



Olmec Civilization

Many archaeologists tell us that the Olmec culture represents the mother culture of all Mesoamerican cultures. No one knows the exact origins of these people. This is because the Olmec culture is one of Mexico's oldest civilizations. It existed from 1400 BC to 400 BC. The Olmecs occupied an area that runs parallel with the Gulf of Mexico and is approximately 200 kilometers long and 50 kilometers wide. This area is now called Veracruz. The Olmecs survived by cultivating crops and hunting wild game. However, because of their proximity to the ocean they also ate an abundance of seafood. They also cultivated corn and cacao. Cacao was a highly sought after trade item. Olmec lands were very fertile, and they produced an abundance of wild fruits and vegetables.

We do not know their real name, but the Aztecs called the area where the Olmecs lived "Olmeca." In the Aztec language of Nahuatl the word Olmec means "land of rubber." This was because rubber trees were abundant in that area. The Olmecs produced a latex extract from which they made rubber balls, bowls, and clothing.

In 1871, the first of eleven colossal Olmec stone heads was found in Tres Zapotes, Veracruz. These heads are nine feet high and on an average weigh more than 30 tons. Originally, scientists were convinced that the Olmecs had come from far away continent. They did not believe that a culture as advanced as the Olmecs could have existed in Mexico. The carved heads are believed to be portraits of former Olmec leaders. These enormous heads are crowned with helmet-like caps that may have been used as protective gear during ball games. It is believed that they came from a rock quarry 130 kilometers away. We will never know how these heads were moved about, but scientists believe that they may have been moved by raft on artificially created canals or waterways.

Olmec art style includes pear-shaped heads, broad noses, baby faces, large lips, drooping mouths, and occasionally jaguar fangs. Dwarfs, hunchbacks, and others with deformities were often artistic subject matter. Nude males were also common. Olmec artifacts have been found all over Mesoamerica. Besides their artistic contributions, the Olmecs wrote using hieroglyphics, and they were pioneers in both astronomy and mathematics.

There are three main Olmec sites. They are called La Venta, San Lorenzo, and Tres Zapotes. The Olmecs did not build great cities. They did however have well-planned ceremonial centers, mounds, stone alters, and rectangular city plazas. Tres Zapotes contains a cone shaped pyramid one-hundred feet high. Olmec ruins also have tombs, mosaic floors, hematite mirrors, and incredibly carved jade figures.

San Lorenzo was destroyed by invaders sometime around 900 BC. Then, some five-hundred years later La Venta would suffer the same fate. The invaders would do everything they could to wipe-out all evidence of the Olmec existence. Some scientists believe that the Olmecs were a branch of the Maya culture, but we will never know for sure.

Olmec Civilization Questions

Answer using complete sentences

1. When did the Olmec civilization exist?
2. What did the Olmec eat?
3. What does the word Olmec mean in Nahuatl?
4. Describe the Olmec stone heads.
5. How do scientists believe that the stone heads were moved?
6. State six features of Olmec art styles.
7. What types of things were favorite subject matter for Olmec artists?
8. Briefly describe the features of an Olmec city.
9. What did the Olmec eat?
10. What happened to the Olmec cities of San Lorenzo and La Venta?