

Lesson 3 The Olmec of Meso-America

MAIN IDEAS

Geography The Olmec lived in a fertile land and developed the first civilization in the Americas.

Culture The Olmec had a complex civilization with many great accomplishments in art and learning.

Culture Olmec culture spread to other groups of people in Meso-America through trade.

The Earliest American Civilization

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What helped the Olmec develop the first civilization in the Americas?

The Olmec

- Archaeologists found city-based culture in Mexico's lowlands
 - proved that in 1200 B.C., people didn't just live in villages
 - **Olmec**—first known Meso-American civilization

Geography

- Olmec civilization began in jungles on southern Mexico's Gulf coast
 - rich soil along rivers produced corn crops

Cities

- Olmec built several cities which served as political centers
 - San Lorenzo dates from 1150 B.C.; La Venta from 900 B.C.
 - La Venta has 100-foot pyramid, possibly tomb of Olmec ruler
- Olmec cities possibly ruled by dynasties, had rigid structure
 - rulers at top, followed by administrators, engineers, builders
 - farmers formed lowest class

REVIEW QUESTION

Why were the Olmec able to build cities?

Olmec Culture

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What did the Olmec accomplish in art and learning?

Olmec Art

- Made huge stone heads, up to 9 feet tall and weighing 20 tons
 - who the heads represent is a mystery—maybe rulers, maybe gods
 - helmets suggest they may represent athletes from ritual games

Religion and Learning

- Olmec worshiped nature gods, especially jaguar spirit
 - sculptures show half-human, half-jaguar creature
- May have developed calendar; used picture symbols

REVIEW QUESTION

How was Olmec art tied to religion?

Olmec Legacy

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How did the Olmec influence other cultures?

Decline of the Olmec

- Olmec civilization ended after 400 B.C.; reasons for decline unclear
 - Olmec or invaders destroyed most city monuments
- Olmec were Meso-America's **mother culture**—influenced other cultures

Influences

- Pottery, sculpture of later peoples use Olmec art styles, jaguar
 - ideas about cities, ceremonial centers, ritual games also spread
 - use of picture symbols may have influenced later writing systems

REVIEW QUESTION

Why is Olmec civilization called Meso-America's mother culture?

Lesson Summary

- Successful farming gave rise to a great civilization in Mexico's lowlands.
- The Olmec made great advances in art and learning.
- Trade spread Olmec influence throughout Meso-America.

Why It Matters Now . . .

The Olmec mother culture continues to influence the cultures of Mexico and Central America today.