Chapter 8

The Americas

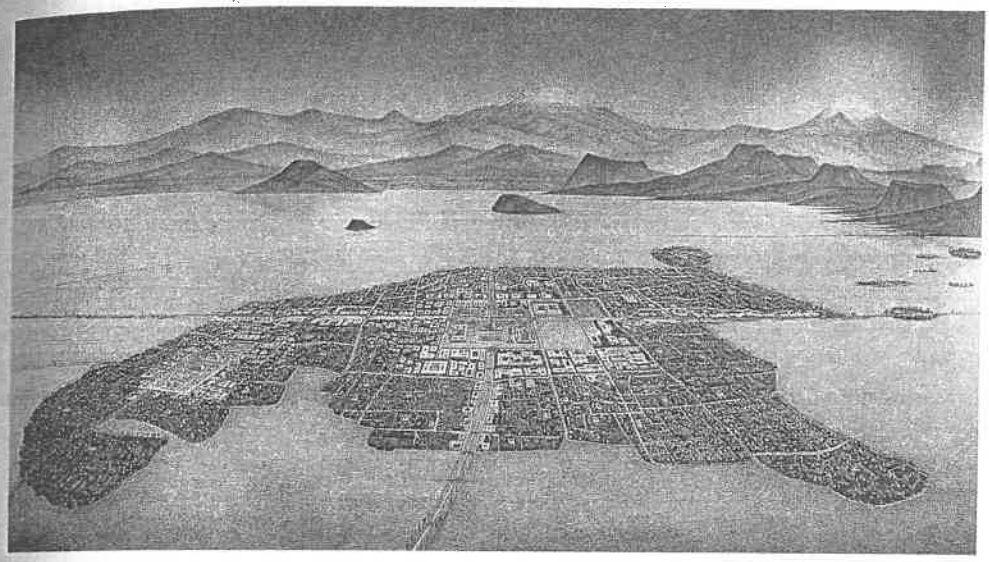


Figure 8.1

The great Aztec city-state of Tenochtitlan was established on an island in the midst of a large lake. Connected to the shores by causeways and supplied with fresh water by an aqueduct, it housed a population estimated to be over 150,000. Early Spanish observers compared its canals to Venice and were fascinated by its markets and gardens. To the Aztecs it was the center of political and spiritual power, or as they called it, "the foundation of heaven."

Island Capital of the Aztecs, Tenochtitlan (mural), Covarrubias, Luis (1919–1987)/ Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico City, Mexico/Sean Sprague/Mexicolore/ Bridgeman Images

Contents and Learning Objectives

After reading each section, you should be able to answer these questions:

IF YOU CLIMBED THE STEEP STAIRWAY to the temple at its summit and looked out from atop the great pyramid at its center, you could see that the splendid city of Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec Empire, rose from two islands in a large lake (Figure 8.1). All around its shores were densely settled towns and cities surrounded by cultivated fields. Canoes constantly traversed the lake and entered the city through a maze of canals, large crowds trod across the causeways that linked the city and its markets to the shores, and in some marshy areas, complex farming on "floating gardens" kept thousands of peasants at work. The Mexica or Tenochca people (sometimes called the Aztecs) who built the city considered it "the foundation of Heaven." For them it was a sacred space as well as a thriving metropolis and the heart of their empire.

When the first Europeans saw Tenochtitlan in 1520, the city had a population of over 150,000 and covered about 5 square miles, making it as large as contemporary Seville or Paris. The first Europeans who saw it were amazed. Some of them compared the city and its canals to Venice. Hernán Cortés, the Spanish captain who first entered the city, reported that "the stone masonry and the woodwork are equally good; they could not be bettered anywhere." His companion, the foot soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a man usually given to plain speech, could not hide his admiration:

> Gazing on such wonderful sights, we did not know what to say, or whether what appeared before us was real, for on one side, on the land, there were great cities, and in the lake ever many more, and the lake was crowded with canoes, and in the causeway were many bridges at intervals, and in front of us stood the great city of Mexico.

Díaz del Castillo went on to describe the palaces and temples, the two-storied homes of the nobles, the stuccoed buildings hung with garlands of flowers, the smell of the cedar wood beams, the zoo, the aviary, the rooftop gardens, and the bustling markets filled with everything from chocolate to elaborate textiles and from parrot feathers to precious stones and slaves. The hum of the crowd in the great market, he said, could be heard miles away. Of course, there was much about the city that he did not understand, such as the fact that each city ward was controlled by a kin group that cared for its temples, shrines, and palaces. Later, he came to understand that the purpose of temples was for ceremonies of human sacrifice, which he found appalling, but his overall impression was one of admiration and wonder.

Tenochtitlan, clearly a great urban center, was the largest of about 50 such city-states that dotted central and southern Mexico. They were the heirs of the long development of civilization in the Americas, a process that seems to have taken place in relative isolation from the other centers of world history.

The period from 1200 to 1450 saw many important developments in the Americas, particularly through the formation of great empires in Central America and the Andes—empires that can be compared to other ambitious states in the same period. But American patterns were clearly distinctive in one respect: They occurred with no contact with societies in other parts of the world. They obviously were not influenced at all by the great Mongol surge—like sub-Saharan Africa in this respect. But in contrast to Africa, the Americas also had no other kinds of trading or cultural links with other civilizations in Afro-Eurasia. This isolation did not prevent great creativity in economic, cultural, and

political domains. But it would leave the region open to massive challenges when contacts did begin to occur—after 1492.

By the mid-fifteenth century, the Americas were densely populated in many places by peoples long indigenous to the New World. These peoples were later called **Indians**. That term of course, is derived from a mistake Columbus made when he thought he had reached the Indies, what Europeans called India and the lands beyond, but the label is also misleading because it implies a common identity among the peoples of the Americas that did not exist until after the arrival of Europeans. *Indian* as a term to describe all the peoples of the Americas could have a meaning only when there were non-Indians from which to distinguish them. Still, the term has been used for so long—and is still in use by many Native Americans today—that we will continue to use it along with the term *Native Americans* to describe the early peoples of the Americas.

Indians
Misnomer created by Columbus referring to indigenous peoples of the New World; implies social and ethnic commonality among Native Americans that did not exist; still used to apply to Native Americans.

As should already be clear, what we now call the Americas embraced many different peoples with a vast array of cultural achievements. The variety of cultural patterns and ways of life of pre-Columbian civilizations makes it impossible to discuss each in detail here, but we can focus on a few areas where major civilizations developed, based on earlier achievements. By concentrating on these regions, we can demonstrate the continuity of civilization in the Americas. This chapter examines in some detail Mesoamerica, especially Central Mexico, and the Andean heartland. In both these areas great imperial states were in place when European expansion brought them into direct contact with the Old World. Discussed in less detail are a few areas influenced by the centers of civilization—and some whose development seems to have been independent of them—to provide an overview of the Americas on the eve of invasion.

900 C.E.	1150 C.E.	1300 C.E.	1450 C.E.
900–1465 Chimor Empire based on Chan-Chan on north coast of Peru	**1150** Fall of Tula, disintegration of Toltec Empire	**1325** Aztecs established in Central Mexico; Tenochtitlan founded	**1471–1493** Inca Topac Yupanqui increases areas under control
968 Tula established by Toltecs	**1200–1500** Mississippian culture flourishes	**1350** Incas established in Cuzco area	**1493–1527** Huayna Capac expands into Ecuador; his death results in civil war
1000 Toltec conquest of Chichén Itzá and influence in Yucatan		**1434** Creation of triple alliance in Mexico	**1502–1520** Reign of Moctezuma II
		1434–1471 Great expansion under Inca Pachacuti	
		1434–1472 Rule of Nezhualcoyotl at Texcoco	
		1438 Incas dominate Cuzco and southern highlands	
		1440–1469 Reign of Moctezuma I	

8.1 Postclassical Mesoamerica, 1000–1500 C.E.

What were the main features of the Toltec and Aztec empires?

After the collapse by the great Mayan civilization before 900 C.E., Mesoamerica experienced significant political and cultural change. In Central Mexico, nomadic peoples from the north took advantage of the political vacuum to move into the richer lands. Among these peoples were the Toltecs, who established a capital at Tula about 968. **Toltec culture** adopted many features from the sedentary peoples and added a strongly militaristic ethic. This included the cult of sacrifice and war that is often portrayed in Toltec art and that became a feature of Aztec society as well. Later Mesoamerican peoples, such as the

Toltec culture
Succeeded Teotihuacan culture in Central Mexico; strongly militaristic ethic, including human sacrifice; influenced large territory after 1000 C.E.; declined after 1200 C.E.

Figure 8.2

Toltec political and cultural influence spread from its capital at Tula in Northern Mexico to places as far south as Chichén Itzá in Yucatan. The colossal statues of warriors shown here served as columns that supported the roof of a great temple.

Lukiyanova Natalia frenta/Shutterstock

Aztecs, had some historical memory of the Toltecs and thought of them as the givers of civilization. However, the archeological record indicates that Toltec accomplishments often were fused or confused with even earlier societies, like the Mayans, in the memory of the Toltecs' successors (Figure 8.2).

Toltec influence spread northward as well. Obsidian was mined in Northern Mexico, and was probably traded for turquoise in the American Southwest. There are other indications as well that the large settlements of the Mississippian culture that flourished between 1200 and 1500 C.E. based on maize and bean agriculture probably had contacts with Mesoamerica. Towns, usually located along rivers, had stepped temples made of earth, and sometimes large burial mounds. Some of the burial sites include well-produced pottery and other goods, and some burials seem to have been accompanied by ritual executions or sacrifices. All this indicates social stratification in the society. Cahokia, near East St. Louis, Illinois, covered 5 square miles and may have had more than 30,000 people in and around its center. Its largest earthen pyramid, now called Monk's Mound, covers 15 acres and is comparable in size to the largest pyramids of the classic period in Mexico. Many of these cultural features seem to suggest contact with Mesoamerica.

8.1.1 The Aztec Rise to Power

The Toltec Empire lasted until about 1150, when it apparently was destroyed by nomadic invaders from the north, who also seem to have sacked Tula about that time. The center of population and political power in Central Mexico shifted to the valley of Mexico and especially to the shores of the large chain of lakes in that basin. These provided a rich aquatic environment. The shores of the lakes were dotted with settlements and towns and supported a dense population. Of the approximately 3,000 square miles in the basin of the valley, about 400 square miles were under water. The lakes became the cultural heartland and population center of Mexico in the postclassical period. In the unstable world of post-Toltec Mesoamerica, various peoples and cities jockeyed for control of the lakes. The winners of this struggle, the Aztecs—or, as they called themselves, the Mexica—eventually built a great empire, but when they first emerged on the historical scene, they were the most unlikely candidates for power.

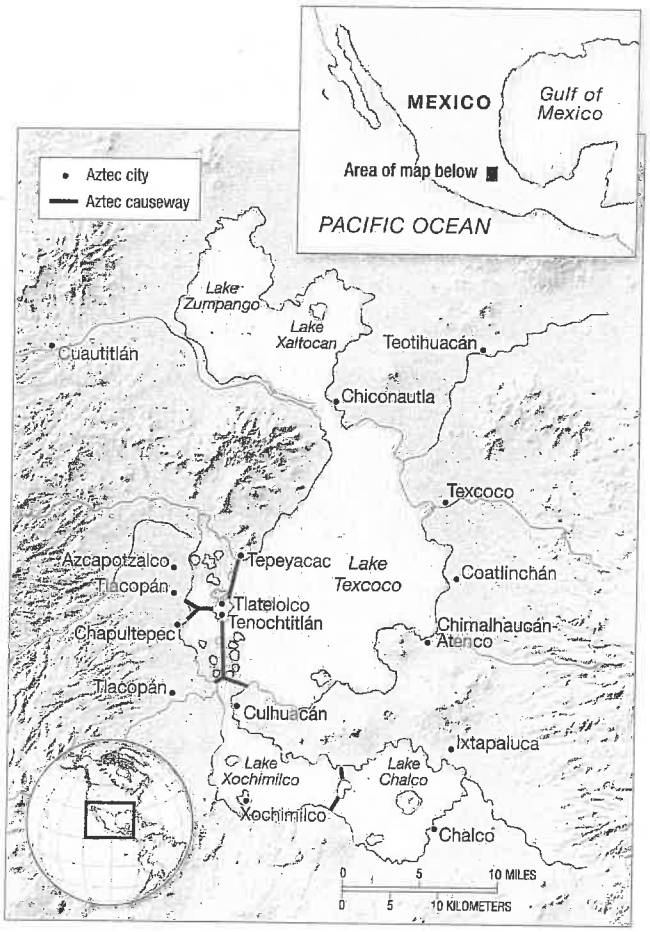
The Aztec rise to power and formation of an imperial state was as spectacular as it was rapid. According to some of their legends, the Mexica had once inhabited the central

valley and had known agriculture and the "civilized" life but had lived in exile to the north in a place called Aztlan (AZT-lahn) (from whence we get the name *Aztec*). This may be an exaggeration by people who wanted to lay claim to a distinguished heritage. Other sources indicate that the Aztecs were simply one of the nomadic tribes that used the political anarchy, after the fall of the Toltecs, to penetrate the area of sedentary agricultural peoples. Like the ancient Egyptians, the Aztecs rewrote history to suit their purposes.

What seems clear is that the Aztecs were a group of about 10,000 people who migrated to the shores of Lake Texcoco (Map 8.1) in the central valley of Mexico around 1325. After the fall of the Toltec Empire, the central valley was inhabited by a mixture of peoples: Chichimec migrants from the northwest and various groups of sedentary farmers. In this period, the area around the lake was dominated by several tribes or peoples organized into city-states. Much like medieval Europe, this was a world of political maneuvers and state marriages, competing powers and shifting alliances. These political units claimed authority on the basis of their military power and their connections to Toltec culture. Many of these peoples spoke Nahuatl (NAH-wahtl), the language the Toltecs had spoken. The Aztecs also spoke this language, a fact that made their rise to power and their eventual claims to legitimacy more acceptable.

An intrusive and militant group, the Aztecs were distrusted and disliked by the dominant powers of the area, but their fighting skills could be put to use, and this made them attractive as mercenaries or allies. For about a century the Aztecs wandered around the shores of the lake, being allowed to settle for a while and then being driven out by more powerful neighbors.

Map 8.1 CENTRAL MEXICO AND LAKE TEXCOCO



This aquatic environment was the heart of the Aztec Empire.

In a period of warfare, the Aztecs had a reputation as tough warriors and fanatical followers of their gods, to whom they offered human sacrifices. This reputation made them both valued and feared. Their own legends held that their wanderings would end when they saw an eagle perched on a cactus with a serpent in its beak. Supposedly, this sign was seen on a marshy island in Lake Texcoco, and there, on that island and one nearby, the Mexica settled. The city of **Tenochtitlan** was founded about 1325.

From this secure base the Aztecs began to take a more active role in regional politics. Serving as mercenaries and then as allies brought prosperity to the Aztecs, especially to their ruler and the warrior nobles, who took lands and tribute from conquered towns. By 1428, the Aztecs had emerged as an independent power. In 1434, Tenochtitlan created an alliance with two other city-states that controlled much of the central plateau. In reality, Tenochtitlan and the Aztecs dominated their allies and controlled the major share of the tribute and lands taken.

Tenochtitlan

[teh-nahk-teet-LAHN] Founded c. 1325 on marshy island in Lake Texcoco; became center of Aztec power; joined with Tlacopan and Texcoco in 1434 to form a triple alliance that controlled most of central plateau of Mesoamerica.

8.1.2 The Aztec Social Contract

Aztec domination extended from the Tarascan frontier about 100 miles north of present-day Mexico City southward to the Maya area. Subject peoples were forced to pay tribute, surrender lands, and sometimes do military service for the growing Aztec Empire.

Aztec society had changed in the process of expansion and conquest. From a loose association of clans, the Mexica had become a stratified society under the authority of a

supreme ruler. The histories were rewritten, and the Mexica were described as a people chosen to serve the gods. Human sacrifice, long a part of Mesoamerican religion, greatly expanded into an enormous cult in which the military class played a central role as suppliers of war captives to be used as sacrificial victims. A few territories were left unconquered so that periodic "flower wars" could be staged in which both sides could obtain captives for sacrifice. Whatever the religious motivations of this cult, the Aztec rulers manipulated those motivations as an effective means of political terror. By the time of Moctezuma II, (1502–1520) the Aztec state was dominated by a king who represented civil power and served as a representative of the gods on earth. The cult of human sacrifice and conquest was united with the political power of the ruler and the nobility.

8.2 Aztec Religious and Economic Structure

What were the main characteristics of Aztec society?

The Aztecs utilized many of the cultural and economic features they inherited from earlier societies in the region. But they added important new elements, including a more militaristic cultural tone and, in agriculture, a variety of new techniques. Aztec achievements were all the more remarkable as they continued to work within an essentially Neolithic technological framework.

8.2.1 Religion and the Ideology of Conquest

Aztec religion incorporated many features that had long been part of the Mesoamerican belief system. Religion was a vast, uniting, and sometimes oppressive force in which little distinction was made between the world of the gods and the natural world. The traditional deities of Mesoamerica—the gods of rain, fire, water, corn, the sky, and the sun, many of whom had been worshiped as far back as the time of Teotihuacan—were venerated among the Aztecs. There were at least 128 major deities, but there seemed to be many more: As in popular Hinduism, each deity had a male and female form, because a basic duality was recognized in all things. Moreover, gods might have different manifestations, somewhat like the avatars of the Hindu deities. Each god had at least five aspects, each associated with one of the cardinal directions and the center. Certain gods were thought to be the patrons of specific cities, ethnic groups, or occupations.

Tlaloc
[tlah-LOHK] Major god of Aztecs; associated with fertility and the agricultural cycle; god of rain.

The gods were supported by a round of yearly festivals and ceremonies that involved feasting and dancing along with penance and sacrifice. This complex array of deities can be organized into three major themes or cults. The first were the gods of fertility and the agricultural cycle, such as **Tlaloc**, the god of rain (called *Chac* by the Maya), and the gods and goddesses of water, maize, and fertility. A second group centered on the creator deities, the great gods and goddesses who had brought the universe into being. The story of their actions played a central role in Aztec cosmography. Much Aztec abstract and philosophical thought was devoted to the theme of creation. Finally, the cult of warfare and sacrifice built on the preexisting Mesoamerican traditions that had been expanding since Toltec times and, under the militaristic Aztec state, became the cult of the state. **Huitzilopochtli**, the Aztec tribal patron, became the central figure of this cult.

Huitzilopochtli
[WEE-tsuh-loh-POHKT-lee] Aztec tribal patron god; central figure of cult of human sacrifice and warfare; identified with old sun god.

The Aztecs revered the great traditional deities—such as Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl, an ancient god of civilization—that were so holy to the Toltecs, but their own tribal deity, Huitzilopochtli, was paramount. The Aztecs identified him with the old sun god, and they saw him as a warrior in the daytime sky fighting to give life and warmth to the world against the forces of the night. To carry out that struggle, the sun needed strength, and just as the gods had sacrificed themselves for humankind, the nourishment the gods needed most was that

which was most precious: human life in the form of hearts and blood. The great temple of Tenochtitlan was dedicated to both Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. The tribal deity of the Aztecs and the ancient agricultural god of the sedentary peoples of Mesoamerica were thus united.

In fact, although human sacrifice had long been a part of Mesoamerican religion, it expanded considerably in the postclassical period of militarism. Warrior cults and the militaristic images of jaguars and eagles devouring human hearts were characteristic of Toltec art. The Aztecs simply took an existing tendency and carried it further. Both the types and frequency of sacrifice increased, and a whole symbolism and ritual, which included cannibalism, developed as part of the cult (Figure 8.3). How much of Aztec sacrifice was the result of religious conviction and how much was a tactic of terror and political control by the rulers and priests is still open to debate.

Beneath the surface of this polytheism, there was also a sense of spiritual unity. **Nezhualcoyotl**, the king of Texcoco, wrote hymns to the "lord of the close vicinity," an invisible creative force that supported all the gods. Yet his conception of a kind of monotheism, much like that of Pharaoh Akhenaton in Egypt, appears to have been too abstract and never gained great popularity.

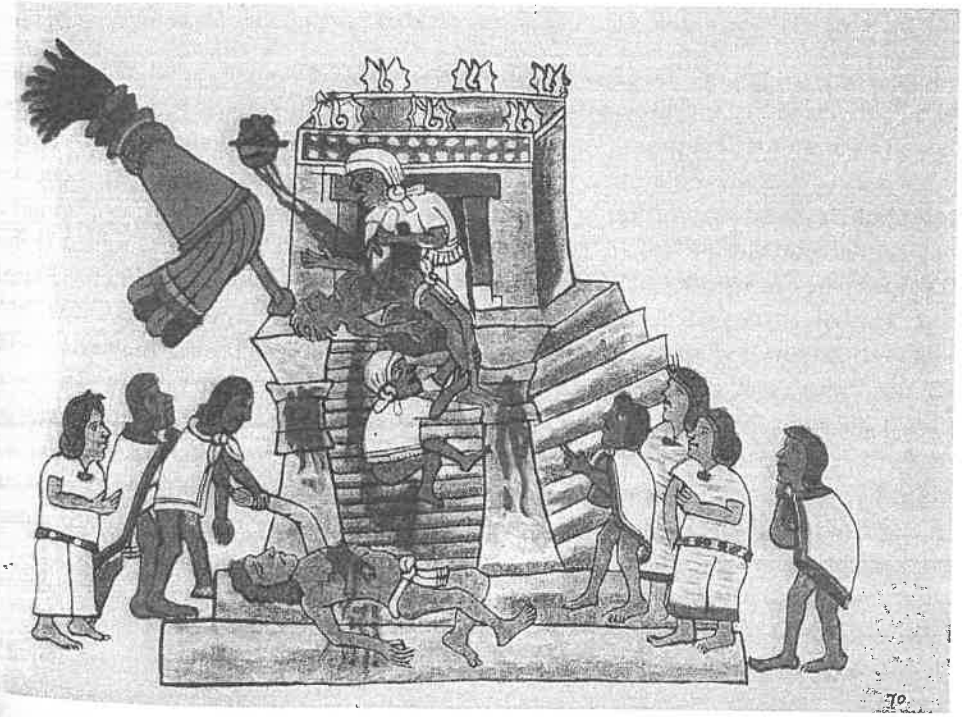
Nezhualcoyotl
[nehz-uh-WAHL-koh-YOH-tihl] Leading Aztec king of the fifteenth century.

Although the bloody aspects of Aztec religion have gained much attention, we must also realize that the Aztecs concerned themselves with many of the same great religious and spiritual questions that have preoccupied other civilizations: Is there life after death? What is the meaning of life? What does it mean to live a good life? Do the gods really exist?

Nezhualcoyotl, whose poetry survived in oral form and was written down in the sixteenth century, wondered about life after death:

> Do flowers go to the land of the dead?
> In the Beyond, are we dead or do we still live?
> Where is the source of light, since that which gives life hides itself?

Figure 8.3



Human sacrifice was practiced by many Mesoamerican peoples, but the Aztecs apparently expanded its practice for political and religious reasons. This image shows Aztec priests cutting out their victims' hearts and then rolling the bodies down the steps of the pyramid.

Photo Researchers/Science History Images/Alamy Stock Photo

Figure 8.4

This Aztec stone calendar is about 12 feet across and 4 feet thick, and it weighs about 24 tons. It was unearthed accidentally by construction crews in Mexico City in 1790.

jejim/Shutterstock

As in the Vedas of ancient India, he also wondered about the existence of the gods:

> Are you real, are you fixed?
> Only You dominate all things
> The Giver of Life.
> Is this true?
> Perhaps, as they say, it is not true.

Aztec religious art and poetry are filled with images of flowers, birds, and song, all of which the Aztecs greatly admired, as well as human hearts and blood, the "precious water" needed to sustain the gods. This mixture of images makes the symbolism of Aztec religion difficult for modern observers to appreciate.

Aztec religion depended on a complex mythology that explained the birth and history of the gods and their relationship to peoples, and on a religious symbolism that infused all aspects of life. The Mesoamerican calendar system was religious, and many ceremonies coincided with particular points in the calendar cycle (Figure 8.4). Moreover, the Aztecs also believed in a cyclical view of history, and that the world had been destroyed four times before and would be destroyed again. Thus, there was a certain fatalism in Aztec thought and a premonition that eventually the sacrifices would be insufficient, and the gods would again bring catastrophe.

8.2.2 Feeding the People: The Economy of the Empire

Feeding the great population of Tenochtitlan and the Aztec confederation in general depended on traditional forms of agriculture and on innovations developed by the Aztecs. Lands of conquered peoples often were appropriated, and food sometimes was demanded as tribute. In and around the lake, however, the Aztecs adopted an ingenious system of irrigated agriculture by building **chinampas**. These were beds of aquatic weeds, mud, and earth that had been placed in frames made of cane and rooted to the lake floor. They formed artificial floating islands about 17 feet long and 100 to 330 feet wide. This narrow construction allowed the water to reach all the plants, and willow trees were also planted at intervals to give shade and help fix the roots. Much of the land of Tenochtitlan itself was chinampa in origin, and in the southern end of the lake, more than 20,000 acres of chinampas were constructed. The yield from chinampa agriculture was high: Four corn crops a year were possible. Apparently, this system of irrigated agriculture had been used in preclassical days, but a rise in the level of the lakes had made it impossible to continue. After 1200, however, lowering water levels once again stimulated chinampa construction, which the Aztecs carried out on a grand scale. Not only the Aztecs, but all the peoples of Central and Northern Mexico realized that control of water was the key to survival and ecological success.

chinampas
Beds of aquatic weeds, mud, and earth placed in frames made of cane and rooted in lakes to create "floating islands"; system of irrigated agriculture utilized by Aztecs.

Production by the Aztec peasantry and tribute provided the basic foods. In each Aztec community, the local clan apportioned the lands, some of which were also set aside for support of the temples and the state. In addition, individual nobles might have private estates, which were worked by servants or slaves from conquered peoples. Each community had periodic markets—according to various cycles in the calendar system, such as every 5 and 13 days—in which a wide variety of goods were exchanged.

Cacao beans and gold dust sometimes were used as currency, but much trade was done as barter. The great market at Tlatelolco (TLAT-ehl-UHL-koh) operated daily and was controlled by the special merchant class, or **pochteca**, which specialized in long-distance trade in luxury items such as plumes of tropical birds and cacao. The markets were highly regulated and under the control of inspectors and special judges. Despite the importance of the markets, this was not a market economy as we usually understand it.

pochteca
Special merchant class in Aztec society; specialized in long-distance trade in luxury items.

The state controlled the use and distribution of many commodities and redistributed the vast amounts of tribute received from subordinate peoples. Tribute levels were assigned according to whether the subject peoples had accepted Aztec rule or had fought against it. Those who surrendered paid less. Tribute payments, such as food, slaves, and sacrificial victims, served political and economic ends. More than 120,000 mantles of cotton cloth alone were collected as tribute each year and sent to Tenochtitlan. The Aztec state redistributed these goods. After the original conquests, it rewarded its nobility richly, and the commoners received far less.

8.3 Aztec Society in Transition

What were the principal strengths and constraints of the Aztec economy and social structure?

As with all civilizations, Aztec society experienced changes over time. The Mexica were one of a number of peoples who spoke the Nahuatl language and occupied the region of central Mexico. From their humble origins as hunters and gatherers they emerged as a dominant power, and their rise created opportunities for some groups and a loss of status for others within their society. Eventually, they held sway over the 50 or so political units of the central valley of Mexico. Expansion by warfare privileged the warriors, and the religious basis for expansion made the priests and the cults of the temples a force in society. No ruler could govern without the support of these sectors of society, a support obtained and preserved by giving out rewards and benefits. But such policies transformed the nature of Aztec society.

Aztec society became more hierarchical as the empire grew and social classes with different functions developed, although the older organization based on clans and kinship groups never disappeared. Tribute was drawn from subject peoples, but Aztec society confronted technological barriers that made it difficult to maintain the large population of central Mexico.

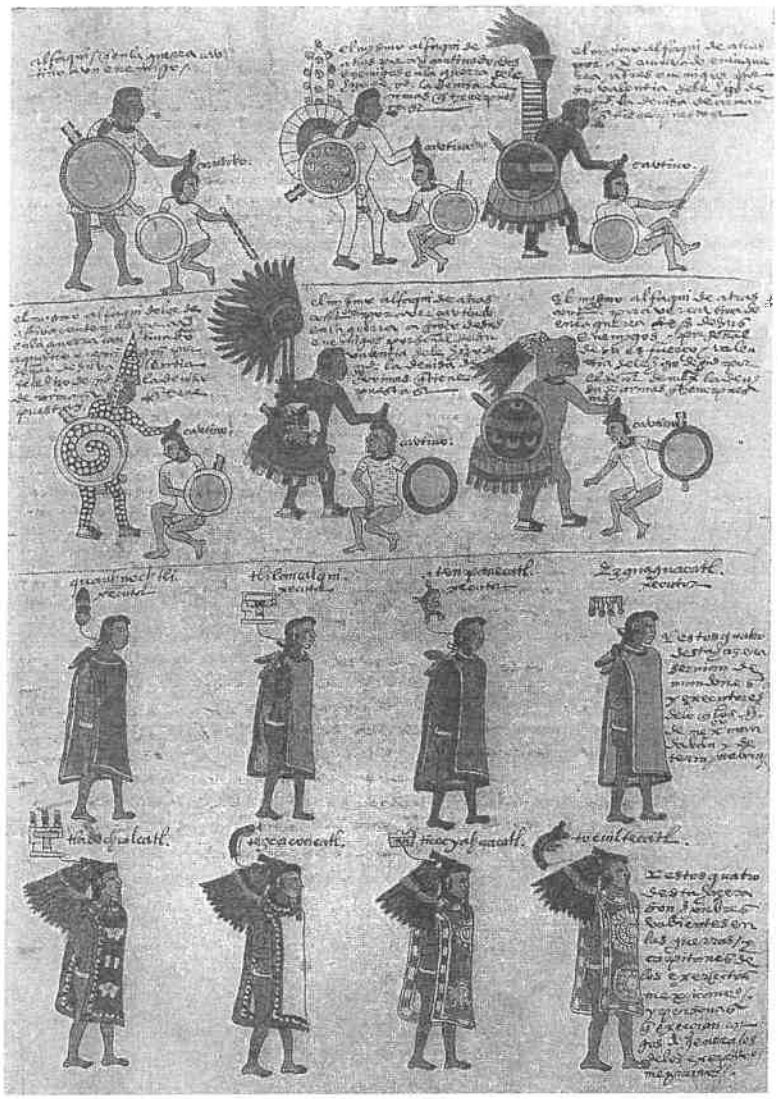
8.3.1 A Widening Social Gulf

During their wanderings, the Aztecs had been divided into seven **calpulli**, or clans, a form of organization that they later expanded and adapted to their imperial position. The calpulli were no longer only kinship groups but also residential groupings, which might include neighbors, allies, and dependents. Much of Aztec local life was based on the calpulli, which performed important functions such as distributing land to heads of households, organizing labor gangs and military units in times of war, and maintaining a temple and school. Calpulli were governed by councils of family heads, but not all families were equal, nor were all calpulli of equal status.

calpulli
[kal-PUHL-lee] Clans in Aztec society, later expanded to include residential groups that distributed land and provided labor and warriors.

The calpulli obviously had been the ancient and basic building block of Aztec society. In the origins of Aztec society every person, noble and commoner, had belonged to a calpulli but as Aztec power increased, the calpulli had been transformed, and other forms of social stratification had emerged. As the empire expanded, a class of nobility emerged, based on certain privileged families in the most distinguished calpulli. Originating from the lineages that headed calpulli and from marriages, military achievements, or service to the state, this group of nobles accumulated high offices, private lands, and

Figure 8.5



In the militarized society of the Aztec Empire, warriors were organized into regiments and groups distinguished by their uniforms. They gained rank and respect by capturing enemies for sacrifice. Note the symbolic gripping of the defeated captives' hair as a sign of military success.

The History Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

other advantages. The most prominent families in the calpulli, those who had dominated leadership roles and formed a kind of local nobility, eventually were overshadowed by the military and administrative nobility of the Aztec state.

Although some commoners might be promoted to noble status, most nobles were born into the class. Nobles controlled the priesthood and the military leadership. In fact, the military was organized into various ranks based on experience and success in taking captives (Figure 8.5). Military virtues were linked to the cult of sacrifice and infused the whole society; they became the justification for the nobility's status. The "flowery death," or death while taking prisoners for the sacrificial knife, was the fitting end to a noble life and ensured eternity in the highest heaven—a reward also promised to women who died in childbirth. The military was highly ritualized. There were orders of warriors: The Jaguar and Eagle "Knights" and other groups each had a distinctive uniform and ritual and fought together as units. Banners, cloaks, and other insignia marked off the military ranks.

The social gulf that separated the nobility, or *pipiltin*, from the commoners was widening as the empire grew. Egalitarian principles that may have existed in Aztec life disappeared, as happened among the warring Germanic tribes of early medieval Europe. Social distinctions were made apparent by the use of and restrictions on clothing, hairstyles, uniforms, and other symbols of rank. The imperial family became the most distinguished of the pipiltin families.

As the nobility broke free from their old calpulli and acquired private lands, a new class of workers almost like serfs was created to serve as laborers on these lands. Unlike the commoners attached to the land-controlling calpulli, these workers did not control land, and they worked at the will of others. Their status was low, but it was still above that of the slaves, who might have been war captives, criminals, or people who had sold themselves into bondage to escape hunger. Finally, there were other social groups. The scribes, artisans, and healers all were part of an intermediate group that was especially important in the larger cities. The long-distance merchants formed a sort of calpulli with their own patron gods, privileges, and internal divisions. They sometimes served as spies or agents for the Aztec military, but they were subject to restrictions that hindered their entry into or rivalry with the nobility.

It is possible to see an emerging conflict between the nobility and the commoners and to interpret this as a class struggle, but some specialists emphasize that to interpret Aztec society on that basis is to impose Western concepts on a different reality. Corporate bodies such as the calpulli, temple maintenance associations, and occupational groups cut across class and remained important in Aztec life. Competition between corporate groups often was more apparent—and more violent—than competition between social classes.

8.3.2 Overcoming Technological Constraints

Membership in society was thus defined by participation in various wider groups, such as the calpulli or a specific social class. It was also defined by gender roles. Aztec women assumed a variety of roles. Peasant women helped in the fields, but their primary domain was the household, where child-rearing and cooking took up much time. Above all, weaving skill was highly regarded. The responsibility for training young girls fell to the older women. Marriages often were arranged between lineages, and virginity at marriage was highly regarded for young women. Polygamy existed among the nobility, but the peasants were monogamous. Aztec women could inherit property and pass it to their heirs. The rights of Aztec women seem to have been fully recognized, but in political and social life their role, although complementary to that of men, remained subordinate.

The technology of the Americas limited social development in a variety of ways. Here we can see a significant difference between the lives of women in Mesoamerica and in the Mediterranean world. In the maize-based economies of Mesoamerica, women spent six hours a day grinding corn by hand on stone boards, or *metates*, to prepare the household's food. Although similar hand techniques were used in ancient Egypt, they were eventually replaced by animal- or water-powered mills that turned wheat into flour. The miller or baker of Rome or medieval Europe could do the work of hundreds of women. Maize was among the simplest and most productive cereals to grow but among the most time-consuming to prepare. Without the wheel or suitable animals for power, the Indian civilizations were unable to free women from the 30 to 40 hours a week that went into preparing the basic food.

Finally, we must consider the size of the population of the Aztec state. Estimates have varied widely, from as little as 1.5 million to more than 25 million, but there is considerable evidence that population density was high, resulting in a total population that was far greater than previously suspected. Some historical demographers estimate that the population of Central Mexico under Aztec control reached over 20 million, excluding the Maya areas. This underlines the extraordinary ability of the Aztec state to intimidate and control such vast numbers of people.

Document

Aztec Women and Men

In the mid-sixteenth century, bernardino de sahagún, a Spanish missionary, prepared an extraordinary encyclopedia of Aztec culture. His purpose was to gather this information to learn the customs and beliefs of the Indians and their language in order to better convert them. Although Sahagún hated the Indian religion, he came to admire many aspects of their culture. His *Florentine Codex: The General History of the Things of New Spain* is one of the first ethnographies and a remarkable compendium of Aztec culture. Sahagún used many Indian informants to tell him about the days before the European arrival, and even though this work dates from the postconquest era, it contains much useful information about earlier Aztec life.

In the following excerpts, the proper behavior for people in different roles in Aztec society are described by the Aztecs themselves.

Father

One's father is the source of lineage. He is the sincere one. One's father is diligent, solicitous, compassionate, sympathetic, a careful administrator of his household. He rears, he teaches others, he advises, he admonishes one. He is exemplary; he leads a model life. He stores up for himself; he stores up for others. He cares for his assets; he saves for others. He is thrifty; he saves for the future, teaches thrift. He regulates, distributes with care, establishes order.

The bad father is incompassionate, negligent, unreliable. He is unfeeling... a shirker, a loafer, a sullen worker.

Mother

One's mother has children; she suckles them. Sincere, vigilant, agile, she is an energetic worker—diligent, watchful,

solicitous, full of anxiety. She teaches people; she is attentive to them. She caresses, she serves others; she is apprehensive for their welfare; she is careful, thrifty—constantly at work.

The bad mother is evil, dull, stupid, sleepy, lazy. She is a squanderer, a petty thief, a deceiver, a fraud. Unreliable, she is one who loses things through neglect or anger, who heeds no one. She is disrespectful, inconsiderate, disregarding, careless. She shows the way to disobedience; she expounds nonconformity.

The Rulers

The ruler is a shelter—fierce, revered, famous, esteemed, well-reputed, renowned.

The good ruler is a protector: one who carries his subjects in his arms, who unites them, who brings them together. He rules, he takes responsibilities, assumes burdens. He carries his subjects in his cape; he bears them in his arms. He governs; he is obeyed. To him as a shelter, as refuge, there is recourse....

The bad ruler is a wild beast, a demon of the air, an ocelot, a wolf—infamous, avoided, detested as a respecter of nothing. He terrifies with his gaze; he makes the earth rumble; he implants; he spreads fear. He is wished dead.

The Noble

The noble has a mother, a father. He resembles his parents. The good noble is obedient, cooperative, a follower of his parents' ways, a discreet worker; attentive, willing. He follows the ways of his parents; he resembles his father; he becomes his father's successor; he assumes his lot.

One of noble lineage is a follower of the exemplary life, a taker of the good example of others, a seeker, a follower of the exemplary life. He speaks eloquently; he is soft-spoken, virtuous, deserving of gratitude. He is noble of heart, gentle of word, discreet, well-reared, well-taught. He is moderate, energetic, inquiring, inquisitive. He scratches the earth with a thorn. He is one who fasts, who starves his entrails, who parches his lips. He provides nourishment to others. He sustains one, he serves food, he provides comfort. He is a concealer [of himself], a belittler of himself. He magnifies and praises others. He is a mourner for the dead, a doer of penances, a gracious speaker, devout, godly, desirable, wanted, memorable.

The bad noble is ungrateful and forgetful, a debaser, a disparager of things, contemptuous of others, arrogant, bragging. He creates disorder, glories over his lineage, extols his own virtues.

The Mature Common Woman

The good mature woman is candid. She is resolute, firm of heart, constant—not to be dismayed; brave like a man; vigorous, resolute, persevering—not one to falter. She is long-suffering; she accepts reprimands calmly—endures things like a man. She becomes firm—takes courage. She is intent. She gives of herself. She goes in humility. She exerts herself.

The bad woman is thin, tottering, weak—an inconstant companion, unfriendly. She annoys others, chagrins them, shames, oppresses one. She becomes impatient; she loses hope, becomes embarrassed—chagrined. Evil is her life; she lives in shame.

The Weaver of Designs

She concerns herself with using thread, works with thread. The good weaver of designs is skilled—a maker of varicolored capes, an outliner of designs, a blender of colors, a joiner of pieces, a matcher of pieces, a person of good memory. She does things dexterously. She weaves designs. She selects. She weaves tightly. She forms borders. She forms the neck....

The bad weaver of designs is untrained—silly, foolish, unobservant, unskilled of hand, ignorant, stupid. She tangles the thread, she harms her work—she spoils it.

The Physician

The physician is a knower of herbs, of roots, of trees, of stones; she is experienced in these. She is one who conducts examinations; she is a woman of experience, of trust, of professional skill: a counselor.

The good physician is a restorer, a provider of health, a relaxer—one who makes people feel well, who envelops one in ashes. She cures people; she provides them health; she lances them; she bleeds them... pierces them with an obsidian lancet.

SOURCE: Bernardino de Sahagún, "Florentine Codex: The General History of the Things of New Spain", trans. and ed. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble (Santa Fe, NM; Salt Lake City: University of Utah: 1950–1982).

Review Questions:

1. In what ways do the expectations for men and women differ in Aztec society?
2. To what extent do the roles for men and women in Aztec society differ from our own?
3. Did the Aztecs value the same characteristics as our own and other historical societies?

8.3.3 A Tribute Empire

Each city-state was ruled by a speaker chosen from the nobility. The Great Speaker, the ruler of Tenochtitlan, was first among supposed equals. He was in effect the emperor, with great private wealth and public power, and was increasingly considered a living god. His court was magnificent and surrounded with elaborate rituals. Those who approached him could not look him in the eye and were required to throw dirt upon their

heads as a sign of humility. In theory he was elected, but his election was really a choice between siblings of the same royal family. The prime minister held a position of tremendous power and usually was a close relative of the ruler. There was a governing council; in theory, the rulers of the other cities in the alliance also had a say in government, but in reality most power was in the hands of the Aztec ruler and his chief advisor.

During the century of greatest Aztec expansion after 1426, a social and political transformation had taken place. The position and nature of the old calpulli clans had changed radically, and a newly powerful nobility with a deified and nearly absolute ruler had emerged. The ancient cult of military virtues had been elevated to a supreme position as the religion of the state, and the double purpose of securing tribute for the state and obtaining victims for Huitzilopochtli drove further Aztec conquests.

The empire was never integrated, and local rulers often stayed in place to act as tribute collectors for the Aztec overlords. In many ways the Aztec Empire was simply an expansion of long-existing Mesoamerican concepts and institutions of government, and it was not unlike the subject city-states over which it gained control. These city-states, in turn, were often left unchanged if they recognized Aztec supremacy and met their obligations of labor and tribute. Tribute payments served both an economic and a political function, concentrating power and wealth in the Aztec capital. Archeologists at the recent excavations of the Great Temple beneath the center of Mexico City have been impressed by the large number of offerings and objects that came from the farthest ends of the empire and beyond. At the frontiers, neighboring states such as that of the Tarascans of Michoacan in West Central Mexico preserved their freedom, while within the empire enclaves of independent kingdoms such as Tlaxcala (tlaks-KAHL-uh) maintained a fierce opposition to the Aztecs. There were many revolts against Aztec rule or a particular tribute burden, which the Aztecs often put down ruthlessly.

In general, the Aztec system was a success because it aimed at exerting political domination and not necessarily direct administrative or territorial control. In the long run, however, the increasing social stresses created by the rise of the nobles and the system of terror and tribute imposed on subject peoples were internal weaknesses that contributed to the Aztec empire's collapse.

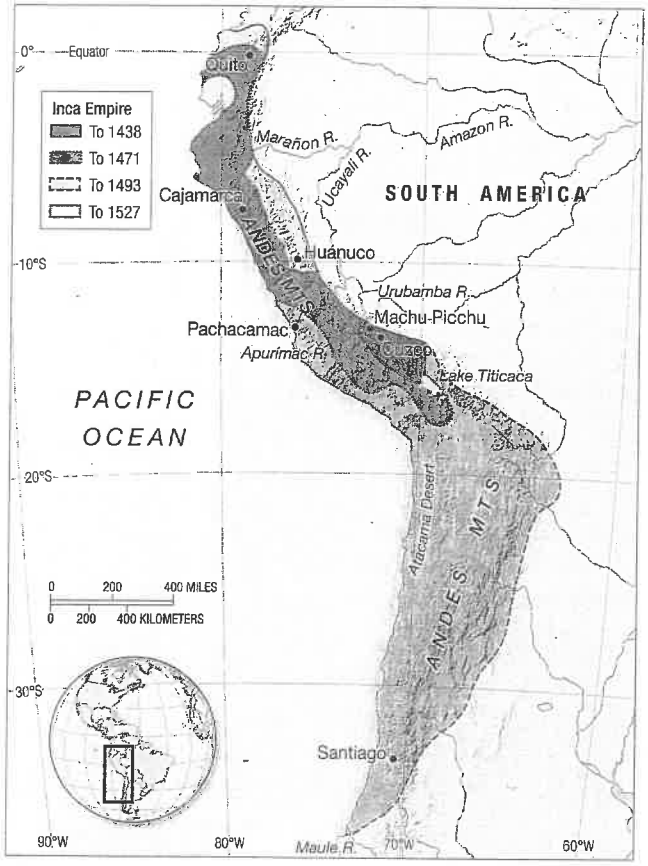
The Aztecs were a continuation of the long process of civilization in Mesoamerica. The civilizations of the classic era did not simply disappear in Central Mexico or among the Maya in Yucatan and Central America, but they were reinterpreted and adapted to new political and social realities. When Europeans arrived in Mexico, they assumed that what they found was the culmination of Indian civilization, when in fact it was the militarized afterglow of earlier achievements.

8.4 Twantinsuyu: World of the Incas

What were the principal causes of the expansion of the Inca Empire?

Almost at the same time that the Aztecs extended their control over much of Mesoamerica, another great imperial state was rising in the Andean highlands, and it eventually became an empire some 3,000 miles in extent (Map 8.2). The Inca Empire incorporated many aspects of previous Andean

Map 8.2 INCA EXPANSION



Each ruler expanded the empire in a series of campaigns to increase wealth and political control.

cultures but fused them together in new ways. With a genius for state organization and bureaucratic control over peoples of different cultures and languages, it achieved a level of integration and domination previously unknown in the Americas.

After about 1300 C.E., the Inca Empire emerged in the highlands of Peru and eventually spread its control over the whole region by integrating many ethnic groups into an extensive imperial state.

Throughout the Andean cultural hearth, after the breakup of the large "intermediate horizon" states of Tiahuanaco and Huari (c. 550–1000 C.E.), several smaller regional states continued to exercise some power. Unlike the breakdown of power that took place in postclassical Mesoamerica, in the Andean zone many large states continued to be important. Some states in the Andean highlands on the broad open areas near Lake Titicaca and the states along rivers on the north coast, such as those in the Moche valley, remained centers of agricultural activity and population density. This was a period of war between rival local chiefdoms and small states and in some ways was an Andean parallel to the post-Toltec militaristic era in Mesoamerica. Of these states, the coastal kingdom of Chimor, centered on its capital of Chan-Chan, emerged as the most powerful. Between 900 and its conquest by the Incas in 1465, it gained control of most of the north coast of Peru.

8.4.1 The Inca Rise to Power

While Chimor spread its control over 600 miles of the coast, in the southern Andean highlands, where there were few large urban areas, ethnic groups and small states struggled for survival. Among these groups were several related Quechua-speaking clans, or **ayllus**, living near Cuzco, an area that had been under the influence of Huari, a powerful state, but had not been particularly important. Their own legends stated that 10 related clans emerged from caves in the region and were taken to Cuzco by a mythical leader. Wherever their origins, by about 1350 C.E. they lived in and around Cuzco, and by 1438 they had defeated their hostile neighbors in the area. At this point under their ruler, or *Inca*, **Pachacuti** (r. 1438–1471), they launched a series of military alliances and campaigns that brought them control of the whole area from Cuzco to the shores of Lake Titicaca.

ayllus
[EYEL-lehs] Households in Andean societies that recognized some form of kinship; traced descent from some common, sometimes mythical ancestor.

Pachacuti
[PACH-uh-KOO-tee] Ruler of Inca society from 1438 to 1471; launched a series of military campaigns that gave Incas control of the region from Cuzco to the shores of Lake Titicaca.

Over the next 60 years, Inca armies were constantly on the march, extending control over a vast territory. Pachacuti's son and successor, Topac Yupanqui (TOH-pak YUH-pan-KEE), conquered the northern coastal kingdom of Chimor by seizing its irrigation system, and he extended Inca control into the southern area of what is now Ecuador. At the other end of the empire, Inca armies reached the Maule River in Chile against stiff resistance from the Araucanian Indians. The next ruler, Huayna Capac (WEYE-nah kah-PAHK) (r. 1493–1527), consolidated these conquests and suppressed rebellions on the frontiers. By the time of his death, the Inca Empire—or, as they called it, **Twantinsuyu**—stretched from what is now Colombia to Chile and eastward across Lake Titicaca and Bolivia to northern Argentina. Between 9 million and 13 million people of different ethnic backgrounds and languages came under Inca rule, a remarkable feat, given the extent of the empire and the technology available for transportation and communication.

Twantinsuyu
[twahn-tihn-SOO-yoo] Word for Inca Empire; region from present-day Colombia to Chile and eastward to northern Argentina.

8.4.2 Conquest and Religion

What impelled the Inca conquest and expansion? The usual desire for economic gain and political power that we have seen in other empires is one possible explanation, but there may be others more in keeping with Inca culture and ideology. The cult of the ancestors was extremely important in Inca belief. Deceased rulers were mummified and then treated as intermediaries with the gods, paraded in public during festivals, offered food and gifts, and consulted on important matters by special oracles. From the Chimor kingdom the Incas adopted the practice of royal **split inheritance**, whereby

split inheritance
Inca practice of descent; all titles and political power went to successor, but wealth and land remained in the hands of male descendants for support of cult of dead Inca's mummy.

all the political power and titles of the ruler went to his successor but all his palaces, wealth, land, and possessions remained in the hands of his male descendants, who used them to support the cult of the dead Inca's mummy for eternity. To ensure his own cult and place for eternity, each new Inca needed to secure land and wealth, and these normally came as part of new conquests. In effect, the greater the number of past rulers, the greater the number of royal courts to support, and the greater the demand for labor, lands, and tribute. This system created a self-perpetuating need for expansion, tied directly to ancestor worship and the cult of the royal mummies, as well as tensions between the various royal lineages. The cult of the dead weighed heavily on the living.

Inca political and social life was infused with religious meaning. Like the Aztecs, the Incas held the sun to be the highest deity and considered the Inca to be the sun's representative on earth. The magnificent Temple of the Sun in Cuzco was the center of the state religion, and in its confines the mummies of the past Incas were kept. The cult of the sun was spread throughout the empire, but the Incas did not prohibit the worship of local gods.

Other deities were also worshiped as part of the state religion. Viracocha (vee-reh-KOH-chuh), a creator god, was a favorite of Inca Pachacuti and remained important. Popular belief was based on a profound animism that endowed many natural phenomena with spiritual power. Mountains, stones, rivers, caves, tombs, and temples were considered *huacas*, or holy shrines. At these places, prayers were offered and animals, goods, and humans were sacrificed. In the Cuzco area, imaginary lines running from

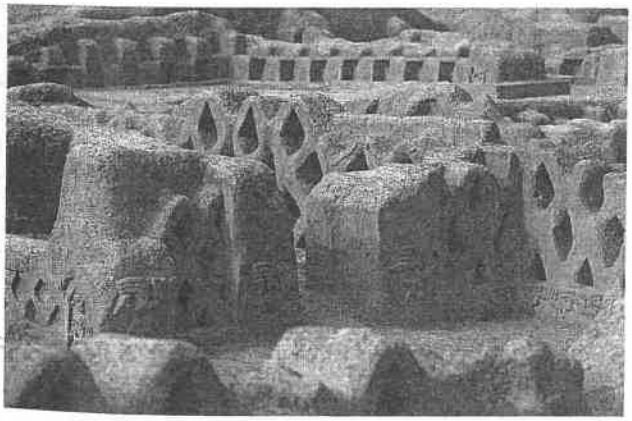
Visualizing the Past

Archeological Evidence of Political Practices

The inca system of split inheritance probably originated in the Chimu kingdom. Chimu king lists recorded 10 rulers' names. Excavations at Chan-Chan, the Chimu capital, have revealed 10 large walled structures. Archeologists believe that each of these palatial compounds was a different king's residence and that each became a mausoleum for his mummy upon his death.

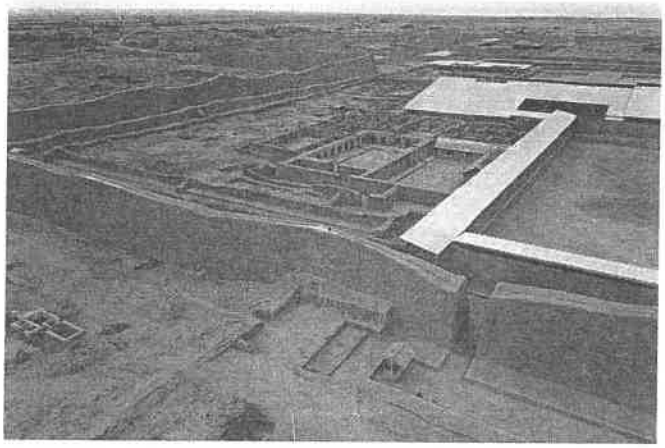
Review Questions:

1. To what extent does such evidence indicate the composite nature of Inca culture?
2. What are some of the possible problems of archeological interpretation?
3. To what extent can material remains be used to explain or illustrate social phenomena?



Chan-Chan covered more than two square miles. It contained palace compounds, storehouses, residences, markets, and other structures.

J Marshall - Tribaleye Images/Alamy Stock Photo



City of Chan-Chan.

CRIS BOURONCLE/AFP/Getty Images

tambos
Way stations used by Incas as inns and storehouses; supply centers for Inca armies on the move; relay points for system of runners used to carry messages.

mita
Labor extracted for lands assigned to the state and the religion; all communities were expected to contribute; an essential aspect of Inca imperial control.

Inca socialism
A view created by Spanish authors to describe Inca society as a type of utopia; image of the Inca Empire as a carefully organized system in which every community collectively contributed to the whole.

the Temple of the Sun organized the huacas into groups for which certain ayllus took responsibility. The temples were served by many priests and women dedicated to preparing cloth and food for sacrifice. The temple priests were responsible mainly for the great festivals and celebrations and for the divinations on which state actions often depended.

8.4.3 The Techniques of Inca Imperial Rule

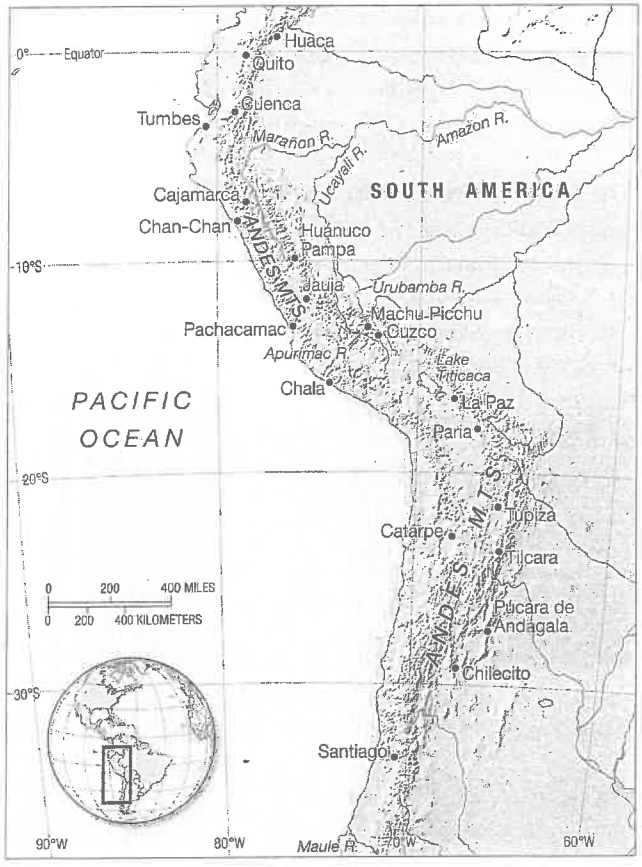
The Inca were able to control their vast empire by using techniques and practices that ensured cooperation or subordination. The empire was ruled by the Inca, who was considered almost a god. He ruled from his court at Cuzco, which was also the site of the major temple; the high priest usually was a close relative. Twantinsuyu was divided into four great provinces, each under a governor, and then divided again. The Incas developed a state bureaucracy in which almost all nobles played a role. Although some chroniclers spoke of a state organization based on decimal units of 10,000, 1000, 100, and smaller numbers of households to mobilize taxes and labor, recent research reveals that many local practices and variations were allowed to continue under Inca rule. Local rulers, or *curacas*, were allowed to maintain their positions and were given privileges by the Inca in return for their loyalty. The curacas were exempt from tribute obligations and usually received labor or produce from those under their control. For insurance, the sons of conquered chieftains were taken to Cuzco for their education.

The Incas intentionally spread the Quechua (KEHCH-uh-wah) language as a means of integrating the empire. The Incas also made extensive use of colonists. Sometimes Quechua speakers from Cuzco were settled in a newly won area to provide an example and a garrison. On other occasions, the Incas moved a conquered population to a new home. Throughout the empire, a complex system of roads was built, with bridges and causeways when needed (Map 8.3). Along these roads, way stations, or **tambos**, were placed about a day's walk apart to serve as inns, storehouses, and supply centers for Inca armies on the move. Tambos also served as relay points for the system of runners who carried messages throughout the empire. The Inca probably maintained more than 10,000 tambos.

The Inca Empire extracted land and labor from subject populations. Conquered peoples were enlisted in the Inca armies under Inca officers and were rewarded with goods from new conquests. Subject peoples received access to goods not previously available to them, and the Inca state undertook large building and irrigation projects that formerly would have been impossible. In return, the Incas demanded loyalty and tribute. The state claimed all resources and redistributed them. The Incas divided conquered areas into lands for the people, lands for the state, and lands for the sun—that is, for religion and the support of priests. Also, some nobles held private estates.

With few exceptions the Incas, unlike the Aztecs, did not demand tribute in kind but rather exacted labor on the lands assigned to the state and the religion. Communities were expected to take turns working on state and church lands and sometimes on building projects or in mining. These labor turns, or **mita**, were an essential aspect of Inca control. In addition, the Inca required women to weave high-quality cloth

Map 8.3 THE ANCIENT CITIES OF PERU



The Inca system of roads, with its series of tambos, linked major towns and cities and allowed rapid communication and troop movement.

for the court and for religious purposes. The Incas provided the wool, but each household was required to produce cloth. Woven cloth, a great Andean art form, had political and religious significance. Some women were taken as concubines for the Inca; others were selected as servants at the temples, the so-called Virgins of the Sun. In all this, the Inca had an overall imperial system but remained sensitive to local variations, so that its application accommodated regional and ethnic differences.

Thinking Historically

The "Troubling" Civilizations of the Americas

From the first encounter with the peoples of the Americas, European concepts and judgments about civilization, barbarism, morality, power, politics, and justice were constantly called into question. The American Indian societies had many religious ideas and practices that shocked Christian observers, and aspects of their social and familial arrangements clashed with European sensibilities. Those sensibilities often were influenced by religious and political considerations. Many of those who most condemned human sacrifice, polygamy, or the despotism of Indian rulers were also those who tried to justify European conquest and control, mass violence, and theft on a continental scale. Other European voices also were heard. Not long after the Spanish conquests in the sixteenth century, defenders of Indian rights came forward to argue that despite certain "unfortunate" habits, Indian civilization was no less to be admired than that of the ancient (and pagan) Romans and Greeks.

For Western civilization, evaluating and judging non-Western or past societies has always been a complex business that has mixed elements of morality, politics, religion, and self-perception along with the record of what is observed or considered to be reality. That complexity is probably just as true for Chinese culture, Persian culture, or any culture trying to understand another. Still, Western society seems to have been particularly troubled by the American civilizations, with their peculiar combination of Neolithic technology and imperial organization. At times this has led to abhorrence and rejection—as of Aztec sacrifice—but at other times it has led to a kind of utopian romanticism in which the accomplishments of the Indian past are used as a critique of the present and a political program for the future.

The existence of **Inca socialism** is a case in point. Some early Spanish authors portrayed Inca rule as despotic, but others saw it as a kind of utopia. Shortly after the conquest of Peru, Garcilaso de la Vega, the son of a Spaniard and an Indian noblewoman, wrote a glowing history of his mother's people in which he presented an image of the Inca Empire as a carefully organized system in which every community contributed to the whole, and the state regulated the distribution of resources on the basis of need and reciprocity. There was some truth in this view, but it ignored some aspects of exploitation as well. In the twentieth century, Peruvian socialists, faced with underdevelopment and social inequality in their country, used this utopian view of Inca society as a possible model for their own future. Their interpretation and that of historians who later wrote of Inca socialism tended to ignore the hierarchy in the Inca Empire and the fact that the state extracted labor and goods from the subject communities to support the nobles, who held extensive power. The utopian view of the Incas was no less political than the despotic view. Perhaps the lesson here is that what we see in the past often depends on what we think about the present or what we want for the future.

But if Inca socialism and despotism have fascinated students of the past, Aztec religion has caught the imagination of historians and the general public. It causes us to ask how a civilization as advanced as this could engage in a practice so cruel and, to us, so morally reprehensible. Perhaps nothing challenges our appreciation of the American civilizations more than the extensive evidence of ritual torture and human sacrifice, which reached staggering proportions under Aztec rule. On some occasions thousands of people were slain, usually by having their hearts ripped out.

First, we must put these practices in perspective. Cruelty and violence can be found in many cultures, and to a world that has seen genocide, mass killings, and atomic warfare, the Aztec practices are not so different from what our own age has seen. Certain customs in many past civilizations and present cultures seem to us strange, cruel, and immoral. We find Aztec human sacrifice particularly abhorrent, but such practices also were found among the ancient Canaanites and the Celtic peoples, and the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, although its message is against such sacrifice, reflects a practice known in the ancient Near East. Human sacrifice was practiced in pre-Christian Scandinavia and ancient India. Although by the time of Confucius human sacrifice of wives and retainers at the burial of a ruler was no longer practiced in China, the custom had been known. Sati, the Hindu ritual suicide of the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband, existed in India in the nineteenth century, although admittedly it may have been exaggerated by the British colonial authorities. The Aztecs certainly were not alone in taking human life as

a religious rite. Whatever our moral judgments about such customs, it remains the historian's responsibility to understand them in the context of their own culture and time.

How have historians tried to explain or understand Aztec human sacrifice? Some defenders of Aztec culture have seen it as a limited phenomenon, greatly exaggerated by the Spanish for political purposes. Many scholars have seen it as a religious act central to the Aztec belief that humans must sacrifice that which was most precious to them—life—to receive the sun, rain, and other blessings of the gods that make life possible. Others have viewed Aztec practice as the intentional manipulation and expansion of a widespread phenomenon that had long existed among many American peoples. In other words, the Aztec rulers, priests, and nobility used the cult of war and large-scale human sacrifice for political purposes, to terrorize their neighbors and subdue the lower classes. Another possible explanation is demographic. If Central Mexico was as densely populated as we believe, then the sacrifices may have been a kind of population control.

Other interpretations have been even more startling. Anthropologist Marvin Harris has suggested that Aztec sacrifice, accompanied by ritual cannibalism, was a response to a lack of protein. He argued that in the Old World, human sacrifice was replaced by animal sacrifice, but in Mesoamerica, which lacked cattle and sheep, that transformation never took place. Harris called the Aztec empire a "cannibal kingdom." Other scholars have strongly objected to Harris's interpretation of the evidence, which gave little attention to the ritual aspects of these acts. Still, human sacrifice shades all assessments of Aztec civilization.

Perhaps nothing challenges our appreciation of the American civilizations more than the extensive evidence of ritual torture and human sacrifice.

These debates ultimately raise important questions about the role of moral judgments in historical analysis and the way in which our vision of the past is influenced by our own political, moral, ethical, and social programs. We cannot and perhaps should not abandon those programs, but we must always try to understand other times and other peoples in their own terms.

Review Questions:

1. What special features of Aztec civilization must be explained?
2. Are they really distinctive?
3. What explanations are most persuasive in terms of historical sensitivity and contemporary standards?
4. What features of twenty-first-century society are similar to those of Aztec civilization in that they will later need to be explained?

In theory, each community aimed at self-sufficiency and depended on the state for goods it could not acquire easily. The ayllus of each community controlled the land, and the vast majority of the men were peasants and herders. Women worked in the fields, wove cloth, and cared for the household (Figure 8.6). Roles and obligations were gender-specific and, at least in theory, equal and interdependent. Andean peoples recognized parallel descent, so that property rights within the ayllus and among the nobility passed in both the male and female lines. Women passed rights and property to daughters, men to sons. Whether in pre-Inca times women may have served as leaders of ayllus is open to question, but under the Incas this seems to have been uncommon. The Inca emphasis on military virtues reinforced the inequality of men and women.

The concept of close cooperation between men and women was also reflected in the Inca view of the cosmos. Gods and goddesses were worshiped by men and women, but women felt a particular affinity for the moon and the goddesses of the earth and corn: the fertility deities. The Inca queen, the Inca's senior wife (usually also a sister of the Inca), was seen as a link to the moon. Queen and sister of the sun, she represented imperial authority to all women. But despite an ideology of gender equality, Inca practice created a gender hierarchy that paralleled the dominance of the Inca state over subject peoples. This fact is supported, and the power of the empire over local ethnic groups is demonstrated, by the Incas' ability to select the most beautiful young women to serve the temples or be given to the Inca.

The integration of imperial policy with regional and ethnic diversity was a political achievement. Ethnic headmen were left in place, but over them were administrators

drawn from the Inca nobility in Cuzco. Reciprocity and hierarchy continued to characterize Andean groups as they came under Inca rule; reciprocity between the state and the local community was simply an added level. The Inca state could provide roads, irrigation projects, and hard-to-get goods. For example, maize usually was grown on irrigated land and was particularly important as a ritual crop. State-sponsored irrigation added to its cultivation. The Inca state manipulated the idea of reciprocity to extract labor power, and it dealt harshly with resistance and revolt. In addition to the ayllu peasantry, there was also a class of people, the **yanas**, who were removed from their ayllus and served permanently as servants, artisans, or workers for the Inca or the nobility.

Members of the Inca nobility were greatly privileged, and those related to the Inca himself held the highest positions. The nobility were all drawn from the 10 royal ayllus. In addition, the residents of Cuzco were given noble status to enable them to serve in high bureaucratic posts. The nobles were distinguished by dress and custom. Only they were entitled to wear the large ear spools that enlarged the ears and caused the Spaniards to later call them *orejones*, or "big ears." Noticeably absent in most of the Inca Empire was a distinct merchant class. Unlike in Mesoamerica, where long-distance trade was so important, the Incas' emphasis on self-sufficiency and state regulation of production and surplus limited trade. Only in the northern areas of the empire, in the chiefdoms of Ecuador, the last region brought under Inca control, did a specialized class of traders exist.

Figure 8.6

This Inca sculpture, made of gold, portrays one of the mamaconas, or "chosen women," who served as concubines to the Inca emperors. The wool of her cloak is woven in a classic Inca design.

Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY

The Inca imperial system, which controlled an area of almost 3,000 miles, was a stunning achievement of statecraft, but like all other empires it lasted only as long as it could control its subject populations and its own mechanisms of government. A system of royal multiple marriages as a way of forging alliances created rival claimants for power and the possibility of civil war. That is exactly what happened in the 1520s, just before the Europeans arrived. When the Spanish first arrived in Peru, they saw an empire weakened by civil strife.

yanas
A class of people within Inca society removed from their ayllus to serve permanently as servants, artisans, or workers for the Inca or the Inca nobility.

8.4.4 Inca Cultural Achievements

The Incas drew on the artistic traditions of their Andean predecessors and the skills of subject peoples. Beautiful pottery and cloth were produced in specialized workshops. Inca metalworking was among the most advanced in the Americas, and Inca artisans worked gold and silver with great skill. The Incas also used copper and some bronze for weapons and tools. Like the Mesoamerican peoples, the Incas made no practical use of the wheel, but unlike them, they had no system of writing. However, the Incas did use a system of knotted strings, or **quipu**, to record numerical and perhaps other information. It worked like an abacus, and with it the Incas took censuses and kept financial records. The Incas had a passion for numerical order, and the populace was divided into decimal units from which population, military enlistment, and work details could be calculated. The existence of so many traits associated with civilization in the Old World combined

quipu
[KEE-poo] System of knotted strings utilized by the Incas in place of a writing system; could contain numerical and other types of information for censuses and financial records.

with the absence of a system of writing among the Incas illustrates the variations of human development and the dangers of becoming too attached to certain cultural characteristics or features in defining civilizations.

The Incas' genius was best displayed in their land and water management, extensive road system, statecraft, and architecture and public buildings. They developed ingenious agricultural terraces on the steep slopes of the Andes, using a complex technology of irrigation to water their crops. The empire was linked together by almost 2,500 miles of roads, many of which included rope suspension bridges over mountain gorges and rivers. Inca stonecutting was remarkably accurate; the best buildings were built of large fitted stones without the use of mortar. Some of these buildings were immense. These structures, the large agricultural terraces and irrigation projects, and the extensive system of roads were among the Incas' greatest achievements, displaying their technical ability as well as their ability to mobilize large amounts of labor.

8.4.5 Comparing Incas and Aztecs

The Inca and the Aztec cultures were based on a long development of civilization that preceded them. Although in some areas of artistic and intellectual achievement earlier peoples had surpassed their accomplishments, both cultures represented the success of imperial and military organization. Both empires were based on intensive agriculture organized by a state that accumulated surplus production and then controlled the circulation of goods and their redistribution to groups or social classes, although the well-developed merchant class of Mesoamerica was mostly absent in the Inca realm. In both states, older kinship-based institutions, the ayllu and the calpulli, were transformed by the emergence of a social hierarchy in which the nobility was increasingly predominant. In both areas, these nobles also were the personnel of the state, so that the state organization was almost an image of society.

Although the Incas tried to create an overarching political state and to integrate their empire as a unit (the Aztecs did less in this regard), both empires recognized local ethnic groups and political leaders and allowed variation from one group or region to another as long as Inca or Aztec sovereignty was recognized and tribute was paid. Both the Aztecs and the Incas, like the Spaniards who followed them, found that their military power was less effective against nomadic peoples who lived on their frontiers. Essentially, the empires were created by the conquest of sedentary agricultural peoples and the extraction of tribute and labor from them.

We cannot overlook the great differences between Mesoamerica and the Andean region in terms of climate and geography or the differences between the Inca and Aztec civilizations. Trade and markets were far more developed in the Aztec Empire and earlier in Mesoamerica in general than in the Andean world. There were differences in metallurgy, writing systems, and social definition and hierarchy. But within the context of world civilizations, it is probably best to view these two empires and the cultural areas they represent as variations of similar patterns and processes, of which sedentary agriculture is the most important. Basic similarities underlying the variations can also be seen in systems of belief and cosmology and in social structure. Whether similar origins, direct or indirect contact between the areas, or parallel development in Mesoamerica and the Andean area explains the similarity is unknown. But the American Indian civilizations shared much with each other; that factor and their isolation from external cultural and biological influences gave them their peculiar character and their vulnerability. At the same time, their ability to survive the shock of conquest and contribute to the formation of societies after conquest demonstrates much of their strength. Long after the Aztec and Inca empires had ceased to exist, the peoples of the Andes and Mexico continued to draw on these cultural traditions.

8.5 The Other Peoples of the Americas

What were the characteristic economic forms of American groups outside the two great imperial territories?

Rather than seeing a division between "primitive" and "civilized" peoples in the Americas, it is more useful to consider gradations of material culture and social complexity. Groups such as the Incas had many things in common with the tribal peoples of the Amazon basin, such as the division into clans or halves—that is, a division of villages or communities into two major groupings with mutually agreed-upon roles and obligations. Moreover, as we have seen, the diversity of ancient America forces us to reconsider ideas of human development based on Old World examples. Social complexity, for example, was not necessarily dependent on agriculture. In the Americas, some groups of fishers and hunters and gatherers, such as the peoples of the northwest coast of the United States and British Columbia, developed complex hierarchical societies. For those who see control of water for agriculture as the starting point for political authority and the state, such societies as the Pimas of Colorado and some of the chiefdoms of South America, who practiced irrigated agriculture but did not develop states, also provide exceptions to theories based on Old World evidence. Finally, archaeological finds in the Amazon now suggest that pottery and agriculture may have developed there even before it did in the Andean region.

The civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes were high points of a Native American cultural achievement. However, the Americas continued to be occupied by a variety of peoples who lived in different ways, ranging from highly complex sedentary agricultural empires to simple kin-based bands of hunters and gatherers.

8.5.1 How Many People?

A major issue that has fascinated students of the Americas for centuries is the question of population size. For years after the European conquests, many observers discounted the early descriptions of large and dense Indian populations as the exaggeration of conquerors and missionaries who wanted to make their own exploits seem more impressive. In the early twentieth century, the most repeated estimate of Native American population about 1492 was 8.4 million (4 million in Mexico, 2 million in Peru, and 2.4 million in the rest of the hemisphere). Since that time, new archeological discoveries, a better understanding of the impact of disease on indigenous populations, new historical and demographic studies, and improved estimates of agricultural techniques and productivity have led to major revisions. Estimates still vary widely, and some have gone as high as 112 million at the time of contact. Most scholars agree that Mesoamerica and the Andes supported the largest populations. Table 8.1 summarizes one of the most

Table 8.1 POPULATION ESTIMATE FOR THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE, 1492

Area	Population (thousands)
North America	4,400
Mexico	21,400
Central America	5,650
Caribbean	5,850
Andes	11,500
Lowland South America	18,500
Total	67,300

SOURCES: William M. Deneven, *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (1976), 289–292; John D. Durand, "Historical Estimates of World Population," *Population and Development Review* 3 (1957): 253–296; Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival* (1987).

Table 8.2 WORLD POPULATION, c. 1500

Area	Population (thousands)
China	100,000–150,000
Indian subcontinent	75,000–150,000
Southwest Asia	20,000–30,000
Japan	15,000–20,000
Rest of Asia (except Russia)	15,000–30,000
Europe (except Russia)	60,000–70,000
Russia (USSR)	10,000–18,000
Northern Africa	6,000–12,000
Rest of Africa	30,000–60,000
Oceania	1,000–2,000
Americas	57,000–72,000
Total	389,000–614,000

SOURCES: William M. Deneven, *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (1976), 289–292; John D. Durand, "Historical Estimates of World Population," *Population and Development Review* 3 (1957): 253–296; Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival* (1987).

careful estimates, which places the total figure at more than 67 million, although a Native American demographer has increased this figure to 72 million. Other scholars are still unconvinced by these estimates.

These figures should be considered in a global context. In 1500, the population of the rest of the world was probably about 500 million, of which China and India each had 75 million to 150 million people and Europe had 60 million to 70 million, a figure roughly equivalent to the population of the Americas (Table 8.2). If the modern estimates are valid, the peoples of the Americas clearly made up a major segment of humanity.

8.5.2 Differing Cultural Patterns

Although it is impossible to summarize the variety of cultural patterns and lifeways that existed in the Americas on the eve of contact with Europeans, we can describe the major patterns outside the main civilization areas. Northern South America and part of Central America were an intermediate area that shared many features with the Andes and some with Mesoamerica and perhaps served as a point of cultural and material exchange between the two regions. In fact, with the exception of monumental architecture, the intermediate zone chieftainships resembled the sedentary agriculture states in many ways.

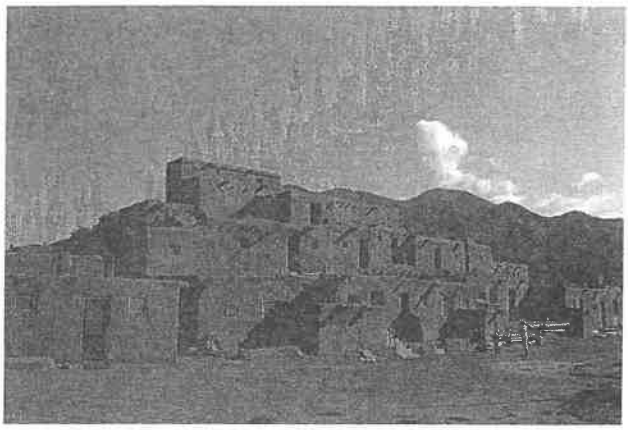
Similar kinds of chieftainships based on sedentary agriculture were found elsewhere in the Americas. There is strong evidence of large chieftainships along the Amazon, where the rich aquatic environment supported complex and perhaps hierarchical societies. The island Arawaks or Tainos encountered by Columbus on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola were farmers organized in a hierarchical society and divided into chiefdoms. These Indian chiefdom-level societies strongly resemble the societies of Polynesia. On the bigger Caribbean islands, such as Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, chieftainships ruled over dense populations, which lived primarily on the root crop manioc.

Agriculture was spread widely throughout the Americas by 1500. Some peoples, such as those of the eastern North American woodlands and the coast of Brazil, combined agriculture with hunting and fishing. Techniques such as slash-and-burn farming led to the periodic movement of villages when production declined. Social organization in these societies often remained without strong class divisions, craft specializations, or the demographic density of people who practiced permanent, intensive agriculture. Unlike Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Americas lacked nomadic herders. However, throughout the

Americas, from Tierra del Fuego to the Canadian forests, some people lived in small, mobile, kin-based groups of hunters and gatherers. Their material culture was simple, and their societies were more egalitarian.

Nowhere is Native American diversity more apparent than in North America. In that vast continent, by 1500, perhaps as many as 200 languages were spoken, and a variety of cultures reflected Indian adaptation to different ecological situations. By that time, most concentrated towns of the Mississippian mound-builder cultures had been abandoned, and only a few groups in southeastern North America still maintained the social hierarchy and religious ideas of those earlier cultures. In the Southwest, descendants of the Anasazi and other cliff dwellers had taken up residence in the adobe pueblos mostly along the Rio Grande (Figure 8.7), where they practiced terracing and irrigation to support their agriculture. Their rich religious life, their artistic ceramic and weaving traditions, and their agricultural base reflected their own historical traditions.

Figure 8.7



Taos Pueblo, in the foothills of what is now New Mexico. The pueblos of the Rio Grande valley were based on agriculture and the concentration of population in urban areas. This reflected a number of the traditions of the older Native American cultures of the southwestern United States.

Michael Runkel/Superstock/Alamy Stock Photo

Elsewhere in North America, most groups were hunters and gatherers or, like the Iroquois of the Northeast or the Natchez of the Southeast, combined those activities with some agriculture. Sometimes an environment was so rich that complex social organization and artistic specialization could develop without an agricultural base. This was the case among the Indians of the northwest coast, who depended on the rich resources of the sea. In other cases, technology was a limiting factor. The tough prairie grasses could not be farmed easily without metal plows, nor could the buffalo be hunted effectively before Europeans introduced the horse. Thus, the Great Plains were only sparsely occupied.

Finally, we should note that although there was great variation among the Indian cultures, some aspects stood in contrast to contemporary societies in Europe and Asia. With the exception of the state systems of Mesoamerica and the Andes, most Indian societies were strongly kin-based. Communal action and ownership of resources, such as land and hunting grounds, were emphasized, and material wealth often was disregarded or placed in a ritual or religious context. It was not that these societies were necessarily egalitarian but rather that ranking usually was not based on wealth. Although they were often subordinate, women in some societies held important political and social roles and usually played a central role in crop production. Indians tended to view themselves as part of the ecological system and not in control of it, balancing their hunting or farming with existing resources. These attitudes stood in marked contrast to those of many contemporary European and Asian civilizations.

8.5.3 American Diversity in the World Context

By the end of the fifteenth century, two great imperial systems had risen to dominate the two major centers of civilization in Mesoamerica and the Andes. Both empires were built on the achievements of their predecessors, and both reflected a militaristic phase in their area's development. These empires proved to be fragile, weakened by internal strains and the conflicts that any imperial system creates but also limited by their technological inferiority.

The Aztec and Inca empires were one end of a continuum of cultures that went from the most simple to the most complex. The Americas contained a broad range of societies, from great civilizations with millions of people to small bands of hunters. In many of these societies, religion played a dominant role in defining the relationship between people and their environment and between the individual and society. How these societies

would have developed and what course the American civilizations might have taken in continued isolation remain interesting and unanswerable questions. The first European observers were simultaneously shocked by the "primitive" tribespeople and astounded by the wealth and accomplishments of civilizations such as that of the Aztecs. Europeans generally saw the Indians as curiously backward. In comparison with Europe and Asia, the Americas did seem strange—more like ancient Babylon or Egypt than contemporary China or Europe—except that without the wheel, large domesticated animals, the plow, and to a large extent metal tools and written languages, even that comparison is misleading. The isolation of the Americas had remained important in physical and cultural terms, but that isolation came to an end in 1492, with disastrous results.

Global Connections and Central Themes

The Americas and the World

Conditions in the Americas before 1492 reveal the importance of global connections in Afro-Eurasia and the absence of such connections in the Americas. American isolation from effective global connections is exhibited by the absence of key technologies, like ironworking and the wheel, that would have been easily transmitted had contacts been available. American isolation shows in the absence of the standard range of domesticated animals. It would show, tragically, in the absence of any immunity to some of the common contagious diseases of Afro-Eurasia.

The absence of several features that had become normal in Afro-Eurasia must be stated carefully and should not detract from the impressive economic, cultural, and political achievements of the key American Indian civilizations, including their ability (particularly in Mesoamerica) to sustain dense populations. The absence of these features should not obscure the heritage of these societies to later patterns in the Americas. The comparative distinctions that resulted from lack of wider contact would count only when the Americas were forced into new global connections after 1492—but then they mattered greatly.

Further Readings

Charles C. Mann, *1491* (2005) provides a well-written overview of many aspects of Native American cultures and accomplishments. Mary Miller, *Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec* (2006) surveys evidence from archaeology and art history. Friedrich Katz's *The Ancient Civilizations of the Americas*, 2nd revised ed. (1997) provides the best overall survey that compares Mesoamerica and Peru. It traces the rise of civilization in both areas. Michael Coe et al., *Atlas of Ancient America* (1986), includes excellent maps, illustrations, and an intelligent and comprehensive text.

The literature on the Aztecs continues to grow rapidly. Bernardino de Sahagún's *Florentine Codex: The General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. and trans. Charles Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson, 12 vols. (1950–1968), is a fundamental source that most scholars still use as a starting point. Good overviews are provided by Frances Berdan's *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society*, 2nd ed. (2005), and Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (2012). Miguel Leon-Portilla's *Fifteen Aztec Poets* (1992) deals with religion and philosophy in a sympathetic way while David Carrasco, in *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers* (1990), tries to integrate archaeology into an understanding of the Mesoamerican cosmology and his *City of Sacrifice* (2000) puts religious violence into context. Elizabeth Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (2000) discusses writing systems while Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare* (1988), examines their military organization, and Inga Clendinnen, *The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society* (2010), provides thoughtful essays on their philosophy of war. Barbara Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (2015) provides an urban, ecological, and architectural history of the capital city. Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (2006), is a useful encyclopedia on many aspects of Aztec culture.

On Peru, a good overview through solid scholarly articles is provided in Richard W. Keatinge, ed., *Peruvian Prehistory* (1988). The article on Inca archeology by Craig Morris is especially helpful. Also useful is Michael Moseley, *The Incas and Their Ancestors* (1992). Art and archeology are the focus of Rebecca Stone Miller, *Art of the Andes from Chavín to Inca* (1995). María Rostoworowski de Diez Canseco, *History of the Inca Realm* (1996), integrates historical and archeological sources, while Juan de Betanzos, *Narrative of*

the Incas (1996), makes a classic available to modern readers. Terence D'altroy, *The Incas* (2002), integrates anthropology and archaeology. John Murra's classic *The Economic Organization of the Inca State* (1980) has influenced much thinking about the Incas. J. Hyslop's *The Inca Road System* (1984) examines the building and function of the road network, and Carolyn Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock* (2010) underlines the spiritual meaning of stones and of construction in Inca culture. The work of Gary Urton, *The History of a Myth: Pacariqtambo and the Origin of the Inka* (1990), and Frank Salomon, *The Code Keepers* (2004), on the quipus show how ethnohistory is deepening our understanding of Inca society. Interesting social history is now being done. Irene Silverblatt's *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (1987) is a controversial book on the position of women before, during, and after the Inca rise to power. Richard L. Burger and Lucy C. Salazasr, eds. *Machu Picchu: Unveiling the Mystery of the Incas* (2004) provides studies of the most famous Inca archeological site. Brian S. Bauer, *The Development of the Inca State* (1996), offers an interpretation of government and rule.

In Geoffrey W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demerest's *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism* (1984), two archeologists compare the political systems of the two empires and the motivations for expansion. The authors find more similarities than differences. On the native peoples who lived north of Mesoamerica there is an extensive literature. Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count* (2003), provides an excellent and up-to-date overview, while Linda Cordell, *Ancient Pueblo Peoples* (1994), and George Miner, *The Moundbuilders: Ancient Peoples of Eastern North America* (2004), provide more detail. Carroll L. Riley, *Becoming Aztlan: Mesoamerican Influence in the Greater Southwest, AD 1200–1500* (2005) weighs the evidence on the possible ties between Mesoamerica and the Anasazi and other groups. Timothy R. Pauketat, *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi* (2009), is a good starting point on Mississippian cultures that suggests inspiration from Mesoamerica. Finally, on the question of the populations of the Americas, see Noble D. Cook, *Born to Die* (1998), which tries to establish the populations when post-1492 contact took place, and Massimo Livi-Bacci, *Conquest: The Destruction of American Indios* (2008) dismisses monocausal explanations of Indian population decline and discusses the size of indigenous populations before conquest.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Aztec Empire?
2. What were the main similarities and differences between the Aztec and Inca empires?
3. What are the key issues involved in trying to understand Aztec religious practices?
4. What were the most important differences between Central American and Andean civilizations; and the major societies of Africa, Asia, and Europe between about 1200 and 1450?