



Ancient History

The first inhabitants in Mexico were people who probably migrated into the **New World from Asia**, perhaps by crossing a land bridge that existed in the **Bering Strait** at some time during the Ice Age.

Then, they travelled south through Alaska, Canada, the United States and into what is today, Mexico. Different tribes settled in different regions. This took place more than **40,000 years ago**.



Ancient cultures of Mexico

Mexico's ancient cultures helped shape the country as it is today. There was no direct succession from one group to another. Instead, many cultures existed at the same time in various parts of Mexico and Middle America (*Mesoamerica*), among them, the Olmecs, the Teotihuacans, the Maya, the Mixtecs, the Zapotecs, the Tarascans, the Totonacs and the Aztecs.

The Olmecs | 150- 300 BC

The Olmecs lived in the humid lowlands of southern Veracruz and Tabasco along the Gulf of Mexico. The word *Olmec* means "*the dweller in the land of rubber*". The *Olmecs* were great sculptors, whether carving **tiny jade figures** or gigantic basalt monuments. They considered jade to be a precious stone.

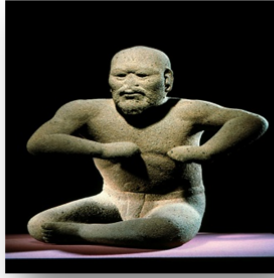
They are most famous for their carvings of huge human heads made from boulders, some weighing as much as **50 tons**, which they made without any metal tools.

The largest head found is 3.40 metres (10 feet) high. Nowadays, as much as 17 of these colossal heads had been found.

The *Olmecs* carried these boulders as far as 100 kilometres (60 miles). Nobody knows how they did this. It is believed that the stones were somehow dragged down to the nearest navigable stream



and from there transported on rafts up the Coatzacoalcos River.
Imagine the strength of the people who were able to do this!



These colossal heads probably represent rulers, warriors or athletes. The heads seem to be wearing helmets like those worn for American football so it is thought these sculptures might be players of an ancient **ball game** which was played by the Olmecs as well as other groups from the Mexican region.

The *Olmecs* invented a calendar and influenced later cultures such as the Aztecs, Mixtec, Totonac and the Maya.

The Teotihuacans 100 BC- AD 750

Teotihuacan is an ancient city that was built around 200 AD, in the Valley of Mexico.

Teotihuacan means "**The City of the Gods**". It is about one hour's drive north of present day Mexico City.

It was believed to be the place where the gods were created; and many people came on pilgrimages to visit it. Before the Spanish arrived, *Teotihuacan* had about 150,000 inhabitants (as big as Oxford), making it probably the largest city in Mesoamerica.



The *Teotihuacans* built the temples, monuments, streets and squares of their city based on their observations of astronomy.

This is one of the most breathtaking archeological sites in all the Americas. Even today you can still walk along the main street, called the *Avenue of the Dead*, climb the Pyramid of the Moon and then tackle the even higher Pyramid of the Sun, which compares in size to the pyramids of Egypt.

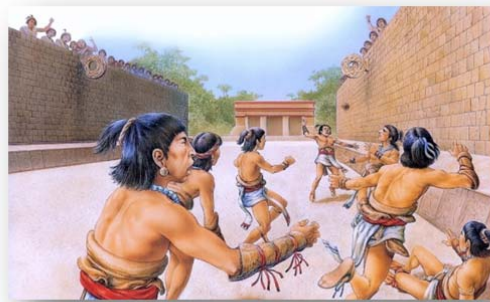


The Temple of Quetzalcoatl is covered in large, carved, feathered snake heads. The Teotihuacans used *obsidian* — a black volcanic glass — for trading, cutting tools and ornaments. The Teotihuacans had a great influence over later cultures and there is evidence that

they travelled as far as present day Guatemala.

The Ball Game

This was a game played by two teams using a rubber ball, in a rectangular court bordered by stone walls. The players could only use their elbows, hips and knees to hit the ball, and the aim was to send the ball through stone rings which were high on the sides of the court. Injuries were sometimes fatal so the players wore heavy protective padding. It was so hard to put the ball through the rings that the games usually lasted a long time.



Information about the game is still being discovered by archeologists. There are two explanations about the result of the game. One is that the winning team could claim clothes or jewellery from the spectators, who usually watched the game wearing their most elegant outfits. So, when the ball went through the hoop, it was not uncommon for the spectators to flee with the winning players in hot pursuit!



The other explanation is that it was a religious game. After the game, a ceremony was held at which the losing players were sacrificed to the gods.

Versions of the game still survive today in the North West of Mexico and in the state of Oaxaca.