



Valuation of the Character of Olmec State

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Abstract: The remains and relics left by the *Olmec* people show that the *Olmec* people had formed a class state and lived in their own way. However, the agreement on the development level of *Olmec* state has not been reached. Many scholars assert that the state of *Olmec* was an archaic state. However, if we analyse the city remains and relics created by the *Olmec* people again, in compared with the early states existed in the cradles of ancient civilization including *Mesopotamia* and ancient *Egypt*, we can find out some grounds that the state of *Olmec* was a slave state reached onto a certain level emerged from the stage of archaic state.

Keywords: Olmec, San Lorenzo and La Venta, Colossal Head, Mesoamerica

1. Introduction

Architecture originated along with the birth of society and has since developed. As it is created by human beings, it reflects the aspiration and desire of people. In the class society, in particular, it is associated with the demand of the ruling class of the society concerned.

The class character of architecture is defined according to the class interests it reflects and which class it serves. Therefore, we could define the socio-class character of a certain period of time by the structures of the time.

Likewise, the character of the *Olmec* culture in *Central America* can be identified by the remains and relics of the architecture it left behind.

The *Olmec* people inhabited in the tropical lowland in central south Mexico occupied by *Veracruz* and *Tabasco* provinces at present. The main remains showing the life of the *Olmec* people are to be found in *San Lorenzo* and *La Venta*, which were the cultural centres of the people.

In these places were unearthed a *colossal head* sculpture which is likely to have represented the ruler, different kinds of elaborate and luxurious handicraft articles made of jade, a great *pyramid* standing 34m above the naturally flat landscape even after the centuries of erosion [1], a well-polished serpentine block weighting 1,000 tons and large areas of mosaic pavements [1].

But the *Olmec* cities of *San Lorenzo* and *La Venta* were deserted around 900 B.C. and 400 B.C. respectively [2].

Although the reason why the centres of the *Olmec* civilization were abandoned has not been established yet, there is an overwhelming opinion that the demolition is to be ascribed to the excessive increase in the population and the ensuing excessive production activities [3] or to the environmental changes caused by diversions of the local river due to tectonic upheavals or subsidence [2].

The remains and relics of the *Olmec* people in *San Lorenzo* and *La Venta* are the showcase of their social relationship and the level of their civilization, which served as the basis of the cultural progress in Central America.

In this paper, I am going to analyse the nature of *Olmec* state through the remains and relics including *Olmec* architectures again.

2. The Birth of Civilization in Mesoamerica

It is the law-governed historical course of development of human society that a class state is formed through a long period of stage of primitive society. In American continent, too, the ancient civilization is created and developed through the stage of the primitive collective.

The ancient civilization in American continent was born for the first time in Mesoamerica, in other words, central America including the *Gulf of Mexico* and *Yucatan*. Under the influence of this area, ancient civilization came to appear and develop in other various parts of America.

However, any documentary data on the ancient civilization, which had come into being in *Mesoamerica*, has not been found yet. Therefore, we can guess the extent of birth and development of the ancient civilization in this area through the vestiges left by Indians in those days.

The remains and relics of the earliest period showing the birth of class society in *Mesoamerica* are those created by the *Olmec* people.

The leftovers of *Olmec* are indicative of the idea that it was a class society composed of hostile classes. Probably the *Olmec* civilization came from the early farming culture of *Tabasco* that began in the *Coatzacoalcos River* basin between 5,100 B.C. and 4,600B.C. [2]

Historically, the regions with favourable conditions for farming were usually inhabited by people earlier than other places to develop farming culture, and in the course of this the people's creativity grew with the result that the society enlarged in scale and the social wealth increased. The expansive scale of society separated the social administration as a special social function, while the increased social wealth brought about surplus products. This gradually gave rise to political privilege and widening gap between the poor and the rich. The aggravation of the phenomena ended in the division of society in classes. This is a law of social evolution.

Neolithic cultural relics including the remains of *Gungsan* and *Jitab-ri* in *Taedong River* basin, the cultural relics of *Badari* in the *Nile* basin, those of the *Yangshao* in the *Yellow River* basin, shows that class states were established about 2,000 or 3,000 years after the people settled in certain regions and began to farm. And *Olmec* had been engaged in settled farming in *Coatzacoalcos River* basin favourable to farming since about 5,100 to 4,600B.C. Taking these into account, we can fully guess that it is in about 2nd millennium B.C. that the class differentiation occurred in *Olmec*.

Just as it happened in the *Nile*, *Indus*, *Taedong*, *Yellow river* basins and the *Mesopotamian* region, the *Coatzacoalcos River* provided the *Olmec* people with rich water and fertile land for farming.

The findings in the ritual site at the *El Manati Shrine* near *San Lorenzo* hints at the probability that the *Olmec* civilization rose around 1,600-1,500 B.C. [2]

3. The Nature of *Olmec* State

When we compare the relics of *Olmec* with those in the other parts of the world, we can grasp some points which make us conclude that *Olmec* state was a slave state which had reached onto a certain level, already going beyond the stage of an archaic state.

Firstly, the remains and relics in *San Lorenzo* and especially, those in *La Venta* show that *Olmec* had ruling system whose centralistic power was comparatively strong.

Architecture and sculpture are associated with the class character of a given period of time. In other words, their creation depends on the demand and interest of the ruling class of the relevant time. The sculpture and other artworks found in Asia, Africa and Europe were all dedicated to the show of the

ruling class, the monarchs in particular, as they were aimed at demonstrating the ruling class's dignity and eulogizing their "achievements." From this point of view, the *colossal head* sculptures found in the remains in *San Lorenzo* and *La Venta* are thought to be representations of the *Olmec* rulers. And the rare and luxurious handiworks made of jade, obsidian and magnetite must have been used for the luxury life of the ruling class.

What is important is that the scale of above-mentioned relics are large and the materials, which the relics were made of, were carried from remote regions considerably far away from the vestige sites.

Some of the *colossal heads* carved of basalt, a volcano rock, unearthed in the abovementioned cities, are 2.7m tall and weigh more than 40tons each. The *Olmec* people brought the gigantic rocks from a place 97km away. And the source of the expensive jewel of jade used to make a variety of handiwork is found in the *Motagua River* valley in east Guatemala [1], as many as 200km away from *San Lorenzo* that used to be the *Olmec* centre, and the obsidian has been traced to source in Guatemalan plateaus, such as *El Chayal* and *San Martin* in *Puebla* [2]. Moreover, the great *pyramid*, which was the largest structure in Central America in the contemporary time, is regarded as a labour-intensive object that cost enormous workers' toil and moil. The making of such big sculptures and expensive trinkets and the carrying out of such colossal construction projects in the time when they relied on mean implements and had no means of transport worth mentioning are inconceivable apart from an enormous authoritative power.

In ancient Egypt, the *pyramid*, symbol of centralistic rule began to be built in the period of *Old Kingdom*. *Pyramid* in *Olmec* is nearly similar with the *Step Pyramid* in *King Djoser* of *Old kingdom* in its scale. From these facts, *Olmec* may be regarded as a slavery state.

Secondly, the relics of *San Lorenzo* and *La Venta* show that the class antagonism and contradiction in *Olmec* was considerably acute, in other words, the relation of class status was relatively well-developed.

There have been some attempts to ascribe the move of the centre of the *Olmec* culture from *San Lorenzo* to *La Venta* around 900 B.C. to changed natural environment, but it is advisable to see the massive destruction of *San Lorenzo* by the people when identifying the cause of the move.

Study up to now has discovered there was no invasion into *San Lorenzo* from the outside. This makes us conclude that massive destruction of great monuments in *San Lorenzo* was due to the result of class struggle domestic in *Olmec* state.

Oppression and exploitation by the reactionary ruling class bring about resistance from the oppressed and exploited class inevitably. The exploited people in *Olmec* rose against the oppression and exploitation of the reactionary rulers, and, as a result, the monuments in *San Lorenzo* were probably destroyed. The disasters added to this. Finally, it is likely to be that the *San Lorenzo* was deserted and the centre of *Olmec* state was transferred to *La Venta*.

In ancient Egypt, *Middle Kingdom* was also ruined by the

revolt of slaves and the poor in 1,750B.C. Above-mentioned facts show that the relation of slavery class status was considerably developed in *Olmec*.

Thirdly, the ages when the relics of *San Lorenzo* and *La Venta* were made make me guess that *Olmec* was a comparatively developed slave state which went beyond the stage of archaic state.

San Lorenzo was established in ca. 1,600B.C. or 1,500B.C., while *La Venta* became the centre of *Olmec* in ca. 900B.C. As mentioned above, it was universal in the establishment of a state in the cradles of ancient civilization that the class states were established about 3,000years after the settled farming had begun. Similarly, slavery system was established 500 or 1,000years after an early state had been established. Early states were formed in the middle of the 4th millennium. in *Mesopotamia* and ancient *Egypt* and the slavery system was established in the 3rd millennium B.C. Also in ancient China, the slavery system was established about 400 or 500 years after the first state had been formed. Judging from this reality, it is not too much to say that the slavery system was established in *Olmec* founded in ca. 1,600 B.C. or 1,500B.C.

The half of academic world regards *Olmec* as the archaic state.

The primary reason for the argument is that there have not been found any materials which name the rulers and provide the dates of their rule.

But this can hardly be an absolute condition to deny the class character of the *Olmec* society.

There is no literature on the scio-political system of *Olmec*. Therefore, I think we can define her nature in comparison with material, cultural, and economic situation of the other areas.

As mentioned above, the *Olmec* remains retain a lot of relics with manifest indication of its class character, including the *colossal stone head* sculpture representing the ruler. Accordingly, it is unreasonable to deny the class character of the *Olmec* culture simply because there is no material record on the names of the rulers or their rule.

Another reason for the argument is that the *Olmec* community had few criteria of the state civilization like the possession of a standing army or priestly caste.

This argument cannot be an absolutely correct logic to deny the class character of the *Olmec* society. Even for the *Xia dynasty* which is regarded as the first slave-owning state in the *Yellow River* basin, there are no historical findings helpful to succinctly prove there was a standing army. Even today, some nations keep no standing army.

Still another reason why they see the *Olmec* state as the archaic state is that there is no document on *San Lorenzo* and *La Venta*'s control of the central district of *Olmec* as a whole even during its heyday.

For instance, they say *La Venta* had no control of *Arroyo*

Sonso no more than some 35km away and that the population in the *Tuxtla mountain* area some 60km away was in the stage of relatively stable primitive community free from the control of the *Olmec* rulers.

The territories under the sovereignty of a state may not be the only criterion which shows her development level. The remains of *San Lorenzo* were made with the materials brought from remote areas tens of or hundreds of kilometres away from the city. This fact shows that those areas were under the domination of *Olmec*.

4. Conclusion

Above-mentioned analysis indicates that *Olmec* was a slavery state.

So, I can appreciate the state of *Olmec* was a relatively developed slavery state emerged from the archaic state.

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