

# Olmecs: Where the Sidewalk Begins

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An In Depth Look at the Olmec Controversy  
Mother Culture or Sister Culture

The discovery of the Olmecs has caused archeologists, scientists, historians and scholars from various fields to reevaluate the research of the Olmecs on account of the highly discussed and argued areas of debate that surround the people known as the Olmecs. Given that the Olmecs have only been studied in a more thorough manner for only about a half a century, today we have been able to study this group with more overall gathered information of Mesoamerica and we have been able to take a more technological approach to studying the Olmecs. The studies of the Olmecs reveals much information about who these people were, what kind of a civilization they had, but more importantly the studies reveal a linkage between the Olmecs as a mother culture to later established civilizations including the Mayas, Teotihuacan and other various city-states of Mesoamerica. The data collected links the Olmecs to other cultures in several areas such as writing, pottery and art.

With this new found data two main theories have evolved. The first is that the Olmecs were the mother culture. This theory states that writing, the calendar and types of art originated under Olmec rule and later were spread to future generational tribes of Mesoamerica. The second main theory proposes that the Olmecs were one of many contemporary cultures all which acted sister cultures. The thought is that it was not the Olmecs who were the first to introduce writing or the calendar to Mesoamerica but that various indigenous surrounding tribes influenced and helped establish forms of writing, a calendar system and common types of art.

This questions has taken many who study this field to consider another possibility besides the mother culture and that is the idea of a sister culture. This belief strips the Olmecs of their title of mother culture and presents various tribes and cities before or even during the time of the Olmecs as having contributed to the advancements of the calendar, writings and common art. The debate coalesced in 1983 at a seminar that focused on the issue of Olmec society. At that meeting, scholars came together with the goal of reaching a synthesis for understanding the nature of the Formative era in Mesoamerica.<sup>1</sup> The efforts to reach a common agreement proved useless as the two main theories only grew bitterer toward the others. The mother theory more so the traditional view continued to argue that the Olmecs had helped stimulate Mesoamerica with new complex social developments. Sister culture advocates remain true to their convictions proclaiming that it was not just the Olmecs but a mixture of regional tribes that helped progress the social complexity of Mesoamerica.

Numerous times history of Mesoamerica has been taught in such a way and later taught in an entirely different manner, usually the case being that there was historical inaccuracy, thus, educational books, published articles and the way in which we teach others is replaced by more accurate and well rounded materials. However, in the case of interpretation even well rounded materials are not enough to convince the biggest critics. I intend to present a series of arguments based on new found evidence that has been discovered within the past five years and show the outcomes of the arguments. Also, I intend to give

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<sup>1</sup> Mary E. Pye & John E. Clark eds. Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica: Introducing Olmec Archaeology. (Washington: Yale University Press, 2000), 14.

evidence why I consider the sister culture theory to be invalid and in return support my reasoning for the Olmecs being the mother culture of Mesoamerica.

The belief from the Old World when it encountered with the new was focused on religious beliefs and the argument of the day wasn't so much on the origin of writings or calendars but whether or not the new world was a separate world created by God. During the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries many believed that these men and women were in fact related to the Old World by what the bible states in Genesis 2:7 which says, "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."<sup>2</sup> From this passage it is taken that Adam was the first human on earth and that all others proceeded from him. Joseph de Acosta addresses the situation in a comment he made in 1590 to The Natural and Moral History of the Indies. In the article he said, "The reason that inforceth us to yeld that the first men of the Indies are come from Europe or Asia, is the testimonie of the holy scripture, which teacheth us plainly that all men came from Adam... And by this meanes we must seeke out both for men and beasts the way whereby they might passé from the old world to the new."<sup>3</sup> The idea taken from this passage and the quote by Acosta is that the advancements of the old world were simply made anew in the new world. A concern for knowing more about who these people were and the way in which they lived was replaced by how they got to the new world. When ways in which they might have reached the New World came about it was assumed that the advancements as well came from the Old World to the

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:7 NKJ

<sup>3</sup> Joseph de Acosta. The Natural and Moral History of the Indies. Trans. By Edward Crimston (New York, 1970 reprint), 57.

New World rather than evolving in later generations after the arrival to the New World.

In the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards a new ideology of Mesoamerican history came about from yet another religious point of view. Mormon belief deals with the concerns that Acosta had stated only the Mormons provide a clearer statement as to how they got to the new world, when they established themselves and what occurred thereafter. The Mormons believe that around 600 B.C. Lehi was commanded by God to leave Jerusalem in order to save his life. So according to Mormon belief Lehi left and took with him followers of the tribe of the Nephites and of the Lamanites and they proceeded to the Americas by boat where upon their arrival they established cities, towns and eventually civilizations. The Nephites made themselves known to Mesoamerica and the Lamanites to North America. The Nephites would later become the known tribes of Mesoamerica according to Mormon belief. Also included in The Book of Mormon is the book of Ether which discusses the tribe Jaredites and how God wanted to preserve them and their language at the tower of Babel, an event said to have been some 3,000 years before Christ, so God led these people to the New World. A majority of Mormon scholars are in agreement that this tribe became the Olmec, the perceived first civilization of Mesoamerica.<sup>4</sup> This belief was widely known and if it were to be true than all the writing, language and calendars would have their influence directly from the Middle East area. The writings in return would show remarkable similarities to that of Hebrew and the

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<sup>4</sup> John Keyser. Unraveling the Origins of the Mysterious Olmec! ([online], [www.hope-of-israel.org/olmec.htm](http://www.hope-of-israel.org/olmec.htm), 2005).

language as well, and the origin of Mesoamerican writings and other early B.C. accomplishments would be credited to that of the Nephites and Lamanites. This would also shed light on when exactly the Olmecs became a people.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the common belief was that some time around 12,000 B.C. and 10,000 B.C. during the last great ice age when the Bering Strait was frozen over that many Asian hunters walked across the Strait and followed the herds of America until this process led them further south into the Mexican region. The region in which they established themselves was a good area “It’s great for growing corn,” said the Yale University archaeologist Michael Coe. “This is probably the most fertile area in the entire New World,” he told UPI. “They would be crazy to object to this location,” no matter how unpleasant the climate. “Rivers that flooded in the rainy season left extremely fertile land. It was like the Fertile Crescent or the Nile.”<sup>5</sup> When they reached the Mexican region they began to settle and build great cities and later became civilizations. The civilizations that were known and more so study and examined were that of the Mayas, Aztecs and Teotihuacan. This led to other beliefs about Mesoamerica such as the oldest recorded calendar was that of the Mayas and that the oldest writings were of the Mayas and that Language in Mesoamerica originated from the Mayas and or other active city-states that had established during or around the time of the Olmecs. It wasn’t until the early twentieth century that this common belief was being challenged by new findings and evidence that was appearing in the Gulf coast of Mexico. In La Venta, San Lorenzo, San Andres, Tres Zapotes and other near by places there were

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Choi. [Earliest New World Writing Evidence Found](#) ([online] Florida, 2002).

discoveries of an earlier civilization that predated that of Teotihuacan and Mayas. This discovery which became known as the discovery of the Olmecs wasn't just a discovery of a small group of nomads or of a small indigenous tribe but of a predated civilization to that of the Mayas, Teotihuacan or any other Mesoamerican city-state.

The Olmecs are famous for their large basalt heads which are said to represent past leaders of the Olmec people. Olmec artifacts have been known since the first gigantic head was discovered in 1867 at the site now known as Tres Zapotes.<sup>6</sup> Over a hundred years later we have discovered much more about the Olmecs and are continuing to uncover more as numerous sites are



“ Colossal

Heads” (May 2005) Olmec head online at <http://www.cultures.com/contests/heads/olmecs-contest/c.html> being excavated with the purpose of trying to reveal more of what once was

Mesoamerica.

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<sup>6</sup> Pye & Clark 13.

Today we know that the Olmecs were in fact a large group with an estimated population of about 32,000. The area of the Olmecs spread throughout the region and the site of La Venta has been recognized as the headquarters of the civilization. In the early stages of the Olmec civilization San Lorenzo was recognized as the capital in later stages the capital became La Venta. The growth of the Olmec civilization has been discussed by most in this field of study and several dates and stages are presented. Roman Pina Chan puts the Olmecs into four stages. He suggests that the Olmecs began in a stage known as the Formative stage (1700-1300 B.C.), then the Integration stage (1300-900 B.C.), then the Expansion stage (900-300) and finally the Disintegration stage (300 B.C.-A.D. 200).<sup>7</sup> Michael D. Coe and Richard A. Diehl purpose that the Olmecs were indeed a four stage civilization beginning with the Early Formative (1500-900 B.C.), then the Middle Formative (900-400 B.C.), then the Late Formative (400 B.C.-100 B.C.) and finally the Early Post-Classic (900 A.D.-1100 A.D. emphasis on San Lorenzo).<sup>8</sup> While many scholars do not agree on exact dates and number of stages they do agree that the Olmecs went through stages as a large tribe enhancing at each stage. Also scholars agree that the Olmecs became an indigenous group prior to 1200 B.C. During these stages the Olmecs left behind evidence of supporting the idea that the Olmecs were, in fact the first great sociopolitical group of Mesoamerica.

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<sup>7</sup> Roman Pina Chan. The Olmec: Mother Culture of Mesoamerica. Ed. Laura Laurencich Minelli. (New York, 1989), 31-39.

<sup>8</sup> Michael D. Coe & Richard A. Diehl. In the Land of the Olmec: The Archaeology of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan. (Vol. 1, London, 1980).



Findings historians have found left them to consider the Olmecs to not only have been a previous social complex group to that of the Mayas and Teotihuacan but also a very advanced and influential group as well. Within the Olmec region a vast amount of pottery can be found, fist size cylinder seal, engraved chips of greenstone, a discovery of stratified deposit of floors, hearths and trash heaps, Glyphs, monuments with glyphs on them, large political and population developments, indications of the calendar, monuments displaying sculptures of humans and felines, aqueducts that delivered spring water, a one hundred square-meter palace with basalt drains (possibly site of government throne), a box found near San Lorenzo which was magnetic suggest first compass, trade and altars. The Olmecs from the evidence found were not just a poorly structured society but an advanced one at that with the capabilities of being the mother culture of Mesoamerica. With what we know about the Olmecs this brings us to the modern day thought of Mesoamerica. Was writing, art and the calendar an origin of the Olmecs? Yes, they were a complex group probably the first from what we know but can we credit the Olmecs as being the mother culture of Mesoamerica. With the well rounded materials we have today, we can assess the evidence and investigate this modern day argument and make a choice for ourselves on whether or not the advancements of Mesoamerica can be attributed to a mother culture or a sister culture.

The extent of the evidence that has been provided for in the past decade overwhelmingly suggests that the Olmecs were the mother culture of

Mesoamerica. My thought is precisely this; that the Olmecs were the higher sociopolitical power and that they can be attributed to the title of mother culture.

The biggest study on Olmec influence was done by Jeffrey P. Blomster, Hector Neff and Michael D. Glascock. The work that they did was an in depth look at the significance of the pottery, where it most likely came from and test to back it up. No other testing of Mesoamerican pottery has been done to this extent and the findings that came across are strikingly alarming.

Jeffrey P. Blomster along with several other researchers gathered, studied and analyzed 725 samples of pottery and clay from San Lorenzo. Six other sites that were known parts of the Olmec heartland were also included when gathering up evidence to evaluate. Of the clay and pottery materials they received they focused on late formative findings. The Late formative period is suggested to be the beginning of the Olmec civilization which began around 1500/1200 B.C. and ended around 900 B.C. The researchers focused on several types of pottery: fine kaolin clay which Blomster refers to as “white wares”; coarser “gray wares”; and a type of orange on white ware he refers to as “conjeo orange-on-white.”<sup>9</sup>. These types of pottery show a distinction of where they most likely came from. The pottery examined was retrieved throughout Mexico and with the aide of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia over a thousand samples whether fragments of pottery or clay were collected and examined. The samples were taken to Missouri Research Reactor (MURR) and put tested through instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA). MURR is a research program that holds

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Kohout. “Professor’s Research Rocks Mesoamerican Cultural Theory.” ([online], BY GEORGE, George Washington’s Faculty, Staff & Community Newspaper, 2005).

numerous tests in order to investigate on matters such as Blomster's study on Mesoamerican pottery. INAA is the system of testing that the pottery was put through. INAA of ceramics at MURR consists of two irradiations and a total of three gamma counts (S1, S2).<sup>10</sup> The testing then embarks on 'quantitative analysis.' The goal of quantitative analysis of the chemical data is to recognize compositionally homogeneous groups, assumed to represent geographically restricted sources or source zones.<sup>11</sup> From this point the evaluated pieces are exposed to Mahalanobis distance. A metric known as Mahalanobis distance (or generalized distance) makes it possible to describe the separation between groups or between individual points and groups on multiple dimensions.<sup>12</sup> The process allows each evaluated piece to be grouped after examining carefully the probabilities. To ensure that the process was not swaying in favor of Blomster from the start the pieces of pottery were separated from their gathered location and mixed to promote a honest assessment of the testing.

Scientists at MURR focused on the presence of elements such as chromium, tantalum, and thorium to determine the regions of origin.<sup>13</sup> After they examine the data Blomster determined that the pottery in areas outside of San Lorenzo had been producing Olmec-style ceramics by clay within the area. Also included in the research were that other cities outside of the Olmec civilization also used clay from San Lorenzo to make Olmec style ceramics; however they did not trade this pottery amongst themselves or with the Olmecs. Of all the

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey P. Blomster. "Olmec Pottery Production and Export in Ancient Mexico Determined Through Elemental Analysis." (Science, 2005.) 1068.

<sup>11</sup> Blomster, 1068.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Kohout, 2

samples of Conjeo orange-on-white including most all of two “white wares,” the products themselves came directly from San Lorenzo. This indicates that the Olmecs were not in the business of importing materials but of exporting them throughout Mexico.

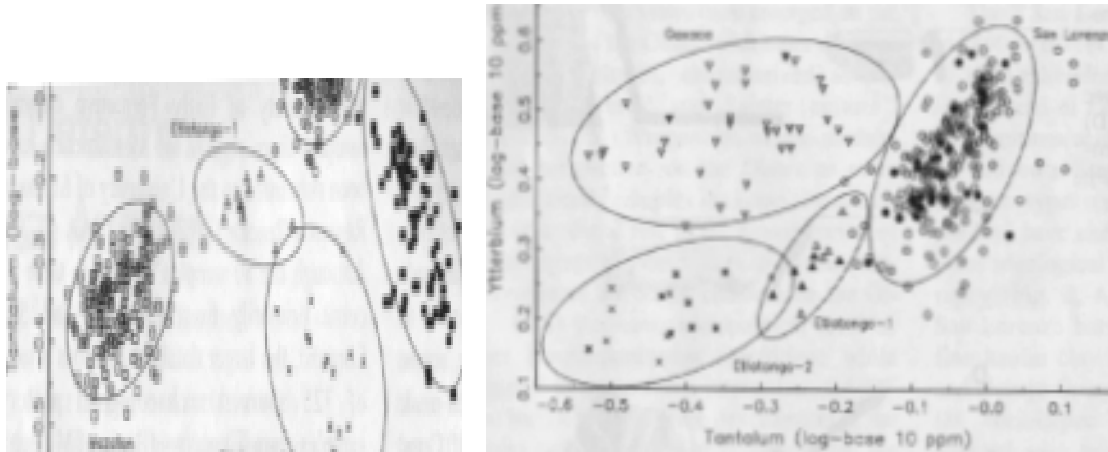
Pottery made in San Lorenzo had a unique style to it with carvings engraved all about the exterior. So too does pottery resemble Olmec style with similar marks to those made in San Lorenzo. It is believed that the pottery outside San Lorenzo was made to mimic Olmec style and that many cities used their clay to do this task. To test this theory Blomster and his team of researchers examined the clay deposits to see if there was any distinction that could be made to separate and organize the pottery findings into groups. Also this process was done to see if San Lorenzo was the more sociopolitical city of Mesoamerica that was influencing towns and villages outside its borders by introducing new methods, styles, religion, government, writings, etc. Blomster did not pick the samples randomly but from certain well known towns that are being used to argue the sister culture theory. The pottery samples were tested by the amount of elements a sample contained. Several elements, such as chromium (Cr), cerium (Ce), cobalt (Co), cesium (Cs), europium (Eu), iron (Fe), etc, are helpful in determining ceramics constructed at different landmarks. For example, the Mazatan samples are all low in Chromium, whereas the Tlapacoya samples are all enriched in Chromium.<sup>14</sup>

In figures 1 and 2 you can see the graphs of the pottery samples after they have been examined and in the figures you see that most all of the samples are

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<sup>14</sup> Blomster, 1070.

placed in the geographical place that best fits were the samples originated from. After being separated and placed back into the purposed group most of the pottery samples are linked back to the San Lorenzo area while other places in the area indicate the makings of pottery.



Blomster, Jeffrey P. "Olmec Pottery Production and Export in Ancient Mexico Determined Through Elemental Analysis." *Science* V. 307 no. 5712 (2005) 1070.

Figure 1

Figure 2

The towns in which he focused on were San Lorenzo, Mazatan, Valley of Oaxaca, Etlatongo, Tlapacoya, San Isidro and Laguna Zope. Of the 725 selected samples Blomster's results can be seen on table 1.

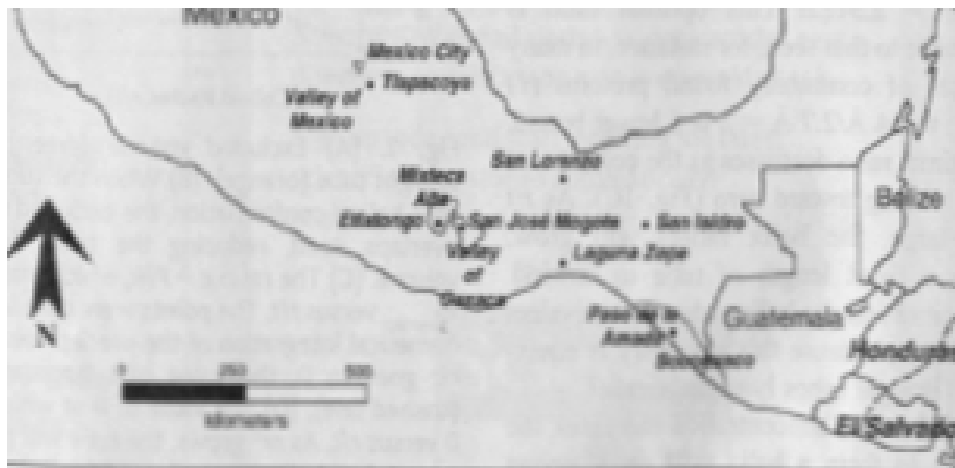
Table 1

Region as identified by INAA

Table 1	Gulf Coast	Mazatan	Valley of Oaxaca	Nochixtlan Valley	Valley of Mexico	Chiapas Central Depression	Isthmus of Tehuantepec	Total
San Lorenzo (Gulf Coast)	203	0	0	0	0	0	0	203
Mazatan (Various Sites)	23	177	0	0	0	0	0	200
Valley of Oaxaca (various Sites)	12	0	42	0	0	0	0	54
Etlatongo (Nochixtlan Valley)	35	0	0	26	0	0	0	61
Tlapacoya (Valley of Mexico)	17	0	0	0	87	0	0	104
San Isidro (Chiapas Central Depression)	1	0	0	0	0	41	0	42
Laguna Zope (Isthmus of Tehuantepec)	3	0	0	0	0	0	58	61

Blomster, Jeffrey P. "Olmec Pottery Production and Export in Ancient Mexico Determined Through Elemental Analysis." *Science* V. 307 no. 5712 (2005) 1071.

In the diagram above several things can be noted. First to note is of the pottery examined none of the tests showed San Lorenzo importing pottery from other towns, but that they only exported. Secondly, none of the other regional areas and towns traded with one another. The only imports that any of these places were getting came from San Lorenzo and none of the testing shows that it came from any other area. Another point to observe is the distance between these places.



Blomster, Jeffrey P. "Olmec Pottery Production and Export in Ancient Mexico Determined Through Elemental Analysis." *Science* V. 307 no. 5712 (2005) 1068.

### Figure 3

Above, figure 3, is a map of Mesoamerica a territory that includes central Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. As you can see in the map San Lorenzo was desolate compared to other cities during the early formative stage. While San Jose Mogote in the Valley of Oaxaca was only about 40 to 50 miles from one another they didn't trade with one another, however, San Lorenzo which was over 200 miles away did trade with them but did not import

any of their pottery. This evidence gives reason that the pottery made in other areas was made to demonstrate Olmec style and that in the process of obtaining the pottery it was either made in San Lorenzo and exported to the site or it was made with the regions own clay and presented as a fake as opposed to an Olmec style pottery made in San Lorenzo. This shows how influential the iconography of the Olmec was throughout Mesoamerica. Blomster said, “Because this iconography has been linked with the dissemination of the social, political, and religious institutions of the Olmec, analyzing its origin and spread is central to understanding the development of complex society in Mesoamerica.”<sup>15</sup> The evidence also brings to mind that San Lorenzo was a more sociopolitical power as opposed to other sites. San Lorenzo had the ability to expose its art to distant parts of Mesoamerica while other sites noted for their cultural growth did not have much if any of an influence on other sites including San Lorenzo. Although some regions produced local variants, these were not exported between regions; no non-Gulf Coast- produced white ware was exported to San Lorenzo.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, all nonlocally produced Olmec-style gray pottery samples found outside the Gulf Coast appear to be San Lorenzo exports.<sup>17</sup>

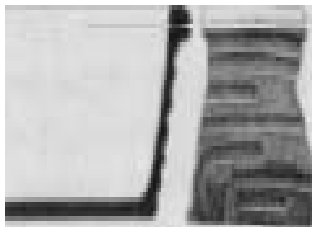


Figure 4



Figure 5

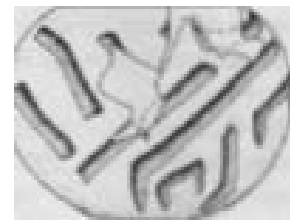


Figure 6

Blomster, Jeffrey P. “Olmec Pottery Production and Export in Ancient Mexico Determined Through Elemental Analysis.” *Science* V. 307 no. 5712 (2005) 1069.

<sup>15</sup> Kohout, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Blomster, 1070.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 1071.

Figure 4 is a sample of the pottery that can be associated with Olmec style. The Olmec style was found in various sites in Mesoamerica and by Blomster study the pottery was exported from the San Lorenzo area. Olmec pottery featured several types of elements and exterior views. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show pottery that has been excavated from Etlatongo yet portrays Olmec style.

In the research one problem that did present itself was that some samples from the Gulf Coast area did resemble samples from the Valley of Oaxaca such as similar amount of calcium. However, when fully evaluated by other elements the samples were one by one placed in their proper place. A multivariate perspective resolves this problem; when all 32 elements retained from the analysis are considered, the discrimination into groups is unambiguous. This process of numerous testing helped establish an overall sound testing session and only furthers the support of the Olmecs being a mother culture as opposed to a sister culture. Once again this mother culture approach suggests that the Olmecs had a more advanced sociopolitical culture with the abilities to heavily influence neighboring groups near and far. The sister culture approach allies itself with contemporaneous groups within Mesoamerica that were responsible for developing and advancing the regions as opposed to a single site or group. The study done by Bromster contradicts the sister culture theory by showing that in fact it was just one group at the early stages of Mesoamerica that pushed along the advancements. The regions outside the Gulf Coast appear to be primarily consumers and emulators rather than exporters and innovators of



Olmec-style motifs.<sup>18</sup> The Olmec pottery testing indicates the role the Olmecs played in Mesoamerica and how prestigious they were as opposed to Mazatan, Valley of Oaxaca, Etlatongo, Tlapacoya, San Isidro or Laguna Zope. The Olmecs were complex in their ways, advancing as a civilization and at the time influencing other regions greatly.

After publishing of the research done by Blomster and aiding researchers, California State Long Beach Anthropology Professor Hector Neff said in reply to their study, "This is a fairly straightforward ceramic provenance investigation. We used concrete chemical fingerprint data to establish patterns of interaction, but the patterns we found are strikingly one sided. If the Olmec were not colonizing, they were certainly exporting ceramics pots with their distinctive iconography. Mother-culture proponents will view this as evidence that the Olmec were also exporting ideas about how to organize society to the rest of Mesoamerica."<sup>19</sup>

However, the same reply was not that of David C. Grove of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and who is a supporter of the sister-culture theory. Grove, after reading about Blomster's findings quoted on Blomster's research team, "has demonstrated that pots were traded. They did not demonstrate that trade sent Olmec religious and political ideas."<sup>20</sup> Grove, even after analyzing the information presented by Blomster, didn't accept the idea that the Olmecs who were exporting to site as far as over 200 miles away did nothing more than trade. Grove statement overshadows weeks of research done by the

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<sup>18</sup> Blomster, 1071.

<sup>19</sup> "Cal State Long Beach Anthropology Professor Has Research on Olmec Pottery Published in Science" (CSU Long Beach, March 2, 2005)

<sup>20</sup> Guy Gugliotta. "Pottery Presented as Evidence of Olmec Culture's Influence." (Washington, Washington Post, 2005.)

Blomster team and only confronts the issue with a bias reply in favor of his personal theory. Grove and other sister-culture supporters ignore the striking evidence of Olmec influence by this study. Blomster himself said, “This analysis validated the theory that the Olmec had a profound impact,” “These civilizations were already thriving. The level of that impact [the Olmec had] varied from region to region.”<sup>21</sup>

The examined materials and wares don’t just show trade by the Olmecs but it is clearly an indication of an advancing civilization that was influencing others in such a way that they were making Olmec-style pottery. Other regional areas were indeed producing pottery identical to that of the Olmecs. “It is incontrovertible evidence that the Olmec wares held priority,” said Allison Brooks. “The regions were transformed by their contact with the Olmec, but there is no evidence of conquest.”<sup>22</sup>

The study of the pottery shows us more than a trading site, but it indicates the impression the Olmecs had on other chiefdoms outside of their area. Pottery itself was something that was a necessity to tribes. Gareth W. Lowe speculated that people “made pottery only when it was economically or socially essential to their survival in increasing competitive situations.”<sup>23</sup> This entitles that pottery was used to store water, boil foods, store food and prepare meals. In addition to its practical value pottery also demonstrated social class. Certainly, archaeologists have been cognizant of the obvious- that prestige technologies are used by the

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<sup>21</sup> Kohout, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Kohout, 2.

<sup>23</sup> John E. Clark & Dennis Gossler. Eds. William K. Barnett & John W. Hoopes. The Emergence of Pottery: Technology and Innovation in Ancient Societies. Reinventing Mesoamerica’s First Pottery. (Washington: Yale University Press, 2000). 214.

elites...<sup>24</sup> In contrast, a prestige technology is based on the principle of displaying or showing off one's wealth, power, or control over labor and resources.<sup>25</sup> Therefore as a common ritual of burial amongst the elite prized possessions they used to display their power would be buried with them. If the Olmecs were simply a trading chiefdom doing nothing more than trading pottery throughout Mesoamerica then no pottery would be found at the burial sites of elites or leaders of opposing chiefdoms and if this were so it would support the sister theory and acknowledge that the Olmecs didn't have much influence but that they just traded. However, according to Blomster he said, "In the Valley of Oaxaca, some whole pots with Olmec designs have been found at sites such as San Jose Mogote. Some of the archaeologists who worked on this material have seen that exotic pottery, including Olmec materials, are more common in upper status households."<sup>26</sup> Blomster added, "They also, however, exported ideology and symbolism, as seen in the iconography of Olmec-style vessels and hollow figurines, at least one of which has been traced to San Lorenzo through INAA."<sup>27</sup> With the recent study done by Blomster and a prestigious team of researchers it can be noted that pottery was traded and that it symbolized both ideas and higher social standards. While sister theorists conclude only that pottery was only traded and nothing more Blomster has replied,

These Olmec-style symbols represented more than just status markers; they connected "those who were entitled to use them to the ultimate sacred propositions of Olmec religion. The fact that so much of this

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<sup>24</sup>Clark & Gosser, 257.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 258

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey P. Blomster May 31, 2005, personal e-mail message (accessed May 31, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey P. Blomster. Etlatongo: Social Complexity, Interaction, and Village Life in the Mixteca Alta of Oaxaca, Mexico. (Brandeis University, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.) 188.

interaction appears to involve distribution of ritual paraphernalia suggests to me that much of the interaction appears to involved ideology, which is consistent with a regional cult.<sup>28</sup>

Another advancement of the Olmecs that has been challenged by the sister culture theory is that of writing. While writing didn't flourish until the Mayan times there is substantial evidence that can be brought to attention to attribute to the Olmecs the developments of the first writings of Mesoamerica.

A cylinder seal and carved greenstone plaque bearing glyphs dating to ~650 B.C. have been uncovered near the Olmec center of La Venta in Tabasco, Mexico.<sup>29</sup> The glyphs indicate that the Olmecs were using some kind of system in order to initiate titles, messages and even stories. The new information is a stunning find, while for years archeologist, historians and others in similar fields have tried to find evidence that could link the Olmec to the origins of Mesoamerica writing none could be found until recently. The glyphs mark origins of not only writing but of the calendar and of kingship.

The glyphs that were found and tested by radiocarbon dating and ceramic chronology testify that the date of the glyphs fall around 650 B.C. Also, in addition to testing the glyphs for dates there was also some charcoal and other debris by the glyphs that were tested and they too were dated around 650 B.C.<sup>30</sup> The glyphs from the Oaxaca valley from San Jose Mogote that were thought to be around 600 to 500 B.C. were tested and suggest a later date of 300 B.C. to 200 A.D. The glyph that was found was called monument 3. Monument 3 depicts a slain captive with two glyphs inscribed below the body, probably giving

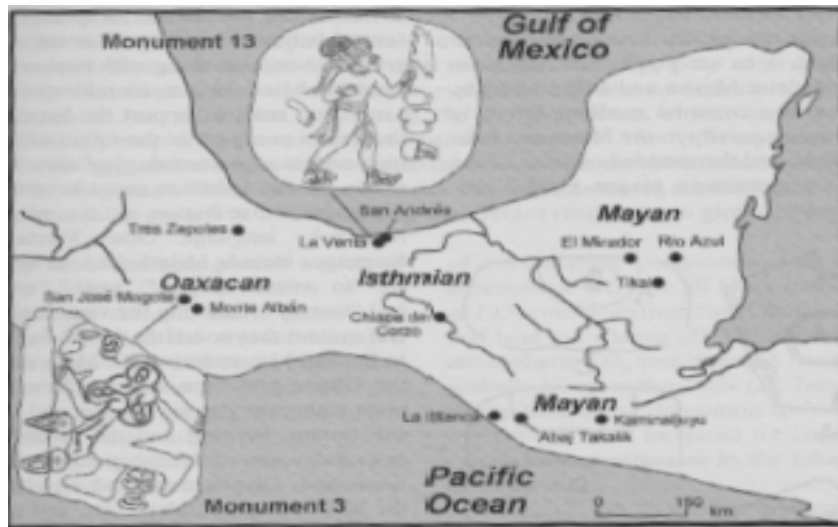
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<sup>28</sup> Blomster Etlatongo, 188.

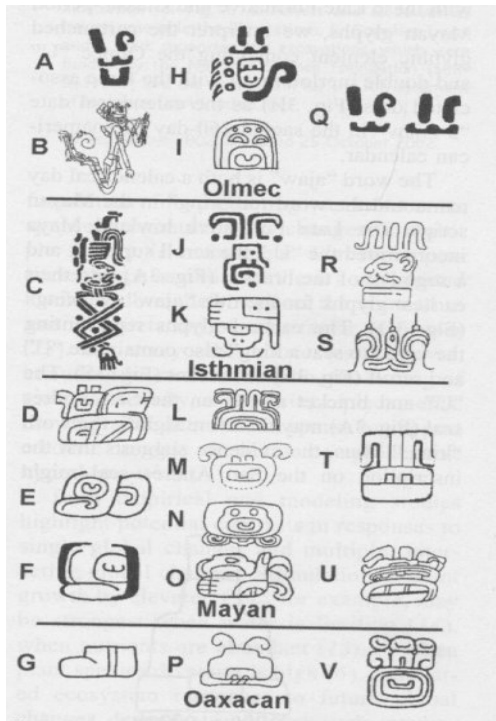
<sup>29</sup> Mary E. D. Pohl. "Olmec Origins of Mesoamerican Writing." (Science,2002) 1984.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 1985.

the calendrical name of the victim based on his day of birth in the 260-day sacred Calendar Round.<sup>31</sup>



Pohl, Mary E.D. "Olmec Origins of Mesoamerican Writing." *Science* V.298 no. 5600 (2002) 1985.



Pohl, Mary E.D. "Olmec Origins of Mesoamerican Writing." *Science* V.298 no. 5600 (2002) 1985.

Because the glyph was giving a later date the finding of the San Andres glyph make it the oldest glyph recorded in Mesoamerica. This is an important point because prior to the first glyphs the Olmecs were trading with San Jose Mogote in the Valley of Oaxaca. If the level of impact the Olmecs had on the San Jose Mogote was nothing more than trade then other influences like writing wouldn't occur. The

<sup>31</sup> Pohl, 1984.

two tests done on the glyphs help indicate that the Olmecs, for the time being, are presumed to have the first recorded glyphs in Mesoamerica. Also it shows, as you compare the glyphs, the impact the Olmecs had on behalf of their trade. The glyphs show similarities of 'Olmec-style' and according to the test done we can proclaim that the first recorded 'Olmec-style' glyph came from La Venta, the second capital of the Olmecs, and that San Jose Mogote, some two hundred years later, displayed an 'Olmec-style' glyph; Olmec first and then another chiefdom second.

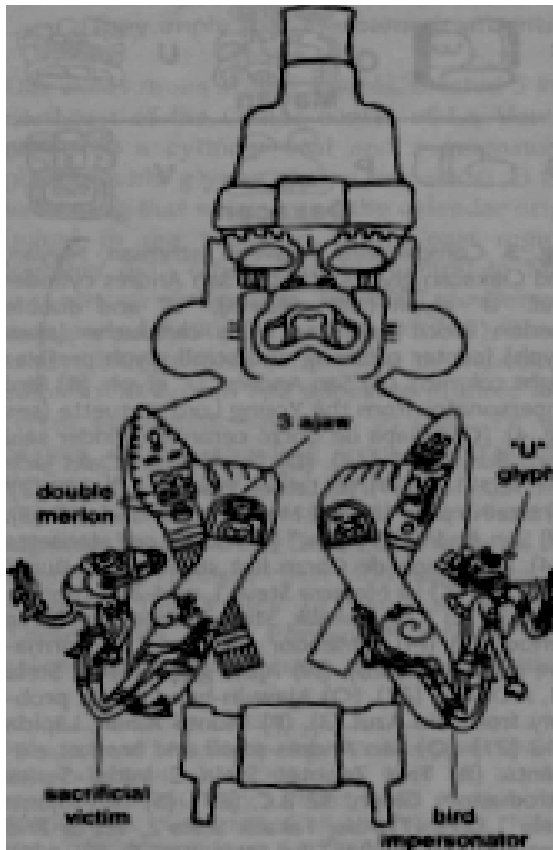
The figure above shows Olmec glyphs in comparison with the Isthmian, Mayan and Oaxacan glyphs. The glyphs that were found during the middle formative stages are similar with that of the early classic period of Mesoamerica.

Grove contends that just because there are similarities between the ceramics and motifs doesn't always conclude that it is Olmec-style. He says, "The belief that Olmec culture influenced its Mesoamerican contemporaries during the Early Formative period is based primarily on a set of motifs which decorate archaeological ceramics in many regions outside of the Gulf coast."<sup>32</sup> To an extent Grove is correct. If one were to discover a writing utensil and draw a person it could very well look just like a picture of a person drawn on the otherside of the world. However, would it be that much more likely if the drawings were more complex and decorative to be verbatim to that of another drawing thousands of miles away? The first glyph that has been found came from La Venta. All other glyphs have succeeded that of the Olmecs so it easy to

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<sup>32</sup> Robert J. Sharer & David C. Grove Eds. Sharer & Grove. Regional Perspectives on the Olmecs: Olmecs: What's in a Name? (Great Britain, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

point out that this style that appeared some two hundred years prior to other glyphs outside of the 'Olmec heartland' were influenced by their style. Grove states, "We believe those "answers" may be too simplistic. Non-Gulf coast cultures and their evolution must be studied "independently," without the continual specter of "Olmec influence" as the only explanation."<sup>33</sup>



The seal to the left depicts two speech scrolls that emanate from the beak of a bird and terminate in two columns of grouped glyphic elements. One scroll ends in a "U" glyph with scroll and bracket elements above. The other ends in a glyph containing the "U" and double merlon encircled in a cartouche, also with the scroll and brackets above.

The glyphs of Olmecs are extremely similar to that of the Maya. In Olmec glyph you can see a king with a

Pohl, Mary E.D. "Olmec Origins of Mesoamerican Writing." *Science* V.298 no. 5600 (2002) 1985.

garment indicating his reign and on his shoulder is a bird who has his mouth open and in the beak is the 'u' and next to the 'u' there are three dots. A couple things can be pointed out by these glyphs one being that the dots and the 'u' stand for what researchers in this field have called "Ajaw." The 'Ajaw' stands for both a calendar day and for the phrase to seat a king. Common practice in early

<sup>33</sup> Sharer & Grove, 13, 14.

Mesoamerican times was to take your birth day as your official name. So add to “Ajaw” the three dots in the glyph and the meaning of ‘Ajaw’ and you get ‘king 3 Ajaw.’ Regardless of the exact reading, the presence of the 3 Ajaw day name implies the existence of the sacred 260day calendar round at ~650 B.C. and points to its association with rulership. Its association with rulership is significant due to the fact that it was common for rulers to be depicted with the calendar and writings. A calendrical date in a Middle Formative context supports the hypothesis that early writing in Mesoamerica began with the association of day signs and numbers.<sup>34</sup>

Although Pohl argues that a glyph that was “spoken” is evidence of writing, linguists and epigraphers tend to have a stricter definition. They want to see columns or rows of glyphs with word order and syntax—far more than these fragments can reveal. “A few isolated emblems... fall well below the standard for first writing,” says epigrapher Stephen Houston of Brigham Young University. “Show me a real text with sequent elements, and I’ll be more convinced.”<sup>35</sup> Archaeologist David Grove of the University of Florida in Gainesville told UPI he thinks the researchers “are making a mountain out of a molehill.” He added, “While what they say sounds convincing, I believe that they have misused the very scant data that they have and made some fundamental errors and thus they haven’t proved at all that the Olmec invented writing. The few bits of data they have simply cannot be called writing—yet.” Archaeologist Michael Love of California State University at Northridge said the importance attached to these

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<sup>34</sup> Pohl, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> Erik Stokstad. “Oldest New World Writing Suggests Olmec Innovation.” (Science, 2002) 1873.



finds by Pohl's team "is greatly overblown..."<sup>36</sup> Linguist Martha Macri of the University of California at Davis agreed. "I think it's likely that writing and social development took place in a context of many cultures interacting with each other, not just one single ethnic or political group," she told UPI.<sup>37</sup> Mesoamerican epigrapher Stephen Houston said, "... the Olmec would have been involved at a late date with the origins of writing, but this new 'evidence' isn't enough to prove that case.

The elements coming from the bird's mouth are simply another example of the sophisticated iconography of the time."<sup>38</sup> The supporters of the sister culture theory go to lengths as to not even recognize the importance of iconography being the first steps towards writings in Mesoamerica or that the Olmecs directly had influences on opposing sites by means of their style and way of thinking. After hearing numerous arguments from the sister culture supporters Pohl remains resolute. "It's logical that we would find a logo-graphic stage of writing before we get fullblown texts and a syllabic system. It will be difficult to identify the transitions between stages of writing, but I'm confident that there's more evidence to be found."<sup>39</sup> Michael Coe touched base on the thought of defying writing he said, "Nobody's ever been able to really find any convincing writing for the Olmec—God knows we've looked," Coe said. "The problem is how you define writing. In a broad sense, you can say it's some physical system of communication that depends on symbols, such as international road sign

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<sup>36</sup> Choi.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Colleen P. Popson. "Earliest Mesoamerican Writing?" (Archaeology Vol. 56, 2003), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

symbols for instance, 'stop' or 'no parking.'"<sup>40</sup> The arguments presented are worthy of recognition, however, the mother culture supporters have identified several areas of a civilization and taken into the account what impact the Olmecs had in these areas; writing, art, the calendar, trade and religion. The evidence substantially favors the mother culture in each of the areas listed above. Sister culture theorist have only the power of their voice and personal impute and lack greatly in evidence, providing little indication that contemporaneous groups led to the establishment of highly sophisticated methods of society. While presented evidence from research, archaeological digs and numerous testing, not voice alone, has strengthened the idea that the Olmecs had the first writings of Mesoamerica.

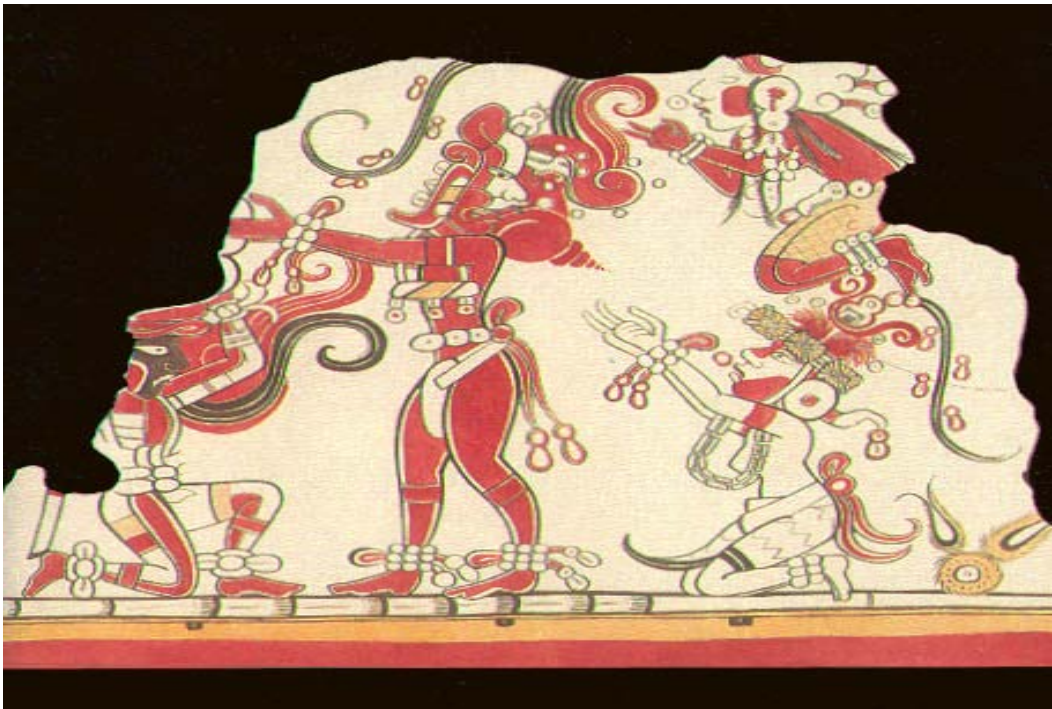
Often glyphs were represented on greenstone and for the La Venta Olmecs this practice helped distinguish themselves from neighboring towns. The greenstone was a precious stone for the Olmec sites and the greenstone was also a stone of value for the Mayas and Isthmian as well. A problem that occurs when making this statement is that there really wasn't any greenstone/jadite in the area. Three years ago, scientist reported finding a rich lode of Jadite, including huge boulders of it, in the jungles of Guatemala.<sup>41</sup> The location in Guatemala was shown to have had ancient mining What was found was blue jade, which the Olmecs appreciated far more than any other gemstone for carvings of pictures or of rulers and other human figures. The findings of the gemstone some 500 hundred miles away suggest the extending territory and

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<sup>40</sup> Choi.

<sup>41</sup> John Noble Wilford. "Olmec, Mother of Mesoamerica Culture?" (New York Times News Service, March 2005 [online])

influence the Olmecs had on surrounding sites, influences of pottery, writing, glyphs, the calendar and religion. The classic maize god of the Maya, scholars say, appears to be a clear descendant of a similar Olmec god.<sup>42</sup> A Maya wall painting in San Bartolo, Guatemala, shows a resurrected maize god surrounded by figures offering him gifts of tamales and water.<sup>43</sup> “The deity’s head is purely Olmec,”<sup>44</sup> Coe said. The information only further confirms the influence the Olmecs had on others, by their style of art, religion and even to the point of rulership.



Artist's rendering by H. Hurst. "Archaeologists Find Maya 'Masterpiece' in Guatemala." (March 14, 2002)  
<http://www.csudh.edu/dearhabermas/14maya.html>.

Overall the study done by Blomster and his team of researchers revealed the Olmecs at the site of San Lorenzo as a major trading station for their Olmec style pottery. The study showed the great distance that went to with their trade

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<sup>42</sup> Wilford

<sup>43</sup> Wilford.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

and how other cultures began to adapt to their styles. Pohl's findings showed glyphs from the Olmec region that supported the idea that the first stages of writing in Mesoamerica came from the Olmecs and that the first sign of the sacred 260 day calendar was used by the Olmecs and not the Mayas. Also, similarities from Mayan glyphs and pictography compared to that of the Olmec show a distinct similarity. Altogether Grove contest against the idea that the Olmecs were the mother culture of Mesoamerica and he even goes to lengths to say, "We strongly reject Olmec 'influence' on the ancient cultures of central Mexico."<sup>45</sup> On the opposing side mother culture theorist Michael Coe says, "This is the place where everything was innovated."<sup>46</sup> In addition to Coe's reply was one of Richard Diehl who said, "It's the mother and father of all later Mesoamerican writing systems."<sup>47</sup>

In a letter from Joyce Marcus from the University of Michigan she said, "I would say that no one (or very few archaeologists) believes in either a sister or a mother culture; most just believe in multiple interacting chiefdoms who send a wide range of products out to their many satellite centers and to many centers outside their region. In some cases, we have data on more than 10 or so interacting chiefdoms; in the next couple of decades of archaeological work, we could have data on 30 or more chiefdoms, especially if work is done intensively and extensively in poorly known regions."<sup>48</sup> Blomster himself comments on the chiefdoms saying, "The first chiefdom probably arose among the Mokaya of

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<sup>45</sup> Stokstad, 1872.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Joyce Marcus, May 22, 2005, personal e-mail message (accessed May 23, 2005).

coastal Chiapas early in the Formative period, while an even more complex society, the Olmec, developed along the Gulf Coast of Mexico by 1200 B.C.”<sup>49</sup> Also, “No one characterization typifies Olmec interaction; it varies with each region. For example, in the Soconusco region of Chiapas, the Mokaya appear to have been radically transformed by their Olmec contact- a process referred to as “olmecization”.<sup>50</sup>

On behalf of one of his archaeologist friends, Grove said, “As a noted Mexican archaeologist who carries out research in western Mexico wrote to me, ‘I hate the mother culture concept because it implies that the people in my area were all a bunch of retards!’”<sup>51</sup> Grove added, “I’ve been one of the vocal opponents against “mother culture” for decades. But I haven’t “done work” on the topic because frankly mother culture is more of an emotion and myth and not something that can be tested archaeologically... 60 years ago when Mexican archaeology was still in its infancy, mother culture was a simplistic explanation. Today it not only remains overly simplistic but is now also 60 years out of date!”<sup>52</sup> It is not that the mother culture theorist believes other chiefdoms or tribes to be “retards” but that even while certain tribes and chiefdoms had somewhat of a high sociopolitical standard the Olmecs had an even greater one during the time period. Blomster says, “While leaders at other sites lived in houses not fundamentally different from the reed and mud houses of everybody else in the village, Olmec elites lived in a large structure with plastered and painted walls,

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<sup>49</sup> Blomster. *Etlatongo*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> David C. Grove, May 18, 2005, personal e-mail message (accessed May 19, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

large basalt column roof supports, a stone aqueduct, and step coverings. Further, crafts under elite control were concentrated along the Red Palace, where Ann Cyphers has exposed a basalt workshop. No contemporaneous structures comparable to the Red Palace have been documented in Mesoamerica.”<sup>53</sup>

My thoughts on the matter align with the last quote by Archaeologist Richard Diehl. The evidence shows in more than a couple ways the influence this one group called the Olmecs had on following groups in Mesoamerica. In writing, trade, religion, the calendar and art each area can be traced back to the Olmecs as being the first. It was the Olmecs who began trading pottery to other chiefdoms some over two hundred miles away. At the time no evidence shows that these sites were trading with the Olmecs or with other chiefdoms. In 650 B.C. it was the Olmecs who are noted for having the first glyph representing writing and the sacred 260 day calendar. It wasn't until around 300 B.C. that these same styles of glyphs and the sacred 260 day calendar show up outside of the Olmec territory. Even the maize God of the Olmecs has been compared to that of the Mayan maize god and the similarities are strong. Its not that the Olmecs were the only group capable of obtaining a high level of social complexity it's the notion that the Olmecs were capable of reaching an even higher level of social complexity and the evidence only verifies that the Olmecs were the mother culture of Mesoamerica. The Olmecs were, indeed, the innovators of the Mesoamerica who accompanied preceding civilization with advancements they themselves established, making them the mother culture.

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<sup>53</sup> Blomster, Etlatongo 17.

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