2014

The Origins of Mesoamerican Civilization

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When it comes to the influence that the Olmec exerted, the evidence is likewise precarious. Some researchers have questioned whether the Olmec wielded much power, even in their own heartland of Olman. Olmec "things" and traits also appear at various points in other cultures, ranging from 1500 to 400 BC. This is more indicative of other cultures voluntarily adapting these motifs, instead of the Olmec themselves imposing a sort of cultural hegemony upon others. The Olmec’s behavior can best be understood, then, through the concept of Costly Signaling. This is the idea that the Olmec expelled much of their efforts on large stone carvings and long distance transport of ceramics in order to procure prestige while neglecting more forceful ways of projecting their influence (Neff 2011). This theory is supported by the fact that Olmec ceramic phases were unusually long, with one style remaining largely unchanged for 400 years (Pool 242).

One final piece of the puzzle comes from a group of researchers who did a comparison study of three Mesoamerican cultures in an attempt to see which was the oldest “complex” society. After comparing a wide range of evidence, the conclusion was reached that the Olmec society was merely a complex chieftaindom, exhibiting only a three-tier settlement hierarchy (Spencer 183-194). The nearby kingdom of Monte Albán, however, had a four-tier hierarchy, meeting the criteria for a state society, making it a better candidate for inspiring the Mayan state and others that followed.

Conclusion

With the cultures of Mesoamerica borrowing heavily from neighbors and building continually on top of old settlements, it can be hard to separate out strands of influence. The obsession of the Mayans and Aztecs with the relics of the Olmecs should, however, not be seen as reverence for a mother culture, but as part of a complex belief system used to justify their own power structures and explain their cosmos. While the Olmec’s strategic use of trade goods allowed them to have an outsized influence on the artistic motifs of the region, it is likely that much of their supposed power was ultimately illusory. As the Mayan examples provided have shown, spatial organization was much more important in the long run to the development of social complexity. This project shines light not only on the history of Central American cultures, but also on the practice of archaeology and, more generally, the assumptions upon which western science is based. The past misinterpretation of the Olmec points to a differences between the purpose of monuments and prestige goods in western societies and ancient Mesoamerican ones. These differences have in turn affected the interpretational tendencies of western trained archaeologists. While the conclusions reached here fit the current state of knowledge, there are many paths for future research that could change this. Obsidian hydration dating and archaeomagnetism studies could, for example, help definitively date the various layers of Olmec culture.

Works Cited

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