carved hard stone pieces have been discovered in the course of the last few years. From El Viejón in the north to La Venta in the southeast, this region which is often described as the "heartland" of Olmec civilization and which Ignacio Bernal calls the Olmec "metropolitan area" covers approximately 18,000 square kilometers. With the exception of the volcanic mountains of Los Tuxtlas, whose average altitude is on the order of 600 meters, the entire region is no more than 100 meters above sea level. It is a vast alluvial plain traversed by the Papaloapán, Coatzacoalcos, and Tonalá rivers as well as their numerous tributaries. There are lagoons and swamps everywhere. Alfonso Caso has compared this region to Mesopotamia. Nowhere else in Mesoamerica has agriculture enjoyed such plentiful water resources, since in addition to the rivers there is abundant rainfall in two seasons (June–November and January–February). The soil along the riverbanks is enriched by deposits left by floodwaters. The vegetation, it is true, is so dense, and grows back so fast, that farmers must constantly clear their land, with implements for that purpose—made of stone in antiquity—and by burning it off. But on the whole the Olmecs had particularly fertile land at their disposal, quite suitable for growing crops even without fertilizer. The same method of cultivation is still used today in the tropical regions of Mexico: cutting down the trees and bushes, burning them, planting maize and beans by means of a simple digging stick, must have given the Olmecs exceptionally high returns. In any event, they were not obliged to confront the problems of arid soil and irregular rainfall that weighed so heavily on the civilizations of the high plateau. Their problem, rather, was the struggle against an excess of water and the creation of drainage systems such as that at San Lorenzo. It is quite likely that the soil and climatic conditions of their habitat enabled them to obtain two harvests a year.

Even today, as was surely true in antiquity as well, the jungle abounds in game of every sort: deer, tapirs, wild pigs, monkeys, pheasants, iguanas. It is probable that the Olmecs kept dogs and turkeys, animals domesticated in very early times on the American continent, but the destruction of any sort of bone remains, both human and animal, by the dampness and the acidity of the soil keeps us from being certain of this. Above all, the sea, the lakes, and the rivers furnished them with an inexhaustible supply of fish, crustaceans, shellfish, all foods rich in proteins and an excellent complement of the vegetable foods in their diet. The Olmec art of carving has left us numerous jade objects: models of boats, shells, aquatic birds. A sculpted stone slab from San Lorenzo (monument no. 58) represents an enormous fish. Certain stones found in excavations of various sites were no doubt weights for fishnets.

In a word, the inhabitants of this region had available to them rich

With this hypothesis as our point of departure, it would seem as though a non-Maya group had inserted itself like a wedge between the Huastecs and the Mayas, whereupon the Huastecs headed (or were driven) toward the north and the Mayas toward the east and south. This event would seem to have occurred at approximately the same time, around 1200 B.C., that Olmec civilization appeared at San Lorenzo and La Venta—in point of fact, in the center and the south of Veracruz. A coincidence perhaps, but a coincidence worth pondering. We cannot help but think that the people that shattered the unity of the proto-Mayas was also the people that brought Olmec civilization to the region.

Another hypothesis might also be considered, namely, that the Olmecs were themselves part of the Huasteco-Maya family. According to this theory, of all the subdivisions of this great linguistic family, their dialect alone failed to survive. Such a conjecture cannot be dismissed out of hand: who has any idea how many of the world's indigenous languages have totally disappeared! But if we accept this hypothesis, the fragility of proto-Maya Olmec makes it an exceptional case by comparison with the extraordinary resistance of Maya and its related dialects.

The Indians of the state of Veracruz speak either Nahua (in general the so-called *nahuat* variety, without the *tl* characteristic of Aztec) or dialects that are often pejoratively called *popoloca* and that belong to the Mixe-Zoquean linguistic family. The implantation of Nahua in this region is obviously a recent phenomenon. Mixe (the *popoloca* of Sayula and Oluta) and Zoque (the *popoloca* of the Sierra and of Texistepec) are ancient languages, firmly rooted in the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Chiapas since antiquity. In the south of Veracruz, the implantation of these dialects corresponds precisely to the Olmec region from Tres Zapotes to San Lorenzo.

It was on the basis of this observation that Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman put forward the hypothesis that the language of the Olmecs was most likely a proto-Mixe-Zoquean; in support of their argument, they studied in particular the borrowing of Mixe-Zoquean words by other indigenous Mesoamerican languages. According to them, words designating cultivated plants and foods (gourd, cocoa, tomato, bean, maize cake), animals (dog, turkey), ritual elements (copal, incense), techniques (weaving, fishing), etc., were borrowed from Mixe-Zoquean by other languages. These words are tantamount to a "cultural inventory" which would appear to be consonant with that of the Olmecs around the middle or in the second half of the second millennium B.C. Hence the conclusion arrived at by Campbell and Kaufman: "The Olmecs, at least in part, spoke Mixe-Zoque languages." But these two authors add that this is simply a hypothesis