

# 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.

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## 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?

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# 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?

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# 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.