

THE CROSSES OF LA VENTA

At the Olmec site of La Venta (Tabasco, Mexico) three offerings of celts were found arranged in the form of a cross. Besides these three, there is one more offering which, according to some premises that will be discussed later, may have also had this form. Unfortunately, some of the essential details concerning these findings are lacking in the reports of the excavations. The crosses of La Venta are rarely and only perfunctorily mentioned in the literature; all the authors confine themselves to the descriptive level of analysis.

The aim of this paper is to extend the analysis concerning these objects to the interpretational level and to look for an explanation of some of their most intriguing features.

Let us sum up here all the necessary data concerning the objects in question, adjusting in their enumeration to the sequence of the time of their discovery. The numbers given to this sequence will be subsequently used as reference numbers.

1. Offering 1942-C (fig. 2). It was found in 1942 on platform A-2, enclosed in the fill over the Massive Offering No. 2, on the centerline of Complex A (fig. 1)¹. This stratigraphic position allows us to date it to phase IV, just as the whole of all the fill over the Massive Offering No. 2 and the latter offering itself. There were 37 jade² celts "laid out in neat rows, bits to the north except 2 which were stood up on end . . . embedded in a layer of 7 to 10 cm thick of very compact olive-brown clay"³. Five of the celts were removed by the workmen but their probable position is given on the drawing attached to the report of the excavations⁴. Three of the celts have engraved decoration (fig. 3), but unfortunately the report fixes the position of only two of them and without specification⁵. Thus the decoration pattern of these three celts as a whole, which must have had some special meaning, is not known. The details of this decoration will be discussed later. In north-south extent the cross measured 112 cm; in east-west extent, 122 cm⁶.

2. Offering 1942-E. In 1942 a small pit (1 m. by 2 m.) was excavated in the middle of platform A-1-e (fig. 1). The pit was dug through the layer of

adobe bricks and according to Ph. Drucker „Under the bricks on both north and east sides of the trench, two small caches of serpentine celts were found. The cache on the north side consisted of two specimens, and the one in the east of four. In both cases the objects were enveloped in masses of very hard dark olive-brown clay which showed impressions of straw or grasses⁷“. In their report on the excavations in 1955 the authors suggest the possibility that it was also arranged in a cruciform layout⁸. Their suggestion is based on the similarity of the position of this offering and that of Offering 1943-E, found in an analogical place on the opposite side of the centerline (see cross No. 3). The offering described above should be dated to the same phase as Massive Offering No. 1 and the jaguar mask mosaic underlying platform A-1-e, that is to say to phase II.

3. Offering 1943-E (fig. 4). It was found an 1943 in platform A-1-d (fig. 1) “some 15–20 cm below the contact plane between bricks and underlying sandy clay rubble, completely enclosed by the latter material, and about 50 cm west of the center of the column enclosed area . . .⁹”. There were 20 celts. Most of them were of serpentine, while according to Waldo R. Wedel “two or three were of some harder stone, apparently jade¹⁰”. Unlike Offerings 1943-C and E mentioned above, here “there was no evidence of a specially prepared bed for the celts¹¹”. In the center of the cross there is a concavity measuring 17 cm in diameter and containing traces of some wooden object (probably a wooden plaque) covered with red pigment (“ochre of cinnabar”)¹². North of the center of the cross, between the three celts and the last single one, a concave mirror was found with its polished face turned up. The dimensions of the offering are: 110 cm in north-south extent, 125 cm in east-west extent. The dating is similar to that of Offering 1943-E, described above, lying under platform A-1-e which was once more excavated in 1955 and has therefore its phase chronology which was developed during these excavations. There is a strict analogy between platforms A-1-d and A-1-e, the former having also an underlying jaguar mask mosaic and possibly also a massive offering. The form of the cross may be seen in fig. 4. As there is no drawing of this offering in Waldo R. Wedel’s report, I have made it myself according to the information available¹³. The position of the celts as well as their size and form are given only approximately, particularly in the case of the three top ones which are not shown on the plates as they were “removed during earlier excavations¹⁴”.

4. Offering 1955 No. 10 (fig. 5). It was discovered in 1955, enclosed in the fill over Massive Offering No. 3, on the centerline of Complex A (fig. 1)

It is composed of 51 celts “laid out on a special bed of reddish clay, and . . . plastered over with a layer of yellow sandy clay¹⁵”. According to Table 8 in the report on the excavations¹⁶, only four of the celts are of jade, and the others being of serpentine. This table does not give the position of the celts, but the comparison of the dimensions given there and on the enclosed drawing¹⁷ allows us to conclude that the biggest of the celts, in the northern part of the center of the cross, is made of jade. This does not exhaust the possible colour symbolism of the offering. As the excavators state that “at the extreme south end there was a small area covered with dark-purple material, which may perhaps be a pigment, or a form of cinnabar¹⁸”. As for the form of the cross it is shown in fig. 5. There are some apparent irregularities in the layout of the offering. However, “there was no indication that it had been disturbed subsequent deposition, and the layers of deposit upon which it was placed appeared so compact that it seems doubtful that they might have settled¹⁹”. Thus the authors of the foregoing quotation take it as “at least worth considering as a possibility that the apparent irregularity may have been intentional, and that the layout actually represents some more complex symbol, and one which we are unable to recognize²⁰”. The dimensions of the cross are: 134 cm in north-south extent and 142 cm in east-west extent²¹. Similarly to all the fill over Massive Offering No. 3 and this offering itself, it may be dated to phase III.

The three, or possibly four, crosses described above constitute a part of the whole symbolical arrangement of La Venta offerings (fig. 1). Each phase was probably inaugurated in La Venta by a deposition of a new massive offering. Moreover, in phase II and possibly IV²² the monumental jaguar mask mosaics were laid. These offerings are deposited on the Complex A centerline or symmetrically on either side of it, with the jaguar mask mosaics of phase II lying half-distance between Massive Offering No. 2 (under platform A-2) and the jaguar mask mosaic placed at the south end of platform A-3. In view of this symmetry it seems probable that there was one more cross in the region of the south end of platform A-3. Be it as it may, the cultural context of the crosses justifies the conclusion that some deep symbolism must have been connected with them.

Let us analyze first of all the general form of the crosses. All of them have a north-south orientation of the symmetry axis similarly to the whole pattern of Complex A. The northern and southern segments are apparently different, one being shorter than the other. In crosses Nos, 1 and 3, the shorter is the southern segment, while in cross No. 4 – the northern one.

Thus there arises the question which of these two parts, if any, was considered by the La Ventans to be the top of the cross. The figures showing the offerings in the reports of the excavations were drawn according to the arbitrary criterion that north should be in the upper part of the drawing. This results in the case of crosses Nos. 1 and 4 in the longer part being the top and bottom, respectively.

Fortunately the Olmecs themselves provide us here with the clue. Let us observe first that in cross No. 1 and 4 all the bits show the same direction (pointing south and north, respectively). Now, the bit was always considered to be the top of the celt, as may be seen from the arrangement of the decoration of all the Olmec decorated celts, those of cross No. 1 being an example. This implies that in the crosses Nos. 1 and 4 we should take as the *top* the southern and northern part, respectively, that is to say – the *shorter* part in both cases. For this reason I have turned in fig. 2 the cross (cross No. 1) upside down in relation to its original drawing²³. The same orientation may be assumed by analogy in the case of cross No. 3 in which all the celts are pointing with their bits outward.

When we look at these crosses in the correct way, there appears a striking similarity to the well-known Mesoamerican representations of the so-called world trees – a very important element in the central Mexican as well as the Maya religion. The green celts are a very good substitute for leaves. Moreover, the arrangement of the crosses at the site (fig. 1) recalls the fact that there were five world trees, one in the center and one related to with each cardinal point²⁴. This supports the hypothesis that there was a fifth cross in the place suggested above. The cross No. 4 may be taken as the central one, as it fits more or less into this role and as the real center of the whole arrangement, between platforms A-1-d and A-q-e, proved to be devoid of any remarkable features²⁵. This displacement of the center may be due to the necessity of adjusting new constructions to the old one.

One may argue that, in view of the temporal distances separating the three respective phases of the development of the sites, the arrangement of the crosses *as a whole* is not likely to have any special meaning. It seems to me, however, that the temporal distances are insignificant here as we know well that in all phases the site developed according to the same general original plan. This is evidenced by the arrangement of the massive offerings and jaguar mask mosaics as well as by the case of the famous Offering No. 4. As for the latter, there is a hole cut through the floors covering it, probably at the end of phase III. According to the excavators, “the point of special

interest in this connection is the very accurate manner in which this inspection hole was located directly over the elliptical area occupied by the offering. We are of the opinion that this indicates that some sort of accurate record were made, or possibly some sort of plan, so that a considerable time after the burial of the offering it could be found again²⁶”.

The symbolism of cardinal points is repeated in the decoration of the celts in Offering 1942-C (cross No. 1). Two of them have the four-dot-and-bar motif similar to that in the jaguar mask mosaics. In the case of the incised decoration on the recently found Olmec mask from San Felipe (Tabasco) the central bar is replaced by a simple dot resulting in a typical Mesoamerican quincunx. That in this case the latter is also a simplified representation of the jaguar mask may be seen from the fact that there is a cleft on the top of this motif²⁷. As the quincunx is connected with the symbolism of the cardinal points we can assume that the four-dot-and-bar motif has the same meaning.

There is one more interesting problem connected with the above-discussed decoration. On the celts b and c (fig. 3) there appears a motif which may represent a sprouting plant, probably maize. The central motif of the upper band shown on the celt denoted by the letter a is interpreted by P. D. Joralemon in the same way, and all the three celts are claimed to be simplified representations of one Olmec god (god II), possibly the maize god²⁸, who in some of his later Mesoamerican representations bears a similar sprouting plant motif on his head²⁹. If this is really the case we have here the first trace of the Olmec system of connecting their gods with the cardinal points. Here it would be the connection of the maize god with north, as the celts mentioned constitute a part of the northern cross. This system has an analogy for example in the famous p. 1 of Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, where Centeotl (the maize god) is placed on the right side of the *northern tree*³⁰. The existence of such a system among the Olmecs is suggested by the decoration of the famous Olmec figure from Las Limas. On its arms and legs there is a regular arrangement of four versions of the Olmec jaguar dragon mask, which are interpreted by M. Coe as the representations of the prototypes of four later Mexican gods: Xipe Totec, Xiuhtecuhtli, Quetzalcóatl and Mictlantecuhtli³¹. The lack of the maize god's symbols is insignificant here as each cardinal point may have been connected with many gods. Unfortunately, we do not know the original position of this figure and hence cannot reconstruct the hypothetical correspondences to the cardinal points.

As for the symbolism of colours noteworthy is the green jade heart of

cross No. 4 and the red heart of cross no. 3, the center of cross No. 4 may be its individual center but it may also have a wider meaning as this seems to be the central cross (see above). Cross No. 3 which has a red center lies on the eastern side of the site, and this is consistent with one of the later Mesoamerican systems of correspondences of the colours to the cardinal points (for example in the Maya mythology). Thus it seems that, at least as regards the colours of the world trees, this system was in Mesoamerica the original one.

There is a difference in the orientation of the crosses as the cross No. 4 has its top pointing north, contrary to the other ones. This may have some meaning, but presently I am unable to find it. Moreover, all the crosses discussed are more or less different from each other. As, except for the controversial offering 1942-E, each of them belongs to a different phase, we cannot decide whether these differences are due only to the differences of style in the particular phases or whether they are a manifestation of some deeper symbolism, the latter possibility being in my opinion less probable. As for the irregularities in cross No. 4, I am against the opinion that they may have some symbolical interpretation (see above), as it seems to be inconsistent with the otherwise clear symbolical conception inspiring the formal appearance of the objects in question. Be that as it may, all these differences and irregularities do not contradict the hypotheses formulated above.

These hypotheses may be of some importance not only for the analysis of the Olmec religion but also for the problem of the role the Olmecs played in the cultural development of Mesoamerica. As the concept of the world trees and the correspondences of the maize god and the red colour to the north and east, respectively, have apparent analogies in the later Mesoamerican religions, the great probability of the existence of these elements in La Venta is another reason for regarding the Olmec culture as the *cultura madre* of Mesoamerican civilisation.

A few months after finishing my paper I have been able to read the proceedings of the conference in pre-columbian iconography held at Dumbarton Oaks in 1970 (Elizabeth Benson ed., *The Cult of the Feline*, a Conference in Pre-columbian Iconography, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D. C. 1972) where M. D. Coe in his paper "Olmec Jaguars and Olmec Kings" says that the Offering 1943-E from La Venta (see above) represents a World-Tree (p. 9). Moreover, in the discussion he compares the quadripartite division of the four representations

on the Las Limas figure with that of the World-Trees (p. 17) I am glad to find support for some of my theses in the opinion of one of the best specialists in the Olmec problem. As for M. Coe's hypothesis that the mirror in the offering in question is a symbol of the Olmec counterpart of Tezcatlipoca, there is here one point worth a closer examination. To support this hypothesis the author recalls the mythological connection of Tezcatlipoca with the rising of the World-Trees (op. cit., p. 9), suggested also implicitly by the equation made between Tezcatlipoca and Bacab (op. cit., p. 8). Thus it seems to me quite possible that in the arrangement of the La Venta offerings we have reflected not only the concept of a static mandala but also a dynamic concept of the world's creation, similar to that of the later times. The suggestion is a very speculative one, but it (as well as M. Coe's hypothesis) gains support from the fact of the great similarity in general, between the Olmec and later religious symbolism (see above) and if we take the latter fact into consideration we can add some new supporting data, pointing out much closer parallels between the symbolism of the Tezcatlipoca – World-Tree complex and the La Venta Offerings. Namely, according to the "Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas", after the destruction of the world bringing to the end the fourth Sun, in order to support the heaven Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl changed themselves into the World-Trees, the former in this manifestation being called "Mirror-Tree" (Tezcaquauitl)! Now, turning back to the La Venta offerings let us observe that it is possible not only that the mirror has here a special meaning (it is itself a hypothesis) but also that it was intentionally laid in one cross only (the eastern one) to distinguish it from the others. Unfortunately, we know nothing in this regard in the case of the hypothetical crosses from platform A-1-e (Offering 1942-E) and from the southern end of platform A-3. Moreover, all the three known crosses are from a different phase each. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that what is symbolized here is not Tezcatlipoca in general but Tezcatlipoca as the "Mirror-Tree", ascribed by the Olmecs to the east. It would be interesting to know what was the connection of this manifestation of Tezcatlipoca with the cardinal points in the postclassic period, but there is no information on this point in the "Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas" and, as far as I remember, in all the other sources neither. Moreover, there is still very little evidence for all the suggestions made above and they are intended mainly to trace a new direction for further analysis.

NOTES

- 1 Ph. Drucker, *La Venta, Tabasco. A study of Olmec ceramics and art*, *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology* 153, 1952, p. 27; for the exact position see Ph. Drucker, R. F. Heizer, R. J. Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*, *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology* 170, 1959/cited DHS/, fig. 4 and 12.
- 2 DHS, p. 272.
- 3 Ph. Drucker, l. c.
- 4 Ph. Drucker, o. c., fig. 10b.
- 5 See note 3.
- 6 Calculated after Ph. Drucker, o. c., fig. 10b.
- 7 Ph. Drucker, o. c., p. 31.
- 8 DHS, p. 129.
- 9 Waldo R. Wedel, *Structural investigations in 1943*, in: Ph. Drucker o. c., p. 55.
- 10 Waldo R. Wedel, l. c.
- 11 Waldo R. Wedel, l. c.
- 12 Waldo R. Wedel, o. c., p. 56.
- 13 Waldo R. Wedel, O. c., pp. 55–56, pl. 8.
- 14 Waldo R. Wedel, o. c., pl. 8, legend.
- 15 DHS, p. 185.
- 16 DHS, o. c.
- 17 DHS, fig. 51.
- 18 DHS, p. 185.
- 19 DHS, l. c.
- 20 DHS, l. c.
- 21 Calculated after DHS, fig. 51.
- 22 DHS, pp. 117–118, 299.
- 23 Ph. Drucker, o. c., fig. 10b.
- 24 See for example Fray Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites*, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman 1971, pp. 160–166; *Codex Fejérváry–Mayer*, p. 1; *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, folio 24, trans. Ralph L. Roys, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman 1967, p. 100; etc.
- 25 Waldo R. Wedel, o. c., p. 59.
- 26 DHS, pp. 154–155.
- 27 E. B. Sisson, *Máscara olmeca de San Felipe*, *Boletín de INAH* 40, 1970, pp. 45–48, fig. 61; for two other examples of quincunx with the cleft see P. D. Joralemon, *A Study in Olmec Iconography*, *Studies in pre-columbian art and archaeology* 7, 1971, figs. 64, 89, 146.
- 28 P. D. Joralemon, o. c., pp. 60, 64, 90, figs. 174, 181.
- 29 See for example *Codex Fejérváry–Mayer*, p. l.
- 30 cf. C. A. Burland, *The Gods of Mexico*, London 1967, p. 206; C. A. Burland, *The four directions of time. An account of the page one of Codex Fejérváry–Mayer*, Santa Fe, New Mexico 1950; I. Nicholson, *Mexikanische Mythologie*, Wiesbaden 1967, p. 96; on p. 111 of “*The Gods of Mexico*” (see above) the author ascribes Centeotl to the west, together with Tlazolteotl, changing the other correspondences respectively, but this implies an unjustifiable connection of the gods in pairs, the only acceptable one being according to my estimation that of the gods facing each other on both sides of the world trees which are the best element to determine the cardinal points.
- 31 M. Coe, *America’s first civilisation*, New York 1968, pp. 111–115; for the full description of the figure see A. Medellín Zenil, *La escultura de Las Limas*, *Boletín de INAH* 21, 1965, pp. 5–17; the possibility of the cardinal points symbolism was suggested to me by doc. dr A. Wierciński.

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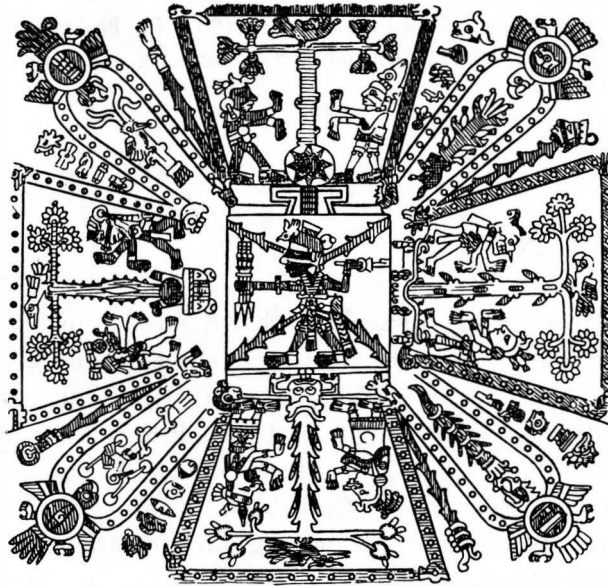
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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ziel dieses Aufsatzes ist es, Aufschlüsse über die Bedeutung der kreuzförmig ausgelegten Opferdepositen aus kreuzförmig ausgelegten Steinaxtklingen zu gewinnen, wie sie in La Venta (Tabasco, México) zu finden sind. Aus dem Vergleich mit dem späteren religiösen Symbolismus Mesoamerikas ergibt sich, daß es sich offenbar um die Strukturen von „Weltbäumen“ handelt. Die Anordnung der Opferstücke nach Kardinalpunkten und die Analogie zu dem jüngeren mesoamerikanischen System von Entsprechungen zwischen Göttern, Farben und Himmelsrichtungen zeigt, daß es sich um das typische Weltbild-Schema dieses Raumes handelt – um ein Gegenstück zum indischen Mandala.

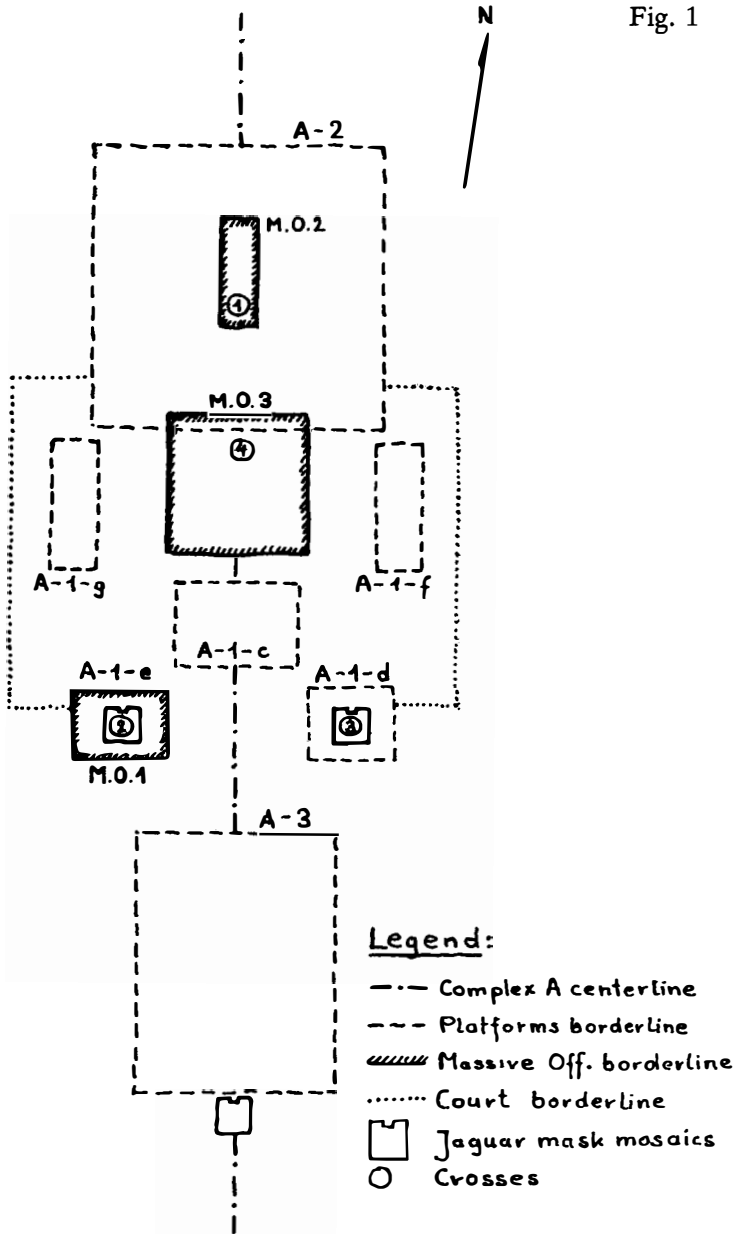
RESUMEN

El objeto de este artículo es de informar acerca del significado de los atributos de sacrificios (piedras de hacha dispuestas en forma de cruz), tal como se encuentran en La Venta (Tabasco, México). Comparados con el final del simbolismo religioso de Mesoamérica es de creer que se trata de estructuras de “árboles del universo“. La disposición de las piezas de sacrificio colocadas según los puntos cardinales y la analogía al sistema más reciente mesoamericano de concordancias entre dioses, colores y puntos cardinales muestra que se trata del esquema típico del concepto del mundo de esta región – similar al Mandala hindú.



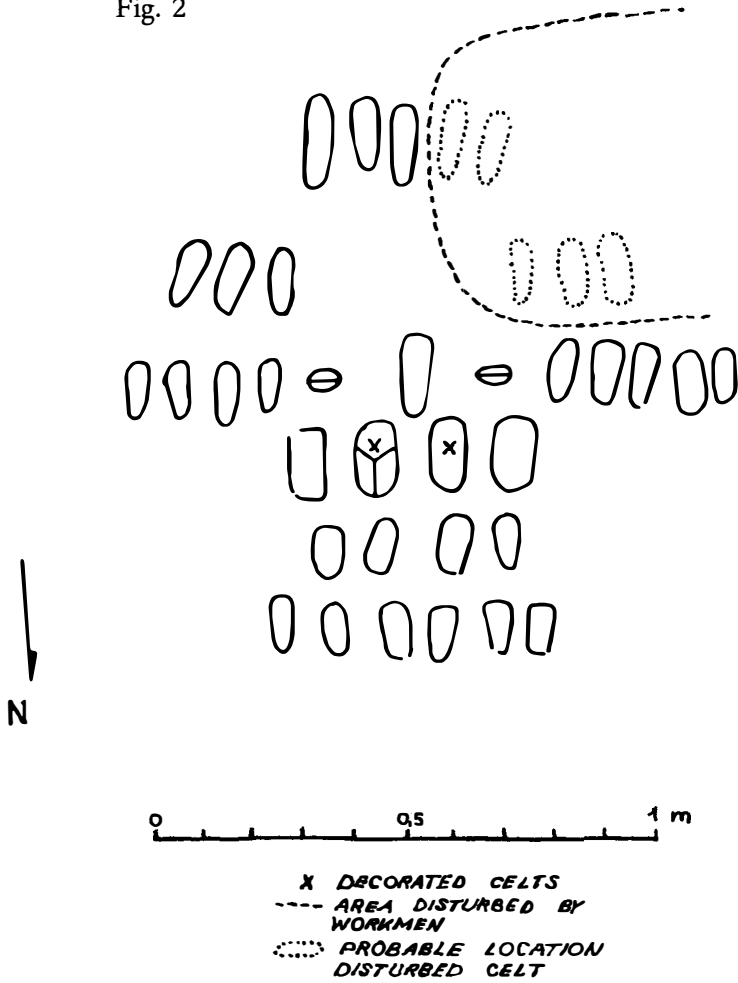
Ein schematisches Bild des Kosmos mit den Hütern der vier Weltgegenden aus dem vorkolumbischen Amerika (Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, Altmexiko). Vgl. H. Biedermann, Altmexikos heilige Bücher, Graz 1971.

Fig. 1



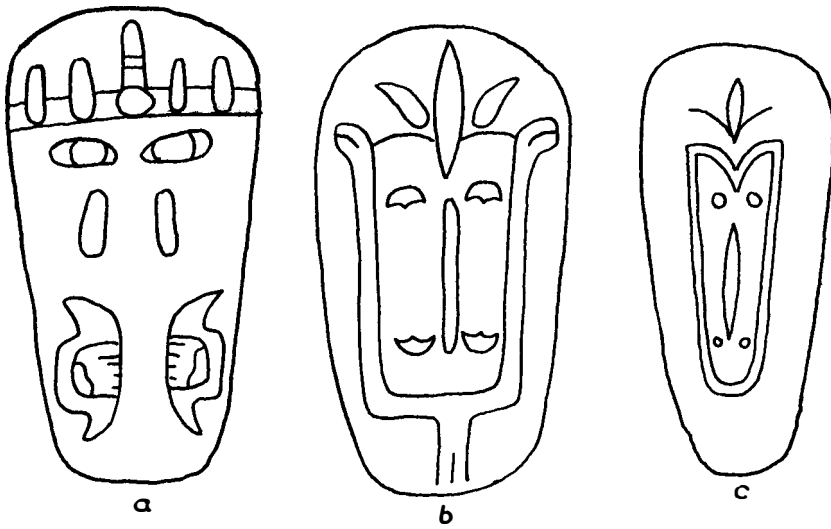
1. Plan of Complex A at La Venta (without platforms A-4 and A-5). The borderline of platform A-1-e is not shown as it is nearly indential with that of Massive Offering No. 1. In the case of platform A-1-d it may also have an underlying massive offering. The numbers of the crosses refer to their numbers in this paper.

Fig. 2



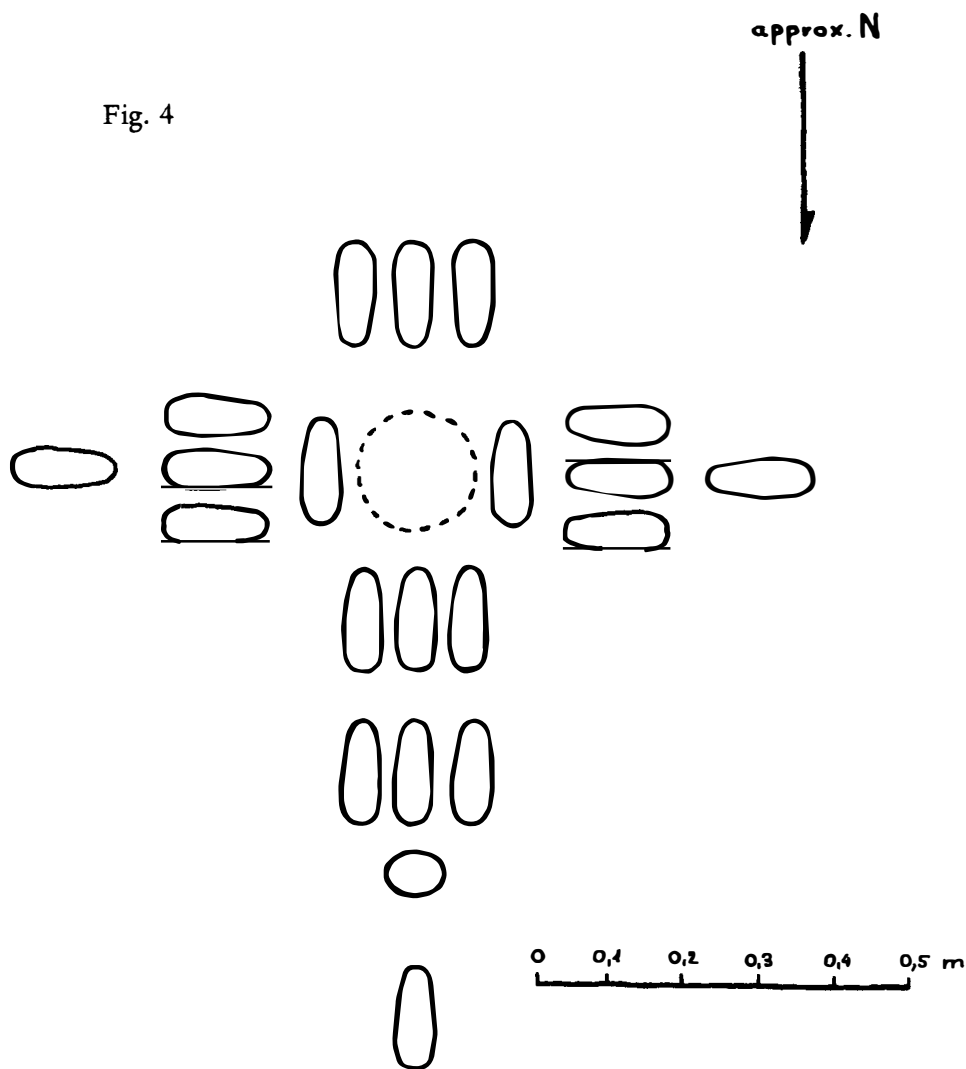
2. Offering 1942-C from La Venta. The drawing is made after Ph. Drucker, La Venta, Tabasco. A study of Olmec ceramics and art, *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology* 153, 1952, fig. 10b. The cross has been turned upside down and the scale changed from inches into meters.

Fig. 3



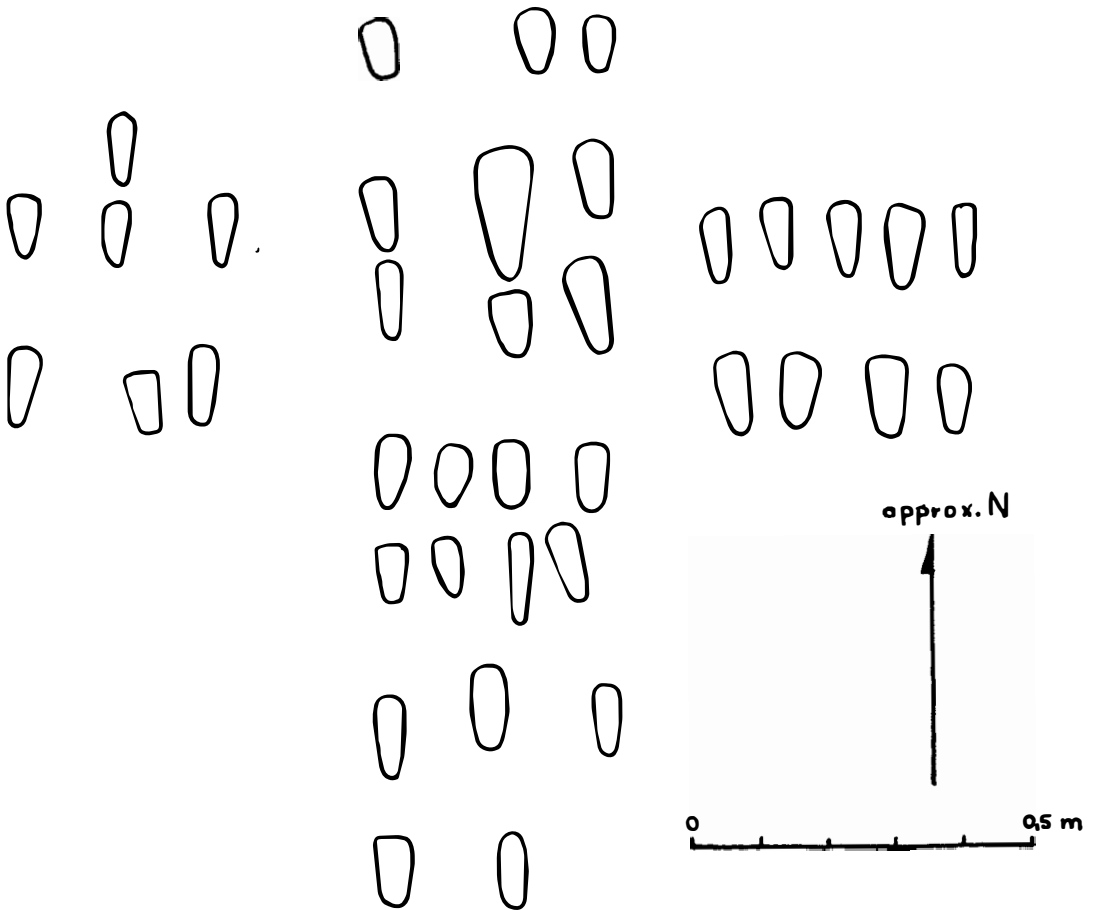
3. Designs on the decorated celts of the cross No. 1. After Ph. Drucker, La Venta, Tabasco. A study of Olmec ceramics and art, *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology* 153, 1952, fig. 47.

Fig. 4



4. Offering 1943-E from La Venta. The drawing is made after Waldo R. Wedel, *Structural investigations in 1943*, in: Ph. Drucker, *La Venta, Tabasco. A study of Olmec ceramics and art*, *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology* 153, 1952, pp. 55–56, pl. 8. The small irregularities of the position of the celts as well as the differences of their shape and size, as seen on pl. 8 (see above), have been omitted. The broken line in the center marks the concave area with the remnants of wood and red pigment.

Fig. 5



5. Offering 1955 No. 10 from La Venta. After Ph. Drucker, R. F. Heizer, R. J. Squier, Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955, Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology 170, 1959, fig. 51.