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## **Olmec Culture: Textbook for Russian Universities**



**Research Year:** 2005

**Culture:** Olmec

**Chronology:** Pre-Classic

**Location:** Gulf Coast, México

**Sites:** San Lorenzo, La Venta, Tres Zapotes, Las Bocas, Chalcatzingo, Cerro de las Mesas, Potrero Nuevo, et al.

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### **Abstract**

The principle goal of the project was publication of the special textbook devoted to the Olmec culture and its place in the cultural sequence in ancient Mesoamerica. This would be the first book of such kind in Russia. We saw our task in preparing the

textbook on the first Mesoamerican culture with a helpful list of literature, lots of pictures and photos from old and recent publications, for a wide range of students in humanities.

## Resumen

El objetivo de este proyecto es la publicación de un libro de texto especial dedicado a la cultura olmeca y su lugar en la secuencia cultural en Mesoamérica antigua. Este será el primer libro de tal tipo en Rusia. Nuestra tarea en la preparación del libro de texto sobre la primera cultura mesoamericana consiste en aprovechar la literatura, así como incluir muchos cuadros y fotos de publicaciones viejas y recientes para la amplia variedad de estudiantes en las humanidades.

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## Results of the Project

According to the time-table of the project, the textbook was written before April, 2005, and it took about four months to finish with the editing, computer design, illustration preparation, and publishing. The English translation of the textbook's title is: Ancient Olmecs: History and Problems of Investigations. In the very end of August, 2005, the book was published in the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Novosibirsk (500 books). The volume of the textbook is 144 pages, including 161 pictures, drawings, maps, and photos. Most of the pictures were adapted to Russian version from foreign publications, along with the big number of drawings made from the original photos (see [Attachments 1–3](#)). Textbook includes the foreword written by such distinguished expert in Olmec archaeology as Dr. Michael D. Coe (Yale University, U.S.A.); two parts ("From the History of Olmec Researches" and "Olman – The Country of Olmecs"); special topics on the various cultural traits of Mesoamerica (jade, pottery, obsidian, cult of wild felines, etc.); personalities (M. Stirling, M. Coe); list of literature in Russian, English, German, French, and Spanish for further readings; and a short glossary of terms, names, foundations, museums, and scientific institutions.

The distribution of the textbook was our next task. Since the textbook was out, the author of the project sent it to most of the Russian universities over Russia (from Moscow to Vladivostok), to major libraries, and museums. The book was also sent to more than 40 colleagues in Russia and 25 in other countries (U.S.A., Canada, France, Germany, and Japan). So far most of the comments on the textbook are pretty positive. And, of course, the textbook was presented and gifted to the students in Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University (first year students, 25 books) and Novosibirsk State University (third year students, 15 books) during lecture course on the Pre-Columbian America in September – November, 2005. According to the agreements with these universities, the course on the culture and history of Pre-Columbian America will be taught each year in frames of fall semester. All the students will be provided with the textbooks on Olmec culture.

So, the author of this final report is sure that the main goals of the project were successfully reached – the textbook on Olmec culture was prepared, published, and included into teaching process in a short period. This was the first textbook not only on the Olmec culture, but on the Mesoamerican cultures in whole. The fact that the textbook met with the great interest of students, colleagues, and wide public makes the perspective of further work in this direction really useful.



Figure 1. Textbook Cover.

## **Attachments**

### ***Attachment 1. Textbook's Content***

Ancient Olmecs: History and Problems of Investigations (English translation of textbook title)

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### ***Attachment 2. Epilogue (English translation)***

So far archaeology cannot answer on all the questions about the origin and content of Olmec culture. But its contours and details, hidden in the mist of history, become more and more visible.

Being impressed with the bright art style of new unknown culture, the archaeologists of XXth century called Olmec "Children of Jaguar" or "*People of Jaguar*". Today we know that along with jaguar, Olmec used in their multifaceted art the images of various beasts – land and sea animals, reptiles, birds, and insects. But in any case, the were-jaguar (half-man, half-animal) is the crest of ancient Olmecs, whose culture appeared in the Gulf Coast about 3500 B.P.

As most of the Mesoamerican people of Formative period, Olmecs were the "*People of Maize*". Maize became the base of early agriculture, provided the food along with other plants (manioc, beans, peppers, nuts, etc.), and stimulated the growth of population and settlements that led to the appearance of such centers as San Lorenzo and La Venta. Olmec art is full of maize symbols.

Olmecs lived in frames of unique ecological zone – on the islands and along the banks of multiple rivers, streams, and lagoons. So they could be called "*People of the River*". River brought fertile silt on the maize fields; it was the main way in trade and in the transportation of monuments and colossal heads from the quarries; it provided Olmecs with fish, mollusks, turtles, crocodiles, and water birds; it connected the lands of Olmecs with other regions and with the sea coast.

Olmecs were the "*People of Jade*". None of the cultures in Mesoamerica after Olmecs, including Maya and Aztec, created such outstanding variety of green stone items. Being transported from the sources (hundreds of km) jade and serpentine were turned, with the hands of Olmec, into astonishing examples of stone craft – celts and figurines, masks and diadems, earrings and beads. Jade was the symbol of wealth and power of Olmec elite; jade was the attribute of ceremonies and burial rituals; jade accompanied sacrifices and rich offerings; jade was the central object of trade with neighboring cultures and regions.

It's also possible to call Olmecs "*People of Stone*". Using the Neolithic technique of stone work, they created hundreds (thousands?) of monuments – altar-thrones, stelas, sculptures, and colossal heads. In sculpture form, they recorded the most important events of their history (dynastic marriages, victories in the wars, etc.), mythological ancestors and gods, along with the real personages – rulers and/or priests.

Olmecs were "*People of Travels*". Looking for jade, serpentine, obsidian, magnetite, and other raw materials; they traveled on hundreds and thousands of kilometers on land and on water to the West, South, and North from the Gulf Coast. Trade contacts and marriages linked Olman with many Mesoamerican cultures during several centuries.

Also, it's possible to suggest that Olmecs were "*People of First Script*" in all Pre-Columbian America. One day the investigations of archaeologists and linguists will force the signs on the stelas, altars, masks, celts, figurines, and seals to speak. And that day we will know how called *themselves*, the people of this surprising and enigmatic culture.

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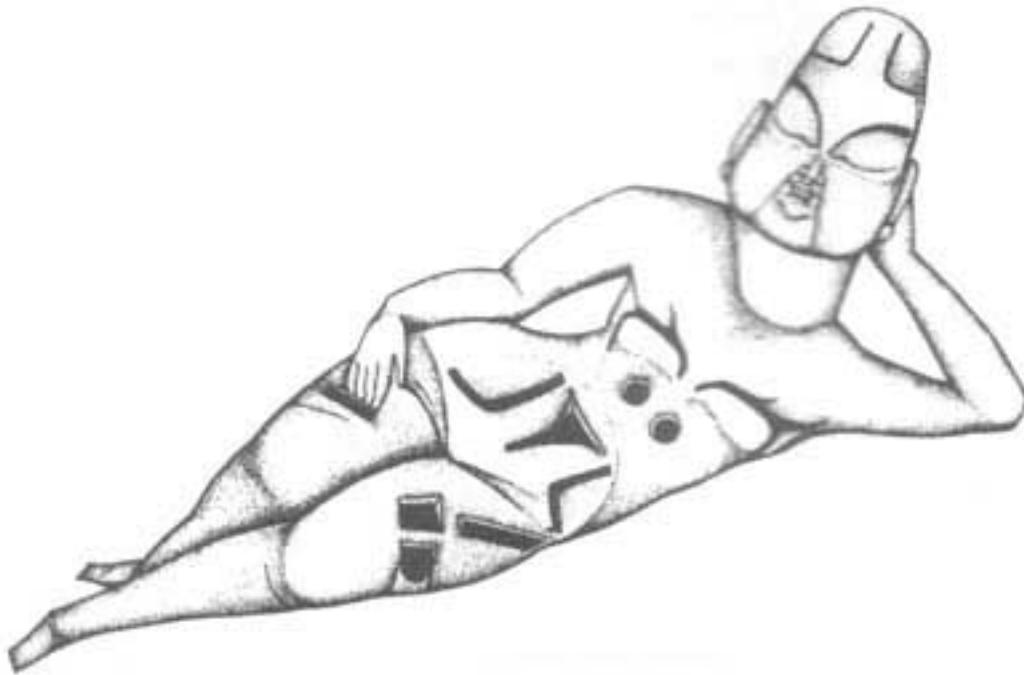
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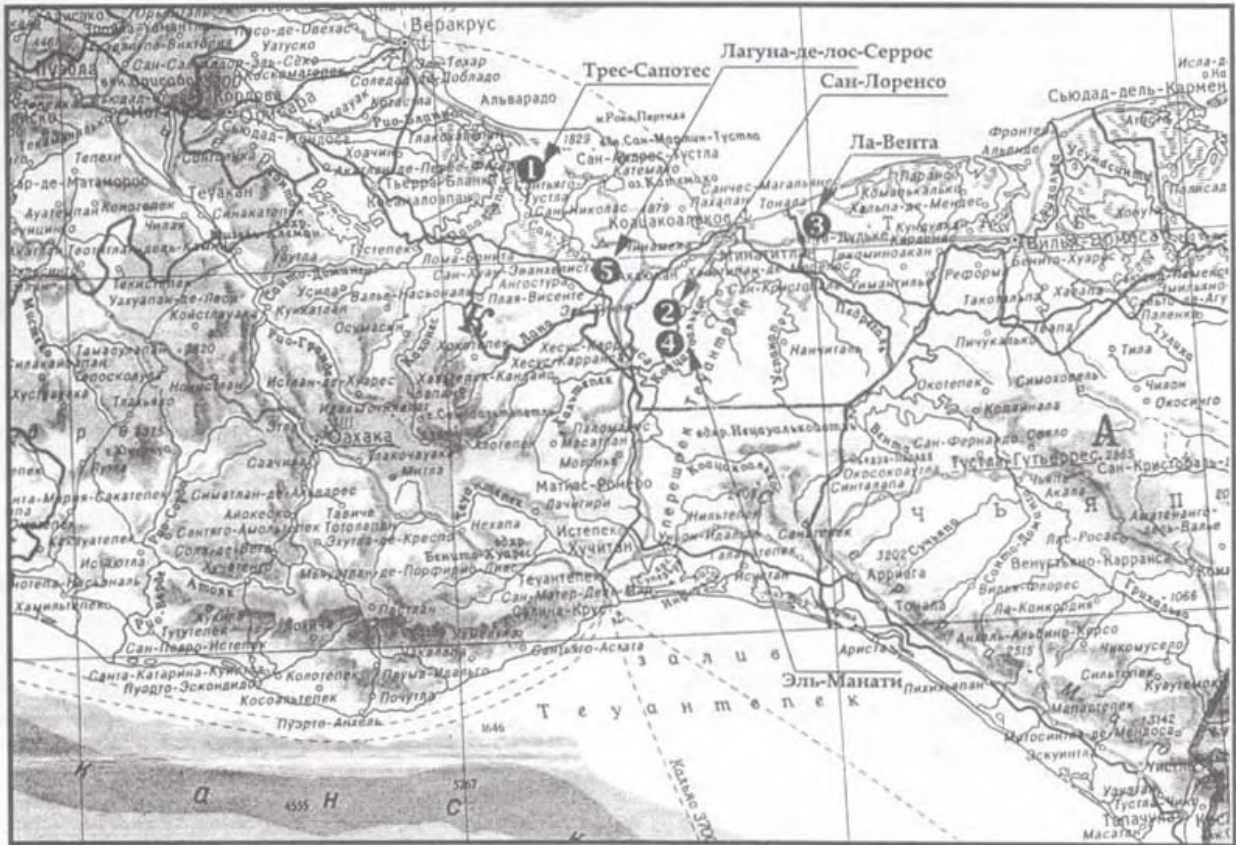


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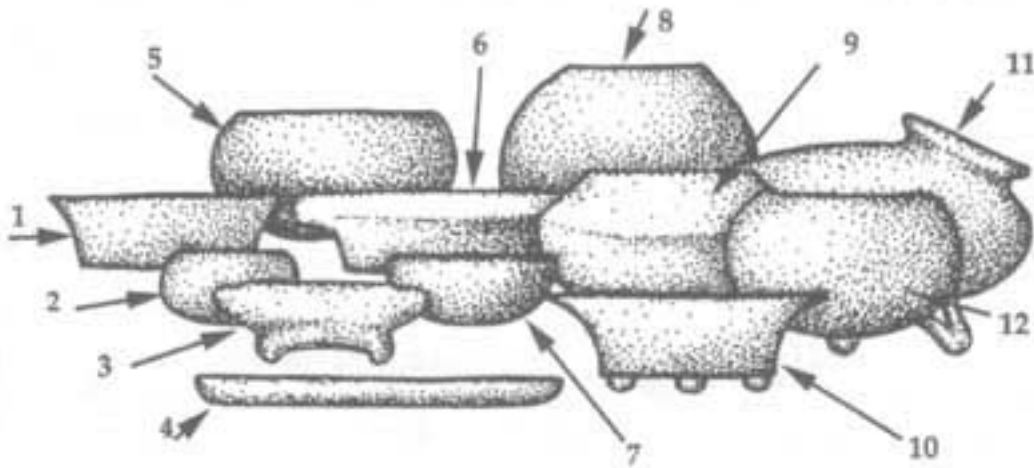


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