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## Journey's End(?)

### *The Travels of La Venta Offering 4*

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In the 1980s a compelling metaphor emerged in social science whereby objects, like subjects, were acknowledged to have “social lives” whose trajectories were characterized as “biographies” or life histories (e.g., Appadurai 1986b; Gaitán Ammann 2005; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Hahn and Weiss 2013a; Holtorf 1998; Hoskins 1998, 2006; Joy 2009; Kopytoff 1986; Meskell 2004; Moreland 1999; Overholtzer and Stoner 2011). This approach was consonant with relationist theories developing in the same decade, such as materiality (Miller 1987, 2005a) and actor-network-theory (Latour 1988, 2005), which highlight the roles played by nonhumans in social interactions, thereby challenging the modernist subject-object divide (e.g., Gell 1998; Keane 2006; Olsen 2003, 2007, 2010; Watts 2013; Webmoor and Witmore 2008).

The biographical orientation—changes experienced over time—in these studies coincided with a growing anti-modernist, anti-essentialist ontology according to which all matter is in flux, continuously emerging and undergoing change (e.g., DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Hicks 2010; Ingold 2011). Things are to be understood in terms of their histories rather than static properties (Ingold 2011:32). Analysts were thus urged to “follow the things themselves” (Appadurai 1986a:5) or follow the materials (Ingold 2011:213). Following them through their interactions with humans

elucidates how people and things are mutually transformed (Gosden and Marshall 1999:169). They become “entangled” (Hodder 2011a, 2012; N. Thomas 1991), “enchained” (Strathern 1988:161), or “allied” with each other (Latour 2005; Strathern 1996:520).

Attention to the social lives of things has, however, been criticized for its inherent anthropocentrism (e.g., Hicks 2010; Ingold 2007a, 2011; Latour 2005; Webmoor and Witmore 2008). Appadurai (1986a:5) famously observed, “It is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.” However, many aspects of the being of things are different from those of humans and lie outside social contexts, unrecognized or undertheorized by humans. The effects and efficacies of objects derive from their material constitutions and their own temporalities or durability, as well as processes of entropy, fragmentation, and destruction (Hicks 2010:75; Ingold 2007a).

Archaeologists in particular are well aware of how materials and made objects are transformed over time; indeed, their discipline trains them to document those transformations as revealed through traces left on artifacts and features (Hicks 2010:82; Joyce 2012b). Lucas (2012:166) argued that archaeologists should be less concerned with “materiality” than with “materialization,” the dynamic processes that make and unmake objects and people in contingent ways. Such processes constitute the social contexts that endow persons and things with meaning and agency (Hicks 2010:62).

Attention to movement in space, duration in time, and change along the way is facilitated by a complementary focus on object “itineraries” (Hahn and Weiss 2013a:7–9; Joyce 2012a, 2012b; Joyce and Gillespie, chapter 1, Joyce, chapter 2, this volume). Examining how and where things move or are moved in performative interactions, the work they do and the effects they bring about, the way stations where they may temporarily come to rest, the routes they take and the means by which they move, and their physical changes as a result of moving and stopping provides insights beyond sheer biography. By following things in their iterations and itineraries, the analyst can investigate how “values are generated, maintained, rejected or even destroyed” (Hahn and Weiss 2013a:9). To follow an itinerary is to investigate things as “historicized traces of practices” and to reassemble the networks they facilitated, tasks that are central to archaeology (Joyce 2012a, 2012b).

The valuations, potential transformations, and networked associations and interactions of “things-in-motion” may depend on whether they travel solo or with companions, whether and how a group is kept together on a

journey, whether individual objects remain intact or are divided into portions that undertake separate paths, and whether once separated whole objects or fragments ever meet up again. These specific issues are taken up in this chapter (see also Blair, chapter 5, Haskell, chapter 4, Roddick, chapter 7, Walz, chapter 9, this volume) as I follow the social and material lives of things in transit through a case study of a purposely buried grouping of finely made artifacts. Excavated in 1955 at La Venta, an Olmec regional center in southern Mexico, this group was designated Offering 4 in the inventory of the caches recovered from the site (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:152–161). Offering 4 was described as a structured assemblage of 16 anthropomorphic stone figurines and 6 jade celts (slender, axe-shape objects) arranged to form a miniature tableau.

By its very name, Offering 4 was recognized by its excavators as an artifact set, on par with other recovered caches whose component parts drew their significance from being members of a set. My discussion focuses on how the predeposition biographies and travels of the Offering 4 objects, as they can be archaeologically traced, were transformed by their movement to and placement in the cache. Their burial together at La Venta, the ostensible end of their individual itineraries, created a new valuation, one dependent on fellow travelers. I consider the circumstances of the event when they were originally deposited and the “recontextualizations” (N. Thomas 1991) resulting from their movements following excavation. Although it was not inevitable, the prior life histories, itineraries, and individuated meanings of the Offering 4 objects were subsequently lost as a consequence of their “reconstitution” (Lucas 2005:129) by archaeologists as a “ritual deposit,” as well as by taphonomic processes. Soon after its discovery, the group was split up and remained so for more than a half century. The cache members were finally reunited in 2012, but along the way, Offering 4 acquired new meanings, functions, and social associations.

In following most of the Offering 4 artifacts up to the present day, I base my analysis in the ontology of “things” and “objects” as different modes of being, in the movements of things that create and cut networks of associations, and in the transformative practices of object fragmentation and accumulation in archaeological interpretation. I particularly seek to resurrect the neglected individual social lives of these erstwhile heirlooms and to tentatively regather their original, now irrevocably fragmented, assembly. The Offering 4 case study exemplifies how things can emerge as the “effects of material practices” (Hicks and Beaudry 2010a:20), specifically, the disciplinary practices and discourses of archaeology and museography.

THINGS, OBJECTS, AND NETWORKS

The early twenty-first century witnessed a resurgence in thing theory (e.g., B. Brown 2001; Gosden 2004; Grosz 2009; Hodder 2011a, 2012; Ingold 2010b:4; Keane 2006; Knappett 2008, 2011a), frequently building on Heidegger’s seminal essay “The Thing” (1971). In its original etymology, a “thing” was an assembly or gathering (Heidegger 1971:174). Technologically, made things assemble into their being the materials, techniques, tools, knowledge, and skills to manufacture and use them, and this is often analyzed as a *chaîne opératoire* or a life history (e.g., Knappett 2011a; LaMotta and Schiffer 2001). Chorographically, they index the places of acquisition of their materials and where they were made, exchanged, modified, and deposited, in some instances, endowing those places with particular meanings (Bradley 2000). In terms of sociality, they gather the various actors—human and nonhuman—that depend on them (Gell 1998; Latour 2005:65), as well as values, meanings, memories, emotions, and affects (Gell 1992). Historically, they assemble all these factors in time, forming their own and others’ biographies (Appadurai 2006:15; Gosden 2006; Hoskins 1989).

Accordingly, Offering 4 can be analyzed as a thing or as an object, as can its individual components. Things and objects are different “modes of material being” or “relational registers” (Knappett 2008:144, 2011a:45). Things are characterized by the constancy of gathering: “The thing things. Thinging gathers” (Heidegger 1971:174). In a dynamic relational ontology, things are in continuous formation or incipient emergence (Ingold 2011:63, 69), a “going on” in which humans may participate in some, but not all, aspects of its thinging (Ingold 2010b:4).

A thing is “the coming-into-existence of a prior substance or thing” and a “transmutation” of a previous thing into a new thing (Grosz 2009:125–126). These ideas resonate with the concept of “assemblage” of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and DeLanda (2006; see Bennett 2010:24; Harris 2013:177) and with Ingold’s (2011) “meshwork.” Things flow within their own temporalities (Knappett 2011a:46). They have histories and lives of their own (Grosz 2009:124) and thus may bear the “indexical traces” of their particular life course (Keane 2006:200).

The “ongoing historicity” (Ingold 2012:8) of things includes processes of taphonomy (decaying, aging, weathering) and their “entanglements” with people and with other things (Hodder 2011a, 2012). Archaeologists acknowledge that “things seem transient, always changing, problematic, unbounded. Things are always falling apart, transforming, growing, changing, dying, running out” (Hodder 2011a:160), even those that manifest an

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“illusion of permanence” (Appadurai 2006:15). Yet, gathering is rarely self-evident (Heidegger 1971), and manifold efforts and resources are deployed to preserve certain classes of things (heirlooms, artworks, archaeological artifacts) and thus deny “the inherent tendency of things to move on to some new state in their social lives” (Appadurai 2006:16). Once objectified, things can conceal their relationships with the entities that brought them into existence (Meskell 2004:21; Miller 2005a:8); alternatively, their “thinging” truly ceases, and they come to rest as “objects” (Appadurai 2006:15).

A network, meshwork, or assemblage model is useful to systematically follow the intersections through time and space of things in motion (Harris 2013:177; Ingold 2011:63–64; Knappett 2008:142), yet networks can be halted or “cut” (Strathern 1996:523). Whereas Ingold (2011:69, 2012:5) emphasized the unceasing “material flows and formative processes” that bring things into being, Gell (1998:248–249) called attention to the points when and where networks were stopped or stabilized and assumed a particular configuration. Gosden (2006:431) argued for the need to account for both flows (or relations) and stoppages (see Díaz-Guardamino, chapter 6, Law Pezzarossi, chapter 10, Roddick, chapter 7, Wallis, chapter 11, this volume). Importantly, an object itinerary should not focus just on movement. Periods of inertia—for example, as a result of being buried or unused—must also be included (Hahn and Weiss 2013a:9). As I will show, the alternating movement and stasis of Offering 4 played a critical transformative role in its internal structure and the networks of its gathering.

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### FRAGMENTATION, ENCHAINMENT, AND ACCUMULATION

Things can be physically assembled and disassembled on their itineraries. The purposeful fragmentation of things and the division of their parts among different keepers may serve to enchain those persons. This thesis was developed in archaeology by Chapman for early Balkan prehistory (Chapman 1996, 2000a, 2000b, 2008, 2010; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007) and has been applied by other archaeologists, although not without strong caveats (Brittain and Harris 2010; Frieman 2012; A. Jones 2005; Knappett 2006, 2011a; J. Pollard 2004).

Chapman drew attention to the practice of deliberate fragmentation, especially where archaeologists recovered some, but not all, pieces of a once intact object fractured in a single act at a discrete location or where artifact parts were discovered spatially separated, ostensibly divided among various persons who then traveled their separate ways (e.g., Carter 2007; Roddick, chapter 7, this volume). Chapman argued that the fragments continued to reference not only the entire artifact but also the chains of networked

relationships with humans and other things that the original artifact indexed, including relationships that emerged from the act(s) of its fragmentation. The part stands for the whole and the whole for its parts; this is a relationship of “fractality,” the capacity to be simultaneously individual and collective (Chapman 2000a:28, 37; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007:1, citing Wagner 1991; see Haskell, chapter 4, this volume).

Chapman (2008, 2010; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007:9) acknowledged methodological objections to his interpretation of enchainment through fragmentation. Intentionally broken and dispersed artifacts had to be isolated from the usual “rubbish,” for example, via refitting analyses. Comprehensive excavation with thorough recovery techniques was required to locate any missing pieces that might indicate accidental breakage or disinterest in curating dispersed parts. Furthermore, there had to be evidence that the fragments continued to have a use life after breakage. Even where such intentional fragmentation can be demonstrated, archaeologists have challenged the embedded assumption that purposeful breakage and the sharing of parts always implicates an enchainment of persons (Brittain and Harris 2010).

Brittain and Harris criticized the emphasis on the part-whole relationships referenced by fragments because it shifted attention away from the artifact to the more recognizably social sphere of humans. They called for greater attention to how artifact fragments work “in their own right” (Brittain and Harris 2010:589; see also Frieman 2012). Pollard (2004:50) observed that in Chapman’s thesis, fragmented objects must remain stable in order to maintain their recognizable fractality, whereas in reality, objects undergo decay, aging, or other metamorphoses, giving rise to new kinds of substances that could change the relationships between parts and wholes.

Chapman’s thesis included a counterpart to intentional fragmentation—namely, accumulation—but it has been comparatively neglected by archaeologists (Brittain and Harris 2010:583). Chapman identified acts of accumulation based on objects deposited in sets. Sets are “integrally related groups of individual elements,” with the fractal relationship between a member of a set and the set as a whole treated as equivalent to the relationship between a fragment and a once intact artifact (Chapman 2000a:46; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007:9). Four kinds of artifact sets were commonly deposited in the Balkans during the Neolithic-to-Chalcolithic time span (Chapman 2000a): costume elements revealed in mortuary contexts, although a number of them were cenotaphs (items of costume laid out as if on a body, although the body is absent); hoards; grave goods; and groups of figurines arranged in interactive scenes.

An important difference between an object fragmented into pieces and a set composed of discrete members is that sets are capable of infinite expansion as new members are added (Chapman 2000a:46; Haskell, chapter 4, this volume). Chapman (2000a:47–48; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007:9; Meskell 2004:29) considered accumulation to be an opposing historical process in tension with enchainment via fragmentation, whereas Knappett (2011a:166) suggested that the two are complementary rather than opposed. Chapman (2000a:47) hypothesized that in the Neolithic-to-Chalcolithic transition in the Balkans, “the value of the object or set of objects became more significant than the relationships” they once signified as individual things or fragments enchainment with persons and other things. Artifacts within sets may have been made expressly for that purpose, manifesting a fractal relationship with the set from their origin. In other cases, artifacts made for individual purposes were only subsequently assembled as a set, archaeologically recognizable by their joint deposition.

In the Balkans, the change in relationships between people and things evident in the waning practice of enchainment through fragmentation and a growing emphasis on accumulation was seemingly precipitated by the introduction of new materials in the Chalcolithic period: copper and gold. Objects made of metal were more resistant to fragmentation than were fragile ceramics, their manufacture was more restricted, and the use of metal contributed to the development of the abstract notion of wealth, which created new kinds of relationships among persons (Chapman 2000a:47–48, 131, 2000b:171).

Although all things in motion reference places, the positioning of accumulated sets in discrete locales marks those places, which serve to keep the sets together, as special. This is particularly so when the places that shelter the sets are “closed contexts”—below ground or otherwise meant to be permanent resting places—signaling to Chapman (2000a:130) “the end of a sequence of social practices”: the “deaths” of the objects. The spatial dispersion of both artifact fragments and sets can create a landscape as a network of emplaced references and experiences (Chapman 2008), although much of that landscape is buried and rendered less visible (J. Pollard 2001). Significantly, adding time to this landscape expands the action of “accumulation” to include repeated depositions of materials in the same places (e.g., Joyce and Pollard 2010). These sequential actions continue to invoke obligations between persons and things (Meskell 2004:30), such that the deposition of sets in closed contexts need not mark the cessation of social practices or the deaths of the objects. This latter situation is exemplified by the artifact set known as La Venta Offering 4.

## LA VENTA OFFERING 4: ACCUMULATION AND FRAGMENTATION

The concepts of enchainment through fragmentation and accumulation developed for the Old World provide useful analytical tools in a parallel case from the late Neolithic New World site of La Venta. Located near the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico in the state of Tabasco, La Venta was the principal regional center of Mesoamerica's Olmec archaeological culture during the Middle Formative period (ca. 900–400 BC). Curiously, the same kinds of fragmentation practices and accumulations into the same four kinds of sets identified by Chapman in the Balkans occurred at La Venta, based on its most thoroughly excavated ceremonial precinct, Complex A. In Complex A, archaeologists recovered sets of body ornaments in pseudo-burials, arrangements of anthropomorphic figurines (Offering 4 being the prime example), sets of "grave goods" (the graves are ambiguous), and hoards of jadeite and serpentine celts and of serpentine blocks. Eschewing the word "hoard," La Venta archaeologists designated the carefully buried caches based on their relative size as either "massive" or "dedicatory" offerings (Drucker 1952; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959).

La Venta played a pivotal role in Middle Formative Mesoamerica, a period of growing social complexity prior to the emergence of archaic states. Among other things, the chiefly residents of this center were involved in the critical shift in the "regime of values" (Appadurai 1986a) toward the appropriation of "jade" (jadeite, serpentine, and related minerals) as a high-profile substance essential to their claims of hierarchy and political legitimacy. The use of jade is comparable in some respects to the use of copper and gold in the Old World Chalcolithic. However, unlike what transpired with the introduction of metal objects in the Balkans according to Chapman's thesis, when jade artifacts first began being widely circulated in Mesoamerica, they were frequently subjected to intentional breakage, despite their hardness, rarity, difficulty of manufacture, and inherent value (Gillespie 2012). This was the case with the Offering 4 artifacts. Furthermore, although Offering 4 fits into the schema of the four Balkan artifact sets, it does not precisely match Chapman's criteria for accumulation as a social practice that developed in tension with enchainment through fragment exchange. As I discuss below, the items included in this cache were not ostensibly made for that destiny. Each had its own biography and was brought into a new assembly when the gathered objects were covered with sand in Complex A.

Nevertheless, Offering 4 has been treated as a closed set ever since its discovery, implicating certain attitudes of analysts and the consuming public



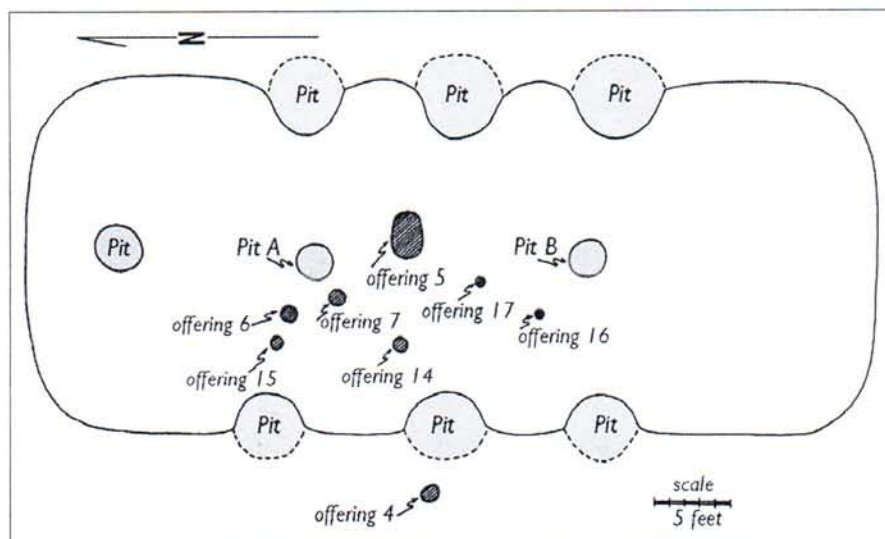
toward its significance as a thing that depends upon, but transcends, its components. As a result, the prior biographies of its parts have been disregarded, and the gathering or thinging of Offering 4 has been cut. The very name Offering 4 reduced its original complexity to the representation of an act of ritual deposition. It was made into an object, albeit in compound form. Despite its presumed significance as a miniature scene of interacting humans, the internal structure of Offering 4 was neglected, and the individual pieces were so understudied as to be unrecognizable except within the boundaries of the set. Fractality was lost. These parts no longer stand for the whole; there is only the whole, but its integrity and value have been transformed.

In short, things that once traveled their own paths were changed by the circumstances of their material assembly into a new thing over 2,500 years ago and again by the rupture of that assembly some 60 years ago. The processes of materialization that made, unmade, and remade Offering 4 in the distant and recent past provide insights into the tension between things and objects and between fragmentation and accumulation, revealing aspects of sociopolitical processes at La Venta and some attitudes of modern consumers of this material culture.

### **Description and History**

Offering 4 (figure 3.1) was discovered in April 1955 next to the western edge of the Northeast Platform, located within the walled Ceremonial Court of Complex A (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:152, fig. 14; Gillespie 2011:fig. 14). This artifact cache was considered unique to La Venta (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:152), although it has been compared to buried groupings of ceramic figurines elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Marcus 2009). Within an elliptical area approximately 51 cm north-south by 36 cm east-west were 16 upright stone figurines, all about the same height (from 16.03 cm to 20.16 cm). They faced one another in a semicircle as if they were miniature humans engaged in a social interaction. Depicted with little to no clothing, they were interpreted as adult males. The 6 slender objects labeled celts (from 23.55 cm to 27.53 cm long) were placed polls down upright in a north-south line east of the figurines (between them and the platform), creating a wall-like backdrop for the tableau (figure 3.2) (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:152, table 4; Jaime-Riverón 2013).

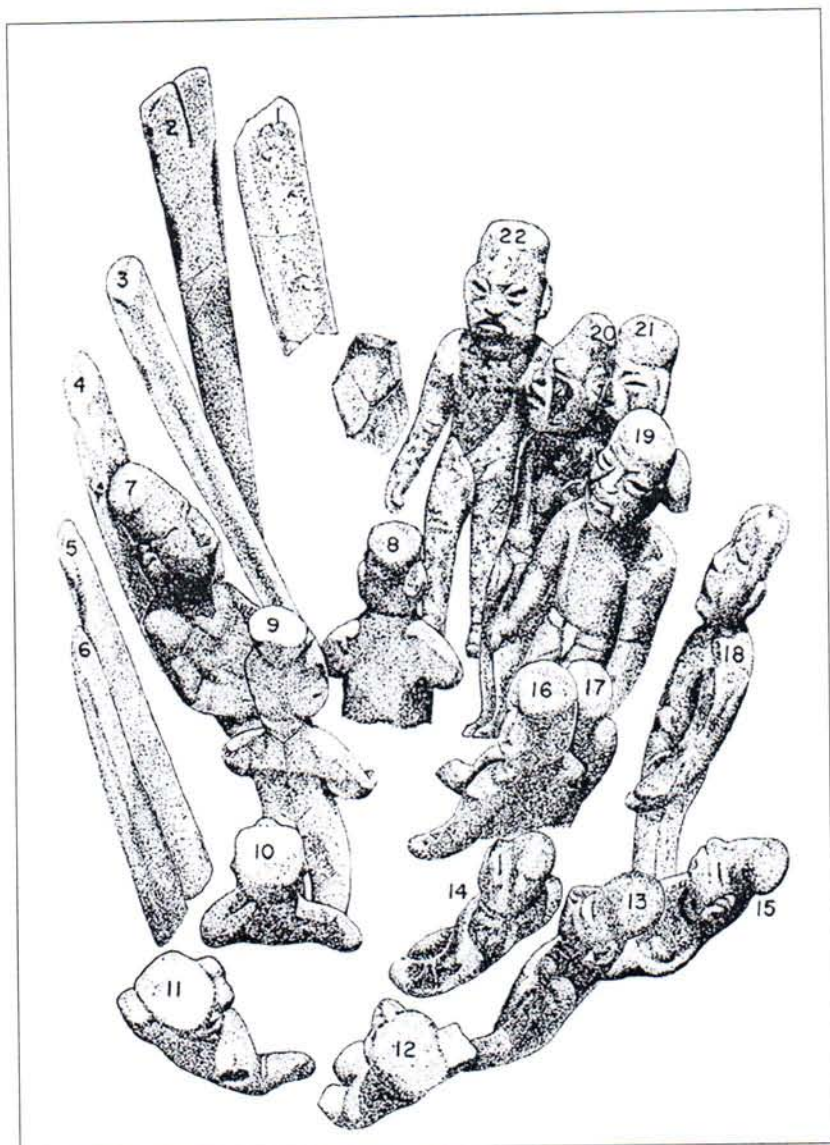
All the celts and two figurines (nos. 9 and 22) were made of jadeite, a mineral found only in the Motagua River valley in Guatemala. The rest of the figurines, with one exception (no. 7), were crafted of serpentine, a related semiprecious stone that was probably imported from the state

**FIGURE 3.1**

Plan of the Northeast Platform in the Ceremonial Court, Complex A, La Venta (after Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959, fig. 14). North is to the left. The locations of buried offerings found within the platform and the location of Offering 4 (bottom) off the platform, under the Ceremonial Court floor, are indicated. The pits (shaded) were dug into the platform during or after Phase IV construction and postdate the offerings.

of Oaxaca over 200 km away (Filloy Nadal et al. 2013). The artifacts were positioned in a layer of reddish-brown sand that covered the feet of the figurines and the polls of the celts. The sand was part of an extensive filling operation to raise the level of the Ceremonial Court during its third major construction phase. Where the figurines and celts were to be placed, the sand was slightly mounded. Once in position, the artifacts were fully covered by a layer of light brown or whitish sand that was level elsewhere in this vicinity but mounded up over the offering, rendering it invisible while evidencing its position. The whitish sand was capped by a thin layer of brown sand and a thicker leveling layer of brown-gray sand, the final fill layer of the newly raised court floor. The floor was then gradually resurfaced with several thin, variously colored layers of sandy clay, called the Phase III “old rose” floor series (figure 3.3; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:154, fig. 39).

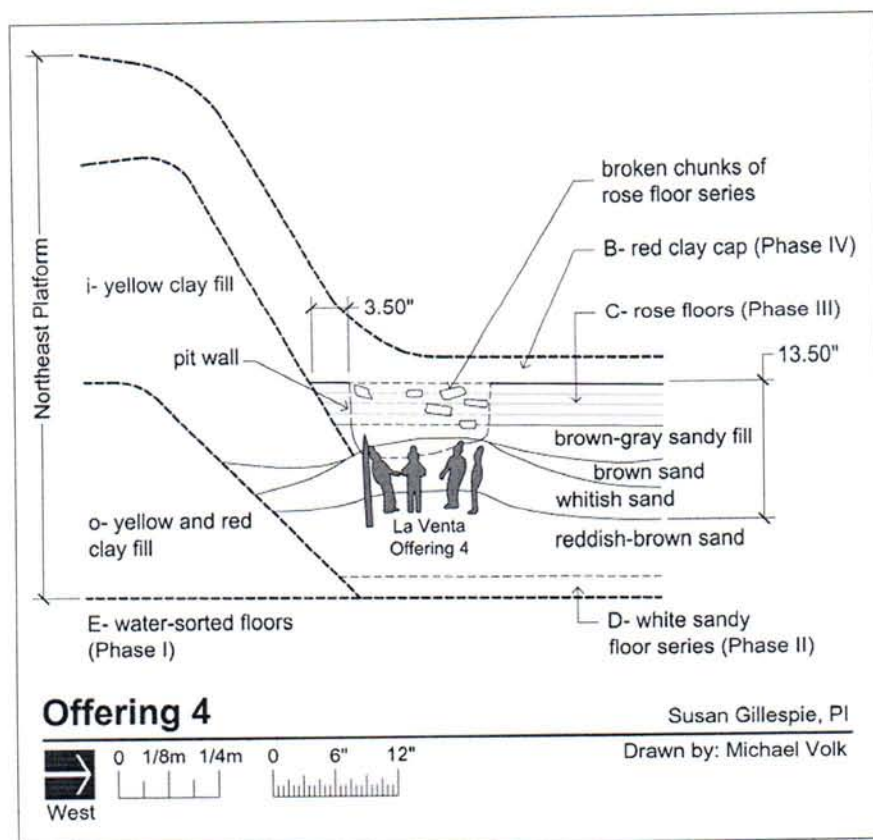
Despite its invisibility, Offering 4 continued to circulate in the memories of the stewards of the Ceremonial Court. Although this interpretation remains controversial (Coe and Stuckenrath 1964; González Lauck and Courtès 2013), the 1955 archaeologists interpreted the stratigraphic



**FIGURE 3.2**

*Offering 4, with objects numbered. This drawing (after Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959, fig. 38) was made from an excavation photograph taken while the celts and figurines were still embedded in the surrounding sand matrix.*

evidence as indicating that after the objects had been sealed under several Phase III floor resurfacings, an oval-shaped hole was dug through those clay layers over the cache's location. The soil matrix was removed just enough to



**FIGURE 3.3**

*Reconstructed profile of Offering 4 (looking south), adjacent to the west side of the Northeast Platform, covered by the Phase III rose floor series of colored clay layers. Dashed lines indicate the outline of the "inspection hole" and the general locations of Phase IV modifications. Scale drawing based on the 1955 field records (Robert Fleming Heizer Papers, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution). Courtesy Susan D. Gillespie.*

observe the tops of the figurines and celts, and then this "inspection hole" was refilled. The material that refilled the hole included pieces of the colorful clay floors that had been broken through to get to the cache—evidence of the fragmenting of the court floor to expose the figurines and celts to view. Although its timing is uncertain, this event was presumably carried out prior to the final construction phase (Phase IV) for the Ceremonial Court, when all the architecture was covered with a thick layer of reddish clay (see figure 3.3; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:152–161). And there the cache remained for some 2,500 years. When once again exposed, the

objects were hastily photographed and removed from the soil, for there was little chance they would have remained undisturbed if left overnight (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:152). The celts (see figure 3.2) were cataloged as objects 1–6, followed by the figurines as objects 7–22 (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:fig. 38, plates 30–32).

Enormous interest was immediately generated by this discovery, whose photographic image graced a full page of *National Geographic* magazine in 1956 (Drucker and Heizer 1956). It is still widely considered to be one of the most famous finds from La Venta (Walsh 2013:33). The 1955 excavators, Philip Drucker and Robert Heizer, interpreted Offering 4 as a small-scale replica of some Olmec rite, appropriately deposited in the Ceremonial Court, a place devoted exclusively to ritual activities. In the 1956 article, they suggested that the gaze of the persons represented by the figurines seemed to be directed toward Figurine 7. This figurine was uniquely crafted from “granite” or a similar conglomerate rock (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:155, table 4). Figurine 7 also stood alone, the only one with its back to the row of celts, facing the other figurines.

However, in the 1959 site report, the authors suggested instead that four figurines (nos. 8–11) appeared to be moving in a single file toward a focal individual (see figure 3.2). That is, they were traveling in a state of suspended animation. The figurine the four are advancing toward, number 22, had the most “spectacular” appearance, uniquely made of a bright green jade with black inclusions and given “haughty and commanding” facial features (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:155). The figurines on either side were deemed to be active witnesses to the unfolding action. In addition, the archaeologists noted that the figurines were grouped in pairs, with the exceptions of number 7 (the rough conglomerate one) and number 22 (the spectacular jadeite one) (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:155–156).

Despite the cache’s fame in archaeological circles well beyond Mesoamerica, the Offering 4 artifacts themselves were analytically neglected. In keeping with its classification as an artifact set, subsequent interpretations were concerned with the nature of the ritual and the identities of the celebrants represented by the figurines, for example, shamans, priests, rulers, ancestors, mythical figures, or deities (e.g., Cyphers 2011:229; Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal 2013b; Reilly 1999:29, 2002:37; Tate 1996:437, 1999:184). The 1956 reading of the scene as centered on the odd figurine (no. 7) continued to be promulgated (Castro-Leal 1996a; M. Coe 1968:66; Cyphers 2011:228; González Lauck 1994:104; Lothrop 1972:22; Marcus 2009:31). A few archaeologists more cautiously maintained that its mean-

ing remained undetermined (e.g., González Lauck 1994:106), and the excavators (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:156) insisted that the figurines could not be identified with a specific social role.

Because it has always been considered an artifact set, museographers have designated Offering 4 as a single item in exhibits and catalogs (Benson and de la Fuente 1996:204–205, no. 42; Berrin and Fields 2010:160–161, plate 72; Cyphers 2011:228–229, no. 63). Based on their spatial association and relative positions, the figurines are transformed into interacting humanoids. The narrow celts are believed to serve as miniature versions of stone stelae (Cyphers 2011:229; González Lauck 1994:104), providing a sanctified setting for the action or, alternatively, mimicking the wall of basalt columns that edged the Ceremonial Court (Marcus 2009:31; Walsh 2013:31). Monumental stone stelae with bas-relief carvings (cf. Díaz-Guardamino, chapter 6, this volume) were erected in Complex A and elsewhere in La Venta's civic-ceremonial precinct. Although they cannot be precisely dated as coincident with Offering 4 (and the Phase IV basalt column wall postdates Offering 4), they add support to the notion that the figurines were meant to represent real humans in a locale equivalent to La Venta itself.

The special consideration given to Offering 4 by archaeologists and museographers was appropriate within their disciplinary practices, which effectively made this “thing” out of a preexisting thing. It matches the common assessment that Offering 4 is among the most spectacular finds in Olmec archaeology (González Lauck and Courtès 2013:17), “the most unusual Olmec treasure ever found” (Coe 1968:67), even “the most impressive offering from early Mesoamerica” (Castro-Leal 1996a:205). However, circumscribing Offering 4 as an artifact set has erased the prior biographies and enchainments of the objects that were gathered to create it. It also unintentionally added supplemental itineraries and new transformations to Offering 4 and its components.

#### **The Travels of Offering 4**

At the end of the 1955 field season, the Offering 4 artifacts and other La Venta finds were taken to the old National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Mexico City for preliminary cataloging and description (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:3). They were transferred to the new National Museum of Anthropology that opened in 1964, where Offering 4 was displayed—as a group—as the “piece of the month” in 1967 (Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:42). The figurines and celts were enshrined in a free-standing vitrine in the Gulf Cultures room.

Once stabilized in the nation's capital, Offering 4 rarely strayed. Among its recent travels, the set was lent for an Olmec exhibit in 1996 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (Benson and de la Fuente 1996:204–205) and another in 2010–2011 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the De Young Museum of San Francisco (Berrin and Fields 2010:160–161; Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:43–46).

When first installed in Mexico City the objects were meant to be positioned “exactly” as they appeared when discovered by the archaeologists (Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:42)—as if they had not moved. However, this is not what happened. Excavation photos (e.g., Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:plate 32, upper) show the celts in two separate groups: numbers 1–4 forming a cluster edged by the odd Figurine 7 and numbers 5–6 as a pair a few centimeters away. However, on exhibit, the celts have been positioned nearly equidistant from one another. When displayed as the piece of the month in 1967 (Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:fig. 2), the celts (numbered 1–6, south to north) were positioned as 1–2–5–3–4–6. Moved to their permanent display in the Gulf Cultures room, the celts were reordered as 5–2–1–3–4–6 (photo in Anonymous 1987:96). This sequence was maintained in the National Gallery and the two California museum exhibits and upon their return to Mexico City (photos in Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:figs. 6, 10). However, a photograph taken before Offering 4 was transferred to the new museum in 1964 has the celts, but not the figurines, in their original order (M. Coe 1968:68–69; Lothrop 1972:22–23). Shifting the order of the celts renders them interchangeable, tokens of a type, rather than parts of a structured set.

As noted above, the figurines were moved about. Photographs revealed that they were no longer spatially paired (e.g., Anonymous 1987:96; Benson and de la Fuente 1996:204; Cyphers 2011; González Lauck 1994:fig. 6.20). Moreover, in the California exhibit catalog, the lead “moving” figurine (no. 8) was inexplicably turned 180 degrees, facing the opposing direction (Berrin and Fields 2010:plate 72). These are not pedantic observations, given the operating assumption that the positioning of each object was essential to the meaning of the whole and thus to the singular importance of this cache (González Lauck and Courtès 2013:30). Internal movements within the artifact set, a consequence of its travels to various museums, have altered its potential meanings.

Although the objects have rarely left Mexico City, Offering 4 also has circulated rather extensively in other media. A life-size duplicate is on display in the La Venta site museum. Offering 4 has frequently appeared in photographic imagery to represent La Venta specifically and the Olmecs

more generally. Its photograph in books, posters, websites, and other media serves as an icon of Olmec culture. I use the term “icon” deliberately because the figurines are thought to resemble Olmec persons engaged in an Olmec ritual action, rather than being treated as indexes of proximal linkages of the artifacts with other phenomena (Keane 2003:413), such as their owners, source locales, and the itineraries of their materials.

Images of Offering 4 are available on photo-sharing websites such as Flickr ([flickr.com](http://flickr.com)) and Wikimedia Commons ([commons.wikimedia.org](http://commons.wikimedia.org)). Taken by museum visitors, these images are almost always of the entire reconstructed group. Otherwise, Offering 4 would not be so recognizable or so intriguing. Interestingly, accurate drawings of the figurines are not circulated (cf. Wallis, chapter 11, this volume). The line drawing (see figure 3.2) in the 1959 site report (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:fig. 38) was made from a photograph taken while the objects were still partially buried. Even a 2013 book on Offering 4 (Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal 2013c), which provides, for the first time, outstanding photographs of each figurine, lacked archival drawings. As for the six celts, little attention has been paid to them except for the four with remnants of incised designs. Fragmented from the artifacts on which they appear, those designs do circulate as drawings (Benson and de la Fuente 1996:204; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:fig. 40; Jaime-Riverón 2013), but the drawings are not arranged in the same relative positions in which the celts were found.

The treatment accorded Offering 4 by archaeologists and museographers stands in sharp contrast to the fates of the other Complex A dedicatory offerings. Most of them also compose sets but took different paths after their removal. Within the Northeast Platform alone, archaeologists recovered eight other caches (seven are shown in figure 3.1), including three sets of body ornaments arranged in pseudo-burials (Offerings 5, 6, and 7). Other impressive costume and grave sets were revealed in pseudo-burials elsewhere in Complex A (Joyce 2000:44–48). The hoards of jadeite and serpentine celts yielded hundreds of artifacts. Five “massive offerings” of thousands of serpentine blocks were partially excavated. However, these latter artifacts (celts and blocks) were classified categorically, according to artifact types. The rare exceptions were some particularly finely made celts, a few of which have incised designs (Offerings 2 and 2a; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:135–146).

Little to no care was taken to keep these other artifact sets intact, even those comprising grave goods or costumes. For example, the single published color photograph of the items recovered from several distinct “tombs” during the 1942 field season at Complex A indiscriminately com-



bined some (but not all) of the pieces (Stirling and Stirling 1942:plate I), and no known photograph or drawing records all their original positions. The few La Venta cache objects on display in the National Museum of Anthropology that are at least kept together (e.g., from the Tomb C pseudo-burial, Offering 1943-G) are not positioned to match their original placement. In most cases, the artifacts have been separated from their sets and mixed up in the museum displays. Thus, when they travel abroad in exhibitions or as photographs in catalogs, they do so individually, stripped of their value as members of assemblies. This is very unlike the treatment (seemingly) given to Offering 4.

Despite the obvious significance of its composition, in 1955 Philip Drucker chose three of the Offering 4 figurines, along with some other La Venta jades, to give on indefinite loan to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC (Magaloni Kerpel 2011:33; Tate 1996:425; Walsh 2013:35–36). Such loans were not unusual at that time (Castro-Leal 1996b:142). Thus, Offering 4 was fragmented to enchain the two institutions (cf. Bauer, chapter 5, this volume). At the Smithsonian, Figurines 20, 21, and 22 became part of a display of "Olmec jade." That is, they were recontextualized as examples of an abstract archaeological category, not seen as individuated objects or as members of a set. In 1975 the display was changed and the figurines were moved to storage, hidden from view once more and available only to researchers (Walsh 2013:37).

Meanwhile, resin duplicates crafted in Mexico substituted for the missing figurines in the Offering 4 display in Mexico City (Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal 2013a:11); to all appearances, the twenty-two objects were still together. The duplicates indexed (as icons) their distant counterparts. In the 1990s, complex negotiations to return the La Venta materials to Mexico were furthered by the Olmec exhibitions in Washington, DC, and California. In those instances, the three Smithsonian figurines were reunited, temporarily, with their erstwhile companions (Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:43, 46; Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal 2013a:11).

From the point of view of Offering 4 itself, this would have been a momentous reunion. It presaged the final return of the figurines to Mexico as part of a "mutual repatriation" of objects between the two national museums (Magaloni Kerpel 2011:40), which occurred in January 2012 (Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:48). The repatriation of the three figurines in particular was indeed treated as an extraordinary occasion by Mexico. The National Museum of Anthropology opened a special

exhibition of Offering 4 on March 16, 2012, attended by dignitaries from the Smithsonian Institution, the National Museum of Anthropology, and Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:50). Following some 15 years of negotiations, Offering 4 was reunited for the first time in more than a half-century in Mexico, its "home" (Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal 2013a:12). For Mexicans, Offering 4 is part of the "national patrimony" (Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013). At its celebratory reunion, it was described as a "magnum opus of universal art" (Magaloni Kerpel, <http://www.mna.inah.gob.mx/agenda/2012/03/ofrenda-4-de-la-venta.html>, accessed September 20, 2014).

This characterization indicated a new status for Offering 4, extending its significance beyond the Olmecs, or even pre-Columbian Mexico, as a "universal" work of art (see Bauer, chapter 8, this volume) and referencing its inherent capacity to enchain the people of Mexico together with other countries and to unite Mexicans collectively with their indigenous past. In order to commemorate the National Museum of Anthropology's success in bringing the pieces home, a formal analysis of the Offering 4 objects was finally conducted and published (Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal 2013a:12), providing essential information on the artifacts for the first time.

Interestingly, until the figurines' return, the public was none the wiser. Neither in Mexico City nor abroad were there indications that substitutes took the places of some artifacts or that the Smithsonian pieces had temporarily rejoined the group. Now that Offering 4 has once again assumed its place in the Gulf Cultures room, no signage informs the public of the varied itineraries of its members since 1955. Its journeying seems once again to be at an end, as if the assemblage had not moved for 2,500 years. Moreover, the three duplicate figurines were added to the museum's archaeological collections, to be permanently retained in acknowledgment of their role as stand-ins for more than 50 years (Carmona Macías and Ochoa Castillo 2013:50). These new artifacts continue to be gathered by Offering 4.

#### **Fragmentation and Enchainment: Offering 4 as a Thing**

Like the quiet separation and replacement of the figurines, it is little known—although clearly stated in the site report (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:156)—that two objects found in the Offering 4 cache did not continue the journey with their fellows after excavation. Two fragments of what looked like figurine arms made of decomposed schistose were recovered in front of Celt 3 next to Figurine 7 (which is in front of Celt 4). The arms were mentioned in the field catalog but not in the laboratory catalog made

in Mexico City (Robert Fleming Heizer Papers, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution). No object numbers were assigned to them when they were taken out, and no photographs or drawings of them exist in the site report or the unpublished Heizer Papers. Because of these acts of erasure, they are the forgotten members of Offering 4.

The 1955 excavators suggested that the arms were the remains of an entire figurine that either disintegrated after burial or had been removed when the group was "inspected," leaving only the arms behind (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:156). Given the lack of evidence to support either alternative, it is more likely that discrete arms were deposited, especially because this practice was known at La Venta. A Phase IV cache excavated in 1942 in another Complex A platform (Offering 1942-A in Tomb A, Mound A-2) included a pair of jadeite forearms with hands (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:app. 1). Those arms have since traveled (as a pair, but leaving behind other items in Offering 1942-A) to museum exhibits (e.g., Benson and de la Fuente 1996:243, no. 85). The forgotten arms were presumably omitted from the Offering 4 set because of their incomplete state, the inability to include them as part of a scene representing intact anthropomorphic beings, and their unstable physical condition. These factors contributed to their "death" as a consequence of their removal in 1955.

The failure to consider the arms as legitimate members of the set disregarded the possibility that they indexed an entire seventeenth figurine, the rest of which may have been on a separate itinerary. Moreover, this putative figurine of soft, unstable material could have created a similarity with the odd Figurine 7, which was positioned immediately adjacent to the arms and was one of two figurines considered to lack a pair. Although number 7 was unusual because of its gritty appearance, the archaeologists suggested that this condition may have resulted from the chemical action of the soil after it was buried or else its surface had become heavily eroded prior to interment. The protected areas of the figurine's body, such as the undersides of the arms, sides, and legs, were smoothly polished (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:159, table 4). Figurine 7 and the putative seventeenth figurine were apparently victims of taphonomic forces not suffered to the same extent by their companions during their life courses, before or after they were joined together in the sand adjacent to the Northeast Platform.

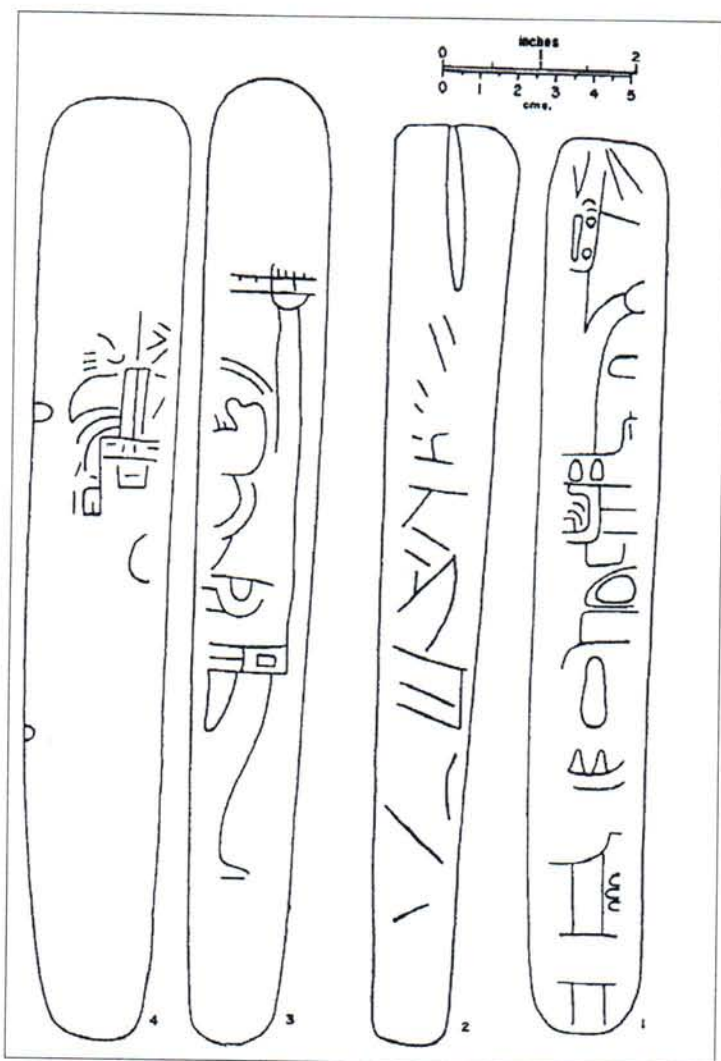
The 1955 excavators did realize that the Offering 4 objects were not originally made for that collective destiny (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:158), unlike the massive offerings of serpentine blocks and some of the celt caches. Although they are all recognizably Olmec in style and approximately the same size, no two figurines look alike (Magaloni Kerpel

and Filloy Nadal 2013b:221). Crafted of different materials, they manifest varied levels of skill in their making (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:160). These factors suggest that not all of them were manufactured at La Venta.

Furthermore, many of the Offering 4 artifacts were well worn from use and handling (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:161). Biographically speaking, they were geriatrics. The eroded figurine and arm fragments may have been interpreted as older still, thereby endowing the group with a lengthy pedigree. Seven of the figurines have missing parts: two (nos. 9 and 12) lack left arms, four (nos. 8, 10, 13, and 19) have one or both feet removed, and one (no. 18) has the face broken off (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:155, table 4). Jadeite and serpentine are not easily broken, meaning that these objects were purposely fragmented. Missing limbs may have undertaken separate journeys, like the two arms in Offering 4 and the two jadeite forearms in Mound A-2. Each figurine seems to have acquired an ostensibly independent history, beginning with its source material and manufacture, and was enchained as a thing with likely different persons and places.

The six celts are much narrower than the many other celts buried at Complex A (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:156), although Celt 5 shows battering, indicating that it had indeed been used as a tool (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:158). Celts 1–4 are similar in the color and texture of the jadeite and in their dimensions. The northernmost of this quartet (no. 4) has the remains of two deep drill pits, partly ground away. Drucker thus surmised that these four separate objects were made by fragmenting a larger piece, possibly a plaque, based on the drill holes for suspension on Celt 4 (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:157). They also have traces of incised designs, just enough imagery to evoke a larger, inalienable object (figure 3.4). Unfortunately, the published drawing of the celt designs in the site report has them arranged out of order, obscuring their original relationships to one another (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:fig. 40), and the published photograph (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:plate 32, lower) shows them upside down compared with the drawings.

The incised designs on Celts 1–4 were cut through and the edges of the objects rounded, making it impossible to completely reconstruct a single larger design. However, Kent Reilly (quoted in Tate 1996:432) linked the partial motifs of a prone figure with outstretched arm on Celts 3 and 4 and imagined the complete motif on Celt 1. Significantly, these four pieces and Celt 5 have high polish at their midsections, indicating that after fragmentation, they were handled over a considerable period of time. Celt 1 also has three old breaks: the separation of two of its parts at the time of



**FIGURE 3.4**

*Drawings of the incised designs on Celts 1–4 based on Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959, fig. 40, with the celts rearranged to put them in the order as originally found (no. 1 is in the southernmost position). Courtesy Susan D. Gillespie.*

excavation is clearly visible in the group drawing (see figure 3.2). As noted above, Celts 1–4 had originally been placed in the sand in a cluster separate from Celts 5 and 6, which are different in material from the first four and from each other.

Incredibly, if Drucker's assumption is correct, Celts 1–4 manifest the

refitting of a fragmented object, one whose parts had been transformed into different things and bore the traces of considerable individual use lives, in the past! They may have been reassembled uniquely for this cache. The refitting of Celts 3 and 4 is indisputable based on the shared design. Significantly, the breaks in the original plaque were on the incised design, whose edges were subsequently worn down by intention or as a consequence of wear, or both. The same practice was noted by Chapman (2008:192) in his studies of fragmented Balkan pottery: the breaks were usually across the design, each part retaining a portion of the motif in order to maintain its indexical link to the others.

Even if all 4 refashioned celts did not derive from a single artifact, the similar jadeite material (which may have come from a single quarry) and their similar dimensions suggest that they belonged to a matched set of jewelry (a *parure*). Reconnecting the scattered parts—such that their virtual thinging was literally materialized in this location—must have been a momentous event in their individual social lives. Bringing the long-lived fragments back together for common burial was likely also a pivotal moment for the persons who assembled and deposited them, and the uniqueness of the historical circumstances of their stoppage should not be overlooked. Unfortunately, this highly charged event has been ignored by treating the celts as just 4 of 22 (plus 2) members of a set, of which the 16 relatively intact figurines have commanded disproportionate attention. Their thinging has been cut.

In sum, the Offering 4 artifacts reveal historical traces of things in motion before they were brought together. The latter step may have been an act of accumulation, in which case, their individual histories and the networks of actors and places they mediated were overshadowed, but it did not necessarily override their enchaining qualities. It could well have been the case that the new assembly signaled an “alliance” among their individual keepers that amplified their biographies. The thing that was Offering 4 enhanced and expanded those qualities through an event that created a singular memorable locus in space and time at La Venta.

## CONCLUSION

The unique collective destiny of Offering 4 since its discovery has resulted in changes in its status as a thing. In accordance with disciplinary practices, modern interpreters—archaeologists, art historians, museographers—have made Offering 4 a single “piece,” a scene of interacting and interchangeable humanoids against a backdrop, to the detriment of the internal structure of the cache and the prior life histories of its compo-

nents. The individual artifacts have been objectified. The gathering of significations, biographies, itineraries, and enchainments of the artifacts, along with their prepared enclosing materials and the spatial locus of the cache next to the Northeast Platform before the old rose floors were laid, have been ignored.

Nevertheless, a transformed thing was created in the process. In the diplomatic struggle to return the absent figurines to Mexico, Offering 4 enchainned a number of institutions and individuals (Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal 2013a). It now assembles millions of visitors and also sentiments of Mexican patrimony and national pride, to the extent that the Mexican archaeologist on the 1955 project, Eduardo Contreras, is now being given credit for its discovery (Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal 2013a:11).

The treatment of Offering 4 contrasts with that of other caches recovered at La Venta. Isolated from their original groups, the finer of those objects often travel alone in museum exhibits and publications, while the more common pieces generate almost no interest. Having lost their companions, all these things have been devalued of most of their original significance. Yet, the potential exists to analyze them in terms of their individual and collective biographies, their enchainment with various kinds of social persons, and their agency in shifting social relations, returning to them their thingness.

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