Around 1860, a workman in a field in southeastern Mexico uncovered a giant stone head. It was the first archaeological evidence of the Olmec civilization. The Olmec flourished between 1200 and 400 B.C. and are considered the first complex society in the Americas. Since the 1800s archaeologists have uncovered many Olmec artifacts, including basalt heads, stone monuments, and jade carvings, at a variety of sites along the Gulf coast region in southern Mexico. This excerpt from a *National Geographic* article describes some of the recent findings as well as past discoveries about the Olmec civilization.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Clarifying**

According to archaeologists, what do the giant carvings of heads, people, and jaguars indicate about the Olmec people?

It began innocently enough. In 1987 some villagers in southern Mexico started to dig a fishpond at El Manatí, beside the ancient springs at the foot of a small hill. But the villagers didn’t dig for long, for strange things emerged from the sticky, gray muck: clusters of brilliantly polished stone axheads, human bones, rubber balls, and, strangest of all, large busts with long, impassive faces, made from wood and painted red and black.

These surprisingly well-preserved artifacts belonged to the Olmec, a culture that flourished along Mexico’s Gulf Coast between 1200 and 400 B.C., roughly the period between the Trojan War and the Golden Age of Athens.

The Olmec world holds a special place in the sweep of cultures that rose and fell in the New World before the arrival of Europeans. Because of their early achievements in art, politics, religion, and economics, the Olmec stand for many as a kind of “mother culture” to all the civilizations that came after, including the Maya and the Aztec.

The diggers at El Manatí had stumbled upon an aspect of Olmec art that was previously unknown. Archaeologists Ponciano Ortiz with Mexico’s University of Veracruz and Carmen Rodriguez of the National Institute of Anthropology and History believe the site was a place of pilgrimage—a natural shrine devoted to the hill and to water, features often considered sacred by early American cultures.

When Ponciano sent word of the new discoveries, I was tantalized. I knew well that the Olmec had carved huge monuments of stone but no wooden objects had
ever been uncovered in situ.\(^1\) And the busts were said to be 3,000 years old, among the oldest wooden artifacts yet found in Mesoamerica.

I arrived at the camp in the sodden heat of the Veracruz lowlands. Ponciano showed me one of the busts preserved in a tub of clear water. As I gazed down at the face, I recognized the slanted eyes, thick lips, and pear-shaped head characteristic of the Olmec style. “Perhaps the busts represent sacrificial offerings,” Ponciano told me. “Or they may portray the Olmec elite or their deified ancestors.”

Whatever they represent, we know that Olmec worshipers came to this spot and placed wooden sculptures and other treasures. For 3,000 years their gifts lay undisturbed, buried in layers of mud.

From such clues gathered over the past half century, archaeologists and art historians had drawn the broad outline of the Olmec, a people who seemed as inscrutable as the wooden faces found in the mud. But within the past decade scientists have begun to sketch in more of the details of a complex society that invented its own cosmology, engaged in ritual sacrifice, and played a ceremonial ball game—all characteristics of the great civilizations that came much later. . . .

It was the discovery of . . . basalt sculptures at Tres Zapotes that brought the Olmec to world attention. Around 1860, according to the sketchy account that survives, a workman clearing a field happened upon what he later described as “the bottom of a huge inverted iron kettle” protruding from the ground. Curious villagers soon unearthed a bizarre object: a stone head almost five feet high, estimated to weigh eight tons. The face was expressionless, with thick lips, a flat nose, and staring eyes. The top was carved with a headdress resembling a modern football helmet, which some experts believe may have been worn for protection during ritual ball games.

Intrigued by the fantastic head and other unusual sculptures from the same area, archaeologist Matthew W. Stirling of the Smithsonian Institution visited Tres Zapotes in 1938 and counted 50 earthen mounds, revealing the immensity of the site. Soon after, under the joint auspices of the Smithsonian and the National Geographic Society, Stirling led a series of expeditions into the Gulf Coast hinterland.

Over the next 16 years Stirling and his colleagues excavated at Tres Zapotes, La Venta, San Lorenzo, and other Olmec sites. By the mid-1950s they had wrested evidence of a remarkable culture from the swamps and uplands. They suggested that the Olmec represented the earliest civilization in the region that archaeologists call Mesoamerica, which stretches from central Mexico to the Pacific shores of El Salvador. Stirling, now revered as the “father of Olmec archaeology,” argued that his finds dated back to earlier times than most other experts believed. By the late 1950s radiocarbon dates from La Venta proved him right. The site had flourished between about 800 and 400 B.C.—centuries before the flowering of Teotihuacan and other great urban civilizations of Mesoamerica. . . .

1. *in situ*: in its original place
Matt Stirling had put San Lorenzo on the archaeological map in the 1940s, when he excavated five colossal heads and other monumental sculptures on the plateau summit and in the deep ravines along its edges. Twenty years later, archaeologists Michael Coe and Richard Diehl spent the better part of three dry seasons excavating at the huge site.

From analysis of ceramics and other material discovered in layer after layer of excavations, Coe and Diehl traced the settlement’s gradual progression from a hamlet of corn farmers to an important political and religious center. They also proved that San Lorenzo flourished between about 1200 and 900 B.C., making it the earliest of the large Olmec centers found so far. “Something happened at San Lorenzo around 950 B.C.,” says Diehl. “The pottery changed after that, and monuments were deliberately mutilated and buried. They were placed in a line and covered with soil.” Coe, for one, believes the monuments were destroyed by outside invaders. But David Grove and other scholars offer a different hypothesis: Many of the monuments were ritually destroyed at the death of the ruler they celebrated.

In 1987 Atanacio Vasconcelos was cutting grass in these hills when his machete clanged on a buried stone, and, this being Olmec country, he and his friends checked it out. When they finished digging, three more basalt carvings had joined the inventory of Olmec sculpture—two exquisitely carved identical human figures found facing a four-foot-tall jaguar.

These splendid sculptures were the first Olmec pieces I had ever seen in the actual spot where they were discovered. Each of the human statues sat cross-legged, leaning forward slightly, gazing straight ahead. I sat in front of them and stared back. Their features seemed almost alive, even after the passage of 3,000 years. Clad in large, flat headdresses with flowing trainlike affairs sweeping down their backs, both wore rectangular chest ornaments, perhaps representing mirrors and, most remarkable of all, each had apparently been damaged in precisely the same way—by chipping off identical parts of the headdresses. It looked intentional, perhaps part of an inscrutable ritual.

When I first saw La Venta some 25 years ago, it lay in the grip of a newly constructed oil refinery complete with a town that grew on the spot to house the workers. Despite the encroachment, I vividly recall the impressive symmetry of the layout, for I looked down on the settlement as privileged Olmec nobles must have—from the summit of the principal mound, a stupendous heap of earth more than a hundred feet tall.

During La Venta’s florescence, between about 800 and 500 B.C., this mound may have stood as the largest pyramid in all Mesoamerica. The mounds below, probably platforms for long-vanished buildings, lie in near-perfect symmetry along an axis eight degrees west of true north, an orientation that marks other Olmec sites. Among these mounds the citizens of La Venta built an awesome assortment of sculptures, thrones, and row upon row of monumental basalt columns. Then,
as if to guard the town, they placed three colossal heads in front of the main mound.

In the 1950s excavators discovered burials and dozens of spectacular offerings deep beneath La Venta’s surface. Some were jade figures and ornaments, arranged much like the offerings at El Manati.

By dating layers of earth at La Venta, archaeologists deduced that the Olmec here had a penchant for burying their monumental works of art almost immediately after completing them. In one offering pit they put together great mosaics of supernatural faces from slabs of serpentine; another pit held an estimated thousand tons of special stone, brought in from the Pacific coast and laid 28 layers thick, then buried with layers of exotic orange, red, and purple clays brought to the site just for the occasion.

Although the sculptures of La Venta long outlasted the living town—for reasons yet unknown the place was abandoned by about 400 B.C.—none of them are left at the site. In the late 1960s, when oil construction threatened La Venta, they were moved by truck to a park specially made for them in Villahermosa, state capital of Tabasco, 50 miles east. Whenever I’m near Villahermosa, I go out of my way just to visit the park, a little oasis in the middle of a boomtown. I love to walk down its wide gravel trails as they wind past aviaries, crocodile pools, and shady clearings until I come face to face with my favorite Olmec image.

Prosaically labeled “cabeza colosal no. 1”—colossal head number 1—it was found in 1925, buried up to its eyes near the base of the great mound at La Venta. Now, retrieved and revered anew, it stares sightlessly with a certain air that seems to me to verge on smugness, perhaps because it has survived a span of time that began long before the Parthenon rose on the heights above Athens.

For many the colossal stone heads remain the most readily recognizable hallmark of the ancient Olmec. So far, 16 complete heads have come to light in the Olmec heartland. These range in size from five to eleven feet high.

For Beatriz de la Fuente, an Olmec scholar at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the different headdress motifs—from jaguar themes to what may be ball-game helmets—indicate that the stone heads represent individual rulers of the sites where they were placed. If so, they mark the earliest recognizable political portraiture known from the Americas.

A “strange melancholy” pervades much of Olmec art, according to Yale University’s Michael Coe. Polished jade figurines often depict sexless, almost infantile forms with cleft heads and fanged snarling mouths. Others depict jaguars—a key Mesoamerican symbol for cosmic and political power—or curious composite beings, part jaguar, part human.

“You can almost call the Olmec the people of the jaguar,” says Peter Furst, an anthropologist at the University Museum in Philadelphia. “In tropical America, jaguars were the shamans of the animal world, the alter ego of the shaman. They are the most powerful predators. That’s why in Olmec art you get these combinations of jaguars and humans.”
The archaeological record is nearly silent on what happened in the Olmec heartland in the centuries following the demise of La Venta. But in 1986 an important clue emerged from the waters of the Acula River, near La Mojarra, a small ranching settlement northwest of San Lorenzo. According to locals, some men were placing log pilings for a boat dock on the east bank when one of them slipped and stepped on a large smooth stone about six feet underwater. It was a four-ton slab of basalt, a monument, or stela, about eight feet high and five feet wide.

When I first heard of the monument, I couldn’t believe something rumored to be so big and beautiful really existed. As soon as I could, I went to the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa to see it. Inside, Fernando Winfield Capitaine, then director of the museum, took me to a basement storeroom where he removed a protective tarpaulin from the stela. I took a deep breath.

Before me stood a man in resplendent garb. Over his upper body he wore a shirt of what looked like overlapping feathers and a gigantic chest ornament depicting the profile of a god draped with oblong mirrors. His towering headdress was dominated by a huge profile with a curved beak or snout and laden with smaller profiles and other icons, including a pointed, serrated object and a procession of small fish.

At first I couldn’t see the hieroglyphs very well but soon realized that the stone was covered with glyphs, hundreds of them. Incised above and beside the figure were 21 glyph columns, one of the longest texts ever found in Mesoamerica.

I had seen stelae from all over Middle America, and I knew immediately that this one was special. Even as I ran my hand over the relief carving and moved my flashlight to reveal its details, I had the feeling that the La Mojarra stela would rank as one of the most important single stones ever found in Mesoamerica.

Fernando had already recognized its significance. For the next ten hours he helped me inspect and photograph the stela for the drawing I planned.

I realized that the inscription included two dates in the Long Count system, a calendrical notation used later by the Maya to give the number of days elapsed since a base date. From what we know, the two main dates on the La Mojarra monument correspond to May 21, a.d. 143, and July 13, 156.

Because of these dates, the elaborate costume that anticipates later Maya depictions of rulers, and the location of the find, I knew we were looking at a piece suspended in time between the Olmec and later cultures. But no one could read the story it told until two scholars deciphered more than half the glyphs this year, after two years of painstaking detective work.

For Terrence Kaufman, a linguist at the University of Pittsburgh, and John Justeson, an anthropologist at the State University of New York at Albany, deciphering the La Mojarra stela was one of the biggest intellectual challenges they had ever faced. “It was a puzzle,” says Justeson. “They were literally spelling things out on the monument, and you had to use your wits to find clues to both the meaning and the grammar.”

5

World History: Patterns of Interaction © McDougal Littell Inc.
By comparing an ancestral form of local Indian language with the patterns on the tablet, the researchers put together a partial syllabary. It was like using Italian and Spanish to reconstruct Latin. Terry and John also realized that the hieroglyphs had some of the characteristics of later Maya writing, providing some small clues to the translation. . . . They could guess at what the La Mojarra text said, but their final reading could only be confirmed by using another text for comparison, one in the same language and from the same era.

Enter the Tuxtla Statuette, an almost comical figurine of polished green nephrite that looks like a man dressed as a duck. John and Terry turned to the statuette while they were struggling with the La Mojarra text. Identical syllables and words appeared on both artifacts. When the scholars’ translations of words on the stela worked for the same symbols on the statuette, they knew they had broken the code.

What John and Terry discovered was that the La Mojarra stela was used as a kind of political poster, for it records the exploits of a warrior-king named Harvest Mountain Lord. It tells of his accession to the throne and the rituals of sacrifice that celebrated each new rise in power. The story ends with the king crushing a coup led by his brother-in-law.

But the most important information gleaned from the La Mojarra carving is the language in which the text is written, perhaps a direct descendant of the language the Olmec spoke. “The language that we found in the text is Zoquean, an early ancestor of four languages spoken today in Veracruz, Tabasco, Oaxaca, and Chiapas,” according to John. “We may well have discovered the linguistic identity of the Olmec themselves.”

As investigators of the Olmec now realize, the stories of San Lorenzo, La Venta, and other centers form only a part of a grander one, and for it we must expand the scope of inquiry to a much wider area of Mesoamerica where other discoveries are causing us to reconsider the way we define the Olmec civilization.

Source: Excerpt from “New Light on the Olmec” by George E. Stuart, in National Geographic, November 1993, pp. 88–104. Used by permission of National Geographic Society.
THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER
The artwork suggests an advanced civilization. Scholars propose that the stone heads represented individual Olmec rulers of a particular area. Statues of jaguars probably represented power, for the jaguar was one of the most powerful creatures in Olmec mythology. The carvings probably held political and ritual significance for those who gazed upon them.