

LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY – Ancient Period

Overview It's hard to imagine a series of cultures more maligned than the MesoAmerican and South American cultures encountered by the Europeans in the 16th century and later. Although in many ways, the Latin Americans were light years more advanced than the Europeans, they were not able to compete militarily, mainly due to preexisting beliefs that encouraged them to simply give up and submit to the conquerors. Consequently, the cultures were not only obliterated politically and physically, their legacies were tainted by prejudice – a prejudice that only began to correct itself in the late 20th century, thanks to commercial and political interests that no longer felt threatened by a long-vanquished and subjugated foe. What we now know about the pre-Conquest Latin American cultures makes us appreciate them with eyes unclouded by fear or imperialistic designs.

POLITICAL HISTORY

GOVERNMENT

Maya (250 CE – 900 CE): The Maya began to establish smaller centers, and each city-state had a unique king or queen. The basic organizational structure remained intact. The power of the ruler was maintained by assuring sufficient food and water for all (by placating the gods with human sacrifice). There is evidence that during droughts, there was a dramatic uptick in the number of human sacrifices.

Discussion/Questions

The cosmology and religious beliefs of the Olmecs resulted in a human sacrifice-based government. It was, as far as we can tell, perhaps the first one in Mesoamerica, and served as a pattern for those that followed. Describe how and why human sacrifice might have been not only tolerated, but encouraged by the people of the Olmec civilization and those that went later.

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MILITARY

The large quantity of Stone Age artifacts found in Mesoamerica demonstrates that PreColumbian warfare was perhaps achieved the highest level of all Stone Age civilizations. It was unique in that all the warfare technology was developed without the wheel, metallurgy, explosives, pack animals, or ships. The Olmecs (1200 – 400 BCE), who lived in on the coast in southeast Mexico near what is now Veracruz, developed obsidian-edged weapons for hand-to-hand combat against encroaching groups.

La Venta (900 – 400 B.C.E.): An Olmec stronghold near Veracruz, Mexico, La Venta was an Olmec stronghold which shows evidence of extensive warfare and weaponry. In addition to creating a fortress-type structure, the Olmecs developed weapons that included the sling, clay projectiles, obsidian-tipped spears, spear throwers, shields, yucca-fiber armor, and helmets made of animal hides.

Monte Alban (400 – 100 BCE): The largest fortified city in Mesoamerica, Monte Alban served as the center for a large territory, and in it they produced weapons such as obsidian knives, spears, axes, knives, shields and new kinds of armor. They used their military prowess to protect trade routes.

Tiwanaku (500 BCE): In the Andes, the ancestors of the Inca engaged in organized conflict and warfare, according to the artifacts that have been found. They fought their neighbors for control of trade routes and of resources, primarily arable land and water.

Conquest of Mexico: Historians continue to be astounded that a ragtag army of Spaniards who **Teotihuacan (100 – 700 CE):** The people of Teotihuacan in the Valle of Mexico, appropriated the Monte Alban technology and improved it. The Teotihuacanos focused on combining military and trade routes. Their trade centers were well stocked with the latest weaponry, including larger and more effective obsidian-tipped spears, knives, axes, which could be launched with slings and different types of throwers. The warriors were equipped with protective gear, and there are storehouses for supplies such as tortillas as well as armor and equipment.

Early Maya (380 – 900 CE): The Maya added innovations to warfare and quickly dominated valuable trade routes. The Maya ruler, Smoking Frog, lived in the complex of Tikal and began to incorporate astronomy and religious ceremony into the warfare. There were many series of so-called “star wars” (planned around astronomical phenomena), and the different population centers were often at war with each other, which led to crippling battles, and potentially contributed to crop failures and the disappearance of the Maya.

Discussion/Question

The wars waged by the Toltecs, Aztecs, and Incas were not just about a simple need to defend their territory or to keep trade routes open. They also served an important purpose in that they needed to keep the gods happy in order to keep apocalypse at bay. Describe the ways in which the ancient civilizations in Latin America blended warfare, the taking of prisoners of war, and their beliefs in the efficacy of blood sacrifice.

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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 and others believed that blood sacrifice should also 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.

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 Maya, 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 Maya mindset result in a flatter, or less hierarchical society?

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GENDER RELATIONS

Maya: For the Maya, the earth was created by the wind and sky god, Huracan, who was male. And yet, the male force was transformed into the feminine as the Ceibe Tree of Life knit together the sky and the earth, and positions branches where life could emerge. The tree's essential energy was female, and the flowering of plant and animal life was considered to be a feminine force. Gender could be complicated, as were all representations of identity. The fact that the Maya deities were shape-shifters and had more than one manifestation (male, female, animal), suggested that all beings possessed attributes of both male and female. An example of this could be found in Chorti, the Maya death god, which was described as both male and female. In addition, the Maya believed in the concept of animal spirits and shamanistic energy transfer. The animals (jaguar, serpent, etc.) were likewise gendered.

Discussion/Questions

In the ancient civilizations of the male and female could co-exist in the same person, mainly by means of the animal totem that they identified with. For example, a man could clearly be male, but his spirit guide or totem could be an animal identified with feminine energy or power. Also, all observable beings and objects were considered capable of animation. A priest could sing an invocation and an object could spring into life, sometimes acting as a fertility accelerant, either male or female.

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ECONOMIC HISTORY

INNOVATIONS

Mayan Calendar: The idea of the Mayan calendar is something of a misnomer, since it was not a single calendar, but a series of three separate interpenetrating, corresponding calendars, which was a dramatic improvement over the calendars that had been used before the Maya. The three calendars consisted of the Long Count (solar universal cycles), the Divine Calendar (260 days, tied to religious and ceremonial events), and the Civil Calendar, which is a solar calendar divided into 18 months of 20 days each, with a leap year. The Long Count calendar predicts the end of cycles, and potentially the end of the world. The end of the last Long Count cycle was said to have corresponded to December 21, 2012.

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 Maya in their sacrificial rites.

Discussion/Questions

The calendars of the Maya 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

Olmec: La Venta (1200 – 400 B.C.E.): The Olmecs achieved their legendary warrior status and the ability to create large artifacts because they controlled an extensive trading network. They manufactured goods such as cloth and leather, and they sold the products of their agriculture and fishing activities. They were highly effective at using their military to protect and expand trade routes and markets.

Maya (1500 BCE – 250 CE): The Maya had an agriculture and manufacturing-based economy, with a surplus which they were able to trade with groups as far away as the Mississippi River Valley.

Moche (400 – 100 BCE): The Moche's economy was based on agriculture and also the production of fine potteries and textiles. They used trade relations to obtain the raw materials (dyes, pigments, etc.) that they needed, and they sold their textiles and ceramics to neighboring villages.

Discussion/Questions

The Olmecs and other Mesoamerican economies were more complex than they might appear, and their success had much to do with their militarism. Open trade routes and the health of manufacturing required a well-equipped and prepared security force. Describe the dependence of the Olmecs on their war-like stance.

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CULTURAL HISTORY

SCIENCE

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).

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 Maya believed that the sun and the entire world had gone through apocalypses (total destruction and rebirth).

Discussion Question:

The level of technology possessed by the Maya and Tiwanaku 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 Maya and Tiwanaku 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: 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 “nahuales” and the shamans who has the jaguar power were referred to as “were-jaguars” (like “were-wolves). In addition to creating monuments that reflected the religious beliefs. They also incorporated their religious beliefs about the “nahuales” 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.

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 transmogrification 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.

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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.

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/Questions

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

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.

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

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 addresses issues of the condition of women and indigenous peoples.

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ART

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/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 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 Moches, 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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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/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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