

Early Americas  
AP World History  
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The history of the Americas (North, South, and Central America, and the Caribbean) begins with people migrating to these areas from Asia during the height of an Ice Age. These groups are generally believed to have been isolated from peoples of the "Old World" until the coming of Europeans in the 10th and 15th centuries. The ancestors of today's American Indigenous peoples were the Paleo-Indians; they were hunter-gatherers who migrated into North America. The most popular theory asserts that migrants came to the Americas from Central Asia via the Bering Land Bridge, Berengia, the land mass now covered by the cold ocean waters in the Bering Strait.

### **Early Mesoamerican Civilization**

The mysterious Olmec civilization prospered in Pre-Classical (Formative) Mesoamerica from 1200 BCE to 400 BCE and is generally considered the forerunner of all subsequent Mesoamerican cultures such as the Maya and Aztecs. Centered in east-central Mexico, their influence and trade activity spread from 1200 BCE, even reaching as far south as present-day Nicaragua. Monumental sacred complexes, massive stone sculpture, ball games, chocolate drinking and animal gods were features of Olmec culture which would be passed on to all those who followed this first great Mesoamerican civilization.

The Olmec civilization presents something of a mystery. We do not even know what they called themselves, as 'Olmec' was their Aztec name and meant 'rubber people'. Due to a lack of archaeological evidence their ethnic origins and the location and extent of many of their settlements are not known. The Olmecs did, however, codify and record their gods and religious practices using symbols. The precise significance of this record is much debated but, at the very least, its complexity does suggest some sort of organized religion involving a priesthood. The Olmec religious practices of sacrifice, cave rituals, pilgrimages, offerings, ball courts, pyramids and a seeming awe of mirrors, was also passed on to all subsequent civilizations in Mesoamerica until the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century CE.

By 1200 BCE significant urban centers developed at San Lorenzo (the earliest), La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, Tres Zapotes and Las Limas. San Lorenzo reached its peak of prosperity and influence between 1200 and 900 BCE when its strategic position safe from flooding allowed it to control local trade. Typical Olmec trade goods included obsidian, jade, serpentine, mica, rubber, pottery, and feathers

Evidence of San Lorenzo's high culture includes the presence of mound structures, possibly an early ball court, carved basalt drains through one of the man-made mounds and the Red Palace structure with painted red floors and workshops. At La Venta the first pyramid in Mesoamerica was constructed, and the buildings are placed symmetrically along a north-south axis with four colossal heads facing outwards at key points, seemingly acting as guardians to the complex. A huge ceremonial step pyramid (now a shapeless mound), sunken plaza once lined with 2 meter high basalt columns, and two smaller pyramids/mounds provide features that would be copied time and again at the major sites of later Mesoamerican cultures.

The most striking legacy of the Olmec civilization must be the colossal stone heads they produced. These were carved in basalt and all display unique facial features so that they may be considered portraits of actual rulers. The heads can be nearly 3 m high and 8 tons in weight and the stone from which they were worked was, in some cases, transported 80 km or more, presumably using huge balsa river rafts. 17 have been discovered, 10 of which are from San Lorenzo. The ruler often wears a protective helmet (from war or the ballgame) and sometimes show the subject with jaguar paws hanging over the forehead, perhaps representing a jaguar pelt worn as a symbol of political and religious power. The fact that these giant sculptures depict only the head may be explained by the belief in Mesoamerican culture that it was the head alone which bore the soul.

The Olmecs influenced the civilizations they came into contact with across Mesoamerica. Many deities featured in Olmec art and religion such as the sky-dragon (a sort of caiman creature with flaming eyebrows) and the feathered-snake god, would reappear in similar form in later religions. The snake-god especially, would be transformed into the major gods Kukulcan for the Maya and Quetzalcoatl for the Aztecs. This artistic and religious influence, along with the features of precisely aligned ceremonial precincts, monumental pyramids, sacrificial rituals and ball-courts, meant that all subsequent Mesoamerican cultures would owe a great deal to their mysterious forerunners, the Olmecs.

### **Early Andean Civilizations**

There are enduring arguments about the earliest civilizations in the Andes. The two societies believed to be the early forerunners of later civilizations appear to be the Chavín culture and the Norte Chico culture.

The village of Chavín de Huántar, located in a high valley of the Peruvian Andes was constructed near one of the oldest known and most admired pre-Hispanic sites. This site gave its name to the Chavín Culture, one of the ancient civilizations of South America, which developed roughly between 1500 and 300 BCE. Chavín de Huántar had a dense population of 2,000-3,000 citizens. The city had an agricultural economy based on the trade of quinoa, corn, potatoes, llamas, and cocoa beans. Chavín de Huántar had a complex social hierarchy with classes of priests, political leaders, shamans (religious figures who believed they could help people communicate with the gods), and artists. Without a doubt, Chavín de Huántar had a centralized state, as evidenced by the many temples, canals, palaces and other forms of monumental building. One famous monumental work of art is the Raimondi Stela, a huge stone slab depicting local religious beliefs. It is named after an Italian traveler, Antonio Raimondi, who found the stela in the hut of a peasant in Callejon de Conchucos in 1874. The stela is carved in the image of a god, possibly the main god worshiped in the new temple of Chavín de Huántar. It contains a figure known as the "Staff Bearing God" which covers only the bottom 1/3 of the stela. The upper 2/3 is made up of a head dress.

In the late 1990's, an unusually ancient civilization was discovered by Peruvian archaeologists in the north-central coastal area of Peru. Led by Ruth Shady Solis, the team uncovered the monumental architecture and remains of a society that existed more than 6000 years ago, an age far older thought possible for such complex societies to exist in the Americas. Initially the Norte Chico sites were identified in 1905, but were quickly forgotten due to the lack of ceramic or gold

materials at the sites that so many early 20th century explorers coveted most.

Relatively little is known about the site, as almost nothing physical remains other than the gigantic earthen structures and buildings the Norte Chico left behind, can be studied.

Supposedly, according to scientists, the population density was enormous, despite the relatively few artifacts found at the site and lack of agriculture. Although the Norte Chico did not cultivate cereals for food, the population exceeded that of ancient China at the time and built giant ceremonial complexes, whose function still is not known. The Norte Chico diet apparently relied almost all on seafood. The discovery is a significant breakthrough in the study of how early civilization arose around the world. Unlike any other sites studied globally, scholars had long believed that the cultivation and widespread use of agriculture, specifically cereals, was solely responsible for the proliferation and development of complex societies. The evidence at Norte Chico has shattered this idea. This could potentially push back the birth of civilization by many thousands of years.

What is evident at the largest site, Caral-Supe, is that this was not a typical civilization, and archaeologists are still debating whether or not the absence of typical civilization evidence disqualifies Norte Chico as a civilization. Typical characteristics of civilization, ceramics, pottery, and absolute evidence of social hierarchy and centralized government, are completely absent from Norte Chico sites. A gourd was found that featured the famous staff god of later Andean and pre Columbian cultures, but almost no signs of art work are present at any of the Norte Chico settlements. The monuments are the most noticeable remains of the culture, but do not prove with absolute certainty that government existed. The largest site, Caral Supe, covers an area of over 650 square kilometers, lined with plazas, amphitheaters, and concentrated residential areas. Most of the monumental architecture was constructed using stone filled bags, which were dropped into trenches behind retaining walls, level by level. The later recording device of the pre Columbian cultures, the Quipu, was also found, a device which contained a series of knotted strings, probably used in recording trade documentation.