

◆ Olmec “influence” at San Bartolo

Imagine my surprise when I spotted an Olmec face (mask?) on a figure in the San Bartolo mural! Before the symposium began, I was looking at a section of the mural, a hand-painted reproduction by Heather Hurst which was on display outside the auditorium. This was my first glimpse of what I had only read about.

The Olmec face was totally unexpected at San Bartolo, a Maya site in the heart of the lowlands which we learned reaches back as early as 600 BC. The murals date to approximately 100 BC. Many questions were buzzing in my head. Some were answered in the first presentation, but many more remain.

In the 1950s radiocarbon dating revealed that the Olmec predated the Maya. Subsequent work has pushed the Olmec dates back at least two millennia. This revelation sparked a debate concerning the role of the Olmec that has continued since the 1950s. We generally correlate the Olmec civilization with the Jaredites and the Maya with the Nephites/Lamanites/Mulekites in The Book of Mormon.

John Clark of Brigham Young University discussed the basic debate, whether the Maya civilization derived

from the Olmec or whether the Olmec were not that influential. He presented his research which focused on the evidence of connections between the two cultures. His premise was that historically the Olmec influence and power radiated in all directions and provided heritage for the Maya, including the early beginnings of ceramics, village life, social ranking, the first city, massive terraces, stone monuments, stone sculptures, social stratification, planned architecture, ceremonial centers, earliest ballcourt, and kingship. The reuse of Olmec “heirloom” objects by the Maya, such as Maya carvings on the back of Olmec jade items, however, does not require actual contact. As an example to illustrate the widespread and long-term connection, Clark compared a long list of elements of Olmec burials at La Venta (850-400 BC) with the Maya burial of Pacal at Palenque (died AD 683), which resulted in an 80% match so far. He concluded that the overall evidence supports an Olmec origin for the Maya civilization.

What does this widespread influence mean to us? We have The Book of Mormon as our advantage—a written record of the two groups that tells us they each have a distinct origin. While the Jaredite history covers more than two millennia, it is greatly condensed in the Book of Ether, with the bulk of the

record devoted to the Nephites/Lamanites. Ether, the last Jaredite prophet recorded the final battle and Coriantumr, the last king of the Jaredites, falling “as if he had no life” (Ether 6:106). Coriantumr was discovered by the people of Zarahemla and lived among them for nine “moons” (Omni 1:35-39), giving us the only recorded link we find between the early and later peoples. However, within the record itself there are a number of names among the Nephites/Lamanites that obviously have a Jaredite origin, giving us a hint that there may have been more interaction than first thought. (Also, we shouldn’t forget that there were spans of time when the Jaredite leaders and their families were in captivity, with little or nothing recorded about what was occurring outside this confinement. It is a complex story.)

The mask in the mural at San Bartolo serves to remind us that there is more to the story of the Olmec. But we’re also mindful that while the archaeology record can contribute to a better understanding of the Olmec/Jaredite connection with the later groups, it must be filtered through the written Book of Mormon record. It is an exciting prospect!

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