

Title:

History of Olmec Civilisation

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776

Summary:

Who were these mysterious people who first colonised Mexico and worshiped Jaguars and began cacao cultivation? They built pyramids, were keen mathematicians and influenced succeeding civilisations up the Spanish Conquest.

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Article Body:

A History of Olmec Civilization.

The first relatively modern awakening to the existence of the Olmecs was when plantation workers in 1862 came upon what they thought was a large, buried, iron kettle. Upon further excavation, and driven by thoughts of buried treasure, they finally excavated a huge stone carved head, which turned out to be the first Olmec sculpture to be discovered in Mexico.

OLMEC ORIGINS.

Who were the Olmecs? What is known about them is that they preceded the Mayans in Mesoamerica, and are thought to be the foundation of all subsequent cultures in that part of the Americas, though there is evidence of humans going back to 20,000 B.C. There will always be differing opinions when it comes to dates, but the Olmecs are believed to have originated in around 1250 B.C. and disappeared around 400 B.C. A common feature with theirs and later civilisations were that they:-

Followed a 365 day year.

Built pyramids.

Cultivated corn.

All had similar religious rituals and the same Gods of fertility, war, sky & nature.

Regarding the thick-lipped Negroid features of their carvings, some researchers postulate that the Olmecs originally came from Africa, and indeed their language is very similar to that spoken today in Mali. Details of facial scarring & lines on Olmec statues also bear similarities to tribal marks

found among the Yoruba peoples of West Africa.

OLMEC LANDS.

Their range of influence extended from the Tuxtlas mountains in the west, to Contalpa in the eastern Mexican lowlands, around the Gulf of Mexico area. The three largest Olmec cities were:-

La Venta in Tabasco (the eastern sector), dominated the rich coastal estuaries, including the cacao, rubber & salt trade.

San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan in Veracruz was at the center of the Olmec civilization, and an important political/religious center, which controlled the vast flood plains of the Coatzacoalco basin and river trade routes. The first drainage system in Mesoamerica was discovered there, consisting of channeled blocks of stone set into the earth, covered with slabs. Their region is also famous for the colossal basalt carved heads, weighing 20-40 tons each.

Laguna de los Cerros, also in Veracruz, to the West, controlled the important basalt mines/mountains, important for the manufacture of Metates (stones for grinding food), & monuments.

OLMEC ART.

The Olmecs must have had a high regard for art as many cave paintings & huge stone sculptures have been found, along with jade artefacts & statues. Typical Olmec art featured jaguars, thick-lipped soldiers and goatee-bearded men and often a combination of jaguar and children. As they believed themselves to be descendants of the Jaguar, the animal was held in very high esteem, often featuring 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 likeliest explanation must be that they floated them on barges down the extensive network of rivers.

WORK & PLAY.

Rubber was first exploited by the Olmecs and various carvings show ball games where the ball could be deflected off elbows, hips, knees and head, though using the hands was considered an illegal move. Initially, the Olmecs in the swampy tropical heartland lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, later spreading to outlying areas and developing agriculture and distinct political & economic hierarchies as wealth and commerce with outside people grew.

RELIGION Olmec religion featured mainly worship of the Jaguar and Werejaguars

(children with Jaguar features), though snake worship was popular too. They believed that the Jaguar was very closely associated with a person's spirit and that should the Jaguar die, the person would also die. In common with all religions, to maintain their position in society the Olmec ruling elite needed to make the people believe either that they were Gods or that they were associated with The Gods (Gods of Fire, Water, Earth & Sun were the popular deities).

Their religion, symbolic language and architectural systems seemed strong & popular enough to have lasted through to the Zapotecs, Teotihuacans and Mayan peoples, until everything changed with the Spanish conquests of Hernandez Cortez and Spanish influence. That of the Catholic Church being especially instrumental in destroying the old Gods and bringing a new one that eventually spread throughout the whole of South America.

Some might argue that Catholicism brought about changes for good and others point to the great poverty of the majority of predominantly Catholic South America.

Whatever your opinions, I will just leave you with this thought:-

"Religion is regarded by the common people as true,
by the wise as false, and by rulers as convenient."

Seneca the Younger. (3 B.C.-65 A.D.)