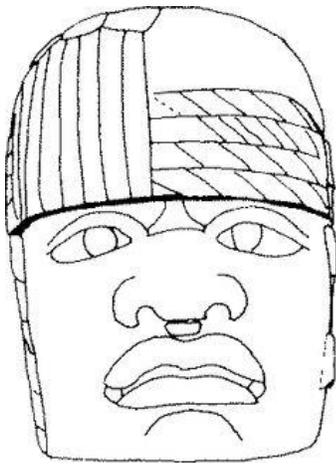
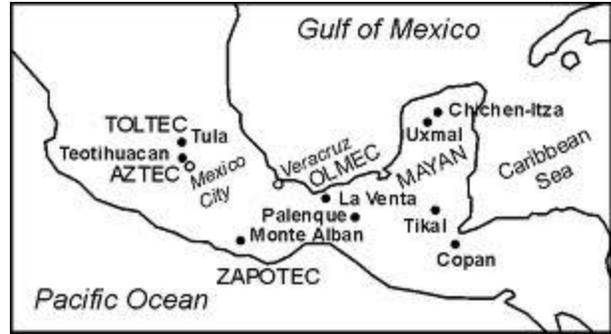


THE OLMEC

The Olmec civilization was at its most powerful between 1200 BC and 300 BC. They developed in southern Mexico surrounded by rain forests. Their culture spread across Mexico and Central America through trade routes. A main city was La Venta (the window) located on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. They farmed corn and beans and had resources to produce rubber, tar, and salt. They used their surplus supplies to build a strong trade. Being on the Gulf also contributed to the growth of a large fishing industry. The Olmec controlled trade in the area for many years.



The Olmec carved enormous head statues. Most researchers believe the stone heads represented Olmec rulers. Seventeen head statues have been found to date. Each head is carved from a single basalt boulder and weighs about eight tons. The heads were sculpted using hard hand-held stones and were probably painted in bright colors. Many statues show a protective helmet, which was worn by the Olmec in battle.

Evidence indicates that the average Olmec citizen lived in simple one-room buildings made from earth packed around poles. Because they were farmers and lived near flood plains to help water the crops, homes were often built on a mound or platform. More important citizens would live in stone houses on a plateau closer to a religious temple or pyramid.

Historians give the Olmec credit for contributing discoveries and inventions to later cultures. These early people were probably the first to ferment, grind, and roast cacao beans to make food. Today, we know this bean as the main ingredient in chocolate. The Olmec used the cacao bean in a special drink that was served out of special round jars called tecomates. They developed a calendar much like the Maya. Their calendar was round and was probably related to important farming dates. This early calendar was called a solar round. In addition, Olmec may have been the first American people to understand the concept of zero. Understanding zero is key to place value and enables us to write larger numbers. The Olmec people are considered the predecessors to the other great Mesoamerican cultures such as the Maya and Aztec.

