

### III. THE EL MESÓN MONUMENT AT ANGEL R. CABADA, VERACRUZ

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The large, ornately carved monument at El Mesón, Veracruz, Mexico, was first reported by Covarrubias (1957:241, fig. 68) who published a drawing of it. His drawing, however, contains numerous serious errors. For that reason this description and photograph of the monument are presented here.

Since the time that Covarrubias observed the monument and made his sketch, the official name of the town in which it is located has been changed from "El Mesón" to "Angel R. Cabada." (The community, it should be mentioned, is on the flat plain just north of the Tuxtla Mountains.) The monuments perhaps should be designated by the present name of the town in which it is situated; however, since it has been referred to in publications as the "El Mesón Monument" (or "Stela"), that nomenclature is retained here.

At the present time the stone has been set up to adorn the town park at the edge of the Veracruz - Coatzacoalcos highway. According to local information, it was found in or near a small mound group situated "about a kilometer" east or east-southeast of the present limits of the modern town. The discovery apparently was made in connection with excavating fill for the construction of the highway. Nearby, so it is reported, was another carved stone, a basalt column with a very damaged carving which has been described by Stirling (1943, pl.16a).

In all likelihood other students of Mesoamerican archaeology have seen the El Mesón monument, but as far as I know no photographs of it have been published. The probable reason for this is that it is extremely difficult to photograph. The relief is very low, and in addition the stone is set up tilted back slightly and from side to side is placed on an E-W azimuth that makes the sun, from mid-morning on, strike it directly enough as to obliterate all shading. Only with early morning light, and probably very late afternoon light, is it possible to get adequate photographs.

The monument (pl. 1) is made of El Vigía basalt of the type characterized by exceptionally coarse-grained olivine and augite phenocrysts (Williams and Heizer 1965:4, fig. 4). The object measures about 2.6 m. tall; its maximum width (which varies since one side curves convexly) is 1.7 m., and the thickness is 0.27 m. The top of the stone is irregular, not squared or trimmed evenly. At the present time, the base is encased in a block of concrete to sustain the monument in its position. My recollection, which

may or may not be worth much since it represents an attempt to conjure up a memory from 1955 when I saw the monument before the modern concrete base had been poured around it, is that the base is fairly square, side to side and front to back, so that the stone sat reasonably firmly on top of the ground, tilted back slightly against a couple of steel rails set in the ground behind it as braces. (My photographs taken in 1955 should have resolved this problem of the form of the base, but they were taken under a mid-day sun so I threw them away; they showed only an apparently featureless slab of rock speckled with phenocrysts.) A rough computation of volume (assuming a fairly square base) times the specific gravity of El Vigía basalt figures out to a weight of a bit over 2.5 metric tons.

The face of the block of stone had been ground flat, then cut away around the outlines of the figures to leave a low flat champlévé relief. This relief stands 2 to 4 mm. above the finished surface of the background. Within the figures themselves most ornaments and details are indicated by outlining with shallow incised lines; in a few places deeper, bolder carving defines interior details. While a great deal of detail still can be seen on the monument, some of it is lost or unclear, possibly through weathering or, if the stone lay worked-face down, through action of soil acids and perhaps of rootlets. The faces of the two figures appear to have been intentionally destroyed. That of the larger figure has been ground away very neatly, so that on looking at the monument one looks in vain for the features but at the same time sees no obvious traces of battering or pounding. The features of the smaller figure also seem to have been deliberately damaged; however, the abrupt, jagged, irregular edge where the face should be suggests that defacing may have been done by battering at the edge of the raised area.

### The Decorative Field

On the face of the monument two figures are represented, one of which, centrally situated, is the larger - with more complex ornaments - and obviously the principal figure of the composition. It stands on a complex structure, or platform. This central personage is designated "Fig. 1" in the following description, and the feature on which it stands is referred to as the "Platform." The smaller figure, "Fig. 2", is to the (viewer's) right of Fig. 1 and appears to be seated just over an ornamental projection of the Platform. The effect is clearly that the figure is not actually meant to be shown as sitting on the Platform but somewhere beyond or behind it.

In studying the design, it was found that the photographic print, placed over a frosted glass and a fairly strong light, revealed some ornamental details that had not been noted in the unilluminated print. Tracings were made showing certain of these details (figs a through d). Both photograph and tracings should be observed during the following description and discussion.

Fig. 1 is presented standing, facing to the viewer's right. The posture is a non-perspective one (see fig. a): face (prior to destruction) apparently was in profile (since the headdress is in side view); shoulders full front view, hips three-quarters view; legs and feet in profile; feet pointing to the right (Posture I-A-1, Proskouriakoff 1950:19 ff.). The figure's right arm slopes downward and rearward (to viewer's left), the hand with fingers extended (not shown grasping realistically) holds an object with one end bifurcated and the other end obviously decorated. Just to the right of the hand an object which may be a tassel or possibly a blade seems to descend from the rod. A blade would of course indicate a weapon, in fact a hatchet-like one, but if we assume even a moderate amount of realism, the blade-like object seems to be at too great an angle from the "handle" to be an effective fighting tool. There is a suggestion of a row of small objects pendant from the lower margin of the object which, if certainly identified, would mean it is a tassel and not a blade. The left arm extends outward (to the viewer's right) in an awkward posture, holding in a cursorily represented hand a short baton from which dangles an unidentified object. This object is being pointed toward or offered to Fig. 2. The depiction of the human figure is done in a stiff, rigid manner, representative but without touches of realism: for example, the backs of the lower legs are shown by straight lines, not curves suggesting musculature.

As previously noted, the face of Fig. 1 has been destroyed, albeit in a neat, painstaking way, for traces of battering were removed presumably by careful grinding and/or hammer-dressing. The face must have been framed in the jaws of an open jaguar-saurian's mouth which forms the lower body of the headdress. An ear-spool is sharply defined in the proper place for a profile head so placed, and a chin-strap from the headdress is similarly placed.

From the area where the face was, or should have been, projects a form, defined by shallow incising, consisting of two double curved lines whose outer ends join to form a downward curving point. The form suggests a monstrous tongue, or even a flame, but without relief. The curves seem to be drawn much too regularly to be accidental. There is no recognizable similarity to the "speech scrolls" of Highland Mexican mural painting.

This figure was originally arrayed in an ornate dress and headdress. Unfortunately, much of the ornamental detail was in very fine line incising which has been damaged by weathering or action of soil and/or rootlet acids, so that in many places only remnants of lines that no longer join to form coherent patterns remain. Trying to trace the vestigial patterns was an exercise in frustration.

Of the various items of dress, the headdress is the best preserved. The basic portion is a version of the common Mesoamerican theme of the open-

mouthing animal or monster whose jaws frame the face of the wearer. However, this mask is double: a monstrous profile head that suggests a saurian holds in its jaws the space presumably once occupied by the face of Fig. 1; the saurian in turn is combined with, or possibly protrudes from, the mouth of a very stylized jaguar (fig. b). In front of the jaguar's snout and above the saurian an object with serrated lower margin protrudes, in front of which a bunch of plumes extends horizontally. A rank of plumes is attached as well to the back of the jaguar head.

Surmounting the forehead of the jaguar is a tall element that curves forward and contains abundant traces of minute elaborate design in which one can almost "see" a series of faces and the like, which cannot really be made out (pl. 1). The leading edge of this element is irregular and adorned with various projections, including one simple scroll. The rear edge sweeps upward in a clean curve to an attachment near the top: an elongate object, rounded at the rear, with ten (or eleven?) small round objects - four (or five?) above, four below, and two at the rear - which project beyond the silhouette. The interior space contains a series of rectangular figures that suggest very strongly twilled checkerwork basketry, but which are not well enough preserved for certainty. At the very top of the forward-curving element, a set of six long plumes in three pairs - or three forked plumes - swirl forward in elegant curves. From behind the basketry-like element descends a long trailer of feathers - depicted in segments sloping at differing angles - which hangs to just below the figure's waist. The variation in the slant and length of the segments of the feathers gives this element a very realistic appearance.

The torso of the figure seems to be covered with a short cape, possibly of slipover type. On the figure's chest, overlying the cape, is a vertical column of elements that suggests a string of pendants suspended from the figure's neck. Slightly overlapping the lower edge of the cape is a horizontally elongate hexagon, within which tantalizing remnants of lines hint at a former complex pattern. The hexagon may have been the bottom element of the vertical string of pendants, but is not certainly so.

Seemingly from the left (viewer's right) shoulder dangles an object consisting, from top downward, of a round form, three narrow vertical elements, a round form, another round form, and three vertical elements (tassels? jinglers?). Vestiges of an identical series of elements appear to depend from the ear-spool behind the chin-strap of the headgear. It seems likely that a pair of ear-spool pendants was intended; if this is correct, considerable liberty was taken with the real position of the right-hand one in order to display it prominently. From the right (viewer's) lower edge of the cape hangs a tassel-like form: a round object with three danglers (or

feathers?). Over the figure's right thigh (left side to viewer) a vertical and a slanting bar and vestiges of a round form indicate a matching pendant or tassel.

A trapezoidal breechclout apron hangs from under the cape. Its lower edge is adorned with a row of six (five?) round forms (a string of beads?). At about the middle of the lower edge of the apron is an oval form; it cannot be determined whether this represents a pendant from the apron or is an ornament on the garter on the figure's left leg. Behind the figure, an unornamented strip, the rear trailer of the breechclout, dangles almost to the figure's heel. The figure's right upper leg (the one on the viewer's left) seems to be covered with a short kilt whose lower edge slopes upward toward the front, like the breechclout bordered on its lower margin by small round elements, with vestiges of fine lines that perhaps once formed a design.

Just below the kilt each of the angular legs wears a garter with a projecting ornament. The feet are shod in elaborate guaraches. On the right (rearward) foot a maze of lines seems to have once connected the sole to an ankle-band in a complicated lashing. Vestiges of lines on the forward (figure's left) foot suggest a similar lashing, but the eroded design is unclear. Flowing tassels, presumably of plumes, are attached over the toes of the footgear.

### The Platform

The platform on which Fig. 1 stands consists of two vertical members capped by a double-headed Serpent (or Monster) bar (cf. Parsons 1967). The patterns interpreted as "Serpent (or Monster) heads" seem to contain the element termed by Parsons the "scroll eye." Above, and slightly to the rear, in each case is a long narrow channel that seems better positioned to represent an "eye." Both of these upper "eyes" seem to have been lengthened rearwards after the original design had been laid out. Elements that can be interpreted as plumed eyebrows are positioned directly over the original segments of these slit-like "eyes." At first glance the two Serpent (or Monster) heads give the impression of being mirror images of each other, but actually they are not: for example, the top of the central portion of the left-hand (viewer's) head is enclosed by two sharply defined angular scrolls whose upper edges level off to an almost straight line, while the right-hand element has only a "nose-scroll" which extends out beyond the line of the rest of the element. Details of small components of the two heads differ when compared closely (fig. c).

The vertical "supports" consist of two large decorated rectangles, each

flanked by a plain narrow bar. The decorated panels contain at their tops small matching figures, each terminating in a simple scroll. These figures vaguely suggest stylized Dragon or Serpent heads, but cannot be identified with certainty because of deterioration of detail; they may or may not have been precise mirror images. On the inner side of each figure, in a small area enclosed by narrow borders, is a boss or raised dot. Above, and apparently connecting the two small head-like figures, is an inverted U-shape formed by a strip of stone set off by both carving and incising, which Covarrubias (1957) interpreted as an Olmecan rendering of the frontal view of the upper jaw of a jaguar's (or Jaguar Monster's) open mouth. The angular hook or scroll breaking the continuity of the lower step of this suggested mouth symbol on the left, and the remnants of incised lines indicating a similar hook or scroll on the right, make this interpretation dubious. Similarly, weighing against the reading of the line as a Jaguar Monster's mouth is the fact that in purist Olmec depictions, and even in epigonal Olmec ones (e.g. the Tres Zapotes Stela 3 representation), the corners of the mouth do not carry extraneous appendages. A possible supporting factor for the reading of this melange of forms as a Jaguar Monster mouth consists in the irregularly sawed slits on either side of the inverted-U which perhaps might be considered the "eyes" of the Monster.

Under the preceding designs in the vertical supports of the Platform are two deeply engraved bands forming rectilinear six-sided scrolls, in approximate mirror relationship to each other.

Especially noteworthy as referent to the Platform is the inferior craftsmanship of its carving - it was done carelessly or ineptly. This is most conspicuous when contrasted to the delicate, rigidly controlled workmanship of Fig. 1. The slits mentioned on either side of the inverted-U are a case in point: examination shows they were scratchily sawed out, are not the same size, nor are they quite level with each other. Also, the somewhat irregular line marking the under side of the inverted-U is an asymmetric obtuse angle; that is, the left side is at a lesser inclination from the horizontal than the right. The scrolls at the bases of the "supports" also show dissimilar handling. That on the left is sharply and cleanly cut, with nearly square corners; the right-hand figure has some sharp and some rounded-off edges, and the inner corners of the scroll are rounded off, not trimly squared. Asymmetry abounds in the presentation of the Platform, although areal patterns indicate mirror symmetry was the ideal for this sort of design. The differences between the upper portions of two Serpent (or Monster) profiles have been noted; these are not the result of damage for the outlines of the figures are clearly defined. The fang element on the underside of the left-hand head overlaps half the width of the plain vertical bar under it; that on the right just barely

intrudes on the corner of its bar. The raised bands surrounding the scrolls each include, on the outer vertical edge, a small, vertically oriented rectangle excavated into the raised border. These two small rectangles are not symmetrically placed but are at different levels. Finally, among the more obvious asymmetries, the right vertical support slopes inward notably as it ascends, so that the entire base of the Platform is quite out of square, being wider at the bottom than at the top.<sup>1</sup>

There is, of course, the possibility that some of these details, particularly those referred to as "scratchy" etc. may have been added to the carving at a later date—later, that is, than the completion of the original design. In such case, however, it would seem remarkable that such embellishments should have been restricted to the Platform, if they indeed represent a later reinterpretation of the design. It is assumed that if these technologically different treatments were made after completion of the first design, they had nothing to do with the demolition of the faces of Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. To associate modifications of design with destruction would suggest purposeless vandalism, not clarification of meaning and deliberate destruction.

Characterization of the handling of the representation of the Platform as a result of "carelessness" or "ineptitude" involves, of course, a value judgment. This evaluation derives from standards demonstrated in formal Mesoamerican sculpture, where cleanly defined straight or evenly curved lines, rather than irregular scratchy ones, were used for depiction, square corners were normal (even when corners were deliberately rounded the sides of the angles normally were at or very near to 90 degrees).<sup>2</sup> Precise mirror symmetry was usual in Mesoamerican sculpture in the representation of platforms, pedestals, framing devices, and other secondary patterns associated with the principal figure or figures of the monument.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the slope of the outer right components of the Platform supports in the photograph are not due to illusory photographic effects from the slight tilt of the stone in its present position; the angle of these components with any assumed vertical differs from the angle of the lines defining the components on the left.

<sup>2</sup> Right angles were used so commonly in Mesoamerican architecture, in facing stones, cornices, doorways, etc., as well as in sculpture, that one is justified in wondering whether some simple formula for erecting 90 degree angles (like our 3-4-5 rule) may not have been known and used for making try-squares for stone cutters, masons, and sculptors. The earliest Mesoamerican use of right angles known to me is to be seen in the neat three-dimensionally squared basalt blocks inset as ornamentation in the clay structures at La Venta (Drucker, Heizer and Squier 1959, pls.12-17), that cannot fail to suggest an attempt, in a region where all building stone had to be imported, to copy an effect of true masonry construction.

The remarkable contrast in craftsmanship between the treatment of Fig. 1, with its dynamic symmetry (discussed below), and the lopsided Platform, with its mixture of clean-cut and irregular lines, may be accounted for by one of the following hypotheses:

(1) The contrast was deliberately planned as an integral part of the design, with a specific symbolic significance.

Comment: The iconography of such a design would be completely beyond modern interpretation, the more so since it appears to be unique in Mesoamerican sculpture.

(2) The two parts of the sculpture were accomplished at different times or epochs, separated by a period during which esthetic standards changed.

Comment: While it is just possible that what I have called the scratchily-sawed components of the design may represent post-completion modifications or reworking, the basic design almost certainly represents a single unit temporally speaking. The uniform surface height of both Fig. 1 and the Platform above the cutaway surface of the monument indicates this, and the placing of the feet of Fig. 1, with their elaborate tassels, into the upper surface line of the Platform makes a separate history for each component of the final layout unlikely, if not impossible.

(3) The differential handling may indicate that two or more individuals or groups of individuals were encharged with the carving of different portions of the total design, and that in the case of this monument the competence of the carvers or groups of carvers differed.

Comment: One can but guess at the time factor involved in the carving of large monuments in tough basalts and andesites (probable and possible techniques utilized in sculpturing the Olmec colossal heads are given in Clewlow et al. (1967:63 ff.)). It must have been a fearfully slow and laborious process. Given, however, the Mesoamerican achievement in organizing cooperative effort manifested in major constructions, moving of heavy weights, and the like, it does not seem unreasonable that the work of sculpture might have been parceled out, especially in the case of large monuments where there would be physical space enough for several artisans to work simultaneously. Heizer (1967:38) has discussed this possibility in connection with stylistic analysis of two La Venta monuments.

Fig. 2, the small figure on the (viewer's) right appears to be seated facing Fig. 1, holding up its right hand in a gesture that suggests rejection. The figure may, on the other hand, be offering some small object to



Fig. 1; the fingers in the Covarrubias sketch (1957) that emphasize "rejection" cannot be discerned on the stone or in the photograph. This figure has suffered a good deal of damage - in part as a result of natural processes, in part from ancient mutilation - so that one can see but vestiges of what seems to have been originally rather elaborate detail. As previously noted, this figure's facial features have been obliterated, apparently intentionally, in part by battering, then by grinding or hammer-dressing. The rear portion of the face remains, in distinction to Fig. 1. With only a moderate exercise of the imagination, a jaguar headskin may be seen serving as a headdress, with a fleshless mandible (the Jaguar's?) protruding below the figure's face, and with the rest of the skin hanging cloak-like down the figure's back at the very edge of the pictorial field (simultaneously the edge of the stone). What seems to be a large square knot is incised on the lower portion of the figure. It cannot be determined whether this represents the tie of a wide belt or whether the figure is supposed to be lashed up (representing a captive). A three element (or fold) sash passes through a sort of grommet, or is tied slip-knot fashion, at the level of and to the rear of the square knot, its ends curving forward.

The first impression produced by Fig. 2 is that it is much simpler and more crudely drawn than Fig. 1. This may not be correct; it may be more damaged, with consequent loss of detail.

### Composition

Implicit in any discussion of application of laws of esthetics to an art object is the assumption that specific application of such laws was accomplished deliberately, not accidentally. Whether done "intuitively," as some modern artists would have us believe is their method, or through painstaking planning, cannot be determined and is not significant for our purposes. What is important is that utilization of esthetic standards (whether more or less "successfully" in modern art jargon) denotes the existence of a value system in art; in other words, a cultural pattern. Heizer (1967) has verified the application of esthetic laws to two Olmec sculptures of unusually complex design for that period.

A minute analysis of the El Mesón monument is not attempted here; rather, certain of its more obvious features are discussed. One of these is the skillfully devised unequivocal direction of attention to the center of interest: the area enclosed by the outstretched hands of the two figures, specifically, the unidentifiable object(s) attached to the baton held out by Fig. 1, and perhaps the hand of Fig. 2 (fig. d). The outstretched arms of the two figures have this directional significance, of course; before the facial features were demolished they doubtless directed toward, though not at, the same area. A vector of the angle of the jaws of the saurian(?) mask

passes directly through the objects attached to the baton, although before the face of Fig. 1 was destroyed the direction of this line might have been slightly different. In addition, the swirl of the plumes at the top of the headdress produces a line of force that transects the focus of interest and is reinforced by the downward-pointing lower tip of the bunch of feathers at the front of the headdress. The tongue-like (or flame-like) projection from the mouth of the saurian(?) mask, if it was prominent when the design was new and clear, points to Fig. 2's hand rather than to the baton. Below, the conspicuous tassel on Fig. 1's leading foot produces an upward-pointing vector. Incidentally, all these directional devices also enclose a space to the (viewer's) right of Fig. 1 that balances the heavy mass of headdress and feather trailer behind (left of) the figure.

The Doubleheaded Serpent bar of the Platform, despite its asymmetric defects, produces the impression of symmetry and in treatment is compatible with the two figures. The vertical supports, with their bold angular design elements, are not compatible. They constitute bad composition: the heavy angular lines strongly distract the viewer's gaze from what was intended as the important area of the total pattern. That they do not completely disrupt the design's coherence seems to be due in part to the strength of the directional lines just discussed, plus an interest factor - the fact that representational forms tend to attract the viewer's interest more than simple geometric figures.

### Comparative Materials

The first impression one receives of the El Mesón monument is that, stylistically, it is unique in Mesoamerican art. The relatively large open spaces of the background augment this impression. True enough, certain design units known from elsewhere in the area are included. The obtrusive angular scrolls of the platform in (more or less) mirror image are very like a pair forming a platform for a figure on a monument from Kaminaljuyu, as Miles (1965, fig. 14a, passim) has noted. The conventional Serpent (or Monster) profile masks are of long duration in Mesoamerican art, as Parsons (1967) has shown, whether or not they are all of the lineage of the Olmec Jaguar Monster representations. The persistence of the slightly more realistic jaguar motif, as in the headdress, over the millenia, is too well known to require documentation.

The principal human figure (Fig. 1), regarded without its confusion of ornaments, is the most useful portion of the design for comparative purposes. The posture - shoulders in front view, hips in three-quarters view, legs in profile - is similar to that designated by Proskouriakoff (1950:19 ff.) as I-A-1, and noted by her as frequently used on early Early Classic Mayan monuments.

However, distinguishing this figure from those of the Early Classic Maya tradition, and as well from Proto-Maya according to Parson's (1967: 184) classification, is the treatment of the figure: a notable rigidity, and departure from realism—lower legs indicated by straight lines, without curves suggesting musculature of the calves; left arm (on viewer's right) indicated in forced, unnatural position; hands diagrammatically rather than realistically depicted. This treatment is manifestly closely related to that of the human figures—out of proportion, neckless, angular—of the Initial Series stelae at Cerro de las Mesas (stelae 6,8,3; Stirling 1943). These in turn are closely related to the large figures of Teotihuacán murals (except that in the murals an attempt has been made to show shoulders in perspective). We have to do here with a very significant factor in the definition of an art style: what the artist's intent was, what he was trying to depict. Within certain limits this can be discerned objectively. The Mayan artists were attempting realistic presentations of the human figure, though with only moderate success until later in the development of their sculptural art—this despite additional interest in depiction of symbolic items, glyphs, and ornaments that fill so much of the space of Mayan pictorial fields. Similarly, the earlier Olmec artists stressed realism in representations of human beings. On the other hand, the designer of the El Mesón monument, like those of the Cerro de las Mesas stelae and the Teotihuacán murals, was interested in the human figure only as a sort of mannequin on which the symbolic elements could be displayed in the form of masks, headgear, articles of apparel, and accouterments. The most realistically carved portion of Fig. 1, in fact the only realistically depicted portion, is not the human form at all, but is rather the elegant feather trailer of the headdress with its changing curves and dip of sections of plumes coordinated with the varied outer edge to create a handsome rippling effect.

Similarly, what can still be seen of Fig. 2 suggests no particular interest in human anatomy. I have interpreted the figure as seated, mainly because no feet and legs are to be seen; the bottom of the figure is the widest part, as though it were supposed to have its legs tucked under, or perhaps was seated cross-legged. The carver patently had no interest in depicting the position of the legs. Nevertheless, the knot of the belt (or lashing?) and the pendant strips (or folds) of clothing are precisely shown.

Comparison to the Central Veracruz site of Cerro de las Mesas<sup>3</sup> suggests

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<sup>3</sup> Cerro de las Mesas presents a basically Central Veracruz pattern affected by extremely strong Highland influences from Early Classic times. It is incorrectly referred to as Olmec in some comparative discussions by persons who do not bother to read the reports; they assume it was Olmec because Stirling investigated it. Actually, both Stirling and the present

further Central Veracruz comparisons. However, the most casual inspection suggests complete conceptual and stylistic difference between the composition treated here and the characteristic Central Veracruz art which Proskouriakoff (1954:65) characterizes as "marked by a rich interplay of ornament and theme, with no concentrated areas of design or voids in the compositions." The contrast, in the El Mesón specimen, between the elaborately decorated figures and the blank unadorned background area (at a rough estimate, more than a quarter but less than a third of the pictorial area) creates an effect poles apart from the busy, heavily loaded "baroque" Central Veracruz design.

Apart from stylistic considerations, a detail of material culture depicted on the monument and common in Central Veracruz sculpture can be noted: the combination of breechclout and short skirt or kilt. This seems, on consideration, to be a rather unusual dress style.<sup>4</sup> The combination, with kilts whose lower edge slopes upward to the front just as on the El Mesón stone, can be seen on a number of "palmas" (Proskouriakoff 1954, palmas 3,4, 6,7,9; numbers 5 and 10 show kilts combined with breechclouts with straight lower edges), in the Tajín panel reproduced by Proskouriakoff (op.cit. fig. 9-b, in which one personage wears a kilt with sloping, another with straight, edge, and two wear only breechclouts), as well as on the figure on the monument buried in Str. 5, Tajín (op.cit. fig. 9-a) and the Cerro de Moreno, Ver., stone (op.cit. fig. 9-f). A few clay figurines from La Venta also suggest such garb, though with straight, not sloping, edged kilts.

A number of the human figures on the palmas wear huge, apparently elaborate, feather headgear, but there is nothing reasonably like Fig. 1's head-dress. As a matter of fact, I can find nothing comparable to the feathered trailer closer in time and space than the trailers of the late horse-culture Plains area—a comparison that manifestly can have no culture-historical significance whatsoever.

Slipover capes (strange garb for the hot coast plain; were they rain-capes? or slavish copies of dress of the chill Highland?) are duplicated in clay figurines from Remojadas and Cerro de las Mesas (Medellín Z. 1960, pls. 38,39).

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<sup>3</sup> writer have stressed its non-Olmec character, although noting traces of Olmec influence that filtered across the vast swampland between the lower Papaloápam and the Río Blanco, or were transmitted by routes flanking this barrier.

<sup>4</sup> By exercise of great restraint, I have desisted from making captious comparison to simultaneous use of belt and suspenders in our modern wearing apparel complex.

### Temporal Position

Bereft of archaeological context, content and stylistic features offer the only means for relating the monument to a specific time horizon. Both Miles (1965:255) and Parsons (1967:182) refer the specimen to Pre-Classic epochs, but it must be remembered that they had only Covarrubias' sketch on which to base their opinions; a sketch that gives the design an Olmec or Olmecoid flavor quite lacking in the actual design. Although the monument was found not far from the northern slopes of the Tuxtla Mountains, within what was once the Olmec heartland, and although it is made of the same material as many of the Olmec and Olmecoid monuments of Tres Zapotes and Nestepe, it is completely lacking in Olmec stylistic traits.

If we accept the hypothesis that the "Serpent or Dragon heads" are properly identified, and further, that this motif is, as Parsons, Covarrubias and others have proposed, a lineal descendant of the Olmec Jaguar Monster wherever found, and in addition, if we assume that the so-called "scroll eyes" and the rectangular slits above them are properly read as "eyes" and are parts of the original layout, we have a clean-cut indication of conceptual change. (This is, of course, piling an Ossa of hypothesis on a Pelion of conjecture to squeeze out a wisp of chronology, but the fact is we have little precise data to work with.) Making all the foregoing assumptions leads to the conclusion that the symbolism of the scroll eyes as eyes had been lost by the time this monument was designed. (Interestingly, the Serpent or Dragon head on the Bilbao monument [Parsons 1967] seems to have two scroll eyes; reading the upper one as right, the head "faces" to the right, and vice versa.)

Nor do items of content help us much. The somewhat unique breechclout-kilt combination is interesting but seems to have little precise time significance. Proskouriakoff argues convincingly for a Late Classic (and late Late Classic at that) date for the palmas and for the Tajín ball court panels. She judges the figure similarly garbed on the buried Tajín monument to be earlier on stylistic grounds, an appraisal substantiated by its stratigraphically earlier origin. Hence we have a time span that includes both Early and Late Classic. If the La Venta figurines really represent a comparable dress style, we have to do with a tremendous time span. Just because we are accustomed to thinking of dress styles in our culture as subject to constant and rapid change does not mean those of other cultures may not be stable.

The slipover cape associated with the handmade plus appliqué figurines with triangular Teotihuacanoid faces are surely of Early Classic date and may provide a somewhat better time marker. However, it is not certain that this trait did not persist into later periods.

Of all the recognizably distinctive characters of the El Mesón monument, that relating to the treatment of the human figure in relation to the presumably symbolic appurtenances is probably the surest guide to temporal placing: it plainly points to strong Teotihuacán influence of Early Classic date. Consequently, an Early Classic origin of the monument seems most likely.

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Plate 1





Fig. a. Human figure portion of Fig. 1

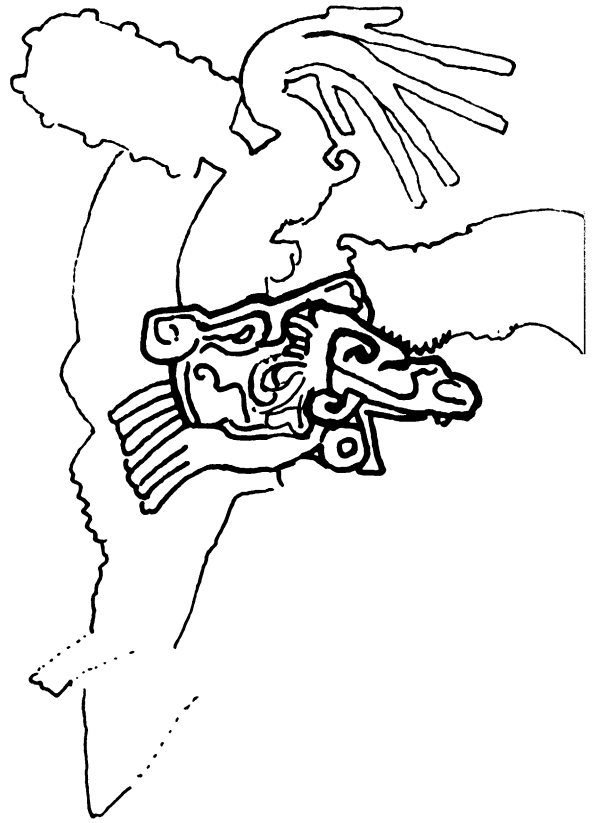


Fig. b. Jaguar-Saurian (?) portion of Fig. 1 headdress

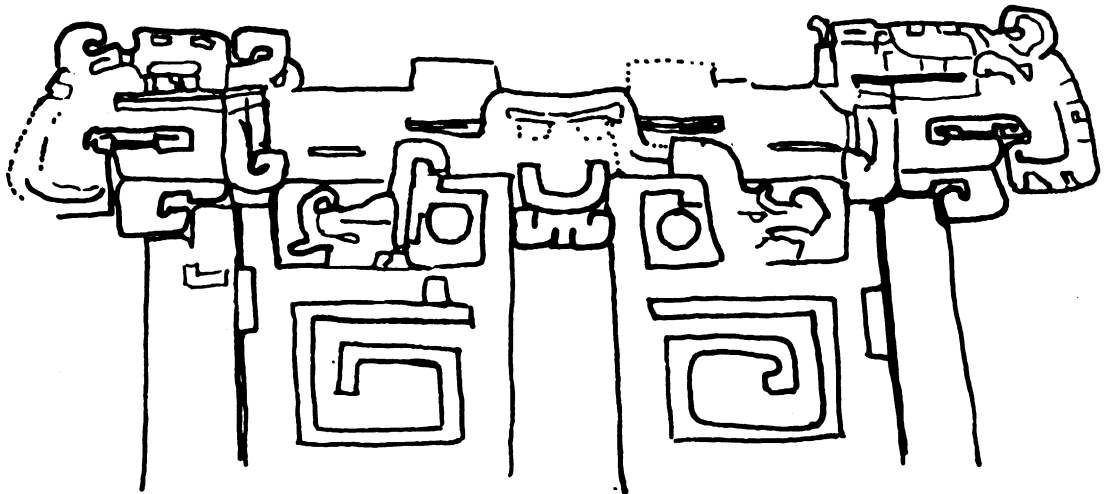


Fig. c. Detail of Platform





Fig. d. Directional lines to area of interest