

The Americas on the Eve of Invasion



CHAPTER 11

**WHAT ARE THE CHIEF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES OF AZTEC AND INCA CIVILIZATIONS?
WHAT CULTURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS DID THE AZTECS AND INCAS DEVELOP INDEPENDENT OF THE OLD WORLD?**

Before the Aztecs...



- Olmecs – 1400 BC
- Toltecs and Mayans were early civilizations that developed in Meso America as early as 300 AD
- Mayans vanished by the 8th C and Toltecs developed in Central Mexico...the Toltecs would be the precursor to Aztec civilization...comparative characteristics included:
 - Sedentary agriculture (capital = Tula)
 - Strong military/desire to conquer territory
 - Human sacrifice

Aztec Rise to Power



- The Toltec Empire lasted until about 1150 CE, succumbing to (what else but) nomadic invasions from the north.
- The center of population and political power shifted south from Tula to the Valley of Mexico and its great lakes...the great lakes (including Lake Texcoco) were used as water for agriculture, fishing and transportation through the valley
- The peoples of this region established competing tribal units that struggled for control of the lake's resources...the most militant of these were the Mexica (Mehica), a people who migrated in and served as warriors (mercenaries) for the local tribes...eventually, they came to dominate the lakes region
- They built cities on islands (Tenochtitlan being the central city)...and by 1434, were a vast empire encompassing all of central Mexico



Aztec Society, Religion and Conquest

- Society transformed from a loose association of clans (sound familiar?) into an organized society under the Mexica
- The central purpose driven into the society by the Mexica was that the people should serve the gods at all times or face consequences
- This service extended itself amongst the people to the extent of practicing human sacrifice...the military had a prime role in capturing people from resistant tribes for the sole purpose of being sacrificed to the gods



Aztec Society, Religion and Conquest

- In religion, little distinction was made between the many gods (128) that represented natural elements in male and female forms...they can, however, be arranged in 3 classes:
 - 1: gods of fertility, agriculture, maize and water
 - 2: Creators: warrior sun and night sky gods were popular
 - 3: gods of war and sacrifice: Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl
- Along with the extensive practice of sacrifice came cannibalism rituals...these activities brought motivation into the society and maintained social order
- Aside from sustained social order, Aztec mysticism justified sacrifice, as the Aztecs believed the world would end and the sun would not come up the next day w/o a human sacrifice

The Aztec Economy

- Traditional agriculture and technological innovations were required to feed the Aztec society
- Traditional methods involved taking the land of the conquered for farming and requiring food as tribute
- Innovation came in the form of chinampas, floating artificial islands that produced high yield crops...peasants produced crops and paid them as tribute...noble clans had larger estates for farm production w/slaves



- A periodic market existed for exchange in the major urban centers, where gold dust and cacao beans served as currency...a special merchant class (pochteca) brought in trade goods from distant lands
- The state ultimately controlled the economy, assigning tribute values to societies...those that totally accepted Aztec rule paid less than others (sound familiar?)...collected tributes were redistributed/resold to other peoples

The Widening Aztec Social Gulf



- By the 1500s, Aztec society had organized itself from its seven main calpulli (kinship [family] social groups) into residential groupings such as neighbors, allies and dependents...these new groupings oversaw local matters such as food distribution, land distribution, maintaining labor forces and public works
- Each calpulli was still governed by family heads, but there was a larger amount of inequality...leading to new class differences in Aztec society (historians will say that it is not fair to compare social issues in Aztec society to those in Western history, as the struggle was more of a competitive nature rather than socio-economical)
- A distinct nobility emerged, which controlled selection of military officers and priests, even determining ritual sacrifices... these social distinctions manifested themselves in manner of dress and hairstyle
- Other social groups emerged based on artisan, medical and merchant groups

Aztec Women



- Held a variety of roles
- Peasant women worked in the fields and in the house...weaving was a highly regarded skill...elder women trained younger girls in various skills
- Marriages were arranged and marrying a *virtuous* female was important...the nobles, however, were polygamists
- Women were able to inherit property and wealth, but were ultimately subordinate to their men
- Limited technological advancements meant women spent an AWFUL lot of their day doing things by hand (weaving clothes, milling grains)

Aztec Government



- Each Aztec city-state was ruled by a speaker chosen by the nobility...these speakers comprised a governing council which ultimately did not have any real power
- The ruler of Tenochtitlan, the Great Speaker, was the wealthiest man in the empire...he was basically the emperor and was revered as a living god, he could not be looked at and had absolute control
- Warfare became central to Aztec society, as expansion for tribute and the capture of slaves for labor and sacrifice drove the government to conquer
- Absorbed citizens were not integrated, they were turned into subordinate members of society as long as they paid their tribute
- Any revolts against the government were dealt with swiftly
- Eventually, this harsh rule coupled with the stresses of the evolving society led to the Aztec downfall (those people allied themselves with the impending, arriving conquerors from Spain)

Twantinsuyu: The World of the Incas

- The Inca world was the result of unifying several smaller societies into one vast empire
- Groups such as the Chavin, Nazca, Tihuanco, Huari, Chimor and Mochica occupied the Andean highlands and plateaus for centuries
- In the 15th C, Quechua speaking peoples under the rule of Pachacuti (ruler = *inca*) conquered surrounding areas and absorbed them into his empire...his subsequent offspring managed to extend the new empire north into Colombia and south into Chile

Conquest and Religion

- Reasons for expansion went above and beyond desire for economic gain and political power, it was a matter of split inheritance...the successor kept political power while wealth was traditionally passed down to male descendants...this explains why conquering and expanding were crucial
- Politics and social life were infused with religion...the sun god was supreme and the *inca* was his representative on Earth...the sun cult had a temple in the capital, Cuzco...though popular, local religious beliefs in animism and spirits remained
- People still prayed to their own gods and held sacrifices in huacas (holy shrines)...sacrifices also came in human form but were not as prolific or intended as was in Aztec society...Inca religion was primarily practiced through many different festivals to their gods

Inca Imperial Rule

- As with the Aztecs, the Inca was a god
- The empire was divided into 4 provinces (Twantinsuyu means "The Four Regions"), ruled by a governor
- The empire had a bureaucracy of nobles and a system of curacas, local rulers who pledged loyalty to the noble bureaucracy the empire...they were exempt from tribute and received labor/food from subjects (like feudal lords)
- To integrate and unify the empire, the Inca spread learning the Quechua language, colonized areas with their own people (sometimes relocating a population to a new home closer to Cuzco) and MOST importantly built a complex system of roads w/ tambos (stations) along the way.
- Rather than demanding tribute from conquered peoples (like the Aztecs), the Inca required *mita*, which is basically labor services from all captured peoples...*mita* usually led to service in agriculture or the mines, and would perpetuate as a system of servitude well into the days of Spanish conquest

Social Standing in the Inca Empire

- Like the Aztecs, women were active in agriculture and weaving (mainly cloth) while others served as concubines or servants in the temple...men outside the government and military were peasant herders and farmers
- Each community was controlled by the ayllus (family networks, similar to the callipuli) and were bent on self sufficiency in rural areas
- Andean peoples believed in parallel descent, meaning wealth and property passed down on family lines and sex was complimentary...meaning mothers passed things on to daughters and fathers passed things on to sons...males still were dominant however, as was dictated by military virtues
- Still, cooperation among the sexes was emphasized in the religion and a gender hierarchy was established, with the most beautiful women seeing higher status
- Like the Aztecs, class differences could be seen in dress...there was not a merchant class

Inca Achievements

- As previously mentioned, the road and bridges system which unified the empire paralleled that of the Roman Empire
- The Inca were quite adept at pottery making and cloth made from llama and alpaca and as well were the most skilled metal workers in the Americas
- They had no system of writing, so they relied upon knotted strings called quipu to keep records (like an abacus)
- In agriculture, they had a complex system of irrigation and terraced farming on the mountain sides





Inca Decline

- The major factor contributing to decline was the system of noble/royal marriages that were meant to forge alliances amongst dissident peoples...they actually widened the gap between families, creating rivals for power
- The result was a series of civil wars that occurred in the 1520s, before the Spanish arrived in the 1530s
- The final death nail to the empire came with the arrival of Francisco Pizarro and the conquistadors, who tricked then emperor Atahualpa in alingning with him...
