History of Olmec Civilization

Who were the Olmecs? Little is known of them but they are believed to have been the first civilization to have a written language, cultivated and utilized the cacao tree, and generally were the forerunners of subsequent inhabitants of Mexico.

**OLMEC ORIGINS**
- What is known about them is that they preceded the Mayans in Mesoamerica, and are thought to be the foundation of all subsequent cultures in that part of the Americas.
- There will always be differing opinions when it comes to dates, but the Olmecs are believed to have originated in around 1250 B.C. and disappeared around 400 B.C.
- A common feature with theirs and later civilizations were that they:
  - Followed a 365 day year
  - Built pyramids
  - Cultivated corn (maize)
  - All had similar religious rituals and the same Gods of fertility, war, sky & nature
- Regarding the thick-lipped Negroid features of their carvings, some researchers postulate that the Olmecs originally came from Africa, and indeed their language is very similar to that spoken today in Mali. Details of facial scarring & lines on Olmec statues also bear similarities to tribal marks found among the Yoruba peoples of West Africa. This is not necessarily to suggest that the founders or leaders of Olmec civilization came directly from Africa, since many original populations of countries like Cambodia and the Philippines have similar characteristics. These might have been brought along when the first humans entered the Americas from Asia. *(JOURNEY OF MAN)*

**OLMEC LANDS** - The three largest Olmec cities were:
- La Venta in Tabasco (the eastern sector), dominated the rich coastal estuaries, including the cacao, rubber & salt trade.
- San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan in Veracruz was at the center of the Olmec civilization, and an important political-religious center, which controlled the vast flood plains of the Coatzacoalco basin and river trade routes. The first drainage system in Mesoamerica was discovered there, consisting of channeled blocks of stone set into the earth, covered with slabs. Their region is also famous for the colossal basalt carved heads, weighing 20-40 tons each.
- Laguna de los Cerros, also in Veracruz, to the West, controlled the important basalt mines/mountains, important for the manufacture of *metates* (stones for grinding food) & monuments.
- Perhaps marriage alliances between Olmec centers helped maintain such an exchange network.

**OLMEC ART**
- The Olmecs must have had a high regard for art as many cave paintings & huge stone sculptures have been found, along with jade artifacts & statues.
- Typical Olmec art featured jaguars, thick-lipped soldiers and goatee-bearded men and often a combination of jaguar and children (were-jaguars – like werewolf). As they believed themselves to be descendants of the Jaguar, the animal was held in very high esteem, often featuring in religious ceremonies.
- Ceramics are produced in kilns capable of exceeding approximately 900° C. The only other prehistoric culture known to have achieved such high temperatures is that of Ancient Egypt.
Colossal Heads - Perhaps the best-recognized Olmec art are the enormous helmeted heads. There have been 17 colossal heads unearthed to date. No known pre-Columbian text explains these impressive monuments that have been the subject of much speculation. Given the individuality of each, these heads seem to be portraits of famous ball players or perhaps kings rigged out in the accoutrements of the game. Some of these huge carved stone heads have been found up to 50-60 miles away from the source of stone, leaving researchers still wondering exactly how they managed to transport such massive pieces those distances, though the most likely explanation may be that they floated them on barges down the extensive network of rivers.

WORK & PLAY
- Initially, the Olmecs in the swampy tropical heartland lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, later spreading to outlying areas and developing agriculture and distinct political & economic hierarchies as wealth and commerce with outside people grew.
- The great Olmec centers were dynamic settlements that included artisans and farmers, as well as religious specialists and the rulers.
- An important feature at the Olmec centers were irrigation / drainage systems consisting of a buried network of stone drain lines. Research at San Lorenzo suggests those systems were actually aqueducts used to provide drinking water to the different areas of the settlement.
- Rubber was first exploited by the Olmecs and various carvings show ball games where the ball could be deflected off elbows, hips, knees and head, though using the hands was considered an illegal move.
- The Olmec were perhaps the originators of the Mesoamerican ballgame, prevalent among later cultures of the region and used for recreational and religious purposes. They were playing ball before anyone else has been documented doing so.

CALENDARS & MATHEMATICS
- The Olmecs were clever mathematicians and astronomers who made accurate calendars.
- The late Olmec had already begun to use a true zero (a shell glyph) several centuries before Ptolemy, possibly by the fourth century BCE. This would later become an integral part of Maya numerals.

RELIGION
- Olmec religion featured mainly worship of the Jaguar and Were-jaguars (children with Jaguar features), though snake worship was popular too.
- They believed that the Jaguar was very closely associated with a person's spirit and that should the Jaguar die, the person would also die.
- In common with all religions, to maintain their position in society the Olmec ruling elite needed to make the people believe either that they were Gods or that they were associated with The Gods – Present were several important deities of the later, established Meso-American pantheon, such as the fire god, rain god, corn/maize god, and the Feathered Serpent.
- Their religion, symbolic language and architectural systems seemed strong & popular enough to have lasted through to the Zapotecs, Teotihuacans and Mayan peoples, until everything changed with the Spanish conquests of Hernandez Cortez and Spanish influence.