

Carlo GAY, New York

Illustrations by Frances PRATT, New York

## PALEOLITHIC AND MEGALITHIC TRAITS IN THE OLMEC TRADITION OF MEXICO

For years there has been a sustained interest in problems of cultural contact between the Old and the New world. Among diffusionists the consensus is that the dissemination of ideas, customs, skills, and a few domesticated plants, between the two areas was a one way phenomenon in which high cultures of the Old World were the donors and the aborigines of the Western Hemisphere the beneficiaries.

With a few laudable exceptions, the diffusionists have focused their attention upon the interval between the fifth century B.C. and the fifteenth century A.D., that encompassed the birth and growth of civilization in the Americas. Lately, as cultural parallels are frequently elusive and difficult to define, their interest seems to have shifted to the question of how ancient people crossed vast bodies of water, either from Asia or the Mediterranean side, if indeed they did. This may be a challenging endeavor, particularly when it involves transoceanic voyages to test the seaworthiness of precarious craft, but it does not help in the least to prove diffusion as long as factual evidence is not found on land.

While ancient people may have been capable of navigating the oceans, it does not necessarily follow that diffusion was always accomplished by maritime routes. Time enters into consideration, and the farther back the higher the probability is that diffusion was achieved by way of a land route. In that event, the question arises as to how far back in time one can reasonably expect to find evidence of cultural contacts between the Old and the New World. The answer is that there is no limit in time as long as America was inhabited, and that no aspect of ancient American history should be neglected.

I fail to understand why the Teotihuacán and Maya cultures (400 B.C. – A.D. 1500) have long been subject to scrutiny in the search for evidence of cultural contacts with the Old World, while the Olmec tradition that preceded them has been largely overlooked. Yet, the impact of this tradition upon the Mesoamerican scene between 1500 and 500 B.C. was of such consequence that its lasting effects far exceeded any hypothetical influence that later Mexican cultures might have received from across the oceans. If

these cultures were indebted to the Olmec heritage for most of their accomplishments as they undoubtedly were, then it would seem reasonable to delve directly into the question: from whom did the Olmecs derive their basic knowledge and creative impetus which was eventually to forge civilization in Mesoamerica? Was the Olmec tradition a recipient of cultural traits from foreign sources? Or was it a unique phenomenon in the history of mankind, contrary to the accepted principle that no major culture ever evolved in a state of total isolation? Throughout the years I have frequently pondered these questions, and have concluded the following which may suggest a reorientation of thinking about the Olmec culture in general and its possible pertinence to diffusion.

1. The vast intellectual disparity that existed between the Olmecs and all the other peoples that lived at the same time in Mexico, can only be explained by allowing for a greater antiquity of the Olmec tradition in terms of cultural evolution, than has previously been thought.
2. The Olmec tradition appears to be a totally independent phenomenon with no antecedents of any sort. At the same time, there is no way of knowing how long the tradition thrived in Mexico, nor where the Olmecs originated before settling in the country at an undetermined date, but certainly before the second millennium B.C.
3. As the autogenesis of a culture of the magnitude of the Olmec is out of the question, the culture must have been rooted in some other tradition of greater antiquity and endowed with a remarkable cultural potential. Apparently, neither in Mexico nor in any other part of the Americas did such a tradition exist. And so Eurasia enters into consideration as the possible cradle of a "mother tradition" for the Olmec.
4. No matter in what terms the components of the Olmec repertory are considered, there still is no concrete evidence of any cultural trait having been carried from the Old World to the Olmec tradition during the second and first millennium B.C. There are, however, a number of peculiar features in the culture that relate to foreign and more ancient ones in the Paleolithic and Megalithic traditions of western Europe.

These features are tantalizing in their suggestion of a new approach to the much debated question of the origin of the Olmecs, and deserve to be analyzed in detail.

## PALEOLITHIC TRAITS

There are three distinct examples in the Olmec tradition, strictly symbolic in character, that find more or less close counterparts in the Paleolithic tradition of western Europe: the organization of the deep-cave sanctuary at Juxtlahuaca, Guerrero; the pairing of signs; and the use of cup-marks.

The painted decoration of the Juxtlahuaca sanctuary appears to be organized in accord with a formula that, in the opinion of Leroi-Gourhan (1967), regulated the decoration of cave sanctuaries in the Franco – Cantabrian region from about 25000 to 8500 B.C. Most significant is the close similarity of introductory and closing signs to the sanctuaries, which at Juxtlahuaca as well as in a number of paleolithic sanctuaries consist of groups of spot signs. The subject is discussed at length in CHALCACINGO (1971).

Regarding the pairing of signs (also discussed in CHALCACINGO), the most striking analogy is between the pairing of spot signs with triangle-and-slit signs at Chalcacingo, Morelos, and the pairing of cup-marks with vulva signs on stone slabs and boulders from paleolithic Europe.

The use of cup-marks – the earliest man-made symbols (Giedion, 1962) – was not only frequent in paleolithic and neolithic Europe, but it was also a distinctive trait of the Olmec tradition. On the Gulf Coast of Mexico cup-marks are specifically found on colossal heads from San Lorenzo, Veracruz, and La Venta, Tabasco. At Chalcacingo they occur on a number of megalithic altars, and in conjunction with at least one rock carving, Relief 3. I have also recorded cup-marks on a monolith in Guerrero and two more in Morelos.

In August, 1970, I found 8 cup-marks – 5 of which are interconnected by shallow channels – carved out of the vertical face of a huge monolith (Fig. 1) that overlooks a perennial spring near the village of Xochipala, Guerrero. In my opinion, this pit-and-groove work is the earliest example that can be attributed to the Olmecs. It can be dated at around the middle of the second millennium B.C., but it may be earlier.

In July, 1971, John Hankins and I were guided by a nearly blind man to a huge rock with no less than 50 cup-marks and about 70 grooves gouged out of the rounded top (Figs. 2). This is by far the most impressive example of pit-and-groove work I have ever seen in Mexico. The 6 by 4 meter (estimated) rock is located about 400 meters east of the village of Tetela del Monte near Cuernavaca, Morelos. It is on the bank of a stream that flows

through a ravine 25 meters below, but at the time the stone was decorated the stream bed was probably on the same level as the rock. Some of the cup-marks and grooves are heavily weathered. Traces of others are on sections of the rock that was dynamited by treasure hunters. (Isolated monoliths bearing signs are sometimes blasted in the hope of finding gold hidden inside the stone.)

Because of the particular nature of the signs, which closely relate to the pit-and-groove work found on some of the colossal heads from the Gulf Coast, there is good reason to believe that the monolith of Tetela del Monte belongs to the Olmec corpus of archaic monuments. (So far, the Preclassic site of Gualupita, within the city limits of Cuernavaca, is the nearest location that bears evidence of Olmec occupation in the same general area.)

In August, 1971, Gillett Griffin and I found another stone with cup-marks and grooves (Fig. 3), at the headwaters of an affluent of the Yautepec River in Morelos. The 1.65 by 0.90 meter table-like monolith, locally known as "Piedra del Sacrificio" (Sacrificial Stone), lies in a meadow bordering the stream, about a half-hour walk from the town of Oaxtepec. Though the stone is considerably smaller, the pit-and-groove work is similar to that of the monument of Tetela del Monte and for that reason it probably belongs to the same Olmec complex of decorated monoliths.

It is of particular interest that both the Morelos monoliths and the one at Xochipala are close to water. Should other monuments of the same kind be found in a similar context, then it would be logical to conclude that these sacred stones were closely related to water concepts.

The repeated association of cup-marks with groove signs is intriguing. If the grooves are a simplified form of vulva signs, then their association with cup-marks equates the pairing of cup-marks with triangle-and-slit signs on stone slabs and boulders from paleolithic Europe.

## MEGALITHIC TRAITS

If the signs found on the monoliths described above have close points of similarity with paleolithic symbols, it is not less true that conceptually the sacred stones, per se, fall into the category of undressed, decorated and undecorated monuments that characterize the Megalithic tradition of western Europe and other areas of the Old World. In western Europe, and more precisely in Brittany, this tradition has been dated from 3000 to 1300 B.C.

(Biedermann, 1965), but, recently, tree-ring measurements have indicated that early carbon-14 dates may have to be revised backward by as much as 700 years (Renfrew, 1971).

Besides the Morelos and Guerrero stones with pit-and-groove decoration, there are other significant Olmec monuments and stone arrangements that find a counterpart in the Megalithic tradition of western Europe. Following the date of their discovery, they include: a dolmen-like structure, as well as stone alignments and enclosures at La Venta; 18 table-altars and 3 bedrock-altars at Chalcingo; and two undressed monoliths at Las Mesas near Xochipala.

The La Venta monuments were described and documented in detail by Philip Drucker (1952) and Philip Drucker et al. (1959). The dolmen-like tomb (Fig. 4), excavated from an earthen mound, has a rectangular chamber about 5 meters long and 2.20 meters wide. The structure is composed of 29 upright monoliths (columnar basalt), 10 monoliths placed horizontally to form a roof, and 5 more that lean and close the entrance of the tomb. Various stone alignments forming walls and enclosures at La Venta, now for the most part destroyed, were also composed of the same basalt columns set upright side by side.

From 1965 through 1969, Frederick Field, Gillett Griffin, Frances Pratt, and I located 18 table-altars and 3 bedrock-altars at the site of Chalcingo. Except for one with a rectangular cavity, the table-altar consist of undressed monoliths bearing from 1 to 10 large pits (Fig. 5). A number of the altars have additional features such as cup-marks, drain canals, and in one instance a group of symbolic motifs. The bedrock-altars, also featuring large pits and in one instance a rectangular cavity, are at the foot of rock carvings in low-relief. I have described the megalithic altars in CHALCACINGO, and proposed that they were probably used by the Olmecs for propitiatory rites in an agricultural context.

In July, 1970, Gillett Griffin and I went to Xochipala, a mountain village in the Sierra Madre del Sur. The trip was primarily motivated by my hope of finding archaic monuments in the region. One afternoon, while we were resting in the shade of a tree with two farmers, I showed them sketches of stone arrangements in the Megalithic tradition of western Europe. Both confirmed having seen two monuments like those I had drawn in New York months before. One, they said, consisted of an alignment of six upright monoliths, located on the western side of the Xochipala basin, on a sort of plateau locally known as "Las Mesas." The other was described as two upright monoliths supporting a large slab.

On a subsequent trip to Las Mesas it turned out that only two of the monoliths (Fig.6) were still in place, one on either side of a man-made earthen mound. Our guide suggested that the other four had probably been removed or buried in an adjoining cornfield. Rather than being an alignment of stones, I suspect that if there were four other monoliths, as claimed by our guide, they probably flanked burial mounds as markers or memorial monuments. In any event, the two that are still in situ at Las Mesas – now recognized as an Olmec site – are technically and conceptually similar to the menhirs of the Megalithic tradition of western Europe. Even though they are about a meter off the ground, they are probably sunk deeper than they appear because of soil accumulation.

In August, 1971, Frances Pratt and I made an arduous trip in the Sierra Madre, west of Xochipala, in the hope of locating the monument that had been described as “two monoliths supporting a slab.” We did not find the monument, but on a seventy-meter elevation above the floor of a precipitous canyon through which a river flows, we came across a system of dry walls built of huge blocks of stone (Fig.7), apparently quarried from the nearby tabular limestone formations.

As it is only possible to gain the site by wading down the swift river for about an hour, the trip is only safe during the dry season. A two-week dry spell last summer accounted for the success of our trip, but fear of the possibility of a flash flood that might have locked us into the canyon for days, prevented us from staying at the site more than half an hour. While the chance find appears to be very important in that it denotes an occupancy of the place by early people, I cannot draw any conclusion as to its architectural nature and cultural affiliation until it is possible to return to the site.

## CONCLUSIONS

In discussing Olmec features that have counterparts in the Paleolithic and the Megalithic traditions of western Europe, I have purposely omitted less significant examples such as the extensive use of red paint in burials, and similarities of symbols in general, including hand signs. The use of red paint and hand signs had such a wide range of temporal and spatial distribution, that if they are of consequence in an Olmec context it is only because they mesh with more pertinent and more unique cultural parallels.

What is most surprising in considering these parallels is that there are at

least seven significant features in the Olmec tradition that were first developed in the Old World. The very nature of these features, and principally of the scheme that regulates the organization of the Juxtlahuaca sanctuary, makes it difficult to explain them as incidents of independent evolution. In such an event, there are only two alternatives: either these features can be accounted for by cultural diffusion, probably accomplished before 1500 B.C.; or they were an integral part of the ancestral Olmec cultural heritage, either in a positive or a latent form.

The first alternative seems unlikely because the number and diversity of the features, as well as the complexity of some of them, tend to indicate the existence of a closer relationship between the Olmec and more ancient traditions of western Europe, than would have resulted from an occasional chance contact. The second alternative is more plausible, because it is only through an unbroken line of descent that such a wealth of cultural traits could conceivably have been transmitted and preserved to such a high degree of integrity for so long. And this is not to reiterate the unique and otherwise unexplainable intellectual preeminence of the Olmecs in Mexico.

While either proposition is wholly speculative, I believe it is a grave error to assume that all ancient Amerinds had such a limited cultural background that they were unable to progress appreciably without outside stimuli. Probably, the unprecedented, independent and dramatic evolution of the Olmecs can, to a large extent, be ascribed to the unique cultural potential they already possessed at the beginning of their new life on this continent.

This brief article merely intends to demonstrate that there are cultural parallels between the Olmec and more ancient traditions of western Europe, and to stimulate an interest in the provocative question of Olmec ancestry. Only further research will tell if the Olmecs did inherit cultural traits from foreign sources, or if their forefathers carried with them a superior cultural legacy from the Old to the New World.

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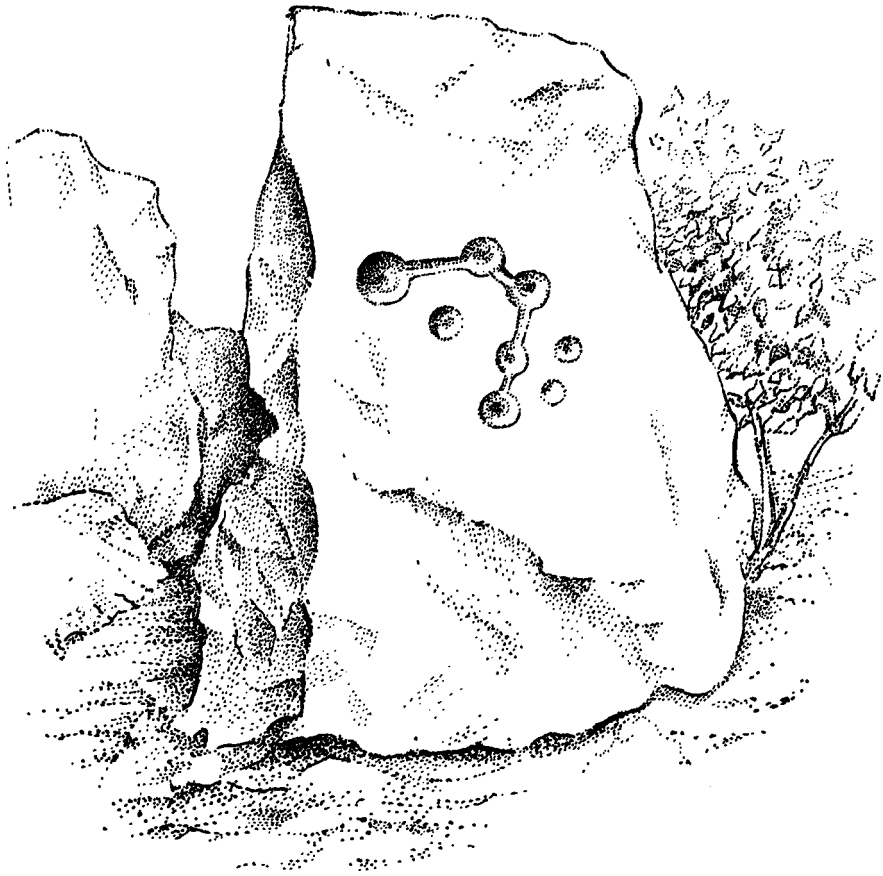


Figure 1. Pit-and-groove work on the monolith of Ojo de Agua, Xochipala, Guerrero, Mexico.

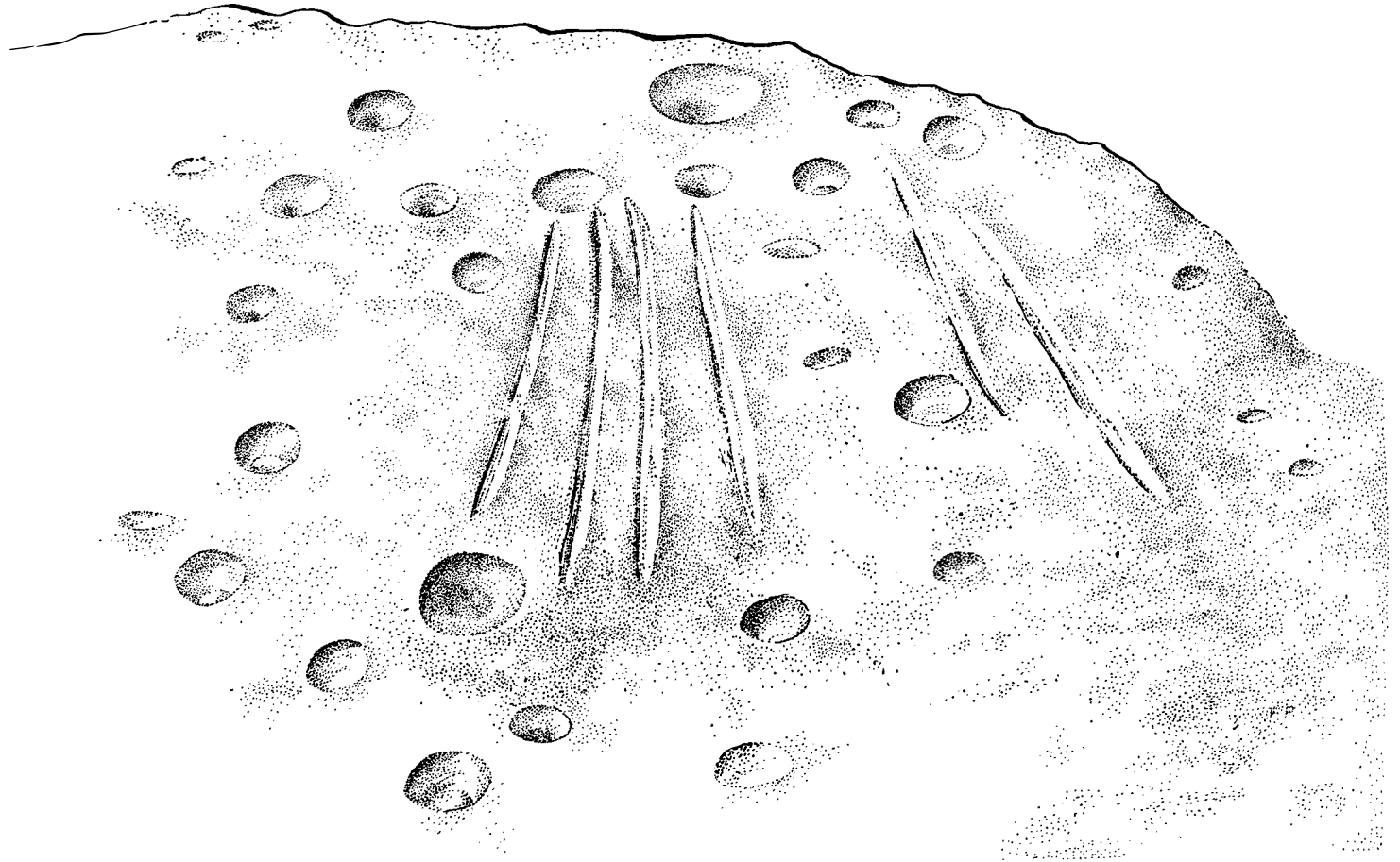


Figure 2. Detail of the pit-and-groove work on the megalith of Tetela del Monte, Morelos, Mexico.

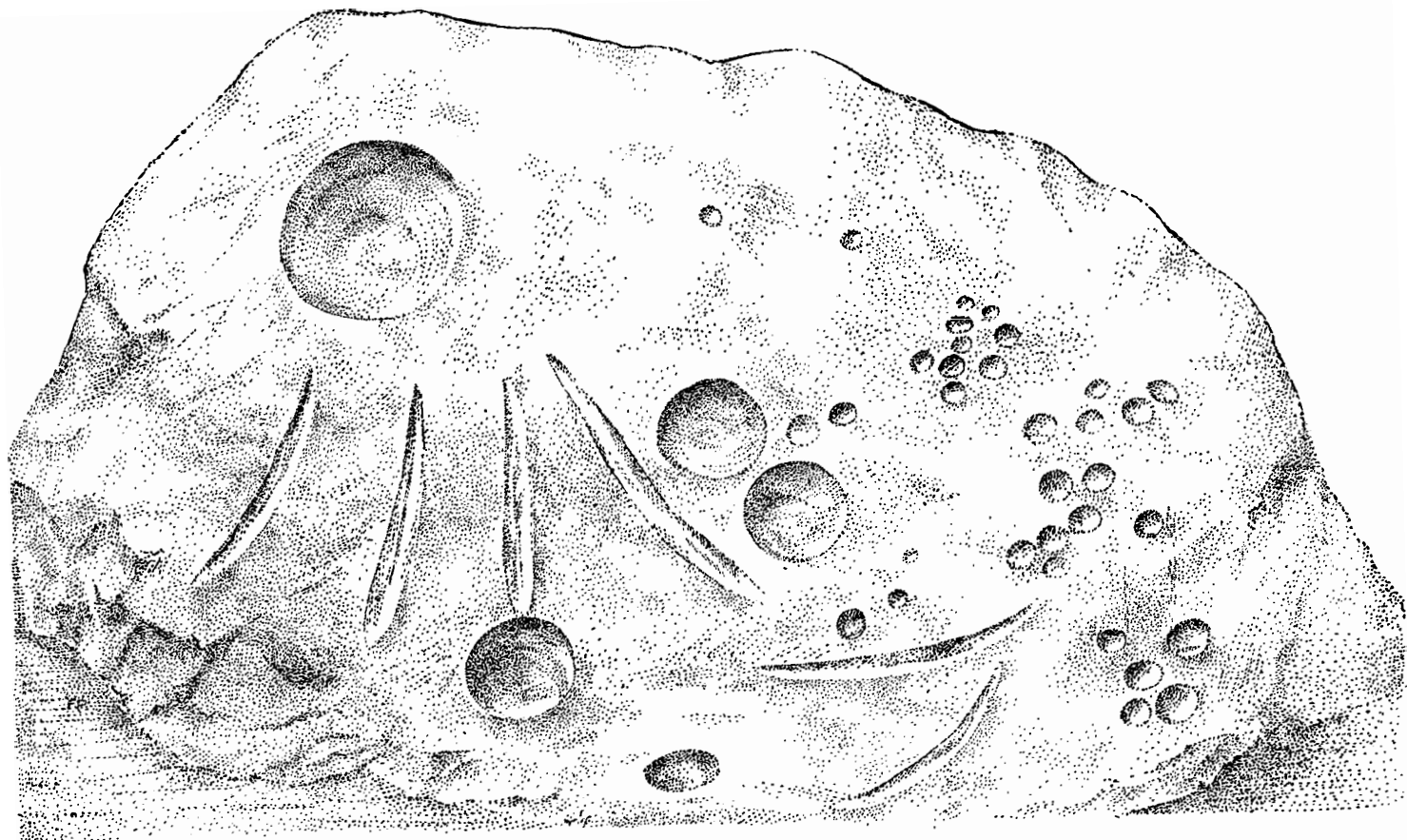


Figure 3. Pit-and-groove work on the megalith of Oaxtepec, Morelos, Mexico.



Figure 4. Dolmen-like tomb from La Venta, as reconstructed in the Parque La Venta in Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico.

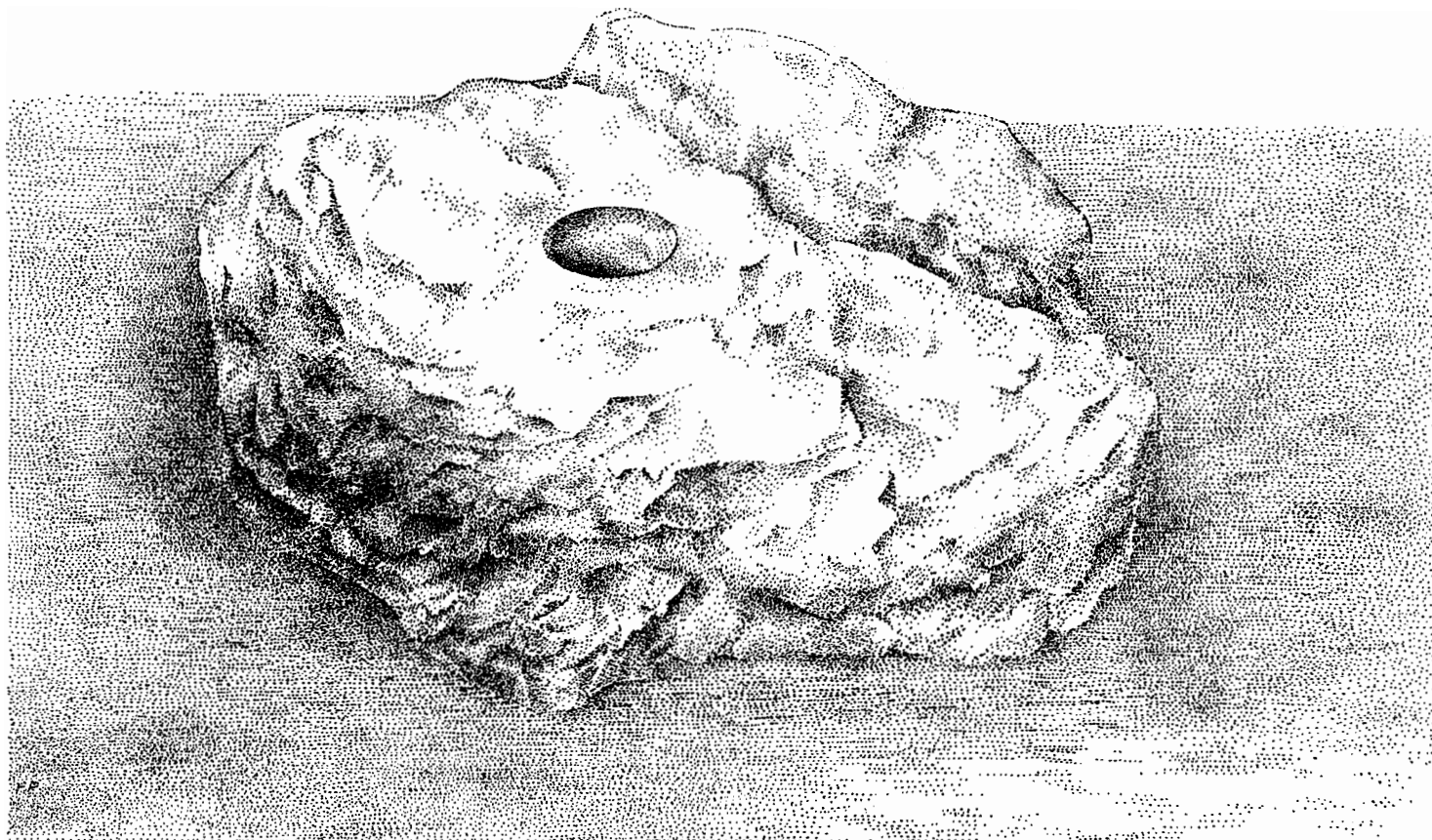


Figure 5. Megalithic Altar No. 7 at Chalcingo, Morelos, Mexico.



Figure 6. Two monoliths flanking a burial mound at Las Mesas, Xochipala, Guerrero, Mexico.

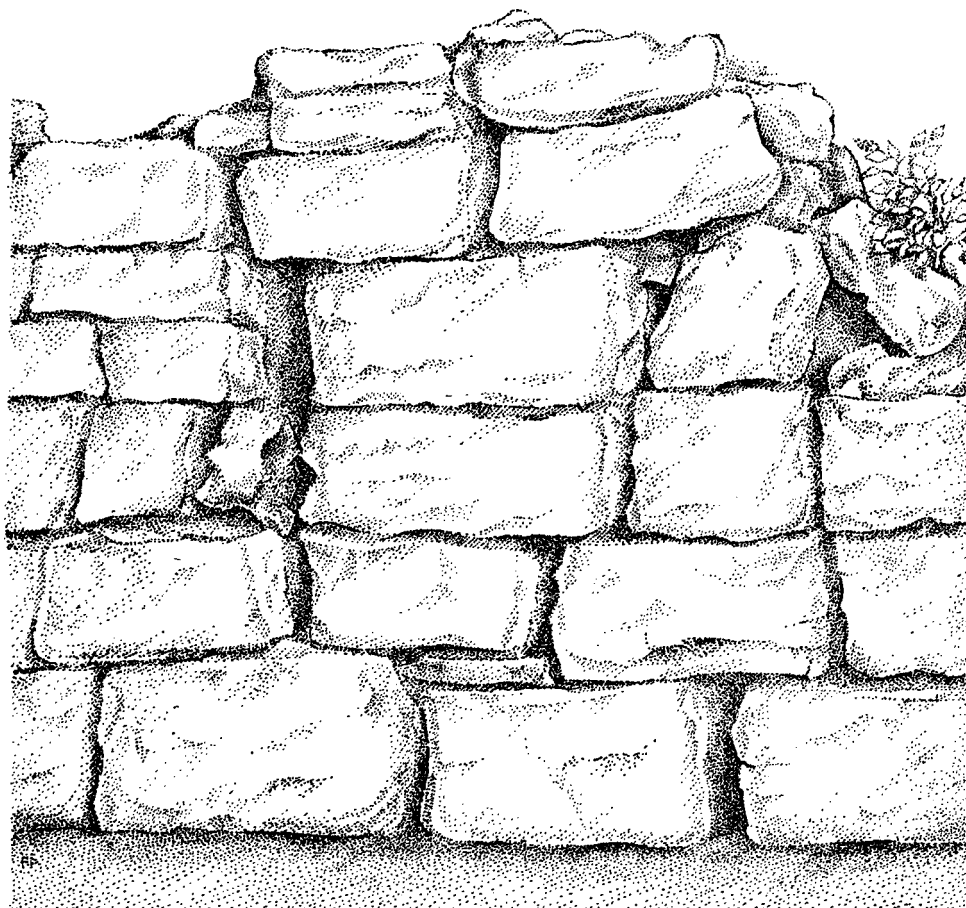


Figure 7. Section of a dry wall at a site in the Sierra Madre del Sur, west of Xochipala, Guerrero, Mexico.