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ENTITLED Patterns of Olmec Monument Mutilation at

La Venta and San Lorenzo

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DEGREE OF Bachelor of Arts

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**PATTERNS IN OLMEC MONUMENT MUTILATION
AT LA VENTA AND SAN LORENZO**

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Formative period in Mesoamerica saw the rise and decline of one of the world's most misunderstood cultures: the Olmec culture of the Mexican Gulf Coast. The Olmec dominated the Gulf Coast area from approximately 1200-400 B.C. The Olmec are more archaeologically visible than other cultures because of their large ceremonial architecture, distinctive art style, and immense basalt monuments. Therefore, art and ideas across Mesoamerica have been attributed, often erroneously, to this culture.

No one knows why their culture arose or declined. Many archaeologists assume that the Olmec centers were "willfully destroyed" (Weaver 1972:67). This theory is based on the mutilation and destruction of the monuments at the Gulf Coast centers.

Monuments from all of the well-known Olmec sites on the Gulf Coast display mutilation, such as battering, fracturing, and pitting. In discussing the monuments, archaeologists often ignore the implications of mutilation and merely mention it in monument descriptions. The orthodox view of this mutilation is that it reflects violence that ended the Olmec civilization. Mutilation may, however, have a significance within the culture, rather than signifying its end.

Recent excavations by David Grove (1981) have also

demonstrated the occurrence of mutilation on Olmec-style monuments at the site of Chalcatzingo, located in the central Mexican highlands. Grove believes that this mutilation provides an insight into the true symbolism of mutilation. A recent hypothesis by Grove (1981) is designed to understand monument mutilation, destruction, and subsequent burial as part of the religious life and ritual cycle of the Olmec. In order to test this hypothesis, this paper examines the methods of mutilation in relation to the different types of monuments at San Lorenzo and La Venta, two major sites on the Gulf Coast.

Previous Explanations for Monument Mutilation

Matthew Stirling was the first archaeologist to speculate on the cause of monument mutilation. He believed that the mutilation was carried out by later Gulf Coast inhabitants in an effort to destroy these monuments because of their pagan nature (1940:334). Excavations at San Lorenzo have demonstrated, however, that these monuments were buried during the Olmec occupation.

In the case of Tres Zapotes, another major Gulf Coast site, Stirling suggested that the monuments were destroyed by invaders during the Olmec period (1940:111). Drucker et al. accepted this hypothesis in their report on the 1955

excavations at La Venta, claiming the same fate for that site (1959:230). Recent excavations at the major Gulf Coast sites have shown no evidence of invasion during the Olmec periods. Instead, Michael Coe postulated that the destruction of the monuments pointed to "internal strife. . . more than a peasant revolt" (1968:220).

There are problems with any hypothesis that involves strife, whether internal or external. Supporters of these hypotheses see conflict as the only reasonable cause for destruction. In fact, monument mutilation is the only piece of evidence that archaeologists use to demonstrate the "violent" end of Olmec culture. Although it is certainly possible that the Gulf Coast sites were scenes of violent confrontations, conflict should not be automatically accepted as the cause for defacement. In doing so, one ignores a tradition of ritual destruction in Mesoamerica, seen in later monuments and architecture, and documented in ethnohistoric sources. Violence, however, is the simplest answer to the question of monument mutilation. It neatly ties up a number of loose ends including why the monuments are defaced and buried, and why and how the Olmec culture ended. Such easy answers should be examined carefully before they are wholeheartedly accepted.

Drucker et al. did note, however, that "what we

interpret as . . . vandalism. . . may in fact be signs of some deliberate act directed toward placation of the spirits of the ancient sculptures" (1959:197). This statement was an attempt to go beyond the usual interpretations. Clewlow et al., in their work on colossal heads, also felt that defacement could be some sort of "ritual or ceremonial act" (1967:71)

David Grove has recovered Olmec-style monuments, which are also mutilated, from the site of Chalcatzingo. This site is located in central Mexico, over 200 miles from the Olmec area on the Gulf Coast. It is unlikely that mutilation found here would represent the same "internal strife" envisioned by Coe. Instead of reflecting a terminal event, mutilation could represent periodic destruction that was an integral part of Olmec beliefs. Grove noted some basic patterns underlying mutilation and suggested three hypotheses: 1) monuments were destroyed in connection with a calendric cycle; 2) mutilation occurred with the change of ruling dynasties; and 3) mutilation occurred at the death of a chief (1981:63). Because these explanations provide a basis for considering monument mutilation within its cultural context, they appear to be the most useful of any hypothesis offered so far.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, monuments were grouped by site and type. Because of the large numbers of mutilated monuments at the sites of San Lorenzo and La Venta, and because monuments at other sites are not so thoroughly catalogued, the monuments of San Lorenzo and La Venta were the only ones selected for this study. Monuments from the sites of Potrero Nuevo and Tenochtitlan, part of the San Lorenzo site complex, were added to the San Lorenzo list. One hundred and twenty three monuments were used in this study.

The monuments were divided into altars, colossal heads, stelae, reliefs, and free standing figures of humans, supernaturals, and zoomorphs. "Architectural" monuments such as benches, columns, or drainage sections, were excluded. The types of mutilation on each monument was then recorded. Mutilation was divided into fracturing, battering, grooves, pits, rectangular niches, and missing body portions. Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of monuments displaying a certain type of mutilation by the total number mutilated within a monument type. Monuments that could not be clearly identified were excluded from final percentages.

ANALYSIS

Altars (Table 1)

All of the altars at both sites have been mutilated. Both sites have many fractured altars: five at La Venta and nine at San Lorenzo. Eight of the fourteen altars at San Lorenzo are battered, but only one of seven at La Venta has been battered. A few altars at both sites display grooves, pits, and niches. Examples of this include San Lorenzo Monuments 14 (Fig. 1) and 20 (Fig. 2). As shown by Grove (1981), faces and other identifying marks are often removed from figures depicted on the altars.

Colossal Heads (Table 2)

None of the colossal heads have been fractured. Four of the ten San Lorenzo heads are battered but none of the four La Venta heads are. Three of the La Venta heads are grooved, as are four at San Lorenzo. Many of the heads at both sites are pitted: three at La Venta and seven at San Lorenzo. One head at San Lorenzo (Monument 19) has been battered and pitted until it no longer resembles a colossal head (Fig. 3). None of the La Venta heads display niches, and only one of the San Lorenzo heads has a niche. This particular head is also grooved and pitted (Monument 2, Fig. 4).

TABLE 1. Altars.

Mutilation Type	La Venta		San Lorenzo		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fractured	5	71	9	64	14	67
Battered	1	14	8	57	9	43
Grooves	1	14	3	21	4	19
Pits	1	14	2	14	3	14
Niches	1	14	2	14	3	14

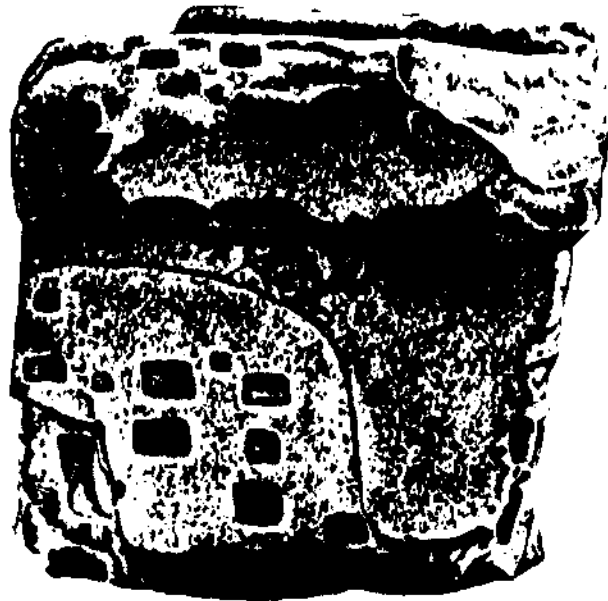


FIGURE 1 San Lorenzo Monument 14 (From Coe and Diehl
1960)

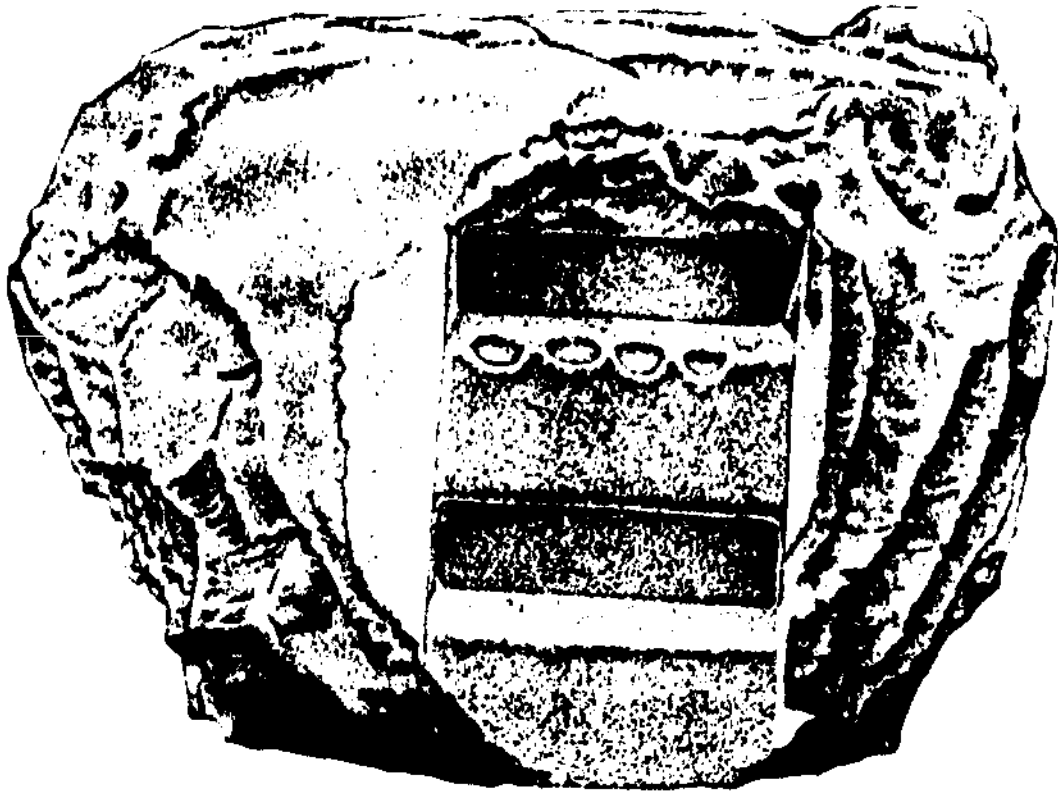
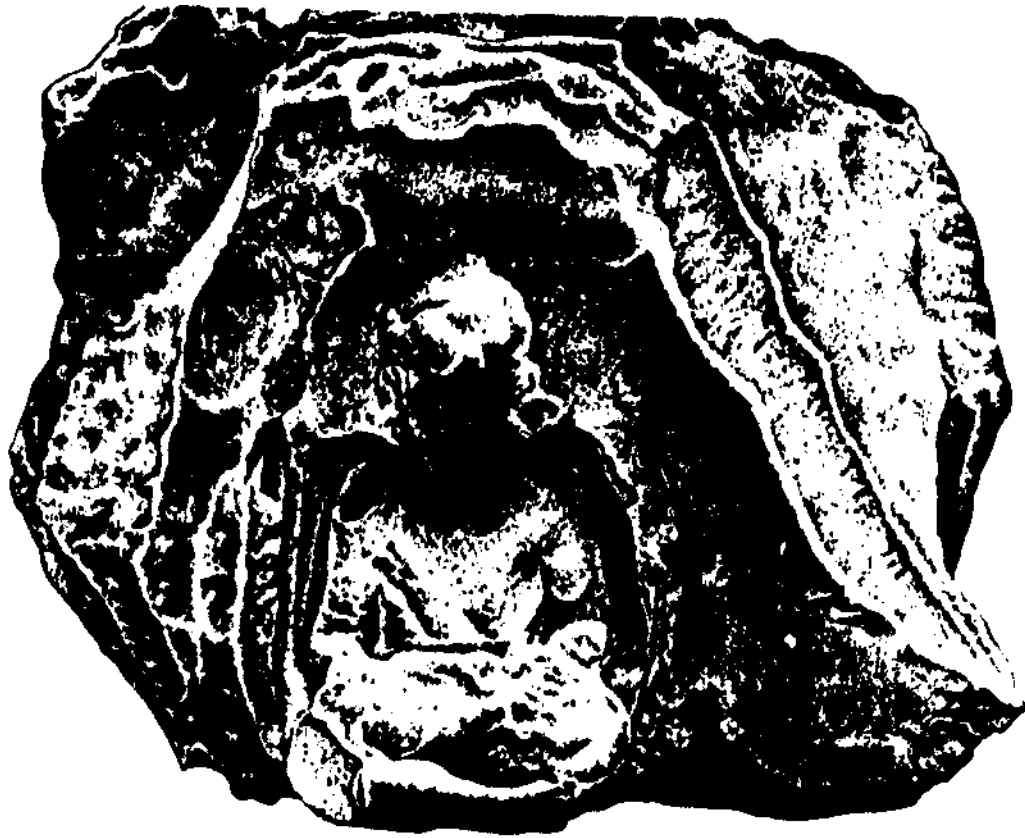


FIGURE 2. San Lorenzo, Montañas de San Lorenzo, 1950. (a) and (b) are the same specimen.

TABLE 2. Colossal Heads.

Nutilation Type	La Venta		San Lorenzo		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fractured	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dattered	0	0	4	44	4	31
Grooves	3	75	4	44	7	54
Pits	3	75	7	77	10	76
Niches	0	0	1	11	1	7





Stelae (Table 3)

Six of nine La Venta stelae have been mutilated. Of those six, two are fractured, three are battered, two are grooved, and one is pitted. An example of a battered stela is La Venta Stela 3 (Fig. 5). San Lorenzo has fewer stelae, but three of these four are mutilated. Two of these are fragmented, two are grooved, and one is pitted. Niches do not appear on any of the stelae at either site.

Reliefs (Table 4)

All of the nine reliefs at La Venta display some type of mutilation. Two of three San Lorenzo reliefs are mutilated. Eight of the La Venta but none of the San Lorenzo reliefs have been fractured. Two of the La Venta reliefs and one from San Lorenzo are battered. One relief at San Lorenzo is grooved and pitted (Monument 21, Fig. 6). None of the La Venta reliefs are grooved, and only one is pitted.

Human Figures (Table 5)

Most of the human figures at La Venta are mutilated (20 of 23). Twelve of twenty-three have been mutilated at San Lorenzo. Monuments at both sites are missing portions of the body. Most of the figures that are mutilated have been decapitated (11 out of 12).

TABLE 3. Stelae.

Mutilation Type	La Venta		San Lorenzo		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fractured	2	67	3	75	9	69
Battered	3	50	0	0	2	22
Grooves	2	33	2	67	4	44
Pits	1	17	1	33	1	11
Niches	0	0	0	0	0	0



FIGURE 5. La Venta Stela 3 (From de la Fuente 1973).

TABLE 4. Reliefs.

Mutilation Type	La Venta		San Lorenzo		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fractured	8	89	0	0	8	73
Dattered	2	22	1	50	3	27
Grooves	0	0	1	50	1	9
Pits	1	11	1	50	2	18
Niches	0	0	0	0	0	0

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FIGURE 1. SEM PHOTOGRAPH OF THE SURFACE OF THE



TABLE 5. Human figures.

Mutilation Type	La Venta		San Lorenzo		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fractured	11	55	11	92	22	69
Battered	1	5	5	42	12	38
Grooves	3	15	1	8	4	13
Pits	0	0	0	0	0	0
Niches	0	0	0	0	0	0
Missing Head	9	45	11	92	20	63
Missing Arms	7	35	5	42	12	38
Missing Legs	4	20	5	42	9	28
Missing Dody	4	20	5	42	9	28

Nine of the mutilated sculptures at La Venta were decapitated. At both sites, other body appendages were broken off. At La Venta, seven are missing arms, four are missing legs, and four are missing torso portions. San Lorenzo statues are also missing appendages. Five are armless, five are legless, and five are missing most of the body. A typical decapitated figure is probably San Lorenzo Monument 11 (Fig. 7). Only one of the La Venta figures is battered, while seven at San Lorenzo have been battered. A few of the figures are grooved: three at La Venta and one at San Lorenzo.

Supernatural Figures (Table 6)

All of the four definable supernatural figures at La Venta display mutilation. One (Monument 75) is missing its head and one (Monument 64, Fig. 8) is missing its body. At San Lorenzo the two supernaturals are battered but basically complete.

Zoomorphic Figures (Table 7)

Four of five zoomorphic figures at La Venta are mutilated. These are all fractured but display no particular pattern. All of the six zoomorphic monuments at San Lorenzo are mutilated. Four are headless, and one is legless. Five are fractured, one is battered, and one is



FIGURE 7. San Lorenzo Monument 11 (From Coe and Diehl 1980).

TABLE 6. Supernatural figures.

Mutilation Type	La Venta		San Lorenzo		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fractured	4	100	2	100	6	100
Battered	2	50	0	0	2	33
Grooves	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pits	0	0	0	0	0	0
Niches	0	0	0	0	0	0
Missing Head	1	25	0	0	1	14
Missing Arms	0	0	0	0	0	0
Missing Legs	0	0	0	0	0	0
Missing Body	1	25	0	0	1	17



FIGURE 8. La Venta Monument 64 (Prom de la Puente 1973).

TABLE 7. Zoomorphic figures.

Mutilation Type	La Venta		San Lorenzo		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fractured	4	80	5	83	9	90
Dattered	0	0	1	17	1	10
Grooves	0	0	1	17	1	10
Pits	0	0	0	0	0	0
Niches	0	0	0	0	0	0
Missing Head	1	25	4	67	4	40
Missing Arms	0	0	0	0	0	0
Missing Legs	0	0	1	17	1	10
Missing Body	0	0	0	0	0	0

grooved. An example of a headless zoomorph is depicted in Fig. 9.

All Monuments (Table 8)

Of the sixty La Venta monuments used in this analysis, fifty are mutilated. Thirty-two are fractured, nine are battered, nine are grooved, six are pitted, one has a niche, fourteen are missing heads, seven are missing arms, five are missing legs, and six are missing bodies.

Of the sixty-three analyzed San Lorenzo monuments, forty-eight are mutilated. Twenty-seven are fractured, twenty-two are battered, thirteen are grooved, eleven are pitted, three display niches, fifteen are missing heads, five are missing arms, six are missing legs, and five are missing bodies.

DISCUSSION

La Venta and San Lorenzo display similar patterns of monument mutilation. The pattern in types of mutilation is remarkably similar at the two sites. Fracturing is the most common type of mutilation, even on such massive monuments as the large tabletop altars. Fracturing is not, however, found on colossal heads. Grooves are most common on colossal heads, altars, and stelae. Niches are found mainly

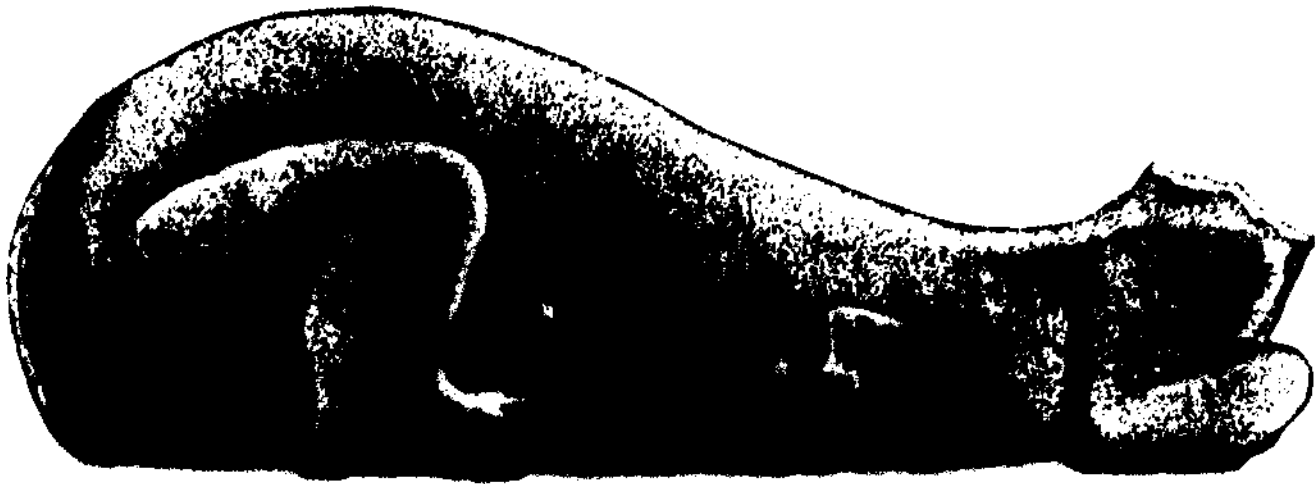
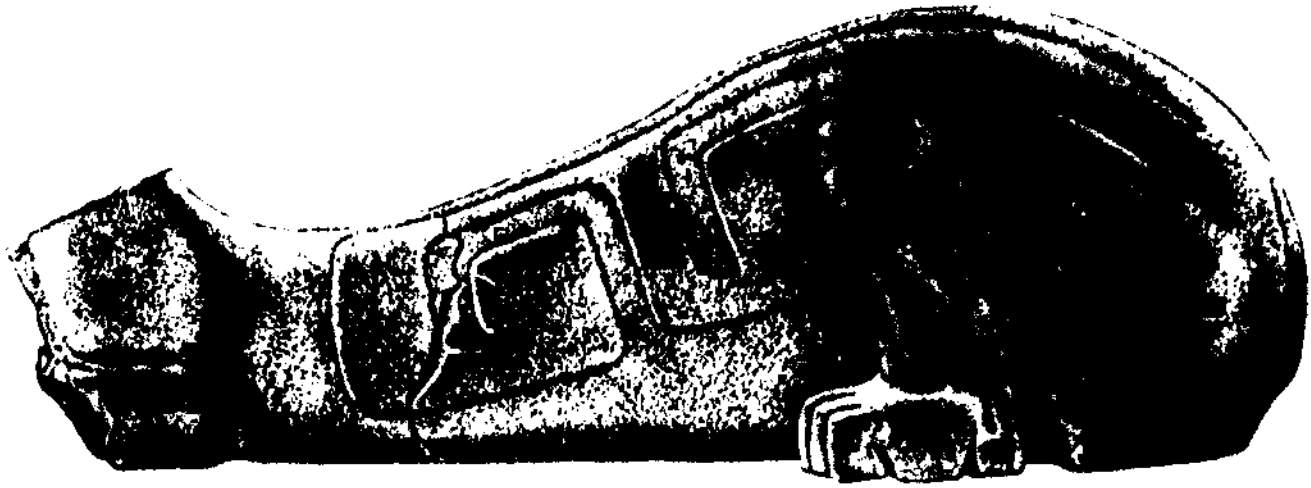


FIGURE 1. (a) Side view of the boot. (b) Side view of the boot.

FIGURE 1. (a) Side view of the boot. (b) Side view of the boot.

TABLE 8. All monuments.

Mutilation Type	La Venta		San Lorenzo		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fractured	32	64	27	17	59	60
Dattered	9	18	22	46	31	32
Grooves	9	18	13	27	22	22
Pits	6	12	11	23	17	17
Niches	1	2	3	6	4	4
Missing Head	14	28	15	31	29	30
Missing Arms	7	14	5	10	12	12
Missing Legs	5	10	6	13	11	11
Missing Body	6	12	5	10	11	11

on altars, but they are rare on any monument. Humans display the most varied damage in terms of fracturing. Heads were the main targets, but arms and legs were also missing from many of the monuments. The fate of zoomorphic figures varied. At La Venta the zoomorphs were randomly fractured, but at San Lorenzo, special attention was given to the heads. There were only a few supernatural figures in the study group, and their destruction bore no discernible pattern.

Why was so much attention placed on the human body, especially on the human head? The human statues and colossal heads were probably depictions of rulers. Colossal heads, therefore, reflect the importance of the ruler's head. The head is probably the most unique feature of any individual, and power rested with the specific individual. The rulers of La Venta and San Lorenzo commanded immense power to oversee the building of ceremonial complexes at these sites. The colossal heads are proof that this power was more personal and not inherent in the political system.

Could destruction and defacement reflect dissatisfaction with the rulers? It is unlikely that a disgruntled rebel would take the time to follow neat patterns. Nor does this explain the mutilation of monuments depicting supernaturals and animals.

It is more likely that the defacement was part of a

ritual acknowledging the power of the ruler. Grove states that "the personification of rulers in monuments and figures indicated that the ruler had become the focal point of society. . ."(1981:122). A depiction of a ruler would capture some of the ruler's power as the focal point. One could also state that a portrait would capture part of the ruler's "spirit." When the ruler died, his portraits would have to be destroyed or defaced in order to release his spirit.

In the case of altars, Grove (1973) has demonstrated that they were "thrones," and, literally, the seat of a ruler's power. The ruler is usually shown in a niche representing the mouth of the earth-monster. This represents the ruler's access to the underworld, a place of great power in Mesoamerican religious tradition. Therefore, it is not surprising that these are the most heavily damaged of all the monuments. The ruler would be the only person who could control the power depicted on his throne (Grove 1981:64). When the ruler died, the power would be uncontrolled, and only neutralized by the destruction of the altar. It is interesting to note that the altar which received the least damage at San Lorenzo was an altar that did not display a ruler; instead, it depicts four "Atlantean" figures holding the tabletop (Potrero Nuevo Monument 2, Fig. 10).



FIGURE 10. Potrero Nuevo Monument 2 (From Coe and Diehl
1980).

Few people have questioned why other appendages are broken off. It may simply be chance that the limbs are knocked off. An alternative explanation is that the arms and legs were also considered important parts of the ruler's body. Susan Gillespie (personal communication) has associated decapitation and dismemberment with the division of time into periods. Although this hypothesis was developed to explain iconography of the rubber ballgame, ritual dismemberment could have existed during the Formative period. The dismemberment of a ruler's portrait figure could represent the division of time into periods based on the life and death of the ruler.

Supernatural figures would also be mutilated at the death of the ruler that commissioned them, for they represent the ruler's control over supernatural forces. As Grove points out, "uncontrolled supernatural power is both frightening and dangerous to the members of the society" (1981:64). This would explain the extensive mutilation done to the famous copulation figures. (An example is shown in Fig. 11). These figures obviously represent an event of great significance in Olmec religious beliefs. As such, they would be recognized as a immense source of supernatural power. These could not be left lying uncontrolled in the middle of the settlement.

Very little attention has been paid to the grooves,



FIGURE 11. Tenochtitlan Monument 1 (From Coe and Diehl 1980).

pits, and niches found on Olmec monuments. Grooves may reflect usage of the monuments as sharpening tools. These are found on large plain monuments (such as columns) as well as on monuments with iconography. Pits and niches are less easy to explain. These are restricted to certain types of monuments. Pits, which are formed by deliberate grinding, are only found on altars, colossal heads, stelae, and reliefs. Niches, which are carefully carved out, are only seen on four monuments; of these four, three are altars, and one is a colossal head. Because niches only appear on the most powerful monuments, it must be a very special type of mutilation. Grove (1981) refers to grooves, pits, and niches as non-specific kinds of mutilation. I believe, however, that I have presented evidence that these pits and niches are very specific acts of mutilation, perhaps meant to release the power bound up in these monuments.

CONCLUSIONS

Patterns can definitely be discerned in the destruction of monuments at San Lorenzo and La Venta. It seems unlikely that angry rebels would take the time to deface the monuments in specific patterns that basically do not vary from site to site, then stop to bury them in straight lines. It is more likely that breakage was not only

symbolic of the end of a historic cycle (i.e., the period of a chief's rule), but also insured that the ruler's power objects would not be left uncontrolled. These patterns seem to support the third of Grove's hypotheses.

Further research on Olmec monument mutilation could look at monuments from other Olmec sites to see if they fit the patterns described above. Further analysis should also look for associations between types of mutilation, or between types of mutilation and the specific iconography of each monument. The hypothesis proposed by Grove and the analysis presented here are only important first steps in placing monument mutilation into a cultural context.

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