

The Olmecs



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The Olmecs of southern Mexico are America's oldest civilization and Mesoamerica's "Mother Culture." Long famous for their colossal heads carved from giant boulders, the Olmecs have fascinated the public and archaeologists alike since the 1940s when National Geographic magazine reported the initial explorations of their centers. Despite well-publicized discoveries of spectacular basalt sculptures, portable jade objects, and richly decorated pottery vessels, until recently almost nothing was known about Olmec history, foreign contacts, and daily life. Now archaeologists have recovered information that allows them to assemble a reasonably complete picture of Olmec culture and its impact on later Mexican civilizations. The Olmecs established the first cities in the Americas on high ground overlooking the rivers that meander across southeastern Mexico's fertile coastal lowlands. Between the thirteenth and sixth centuries BC, rulers of San Lorenzo and La Venta oversaw the construction of palaces, pyramids, plazas, richly stocked tombs, and religious sanctuaries, and commissioned hundreds of sculptures carved from raw basalt. Thousands of Olmec farmers supported themselves and their leaders by growing maize and other domesticated plants. Rulers and priests interceded on behalf of the entire society with the gods and spirits, while merchants ventured into distant lands searching for rare stones, shells, animal pelts, feathers, and exotic foods such as cacao. The Olmecs presents the first

modern overview of information from recent archaeological field projects and studies of Olmec art. Profusely illustrated, it will become the standard work on this enigmatic culture.

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