

NAME: _____

HOUR: _____

Comparing Different Interpretations of Olmec Complex Society

Interpretation 1: A variety of “sister” chiefdoms existed in different areas with a common religion based on worship of the jaguar. The heads represent the shamanistic practices, such as the transformation of priests into jaguars. Over time, the jaguar became associated with the god of rain.

Interpretation 2: The purpose of heads was to honor the current ruler. When the ruler died, his sculpture was decapitated as a religious sacrifice. Some historians think that competitors for power were responsible for decapitating sculptures.

Interpretation 3: The colossal heads demonstrated the power of rulers. When monuments, such as heads, statues, altars, or pillars, were located in large public plaza, people would gather for ceremonies. Many large gatherings implied that the ruler possessed great power. Rulers were those who could show contact with ancestors and gods through shamanistic rituals. The purpose of the ceremonies was to ask for help with rainfall and to control the ferocity of jaguars and other aggressive animals in the rainforest. The heads represented those rulers who demonstrated religious power. The temple complex platforms were oriented eight degrees north to align with the summer solstice, so every year when the sunrise appeared in the right place, the ruler was legitimized.

Interpretation 4: Heads celebrated ball players who may have been rulers, too. Many of the earliest heads seem to represent participants in the ritualistic ball game, which, according to Mesoamerican beliefs, recreates the world.

~~~~~

### **ASSIGNMENT:**

Based on what you have learned about Olmec sculptures and their society, which of these four interpretations about why the sculptures were created do you think is most plausible? Explain your answer.

## *Olmec Social Hierarchy*

The elite of the Olmec, determined by status and wealth, included rulers and priests who possessed political and religious power. They, along with the skilled artisans and merchants, probably lived in the larger cities, and relied on farmers, who lived in the surrounding countryside, to produce enough food for the urban population. The upper class traded in art and other items of luxury, while the lower class, residing in less populated areas, hunted and farmed for a living.

**Ruler:** There was not one centralized ruler. Rather, there were multiple rulers of rival city-states. The rulers led any military operations against rival states.

**Olmec Priests:** They probably had several duties: scribes, calendar makers, and overseers of rituals in the religious temple complexes. The temple complexes were earthen mound platforms shaped like upside-down cupcakes. Their areas were similar in size to those of volcanoes. The priests also may have been consulted about the location and ceremonies for the burial tombs. They were experts in the stories of the gods including the were-jaguar. Perhaps the priests also had the duty of deciding when to deface or to decapitate the heads of sculptures. The 260-day sacred calendar and 365-day secular calendar created by the Olmec used the highest volcano or mountains in view to mark the sunrise position on the summer solstice (June 22), thus establishing the true length of the solar year. They ingested Bufo toads to achieve a hallucinogenic trance that by tradition allowed them to transform themselves into jaguars or other supernatural beings.

**Ball Players:** They played the ritual ball game. The ball was made of rubber from latex found in trees in the area.

**Engineers:** They designed the plan to quarry volcanic basalt blocks and transport them by land and probably by rafts on streams and rivers and along the Gulf coast. They also must have ordered the drains for the artificial ponds. They were most likely responsible for creating the mounded earthen platforms, which after 900 BCE were built as pyramid-shaped platforms.

**Sculptors:** They carved the were-jaguar motif. The jaguar of Mesoamerica is comparable to the royal symbol of the lion in the Eastern hemisphere. The sculptors had to make tools to carve Obsidian and jade. They probably knew the meaning of special icon symbols, for example cleft heads in sculptures of jaguars. Their workspaces for their craft specialization show up in Olmec archaeological sites.

**Artists:** They produced colored clay masks, which were covered up right after being made.

**Laborers:** They quarried the volcanic basalt, carried the basalt blocks, constructed the rafts, sailed the rafts down rivers and along the coast, and lifted the basalt up to the religious temple complex platforms.

**Merchants:** They traded local products for jade, cacao beans, colored clay, obsidian, and other goods.

**Farmers:** They grew maize, beans, and squash in surplus quantities both to feed themselves and to supply all the social and occupational groups that did not farm.

**Textile workers:** They cultivated cotton, dyed it, wove it, and made it into clothing.