Lesson 2

MAIN IDEAS

1. **Geography** Because of geographic advantages for agriculture, the Olmec developed one of the earliest civilizations in the Americas.

2. **Culture** The Olmec developed a sophisticated culture that influenced later civilizations.

3. **Culture** Through trade, Olmec culture spread throughout Meso-America and had a lasting influence.

TAKING NOTES

Reading Skill: Summarizing

Summarizing information, which involves restating main ideas and important details in fewer words, will help you understand materials that you read. As you read Lesson 2, record information on the major features of Olmec civilization in a graphic organizer like the one shown below.

![Graphic Organizer](image)

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CALIFORNIA STANDARDS

7.7 Students compare and contrast the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Meso-American and Andean civilizations.

HI 2 Students understand and distinguish cause, effect, sequence, and correlation in historical events, including long- and short-term causal relations.

CST 2 Students construct various time lines of key events, people, and periods of the historical era they are studying.

- Jaguar The jaguar is native to Meso-America. Its importance to the Olmec is seen in the many jaguarlike sculptures and figurines they made.
The Olmec Civilization

Build on What You Know  Meso-America has a variety of landforms, climates, plants, and natural resources. In this lesson you will learn how these geographic elements led to the development of the Olmec civilization.

An Early American Civilization

ESSENTIAL QUESTION Why were the Olmec able to develop one of the earliest civilizations in the Americas?

About 3,000 years ago, a group of people called the Olmec lived along the Gulf Coast in what is now southern Mexico. They settled near rivers and began to farm. This activity helped them to develop the first major civilization in Meso-America.

A Productive Land  The area where the Olmec lived received a lot of rain. In the rainiest months, the rivers often flooded. When the floodwaters subsided, they left a layer of alluvial soil on the land near the rivers. This soil, deposited by flowing water, was very fertile.

The Olmec soon realized that the flat lands near rivers were good for growing crops. In time, farming began to thrive in the region. As a result, the food supply increased and became more reliable. With a steady food supply, the Olmec population grew.

A steady food supply also meant that some people could focus on tasks other than farming. Some became potters or weavers, while others became priests or teachers. This division of labor was accompanied by another important development—the growth of cities.

TERMS & NAMES

Olmec
alluvial soil
elite
glyph
mother culture
Olmec Cities  As the Olmec population grew, so did their farming villages. Some of these villages developed into cities. By 1150 B.C., the Olmec had built the city now called San Lorenzo. (See the map on the previous page.) The center of the city contained raised mounds and huge stone monuments used for religious ceremonies. San Lorenzo also had plazas—large open areas—which probably were used as trade centers. In addition, there were housing areas, where Olmec priests and rulers lived.

To the east of San Lorenzo, another huge Olmec city, now called La Venta, began to grow around 900 B.C. Within 100 years, it had replaced San Lorenzo as the center of the Olmec civilization. Like San Lorenzo, La Venta served as a religious and trade center.

What impact did an increased and more reliable food supply have on the Olmec?

Olmec Culture

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  What kind of culture did the Olmec develop?

Much of how the Olmec lived remains a mystery. However, based on archaeological evidence, historians have formed some ideas about Olmec culture. These ideas continue to develop and change as more evidence is found.

Olmec Society and Daily Life  Most Olmec were farmers and fishers. They lived in villages near rivers. They may have built their houses on top of earthen mounds. Each mound probably held several dwellings. These buildings most likely had mud or wooden walls and roofs made out of palm leaves. The Olmec villagers’ main task was to provide food for all. They grew maize, beans, squash, and peppers. They also caught fish and turtle, and hunted deer.

Most Olmec city-dwellers were from the elite, an upper class of priests and nobles who ruled Olmec society. These people lived in large stone houses. They wore jewelry and fancy clothes. Some commoners, who were mostly laborers and craftworkers, also lived in the cities. Their houses were smaller and made of wood or mud. And their clothes were very plain.
Some historians believe that the pattern produced by the seal was used to show the king's authority. How might these glyphs express a ruler's power?

Historians know that the Olmec played a ball game like the one you read about on pages 364–365. In fact, the Olmec may have invented the game. The huge ball courts built by the Olmec suggest that the game was popular with spectators.

**Olmec Art and Learning** In the remains of San Lorenzo and other Olmec cities, archaeologists have discovered several huge stone heads. Each head has a flat face, thick lips, and staring eyes. What these heads represent and why the Olmec built them are a mystery. They may be monuments to Olmec rulers or famous ballgame players.

The Olmec made the heads out of basalt (buh•SAWLT), a kind of volcanic rock. They transported these huge rocks from quarries more than 50 miles away. How the Olmec managed to accomplish this feat remains unknown. They did not have the wheel or pack animals.

The Olmec also made small sculptures out of jade. Other Olmec art included pottery and cave paintings.

The Olmec used an early form of glyph writing to record events, dates, and to tell stories. (See the Primary Source feature above.) The Olmec were also incredible astronomers. They developed a calendar that was amazingly accurate for its time.
Religion  The Olmec worshiped several gods. The chief god was the jaguar. They probably believed that the jaguar god brought rain. The Olmec also worshiped a fire god and a corn god. These gods were sometimes represented as a jaguar and sometimes as other animals.

As you read earlier, the Olmec built large mounds in the centers of their cities. Later, they replaced these mounds with pyramids. The Olmec probably used the pyramids as religious centers.

**REVIEW** How was Olmec society organized?

**The Olmec Legacy**

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** Why did Olmec culture have a lasting influence in Meso-America?

Historians believe that the Olmec did not focus on warfare and conquest. Instead, they influenced other cultures mainly through trade.

**Prosperous Trade**  Most Olmec cities served as trade centers. The Olmec mainly traded for luxury items needed by the elite. These items included precious stones, iron ore, and obsidian. Knowledge and ideas also were exchanged at these trade centers. As a result, the Olmec culture spread throughout much of Meso-America.
A Lasting Influence  Around 500 B.C., the Olmec began to abandon their cities. The reason for this remains unclear. By 400 B.C., the Olmec civilization had largely disappeared. Even so, it had a huge impact on Meso-America.

Many historians consider the Olmec civilization the mother culture of Meso-America. A mother culture is a way of life that strongly influences later cultures. Olmec culture and customs shaped succeeding Meso-American cultures, such as the Zapotec, the people of Teotihuacán, the Aztec, and especially the Maya.

REVIEW  Why is Olmec civilization considered a mother culture?

Lesson Summary

• The Olmec developed a thriving civilization that included cities.
• The Olmec developed notable art and a complex religion.
• Olmec culture shaped later Meso-American civilizations.

Why It Matters Now . . .

Today the peoples of Mexico and Central America are still influenced by Olmec culture.

Terms & Names

1. Explain the importance of
   - Olmec
   - elite
   - mother culture
   - alluvial soil
   - glyph

Using Your Notes

Summarizing  Use your completed graphic organizer to answer the following question:

2. How do the features of Olmec civilization compare with those of a typical civilization? (7.7)

Critical Thinking

6. Making Inferences  Why do you think the jaguar god, or rain god, was the most important one for the Olmec? Explain. (7.7)

7. Forming and Supporting Opinions  How do you think the Olmec transported the huge heads they created without using pack animals or the wheel? Give reasons for your answer. (7.7)

Creating a Diagram  Conduct research to find information about Olmec pyramids. Use your findings to create an annotated diagram that shows what an Olmec pyramid looked like. (7.7)