

II. ANALYSIS OF TWO LOW RELIEF SCULPTURES FROM LA VENTA

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1938 and 1943, Matthew W. Stirling, then Chief of the Bureau of American Ethnology, directed a series of Smithsonian Institution - National Geographic Society expeditions to southeastern Mexico for the purpose of archaeological reconnaissance and excavation. These explorations by Stirling, to whom goes a great deal of credit for having been the first to look for and find the archaeological sites which contained objects of the Olmec art style, led to the discovery and publication of most of the major sculptures presently known for the Olmec culture, whose center of development lay in southern Veracruz and Tabasco (Stirling 1943a; Drucker, Heizer and Squier 1959; Coe 1965a, 1965b, 1965c; Drucker 1952).

Despite a number of studies which deal with Olmec ceramics and stone sculpture (Covarrubias 1946a, 1946b, 1957; Westheim 1957:191-229; Mayas y Olmecas 1942; Drucker 1952; Coe 1965a, 1965b; Stirling 1943a, 1965; Piña Chán and Covarrubias 1964; T. Smith 1963), we are still a very long way from having at hand anything in print which can be called adequate as a stylistic analysis of the genre. Many individual pieces of sculpture are well known since they have been published scores of times, but even these familiar examples are nowhere described in detail, and ordinarily one sees the same view presented time and time again. (For bibliographies of published works on Olmec archaeology see Jones 1963; Heizer and Smith 1965.) It is as though the Olmec art style, once discovered by archaeologists, has become the almost exclusive property of the art historians, or the sole concern of that large but ill-defined segment of the public which is interested in viewing or collecting primitive art (cf. Coe 1965c). Although Stirling, Covarrubias, Drucker, and Michael Coe have made attempts to define the Olmec art style and to propose some iconographic interpretations of the style—and these efforts should not be deprecated—it is still a fact that all of this work has been based upon superficial and incomplete records of the details of the sculptured designs on the pieces themselves. In order to arrive at a meaningful knowledge and understanding of the Olmec art style which is anything more than impressionistic, we must be in possession of detailed records of all features of every piece of sculpture. To accumulate this information will require a lot of hard work, but the cost will not be excessive, nor the amount of travel unduly great. Olmec stone sculptures, whether these be the small jade figurines and ornaments, the colossal heads, the huge table-top altars, the stelae, the sculptured human figures, or the miscella-

neous monuments, are concentrated in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City and in the regional museums established under the aegis of the Instituto in Jalapa, Veracruz, and Villahermosa, Tabasco. That such detailed studies can be done is demonstrated through the successful one-month-long research trip of four students from the Anthropology Department at Berkeley, made with the aim of making a full record of the twelve colossal heads of the Olmec culture. The monograph containing the detailed descriptions and photographs of these remarkable monumental sculptures has been completed and will be published in 1967 as Contribution No. 4 of the Archaeological Research Facility.

The Olmec stone sculptors worked with a variety of kinds of stone and with a variety of techniques, and their productions ranged from exquisitely carved and highly polished figurines and ornaments of green, gray, and milky white jadeite, which weigh only a few ounces, all the way up to stone sculptures of monumental size, the largest of which approach forty tons. No parent or source from which the Olmecs of southeastern Mexico as early as 1100 to 1200 B.C. (Berger, Graham and Heizer 1967; Coe, Diehl and Stuver 1967) drew the inspiration for their distinctive art is known, or, if it exists, it is so different that it has not been recognized thus far as the precursor of the Olmec style. Looking to the Chavin style as a source does not seem warranted to me,¹ and suggestions that its origin may have to be searched for in transoceanic localities strike me as equally, if not more, improbable. It is best, in the absence of information bearing on the question of origin, to simply admit that we do not know the answer, and to begin to search harder in Mesoamerica rather than engage in more speculation. Perhaps antecedents of Olmec art will be recognizable when we are able to speak with assurance about what Olmec art really is—this point being a extension of one made earlier.

We do not know why some Olmec art is in part miniaturized, as with the beautifully cut, polished, and often engraved jadeite figurines, celts, and plaques; and in part of such monumentality, as with the three La Venta stelae that vary from 5 to 26 tons in weight, the La Venta altars that range from 4 to 37 tons, and the four La Venta colossal heads whose weights range from 11 to 24 tons. On the time level of the La Venta site, namely at the beginning of the first millennium B.C., there is no equally large, free-standing sculpture known for Mesoamerica. If I were to hazard some explanation for the existence of this monumentality of part of the Olmec sculpture, I would guess that the group that had the authority to cause the great stone to be transported the half-hundred miles from their source to the La Venta site, and sculptured into altars, heads, and stelae, simply decided that they would carry out this work in a really big manner. All that would have been

¹ See p. 40 for end notes.

required, according to this theory, would be a large labor force, sufficiently developed transport technology, stone carvers skillful enough to design and shape the stones, and the determination on the part of the managerial group to have this plan carried out. Stirling (1965:720) has touched on this question, and his remarks indicate that he also sees in the monumentality of Olmec sculpture a kind of self-generated spontaneous gigantism.

There are three multiton "stelae" from the La Venta site. Stela 1 is a thick rectangular slab, sculptured on one face and depicting a "topless" woman standing in a rectangular niche that may represent an open doorway (pl. 2). Stela 2 is a somewhat larger, naturally flattened stone slab that is not trimmed on the surfaces or sides (pl. 1). One surface bears a low relief sculpture of a standing, ornately costumed person, presumably a priest, who is flanked on the sides and above by a number of smaller staff- or club-carrying figures whose postures indicate that they are involved in some kind of physical activity, such as kneeling or walking. Stela 3 shares with Stela 1 the feature of a well dressed stone block, and with Stela 2 the general scene of the flat-footed, inactive or static pose of the central figures—which in this instance number two—as well as the small sized individuals ranged beside and above them. Stelae 2 and 3 are therefore stylistically related.

The label "stela" has been employed here simply as a descriptive term, and continues its usage as first applied by Blom and La Farge (1926), and later by Stirling (1943a). Nothing is implied here as to the existence of a "stela cult" of the type occurring among the Classic Maya (cf. Westheim 1965: 165), and it seems most probable that the three La Venta stelae are nothing more than two special kinds of sculptured stone monuments.² La Venta Stela 1 was probably set up vertically, but we cannot be certain of this. Stela 2 and Stela 3 from La Venta were almost certainly set upright, as evidenced by the unworked lower portion and base line upon which the principal figures stand. Stirling (1965:723) discusses the probable origin and development of the Mesoamerican practice of sculpturing and erecting stelae, and includes in his survey of examples the La Venta stelae. I cannot agree with him in his identification of Stelae 1, 2, and 3 from La Venta as true stelae, or even proto-stelae, and am of the opinion that Stela 1 from La Venta is nothing more than a unique sculpture, and that Stelae 2 and 3 are two stylistically closely related low relief sculptured stone slabs that portray ritual scenes and are monuments of a type thus far known in Olmec sites only from La Venta.³ I believe that the term "stela" should not be used in future when referring to Stelae 1, 2, and 3 from La Venta, and, as well, to the pieces now known as Stelae A and D from Tres Zapotes. No alternative name is suggested since this should be done by whoever makes a general study of Olmec sculpture.

STELA 3

Stela 3 (pl. 1) from the La Venta site is a massive block of dark gray porphyritic basalt which was secured from the Tuxtla Mountains that lie about fifty miles to the west (Williams and Heizer 1965:18, maps 2, 3). It stands 14 feet high, 6.6 feet wide, and 3 feet thick, and weighs 26 metric tons. It was first seen by Stirling in 1940, lying face down just to the west of the centerline of the La Venta site, and within the rectangular shaped basalt-column enclosed "court" or plaza which was clearly the area of the site where the most important rituals were performed. Stirling removed the enclosing soil, and the earth below the sculptured face was dug away so that the great slab could be supported on posts in order for it to be photographed from below. The 1940 photographs (Stirling 1943a, pl. 35) were taken with a wide-angle lens from a distance of about six feet, and the perspective was severely distorted. Drucker (1952, fig. 50) published a drawing of the sculpture which was incomplete and inaccurate, since it was based on the 1940 photographs. The same deficiency holds for the otherwise excellent drawings of the stela published by Covarrubias (1946b, pl. 4; 1957, fig. 27). In 1955, Drucker and I, with the aid of a D8 bulldozer loaned by the Pemex Company, were able to set the stone upright, and this permitted undistorted photographs (Drucker, Heizer and Squier 1959, pl. 55) to be made, as well as providing for the first time the opportunity to study the sculptured surface (pl. 1) with comfort and in detail. In our report on the 1955 excavations, we were able to provide a reconstruction of the original scene (*ibid.*, fig. 68), but further study has encouraged me to make some changes and to present here (fig. 1) a revised version. This second reconstruction is not alleged to be accurate or authentic, but merely a conjectural recreation of the original sculpture.

The low-relief sculpture is incomplete due to exfoliation of portions of the surface. While many of the stone sculptures at the La Venta site have been deliberately mutilated, it is my opinion that the imperfections of Stela 3 are not due to the hand of man but to natural weathering. After the La Venta site had been abandoned by its builders, succeeding groups of occupants farmed the soils of the area. Large monuments that protruded from the surface offered convenient spots on which to pile cut trees and shrubs that were to be burned after they had dried out. The occasional and repeated heating and cooling of the stone monuments over a period as long as 2500 to 3000 years would seem to have been the major cause of the splitting off of pieces of the large stone sculptures. This is clearly evidenced along the upper left edge of Stela 3, where the absence of any tool marks along the edges of the major breaks is a good indication that the fractures are thermal rather than manual.

What is the meaning of the composition that is portrayed? Two elabo-

rately costumed, life-sized individuals face each other and are presumably engaged in some kind of parley. (Hereafter the individual on the left will be referred to as L; the individual on the right, as R.) Whether this is a peaceful meeting of two local priests or political leaders, or a confrontation between two enemy leaders, we cannot say. Both are equipped with unusually complicated examples of headgear of a kind that would be ill-suited to wearing in hand-to-hand combat, so we may assume that the men are leaders or priests who have dressed themselves for a pacific encounter. Scenes of war are not typical of Olmec art, and while "war clubs" are at times depicted (Coe 1965b, fig. 49), we cannot really be certain that these flat, pointed, or angled-end instruments were weapons, or, alternatively, whether they may have been staffs symbolizing authority. (What are apparently warriors armed with long spears, shown on Monument C from Tres Zapotes, may date from a later period than La Venta [*ibid.*, 773].) Individual L in Stela 3 holds in his right hand a thin, flat, squared-end piece that has been called a club, but which could with equal plausibility be interpreted as an agricultural tool or a scepter or staff symbolic of special office.

That the two central figures, R and L, are merely elaborately dressed personages seems obvious. Their faces, or as much of them as we can now discern, are those of ordinary men. Each stands five feet, seven inches tall, and each is dressed in a different manner. Person L wears a waist-to-mid-thigh skirt or kilt⁴ that is supported by a wide belt with an elaborate buckle. His bare chest is adorned with an elaborate pectoral, perhaps of carved jade, hung from an upper piece bearing pendant beads. Whether this pectoral is suspended from a collar or is strapped to the chest cannot be determined. His upper arms each bear a flexible band that holds down a rectangular ornament. L wears a cape with a flared lower edge, and what are apparently closely fitted leather shoes whose tops come to just above the ankles. The cape appears to be a double one, with each layer of unequal length. The face of individual L cannot be seen, and all we can detect is part of the right ear, which seems to be delineated as though it were fully exposed and without ornamentation. There is no hint or suggestion that L was bearded.

Figure R wears a somewhat shorter but no less elaborate headdress, which is held in place by vertical guides running down the cheek and attached at the bottom to a fitted chin strap, in front of which is affixed a pointed beard. This beard may be natural, with the chin strap running underneath it, but more probably it is an artificial beard. A circular depression marks an expanded ear lobe opening for an ear spool, and this hole seems to be cut through the flat piece which drops from the rear part of the base of the headgear and then bends to curve across the top of the chest to provide support for the headdress. Attached to this lower brace is a human trophy skull which rests on the upper chest. The perspective here is that of a profile of

the headgear, face, and supporting features projected against the full-front view of the torso and profile view of the legs. This posture is classified as category I-A1 by Proskouriakoff (1950:19, fig. 7), and in her study of Classic Maya sculpture (*ibid.*) is said to be "typical of the earliest [Maya] monuments." There are not known at present any Maya sculptures of this kind that can be dated with confidence as equivalent in age to Stela 3 from La Venta, which may be as old as 1100 B.C. or as young as 800 B.C.

The six small human figures which occur on Stela 3 have been termed by Kubler (1962:68) as "chubby were-jaguars [which] float above," and by Coe (1965b:752, 773) as "sky gods" or "rain gods" who are "shown flying through the air carrying weapons," engaged in what may be a "war in heaven." I am doubtful of this interpretation, and prefer to view these smaller sized persons merely as earthbound individuals of lesser rank who are the attendants of the two principal persons (L and R) who dominate the composition. The poor preservation of the dress of R and the face of L makes nothing more than a guess the suggestion that individual L is the representative of a non-ear ornamenting, leather shoe-clad group, and that individual R is typical of a different societal unit recognizable by the wearing of a round bead attached to the nasal septum, a false beard, a large ear spool, and lack of footgear. Person R may possibly be connected with water, since his headdress prominently displays a fish, and above him, lying horizontally on their backs and facing up, are two probable aquatic saurians that look like alligators, one of which has the rattles of a rattlesnake at the end of his tail. There are two possible interpretations of these double (man plus saurian) figures. They may either represent an animal shown to indicate that the person was affiliated with it, or they may be figures (actual or models) which are carried on the backs of the persons. I cannot choose between the two possibilities, but think that the second is more probably the case. I do not press the interpretation that R and L are from different ethnic groups. They may simply be two Olmec priests, both from La Venta, or one from La Venta and the other from one of the other Olmec religious centers such as San Lorenzo.

It can be suggested (but not proved) that R is an Olmec and L an outsider. Person R stands before the inverted U "arch" that is so characteristic a feature of Olmec sculpture. It is probably intended to be the muzzle or upper jaw outline of a jaguar (Drucker 1952:200), and is often represented with a human figure emerging from the opening, as in Altars 2, 4, and 5 at La Venta (Stirling 1943a, pls. 37, 38, 40). The fact that individual R stands immediately in front of this "arch" suggests that he is a La Ventan. While wearing of large ear spools and false beards is known to be an Olmec decorative feature, we cannot affirm that these were exclusive to Olmecs (cf. Vaillant 1931; Drucker 1952:196). It should be noted that to the left of L's shoulder is a smaller kilted figure who matches L himself in

this article of dress, while most of the other smaller figures are wearing breechclouts.

C. Cook de Leonard (1959:339) says that Stela 3 appears to represent the marriage of an Olmec woman (our L) and a foreigner (our R) with different features. The "man-tigers" float above and consecrate the union, which may be the establishment of the first Mesoamerican dynasty. Here I can only say that we differ on the gender of L, and that I fail to see any evidence of this as a nuptial scene, or that the superior figures are engaged in bestowing their benediction.

The interpretation suggested here is that two important people, who may be either priests or chiefs, one (R) from La Venta and the other (L) from a neighboring region where dress is somewhat different, are meeting, though whether in friendship or hostility we cannot say. I admit to having leaned heavily, perhaps unduly so, on my reconstruction and thus have emphasized differences which cannot be demonstrated. The alternative is that we are looking at a depiction of an event where two principal persons from La Venta are engaged and that except for minor details they are dressed in a very similar way.

Careful layout and planning were clearly involved in this sculpture. Because La Venta art is religious in its theme and intent (Heizer 1962), we may assume that the sculptor was instructed in precisely what was wanted by the priests in charge of the ritual center. The spatial limitations imposed by the stone surface to be sculptured forced the stone carver to distribute the individuals accompanying R and L (whether soldiers, guards, acolytes, lesser priests, or something else) in the remaining open area. He made efficient use of the available space, since he was able to represent six individuals and two animals there. There is a rather greater impression of movement or bodily activity in the six smaller figures than in the two larger individuals, R and L. This impression is caused in part by the fact that the positions of the smaller individuals are rotated variably through a ninety degree arc from the vertical in order to occupy the available space. Their knees (or at least those knees we can see) are more bent than those of individuals L and R, so they may be engaged in dancing or walking. It is suggested that rather than "flying" or "floating," or being engaged in a war, heavenly or terrestrial, they are simply turbaned attendants of one or the other major person (L and R) who has come to the meeting, and that they are placed in the background (i.e. behind) the principals. The sculptor may have attempted to depict in this single scene a series of quite specific ideas. Note, for example, that above and to the right of individual R there is a "club"-carrying, monster-visaged figure who is strongly reminiscent of similar figures on Stela 2, and that he is, so far as we can tell, unique in the group. Is he the spiritual protector of individual R? Directly over

the top of the headgear of R are two pairs of closely associated figures, each couple comprising an ordinary human behind whom is an animal having, as already suggested, mainly saurian features. One may suppose that these two men are saurian-connected priests and that their presence at the ceremony is intentional and meaningful. The left hand held flat on the chest appears at least twice, and the semi-extended right arm is present three times. While we may assume that the extended right arm and hand is pointing to something, it seems to me more probable that the position of the two arms may be intended to represent a formal gesture, such as a body posture while dancing, a pose adopted while attending a meeting of important hierarchical persons, a gesture of greeting, or any other of a number of guesses, all without foundation. The iconography of La Venta sculpture remains purely a matter of speculation, in my opinion. Coe (1965b), Cook de Leonard (1959), Schaefer (1948), Stirling (1943a, 1965), and I, to some extent here, have suggested various interpretations.

STELA 2

Stela 2 from La Venta was first described in detail by Stirling (1943a: 50-51), but had been seen and named earlier by Blom and La Farge (1926:I:85). It is a low relief sculpture applied to one face of a large, irregularly flattened face of an untrimmed slab of petrographically distinctive ~~by~~ salt (Williams and Heizer 1965:18) whose source, like that of Stela 3, was the Cerro Cintepec in the Tuxtla Mountains. It is 12 feet high, 6.75 feet wide, and 18 inches thick. Its weight is calculated at 10.5 metric tons.

In 1955 our attempts to secure detailed photographs were unsuccessful, partly because of the position in which Stela 2 then lay, and partly because much of the carving has been worn and rounded to the extent that detail has been lost. The photograph which appears here (pl. 2) was taken in 1963 by Miss Tillie Smith. There is no evidence of deliberate defacement by battering or smashing on the piece; the worn condition appears to be natural. The one area which may have been deliberately erased is the face of the individual in the upper left. The face area is worn so smooth that it contrasts noticeably with the well-preserved relief above and below this area. I believe that Drucker's sketch (1952, fig. 49) is the most complete version that we can hope to get, although it contains some errors which I have attempted to correct in the sketch shown in Figure 2. (For other illustrations see Covarrubias 1946b, pl. 3; 1957, fig. 28; Pellicer 1961, fig. D; Stirling 1940a:321; 1943a, pl. 34; 1943b:324.) The sculpture now stands in the Parque La Venta at Villahermosa, Tab., exposed to the weather, and in noticeably more worn condition than when first fully uncovered by Stirling twenty-five years ago. It is partly because of the damage and progressive deterioration to which most of the La Venta monuments are subject (despite the sincere efforts of the INAH

caretakers at the Parque) that I believe it is important for detailed records of the sculptures to be made while this is still possible. The original surfaces of all of the La Venta stone sculptures have been somewhat "softened" after 3000 years of contact with the highly acid soils, and this altered surface is subject to wearing away if it is exposed to the rain and sun. Lichen now covers most of the surfaces, and the monuments are also subject to vandalism by unappreciative visitors. It would be far better to protect these in some enclosed, or at least roofed, housing. Such care is surely warranted in view of the fact that these are among the most ancient of all known pre-historic Mexican sculptures and are therefore infinitely precious since their numbers are finite.

There is a strong similarity between the scenes depicted on Stela 2 and Stela 3. We are immediately aware of the life-sized, highly costumed person who occupies the central position. He stands in full-front view with both feet planted on a horizontal base line (now almost wholly removed by erosion). His headdress, held on with a chinstrap, is large and elaborate, as is true of the headdresses of persons R and L on Stela 3. On either side of the central person—who is probably a high priest (or chief or lord or king)—are ranged vertically three standing or kneeling smaller figures, whose counterparts occur in the six individuals attending R and L on Stela 3. The head person in Stela 2, like R and L in Stela 3, stands solidly, statically, and dominating, as though his mere presence is warrant enough for his predominance.

I quote here Stirling's (1943a:50-51) excellent description of Stela 2, adding my own corrections or additions in brackets.

This large stela represents a standing male figure in half relief. The lower part of the design is mutilated [eroded], but evidently the toes point outward. Diagonally across his chest the figure holds a staff, the handle [shaft] of which is grasped with both hands. From the upper end a tassel-like ornament hangs over the right shoulder. Behind the shoulders and back is a circular object, possibly a shield with ornaments hanging on either side of the hips [this appears, rather, to be a back cape, not unlike the one worn by individual L on Stela 3; I do not think that it is a shield: from its lower edge on each side hang three triangular elements which are apparently pendant ornaments]. Bands are worn around the wrist and ankles. In the ears are circular ear disks, and on the head is a remarkable tall and elaborate headdress, the extreme upper part of which is mutilated [eroded away]. The headdress seems to be held in place by means of a chin strap.

In the spaces on either side of the central figure, carved in low relief, are six crouching, barefooted figures, three on each side, one over the other. All six appear to be brandishing axes or batons [staffs]. Each of them wears a broad belt, circular ear ornaments, and a headdress fastened by means of a chinstrap. [The smaller figures often have on their backs a circular cape with a notched edge. The left hand smaller individuals consistently display this circular cape behind their left arms and a multi-element tiered (or pleated or ruffled?) pendant decoration below the bent elbows of their right arms. This 'cape' and the pendant elements may, of course, only be an ornament attached to the lower rear edge of the headdress. Between the thighs of the smaller individuals can be seen a flat, apparently free-hanging piece which may be part of the 'cape,' or a front plaque or sash such as that worn by the central figure.] The three figures at the observers left are better preserved than the ones on the right. Their faces are like anthropomorphic jaguars with projecting fangs. All of these figures [including the uppermost one at the viewer's left, despite the drawing in Drucker 1952, fig. 49] are looking to the right [their faces are shown only in right profile], the first group [left hand] looking backward over their shoulders in order to do so. The face of the central figure, although somewhat worn, is 'La Venta' in type, and the expression is one of serene dignity. [The central figure's beard seems to be a real set of chin whiskers rather than a false beard of the kind attached to the chinstrap of individual R on Stela 3.]

Judging from the erosion of the stone, the monument had fallen in such a manner that the right side became buried, leaving the left side exposed for a longer period....

It seems to have been carved from a naturally formed slab of stone, which had a smooth but irregular surface. Not much attempt was made to level off these irregularities, and the carved designs follow them over the surface.

There are some interesting parallels and differences between the composition and layout of Stela 2 and Stela 3. Whereas only two of the small

individuals on Stela 3 carry a staff, all six of those on Stela 2 hold these instruments. The way in which the staff is grasped and its position diagonally across the chest and over the shoulder are the same in every instance on both stelae.⁵ The staff, therefore, appears to be a ritual object which is held in a certain position, and this seems to support the proposition that some ritual performance is being portrayed. Why all seven persons on Stela 2 carry staffs and only three (individual L and the smaller figures immediately over and above R's shoulder) do so on Stela 3 is something for which I cannot suggest an explanation. Other duplications between Stela 2 and Stela 3 include the back cape, the large and elaborate head-dresses of the principal individuals which fill a considerable space, and the body postures and turbans of the smaller individuals. Note also the presence on each stela of six small sized individuals. There is no ready answer to the question of whether the presence of six lesser persons on each stela is accidental (as though there was available space for this many and no more) or deliberate (as though it was a manifestation of a sacred number, or that in the operating culture there were six attendants to the head priest). One of the smaller figures on Stela 3, which has been suggested as being the "spiritual protector" of individual R, and his counterpart on Stela 2, may be the standing (or walking) smaller middle figure on the right side, he being the only one not depicted in the bended knee posture.

We can conclude that the similarities of the scenes and ways of representing persons are so abundant that the two sculptures must depict essentially the same kind of event, or affirm the same kind of interpersonal relationship between the larger central figure (or figures) and the smaller individuals who surround him. Whether the depiction was intended to memorialize a specific person (or persons) on some particular occasion, such as accession to office, or as a tribute to his memory after his death, we cannot guess. C. Cook de Leonard's theory that Stela 2 represents a marriage is possible (notwithstanding my declining to accept this), and so are any number of other suggestions. We would have to know a great deal more about Olmec culture and sculpture than we do now to make any such proposals more than conjecture.

That careful consideration was given by the sculptor to utilizing available space on the stone seems obvious. The scene on Stela 3 is a busy one, but there are enough blank areas to allow each of the eight human figures, as well as the two "saurians," to be distinguished without difficulty. The position and size of the six humans above individuals R and L can probably be accounted for by invoking two familiar principles of ancient art. The first is the depiction of individuals of lesser social rank in smaller size, not because they were actually smaller but because they were less important. This practice is well known in Egyptian (W. Smith 1958:17; Janson and Janson 1957, pl. 32), Assyrian (Contenau 1954:133, 236), and Maya (Lothrop, Foshag and Mahler 1957:26) art. The second of these is the device of representing objec

in the background in the upper part of the composition. This, as Lothrop (1952:51) pointed out when defining the perspective on the gold disks from the cenote at Chichén Itzá, is not our "linear" or "aerial" perspective, but is "comparable to the isometric projections or geometric elevations traditional in our architectural drawing today." A similar technique is employed in Egyptian (Read 1917:147-148) and Assyrian (Contenau 1954:236; Parrot 1961:14) sculpture. Kubler (1962:37, 203, pl. 6, fig. 70) discusses and illustrates this kind of attempt to achieve depth of pictorial space in wall paintings at Teotihuacán and Chichén Itzá. It is this same contrivance that seems to have been employed in the scene portrayed on Stela 3 from La Venta. That the smaller and higher figures were placed behind the larger lower ones seems clearly indicated by the left hand of the figure just to the left of the top of the headdress of individual L.

On low relief sculptures from La Venta there was a tendency to plan the design layout to accommodate to the natural shape of the stone. This is clearly apparent in Monument 19 from La Venta (Drucker, Heizer and Squier 1959, fig. 55), and can be seen on other examples, including, in my opinion, Stela 2.

Another matter concerns perspective, or what Coe (1965b:749) calls utilization of "space to give three-dimensional depth to bas reliefs" (cf. Westheim 1965:168). This was accomplished, he believes, by "establishing a tension between forms." I confess that I do not know what Coe means by this, nor can I see it in Olmec art as illustrated by Stela 2 and Stela 3. Both of these sculptures seem to me to be fairly simple, straightforward, and untense portrayals, although it is true that the flatness or static quality of individuals R and L on Stela 3, and of the central figure on Stela 2, contrasts with the impression of movement and activity of the six smaller figures that are present in each composition. Any composition has "tension" in it; if it did not it would be infinite in its dimensions. If Coe sees as tension the spacing of the figures, or the bodily activity and postures of the individuals shown on Stela 2 and Stela 3, then that can best be left (as no doubt much of what I have written here) as an impression of what he sees.

A dramatic moment in some historic event or episode may be the original inspiration for the scene shown on Stela 3, and I would prefer to characterize the composition as analogous to a still photograph, where the persons present are shown in action at the instant the film is exposed.

Figures 4 and 5 attempt to indicate that there are two dynamic factors or "forces" involved in the composition of Stela 3. One of these is "centripetal" and this brings the viewer's attention to the focal center at the midpoint of a line drawn between the eyes of the central figures, R and L, by following the line-of-sight of the six smaller individuals (fig. 4). The

other dynamic force is "centrifugal" or "radial," and this is effected by placing the legs and feet of the eight figures at, or aimed at, the outer boundary of the stone (fig. 5). The vertical rising sides of Stela 3 help to force the movement upward to the point where it is released and radiated out via the legs of the upper figures. The curved top of Stela 3 reinforces this radial tendency, and it is probably not wholly accidental that the stela takes this form rather than the more typical angularity of most La Venta monuments. I prefer to see Stela 3 as a dynamic whole, successful as a result of carefully contrived line and use of space, rather than impressive through the creation of "tension between forms."

Stela 2 is similar but not identical. Figure 6 is an effort to show that the "centrifugal" or "radial" force is present, but is effected not so much by the outward pointing of the legs and feet of the figures as by the angle at which the staffs are held by each individual. If the eye picks up one of these, it is carried right out to the edge of, or beyond, the sculpture, and the total effect of seven such lines is such as to make this impression of centrifugality a most positive one.

Another difference between Stela 3 and Stela 2 is to be seen in the vertical (or near-vertical) or "gravitational" main orientation⁶ of the bodies of all seven individuals (shown in fig. 7). The body axes in Stela 2 point down like plumb-bob lines. A distinctive feature of the line-of-sight of the six smaller individuals on Stela 2 (the large central figure is "neutral" in his forward gaze) is that everyone is looking to the left, even though this required swiveling the heads of the three figures on the left so that they look over their shoulders. Whether the intent is to show a convention of ritual posture which demanded that attendants of lesser rank avert their gaze and present only their profiles when in the company of the high priest, we do not know. If this explanation does account for the uniformity of the line-of-sight of the six small figures on Stela 2, it may have been done because it was more important to indicate this gesture in a permanent record than to orient to the focal center the lines-of-sight of all persons present, as portrayed on Stela 3 for aesthetic reasons. Pursuing this line of reasoning, one could suggest that a different ritual is being depicted on each stela—one of these (as on Stela 3) requiring the averted glance, and the other (as on Stela 2) not demanding it. What has earlier been suggested as a ritual posture in Stela 3, expressed by one arm (either right or left) held to the chest and the other partially extended (see fig. 5), may have been the significant gesture required for the rite being portrayed in that composition. The way in which the six smaller figures on Stela 2 grasp the staffs can also be taken as a fixed, patterned, ritualized method of holding these objects. The unusual bended-knee position of five of the small figures on Stela 2 may be still another ritual posture.

DISCUSSION

Olmec sculpture, except for certain standardized forms such as one group of the massive table-top "altars" and the colossal heads, can be characterized as unpatterned, in the sense that most of it consists of individual works. The tendency to formal patterning that one sees in Classic Maya stela sculpture (cf. Proskouriakoff 1950:180; Thompson 1950:18-19) is not typical of Olmec large sculpture (with the exceptions noted above), and one senses that the art form had not arrived at a fixed, stable, formally patterned "dogmatic" stage. It is partly because Stela 2 and Stela 3 from La Venta are so different that one may suppose in each instance that some quite particular event or situation involving actual persons was being depicted. At the same time, the two scenes show so many similarities that one may also suggest that the same sculptor carved both blocks of stone.

The idea of a master sculptor—a man with apprentices to aid him in the actual work—who, in the period of his greatest productions was responsible for executing Stela 2 and Stela 3 does not seem to me farfetched or implausible. When we consider that the stones for Stela 2 and Stela 3, now weighing respectively 26 and 10 tons at a minimum (and rather more before being sculptured), had to be transported from the Tuxtla region, we realize that this must have involved a large number of men and substantial transport aids (i.e. sledges and bridged canoe-barges). Large scale transport of this sort in all probability could only have been done with organization and direction (cf. Heizer 1966), and the considerable number of multiton sculptures at La Venta shows that this site was a focal point for receiving imported stones, and for engraving and placing them in the ceremonial precinct when they were completed. We have at La Venta a sculpture center, and it is not surprising to find that there is evidence of great virtuosity in many of the monuments. The duplication of certain kinds of sculpture (e.g. colossal heads, of which there are four; table-top altars, of which there are six; cross-legged seated humans, of which there are at least four; "stelae," of which there are two; and a score or more of large individualized pieces) may be an indication that there were several "schools" or "workshops," each with its master and pupils, at the site. Attractive as this suggestion is in providing an explanation for the duplication of some forms of sculpture, we cannot press it too far. We do not know how long a time span is represented by the totality of monumental sculpture, and therefore cannot choose between the alternatives of (1), a number of sculpture workshops existing and producing concurrently; and (2), a succession over time of different kinds of sculpture which were in vogue for a time and were then replaced by another form.⁷ Even though we are unable to choose between two such alternatives (among a larger number that could be suggested), we need to think about such possibilities, for it is by finally being able to reach decisions on such options that we will understand what was going on at the site. In the larger reference frame

of Olmec culture, we need to understand why there is such a concentration of stone sculpture at the La Venta site; why there are four colossal heads at La Venta, six at San Lorenzo, and one each at Tres Zapotes and Nastepe; why table-top altars with human figures seated in the niche or portal on the face are abundant at La Venta and rare at San Lorenzo, etc., etc. Was La Venta, unique among known Olmec sites in its size, layout, huge pyramid, mosaic "masks," buried pavements, and wealth of jade offerings, among other things, also a religious capital? Was it a kind of first millennium B.C. Vatican, where the high priests of the larger society resided, where the most important of the nation's rituals were performed, where the religious wealth was concentrated in buried offerings—making it thus the national treasury—and where was maintained, through the bounty of peasant tithes, a large priesthood, corps of technologists, and public-supported sculpture workshops? We do not know the answers to any of these questions, but the mere existence of the material wealth at the La Venta site requires that they be asked.

Coe (1965c:122; 1967:128) has questioned my proposition (Heizer 1960; 1961; 1963) that the Olmec society was theocratically organized, and appears to be inclined to the alternative interpretation that the society's leaders may not have been priests but "secular lords who drew their power from lineage and from conquest." In fairness to Coe, it should be admitted that some propositions made by me in this connection have had to be amended as quite unproven (Drucker and Heizer 1965), but none of these recantings concern the earlier or present interpretations of the identification of the principal persons on Stela 2 and Stela 3 as ritual leaders of high authority, or the probability that there is depicted on these monuments scenes that are heavily loaded with ceremony and ritual. Whether we call the La Venta leaders "priests," "kings," "secular lords," "priest-kings," or whatever, is a matter of choice, and to me it still seems that the best interpretation of the available data is to view La Venta as a ceremonial center, a place where important organized ritual was performed, and where the head people were religious leaders. I do not insist that I am correct in this view, and say only that we probably now control enough information for the southeast Mexican Olmec area to permit some fairly sound conclusion to be reached in this regard.

I have now come to the end of this brief examination of two of the large sculptures from the La Venta site. What has been suggested will no doubt be considered as very amateurish by art historians, who, by their training and experience, know the rules, principles, and terminology for such analyses. Thus far the art of La Venta has not been seriously studied by competent art historians, and it is much to be hoped that while the sculptures are still in sufficiently good condition to examine, this will be done. Proskouriakoff (1958:29) argues that "the critical study of art is not for the archaeologist

[to do]," and this is probably true. On the other hand, an art historian who knows little or nothing of the extra-esthetic aspects of the culture whose art he analyzes is scarcely in a position to provide conclusions that will be of very much assistance to the archaeologist. Apparently what we need, in order for all parties to be satisfied, are either art historians who are competently trained in archaeology, or archaeologists who are competent in art criticism. The student who wishes to explore the possibilities of such a dual approach can begin by reading Spinden's A Study of Maya Art (1913); Proskouriakoff's A Study of Classic Maya Sculpture (1950) and Studies on Middle American Art (1958); Kroeber's Style and Civilizations (1957); Kubler's monumental Art and Architecture of Ancient America (1962), and his shorter papers (1958, 1961); and articles by Kelemen (1946) and Rands (1958).

Notes

1. This does not deny the possibility that some similar stimulus which produced both Chavin and Olmec once existed (cf. Kubler 1962:70-71; Willey 1962).
2. Knorozov (1967:3) is quite incorrect when he writes that there are stelae from La Venta which "show that the 'Olmec' had numerals, hieroglyphic writing, a calendar, and year-reckoning from an initial era of the same character as that of the Maya."
3. This is not to say that true stelae are absent from all Olmec sites. Stela C from Tres Zapotes (Stirling 1940b), while fragmentary, bears glyphs and is probably a true stela. Other pieces (e.g. those labeled Stela A and Stela D) from Tres Zapotes seem more similar to the special kind of sculptured monument evidenced in Stela 2 and Stela 3 from La Venta.
4. Another possibility is that he wears a garment resembling shorts. What may be the same kind of article, which ends above the knee, can be seen in the left hand figures on Stela 2 (pl. 2).
5. It is interesting to note that an Early Classic Maya figure pose (Type I-D1 of Proskouriakoff 1950, fig. 8d) is very similar to that of the central figure on La Venta Stela 2.
6. This is similar to the "main volume axis" principle used by Loran (1950) in his analysis of Cezanne's paintings.
7. Proskouriakoff (1950:3, 5) can discuss Maya sculpture in terms of a tradition which ran for at least ten centuries, and is therefore justified

in assuming that there existed the sculptor's profession. At La Venta we cannot do this because the site stands as only one point in the flow of artistic expression, and we do not yet know the derivation, the period of duration, or the destination of the La Venta art. Kubler (1962:71) writes that "the [Olmec] colossal heads and the jades can have been carved only by professional sculptors relieved of all other work, and maintained by the community."

List of Illustrations

- Plate 1. Stela 3, La Venta. Photo by R. F. Heizer at La Venta, 1955 (copyright National Geographic Society, negative 131280A).
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- Figure 5. Stela 3. Stick figures which take the viewer's eye outside the composition ("centrifugal or radial dynamic force") via the legs of the eight figures.
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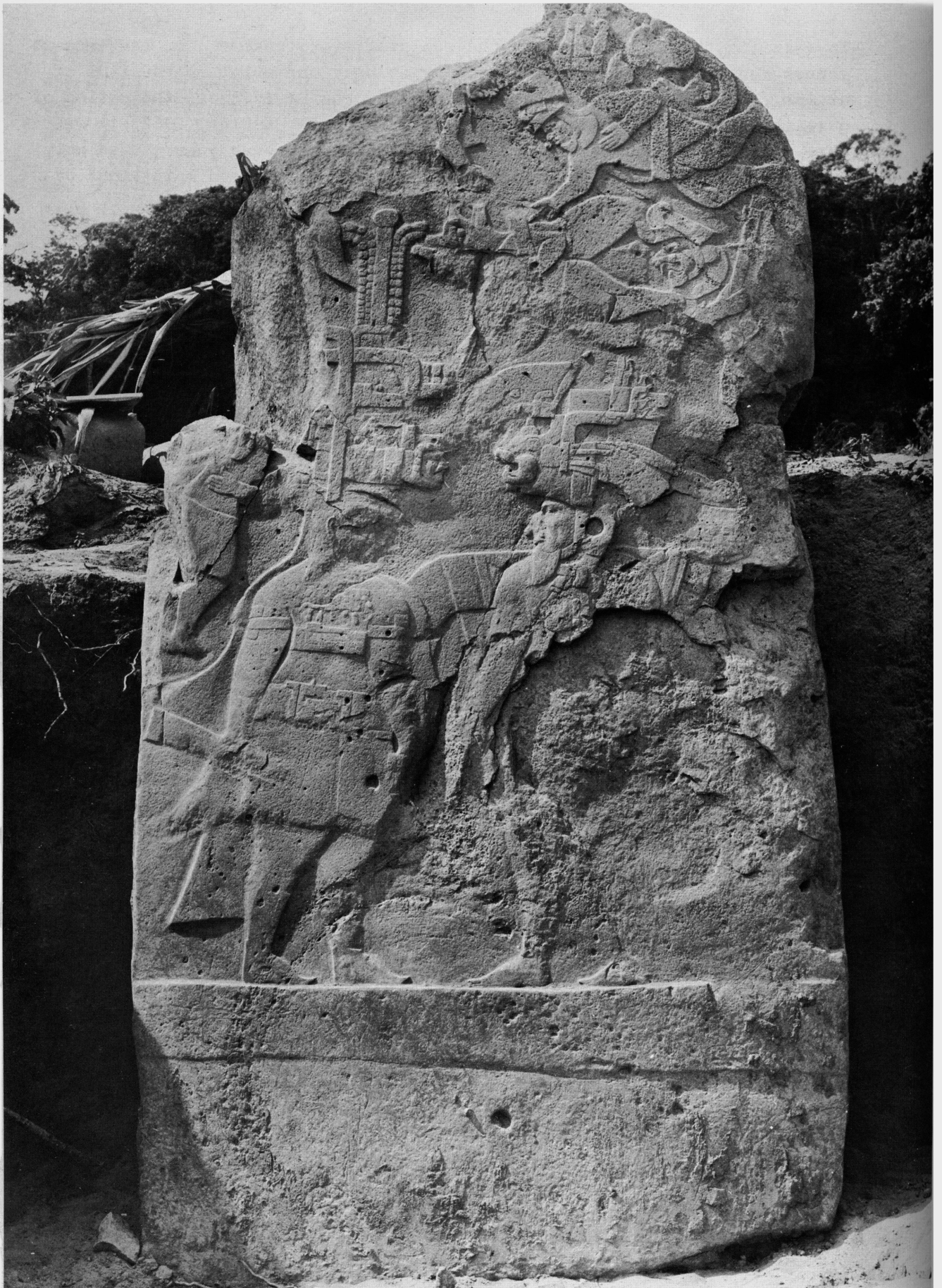


Plate 1



Plate 2

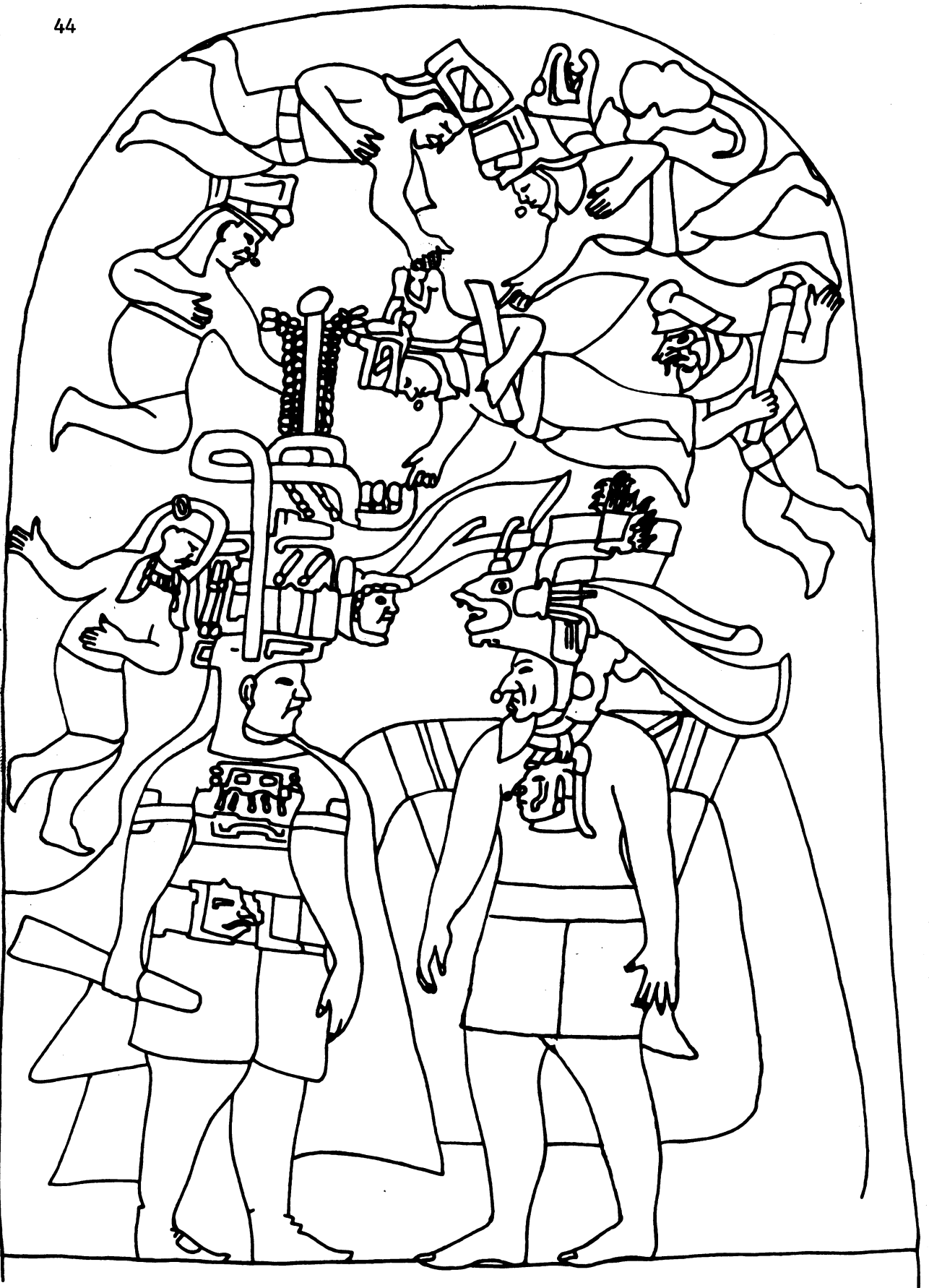


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

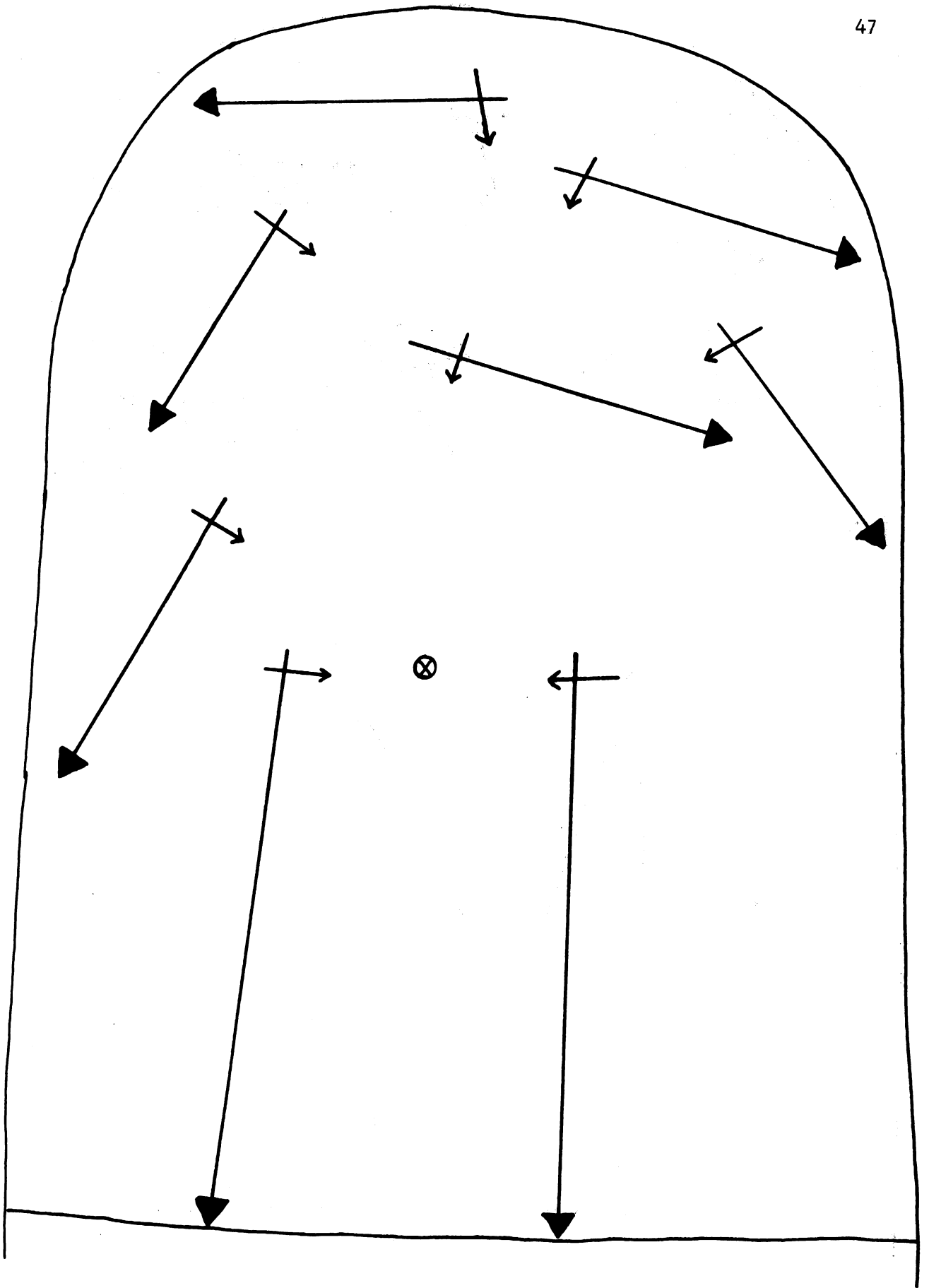


Figure 4

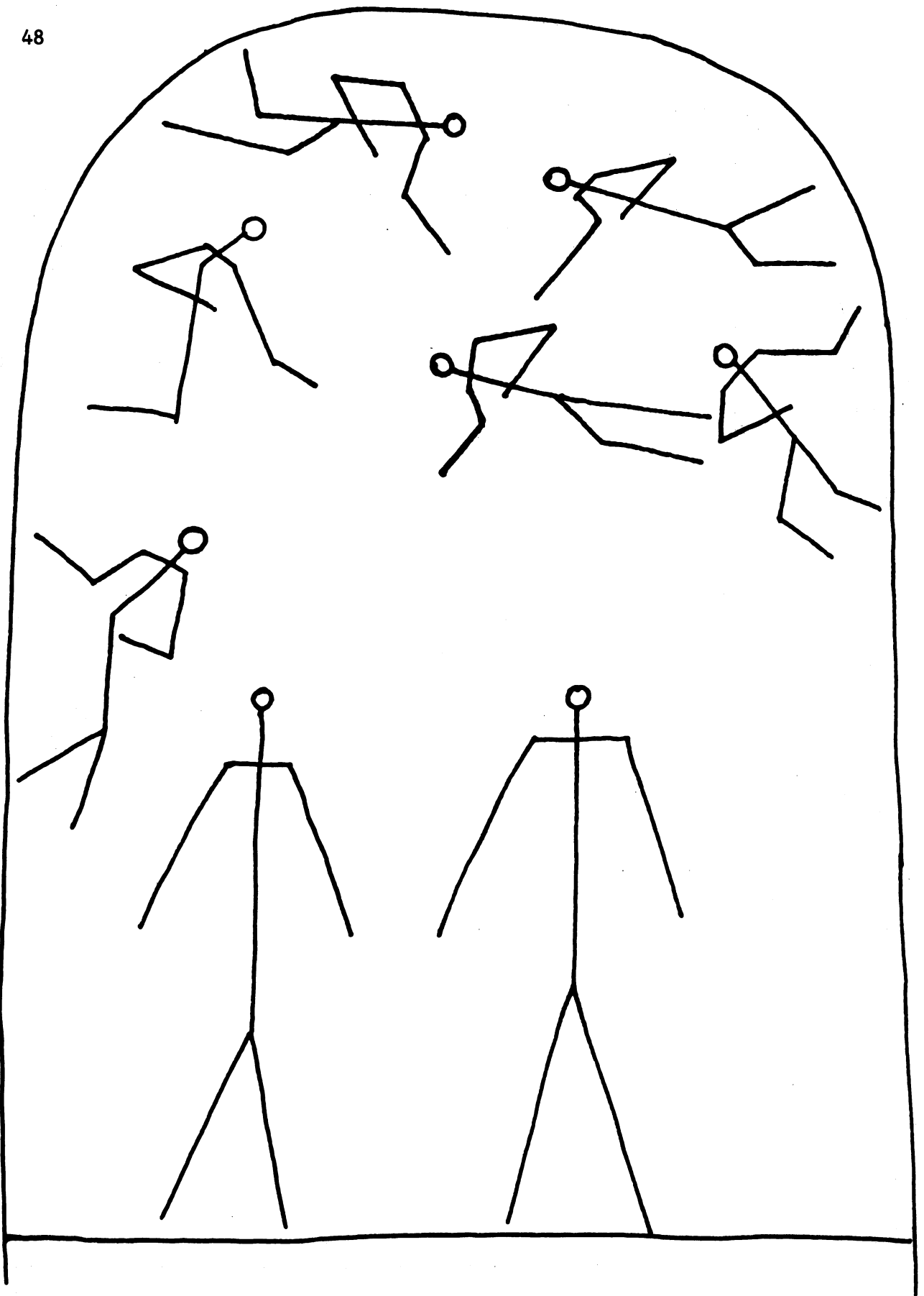


Figure 5

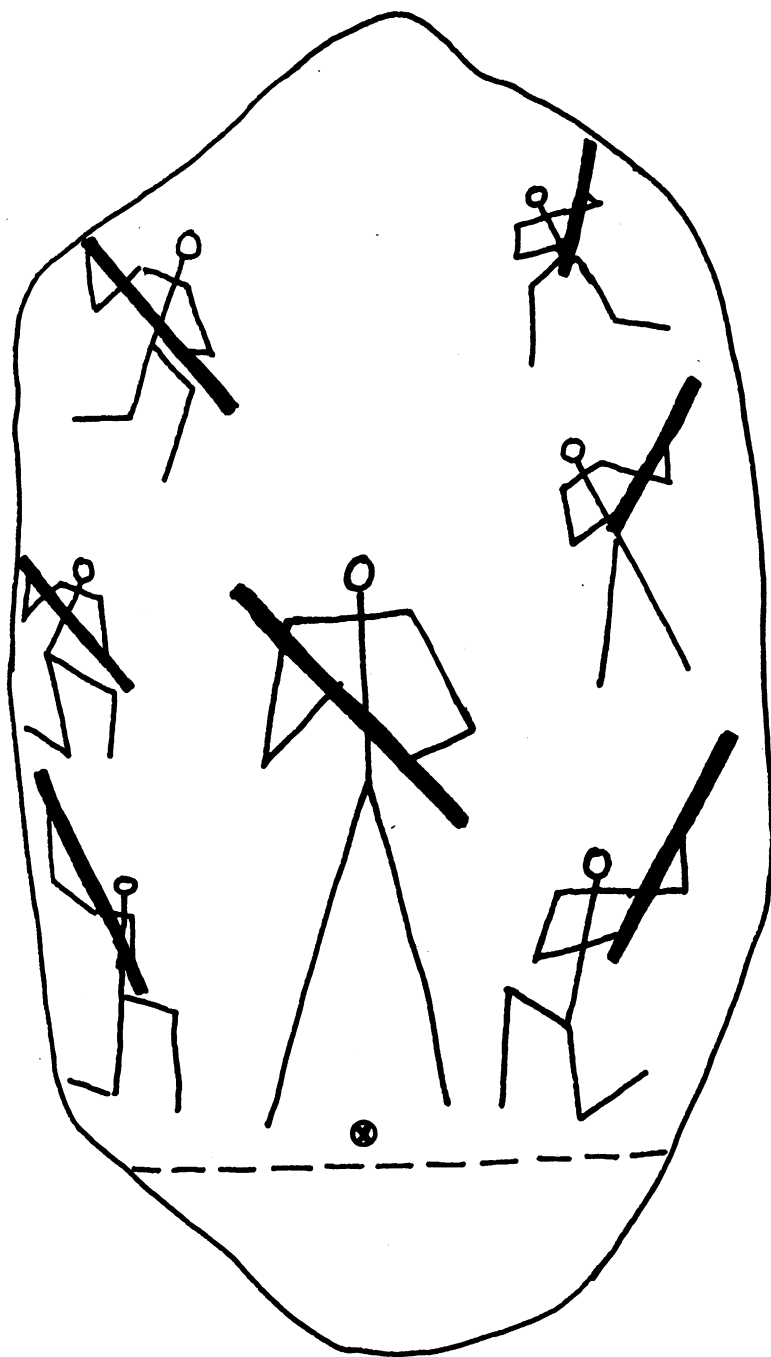


Figure 6

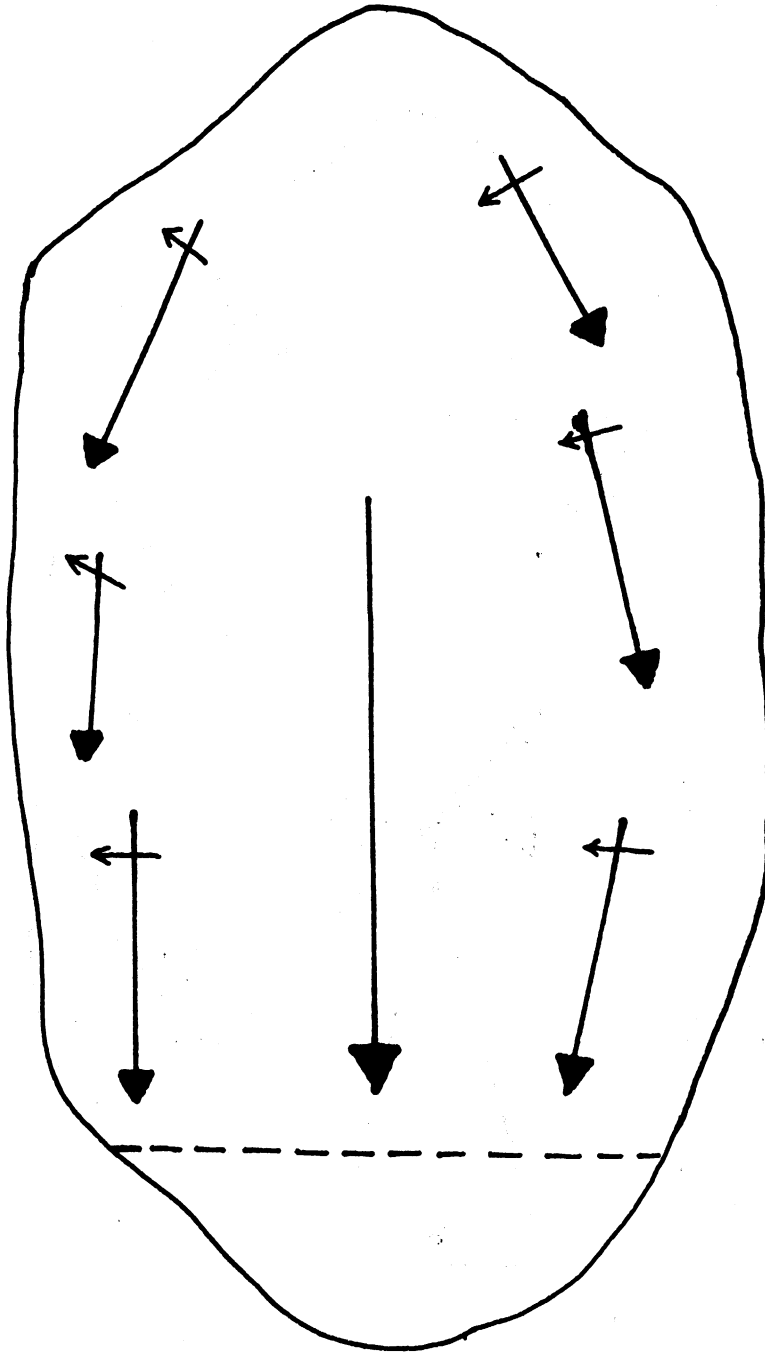


Figure 7

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