

## LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE – Post-Classical Period

**Overview** In MesoAmerica, the Aztecs were conquering their neighbors by means of setting up and providing military protection for trade routes. At the same time, in South America, the Incas had established an empire that extended from the Pacific coast and into the Andes Mountains. Like the Aztecs, their empire was cemented by a combination of financial self-interest (trade and commerce), and military prowess (warriors trained to protect the trade routes. Not surprisingly, their contact and relationships with far-flung neighbors resulted in a synthesis of beliefs, values, religious practices, architecture, and culture.

### VERBAL ARTS

#### Literature

**Aztec Codices:** Written in colorful pictograms (as opposed to the hieroglyphics of the Aztecs), the surviving Aztec codices are written on cloth paper. They tell the story of the Aztec journey from Aztlan to the Valley of Mexico, and also they include the Aztec calendar.

#### Discussion:

What were the key elements in the Aztec codices? What did they communicate? Describe how they continued to be used, even after the Conquest. Why might they have been useful, even for the conquistadores?

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#### Language

**Nahuatl:** Nahuatl is considered a group of languages within the Uto-Aztecan language family, found primarily in central Mexico, but with linguistic influence extending to the Pacific coast. As opposed to many languages of conquered peoples, Nahuatl was converted into a written language with the advent of the Latin alphabet. Thus, it happened that poetry, administrative documents, historical chronicles, and codices were written in Nahuatl after the Conquest. Many Nahuatl words appear now in Spanish and English. They include tomato, avocado, chocolate, coyote, and chili.

**Aymara:** Still spoken by more than a million speakers in the Andes, Aymara is found in present-day Bolivia, Peru, and Chile. It has been assumed that the inhabitants of Tiwanaku spoke a dialect of Aymara, but it is not certain. It is certain that Aymara speakers have benefited from a rich body of oral stories, poems, and songs.

**Quechua:** Today, only about 500,000 people speak Quechua, and they are primarily located in the Andes and highlands of South America. Peruvians, Bolivians, Chileans, and some Ecuadorians speak Quechua.

Quechua is unique in that it was the language of the Inca empire. Quechua words have entered the English vocabulary, and they include condor, jerky, llama, poncho, puma, and guano.

**Tupi-Guaraní:** Spoken by people in Paraguay, southwestern Brazil, eastern Bolivia, and northern Argentina, Guarani is unique in that it is spoken by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples alike, thanks in large part to the Jesuit priests who came to Paraguay in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and published a written grammar of Guarani called *Tesoro de la lengua guaraní (Treasure of the Guarani Language)*. Guarani is an expressive language which allows noun agglutination, which are compound nouns. For example, a blonde may be referred to as a “honey-hair”. This highly concrete and describe nature makes Guarani deeply treasured by its speakers as uniquely poetic. In recent years, politicians who wish to endear themselves to a large block of voters speak to the crowds in Guarani (the language of hearth, home, and mother love) rather than in the more aseptic Spanish.

### Discussion

The way that Nahuatl-speaking Aztecs relate to the world has a great deal to do with the way that they speak, and the words that they use to address the phenomenal world. For example, the language has built in it the idea that everything has a living spirit, and also can, under special circumstances, change forms. Many poems are in the form of incantations which as inanimate things such as brooms to come alive and help. Contemplate the Nahuatl worldview and discuss how that might result in different worldview than the Western scientific world.

### Readings

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### **Script**

**Aztec pictograms:** The Nahua peoples of the central highlands of Mexico used pictograms to communicate with others who spoke the Nahuatl language. The pictograms can be found in Aztec codices, and were produced by the highly skilled scribes, or codex painters. Each pictogram conveyed meaning by means of graphic symbols. For example, night was represented by a black sky and a closed eye. Thus, the pictograms were systems of signs (semiotics), and the did not correspond to spoken syllables as did the Maya glyphs. While only 15 pre-Columbian Mesoamerican codices survive today, there are hundreds of Aztec codices that were produced in colonial times by the codex painters. They represent a great bridge in our understanding of the Nahua peoples, and also the perception of the Spanish conquistadors because many of the colonial-era contain Nahuatl and Spanish written commentary and descriptions.

**Inca:** The Inca did not have a writing system. However, they did have a coded system of communication that involved elaborate patterns of knots tied in a wide array of types of strings, that came in different colors and weights. Individuals could use the system of knots and strings to communicate numbers, dates, statistics, and even sequences of events. Thus, the quipus could, in a rudimentary way, even communicate stories or narratives. The larger quipu had as many as 1500 strings. The numerical system was a decimal system (groups of 10), and the largest decimal was 10,000. The quipu were carried by runners who delivered the quipus as messages and receipts. The quipu recorded inventory,

demographics, statistics, armies, equipment, and important dates on the calendar. Simple quipu are still in use today by llama flock owners.

### Discussion

We have more examples of Aztec pictograms than we do of the Maya codices. Unfortunately, the Spanish priests aggressively destroyed all that they could find. Further, it was not possible to produce more Maya glyphs because the people who built the temples and wrote the codices had already been gone for centuries. In contrast, the Nuhua people continued to speak their language and to paint pictograms. In fact, the Conquistadores found it useful for the Nuhuatl (Aztec) to produce pictograms depicting conversion. How might the differences in the experiences with writing have an impact on cultural blending and a sense of self?

### Reading

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## Mythology

### Aztecs

**Codices** The Aztec codices are books consisting on animal skin pages covered with vivid pictographs. They contain valuable information about Aztec culture, including their myths.

**Myths** The Aztecs believed that the earth has had at least five suns. The first was the Jaguar Sun, which was eventually destroyed because it was inadequate. The second sun was a wind sun, and was managed by Quetzalcoatl. The third and fourth were Rain Sun and the Water Sun. Finally, the fifth sun is the Earthquake Sun. The Aztecs believed that the end of this world will come about through massive earthquakes.

**Gods: Quetzalcoatl** Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, was an important god not only for the Aztecs, but also for the Maya, Toltecs, and Aztecs. He is associated with the East, the most important cardinal direction, and has great powers to create and destroy. Interestingly, his appearance is very different from that of others, since he is considered to have light, shining skin, as well as feathers. Many temples and sculptures were made in his honor and to appease him.

### Incas

**Creation Myth** The Inca Civilization, which extended along the Andean Cordillera from Colombia to Chile, was the largest of the world. The Inca believed that the first Inca person was created by Viracocha, the sun god. After creating the first man, Manco Capac, Viracocha then created a woman, so he could have a wife and not be lonely. They established the first sacred city, Cuzco, at Lake Titicaca to be close to the sun, and in fact, the Inca people thought of themselves as the Children of the Sun.

**Concept of Reality: Dualism** The Inca believed that all of nature consists of oppositional complementarity. That is to say that everything has two aspects: male and female; left and right; sun and moon; animal and human. One example in mythology was the Pachamama, the earth mother and wife of

Pachacamac. She personified the earth as was considered to have human qualities, but to also to shape-shift into a dragon and cause earthquakes. To appease her, Incas offered coca leaf and chichi beer.

### **Great flood myth**

The Inca believed that during the time of Pachamaa, humanity was cruel and barbaric. As a result, the gods decided to flood the world to rid them of the evil. Only the creatures in the mountaintops would survive. At that time, two brothers of exceptional virtue were minding their llamas when they noted odd behavior. The llamas then communicated to the two brothers that a great flood was coming. The flood did occur and flooded all the lowlands, so that all the people drowned. The mountains where the llamas and the brothers were started rising. At the end, all of the people of the world were drowned with the exception of the two good brothers and the llamas.

### Discussion Question

The way that ancient peoples described their origins lets us know how they believed how and why they were created, and what their destiny would (or should) be. Their creation myths described their gods, the forces for good, and for evil in their world. Compare the creation myths of the Aztecs and Inca.

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### **Folklore**

**Aztec:** Like the Maya, the Aztecs (the Nahuatl peoples) carried their oral tradition with them. Not only did the oral tradition consist of stories, it also included poetry, songs, creation myths, and predictions about the end of the world. The Nahuatl language and oral traditions have been a vital force in maintaining cultural identity.

**Inca:** The Inca's oral narratives focused on the stars. They truly believed that each person is a descendent of people from the stars, and as such, they were a race of starmen. Each village had a special place constructed specially for sacred rituals. The location of the sacred place corresponded to where the son of the Sun God (Manco Capac) emerged from caves. Part of the oral narratives for each village included being able to point to the sky and to say precisely which star was that village's star of origin.

**Tupi-Guarani:** The Tupi-Guarani lived in the jungles and savannah areas of southeastern Brazil and in Paraguay and northwestern Argentina. Their language still lives in Paraguay, and so the oral narratives have persisted. Their core belief system is very animistic, with shamans as their spiritual leaders. The focus is on understanding one's true nature, and then to find and enhance their core essence. Oral narratives focus on shape-shifting and finding affinities with animals, especially the jaguar, which would then help one develop the qualities valued by the culture.

### Discussion Question

The beliefs about the origin of the human race in Pre-Hispanic cultures in Latin America share one thing in common: they were created by gods as fully formed human beings. However, their myths of origin differed in many important ways. Please compare and contrast the Aztec and Inca myths of origin and explain how the beliefs may shape their sense of identity, and their use of calendars, religious rituals, etc.

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## VISUAL ARTS

### Painting

**Inca:** Incorporated painting in articles for daily life as well as for religious ceremonies. The dedicated a great deal of work painting with ceramics. Woven art, while not painting, also created meaning through colorful patterns that could be found in the textiles they created. The geometric shapes and colors had symbolic meaning. The finely woven textiles were used as currency.

**Aztecs:** The Aztecs painted to communicate, and much of their painting was in the form of brightly colored and detailed pictograms which appear in the Codices.

### Discussion Question

Being able to envision the gods, and to point out just how different they were from human beings was very important to the different groups of people who lived in Latin America before the arrival of the Europeans. Showing the people the consequences of the gods' displeasure was important, particularly in the case of the "Decapitator" gods of Tiwanaku, the Moche, and later, the Incas in the Andes. At the same time, the worldview extended far beyond the bounds of the earth, and incorporated depictions of calendars and celestial bodies. Explain how pre-Hispanic painting depicted beliefs and traditions, both religious and secular.

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## Sculpture

**Inca:** The Inca created vast quantities of sculptures and figurines of all sizes. Some of the sculptures and figurines had a purpose in daily life, but the vast majority was used in conjunction with ceremonial practice.

### Discussion Question

When the Spanish arrived in the Americas, they found a veritable treasure trove of sculptures. Unfortunately for the indigenous peoples, many of the sculptures were made of gold and precious stones, which inflamed the greed and ambition of the explorers. The most finely worked were in gold and in jade. While many were melted down, some still exist. Describe some of the gold and jade sculptures and explain how the cultures differed from each other.

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## Architecture

**The Philosophy of the Latin American Precolumbian City:** Latin American religious systems had, at their heart, the need to express their belief in outward manifestations – tangible, concrete forms – that perfectly replicated the structure and relationships of the gods, the solar system, the movement of moon and stars, the history of the world, and how they related to the life of beings on the earth. The cities were microcosms and living models of a cosmogony. The cities were a framework for worship, but even more profoundly, they were a framework – even a machine – that shaped behaviors, inculcated beliefs, and unified mindsets. Whether there was any room for new ideas or the discussion of new paradigms is not

clear; but what is very clear is that throughout Latin America, the architecture of the cities was used to harmonize (even control) the thoughts and behaviors of the people, and it may explain why it was possible to attain a high level of productivity and to sustain populations of 100,000 inhabitants and more, who cohabited in evident peace and prosperity.

**Pyramids:** Perhaps the most characteristic Latin American architectural form is the pyramid. While it is important as the focal point in the city or religious center, it is by no means the only building in the typical Latin American city. The Olmecs, Maya, Aztec, and Inca placed the pyramid at a point of prominence in their cities. There they brought people together for religious ceremonies, sacrifices, and for interment of their leaders. The pyramid became a living symbol of power; at times of the great transcendent and protective power of the belief system; at times an internalized control mechanism to demonstrate how precarious life was and how important blood sacrifice was. The Maya rituals that were enacted in the pyramids were typical: The ruling class mutilated themselves (women piercing their tongues; men drawing blood from the penis), and in the spectacle of extreme pain and bloodshed, established a connection to the gods and even took on attributes of the gods.

**Orientation of the City:** The cities were very carefully designed so that they aligned with celestial occurrences such as equinoxes, alignments of planets, and more, not only to achieve certain lighting effects, but to instill a relationship between the time of day and conditions of light. What resulted was a mental programming that related times of days to certain rituals or beliefs, which were carved on the walls and embedded in the design. For example, in the “Castillo” of Chichen Itza, a Mayan pyramid, the lighting is such in the stairway that the serpents carved on the walls appear to move, which reminds the viewer of the fact that the powerful sky god, the Plumed Serpent, Kukulcan, is alive and always present.

**Ball courts:** The architecture of the ball court resulted in the fact that the individuals playing the sports were also enacting the journey between the underworld and that of the living, and the mysteries of being in two places simultaneously. While much has been said of the fact that the game itself had sacrificial elements, the focus really should not be on the individual feats of strength or athleticism. Instead, the ballcourt represents the dynamic processes of life and community, and the spectators (who actively participated and bet on outcomes) enact the collective energies in the struggles to emerge from darkness, and the need to understand what happens in the underworld. Not all cultures had the same emphasis on ballcourts. The largest ballcourt can be found at Chichen Itza. The Olmecs in Veracruz state had, at El Tajin, more than 18 ballcourts.

**Portals to the Sun (Tiwanaku):** The pre-Incan culture of the Tiwanaku and the Incans themselves built their cities to connect the human spirit with the energy of the sun. As a result, they constructed portals or gateways that represented that moment in which the human being merges with sun energy. The Gate of the Sun at Tiwanaku, Bolivia, is oriented so that the rays of the sun shine through the portal and illuminate the figure of a man whose head is surrounded by 24 linear rays. The carvings on the gate – human heads and condors – suggest transmogrification, and a merging of human and soaring condor spirits.

### Discussion Question

The movement of the sun, moon, and stars were deeply important to Latin American civilization. Not only did they dictate when crops would be planted and ceremonies would be held, they predicted their history, including invasions from other peoples, death, and destruction. Describe the observatories, pyramids, ball courts, gates, and temples in the Pre-Hispanic (Inca, Aztec, Tiwanaku, etc.) world and speculate how daily life might have been in these early cities.

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## PERFORMING ARTS

### Dance

**Masked Dances:** Early dances were included in shamanistic rituals, with dancers wearing masks that represented animals such as in the Yaqui Baile de Venado (Yaqui - deer dance) and the Maya Baile de Nagual (Deer Dance).

**Totonac Voladores (Flying Pole ceremony):** As a part of a religious ceremony, young men ascended a tall pole where they suspended themselves with ropes tied around one leg and hung upside-down from a platform. They twirled around the pole. In other variations of the dance, they plunged 80 feet to soar like birds.

**Owl Dance:** In Mayan culture, the Owl is a symbol of death and a messenger of the underworld. In the Owl Dance, the dancer wears a feathered cloak and paints his face to represent the knowledge that comes from the "inframundo" (underworld).

**Animal Spirit Dances (Toltec and Aztec):** As in the case of the masked dancers of the Yaqui and the Maya, Toltec and Aztec dancers wore elaborate costumes of animal skins, spectacular accessories, feathers, showy headdresses. To intensify the experience, the dancers often held rattles (maracas, for example) in their hands and put on rattles made of nutshells on their ankles.

**Qhapaq Ch'uncho (Peru):** This dance reenacts encounters and skirmishes between the Antisuyo rain forest peoples and the Incas. The dance costumes include macaw feathers to symbolize the rain forest.

**Ukuku (Peru):** The main dancer wears a stringy coat that represents an animal's pelt. He is a trickster figure, and dances randomly and out of sync with very tightly choreographed dancers.

**Huayno (Peru and Bolivia):** This is an Andean dance which has become very popular. The male dancer invites the woman to dance by either offering his right arm or placing his handkerchief on her arm. The dance enacts courtship, and the music that accompanies the Huayno brings together typical Andean instruments, including the quena (flute), siku (panpipe), harp, accordion, charango, and guitar.

### Discussion Question

Shamanism was an essential part of many of the tribal religious practice throughout Latin America. Many creatures from the animal kingdom were viewed as spirit guides, including the jaguar, parrot, snake, condor, vulture, frog, and turtle. What was the purpose of using animal masks and skins in PreHispanic dance?

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## Music

**Mesoamerica:** Music was an important part of the religious ceremonies and social life. The musical instruments were often shaped from materials found almost intact in nature: conch shells, three-hole flutes, drums created from skins stretched on frames, or created from hollow nuts. Rattles created from nuts and seedpods were also used.

**Andean music:** Prehispanic music in the Andes consisted of chants blended with different types of instruments, many of which were flutes. The flutes include panpipes (can be very large, with many pipes), and also quenenas, which are smaller and have notched ends. Both are made of aquatic hollow cane plants. Drums are also prevalent.

### Discussion Question

The Spaniards received a surprise when they encountered the music of the indigenous peoples. It was nothing at all like European music, and what is more, the instruments were utterly different. The Spaniards were quick to denounce the music as being of the devil, because it often accompanied dances and rituals (including human sacrifice and self-mutilation). Further, the instruments were often made of bone, skin, and shells. Describe some of the musical instruments and how they were used.

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## Theatre

**Aztec:** The Aztec calendar consisted of 18 months, and each had a number of days dedicated to the devotion and appeasement of the gods, in particular to the sun god, Huitzilopochtli. The sun god, Huitzilopochtli, required blood sacrifice in order to conquer the forces of the night (and darkness), and so the rituals (which were performative enactments and could be considered theatre), were elaborate and invariably ended in human sacrifice.

**Inca:** The most important Inca rituals (and performative enactments) took place in the “huacas” – the locations in the earth where each tribe supposedly emerged from the earth after the bearded giant from the stars buried a clay figurine that transformed into people. Each “huaca” corresponded to a specific star or constellation that was thought to be their place of origin, and thus the Inca truly considered themselves to be people from the stars. The rituals and theatrical enactments would include the carefully preserved mummified remains of their ancestors, whom they dressed in finery and even fed. The most important festival was the Inti Raymi (Sun Festival) event.

### Discussion Question

When the Spaniards arrived in MesoAmerica, they were shocked to see the enactment of what could have been theater, religious rite, or a dance festival? Which was it? There may have been relatively benign or happy performances, but they were not what caught the Spaniards' attention. They were riveted by the torture, dismemberment, and death, performed as a spectacle. The Spaniards were undoubtedly familiar with bloody fight-to-the-death bullfights. What would make these enactments different?

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## Writing

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## Discussion

Of all the world's early written communications, the hieroglyphics of the Maya were unique in that the symbols represented both a depiction of meaning, as well as a direct correspondence to the spoken sound of the language. It is not known to what degree the populace was literate, but it can be assumed that there were a large number of people who could at least read, even if they could not produce the glyphs. The glyphs were ubiquitous. What are the implications to the culture? How might it give the Maya more ways to understand themselves and the world around them?

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## WORLDVIEW

### Religion

**Mesoamerica : Aztecs** Like the Maya, the Aztecs believed that the world and humanity would be destroyed and regenerated, not once, but with predictable regularity. Their calendar helped them follow the progression to the present day, which was considered to be the final age. The Aztec calendar was also very important in helping keep track of the special feast days for the Aztec gods and goddesses. The Aztecs had a large pantheon of gods, and the ones listed above represent only a few. Virtually all aspects of life had at least one corresponding god. All the gods required abeyance, and so it was important to find a way to coordinate the ceremonies and festivals that honored them by means of festivals, banquets, dancing, music, decorations, incense-burning, penance and human and animal sacrifice. It was important to honor the gods, because if they were not sufficiently honored, they would punish humanity by means of natural disasters. The larger the need, the bigger the sacrifice. The highest-quality sacrifices were considered to be warriors who had shown valor in battle.

**South America : Inca** The Inca Empire was the largest empire in the world at the time that it flourished, between 1400 – 1533 CE. At their height, there were 10 million inhabitants in the Inca Empire, and they were ruled by 40,000 Incas. Within the empire, there were at least 30 different languages, which led to the development of quipus (coded knots and strings), which recorded statistics and communicated calculations. Central to Inca religious belief was the progression of the Sun, Moon and stars, and a sense of how the world's history could be predicted through the movement of the constellations and the Milky Way. The Inca religion possessed several aspects in common with other religions of the time, such as the Aymara, Moche, and Tiwanaku.

Inca religious practices centered around ancestor worship, and they often offered food, drink, and precious items to the ancestors at their tombs. The Inca practiced mummification. As in other parts of South America, the Incas practiced sacrifice of animals and humans, even children in order to appease the gods. The pouring of libation (water or chichi beer) was also included in the rituals. In comparison with other South American or Mesoamerican civilizations, the Incas did not devote as much space or time to temples or religious practices. However, the Temple of the Sun in present-day Quito was sufficiently imposing to motivate the invading Spaniards to take it down and to erect a huge cathedral in its stead.

#### Discussion Question

The Aztecs believed that they were created by the blending of the blood of the gods and corn. However, they were not the first people to be created; the gods had to destroy two other attempts, because their creations were defective. The Inca believed that they were created from giants from the stars who descended into the earth, and where they emerged, they created human beings. In both cases, the ongoing existence of the human beings was provisional. They had to please the gods or be destroyed. Describe the creation stories or myths from Mesoamerica and South America and evaluate the nature of the gods in terms of archetypes and models.

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### Philosophy

**Ontological Instability:** For the Aztecs, the key problem of existence is its essential ephemeral nature. It is not stable, and the corporal, tangible aspects are impermanent. The nature of human spirit and the heart, however, were considered unchanging.

**Calendar:** The Aztecs believed in five consecutive worlds of the sun, which translates into a philosophy of time and change, and the idea that nothing is ever permanent and that the world is constantly in motion. The calendar is a vital tool for imposing balance.

**Sacrifice:** The underlying philosophy perpetual change helps understand the need for constant and recurring rituals and sacrifice to assure mankind's continuance.

**Dualism:** The Aztecs believed that everything has a potential duality, and hence many of the deities had contradictory qualities. They also believed in rituals in which individuals are able to take on attributes of animal spirits. Shape-shifting is an important manifestation.

**Nature of Reality and Destiny in the Stars:** The Incas believed that every tribe or community sprang from a specific place in the earth, where they had been seeded (in the form of clay figures) and brought to life based on the energy from the heavens. Each community had a specific star that was their place of origin. They truly believed they were people from the stars, and their destiny was mapped in the constellations.

**Ancestors as Shapers of the World:** Although it may seem grotesque now, the Inca liked to have their mummified ancestors accompany them at important events including harvests and marriages. They stored the mummified ancestors in tombs, and then would bring them out to participate. The mummies would be dressed in ceremonial clothing and ritually fed. For the Inca, the ancestors also embodied gods and spirits, and the essential spirits manifested on earth in mountains, rivers, caves, and other forms.

**Search for Truth:** The Incas believed in the necessity of understanding one's own inner nature in order to appreciate the truth in the world. The truth, for the Incas, was in the messages in the stars and in the bodies of their ancestors, both of which communicated directly with the gods.

**Ethics / Right Action:** Respect for all forms of life: At the heart of all forms of life is the sun, according to the Inca. They did not worship the sun, per se, but the fact that it expresses the divine. Pacha Yachay, the Universe, is the magnetism and linking force that holds everything together.

### Discussion Question

The Spaniards walked into a deeply unstable world. The Aztecs and the Incas spoke of world after world, apocalypse after apocalypse. The main thrust of their religion was to keep the gods happy enough to not destroy the world. Given the Spaniard's recent experience with the "Other" that threatened to destroy their world, how do you think that the Spaniards regarded the beliefs? Discuss the key elements of Aztec and Incan thought.

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## Science

**Aztec chinampas:** Known as “floating gardens,” the Aztecs further developed and expanded “chinampas,” a type of aquaculture which allowed them to cultivate shallow lake beds in the Valley of Mexico. The chinampas are small, rectangular artificial islands that were fabricated by weaving reeds and anchoring fences that were made of reeds. Canal waterways and drainage ditches crisscrossed the chinampas, which gave the impression that the islands were floating, when in reality they were anchored to the bottom of the lake. The chinampas were extremely fertile, and were well known for producing bountiful harvests of beans, tomatoes, squash, watermelon, chilis, cilantro, and even corn.

**Aztec aqueducts:** The Aztecs developed a unique system of aqueducts for transporting fresh water to the large city center of Tenochtitlan, which was located in the middle of the large lake, Texcocol. The aqueduct system consisted of twin pipes in order to have redundancy so that if one required repair or cleaning, the other would still be available for transporting fresh water.

**Astronomy:** The Maya, Aztecs, Inca relied on elaborate and detailed calendars for virtually all aspects of their lives. For that reason, they built observatories and developed very accurate systems of tracking, predicting, and communicating the movements and alignments of the sun, moon, stars, and planets. The Aztec (Mexica) calendar consisted of a 260-day ritual cycle, which formed a 52-year “calendar round.” Both the Aztecs and the Maya believed that the sun and the entire world had gone through apocalypses (total destruction and rebirth). According to the Aztecs, the current sun is the fifth one, and it will eventually perish due to its imperfections.

**Civil engineering in the Andes:** The Inca were able to develop extremely complex and effective methods for transporting water, stabilizing mountain slopes, engineering terraces for agricultural purposes, and precision-cutting building stone so that it would not be necessary to use mortar.

**Surgery and Inca medicine:** The well-preserved Inca mummies reveal that the Incas were well-versed in surgery, and in particular, cranial surgery used to relieve intercranial pressure that could be a result of concussion or inflammation. The Inca skull surgeons were highly skilled at trepanation, and it appears that the majority of the individuals who underwent the surgery survived.

## Discussion / Questions

The level of technology possessed by the Aztec and Inca civilizations was so advanced that many people have proposed that the technology came from space aliens. While we do not have any evidence for such a far-fetched hypothesis, the accomplishments of the preHispanic civilizations deserve merit for their accomplishments. Please take a look at the technology and science of the Aztec and Inca civilizations

and evaluate their contributions. Which are the most surprising? What questions do their accomplishments provoke? What more would you like to know about their civilizations?

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