



AMERICAS

Overview:

- The Olmec lived along the Gulf Coast of Mexico in the modern-day Mexican states of Tabasco and Veracruz.
- The Olmec society lasted from about 1600 BC to around 350 BC, when environmental factors made their villages unlivable.
- The Olmec are probably best known for the statues they carved: 20 ton stone heads, quarried and carved to commemorate their rulers.
- The name Olmec is an Aztec word meaning the rubber people; the Olmec made and traded rubber throughout Mesoamerica.

Who were the Olmec?

The Olmec were the first major civilization in Mexico. They lived in the tropical lowlands on the Gulf of Mexico in the present-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco. The name Olmec is a Nahuatl—the Aztec language—word; it means the rubber people. The Olmec might have been the first people to figure out how to convert latex of the rubber tree into something that could be shaped, cured, and hardened. Because the Olmec did not have much writing beyond a handful of carved glyphs—symbols—that survived, we don't know what name the Olmec people gave themselves. Appearing around 1600 BC, the Olmec were among the first Mesoamerican complex societies, and their culture influenced many later civilizations, like the Maya. The Olmec are known for the immense stone heads they carved from a volcanic rock called basalt. Archaeological evidence also suggests that they originated the Mesoamerican practices of the Mesoamerican Ballgame—a popular game in the pre-Columbian Americas played with balls made from solid rubber—and that they may have practiced ritual bloodletting.

Trade and village life

There are no written records of Olmec commerce, beliefs, or customs, but from the archaeological evidence, it appears they were not economically confined. In fact, Olmec artifacts have been found across Mesoamerica, indicating that there were extensive interregional trade routes. The presence of artifacts made from jade, a semiprecious green stone; obsidian, a glassy, black volcanic rock; and other stones provides evidence for trade with peoples outside the Gulf Coast of Mexico: the jade came from what is today the Mexican state of Oaxaca and the country of Guatemala to the south;

the obsidian came from the Mexican highlands, to the north. The Olmec period saw a significant increase in the length of trade routes, the variety of goods, and the sources of traded items.

Picture is a map of the Olmec heartland, the Tuxtla Mountains, and part of the Gulf of Mexico. The yellow dots represent Olmec settlements, and the red dots represent archaeological finds. These Spanish place names are modern; we don't know what the Olmec names for these places were.



A map of the Olmec heartland. The yellow dots represent Olmec settlements, and the red dots represent archaeological finds. These Spanish place names are modern; we don't know what the Olmec names for these places were. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Trading helped the Olmec build their urban centers of San Lorenzo and La Venta. These cities, however, were used predominantly for ceremonial purposes and elite activity; most people lived in small villages. Individual homes had a lean-to—sort of like a garage shed—and a storage pit for storing root vegetables nearby. They also likely had gardens in which the Olmec would grow medicinal herbs and small crops, like sunflowers.



A photograph of the Great Pyramid in La Venta on a partly cloudy day. The pyramid takes up most of the image and there is a small tree with green leaves on the left-hand side. Mostly dead, brown grass covers the pyramid but there are patches of green at the bottom.

Great Pyramid in La Venta, Tabasco. [Image](#) courtesy Boundless.

Most agriculture took place outside of the villages in fields cleared using slash-and-burn techniques. The Olmec likely grew crops such as maize, beans, squash, manioc, sweet potatoes, and cotton.

Religion

There are no direct written accounts of Olmec beliefs, but their notable artwork provide clues about their life and religion.

Photograph of a stone carving. A chief wears an elaborate headdress and carries a weapon. His face has been worn down over time so features are not discernible.

Surviving art, like this relief of a king or chief found in La Venta, help provide clues about how Olmec society functioned. [Image](#) courtesy Boundless.

There were eight different **androgynous**—possessing male and female characteristics—Olmec deities, each with its own distinct characteristics. For example, the Bird Monster was depicted as a harpy eagle associated with rulership. The Olmec Dragon was shown with flame eyebrows, a bulbous nose, and bifurcated tongue. Deities often represented a natural element and included the following:

- The Maize deity
- The Rain Spirit or Were-Jaguar
- The Fish or Shark Monster

Religious activities regarding these deities probably included the elite rulers, shamans, and possibly a priest class making offerings at religious sites in La Venta and San Lorenzo.

Art

The Olmec culture was defined and unified by a specific art style. Crafted in a variety of materials—jade, clay, basalt, and greenstone, which is an archaeologist's term for carved, green-colored minerals—much Olmec art is **naturalistic**. Other art expresses fantastic **anthropomorphic**—human-shaped—creatures, often highly stylized, using an iconography reflective of a religious meaning. Common motifs include downturned mouths and **deltoid heads**, both of which are seen in representations of were-jaguars and the rain deity.



Photograph of a realistic ceramic baby figurine. The child is nude, with its eyes shut and furrowed brow, appearing to cry. It is seated and reaches one arm up. Its legs are splayed out.

Olmec hollow baby figurine. Realistic ceramic objects, such as this portrayal of an infant, illustrate the highly skilled artistic style of the Olmec culture. [Image](#) courtesy Boundless.

Reading Adapted from: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/world-history-beginnings/ancient-mesopotamia/a/mesopotamia-article>



Olmec colossal heads

The most striking art left behind by this culture are the Olmec colossal—very big—heads. Seventeen monumental stone representations of human heads sculpted from large basalt boulders have been unearthed in the region to date. The heads date from at least before 900 BC and are a distinctive feature of the Olmec civilization. All portray mature men with fleshy cheeks, flat noses, and slightly crossed eyes. However, none of the heads are alike, and each boasts a unique headdress, which suggests they represent specific individuals.

The Olmec brought these boulders from the Sierra de los Tuxtlas mountains of Veracruz. Given that the extremely large slabs of stone used in their production were transported over large distances, requiring a great deal of human effort and resources, it is thought that the monuments represent portraits of powerful individual Olmec rulers, perhaps carved to commemorate their deaths. The heads were arranged in either lines or groups at major Olmec centers, but the method and logistics used to transport the stone to the sites remain uncertain.

Photograph of an Olmec colossal head. There is a headdress carved onto the head and its eyes, nose and lips are prominent while its ears are not visible. The head is made of stone and is placed outdoors with palm fronds in the background.

This sculpture, which stands almost eight feet tall and weighs about 24 tons, is typical of the colossal heads of the Olmec. It's now housed in the Parque-Museum La Venta, in Villahermosa, the capital of the Mexican state of Tabasco. [Image](#) courtesy Boundless.



The end of the Olmecs

The Olmec population declined sharply between 400 and 350 BC, though it is unclear why. Archaeologists speculate that the depopulation was caused by environmental changes, specifically by the silting-up of rivers, which choked off the water supply.

Another theory for the considerable population drop proposes relocation of settlements due to increased volcanic activity as the cause rather than extinction. Volcanic eruptions during the Early, Late, and Terminal Formative periods would have blanketed the lands with ash and forced the Olmec to move their settlements.

Overview

- Several complex societies formed in the Andean region of South America, the **Caral**—or **Norte Chico**—and the **Chavín**.
- Some scholars dispute whether the Caral culture represented a true civilization.
- The **Chavín** civilization was named for and centered around a large temple at Chavín de Huántar and was probably organized around a religious hierarchy.

Caral—or Norte Chico—civilization

The Caral civilization—also known as the Norte Chico civilization—was a **complex society**, meaning its people had specialized, but interconnected, roles. It was located in what is now north-central coastal Peru, and existed between roughly 3500-1700 BC. Some have argued that it is the oldest known civilization in the Americas, but others have claimed that there is too little evidence of the political, economic, and religious structures to definitively claim the Caral society was truly a civilization. For example, those who study Caral sites assume that sophisticated government was required to manage them, but questions remain over how it was organized to carry out these building projects.

A photograph of the remains of the Caral site in Peru on a cloudy day with mountain ranges in the background. The remains look to be stepped pyramids or mounds.

The remains of the Caral site in Peru. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.



The most impressive achievement of the Caral society was its monumental architecture, including large earthwork platform mounds and sunken circular plazas. The urban complex of Caral takes up more than 150 acres, and at its peak, approximately 3,000 people lived in Caral. Its urban plan, which contained a central plaza and temples surrounded by homes, was used by other Andean civilizations for the next 4,000 years.

Most cities were located on one of three rivers in the region. This provided irrigation that allowed for cotton cultivation on a large scale. Evidence for large-scale cultivation of food crops is less clear. Archaeological evidence suggests use of textile technology for making clothing and fishnets, which fits with the evidence of cotton cultivation.

There is no evidence for the creation or use of ceramic pottery, which is often related to food storage and preparation. Some scholars have suggested that Caral civilization obtained much of its food resources from the sea rather than from the development of agricultural cereal and crop surpluses, which have been considered essential to the rise of other ancient civilizations. This is one reason why not all scholars are convinced that Caral represents a “true civilization”.

Artifacts found include flutes made of bird bones and cornetts—a type of instrument similar to a flute, made of deer and llama bones. These animals also provided meat to the Caral diet and were almost certainly hunted in the wild, rather than domesticated.

One of the most interesting artifacts found at Caral is a knotted cotton textile piece called a **quipu**—sometimes spelled khipu. Quipu were used by many Andean societies, including the Inca, who were still using the system in the 1500s AD when the Spanish arrived in South America. Quipu consisted of a series of strings with knots that allowed its users to perform calculations and to record transactions and other information. Along with questions about Caral food production, debates over whether quipu represented a formal writing system also prevent agreement over the status of the Caral as a civilization.

Chavín Civilization



The Chavín civilization developed in the northern Andean highlands of Peru between 900 and 250 BC, roughly 1,000 years after the decline of the Caral civilization. It was located in the Mosna River Valley, where the Mosna and Huachecsa rivers merge.

A map of Peru and the western part of Brazil. The Chavín civilization is highlighted in red along the coast and areas with "Chavín influence" are highlighted in pink and spread both north and south on the coast.

[Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The Chavín civilization is named for the temple at Chavín de Huántar, which is the most prominent site linked with the broader culture. Like all other civilizations, Chavín society developed and changed over time. Between about 900 and 500 BC, only several hundred people lived near

the temple site. The temple itself was probably a regional ceremonial center to which people would travel for significant events. Around 500 BC, the number of people living around the temple increased, and renovations and remodeling of the temple to allow for larger crowds were completed. The domestication of llamas appeared around this time, as did increased evidence of cross-cultural trade in the form of non-Chavín materials. This indicates that there must have been some increase in specialized economic activity to produce goods that could be traded.

From about 400 BC to 200 BC, the Chavin population grew substantially, and more urban forms of settlement appeared. Specialized pottery showed up during this time as well, indicating increased local production and probably an increased level of agricultural surplus, as pottery was often a means of storing surplus food.

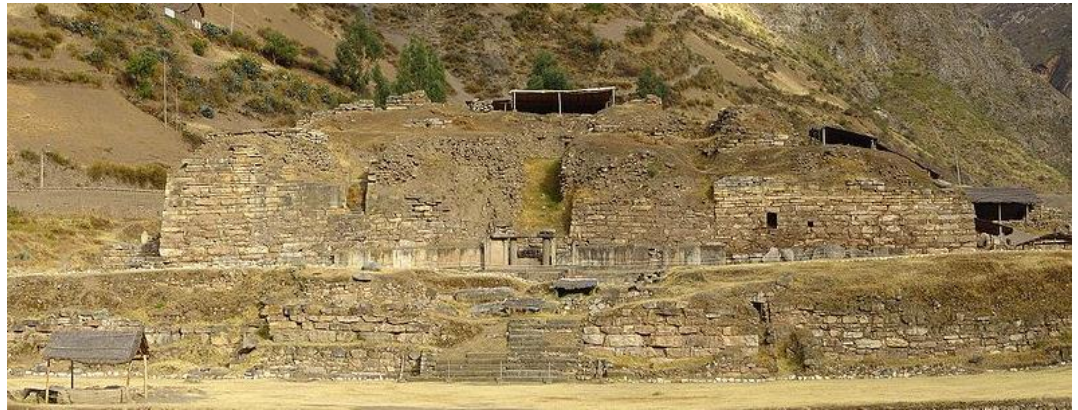
The unique geography of the Chavín site—near two rivers and also near high mountain valleys—allowed its residents to grow both maize, which thrived in the lowlands of the river valley, and potatoes, which grew best in the higher

altitudes of the Andes Mountains. The settlement pattern of larger villages in the lowland regions surrounded by smaller satellite villages in the highlands might have been a way to take advantage of these diverse agricultural opportunities through specialized production.

Along with maize and potatoes, the Chavin people also grew the grain quinoa and built irrigation systems to water these crops. They used domesticated llamas as pack animals to transport goods and as a source of food. A common method of preserving llama meat was drying it into what later Andean people called ch'arki—the origin of the word jerky!

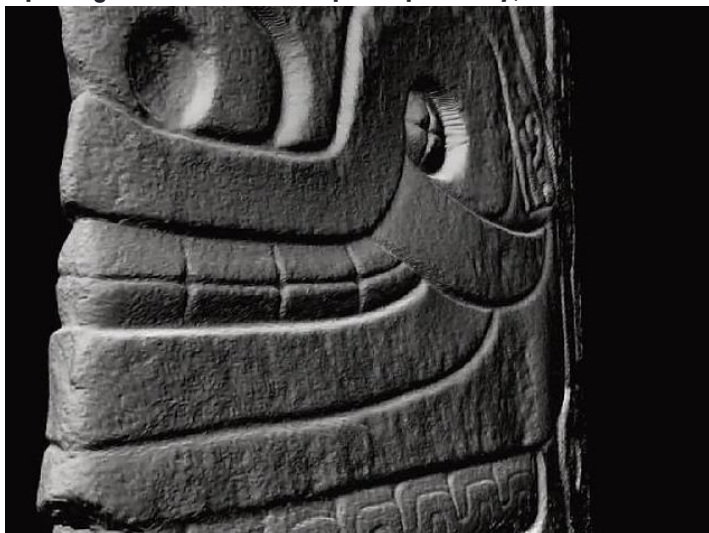
Ruins of Chavín de Huantar set into the base of a mountainside. The site is made of brown bricks that are crumbling.

Site of Chavín de Huantar. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.



The design of the Chavín de Huántar temple shows advanced building techniques that were adapted to the highland environment of Peru. To avoid flooding and the destruction of the temple during the rainy season, the Chavín people created a drainage system with canals under the temple structure. Chavín art was the first widespread, recognizable artistic style in the Andes and the temple itself was the most dramatic expression of Chavín style. The Old Temple featured the Lanzón, a 4.5 meter long piece of granite, carved in the form of the most important Chavín deity. The name Lanzón refers to the sculpture itself, coming from the Spanish word for lance, which the Spanish thought the sculpture resembled.

Because the Chavín left no written records and the civilization was no longer in existence when the Spanish arrived, the Chavín name of the deity is unknown. The Lanzón was housed in the central chamber of a labyrinth of underground passages below the temple. Spiritually, the Lanzón likely marked a pivot point linking the heavens, earth, and underworld.



Black-and-white photograph of the head of the stela statue Lanzón, a granite carving of the Chavín deity.

The most important stela statue of the central deity of the Chavín, called the Lanzón. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Also near the temple was the Tello Obelisk, a giant sculpted shaft of granite. The obelisk features images of plants and animals—including caimans, birds, crops, and human figures—and may portray a Chavín creation myth. Though its purpose has not been fully deciphered by archaeologists,

the obelisk seems to have been aligned on an axis with the Lanzón and thus may have also served as a sort of spiritual or astrological marker. This indicates that the Chavín possessed some knowledge of astronomy.

Photograph of the Tello obelisk, a giant sculpted shaft of granite. The obelisk features images of plants and animals—including caymans, birds, crows, and human figures—and may portray a Chavín creation myth.

Tello Obelisk. [Image](#) by Robert Nunn, licensed under a [CC BY-NC 2.0](#) license

The Chavín people created refined goldwork and used early techniques of melting metal and soldering—connecting two pieces of metal by using another metal as a sort of glue. Chavín art decorated the walls of the temple and includes carvings, sculptures, and pottery. The feline figure—most often the jaguar—had important religious meaning and shows up in many carvings and sculptures. Eagles are also commonly seen throughout Chavín art. The art was intentionally difficult to interpret, as it was meant to be read by the high priests alone.



There is little evidence of warfare in Chavín relics and no signs of defensive structures at urban sites. Instead, local citizens were likely controlled by a combination of religious pressure and environmental conditions. The Andes Mountains and Pacific Ocean acted as natural barriers to movement, confining settlement and travel largely to the coastal strip, see map above.

The political structures of Chavín society are not clear, but the construction of the temple and the limited access to knowledge of symbols both imply that a hierarchy based on religious or spiritual beliefs existed.

The construction and later renovation of the temple would have required mobilizing a large amount of labor, so there must have been some system for doing this. The most common theory is that there existed a small, elite group of **shamans**—people believed to have the ability to communicate with the spiritual world—and that they maintained positions of power through this exclusive ability.