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 4,600 B.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 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 4,600 B.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 handicrafts 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 1,750 B.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. 1,600 B.C. or 1,500 B.C., while La Venta became the centre of Olmec in ca. 900 B.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 3,000 years after the settled farming had begun. Similarly, slavery system was established 500 or 1,000 years 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 1,500 B.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 socio-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 35 km away and that the population in the Tuxtla mountain area some 60 km 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.

References

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