



South America is probably the least known continent in our over-explored, over-publicized world. Africa has become as familiar to schoolchildren and television viewers as their own backyard; even the most remote parts of Asia are much the same, but South America is seldom seen or discussed except when there is a particularly large-scale disaster or a nasty change of government. Why this should be is an enigma. The rest of the world has economic and political ties, both open and illicit, with the various South American countries, but nevertheless they remain apart from our consciousness. We are largely ignorant of their cultures, their geography, their resources, and, especially, of their past. Most people have heard of the Incas. But few have heard anything more. Even with the passion for tourism characteristic of our times, South America remains far less visited than, say, Mexico or Costa Rica, and much of its past is inaccessible to anyone but a determined specialist (Figure 1.1).

The following is an attempt towards rectifying this situation by presenting an indication of how tremendously varied, unique, even exotic, the prehistory of South America is. This is an extremely general and very incomplete treatment; it is frankly impossible to do justice to 12,000 plus years' history of an entire continent in a single volume. So I had to pick and choose. Unfortunately this has meant that many notable cultures and interesting peoples have been left out. Moreover, there is not equal coverage of the entire continent; the Andes, particularly the central Andes, have been emphasized and all else is oriented towards events in this relatively small area. However, there is a reasonable basis for this orientation. It was within the Andean mountain chain that the first complex cultures developed and where civilization reached its most elaborate form in terms of complex social and political organizations, advanced technologies, international religions, major art styles, and the other things that we tend (if rather vaguely) to associate with civilization.

A number of factors, including preservation, accessibility, and the monumentality of the remains have led to more archaeological field work being



Figure 1.1 Modern political divisions, capitals, and other important cities of the South American continent.

carried out in the central Andes, especially in Peru, than anywhere else. In addition, more of this work has been published in accessible places and there is a much better control of time than there is elsewhere upon the continent, essential when one is trying to write the history of prehistoric peoples. Thus the arrangement of this book has been pegged to events in the central Andes. This is not to say that important events did not take place

outside of the Andes; they most certainly did and there is no more reason to peg events in, say, Venezuela to those in Peru or Bolivia than there is to peg events in Southeast Asia to those in western Europe (or in any event, there was not before the coming of the modern era). But we also need some fixed chronological and cultural points and these are best developed in the central Andes, so expediency wins again.

The South American continent, when first encountered by Europeans in the sixteenth century, presented a tremendous variety of cultures, ranging from hunting and gathering nomads, living in small social groups with minimal material cultures, up to a huge multinational conquest state: the Incas. These societies were the contemporary exemplars of a process of historical differentiation and cultural development which had begun 14,000 or more years previously, when the first inhabitants, the Paleoindians, moved south via Panama and into the many very different environments of the South American continent. Within some thousands of years these peoples had settled down, had invented agriculture, pottery, weaving, and metallurgy, had domesticated animals, and were doing all of the things that in the Old World we regard as being preparatory to the development of that fuzzy concept “civilization.” Our view of civilization is, inevitably, Eurasia-centered and has been, through the process of standardized education, codified into an ethnocentric mold. Most people more or less subscribe to the “laundry list” of traits a culture must manifest to be a civilization that was developed by the 1930s archaeologist V. Gordon Childe. Childe’s criteria for being civilized included not only such obvious core elements as agriculture, full time specialization of labor, a class-structured society with a well-defined ruling class who held control over surplus goods and labor that they deployed towards their own ends, monumental “public” works such as palaces, temples, irrigation systems, etc., but also such dubious characteristics as the knowledge of metal-working, wheeled vehicles, and writing. These latter either were not present or were unimportant in many American cultures. Indeed, many European scholars somewhat capriciously excluded the American continents from consideration as centers of early civilizations because of the differences between them and what was thought to have happened in the Near East and Europe (research carried out since Childe wrote nearly 90 years ago has shown that he was not exactly correct). Any macrotheory of what a civilization is must explain what happened on a world-wide scene, not simply those parts of it that happen to be ancestral to much of our own culture. The Americas, and South America in particular, are, from a theoretical viewpoint, extraordinarily important in testing our ideas of the human dynamics of civilization, because this area saw the development of pristine civilizations totally separate from those of Eurasia. Thus, those characteristics that the American civilizations share with Eurasian ones, in terms of social structures, technologies, and developmental processes, must be part and parcel of the process of civilization

in general. With this in mind, a careful look at the American cultures shows us that a number of items and technologies once commonly held to be characteristic of civilizations are really not all that necessary. For example, there are numbers of ways to deal with such things as transport and record-keeping besides wheeled vehicles and writing. Wheels, in fact, are not much good in vertical (or heavily forested/ riverine) landscapes nor are they useful when there are no draft animals – or not unless you have the wheelbarrow, a Chinese invention. The problem of building roads for wheeled vehicles has not really been solved in much of the South American continent, despite their having had access to Eurasian modes of transport for half a millennium. Verticality, heavy rainfall, seismic instability, and similar factors lead to tremendous expense in building and maintaining the wide, hard surfaced tracks needed for wheeled vehicles. It is notable that South America pioneered the large-scale peacetime use of airplanes.

We think of writing as being inextricably intertwined with civilization, mainly because it has been with ours. Yet writing was very late in Eurasia and, like large-scale irrigation systems, may well be a result of civilization, not a contributive factor to its development. Eurasian writing arose from geometric tokens used for bookkeeping. In South America, mnemonic devices were also used for records, but went in a different direction: the *quipu*, a system of knotted cords (Figure 1.2). Quipus are known in a fully developed form from the first major conquest state that we know of, that of Huari. They probably have a considerably greater antiquity. The existence of the quipu (and of similarly complex systems of mnemonic devices in some of the ancient Mexican civilizations) suggests that we should seriously review the role of writing in our own.

The working hypothesis of this volume is that, of course the South Americans had civilizations, in the sense of having complex societies with elaborate social and political organizations, institutionalized religions, international art styles, and developed technologies. That these characteristics were different from those of Eurasia in form and order of appearance, and that ideological organizations were equally different is also taken as a given. We cannot define the world by us; the human experience is somewhat greater than that. The organizational approach taken in this volume is geographical and chronological. This has proven inconvenient in many cases, if only because a whole continent does not move in concert, but it is a useful way to give a general overview and to enable a general comparison of cultures at any given time. This given time is necessarily somewhat loose. We have no written calendars for South America prior to the European invasions. Some native histories were recorded after the conquest, but these extend history back only a century or so and are notoriously difficult to use, especially since some of the Peruvian peoples had the same idea as Eurasian potentates, which was that history needed to be rewritten to their own order. Thus we are thrown

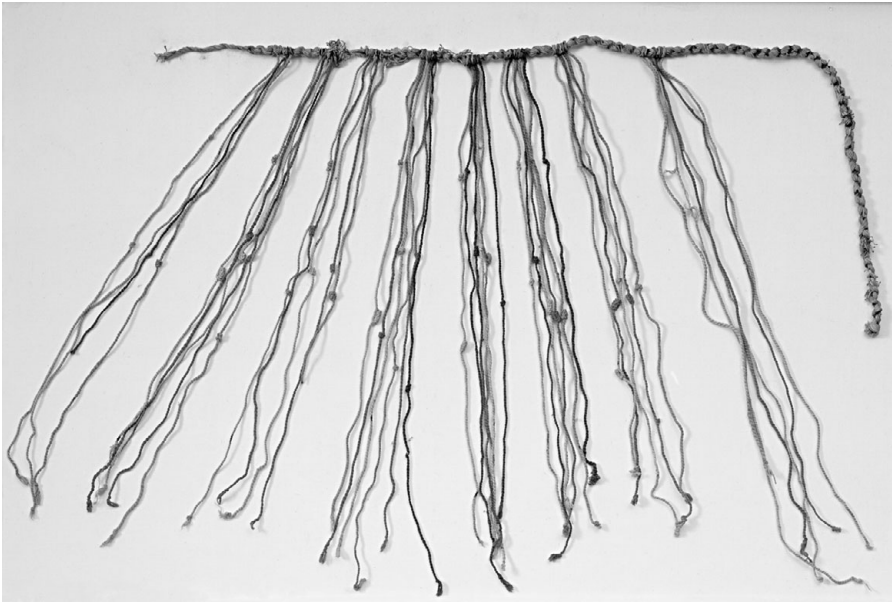


Figure 1.2 Inca quipu (cotton), Inca (?)Nazca Valley. These devices record information via knots in the strings, using a decimal system. Farthest out are the ones, next the 10s, etc. A subsidiary string may record totals for a complex string or set of strings. Although non-numeric information was also encoded on quipus, the key(s) have been lost and thus we can read the numbers but we have no idea of what was being recorded. Source: Gift of Philip A. Means, Dr. Alfred M. Tozzer, and Dr. Thomas Barbour. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 32-30-30/55.

back on archaeological chronologies and upon such archaeological dating methods as cross-dating and radiocarbon dating. These methods have their limitations, but do give us a general idea of when something happened. I have also taken the liberty of continuing some narratives for longer than the space of time the chapter is supposed to cover, again largely because the entire world was not pegged to the Andes. This is especially true for Greater Amazonia (including Venezuela and the Guineas as well the eastern slopes of the Andes and the grasslands of Argentina and Bolivia). An incredible amount of archaeological investigation has been carried out in these areas within the past several decades, but it is difficult to integrate it (yet) with our understanding of Andean history. I have solved this by putting Greater Amazonia in its own, separate, chapter, something which allows the appreciation of the newer, data-based, views of lowlands prehistory.

The theoretical approach taken in this volume is loosely that of culture history. That is, it is descriptive and takes as a given that the artifacts we find and their associations – how they relate to one another in the archaeological context – are the representatives of a past cultural system and that by carefully

recovering and studying these artifacts and their associations we can come to some understanding of that system. This is incomplete; all archaeological reconstructions are incomplete unless they owe more to the imagination of the writer than to the facts of the archaeological record, but it gives a certain freedom from the fallacies of misplaced ethnocentricity in interpretation, an ethnocentrism usually drawn from exclusively western social theory. Marxist and other Eurocentric stage theories of interpretation of the past are quite prevalent in South American archaeological reporting and are implicit in some of the chronological schemes used. However, there are tremendous difficulties in implementing such schemes, mainly because the data are, as usual, unruly and seldom fit a priori decisions of what ought to have happened. Culture history is, or tries to be, a factual statement of what did happen as best we know, laying a basis for further discussion of meaning and pattern from the archaeological record. Some of the theoretical and methodological problems in dealing with these data, problems related to both the nature of archaeology and to the theoretical stance of specific archaeologists, are brought up when necessary to a clarification of the presentation. In general, what a valued colleague refers to as “greater conceptions” have been avoided as unnecessary in a general treatment such as this book tries to be. As to whether the story of South America’s past really shows the existence of a utopia now ruined by degenerate man, progress towards a truly egalitarian state of being (similarly now ruined by degenerate man), or even just the variety of the human response to life, I leave to the reader to decide.