Name: _____

Date: _____

The Olmecs

In 1862, near the village of Tres Zapotes in southern Mexico, a farmer uncovered a dome-shaped rock while clearing land. He dug deeper and excavated a nearly six-foot-tall stone head. Archaeologists later dated it to about 900 BCE. This farmer, whose name was never recorded, had discovered the first widely recognized evidence of the culture we now call the Olmecs.

Archaeologists have uncovered seventeen colossal heads in the densely forested land of southern Mexico.

Around 1800 BCE, the Olmecs appeared in the densely forested lowlands near Mexico's Gulf Coast. They planted squash, tomatoes, and peppers, but corn was their main crop. As farming improved, their population grew, helping them build the first advanced civilization in the Americas.

The Olmecs are often called the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica because later civilizations—like the Maya and Zapotec—seem to have borrowed many Olmec ideas. We know very little about the Olmecs—not even what they called themselves. "Olmec" is actually an Aztec word meaning "people from the rubber-growing region."

The Olmecs built some of the first pyramids in Mesoamerica and appear to have studied the stars. Their ceremonial centers suggest an early interest in astronomy, which likely influenced later Mesoamerican calendars. Their religious beliefs and cultural practices helped shape civilizations such as the Maya and Aztec.

Some scholars believe the Olmecs may have developed the earliest writing system in the Americas, but their glyphs are faint and have not been deciphered.

Archaeologists have excavated seventeen colossal heads carved from basalt, the latest in 1994. The largest of the heads stands over eleven feet tall and weighs nearly fifty tons. These sculptures are thought to be portraits of Olmec rulers. Some appear to be smiling, while others look calm or stern, suggesting the artists captured a range of emotions. All wear what look like helmets—possibly linked to military status or to the ceremonial ballgame, which was important in later cultures.

We don't know much about Olmec ball games, but archaeologists have found courts for playing and large spaces where people likely gathered to watch. The game used a solid rubber ball and required great skill. Some evidence suggests it was part of a religious ceremony.

Artists of this ancient culture often created human-like figures with unusual features—people with long, flattened skulls and misshapen hands, often with missing fingers. The reason these traits fascinated the Olmecs remains a mystery.

The Olmecs lived in a swampy region with no natural sources of stone. The basalt used to carve the colossal heads came from more than fifty miles away. Workers transported the enormous stones through dense jungle and across rivers—without using the wheel.

The Olmecs occupied three successive cities that were all eventually abandoned. The first, now called San Lorenzo, rose to prominence around 1200 BCE. As San Lorenzo declined, the Olmecs appeared to have moved to a larger city near present-day La Venta, though the reason for the shift is unclear. That city was also abandoned around 350 BCE. Archaeological evidence suggests the population in the region dropped sharply. The reason for their disappearance is still uncertain. Because they lived in one of the wettest parts of Mesoamerica, the jungle quickly reclaimed their abandoned cities.

The Olmecs vanished so completely that even the peoples who came after them seemed to forget they ever existed. When that farmer near Tres Zapotes excavated a massive stone head in the 1860s, he wasn't just clearing land—he was uncovering a civilization that had disappeared from memory for more than two thousand years.

Just two centuries ago, ancient Egypt was equally mysterious. But in 1823, Jean Champollion deciphered its hieroglyphic writing. Likewise, archaeologists have made great advances in understanding the history of Mesoamerica in recent years. So, it is possible that the mysteries of the Olmecs and other civilizations of the region will soon be explained.

Name: _____
Date: _____

Fill in the Blanks

The Olmecs were the first advanced civilization of M__s__a__e__i__a. They first appeared about _____BCE in the densely f__r__s__ed lands of s__u__he__n Mexico, near the present-day states of Veracruz and Tobasco. The Olmecs studied a__t__o__o__y and developed systems of w__i__i__g and m__t__e__a__i__s. They also constructed p__r__m__ds and developed a c__l__n__ar.

The Olmecs built three ci__i__s that were each mysteriously a__a__d__n__d at different times. An even greater mystery is what happened to the Olmecs as a culture. The evidence suggests the p__p__l__ti__n of the region suddenly dropped about _____BCE. The f__r__st reclaimed their land and the Olmecs stayed hidden from history for perhaps as long as two thousand years.

Colossal Head #6 was excavated in 1965.

The culture remained unknown to the *m__d__rn world until the late 1850s, when a Mexican f__rm__r found a *s__a__ue of a man's h_____. Archaeologists have since uncovered seventeen c__l__s__al heads in the region. The statues are complex portraits of men wearing h__l__e__s. Some of the statues portray s__i__i__g men, while others show faces that are ca__m or a__g__y. Scholars have suggested that the statues represent Olmec r__l__rs dressed for a b_____ g_____.

The Olmecs lived in a s__a__py region with no natural stone from which to *c__r__e the c__l__ss__l heads. Without the use of the *w_____, they somehow transported the stone through jungles and over rivers from m__u__t__i__s more than one hundred miles away. Olmec sculptors fashioned the heads with s__o__e tools because metallurgy was unknown in the region more than two thousand *y__a__s ago.

Answer in complete sentences

*1. Why was the Olmec civilization unknown to the modern world until the late 1850s?

*2. According to the text, what crops allowed the Olmec population to grow?

3. Why have many scholars dubbed the Olmecs the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica?

*A higher order learning question. Any reasonable answer will be accepted.