

## The Olmec

# The cocoa pioneers of America.

The history of chocolate starts in around 3000 BC with America's first advanced civilization - the Olmec. They settled in the east of what is today Mexico and are most famous for the giant basalt heads they sculpted.

It is today considered almost certain that the Olmec were the first to cultivate the cacao tree. Archaeologists have found artifacts proving that they grew the cacao tree alongside their main source of food: maize. Another clue is the term "cacao", originally pronounced "cacaua", which was already part of their vocabulary. It is thus no great leap to conclude that the Olmec not only knew the cacao tree but were also the first to produce chocolate from its beans.



The giant Olmec stone head

However, they were not very widespread at the time, firstly because the hard-to-cultivate cacao only grew in the wild in the American tropics, and could thus only be grown there, and secondly because the consumption of cacao beans was a privilege of the elite.

The Olmec, with their advanced civilization, had a significant influence on the neighboring peoples with whom, for example, they traded. Their enormous ceremonial complexes and pyramids set an example for all the cultures that followed them, such as the Mayas, Toltecs and Aztecs. It was then these peoples, especially the Mayas, who borrowed and passed on the Olmec knowledge of cocoa from about 1000 BC.