

**The Americas: A Separate World****Section 2**

# Early Mesoamerican Civilizations

**Terms and Names**

**Mesoamerica** Area that stretches south from central Mexico to the northern part of modern-day Honduras

**Olmec** People who flourished along the Mesoamerican coast of the Gulf of Mexico from 1200 B.C. to 400 B.C.

**Zapotec** Early Mesoamerican civilization that was centered in the Oaxaca Valley of what is now Mexico

**Monte Alban** First urban center in the Americas, built by the Zapotec

**Before You Read**

In the last section, you read about the first inhabitants of the Americas.

In this section, you will read about the first civilizations in America.

**As You Read**

Use a Venn diagram to compare Olmec and Zapotec cultures.

**THE OLMEC (Pages 240–241)****Who were the Olmec?**

The story of American civilizations begins in Mesoamerica. This area stretches south from central Mexico to the northern part of present-day Honduras.

The earliest known American civilizations arose in southern Mexico, an area of hot rain forests. The people are called the Olmec. They flourished from about 1200 to 400 B.C. Their culture had a great influence on their neighbors and on peoples who lived long after them.

The Olmec lived along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in a land of dense forests and heavy rains.

The land gave them many benefits. It had good clay that could be used for pottery. Wood and rubber could be taken from the forest. The mountains to the north had stone for building. The rivers

could be used to move people and goods. The soil was excellent for growing food.

Archaeologists have found earthen mounds, courtyards, and pyramids built of stones. On top of the mounds were many monuments made of stone. Some of these stone structures are very large. They weigh as much as 44 tons.

Researchers are not sure whether the Olmec sites were monuments to rulers or areas important for religious reasons. They do think that the Olmec had many gods who stood for important forces of nature. The most important god, it seems, was the jaguar spirit. Many stone monuments show figures that are half-human and half-jaguar.

The Olmec traded goods and their culture with other people in the region. In return for the products they made, they received iron ore and different kinds of stone.

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For some reason, the Olmec disappeared around 400 B.C. Historians still do not understand why. But their influence lived on.

1. What evidence of Olmec civilization has been found?

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2. What evidence of Zapotec civilization has been found?

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**ZAPOTEC CIVILIZATION ARISES**  
(Pages 242–243)

**Who were the Zapotec?**

Another important early culture of Mexico was that of the **Zapotec** people. Their home was to the southwest of the Olmec in a valley that had excellent soil for farming and plenty of rainfall. By about 1000 B.C. the Zapotec built stone platforms and temples. A few hundred years later, they developed a kind of writing and a calendar.

Around 500 B.C., the Zapotec built the first city in the Americas. The city was called **Monte Alban**. As many as 25,000 people lived there. The city lasted as late as A.D. 700. Monte Alban had tall pyramids, temples, and palaces made out of stone. It had an observatory that could be used to look at the stars. But the Zapotec culture collapsed. As with the Olmec, historians do not know why.

**THE EARLY MESOAMERICANS' LEGACY** (Page 243)

**How did the early Mesoamericans influence later peoples?**

Both of these cultures left their mark on later cultures. The jaguar figure of the Olmec continued to appear in the sculpture and pottery of people who came later. Also, the look of Olmec towns—with pyramids, open space, and huge stone sculptures was repeated in later times. The ritual ball games of the Olmec continued to be played.

The Zapotec also shaped the lives of later peoples. Their way of writing and their calendar were used by other groups. The city of Monte Alban also influenced later peoples, who built their own cities in similar ways. These cities combined religious purposes with the needs of the common people who lived in them.

3. How did the Zapotec influence later peoples?

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As you read about early Mesoamerican civilizations, fill out the charts by writing notes that describe aspects of the Olmec and Zapotec civilizations.

<b>Olmec</b>	
1. Geography/Environment	
2. Urban design	
3. Economy	
4. Achievements/Legacy	

<b>Zapotec</b>	
5. Geography/Environment	
6. Urban design	
7. Language	
8. Achievements/Legacy	