

Olmec Ferox: Ritual Human Sacrifice

IN THE ROCK ART OF CHALCATZINGO, MORELOS

Introduction

This study investigates the variant forms of ritual human sacrifice attested in the Olmec-style rock carvings of Chalcatzingo, in Morelos, Mexico. While there are no complete renditions of an entire Middle Formative period (900-500 BC) ceremony involving human sacrifice to be found at the site, there appear to be a number of shared themes in the rock carvings concerning the people involved in sacrificial rites, the types of sacrifice employed at Chalcatzingo, and the mytho-religious underpinnings of these rituals and their linkages to rulership. Although this study will focus on different configurations of the practice of ritual human sacrifice observable in the Olmec iconography of Chalcatzingo's monuments, comparative data from Classic and Late Postclassic period Central Mexican, Gulf Coast and Maya sources will be used when appropriate (e.g. González Torres 1988; Graulich 2003; Taube 1988; Wyllie 2008). It is hoped that by studying the ritual of human sacrifice at Chalcatzingo, this paper will contribute to our understanding of the role such cultural practices and their representation in rock art played in the social construction of elite identities at the site.

The Rock Carvings of Chalcatzingo

Situated in the semi-arid eastern Valley of Morelos at the base of two large hills, Cerro Delgado and Cerro Chalcatzingo,

the large Formative period village of Chalcatzingo is widely known for its rich corpus of Olmec-style rock carvings. These low-relief carvings are conveniently classified into two groups. The Group A rock carvings are relatively hidden on the northwestern slopes of Cerro Chalcatzingo. These seven rock carvings typically deal with themes of rainfall and agricultural fertility and employ reptilian and cave imagery as well as the representations of rulers. By contrast, the six low-reliefs comprising the Group B cluster of rock carvings are on six distinct boulders and slabs located on the rocky northern talus slopes of Cerro Chalcatzingo near the central plaza of the site. In order from west to east, Group B consists of the following rock carvings: Monuments 2, 31, 41, 3, 4, and 5 (Figure 1).

Unlike the Group A rock carvings, then, the Group B cluster of reliefs are much more readily observable from the main areas of the site. These rock carvings also deal with themes primarily associated with human sacrifice (Cook de Leonard 1967:71; Reilly and Garber 2003:146) and employ a distinct but related set of images involving felines, serpents, and avians. By studying this imagery, this paper will attempt to uncover some of the common themes shared by the disparate forms of sacrifice attested in the Group B rock carvings.

I will begin by identifying the ritual participants alluded to in the reliefs: those of-



Fig. 1: Panoramic view of the Group B Rock Carvings depicting (from left to right) the location of Monument 5, Monument 4, Monument 3, Monument 41, Monument 31, and Monument 2. Drawings of the rock carvings are not shown to scale. Drawings by the author.

fering the sacrifice, usually rulers or priests (*los sacrificadores* in Spanish), and the sacrificial victims (*los sacrificantes* in Spanish).

Dressed to Kill: Rulers and Their Animal Alter-Egos

Of all of the Group B rock carvings, Monument 2 has often stood out as being the most clearly recognizable representation of human sacrifice at Chalcatzingo (Graulich 2003:17; Magni 2003:211). Originally described by Eulalia Guzmán (1934), this large low-relief carving represents four personages, three standing and one seated facing the other three (Figure 2). The seated figure is bound and nude – two classic tropes often used to portray captives in scenes of human sacrifice in both Classic Maya art (Stuart 2003:24-26) and Late Postclassic Mexica art (González Torres 1988:112-117). The standing figures are elaborately dressed with masked headdresses, decorative belts,

and capes. Two are shown holding pointed implements, possibly clubs. The last standing figure, by contrast, is holding a staff with vegetal designs perhaps indicating that the sacrifice was linked to agricultural fertility.

Fig. 2: Detail of the seated figure in Chalcatzingo Monument 2. Photograph by the author.



Because of the zoomorphic imagery used throughout the other Group B rock carvings, it has been more difficult to relate these animal figures to human beings participating in rituals of human sacrifice. However, the zoomorphs portrayed in Monuments 31, 41, 3, 4, and 5 share a number of motifs with the masked humans depicted in Monument 2 including crossed bands, vegetal motifs and avian elements (i.e. gum ridges, curved beaks, flame brow ridges). This observation suggests a close association between the standing human figures in Monument 2 and the zoomorphs depicted throughout the Group B monuments. If the elaborate dress and costuming of the standing figures in Monument 2 are interpreted as symbolizing their elite status, then the shared imagery may have emphasized the identification of elites rather than priests at Chalcatzingo with the powerful serpentine and feline images found in these rock carvings.

Often referred to in the context of *nagualism*, or a belief in the ability of certain individuals to transform into animals and pass between different realms during trance states or while sleeping (Foster 1944; Furst 1976), similar human-animal identifications are typically linked to shamanic practices or cosmologies involving human-jaguar transformation (Reilly 1989). While the existence of such shamanic practices among the Formative and Classic period peoples of Mesoamerica is debatable (compare Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993 with Kehoe 2000), it is important to note that there are other divine-human relations which could account for the imagery. Echoing Houston and Stuart (1996:306), I believe several strategies were involved in conflating human rulers with the zoomorphs depicted in the Group B rock carvings, including: costuming (e.g. the standing figures in Monument 2), transformation into a zoomorphic alter-ego (e.g. Monuments 41, 31, 3, 4, and 5), and a possible reference to tonalism (Dow 1986), i.e. the existence of an animal spirit guardian (e.g. the bound figure in Monument 2). The terms “tonal” and “nagual” have been used in a variety of ways by anthropologists to indicate spirit guardians (Dow 1986) and

transforming witchcraft or shamanism (Foster 1944). Although used in many different ways, both concepts refer to superhuman animals or alter-egos with important implications for ancient Mesoamerican notions of personhood. That is, these concepts create an animal-human continuum in which cultural categories such as “human” and “animal” overlapped and may have been seen as interchangeable (Thierner-Sachse 1992). In this way, the zoomorphic representations in the Group B rock carvings can be interpreted as depicting human rulers who have taken the form of serpents and felines, use these zoomorphs as spirit companions, or employ these animal figures as some heraldic form of identification during rituals of human sacrifice.

Food for the Gods: The Sacrificial Victim at Chalcatzingo

Several lines of evidence from the rock carvings can also be used to determine the social status and symbolic role of sacrificial victims. In Monuments 3, 4 and 5, the victims are shown not only wearing minimal garments such as loin cloths, hip cloths, leg bands and arm bands but are also portrayed with diadems, headdresses or pendants (Figures 3 and 4). During the Middle Formative period, such elements of dress were frequently equated with elite members of society, possibly rulers (Grove and Gillespie 1992:196). Thus, at Chalcatzingo, the sacrificial victim seems to embody two contradictory social states: that of the captive who is literally stripped of rank and that of a person of high social standing. However, the reliefs leave no room for doubt regarding the ultimate status of the victim. In Monuments 31, 3, 4, and 5, the victims are invariably shown lying in either a prone or supine position indicating that they are in a powerless state as they are being devoured by the ruler’s animal alter-ego (Figures 5 and 6).

A similar trope is used to depict the captive in Monument 2. The seated figure in Monument 2 is portrayed nude (as demonstrated by his erect penis) but with a horned headdress (an indication of a previous high



Fig. 3: Chalcatzingo Monument 3. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 4: Chalcatzingo Monument 4. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 5: Chalcatzingo Monument 31. Photograph by the author.

status?) and is bound at the wrists. This captive figure is also represented with an elaborate armature on his back featuring a backward facing avian mask embellished with serpentine forms (Figure 7a). These details are comparable to the kind of idols and bundles carried by so-called "god-bearers" in the Río Blanco pottery style of Classic Veracruz but also observed in the Early Colonial period *Codex Boturini* (von Winning 1982:113-115). Although their identity is less clear during the Classic period, later codical sources suggest that Nahuatl "god-bearers" appear to have been closely associated with merchants and migration (von Winning 1982:116-117; Wyllie 2008:245-251). Based on their representation in the reliefs of Chalcatzingo, then, the sacrificial victims were of relatively high status, possibly captive warriors or rulers, suggesting a strong correlation between human sacrifice and inter-community or inter-polity warfare. Echoing later Mexica

Fig. 6: Chalcatzingo Monument 5. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 7: The iconography of human sacrifice at Chalcatzingo: (a) Monument 2; (b) Monument 31; and (c) Monument 41. Drawings of the rock carvings are not to scale. Drawings by the author.



practices (González Torres 1988:228-231), it seems that some of the Formative period elite victims may have also played distinct roles in some forms of human sacrifice related to their capacity as “god-bearers” and merchants.

Forms of Human Sacrifice at Chalcatzingo

Both rulers and their animal alter egos (*los sacrificadores*) as well as sacrificial victims (*los sacrificantes*) appear to have taken part in at least two, perhaps three, distinct forms of ritual human sacrifice at Chalcatzingo.

There is direct and indirect evidence for these variants on five of the six Group B rock carvings. Monument 2 provides the best evidence for an uncommon form of human sacrifice in which a victim is beaten to death with clubs (Figures 2 and 7a). Similar rituals appear in the *Relación de Michoacán* in association with royal funerals (Talavera González and Rojas Chávez 2003:31); however, the ritual portrayed at Chalcatzingo appears to have involved paddle-shaped clubs. The vegetal motifs on the masked *sacrificadores* strongly suggests that the sacrifice was related to agricultural renewal; while the god-bearer or merchant as victim

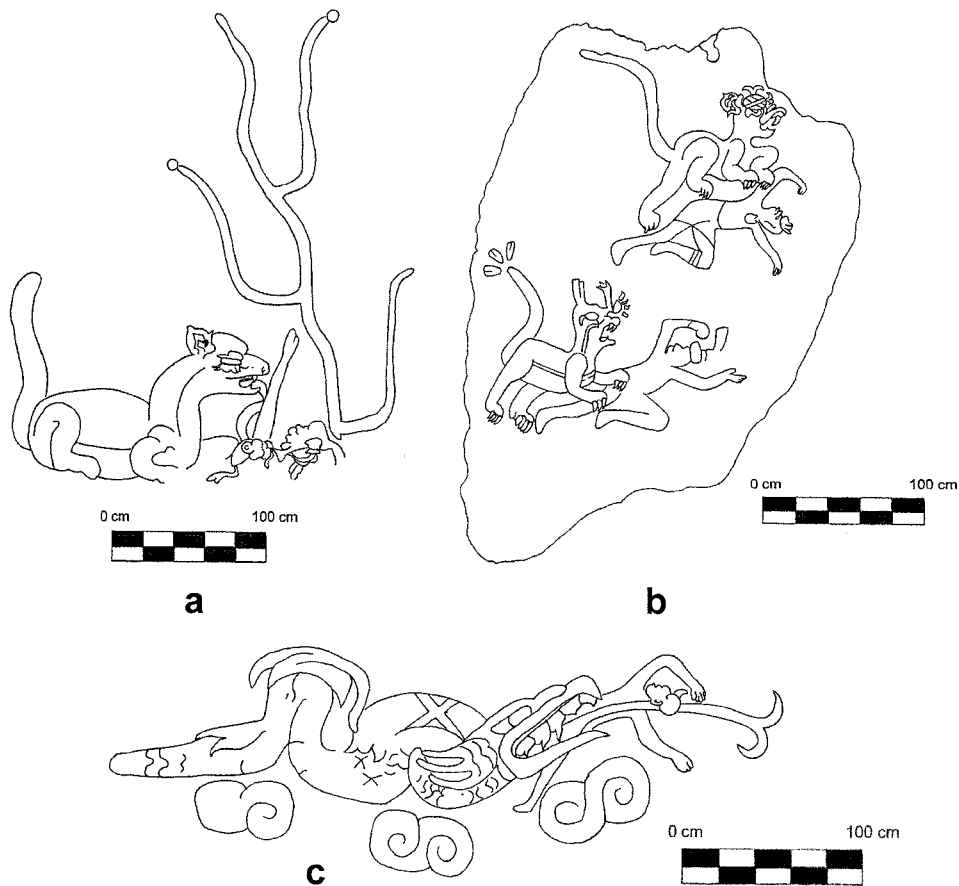


Fig. 8: The iconography of human sacrifice at Chalcatzingo: (a) Monument 3; (b) Monument 4; and (c) Monument 5. Drawings of the rock carvings are not to scale. Drawings by the author.

implies that it may have been part of a ritual re-enactment of a mythic narrative, possibly related to political and economic conquest.

Both Monuments 4 and 5 offer indirect evidence of sacrifice by depicting the devouring of a human victim by an animal figure or alter-ego (Figures 8b and 8c). More concrete data regarding the types of sacrifice involved in these reliefs may be garnered by a close examination of the neighboring rock carvings. Monument 31 portrays a feline situated atop a supine human victim (Figures 5 and 7b). The victim is nude and appears to have been disembow-

eled with some of their viscera having been pulled out of their body by the feline's rear paw. A similar form of ritual disembowelment is visible on Monument 3 where another feline alter-ego is shown licking a human being with an out-stretched arm (Figures 3 and 8a). Below the arm, the victim's viscera can be seen near the feline's front paw. Interestingly, one of the human organs depicted in this relief appears to have the same overall shape as Early Classic period Zapotec depictions of the human heart (Urcid 2005:45, Fig. 13). If this identification is correct, Monument 3 may be a possible Middle Formative period anteced-

ent to rituals of human heart extraction. While circumstantial at best, Monument 3 also bears evidence of a conceptual link between human heart extraction and agricultural renewal in the form of the large branched plant, possibly a cactus, growing from the sacrificial victim. This iconographic pattern seems to mirror the Mexica legend of Copil from whose sacrificed heart grew the nopal cactus on the island of Tenochtitlán (González Torres 1988:242-243). It also closely parallels Late Postclassic Maya *Tup Kaak* rain rituals in which the burning of the extracted heart in the victim's chest and the subsequent extinction of the flames with water were confounded with basic agricultural events such as burning fields and the coming of the life-giving rains (Taube 1988:334-336).

The Significance of Ritual Human Sacrifice at Chalcatzingo

Although the symbolism of human sacrifice at Chalcatzingo has clear affinities with the iconography of agricultural renewal and rainfall, this relationship was often interlarded with expressions of elite status. To understand the role that human sacrifice played in the social construction of elite identities at the site and the legitimation of their rank in the community, it is necessary to explore this link in greater detail.

I previously noted that the Group A and Group B rock carvings at Chalcatzingo referred to two distinct but related themes. The Group A rock carvings seem to have represented a cosmogram which connected reptilian embodiments of the earth, rainfall, and agricultural fertility with rulership. The Group B rock carvings, on the other hand, evidently took part in a distinctive set of symbols linking elites with superhuman animals or animal alter-egos while engaging in rituals of human sacrifice. Although thematically different from the cosmogram depicted in the Group A rock carvings, the Group B reliefs seem to have been complementary to the former group by subtly relating the practice of human sacrifice to rainfall and agricultural fertility through the use of images found in Group A such as

clouds (Monuments 41, 31, and 5), vegetal designs on masks and implements (Monument 2), and growing plants (Monument 3). There is no doubt therefore that the Group B rock carvings were used by the same elite members of the community as the Group A reliefs. However, the Group B carvings reinforced the conceptual relationship between rainfall, agricultural fertility and rulership via representations of nagualism (Gutiérrez and Pye 2010) and the practice of human sacrifice.

The most striking feature of the Group B rock carvings as depictions of human sacrifice is that they placed elites in the roles of both the *sacrificador* and the *sacrificante*. As suggested by the god-bearer in Monument 2, the capture and sacrifice of outsiders such as merchants may have had special significance at Chalcatzingo although it is not yet clear whether these victims came from other communities. Regardless of their place of origin, it appears that only captives of high status were shown in the rock art. However, their portrayal as bound and nude victims stripped of almost all signs of rank suggests that part of the purpose of these rites was to negate the social status of the victim. From this perspective, the choice of representing elites in animal form in their role as *sacrificadores* is also significant in the sense that this visual strategy was also a strong evocation of their dominance over their sacrificial victims. The aggression involved in these portrayals of human sacrifice is also worthy of note. Whether entailing heart extraction, ritual disembowelment, or clubbing to death, the ceremonies pictured in the rock art of Chalcatzingo featured brutal acts geared towards the shaming and annihilation of the victim. Although these acts of destruction may have been integral to rites of agricultural renewal (see e.g. Taube 1988); it seems likely that they were also intended to publicly glorify the ruler(s) of Chalcatzingo through the power of their animal alter-egos over other elite members of the community or from those outside the group.

Conclusions

The rock art of Chalcatzingo contains some of the earliest iconographic evidence of ritual human sacrifice in Mesoamerica (see Graulich 2003). Careful analysis of the Group B rock carvings at the site have shown that as many as three different variants of the ritual were performed there during the Middle Formative period. Involving acts of ritual disembowelment, clubbing to death and possibly heart extraction, the purpose of these rites was apparently twofold. On the one hand, human sacrifice seems to have been linked symbolically to rainfall and agricultural renewal as the special purview of rulers. On the other hand, it is also likely that these ceremonies and their representation in the Olmec-style rock art of Chalcatzingo aided in the social construction of elite identities at the site by providing a highly visible means with which to equate Formative period rulers with animal alter-egos (nagualism) and exalt their role in sacrificial rituals relative to the low social standing of the victims who may themselves have once been rulers, warriors or merchants from competing communities.

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