

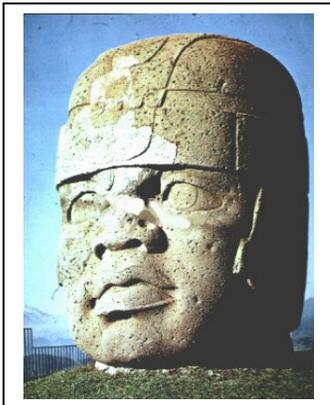
# The Olmecs

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

During the period between 1200 BC and 600 AD, the Olmecs were the largest group in North America. The Olmec resided around the regions of La Venta and San Lorenzo in Central America. They seem to have created a highly developed and well-organized civilization. They developed a complex calendar, a hieroglyphic writing system, and had unique artistic creations.

The Olmec cities were constructed around a central raised mound, which was used for religious ceremonies. Around 900 BC, these raised mounds were replaced with pyramid-shaped structures. They saw the pyramids as reaching upwards towards the gods they worshiped.



The Olmecs lived in a hierarchical society meaning there was a divide between the upper and lower classes. This separation of the elite and common groups is seen in the residential houses. Houses for the lower class were made of wooden walls with clay and palm roof tops, while the upper class citizens had houses made out of wood and brick. Olmec cities were well irrigated, meaning that they had water brought to the city using ditches. This allowed for crop production by the Olmecs. It also allowed them access to many waterways which they used for fishing and trading.

Animals were strong symbols in the Olmec religion. They believed that each person had an animal spirit. They believed that when their nobles died, they could take their riches into the afterlife. For this reason, the nobles were buried with jewels in tombs constructed of jade walls.

The Olmecs are most famous for their large structures that resemble giant heads. It is believed that the heads are modeled after their rulers. Most of the large heads were destroyed in some way. Researchers believe that the Olmecs did this themselves and that it was done after a ruler died. The facial features of the heads were people with slanted eyes and large lips. Many have argued over whether the Olmecs were of African or Asia descent, because of these facial features. Other figures in Olmec art that are seen repeatedly are jaguars, serpents and monkeys. Most sculptures were made of jade, although the giant heads were made of large blocks of stone.



1. Where did the Olmec live? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Around 900 BC, why did the Olmec replace the raised mound with a pyramid?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What does it mean to have a hierarchical society? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is irrigation? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Why were nobles buried with jewels and in tombs made of jade walls? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What are the Olmecs most famous for? \_\_\_\_\_
7. It is believed that the heads are modeled after their \_\_\_\_\_.
8. What were most sculptures in Olmec art made of? \_\_\_\_\_

# THE MYSTERY OF THE OLMEC HEADS



The Olmecs were able to move stone from Cobata in the Tuxtla Mountains to their town of La Venta. This was a distance of about 50 miles and the stone weighed several thousand pounds. How did they move the stone so far? That is the mystery. Take a look at the map and come up with a theory on how the Olmec were able to move stone so heavy without the use of wheels or metal. In your theory describe the route you think they took to get from Cobata to LaVenta and the method or methods that were used to move the several ton stone.

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