

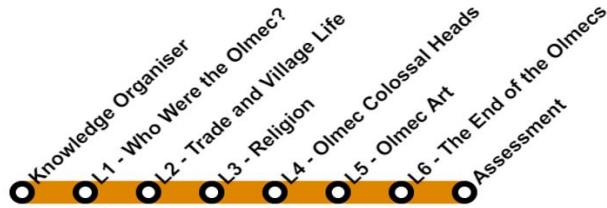


# History Knowledge Organiser - Mexico

## Who were the first of the ancient civilisations to inhabit Mexico?

Skills: Chronological Understanding, Historical Knowledge, Interpretations of History, Historical Enquiry

### Lesson Sequence



### Trade and village life

There are no written records of Olmec commerce, beliefs, or customs, but from the archaeological evidence, it appears they were not economically confined. In fact, Olmec artefacts have been found across Mesoamerica, indicating that there were extensive interregional trade routes. Trading helped the Olmec build their urban centres of San Lorenzo and La Venta. These cities, however, were used predominantly for ceremonial purposes and elite activity; most people lived in small villages. Individual homes had a lean-to-sort of like a garage shed—and a storage pit for storing root vegetables nearby. They also likely had gardens in which the Olmec would grow medicinal herbs and small crops, like sunflowers.

### Religion

There are no direct written accounts of Olmec beliefs, but their notable artwork provides clues about their life and religion. There were eight different **androgynous**—possessing male and female characteristics—Olmec deities, each with its own distinct characteristics.



A map of the Olmec heartland. The yellow dots represent Olmec settlements, and the red dots represent archaeological finds. These Spanish place names are modern; we don't know what the Olmec names for these places were.



Great Pyramid in La Venta

### Who were the Olmec?

The Olmec were the first major civilization in Mexico. They lived in the tropical lowlands on the Gulf of Mexico in the present-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco. The name Olmec is a Nahuatl—the Aztec language—word; it means the rubber people.

### Olmec colossal heads

The most striking art left behind by this culture are the Olmec colossal—very big—heads. Seventeen monumental stone representations of human heads sculpted from large basalt boulders have been unearthed in the region to date. The heads date from at least before 900 BCE and are a distinctive feature of the Olmec civilization. All portray mature men with fleshy cheeks, flat noses, and slightly crossed eyes. However, none of the heads are alike, and each boasts a unique headdress, which suggests they represent specific individuals.

### The end of the Olmec

The Olmec population declined sharply between 400 and 350 BCE. Archaeologists speculate that the depopulation was caused by environmental changes, specifically by the silting-up of rivers, which choked off the water supply. Another theory for the considerable population drop proposes relocation of settlements due to increased volcanic activity as the cause rather than extinction. Volcanic eruptions during the Early, Late, and Terminal Formative periods would have blanketed the lands with ash and forced the Olmec to move their settlements.