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A History of Peru

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Introduction

Peru's history is a fascinating journey that spans millennia, crossing the boundaries of geography, culture, and power. From its early hunter-gatherer inhabitants to the emergence of one of the greatest empires in the pre-Columbian Americas, and through the profound changes brought by European contact and the forging of a complex modern nation, Peru stands as a testament to both resilience and transformation. The majestic Andes, the vast Amazon, and the arid coastal deserts have all served as the backdrop to a narrative filled with ingenuity, adversity, and adaptation.

The earliest chapters of Peru's history are marked by groundbreaking developments among some of the oldest civilizations in the world. The Norte Chico culture, with its monumental urban centers, was among the most ancient cradles of civilization. Over centuries, the region saw the rise and fall of influential societies such as the Chavín, Paracas, Nazca, Moche, Wari, and Tiwanaku, each contributing unique advancements in religion, agriculture, artistic expression, and social organization. This tapestry of ancient achievements set the stage for the eventual rise of the mighty Inca Empire.

The Incas, renowned for their administrative genius, monumental architecture, and extensive road networks, left a lasting legacy that shapes Peru's identity even today. However, their world was irrevocably changed with the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century. The ensuing conquest led by Francisco Pizarro not only ended Inca dominance but also reshaped the continent's demographic, economic, and cultural makeup. Spanish colonial rule imposed new hierarchies and traditions while giving rise to centuries of both resistance and forced adaptation among Peru's varied peoples.

Following nearly three centuries under Spanish domination, Peru's struggle for independence was hard-fought and often driven by figures from outside its own borders. Liberation brought with it a new set of challenges, from political instability and civil strife to foreign intervention and economic upheaval. The nation navigated these turbulent waters, periodically experiencing short-lived prosperity as well as devastating losses, such as those suffered in the War of the Pacific.

The twentieth century introduced an era of unprecedented change, as Peruvians confronted the legacy of colonialism while striving to shape a more inclusive and democratic society. This period saw the emergence of new political movements, military regimes, and the trauma of internal conflict between state forces and insurgent groups. The scars of this violence, especially upon indigenous communities, remain a vital subject of contemporary reflection and reconciliation.

In the twenty-first century, Peru stands at a crossroads, balancing rapid economic growth and urbanization with persistent social inequality and political tensions. Its dynamic society, vibrant culture, and remarkable natural heritage continue to inspire, provoke, and challenge notions of identity and progress. This book aims to provide a comprehensive yet accessible account of Peru's history—from ancient civilization through empire, colonialism, revolution, and modern nationhood—revealing a story as complex and enduring as the land itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: Early Arrivals and the Dawn of Agriculture

The story of human presence in Peru is a deep one, stretching back into the mists of the late Pleistocene. Imagine small bands of hunter-gatherers, equipped with little more than their wits and stone tools, making their way across a landscape dramatically different from today. These intrepid early inhabitants, part of the broader migration into the Americas, gradually dispersed and adapted to the incredibly varied environments that Peru offers, from the arid coast to the high Andes and the fringes of the Amazon. Evidence suggests human occupation in the Andes from around 11,000 BCE. Some archaeological finds, like hunting implements found near Ayacucho at Pikimachay Cave, have even been dated back as far as 20,000 years ago, though the exact timing of the earliest arrivals is still a subject of debate among scientists. Regardless of the precise date, it's clear that these early peoples were resourceful, learning to live off the land and its resources.

As the last glacial period ended and the climate shifted, so too did the available resources and the ways in which people interacted with their surroundings. This period, often referred to as the Archaic or Preceramic period, saw a significant adaptation of human populations. Societies during this time primarily relied on hunting and gathering, but they developed a broad diet, utilizing the diverse array of animals and plant resources available in their specific ecological niches. Different traditions emerged, such as the Paijan tradition in northern Peru, who focused on exploiting local resources. Early sites across the continent indicate that people gradually transitioned from solely foraging to incorporating domesticated plants into their diet.

The move towards a more settled lifestyle didn't happen overnight. It was a gradual process of experimentation and observation. As early as 6000 BCE, some of the oldest civilizations began to appear in both coastal and highland regions of Peru. This marked a significant shift from nomadic hunting and gathering to more settled agricultural communities. Sites like Jiskairumoko, Kotosh, and Huaca Prieta offer tangible proof of this transformation. The people at these sites began to cultivate crops and domesticate animals, laying the groundwork for more complex societies.

The domestication of plants in the Americas had at least two major centers, with Peru being one of the key areas. While the Americas had fewer animals suitable for domestication compared to other parts of the world, early Peruvians managed to domesticate the guinea pig as early as 3500 BCE, the llama by 3500 BCE, and the alpaca by 1500 BCE. These animals would become vital sources of food, transportation, and fiber in the Andean region. The Muscovy duck was also

domesticated long before the arrival of the Spanish.

The plant repertoire of early Peruvians was much richer. Horticulture developed independently in Peru, much like in Asia, and almost as early. Key crops that were domesticated included corn (maize), potatoes, various beans and squashes, and cassava (manioc). These staples, still important globally today, were first cultivated and developed in different parts of South America. At Guitarrero Cave in Peru, domesticated beans and squash have been found dating back to around 8,000 BCE. Peanuts have also been found domesticated in Peru as early as 7,000 BCE, alongside squash and cotton.

Potatoes, a crop synonymous with the Andes, were collected as early as 11,000 years ago in the highlands of south-central Chile and were domesticated well before 5000 years ago, appearing in desert coastal sites by that time. Quinoa was harvested by 7500 years ago, and cotton by 6000 years ago in northern Peru. Lima beans, another significant crop, appear to have been domesticated in the southern Andes, with the oldest domesticated examples found on the Peruvian desert coast dating between 7000 and 5000 years ago.

The development of agriculture allowed for a more sedentary lifestyle and, as populations grew, led to the development of more complex societies around 5000 BCE. This shift is evident in archaeological sites along the coast and in the highlands. The coastal regions, with their rich marine ecosystems and river valleys, became attractive locations for settled communities. Early villages began to appear, with evidence of houses being built.

One such early village is La Paloma, located on the central coast south of Lima. Dating back to the late Preceramic period (roughly 5700 to 2800 BCE), La Paloma is one of the earliest villages in the Americas that has been stratigraphically dated. Excavations at La Paloma have revealed the remains of houses, some constructed with adobe bricks and thatched roofs, providing insight into early domestic architecture. The inhabitants also practiced agriculture, cultivating squash, beans, and cotton, demonstrating their adaptation to the local environment and their ability to utilize both agricultural and marine resources. The presence of organized communities and structures at sites like La Paloma suggests the beginnings of more intricate societal structures by the mid-third millennium BCE.

In the highlands, while evidence for preceramic architecture is sparser, remains of what are interpreted as circular huts have been found at sites like Pachamachay in the Junin region, dating back to around 4500 BCE. These structures, likely made of perishable materials like thatch or animal hides over a post framework, indicate a settled or semi-settled presence in the high altitudes.

The transition to agriculture also brought about changes in technology. While ceramics

were not yet in widespread use during the Preceramic period, early forms have been discovered at some sites like La Paloma, suggesting a gradual adoption of pottery production. Instead, the focus was on developing tools and techniques suited to farming and resource extraction in their specific environments. The development of irrigation systems, while becoming more elaborate later, also had early roots. Ancient agriculturalists constructed canal networks and developed techniques to manage water, including floodwater.

Sites like Huaca Prieta on the north coast, occupied as early as 4700 BCE, even before the widespread introduction of ceramics, show evidence of early cultivation, including cotton from around 2500 BCE. The presence of sophisticated textiles at Huaca Prieta, some dating back 6,000 years and showing the earliest known use of indigo dye, highlights the technological advancements of these early coastal communities. The shift to agriculture wasn't uniform across Peru; while northern and central coastal areas saw a pattern of increasing reliance on agriculture, the southern coast appears to have followed a different, more local model that initially emphasized marine resources before a later shift to agriculture, possibly driven by climate changes.

The domestication of plants and animals, along with the development of agricultural techniques, was a process that unfolded over thousands of years. These developments weren't always triggered by environmental changes; in some cases, favorable conditions already existed. This gradual but profound transformation laid the foundation for the emergence of more complex societies and eventually, the rise of monumental architecture and organized ceremonial centers, setting the stage for the civilizations that would follow.

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