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.; LaVenta from 900 B.C.
  - LaVenta 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.