

Olmec and Chavin  
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. The ancestors of today's American Indigenous peoples 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 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 due to our inability to read their writing. But we do know that the Olmec religious practices of human sacrifice and building were and passed on to all subsequent civilizations in Mesoamerica until the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century CE. The idea of human sacrifice as a tribute to the leaders or the gods is common in later Mesoamerican civilizations. Tribute involves doing something to show your superiors or the gods that you are loyal and obedient. We also know that the Olmec traded heavily. Typical Olmec trade goods included obsidian, jade, serpentine, mica, rubber, pottery, and feathers. The Olmec also taught later civilization to grow maize (corn), beans, squash, and cocoa.

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 gods 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. The Olmec also were the first to practice shamanism, meaning that priests and religious leaders were used to speak to the dead and/or ancestors.

## **Early Andean Civilizations**

There are enduring arguments about the earliest civilizations in the Andes. The Chavin civilization, however, is generally agreed to be one of the first.

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. 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 communication devices. One type of recording device, the Quipu, was also found in many early sites. The quipu was a device which contained a series of knotted strings, probably used in recording trade documentation.