Richard L. Burger. *Chavin and the Origins of Andean Civilizations*

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When the Spanish conquered Peru in 1532, they encountered an extraordinary empire ruled by the Incas. Even by 16th century standards, the Incas had many things better than one would find in Europe, such as an excellent road system that bound together an enormous empire, sophisticated statecraft, a high level of arts and crafts, with no sign of poverty, hunger, or crime. What they did not have, however, brought them down: no steel weapons, no gunpowder, and no resistance to Old World Diseases.

What the Spanish did not know about the Inca empire was that it was only about 100 years old and that the Incas did not choose to acknowledge that their culture was based on developments stretching back thousands of years into Peruvian history. They claimed to be, improbably, the inventors of everything Peruvian.

The author adds another element to the problem of assessing the Incas’ antecedents: does the Eurasian concept of “civilization” correspond to the New World’s? He claims that great cities and writing systems, large draft animals and the wheel are not the only characteristics of civilizations. The Incas (and the Aztecs) had civilizations and empires without all of the Old World elements.

In this volume, the author favors a definition that refers to a society “with a high level of cultural achievement in the arts and sciences, made visible in the form of material objects.” If one keeps the definition deliberately loose, the investigator can concentrate on the processes and nature of a civilization rather than on the degree of match with a preconceived typological category.

Of the first “pristine” civilizations—Mesopotamia, China, Indus Valley, Egypt, Peru, and Mesoamerica – Peru is the least understood. The author thinks that when we can fully understand
it, it will prove to be of a different nature than the other five.

Between the arrival of the New World hunters some 15,000 years ago (there is some growing controversy over this issue today, moving it further back in time and drawing it from more than one source), it took 10,000 years of population growth before anything resembling civilization began to emerge.

The civilization called Chavin (from the archaeological site in the northern highlands of Peru where it was first found in the 1930s) appears to be the mother culture of Peru—corresponding to the other mother cultures of the Shang in China, Sumerian in Mesopotamia, and Olmec in Mesoamerica.

Burger's book comprises the following elements:
1. Introduction: provides a Peruvian chronology, a large section on the geographic and topographical setting, and notes on the changing environment caused by the inhabitants themselves and by introductions from the Old World.
2. The Late Preceramic and the Beginnings of Peruvian Civilization: the late Preceramic period on the coast, in the highlands, and Ecuador and the tropical forest.
3. The Initial Period Societies on the Coast: the first ceramics, central coast and U-shaped public architecture, north-central pyramids with circular courts, the Cupisnique culture of the north coast, technological developments, the northern and southern frontiers.
4. The Initial Period Societies in the Highlands and Montane Forest: northern highlands, unequal development in Huamachuco and Otuzco, eastern slopes, upper Huallaga and Callejon de Huaylas, central highlands, beginnings of gold metallurgy.
5. Early Ceremonial Center of Chavin de Huantar: the Old Temple, Chavin sculpture, Hallucinogens and Chavin ritual, the Urabarriu-phase settlement.
7. Florescence and Collapse of Chavin Civilization: crisis on the coast, prosperity in the highlands, functional interpretation of
Chavin horizon, religion, innovation, and diffusion, social stratification and the Chavin cult, subsistence diversity, interregional exchange, ceramic style and changing cultural identity, the northern frontiers, some concluding thoughts on Chavin civilization.

8. Epilogue: chronological chart, appendix of radiocarbon dates, notes, further reading and bibliography, sources of illustrations, and index.

This is an excellent work for specialists, with 263 illustrations, 18 in color, and it leaves the reader with the realization of how much work there is to do before we can understand the roots of the very rich civilization of Peru.

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