

The Early Modern World

1450–1750

CH 16



MAJOR GLOBAL CHANGES occurred between 1450 and 1750, as regional societies gave way to multiethnic empires, and horse-borne raiders gave way to cannon and long-distance sailing craft. Historians call this era “early modern” because it was marked by a general shift toward centralized, bureaucratic, monetized, and technologically sophisticated states. Yet nearly all of these “modern” states also clung to divine kingship and other remnants of the previous age, and most sought to revive and propagate older religious or philosophical traditions. Some states embraced mutual tolerance, but many others fought bitterly over matters of faith.

One of the most striking breaks with the past was the creation of new linkages between distant regions, most notably the Americas and the rest of the world. Early globalization accelerated changes in everything from demography to commerce to technology, allowing populations to grow and many individuals to get rich. Yet globalization also enabled the spread of disease, and some technical innovations increased the scale and deadliness of warfare; early modernity did not promise longer and better lives for everyone. The shift to modernity was not a uniquely Western phenomenon either, although western Europeans were key players in its spread, usually as traders, missionaries, or conquerors.

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Beginning in around 1450, Iberians—the people of Spain and Portugal—used new ships and guns to venture into the Atlantic, where they competed in overseas colonization, trade, and conquest. They set out to claim new territories for their monarchs and to spread their Roman Catholic faith. They did both at the expense of many millions of native peoples, first in Africa and the East Atlantic and then throughout the Americas and beyond. Wherever they went, Iberians moved quickly from plunder to the creation of settled colonies, creating a new trading sphere that historians call the “Atlantic world.” Other Europeans soon followed in the Iberians’ wake, but the silver of Spanish America became the world’s money.

Modernity affected Africa most deeply via the slave trade. The older flow of captive workers to the Muslim Middle East and Indian Ocean basin continued well into early modern times, but it was soon overshadowed by a more urgent European demand in the Atlantic. This desire for slaves to staff distant plantations and mines fueled

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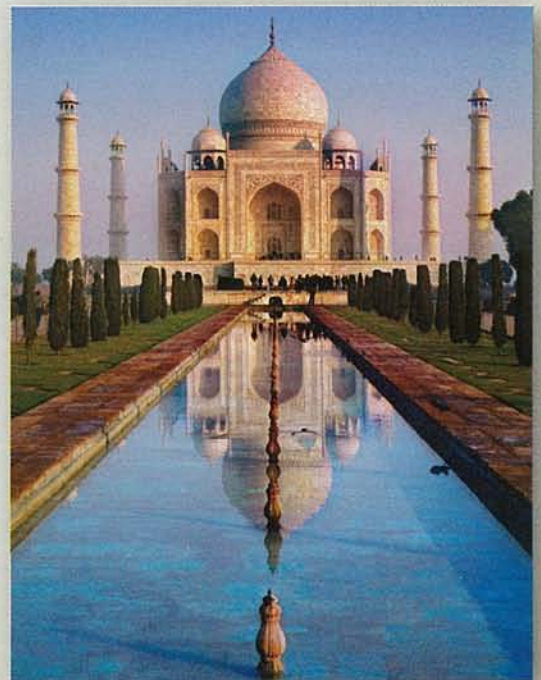


existing antagonisms within Africa even as it spawned new ones, each generating captives and refugees to be traded abroad for select commodities, including firearms, textiles, and metal ware. Europeans did not penetrate, much less conquer, sub-Saharan Africa at this time, however, in part due to their general lack of resistance to tropical disease.

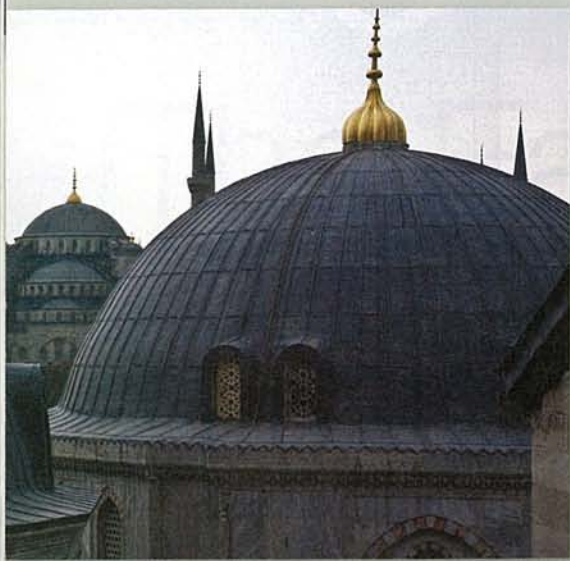
In the vast Indian Ocean basin a freer model of interaction and integration developed. Islamic merchants had come to dominate these seas by 1450, not through imperial means but rather by establishing trading networks from East Africa to Southeast Asia. Luxury products from the African interior were traded abroad for spices, cloth, porcelain, and other compact valuables. Ships also carried bulk commodities and religious pilgrims. After 1500, European interlopers discovered that in such a thriving, diverse, and politically decentralized region, they would have to compete fiercely for space. This they did, first by establishing coastal trading forts, then by moving inland.

On the Eurasian mainland, with the aid of modern firearms, powerful Ottoman, Russian, Safavid, and Mughal leaders turned from regional consolidation to massive imperial expansion by the sixteenth century. Each combined religious fervor with considerable political ambitions, but several of these states, notably the Ottomans and Mughals, embraced religious diversity. Collecting tributes in cash and establishing the appropriate bureaucracies to collect them were shared objectives. Unlike the Safavids and Mughals, the Ottomans sought to extend their empire overseas, taking on Venice and the Habsburgs in the Mediterranean and the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. Russia would venture abroad under Peter the Great.

Europe remained mostly embroiled in religious and political conflict. The religious schism known as the Protestant Reformation touched off over a century of bloody war after 1500, and doctrinal disputes would carry on well into modern times. Warfare itself was transformed from knightly contests and town sieges to mass infantry mobilization and bombardment of strategic fortresses. These models would be exported, along with armed sailing ships. Europe's political fractures enabled the rise of market economies as well, with more states sponsoring overseas colonizing ventures



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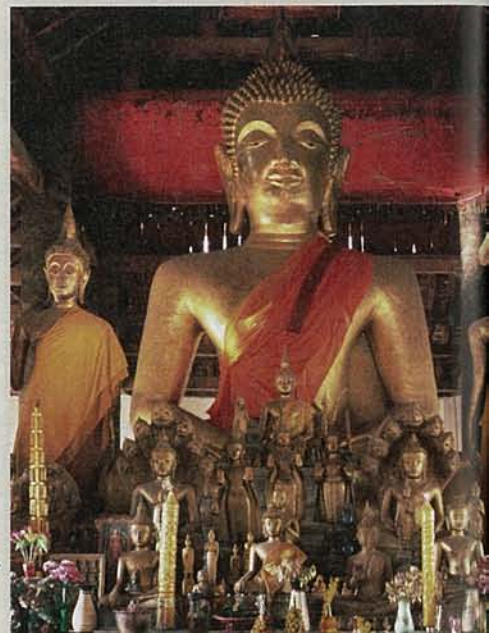


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over time to augment their share of business. New forms of government emerged, and also a marked tendency to question ancient authorities. From this came a revolution in science, emphasizing physical observation and secular reasoning, and at the end of the early modern period, a new intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment.

In East Asia, by contrast, introversion rather than foreign engagement was the rule in early modern times. Although both China and Japan had strong seafaring traditions by 1450, state policies from the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries gradually discouraged external affairs. Despite official isolation, both regions proved to be extraordinarily dynamic. Political consolidation and population growth were matched with a general shift from tributary to money economies. In the Chinese Ming and Qing empires this led to a massive rise in demand for silver, stimulating global circulation of this mostly American-produced metal. Porcelain and silk, much of it produced by poor women working in the household, were sent abroad in exchange. With the patronage of newly wealthy merchants and bureaucrats, the arts flourished on a scale not seen before.

By 1700, the American colonies were not the neo-Europes their first colonizers had envisioned. Centuries of ethnic and cultural mixture, forced labor regimes, frontier expansion, and export-oriented economies all led to the formation of distinct societies. Native populations were recovering in some areas, and African and African-descended populations had grown to dominate whole regions. Europeans continued to migrate to the colonies in search of new livelihoods, but most soon adopted the nativist attitudes of earlier colonizers. In much of the Americas, the different outlooks of European colonizers and colonists would prove irreconcilable by the end of the early modern era.



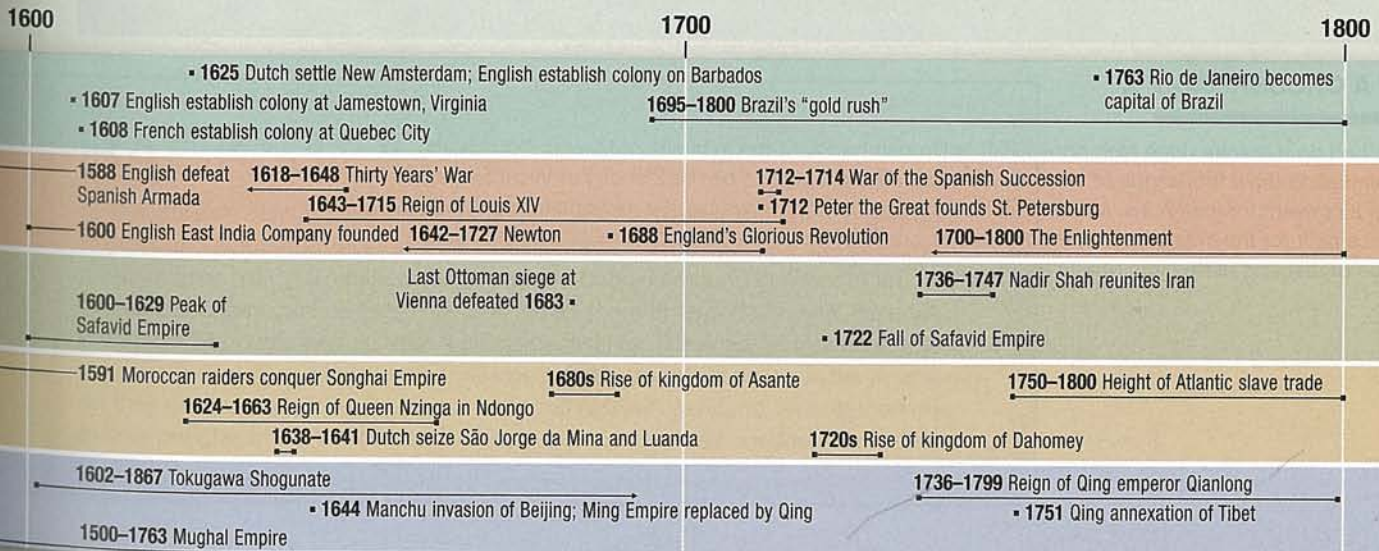
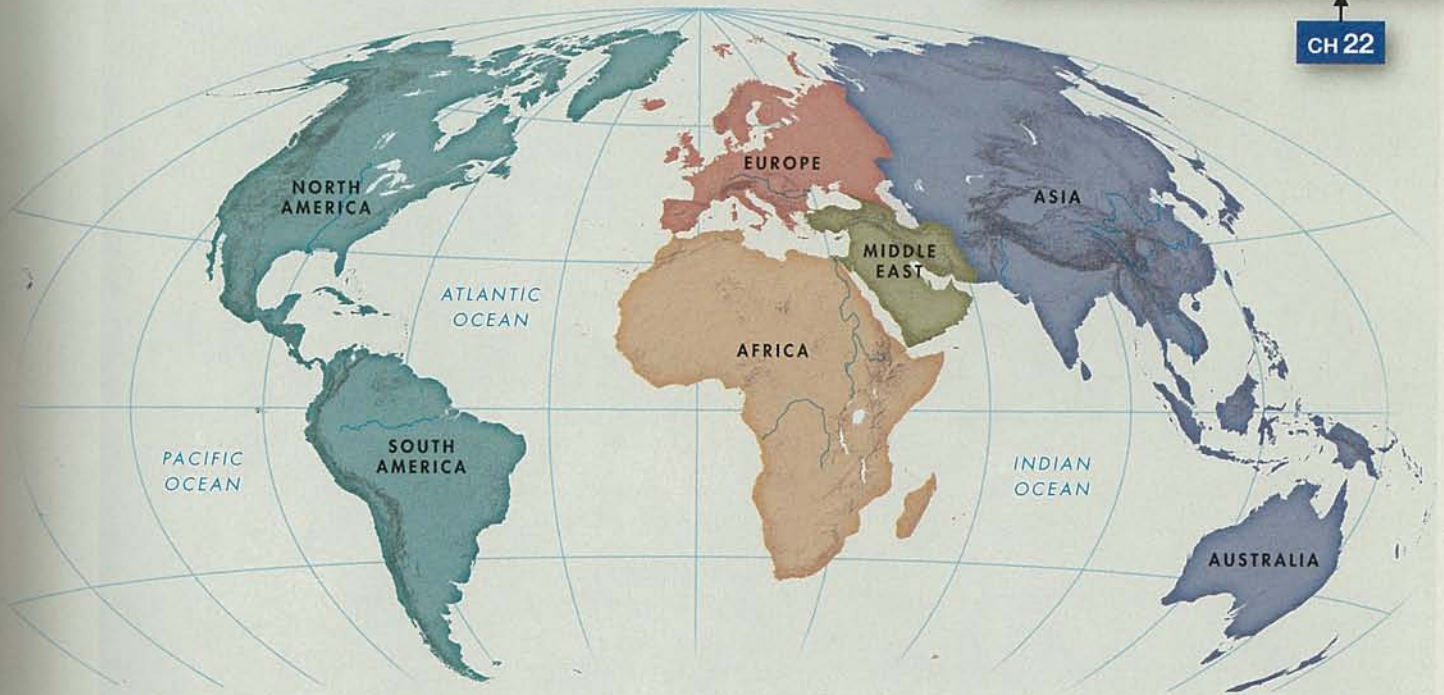
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	1400	1500
Americas	<p>1325–1521 Aztec Empire</p> <p>1430–1532 Inca Empire</p>	<p>Spanish conquest of Aztecs 1519–1521</p> <p>Discovery of silver at Potosi 1545</p> <p>Spanish conquest of Inca 1532–1536</p> <p>Columbus reaches the Americas 1492</p> <p>Portuguese reach Brazil 1500</p>
Europe	<p>1462–1505 Ivan III unites Russia</p> <p>Christian reconquest of Spain completed 1492</p>	<p>1473–1543 Copernicus</p> <p>1517 Luther confronts Catholic Church, sparking the Protestant Reformation</p>
Middle East	<p>1453 Ottoman conquest of Constantinople</p>	<p>Ottoman conquest of Egypt 1517</p> <p>Battle of Lepanto 1571</p> <p>1520–1566 Reign of Suleiman the Magnificent</p>
Africa	<p>First sub-Saharan Africans captured and taken to Portugal 1441</p> <p>1450 Height of kingdom of Benin</p>	<p>1506–1543 Reign of Afonso I of Kongo</p> <p>1464–1492 Reign of Songhai emperor Sunni Ali</p>
Asia and Oceania	<p>1405–1433 Voyages of Ming admiral Zheng He</p> <p>1421 Relocation of Ming capital to Beijing</p> <p>1428–1788 Vietnamese Le dynasty</p>	<p>1498 Vasco da Gama reaches India</p> <p>Portuguese establish fort in Ceylon 1517</p>

Despite these profound transformations, many people remained largely unaffected by the currents of early modernity. Though not densely populated, most of North and South America, Polynesia, Oceania, central and southern Africa, and highland Asia remained beyond the zone of sustained contact with foreigners. New commodities and biological transfers were only beginning to be felt in many of these places at the end of the early modern period. As a result of their long isolation, inhabitants of these regions would be among the most drastically affected by modernity's next wave.



CH 22





AT A CROSSROADS ▲

Perched on a granite ridge high above Peru's Urubamba River, the Inca site of Machu Picchu continues to draw thousands of visitors each year. First thought to be the lost city of Vilcabamba, then a convent for Inca nuns, Machu Picchu is now believed to have been a mid-fifteenth-century palace built for the Inca emperor and his mummy cult. It was probably more a religious site than a place of rest and recreation. (The Art Archive/Gianni Dagli Orti.)

Empires and Alternatives in the Americas

1430–1530

In 1995, American archaeologist Johan Reinhard and his assistants discovered a tomb atop Mount Ampato, a peak overlooking the Peruvian city of Arequipa. Inside were the naturally mummified remains of a fourteen-year-old girl placed there some five hundred years earlier. Material and written evidence suggests she was an *aclla* (AHK-yah), or “chosen woman,” selected by Inca priests from among hundreds of regional headmen’s daughters. Most *aclla* girls became priestesses in temples and palaces dedicated to the Inca emperor or the imperial sun cult. Others became the emperor’s concubines or wives. Only the most select, like the girl discovered on Mount Ampato, were chosen for the “debt-payment” sacrifice, or *capacocha* (kah-pah-KOH-chah), said to be the greatest honor of all.

According to testimonies collected soon after the Spanish conquest of the Incas in 1532 (discussed in the next chapter), the *capacocha* sacrifice was a rare and deeply significant event preceded by numerous rituals. First, the victim, chosen for her (and rarely, his) physical perfection, trekked to Cuzco, the Inca capital, to be feasted and blessed. The child’s father brought gifts and sacred objects from his province and in turn received fine textiles from the emperor. Following an ancient Andean tradition, reciprocal ties between ruler and ruled were reinforced through such acts of ritualized gift exchange, feasting, and finally, sacrifice. The girl, too, received fine alpaca and cotton skirts and shawls, along with tiny gold and silver votive objects, a necklace of shell beads, and tufts of tropical bird feathers. These items adorned her in her tomb, reached after a long journey on foot from Cuzco.

As suggested by later discoveries in Chile and Argentina, at tomb-side the *aclla* girl was probably given a beaker filled with beer brewed from maize. In a pouch she carried coca leaves. The sacred coca, chewed throughout the Andes, helped fend off the headaches

Many Native Americas

FOCUS What factors account for the diversity of native American cultures?

Tributes of Blood: The Aztec Empire, 1325–1521

FOCUS What core features characterized Aztec life and rule?

Tributes of Sweat: The Inca Empire, 1430–1532

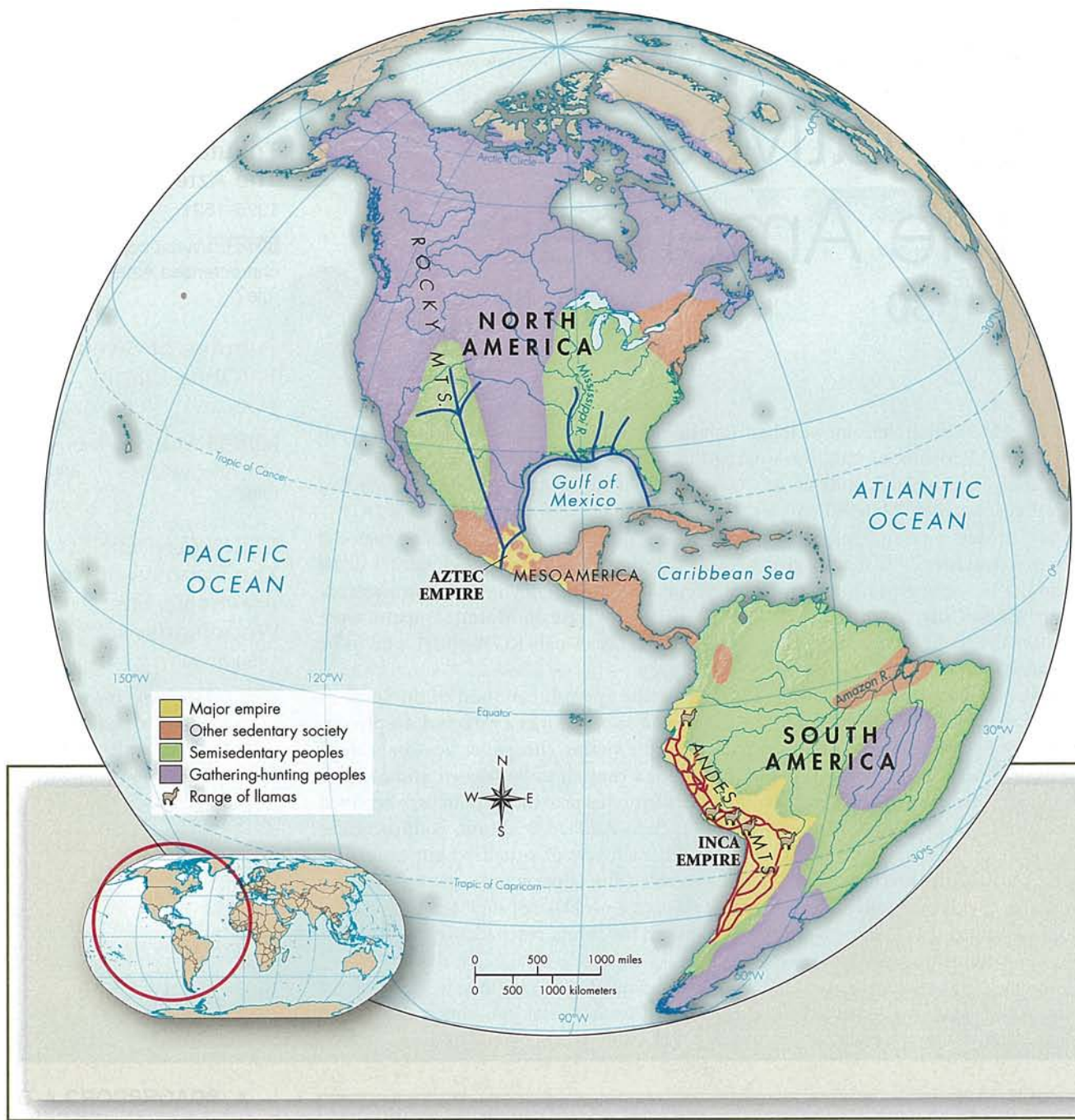
FOCUS What core features characterized Inca life and rule?

COUNTERPOINT: The Peoples of North America’s Eastern Woodlands, 1450–1530

FOCUS How did the Eastern Woodlanders’ experience differ from life under the Aztecs and Incas?

BACKSTORY

By the fifteenth century, the Americas had witnessed the rise and fall of numerous empires and kingdoms, including the classic Maya of Mesoamerica, the wealthy Sicán kingdom of Peru’s desert coast, and the Cahokia mound builders of the Mississippi Basin. Just as these cultures faded, there emerged two new imperial states that borrowed heavily from their predecessors. The empires treated in this chapter, the Aztec and Inca, were the largest states ever to develop in the Americas, yet they were not all-powerful. About half of all native Americans, among them the diverse peoples of North America’s eastern woodlands, lived outside their realms.



c. 900–1600 Late Woodland period of dispersed farming and hunting

• c. 1100 Aztecs leave Aztlán

• c. 1200 Incas move into Cuzco region

900

1000

1100

1200

and nausea brought on by oxygen starvation at high altitude, whereas the maize beer induced sleepiness. Barely conscious of her surroundings, the girl was lowered into her grass-lined grave, and, according to the forensic anthropologists who examined her skull, struck dead with a club. Other Inca sacrificial victims appear to have been buried alive and left to freeze to death, as described in postconquest accounts.

Why did the Incas sacrifice children, and why in these ways? By combining material, written, and oral evidence, scholars are beginning to solve the riddle of the Inca mountain mummies. From what is now known, it appears that death, fertility, reciprocity, and imperial links to sacred landscapes were all features of the capacocha sacrifice. Although macabre practices such as this may challenge our ability to empathize with the leaders, if not the common folk, of this distant culture, with each new fact we learn about the child mummies, the closer we get to understanding the Inca Empire and its ruling cosmology.

The Incas and their subjects shared the belief that death occurred as a process rather than in an instant, and that proper death led to an elevated state of consciousness. In this altered state a person could communicate with deities directly, and in a sense join them. If the remains of such a person were carefully preserved and honored, they could act as an oracle, a conduit to the sacred realms above and below the earth. Mountains, as sources of springs and rivers, and sometimes fertilizing volcanic ash, held particular spiritual significance.

In part, it was this complex of beliefs about landscape, death, and the afterlife that led the Incas to mummify and otherwise preserve respected ancestors, including their emperors, and to bury chosen young people atop mountains that marked the edges, or heights, of empire. Physically perfect noble children such as the girl found on Mount Ampato were thus selected for the role of communicants with the spirit world. Their sacrifice unified the dead, the living, and the sacred mountains, and also bound together a far-flung empire that was in many ways as fragile as life itself.¹

MAPPING THE WORLD

The Western Hemisphere, c. 1500

Native Americans inhabited the entire Western Hemisphere from the Arctic Circle to the tip of South America. Their societies varied tremendously in density and political sophistication, largely as a result of adaptation to different natural environments. Empires were found only in the tropical highlands of Mesoamerica and the Andes, but large chiefdoms based on farming could be found in eastern Canada, the bigger Caribbean islands, and the lower Amazon Basin. Gatherer-hunters were the most widespread of all native American cultures, and despite their relatively small numbers they proved most resistant to conquest by settled neighbors.

ROUTES ▼

- Inca road
- Other trade route

c. 1270 Aztecs settle in Valley of Mexico

▪ c. 1320 Aztecs ally with Colhua

1300

▪ c. 1325 Tenochtitlán founded at Lake Texcoco's edge

Incas defeat Chankas c. 1437 ▪

Great famine in Valley of Mexico 1450–1451

c. 1440–1471 Sapa Inca Pachacuti expands empire into Ecuador and Bolivia

1400

1471–1493 Incas conquer northern Chile and Argentina

1487–1502 Aztecs dedicate Coatepec (Templo Mayor) and expand sacrificial wars

1500

1502–1519 Reign of Moctezuma II, conquered by Spanish

1525–1532 Inca succession war, followed by arrival of the Spanish

1493–1525 Incas conquer northern Peru and highland Ecuador

1600

▪ c. 1580 Formation of Powhatan Confederacy in eastern Virginia

▪ c. 1570 Formation of Huron Confederacy north of Lake Ontario

▪ c. 1570 Formation of Iroquois League south of Lake Ontario

But this fragility was not evident to the people gathered at the capacocha sacrifice. By about 1480, more than half of all native Americans were subjects of two great empires, the Aztec in Mexico and Central America and the Inca in South America. In part by drawing on ancient religious and political traditions, both empires excelled at subduing neighboring chiefdoms through a mix of violence, forced relocation, religious indoctrination, and marriage alliances. Both empires demanded allegiance in the form of tribute. Both the Aztecs and Incas were greatly feared by their many millions of subjects. Perhaps surprisingly, these last great native American states would prove far more vulnerable to European invaders than their nonimperial neighbors, most of whom were gatherer-hunters and semisedentary villagers. Those who relied least on farming had the best chance of getting away.

OVERVIEW QUESTIONS

The major global development in this chapter: The diversity of societies and states in the Americas prior to European invasion.

As you read, consider:

1. In what ways was cultural diversity in the Americas related to environmental diversity?
2. Why was it in Mesoamerica and the Andes that large empires emerged in around 1450?
3. What key ideas or practices extended beyond the limits of the great empires?

Many Native Americas

FOCUS

What factors account for the diversity of native American cultures?

Population Density

Scholars once claimed that the Western Hemisphere was sparsely settled prior to the arrival of Europeans in 1492, but we now know that by the end of the fifteenth century the overall population of the Americas had reached some 60 million or more. Vast open spaces remained, but in places the landscape was more intensively cultivated and thickly populated than western Europe (see Map 16.1). Fewer records for nonimperial groups survive than for empire builders such as the Incas and Aztecs, but by combining archaeological, artistic, anthropological, linguistic, and historical approaches, scholars have shed much new light on these less-studied cultures. Outside imperial boundaries, coastal and riverside populations were densest. This was true in the Caribbean, the Amazon and Mississippi river basins, the Pacific Northwest, parts of North America's eastern seaboard, and the upper Río de la Plata district of southeastern South America.

Environmental and Cultural Diversity

Ecological diversity gave rise in part to political and cultural diversity. America's native peoples, or Amerindians, lived scattered throughout two vast and ecologically diverse continents. They also inhabited a variety of tropical, temperate, and icy environments that proved more or less suitable to settled agriculture. Some were members of wandering, egalitarian gatherer-hunter bands; others were subjects of rigidly stratified imperial states. In between were many alternatives: traveling bands of pilgrims led by prophets, as in Brazil and southeastern North America; chiefdoms based on fishing,



whaling, or farming, as in the Pacific Northwest and Greater Antilles; large confederacies of chiefdoms as in highland Colombia and northeastern North America; commercially vibrant and independent city-states as in the Maya heartland of Central America. Others, such as the peoples of coastal Ecuador and the Lesser Antilles, had mastered the sea, routinely ferrying goods and ideas from one continent to the other, and throughout the Caribbean islands. Gold working and maize farming were among the many technologies that traversed American waters. Long-distance overland traders were equally important, carrying copper and tropical feathers from Central America to North America's desert Southwest in exchange for turquoise or, in South America, trekking between

distant jungle, mountain, and coast settlements to trade gold and precious stones for seashells, animal pelts, and salt.

Political diversity was more than matched by cultural diversity. The Aztecs and Incas spread the use of imperial dialects within their empires, but elsewhere hundreds of distinct Amerindian languages could be heard. Modes of dress and adornment were even more varied, ranging from total nudity and a few tattoos to highly elaborate ceremonial dress. Arctic peoples had no choice but to bundle up, yet even their style choices distinguished one group from another. In imperial societies strict rules of dress and decorum separated elites from commoners, women from men, and juniors from seniors. Lip and ear piercing, tooth filing, and molding of the infant skull between slats of wood were but a few of the many ways human appearances were reconfigured. Architecture was just as varied, as were ceramics and other arts. In short, the Americas' extraordinary range of climates and natural resources both reflected and encouraged diverse forms of material and linguistic expression. Perhaps only in the realm of religion, where shamanism persisted, was a unifying thread to be found.

Shamanism

Not a formal ideology or doctrine but rather a broadly similar set of beliefs and practices, **shamanism** consisted of a given tribe's or chiefdom's reliance on healer-visionaries for spiritual guidance. In imperial societies shamans constituted a priestly class. Both male and female, shamans had functions ranging from fortuneteller to physician, with women often acting as midwives (see *Lives and Livelihoods: The Aztec Midwife*, page 528). Judging from material remains and eyewitness accounts, most native American shamans were males. In some Amerindian cultures the role of shaman was inherited; in others, select juniors announced their vocation following a vision quest, or lengthy ritual seclusion. This often entailed a solo journey to a forest or desert region, prolonged physical suffering, and controlled use of hallucinogenic substances. In many respects Amerindian shamanism reflected its Central Asian origins, and in other ways it resembled shamanistic practices in sub-Saharan Africa.

Often labeled “witch-doctors” or “false prophets” by unsympathetic Christian Europeans, shamans maintained and developed a vast body of esoteric knowledge that they passed along to juniors in initiations and other rituals. Some served as village or clan historians and myth-keepers. Most used powerful hallucinogens, including various forms of concentrated tobacco, to communicate with the spirits of predatory animals. Perhaps a legacy of the ancient era of great mammals and a sign of general human vulnerability, predators were venerated almost everywhere in the Americas. Animal spirits were regarded as the shaman's alter ego or protector, and were consulted prior to important occasions

Canadian War Club

This stone war club with a fish motif was excavated from a native American tomb in coastal British Columbia, Canada, and is thought to date from around 1200 to 1400 C.E. Such items at first suggest a people at war, but this club was probably intended only for ceremonial use. Other clubs from the same tomb share its overt sexual symbolism. Modern Tsimshian inhabitants of the region, who still rely on salmon, describe the exchange of stone clubs in their foundation myths. (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Catalog number: 5/5059. Photo by Katherine Fogden.)



shamanism Widespread system of religious belief and healing originating in Central Asia.

such as royal marriages, births, and declarations of war. Shamans also mastered herbal remedies for virtually all forms of illness, including emotional disorders. These rubs, washes, and infusions were sometimes highly effective, as shown by modern pharmacological studies. Shamans nearly always administered them along with complex chants and rituals aimed at expelling evil spirits. Shamans, therefore, combined the roles of physician and religious leader, using their knowledge and power to heal both body and spirit.

The many varieties of social organization and cultural practice found in the early modern Americas reflect both creative interactions with specific environments and the visions of individual political and religious leaders. Some Amerindian gatherer-hunters lived in swamplands and desert areas where subsistence agriculture was impossible using available technologies. Often such gathering-hunting peoples traded with—or plundered—their farming neighbors. Yet even farming peoples, as their ceramic and textile decorations attest, did not forget their past as hunters. As in other parts of the world, big-game hunting in the early modern Americas was an esteemed, even sacred activity among urban elites, marked by elaborate taboos and rituals.

Just as hunting remained important to farmers, agriculture could be found among some of the Americas' least politically complex societies, again characterized by elaborate rituals and taboos. According to many early modern observers, women controlled most agricultural tasks and spaces, periodically making offerings and singing to spirits associated with human fertility. Staple foods included maize, potatoes, and manioc, a lowland tropical tuber that could be ground into flour and preserved. Agricultural rituals were central in most cultures, and at the heart of every imperial state. With the ebb and flow of empires, many groups shifted from one mode of subsistence to another, from planting to gathering-hunting and back again. Some, such as the Kwakiutl (KWAH-kyu-til) of the Pacific Northwest, were surrounded by such abundant marine and forest resources that they never turned to farming. Natural abundance combined with sophisticated fishing and storage systems allowed the Kwakiutl to build a settled culture of the type normally associated with agricultural peoples. Thus, the ecological diversity of the Americas helped give rise to an equally diverse array of native American cultures, many of which blurred the line between settled and nomadic lifestyles.

Tributes of Blood: The Aztec Empire 1325–1521

Mesoamerica, comprised of modern southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and western Honduras, was a land of city-states after about 800 C.E. Following the decline of ancient cultural forebears such as Teotihuacán (tay-oh-tee-wah-KAHN) in the Mexican highlands and the classic Maya in the greater Guatemalan lowlands, few urban powers, with the possible exception of the Toltecs, managed to dominate more than a few neighbors at a time.

This would change with the arrival in the Valley of Mexico of a band of former gatherer-hunters from a mysterious northwestern desert region they called Aztlán (ost-LAWN), or “place of cranes.” As newcomers these “Aztecs,” who later called themselves Mexica (meh-SHE-cah, hence “Mexico”), would suffer a number of humiliations at the hands of powerful city-dwellers centered on Lake Texcoco, now overlain by Mexico City. The Aztecs were at first regarded as coarse barbarians, but as with many conquering outsiders, in time they would have their revenge (see Map 16.2).

Range of Livelihoods



FOCUS

What core features characterized Aztec life and rule?



MAP 16.2 The Aztec Empire, 1325–1521

Starting from their base in Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City), the Aztecs quickly built the most densely populated empire in the Americas. Their first objective was the Valley of Mexico itself, where the Aztecs made strategic alliances and conquered neighboring city-states on the margins of Lake Texcoco. A line of Aztec kings greatly extended the empire, conquering chiefdoms and city-states throughout Mexico's central highlands and down to the Pacific and Gulf coasts. Not all peoples fell to the Aztec war machine, including the Tlaxcalans to the east of Tenochtitlán and the Tarascans to the west. Also unconquered were the many nomadic peoples of the desert north and the farming forest peoples of the southeast.

Humble Origins, Imperial Ambitions

Unlike the classic Maya of preceding centuries, the Aztecs did not develop a phonetic writing system. They did, however, preserve key aspects of their history in a mix of oral and symbolic, usually painted or carved, forms. Aztec elders developed and maintained a series of chronicles of the kind historians call master narratives, or state-sponsored versions of the past meant to glorify certain individuals or policies. These narratives related foundation myths, genealogies, tales of conquest, and other important remembrances. Though biased, fragmentary, and otherwise imperfect, many Aztec oral narratives were preserved by dozens of young native scribes writing in Nahuatl (NAH-watt), the Aztec language, soon after the Spanish Conquest of 1519–1521 (discussed in the next chapter).

Historical Documentation

Why is it that the Spanish victors promoted rather than suppressed these narratives of Aztec glory? In one of history's many ironic twists, Spanish priests arriving in Mexico in the 1520s taught a number of noble Aztec and other Mesoamerican youths to adapt the Latin alphabet and Spanish phonetics to various local languages, most importantly Nahuatl. The Spanish hoped that stories of Aztec rule and religion, once collected and examined, would be swiftly discredited and replaced with Western, Christian versions. Not only did this quick conversion not happen as planned, but an unintended consequence of the information-gathering campaign was to create a vast and diverse body of Mesoamerican literature written in native languages.

Despite the agony of the immediate postconquest years, the Aztecs were a quick study in the production of written historical documents. Indeed, most of what we know of Aztec history relies heavily on these hybrid and often enigmatic sixteenth-century sources (see *Seeing the Past: An Aztec Map of Tenochtitlán*). Aside from interviews with the elders,

SEEING THE PAST

An Aztec Map of Tenochtitlán



Tenochtitlán, from the *Codex Mendoza* (The Granger Collection, New York.)

Named for Mexico's first Spanish viceroy, the *Codex Mendoza* was painted by Aztec artists about a dozen years after the Spanish Conquest of 1519–1521. It was commissioned by the viceroy as a gift for the Holy Roman emperor and king of Spain, Charles V. After circulating among the courts of Europe, the *Codex Mendoza* landed in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England, where it remains. Much of the document consists of tribute lists, but it also

contains an illustrated history of Aztec conquests, crimes and punishments, and even a map of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital. This symbol-filled map is reproduced here.

According to legend, the Aztec capital came into existence when an eagle landed on a cactus in the middle of Lake Texcoco. This image, now part of the Mexican national flag, is at the center of the map. Beneath the cactus is a picture of a stone carving of a cactus fruit, a common Aztec symbol for the human heart, emblem of sacrifice. Beneath this is a third symbol labeled afterwards by a Spanish scribe "Tenochtitlán."

The city, or rather its symbol, marks the meeting of four horizontal, spatial quarters as well as a vertical axis linking the sky, earth, and watery underworld. In each quarter are various Aztec nobles, only one of whom, Tenochtli (labeled "Tenuch" on the map), is seated on a reed mat, the Aztec symbol of supreme authority. He was the Aztecs' first emperor; the name "Tenochtli" means "stone cactus fruit."

The lower panel depicts the Aztec conquests of their neighbors in Colhuacan and Tenayuca. Framing the entire map are symbols for dates, part of an ancient Mesoamerican system of time keeping and prophesying retained by the Aztecs. Finally, barely legible in the upper left-hand corner is the somewhat jarring signature of André Thevet, a French priest and royal cosmographer who briefly possessed the *Codex Mendoza* in the late sixteenth century.

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

1. What does this map reveal about the Aztec worldview?
2. How might this document have been read by a common Aztec subject?

several painted books, or codices, marked with precise dates, names, and other symbols, survive, along with much archaeological and artistic evidence. In combining these sources with Spanish eyewitness accounts of the conquest era, historians have assembled a substantial record of Aztec life and rule.

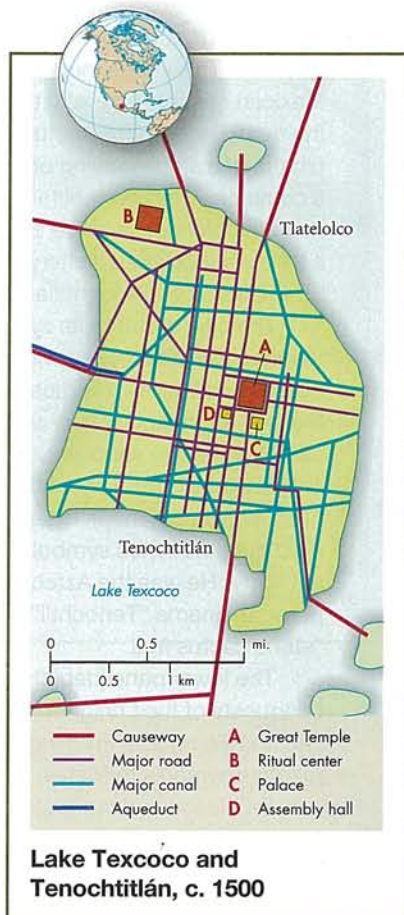
Aztec Origins

According to most accounts, the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico sometime in the thirteenth century, but it was not until the early fourteenth that they established a permanent home. The most fertile sites in the valley were already occupied by farmers who had no interest in making room for newcomers, but the Aztecs were not dissuaded; they had a reputation for being tough and resourceful. Heeding an omen in the form of

an eagle perched on a cactus growing on a tiny island near the southwest edge of Lake Texcoco, the refugees settled there in 1325. Reclaiming land from the shallow lakebed, they founded a city called Tenochtitlán (teh-noach-teet-LAWN), or “cactus fruit place.” Linked to shore by three large causeways, the city soon boasted imposing stone palaces and temple-pyramids.

The Aztecs quickly transformed Tenochtitlán into a formidable capital. By 1500 it was home to some two hundred thousand people, ranking alongside Nanjing and Paris among the world’s five or six most populous cities at the time. At first the Aztecs developed their city by trading military services and lake products such as reeds and fish for building materials, including stone, lime, and timber from the surrounding hillsides. They then formed marriage alliances with regional ethnic groups such as the Colhua, and by 1430 initiated the process of imperial expansion.

Intermarriage with the Colhua, who traced their ancestry to the mighty Toltec warriors, lent the lowly Aztecs a new, elite cachet. At some point the Aztecs tied their religious cult, focused on the war god Huitzilopochtli (weetsy-low-POACH-tee), or “hummingbird-on-the-left” to cults dedicated to more widely known deities, such as Tlaloc, a powerful water god. Also known to the distant Maya, the fearsome Tlaloc resembled a goggle-wearing crocodile, and was usually surrounded by shells and other marine symbols. A huge, multilayered pyramid faced with carved stone and filled with rubble, now referred to by archaeologists as the Templo Mayor, or “Great Temple,” but called by the Aztecs Coatepec, or “Serpent Mountain,” became the centerpiece of Tenochtitlán. At its top, some twenty stories above the valley floor, sat twin temple enclosures, one dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the other to Tlaloc. Like many imperial structures, Coatepec was built to awe and intimidate. In the words of one native poet:



Proud of itself
Is the City of Mexico-Tenochtitlán
Here no one fears to die in war
This is our glory

This is Your Command
Oh Giver of Life
Have this in mind, oh princes
Who could conquer Tenochtitlán?
Who could shake the foundation of heaven?² *

As these words suggest, the Aztecs saw themselves as both stagehands and actors in a grand-scale cosmic drama centered on their great capital city.

* Miguel Leon-Portilla. *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, by and Leon-Portilla, translated from the Spanish by Grace Lobanov. Copyright © 1969 by The University of Oklahoma Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

Enlarging and Supplying the Capital

With Tenochtitlán surrounded by water, subsistence and living space became serious concerns amid imperial expansion. Fortunately for the Aztecs, Lake Texcoco was shallow enough to allow an ingenious form of land reclamation called *chinampa* (chee-NAHM-pah). Still visible in a few Mexico City neighborhoods today, **chinampas** were long, narrow terraces built by hand from dredged mud, reeds, and rocks, bordered by interwoven sticks and live trees. Chinampa construction also created rows of deep canals, which served as waterways, or suburban “canoe roads.” Because the Aztecs lacked iron or bronze metallurgy, wheeled vehicles, and draft animals, construction of large-scale agricultural works such as chinampas and massive temple-pyramids such as Coatepec absorbed the labors of many thousands of workers. Their construction, therefore, is a testimony to the Aztecs’ ability to command and organize large amounts of labor.

Over time, Tenochtitlán’s canals accumulated algae, water lilies, and silt. Workers periodically dredged and composted this organic material to fertilize maize, bean, and tomato plantings on the newly formed island-terraces. Established chinampa lands encompassing several square miles were eventually used for building residences, in part to help ease urban crowding. Always hoping not to anger Tlaloc, the fickle water god, by the mid-fifteenth century the Aztecs countered problems such as chronic flooding and high salt content at their end of the lake with dikes and other complex, labor-intensive public works.

Earlier, in the fourteenth century, an adjacent “twin” city called Tlatelolco (tlah-teh-LOLE-coe) had emerged alongside Tenochtitlán. Tlatelolco served as the Aztec marketplace. Foods, textiles, and goods from throughout Mesoamerica and beyond were exchanged here. Highly prized cocoa beans from the hot lowlands served as currency in some exchanges, and more exotic products, such as turquoise and the iridescent tail feathers of the quetzal bird, arrived from as far away as northern New Mexico and southern Guatemala, respectively. Though linked by trade, these distant regions fell well outside the Aztec domain. No matter how far they traveled, all products were transported along well-trod footpaths on the backs of human carriers. Only when they arrived on the shores of Lake Texcoco could trade goods be shuttled from place to place in canoes. Tlatelolco served as crossroads for all regional trade, with long-distance merchants, or *pochteca* (poach-TEH-cah), occupying an entire precinct. For the Aztecs, Tenochtitlán was the center of the political and spiritual universe. Tlatelolco was the center of Aztec commerce, connecting the peoples of the Valley of Mexico to diverse societies scattered across the Americas.

Genuine Aztec imperial expansion began only in around 1430, less than a century before the arrival of Europeans. An auspicious alliance between Tenochtitlán and the neighboring city-states of Texcoco and Tlacopan led to victory against a third, Atzacapotzalco (otts-cah-poat-SAUL-coh). Tensions with Atzacapotzalco extended back over a century to the Aztecs’ first arrival in the region, and these early slights were not forgotten. Whether motivated by revenge or something else, the Aztecs used the momentum of this victory to overtake their allies and lay the foundations of a regional, tributary empire. Within a generation they controlled the entire Valley of Mexico, exacting tribute from several million people representing many distinct cultures. The Nahuatl language helped link state to subjects, although many newly conquered and allied groups continued to speak local languages. These persistent forms of ethnic identification, coupled with staggering tribute demands, would eventually help bring about the end of Aztec rule.

Holy Terror: Aztec Rule, Religion, and Warfare

A series of six male rulers, or *tlatoque* (tlah-TOE-kay, singular *tlatoani*), presided over Aztec expansion. When a ruler died, his successor was chosen by a secret council of elders from among a handful of eligible candidates. Aztec kingship was sacred in that each *tlatoani* traced his lineage back to the legendary Toltec warrior-sages. For this, the incorporation of the Colhua lineage had been essential. In keeping with this Toltec legacy, the Aztec

Land Reclamation

Long-Distance Trade

From City-State to Empire

chinampa A terrace for farming and house building constructed in the shallows of Mexico’s Lake Texcoco by the Aztecs and their neighbors.

SEEING THE PAST

The Coyolxauhqui Stone



Coyolxauhqui Stone (The Art Archive/Museo del Templo Mayor Mexico/Gianni Dagli Orti.)

Like many imperial peoples, the Aztecs sought to memorialize their deities in stone. The Aztec war god Huitzilopochtli was central, but as in other traditions, so were his mother and other female relatives. Huitzilopochtli's mother was Coatlicue (kwat-lih-KWAY), "Serpent Skirt," a fearsome and not obviously maternal figure. Huitzilopochtli's birth was said to be miraculous; Coatlicue had been inseminated by downy feathers while sweeping a temple, a ruse of the trickster-creator god Tezcatlipoca (tess-caught-lee-POH-cah), "Smoking Mirror."

A daughter, Coyolxauhqui (coe-yole-SHAU-key), "She Who is Adorned with Copper Bells," was so outraged at her mother's suspicious pregnancy that she incited her four hundred siblings to attempt matricide. Coatlicue was frightened at the prospect, but her unborn child, Huitzilopochtli, spoke from the womb to calm her. Upon the arrival of the angry children, dressed for war and led by Coyolxauhqui, Huitzilopochtli burst out of his mother's womb fully grown. He quickly prepared for battle and confronted his sister, whom he dismembered with a fire serpent. Huitzilopochtli went on to rout his other siblings, running them down like a proper Aztec warrior, stripping and sacrificing each without mercy.

The circular stone shown here, discovered by electrical workers near Mexico City's cathedral in 1979, depicts Coyolxauhqui dismembered on the ground. Some ten feet across, this stone apparently sat at the base of the Aztec Templo Mayor. Sacrificed warriors from all over the Aztec Empire probably got a good look at it before climbing the temple stairs to their deaths. Although shown in defeat, Coyolxauhqui is the ideal woman warrior, her serpent belt buckled with a human skull. Earth Monster knee- and elbow-pads, as well as heel-cups, add to her fearsome appearance, as do serpent ties on her severed arms and legs. An elaborate headdress and huge, Toltec-style ear-spools top off the battlefield ensemble.

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

1. How does the Coyolxauhqui stone reflect women's roles in Aztec society?
2. What does the stone suggest about death in Aztec thought?

Sacrifice

Empire was characterized by three core features: human sacrifice, warfare, and tribute. All were linked to Aztec and broader Mesoamerican notions of cosmic order, specifically the fundamental human duty to feed the gods.

Like most Mesoamerican peoples, the Aztecs traced not only their own but all human origins to sacrifices made by a wide range of deities. In most origin stories male and female gods threw themselves into fires, drew their own blood, and killed and dismembered one another, all for the good of humankind. These forms of sacrifice were considered essential to the process of releasing and renewing the generative powers that drove the cosmos (see *Seeing the Past: The Coyolxauhqui Stone*).

According to Aztec belief, humans were expected to show gratitude by following the example of their creators in an almost daily ritual cycle. Much of the sacred calendar had been inherited from older Mesoamerican cultures, but the Aztecs added many new holidays to celebrate their own special role in cosmic history. The Aztecs' focus on sacrifice also appears to have derived from their acute sense that secular and spiritual forces were



Aztec Human Sacrifice

This image dates from just after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, but it was part of a codex about Aztec religious practices and symbols. Here a priest is removing the beating heart of a captive with a flint knife as an assistant holds his feet. The captive's bloody heart, in the form of a cactus fruit, ascends, presumably to the gods (see the same icon in *Seeing the Past: An Aztec Map of Tenochtitlán*, page 521). At the base of the sacrificial pyramid lies an earlier victim, apparently being taken away by noble Aztec men and women responsible for the handling of the corpse. (Scala/Art Resource, NY.)

inseparable and interdependent. Affairs of state were affairs of heaven, and vice versa. Tenochtitlán was thought to be the foundation of heaven, its enormous temple-pyramids the center of human-divine affairs. Aztec priests and astrologers believed that the universe, already in its fifth incarnation after only three thousand years, was inherently unstable, always on the verge of chaos and collapse. Only human intervention in the form of sustained sacrificial ritual could stave off apocalypse.

As an antidote, or at least a brake against impending doom, the gods had given humans the "gift" of warfare. Human captives, preferably able-bodied, energetic young men, were to be hunted and killed so that the release of their blood and spirits might satisfy the gods. Warrior sacrifice was so important to the Aztecs that they believed it kept the sun in motion. Thus the act of human sacrifice, which involved removing the hearts of live victims using a flint knife, was in part a reenactment of several creator gods' own acts of self-sacrifice.

Devout Aztec subjects, rather like the classic Maya before them, also took part in non-lethal cosmic regeneration rituals in the form of personal bloodletting, or **autosacrifice**. According to a number of eyewitness sources, extremities and genitals were bled using thorns and stone blades, with public exhibition of suffering as important as blood loss. Blood offerings were absorbed by thin sheets of reed paper, which were burnt before an

autosacrifice The Mesoamerican practice of personal bloodletting as a means of paying debts to the gods.

altar. These bloodlettings, like captive sacrifices, emphasized the frailty of the individual, the pain of life, and most of all indebtedness to the gods. Autosacrifice was, in short, a physical expression of the empathy and subordination humans were to feel before their creators. Human blood fueled not only the Aztec realm, but the cosmos.

Warfare

Given these sacrificial obligations, Aztec warfare was aimed not at the annihilation, but rather at live capture of enemies. This is not to say that “stone age” weapons technology was an impediment to determined killers: two-handed broadswords with razor-sharp obsidian blades could slice feather-clad warriors to ribbons, and ceramic projectiles could be hurled from slings with deadly accuracy. Spears, lances, clubs, and other weapons were equally menacing. Still, according to most sources, Aztec combat was ideally a stylized and theatrical affair similar to royal jousts in contemporary Eurasia, with specific individuals paired for contest.

In the field, Aztec warriors were noted for their fury, a trait borrowed from their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli. Chronic enemies such as the Tlaxcalans of east-central Mexico, and the Tarascans to the west, apparently learned to match the ferocious Aztec style. Despite their proximity to Tenochtitlán, they remained unconquered when Europeans arrived. Some enemies, such as the nearby Otomí, were eventually overwhelmed, then incorporated into Aztec warrior ranks.

All Mesoamerican warriors considered death on the battlefield the highest honor. But live capture was the Aztecs’ main goal, and most victims were marched naked and bound to the capital to be sacrificed. Although charged with religious meaning, Aztec warrior sacrifices were also intended to horrify enemies; visiting diplomats were made to watch them, according to sources. Aztec imperial expansion depended in part on religious terror, or the ability to appear chosen by the gods for victory.

Tribute

In addition to sacrificial victims, the Aztecs demanded **tribute** of conquered peoples, a common imperial practice worldwide. In addition to periodic labor drafts for temple building and other public works, tribute lists included useful things such as food, textiles, and craft goods, crucial subsidies for the empire’s large priestly and warrior classes. Redistribution of certain tribute items to favored subjects of lower status, a tactic also practiced by the Incas, further helped cement loyalties. Other tribute items were purely symbolic. Some new subjects were made to collect filth and inedible insects, for example, just to prove their unworthiness before the Aztec sovereign. As an empire that favored humiliation over co-optation and promotion of new subjects, the Aztecs faced an ever-deepening reservoir of resentment.

Daily Life Under the Aztecs

Class Hierarchy

Aztec society was highly stratified, and class divisions firm. As in most imperial societies, Mexica nobles regarded commoners, particularly farming folk, as uncouth and generally beneath contempt. In between were imperial bureaucrats, priests, district chiefs, scribes, merchants, and artisans. Although elites at several levels showed off the fruits of their subordinates’ labors in lavish displays, most Aztec art seems to have been destined not for wealthy people’s homes but rather for temples, tombs, and religious shrines. Despite heavy emphasis on religious ceremonies, the Aztecs also maintained a multitiered civil justice system. In many instances, and quite unlike most of the world’s imperial cultures, including the Incas, Aztec nobles received harsher punishments than commoners for similar misdeeds.

Class hierarchy was further reinforced by a host of detailed dress and speech codes, along with many other social rules and rituals. The tlatoani, for example, could not be touched or even looked in the face by any but his closest relatives, consorts, and servants. Even ranking nobles were supposed to lie face down on the ground and put dirt in their mouths before him. Nobles guarded their own rank with vigilance, going so far as to develop a restricted form of speech. Chances for social advancement were severely limited, but some men, all of whom were expected to serve in the military for a period, gained status on the battlefield.

At the base of the social pyramid were peasants and slaves. Some peasants were ethnic Aztecs, but the vast majority belonged to city-states and clans that had been conquered after 1430. In either case, peasants’ lives mostly revolved around producing food for subsistence

tribute Taxes paid to a state or empire, usually in the form of farm produce or artisan manufactures but sometimes also human labor or even human bodies.

and providing overlords with tribute goods and occasional labor. Slavery usually took the form of crisis-driven self-indenture; it was not an inherited social status. Chattel slavery existed, in which slaves were treated as property and traded in the marketplace, but slavery remained unimportant to the overall Aztec economy.

Merchants, particularly the mobile *pochteca*, responsible for long-distance trade, occupied an unusual position. Although the *pochteca* sometimes accumulated great wealth, they remained resident aliens much like other ethnic merchant communities operating in the contemporary Mediterranean and Indian Ocean basins. They had no homeland, but made a good living supplying elites with exotic goods, including slaves. Yet even among merchants there seems to have been little interest in capital accumulation in the form of money, land, or saleable goods. There is no evidence of complex credit instruments, industrial-style production, or real estate exchange of the sort associated with early merchant capitalism in other parts of the world at this time. The Aztec state remained at root tributary, the movement of goods mostly a reflection of power relations underpinned by force. Merchants, far from influencing politics, remained ethnic outsiders. Thus, both the Aztec economy and social structure reinforced the insularity of Aztec elites. The inflexible Aztec society could not incorporate outsiders, and economic exchange, even long-distance trade, did little to add new ideas and beliefs to Aztec culture.

The life of an Aztec woman was difficult even by early modern standards. Along with water transport and other heavy household chores, maize grinding and tortilla making became the core responsibilities of most women in the Valley of Mexico, and indeed throughout Mesoamerica. Without animal- or water-driven grain mills, food preparation was an arduous, time-consuming task, particularly for the poor. Only noblewomen enjoyed broad exemption from this and other forms of manual work.

Sources suggest that some women achieved shaman status, performing minor priestly roles and working as surgeons and herbalists. Midwifery was also a fairly high-status, female occupation (see *Lives and Livelihoods: The Aztec Midwife*). These were exceptions; women's lives were mostly hard under Aztec rule. Scholars disagree, however, as to whether male political and religious leaders viewed women's substantial duties and contributions as complementary or subordinate. Surviving texts do emphasize feminine mastery of the domestic sphere and its social value. However, this emphasis may simply reflect male desire to limit the sphere of women's actions, since female reproductive capacity was also highly valued as an aid to the empire's perpetual war effort.

Indeed, Aztec society was so militarized that giving birth was referred to as "taking a captive." This comparison reflects the generalized Aztec preoccupation with pleasing their gods: women were as much soldiers as men in the ongoing war to sustain human life. Women's roles in society were mostly domestic rather than public, but the home was a deeply sacred space. Caring for it was equivalent to caring for a temple. Sweeping was a genuine ritual, for example, albeit one with hygienic benefits. Hearth tending, maize grinding, spinning, and weaving were also highly ritualized tasks, each accompanied by chants and offerings. Insufficient attention to any of these daily rituals put families and entire lineages at risk.

Aztec children, too, lived a scripted existence, their futures predicted at birth by astrologers. Names were derived from birthdates, and in a way amounted to a public badge of fate. According to a variety of testimonies taken just after the Spanish Conquest, Aztec society at all levels emphasized duty and good comportment rather than rights and individual freedom. Parents were admonished to police their children's behavior and to help mold all youths into useful citizens. Girls and boys at every social level were assigned tasks considered appropriate for their sex well before adolescence. By age fourteen, children of both sexes were fully engaged in adult work. One break from the constant chores was instruction between ages twelve and fifteen in singing and playing instruments, such as drums and flutes, for cyclical religious festivals. Girls married at about age fifteen, and boys nearer twenty, a pattern roughly in accordance with most parts of the world at the time. Elder Aztec women usually served as matchmakers, and wedding ceremonies tended to be elaborate, multiday affairs. Some noblemen expanded their prestige by retaining numerous wives and siring dozens of children.

Women's Roles

Children's Lives

The Aztec Midwife



Aztec Midwife

Women were expected to be tough in Aztec culture, which described giving birth as “taking a captive.” But as in war, medical attention was often required, so a trained class of professional midwives stood by to administer aid. This image accompanies a description in Nahuatl, the Aztec language, of the midwife’s duties written soon after the Spanish Conquest. (Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ms. Med. Palat. 219, c. 132v.)

In Aztec culture, childbirth was a sacred and ritualized affair. Always life-threatening for mother and child, giving birth and being born were both explicitly compared to the battlefield experience. Aside from potential medical complications, the Aztecs considered the timing of a child’s birth critical in determining his or her future. This tricky blend of physical and spiritual concerns gave rise to the respected and highly skilled livelihood of midwife. It is not entirely clear how midwives were chosen, but their work and sayings are well described in early postconquest records, particularly the illustrated books of Aztec lore and history collectively known as the *Florentine Codex*. The following passage, translated directly from sixteenth-century Nahuatl, is one such description. Note how the midwife blends physical tasks, such as supplying herbs and swaddling clothes, with shamanistic cries and speeches.

And the midwife inquired about the fate of the baby who was born.

When the pregnant one already became aware of [pains in] her womb, when it was said that her time of death had arrived, when she wanted to give birth

already, they quickly bathed her, washed her hair with soap, washed her, adorned her well. And then they arranged, they swept the house where the little woman was to suffer, where she was to perform her duty, to do her work, to give birth.

If she were a noblewoman or wealthy, she had two or three midwives. They remained by her side, awaiting her word. And when the woman became really disturbed internally, they quickly put her in a sweat bath [a kind of sauna]. And to hasten the birth of the baby, they gave the pregnant woman cooked *ciuapatli* [literally, “woman medicine”] herb to drink.

And if she suffered much, they gave her ground opossum tail to drink, and then the baby was quickly born. [The midwife] already had all that was needed for the baby, the little rags with which the baby was received.

And when the baby had arrived on earth, the midwife shouted; she gave war cries, which meant the woman had fought a good battle, had become a brave warrior, had taken a captive, had captured a baby.

Then the midwife spoke to it. If it was a boy, she said to it: “You have come out on earth, my youngest one, my boy, my young man.” If it was a girl, she said to it: “My young woman, my youngest one, noblewoman, you have suffered, you are exhausted.” . . . [and to either:] “You have come to arrive on earth, where your relatives, your kin suffer fatigue and exhaustion; where it is hot, where it is cold, and where the wind blows; where there is thirst, hunger, sadness, despair, exhaustion, fatigue, pain. . . .”

And then the midwife cut the umbilical cord. . . .

Source: Selection from the *Florentine Codex* in Matthew Restall, Lisa Sousa, and Kevin Terraciano, eds., *Mesoamerican Voices: Native-Language Writings from Colonial Mexico, Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Guatemala* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 216–217.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why was midwifery so crucial to the Aztecs?
2. How were boys and girls addressed by the midwife, and why?

For Further Information:

Carrasco, David, and Scott Sessions. *Daily Life of the Aztecs, People of the Sun and Earth*, 2d ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2008.

Clendinnen, Inga. *Aztecs: An Interpretation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

At around harvest time in September, Aztec subjects of all classes ate maize, beans, and squash lightly seasoned with salt and ground chili peppers. During other times of the year, and outside the chinampa zone, food could be scarce, forcing the poor to consume roasted insects, grubs, and lake scum. Certain items, such as frothed cocoa, were reserved for elites. Stored maize was used to make tortillas year-round, but two poor harvests in a row, a frequent occurrence in densely populated highland Mexico, could reduce rations considerably.

In addition to periodic droughts, Aztec subjects coped with frosts, plagues of locusts, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and floods. Given such ecological uncertainty, warfare was reserved for the agricultural off-season, when hands were not needed for planting, weeding, or harvesting. In the absence of large domesticated animals and advanced metallurgy, agricultural tasks throughout Mesoamerica demanded virtual armies of field laborers equipped only with fire-hardened digging sticks and obsidian or flint knives.

Animal protein was scarce in highland Mexico, especially in urban areas where hunting opportunities were limited and few domestic animals were kept. Still, the people of Tenochtitlán raised significant numbers of turkeys and plump, hairless dogs (the prized Xolo breed of today). Even humble beans, when combined with maize, could constitute a complete protein, and indigenous grains such as amaranth were also highly nutritious. Famines still occurred, however, and one in the early 1450s led to mass migration out of the Valley of Mexico. Thousands sold themselves into slavery to avoid starvation.

The Limits of Holy Terror

As the Aztec Empire expanded in the later fifteenth century, sacrificial debts grew to be a consuming passion among pious elites. Calendars filled with sacrificial rites, and warfare was ever more geared toward satisfying what must have seemed a ballooning cosmic budget.

By 1500 the Aztec state had reached its height, and some scholars have argued that it had even begun to decline. Incessant captive wars and related tribute demands had reached their limits, and old enemies such as the Tlaxcalans and Tarascans remained belligerent. New conquests were blocked by difficult terrain, declining tributes, and resistant locals. With available technologies, there was no place else for this inherently expansive empire to grow, and even with complex water works in place, agricultural productivity barely kept the people fed. Under the harsh leadership of Moctezuma II (“Angry Lord the Younger”) (r. 1502–1520), the future did not look promising. Although there is no evidence to suggest the Aztec Empire was on the verge of collapse when several hundred bearded, sun-burnt strangers of Spanish descent appeared on Mexico’s Gulf Coast shores in 1519, points of vulnerability abounded.

Food and Scarcity

Underlying Weaknesses

Tributes of Sweat: The Inca Empire 1430–1532

At about the same time as the Aztec expansion in southernmost North America, another great empire emerged in the central Andean highlands of South America. There appears to have been no significant contact between them. Like the Aztecs, the Incas burst out of their highland homeland in the 1430s to conquer numerous neighboring cultures and huge swaths of territory. They demanded tribute in goods and labor, along with allegiance to an imperial religion. Also like the Aztecs, the Incas based their expansion on a centuries-long inheritance of technological, religious, and political traditions.

Despite enormous geographical, technological, and cultural barriers, by 1500 the Incas ruled one of the world’s most extensive, ecologically varied, and rugged land empires, stretching nearly three thousand miles along both sides of the towering Andean mountain range from just north of the equator to central Chile. Like most empires ancient and modern, extensive holdings proved to be a mixed blessing (see Map 16.3, page 531).

FOCUS

What core features characterized Inca life and rule?

From Potato Farmers to Empire Builders

Inca Origins

Thanks to abundant archaeological evidence and early postconquest interviews and narratives, much is known about the rise and fall of the Inca state. Still, like the early Ottoman, Russian, and other contemporary empires, numerous mysteries remain. As in those cases, legends and sagas of the formative period in particular require careful and skeptical analysis. The Inca case is somewhat complicated by the fact that their complex knotted-string records, or *quipus* (also *quipus*, KEY-poohs), have yet to be deciphered.

Scholars agree that the Incas emerged from among a dozen or so regional ethnic groups or allied clans living in the highlands of south-central Peru between 1000 and 1400 C.E. Living as scattered and more-or-less egalitarian potato and maize farmers, the Incas started out as one of many similar groups of Andean mountaineers. Throughout the Andes, clan groupings settled in and around fertile valleys and alongside lakes between eighty-five hundred and thirteen thousand feet above sea level. Though often graced with clear mountain springs and fertile soils, these highland areas were subject to periodic frosts and droughts, despite their location within the tropics. Even more than in the Aztec realm, altitude (elevation above sea level), not latitude (distance north or south of the equator), was key.

Environment and Exchange

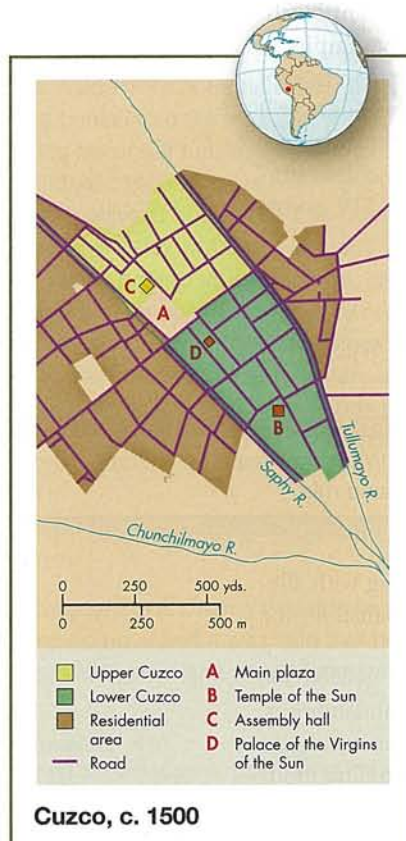
Anthropologist John Murra once described Inca land use as a “vertical archipelago,” a stair-step system of interdependent environmental “islands.” Kin groups occupying the altitudes best suited to potato and maize farming established outlying settlements in cold uplands, where thousands of llamas and alpacas—the Americas’ only large domestic animals—were herded, and also in hot lowlands, where cotton, peanuts, chilis, and the stimulant coca were grown. People, animals, and goods traveled constantly between highland and lowland ecological zones using well-maintained and often stone-paved trails and hanging bridges, yet the incredibly rugged nature of the terrain (plus the stubborn nature of llamas) made use of wheeled vehicles impractical.

vertical archipelago Andean system of planting crops and grazing animals at different altitudes.

Clans with highland ties and even some states of considerable size inhabited Peru’s long desert coast. Here, urban civilization was nearly as old as that of ancient Egypt. Andean coast dwellers engaged in large-scale irrigated agriculture, deep-sea fishing, and long-distance trade. Trading families outfitted large balsawood rafts with cotton sails and plied the Pacific as far as Guatemala. Inland trade links stretched over the Andes and deep into the Amazon rain forest. Stopping at pilgrimage sites along the way, coast-dwelling traders exchanged salt, seashells, beads, and copper hatchets for exotic feathers, gold dust, and pelts. The Incas would move rapidly to exploit all of these diverse Andean regions and their interconnections, replacing old exchange systems and religious shrines with their own. Around 1200 C.E. they established a base near Cuzco (KOOS-coh), deep in the highlands of Peru not far from the headwaters of the Amazon, and soon after 1400 they began their remarkable drive toward empire.

The Great Apparatus: Inca Expansion and Religion

Cuzco, located in a narrow valley at a breathtaking altitude of over two miles above sea level, served as the Incas’ political base and religious center. Like the Aztecs, the Incas saw their capital as the hub of the universe, calling it the “navel of the world.” An array of dirt paths and stone-paved roads radiated out in all directions and tied hundreds of subsidiary shrines to the cosmically-ordained center. Much like the Aztecs’ Tenochtitlán, Cuzco served as both the preeminent religious pilgrimage site and the empire’s administrative capital. Compared with the Aztec capital, however, the city was modest in size, perhaps home to at most fifty thousand. Still, Cuzco had the advantage of being stoutly built



Cuzco, c. 1500

of hewn stone. Whereas most of Tenochtitlán's temples and palaces were dismantled in the centuries following the Spanish Conquest, Cuzco's colossal stone foundations still stand.

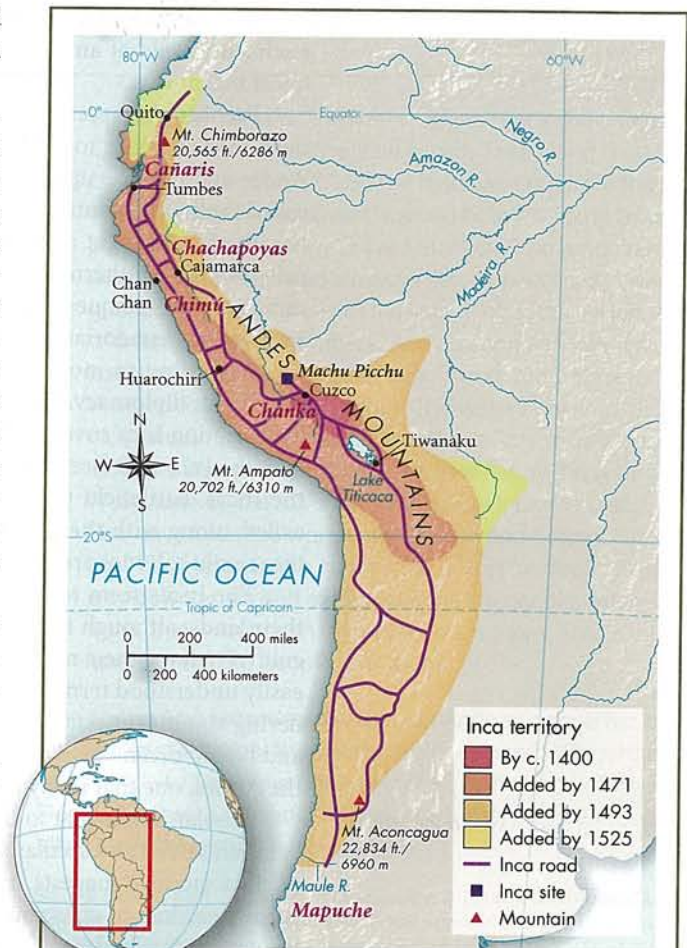
For obscure reasons, the Incas in the early fifteenth century began conquering their neighbors. In time each emperor, or Sapa ("Unique") Inca, would seek to add more territory to the realm, called Tawantinsuyu (tuh-wahn-tin-SUE-you), or, "The Four Quarters Together." The Sapa Inca was thought to be descended from the sun and was thus regarded as the natural lord and sustainer of all humanity. To worship the sun was to worship the Inca, and vice versa. Devotion to lesser mountain and ancestor deities persisted, however, absorbed over time by the Incas in a way reminiscent of the Roman Empire's assimilation of regional deities and shrines. This religious inclusiveness helped the empire spread quickly even as the royal cult of the sun was inserted into everyday life. In a similar way, *runasimi*, later mislabeled "Quechua" (KETCH-wah) by the Spanish, became the Incas' official language even as local languages continued to be spoken.

Inca expansion was so rapid that the empire reached its greatest extent within a mere four generations of its founding. In semilegendary times, Wiracocha Inca (r. 1400–1438) was said to have led an army of followers to defeat an invading ethnic group called the Chankas near Cuzco. According to several royal sagas, this victory spurred Wiracocha to improve the defensive position of his people further by annexing the fertile territories of other neighbors. Defense turned to offense, and thus was primed the engine of Inca expansion.

Wiracocha's successor, Pachacuti Inca Yupanki (r. 1438–1471), was far more ambitious, so much so that he is widely regarded as the true founder of the Inca Empire. Substantial archaeological evidence backs this claim. Pachacuti (literally "Cataclysm") took over much of what is today Peru, including many coastal oases and the powerful Chimú kingdom. Along the way, Pachacuti perfected the core strategy of Inca warfare: amassing and mobilizing such overwhelming numbers of troops and backup forces that actual fighting was usually unnecessary.

Thousands of peasants were conscripted to bear arms, build roads, and carry grain. Others herded llamas, strung bridges, and cut building stone. With each new advance, huge masonry forts and temples were constructed in the imperial style, leaving an indelible Inca stamp on the landscape still visible today from Ecuador to Argentina. Even opponents such as the desert-dwelling Chimú, who had their aqueducts cut off to boot, simply capitulated in the face of the Inca juggernaut. Just after the Spanish Conquest, Pachacuti was remembered by female descendants:

As [Pachacuti] Inca Yupanki remained in his city and town of Cuzco, seeing that he was lord and that he had subjugated the towns and provinces, he was very pleased. He had subjugated more and obtained much more importance than any of his ancestors. He saw the great apparatus that he had so that whenever he wanted to he could subjugate and put under his control anything else he wanted.³



MAP 16.3

The Inca Empire, 1325–1521

Starting from their base in Cuzco, high in the Andes, the Incas built the most extensive empire in the Americas, and the second most populous after that of the Aztecs. They linked it by a road system that rivaled that of the ancient Romans. Inca expansion was extremely rapid as each ruler competed with his predecessor to extend tributary control. Some groups, such as the Cañaris and Chachapoyas, resisted Inca domination for many years, and the Mapuche of Chile were never conquered.

Imperial Expansion

These early colonial remembrances underscore the Sapa Inca's tremendous power. Pachacuti could at any time deploy the "great apparatus" of empire as his personal conquest machine.

Pachacuti's successors continued in the same vein, extending conquests southward deep into what are today Chile and Argentina, and also eastward down the slope of the Andes and into the upper Amazon Basin. It is from this last region, the quarter the Incas called Antisuyu (auntie-SUE-you), that we derive the word *Andes*. On the northern frontier, the Incas fought a series of bitter wars with Ecuadorian ethnic groups to extend Inca rule into the southernmost part of present-day Colombia (see again Map 16.3). Here the imperial Inca conquest machine met its match: instead of capitulating, awestruck by the Inca, many Ecuadorian and Colombian highlanders fought to the death.

According to most sources, Inca advances into new territory were couched in the rhetoric of diplomacy. Local headmen were told they had two options: (1) to retain power by accepting Inca sovereignty and all the tributary obligations that went with it, or (2) to defy the Inca and face annihilation. Most headmen went along, particularly once word of the Incas' battlefield prowess spread. Those who did not were either killed in battle or exiled, along with their subject populations, to remote corners of the empire. Several of these exile colonies are still identifiable today in southern Ecuador and northern Bolivia.

The Incas seem to have been most interested in dominating productive peoples and their lands, although they also succeeded to some extent in spreading their imperial solar cult. Whatever their motives, like the Aztecs they defined political domination in simple, easily understood terms: tribute payment. Conquered subjects showed submission by rendering significant portions of their surplus production—and also labor—to the emperor and his subordinates. Tribute payment was a grudgingly accepted humiliation throughout the Andes, one that many hoped to shake off at the first opportunity.

Inca Religion

Scholars argue that to understand Inca religion one must set aside familiar distinctions between sacred and secular and between life and death. As the chapter-opening description of child sacrifice suggests, a continuum of life was assumed throughout the Andes, despite permanent loss of consciousness, and spirit and body were deemed inseparable. Likewise, features in the landscape, ranging from mountain springs and peaks to ordinary boulders, were almost always thought to house or emit spiritual energy (see Reading the Past: An Andean Creation Story). Even practical human-made landforms, such as irrigation canals, walls, and terraces, were commonly described as "alive." These sacred places, *wakas* (or *huacas*), received sacrifices of food, drink, and textiles from their human caretakers in exchange for good harvests, herd growth, and other bounties. In addition, most Andeans venerated images and amulets carved from wood, shell, stone, metal, and bone.

Andeans also venerated the human corpse. As long as something tangible remained of one's deceased relatives or ancestors, they were not regarded as entirely dead. It was generally thought wise to keep them around. Of course it helped that the central Andes' dry highland and coastal climates were ideal for mummification: preservation often required little more than removal of internal organs. In wetter areas, the dead were sometimes smoked over a slow fire, a process that led some outsiders to suspect cannibalism. In fact, it would have been fairly common in Inca times to encounter a neighbor's "freeze-dried" or smoked grandparents hanging from the rafters, still regarded as very much involved in household affairs. Andeans sometimes carried ancestor mummies to feasts and pilgrimages as well. Thus, Inca society included both past and present generations.

The Incas harnessed these and other core features of Andean society at its most ancient, yet like the Aztecs they put a unique stamp on the vast and diverse region they came to dominate. Though warlike, the Incas rarely sacrificed captive warriors, a ritual archaeologists now know was practiced among ancient coastal Peruvians. As for cannibalism, it was something the Incas associated with barbaric forest dwellers. Inca stone architecture, though clearly borrowing from older forms such as those of Tiwanaku, a temple complex in modern Bolivia, is still identifiable thanks to the frequent use of trapezoidal (flared) doors, windows, and niches (see the illustration of Machu Picchu in At a

waka A sacred place or thing in Andean culture.

An Andean Creation Story

The small Peruvian town of Huarochiri (wahr-oh-chee-REE), located in the high Andes east of Lima, was the target of a Spanish anti-idolatriy campaign at the end of the sixteenth century. The Spanish conquest of the Incas, which began in 1532 (see Chapter 17), had little effect on the everyday life of Andean peasants, and many clung tenaciously to their religious beliefs. In Huarochiri, Spanish attempts to root out these beliefs and replace them with Western, Christian ones produced written testimonies from village elders in phonetically rendered Quechua, the most commonly spoken language in the Inca Empire. Like the Aztec codices, the resulting documents—aimed at eradicating the beliefs they describe—have unwittingly provided modern researchers with a rare window on a lost mental world. The passage here, translated directly from Quechua to English, relates an Andean myth that newly arrived or converted Christians considered a variation on the biblical story of Noah and the Great Flood. In the Christian story, God, angered by the wickedness of man, resolves to send a flood to destroy the earth. He spares only Noah, whom he instructs to build an ark in which Noah, his family, and a pair of every animal were saved from the Great Flood.

In ancient times, this world wanted to come to an end. A llama buck, aware that the ocean was about to overflow, was behaving like somebody who's deep in sadness. Even though its owner let it rest in a patch of excellent pasture, it cried and said, "In, in," and wouldn't eat. The llama's owner got really angry, and he threw a cob from some maize he had just eaten at the llama. "Eat, dog! This is some fine grass I'm letting you rest in!" he said. Then that llama began speaking like a human being. "You simpleton, whatever could you be thinking about? Soon, in five days, the ocean will overflow. It's a certainty. And the whole world will come to an end," it said. The man got good and scared. "What's going to happen to us? Where can we go to save

ourselves?" he said. The llama replied, "Let's go to Villca Coto mountain. There we'll be saved. Take along five days' food for yourself." So the man went out from there in a great hurry, and himself carried both the llama buck and its load. When they arrived at Villca Coto mountain, all sorts of animals had already filled it up: pumas, foxes, guanacos [wild relatives of the llama], condors, all kinds of animals in great numbers. And as soon as that man had arrived there, the ocean overflowed. They stayed there huddling tightly together. The waters covered all those mountains and it was only Villca Coto mountain, or rather its very peak, that was not covered by the water. Water soaked the fox's tail. That's how it turned black. Five days later, the waters descended and began to dry up. The drying waters caused the ocean to retreat all the way down again and exterminate all the people. Afterward, that man began to multiply once more. That's the reason there are people until today.

[The scribe who recorded this tale, an Andean converted by Spanish missionaries, then adds this comment:] "Regarding this story, we Christians believe it refers to the time of the Flood. But they [i.e., non-Christian Andeans] believe it was Villca Coto mountain that saved them."

Source: Excerpt from *The Huarochiri Manuscript: A Testament of Ancient and Colonial Andean Religion*, trans. and ed. Frank Salomon and George L. Urioste (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 51–52.

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

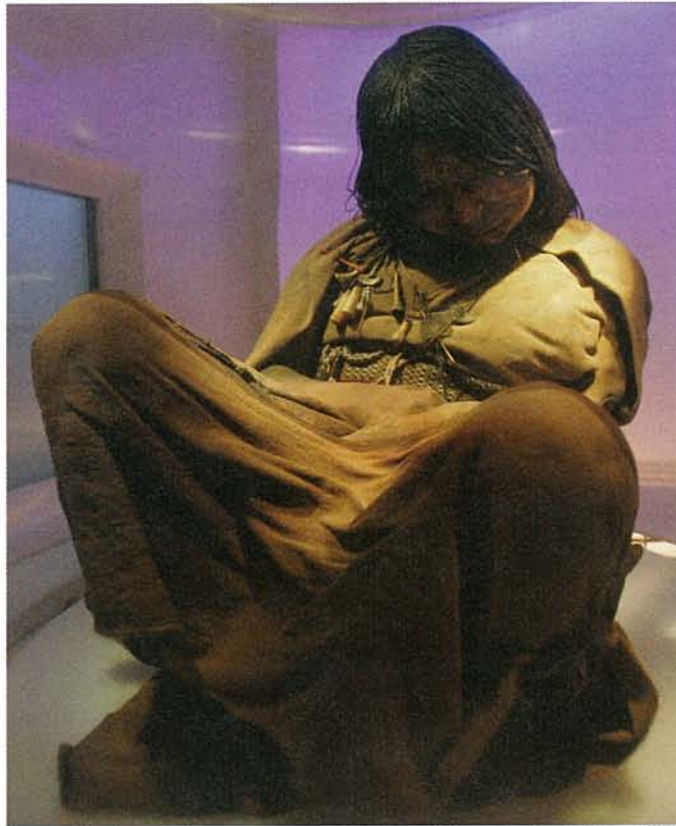
1. What do the similarities and differences between the Andean and Judeo-Christian flood stories suggest?
2. What do the differences between them reveal?

For Further Information:

Spalding, Karen. *Huarochiri: An Andean Society Under Inca and Spanish Rule*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

Urton, Gary. *Inca Myths*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

Crossroads, page 512). It is worth noting, however, that the cult of the sun, which the Incas transformed and elevated to something new and imperial, proved far less durable than local religious traditions once the empire fell. Despite the Incas' rhetoric of diplomacy, most Andeans appear to have associated their rule with tyranny. Like the Aztecs, they failed to inspire loyalty in their subjects, who saw Inca government as a set of institutions designed to exploit, rather than protect, the peoples of the empire.



Inca Mummy

The Incas did not sacrifice humans as often as the Aztecs did, but headmen in newly conquered regions were sometimes required to give up young sons or daughters for live burial on high mountains. The victims, including this adolescent girl found in a shallow tomb atop 20,000-foot Mount Lullailaco in the Argentine Andes, died of exposure after the long climb, but the Incas believed them to remain semiconscious and in communication with the spirit world. The girl seen here wears fine camelid-fiber garments bound by a *chumbi* (traditional Andean belt) and silver *topos* (shawl pins). She is also adorned with a shell necklace and other amulets, and her hair is pleated as described in early postconquest accounts. Such sacrifices were known as *capacocha*, or “debt payment.” (AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko.)

Class Hierarchy

decorated generals and hereditary lords of prominent and ancient clans. Often drawn from these and slightly lower noble ranks was a substantial class of priests and astrologers, charged with maintaining a vast array of temples and shrines.

Many noble women and girls deemed physically perfect, like the sacrificial victim described at the start of this chapter, were also selected for religious seclusion, somewhat like nuns in contemporary Western societies. Seclusion was not always permanent, because some of these women were groomed for marriage to the Inca. Still more noblewomen, mostly wives and widows, were charged with maintaining the urban households and country estates of the Incas, dead and alive.

Next came a class of bureaucrats, regional military leaders, and provincial headmen. Bureaucrats kept track of tribute obligations, communal work schedules, and land appropriations. Following conquest, up to two-thirds of productive land was set aside in the name of the ruling Inca and the cult of the sun. Bureaucrats negotiated with headmen as to which

Daily Life Under the Incas

Inca society, like Aztec society, was highly stratified, with few means of upward mobility. Along with class gradations tied to occupation, the Incas maintained a variety of divisions and ranks according to sex, age, and ethnic or regional origin. Everyday life thus varied tremendously among the Inca’s millions of subjects, although the vast peasant majority probably had much in common with farming folk the world over. Seasonal work stints for the empire were a burden for men, whereas women labored constantly to maintain households, raise children, and care for elderly kin. Unlike that of the Aztec, the Inca legal system, in common with most such systems in early modern times, appears to have been more harshly punitive against commoners than nobles. Exemplary elite behavior was expected, but not so rigidly enforced.

At the pinnacle of society was the Sapa Inca himself, the “son of the Sun.” As in most imperial cultures, the emperor’s alleged divinity extended to matters of war; he was believed to be the greatest warrior in the world. As a sign of unworthiness, everyone who came before him was obliged to bear a symbolic burden, such as a load of cloth or large water vessel. Only the Inca’s female companions had intimate, daily contact with him. Although the ideal royal couple according to Inca mythology was a sibling pair, it was in fact dozens of wives and concubines who assured that there would be numerous potential heirs. Unlike monarchs in Europe and parts of Africa, the imperial household did not practice primogeniture, or the automatic inheritance of an estate or title by the eldest son. Neither did they leave succession to a group of elders, the method preferred by the Aztecs. Violent succession struggles predictably ensued. Though barred from the role of Inca themselves, ambitious noblewomen came to exercise considerable behind-the-scenes power over imperial succession.

Just beneath the Inca imperial line was an assortment of Cuzco-based nobles, readily identifiable by their huge ear-spools and finely woven tunics. Rather like their Aztec counterparts, they spoke a dialect of the royal language forbidden among commoners. Among this elite class were

lands these would be, and how and when their subjects would be put to work on behalf of their new rulers. If negotiations failed, the military was called in for a show of force. Lower-ranking Inca military men, like bureaucrats, often faced service at the most hostile fringes of empire. They had little beyond the weak hold of local power to look forward to. As a result, in sharp distinction with the Aztecs, death in battle was not regarded as a glorious sacrifice among the Incas, but rather as yet another humiliation. Furthermore, many officers were themselves provincial in origin and thus had little hope of promotion to friendlier districts closer to the imperial core.

The Inca and his substantial retinue employed and received tribute from numerous artisans, mostly conquered provincials. Such specialists included architects, khipu-keepers, civil engineers, metalworkers, stonecutters, weavers, potters, wood-carvers, and many others. Unlike the Aztecs, the Incas did not tolerate free traders, instead choosing to manage the distribution of goods and services as a means of exercising state power. Partly as a result, chattel, or market-oriented, slavery appears not to have existed under the Incas, although some conquered young men and women spared from death or exile were absorbed into the labor force as personal servants. Most Inca subjects and tribute payers were peasants belonging to kin groups whose lives revolved around agriculture and rotational labor obligations. For them, the rigors of everyday life far outweighed the extra demands of Inca rule. Only in the case of recently conquered groups, or those caught in the midst of a regional rebellion or succession conflict, was this not true. Even then, subsistence remained the average Andean's most pressing concern; battlefields were abandoned at planting and harvest times.

Andean artisans living under Inca rule produced remarkable textiles, metalwork, and pottery, but the empire's most visible achievements were in the fields of architecture and civil engineering. The Incas' extensive road systems, irrigation works, and monumental temples were unmatched by any ancient American society. No one else moved or carved such large stones or ruled such a vast stretch of terrain. Linking coast, highlands, and jungle, the Incas' roads covered nearly ten thousand miles. Draft workers and soldiers paved them with stones whenever possible, and many sections were hewn into near-vertical mountainsides by hand. Grass weavers spanned breathtaking gorges with hanging bridges strong enough to sustain trains of pack llamas for years at a time. These engineering marvels enabled the Incas to communicate and move troops and supplies across great distances with amazing speed, yet they also served the important religious function of facilitating pilgrimages and royal processions. Massive irrigation works and stone foundations, though highly practical, were similarly charged with religious power. Thus, the Inca infrastructure not only played an important practical role in imperial government, but it also expressed the Incas' belief in the connection between their own rule and the cosmic order.

The Incas appropriated and spread ancient Andean metalworking techniques, which were much older and thus far more developed than those of Mesoamerica. On the brink of a genuine Bronze Age by 1500, Inca metallurgy ranged from fine decorative work in specially prepared alloys to toolmaking for the masses. As in many parts of the early modern



Inca Road

Stretching nearly 10,000 miles across mountains, plains, deserts, and rain forests, the Inca Royal Road held one of the world's most rugged and extensive empires together. Using braided fiber bridges to span chasms and establishing inns and forts along the road, the Incas handily moved troops, supplies, and information—in the form of khipu records and messages—across vast distances. The Royal Road had the unintentional consequence of aiding penetration of the empire by Spanish conquistadors on horseback. (akg-images/Aurélia Frey.)

Material Achievements

world, the forging of metals was as much a religious as an artistic exercise in the Andes, and metals themselves were regarded as semidivine. Gold was associated with the sun in Inca cosmology, and by extension with the Sapa Inca and his solar cult. Silver was associated with the moon and with several mother goddesses and Inca queens and princesses. Copper and bronze, considered less divine than gold and silver, were put to more practical uses.

Another ancient Andean tradition inherited by the Incas was weaving. Weaving in fact predates even ceramics in the Andes. Inca textiles, made mostly from native Peruvian cotton and alpaca fibers, were of extraordinary quality, and cloth became in essence the coin of the realm. Cooperative regional lords were rewarded by the Incas with substantial gifts of blankets and ponchos, which they could then redistribute among their subjects. Unlike some earlier coastal traditions, Inca design features favored geometric forms over representations of humans, animals, or deities. Fiber from the vicuña, a wild relative of the llama, was reserved for tunics and other garments worn only by the Sapa Inca. Softer than cashmere, it was the gold standard of Andean textile components. Some women became master weavers, but throughout most of the Inca Empire men wove fibers spun into thread by women, a gendered task division later reinforced by the Spanish.

With such an emphasis on textiles, it may come as no surprise that the Incas maintained a record-keeping system using knotted strings. Something like the Chinese abacus, or accounting device, in its most basic form, the **kipu** enabled bureaucrats and others to keep track of tributes, troop movements, ritual cycles, and other important matters. Like bronze metallurgy, the khipu predates the Inca Empire, but was most developed by Inca specialists. Although the extent of its capabilities as a means of data management remains a subject of intense debate, the khipu was sufficiently effective to remain in use for several centuries under Spanish rule, long after alphabetic writing was introduced.

Social Relations

Other ancient Andean traditions appropriated and spread by the Incas include reciprocity, the expectation of equal exchange and returned favors, complementary gender roles, and a tendency to view all social relations through the lens of kinship. Villagers, for example, depended on one another for aid in constructing homes, maintaining irrigation works, and tilling and harvesting fields. Whereas they chafed at service to the Inca ruler, they regarded rotational group work and communal care for disadvantaged neighbors not as burdens, but rather—after the work was done—as excuses for drinking parties and other festivities. Even in such a reciprocal environment, stresses and strains accumulated. In some villages, aggression was periodically vented during ritual fights between clan divisions.

Throughout the Andes, women occupied a distinct sphere from that of men, but not a subordinate one. For example, sources suggest that although the majority of Andeans living under Inca rule were patrilineal, or male-centered, in their succession preferences, power frequently landed in the hands of sisters and daughters of headmen. Literate Inca descendants described a world in which both sexes participated equally in complementary agricultural tasks, and also in contests against neighboring clans. Women exempted from rotational labor duties handled local exchanges of food and craft goods. Whether or not they were allowed to accumulate property as a result of these exchanges remains unknown.

Women's fertility was respected, but never equated with warfare, as in Aztec society. Interestingly, Andean childbirth was almost regarded as a nonevent, and rarely involved midwives. The Andean creator god, Wiracocha (weer-ah-COACH-ah), somewhat similar to the Aztecs' Tlaloc, had both male and female aspects. As in many traditional societies, Andean social hierarchy was described in terms of age and proximity of kin relation. "Mother" and "father," for example, were terms used to describe both gods and the most prominent earthly individuals (including one's parents). Next in line were numerous aunts, uncles, cousins, and so on down the family tree. Almost any respected elder was referred to as "uncle" or "aunt."

kipu Knotted cotton or alpaca fiber strings used by the Incas and other Andeans to record tributes, troop numbers, and possibly narratives of events.

As in most early modern societies, parents treated Inca children much like miniature adults, and dressed them accordingly. Parents educated children by defining roles and duties early, using routine chores deemed appropriate to one's sex and status as the primary means of education. Girls and boys also participated in community and even state-level

work projects. The expectation of all children was not to change society but to reproduce and maintain it through balanced relations with deities and neighbors. Contact with the Inca himself was an extremely remote possibility for most children living in the empire. A rare exception was capacocha sacrificial victims, such as the headman's daughter described at the opening of this chapter.

Just as maize was native to highland Mesoamerica and served as the base for urban development, the potato was the indigenous staple of the central Andes. A hearty, high-yield tuber with many varieties, the potato could be roasted, stewed, or naturally freeze-dried and stored for long periods. Control of preserved food surpluses was a hallmark of enduring imperial states, in large part because marching armies needed to eat. Maize could also be dried or toasted for storage and snacking, but among Andeans it was generally reserved for beer making. Along with maize, many lowland dwellers subsisted on manioc, peanuts, beans, and chili peppers.

Unique in the Americas, though common in much of Eurasia and Africa, Andean pastoralism played a critical role in Inca expansion. Andean domesticated animals included the llama, alpaca, and guinea pig. Llamas, in addition to carrying light loads, were sometimes eaten, and alpacas provided warm cloth fiber, much appreciated in the cold highlands. Slaughter of domestic animals, including fertilizer-producing guinea pigs, usually accompanied ritual occasions such as weddings or harvest festivals. Although like most early modern elites, the Inca and other nobles preferred to dine on freshly hunted deer, wild pig, and other meats. The average Andean diet was overwhelmingly vegetarian. Nevertheless, a common component of Inca trail food was *charqui* (hence “jerky”), bits of dried and salted llama flesh. Apparently for cultural rather than practical reasons, llamas and alpacas were never milked. Like many other peoples, Andeans restricted consumption of and even contact with certain animal fluids and body parts.

The high Inca heartland, though fertile, was prone to periodic droughts and frosts. The warmer coast was susceptible to catastrophic floods related to the so-called El Niño phenomenon, or periodic fluctuation in the eastern Pacific Ocean's surface temperature and resulting onshore moisture flow. Only by developing food storage techniques and exploiting numerous microenvironments were the Incas and their subjects able to weather such events. Added to these cyclical catastrophes were volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, mudslides, tsunamis, and plagues of locusts. Still, the overall record suggests that subsistence under the Incas, thanks to the “vertical archipelago,” was much less precarious than under the Aztecs.

The Great Apparatus Breaks Down

In its simplest form Inca expansion derived from a blend of religious and secular impulses. As in Aztec Mexico, religious demands seem to have grown more and more urgent, possibly even destabilizing the empire by the time of the last Sapa Inca. As emperors died, their



Khipu

The Incas did not invent the knotted-string record-keeping method known as khipu, but they used it extensively as they rapidly built their vast empire. Khipu masters braided and knotted cords of different colors and thicknesses in many combinations. Some khipus were kept as stored records and others sent as messages carried across the Andes by relay runners. (The Art Archive/Archaeological Museum Lima/Gianni Dagli Orti.)

Food and Subsistence

mummy cults required permanent and extravagant maintenance. In a context where the dead were not separate from the living, such obligations could not be shirked. The most eminent of mummies in effect tied up huge tracts of land. Logically, if vainly, successive emperors strove to make sure their mummy cults would be provided for in equal or better fashion. Each hoped his legacy might outshine that of his predecessor. Given the extraordinary precedent set by Pachacuti Inca, some scholars have argued that excessive mummy veneration effectively undermined the Inca Empire.

Despite this potentially unsustainable drive to conquer new territories, it was the Incas' notable organizational and diplomatic skills that held their enormous, geographically fractured empire together until the arrival of the Spanish in 1532. The Incas' ability to control the distribution of numerous commodities over great distances, to maintain communications and transport despite the absence of written texts and wheeled vehicles, to erect temples and centralize religious observation, and finally, to monopolize violence, all marked them as an imperial people.

As with the Aztecs, however, rapid growth by means of competitive violence sowed seeds of discontent. On the eve of the Spanish arrival both empires appear to have been on the verge of contraction rather than expansion, with rebellion at court and in the provinces the order of the day. The Incas had never done well against Amazonian and other lowland forest peoples, and some such enemies kept up chronic raiding activities. Highlanders such as the Cañaris of Ecuador and the Chachapoyas of northern Peru had cost the Incas dearly in their conquest, only just completed in 1525 after more than thirty years. Like the Tlaxcalans of Mexico, both of these recently conquered groups would ally with Spanish invaders in hopes of establishing their independence once and for all.

The Inca state was highly demanding of its subjects, and enemy frontiers abounded. Yet it seems the Incas' worst enemies were ultimately themselves. A nonviolent means of royal succession had never been established. This was good for the empire in that capable rather than simply hereditary rulers could emerge one after another, but bad in that the position of Sapa Inca was always up for grabs. In calmer times, defense against outside challengers would not have been much trouble, but the Spanish had the good fortune to arrive in the midst of a civil war between two rivals to the throne, Huascar and Atawallpa (also "Atahualpa"). By 1532 Atawallpa defeated his half-brother in a series of epic battles, only to fall prey to a small number of foreign interlopers.

COUNTERPOINT

The Peoples of North America's Eastern Woodlands 1450–1530

FOCUS

How did the Eastern Woodlanders' experience differ from life under the Aztecs and Incas?

By 1450 a great variety of native peoples, several million in all, inhabited North America's eastern woodlands. East of the Great Plains, dense forests provided raw materials for shelter, cooking, and transportation, as well as habitat for game. Trees also yielded nuts and other edible byproducts, and served as fertilizer for crops when burned. The great mound-building cultures of the Mississippi Basin had mostly faded by this time, their inhabitants having returned to less urban, more egalitarian ways of life. Villages headed by elected chiefs, not empires headed by divine kings, were the most common form of political organization (see Map 16.4).

Most of what we know about the diverse native inhabitants of eastern North America in early modern times derives from European documents from the contact period (1492–1750), plus archaeological studies. Although far less is known about them than about the Aztecs or Incas, the evidence suggests that Eastern Woodlands peoples faced significant changes in both their politics and everyday lives at the dawn of the early modern

period, just before Europeans arrived to transform the region in other ways. Climate change may have been one important factor spurring conflict and consolidation.

Eastern Woodlands peoples were like the Aztecs in at least one sense. Most were maize farmers who engaged in seasonal warfare followed by captive sacrifice. According to archaeological evidence, both maize planting and warrior sacrifice spread into the region from Mesoamerica around the time of the Toltecs (800–1100 C.E.). The century prior to European contact appears to have been marked by rapid population growth, increased warfare, and political reorganization. Multisettlement ethnic alliances or leagues, such as the Iroquois Five Nations of upstate New York and the Powhatan Confederacy of Tidewater, Virginia, were relatively new to the landscape. Some confederacies were formed for

Population Growth and Political Organization

MAP 16.4

Native Peoples of North America, c. 1500

To the north of Mesoamerica, hundreds of native American groups, most of them organized as chiefdoms, flourished in a wide array of climate zones, from the coldest Arctic wilderness to the hottest subtropical deserts. Populations were highest where maize and other crops could be grown, as in the Mississippi Valley, Great Lakes, and eastern woodlands regions. Dense, sedentary populations also developed in the Pacific Northwest, where peoples such as the Kwakiutl lived almost entirely from gathering, hunting, and fishing. Nomadic hunters lived throughout the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Nevada, and the desert Southwest. Conflict between sedentary farmers and nomadic hunters was common, and some groups formed alliances to defend themselves against these and other attackers.



Huron Wampum Belt

For many Eastern Woodlands peoples such as the Huron, seashells like the New England quahog (a variety of clam) were sacred trade goods. Shell beads, generically called *wampum* after the arrival of Europeans, were woven into ceremonial belts whose geometrical designs and color schemes represented clans and sometimes treaties between larger groups. The linked-hands motif in this belt suggests a treaty or covenant. (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Catalog number: 1/2132. Photo by Katherine Fogden.)



temporary defensive or offensive purposes, and others were primarily religious. Village populations sometimes exceeded two thousand inhabitants, and confederacies counted up to twenty thousand or more. As in the Andes, clan divisions were fairly common, but overall population densities were considerably lower.

Gathering-hunting groups, which made up a minority of the total Eastern Woodlands population, tended to occupy large but rocky, cold, or otherwise challenging landscapes. Notably, thanks to their varied diet, these nonsedentary peoples seem to have suffered fewer vitamin and mineral deficiencies than settled maize eaters. Even maize farmers, however, were generally taller than their European (or Mesoamerican) contemporaries. Throughout the eastern forests, including the vast Great Lakes region, metallurgy was limited to simple manipulation of native copper. Raw copper, found in abundance in northern Michigan, was regarded as a sacred substance and was associated with chiefly power. Beads made from polished seashells, or **wampum**, were similarly prized.

Nearly all Eastern Woodlands groups, including small gatherer-hunter bands, were headed by chiefs. These men were usually exceptional warriors or shamans elected by popular agreement. Chiefs retained power, however, only by redistributing goods at periodic ceremonies; generosity was the hallmark of leadership. Since surplus food, game, and war booty were far from predictable, chiefs could be unceremoniously deposed at any time. Few chiefdoms were hereditary. As in many societies, individual Eastern Woodlanders, particularly young men, yearned for independence even as circumstances forced them to cooperate and subordinate their wills to others. If the chief's generosity was a centripetal force, egalitarian desires formed a powerful centrifugal one.

Some agricultural peoples, such as the Huron of central Ontario, Canada, had male chiefs or headmen but were organized matrilineally. This meant that society was built around clans of mothers, daughters, and sisters. Matrilineal clans occupied **longhouses**, or wooden multifamily residential buildings, typical of most Eastern Woodlands peoples. Elder women consulted with chiefs regularly, and all women played a part in urging men to war. Agriculture was regarded as a strictly female preserve among the Huron, closely linked to human fertility. Huron men were relegated to risky, perennial activities such as hunting, warfare, and tree felling. Their sphere of influence lay almost entirely outside the village. Men's exploits abroad, including adolescent vision quests, conferred status. Among all Eastern Woodlanders, public speech making, or rhetoric, was as highly prized among adult men as martial expertise. Only the most esteemed men participated in councils.

Matrilineal Society

wampum Beads made of seashells; used in eastern North America as currency and to secure alliances.

longhouse A wooden communal dwelling typical of Eastern Woodlands peoples.

Children's Lives

Children's lives were generally unenviable among North America's Eastern Woodlanders (keeping in mind that this was true of childhood throughout the early modern world). Thanks to a multitude of vermin and pathogens, generally poor nutrition, smoky residences, and manifold hazards of war and accident, relatively few children survived to adulthood. Partly for these reasons, Eastern Woodlands cultures discouraged severe discipline for children, instead allowing them much freedom.

Playtime ended early for surviving girls and boys, however, as each was schooled before puberty in the arts and responsibilities deemed appropriate for their sex. Girls learned to farm and cook, boys to hunt and make war. Soon after puberty young people began to "try out" mates until a suitable match was found. This preference for trial marriage over forced arrangements was found in the Andes and other parts of the Americas as well. Though this and the seemingly casual practice of divorce among Eastern Woodlanders were considered scandalous by early modern European standards, stable monogamy prevailed.

Warfare was endemic throughout the Eastern Woodlands in the summer season, when subsistence itself was less of a battle. In form, these wars resembled blood feuds, or vengeance cycles. According to European witnesses, wars among the Iroquois, Mahicans, and others were spawned by some long-forgotten crime, such as the rape or murder of a clan member. As such, they did not constitute struggles over land or other natural resources, which were relatively abundant, but rather male contests intended to prove courage and preserve honor.

Warfare closely resembled hunting in that successful warriors gained status for their ability to ambush and capture their equivalents from the opposite camp. These unlucky individuals were then brought to the captor's longhouse for what can only be described as an excruciating ordeal, nearly always followed by slaughter and ritual consumption. (Female and child captives, by contrast, were "adopted" as replacements for lost kin.) The religious significance of captive sacrifice among Eastern Woodlands peoples has been less clearly explained than that of the Aztecs and other Mesoamericans, but it seems to have been tied to subsistence anxieties.

Religious thought among Eastern Woodlands peoples varied, but there were commonalities. Beyond the realm of everyday life was a complex spirit world. Matrilineal societies such as the Huron traced their origins to a somewhat malevolent female spirit whose grandsons were responsible for various technical innovations and practices considered essential to civilized human life. The sky itself was often more important than the sun or moon in Eastern Woodlands mythologies, and climatic events were associated with enormous bird spirits, such as the thunderbird.

Like Andean peoples, many Eastern Woodlanders believed that material things such as boulders, islands, and personal charms contained life essences, or "souls." Traders and warriors, in particular, took time to please spirits and "recharge" protective amulets with offerings and incantations. Periodic feasts were also imbued with spiritual energy, but were unlike those of the Aztecs or Incas in that none was held on a specified date. As in many nonurban societies, religious life was an everyday affair, not an institutionalized one. Instead of priesthoods, liturgies, and temples, most Eastern Woodlands peoples relied on elders and shamans to maintain traditions and remind juniors of core beliefs.

Dreams and visions were carefully analyzed for clues to personal and group destinies. Dreams were also analyzed for evidence of witchcraft, or malevolent spell casting, within the group. Stingy or secretive individuals were sometimes suspected of this practice, often associated with jealousy, greed, and other socially unacceptable impulses. As in many semisedentary cultures worldwide, malicious witchcraft was blamed for virtually all sickness and death.

Unlike many other native American groups, most Eastern Woodlanders did not regard death as a positive transition. They believed that souls lived on indefinitely and migrated to a new home, usually a recognizable ethnic village located in the western distance. Even dogs' souls migrated, as did those of wild animals. The problem with this later

Warfare

Religion

existence was that it was unsatisfying. Dead souls were said to haunt the living, complaining of hunger and other insatiable desires. The Huron sought to keep their dead ancestors together and send them off well through elaborate burial rituals, but it was understood that ultimately little could be done for them.

Conclusion

By the time Europeans entered the Caribbean Sea in 1492, the two continents and many islands that make up the Americas were home to over 60 million people. Throughout the Western Hemisphere, native American life was vibrant and complex, divided by language, customs, and sometimes geographical barriers, but also linked by religion, trade, and war. Cities, pilgrimage sites, mountain passes, and waterways served as crossroads for the exchange of goods and ideas, often between widely dispersed peoples. Another uniting factor was the underlying religious tradition of shamanism.

The many resources available in the highland tropics of Mesoamerica and the Andes Mountains promoted settled agriculture, urbanization, and eventually empire building. Drawing on the traditions of ancestors, imperial peoples such as the Aztecs and Incas built formidable capitals, road systems, and irrigation works. As the Inca capacocha and Aztec warrior sacrifices suggest, these empires were driven to expand at least as much by religious beliefs as by material desires. In part as a result of religious demands, both empires were in crisis by the first decades of the sixteenth century, when Europeans possessing steel-edged weapons, firearms, and other technological advantages first encountered them. Other native peoples, such as the Huron, Iroquois, and Powhatan of North America's eastern woodlands, built chiefdoms and confederacies rather than empires, and to some degree these looser structures would prove more resilient in the face of European invasion.

NOTES

1. For the archaeologist's own account of these discoveries, see Johan Reinhard, *The Ice Maiden: Inca Mummies, Mountain Gods, and Sacred Sites in the Andes* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2005).
2. Miguel León-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 87.
3. Juan de Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, c. 1557, trans. Roland Hamilton and Dana Buchanan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 92.

RESOURCES FOR RESEARCH

Many Native Americas

Native American history has long been interdisciplinary, combining archaeology, anthropology, history, linguistics, geography, and other disciplines. Here is a small sample of works on the last centuries before European arrival plus several venerable encyclopedias.

Conrad, Geoffrey, and Arthur Demarest. *Religion and Empire*. 1984.
Denevan, William, ed. *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492*, 2d ed. 1992.

National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC:
<http://www.nmai.si.edu/>.

Steward, Julian, ed. *The Handbook of South American Indians*, 7 vols. 1946–1959.

Sturtevant, William E., ed. *The Handbook of North American Indians*, 20 vols. 1978–2008.

Trigger, Bruce, ed. *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, 3 vols. 1999.

Tributes of Blood: The Aztec Empire, 1325–1521

Scholarship on the Aztecs has exploded in recent years. The following small sample includes new works that synthesize the perspectives of history, anthropology, and comparative religions.

Carrasco, David. *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization*. 1999.

Carrasco, David, and Scott Sessions. *Daily Life of the Aztecs, People of the Sun and Earth*, 2d ed. 2008.

Clendinnen, Inga. *Aztecs, an Interpretation*. 1994.

For more on Mexico City's Templo Mayor, see:
<http://archaeology.asu.edu/tm/index2.htm>.

Hassig, Ross. *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control*, 2d ed. 2006.

Townsend, Richard F. *The Aztecs*, rev. ed. 2000.

Tributes of Sweat: The Inca Empire, 1430–1532

As with the Aztecs, studies of the Incas have proliferated in recent years. Exciting work has taken place in many fields, including archaeology, linguistics, history, and anthropology.

D'Altroy, Terrence. *The Incas*. 2002.

McEwan, Gordon F. *The Incas: New Perspectives*. 2006.

On khipus, see also Prof. Urton's Web site: <http://khipukamayuk.fas.harvard.edu>.

Urton, Gary. *Signs of the Inka Khipu: Binary Coding in the Andean Knotted-String Records*. 2004.

Von Hagen, Adriana, and Craig Morris. *The Cities of the Ancient Andes*. 1998.

COUNTERPOINT: The Peoples of North America's Eastern Woodlands, 1450–1530

The history of North America's Eastern Woodlands peoples was pioneered by Canadian and U.S.-based anthropologists and historians. It has continued to grow and broaden in scope. Indigenous voices are best heard in James Axtell's documentary history.

The American Indian Studies Research Institute, University of Indiana, Bloomington. <http://www.indiana.edu/%7Eaisri/index.shtml>.

Axtell, James. *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America*. 2001.

Axtell, James, ed. *The Indian Peoples of Eastern North America: A Documentary History of the Sexes*. 1981.

Richter, Daniel. *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization*. 1992.

Trigger, Bruce. *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, 2d ed. 1987.

► For additional primary sources from this period, see *Sources of Crossroads and Cultures*.

► For Web sites, images, and documents related to topics in this chapter, see Make History at bedfordstmartins.com/smith.

The major global development in this chapter ► The diversity of societies and states in the Americas prior to European invasion.

IMPORTANT EVENTS

c. 900–1600	Late Woodland period of dispersed farming and hunting
c. 1100	• Aztecs leave Aztlán
c. 1200	Incas move into Cuzco region
c. 1270	Aztecs settle in Valley of Mexico
c. 1320	Aztecs ally with Colhua
c. 1325	Tenochtitlán founded at Lake Texcoco's edge
c. 1437	Incas defeat Chankas
c. 1440–1471	Sapa Inca Pachacuti expands empire into Ecuador and Bolivia
1450–1451	Great famine in Valley of Mexico
1471–1493	Incas conquer northern Chile and Argentina
1487–1502	Aztecs dedicate Coatepec (Templo Mayor) and expand sacrificial wars
1493–1525	Incas conquer northern Peru and highland Ecuador
1502–1519	Reign of Moctezuma II, conquered by Spanish
1525–1532	Inca succession war, followed by arrival of the Spanish
c. 1570	Formation of Huron Confederacy north of Lake Ontario and of Iroquois League south of Lake Ontario
c. 1580	Formation of Powhatan Confederacy in eastern Virginia

KEY TERMS

autosacrifice (p. 525)	tribute (p. 526)
chinampa (p. 523)	vertical archipelago (p. 530)
kipu (p. 536)	waka (p. 532)
longhouse (p. 540)	wampum (p. 540)
shamanism (p. 518)	

CHAPTER OVERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what ways was cultural diversity in the Americas related to environmental diversity?
2. Why was it in Mesoamerica and the Andes that large empires emerged in around 1450?
3. What key ideas or practices extended beyond the limits of the great empires?

SECTION FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What factors account for the diversity of native American cultures?
2. What core features characterized Aztec life and rule?
3. What core features characterized Inca life and rule?
4. How did the Eastern Woodlanders' experience differ from life under the Aztecs and Incas?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Compare the Aztec and Inca empires with the Ming (see Chapter 15). What features did they share? What features set them apart?
2. How did Aztec and Inca sacrificial rituals differ, and why?
3. What were the main causes of warfare among native American peoples prior to the arrival of Europeans?