

Mexico discovery shows Olmecs had greater influence

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By Gunther Hamm

XOCHITEPEC, Mexico (Reuters) - A 2,500-year-old city discovered between a gas station and a housing development near Mexico City has shown the ancient Olmecs wielded deeper influence beyond their homeland than was earlier thought, according to archeologists.

The Olmecs, who lived on or near Mexico's Gulf coast from around 1,200 B.C. to 400 B.C., are considered the mother culture of pre-Hispanic Mexico, including the Maya and Aztec civilizations.

The sophistication of six Olmec-style temples unearthed in April near Xochitepec, 68 miles south of Mexico City, delighted experts.

The Zazacatla complex sits on a vacant lot and is the first site on the central Mexican plateau to feature monumental Olmec architecture and detailed statues.

"We have sculpture like this in the Olmecs' main zone, but never in this area, so it is incredibly important," Giselle Canto, the site's lead archeologist, said on Tuesday. The site's discovery was announced last week.

Major Olmec ruins exist in the Gulf states of Veracruz and Tabasco and in the Pacific state of Guerrero, but the presence of a large Olmec-influenced city in the center of the country suggests a major trading route between the two coasts.

Experts say the city was likely not Olmec but adopted that people's culture and gods as rising local elites tried to distinguish themselves from agrarian counterparts.

The Olmecs used jade and other stones from throughout Mexico to create their famed sculptures of oddly helmeted heads up to 10 feet tall, indicating a wide commercial network.

The ruins, which consist of the bases of six ceremonial temples and two small sculptures of jaguar-like men, were discovered when a neighboring brewery began building a parking lot.

"Thankfully the construction was next to the highway so we could see the destruction. We were going to a museum when we passed by and said, 'What is this?'" Canto said.

Between 50 and 70 percent of the city was likely destroyed by the construction of neighboring housing developments, commercial centers and a highway in recent years, she said.

The ruins sit on the brewery's property and if negotiations to buy the land fail, they will be covered over and the land left vacant.

Excavation director Victor Castro said that much of the archeological work at Zazacatla consists of searching out new areas and declaring them out of bounds for construction.

"We practically have the bulldozers right behind us. We keep excavating but there isn't time for everything," he said.

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