

The Illinois Amistad Commission  
and The DuSable Museum of African American History  
Present:

**African Presence in the Americas before Columbus**



# African Presence in the Americas before Columbus

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**“Africans not only came here (before the Vikings or any other Old World group) but they left an impact upon America’s first major civilization.”**

**– Ivan Van Sertima**

*Did African people come to the Americas (North, South, and Central America) before Columbus’s arrival in 1492? If so, what primary source of evidence do we have of their coming?*

The Olmec civilization is the oldest known civilization in the Americas (North America, South America, Central America, and the islands of the Caribbean). In fact, the Olmec high culture is considered the mother culture of America. The Olmec homeland was in what is today Mexico. The Olmec were known as the “jaguar people,” and they produced a very artistic, religious, and scientific culture. One of the important ceremonial centers for the Olmec was in La Venta, Mexico.

The first evidence of African people interacting with the Olmec civilization comes from a team of archaeologists led by Matthew Stirling, which rediscovered a huge stone head in 1938. The massive head stood eight feet tall, weighed ten tons, and was first uncovered by peasants in Tres Zapotes, Mexico. It was a bodiless head that had on it a peculiar helmet. Stirling wrote in his description of it, “The features are bold and amazingly Negroid in character.” Later excavations at La Venta, right next to the oldest pyramid in America, would turn up even more colossal stone heads, with similar helmets and bearing resemblance to African people.

How did these artifacts amount to evidence of an African presence and influence? Let’s examine the numerous facts below:

- The leading historian in this area, Ivan Van Sertima found that similar colossal, bodiless heads had been found in only one other location in the ancient world: Tanis, the main harbor for seagoing ships of ancient Egypt.
- The phenotype of the stone heads is distinctly African, having full lips, broad noses, and, in some cases, beaded braids found only in Ethiopia at the time.
- The pyramid found at La Venta was, like the pyramids of Egypt and Sudan, set on a precise north–south axis. Axial orientation had never been used in any building in the Americas prior to its appearance in the building of the pyramid at La Venta.
- The La Venta ceremonial platform has both a true pyramid and a step pyramid very reminiscent of the step pyramid of Saqqara, Egypt.
- The pyramids in Mexico utilized the same standard of measurement that was utilized by the mathematicians of ancient Egypt-Sudan.
- The pyramids of America, like those of ancient Egypt, served as a temple/tomb.
- In at least one case, in the city of Teotihuacan, the pyramid served as a celestial observatory, as did its counterpart the Great Pyramid of ancient Egypt.
- Carbon-dating of nine wood charcoal samples taken from the La Venta ceremonial site gave an average date of 814 BCE, plus or minus 134 years.
- For those who would argue that the stone heads of Mexico are not representations of African people but were carved that way for practical reasons, Van Sertima asks, *How would they explain the small clay figurines found buried side-by-side with the stone heads?* The clay figures are distinctly African in skin color, hair, and facial phenotype. The clay figures even wear earplugs, which are adornments native to Africa.
- Alexander Von Wuthenau, the foremost historian on the small clay figures found beside the colossal stone heads of Mexico, says this when describing them: “I challenge any artist to equal the depiction of kinky hair unique to the African race with such minute perfection.”
- Van Sertima states that what clinches the argument for the African presence in early (pre-Columbian) America are the skulls and skeletons of African people that were found on the ancient Olmec site. When the skulls were carefully examined, one of the world’s leading skull experts, the Polish professor Andrej Wiercinski, declared that the skulls evinced “a clear prevalence of the total Negroid pattern.”
- Wiercinski further explained that the skulls found on the Olmec site are of the continental African type, such as is found in West Africa today.

To explain how Africans first came to the Americas, Van Sertima asserts it is most likely that inhabitants of the Nile Valley, mostly men but also some women, were at sea, moving westward down the Mediterranean toward North Africa between the years 948 BCE and 680 BCE, when they were

caught in one of the powerful westward currents that can easily carry a boat to the Olmec homeland. This would explain the Olmec use of the Egyptian double crown, royal artificial beard, and ceremonial parasol, among other things. Van Sertima goes to great lengths to establish that Africans did not build that Olmec civilization, but that they were present and did make significant contributions.

The evidence supporting this thesis is far too extensive to be listed here. Nevertheless, based on what has been found to date, there is a clear need for a new analysis of African people in the history of the Americas. Perhaps this need is described best by the Native American educators quoted below:

***Scholars should work to re-write the official curriculum to include detailed accounts of “the nobility of Black rulers who had their portraits carved in colossal stone monuments on American soil” which underscores “the glorious past of African Lords in Ancient America.”***

– Curry Stephenson Malott, Lisa Waukau, and Lauren Waukau-Villagomez

# Activity One

## Geography

### Part A – The Locations

On the attached map of Central America, students should find the following locations: Mexico, the boundaries of the ancient Olmec homeland, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes.

### Part B – The Route

Using a large classroom map, students should use thumbtacks and red or black yarn to retrace the most probable route the Egyptians/Nubians used to get to the new world.

1. The first tack, with string attached should be placed in Tanis, Egypt.
2. Next, the string should be stretched west, across the Mediterranean Sea, around the hump of North Africa.
3. Tacks can be placed along the way to stabilize the string.
4. The string should stretch across the Atlantic Ocean right to the Gulf of Mexico and the Olmec homeland.

# Activity Two

## A Debate

Students should view the documentary *Secrets of the Ancients: Olmec Heads*. This film can be viewed free online on [YouTube](#) or at [TopDocumentaryFilms.com](#). The film runs for roughly forty-nine minutes. After watching the modern engineers struggle to duplicate the work of the Olmec stone carvers, students should divide into two teams and debate the question: *Did the Olmec stone carvers have technology that modern humans do not have? Yes or no?* Both sides should provide plausible reasons for their stance.

# Activity Three

## Archaeology

### Part A – Archaeology

Much of what we know about the ancient Olmecs and their African contemporaries comes from archaeology. Students should first visit the website <http://archaeology.mrdonn.org/index.html>

Students should then be able to answer the following questions:

1. What is an archaeologist?
2. What is the difference between a fossil and an artifact?
3. How do archaeologists find sites to explore?

As a closing activity for this section, students can also play the archaeological games on the site.

## Part B – Current Archaeological Projects

Students can visit the website <http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/brooklyn/index2.html> to learn about a current archaeological project taking place in Brooklyn, Illinois, the oldest incorporated African American town in the United States.

## Activity Four

### Essay

Students should write an essay exploring the three methods or ways of finding evidence to prove that African people were present in Early America.

### Resources

#### For Teachers

*They Came before Columbus* by Ivan Van Sertima (2003)

“Egypto-Nubian Presences in Ancient Mexico” by Ivan Van Sertima, in *African Presence in Early America*, edited by Ivan Van Sertima

“Unexpected African Faces in Pre-Columbian America” by Alexander Von Wuthunau, in *African Presence in Early America*, edited by Ivan Van Sertima.

“African Influences in Ancient Central America” by Curry Stephenson Malott et al., in *Teaching Native America across Curriculum* by Curry Stephenson Malott et al.

#### For Students

*Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico*, edited by Kathleen Berrin and Virginia Fields

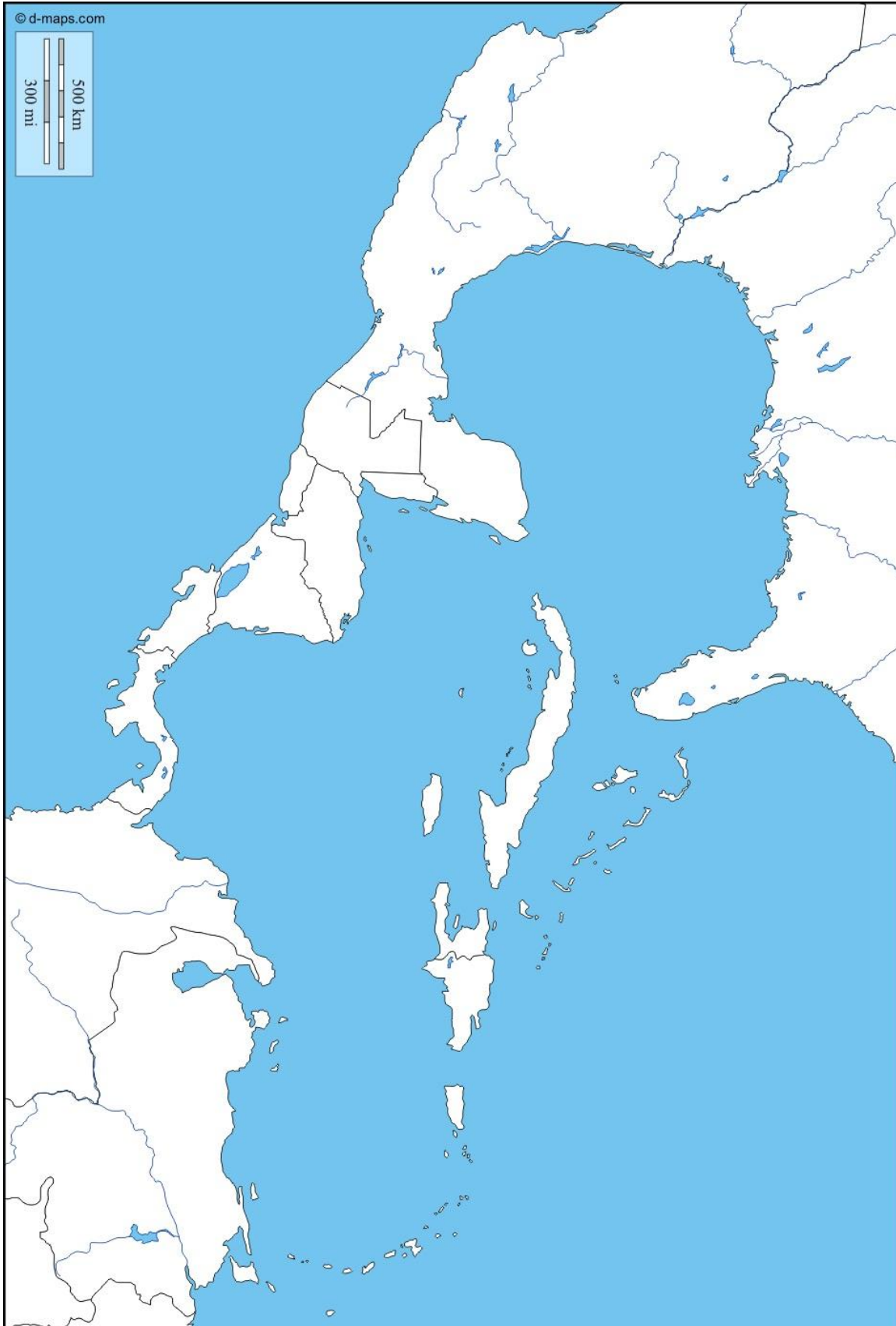
*The Mystery of the Olmecs* by David Hatcher Childress

*Hands-On Archaeology: Real-Life Activities for Kids* by John White, Ph.D.

Thomas and Kosmos Classic Science Archaeology Pyramid (kit)

# Appendix

## Blank Map of Central America



# Lesson Plan

African Presence in the Americas Before Columbus	
Grade Level(s)	Grade 6
Unit and Time Frame	Two 50-minute periods
Common Core State Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RI. 6.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.</li> <li>• CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RI. 6.7: Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.</li> <li>• CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RH. 6-8.9: Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.</li> <li>• CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W. 6.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.</li> <li>• CCSS.ELA-Literacy. SL. 6.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.</li> </ul>
Lesson Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase students' understanding of the African presence in the Americas before Columbus. Students will be able to:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explain how Africans came to the Americas before the Vikings or any other group and left an impact on the first civilization of the Americas.</li> <li>2. State the implications of the work of Matthew Stirling, Alexander Von Wuthenau, and Ivan Van Sertima.</li> <li>3. Identify the location of the Olmec civilization on a map.</li> <li>4. Discuss the important legacies of Olmec society and its influence on other Latin American cultures.</li> <li>5. Discuss the important achievements of Olmec society.</li> <li>6. Identify some of the similarities between the Olmecs and other early societies.</li> <li>7. Identify some of the most important features of the Olmec religion, society, and economy.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
Materials/Resources	<p><b>For Teachers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>They Came before Columbus</i> by Ivan Van Sertima (2003)</li> <li>• "Egypto-Nubian Presences in Ancient Mexico" by Ivan Van Sertima, in <i>African Presence in Early America</i>, edited by Ivan Van Sertima</li> <li>• "Unexpected African Faces in Pre-Columbian America" by Alexander Von Wuthenau, in <i>African Presence in Early America</i>, edited by Ivan Van Sertima</li> <li>• "African Influences in Ancient Central America" by Curry Stephenson Malott et al., in <i>Teaching Native America across Curriculum</i> by Curry Stephenson Malott et al.</li> </ul>



	<p><b>For Students:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico</i>, edited by Kathleen Berrin and Virginia Fields</li> <li>• <i>The Mystery of the Olmecs</i> by David Hatcher Childress</li> <li>• <i>Hands-On Archaeology: Real-Life Activities for Kids</i> by John White, Ph.D.</li> <li>• Thomas and Kosmos Classic Science Archaeology Pyramid (kit)</li> </ul>
<p>Key Terms and Concepts</p>	<p><b>Olmec:</b> an ancient people of the southeastern coast of Mexico who flourished during about 1200–400 BCE.</p> <p><b>archaeology:</b> the scientific study of material remains (such as fossil relics, artifacts, and monuments) of past human life and activities.</p> <p><b>pyramid:</b> an ancient massive structure found especially in Egypt having typically a square ground plan, outside walls in the form of four triangles that meet in a point at the top, and inner sepulchral chambers.</p> <p><b>civilization:</b> a relatively high level of cultural and technological development.</p> <p><b>Christopher Columbus:</b> Italian navigator and explorer who worked for Spain.</p> <p><b>Teotihuacan:</b> an ancient city in South Central Mexico.</p>
<p>Interdisciplinary Connections</p>	<p><b>Geography</b>  <b>Activity One</b>  On the attached map of Central America, students should find the following locations: Mexico, the boundaries of the ancient Olmec homeland, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes.</p> <p><b>Part B –</b> Using a large classroom map, students should use thumbtacks and red or black yarn to retrace the most probable route used by Egyptian/Nubians to get to the new world. The first tack, with yarn attached, should be placed in Tanis, Egypt. Next, the yarn should be stretched west, across the Mediterranean Sea, around the hump of North Africa. Tacks can be placed along the way to stabilize the yarn. The yarn should stretch across the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico and the Olmec homeland.</p> <p><b>Science</b>  <b>Activity Two</b>  <b>A Debate –</b> Students should view the documentary <i>Secrets of the Ancients: Olmec Heads</i>. This film can be viewed free online on YouTube or at TopDocumentaryFilms.com. The film runs for roughly forty-nine minutes. After students watch the modern engineers struggle to duplicate the work of the Olmec stone carvers, students should divide into two teams and debate whether the Olmec stone carvers had technology that modern humans do not know about. Both sides should provide plausible reasons for their stance.</p>

**Activity Three**

**Archaeology** – Much of what we know about the ancient Olmecs and their African contemporaries comes from archaeology. Students should visit the website <http://archaeology.mrdonn.org/index.html> to be able to answer these questions: What is an archaeologist? What is the difference between a fossil and an artifact? How do archaeologists find sites to explore? Students can also play the archaeological games on that site.

**Part B** – Students can visit the website

<http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/brooklyn/index2.html> to learn about a current archaeological project taking place in Brooklyn, Illinois, the oldest incorporated African American town in the United States.

**Writing****Activity Four**

Students should write an essay exploring three ways that we know that African people were present in Early America.

1. Opening: Students will be asked to think of a time when they discovered or thought about something that could potentially change their lives. Students will write a few sentences about this moment. A few students will be invited to share. Teacher will connect this to the discovery of the manuscripts in Mali and the potential it has to change the course of African and world history.
2. Introduction to New Material:
  - Main Idea: Africans were in the Americas before Columbus, and they had an impact on the Americas' first major civilization.
  - Activate Prior Knowledge: Teacher will tell students that a civilization is a culture that has built cities and has developed, in most cases, a writing system, the arts, the sciences, and a system of educating its people. Civilizations also generally have a government, public buildings, and commerce.

Teacher will begin the lesson by informing the students that this lesson will focus on the African presence in the Americas before the coming of Christopher Columbus. Teacher will pose the question “Did African people come to the Americas (North, South, and Central America) before Columbus’s arrival in 1492? If so, what primary source evidence do we have of their coming?” Teacher will define a primary source as an original document such as a speech, novel, poem, diary, manuscript, eyewitness account, or interview. Teacher will proceed to talk about the Olmec civilization, the oldest known civilization in the Americas. The Olmec high culture is considered the mother culture of America. The Olmec homeland was in what is now Mexico. The Olmecs were known as the “jaguar people,” and they produced a very artistic, religious, and scientific culture. One of the important ceremonial centers for the Olmecs was in La Venta, Mexico.

The first evidence we have that African people had anything to do with the Olmec civilization emerged in 1938 when a team of archaeologists led by Matthew Stirling rediscovered a huge stone head that was first uncovered

by peasants in Tres Zapotes, Mexico. The head stood eight feet tall and weighed ten tons. It was a bodiless head that had on it a peculiar helmet. Stirling wrote in his description of it, "The features are bold and amazingly Negroid in character." Later excavations at La Venta, right next to the oldest pyramid in the Americas, would turn up even more colossal stone heads with similar helmets and bearing resemblance to African people. How did these artifacts amount to evidence of an African presence and influence? Let's examine the facts below.

- The leading historian in this area, Ivan Van Sertima, noted that similar, colossal, bodiless heads were found in only one other location in the ancient world: Tanis, the harbor for seagoing ships in ancient Egypt.
- The stone heads were distinctly African in phenotype, having full lips, broad noses, and even, in some cases, Ethiopian-type, beaded braids.
- The pyramid found at La Venta was, like the pyramids of Egypt and Sudan, set on a precise north-south axis. Axial orientation was never used in any building in the Americas before it was used in the building of the pyramid at La Venta.
- The La Venta ceremonial platform has both a true pyramid and a step pyramid very reminiscent of the step pyramid of Saqqara, Egypt.
- The pyramids in Mexico utilized the same standard of measurement that was utilized by the mathematicians of ancient Egypt-Sudan.
- The pyramids of America, like those of ancient Egypt, served as a temple/tomb. And in at least one case—the pyramid in the city of Teotihuacan—served as a celestial observatory like its counterpart, the Great Pyramid of ancient Egypt.
- Nine wood charcoal samples taken from the La Venta ceremonial site, when carbon dated, gave an average reading of 814 BCE, plus or minus 134 years.
- For those who would argue that the stone heads of Mexico are not representations of African people but were carved that way for practical reasons, Van Sertima asks how they would explain the small clay figurines found buried side-by-side with the stone heads. The clay figures are distinctly African in skin color, hair, and facial phenotype. The clay figures even wear earplugs that are identical to native Africa.
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3. Discussion: Students will respond to the following:
  - Did African people come to the Americas before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492?
  - What primary source evidence do we have of their coming?
4. Critical Reflection: Students will complete the following:
  - Define *civilization*, *archaeology*, and *pyramid*.
  - Identify and describe Teotihuacan.
  - How do we know that African people were in the Americas before Columbus in 1492?
  - Describe the characteristics and achievements of the Olmec civilization.
  - In your own words, discuss why Ivan Van Sertima and Alexander Von Wutheneau are convinced of the African presence in the Olmec civilization.
5. Closing: Teacher will reiterate the highlights of the lesson.

Assessment	Observation, critical reflection activity, participation in class discussion, writing, geography, and science activities
Extensions (Homework, Projects)	Observation, critical reflection activity, participation in class discussion, writing, geography, and science activities