

# America's Most Controversial Civilization

by Charles Hughes

## The Mystery of the Olmecs

David Hatcher Childress  
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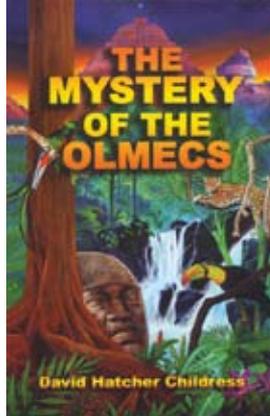
Author David H. Childress has travelled around the world several times and written at least 12 books on exploration, lost cities, and ancient civilizations. But he says that one of the strangest and most fascinating mysteries is located right here in North America: the ancient Olmec civilization, which was only recognized as a separate entity in the 1940s. And ever since, the Olmec culture has been a constant source of disagreement and controversy.

Prior to the 1940s, establishment archaeologists believed that the oldest civilization in Mesoamerica was the Maya, which flourished in Yucatan, Guatemala, and the Gulf Coast of Mexico.

Then, beginning in the 1930s and continuing to the present, it was noticed that some of the Mayan artifacts were unlike the rest, in peculiar ways. Large heads, carved in very hard basalt rock, resembled people from Africa, or wore masks with feline features such as those of a jaguar, the large tiger-like beast of the area.

These strange artifacts were found mainly in the area of the southern Mexican regions of Tabasco and Veracruz. This is a swampy jungle region noted for the production of rubber from ancient times. The name Olmec derives from the Aztec Nuatl language, and means rubber.

The Mexican archaeologist Ignacio Bernal relates that Olmec-type art first turned up as early as 1869, but the designa-



tion of Olmec to describe this culture was not used until 1927.

Explorations and excavations in the late 1930s at Tres Zapotes, and La Venta

by the Smithsonian and by the National Geographic Society uncovered artifacts and large inscribed stone tablets, called stela.

There was resistance to recognizing the Olmecs as a culture older than the Mayan, and which most likely preceded and gave birth to the Mayan culture, by such old timers of Mexican archaeology as Eric Thompson, who had helped decipher the Mayan calendar. At a special archaeology meeting in Mexico City in 1942, it was largely settled among Mexican archaeologists that the Olmecs predated the Maya, although the date of the beginning of Olmec civilization continued to be hotly debated.

The controversy over which culture was primary, Maya or Olmec, was settled in the 1950s by the use of radiocarbon dating. Artifacts found at San Lorenzo were given a radiocarbon date of 1200 B.C. So, here was a culture preceding the Maya, which featured very strange art, with depictions of bearded men, massive Negroid stone heads, and hieroglyphic writing. Subsequently it was found that the carbon dates determined in the 1950s were erroneously too recent, and that the Olmecs are probably older than 1200 B.C.

### A Chinese Link

Childress's large-size book is well illustrated, with photographs in black and white and color, as well as maps and bibliographical footnotes. The reader may see photos of the huge, multi-ton Negroid heads in stone, statues carved in jade of strange looking people with elongated heads, weird feline-like humanoid statues, and carvings of Caucasian-appearing men with beards. Many



From *The Mystery of the Olmecs*

An early color photo of the colossal head discovered at La Venta, Mexico, in the late 1940s.

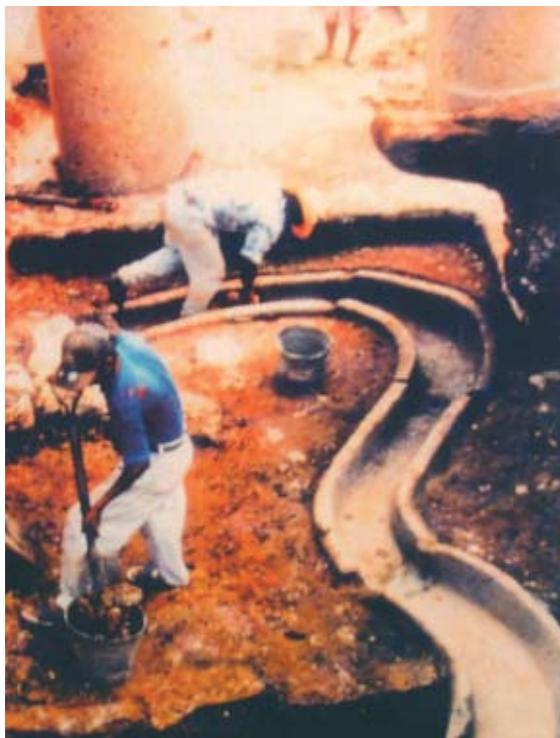
statues are of figures in a seated position, apparently praying, in a very similar fashion to what the Chinese call the stance *Qhizuo*.

A good deal of Olmec art, in fact, closely resembles that of the Shang Dynasty, and Childress says that Olmec writing has been examined by Chinese scholars, who claim that it is derived from early Chinese pictographs, found on Shang oracle bones (see *U.S. News and World Report*, Nov. 4, 1996).

Chinese scholar Han Ping Chen, one of the few experts on Shang inscriptions, stated that this is plainly Chinese writing. His statement apparently upset Mesoamerican specialist Michael Coe of Yale University, who said that such an implication of Chinese influence on the Olmecs is insulting to the indigenous people of Mexico! Such comments reveal the attitude of the mainstream archaeologists to the concept of Universal History.

Here is a civilization, right next door to us, who were the inventors of the number and writing system of the Mayas, ball-games with rubber balls, monumental architecture, and the wheel (as evidenced in wheeled toys). Author Childress asks, "So who were these weirdos?" We seem to have here a vast, unusual culture, which flourished from central Mexico to Costa Rica, and possibly into Colombia. Its cities ranged from the Gulf to the Pacific, very likely being the recipients of trade by sea from Europe, across Mexico, to the Pacific, where goods arrived from Asia and Oceania.

This is an excellent book, as the author focusses on the singularities, and points out to the reader what the archaeological mafia would rather you not see, much less think about. Childress spent almost a year visiting Olmec areas, as well as museums. For those interested in our ancient predecessors, I recommend this book on the Olmecs, America's most controversial civilization.



From *The Mystery of the Olmecs*

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