The Olmecs carved basalt boulders into a variety of shapes, including human heads. (PhotoDisc)

Encyclopedia of the Ancient World
Olmecs

**Date:** c. 1200-400 b.c.e.
**Locale:** Southern Gulf coast of Mexico
**Related Civilizations:** Maya, Zapotec, Teotihuacán

**Significance**
The Olmec culture, Mesoamerica’s “mother culture,” established the basic pattern for later high cultures in the region.

The Olmec heartland or core area extended along Mexico’s southeastern Gulf coast lowlands, a humid and hot tropical environment abounding with lush vegetation and streams. The identity and origins of this early people are unknown. Olmec, a name applied by modern archaeologists, is a term from the Nahuatl language spoken by the Aztecs and other later peoples; it roughly translates “Rubber People” in reference to a product naturally found in this area.

**History**
During the time archaeologists denote as Early Formative (1500-900 b.c.e.), increased agricultural productivity in Mesoamerica gave rise to permanent villages whose inhabitants cultivated basic staples such as maize, beans, and squash. The Olmecs, however, were noticeably more advanced than the contemporary small village and farming cultures of this era. The fertile lowlands of southern Veracruz and Tabasco were rich enough to allow specialization in nonfarming activities such as the arts and commerce. It is believed that struggles for control of the area’s limited but rich farmland gave rise to the dominant landowning class that shaped Mesoamerica’s first high culture.

Olmec civilization initially flourished at the site of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán in southern Veracruz province from 1200 to 900 b.c.e. Some radiocarbon dating indicates a presence as early as 1500 b.c.e., and early Olmec settlers may have inhabited the area even before this time. However, most of the site’s monuments that distinguish this civilization date from the mid-1100’s b.c.e. Another important Olmec center, La Venta, in Tabasco province, functioned between 800-400 b.c.e. These Olmec sites were not true cities but impressive political and religious centers.
run by an elite of religious specialists and ruling families. Artisans and farmers also figured among their inhabitants. Monumental structures, such as huge platforms 3,000 feet (914 meters) long, 1,000 feet (305 meters) wide, and reaching heights of 150 feet (46 meters), as well as pyramids, altars, and tombs, indicate that these centers served as gathering places for religious rituals and burial sites for the leadership.

At San Lorenzo, elaborate drainage systems and hydraulic works were constructed from joined sections of U-shaped carved stones covered with capstones. These constructions served as aqueducts that channeled water into sacred and decorative pools and created fresh streams running throughout the complex for drinking and bathing. Some flow was also diverted for waste runoff. The scope of massive labor-intensive projects at these sites suggests the existence of Mesoamerica’s first political state, which exercised strong governmental control and direction over the farming populace.

After 800 B.C.E., Olmec stylistic influence over the region waned, and the civilization ceased to be the cultural leader, although some centers continued to exist. By 300 B.C.E. the culture had disappeared. Nevertheless, other regional civilizations such as the Maya, Totonac, and Zapotec flourished during the Late Formative and Classic periods (300 B.C.E.-900 C.E.) and represented distinctive variations of a shared Olmec heritage.

Architecture and Art
Most of what is known about this ancient culture derives from its monumental works and artistry. Skilled Olmec craftspeople and laborers, among the first to use stone in architecture and sculpture, produced impressive works from volcanic basalt, stone, and jade. Some monuments carved from basalt weigh as much as 44 tons (40 metric tons). The nearest source of this stone is located 50 to 60 miles (80 to 97 kilometers) to the northwest of San Lorenzo in the Tuxtla Mountains. Olmec specialists speculate that the massive boulders were dragged to one of the nearest navigable rivers and transported on large rafts to the vicinity of the ceremonial site.

The most striking and common stone carvings are colossal heads. The largest of these realistic portraits, believed to represent rulers, are about nine feet (three meters) in height and weigh close to twenty tons (eighteen metric tons). The lips are full, the noses are broad and flat, and the faces are flat and broad. Each is wearing headgear resembling a football helmet, which many believe to be part of the gear worn by ballplayers.

Calendars and Chronology
Olmec intellectual and scientific achievements predate those of the Maya, who were once thought to have originated the most advanced features of Mesoamerican high cultures. In 1939, the archaeologist Matthew W. Stirling discovered an Olmec stela, or marker, at the Tres Zapotes site, containing numerals based on a bar-and-dot system. Stirling deciphered a date corresponding to the Maya calendar as 31 B.C.E.; this is more than a century before dated Maya inscriptions appear. The finding indicated to archaeologists that the famous Maya long-count system of dating, based on counting time from a specific starting date, may be an Olmec invention.

Religion and Ritual
A very common theme in Olmec drawings and stone carvings is the figure of the were-jaguar, a half-animal and half-human figure with baby features and curved,
snarling lips. The Olmecs believed themselves to be descended from the jaguar, an animal revered as sacred. This suggests that Olmec religion employed shamanistic practices whereby shamans or curers were believed to have the power to transform their shapes into animal form and communicate with the spirit world.

**Sports and Entertainment**

In part because of the colossal carved heads of rulers wearing ballplayers’ gear, many experts believe that the popular and widespread Mesoamerican game that featured a solid rubber ball and opponents attired with protective gear originated with this culture located near the source of rubber. Rubber balls still giving off a strong smell of latex, as well as carved figurines representing ballplayers, have been excavated at Olmec sites. Archaeologists at La Venta have discovered what might be the remains of a ball court and speculated that these structures were also present at other Olmec centers.

**Trade and Commerce**

Masters at carving in stone and jade, the Olmecs produced many fine and exquisite works of art, such as small figurines, ceremonial masks, jewelry, and burial items. Between 1100 and 800 B.C.E., the Olmecs developed an extensive trading network that spread their influence and led to cultural interaction with other parts of Mesoamerica. The aim was to secure access to valuable products and control the luxury trade in items such as obsidian, green jade, and iron. Obsidian, imported from the Guatemala highlands, was used in making blades, flakes, and dart points. Iron ore was polished to make mirrors that could be pierced and worn around the neck. Serpentine and fine stones were needed for jewelry manufacture. Jade was highly prized, and the color green may have been considered sacred. Fine human and animal figures and axe heads were fashioned from jade.

To control trade routes and ensure the flow of goods to centers such as San Lorenzo, the Olmecs established trading stations garrisoned by troops. These sites, located in areas such as Puebla, the Valley of Mexico, and Morelos, were strategically located at the ends of valleys near or on major mountain passes. The largest of these sites is Chalcatzingo in Morelos, where an Olmec religious center was built. Huge boulders in the area display Olmec reliefs in the La Venta style. Olmec ceramics and figurines are found in burial sites at several places in the Valley of Mexico and Morelos. The Olmec presence also spread west into the provinces of Guerrero and Colima near the Pacific coast. Guerrero is the site of a spectacular cave painting depicting a characteristic Olmec figure and located almost a mile from the entrance. The southern highlands of Oaxaca and areas as far south as Guatemala and El Salvador also contain evidence of this early culture.

**Writing Systems**

The Olmecs had an early form of hieroglyphic writing similar to that of the more complex and elaborate system the Maya later developed. Experts have identified 182 symbols with specific meanings. However, this script remains undeciphered and was probably in an early stage of development when the civilization declined.

**Current Views**

Although Olmec artifacts were found as early as 1862, it was nearly a century before the scientific community discerned and recognized their distinct qualities and importance to Mesoamerican cultural development. Scholars now consider the Olmec culture to be perhaps the first great civilization of ancient North America.
It appears that the Olmecs contributed a number of features to the basic cultural pattern of later Mesoamerican cultures. In the area of religion, this culture revered a number of deities that are important in the later established Mesoamerican pantheon such as the fire god, rain god, corn god, and famous Feathered Serpent. Olmec religious practices also apparently included ritual warfare with mutilation of captives and some human sacrifice. Moreover, the ceremonial center of La Venta was built on an axial pattern of alignment that influenced urban development in Mesoamerica for many centuries to come.

Additional Resources


See Also
Ball game, Mesoamerican; Maya; Teotihuacán; Zapotecs.