Early Mesoamerican Civilizations

**MAIN IDEA**

The Olmec created the Americas’ first civilization, which in turn influenced later civilizations in the region.

**WHY IT MATTERS NOW**

Later American civilizations relied on the technology and achievements of earlier cultures to move forward.

**SETTING THE STAGE**

The story of developed civilizations in the Americas begins in a region archaeologists and historians refer to as **Mesoamerica**. This area stretches south from central Mexico to the northern reaches of modern-day Honduras. It was here, more than 3,000 years ago, that the first complex societies in the Americas arose.

**Mesoamerica’s Mother Culture**

Mesoamerica’s first known civilization builders were a people known as the **Olmec**. They began carving out a thriving society around 1200 B.C. in the humid jungles of southern Mexico. The Olmec influenced neighboring groups, as well as the later civilizations of the region. Thus, they often are called Mesoamerica’s “mother culture.”

**The Rise of Olmec Civilization**

Around 1860, a worker clearing a field in the hot coastal plain of southeastern Mexico uncovered an extraordinary stone sculpture. It stood five feet tall and weighed an estimated eight tons. The sculpture was of an enormous head, wearing a headpiece that resembled a football helmet. The head was carved in a strikingly realistic style, with thick lips, a flat nose, and large oval eyes. (See History Through Art on page 219.) Archaeologists had never seen anything like it in the Americas.

This head, along with others that were discovered later, was a remnant of the Olmec civilization. The Olmec flourished from 1200 B.C. to 400 B.C. They lived along the Gulf Coast of Mexico, in the modern-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco.

On the surface, the Gulf Coast seemed an unlikely site for a high culture to take root. The region was hot and humid and covered with swamps and jungle. In some places, giant trees formed a thick cover that prevented most sunlight from reaching the ground. Up to 100 inches of rain fell every year. The rainfall swelled rivers and caused severe flooding.

However, the region also had certain advantages. There were abundant deposits of salt and tar, as well as fine clay used in making pottery. There was also wood and rubber from the rain forest. The hills to the north provided hard stone from which the Olmec could make tools and monuments. The rivers that laced the region provided a ready means of transport. Perhaps most important, the flood plains of these rivers provided fertile land for farming.

The Olmec used their abundant resources to build thriving communities. The oldest site, San Lorenzo, dates back to around 1150 B.C. Here, and at other sites, archaeologists uncovered important clues that offered a glimpse into the Olmec world.

**Olmec Society**

At San Lorenzo archaeologists discovered earthen mounds, courtyards, and pyramids. Set among these earthworks were large stone monuments. They included columns, altars, and more colossal, sculpted heads, which may have represented particular Olmec rulers. These giant monuments weigh as much as 44 tons. Researchers are left to wonder how the Olmec moved them to various centers of...
worship. Some scholars suspect that Olmec workers moved these sculptures over land on rolling logs to the river banks. From there, they rafted the monuments along numerous waterways to various sites.

The organization needed for such an undertaking is one reason scholars think San Lorenzo was home to a small ruling class of priests and nobles. These rulers may have commanded a much larger group of peasant farmers living in the surrounding country.

To the east of San Lorenzo, another significant Olmec site, La Venta, rose around 900 B.C. Here, researchers discovered a 100-foot-high mound of earth and clay. This structure may have served as the tomb of a great Olmec ruler. Known as the Great Pyramid, the mound also may have been the center of the Olmec religion. Based on other artifacts found at sites like La Venta, experts believe the Olmec prayed to a variety of nature gods.

Jaguar Worship Most of all they probably worshiped the jaguar spirit. Numerous Olmec sculptures and carvings depict a half-human, half-jaguar creature. Some scholars believe that the jaguar represented a powerful rain god. Others contend that there were several jaguar gods, representing such vital things as the earth, fertility, and maize. As anthropologist Peter Furst points out, the jaguar was central to Olmec religion:

A VOICE ABOUT THE PAST
You can almost call the Olmec the people of the jaguar. In tropical America, jaguars were the shamans [medicine men] of the animal world, the alter ego [other identity] of the shaman. They are the most powerful predators. That’s why in Olmec art you get these combinations of jaguars and humans.

PETER FURST, quoted in “New Light on the Olmec”

Trade and Commerce Archaeologists once believed that sites such as La Venta were ceremonial centers where important rituals were performed but few people lived. In recent years, however, experts have begun to revise that view. According to Mexican archaeologist Rebecca González, “La Venta was not just an empty ceremonial spot visited by Olmec priests and nobles, but a prosperous community of fishers, farmers, traders, and specialists, such as the artisans and the sculptors.”

Indeed, the Olmec appear to have been a prosperous people who directed a large trading network throughout Mesoamerica. Olmec goods traveled as far as Mexico City to the north and Honduras to the south. In addition, raw materials—including iron ore and various stones—reached San Lorenzo from faraway regions. This trade network helped boost the Olmec economy and spread Olmec influence to other parts of Mesoamerica.
A Legacy of Sculpture  

More than 2,000 years after the Olmec’s collapse, the ancient society’s sculpture remains its most lasting legacy. From the colossal stone heads to the tiny jade figures, these carvings reveal the Olmec’s expert craftsmanship and commitment to detail. They also provide a glimpse of the values and beliefs of the Americas’ oldest known civilization.

Giant Altars  
The Olmec carved a number of impressive altars. Like the one pictured to the right, they often depicted a priest or shaman emerging from the structure. In numerous altars, the priest cradles a child. Some scholars believe that this may have signified the importance of the notion of dynasty—with the child representing the heir to the throne—in Olmec society.

Decline of the Olmec  
For reasons that are not fully understood, Olmec civilization eventually collapsed. Scholars believe San Lorenzo was destroyed around 900 B.C. La Venta may have fallen sometime around 400 B.C. Some experts speculate that outside invaders caused the destruction. Others believe the Olmec may have destroyed their own monuments upon the death of their rulers.

Because the Olmec apparently left no written records, scholars may never know the full truth. Nevertheless, Olmec artifacts continue to offer up tantalizing clues about this first known Mesoamerican civilization.

Zapotec Civilization Arises  
By the time Olmec civilization had collapsed, another people—the Zapotec—were developing an advanced society to the southwest, in what is now the Mexican state of Oaxaca (wuh-HAH-kah). Though they showed traces of Olmec influence, the Zapotec built a unique civilization. This ancient group dominated Oaxaca for more than a thousand years.

Peoples of the Oaxaca Valley  
Oaxaca is a rugged region of mountains and valleys in southern Mexico. In the center of the state, three valleys meet to form a large open area known as the Oaxaca Valley. (See map on page 217.) Though much of Oaxaca is hot and dry, this valley has fertile soil, a mild climate, and enough rainfall to support agriculture. As a result, various peoples have made the Oaxaca Valley their home, including the ancient Zapotec.

For centuries the Zapotec lived in scattered villages throughout the valley. By 1000 B.C., however, one site—San José Mogote—was emerging as the main power in the region. At this site, the Zapotec constructed stone platforms. They also built temples and began work on monumental sculptures. By 500 B.C. they also had developed early forms of hieroglyphic writing and a calendar system.

HISTORY THROUGH ART: Sculpture

HISTORY THROUGH HISTORY:  
C. Hypothesizing  
What things might lead to the disappearance of an entire civilization?
The Zapotec Flourish at Monte Albán  Around 500 B.C., Zapotec civilization took a major leap forward. High atop a mountain at the center of the Oaxaca Valley, the Zapotec built the first real urban center in the Americas: Monte Albán. This city, with its commanding view of the entire valley, grew and prospered over the next several centuries. By 200 B.C., Monte Albán was home to around 15,000 people. The city eventually would reach a peak population of 25,000.

From A.D. 250 to A.D. 700, Monte Albán was truly impressive. At the heart of the city was a giant plaza paved with stones. Towering pyramids, temples, and palaces, all made out of stone, surrounded this plaza. There was even a building that may have acted as an observatory for gazing at the stars. Nearby was a series of stone carvings of corpses. Their thick lips and flat noses show a clear influence of Olmec style.

For more than a thousand years the Zapotec controlled the Oaxaca Valley and the surrounding region. Sometime after A.D. 600, however, the Zapotec began to decline. Some scholars believe they may have suffered a loss of trade or other economic difficulties. As with the Olmec, the fall of Zapotec civilization remains a puzzle.

The Early Mesoamericans’ Legacy

Although both the Zapotec and Olmec civilizations eventually collapsed, each culture left its mark on the Mesoamerican civilizations that followed.

The Olmec Leave Their Mark  The Olmec contributed much to later Mesoamerican civilizations. They influenced the powerful Maya, who will be discussed in Chapter 16. Olmec art styles, especially the use of the jaguar motif, can be seen in the pottery and sculpture of later peoples in the region. In addition, future Mesoamerican societies copied the Olmec pattern of urban design. Like the Olmec, later civilizations built cities by combining pyramids, plazas, and monumental sculpture.

Jade Figures

With little technology at their disposal, the Olmec mastered the difficult art of carving jade. Jade is a hard and tough but highly colorful stone. “The tough material was mastered as though it were a plastic,” one scholar said of the Olmec’s work. As shown here, the Olmec often carved jaguar figures out of jade. The jaguar-god was a powerful deity in Olmec society.

Colossal Heads

Perhaps the most recognizable Olmec sculptures are the giant stone heads. Researchers have uncovered more than a dozen Olmec heads. The largest one stands 11 feet tall. Some scholars say that the heads represent idolized warriors or ball players. However, most experts believe they depict individual rulers.
2. TAKING NOTES

Compare the Olmec and Zapotec cultures by using a Venn diagram similar to the one below.

Olmec  Both  Zapotec

Design another way to show this same information.

3. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Why do you think the Olmec are called Mesoamerica’s “mother culture”? Consider the Olmec’s influence on later groups in the region.

THINK ABOUT
- architecture
- religion
- art

4. THEME ACTIVITY

Cultural Interaction As a trader from a small Mesoamerican village, you have just returned from your first visit to the Olmec site at La Venta. Write a description of what you might tell your family about the wondrous things you saw in and around the site. Prepare to present the description orally to the class.