Enclosed Ritual Spaces and the Watery Underworld in Formative Period Architecture: New Observations on the Function of La Venta Complex A

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Water Iconography and the Maya Underworld

As many examples of Maya funerary art demonstrate, Xibalbá was an underwater realm entered by passing beneath the surface of standing bodies of water or through the gaping maw of the earth (Hellmuth in Schele and Miller 1986:267). The iconography that conveys this watery imagery was often arranged around a central band that represented the surface of still bodies of water. Such water bands were usually augmented with other water symbols such as water dots, water stacks, water lilies, shells and fish (fig. 1a). Water bands could be placed around the base of a tomb chamber, as at Rio Azul, and thus symbolically create an underwater environment for the tomb and its contents. The same water iconography, when painted on Maya vases, inevitably signals that the actions depicted within the painted scene are taking place in a watery location. The identity of this underwater location in the Maya cosmic view "...was Xibalbá, the residence of the dead before their rebirth" (Schele and Miller 1986:267).

Besides the watery location of the dark world of the tomb, the Classic Maya identified the plazas of their great cities as the surface of this watery underworld (Schele and Grube 1990). In these plazas *(nab)* were held elaborate dance rituals in which the Maya elite publicly accessed the power of the ancestors, and thus the supernatural, as they danced across the surface of the otherworldly ancestral realm. The image of ancestors in this watery otherworld could also be a subject for such public monuments as Copán Altar T (fig. 1b). Located in an outlying area of the Copán valley, Altar T presents the saurian-derived image of the giant earth-crocodilian, here depicted with fish nibbling at the water lilies tied around his paws, who floats in the primordial ocean, and whose back is the surface of the earth itself. Beneath the earth-crocodilian and below the surface of that primordial ocean can be glimpsed a landscape inhabited by underworld deities and departed Copanec rulers (Linda Schele. pers. com. 1989).

In many Mayan artistic compositions, the gaping maw that served as a terrestrial entrance to watery Xibalbá was shown as the open mouth of a zoomorphic supernatural, often the earth-crocodilian. This gaping maw is nowhere more dramatically depicted than on the Palenque sarcophagus lid (fig. 2). Here it is shown as a giant pair of double-hooked and bracket-shaped skeletal monster jaws into which Lord Pacal II falls at the moment of his death. As Schele and Miller (1986:282-285) noted, it is also from this terrible mouth that the mirror-covered, cruciform-shaped world tree emerges to become the *axis mundi* of the Maya cosmos.

The iconographic symbol set that visually describes the watery underworld and its maw-

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Fig. 1. a) The Classic Maya water symbol set. From Schele and Miller (1986:fig. 28); b) Copán Altar T. Drawing by Linda Schele, 1988.

like entrance was fully functioning, for the Maya, by the Early Classic Period (Hellmuth 1987:3). In order to determine if that symbol set has a Formative Period origin it is necessary to examine Olmec tombs, their contents, and their architectural settings, as well as the Olmec symbol system. For, as we will see, it was often the function of Olmec architecture as well as the Olmec symbol system to act as a visual expression of the Olmec cosmic view. This cosmic model could then be manipulated to provide a political charter for Formative Period Gulf Coast rulers (Reilly 1987, 1991).

Mound A-2 and Tomb A in La Venta Complex A

Olmec tombs are quite rare, and those recovered under archaeological conditions are rarer still. In the Olmec Gulf Coast heartland, the one site where tombs have been uncovered by archaeological methods is La Venta. Much of La Venta was thought to be destroyed by industrial and urban encroachments, but recent excavations conducted by I.N.A.H. under the inspired direction of Rebecca González Lauck reveal that the site still holds many surprises (González Lauck 1988: 121-165). The tombs which were excavated at La Venta were all located in that part of the site known as Complex A. However, only one of these tombs actually contained human bones: Tomb A.

Tomb A was contained within a lowlying, now destroyed, stepped pyramid (Mound A-2) located on the extreme northern end of La Venta Complex A (fig. 3). A short discussion of the construction features of Mound A-2 is necessary, because the

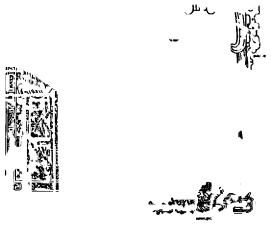

Fig. 2. The Palenque sarcophagus lid showing Pacal II falling down the world tree into the underworld maw. Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson.

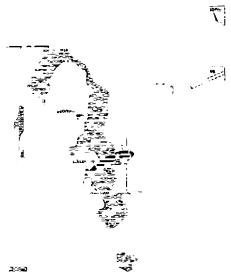

Fig. 3. Map of La Venta. After Bernal (1969:fig. 2).

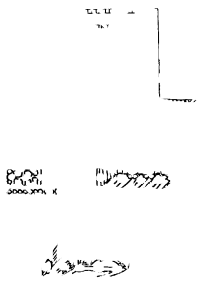

Fig. 4. a) La Venta Monument 6, the sandstone sarcophagus carved to represent the Olmec Dragon. From Joralemon (1976b:fig. 9c); b) La Venta Tomb A. Drawing by F. Kent Reilly, 1989; c) cross section through La Venta Mound A-2 showing the relationship of Tomb A to Massive Offering No. 2 and Monument 6. The southern half of Tomb A overhangs the polished, serpentine pavement of Massive Offering No. 2 while Monument 6 is directly centered over that pavement. Between Tomb A and Monument 6 was a row of basalt columns which covered Offering No. A-2-b. Drawing by F. Kent Reilly, 1989.

location of the mound, in the northern entrance of an enclosed court, and the symbolic function of Tomb A are all interrelated. The first low platform mound that would become Mound A-2 was located a few meters north of what all the excavators of La Venta Complex A have agreed is an enclosed court (Stirling and Stirling 1942:637; Stirling 1943:323; Drucker 1952:22-33; Wedel 1952:36-37; Drucker et al. 1959:8). During the four identified phases of construction in Complex A, Mound A-2 was gradually enlarged until it intruded into this enclosed court through what had been a gap or entrance in that court's northern wall (Drucker et al. 1959: 44-46). At the beginning of the fourth construction phase (ca. 600 B.C.), a trench was excavated through the top of Mound A-2 down through the underlying ground surface to a depth of some 4.8 m. At the bottom of this excavated pit a layer of bright red sand was deposited, on top of which was laid a pavement of a single layer of cut and polished serpentine blocks (Massive Offering No. 2) measuring 14.8 m north-south by 6 m east-west (Drucker et al. 1959:128). This excavation and the accompanying serpentine pavement were a single construction episode completed during the dry season. This is known because the very steep and sandy sides of the pit had not been braced or shored up in any way and showed no evidence of rainy season erosion (Drucker et al. 1959:129).

When the pit in Mound A-2 was filled with its own excavation debris, a cache of thirty-seven jade celts was laid out within that fill in a cruciform pattern (Offering 1942-C) (Drucker 1952: 25, fig. 10). Atop the now filled pit and 4.8 m above the serpentine pavement was placed a large sandstone sarcophagus (Monument 6). This sarcophagus was positioned squarely in the middle of the serpentine pavement buried below it. This location, and the fact that a large sandstone block closely resembling the sandstone from which the sarcophagus is carved was also buried in the fill, indicate that Monument 6 and Massive Offering No. 2 were a part of the same construction episode (Drucker et al. 1959:49).

The sandstone sarcophagus was covered with a dressed and squared rectangular sandstone lid. The sarcophagus itself (2.8 m long, 0.96 m wide, and approximately 0.86 m high) was hollowed out and contained a cache of jade jewelry laid out as if it had adorned a human body, however no skeletal material was found. The sides of this sandstone box were so carved that the entire sarcophagus was to be perceived as a north-facing supernatural zoomorph. This zoomorph is depicted as floating on water bands with its four legs extending out from its body, certainly a crocodilian posture (fig. 4a). Other crocodilian attributes that can be detected in this sculptural composition include the bifurcated or cleft browline, the flame or flanged eye ridges, and emphasized upper fangs (Stocker, Meltzoff, and Armsey 1980:740-759). The split-stemmed plants emerging along the back of this supernatural zoomorph make its identity as the earth-crocodilian certain. The zoomorph carved on the sarcophagus is the Olmec version of the floating earth-crocodilian on Copán Altar T.

Considering the placement of this Olmec earth-crocodilian directly mid-center over the serpentine pavement of Massive Offering No. 2, and taking into consideration the other archaeological evidence that the two features were part of the same construction episode, I propose that the green polished surface of Massive Offering No. 2 symbolically represents the waters of the underworld which underlie the primordial ocean, represented by the carved water bands, in which the earth-crocodilian carved on the sides of the sarcophagus floats. How does a green stone pavement symbolically become water? At first glance this is a problem, but it is generally accepted by scholars of ancient America that in Mesoamerican cultures green stone could carry the symbolic value of water (Thompson 1950:44, 289). In modern Mexico at least one group of native peoples, the Huastecs, retain this green stone/water association in the story of the Lints'i'. According to the Huastec, the mythological Lints'i' could create a water source by simply burying a green stone in the ground (Alcorn 1984:60). However, ethnological sources alone will not support a green stone/water association from more than 3,400 years earlier. In order to further support the green stone/water hypothesis for Massive Offering No. 2 and, in fact, the other three massive offerings of serpentine blocks in the enclosed court at La Venta Complex A, I now turn to the contents of Tomb A and the relationship of that tomb to Massive Offering No. 2 (fig. 4b).

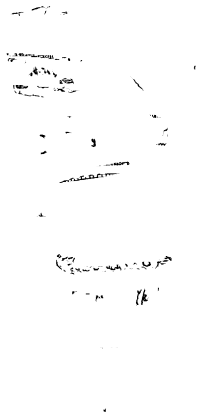

Fig. 5. a) The three levels of the Olmec Cosmos. Drawing by F. Kent Reilly, 1988; b) Chalcatzingo Relief 1 and Chalcatzingo Monument 9. From Coe (1965.fig. 10, Joralemon 1971 fig. 141).

Tomb A and Its Contents

Tomb A is a remarkable structure (approximately 3 m long by 2 m wide and 1.8 m high) constructed of forty-four close-fitting vertical and horizontal basalt columns. These columns were so "...fitted as to present a smooth and even surface on the interior, leaving the outside rough" (Stirling and Stirling 1942:640). The entrance to this structure faced north and was itself closed by five inclined basalt columns. The interior of the tomb was packed with clay. When the excavators cleared this packing they found that the southern 2.2 m of the tomb floor was paved with eight water-worn flagstones. It was on this flagstone floor that the burials and their grave goods were positioned. Interestingly, Tomb A is so placed within Mound A-2 that the southern, flagstone-covered half of its floor is positioned on the fill that covers Massive Offering No. 2, while the entrance of Tomb A rests on the original surface of Mound A-2 (Drucker et al. 1959:49)! Tomb A, like the sandstone sarcophagus located some 3 m to the south, is associated with construction stage 4 and is constructed of the same basalt columns that were erected around the perimeter of the enclosed court during the same construction phase. If an argument can be made that the sandstone sarcophagus can be symbolically seen

as floating in the primordial ocean that is symbolized by Massive Offering No. 2, then it can also be hypothesized that the southern or flagstone-paved half of the floor of Tomb A and the accompanying burials are symbolically in a watery environment (fig. 4c). The entrance to Tomb A, however, is in a terrestrial location, because it does not overhang Massive Offering No. 2. The Tomb A entrance thus functions symbolically as the gaping maw of the earth monster and the entrance to a watery underworld in which the deceased now reside. This interpretation is supported by the objects that were chosen to accompany the dead of Tomb A into the underworld.

Directly on the Tomb A flagstones was a coating of what Stirling and Stirling (1942:640) described as a thin layer of blue clay and what Drucker (1952:23) called a layer of heavy olive brown swamp muck. Either of these substances can be argued to have water associations. On top of this deposit were two large areas of red cinnabar. It was within these red stains that the remains of the bundle burials of between two and perhaps three individuals were found (Drucker 1952:23; Stirling and Stirling 1942:641).

The funerary objects contained within the two areas of red cinnabar consisted of the remains of much organic material that had crumbled away and some of the most exquisite examples of the Olmec jade carvers' art (for a color illustration of these carved jades see *National Geographic.* Nov. 1942:648 [ill. I]). These beautiful objects are too numerous for a full description in this paper, but they included jade ear flares, jade perforators, a pair of seated and standing jade figurines, and a rolled up necklace or headdress. This unusual object was composed of "...six stingray spines, each about six inches long, set with small squares

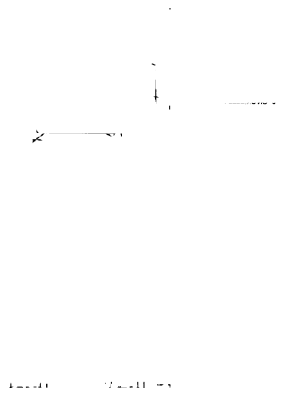

Fig. 6. The enclosed court at the northern end of La Venta Complex A showing the massive serpentine deposits associated with each of the four construction phases. Drawing: RD and adapted from Drucker et al. 1959.fig. 3.

of glittering hematite. A seventh, evidently the central piece of the necklace, a reproduction of one of these spines, was carved from translucent green jade" (Stirling and Stirling 1942:640-642). For the purposes of this discussion, the most important items found in Tomb A were the unusually large shark's tooth (on which was placed a translucent blue jade standing figure), a jade frog, and a carved jade clamshell. The jade clamshell "...was a realistic reproduction of a freshwater clam shell...about 10 inches long...perforated for use as a pendant. Inside it was a small oval mirror of brilliant crystalline hematite" (Stirling and Stirling 1942:640-641). Underneath the clamshell was one of the carved jade seated figures. It is these objects that play an important iconographic role in describing the underworld level of the Olmec cosmos.

Water Iconography and the Olmec Underworld

Like many other cosmic models in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, the Olmec cosmos was multileveled (fig. 5). Divided into celestial, terrestrial, and underworld components, the levels of the Olmec cosmos were iconographically represented by supernatural zoomorphs who were derived from the major predators who occupied these same levels in the Gulf Coastal natural environment (Reilly 1987). These creatures were considered to be supernatural because they could function in more than one of the three cosmic realms. For example, crocodilians hunt their prey in the water but they can also stalk them on land, and the jaguar, which is commonly thought of as a land hunter, also swims, catches fish, climbs trees, and lives in caverns.

The zoornorphic supernaturals derived from such natural models were used to define the Olmec cosmos in the following way: for the sky realm it was the image of an avian supernatural whose cruelly-hooked beak identified his natural origin as the raptorial birds (Reilly 1987:85-86). The terrestrial level was symbolically represented by images of the ruler performing those ceremonial functions that balanced the oppositions in nature, or by a supernatural feline figure whose natural model was the jaguar (Reilly 1991). The watery underworld realm was symbolized by fish, shell motifs, amphibians, and shark supernaturals. Entrance to this watery underworld was through naturally-occurring mountain clefts, caves, and, as we shall see, ritual spaces. These underworld portals could be artistically represented as the gaping maw of the Olmec earth-crocodilian like those depicted on Relief 1 and Monument 9 at the Middle Formative Highland site of Chalcatzingo (fig. 5b). The *axis mundi* for this Olmec cosmic model was provided by a world tree, a sacred mountain, or the image of the Olmec ruler with the image of the cosmic levels incised on his body (Reilly 1987:65-107).

The above described underworld iconography is represented in Tomb A by the carved jade objects such as the clamshell, the jade frog, and the shark's tooth. It can be argued that the shark's tooth is a bloodletting symbol, but as David Stuart, Linda Schele and others have demonstrated, for the Maya it was the act of bloodletting that opened the portal to an underwater world where the watery environment itself was blood (Schele and Miller 1986:304). I have no doubt that it did the same for the Olmec (Reilly 1991). When we consider that the objects from Tomb A, many of which have watery connotations, were placed on a layer of blue clay or olive green swamp muck—which, either because of its color or source, can be interpreted as a watery surface—and then we architecturally relate the entire tomb to Massive Offering No. 2, which itself is constructed atop a layer of red sand just as the waters of the earth are underlain by the bloody waters of the underworld, then there is unmistakable evidence that the realm of the Olmec dead was, like the Maya, underwater as well as underworld. Also like the Maya, the entrance to this Olmec underworld could be through the gaping maw of earth monsters, and as we shall see, through enclosed ritual spaces.

The La Venta Complex A Enclosed Court and the Olmec Underworld

The enclosed court in La Venta Complex A consists of a series of mounds (Features A1-A5) grouped around an enclosed court (possibly a sunken patio) located to the north of the 32 m high inverted cupcake-shaped pyramid (see fig. 3). Major excavations were conducted in Complex A during 1941-1943 and again in 1955 (Stirling and Stirling 1942:635-661; Stirling 1943:321-332; Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959). Carbon samples obtained during the 1955 excavations

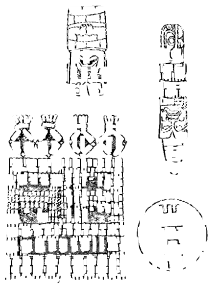

Fig. 7. a) One of the twin mosaic pavements placed on top of the massive serpentine offerings associated with the second construction phase of the enclosed court in La Venta Complex A. From Drucker et at. (1959.fig. 29); b) examples of the "double merlon" motif; c) two Olmec zoomorphic images with a double merlon incised in the mouth area of each. An hacha from Oaxaca and a celt from Cardenas, Tobasco. From Joralemon (1971 fig. 165) and drawing by F. Kent Reilly, 1989.

revealed that the enclosed court in Complex A had been in use between 1000 B.C. and 600 B.C. (Heizer 1968:14). The same excavations also uncovered many of the construction details of the enclosed court revealing, as previously mentioned, that it had undergone four major phases of construction and that each of these major construction phases was initiated with the deposit of a massive offering of serpentine blocks (Drucker et al. 1959:27-29, 46) (see fig. 6).

The first of these construction phases saw the removal of drift sand down to subsurface soil and the dumping of a massive clay block to serve as a level foundation for the court. The limits of the court were then marked by a red clay embankment, open only by gaps at the southern and possibly the northern end. The court itself was, over time, paved with a series of light brown and buff, water-sorted, sandy floors. Within the court, on the east, west, and south sides low platform mounds were constructed. The deposit of serpentine blocks associated with construction phase 1 was originally laid out as a pavement in the center of the enclosed court. The 1955 excavation team hypothesized that it was removed to make way for Massive Offering No. 3. The remains of this, the first major serpentine deposit, were then dumped into a shallow trench that had been dug to receive them around the border of Massive Offering No. 3 (Drucker et al. 1959:46 and ills. 9-10).

The phase 2 construction saw the incorporation of the red clay embankment into a larger adobe wall. The interior line of this adobe wall was marked by a single row of basalt facing blocks. The brown and buff, water-sorted, sandy floors of phase 1 were now covered with a series

Fig. 8. a) The sunken patio at Chalcatzingo with the altar (Monument 22) so positioned along the southern wall that it forms an architectural double merlon. From Grove (1987b: fig. 7.4); b) the enclosed court at Teopantecuanitlan with the four upside-down, T-shaped monoliths projecting above the east and west walls in a double merlon motif. From Donjuan (1985:216); c) the enclosed court in La Venta Complex A with the south entrance constructed as a double merlon. From Drucker et al. (1959:frontispiece).

of white sandy floors. The latest discernible level in this white sandy floor series is differentiated from the others by a thin layer of crushed green serpentine. The serpentine deposits associated with phase 2 (Massive Offering No. 1 and Pavement No. 1-1943) are two of the most remarkable discoveries in the history of Olmec studies. The southern entrance of the enclosed court becomes partially closed by the addition of two bastionlike platform mounds (Features A-1-d and A-l-e). Located under each of the two adobe mounds was a serpentine deposit consisting of twenty-eight courses of rough serpentine blocks weighing some one thousand tons (Drucker et al. 1959:97). On top of each of these huge deposits of serpentine a mosaic pavement with diamond-shaped appendages was set in clay. In the fill above the mosaic pavement buried in the southeast platform was found a cache of twenty celts (Offering 1943-E) arranged in a cruciform pattern. At the base of this cruciform-shaped axe deposit lay a hematite mirror (Wedel 1952:55). A deposit of six serpentine axes was also found by Drucker in the fill over the mask under the southwest platform, but he was unable to determine if they were laid in a cruciform pattern (Drucker et al. 1959: 132). The symbols associated with these mosaic pavements and their position in the south entrance will be discussed below.

Construction phase 3 begins with the deposit of a massive red, purple, and pink clay fill throughout the court. Atop this reddish clay deposit a new series of multicolored floors were laid down. These phase 3 multicolored floors were labeled Tierra Bonita by the early excavators (Wedel 1952:38) and the Old Rose Floor Series by the 1955 excavators (Drucker et al. 1959:23). The buildup of the floor level within the surrounding adobe walls of the court led to alterations in the height of the three platform mounds. The serpentine deposit that marks the beginning of phase 3 construction is Massive Offering No. 3, a deposit of six layers of serpentine blocks buried some 3.9 m under the layered floors of the enclosed court. Measuring 18.9 m x 19.8 m, the deposit of Massive Offering No. 3 as previously mentioned caused the removal of the serpentine block offering associated with the first phase of construction. Included with the offerings buried in the fill over Massive Offering No. 3 was a cache of thirty-eight serpentine and jade celts (Offering No. 10) arranged in a cruciform pattern (Drucker et al. 1959:185-186).

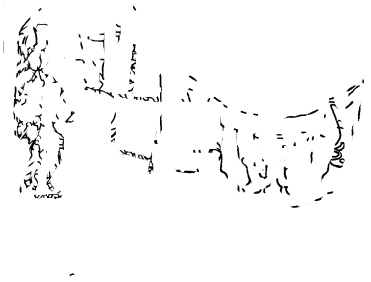

Fig. 9. a) La Venta Stela 2. From Drucker (1952:fig. 49); b) reconstruction of the lower headdress worn by the central figure on La Venta Stela 2. Here a bar and four dots motif is bracketed by two fish. Drawing by F. Kent Reilly, 1987.

Construction phase 4 was initiated by the already discussed Massive Offering No. 2. Phase 4 saw the addition of an uncompleted basalt stone-columned fence atop the now partially eroded adobe wall that bordered the court. This construction may have been necessitated by the buildup of the pavements within the adobe wall. Ritual activity that had been hidden within the enclosure was now being performed on what had become an elevated platform. The addition of the basalt column fence would have restored a sense of secrecy and exclusiveness to that ritual activity. Also in phase 4 what had been the Court's northern entrance was now almost entirely blocked by a greatly enlarged lowlying stepped pyramid (Mound A-2). It would be the deposit within Mound A-2 of the basalt column tomb (Tomb A) that signaled the end of ritual activity in La Venta Complex A. The subsequent abandonment of the enclosed court is heralded by the deposit of a one foot thick red clay cap over the entire complex (Drucker et al. 1959:25).

Fig. 10. a) A water lily and the fringed diamonds from the La Venta Mosaic Pavements. Drawings by F. Kent Reilly, 1989, and from Drucker et al. (1959:fig. 29); b) the Olmec Dragon incised on the left thigh of "Slim" and the fringed vegetative element which emerges from under the dragon's ventral plate. From Reilly (1987:fig. 55).

The Iconography and Interpretation of the Phase 2 Mosaic Masks

Returning to the phase 2 serpentine deposits, each of the mosaic pavements buried under the southeast and southwest mounds at the entrance of the enclosed court are constructed from some 485 squared blocks of cut serpentine. Measuring some 4.8 m x 4.4 m, each pavement has a squared cleft in the middle of its northern border and four feathered or fringed diamonds which extend out from the pavement's southern border (fig. 7a). The motifs visible on the surface of the pavement are rendered as a positive pattern by outlining each of the motifs with negative space. This negative space accentuated the positive image of the motif by being filled with orange, purple, and red clays.

There are two motifs outlined on the surface of each of the two serpentine pavements. At the northern end is a "double step" (Joralemon 1971: 16 [cat. no. 141]) and in the middle is the "bar and four dots" (Joralemon 1971:16 [cat. no. 139]), each of the four dots rendered as a "double step" motif. The "double step" or "double merlon," as it is more commonly called, is a symbol used widely within the Olmec symbol system (Benson 1971: 16, n. 2) (fig. 7b). The double merlon can be seen on the "torches" held by both human rulers and supernatural zoomorphs. It was shown surrounded by circles, contained within triangles, and is one of the motifs carved on the ground lines of tabletop altars; most important, it was frequently incised across the mouth of zoomorphic supernaturals (fig. 7c).

These renderings of the double merlon demonstrate that this motif should be placed in the symbol set that contains the open mouth of the earth-crocodilian, the U and inverted U elements, and the cleft element, all of which function as symbolic entrances to the Olmec underworld. The cleft element has long been recognized as functioning as an entrance into the earth because of the many depictions of vegetative motifs sprouting from clefts. Grove (1987b:431) reasoned that the importance of Chalcatzingo lay in the cleft between the two mountains that bracket the highland site. The squared or geometric shape of the double merlon is derived from a cross-sectional rendering of the enclosed courts or sunken patios that appears to be a focus at Formative Period sites. At Chaicatzingo the double merlon is archi-

tecturally created in the southern wall of a sunken patio by the intrusion of the altar, Monument 22 (fig. 8a). If the Chalcatzingo patio was the only example of the double merlon motif functioning as an architectural feature, then it would exist purely by happenstance. Fortunately at least two other examples exist. At Teopantecuanitlan, a recently discovered Formative Period site in Guerrero, four inverted T-shaped monoliths are positioned in the east and west walls of a sunken court so that a double merlon motif is formed along the top of each wall (fig. 8b). At La Venta the southeast and southwest platforms that cover the mosaic pavements are so positioned that the southern entrance of the court is through an architecturally constructed double merlon (fig. 8c). The fact that the mouths of certain supernaturals had double merlons incised across them also emphasizes that double merlons were entrances, and that the ritual spaces that incorporated the double merlon as an architectural element was itself to be perceived as a gaping maw and an entrance to the underworld. The presence of a large double merlon on the La Venta mosaic pavement identifies one of its functions as that of an underworld entrance.

Now that the function for the double merlon motif on the mosaic pavement has been proposed, an identification of the bar and four dots will allow a symbolic identification of the mosaic pavement itself. The bar and four dots motif was first suggested by Benson (1971: 29) as a possible place sign for the La Venta polity. However, a later identification by Joralemon (1976b:47-52) demonstrated that the bar and four dots is a symbol that describes his God 1, the "Olmec Dragon." Joralemon (1976b:fig. 9) also identified the La Venta sandstone sarcophagus as a primary image of the Olmec Dragon. As Joralemon (1976b:37-38) further states:

> God 1's primary associations are with earth, water, and agricultural fertility. Representations that depict vegetation sprouting from the deity's body suggest that the Olmec identified God 1 with the earth itself and imagined him as the ultimate source of agricultural abundance. The Dragon's gaping mouth symbolizes a cavern, which may represent the entrance to the Olmec underworld.

The bar and four dots motif is also seen in the headdress of the central, human figure of La Venta Stela 2 (fig. 9a). The scholarly consensus is that the figure on Stela 2 is a depiction of a La Venta ruler. The placement of the bar and

Fig. 11. a) Two Formative Period bowls from the Mexican Highlands. Drawings by F. Kent Reilly. redrawn after Soustelle (1967:ill. 3-4) and Covarrubias (1946: The Notebooks); b) the maw of the underworld from the Palenque sarcophagus lid. Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson.

four dots within this ruler's towering headdress supports Benson's contention that the bar and four dots motif, as it was used at La Venta, had political implications. In its placement in the headdress the bar and four dots is surrounded by a cartouche which is surmounted by a tripartite vegetative element and bracketed by what can be reconstructed as two ring-tailed fish (fig. 9b). The fish that forms the right bracket has a barbel or fin emanating from the corner of its mouth, a feature that was probably echoed by the fish on the left. The function of these two fish is similar to the function of the fish depicted nibbling on the water lilies tied to the arms of the earth-crocodilian on Copán Altar T. They are symbolic locatives that indicate that the "Olmec Dragon," represented by the bar and four dots, like the earth-crocodilian on Copán Altar T, floats in the waters of the primordial sea. The tripartite vegetative device above the bar and four dots was shown by Fields (1991) to derive from maize and to be ancestral to the tripartite headdress of the Jester God, the chief symbol of royalty amongst the Classic Maya. The association of this motif with the bar and four dots emphasizes the role of the Olmec Dragon as the source of vegetative fertility (Reilly 1991). The presence of both symbols in the headdress of a La Venta ruler is a signal that one of the sources of that ruler's power was, as Joralemon (1976b:40) hypothesized, the Olmec Dragon.

The bar and four dots and the double merlon motifs laid out within the mosaic pavements strongly indicate that the pavement itself symbolically is water, the medium in which the Olmec Dragon floats, and that this water serves as an underworld entrance. The identification of the fringed diamonds (Joralemon 1971:16 [cat. no. 140]) extending out from the southern border of the mosaic pavements is more tenuous (fig. l0a). The difficulty of providing any sort of sound iconographic interpretation for this specific motif is the paucity of similar designs, within the Olmec symbol system, with which to make comparisons. Rosemary Joyce (pers. com. 1987) suggested that the fringed diamonds represented vegetation. This vegetation identification fits very well with the function of the Olmec Dragon whose presence within the mosaic pavement is signaled by the bar and four dots motif. However, the fringed diamond does not resemble in any way the tripartite maize motifs that are so prevalent within the corpus of Olmec art. I would like to suggest the hypothesis that the fringed diamonds are representations of water vegetation, more specifically, some form of the water lily whose pad is represented by the diamond-shaped element and whose blossom is the fringe. A likely candidate for the natural source of this water lily symbol would be the *Nymphaea ampla*. As Hellmuth (1987:105) pointed out, the *Nymphaea ampla* "start their blossoms underwater. Thus, natural referents exist for fish nibbling on water lily pads and flowers." This water lily motif hypothesis will require more examples of the symbol before any conclusion can be reached. However, the fact that the blossom of the water lily which grows from under the Olmec Dragon, which is incised on the left thigh of "Slim" (a Middle Formative Period statue from the Pacific coast of Guatemala) as a fringed element, lends support to the hypothesis (fig. 10b). The function of the water lily on "Slim" is to symbolically represent the still water in which the Olmec Dragon/earth-crocodilian floats (Reilly 1987:107). If the fringed diamonds on the southern border of the mosaic pavements are symbolic water lilies, then they would fulfill the same symbolic function as the water lily attached to the Olmec Dragon incised on "Slim."

Conclusions

For the Classic Maya, Xibalbá was an underwater realm. The symbol set that artistically expressed this watery underworld view included water lilies, several symbols for water, and the gaping maw that served as a terrestrial entrance to the world of the ancestors. As we have seen, the positioning of a part of Tomb A at La Venta over Massive Offering No. 2, the contents of that tomb, and the placement of a monument representing the Olmec Dragon/earth-crocodilian exactly over the center of the same massive offering indicates that the "heartland" Olmec held a similar cosmic view. The fact that the enclosed court to the south of Tomb A has a similar serpentine pavement buried in the middle of its plaza space suggests that the purpose of the ritual activity taking place in that plaza would be to initiate communication with the underwater underworld and the ancestors who dwell there. The placement of an architectural double merlon at the entrance of

the enclosed court further indicates that the court itself was a constructed sacred landscape, the entrance to which was through an earthly portal. The exact nature of that earthly portal is signaled by the buried massive serpentine offerings and the two mosaic pavements above them. Since each mosaic pavement is bordered by what appears to be vegetation (perhaps water lilies), and each mosaic pavement contains an Olmec Dragon in the form of the bar and four dots, then the mosaic pavements could symbolize the water lily-covered surface of the primal waters in which the earth crocodile floats. The great serpentine deposits beneath the mosaic pavements would then be the waters of the underworld which underlie that primordial ocean. The placement over the La Venta serpentine pavements of a cruciform-shaped offering of stone celts (in one case containing a mirror) cached over it suggests that the Olmec, like the later Classic Maya, considered the watery underworld to be not only the location of the ancestors and thus of supernatural power, but also a realm pierced by the cruciform-shaped world tree. Finally, note should be made that the walls bracketing the enclosed court at La Venta have a similar shape to the bracketlike jaws on the sarcophagus lid at Palenque. The fact that designs on at least two Middle Formative Period bowls from the central Highlands depict these same double-hooked and bracket-shaped jaws indicates that, like other examples of Classic Maya underworld iconography, the gaping earth maw has a source in the symbol system of the Formative Period (fig. 11 a, b). It should be further noted that many other pots excavated or looted from Formative Period Highland tombs are rendered as fish, water fowl, and other creatures which have a water or underwater association. The presence of such aquatically-derived zoomorphic vessels in these Highland tombs indicates that the tombs and their occupants were considered to be underwater and underworld. They also demonstrate that a belief in an underwater underworld was not limited just to the tropical environments but was widespread throughout Formative Period Mesoamerica.

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