

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One day in the late 1850s (the precise year is not recorded) a farm worker was clearing a cornfield on the Hacienda Hueyapan in southern Veracruz state, Mexico. As he hacked at the forest, he came upon what he thought was the bottom of an overturned cauldron, partly buried in the ground. Ordered by the hacienda owner to retrieve the cauldron, he returned and began to dig. To his surprise, his labors were rewarded not by the rim of an iron vessel, but by the baleful stare of a great head carved in dark volcanic stone (Melgar 1869: 292) (Fig. 1.1).

Today we recognize the “*cabeza colosal de Hueyapan*” as one of the masterworks of the earliest tradition of monumental sculpture on the North American continent. Modern scholars have given the name “Olmec” to this artistic tradition, the archaeological culture of which it was the most spectacular expression, and the people who created it. Beginning about 1400 B.C. in the tropical lowlands of Mexico’s southern Gulf Coast, the Olmecs achieved an unprecedented level of social and political complexity. From the early Olmec capital at San Lorenzo, and later ones at La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, and Tres Zapotes, paramount rulers wielded their power and influence over subordinate local leaders and thousands of subjects in surrounding towns, villages, and hamlets. At San Lorenzo, at least ten rulers were memorialized between 1400 and 1000 B.C. with colossal stone portrait heads such as the one from Hueyapan. The hard basalt stone used to fashion these heads, along with the multi-ton table-top thrones and over a hundred sculptures of humans and supernatural beings were brought from volcanic slopes 60 km away. The inhabitants of San Lorenzo reshaped the plateau on which the capital rose with extensive terraces and built causeways across the swampy lowlands to river ports. Later, between 1000 and 400 B.C., the rulers of La Venta constructed a carefully planned civic and ceremonial precinct with over 30 earthen mounds, the largest rising 30 m above the grand plaza below. These La Venta rulers were laid to rest in elaborate tombs, and they imported thousands of tons of serpentine, which they buried in massive offerings, along with hundreds of jade ornaments and

figurines. Like their counterparts at San Lorenzo, early rulers of La Venta celebrated their might and prestige with the creation of colossal heads and table-top thrones, but their successors commemorated diplomatic encounters and the divine sources of their power with low-relief carvings on slab-like stelae. A column of symbols on a late monument at La Venta, and symbols on a cylinder seal and fragments of a stone plaque from nearby San Andrés, also suggest the Olmecs made early steps toward writing (Pohl et al. 2002).

Monumental artwork and public works, a complex social hierarchy, and writing are all traits that V. Gordon Childe famously included in his definition of civilization, and some have described Olmec culture as “America’s first civilization” (Coe 1968a; Diehl 2004). Like much about the Olmecs, this claim has provoked considerable controversy. “Civilization” implies the highly stratified political organization of the state, and modern scholars disagree strongly over whether state institutions existed among the Olmecs. They also argue vehemently over the significance of Olmec contributions to later civilizations in Mexico and Central America. At its extremes, this debate pits those who view the Olmecs as the “Mother Culture” of Mesoamerica, vastly superior to their contemporaries and responsible for the major ideas and institutions that laid the foundation for all subsequent Mesoamerican civilizations, against those who argue the Olmecs were on a par with their contemporaries, who contributed equally to the development of Mesoamerican civilization. Like many, perhaps most, current Olmec scholars, I see the truth as lying between these extremes (for a particularly cogent discussion see Lesure 2004). The Olmecs of San Lorenzo were one of only a handful of societies in the Americas that had achieved a comparable degree of social and political integration by the end of the second millennium B.C. On the other hand, sociopolitical complexity varied among the Olmec societies within the Gulf Coast region, the intensity and effects of interaction with the Olmecs varied across Mesoamerica, and other Formative societies made significant contributions to the development of a distinctively Mesoamerican civilizational tradition. Consequently, much of this book focuses on how leaders among the Olmecs and other Formative societies used local and external sources of power as they created the early complex polities and societies of Mesoamerica.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The modern countries of Central America and Mexico define the geographical area known as Middle America. A land of exceptional natural variation, the environments of Middle America range from deserts in the north to tropical rainforests in the south and from hot coastal lowlands to snow-covered mountain peaks, with cool highland slopes, plateaus, and valleys in between.

The early inhabitants of Middle America shared a hunting-gathering way of life and also styles of chipped stone projectile points with other societies



Figure 1.1. The *cabeza colosal de Hueyapan*, Tres Zapotes Monument A, during re-excavation by Matthew Stirling in 1939 (from Stirling 1943: Plate 4a).

in North and South America. Between 2000 and 1500 B.C., however, in the central portion of Middle America, there began to emerge a distinctive cultural pattern that would define the culture area of Mesoamerica. Early elements of this pattern included permanent settlements, manufacture of pottery, and subsistence based on cultivation of domesticated maize, beans, and squash (cf. Clark and Cheetham 2002). Over the next 2000 years social hierarchies, centralized governments, and specific religious concepts and practices emerged in various societies, including the Olmecs, and were adopted by their neighbors.

At their maximum geographical distribution in the sixteenth century A.D., societies that participated in the Mesoamerican cultural tradition extended from the edge of the northern Mexican desert through the rainforests of northern Central America (Fig. 1.2). These boundaries fluctuated, however, with shifting patterns of cultural interaction and climatic changes that affected the northern range of maize agriculture (Braniff 1989). Neither did the spread of characteristic Mesoamerican traits obliterate cultural difference. Rather, the area encompassed an astounding variety of regional traditions and ethnicities. By some estimates, more than 200 languages were spoken in Mesoamerica when Cortes landed on its shores in 1519.

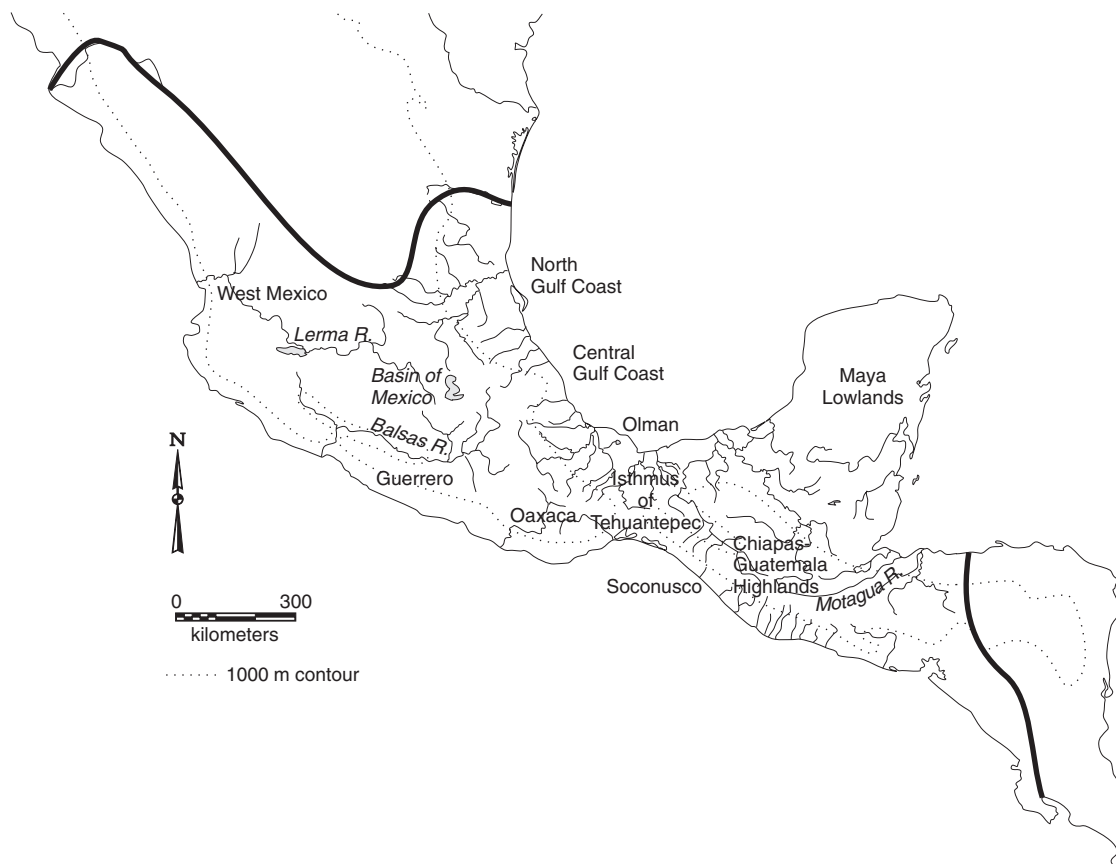


Figure 1.2. Geographical regions of Mesoamerica.

Muriel Porter Weaver (1993: 5) aptly describes the map of Mesoamerica as a lopsided bow, its knot formed by the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which separates the Gulf of Mexico to the north from the Pacific Ocean to the south. The Olmecs resided on the north side of the Isthmus amid the tropical rain forests, swamps, and savannahs in the hot, humid, southern Gulf lowlands of southern Veracruz and western Tabasco (Fig. 1.3). There, the broad rivers of the Papaloapan, Coatzacoalcos, Tonalá, and Mezcalapa-Grijalva systems meander across the coastal plain, which is broken by the low volcanic massif of the Tuxtla Mountains. The four major sites of Tres Zapotes, Laguna de los Cerros, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, and La Venta form a rough semicircle running from west to east from the Papaloapan to the Tonalá drainage, and hundreds of smaller sites dot the coastal plain and mountain slopes between them.

Archaeologists have labeled this region the “Olmec heartland” and the “Olmec Metropolitan Zone.” These terms recognize the southern Gulf lowlands as the homeland of the Olmecs, but they also controversially cast the rest of Formative period Mesoamerica in the role of an exploited hinterland. The

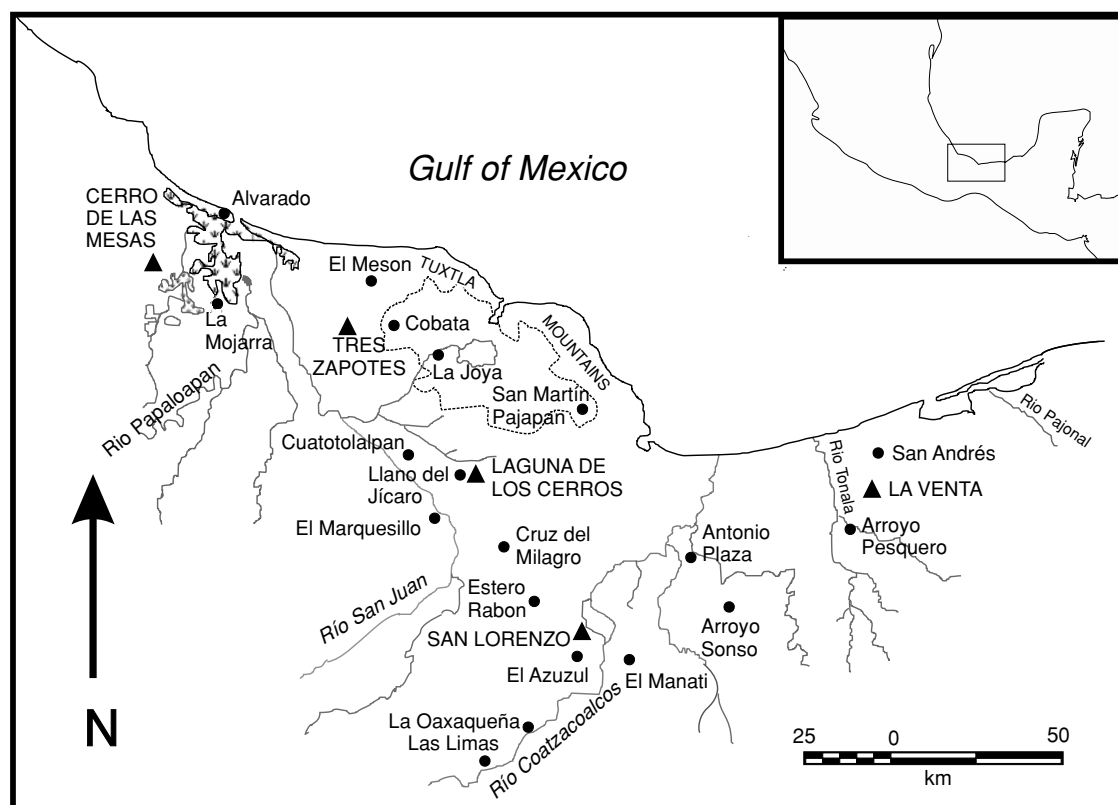


Figure 1.3. Formative period sites of Olman. Triangles indicate major centers.

Aztecs, however, have given us an alternative name that avoids presupposing Olmec dominance. They christened the Gulf lowlands of southern Veracruz and Tabasco *Olman* (or *Uلمان*), meaning “Land of Rubber” in their Nahuatl language, evoking an economically and spiritually important resource as well as the tropical nature of the region (Diehl 1996: 29).

The Aztecs referred to the people who inhabited Olman as the *Olmeca* (also rendered as *Ulmeca*). Modern scholars have adopted the Nahuatl name for the archaeological culture representative of a group of closely interacting societies that flourished in the region more than 18 centuries before the Aztecs forged their empire, as well as for the associated art style, elements of which were shared widely across Mesoamerica between 1400 and 400 B.C.

This book is about Olmec societies as they adapted to the specific challenges and opportunities of Olman and the broader sociopolitical context of Formative Mesoamerica. Throughout the volume I use the terms “society” and “culture” advisedly. By “society” I mean a group of people united in regular interactions by a set of relationships and institutions. These social relationships and institutions include those of kinship, sodality, occupation, rank or class, and political administration. By “culture” I refer to the system of learned

behaviors, beliefs, and ideals shared to a greater or lesser extent by individuals as members of a society and expressed in their art, architecture, and crafts. Admittedly, this common anthropological distinction is more analytical than real. Social (including political and economic) institutions are supported by cultural beliefs and ideals, and individuals and groups within a society vary in the degree to which they share cultural precepts and behaviors.

Like many early complex societies of the Americas, the Olmecs relied upon domesticated crops and animals as well as wild foods they obtained by hunting, fishing, and gathering. With these they provided for their individual needs and produced the surpluses of food that supported the construction of large public works and the emergence of social and political hierarchies that integrated many formerly autonomous communities. As all societies must, the Olmecs adapted their subsistence practices and social institutions to the specific challenges, resources, and opportunities afforded by their land's ecology and geographical setting.

The linguistic affiliation of these people remains a matter of debate, with some arguing they spoke a Mayan language. The evidence of later inscriptions and studies of loan words into other Mesoamerican languages, however, suggest the Olmecs spoke an ancestor of the Mije-Sokean languages still spoken in parts of the southern Gulf lowlands and adjacent regions parts of Chiapas and Oaxaca (Campbell and Kaufman 1976; Justeson and Kaufman 1993, 1997).

CHRONOLOGY

A handful of scattered archaeological sites and skeletal remains suggest that humans may have entered Middle America between 35,000 and 14,000 years ago, initiating the Paleoindian period. Around 8000 B.C., the advent of modern climates and the extinction of many Pleistocene species caused hunter-gatherers throughout the Americas to adopt new adaptations and technologies that characterize the Archaic period. The remaining pre-conquest history of the developing culture area of Mesoamerica is roughly divided into the Preclassic or Formative period (ca. 2000 B.C. – A.D. 300), the Classic period, (ca. A.D. 300–900), and the Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 900–1521), although the precise divisions between these periods vary from region to region (all dates are in calendar years as opposed to uncalibrated radiocarbon years)¹ (Fig. 1.4). The Olmec culture flourished during the Early Formative period and the Middle Formative period (ca. 1500–400 B.C.). Subsequently, in the Late Formative period (ca. 400 B.C.–A.D. 100), the Olmec culture evolved into the epi-Olmec culture, continuing and transforming many earlier practices.

One of the persistent difficulties for students of Mesoamerica has been the conflation of chronological periods and developmental stages under the same names. Mesoamerican studies are not unique in this regard, but the problem in this field is particularly acute, because “Mesoamerica” encompassed many

C14. Date	Cal. Date	General Periods	San Lorenzo	Western Tabasco	Tres Zapotes	Central Tuxtlas	Soconusco	Oaxaca	Morelos	Basin of Mexico				
200 – 300		Terminal Formative	<i>hiatus</i>	<i>hiatus</i>	Nextepetl	Late Bezuapan	Istapa	Monte Albán IIIa	Terminal Formative	Miccaotli				
50 – 100												Tzacualli		
50 – 100	A.D.	Late Formative	Remplás	<i>hiatus</i>	Hueyapan	Early Bezuapan	Hato	Monte Albán II	Late Formative	Patlachique				
150 – 200	B.C.													Ticomán
200 – 300							<i>hiatus</i>						Monte Albán I	
400 – 400		Middle Formative	Palangana	Late Franco	Tres Zapotes	Gordita	Francesa		Late Cantera	Zacatenco				
500														
550 – 600							Early Franco				Escalón	Rosario	Early Cantera	
700							Late Puente							
650 – 800				<i>hiatus</i>										
800 – 900			Nacaste	Early Puente										
900 – 1000		Early Formative	San Lorenzo	Palacios	Arroyo	Coyame								
950 – 1100										Jocotal				
1050 – 1200											San José			
1200 – 1300										Cuadros		Late Amate	Ayotla	
1150 – 1400			Chicharras	Molina										
1250 – 1300			Bajío			Tulipan	Cherla							
1300 – 1500							Ocos	Tierras Largas	Early Amate	Nevada				
1400 – 1600		Initial Formative	Ojochi	Pellicer	"Ocos"		Locona							
1500 – 1700														
1600 – 1800							Barra	Espiridión						
1700 – 2000														

Figure 1.4. Formative period chronology of Mesoamerica. See note 1 on cultivation and text for discussion of specific sequences.

distinct cultural traditions that experienced different tempos of change during particular spans of their histories. Technically, periods refer to blocks of time, with precise, if somewhat arbitrary, beginning and ending dates. Thus for the southern Maya lowlands we can refer to a Classic period between A.D. 250 and A.D. 900, roughly bracketed by the earliest and latest calendrical dates in the Long Count system inscribed on stone monuments. In contrast, developmental stages are defined by cultural characteristics, such as urbanism, state organization, agriculture, technological innovations, and so on. Of course, it is the aim of most archaeological periodizations to identify when or in what sequence such developments occur. The conflation of periods and stages presents few problems when consideration is confined to a particular region, or when the lack of chronometric dates forces archaeologists to rely on relative chronology, as was the case for most of Mesoamerica before the development of radiocarbon dating. Stages, however, are usually time-transgressive; that is, they begin and end at different points in the history of different regions. When absolute dating methods reveal these differences in timing, then the use of the same terms for periods and stages over an entire culture area such as Mesoamerica can create considerable confusion.

Stage schemes have a long history in Mesoamerican archaeology; Pedro Armillas (1948) introduced such a scheme with similar developments occurring

at different times in different parts of the culture area (Willey and Sabloff 1993: 207). Likewise, the early use of the term “Archaic” (Vaillant 1941) for what is now called the Formative or Preclassic had stage-like implications. Use of the term “Formative” became widespread in the Mesoamerican literature as the result of the evolutionary scheme for the entire New World developed by Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips (1955, 1958), where it indicated the “village agricultural threshold and/or sedentary life” (Willey and Sabloff 1993: 207). For those who are uncomfortable with the evolutionary implications of the term “Formative,” “Preclassic” exists as an alternative, but Preclassic is still identified by the same set of cultural traits, particularly the appearance of pottery. The compromise has been to use Formative and Preclassic interchangeably, to refer to them as a period, and to recognize that the period begins and ends at different times in different parts of Mesoamerica.

An additional complication is that, historically, some authors who used the term Formative in their writing divided the period between 2000 B.C. and A.D. 300 differently from those who used the term “Preclassic” (Grove 1981a: 374). The “Middle Preclassic” was usually defined as corresponding to the period of Olmec culture between about 1500 and 400 or 500 B.C. The “Middle Formative,” however, typically referred to the time span between about 1000 and 500 B.C., which accords better with cultural changes widespread throughout Mesoamerica (Grove 1981a: 374). I follow Grove’s suggestion and use “Formative period” to reflect the way the period is subdivided in this book.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE FORMATIVE PERIOD

The Formative period saw the most fundamental changes in the prehispanic history of Middle America. Before 2000 B.C., most inhabitants of the region lived in small, seasonally mobile, hunting-gathering bands; by A.D. 300, large urban centers were common features of the landscape. This remarkable transformation occurred through a complex set of interrelated processes. Over the preceding five millennia, small hunting-gathering bands had gradually become less mobile, staying in larger base camps for longer periods of the year. In many highland valleys of Mexico this was made possible through greater use of storage facilities and an increasing reliance on domesticated crops. In a few favored locales, such as along the estuaries on the Pacific coast of Chiapas, abundant wild resources made year-round occupation possible without cultivating domestic plants. In the Initial Formative period (2000–1500 B.C.) (see Evans 2004), the processes of domestication and sedentarization combined to foster the spread of settled farming villages over much of the area that was becoming Mesoamerica.

Significant changes in technology accompanied the transition to the Formative period, the most ubiquitous of which was the creation of pottery vessels.

Pottery appears between 1900 and 1750 B.C. on the Pacific coast of Chiapas, in the valleys of highland Mexico, and on the Gulf coast of northern Veracruz (Clark and Cheetham 2002; Clark and Gosser 1995), expanding over the rest of Mesoamerica after 1750 B.C. Differences in form and amount of decoration among these early ceramic complexes suggest that the initial functions of pottery differed regionally, with more utilitarian uses favored in the highlands and forms of social display emphasized in some lowland complexes (Clark and Gosser 1995: 216–217). After about 1400 B.C., widespread sharing of ceramic motifs and long-distance exchange of obsidian, shell, serpentine, jade, and artifacts shaped from iron ore indicate increasingly intensive interaction among different regions in Mesoamerica.

Over the course of the Initial and Early Formative periods, ranked social statuses emerged in several Mesoamerican regions. In the Mazatán region on the Pacific coast of Chiapas, settlement patterns during the Locona phase indicate a two-tiered settlement hierarchy of small centers and villages (Clark and Blake 1994). At the largest site, Paso de la Amada, a large rectangular structure with rounded ends was built, measuring 21 m by 10 m. Different authors disagree as to whether this apsidal structure constituted public architecture (Marcus and Flannery 1996: 90) or served primarily as the residence of a high-ranking household (Clark 1994b: 339–362; Love 1999: 362).

In the Valley of Oaxaca, during the Tierras Largas phase (ca. 1650–1400 B.C.) small public buildings were constructed by egalitarian village inhabitants. These buildings had plastered walls and plastered floors set into low platforms of crushed rock, in contrast to the dirt floors and unplastered walls of residences (Flannery and Marcus 1994: 31–33). Other distinctive features included a central pit filled with powdered lime and a low step or altar at the center of the back wall. Rank society (*sensu* Fried 1967: 110) appears to have emerged in the succeeding San José phase (ca. 1400–1000 B.C.) (Marcus 1999). A two-tiered settlement hierarchy was established in the northwestern ETL arm of the valley, as San José Mogote expanded to a 70 ha center (Blanton et al. 1993: 60). San José Mogote also boasted a large nondomestic structure built in several tiers of stone and adobe, on which were placed stone carvings of a jaguar head and a raptorial bird (Blanton et al. 1993: 60). Social differentiation also is evident in the varying sizes of residential buildings, differences in their associated artifact assemblages, and in contrasting amounts and quality of grave goods (Blanton et al. 1993: 61). Horizontal social distinctions are suggested by differential distributions of ceramic motifs that may reflect the kin-based division of San José Mogote into residential wards.

Similar developments are seen after 1450 B.C. in the Valley of Mexico (Niederberger 2000). In the Ayotla phase (1450–1000 B.C.), Tlapacoya, Tlatilco, and Coapexco served as regional centers. Grave goods in burials at these sites also suggest the emergence of ranked social statuses and the use of specific pottery styles to distinguish kin and residence groups (Tolstoy 1989a).

None of these developments was uniform throughout Early Formative Mesoamerica. Differing degrees of reliance on domesticated crops, sedentism, and social complexity are all documented in diverse areas. In particular, hierarchical social differentiation is not strongly marked in most of the Maya lowlands until after 400 B.C., and even later in the northwestern and north-eastern frontiers of Mesoamerica.

OLMEC CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Among the Early and Middle Formative cultures of Mesoamerica, the Olmecs of the Gulf Coast are exceptional in several respects. Their most obvious accomplishments were in monumental stone sculpture. Although stone sculptures appear at least as early on the Pacific slope of Guatemala, at sites such as Takalik Abaj² and Monte Alto, no other contemporaneous culture matches the Olmecs for the sophistication, size, and number of their stone monuments. Indeed, it is precisely the concentration of Olmec-style monuments in southern Veracruz and Tabasco that most clearly distinguishes Olman as a cultural region (Grove 1997: 51–53). Although Olmec sculptors expressed several themes, and sculptural styles do vary in time and space throughout Olman, consistencies in representation, subject, and symbolic expression define a coherent Olmec sculptural tradition spanning the period from 1400 to 400 B.C. These include a focus on humans and composite supernatural beings depicted with harmonious flowing lines and swelling volumes and a standard set of symbols representing cosmological concepts and natural forces.

One of the prominent themes in Olmec sculpture is rulership. The distinctive colossal heads are believed to be portraits of rulers, who also appear carved in the round in niches on the fronts of massive table-top thrones and in low relief on later stelae. The largest of these sculptures weigh up to 40 tons and the stones were transported as much as 90 km from their sources across swamps and rivers. The sheer labor requirements involved in these operations attest to the exceptional power of the rulers who commissioned them (Clark 1997: 218–219; Drucker 1981: 32–33). At San Lorenzo, elites also used basalt for carved columns, drains, and other embellishments in large houses, the earthen walls and floors of which were colored red with hematite-stained sand (Cyphers 1997a, 1997e, 1997f). Graves of the elite from the Early Formative period have not yet been recovered from Olman, but the later tombs of individuals buried in a ceremonial precinct at La Venta are the most elaborate discovered for the Middle Formative period in Mesoamerica.

The Olmecs also participated to an unusual degree in the exchange of prestige goods. Literally tons of iron ore in the form of perforated iron cubes and polished mirrors were imported from Chiapas and Oaxaca to San Lorenzo (Agrinnier 1984; Coe and Diehl 1980a; Cyphers and DiCastro 1996; Pires-Ferreira 1976b), and iron ore mirrors later were interred with high-ranking