People and Empires in the Americas

Lesson 3

Early Civilizations of the Andes

Key Terms and People

Chavín  first influential culture in South America, which flourished from around 900 BC to 200 BC

Nazca  culture that flourished along the southern coast of Peru from around 200 BC to AD 600

Moche  culture that flourished along the northern coast of Peru from around AD 100 to AD 700

Before You Read

In the last lesson, you read about the first Mesoamerican civilizations.

In this lesson, you will read about the civilizations of the Andes.

As You Read

Use a chart to record important information about early Andean civilizations.

SOCIETIES ARISE IN THE ANDES

What geographic factors made it unlikely for a civilization to arise?

Other interesting civilizations arose in the Americas far to the south of the Olmec and Zapotec peoples. These civilizations grew in a very harsh environment—the Andes in South America. This mountain range has many peaks that are more than 20,000 feet high.

Toward the northern part of South America, along these mountains, lies the modern country of Peru. In this area, the mountains are steep and very rocky. Ice and snow cover the tops of the mountains during the entire year. Travel is hard. The climate changes quickly from being hot during the day to bitter cold at night. The soil is poor.

It was in the mountains of this difficult land that a new civilization arose. That culture is called Chavín. It takes its name from a major ruin, Chavín de Huántar in the Andes. At this site, researchers have found pyramids, open spaces, and large mounds made of earth. The Chavín culture was at its height from 900 BC to 200 BC. It is considered the first influential civilization in South America.

Scientists have found objects that suggest that the Chavín culture helped shape other cultures to the north and south of this site. At these other sites are the art styles and symbols of religion found at Chavín. Scientists think that the main site was not the center of a political empire but was the chief site of a spiritual or religious movement.
People from other areas may have made trips to the main site to pay their respects. The Chavin culture, like the Olmec in Mexico, may have been a “mother culture,” one that gave the first form to the ideas and styles of the area.

1. What theories do scientists have about the Chavin culture?

The other culture of early Peru arose along the Pacific Coast but far to the north. This was the Moche culture. It lasted from AD 100 to AD 700. The Moche tapped into rivers that flowed down from the mountains. They built ditches to bring water to their fields. They raised corn, beans, potatoes, squash, and peanuts. They also fished, caught wild ducks and pigs, and hunted deer.

Archaeologists have found some tombs of the Moche people. They show that the culture had great wealth. They have found objects made of gold, silver, and jewels. The Moche people made beautiful pottery that showed scenes of everyday life. So, even though they never had a written language, it is possible to learn much about how they lived.

Eventually, the Moche culture also fell. As with the other peoples of the Americas, the reason for this fall is not known. For the next hundred years, other cultures would rise and fall in the Americas. But most of them remained separate from one another.

2. Name three characteristics of the Moche people.
As you read this lesson, fill in the chart to compare three early civilizations that developed in the Andes.

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