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"THE OLMEC.....THE MOTHER CULTURE OF MEXICO (AND THE AFRICAN CONNECTION?)"

One objective of our course is to learn the history of Native Americans so that we can know the cultural and historical differences between the indigenous people of the Americas and the colonizers, and understand why and how these differences developed. These various patterns of living have affected the descendants of these people for generations.

I am particularly interested in the Olmec civilization. It was a relatively recent discovery that the Olmec had developed an earlier culture than the Mayans, Aztec, Incas and other better known cultures of Mesoamerica. However, the lack of Olmec texts and the extreme antiquity of the culture make the interpretation of Olmec iconography a challenging prospect. Nowhere is this fact more pronounced than in their stone carvings. Colossal heads and other sculptures were discovered in 1862, largely in the states of Veracruz and Tabasco. Scholars acknowledge that these huge heads, some weighing as much as 20 tons, date back at least 3,000 years.



The first known report on an Olmec artifact, a colossal head found by a farmer in Hueyapan in the state of Veracruz, was by Jose Maria Melgar y Serrano, a Mexican explorer. He published his discovery along with illustrations in an 1869 issue of the *Seminario Ilustrado*. In 1906 the German explorer Eduard Seler visited the head, which was then lost to the archeological record until Albert Weyerstall discovered it again in 1932. (Smithsonian Institution, 2009)



-Carved wood reproduction of the colossal head of Hueyapan (Tres Zapotes Monument A) and other artifacts, in "Estudio sobre la antigüedad y origen de la cabeza colosal de tipo etiópico que existe en Hueyapan en el cantón de los Tuxtlas" (1871), by Jose Maria Melgar y Serrano.

My research indicates there has not been a serious and sustained effort to examine the origin of the persons whom the sculptors used as models. Why did so many of the sculptures and artifacts have facial features that clearly are Africoid...was it simply the artists' imaginations? That seems highly unlikely. It is generally accepted that these colossal heads were representative of Olmec authority figures; certainly not commoners or persons of little or no status in the society. In examining the various texts and comments made by scholars about the discovery of these colossal heads and other artifacts, it is clear that the majority have ignored or glossed over the African-ness of the facial features of many of the sculptures.

I believe there is no human being on the planet more despised in contemporary society than a black man, but also that racism was not as rampant in antiquity. And second, that there is a virtual conspiracy among western scholars to withhold any evidence of an African presence in native American cultures well before the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the so-called new world in the early 16th century and were heralded in Europe as the "discoverers" of the Americas.



IMAGE OF MONUMENT "F", TRES ZAPOTES

In the rare case when the African traits of sculptures are acknowledged, for instance in the Tres Zapotes Monument "F" above, there is no attempt to explain the phenomenon. In his book "Olmec Archeology and Early Mesoamerica"(Cambridge University Press, 2007) University of Kentucky anthropologist Christopher A. Poole identifies the monument, which was discovered in southern Veracruz state simply as "El Negro". No additional information about it was offered. In fact, some of the scholarly comments made about the origin of the facial features of other colossal heads border on the ridiculous. We will examine some of these comments and texts.

Now, you may ask, what does it matter whether or not Africans were among the first to inhabit the Americas? Well, it matters mostly in what I consider the denial, which to me points to the institutional racism inherent in much Eurocentric and American scholarship. Secondly, acknowledgement of the early arrival of Africans to these shores

would likely result in the re-examination of how the history of native Americans is taught in American high schools and universities and would likely cause a fair amount of scholarly disquietude and financial distress as current textbooks are withdrawn, revised and updated to reflect the new realities. This in turn could facilitate and hasten the awakening of school children and their teachers to the contributions that Africans had made to the culture considered to be the “cradle” of Mesoamerican civilization. Although rewriting of textbooks is a constant, my view is that this would be akin to General Motors recalling all Chevrolets ever manufactured because of a serious malfunction; no doubt an expensive and logistical nightmare. That could certainly explain the scholarly reluctance to acknowledge and explain the Africoid Olmec heads.

Let’s begin by looking at some of the arguments for and against an early African presence in the Americas. Mexican traditions recorded by Friar Diego de Landa, the Aztec historian Ixtlilxochitl and Fray Bernardino de Sahagun make it clear that a race of people other than Amerindians landed at Panotla, on the Gulf Coast, and spread to the states of Guerro and Oaxaca on the Pacific Coasts (Florentine Codex ,1579-80). Recent evidence presented by Walter A. Neves of the University of Sao Paulo suggests early immigrants to South America may have come from Africa. Neves has taken extensive measurements from dozens of skulls, including the oldest, a woman who has been named Lucia (Science News, 2001). He says at least 45,000 years ago migrating Africans reached Australia via a southern route. Neves and co-workers excavated the skeletal remains of at least 40 individuals in 28 separate graves at Santana do Riacho 1, the largest known prehistoric burial site in the Americas. Radiocarbon analyses indicated that the burials occurred over a 3,000-year span, beginning about 11,000 years ago. Brazilian scientists compared measurements of the intact skulls of six adults--two men and four women--with those of skulls from modern populations of Africans, aboriginal Australians, Asians, and Native Americans and found several shared traits. However, Richard L. Jantz of the the University of Tennessee says If ancient Brazilian settlers exhibited a large amount of anatomical variability, it may be a coincidence that Neves found a few who show African similarities.

As explained in a BBC documentary of June 15, 2003 titled “First Americans Were Australian”, the skulls suggest faces like those of Australian aborigines.



Lucia’s face was reconstructed by forensic artist Richard Neave at the University of Manchester, UK. , based on her 12,000 year old skull.

Karl W. Luckert in his book “Olmec Religion” (University of Oklahoma Press, 1976) theorizes that the colossal heads were expressions of religious devotion. He uses the term megalith, meaning simply “man-placed large stones”, in describing these sculptures. He believes that “the drooping mouth and snarling lips...with the flat nose, are obviously serpentine.” He says different colossal heads may go with different species of snakes. That seems to me to be a stretch...no pun intended.



At least Author Luckart attempted an explanation. When I examined “Precolumbian Art of North America and Mexico” edited by Francesco Abbate with translation by Elizabeth Evans (Octopus Books, London, 1972), he included 151 illustrations, only 1 of which was a colossal head (a huge omission in my view) and there was no description or explanation of the head, whereas there were explanations with all 150 of the other illustrations. I think he goes a long way in substantiating the notion of a virtual conspiracy to negate the possibility of a pre-Columbian African presence in the Americas.

Another scholar who seemingly fudged the issue of the Africoid appearance of many of the Olmec sculptures was Frank Waters in his book “Mexico Mystique, The Coming Sixth World of Consciousness” (Swallow Press, Chicago, 1975). He accurately describes the discoveries at San Lorenzo, La Venta and Tres Zapotes as having round faces with flat Negroid noses and thick lips, slanted eyes with the Mongoloid features. He goes on to say “their gigantic stone heads may not prove to be an anthropological record of their racial derivation, whatever it may be”. He then doubles back and says the Mongoloid features “prompts the inquiry whether the Olmecs came from Polynesia.”



I think you get the picture. So how do the proponents of an African presence in Precolumbian America justify their assertions?

Author Andre Emmerich writes in “Art Before Columbus” (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1963) that the massive stone heads portray men with characteristic Olmec features: thick, heavy lips, full cheeks, broad noses, almost swollen eyelids and a peculiar type of close-fitting headdress or helmet.



Afrocentric scholar Ivan Van Sertima in “African Presence in Early America” (Transaction Books, Rutgers University, N. Brunswick N.J. 1987) writes that Polish professor Andrzej Wiercinski told the 41st Congress of Americanists in Mexico in September 1974 that African skulls had been found at Olmec sites in Tlatilco, Cerro de las Mesas and Monte Alban. In terms of the likelihood of the Atlantic Crossing by African sailors, Van Sertima asserts that the Atlantic currents off African coasts move like conveyor belts to the Caribbean, northeastern South America and the gulf of Mexico. He writes the winds and currents have not changed appreciably in the 3-thousand or so years since that travel occurred. He believes crews may have been blown off course and landed in the Olmec heartland, and were not able to retrace their course and return to Africa. Historian and author John Thornton weighed in on this issue in his book “Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World 1400-1680 (Cambridge University Press, 1992). He contends that Africans concentrated their boatbuilding talents on craft designed for coastal and riverine

navigation and engaged in very little deliberate oceanic navigation. He believes ocean currents may have made African voyages to the Americas possible, but adds that it required well developed techniques for high-seas navigation which he says the Africans lacked.

“The ethnic identity of Olmec civilization itself remains unknown.” (Mary Ellen Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica*, Thames & Hudson, 1996). She contends that at some period between 400 and 100 BC (Late Formative era) the once successful Olmec culture weakened and collapsed for reasons that are still unknown. The first of the great Mesoamerican civilizations to rise, flourish and fall, it influenced all the civilizations that were to follow.

The next question is what do we do with the information at hand...the call to action. If you believe, as I do, that there is a cover-up of the possible African first presence in the Americas, then it should be brought to light. Personally, I intend to alert all who will listen to the possibilities of such a phenomenon. You, Professor Townsend, on the other hand, have access to many young, fertile and inquisitive minds. Were I in your position, I would devote a little extra classroom time to delve into the possibility that the first Native Americans may have been black. Once the seed is planted, there's no telling where it could lead an inquisitive 19 year old. Among your peers and colleagues, I would ask what they know and feel about the possibility, and whether they approach it in their academic settings. I have always believed that it's best to think big. I can just imagine how the eyes of an African American 5th grader might light up, and she might run home to tell her parents and everyone else who will listen that her ancestors could well have been the first to land on these shores we now call America.