



The Mother Culture of Mexico: The Olmecs

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Denver Public Schools

In partnership with Metropolitan State College of Denver



THE ALMA PROJECT
A Cultural Curriculum Infusion Model



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**The Mother Culture of Mexico:
The Olmecs**

by Daniel Villescas

Sixth Grade

Implementation Time: 3–4 Weeks

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The Alma Curriculum and Teacher Training Project
Loyola A. Martinez, Project Director

Unit Concepts

- Early History
- Ancient Centers of Civilizations
- Geographical Land Marks
- Migration
- Cultures
- Early Art Forms
- Counting Systems
- Effigies

Standards Addressed by This Unit

History

- Students understand the chronological organization of history and know how to organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships. (H1)
- Students know how to use the processes and resources of historical inquiry. (H2)
- Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)
- Students use appropriate technologies to obtain historical information; to study and/or model historical information and concepts; and to access, process and communicate information related to the study of history. (H7)

Geography

- Students know how to use and construct maps and other geographic tools to locate and derive information about people, places and environments. (G1)
- Students know the physical and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define and study regions and their patterns of change. (G2)

Reading and Writing

- Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources. (RW5)
- Students use appropriate technologies to extend comprehension and communication skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (RW7)

Visual Arts

- Students recognize and use the visual arts as a form of communication. (A1)
- Students know and apply elements of art, principles of design, and sensory and expressive features of visual arts. (A2)
- Students know and apply visual arts materials, tools, techniques and processes. (A3)
- Students relate the visual arts to various historical and cultural traditions. (A4)



Introduction

For many hundred of years the Mayan, Zapotec and Toltecs were considered by many to be the first Indians of Mexico. However, within the last 100 years a newly discovered culture has come to the forefront of scientific and historical inquiry. This is Olmec civilization. The name Olmec means “rubber people” in the Aztec language, since they were the discoverers of rubber trees. The origins of this civilization are located in the lowlands of south-central Mexico where present day Veracruz, Tabasco and Oaxaca, between Grijalva and Papaloapa rivers in southern Mexico on the Isthmus Of Tehuantepec. Evidence of their expansion extends as far as El Salvador.

The Olmecs predominated in this geographical region from about 1200 B.C. to about 400 B.C. and are considered to be the Mother culture of Mesoamerican civilizations. The Olmecs established grand cities with centers of worship, market places temples and developed trade routes; they were able to navigate the waterways of Mexico to move large stone heads to various regions of the Olmec kingdom. The centers that flourished during the Olmec era were: La Venta, San Lorenzo, Laguna de los Cerros, Chalcatzingo, La Mojarra, Tenochtitlán and Tres Zapotes. These centers were supported by a fully developed agricultural system, based on corn (maize), beans (frijoles) and squash (calabaza). Art and culture also flourished under the Olmecs; artwork is still being uncovered today with the distinct artistic form developed by the Olmecs. Also, still being unearthed are the colossal or giant stone heads that exemplify or symbolize the Olmec Indians.

Implementation Guidelines

This unit of study supports the sixth grade social studies curriculum. This particular focus on the Olmecs is a precursor to the study of the Aztec, Maya and Inca civilizations (refer to the Civilization Timeline). While the unit can be used to compare/contrast ancient civilizations, it should be emphasized that much of the artistry, traditions, and customs of the Aztecs and Maya were inherited from the Olmecs. This unit was developed as a supplemental guide for a study on Latin America, specifically Chapter 4, “Ancient Civilizations,” in *Peoples World Cultures: Latin America* textbook.

Instructional Materials and Resources

Mexico – From the Olmecs to the Aztecs by Michael D. Coe

Maps of Mexico

Library and Internet Access

Using Geography: Latin America (Student Edition)

Peoples World Cultures: Latin America (Teacher’s Edition)

Peoples World Cultures: Latin America (Student Edition)



Lesson Summary

Part 1: Geography of Mexico

This section of the study invites the students to learn about the key sites where the Olmecs flourished and introduces the students to the landscape of early Mexico. Students will learn of the interdependence of the inhabitants of these ancient centers. Key land features will be highlighted, along with common geographical features. The expansion of the Olmec civilization will be followed, as well as their major contributions still evident today.

Part 2: Olmec Civilization

Students continue their journey back in time 40,000 to 60,000 years to Mesoamerica where stark contrasts frame the geographical landscapes from Northern Mexico to South America. Students are asked to complete a timeframe overview for early civilization periods beginning with early hunters to a Post-Classic period. Vocabulary and Olmec historical background are major focuses of this lesson. The final project, a mock television newsmagazine, connects the Olmec civilization to the present-day states of Veracruz and Tabasco.



What Will Students Learn?

Standards

- Students know how to use and construct maps and other geographic tools to locate and derive information about people, places, and environment. (G1)
- Students know the physical and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define and study regions and their patterns of change. (G2)

Benchmarks

- Students know how to use maps and other geographic tools to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.

Objectives

- Students will learn the specific geographical features of Mexico focusing on the areas of the Olmec civilization and other major landmarks.
- Students will expand their vocabulary by 21 words.
- Students will be introduced to the civilization phases of Mexico.

Specifics

Mexico is one of the most diverse countries in the world with a rich history dating back to Pre-Columbian times and extending to modern day. The sharp contrasts of the geographical landscape contain climates from the highest volcanoes to sea level coastal jungles. Major areas in Mexico lie above 3,000 ft. with mountain ranges commencing in the north and extending through valleys of volcanic terrain. Inhabitants of each of these areas have come together in an interdependence rivaled by many other countries.

Two major mountain chains, the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental form an enclave of inland plateaus. A natural basin, the Valley of Mexico was once home of the Aztecs with its swampy landscape giving way to the famous floating gardens or *chinampas*. Two famous volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Iztaccihueatl are major landmarks of which many stories and legends have been told and retold through the ages. The highlands such as the Sierra Madre del Sur and the mountainous lands of Oaxaca form various ranges beginning in Chiapas, extending into South America. The diverse climates range from one extreme to another extreme (arid to rainforest). The variety of landforms and geographical features with their varying climate are home to many native animals and plants. However, the wild game has diminished over time. The white tailed deer, the peccary, tapirs, monkeys and various wild cats can still be found. Ducks, and tropical birds—including the historical quetzal—, were common with various fish and turtles.

There are specific stages of development if Pre-Conquest Mexico beginning with Early Hunters, Archaic, Preclassic which was the epoch that the Olmec and various other ancient civilizations existed, followed by the Classic and finally the Post-Classic periods.



The beginning of the Olmec culture was established in southeastern Mexico, in the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Tabasco, between the Grijalva and Papaloapa Rivers. Some place the Olmec civilization around 1200 B.C. or possibly 300 years earlier according to radiocarbon dates. There were over 45 different Olmec cities throughout southeastern Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. However, there were three main capitals of the civilization—La Venta, San Lorenzo and Tres Zapotes. Each of these cities was established strategically so its occupants could take advantage of the natural resources surround it.

Prior to the Olmecs, the Indians of Mexico were hunters and gathers. They were nomadic, spending very little time in one location. As soon as the animals they hunted became scarce in one area, they gathered the few belongings they had and moved to a new location with the hope of more plentiful game. When the Olmecs settled in southeastern Mexico, they established agricultural staples such as corn, squash and beans. They also constructed large cities, religious centers, and trade routes. They developed a distinct culture, characterized by highly developed art and religion.

What Will Be Done to Help Students Learn This?

Instructional Strategies

- Summarizing
- Teacher Guided
- Sequencing
- Categorization
- Discussion
- Map Skills
- Independent Reading
- Questioning
- Inferring

Preliminary Lesson Preparation

Have students review the vocabulary guide sheet with a partner. Students will have to complete a vocabulary quiz for the lesson assessment. You have been provided with an excellent teacher resource—*Mexico*, by Michael Coe—that can be used to provide students with background information as time allows.



Activities

The teacher will present an introduction to Mexico providing students with the Southern Mexico and the Home of the Olmecs map (p.26). Explain to students that there are many sites where Olmec artifacts have been unearthed but the main civilization centers are those listed on map. You may wish to provide students with more detailed information about the sites using the Michael Coe text, *Mexico*. Have students look at a modern day map of Mexico and cross reference the sites with the modern day cities.

Next provide students with the Geography of Mexico Guide Sheet and ask students to complete the blank map worksheet (pp. 27–28). Encourage students to utilize maps available to them to label the blank map. After students have completed the map, introduce the periods of development in early Mexico (p. 29). Provide students with the Periods of Development Guide Sheet (p. ?) in Mexico. You may wish to jig saw the periods of development in small groups or ask students to learn this information on their own. Lesson 2 will call for this information from students.

Make sure that students have sufficient time to study and ask questions about the vocabulary. At the end of the lesson, administer the vocabulary quiz..

Vocabulary

bay	isthmus
canyon	lake
coast	mountain
cardinal direction	mountain range
compass rose	ocean
desert	peninsula
equator	plateau
forest	plains
gulf	region
harbor	valley
island	



Resources/Materials

Classroom atlases

Vocabulary Guide Sheet

Southern Mexico and the Home of the Olmecs Map

Geographical Features Map Worksheet, Parts 1 and 2 (map labeling activity)

Guide Sheets for Periods of Development in Mexico (

Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs by Michael D. Coe

Using Geography: Latin America

Peoples World Cultures: Latin America (Teacher's Edition)

Peoples World Cultures: Latin America (Student Edition)

Internet and Library Access

Assessment

Rubrics for the map activity and vocabulary quiz.



Vocabulary Guide Sheet

bay	Body of water partially enclosed by land but with a wide mouth, affording access to the sea.
canyon	Deep narrow valley with high, steep slopes.
coast	Land along a large lake, sea, or ocean.
cardinal direction	One of the four points of the compass – north, south, east, and west.
compass rose	A map feature that where the cardinal directions, north, south, east, and west are located.
desert	Large land area that receives very little rainfall.
equator	The great circle circumscribing the earth's surface, the reckoning datum of latitudes and dividing boundary of Northern and southern hemispheres, formed by an intersecting plane passing through the earth's center perpendicular to its axis of rotation.
forest	Large land area covered with trees.
gulf	Large area of water that lies within a curved coastline
harbor	Sheltered body of water where ships can anchor safely.
island	Piece of land surrounded by water.
isthmus	Narrow piece of land that joins two large sections of land.
lake	Inland body of water.
mountain	Land that rises much higher than the land around it.
mountain range	Row of mountains that are joined together.
ocean	Any of the large bodies of water into which the whole body of salt water that covers much of the Earth is divided.
peninsula	Piece of land that projects into a body of water and is connected with the mainland by an isthmus.
plateau	Large, high land area that is generally flat.
plains	Extensive area of level or rolling treeless country.
region	A group of places with at least one thing in common and can be defined by political, physical, cultural or economic characteristics.
valley	Lower land between hills or mountains. A valley usually contains a river or a stream.



Vocabulary Quiz Name _____ Score _____

DIRECTIONS: Write the letter of each word's correct definition in the blank.

- | | | |
|-------|-----------------------|--|
| _____ | 1. bay | A. Land along a large lake, sea, or ocean. |
| _____ | 2. canyon | B. A narrow piece of land that joins two large sections of land. |
| _____ | 3. coast | C. A group of places with at least one thing in common and can be defined by political, physical, cultural or economic characteristics. |
| _____ | 4. cardinal direction | D. Lower land between hills or mountains. A valley usually contains a river or a stream. |
| _____ | 5. compass rose | E. One of the four points of the compass—north, south, east, and west. |
| _____ | 6. desert | F. A large land area that receives very little rainfall. |
| _____ | 7. equator | G. A sheltered body of water where ships can anchor safely. |
| _____ | 8. forest | H. A body of water partially enclosed by land but with a wide mouth, affording access to the sea. |
| _____ | 9. gulf | I. The great circle circumscribing the earth's surface, the reckoning datum of latitudes and dividing boundary of northern and southern hemispheres, formed by an intersecting plane passing through the earth's center perpendicular to its axis of rotation. |
| _____ | 10. harbor | |
| _____ | 11. island | J. A large land area covered with trees. |
| _____ | 12. isthmus | K. A large area of water that lies within a curved coastline |
| _____ | 13. lake | L. A piece of land surrounded by water. |
| _____ | 14. mountain | M. An inland body of water. |
| _____ | 15. mountain range | N. An extensive area of level or rolling treeless country. |
| _____ | 16. ocean | O. A piece of land that projects into a body of water and is connected with the mainland by an isthmus. |
| _____ | 17. peninsula | P. A deep narrow valley with high, steep slopes. |
| _____ | 18. plateau | Q. Land that rises much higher than the land around it. |
| _____ | 19. plains | R. Any of the large bodies of water into which the whole body of salt water that covers much of the Earth is divided. |
| _____ | 20. region | S. A large, high land area that is generally flat. |
| _____ | 21. valley | T. A map feature that where the cardinal directions, north, south, east, and west are located. |
| | | U. A row of mountains joined together. |

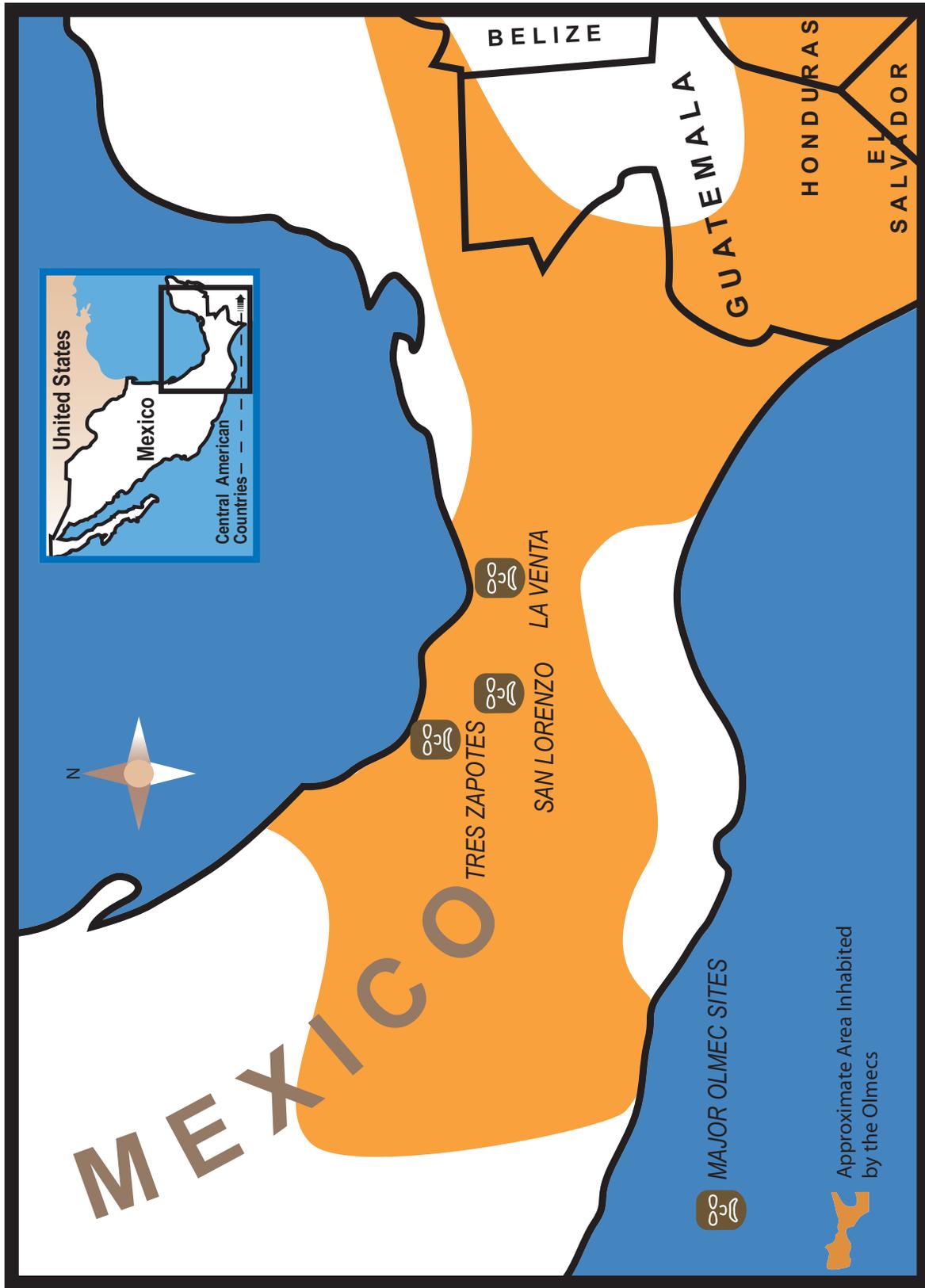


Vocabulary Quiz Answer Key

<u>H</u>	1. bay	A. Land along a large lake, sea, or ocean.
<u>P</u>	2. canyon	B. A narrow piece of land that joins two large sections of land.
<u>A</u>	3. coast	C. A group of places with at least one thing in common and can be defined by political, physical, cultural or economic characteristics.
<u>E</u>	4. cardinal direction	D. Lower land between hills or mountains. A valley usually contains a river or a stream.
<u>T</u>	5. compass rose	E. One of the four points of the compass—north, south, east, and west.
<u>F</u>	6. desert	F. A large land area that receives very little rainfall.
<u>I</u>	7. equator	G. A sheltered body of water where ships can anchor safely.
<u>J</u>	8. forest	H. A body of water partially enclosed by land but with a wide mouth, affording access to the sea.
<u>K</u>	9. gulf	I. The great circle circumscribing the earth's surface, the reckoning datum of latitudes and dividing boundary of northern and southern hemispheres, formed by an intersecting plane passing through the earth's center perpendicular to its axis of rotation.
<u>G</u>	10. harbor	J. A large land area covered with trees.
<u>L</u>	11. island	K. A large area of water that lies within a curved coastline
<u>B</u>	12. isthmus	L. A piece of land surrounded by water.
<u>M</u>	13. lake	M. An inland body of water.
<u>Q</u>	14. mountain	N. An extensive area of level or rolling treeless country.
<u>U</u>	15. mountain range	O. A piece of land that projects into a body of water and is connected with the mainland by an isthmus.
<u>R</u>	16. ocean	P. A deep narrow valley with high, steep slopes.
<u>O</u>	17. peninsula	Q. Land that rises much higher than the land around it.
<u>S</u>	18. plateau	R. Any of the large bodies of water into which the whole body of salt water that covers much of the Earth is divided.
<u>N</u>	19. plains	S. A large, high land area that is generally flat.
<u>C</u>	20. region	T. A map feature that where the cardinal directions, north, south, east, and west are located.
<u>D</u>	21. valley	U. A row of mountains joined together.



Southern Mexico and the Home of the Olmecs Map





Geographical Features Map Worksheet, Part 1: Places to Locate on Map

Directions: On the map provided by your teacher, locate and label the following locations. Color the approximate area occupied by the Olmecs. Some locations are on the guide sheet provided. To locate others, you will need to use additional sources. You may use an atlas, the Internet, or the book *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*. Your teacher has a copy of this book. *Spelling counts!*

Countries

Mexico
Belize
El Salvador
Guatemala
Honduras

Geographical Features

Yucatán Peninsula

Rivers

Rio Grijalva
Rio Papaloapa

Olmec Sites

San Lorenzo
Tres Zapotes
La Venta

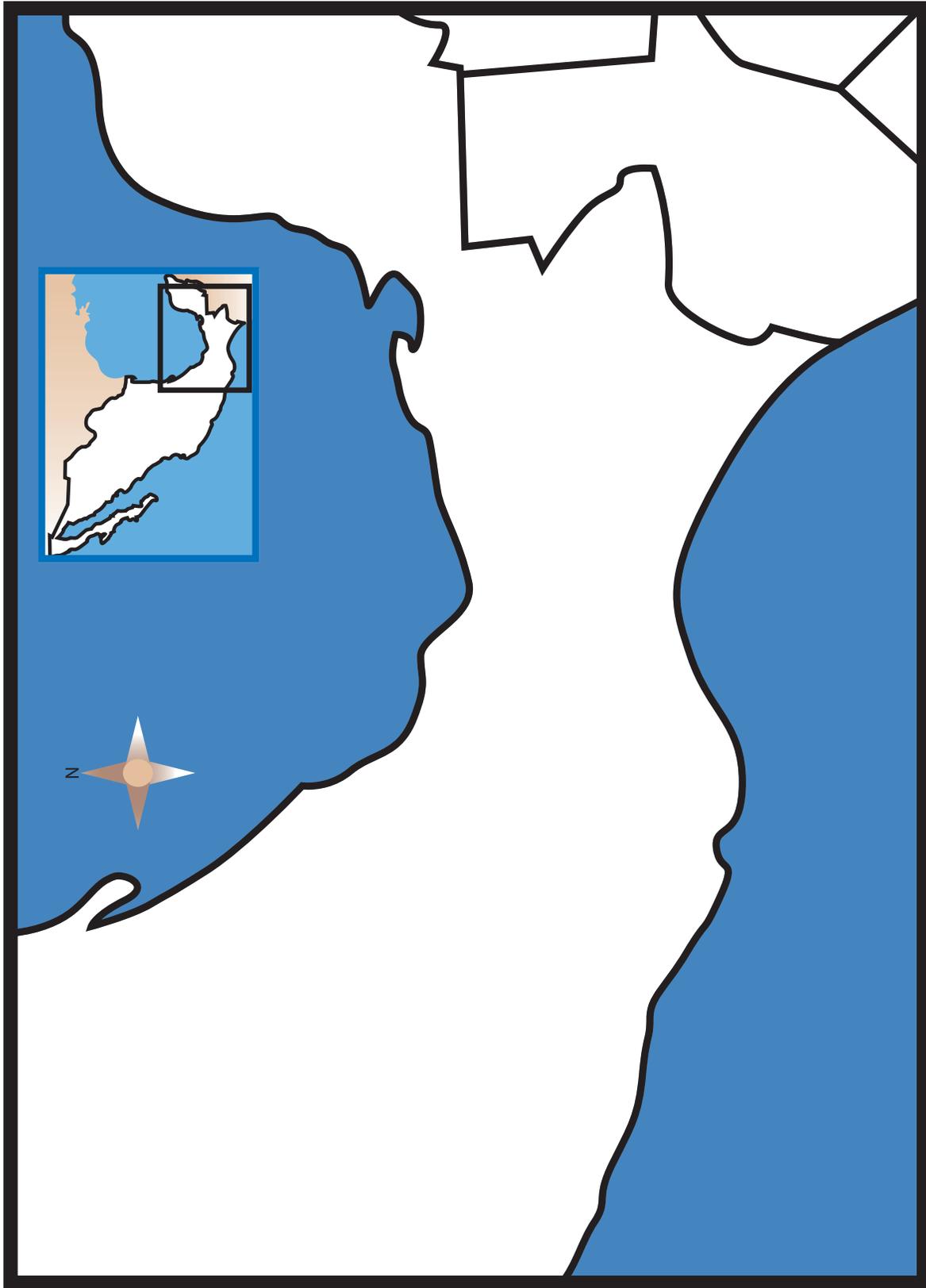
Bodies of Water

Pacific Ocean
Gulf of Mexico
Bay of Campeche



Name _____

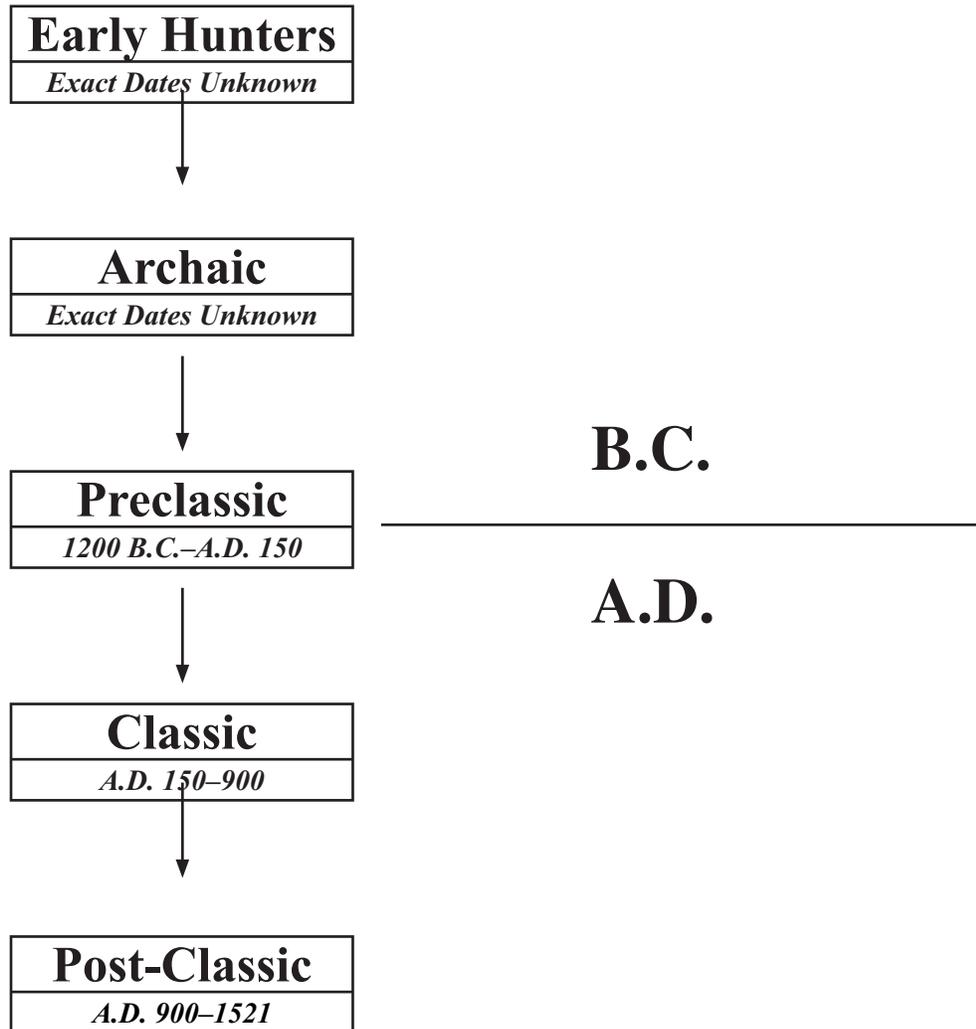
Geographical Features Map Worksheet, Part 2: Blank Map





Guide Sheet for Periods of Development in Mexico: A Brief Timeline

More information will be found on the Guide Sheets for Periods or Stages of Development in Mexico





Guide Sheet for Periods of Development in Mexico:

The Early Hunters

<i>Early Hunters</i>	Archaic	Preclassic <i>1200 B.C.–A.D. 150</i>	Classic <i>A.D. 150–900</i>	Post-Classic <i>A.D. 900–1521</i>
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Characteristics of the Early Hunters Period

- Evidence of lakes and beaches initially.
- Drastic climatic change brought in cold temperatures, snow fall and ice sheets.
- Small bands of hunters, some wild plant foods.
- Earliest migrant to about 7000 B.C.
- Evidence of first man not definite.
- Ice sheets formed a land bridge at least 1,000 miles wide between Siberia and Alaska possibly enabling earliest hunters to enter into American through Alaska from Asia.
- Anywhere between 12,000-14,000 to 50,000 years ago.
- Evidence of stone points used for hunting (Clovis points) and other tools.
- Cave floor dwellings which were relocated depending on availability of food sources.



Guide Sheet for Periods of Development in Mexico:

The Archaic Period

Early Hunters	Archaic	Preclassic	Classic	Post-Classic
		1200 B.C.–A.D. 150	A.D. 150–900	A.D. 900–1521

Characteristics of Archaic Period

- Agricultural—domestication of plants especially maize.
- Around 7000 B.C., high temperatures (Hypsithermal period).
- Pleistocene overkill and extinction of the mastodon, mammoth, horse, camel, giant bison, ground sloth and dire wolf.
- Small bands of hunters inhabiting caves and open sites giving way to village life.
- Various tools for hunting and grinding and development of sandals, baskets and matting.
- Beans, maize and squash and chilies.
- Domestication of various animals and plants.



Guide Sheet for Periods of Development in Mexico:

The Preclassic Period

Early Hunters	Archaic	<i>Preclassic</i> 1200 B.C.–A.D. 150	Classic A.D. 150–900	Post-Classic A.D. 900–1521
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Characteristics of the Pre-Classic Period (Early Villagers)

- Early (1800 to 1200 B.C.), Middle (1200 to 400 B.C.) and Late (400 B.C. to AD 150) Preclassic.
- Village life continues with the birth of more complex societies.
- Farming.
- First appearance of pottery.
- Chiapas yields hard evidence of various cultures.
- Oaxaca, homeland of the Zapotec people and Monte Albán culture.
- Valley of Tlatilco yields pottery and figurines (often found at burial sites).
- Sites of El Arbolillo and Zacatenco.
- Late classic villages – Chupicuaro.
- Appearance of the temple-pyramid.
- Regional center of Cuicuilco.
- Mezcala art located in chamber tombs.

NOTE: *The Pre-Classic Period is divided into Early Villagers and Early Civilizations. Characteristics of Early Civilization are shown on the next page.*



Guide Sheet for Periods of Development in Mexico:

The Preclassic Period

Early Hunters	Archaic	<i>Preclassic</i> 1200 B.C.–A.D. 150	Classic A.D. 150–900	Post-Classic A.D. 900–1521
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Characteristics of the Pre-Classic Period (Early Civilizations)

- Advance of arts and technology.
- Birth of elite centers and other urban centers.
- Olmec (rubber people) occupation in southern Veracruz and Tabasco mostly along Gulf Coast.
- Olmec culture flourished in Middle Preclassic.
- Distinctive art styles based on specific iconography.
- Art shows mastery of form.
- Carvers of stone (colossal heads and alters to small jade figurines).
- Tres Zapotec, La Venta and San Lorenzo major excavation sites.
- El Manatí yields extraordinary preservation of Olmec artifacts.
- Zapotec utilizing various forms of irrigation namely canals.
- Monte Albán, greatest of Zapotec sites and still home to Zapotec people today.
- Numbers and other hieroglyphs evident in the stone slabs uncovered at Monte Albán I (population between 10,000 to 20,000).
- Monte Albán II is a complex in the form of an arrowhead pointing southwest with stone slabs bearing various inscriptions, most of which depict victories over enemies.
- Dainzú, and Izapa civilizations.
- La Mojarra stela unearthed bearing longest script in Mesoamerica.

NOTE: *The Pre-Classic Period is divided into Early Villagers and Early Civilizations. Characteristics of Early Villagers are shown on the previous page.*



Guide Sheet for Periods or of Development in Mexico:

The Classic Period

Early Hunters	Archaic	Preclassic <i>1200 B.C.–A.D. 150</i>	Classic <i>A.D. 150–900</i>	Post-Classic <i>A.D. 900–1521</i>
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Characteristics of the Classic Period

- Golden Age of Mesoamerica.
- Height of Mexican and Mayan civilization.
- Mayan and Zapotec develop hieroglyphic scripts.
- Rise and decline of large cities like Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, and El Tajin.
- Pantheon of deities: Rain God, Water Goddess, Sun and Moon Gods, Maize God, and the Feathered Serpent, later known as Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent.
- Urban centers such as Teotihuacan (largest city of the Pre-Columbian New World with a population reaching 200,000 in what is now the valley of Mexico).
- Art style is extremely refined with greenstone, jade, basalt, andesite, mussel-shells and obsidian.
- Spear and dart points, bone needles.
- Great pyramids such as Cholula that was the largest structures in the New World.
- Great murals, paintings, pottery, and temples.
- Ritual ball games.
- Residential terraces in Monte Albán.
- Subterranean tombs.



Guide Sheet for Periods or of Development in Mexico:

The Post-Classic Period

Early Hunters	Archaic	Preclassic 1200 B.C.–A.D. 150	Classic A.D. 150–900	Post-Classic A.D. 900–1521
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Characteristics of the Post-Classic Period

- Toltecs and Aztecs.
- Emphasis on militarism
- Confusion and movement of people forming small states.
- Introduction of metals.
- Migration of barbaric tribes.
- Domestic architecture.
- Farming.
- Trading.
- *The Turquoise Road*, mining of rare minerals at Alta Vista.
- Slave labor.
- Toltec contact with the Pueblo Indians in the Southwest United States.
- Turquoise deposits discovered and exploited in New Mexico.
- Toltec traits merge into the American Southwest (masks, masonry building, platform pyramid, ball court and game, worship of the Feathered Serpent).
- Toltec influence in Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee and Illinois.
- Zapotec culture at Mitla.
- Mixtec people.
- Tarascans in Lake Patzcuaro in western Mexico.
- Rise of the Aztec state.



Rubrics for Part 1

Name _____ Date _____

Map Exercise

Rubric Points	Description	
	Minimum number of items labeled in their proper locations	Number of spelling errors allowed
4—Advanced	13–14	none
3—Proficient	11–12	up to 2 errors allowed
2—Partially Proficient	10	up to 4 errors allowed
3—Unsatisfactory	fewer than 10	5 or more errors

Vocabulary

Rubric Points	Description
4—Advanced	All 21 correct
3—Proficient	18–20 correct
2—Partially Proficient	15–17
3—Unsatisfactory	fewer than 15 correct



What Will Students Learn?

Standards

- Students know how to use the processes and resources of historical inquiry. (H2)
- Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)
- Students use appropriate technologies to obtain historical information; to study and/or model historical information and concepts; and to access, process, and communicate information related to the study of history. (H7)

Benchmark

- Students know how to interpret and evaluate primary and secondary sources of historical information.
- Students know how various forms of expression reflect religious beliefs and philosophical ideas.
- Students use appropriate technologies to enable historical inquiry.

Objective

- Students will travel back 40,000 to 60,000 years to a time of early hunters and to a region where the ancient civilization of the Olmecs flourished.
- Students will learn the characteristics for the periods of development—from the Early Hunters to the Post-Classic period in early Mexico.
- Students will assume various roles for the presentation of a news cast.
- Students will expand their vocabulary by 25 words.
- Students will learn the civilization phases of Mexico and their key features

Specifics

There is much speculation as to the first inhabitants of Mexico but the more common notion is that early travelers crossed a thick land mass covered by ice known as the Bering Strait between 40,000 to 60,000 years ago. This ice bridge allowed nomadic hunters to cross from Asia to North America. These early travelers set the stage for others but remained isolated for a time. The small villages grew with the introduction of maize and a highly developed social structure of labor, politics and religion—as well as a calendar and a system of pictorial writing.

The first art form to emerge from this ancient civilization was a series of large stone heads measuring nine feet in height and weighing some 40 tons each, and the second art form was that of small figurines made of precious and semi-precious stones such as jade (more valued than gold), marble, quartz, serpentine, and greenstone. Many of their sculptures represented jaguar faces



combined with human bodies or features to create “were-jaguars.” The jaguar represents various religious beliefs. The Olmecs suddenly disappeared and the people of Monte Albán followed.

What Will Be Done to Help Students Learn This?

Instructional Strategies

- Summarizing
- Teacher Guided
- Sequencing
- Categorization
- Discussion
- Map Skills
- Independent Reading
- Questioning
- Inferring

Preliminary Preparation

Have students review the Timeline Overview introduced in Part 1 and present the Historical Summary Guide Sheet. Introduce the vocabulary for Part 2.

Activities

Allowing students to work independently or in small groups during class, provide the Guide Sheets for Periods of Development in Mexico presented in Part 1 of this study. Have students learn the key characteristics that describe each phase. After the study sessions or at a later time, students will complete the Civilization Period Overview worksheet individually. Present the Olmec Historical Summary Guide Sheet and have students learn the various components. Each student is responsible for knowing five or more facts for each category and completing the Olmec Historical Summary Worksheet.

Class discussion can center on contrasting the Olmec civilization to other Pre-Columbian civilizations and even to modern day societies.

After allowing sufficient study and discussion on the vocabulary, administer the vocabulary quiz.

As a culminating activity, have the students participate in the Dateline Veracruz mock TV show.



Vocabulary

hieroglyphics

ecology

archaeologist

deity

jade

sacrifice

benevolent

economically

ceremonial

Neolithic

ritual

domestication

settlements

gourds

demography

decipher

La Venta

San Lorenzo

plateau

Tres Zapotes

anthropomorphic

zoomorphic

Hacienda

statues

prestige



Resources/Materials

Vocabulary Guidesheets

Guide Sheets for Periods of Development in Mexico included in Part 1

Civilization Period Overview Worksheet

Olmec Historical Summary Guide Sheet

Olmec Historical Summary Worksheet

Vocabulary quiz

Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs by Michael D. Coe

Using Geography: Latin America

Peoples World Cultures: Latin America (Teacher's Edition)

Peoples World Cultures: Latin America (Student Edition)

Internet and Library Access

Assessment

Rubrics for the Civilization Period Overview Worksheet, the vocabulary quiz, the Olmec Historical Summary Guide Sheets, and Dateline Veracruz



Vocabulary Guide Sheet

hieroglyphics	Pertaining to a system of writing where often times pictorial symbols are used to represent words or sounds.
ecology	The science of the relationships between organisms and their environments.
archaeologist	A person who systematically recovers and studies material evidence, such as graves, buildings, tools, and pottery, remaining from past human life and culture.
deity	A god or goddess.
jade	Either of two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, that are generally pale green.
sacrifice	The act of offering something to a deity in propitiation or homage.
benevolent	The inclination or tendency to do kind or charitable acts.
economically	Not wasteful or extravagant; prudent and thrifty in management.
ceremonial	Characterized or involved in a ceremony.
Neolithic	Of or denoting the cultural period beginning around 10,000 B.C. in the Middle East and later elsewhere and characterized by the making of technically advanced stone implements.
ritual	The prescribed form or order of conducting a religious or solemn ceremony.
domestication	To bring down to the level of the common man.
settlements	Establishment, as of a person in a business or of people in a new region.
gourds	Any of several vines or the family Cucurbitaceae, related to the pumpkin, squash, and cucumber and bearing fruits with a hard rind.
demography	The study of the characteristics of human populations, as size, growth, density, distribution, and vital statistics.
decipher	To read or interpret, to convert from a code or cipher to plain text.
La Venta	A major Olmec location.
San Lorenzo	A major Olmec location.



Vocabulary Guide Sheet (continued)

plateau	An elevated and comparatively level expanse of land, tableland.
Tres Zapotes	A major Olmec location.
anthropomorphic	Having or suggesting human form and appearance.
zoomorphic	The attribution of animal characteristics or qualities to a god.
Hacienda	In Spanish speaking countries, a large estate or plantation.
statues	Forms or likeness sculpted, modeled, carved, or cast in materials such as stone, clay, wood, or bronze.
prestige	Prominence or influential status achieved through success, renown, or wealth.



Student Vocabulary Quiz

Name _____ Score _____

DIRECTIONS: Write the letter of each word's correct definition in the blank. *One definition will be used three times.*

- _____ 1. hieroglyphics
- _____ 2. ecology
- _____ 3. archaeologist
- _____ 4. deity
- _____ 5. jade
- _____ 6. sacrifice
- _____ 7. benevolent
- _____ 8. economically
- _____ 9. ceremonial
- _____ 10. Neolithic
- _____ 11. ritual
- _____ 12. domestication
- _____ 13. settlements
- _____ 14. gourds
- _____ 15. demography
- _____ 16. decipher
- _____ 17. La Venta
- _____ 18. San Lorenzo
- _____ 19. plateau
- _____ 20. Tres Zapotes
- _____ 21. anthropomorphic
- _____ 22. zoomorphic
- _____ 23. hacienda
- _____ 24. statues
- _____ 25. prestige



Definitions for Vocabulary Quiz

- A. A person who systematically recovers and studies material evidence, such as graves, buildings, tools, and pottery, remaining from past human life and culture.
- B. The act of offering something to a deity in propitiation or homage.
- C. The prescribed form or order of conducting a religious or solemn ceremony.
- D. Characterized or involved in a ceremony.
- E. Any of several vines or the family Cucurbitaceae, related to the pumpkin, squash, and cucumber and bearing fruits with a hard rind.
- F. To bring down to the level of the common man.
- G. The attribution of animal characteristics or qualities to a god.
- H. To read or interpret, to convert from a code or cipher to plain text.
- I. An elevated and comparatively level expanse of land, tableland.
- J. In Spanish speaking countries, a large estate or plantation.
- K. Pertaining to a system of writing where often times pictorial symbols are used to represent words or sounds.
- L. Prominence or influential status achieved through success, renown, or wealth.
- M. Not wasteful or extravagant; prudent and thrifty in management.
- N. A god or goddess.
- O. Establishment, as of a person in a business or of people in a new region.
- P. The study of the characteristics of human populations, as size, growth, density, distribution, and vital statistics.
- Q. A major Olmec location.
- R. Either of two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, that are generally pale green.
- S. Forms or likeness sculpted, modeled, carved, or cast in materials such as stone, clay, wood, or bronze.
- T. Having or suggesting human form and appearance.
- U. The science of the relationships between organisms and their environments.
- V. Of or denoting the cultural period beginning around 10,000 B.C. in the Middle East and later elsewhere and characterized by the making of technically advanced stone implements.
- W. The inclination or tendency to do kind or charitable acts.



Vocabulary Quiz Answer Key

- K** 1. hieroglyphics
- U** 2. ecology
- A** 3. archaeologist
- N** 4. deity
- R** 5. jade
- B** 6. sacrifice
- W** 7. benevolent
- M** 8. economically
- D** 9. ceremonial
- V** 10. Neolithic
- C** 11. ritual
- F** 12. domestication
- O** 13. settlements
- E** 14. gourds
- P** 15. demography
- H** 16. decipher
- Q** 17. La Venta
- Q** 18. San Lorenzo
- I** 19. plateau
- Q** 20. Tres Zapotes
- T** 21. anthropomorphic
- G** 22. zoomorphic
- J** 23 hacienda
- S** 24. statues
- L** 25. prestige



Civilization Period Overview Worksheet

Student Name _____ Date _____

List five or more characteristics for each time period.

I. Early Hunters Period

II. Archaic Period

III. Preclassic Period: Early Villagers (1200 B.C.–A.D. 150)



IV. Preclassic Period: Early Civilizations (1200 B.C.–A.D. 150)

V. Classic Period (A.D. 150–900)

VI. Post-Classic Period (A.D. 900–1521)

VII. What conclusions can you draw from each time period?



Olmec Historical Summary Guide Sheet

It wasn't until this century that the Olmecs were acknowledged to be part of Mexico's history. Researchers prior to this time attributed many of the discoveries now associated with the Olmecs to Mayan, Toltec, or even Chichimecan cultures. However, due to advances in scientific dating, scientists were able to determine that the art, artifacts, and miscellaneous objects found at La Venta, Tres Zapotes, and San Lorenzo were from a period of time earlier than the Maya.

The Olmecs, which means "people of rubber" in Nahuatl (the ancient language of the Aztecs), began their civilization in southeastern Mexico between 1600 B.C. and 1400 B.C. It is believed that the Olmecs created their first cities between the Grijalva and Papaloan rivers, in the present-day Mexican states of Oaxaca, Veracruz, Chiapas, and Tabasco.

The Olmecs had approximately 45 different cities, but there were three main sites. Some researchers claim that each city was a capital that controlled trade routes, provided defense from attacking tribes, and was responsible for the accumulation of natural resources in the area. The three cities were Tres Zapotes, La Venta, and San Lorenzo. These cities were east of the Tuxtla Mountains and the Southern Mountain Range (Sierra Madre del Sur). The locations of these cities on a map show a triangle of control and power.

The geographical area of the Olmec civilization is varied in its features. It is close to the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It was a humid area and contained a varied landscape of jungles, plains, and mountains.

The Olmecs established cities, trade routes over land and water, and most importantly, an agricultural system that could feed those who lived in those cities. Corn (maize), beans (frijoles), and squash (calabaza) were planted and harvested. These crops are still prevalent in Mexico. The Olmecs were also known to have domesticated dogs and turkeys. There is some evidence that they practiced cannibalism as well; however, this has not been completely proven. The Olmecs lived in a society based on a theocratic form of government (government ruled by or subject to religious authority). Religion played a major role in the lives of the Olmecs. Scientists and historians have unearthed altars and other sculptures that support this.

The giant heads of the Olmecs are quite unusual. The first head was discovered in 1862 in southern Veracruz by Jose Maria Melgar. It wasn't until 1925 that a second giant head was discovered, along with several other objects. In 1929, Marshall H. Saville, coined the phrase the "Olmec" in a paper that he published.

In much Olmec art and other objects, there are two repeating themes: the use of jade and the symbol of the jaguar. Both of these held special meaning for the Olmecs. The Olmecs and other Indians of Mexico believed that the jaguar had special powers.

The Olmecs used stone from as far as 60 miles away to sculpt their giant heads. It is now believed that these heads were meant to honor famous leaders and/or warriors. To date, 16 heads have been found, the tallest standing over eleven feet.



Olmec Major Centers

A major center was primarily in the San Andres Tuxla area close to Lake Catemaco, extending down to the Gulf of Mexico in the southern part of Vera Cruz. Three major centers were occupied by the Olmecs—La Venta, Tres Zapotes and San Lorenzo.

La Venta is approximately two square miles on an island in a swamp in the Tonalá River. Large pyramids have been found in the center of the island, but the outlying areas have not been excavated yet. There is speculation that one pyramid may have been constructed to remind the Olmec of the volcanoes from their homeland.

Agriculture

Maize

Farming, fishing, and hunting.

Plant domestication with gourds being the first food that was grown with beans, squash, pumpkins, chili peppers, peppers, avocados and cotton being cultivated later.

Bartering system

Clearing of jungle for farmland with one or two harvests per year.

Irrigation was done utilizing an aqueduct system that delivered drinking water to various parts of the center. The irrigation system contained buried drain lines.

Demography

Estimation of 40 – 60 people per square mile. Densely populated group of the Mesoamericans.

Language

Most likely a proto-Mixe-Zoquean or Epi-Olmec

Writing

The Olmecs may have been the first people to introduce a writing system to the world. The Olmec is a logosyllabic scrip with various hieroglyphic writing systems. There are two writing forms of Olmec hieroglyphic writing: the pure hieroglyphics (pictures) and the phonetic hieroglyphics which combined syllabic and logographic signs. Many engravings have been found, and when broken down, can often be interpreted using the ancient Libyco-Berber script.

Calendar

The Olmec calendar began as a calendar year consisting of 52 years then ending up with a calendar similar to our calendar today but with 360 days instead of 365. Dots signified the value of 1, lines signified the value of 5, and there was a special glyph for zero.



Physical Characteristics

One can only speculate what the Olmec people looked like. Based on the sculptures and monuments found, there is strong indication that they were a people of low stature leaning towards solid, chunky frames with slanted eyes, short wide noses and thick lips with the corners turned downward, prominent jaw line, and short thick necks.

Artistry

The Olmecs made fine pottery, small carved figurines, huge colossal heads and carved jade jewelry. Wood, basalt and jade were used to make statues with the wood possibly being the oldest in Mesoamerica. Basalt was used to make the huge heads which ranged from 5 feet to 11 feet tall. The huge heads may have represented the elite Olmec ancestors or sacrificial offerings. They could also have been warriors or ball players. Basalt was also used for the making of thrones. Human faces with jaguar mouths have been found with the huge colossal heads having flattened noses, wide lips, and capping headpieces that possibly represent warrior kings.

Olmec Society

The Olmecs are known as the mother culture throughout Mexico because of their early achievements in art, politics, and economics. Their original capital was San Lorenzo until 900 B.C. and then the capital was La Venta. There is evidence of trading since many Olmec objects can be found outside of their immediate areas. Although the Olmecs may have moved and relocated outside of their centers, Olmec objects were exported out of the main centers. Various objects have been found in Tlatilco, Monte Albán, and down into Central America.

Olmec society was divided into two groups, the elite who lived in the urban areas and the common people who lived in the rural areas. The elite heavily influenced art style, political and economic climate and religious practices. Other classes of Olmecs such as farmers, artisans and sculptors were part of the common people—followed closely by the merchants and warriors and finally the high authority. The high authority had wealth, status and prestige. The Mesoamerican states are often referred to as military theocracies.

Religion

The Olmecs practiced Shamanism, with shamans practicing healing and conducting rituals. The sun may have been part of their worship, with the jaguar being a very important part of their belief system. Much has been written about were-jaguars who were offspring of a human mother and a feline father. Other significant divinities were the jaguar monster, fire god or maize god, bird god, jaguar baby, death god, bearded god, plumed serpent, human-feline figure, God X, and a figure representing Xipe-Toltec. A prominent god was the jaguar who may have been a fundamentally earth god with a dominance of water and earth. The jaguar represented Mother Earth with the serpent representing water. There may have been at least ten different gods represented in Olmec art.



Olmec Historical Summary Worksheet

List at least five facts from the Olmec Historical Summary Guide Sheet for each category below.

Student Name _____ Date _____

Olmec Centers	Agriculture	Demography
Writing/Language	Calendar	Physical Characteristics
Artistry	Olmec Society	Religion



Rubrics for Part 2

Name _____ Date _____

Civilization Period Overview Worksheet

Rubric Points	Description	
	Minimum number of items required	Number of factual errors allowed
4—Advanced	at least 5 items on each list	all items must be accurate
3—Proficient	at least 28 items among all lists	up to 2 errors allowed
2—Partially Proficient	at least 25 items among all lists	up to 4 errors allowed
3—Unsatisfactory	fewer than 25 items among all lists	5 or more errors

Vocabulary Quiz

Rubric Points	Description
4—Advanced	All 25 correct
3—Proficient	21–24 correct
2—Partially Proficient	17–20
3—Unsatisfactory	fewer than 20 correct



Rubrics for Part 2 (cont'd)

Name _____ Date _____

Olmec Historical Summary Activity

Rubric Points	Description	
	Minimum number of items required	Number of factual errors allowed
4—Advanced	at least 5 items on each list	all items must be accurate
3—Proficient	at least 40 items among all lists	up to 2 errors allowed
2—Partially Proficient	at least 30 items among all lists	up to 4 errors allowed
3—Unsatisfactory	fewer than 30 items among all lists	5 or more errors



Culminating Activity

Dateline Veracruz: Special Television Coverage of a Convention on the Olmec Civilization

To the Teacher

This mock television report activity is a perfect chance to individualize instruction according to your students' needs. The roles played in this activity require a range of skills, cognitive abilities, and cultural backgrounds of your students. Please modify, omit, scaffold, or add to the roles identified below. Be sure to investigate the resources available to your students before assigning this project. Know what your school library has to offer, and evaluate the appropriateness of Web resources.

Assign each role below to a student or a pair of students. Once finished with the research, the show's host will work with each reporter and guest to determine what kinds of questions to ask.

Dateline Veracruz: What Does the Show Look Like?

Dateline Veracruz is a television newsmagazine show that airs in the states of Veracruz and Tabasco in southern Mexico, the area where the Olmecs lived.

The show begins with the host introducing the special focus of that particular edition. This edition will feature a convention of historians, archaeologists, and art experts studying the Olmec civilization. After explaining the focus of the show, the host will introduce a news reporter who will give a short report on the latest news of the day in Veracruz and Tabasco. A weather reporter then will give the daily forecast, and a sports reporter will talk about the latest games and scores.

Then the host interviews the special guests on their specialties regarding the Olmecs. This is a question/answer format, with the host asking the questions. It should be more of a conversation than a formally rehearsed interview. However, the host should talk to the experts before the show to find out what they know. Then, come up with interview questions on what the experts have learned about their subject.

Since this is for television, visuals will help get the message across. Such visuals may include weather maps, political maps, sports scores, team logos, drawings of Olmec art, maps of the Olmec heartland, and artifacts.



Job Descriptions: Host, Reporters, and Olmec Experts

Dateline Veracruz Host

You have talked with your reporters and guests before the show so that you know what kinds of questions to ask during the show. You introduce your reporters and guests and keep the show on schedule.

News Reporter

Your job is to report the latest news in the modern-day area where the Olmecs lived. First, look at a map to see where in Mexico the Olmecs lived, and figure out what modern-day places are in that region. Then, explore the Web to find out what the hot stories in that area are today. Your teacher will help you figure out which Web sites are accurate and which ones are not. You don't want to be embarrassed by giving your TV audience the wrong information!

Weather Reporter

Your report on current weather conditions where the Olmecs lived will help tourists, archaeologists, and historians decide whether to jump in the car and drive to these places, do research at the library, or sleep in at the hotel!

Sports Reporter

Archaeologists, historians, reporters, and art experts visiting the homeland of the Olmecs like to take a break and watch an exciting sporting event. What sports being played right now in Olmec country can you recommend to these people? Throw in a little color commentary about the Olmecs' rubber ball!

Arts and Culture Reporter

Archaeologists, historians, reporters, and art experts like to visit art museums and historical sites. Offer some travel tips for them in the Olmec region. Include a suggestion or two on concerts and theater performances.

Archaeologist

You know how to carefully dig up what's left of important historic and prehistoric places. You can explain how a team of archaeologists use tools such as shovels and tiny brushes to gently remove the soil around important artifacts.

History Professor

Your area of expertise is the history of the Olmecs. Since this is tied to the artwork of this ancient civilization, you will probably want to collaborate with the art historian.

Art Historian

You're into the Olmecs' fascinating large head sculptures, the smaller carvings, and their similarities to other cultures—including those in Africa. Be prepared to talk about the human/jaguar images (the were-jaguar) and other meanings of the Olmec art.



Assessment Rubrics for Dateline Veracruz: Special Television Coverage of a Convention on the Olmec Civilization

Name _____ Date _____

Rubric for Research and Knowledge of Speciality Score _____

Rubric Points	Description
4	The student has done responsible, in-depth research, has pulled information from at least four sources, and has presented accurate information during the show.
3	The student has done somewhat responsible, in-depth research, has pulled information from at least three sources, and has presented mostly accurate information during the show.
2	The student has done little responsible, in-depth research, has pulled information from at least two sources, and has presented somewhat accurate information during the show.
1	The student has done very little or no responsible, in-depth research, has pulled information from only one source, and has presented little accurate information during the show.

Rubric for Performance on the Show Score _____

Rubric Points	Description
4	The student answers/asks questions with poise and confidence; maintains eye contact with either the camera or the host/guest, as appropriate; and speaks clearly and fluently.
3	The student answers/asks questions somewhat nervously; nearly always maintains eye contact with either the camera or the host/guest, as appropriate; and speaks clearly and fluently.
2	The student nervously answers/asks questions; sometimes maintains eye contact with either the camera or the host/guest, as appropriate; and speaks haltingly.
1	The student does not participate in the show.



Daniel Villescas was born in El Paso, Texas and moved to Denver in the late 1970s. He attended Metropolitan State College of Denver and graduated with a degree in history. He is currently the principal at Del Pueblo Elementary School in Denver. Before that, he taught sixth-grade bilingual social studies and English as a second language at Lake Middle School. He also served on the ISA advisory team and coached football.

Daniel is married and the proud father of his son, Alexander Xavier Villescas. He is the third of four brothers and is the only one to choose a career in education. He believes that “we have the power and responsibility to educate the youth of today.”



Bibliography

Coe, Michael D. Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994.

An authoritative work on ancient Mexican civilizations, including the Olmecs.

Chan, Roman Piña. *Los Olmecas: La Cultura Madre*. Barcelona-Madrid: Lunwerg Editores, S.A., 1990.

Excellent source on all aspects of the Olmecs. Published in Spanish only.

Davies, Nigel. *The Ancient Kingdoms of Mexico: A Magnificent Re-creation of Their Art and Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1982.

Provides a good overview of the Olmecs, especially about their history, location, and traditions.

King, Jaime Litvak. *Ancient Mexico: An Overview*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985.

Does a good job of introducing the Olmecs; however, does not provide enough depth.

Loprete, Carlos A. Ibero McMahon. *America: Sintesis de su civilization*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965.

Does not discuss the Olmecs; however, has a nice map placing them in the correct regions of Mexico.

Parks, Henry Bamford. *A History of Mexico*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960.

Brief reference on the Olmecs; however, does not give full acknowledgment of their existence or contributions.

Smith, Bradley. *Mexico: A History in Art*. Mexico: Gemini Smith Inc., 1968.

Very good source that provides illustrations of Olmec art. Great visuals. Internet <http://udgftp.cencar.udg.mx/ingles/precolombina/olmecas/docs/olmin.html>

http://www.cultures.com/contests/heads/em_all.html

Excellent resource page with useful links. Illustrations of Olmec heads can be accessed from this site.

<http://www.crystalinks.com/olmec.html>

Good Web page that provides a detailed summary of what is known about the Olmecs, as well as what has been accomplished by historians, archaeologists, and researchers since the discovery of the Olmecs in the 19th and 20th centuries. Also very good visuals.