

# The Tiahuanacan Culture

## Brief History

The Tiahuanacan culture emerged at the southeastern edge of Lake Titicaca, on the border of Peru and Bolivia, and was centered around the city of Tiahuanaco. The Tiahuanacan culture arose around 400 BCE and lasted until 1100 CE, making it one of the most enduring civilizations of pre-Columbian America.

The Tiahuanacan civilization used both trade and colonization to expand its territory. At the height of its power and prosperity (c. 900 CE), it is estimated that there were between 40,000 and 100,000 inhabitants in the Tiahuanacan Empire.

According to archaeological evidence, the collapse of the Tiahuanacan culture was caused by a severe drought (c. 1000 CE). By 1100 CE, the Tiahuanacan Empire disintegrated, resulting in the rise of the Aymara civilization.

## Geographical Extent

The Tiahuanacan culture emerged at the southeastern edge of Lake Titicaca, 12,500 ft (3,800 meters) above sea level. Geographically, the Tiahuanacan Empire was vast; at its height (c. 900 CE), it encompassed large portions of present day Bolivia, northwestern Argentina, northern Chile, and southern Peru.

## Culture

The Tiahuanacan civilization had long since disappeared by the time Europeans discovered it, and it is known to us only through oral history, colonial accounts, and archaeological investigations.

The ruins of the city of Tiahuanaco were first described in 1549 CE by Spanish conquistador Pedro Cieza de Leon, who found it while searching for the Incan city of Qullasuyu. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that professional

excavations were organized by European governments, as, for example, the 1903 *Mission Scientifique Française à Tiahuanaco*, by the French government. Since then, there have been regular archaeological excavations at the site. Tiahuanaco was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000, and is currently administered by the government of Bolivia.

The term “Tiahuanaco” (or “Tiwanaku”) is shrouded in mystery. One hypothesis affirms that it comes from the Aymaran word “Taypiqala,” meaning “stone in the center,” referring to the belief that it was the center of civilization. Unfortunately, the Tiahuanacans left no evidence of a written language.

## **Economy**

The Tiahuanacan culture depended heavily upon agriculture and trade. The Tiahuanacans created a raised-field system that required extensive irrigation. The raised planting surfaces were separated by water canals, which cooled the fields during the hot days and prevented frost during the cold nights.

The city of Tiahuanaco was a key economic center, dominating commodity exchange over a wide area that reached as far as the Pacific coast. Their main exports were potatoes, llama products, and ceramics.

## **Social Structure**

The Tiahuanacans were a complex hierarchical society divided into three classes: the elite, the artisans, and the commoners or farmers. Some historians include a fourth class—traveling merchants.

## **Religion**

Tiahuanacan religion was polytheistic. At the top of their pantheon was Viracocha, the creator deity, who was later adopted by the Incas. All other deities were depicted in both human- and animal-like forms.

Archaeological evidence points to ancestor worship—practicing rituals in relation to the dead (i.e. mummification and ground burials).

## **Art**

Probably the most recognizable form of Tiahuanacan art is its architecture. They built impressive public buildings with stone blocks that weighed up to 100 tons and fitted into each other, involving no mortar. Tiahuanacan architecture was heavily influenced by religion. One of the greatest examples of their architecture is the “Sun Gate” in the city of Tiahuanaco. This monolith, sculpted over 2000 years ago, represents the Tiahuanacan deity Viracocha surrounded by winged figures with both human and animal faces.

Tiahuanacan pottery included both ceremonial items (i.e. ceremonial vessels) and practical items (i.e. cooking pots, tableware, and storage jars), and was one of their most important exports.

Metalworking was another area in which the Tiahuanacans excelled. Numerous articles made of bronze, copper, and gold have been found at the site of Tiahuanaco, which suggests that the city may also have been an important metallurgical center.

## **Contributions**

The Tiahuanacans are considered to be the cultural predecessors of all major Andean civilizations, such as the Aymaras and the Incas.