

Writer's Model

Historical Research Paper

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The Olmecs: New Light on a Shadowy Past

In an old movie, a dashing adventurer hacks his way through tangled jungle vines, searching for a lost civilization. Suddenly, he stumbles upon a dark pit hidden by dense undergrowth. At the bottom of the pit stands a huge stone monument covered with strange carvings. The adventurer is thrilled when he realizes that he has chanced upon the remains of an unknown civilization that existed thousands of years ago.

More than three thousand years ago in the jungles near the Gulf of Mexico, the people now known as the Olmec developed a complex civilization that lasted for at least eight hundred years before mysteriously disappearing (Autry). Today, thanks to the work of many scholars and archaeologists, people from around the world can learn about the Olmecs and see the artifacts they left behind. There was no solo adventurer who, after stumbling upon Olmec monuments, immediately recognized their significance. Instead, researchers have painstakingly pieced together the story of the Olmecs. After years of puzzling finds, careful excavation, and cooperative research, most archaeologists agree that the Olmecs created one of Mesoamerica's first highly civilized societies, a society that shaped the history and culture of the region.

Field research related to the Olmecs began around 1860 in Tres Zapotes, Mexico. Villagers there unearthed a five-foot-high stone head in a field a workman had been clearing (Stuart 95). In 1862, scholar José Melgar saw the head and, in 1869, published an article about it (Piña Chan 25). Over the years, other archaeologists wrote about discoveries of similar stone heads, old monuments, and smaller relics, which did not seem to have been created by any of the early cultures that were already documented. Archaeologists gradually began to theorize that the objects must have come from a previously unknown ancient culture, one they called Olmec because it seemed to have been centered in Olman, the

ancient Aztec “Rubber Country” (Fagan 97).

Full-scale excavations of the Olmec areas began in 1938. Since then, archaeologists have used many scientific methods to locate Olmec ruins and learn about the Olmec culture. Some of the ruins, for example, were discovered or mapped by aerial photography or, more recently, by satellites. Scientists have used radioactive carbon dating to establish the age of bones and relics found at the sites and have subsequently determined that the Olmec preceded other Mesoamerican civilizations such as the Maya (Grove 27). Using these scientific methods, researchers have learned much about how the Olmecs lived, and most experts now agree that the Olmec civilization continued to influence Mesoamerican cultures even after its demise.

Based on their findings, experts theorize that Olmec society consisted of farming villages grouped around large centers or cities. At first, scholars believed that the Olmecs used these centers only for religious ceremonies (Piña Chan 83). However, excavations in 1986 convinced many archaeologists that the Olmecs actually lived in the centers as well as in the outlying villages (Bower).

Early Olmecs probably struggled to grow enough food to survive. Gradually, though, as they developed irrigation and improved farming methods, they were able to grow a surplus of food. Scholars suggest that this surplus came to be controlled by a class of strong leaders, allowing some Olmecs to become specialized artisans instead of farmers. The leaders then built Olmec centers and commissioned artisans to create stone heads as monuments to their power (Piña Chan 83).

Sixteen stone heads have been found over the years since Melgar wrote about the first discovery. These stone heads, which many scholars believe preserve the features of actual Olmec rulers, are from five to eleven feet high and weigh as much as 36,000 pounds (Stuart 104; Autry). The stone used to create them is not native to many of the areas where the monuments were found; most likely, it came from nearby mountains. Experts believe that the Olmecs may have moved the huge stones first on sledges or rolling logs, and then down rivers on large rafts (Stuart 95, 102). In addition to the heads, the Olmecs built large earthen mounds. Scholars surmise that only powerful rulers would have had the means to plan such colossal projects and to command the many workers needed to create them (Stuart

104). The combination of powerful rulers, advanced technological processes for moving stone, and leisure time devoted to creating artistic monuments leads experts to believe that the Olmec civilization was highly advanced for the era in which it flourished.

Some scholars seem reluctant to believe that an advanced civilization could have existed in the jungles of the Gulf coast. They argue that the Olmecs must have migrated to the area, or they attribute relics such as the stone heads to other, more advanced civilizations. To these writers, the features of the stone heads and other artifacts suggest that the Olmecs had contact with people from Africa and Europe, or that the Olmec rulers originally came from these distant lands (Grove). Olmec archaeology specialist Billie Follensbee responds to that claim in this way:

Those who have claimed the Olmec Colossal Heads to be of foreign origin have only noticed some superficial similarities with groups of people on the other side of the ocean, and without any concrete evidence for support, they have given the credit for these works to far-away foreign cultures. This is both academically irresponsible and unfair to the cultures that truly produced them.

Follensbee, along with many other experts, concludes that there is “overwhelming archaeological evidence that the Olmec Colossal Heads were made by and for Native Americans.”

Other evidence also indicates that the Olmec civilization was highly advanced. Dates carved on some Olmec artifacts suggest that the Olmecs may have used one of the world’s first carefully constructed calendars—a ritual calendar, based on a 260-day cycle. Since the average term of a human pregnancy is about 266 days, and the planting-and-harvesting cycle in the Olmec area lasts about the same number of days, some writers have suggested that the Olmecs might have associated the calendar with fertility (Fagan 120).

Many archaeologists also believe that the Olmecs were the first to use hieroglyphic writing within Mesoamerica. (In hieroglyphic writing, a picture represents a word, syllable, or sound.) Evidence for this includes an Olmec sculpture carved with the figure of a man who seems to be walking. Behind him is a carving of a human foot, which experts believe is the hieroglyphic symbol for “walking” or

“marching.” Other sculptures have carvings of stars and clouds that appear to be hieroglyphic symbols (Piña Chan 184). Olmec hieroglyphics, along with the quality of Olmec art, hint at the sophistication and learning of the culture that produced them.

The religious patterns and artistic and architectural motifs created by the Olmecs appear in carvings, paintings, and settlements developed by later peoples (Carrasco 31). The jaguar, which played an important role in the Olmec religion, became one of the most powerful religious symbols of the Maya and the Aztec (Lowenstein 88). Mayan and Aztec ceremonial centers, like those of their Olmec predecessors, usually included pyramidal structures surrounded by large public plazas. A ritualistic ballgame played by the Olmecs continued to be played by the Maya and the Itza peoples. Thought to have been somewhat similar to rugby, the game was played by teams of two or more and was highly symbolic, often involving the sacrifice of defeated players (Allan 24, 41).

How and why the Olmec civilization disappeared remains a mystery, but most archaeologists agree that subsequent Mesoamerican civilizations depended heavily on Olmec achievements. For example, the Olmec calendar influenced the later, highly accurate calendar of the Maya, and the Olmec system of writing was the earliest in that part of the world. Many other elements of Olmec life, including ceremonial centers featuring pyramids, the practice of human sacrifice, the division of the world into four “directions,” and a well-defined class system, survived in subsequent Mesoamerican cultures (Allan 11).

Rarely does an archaeologist stumble, Indiana Jones-like, upon an ancient, lost civilization. Instead, the history of these ancient peoples is most often pieced together, one fragment at a time, through the collective efforts of numerous researchers and scholars. It is just such a collective effort that has given us our understanding of the once-powerful and highly complex Olmec civilization. It is also an effort that has allowed us to see how even a civilization that survives for a relatively brief historical moment leaves a legacy that helps to shape the cultures that follow it.

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Definition

A **historical research paper** gives readers factual information about events that happened in the past and helps them gain a better understanding of the events of today.

Many historical research papers use the structure illustrated in the framework below. Print this framework and use it as a guide when you write your own historical research paper.

Framework

Directions and Explanations

