

## History of the Olmecs

From c.1400 BCE to c.400 BCE

The Olmecs, often called the mother culture of Mesoamerica, were a culture that arose in the lowlands of Mexico, specifically, the Veracruz and Tabasco regions. This was known as the Olmec Heartland.

However, even though the Olmecs spread out over a comparable small area, their cultural influence was felt over all of Mesoamerica. The Olmecs had the first writing system (even though it hasn't been deciphered yet), calendar, established cities, pyramids, and the popular Mesoamerican ball game. They also had trade routes throughout most of Mesoamerica, which was how they spread their cultural influence throughout the region.



*The Olmec Heartland, with the cities labeled.*

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How-To Brochure

# HOW TO: CARVE AN OLMEC HEAD



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Period 2

## Finding the material

Basalt is an extrusive igneous rock that forms the majority of the sea floor. It contains large amounts of silicon and oxygen and is mostly formed by volcanoes.

Sadly, your best basalt mines are 65 miles away. Oh well, you can always wheel it...or not, since the Olmecs never invented the wheel, as they had no need for it. They also had no domesticated animals, except for the llama and alpaca (which were really down in South America).



*Basalt is formed from the lava in volcanic explosions and forms most of the sea floor.*

## Carving

The most important thing to remember when one is carving one's Olmec head is the features are very distinct.

The Olmec heads had were often called 'N' features (leading to the African theories, see below). These include fleshy cheeks, flat and wide noses and slightly crossed eyes. They all have headdresses.

The basic tools were hammerstones (usually made of basalt and abrasives for fine details.



*A partially carved Olmec head.*

## Final Product – a finished Olmec head



## WHERE TO PLACE YOUR HEAD

Now, you may be wondering- "I've just carved a 40 ton head (and fit took me about 2 years). Where on earth shall I place it?"

Fear not, we have... no idea. This is the object of serious debate but no one really knows.

The flat backs on most of the heads indicate that they would be placed against a wall.

Because of the individual detail that the heads display, it thought that they were based off of living or recently deceased people.

**No one knows who the Olmec heads are based on – probably kings or their gods.**

- People use the Olmec heads as evidence for the fact that the Africans made it to south America
- Because of the head's African American like features
- Of course, the tribes living in this area today have these features.  
-Argument being they would if the Africans had intermarried.

**Heads are found outside of all Olmec cities (all 3 of them) and most towns. So, people think they were a way of honoring the gods/kings or protection.**