



## Ancient Civilizations of Peru

Best known as the heart of the Inca Empire, Peru was also home to many diverse cultures long before the rise of the Inca Empire. Peru goes back to some 20 000 years B.C. when the territory began to be populated with groups of hunters and gatherers. Although hunter gatherers lived in Peru, there is little evidence of organized life until about 2500 BC.

In South America, there developed various real civilizations which we call, "Pre-Inca." A change in climate in the coastal regions prompted Peru's early inhabitants to move toward the more fertile interior river valleys. For the next 1,500 years, Peruvian Civilization developed into a number of organized of "Pre-Inca Cultures". Among the most significant were:

- **On the coast:** Paracas, Nazca, and Chimú.
- **In the mountains:** Chavin and Tiahuanaco.

### Civilizations before 600 BC

The Chavín culture, flourishing from the 10th century BC, has long been considered the first civilization of South America. But in recent decades archaeologists have revealed far earlier centralized societies in the Norte Chico region of Peru, along the Supe River. Aspero was the first of many such sites to be discovered, and Caral is the largest. Sophisticated architecture (pyramids and raised platforms) suggests complex societies, and carbon-dating reveals that they were in existence at around 2627 BC - contemporary with the beginnings of civilization in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

In the early age of this culture, the Chavin were mainly hunters and gatherers. Eventually, the area became an urban centre - they developed their agricultural methods, raised cattle, practiced metallurgy, mastered the techniques of making textiles, began to practice religious rituals, and became brave warriors.

The main Chavín ceremonial site, the magnificent Chavín de Huántar, is about 10,000 feet above sea level in Peru's Cordillera Blanca. Its temple architecture, begun in about 900 BC is characterized by huge raised platforms. They are formed from massive blocks of dressed stone, in the beginning of a long Peruvian tradition. The Chavín culture subsequently spreads through much of the Andean region. One of its characteristics is stone sculpture of fantastic beasts, of which serpents, birds and jaguars often provide the component details.

### Paracas: 600 BC - AD 200

The Paracas culture (600 BC – 200 AD) flourished on the peninsula of Paracas, known today as the department of Ica.

Their knowledge of medicine was advanced, as shown by the remains of surgical operations to the brain (cranial trepanations). Bodies were preserved on a large, underground necropolis where mummies were wrapped in luxurious cloths and mantles, and were well-preserved owing to certain optimal conditions (i.e., the sands in the area), and thanks to the cranial trepanation technique. In their first stage, mummies were located in collective tombs, dug in the form of caverns. At a later stage, mummies were buried directly in the earth.

The Paracas were also masters in the textile arts. They are, in fact, considered to be the best in textile production of all the ancient Peruvian cultures. They used vicuña wool or cotton in many colours. The most common themes were animal-like, incorporating both anthropomorphic and geometric designs.

Their ceramic art was influenced by the Chavin culture and involved simple shapes, with many colours and illustrations, as well as drawings similar to the Nazca culture. Their ceramics were made without moulds and baked in closed ovens.

Their economy was based in agriculture and fishing. They excelled in agrarian activities and the intelligent use of irrigation (aqueducts) in desert-like regions, enhanced by means of artificial watering channels and the use of guano as fertilizer.

### **Mochica and Nazca: 200 BC - AD 600**

After the decline of Chavín de Huántar, the Andean region develops several more localized cultures. Of these the two most distinctive are the Mochica in the north and the Nazca to the south.

The Mochica, centred upon Moche on the coast in northern Peru, is known in particular for brilliantly realistic pottery sculpture - usually depictions of human heads (possibly even portraits), functioning as jugs with stirrup-shaped spouts emerging from the top. The Mochica were also ambitious builders. The so-called Temple of the Sun at Moche is a stepped pyramid with a height of 41 metres. It is constructed entirely of unfired bricks, dried in the sun.

Contemporary with the Mochica, but inhabiting a desert region along the southern coast of Peru, are the Nazca. They are noted for their brightly coloured pottery and for sophisticated textiles, with vivid embroidery.

The most remarkable aspect of their culture is the so-called Nazca Lines. These are drawings executed on a massive scale on the coastal plane. Sometimes purely geometrical, sometimes formal versions of bird or animal shapes, the images are achieved by removing the brown surface of the plain to reveal lighter soil beneath. The purpose of these vast drawings (best viewed in a way the Nazca never saw them, from the air) remains unknown.

### **Tiwanaku and Wari: AD 400-1000**

In about the 5th century AD the centre of civilization in the Andean region shifts from the coastal plain to the highlands. The most impressive of the highland cities is Tiwanaku (also spelt Tiahuanaco), near Lake Titicaca in what is now Bolivia. It is well established by about AD 400, and begins to dominate large areas of the surrounding territory from about 550.

Shortly after this date a rival empire develops in the highlands further to the north, around the city of Wari. Of the two, Wari has a shorter period of prosperity. It declines by about 800, whereas Tiwanaku remains an important local power until early in the 11th century.

### **Sican and Chimú: AD 800 - 1470**

After the heyday of the first two highland empires of the Andes, Tiwanaku and Wari, the coastal regions recover the leading role in the region. Descendants of the Mochica develop a culture known as Sican, in the Lambayeque area of northern Peru.

Their main city is Batán Grande, a pilgrimage centre with several monumental pyramids, which has yielded numerous golden tomb treasures in recent years to the archaeologists (and previously to grave robbers). The site seems to have been abandoned in the 12th century after a great flood.

During the Sican period a greater and more extensive culture is evolving a little way down the coast, again among descendants of the Mochica inhabitants of these regions. Known as the Chimú, these people develop a great city from about AD 900. They call it Chan Chan.

Chan Chan is the largest of the ruined cities of the Andean civilizations. Its walls enclose an area of about eight square miles, within which there are ten or more huge rectangular palace compounds - known as *ciudadelas*.

The *ciudadelas* are almost like self-contained townships, with their own public buildings, water supply and even burial arrangements in addition to accommodation for the residents - probably the members and followers of one powerful family in each *ciudadela*.

----- Inca Civilization c.1500 AD

Elsewhere in the city are numerous signs of production and trade. The two main Andean crafts are extensively practised here, metal being worked by men while the women are in charge of the spinning and weaving of cloth. Caravanserais in the city, capable of housing several hundred people, cater for the caravans of llamas arriving with wool and metal ores for sale and exchange.

The prosperity of Chan Chan within its own immediate region is based on elaborate systems of irrigation in the coastal plain, but it also has a large commercial empire. In the 13th and 14th century the influence of the Chimú extends over the entire length of modern Peru, from Ecuador in the north to Chile in the south.

But this is the last coastal civilization of the South American Indians, in a tradition going back more than 2000 years to Chavín de Huántar. Between 1465 and 1470 the Chimú are overwhelmed by a highly organized people from the Andean highlands. They become incorporated into the empire of the Incas.



Caral has the distinction of being the oldest known city in the Americas and one of the oldest in the world.

There are six pyramids in total, the largest of which is Piramide Mayor.

Piramide Mayor measures about 450 by 500 feet and is more than 60 feet in height.

Caral is 14 miles inland from its nearest neighbour, the town of Supe, and is one of 18 ancient settlements built by the Norte Chico Civilization in the Supe Valley region. Caral and its pyramids are believed to have been the central hub of the settlements. Crafted from stone, their design indicates a complex and advanced architectural understanding. Like other pyramids in history, the Caral pyramids are believed to have religious significance and to have been used in city gatherings and celebrations.

[cosmic]

----- Inca Civilization c.1500 AD