

# The Gupta and the Olmec Civilizations

The Gupta and Olmec civilizations were separated by time and great distance. The Gupta Empire controlled northern and most of eastern India around A.D. 400. The Olmec civilization controlled Meso-America around 1000 B.C. They were very different civilizations, but they had similarities in trade, religion, architecture, art, and mathematics. This essay will compare and contrast the fascinating Gupta and Olmec civilizations.

Both the Gupta and Olmec civilizations had a strong influence on their neighbors. The Gupta Empire traded heavily with different regions. Gupta traders spread Indian goods and culture to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Sri Lanka, and China. The Olmec, as well, developed a vast trade network. This network spread northeast to the Valley of Mexico and southeast to parts of Central America. As similar as the Gupta and Olmec were in establishing trade, what they traded differed greatly. For example, the Gupta prized such luxury items as silk from China, whereas the Olmec valued iron ore to make luxury items such as mirrors.

The belief systems of the Gupta and Olmec civilizations also had similarities and differences. Most of the people of Gupta India practiced Hinduism. Although this religion had many gods, it recognized one supreme god or life force. Like Hinduism, the Olmec religion also had several gods. A rain god shown as half-human and half-jaguar dominated their religion. But unlike the Gupta, the Olmec probably did not view this rain god as a supreme god.

Both the Gupta and Olmec built great temples for worship. Gupta builders constructed two types of temples. One type had a square shape with a pillared front porch and a flat roof. The other type also had a square structure, but its roof had a pyramid shape. The Olmec constructed entire buildings that were pyramids and probably used them as temples. So two civilizations, thousands of miles apart with no direct connection, both used the pyramid shape for their houses of worship.

The Gupta culture is also known for having created beautiful sculptures of gods. These works have an elegance about them that conveys a spiritual sense. In contrast, the Olmec are known for having carved huge stone

heads. Up to nine feet high, these sculptures have a solid, impressive appearance. Why were these heads built? Historians are not sure. Many believe that they represent either Olmec rulers or gods.

Artists in both the Gupta and Olmec civilizations created cave paintings. Gupta paintings are often scenes from Indian life or the life of the Buddha. The cave paintings of the Olmec depict humans and animals. Although the subject matter of the paintings is different, both civilizations participated in an art form that can be found in civilizations around the world.

Finally, the Gupta and Olmec civilizations also shared a talent for mathematics. Gupta scholars made several advances in mathematics, including creating the decimal system and Hindu-Arabic numerals. The Olmec developed a counting system and a calendar.

Although separated by time and vast distances, the Gupta and the Olmec had much in common. They both had large trade networks, practiced religions with several gods, built pyramid-shaped structures, created cave paintings, and made advances in mathematics. However, they also had their differences, such as their luxury goods, their views about one supreme god, and the style of their sculptures. Both the Gupta and the Olmec had complex civilizations that continue to fascinate historians.

## Organization

One way to organize a comparison and contrast essay is point by point. This type of organization shows **similarities** and **differences**, one point at a time. Look in your text book for two other types of organization known as “whole by whole” and “similarities and differences.” How will you organize your essay?

Both the Gupta and Olmec civilizations had a strong influence on their neighbors. The Gupta Empire traded heavily with different regions. Gupta traders spread Indian goods and culture to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Sri Lanka, and China. The Olmec, as well, developed a vast trade network. This network spread northeast to the Valley of Mexico and southeast to parts of Central America.

**similarities**

As similar as the Gupta and Olmec were in establishing trade, what they traded differed greatly. For example, the Gupta prized such luxury items as silk from China, whereas the Olmec valued iron ore to make luxury items such as mirrors.

**differences**

The belief systems of the Gupta and Olmec civilizations also had similarities and differences. Most of the people of Gupta India practiced Hinduism. Although this religion had many gods, it recognized one supreme god or life force. Like Hinduism, the Olmec religion also had several gods. A rain god shown as half-human and half-jaguar dominated their religion.

**similarities**

But unlike the Gupta, the Olmec probably did not view this rain god as a supreme god.

**differences**

## Finding Details

Details in a comparison and contrast essay can clarify the similarities and differences between things. What details will you use in your essay?

Both the Gupta and Olmec civilizations had a strong influence on their neighbors.

statement

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details

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details

Both the Gupta and Olmec built great temples for worship.

statement

Gupta builders constructed two types of temples. One type had a square shape with a pillared front porch and a flat roof. The other type also had a square structure, but its roof had a pyramid shape. The Olmec constructed entire buildings that were pyramids and probably used them as temples. So two civilizations, thousands of miles apart with no direct connection, both used the pyramid shape for their houses of worship.

details

## Transitions

A well-written comparison and contrast essay uses transition words and phrases to highlight similarities and differences. Transitions such as *like*, *also*, and *as well* highlight **comparisons**. Transitions such as *in contrast*, *whereas*, and *unlike* highlight **contrasts**.

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transition,  
comparison

transition,  
contrast

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The Gupta culture is also known for having created beautiful sculptures of gods. These works have an elegance about them that conveys a spiritual sense. **In contrast**, the Olmec are known for having carved huge stone heads. Up to nine feet high, these sculptures have a solid, impressive appearance. Why were these heads built? Historians are not sure. Many believe that they represent either Olmec rulers or gods.

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