



Ancient Agrarian Societies: The Olmec and Chavín

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

They didn't leave us much, but two ancient societies in the Americas left enough clues behind to piece together the rituals and systems they may have developed several millennia ago.

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Introduction

Early humans migrated to the Americas at least 15,000 years ago. It's possible they migrated much earlier. These early humans created foraging communities throughout North, Central and South America. Like other communities around the world, these foragers eventually began to farm crops, usually along rivers. However, the Olmec were the earliest community to practice a mixture of farming and foraging methods like hunting and fishing. The Olmec lived in modern-day Mexico. One of the earliest settlements in South America was the community at Chavín de Huántar in modern-day Peru. These cultures had a lot in common with other Mesoamerican and Andean peoples who lived in these regions from the time the first humans arrived until the Spanish arrived in the fifteenth century.

The Olmec (c. 1600-350 BCE)

Foraging communities lived in what is now south-central Mexico beginning around 2500 BCE. Around 1600 BCE, the Olmec people founded settlements along the Coatzacoalcos River near the Gulf of Mexico in modern-day Veracruz, Mexico. These settlements included structures for religious ceremonies and more permanent living sites. The largest Olmec city was San Lorenzo. At first, it was just elite rulers and religious leaders of Olmec society that lived in San Lorenzo.



Olmec, major settlement sites (yellow) and secondary sites (red). By Madman2001, CC BY 3.0.

Other major Olmec cities were located nearby in what is now Veracruz and Tabasco, Mexico. Archaeologists believe that central rulers, such as kings or chiefs, governed the Olmec cities. They ruled using political and economic power, as well as religious authority.

The Olmec did not leave any written records, but archaeological evidence provides a large amount of information about them. The most recognizable artifacts of the Olmec are the massive sculpted heads. Each head weighed around 20 tons, about as heavy as three elephants. The statues were carved out of mountains using a volcanic rock called *basalt*, and then transported about 60-70 kilometers (37-43 miles) to various sites.

The Olmecs often used other materials to make their art. However, these materials were obtained from outside the Olmec settlements, suggesting that the Olmec had large trade networks with other cultures. The Olmec likely influenced later societies like the Maya and Aztecs, who have some similarities with Olmec art and culture.

The main Olmec cities were reserved for the kings and elite members of Olmec society, as well as religious ceremonies. Most Olmec people lived in more rural areas, where they worked as farmers and craftspeople. The Olmec farmed a variety of crops including maize, cotton, squash and beans. The Olmec society was one of the first to discover how to make rubber from the rubber tree. Archaeologists also found the ruins of a ball court, which the Olmec used to play an ancient Mesoamerican game using a rubber ball. In fact, it was the Aztecs who gave the Olmecs their name, which means “rubber people.”

The Olmec ballgame may have been played for sport. It also may have been part of a ritual where the losing team was killed in a sacrifice. Human sacrifices were probably performed to make peace with the Olmec gods. The sacrifices could also have been used as a way to control the people through religious beliefs and fear.

At its largest, Olmec society may have had as many as 20,000 people. However, there are no written documents to confirm these numbers. Instead, archaeologists have to estimate based on the size of Olmec land, as well as artifacts.

During Olmec history, certain cities grew in importance at certain times, and then declined. By 350 BCE, Olmec society had ended completely. Historians have two main ideas for explaining what happened to the Olmecs. It's possible the centers for religious life had to be moved, causing the cities to decline. Scientists have also suggested that climate change and volcanic eruptions could have ruined parts of Olmec farmland.



Olmec head, San Lorenzo, c. 1200-900 BCE. By Mesamerican, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Chavín (c. 900-250 BCE)

About 5,500 km (3,500 miles) South of the Olmecs, a society known as the Chavín developed. The Chavín inhabited an area near two rivers on the coast of Peru, as well as in the Andes Mountains region. Like the Olmec up north, Chavín culture did not leave any written records. We don't even know what they were really called. *Chavín* comes from the Spanish name for the temple ruins at Chavín de Huántar.

Archaeologists have determined that the temple was used for religious ceremonies. It may have been shared by different settlements in the region. However, archaeologists haven't found trash, living spaces or any other evidence of people living inside the temple. The temple was renovated after 500 BCE, possibly to make more space for the growing number of people taking part in religious ceremonies.

The dwellings and agricultural sites they did find at Chavín were located outside of the temple complex. Crops like quinoa were grown in the area near the river, while potatoes were grown in the mountains. More pottery was produced after 500 BCE. This suggests that the Chavín were producing more food and needed more jars to store the extra food. There is also evidence that the Chavín society raised llamas to transport goods throughout the Chavín region and beyond. Chavín goods have been found hundreds of miles away from Chavín land, and other communities used Chavín artistic style in their own art. Scientists believe this is because the Chavín were part of a large trade network and communicated with other communities.

Chavín society was organized in a hierarchy, meaning members of Chavín society were ranked by social status. At the top of the hierarchy were shaman-priests, who had the most authority. Like the Olmecs, the residents of Chavín may have been controlled by religion and fear. This suggests that Chavín society may have had a central political ruler, such as a religious leader. However, we don't really know how their government was organized.



Location of Chavín and its area of influence. By Zenyu, public domain.



Chavín de Huántar, interior hallway of the temple. By Martin St-Amant, CC BY 3.0.



The Chavín used llamas to transport goods over long distances, though this one does not appear to be in a hurry. By Johann "nojhan" Dréo, CC BY-SA 2.5.

At its largest, the center of Chavín society was about 1,000 acres, an area around the size of 1,000 football fields. The land could support a population of about 2,000-3,000 people. Scientists are not sure why the Chavín society's population declined or relocated, but it's possible that the land was overused, resulting in environmental changes. Another possibility is that the Chavín's religious site became less important for some reason.

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The Chavín used llamas to transport goods over long distances, though this one does not appear to be in a hurry. By Johann "nojhan" Dréo, CC BY-SA 2.5. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Lama_glama#/media/File:Llama_lying_down.jpg



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