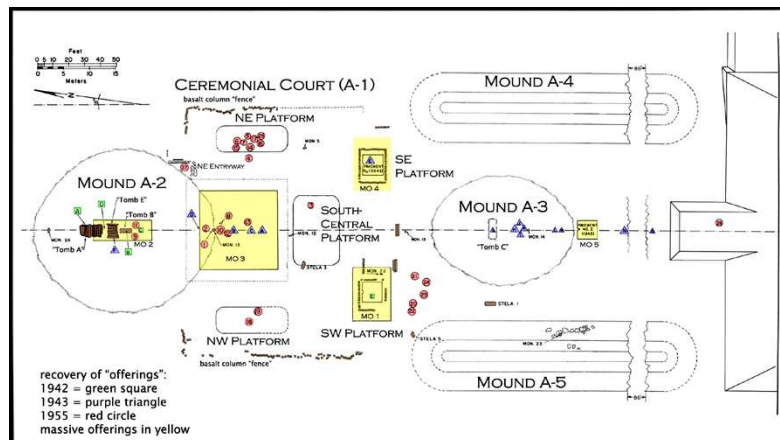


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The Architectural History of La Venta Complex A: A Reconstruction Based on the 1955 Field Records



Research Year: 2007

Culture: Olmec

Chronology: Middle Preclassic (circa 900-500 B.C.)

Location: Tabasco, México

Site: La Venta

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Abstract

Complex A, the ceremonial precinct of the important Middle Formative Olmec site of La Venta, Tabasco, was excavated in 1955 in a project directed by Philip Drucker and Robert Heizer. Unfortunately, the surface architecture of Complex A was destroyed by 1956, such that archaeologists have had to rely on the 1955 maps, profile drawings, and descriptions of the excavations, which were published in 1959. However, there are many acknowledged shortcomings in the 1959 publication. This objective of this project was to obtain additional information concerning the 1955 excavations by consulting the field maps and records, housed in the National Anthropological Archives (Smithsonian Institution) in Suitland, Maryland. The focus of analysis was to produce the first accurate phase-by-phase construction plans of the architecture of Complex A to reveal new insights into the history and construction of the Complex A architecture.

Resumen

El Complejo A, la zona ceremonial del sitio Formativo Medio olmeca de La Venta, Tabasco, se excavó en 1955 en un proyecto dirigido por Philip Drucker y Robert Heizer. Desgraciadamente, la arquitectura de la superficie del Complejo A fue destruido en 1956, tanto que los arqueólogos debían que fiarse de los 1955 mapas, dibujos de perfiles, y las descripciones de las excavaciones, que se publicó en 1959. Sin embargo, hay muchos defectos reconocidos en la publicación de 1959. El objetivo de este proyecto debía obtener información adicional con respecto a las 1955 excavaciones consultando los mapas de campo y registros en los Archivos Antropológicos Nacionales (Institución Smithsonian) en Suitland, Maryland. El foco del análisis debía producir los primeros planes exactos de la construcción de la arquitectura del Complejo A fase-por-fase, revelar las penetraciones nuevas en la historia y la construcción de la arquitectura ceremonial del Complejo A.

Introduction: Project Overview

The purpose of this project was to examine the original field records from the 1955 excavations of Philip Drucker, Robert Heizer, Robert Squier, and Eduardo Contreras at La Venta Complex A, published as Drucker et al. (1959). These records were donated by Robert Heizer to the National Anthropological Archives (NAA), Smithsonian Institution. The analytical goal was to use the original field drawings to accurately reconstruct the different construction phases of Complex A's mound architecture, something never done by the excavators, and to provide more accurate plan views using computer-assisted technologies.

Phase I of the project was completed in March 2007 with a 4-day sojourn at the National Anthropological Archives (NAA) to locate and request duplicates of the most significant materials. Photocopies of the 1955 field notebooks had been obtained on a previous trip. The FAMSI-funded 2007 visit concentrated on acquiring scans of instrument-made maps and drawings, copies of some of the color slides of the excavations, and duplicates of other relevant records (catalogs, some correspondence, and miscellaneous drawings of architecture). While in Washington I also examined the photos taken by Richard Stewart of the 1942 and 1943 La Venta excavations directed by Matthew Stirling, housed in the Image Collection of the National Geographic Society.

Once the requested materials had arrived by mid-summer, analysis began with the gleaning of elevation data from the field records. Despite the absence of any elevations (vertical datums) in the published maps and profiles, which has greatly diminished their utility several hundred elevations were found to have been recorded by Robert J. Squier, along with at least ten instrument-made field maps. Phase II began in late summer with the digitizing of the instrument-made maps using Geographic Information System (GIS) applications in order to create phase-by-phase plan views of Complex A. Computer-assisted drawing (Auto-CAD) applications are also being utilized, integrating the profile views with the plan views to create three-dimensional representations of the architecture. This phase of the project (III) is ongoing and is outside the scope of the FAMSI-funded analysis, but it could not have been made possible without FAMSI support.

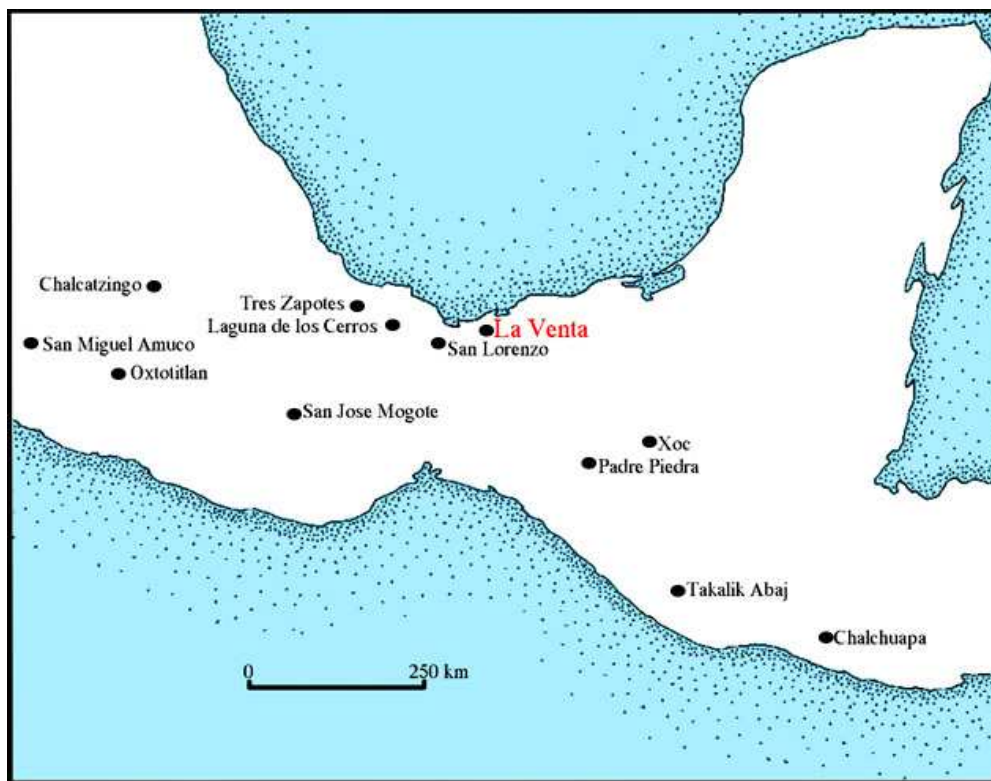


Figure 1. La Venta and other Early to Middle Formative sites with monumental artworks.

Background to the Research Problem

La Venta

La Venta is one of the most important primate centers of the Middle Formative (Preclassic) period Olmec culture in Mesoamerica (circa 900-500 bc uncalibrated rcy). The site is located in the center of a remnant island some 15 kilometers inland from the Gulf coast of Tabasco state in southern México ([Figure 1](#)). Its civic-ceremonial core has over 30 mounds and platforms in an area of some 200 hectares, including a massive earthen pyramid that rises over 30 meters high (González Lauck 1996). Just north of the pyramid is a concentration of platforms and small plazas designated Complex A. Complex A was excavated in the early 1942-1943 by Matthew Stirling, Philip Drucker, and Waldo Wedel, and again in 1955 by Drucker and Robert Heizer as a joint project of the National Geographic Society, Smithsonian Institution, and the University of California.

These discoveries brought world attention to the Olmecs. Buried under the earth at Complex A were richly stocked “tombs,” one of which (Tomb A) was composed of columnar basalt, numerous small objects of jade and other greenstones, and five massive deposits of hundreds of serpentine blocks. Three of the massive offerings included a mosaic design (often considered the face of a jaguar) composed of serpentine blocks (Drucker et al. 1959). These mosaics were laid down in great pits and then immediately covered with clay fill.

With the Complex A excavations, La Venta assumed a significant place in discussions of the evolutionary development of sociopolitical complexity and hierarchy in the Formative (or Preclassic) period, the possible role of the Olmecs as a “mother culture” to rest of Mesoamerica, and the suggested Olmec innovation of much of later Maya civilization to the east. Despite La Venta’s importance to Mesoamerican prehistory and to theories of the evolution of the pristine state, surprisingly little has been made of the principal archaeological findings from Complex A—concerning its architecture—since the publication of the principal excavation reports (Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959).

Unfortunately, Complex A itself was destroyed by development (Drucker and Heizer 1965). It was “so torn up by bulldozers that no surface feature whatsoever exists that can be identified as being present in 1955. The 1955 map of Complex A, therefore, is the best we will ever have” (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968:139). Archaeologists have continued to rely on the published record of the Complex A excavations to understand La Venta as a ceremonial and political center (e.g., Diehl 2004), but they remain dependent on the 1955 map, a single complicated plan view of the architecture and buried objects or “offerings” (Drucker et al. 1959:Fig. 4; [Figure 2](#)).

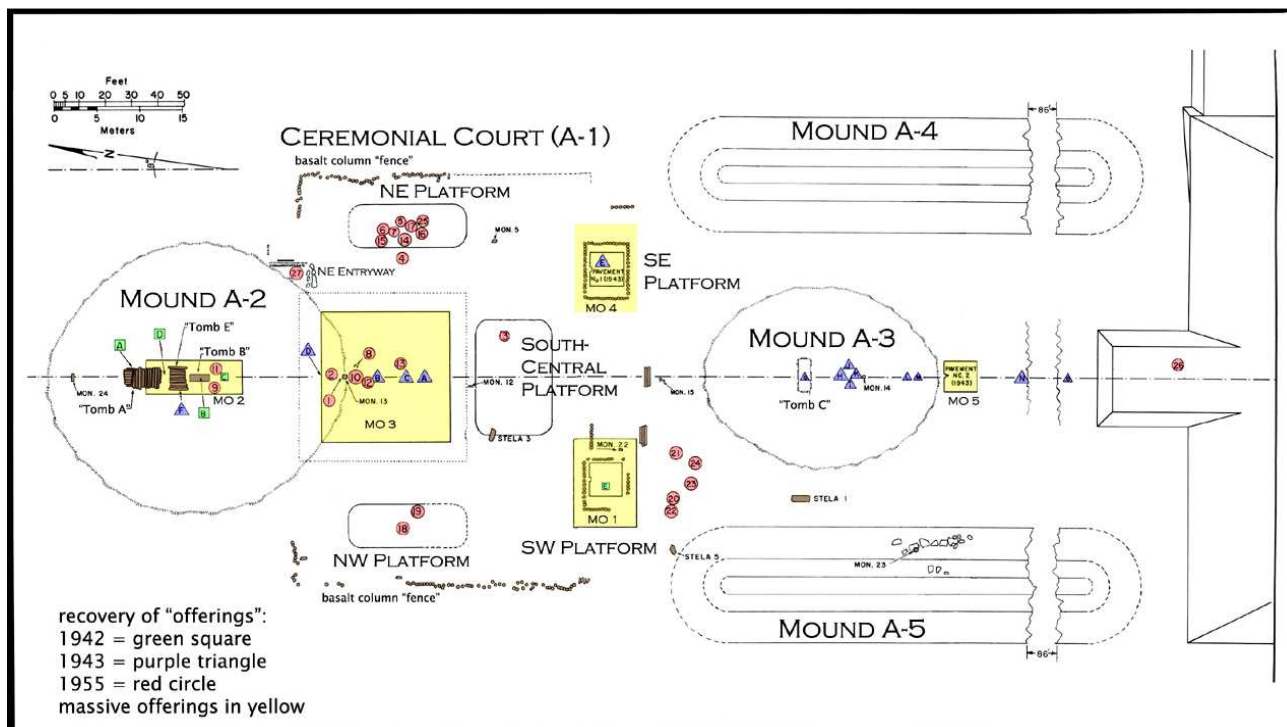


Figure 2. Plan map of La Venta Complex A based on Drucker et al. (1959:Fig. 4). Excavation units and small details have been omitted. Colors have been added to facilitate reading. The north edge of the pyramid (Mound C) is to the right (south).

The Complex A Architecture

Complex A is characterized by a formal design plan with unusual bilateral or axial symmetry (Diehl 1981:78; González Lauck 1996:76). Drucker and Heizer believed that a rectangular walled area in the center of Complex A—the “Ceremonial Court” (Feature A-1) enclosing several small earthen platforms—was its premier architectural structure (Drucker and Heizer 1965:40). The Ceremonial Court wall was visible in the form of large upright columnar basalt pieces forming a kind of stockade on its eastern and western sides although it was incomplete, with gaps in the fence and some fallen columns. Mounds A-2 and A-3 are on a north-south “centerline” that bisects the Ceremonial Court, conforming to an orientation 8 degrees west of true north (Drucker et al. 1959:15), whereas Mounds A-4 and A-5 are linear structures lying equidistant from that center line. The square platforms on the southern edge of the Ceremonial Court were first called the East and West Bastions and later renamed the Southeast and Southwest Platforms. Excavations in 1955 revealed the Northeast, Northwest, and South-Central Platforms within the bounds of the Ceremonial Court, which had been covered by human- and naturally-deposited overburden and so could not be glimpsed on the surface. The great earthen pyramid that forms the southern boundary of Complex A was considered to be part of a separate architectural group, Complex C.

The Building Phases of Complex A

The 1943 and 1955 excavations demonstrated that the Ceremonial Court and its associated platforms and floors were built and modified from a series of continuous practices of deposition of specially prepared earth, discrete episodes of digging through those deposits to cache stone and other materials, engineering for surface water control, sweeping, refurbishment, and ceremonial offerings (including burned offerings) among other activities, carried on uninterrupted for a considerable period of time. The sequence of its building over possibly several centuries was the major contribution of the 1955 excavation report (Drucker et al. 1959). Drucker and Heizer's (1965:45) original goal had been to reconstruct the building sequence for each of the platforms in and around the Ceremonial Court. At the conclusion of the project, however, they decided to focus on four construction stages (I-IV) for the Court as a whole (Drucker et al. 1959:121-127), thereby simplifying its complicated history (see, e.g., Diehl 2004). The four construction stages later became conflated with chronological phases for the site of La Venta as a whole, although the Complex A radiocarbon dates are problematic (Grove 1997).

The Ceremonial Court was initiated when the natural north-south ridge of the "island" was graded by the removal of drift sand at its high points in the east half, and artificial fills were placed in low areas on the west half to provide the flat foundation. Several thousand tons of material were removed (Drucker and Heizer 1965:41). Fragments of painted platforms under the Phase I floors indicate that pre-existing structures were razed in the process. The Court area was demarcated by a low clay wall, best observed on its east and west sides.

In Phase I and succeeding phases platforms were built or refurbished, and thin layers of colored clays were deposited on some of the platforms and the Court floor. For each construction phase the Court floor was resurfaced with its own "floor series" distinct in color, composition, and texture. These floors were cut into by the successive massive offerings, which formed the basis for distinguishing the different construction phases. The Phase I "water-sorted" floor series was dug through for the pits for the Phase II massive offerings and mosaics under the Southwest Southeast platforms. The Phase II "white sandy" floor series was cut through to dig the pit for Phase III Massive Offering 3 just south of Mound A-2, and the Phase III "old rose" floor series was dug through for the Phase IV Massive Offering 2 in Mound A-2.

In Phase IV, tons of prepared red clay were brought in to raise the level of the floor and cover all the platforms, including Mound A-2 and Mounds A-3, A-4, and A-5 south of the Court. Basalt columns were imported to ring the Court boundary, placed into pits excavated into the red clay. The red clay is comparable to earlier filling episodes, and it may have been meant to be leveled and finished (Drucker and Heizer 1965:48). However, no traces of a superimposed floor series were found, and the red clay was eroded prior to being covered with drift sand. This was the termination of ritual deposition practices—the abandonment of Complex A—although the area continued to see occasional ritual use, including the placement of pottery offerings in pits in the sand.

Problems with the Complex A Maps and Drawings

The 1955 Map of Complex A

Significantly, since the early 1960s there has been surprisingly little discussion of the history, technology, and ritual use of the Complex A architecture (an exception is Diehl 1981). The relative neglect of the Complex A architecture and the typically static perspective adopted by most archaeologists in interpreting this architecture are due in large part to the difficulties archaeologists face when they attempt to interpret the available published data, especially the maps, plans, and profile views (Gillespie n.d.).

Figure 4 of Drucker et al. (1959) is a plan map that includes a great deal of excavation information: outlines of all the structures; the excavation units from the different projects in 1942, 1943, and 1955; and the location of the small and massive offerings. It is not often realized that the architecture is represented at different stages of appearance in this single plan. Mounds A-2 and A-3 were visible rounded knolls in 1955 and were so mapped, although for most of their use life they were rectilinear, stepped structures. The Northeast, Northwest, and South-Central Platforms were buried under fill, so their outlines are shown based on their form and extent while still in use. Mounds A-4 and A-5 were also covered by clay fill that would have lent them an irregular outline, but this is not indicated on the map. The Southeast and Southwest Platform outlines are missing, indicated only by the rectangular enclosure of basalt columns on their upper surface that was added only during the last building stage of the complex. Finally, the Ceremonial Court is not shown as a great raised platform, and its thick adobe wall is missing, referenced only by the incomplete fence of basalt columns that lined that wall in the final stages of ceremonial use of the complex. As for the offerings, they are all shown together (indicated by year of discovery), rather than separated by what construction phase they pertained to.

Because Figure 4 was such a complicated map, a simplified view of Complex A was separately presented in Figure 3, although the architecture in these two maps is not identical. In addition to these two plan views, the 1959 publication includes a perspective drawing of Complex A (Drucker et al. 1959:frontispiece) that provides additional data not found in either of the plan maps. Only in the perspective drawing can one see that the wall of the Ceremonial Court was a raised structure several meters wide. The simple plan map (Figure 3) and the perspective drawing in the 1959 volume are the basis for virtually all subsequent renderings of Complex A (Gillespie 2006).

The 1968 Map of La Venta

In 1967 and 1968 Robert Heizer directed two short field projects at La Venta to obtain more radiocarbon samples, to document sculptures that were rapidly disappearing from the site, and to map architectural complexes south of the great pyramid (Heizer and Drucker 1968; Heizer, Drucker, and Graham 1968a, 1968b; Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968). The 1968 map produced as a result of this project (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968) came to partially supercede the 1955 map. The pyramid was finally cleared of vegetation and was believed at that time to have a round, fluted appearance rather than a quadrangular shape.

A striking innovation of the 1968 map is that all of the architecture is now shown as rectilinear because of the adoption of certain mapping conventions for representing surface architecture. However, the archaeologists advised that “the reader is warned that while the map may show right-angled corners and flat-topped mounds, these features may in fact be rather different” (Heizer, Graham, and Napton 1968:139).

The Profile Drawings

Stratigraphic information regarding the construction of Complex A over time is provided in the dozen or so profile drawings (in Drucker et al. 1959). The profile drawings have been little used to clarify the construction sequence because they are so difficult to understand. The profiles were published at different scales, some in English and some in metric. Usually the horizontal and vertical scales are not the same in a single drawing, greatly exaggerating the height of structures and depth of pits in relation to their horizontal extent. Most of the drawings lack vertical and horizontal datums or other reference points (Coe and Stuckenrath 1964:4). The excavators never put in an east-west trench all the way across the Court, so the stratigraphy between the Northeast and Northwest Platforms cannot be correlated (1964:6). Finally, the profile drawings do not provide immediate information on the four construction phases. The different strata are not labeled according to phase; instead, textual descriptions of each stratigraphic unit must be individually correlated with each drawing.

Summary

In sum, the relative neglect of Complex A’s architecture in the last half-century is in large part the result of difficulties archaeologists face when they attempt to interpret the published data, especially the plan and profile views. There has been an over-reliance on the plan view of Complex A, an image in which different building stages are shown simultaneously. Depicting the evolution of Complex A over time could have been facilitated by plan views of the individual structures and the complex as a whole at different points in their use life. However, such plan views were never produced by the 1955 project, which emphasized trenching operations; instead, chronological data were presented in profile drawings and descriptions of stratigraphy, which are so fraught with difficulties that their utility was virtually dismissed early on (Coe and Stuckenrath 1964).

The 1955 Field Records

Although Heizer called the 1955 map (Drucker et al. 1959:Fig. 4) the “best map we will ever have,” this project’s objective was improve on the 1955 Complex A map by consulting the original field notes, maps, drawings, and photographs from the 1955 project to create more useful maps and plans using computer-assisted technology not available in the 1950s.

The Robert F. Heizer Papers

The original field records from the 1955 excavation project are housed in the Robert Fleming Heizer Papers within the National Anthropological Archives (NAA), part of the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum Support Center in Suitland, Maryland outside of

Washington, DC. Heizer's La Venta materials, donated in 1979, fill 19 boxes and 1 map case drawer, and include field notebooks, instrument-made maps, black-and-white photos, color 35mm slides, correspondence, and miscellaneous papers relating to the 1955, 1967, and 1968 projects at La Venta directed by Heizer. (The NAA inventory shows no relevant La Venta materials in either the Philip Drucker or the Matthew Stirling papers housed there.) In addition, the Heizer Papers in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, has some of the correspondence between Heizer and the other principals (notably Drucker) concerning planning for the project and preparation of the 1959 publication.

Elevation Data

The most important holdings for the purpose of this project—to reconstruct the phase-by-phase architectural history of Complex A—were ten instrument-made (alidade and plane table) maps by Robert Squier, among the thirteen numbered “drawings” he listed in the front of his 1955 field notebook.

1. Map of overall site
2. Map of all surface features at Complex A
3. Plan view of 1955 excavation units at Complex A
4. Plan view of the start of the excavations at the Southwest Platform showing the basalt columns in situ
5. Side elevation drawings of the basalt columns, North and West sides of the Southwest Platform
6. Side elevation drawings of the basalt columns, East side of the Southwest Platform
7. Plan view of excavations at the level of the 10th course of adobe bricks, Southwest Platform
8. Plan view of the mosaic mask, Southwest Platform
9. Profile of east-west and north-south stratigraphic walls of the Southwest Platform
11. Profile of the west wall of the main North-South Trench

Although most of these were plan views, they include elevation measurements taken by Squier for major architectural features, including the elevations of the different floor series at locations throughout the Ceremonial Court and the depths of the serpentine blocks making up the mosaic mask, part of Massive Offering 1 under the Southwest Platform. His Drawing 2 is the basis for the published plan view (Drucker et al. 1959:Fig. 4), including the outlines of the visible mounds and each of the basalt columns that formed the Court fence. Squier's Map 3 added to the 1959 Figure 4 published plan view the 1955 excavation units (trenches), although these were highly rectified and schematized in the published version. The mapped profile of the main North-South Trench down the centerline of the site from Mound A-2 to the South-Central Platform is much more finely detailed than the published version (see [Figure 3](#); compare to the simplified drawing in Drucker et al. 1959:Fig. 10). This profile includes over two dozen elevations that were not mentioned in the publication. In addition to mapping the horizontal and vertical extent of the earthen architecture, Squier also carefully mapped the location and depth of the buried offerings from 1955, as well as some of the sculptures found in the 1940s. His field notes include drawings,

measurements, and elevations of every basalt column still present in the Court wall and the Southeast and Southwest Platforms. His excavation profiles of the Southwest Platform—which received the most careful attention in 1955—also include elevations of relevant features.

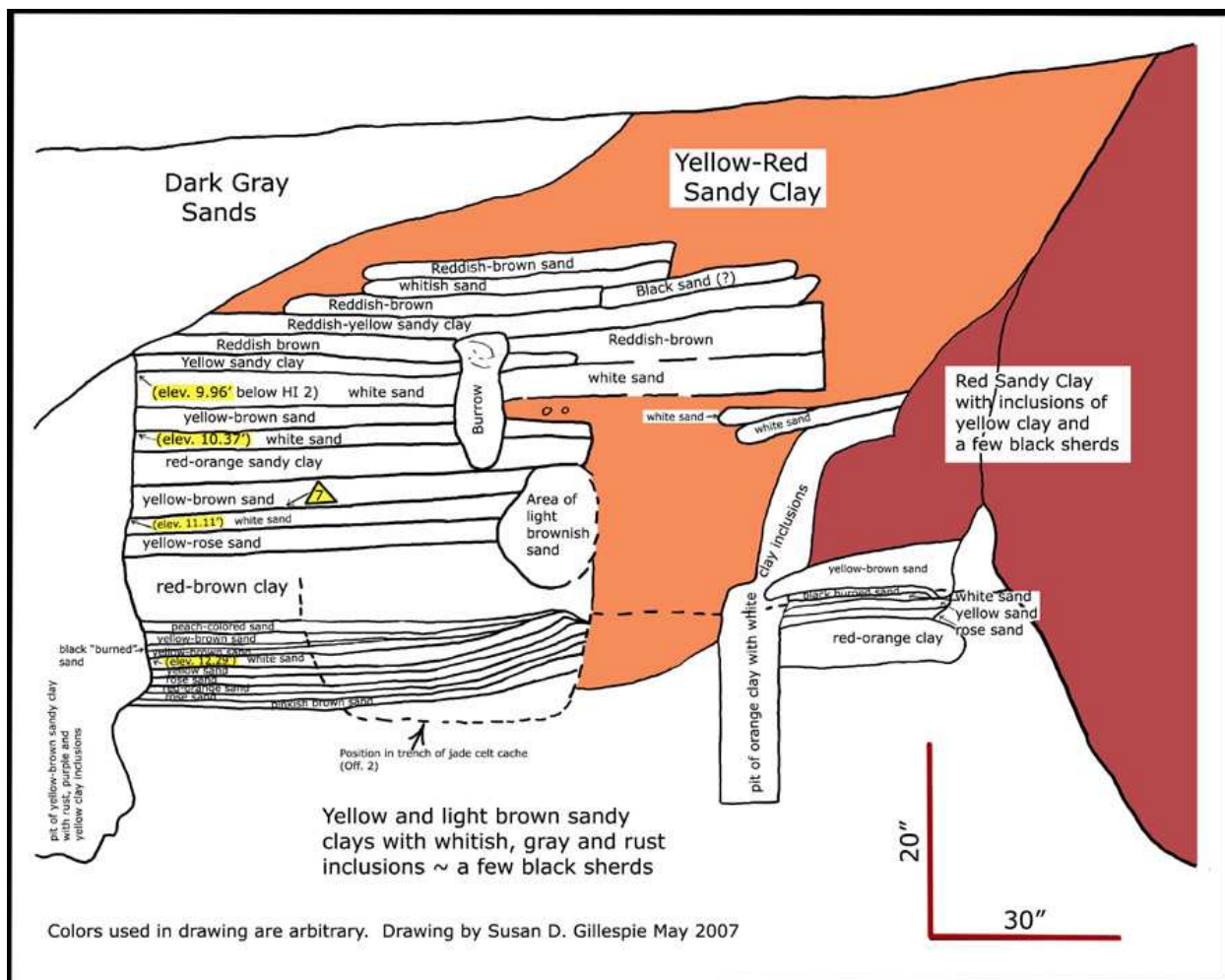


Figure 3. Colored clay and sand layers of the “apron” in front of (south of) Mound A-2 based on Robert Squier’s 1955 “Map 11: Profile, West Wall, Main North-South Trench.” Embedded elevations are highlighted in yellow.

In short, there were several hundred elevations recorded by instrument. They were all standardized by Squier to an arbitrary elevation (Instrument Station 2, near the Southwest Platform) rather than to actual elevation above sea level. For this project all readings were converted to an arbitrary elevation above sea level. However, their true elevation can be calculated because Squier also measured the height of the great pyramid from that instrument station, a point whose elevation is known. These critical data will facilitate the vertical alignment of the same strata depicted in separate profile drawings, the major criticism made by Coe and Stuckenrath (1964), and will allow accurate three-dimensional reconstructions of the architecture within the Court wall.

Digitizing the Complex A Map Information

The new Complex A map was created using ArcGIS 9 (GIS by ESRI™), specifically, ArcMap, ArcEditor, and ArcCatalog Version 9.1. The digitizing was done by Joshua Toney (University of Florida) using the resources of the UF Land Use and Environmental Changes Institute. The high resolution scans of the instrument-made maps, drawings and profiles produced by Squier were added to a data frame in ArcMap and given a projected coordinate system of WGS 1984 UTM Zone 15N. Using interactive or “heads up” digitization, all features on the scanned maps were traced and saved as separate shapefiles. These shapefiles were created in ArcCatalog and given names based on a combination of the labels found on the original maps and the labels used in the field notebook. Each shapefile, usually a “polyline,” was also given a Z coordinate. This Z coordinate was designated as the “Elevation” in a separate attribute column and given a value based on those recorded in Squier’s field notebook or on the drawings themselves. Several “point” shapefiles were also created to record the location of different datum and control points marked on the original field maps.

Squier’s Drawing 2, the map of all visible features that served as the basis for Drucker et al. (1959:Fig. 4), was digitized first and all smaller detail maps were then georeferenced to that map. Elevation data for features on this map were recorded in Squier’s field notebook. Then his Map 3, locating the position of all 1955 excavation units, was georeferenced to Drawing 2 and the outline of all excavations were digitized as a single shapefile. The plan maps of the different levels of excavations in the Southwest Platform (Maps 4, 7, and 8 of the “West Bastion”) were digitized, again with each feature on the map created as a separate element or shapefile. Finally, the published map from the 1959 site report was imported, georeferenced to Drawing 2, so that several features whose location was recorded there but not found on the 1955 field maps could be added.

All features, from all maps, were digitized exactly as they appeared on the original maps. No general symbology was used to replace individual columns (unlike Drucker et al. 1959:Fig. 4). Each basalt column or feature was digitized as drawn on the original maps, with a few exceptions noted here. The digital map was elongated to include the 86 feet of construction of Mounds A-4 and A-5 that were removed from the original map to facilitate its placement on one page of paper. Thus the digital maps show the true dimensions of Complex A with Mounds A-4 and A-5 at their full length. The dimensions of the court walls on the east and west side—missing in the published map—were reconstructed from information recorded in the excavation profiles. The Phase IV dimensions of Mound A-2 were only recorded on the east and west sides of the mound. Its north-south dimensions were approximated using the projection of the court wall to the south and assuming Monument 24 (a stone step cover) was at or near its northern edge. Mound A-3 was also approximated from Phase I-III using the dimensions recorded on the map for Phase IV, as its northern and southern extent was not determined in the field.

The Phase-by-Phase Maps

As noted above, Drucker and Heizer believed that there were four general construction phases at Complex A, each with its own floor series (Drucker et al. 1959; Drucker and Heizer 1965). Based on the stratigraphic information from the trench excavations, they

assigned the different platforms, massive offerings, and small offerings to each of the four phases (I-IV; see [Table 1](#), [Table 2](#)). This information forms the basis for the tentative phase-by-phase plan maps of the complex, showing how it changed over time, with one exception. It was clear from the stratigraphy that the Northwest Platform and Mound A-3 were constructed atop the water-sorted floor series of Phase I. Thus, Phase I was divided into two subphases (IA and IB) to distinguish the different timing for the construction of these structures ([Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#)). The offerings in the Northeast and Northwest Platforms were simply assigned to the subphase in which the structure was first built. The exact placement and extent of Mounds A-2 and A-3 in Phase I cannot be determined at this time. The northern and southern extent of the low clay wall that bounded the sacred space of the Ceremonial Court is also uncertain.

Major changes in Phase II ([Figure 6](#)) include the erection of the adobe-brick Southeast and Southwest Platforms interrupting the southern boundary of the court. Under these structures were great pits with stacks of hundreds of serpentine blocks (Massive Offerings), including two of the mosaic serpentine “faces” or “masks.” Another major architectural feature is the enlargement and raising of the court wall, also made of adobe bricks. The size of the South-Central Platform was augmented on its east-west axis.

The important transformation that marks Phase III ([Figure 7](#)) is the building of a huge pit in the space between Mound A-2 and the Northeast, Northwest, and South-Central Platforms. The pit, which is off-center within the court, held six stacks of serpentine blocks, covered with clay fill. In that fill a number of buried objects (offerings) were encountered, almost all on the centerline of the court. Additional offerings were placed in the Northeast Platform, and the famous Offering 4—a tableau of anthropomorphic figurines—was positioned just off the west side of that platform.

Phase IV ([Figure 8](#)) in Drucker and Heizer’s scheme conflates many large and small building episodes that are difficult to distinguish without further analysis of the stratigraphic data. Major construction attributed to this phase includes the enlargement of Mound A-2, the erection of Mounds A-4 and A-5, the digging of pits for massive offerings within Mound A-2 and just south of Mound A-3, and the importation of basalt columns. The columns were used (probably at different points in time) to create a higher fence for the Ceremonial Court, to ring the upper surfaces of the Southeast and Southwest Platforms, to create “Tomb A” over the massive offering in Mound A-2, to form “steps” for access to the court floor on its south side, and for other purposes. The Ceremonial Court floor had been so raised by the addition of fill that it became difficult to enter, and the floor was reaching the top of the Phase II adobe-brick wall. The basalt columns were placed side-by-side to essentially raise the wall higher. However, the columns were not put on top of the wall; instead, they were laid in a trench along the inner edge of the wall, so that the wall itself could help stabilize them. The basalt columns are shown as they were mapped by Squier (including fallen pieces and gaps). This map also clearly shows the northern terminus of the court wall with its stone embellishment.

La Venta Phase I-A

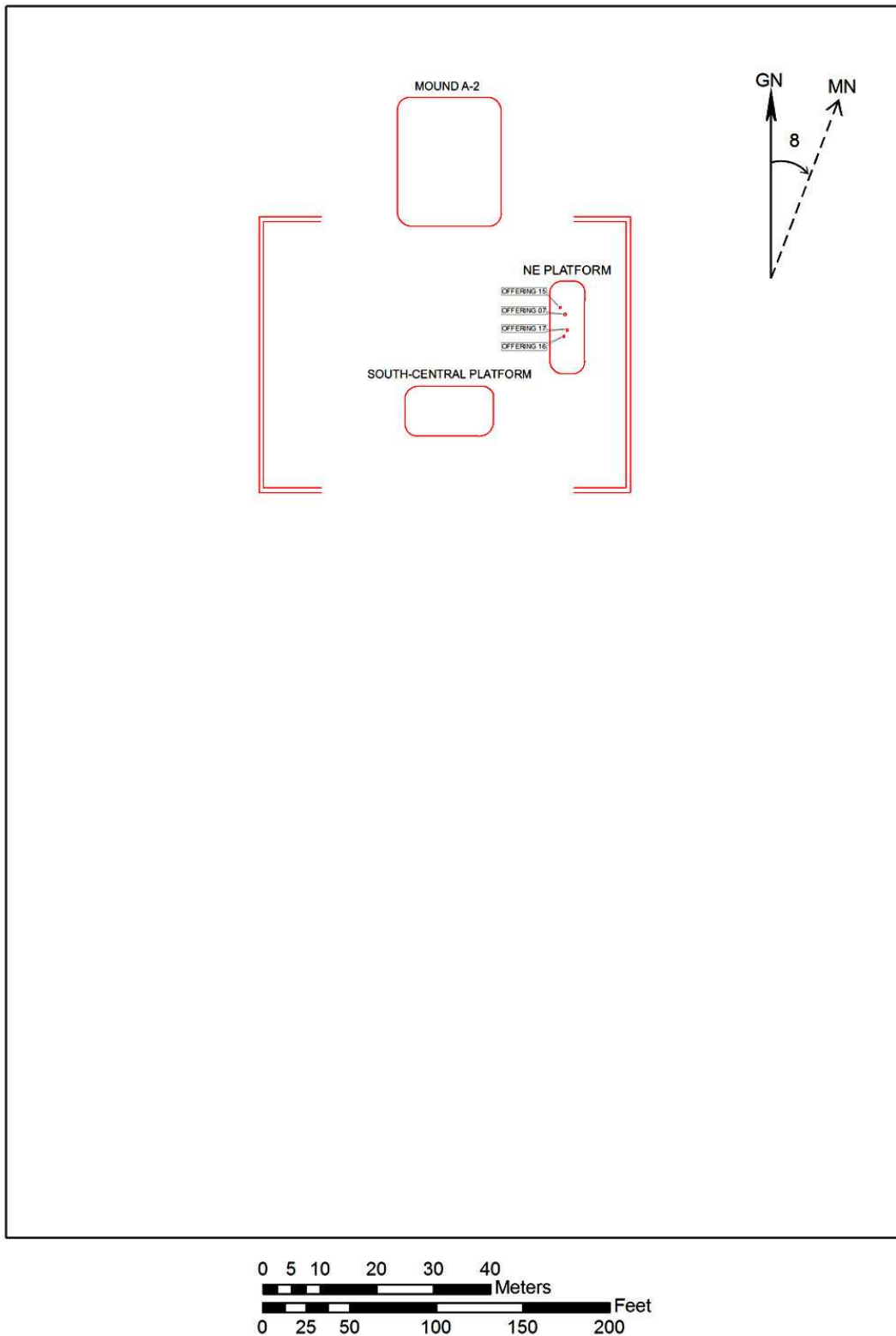


Figure 4. Reconstruction of Phase I-A of Complex A. Figures 4 through 10 were produced by Joshua Toney.

La Venta Phase I-B

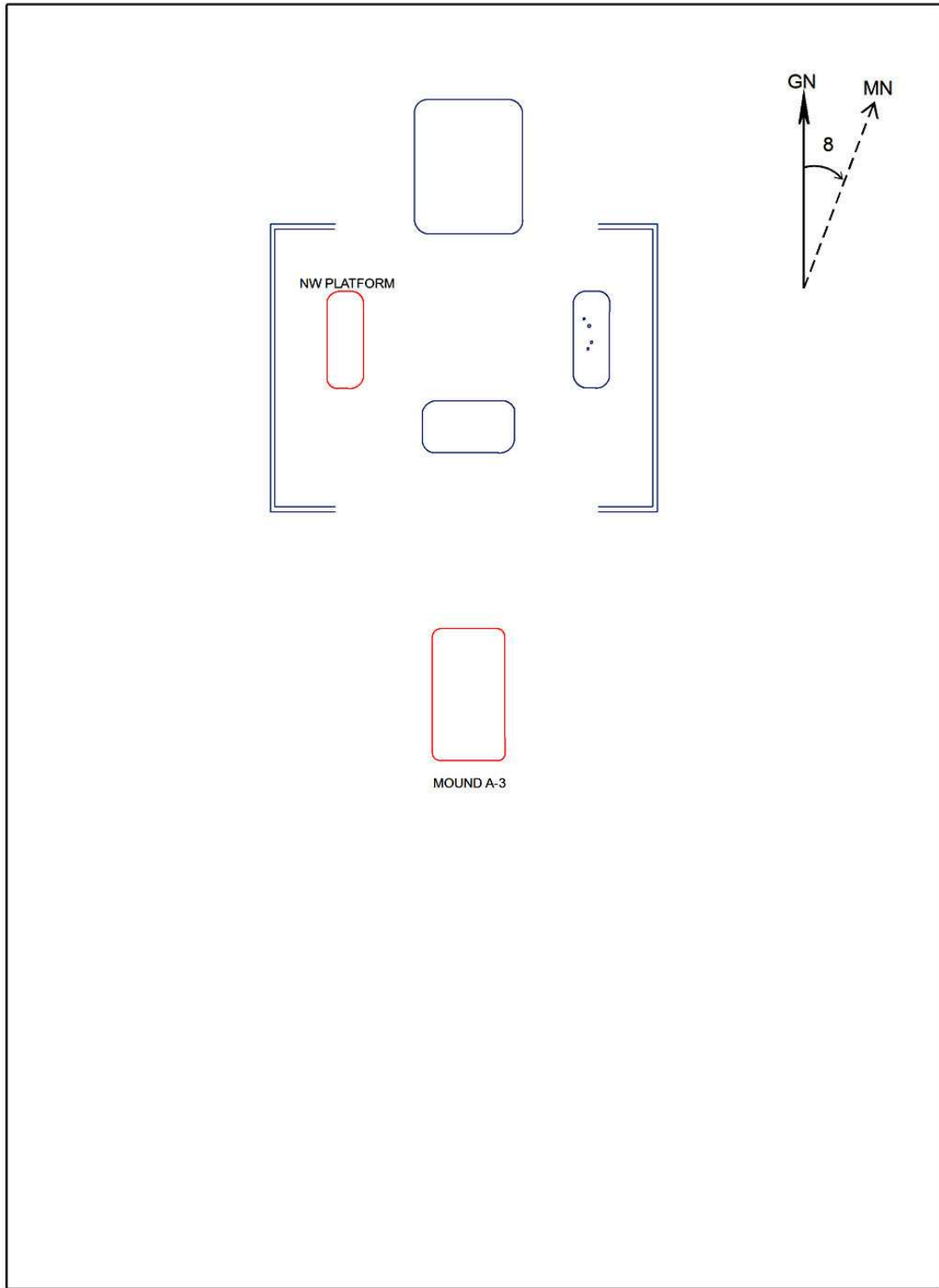


Figure 5. Reconstruction of Phase I-B of Complex A.

La Venta Phase II

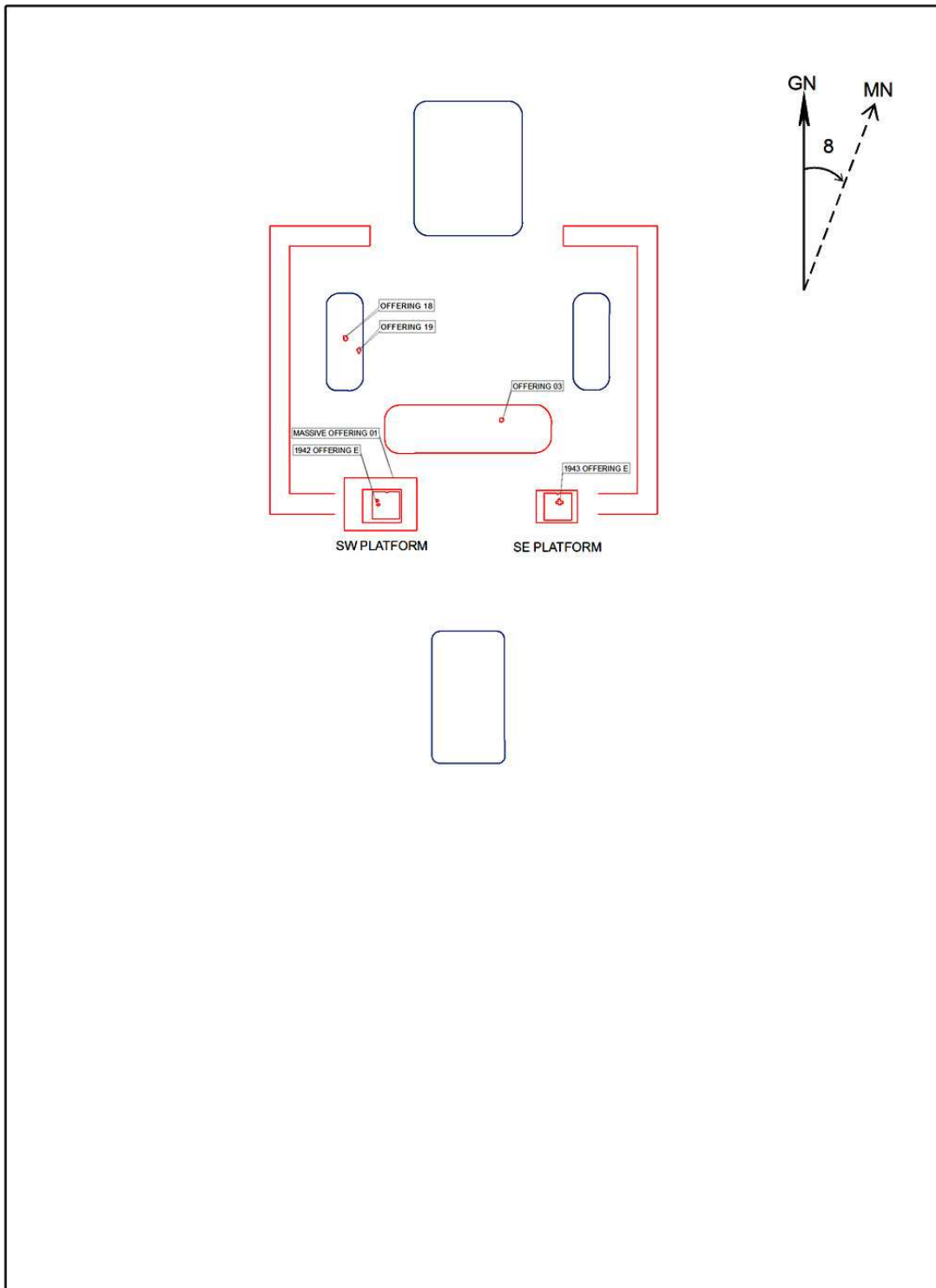


Figure 6. Reconstruction of Phase II of Complex A.

La Venta Phase III

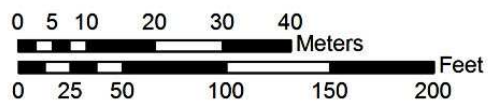
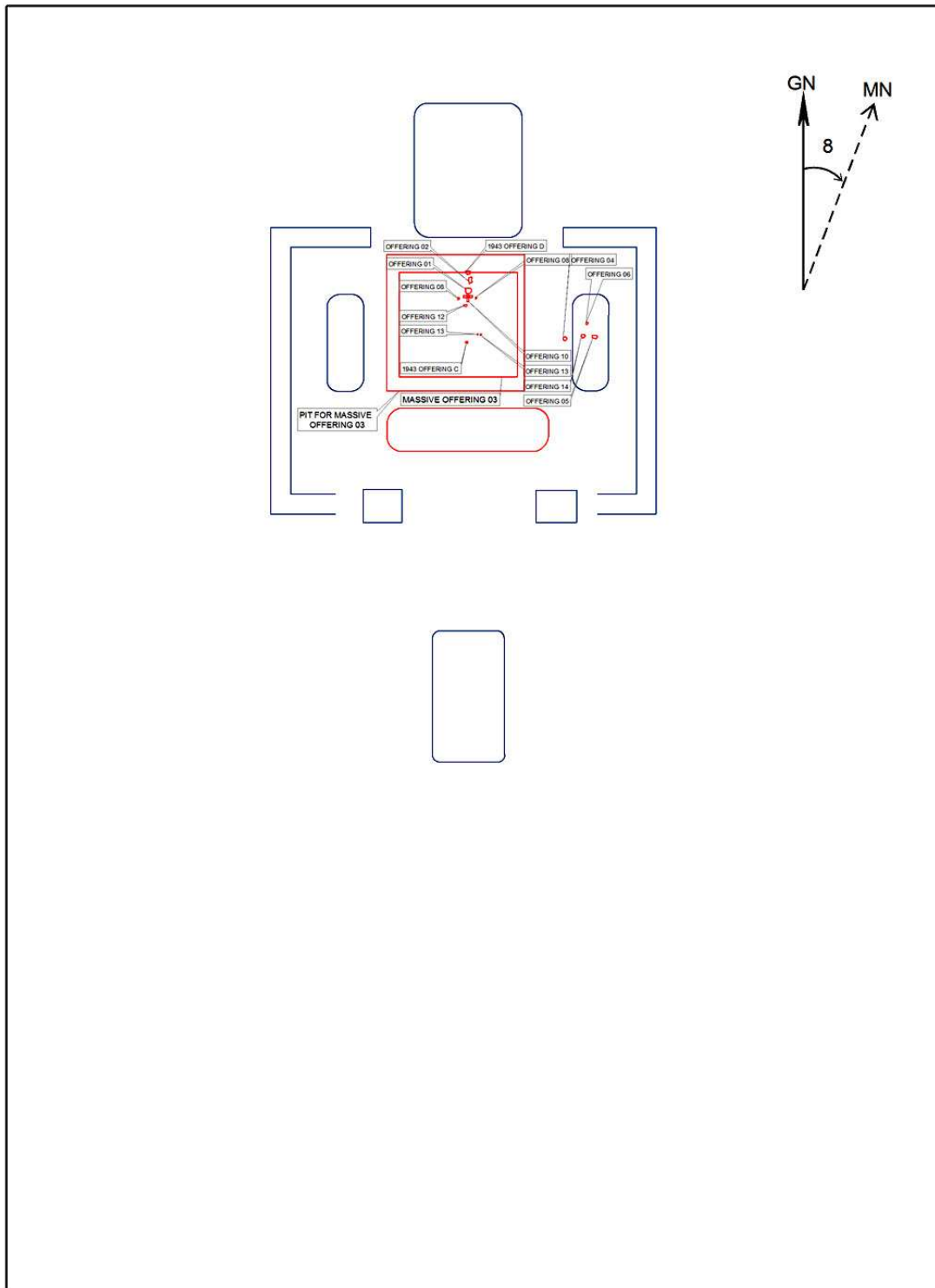


Figure 7. Reconstruction of Phase III of Complex A.

La Venta Phase IV

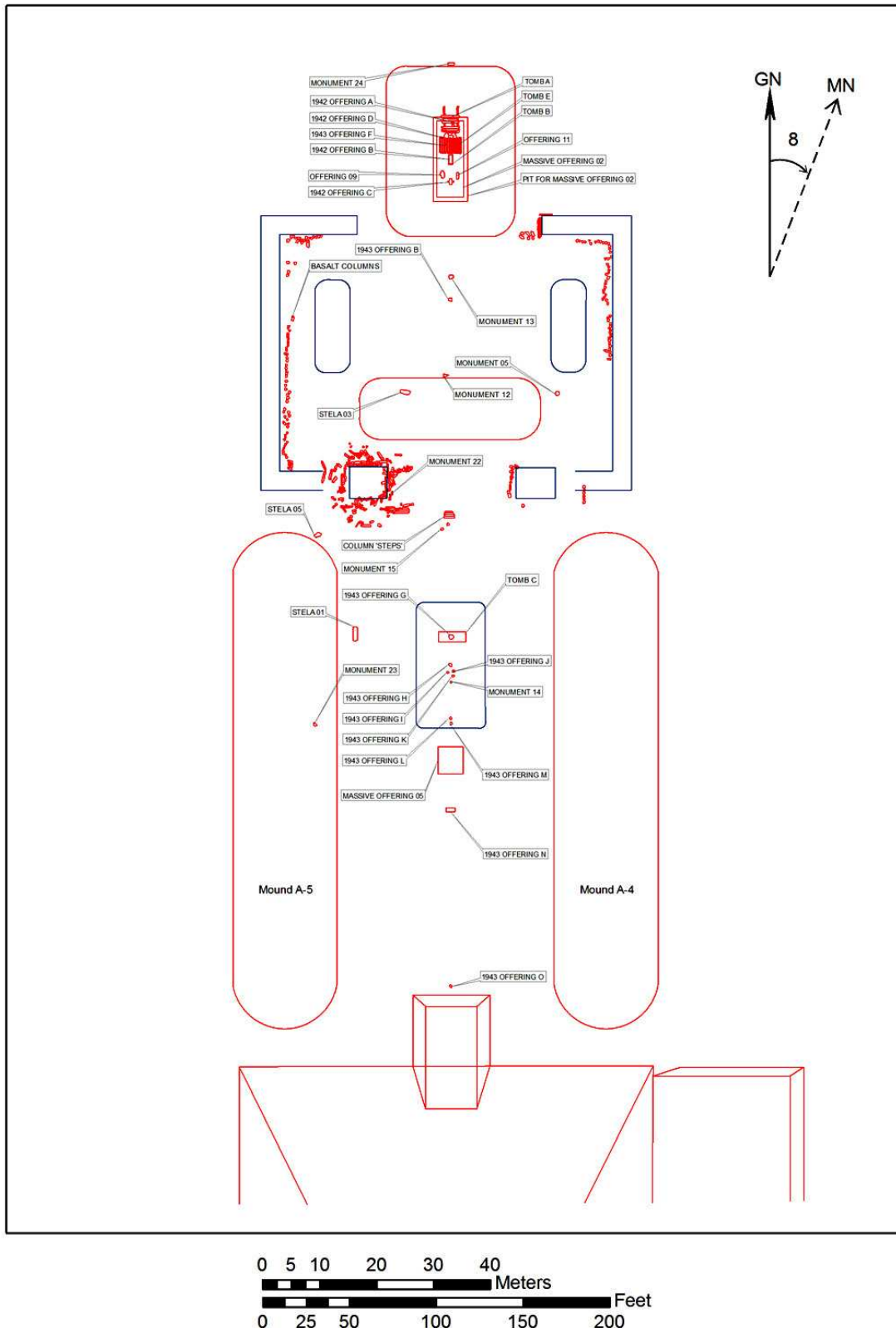


Figure 8. Reconstruction of Phase IV of Complex A.

Many additional offerings were made in this period, including the “tombs,” but virtually all of them are now outside the Ceremonial Court, and they conform to the north-south centerline. Carved monuments are also indicated as dating to this phase, although this is uncertain. They were typically positioned above the red clay that was brought in to cover all of the Complex A architecture.

The Post-Phase IV plan ([Figure 9](#)) is included to indicate the recovery of small offerings—mostly pottery vessels—in the drift sand that was allowed to accumulate in Complex A once its ritual maintenance had ceased. This map also shows the mapped eroded outlines of Mounds A-2 and A-3, covered with red clay, which occurred during Drucker and Heizer’s Phase IV. Again, the exact north and south extent of both of these structures is not known. The final illustration ([Figure 10](#)) overlays the appearance of Phase IV Complex A on the Google-Earth™ photo of La Venta as close to its original location as we can determine at this time.

La Venta Post-Phase IV

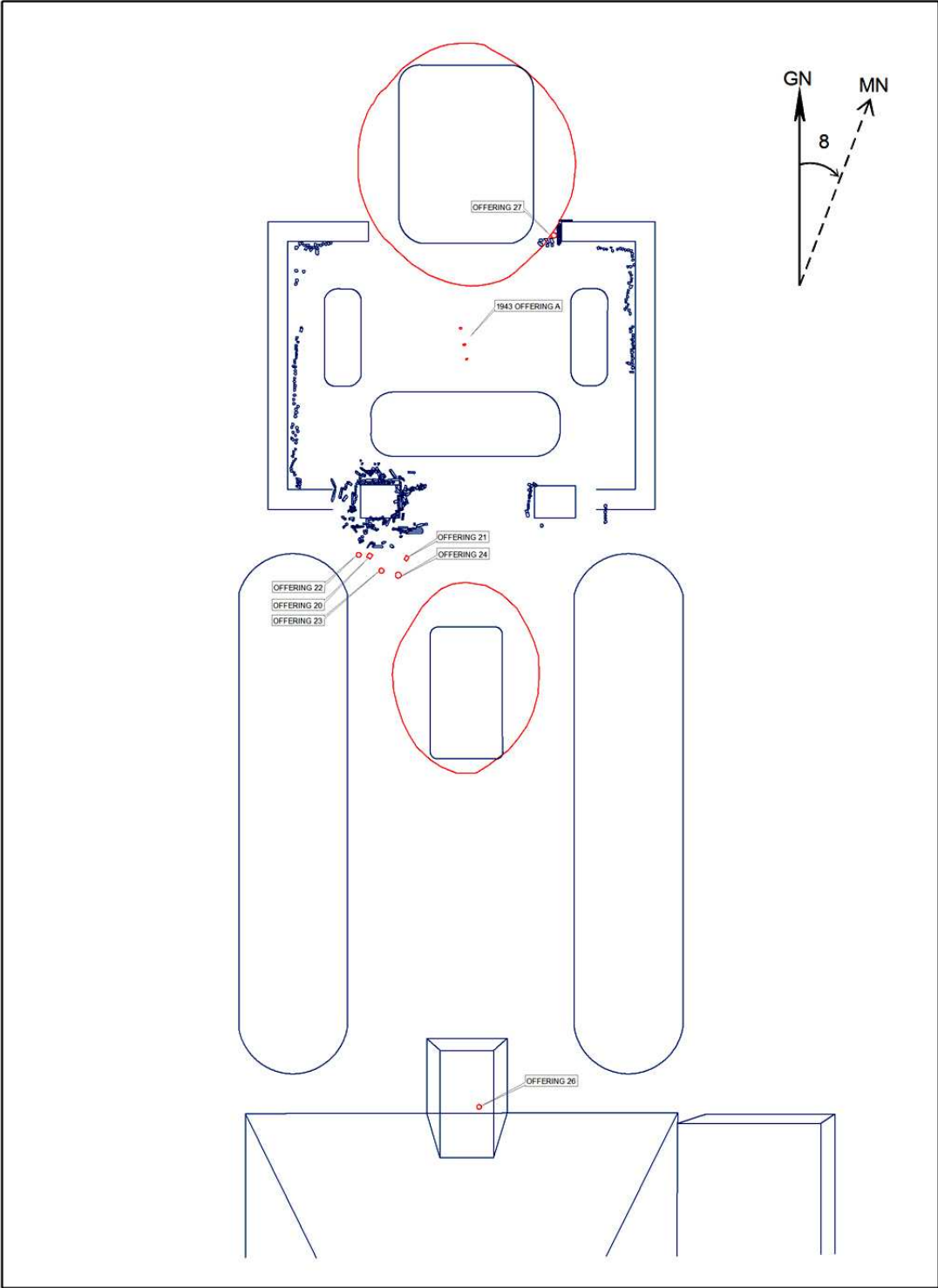


Figure 9. Reconstruction of Post-Phase IV of Complex A.

La Venta Post-Phase IV

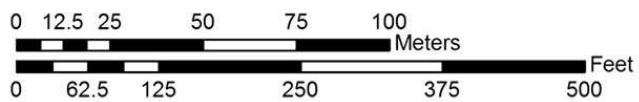


Figure 10. Overlay of Post-Phase IV Complex A onto Google Earth™ photo of La Venta.

Table 1. Construction Events by Phase

Phase	New Architecture	Floor Series	Massive Offerings and Other Features
pre-I	remnants of painted platforms or floors under area of Mound A-2 and Northwest Platform	n.a.	
I	clay enclosure wall Mound A-2 Northeast Platform South-Central Platform Northwest Platform? (or Phase II) Mound A-3	Water-sorted floors	Leveling of Court area (removal and filling)
II	Southwest Platform Southeast Platform (presumed), both built of adobe brick with basalt facing blocks	White-sandy floors	Massive Offerings 1, 4 Adobe brickwork with basalt facing blocks placed adjacent to (inside) clay enclosure wall
III		“Old Rose” floors	Massive Offering 3 Raising of Court floor with fill Some platforms greatly enlarged
IV	Mound A-5 Mound A-4 (presumed)	(if there was one, it was completely eroded)	Massive Offering 2 Massive Offering 5? “Tombs” A, B, C, D, E Red clay “cap” throughout Court, Mound A-2, to the south (Mounds A-4 and A-5) Basalt columns on wall, Southwest, and Southeast Platforms placed atop red clay Use of limestone and sandstone
post-IV	filling in of drift sand	n.a.	Pits and pottery offerings Sculptures?

based on Drucker et al. (1959:121-127, Table 1)

Table 2. Dating by Phase of Complex A Offerings

(Numbered Offerings Recovered in 1955; Lettered Offerings in 1942 and 1943)

Phase	Number	Location	Contents
I	7	Northeast Platform	jade items on a layer of orange clay and cinnabar
I	15	Northeast Platform, under Offering 6	single pottery bowl, inverted
I	16	Northeast Platform	single vessel, like #17, no pit associated
I	17	Northeast Platform	single vessel, like #16, same situation
II	3	East half of South-Central Platform	large number of jade and other costume ornaments and small objects in bed of cinnabar
II	18?	In shallow pit intruded into Phase I levels at center of Northwest Platform	pottery vessel in a pit (see #19)
II	19?	In shallow pit intruded into Phase I levels at center of Northwest Platform	pottery vessel in a pit, 5" above and 2'3" south of another vessel (#18) in same pit
II	MO 1	Southwest Platform	stacks of serpentine under mosaic mask
II	1942-E	Southwest Platform, in fill over MO 1	6 serpentine celts; possibly 2 arms of incomplete or incompletely cleared cruciform arrangement
II	1943-E	Southeast Platform	20 celts and a concave mirror in cruciform arrangement
II	MO 4	Southeast Platform	serpentine mosaic mask like MO 1, not excavated below mask but likely has stacks of serpentine
III	1	Centerline of site, beneath Mon. 13	20 large serpentine pseudo-celts in 3 rows
III	2	Centerline of site	2 layers of 51 celts of jade, serpentine; 5 decorated with incised designs
III	2a	Centerline, just NE and outside of pit of Offering No. 2	5 celts, placed prior to making pit for #2
III	4	West of center of NE Platform under Court floor	grouping of 16 figurines and 6 (cut) celts
III	5	Northeast Platform	pottery, with earspools and beads laid out between two rows of four small stones

III	6	Northeast Platform (see Offering 15)	two earspool assemblies, pendants and beads
III	8	Centerline, in fill under old-rose floor series	3 groups of celts in a row transverse to the centerline
III	10	Centerline, in fill overlying MO 3	38 serpentine and jade celts in a cruciform pattern, 5' above the uppermost layer of serpentine blocks
III	12	Centerline, in fill overlying MO 3	two round masses: one green malachite and the other red cinnabar; no objects
III	13	Just east of centerline above MO 3	2 celtlike serpentine objects, set upright, spaced 27" apart (possibly part of offering uncovered in 1943)
III	14?	Northeast Platform	6 pottery vessels, 5 of them nested together and in contact with the 6th
III	1943-C	South-Central Platform and Court, centerline above MO 3	2 pottery vessels
III	MO 3	South-Central Platform and Court	6 layers of serpentine blocks, not fully exposed
III	1943-D	Mound A-2 and area to south, centerline	6 serpentine celts

IV	9	4' 6" west of centerline, in fill overlying MO 2, in Mound A-2 just SW of coffer	Paired with #11: 1 concave mirror (magnetite) and 9 jade and serpentine celts in 3 rows
IV	11	4' 6" east of centerline, in fill overlying MO 2, in Mound A-2 just SE of coffer	Paired with #9: 1 concave mirror (ilmenite), 9 jade and serpentine celts in 3 rows, plus 907 jade beads
IV	1942-A	Mound A-2	Tomb A/Mon. 7 (basalt column tomb) contents; separated into two groups with bundle burials
IV	1942-B	Mound A-2, just S of Tomb A	Mon. 6 (sandstone coffer) contents (Tomb B)
IV	1942-C	Mound A-2, on centerline just south of coffer (1942-B)	37 celts in cruciform arrangement
IV	1942-D	Mound A-2, in between Tomb E and Tomb A	2 jade earspools, 1 figurine fragment, 6 jade beads, 28 cylindrical and disk jade beads
IV	1943-B?	Mound A-2 area, centerline above MO 3	12 serpentine celts, no particular orientation
IV	1943-F	Mound A-2, beneath pile of basalt columns (Tomb E) between Tomb A and coffer	celts, earspools and other ornaments, jade skull, concave mirror, many beads

IV	MO 2	Mound A-2	pit with single layer? of serpentine blocks
IV	1943-G	Mound A-3, Fea. A-3-a, Tomb C	contents of cist grave: celts, ornaments, figurine, etc.
IV	1943-H	Mound A-3, between Tomb C and Mon. 14	2 serpentine celts
IV	1943-I	Mound A-3, between Tomb C and Mon. 14	sandstone "vessel"
IV	1943-J	Mound A-3, between Tomb C and Mon. 14	small jade mosaic plaque?
IV	1943-K	Mound A-3, between Tomb C and Mon. 14	amber pendant
IV	1943-L	Mound A-3, Tomb D contents	small pseudo-burial: pottery vessel plus adornments
IV	1943-M	Mound A-3, just south of 1943-L	4 serpentine figurines
IV	MO 5?	south of Mound A-3; dating uncertain	incomplete mosaic mask; possibly on layers of serpentine but not excavated below

IV or Post-IV	1943-N	on center-line south of MO 5	253 serpentine "celts" and 1 concave mirror
IV or Post-IV	1943-O	on center-line north of Platform C-2	4-5 pottery vessels in drift sands at north flank of pyramid

Post-IV	20 to 27		Pottery vessels found singly and in concentrations in the drift sands after Complex A was no longer being maintained
Post-IV	1943-A	Ceremonial Court, between South-Central Platform and Mound A-2	several pottery vessels found in upper drift sands

based on Drucker et al. (1959:133-191, 218-226, Table 1, Appendix 1); Drucker and Heizer (1965:59)

Conclusion

Because the Complex A landscape is virtually destroyed, there are many things that we will never know about it. Limitations in the published plan and perspective drawings, along with biases introduced by map-making conventions, have failed to adequately represent Complex A for the last 50 years. Furthermore, we still know little about the history of the construction and use of this ceremonial precinct despite the fact that this was the major contribution of the 1955 excavations.

This analysis has produced the first reliable plan views of Complex A's construction sequence, allowing for interpretations of the dynamic history of the ritual performances enacted within this sacred landscape in conjunction with transformations in sociopolitical organization. The tentative phase-by-phase plan views presented here will continue to be refined as we become able to incorporate the many profile drawings into the overall digitized site plan.

This project calls attention to the value of archival archaeology. Much more can be accomplished with the La Venta data, both the published and the unpublished information. The original field notes, photos, and drawings in archives constitutes a largely untapped resource. These records should be investigated with the same serious consideration and respect given to an archaeological site.

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