

EXAMINING OLMEC PRIMARY SOURCES

Introduction

The Olmec were one of the earliest civilizations in Mesoamerica. They did not leave behind long books or written histories that we can easily read today, so historians study artifacts to learn about their lives, leaders, beliefs, and skills.

Directions: Look closely at each Olmec artifact. Then answer the questions using evidence from the artifact.



Source 1: Colossal Head 1

c. 1000 - 600 BCE

1. What does the size of the colossal head suggest about the person it may represent?
2. What does this artifact suggest about the Olmec's ability to organize workers and resources?
3. Why might historians think this head represents a ruler or important leader instead of an ordinary person?

Source 2: Olmec Greenstone Face

c. 900 - 400 BCE

4. Why might the Olmec have chosen greenstone, a rare and difficult material to carve, for an important mask or face?
5. What can this artifact suggest about social class or power in Olmec society?
6. What is one thing historians can learn from this artifact, and what is one thing they still cannot know for sure?



EXAMINING OLMEC PRIMARY SOURCES KEY

Source 1: Colossal Head 1

1. What does the size of the colossal head suggest about the person it may represent?

The size suggests the person may have been very important, powerful, or respected in Olmec society.

2. What does this artifact suggest about the Olmec's ability to organize workers and resources?

The artifact suggests the Olmec could organize many workers, move heavy stone, and plan large projects.

3. Why might historians think this head represents a ruler or important leader instead of an ordinary person?

Historians may think it represents a ruler or leader because it is large, carefully carved, and likely required a lot of labor and resources to create.

Source 2: Olmec Greenstone Face

4. Why might the Olmec have chosen greenstone, a rare and difficult material to carve, for an important mask or face?

The Olmec may have chosen greenstone because it was rare, valuable, beautiful, and possibly connected to power, religion, or ceremony. Using a difficult material also showed skill and importance.

5. What can this artifact suggest about social class or power in Olmec society?

The artifact suggests that some people in Olmec society may have had higher status or power because rare materials and skilled artists were likely controlled by leaders, priests, or important families.

6. What is one thing historians can learn from this artifact, and what is one thing they still cannot know for sure?

Historians can learn that the Olmec had skilled artists, valued certain materials, and may have used masks or faces for important ceremonies. However, they cannot know for sure exactly who used the mask, what ceremony it was used for, or what every detail meant.