

LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY – Postclassical Period

Overview Latin America was the center of incredibly advanced civilizations that rivaled the Egyptians and Mesopotamians. Yet, many mysteries persist, primarily because of the prejudicial disinformation from the Europeans who, when encountering the ruins and remains of earlier civilizations, did all they could to obliterate it. When new artifacts, ruins, and cultural relics were encountered beginning in the 19th century, the mindset had changed. Instead of feeling threatened, the Victorians and 19th-century Americans were motivated by a desire to uncover, explain, unearth, and to transport into their universities and museums, as an expression of the triumph of science over time. The spirit of inquiry opened the portal to a new attitude of acceptance and scientific investigation, one which has persisted into the 21st century.

POLITICAL HISTORY

GOVERNMENT

Aztec: The Aztec government was ruled by an elite class of priests and shamans. They administered the economy, land rights, and administration of trade and commerce. At the same time, there was a co-existing branch of government organized around the military also entrusted with maintaining commerce. While human sacrifice is often considered a religious activity, in Aztec culture, it was a regular part of the administration of the government, since it both enforced rule of law and demonstrated to the people the effort made to maintain favor of the gods.

Inca: The Inca government was organized around the ruling elite, with vast number of administrators throughout the Andes, who communicated through a complex system of knots and strings (quipus). There were 40,000 functionaries who administered a kingdom of 10 million subjects who spoke more than 30 different languages. They practiced diplomacy as well as a strict system of law enforcement. The nations that were conquered found there were many benefits of being a part of the empire. There were state-sponsored public works, roads, banquets, art productions, and religious festivities.

Discussion/Questions

Extensive confederations of far-flung city-states requires extremely effective care, coordination, and administration. It also requires a kind of “lingua franca” for the member states. The Inca Empire extended throughout the Andes, and incorporated more than 30 languages. Describe how their system of quipus, as well as other actions helped maintain control and unity.

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MILITARY

Toltec (900 – 1200): Long revered and feared as the most ruthless of the Mesamerican warriors, the Toltecs developed fire-tipped spear throwers, firing platforms, and military watercrafts. Like the Olmecs and Teohinacans before them, the Toltecs had a highly militaristic society that used its prowess to dominate commerce. They used psychological warfare as well as direct attacks, and their human sacrifices were both a means of appeasing their gods and inspiring terror in their rivals.

Aztec (1200 – 1519): The Aztecs had consolidated power through a series of bold moves, that spoke to a culture of war. They did not necessarily hold military superiority in terms of technology, but they used logistics and sheer numbers to their advantage. Located as they were in the Valley of Mexico, they were able to withstand long sieges, and to maintain production of arms and supplies, resulting in the ability for huge armies (100,000 or more) to maintain long campaigns, and to incorporate religious rituals with the captured warriors on imposing platforms and pyramids.

Incas (1430 – 1530): The Incas were a militaristic society, with obligatory training of soldiers, a clear rank and highly-structured hierarchy. They had large numbers of highly disciplined and organized warriors who tended to overwhelm their adversaries and to maintain control over their land, which was the most fertile part of the Altiplano, and which had been rendered extremely productive due to elaborate and complicated engineering that allowed high-yield crops and a water supply. Their technology included slingshots, maces, axes, spears which had copper and wood. They used copper and leather for armor and protection.

Discussion/Question

The military activities of the Incas often led to traumatic brain injuries. To deal with the potential for injury, the Incas developed copper and leather helmets. They also developed medical procedures to help relieve pressure on the brain. Please describe the battle surgery developed by the Incas, and the anthropological evidence we have for it.

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SOCIAL HISTORY

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Priests: Throughout Latin America, the priests and shaman classes occupied a position of privilege. They were the spiritual leaders, which meant a great deal, given the prevailing belief that the only way to keep the world from entering into oblivion was to placate the gods, often by means of rituals led by the priests.

Kings, Royal Family: The Pre-Conquest Latin American world was one of distinct social hierarchies. They were monarchies, and the members of the royal family enjoyed a higher standard of living than the other city dwellers. However, they did pay a price, since the Maya, Aztec, and the Inca believed that blood sacrifice should come from the ruling class.

City-Dwellers: The average city dwellers were engaged in the arts, trades, and crafts of daily life. For example, in Tenochtitlan in the Valley of Mexico, many city dwellers were vendors and they sold their goods in the central marketplaces.

Captured Warriors and Slaves: Life was not pleasant for the warriors unlucky enough to be captured by the Aztecs. They were often the first to be sacrificed in rituals of human torture and sacrifice, the spilled blood believed to placate and satisfy their gods.

Question / Discussion

If you were a captured warrior in a Pre-Hispanic culture, chances are, you would already understand the rules of the game, and you would know that you were likely to be painfully murdered in order to placate someone else's gods. Chances are, you would simply hope that it would be a quick death, but you would hold out hope that you would have a reward and be able to ascend the social hierarchy in another life. You might look at the ruling class -- the kings, priests, and princes -- and think that they had a much better life. But, did they? The more we know about Incas, Maya, and Aztecs, the more we realize that they had to subject themselves to periodic blood-letting, flagellation, and ritual torture. Imagine a society where the ritual torture, self-torture, and human sacrifice extend across every level of society. How might that affect one's sense of one's place in society? How does it contrast with the view that those who fail to conform are those who merit torture? How might the Inca or Maya mindset result in a flatter society?

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GENDER RELATIONS

Aztecs: The Nahuas (Aztecs) did not have a category for individuals possessing both genders, but they did acknowledge a continuum of behaviors and attributes, such as the "effeminate men" and "masculine women." There are no deities that shift from one gender to another, which may explain the distrust and suspicion of gender ambiguity, expressed in cultural history and also in the *Codex Magliabechiano*.

Inca: For the Incas, everything in the world of perceivable phenomena was gendered. The Inca gods also had clear genders. For example, the creator god Viracocha was male, as was the destroyer god, Illapa. In general, the sun was considered male, while the moon was female (Mama Kilya). In certain ways, time itself was considered female, because Mama Kilya was also the ruler of the calendar. But, given that the Inca believed that they were originated from the stars, and that each city had a star of origin, it's not too surprising that the movement of the stars would be governed by a female mother goddess.

Discussion/Questions

In the ancient civilizations of the Andes, everything had a gender, either male or female. Each gender was ascribed attributes as well, which carried into the beliefs about the essence of the things. Ironically, some of the preHispanic Tiwanaku and Inca gods were sometimes male and sometimes female. The overall focus was that of divine procreation and continuity. What are the implications of such a worldview? How might they translate into beliefs and attitudes about human behavior?

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ECONOMIC HISTORY

INNOVATIONS

Aztec Calendar: Like the Mayan calendar, the Aztec calendar is actually built on separate inter-related calendars. The Xihpohualli (the agricultural year count) has 365 days. The Tonalpohualli (the day count) has 260 days, and was used for religious purposes. The system was based on 13, and each calendar wheel moved in conjunction with each other in intervals of 13. After 20 “trecenas”, and the passage 260 days, the two wheels were back in their original position. Each Trecena (13-day block) corresponded to a god or elemental force, as the provider of the “shadow soul” life energy for the day.

Inca Calendar and Constellation Stories: The Inca calendar started on December 21, which is the solstice. It was a 365-day solar calendar. They also had a lunar calendar, which was 328 days. However, very little is known about how the Inca used their solar and lunar calendars. More is known from mythology about how they created sky maps. There are a few remaining artifacts that seem to depict a ruler’s relationship to specific constellations. One of them, the Inti Punchaco, has been extensively studied, and it seems to point to the specific constellation that was thought to be the origin of that group.

Aztec Agriculture (1200 – 1519): The Aztecs devised a unique system of aquaculture known as “chinampas,” in which they created anchored floating islands within Lake Chapultepec in the Valle de Mexico. They were very productive, and in them, the Aztecs raised corn, beans, tomatoes, chilis, squash, and other products. At the same time, they were able to raise fish and ducks.

Inca Engineering (1430 – 1530): The Incas were master engineers, and it is a stunning testimony to their inventiveness that they could construct massive earthworks, drainage systems, waterways, and roads without the use of blueprints or drawings (as far as we know), but with quipus (knotted string). The ceremonial buildings at Cuzco have running water and are built on a mountaintop whose sides were reinforced to eliminate the possibility of erosion and flash floods.

Inca Quipus: The quipus were elaborate sets of knotted strings carried by runners along the Inca highway from community to community along the vast federation. They a series of knots tied in cotton string and they were used for numeric and other values. The quipu could have as many as 2,000 cords. They indicate that the culture was essentially focused on numbers, accounting, trade, construction, and military operations.

Mesoamerican Hallucinogenic Herbal Concoctions: Mesoamerican and South American cultures were often shamanistic, and the use of hallucinogenic herbal substances was a part of religious rituals. The herbs

were said to have healing properties: psychological as well as physical, and represented an innovative way to use herbs, not only as medicine, but as a spiritual healing substance. They were used by the Incas in conjunction with major astronomical events.

Discussion/Questions

The calendars of the Aztecs were very complex, and they did not consist of a single calendar, but of two or three interpenetrating ones. They simultaneously marked solar time, religious festival time, and government / civil activities. Further, they were broken down into blocks of time, and each block of time (for example, 13 days) corresponded to a god or a vital life force. Describe how the information from the calendars figured into daily life.

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TRADE

Aztec: The Aztecs developed an innovative trade culture that relied on the military for protection. In certain ways, it anticipated the drug cartel culture of the 20th century. Territories and transit routes were viciously controlled by a well-equipped, well-fed, and well-trained army of warriors who were noted for their brutality (and the enthusiasm with which they sacrificed their kidnapped foes). The Aztecs had innovative agricultural technologies (chinampas), and also a unique method of warehousing, which allowed them to have extensive trade networks and also to hold onto the goods for propitious conditions.

Inca: The economic activity Incan federation of states included agriculture, exporting public works, consulting, above all trade, but peaceful, through win-win (not cartel-type). The Inca were very adept at creating what resembled today's franchises. The leaders of the Inca did not persuade through force, but through the idea of mutual gain. Because their network was trade relation-based, their "language" for communicating consisted of quipus, which are intricate sets of knotted string, essentially the language of accounting, cyphers, and calculations.

Discussion/Questions

The Incas "franchised" their brand through an extensive confederation of city states, tribes, and outlying groups. Trade networks were held together by common beliefs, but more than that, by their "quipus", the knotted string accounting, messaging, and inventorying system that allowed the groups to communicate by means of the language of math and calculations. Describe the potential strengths and weaknesses of an economy based primarily on relationships and accounting.

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CULTURAL HISTORY

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, Texcoco. 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 Aztecs and 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 (Mexico) calendar consisted of a 260-day ritual cycle, which formed a 52-year “calendar round.” Both the Aztecs 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 Question:

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 ancient 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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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/Questions

The Conquest was a two-pronged effort with government / military on one side, and religion on the other. The most coordinated attacks occurred in the large religious centers, including Tenochtitlan, Cuzco and Quito, where the Church was quick to build over the temples. But, they did not succeed in eradicating the religions. Please describe how the ancient religions persist.

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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: The Incas expressed 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/Questions

Conquest which involves the virtual extermination of people and cultures does not often pause to contemplate the finer points, such as the question, "What are we doing to the fate of women? And, heaven forbid, how are we to work with the highly educated freemen and women? Explain how the Spanish colonialist philosophers address issues of the condition of women and indigenous peoples.

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ART

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/Questions

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 American before the arrival of the Europeans. 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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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/Questions

Unfortunately, the Conquistadors burned the elaborately painted paper codices because they were convinced they were of the devil. But, both the Aztec (Nahua peoples) and the Maya codices were very rich in cultural significance. They contained details about the history of the world, main beliefs and traditions. Of the few fragments that have been preserved, what are main elements found in the Aztec and Maya codices? How do we now interpret them?

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