

### 13. Olmec Thrones as Ancestral Altars: The Two Sides of Power

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*Abstract:* Applications of agency approaches in archaeology have often failed to sufficiently delineate the cultural constructs that signified the motivations, actions, and outcomes of agency. In the case of the Olmecs of Formative period Mesoamerica, two interpretations of monumental stone sculptures have attempted to explain the source of Olmec political power: rulers were powerful because they controlled labor and material resources or because they controlled access to supernatural forces. In this essay, archaeological and ethnographic analogies are employed to "re-contextualize" in social action certain sculpture types—thrones and colossal heads—in an attempt to reveal the nature of Olmec political power. Olmec thrones were homologous with ancestral altars and functioned as material symbols of high-status kin-based corporate groups whose wealth and rank were associated with the ritual maintenance of ties to suprahuman ancestors. The desire of those groups to further demonstrate links with ancestors through the display of heirlooms obtained by illustrious predecessors is proposed as a motivation for erecting the colossal heads.

#### Introduction

In recent decades a concern for "practice" has emerged as a common theme among disparate theoretical orientations in the social sciences (Ochter 1984:144) as a means to integrate "structure" with "action" (Karp 1986: 131). In these approaches, such as Anthony Giddens's (1979, 1984) structuration theory, knowledgeable rule-oriented actors operate with conscious intentionality as "agents" (whose actions, intended or otherwise, bring about certain effects) within the context of structure (the generative rules and resources that define identity and situation), which is both the medium and outcome of that agency (e.g., Bryant and Jarr 1991; Karp 1986:135–137). Both structure and action are contingent upon their interrelationship, in a dialectic that Marshall

Sahlins (1981:72) referred to as "the practice of the structure and the structure of the practice." Practice theories have the advantage of explaining culture change, and they allow for a convergence of social history with anthropology (Karp 1986:131; Sahlins 1985:xvii) to which archaeologists, who deal with broad temporal frameworks, can make notable contributions. In the process, archaeology can rectify its undue emphasis on systemic processes and evolutionary stages that has limited its ability to incorporate factors of human agency (Blanton et al. 1996:1; Marcus and Flannery 1996:244).

Such endeavors do pose major problems with which archaeologists must contend. The synthesis of agency and structure is predicated on the description and interpretation of both. Here is where archaeologists especially run into difficulties, not only in identifying the *relationship* between agency and the structure that both signifies and emerges from it but even at the basic level of identifying agents and their behaviors, and elucidating the historically contingent structures that provide meanings for agents, resources, and outcomes. The failure to explicitly account for the content of historical meanings (i.e., structure) was the basis for Ian Hodder's (1991:78) summary dismissal of practice theory as it had thus far been applied to prehistory. Furthermore, the interplay of structure and practice is a symbolic process (Sahlins 1985:31), and archaeologists utilizing these approaches should recognize the need to model "the symbolic constitution of the actor," as John Robb stated in the introduction to this volume. Yet, as he notes, this half of the structure/agency duality is often undeveloped, resulting in the reduction of "actor" to an abstraction rather than a historically framed agent, or in the projection of contemporary Western motivations and understandings into the minds of ancient non-Western peoples (Pazos 1995).

For example, in these approaches actors are treated as "essentially individualistic, self-interested, rational, and pragmatic" (Marcus and Flannery 1996:31), a characterization familiar to Western scholars because it fits our notion of the "individual" against society, but such concepts do not have a global application: "In Western notions of personhood, bounded units of the species are seen as *ipso facto* morally self-contained, and further are set in opposition to nature and society. Social science notions of personhood that emphatically oppose 'the individual' to 'society' are best understood as flowing from this specifically Western conception" (Strathern 1981:168–169). Moreover, to assume that all humans are motivated to act in essentially equivalent ways implies some vague universality of human nature (Whiteley 1992:61) and thus denies the role of structure in the signification of motivations, actions, and outcomes. Finally, the major contribution of anthropology to the social sciences, one that seems increasingly neglected in some current approaches, should precisely be "to foreground the significance of cultural variation in human life" (Shore 1996:9).

A related problem coincident with the difficulty of elucidating structure is defining the agent as a product of social context, distinct from the "autonomous, strategizing individual" (Brumfiel 1996:49; see also Criado 1996:54; Pazos 1995). The social constitution of actors, including their classification, for example, by kinship, gender, age, and occupation, is critical to their definition.

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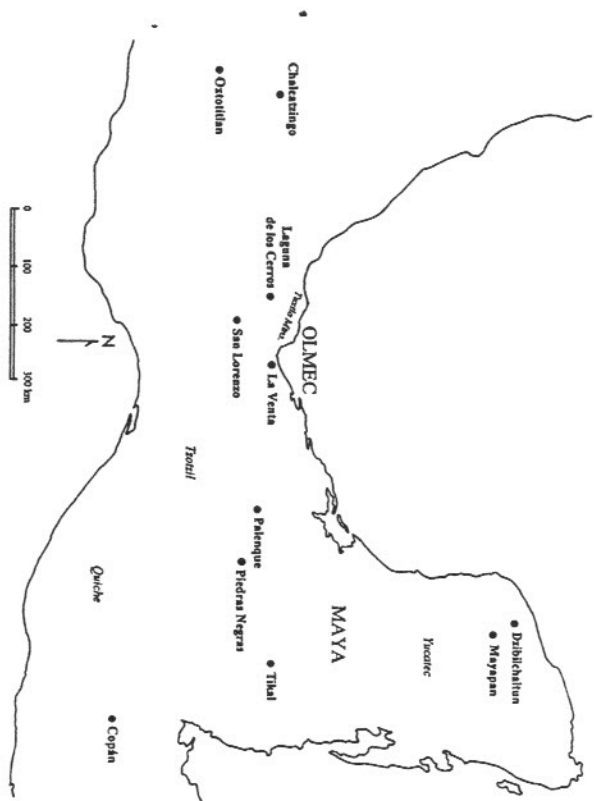


Figure 13-1. Map of central and southern Mesoamerica with archaeological sites and cultures mentioned in the text. *Modern Maya language groups are labeled in italics.*

taken as evidence that the Olmecs attained an advanced chiefdom or primitive state headed by a single individual at the apex of a royal lineage that supervised the activities of farmers, craftsmen, and long-distance traders (e.g., Coe 1968a:109–111, 1968b:59; Coe and Diehl 1980:2:147; Cyphers Guillén 1994:64–65; Drucker 1981:30–31; Sharer 1982:254).

Questions concerning the nature of Olmec “legitimacy”—the constructs that explain and justify the concentration of social power in the hands of a small minority (Fried 1967:26)—were first raised when this culture was known primarily for its monuments, before modern excavation techniques and explicitly scientific interests led to the recovery of archaeological contexts for both exotic and mundane artifacts. Because the decontextualized sculptures were the principal data for understanding the nature of Olmec society, hypotheses often hinged on the difficult issue of interpreting those artifacts to reveal the source of political power. Their forms and the symbolic motifs carved on them indicate that they served as vehicles for meaning systems that integrated cosmology and society. As one Olmec scholar put it, “[W]e have the best possible kind of documentary evidence bearing on this, namely, the sculpture, *if we can read it right*” (Philip Drucker in Coe 1968b:74; emphasis added).

Olmec monumental art has been characterized as “homocentric” in that many of the sculptures and small figurines represent the human form, with fewer animals or supernatural beings (de la Fuente 1981:86). Those depictions of humans deemed realistic and individualized, rather than conforming to stereotyped conventions, have frequently been interpreted as portraits of actual persons (Clewlow 1974:150; Coe 1972:5; Cyphers Guillén 1995:45; de la Fuente 1992:13; Grove 1981:61; Stirling 1965:733). This latter category includes the colossal heads (Figure 13-2) and persons portrayed on the sides of altars, as well as some of the statues and the few stelae. Unfortunately, most of the statues are headless due to mutilation in the past. This is doubly regrettable because the most elaborated item of adornment is the headdress, which may have served as a naming or identifying device for the portrayed person in the absence of a writing system (Coe 1977:186; Grove 1981:65).

The high incidence of portraiture has given rise to detailed hypotheses for the origins of Olmec legitimacy. Common assumptions are that the ruler, who controlled the production and transport of stone monuments, commissioned the artworks to portray himself (Coe 1968b:74; Cyphers Guillén 1994:65) and to communicate messages concerning the nature of his power and right to rule. As one Olmec scholar put it, many of the colossal heads “are doubtless direct representations of Olmec leaders . . . and it is possible to view much of the social context of the large stones as personal expressions of power by the personages whom the carvings depicted and who had them moved and placed on the sites” (Clewlow 1974:150). *Within the artworks themselves*, then, scholars have sought to answer “the classical problem of legitimacy—how some men come to be credited with the right to rule over others” (Geertz 1972:325). In this respect, actor-centered explanations of social change are not new to Olmec studies. There has long been a presumption that we can gaze upon the very faces of the most powerful agents in that society and may realize the intentionality and consequences of their actions from the stone portraits they left behind.

Out of the interpretations, or “readings,” of the sculpture and other artworks have come two different points of view concerning the origins and nature of Olmec political power. On the one hand, some scholars posited that social inequality developed out of the control of major economic resources by high-ranked corporate kin groups. For example, Michael Coe (1981:18; see also Coe 1968a:107; Coe and Diehl 1980:2:148) argued that political power derived from the early expansion of a few kin groups who managed to control the best agricultural land; this is thought to be a typical occurrence in the emergence of ranked societies (Fried 1967:117). Coe saw in the portraiture evidence for this power wielded by the ruler: “Despotic authorities demand a public recognition of themselves and their ancestors in the form of great images as the symbols of their power” (Coe 1968b:65). The depictions of rulers were interpreted as referring to themes of hereditary lineage-based kingship and also military conquest (Coe 1968a:110, 1989:77; Coe and Diehl 1980:1:392).

Coe’s arguments for the economic foundations of political power were made specifically to counteract a competing school of thought in which Olmec civilization was characterized as a theocracy headed by priests (Coe 1968a:110,

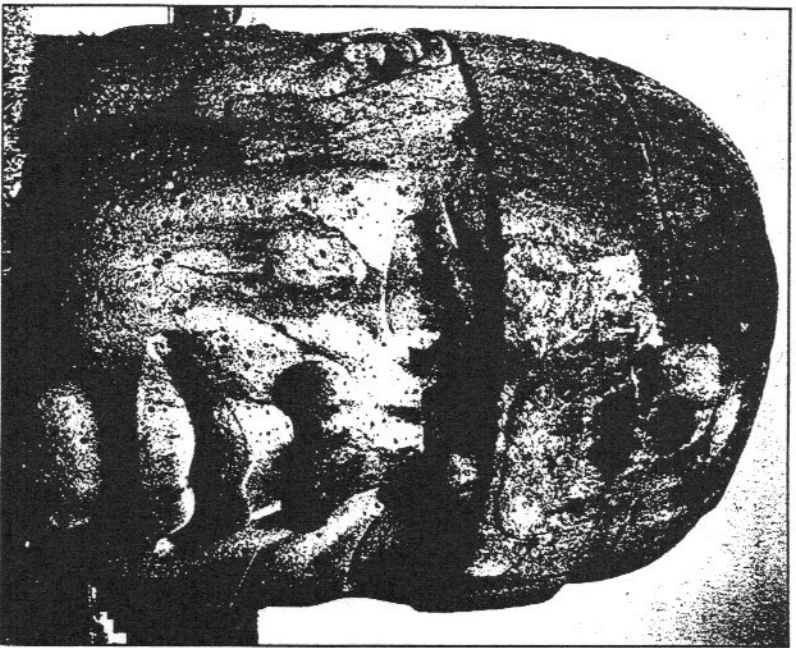


Figure 13-2. Colossal head, San Lorenzo Monument 1. Facial features are in high relief, while the headdress and adornments are in bas-relief. Basalt. Height: 2.85 meters. Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa, Mexico (photograph by David C. Grove).

1968b:74). The latter idea had been promoted by Ignacio Bernal (1969) and Robert Heizer (1962), who were impressed by the “extraordinary importance given to religion and ceremonialism” (Bernal 1969:90) in the monuments and exotic small artifacts. Coe noted, however, that Olmec portraiture demonstrates “an emphasis on the personality and power of individual leaders” (1977:186) and that the Olmecs, like the later Maya but unlike the Aztecs, created huge stone images of their rulers rather than their gods (Coe 1968b:74, 1989:77). Portraiture was thus an argument against religious power as the explanation for sociopolitical inequality.

Other interpretations of Olmec portraiture have reached the opposite con-

clusion. Far from negating the importance of religious power, portraiture is thought to have played a pivotal role in communicating the supernatural associations of the ruler’s legitimacy. Some of the objects seem to depict humans in personal contact with supernatural forces or otherwise performing acts that can be termed “shamanic” (Furst 1966; Grove 1981). Such shamanic ability may have been a source of social difference that subsequently contributed to the development of social ranking and unequal access to political power (Grove and Gillespie 1992:27).

A more elaborate scenario linking portraiture, supernatural forces, and shamanism to the origins of political power was suggested by Kent Reilly (1989). In his view, portraiture is an artistic convention that focuses attention on the uniqueness of the ruler as an individual, a reflection of his charisma. Reilly proposed that charisma was directly associated with the ruler’s ability to communicate with supernatural forces as a shaman and that his access to such power was the “charter” that legitimated his position (1989:5, 18). In this scenario, the stone portraits were commissioned to display his charisma and his acts of supernatural mediation.

However, Reilly recognized the difficulty in reconciling shamanism as part of a charismatic system of access to political power (one in which the role of leader is not conceptually distinguished from the particular incumbent in that role) with complex societies like that of the Olmecs in which the maintenance and transfer of power would require more stable institutional controls. He therefore suggested that the Olmecs had a form of “state shamanism” in which the ruler carried out shamanic activities on behalf of all his people because of his hereditary relationship to the semidivine ancestors of the ruling lineage (Reilly 1989:17). In this hypothesis, the ruler’s charisma, which is what accounts for the many examples of portraiture, “began to derive as much from his hereditary position as from his charismatic personality” (Reilly 1989:18), although how charismatic shamanism gave way to hereditary rulership is not explained.

Coe (1968b:74) had earlier acknowledged that, in Mesoamerica, later complex societies typically were ruled by “lineages with political and religious power” and that the Olmecs likely witnessed a similar “fusion” of religious and secular sources of power in the evolution of their political system (Sharer 1982:254). Utilizing some of the interpretations of shamanism, Coe and Diehl (1980:2:148–149), while maintaining the economic argument for Olmec legitimacy, agreed that the rulers likely monopolized the role of “mediators between the spirit world and the other living members of the community,” talking effective control over supernatural access that previously had been available to many people when society was more egalitarian. They further speculated about “the causal relationship between the emergence of secular and religious power” (emphasis added), taking a position opposite to Reilly’s:

Did economic and political power lead to the elite’s acquisition of religious power in the eyes of society at large, or did religious power based on individual personalities cause the society to accord those personalities and their kin certain crucial economic and political advantages? We sus-

pect the former was more important in the long-term stabilization of inheritable elite status [Coe and Diehl 1980:2:149].

Several points emerge from this review of the debate concerning how portraiture, and Olmec sculptures in general, relate to questions of legitimacy. First, what is being contested is the *source* of power utilized by rulers as agents. The two schools of thought coincide with a classification by Richard Blanton and colleagues (1996:Table 1) of the various sources of power, as analyzed by different scholars, into two major categories—objective and symbolic. “Objective sources include wealth and factors of production, while symbolic sources include elements of a cognitive code, including religion and ritual” (Blanton et al. 1996:3; emphasis in original). The two sources of power are considered categorically different, although it is increasingly recognized that in situational usage Olmec elites eventually came to control economic resources *and* supernatural access, both of which are used to explain the incidence of portraiture in material symbols that display the ruler’s power.

It is typical of Western political thought to distinguish different sources of power because in modern secular societies *power* is an abstraction that describes relationships, and as such it can derive from heterogeneous sources (Anderson 1972:5–6). While such distinctions as *objective* versus *symbolic* have analytic and comparative utility, they do not necessarily account for the nature of power as it is understood in non-Western societies. Benedict Anderson (1972:4–8), for example, demonstrated that the idea of power in Java is completely at odds with the Western or secular view. There, power is treated as a concrete phenomenon that can be concentrated in places, persons, and things. It is also homogeneous, all power deriving from a single source original to the primordium when ancestors and culture heroes interacted with gods and spirits. Anderson further suggested (1972:64) that similar understandings of power will likely apply to other presecular societies, which would include those of Prehispanic Mesoamerica.

The foregoing discussion of how Olmec agents acquired and manipulated power is thus divorced from the contextual issue of how the Olmecs themselves may have conceived of power and interpreted its expressions in political action. Assuming that our secular ideas of power apply to the Olmecs only imposes limitations on our understanding of how power was construed and displayed. Indeed, these limitations form the basis of the current debate over the origin and nature of Olmec legitimacy. The etic categories of power have an explanatory function, but they should not be codified and transported back in time as if they represented some essential reality for the Olmecs that can be “read” in their artworks. Examining this issue from the perspective of what we know of Prehispanic Mesoamerican cultural constructs necessarily changes the parameters of the argument. In presecular societies, charisma, wealth, and authority over labor are outward expressions of the possession of power, not the sources of that power (Anderson 1972:64–65). The symbolic/objective dichotomy of power as argued in the Olmec literature may thus more productively be treated as two aspects, or “sides,” pertaining to the display or effects of the Olmecs’ unitary conception of power.

A second comment on this debate is that an important characteristic of Olmec culture is shared by both viewpoints, although it is de-emphasized by the stress on portraiture as depicting unique and powerful individuals. Both sides of power were considered the prerogative of Olmec rulers because of their position as heads of the highest-ranking kin group, and ancestors played a dominant role in the identification of those groups and in the legitimacy of the ruler (see the importance of ancestors in other contributions to this volume). In the shamanic hypothesis suggested by Reilly (1989), it was the ruler’s own divine ancestors, not generic spirits, who were the most important supernatural beings contacted by him, and he alone had the right to do so by virtue of being their presumed descendant. Similarly, the “objective” view of Olmec rulership is based on a system of hereditary aristocracy in which ancestor recognition is an important component, and it has been suggested that the monuments may depict ancestors in the ruling descent lines (e.g., Kent Flannery in Coe 1968b:74). This demonstrates the significance of the historically contingent structure in the identity, motivations, and behavioral choices of actors (see also, e.g., Marcus and Flannery [1996:95] for the development of social inequality in Formative Oaxaca; contrast with the use of structuration theory in the origins of political inequality among the Formative Pacific Coast contemporaries of the Olmecs, in which individual self-interested competitive aggrandizers seeking personal prestige are postulated as the force behind the development of social rank [Clark and Blake 1994]).

Ancestor veneration was and still is an important institution in the Mesoamerican culture area, and it is founded on sociological as well as religious principles. In Formative Mesoamerica, extrafamilial kin groups sought ways to define and delimit themselves in order to control land and water rights and to increase their jural authority as a collectivity. They would have conceptually based those rights on the past actions of putative or real ancestors, and their relationships to those ancestors were continually enacted by means of cult rituals. Beginning in this early time period, the “ritual maintenance of the ‘founder’s memory’ [became] closely linked to the identity, property rights, and social status of the corresponding social group” (Carmack et al. 1996:296). Ancestor veneration would therefore likely have been a critical component in the mediating structure that signified Olmec legitimacy (just as it was for later Mesoamerican societies).

A third point that comes out of this discussion, and one emphasized by Ann Cyphers Guillén (1993), is the absolute lack of consideration for context in interpreting Olmec monuments and other exotic artifacts. Since they were first unearthed beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, they have been treated as “art” objects having a self-contained and fixed symbolic content inherent in the material form, and motifs chosen by their makers. Many of the smaller artifacts were looted and a number of them are of dubious authenticity, but even the excavated ones have too often been analyzed based on their inherent properties, without due consideration of the evidence for archaeological context. Cyphers Guillén’s (1993) recent excavation data from San Lorenzo showed that some monuments were positioned close to water imagery and artificial canals, revealing an unexpected linking of actual water distribution, the role

of water in ideology, and the ruler. David Grove (1993) has also demonstrated hitherto unanticipated spatial patterns revealed by the placement of monuments at Olmec ceremonial centers.

Certainly a better understanding of Olmec legitimacy and political ideology must await the excavation and publication of more complete data on Olmec sites dealing with both elite and nonelite contexts. Nevertheless, even with the limited information available concerning the monuments, it is still possible to utilize their symbolic qualities to suggest a model for Olmec legitimacy that conceptually links the two sides of power and incorporates both ancestor veneration and the emphasis on portraiture, especially for the colossal heads and altars. Doing so requires investigating the relationships of these artifacts to human actors in social contexts (following Hodder 1991) because symbols, by definition, are not inherently meaningful. Their meanings are dependent on practice, specifically, from the processes involved in a communication event (e.g., Leach 1976:11–15). Furthermore, “[t]he meaning of material culture often depends on the context of use rather than solely on the context of production or on the ‘author’ of the object (Hodder 1991:154). The underlying premise of the structure/agency duality is that within society, shared symbolic meanings are not fixed but emerge out of conventional interactions. A key to the symbolic content of Olmec monuments is to understand how they might have functioned within this larger framework of social action and, particularly, the actions that helped to define and rank corporate groups that controlled the major resources.

### “Seats of Power”

It was the Olmec altars that Coe (1968a:110) had previously suggested referred to hereditary notions of rulership and lineage, and this same monument type was first used by Grove (1981) to demonstrate shamanic access to supernatural power. “Altar” is the type name given to the large rectangular blocks. Their forms and associated designs vary somewhat, but an important feature of many altars is that they directly associate individual human figures with a particular setting thought to be sacred. A frequent scene on the tabletop-style altars (which have a projecting ledge) is a human figure seated partly within a shallow niche located in the center bottom of the front side, his head and headress protruding out from the niche (figure 13-3). The niche is interpreted as a cave and is sometimes shown as the mouth of a chthonic zoomorph, thereby forming an opening into the earth. This interpretation is supported by other iconographic evidence that the altar itself represents the earth (Grove 1973:130–131, 1987:430). The human’s position, seated in the doorway of a cave leading into the earth, indicates that he is on the threshold separating the domain of mortals on the earth’s surface and the domain of supernatural forces, which in Mesoamerican belief resided within the earth. Similarly, his placement under the projecting ledge of the altar, which is marked by earth motifs, repeats the message that he is in contact with the underworld (Grove and Gillespie 1992:26–27). This is visual evidence for



Figure 13-3. *La Venta Altar 4. The central personage is carved in high relief, while the other motifs are in bas-relief. Basalt. Height: 1.6 meters. La Venta Museum Park, Villahermosa, Mexico (photograph by David C. Grove).*

his direct and personal contact with the supernatural domain, although there is the presumption that the person depicted is the then-living ruler.

The function of the altars provides additional information on their meanings. The “altar” designation is based on its shape—it resembles a table for the placement of offerings. Grove (1973), however, has convincingly argued that altars actually functioned as benches upon which a person sat. This may help to explain their limited distribution. Although statues and other types of carvings have been found at secondary Olmec sites within the Gulf Coast heartland area, altars have been excavated only at the three primary centers or their immediate environs. If the stone altar was a very valuable seat, then perhaps it was used only by the highest-ranking personages in those three centers—the paramounts of Olmec society—to serve in the capacity that we would recognize as a throne.

Understanding that the altar was really a seat or throne allowed for further investigation of its probable meaning. To correlate its function with its earth-associated motifs, Grove (1981:63–65) employed an ethnographic analogy to a

common object from Canelos Quichua society of tropical forest South America—the shaman's stool. This stool is considered the shaman's "seat of power." When he sits upon it, it literally connects him to the earth and underworld so that he can ritually contact supernatural forces. Actually, the so-called shaman's stool belonged to every adult male in Canelos Quichua society. In this instance, contact with the earth was not limited to shamans but was within the capabilities of every man (Grove 1981:64). By this analogy, the Olmec altars as seats could have been equivalent points of contact with the supernatural underworld without suggesting that those who used them necessarily monopolized that power, but certainly implying that those with stone seats had the resources to create more costly and elaborate artifacts and that they chose to expend their resources to do so.

There are other appropriate analogies for similar seats of power that can further our understanding of the social contexts of Olmec altars (as I will continue to call them), drawn from the later Maya civilization of Mesoamerica as well as societies elsewhere in the world. These analogues incorporate the use of altars with the definition of kinship groups that base their rights to property on the actions of founding ancestors, to whom they devote ritual activities, just as has been suggested for Formative period Mesoamerica. Using these analogies, I argue that the Olmec altar was a focal point for contact with the supernatural realm, but its physical association with the paramount was based on fundamental sociological principles by which people and property were differentiated.

Maya ancestor veneration practices are known from archaeological, ethno-historical, and ethnographic data. "Ancestors" are guardian spirits who dwell in the mountains or the earth, and they are often associated with caves or other earth-openings. Patricia McNamany (1995:8) has proposed for the ancient Maya that "exclusionary and inherited resource rights go hand in hand with the genesis of ancestor veneration." Among the contemporary Tzotzil Maya (see Figure 13-1), multifamily kin groups still carry out rituals to their real and putative ancestors. The rituals are especially prominent at mountains and water holes because the ancestors of each group are believed to live in the mountains or under the earth and to have established the rights of those families to their farmland and water sources (Vogt 1969:147).

A material focus for the ancestor veneration rites of the Tzotzil and other highland Maya peoples is large crosses put on platforms erected at mountains, water holes, and other sacred places. The cross, which formally resembles the Christian symbol, is a Prehispanic icon representing the great tree that connects cosmic domains. The cross is the place where the spirits of the ancestors gather to be contacted by their descendants. It is described as a doorway, on the other side of which the ancestors sit and wait for their offerings (Vogt 1964:499–500). Similar crosses are erected for the entire town in some instances, as well as for individual families. Among the highland Guatemala Kanjobal Maya the erection of the house cross symbolizes the "planting" of a family group on a particular piece of land. The cross cannot be moved, and family members continue to venerate it for several generations (La Farge 1947:24). Similarly, among the Tzotzil, a cross erected in the patio

belonging to the head of each multifamily group symbolizes the family's continuity back to its ancestral origins. The highland Maya cross shrine is therefore equivalent to household shrines in other Maya communities that more typically take the form of a rectangular table altar with a small cross, saint statue, or similar items on top (Vogt 1969:128).

Despite its Christian veneer, the contemporary Maya table altar is a direct descendant of the Prehispanic household altar that was used for ancestor veneration (Deal 1987). Ancestors and similar guardian spirits are still prayed to at these table altars. A major difference is that the Spanish introduced the table as a distinct form of furniture, whereas in the past, the altar was built in the form of a bench or bed, used for sitting and sleeping. Even today, table altars overlap with the indigenous form of the bed. For example, the Yucatecan altar, the *ka'anche'* (Sosa 1989:139), is constructed in the same manner as the traditional wooden bed described in ethnohistoric sources as erected on poles, with the upper surface created by wooden slats or rods, topped by a woven sleeping mat (Landa 1982:34). This same type of bed was still being made by Maya peoples in recent years (e.g., Wisdom 1940:132), and beds were traditionally built into the interior wall of the house, like a bench (e.g., Vogt 1969:87–88).

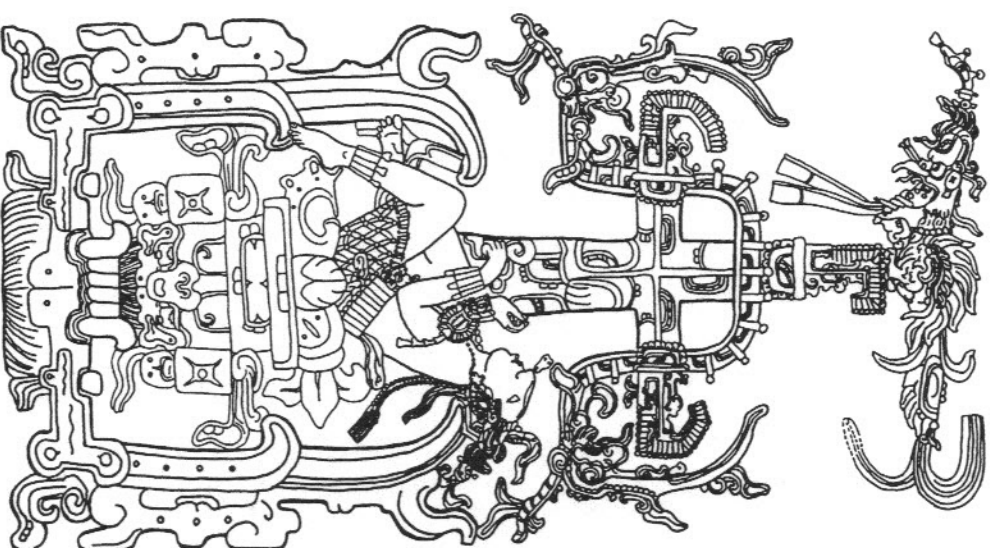
In addition to house and field table altars, Yucatecan Maya towns typically had large crosses erected at the four paths leading into town. Like the highland Maya cross shrines, the crosses were placed atop stone slab altars, known as a *Kanche'*, "bench," where spirits who protect the town come to "rest" (Sosa 1989:138). The same word, *Kanche'*, is also used for the seat upon which men customarily sit (Hanks 1990:112) and is homophonous with *ka'anche'*, the table altar. The Yucatecan altar is thus a place used for sitting and resting by ancestral or other guardian spirits and shares its form and name with the object used for sitting and resting by living humans. A similarly explicit association linking the ancestral altar with a resting place is made by the Quiche Maya of highland Guatemala. Their rituals to patrilineage ancestors are held at a shrine whose focus is a small rectangular stone box, the *warab'alha*, literally the "sleeping house" of the ancestors (Tedlock 1982:17).

Ancestor veneration in the context of sitting places was also reported by Spaniards in the early colonial period. Bishop Diego de Landa stated that lords, priests, and leading men in sixteenth-century Yucatan kept offeritories and idols in their houses for private devotions. With these offeritories they placed vessels and statues containing the cremated remains of their ancestors (Landa 1982:48, 59). For the Itza Maya at the southern base of the Yucatan peninsula, it was reported that every house had several idols kept atop a small "bench" (Thompson 1951:392). Such devotional activities dedicated to ancestors and gods are believed to have taken place in association with masonry altars found in Prehispanic Maya houses belonging to the elite members of society, for example, at Postclassic cities in Yucatan (Smith 1962:220–221, 228–229; Thompson 1954; Thompson and Thompson 1955). The altars were built into the walls of the dwellings, taking the form of a simple rectangular block, and are usually located on the central axis of the room opposite the main door. They have associated ritual artifacts, especially fragments of incense burners.

Similar rectangular masonry constructions, usually longer and located on both the back and side walls of the dwellings, are identified as benches, although the distinction between altar and bench is often difficult to determine (Andrews and Andrews 1980:307; Webster 1989:31). Benches were a common architectural feature in Lowland Maya sites (and elsewhere in Mesoamerica) and are also depicted in Maya artworks (Webster 1989:31). Many are the length appropriate to have served as a built-in bed and, for that use, were topped by a woven sleeping mat (Smith 1962:228). It was a common practice among the Classic and Postclassic Lowland Maya to erect a bench or altar atop a subfloor burial or to inter bodies or cremations within or under existing benches (e.g., Andrews and Andrews 1980:307; Smith 1962:221; Welsh 1988:188–189). These burials are presumed to be of household members, and many of the ritual activities that took place at the altars are interpreted as acts of veneration of ancestors and commemoration of other deceased family members, including children (Thompson 1954). Thus, in the Prehispanic period as well as today, the bench form marked the resting or sleeping places of the dead, while at the same time the benches were the literal sitting and sleeping places for living family members.

A more direct association between a bench as a sleeping place and noble ancestors can be seen in royal tombs of the Late Classic Maya (600–900 A.D.). Maya funerary temples, such as Temple I at Tikal, served as mortuary shrines for the persons interred within or under them and were presumably built by the deceased's successor (Sharer 1994:160–163). They are thus comparable to the ethnohistorically known ancestral shrine structures of Postclassic Yucatecan elite families. A chamber constructed beneath Temple I is the tomb of Tikal's "Ruler A." His body lay directly upon a woven mat placed atop a large masonry bench that took up most of the floor of the tomb chamber (1994:163). Thus, he was laid to rest on the typical mat-topped bench, a form that served as a bed for the living and here became the permanent resting place for this ancestor.

Another well-known Late Classic funerary temple-pyramid is the late seventh-century Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, which contains the tomb chamber for a paramount named Pakal (Ruiz Lhuillier 1992). Pakal's body was not laid out on top of his bed, as was that of his counterpart at Tikal, but was placed within a hollow space carved into a great limestone block, topped with a lid. His presence is nevertheless indicated on the top of the sarcophagus by his portrait, carved in low relief on the lid (Figure 13-4). He is juxtaposed against a great tree (Robertson 1983:55–62), similar in its crosslike form to the "tree-crosses" placed atop modern Maya altars. The position of Pakal's body on the lid resembles that of the niched human figure portrayed on an Olmec altar (Figure 13-3) in that he is shown "seated" partly within a great zoomorphic mouth that serves as an opening into the earth. To further indicate the meaning of this object, depictions of Pakal's ancestors were carved in bas-relief on all four sides of the sarcophagus, and they are shown emerging out of the earth (Robertson 1983:65). Thus, this artifact explicitly conflates earth imagery with male and female ancestors, and it juxtaposes the



**Figure 13-4.** Central motif of the bas-relief design on the sarcophagus lid, Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, Mexico. Limestone. Length of entire lid: 3.72 meters. Width: 2.17 meters (drawing from Gillespie [1993: Figure 3.4]). From Imagery and Creativity: Ethnoaesthetics and Art Worlds in the Americas, edited by Dorothea S. and Norman E. Whitten. Copyright © 1993 The Arizona Board of Regents. Published by the University of Arizona Press. Reprinted by permission..)

horizontal bench as a resting place with the (vertical) tree on top. This is more than an elaborate sarcophagus—it is an ancestral altar.

Furthermore, the sarcophagus was actually raised up above the tomb floor on legs (Robertson 1983:55) and hence purposely given the form of the raised bench-type throne common at Palenque (Robertson 1985b:86) and some other Late Classic Maya centers (see examples in Webster [1989:31]). Maya altars-thrones are known as early as the Late Formative [Kaplan 1995]. In other words, as was the case for Postclassic Yucatan, this Classic period ancestral altar is the same type of furniture as a seat, specifically, a throne.

A Late Classic throne from Piedras Negras communicates the relationship linking ancestors and earth to the paramount's "seat of power" in a different way. It has a vertical seat-back carved with a design indicating that it represents the zoomorphic face of the earth or mountain, and a male and female ancestor emerge from its eyes (Miller 1992:166). Thus, the throne itself could invoke the same meaning as an ancestral altar so that the authority it connoted derived from its ancestral associations. As for Palenque, the bench that forms Pakal's sleeping place could not have served as an actual throne where the paramount would sit to receive subordinates and adjudicate disputes. However, because it was an ancestral altar, it was given the form of a throne to replicate the bench-throne upon which the paramount sat, while it physically encapsulated the ancestor and the power he represented. Pakal's descendant, the ruling paramount, invested a great deal of effort in detailing the history of his family in elaborating the form of this ancestral altar and its great temple shrine because this action and its associated rituals signified the legitimacy of his political position.

To summarize, the evidence from Maya archaeology, ethnohistory, and ethnography indicates that the bench or bed, as a sitting and sleeping place, was the archetypal form constructed as an altar in order to make contact with ancestors, earth-associated beings who were frequently buried under the bench-altars and whose spirits are still believed to travel to these altars to sit and be contacted by their descendants. Altars erected for families or larger kin groups serve as a significant material symbol for the separate identity of those groups and the recognition of their collective rights to economic resources, rights believed to derive from ancestral ties. In the past, every Maya extended family would have had an altar, and the well-made masonry bench-altars and tomb shrines found archaeologically are more elaborate examples of a form that was replicated at all social levels. The ancestral altar, as a focus for ritual activity, thus helped to define social groupings and social status based on kinship ties to real or putative ancestors.

Applying this analogy to Olmec altars of the Early-Middle Formative period is aided by the available archaeological contextual data. For example, the largest altar known, San Lorenzo Monument 14, was apparently placed within a building or patio. Pottery vessels, broken figurines, and burnt bones, including those of a bird and a human infant, were recovered in association with the monument's location as possible evidence of offerings to ancestors or other ritual acts (Cyphers Guillén 1993). In front of La Ventas Altar 4, green-stone beads were found in positions suggesting a necklace and two bracelets

(Stirling 1943:55), perhaps from a burial that had decomposed. The one known Olmec-style altar outside of the Gulf Coast heartland may reveal even more clearly its function as a sleeping place for high-ranked ancestors. It was excavated at Chalcatzingo in highland central Mexico, a site well known for its Middle Formative stone carvings executed in the Olmec style (Grove 1984; Grove, ed. 1987). This altar is not a direct copy of its Olmec counterparts because it was constructed out of smaller blocks of stone rather than a single monolith. The bas-relief carving on the front depicts the stylized eyes of the earth zoomorph (Grove 1996), so it has the same earth-associated theme found on the decorated Olmec altars. There is no niche or human figure on the altar front, but a hollow interior was created when the altar was built. Within this interior were found the remains of a high-ranked adult, and a second burial was placed inside the altar at a later date (Fash 1987:86–90). Thus, this bench-altar is similar in function to the one that held the mortal remains of Pakal at Palenque, with the ancestors literally placed inside the hollow altar rather than portrayed in a niche or some other chthonic position on the outer surface.

The siting of the Chalcatzingo altar is also significant. It was erected (or reerected) in the late Middle Formative above an earlier house with subfloor burials. The altar was built into a wall that is part of a rectangular sunken patio. Although the patio was not roofed, its general form, with the bench-altar against the middle of the far wall, evokes the arrangement of a bench-altar along the wall of a Maya elite residence. Furthermore, there were other burials under the patio floor, such as normally would have occurred under the floor of a dwelling (Fash 1987). Thus, the patio with its altar mimicked the form and some of the functions of a residence and was likely associated with a high-status kin group that utilized the area over a long period.

On the basis of the Maya analogy, I suggest that the Olmec stone altars represented ancestral altars at the same time that they may have functioned as, or replicated, bench-type thrones for the highest-ranked personages. Their earth-associated motifs are entirely in keeping with the notion that ancestors are coincident with the earth. The seated figure, resting in the doorway formed by the niche, seems remarkably like the Maya ancestor who sits in a doorway to the underworld and waits for his descendants to ritually visit him. Thus, the Olmec figure is more likely that of an ancestor, possibly the founder of an elite family group or one of its more notable members, rather than the current paramount (although the current paramount could have served as the model for the physiognomy of the ancestor, since at a certain conceptual level the living merge with the dead, as explained below).

This interpretation locates the "power" symbolized by these objects within their signifying sociocultural context, having to do with the authority that derives from maintaining ties to the past rather than simply from a decontextualized reading of their embedded motifs. The formal level of meaning of the symbols on the altar itself—contact with underworld beings and forces—is not rejected. However, this shaman-like action is projected farther into the past, referring not simply to the living ruler but to a putative ancestor who, by engaging in this act, is thought to have obtained for his descendants the rights to property and power. In that sense, an important aspect of the ruler's legiti-



macy—as derived from links to ancestral founders of corporate groups—is displayed in these artworks, even if the living ruler is not.

### Ancestors and the Seats of Houses

The Maya analogue helps to explain how the iconography of the artworks relates to the material correlates of power in the Olmec world. However, we are still missing information on the probable behaviors associated with the altars by which agents negotiated their meanings. How did their function as seats, an object whose general form overlaps with that of the ancestral altar, help to communicate their associations with ancestors and legitimacy? This more difficult question of social context cannot confidently be answered here, especially with the dearth of relevant archaeological data concerning the Olmecs in general and their altars in particular. Nevertheless, an intriguing analogue is provided by another tropical forest people whose social group formation involved the use of similar objects to display the continuity of living family members to their deceased predecessors.

This analogy is drawn from the Tanimbar Islands of Eastern Indonesia (McKinnon 1991). Social organization in Eastern Indonesia is based on corporate kin groups of a type better described as a “house” than a lineage (e.g., Fox 1980). The Maya, and probably the earlier Olmecs, were also organized into houses (Gillespie and Joyce 1997). A key characteristic of a house is that its members acquire and maintain an estate over many generations, through both descent and marriage ties. The estate can include tangible property, such as land, water rights, and portable objects, as well as intangible property (Lévi-Strauss 1982:163–187).

In Tanimbar, houses that had acquired greater prestige and property are referred to as “noble” houses, although a class system is not implied by this usage. The estates of noble houses include significant tracts of farmlands and forests, as well as heirloomed valuables obtained from the house’s putative ancestors and from other houses as the result of marriage exchanges. The estates also include people, both affinal relatives in allied houses and subordinate commoners who are attached to the noble houses. The heads of the noble houses are expected to “sit” in their dwellings and “talk,” that is, adjudicate disputes relating especially to commoners. They are in charge of maintaining customary law, which it is their privilege to know because of their direct ties to their illustrious ancestors (McKinnon 1991:99–105).

Each of the noble houses of Tanimbar formerly possessed a beautifully fashioned ancestral altar, positioned within the dwelling of the head of the house (McKinnon 1991:92–94). One part was a carved wooden panel, the *tauu*, in the form of a human figure with upturned arms that seemingly supported the main roof beam of the dwelling. Atop this beam, just above the altar panel, were the ancestor statues, their bones, offerings to the ancestors, and the heirloomed valuables that belonged to the house and represented its prestige. The other part of the altar was a bench placed at the base of the wooden panel. To conduct a ritual or one of the protracted marriage exchange transactions, the

head of the house would sit on the bench. It was believed that the spirits of his ancestors would then travel down along the *tauu* and sit beside him. During these social and ritual events, the head of the house, by positioning himself on the bench, physically juxtaposed himself with the relics of his ancestors as well as their spirits, and in so doing, his persona represented the entire history of his house. The *tauu*, which functioned as a bridge between past and present, has therefore been described as “an image that *defies the distinction* between an individual ancestral source and the group of descendants who have issued forth from this source” (McKinnon 1991:92; emphasis added).

While the Tanimbar bench-altar can be considered a “powerful” object because it was directly connected to the supernatural domain, its larger importance derives from its functioning as a material symbol for the nonmaterial house. The altar represented the antiquity, noble status, social rank, and history of marital alliances of that house within the organization of the larger society. When the house head sat on his bench, his authority to speak derived from the fact that his seat represented his entire house through time, and it is in the (physical) house that power (as a concrete phenomenon) is concentrated. Similarly, I suggest that at least some Olmec altars were used as a literal seat by the head of a high-ranked house—headship itself likely being a negotiated position. Alternatively, the stone altars may have replicated—in a permanent and chthonic material—an actual seat made of organic materials situated within the space that corresponded to his dwelling or ancestral shrine. That is, like Pakal’s bench-sarcophagus at Palenque, stone altars may be an iconic representation of the real bench-altars of high-ranking Olmec houses, perhaps for display purposes in the public or ceremonial precincts of the centers. When an Olmec paramount sat upon his seat, he was placed in the physical position that facilitated his identification with his ancestors, while at the same time taking counsel from them, thereby endowing him with oracular or prophesying abilities similar to those attributed to later Maya rulers. He thereby invoked the authority of his noble house when he engaged in this behavior in highly ritualized settings, and *that* may be the key referent signified by this artifact. The bench-altar is a material symbol of specific actions made meaningful within the context of structure. Its multiple meanings were dependent on its use throughout its life history (including its ultimate mutilation and deposition), which entailed changing metonymic relationships with certain house members (living and dead), property, and history.

### Houses and History

The huge, enigmatic Olmec colossal heads, which have no formal equivalent in later Mesoamerican artworks, provide another example of how stone monuments were actively used to signify relationships and social identities. Interestingly, some of the colossal heads from San Lorenzo were re-carved from altars (Porter 1989), and the resculpting of monuments into new forms was not uncommon at that site (Cyphers Guillén 1993). As noted above, the colossal heads have generally been viewed as overlarge portraits of rulers

(the 17 known heads average over 2 m in height) to display in the most impressive way their individual facial features and their “names” via their headdresses. However, such representations focus attention not simply on the singular identity of the person so portrayed but also on the category of person he (or she)—there are a few depictions of women in Olmec artworks) represents and the actions he is performing. It is possible that the head was sculpted not just to portray an individual, to represent a category of “person” or to thereby manifest an ideal form of Olmec physiognomy (e.g., de la Fuente 1992:15) but also to wear the headdress. The headdress, rather than just the face, may also have been a focus of attention but was displayed in an active mode, being worn by someone. Although their headdresses are all different, there is some repetition in the facial features among colossal heads at a single Olmec center, suggesting that one person may have been shown with different headdresses and that not all headdresses functioned to name or identify their wearers (Grove 1981:67). This implies that the headdress signified more than just the individual who wore it, although the identity of that person was an important component of its value, and so both were shown in the sculptures.

Many, if not all, of these headdresses were probably real objects that were among the most treasured house valuables. The later Maya likewise prominently displayed headdresses in association with paramounts, ancestors, and gods. For example, the Palace Tablet (Robertson 1985b:54) and the Oval Palace Tablet at Palenque (Robertson 1985a:30) display the transfer of a prominent headdress from one putative ancestor to another. Both tablets were erected on the walls above a subsequent paramount’s bench-throne to associate his “seat of power” with the visualization of the history of his noble house, a history that claimed those ancestors and their property. Whether the Olmec colossal heads depict living men, recently dead, or long-dead ancestors, those artworks “narrated” the history of the headdresses, associating them with those individuals and the social categories they represented.

The stone heads themselves also likely functioned as wealth objects and heirlooms. Grove (1981:67) observed that La Venta Stela 2 depicts a man whose elaborate headdress incorporates a motif from one of the earlier colossal heads, and he suggested that by using this motif the personage shown on the stela was demonstrating his descent from an ancestor portrayed on the colossal head. Grove further proposed that the presumed descendant moved that particular head to position it next to his stela portrait, a resignification of the earlier monument in a singular act of agency. It is also possible that descendant *per se* was not the principal concern; rather, the personage was claiming for himself the right to own and display a particular item of property. This is effectively the same message—the tie to the past is reified by demonstrating the ownership of heirlooms that are valuable precisely because they encapsulate “history.”

In Annette Weiner’s (1992) terminology, heirloomed house property is “inalienable”—it defines and thus partially coincides with a particular house, even if it no longer is owned by that house, because of its unique value derived from its individual history (see Lesure’s discussion [Chapter 3, this volume] on the life histories of inalienable wealth). This history is authenticated

by fictive or true genealogies or origin myths involving sacred ancestors and gods. Inalienable possessions move through space and time because they are subject to inheritance and exchange transactions, especially in the context of marriage alliances. Even though in the process, they “attract new meanings, fictitious memories, altered genealogies, and imagined ancestors . . . [what gives them] their fame and power is their authentication through an authority perceived to be outside the present,” and this is a “legitimizing force” (Weiner 1992:42). Thus, their value, continually negotiated in practice, requires not just that they be finely crafted or made of exotic materials but that they have a life history predicated on the actions of the dead as well as the living, one that is constantly undergoing revision. The value of the objects is relative to the rise and fall of prestige of the houses to which they are attached, and that is dependent on the social interactions of the living members of those houses.

The collectivity of the house, at a single point in time and through time (since its existence is keyed to its longevity, and by definition its *raison d’être* is the maintenance of an estate over generations), raises the issue of identifying the “agents.” Contributing to this issue is the potential conceptual merger of identities between living and deceased house members noted above for Indonesian Tanimbar that may be characteristic of societies, such as those in Mesoamerica, in which reversible rather than nonreversible time predominates as an organizing principle. The kinds of distinctions we would make between ancestors and descendants—beings who are temporally as well as substantively different—are not necessarily applicable. As noted in the introduction, Marilyn Strathern (1981:168) has called attention to the Western “cultural obsession” that “views the person as a political entity (‘in his/her own right’) with interests opposed to those of society,” thereby treating the category of “person” as a “culturally constituted moral entity, one defined by its potential autonomy and independence from others like it,” and pointed out that while Western notions of personhood assign “individuals” to this category, notions of the person in other societies do not. More generally, as Sahlin (1985:59) cautioned, we should be wary of ascribing “our own ideas of the individuality of event and experience” to happenings that transpire in other societies.

In contrast to previous hypotheses, I therefore suggest that Olmec art, both because of and despite its use of portraiture, transcended the individual and his unique identity. Although the monuments may have been modeled on living persons, it is possible that some of them were meant to represent ancestors who were conceptually equatable—on certain salient occasions—with their living descendants. Moreover, individuals are temporary, but the actions they perform, or are remembered as performing, outweigh and outlive them and can continue to provide a source for meaning long after the portrayed individuals have ceased to be (Gillespie 1997). These material symbols represent in a concretized form—for display purposes, ritual activities, exchange transactions, and ultimately to be cached in the hidden recesses of an ancestral shrine—the history of houses as corporate groups that emerged out of the actions of their members but which themselves could have functioned at a

level of “personhood”; in his definition of the term, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987:152) characterized the house as a *personne morale*. This history (remembered and reconstructed) was tied to social ranking, supernatural access, and the maintenance of an estate that included considerable material property and the lineage of commoners, all of which were manifestations of power.

Individual humans acted as agents, of course, and with the monumental art, Olmec (and Maya) archaeologists have the potential to recognize some of their discrete actions. Such information may ultimately be useful for reconstructing the chronological events of human agency by which structure was transformed (i.e., culture was changed). At the same time, the self-definition of those agents was contextually based on their linkages to other beings (some real, some mythical) and to other social groupings. Allowing for the mediation of structure means that their motivations and self-identities cannot be viewed in isolation from those linkages so that, at a certain level, even where individual actors can be identified, agency is more productively viewed from the perspective of a collectivity.

## Conclusions

The portraiture preserved in Olmec monuments and other artworks has long been the focus for investigating the rise of sociopolitical inequality in Mesoamerica. From these depictions scholars have derived the past actions and motivations of powerful agents and have sought thereby to understand the source of their power. The subsequent formal development of practice or agency theories should correct the overemphasis on the individual that is implicated in such interpretations by considering the dialectic of actors within the medium of structure, which signifies as well as emerges from their actions. The obligation to understand action within structure should carry with it the awareness that imposing our analytic definitions of basic concepts—such as *power*, *time*, and *individual*—may unwittingly override the role of historically contingent structures in the practice/structure duality and may unnecessarily limit the definition of *agent*.

In trying to understand the nature of Olmec rulership, there has been too much emphasis on “reading” the monuments and portable artifacts as “texts” in isolation from their archaeological and social contexts. Their meanings were thought to be inherent and essential, even though competing interpretations of the origins of Olmec inequality were derived from varying readings of the same artworks. On the one side, in the *objective* view, the portraits are believed to demonstrate the tendency for the head of the highest-ranking corporate group to want to display his control over resources and labor by commissioning the erection of monuments to himself or his illustrious ancestors. On the other side, the *symbolic* view posits that the ruler used the artworks to display his exclusive access to supernatural power through his ancestors, who were themselves powerful because they were past heads of the highest-ranking families. The subtext shared by both viewpoints is that power ulti-

mately depends on the emergence of ranked corporate groups organized according to real or fictive kinship principles tied to ancestor veneration.

This chapter has not dealt with the origins of ranking or with the source of power in the indigenous conceptualization, but it has suggested how social inequality was conceived and negotiated by agents in practice, specifically in certain social contexts associated with two types of Olmec material symbols, altars and colossal heads. Reconstructing such experiences in order to take advantage of practice theories is acknowledged to be difficult; nevertheless, archaeological and ethnographic analogies provide models that can serve as a “method of inquiry” (Wolf 1990:591), raising possibilities not previously envisioned. In the interpretation suggested here, the Olmec altar as a “seat of power” was an elaborate marker of the social identity of houses that controlled material resources and labor as part of their estates (the *objective* side of the display of power). It also represented a house’s right to its estate and its high rank as derived from the continuity of its connections to its ancestors in the supernatural domain (the *symbolic* side), connections that had to be ritually maintained through actions that resignified those linkages.

The symbolic component of the altars and colossal heads further indicates a certain use of history as a mode of ideology, in that legitimacy was supported by references to the past. Some of those references took the form of stories that related how persons in the past interacted with supernatural beings. The ownership of those stories was part of the house estate, and the living house members retained them in order to link themselves to their ancestral origins and uphold the value of their property. The histories of the Olmec houses were apparently so requisite to the negotiation of social rank and the exercise of political authority that ultimately decisions were made to depict that history in a narrative fashion and a costly permanent form, requiring the labor of hundreds of people to import the massive basalt boulders to do so.

The Olmec paramounts managed to move beyond the objectification of history through the use of house valuables that were proof of the house’s antiquity and prestige and that were curated or transferred, depending on the circumstances presented by marriage or other social transactions. With the sculptures they had the means to literally depict history itself on a monumental scale, to show the ancestors with certain heirlooms. Thus, the stone carvings were material components in a continuous process of competitive negotiations among agents who acted not just on their own behalf but as members of houses, which thereby extended their social definition beyond the boundaries set by their physiological and psychological singularities. The monuments were activated in social rituals, recarved, mutilated, or reused, and some were intentionally “terminated”—cached, mutilated, or destroyed (Grove 1981). All of these practices not only reified their meanings but could also divest them of previous values and endow them with new ones. It is in this more dynamic sense, in which human agency is played out within the context of structure, that the ideology of Olmec legitimacy can be said to have been preserved for us to “read” in their monuments.

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