

6-3 Mesoamerica and the Olmec Civilization

Mesoamerica (Middle America) extends from central Mexico to encompass all of modern Central America. The Sierra Madre Mountains are a prominent geographical feature of Mesoamerica. The Central Valley of Mexico is located on a high plateau near the convergence of the eastern, western, and southern Sierra Madre mountain ranges. Beyond these ranges, a vast rain forest covers southern Mexico and Guatemala. The earliest complex Mesoamerican societies did not locate in river valleys (as in Eurasia) but on the tropical lowlands inland from the Gulf of Mexico and on the elevated plateaus of the Central Valley ([Chapter 14](#) covers the Central Valley societies).

The Olmec created the earliest known Mesoamerican civilization (1200–300 B.C.E.) in what is now southeastern Mexico. The Olmec civilization centered on ceremonial hubs that were initially built near the Gulf port of Veracruz; in later centuries, however, they enlarged the region over which their culture predominated, in the direction of the Pacific coast (see [Map 6.2](#)). Their regional ascendancy was based on compelling religious practices rather than on mere political power. They established trade networks in Central America, from Guatemala to as far south as Costa Rica. The Olmec traded their rubber, pottery, and decorative ceramics for obsidian, jade, and cacao beans. The Olmecs made good use of the maize tortilla, a fairly imperishable flatbread that provided portable meals to farmers and to traveling merchants, and which is still a staple of the Mexican diet today.

Map 6.2

Olmec and Chavín Cultures

The Olmec and the Chavín were the first complex societies of regional significance in the Americas. Each of these cultures exerted influence through compelling religions that were disseminated by means of extensive trade networks.

Thinking About This Map

How did the geography of the Olmec and Chavín areas compare?



Surviving sculpture indicates that the Olmecs created an authoritarian theocratic society ruled by a hereditary king or high-priest ruler and a small, elite group of priests of the official religion. The elites created writing and numerical systems to keep records and, like previous agrarian civilizations we have studied, they developed highly accurate calendars to regulate the cycles of agriculture and religion. A pervasive religious faith centering on the worship of ancient feline gods was the inspiration for much of their art and architecture. The jaguar—a species of great cat indigenous to the Americas—was particularly revered. The rulers conscripted skilled masons to erect fortified ritual centers with temples on raised earthen mounds, plazas, government halls, and ball courts for a sacred game. Only the elites inhabited these centers; the laboring masses periodically gathered to witness awe-inspiring ceremonies performed by the priests. For example, using carved jade feline masks, the priests ritually transformed themselves into sacred jaguars, showing their powerful connections with the divine forces.

Olmec masonry skills also enabled them to build ceremonial stone pyramids, one of which reached 110 feet high. This Great Pyramid speaks of a high degree of societal organization. The enormous heads of basalt that they left behind most remarkably express the Olmecs' skill in stonework. Standing up to nine feet high and weighing up to twelve tons, these mysterious heads may represent prominent individuals in the guise of were-jaguars. The

Olmecs mined the basalt blocks in the mountains and carved the heads before dragging them to rivers and floating them to the coastal religious centers.

Between 600 and 500 B.C.E., the importance of the Olmec culture began to decline, to be supplanted by the neighboring Mayas (discussed in [Chapter 14](#)). Their writing and number systems, however, as well as their calendar, endured as tools adopted by succeeding Mesoamerican civilizations. The Olmec practices of ritual bloodletting and sacred ball games also continued throughout Mesoamerica.

Chapter 6: Settlement of the Americas and the Pacific Islands: 6-3 Mesoamerica and the Olmec Civilization

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