

America: 1500 to 1000 B.C.
Jack E. Maxfield

MEXICO, CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Village life in Mexico continued to show more advanced societies. In the Oaxaca Valley there were villages with agriculture dominant by 1,300 B.C. Each village contained ten to twenty houses which were single family units made of wattle and daub, all opening into a common plaza. By 1,200 in San Jose Mogote in the same valley, the people began to build large platforms with limed walls and floors. Recent excavations at Dzibilchaltun in northern Yucatan indicate that this site, which contained one of the largest of the Mayan cities of the late post-classic period of A.D.600 or later, had been continuously occupied since 1,500 B.C., so that in all probability pre-Mayan or Mayan people lived there with an ever increasing level of civilization for over 2,000 years.

The big story of this period, however, is that of the Olmecs who had developed a civilization in the humid, low-lying, forest region of southern Veracruz and western Tabasco by 1,200 B.C. Most authorities agree (with a few dissenters) that this remarkable society appeared suddenly, without known antecedents. They were the first Meso-Americans to handle large masses of stone in monumental sculptures and they may have been responsible for extending the growth of maize in that area, chiefly by example or leadership, as they were not the basic inhabitants of the region. The latter were ethnically Huastec while the Olmecs were apparently an hereditary ruling class who promoted efficient farming techniques, long distance trade networks, large temples and public buildings, fine art, an official state religion and social stratification. The question of pre-Columbian contacts with America has been brought up time and again, particularly regarding this advanced, suddenly appearing Olmec civilization, but the nature and method of such contact and whether or not it occurred at all, continues to be debated.

Like the Egyptians, the Olmecs (and later Mayas) wrote in hieroglyphs, developed a calendar and predicted the movements of planets. These Central Americans built flat-topped pyramids similar to the ziggurats of Mesopotamia and decorated those with bas-reliefs showing priests with Semitic facies and long beards. There is even some botanical evidence of European contact in that the Olmec successors wore garments from a strain of cotton that seemed to be a cross between a local, wild type and the long-staple Egyptian cotton. The latter has thirteen large chromosomes and the native central and South American cotton, which was short stapled, had thirteen small chromosomes per cell, but the cotton used for cloth later in Central America was a hybrid of the two above and contained twenty-six chromosomes, thirteen small and thirteen large. One has to wonder if it is just coincidence that these Olmecs developed writing, calendar systems, pyramids etc. directly at the terminus of the strong Atlantic Canary Current, flowing from the bulge of Africa through the Canary Islands to the Gulf of Mexico at the base of the Yucatan peninsula. The swampy, unfavorable jungle coast

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in which this civilization developed would suggest that it must have arrived almost in full bloom, from the sea. The Egyptians and Phoenicians knew more about astronomy, the key to ocean navigation, than the later European contemporaries of Columbus and Pizarro, and it is definitely known that the Phoenicians had settlements all the way down the Atlantic coast of Morocco by 1,000 B.C.

There is also the possibility of still other peoples being the source of early foreign diffusion to the New World. Heyerdahl lists fifty-two examples of common characteristics seen in the early civilizations of Asia Minor (Hittite), Cyprus and Crete and the early societies of Central America and Peru. These include priest-king dynasties in sun-worshipping administrations, brother-sister royal marriages, fully developed script writing¹, paper manufacture from vegetable fibers, stone masonry of amazing accuracy without the use of mortar and with methods of long range transportation of gigantic stone blocks, colossal stone statues, repetitive representations of a bearded man (all true Amerindians of Siberian origin should be beardless) fighting a giant snake standing on its tail, a bird-man standing on a plumed serpent (See Hittites, this chapter), construction of ziggurat types of pyramids, mummification of deceased royalty, trepanning of skulls, circumcision as a religious ritual, cities of adobe houses separated by streets and with water and sewer systems, large scale terrace agriculture with irrigation and fertilizers, similar cotton looms and garments, identical leather and rope sandals (although the latter were useless in the tropical swamps), feather crowns used by nobles, similar organization of standing armies and weaponry, similar tools and utensils, use of red dyes from mollusks, identical stages of metallurgy with outstanding gold work, ceramic, polychrome funeral ware, clay models of daily life, as well as a universal female goddess, stamped seals, curved wooden figurines, understanding of the "zero" concept, belief in their own origin in the first century of the 3rd millennium B.C., remarkably high standard of calendar system and finally the same ocean-going reed ships with canvas sail hoisted on a double-legged mast. We should also note that the date of the blooming of the Olmec civilization at 1,200 (+200) B.C. is the same time often given for the Thera upheaval in the Mediterranean, with the subsequent possible displacement of the Sea People who roved the Mediterranean and possibly the Atlantic! Self portraits of the Olmecs on colossal monoliths have shown two contrasting types - one with Negroid physiognomy and the other with typical Semitic features with long flowing beard - all this in the swampland exactly at the end of the Canary Current.

It is difficult to be certain of the exact physical type of the original Central and South American Indians, since the populations that came back to life after the territories became independent of Spain, are now so cross-bred with Europeans, Chinese and Africans that identification is impossible. The Chinese factor brings up still another diffusion theory that has been advanced as late as 1975 by Betty Meggers of the Smithsonian Institute, who believes that the invaders were Chinese from the Shang Dynasty! As others have, she points out that in Meso-America² as late as 2,000 B.C. there was only one village per kilometer in the estuary systems along the Chiapas-Guatemala coast, but about 1,200 B.C. something unusual occurred - the sudden appearance of the Olmec civilization in full flower - and she relates that this event was

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felt almost simultaneously over almost all of Mesoamerica. This corresponds in time to the end of the Shang Dynasty, in China. Meggers feels that one of the most striking aspects of this new society was the extent of traffic in raw materials such as obsidian, basalt, magnetite, ilmenite, hematite, serpentine and jadeite, along with the transportation of the heavy, basalt boulders over long distances. She points out a great number of shared cultural features of the Shang and the Olmec societies including:

1. writing, stating that a few, often repeated Olmec symbols resemble Shang characters, and later Maya glyphs were read top to bottom in Shang fashion (characters of Minoan Linear A of Crete were read similarly)
2. jade, a primary commodity of long distance trade in both societies
3. batons as a symbol of rank, some with bifurcated tops
4. feline deity, the Shang tiger and the Olmec jaguar both associated with the earth god and both often drawn lacking a lower jaw
5. worship of mountains
6. cranial deformation, apparently artificially produced in the center of the head of rulers
7. large groups of scattered villages with central service Centers
8. the construction of rectangular platforms with a north-south orientation.

When asked why the Mesoamericans did not use the wheel, which was certainly used by the Shang, she replied, as others have, that the Americans had no use for the wheel in the absence of roads and draft animals, the ruggedness of the terrain and the ability of a man to carry more than his weight in fragile cargo.

As might be expected, refutations of Meggers' theory soon appeared. David Grove of the University of Illinois says that the society which we have mentioned as being in the Oaxaca Valley between 1,500 and 1,400 B.C. was a complex culture and perhaps preceded those of the Gulf coast, and would more apt to be the Olmec ancestor than the Shang. Furthermore, he says that the jade carving may not even have been Olmec and that the feline deity idea came up from South America. He also makes the point that excavations by Coe at San Lorenzo on the Gulf coast since 1970 have revealed significant Olmec cultural levels which predate those at La Venta, but also pre-Olmec levels, suggesting that the Olmec culture appeared gradually rather than suddenly. Meggers immediately replied to this in a publication in 1976 stating that twenty-three of the references she had consulted for her previous publication had been written between 1970 and 1974 and that she was still convinced that Shang refugees were involved in Central America. The concept of the sudden appearance of the Olmec society seems to be given another boost by the 1977 publication, *The Encyclopedia of Archeology* (Ref. 45) which discusses recent investigations at San Lorenzo by Yale University, describing that center as having the longest stratigraphic history of any known Olmec center and that it was constructed on an artificially raised mass of land, built by the Olmecs to support a number of earthen pyramid constructions, plazas and mounds, all laid out along a north-south axis. The writer indicated that the Olmec

Culture was emerging at this site just in 1,250 B.C. and that most of the pure Olmec monuments and structures actually date from 1,150 B.C. onwards.

Whether or not the Olmec civilization was imported or local in origin, there is no doubt but what this was the mother of all later true civilizations in Central America, including the Mayan. Probable extensions of the Olmec into more central Mexico are indicated by recent excavations at Chalcatzingo in the state of Morelos, about 85 miles southeast of Mexico City. Radio-carbon datings are from 1,170 B.C. on, and the findings include bas-relief carvings, platform complexes, etc., all typical of the Olmec style. It has been postulated that it was a center for controlling the trade of highland raw materials (obsidian, jade, iron ore and possibly cotton) and channeling these on to the Gulf coast centers. Contacts with nearby Oaxaca seem to have stimulated cultural growth there, as well (or was it vice-versa, as suggested by Grove?). At any rate, within a few centuries, Oaxaca, with its vastly greater resources and richer agricultural possibilities, with irrigation, actually began to be the dominant partner.

Still another, separate culture is suggested by fairly recent excavations at La Victoria, Guatemala, where Micheal Coe has uncovered iridescent ceramic pottery as a unique technological feature dating from 1,500 to 800 B.C.

This same unusual pottery has been found also in Peru, and it seems possible that the technology may have gone from Guatemala to Peru where the earliest dating by radio-carbon is 714 B.C. (+ 200 years). If this diffusion did occur, it was probably by boat for that is only a 1,300 mile sea trip and has been shown possible by Heyerdahl's raft voyage and the presence of ancient sherds on Galapagos Islands, which lie 650 miles off the Ecuador coast. Other pottery of Middle America was highly developed but had no local ancestry and Coe suggests that it possibly migrated down from the Woodland Culture of North America.