

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DRAWINGS AS RE-PRESENTATIONS: THE MAPS OF COMPLEX A, LA VENTA, MEXICO

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Scientific drawings, including maps, are increasingly recognized as theory-laden media for conveying information. The degree to which this quality impacts archaeological interpretations is revealed in the history of the published maps of La Venta, a Formative period Mesoamerican regional center. La Venta is pivotal to understanding the Olmec culture of Mexico's Gulf Coast, yet archaeological knowledge is based primarily on one small portion of the site, Complex A, excavated in 1955. Since destroyed, Complex A is now known especially through visual representations. A review of the Complex A maps in the original field report and subsequent publications demonstrates how these technical drawings have sometimes superseded the textual excavation data in generating and disseminating archaeological knowledge. Over time the maps have become more schematic and misleading, impeding understandings of La Venta and its role in regional cultural manifestations. Reliance on totalizing plan maps has led most archaeologists to overlook the 1955 excavators' major interpretations of the construction history of Complex A. However, the 1955 conclusions regarding the longevity of the formal design rules of the complex, reiterated by later archaeologists precisely because they are clearly visible in plan maps, are less well supported by the stratigraphic evidence.

Los dibujos científicos, incluyendo mapas, son cada vez más reconocidos como medios con carga teórica que comunican información. El grado en que la calidad de los mismos impacta las interpretaciones arqueológicas, es revelado en la historia de los mapas publicados de La Venta, un gran centro regional del período Formativo en Mesoamérica. La Venta es fundamental para el entendimiento de la cultura olmeca de la costa del Golfo de México, más sin embargo, el conocimiento arqueológico está basado casi completamente en una pequeña parte del sitio, el Complejo A, excavado en 1955. Ahora destruido, el Complejo A es conocido principalmente por varias representaciones visuales. Una revisión de los mapas del Complejo A en el informe original de campo y en las publicaciones subsecuentes, demuestra cómo estos dibujos técnicos a veces han sobrepasado en la generación y diseminación del conocimiento arqueológico, a los datos de excavación presentados en forma de texto. Con el tiempo los mapas se han hecho más esquemáticos y engañosos, impidiendo el entendimiento del papel de La Venta en las manifestaciones culturales regionales. En particular, la confianza en los mapas ha conducido a algunos arqueólogos a pasar por alto las interpretaciones más importantes que hicieron los arqueólogos en 1955 sobre la historia de la construcción del Complejo A. Las conclusiones de 1955 en cuanto a la longevidad de los principios del diseño formal del Complejo han sido reiteradas por arqueólogos posteriores precisamente porque son claramente visibles en los planos del sitio, aunque dichas interpretaciones han demostrado no ser apoyadas del todo por la evidencia estratigráfica.

This article considers how maps as visualization devices shape the production and dissemination of archaeological knowledge. Recent critiques in archaeology (e.g., Bradley 1997; Jones 2001; Molyneux 1997; Moser 1992, 1998, 2001; Moser and Gamble 1997; Piggott 1978; Smiles and Moser 2005; Van Dyke 2006; Van Reybrouck 1998; Webmoor 2005), some drawing on science and technology studies (e.g., Latour 1988a, 1988b, 2005), have discussed the subjective and ideological aspects of the images that are

part of archaeologists' "visual language" (Moser and Gamble 1997:185). As Moser and Smiles observe, "We now routinely accept that no pictorial device can be a transparent illustration of the world, but instead deploys technical devices, formal conventions, and ideological assumptions to orchestrate meaning" (2005:1). Archaeologists thus need to consider not merely how technical illustrations should properly be made but also "how they function in science" (Van Reybrouck 1998:57), endowed with a certain agency to produce and

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communicate knowledge (see Moser 1992, 1988, 2001; Moser and Gamble 1997; more generally Latour 1986, 2005:76; Law and Whittaker 1988).

Although these concerns apply to virtually all archaeological illustrations, the case of La Venta, a major prehispanic Olmec regional center in Mexico, is particularly noteworthy because knowledge of the site has been so strongly influenced by graphic renderings of its mound architecture. The published La Venta site maps and stratigraphic drawings do not well represent the complex archaeological evidence detailed in the excavation reports (Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959). Nevertheless, the maps and perspective drawings from the 1955 excavations at La Venta's Complex A have tended to replace, and not just supplement, much of the other archaeological information as a medium of scientific and public communication. Why this is so deserves some explanation, grounded in the properties of archaeological mapmaking and the history of excavations and interpretations of La Venta.

Scientific Drawings

Since the Renaissance, realistic likenesses of phenomena have come to be treated as "representations," mobile media that seem to render present that which is absent (Latour 1988b:24). However, no object can simply be reduced to another; some complexity is lost in the transference (Latour 1988a:158). Furthermore, archaeologists must be trained in "particular ways of seeing" in order to recognize the traces of past peoples in depictions as well as in field settings (Bradley 1997:62–63). Like other sciences, archaeology has developed conventions for crafting illustrations and other visualization devices (e.g., Dillon 1985; Griffiths and Jenner 1990; Steiner 2005). Adherence to these conventions is necessary to garner the confidence of the scientific community in one's findings and interpretations (Van Reybrouck 1998:60).

Moreover, these images are presentations of theories as much as they are depictions of objects or forms (Moser 1992:831, 837). Scientific illustrations more generally have been characterized as simplified, economical, and "docile" media that "speak on behalf" of the unwieldy reality they represent (Law and Whittaker 1988:160–161); as a result, the complexity of that reality is often

neglected (Latour 1986:17–18). Following this metaphor, potential information rendered absent from the images has been "silenced" (Law and Whittaker 1988:161). For example, Jones (2001:352) has observed that the common practice in archaeological illustration of grouping drawings of artifacts from different places and time periods on a single page contributes to their "atemporalization," as the variations that emerged from their manufacture, use, or deposition at different time frames are obviated by the static "two-dimensionality of the page" on which they are arrayed.

Much of the recent questioning of the role of images in archaeology has concerned illustrations of artifacts and pictorial imaginings of life in the past as paintings, museum displays, or video documentary reconstructions, but similar critiques have been extended to maps and related drawings of spatial relationships of landforms. Modern cartography developed in concert with the innovation of linear perspective in Renaissance visual arts and emergent capitalist political economies, both of which contributed to a new "way of seeing" the landscape that distanced the observer from the land (Cosgrove 1985). Although both landscape paintings and maps derived from these same beginnings, they eventually came to be seen as separate products: paintings are considered subjective, qualitative, and evocative, while maps are treated as quantitative and objective, more "science" than "art" (Alpers 1983:124). This conventional contrast between the two media is increasingly challenged today, as maps are recognized as types of pictures "privileging . . . a particular conceptual scheme" (Turnbull 1993:15). The oft-assumed neutrality attributed to instrument-made maps is negated by the selectivity inherent in any map, the filter of mapmaking conventions, and the roles maps play in spatial politics (e.g., Bender 1999; Bradley 1997:70; Duncan and Ley 1993:1; Harley 1988, 1992; Law and Whittaker 1988; Thomas 2001:169; Turnbull 1993:5–6).

Among the criticisms specifically directed to archaeological maps is the static and "totalizing vision" (Thomas 1993:25) they produce. Maps and plan views usually adopt "a bird's eye—*lord's eye*—view of the world . . . [registering] a palimpsest of past activities" (Bender 1999:31; emphasis in original) that contributes to the "atemporalization" of spatial features. The map reader is

often provided only the outlines (footprints) of three-dimensional structures, their relative height (or depth) having been disregarded or inadequately referenced (Bradley 2003:163). Because maps distance viewers from landforms, they make it difficult to comprehend how the original inhabitants of a locale experienced and shaped their landscapes. The temporality of the use and modification of landscape features as well as their material, sensual, and aesthetic qualities are usually silenced.

In drawing upon this body of criticism to investigate the limitations of the maps and related drawings of La Venta, this study investigates that component of the “archaeological record” composed of reports (following Patrik 1985:29–30). Over 50 years ago Laet argued that the critical evaluation of “the results of the most notable excavations made in the past” was an archaeological task equal in importance to “research into the ground for new evidence” of human activities (1957:81; see Patrik 1985:30). However, in such investigations visual devices have tended to receive less scrutiny than textual presentations of archaeological information, because the former are usually “not ascribed with enough power to merit critical examination” (Moser and Smiles 2005:6). Their seeming ability to hide their power to influence the viewer, who then does not think to question them, serves to increase that power (following Miller 2005:5). When these images are technical drawings, presumed to be objective visual representations of structures and strata created with the use of measuring instruments, their ability to evade scrutiny is further enhanced. Maps, in particular, “to have authority in Western society, must have the appearance of ‘artless-ness’”; their embedded conventions “must be so well accepted as to be almost invisible” (Turnbull 1993:6). Because they have the capability to “deny or suppress the point of view” that motivates and shapes them (Turnbull 1993:15), maps should be more carefully analyzed in terms of the decisions and conventions that went into their making.

The Significance of the La Venta Maps

One of “the most notable excavations made in the past” was the 1955 Smithsonian Institution–National Geographic Society project directed by Philip Drucker and Robert Heizer at Complex A,

a small grouping of low clay platforms within the site of La Venta, located near the Gulf Coast in Tabasco state, Mexico (Drucker et al. 1959). La Venta was the premier center of the Olmec culture and likely the most important regional capital in non-Maya Mesoamerica during the Middle Formative period (ca. 900–500 B.C.), a time of emergent regional political formations. It is long thought to have influenced the political and cultural development of other central Mexican settlements as well as nascent Maya centers (e.g., Drucker et al. 1959; González Lauck 1996). Although much more is now known about Olmec origins, cultural characteristics, and chronology from survey and excavations at other sites (reviews in Diehl 2004; Grove 1997; Pool 2007), La Venta is still the linchpin for understanding the Middle Formative Olmec phenomenon.

This is a heavy burden of significance for a site about which so little is known. Although there have been some mapping and excavation projects at La Venta since 1955 (notably González Lauck 1988, 1997; Heizer et al. 1968a), the 1959 report on the 1955 Complex A stratigraphic excavations continues to serve as a principal source for knowledge of the site’s archaeology and chronology. Unfortunately, that report presents many interpretive difficulties, some of which were detailed in a pointed but little-read critique by Coe and Stuckenrath (1964) soon after its publication. In prepublication correspondence to Heizer, William Coe wrote that his criticism was actually directed against unnamed archaeologists who, he said, misused the 1959 report.¹ They never bothered to read it carefully or concern themselves with the excavation details despite the fact that La Venta was such an important site (Coe and Stuckenrath 1964:2).

In questioning the conclusions reached by the 1955 archaeologists, Coe and Stuckenrath (1964) detailed the difficulties they encountered correlating the excavation information presented textually with that depicted in the maps and drawings. I argue here that, in part as a consequence of this incommensurable relationship, the maps and perspective drawings of Complex A came to substitute for the dense descriptive archaeological data of the 1959 report in many interpretations of La Venta’s archaeology. Moreover, soon after that report was published, its complicated maps were replaced by simplified versions in subsequent publications on

the Olmecs, maps that were even further distanced from the primary data contained in the report.

To demonstrate in detail the interpretive difficulties of treating maps as “re-presentations,” this study reviews maps of Complex A especially in publications authored by experts in Olmec or Mesoamerican archaeology (notably Adams 1977, 1991; Bernal 1969; Coe 1968, 1977; Diehl 2004; Evans 2004; González Lauck 1988, 1994, 1996; Grove 1997; Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968; Pool 2007; Porter Weaver 1981; Willey 1966; this article cannot consider every published map of La Venta). These are the works to which other scholars and the public alike would turn for the best information. The published maps are briefly evaluated against the original field records of the 1955 La Venta project, which are housed among the Robert Fleming Heizer Papers at the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution in Suitland, Maryland. I am now incorporating some of this field-recorded information into new maps and depictions using visualization software not available in the 1950s but becoming standard today in archaeological practice and aesthetics.² The latter images are also created according to conventional “craft traditions” within archaeology (Bradley 1997) and cannot be granted greater objectivity, but they include some of the information lost when the 1955 drawings were prepared for publication.

The intent of this reevaluation of the “archaeological record” of Complex A is not to discredit the original excavators, an accusation lodged at Coe and Stuckenrath (1964) by Drucker and Heizer (1965). Neither is it meant as a treatise on map-making practices, although it is impossible to avoid commenting on how archaeological maps are generated to graphically represent a physical reality, and more discussion of this topic among archaeologists is needed (e.g., Webmoor 2005). The proximate objective is to reveal the latent influence of mapping conventions on archaeological interpretations via a chronological review of one very influential map and its cognates (compare to Kidder 2002). I argue that reliance on plan maps has led most archaeologists to overlook Drucker and Heizer’s important conclusions regarding Complex A’s construction history, even as it has overemphasized the excavators’ interpretation that Complex A was built in strict conformance with an original and long-lived formal design plan.

A brief description of Complex A based on excavations in the 1940s and 1950s is presented in the next section. The major goal of the 1955 project was to investigate the clay mound architecture, so the emphasis in this description is on the arrangement and modification of those structures. That section is followed by a review of how Complex A has been represented by totalizing plan maps in subsequent publications. Mapping conventions and restrictions imposed by print publication tended to introduce or exacerbate errors in depictions of the architecture and the excavation units. Stratigraphic profile drawings meant to supplement the plan maps, indicating how and when the individual structures and the complex as a whole were built and modified, have their own shortcomings, as detailed in the following section of the article. In the last section I argue that overreliance on plan maps and perspective drawings has led to the neglect of the ritually charged and materially implicated social practices that built Complex A over generations, information crucial to interpreting La Venta’s role in local and regional cultural manifestations. The ultimate objectives of this article are thus to direct archaeological attention toward alternative means for interpreting Complex A and similar sites and to consider the possibilities for creating imaging devices that more explicitly promulgate such interpretations.

La Venta Complex A

La Venta is an “island,” a narrow natural elevation approximately 4 km long north–south rising above the swamps on the coastal plain of Tabasco state just east of the Tonalá River and 15 km south of the modern Gulf of Mexico coastline (Drucker et al. 1959:8; González Lauck 1996:73, 2001:798; Figure 1). The archaeological site of the same name dominates the island’s center. The 1942 excavations at La Venta directed by Mathew Stirling and undertaken by Philip Drucker enabled archaeologists to finally assign a “homeland” for a style of mostly unprovenienced objects known across Mesoamerica (Drucker 1975:103). This style had been named Olmec by George Vaillant in 1932 (Coe 1965a:747), and La Venta became the type site of the Olmec civilization (Coe 1965b:686; Heizer 1959). Radiocarbon dates from the 1955 excavations demonstrated the antiquity of Olmec culture

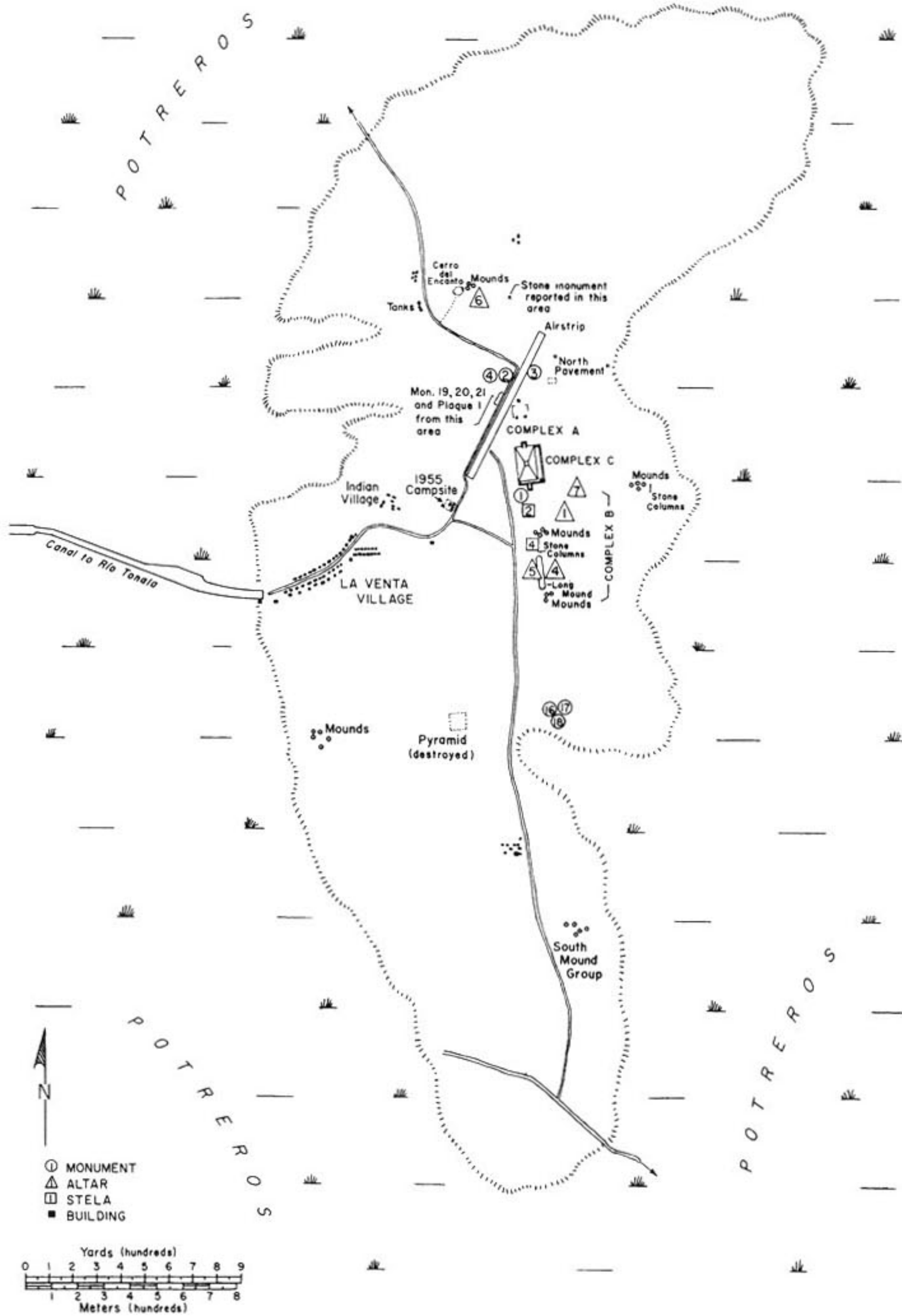


Figure 1. La Venta “island” amid the coastal swamps (labeled potreros) with some site features from the 1942 and 1943 excavations (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 2).

to the Formative period, ending a controversy over its possible contemporaneity with the later Classic Maya civilization (Coe 1965a:741). The impressive finds at La Venta established perceptions of

Olmec culture—its origins, characteristic features, and extent of influence—that have endured for over half a century (González Lauck 2007:49; Grove 1997:61).

Clues to the site's importance first came to light in a brief visit by Blom and La Farge (1926), who investigated several monumental stone carvings still evident on the surface near a great earthen pyramid over 30 m high. Stirling, of the Smithsonian Institution, made La Venta a priority in his long-range program of Olmec archaeology (Drucker 1947). Trenching excavations by Stirling and Drucker in 1942 and by Stirling and Waldo Wedel in 1943 revealed incredible discoveries in Complex A, a group of low clay mounds just north of the pyramid (Figure 2). These include Tomb A, an enclosure constructed of natural basalt columns; Tomb B, a great sandstone effigy coffer; two massive buried mosaic pavements made of hundreds of polished serpentine blocks in a formal design; and many small jade and serpentine objects carefully arranged in buried caches, referred to as "dedicatory offerings" (Drucker 1952, 1975; Stirling 1940, 1942, 1943a, 1943b; Stirling and Stirling 1942). All of the stone had to have been imported to La Venta from sources long distances away.

In 1955 a major archaeological project led by Drucker and Robert Heizer, published in 1959 by Drucker, Heizer, and Robert Squier (Drucker et al. 1959; see also Drucker and Heizer 1965, 1975), revealed more extraordinary buried objects. These include a third serpentine block mosaic overlaying many tons of layered serpentine chunks arranged in a deep pit, two other deep pits with layers of serpentine blocks at their bases, and a cache of standing greenstone figurines and celts (Offering 4). Some subsequent discussions of Olmec culture have tended to dwell on the apparent predilection at La Venta for acquiring and crafting costly stone objects only to bury them within a small ritual setting. Modern sensibilities consider it a wasteful practice, one that may reveal Olmec religious devotion, psychological eccentricities, or alternatively, political strategies of the ruling elites (e.g., Coe 1968:61, 63; Drucker and Heizer 1956:368, 1965; Gillespie 2006; Piña Chan 1989:187). Importantly, the 1955 excavations also highlighted the long history of ritual use of the Ceremonial Court. This is the name given to an area at the heart of Complex A partially enclosed by a wall of vertically positioned pieces of columnar basalt.

For decades Complex A with the adjacent great pyramid (Complex C) represented the site of La Venta. Eventually Complex B south of the pyra-

mid and other nearby clay structures were cleared and mapped (González Lauck 1988; Heizer et al. 1968c), revealing a large civic-ceremonial core defined by platform mounds and monumental stone sculptures in an area that may originally have covered some 200 ha (González Lauck 1996:75). However, despite La Venta's undoubted importance, little else within the civic-ceremonial core has been excavated (González Lauck 1996:76; Rust 2008; Rust and Sharer 1988). Thus archaeologists continue to rely on the Complex A discoveries to characterize La Venta as a whole (e.g., Bernal 1969; Coe 1965b, 1968; Diehl 2004; Evans 2004; González Lauck 1994, 1996; Pool 2007; Reilly 1994, 1999, 2002; Soustelle 1979; Tate 1999, 2001, 2008). Because Complex A exhibits many unique or rare features, the dependence on this one small ritual precinct for knowledge of La Venta specifically, and the Olmecs more generally, is problematic (Diehl and Coe 1995:17).

Unfortunately, Complex A was badly destroyed by looting and occupation activities after the 1955 project ended (Drucker and Heizer 1965:63, 1975:389). As Heizer later observed, Complex A "has been so torn up by bulldozers that no surface feature whatsoever exists that can be identified as being present in 1955. *The 1955 map of Complex A, therefore, is the best we will ever have*" (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968:139; emphasis added). With the destruction of the surface architecture, the 1955 map was given the daunting responsibility not only to "re-present" Complex A but actually to replace it (paraphrasing Van Reybrouck 1998:62).

The Structures and Design Plan of Complex A

Explaining how Complex A was built and transformed over time was a major goal of the 1955 project (Drucker and Heizer 1965:63).³ However, with so much public and archaeological attention devoted to the numerous exotic artifact finds, it was difficult to convince other archaeologists of the importance of the structures themselves (see Coe and Stuckenrath 1964). These were not impressive masonry pyramids, although some facades had been embellished with worked stone. They were low clay platforms, relatively shapeless and damaged by pitting and erosion. The architecture had to be visually represented primarily by maps and related drawings because photographs could not capture the totality of any individual structure. Most

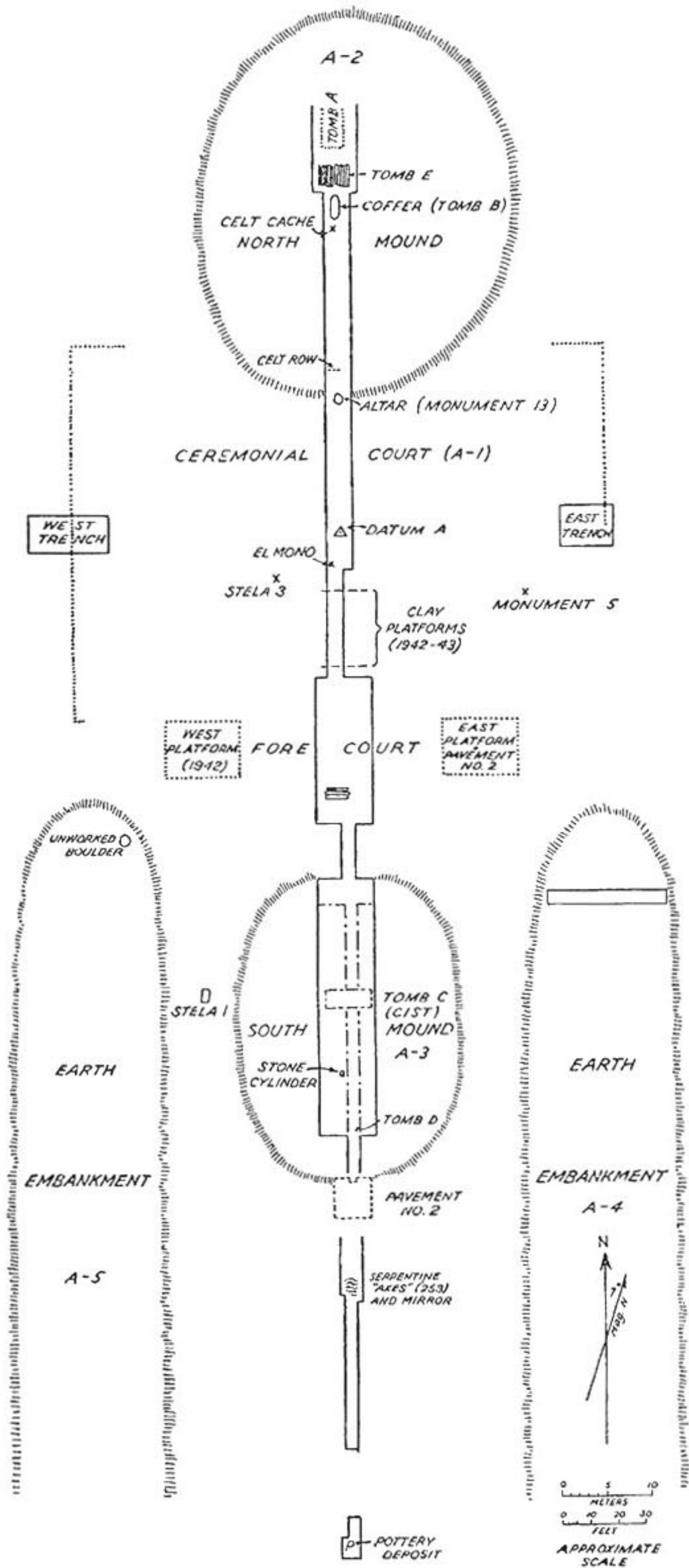


Figure 2. Map of Complex A accompanying Waldo Wedel's report of the 1943 excavations (Drucker 1952:Figure 14).

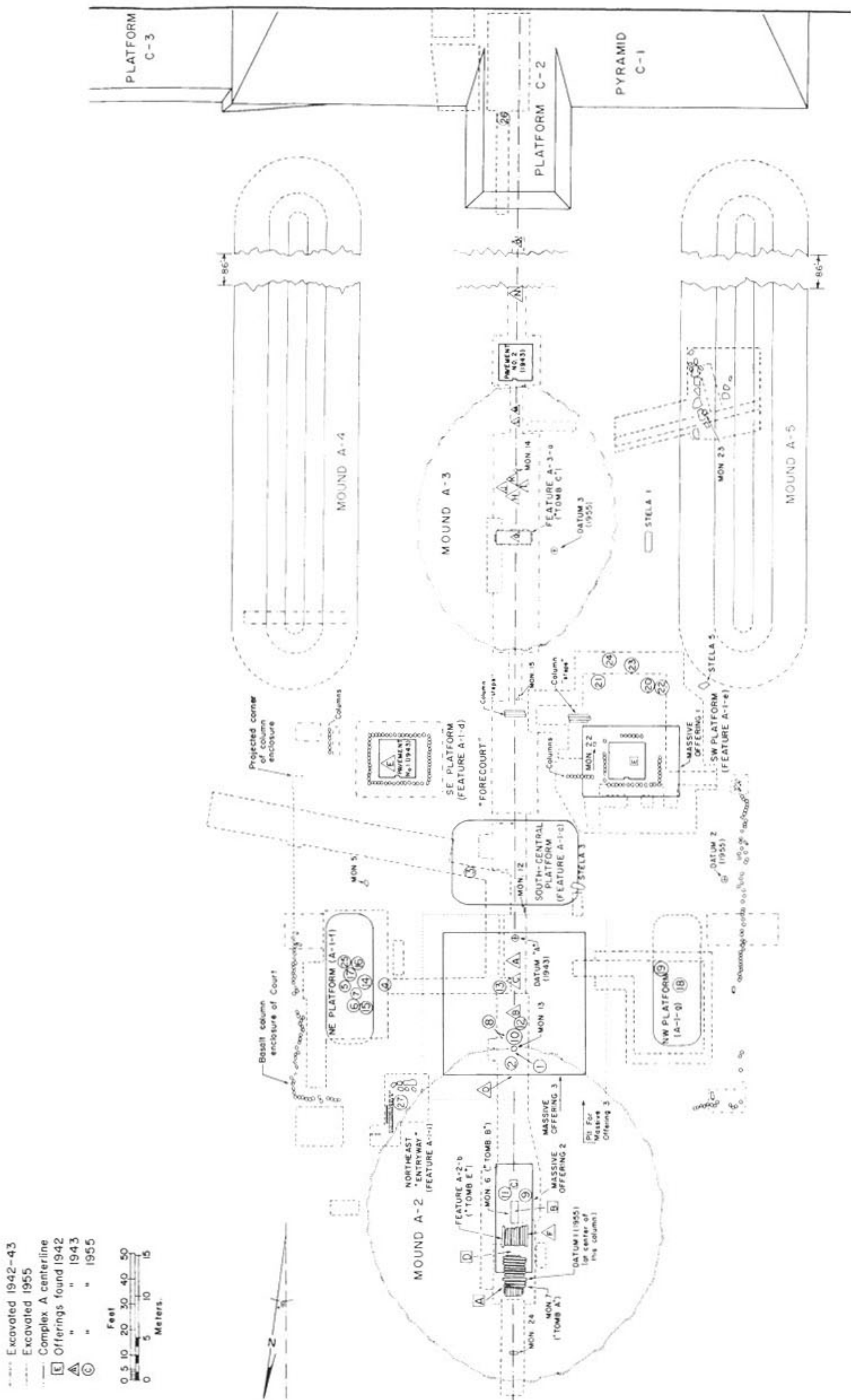


Figure 3. Plan map of Complex A (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4).

of the structures and the massive pits associated with them were too large or incompletely excavated to show well in photos, while the shortest platforms were covered with overburden and revealed only in trenches. In other words, because so much of the physical reality of Complex A was unwieldy and not fully visible to the naked eye, increasing authority was given to the technical drawings (see Latour 1986:18). Furthermore, the color differences among the strata necessary to understand the construction history could not be well discerned in the published black-and-white photographs and drawings (in Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959).

The 1955 plan map shows that Complex A exhibits a formal design with a pronounced north-south orientation and east-west bilateral symmetry (Drucker et al. 1959:14; Figure 3). This symmetry is unique among the La Venta building complexes and is considered unusual for Olmec ceremonial centers (Adams 1991:59; Diehl 1981:78; González Lauck 1996:76; Tate 2008:38). Three platform pairs are arranged east and west of a virtual north-south centerline that bisects the central Mounds A-2 and A-3, the rectangular Ceremonial Court, the South-Central Platform, and the pyramid at the southern end of Complex A. The 1942, 1943, and 1955 excavations opened a wide north-south trench along the centerline from north of Mound A-2 to the northern limits of the pyramid. This trench revealed many buried offerings placed along the centerline, including three of the five massive offerings—the pavements made of layers of serpentine blocks—and five tombs designated A, B, C, D, and E (Drucker 1952:Figure 14).⁴

Excavations also determined that the area of the Ceremonial Court had been artificially leveled and walled with a low clay embankment principally on the east and west sides. This wall was later greatly enlarged with adobe bricks, embellished with rows of facing stones. It was further heightened by the erection of naturally occurring columnar basalts, fitted close together along the inside of the brick wall, enclosing an area 57.3 m (188 ft) east-west x 41.15 m (135 ft) north-south (Drucker et al. 1959:8). The Ceremonial Court was designated Feature A-1, consisting of the wall (Feature A-1-a), the built-up floors within it (Feature A-1-b), and the stone-embellished Northeast Entryway (Feature A-1-i). Twinned square adobe platforms on the

southern boundary of the Ceremonial Court were first called the East and West Bastions and later renamed the Southeast Platform (Feature A-1-d) and Southwest Platform (Feature A-1-e). Excavations in 1955 exposed the low Northeast (Feature A-1-f), Northwest (Feature A-1-g), and South-Central Platforms (Feature A-1-c, at first called a stile) within the Ceremonial Court (Drucker et al. 1959:10–11).⁵

The 1955 excavations uncovered evidence of a series of modifications, summarized in terms of four major construction phases (I–IV) for the Ceremonial Court as a whole (Drucker et al. 1959:121–127). Each architectural stratum as well as the massive and dedicatory offerings and carbon samples were assigned to one of these phases. The construction phases were distinguished by the buildup of floor series that extended throughout the court. The water-sorted floors were laid first (I), followed by the white sandy floors (II), the old rose floors (III), and finally a deposit of red clay (IV). The red clay also covered Mounds A-3, A-4, and A-5 south of the Ceremonial Court and Mound A-2 to the north. The three earlier floor series consisted of multiple thin layers of colored clays and sands, alternating with episodes of clay fill brought in to raise the court floor. The court building phases also impacted modifications to Mounds A-2 and A-3 north and south (respectively) of the court, but Mounds A-4 and A-5 were dated only to the last building phase (IV).

Drucker and Heizer concluded that the Ceremonial Court was the “principal structural feature” of Complex A, built and modified over several centuries in a coordinated fashion, with the other platforms constituting its “adjuncts or appendages” (1965:39–40, 45). They were confident of “functional relationships” among the structures and demonstrable cultural continuity in the ritual practices associated with the Ceremonial Court from Phases I to IV (Drucker and Heizer 1965:63–64; Drucker et al. 1959:124; Heizer 1959:178–179). Furthermore, given the regular patterning exhibited by paired structures on either side of a virtual north-south line that bisected other platforms, they were “convinced of the reality of this centerline as a significant feature *in the planning and original layout of the site*” (Drucker et al. 1959:14; emphasis added). Importantly, they therefore interpreted the sociopolitical system of La Venta as centralized

and authoritarian from the beginning of the site's major occupation in order to have controlled the labor to build and maintain Complex A—“*retaining all the while adherence to the centerline orientation and symmetrical arrangement of features relative to it*” (Drucker 1981:32; emphasis added; see Drucker 1981:32–36; Drucker et al. 1959:269–270; Heizer 1960:218, 1961:46, 1962). In other words, they believed that a formal site plan with a north–south centerline and resulting east–west bilateral symmetry was implemented and maintained over centuries of use, requiring continuous centralized oversight of this ritual landscape. Labor control was also implicated by the huge quantities of imported stone and the construction of the great pyramid (whose building phases remain unknown), but it was more subtly evident in the constant upkeep of the Ceremonial Court, which required caretakers to continually remove wind-borne sand and rainwater (Drucker and Heizer 1965:64).

In sum, important interpretations of La Venta's (and by extension, Olmec) sociopolitical organization, the role of religious ceremony in political life, and the extent and continuity of politico-economic power at the local and regional levels emerged from the excavators' emphasis on the Complex A architecture—its formal design plan, the patterned consistencies of the offerings, the incorporation of tons of imported stone (Drucker 1947:2–3), and the maintenance of religious practices and beliefs across its distinct construction phases (Drucker and Heizer 1965:63–65). Nevertheless, despite the emphasis by the 1955 project on architecture, Diehl (2004:67) recently observed that there has been little discussion of the history, technology, and ritual use of the Complex A structures (exceptions include Diehl 1981; Gillespie 2008). This is due to the fact that acceptance by the archaeological community of the 1955 interpretations was ultimately dependent upon the efficacy of the 1959 report (Drucker et al. 1959) to represent a ceremonial landscape that underwent both routine and dramatic modifications. The descriptive portion of the site report is replete with the minutia of stratigraphic details from the trenching operations, accompanied by 81 drawings and 63 photographic plates.⁶ The monograph was hailed at the time as “an outstanding example of archaeological description and interpretation, with excel-

lent plans, drawings, and photographs” (Coe 1960:119). In his review MacNeish used the same words: “The excavation of these features is described fully and illustrated by excellent plans, drawings, and photographs” (1960:296). Such glowing praise aside, the excavation report is not an easy read, and the accompanying plans and drawings have multiple problems (detailed below).

Field conditions required the excavators to abandon their original research design, which was to clear large horizontal exposures of structures by levels to reveal the changes to the complex over time. Instead, the excavators were forced to rely primarily on trenches to determine the stratigraphic history of the architecture (Drucker and Heizer 1965:38; Drucker et al. 1959:4). It has since proved impossible to correlate the modifications from one structure to another on a phase-by-phase basis from the descriptions and published stratigraphic drawings (see discussion below). For this and other reasons, Coe and Stuckenrath (1964) rejected the finding of cultural continuity at Complex A from Phases I to IV—a key conclusion of Drucker and Heizer (reiterated in Drucker and Heizer 1965:64–65). Interestingly, the major architectural changes by phase were depicted using a three-dimensional model of Complex A made for the widely disseminated 1963 film *The Excavations at La Venta* (and see phase-by-phase maps produced from the published data in Dehnhardt 2010:Figures 3.2–3.3; Gillespie 2008:Figures 6.3–6.6). Nevertheless, only one plan map of Complex A was published, and it incorporates data from all phases of its occupation and postabandonment (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4; see Figure 3). The implications of the theory-laden quality of this plan map (and cognate drawings) have generally gone unrecognized since the 1959 report.

Referred to as the 1955 map (see Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968:139, quoted above), its stylistic canons were influenced by earlier maps of La Venta, the ink drawing and lettering technology of the time, and publication restrictions. Over time the 1955 map underwent a series of changes due to the adoption of new mapping conventions and the addition of previously unknown structures to La Venta's civic-ceremonial core. These maps manifest a chain of relationships, as subsequent drawings were transformations of their predecessors. For example, certain aesthetic decisions implemented in ear-

lier maps, such as the use of hachures to outline Mounds A-2 and A-3, were repeated in later drawings whether or not they best represent the physical reality or best communicate archaeological interpretations of the mounds' forms.

In reviewing the trajectory of the Complex A map in the following section, I am less concerned with the technical aspects of mapping conventions and more with how the maps have promulgated theoretical positions and interpretations of La Venta and the Olmecs. My arguments focus on the increasing disregard for the Ceremonial Court and the collapsing of Complex A's construction history into a tangled palimpsest — consequences contrary to the 1955 excavators' major findings — as a result of misleading representations and simplifications.

Plan Views of Complex A

Early Maps

La Venta was mostly covered in thick scrub forest when it first came to archaeological attention (Blom and La Farge 1926:82; Drucker 1975:103). When Blom and La Farge briefly visited in 1925, only a portion of the site had been cleared for agriculture. They were more interested in stone carvings than architecture, and the pyramid was the only obvious structure. Nevertheless, they reported seeing the exposed tips of columnar basalt pieces placed vertically to form a line. This "fence" (which should indicate the edge of the Ceremonial Court) is shown on their sketch map as a series of dashed lines forming a partial enclosure north of the pyramid (Figure 4). The pyramid was given a stepped rectangular form with a ramp on its south side (Blom and La Farge 1926:82, Figure 68).

More complete maps of Complex A were made in the early 1940s. In the 15 years since Blom and La Farge's visit, the area was no longer under cultivation, and the entire site was covered with thick vegetation, making it difficult to discern the sizes and shapes of the mounds (Drucker 1952:22). Artist Miguel Covarrubias visited La Venta between 1940 and 1942, and in his 1946 book on his travels he (1946:91) published a sketch map of the site drawn from memory. His map also incorporates information provided to him by Stirling based on the 1942 and 1943 excavations. The 1943 project produced

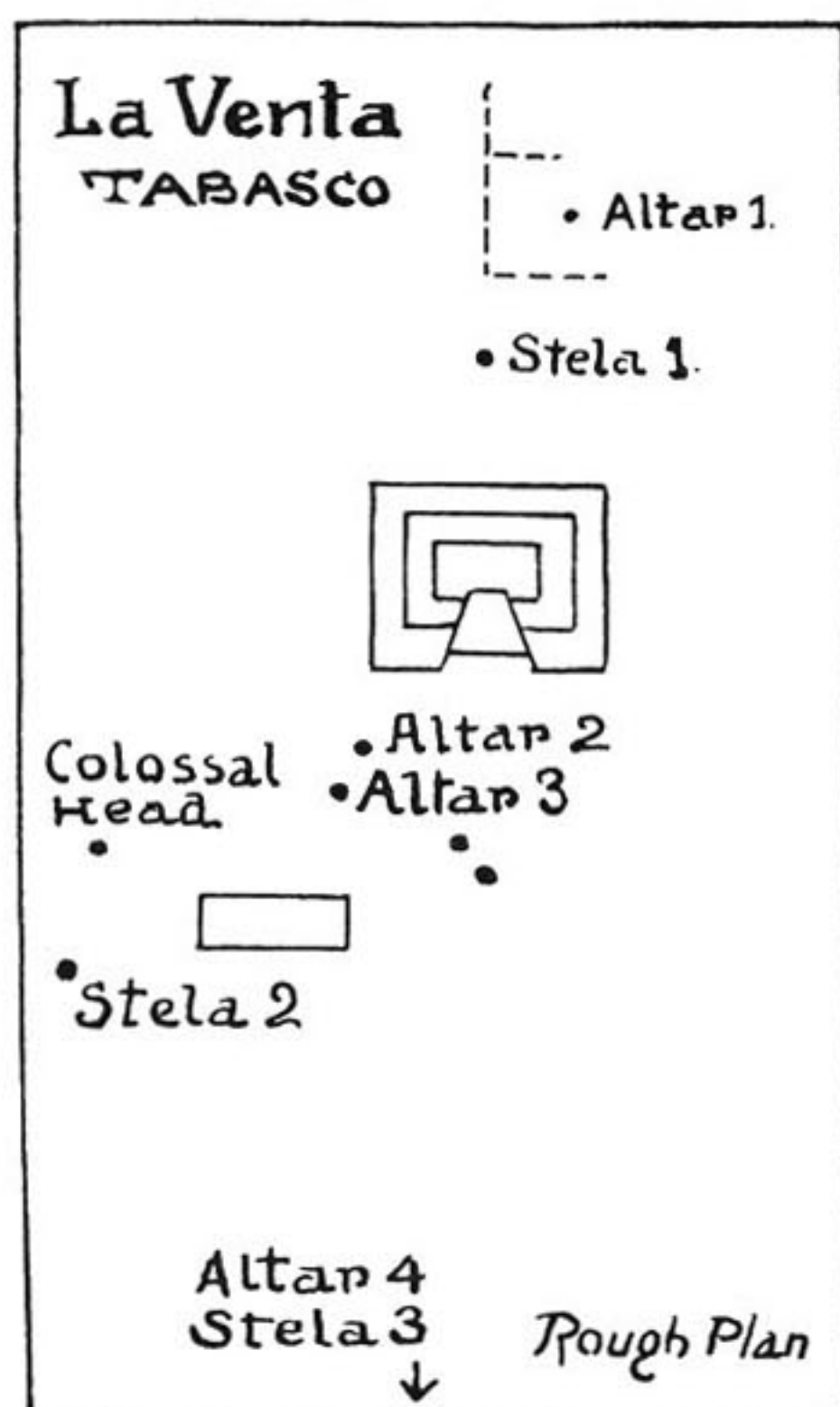


Figure 4. "Rough plan" of La Venta made by Blom and La Farge in 1925 (Blom and La Farge 1926:Figure 68). (Courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana).

a site map (Figure 2) that accompanied Wedel's report of the Complex A discoveries, not published until 1952 (Drucker 1952:Figure 14). Drucker (1952:22), who first investigated Complex A in 1942, described the Ceremonial Court at that time as an elevated rectangle about 1.5 m high bounded on its east and west sides by basalt columns. However, on the map accompanying the 1943 report this enclosure was shown only as an incomplete line of dots representing the tops of the fence of columns and not as a raised platform (Drucker 1952:Figure 14). The 1946 Covarrubias sketch map also shows the line of columns as dots, but in an idealized state enclosing the entire Ceremonial Court.

Drucker (1952) also described the above-surface structures of Complex A based on his 1942 investigations. Mound A-2 was a gently sloping, rounded mound about 4 m above the modern ground surface and 2.5 m higher than the level of the Ceremonial Court. In its eroded state Mound A-2 had an oval footprint (Drucker 1952:9, 22). Mound A-3, south of the Ceremonial Court, was

an elliptical knoll rising only 1.5 to 2.5 m (Drucker 1952:34). Forming the corners of the southern edge of the Ceremonial Court, the East and West Bas-tions (Southeast and Southwest Platforms) were square in shape, 8 m on a side and 1.5 to 2 m high (Drucker 1952:9). On Wedel's and Covarrubias's maps these last two structures are indicated by the square-shaped enclosures formed of basalt columns on their top surfaces.

The Covarrubias and Wedel maps depicted surface features to which some of the 1942 and 1943 archaeological finds had been added. Lower structures, including the adobe brick court wall, were buried by drift sand (Drucker and Heizer 1965:38), and the three platforms within the court, less than 1 m high, were not delineated until the 1955 excavations. Despite the impression one might get from the maps of the prominence we associate with monumentality, these clay structures were characterized by Drucker and Heizer as "little bumps in and around the Court" (1965:39).

The 1955 Map

The 1940s maps were generally superseded by the 1959 publication of the instrument-made 1955 excavation map. That map was published in three different versions (Drucker et al. 1959:Frontispiece, Figures 3–4). In the 1950s the pyramid still had not been cleared, so its form was uncertain. It was depicted as quadrangular—as in the earlier sketches of Covarrubias and of Blom and La Farge—by Squier, a research assistant of Heizer's at the University of California, Berkeley, who was in charge of mapping operations (Drucker et al. 1959:4; see Squier 1964:Figure 4).⁷

Figure 4 of the 1959 publication (Figure 3) is a black-and-white foldout plan map, approximately 45.72 x 30.48 cm (18 x 12 in). It includes a great deal of excavation information and is referred to here as the "base map." Most structures are indicated as outlines (footprints), but either relative height or stepped form is indicated uniquely for Mounds A-4 and A-5 by the use of concentric ovals. Outlines of the Southeast and Southwest Platforms and the court wall are not shown. The court itself does not appear to be a raised area, although two sets of horizontally laid columnar basalts that functioned as steps leading up to the court's elevated floor are indicated on its south side (see Drucker 1952:Plate 12a). Also shown on the base map are

schematic, rectified outlines of the excavation units from the different projects in 1942–1943 and 1955; the locations of stone sculptures ("monuments" and stelae); five massive offerings or "pavements" of serpentine blocks; and the small dedicatory offerings. These last are depicted via symbols (circle, triangle, square) to differentiate the finds according to their excavation year. A simplified version of the base map was separately presented as Figure 3 in the 1959 report. It depicts only the structures and the general location of the major stratigraphic profiles published elsewhere in the report, although the profiles in the Southwest Platform are misleading. A comparison of the two maps (Drucker et al. 1959:Figures 3–4) in the site report reveals that the architecture is not identically drawn in both.⁸

In addition to these two plan views, the 1959 publication includes a perspective drawing of Complex A with the pyramid (Drucker et al. 1959:Frontispiece) that is visually more appealing despite imperfect perspective (Figure 5). The relative size of the pyramid is misrepresented, because at over 30 m high atop a basal platform, it should have been drawn much taller. Features of the perspective drawing are more similar to the site report's simple map (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 3) than to the complicated base map. However, it provides data not found in either of the plan maps. Importantly, only in the perspective drawing is the wall of the Ceremonial Court depicted as a raised structure several meters wide. On the plan map the wall appears incomplete because it is represented only by the basalt columns, which are indicated by irregular lines of circles symbolizing their top surfaces as seen in bird's-eye view (comparable to the lines of dots in the 1943 map). These Phase IV columns were erected against the inner surface of the Phase II brick wall, and they never completely lined those walls (Drucker et al. 1959:15, 25–26).⁹

The 1955 base map was created for the most part from instrument measurements (alidade[?] and plane table) recorded by Squier to construct his field Map 2 of the architecture and Map 3 of the excavation units.¹⁰ The published plans and profiles were drawn by Eduardo Contreras, a Mexican archaeologist who participated in the excavations and produced the ink drawings in 1956 at the University of California, Berkeley, under Heizer's supervision (Drucker et al. 1959:3). Con-

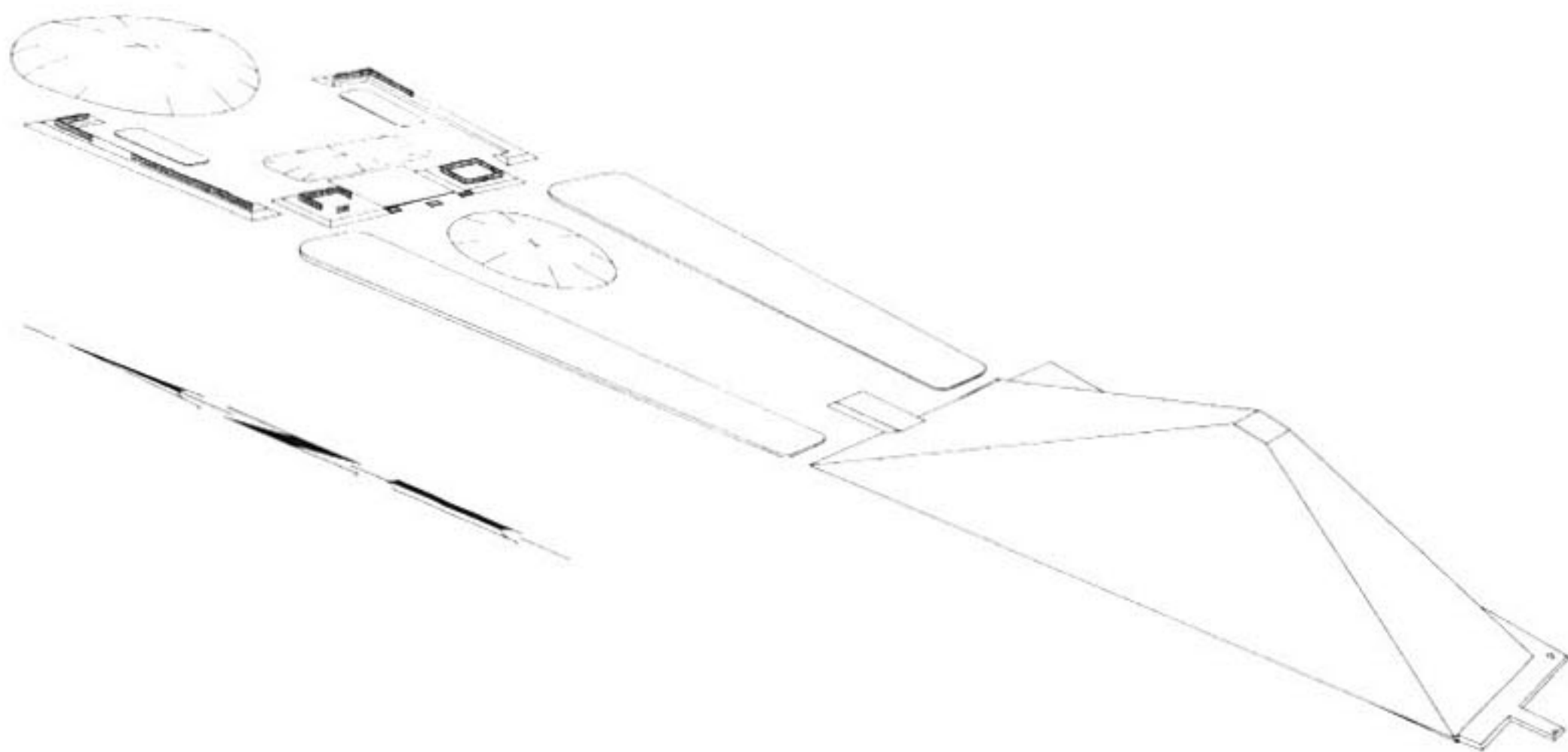


Figure 5. Perspective sketch of Complex A and the Pyramid, Complex C (Drucker et al. 1959:Frontispiece).

terras adopted some of the mapping conventions used in the 1943 map, including hachures to represent the outlines of Mounds A-2 and A-3. The other mounds on the base map are indicated with plain black lines, dashed to show uncertainty regarding the extent of the Northeast and Northwest Platforms and the northern and southern edges of Mounds A-4 and A-5.

Subsequent Drawings Based on the 1955 Map

The simple plan map (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 3) and the perspective drawing (Drucker et al. 1959:Frontispiece) in the 1959 volume were the basis for subsequent renderings of Complex A, while the complicated base map (Drucker et al.

1959:Figure 4) showing the excavation units, offerings, and monuments has seldom been reprinted in publications on La Venta (cf. Gillespie 2008:Figure 6.1). An even more simplified plan of Complex A appearing soon afterward in the influential *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Coe 1965b:Figure 2) omitted the walls of the Ceremonial Court, leaving readers to wonder what feature was designated A-1. However, starting in the 1960s textbooks and popular books on the Olmecs used some version of the perspective drawing—a three-dimensional visualization—to depict Complex A, and together with the pyramid it represented the site of La Venta. A perspective drawing (Figure 6) prepared for Coe's book *Mexico* (1962:Figure 17)

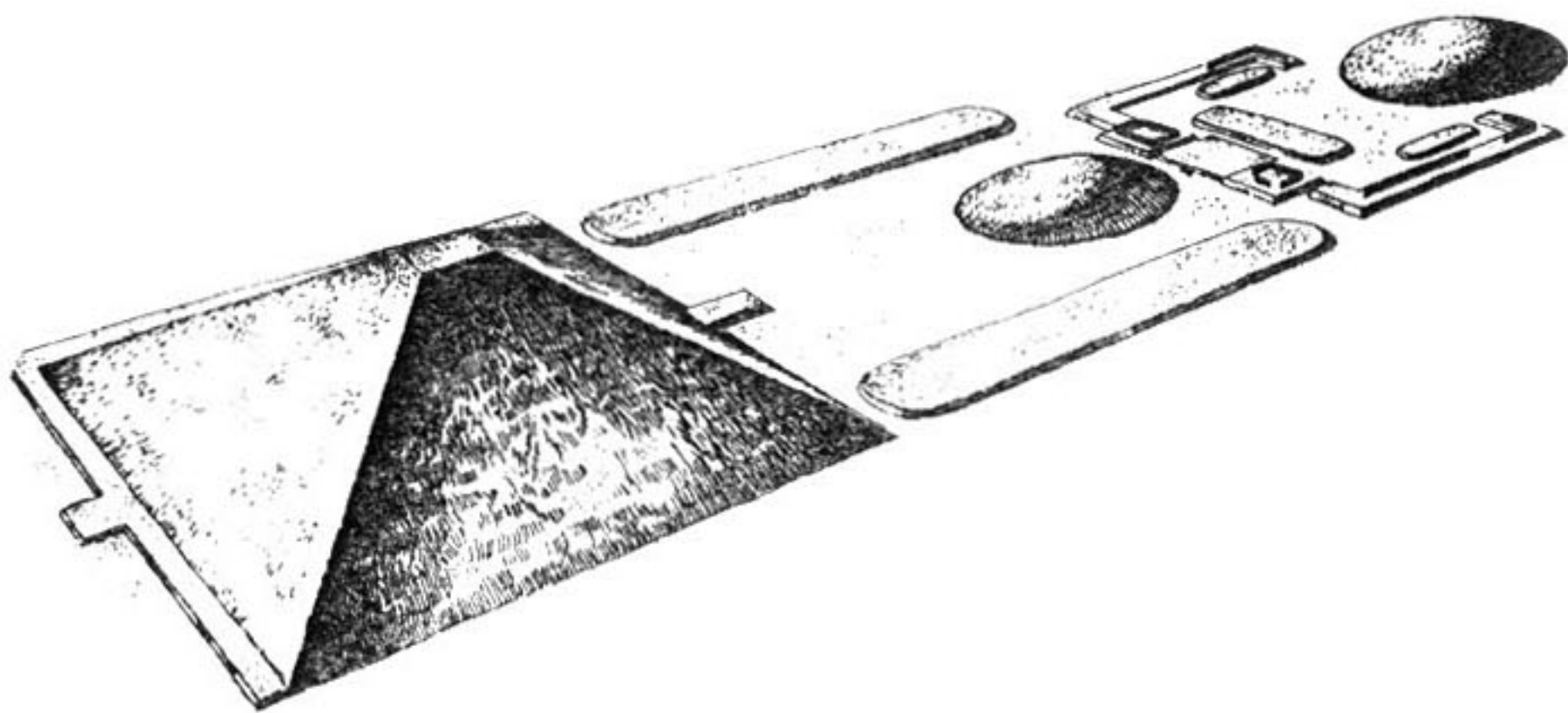


Figure 6. Perspective reconstruction drawing of Complexes A and C based on the 1959 site report (Coe 1962:Figure 17). (Courtesy of Michael D. Coe. Drawing by Patrick Gallagher, © Michael D. Coe.)

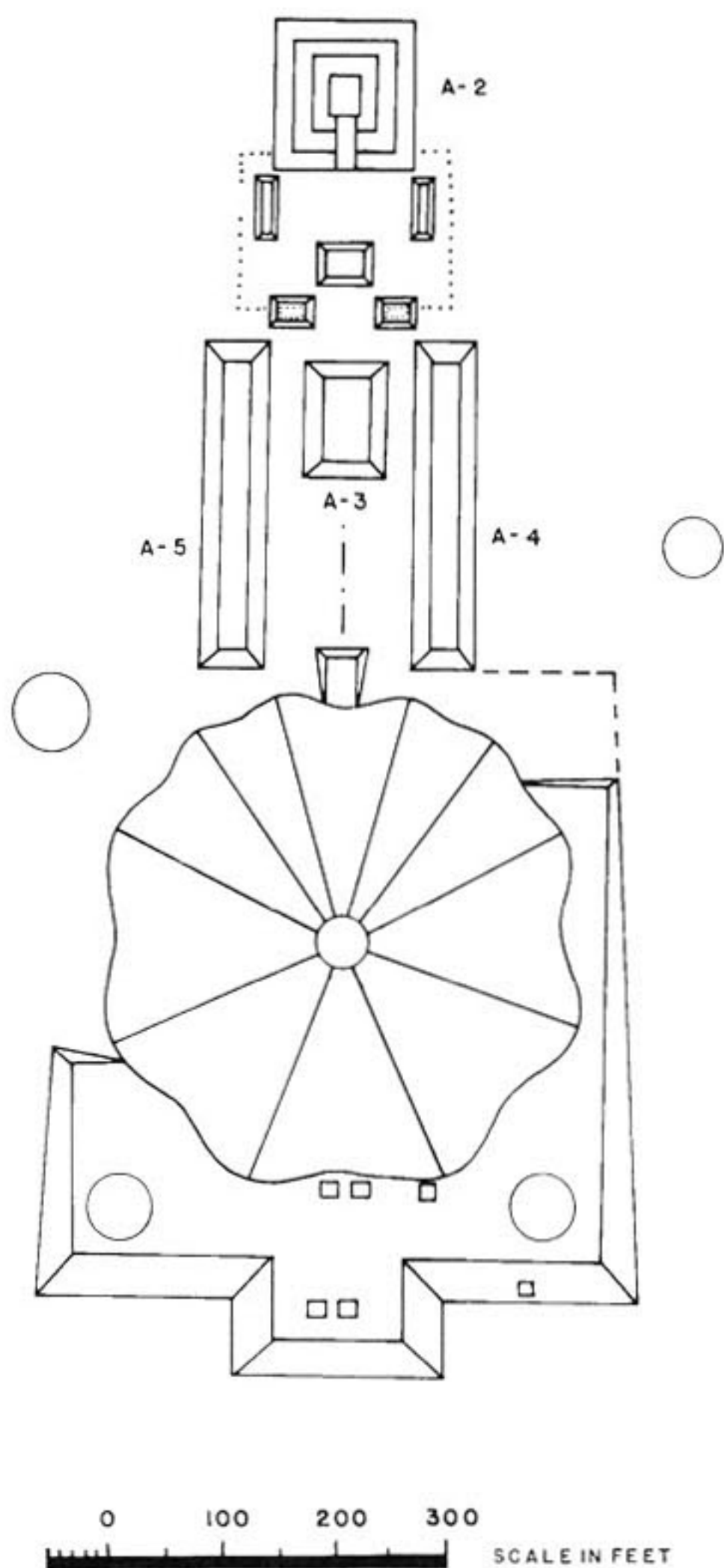


Figure 7. Map of Complexes A and C excerpted from the 1968 La Venta site map (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968). North is at the top of the image. (Courtesy of the Archaeological Research Facility, University of California, Berkeley)

shares similarities with the drawing in Willey's (1966:Figure 3-21) seminal synthesis of North American archaeology, both showing the same slight deviations from the 1959 perspective rendering.¹¹ In other words, soon after the 1959 report appeared, its highly praised maps were set aside, and simplified versions depicting only the major structures were produced to disseminate this spatial information. It was not until decades later that some features were added back to Complex A maps, principally the stone sculptures and locations of the

massive offerings (e.g., González Lauck 1988; Grove 1999; Tate 2008:Figure 2.2).

In 1967 and 1968 Heizer directed two short field projects at La Venta to obtain more radiocarbon samples from Complex A, to document or retrieve sculptures that were rapidly disappearing from the site, and to map architectural complexes south of the great pyramid (Heizer 1968; Heizer and Drucker 1968; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968a, 1968b; Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968;). The 1968 map (Heizer et al. 1968c) came to partially supersede the 1955 map (e.g., Bernal 1969:Figure 2; Soustelle 1979:Figure 2). It includes a few large platforms south of Complex A (in Complex B), but more notice was given to the new rendering of the pyramid, C-1. Finally cleared of vegetation, the pyramid was revealed to have an irregular round, fluted shape (Heizer 1968; Heizer and Drucker 1968; see also González Lauck 1997; Graham and Johnson 1979).

A second major change with the 1968 map is that all of the other architecture is shown as rectilinear (Figure 7). Ironically, as the pyramid's actual form was now finally depicted (albeit schematically) as round rather than rectilinear, the actual rounded edges of the Complex A clay platforms became right-angled corners. This change was not based on any new knowledge of the structures because Complex A's surface constructions had already disappeared by that time. Instead, it reflects the adoption of mapping conventions developed in the early 1960s by Maya archaeologists to record standing stone architecture (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968:139). With these borrowed conventions, relative height is now indicated. Taller structures are drawn as a series of concentric rectangles, such that Mound A-2 looks similar to the pyramid shown in Blom and La Farge's sketch map (Figure 4). However, the difference between nonstepped and stepped platforms is obscured (Mounds A-2, A-4, and A-5 and the South-Central Platform were stepped).

Recognizing the artificiality of these new conventions, Heizer added a note of caution: "The reader is warned that while the map may show right-angled corners and flat-topped mounds, these features may in fact be rather different" (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968:139). A direct comparison with the 1955 base map shows that the 1968 mapmaker squared the original semicircle repre-

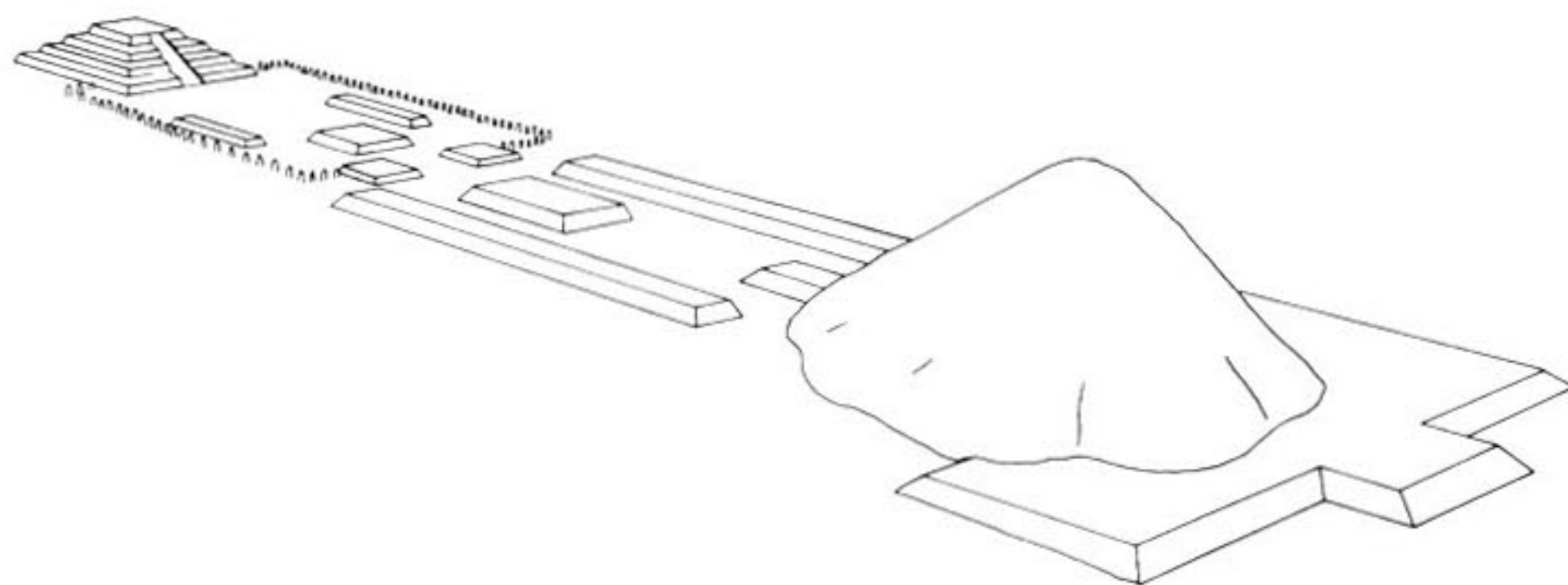


Figure 8. Perspective drawing of Complexes A and C incorporating the 1968 map conventions (Coe 1968:64-65; reprinted in Diehl and Coe 1995:Figure 10). (Courtesy of Richard A. Diehl)

senting Mound A-2 on the earlier map, making the diameter of the mound the same as the length and width of a square platform. Mound A-3 was similarly transformed from an oval into a rectangle. Rather than an improvement on the 1955 map, the 1968 map significantly misrepresents the sizes and shapes of the platforms. Furthermore, despite the attention to height that is essential to these mapping conventions, the 1.22-m-high (4 ft) Ceremonial Court adobe brick walls (Drucker et al. 1959:25) are not shown. The outline of the court is instead symbolized by a line of regular but widely spaced dots to stand for the basalt columns, an idealization of an unwieldy reality given that the base map shows that the columns were not widely spaced and had irregular gaps. The court itself is also not depicted as an elevated structure, a relative “acropolis” as the 1955 excavators called it (Drucker et al. 1959:25).

Some subsequent publications adopted the 1968 map (e.g., Adams 1977:96; Bernal 1969:Figure 2). New perspective drawings of Complex A were made based upon it, one of them treating the artificial mapping conventions quite literally. In the perspective image of Complex A in *America's First Civilization* (Coe 1968:64-65), the architecture is given three-dimensional rectilinearity, and Mound A-2 becomes a four-tiered platform with a ramp on its south side (Figure 8). The dots that represented the columns in the plan view were transformed into widely spaced monoliths stuck directly into the ground. In addition, the court is much longer north-south than east-west. This drawing has been

reprinted several times (e.g., Diehl and Coe 1995:Figure 10; González Lauck 2001:798, 2007:50; Porter Weaver 1981:Figure 5; Tabarev 2005:Figure 58), which is one measure of its potential influence to shape ideas about La Venta. However, that rendering competes in recent publications with the perspective drawing that first appeared in the second edition of Coe's *Mexico* (1977:Figure 17; e.g., Piña Chan 1989:Figure 26). It is a revision of the earlier drawing (Figure 6), substituting the 1968 fluted shape of the pyramid. A very different artistically rendered perspective view (Tate 1999:Figures 2 and 5) breaks the chain of Complex A drawings by placing the Ceremonial Court in the foreground. It adds information not found in earlier renderings, although like some predecessors it shows Mound A-2 as flat-topped with a round footprint and the pyramid as four-sided, as in the 1959 perspective drawing.

The Proyecto Arqueológico La Venta (PALV) Map

The Proyecto Arqueológico La Venta, begun in 1984 and directed by Rebecca González Lauck of Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, was the first major project at La Venta following Heizer's brief 1960s field visits. The inhabitants of the Villa La Venta settlement that had grown up in the archaeological zone (Heizer 1968) were relocated, and a new series of research programs was initiated, including limited excavations, restoration of additional stone sculptures, and reconnaissance and survey of the surrounding area (González Lauck 1988, 1994, 1996, 1997). The

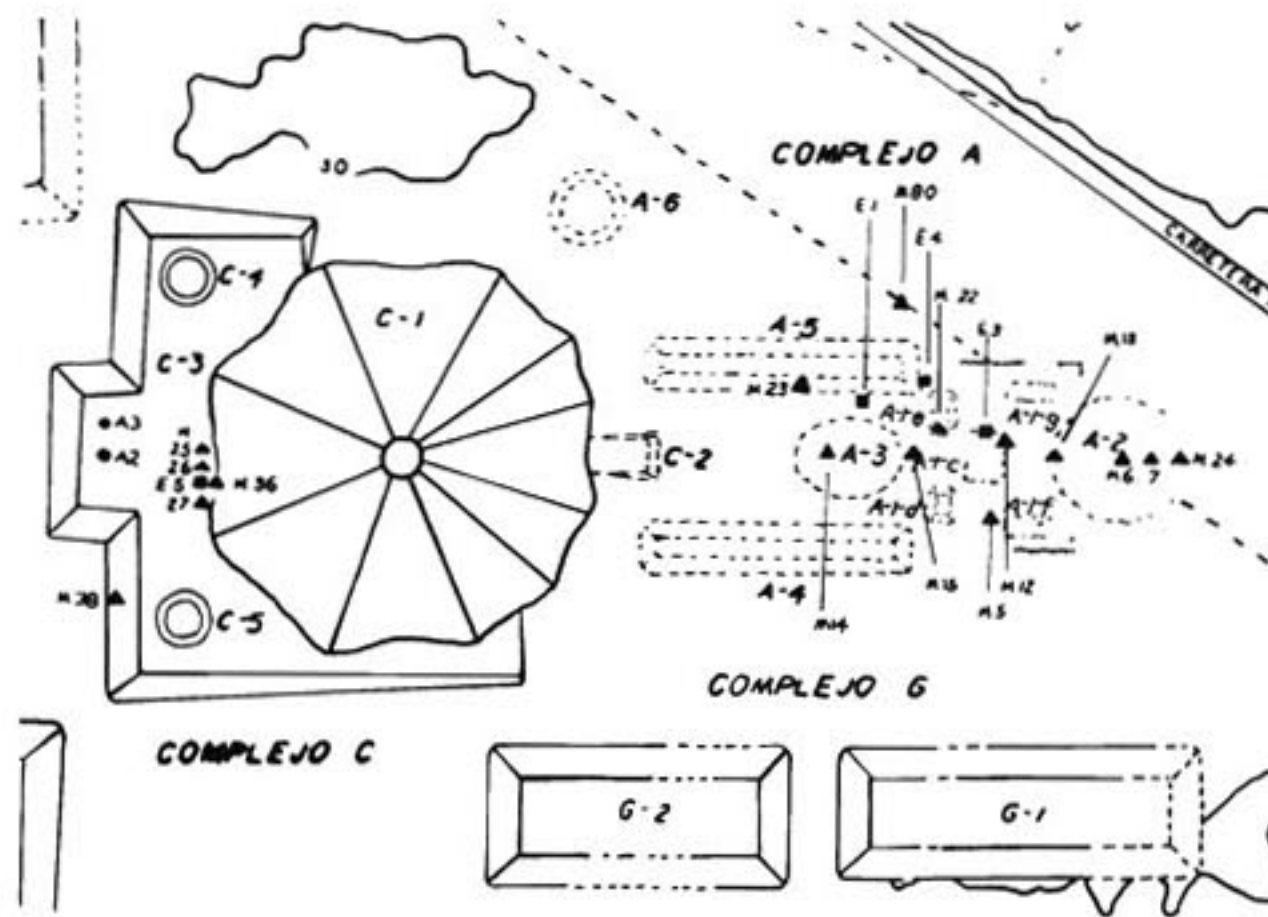


Figure 9. Complexes A and C and neighboring Complex G, excerpted from the Proyecto Arqueológico La Venta map (González Lauck 1988:Figure 1). Redrawn to clarify small labels that are illegible in the published map; triangles are monuments, circles are altars, and squares are stelae. North is to the right. Printed at the approximate size of the original (8 cm long).

topographic site map produced by this project (González Lauck 1988:Figure 1, 1996:Figure 1) shows multiple architectural complexes within the civic-ceremonial core of La Venta. Not all of them date to the Formative period, many structures were destroyed before they could be mapped (González Lauck 1996:75), and all the architecture is drawn in schematic fashion (González Lauck 1988:130).

As knowledge of the larger site has grown, Complex A—which with the pyramid long represented all of La Venta—has receded in relative size on maps but not in importance. Most discussions of La Venta still focus on the exotic Complex A artifacts because the rest of the site is so little known. This creates a problem of visual representation: How does one provide the necessary information locating the important finds (the massive offerings, monuments, tombs, and dedicatory caches) within a spatial field that is much reduced in size in order to display the entire ceremonial center? Despite these changed requirements, archaeologists continue to rely on a single plan map with all the desired information, a practice that goes back to the 1940s maps, and there is renewed emphasis on using plan maps rather than perspective drawings.

The PALV map was drawn in ink and published as another foldout drawing on a page approximately 27.3 x 47 cm (González Lauck 1988:Figure 1). Complex A's architecture, its surface components having been destroyed, is shown with dashed rather

than solid lines (González Lauck 1988:130; Figure 9). The basis for this part of the PALV map is the 1955 map together with the 1968 fluted pyramid. Mounds A-2 and A-3 are drawn as simple ovals, despite their height, while linear Mounds A-4 and A-5, which were shorter than Mound A-2, are shown as raised near-rectangles as depicted in the 1968 map. The Ceremonial Court is labeled Feature A-1 but is otherwise difficult to distinguish. Its walls are barely indicated by narrow incomplete lines on its east and west sides, the result of convergence of the tops of the individual basalt columns as the map was reduced in size. The plan of the complex is further complicated by symbols indicating the location of sculptures of different types (monuments, altars, and stelae). This is useful information, also found on the 1959 base map, but here it required lines to connect sculptures to their labels, and the labels are so small that they are illegible. In sum, the reduced size of Complex A on the PALV map (less than 4 cm long), the supplementary information regarding locations of finds, and the use of dashed lines all make it difficult to see the architecture. Adams's (1991:Map 3-2) revised textbook added a magnified inset of Complexes A and C to a reproduction of the 1988 PALV map to improve the utility of that portion of the map. A simplified version of the 1988 map appears in González Lauck (1996:Figure 1), but the Complex A architecture is still very small, and its

details are minimized. This map was redrawn for a recent textbook (Evans 2004:Figure 6.15), resulting in the loss of almost all meaningful spatial information concerning Complex A despite its prominence in the book's discussion of La Venta.

The reduction in the relative size of Complex A compared to the site as a whole does not explain why some subsequent plan views based on the PALV map leave off entire platforms. Mounds A-2 and A-3, the South-Central Platform, and the Ceremonial Court are absent in a redrawing of the PALV map (by John Clark, in González Lauck 1994:Figure 6.6), and the remaining platforms are incorrectly sized (Figure 10). This later rendering has also been reprinted several times (e.g., Diehl 2004:Figure 28; González Lauck 2007:50; Reilly 1999:Figure 1.1b). Illustrations in other publications focusing just on Complex A reveal more care in depicting all the structures, but these plan maps utilize variable conventions: for example, all rectified platforms (e.g., Clark and Hansen 2001:Figure 1.2) or a combination of rounded and rectified platforms, with Mounds A-2 and A-3 as either oval or round (e.g., Diehl 2004:Figure 32; Grove 1997:Figure 4).

Summary

Since the discovery of La Venta, maps of Complex A with the adjacent pyramid came to represent the entire site. Ironically, even as Complex A has rightly diminished in relative size on maps of La Venta—unfortunately, to the point that entire structures are too small to see or are absent—it still remains the basis for much of the knowledge concerning La Venta archaeology. The subsequent maps reveal a disregard for what the 1955 excavators considered the principal structure of Complex A—the Ceremonial Court—an unintended consequence of decisions made in rendering the 1955 map, produced by essentially inking the field map. This elevated platform is depicted only by a minimal boundary reduced to near-invisibility if not complete absence on many re-presentations. Furthermore, the history of the modifications of the Ceremonial Court through ritual practice over many generations—a major finding of the 1955 excavations—has generally been ignored (notable exceptions are Diehl 2004; González Lauck 2007; Pool 2007; Reilly 1999, 2002) or misunderstood, for various reasons that require further discussion.

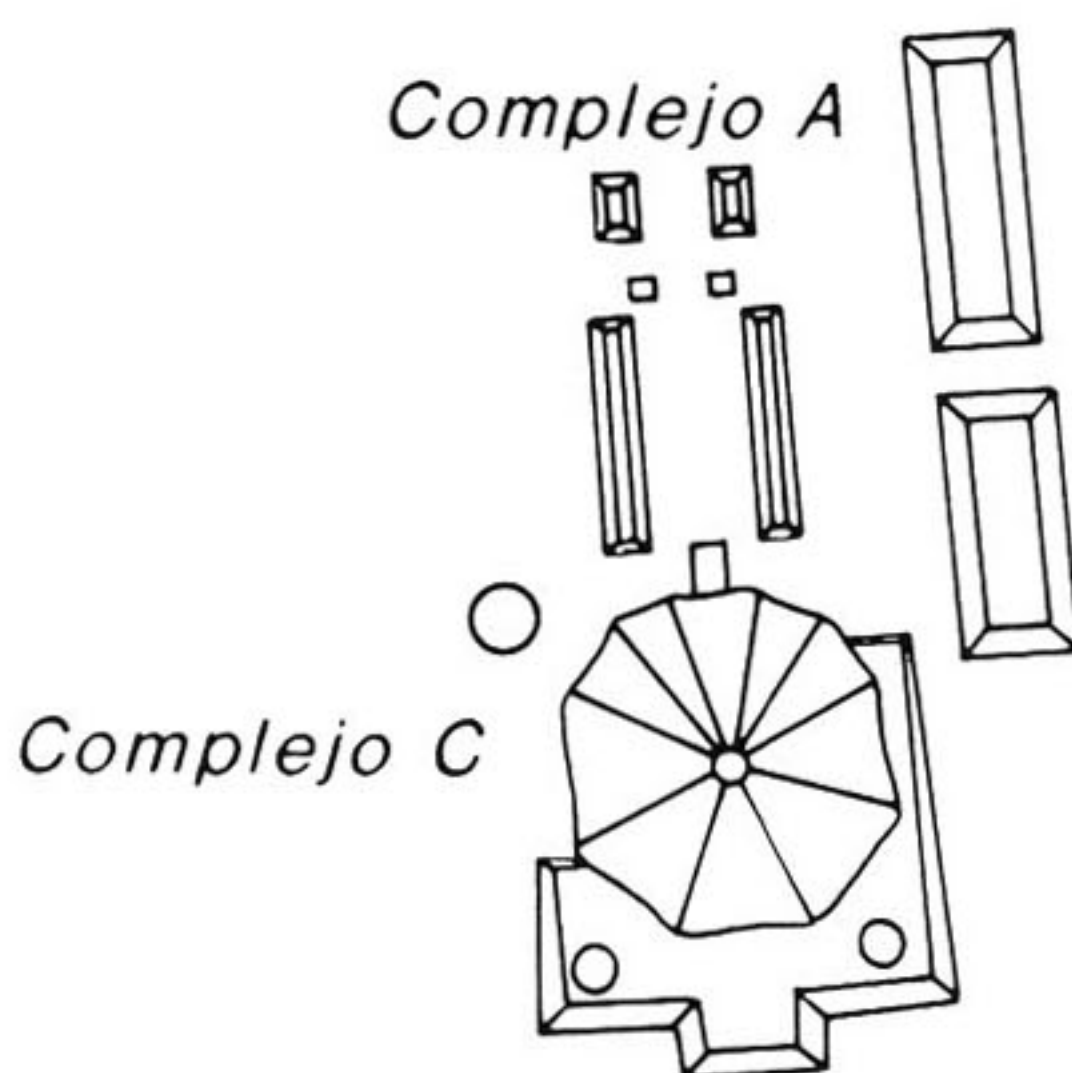


Figure 10. Complexes A, C, and G as redrawn by John Clark from the PALV map (in González Lauck 1994:Figure 6.6). (Courtesy of John Clark)

Representing Change Through Time

Archaeological maps often depict the structures at a site as if they were all simultaneously in their final or complete state, and the published La Venta maps are no different. As discussed in this section, conventions adopted for the 1943 and 1955 maps unwittingly enhanced their anachronistic quality. The published profile drawings showing stratigraphic changes to the structures, which could have tempered that impression, have inherent shortcomings that have exacerbated misunderstandings or neglect of the stratigraphic information they reveal.

Anachronism in the Complex A Plan Maps

The problem of anachronism is especially pertinent to La Venta because chronological information is lacking for much of the site with the exception of Complex A, whose individual history perforce became the history of the entire site. Heizer called La Venta “a one-period site which exhibits four successive building periods (Phases I–IV)” (1959:178), referring principally to the Ceremonial Court with its different floor series. These four construction phases, originally suggested to be a century long each (Drucker et al. 1957, 1959:267; Heizer [1964:49–50] later admitted that was a sheer guess), were subsequently transformed into archae-

ological phases for the entire site: La Venta I through La Venta IV. As such they appeared on chronological charts alongside archaeological phase names from other sites or regions as if they were structurally equivalent (e.g., Bernal 1969:107; Grove 1997:Table 2; Lowe 1978:Figure 11.3). Lowe (1989:Table 4.1) designated earlier and later time periods at La Venta as "Pre-Complex A" and "Post-Complex A." Only since the 1990s have survey and excavation projects yielded the more usual phase distinctions for La Venta and its hinterland (e.g., Grove 1997:73).

Nevertheless, for decades understanding the site's chronology should have hinged on distinguishing these four (building) phases in the archaeological images, something that has not been easy to do. The perspective drawings are of no help. The 1955 base map, a totalizing plan view, flattens or "atemporalizes" (following Jones 2001:352) the modifications to Complex A. In the plan views building outlines, surface and subsurface sculptures, buried caches, and excavation units are all depicted together in space and therefore in time. Not surprisingly, some interpretations of static spatial patterns have been generated from the plan maps that are not supported by the stratigraphic evidence. For example, the three buried mosaic pavements (Massive Offerings 1, 4, 5) were interpreted as manifesting an intentional triadic pattern (Reilly 1999:28–29, 2002:35). However, the mosaics date to construction Phases II and IV (Drucker et al. 1959:Table 1), which means that for a considerable period of time there were only two.

As for the architecture, the prevailing assumption is that the published maps and perspective drawings depict Complex A at its final stage of occupation (González Lauck 1996:75). In actuality, they represent the structures at different stages of their formation and taphonomic transformation. Mound A-2, a stepped rectangular platform (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 11), and Mound A-3, rectilinear in general form, were capped in Phase IV with a thick layer of red clay, which became eroded and covered with naturally deposited drift sand, resulting in a round to oval footprint. This is how these mounds were first drawn in the 1940s and again in 1955. This convention was repeated in later renderings, including the perspective drawings, until the 1968 map, which incorporated numerous misrepresentations of platform shape

and size, as noted above. Rejection of the 1968 rectilinearization has resulted in a fallback to the rounded shapes of the 1955 base map, but only for Mounds A-2 and A-3.

Excavations revealed that all of the platforms and the court wall of Complex A were covered with red clay, an action that helps to define Phase IV (Drucker et al. 1959:25). However, on maps the platforms other than Mounds A-2 and A-3 are drawn as they might have looked before the red clay cap was deposited. Information on the form and size of Mounds A-2 and A-3 prior to the red clay deposit was available from the stratigraphic trenches, which formed the bulk of the 1955 fieldwork, but it was not incorporated into the published 1955 map.

Lowe provided an unusual visualization of Complex A "prior to the placement of the red clay cap" (1989:34, Figure 4.1a). This drawing shows Mound A-2 as a rectangular platform with two tiers, on top of which the Tomb A structure made of basalt columns and the Tomb B sandstone coffer lie exposed. It also shows the fence of basalt columns and two of the carved stone sculptures. However, Drucker and Heizer had interpreted the placement of the red clay layer and the basalt columns as near-contemporaneous (Drucker et al. 1959:25), and almost all of the sculptures were found lying atop the red clay.¹² In spite of good intentions, this map also mixes elements of different chronological phases.

The red clay cap has taken on an important role in recent interpretations of La Venta's demise. Reilly (1994:131) and Diehl (2004:69–70) suggest that the dumping of red clay on all the structures was a ritual act heralding the impending abandonment of Complex A, an interpretation at odds with the stratigraphic information concerning the timing of the use (and reuse) of the basalt columns. Drucker and colleagues (1959:25) presumed that abandonment of the complex by its caretakers must date to the evident erosion (not depositing) of the red clay as it lay exposed to the elements until it was covered by drift sand; until that time the court surface and structures had been carefully maintained. The 1955 archaeologists interpreted this withdrawal of stewardship as an abandonment of the site itself, given that Complex A was considered to be central to the operation of La Venta. Their conclusion is now questionable because the much larger civic-ceremonial core could still have

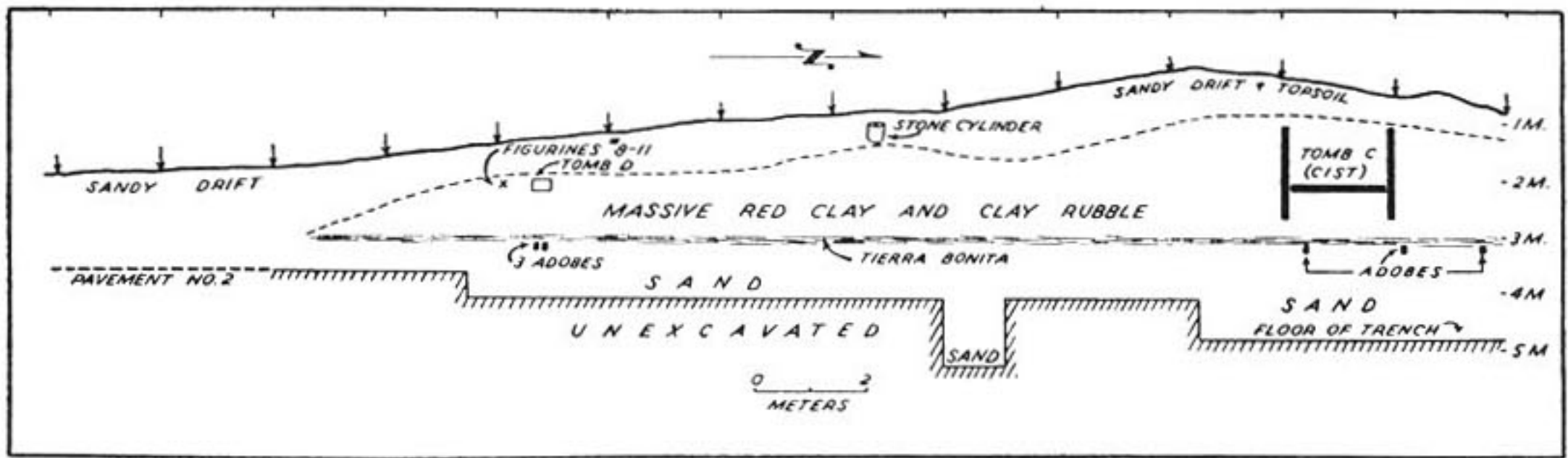


Figure 11. Mound A-3 profile based on Wedel's 1943 excavations (Drucker 1952:Figure 21). Note that "sand" was encountered both above and below the clay mound.

been occupied after Complex A's caretakers ceased their maintenance (Gillespie 2008:133).

Dynamic taphonomic processes such as erosion and the deposition of wind-borne sands further confound attempts to visually represent the physical reality of Complex A as it changed over time. This situation likely contributed to Reilly's (published 1999:20–21) reading of Wedel's 1943 profile drawing of a trench through Mound A-3 (Drucker 1952:Figure 21) to indicate that the mound was built atop the drift sand that covered the red clay cap. If correct, this structure postdated the major occupation of Complex A, an interpretation repeated by Freidel et al. (1993:137, Figure 3.4), whose plan map of Complex A therefore omits Mound A-3. Problematically, the 1943 profile drawing does not separate the basal sand layer upon which the platform was built from the later drift sand (Figure 11), a distinction that was difficult for the 1955 archaeologists to make in the field (Drucker et al. 1959:82). Nevertheless, the 1955 excavations of Mound A-3 dated its construction to Phase I (Drucker et al. 1959:115–118), and the published 1955 trench profile does distinguish the basal and upper sand layers (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 31). Even so, in the 1959 site report the upper (post-Phase IV) drift sand and the basal (pre-Phase I) sand layer were consistently given the same designation (stratum "a") in the text and profile drawings, seemingly obliterating their temporal distinctions. This is just one of the interpretive difficulties inherent in these drawings, as detailed in the following section.

Visualizing Change Through Time via Profile Drawings

Despite the importance of graphic representations of the Complex A landscape to understand the site's

history, the stratigraphic profile drawings have posed major impediments to comprehending change through time. For various reasons, the simple profiles drawn by Wedel in 1943 (in Drucker 1952) cannot be reconciled with those from the 1955 project. Several important images in the 1959 site report are identified as schematic, and even on scaled drawings (e.g., Drucker et al. 1959:Figures 9–12) some details are schematic, especially the thin layers of colored clay that were seldom individually recorded (Heizer 1964:46). The profile drawings were subjected to a scathing critique by Coe and Stuckenrath in their evaluation of how ineffectively the excavators had warranted their interpretations:

Any reader of the reports of La Venta excavation data quickly realizes the problem of checking the authors' observations: one report [1959] is in feet, the others in the metric system; every section seems to differ in published scale, even contiguous or overlapping sections; if sections do in fact join or overlap there is no way of telling due to the omission of printed horizontal controls [1964:4].

Certain aesthetic and logistical decisions for creating the drawings decrease the utility of these visualization devices. The horizontal and vertical scales are often different in a single drawing, exaggerating the heights of structures and depths of pits in relation to their horizontal extent to fit them on a page (or on a field map). The use of simple black lines against a white background—as opposed to distinguishing strata by adding symbolic patterns such as cross-hatching or pictorial renderings of matrix inclusions—makes it difficult for the eye to trace a single stratum across the page, especially

where the layers are complex and interrupted by pit features. The phase designations—requisite to compare phase changes from one structure to the next—were never included in the drawings themselves; one must find them in the accompanying text. Fortunately, some of these problems can be ameliorated today with computer imaging software, for example, equalizing the horizontal and vertical scales and distinguishing the strata using colors or patterns (see the application of color for this latter purpose in González Lauck 2007:50, 52).

However, the most serious criticism cannot be overcome, namely, that the profile drawings lack vertical and horizontal data or other reference points (Coe and Stuckenrath 1964:4). The published map showing the location of the major trenches (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 3) is schematic, and the limits of the excavation units in the 1955 base map (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4) are imprecise. In the profile drawings the edges of trench walls and floors are not indicated; the lines separating strata simply end abruptly and unevenly (Figure 12). This makes it difficult to align one drawing with another even where the units were contiguous. Without a vertical datum, the excavation units float in space, making it impossible to correlate the vertical positioning of the various profile drawings and thereby align the same or equivalent strata across the Ceremonial Court.

The absence of vertical controls resulted from preparing the images for publication, not from incomplete or incompetent fieldwork. Coe and Stuckenrath (1964) did not make this latter accusation explicit, but it was felt by Drucker and Heizer (1965:37; Heizer 1964:46). In fact, the necessary data were recorded to potentially create drawings that would position nearly all spatial relationships in three dimensions. Analysis of the field records reveals that Squier instrument-mapped the horizontal locations of all the 1955 excavation units and recorded elevations at approximately 650 points. These spot elevations include the depths of most of the floor-series levels across the excavated portion of the court, all major finds (including each in situ basalt column), and the serpentine massive offerings. The field profile drawings, while usually not drawn to scale, include measurements that line up rather precisely when redrawn with computer-assisted technology. However, the horizontal spatial relationships in the published base map are more schematic and recti-

fied than they appeared in the field (compared to Squier's Map 3).¹³ More significantly, the elevation information was not utilized when the profiles were drawn for publication. Squier, who controlled the instrument-mapped data, was supposed to have coauthored the response to Coe and Stuckenrath's (1964) critique, but this did not happen (Heizer 1964:45), so the Drucker and Heizer (1965) reply could not directly address this critical issue.

Based on the profile drawings especially, Coe and Stuckenrath (1964:4–6, Figure 1) challenged the excavators on two of their major interpretations: bilateral symmetry as a major planning principle from the beginning and the coordinated construction of the Ceremonial Court as an architectural unit. The assumption of bilateral symmetry as a planning rule, evident in the placement of the Phase II Southeast and Southwest Platforms and Phase IV Mounds A-4 and A-5, had been used by the 1955 excavators to good effect.¹⁴ When the Phase IV Offering 9 cache was discovered 1.37 m (4.5 ft) west of the centerline, its twin was looked for 1.37 m (4.5 ft) to the east, and Offering 11, its mirror image, was discovered in that precise location (Drucker et al. 1959:177). Similarly, after the Northeast Platform was accidentally uncovered, trenches were dug to search for its likely subsurface companion, revealing the Northwest Platform (Drucker et al. 1959:51, 63). The size and placement of the Northwest Platform were estimated to match those of the better-exposed Northeast Platform (Drucker et al. 1959:10).

Concerning these last two platforms—the only platform pair that exhibited longevity of modification from Phases I to IV—Coe and Stuckenrath observe that they “are mapped as of equal form and size. Together these structures contribute heavily to the appearance in Complex A of bisymmetrical layout with implied coordinated growth of balanced or twin structures” (1964:6). Yet their careful study of the profile drawings for both platforms (Drucker et al. 1959:Figures 16, 20–21) showed that the Phase I floor series (the water-sorted floors) appeared under the Northwest Platform (see Figure 12) but lapped up against the facing of the earliest construction phase of the Northeast Platform, which was considerably smaller than the (later) first phase of the Northwest Platform. Using the 1955 excavation data Coe and Stuckenrath (1964:Figure 1) thus demonstrated that the North-

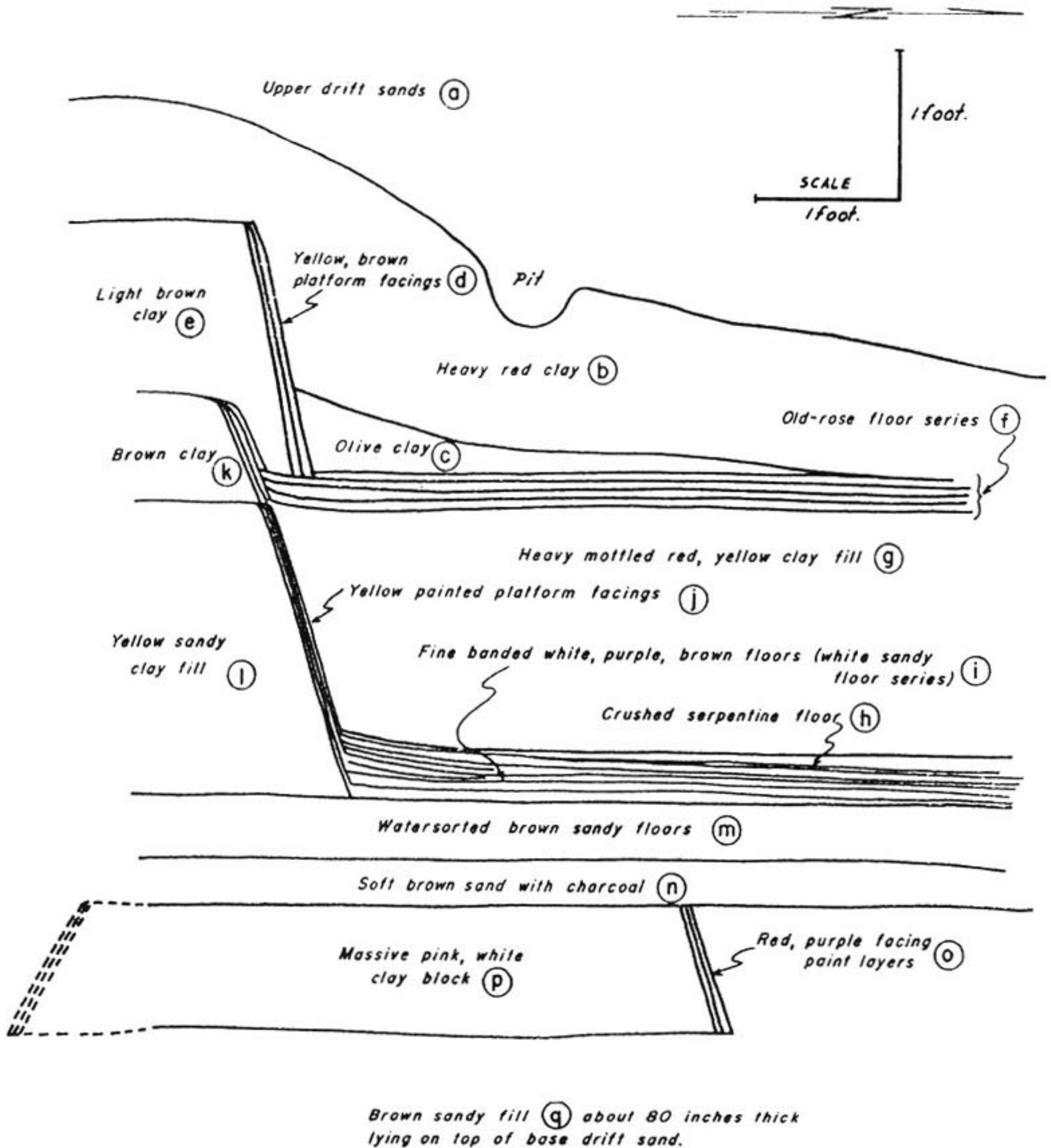


Figure 12. Northwest Platform profile from the 1955 excavations (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 20). In this drawing the absences of horizontal and vertical datums, edges of the trench, and the ground surface reflect what was recorded in the field.

east Platform was built first and used for a while without a twin, and only later was it expanded so that both platforms were of equivalent size. In addition, they pointed out that one profile of the Northwest Platform (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 20) showed what looked like a small portion of an earlier clay platform with painted surfacings built prior to the erection of the first phase of the Northwest Platform and offset from that structure's location (stratum "p" in Figure 12). This had been acknowledged by the 1955 excavators as evidence of "construction prior to the deposition of the water-sorted

floors" (Drucker et al. 1959:65, 121). From all these details Coe and Stuckenrath concluded that

identical or like final products may have evolved in quite dissimilar ways. While the Phase IV end result in Complex A was formal and balanced in terms of a center line, as all have emphasized, one suspects that the various surface structures comprising the Complex evolved in disjointed, independent fashion [1964:6].

In sum, these critics asserted that "asymmetrical growth" could have resulted in a final plan that

appears balanced and symmetrical (1964:7). Indeed, despite their emphasis on a formal design plan imposed from the beginning of Phase I, Drucker and his colleagues (1959:71) did suggest that the Northwest Platform had been given a major height adjustment in Phase III in order to catch up to the height of the Northeast Platform during that time. They (1959:25) also discussed how the Phase IV basalt column “palisade” was probably an originally unplanned necessity, a response to the growing material consequences of increments to the court floors such that the Phase II adobe wall no longer sufficiently enclosed the court.

Plans vs. Practices

In response to these criticisms of their interpretations, Drucker and Heizer (1965:42–44), while admitting to “errors in exposition,” indicated their continued unwillingness to acknowledge a pre-Phase I construction phase for the entire court—the principal architectural unit—even though there were traces of earlier structures with thin layers of painted clay on their surfaces under both the Northwest Platform and Mound A-2. Complex A was built upon an artificially leveled north-to-south-oriented ridge, requiring the removal of earth on the eastern side and buildup of soil on the western side (Drucker and Heizer 1965:43; Drucker et al. 1959:121). The two earlier structural remains that were found, among possibly other early platforms impacted by that leveling, had a different alignment and were thus considered to “indicate a pre-La Venta [*sic*] complex on the same site” (Drucker et al. 1959:124). In other words, these material traces of earlier ritual actions were interpreted as something quite different from the planned site layout that was subsequently built. Drucker and Heizer (1965:44) did acknowledge that the Northwest Platform was begun sometime after its “mate” and speculated on why that was so. They discussed “manifest” differences between the two platforms in ritual function, despite their presumed symmetry in size, shape, and court placement, lending weight to the possibility that distinct yet complementary rituals were carried out at each. In other words, by focusing on the practices involved in the use of the platforms and their material effects over time, Drucker and Heizer recognized noteworthy variations between them that are invisible on most plan maps of the complex.

Among these variations are the placement and type of recovered caches (offerings) within or adjacent to the platforms. The Northwest Platform was less extensively excavated, but it still had proportionally fewer offerings compared to the Northeast (Drucker et al. 1959:63), as shown on the base map (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4) that gives the general locations of the caches (Figure 13). There were eight offerings in the Northeast Platform plus Offering 4 just off its west side, versus two in the Northwest Platform. Subsequent maps of Complex A eliminated the information on these caches, creating the impression that the two platforms were identical in function as well as form. Moreover, the base map does not indicate the timing or type of cache, and quantitative disparity is not the most important distinction between the offerings in the two structures. Offerings 18 and 19 in the Northwest Platform were individual ceramic bowls, only belatedly considered offerings and treated separately because they were found 68.6 cm (27 in) apart (Drucker et al. 1959:191). Nevertheless, they had been placed in the same shallow intrusive pit as it was being filled (Drucker et al. 1959:190), meaning that they were part of the same deposition event during construction Phase II (phase dating of offerings is based on Drucker et al. 1959). In contrast, the Northeast Platform caches were dated to construction Phases I, III, and post-IV, and they include three pseudo-burials (Offerings 5, 6, 7) with greenstone ornaments, one of them (Offering 7) dating to Phase I and the other two dating to Phase III. The 1955 excavations revealed significant differences, in both timing and type of cache, between the two structures.

Another major distinction between them is invisible in the base map and thus in all subsequent plan views. The base map shows the location of recovered objects treated as offerings, but it does not show the pits that housed the offerings (except for Massive Offering 3) or pits that had no recoverable objects in them. This might seem like a small detail, but Complex A was riddled with pits starting at least as early as Phase II. They are traces of activities as evident as the placement of offerings. The published plan view of the Northeast Platform (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 14) indicates that its east and west edges were each intruded by three large pits (.91–1.22 m [3–4 ft] in diameter at the top), and three smaller pits were dug along its

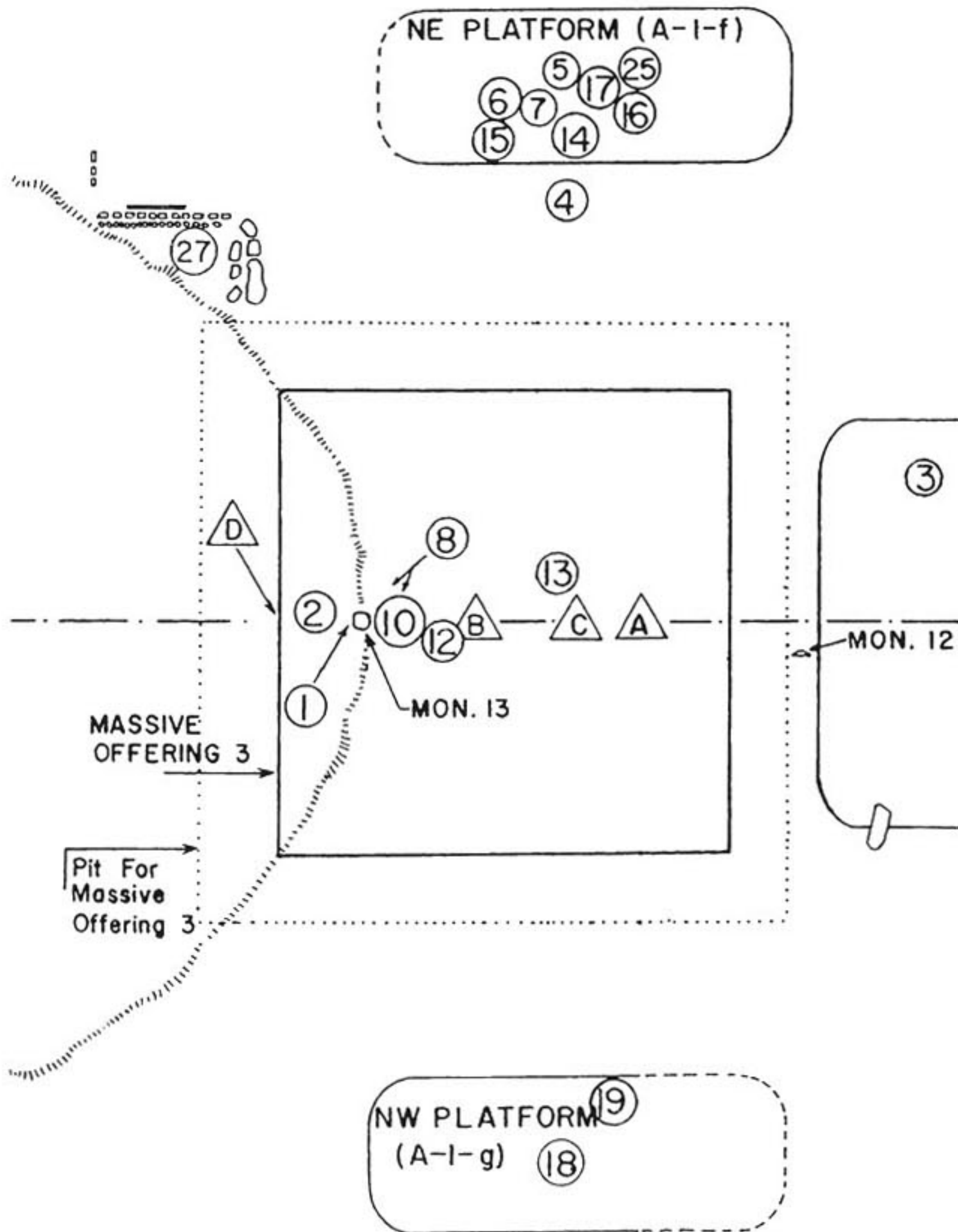


Figure 13. Excerpt from the 1955 base map (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4) showing locations of offerings in the northern half of the Ceremonial Court. Triangles are used to designate 1943 offerings, and circles indicate those found in 1955. North is to the left. For clarity, some other information has been deleted.

north-south centerline (Drucker et al. 1959:52-55). Other pits were dug into the platform at earlier periods, some of which are shown in the profile drawings, reconstructed in a new plan view (Figure 14). None of the pits is depicted as intruding into another.

The situation is quite different with the Northwest Platform. Although only about one-third of its estimated extent was excavated, the profile drawings reveal a series of wide and deep pits, intruding into and overlapping each other as shown in a reconstructed plan view (Figure 15). Here the same area was continually dug into, and the depth

of the earliest pit extended well below the base of the platform (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 21). Furthermore, many of these pits held burned organic offerings, more so than anywhere else in Complex A.¹⁵ Just east of the northeast corner, off the platform, two great pits of irregular shape were dug through the Phase III floor series and filled, their upper portions showing distinct lenses of white sand and a layer of crushed serpentine (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 22). Altogether the evidence shows variation in ritual activities taking place on the eastern and western sides of the Ceremonial Court in terms of the refurbishing of the platforms, the tim-

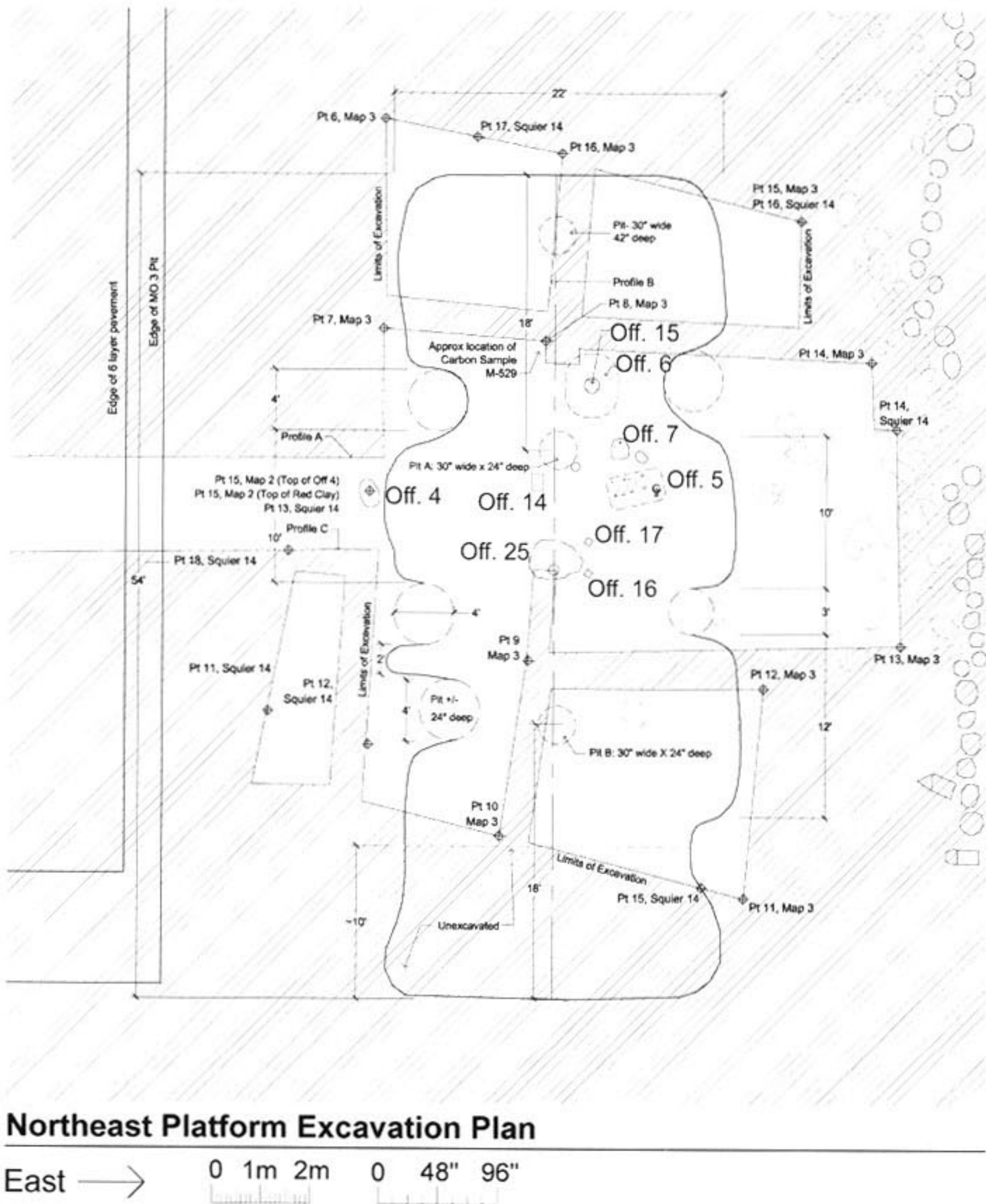


Figure 14. Reconstructed plan view of the Northeast Platform excavations and features based on plan and profile drawings in Heizer's field notebooks and Squier's Maps 2 and 3 (Field Notes; Maps Folder, Heizer Papers, NAA). White areas are the excavated portions of the platform. AutoCAD drawing by Michael Volk with assistance from Joshua R. Toney and Susan D. Gillespie.

ing of deposits, the placement and treatment of pit features, the use of organic materials, and the types of nonperishable offerings.

The overlapping pit features in the Northwest Platform call attention to an aspect of ritual practice that the limitations of the plan maps and drawings have made more difficult to appreciate—namely, the importance of repetition in acts of ritual deposition, by which later actions were undertaken in reference to earlier ones. The citation of

prior actions as a motivation for subsequent ones is now recognized as an archaeologically visible way to understand the meaningfulness of practices (e.g., Jones 2001; Joyce and Lopiparo 2005). It adopts a perspective for understanding actions, such as the deposition or removal of materials in real time, accounting for social, material, and historical contexts and the agency of knowledgeable actors, rather than assuming mere conformity to formal design plans. This point of view engages

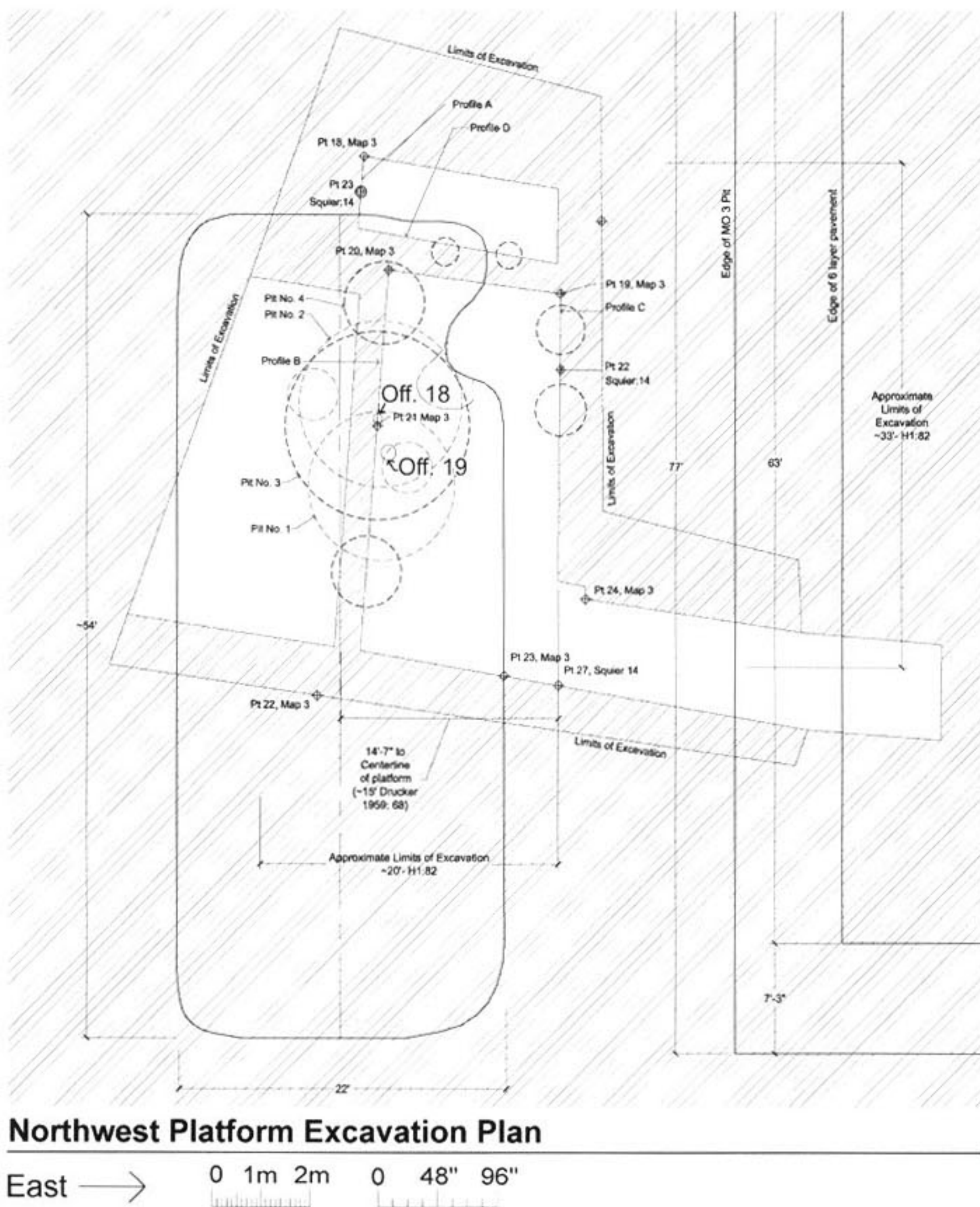


Figure 15. Reconstructed plan view of the Northwest Platform excavations and features based on profile drawings in Heizer's field notebooks and Squier's Maps 2 and 3 (Field Notes; Maps Folder, Heizer Papers, NAA). Locations of Offerings 18 and 19 were not recorded in the field and are only approximated. White areas are the excavated portions of the platform. AutoCAD drawing by Michael Volk with assistance from Joshua R. Toney and Susan D. Gillespie.

the potential of such actions for negotiating or innovating relationships as new materials are brought together in physical association with existing ones, still evident by traces in the ground or as remembered (Pollard 2001). Offering 4 is a prime example: this Phase III grouping that included 16 figurines and six upright celts was reopened after it had been covered by Phase III floors but before the Phase IV red clay was deposited, exposing only the top portions of the

objects before the pit was refilled (Drucker et al. 1959:154–155).¹⁶

Citation of prior acts was a likely motive for the continued repainting of the structure facades and repeated caching and pitting into the platforms, whether or not these deposits were superimposed, but it is especially suggested by the sequential placement of objects in the same locus. The area of Complex A with the most superimposed offerings is within the clay fill over Massive Offering 3

(Figure 13). Massive Offering 3 is composed of six layers of serpentine blocks placed in a deep square pit positioned between the Northeast and Northwest Platforms to the east and west and Mound A-2 and the South-Central Platform to the north and south (Drucker et al. 1959:130). The pit penetrated Phase II floors and was dated to the beginning of construction Phase III; the Phase III old rose floors covered the top of the clay fill (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 9). As clay was dumped in to fill the great pit, offerings were placed especially over the northern half of the serpentine blocks along the court centerline. The excavators believed that this area “was regarded as an especially propitious place for offerings” and suggest that physical markers or records were kept of their locations because of the superpositions of many objects (Drucker et al. 1959:132).

On the Complex A published base map (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4), symbols (circle, triangle, square) show the general locations of all the recovered offerings, but they cannot well indicate superpositions. Tiny arrows were used to indicate that two symbols drawn side by side referenced objects that occupied the same horizontal space (Figure 13). The profile drawings (Drucker et al. 1959:Figures 9–10) reveal that Offering 1943-C lies below Offering 1943-A (not directly so); Offering 10 was placed precisely below Offering 8; Offering 1 lies directly below Monument 13, a columnar basalt post erected vertically just in front of the south edge of Mound A-2; and Offering 1943-D was found slightly offset below a pit from which an earlier post (in front of a prior construction phase of Mound A-2) apparently had been removed. In addition, Offering 2 lies directly under a series of thin layers of colored clay and sand stacked atop one another forming an “apron” in front of Mound A-2. Although the ultimate positioning of the sculptures was dated to Phase IV, most of the caches are in the Phase III fill (Offerings 1, 2, 8, 10, 12, 1943-C, 1943-D). Almost all of these offerings consist of formal arrangements of jade and serpentine celts. This situation is different from that of the numerous Phase III caches in the Northeast Platform, which also exhibited far fewer superpositions.¹⁷

A Historical Shift in Spatial Orientation

Understanding these placements as performance and as citation, taking into account their inherent

temporality and historicity, presents an alternative way of understanding the claim by the excavators (Drucker et al. 1959:14, 133) of a long-lived design plan for Complex A based on a north–south centerline orientation, a consequence of which was an east–west symmetry of architecture and offerings. In their view, if there had not been a plan, Complex A would have been a “helter-skelter, fortuitous, opportunistic, or accidental melange of elements” (Drucker and Heizer 1965:41), which it clearly was not. Nevertheless, as Coe and Stuckenrath (1964:6) observed, the point is not whether such a centerline orientation is manifest in the final placement of structures and offerings but, rather, whether it is best understood as the fulfillment of an a priori plan for this built landscape.

The centerline orientation was considered by the 1955 excavators to manifest an explicit rule requiring strong leadership to prevent its aberration over the centuries (Drucker 1981:32). Heizer (1959:179) further suggested that a centerline focus for ritual activities was a characteristic trait of Olmec culture, for which only La Venta was well known at that time. The assumption at the root of these interpretations is that when the Ceremonial Court area was leveled by cutting and filling operations, the chiefs or religious leaders of La Venta shared a template for a new ceremonial precinct that they and generations of their successors directed subordinates to execute. Phase IV constructions were thus the products of intentions already evident in Phase I; what we see on the map is the result of what was planned before anything was built. Drucker and Heizer (Drucker et al. 1959:124) further believed that this design plan demonstrated a cultural break with the pre-Phase I platform remnants they found in a different alignment, even though the same kinds of practices (painting colored layers on the clay platform surfaces) were evident. This assumption supported their argument for cultural continuity from Phase I to IV, which was contested by Coe and Stuckenrath (Drucker and Heizer 1965:63–65). Significantly, temporal modifications were rendered invisible in their 1955 base map, reinforcing the idea that the same design rules resulted in similar practices to build and modify Complex A.

Barrett (1994, 1999; Barrett and Ko 2009) describes how similar notions have influenced the interpretation of monumental ritual landscapes in

Neolithic Britain, but he suggests an alternative scenario—that “monumentality originated in neither the idea nor the plan, but rather in the practice and in the project” (1994:23). Recent relationist theories reject the conventional notion that building is “a simple process of transcription, of a pre-existing design of the final product on to a raw material substrate” (Ingold 1995:76). Instead, thoughts and ideas emerge from engagement with the material world as humans interact in knowledgeable and intentional ways with its physical properties (e.g., Boivin 2008:14; Ingold 1995:75–78; Miller 2005:38; Thomas 2001:172). As Barrett (1994:23, 1999:255–256) has further explained, simple principles of spatial order, such as orientation to the cardinal directions, or physical features, such as a natural north–south ridge, could have been brought to bear in material practices. By these means immanent values became articulated in certain concrete forms—in the case of La Venta, practices associated with erecting the low court walls on the east and west and the earliest structures. Once extant, these constructions and the values they concretized created “a new set of material conditions which life was then faced with having to accommodate” (Barrett 1999:257), becoming the necessary and even taken-for-granted conditions of future practices (see Joyce 2004 for a Formative Mesoamerican example). This alternative scenario requires a theoretical shift, which is incommensurate with the theories promulgated by the existing maps of La Venta.

The Phase I and II structures—Mounds A-2 and A-3, the wall, the Northeast and Northwest Platforms, the South-Central Platform, and the Southeast and Southwest Platforms (Drucker et al. 1959:Table 1)—do not manifest a predominant north–south orientation as much as a four-sided arrangement, although the pyramid (whose origins are uncertain) to the south may have been an additional focal point. Moreover, known Phase I and II caches were discovered from the east and west buildings, especially the extraordinary Phase II massive offerings under the Southeast and Southwest Platforms. East and west are the principal orienting directions in Mesoamerican cosmology, marking the daily path of the sun. Despite excavation of the wide north–south trench through the center of Complex A, nothing found on the centerline dated to Phases I or II (Gillespie 2008:Table

6.2). Significantly, Drucker suggested that “if any Phase I offerings occurred along the centerline, they may have been removed in Construction Phases III and IV in the excavation of the pits for Massive Offerings 3 and 2” in the northern part of the court (1981:36); indeed, he and Heizer may have assumed that there had been such offerings.

Nevertheless, from the excavation findings themselves—which formed the basis of the presumption of the centerline’s importance for placing offerings—no centerline caches dated to before Phase III, and the Phase III offerings were discovered only over the clay fill above Massive Offering 3. This largest of the five massive offerings was the first known to be located on the centerline, possibly occupying the last, central open space in the court created by the platforms occupying its east, west, and south sectors. The final two massive offerings were also positioned on the centerline, north and south of Massive Offering 3 and outside the Ceremonial Court, in Phase IV.

Again, based on the excavation data, the placement of Massive Offering 3 seems to have heralded an important spatial shift in the burial of caches, although offerings were also placed in the Northeast Platform in Phase III. However, all of the Phase IV offerings were recovered on the centerline, an apparent citational reference to the Phase III shift in ritual deposits, perhaps in concert with an imposed “forgetting” of the earlier offerings of Phases I and II and an intentional and physically marked “remembering” of Phase III Offering 4. Furthermore, with one possible exception, Phase IV materials were placed outside the Ceremonial Court, within Mounds A-2 and A-3, which yielded no earlier offerings, and Mounds A-4 and A-5 also date to this phase (Gillespie 2008:Figure 6.6). Despite the spatial emphasis on the centerline yet away from the Ceremonial Court in Phase IV, the post-Phase IV caches (mostly pottery vessels placed in the accumulating drift sand) reveal a reorientation, with the majority of them off the centerline and some of them within the court confines. In sum, the complex chronology of events revealed in the excavation data indicates that the north–south orientation and bilateral symmetry may be more comprehensively understood as the historical and material outcomes of generations of ritual practices rather than as evidence of original design plans for the building of structures and the placement of

offerings. That singular design is most apparent when the architecture and caches are atemporalized and reduced to simple outlines and symbols on a map.

Summary and Conclusions

This investigation of how La Venta has been represented in maps and related drawings since its discovery and how those depictions continue to shape current understandings of the site illustrates some of the challenges archaeologists face in confronting “the imaging of archaeological knowledge” (Moser and Smiles 2005:1). Since the 1940s La Venta has been represented as an arrangement of platforms depicted via a simple plan map or perspective drawing. The 1955 excavations revealed subsurface platforms and demonstrated the sequence of modifications to Complex A over time. However, the base map printed in the 1959 site report (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4) reduced the complexity of its architecture to structural footprints, some of which are missing or incomplete. The embedded anachronism of the platforms’ building stages and caches on that map was never adequately acknowledged. Coe and Stuckenrath’s (1964) critique received little attention, and much of it was directed to challenging the dating and construction history of Complex A, which for their own reasons they chose to interpret as culturally discontinuous. The base map supported Drucker and Heizer’s (1965) opposing opinion that La Venta was a “one-period site” with obvious cultural continuity in its design plan. As such it was a representation of their theory, even as it undercut their ability to convince other archaeologists of the importance of the Ceremonial Court, its modifications over time, and their other argument for continuity, namely, the constant upkeep and similarity of ritual practices through its construction phases (Drucker and Heizer 1965:64).

As new mapping conventions were adopted (the 1968 rectilinearization) and as the extent of La Venta’s civic-ceremonial core was revealed (the PALV map), further inaccuracies were introduced in depicting Complex A, even as its spatial context within greater La Venta was made evident. Complex A’s surface features had already been destroyed, such that the maps had to speak for that no longer extant architecture. Over time, increas-

ingly simplified maps substituted for a complex reality they were supposed to re-present. Early on only surface forms were typically depicted, even though much of La Venta’s “architecture” was subsurface (e.g., Tate 1999:Figures 2 and 5). In some recent publications entire structures have been omitted, destroying or reshaping the design plan that was once highlighted as integral to the cosmological and sociopolitical significance of Complex A.

The Ceremonial Court—painstakingly built up through countless acts of ritual deposition and extraction and constantly maintained—was considered the principal architectural feature of Complex A by the 1955 excavators. However, it is depicted only in pieces on the published base map: the outline formed by the tips of some of the still-standing Phase IV basalt columns that incompletely lined the interior of its walls, an isolated drawing of the stone facing on the wall at the northeast entry, and basalt column “steps” on its south side whose function appears quite ambiguous given that no change in elevation is shown. On some drawings the court has virtually disappeared, although it has been plainly evident in the perspective views since the 1959 report (Drucker et al. 1959:Frontispiece, Figure 23). The absence from the plan views of the court as a built-up platform bounded on its east and west sides by a wide, adobe brick wall embellished with dressed stone blocks helps to explain why subsequent archaeological discussion has tended to disregard the court as an architectural unit. In fact, some descriptions (Diehl 2004:67; González Lauck 1988:131, 1996:76) refer to the long-lived Ceremonial Court as merely a “north court,” with the space between Phase IV Mounds A-4 and A-5 considered an equivalent “south court.” This interpretation is drawn from the atemporality of the La Venta maps, focusing on the nearly identical appearances of these two adjacent locales as enclosed spaces while ignoring critical differences in time and in ritual practices.

The relative neglect of the construction phases of the Ceremonial Court and its appendage platforms is also an expected consequence of the synchronic quality of the base map, which depicts all of the caches as if they were simultaneous and portrays the platforms at different stages of their use lives. In preparing the map for publication, a decision was made to indicate the dedicatory offerings

with symbols denoting the year of their excavation. This decision matches the organization of information in the 1959 site report, in which the 1955 offerings were labeled and described separately from the 1942 and 1943 finds (Drucker et al. 1959:Appendix 1). If, instead, symbols indicating the building phase for each offering had been utilized—data available in the text and profile drawings—a very different understanding of the chronology of Complex A may have resulted.

In sum, Drucker, Heizer, and Squier argued in the 1959 report and later publications for the following interpretations: (1) the primacy of the Ceremonial Court, Feature A-1; (2) the sequence of the court's modification through four distinct construction phases; and (3) the imposition by La Venta's leaders of two formal design principles from the beginning, namely, (3a) bilateral (east–west) symmetry as a product of (3b) a dominating centerline (north–south) orientation. Ironically, the first two arguments have tended to be ignored by subsequent scholarship because the visualization devices that would allow archaeologists to “see” them in the appropriate ways were flawed. However, the third argument for bilateral symmetry and a centerline orientation for mounds and caches is enhanced by the simplified plan maps. Thus these characteristics and the interpretations they support—produced and communicated by the map—continue to be highlighted in discussions of Complex A.

However, as Coe and Stuckenrath (1964) suggested early on, and as I discussed further here, bilateral symmetry and the emphasis on the centerline need to be considered separately rather than as the manifestation of a single ordering principle. They are more comprehensively understood as consequences of the complicated history of ritual use of this sacred locale, a topic that has tended to be ignored (see also Gillespie 2008). The excavation data suggest that what the earlier inhabitants did to this nonquotidian landscape impacted the knowledge and intentions of their successors, both limiting and enabling subsequent changes, as Drucker and Heizer (Drucker et al. 1959:25, 127) acknowledged. Nevertheless, archaeological attention to the dynamic temporality of the platforms' use on a human scale is hindered by the emphasis on formal design rules and the supposition that adherence to them explains how Complex A, and by implication,

the political structure of La Venta, came to be.

This critical investigation of the Complex A maps has evaluated them for their sufficiency in re-presenting the archaeological evidence recorded during excavations, adopting the position that maps are presentations of theories (Moser 1992:831, 837). I have drawn attention to shortcomings where, intentionally or otherwise, the maps and drawings have supported or subverted the interpretations of the original excavators and later commentators. Because the Complex A landscape is destroyed (although some deep deposits may still be intact), there are many things we will never know about it. Nevertheless, despite Heizer's pessimism, the published 1955 map can be improved by consulting the field records and by employing visualization technology not available at that time. The adoption of alternative theories should also result in modifications to the 1955 map to promote those theories. Even as the craft of mapmaking is facilitated by technological innovations in equipment and software, and as flexible digitized drawings replace those printed on paper, archaeologists need to be attuned to the theory-laden quality of maps and the limitations introduced by mapmaking and publishing conventions that may impede our ability to visualize and interpret the archaeological record. These same advances make it possible to move beyond maps as distanced and atemporalizing representations of the plans of structures and landforms and to devise images, for example, using video (e.g., Van Dyke 2006), virtual reality (e.g., Forte and Siliotti 1997), and interactive multimedia (e.g., Webmoor 2005), that aid in understanding the practices that connected people to their world (Gillings 2005:230). Such an approach to the “mapping” of Complex A would more comprehensively communicate how this dynamic ritual landscape came into being and was changed through material acts, how it was experienced by its caretakers over time, and how it influenced the historical processes of their inhabitation.

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Notes

1. William Coe to Robert F. Heizer, 15 September 1964 and 5 January 1965. Correspondence, Robert Fleming Heizer Papers, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Suitland, Maryland (hereafter Heizer Papers, NAA).

2. This work is part of an ongoing project I am directing, "The Architectural History of La Venta Complex A: A Reconstruction Based on the 1955 Field Records." A few of the new images created from field records were presented in Gillespie et al. 2009. Recourse to the field notes is necessary because the published maps present many impediments to creating a digitized map of La Venta (e.g., Sandoval 2004).

3. The dating of Complex A and its building phases (I–IV) is not discussed here. The 400-year span derived from radiocarbon dates obtained in 1955 (Drucker et al. 1957, 1959:264–267) and 1967 (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968) was revised to indicate occupation from 1000 to 600 B.C. uncalibrated (Berger et al. 1967:5). However, there are difficulties interpreting the carbon samples in terms of their contexts and whether they sort out four distinct building phases (Berger et al. 1967:5; Coe and Stuckenrath 1964; Grove 1997:72). Another problem is that the calibration with calendar years is not straightforward between 800 and 450 B.C. (Pool 2007:160). Diehl (2004:69) suggests that the use of Complex A lasted perhaps only 100–150 years. There are no reliable chronological sequences from the ceramic, stratigraphic, or sculptural data to date changes and building events within the 400- to 500-year time span of occupation at La Venta's ceremonial center (González Lauck 1996:73; Grove 1997:73; Pool 2007:158).

4. The "tombs" are "surrogate" burials, as Drucker and Heizer (1965:56–57) later clarified (see Wedel's "gravelike deposit," in Drucker 1952:64). All but one lacked human remains, at least some of which would have survived if present (Drucker and Heizer 1965:57), and the costume ornaments they contained were arranged too perfectly to have once been attached to a decaying corpse. Some of the other offerings have also been interpreted as less elaborate pseudo-burials (Gillespie 2008:Table 6.2; Joyce 2000:44–45). Tomb A yielded two compact "packaged" assortments of disarticulated bones, neither one indicative of a complete skeleton, interpreted as bundle burials (Drucker and Heizer 1965:57). The bones may have been considered part of the cache objects rather than the skeletal remains of principal grave occupants.

5. In 1943 Wedel (in Drucker 1952:60–61) excavated what appeared to be another platform just east of the Southeast Platform on the south edge of the Ceremonial Court, perhaps 4 x 7 m in extent, made of adobe bricks and topped with basalt columns. He believed that it might have a twin on the west side, but the 1955 excavations showed that it did not. This structure did not receive a designation and was dismissed as a "late modification of the original plan of the Complex" (Drucker et al. 1959:10). It was not formally mapped except as a line of six basalt columns (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 4).

6. Unfortunately, a major portion of the north–south Mound A-2 trench profile drawn in 1943 was lost (Wedel, in Drucker 1952:61), and the northernmost section of the 1955

trench was not recorded (Drucker et al. 1959:47). The northern limit of the tallest structure in Complex A thus remains unknown (Drucker et al. 1959:298).

7. Squier was subsequently criticized in print for rendering the pyramid, covered in forest in 1955, as rectilinear. Heizer (1968:17) acknowledged with regret the "egregious errors" concerning the pyramid's shape in the 1959 report but placed the blame squarely on a surveyor in charge of mapping it. Similar comments naming Squier as that surveyor appear in Heizer and Drucker (1968:52). Bernal followed suit, expressing contempt for the "presumably competent surveyor" (1969:35). Squier's typed notes to accompany his draft Map 1 of Complexes A and C (Maps Folder, Heizer Papers, NAA) indicate that he and Heizer conducted instrument and tape measurements of the pyramid during the last week of the field project, which runs counter to the impression in Heizer and Drucker (1968:52) that its mapping was solely Squier's responsibility.

8. Figure 3 in Drucker et al. 1959 shows the Southeast and Southwest Platforms as raised elevations, whereas in Figure 4 they are indicated only by lines of circles representing the tops of the basalt columns that ringed the central part of their upper surfaces. The basalt column fence around the Ceremonial Court is presented in an idealized complete state in Figure 3, whereas Figure 4 shows that there were gaps in the fence and many of the columns were out of alignment. Figure 3 also fails to bring the northeast side of the wall all the way to the edge of Mound A-2 as shown in Figure 4.

9. Similar to Figure 3 in Drucker et al. (1959), the perspective drawing does not extend the wall on its northern side all the way to the edge of Mound A-2. The South-Central Platform is much longer in the perspective drawing than in the plan views, and that drawing also includes a bounded rectangle in the space between the South-Central Platform and the Southwest and Southeast Platforms that does not appear on the plan views. On the drawing a third set of basalt column "steps" has been added to the south end of the court to introduce symmetry.

10. Maps Folder, Heizer Papers, NAA.

11. These two 1960s drawings depict the bounded rectangle between the Southeast and Southwest Platforms as a dis-

tinct elevated platform with a single stairway or ramp in the center of its south side. They also show the square ring of basalt columns as more complete on both the Southeast and Southwest Platforms. Mound A-2 is about the same size as Mound A-3.

12. Drucker and Heizer (1965:63) acknowledged that the sculptures may have been reset from pre-Phase IV locations or moved during or after Phase IV, such that their stratigraphic positions as found by archaeologists are not a reliable guide to their original erection.

13. Maps Folder, Heizer Papers, NAA.

14. According to a grant proposal to help fund the 1955 excavations, Drucker and Heizer planned to excavate only one-half of the court on the assumption that the other half would provide duplicate information because of the already evident bilateral symmetry. Philip Drucker and Robert Heizer, "Analysis of Olmec Architecture Through Excavation of Structural Features at La Venta Tabasco," undated manuscript, Alphabetical File, Heizer Papers, NAA.

15. Philip Drucker, "Catalog of Offerings," Alphabetical File, Heizer Papers, NAA.

16. Because of inconsistent and misleading section drawings (Drucker et al. 1959:Figures 16-17, 39), Coe and Stuckenrath (1964:28) doubted that Offering 4 had been opened for inspection. In their response Drucker and Heizer admitted to "our own errors of presentation" in the drawings and their failure to carefully proofread the work of their draftsman, upon whom they "relied heavily" (1965:61). They nevertheless effectively refute the criticism, and the field records leave little doubt that the pit had been filled, partially opened, and refilled.

17. Heizer recorded Phase III Offering 6 (a pseudo-burial) in the Northeast Platform as positioned a few centimeters above a Phase I ceramic bowl (Offering 15) (Drucker et al. 1959:189; Field Notes, Heizer Papers, NAA). The vertical relationship of these two caches is reversed in the published profile drawing (Drucker et al. 1959:Figure 18).

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