13.4: Chimú

Learning Objective

• Discuss distinguishing aspects of Chimú religion, craftsmanship, and agriculture

Key Points

• The Chimú expanded to cover a vast area and include many different ethnic groups along the northern coast of modern-day Peru.
• Chimú artisans made notable multi-colored textiles and monochromatic pottery and metalwork.
• In 1470, the Chimú were conquered by the Inca.
• The Chimú worshipped the Moon as the essential deity of fertility, good weather, and bountiful crops.

Terms

Chan Chan
The capital of the Chimú culture. It is in modern-day Peru.

Chimor
The long swath of land along the northern coast of Peru that was ruled by the Chimú elite.
ciudadela

Any one of a number of walled cities in the Chimú capital of Chan Chan where elites consolidated power and artisans lived in organized groups to make prestige goods.

The Chimú were a culture that lasted from approximately 900 CE until 1470 CE along the northern coast of modern-day Peru, centered in the city of Chan Chan. This is not to be confused with the Early Chimú, a related group also known as the Moche that lived in the region until about 800 CE.

The Inca ruler Tupac Inca Yupanqui led a campaign that conquered the Chimú around 1470 CE. This was just fifty years before the arrival of the Spanish in the region. Consequently, Spanish chroniclers were able to record accounts of Chimú culture from individuals who had lived before the Inca conquest. Similarly, archaeological evidence suggests Chimor, the large coastal swath of land inhabited by Chimú culture, grew out of the remnants of Moche culture. Early Chimú ceramics in a high-sheen black, along with detailed and intricate precious metalworking, shared many of the same aspects as Moche craftsmanship.

The mature Chimú culture developed in roughly the same territory where the Moche had existed centuries before, which made the Chimú another coastal culture. It was developed in the Moche Valley south of present-day Lima, northeast of Huarmey, and grew to include central present-day Trujillo, where the bureaucratic and artisanal capital of Chan Chan developed.

The Chimú expansion also incorporated many different ethnic groups, including the Sicán culture, which lasted independently until 1375. At its peak, the Chimú advanced to the limits of the desert coast, to the Jequetepeque Valley in the north, and Carabayallo in the south. Their expansion southward was stopped by the military power of the great valley of Lima.

Agriculture and Bureaucracy

The Chimú expanded and gained power over their 500-year growth through intensive farming techniques and hydraulic works, which joined valleys to form complexes. A few of these landmark agricultural techniques included the following:

- **Huachaques**: These sunken farms included the removal of the top layer of earth and allowed farmers to work the moist, sandy soil underneath.
- **Walk-in wells**, similar to those of the Nazca, were developed to draw water.
- **Large reservoirs** were developed to retain water from river systems in this arid climate where water was an essential resource.

These systematic changes increased the productivity of the land, which multiplied Chimú wealth and likely contributed to the formation of a bureaucratic, hierarchical system.

The Chimú cultivated beans, sweet potatoes, papayas, and cotton with their reservoir and irrigation systems. This focus on large-scale irrigation persisted until the Late Intermediate period. At this point, there was a shift to a more specialized system that focused on importing and redistributing resources from satellite communities. There appears to have been a complex network of sites that provided goods and services for Chimú subsistence.
Many of these satellite areas produced commodities that the Chimú population based in the capital of Chan Chan could not. Some sites relied on marine resources, such as fish and precious shells. However, after the advent of agriculture, more sites developed further inland, where marine resources were harder to attain. These inland communities began raising llamas as a supplemental source of meat, but by the Late Intermediate period and Late Horizon, inland sites started to rely on llamas as an essential transportation and food resource.

Chimú mantle. The Chimú are known for their artisanal works, such as this mantle spun of multiple colored fibers sometime from 1000 to 1476 CE.

Artisans

The capital of Chan Chan likely developed a complex bureaucracy due to the elite’s controlled access to information. This bureaucratic center imported raw materials from across Chimor, which were then processed into prestige goods by highly skilled artisans. The majority of the citizens in each ciudadela (walled cities in the capital of Chan Chan) were artisans. In the late Chimú, about 12,000 artisans lived and worked in Chan Chan alone. Artisans played an essential role in Chimú culture:

• They engaged in fishing, agriculture, craft work, and trade.
• Artisans were forbidden to change their profession, and were grouped in the ciudadela according to their area of specialization.
• Archeologists have noted a dramatic increase in Chimú craft production over time, and they believe that artisans may have been brought to Chan Chan from other areas taken as a result of Chimú conquest.
Chimú pottery is distinctly monochromatic and bears a striking resemblance to Moche pottery.

### Pottery and Textiles

Though their textiles were multicolored, their pottery and metalwork are known for being monochromatic. The pottery is often in the shape of a creature, or has a human figure sitting or standing on a cuboid bottle. The shiny black finish of most Chimú pottery was achieved by firing the pottery at high temperatures in a closed kiln, which prevented oxygen from reacting with the clay.

### Deities

The Chimú worshipped the Moon (Sī) and considered it the greatest and most powerful of the deities. It was believed to be more powerful than the Sun, as it appeared by night and day, and was deeply linked with patterns in weather, fertility, and the growth of crops. Sacrifices of spondylus shells and other precious items were made to the Moon. Devotees sacrificed their own children on piles of colored cotton with offerings of fruit and chicha. They believed the sacrificed children, normally around the age of five, would become deified.
Spondylus shells were used as a currency and as offerings to the deities.

Animals and birds were also sacrificed to the Moon in order to appease this powerful entity. Two of the stars of Orion’s Belt were considered to be the emissaries of the Moon. The constellation Fur (the Pleiades) was also used to calculate the year and was believed to watch over the crops.

The Sun was associated with stones called *alaec-pong* (cacique stone). These stones were believed to be ancestors of the people in the areas they were found. They were also considered to be sons of the Sun deity. Along with the Sun, the Sea (*Ni*) was also a very important deity, and sacrifices of white maize flour, red ochre, and other precious items were made to it. Prayers for fish and protection against drowning were also offered. Shrines (called *huacas*) developed in each district across Chimor, dedicated to an associated legend, deity, or cult of belief, depending on the region.

**The Fall of the Chimú**

The end of the Chimú was brought about in the 1470s. They were conquered by the Inca ruler Tupac Inca Yupanqui, who led a fierce and well organized army northward. The Chimú were considered the last substantial rival culture standing in the way of the Inca conquest of the region.

**Sources**

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