

The Maya



Figure 1. Map of the Mesoamerican civilizations discussed in this unit. Modified from a map at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mesoamerica_topographic_map-blank.svg.

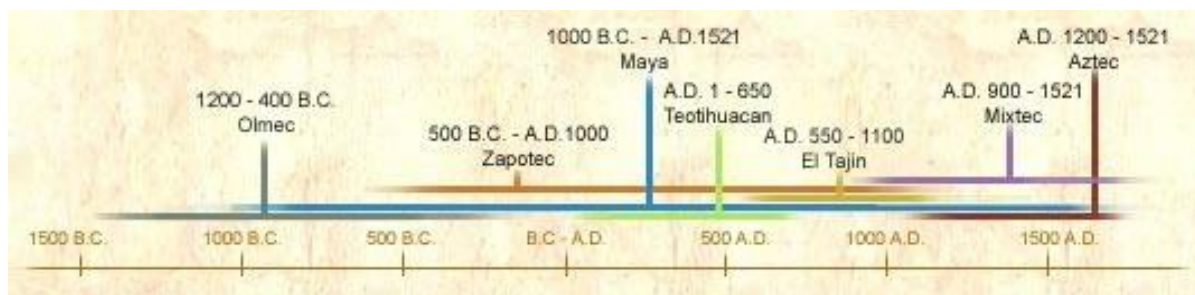


Figure 2. Mesoamerican Civilization Timeline
(Pohls 2003 <http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/chronology.html>)

Introduction

In parts of Mexico there are large groups of living Maya people. They are the descendants of the ancient Maya from long ago. Although the living Maya and the ancient Maya share many cultural traditions, there are also many differences between the two because culture is always changing and because the Spanish conquest strongly affected Mayan traditions. For these reasons, scholars usually differentiate between the living Maya of today and the ancient Maya of the past.

The ancient Maya formed a complex civilization out of a series of **city-states** long before the arrival of the Spanish in the prehistoric New World. Most of what anthropologists and historians know about the time before the arrival of the Spanish comes from a series of books called codices. These were written by the Maya in their hieroglyphic script. The Maya hieroglyphic text is the only complete writing system in the New World. This writing system was capable of conveying complex ideas and beliefs without an oral interpreter. Many of these books were burned by the Spanish, but a few remain and offer important information about pre-Spanish life in the Maya world. After the Spanish arrived and established settlements in the New World, colonists, government officials, and priests maintained records and wrote personal letters and journals that described the society and people living in the New World. These documentary, or written, sources provide detailed information about the Maya, but they cannot tell us everything about the past. To help get a better picture of Maya life, archaeologists also rely on artifacts, or objects left behind by people in the past. These material remains can include garbage, burials, buildings, or art that provide important information about the people who created and used them.

Background

The earliest **civilization** in **Mesoamerica** was the **Olmec**. These people lived along Mexico's Gulf Coast between 1200 BCE and 400 BCE. In comparison to the Maya and Aztec, little is known about the Olmec, however; it is clear that both Maya and Aztec culture were influenced by the Olmec.

The Olmec and the early Maya are the most closely related because they both lived in Mexico at the same time making them neighbors, at least for a while. The Olmec and the Maya traded goods and ideas with each other, leaving imprints of Olmec society with Maya civilization. Some of the similarities between the two groups include spiritual influences such as their shared belief in the importance of jaguars and **nagualism** [NA WA lism] (ability to change from human into animal) and avian serpents. Other cultural traits that are similar include the ballgame, similar calendars, and the creation of **stelea** [steel ee].¹ The Olmec and Maya also both enjoyed drinking chocolate, at least among the higher classes. Overall, the Olmec appear to have been a source of significant cultural inspiration for the Maya, much like the Greeks were an inspiration to the classical Romans.

About the time that the Olmec were in decline, the Maya emerged as a major Mesoamerican civilization. Mesoamerica is the region from central Mexico through northern Central America (see Figure 1). During the period from about 400 BCE to 250 CE, what we know of as the ancient Maya States first emerged. Around 250 CE many of the first Maya states collapsed, but some did not. In some cases, new Maya states arose filling the voids of earlier states. Many of the new states then declined around 800 CE. After this second period of collapse, ancient Maya civilization moved from the tropical southern lowlands of modern Guatemala and Belize into the more **arid** Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico and reformed yet again, this time with significant influence from Aztec civilization.² Unlike the Aztecs or the Inca, ancient Maya states never became an empire. The Maya political landscape always consisted of a series of powerful city-states, each governed locally.

Social Classes

The concept of an **identity** seems simple. My identity is who I am. In the social sciences researchers ask questions about how we know who we are and how we interact with each other. Identities are complex, and people have multiple identities. This doesn't mean we all have a

second person in our heads; it means everybody wears many different hats and all of those hats are parts of our whole identity. Anthropologists believe that identities have many different dimensions that serve to define how we are both the same and different from those around us.³ We construct our identities through our daily actions. How we speak, dress, behave, walk, and interact with the environment around us are ways that we share with the world who we are and how we want to be understood by our friends, families, enemies, and strangers.⁴ Identities are not just individual, in the sense that you are you and I am me. Social identities refer to your association with broader groups in the community such as schools, churches, clubs, or organizations.⁵ Our membership in these groups is based on shared traditions and customs that differentiate us from other groups. Since we are often part of more than one social group at any given time, we have multiple social identities.⁶ While people can make decisions about their identities, not all identities are chosen, some are ascribed, such as class status within stratified **social hierarchies**.

Social hierarchies, or the ranking system that divides citizens into classes along occupational or socio-economic lines, are found throughout the ancient world. Social hierarchies often function as a social control mechanism in which nobles and elite members direct working-class commoners and slaves. As political entities grow in population and area, more people are required to maintain food supplies, craft materials and tools, and to serve in the military. Distribution of labor to support the needs of a complex society often requires a social hierarchy that installs leaders within a group to direct and support production.⁷

Like most ancient states, Maya society was organized into a social hierarchy. At the top were kings or high priests, followed by nobles, merchants, and artisans, and at the bottom were farmers and slaves. Both paternal and maternal descent was necessary for determining an individuals' status at the time of Spanish contact.⁸

The King

Ancient Maya kings, called *K'uhul Ahaw* [c'ool A HOW], were considered divine. They were war and ritual leaders. Any successes or failures of the city-state were ultimately the responsibility of the kings. Kings were expected to maintain cosmic order, and many also chose to expand their territory.⁹ Kings are the main subject of most artwork in the ancient Maya world. They are the primary figure and the main topic of most hieroglyphic texts.

Each ancient Maya city-state had a ruler or king, usually male; and the throne typically passed from father to son; however, a woman could **rule by regency**. Such was the case when **Pacal the Great** came to the throne. Since he was too young to take up the throne when the time came, his mother ruled as a regent under his name for three years. Pacal expanded the power of his city-state into the western parts of Maya region and was responsible for an explosion of art and architecture in his home city. Upon his death, Pacal was entombed within a temple wearing a jade mask; outside of the tomb, there were images and inscriptions that depicted his journey into the Maya Underworld (Figure 4).

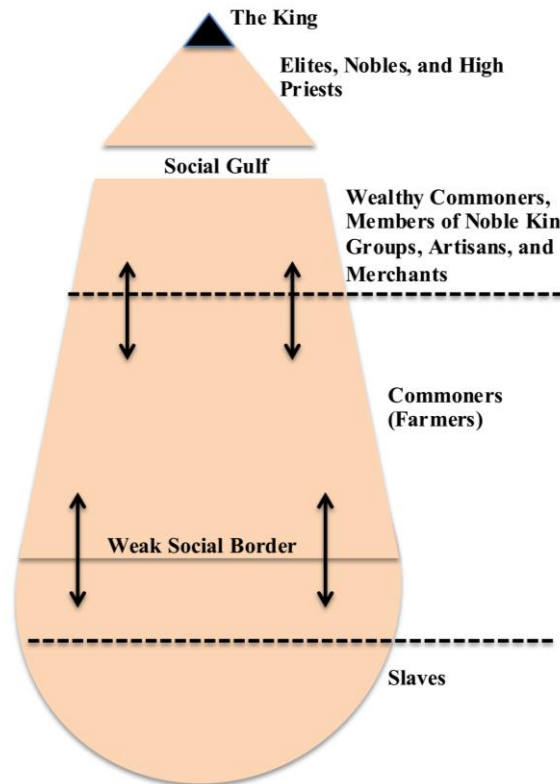


Figure 3. Tear-drop model of Maya social hierarchy. The size of each divided section represents relative population density. The dotted lines are permeable social boundaries and the arrows indicate possible social mobility.

Priests and Priestesses

There is no evidence for priests during much of Maya history, but by 900 CE.–1520 CE they had a large hierarchy of priests, who were second in importance in Maya culture only to the king himself.¹⁰ Maya priests were the keepers of knowledge, responsible for learning and teaching reading and writing of the Maya language. Priests had many roles and duties including performing religious ceremonies, instructing sons of nobles, keeping the calendars, studying astronomy and astrology, divining for the king, nobles, and commoners, and prophecy. Additionally, priests tracked the genealogies and lineages of the noble families, including the kings.

Maya priests taught the children of the nobles. Noble boys learned how to both read and write the glyphs that make up the Maya alphabet and words. Any who were going to be scribes or priests required additional instruction in reading and writing hundreds of glyphs. Priests also instructed children in astronomy, mathematics, and religious rituals.

The Elites and Nobles

The Maya elites were referred to as *almahen* [al MA-HEN], those whose descent is known on both sides.¹¹ Elites were either individuals of noble birth (related to the royal bloodline) or those born into wealthy and powerful non-royal families. Elites were connected to two separate groups; one was the social class from which they originated, and second was the

royal family and the king as a political resource.¹² Some Maya commoners that were under the control of an elite group may have been members of the same **kin group** (or extended family) as the elites, but did not share the same privilege because they were not part of the nuclear family (parents and children) of the elites. Children of high status had their skulls misshapen, eyes forced to be cross-eyed, and teeth filed into elaborate shapes as marks of beauty and status.

The use of nobles and elites as governors of the greater Maya population was dependent on two important aspects of an elite family: their kinship and their ideology. The elite's power over common Maya people was driven by their ability to control vital resources such as land, trade routes, water, and food.



Figure 4. Sarcophagus lid depicting Pacal, the King of the ancient Maya city of Palenque [pa LEN ke], as he descends into the underworld. He has the world tree coming out of him which places him at the center of the universe. Around the sides of the lid are hieroglyphs detailing information about celestial bodies and ancestors. The lid was built by Pacal's son after his death in 483 CE and was placed in a hidden chamber in a temple in the city of Palenque.

Maya elites have been identified in the archaeological record by their elaborately decorated and at times monumental residences, often found at or near the center of the cities. Elite homes are different from commoner houses because they contain architectural and design features that are not utilitarian, but instead consisted of many decorative elements that displayed wealth and position. These residences were often shared with some members of the broader kin group related to the elite nuclear family and were places where food and specialized commercial goods were made. The foundations of these homes contained buried members of the kin group now known as ancestors, which gave both the building and the elite family ritual power. This relationship with the deceased ancestors beneath the living spaces of the surviving kin group is evidenced by a high number of ritual areas in which descendants could easily make offerings of food and drink to their ancestors.¹³

Warriors

Most of the evidence for Maya warriors comes from inscriptions found on *stela*, carved stone monuments usually associated with a circular altar. The images on these monuments depict Maya warriors and battle scenes offering archaeologists and historians a glimpse into the social meanings of war in Maya society. The majority of the images show elite males, including kings, with captives. Some archaeologists believe that these images suggest a great deal of individuality in how warriors dressed for battle which could indicate that Maya warfare was diverse and not guided by the actions of a coordinated military. It is possible that warrior status represented a significant component of elite identities in Maya societies.¹⁴



Figure 5. This is a picture of a Maya stela depicting a warrior standing on a battle captive. (Adam Jones, Ph.D.) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=27891372>

The Commoners

Commoners were called *ah pach kab* [ah poch cob] among the ancient Maya and were people who did not have a noble bloodline. Separating commoners from elites among the ancient Maya is somewhat difficult to do archaeologically, however, as there seems to have been more of a continuum than discrete categories.¹⁵ This is because Maya commoners were able to attain and pass on wealth within their kin groups resulting in greater access to food and an accumulation of finer goods that can be seen in the archaeological record. They often lived alongside or slightly beyond the fringes of the elite residences in fairly dispersed household groups. Commoners were the class that was directly responsible for interacting daily with the physical environment, especially through clearing land, farming, and crafting. Households would often maintain stores of food and materials used for craft production. Maya commoners were directly involved in carrying out daily labors such as producing textiles for clothing, crops for consumption and processing, and stone tools used in farming.

Serfs and Slaves

There is some evidence to support the presence of serfs, laborers who worked the lands of nobles, although this is fairly unclear. Slaves were a special class of people who were, for the most part, collected initially as prisoners of war. The position was hereditary meaning any children born to slaves would then be slaves themselves. However, a slave's kin group could buy them their freedom. High-ranking prisoners of war were often destined to be sacrificed to the Gods.¹⁶

Family Life and Education

What constitutes a family varies across cultures. The responsibilities of people of different ages and sexes within the family are also variable depending on where you are. There are many kinds of families. The two most common types are the nuclear family, which consists of parents and their dependent children, and the extended family which consists of more than that (e.g. grandparents, aunts, uncles, grandchildren, etc.). Anthropologists often use the term **kin groups** to refer to people who share a common ancestry; in other words, people who are related through kinship.

The Maya household consisted of extended families (kin groups living together) with distinct gender roles (tasks and behaviors appropriate for different gender identities). Families made up groups who held exclusive rights to material resources such as water or land and nonmaterial resources such as souls and names. Individuals believed they held a soul within a physical body, and that their souls belonged to the larger kinship group referred to as a "house." In more modern times the Maya are recorded as believing that their souls would be reincarnated over time within the same house; it is widely held that this belief extends to the pre-Spanish period.¹⁷

At the time of Spanish contact, many boys and young men stayed in communal houses learning the arts of war and manhood, while female youth were raised within kinship-based households.¹⁸

Warfare

In the prehistoric world, warfare represents a significant category of analysis for archaeologists and historians. Researchers question the extent to which past societies engaged in warfare, how common and varied warfare was in the past, and the extent to which societies were

shaped by warfare. The archaeological record indicates that there have been periods of conflict of various intensities as well as long periods of peace. Evidence of warfare in prehistoric societies includes defensive walls and barriers, stockpiles of ammunition such as rocks or points, and depictions of war in ancient writing systems.¹⁹

Warfare is a prominent theme in Maya art and hieroglyphics. While war may have been waged between rival groups external to Maya society, such as the Olmec, there is also archaeological evidence that indicates the Maya engaged in **intragroup** warfare in which different city-states fought each other.²⁰ The Maya likely used warfare to gain political influence and access to important resources such as people/labor, water, supplies, or raw materials needed to make valuable goods. Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that for the Maya, warfare was rooted deep in their religious beliefs. Some archaeologists argue that the needs of Maya spiritual life functioned as the primary justification for war among all social classes. Inscriptions in the Temple of the Sun in Palenque depict warriors wearing jaguar body armor. They wore this armor because it allowed the warriors to transform into that spirit companion during battle and signified that the Gods were on their side. For the Maya, victory in the supernatural realm ensured success in the natural world.

Trade

The Maya had bustling trade organizations in prestige items as early as the Middle Pre-classic period, 1000 BCE. Different sites in the Maya region produced cotton, gold, jade, copper, **obsidian**, and other raw materials.²¹ The Maya constructed expansive stone causeways, known as **sacbeobs** [SOCK bay obs], some spanning 100 kilometers, efficiently linking various Maya cities facilitating long distant trade by land directly between polities. The Maya did not use "money" in the modern sense, and there was no universally accepted form of currency, in other words, there was nothing which could be used everywhere in the Maya region as a form of money. Even valuable items, such as cacao [ca cow] seeds (chocolate), salt, obsidian, or gold tended to vary in value from one region or city-state to another, often rising in value the farther away these items were from their source.

The two types of items that the Maya traded were **prestige** and **subsistence** goods. Prestige goods were things like jade, gold, copper, highly decorated pottery, ritual items, and any other items used as status symbols by upper-class Maya. Subsistence items were those used on a daily basis like food, clothing, tools, basic pottery, salt, etc. The Maya often traded with a group called the **Chontalpa** traders. These people were not ethnically Maya and traded with the Aztecs utilizing both sea (Figure 6) and land routes.²²

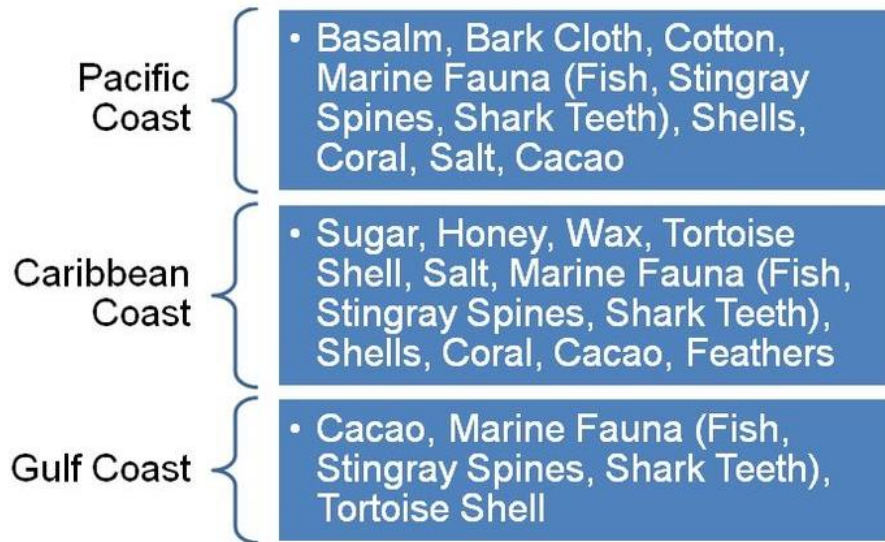


Figure 6. Maritime trade goods from the Maya area
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maritime_Trade_Goods_Chart.jpg.²³

Agriculture

The ancient Maya were an agricultural society, although they never stopped supplementing their diet with hunting, fishing, and gathering. Each household kept gardens and orchards around their homes that were an essential source of household subsistence.²⁴ Many of these household gardens involved extensive terracing of hillsides or raised fields in water-laden regions.

Maya territory expanded over a variety of ecological zones and landscapes that included, dry lowlands and rugged highlands. Regional differences within both the lowlands and highlands caused the Maya to utilize many different agricultural techniques. These methods included **terraced farms** and house and forest gardens.²⁵ In many locations, Maya communities used more than one agricultural method to produce a variety of foods in large enough quantities to feed the local population. While the differences between the highlands and lowlands required the use of different farming methods, crop cultivation in both areas relied on forest burning and periods of rest where the fields were left fallow (un-planted) in order to allow the soil to replenish nutrients. Farmers in both the lowlands and highlands planted fields of **maize** [maze] called *milpas* [meel pas]. In the *milpas*, farmers also planted secondary crops such as squash, beans, manioc, and chili peppers.²⁶

Terraced farming was the most common means of crop production in the Maya lowlands, but evidence suggests that Maya farmers also cultivated forest gardens. A forest garden is a carefully constructed forest environment in which humans have encouraged the growth of beneficial plants while discouraging the growth of others. In these forest gardens, the Maya used burning techniques to clear land and then planted the new plots. However, newly cleared plots in forest gardens did not remain fertile for very long. To overcome this challenge, farmers would rotate their fields in a constant pattern of shifting rotation. During fallowing periods, farmers encouraged new plant growth in which the forest canopy eventually regrew before the next burn cycle. This process of clearing, planting, and re-growth is called the **Maya Milpa Cycle**.²⁷

Archaeologists have found evidence of both house gardens and terraced farming at the archaeological site of Chan, the remains of a Maya farming community located in modern

Belize. Terraced farming is the practice of cutting large steps into the landscape to prevent soil erosion and to help distribute limited water resources across all of the crops. At Chan, archaeological research indicates that farmers used both house gardens and terraced farming systems to grow maize and other staple crops. Archaeologists hypothesize that the amount of labor needed to build and maintain the agricultural terraces indicates firm state control over agriculture. At Chan, this hypothesis is contradicted because the terraces were constructed and maintained by small cooperative groups of farmers. While these fields were used to grow several varieties of maize, the farmers at Chan continued to rely on small plots located near their homes for the year-round growth of other dietary staples.²⁸

Maya Religion

Religion was central and vital to the Maya. Every aspect of their lives held religious meaning. One of the most critical aspects of Maya religion is the notion of cyclical time. According to the *Popol Vuh* [poh pole voo] a book written in the early Colonial Period that records oral histories of highland Maya communities, there have been three periods of creation. The first two periods of creation ended in destruction, resulting in a third creation, in which we currently live. A belief in cyclical time is embedded in the famous Maya calendar system, which is possibly more accurate than our modern Gregorian calendar. There are two Maya calendars that work together like two wheels of a complex machine. The first was a ritual calendar, known as the *Tzolkin* [tzol KEEN], which was composed of 260 days. It contained 13 "months" of 20 days each. The months were named after 13 gods while the twenty days were numbered from 0 to 19. The second was a 365-day solar calendar called the *Haab* [hab]. This calendar consisted of 18 months, each one named after an agricultural or religious event. Each month again had 20 days (again numbered 0 to 19). There was one short "month" of only five days that was called the *Wayeb* [why eb]. The *Wayeb* was considered an unlucky period during which time the Maya did not wash, comb their hair, or do any hard work.²⁹

Gods and Goddesses

Little is known about the ancient Maya pantheon of gods. The Maya were a **polytheistic** society and worshipped many Gods with diverse personalities or appearances. Sometimes, the more important gods shifted into lesser gods, which shared characteristics between the two divine identities.

Itzamnaaj [EATS ma naj] (Figure 7) was the supreme deity among the ancient Maya. He is usually depicted as an old man. In one of his aspects, he is likely the sun god who travels into the underworld at night to become the jaguar god.³⁰

Chahk [chok] (Figure 7), the rain god, was one of the most important deities. He is depicted as only part human with a long animal-like nose. He is most often depicted holding a lightning bolt and painted blue.³¹



Figure 7. Left: Painting of Itzamnaaj on ceramic vase. Image from the Ceramic Codex, a modern compilation of codex-like imagery from ceramic vases. Right: Painting of Chac from the Madrid Codex.

Rituals

The ritual life of the ancient Maya was directed by their calendrical system and was critical to daily Maya life. There were numerous kinds of ancient Maya rituals. Everyone from the king to the commoners made regular offerings to the gods. These offerings were necessary to feed the gods and assure that they were pleased with the people and would continue to provide for them. These offerings could be food, incense, or human blood. Perhaps the most important regular ritual for all members of society was **bloodletting**, or autosacrifice (Figure 8). Blood was believed to contain the essence of life and was, therefore, the most precious offering made to the gods.³² Blood was taken from different parts of the body with a specialized tool designed to produce more blood, which was typically made of toxic marine materials such as stingray barbs. They chose these tools because they inflicted more pain on the worshiper. Pain itself is an offering which emphasizes blood offering to the gods. They would cut themselves on the tongue, arms, and thighs, and the men would also pierce their genitalia. The Maya believed that blood obtained from the tongue and genitals was the most powerful. Bloodletting could signify special dates such as births, anniversaries, and ascents to the throne.³³

In addition to bloodletting, human sacrifice was practiced as an especially important kind of blood sacrifice. Human sacrifice is first seen archaeologically in the Classic Period around 250 CE and continues into the Spanish Period. The most common kind of human sacrifice early on was the decapitation of captured high status enemy warriors during the dedications of buildings or rulers. Later heart extraction became more common. Both forms of human sacrifice are linked to Maya mythology. During times of drought or other climatic stresses, people were sometimes thrown into sacred *cenotes* (sink holes) and drowned. Children were often offered for this ritual.³⁴

Another important ritual of Maya culture was the **ballgame**. The game had religious significance because it played out a scene from Maya mythology. The courts were usually located in the city's sacred precinct. The court was flat with three stone markers down its length. Some of the stone markers have inscriptions that depicted the underworld. Experts have speculated that the game symbolized the movement of the sun (the ball) through the underworld (the ball court) each night, or that it may have represented the moon and the earth. The players

themselves were either professionals or amateurs, but many of them were war captives who were forced to play after losing battles.³⁵



Figure 8. A photograph of stone Lintel 17 at the archaeological site (or ancient city) of Yachilan [ya she lon] showing royal bloodletting. The woman on the left is the queen; she is pulling a rope of thorns through her tongue. The man on the right is the king and he is poking a string ray spine or bone awl through his genitals. By Simon Burchell (Own work), CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6028040>

The Aztec



Figure 9. Map of Mesoamerican civilizations discussed in this unit. Modified from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mesoamerica_topographic_map-blank.svg.

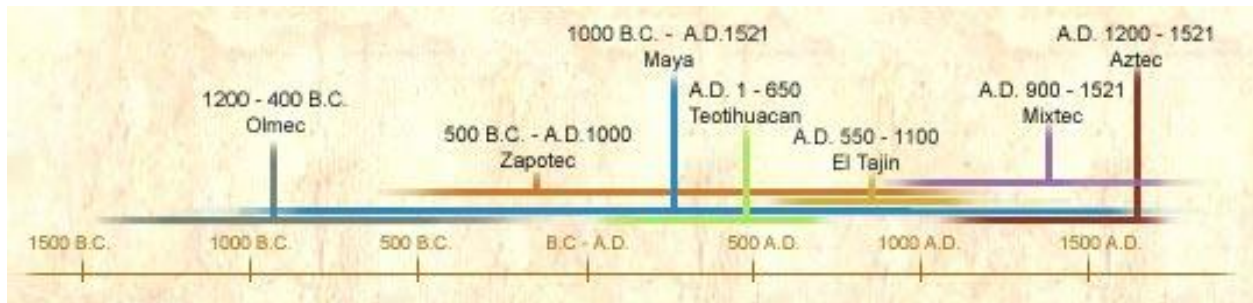


Figure 10. Mesoamerican Civilization Timeline (Pohls 2003 <http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/chronology.html>)

Introduction

The Aztec Empire was a vast civilization in ancient Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest of the New World. There are many living descendants of the Aztec in Mexico today, many of whom still speak the Aztec language *Nahuatl* [na WA tel]. We do not differentiate between the living and the ancient Aztec like we do for the Maya, however. This is because the culture of the Aztecs was more changed by the Spanish conquest than that of the Maya since the

Aztecs were the seat of power in Mesoamerica during the conquest. This made them the target of destruction and re-organization in a way that played out quite differently from that of the Maya.

The intensity of Spanish presence among the Aztecs also means that we have numerous historical accounts describing life in the Aztec empire. A handful of Spanish explorers left accounts of the conquest of the Aztecs, and there were a few Spanish priests who worked with the native population and recorded the things that they learned by talking to people; much of what we know about the Aztec Empire comes from these sources. There were also a few Colonial Period codices, books written by the Aztec people in the Aztec pictographic text, after the Spanish conquest. Unlike the Maya hieroglyphic script, the Aztec pictographic texts required an oral interpreter. Many of these books were annotated in the Colonial Period and are essential sources of information about the Aztecs. The Aztecs wrote numerous books in this text before the Spanish landed in the New World; however, all but a few were burned by the Spanish in the early Colonial Period. There are some pre-Colonial period codices that survived the Spanish burning of all native books; and they are a precious source of information on the Aztecs. The final sources of information on the Aztecs are archeological. These material remains can include garbage, burials, buildings, or art that provide important information about the people who created and used them. Archeological information about the Aztecs is less plentiful than it is for the Maya because much of the center of the Aztec world is now underneath Mexico City, and therefore quite hard to access.

Background

The Aztec civilization came to power at about the same time that the Maya city states were in decline. At this time thousands of migrants and refugees may have flooded the basin of Mexico and settled in Aztec controlled territory. The empire was built on conquest, tribute, and trade similar to earlier states in Central Mexico like the **Zapotecs** [ZA POE teks].³⁶ The Zapotec state dominated the Valley of Oaxaca [wha ha ka] from about 400 BCE to 700 CE (see Figure 9). Aztec expansion was encouraged through a state religion and the awarding of higher social ranks for great military service and accomplishments. Through military coercion the Aztecs united a diverse group of the central Mexican populations, eventually coming to control vast agricultural resources and human labor. The Aztecs were the only clear empire in ancient Mesoamerica.

When the Aztec arrived in the Basin of Mexico, they were known as the Mexica [me SHE KA]. One of the groups of people who occupied the basin at the time of their arrival, the **Tepanecs** [te pah neks], granted the Mexica permission to settle an island in the big lake that filled the basin. This island would become the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan [te NOCH teet lon], and later Mexico City. Initially, the Mexica were employed as hired warriors by the Tepanecs to expand their influence throughout the basin. In 1383 CE, the combined Tepanec and Mexica forces seized the southern lake cities, which provided critical agricultural and freshwater resources.³⁷

The Tepanecs weakened after a joint military campaign with the Mexica into the fertile lands east of the basin known as the Acolhua [AH kol wa]. Directly following the conflict, the Mexica sought universal control of the Tepanec controlled regions. The death of the Tepanec's king provided the Aztec with the opportunity. The Mexica, Acolhua, and Tepanec waged war against one another in 1428 CE. By the end of the war an Aztec king headed a triple alliance of the Mexica, Tepanecs and Acolhua.³⁸ The triple alliance expanded Aztec power from the east to the west coast of central Mexico. This influence is evidenced archaeologically by the spread of the *Nahuatl* language throughout the region as well as shared material culture.³⁹

Social Classes

Like the ancient Maya, the Aztec Empire was hierarchically structured. Aztec society was divided into different classes. Membership in these classes was based primarily on an individual's parent's status (Figure 11). In the Aztec society, in particular, there was little upward mobility between classes. At the top of the social pyramid were the king and the nobility, called the Huetlatoani [way tla toe A KNEE] and the Pipiltin [PEE peel teen].⁴⁰

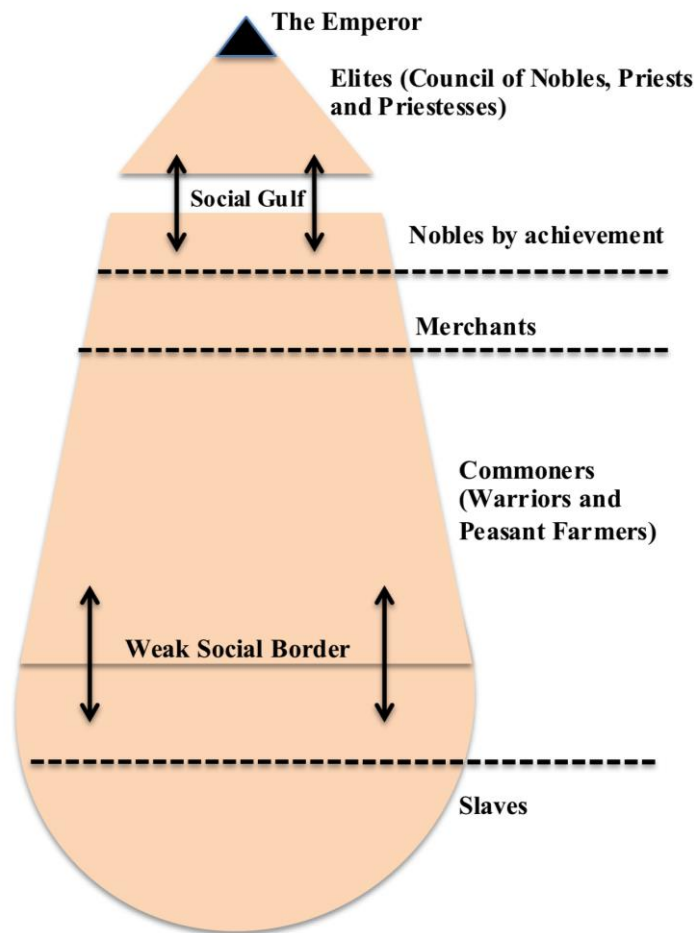


Figure 11. Teardrop model of the Aztec social structure. The bodies of the sections represent the relative population densities of each class. The dotted lines are permeable social boundaries and the arrows represent possible social mobility.

The Emperor (Huetlatoani)

The emperor was considered the highest-ranking elite and was elected by a council of nobles, priests, and military leaders. The title *Huetlatoani* means "great speaker" in the *Nahuatl* language, and the ability to speak eloquently and persuasively was a greatly respected skill among the Aztecs. The emperor's primary function was to lead military campaigns during wartime.⁴¹ The decision to declare or wage war rested solely with the emperor. The son of the

emperor did not automatically become the next ruler. Instead, when the emperor died, a group of advisors would choose the new leader from among the emperor's family.⁴²

Moctezuma I (see Figure 12) ruled the Aztec empire from 1440-1468 CE. For the first eight years of Moctezuma I's reign, he focused on internal affairs. During this period, he began construction of the main temple in Tenochtitlan and implemented a new legal code that widened the gap between nobles and commoners. For example, Moctezuma I established a law prohibiting commoners from wearing cotton clothing explicitly stating that they could only wear fabrics made from *maguey* [ma gay] (cactus) fibers. However, he also established a new title, Eagle Lord, which allowed commoners who showed great prowess in battle to move up in social rank. The end of Moctezuma I's early reign was marked by a three-year drought that led to crop failure and starvation. A break down in social order occurred and in response, Moctezuma I released people from their loyalty to the empire allowing them to seek opportunities elsewhere. Eventually, the drought ended and Moctezuma I began a process of re-consolidating Aztec power through battle. The last decade of his reign was characterized by conquest. His armies conquered parts of modern Morales and Oaxaca as well as the Gulf Coast region. Moctezuma I died in 1468 CE and was succeeded by his grandson.⁴³



Figure 12. Moctezuma I (Tovar/Ramirez Codex)

The Tovar/Ramirez Codex is a late 16th century codex written by a Spanish man that is widely thought to have been a copy of an earlier compilation of works by Aztec people in the early Colonial Period. The image above depicts Moctezuma I accepting tribute from a priest wearing the dress of the Sun God.

Priests/Priestesses

Aztec priests recorded history and law in pictographic texts written on codices. They also taught at schools, and studied astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. Astronomy was important

to the Aztecs, and like the ancient Maya, they had two distinct calendars based on the movement of celestial bodies. The disappearance of constellations, while the sun was at its highest point in the sky, was observed and tracked to mark the beginning of the rainy season, and the dry season was denoted by the constellations return. These astronomical observations directed the cultivation of agricultural fields.

During times of war rulers and priests went into battle as warriors but not as themselves. Aztec rulers would go into battle assuming the persona of two great and powerful Aztec entities. The ruler would take on the persona of the god of the sun, war, and human sacrifice. A high-ranking priest would assume the persona of the goddess of fertility and motherhood.⁴⁴

The Elites and Nobles

The elites were a select group of people of superior rank. Nobles were those with royal blood. The council of nobles was made up of high-ranking elites whose primary responsibility was to select a new emperor from the royal family after the death of a ruler. Council members served as officials, judges, and governors of conquered territories and provinces. The highest ranking nobles were the *Tlatoani*, “he who speaks”, or rulers of city-states. These men owned or controlled the land within that city-state. Nobles displayed their wealth by purchasing expensive garments, such as those made of cotton or decorated capes, and adorning accessories, such as fine jewelry. Although noble status was given at birth, failing to meet assigned responsibilities could result in a lowering of noble rank.⁴⁵

The elite class includes all of the nobles as well as some warriors and traders. Eagle and Jaguar warriors, for example, were to be feared on the battlefield and respected in daily life. They were a rank of warrior that had taken several enemy warriors captive and had shown tremendous physical strength and success on the battlefield.⁴⁶ They were an elite class of combat generals similar in some ways to Navy Seals or Army Rangers in the US military. These elite fighters were easily spotted on the battlefield, as they were adorned in feathers or a jaguar pelt to resemble these fearsome animals (see Figure 14).

Foreign trade, trade outside of the empire, was conducted primarily by a group called the *pochteca* [poach te ka] (see Figure 13), a separate social class that operated many of the trading guilds within the Aztec empire. *Pochteca* merchants served dual roles as both traders and spies. They traded state-owned goods between Aztec rulers and foreign rulers for items of equal value and higher value, such as gold, *cacao*, and slaves. In addition to state goods, merchants would trade personally owned goods to make a profit for themselves.⁴⁷ *Pochteca* were able to gain more elite status through the accumulation of wealth.



Figure 13. *Pochteca* traders (Codex Fejérváry-Mayer)

The Codex Fejérváry-Mayer is a rare Pre-Columbian book made by the Aztecs. The book is often called the merchant's almanac because it features a calendar and a lot of images of traders. In this image we see a *pochteca* trader with a bundle on his back and glyphs below him that probably tell us about what he is carrying. Some consider the small creature at his feet to be a mouse and believe that this was meant to signal that the trader was a spy.

Warriors

Though the Aztecs had no standing army, they did have about 200,000 men they could mobilize at any time. Most warriors were upper-class commoners and only part time warriors. None the less, they could rise to noble status by performing well on the battlefield.⁴⁸ Warriors could increase their rank and become military leaders by capturing enemies in battle. Sons of nobility always had the best opportunity, however, because they received the best military training and started off at a higher initial rank as a product of the status of their fathers. The military ranking of an individual was intimately tied to the overall social structure of Aztec society. The social ranking was bound to political offices, with the latter defining rights.⁴⁹

To Aztec men, dying in battle was their duty and the highest honor in Aztec society. A well-trained warrior could be extremely accurate with an *atlatl* [atell atell] (spear thrower) and *Tlaochitli* [tla ko CHEAT lee] (spear). These weapons allowed them to make killing blows while remaining at a safe distance. Military leaders commanded groups of soldiers and took part in war councils.⁵⁰



Figure 14. Aztec warriors (Codex Mendoza)

The Codex Mendoza is a book made by Aztec people twenty years after the Spanish Conquest. The book was made for the King of Spain. The image above depicts Aztec warriors dressed in cotton and feather armor, carrying their shields, or *chimali* [SHE malee], obsidian bladed spears called *macuahuitl* [ma kwa weetl], and feather flags that identify their group.

The Commoners

Over 90 percent of Aztec society was comprised of commoners.⁵¹ This social group included some warriors and merchants, peasant farmers, and serfs. People of the commoner class were limited to wearing only coarse fiber clothing, while the nobles wore finer materials, such as cotton.⁵² Commoner merchants were responsible for trading goods with both neighboring city-states and distant empires. Domestic trade, trade handled within the empire, was conducted by merchant middlemen. In contrast with the *pochteca*, the middlemen traders dealt in far fewer luxury goods and mostly traded **maize**, seeds, chilies, baskets, turkey, salt, and especially regional variations of crops. The few luxury goods traded by these merchants included *cacao* (chocolate) beans and cotton.⁵³

Peasant farmers were considered low ranking commoners. Approximately 30 percent of the Aztec population were peasant farmers. Early in the Aztec empire, land was owned by *calpulli* [kal poo lee], a neighborhood that is a political unit within a city, and peasant farmers had rights to land use through *calpulli* membership. In the later period, the land farmed by peasants was owned by higher-class citizens or nobles.⁵⁴ Once this happened, farmers had to advertise their services to the nobles and were hired to cultivate land owned by the noble.⁵⁵ This was the beginning of a landless class of people in the empire.

Serfs and Slaves

Serfs and slaves, *Tlacotin* [tla ko teen], were considered the lowest ranking commoners. Serfs were the temporary property of the nobles they served, but were considered free individuals who elected to pay a debt by serving a noble as a slave for a set period of time. Slaves were bound to their owners and farmed their owner's land.⁵⁶ Most slaves were captives of war, criminals, or children previously sold by their parents to repay personal debts.⁵⁷ Slaves were sold at markets and could be sacrificed in religious ceremonies. Slaves could be resold at a

market, but with every resale, a slave's chance of being purchased for sacrifice increased. Slaves had rights established by law, which allowed them to own land and buy their freedom. Slaves were allowed to marry, and children born of slaves would be considered free commoners.⁵⁸

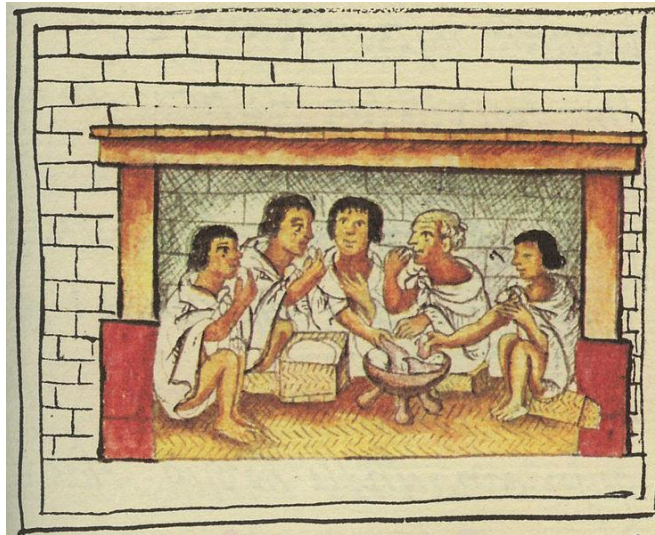


Figure 15. Aztec men eating a meal (Florentine Codex)

The Florentine Codex was written by a Spanish priest named Bernadino de Sahagún in the 16th century. The book is the result of intensive research on the Aztec people and was written in collaboration with Aztec scholars. In this image Aztec men are sharing a meal. The square basket on the left holds tortillas.

Family Life and Education

What constitutes a family varies across cultures. The responsibilities of people of different ages and sexes within the family are also variable depending on where you are. There are many kinds of families. The two most common types are the nuclear family, which consists of parents and their dependent children, and the extended family which consists of more than that (e.g. grandparents, aunts, uncles, grandchildren, etc.). Anthropologists often use the term **kin groups** to refer to people who share a common ancestry; in other words, people who are related through kinship.

The Aztec household consisted of a family unit with a mother, father, their children, and sometimes other close relatives. An Aztec child entered adulthood when he or she got married. The average age for a man to marry was 20, while a woman usually married around age 16. The families of the bride and groom usually arranged the marriages with hopes of marrying up in class. The groom's family would consult a matchmaker to help choose a bride. The matchmaker was often an older woman who approached a potential bride's family about a possible marriage. A man could divorce his wife if she neglected her duties at home, had a bad temper, or did not bear children. A woman could divorce her husband if he physically abused her, deserted her, or failed to support her or their children.⁵⁹

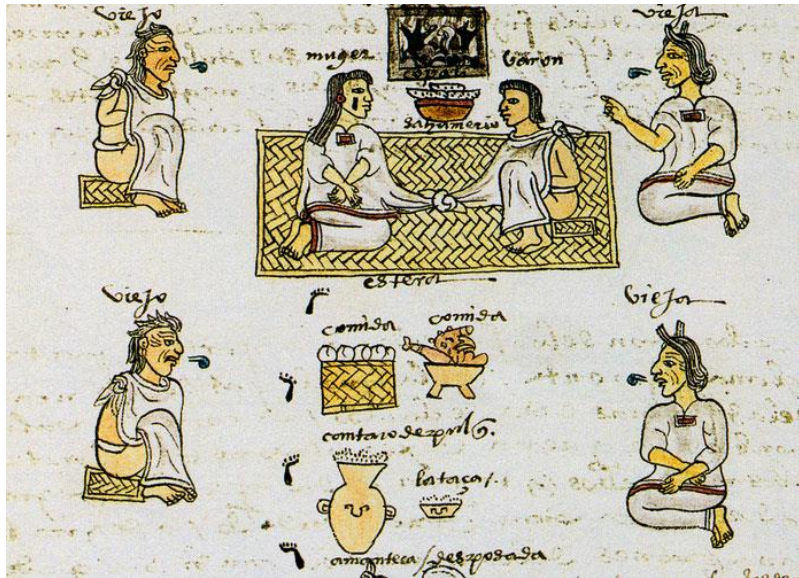


Figure 16. Aztec marriage ceremony (Codex Mendoza)

In this image the bride and groom are seated across from one another as their clothing is knotted to symbolize their marriage. An elder is sitting to the side of the bride and groom to speak on their behalf. Notice the blue scrolls showing that their words are precious. In the bottom portion of the image you see the same elders on either side of a feast which will come before the marriage ceremony, as indicated by the footprints.

The Aztecs were a patriarchal society in which men functioned as the head of household. Male responsibilities included establishing order in the home, storing wealth, and taking care of family assets responsibly.⁶⁰ Among the commoners men built houses and worked as farmers or specialized artisans.⁶¹ Men spent more time outside of the home, which left the bulk of the household responsibilities to women and children.

Aztec society expected a married woman to be a clean, hardworking, talented cook, and good housekeeper. Wives were expected to sweep and purify their homes of evil spirits. Women attended to the subsistence needs of their families by grinding maize used to cook meals. Among the commoners women fixed meals, tended the garden, and looked after livestock. Many Aztec women wove clothes of many colors and fabrics. Some older women practiced a profession, such as matchmaking or midwifery. Midwives were respected women who supervised and assisted a woman's pregnancy and delivery. A midwife also performed ceremonial rituals associated with childbirth and managed the household, while a woman was pregnant. One of the most important jobs of an Aztec woman was to bear and care for children. The Aztecs believed the purpose of marriage was to bring children into the world, so the woman's role in giving birth was significantly honored. When a woman reached 50 years of age, her domestic responsibilities ended.⁶² Women who died in childbirth were given an honored warrior's burial.

Children, especially newborns, were believed to be gifts from the gods in Aztec society. In the Aztec family, punishments were given for even the smallest acts of disobedience, and the penalties were often severe. Parents would beat their children with maguey spines or force them to inhale chili smoke. The parents believed these punishments trained their children to be great citizens. All commoner children helped out around the house. For example, younger boys would fetch water and wood while older boys would learn how to fish and handle a canoe. Eventually,

boys would go to work with their fathers or accompany them to the market. The primary tasks for girls were centered on domestic chores, which included cleaning the house and grinding maize. When girls were around seven years old, their mothers would teach them how to weave clothing and other textiles.⁶³

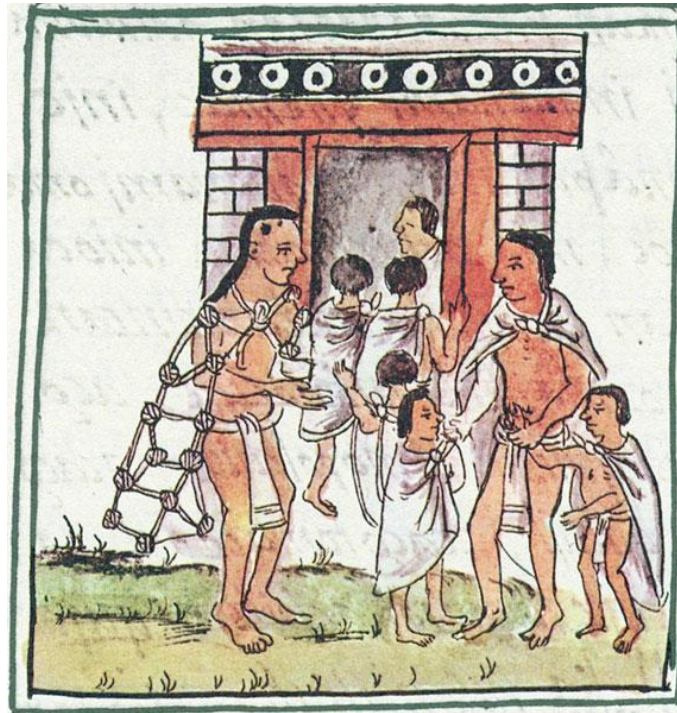


Figure 17. Aztec school (Florentine Codex)

In this image noble men are taking their sons to the *calmecac* (elite school). This school was very strict and demanding. Some commoners could be recommended into the *calmecac*, but this was unusual.

Children began a full-time mandatory education around age 15. All Aztec children attended schools that were separated by gender and social class (Figure 17). The *calmecac* [call meh kak] schools were for noble children and exceptionally gifted commoner children.⁶⁴ Boys were trained in military arts, religion, law, history, the calendar, oral literature, and writing. Knowledge of these subjects gave them the potential to become priests, judges, government officials, or military commanders. Girls learned skills such as how to direct servants performing household tasks, how to weave cotton textiles, and other domestic responsibilities within a home.

Commoner children attended the *telpochcalli* [TELL poach cah lee] schools. Boys were primarily taught how to become warriors, while the girl's focused on learning housekeeping. The children at the *telpochcalli* schools also learned things such as their ancestral history and religion. Both schools imposed harsh punishments on their students if they misbehaved, but the children at the *calmecac* schools received extreme punishments because more was expected of the noble children than the commoner children⁶⁵.



Figure 18. Children being punished (Codex Mendoza)

On the left hand, we see a boy being bound and pierced by a man with maguey cactus spines. On the right hand, we see a girl receiving the same punishment from a woman.

Warfare

Aztec society placed great emphasis on war and conquest even though no official standing army was maintained. The primary purpose of warfare was to expand the Aztec empire through a combination of conquests and alliances. The *pochteca*, who were both spies and noble merchant traders, were sent out to neighboring empires outside and around the Basin of Mexico. Information gathered during trading was relayed to rulers and briefed to military leaders and the emperor. An Aztec ambassador would be employed to request that the targeted city-state or empires pay tribute to the Aztecs. If they agreed peacefully, the sitting ruler was left in place and tribute to the Basin of Mexico was established. If the ruler refused to comply, all elites and commoners that resisted Aztec rule were slain and a new Aztec ruler was appointed. The Aztec also conducted some territorial warfare, which forced their ways of life and their religion upon those they conquered. As the empire's territory expanded a type of **hegemonic empire**, where conquered peoples would display loyalty to the conquering empire through a tribute system (kind of like taxation), was established. **Tribute** often took the form of an act, statement, or gift that was intended to show gratitude, respect, or admiration. Tributes could include any number of subsistence or luxury goods.

In addition to wars of empire building, the Aztec also fought what they termed flower wars against the neighboring Tlaxcalans [tlax call ans]. Flowery wars were wars fought for the purpose of taking prisoners to be used in ritual sacrifices and may have been fought at times of environmental or socio-political unrest.⁶⁶ The Aztecs describe these wars as opportunities for their warriors to get proper practice and training with rival powers.⁶⁷ The Tlaxcalans may not have seen the wars this way, indeed they remained staunchly opposed to the Aztecs when the Spanish arrived, suggesting that they considered the wars more territorial in nature.

Trade

As the previous paragraph illustrates, war and trade were intimately connected in the Aztec world. Aztec society thrived from trade economies and land acquisitions. Warfare was the primary way to increased tribute and to expand trade networks. The Aztecs indirectly ruled weaker adjacent territories and flourished with the influx of loyalty tribute.

Trade at the local level was conducted in marketplaces (see Figure 19). Some markets were extremely large and sold an expansive array of almost every type of commodity available

within the empire. Religious doctrine and Aztec law restricted trade from occurring outside of certain markets. All trading was required to be conducted within the market, which ensured that goods could be properly weighed and counted. The larger the scale of the trading operation the more intensely the political boundaries involved were enforced. Full-time merchants preferred trading goods with high exchange rates and materials/products that were difficult to obtain from distant trade routes over hostile terrain, because they were associated with higher market values.⁶⁸

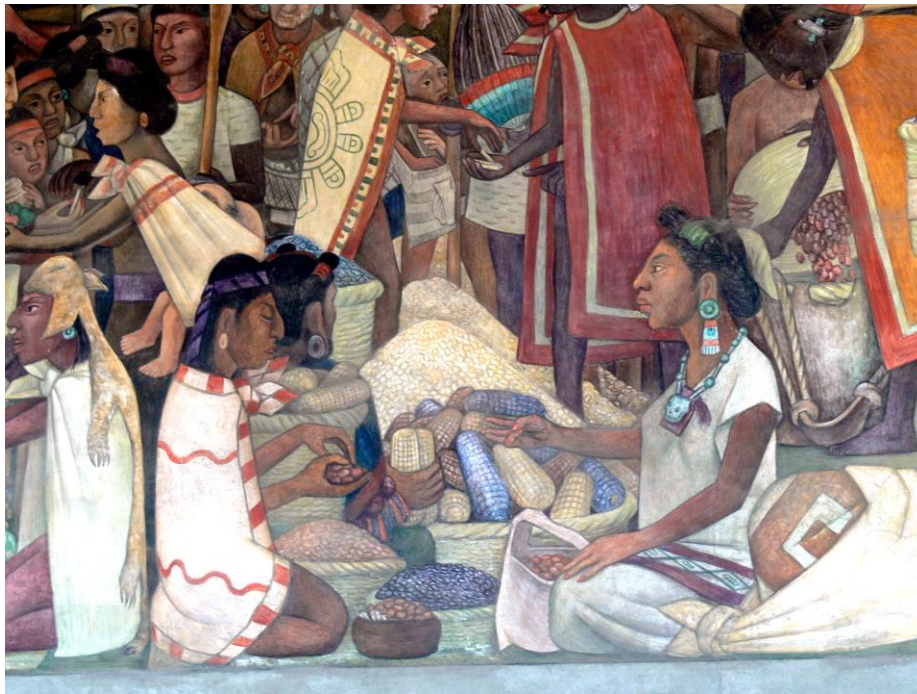


Figure 19. Artist's reconstruction of the marketplace at Tlatelolco by famous 20th century Mexican artist Diego Rivera (Wikimedia Commons).

Agriculture

The Aztecs relied heavily on agriculture to meet their subsistence needs. Cultivation was carried out with a style of farming called the *chinampa* [chee nam pa](Figure 20). The *chinampa* system is a type of raised field agriculture, where canals are dug out of the shallow lake bottom and the soil is piled into rows of man-made islands.⁶⁹ The process creates fertile land where there was only a shallow lake previously, and makes use of the plant and animal life in the lake to replenish nutrients in the soil used for cultivation. This type of farming worked well in the swampy areas around the basin's lake bed because it allowed them to control large amounts of water and maximize agricultural production from small areas of land. The *chinampas* were typically run by the Aztec government and produced abundant amounts of crops at one time, which provided ample food to the large population of the empire. The Aztecs also built terraces and check dams to increased agricultural production on the hillsides surrounding the lake.

Maize was the principal staple of the Aztec people; however, maize was not the only thing they ate. Other foods that were used to supplement the diet would have been grown in household gardens, hunted, or fished. The Aztec diet consisted mostly of fruits and vegetables with maize, beans, squash, and chili peppers taking up most the plate. Wild-type animals such as

turkey, fish, and insects were also consumed as part of the Aztec diet. In addition to plants intended as food, the Aztecs also created botanical gardens to grow medicines and herbs for use by the ruling class. One of the most esteemed crops grown was *cacao*, or chocolate. As was the case among the ancient Maya, *cacao* beans were often ground up, and hot water was added to make a beverage mostly consumed by the elites. It was highly prized because, like coffee or tea, cacao beans contain caffeine. *Cacao* beans were so valuable that they were often used as currency in Aztec trade.⁷⁰

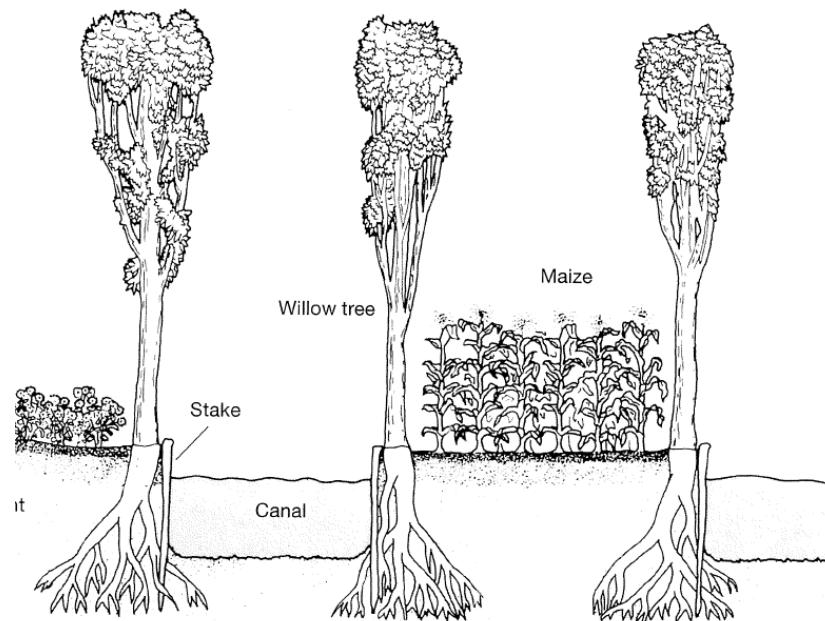


Figure 20. Drawing of a *chinampa* system. Townsend 2009.

Religion

Religion and ritual were integral parts of daily life in the Aztec world. Like the ancient Maya, the Aztecs were polytheistic and believed in a very diverse array of Gods and Goddesses. Similar to the ancient Maya world, the Gods were ever present among the Aztec people and played critical roles in their lives. In fact, the day of one's birth determined one's name and much of their future according to Aztec beliefs.

Gods and Goddesses

The two principal deities that defined Aztec religion are *Huitzilopochtli* [WHEAT zee low poach tlee] and *Tlaloc* [tla lock] (Figure 21), the God of war and the God of rain. These two deities are represented in the main temple of the Great Temple Complex of Tenochtitlan. At the top of the temple are two chapels. One houses a statue of *Huitzilopochtli* and the other a statue of *Tlaloc*. *Huitzilopochtli*, the patron god of the Aztecs and most revered within the Aztec pantheon, was a formidable figure often depicted adorned with the skulls of his enemies.⁷¹ *Tlaloc* was an ancient God revered by people living in the Basin of Mexico before the arrival of the Mexica people. *Tlaloc* was a rain God, and his primary responsibility was to create rains and nourish crops, particularly maize. The dual nature of this temple represented the integration of existing and new traditions in the Aztec empire.⁷²



Figure 21. Images of Aztec Gods (Codex Borgia)

The Codex Borgia is a ritual and divinatory manuscript that is widely believed to have been written before the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. The image on the left is Huitzilopochtli, god of war and sacrifice. The image on the right depicts Tlaloc the rain god.

Each of the gods had one or more temples where their idol was kept, and each had a group of full-time priests dedicated to their worship. Most priests were men who had begun their training early, in the *calmecac*. Promising commoner boys, whose parents had dedicated them to the priesthood, joined noble youths with ability and inclination to become servants of the gods. These young men carried the title *tlamacazton* [tla ma katzone], little priest, and spent about one year learning about priestly lore and duties. The most accomplished among the *tlamacaztons* were chosen to become priests, or *tlamacazqui* [tla ma kaz key], givers of things. Female priests, *cihuatlamacazqui* [SEE WHAT la ma kaz key], female givers of things, were less common than males. *Cihuatlamacazqui* were also trained at the *calmecac*, however, most of these women rarely served for their entire lives the way male priests did.⁷³

Ritual

Aztec religion and ritual were based on the idea that the Gods sacrificed themselves for the good of humanity. Religious practice and worship centered on reciprocity in which the Aztecs repaid the Gods with blood sacrifices. The Aztecs believed that blood was the life force of the universe. The gods would sacrifice their blood to keep the universe functioning, and Aztec citizens were expected to do the same. Like the Maya, the Aztec practiced auto sacrifice regularly. Auto sacrifice is a self-inflicted and non-fatal blood sacrifice practiced by piercing oneself in vulnerable areas, such as the tongue or genitalia, with cactus spines. This was perhaps the most common form of blood sacrifice⁷⁴.

The Aztecs also practiced both animal and human sacrifices frequently, and sometimes in large numbers. These sacrifices were an especially sacred fulfillment of the repayment of the Gods with blood⁷⁵. The most common form of human sacrifice was heart extraction. Other forms of sacrifice included decapitation, gladiatorial battles, the ballgame, drowning, and being shot with arrows. Most of the people sacrificed were captured enemy warriors. In the Aztec world this seems to have been the expected form of death for warriors and was considered honorable. However, slaves and children were also sometimes sacrificed. Sacrifices occurred as dedications

for buildings, deaths, or coronations; as acts of devotion during certain times in the ritual calendar; and as a response to environmental stress⁷⁶.

While blood and sacrifice rituals represented significant events in the Aztec ritual cycle, some archaeologists suggest that household level rituals geared toward the agricultural cycle were also important components of Aztec ritual. These monthly rituals included the preparation of special foods and bringing ritual objects into the home. Moreover, household level rituals also included offerings of music, flowers, and incense. These activities are evidenced by the recovery of ceramic figurines and incense burners found in household sites.⁷⁷

The Aztec calendar is very similar to that of the Maya. It is primarily a calendar of rituals, celebrations, and sacrifices based on two different calendars that come together like a complex machine (Figure 22). The first calendar consisted of 260 days and regulated the birthday celebrations of local neighborhood patron deities across the empire. The second calendar consisted of a 365-day year divided into 18 units with 20 days each. The Aztecs added an extra five unlucky days at the end of the year to complete the cycle. The combination of both of these calendars established a cycle that repeated every 52 years. This 52-year cycle was known as *Xiuhmolpilli* [Shoo mo peelee].⁷⁸ The end of the 52-year cycle was celebrated with the New Fire Ceremony. In this celebration, priests climbed a sacred hill, where they watched for a celestial event that signaled a new 52-year cycle would begin the next day. As an offering to the Gods, the priests would start a fire on the chest of a sacrificial individual. When the flames reached their peak, the individual was sacrificed, and their heart was thrown into a fire. Prior to this sacrifice all flames in the city had been extinguished for five days in anticipation of the end of the world. Runners carried the flame into the city of Tenochtitlan to re-light all of the fires. Through this ritual, the temple Gods were renewed, and the new cycle began.⁷⁹



Figure 22. (Antonio de Leon y Gama 1792)

This image shows the Aztec solar calendar with the multiple sub-divisions of days in units.

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[bin/displayPhoto.pl?path=/service/rbc/rbc0001/2006/2006kislak2&topImages=0030r.jpg&topLinks=0030v.jpg,0030u.tif,0030a.tif,0030.tif&displayProfile=0](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/displayPhoto.pl?path=/service/rbc/rbc0001/2006/2006kislak2&topImages=0030r.jpg&topLinks=0030v.jpg,0030u.tif,0030a.tif,0030.tif&displayProfile=0), Public Domain,

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The Inca

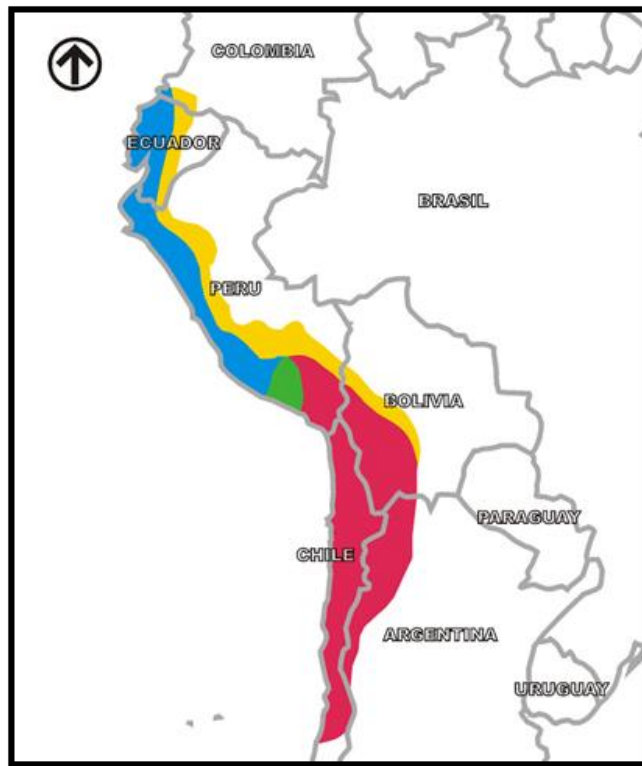


Figure 23. Map of the extent of the Inca Empire at the time of Spanish contact. Each color represents one of the four quarters making up the empire. The capital of the empire was Cusco which is located in the green section of the map. Cusco was considered the bellybutton of the universe. CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=351056>

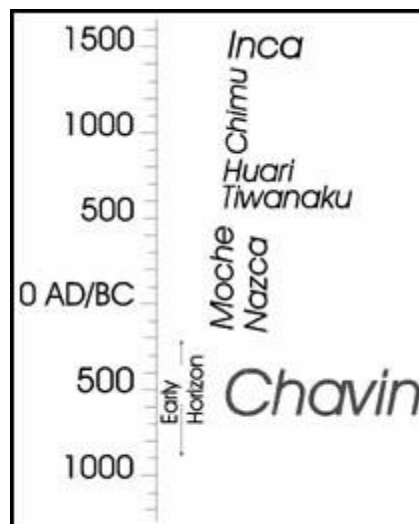


Figure 24. Timeline of major Andean civilizations.
http://www.stanford.edu/~johnrick/chavin_wrap/chavin/images/timeline.jpg.

Introduction

The Inca Empire was a vast and complex civilization in South America at the time of the Spanish conquest of the New World. There are still many living descendants of the Inca in South America, many of whom still speak the Inca language called Quechua [KE choo-a]. Like the Aztecs, however, as the regional seat of power during the Spanish conquest, Inca society suffered major changes culturally and socially such that there is less direct continuity than there is among the Maya. Additionally, because the Inca had only been around for about 100 years before the Spanish arrived, and had incorporated a great diversity of traditions into their empire, there was not a deep association with Inca culture for most people in the Andes.

Unlike the prehistoric Mesoamerican societies we have looked at, the Inca did not have a writing system. Their history was passed down in stories rather than in books. Therefore, we have no written records before the Spanish to rely on for understanding the Inca peoples. The Spanish left detailed accounts of their travels in the Inca Empire, however, and some Spanish priests worked with the native population and recorded the things that they learned by talking to people; much of what we know comes from these sources. There were also a few noble Inca men in the Colonial Period who wrote books about their past, and these too are a vital source of information. The final sources of information on the Inca are archaeological and there has been a lot of archaeological research. These material remains can include garbage, burials, buildings, or art that provide important information about the people who created and used them.

Background

In the early twentieth century, archaeologist Julio C. Tello (1919), referred to **Chavin**, a significant pre-Inca culture, as the mother of Andean civilization. Andean civilization refers to the complex states that existed on the Western side of South America in prehistory. Chavin culture extended along the coast and into the highlands of Peru from about 900 BCE to 200 BCE. The ceremonial center of the Chavin world was **Chavin de Huantar** [SHA VEEN day wantar] located north of modern Lima on the eastern slope of the Cordillera Blanca at 10,330 ft (Figure 25). Decades of archaeological investigation by Tello in the Andes revealed that the art and architecture of Chavin could be found at sites throughout the Andes. However, new archaeological research across the region suggests that the connections between Chavin and the Inca are very broad and are better thought of as shared characteristics that were wide-spread in the Andes before the rise of the Inca. The Inca initially rose to power where they had pre-existing political and social relationships; near Cusco in the southern highlands and outside of any direct Chavin influence.



Figure 25. Map showing the extent of Chavin de Huantar's influence and the location of Cuzco, the heartland of the Inca empire.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chav%C3%ADn_de_Huantar#/media/File:Chavin-small.png

The Inca Empire expanded across much of Western South America between about 1400 CE and 1535 CE when they were conquered by the Spanish. They grew from a small regional **polity** centered at Cuzco to include 2,400 miles of land encompassing modern Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia; and with a population of between 6 and 14 million people. They named their empire **Tawantinsuyu** [tay wan tin soo yoo], “the four portions that became one”.

Archaeological evidence, specifically pottery, indicates that the Inca emerged in the Cuzco basin around 1300 CE. Around this time, the basin experienced a population increase of people settled in large agricultural villages. They modified the landscape transforming steep slopes into terraced farms and constructing elaborate water management systems. According to Jerry Moore, these landscape management projects indicate the emergence of a state system in the basin with a growing center located in the city of Cuzco. The Inca state, therefore, represents a process of long-term cultural and political development. This narrative problematizes Inca oral tradition. The Inca tell of a roving band of brothers and sisters who, after cresting a mountain, viewed the Cuzco valley and knew it was the destined homeland. They pushed down the slopes and conquered the valley. The establishment of a heartland in the Cuzco basin allowed the Inca to build on existing trade and exchange relationships and to solidify their power base at home before pushing north to incorporate more territory.⁸⁰

The primary weakness of the Inca Empire was the nearly constant rebellions of commoners and royal coups. Angry groups that resisted Inca rule would often become bolder during the absence of the Inca troops, who were away on expansionist campaigns, and revolt. While uprisings were frequent, the Inca elite used a sophisticated strategy of social manipulation and control to maintain order in the empire. Inca provinces were divided up along ethnic,

linguistic, and cultural lines. Disloyal commoners were sometimes exchanged with loyal commoners from across the empire by way of mass forced migrations. This social engineering system placed rebellious groups of commoners into communities of Inca loyalists, and backfilled the original rebellious villages with Inca loyalists. This strategy allowed the Inca to balance the social perception of Inca rule. Although this policy could not effectively prevent all potential uprisings, it did create a diverse commoner population throughout the empire, which may have reduced the number of rebellions.⁸¹

Social Classes

As was true for the ancient Maya city-states and the Aztec Empire, Inca society was hierarchically organized. The Inca were divided socially into three main classes (Figure 26). The *Sapa Inca*, or king/emperor, was the most powerful. He was the son of the sun and had many wives and children. The royalty and nobles were next in social status. Royalty included the king's family. Nobles served as priests and government officials. They did not have to pay taxes and received gifts. At the bottom of the social hierarchy were the commoners. Commoners served as farmers, herders, servants, and artisans. There was no category of slaves in Inca society.

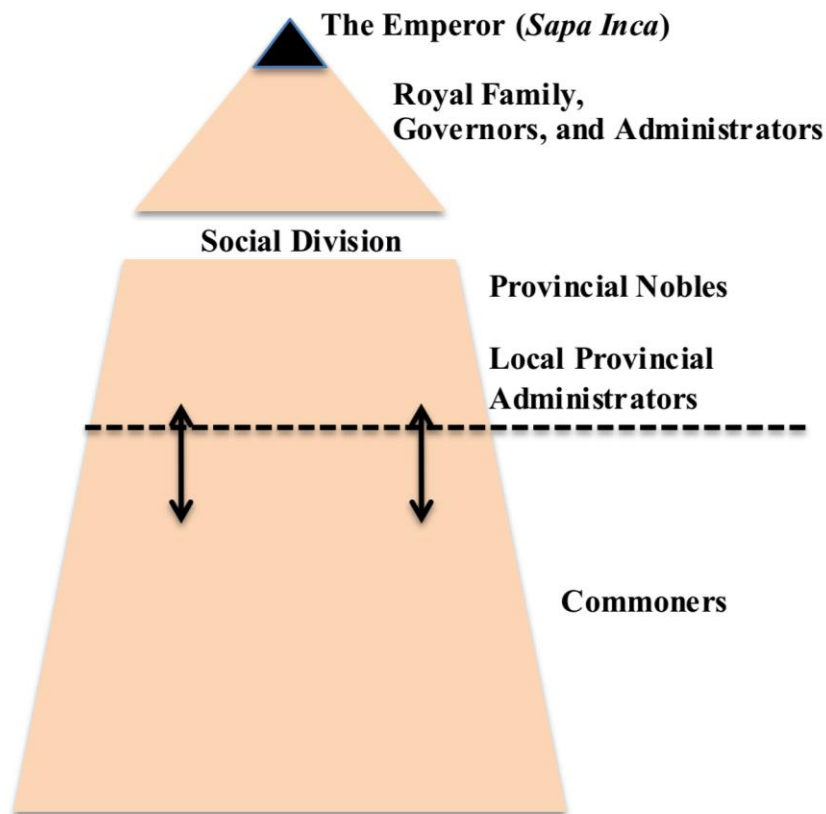


Figure 26. Teardrop model showing the social structure of the Inca Empire. The divided sections represent relative population densities. The dotted line is a permeable social division and the arrows indicate possible social mobility.

The Emperor

All political power rested with the *Sapa Inca*, the king/emperor. Inca emperors were elected by a council of their extended family who constituted the royal kin group. Members of the kin group held prominent positions in the empire, such as governors and administrators. There was no formal legal framework outlining the rules of succession to the Inca throne. The royal kin group chose a successor from among the eligible males. This selection process was complicated because there were many eligible male children since royal males typically had multiple wives. Once the selection was made, a ruler was crowned the divine king and son of the sun. Absolute power and authority of the empire was granted to the new emperor. However, the friction created from other royal male competitors for the throne often undermined and threatened the rule of the emperor for the duration of his reign, sometimes even resulting in his assassination.⁸²

The last uncontested Inca emperor was **Huayna Capac** [why na kapak] (Figure 27). He is responsible for expanding the empire's borders all the way to modern day Columbia and for quelling numerous uprising and rebellions by demonstrations of brute power. Huayna Capac died suddenly of smallpox in 1525 CE. The disease spread to the New World faster than the Spanish themselves did and because it was not previously known to the inhabitants of the region, they had no resistance whatsoever. When Huayna Capac died, he had not yet named a successor, resulting in two rival brothers vying for the throne: Atahualpa and Huascar. The result of this rivalry was a civil war that was only just ending when the Spanish arrived in 1531 CE.⁸³

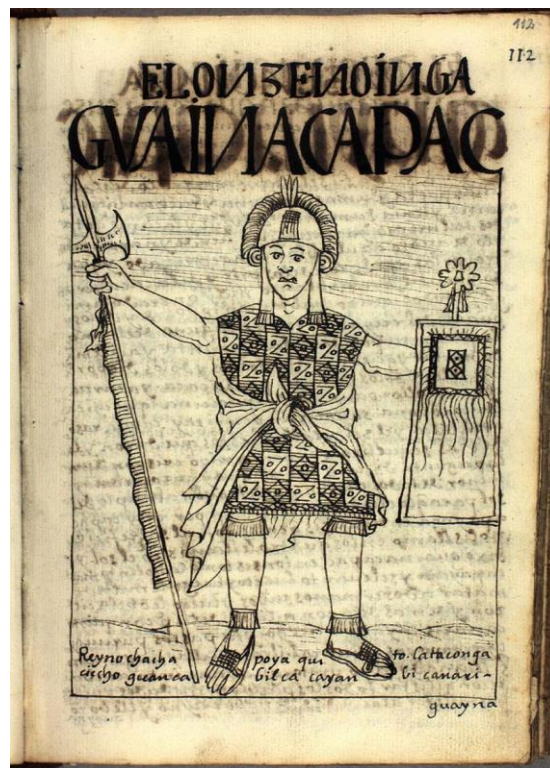


Figure 27. Drawing of Huayna Capác from the *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* written by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala in 1615. Guamán Poma de Ayala was an Inca nobleman in the early Colonial Period who denounced Spanish treatment of the natives.

Priests and Priestess

One of the most influential people in the empire was the high priest or *Willaq Umu* [WEE lock oo-moo]. The power of this priest rested primarily in his role as the person who confirmed the selection made by the nobility for the next emperor.⁸⁴ Numerous lower level priests were appointed throughout the empire. Emperors allowed different groups to maintain their religious practices on the condition that they accept the sun god, *Inti* [in- tea], as their chief deity.⁸⁵ Conquered states would have a temple built in Cuzco and send some of their priests to maintain it. This way when people visited the capital city they could worship their lesser gods and feel a spiritual connection with the seat of Inca power. The tolerance of the Inca emperors for different religious practices came at a price, however; the priests in Cuzco were punished if their worshipers rebelled against the emperor or disobeyed commands. This form of psychological and spiritual control may have cultivated the belief within the commoner class that disobedience to Inca rule would anger their deities and they would retaliate against their priests and peoples. Harnessing the power of religion, the Inca were able to add another dimension to how they managed the population effectively.⁸⁶

The Elites and Nobles

The Inca nobility was divided into nobles by blood and by privilege. All nobility was exempt from paying taxes, and many nobles had multiple wives. Inca nobility by blood were ethnically Inca people who were members of important kin groups called *panaqa* [pa knock-ka]. They typically held crucial administrative and courtly positions. The emperor's extended male family members, such as his uncles and cousins, were appointed to the regional governorships, which controlled the four major sections of the empire from elaborate regional administrative centers. Additional royal appointments awarded to family members included economic and social advisors and emissaries used to inform the emperor of regional and local provincial management, surplus inventories, and perceptions of the nobles and commoners of the emperor's rule.⁸⁷

Inca nobility by privilege were those persons of nobility who were not of royal blood. These included local lords of the provinces and non-royal kin groups in Cusco and the four regions. A complex tiered system of provincial hierarchy of the local heads of households was put in place for tax purposes. There were many different kinds of nobles in this category, which were responsible for fewer heads of households than the regional royal administrator and governor.⁸⁸ All held prestigious titles associated with administrative or leadership positions. Although the nobility did not owe a labor tax like most of the commoners, they were expected to manage the people under their care. Should a community have trouble meeting the demands of the state or should persons in a community be found stealing food out of hunger, the local noble leaders could be held responsible.⁸⁹ It was their express responsibility to see to it that the needs of the state and the people were met and that each Inca commoner head of household paid taxes on behalf of the family.

Not-Quite Nobles

There were also some special classes of people that were subjects of the noble lords, but who were not thought of as commoners. One example of these not-quite nobles is the *yanacona* [yawn-a cone-na]. The *yanacona* were hand-selected servants for the nobility. Sometimes they were even appointed as local leaders. The members of this Inca group originated from throughout the empire and once they were selected, they were permanently separated from their

families. The *yanacona* operated outside of the typical labor tax demands. Because the position was passed on to one's children, it is an example of one of the few possibilities for upward mobility in the empire. The *yanacona* often served as retainers for the emperor and maintained royal residences, retreats, and kept accurate and detailed inventories of all Inca storehouses. Storage depots were critical to Inca success during military campaigns. The Inca army could be supplied and fed with the provisions housed within multiple storehouses along the Inca roads and on royal residential lands. Inca storehouses contained the wealth of the emperor, consisting of dried maize, quinoa, potatoes, and beans, cloth textiles, warrior garb, and precious stones such as gold and gems. These same storehouses could also be used in times of poor harvests to feed the people.⁹⁰

Another special class of people was the *aclla* [ahk-ya] or chosen women. These girls were selected from all social classes on the basis of their physical beauty. Most *aclla* were weavers and *chicha* [chee cha] brewers for the state or served in the temples of the gods (Figure 28). Some were also given as rewards to nobility. It is widely seen as another rare opportunity for upward mobility within the empire.⁹¹



Figure 28. Photograph of a typical Inca *chicha* vessel with geometric designs that imitate those found on textiles.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Inca_pottery#/media/File:Ar%C3%ADbaloIncaP araChicha-2.jpg

Warriors

The Emperor himself was the commander of the army but required his regional governors to serve as generals to orchestrate battles and troop movements. The bulk of the warriors, however, were made up of conscripted commoners for whom military service was required. Unlike the Aztecs, there were no formal schools for most people in the Inca Empire. None the less, boys were trained for warfare. The *orejones* [or eh HONE-nes] (or big-ears as the Spanish called them) were an elite personal guard for the Emperor, who accompanied the Emperor in Cuzco and on the battlefield. These warriors were often sourced from particularly skilled commoner warriors or from previous enemy fighters, which cemented their loyalty to the Inca emperor. Besides the emperor's guard, no other Inca specialized fighting forces existed.

However, late in the empire, there were some ethnic groups who became especially skilled troops of warriors.⁹²

Commoners

Commoners consisted of artisans, farmers, herders, infrastructure maintainers, warriors, and fishers. In general, Inca society leaves almost no room for social mobility. People are born into a role, and it was their responsibility to fulfill that role during their lifetime. However, excellence in war could be rewarded with noble status as an *orejone* or great physical beauty could earn one status as an *aclla*.

Commoners owed a labor tax to the state. This labor tax was paid in the form of labor toward agricultural production, textile production, or another service to the state called *mit'a* [me-ta]. Commoners were organized along ethnic, linguistic, and cultural lines. The connection of individuals to a kin group and a head of household, who was responsible for paying taxes to provincial administrators on behalf of the kin group, was an especially important organizing principle among the Inca.⁹³ The Inca had strict sumptuary laws, laws defining what one could wear and how they were expected to behave. These laws assured that there was no blurring between class and ethnic divisions⁹⁴.

Serfs/Slaves

There is no evidence for an enslaved class in the Inca Empire. However, as the previous sections indicate, there were many people in the empire who were given into specific roles that required labor without reward beyond subsistence.

Family Life and Education

What constitutes a family varies across cultures. The responsibilities of people of different ages and sexes within the family are also variable depending on where you are. There are many kinds of families. The two most common types are the nuclear family, which consists of parents and their dependent children, and the extended family which consists of more than that (e.g. grandparents, aunts, uncles, grandchildren, etc.). Anthropologists often use the term kin groups to refer to people who share a common ancestry; in other words, people who are related through kinship.

Every person in the Inca world had a role that came with certain rights and responsibilities. The society as a whole depended on a kind of collective action and cooperation at all levels. There were ten age grades for each sex that specifically outlined the rights and responsibilities of individuals.⁹⁵ Children were named after about one year and underwent puberty rights around age 14. At this time boys were trained as warriors. Commoners and women did not receive any formal education. Noble males went to a formal place of learning around age 8 to be trained in language, religion, history, and record keeping.⁹⁶

An individual was considered an adult responsible for meeting labor tax requirements and military service upon marriage. There were strict rules about who one could marry, based on kinship relations. Commoners could have only one wife who was often chosen by the state.⁹⁷ The Inca saw males and females as two halves of a whole, however, while the halves are viewed as balanced, there are not seen as equals. Men held more authority.

Warfare

The Inca Empire is defined politically by its largely successful policy of expansion and conquest of the greater Andean region. Once an emperor was in place, no formal passing of wealth occurred from the previous emperor. This meant that each new emperor had to accumulate new wealth through conquest. This is why the empire built upon the successes of military campaigns and expansionist policies. The emperor would often accompany his army into battle, with the protection of the royal guard. The actual responsibility of command rested with the emperor's regional governors, who served as generals during wartime. Warriors themselves were primarily conscripted commoners and they were accompanied by some of their female kin who formed a kind of rearguard carrying supplies. For this reason wars were not usually fought during the agricultural season⁹⁸.

Inca emperors would often fight battles to acquire territory using tactics of diplomacy and intimidation. Their large armed forces usually fought against smaller less well-equipped armies because there were few polities of their size in the region. Additionally, the Inca built roads and storehouses to supply an army on the move and no other polities had that kind of infrastructure. The Inca always tried to spare damage to land, property, and peoples in order to preserve the potential value of the polity they were conquering. The thought was that the fewer people you killed during a physical battle; the more potential taxpayers you would have for the empire. However, at times the Inca army would be required to fight bloody battles against groups that rejected Inca diplomatic tactics and intimidation.⁹⁹

Once new territories were incorporated into the empire, the wealth of the new lands flowed directly to the emperor in the form of gifts, surpluses of food, and material goods. Additional wealth was distributed to the temples and priests and finally to the commoners of the region and provinces.¹⁰⁰ The Inca possessed no heavy artillery but instead relied on a combination of both ranged units, such as slingers, and infantry units. Inca slingers used slings made of cloth or leather, which were capable of launching medium-sized rounded stones onto enemy troops from a short distance. The Inca infantry was equipped with a variety of spears and heavy reed and wood clubs with star-shaped metal spikes attached to the ends. All units would have been armored with various wooden helmets and body plates capable of withstanding several impacts from enemy clubs or projectiles before failing. Inca military units were organized based on ethnic and linguistic ties, which facilitated communication from lower officers to the generals commanding the army. Each ethnically diverse unit would have additional cloth material draped over their armor, which allowed them to be easily identified and organized into units. Inca soldiers would wear all military decorations, ranging from metallic medallions to human bones from slain enemies. Directly following a victorious battle, the enemy generals would be marched to Cuzco where the emperor would walk across their necks on the steps of the sun gods temple. The enemy generals were then killed and dismembered with their skin used to create drums or their skulls used to create drinking cups lined with gold.¹⁰¹

Distribution of Goods and Trade

The Inca did not have a market-system, so the distribution of goods and trade looked quite different from that of many ancient empires. At the local level, lords of communities gained access to goods by controlling a variety of environmental zones simultaneously, either directly or through kinship-based relationships.¹⁰² At the level of the empire trade looked rather different. The somewhat unique economy of the Inca has been called supply-on-command by some archaeologists; this is defined as an economy built on the mobilization of labor rather than

goods.¹⁰³ In the Andean region, the primary measure of wealth and power was how many people or how much labor one commanded. Communities owed a labor tax to the state, though often this labor tax was paid in goods that were locally produced or materials that were locally available. Those goods/materials were stored by the state and then redistributed to some people when they participated in the *mit'a* labor projects, such as building projects. These supplies were also used to supply troops during war or in ceremonial contexts. Many commoners may never have seen any of these goods redistributed to them.¹⁰⁴

Royal estates were also an important part of the economy. There are many royal Inca estates along the Urubamba River Valley near Cusco. Among the most spectacular of these estates is **Machu Picchu** [machoo peechoo]. These estates were important to the royalty because they largely underwrote the economic needs of the ruling families. These estates were small to medium size towns housing many servants, temples, storerooms, and agricultural terraces.¹⁰⁵

One of the most important tasks for a common person was the construction and maintenance of the Inca highway system. The Inca highway served as a vital connection to Cuzco and the emperor. Only individuals on official royal business were permitted to use the road. Young commoner boys served as messengers for the capitol. The boys manned small outpost along the route every 1-2 kilometers and carried messages and small goods to and from Cuzco in this way. There were no wheeled vehicles in the Inca Empire, so all traffic on the roads was foot traffic. This allowed the roads to incorporate bridges at river crossings and stairs in high elevation areas. Emissaries and administrators on official travel could travel up to 20 kilometers per day; thus approximately every 20 kilometers along the routes a provisioning house was constructed, which provided food, shelter, and supplies to commuters. The Inca highways were vital links to the capitol, which facilitated efficient reporting of all regional activities to the emperor in Cuzco.¹⁰⁶

When no community was located near raw materials that were desirable, households would be relocated to those locations so that they could extract and work desirable materials for their labor tax. Such relocated colonies were known as *mitimaes* [mi-tea mys]. The *mitimae* colonies were also political, however, as the system allowed the Inca to relocate households from rebellious regions, thereby breaking up the community.¹⁰⁷

This very complex system of extracting labor and goods, and of redistributing goods through labor projects, required careful record keeping for a political entity the size of the Inca Empire. The Inca did not have a writing system, but they did keep track of accounting with *quipu* [key-poo] (Figure 29). *Quipu* are knotted cords of varying material and color that functioned as mnemonic devices for accountants called *quipucamayocs* [key-poo ka-my ocks]. *Quipu* required a *quipucamayoc* to be interpreted and remain largely un-deciphered today for this reason.

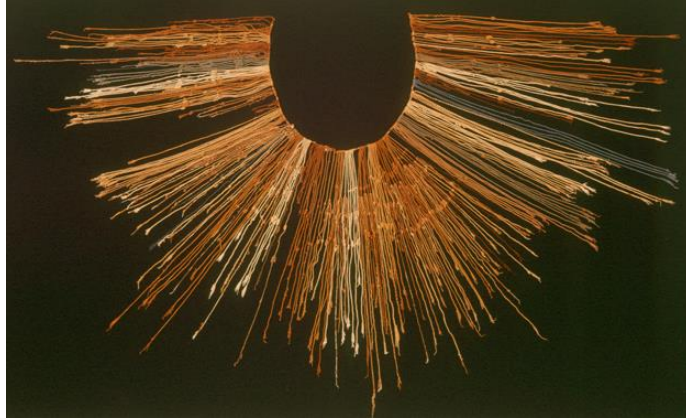


Figure 29. Photograph of a quipu. Photo Credit: Claus Ableiter
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Inca_Quipu.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2986739>

Cloth was the most important material good in the Inca Empire, and vast quantities were needed for ritual offerings and rewards. Indeed, cloth was both a status marker and an identifier of ethnicity in the Inca world (Figure 30). Because of its great importance, the Inca also had a special textile tax. The state would provide materials to communities with the expectation that those materials would be transformed into textiles for the state. The finest cloth was woven by the *acllas*, female specialists in regions known for cloth production, who were exempt from all other responsibilities to the state.¹⁰⁸



Figure 30. A photograph of an elaborately woven Inca tunic. Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=394582>

Agriculture and Herding

The Inca relied primarily on agricultural for food; although both fishing and **herding** were also a significant part of their subsistence economy, or how the Inca made sure everyone had food. In the highlands, households were largely self-sufficient and relied strongly on planting crops at different elevations to maximize the potential of the landscape (Figure 31). This involved extensive terracing (Figure 32). Inca terraces were very sophisticated feats of engineering that allowed them to manipulate landscapes and climate zones so as to maximize crop production. On the coast, communities were more closely integrated due to the need for large irrigation networks for growing crops. Coastal irrigation systems were enormous and complex. These highland and coastal communities were also integrated with one another through exchange networks that broadened the diets of people across the Andes.¹⁰⁹

Newly conquered lands were divided into three parts in terms of how production would be organized: one third of the land/herds would be used to support the state religion, one third to support the emperor, and one third to support the local population. The three parts were to be worked in that order. The state provided seed/animals and tools; the people provided labor.¹¹⁰



Figure 31. Drawing from the *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* written by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala in 1615.



Figure 32. A photograph of Inca terraces.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inca_terraces_\(22994034004\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inca_terraces_(22994034004).jpg)

Inca Religion

Part of the success of the Inca Empire is rooted in their official system of religious tolerance. The Inca did not force conquered rival groups to abandon their local spiritual beliefs as long as they incorporated the official Inca pantheon into their worship practices. The result was a dualistic religious system: The official state religion based on the worship of the Inca pantheon and adherence to the ritual calendar, and local level systems based on previous spiritual beliefs.¹¹¹

The Inca worldview, or **cosmology**, was based on the principles of duality and reciprocity. They believed the world was balanced between opposing forces, for example, dark and light, heat and cold, male and female, or elite and commoner. They believed that the balanced between these forces was maintained through a system of reciprocal exchanges.

Gods and Goddesses

The official religion of the Inca state was polytheistic and included a diverse pantheon of Gods and Goddesses as well as stellar deities. The Inca believed that stellar bodies were the patrons of certain animals or activities.¹¹²

The principle creator deity of the Inca pantheon was called by a series of titles *Ilya-Tiqsi Viracocha Pachayacachiq*, which means “ancient foundation, lord, instructor of the world”. Spanish chronicles of the Inca Empire typically refer to this God by one of his titles *Viracocha* [veer-a coach-a]. The Inca believed that he created humanity at Tiwanaku [tea WA-nakoo], an ancient city on the banks of Lake Titicaca [ti-tea caca] on the border of modern Peru and Bolivia. *Viracocha* traveled through the Andes performing miracles and teaching the people to live.¹¹³ After he taught the people what they needed to know, he relinquished power to the remainder of the Inca pantheon and the *huacas* [wha-kas], or scared places/objects.

Inti [in-tea], the sun God, and his wife *Mamaquilla* [mama key-a], the moon, protected crops and regulated the timing of certain festivals. *Inti* was represented by a gold disk with a human face. This sun idol was kept in temples of the sun across the empire. *Mamaquilla* is represented by a silver disk and was also kept in the temples of the sun. Unlike the Aztecs and

the Maya, the Inca did not represent their deities in imagery. Inca imagery is characterized by geometric designs.

Rituals

Ancestor veneration was an important ritual component of the Inca world. The ancestors were believed to remain with the living and be able to intercede with the gods on their behalf. The special ancestors were preserved as mummies, *mallqui* [mal-key]. After a *Sapa Inca* died, his body was taken to a royal estate outside Cusco for the process of mummification. This was a multi-step process that began with the removal of the intestines and heart. The heart was dried and added to a mass of hearts from previous Sapa Inca and stored inside the golden sun icon. After a year, the mummy returned to Cusco's great plaza to be re-introduced into society. They lived in a palace surrounded by prestige goods, or luxury goods that are not essential to life.¹¹⁴ The mummies of the *Sapa Inca* were important and venerated in a variety of ritual contexts. In exchange for food and care, the mummified ancestors helped to ensure bountiful crops and water supplies. Indeed, their most important function was to maintain the water supply.¹¹⁵ Caring for the *mallqui* of previous emperors was the express duty of the royal *panaqa*s [pa-KNOCK-ahs], or royal kingroups.

In the Inca religious system, mountains represented powerful places on the landscape. The Inca made pilgrimages to the high peaks of the Andes Mountains to conduct rituals and rites with the intent of maintaining the balance between the worlds. The offerings they left were diverse and included gold and silver figurines, shell necklaces, high-quality fabric, pottery, and food. On special occasions, such as commemorating an event in the emperor's life or when faced with the effects of natural disasters, the Inca would prepare special human sacrifices (Figure 33). These rituals, called *capacocha* [kap-a coach-a], were conducted on the highest mountain peaks.¹¹⁶ Archaeological evidence indicates that individuals were dressed in finery including feathered headdresses and their burials contained precious goods such as gold and silver figurines, food, and sometimes animals. There is some debate among archaeologists about how the sacrificial individuals were killed. The strongest evidence suggests that the sacrificed individuals were buried alive. This is supported by historical accounts that stated the Inca did not want to present the Gods with a broken body.¹¹⁷ Additional research indicates that child sacrifices were fed increasing amounts of coca and alcohol in the weeks leading up to the sacrifice. The Inca believed that intoxicants allowed for communication with the spirit world, and the intoxication of sacrificial individuals possibly helped them to connect with the mountain *huaca*.¹¹⁸



Figure 33. Photo of one of the Inca Period Lullailaco mummies from Argentina. This is an example of an individual who was part of a capacocha offering.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lullailaco_mummies_in_Salta_city,_Argentina.jpg

Glossary

Aclla – A special class of girls in Inca society who were selected from all social classes for their exceptional beauty.

ah pach kab – Ancient Maya commoners.

Almahen – Maya word for elites and nobles

Atlatl – American Indian tool used to throw spears.

Aztec – Significant Mesoamerican empire in the Central Mexico between 1300 CE and 1521 CE.

Ballgame – A Mesoamerican athletic event that was also a religious ritual and offered great rewards for the winners.

Bloodletting, or autosacrifice – The letting of one’s own blood as part of an offering to the Gods.

Calmecac – Aztec schools for noble children and exceptional commoner children.

Calpulli – An Aztec political unit neighborhood within a city.

Capacocha – Inca human sacrifice rituals conducted on the highest mountain peaks.

Chahk – Maya rain God and one of the most important deities in the Maya world.

Chavin – A significant pre-Inca Andean civilization

Chavin Huantar – The ceremonial center of the Chavin civilization.

Chicha – A fermented beverage made from grains, maize, or fruit consumed in the Andes.

Chimali – Shields that Aztec warriors used in battle.

Chinampa – Aztec raised-field agriculture in which canals are dug to allow water to flow between fields and the fertile mud from digging the canals is used to fertilize crops.

Chontalpa Traders – group of middlemen traders that traded between the Maya and Aztecs using a variety of land and sea routes.

Cihuacoatl – Aztec goddess of fertility and motherhood.

Cihuatlamacazqui – Aztec female priests, female “giver of things.”

City-states – An independent city and its surrounding landscape, which has its own government.

Codex (Codices) – Ancient manuscripts in book form from Mesoamerica.

Cosmology – A theory of the origin of the universe or worldview.

Haab – Maya solar calendar composed of 365 days divided into 18 months.

Hegemonic empire – An empire in which conquered city-states or peoples would pay tribute to display loyalty to the conquering empire through a tribute system.

Huaca – An Inca word for revered places in the natural landscape such as mountains or rivers.

Huayna Capac – The last uncontested emperor of the Inca.

Huetlatoani – Nahuatl word for the Aztec emperor, “Great speaker”

Huitzilopochtli – The patron god of the Aztec and the most revered god in their pantheon. God of sun, war, and human sacrifice.

Huixachtlan – A hill that Aztec priests would climb to observe celestial events for the signal of the beginning of a new 52-year cycle.

Human sacrifices – The act of killing one or more people as an offering to a deity as part of a ritual.

Identity – How we understand ourselves and others

Ilya-Tiqsi Viracocha Pachayacachiq – The principle creator deity of the Inca pantheon.

Inca – Significant South American empire in the Andes Mountains between 1430 CE and 1532 CE.

Inti – Inca sun god.

Intragroup Warfare – Conflict between two or more members of the same group or city-state.

Itzamnaaj – Supreme deity of the ancient Maya who is usually depicted as an old man.

K'uhul Ahaw – Ancient Maya kings that were warfare and ritual leaders.

Kin group – An extended family that may or may not include members related by blood.

Machu Picchu – A royal Inca estate whose remains are a popular tourist destination today.

Macuahuitl – Obsidian bladed spears used by Aztec warriors in battle.

Maize – Type of corn in Mesoamerica.

Mallqui – Special ancestors preserved as mummies and venerated at special rituals and ceremonies among the Inca.

Mamaquilla – The wife of Inti, the moon goddess who protected crops and regulated the timing of certain festivals.

Maya – Significant Mesoamerican group that emerged in Mexico between 400 BCE and 800CE. There are Maya populations still living in Central America today.

Maya Milpa Cycle – Process of clearing, planting, and regrowth of maize fields in Mesoamerica.

Milpas – Fields of maize in Mesoamerica.

Mit'a – Labor tax in the Inca Empire.

Mitimae – Colonies of Inca relocated to live near desirable raw materials and resources.

Moctezuma I – Ruler of the Aztec empire from 1440-1468 CE who was responsible for the construction of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan.

Nagualism – Olmec and Maya belief that some humans had the ability to change form into an animal.

Nahuatl – Aztec language.

Obsidian – A naturally occurring igneous rock that forms glass through the rapid cooling of molten rock. Typically used by ancient peoples as a cutting tool, weapon, or trade good.

Olmec – Early Central American civilization that lived on the Gulf coast of Mexico between 1200 BCE and 400BCE.

Orejones – An elite special guard for the Inca emperor often selected from skilled commoner warriors.

Pacal the Great – Maya king of Palenque who expanded the Maya state and was responsible for a period of artistic creativity and building.

Panaqas – Royal Inca kinship responsible for caring for mallqui.

Pipiltin – Aztec noble class.

Pochteca – A special class in Aztec society comprised of a special class of merchants and some warriors who were able to gain more elite status through the accumulation of wealth.

Polity – An organized political entity.

Polytheistic – Worship or belief in multiple Gods and/or Goddesses.

Popol Vuh – A book written in the colonial period that records the oral history of Highland Maya communities.

Prestige – Respect and admiration felt for someone or something on the basis of their achievements or perceived value.

Quipu – Knotted cords of varying material and color that functioned as an accounting device among the Inca.

Quipucamayocs – Inca accountants that maintained records on quipu.

Sacbeobs – Expansive and long causeways built by the Maya to facilitate trade.

Sapa Inca – The most powerful Inca leader, considered to be the King and son of the sun.

Sarcophagus – A stone coffin typically adorned with carvings or inscription associated with ancient civilizations.

Serfs – An unfree laborer typically tied to the estate of a noble family.

Social hierarchies -A fundamental aspect of the organization of societies that is established through fighting or political maneuvering that results in the ranking of people within a social group.

Stelea – Carved stone monuments typically associated with a circular alter.

Subsistence – a means of gathering, collecting, or saving the necessary items to support life such as food, water, and shelter.

Tawantinsuyu – The name the Inca gave their empire, “The Four that Became One.”

Telpochcalli – Aztec schools for commoner children.

Tepanecs – Nahuatl speaking tribe that lived in the Valley of Mexico before the arrival of the Aztec.

Terraced farms – A system of farming that consists of different steps cut into a hill or mountainside. These steps help prevent soil erosion and water runoff.

Tlacotin – The lowest social rank in Aztec society composed of serfs and slaves.

Tlaloc – A Mesoamerican rain god whose primary responsibility was to create rain and nourish crops.

Tlamacazqui – “giver of things.” Title given to the most accomplished Aztec boys who are chosen to become priests.

Tlamacazton – “little priest.” A title carried by commoner Aztec boys whose parents dedicated them to the priesthood.

Tlatoani – Aztec rulers who went into battle while assuming the persona of two great and powerful Aztec deities

Tlaxcalans – A Nahuatl speaking group living in Mesoamerica.

Tribute – An act, statement, or gift that was intended to show gratitude, respect, or admiration.

Tzolkin – Maya ritual calendar composed of 260 days divided into 13 months.

Wayeb – A short five-day month among the ancient Maya that was considered an unlucky time.

Willaq Umu – The high priest of the Inca Empire.

Xiuhmolpilli – The 52-year Aztec cycle of rituals, celebrations, and sacrifices.

Yanacona – A special class of people in the Inca empire that were subjects of nobles but were not considered commoners.

Zapotecs – An indigenous civilization that pre-dated the Aztecs in Mesoamerica.

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