

The olmec



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THE OLMECS The Olmec were an ancient pre-Columbian civilization that lived in the tropical low-lands of south central Mexico. They were the first signs of complex society in Central America. They inhabited the tropical coastal plain of the contemporary states of Veracruz and Tabasco, between 1200 and 400 BC. The Olmec created many things.

One major thing was art. They must have had a high regard for art as many caves, paintings, & huge stone sculptures have been found, along with jade artifacts & statues. Typically, the Olmec's art featured jaguars, thick-lipped soldiers and goatee-bearded men, and often a combination of jaguar and children. Their art was so strongly connected to jaguars because they believed that they were descendants of them. Because of this the animal was held in very high esteem and was commonly featured in religious ceremonies. Some of these huge carved stone heads have been found up to 100km away from the source of stone, leaving researchers still wondering exactly how they managed to transport such massive pieces those distances, though the most likely explanation must be that they floated them on barges down the extensive network of rivers. In fact itself is part of a lodestone that had been polished into a bar with a groove at one end (that Carlson suggests may have been used for sighting).

The artifact now consistently points 35.5 degrees west of north, but may have pointed north-south when whole. It is possible that the artifact was in fact used as some constituent piece of a decorative ornament. No other similar hematite artifacts have yet been found. Another major creation possibly brought about from the Olmec was the calendar. The Long Count calendar used by many subsequent Mesoamerican civilizations, as well as

the concept of zero, may have been devised by the Olmec. Because the six artifacts with the earliest Long Count calendar dates were all discovered outside the immediate Maya homeland, it is likely that this calendar predated the Maya and was possibly the invention of the Olmec.

Indeed, three of these six artifacts were found within the Olmec heartland area. But an argument against an Olmec origin is the fact that the Olmec civilization had ended by the 4th century BC, several centuries before the earliest known Long Count date artifact. This Olmec invention is still in question today. Another major creation was their writing skills. The Olmec were said to be the first civilization to create a writing system in the New World. Their writing was very unique.

It was very similar to the writing used by the Vai people of West Africa. The Olmec script is a logo syllabic script. The Olmec had both syllabic and hieroglyphic script. The Hieroglyphic signs were syllabic signs used to make pictures.

The Olmec also spoke aspects of the Manding Language which was also originated in West Africa. All of this was later taken upon by future cultures. The Olmec were also said to be the first possible people to use the compass. The American astronomer John Carlson has suggested that " the Olmec may have discovered and used the geomagnetic lodestone compass earlier than 1000 BC". If true, this " predates the Chinese discovery of the geomagnetic lodestone compass by more than a millennium".

Carlson speculates that the Olmec may have used similar artifacts as a directional device for astrological or geomantic purposes, or to orientate

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their temples, the dwellings of the living or the interments of the dead. The Olmec are strong candidates for originating the Mesoamerican ballgame so prevalent among later cultures of the region and used for recreational and religious purposes. A dozen rubber balls dating to 1600 BC or earlier have been found in El Manati, an Olmec sacrificial bog 10 kilometers east of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan. These balls predate the earliest ballcourt yet discovered at Paso de la Amada, circa 1400 BC. The fact that the balls were found with other sacrificial items, including pottery and jadeite Celts indicates that even at this early date, the ballgame had religious and ritual connotations. The Olmec Indians also engaged in trade. The wide diffusion of Olmec artifacts and "Olmecoid" iconography throughout much of Mesoamerica indicates the existence of extensive long-distance trade networks.

Greenstone and marine shell were moved in abundant amounts across very large distances. The Olmec period saw a significant expansion in interregional trade routes, more variety in material goods exchanged and a greater diversity in the sources from which the base materials were obtained. But one factor was that they mostly only traded culture rather than goods. And the downfall to that was not being able to get all needed materials for life. And the up come was that many years later their same culture was practiced by many newer civilizations. Little is known about the Olmec's social and political background because they didn't leave any for sure signs of deity, monarchs, or rulers. But what researchers came to realize was that the monuments and sculptures built by the Olmec could have possibly been symbolic of their ruler.

The huge colossal head was a main factor of that theory. Many people believed that they were under the control of a theocracy while others believed that they were controlled by a monarchy. No one is for sure about any of these accusations but further research is still in play. On the hand, their religious background is very much known about. The Olmec practiced shamanism. They believed each individual has an animal spirit. The Olmec religion centered around the Shaman. " The feared and revered shaman would conduct rituals and heal the sick.

" Some believe that the sun was a part of their worshipping along with the jaguar. The jaguar was very important to the Olmec Indians. This was because they saw it to be a supernatural force. Not just a simple animal, but a god. It was referred to as a nahual, which is an animal that is so closely related to a certain man, that if the animal dies, the man will also die. They believe that the nahual can be that of a god, that is, the animal form of his representation. Other rituals also came into play. One even had to do with drugs.

Hallucinogenic drugs from a marine toad and/or several mushroom species may have been used by the shamans to enter trances. The Olmec also had different ceremonial places where these rituals to place. One main one was The Temple of the Feathered Serpent in Teotihuacan. This is the modern-day name for the third largest pyramid at Teotihuacan, a pre-Columbian site in central Mexico. This structure is also particularly notable due to the 200 or more sacrificial victims found buried beneath the structure. These are all tribal rituals and places the Olmec occupied.

The majority of the Olmec lived in villages similar to present-day villages and hamlets in Tabasco and Veracruz. These villages were on higher ground and consisted of several scattered houses. A modest temple may have been associated with the larger villages.

The individual dwellings would consist of a house, an associated lean-to, and one or more storage pits (similar in function to a root cellar). A nearby garden was used for medicinal and cooking herbs and for smaller crops such as the domesticated sunflower. Fruit trees, such as avocado or cacao, were likely available nearby. The Olmecs also likely practiced swidden (or slash-and-burn) agriculture to clear the forests and shrubs, and to provide new fields once the old fields were exhausted. Although the river banks were used to plant crops between flooding periods, this still took place. Fields were located outside the village, and were used for maize, beans, squash, manioc, sweet potato, as well as cotton. Fruit was also grown here.

The fruits and vegetables were supplemented with fish, turtle, snake, and mollusks from the nearby rivers, and crabs and shellfish in the coastal areas. Birds were available as food sources, as were game including peccary, opossum, raccoon, rabbit, and in particular deer. Despite the wide range of hunting and fishing available, midden surveys in San Lorenzo have found that the domesticated dog was the single most plentiful source of animal protein. The first Olmec center, which was San Lorenzo, was all but abandoned around 900 BCE at about the same time that La Venta rose to prominence. A wholesale destruction of many San Lorenzo monuments also occurred circa 950 BCE, which may point to an internal uprising or, less likely, an invasion. The latest thinking, however, is that environmental

changes may have been responsible for this shift in Olmec centers, with certain important rivers changing course.

Following the decline of San Lorenzo, La Venta became the most prominent Olmec center, lasting from 900 BCE until its abandonment around 400 BCE. La Venta sustained the Olmec cultural traditions, but with spectacular displays of power and wealth. The Great Pyramid was the largest Mesoamerican structure of its time. Even today, after 2500 years of erosion, it rises 34 meters above the naturally flat landscape. Buried deep within La Venta, lay opulent, labor-intensive " Offerings": 1000 tons of smooth serpentine blocks, large mosaic pavements, and at least 48 separate deposits of polished jade Celts, pottery, figurines, and hematite mirrors. With all of that being said, this is what led the Olmec to an early decline. This period was called the formative period.