

The Origins of Olmec Civilization

IN THEIR RESEARCH ARTICLE "OLMEC POTTERY production and export in ancient Mexico determined through elemental analysis" (18 Feb., p. 1068), J. P. Blomster *et al.* report that "all nonlocally produced Olmec-style gray pottery samples found outside the Gulf Coast" and all Conejo Orange-on-White and San Lorenzo White vessels were produced in San Lorenzo. This evidence, they argue, indicates that "the San Lorenzo Olmec played a central role in synthesizing a distinct style and associated iconography, disseminating it across Mesoamerica" during the Early Formative period (circa 1200 to 850 B.C.E.). They speculate that "[e]xchange of these symbols formed an important component of communication and negotiation between communities on both intra- and interregional levels" (p. 1071), but do not suggest what information was transmitted. R. A. Diehl poses this question in his accompanying Perspective "Patterns of cultural primacy" (18 Feb., p. 1055) in the discussion of an Olmec stone figure (shown here) displaying several "defining" motifs. He asks, "what goods and other things did they seek?"

Like most other Mesoamericanists, the authors do not mention the striking resemblance between Olmec iconography and Shang writing, which has been demonstrated most recently by Mike Xu with the collaboration of numerous Shang specialists in China (1). The three-pronged symbols on the headdress of the statue shown in Diehl's Perspective and here are the Shang symbol for rain, and the cross on the chest represents the Shang sun god (2). Translation of the symbols on three of the small "celts" (ungrooved axes) from the famous cache at La Venta, based on Shang counterparts, produces phrases compatible with Shang ritual offerings (2), and many other Olmec innovations have Shang antecedents (3).

The invention of writing revolutionized Chinese society by facilitating communication among speakers of 60 mutually unintelligible languages and resulted in increased commercial interaction and social intergration. The rapid diffusion of Olmec iconography and associated cultural elaboration suggests it had the same impact



A statue of a water deity from San Lorenzo monument 52.

across multilingual Mesoamerica. The demise of the Shang Empire circa 1500 B.C.E. coincides with the emergence of Olmec civilization. Rather than speculate in a vacuum on the intangible character of Olmec society, it would seem profitable to compare the archaeological remains with the detailed record of the impact of writing on the development of Chinese civilization. What do we have to lose?

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References

1. M. Xu, *J. Wash. Acad. Sci.* **88**, 1 (2002).
2. M. Xu, *Origin of the Olmec Civilization* (Univ. of Central Oklahoma Press, Edmond, OK, 1996), figs. 19, 24.
3. B. J. Meggers, *Am. Anthropol.* **77**, 1 (1975).

Response

I THANK MEGGERS FOR HER COMMENTARY. Meggers criticizes our failure to allude to what she considers to be the striking resemblance between Olmec iconography and Shang writing. Although I acknowledge her long-standing interest in this subject (1), our Research Article focused on the role of the Gulf Coast Olmec in synthesizing and disseminating the first unified iconographic system in Mesoamerica, rather than the actual origins of Olmec civilization.

The scholar Meggers refers to, Mike Xu, suggests Shang origins for the Olmec, invoking a transcontinental migration (2). Ongoing excavations by Ann Cyphers (3), as well as previous research (4), at the first Olmec center, San Lorenzo, document that

Olmec culture developed in situ. Precedents to ceramic forms and many sculptural types have been identified at San Lorenzo before the crystallization of Olmec civilization by 1200 B.C.E. (uncalibrated). The origins of Olmec civilization most likely lie in the dynamic social competition and negotiation of agents and factions at San Lorenzo, strategies expressed in both communal and individualistic stone monuments (5). No direct evidence of Shang influence on the Olmec—or that of other Old World cultures—has been documented by any of the archaeologists currently working on the Gulf Coast.

The most frequently cited example of "Shang influence" comes from the incised celts found in La Venta Offering 4, which

serve as the backdrop for a series of 16 jadeite figurines arranged in a ritual scene. These celts were deposited in Complex A at La Venta between 800 and 700 B.C.E. (6), long after the demise of the Shang empire. Xu translates the incisions on the Offering 4 celts based on Shang characters (2); these celts, however, were recarved from a larger engraved celt or plaque, so that the incisions represent fragments of a larger original scene and are not individual characters (6).

Meggers is quite right to suggest that different possibilities for the rise of the Olmec should be considered, and as scholars we have nothing to lose by maintaining an open mind. There is also much value in Meggers' suggestion of comparing the spread of Olmec iconography across Mesoamerica with the way the invention of Shang writing revolutionized Chinese society by allowing communication across broad regions. Cross-cultural comparisons can be most illuminating, and I thank her for presenting this idea.

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References

1. B. J. Meggers, *Am. Anthropol.* **77**, 1 (1975).
2. M. Xu, *J. Wash. Acad. Sci.* **88**, 1 (2002).
3. A. Cyphers, in *Población, Subsistencia y Medio Ambiente en San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, A. Cyphers, Ed. (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, 1997), pp. 255–274.
4. M. D. Coe, R. A. Diehl, *In the Land of the Olmec*, vol. 1, *The Archaeology of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán* (Univ. of Texas Press, Austin, TX, 1980).
5. B. Stark, in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, J. Clark, M. Pye, Eds. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2000), pp. 31–53.
6. R. A. Diehl, *The Olmecs: America's First Civilization* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2004).

"Intelligent" Design versus Evolution

DONALD KENNEDY'S EDITORIAL ("TWILIGHT for the enlightenment?"), 8 Apr., p. 165) highlights how ineffective the scientific community has been in the battle for the minds of the American public. Arguing details of scientific facts before this audience has been largely unproductive. Perhaps it is time to take a lesson from recent political campaigns: Instead of defending your position, attack a weakness of the opposition and repeat (again and again), with a modicum of humor. The following script has been effective in dealing verbally with creationists/intelligent design adherents.

"You have a philosophic choice between evolution or belief in ID, so called intelligent design. But even a first-year engineering student would be embarrassed to have