

# Olmec

## Practices

There is no surviving direct account of the Olmec's religious beliefs. However, it is theorized that many later Mesoamerican beliefs had their foundation in the Olmec belief system. What we do know is that the Olmec religious activities were performed by a combination of rulers, full-time priests, and shamans. The rulers seem to have been the most important religious figures, with their links to the Olmec deities or supernaturals providing legitimacy for their rule.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally evidence suggest that The Olmec believed in three tiers of existence: the physical realm they inhabited, an underworld and a sky realm, home of most of the gods. Their world was bound together by the four cardinal points and natural boundaries such as rivers, the ocean and mountains. The most important aspect of Olmec life was agriculture.<sup>2</sup>

Burials that have been found seem to be for the elite class. The deceased were often buried with lavish jade objects and mirrors. Jade was used not only because of its material value and its luxurious symbolism, but also its color. The color green being seen as the center of the directional points in many Mesoamerican cultures.<sup>3</sup>

The elite where laid to rest in a special burial mound in the middle of a ceremonial court. The individual was placed in the mound adorned with earrings, beads , and necklaces made of jade. Over the body, a layer of thick cinnabar red putty in the shape of an oval was spread over the body with thirty-seven serpentine and jade celts. This site was then decorated on top with jewels and other decor. However, only traces of human remains have been found. It has been theorized that the Olmecs believed that the human body, itself, and especially that of the ruler, divided itself and represented the three cosmic levels: the celestial or heavenly, the terrestrial, the earth's surface and the watery underworld, reachable through caves and sacred accesses.<sup>4</sup>

## Deities and Important Concepts

- The Jaguar  
Considered the most powerful earthly predator. It navigated well on earth, air and in the water – the three vital divisions of the Olmec world. According to the Olmec religion, in early times, a human woman and a jaguar bred, creating a were-jaguar, or a creature both human and jaguar, who was the ancestor of all Olmecs.

The Jaguar was the most common animal spirit that shamans transformed themselves into.<sup>5</sup>

- Olmec Dragon  
Also called the Earth Monster, the Olmec Dragon has “flaming eyebrows” which are believed to actually be crest feathers of the harpy eagle, a pear-shaped nose, and a forked tongue it was one of the most depicted Gods in the Olmec Religion. Believed to evolve into the Fire God of later civilizations, specifically associate with royal lineage and dynastic succession.<sup>6</sup>
- Man of Crops / Maize God  
Depicted as a man growing corn from his cleft (the cleft is taken as a symbol of divinity) with the

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<sup>1</sup> Olmec Religion. Wikipedia, n.d. Web. 23 June 2013. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olmec\\_religion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olmec_religion)

<sup>2</sup> Minster, Christopher. Olmec Religion – The First Mesoamerican Civilization. About.com, n.d. Web. 23 June 2013. <http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/thehistoryofmexico/a/Olmec-Religion.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Mortuary Rituals In Mesoamerica. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 June 2013. <http://mesoamericablog.wordpress.com/category/olmecs/>

<sup>4</sup> “The Olmecs: A Mesoamerican Wonder.” The Olmecs: A Mesoamerican Wonder. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 June 2013. <http://facweb.stvincent.edu/academics/religiousstu/writings/lavin1.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Olmec Culture. Gale Student Resources, n.d. Web. 24 June 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/mlmbqdn>

<sup>6</sup> “Regional Perspectives on the Olmec.” Google Books. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 June 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/nodf6uy>

snarling face associated with the jaguar. He was also human hero who gave his life so that his people might grow food.<sup>7</sup>

### **Modern Adaptations**

- Speak of the spirit of the Jaguar as guiding the dead to the underworld. Use the idea that the Jaguar, with great power and sureness leads the dead to the underworld, protecting them from all harm.
- Speak of how the body of the deceased can be thought of as residing in three places. Their spirit in the heavenly afterlife, their body given back to the earth, and their memory felt in our tears.
- Bury a Jade cleft to invoke the blessings of the directional points. Speak of how we are placing the deceased in the center of the four points and thus invoking the blessings of the directions.

### **Sample Readings**

The following were found on bricks that had both Mayan and Olmec writing. Additionally, they may speak of a person who felt as though they were dead and needed to make restitution. I include them here because they could be adapted for use in a funeral.

#### ***Translation/Transliteration Olmec Plain Signs***<sup>8</sup>

Thou exist incomplete.  
He is the manifestation of life, a talisman in this proximity.  
Give birth to this [funerary] habitation.

#### ***Translation/Transliteration Olmec Signs inside Mayan Glyphs***<sup>9</sup>

The person of considerable dignity is void of breath.  
[He goes to me the] Jaguar God.  
[He] is no longer alive / or Powerful Righteousness!  
[His] Place of rest exist here.

### **Resources**

The Gods of the Olmec

[http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/The\\_Olmec/a/The-Gods-Of-The-Olmec.htm](http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/The_Olmec/a/The-Gods-Of-The-Olmec.htm)

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<sup>7</sup> "Olmec Mythology." Olmec Mythology. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 June 2013  
<http://atlantisonline.smfforfree2.com/index.php?topic=1467.0;wap2>

<sup>8</sup> "Bilingual Mayan-Olmec Text." Bilingual Mayan-Olmec Text. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 June 2013.  
<http://saturniancosmology.org/files/winters/bilingomy.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.