Early Civilizations of the Andes

MAIN IDEA

INTERACTION WITH ENVIRONMENT

In the Andes Mountains, various groups created flourishing civilizations.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Like the early Andean civilizations, people today must adapt to their environment in order to survive.

TERMS & NAMES

• Chavín
• Nazca
• Moche

SETTING THE STAGE

While civilizations were emerging in Mesoamerica, advanced societies were independently developing in South America. The early cultures of South America arose in a difficult environment, the rugged terrain of the Andes Mountains.

Societies Arise in the Andes

The Andes Mountains stretch about 4,500 miles down the western edge of South America, from Colombia in the north to Chile in the south. After the Himalayas in southern Asia, the Andes is the next highest mountain range in the world. The Andes has a number of peaks over 20,000 feet in elevation. South America’s first civilizations emerged in the northern Andes region, in Peru.

Settlements on the Coastal Plain

Peru was a harsh place to develop a civilization. The Andes are steep and rocky, with generally poor soil. Ice and snow cover the highest elevations year-round. Overland travel often is difficult. The climate is also severe: hot and dry during the day, and often freezing at night.

Between the mountains and the Pacific Ocean lies a narrow coastal plain. Most of this plain is harsh desert where rain seldom falls. In some places, however, rivers cross the desert on their path from the mountains to the sea. It was in these river valleys that the first settlements occurred.

Between 3600 and 2500 B.C., people began to establish villages along the Pacific coast. These first inhabitants were hunter-gatherers who relied on seafood and small game for their survival. Around 3000 B.C., these people began to farm. By 1800 B.C., a number of thriving communities existed along the coast.

The Chavín Period

The first influential civilization in South America arose not on the coast, however, but in the mountains. This culture, known as the Chavín (sha•VEEN), flourished from around 900 B.C. to 200 B.C. Archaeologists named the culture after a major ruin, Chavin de Huántar, in the northern highlands of Peru. This site features pyramids, plazas, and massive earthen mounds.

Chavín culture spread quickly across much of northern and central Peru. Archaeologists have found no evidence of political or economic organization within the culture. Thus, they conclude that the Chavín were primarily a religious civilization. Nevertheless, the spread of Chavín art styles and religious images—as seen in stone carving, pottery, and textiles—shows the powerful influence of
this culture. Ancient Peruvians may have visited Chavin temples to pay their respects. They then carried ideas back to their communities. The Chavin are believed to have established certain patterns that helped unify Andean culture and lay the foundation for later civilizations in Peru. Thus, like the Olmec in Mesoamerica, the Chavin may have acted as a “mother culture” in South America.

Other Andean Civilizations Flourish

Around the time Chavin culture declined, other civilizations were emerging in Peru. First the Nazca and then the Moche built societies that flourished in the Andes.

Nazca Achievements  The Nazca culture flourished along the southern coast of Peru from around 200 B.C. to A.D. 600. This area is extremely dry. The Nazca developed extensive irrigation systems, including underground canals, that allowed them to farm the land. The Nazca are known for their beautiful textiles and pottery. Both feature images of animals and mythological beings. They are even more famous, however, for an extraordinary but puzzling set of creations known as the Nazca Lines. (See History in Depth on the next page.)

Moche Culture  Meanwhile, on the northern coast of Peru, another civilization was reaching great heights. This was the Moche culture, which lasted from about A.D. 100 to A.D. 700.
**Nazca Lines**

Etched on the plains of southeastern Peru are more than 1,000 drawings of animals, plants, humans, and geometric shapes. Most of them are so large that they can be recognized only from the air. Scientists believe that the Nazca people made the drawings between 200 B.C. and A.D. 600. Since the lines were discovered in 1927, people have proposed many theories about their purpose, including the following:

- The Nazca people worshiped mountain or sky gods and created the drawings to please them.
- The lines indicated where surface water entered the plain and marked elevated land between ancient riverbeds.
- The lines are a huge map that marks the course of underground aquifers, or water sources. (This is the most recent theory.)

**Size of the Nazca Lines**

Many of the Nazca drawings are huge. Some of the wedges (below) are more than 2,500 feet long. The hummingbird (right) is 165 feet long. The Nazca people probably created small model drawings and used math to reproduce them at such a vast scale.

**Durability of the Nazca Lines**

This spider was created more than 1,000 years ago. It survived because the region has little erosion. The plains are one of the driest regions on earth with only 20 minutes of rain a year. Also, the ground is flat and stony, so wind rarely carries away the soil.

**Nazca Water Cult**

Some scholars think the lines were linked to a Nazca water cult, or religion. The straight lines may have led to ceremonial sites. The animals may have been symbols. For example, according to traditional beliefs, the hummingbird (above) represents the mountain gods. The mountains were a main source of water.

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**SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Visual Sources**

1. **Forming and Supporting Opinions** Do you think the purpose of the Nazca lines had something to do with water? Why or why not?
2. **Evaluating Courses of Action** What might be the next step for researchers who wish to prove or disprove the aquifer theory? What are potential positive and negative consequences of such an action?
The Moche took advantage of the rivers that flowed from the Andes Mountains. They built impressive irrigation systems to water their wide range of crops, which included corn, beans, potatoes, squash, and peanuts. According to Peruvian archaeologist Walter Alva, the Moche enjoyed a variety of foods. These included both fish and game:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**
The Moche enjoyed a diet rich in protein and probably better balanced than that of many modern Peruvians. Fish from the nearby Pacific were eaten fresh or sun dried. They ate Muscovy ducks and guinea pigs. To drink, there was potent chicha, a cloudy beverage fermented from corn that had been ground and boiled. Deer, now rare, were abundant... Crayfish in irrigation ditches supplemented seafood from the coast.

WALTER ALVA, “Richest Unlooted Tomb of a Moche Lord,” *National Geographic*

Moche tombs uncovered in the recent past have revealed a civilization with enormous wealth. Archaeologists have found beautiful jewelry crafted from gold, silver, and semiprecious stones. The Moche were also brilliant ceramic artists. They created pottery that depicted scenes from everyday life. Moche pots show doctors healing patients, women weaving cloth, and musicians playing instruments. They also show fierce soldiers armed with spears, leading enemy captives. Although the Moche never developed a written language, their pottery provides a wealth of detail about Moche life.

Nevertheless, many questions about the Moche remain. Experts still do not fully understand Moche religious beliefs. Nor do they know why the Moche fell. Like many early cultures of the Americas, the Moche remain something of a mystery awaiting further archaeological discoveries.

Unlike the lands you will read about in the next chapter—which were unified by the spread of Islam—the Americas would remain a patchwork of separate civilizations until the early 16th century. Around that time, as you will read in Chapter 20, the Europeans would begin to arrive and bring dramatic and lasting changes to the American continents.