Origins of the Inca Civilization

The Incas are an ancient people who lived in South America. The Incas and their ancestors occupied the land where the modern countries of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina are today. Historians believe that the first humans in North America came from Asia about 30,000 years ago. At that time, Alaska and Russia were connected by a land bridge. With changes in the earth’s environment, the land bridge is now under water. Over the centuries humans moved further and further south into Central America and then South America.

Historians estimate that groups of humans settled in South America along the west coast between 13,000 and 10,000 BCE. In fact, archaeologists found evidence of human settlement in Chile that occurred around that time and included mastodon bones in a fire pit. As civilization progressed, people learned to cultivate squash, corn, potatoes, and cotton as well as herd llamas and alpacas. The farmers and herders formed a culture called the Chavin that lasted from 1000 BCE until 500 BCE. Another culture called Paracas began around 700-600 BCE and their clothing used some of the same designs as the Chavin. We know about this culture because of burial sites where mummies were found. The Paracas culture lasted until 200 CE.

Next came the Nazca and Moche civilizations. These people were skilled craftsmen, especially at weaving designs from llama and alpaca wool. Archaeologists discovered original pottery jars inside earthen burial mounds that contained preserved Nazca textiles. The people of the Moche civilization were able to craft gold and silver. They also built stone pyramids with steps, including a Pyramid of the Sun and a Pyramid of the Moon. The Moche civilization lasted in the area of present-day Peru until about 900 CE.

Two other cultures thrived in Peru. The Huari culture arose around 600 CE. Their main city contained 700 buildings, some of them three stories high, and they had terraced fields for crops. The Huari people abandoned their city in 900 CE. The Chimu civilization lasted from 900 to 1400 CE. These people built irrigation canals for farming. The Incas first came to Peru between 1150 to 1250 CE. The Incas believed they were Children of the Sun and began conquering their neighbors around 1300 CE.