

# The Olmec of Mesoamerica

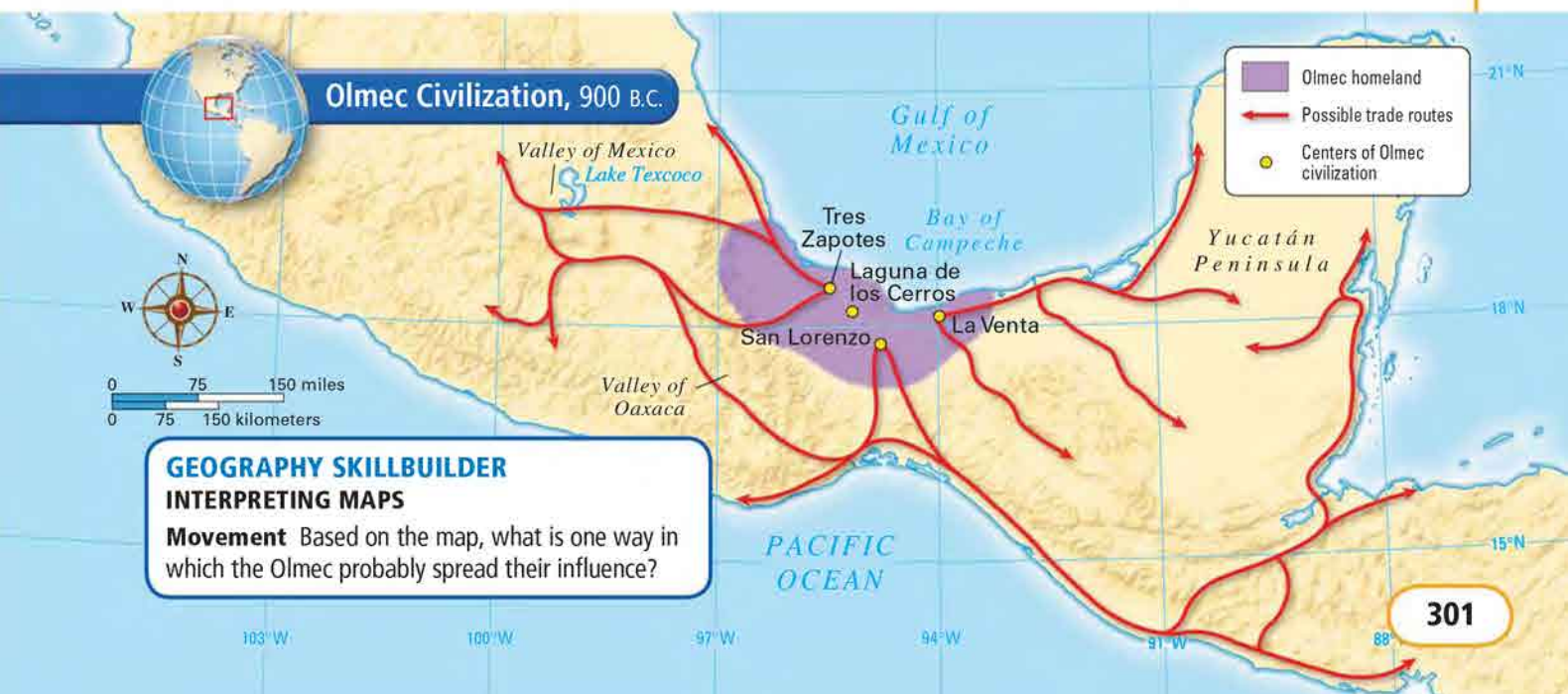
**Build on What You Know** You have learned about the ancient Andean civilizations in South America. Now you will read about the Olmec civilization, which arose even earlier in Mesoamerica. This North American region had better geographical conditions than the Andes.

## The Earliest American Civilization

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

Scholars of Mesoamerica used to think that in 1200 B.C., people lived only in villages. Then they discovered the remains of a city-based culture in Mexico's lowlands. Archaeologists named Mesoamerica's first known civilization the **Olmec** (AHL•mehk).

**Geography** Olmec civilization took root in the jungles along southern Mexico's Gulf coast. Rich soil along the rivers in the region produced generous corn crops for Mesoamerican farmers, just as the fertile soil around the Nile supported Egyptian farmers. As you have already learned, successful agriculture usually comes before the rise of cities.





**Cities** The Olmec built several cities, which served as political centers. One of the cities, now called San Lorenzo, dates back to around 1150 B.C. Archaeologists have found earthen mounds, courtyards, and pyramids in the city. Another Olmec city, now called La Venta, rose around 900 B.C. A 100-foot pyramid discovered there probably once contained the tomb of a great Olmec ruler.

Archaeologists believe that Olmec cities were ruled by powerful dynasties. Administrators, engineers and builders, and artists came below the rulers in the rigid Olmec social structure. Farmers formed the society's largest and lowest class.

**REVIEW** Why were the Olmec able to build cities?

## Olmec Culture

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

San Lorenzo and La Venta have given archaeologists greater insight into Olmec culture. These cities give us a glimpse into Olmec accomplishments in art and learning.

**Olmec Art** Some of the most amazing finds were huge stone heads. Crafted with simple tools, some heads stand as tall as 9 feet and weigh as much as 20 tons.

Archaeologists do not know who or what the heads represent. They may represent Olmec rulers or gods. Since all of the faces stare out from underneath helmets, they may also represent athletes who played a ritual ball game played during religious festivals. You will learn more about this ball game in Lesson 4.

**Religion and Learning** Much like the art of the ancient Andean civilizations, Olmec art was often tied to religion. The Olmec worshiped a number of nature gods. But above all, the Olmec worshiped the jaguar spirit.



**Olmec Head** The stone used for the heads was carried up to 80 miles over mountain ranges, rivers, and swamps. ▼





## Primary Source

### Jaguar Sculpture

**Background:** Scholars have not yet been able to decipher Olmec writing. But images of a jaguar, a big cat that still prowls the jungles of Mesoamerica, appear on many Olmec carvings and other artifacts. The jaguar is an important symbol of Olmec culture. Some historians have even called the Olmec “the people of the jaguar.”

The carvings often show an imaginary animal that is part human and part jaguar. Like the three-inch-high sculpture shown here, the creature usually has a snarling mouth and long, curved fangs. The Olmec worshiped the jaguar for its power. They believed that the jaguar could control nature and society.

#### DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

Why do you think the Olmec pictured the jaguar as part human?



Many Olmec sculptures represent this spirit as a half-human, half-jaguar creature. You can learn about these sculptures in the Primary Source feature above.

Advances in learning also reflect religious influence. Some archaeologists believe that the Olmec developed a calendar to keep track of religious ceremonies. They may also have used picture symbols to illustrate the calendar.

**REVIEW** How was Olmec art tied to religion?

### Olmec Legacy

#### 3 ESSENTIAL QUESTION How did the Olmec influence other cultures?

For reasons that are not fully understood, Olmec civilization ended some time after 400 B.C. Invaders, or the Olmec themselves, destroyed most of the monuments in cities such as San Lorenzo and La Venta.

Nevertheless, the Olmec legacy lived on in later Mesoamerican cultures. A large trading network throughout Mesoamerica helped spread Olmec influence. As a result, the Olmec are often called Mesoamerica's **mother culture**.

#### Vocabulary Strategy

You can use **context clues** to understand the meaning of the term *mother culture*. Words like *legacy*, *spread influence*, and *mother* suggest a culture that supported and inspired others.

**Influences** Other cultures were particularly influenced by Olmec art styles. These styles—especially the use of the jaguar—can be seen in the pottery and sculpture of later peoples. In addition, the Olmec left behind their ideas for cities, ceremonial centers, and ritual ball games. Their use of picture symbols may also have influenced later writing systems. The Olmec greatly influenced the Mayan civilization, which you will learn about in Lesson 4.

**REVIEW** Why is Olmec civilization called Mesoamerica'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 Mesoamerica.

### Why It Matters Now . . .

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

## 3 Lesson Review

### Terms & Names

1. Explain the importance of Olmec mother culture

### Using Your Notes

**Categorizing** Use your completed web diagram to answer the following question:

2. What were important parts of Olmec culture?



### Main Ideas

3. How were classes in the Olmec social structure ordered?
4. What does Olmec art tell us about their religious beliefs?
5. What was the effect of Olmec trade in Mesoamerica?

### Critical Thinking

6. **Recognizing Changing Interpretations of History** Why did historians change their minds about how people lived in ancient Mesoamerica?
7. **Comparing and Contrasting** How was the rise of Olmec civilization similar to that of ancient Egypt?

### Activity

**Writing a Letter** Imagine that you are an Olmec artist. Write a letter in which you explain why the jaguar is important to you.



# Make a Shoebox Time Capsule

**Goal:** To understand that much of what we know about the Olmec and other ancient American civilizations is based on the artifacts archaeologists have found

## Prepare

- 1 Get together with a small group of classmates.
- 2 Discuss items that represent today's culture in the United States.

## Do the Activity

- 1 Use the paper and colored pencils to draw two pictures of items that represent U.S. culture.
- 2 Cut out each drawing with the scissors.
- 3 Label your drawings.
- 4 Place all of your group's drawings in a shoebox. Label the box with your group name or number.

## Follow-Up

- 1 Exchange shoeboxes with another group. What items did this group place in its shoebox?
- 2 Pretend you are archaeologists who have discovered the box 1,000 years from now. What insight does each artifact provide about U.S. culture in the 21st century?

## Extension

**Making Historical Interpretations** With your group, take the drawings out of your shoebox. Erase the labels and tear small pieces off the drawings. Then put the drawings back and exchange shoeboxes once again with another group. Try to identify the "ruins" in the shoebox.

## Materials & Supplies

- paper
- colored pencils
- scissors
- shoebox

