HISTORY OF PERU
Pre-Columbian History

Numerous civilizations have risen and fallen through thousands of years of history in Peru. Independent of any contact with populations in Europe or Asia, many of them achieved great advances in architecture, agriculture, the arts, and social organization. One of the highlights of any visit to Peru is the opportunity to consider some of these extraordinary civilizations.

The First Inhabitants

The earliest inhabitants of Peru descended from the people who crossed the Bering Land Bridge that once connected Asia with the North American continent approximately 15,000 years ago. There are signs of human habitation in Peru dating from around 4000 BCE. These were largely hunter-gatherer societies, subsisting mainly on fishing and living along the coasts. Cultivation of crops began with the early inhabitants of Peru. In these coastal settlements and in a few other sites in northern Peru near Trujillo, one can observe the gradual progression of pottery and textiles to higher levels of refinement over these earliest centuries of human habitation.

The Chavin and the Classic Period

The Chavin culture, which developed roughly from the 9th century BCE to the 4th century BC, was one of the most influential, if not the most influential, in Peruvian pre-Columbian history. The styles of ceramics can be seen in several subsequent cultures extending over a large part of Peru. The Chavin disappeared mysteriously in about 300 BCE. After their decline, several different, more localized cultures developed and prospered for the next several hundred years. Among the most well-known of these is the Paracas culture that existed on the coast south of Lima. This was a society that lived off an oasis in an otherwise extremely harsh desert environment. They cultivated cotton and became known for creating what are considered the finest textiles in the pre-Columbian Americas. You can see some examples of these dyed cotton textiles in the museums in Lima and in Ica (near Paracas and Nazca). They are extraordinarily beautiful.

From early in the first millennium AD up until about the 8th century AD, isolated regional societies in Peru began to make significant advances in the arts and sciences, including the beginning of metalwork. The Moche built massive temples to the Sun and Moon near Trujillo, and the people of the Nazca culture etched their famously enigmatic designs into the surrounding desert. Due to the great advancements in culture and social organization during these years, they are known as the Classic Period.
The Wari
After the Classic Period, the biggest advances in Peru came in the fields of social and military organization rather than in the arts and sciences. The Wari were the first tribe in Peru to become expansionist conquerors, and they subjugated numerous Andean tribes from about 700 CE to about 1100 CE. They inherited many of their skills in social organization from the Tiahuanaco civilization that prospered in Bolivia near Lake Titicaca, and would subsequently pass these skills onto the Incas.

The Chimu
During the period of the Wari, other cultures in different parts of Peru were also prospering. The Chimu people established a kingdom in the area of Trujillo, with its capital the massive adobe city of Chan Chan, known as the largest adobe city in the world. Another influential culture during this period was the Chachapoyas, in the Amazon region. The Chachapoyas people built the remarkable fortress of Kuelap.

The Rise of the Incas
The Incas started out in about the 12th century as one of several different Andean tribes that gradually grew in power and influence. The name “Incas” actually applies only to the leaders of these people. In the Incan mythology, the leaders were considered descendants of the Sun. The first of the Incas was named Manco Capac, and he is said to have arisen from the waters of Lake Titicaca and to have chosen Cusco as the place to establish his kingdom by driving his staff into the ground where the city now lies. Throughout the first 300 years of their reign, the Incas ruled only over the area near Cusco and the Sacred Valley. They built impressive palaces in Cusco and gradually improved their skills in administration, governing, and warfare.

Pachacutec and the Inca Expansion
In the first half of the 15th century Pachacutec, the ninth Inca, came to power. He assumed the role of Inca ahead of his older brother due to his extraordinary accomplishments on the battlefield. Under his rule, the Incas quickly set out to conquer and subjugate neighboring tribes. The succeeding Incas continued his policies of expansion, and in less than a hundred years, the Incas ruled over an empire that stretched from present-day southern Colombia all the way down to central Chile. It was one of the largest empires in world history.

How the Incas Maintained Their Empire
The Incas maintained order across their kingdom by building a vast network of stone-paved roads, estimated at about 20,000 miles in all. The roads ran over extremely difficult terrain, much of it straight up and down the Andes. Numerous large suspension bridges were built across powerful rivers such as the Apurimac and the Urubamba. The Incas also had an efficient system of relay runners called “chaskis” that delivered messages across the territories via the highways at previously unheard of speeds, allowing for greater communication and administration of the far-flung empire. They imposed their language, Quechua, and their religion of worshipping the Sun on all of the peoples they conquered. Difficult tribes were sometimes broken up and relocated to different areas to reduce their threat. Vast storage houses and imperial outposts were built. The Incas were not known for significant advances in the arts and sciences from what the earlier Peruvian societies had achieved, but their advances in political and military organization were stunning.
The empire did not last for long, though. When the Spanish arrived to the New World at the end of the 15th century, the single most destructive thing they brought with them was their diseases. Before the Spanish ever made it to Peru, these new illnesses spread down across the lands of South America, sowing disorganization and death. The last Inca to rule over a completely united empire, Huayna Capac, is said to have died of smallpox. Before he died he divided his empire between two of his sons, Huascar and Atahualpa. Huascar was to rule over the southern half from Cusco, while Atahualpa was to rule over the northern half from Quito.

The Civil War and the Arrival of the Spanish

The plan to split the empire had disastrous consequences. Civil war ensued between the two brothers in the 1520s, not even a century after Pachacutec had begun the great period of Incan expansion. The Spanish had already conquered the great civilization of the Aztecs of Mexico, and they were gradually making their way down through Central America and starting to explore the northwest coast of South America into Colombia.

Francisco Pizarro was one of the conquistadores who first began exploring this area, and upon rumors of a great civilization to the south, he organized and set off on several different exploratory sailing expeditions down the coast of Colombia toward Ecuador. At some point, these conquistadores came into contact with people under the rule of the Incas, far up in Ecuador, and over a thousand miles from Cusco. They began to understand that this was the northern border of a vast and powerful empire, and they went ashore with a group of a few dozen armed men on horseback to explore inland.

Just as Pizarro was arriving in northern Peru with his men, Atahualpa was winning the decisive battles of the civil war. His soldiers had recently captured his brother Huascar outside Cusco. In 1532 Atahualpa was in Cajamarca, an Incan city in northern Peru, resting after the long military campaign and preparing to begin his march south to assume power. The empire was undoubtedly greatly weakened by the fact that it had just undergone a long and very bloody civil war, and this fact played directly into the fortunes of the Spanish conquerors.

Atahualpa was apparently unaware of the Spanish presence throughout these few years prior to 1532, as he was caught up and distracted by the civil war. With the war over, these strange newcomers began to attract much more attention. They rode on huge animals never before seen, had beards, and wore armor from head to toe. Though small in number, they were certainly impressive. Pizarro, as the leader of these new arrivals, requested a visit with Atahualpa in Cajamarca. For reasons that are not entirely understood, the Incan ruler agreed, allowing the Spanish horsemen to ride into the city center without even giving up their swords and other weapons. Perhaps he thought that with such a relatively small army they could not pose a serious threat and would never be so foolhardy as to engage the Incan troops in battle.

Pizarro and the rest of his men arrived in Peru with one main goal: to obtain as large a fortune as possible, whatever the means. Their goal was not to make peace with this new empire, but
to conquer it. Given this extraordinary opportunity to get all the way to the leader of the empire, they did not squander it. Upon meeting with the Inca they were awed by the grandeur and ceremony that surrounded him. However, in secret they had made plans to offer the Inca the chance to accept their Christian religion, and if he did not, they would attack and take him prisoner. The Inca found the Spanish inquiries about Christianity offensive to his beliefs in his own religion, and he threw down a Bible that had been given to him by one of the Spanish missionaries. Upon this, the Spanish gave the agreed upon signal to attack. This marked the beginning of the Conquest.

**The Inca is Taken Prisoner**

On horseback, fully covered in armor, and with the finest steel swords in the world, the Spanish were virtually invincible in battle with the soldiers of the Incan empire, who fought with clubs and sticks and had no armor. In a single battle, a Spanish conquistador on horseback could defeat literally dozens, if not hundreds, of Incan soldiers. It was a short-lived and bloody rout once the fighting started, and the Spanish took Atahualpa prisoner.

Atahualpa said that he would pay a ransom of an amount equal to three rooms filled with gold and silver in order to secure his release, and the Spanish heartily agreed, with no real intention of ever letting Atahualpa go once the ransom was collected. Eventually, the Inca realized that the Spanish would not let him go, and after handing over a massive fortune in silver and gold pieces, ordered the ransom collecting stopped. He still held huge authority over his people even while captured. The Spanish feared that he would try to incite a rebellion against them, and now that he was no longer cooperating with the ransom, the Spanish mercilessly executed him.

The Spanish then marched south toward Cusco to finish the conquest. They engaged in various battles along the way, though they were often seen as liberators by local tribes that had only recently been conquered by the Incas. Pizarro arrived to Cusco in November of 1533. A puppet Inca, Manco, who was a relative of Huascar, was put on the throne. Eventually, however, he came to understand that the Spanish only intended to take as much from the Incas as they could. Manco escaped from Cusco, raised a massive army of tens of thousands of men, and laid siege to Cusco to try and drive out the Spanish. The rebellion was nearly successful, but even though greatly outnumbered, the Spanish were victorious. The final dramatic battle occurred at Sacsayhuaman, the giant fortress overlooking Cusco.

Manco, having failed in the rebellion, retreated first to the Sacred Valley, where he made one successful stand against the Spanish at Ollantaytambo (an impressive set of ruins that you can also visit), before finally retreating into the jungles of Vilcabamba (past Machu Picchu). He set up an exile kingdom in that region that lasted for several decades, in an inhospitable region that the Spanish considered nearly inaccessible. However, the Spanish persisted, and in 1572 they eventually succeeded in capturing and executing the last Inca ruler in Vilcabamba, Tupac Amaru.

**Spanish Rule in Peru**

Over the years, the Spanish consolidated their power along with the collaboration of a string of puppet Incas, and began the “encomienda” system that essentially put the Indians into a form of slavery for the next several hundred years. The Spanish needed a capital close to the sea, and they established it at Lima. Lima became by far the wealthiest and grandest city in South America, and probably in all the Americas, for the next two hundred years. Unfortunately, it was almost completely destroyed by a massive earthquake in 1746, and never regained its glory. While the Spanish settlers were building Lima, the native population was put to work in the mountains, particularly in the mines, in horrendous conditions. Under the encomienda system, the natives all had to pay regular “tribute” to the Spanish in the form of part of their small earnings or production. Francisco Pizarro and the earliest conquistadores made huge fortunes, but there was considerable fighting between them over who should be entitled to what lands. Pizarro was murdered in Lima in 1541 in connection with these disputes, nine years after first arriving to Peru to begin the conquest.
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Recent History
Peru’s history is filled with complex economic and social problems. In the 1980s, these problems culminated in the rise of the Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, a radical liberation movement of the native population that was in many ways similar to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Sendero Luminoso’s leader was a university professor from Ayacucho named Abimael Guzmán. He advocated forcibly moving people out of cities and starting society over again based on an agrarian communist ideal. The methods of the Shining Path were brutal, and for many years they committed terrorist attacks against sites throughout Peru. The government responded with harsh measures against the rebels.

Alberto Fujimori gained a great deal of support when the leader of the Shining Path was captured in 1992. Since then, the situation in Peru has calmed down and the Shining Path has all but disappeared. Fujimori was involved in corruption scandals in the 2000 elections, and eventually fled the country. Alejandro Toledo, Peru’s first president of indigenous blood, took office after Fujimori’s departure, but suffered severe unpopularity despite considerable macro-economic improvement. In 2006, Alan García, a formerly disgraced head of state, was once again elected President of Peru, and oversaw a robust economic rebound. Former army officer Ollanta Humala Tasso was elected president in 2011, and he carried on the stable economic policies of the three preceding administrations. In 2016, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski was elected, though his government was short lived as he resigned in 2018 amid various controversies surrounding his administration. Vice president Martín Vizcarra assumed office in March 2018.

Tupac Amaru II
The next major native uprising against the Spanish took place in 1780, when José Gabriel Condorcanqui raised an army of 60,000 to rebel against the Spanish. He adopted the name Tupac Amaru in honor of the last Inca killed by the Spanish. The insurrection succeeded at first, but was brutally crushed by the Spanish authorities in 1781. The Spanish tortured and executed Condorcanqui and thousands of his fellow revolutionaries. Another rebellion occurred in 1814, but the Spanish again succeeded in suppressing it.

However, opposition to Spanish rule had taken root not just among the indigenous peoples, but also among the native-born Creole population. “Creoles” were people of Spanish descent that were born in Peru, and they came to resent their inferior status to those who were born in Spain.

Peruvian Independence From Spain
This resentment on the part of the locally-born population against the Spanish was arising in many different parts of South America. The Argentinean liberator José de San Martín began the liberation of Peru after liberating Chile. In 1821, San Martín entered Lima, and Peruvian independence was proclaimed formally on July 28, 1821. The Spanish fought to retain their empire, and a series of battles ensued. Simón Bolívar, a Venezuelan revolutionary, helped lead the forces against Spain in establishing Peru’s independence.

Not much changed after independence for the vast majority of people in Peru. Those of Spanish descent still wielded all the power. The government was rather chaotic for several years as the locally-born population began to learn how to rule the country. Good governments have alternated with corrupt dictatorships for many decades and throughout the twentieth century.

Alberto Fujimori
PEOPLE OF PERU
Approximately 45% of Peru’s inhabitants are of purely indigenous blood. Many, particularly those in the highlands, continue to speak Quechua (the language of the Incas) as their first language. There are about 100 different indigenous groups living in the Amazon areas of eastern Peru. They speak their own languages and live largely in isolation from the remainder of Peru’s population. Their numbers are dwindling as their lands have been encroached, but some continue to live as they have for thousands of years, subsisting on hunting, fishing and agriculture. About 35% of Peru’s population is “mestizo,” of mixed indigenous and European blood, and about 15% is of purely European descent.

There are sizeable communities of Japanese descendants in Peru, the most famous of whom has been Alberto Fujimori. Approximately 70% percent of the people live in urban areas. Many farmers and peasants who have found it impossible to make a living in recent years have moved to the cities, particularly Lima, which now has a population of nearly 10 million people.