Chapter 16

The Americas on the Eve of Invasion

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

By 1500, the Americas were typified by a high population in many places. The greater American civilizations developed advanced agricultural systems, urbanization, social and economic diversity, and centralized political institutions. Their cultures were far more diverse than the misnomer “Indian,” which suggests cultural unity, implies.

II. Postclassic Mesoamerica, 1000-1500 C.E.

A. Introduction

The most important of the Mesoamerican civilizations were those of the Toltecs and Aztecs. The Toltecs migrated into central Mexico from the north and adopted a militaristic ethic from sedentary peoples already living in the area.

B. The Toltec Heritage

From the establishment of their capital at Tula in 968 C.E., the Toltecs were able to establish a significant empire in central Mexico and the Yucatan. Some later Mayan rulers were clearly under Toltec influence. Toltec influence may have extended as far north as the American Southwest, where some evidence of their trade network can be found. There is less agreement about the possibility of Toltec influence in the Mississippian culture of the Ohio River valley.

C. The Aztec Rise to Power

Nomadic invaders destroyed the Toltec capital of Tula around 1150. Thereafter, the center of Mesoamerican power shifted to the region surrounding a group of lakes in the valley of Mexico. Various groups contested for supremacy in the valley. Among these groups were the Aztecs, who probably migrated into the valley around 1325 following the fall of the Toltec empire. Eventually the Aztecs, after a period of serving as mercenaries, settled on an island in Lake Texcoco and established their capital of Tenochtitlan. Through a series of alliances with and against the other city-states, the Aztecs were able to emerge as an independent power. By 1434, the Aztecs were the most powerful partners in a triple alliance linking Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan.
D. The Aztec Social Contract

The series of wars leading to Aztec dominance caused social changes. The Aztec ruler, supported by a nobility, became vastly more powerful. Eventually Aztec dominance spread to encompass most of central Mexico. Social stratification became pronounced. The architect of social change was Tlacaelel, a prime minister for three rulers. The use of human sacrifice as part of Aztec ritual was expanded under his influence. Some areas were purposely left independent in order to make wars possible. The intent of the wars was to secure captives for human sacrifice.

E. Religion and the Ideology of Conquest

The Aztecs venerated the traditional pantheon of Mesoamerican gods. Yearly festivals and complex rituals supported the numerous deities. Gods were organized into the major cults of fertility, creation, and warfare. The last included rituals of human sacrifice and became the cult of the state. The central deity of the cult of the state was Huitzilopochtli. Under both the Toltecs and Aztecs, the frequency and scale of human sacrifice increased. Although human sacrifice dominated Aztec religion, worship also concerned the afterlife, creation myths, and a cyclical view of history based on a distinctive calendar system.

F. Tenochtitlan: The Foundation of Heaven

The Aztecs considered their capital city a sacred space. The city became a great metropolis and the heart of an empire. The nearby market town, Tlatelolco, was also impressive. Tenochtitlan, an island-city with canals, was divided into wards, each controlled by a calpulli, or kin group.

G. Feeding the People: The Economy of the Empire

To feed their enormous population, the Aztecs constructed a tribute system from conquered peoples. In addition, the Aztecs developed an intensive form of agriculture utilizing floating beds and artificial islands, or chinampas. Yields from chinampa agriculture were high. In each Aztec community, clans distributed available land for cultivation. Some land was reserved for the nobility and worked by slaves. A merchant class, the pipiltin, operated the markets that provided for the exchange of food and luxuries. The state actually controlled all trade and managed the collection and redistribution of tribute.

III. Aztec Society in Transition

A. Introduction

Aztec society became increasingly hierarchical. Eventually the growing population could not be sustained on the basis of the tribute system.

B. Widening Social Gulf

The basic social unit of Aztec society was the calpulli, or clan. By the 16th century, there were about 20 major clans. These groups controlled land distribution, labor, and military service. Beyond the clan structure of Aztec society, a nobility, the pipiltin, developed from elite families within the calpulli. The nobility held private land and political offices within the empire. Nobles controlled the priesthood and military, which was in turn divided into ranks depending on an individual’s success in taking captives. The nobility was closely associated with the ritual of human sacrifice. As the Aztec empire grew, the gulf between commoners and the nobility expanded. As the nobility separated from the calpulli, a class of semifree laborers with low social status emerged to work on noble estates. Another intermediate group consisted of scribes,
artisans, and healers. Merchants comprised a separate calpulli. By the 16th century, it is possible to see some conflict between the calpulli of commoners and the nobles.

C. Overcoming Technological Constraints

Aztec women provided some agricultural labor, but their primary responsibility was the household. Although politically subordinate, Aztec women did have recognized legal rights. Lack of machines for grinding forced Aztec women to spend a disproportionate amount of time grinding maize into flour. Population density within the Aztec empire appears to have been high.

D. A Tribute Empire

A speaker chosen from among the nobility ruled each Aztec city-state. The speaker of Tenochtitlan, the capital, was the emperor. A powerful prime minister, often chosen from the same family, assisted the emperor. As the empire matured, the position of the emperor and the central government became more powerful and the cult of the military became the cult of the state. The empire never developed strong ties to local administration, which often remained in the hands of local rulers. City-states were left relatively free to govern their subjects, so long as they recognized the Aztec rulers and paid tribute. There were many rebellions against Aztec rule. In the long run, the rise of the nobility and the continued reign of terror contributed to the downfall of the Aztec empire.

IV. Twantinsuyu: World of the Incas

A. Introduction

The establishment of the Inca empire coincided with the Aztec expansion in Mesoamerica. The Incas built on the cultural traditions of earlier Andean societies but provided a greater degree of political and cultural centralization. Following the decline of the ‘horizon’ states of Tiahuanaco and Huari around 1000 C.E., many regional political units continued to survive. The most important of these regional cultures was the coastal kingdom of Chimor, which flourished between 900 C.E. and 1465 C.E.

B. The Inca Rise to Power

While Chimor controlled the coast, several clans, or *ayllus*, contested for supremacy in the Andean highlands. The most successful group of 10 clans controlled a region near Cuzco. By 1438 these clans - under the leadership of the ruler, or Inca, Pachacuti - were able to establish their government over much of the highland region. Inca Topac Yupanqui defeated Chimor. By 1527, the Inca empire stretched from what is now Colombia to Chile in the Andean region.

C. Conquest and Religion

One of the chief incentives to continue expansion was the Inca practice of split inheritance. Following the death of a leader, political power passed to his successor, but all movable wealth and real property was retained to support the cult of the dead Inca’s mummy. Each new Inca thus had to expand his territory to increase his wealth and provide for his afterlife. The Incas regarded the sun as the chief deity and identified the ruler as the sun’s earthly representative. In addition to the sun, other major deities, as well as local gods, continued to be worshiped. Inca religion was strongly animistic. Prayers and rituals were offered to holy shrines, or *huacas*.

D. The Techniques of Inca Imperial Rule
The capital of the Inca empire was Cuzco, from where the Incas ruled as semidivine figures. The empire was divided into four major provinces, each of which was subdivided into local administrative units. Local rulers were often permitted to retain power in return for securing tribute for the Incas. Loyalty was secured by the practice of colonization, in which loyal groups were imported into newly conquered territories or disaffected populations were forcibly moved to new regions. Roads served to secure communications throughout the empire. The Inca state engendered loyalty by its management of a complex system of collection and redistribution, state enhancement of the infrastructure, and the opportunity for sharing in the spoils of conquest. Tribute was largely collected through labor on state lands and building projects. Local ayllus controlled land distribution and labor requisitions in each community. Property passed through both the male and female line in Inca social hierarchies, but women did not commonly serve as heads of ayllus during the Inca period. Some women were forced into concubinage of the royal family or dedicated to various temples. Over the heads of the ayllus were members of the Inca nobility. Those members of the nobility related to the royal family enjoyed highest status. Unlike Mesoamerica, the Inca empire lacked a distinct merchant class. Although the Inca empire functioned efficiently for nearly a century, royal multiple marriages eventually produced civil strife in the 16th century.

E. Inca Cultural Achievements

The Inca were particularly proficient metallurgists. Like the peoples of Mesoamerica, the Inca did not develop the wheel. The Incas were relatively unique in that they lacked a system of writing. They used quipus, knotted strings, to record information. Monumental architecture and road building were highly developed among the Andean people.

F. Comparing Incas and Aztecs

Both the Incas and the Aztecs represented the imperial stage of political development. Both states relied on intensive agricultural systems to support massive populations and managed redistribution networks to circulate necessities and luxuries. In both regions, the nobility served as the administrative bureaucracy. Both empires allowed the continued existence of local governments subject to the payment of tribute, the collection and redistribution of which provided the primary source of trade. Trade and markets were far more developed among the Aztecs than the Incas. Basic similarities existed in religious beliefs, cosmology, and social structure. Whether by direct contact or parallel development, Indian societies in the Americas shared many common traits.

V. The Other Indians

A. Introduction

Aside from the imperial cultures of Mesoamerica and the Andes, the Americas were populated by numerous other Indian groups organized at various levels of social complexity.
B. How Many Indians?

Population density in the Americas prior to European contact was relatively high. Mesoamerica and the Andes supported the most dense population concentrations. The Indian population of the Americas may have been roughly the same as that for contemporary Europe.

C. Differing Cultural Patterns

Northern South America and parts of Central America shared important cultural traits with the imperial regions. Chiefdoms based on sedentary agriculture existed in the areas of modern Colombia, along the Amazon, and on some islands in the Caribbean. In the North American woodlands, agricultural societies supplemented their food supply with hunting and gathering. There was less social stratification and economic specialization among these groups. Full-fledged nomadic pastoralists were lacking in the Americas prior to European contact. In North America, there was remarkable cultural diversity, with over 200 language groups spoken by 1500. North American societies varied from the hierarchical and agricultural groups in the southeast and southwest to less complex social units of hunters and gatherers. With the exception of the imperial states of Mesoamerica and the Andes, most Indian groups remained strongly kin-based, with property held communally or by clan.

VI. American Indian Diversity in World Context

By the end of the 15th century, two militaristic empires were established in Mesoamerica and the Andes. These empires proved vulnerable to internal disruption and technologically inferior to Eurasian civilizations. Elsewhere in the Americas, other Indian groups demonstrated enormous diversity in social organization and economic development.

VII. Global Connections: The Americas and the World

The isolation of the Americas is seen in the absence of key technologies, many domestic animals, the world’s major religions, and in the lack of resistance to major diseases. Still, their achievements were impressive, particularly their ability to sustain dense populations. Further, they contributed to later patterns in the Americas.
TIMELINE

*Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.*

- Foundation of Tenochtitlan
- Incas establish empire
- Aztecs establish empire
- Fall of Toltec empire
- Foundation of Tula
- Rise of Chimor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>900 C.E.</td>
<td>Foundation of Tenochtitlan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>968 C.E.</td>
<td>Incas establish empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1150 C.E.</td>
<td>Aztecs establish empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1325 C.E.</td>
<td>Fall of Toltec empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1348 C.E.</td>
<td>Rise of Chimor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

*The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.*

- Toltecs
- Aztecs
- *pipiltin*
- Tlaloc
- Tlatelolco
- *calpulli*
- Cannibal kingdom
- Topac Yapanqui
- Temple of the Sun
- Yanas
- Topiltzin
- Nahuatl
- *quipu*
- Huitzilopochtli
- *chinampas*
- Mayque
- *mitmaq*
- *ayllus*
- Chichen Itzá
- Tenochtitlan
- Tlacaely
- Quetzalcoatl
- Pochteca
- Inca socialism
- Pachacuti
- Split inheritance
- *mita*
The Indian empires and the areas that surrounded them were based on sedentary agriculture. How was the location of the Indian empires related to the earliest agricultural hearths in the Americas? Can sedentary agricultural societies in the Americas be described as radiating out from the Indian empires as a center?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What was the relationship of the Aztecs to the Toltecs?
2. What was the political and economic organization of the Aztec empire?
3. What was the social organization of the Aztec empire? How did it change over time?
4. What was the political and economic organization of the Inca empire?
5. What was the social organization of the Inca empire?
6. How did the other Indian groups of the Americas differ from the imperial cultures?
7. How were American societies different from European societies?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. Compare and contrast the imperial civilizations of the Andes and Mesoamerica.
2. How would you compare and contrast the cultures of the Americas with those of contemporary Africa? How did the continued isolation of the Americas result in differences from the African experience? How would you compare and contrast the cultures of the Americas with Polynesia, where there was similar isolation from Eurasian influences?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. During the postclassical period, societies in the Americas
   a. remained entirely separate from those of the Old World.
   b. experienced the initial contacts that led eventually to the European invasion of the New World.
   c. failed to develop imperial forms of government.
   d. were united under a single government.

2. After the sack of Tula in the 10th century, the center of population and political power in Mesoamerica moved to
   a. Yucatan.
   b. the valley of Mexico and the shores of a chain of lakes in that basin.
   c. Teotihuacan.
   d. Chimor.

3. What form of government was the basis for the imperial structure of the Aztecs during their first settlement in the valley of Mexico?
   a. regional kingdoms
   b. hunting and gathering bands
   c. city-states
   d. chiefdoms based on shifting agriculture

4. What was the impact of expansion and conquest on the Aztec social system?
   a. From a loose association of clans, Aztec society became more hierarchical.
   b. Conquest opened up Aztec society to incursions by the indigenous peoples, who began to form a trained bureaucracy.
   c. Aztec society was transformed in the sense that the Mexica adopted the social patterns of the Maya.
   d. Despite the stress of war and invasion, the Aztec society remained remarkably egalitarian.

5. What was the significance of the god Huitzilopochtli?
   a. He was the god of rain, adapted by the Aztecs from earlier Mesoamerican deities.
   b. He was the creator deity of the Aztecs, associated with the moon.
   c. He was the single god of salvation proposed by a religious reformer but rejected by the Aztecs.
   d. He was the patron god of the Aztecs most closely associated with the cult of human sacrifice.

6. What was the nature of the Aztec administration of subject territories?
   a. The Aztecs placed members of the royal family as rulers over subject peoples.
   b. All territories became part of a centralized administration run by a trained bureaucracy.
   c. Conquered territories were often left relatively unchanged under their old rulers as long as they recognized Aztec supremacy and paid tribute.
   d. The Aztecs established a military administration with subject territories controlled by regional generals.
7. Following the decline of the horizon states of Tihuanaco and Huari,
   a. a number of large states such as Chimor continued to be important.
   b. a general breakdown of power similar to the situation in central Mexico after the decline of Teotihuacan occurred.
   c. an invasion of nomadic peoples from the northern frontiers of the Andean region established small city-states.
   d. the Incas immediately established their empire.

8. What was the Inca practice of split inheritance?
   a. The throne passed to two descendants from the previous ruler’s family.
   b. The ruler’s wealth was equally divided among all male heirs.
   c. The inheritance passed through the family of the senior wife to her oldest brother.
   d. All political power and titles went to the ruler’s successor, but his wealth was kept in the hands of the male descendants to support the cult of the dead ruler’s mummy.

9. Which of the following practices was common to the Aztec and the Inca empires?
   a. the extensive use of colonization
   b. a tribute system
   c. a merchant class
   d. a writing system

10. Which of the following statements concerning the population of the Americas is most true?
   a. The population of the Americas before 1500 is easily calculated.
   b. North America was more densely populated than Mesoamerica and the Andes.
   c. The population of the Americas was probably close to contemporary Europe’s, excluding Russia.
   d. The early 20th-century estimate of 8.4 million still seems the most accurate.