

# 6

## History in Practice

### *Ritual Deposition at La Venta Complex A*

**Susan D. Gillespie**

Archaeologists need constant reminders of the biases impacting their interpretations, including from such mundane technologies as mapmaking and illustration (for example, Bradley 1997). Even with well-established conventions for depicting three-dimensional space in two dimensions, opportunities for erroneous readings abound. But beyond difficulties in our graphic systems of representation are more profound biases concerning what the artifacts and features we map and draw signify to us. In normative and processual archaeologies, archaeological remains have been considered to represent actions reflective of preexisting beliefs, values, and customs, or to result from adaptive and cultural processes (Joyce, this volume). In contrast, a practice perspective (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984) focuses on actions not as the outcomes or representations of processes but as those processes themselves (for example, Pauketat 2001:85). The ontology and value of objects is dependent on their performative contexts and engagements with human actors, and not solely on their physical qualities (Mills, Pollard, this volume). Process generates form, rather than the reverse (Ingold 1995:58). Beliefs and values are instantiated in social interactions, all of which involve some degree of materiality (Gosden 1999:120; Thomas 1999b:71). Thus, instead of being reduced to an “archaeological record,” in this perspective materiality is investigated as the media for and

**Susan D. Gillespie**

outcome of social action (Barrett 2001:153).

Much of this rethinking of representation—in terms of both our maps and our notions of the archaeological record—has come about through the study of ancient landscapes. Landscapes are “systems of reference” that make human action “intelligible in terms of other past and future acts” (Thomas 2001:174; see Ingold’s [1993] “taskscape”). Although each generation is born into a landscape, their practices reproduce it via their “inhabitation” of it (Barrett 1999; Ingold’s [1995] “dwelling perspective”). What the archaeologist may see and draw as a static arrangement of structures and features on a Cartesian grid, often meant to be viewed from an omniscient “god’s eye” perspective, was a dynamic, lived landscape to the inhabitants, who shaped it by their actions even as those actions were shaped by the landscape. In an “archaeology of inhabitation...the material no longer simply represents the consequence of processes which we need to discover but becomes instead the historically constituted and necessary conditions of a world inhabited, interpreted, and acted upon” (Barrett 1999:257).

The site of La Venta, Mexico, exemplifies how this shift in focus towards examining the historically constituted world—in terms of landscape as a system of references for the intelligibility of practices—can provide a radically different perspective on the past. Complex A, La Venta’s famous ceremonial precinct excavated over 50 years ago, is known to archaeological audiences as a series of images that have achieved iconic status because they are continually reproduced in publications, forming “an important part of the way we know” the site (Jones 2001:338). These images include a single site plan of the architecture, abstract mosaic faces made of serpentine blocks, caches of jade and serpentine celts arranged in cruciform shapes, and an assortment of anthropomorphic figurines positioned to form a tableau (Offering 4). The value of the objects deposited at La Venta has been assessed archaeologically in terms of such static factors as the raw material, distance from source locations, quantity, and inherent symbolic meanings.

To the archaeological mind-set, these synchronic representations have overshadowed the complex processes of ritual deposition in Complex A that, transpiring over several centuries, produced those forms. Moving beyond these passive images to understand the practices that shaped that sacred place reveals new insights on social processes, particularly the role of memory and forgetting in forging the intersubjectivity of people and the landscape, and of the present with the past.

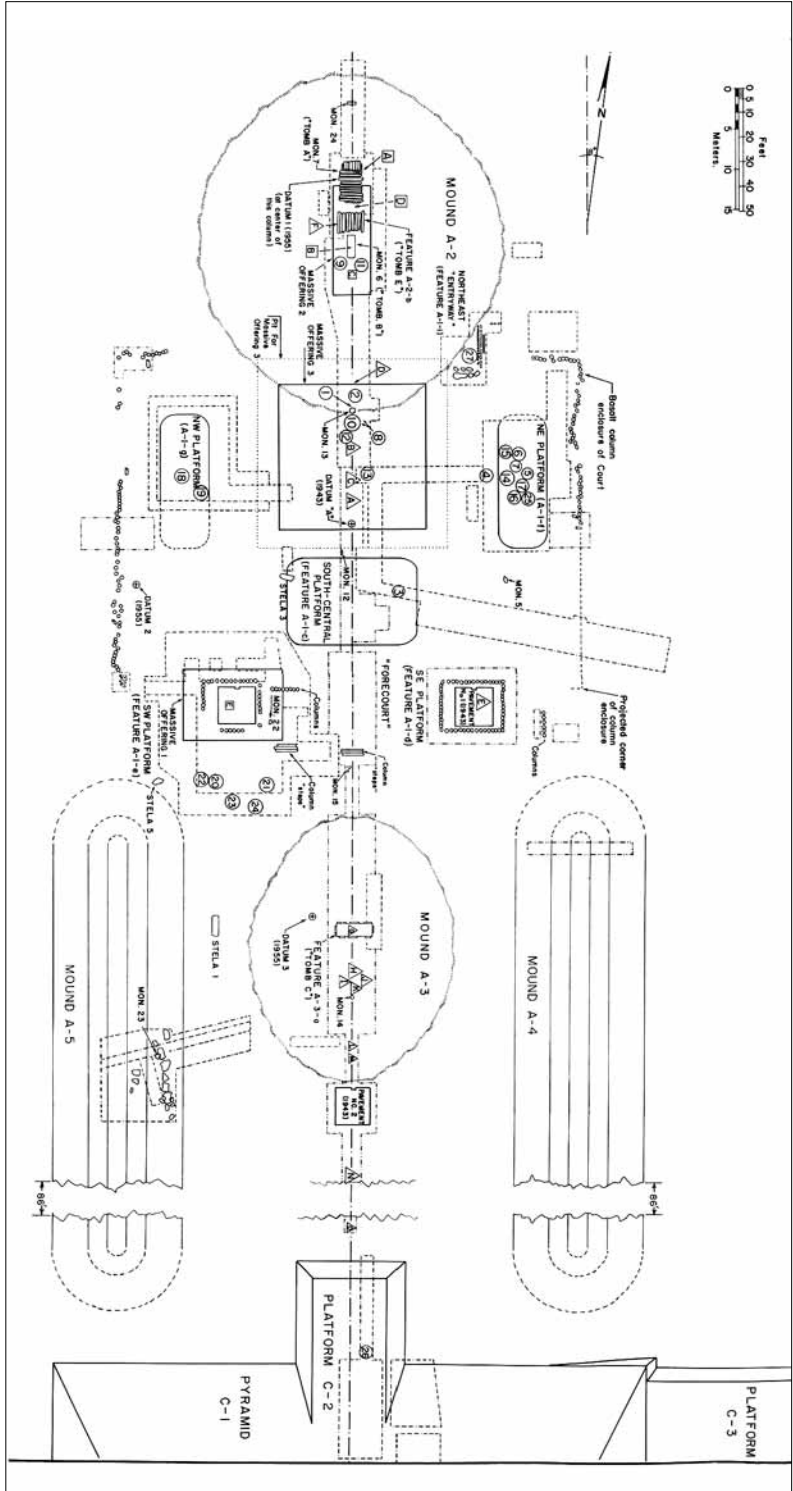
## HISTORY IN PRACTICE

### LA VENTA AS A STUDY OF REPRESENTATIONS

La Venta, situated near the Gulf Coast in Tabasco state, was one of the most important primate centers of the Formative period Olmec culture in Mesoamerica. Its principal period of occupation was the Middle Formative (ca. 900–400 bc uncalibrated). The area designated Complex A is just north of the great earthen pyramid that dominates La Venta's large civic-ceremonial zone. It consists of a walled precinct (the "Ceremonial Court") with low clay and adobe-brick platforms both within and adjacent to that enclosure. Complex A was excavated in the 1940s (Stirling 1940, 1943a, 1943b; Drucker 1952) and again in 1955 with a major project directed by Drucker and Heizer (Drucker et al. 1959). The area was badly disturbed by development projects and looting after 1955 (Drucker and Heizer 1965:62–63), and little else has been excavated at La Venta (González Lauck 1996). The Complex A excavations therefore continue to dominate understandings of La Venta and the Olmecs more generally (for example, Diehl 2004; Evans 2004).

The formal plan of Complex A exhibits unusual bilateral symmetry not found at the rest of the site (Diehl 1981:78; Figure 6.1). The Ceremonial Court has three interior low platforms—the Northeast, Northwest, and South-Central—and its southern boundary is marked by the Southeast and Southwest Platforms. Four lateral mounds are equidistant from a north-south ("centerline") axis that runs through the center of the South-Central Platform, the court itself, and Mounds A-2 and A-3, respectively north and south of the court. The same centerline also bisects the great pyramid (Mound C-1) at the southern edge of Complex A. In 1942 and 1943 trenching that north-south line revealed a great number of exotic buried objects, including those found in what appeared to be rich graves (Drucker 1952:Figure 14).

Figure 6.1 is the sole published plan view of all the architecture, features, and buried objects found through 1955 (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4 [Figure 3 is a simplified version of Figure 4, and the frontispiece is a perspective drawing]). What cannot be determined from this plan view is the long span of use of Complex A and the changes it underwent over several centuries: how the mounds were gradually enlarged with thin resurfacings of colored clay, the court floor was built up with tons of clay and sand, pits were dug—some of them massive—and thousands of crafted exotic objects were buried in them and sometimes later removed. The different episodes of construction and later modification are conflated in this one drawing. Mounds A-2 and A-3 were eroded, rounded knolls in the 1940s, and they were so mapped, although their original form was rectilinear. In contrast,



**Figure 6.1.** Plan of La Venta Complex A, indicating the locations of all offerings and excavations (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4). Dashed lines indicate excavation units in 1942-1943 and 1955. Symbols for offerings: square for 1942, triangle for 1943, circle for 1955.

## HISTORY IN PRACTICE

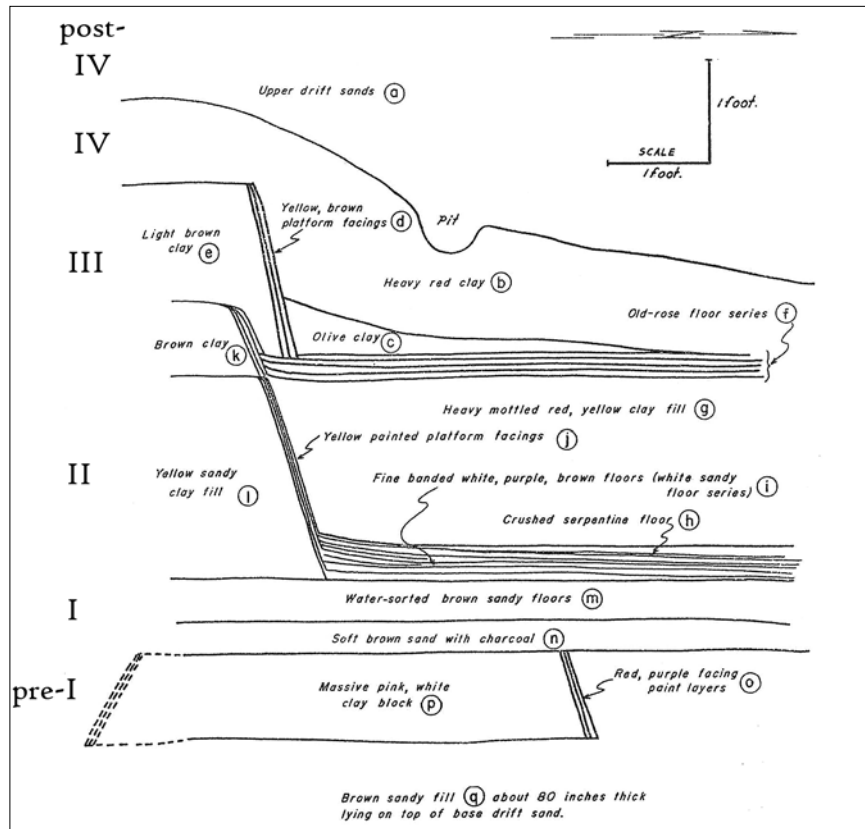
some platforms were subsurface, buried under drift sand, and their dimensions were reconstructed by trenching. Since 1959 renderings of Complex A have virtually always reproduced this plan, showing the mounds at these different points in time, two in their eroded condition alongside other architecture in pristine condition.<sup>1</sup> With this representation, Complex A was flattened in time.

One reason for creating a single surface plan map was that the excavators used trenches rather than clearing operations, a procedure not conducive to level-by-level plan views, which would have shown changes to the Ceremonial Court over time. To serve the latter purpose, the excavators published profile views of their trenches. These should have provided the important information on the history of this ritual landscape, given that Drucker and Heizer (Drucker et al. 1959; Drucker and Heizer 1965) distinguished four successive building phases (I–IV) for the Ceremonial Court. Although they were considered exemplary at the time (for example, Coe 1960:119; MacNeish 1960:296), these drawings have been difficult to interpret. The profiles were published at different scales, the horizontal and vertical scales are usually not the same in a single drawing, and many drawings lack datums or other reference points (Coe and Stuckenrath 1964:4; Figure 6.2). Because some details are schematic, especially the thin layers of clay on the platforms and floor that were rarely accurately recorded (Heizer 1964:46), it is impossible to line up one drawing with the next in the same trench. The different strata are not labeled according to construction phase; that information is buried in the text.

However, the flattening of La Venta cannot be blamed on graphic conventions alone. A fundamental premise of the excavators' understanding of Complex A is the continuity over centuries of a formal plan for the architecture and buried offerings oriented to the centerline axis (Drucker 1981; Drucker and Heizer 1965). Drucker and Heizer concluded that La Venta was a "one-period site that exhibits four successive building periods" (Heizer 1959:178). They assumed that through all its phases, construction did not deviate from the design principles of the original conception, dominated by a north-south orientation (Drucker and Heizer 1965:41; Drucker et al. 1959:124). Such persistence in ritual practices lent a general sense of sameness to what they presumed were centuries of occupation (Drucker and Heizer 1965:64).

Political organization was similarly assumed to be static, with either priests (Heizer 1960, 1961, 1962) or a long-lived dynasty of secular rulers (Drucker 1981) exerting strong control of the populace during the entire use-life of Complex A. Only in its last phase, IV, were "large tombs and sar-

Susan D. Gillespie



**Figure 6.2.**  
*North-south profile of the Northwest Platform, 1955 excavations (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 20). Phase designations have been added.*

cophagi” (Heizer 1960:220) placed in Complex A, suggesting a “top-heavy” social structure that could not or would not be supported by the general population. This political development was believed to have precipitated the abandonment of the Ceremonial Court and La Venta itself after Phase IV (Drucker et al. 1959:127).

There is an interplay of remembering and forgetting embedded in the archaeological interpretations of La Venta, although these processes are rarely explicitly acknowledged (see Mills, this volume). The “staggering” effort and cost (Diehl 2004:74) evident in La Venta’s buried wealth has been considered an “incredible waste” of exotic, finely crafted items (Coe 1968:61, 63) dedicated to the veneration of enigmatic gods. Three large abstract faces made of hundreds of worked serpentine blocks were laid in

**HISTORY IN PRACTICE**

pits and almost immediately covered with clay, as if part of “a cult, or secret, burial of the spirit of the totemic gods” (Piña Chan 1989:176). Drucker and Heizer (1956:367, 370) mused: “As baffling as any single fact about the Olmec is the passion they had for burying their most treasured structures and possessions...apparently almost as soon as they were completed.... Were they mad?” The common opinion is one of waste and conspicuous consumption associated with rendering the objects invisible—hence forgotten (if truly “wasted”)—but it is paradoxically juxtaposed with notions of secrecy and exclusivity, which imply unequally shared memories.

While altogether these actions were thought to manifest possible collective insanity, order and systemic control have also been assumed in the interpretations of La Venta. Drucker (1981:30) believed that a state-level society with centralized political authority is evident in the ability to accomplish “long-term projects, such as the four-century progressive construction of the A, B, and C complexes at La Venta, adhering the while to the centerline orientation.” This scenario implies recourse to a dominant memory of orthodox principles of ritual deposition, along with a profound desire to make the present continuous or equivalent with the past.

Memory must also have played a role in Offering 4, an arrangement of small stone anthropomorphic figurines set against a line of upright celts that create a backdrop for the scene. The excavators believed that the offering, once covered with clay, was later dug up part way, exposing the figurine heads enough to be “inspected” by certain persons. The stratigraphy suggests that a small pit was excavated directly from above the buried objects and then refilled (Drucker and Heizer 1956:367; Drucker and Heizer 1965:61; Drucker et al. 1959:152–161). Some archaeologists believe records must have been kept or surface markers placed to remind the caretakers of Complex A of the locations of certain buried caches (Coe 1968:66; Drucker and Heizer 1956:367, 374; Drucker et al. 1959:132)—that is, presuming that human memory would have been insufficient and forgetting was not an option.

Drucker and Heizer’s two important conclusions from the 1955 project can therefore be summarized as follows: first, Complex A was built according to a formal plan that remained unchanged for centuries due to the control of a single dominating authority; and second, the clay platforms with their buried offerings were produced by the continuous actions of elite caretakers, who engaged in regular practices of ritual deposition over many generations, resulting in four distinct building phases. However, the second interpretation, having to do with performance, should call into question the likelihood of the first, which is premised upon certain representations. Drucker and Heizer (1965:64) emphasized the sameness and

**Susan D. Gillespie**

symmetry of ritual depositional practices in Complex A over time—an “obvious continuity” from Phases I to IV—against critics who wanted to claim that only the last phase was truly “Olmec” (Drucker and Heizer 1965:65). Nevertheless, the evidence they reported reveals asymmetry in the early construction phases that, though slight, may have eventually resulted in a profound change in the court’s plan over time, possibly as the result of contestation and conflict, despite what looks like adherence to a centerline orientation dictated from the very beginning.

In contrast with the static images and unchanging quality assumed for La Venta, I take a diachronic approach to the Complex A data to consider how practices of ritual deposition built a sacred landscape that shaped its caretakers even as their actions transformed that place. My purpose is not to criticize the pioneering archaeologists of La Venta; on the contrary, I hope to rescue some of their findings, which have been disregarded. I utilize an interpretive perspective that considers the consequences over time of the performance of ritual practices, the role played by materiality and social memory in these practices, and their enactment within a dynamic orienting landscape. This approach implicates consequences for social organization and political strategies of the builders of Complex A (as did Heizer and Drucker’s interpretations) and how those strategies may have changed through time, despite the dearth of archaeological evidence on domestic activities and residences at La Venta. Treating ritual as a context for both reproduction and transformation of sociopolitical relations (Stahl, this volume), I suggest that the Complex A landscape played an agentive role in La Venta society as sociopolitical organization may have changed in concert with, and as a consequence of, the processes of building this ceremonial precinct.

**A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE CEREMONIAL COURT**

A diachronic perspective can be achieved via a biography of the Ceremonial Court and its associated mounds, based on the premise that “as people and objects gather time, movement and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other” (Gosden and Marshall 1999:169). Complex A was continually modified by the importation and deposition of clay, sand, and stone as well as finished artifacts, such as stone figurines, celts, pottery, and serpentine blocks. These items and materials were brought together in new contexts within this setting through highly formalized and repetitive practices that thereby would have transformed social relations and identities.



## HISTORY IN PRACTICE

The focus is on the Ceremonial Court because Drucker and Heizer (1965:40) demonstrated it was the premier architectural structure of Complex A. The court and its associated platforms were built and modified by the deposition of specially prepared earth; discrete episodes of digging through those deposits to cache or remove artifacts; engineering for surface-water control; sweeping; refurbishment; and ceremonial offerings (including burned offerings), among other activities, carried on without significant interruption for a considerable period of time. Drucker and Heizer's four construction phases were not designed to reflect modifications to the individual mounds but only major changes to the court as a whole (Drucker and Heizer 1965:45). Their phases were based on the alternation of rare instances of digging great pits for "massive offerings" (MOs) of layers of hundreds of serpentine blocks with the more routinized painting of thin, colored clay layers on the court floor and platforms. In their interpretation, each new construction phase (after the first) was initiated by the placement of a massive offering in a great pit (MOs 1 and 4 in Phase II, MO 3 in Phase III, and MOs 2 and 5 in Phase IV). The offerings were rapidly covered with prepared clay fill, and the court floor was more gradually raised with a phase-specific series of distinctive layers (the water-sorted floors in Phase I, the white-sandy floors in Phase II, and the old-rose floors in Phase III). For Phase IV only a covering of red clay fill remained.

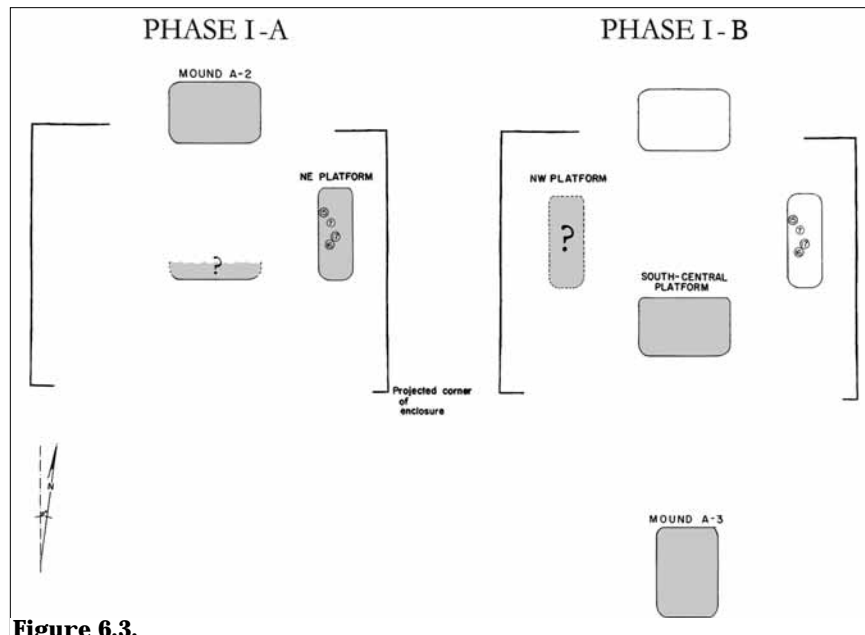
The major architectural constructions assigned by Drucker and Heizer to each phase are summarized in Table 6.1 and form the basis of the phase-by-phase plan views in Figures 6.3–6.6. Table 6.2 describes the offerings by phase. This biographical sketch is preliminary: it relies on the incomplete and partly schematized published excavation drawings and treats Complex A in isolation from the rest of the site. Plan drawings are purposely crude approximations to give a general sense of change in the structures and offerings over time and do not indicate accurate dimensions or surface appearances of the structures. Change through time is treated as relative because the radiocarbon dates (1000–600 bc uncalibrated) have proven controversial and do not support the four-century sequence (one century per phase) originally interpreted by Drucker and Heizer.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the integrity of the four construction phases was challenged early on by Coe and Stuckenrath (1964:6), who claimed that any rule of bilateral symmetry of Complex A is a product of the maps and interpretations of the archaeologists but not supported by the stratigraphic evidence. They exposed the different construction histories of the Northwest and Northeast Platforms: the Northwest seems to postdate the Northeast Platform, but it also seems to have remains of pre-Phase I structures under-

**Susan D. Gillespie****Table 6.1**  
*Construction Events by Phase*

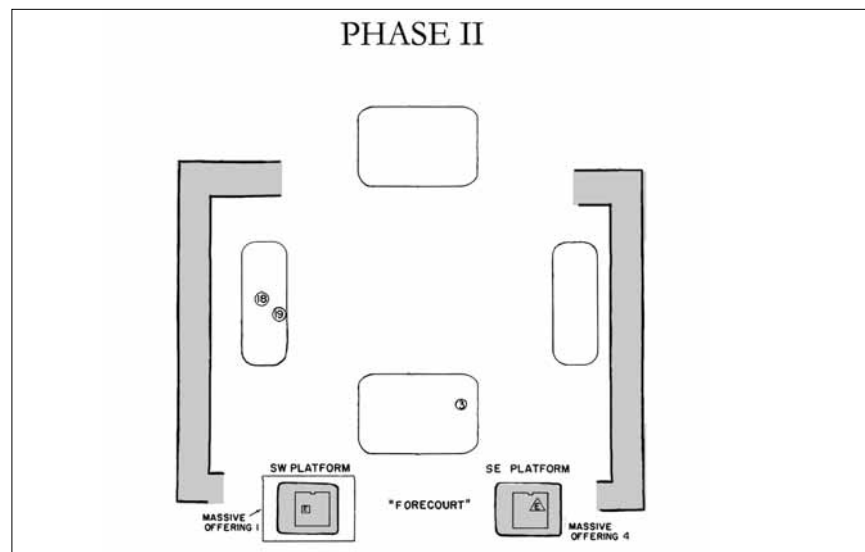
Phase	New Architecture	Floor Series	Massive Offerings and Other Features
Pre-I	Remnants of painted platforms or floors under area of Mound A-2 and Northwest Platform.	N.a.	-
I	Clay enclosure wall.  Mound A-2. Northeast Platform. South-Central Platform. Northwest Platform? (or Phase II). Mound A-3.	Water-sorted floors.	Leveling of court area (removal and filling).
II	Southwest Platform. Southeast Platform (presumed); both platforms built of adobe brick with basalt facing blocks.	White, sandy floors.	MOs 1, 4. Adobe brickwork with basalt facing blocks placed atop clay enclosure wall.
III	-	Old-rose floors.	MO 3. Raising of court floor with fill. Some platforms greatly enlarged.
IV	Mound A-5. Mound A-4 (presumed).	If there had been a floor series, it was completely eroded."	MO 2. MO 5? "Tombs" A, B, C, D, E Red clay "cap" throughout court, Mound A-2, to the south (Mounds A-4 and A-5). Basalt columns on wall, Southwest and Southeast Platforms placed atop red clay. Use of limestone and sandstone.
Post-IV	Filling in of drift sand.	N.a.	Pits and pottery offerings. Sculptures?

neath it (a "pre-Phase I" court was rebuffed by Drucker and Heizer [1965:42]). Yet "these structures contribute heavily to the appearance in Complex A of bisymmetrical layout with implied coordinated growth of balanced or twin structures" (Coe and Stuckenrath 1964:6). Despite the interpretation of coevality and a consistent formal arrangement, Coe and



**Figure 6.3.**

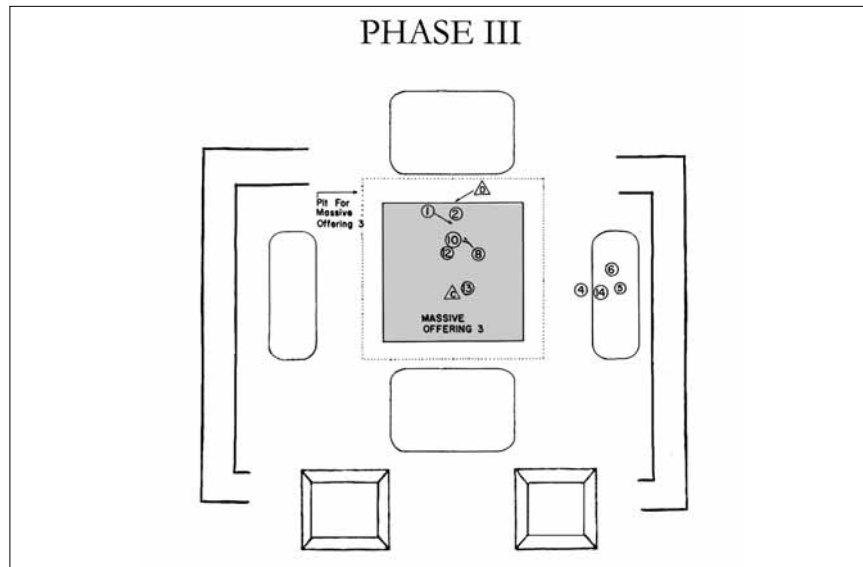
*Sketch map of Phases Ia and Ib architecture and offerings. Based on information from profiles and plan map in Drucker et al. (1959), reoriented with north at top. Here and in Figures 6.4–6.6, locations, shapes, and sizes of platforms are approximate, and shaded areas indicate new architecture or massive offerings.*



**Figure 6.4.**

*Sketch map of Phase II architecture and offerings. Based on information from profiles and plan map in Drucker et al. (1959).*

**Susan D. Gillespie**



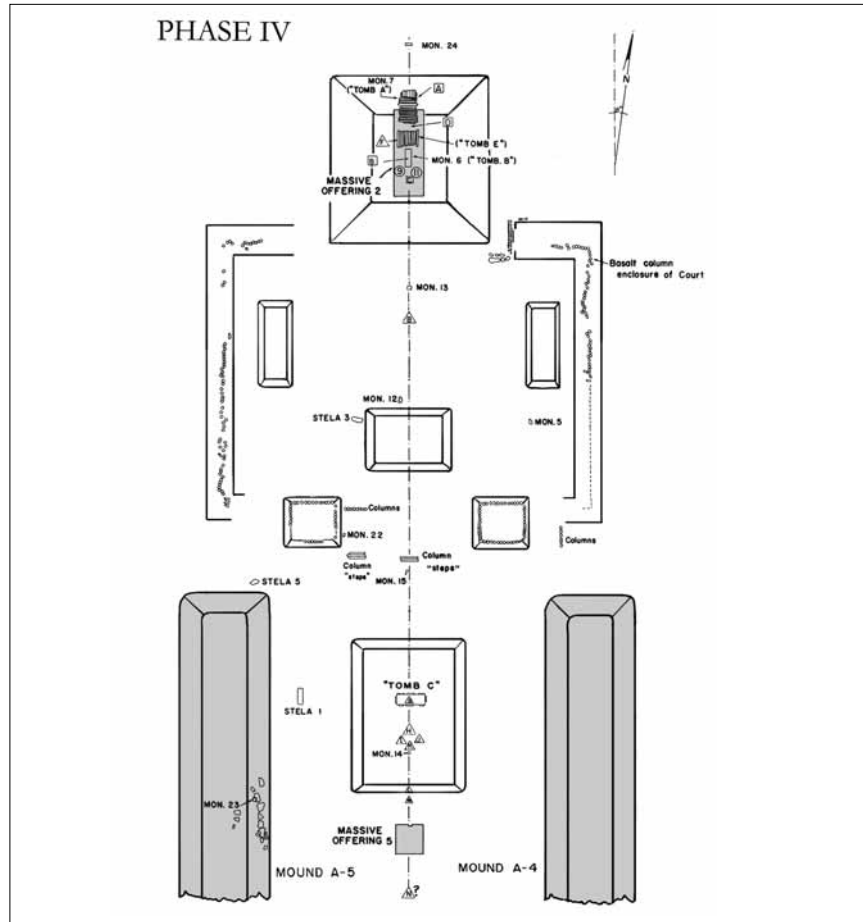
**Figure 6.5.**

*Sketch map of Phase III architecture and offerings. Based on information from profiles and plan map in Drucker et al. (1959).*

Stuckenrath (1964:6) suspected that “the various surface structures comprising the Complex evolved in disjointed, independent fashion,” such that the final appearance of a balanced plan was only the result of “a quite asymmetric earlier development” (Coe and Stuckenrath 1964:35). In other words, symmetry was produced out of a sequence of building activities, with later structures erected in response to earlier ones, and need not be explained as the execution of a preexisting plan.<sup>3</sup>

In reply to Coe and Stuckenrath, Drucker and Heizer (1965) acknowledged that they could not date the Northwest Platform to Phase I; it might have been Phase II. They recognized that the Northeast Platform had more offerings and may have had a different function than the Northwest, which was likely built later as its architectural complement only after the Northeast Platform was fully functioning (Drucker and Heizer 1965:44). They further admitted that exactly the same earthen materials were not laid down everywhere throughout a single court floor series—the “individual floors often thinned out and were replaced by another of different color and thickness,” something not recorded in detail (Drucker and Heizer 1965:46). They attributed variations in the number of floor layers within the same series in various parts of the court to wear or erosion and

HISTORY IN PRACTICE



**Figure 6.6.** Sketch map of Phase IV architecture and offerings. Based on information from profiles and plan map in Drucker et al. (1959).

its repair (Drucker and Heizer 1965:46). In addition, the three floor series vary in both their materials and the colors used, indicating important temporal differences in the use of the court.

Phase IV presents its own difficulties. Tons of prepared red clay were brought in to raise the level of the floor and cover all the platforms, including Mound A-2 and Mounds A-3, A-4, and A-5, south of the court. The red clay is comparable to that used in earlier filling episodes, although extreme in terms of extent of coverage (Drucker and Heizer 1965:49). It may have been meant to be leveled and finished (Drucker and Heizer 1965:48); however, no traces of a superimposed floor series were found, and the red clay

**Table 6.2**  
Offerings by Phase

Number	Location	Contents
<b>Phase I:</b>		
7	Northeast Platform.	Jade items on a layer of orange clay and cinnabar (pseudoburial).
15	Northeast Platform, under Offering 6.	Single pottery bowl, inverted.
16	Northeast Platform.	Single vessel, like No. 17, no pit associated.
17	Northeast Platform.	Single vessel, like No. 16, same situation.
<b>Phase II:</b>		
3	East half of South-Central Platform.	Large number of jade and other costume ornaments and small objects in bed of cinnabar (probable pseudoburial), disturbed by bulldozer.
18?	In shallow pit intruded into Phase I levels at center of Northwest Platform.	Pottery vessel in a pit (see No. 19).
19?	In shallow pit intruded into Phase I levels at center of Northwest Platform.	Pottery vessel in a pit, 13 cm above and 69 cm south of No. 18 i same pit.
MO 1	Southwest Platform.	Stacks of serpentine under mosaic mask.
1942-E	Southwest Platform, in fill over MO 3.	6 serpentine celts; possibly 2 arms of incomplete or incompletely cleared cruciform arrangement.
1943-E	Southeast Platform.	20 celts and a concave mirror in cruciform arrangement.
MO 4	Southeast Platform.	Serpentine mosaic mask like MO 1, not excavated below mask but likely has stacks of serpentine.
<b>Phase III:</b>		
1	Centerline of site, beneath Monument 13.	20 large serpentine pseudocelts in 3 rows.
2	Centerline of site.	2 layers of 51 celts of jade, serpentine; 5 decorated with incised designs.
2a	Centerline, just northeast and outside of pit of Offering 2.	5 celts, placed prior to making pit for No. 2.
4	West of center of Northeast Platform under court floors.	Grouping of 16 figurines and 6 (cut) celts.
5	Northeast Platform.	Pottery, with earpools and beads laid out between two rows of four small stones (pseudoburial).
6	Northeast Platform (see Offering 15).	2 earpool assemblies, pendants, and beads laid out as if on a body (pseudoburial).
8	Centerline, in fill under old-rose floor series.	3 groups of celts in a row transverse to the centerline.
10	Centerline, in fill overlying MO 3.	38 serpentine and jade celts in a cruciform pattern, 13 cm above the uppermost layer of serpentine blocks.
12	Centerline, in fill overlying MO 3.	2 round masses, one green malachite and the other red cinnabar; no objects.
13	Just east of centerline above MO 3.	2 celtlike serpentine objects, set upright, spaced 69 cm apart (possibly part of offering uncovered in 1943).

147	Northeast Platform.	6 pottery vessels, 5 of them nested together and in contact with the 6th.
1943-C	South-Central Platform and court, centerline above MO 3.	2 pottery vessels.
MO 3	South-Central Platform and court.	6 layers of serpentine blocks, not fully exposed.
1943-D	Mound A-2 and area to south, centerline.	6 serpentine cels.
<hr/>		
Phase IV:		
9	11.7 cm west of centerline, in fill overlying MO 2, in Mound A-2 just southwest of coffer.	Paired with No. 11: 1 concave mirror (magnetite) and 9 jade and serpentine cels in 3 rows
11	11.7 cm east of centerline, in fill overlying MO 2, in Mound A-2 just southeast of coffer.	Paired with No. 9: 1 concave mirror (ilmnite), 9 jade and serpentine cels in 3 rows, 907 jade beads.
1942-A	Mound A-2.	Tomb A/Monument 7 (basalt column tomb) contents; separated into two groups with bundle burials.
1942-B	Mound A-2, just south of Tomb A.	Monument 6 (sandstone coffer) contents (Tomb B) (pseudoburial).
1942-C	Mound A-2, on centerline just south of coffer (1942-B).	37 cels in cruciform arrangement.
1942-D	Mound A-2, in between Tomb E and Tomb A.	2 jade earpools, 1 figurine fragment, 6 jade beads, 28 cylindrical and disk jade beads (pseudoburial).
1943-B?	Mound A-2 area, centerline above MO 3.	12 serpentine cels, no particular orientation."
1943-F	Mound A-2, beneath pile of basalt columns (Tomb E) between Tomb A and coffer.	Cels, earpools and other ornaments, jade skull, concave mirror, many beads (pseudoburial).
MO 2	Mound A-2.	Pit with single layer (?) of serpentine blocks.
1943-G	Mound A-3, Feature A-3-a, Tomb C."	Contents of cist pseudoburial: cels, ornaments, figurine, etc."
1943-H	Mound A-3, between Tomb C and Monument 14.	2 serpentine cels.
1943-I	Mound A-3, between Tomb C and Monument 14.	Sandstone "vessel.
1943-J	Mound A-3, between Tomb C and Monument 14.	Small jade mosaic plaque?
1943-K	Mound A-3, between Tomb C and Monument 14.	Amber pendant.
1943-L	Mound A-3, Tomb D contents.	Small pseudoburial: pottery vessel plus adornments.
1943-M	Mound A-3, just south of 1943-L.	4 serpentine figurines.
MO 5?	South of Mound A3; dating uncertain.	Incomplete mosaic mask; possibly on layers of serpentine but not excavated below.
<hr/>		
Phase IV or Post-Phase IV		
1943-N	On centerline south of MO 5.	253 serpentine "cels" and 1 concave mirror.
1943-O	On centerline north of Platform C-2.	4-5 pottery vessels in drift sands at north flank of pyramid.
<hr/>		
Post-Phase IV		
20-27	-	Pottery vessels found singly and in concentrations in the drift sands after Complex A was no longer being maintained.
1943-A	Ceremonial Court, between South-Central Platform and Mound A-2.	Several pottery vessels found in upper drift sands.

Based on Drucker et al. (1959:133-191, 218-226, Table 1, Appendix 1); Drucker and Heizer (1965:59).

**Susan D. Gillespie**

was eroded prior to being covered with the airborne sand that pummels the site during rainstorms. The excavators considered this cessation of maintenance as evidence of the abandonment of La Venta itself, at least for a period of time (Drucker et al. 1959:246; see Berger et al. 1967:9). Others, however, have suggested that occupation continued at La Venta into the Late Formative, based on post-Phase IV deposits of pottery in the accumulating drift sand in Complex A (for example, Coe 1960:120; Lowe 1989:Table 4.1). An alternative hypothesis to site abandonment is that for the first time in centuries, major ritual attention shifted away from the Ceremonial Court in Complex A to a different locale within a still vibrant and powerful center.

**HISTORY IN PRACTICE**

This brief biography of the Ceremonial Court can be considered in relation to the emerging subjectivities of persons for whom it formed a salient nexus of sociospatial relationships. Complex A provided a nonquodidian arena for the negotiation of personal and corporate group identities within a referential framework that was structured by fundamental cosmological principles, as seen in the persistent spatial patterning of acts of deposition. However, architectural transformation of Complex A is also evident through its life span, implicating transformations in La Venta society.

What kinds of practices motivated these particular architectural forms and spatial patterns? Surprisingly, the functions of the Complex A architecture have never been systematically interpreted except to fall back on the conventional use of platforms as substructures for perishable buildings (Diehl 2004: 68), for which there is no evidence at Complex A. However, there are other ritual structures in the Mesoamerican inventory that can serve as analogues, namely, foundation caches and altars. Both are conceived as cosmic replicas, and both are involved in the interaction of people with spirits—for example, ancestors, earth lords, winds, guardians, and celestial denizens.

Dwyer (1996) suggests that the degree to which he calls the “visible and invisible worlds” are either coextensive or spatially separated varies with the scale of social complexity. As complexity increases, the invisible world (spirits) tends to be bounded off from the visible (the routine actions of daily life), confined to certain places. It could be argued that the ritual activities in Complex A were intended to spatially constrain interactions with the invisible world of particular spirits, to circumscribe them in this singular locus. Furthermore, much of what was put in that place was literally “invisible” to mortals, at least, and not just spatially segregated.



## HISTORY IN PRACTICE

However, that the massive offerings and jade costume objects were buried rather than displayed should not be taken to indicate their relative unimportance in political life compared, for example, to the exposed stone carvings at La Venta, nor should it be relegated to acts of conspicuous consumption. The invisibility of the buried constructions may have been a sign of their potency, and the processes of making the offerings and rendering them invisible may have generated more political resonance than their display, engendering remembering rather than forgetting (see Mills, this volume).

Foundation caches in Mesoamerica typically reference cosmic totality via the patterned use of objects or materials that signify cosmic levels or segments—the sky, earth, sea, and underworld. As such, they connote myths of cosmic origins, inscribed into the landscape and rendered experiential (see Pauketat, this volume). Foundation caches among the neighboring (and later) Maya were typically placed at the original building of a structure and also at each renovation, usually on the centerline (Joyce 1992; Mathews and Garber 2004). Without having access to this subsequent literature, Drucker and Heizer surmised the importance of the massive offerings, three of which are on the centerline, as initiating a major remodeling of the Ceremonial Court. As foundation caches, the massive offerings sanctified that entire enclosure in an act of “world renewal.” Caches are part of the architecture (Joyce 1992:497); thus, the belowground architecture in Complex A dwarfed that which was aboveground.

The second functional analogue—the altar—shares similarities with the foundation cache but is formally opposed in being visible and aboveground. Altars, as still built today by ritual specialists in Mesoamerica, are also iconic models of cosmic totality. They are made according to recognizable principles, but in their making they concretize and memorialize abstract theological notions and do not simply mimic orthodox design plans (Sandstrom 2003:51). Rectangular forms—tables and benches—are commonly employed to reference the four directions of the horizon (Vogt 1993:11). Although in the Mesoamerican world view the entire landscape is believed to be imbued with animating power, the altar is necessary as a material place to serve as a “seat of exchange” between living peoples and spirits, a focal point for the presentation of offerings to spirits in requests for favors (Sandstrom 2003:61).

The Ceremonial Court can therefore be seen as a great altar, its rectangular shape defined by a prominent wall from its inception, and its associated platforms were positioned according to a quadripartite spatial design referencing the earth’s surface (see Figure 6.5). The individual plat-

**Susan D. Gillespie**

forms also functioned as altars, thereby metonymically referencing the whole space, but they could take on different symbolism—as the archaeology shows that they did—which changed over time. The episodes of painting thin clay floors following the burial of the massive foundation caches could also have formed a series of commemoration events, dedicated to the episodes of world creation materialized by the massive offerings, forming institutionalized acts of remembrance.

The platforms, as altars made of earthen materials, were likely dedicated to spirit denizens associated with the earth, including ancestors. Like the Andean *chullpas* described by Nielsen (this volume), the altars, which were continually enlarged, may have become “monumental embodiments” of those spirits, endowed with agentive capacities. They would have invoked the presence of ancestors and other guardian spirits in the daily lives—and the everyday politics—of the people of La Venta.

Although the archaeological emphasis on buried offerings has given rise to notions of a cult of secrecy, commentators who make such judgments do not take into account the performance of ritual actions and the deeply felt social memories they entailed. Too much scholarly emphasis has been put on the symbolic meanings or high cost of the buried objects of Complex A, and too little on the performative contexts from which human-human and human-object relationships emerge (see Pollard, this volume). The massive offerings would have taken a considerable amount of time to prepare and accomplish, even if the digging and filling of the pits were done more rapidly. By participating in the construction of the foundation caches—from the logistics of planning trips to acquire and stockpile the serpentine, which was cut and shaped in workshops; to the laborious digging of the pits and removal (to somewhere else) of the now sanctified earth they contained; to the collection and preparation of the clay fill; and so forth—numerous corporate groups and titled individuals created connections and “sedimented” them quite literally in cosmically sanctioned ways at a sacred locale known to everyone, even if usually accessible to only a few.

Much of this activity would have occurred in the presence of large crowds of active participants and audiences, even if the final deposition were witnessed by a smaller select group, such that inclusivity rather than exclusivity would have prevailed. The logistical requirements of feeding and housing guests would also have absorbed considerable resources and labor. The social memories created by these actions would have forged a linkage among those who participated (following Küchler 1993), even after the impetus for their coming together had been finished and the

**HISTORY IN PRACTICE**

caches rendered invisible under the platforms or court floor. Those memories would have become the stuff of legend, part of the oral histories maintained and retold by every social group whose living members—and later ancestors—had taken part in these great events.

Drucker (1981:31) imagined La Venta as a state-level society whose “control structure would center on one individual, scion of a royal lineage, whose immediate subordinates would be a hierarchy of hereditary nobles.” He based his scenario on the presumed maintenance of the ceremonial plan of Complex A over centuries, with its requisite need for the control of the labor of thousands, and not from the discoveries of palaces and elite residences or even the dwellings of commoners, which have yet to be found at La Venta. Nevertheless, the archaeological evidence from Complex A holds open the likelihood that there were multiple groups of ritual caretakers, whose performances would have invoked competing memories rather than a unitary line of transmission of past knowledge.

At certain times those groups acted in concert, as when creating the massive foundation caches and resurfacing the entire court floor. However, even concerted actions reveal variability. The two serpentine mosaic faces buried under the Southeast and Southwest Platforms were “*almost* the exact counterpart(s)” of each other (Drucker et al. 1959:93, emphasis added) but had minor differences. The number of stones used to make them varies, as do the colors of sand that fill the facial cavities (Drucker 1952:56–59; Drucker et al. 1959:93–94). The placement of the serpentine chunks in layers under the mosaic in the Southwest Platform also showed variation, including one area of one row with carefully worked blocks (Drucker et al. 1959:96–97), possibly set there by a distinct work crew. Furthermore, as noted above, the individual platforms had different construction histories with different quantities and types of offerings. As noted above, in Phases II and III the colors of the painted floors and the numbers of floor layers varied from one part of the court to another, as if deposited by different groups at different times.

Although such variation in the deposition of materials, including asymmetry between the eastern and western platforms, may have resulted from symbolic differences maintained by a single ruling authority, I suggest that through much of its history the apex of La Venta’s sociopolitical hierarchy consisted of several chiefly “houses” (in the sense of corporate groups; Gillespie 1999) with proprietary claims to different sections of Complex A. Pauketat (this volume) notes that among peoples of the Southeast United States, the use of certain colors or activities such as fire-keeping were the prerogatives of specific corporate groups, whose ritual coordination in the

**Susan D. Gillespie**

making of earthen deposits forged social networks.<sup>4</sup> Participation of different groups in rituals within the Ceremonial Court would thereby have created a “geography of social relations” (Pollard, this volume). It would also have been a performative means to assert house membership, which (based on ethnographic analogy) was likely contested. Houses could have maintained access to different sources of clay as their property and may also have had their own attached artisans with distinct craft technologies. By collecting and working materials from certain locales for ritual use in the court, houses would have continually asserted their rights to that property.

Some of the places indexed by deposition in the Ceremonial Court were near localities visited by La Ventans themselves, the sources of the clays and sands. In contrast, the stone came from far distant places, requiring the mobilization and organization of a large number of people to travel and acquire the serpentine, basalt, sandstone, schist, and limestone, lugging the stones overland or rafting them on the rivers. Jade from Guatemala and magnetite from Oaxaca may have been obtained through down-the-line exchanges, referencing unseen locales. The figurines, celts, earspools, and other objects made from exotic materials were likely exchanged and heirloomed, encoded with the identities and histories of their owners to create a chain of social relations (“enchainment,” following Chapman 2000a:171). Those personas and histories were “gathered” (in the sense of Heidegger 1977) along with the prepared earth, at the places where they were interred, creating novel intersubjective relationships of places, persons, and materials.

Interestingly, the Phase III Offering 4 figurines—the largest figurine cache found—exhibited considerable difference in technical skill, quality of the raw material, and apparent age of the individuals portrayed. Some of the figures were worn, had old breaks, or lacked part of a limb. Four of the upright celts that form a stage-setting for the scene were cut to that shape from older objects (Drucker et al. 1959:160–161). Drucker et al. (1959:161) thus suggested that the cache “was assembled from figurines that had been made in times past.” These were heirlooms, referencing different owners but all put together in a miniature tableau. The tableau is sometimes interpreted as representing a historical event, but even if not, the figurines may have created a gathering of identities (corporate or individual) at the central (east-west) axis of the Northeast Platform. This kind of act has been called “accumulation” by Chapman (2000a:17), indicating “a new type of relationship between persons and objects which was in tension with traditional, enchainment relationships.”

Coordinating ritual activities according to spatial orientations within

## HISTORY IN PRACTICE

Complex A would have become one of the mechanisms (along with marriage exchange, descent, and possibly warfare) for organizing relationships and rankings among the chiefly houses. Complex A would have been an arena for negotiating and contesting that hierarchical ordering, as house identity and prestige were materialized in fairly regular fashion within this ritually charged place. As a sacred locale, the court (and thus its caretakers) was associated with creation stories that served to define sociocosmic categories and legitimize social hierarchies. Those definitions could themselves have been held out for scrutiny and questioning, moved out of the realm of doxa and into the “universe of discourse” (Bourdieu 1977:168) as a consequence of their concretization in the ephemeral ritual performances and the more enduring architecture of Complex A.

At a minimum, important differences between the east and west sides of the court in its early history are seen in variations between the Northeast and Northwest Platforms in Phase I, and the Southeast and Southwest Platforms (two adobe-brick mounds built over the massive offerings of serpentine) in Phase II. In pan-Mesoamerican cosmology, east and west are the fundamental directions, marked most obviously by the rising and setting of the sun, the basis for a cyclical rhythm of time. East is the more important direction, and at Complex A the Northeast Platform is earlier, with more offerings, than the Northwest. This fundamental cosmic distinction, with its embedded hierarchical ordering, was likely integrated with social differences recognized between the houses that maintained the altarpatforms on the east and west sides of the centerline. The salient relationships among the chiefly houses may have been metaphysically mediated by the cosmic symbolism manifest in their altars and more pragmatically negotiated through the rituals carried out in the Ceremonial Court.

Phase III in Drucker and Heizer’s scheme began with MO 3, the largest of the five massive offerings and the first to be placed on the centerline. Precious objects buried in the clay fill above the serpentine blocks that make up the offering were also all placed along the centerline for the first time, although additional elaborate offerings in the Northeast Platform, including the tableau of figurines (Offering 4), were also dated to this phase. The rapid construction and refilling of the massive offering constituted an important shift in the use of space in the Ceremonial Court and correlatively, I suggest, in the relationships of the chiefly houses who maintained Complex A. The east-west symmetry of the Phase I–II structures seems to have created the open space between them that was subsequently co-opted, possibly by the house(s) associated with the Northeast Platform. Moreover, when the La Ventans dug through the court floor for that

**Susan D. Gillespie**

massive offering, the accumulated linear history, which they themselves had sedimented into this sacred landscape as layers of clay, would have become self-evident, possibly contributing to an innovated understanding of time and duration.

Just before the initiation of Phase IV, Offering 4, on the western edge of the Northeast Platform, was opened for “inspection” (Drucker et al. 1959:154). But all of the Phase IV offerings were placed along the center-line, and with one exception were now positioned north and south of the court, in Mounds A-2 and A-3, which had no known earlier caches. These included two massive offerings (one cutting through Mound A-2, the other south of Mound A-3) and several features labeled as Tombs A–E. The transition of offering placement from east-west within the court to the north-south axis outside the court was complete. No Phase IV offerings were discovered in the other platforms.

This structural transformation in the materialized spatial orientations in Complex A could be evidence of a corresponding shift in the hierarchy and relationships of chiefly houses at La Venta, having to do with the materialization of “history” in a new context and an expansion of extralocal relationships beyond La Venta. The Phase III–IV ceramics show a significant widening of La Venta’s external connections (Lowe 1978:366). It is also in Phase IV that new types of imported stone materials were incorporated into Complex A features—the great columnar basalt pieces, limestone, sandstone, and greenschist (Drucker et al. 1959:126).

Drucker and Heizer had commented on the elaborate graves and tomb constructions of Phase IV as indicative of more powerful leaders, perhaps so overbearing that they toppled La Venta’s political organization. Tomb A in Mound A-2 was constructed of basalt columns arranged as if to form a house of stone “logs,” while nearby Tomb B was a great limestone sarcophagus with carving on its outer surface making it appear to be the body of a saurian. Tomb C in Mound A-3 was lined with sandstone slabs, but Tombs D and E lacked stone constructions.

What was missing from most of these “tombs” was human bone. Wedel (in Drucker 1952:64), who excavated in 1943, referred to his finds as “grave-like deposits” in which fine costume items such as earspools and beads were “so arranged as to suggest grave furniture but without the slightest accompanying trace of bone or tooth enamel.” Stirling, who led the 1942 expedition that uncovered Tombs A and B, was convinced that skeletal remains could not survive in the tropical soils (Stirling 1943a:323–325; Stirling and Stirling 1942:637), an opinion that was later widely repeated. However, Drucker and Heizer (1965:56) subsequently

## HISTORY IN PRACTICE

apologized for their use of terms such as “tombs” and “graves,” reiterating that only Tomb A contained human skeletal remains as two bundle burials (Drucker et al. 1959:162). They further dismissed the notion that bone would have completely perished based on Drucker’s prior experience of finding bone in the region. Furthermore, the positioning of the artifacts in the pseudoburials is such that the objects could not have been found as they were if they had actually adorned a decaying corpse—they are sometimes too perfectly placed (Drucker et al. 1959:162).

Drucker and Heizer (1965:58) concluded that there was a pattern of surrogate burials at Complex A, starting in Phase I and continuing through Phase III, primarily in the Northeast Platform. What these features have in common is an assortment of costume items of greenstone and other precious materials on a prepared layer of cinnabar or similar material, an ore or color that may have had mortuary significance. Joyce (1987, 1999, 2000b) analyzed the ornaments in these pseudoburials—assuming that they stood for personages whether or not there was a body—and suggested that they may represent gendered persons. For the preliterate Olmec, such costume ornaments “can be viewed as quasi-textual elements, with messages to be read” (Joyce 1987). They evidence “inscribed practices” (following Connerton 1989), contributing to social memory in ways that transcend the temporal and spatial limitations of ephemeral performances. The burials (real or pseudo) are the materializations of individual persons, indexically signaled not by bodies but by precious objects, inalienable house property that likely referenced named or titled ancestors. This is a materialization of a memory, real or innovated, but it just as likely entailed forgetting, because only certain individuals would have been rendered visible through their costume ornaments, while others were not.

Drucker and Heizer had suggested that the rich tombs appearing in Phase IV signaled a major change in La Venta’s political hierarchy, which may have become too top-heavy for the populace to bear. In fact, pseudoburials date back to Phase I (Offering 7), all but one of them in the Northeast Platform, so the Phase IV features can be seen as a continuation of a venerable tradition. However, the linear arrangement of multiple surrogate burials in Phase IV north and south of the Ceremonial Court, which by then was possibly closed off to further buried caches, is new, indicating a transformation of the earlier practice. It hints strongly of the narration of a pedigree or genealogy as a dynastic history. These interments thus constitute an extremely important “moment” in the production of history, the “fact assembly” involved in making an “archive” (following Trouillot 1995:26).

**Susan D. Gillespie**

It is possible that earlier offerings had been placed along the centerline in Phases I and II but were removed for the massive offerings made during Phases III and IV (Drucker 1981:36). If so, such an act of obliteration would have been one of the “silences” common in historical production, a strategic forgetting as a result of “the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others” (Trouillot 1995:25). The pseudoburials in particular, and all of the Ceremonial Court more generally, were “signs in history,” objects or patterns of action that “become involved in social life as loci of historical intentionality *because* of their function as representational vehicles. These objects are frequently considered to be concrete embodiments or repositories of the past they record, that is, to be endowed with the essentialized or reified property of historicity” (Parmentier 1987:11–12, original emphasis).

Historical narratives “are always produced in history” (Trouillot 1995:22), and the production of this specific narrative (with its later emendations) must take into account the prior history of inhabitation of Complex A. The La Venta elites performed their history, literally putting their “ancestors” as indexed by house valuables into the otherworld/other-time dimension that Complex A had become over generations. And in Phase IV they did so on the centerline as part of the last major “world creation” event enacted at that place, when the final massive foundation caches (MO 2 and MO 5) were positioned in association with Mounds A-2 and A-3—the locales of the Phase IV pseudoburials. Certain house ancestors became incorporated into the cosmogony, materially sedimented within the sacred narrative of the establishment of cosmic order and the distribution of cosmic power to demigods and heroes. The landscape was therefore inscribed with a slightly different creation story (as happened at Cahokia [see Pauketat, this volume]). However, this was not a universalizing recounting of foundation events. Instead, it devolved out of the mythic past into a more narrow recent history that belonged to what had by then become the paramount house of La Venta—“a narrative of inclusions and exclusions” in Chapman’s (2000a:172) phrase—as an act of self-definition, possibly of a new social category.

In the scenario sketched here, the ritual deposition practices that built Complex A over a number of generations were part of a strategy for negotiating and contesting sociosacred relationships and defining identities and categories of persons in the process. These activities had been carried on generally uninterrupted, incorporating several episodes of “world renewal” that redefined the entire court in the process. Those episodes allowed for a return to the past and the regeneration of the invisible world, to



**HISTORY IN PRACTICE**

create transformed memories in forging links between past and present. Complex A was a place of transformation, allowing for the emergence of new relationships and social fields.

By Phase IV, however, a single paramount house may have performed and inscribed its own history in ways not open to other chiefly houses, contenders for their rank. This house (with or without its allies) monopolized the most sacred and controlled location in their world: its ancestors now flanked the north and south ends of the Ceremonial Court. Its history may subsequently have become a “world history” for La Venta, because “history is made isomorphic with the hierarchy of chiefly persons” (Heckenberger 2005:285; Sahlins 1985). Multiple collective memories and the memory work of ritual deposition of past generations would have been trumped by the ownership and privileged recitation of house histories in what had become a different setting. This effort would have been part of a “forgetting campaign” to redirect the memory of ancestors for political purposes, like that of the Inkas described by Nielsen (this volume). It is therefore quite probable that with the application of the thick red clay cap, which covered all the altar-platforms and Tomb A, and into which a few more surrogate burials were laid, Complex A was closed to ritual resurfacings, to the refurbishment of altars to contact spirits. The founding history inscribed there was not to be disturbed. Basalt columns were erected to raise the height of the court wall (although they never completely encircled it). Complex A was left to erode and fill with drift sand.

One suspects that only powerful rulers could have accomplished the cessation of such long-standing traditions, to enforce “a rupture between past and present,” which is how we think of history (Hoskins 1993:307). Importantly, La Venta may have continued for some time as a primate center. Several stone sculptures, including a large stela that depicts elite persons, were placed atop the red clay stratum in Complex A. They are similar to monuments positioned in Complex B, south of the great pyramid (Mound C) that hid Complex A from view. Complex A had become invisible (just like its buried caches), but it was not forgotten. Its hidden history would have been implicated in the controlled contexts of ceremonies in the plaza of Complex B. The political positioning and cosmic sanctioning of later paramounts was dependent in part on the prior history that had been produced in Complex A, maintained as memories of the royal and noble houses. This was the legacy bequeathed by the earlier generations of the Complex A caretakers, but they could not have anticipated that outcome when they first engaged in those ritual labors and performances.

I am thus presenting a scenario of a new orientation to the temporal

**Susan D. Gillespie**

qualities of landscape like that proposed by Barrett (1999) for Stonehenge and its environs between the Neolithic and the Iron Age. In the earlier use of Complex A's Ceremonial Court, the landscape was transformed by repetitive actions as a form of inhabitation to "evoke or revitalize the ever-present ancestral and spiritual order embedded in that same landscape. The actions of construction, and the inhabitation of these places, thus overlay the sacred structure of the landscape in such a way that the past and present effectively existed alongside each other" within that locale, as Barrett (1999:261) described for Stonehenge. However, in the process of shaping the landscape, a distinction was created between the past—the origins of cosmic and social order—and the present, facilitated in the British and Mexican cases by the "construction of a linear representation of time which projected back to a time of origins" (Barrett 1999:261). In Britain this was the unintended consequence of the inclusion of graves of warrior-chiefs into mounds to which more graves were added, creating a lineal sequence of the dead in the landscape, a "human past distinct from the present" (Barrett 1999:261). The mythic past of the earlier landscape with its monumental ancestral forms was now no longer part of the routine temporal horizon of the people who lived there, so those monuments were no longer subjected to modifications or renovations. The landscape presented its living inhabitants with a very different system of referents than before, and society was transformed in the process.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite its tremendous importance in Formative and later Mesoamerican prehistory, and notwithstanding evidence of its lengthy occupation, La Venta has been treated as a single-period site. The reasons for the failure to properly consider the history (and not just the chronology) of Complex A range from confusing graphic representations to archaeological agendas that put greater emphasis on continuity than change. The diachronic perspective pursued here, examining the biography of Complex A's Ceremonial Court, has treated this landscape and the people who built it in terms of intersubjective practices of inhabitation in space and time. Performance and the interplay of remembering and forgetting among multiple groups with both coordinated and competing agendas come to the fore. Minor variations and discontinuities originally observed and recorded by the excavators were thereby given more significance. Attention to variation, to the actions and perspectives of different categories of people, and to the internal origins of social change are among the advantages of practice theory (Brumfiel 2000). All of these fac-

## HISTORY IN PRACTICE

tors provide clues to how the Complex A landscape, as a system of orientation, could have been modified over time, even as the La Ventans adhered to fundamental cosmological principles and reproduced customary practices through commemorative acts. Such orienting structures “do not simply constrain agents but allow them to act in ways that frequently lead to their transformation” (Rowlands and Kristiansen 1998:23).

What has previously been neglected at La Venta is not so much the evidence of change at Complex A but the potential for understanding the development of social differentiation and political hierarchy, entwined with the rise of new categories of social persons in a value-laden landscape built from generations of depositional practices. A shift in the placement and types of ritual depositional activities must have been influenced by the preexisting materialization of orienting principles. As Barrett (1999:257) observed, “each generation [has to] confront its own archaeology as the material remains of its past piled up before it.” Deposits and constructions in the later phases (III and IV), which emphasize the north-south centerline, were integrated into and dependent upon the prior landscape created in the earlier phases (I and II), when an asymmetrical east-west axis was more apparent. The bilateral symmetry so produced may have opened the central space for the north-south axis between them. As with Pauketat’s (2000) “tragic commoners” at Cahokia, the unintended consequences of earlier actions created a landscape of power that could be appropriated for innovated purposes.

When building is enduring, and the same practices are repeatedly performed for generations, the system of reference may become doxic (Bourdieu 1977:164) or taken for granted, a component of “practical knowledge” (Giddens 1984:4, 22; see Joyce, this volume). But Barrett (2001:154) suggested that archaeologists pay attention to “moments when practitioners stood apart from the world of their actions and looked in upon that world discursively. They objectified certain conditions as a strategy for acting upon them.” Such moments would have included salient occasions “when political authorities sought to extend their authority, to objectify, and thus to act upon, the lives of others” (Barrett 2001:154).

In the latter period of use of Complex A, I suggest, one or more chiefly houses may have done just that in appropriating this ritually charged place to materialize its own history, including highly elaborate pseudoburials of revered ancestors in a linear arrangement. The archaeological evidence suggests that after centuries of continuous use, Complex A was closed to further modifications, so that the history inscribed into that sacred earth could not be further changed, even as the site may have flourished for

**Susan D. Gillespie**

some time. This profound structural transformation in the linking of history to an innovated manifestation of political authority cannot be fully explained by reference only to internal factors peculiar to La Venta: La Venta's external connections had considerable impacts that are also manifest in Complex A. Nevertheless, the La Venta excavations of 50 years ago can continue to yield insights into how internal and external factors stimulating change were played out among La Venta's chiefly houses through practices of ritual deposition, the invocation of social memory, and the consequences of their accumulated actions in history.

**Notes**

1. A later rendering of Complex A (Heizer et al. 1968) attempted to correct this misperception, showing all the platforms as rectilinear, but it is equally problematic and has not been accepted.
2. Space limitations preclude discussion of the dating of Complex A. See Drucker et al. (1957), Drucker et al. (1959:264–267), and Drucker and Heizer (1965) for the 1955 dates; and Berger et al. (1967:5) and Heizer et al. (1968) for dates from the short 1967 and 1968 field seasons. For critiques, see Coe and Stuckenrath (1964:8ff.), Graham and Johnson (1979:3), Grove (1997:72–73), and Heizer (1964:49–50).
3. An additional problem is the South-Central Platform, which seems to have been placed farther north in Phase I and was repositioned to the south in Phase II (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 9). Based on these discrepancies, I divided Phase I into two subphases in my plan views (Figure 6.3).
4. Pauketat (this volume) describes the typical pattern at Mississippian centers of alternating light and dark colors of clay or earth that have been carefully selected and processed to eliminate impurities. The same practices characterize the ritual deposition at Complex A.