Chapter 6: Settlement of the Americas and the Pacific Islands: 6-4 Early Andean Chiefdoms and the Chavín Civilization
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6-4 Early Andean Chiefdoms and the Chavín Civilization

Successful civilizations along the South American Andes depended on cooperation and trade among various ethnic groups in a land of climactic extremes like no other on Earth. The 20,000-foot Andes peaks separate the arid Pacific coast from the lush interior Amazon rain forest. Tropical plants can flourish mere miles from perpetual snow because the climate varies dramatically according to steeply increasing altitude. For example, traveling east from the Pacific coastal plains, the terrain rises steadily to the river valleys, then to the Andes foothills, finally reaching the grassy plateaus and frigid peaks of the Andes. The eastern slopes of the mountains are covered with dense tropical forests leading to the Amazonian jungle. The peoples of each ecological niche developed ingenious methods for exploiting the local resources—as fishermen, hunters, gatherers, and farmers. Because no known writing system existed in ancient South America, our information about the earliest South Americans is mostly speculative and comes from archaeological and linguistic evidence.

When and where did human societies originate in South America? This question is hotly debated. A widely accepted theory claims that the first South American settlements occurred on the coast, near the abundant Pacific Ocean cold-water fisheries (c. 3800–3000 B.C.E.). The inhabitants thrived on the fairly dependable supply of protein-rich seafood, supplemented by wild plants from the fog lands near the ocean. It seems that the first settled agricultural communities had emerged by 2000 B.C.E. in the same moist tropics near the Pacific Coast. In the arid Andes highlands, agricultural settlements were established two centuries later, by about 1800 B.C.E.

The collective food basket in Peru provided more nourishment than that in Mesoamerica. For example, the coastal fisheries traded protein-rich fishmeal to inland peoples in exchange for potatoes and other root vegetables from the highlands; fruit, sweet potatoes, pineapples, and manioc came from the Amazon tropical forests. The only native grain was quinoa (KEEN-wah), which was fodder for llamas. Trade with Mesoamerica brought maize to South America by about 1800 B.C.E.; maize subsequently became a staple grain, cooked for food and fermented for beverages. Evidence suggests that elite women were master brewers of maize beer. Metallurgy (particularly of gold, silver, copper, and some bronze) and perhaps pottery spread to Mesoamerica from the Andes area.

When the coastal climate became drier, some fishing groups moved east, settling along the oases of mountain-fed rivers that drain to the Pacific Ocean. There they learned to divert the river waters to irrigate their fields of cotton, squash, lima beans, coca, chili peppers, and eventually maize. The abundance of food meant that population density increased within the river valleys. Naturally, this growth in turn led to more intensive agriculture, with the food

surpluses supporting elites who organized the village clans, oversaw the crucial irrigation works, and supervised religious activities and the construction of ceremonial centers.

The north-central coast of modern Peru saw a series of rival chiefdoms during the millennium after 1800 B.C.E. These chiefdoms had thousands of inhabitants living in cities with enormous stone pyramids, plazas, and sophisticated hydrographic systems. Ritual life grew more elaborate at the distinctive U-shaped ceremonial centers that replaced the round, sunken plazas of their fire-worshiping predecessors. The religious sites boasted man-made streams, gardens, and pyramids with inner recesses, all created to emulate nature's rivers, caves, and mountains—the abodes of the Andean sacred spirits. The cloth-wrapped mummies of ancestors were also revered. **Peruvian textiles** (Pattern cloth woven from alpaca wool and cotton by the ancient Andean peoples, used to convey religious symbols and meaning.) and fibers held paramount importance in every Andean society. Craftsmen fashioned roofs for houses and braided rope cables to make bridges over Andean canyons. Knotted, abacuslike cords called *quipus* (KEE-pooz) were the only means of calculating and recording numerical data. Textiles—the most exquisite of Andean art—were highly prized as status symbols and as gifts.

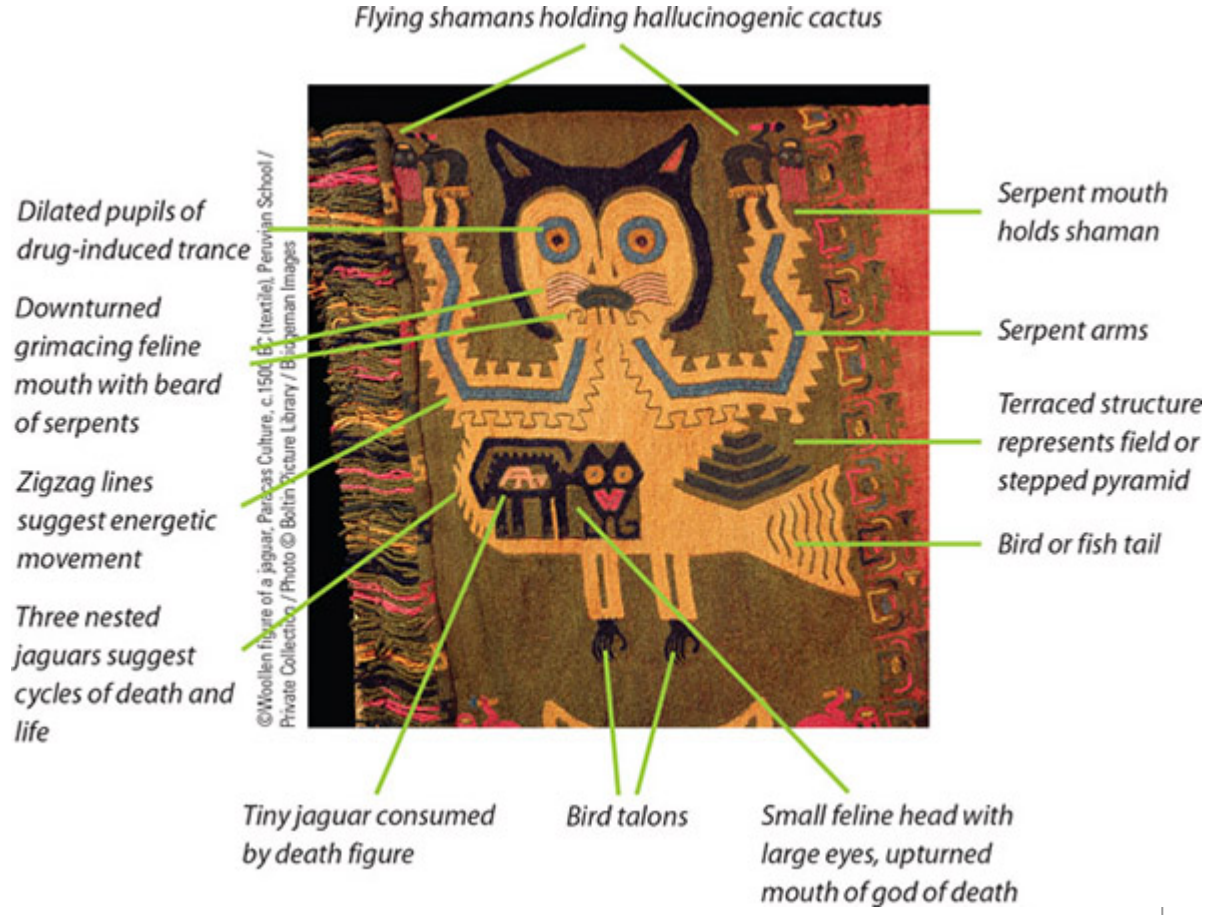
In contrast to most ancient cultures, the development of Andean cloth-weaving preceded that of fired ceramics by thousands of years. In fact, the Andes area has the world's longest unbroken textile record. Weaving probably evolved from making cotton fishing nets; finer textiles later incorporated wool from the llamalike alpaca. Women and girls of all social classes labored at spinning and weaving—even aristocratic women who had servants for other chores made textiles. Weaving was a labor of religious devotion, a gift of gratitude to the gods, the ancestors, and the leaders. Patterned textiles were a portable medium for disseminating the culture and religion through trade. (see Images of History).

Images of History

Rituals of Transformation

Ancient Peruvian Textile c.1500 B.C.E.

This woolen weaving from the southern coast of Peru portrays a deity that combines features of the jaguar, bird, and serpent—three symbolic images shared by all Andean cultures from the Chavín forward. The encoded message of this textile was clear to the ancient Andean peoples: supernatural, animal, and human beings could be transformed one into the other through the agency of the shaman-priest. Textiles were the pages in the sacred records of the nonliterate cultures.



©Woollen figure of a jaguar, Paracas Culture, c.1500 BC (textile), Peruvian School / Private Collection / Photo © Boltin Picture Library / Bridgeman Images

In South America, while the Mesoamerican Olmec flourished, the Chavín culture showed a comparable development (c. 1000–200 B.C.E.). During the Chavín era, widespread use of the llama, a small but sure-footed pack animal, fomented trade and led to the construction of roads. Most scholars agree that Chavín hegemony came about through trade and cultural exchange, rather than through political power or military might. Furthermore, the elaborate Chavín cult of a composite feline/eagle/serpent deity (a synthesis of elements from previous coastal and highland beliefs) spread quickly and lasted for centuries.

The Chavín priests organized irrigation projects and supervised the labor force throughout the area. The capital city, *Chavín de Huántar* (cha-VEEN deh wahn-tahr), at an altitude of 10,000 feet, was strategically located on the trade routes connecting the coast with the mountains. The city was, above all, a place of pilgrimage. Chavín de Huántar's terraced shrine and blunt-tipped pyramid provided the stage for priests to demonstrate their god-given powers to mediate between the underworld, the living, and the supernatural. The priests, magnificently costumed as jaguars or eagles, theatrically manipulated water and smoke, inspiring awe among the cult's devotees. Torrents of water roaring through tunnels under the shrine vividly evoked the rush of the Andean rivers.

The triumph of the Chavín lay above all in the provision of adequate food for a dense population in topographically difficult areas. This achievement has barely been replicated in modern Peru, even with the aid of late twentieth-century technology. The Chavín civilization

eventually collapsed, however, possibly resulting from overpopulation, increased social stratification, and rising militarism in the region. Like the Olmec, the Chavín never became a true political state. However, their religious heritage is evident in the succeeding theocratic kingdoms of north and south-central Peru. These kingdoms are the subject of Chapter 14.