

LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE – Ancient Period

Overview From petroglyphs on rocks along streams or in caves, and massive geoglyphs so large they are best viewed from an adjacent mountain or hilltop, the inhabitants of Latin America were driven to express themselves. They created art, constructed elaborate structures, and practiced elaborate rituals that demonstrated that their sense of identity and place in the world had a great deal to do with artistic and cultural productions.

VERBAL ARTS

Literature

Maya Codices: Written in Maya hieroglyphics on bark cloth with a unique, bright ink, there are four extant Maya codices. They have not been completely deciphered, but from what we know now, the content tells the story of the history of the world, and contains almanacs and astronomical descriptions. They also depict the Maya gods. Unfortunately, Spanish priests burned the majority of the codices.

Popol Vuh: Transcribed by an unknown writer, the *Popol Vuh* is an account of the Maya creation story and other important religious and mythical stories of the Quiche Maya who lived in Guatemala.

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?

Readings

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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.

Maya: Maya is a living language with at least 6 million Maya speakers in southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. The language has at least 30 separate languages in overall family, with hundreds of dialects. The Spanish priests burned all but four of the Maya codices. Nevertheless, with the Latin alphabet, the Maya were able to preserve their myths, history, poems, and prophetic accounts.

Discussion

The way that Quiche Maya 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 Quiche Maya worldview and discuss how that might result in different worldview than the Western scientific world.

Readings

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Script

Maya script: The Maya developed an elaborate set of glyphs which they used in their writing. Most are preserved today in the form of elaborate carvings or molded stucco in walls and stela. Others exist as they were painted onto ceramics and on bark-paper codices. Unfortunately, most of the bark-paper codices were burned by Spanish priests. The Mayan glyphs are constructed of compound elements, and they are essentially logosyllabic, which means that each logo corresponds to a syllable. In addition to a system for words, the Maya also developed a system for writing numbers, equations, and also astronomical relationships (for their calendars). The Maya were the only culture in Latin America that developed a fully functional written language, which is to say that they write everything they could say. While only four Maya codices survived the conquistadores, it is possible that in the future, codices will be found in the numerous Maya ruins yet to be excavated.

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 Nahuatl people continued to speak their language and to paint pictograms. In fact, the Conquistadores found it useful for the Nahuatl (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

Mayas

Popol Vuh The Popol Vuh is a pre-conquest cultural narrative of the Quiche Maya people located in present-day northwest Guatemala. Based on oral narrative, the collection was compiled by anonymous authors for whom it could have been dangerous to preserve the creation myths and religious beliefs at a time when the Spanish conquistadores and priests were burning the Mayan hieroglyphic texts they could find. The Popol Vuh has ambiguous passages due to degradation of the text over time. Nevertheless, it is a text that includes some of the most important myths, which include the primordial realm, the creation of the Earth, the creation of the animals, the fall of the animals, the creation of the mud person, the creation of the stick and reed people, and the story of the first leaders and the many events that took place. The importance of the Popol Vuh cannot be overstated.

Chilam Balam The Books of Chilam Balam consist of nine separate books that cover migration legends, predictions, prophecies, riddles, calendars, and the Maya apocalypse, which describes the destruction and recreation of the world. Written in the Yucatec Maya language, they provide insight into the culture as well as the beliefs of the Maya. In addition to providing an understanding of the beliefs of the Yucatan Maya people, they also include incantations and ritualistic texts, so we can understand the Maya way of relating to the world and the kinds of beliefs about the nature of reality and their relationship to the divine.

Creation Myths In the Popol Vuh, the earth was created by the forces of Huracan, the wind and sky god, who connected the sky and the earth. He planted a Ceiba tree, which provided a framework for plants, animals, and humans to live. Its roots went to the underworld, and the branches reached to the sky. The gods created animals first, then three different phases of humans: the mud, the wood, the maize. The first was destroyed for speaking without making sense, and thus annoying the gods. The second for acting without respect, and so they were destroyed. The third, made from a mixture of the blood of the gods and ground corn, are today's human beings. The Popol Vuh does not indicate how the Maize people end.

The Maya Concept of Reality For the Maya, there is no such thing as something without a spirit. Even inanimate things such as trees, shoes, or tools have spirits. As such, they all contain "k'uh" or sacredness. Understanding the underlying quality that makes each thing we perceive to be sacred is a key to appreciating the Maya worldview.

Religious Practice: Bloodletting The Maya royals were expected to practice bloodletting at certain points in the Maya calendar in order to honor the gods and to demonstrate their worthiness to be part of the royalty. Bloodletting was done from different parts of the body, and also with different tools such as ones made of stingray spines. For example, in one ceremony, Maya royal women used thorned ropes to pierce their tongues and to scatter blood over icons. Men used a thorned rope to draw blood from their penis, for blood to scatter on icons and to mix with maize.

Transformation Animals: The Jaguar The Jaguar played an important role, especially with the Olmec civilization, and also in the Maya, Toltec, and Aztec. Jaguars were, in the practices of shamans, a powerful transformational force, which meant that a person could move in and out of "jaguar nature" with the physical and psychological attributes, which allowed them to journey into fearsome spaces such as the nine levels of the underworld, or the most violent battlefields of the "middle world" (surface of the earth). The jaguar is a spirit guide and a transformer.

Discussion Question

They 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.

Readings

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Folklore

Maya: The Maya possessed a written language which was accompanied by many oral narratives which persisted long after their vast cities had been abandoned. The oral narratives existed within the speakers of all the different Maya dialects, and they had several stories in common: a creation narrative; an apocalyptic narrative that recounted the destruction of the world and its subsequent re-creation; and many stories about the gods and their relationship with people.

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.

Readings

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VISUAL ARTS

Painting

Cave paintings: Cueva de los Manos (Santa Cruz, Argentina) 13,000 – 9,000 years ago. Stenciled hand paintings (mainly left hands), 9,000 years old. Also, sun, geometric shapes, hunting scenes.

Petroglyphs: Pedra Furada, northeast Brazil. Iron oxide pigment, animals, hunters, geometric shapes. Carved 9,000 years ago. Altavista, Pacific coast of Mexico. Carved by the Tecoxquines (2300 – 2000 BCE). 56 petroglyphs representing rains, crops, religious rites. The petroglyphs in Checta, Peru feature animal, human, geometrical shapes.

Moche: Predating the Incas, the Moche created elaborately decorated ceramics. Very little was known about Moche life except for their pyramids until the 1980s when explorers happened upon untouched

tombs. In them, they found elaborate murals that depict everyday life. The ceramics are also painted. What is unique about the ceramics is that more than 500 are explicitly sexual and display not only giant genitals, but also human figures engaged in sexual acts, including intercourse between heterosexuals, intercourse between human females, intercourse between females and mythical creatures.

Maya: The painting of the Maya was often expressed through their hieroglyphics, which were painted in their 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

Terracotta figurines: Small terracotta figurines have been found in tomb shafts in Mexico and in graves in the Andes. They often depict people, roles, and daily life in their communities.

Jade figurines: Costa Rica (400 – 800 AD) Atlantic watershed. Abstract figures of people and animals, masked people, frog (fertility), birds (offerings).

Gold figurines: Colombia and Costa Rica. (400 – 800 AD) Primarily animals, reflecting shamanistic beliefs and practices. Frog, birds, deer, jaguar, iguana, lizard gods.

Tiwanaku (300 – 1150): Large carved blocks in shape of human, with huge heads, massive eye sockets. These are largely monumental to accompany the blocky architecture of the ceremonial centers. The figures are sometimes depicted with human heads in their hands, which suggests human sacrifice.

Olmec (1200 – 400 BC): Living in the tropical forests of south-central Mexico (Veracruz and Tabasco), the Olmec produced massive basalt portrait heads of their rulers. They also created small-scale jadeite objects that corresponded to religious roles and practices. The Olmec were remarkable in their ability to create sophisticated products without the use of knives.

Moche: A pre-Inca civilization, the Moche (100 – 800 AD) lived in northern Peru where they produced useful yet intricate ceramics for daily and ceremonial use. The ceramics were often in the form of humans and animals, often in humorous or surprising poses (monkeys sitting next to each other, arms on each others' shoulders; a couple engaged in the act of copulation).

Maya: Maya sculptures, especially during the Classic Period (250 – 900 AD) are worked from limestone and volcanic tuff. They are primarily carved bas relief into walls and portals in the pyramids and large buildings. The subjects are individuals, deities, and animals, the most common being Quetzalcoatl, Chac (rain god), aristocracy, priests, and animals (jaguars, lizards, etc.). They also carved calendars and representations of the Tree of Life.

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

Stilt houses with grass roofs: The earliest dwellings in MesoAmerica and South America consisted of wood frames with grass roofs. They were often on stilts, particularly in coastal or jungle areas.

Cave dwellings: Cave art throughout Mesoamerica and South America indicates that early peoples lived in caves. Perhaps the famous, the "Cave of the Hands" in the Serra da Capivara National Park in

northeast Brazil. In the archaeological site, Pedra Furada, more than 15,000 drawings depict animals, humans, birds, representations of the sun, and hunting scenes. So, while the people who lived in the caves did not construct the caves, they did modify them for their purposes.

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

Early man was attracted to caves. Certainly they could be dark, and potentially filled with danger if they were a part of an extensive karst system with underground rivers and potential cave-ins. However, they represented a unique type of shelter as well as a location for religious rites and ceremonies. The early cave dwellers were hunters and gatherers. Describe the cave drawings and what they illustrated. What do they tell us about their lives and lifestyle?

Readings

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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?

Reading

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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.

Readings

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Theatre

Maya: The Maya incorporated dance and performative art in their religious ceremonies. They wore elaborate costumes of feathers, headdresses, paint, rattles, spears, and more to depict the gods and events. The rituals corresponded to specific points in the Maya calendar, and the goals were twofold: to “merge” with the god spirit and allow that spirit to enter the body; and second, to please the gods and maintain balance in the universe. The rituals often ended in blood-letting and sometimes human sacrifice.

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

Maya script: The Maya developed an elaborate set of glyphs which they used in their writing. Most are preserved today in the form of elaborate carvings or molded stucco in walls and stela. Others exist as they were painted onto ceramics and on bark-paper codices. Unfortunately, most of the bark-paper codices were burned by Spanish priests. The Mayan glyphs are constructed of compound elements, and they are essentially logosyllabic, which means that each logo corresponds to a syllable. In addition to a system for words, the Maya also developed a system for writing numbers, equations, and also astronomical relationships (for their calendars). The Maya were the only culture in Latin America that developed a fully functional written language, which is to say that they write everything they could say. While only four Maya codices survived the conquistadores, it is possible that in the future, codices will be found in the numerous Maya ruins yet to be excavated.

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?

Readings

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WORLDVIEW

Religion

Preclassic (1st Millennium BCE)

Mesoamerica : Olmecs The Olmecs lived in the tropical lowlands of south-central Mexico on the Gulf of Mexico. The most important location was San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan, where a civilization arose in the fertile alluvial plains. Artisan items and rather ornate artifacts were produced of jade, obsidian, and magnetite, which suggested trading networks. Shamanism was important in the Olmec religion, and the shamans possessed powers associated with an animal or animal-quality (spirit or essence). One of the most important was the jaguar god, which was recognized by its almond-shaped eyes and downturned open mouth. The animals that imbued the shamans with their powerful qualities were called “nuhuals” and the shamans who has the jaguar power were referred to as “were-jaguars.” In addition to creating monuments that reflected the religious beliefs. They also incorporated their religious beliefs about the “nahuals” in their pottery, figurines, and jade carvings, which were traded and exchanged in the region. Their ceremonial centers included massive sculptures of heads, and also ornate *stelae*, which included carvings representing the Olmec gods. There were at least 10 different Olmec deities. The Olmec beliefs were shared by subsequent peoples, including the Toltecs and Mixtecs, who also adopted the shamanistic traditions of animal spirits and gods.

South America : Chavin Culture The Chavin people lived in the Andean highlands in Peru and Ecuador from 900 to 200 BCE. Their religious practices took place in the *Chavin de Huantar* temple, which has several interesting design elements. The first is that it is constructed of heavy rocks which are not found near the temple, but were desirable for their black and white appearance which allowed meaningful patterns. Also, the temple was constructed to maximize the sounds of rushing water and wind, which were considered sacred. The Chavins considered the jaguar to be a spirit guide, and an agent of transformation.

Classic Period (1st Millennium CE)

Mesoamerica : Maya Religious texts and beliefs are in evidence in San Bartolo (northern Guatemala), Monte Alban (southern Mexico / Oaxaca), and Tikal (northern Guatemala): The Maya believed that both animate and inanimate objects have sacred qualities, and that there is an innate spirituality in everything in the world. Their word for the sacred quality was “k’uh” and also “k’uhul.” For the Maya, the earth was created as a result of the god of the skies and wind, Huracán (Hurricane), who made the sky and the earth come together. Animals and plants were created first, and then only later, humans were created in order to honor the gods.

Shape-Shifting and Cyclic Extinction: The most recent Mayan cities and temples demonstrated an evolution in the religion in that it tended to emphasize transfiguration and shape-shifting, as well as the animation of inanimate objects. The cosmology of the underworld is not as prominent, nor are the creation myths that detail the three episodes of creation (clay people, wood-reed people, flesh&blood people). However, the calendar is emphasized as is a narrative pointing to a future cycle of mass extinction and rebirth. The event is predicted as the end of the world, which is, in reality the end of a cycle.

Creation Mythology The Popol Vuh has an account of three different creations: the first were made of mud, but they were not able to speak intelligently and were destroyed with water. The second creation involved creating men from wood and women from reeds. They, however, did not have souls and could not honor the gods. So, they were destroyed with hot, boiling water. Finally, the third creation involved making humans made of white and yellow maize, and the blood of the gods. While the different creation myths vary, what they have in common is the idea that creations are cyclical, and that there will undoubtedly be another destruction of humans, with a subsequent rebirth. The apocalyptic narrative focuses not only on destruction, but also in regeneration and rebirth.

South America : Mochica (or, Moche) flourished along the Pacific coast of Peru, from 100 – 700 AD. The religion reflected the culture’s need to defend itself against its neighbors, and from the artifacts that remain, seemed to center on human sacrifice, with an emphasis on decapitation and blood-letting. Whether or not this was actually the case is not easily determined; after all, the archeological record consists of the materials that resist the assaults of weather and time, and the time-resistant sculptures of stone are those that speak for the entirety of the culture. The fact that they feature individuals holding the decapitated heads of others and portray ritual blood-letting gives the impression that such practices predominated when it is possible that they did not.

Discussion Question

The Maya believed that they were the third attempt of the gods to create decent human beings. However, they were not the first people to be created; the gods had to destroy two other attempts, because their creations were defective. In such situations, 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

K'uh: The dominant Maya philosophy had to do with identifying, preserving, and channeling divine life force in order to maintain cycles of existence. The divine life force is also understood as a sacred force and the most important role of humans is to respect the divine life force, or the sacred. Showing respect for the divine force is a way to please the gods. Humans were created in order to honor the gods.

Three Creations / Three Apocalypses: The sacred texts, Popol Vuh, and the Chilam Balam, give insights into the Maya worldview and underpinning philosophy. According to the Popol Vuh (of the highland Maya), there is no permanence and the world and people are to be created, destroyed, and recreated, each time to correct a defective approach to the gods. On a metaphorical level, the idea of all of life and consciousness as cyclical rather than linear will have an influence on one's mindset.

Time / Calendar: Reality and hence all of existence for the Maya tied closely to the calendar, which showed the peak moments for contact between the gods and human beings.

Discussion Question

The Spaniards walked into a deeply unstable world. The Maya and those who came after 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 Maya thought.

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Science

Astronomy: The Maya 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 and the Maya believed that the sun and the entire world had gone through apocalypses (total destruction and rebirth). The Tiwanaku also oriented their buildings around positions of the sun and stars.

Maya agricultural methods: In order to provide enough food to support the large population centers in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala, it was necessary for the Maya to develop innovative approaches for managing arable fields for the cultivation of corn, tomatoes, chili peppers, beans. Their innovations included the development of raised fields, stone-wall terraces, and crop rotation technologies.

Maya water management: The Maya lived in the Yucatan peninsula and in the part of Central America that is now Guatemala, Belize, Mexico, and Honduras. Much of the land is flat and low, with a bedrock of limestone, which has many caves and sinkholes. As a result, there are few rivers and above-ground lakes and ponds. To have enough water for life and agriculture, the Maya developed an extensive system of canals and cisterns (chultunob). They also developed a system of collecting and distributing water from limestone sinkholes (cenotes).

Civil engineering in the Andes: The Tiwanaku (and later, 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.

Discussion / Questions

The level of technology possessed by the Maya and Tiwanaku civilization 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 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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