

THE OLMECS

The Birth of a Great Civilization

Ann Cyphers*

When the Spaniards landed in Mesoamerica in 1519, they were unaware that many great civilizations had flourished in this land for over 2,500 years before their arrival. They conquered the Mexicas, or Aztecs, who were the culmination of a long tradition of complex cultural development whose beginnings may be traced to the Olmec culture. The Olmecs established a number of customs, beliefs and traditions that persisted and/or were transformed over the centuries by the cultures that followed them. Among these traits are their calendars, human sacrifice, the ritual ballgame, monumental architecture including pyramids and plazas, jaguar deities, jade carving, hematite mirrors, monumental stelae and thrones. For this reason, Alfonso Caso, the great Mexican scholar, dubbed them the “mother culture” and was followed in this interpretation by prominent scholars such as Miguel Covarrubias and Michael Coe. This designation has come to be hotly debated in recent years because of its inherent or genetic implications of primacy. In this vein, it must be noted that in several regions of Mesoamerica, agriculture-based cultures were developing and there was significant interplay among them very early. However, none of them achieved the splendor for which the Olmec are famous.

During the Preclassic period, complex culture appeared in Mesoamerica. The concept of “social complexity” refers

to the existence of marked social differences. Around 2300 B.C., the ancient inhabitants lived in egalitarian villages and practiced agriculture. Over a millennium later, around 1200 B.C., the first characteristics of civilization appeared at the site of San Lorenzo. There, the Olmecs created monumental stone art and large-scale architecture. Without a doubt, they were the most highly developed people of their time.

The most important archeological sites in the Olmec territory, sometimes called capitals or regional centers, were San Lorenzo, La Venta and Tres Zapotes. For about 1,200 years, these three capitals flourished and declined sequentially in the order mentioned. A fourth site, known but practically unexplored, is Laguna de los Cerros, considered by some scholars to be a major center.

The Olmecs arose from simple beginnings, establishing their way of life in the fertile coastal lowlands of Veracruz and Tabasco. Their agriculture was based on the Mesoamerican combination of beans, corn and squash and the exploitation of the abundant natural resources of the primary jungle that covered the rich river floodplains and hills. Even though archeologists are still uncertain as to the reasons for their sudden, rapid development, it is likely that local environmental conditions favored it. The complex riverine, coastal and marine environments were full of resources for sustaining life and favoring the early development of the accumulation of wealth. However, life in the tropical jungle was not as easy as we might imagine; for example, in order to plant crops, the Olmecs had to cut down immense trees, a time-consuming and laborious process

* Researcher at the Institute of Anthropological Research, UNAM.

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reflected in their obsession with highly polished axes, indispensable technology for clearing the jungle.

The Olmec region has often been cited as a water-rich paradise when compared to more arid regions of Mesoamerica because it receives the greatest amount of rainfall registered in Mexico. It may be true that this resource, so necessary for life, was also a major threat to their survival because heavy rainfall can be detrimental to crops, and severe floods were a natural, annual and often catastrophic event. Ecologically speaking, the Olmecs were blessed with a natural abundance not found in all regions of Mesoamerica.

The Olmecs are generally known for their monumental works of art executed in a powerful but simple style, such as the monolithic stone colossal heads, gigantic thrones, stelae, human figures and syncretic and composite figures. Nevertheless, a wide range and variety of art forms can be identified as Olmec, including small or portable stone sculptures, polished jade and serpentine axes with or without

complex iconography, hollow ceramic figurines called “baby faces,” small, solid terra-cotta figurines, carved ceramics, greenstone beads, plaques, perforators, pendants, earspools and other adornments, jade figures and masks. A large number of these artifacts have been united into one large exhibit on the Olmec culture, now on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., a show which affords a unique opportunity to view the products of Olmec culture.

Olmec society had strong rulers who were the heads of royal lineages. It is generally accepted that the colossal heads, multi-ton monolithic sculptures made of basalt, are portraits of the ancient rulers. Because the rulers were based in the capitals, it should not be surprising that the majority of the heads come from the regional capitals. Of the 17 known heads, 10 come from San Lorenzo, four from La Venta, two from Tres Zapotes and one from Cobata.

Also associated with rulership, the massive, altar-shaped thrones were the symbols of power of the rulers. Thrones tend to bear the symbols that legitimized the right to rule and include motifs related to the earth monster, caves and sacrifice. Without a doubt, the human figure is the most common theme in Olmec art, yet the heads and thrones are the best known and perhaps their most original contribution. Many monuments such as the colossal heads and thrones show evidence of mutilation and destruction which may be explained in various ways. The death or defeat of a ruler may have resulted in the mutilation of monuments associated with his reign. However, there is evidence from a recent study that some colossal heads were recarved from thrones as part of a ritual sculptural cycle perhaps associated with the death or succession of rulers when the symbol of power is transformed into the portrait of a ruler. Some mutilation was conducted ritually and some is related to the process of recycling valuable, imported stone into new sculptures with different iconography.

The Olmecs established intensive economic exchange with nearby and distant regions. Even the volcanic rock used to make their sculptures was brought from afar, from the Tuxtla Mountains, some 60 kilometers from San Lorenzo and 100 kilometers from La Venta. One of the reasons that the stone sculpture has attracted attention is precisely because southern Veracruz and Tabasco

do not have natural deposits of volcanic stone, and thus, a large workforce was required to transport the huge stones which sometimes weighed 20 tons. This feat defines, in a sense, the strength and authority of the rulers capable of directing these activities.

The Olmec elite patronized talented craftspeople who produced fine stone pieces on a monumental and portable scale. Magnetite mirrors, beads, pendants and other personal adornments and axes are some of the best known objects. Raw material and finished objects were brought from distant places such as Puebla, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guatemala. Olmec success in economic exchange is evidenced in the presence of objects stylistically “Olmec” in far-flung places in Mesoamerica.

In the Olmec system of beliefs, supernatural beings with animal attributes were prominent. There are naturalistic and stylized representations of jaguars, crocodiles, snakes, sharks and other animals. A central concept was the transformation of humans into special creatures with animal traits and qualities. This syncretism is most notable in the “were-jaguars,” which personify the mystery and power of rulers and priests. The question of Olmec religion is a moot point since scholars apparently have not yet reached agreement on its existence or character. While some favor an animistic belief system based on the existence of supernatural and derived from the environment, others believe there was a more organized religion with definable gods.

For people interested in visiting the region where this great civilization was born and flourished, it is important to mention that the major sites are located along or near modern highways, rivers or ports of Mexico’s gulf coast and have important museums open to the public. Many sculptures from San Lorenzo are located in the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, including 7 colossal heads. In the Tenochtitlan, Potrero Nuevo and Azuzul community museums, in the municipality of Texistepec, more than 30 sculptures may be viewed including the most recently discovered colossal head from San Lorenzo. The town of Tres Zapotes has a community museum which displays a number of important Olmec sculptures, as does the Tuxteco Museum in downtown Santiago Tuxtla. The site of La Venta and its museum can be visited in the town of the same name. However, the bulk of La Venta

sculptures are in Villahermosa at the La Venta Museum Park and the CICOM.

Archeological research continues in the gulf coast region with important projects concentrating efforts in and around the four major centers. After several decades of neglect, the renewed interest in America’s earliest civilization has been bringing to light new information that is providing totally new perspectives on the Olmecs, including interpretations of the ancient environment, regional settlement patterns, diet, house areas, burials, craft workshops and ceremonial activities. Yet one of the key problems to be resolved is the reason for the Olmecs’ decline. All of these studies are indispensable for learning about aspects of Olmec life that are not evident in the monumental art which has always been the main focus of study. ❧



A monolithic colossal head, the widely known symbol of the olmecs.