

A REVIEW OF LA VENTA, TABASCO AND ITS RELEVANCE
TO THE OLMEC PROBLEM

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Introduction

A detailed review of the reports on excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, has been prompted by various considerations. This remarkable site is obviously crucial to the whole question of "Olmec culture," "civilization," "expansion," and so forth. Anyone concerned with origins of "high culture" in Mesoamerica, or for that matter in Nuclear America, is bound to take into account the role which La Venta and the Olmec, or simply Olmec, played. But Olmec is a somewhat disturbing subject. Too much faith, too much mystique colors the topic. Then there is the matter of terminology. "Olmec" has been applied to a people, a complex, a culture, a style, even to an horizon, as well as to what scoffers feel to be nothing but a rather shaky construct.

As regards La Venta: was this site a pure primary Olmec center, or was it at least within a Gulf Coastal Olmec "heartland?" Or was La Venta rather merely one of a group of exotic coastal "outposts," with the true, original focus of Olmec in Guerrero or possibly in the Valley of Mexico? Was Olmec sufficiently early and pervasive or expansive to have been the "mother culture" as believed by Covarrubias and as enthusiastically elaborated on by others? May it not have been instead a late first millenium B.C: distinctive (but oddly diffuse) "culture," the development of which paralleled in time comparable yet equally distinct developments, each leading towards its own peculiarly colored but similar complex level which we label "civilization?"

Such questions come to mind and stick there when one is engaged in analysis of data derived from what amounts to a competitive site and culture. In this case we are thinking of Tikal, the major central lowland Maya site. The makeup of Formative or Preclassic Tikal is intricate, sophisticated, and replete with many Classic characteristics (details are omitted here as they are not pertinent to this review). The point is that Preclassic Tikal by no means bears out the assertion on occasion encountered today that "civilization" (we see no reason not to apply this well-bruised term to Preclassic Tikal) in the New World was what amounts to an Olmec innovation. At the moment it would require semantic, interpretive juggling of the most dubious order to derive early Tikal from what is currently known of Olmec. This is not to deny that Olmec was a far earlier feature on the Mesoamerican scene than once allowed, even a decade ago, nor is it to contradict the "internationalism" of Olmec, as evidenced by the impressive distribution of objects and representations of Olmec style, derivation, or inspiration. Nevertheless, before Olmec (style, culture, etc.) is placed so high beyond the reach of the most cautious, articulate critic, it seems useful to review the meaning and placement in time of at least some of its outstanding features.

There is no better place to do this than within the context of La Venta. Excavated in 1940, 1942, 1943, and 1955 (with subsequent excavations, evidently unpublished, by Piffa Chan; MacNeish 1960:296), this site yielded many of the frequently claimed components of Olmec culture, as well

as architecture, construction sequence, and radiocarbon dates. The 1955 work, as is well known, completely revised earlier conclusions by the excavators which placed La Venta and the elements of its Olmec occupation on an Early Classic time level. The radiocarbon dates bore out what Wauchope, Covarrubias and others had emphasized, namely that the site, and by extrapolation Olmec in general, was Preclassic or Formative in time. The radiocarbon results were rationalized to produce the conclusion that occupation of La Venta Complex A spanned the centuries from approximately 800 to 400 B.C. (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:264-267; hereafter cited as "DHS 1959").

Within this Middle Preclassic time-span it is understood that Olmec culture dominated La Venta and that Olmec religion was present at the time of the beginning of the site (DHS 1959:269-270). The occupants constructed platforms of clay and adobe in an extremely formal ceremonial layout replete with quantities of monumental sculptures in Olmec style, as well as huge pavements in the form of stylized jaguar heads with or without associated intrusive offertory piles of similarly secreted stone blocks. Small offerings occurred in quantities, and these yielded on occasion beautiful examples of Olmec stone figurine art as well as other typologically distinct items considered to be part of the Olmec religious complex. But as has been frequently underscored, La Venta was peculiar in the lack of unequivocal stone-faced architecture, of hieroglyphic writing and calendric statements, in the marked paucity of human burials, and in the peculiar local emphasis on columnar basalt enclosures or palisades. Despite the presence of many monuments of all shapes and sizes nothing much in the way of context was found for them.

In this paper there is no attempt to rise to the bait so amply provided, we think, in various reconstructions of early Mesoamerica in print. Our purpose here is limited to La Venta, a main fixture in such reconstructions, and to how the La Venta published data were derived, how substantial they are, and to how they have been used by the responsible excavators within their excavation reports and secondary studies. If "Olmec" as a subject and a problem is so evidently dependent on La Venta, the certainties and uncertainties emerging from its excavation ought to be focused as sharply as possible. A great deal depends on this site until more like it are found and excavated.

One subject for reconsideration here is the physical stratigraphy and construction sequences at La Venta "Complex A." Others include the placement of offerings, both large and small, in construction phases, the carving and erection-times of monuments, the relationship between architectural constructions and ceramics, and the source and meaning of the La Venta radiocarbon dates.

Construction Phases

The control of relative time and sequences of building activity at Complex A are entirely dependent on the control of the plaza-court floors lying within this major La Venta area. To the south this ceremonial group terminates at Pyramid C-1, the huge, dominant feature of the site; to the north the group is bounded by the large Mound A-2. The floor sequence in this group is as follows, from earliest to latest:

"Water-sorted." This term applies to a group of directly superimposed floors, believed to have been formally laid. They are described as "Buff and brown sandy floors, apparently partly water-sorted" (DHS 1959:113). "These floors mark a series of early sandy clay surfacing layers of the Court which were subjected to sheet washing of rainwater. . . ." (DHS 1959:20). These floors ultimately overlie sterile base drift sands of the island but may also at times rest on either specially prepared pre-"Water-sorted" sand and/or clay fills or on occupation fills.

"White sandy." This "floor series" variably caps a fill laid on the "Water-sorted" series; in some instances "White-sandy" was laid directly on the surface of the prior floor series. The "White sandy" series is made up of "white sandy material separated by tan and buff sandy layers. . . . It recurs in various parts of the Complex and because of similarities in color, material, and in stratigraphic position is considered to be a unit" (DHS 1959:90). Its variable coloration is also indicated by the "fine banded purple, white and brown" floors equivalent to it at one excavation locus (DHS 1959:66).

"Old-rose." The "old-rose colored floor series" is noted as a "continuous level extending over the entire Court surface" (DHS 1959:87). Nevertheless, considerable variation occurs even within the Court area, let alone the area south of it (cf. DHS 1959:23, 75). In one instance the floors of this series are, from earliest to latest, "rose-colored," "yellow sandy clay," "peculiarly colored sandy clay" (DHS 1959:87); in another, white, tan, pink or rose, and finally white (DHS 1959:66).

"Red clay cap." The reports never adequately explain this "massive red clay cap," about one foot thick, that was laid over the whole complex including the extant platforms. It is probably the most perplexing of the La Venta features. The reader is left with the impression that this "cap" is the final formal plaza-court surfacing material which was also used to refurbish the extant platforms. Its surface is frequently noted as heavily eroded. "Surface drift sands" consistently cover the red clay cap.

The published basic sequence at La Venta Complex A can be summarized as follows:

- Surface drift sands (latest)
- "Red clay cap"
- "Old-rose" floor series (over fill)
- "White sandy" floor series (usually over fill)
- "Water-sorted" floor series
- Sand fills (including cultural material)
- Basal drift sands (evidently sterile)
- Clay subsoil (sterile)

Complex A has been periodized or phased almost exclusively by the use of the three floor "series" and the red clay cap. The laying of the "Water-sorted" series is the principal diagnostic of Phase I, while activities antedating the floor are informally categorized as Pre-Phase I. The "White sandy" floor series marks Phase II, while Phase III is marked by the "Old-rose" series. Phase IV is uniformly defined by the deposition of the "Red clay

cap," as well as by any feature concluded to belong temporally with the deposition of this cap. A Post-Phase IV is allowed for the accumulation of the surface drift sands; various cultural activities have been correlated with this naturally deposited surface layer.

In practice the three floor series and the "red clay cap" are employed to develop (in the form of numbered phases) almost the entire cultural record present in Complex A. The floor sequences in various courts or plazas of the complex are used to date relatively all cultural activity (offactory, architectural, etc.), irrespective of the relative simplicity or complexity of mound development in relation to the plaza-court areas. No systematic provision was made for expressing the superimposed architectural growth stages and components that culminated in a final structure whose erosion with time provided the "mound." A mound in practice at La Venta was not treated as a "growth unit" to be analyzed and periodized initially in its own terms but rather as a source for data to fatten Complex A phases, whose number diagnostics coincided with the floor series and red clay cap in the plaza-court areas. Rather than use the latter features to correlate independently periodized data for each mound or excavation locus, the basic four-fold sequence was imposed in situations where the local developmental sequence need not and in fact did not always mesh or match.

Figure 1 was devised to illustrate in a simple, schematic way, first, the four court-plaza horizontal features (floor series and cap) and how they relate to and interrelate the growth of structures or platforms (and court walls) at most of the excavation loci in Complex A. This composite cross-section is based upon the published (Drucker 1952, DHS 1959) sections, descriptions and phase assignments. Scale, both vertical and horizontal, has been disregarded in Figure 1 and forms have been schematicized as were the exact relationship of a "platform" to the one overlying it. (Parenthetically, there is no way of vertically aligning features in such a sectional presentation inasmuch as a vertical datum was omitted in the published sections and the textual descriptions are keyed to nothing that is vertically constant. Any reader of the reports of La Venta excavation data quickly realizes the problem of checking the authors' observations: one report is in feet, the others in the metric system; every section seems to differ in published scale, even contiguous or overlapping sections; if sections do in fact join or overlap there is no way of telling due to the omission of printed horizontal controls.)

Since the reports provide no formal designations for the sequent constructions within each architectural feature, it has been necessary to devise simple terminology in order to speak of the sequences. Accordingly, each major "growth unit" in each locus has been designated as a lettered "unit" (e.g. "N.E. Plat: Unit A" identifies the earliest non-floor construction at the Northeast Platform locus; at "Mound A-3" the next to the earliest construction is labeled "Md. A-3: Unit B").

Turning to Figure 1 and the matter of control provided by the "Water-sorted" floor series, this series is seen to underly and to support directly numerous units at different loci (N.W. Plat: Unit B; Md. A-3: Unit A; S. Cent. Plat: Unit A; N.E. Entry: Unit A; E. Wall: Unit B). "Water-sorted" turns up to or abuts the following features in Figure 1: N.E. Plat: Unit A;

Md. A-2: Unit A; and a wall remnant in E. Wall: Unit A. The floor series seals a problematical feature, N.W. Plat: Unit A. In practice the excavators employed this floor series to mark the inception of Phase I. What the series sealed was considered to be pre-Phase I; what it directly supported was assigned to Phase I, but with important exceptions.

Our first close reading of the excavation section of the 1959 La Venta report failed to make us realize how these exceptions came about. Certain structures built on the "Water-sorted" series were assigned to Phase I (e.g. Md. A-3: Unit A; S. Cent. Plat: Unit A), while other platforms abutted by this series, or its "equivalent" (DHS 1959:38), were also assigned to Phase I (cf. N.E. Plat: Unit A; Md. A-2: Unit A). To add to confusion, platforms and other features, though built directly on this floor series, but abutted by the subsequent Phase II "White sandy" floor series, were assigned consistently to Phase II (cf. N.W. Plat: Unit B; N.E. Entry: Unit A (somewhat uncertain; DHS 1959:77); E. Wall: Unit B). But Phase II also applied to those platforms to which the Phase II "White sandy" series is directly tied through floor-platform "fusion" rather than floor "run-under" or "abuttment" (cf. Md. A-2: Units B, C, D, E; S. Cent. Plat: Unit B; S.W. Plat: Unit A). A second reading of the text made it clear that the excavators were invoking (perhaps too quietly) an interpretive principle, namely, that although a platform was built on a floor which serves as a construction level, the floor did not necessarily serve the newly-built platform as its functional base surface; a floor subsequently laid on the first one and abutting the new platform is taken as the base surface for the platform. Alternatively, the old floor served first as a construction level and then as the base surface for the new platform, while the subsequent floor was laid during the use of the platform. The manner in which the original surface and subsequent clay resurfacings of the platform relate to the two sequent floors (or, here, "floor series") provides a primary determinant in phasing or simply in isolating the sequential position of construction and use.

To help clarify what may have happened at La Venta, we have prepared a schematic composite section (Figure 2) that combines the north-south sections through the north sides of the balanced and seemingly twin Northeast and Northwest Platforms (DHS 1959:Figs. 15 and 20). Figure 2 shows in detail what Figure 1 attempts in part to show in summary fashion. The phase attributions are those of the excavators and agree with those shown in Figure 1.

In Figure 2, N.W. Plat: Unit B, Phase II, is shown built on Phase I "Water-sorted" while this same floor series abuts the Phase I N.E. Plat: Unit A. The inference to be gained from this section and the excavators' text is that N.W. Plat: Unit B is Phase II because it never employed Phase I "Water-sorted" as anything more than a construction level. Proof of this must lie in how the facing layers of Unit B relate to "Water-sorted" and the directly superimposed Phase II "White sandy" floors. We have tried to duplicate accurately in Figure 2 the relationships shown in the published sections. The facings have been designated by Arabic numbers to facilitate reference.

The first fact to be established is whether or not N.W. Plat: Unit B1 and N.E. Plat: Unit A1 represent true functioning faces of the respective platforms. Evidence that they were such is possibly provided by N.E. Plat: Unit C1, directly abutted by all but the floor of the "Old-rose" series

(Phase III) and thus comparable in this regard to N.E. Plat: Unit A1, abutted by the Phase I "Water-sorted" series. But the evidence is not overwhelming. In short, was the innermost, earliest face of each of these platforms a finished face or simply the surface of the construction core which was immediately covered by a finish-facing? The 1959 La Venta report never openly handles this problem although seriously it infects the whole matter of meaningful construction phasing in Complex A. If N.W. Plat: Unit B1 was a finish-facing, Unit B must pertain to Phase I although it certainly continued to be used and renovated (B2 - B4) during the Phase II accumulation of "White sandy" floors.

Alignment of the Northwest and Northeast Platform sections in our Figure 2 serves also to illustrate other significant points. These two structures are symmetrically placed in relation to the centerline of the Complex (DHS 1959:Fig. 4). They are mapped as of equal form and size. Together these structures contribute heavily to the appearance in Complex A of bisymmetrical layout with implied coordinated growth of balanced or twin structures. The La Venta report makes considerable use of these aspects, especially in the cases of the heavily investigated Southwest Platform and incompletely excavated Southeast Platform. Our Figure 2 would seem to illustrate that identical or like final products may have evolved in quite dissimilar ways. While the Phase IV end result in Complex A was formal and balanced in terms of a center line, as all have emphasized, one suspects that the various surface structures comprising the Complex evolved in disjointed, independent fashion.

The floor-linked construction sequences of two "twin" features in Figure 2 show the manner in which architectural convergence was achieved. The N.W. Plat: Unit B significantly postdated N.E. Plat: Unit A. The latter underwent at least three clay-plaster refacings before being buried by Unit B, which was built on "Water-sorted" as was N.W. Plat: Unit B. N.E. Plat: Unit B was refaced twice before the first of the "White sandy" series was laid; it was not refaced during the laying of any of the component floors of this series. The current N.W. Plat: Unit B was contrastingly repeatedly faced during the laying of successive "White sandy" floors. Presumably, at some time after N.W. Plat: Unit B4 facing was made, the Unit B platform was markedly raised with the addition on it of Unit C. That the underlying Unit B was not completely buried by Unit C and the "Old-rose" series is indicated by the fact that Units C1 and C2 carry down onto the Unit B face; Unit C thus appears to have had initially the "White sandy" series as its base surface. N.E. Plat: Unit B, if we read the section correctly, continued in use during the early occupation of N.W. Plat: Unit C (i.e. C1 and C2). N.W. Plat: Unit C3 was added at the same time that the first of the "Old-rose" series was fused with it. At this same time N.E. Plat: Unit C was built; the base of its only facing (C1) fused with the first "Old-rose" floor. Three more "Old-rose" floors came to abut the opposite N.W. Plat: Unit C3 by the time the C4 facing there was added. It was on this fourth "Old-rose" floor that N.W. Plat: Unit D was built. The opposite N.E. Plat: Unit C had been in existence since the laying of the first "Old-rose" floor. It was not until after N.W. Plat: Unit D had been refaced with the D3 layer that the fifth and latest local "Old-rose" floor was laid. Finally the "red clay cap" was

laid over all extant construction at each locus. This presumably was the only coordinated major activity in the otherwise quite different evolutions of these important Complex A features.

The preceding "reading" of Figure 2 is only significant if the following conclusions are pertinent: (1) The use of Complex A court-plaza floors as determinants of construction sequences of all architectural features in the Complex is simplistic inasmuch as each floor of each "series" might have related to and, in many cases, did relate to architecture in different ways in different loci; (2) If the never-explained system of phasing in Complex A was intended only to put in gross sequence (DHS 1959:Table 1) the relative construction intervals of many somewhat obscure clay platforms, such simple phasing might be considered valid for the purpose; (3) But since C14 samples and masses of offerings, many containing representative Olmec-style pieces, were sequentially ordered on the basis of affiliation with construction phases, there is potential danger in employing too simple a framework; (4) If the objective is to reconstruct La Venta development in all complex detail (and such detail surely is present), a more precise approach to sequence than the one in print will be required; (5) If two symmetrically placed, identically planned final structures developed in quite different ways (cf. Fig. 2), it is to be doubted that other balanced, superficially similar examples (e.g. Southwest and Southeast Platforms) necessarily evolved in identical, correlated fashion; asymmetrical growth of Complex A should be considered.

A most useful contribution would be a really detailed correlation of all La Venta sectional data (as done briefly in Figure 2). This would illustrate to what extent the various floor series were physically traced from one structure to another. It would clarify the degree to which floor series were re-established by typology level, and other means than truly traced continuity. Moreover, the section could be coordinated with successive plans of the Complex. Such plans would not only graphically establish what actually was involved in local construction sequence but would reify the subject of La Venta architecture as well.

Admittedly, sections do not necessarily permit preparation of even broken-line plans except in cases where a feature has been cross-sectioned at various points, e.g. Northeast Platform (DHS 1959:Fig. 13). But it would be hard to find another site of this architectural magnitude in which so much was excavated but so little said clearly if not decisively about architectural form and detail, possibly even function.

Radiocarbon Dates

Nine charcoal samples have been processed for La Venta Complex A. The results of analysis given throughout this section were published by Drucker, Heizer and Squier (1957, 1959; see also Crane and Griffin 1958). We know of no other analyses for La Venta.

Five of the nine charcoal samples are indicated (DHS 1959:264-265) to come from "levels which belong stratigraphically to Phase I." These five samples are reviewed here in order of lessening age, followed by review of the remaining four samples.

SAMPLE M-535. "Charcoal from Phase I water-sorted floors at north-east corner of Southwest Platform." 1154 - 300 B.C. (1454 - 854 B.C.) The location of the sample from "Water-sorted" floors is indicated in Figure 26 of the 1959 publication (DHS). The text (DHS 1959:101) merely notes that this "Water-sorted" floor series "contained considerable amounts of charcoal" at the point where M-535 was recovered. One gathers that the charcoal was not concentrated but rather scattered as part of the floor matrices. Three levels or strata are indicated in the floor series here (DHS 1959:Fig. 26). The charcoal presumably comes from one, two, or three levels. One cannot be sure. These three levels, presumably true floors, may have spanned a considerable amount of time, each with complex but unknown architectural relationships (through run-under abutment, and/or "fusion"). The charcoal was deposited in the course of laying these floors; the origin of the charcoal is moot. It should be evident however that in the absence of evidence of burning in the spot, charcoal must owe its presence to redeposition. Deposition as part of the floor or floors is at least secondary. The charcoal of M-535 surely comes from some other place and thus time. The death and burning of the material(s) responsible for the charcoal antedates the ultimate deposition of the charcoal (here, in the "Water-sorted" floor series). We have an early limit "spread," 1454 - 854 B.C.

The final deposition of the M-535 charcoal was during Phase I. The derivation or source of the charcoal is another matter. It could have derived from activity (cutting, burning, dumping, etc.) essentially current with the laying of the floor series or from activity significantly earlier, that is Pre-Phase I. In either case, we of course have no control on the age of the wood (assuming that it was this that provided the charcoal) at the time of its cutting. Nor do we have control on how long a substance like wood was retained before being burned and then, or later, deposited.

A proper interpretation of the radiocarbon result would seem to be one that associates it with Pre-Phase I or Phase I La Venta occupation. Since the possibility exists that the sample was gathered unselectively from two or three sequent "Water-sorted" levels, there is a good chance the result is an average of many uncontrollable factors. As in all Carbon-14 results, the product must be handled in terms of the fact that there are two out of three chances that the true age of the sample lies within the given 1-sigma age spread. But in a particular case, such as this, longer odds might actually be more realistic.

SAMPLE M-529. "Charcoal from Phase I stage at midpoint of Northeast Platform in vicinity of Offering No. 15. Date may or may not refer to time of offering, but was collected to indicate age of Phase I platform fill." 904 + 300 B.C. (1204 - 604 B.C.) The evaluation of this sample, just quoted, is peculiar and becomes increasingly baffling as the reader tries to discover where the sample comes from and what it is that was supposed to be dated.

Offering No. 15, referred to above, is listed as a bowl "associated" with a "considerable amount of charcoal"; also "it is considered possible that the vessel may have contained, or may have been inverted over, charred remnants of some burned organic offering" (DHS 1959:190). This is the only reference throughout the text to what might be M-529 beyond that given in the initial quotation in this section. The reader is left to assume that the

charcoal, in or under the vessel, was in fact that which supplied the M-529 sample. Matters become worse when one reads that Offering No. 15 pertains to a "Phase I(?)." Moreover, why does the resulting C14 date more likely "indicate age of Phase I platform fill" rather than the time of making the offering?

Following the Offering No. 15 clue, the only one at hand, one discovers (DHS 1959:189) that the offering came from "directly under Offering 6." Turning to the plan of the offerings found in the Northeast Platform (DHS 1959:Fig. 18), Offering No. 6 is shown about one foot east of Offering No. 15. The section (DHS 1959:Fig. 18) shows Offering No. 15 above and to the side of Offering No. 6, not directly under Offering No. 6, as stated. Superimposition of offerings could not have occurred if the plan and section are correct. One reads on and discovers that Offering No. 6 has been assigned to Phase III because it occurred within a pit cut down into the first platform at this locus (cf. our Figs. 1, 2, N.E. Plat: Unit A) in the course of laying fill for the Phase III platform here (N.E. Plat: Unit C). Turning again to the excavators' Figure 18, we find that Offering No. 15 ("Phase I[?]") is also shown at the bottom of this same pit. Nothing in text or caption states that Offering No. 15 was not, as depicted in section, within the limits of the pit, purportedly Phase III.

For purposes of trying to clarify matters, we momentarily assume that M-529 was proximate to the Offering No. 15 bowl. One cannot take it for granted that the charcoal and bowl were simultaneous, ceremonially related deposits, or a single offering. The excavators' evaluation of the sample makes the point that the date pertains to the construction date of the "Phase I" platform rather than to the offering. Since the noted pit penetrates this platform fill from a Phase III feature above, it seems likely that the authors were trying to intimate that the charcoal was temporally unassociated with the offering bowl, that the charcoal came from beneath the bowl but below the lowest limits of the pit. The fact that the text and diagrams are confused on the relationships of Offerings No. 5 and No. 6, as well as on whether the charcoal was in the bowl (No. 15) or under it, allows a number of possibilities for the deposition of the charcoal. If the sample was run with the intention of dating Phase I, the sample must have been deposited outside the pit. As indicated in our section on small offerings, the bowl comprising Offering No. 15 cannot have occurred in this same pit if its dubious date of "Phase I(?)" is to have any validity. Whether or not such reasoning physically and temporally associates the deposition of both bowl and charcoal is too much to contend with here.

As regards derivation of the sample, we have no way of knowing from where in space and time it came. If found in direct association with the Offering No. 15 bowl, the sample could derive from recently killed and burned short-lived substance(s). If charcoal so derived truly occurred within Phase I fill, it would be hard to imagine a better sample to submit. But we can be sure of nothing, not even the form or layout of the charcoal providing M-529. With nothing published to the contrary, one could visualize the charcoal as a concentrated but incidental element within Phase I fill. It could derive from Pre-Phase I activities. But, as emphasized, nothing occurs in print to assure one that charcoal and/or offering bowl, above or below Offering No. 6, did not occur within the pit. Finally, in discussing Offering No. 6 (Burials and Small Dedicatory Offerings) below, the point is made that the pit could have originated early in Phase IV, rather than the published Phase III.

Sample M-529 is problematic as to its ultimate provenience, deposition dating, and original source or derivation. The published record is so contradictory as to suggest considering that the C14 result has no reliable meaning. However, the excavators have emphasized on a number of occasions that the date is meaningful, that it "indicates the age of Phase I platform fill." (Incidentally one might question that this platform, i.e. N.E. Plat: Unit A in Figs. 1, 2 is Phase I; while surely used during Phase I, it was built prior to the laying of the "Water-sorted" floor series; the time interval however is moot.) We have emphasized that this can only be so if the charcoal is of essentially the same age as the act of filling, that is of constructing the Phase I Northeast Platform. To be so, the substance ultimately providing M-529 must have died at or close to the time of construction. The charcoal must be directly associated with the fill. It is the phasable act of "filling," not "platform fill" that is being allegedly dated here. To repeat, if the excavators were correct in their assessment of what was being dated (beyond the charcoal itself), the sample by necessity occurred below or beyond the intrusive pit, regardless of what their text and figures elsewhere show or imply.

For better or for worse, our interpretation of M-529 is that the sample either dates Phase I, or subsequent activities of no later date than the laying of the "red clay cap," i.e. Phase IV. It is this cap that provides the only sure seal for the pit in which the sample may have been found. If in the pit and if from currently killed material, it follows that the charcoal does in fact date the act of its deposition and thus the digging of the pit. In this case, since the pit penetrated a Phase I construction, the resulting date is an upper limit one beyond which Phase I could not have persisted. The result also serves as a lower limit date for the deposition of the Phase IV "red clay cap."

SAMPLE M-534. "Charcoal from depth of 120 inches below center of Northwest Platform. This sample is from fill layer underlying and contemporaneous with Phase I floors elsewhere in the Court area." 714 ± 300 B.C. (1014 - 414 B.C.). The sample is shown to have been collected from an "heavy olive clay" level about 4 feet below the "Water-sorted" floor series (DHS 1959:Fig. 21). "Considerable charcoal" occurred in this stratum. In the same layer were floor fragments "which must have been secured from some structure existing locally" (DHS 1959:67).

The charcoal can be inferred to have been incidentally present within the olive clay. This same stratum contains residue of necessarily prior construction. Both floor fragments and charcoal presumably derived from earlier activities than the activity responsible for the deposition of the clay matrix. Lying some four feet beneath the "Water-sorted" floor series, can the olive stratum be validly assumed to have been laid in anticipation of laying the first floor of the series? We think not. In either case, the charcoal cannot be assumed to have been deliberately placed in the stratum. It is likely that this charcoal was relatively old at the time of depositing the clay and had become mixed with the clay by pure chance.

The C14 result is better interpreted as pertaining to a time of La Venta occupation significantly earlier than the laying of the Phase I "Water-sorted" floor series and all preparatory work. What was dated was unspecifi-

able Pre-Phase I occupation. It is assumed that the charcoal is charcoal because of human rather than other agencies (lightning, forest fire, etc.).

SAMPLE M-532. "Charcoal from earliest (Phase I) construction layers in Mound A-2 collected from the j-3 and j-5 components." 694 + 300 B.C. (994 - 394 B.C.). The "j-3" component is indicated in our Figure 1 as Md. A-2: Unit A. The "j-5" component is the level abutting this Unit A (i.e. abutting "j-3"). As indicated, the sample is said to come from these two features. Yet, when the excavation section is consulted (DHS 1959:Fig. 10), M-532 is shown as having come from the "j-3" platform only (our Unit A). If one trusts the text rather than the section, the fact is that the sample is from two temporally distinct contexts inasmuch as the "j-5" level abuts, secondarily, the "j-3" platform. Thus the collected sample is mixed; it has different dates of deposition and in terms of derivation the sample is inherently uncontrollable. The charcoal was incidentally rather than deliberately part of the "j-3" or "j-3 + j-5" fills.

The fill of the "j-3" platform (our Md. A-2: Unit A) contained not only charcoal but "fragments of flooring levels which had been dug up and mixed in as part of the fill. . . They must have come from some earlier structure or structures surfaced with colored floors, but where these earlier structures were is quite unknown" (DHS 1959:37). While this observation almost suggests that the demolition material was deliberately placed in the fill used in "j-3," one doubts that the excavators intended this to be the case. Rather, it seems plausible that both charcoal and demolished old floors were incidentally present in dumped material brought here as fill. If the fragments come from admittedly old construction, the charcoal must also derive from old activity.

From the preceding, it is evident that the charcoal comes from material and activity "significantly" earlier than the time or times of its deposition. Again, the reader cannot be sure whether it was deposited only in "j-3" or "j-3 + j-5" (DHS 1959:37, footnote 5, 264, Fig. 10). As regards these two components, "j-5" abutting "j-3," is not claimed by the excavators to be a floor, let alone "Water-sorted." This feature is interpreted as a series of fill layers set, if not in Phase I, then as an "initial activity of the Phase II period" (DHS 1959:44, also 38). But the report equivocates on this: "Our reason for assigning [the "j-5" fill layers] to Phase I is that they appear to be, insofar as level is concerned, either a part of, or a local equivalent to, the "Water-sorted" floors found elsewhere in the A-1 complex" (DHS 1959:44). If provably contemporary with "Water-sorted" floors, the "j-5" layers would be Phase I. But where this leaves the Phase II possibility, just quoted, is difficult to say. Turning to the "j-3" platform, abutted by "j-5," we read (DHS 1959:44) that it belongs to Phase I because the floor fragments in its hearting are from "Pre-Phase I." This deduction might be better reversed to read that the floor fragments are Pre-Phase I because the "j-3" platform was demonstrably Phase I. But the latter was not convincingly demonstrated. As was discussed in connection with floor and platform sequences (above), the excavators emphasized the "Water-sorted" floor series in delineating Phase I. But a platform abutted by this series or sustained by this series was also assigned to Phase I. If we accept common level and one would suppose "limited possibilities," as means of

linking "Water-sorted" and the "j-5" levels, then a Phase I feature still abuts "j-3," the platform, a pre-"Water-sorted 'j-5' Phase I" feature.

Where did the M-532 sample come from in excavation? One cannot be sure from the information in print. What was the sample intended to date? We are told Phase I, but discover on careful reading that the excavators might have meant anything local from Pre-Phase I to early Phase II. Finally, the original source of the sample does seem to antedate its deposition which, as indicated, could have occurred at two points in time.

Despite the many variables here, the chances seem good that the C14 result for M-532 sample pertains to Pre-Phase I (if from "j-3") and more certainly to activity no later than the conclusion of Phase I (if from "j-3 + j-5").

SAMPLE M-531. "Charcoal from leveling fill for Phase I platform in Mound A-2." 604 + 300 B.C. (904 - 304 B.C.). "This sample immediately predates stratigraphically Sample M-532" (DHS 1959:264). The M-531 charcoal was deposited in fill laid down before the fill or fills yielding M-532, just discussed.

The M-531 charcoal was not found in a lens or hearth, but was scattered uniformly throughout the sandy fill (DHS 1959:37). The charcoal was therefore almost certainly within the sandy material when it was dug or removed from some other spot to be spread in the Mound A-2 locus as fill. The formally stated evaluation of this sample (above) notes that the fill layer (DHS 1959:Fig. 10, "j-2") was for purposes of leveling an area on which a Phase I platform was to be built. What evidence exists to support this interpretation? The "j-2" level or "fill" could have been deposited some time before the platform was even planned. This platform is the "j-3" feature that provided the whole or part of Sample M-532, just discussed. The conclusion was that the "j-3" platform could be considered "Pre-Phase I" rather than "Phase I."

Since Sample M-531 appears to be Pre-Phase I in terms of both deposition and derivation, it follows that the C14 result refers to Pre-Phase I unspecifiable activity. The sample also supplies a lower limit date for all constructional and ceremonial activity occurring in connection with Mound A-2, the central north structure of the La Venta Complex A.

SAMPLE M-530. One sample, said to pertain to Phase II, was submitted. M-530 was provided with the following specifics: "Charcoal from bottom of Phase II pit 68 inches below surface of Northwest Platform." 804 + 300 B.C. (1104 - 504 B.C.). The bottom of this pit ("No. 3," in DHS 1959:Fig. 21) consisted of a lens of charcoal. Just above and within the pit were two adjacent vessels, Offerings Nos. 18 and 19. Judging from the section it seems likely that the charcoal and pottery vessels comprised a single intrusive offering. "There is no question but that [the vessels] were deliberately placed in the pit before it was entirely filled. . ." (DHS 1959:190-191). If the pit is Phase II, it is peculiar to find that the pit-associated vessels are assigned to "Phase II (?)" (DHS 1959:190-191). This is only one discrepancy to be contended with in attempting to assess what M-530 means.

Pit No. 3 is shown in section (DHS 1959:Fig. 21) as cut down into an earlier pit, Pit No. 2. The latter had penetrated the "Water-sorted" floor series underlying the mound platform series. Both pits are thus necessarily later in time than "Water-sorted" which is the primary marker of Phase I. The section shows a level feature, simply labeled "floors," about two feet above the "Water-sorted" level. If these "floors" were not originally penetrated by the older Pit No. 2, they were certainly cut by the later Pit No. 3 containing M-530 and the offerings. To what do these "floors" pertain? Since the section (DHS 1959:Fig. 21) illustrates conditions close to the mound center, it is possible that the "floors" are the successive top surfaces of a platform construction. The presence of "Water-sorted" here is expectable inasmuch as this series often ran-under and sustained the first platforms built at various loci (our Fig. 1). By comparing the differently scaled sections in the excavators' Figures 20 and 21, one arrives at the possibility that these "floors" correspond in essential level with the surface of the early platform built on the Phase I "Water-sorted" series (DHS 1959:cf. Fig. 20, 1; equivalent to N.W. Plat: Unit B in our Figs. 1, 2). However, floor thickness and fill descriptions do not match in the roughly in-line but discontinuous sections (DHS 1959:Figs. 20, 21). If these discrepancies are arbitrarily disregarded, the conclusion is reached that the crucial Pit No. 3 penetrated a platform built on and over nothing but the "Water-sorted" floor series.

This platform was examined at length in our discussion of Construction Phases (above). Although built on the Phase I floor series it was assigned to Phase II, the excavators having concluded that immediately following its construction the first of the Phase II "White sandy" floor series was laid up to it and over the "Water-sorted" series. Our conclusion was that the record was not sufficiently clear on this point to preclude a Phase I date for N.W. Plat: Unit B, though the platform in this case surely continued in use during the laying of the entire Phase II floor series. A Phase I rather than Phase II assignment for this the original Unit B platform might be supported by the following: (1) The Northwest Platform appears to have been sufficiently trenched to have disclosed some sign of any earlier platform built on "Water-sorted" and thus unambiguously Phase I (DHS 1959:Fig. 19); (2) Since no such platform appeared, it seems unlikely that the Northwest Platform locus would have been featureless during the entire span of Phase I, keeping in mind that a platform did exist at the Northeast Platform locus during this span (cf. our Fig. 2); (3) It follows that the only construction that could have filled at least a part of this Phase I interval in the Northwest Platform locus was the Unit B platform; (4) This platform necessarily would have been built during Phase I some time after its inception. While this argument seems logical it very likely is specious. For one, we cannot be sure that the Unit B platform is the one into which Pit No. 3 was intruded. If it was truly Unit B, we only make the point that consideration of all possibilities and published data does permit limited openness in the matter of phasing. It seems likely that some platform, probably Unit B, of either Phase I or Phase II construction date was disturbed by an intrusive pit, the origin of which was well above the platform surface. If the platform was built in Phase II times, it follows that the pit and the deposition of its contents belong to Post-Phase II times. This conclusion then is in disagreement with the "official" Phase II attribution of the pit (DHS 1959: 264; 1957:72; Crane and Griffin 1958:7).

Sample M-530, deposited unquestionably later than the Phase I "Water-sorted" floors, could not have been placed later than the laying of the Phase IV "Red clay cap" (DHS 1959:Fig. 21, b). These are the outside depositional limits for this most important sample. As regards derivation of the sample, the excavators speculate that the "charcoal may represent evidence of burned offerings (such as copal, feathers, or the like) in the bottom of the pit" (DHS 1959:68). Could it not be determined whether the "charcoal" was of wood? Do feathers, copal and the like yield charcoal in the common sense of the word? Whatever it was that was burned, was it burned within the pit? Such considerations are critical when trying to establish whether a time interval occurred between the death of the substance (the feature being truly dated) and its burning, as well as between burning and ultimate deposition in the intrusive Pit No. 3.

Sample M-530 was inherently the best sample found in Phase I to Phase IV contexts. It was intentionally deposited where found. It cannot have been deposited earlier than Phase I nor later than Phase IV. Unfortunately the record does not support the published statement (or implication) that the C14 result applies to Phase II alone. While we can be fairly specific as to the "phase date spread" of deposition of the charcoal (i.e. Phase I-Phase IV), it is impossible to gauge the time interval between substance death and deposition as charcoal. Assuming that this interval was insignificant, the C14 result can be said to apply to unspecifiable human activity somewhere in time between Phase I (probably late Phase I as the charcoal was set later than the building of an early platform) and Phase IV (early in Phase IV, that is just prior to laying the "Red clay cap").

Phase IV of Complex A is allegedly controlled in time by two samples of charcoal recovered from what are believed to be Post-Phase IV contexts.

SAMPLE M-533. "Charcoal from burned area lying on disturbed Phase IV red clay surface just west of limestone slab paving near Northwest Entryway. Probably refers to early Post-Complex A activity of people following abandonment of site by builders" (DHS 1959:265, 78). 174 ± 300 B.C. (474 B.C. - A.D. 126). While the text (DHS 1959:267) states that the sample was "deposited shortly after the drift sand began to accumulate without interruption," the fact is that the section showing the location of M-533 (DHS 1959:Fig. 24) shows a "heavy bed of charcoal of undetermined extent to underlie the drift sand." The "red clay cap" surface had been "burned to a brick orange from the action of the open fire" (DHS 1959:77). In short, nothing in the section nor in the excavation portion of the text supports the observation elsewhere that the "drift sands" had already begun to accumulate by the time of the fire.

This point is important if one is concerned with when in local sequence the fire occurred. The laying of the enigmatic "Red clay cap" over the Complex is the primary marker of Phase IV. Ceremonial activities that are believed to have immediately preceded the laying of the "cap" are also attributed to Phase IV. If preliminary offertory activity and construction are subsumed by Phase IV, surely occupation of the architectural features composed of red clay must be allowed for. If construction and use are not to be distinguished by sequent phases, it follows that a La Venta construction phase must comprehend occupation even though no structural renovation

can be shown to have occurred within the phase, as is the case in Phase IV. Although admittedly a fine point, the possibility exists that the charcoal bed, of undetermined extent, was the result of late or terminal Phase IV activity.

A more significant inquiry is one that questions the source of the charcoal. We assume that the charcoal derives from wood. May not late La Venta occupants have availed themselves of structural wooden members of Phase IV or earlier use and installation dates? We hesitate here to introduce relevant but unpublished data. Nevertheless, there is at least one instance at Tikal of a Post-Classic hearth having been made on vault debris within a room of an (Early) Classic temple; the radiocarbon result makes sense only if the submitted charcoal from the hearth derived from by then ancient lintel or vault beams that someone took advantage of for ready fuel (Coe, Shook and Satterthwaite 1961:30, for examples of 19th Century burning of Classic wooden beams). It is not inconceivable that a similar incident was responsible for the charcoal yielding La Venta Sample M-533. In this not impossible case (assuming that wood was used in La Venta construction), the C14 date would apply to the cutting of the beam or beams, the burning of which provided the charcoal (again assuming this was wood charcoal and not feathers or copal; cf. Sample 530). All reasonable possibilities should enter into the evaluation of the La Venta C14 results.

SAMPLE M-528. "Charcoal from lower margin of Post-Phase IV wind-blown sands in vicinity of Northeast Entryway. This is definitely of Post-Complex A date marking a time immediately following abandonment of the site by the Phase IV occupants." 444 ± 250 B.C. (694 - 194 B.C.). In the midst of this quoted description the reader is referred to Figure 24 (DHS 1959). Figure 24 shows a charcoal layer. On page 77, footnote, one discovers that this is not the source of M-528, but of M-533 (just discussed). The quoted text is the only clue as to the source of M-528 (one doubts that M-528 and M-533 would have been collected from the same charcoal deposit without the text advising so). Inferentially, there were two superficially located charcoal deposits in the area of the Northeast Entryway. In discussing M-533 the point was made that the relationship of its location to the drift sands was by no means clear from the text. Was M-528 at a higher level than M-533 and truly within the "lower margin" of the drift sand? Evidently it was, according to the "official" statement as to provenience, although the advertised section (in Fig. 24) does nothing to support the published provenience of the sample. The excavators estimate (DHS 1959:267) that both samples were not deposited until about a century after the end of Phase IV.

Granting that the M-528 charcoal was deposited at a time when the first sands were being blown over the abandoned site, there is still the question of what it was that was being burned (we are not told that this was a hearth or an in situ burning). Again, it might be allowed that the "depre-dators" of Post-Phase IV took advantage of still available structural wood of Phase IV or earlier cutting and installation dates.

Both Samples M-528 and M-533 might be interpreted as follows: if they derive from short-lived material killed or cut and burned close in time to the times of their deposition, they provide upper limit dates later than

which Phase IV "classic" occupation probably did not extend. If depositions of the samples are certain in terms of sequence of events, but sources of the samples are problematical, the C14 dates provide a lower limit earlier than which terminal Phase IV and/or Post-Phase IV activities probably could not have occurred. Here, "probably" refers to the two-out-of-three chance factor operating in usual C14 results (at 1-sigma). When chance and numerous basically uncontrollable "ifs" combine as they do here, what do these two C14 dates mean? Perhaps what the excavators believe them to mean. Perhaps nothing identifiable.

SAMPLE M-536. The last of the La Venta radiocarbon series comes "from bottom of trench cut into the North Platform of the Great Pyramid. Charcoal-bearing level consisted of white sands mixed with La Venta Coarse Paste Buff Ware and Coarse Paste Brown Ware sherds. Phase attribution of this layer is unknown since we were unable to correlate the Pyramid construction layers with those in the Ceremonial Court" (DHS 1959:265). 574 ± 300 B.C. (874 - 274 B.C.). Elsewhere (Crane and Griffin 1958:7) is the observation that this sample "Should give the date of the early (perhaps the initial) construction of the Pyramid." This contrasts with the following statement: ". . . it is our impression that the trench was excavated into what may be considered the outermost shell of the Pyramid, that is to say a late stage of enlargement rather than the hearting of the original structure" (DHS 1959:266-267). This "impression" evidently supersedes the prior one as to what it was that was being dated.

The charcoal is said to be of wood and to have been apparently scattered rather than concentrated as an offering in the sand stratum. But did the charcoal enter the sand randomly? The sherds are said to have been "thrown into [the sand] deliberately, perhaps as a binder, for the sand was far too clean to have come from an occupation or refuse zone" (DHS 1959:119). By the same argument, the wood charcoal also entered the sand as "binder."

It seems clear that the sand stratum was laid down before the final stage of Pyramid construction, if in fact the Pyramid grew by "construction phases." If the sherd and charcoal were provable, deliberate inclusions in the pristine sand, one would have to assume that both had a common temporal origin for the C14 result to be meaningful. The associations of Pyramid, sand stratum, sherds and charcoal would have to be shown to be significant ones before the C14 date could be considered relevant to anything more than the death of wood. The radiocarbon result of course can be considered as a lower limit earlier than which the whole or some portion of the Pyramid probably could not have been built. Why the sample was submitted is difficult to understand.

Summary and Re-Interpretation of Dates

The nine samples have been reviewed with attention to published and precise provenience, deposition in the sequence, known or possible derivation, and what it is to which each C14 date properly and most probably pertains. While this critique has at times reached the point of hair-splitting, we feel that such is warranted by the major role that the allegedly well-dated La Venta Complex A plays in current Mesoamerican reconstructions.

The following tabulation summarizes contrasting views as to what was dated by the nine samples:

<u>Sample</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Original Interpretation</u> (DHS 1959:264-267, Fig. 79)	<u>Revised Interpretation</u>
M-535	1454 - 854 B.C.	Dates Phase I floor series	Dates Pre-Phase I, or Phase I
M-529	1204 - 604 B.C.	Dates Phase I platform fill	Dates Phase I, or dates Phase II-IV (prior to red clay cap)
M-534	1014 - 414 B.C.	Dates Phase I floor series and underlying fill	Dates Pre-Phase I
M-532	994 - 394 B.C.	Dates Phase I construction layers	Good chance that it dates Pre-Phase I or Phase I
M-531	904 - 304 B.C.	Dates Phase I fill	Dates Pre-Phase I
M-530	1104 - 504 B.C.	Dates Phase II pit	Dates late Phase I to early Phase IV (prior to red clay cap)
M-533	474 B.C. - A.D. 126	Probably dates Post-Phase IV activity	Could date Post-Phase IV activity, or terminal Phase IV occupation, or Phase IV or Pre-Phase IV construction
M-528	694 - 194 B.C.	Definitely dates Post-Phase IV activity	Could date Post-Phase IV activity, or Phase IV or Pre-Phase IV construction
M-536	874 - 274 B.C.	Might date a Phase III or IV activity but no proof	Dates wood that provided sample

Six of the La Venta samples comprise charcoal found in construction fills; three (M-530, M-533, M-528) consist of charcoal probably from in situ burning. Each sample has been reviewed from the standpoints of its phase assignment, associations, manner of final deposition, and original source.

It would be well to reiterate the obvious, that in each case it is the organic source of the charcoal that has been primarily dated. We assume, as did the excavators, that it has been reliably dated. Each charcoal sample, as must be granted, can have multiple sources. A tree is cut; wood from it immediately or eventually provides a part or the whole of the carbonized sample submitted for analysis. We do not know how many organic sources a sample

may have, nor the proportion of those sources represented in the sample. If entirely wood charcoal, we do not know how many trees may have provided the sample. Another unknown is the point of origin of wood within a tree; therefore, there is no way of gauging "post-sample growth" (Satterthwaite and Ralph 1960:167), by which is meant the growth-time interval between the "death" of the sample source and "death" of the whole tree. Post-sample growth error, though usually unreckonable, must be taken into account in interpretation. The greater the life-span of the sample source (tree, etc.), the greater the potential for significant post-sample growth error. While it is possible to have wood charcoal identified as to contributing genera (or genus, if the sample is homogenous), there appears to be little reliable data on the differing life spans of tropical trees. In an attempt to minimize post-sample growth error, one would exclude the larger pieces of charcoal in a C14 sample and submit only the smallest pieces in the hope that the smaller ones derive from the youngest growth of the tree or trees.

Post-sample growth ("PSG") error is not the only factor to be considered. One may not be able to control or specify the intervals between cutting and carbonization and between carbonization and final deposition of the material comprising the charcoal sample. This total interval is here termed the Placement History ("PH") of the sample. We ought also to recognize an "X" that represents the average of the death-dates of the original organic materials comprising the sample; if the sample is homogenous material of a single death-date, "X" represents that date. In usual C14 interpretations there are two out of three chances that X falls within the 1-sigma date-spread yielded by analysis of the sample.

To take one example, M-534, with a date of 1014 - 414 B.C., and concluded after review to pertain to Pre-Phase I activities: Since we are concerned with dating Phase I, it follows that this subsequent phase is interpretatively at least post-X within the given spread. But unless it can be proved that PSG and PH are insignificant, it is necessary to conclude that Phase I is younger than X by the time values of PSG and PH. The addition to X of the sum of PSG and PH increases the chance that Phase I came into being no earlier than a date closer to 414 B.C. than to 1014 B.C. If X in fact coincides with 414 B.C., the inception of Phase I occurred subsequent to 414 B.C. by the amount of time represented by PSG and PH. If X coincides with 1014 B.C., these same two values serve to position the inception date of Phase I as younger than 1014 B.C. The more environmentally and culturally complex the site, and the more intensive its construction, demolition, and refurbishing, the more the inherent errors of PSG and PH, as well as X as a potential average, must be taken into account.

This same Sample M-534 more directly purports to date Pre-Phase I "activities." The question is whether this is very meaningful. What is meant is that organic material was acquired probably through human agency from one or more sources of the same or different death-dates prior to the date of the laying of the first "Water-sorted" floor, an event initiating Phase I. Placement History (PH) has no bearing here. With this one result, we are by no means assured that La Venta was occupied during the date-spread. The probability is merely good that some or all of the organic material ultimately providing M-534 was alive at a point or points within the spread.

In order to date Phase I, the excavators averaged five C14 results (M-535, M-529, M-534, M-532, M-531) concluded to pertain to this phase, with a result of 948 - 680 B.C. ($814 + 134$ B.C.). The date 800 B.C. was selected in round-number fashion for Phase I La Venta construction (DHS 1959:265).

In order to date Phase I, specifically the laying of the "Water-sorted" floor series, revised interpretation requires consideration (above) of Samples M-534 and M-531 which appear to pertain directly to Pre-Phase I. The maximum spread of these two samples is 1014 - 304 B.C. The chances are good that the first Phase I floor postdates X, occurring within this date-spread, by the amount of PSG and PH. Assuming that we are not averaging horses and apples, we note that the average of M-534 and M-531 is $659 + 212$, that is 871 - 447 B.C. While averaging reduces the tolerance, we are not sure that it here effectively increases probability.

Phase II is theoretically controlled by Samples M-535, M-534, M-532, and M-531 (Pre-Phase I, and Pre-Phase I or Phase I). The maximum spread of these samples is 1454 - 304 B.C. It is maximum spread that we believe to be meaningful. If averaged, the result is $792 + 150$, or 942 - 642 B.C. Phase II may be concluded to have begun after X within either spread by the amount of PSG and PH. When put in these terms it is obvious that we have a relative dating for Phase II, but no date.

Sample M-530 is probably the best sample of the nine in that the charcoal was deposited after laying the "Water-sorted" series and prior to the deposition of the "Red clay cap." If the charcoal was truly made up of material in which PSG and PH were of insignificant time, there is a good probability that charcoal and two pottery vessels were cached at some point in the spread 1104 - 504 B.C. The vessels were made earlier than that point, but by how much time is unknown. The "Red clay cap" may be said to have been post-X within this spread.

Samples M-533 and M-528 might also have bearing on when this same "Red clay cap" was laid. The date-spread maximums of the combined samples is 694 B.C. - A.D. 126. The cap was possibly (or probably, or surely, depending on one's point of view) laid earlier than X within this date-spread, plus PSG plus PH. The sum of PSG and PH, although incalculable, theoretically allows X+PSG+PH to be post-A.D. 126. If PSG and/or PH are of considerable time values, as they well could be in these samples, the true upper limit date for the cap and Phase IV cannot fall at 694 B.C. If the two samples are averaged (with no idea of what we are really averaging) the same variables operate within the date-spread of 504 - 114 B.C. ($309 + 195$).

Sample M-529 also relates to the deposition of the "Red clay cap" in that the sample was associated with construction surely no later than the cap. Thus, laying of cap = post-X within spread 1204 - 604 B.C. + PSG+PH.

Finally, Sample M-536 and the result of its analysis have no recognizable pertinency.

The excavators concluded that the "radiocarbon dates from La Venta are interpreted . . . as indicating that Complex A was constructed and used during approximately the period 800 B.C. to 400 B.C." (DHS 1959:267).

Reassessment of the La Venta C14 dates provides no basis for clear-cut conclusions beyond one that emphasizes ambiguousness of sample association and enormous tolerance in each result. Despite these serious shortcomings, a truly useful and safe conclusion does emerge, namely, that construction occurred at La Venta during the first millenium B.C., if not earlier and later. Review, reassignment, attention to "PSG" and like factors, and, even on occasion hair-splitting, interestingly do not invalidate the commonly trusted 800 to 400 B.C. time span for Phases I to IV in Complex A. On the other hand, we find nothing within the La Venta C14 dates to support this published conclusion. The tolerances are simply too excessive. Averaging of results, while reducing the tolerance, raises the problem of whether like data are being averaged. Averaging also begs the question of what it is that the result is supposed to illustrate. All in all, the nine La Venta dates barely control anything of any substance. A variety of fascinating but eventually pointless games can be played with them.

Massive Offerings and Mosaic Pavements

A notable feature uncovered during the La Venta work was the presence of huge, squarish pits intruded into the Court and/or associated platform-type constructions. Five such pits were located. Three of these were defined as "Massive Offerings," ("M.O." in our Fig. 1), the term applying in two cases (Nos. 1, 3) to the multi-layered deposit of worked blocks of serpentine, and in the third (No. 2) to a single layer of the same objects. Only M.O. 1 underlay an example of the La Venta serpentine mosaic pavements. Oddly, this pavement was not brought into the established series of numbered "Pavements." Two mosaics, Pavements Nos. 1 and 2 ("pvmt." in Fig. 1), had been found previously (1945). Pvmt. 2 was exposed but not removed to check the possibility of layers of serpentine blocks beneath it. What appears to have been shallow probing revealed that Pvmt. 1 overlay a "stone rubble and earth foundation" (Drucker 1952; Figs. 18, 19). This "rubble" was later (DHS 1959:128) considered to be "similar to or identical" with the 1955 examples of layered blocks of serpentine.

Any reader of the La Venta reports is bound to be confused as to what constituted a "Massive Offering." Only the three 1955 features were so defined. The diagnostics of this category are indicated to be "large deep pits" containing what are interpreted as offerings consisting of a "very great quantity of stone" (DHS 1955:128). The authors never make clear whether the conventionalized jaguar(?) serpentine mosaics are to be considered as primary or supplementary evidence of such offerings. The same is true of a "cruciform cache" of celts, which, in four instances, occurred in the fill overlying the mosaic or layered blocks (DHS 1959:129).

The following tabulation helps to illustrate the components and associations of these five remarkable features:

Feature	Assigned Phase	Mosaic Mask	Underlying stone layer		Cruciform Celt cache Offering
			Many	Single	
M.O. 1	II	X	X	-	X(1942-E)
M.O. 2	IV	-	-	X	X(1942-C)
M.O. 3	III	-	X	-	X(10)
Pvmt. 1	II	X	X?	-	X(1943-E)
Pvmt. 2	IV?	X	?	?	Robbed?

The data in this table are to be kept in mind when evaluating various positive statements and speculations regarding the role of "massive offerings" at La Venta. For instance, Heizer (1959:180) writes that "installation of a massive offering [of single or multi-layered 'pavements' of dressed rectangular blocks of green serpentine] marked the beginning of each of the four construction phases. The strong suggestion exists that these renovations are cyclic and presumably are associated with a calendar system. Our present crude chronology, based on radiocarbon dates, would indicate a periodicity of about 100 years" (see also Heizer 1960:219-220 for more elaborate use of cycles within the purported 400 years of La Venta construction). Elsewhere (DHS 1959:299), one reads that the "known practice of the builders of the La Venta site in making a massive offering at the beginning of each phase does suggest an element of periodicity for the mosaic masks. . ." The authors (DHS 1959:299) suggest that further excavation would reveal two new masks to fill the Phase I, III, and IV gaps, assuming that Pavement No. 2, now unassignable, could fill one of the three gaps on further investigation. They further suggest (DHS 1959:46) that serpentine blocks in two ancient trenches on the north and south sides of the Phase III M.O. 3 stem from a disturbed and subsequently redeposited (in M.O. 3) postulated Phase I Massive Offering.

Reference to our Figure 1 and preceding table does not verify the quoted statements that each construction phase was initiated by the placement of "massive offerings," by which the excavators apparently mean only multi- or single layered pavements of serpentine blocks (but contrast with given components of M.O. 1, p. 128). No such offering can as yet be assigned to Phase I. Two (M.O. 1 and Pvmt. 1, the latter a mosaic mask which very likely overlies a multi-layered deposit) are assigned to Phase II on the assumption that the Southwest Platform, the source of M.O. 1, paralleled in time and detail the development of the incompletely investigated Southeast Platform, beneath which Pvmt. 1 was found. The assumption of bisymmetry is not borne out in the case of the Northeast and Northwest Platforms (our Figs. 1, 2). A minor point: in the description of its excavation, M.O. 1 is assigned to a Phase IIa, not to II. In any case, the excavators might have emphasized, while generalizing, that on occasion a phase might have been initiated by a double or dual offering.

"Massive Offering," a term devised for the La Venta data, needs redefinition. The excavators apply it in a most inconsistent manner. It should be evident that five massive offerings have been found to date and that in each case a large, relatively deep pit had been dug to receive the material. There are varieties of offertory content, thus varieties of "massive offering." Probably all mosaic masks overlie multi-layered serpentine blocks.

Non-mosaic offerings consisted of either a single layer of blocks or many layers. Probably all varieties were directly associated with "supplementary" offerings of celts arranged in a cruciform pattern. That varieties of massive offerings marked, singly or doubly, the beginnings of new phases of construction in Complex A remains to be determined. As has been indicated, the published phasing of Complex A appears to contain a number of non sequiturs. These, plus patently vague application of "Massive Offering," together with questions as to the meaning of the Complex A C14 dates, jointly impair the usefulness of statements that emphasize the cyclical, dedicatory features of such offerings. They could be all that the excavators conclude them to have been but the proof has yet to be presented. The "dedicatory" aspect of cached offerings and tomb-type burials in the context of Mesoamerican ceremonial construction is an important subject. The La Venta massive offerings very likely fall within the scope of this subject. For this reason alone, a cautious assessment of their role or roles at La Venta is needed.

The problem remains of verifying the mosaic pavements as Olmec products. There is no question that M.O. 1 was set just prior to laying the Phase II "White sandy" floor series. As indicated, this is the only surely phased mosaic pavement found at La Venta. As regards stylistic affinity, the point has been made (DHS 1959:93) that this "very highly conventionalized mask of the jaguar . . . incorporated most of the distinctive features repeated in other Olmec representations of this deity." The only distinctive elements cited are the "plumed eyebrows of the typical Olmec Jaguar representation" (DHS 1959:93-94). It strikes us that it requires considerable imagination to see plumed eyebrows within the geometric layout of this or any other La Venta mosaic pavement mask. More important, what is truly Olmec about these three masks? That they represent jaguars in full-face fashion is a conclusion, one suspects, from their failure to impress observers that they are human or reptilian. A constant in all three is the presence of "four open spaces with castellated upper edges [representing] four eyes" (DHS 1959:93). Though not commented upon in the text, a four-eyed jaguar seems pretty unusual, even in Olmec contexts; an analytic study of the components making up Olmec jaguar-monster faces in sculpture fails to record this peculiarity (Drucker 1952: Fig. 58). It is also noteworthy that the orientation of the "muzzle" area is opposite to that in sculptured representation (Drucker 1952:Fig. 58). All in all, a very poor case has been made out that these mosaics, jaguar or not, conform to any known Olmec standard, tradition, or style. They are extraordinary and, being so, ought to be fully analyzed without initial conviction of their Olmec affiliation. Because they might be "early," and because they occur at La Venta do not constitute arguments that they are in fact Olmec.

Burials and Small Dedicatory Offerings

If La Venta was as pivotal as is commonly claimed or implied in the matter of early Mesoamerican development, one would expect that human burials would have been found in association with ceremonial areas and architecture. But, it appears that "Clay platform structures [were] rarely used for burial but often for ritual offerings" (Heizer 1959:179). Stirling (1955:23) however indicates that things were far better than Heizer allows, for he speaks of "lush tombs" and "rich tomb burials" at La Venta. Finally, the mortuary aspect of La Venta is greatly amplified when Heizer (1960:220), in speaking of 400 years of spiritual and temporal power of La Venta priests, sees within

Phase IV times the "ultimate development of class differences evidenced by the burial of high priests [in 'large tombs'] within the ceremonial area" of La Venta.

In hopes of discovering more about these fine tombs, the reader reverts to the La Venta excavation reports. There one reads that the "only burials uncovered at the site of La Venta were those within the tomb excavated in 1942 [i.e. "Tomb A"] (DHS 1959:162). But, incredibly, within the same report (p. 127) there appears the statement: "Distinctive to Phase IV at La Venta are the great tombs represented by Monuments 6, 7, and Feature A-3-a." Monument 6 is discovered to be Tomb B, though Monument 6 refers to the great stone coffer; the coffer has contents confusingly termed Offering 1942-B. Monument 7 turns out not to be a stele or altar but a chamber or construction that, Tomb A, made of basalt columns; its contents were collected as Offering 1942-A. Feature A-3-a is "Tomb C," while Offering 1943-G pertains to its contents.

The fact is that five "rich" features (Tombs A-E) uncovered in the early seasons of excavation were called tombs. The contents of these features were assigned numbers as offerings in the 1959 report. Tombs B, C, D, and E are specifically noted to have been completely devoid of traces of human skeletal material (bone, teeth, etc.) (Drucker 1952:27, 64, 71, 73). Only Tomb A contained such remains. We have treated B-E as "surrogate burials" (below), following an interpretive lead provided by Wedel (in Drucker 1952:64, 73). Although conceivably symbolic of human interment, there is apparently not the slightest proof that bodies were ever placed in Tombs B-E.

As regards Tomb A (Monument 7, Off. 1942-A), human interment was indicated by cinnabar(?) reddened "remains of two bundle burials, each probably containing at least one individual." The skeletal material was confined to a "mass of splinters" tentatively identified as pertaining to juvenile long bones (Drucker 1952:23). One "bundle" yielded deciduous teeth. The fine offerings and association with red pigment suggests to us a repetition of the "surrogate burial" offertory type discussed below. We are unable to find what the reasons were for concluding that these two contiguous deposits at one end of the "tomb" chamber were in fact "bundles" let alone why they were "bundle burials." The presence of human skeletal material in offertory or true non-burial cache contexts is well documented in the Maya area (Coe 1959: 77-78; 1962:498); the teeth and bone fragments in the Tomb A deposits might well have been placed where found as symbolic objects thus not the rotted residue, as assumed in the report, of two funereally buried individuals. We doubt that any common definition of "burial" is satisfied by "Tomb A." Despite assertions to the contrary, an indisputable human interment has yet to be uncovered at the site. Tombs, rich, lush, large or otherwise, are not a known La Venta trait if "tomb" is to preserve any common, archaeological meaning. This is not to minimize the importance of the basically enigmatic features termed "tombs" at La Venta. They could well be substitutes, as indicated below, for the "real thing." (One wonders whether cremation may not have been customary among the La Venta elite and whether these strange deposits may not have been the means whereby funerary demands were satisfied.)

Turning to the subject of caches, the term "small dedicatory offering" was applied to most of the offerings recovered in 1955 (DHS 1959:133) to differentiate them from the "Massive Offerings" previously discussed. If we

omit the misleading "dedicatory," it appears that 49 "small offerings" were encountered during the La Venta excavations. Eleven of these are indicated to be probably or surely Post-Phase IV. The remainder are said to fall in time from Phase I(?) to Phase IV.

The offerings, i.e. cached offerings, of La Venta are here reviewed for various purposes. In terms of the common proposition that likeness may indicate contemporaneity, the offerings have been searched for patterns. Apart from the almost entirely "floating" sculptured monuments of La Venta, Olmec style is exclusively evident in certain offertory material (figurines, engraved celts, etc.). As re-emphasized in this paper (below), the La Venta monuments offer little temporal control on Olmec style. Style and time are here best controlled via the content of offerings. A crucial question is at what points in the local construction sequence (and in actual time provided by C14 dates) do objects in or exhibiting unequivocal Olmec style appear?

Surrogate Burial Type

An exotic type of La Venta offering can be recognized and tentatively termed "surrogate burial." The nine examples are: Offerings 5, 6, 7, 1942-A (i.e. Tomb A), 1942-B, 1942-D, 1943-F, 1943-G, and 1943-L. The 1942-D example is not as sure as the other eight. The pattern (briefly indicated by DHS 1959:163-164) consists of the deposition, in a formal arrangement, of stone beads, earspools, pendants, and occasionally figurines or "maskettes." These are arranged usually to replicate the layout of material worn by the deceased. However, no trace of skeletal material occurs. The offertory objects occur on, under, or within a marked layer of cinnabar, pure or admixed by clay. One marked exception to the rule of cinnabar was Offering 1942-B, within the famed stone coffer ("Monument 6"); another was Offering 1942-D, an apparently scattered offering. Contexts differ. One, as just noted, was in a lidded monumental "coffer." 1942-A was in "Tomb A," as noted above. 1943-F was covered by basalt columns laid horizontal ("Tomb E") while 1943-G was on the floor of a large slab-lined "cist" ("Tomb C"). 1943-L was located within a rectangular area carefully delineated by cinnabar (the feature was first termed "Tomb D"). The remaining examples were simply situated, in construction fills and intrusive pits.

Published phase assignments of these "surrogate burial" offerings are as follows: Phase I(?), Offering 7; Phase III, Offerings 5, 6; Phase IV, 1942-A, 1942-B, 1942-D, 1943-F, 1943-G, 1943-L. The apparent offertory pattern was long-lived if one accepts the published radiocarbon controls on the Complex A phases.

Offering 7, doubtfully attributed to Phase I, is of exceptional importance inasmuch as it is possibly the earliest La Venta deposit in which an object in Olmec style is present. The object is a "maskette" of a human face in which the mouth appears to have the basic Olmec conventionalization (DHS 1959:Fig. 43,b). Offering 7 is shown as occurring in the fill of the earliest platform at the Northeast Platform locus (DHS 1959:Fig. 18). The excavators specify that it did not occur within a pit dug down into the platform fill (DHS 1959:171), unlike other proximate offerings (see below). The platform (N.E. Plat: Unit A in our Figs. 1, 2) is assigned to Phase I (rightly or wrongly, depending on how the abutment of the "Water-sorted" series is interpreted). Yet, Offering 7 is "doubtfully attributed" to Phase I. Why? No reason is

given, although this offering is crucial from the standpoint of offertory pattern and Olmec style.

Offerings 5 and 6, Phase III, also come from the Northeast Platform. Both contained Olmec style "maskettes" (DHS 1959:Fig. 43,a,d). Both were found within pits indicated (DHS 1959:Fig. 18) to have been cut down through the earlier two platforms (N.E. Plat: Units A and B, Figs. 1, 2). In the case of Offering 5, the point of origin of the associated pit "appeared to be in the next to the last structural phase" (DHS 1959:162), i.e. N.E. Plat: Unit C in our Figure 1. The pit is shown (DHS 1959:Fig. 18) beginning in the very lowest fill of the Phase III platform. This pit, yielding Offering 6, is shown originating in fill just beneath the surface of the same Phase III platform. The suggestion gained from text and section is that the pits were dug during two moments of the Phase III filling operation culminating in the Phase III platform. The Offering 5 pit is said to have apparently originated within this fill (above). The Offering 6 pit definitely originated within this fill but at a point close to the Phase III platform (N.E. Plat: Unit C; our Figs. 1, 2) top surface (DHS 1959:167). If we accept the earlier platform (N.E. Plat: Unit B) as belonging to Phase II, and both pits, as indicated, were intruded into it, then the two Offerings, 5 and 6, are certainly no earlier than Phase II. Since the stratigraphic origin of Offering 5 was not clear, it should at least have been assigned to a "Phase III(?)." How the origin of the Offering 6 pit was established is not specified. When all published data are considered, nothing substantial really precludes that these two Offerings (5 and 6) were intruded into earlier platforms at the time of depositing the Red clay cap, which, as we have indicated, is treated as the principal determinant of Phase IV.

The "surrogate burial" type of offering may have been so traditionalized that it persisted over four construction phases. The four phases conceivably occupied far less time than assigned them by the excavators. On the other hand, the very uniqueness of this offertory pattern might argue that it occupied a short time-span. However, there are too many local variables at this time to be able to reconstruct the history of this particular pattern. Moreover, the published record too often thwarts attempts to find out what evidence allows a particular phase attribution.

Celts and mirror type. Offerings consisting of nothing but plain celts and a single solid concave mirror (ilmenite, magnetite, etc.) occur as follows: Offerings 9, 11, 1943-E, 1943-N, while the two components occur with other materials in Offerings 1942-A, and 1943-F. All occurrences, exclusive or not, are attributed to Phase IV with the exception of 1943-E, Phase II, and 1943-N, Phase IV or Post-Phase IV. The marked exception to a consistent Phase IV dating for this odd offertory type (and for the impressive mirrors themselves) is Offering 1943-E, assigned to Phase II (DHS 1959:App. 1). This is a "cruciform deposit" associated with a potential "Massive Offering" which we have indicated has been illogically left as "Pavement No. 1," Southeast Platform. We have also emphasized that the Phase II attribution is entirely based on the unproved assumption that the incompletely excavated Southeast Platform temporally and constructionally duplicated the fully studied, seemingly twin Southwest Platform. Offering 1943-E was within fill directly overlying a mosaic mask, Pavement No. 1. Its "twin" offering in the Southeast Platform would be Offering 1942-E (Phase II, or IIa) actually found as "two small caches" providing a total of six celts and no mirror (Wedel, in Drucker 1952:31; note

that 20 celts and 1 mirror comprised Offering 1943-E). To reiterate, the balanced structures, the Northwest and Northeast Platforms, did not, according to published sections, duplicate each other's development (our Figs. 1, 2). This fact, when applied to the Southwest and Southeast platforms and when coupled with the fact of offertory discrepancies, allows one to question a Phase II "dating" for Offering 1943-E. The likeness of "celts and mirror" offerings and their predominant Phase IV dating could just as well argue a similar dating for Offering 1943-E and, by associational extension, the underlying massive mosaic mask as well.

Offering 1943-N, the remaining exception to a Phase IV position for this offertory type, is unusual in the fact that the celts were so rough as to require the term "pseudo celts," or serpentine objects thought to resemble celts. These were found six meters south of the temporally uncontrolled mosaic Pvmt. 2. One wonders, in view of Offering 1943-E (relating to Pvmt. 1; see above), whether Offering 1943-N might not be a "displaced" correlate of the undated Pvmt. 2. Offering 1943-N is uncontrolled by Complex A floors (Wedel, in Drucker 1952:75). In view of this, why in subsequent years attempt to date it at all ("IV or Post-IV"; DHS 1959:App. 1)? Phase assignment, loose as it is, is still too definite. It is a "guesstimate." It might have been a reasoned conclusion if the temporal or phase distribution of such offerings had been considered. The independent dating of "pseudocelts" might also have been given thought. In this respect, we note that Offering 1 with 20 "roughly made pseudocelts of serpentine" (DHS 1959:133), is assigned to Phase III on the grounds that it is immediately sealed by the unbroken "Old-rose" floor series. Given this fact, one might hesitantly but more rationally assign the cache in question, Offering 1943-N, to Phase III, as the earliest example of celts (albeit "pseudocelts") and a mirror as an offering, rather than to Phase IV or Post-Phase IV. We believe that a good case can be made out for this special type of offering being entirely Phase IV in the local sequence.

Offerings featuring stone figurines. Serpentine and jade human figurines have the following offertory distribution and phase dating at La Venta: Offerings 3 (Phase II), 4 (Phase III), 1942-A (Phase IV), 1942-B (Phase IV), 1942-D (Phase IV), 1943-G (Phase IV), and 1943-M (Phase IV). Offerings 1942-A, 1942-B, 1942-D, and 1943-G have been previously dealt with as "surrogate burials"; all are properly attributed to Phase IV. Offering 3 consisted of one complete figurine, another slightly incomplete, and a third represented only by a fragment of an arm, together with many jade ornaments, others of crystal, as well as four small canoe-like perforated jade objects. Offering 4 consists of the serpentine and jade figurines and elongate celt-like jades that had been placed vertically to form a remarkable scene. Offering 1943-M is the only reputed offering that contained nothing but figurines, here of serpentine.

No one to our knowledge has studied all La Venta small stone figurines (to say nothing of those like them from all over the map) from the standpoint of types and varieties. To do so here, even for La Venta, would go far beyond the already swollen limits of this review. While there is diversity among the La Venta site figurines, all display sufficient traits to specify them as in Olmec style. Many show features that relate them to the "classic" specimens so prized publicly and privately. The main problem here is to review the published evidence for the relative dating of the ultimate deposition at La Venta of figurines in Olmec style, variable as this may be.

As Drucker has pointed out (DHS 1959:161), the date (local phase) of deposition of a figurine as an offering provides an "upper-limit" date for its manufacture. Various figurines have been found at the site in fragmentary condition, suggesting that they had been long venerated by the time they were cached. We cannot temporally control manufacture at La Venta (an assumption) except by controlling the final deposition of products and possessions.

The exceptions to an otherwise exclusive Phase IV assignment for such La Venta figurines are Offerings 3 and 4 (Phases II and III respectively).

Offering 3, in the South-Central Platform, the contents of which have been briefly noted, was disturbed by bulldozing, precluding knowledge of its precise layout (DHS 1959:146). "The location, however, could be determined with some precision because of the fact that the offering had been covered over with some sort of cap of yellow clay. The northern part of this clay envelope remained in situ in the trench wall" (DHS 1959; note that a similar yellow clay "seal" was encountered in Offering 5; DHS 1959:164). The excavation report on the Platform briefly notes the presence of Offering 3: the "offering appears to have been deposited" at the time of adding a platform layer referable to Phase II (DHS 1959:22, cf. Figs. 7, 8, p. 27). The layer referred to would seem to pertain to S. Cent. Plat: Unit B in Figure 1 (correlation of the various mound sections is extremely difficult). Inasmuch as this is indicated as the earliest occurrence of the Olmec style figurine at La Venta, it is somewhat remarkable that it has received such casual treatment in print. How certain, considering the bulldozing, is the Phase II attribution? As noted, the offering "appears" to have been set during Phase II construction, as if there was some uncertainty about it. If so, the reasons for doubt might have been usefully stated.

Offering 4, assigned to Phase III, consists of celts and figurines set upright in a lifelike scene. Five of the sixteen figurines were lacking parts at the time they were offered (DHS 1959:Table 4). The group appeared at the bottom of a pit opening at the surface of the "Old-rose" floor series (the laying of the first of which marks the inception of Phase III). The figurines and celts stood embedded in two sand strata locally running continuously underneath the "Old-rose" floors. The upper layer of sand mounded about, if not over, the pieces forming the scene. The strata, mounding, and position of the pieces indicated to the excavators that the offering had been made prior to laying the "Old-rose" floors; floor fragments resulting from the cutting of the pit indicated that the earliest of the four "Old-rose" floors was the one initially sealing the deposit. The pit was cut through the latest "Old-rose" floor so that the offering might be inspected, implying accurate records as to the location of the offering. The hole was "almost exactly the same size as that of the figurine layout, and was centered very accurately directly above it" (DHS 1959:154). That the pit was not dug through the latest floor to place the offering rather than to "inspect" it is indicated by the basically "undisturbed" condition of the two sand strata in which the objects occurred (DHS 1959:154). Following inspection, the pit was refilled but evidently left unpatched. Its location was obvious to the excavators.

The key supports of a Phase III rather than a Phase IV dating for Offering 4 are the mounding of the upper sand stratum over the scene and tapering off beyond the pit limits, as well as the "undisturbed" condition of the two strata. Yet, if the pit is interpreted as an inspection hole, the

upper sand stratum would have had to have been disturbed to reveal at least the heads of the figurines. The crucial section, Figure 39 (DHS 1959) disagrees with the text: in section, the upper stratum is shown continuous over the heads of the figurines; the text (DHS 1959:154) states that this "hole was dug down to the level of the heads of the figurines and the tips of the celts and then refilled." The pit limits are shown in broken-line in the section, the continuous white sand stratum over the figurines in solid-line. To conform to published interpretation of events, the pit conventionally should be in solid-line, the stratum over the figurines in broken-line. Did the pit actually disturb the white sand? Moreover, one would like to know the consistency of this white sand and the underlying reddish-brown sand. Were the strata of a texture that would permit insertion from above of the vertically placed objects comprising the scene? Nothing in print really precludes the possibility that the white sand was removed within the pit outlines, the cache objects inserted into the reddish-brown sand, then the white sand replaced, and the pit filled.

We read that the offering was recorded and excavated under what may not have been the best of circumstances (DHS 1959:152). One wonders to what extent, if any, the crucial Figure 39 was drawn to fit interpretation. Was it drawn during excavation, or drawn subsequently to conform to features apparent in photographs (compare DHS 1959:Fig. 39, Pl. 39)? The strongest support for the excavators' interpretation (i.e. Phase III installation and later "inspection hole") is, as noted, the conformation of the white sand stratum. But, most interestingly, in the master section (DHS 1959:Fig. 17), the sand stratum does not mound but appears as an unremarkable fill layer throughout the whole area of Offering 4. In other words, the master section does not confirm a Phase III attribution. This section could be used to infer that the offering was placed through the latest "Old-rose" floor and then sealed by the "Red clay cap" (Phase IV). This was the excavators' "first thought" (DHS 1959:154). It may have been the correct one.

Finally, a third section (DHS 1959:Fig. 16) shows Offering 4 as completely within the level white sand stratum, with no "inspection hole." There are thus very real reasons for doubting that the published dating of Offering 4 is as certain as claimed.

In summary, jade and serpentine figurines were a marked feature of Phase IV La Venta offerings. We have discussed the two published exceptions in the matter of dating, Offerings 3 and 4. In the first case, one almost has to take it on faith that the offering pertains to Phase II while, in the second case, one is faced by a choice between two very real possibilities, each leading to a different conclusion as to dating (i.e. Phase III, or Phase IV).

Celt type. Offerings exclusively made up of jade and/or serpentine celts were as follows: Offerings 2 (Phase III), 2a (Phase III), 8 (Phase III), 10 (Phase III), 13 and 1943-B (Phase III), 1942-C (Phase IV), 1942-E (Phase II), 1943-D (Phase III), and 1943-H (Phase IV). The single offering consisting of "pseudo-celts" only was Offering 1 (Phase III). Celts occur with other objects in offerings of the "celt and mirror type" (above) as well as in "surrogate burials," and "offerings featuring stone figurines."

The earliest "celt type" offering is indicated to be 1942-E (Phase II). Consisting of six plain serpentine examples, it was located within the Southeast Platform in fill overlying the mosaic Pavement No. 1. For reasons already given in a number of contexts, phase assignments of features associated with this Platform are based on untested assumptions. At the very least, this offering should be, we think, assigned to a "Phase II(?)."

Offering 2, with a Phase III dating (DHS 1959:135), contained five decorated celts. One of these showed a notched head profile face in "absolutely classic conventional Olmec style" (DHS 1959:142, Fig. 35,e). The description of the offering does not indicate any possibility of doubt as to phase-dating. Nevertheless, the excavation portion of the report almost explicitly allows for uncertainty. The offering occurred immediately in front of Mound A-2 in an area of heavy offertory activity and disturbance. The "Old-rose" floor series (apparently only three floors here) occurs south of the offering (DHS 1959:Fig. 10). As the floor series moves north, continuity is broken by the Monument 13 pit. Directly north of this pit, a short section of floors appears, three times thicker and triple in number the "Old-rose" floors south of the pit. This unusually thick series is shown overlying Offering 2. The text (DHS 1959:41) assumes that south and north of the Monument 13 pit the same floor series is present. No evidence is given that the lowest three floors of the thick, north section are typologically identical to the three to the south, nor, if traced about the intervening pit, that the three surfaces were physically linked and thus the same. The offering was nevertheless said to be intruded through the "lowermost" floors of the north thick series (DHS 1959:41). Yet, the excavators comment that "it was not possible for us to determine . . . whether the offering was intruded through the entire floor series or only part of them. The problem is a minor one, however, since we can be certain that Offering 2 dates from the period of the old-rose floors" (DHS 1959:41). The problem is not minor. Their conclusion leads to an unequivocal Phase III dating for a cache possessing a superb Olmec feature. First of all, the north series of floors cannot be convincingly shown to be the same as the "Old-rose" series to the south. Implausible as it may sound, the north ones might represent a "laminated patch" for an offertory pit (No. 2) intruded during or at the moment of abandonment of the "Old-rose" level of Complex A. If put through all the north "floors," the cache would pertain to Phase IV, inasmuch as Phase IV is marked by the deposition of the "Red clay cap" over all features of later date than the laying of the latest "Old-rose" floor. In summarizing the Phase III sequence of the general context of this offering, the excavators make the point that the laying of the "Old-rose" series and the contemporary construction and renovation of platforms "bring the phase [i.e. III] to a close" (DHS 1959:45). If the cache was intruded into this floor series during the use of the latest of the series, the offertory act must then post-date Phase III.

The excavation portion of the report reveals the problematic stratigraphy of Offering 2. We feel the situation to be even more uncontrolled than allowed there. It is unfortunate that the excavators' doubts were not paraphrased in the section devoted to offerings (always more palatable and thus influential to readers than dry excavation data). All in all, a good case could be made for Offering 2 having been immediately made prior to the deposition of the "Red clay cap" and thus an early feature of Phase IV (if we correctly understand the approach to phasing at La Venta).

To save space, we do not review the dating or phasing of the remaining "celt offerings." These have been indicated as belonging within Phases III and IV. The important fact is that none of these remaining caches contain items fully or partially in "Olmec style."

Pottery vessel offerings. Seventeen offerings were encountered at La Venta that consisted of pottery vessels. Ten of these were assigned to Post-Phase IV as they were found within the surface drift sands (Offerings 1943-A, 20 through 27, and 1943-0, the latter within the sands but possibly of Phase IV).

The surface sand deposits contained vessels, spottily identified with such tags as "Crude Reddish-buff ware," and "Red-slipped Buff ware." One Post-Phase IV offering, No. 25, contained a bowl that "conforms to a striking degree with the La Venta Fine Paste Gray ware" previously defined by Drucker (DHS 1959:223-224). The excavators suggest that this specimen was deposited very shortly after the abandonment following on Phase IV, or possibly the ware continued to be made in Post-Phase IV times. In short, Offering No. 25 raises an important question as to the time-span of a particular ware of the La Venta ceramic "complex."

Turning to pottery offerings in architectural contexts, seven were recovered: Offerings 14 (Phase III(?)), 15 (Phase I(?)), 16 (Indeterminate, Phase I(?)), 17 (Indeterminate, Phase I(?)), 18 (Phase II(?)), 19 (Phase II(?)), and 1943-C (III).

Are Offerings 14, 15, and 16 as early as even the questioned Phase I assignments imply? The three come from the Northwest Platform. Offering 14, made up of six vessels (Fine Paste Buff ware, Fine Paste Black ware, Fine Paste Orange ware) was found within the hearting of the earliest platform (Figs. 1, 2: N.E. Plat: Unit A). If this platform is a valid component of Phase I (see Construction Phases, pp. 2 et seq.), the offering surely cannot have been deposited earlier than Phase I. However, the "position of the vessels . . . suggested that they had been placed in the bottom of a small pit" (DHS 1959:187). The pit edges could not be defined and accordingly it could not be settled whether the offering pertains to Phase II or Phase III. Offering 14 is shown in Figure 18 (DHS 1959) as occurring within the limits of a broken-line pit. Is this the pit in question? This Offering 14 appears in this section associated with Offering 5 within the same pit. Yet, Offering 5, as previously discussed under "Surrogate Burials," is allegedly Phase III without a question mark. We conclude that it would be hard to find a more confusing and confused section than that in Figure 18 of the 1959 report. As previously noted, nothing in text or sections precludes the possibility that this pit had been cut through the local Phase III platform (Figs. 1, 2: N.E. Plat: Unit C) at the time of laying the Phase IV "Red clay cap." The offering surely postdates the "Water-sorted" floor series and antedates the deposition of the "Red clay cap."

Offering 15, Phase I(?), of a Coarse Brown ware bowl was previously discussed in connection with radiocarbon Sample M-529. The clues as to when this offering was made and to what did it relate were found to be so misleading that the only reasonable "dating" for the offering is Phase I, or Phase II-Phase IV.

Offerings 16 and 17 (Indeterminate, Phase I(?)) also come from this same Northeast Platform. Each consisted of a rectangular Coarse Brown ware

vessel ("a distinctive Olmec type") (DHS 1959:190). The reasons for indeterminateness of Phase-dating are not indicated in the description of the offerings. Their positions are shown in the section (DHS 1959:Fig. 18). They are not shown encompassed by intrusive pit or pits, but lie well within the hearting of the earliest platform (our Unit A; cf. Figs. 1, 2). The excavation report does not deal with these offerings beyond mentioning that they are "doubtfully attributed to Phase I" (DHS 1959:61, 124). If, as the excavators indicate, this early platform belongs to Phase I, why should not the caches unequivocally belong to the same phase? What was "indeterminate" about their provenience and deposition?

Offerings Nos. 18 and 19 consisted of a Coarse Brown ware bowl and a White-Rimmed Coarse Black ware bowl (possible method of manufacture of latter discussed by Foster 1960:213). They have been attributed to Phase II(?) (DHS 1959:190-191). Both were in a pit intruded into early hearting of the Northwest Platform. This same pit, No. 3, was the source of radiocarbon Sample 530, previously discussed. Our review of the provenience and associations of the sample led to the conclusion that the sample, pit, and necessarily these two caches belong to a time no later than the deposition of the "Red clay cap," that is, Phase IV, and no earlier than the first "Water-sorted" floor, the laying of which marks Phase I.

Offering 1943-C, attributed to Phase III, was found overlying Massive Offering 3, within the pit of the latter, and sealed by the intact "Old-rose" floor series, which marks Phase III. The cache consisted of two pottery vessels (Drucker 1952:39; DHS 1959:App. 1). No data are given on ware. One vessel was inverted over the other, but without known contents. There appears to be no reason to question the phase assignment of this offering.

This brief review of offerings featuring pottery has been oriented to phase assignments of the offerings and the wares represented in them. Realizing that the Complex A excavations yielded little ceramic material beyond cached specimens, we feel it mandatory that at least the constructionally sequential status of each offering be specified as objectively as the record allows. The assumption may or may not be correct that little time intervened between the manufacture and deposition of a White-Rimmed Black ware vessel or one of Fine Paste buff ware. The control of deposition, first in terms of local "phases," and secondly through radiocarbon dating, is bound to have import in comparative ceramic studies. Increasingly La Venta (and Tres Zapotes) are being turned to in order to substantiate ceramic conclusions elsewhere, particularly in southern Mesoamerica. One would imagine that a well controlled series of pottery caches spanning the era of Complex A construction would do much to clarify the at present muddled picture of La Venta as well as Tres Zapotes ceramic development, based on material approximating occupation debris (Drucker 1943, 1952). While a small sample of cached vessels was, as indicated, recovered in Complex A constructions, we have tried here to show that various deposits are severely problematic as to phase affiliation, in some cases, probably far more so than their excavators indicated in print.

It might be useful to add here that three "surrogate burial" offerings (Nos. 5, 1943-G, 1943-L) with mixed contents did contain pottery. Offering 5 was assigned to Phase III, the other two to Phase IV. Offering 5 was reviewed, with the conclusion that there are grounds for questioning its published phase assignment; a Phase IV dating is a possibility worth considering. The Offer-

ing 5 vessels, either two or three in number (Drucker 1952:164, Figs. 41, 42, a), include Fine Paste Buff-Orange ware and Brown ware. Coarse Buff ware and Coarse Brown ware(?) (sic) occurred in the Phase IV Offering No. 1943-G (Drucker 1952:70, Figs. 18b, 19f) while the single vessel in Phase IV, Offering 1943-L, could not be specified.

Stone Monuments

Forty La Venta objects were assigned to the catch-all category of "monuments" (DHS 1959:229, App. 2). Here we are first of all concerned with those "monuments" whose ultimate position can be correlated with La Venta construction phases, particularly those monuments exhibiting specific Olmec characteristics.

Monument 6 is the famed lidded carved "coffer," or Tomb B, the contents of which became Offering No. 1942-B. The coffer or stone box was evidently set following the placing of Massive Offering No. 2 and just before the deposition of the "Red clay cap" over Mound A-2. The setting of this monument then can be said to be "dedicatory" to the final major renovation of the Mound A-2 structure. The coffer was fashioned no later than this but nothing beyond this upper limit dating and stylistic considerations governs its time of manufacture. As will be shown, this is the only major La Venta object that can be associated with La Venta construction. There is nothing in Drucker's discussion of its carved face that would depreciate it as an excellent example of Olmec style (Drucker 1952:178).

Monuments 7 and 24 are published (DHS 1959:229) as other examples that were sealed by the Red clay cap and thus Phase IV. Monument 7 is the "Tomb A" basalt column construction and thus principally architectural in significance. Monument 24 designates a fragmentary shaped basalt slab found in an area of "considerable disturbance," but still considered to be of Phase IV deposition (DHS 1959:204). There is nothing about it to characterize it as stylistically or specifically Olmec.

Monument 25 appears also to be a candidate. This stela-like incomplete stone, seemingly carved in good Olmec style, occurred in a line with the apparently intentionally upside-down oriented Monuments 26 and 27 (DHS 1959:120, 208). The three monuments are concluded to have been erected "in shallow holes with backs braced against a shelflike bank cut into the main Pyramid mass." However, "Two limestone flakes serving as shims under Monument 25 suggest that the setting of the sculpture dates from Phase IV" (DHS 1959:206). The reasoning here is obscure. The fact that limestone slabs seem to be fairly frequent in connection with Phase IV (DHS 1959:126) architectural features may have led to this suggested date.

Returning to the Monument 6 "coffer," it appears to be the only "phasable" major La Venta object found to date that has stylistic import. One outstanding problem in La Venta archaeology has been to rationalize superficial positions of many fine major sculptures but to control temporally the deliberate mutilation.

With the noted exceptions of Monuments 6, 7, and 24, all other monuments from the Complex A area "lay entirely above the Phase IV clay surface [i.e. "Red clay cap"] or were mounted in clay but protruded for most of their length above the clay surface" (DHS 1959:229). One supposes that "mounted in clay" refers to intrusion of the monuments into the extant "Red clay cap" (the

only illustrated example however seems to be Monument 13, in DHS 1959:Fig. 10). The excavators go on to infer that it was "customary" at La Venta "to raise and reërect the stone monuments when the periodic alterations were made to the site. This practice was followed during Phase IV, leaving all the monuments fully exposed when the site was abandoned except for those that were intentionally buried" (DHS 1959:229-230, 259). The destruction and mutilation of monuments is attributed to Post-Phase IV occupants. It is never quite stated as such, but the excavators evidently attribute the ultimate location of the monuments to the Phase IV occupants. In this case, were the Phase IV occupants also responsible for the peculiar upside-down setting of Monuments 26 and 27 (see above)? This problem is never handled.

Did the La Venta monuments work their way up through time through a process of construction, ultimately to emerge in association with the "Red clay cap" era of occupation and ceremonialism as proposed in print? Only speculation guides the suggestion that an odd clay feature, sealed by the "Water-sorted" floor series (DHS 1959:65, 259, Fig. 20; also our Figs. 1, 2, N.W. Plat. Unit A), "may have been a pedestal for a monument long since removed." If evidence for the carving and erection of monuments at La Venta during Phase III and earlier times was found, we cannot find it in print. Unless there is a style progression evident in the carved La Venta monuments, a good case could be made out for their origins and original placement within Phase IV times. But only the carved "coffer," Monument 6, can be proved to be of Phase IV times, and it is neither a stela nor an altar.

The "limestone shim" argument, previously noted, is a peculiar way of demonstrating a Phase IV erection date for Monument 25 where found; it and the two "associated" upside-down monuments were intruded into the side of the Great Pyramid. It seems more plausible that they owe their alignment and location to Post-Phase IV activity. Stela 5 is also said to be associated with limestone shims (DHS 1959:126). With no sign of carving, its description merely suggests that it is a fragment of a stela (Stirling 1943:52). Stone types, such as greenschist, common in Phase IV architectural contexts, are used to provide various monuments, including number 5, with a suggested Phase IV date of fashioning (DHS 1959:126).

In summary, we can find no evidence for the carving and positioning of major monolithic objects, in Olmec style or not, prior to the inception of Phase IV times. There is no direct evidence through excavation that would support the published assertion that La Venta monuments, found in superficial circumstances, were carved and positioned in times earlier than Phase IV. Until stylistic considerations prove otherwise, one might argue that such monuments were exclusively Phase IV products. Supposing this to be so, it is not unreasonable to assume that they were carved and positioned in association with "Red clay cap" platforms, whatever happened to them thereafter.

Discussion and Conclusions

During the course of writing this review, a glossy-paper advertisement arrived on our desk from a New York dealer in Pre-Columbian art. It illustrates, presumably for sale, a superb object with the caption "Olmec jade figurine/ La Venta: ca. 800 B.C." Disregarding the question of whether or not the piece really comes from La Venta, the leaflet is in fine agreement with current dating and interpretation.

We have tried here to be fair in our appraisal of what the excavation record really allows. In this case, fairness centers on searching for outside limits of certainty and probability. Not to allow a plus-or-minus where properly due in historical calculation must undercut the discipline that is the basic ingredient of archaeology. The La Venta "facts" had better be reasoned and then conscientiously used with full regard to their probability or lack of it, before entering infectious recreations of what happened in history, here, of Mesoamerica. Too much depends on La Venta. Archaeological interpretation might profitably flag itself down for occasional inspection of the "truths" that the contributing facts purport to be. For some, it is only a hop from La Venta to primal civilization in Mesoamerica. We merely suggest that the point of departure might be more accurately surveyed.

The Complex A construction phases, four in number, are not easily understood. The basic ingredient in phasing was the plaza-court floor "series." In published usage, a phase seems to have been initiated with the laying of the first floor of a series. The phase persisted throughout the interval of adding floors to produce the total series. The phase further encompassed the building of clay platforms on the floors as well as the resurfacing of the platform faces and tops. The (undefined) concept of Phase at La Venta must assume that renovations to court and platforms were sufficient to span the time interval between the start of one phase and the start of the subsequent one. No allowance is made for occupation during which construction did not locally take place. It is especially difficult to handle Phase IV without providing for occupation or use of whatever the "Red clay cap" comprised.

We read of a "Water-sorted" floor series that must have taken time to accumulate. It is on the surface of the latest of this series that some early platforms were built and interpreted as though the constituent surfaces of the series had never related to prior platforms through "run-under," "fusion," and "abutment." The 1959 report never really handled systematically these three floor-structure relationships and their bearing on phasing. All in all, the construction sequence in each structural locus was grossly simplified by condensing it to fit the four-phase sequence governed by the plaza-court area of Complex A. Quantification of superimposed platform features was precluded by the failure to designate the constituent platforms in a systematic, tangible way.

It is our impression that a great deal could have been said about La Venta architecture and detail but the reports fail to do so. The architecture has been barely rationalized in print. Knowledge of it seems largely to have been incidental to excavation for other things. A case in point is the ubiquitous "Red clay cap." It is almost treated as a great red blanket pulled over the site just before the night of its oblivion. Yet this is the architecture, along with basalt columns and the like, that mark the obvious heyday of La Venta, so-called Phase IV.

Anyone concerned with the reality of La Venta influence on the development of early high culture in Mesoamerica might profitably attempt to assess independently the architectural growth data latent in publications on the site. It is all very well to emphasize the formal layout of Complex A, its bisymmetry in relation to a centerline, the huge Pyramid (unexcavated and assumed, probably rightly, to belong to "classic" times at the site), and so forth. But such emphasis could be misleading without taking into account the architectural

whole of Complex A. For instance, the well-noted formal arrangement of the Complex may have emerged at least in part from a quite asymmetric earlier development. It would be well to keep in mind the unrelated fashion in which the Northeast and Northwest Platforms (Fig. 2) came eventually to look alike. If we were to use Heizer's suggested century-long construction phase intervals, the locus of the Southwest Platform (Fig. 1) was apparently blank for a hundred years or so before construction was initiated in Phase II.

The Complex A phases are crucial to the whole matter of La Venta culture development. Though purportedly constructional, these phases came to subsume all physically associated features. No culture category (offerings, "tombs," etc.) can be reviewed without confronting these phases. The sequence of laying court "floor series" came to control as much as possible. We doubt very much that the intricate, unbalanced growth of Complex A can be usefully compressed into four phases. For the four phases to be fundamentally valid, it is necessary to assume, in the absence of verifying overall sections, that "Old rose" was truly "Old rose" in another locale, or, even with a section, within a few feet (cf. Offering 2, "celt type" of offering). But the logic of common level, or typology, in lieu of physical continuity, becomes increasingly speculative as the value of what the floor relates to increases (e.g. a cache of celts, some of which are engraved in "classic Olmec style"). To repeat, floor-based phases are only as substantial as the control imposed on them in excavation and reporting.

The subject of Olmec architecture at La Venta cannot exist unless La Venta architecture emerges three-dimensionally. A proper query is one that asks at what point in time (or in local phases) did Complex A become architecturally Olmec. If one wishes to reason circularly, it is possible to claim that Phase I platforms, large as they were (which was how large?) were Olmec constructions because "substantial ceremonial-public architecture" is an ingredient of "civilization" and Olmec is civilization in Middle Formative times. It is difficult to see how the question can be answered without determining at what point in the local sequence did Olmec art style manifest itself in Complex A.

Cached offerings, "massive" and "minor," have been reviewed at length with various aims in mind. As noted, each Complex A phase (how substantial these phases is the question) may have been initially ceremonialized by the installation of a "Massive Offering" but there are a number of problems to be solved before asserting this as a fact. Relatively small offerings were most plentiful in Phase IV contexts. Certain exceptions to this dating involving objects in Olmec style, were reviewed. Questions were raised as to the validity of these pre-Phase IV assignments. Phasing of offerings containing items in clear Olmec style is particularly crucial. Such items cluster in Phase IV offerings. We have discussed in detail the evidence for earlier phased offerings containing Olmec style objects (Offerings 2 - 7). We have concluded that the published phase assignments are in all cases problematic to one degree or another. The possibility is repeatedly raised that most if not all exceptions pertain to Phase IV ceremonial activity. It has been further emphasized that human burials, in the usual sense of the term, have yet to be discovered at the site.

The La Venta publications were checked without success to discover whether La Venta monuments in Olmec style could be attributed to a time earlier

than Phase IV. Indeed it is even difficult to assign any such monument, beyond the famed Monument 6 "coffer," to Phase IV. There are grounds however for seeing Phase IV as a time of exceptional activity in the matter of monuments.

The subject of the architectural associations of ceramics is a difficult one. There can be no question that examples of Fine Paste and Coarse wares, established by Drucker in his study of occupation debris, were employed in or as offerings during Phase IV and probably earlier, though the latter still requires considerable proof. We realize that Drucker's sherd collections have been, or continue to be, under restudy. This study presumably will reveal the temporal relationships between the Complex A cached vessels and the La Venta midden(?) material. Our review here is not intended to suggest that the production of the already published "classic" La Venta wares was restricted to a time-span equal to that of the construction Phase IV. All we say is that the Complex A excavation record provides little basis for specifying the true "phase-spans" of the various wares that entered offerings.

Since the La Venta radiocarbon dates are extensively used for various purposes in Mesoamerican reconstructions, the dates have been cautiously reviewed. Each sample and result has been studied as to placement history, associations, original source, and interpretation. Our conclusion is that the nine dates have very limited pertinency when so examined. On reconsideration, these dates neither confirm nor nullify the generally accepted 800 - 400 B.C. span for Complex A. The dates merely make it highly likely that this Complex A was the scene of construction during the first millennium B.C., if not before and after. The compunction to make the most of these C14 dates is understandable. However, it is difficult to see how they can be used for anything more momentous if the aim of high probability is not to be deflected. La Venta was a Formative site. The real problem is at what point in time did it take on or develop specialized attributes that require inclusion of La Venta in any comprehensive, even casual consideration of early Mesoamerican cultural evolution.

Phase IV gives every indication of having been a multi-faceted climax of a period of occupation and construction, but a period of truly indeterminate length. The time-span of Phase IV is moot. The location of radiocarbon Sample M-533 was ideal for terminally dating Phase IV. The date spread (474 B.C. - A.D. 126) resulting from its analysis would so apply, within chance limits, were it not for the uncertainty of what source or sources provided the charcoal. The inclination is to assume that short-lived organic material provided the charcoal and that no significant interval occurred between the death of the material and its deposition where found as charcoal. On the other hand, we have suggested the possibility that Phase IV or Pre-Phase IV structural members may have been salvaged and burned to provide the sample. This suggestion permits potentially significant error that, if great enough, could place terminal Phase IV in post-A.D. 126 times. Speculation of this order would be pointless were it not for the fact that Phase IV marked a time of intensive major and minor offertory activity. It has been suggested here that the carving and positioning of monuments in Olmec style belong entirely to this phase. Within this same phase the great basalt column features came into being. Everything points to Phase IV La Venta having been a major Olmec center.

Was La Venta Olmec prior to Phase IV? One purpose of this review has been to search for incontrovertible evidence that Phase IV was a florescence

of previously Olmec La Venta. Massive Offerings, so-called "jaguar" mosaic pavements and celt caches are demonstrably early in a relative sense at Complex A. Low rectangular clay platforms were present in Phase I and probably Pre-Phase I times as well. Ceramics and figurines occur in Pre-Phase I context (MacNeish 1960:296). However, it is only "jaguar" mosaic pavements, going back in time to Phase II, that embody allegedly Olmec stylistic traits. Perhaps obtuseness interferes with our acceptance of the conviction that these mosaic pavements really are conventionalized full-face jaguar heads and that they really do incorporate "most of the distinctive features repeated in other Olmec representatives of this deity" (DHS 1959:93). We do feel that the subject matter and style of these "masks" are quite speculative. Because of this, it is hard to emphasize them as unequivocal evidence of Olmec presence in Pre-Phase IV La Venta. Potentially the best case for depositional earliness at La Venta of objects or features in Olmec style is the jade "maskette" from Offering 2 (DHS 1959:Fig. 43,b); why this offering was dubiously assigned to Phase I should be explained. If it could be proved that this offering belonged to the time of constructing a Phase I platform, a strong case could be made that Phase I La Venta was Olmec, or at least receptive to Olmec influence and products. All offerings producing engraved celts and stone figurines in Olmec style that allegedly come from Pre-Phase IV deposits, are, on close examination, stratigraphically problematic to one degree or another. La Venta also failed to produce evidence of large sculptures in Olmec style prior to the advent of Phase IV. To say that small jade and serpentine Olmec figurines with missing parts at the time of their caching comprises evidence of significantly earlier manufacture is to raise the question of what "significantly" means in time. How long after manufacture does "veneration" result in broken figurine limbs?

In short, the excavation data on review seem to underscore to a greater degree than previously that Phase IV encompasses the bulk, if not the entirety of Olmec La Venta culture (or the La Venta variety of Olmec culture). Four seasons of work at the site yielded little, perhaps no straightforward sign of Olmec presence at the site prior to Phase IV. A further season there might produce proof of earlier Olmec presence but the record at hand is all that we have to go on now.

The La Venta radiocarbon results are most accommodating. One can argue that Phases I to IV spanned little time because offerings large and small were too patterned not to occupy a short time-span; or they were traditionalized, and pattern, in order to be tradition, requires considerable time. It can be argued that the Phase I to Phase IV constructions required centuries for superpositions and renovations to have taken place. Conversely, there is nothing in these phases of construction that would require more than a century to achieve (after all, they are clay platforms). Finally, the crucial Phase IV, can be pinned down where one pleases or where outside evidence dictates within a period perhaps as long as a half millennium.

It has not been the purpose of this paper to review how data from sites beyond La Venta may or may not mesh and independently control La Venta. It is our impression that the La Venta data comprise a pivotal reference point in Preclassic comparisons; La Venta helps make sense of data from other sites and not the other way around. If true, then scrutiny of the La Venta facts and fancies has been especially warranted.

It would be very easy to conclude as follows: La Venta was a fairly short-lived maverick site that finally got on the Olmec track of civilization in a very big way in very late Formative, even Proto-Classic, times; that Olmec, as generally thought of, was as late on the Mesoamerican scene as Complex A Phase IV; and that this scene already contained emergent civilization in various regions. Such a conclusion, facile and irreverent sounding as it may be, is not, we think, contradicted by La Venta as now known. But neither does La Venta, as presented here, contradict the theory of Olmec as the "mother-culture" and progenitor of Mesoamerican civilization. Nor does it by any means substantiate it. The whole problem comes down to the actual date of Phase IV, to where Offerings 2 and 4 sequentially belong, to mosaic pavements as truly four-eyed Olmec jaguars, and so on and so forth. We doubt that La Venta should play the interpretive role that it does until such questions have been recognized and independently searched, if not answered.

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Certain papers bearing on the interpretation of La Venta have not been utilized in this critique (e.g. R. F. Heizer, 1961, Inferences on the nature of Olmec society based upon data from the La Venta site, Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers No. 25:43-57). Such omissions do not alter materially the factual basis of our critique.

FIGURE 2

Comparison of sequences at Northwest and Northeast Platforms. Detailed schematic cross-sections of north sides of these platforms. Based on Drucker, Heizer and Squier 1959: Figs. 15, 16, 20. Roman numbers are the published construction phases. Letters refer to architectural units employed in this review. Arabic numbers refer to the platform faces of each unit discussed in this review. Approximate scale is indicated. For purposes of this figure, it is assumed that "Water-sorted" floor series runs horizontally between the two platforms. In terms of this assumed datum, heights of architectural features are approximately correct. The thicknesses of the platform faces have been increased for purposes of clarity and labeling.

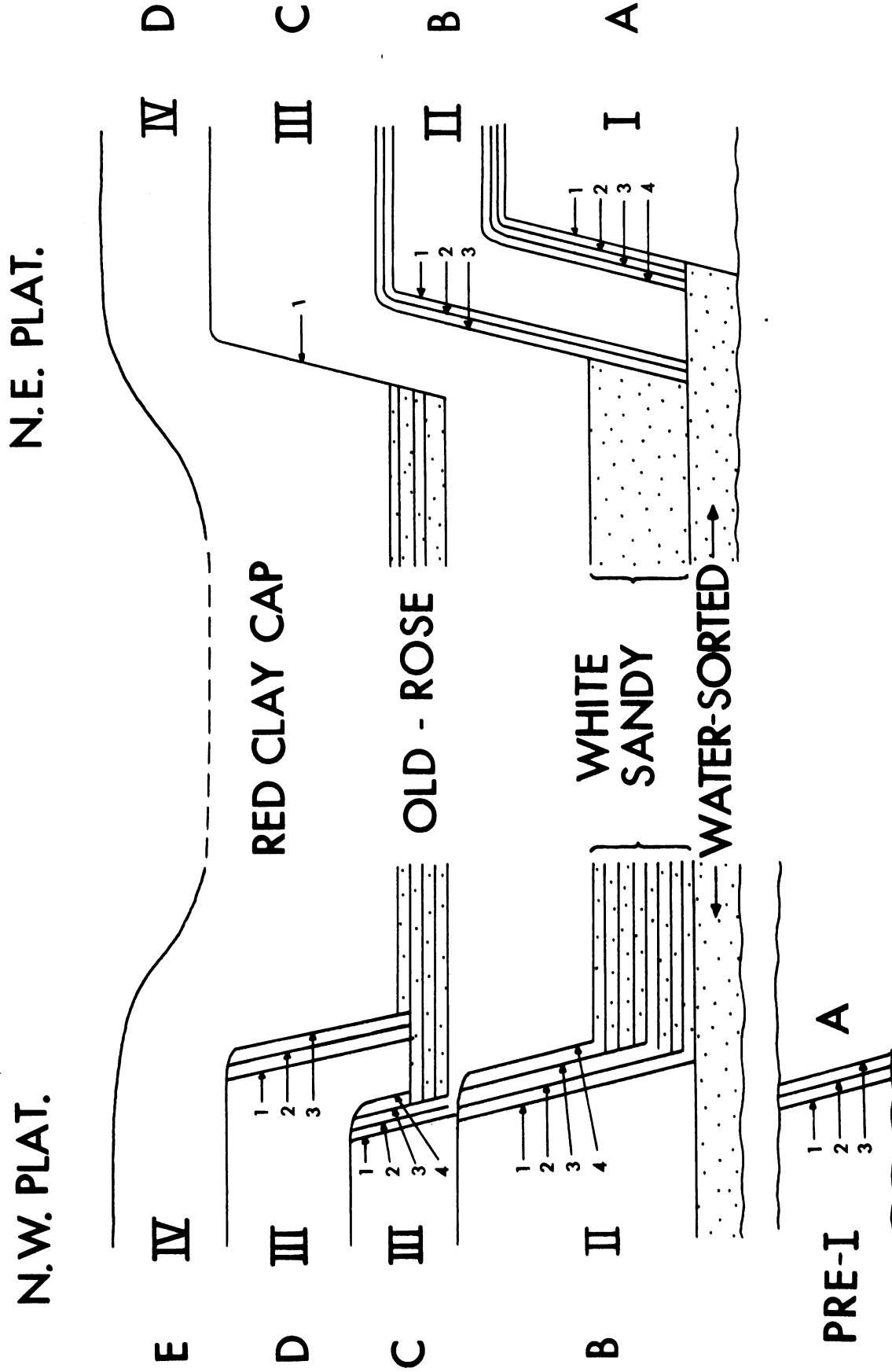


FIGURE 2