

III. COMPARISON OF TWO UNUSUAL OLMEC MONUMENTS

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During January and February of 1968, a University of California field party under the direction of Professors Robert F. Heizer and John A. Graham conducted limited work at the Olmec site of La Venta, Tabasco. Although the main task was to accurately map the unusual pyramid (cf. Heizer, 1968; Heizer and Drucker, 1968), some site reconnaissance and a small amount of excavation was carried out and has been reported on (Heizer, Graham and Napton, 1968; Hallinan, Ambro and O'Connell, 1968). Twenty-nine new carved stone Olmec monuments were recovered and numbered (Clewlow and Corson, 1968). While several of these new pieces are highly deserving of interest by both archaeologist and art historian, the most interesting is Monument 44 (Plate 1b). Its significance, aside from its merit as a work of art, derives from its remarkable similarity to the *Idolo de San Martin Pajapan* (Blom and La Farge, 1926, Fig. 433; Covarrubias 1946:80), a large basalt sculpture which rested for years atop the San Martin Pajapan volcano, in the Tuxtla mountains, but now resides at the Museo de Antropologia in Xalapa, Veracruz (Plate 1a). Known from a number of published drawings and photographs, the *Idolo* and its remarkable recovery have only recently been fully described (Medellin, 1968). It consists of a large human figure positioned with the left leg kneeling, and the right leg in a squatting crouch. The body leans forward and the hands grip a large round bar which stretches in front of the piece. The figure displays elaborate incising, probably representing tattoos, on the thighs and upper arms. It wears an abdomen wrap which also bears incising in geometric patterns. The entire piece is 1.42 meters in height, with a maximum basal width of 93 centimeters. The portion with which the present comment is concerned, however, is the head and headdress, which together have a height of 76 centimeters.

As may be seen in Fig. 1, the head and headdress of the *Idolo de San Martin* may be conveniently divided into three portions. The first and lower-most is the figure of the human face, 21 centimeters high; the second, or middle, portion consists of the snarling, anthropomorphic jaguar mask, 34 centimeters high, which makes up the main part of the headdress; the final portion is a 21 centimeter high crownlike projection rising from the center top of the main headdress element. While Monument 44 from La Venta has been broken, and lacks the top crownlike element, it is interesting to note that in other respects the piece is almost exactly the same size as the equivalent portion of the *Idolo*. That is, the central headdress segments of both sculptures are 34 centimeters high, 28 centimeters wide at the top, and 50 centimeters in length (see Figures 1-3). The main human heads of both pieces are about 22 centimeters wide at the cheeks, and are, respectively, 27, and 21 centimeters high, the face of Monument 44 being 6 centimeters higher than that of the *Idolo*.

In addition to being very nearly the same size, the two pieces are strikingly similar in manner of execution. In both, the lower human face is depicted as a realistic individual with puffy cheeks, somewhat

prominent jowls, and well-modeled, fleshy chins. Although both pieces are unfortunately eroded, it is possible to see that both had broad noses with subrhomboidal nasions, eyes which were executed by flattening and incising, and mouths in which the lips were slightly parted but with no teeth showing. The upper lips of both faces are bow-shaped, as is the lower lip of Monument 44 while the lower lip of the Idolo appears to be straight.

Both pieces exhibit two-part ear ornament assemblages in which the lower elements are badly eroded, cleft-headed "were-babies" (cf. Coe, 1965a, p. 752; Coe, 1965b, p. 14), such as are portrayed on the low relief panels of Alter 5, La Venta (Drucker, 1952, p. 177), and which are carried on the laps of the niche figures of Alter 5 at La Venta, and the jade priest found at Las Limas (Medellin, 1965). Immediately above these "were-baby" heads are sub-rectangular disc-like elements in which low relief incising occurs. On Monument 44 the incising, although the piece has sustained considerable damage in this area, appears to be incised representations of anthropomorphic jaguar faces which bear similarities both to the small heads which are suspended from them, and to the large anthropomorphic face constituting the central front portion of the headdress. On the Idolo, these faces are very indistinct, appearing at first like four small ground pits within an incised ring. However, close scrutiny reveals that these are probably the badly eroded remnants of the small incised faces which once appeared there. One minor difference between the Idolo and Monument 44 is that the upper disc of the ear ornament assemblage on Monument 44 is attached directly beneath the overhanging headdress. This has the effect of raising the whole ear ornament so that the bottom of the "were-baby" faces are parallel to the bottom of the main human face. On the Idolo, the ear assemblage is suspended from the headdress on what appears to be a short, thick strap, with the result that the "were-baby" faces hang below the chin level of the main human face.

The front portion of each headdress consists of a large, anthropomorphic face with the characteristic Olmec snarl upon its lips. The eyes of each headdress face are incised around the perimeters, slanting upward toward the outside corner at a 35 degree angle to the horizontal from a broad, flat nose. The upper and lower lips of the anthropomorphic faces are both bow-shaped and parted, revealing the upper gum beneath. Fangs which are badly eroded, but which may have been depicted as bifurcate, as well as a tongue, are present on the Idolo. Monument 44 is too badly eroded to discern further mouth detail. Both faces exhibit characteristic puffy cheeks, and fleshy, well-modeled chins. Unfortunately, the top portion of the Monument 44 headdress has been broken and badly worn. However, it is reasonable to assume that the deep cleft in the top center of the forehead which is present on the Idolo also once characterized Monument 44.

On the sides, each headdress consists primarily of a number of upward and backward sweeping incisions which may represent feathers. The Idolo has seven of these on each side, while Monument 44 has ten on the right, and eleven on the left side. Below these incisions runs a thick headband containing three simply incised decorative elements which are easy to discern on the Idolo, but nearly obliterated from Monument 44 (see Figure 2).

In back, the upper portions of both headdresses terminate in four-part rectangles formed by the intersection of two perpendicular V-shaped grooves, which run through the center of this section, one vertically, the other horizontally. Below this, the headband of Monument 44 supports a slightly raised rectangular plaque within which is incised a snarling "were-baby" face, similar to those on the ear ornament discs. On the Idolo, the rectangular plaque is present, but no detail can be discerned within its borders (Fig. 3).

In addition to similarities between Monument 44 and the Idolo de San Martin in size and sculptural treatment, preliminary X-ray fluorescence analysis indicates that the basalt from which the two pieces are carved probably came from the same source (Dr. Fred Stross, Shell Development Corp., personal communication). Although the exact basalt flow from which the pieces came has not been identified, it is certain that it is one from the Tuxtla Mountains, where Williams and Heizer (1965) have precisely located several sources of stone used in other Olmec monuments.

Robert Heizer, in his study of two low relief carved stelae from La Venta (1967:38) has suggested the possibility of "schools", perhaps consisting of a master sculptor and his apprentices, for explaining the similarities between certain pieces of Olmec monumental art. In a detailed study of the twelve known Olmec colossal heads (Clewlow, Cowan, O'Connell and Benemann, 1967:60) the same possibility was proposed. It would appear that the close similarities between Monument 44 of La Venta and the Idolo de San Martin Pajapan present additional evidence for the existence of sculptural schools within the Olmec culture.

Since no stone sculpture working area has been located at La Venta, it is probable that both the Idolo de San Martin and La Venta Monument 44 were sculptured in the Tuxtla Mountains, with one being taken to the nearby San Martin summit, and the other being transported to the La Venta ceremonial center, a distance of about 90 kilometers in a straight line, and some 135 kilometers by water. An alternative suggestion would be that one master sculpture worked both in the Tuxtlas, and at La Venta.

Medellin (1968) has indicated that the San Martin piece was last positioned atop the summit in the late Classic period. La Venta Monument 44 was recovered from a clay fill level which has been dated by the radiocarbon method at 2460±80 (UCLA-1351) and 2910±80 (UCLA-1352), and is thus certainly of Preclassic age (Heizer, Drucker, and Graham, 1968). The probable explanation for this is that the Classic period peoples in the Tuxtlas were re-using a much older piece when they placed the Idolo atop its platform on San Martin. Regardless of later usages, it appears that the two pieces are of the same relative age, and it is suggested that they may have been executed by the same master, or, alternatively, by two schools of workers who were in close contact, each familiar with the work of the other.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 Schematic drawing of front view.

- a. Monument 44
 - b. Idolo de San Martin
- Scale 1:10

Figure 2 Schematic drawing of side view.

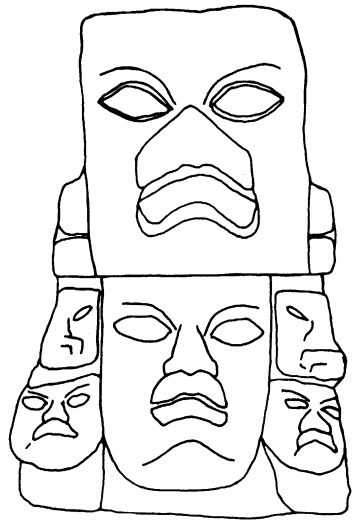
- a. Monument 44
 - b. Idolo de San Martin
- Scale 1:10

Figure 3 Schematic drawing of rear view.

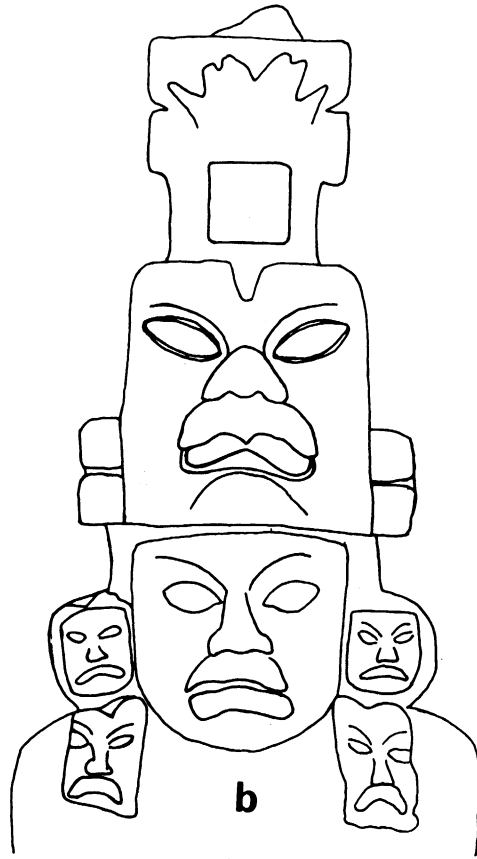
- a. Monument 44
 - b. Idolo de San Martin
- Scale; a. 1:8
b. 1:10

Plate 1a Idolo de San Martin

Plate 1b La Venta Monument 44

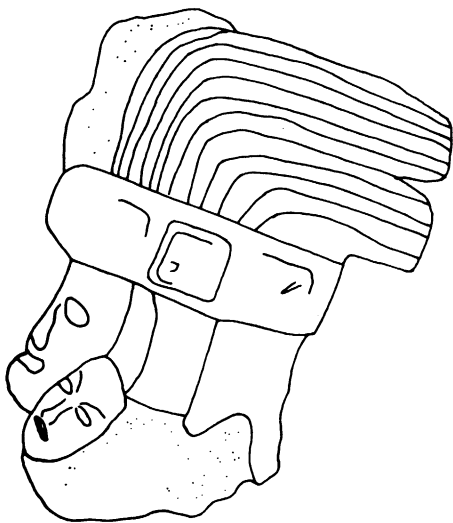


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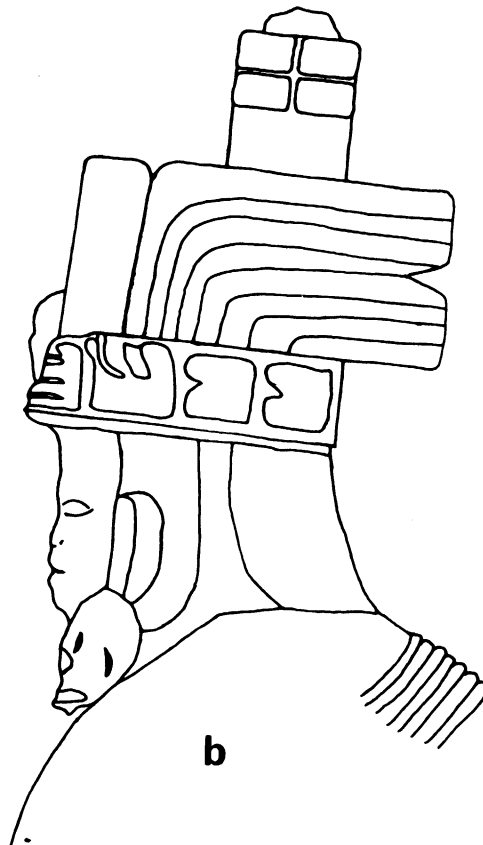


b

Figure 1

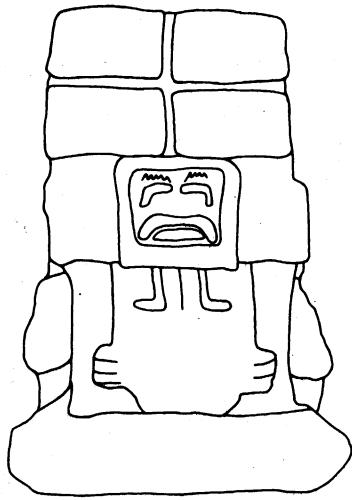


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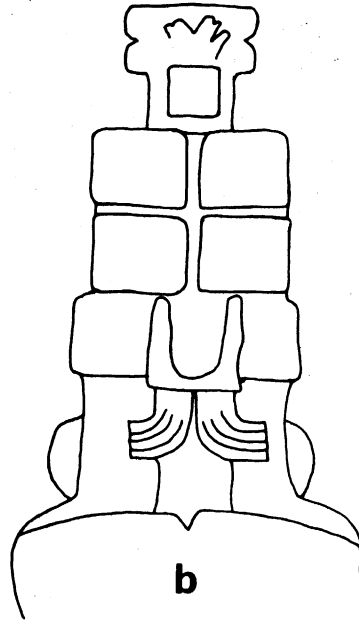


b

Figure 2



a



b

Figure 3



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