MESOAMERICA I

“Intro & Olmecs”
6 AREAS OF MESOAMERICA

- GULF COAST
- MAYA
- OAXACA
- WESTERN MEXICO
- CENTRAL MEXICO
- NORTH
HISTORICAL PERIODS

- PRE CLASSIC PERIOD
  (1500BC - 150BC)
- CLASSIC PERIOD
  (150BC - 900AD)
- POST-CLASSIC PERIOD
  (900AD – 1521 AD)
SOURCES

1. Archeological Sources
2. Native Written Accounts
3. Spanish Written Accounts
I. ARCHEOLOGICAL SOURCES

A) Large Scale:
   Temple platforms, "Pyramids", Massive architecture

B) Small Scale:
   Figurines, Human remains, Jewelry, Ceramic vases
II. NATIVE WRITTEN ACCOUNTS

A) Hieroglyphic Codices (Pre-Conquest)
   “Amoxtlis”, Indigenous books, as few as little as a dozen in existence

B) Native Oral Literature
   Spanish translations of poems, ballads, prayers, etc..
   1) Nahuatl Language Documents
      “Florentine Codex”, etc.
   2) Mayan Language Documents
      “Popol Vuh”, Books of Chilam Balam
C) Hieroglyphic Inscriptions
   Found carved throughout Temples, structures, stelaes, etc..

D) Accounts of Post-Cuahutemoc Historians
   Fernando Alvarado “Tezozomoc”
   Fernando de Alva “Ixtlilxochitl”
III. SPANISH WRITTEN ACCOUNTS

Documents, letters, histories
Cortez’s “Cartas de relacion”
Diaz’ “True Conquest of New Spain”
“The Olmecs”
(1500 BC-250 BC)
MOST INFO KNOWN IS THROUGH ARCHEOLOGICAL REMAINS
NO SKELETAL REMAINS
REASON: ARID REGION WITH HIGH ACIDITY IN SOIL.
I. LARGE SCALE SOURCES:

- TEMPLE MOUNDS
- LARGE “COLOSAL HEADS” (KING REPRESENTATIONS?)
“COLOSAL HEADS”
II. SMALL SCALE SOURCES:

- ART SHOWING SMALL “CHILD-LIKE JAGUAR BABIES”
- CHARACTERISTICS: “WERE-JAGUAR MOUTH” MOTIF
- CEREMONIAL “Kuntz axes”
“Were-Jaguar”
ARCHEOLOGY

M. Stirling
M. Covarrubias
Excavations in Olmec heartland id Olmecs as a pre-maya civilization
Miguel Covarrubias (1904-1957)

Art background id Olmec culture as being “Mother culture”
GEO LOCATION:

“Olmec Heartland” in modern S. Veracruz & Tabasco. Also: Guerrero and as far a Costa Rica.

Olmec Culture and Influence found throughout Mexico.
Geographic Location of the Olmec Culture

Olmec Zone

Places with Olmec influence

Tres Zapotes
Laguna de los Cerros
La Venta
San Lorenzo
The Majority of what is know about Olmec is through their art.

Aztecs describe them as the “TAMOANCHAN” (Maya word) the old society or ancestors.

Most likely “War-like” as art and influence is found throughout Mesoamerica.
SOCIETY cont..

This type of cultural influence occurs usually through military subjugation.

They were a large agricultural society Maiz, beans, squash, chile its main products.

Had a large trade network. Extensively used of unusual blu/green jade. But with no local source. (Motagua River, Guatemala-2003)
Unknown. Maybe a form of pre Mixe-zoquen. Or pre-Maya
Art was connected to belief system.
Theorized that “were-jaguar statues are belief in “NAHUALISMO” in human’s connection to nature.
Originated religious ball-game. (Theorized that Colosal heads are wearing the game helmets)
 Losing opponents would be sacrificed
Were Jaguar
Ceremonial Ballgame
“MOTHER CULTURE”

- Influence found throughout Mesoamerica.
- “Olmecoid” figures common.
- Later Mesoamerican belief systems can be traced to Olmecs.
- Developed writing, numerical, calendric systems.
Hieroglyphs have been found on Olmec art, but cannot be read.
Connected to Mayan hieroglyphs
Oldest example dated to 650 BC (2003)
Tuxtla Statue
(March 14 162 AD)

Olmec Writing
“King 3 AJAU” (650 BC)
Oldest example of Writing in the Americas
NUMERICAL SYSTEM..

Had the concept of the “0” 1000 years before Europeans.

Olmec (Usually called “Mayan”) is a vigesimal system made up of 3 symbols.

Our arab-indian numerical is a decimal system made up of 10 symbols.

Ex: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,0
Numerical system cont.....

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<th>(20)^4</th>
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<tr>
<td>(20)^2</td>
<td>= 6 x 400 = 2,400</td>
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<tr>
<td>(20)^1</td>
<td>= 13 x 20 = 260</td>
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<tr>
<td>(20)^0</td>
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562,677
CALENDRIC SYSTEM

Calendar dates found throughout Olmec art. The oldest being the “Tuxtla Statue” = 14 March, 162 AD.

Aug 13, 3114 BC is start date of Maya calendar. ????
CEREMONIAL CENTERS

1) San Lorenzo (1500 BC - 1200 BC)
2) La Venta (1200 BC - 400 BC)
3) Tres Zapotes (1200 BC - 400 BC)
DECLINE

Either through revolution or invasion.

Evidence at the 3 ceremonial centers indicated that statues were purposely broken, buried, and buildings burned.

By 250 BC, Olmec centers were abandoned.

Links to the Classic Maya in “Isthmus Culture”
La Mojarra Stelae