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The Origins of Mesoamerican Civilization

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Abstract

This research project will attempt to unravel the various threads of cultural influence that existed in Archaic Mesoamerica. Of particular interest will be to test the validity of the theory that there is a “mother culture,” usually posited as the Olmec, which was responsible for the innovations that led to the social complexities of later cultures such as the Mayans and Aztecs. Alternately, it is possible that innovations developed by several different cultures were shared through diffusion due to strong trade networks and other methods. This research question is important because it deals with the evolutionary development of advanced social structures and complex societies. Historical data will be examined to see if there is any bias towards one of these competing viewpoints. Of particular interest will be to look for parallels between the development of these civilizations and ones that developed around the same time in the Middle East and Asia. Finally, several archaeological case studies will be examined to attempt to fit the evidence within one of these theoretical frameworks and show how archaeological evidence can facilitate theory formation.

Background

Ever since the early times of Spanish colonialism, there has been a heated debate about the origins of the complex state societies in Central America and the monumental architecture they left behind. Early European explorers concluded that these remains could not have been made by the people they encountered. Instead, they were said to represent an earlier migration of “Old World” peoples to the New World. The notion that these Mesoamerican civilizations appeared from “out of nowhere” has also been popular in the past, in part due to the fact that the archaeology of the region was largely neglected until the past few decades.

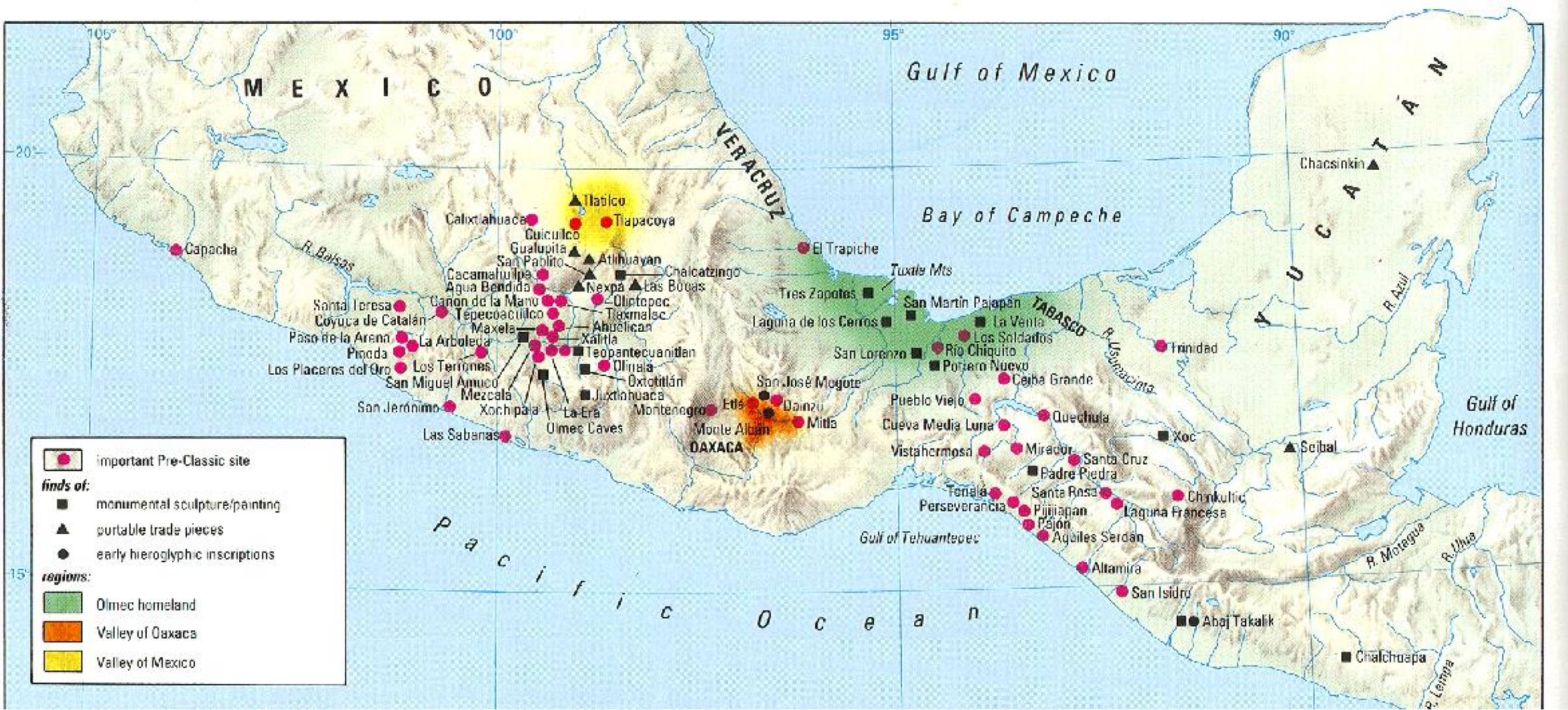
The slow progress of knowledge about the region is evident when looking at a modern understanding of Mayan history. The dates for the beginning of classical “Mayan” culture have continually been pushed further back in time due to archaeological discoveries. For instance, excavations at Abaj Takalik near the Pacific coast of Guatemala in the 1970s uncovered a dated stone Stela that was found to be from between the third to first centuries BC. It had previously been thought that the earliest large ceremonial site of the classical period had been Tikal, founded around 292 AD. Around the same time, excavations of a large midden in Cuello, Belize provided radiocarbon dates that showed a continual, culturally consistent, sedentary occupation going back to at least 2600 BC (Science News 261).

More recently, in 2013, archaeologists in Ceibal, Guatemala tunneled beneath 12 meters of pyramids to uncover the original plaza that had been built on top of (Pringle 2013). Radiocarbon dates of this layer revealed that the plaza, an example of the Mayan E-group shape, was built between 1100 and 800 BC, making it the earliest such example. Other excavations at Copan have shown that the founder of the dynasty there was neither mythical, nor from Teotihuacan as once thought. This association was only made by later rulers of the same dynasty as a method of promoting prestige (Price 19-30).

Concepts of Time and Space

In order to fully understand all of the factors at play surrounding this research question, we must use not only an archaeological lens, but a historic one as well. A cross cultural look at the various groups in Central America reveals an almost fanatical obsession with the past and its artifacts, a proclivity that has lasted even into modern times. Almost all cultures in the area have reappropriated sites and artifacts from groups that came before them, a habit that makes it difficult to identify the “first-mover.” More than simply reused, these objects and locations were reinterpreted as evidence of a previous, flawed era of creation, one that had been destroyed to make way for the current, properly ordered one (Hammann 352-353). This set of beliefs is manifested in the concepts of original destruction and original debt, akin to the western concept of original sin.

As one of the earliest and most visible cultures in the region, Olmec artifacts were often imitated or reworked by other cultures. For instance, Mayans during the classical period of 250-900 AD recarved Olmec jade figures that had originally been produced between 1500 and 1300 BC. The same jades were also depicted in the wall murals of Teotihuacan. Additionally, historical records show that they were also collected and displayed by the Aztecs (Hammann 351-353).



Map showing the three epicenters of Early Mesoamerican civilization: Olman, Oaxaca, and the Valley of Mexico. The oldest four-tier civilization, Oaxaca, is in orange, Olmec territory is in green.

Results

In many ways, an overview of the archaeology of the Olmec heartland of Olman itself raises more questions than answers. For instance, ceramic chronologies have been difficult to create for the region, in part due to fluctuations in atmospheric Carbon-14 that occurred between 800 and 400 BC (Pool 242-243). These inconsistencies had previously led researchers in the 1980s to conclude that the Olmecs had migrated to the area from Central Mexico or the Pacific coast. After subsequent excavations, however, the region is now believed to have been continually occupied, with agriculture practiced from at least 2900 BC (Pool 243-244).

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 chiefdom, 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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