

## Anthropology 3891/6804, Section 80

### The Olmecs & their Neighbors:

### America's First Civilization

Fall 2016, Thur, 2:30-5:00 pm

HAH, Rm. 202

**Instructor:** Dr. Jeffrey Blomster  
**Office:** 303 HAH (2110 G St.), Telephone: 994-4880  
**Office Hours:** Thursday, 11:00 – 1:00, or by appointment.  
**E-mail:** blomster@gwu.edu

#### General Course Description:

The emergence of early complex societies remains a focal point of anthropological research throughout the world. In this class, we shall utilize the Olmec – sometimes referred to as “America’s First Civilization” – to explore in depth the emergence of a specific society and the nature, and impact, of its interregional interaction with contemporaneous societies throughout ancient Mexico. Few ancient societies have attracted the kind of rampant speculation as the Olmec; when Olmec colossal heads are not regularly appearing on popular television shows (the *Simpsons*), they are cited as proof of ancient African presence in the New World. Stripped of much of the mystification bestowed upon them by the popular press, the Olmec achievement is even more fascinating; they emerge as the creators of a complex society with monumental art, architecture and iconography that still remains poorly understood.

Due to their importance in understanding complex society in the New World, the Olmec are situated at the nexus of a series of anthropological debates. In this class, we will focus on issues that have a larger resonance in both archaeology and anthropology, for the following **learning outcomes**:

- models for the origins of complex society
- the Olmec level of complexity, settlement pattern, hierarchy and nature of their urban centers
- the role of art and ideology in society
- Olmec impact on/relations with other regions of Mesoamerica
- the creation and destruction of art
- acquisition and long-distance exchange
- sacred landscapes and iconography
- the Olmec legacy in Mesoamerica.

In all of these issues, we also explore *how* archaeologists make these interpretations, and students will be encouraged to challenge and critique the conclusions reached by various scholars.

**Graduate Students** will have additional readings (see reading list) and meetings. Interested undergraduates are welcome in these discussions as well.

#### Students with extra challenges:

If you are a student with a documented disability at George Washington University and wish to request a reasonable accommodation for this class, please see me immediately. Keep in mind that reasonable accommodations are not provided retroactively.

**Grading:**

There will be two essays (a combination essay/take-home exam), a group research project, and a final research paper. These items are weighted as follows:

Essay 1	20%
Article Critique	10%
Group Research Project	25%
Research Paper	35%
Participation	10%

The standard University system will be used to assign letter grades as follows: A = 92-100; A- = 90-91; B+ = 88-89; B = 82-87; B- = 80-81; C+ = 78-79; C = 72-77; C- = 70-71; D+ = 68-69; D = 62-67; D- = 60-61; F = 0-59.

**Academic Integrity**

All students will work individually on all assignments unless otherwise instructed. Students are expected to adhere to the GW Code of Academic Integrity. It states: “Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one’s own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.” For the remainder of the code, see: <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html>.

**Required Textbooks:**

In addition to articles placed on Blackboard, there are three required textbooks for the class, available at the bookstore (and very inexpensively “used” from Amazon sellers), and on reserve at Gelman:

*The Olmecs: America’s First Civilization*, R. Diehl, 2004, Thames & Hudson.

*Etlatongo: Social Complexity, Interaction, and Village Life in the Mixteca Alta of Oaxaca, Mexico*, J. Blomster, 2004, Wadsworth.

*Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, edited by J. Clark and M. Pye, 2000, Yale University Press/National Gallery of Art. Reprinted 2006.

While the remaining articles will be posted on Blackboard, several articles will come from the following book, which is on reserve at Gelman:

*Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, edited by E. Benson and B. de la Fuente, 1996, National Gallery of Art.

**Class Schedule and Assignments:**

Note: see Reading List for articles to be read for each day; articles must be read for the day under which they are listed.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Due</b>
09/01	America’s First Civilization? The Olmec in Mesoamerica. Olmec Archaeology: History, Major Issues and Debates.	
09/08	Olmec: The Olmec World and Olmec Origins – African or Asian? Pre-Olmec Early Formative Villages, Imagery, and Social Identity.	
09/15	Archaeological Perspectives on Socio-political Complexity. The Emergence of Leaders and Public Space: pre-Olmec chiefdoms in Soconusco and the Gulf Coast.	

09/22	The Rise of San Lorenzo: Urban Space, Daily Life and Agriculture? San Lorenzo Settlement and its Hinterland.	
09/29	Early Olmec Monumental Art: Creation and Destruction, Power and Politics. Portable Art. Interpreting the Rise – and Fall – of San Lorenzo.	
10/06	Archaeological Approaches to Early Olmec Cosmology, Ritual and Religion. Were-Jaguars and Dragons: Iconographic Approaches to Olmec Supernaturals and Ideology.	
10/13	Olman beyond San Lorenzo: Tres Zapotes, La Joya. Olmec Political Organization. <b>In-class Debate:</b> San Lorenzo Olmec – Chiefdom or State?	
10/20	Archaeological Approaches to Style and Interaction. Olmec style in Mesoamerica: “Mother” or “Sister” Culture Debate. Interregional Interaction: Olmecs and the Valley of Oaxaca.	
10/27	No class – Essay 1/Take-home Exam due in Anthro. Dept. by 4:30.	Essay 1
11/03	Interregional Interaction in Oaxaca: the Isthmus and Mixteca/Etlatongo. Sherd Wars: the Debate over Olmec Interaction based on Ceramic Sourcing.	Paper topics due!
11/10	Olmecization in Soconusco: Cantón Corralito Rethinking Olmec Interaction during the San Lorenzo Horizon.	
11/17	San Lorenzo Horizon Interaction: Central Mexico & Guerrero. Sacred Landscapes: the La Venta Olmec and La Venta Art.	1 <sup>st</sup> Groups present!
11/24	No Class; Thanksgiving Recess.	
12/01	Olmec-style Materials in the Southeast Periphery/Central America, & La Venta horizon Soconusco. Chalcatzingo and the La Venta Horizon in Central Mexico. <b>In-class Debate:</b> Olmec Bodies and Art – is the Wrestler a Fake?	2 <sup>nd</sup> Groups present!
12/08	Tres Zapotes, Epi-Olmec, and Writing? Looking at Olmec Gender. The Olmec Legacy Paper “in progress” Presentations/workshop.	Present papers

## **Course Requirements:**

### *-Readings, Attendance and Participation*

It is critical that students attend every class. Lectures will form only approximately half of each meeting; discussions on readings will occur at each class. No more than 3 unexcused absences will be allowed. An important part of the grade will be comprised of the student's informed participation in discussions. A reasonable amount of readings have been selected for discussion on each day of class; students must arrive ready to discuss them (chapters from the Diehl textbook won't be discussed). Graduate students generally have an additional reading for each class; undergraduates are invited to read them as well, but these readings are *only required for graduate students*. Read the articles in the order in which they are listed. If a class is missed, the assignment for that day must be handed in unless there has been a prior agreement. Students must notify me in advance if they will miss class the day an assignment is due. Students should notify me at the beginning of the semester of their intention to be absent from class on their day(s) of religious observance. Part of a letter grade will be deducted for each day an assignment is late.

### *-Article Cacique*

At some point in the semester, each student will perform an in-class article presentation and critique. Undergraduates will sign up to discuss one article during the semester; graduate students will sign up for **two**. For that article, the student's duties are to provide a brief synthesis – 5 to 10 minutes – and critique it (discussing its strengths and weaknesses); plus the student should be able to comment on that article throughout that day's class. Students will post 2 discussion questions on Blackboard 24 hours before class. On the same day as their article presentation, students will submit a 5 to 6 page essay dealing with the article, of which at least 1 page must be a critique (which should focus on how well the author supported his/her argument; it can be a positive and/or negative assessment).

### *Double jeopardy*

If you are scheduled to discuss an article on the same day that another assignment is due, this is double jeopardy – thus, you have an automatic extension until the next class for that other assignment, allowing you to focus on the article presentation and written version of it.

### *-Essay Guidelines*

All written assignments must be typed, double-spaced, not have excessive margins, and be an original, solo-produced work. While I am flexible about bibliography format, be consistent. Some students may opt to use the format employed in American archaeology for bibliographic references. A guide to this style can be found on Blackboard, and in the October 1992 issue of the journal *American Antiquity* (Vol. 57, pp. 749-770).

### *-Essay 1: Olmec Style*

To ensure students fully understand the complexities involved with the "Olmec style" before they begin the group research projects, Essay 1 will be a combination essay and take-home exam. Students will have one week to answer several questions, one of which will ask students to classify actual archaeological artifacts (to be provided on Blackboard) as "Olmec style" or not. Students may use all resources (notes, readings, etc.) from the semester to answer the questions. Students will conclude the essay by applying what they've learned to a piece of Olmec art, without context, on display at the Kislak Collection in the Library of Congress, or any other museum/source of their choice. Students will select one object identified as "Olmec" and provide general information on the medium, size, location and approximate date of the piece. Since the object has no archaeological context, students must focus on why is it called "Olmec"? Have does the particular object fare when a rigorous definition of Olmec style is applied? Any ideas from where the object originated, based on similar examples with context? Analyze the form and style of the object and explore the possible function of the piece you have selected within Olmec

culture, channeling (and citing) the readings for this week. Undergraduate essays will be 5 – 7 pages of text; graduate essays will be 7 – 10 pages. The bibliography should include four sources that are cited within the essay.

#### *-Group Research Project*

Students will combine forces in 5 groups to research Olmec interaction outside of the Gulf Coast heartland. Each group will present its findings in a 30-35 minute (maximum!) presentation to the class, with time for discussion and critique after the presentation. One week after the class presentation, each undergraduate group will submit a 12-15 page summary of their findings and interpretations (15-20 pages will be expected from graduate students), plus an extensive annotated bibliography. For the project, each group will amass a comprehensive annotated (at least 2 to 3 descriptive sentences for each entry) bibliography of all readings relevant to the theme of Olmec interaction in the region, as well as a sample of references that deal with the cultural history of their region. Undergraduates should have at least 20 sources in their group annotated bibliography, while graduates will have at least 30. Explore (or at least include in your bibliography) sites beyond those listed for your group, as well as relevant sculptures from your region (which are not always associated with a specific site). Only 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the entries in the annotated bibliographies can come from class readings.

Students will address the following issues:

- a brief overview of the geology/natural resources of your region
- an overview of the history of relevant archaeological research in the region
- present the chronology and major sites
- what was the nature of life and socio-political organization prior to and during the specific Olmec horizon(s) you are examining?
- what is the nature of the local material culture?
- what kind of material culture (if any) has been cited as evidence of “Olmec contact” or “Olmec influence” in your region?
- using a robust definition of Olmec style, critically assess these materials – which do you interpret as actual Olmec-style objects and what was the nature of Olmec contact/influence?
- what impact – if any – did the Gulf Coast Olmec have on this region?
- how would you model this interaction? Is it political, religious, economic, or other? All (or none) of the above?

The summary that is submitted should explicitly address all of these questions. Since most groups will have 3 students, there should be 3 sections (each 4 to 5 pages), each clearly authored by one student:

1. geographic/cultural overview, brief history of research in the region, and chronology (discuss local societies and material cultures present before and during Olmec interaction and how you define “Olmec”)
2. descriptions/assessments of sites and material culture
3. model(s) of interaction for your region.

The annotated bibliography should be authored by the group and is **the** most important product from this exercise.

An electronic version of the group’s powerpoint presentation must be sent to me by **noon** on the day of the presentation, so I can prepare additional images to supplement what is presented by the group.

In addition to the hard copy due one week after the presentation, each group will also submit an electronic version of their annotated bibliography, which I will put on Blackboard as a resource that students may wish to consult as their work on final research papers.

A representative of each group should meet with me at least 2 weeks before the presentation to determine if appropriate progress has been made in terms of utilizing the most critical sources, and that the focus is consistent.

Students will sign up for groups in early October.

*-Research Paper*

Students will have the opportunity to explore any one topic on the Olmec in depth by writing a research paper. Students should begin to select their topic IMMEDIATELY, and should feel free to consult with me at any stage in the process. The paper may grow out of your group project, or it may be unrelated. Each student will submit a one-page synopsis of their topic as well as a preliminary bibliography of at least 5 sources (not including class readings) on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. Prepare an extensive bibliography for the paper using only references that you cite within the body of the text. Avoid using unreliable internet sources and webpages. I am happy to critique drafts of papers. Graduate students should come prepared to present a 10 to 15 minute synopsis of their paper as a work in progress on the last day of class. Students will have until December 15<sup>th</sup> to submit their final papers. Undergraduate papers should be 12 - 15 pages of text; graduate students should be 15 - 20 pages. See above for essay guidelines.

*-Undergraduate hours outside of the class*

The University now requires the following statement on all syllabi for undergraduate classes:

**Average minimum amount of independent, out-of-class, learning expected per week:**

In a 15 week semester, including exam week, students are expected to spend a minimum of 100 minutes of out-of-class work for every 50 minutes of direct instruction, for a minimum total of 2.5 hours a week. A 3-credit course should include 2.5 hours of direct instruction and a **minimum** of 5 hours of independent learning or 7.5 hours per week.

**Important Dates:**

- 10/27 – Essay 1/Take-home Exam
- 11/03 – Research Paper Topics/Initial Bibliography due
- 11/17 – Presentations by Groups 1 & 2
- 12/01 – Presentations by Groups 3 - 5; hard copies due for Groups 1 & 2.
- 12/08 – Hard copies due for Groups 3 – 5; graduate student paper workshop.
- 12/15 – Research Paper Due in Anthropology Dept. by 4:30!

