

# FIRST CIVILIZATIONS OF THE AMERICAS

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While civilizations were developing in Africa, Asia, and Europe, they were also emerging in the Americas. Human settlement in the Americas is relatively recent compared to that in other parts of the world. However, it followed a similar pattern. At first the ancient people of the Americas survived mainly by hunting. Over time, they developed farming methods that ensured a more reliable supply of food. This in turn led to the growth of the first civilizations in the Americas

## The Earliest Americans

The American continents include North and South America. They are connected and span two hemispheres, from the frigid Arctic Circle in the north to the icy waters around Antarctica in the south. Although this land mass narrows greatly around modern-day Panama, it stretches unbroken for more than 10,000 miles. This large and rugged land is isolated from the rest of the world by vast oceans. Yet, at one time, thousands of years ago, the Americas were connected by a land bridge to Asia. Most experts believe that the first people came to the Americas from Asia over this land bridge. The land bridge is known as Beringia.

**Peopling the Americas** The first Americans arrived sometime toward the end of the last Ice Age, which lasted from roughly 1.6 million to 10,000 B.C. During this period huge sheets of moving ice, called glaciers, spread southward from the Arctic Circle. They covered large portions of North America. The buildup of glaciers locked up huge amounts of the earth's water. It lowered sea levels and created a land corridor between Asia and Alaska across what is now the Bering Strait.

Herds of wild animals from Siberia, including the mastodon, migrated across the flat, treeless plains of the Beringia land bridge. Gradually, Siberian hunters followed these animals into North America. They most likely were unaware that they were entering a new continent. These migrants became the first Americans.

No one knows for sure when the first Americans arrived. Some scholars contend that the migration across the land bridge began as early as 40,000 B.C. Others argue it occurred as late as 12,000 B.C. For years, many researchers have regarded the discovery of spearheads dating back to 9500 B.C. near Clovis, New Mexico, to be the earliest evidence of humankind in the Americas.

However, recent discoveries of possible pre-Clovis sites have challenged this theory. One such discovery was made at Monte Verde, Chile, near the southern tip of the Americas. Researchers there have found evidence of human life dating back to 10,500 B.C. Underneath this site—a sandy bank near a creek—archaeologists discovered pieces of animal hide and various tools. They also found a preserved chunk of mastodon meat and a child's single footprint. The evidence at Monte Verde suggests that the first Americans arrived well before the Clovis era. To reach southern Chile at such an early date, experts believe, humans would have had to cross the land bridge at least 20,000 years ago. They also could have come by boat. Most experts believe the earliest Americans traveled by foot across the land bridge. However, some scholars think they also may have paddled from Asia to the Pacific Coast in small boats.

**Hunters and Gatherers** Questions remain about how and when the first Americans arrived. What appears more certain—from the discovery of chiseled spearheads and charred bones at ancient sites—is that the earliest Americans lived as hunters. Perhaps their most challenging and rewarding prey was the mastodon. Weighing more than a ton, this animal provided meat, hide, and bones for making food, clothing, shelters, and tools.

Eventually, large animals like the mastodon became extinct. Hunters soon turned to smaller prey, such as deer and rabbits, for their survival. They also fished and gathered edible plants and fruits. Because they were hunters, the earliest Americans found it necessary to move regularly in search of food. Whenever they did settle in one place for a short time, prehistoric Americans lived in caves or temporary shelters in the open air.

With the end of the Ice Age, around 12,000 to 10,000 years ago, came the end of land travel across Beringia. As the great glaciers melted, sea levels rose. The ancient land bridge disappeared under the Bering Strait. By this time, however, humans inhabited most regions of the Americas. Wherever they roamed, from the grassy plains of the modern-day United

States to the steamy tropical forests of Central America, the first Americans adapted to the variety of environments they inhabited. In doing so, they carved out unique ways of life.

## Agriculture Prompts a New Way of Life

Gradually, the earliest Americans became more familiar with plant foods. They began to experiment with simple methods of farming. Their efforts at planting and harvesting eventually led to the birth of agriculture. This in turn dramatically changed their way of life.

**The Development of Farming** Around 7000 B.C., a revolution quietly began in what is now central Mexico. There, people began to rely more on wild edible plants, raising some of them from seeds. By 5000 B.C. many had begun to grow these preferred plants. They included squashes, gourds, beans, avocados, and chilies. By 3400 B.C., these early farmers grew maize, or corn. Maize soon became the most important crop. This highly nourishing crop flourished in the tropical climate of Mexico. There, a family of three could raise enough corn in four months to feed themselves for up to two years. Gradually, people settled in permanent villages in the Tehuacan (tay•wuh•KAHN) Valley, south of present-day Mexico City. There, they raised corn and other crops. Eventually the techniques of agriculture spread over most of North and South America. However, it is believed that people in some areas, such as Peru and eastern North America, may have discovered the secrets of cultivating local edible plants independently.

**The Effects of Agriculture**

Before Agriculture	After Agriculture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People hunted or gathered what they ate.</li><li>• Families continually moved in search of big game.</li><li>• Groups remained small due to the scarcity of reliable sources of food.</li><li>• Humans devoted much of their time to obtaining food.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People enjoyed a more reliable and steady source of food.</li><li>• Families settled down and formed larger communities.</li><li>• Humans concentrated on new skills: arts and crafts, architecture, social organization.</li><li>• Complex societies eventually arose.</li></ul>

**white and black maize**

**avocados**

**peppers**

**potatoes**

**beans**

**ANSWER THESE**

**SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts**

1. How did the early Americans' way of life change after the development of agriculture?
2. How might the establishment of agriculture have helped humans to develop new skills and interests?

Over the next several centuries, farming methods became increasingly advanced. In central Mexico, for example, native farmers created small islands in swamps and shallow lakes by stacking layers of vegetation, dirt, and mud. They then planted crops on top of the island soil. The surrounding water provided continuous irrigation. These floating gardens, known as chinampas, were very productive, yielding up to three harvests a year.

**Farming Brings Great Change** “[The] . . . transition from a foraging to a farming way of life,” noted American scientist Bruce Smith, “was a major turning point in the long evolutionary history of our species.” Indeed, in the Americas as in other regions of the world, agriculture brought great and lasting change to peoples’ way of life. The cultivation of corn and other crops provided a more reliable and expanding food supply. This encouraged population growth and the establishment of large, settled communities. As the population grew, and as farming became more efficient and productive, more people turned their attention to nonagricultural pursuits. They developed specialized skills in arts and crafts, building trades, and other fields. Differences between social classes—between rich and poor, ruler and subject—

began to emerge. With the development of agriculture, society became more complex and sophisticated. The stage was set for the rise of more advanced civilizations.

## ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE READ

1. **DEFINE THE FOLLOWING TERMS:** Beringia • Ice Age • maize
2. How did human beings come to the Americas?
3. How did humans get food before the development of farming?
4. What sorts of changes did farming bring?
5. Why do you think early Americans, isolated from the rest of the world, developed in ways similar to other early humans? **THINK ABOUT** • similarities among all human beings • availability of similar resources • the development from hunting to farming

## THE OLMEC OF MESOAMERICA

The story of developed civilizations in the Americas begins in a region archaeologists and historians refer to as Mesoamerica. This area stretches south from central Mexico to the northern reaches of modern-day Honduras. It was here, more than 3,000 years ago, that the first complex societies in the Americas arose.

Mesoamerica's first known civilization builders were a people known as the Olmec. They began carving out a thriving society around 1200 B.C. in the humid jungles of southern Mexico. The Olmec influenced neighboring groups, as well as the later civilizations of the region. Thus, they often are called Mesoamerica's "mother culture."

**The Rise of Olmec Civilization** Around 1860, a worker clearing a field in the hot coastal plain of southeastern Mexico uncovered an extraordinary stone sculpture. It stood five feet tall and weighed an estimated eight tons. The sculpture was of an enormous head, wearing a headpiece that resembled a football helmet. The head was carved in a strikingly realistic style, with thick lips, a flat nose, and large oval eyes. (See History Through Art on page 219.) Archaeologists had never seen anything like it in the Americas. This head, along with others that were discovered later, was a remnant of the Olmec civilization. The Olmec flourished from 1200 B.C. to 400 B.C. They lived along the Gulf Coast of Mexico, in the modern-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco.

On the surface, the Gulf Coast seemed an unlikely site for a high culture to take root. The region was hot and humid and covered with swamps and jungle. In some places, giant trees formed a thick cover that prevented most sunlight from reaching the ground. Up to 100 inches of rain fell every year. The rainfall swelled rivers and caused severe flooding.

However, the region also had certain advantages. There were abundant deposits of salt and tar, as well as fine clay used in making pottery. There was also wood and rubber from the rain forest. The hills to the north provided hard stone from which the Olmec could make tools and monuments. The rivers that laced the region provided a ready means of transport. Perhaps most important, the flood plains of these rivers provided fertile land for farming.

The Olmec used their abundant resources to build thriving communities. The oldest site, San Lorenzo, dates back to around 1150 B.C. Here, and at other sites, archaeologists uncovered important clues that offered a glimpse into the Olmec world.

**Olmec Society** At San Lorenzo archaeologists discovered earthen mounds, courtyards, and pyramids. Set among these earthworks were large stone monuments. They included columns, altars, and more colossal, sculpted heads, which may have represented particular Olmec rulers. These giant monuments weigh as much as 44 tons. Researchers are left to wonder how the Olmec moved them to various centers of worship. Some scholars suspect that Olmec workers moved these sculptures over land on rolling logs to the river banks. From there, they rafted the monuments along numerous waterways to various sites.

The organization needed for such an undertaking is one reason scholars think San Lorenzo was home to a small ruling class of priests and nobles. These rulers may have commanded a much larger group of peasant farmers living in the surrounding country.

To the east of San Lorenzo, another significant Olmec site, La Venta, rose around 900 B.C. Here, researchers discovered a 100-foot-high mound of earth and clay. This structure may have served as the tomb of a great Olmec ruler. Known as the Great Pyramid, the mound also may have been the center of the Olmec religion. Based on other artifacts found at sites like La Venta, experts believe the Olmec prayed to a variety of nature gods.

**Jaguar Worship** Most of all they probably worshiped the jaguar spirit. Numerous Olmec sculptures and carvings depict a half-human, half-jaguar creature. Some scholars believe that the jaguar represented a powerful rain god. Others contend that there were several jaguar gods, representing such vital things as the earth, fertility, and maize.

**Trade and Commerce** Archaeologists once believed that sites such as La Venta were ceremonial centers where important rituals were performed but few people lived. In recent years, however, experts have begun to revise that view. According to Mexican archaeologist Rebecca González, “La Venta was not just an empty ceremonial spot visited by Olmec priests and nobles, but a prosperous community of fishers, farmers, traders, and specialists, such as the artisans and the sculptors.”

Indeed, the Olmec appear to have been a prosperous people who directed a large trading network throughout Mesoamerica. Olmec goods traveled as far as Mexico City to the north and Honduras to the south. In addition, raw materials—including iron ore and various stones—reached San Lorenzo from faraway regions. This trade network helped boost the Olmec economy and spread Olmec influence to other parts of Mesoamerica.

**Decline of the Olmec** For reasons that are not fully understood, Olmec civilization eventually collapsed. Scholars believe San Lorenzo was destroyed around 900 B.C. La Venta may have fallen sometime around 400 B.C. Some experts speculate that outside invaders caused the destruction. Others believe the Olmec may have destroyed their own monuments upon the death of their rulers.

Because the Olmec apparently left no written records, scholars may never know the full truth. Nevertheless, Olmec artifacts continue to offer up tantalizing clues about this first known Mesoamerican civilization.

**The Olmec Leave Their Mark** The Olmec contributed much to later Mesoamerican civilizations. They influenced the powerful Maya Civilization. Olmec art styles, especially the use of the jaguar motif, can be seen in the pottery and sculpture of later peoples in the region. In addition, future Mesoamerican societies copied the Olmec pattern of urban design. Like the Olmec, later civilizations built cities by combining pyramids, plazas, and monumental sculpture.



**ANSWER THESE**

The Olmec also left behind the notions of planned ceremonial centers, ritual ball games, and an elite ruling class. And while there is no clear evidence that the Olmec used a written language, their descendants or a related people carved out stone symbols that may have influenced later glyph writing.

## ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE READ

1. **DEFINE THE FOLLOWING TERMS:** Mesoamerica • Olmec
2. Why did the Olmec civilization collapse?
3. What was the role of trade in Olmec civilization?
4. Why do you think the Olmec are called Mesoamerica's "mother culture"?
5. What factors made the Oaxaca Valley a likely place for civilization to develop?

## THE CHAVIN OF THE ANDES

While civilizations were emerging in Mesoamerica, advanced societies were also arising in South America. The early cultures of South America arose in difficult environs, namely the rugged terrain of the Andes Mountains. However, like the peoples of Mesoamerica, the early Andean cultures controlled their surroundings and created flourishing civilizations.

**Societies Grow in the Andes Region** The Andes Mountains stretch some 4,000 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 highest mountain range in the world. The Andes has a number of peaks over 20,000 feet in elevation. It was in the northern Andes region, in what is now Peru, that South America's first advanced civilizations emerged. Early Settlements Along the Coast Peru was a difficult place to launch 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 temporary villages along the Pacific coast. These first inhabitants were hunter-gatherers who relied on seafood and small game for their survival. Eventually, 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, Chavín de Huántar, in the northern highlands of Peru. This site is situated more than 10,000 feet above sea level. It 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. According to this theory, Chavín de Huántar and other similar sites were important religious centers rather than outposts of a powerful empire. Nevertheless, the spread of Chavín art styles and religious images—as seen in stone carving, pottery, and textiles—demonstrates the powerful influence of this culture. Ancient Peruvians may have visited Chavín temples to pay their respects. They then carried ideas back to their communities. The Chavín 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, the Chavín may have acted as a "mother culture."

## ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE READ

1. **DEFINE THE FOLLOWING TERMS:** Chavin
2. Why was Peru a difficult place for a civilization to develop?
3. How was the Chavin culture like the Olmec culture?
4. Would the Chavin culture have been more influential if it had arisen along the Peruvian coast? Why or why not?