

CHALCATZINGO, MORELOS, MEXICO: A REAPPRAISAL OF THE OLMEC ROCK CARVINGS

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ABSTRACT

The content and interpretation of the Olmec bas-reliefs at Chalcatzingo are discussed in this paper. This reanalysis shows that some of the most important carvings have apparently been misinterpreted in the past. Information concerning a new carving, previously unreported, is presented, and a reaffirmation of the contemporaneity of the Chalcatzingo carvings with Olmec Gulf Coast reliefs is made. Chalcatzingo is suggested as an important Middle Preclassic religious and trade center.

WHILE there have recently been excellent publications (Cook de Leonard 1967; Gay 1966) which illustrate and discuss the only Olmec bas-relief carvings found in the Mexican central highlands (at Chalcatzingo, Morelos), certain omissions and inaccuracies, plus the discovery of a new carving, warrant a reanalysis of the material at this time. During a recent extensive field period in Morelos, the author, both alone and accompanied by other archaeologists, had the opportunity to visit the Chalcatzingo carvings on numerous occasions. During these visits and subsequent discussions, there arose certain clarifications or alternate interpretations which are significant; these will be discussed here. Complete redescription of the carvings will not be attempted as their physical descriptions are adequately published in the Cook de Leonard (1967) and Gay (1966) articles. Gay's article does not dwell at any length upon the interpretations of the Chalcatzingo carvings, but Cook de Leonard draws lengthy interpretative conclusions, based to some extent upon the iconography of Mesoamerican Postclassic period codices and somewhat upon modern psychoanalytical theory. While the direct historical approach is often a valuable tool in making cultural-historical interpretations, it should be used with caution, and all alternatives should be weighed. Furthermore, because the field of culture and personality is still essentially in its developmental stage in anthropology, cultural interpretations based upon a Western-oriented psychoanalytical theory should be viewed with extreme caution, if not completely rejected.

The Cerro de la Cantera (or Cerro Chalcatzingo) is the central of three large Tertiary granodiorite intrusions (Instituto de Geología 1966) that thrust imposingly out of the alluvial-volcanic plain of eastern Morelos. The bas-relief

carvings occur along the northern portion of the hill above an archaeological zone of Preclassic and Classic age, and they are found in two separate groupings. The first group, designated in this paper as Group A, is located up on the actual hillside and is above and to the west of the Group B carvings, which occur at the base of the hill in conjunction with the archaeological zone. The Group A carvings are found carved upon the bedrock of the hill while the Group B carvings are found on large detached boulders slightly away from the hill. For convenience, the numbering system utilized by Gay (1966) will serve in this paper, with additional numbers added to the reliefs which Gay did not publish. All the reliefs discussed in this paper are illustrated in Figs. 1 to 9.

The Group A carvings consist of reliefs I and VI, plus two small reliefs here designated as VII and VIII. The reliefs I, VII, and VIII were first reported by Guzman (1934: 237-44); relief VI was discovered in 1965. Relief I (Fig. 1) represents a seated figure within a U-shaped niche or "cave" from which large scroll-volutes are issuing. Both Gay (1966: 57) and Cook de Leonard (1967: 66) identify the U-shaped niche as a cave and the volutes as connected with clouds and mist. The seated figure wears an elaborate headdress typical of Gulf Coast Olmec reliefs (see Drucker 1952, Figs. 49, 50), and it carries a ceremonial bar. Over the cave are carved symbols, most probably representing rain clouds, while below these clouds are "pendent dot" elements which are probably representations of rain drops. Other symbols on the relief include five which represent plants, and five concentric circles, similar to simple jade symbols found in Postclassic codices, particularly the Codex Borgia, which probably represent water. Attached to the top of the cave is a glyphic element consisting of an oval containing a flame eyebrow which surrounds a "St. Andrews cross." Although Cook de Leonard (1967: 66, 71) identifies this glyph as representing the "House of the Sun of the Underworld," and the cave as the "Underworld," the positioning of the glyph atop the cave suggests a more probable interpretation—that the cave is a stylized earth monster's mouth with the oval glyph representing

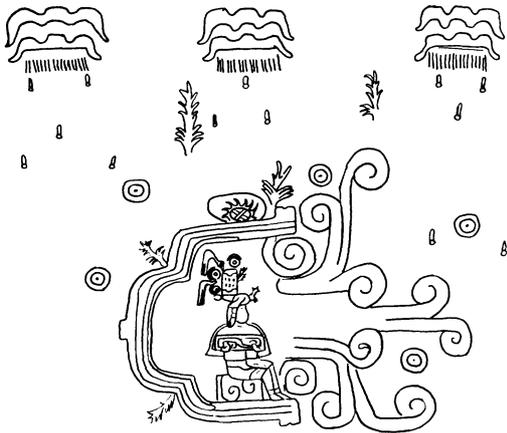


FIG. 1. Relief I, Chalcatzingo.

the eye, a frequent iconographic device used in Postclassic codices to represent caves. This interpretation is further strengthened when we note that Coe (1965a: 757) has pointed out that the U-shaped niche of relief I terminates in an Olmec fang motif.

The most probable interpretation of relief I is that first suggested by Guzman (1934: 241-3). She feels that the entire scene is connected with agricultural fertility and that the seated figure is a "rain god," being possibly (if we may borrow from Aztec period terminology) an Olmec Tlaloc seated in Tlalocan, an area usually associated with caves.

Carvings VI and VII, about 15 ft. northeast of relief I, are located together upon the same rock. Relief VI (Fig. 2a) represents an extremely well-executed squash vine. Relief VII (Fig. 2b), first illustrated by Guzman (1934: Fig. 6b), is too weathered to identify today. The final carving of Group A, VIII (Fig. 2c), is defined by Guzman (1934: 244) as a "fantastic animal, dog or rabbit," while others have likened it to a fish (Cook de Leonard 1967: 73). The uppermost glyphic element of the carving is quite similar to the "rain cloud" glyphs along the top of relief I, and two "rain drop" elements can be found below, also as in relief I. The author suggests an equally tenuous identification of the creature depicted, possibly that it is a lizard or other reptilian creature with a scroll element issuing from its mouth. This relief, too, suggests a connection with rain.

A total interpretation of the Group A reliefs would have to hypothesize a connection with

agricultural fertility. Drucker (1952: 196) has pointed out that floral representations are rare in Olmec art, and so it is important that two of the Group A reliefs (I and VI) should contain these atypical representations. Art historian Dr. T. Grieder suggested, during a visit to the reliefs, that certain stylistic differences between the Group A and Group B carvings may denote different periods of execution; this possibly explains the different location of these two groups. Other reasons may also be offered, however, including separation due to different ceremonial uses for the reliefs or the remote possibility that, behind the tons of alluvial debris that have nearly buried Group A, there exists the ceremonial cave represented in relief I. Although the possibility of the above is remote, the reader's attention is directed to a new relief, IX, and its possible connotations, which are presented later in this paper.

The Group B carvings are also four in number, and all are large in size. Relief II of this group (Fig. 3) was reported by Guzman (1934: 245-8) and Piña Chan (1955: 69); reliefs III, IV, and V are all recent discoveries. Relief II, the so-called "processional" carving, represents four persons; three are standing, and one is seated and facing the other three (Fig. 3). The three standing figures appear to be in walking positions; the two nearest the seated figure are facing him and holding paddle-shaped objects while the third faces away and holds what appears to be a plant. All three of the standing figures wear Olmec-style headdresses and masks, but the seated figure appears to be wearing a mask on the back of his head, and he also wears what has been identified as a horned headdress

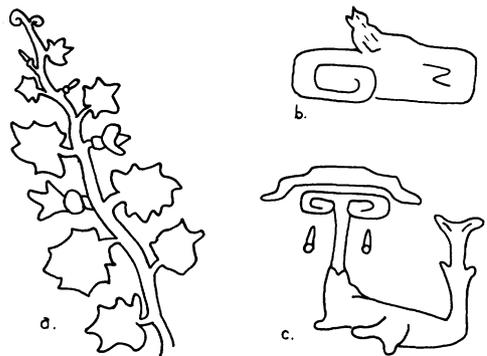


FIG. 2. Chalcatzingo: a, relief VI; b, relief VII; c, relief VIII.



FIG. 3. Relief II, Chalcatzingo.

(Cook de Leonard 1967: 65; Gay 1966: 58). Furst (1965: 42-3) suggests that the horn identifies the seated figure as a shaman. An important feature in all published representations and interpretations of relief II is the apparent phallic erection of the seated figure (Cook de Leonard 1967: 64-5; Gay 1966: 58; Furst 1965: 42-3; Piña Chan 1955: 24-5). A more thorough study of the carving, conducted in conjunction with archaeologist Pedro Armillas, revealed that the upper line of the so-called phallus continues on to form the heretofore previously unillustrated right leg of the seated figure. This line is not carved in relief but is visible in most photographs of the carving, including in Piña Chan (1955, Photo. 15) and in Coe (1965b, Fig. 12b). If the phallus is actually represented, it is certainly poorly carved in comparison with the remainder of the relief; however, I suggest a strong possibility that no phallus is represented at all, and that the symbol often thought to represent the testicles may either represent something else or may not be a part of the original carving. Gay (1966: 58) and Cook de Leonard (1967: 64) state that the figure has his arms bound, although many figures in the various reliefs wear leg bands and arm bands; thus the seated figure may merely be wearing arm bands, as is the central standing figure in the same relief. Although I do not completely reject the possibility of the phallic representation, it has been pointed out by Carlo Gay (1966: 58) that phallic symbolism is rare in Olmec art.

Relief III (Fig. 4) is well described by both Gay (1966: 58-9) and Cook de Leonard (1967: 62-3). Gay's (1966: 58) suggestion that the animal represented is feline has much greater merit than that of Cook de Leonard. She (Cook de Leonard 1967: 62) sees it as a tapir and relates it to a legend from Chiapas, reported in 1702 by Bishop Nuñez de la Vega, which refers to the deity called Uotan (equivalent to Tepeyollotl, an aspect of Tezcatlipoca), who is regent of the tonalpohualli trecena beginning 1. Deer and who "produces tapirs with his breath."

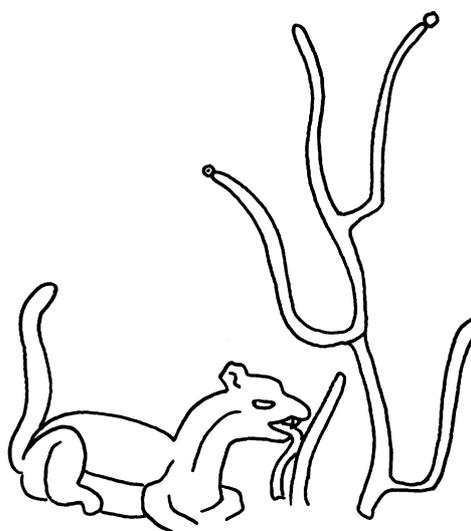


FIG. 4. Relief III, Chalcatzingo.

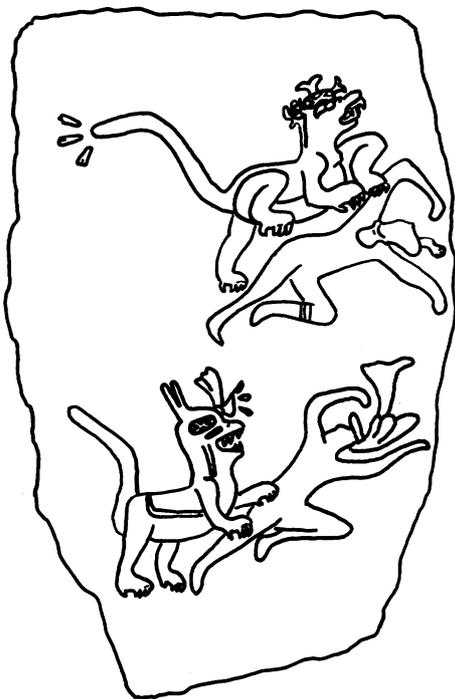


FIG. 5. Relief IV, Chalcatzingo.

However, Cook de Leonard (1966: 68) does point out that elements in the relief which are against her interpretation include the animal's long tail and short snout.

Relief IV (Fig. 5) is found directly to the east of relief III, and at present it leans against the back portion of the boulder upon which relief III is carved. This relief shows two alternating groups of jaguars and humans. The carving is discussed at length by Gay (1966: 59–60) and Cook de Leonard (1967: 58–62), but the Cook de Leonard discussion is based upon the assumption that the relief is, at present, in its original position. Prior to the publication of Gay's article, I was of the opinion that relief IV was lying upon its side rather than in its original position, and Gay (1966: 60) draws the same conclusion. If relief IV were turned on end (as illustrated in Fig. 5), the human figures would not appear to be dancing (as suggested by Cook de Leonard 1966: 61–2) nor would the jaguars appear to be unrealistically balancing upon their tails, but the jaguars would instead appear in a realistic position, standing over the prostrate human figures. Of all the large carvings (I–V), only relief IV does not face northeast; it is, therefore, possible that its original orientation was also in this direc-

tion, and when it fell upon its side it, too, lost this orientation. I also suggest the possibility that reliefs IV and III, due to their proximity, may have formed a combined scene. This, however, is pure speculation, and an argument against this is that the jaguars in relief IV are stylistically dissimilar to the apparent feline animal depicted in relief III.

Relief V (Fig. 6), the last of Group B, was not completely illustrated by Gay; he omitted in his illustration (Gay 1966: 60) a human figure which appears to emerge from the mouth of the large creature which he identifies as a "stylized reptile." Cook de Leonard (1966: 61) correctly points out that the human figure is stylistically analogous to the human figures on relief IV, including the positioning of the arms. While she feels that there is a possibility that the cranial deformation depicted in the human figures in reliefs IV and V was intentionally created on the reliefs to resemble an "eagle's head" (Cook de Leonard 1967: 61), the author has recently pointed out (Grove 1968a: 113) that his excavations at another Olmec site in Morelos uncovered burials which exhibited cranial deformation, mainly lamboidal flattening, in the manner depicted in the carvings. The reptilian creature depicted in relief V closely resembles the *cipactli* of Postclassic codices, and it appears to be a composite animal, combining traits of the serpent and crocodile. Below the creature are scroll elements, possibly representing water. It is speculative as to whether the human figure is actually emerging from the creature's mouth or is behind the creature.

Relief IX is a new carving whose exact provenience at the site is unknown because the discoverer stripped it from its location; it has since passed into the possession of a private collector. There is no doubt, however, that the carving came from Chalcatzingo, because various persons saw it (in its fragmentary, unrestored condition) in the yard of a Chalcatzingo farmer. The relief (Fig. 7), which apparently was carved

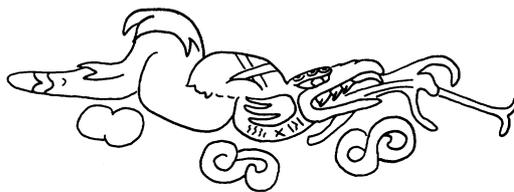


FIG. 6. Relief V, Chalcatzingo.

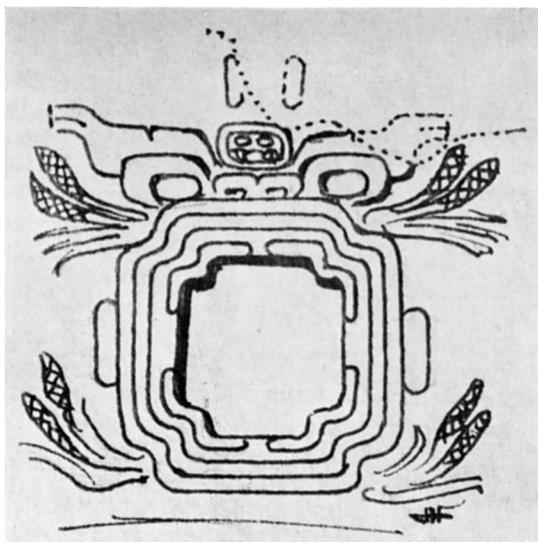


FIG. 7. Relief IX, Chalcatzingo. This carving is now in a private collection.

around the opening of a small cave, represents a jaguar's face with open mouth (the mouth's interior being represented by the cave opening). Surmounting the mouth are large, nearly goggle eyes and flame eyebrows. The eyebrows are unusual in that they terminate in a shape similar to fang glyphic elements in other Olmec reliefs (see Coe 1965a, Fig. 43b; Drucker 1952, Fig. 60m, n, p, q). The nose is represented as wide and flaring, more so than is usual in full-faced Olmec jaguar reliefs (see Drucker 1952, Fig. 58). The eyes and nose closely resemble Drucker's (1952, Fig. 54) reconstruction of La Venta monument 15. Directly above the nose is a glyphic symbol located where usually a cleft or cleft glyph exists. No direct identification has been made of this glyphic symbol although it somewhat resembles the Olmec four-dot-and-vertical-bar glyph (Coe 1965a, Figs. 43c, 44). Above this glyph exists a portion of another unidentifiable element. The mouth is represented in a double-outline motif, similar to the cave representation of relief I. From the outer four corners of the mouth of relief IX sprout floral motifs, possibly representing maize. On the inner four corners of the mouth are elements similar to the inner element of the U-shaped niche of relief I which, in this case, may possibly represent a stylization of fangs. The similarities in style and representation between reliefs I and IX suggest a definite connection between the jaguar-earth monster-cave motif and agricul-

tural fertility. Small caves dot the Cerro de la Cantera, and this fact, together with the similarities in representation and style of reliefs I and IX, suggests a provenience for relief IX connected with Group A, although this need not necessarily be so.

While there can be little doubt that the Group A reliefs have a connection with agricultural fertility, it is more difficult to make this assumption concerning the reliefs of Group B. The orientation of the major reliefs to the northeast, or more generally facing the volcano Popocatepetl, might again lead to a suggested connection with rain, particularly as the rain clouds in Morelos often first form around this striking landmark.

The dating of the reliefs has not yet been accomplished archaeologically. Piña Chan (1955) suggests an Upper Preclassic date for the carvings. However, the resemblances of the Chalcatzingo carvings to their Gulf Coast counterparts suggests contemporaneity and a possible date, therefore, of 1200-900 B.C. (see Coe 1967: 1). The importance of the location of Chalcatzingo to Mesoamerican culture history lies not in the fact that the Cerro de la Cantera very remotely looks like a cleft Olmec head, as suggested by Cook de Leonard (1967: 63), but in its probable strategic location upon what the author suggests was the major trade route connecting Guerrero, Morelos, and the Valley of Mexico, to the Gulf Coast during the Middle Preclassic (Grove 1968a: 228; 1968b). Chalcatzingo was probably an important religious and trade center, much in the same manner as Teotihuacán, Cholula, and Xochicalco, in later periods.

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