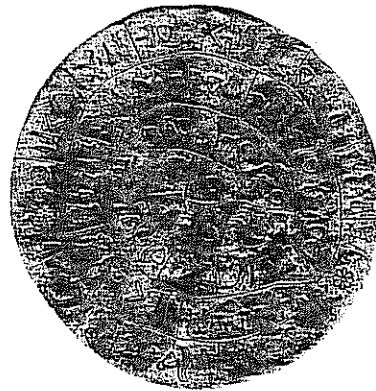


Richard A. Diehl

The Seventy Great Mysteries of the Ancient World

UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF PAST CIVILIZATIONS



RICHARD A. DIEHL

Were the Olmecs African?

Time: 1200–900 BC
Location: southeast Mexico

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I was struck with surprise: as a work of art, it [Tres Zapotes Colossal Head 1] is without exaggeration a magnificent sculpture ... but what astonished me was the Ethiopian type represented. I reflected that there had undoubtedly been Negroes in this country, and that this had been in the first epoch of the world.

MELGAR Y SERRANO, 1869

WERE THE OLMECS, creators of ancient Mesoamerica's oldest civilization, migrants from Africa? All the evidence indicates that they were Native Americans descended from Paleo-Indians who entered the Americas from northeast Asia. Furthermore, there is absolutely no evidence to support the suggestion that Africans reached the Americas prior to the voyages of Columbus. Archaeologists have not identified a single African artifact, plant or animal remain, human skeleton, linguistic element, or any other concrete evidence of African presence in Olmec country or elsewhere in the Americas. How then, a reasonable person might ask, did this question ever arise, and why?

Background

While visiting a sugar *hacienda* in southern Mexico's Tuxtla mountains in 1862, José Melgar y Serrano was shown a giant human head carved from basalt uncovered by a worker there several years before. Melgar, an educated man interested in ancient Old World civilizations as well as those of his native land, realized that the sculpture – now known as Tres Zapotes Colossal Head 1 – was a highly unusual find. In later years he speculated on the meaning of the head, and the ethnic identity of the person depicted, in two published articles. The diffusionist ideas that dominated the intellectual climate of the time held that, like their oppressed 19th-century descendants, pre-Columbian Native Americans must have lacked sufficient intelligence or capacity for culture to create large or beautiful works of art. Thus, Melgar assumed that migrants from the Old World must have carved the head and identified the personage as an African, specifically an 'Ethiopian'.

Melgar's head lay almost completely forgotten until 1939 when archaeologist Matthew W. Stirling cleared it once again in the course of his pioneering investigations of Olmec culture. Stirling's investigations at Tres Zapotes, La Venta, Cerro de las Mesas and San Lorenzo brought Olmec culture to the attention of the scholarly world, while his widely read articles in *National Geographic* magazine made the Olmecs a household name.

Subsequent investigations into Olmec culture have recovered hundreds of stone sculptures, including 17 other Colossal Heads. Most modern scholars believe

Matthew W. Stirling making the first scientific observations on the Tres Zapotes colossal head in 1939.





these unusual monuments are portraits of living or recently deceased Olmec rulers. Interestingly, none of the other 17 look particularly 'African' and in fact no professional archaeologist since Melgar's time has ever accepted his ethnic identification of the Tres Zapotes head. How then did the question of African Olmecs emerge as a serious concern in recent times?

The modern myth

In a recent comprehensive examination of the issue, Gabriel Haslip-Viera and his associates trace the history of the idea to the writings of Ivan Van Sertima, particularly his book *They Came Before Columbus* (1976). Van Sertima, who is not an archaeologist, argues that 'Negroid' Africans made numerous voyages to the Americas long before Columbus' voyages and created or at least strongly influenced the earliest civilizations of Mesoamerica and South America. Although no serious scholar accepts these claims, they have become a central foundation myth for the contemporary Afrocentric movement in North America. According to Haslip-Viera, Afrocentric revisionist history argues that 'all the world's early civilizations, including those of ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, India, China, Europe, and the Americas, were created or inspired by racially "black" peoples'.

Van Sertima and other writers cite five basic lines of evidence to support their claims: written documents from various times and places in the Old World; the 'Negroid' features depicted on Olmec Colossal Heads; architectural correspondences between Olmec earth mounds and the stone pyramids of Egypt and Nubia; plants native to one hemisphere found in the other; and the practice of mummification in the Americas. Haslip-Viera and his colleagues examine the evidence for each claim in detail and refute every one of them.

Given the prominent role the Olmecs played in the origins of Mesoamerican civilization, it is not surprising that Afrocentrists have revived the fanciful ideas of a 19th-century savant to bolster their claims. Ironically, they also perpetuate the equally mistaken racist ideas of the same period, ideas that relegated Native Americans to an inferior status incapable of major cultural developments on a par with peoples of the ancient Old World.

Tres Zapotes Colossal Head I: the features may represent a compromise between the minimal removal of stone from the basalt boulder and the need to portray an actual living or recently deceased ruler.