La Venta: An Olmec Capital

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Geographic-Environmental Setting

La Venta, located in the extreme northwest of the Huimanguillo municipality in the state of Tabasco, is slightly more than 15 kilometers directly south of the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. This zone, which forms part of the largest alluvial plain in the country, extends 40 kilometers south of La Venta. Within this coastal plain of the gulf, less than 10 meters above sea level, are natural elevations corresponding to the Miocene and Pleistocene epochs. On one of these elevations, the Olmec constructed what we now know as the La Venta archaeological zone. The terrain surrounding the site consists of low-lying wetlands, which seem to have been so for at least two millennia, with varying levels of moisture (Jiménez Salas 1990a, 1990b; West, Psuty, and Thom 1969).

Hydrographic features predominate in the countryside around La Venta. At present, the Tonalá River is 4 kilometers west of the site. Two tributaries, the Chicozapote and Blasillo rivers, flank La Venta to the north and south, respectively. The Chicozapote River is 13 kilometers from La Venta, and the Blasillo is 2 kilometers away. Permanent and seasonal bodies of water are found throughout the area, both fresh and saltwater. Recent geomorphological studies suggest that the La Venta environment was very dynamic, with constantly changing river courses (backwash channels, abandoned meanders, etc.). The now silted Palma River, for example, less than 1 kilometer north of La Venta, was active until the beginning of this century. Settlements with long occupations are found on its banks from the pre-Hispanic epoch until today (Govarrubias 1946: 123; González Lauck 1988: 137–139; Jiménez Salas 1990: 6; Rust and Sharer 1988; Stirling 1943b: 50).

The climate of La Venta, characterized as the humid Tropics, has an average annual temperature of 26 degrees Celsius and an average annual rainfall of 2,000 millimeters. These factors form one of the richest and most varied environments in existence. Within a day’s walk from La Venta, four different ecosystems are found (marshes, mangrove swamp, tropical forest, ocean), with diverse flora and fauna: mañara, snook, pompano, catfish, carp, striped mullet, alligator gar, crocodiles, turtles, freshwater clams, snails, migratory ducks, manatee, white-tailed deer, iguanas, frogs, crabs, oysters, mussels, and freshwater and marine shrimp, for example (González and Jiménez 1991). These exploitable resources were used as food and construction materials in the daily life of the ancient inhabitants, and were also incorporated into their art. Farming was concentrated in the rich alluvial soils along the slightly elevated river banks, where it is now possible to harvest up to three times a year. In a settlement neighboring La Venta, evidence has been found for corn (Zea mays) of teosinte size associated with ceramic material dated to 1750 B.C., indicating the most ancient occupation in the neighboring region to date (Rust and Leyden 1994).

Chronology

La Venta is generally dated to between 1000 and 600 B.C., based on the archaeological investigations undertaken in 1955, 1964, and 1967 (Berger, Graham, and Hester 1967; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1950; Squier 1964). These approximations are the basis for the dating for the architectural sequence of Complex A, in which four construction phases of one hundred years each were proposed. In addition to questions raised by William Coe and Robert Stuckenrath (1964) over this sequence, it should be noted that the carbon samples used for this dating came from construction fills, with the exception of one found in a sealed context. Thus, although the materials used for the earth constructions have been adequately dated, these dates do not necessarily apply to the construction and use of the buildings.

Recognizing the limitations of the evidence, including the "acceptable" results of the radiocarbon dating, pre-Hispanic settlement at La Venta can be dated between 1100 B.C. to A.D. 800, while dates recovered from the surrounding area fall between 1750 B.C. and A.D. 1400 (Raab, Bost, and Bradford 1993; Rust and Leyden 1994). The Olmec occupation at La Venta is concentrated between 1200 and 400 B.C. (Heizer 1971: 52). Unfortunately, there are no reliable chronological sequences for the ceramic, architectural, and/or sculptural traditions that elucidate the cultural history of La Venta during its eight-hundred-year existence.
Fig. 1. Architectural plan of Olmec settlement at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico.
OLMEC SETTLEMENT AT LA VENTA

There has been a reluctance to categorize La Venta as an urban settlement, despite decades in which the Olmec have been identified as a "civilization"—a word with a Latin root that means "a society with cities." Sufficient archaeological information to label La Venta as a city has existed for seventy years, since Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge (1926) first reported on La Venta in the archaeological literature. For one, there was a large resident population at the site, a number of specialists not dedicated to food production, and political, religious, economic, and/or military relations with other sites within its area of influence.

One of the most solid arguments for the definition of La Venta as a city is its architecture (fig. 1). It is estimated that the original site covered some 200 hectares, while today little more than half of the site has survived the incursions of urban and industrial blight from the modern town of La Venta; this is why the plan of the ancient city presented here is incomplete. Among the registered edifices are civic-ceremonial structures (Complex C), civic-administrative structures (Complexes B, D, G, H, and the Stirling "Acropolis"), a small but impressive ceremonial precinct (Complex A), and evidence for residential areas within and outside of the city limits (Complexes E, I, and the sustaining area). The architectural layout of La Venta represents the final Olmec occupation of the site between 600 and 400 B.C., which is marked by a high degree of architectural organization and planning. It remains to be determined if the entire site followed a "master plan," and, if it did, its antiquity.

Local clays and sands were used as construction materials in the architecture at La Venta, as were various exotic stones from far away. The elevated platforms likely supported structures made of perishable materials, such as packed earth floors, palm roofs, wooden posts, and wattle-and-daub walls.

Complex C

Structure C-1, also known as "The Great Mound" or "The Great Pyramid," is the central architectural feature of La Venta. From the summit, one has an unrestricted view for 360 degrees. The structure is also visible from many kilometers away. More than 30 meters in height, the structure was built over a platform that was enclosed on three sides. On the southeast and southwest corners of the platform are two small oval-shaped mounds; in the center of the southern side is a central projection, on which Blom and La Farge (1926) discovered two of the first La Venta sculptures—"Altars" 2 and 3.

Structure C-1, a predominantly earthen construction, has eroded, causing speculation about its original configuration, function, and significance. Only recently have systematic investigations been initiated on the southern side of this building, which has permitted the definition of the last phase of construction and offered a more realistic appreciation of what was possibly the most important pyramidal construction of the Olmec world.

Toward the upper parts of the construction is a slightly stepped slope, with white limestone intermittently embedded in the sandy clay mass that forms an abutment to retain the principal construction material. In the central projection, in a space more than 8 meters wide, there are no embedded stones, and the eroded remains preserve what would have been steps to the summit of this pyramidal structure. The architectural remains found in recent archaeological excavations on the south side of Structure C-1 indicate a pyramidal structure with a series of stepped volumes and inset corners that recede from the sides of the central access. The sophistication of the shape and construction methods indicate a preestablished and long architectural tradition.

A carbon sample was recovered from a burned area of the original structure surface, resulting in an approximate date of 394 ± 30 B.C. (NAAH-1874). This date produces a logical sequence—though still extremely limited—within the sample M-336, recovered in 1955 from the north side of Structure C-1, under the clay mass that produced the date.

Six monumental sculptures, evenly distributed east and west of the south access, have been found at the foot of the southern front of Structure C-1 of La Venta. Monuments 25/26 and 27 and Stela 5 were found to the southwest, and Monuments 87, 88, and 89 were found on the southeast (fig. 2; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: 126; González Lauck 1968: 142–149; Mercado Arregín 1994). Four of these sculptures—Monuments 25/26, 27, 88, and 89—are carved in low relief, representing essentially the same theme: a supernatural being with almond-shaped eyes; a wide, flat nose; and a beaded mask that hides the upper lip but reveals gums with a central single tooth and two fangs over the lower lip of a downturned mouth. Ear spools and headdresses of the represented figure are identifiable in these features. Below the faces are three horizontal bands interwoven with vertical bands substituting for the bodies of the figures. Of the two remaining sculptures, Stela 5, also carved in low relief, depicts a historical event of the Olmec elite. Monument 87 has no relief, but the smooth face may have been painted with an image, although no traces of pigment were noted.

With the exception of Monument 27, all of the sculptures at the foot of the south side of Structure C-1 were found as the Olmec had left them, because their basal ends were embedded into the ground. The sculptural works, besides demonstrating the contemporaneity of the group, coincide temporally and stylistically with the results of the recent chronometric approximation; in other words, they are of late Olmec style. Additionally, they depict a mythological being in different aspects, although they could also be interpreted as diverse beings, which predominate thematically over this building, as well as historic events of the Olmec elite, in this case represented by Stela 5. Sculptures of this type (i.e., Monuments 25/26, 27, 88, and 89) may be monumental representations of votive celts (Porter 1986). Particularly notable is the variety of greenstone (gneiss, schist, and serpentinite) of the south side sculptures, which create the impression of monumental votive celts in imitation of portable ones worked in greenstone.

While what is here described for Complex C is just the beginning of a long-term archaeological investigation of the function, nature, and dating of Structure C-1 or “The Great Pyramid” of the Olmec world is beginning to be seen more clearly. This structure demonstrates that in the first centuries before our era, various architectural-sculptural canons were firmly established—canons that were, in essence, used in civic-ceremonial constructions throughout the cultural history of ancient Middle America.

**Complex A**

Adjacent to and directly north of the pyramidal structure C-1 is the ceremonial precinct of the ancient city of La Venta, called Complex A. This small architectural group, the most extensively excavated at the site, was investigated in the 1942, 1943, and 1955 seasons, when a series of impressive and extraordinary finds came to light (Drucker 1952; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959). Much of what was known initially about the Olmec was invariably colored by the spectacular discoveries in Complex A, which reinforced the erroneous conception of “vacant ceremonial centers”—a common and predominant idea in the early decades of the discipline. The ceremonial precinct, however, now fits within a much more coherent context, forming an integral part of a pre-Hispanic city.

The architecture of Complex A is distinguished by the bilateral symmetry of its constructions, which are organized as two contiguous courts. The north court has enjoyed the greatest fame at La Venta, given the exceptional quality of the findings there. The court was bounded by a discontinuous wall of basalt columns embedded vertically in a red-clay fill, creating an interior, slightly sunken space of approximately 40 meters (north-south) by 57 meters (east-west). The north side was interrupted by Structure A-2, while the south side was bounded by Mounds A-1-e and A-1-f, which were surrounded by the basalt columns. In the interior of the north court, a small platform was found in each of the northwest and northeast corners, with another in the center. The north court of Complex A had two entrances: one between its northeast corner and Structure A-2, indicated by limestone flagstones; to the south, between Mounds A-1-e and A-1-f, another entrance was found, indicated by stairs made of basalt columns piled horizontally.

Structure A-2 seems to have been a stepped earthen platform 4 meters high. Within this was an unusual funerary chamber with walls and roof constructed of basalt columns. Inside, over limestone flagstones, were found the bones of two or three young individuals, very badly preserved, covered with red pigment, and associated with a rich collection of objects, which the discoverers describe:

With one of these [burials] were two handsome jade figurines. One was a seated figure, hands resting on knees, made from vivid green jade....With it was a standing male figure of translucent blue jade.

Two feet beyond them we came upon a realistic reproduction of a fresh-water clamshell of heavy polished jadé, about 10 inches long, and perforated for use as a pendant. Inside it was a small oval mirror of brilliant crystalline hematite.

Lying under this “clamshell” was what is possibly the most exquisite example of jade carving known from ancient America—a seated female figure of highly polished dark-colored jade, with a circular mirror of crystalline hematite attached to the chest [cat. 51].

The arms were held across the chest, the right hand above the left. Long hair, neatly dressed, hung down the back. The features were realistic, with the slightly parted
lips outlined by a delicate hairline. The face had a relaxed and pleasant expression.

About a foot and a half from this same deposit were a jade frog, a green jade leaf, a jade "flower," and two large rectangular ear ornaments of dark-green jade, each engraved with eagle-head designs.

Around them were a number of long jade beads of especially beautiful material, carved like sections of bamboo.

Near the southwest corner of the platform was an unusual necklace or headdress, apparently rolled into a bundle. This consisted of six stingray tails about 6 inches long, set with small squares of glittering crystalline hematite. A seventh, evidently the central piece of the necklace, a reproduction of one of these tails, was carved from translucent green jade. Each piece was perforated at the base [cat. 108].

Near by was a handsome, highly polished blue jade awl or perforator, with large bulbous handle, but with the point broken off. Beside it was a small pottery vessel, placed against a burned human skullcap.

In the southeast corner of the platform we found another fine standing human figurine of translucent blue jade, with wide mouth depressed at the corners, flat nose, and narrow head [cat. 45]. The figure rested on an unusually large shark tooth.

Scattered about were a number of beads, all of extra fine quality jade, and near the southeast corner of the tomb we found some of the milk teeth of a child.

Beside the engraved ear ornaments was a pair of clay ear-spoolks, painted a pale blue as if in imitation of jade, and with them two pieces of green polished jade, carved in the shape of a pair of human hands [cat. 85]. Two oval-

Fig. 3. Offering 4 of Complex A, La Venta.
shaped pieces of polished obsidian and two similar pairs of green jade were probably eyes set in carved wooden masks or figures. The wood had disappeared.

Throughout the layer were copious unerstorable traces of organic material. The red cinnabar lay in a fashion which gave the impression that it had been inside of wrapped bundles. Probably the bodies had been thus wrapped before interment. (Stirling and Stirling 1942: 649–642)

Directly to the south of this tomb a series of basalt columns was found in a horizontal position, under which were thirty-seven jade objects: principally celts, most of them smooth, but some with incised decorations. Also in an area heavy with cinnabar, two ear spools and necklace beads were found, as well as fragments of hematite mirrors (Wedel 1952: 27).

As if that were not enough, directly south and still within Mound A-2, was Monument 6: a monolithic coffer with its lid worked in sandstone, representing in low relief on three sides a mythological being combining real and fantastic animal features. This “sarcophagus,” 281 centimeters in length by 96 centimeters in width and 89 centimeters in depth, contained “two magnificent paper-thin, mottled green jade circular ear ornaments. To each had been attached, by means of drilled holes, the representations of a jaguar claw fashioned from a translucent emerald-green jade,” a male figurine worked in serpentine, as well as a worked perforator of highly polished jade. Based on the disposition of these objects within the “sarcophagus,” it is thought to have originally formed part of the burial (Stirling and Stirling 1942: 638–639).

More than 50 offerings were found dispersed among both courts of Complex A. The greater part of these consisted of portable objects, such as clay vessels and votive celts. One that has received great attention is Offering 4 (fig. 3), which is distinguished by its grouping of sixteen male figurines. Two of these figurines are worked in jade, thirteen in serpentine, and one in sandstone. This last one was positioned to face the rest of the group: four of the figurines file in front of the sandstone one, and the remaining eleven are arranged in a semicircle, as if to observe the others. Behind the sandstone figurine were six fragments of celts, erected as if to represent stelae. The significance of this scene is unknown, but its importance was such that the ancient inhabitants of La Venta considered it necessary to depict it in stone for posterity.

The small ceremonial precinct of La Venta has also produced a type of offering unique in the ancient history of Middle America: massive offerings. These are divided into two groups: those that present an abstract mosaic design formed by blocks of serpentine, and those without a design. Three examples have been found from the first group: two in the north court and one in the south court of Complex A. Those of the north court were deposited under two mounds (A-1-c and A-1-f) that close off the boundary south of the north court of Complex A. On the surface these mounds are surrounded by basalt columns, embedded in a red clay, which covered the stepped platform constructed of sixteen rows of adobe blocks. These structures were built over a large artificial cavity, which was 8 meters underground. Within this hole were deposited carefully selected stones cemented in clay; with them was constructed a subterranean platform of less than 3 meters in height by almost 9 meters in width and more than 12 meters in length. Over this were placed 443 rectangular serpentine blocks forming a mosaic with an abstract design, measuring roughly 4.5 meters square (fig. 4). In the principal part of the mosaic, the negative spaces were filled with a yellow clay, while around the edges a red-purple earth was deposited that emphasized and contrasted with the green mosaic stones. The investigators who discovered these offerings imaginatively described them as “jaguar masks” (Wedel 1952: 56–59). They were probably not intended for exhibition, because they were covered with a thick layer of clay and sands, and buried underground.

The other type of offering was no less impressive. Massive Offering 3, located in the central part of the north patio of Complex A, was found in a cavity 23 meters square at a depth of almost 4 meters. Within this orifice, six horizontal layers of serpentine blocks were deposited, covering an area almost 20 meters square. These stones, however, were not arranged in a particular design but rather formed a subterranean surface paved with greenstone. Like the other massive offerings, this one was covered with sand and clay so as not to leave it exposed to profane view.

The La Venta Massive Offerings were not identical in their elaboration and presentation, but all of them respect the concept of carefully depositing enormous quantities of greenstone under the surface of the earth. Even the massive offerings (1 and 4) that were found symmetrically arranged at the southern boundary of the heart of the ceremonial precinct have differences between them, although they seem the most similar to each other. In spite of the impact of these remains, their precise significance still eludes us; perhaps they were offerings to Mother Earth (Marcus 1989: 173). The north patio of Complex A guarded four of the six massive offerings, underscoring the sacred nature of this small precinct.

Complexes B, D, G, H, and the Stirling “Acropolis”

Although the striking features of the ceremonial heart of La Venta are the best known, Complex A, in fact, is quite different from the other architectural units of this ancient city. One of clearest differences between Complex A and the others is the size of the structures, as is apparent in the architectural plan.

Another difference is in the use of space. The sacred precinct of La Venta, with its hidden, subterranean features, has extremely limited access. La Venta architects skilfully accentuated this effect with the location of this
architectural group: directly adjacent to the north of the highest structure of the city (C-1) and those of greater scale directly to the west (Complex G), and possibly to the east (a continuation of the alignment of platforms of Complex B2). In contrast, open spaces that invite concentrations of people for special events and public ceremonies are present in the ancient city of La Venta. The largest of these covers an area of 42,000 square meters, interrupted only by a low platform (B-4). To the north of this enormous “plaza” the imposing pyramid is visible, and to the west front is seen one of the largest structures of La Venta, the so-called Stirling Acropolis. Other spaces exist, including a type of elongated “plaza,” as seen especially between the structures of Complex D. These, in particular, seemed to be reflected in the “avenues” and temple platforms in the central part of Teotihuacan, more than half a millennium later (Proskouriakoff 1971: 142).

Enormous gaps still exist in our knowledge of the primary aspects of much of the architecture and urban space in this ancient Olmec city. An example is the Stirling “Acropolis,” which, like other structures at La Venta, was subject to archaeological excavations in the past that, while producing interesting data, were insufficient to determine the precise nature, dating, and function of its construction. Previous investigations have found U-shaped water distribution channels made of volcanic stone cemented with tar, some with covers, in addition to concentrations of sculptural fragments that indicate the presence...
of possible workshops, while alignments of basalt columns, visible at surface level, still have not been investigated systematically (González Lauck 1990; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968; Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968).

Little is known of Complex B. On Platform B-4, a concentration of sculptural fragments was found in the archaeological investigations of the 1970s. Salvage archaeology, carried out in the 1980s to the north of Platform B-3, uncovered materials relating to the carving process, among them different types of lithic instruments, the reuse of utilitarian objects, and debitage (Rojas Chávez, J.M., personal communication, 1994).

Apart from the architectural design of Complex D, our information there is still extremely limited. Excavations in Structure D-7, however, in the extreme south of the area of monumental architecture in the archaeological zone, produced another bit of evidence regarding the function of the sculptural works. On Structure D-7, Blom and La Farge (1926) report three monumental sandstone sculptures in an advanced state of erosion. The three represent, in different sizes, a squatting human figure with arms outstretched as if to support an enormous helmet (Stirling 1968). The location and position of this sculptural group seems to reflect that of the three colossal heads that Stirling (1940) discovered in the northern part of the archaeological zone. In both cases, the sculptures mark the principal area of the city, perhaps signaling the main entrances. In the absence of a written language, these images probably transmitted a visual message that, in the Olmec cultural context, was implicitly understood by the viewers.

Complexes E, I, and the Sustaining Area of LaVenta

One of the most important recent findings was the location of areas that indicate permanent residences for large numbers of inhabitants. These areas were first detected in 1984 in the so-called Complex E of LaVenta, northeast of the ceremonial precinct, where surface reconnaissance located low-lying habitational platforms. This finding was confirmed by means of chemical evaluations of the soil, in which the unusual concentration of phosphates indicates the possible use of the area as a habitational zone (Barba Pingarrón 1988: 198). Other excavations report packed earthen household floors and cavities for food storage with a radiocarbon date of 680 ± 90 B.C. (Rust and Sharer 1988).

As a direct consequence of having detected a habitational zone within the confines of the city, the contiguous area and surroundings, called the “sustaining area,” began to be investigated. These works confirmed the presence of an ancient river drainage directly north of LaVenta, reported by Stirling (1943: 59), on whose margins were detected a series of small settlements contemporary with the LaVenta occupation in the first 1,500 years before our era (Jiménez Salas 1990a, 1990b; Rust 1987, 1988). This changes radically the traditional idea that the surround-

ings of LaVenta were not conducive to human occupation. Indeed, far from being inhospitable swamps, these areas were extraordinarily rich.

In surface reconnaissance of the surroundings of LaVenta during 1986 and 1987, in an area approximately 40 kilometers around the site, a little more than one hundred pre-Hispanic settlements were located (Rust 1987, 1988). Most of the sites are barely known and have been dated tentatively on the basis of surface material and test pits. To date, fifty-eight sites have been reported that correspond to the first millennium before our era. Many of these were located along the margins of the river drainages, some of which are now silted. This riverine pattern signals the close relationship that the ancient inhabitants of the region had with the river and other bodies of water: for comestible resources and communication routes, and the agricultural potential of the alluvial earth that became enriched with each inundation.

While still lacking adequate foundation, the recent archaeological evidence provides sufficient encouragement to see that the population that had existed in the surroundings of LaVenta varied in terms of diet, construction, and other cultural materials. The surface remains in the LaVenta sustaining area present two groups of settlement: those with only simple habitational platforms and those with more elaborate platforms, as well as simple ones. Within the category of habitational platforms, the most common are rectangular in shape with an area of 14 to 15 meters square. They present packed earthen floors, postholes, hearths, and remnants of wattle-and-daub walls and roofs, as well as ceramic, lithic, bone, and shell remains (Raab, Baxt, and Bradford 1995; Rust 1988: 24). The Olmec seem to have consumed different types of fish, turtle, deer, domestic dog, and aquatic animals, such as crocodiles. These last three animal remains appear with greater frequency at those sites with the most elaborate construction (Rust 1986). This evidence points to a clear and complex social differentiation between the resident population of LaVenta as well as its neighboring areas in the first millennium of our era.

Final Comments

The architectural remains of the ancient city of LaVenta are truly impressive. There is no comparable city of the Olmec civilization within the Gulf Coast region or its confines. This highlights LaVenta in its cultural and temporal context, designating it as a capital—where it had, undoubtedly, a concentration of power that was manifested through diverse cultural products. In this case, its architecture is one of the most tangible reflections, as was its large sculptural corpus and the valuable objects deposited in the ceremonial precinct of the ancient city.

Since the 1970s, enormous advances have been made in the definition of the Olmec civilization. This, in part,
supported by the significant body of information revealed from fourteen seasons of fieldwork in the remains of La Venta, a city of the first magnitude in the Olmec world.

Notes
1. For example, it is known that the alignment of the buildings today, which runs from Structure D-7 to B-1, was continuous until the 1970s, when two platforms were demolished between Structures D-2 and B-3. Also, on the basis of various lines of evidence, it is very probable that this alignment of structures extended toward where, in 1939, Matthew Stirling found three colossal heads.
2. Complex F is excluded in this discussion, because it corresponds to a post-Olmec occupation.
3. This architectural unit has been the most severely modified in recent times and, therefore, presently on the surface it is not possible to appreciate most of the features that were seen in the first half of this century.