on nearby hillside boulders, and on free-standing stones—have long been recognized as having affinities with Olmec sculptures on the Gulf coast. Their closest stylistic affiliations are with La Venta, and a few motifs are known only at these two sites (Grove 1987b:426-430, 1989:132-142, n.d.). How-

ever, Chalcatzingo’s sculptors also produced motifs, forms, and spatial patterns that have no known Gulf coast Olmec connections, such as the quatrefoil (Grove 2000), and some designs show ties to west Mexico and to the Pacific slopes and highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala (Grove 1989, 1999, 2000).

This paper describes a recently discovered Chalcatzingo stela, Monument 34, carved with motifs strikingly reminiscent of later (Late Formative) artworks in southern Mesoamerica, including those in the lowland Maya region. This stela manifests yet another historical tie between Chalcatzingo and other areas of Mesoamerica, and it may possibly signal the site’s status as an innovator of important motifs.



Figure 1. Chalcatzingo and other sites mentioned in the text.
Cartography by Precolumbia Mesoweb Maps with source data by Planetary Visions.

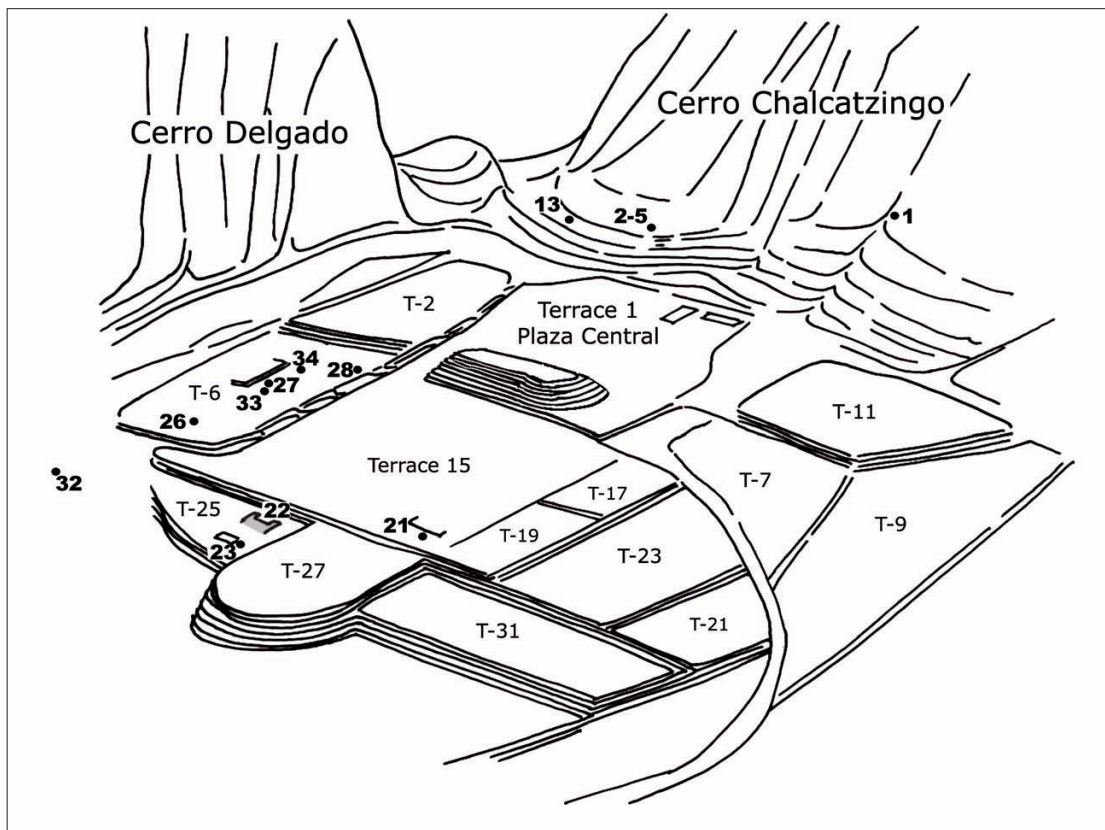


Figure 2. Drawing of Chalcatzingo's terraces showing some of the monument locations (in boldface), based on a drawing by David C. Grove, provided courtesy of David C. Grove.

The Archaeological Context of Monument 34

Chalcatzingo Monument 34 was discovered in 1998 in situ in front of a Cantera phase stepped platform mound (Structure 1) on Terrace 6, in the eastern portion of the site near the foot of the Cerro Delgado (Figure 2). Terrace 6 Str. 1, excavated in 1974 by the Chalcatzingo Archaeological Project (Grove 1984, n.d.; Grove, ed. 1987), is the largest of four known Cantera phase stone-faced platforms at the site, three of which have directly associated stelae. This platform was erected just a few meters east of a precocious Early Formative (Amate phase, c. 1500-1100 bc) stone-faced mound, Terrace 6 Str. 3 (Prindiville and Grove 1987:65), indicating a long period of use of this man-made terrace for public, if not strictly elite, activities. It is therefore useful to consider the relationship of Monument 34 with other carvings previously discovered on Terrace 6.

Terrace 6 Str. 1 is 15.7 meters long oriented north-south and was built directly onto the sloping hillside of the Cerro Delgado to the east, so that its front side is on the west (Prindiville and Grove 1987:65). Immediately in front of the platform's west side is Monument 27, a mutilated stela (Figure 3). It is approximately 2.8 m tall and was positioned just north of the platform's centerline, its carved side facing west. Monument 27 had been broken in antiquity into at least three pieces. Its basal portion

was still in situ, and the right upper half, though severed from the base, was left lying against the platform wall behind it. However, the left upper half had been removed in antiquity. The carving depicts a single standing personage, legs apart as if in a striding pose, in left profile, the left arm bent at the elbow. The person either wears or carries what looks like a large deer or deer skin on his back. The missing section of the stela included the figure's face and headdress (Angulo 1987:151, Fig. 10.24; Grove 1984:Fig. 10; Grove and Angulo 1987:129, Fig. 9.25). Such personal or identifying criteria were often removed from sculptures in antiquity, both at Chalcatzingo and at Olmec centers, as an act of ritual termination (Grove 1981).

Other monuments found on Terrace 6 in the 1970s include another stela, Monument 28, which also depicts the modified profile left view of a single striding figure holding an object in the crook of his left arm (Angulo 1987:152, Figs. 10.23, 10.24; Grove 1984:62, Fig. 13; Grove and Angulo 1987:130). This massive stone, over four meters long, was not broken like Monument 27, but it was heavily eroded, and the person's face was likely purposely effaced. The excavators believe it probable that the stela had once been erected on Terrace 6, possibly in association with an earlier building phase of the Str. 1 platform, and that it was later removed and bur-

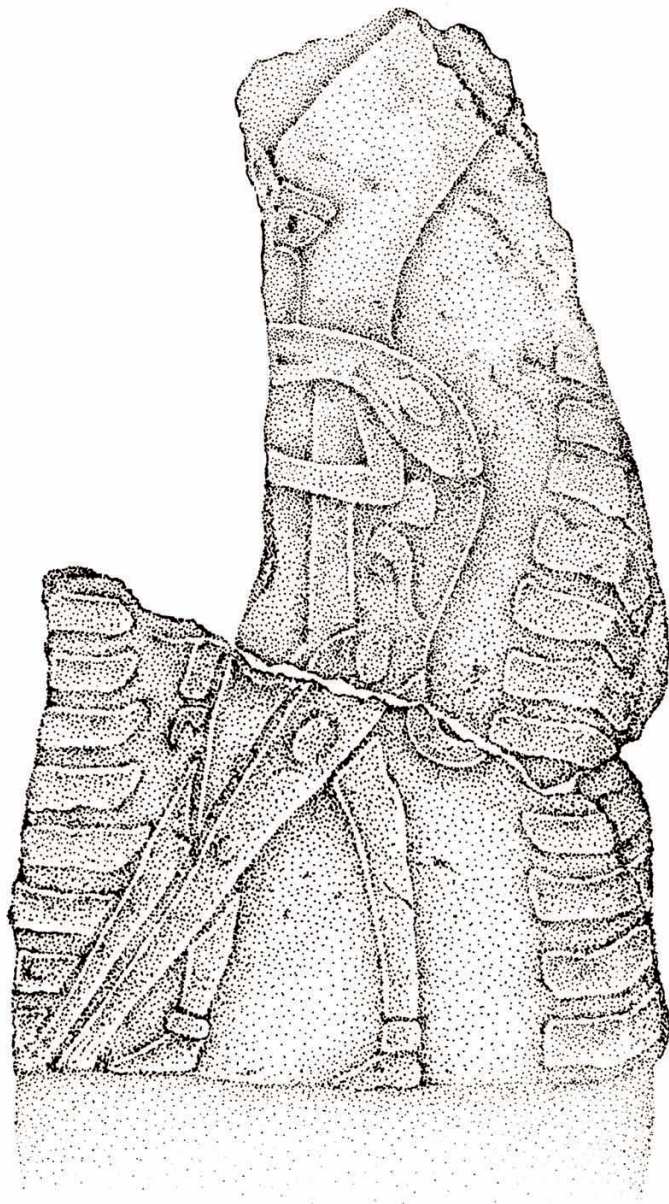


Figure 3. Drawing of Monument 27 by Barbara Fash (in Grove 1984:Fig. 10). Provided courtesy of David C. Grove.

ied face-down 30 meters to the west (Grove n.d.). Grove (1984:62) further suggested from the postural similarities but costume dissimilarities of Monuments 27 and 28 that they may represent a sequence of high-ranked personages associated with the Terrace 6 Cantera phase platform.

Monument 26, a third stela, was found 16 meters north of Terrace 6 Str. 1. Only the basal portion remained, still in situ, with a few engraved lines on it to indicate that its upper section, never recovered by the archaeologists, was once carved (Grove and Angulo 1987:129, Fig. 9.24). More significant was its association with the sculpture next to it, Monument 25, a flat-topped circular

stone (1.3 meters in diameter, 47 centimeters high). It has low relief carving completely around its circumference displaying motifs unknown elsewhere in Formative period iconography (Grove and Angulo 1987:128-129, Fig. 9.23). Monuments 25 and 26 constitute the earliest known pairing of a carved stela and round altar in Mesoamerica (Grove 1984:62-64, 1987a:436, 1989:141, n.d.).

In 1998 two additional stelae were discovered on Terrace 6 by the Proyecto la Arqueología del Preclásico Temprano en Chalcatzingo (PAPTC), conceived and directed by Maria R. Aviles¹ (Grove 2005, n.d.). Designated Monuments 33 and 34, these stelae had been placed in front of the stone-faced platform, Str. 1, approximately four meters out from its northwest and southwest corners, respectively (Figure 4). Monument 33, discovered first, had been broken in half in antiquity. The basal portion was still in situ, while the upper section (1.4 meters long) had been laid horizontally, carved-side up, beside its base. That section had been incorporated into a north-south alignment of large well-faced, rectangular stone blocks laid end-to-end, paralleling the west side of the structure.

Monument 33, like Monuments 27 and 28, depicts a person in striding posture, in a three-quarter view of the left side of the body (Figure 5, also see page 7, Figure 7). The profile face has been effaced, and all of the carving is eroded. The headdress is also erased, although its chin-strap and what may be the ends of a cloth tie are seen in outline. Both arms are shown bent, and the figure holds with his two hands five or more large staves or a sheaf of long objects that extend over the left shoulder. An X-motif is still clearly evident on the left wristband, as are a banded hip cloth and a knotted tie on the left knee. The figure may wear a cape that billows out behind the left side of the body. If Grove is correct that these figural stelae were used in succession and reference a chain of political leaders, then the toppled but re-utilized Monument 33 may originally have been erected prior to the positioning of Monument 27 closer to the platform. However, the stratigraphic data are insufficient to indicate the chronological ordering of stela placements, and they may be contemporaneous (David C. Grove, personal communication 2006).

¹ In 1995 and 1998 PAPTC focused on the excavation of the Early Formative Amate phase structure (Str. 3) on Terrace 6. Discovering the Middle Formative Cantera phase stelae was a byproduct of those investigations. The 1995 project was funded by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., and it laid the groundwork for the 1998 project funded by the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. The project was ably directed by Ms. Aviles, who deserves full credit for the discoveries. Circumstances later delegated responsibility for reporting on the sculptures to David C. Grove (2005, n.d.), who had been issued the permit by the INAH Consejo de Arqueología to carry out the excavations. Monument 33 and 34 were carefully reburied in place to protect them. Monument 32, another figural stela found ex situ in 1995, has been moved to the Chalcatzingo site museum.

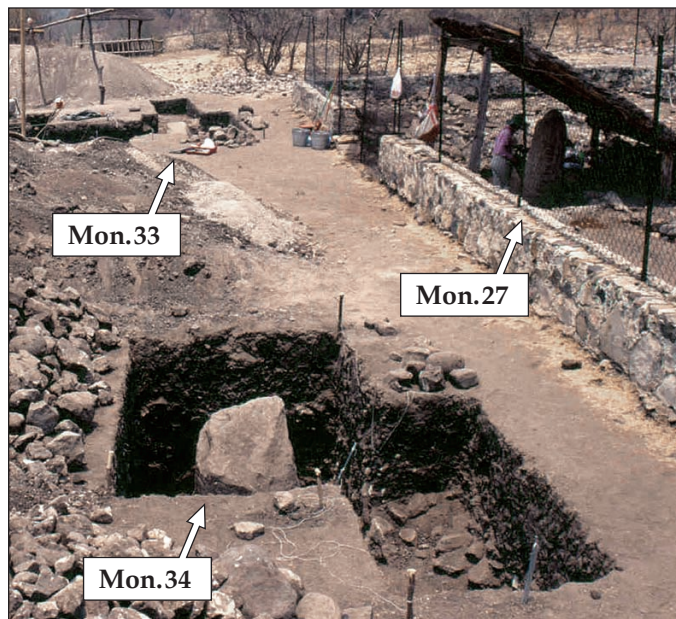


Figure 4. Excavation photograph showing the location of Monument 34 with respect to Monuments 33 and 27 and to Terrace 6 Str. 1 in 1998. The earlier Chalcatzingo Archaeological Project had built a stone wall to protect the platform and a roof over Monument 27. In the center background is a roofed structure built to protect Monuments 25 and 26, the stela butt and round altar, which were moved to that location from their original positions nearby. Photograph by David C. Grove, provided courtesy of David C. Grove.

Based on the location of Monument 33 just off the northwest corner of the platform, the 1998 project opened an excavation pit an equivalent four meters out from the southwest corner to ascertain whether a stela was situated in a symmetrical position. Monument 34 was thereby revealed, badly damaged but still in situ (Figure 6). The basal portion is approximately 1.5 meters high, and based on the heights of other Chalcatzingo stelae, it is probable that some fifty percent of the upper section had been removed (David C. Grove, personal communication 2005). Although its position with reference to the platform is symmetrical with that of Monument 33, Monument 34 exhibited very different designs compared to the other intact stelae on Terrace 6, and it is worthy of more extended discussion.²

Description of Monument 34

Unlike the other Terrace 6 stelae, non-figural bas-relief designs were placed on all four sides of Monument 34. The stela is approximately one meter wide and 0.75 meter in maximum breadth. It is more ovoid than strictly rectangular in cross-section, and the motifs wrap around the rounded corners. The portion of intact decoration ex-

² More stelae may still be found on Terrace 6 as well as elsewhere at Chalcatzingo if modern development on the site can be kept at bay.

tends about one meter in height up to the broken edge. This lower portion of the stela had been battered, parts of the design seem to have been erased, and it had become eroded. The two broad sides (east and west) were especially damaged, with the designs on the east side—facing the platform—almost completely removed.

The north, west, and south sides had the same set of motifs: spiral scrolls, a large J- or L-shaped volute above a stack of slightly curved parallel lines, and interlocking bands (Figure 7). All of these motifs were arranged in vertically oriented zones or columns, and together



Figure 5. Monument 33, photograph with overlain line drawing based on field sketch by Susan D. Gillespie, May 1998. Photograph by David C. Grove, provided courtesy of David C. Grove.



Figure 6. Excavation photograph of the north side of Monument 34. Photograph by David C. Grove, provided courtesy of David C. Grove.

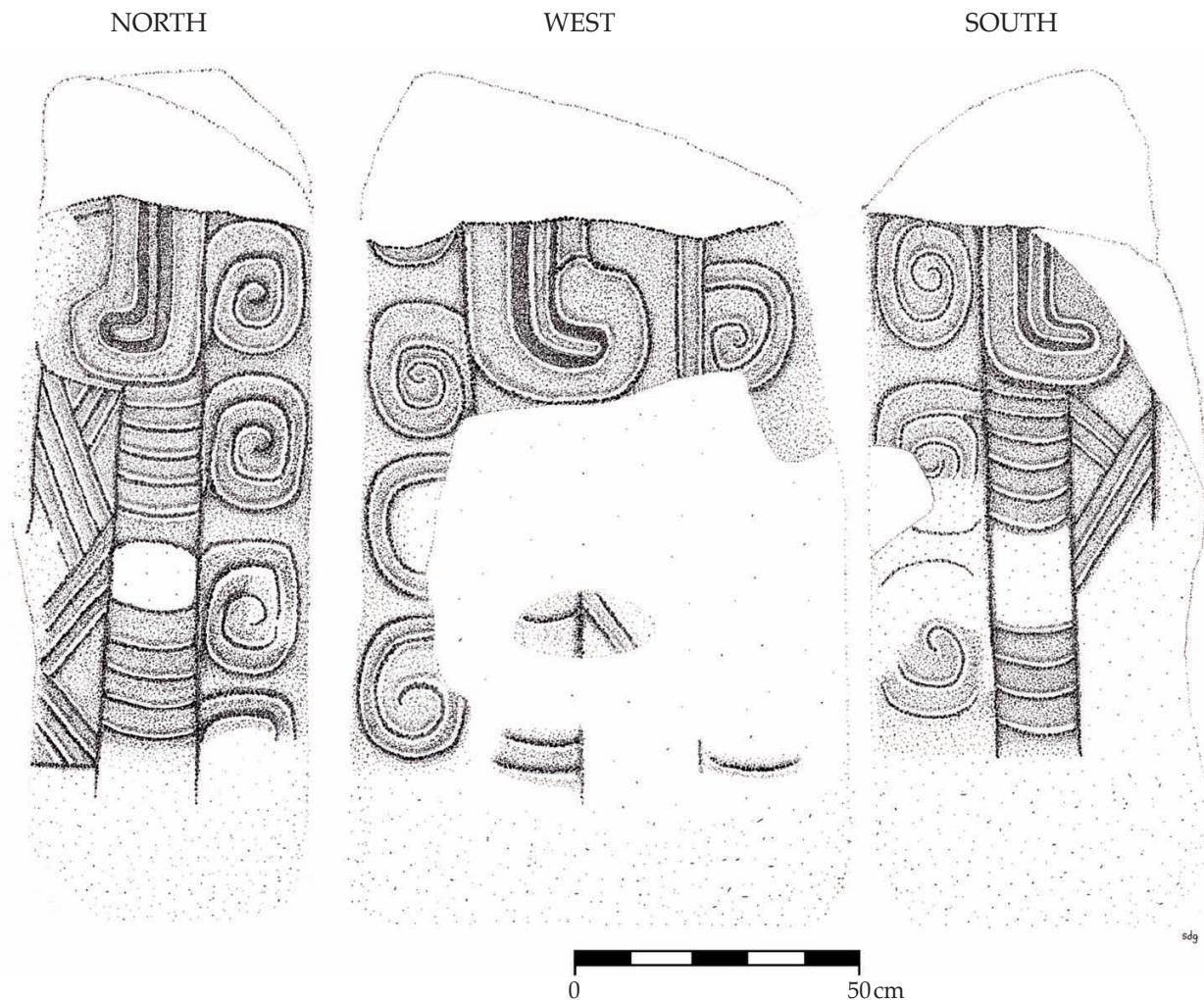


Figure 7. Drawing of the carved designs on Monument 34's north, west, and south faces, based on a scaled field drawing made in May 1998 by Susan D. Gillespie; final drawing by Gillespie.

they compose a larger symmetrical design across at least these three stela faces. On the north side, which is the least damaged, the columns are delineated by vertical lines, each taking about one-third of the space. In the center, a large fat J- or backwards-L-shape descends from the broken upper portion of the stela. Below the J is a narrow column filled by slightly concave parallel horizontal lines or bands. A possible design in the center portion of that column is missing, apparently pecked out. To the left is a column composed of two sets of two- or three-part bands forming an interlocking X-shape, as if woven—recognizable as the Mesoamerican “mat” motif. On the right, forming a less well defined column, is a stack of four circular scrolls originating from the right edge of the central column and curving clockwise about two-and-one-half rotations.

The south face of the stela appears to be a mirror image of the north, with an L-shaped motif in the upper middle zone, the mat motif in the right column, and counterclockwise scrolls in the left. Only three scrolls

were carved on the south face, but they take up about as much room as the four scrolls on the north face.

The wider west face is damaged in its central and lower portion, but its design is similar to the other two. In the top center is a much larger L-scroll with an embellished upward projection on the tip of the L. Scrolls appear on either side of this face of the stela, although they are not completely symmetrically aligned. On the left side they curl counter-clockwise, and at least four may be present, while on the right they curl clockwise. With all three faces shown together in the drawing (a view otherwise obtainable only by walking around the stela), the scrolls on the west face are seen to be directly juxtaposed against their counterparts on the north and south faces, and they curl in opposite directions. Below the large L-scroll on the west face most of the carving has disappeared, but there is enough to see the likelihood of two columns of motifs in the center, one on the left composed of the horizontal curved lines, while just a hint of the mat motif can be seen on the right.

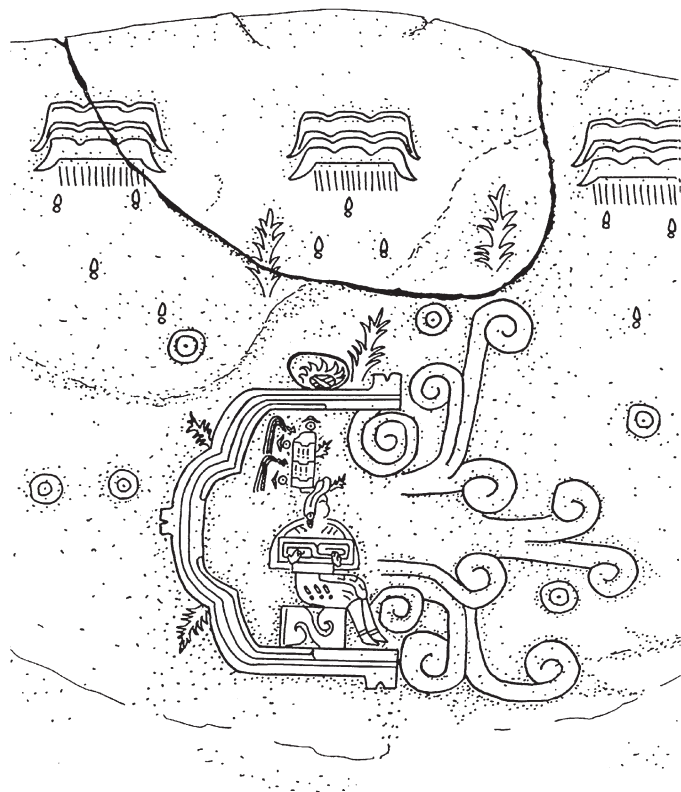


Figure 8. Drawing of Chalcatzingo Monument 1, "El Rey," by David C. Grove (in Grove 1984:Fig. 5). Provided courtesy of David C. Grove.

On the badly damaged east face (not drawn), only the lowermost portion of the design escaped destruction, exhibiting traces of two scrolls. There are also small remnants in the lower central area of vertical lines delineating a column and possibly the parallel shallow curved lines. By looking at this side one can see the mat motif coming around the two corners from the north and south faces, framing the missing main portion. Because this side, which faced the structure, was so greatly damaged by battering and erasing, it may have depicted more personal information, possibly a figure. Thus, the same motif set appeared on at least part of this fourth stela face, but it is impossible to say whether a figure or different motifs were carved here or higher up on the stela and were more vigorously removed for that reason.

Significance of Monument 34's Designs

Spiral scrolls of the same type as those stacked vertically on Monument 34 occur on only one other known Chalcatzingo carving, Monument 1, nicknamed "El Rey," "The King" (Angulo 1987:135-141; Grove 1968:486-487, 1984:Pl. IV; Grove and Angulo 1987:115-117, Fig. 9.3). This bas-relief, carved directly on the stone of the hillside of the Cerro Chalcatzingo overlooking the site's

terraces, depicts an elaborately dressed, modified right-profile human figure seated within a concavity formed as the mouth of a great supernatural entity (Figure 8). The shape of the mouth, shown in profile, is the quatrefoil, and the entity has been identified as the deified earth, its mouth becoming a cave or earth entrance (Grove 1968:486, 2000:279). Grove (2000:280) further observed that in the Formative canon of zoomorphic representation, this being was a serpent. Its "fangs," the tight scrolls on the upper and lower extremities of the mouth, curve outward, making it a sky-serpent (ibid.:281). This is a reference to a vertical register or zoned location in space, and the carving is positioned rather high on the hillside.

The serpent's fangs each make two-and-one-half rotations, just as on Monument 34; the top one is counterclockwise and the bottom is clockwise. In the space between them, other spirals appear as if emanating from the great mouth at the termini of elongated lines. These longer scrolls have typically been interpreted as thunder, clouds, or mist (Grove 1968:486), and the entire scene, which includes clouds, raindrops, and plants, is believed to represent agricultural or fertility themes (ibid.:487). I have suggested that Olmec personages shown seated in niches, for example on Gulf coast monolithic altars, are ancestral figures whose spirits were believed to reside in the earth, mountains, or general otherworldly locations (Gillespie 1999:241). The same interpretation would apply to El Rey, the personage in Monument 1, as a revered ancestor.

Interestingly, Monument 1 also has designs that link it directly to the contemporaneous center of La Venta, especially the triple-raindrop motifs in the headdress of the seated figure (Grove 1989:133-134). However, Middle Formative Gulf coast Olmec carvings lack both the quatrefoil (Grove 2000:283) and spiral scrolls of this particular type. The significance of the scroll motif is better realized when Monument 34 is compared to Late Formative carving traditions. J-scrolls and simple spiral scrolls were used on Izapa stelae on the Pacific coast (Norman 1973) and also occur on the Gulf coast, for example, epi-Olmec Tres Zapotes Monument 3 (Porter 1989:Fig. 14). On those carvings the motifs set off a vertical register of space (upperworld or underworld). The J- and L-shapes on Monument 34 may similarly reference a spatial setting (see Grove 2000). Spiral scrolls more similar to those on Chalcatzingo's Monument 1 and Monument 34 also appear in the Guatemalan Maya highlands in the Late Formative, for example, above the standing figure on El Baul Stela 1 dated AD 37 (Schele and Miller 1986:Fig. 8), where they form an upper registral setting for an ancestral head peering down at a standing figure. The El Baul stela directly associates scrolls with an ancestor, the same association that I suggest applies to the Monument 1 carving at Chalcatzingo, which predates that stela by a half-millennium.

In addition, vertical stacks of scrolls occur on Late

Formative building façades in the Guatemalan Maya lowlands, allowing for further interpretative linkages to the Chalcatzingo motifs. At Tikal's North Acropolis, Late Formative Str. 5D-Sub-10-1st had painted murals of human figures on its front façade (Sharer 1994:Fig. 3.22). They were executed in a style similar to Late Formative depictions in highland Guatemala, such as Miraflores phase Kaminaljuyu (ibid.:109). These murals depict individual (non-interacting) standing humans, each one arrayed against two stacks of spiral scrolls that emerge behind them on their right and left sides. On each side of the figure the scrolls form pairs of opposite-oriented spirals. Given the association of this building with the North Acropolis, which became a necropolis for Late Formative (and later Classic) chiefs and kings, it is likely that these figures represent ancestors. The scrolls may be read as mist or clouds, or more generally, as symbols of an otherworld dimension or state of being.³

Even more intriguing than the Tikal mural in its similarities to Chalcatzingo Monument 34 is the stucco façade on a small Late Formative building at nearby Uaxactun, Guatemala. Str. H-Sub-10 served as the western entryway onto a large platform that had a great pyramid on its eastern edge (Sharer 1994:183). Modeled in stucco on the corners of the building and its doorway were individual standing human figures, their bodies wrapping around the corners. As in the Tikal mural, the figures were individually arrayed against two stacks of scrolls on either side of the body, the scrolls forming pairs spiraling in alternate directions (Freidel et al. 1993:Fig. 3:13). These scrolls are interpreted as smoke (Sharer 1994:183) or clouds (Freidel et al. 1993:142) and as a reference to the otherworld. Although the human figures are considered to be kings (Freidel et al. 1993:142; Sharer 1994:183), they may be ancestral rather than living, like the seated person in Chalcatzingo Monument 1, whose otherworldly location is more explicitly indicated by his positioning within the sky-mountain cave.

The reading of "king" for the Uaxactun figures was based on a second motif that alternates with the personages in the scrolls. A large zone of interlocking bands—the mat motif—dominates the front façade on either side of Str. H-Sub-10's doorway (Figure 9). Read as *pop*, the Maya word for mat, this motif became a widely distributed and long-lived icon symbolizing the throne and hence kingship among the Maya and other Mesoamerican cultures (Robicsek 1975). It is therefore significant that Chalcatzingo Monument 34, erected centuries earlier in the Mexican highlands, juxtaposes exactly these same two motifs—the spiral scrolls and the mat symbol. Like the Tikal and Uaxactun building façades, this stela—placed in front of the large Cantera phase platform

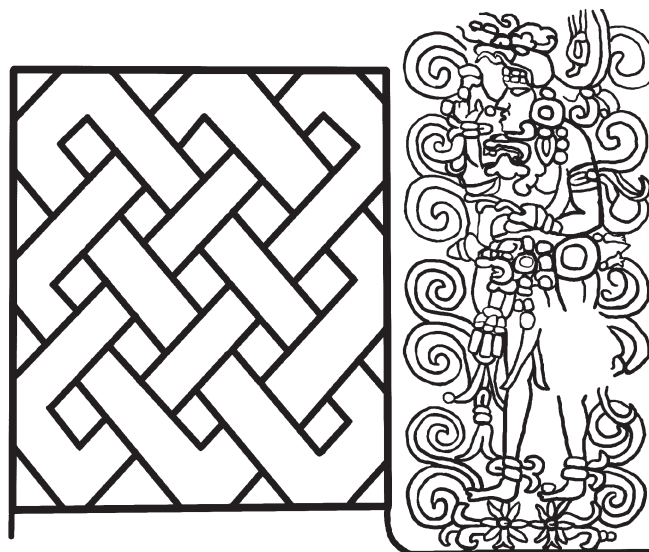


Figure 9. Detail of façade of Str. H-Sub-10, Uaxactun Group H, based on a reconstruction drawing by Linda Schele (in Freidel et al. 1993:Fig. 3:13).

mount at Chalcatzingo—probably refers to ancestors as the source of legitimate authority (symbolized by the mat motif) within the Chalcatzingo polity (see Gillespie 1999).

Conclusion: Chalcatzingo's Southern Connections

Grove (1987a:436-437, 1989:141-142) has previously emphasized features at Chalcatzingo that show certain ties to southern Mesoamerica, in part to counteract the conventional tendency to treat the settlement as a highland community that fell under Olmec influence. These features remain under-appreciated in attempts to reconstruct Middle Formative intra-Mesoamerican historical connections. They include the earliest known round altar and stela combination, Monuments 25 and 26 on Chalcatzingo's Terrace 6, a pairing that became common at Late Formative Izapa on the Pacific slope and at many Classic lowland Maya sites. Another important connection is the early use of the incurving-mouth "earth monster" basal register, which appears on Chalcatzingo Monument 21 (a stela associated with another Cantera phase platform near Terrace 6) and on a looted ceramic vessel probably from Chalcatzingo (Grove 1987c:64). This motif also occurs on Los Mangos, Veracruz, Monument 1 (Grove 1987b:437), but it was more widely used on Late to Terminal Formative sculptures on the Pacific coast, including Izapa (Norman 1973) and Miraflores phase Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (Parsons 1986:66-67).

Beyond artworks, Grove also noted certain ceramic attributes and forms at Chalcatzingo that can be linked to southern Mesoamerica all the way to its southern frontier, including precocious polychrome pottery, *comal*-like plates, three-pronged braziers, and Peralta Orange ceramics; these last two characteristics are also

³ "Smoke and mist" was a much later Aztec metaphor for the fame and honor of an illustrious person, said of someone recently dead or who had gone away but whose honor and glory were still evident (Sahagún 1969:Ch. 43:244).

found on the Gulf coast. Significantly, Cyphers Guillén (1987:234) observed that Chalcatzingo's Peralta Orange ceramics are not similar to other highland pottery types but "exhibit strong correspondences to Middle Formative orange wares from the Maya area, including Mars Orange from Uaxactun," among other sites.

Despite these various material ties to the south and east in the Middle Formative, Grove (1987a:437) observed that "[n]one of the southern or Gulf Coast traits remained in the highlands following the end of Chalcatzingo as a regional center. Instead they disappeared or withdrew. None of these traits left a lasting impact on highlands culture." Nevertheless, it is possible that certain motifs and forms at Middle Formative Chalcatzingo had an impact on Isthmian and southern Mesoamerica. Current data suggest that Chalcatzingo was among the earliest, if not the earliest known, community to erect carvings with the spiral scroll and mat motifs and the earth-monster mouth design. These designs may be part of a repertory that, along with the round altar and stela pairing, developed in association with the materiality of expressions of ruling authority via references to ancestral precedence and the veneration of spirits within the earth or mountains. Specific items from this repertory also occur in the Late Formative Pacific coast and the Maya lowlands in the Late Formative into the Early Classic periods.

At present it is difficult to say what historical connections may have linked Chalcatzingo directly or indirectly to the Maya area. Clearly persons at Chalcatzingo were in communication with their counterparts in various areas of Mesoamerica, and the community's elites could have been interacting with complex societies across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region. Until the archaeology of that area is better understood, we cannot fully evaluate Chalcatzingo's seemingly precocious deployment of certain forms and motifs. With the discovery of Monument 34, these motifs now include the juxtaposition of stacked spiral scrolls and the mat symbol in the context of political leadership and ancestral authority.

Acknowledgments

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