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Photographic Documentation of Monuments with Epi-Olmec Script/Imagery



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Culture: epi-Olmec

Chronology: Pre-Classic

Location: Xalapa Anthropology Museum, National Museum of Anthropology - Mexico City, Tres Zapotes Site Museum

Sites: Xalapa, Tres Zapotes, Cerro de las Mesas, El Mesón

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Introduction

This photographic documentation project provides photographic documentation of monuments in Mexican museums belonging to the so-called epi-Olmec tradition. The main purpose of this report is to disseminate a set of photographs that constitute part of the primary documentation of epi-Olmec monuments, with particular emphasis on those bearing epi-Olmec texts, and of a few monuments from a tradition that we suspect replaced it at Cerro de las Mesas. It does not include objects that are well-published elsewhere, nor does it include two objects to which we have been unable to gain access to. Its first aim is to marry a trustworthy photographic record and the web presence of FAMSI for the purpose of making widely available a large percentage of the corpus of monuments belonging to this cultural tradition. It is hoped that this will have a very positive effect on advancing the script's understanding and supporting its decipherment.

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Background

Given the recent history of recovery of objects bearing epi-Olmec writing, new texts from this source are likely to continue appearing about once every 10 to 20 years, sometimes from field reconnaissance and archaeological excavations (a wall panel and an inscribed sherd from Chiapa de Corzo were recovered in the 1960s, the La Mojarra stela in 1986) and sometimes from private collections (as with the so-called O'Boyle "mask" and a Teotihuacan-style mask). In 1993, as part of the Project for the Documentation of the Languages of MesoAmerica, John Justeson and Terrence Kaufman initiated a different kind of effort to recover more text data: improving the documentation of texts that were inadequately documented, and recovering texts from known objects that they suspected to bear epi-Olmec writing although this had not been previously demonstrated to be the case.

Ideally, the documentation of these texts should consist of a good photographic record of the texts, and of the objects bearing them, and accurate drawings of each one. Justeson has produced field drawings of several epi-Olmec texts, in consultation with Kaufman, and is currently in the process of completing them; this work is discussed in the sketch of the history of the documentation of epi-Olmec texts, below. In 2004, Justeson brought Jorge Pérez de Lara in to photograph those insufficiently documented texts that are now in museums in Mexico, both as primary photographic documentation and as a basis for Justeson's finalizing drawings of these texts.

Working Universe

The goal of this documentation effort is not to present an exhaustive coverage of all objects that display this script, but rather to provide a supplement to the corpus of those pieces that have been more widely disseminated, such as the Tuxtla Statuette or the Teotihuacan-style mask with a long Epi-Olmec text that was published fairly recently by Coe and Houston (see *Mexicon*, December, 2003). As the documentation work progressed, nevertheless, it became apparent that there were other monuments without Epi-Olmec texts on them that, nevertheless, appear to iconographically belong in the same or in a very similar tradition. This is the case of El Mesón Stela 1, the El Mesón basalt column or the Tepetlaxco monument, to name a few of them. So the decision was made to present these monuments alongside others more clearly inserted in this tradition, such as Cerro de las Mesas Stelae 5, 6 and 8. An especially strong effort has been made to present the photographic record of the very eroded (and less well-known) side text on La Mojarra Stela 1.

Technique

Documentation work was almost exclusively carried out at night, so as to avoid the effects of non-controlled, unwanted ambient light. Raking light (i.e., direct light projected onto the subject at a very oblique angle) was used for all photographs. This has the advantage of producing a strong contrast that often helps to bring out the eroded contours of figures and glyphs. The disadvantage of this technique is that, on very battered surfaces, it also brings out all the imperfections and scrapings on the rock, making it hard to distinguish between true carving and the random scratches produced by weathering and erosion.

With the exception of the back of Tres Zapotes Stela C, which has two columns of text carved on an otherwise plain surface, the first thing that was usually aimed for was the production of a general photograph of the monument that was being recorded, in order to show the relationship between text and figure(s) and their relative sizes. These general shots are also very useful for showing where the details belong on a given monument. These general views were usually produced by lighting the monument first from its upper left and then from its upper right. Experience has shown that often detail

that goes unnoticed when lighting from one side can be recorded when lighting it from the opposite side. Also, the roughly 45° downward angle at which the light was projected on the stone surface is especially helpful in avoiding washing out true vertical and true horizontal lines, as is frequently the case when lighting, respectively from above and from the sides at 90° angles.

Securing the participation in this documentation project of Dr. John Justeson of the State University of New York at Albany in the project proved invaluable. Dr. Justeson is one of a handful of scholars who has spent a very large amount of time working both with epi-Olmec script and with the iconography associated with the culture that produced it.

After taking the general views of a monument, Dr. Justeson and this author would move in with a strong torchlight and light the details to be recorded from several angles, in order to determine what lighting arrangement worked best for each case. Then, the photographic lights were brought in at the chosen angle and we would fine-tune their position by using instant film proofs and digital previews until we felt we had achieved the best possible lighting for bringing out the detail to be recorded.

All of the recording work presented together with this report was accomplished in the course of three "seasons". The first one during the months of May and June, 2005; the second one during August, 2005 and the third and last during July, 2006.

Our first working sessions took place at the Xalapa Anthropology Museum, where we recorded views and details of both text and imagery of the following monuments:

- Cerro de las Mesas Monument #5
- Cerro de las Mesas Monument #6
- Cerro de las Mesas Monument #8
- La Mojarra Stela #1

The second set of sessions took place at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, where we recorded general views and details of both text and imagery of the following monuments:

- Tres Zapotes Stela C (lower portion)
- Alvarado Stela #1

A third set of work sessions took place at the Tres Zapotes Site Museum, where we recorded several details the back of the upper portion of Tres Zapotes Stela C, as well as general views and some details of the iconography on its front:

- Tres Zapotes Stela C (upper portion)

During our stay in the area of Tres Zapotes, we also thought it important to record a very large monument (known as El Mesón Stela 1) that is currently lying in a precarious

position against an outside wall of the municipal building of the town of Ángel R. Cabada, in Veracruz. The monument's state of preservation is good overall, but it lies in a place that is far from being the best, both from the point of view of its preservation and for the purpose of viewing it, since the abundant, non-directional natural light, makes it almost impossible to discern its design. The monument lies in the general cultural area where epi-Olmec script and imagery appears to have developed and this is the reason for recording it and presenting it together with the rest of the Epi-Olmec monuments in this project:

- El Mesón stela

In a second work session at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, we also recorded the so-called San Miguel Chapultepec monument and the Tepetlaxco stela. The first of these displays a single column of script that is not clearly not epi-Olmec. Nevertheless, its imagery bears an uncanny resemblance to other monuments from Cerro de las Mesas, most notably to that site's Stela 5. As for the Tepetlaxco stela, it bears no script; nevertheless, its earth and sky iconography shows a strong resemblance to that of other epi-Olmec monuments, most notably those from Cerro de las Mesas:

- San Miguel Chapultepec Monument
- Tepetlaxco stela

During our final July "season", we carried out coverage of the very eroded text on the side of La Mojarra Stela 1. We also recorded other monuments in the Xalapa Anthropology Museum that appear to have strong affinities with the epi-Olmec tradition, while some of them (Cerro de las Mesas Monument 4 and Stela 3) have glyphs that may well be Epi-Olmec and still another one (Cerro de las Mesas Monument 2, also known as the Papaloapan stela) may have once carried texts on very eroded columns on its back. Yet another monument (El Mesón basalt column) bears a strong resemblance in imagery and format to the Alvarado stela at Mexico City's National Museum:

- La Mojarra Stela 1 (side text)
- El Mesón basalt column
- Cerro de las Mesas Monument 4
- Cerro de las Mesas Stela 3
- Cerro de las Mesas Stela 4
- Papaloapan stela

In closing this technical section, it must be underlined that one of the uses envisioned for the sets of general views and details that constitute this documentation effort is that of providing templates (the general views) where the detail views can be fitted, with a view to creating accurate line drawings.

Overall, this project documented 15 monuments.

Known epi-Olmec texts

Table 1 lists all of the objects that we now know to bear epi-Olmec texts (after Kaufman and Justeson 2004: Table 44.1, slightly updated), in order of date. Five of these texts have substantially legible non-calendrical passages: the Chiapa de Corzo sherd, Tres Zapotes Stela C, the La Mojarra Stela, the Tuxtla Statuette, Cerro de las Mesas Stela 6, the Teotihuacan-style mask, and the O'Boyle "mask". On the other texts, only calendrical passages survive, along with occasional individual non-calendrical signs.

One other monument that probably bears a text in the epi-Olmec script is the so-called "Alvarado stela", which Urcid considers to be of Protoclassic date, and which he attributes to the site of Cerro de la Piedra, Veracruz (near Orizaba). Its base panel recalls that of the Tepetlaxco stela, whose "sky panel" consists of a sequence of epi-Olmec-style 'star' signs.

Other sculptures that do not bear texts appear to be in the epi-Olmec tradition because the sculptures on them closely resemble those on monuments that do bear such texts. These include: two stelae from El Mesón, a large slab whose figure is widely compared to that on the stela from La Mojarra, and a columnar basalt monument from the same site that compares closely to the Alvarado stela; the so-called Tepetlaxco stela, whose sky band consists of a repeating sequence of epi-Olmec glyphs for 'star'; and the carved human femurs from Chiapa de Corzo, which make use of a specifically epi-Olmec iconographic motif; and Cerro de las Mesas Monument 4 and Stela 3. A special case is the stela known as the "Chapultepec Stone", a near copy of the scene on Cerro de las Mesas Stela 5, and probably originating from the political unit dominated by that site (Justeson and Kaufman in press); its text is not epi-Olmec. The iconography of some of these objects has the potential to provide insights into epigraphic issues.

The objects that are documented in this report, and their current locations, are as follows:

- Cerro de las Mesas: Monument 4 and Stelae 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8 are all at the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa;
- Tres Zapotes: Stela C: upper half at the site museum in the town of Tres Zapotes, lower half at the Museo Nacional de Antropología;
- El Mesón: a columnar basalt column at the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa; Stela 1 in the town square at Angel R. Cabada, State of Veracruz;
- The so-called Alvarado stela, now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología;
- Chapultepec stone, now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología;
- Tepetlaxco stela, now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología.

We had hoped to be able to document Stela 15 of Cerro de las Mesas, but we have been unable to locate its whereabouts. It is neither in the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa nor in the Museo Nacional de Antropología.

A sketch of prior documentation of epi-Olmec texts

The Tuxtla Statuette

Work on epi-Olmec writing began with the publication of the Tuxtla Statuette (Holmes 1902). The incising on the hard stone was clear, and the image is visually engaging, so the object has been widely published both in photographs and in relatively accurate drawings.

Cerro de las Mesas Stela 5, 6, 8, and 15

Although the fame of the La Mojarra stela has led scholars to think of epi-Olmec writing and culture as a Late Preclassic phenomenon, the largest body of known epi-Olmec texts comes from the Classic period occupation at Cerro de las Mesas.

The monuments of Cerro de las Mesas came to the attention of scholars by the 1920s, but only became generally accessible through the published investigations of Matthew Stirling (1943). The texts were badly weathered. Stirling's drawings give a sense of the degree of preservation of signs on Stela 6 and Stela 8, but, with one exception, the representation of the non-calendrical signs in these drawings was not accurate. In particular, none of the signs as represented in these drawings resembled any sign on the Tuxtla Statuette, and the script was not recognized as having any relationship with the epi-Olmec script. Instead, its long count dates again invited an association with Mayan writing, and three of the four legible day signs (on Stela 6, 8, and 15) were noted as resembling Mayan day signs. Least accurate is Stirling's drawing of Stela 5; it shows no trace of any writing whatsoever on the raised glyph panel, although that panel in fact bears a legible long count date. Stirling's data nonetheless proved useful for investigations into the format of the script and of the long count system (Prem 1971, 1973; Graham 1971; Justeson *et al.* 1985), particularly for their bearing on interrelationships among different writing systems during the Preclassic era.

The monuments have been on public display at the Museo de Antropología of the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa, Veracruz, so visiting scholars and the general public alike at least had direct access to these texts.

An album of photographs of monuments in the museum was published by Medellín Zenil in 1971. These photographs were quite good, considering that they were taken outdoors using, apparently, only the available sunlight. Several epi-Olmec signs can be detected in these photographs. However, the fact was seemingly not recognized by anyone at the time; even in the publication of the La Mojarra stela by the then-director of the same museum (Winfield Capitaine 1988).

Javier Urcid has been drawing these monuments of Cerro de las Mesas and others that appear to be from in and near the Mixtequilla; to our knowledge, his results are not yet published.

The Chapultepec Stone

Stirling (1943:pp) recognized that the sculpture on the Chapultepec Stone was nearly identical to that on Cerro de las Mesas Stela 5. He states that the monument was taken from the village of San Miguel Chapultepec, in Mexico City – it is not from the apocryphal "San Miguel Chapultepec, Veracruz", as is sometimes stated – although he suspected that it was in fact from Veracruz given its general relationship to several of the monuments at Cerro de las Mesas and to Stela 5 most specifically.

Thanks to its deep relief and hard stone, this monument is extremely well preserved. Partly as a result, several quite acceptable photographs of it have been published in several books and articles dealing with Mesoamerican art. Stirling's drawing of the monument is a fairly good guide to the details of the sculpture and text, but Porter's unpublished drawing certainly improves on it.

Tres Zapotes Stela C

The lower half of Tres Zapotes Stela C was discovered by Stirling and shown to have borne the date 7.16.6.16.18. This date replaced that of the Tuxtla Statuette as the earliest then known. At the time, there was resistance to accepting so seemingly early a date at face value – Thompson (1943) argued that it was a Late Classic monument using a long count based on a 400-day year – Coe (1957) showed that it and other early long count dates conformed to the standard Mayan mathematical format. This was confirmed by the later discovery of the upper half of the stela a few meters away.

Chiapa de Corzo

The next substantially legible text was that on a sherd discovered during the excavations of the New World Archaeological Foundation (NAAF) in fill intrusive into a burial at Chiapa de Corzo. This sherd dates to the Francesa phase (450-300 BCE), and is the oldest currently dateable epi-Olmec text. Although the published drawing was seriously flawed, two repeated signs appeared to be rather similar to signs on the Statuette.

The NAAF excavations also turned up an inscribed wall panel, misleadingly designated as "Stela 2". All that survives of its text is the day sign and the end of a long count,

reconstructible as 7.16.3.2.13, making it the earliest fully recoverable long count date currently known. It dates to less than four years before Tres Zapotes Stela C.

Its text is recognizable as epi-Olmec – that is, as part of the same script tradition as the La Mojarra stela and the Tuxtla Statuette – both on the basis of a day sign shared with Cerro de las Mesas Stela 15, and because its date conforms to an epi-Olmec cultural practice, a calendrical/astronomical cycle that is characteristic of epi-Olmec texts (see Kaufman and Justeson 2001, Justeson and Kaufman in press).

The format of the long counts on the Tuxtla Statuette, Tres Zapotes Stela C, the Chiapa de Corzo wall panel, and Cerro de las Mesas Stelae 5, 6, and 8 were recognized to be visually similar, and the format of the calendrics and of the texts as a whole led Prem (1971, 1973; also Graham 1971, Justeson *et al.* 1985) to identify them as part of the same script tradition.

The O'Boyle "mask"

A text on an object of unknown provenience in a private collection has an inscription that appears to consist of 23 glyphic units (one is treated by Justeson and Kaufman [2001:83-85] as consisting of two units, D4-5, and another is treated as a fusion of two distinct signs). The object is made of clay, and the glyphs are small with their details often difficult to make out; as a result there are uncertainties about the unit.

A great number of its signs are shared with the text on the La Mojarra stela, but few are found in the text on the Tuxtla Statuette in an obviously similar form. To our knowledge, the text was associated with the epi-Olmec script only after the publication of the La Mojarra text.

The La Mojarra stela

The stela of La Mojarra was brought to Xalapa's Museo de Antropología in 1986. Its text was quite long by Mesoamerican standards, long enough that work on the decipherment of non-calendrical signs became realistic to consider, and several professional and vocational epigraphers have made efforts to contribute to this process. George Stuart made this work possible by producing a highly accurate drawing of the text, a remarkable accomplishment given that it was done under difficult viewing conditions.

The stela was kept in the Museo's bodega for several years, under a succession of directors; due largely to academic politics, the text was treated as a possible or likely modern fabrication (the reasons that had been put forward being insubstantial and sometimes ill-informed). Access was highly restricted, generally at the discretion of the director. In 1993, Justeson and Kaufman were provided access for as long as they

liked, though they were not allowed to bring in any recording devices or media including paper or pencil; several others were admitted for just 15 minutes, in at least one case with a video camera; and some recognized scholars were denied access.

All of this changed in the September, 1995, when Sara Ladrón de Guevara became director of the museum. Without taking a position on the authenticity of the monument, in view of the world-wide attention it had received, and in view of the steady stream of both academic and non-academic visitors who visited Xalapa to examine it, she chose to make it available to all by directing that it be put on permanent public display. Throughout her 4-year tenure as director of the Museo, and now that she is again serving in that capacity, Ladrón de Guevara has been and continues to be extremely helpful in facilitating access to this monument and all of the others in the collection; in particular, she made it possible for Justeson to work on the epi-Olmec monuments during the night for a cumulative total of more than a month, in addition to the access she has provided to us during the current project.

While the monument was being prepared for display, a geologist brought to the attention of archaeologist Sergio Vasquez Z. that some of the "erosion lines" on one side of the stela were running the wrong way: Vasquez recognized that these were the remains of a hieroglyphic text. This was made known at the unveiling of the monument in November, 1995. Justeson and Kaufman were advised of the existence of a seemingly relatively short column of eroded glyphs in March 1996. The side text turned out to consist of 35 signs, most of which were legible enough to identify.

The Teotihuacán-style mask

Only one object bearing an epi-Olmec text has come to light since 1986 (Houston and Coe 2004): a mask in Teotihuacán style that likely comes either from Teotihuacán or from somewhere in Veracruz. This text is a major addition to the corpus; with 104 signs, it is the second longest text in the corpus.

A preliminary drawing by Joralemon was circulated in the summer of 2002, which made it clear that the text was epi-Olmec.

The "Alvarado Stela"

The Alvarado stela is a tall column of basalt that has a scene spanning two of its sides. On the right side is a tall standing figure, facing a smaller bound, seated Olmec-style figure on the left side. The outstretched hand of the figure reaches out, palm up, as though it is holding up a column of glyphs; in this respect the presentation parallels that on Seibal Stela 12.

The monument has been published in photographs, drawings, and a rubbing. The drawings thus far have not been very explicit in representing the text, apart from the clearly delineated final sign group. During one of his visits, Justeson observed that the uppermost, enlarged sign was in the form of a "lazy 8", set in something like a glyph panel. Its execution recalls that of the coiled snake in the month patron of the second long count introducing glyph on the La Mojarra stela; the head and tail of the snake, if present, were not clear. There was a possible numeral associated with this sign. The other signs were mostly too difficult to make out, but some had distinctive profiles that did not seem to agree with any known epi-Olmec sign. Based on this observation, the text may be in a form of epi-Olmec writing, but it may be in a distinct variety.

Some epi-Olmec monuments that do not bear texts

A number of monuments that do not appear to have texts or to ever have had them, are identified as epi-Olmec based on their shared iconography. Some features are broadly shared; several share certain kinds of base panels, often identifiable iconically with the earth, on which rulers stand (less widely shared and less uniform in execution are sky bands above the main figure).

The slab stela of El Mesón has been of interest in that the main figure generally recalls that of the La Mojarra stela: it is a richly clad figure with a substantial headdress who holds one staff-like object behind him, slanting forward and downward, while the other hand holds another object in front of him.

Our Work

This section includes access to the photographic documentation of the monuments; new observations on monuments discussed in the sketch of the history of documentation; and basic observations on those monuments not discussed in the historical sketch.

The La Mojarra stela

La Mojarra stela: main text

Because the text is quite clear, and Justeson had already traced it in its entirety, no new sign identifications have emerged. We provide here an album of photographs ([view album](#)) that covers the face of the La Mojarra stela.

La Mojarra stela: side text

The text on the side of the stela of La Mojarra is badly damaged by heavy vertical erosion and pocking. Justeson and Kaufman (1997) report on their examination of the monument, provide a drawing of the current state and reconstructed forms, and interpret the text. Justeson takes this text to be a retrospective on the career of the young (13-year-old) king, recounted in some detail in the text on the face of the monument, ending with a claim of shamanic transformation. The Tuxtla Statuette ends with a similar statement.

Here we provide a sequence of photographs ([view album](#)) of the glyphs in this text, alongside an instance of what appears to be the same glyph on the front of the stela.

Tres Zapotes Stela C

Most of the signs on the text of Tres Zapotes Stela C are still in larger measure unclear, but some are identifiable and can be assigned to the epi-Olmec tradition.

The circumstances of the photography were less than ideal both for the upper portion, at the site museum in the town of Tres Zapotes, and for the lower portion, on display in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, since we were not granted to either of these at night and therefore could not keep extraneous light away from the monument. Nonetheless, a fair amount of detail is apparent in the photos that enable us to improve on existing drawings and to identify one additional epi-Olmec sign (view [Upper Section](#) or view [Lower Section](#)).

At the Museo Nacional de Antropología, the lower half of the stela has been moved so that only the side bearing the text is visible. The side displaying the iconography is just inches from the wall; we were not able to photograph it.

Monuments of or relating to Cerro de las Mesas

We distinguish two types of figural sculptures at Cerro de las Mesas. The figures and their accoutrements on Stelae 3, 5, 6, and 8 and on the front of Monument 2 are very similar to one another. All of them have epi-Olmec iconographic elements; Stela 6, 8, and presumably 5 have epi-Olmec texts. We treat all of them as epi-Olmec. These sculptures differ systematically from those on Stela 4 and on the back sides of Monuments 2 and 4, which feature scantily-clad main figures with less imposing headgear. These seem likely to depict the successors of the epi-Olmecs as leaders of Cerro de las Mesas and the surrounding area.

Epi-Olmec sculptures

The imagery on these monuments is mostly quite clear, with the figures standing out in deep relief and with the interior detailing being rather deeply incised. The texts are incised onto raised glyph panels; the divisions between glyphs have survived relatively well, but the incising of the interior details is not as deep, and are largely illegible on Stela 5 and 8.

Stela 6

Remarkably for this site, the text of this monument is mostly quite clear, with only two largely abraded signs (view [Stela 6 album](#)).

Stela 8

One diagnostic epi-Olmec sign, mi, is recognizable (twice) in the badly weathered text of this monument (view [Stela 8 album](#)).

Stela 5

No non-calendrical signs have been found on this text. The trilobed element of the long count introducing glyph may immediately precede the long count, as on Stela 6 (view [Stela 5 album](#)).

The Chapultepec Stone

Because the Chapultepec Stone is in excellent condition, there are no new results to report concerning it (view [Chapultepec Stone photographs](#)).

Stela 3

This stela is carved on one face. It has no glyph panel. Its loincloth resembles that of Stela 6 and Stela 8, which are epi-Olmec in both text and iconography, as well as that of Monument 2. The figure holds what seems to be part of a large plant, a long tapering unit ending with a leaf-shaped element; what is unmistakably the same object hangs down from near the belt of the figures on Stela 5, 6, and 8 and Monument 2. The portion of the monument containing its headgear no longer exists for comparison (view [Stela 3 album](#)).

Monument 2 (also known as the Papaloapan stela)

Cerro de las Mesas Monument 2 is a stela carved on four sides. One continuous scene wraps around three sides of the stela, while another occupies a single side; there is no overlap across the corners, which separate the two scenes. The side of the stela occupied by a single scene, and the opposite side, is wider than the other two sides.

We treat the broader, middle face of the three that bear a continuous scene as the front of the monument. A single, large figure occupies the entirety of this side, above the level of the base panel; part of his clothing wraps around the right corner and lies along almost the entire length of the (viewer's) right hand side of the monument. This figure holds in his forward (right) hand the severed head of a kneeling victim, which wraps around the left corner of the front face of the stela; on the (viewer's) right is the kneeling body of the beheaded figure, whose blood spurts from his neck. Clearly the figure on the front face is the main figure of the scene (view the [Papaloapan Stela album](#)).

The main figure's left arm is held downward behind him, and holds what is probably the knife that he used to sever the head that is held in his other hand. The decapitated kneeling figure's arms are behind his body, stretching straight down, and are plausibly tied behind his back although the details to confirm this interpretation are not clear.

The main figure on the front of the stela resembles those of Stela 5, 6, and 8. The loincloth design is like that on Stela 6 and 8; the beard-mask that it wears is like that of Stela 5 and 8. The wristlets and armlets are like Stela 6 and 8, with three uninterrupted bands flanked by a pair of circles on each side. A seemingly flexible vertical unit hangs down in front of the figure, ending with a leaf-shaped element, as on Stela 5, 6, and 8. The headgear, which on Stela 5, 6, and 8 has diagnostic epi-Olmec elements, has been lost from this monument.

The other scene, on which we refer to as the back side of the monument, appears to be completely distinct and to have no relationship to the other scene: they differ in iconography, style, and content, and in particular they have no features that tie them to any epi-Olmec sculpture. One of the more striking differences in content is that the figures are sparsely clad, like those on Stela 4 and Monument 4. The scene displays two figures facing one another across what appears to be a folded cloth bearing a geometric design. Above the figure on the right is a raised panel, divided up by three horizontal lines, that may well be the remains of a text of four signs or glyphic units.

The base panel of the three-sided scene displays a saurian figure with a monster/god head. The head of one such figure, facing left, is on the right front side of the face of the stela, its body wrapping around to the (viewer's) right side. The same figure or another similar one is on the left side of the base panel on the front of the stela. Accordingly, this base panel seems to have been conceived originally as wrapping around the stela at its base. The surface of the left side of the stela, which continues the scene on the front, is destroyed at the level of the base panel. On the back, the base level is seriously eroded, but contains the remains of a base panel, whose surviving details do not seem consistent with a continuation of the saurian figure.

We therefore suspect that the scene on the back was carved onto the stela after the now three-sided scene was had already been carved. The scene with scantily clad figures would then postdate the scene with classic epi-Olmec features. This is consistent with widely-shared views according to which Monument 4 and the back of Monument 2, which also have scantily clad figures, are of Late Classic date. John

Graham identifies scantily clad main figures on Terminal Classic monuments at Seibal as depictions of people from Tabasco or southern Veracruz; they might be from the same cultural group as the people who appear to have taken over control at Cerro de las Mesas after the epi-Olmec era, and possibly ended epi-Olmec control there.

Monuments that appear to postdate the epi-Olmec period

The discussion of Monument 2 in §4.2.6 suggests that the sculptures depicting sparsely clad figures with minimal adornments as main figures postdate the epi-Olmec period at Cerro de las Mesas. Two other monuments fall into this group. All three seem to make (minimal) use of hieroglyphs.

Monument 4

What is generally treated as the front of this beautiful sculpture, carved in the round on three sides, is one of the most frequently illustrated sculptures from Cerro de las Mesas. The icon at the forehead of this sculpture recalls the Zapotec day sign Reed (Caso's Glyph D); it differs in having a roughly U-shaped element in place of the central circle of the Zapotec form. The double-striped face painting on the cheek of this monument recalls features both of Monte Alban I and II versions of the Zapotec sign for the day Flint, which depict a sacrificial victim with face painting, and markings on some instances of the epi-Olmec syllabogram *sa* (based on **sa7=sa7* 'noble(man)'). Oaxacan influences have been noted at Cerro de las Mesas during the Monte Alban II era.

The fourth side of the monument is slightly curved, and bears a low relief carving that wraps around a beveled corner at its left. There is damage all along the back edge of that extension, damaging both the low-relief carving and the side of the full round sculpture, which seem to have met along a seam.

It appears that the sculpture on the back and the full round sculpture were carved at different times. The damage at corner on the left, from the point of view of the low-relief sculpture, has removed almost all if not all of the evidence that would allow one to prove which came first (view [Monument 4 album](#)).

There is a squared-cartouche glyph on the right of the low-relief side, at the head of a bound captive. It may (but may not) have a numeral coefficient above; if so, it is most likely 4 or 5, and is not a higher number inasmuch as the surface of the stone above the possible 4 or 5 is lower, and at the level of the remaining background. The interior of the sign is so badly damaged that its interior details are not clear; some of the lines that appear rather clear may be the result of damage. The general impression of the sign is abstract rather than iconically representational, but it may represent a face.

Squared cartouche day signs are found in some epi-Olmec texts – Chiapa de Corzo "Stela 2" (36 BCE), Cerro de las Mesas Monument 15 (468 CE), the Teotihuacan-style

mask (Early or Middle Classic), so this could be an epi-Olmec sign which, however, is distinct from all other known epi-Olmec day signs (for days 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17, 18).

Stela 4

This monument probably postdates the epi-Olmec phase of the site's sculptural tradition. The figure is scantily clothed, apart from the fashionable headwear. Lit from the left, the day sign appears to be the head of a bird; if so, it would not be clear whether it is better identified with Eagle or Buzzard/Crow. However, the sign's details seem better brought out by lighting from the left. In this case, the features of the sign most closely resemble those of the Zapotec sign for the day Wind, with the muzzle and abbreviated lower jaw of the wind god.

The coefficient has been read since Stirling (1943) as a 5, in the all-dots system; it may in fact have been a 6, since the dot at the lower left corner does not have an iconographic function that is clear to us (view [Stela 4 album](#)).

The Alvarado stela

The Alvarado stela was photographed under difficult conditions, because it could not be photographed at night and it is fully exposed to outside light. It is also too high to place the lights so that they provide a raking angle from above. Nonetheless, the photographs provide clear enough data on most of the signs so that it can be determined that the text had nine or possibly 10 signs, five of which are relatively legible (we discuss the text as a sequence of 9 signs, A1-A9). Of the five legible glyphs, three are plausibly epi-Olmec (view The [Alvarado stela album](#)).

The sign at A9, which represents a kind of title according to Justeson and Kaufman's analysis, has been adequately represented in past drawings.

The sign at A5 is very plausibly equatable with the pa epi-Olmec sign, given that the photographs reveal a series of striations on the "brush" end of the sign.

The "lazy 8" in a day sign cartouche at A1 has a clear tail emerging at the lower right, suggesting that it indeed depicts a coiled snake; there is no discernable trace of a head at the upper left, but the lazy 8 does not close up at the upper right, so it is possible that a head occupied part of the interior of the glyph. It is likely that the sign represents the day name Snake. However, no numeral coefficient seems to have been associated with the day sign. (The rectangle below the day sign is not especially plausible as a numerical bar.)

Epi-Olmec monuments from El Mesón

Columnar basalt monument from El Mesón

The general features of the figure, its context on a natural basalt column, and its general placement on that column recall those of the Alvarado stela. A significant feature of is the presence of the EARTH symbol at the bottom of the base panel; it is closer to the form of this icon as it is rendered in the epi-Olmec script than is that on any other monument (view Columnar basalt from [El Mesón album](#)).

There is a possibly glyphic element between the sky band and the headgear of the figure, which may end in a numeral bar. The features of this element, even its profile, are not clear to us.

Slab stela from El Mesón

Note the form of the object in the main figure's forward hand, which provides a model for the sign discussed in section 2.10 (view [El Mesón Stela 1 album](#)).

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List of Photograph Albums

[Alvarado Stela Photographs](#)

[Cerro de las Mesas - Stela 3](#)

[Cerro de las Mesas - Stela 4](#)

[Cerro de las Mesas - Stela 5](#)

[Cerro de las Mesas - Stela 6](#)

[Cerro de las Mesas - Stela 8](#)

[Cerro de las Mesas - Monument 4](#)

[The Chapultepec Stone](#)

[El Mesón Basalt Column](#)

[El Mesón Stela 1](#)

[La Mojarra Stela: Main text](#)
[La Mojarra Stela: Side text](#)
[Papaloapan Stela](#)
[Tres Zapotes Stela C \(upper section\)](#)
[Tres Zapotes Stela C \(lower section\)](#)

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