

# The Aztec and Inca Empires, 1300–1550



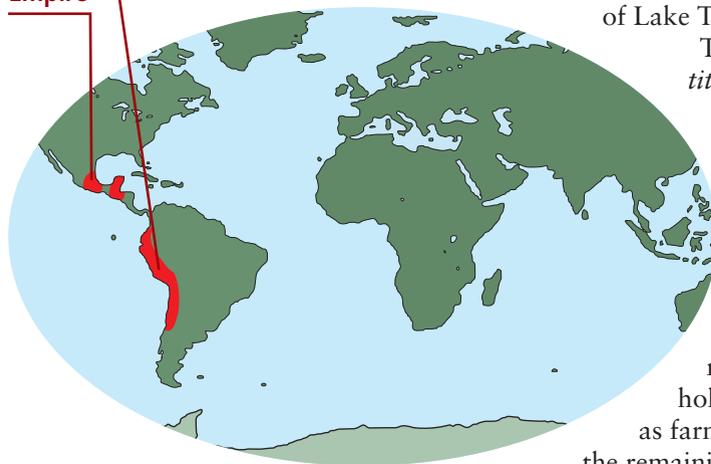
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## Machu Picchu

In the fifteenth century C.E., the Inca Empire constructed this fortress city of Machu Picchu, high in a remote area of the Andes Mountains. The Inca overcame this formidable terrain to create an empire extending for more than 3,000 miles north to south (page 441).

The Inca  
Empire

The  
Aztec  
Empire



Throughout the city, the women arose before dawn. They laid fresh wood on the fires and warmed up a simple meal of tortillas stuffed with beans. Then they awakened their husbands and children for breakfast. The sun was just barely above the horizon when the men left to work in the fields or started their work at home, making weapons, tools, or goods to be offered for sale. After cleaning the family's dishes and utensils, the women left to sweep the streets and to collect the neighborhood's garbage and waste. At mid-morning they would carry the refuse to the water's edge, where it would be loaded into canoes and transported to the mainland. Perhaps some of them would pause to talk among themselves, or simply to gaze out over the placid surface of Lake Texcoco toward the mountains in the distance.

These were the women of Tenochtitlán (*teh-nōsh-tit-LAHN*), capital of the Aztec Empire and one of the most unusual cities of the world. Built on a group of islands within a lake in the Valley of Mexico, eight thousand feet above sea level, Tenochtitlán was the center of a civilization that by 1500 was less than two centuries old. Its women worked diligently to keep the city clean, a critical task in a tropical metropolis surrounded by fungus-bearing water. They raised the children and maintained the households for their husbands, most of whom worked as farmers or artisans for eight months and devoted the remaining four to military combat on behalf of the empire. As farmers, the Aztecs cultivated a wide variety of nutritious

crops; as artisans, they created quetzal-feather mosaics of exceptional beauty; as warriors, they constructed a powerful state that awed and intimidated all other Amerinds who knew of its existence. Yet within a generation, the realm in which these Aztecs lived and worked was invaded and conquered, not by other Amerind peoples but by a foreign people from another hemisphere.

## The Great Amerind Empires

In 1500 C.E., the Amerind civilizations were very new and very isolated. Their newness was due to the relative lateness of the Amerinds' transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture. Before the development of agricultural and urban economies, there had been no need for governments and states with the power to organize labor for public works, such as draining swamps and building walls around cities. All these processes had happened earlier in the river civilizations of ancient Asia and Africa. Also delaying the development of Amerind social organization was the scarcity of large four-footed mammals that could be domesticated for meat and—more important to the economy—for work in pulling plows or heavy loads. These kinds of animals had lived in the Americas before humans arrived, but most had been hunted to extinction shortly thereafter. These and other factors meant that in 1500 early American societies were in earlier stages of development than those inhabiting the Eurasian landmass.

Amerind societies were also isolated compared to Eurasian societies, which had both suffered and benefited from extensive connections among cultures. The economic and technological advantages enjoyed by Europeans in 1500 had been copied or adapted from Persia, Greece, Carthage, Arabia, India, and China—societies that Amerinds did not know existed. European social and governing structures had been influenced by Greece, Rome, the Germanic invasions, and institutionalized Christianity. In contrast, the Aztec and Inca Empires had developed in isolation, cut off not only from any knowledge of the older societies of the eastern hemisphere but also from each other. Because of this isolation, Amerinds lacked immunity to Eurasian diseases, familiarity with Eurasian technology, and acquaintance with Eurasian governing structures.

Isolation delays the development of early America

Three Amerind civilizations, however, had evolved more rapidly than others, despite their isolation. They had created class systems that proved capable of technological innovation, including the construction of cities more extensive in scope and more refined in conveniences than most cities in Asia and Europe. The oldest of the three, the Maya culture of what are now Mexico and Guatemala, had achieved substantial complexity before 800. But a combination of undetermined circumstances had first weakened and then destroyed this civilization in the next few centuries. By 1500 millions of Maya were living in extremely primitive conditions in the rain forests. Their great cities had long been abandoned, and even the ruins remained unknown until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The other two cultures had achieved significant cultural complexity only one or two centuries before 1500. In central Mexico, the Aztec people organized themselves around a warrior elite, conquered neighboring tribes through intimidation or force, and built the spectacular city of Tenochtitlán to serve as their empire's capital. Farther south, the Inca people of Peru pieced together an empire that stretched thousands of miles from north to south, linked by an intricate network of roads and bridges crossing the Andes mountains. They had assimilated other ethnic groups using techniques like those practiced in earlier millennia by Persia and Rome.

The Aztec and Inca empires each considered itself the greatest on earth, a claim attributable at least in part to its complete lack of knowledge of comparable societies. Eurasian and African societies could learn from each other, but the Aztecs and Inca never had that opportunity. Europeans could, by contrast, learn of Chinese inventions such as gunpowder and paper and adapt them to their own purposes, but Amerind societies could not. Their newness and their isolation constituted fatal disadvantages early in the sixteenth century, when European invaders suddenly arrived by sea.

Aztec and Inca empires develop in relative isolation

## The Aztec Empire

According to the Aztecs' own creation story, they originated on an island called Aztlán (hence the name *Aztecs*) off the Pacific coast of Mexico, but left that island in 1111 to search for the land promised them by their most important god, Huitzilopochtli (*hwē-tsē-lō-PŌSH-tlē*), or Southern Hummingbird. From 1270 until 1319 they occupied Chapultepec (*chah-PULL-tā-peck*) Hill on the western fringe of what is today Mexico City. By 1325 they had moved onto an island in Lake Texcoco (*tesh-KŌ-kō*), on which Huitzilopochtli had told them they would find an eagle perched on a cactus and devouring a snake—the



An Aztec representation of the founding of Tenochtitlan in 1325 C.E.

The Aztecs' creation story portrays them as a wandering people

symbol in the center of the modern Mexican flag. The Aztecs, who called themselves Mexica (*mē-SHĒ-kah*), named the valley surrounding Lake Texcoco after themselves, calling it the Valley of Mexico. On the islands in the lake they built Tenochtitlán.

### Tenochtitlán: City in the Lake

The Aztecs quickly recognized the advantages of building a city on islands. The lake was full of fish and birds to eat, and Aztecs used its waters to cultivate their crops. Instead of irrigating, they layered mud and lake plants to build large, latticework platforms, called **chinampas** (*chē-NAHM-pahs*), on which they planted their crops. Then they floated the entire structure on the surface of the lake. Nourished by the mud and plant matter, the roots of the crops sucked up the lake water and produced huge quantities of fruits, vegetables, and grains. Chinampas could be strung together to form rectangles of land on the lake, complete with intersecting waterways. With inexhaustible moisture and a tropical climate, conditions that permitted the cultivation of two successive crops each year, the chinampa system proved capable of sustaining a large population at high levels of nutrition.

The Aztecs build their capital in a lake

Building a city in the middle of a lake carried with it two additional benefits. First, cargo could be moved by canoe, both within the city on canals and between the city and the mainland. Since Mexico lacked wheeled carts (and the large animals required to pull them), water transport was quicker and less exhausting than packing loads on the backs of people. Second, the location provided valuable strategic protection for an assertive, ambitious people who made enemies easily. The city was connected to the shores by three causeways, each 25 to 30 feet wide, separated at intervals by drawbridges that could be raised to cut off the advance or retreat of hostile forces. To invade Tenochtitlán successfully, an enemy would need to construct a fleet of canoes on the lakeshore. The only other way to penetrate the city was to be invited in.

As a location for a city-state, therefore, Lake Texcoco was an unusual but not irrational choice. Nor were the Aztecs alone in their new surroundings: about a dozen other Amerind towns sprang up along the shoreline, and three of them extended into the lake. By 1500 there were some 50 cities in the Valley of Mexico.

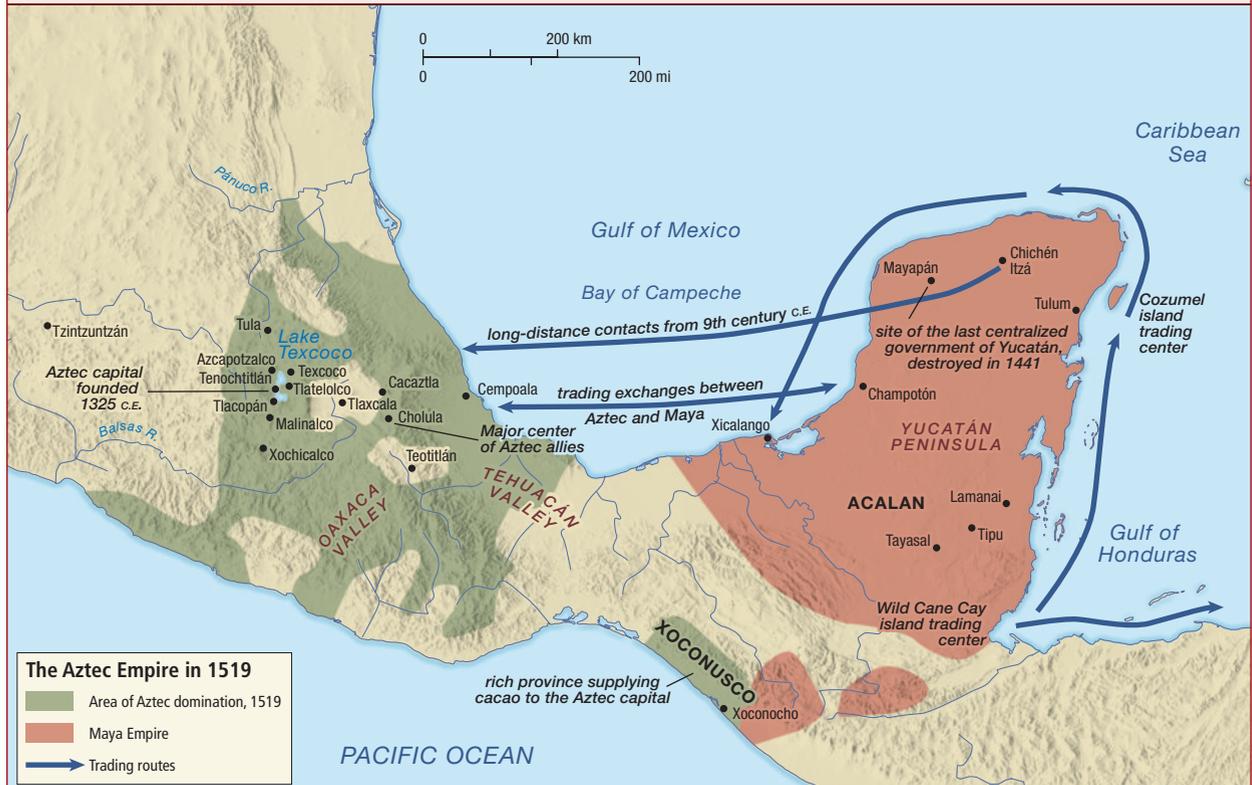
Few cities anywhere in the world could compare with Tenochtitlán. Its center was dominated by a great double temple dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc (*TLAH-lock*), the god of rain. Its many canals were spanned by sturdy bridges. In contrast to other cities of the time, it was also immaculate: there was good drainage, sewage and garbage were hauled away in barges, and every day a crew of a thousand women swept down and washed public streets. Estimates of its population range from 80,000 to 250,000, but even at 80,000, it would have been one of the largest cities in the world. By contrast, in 1500 Seville, the most populous city in Spain, contained 40,000 people.

### Exploitation and Human Sacrifice

Tenochtitlán was also the heart of one of the world's most oppressive realms. Following a succession of capable and aggressive leaders, the Aztecs established an empire in 1468 under Motecuzoma I (*mō-teh-koo-ZŌ-mah*), whose name was later corrupted into Spanish as Montezuma. Although destined to last only half a century, this empire (Map 18.1) was hated profoundly by all neighboring tribes for its ruthlessness.

## FOUNDATION MAP 18.1 The Aztec Empire in 1519

Notice the empire's location, west of the old Mayan city-states. The Aztecs were a subgroup of the Chichimec tribe of northern Mexico, and their empire represents an intrusion of the Chichimecs into the fringes of the Mayan homelands. Notice also the existence of connections between central Mexico and the Mayan homelands three hundred years before the arrival of the Aztecs, who built trading relationships on preexisting networks. How would the compactness of central Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula have contributed to contacts between Aztec and Maya?



Aztec ruthlessness derived from a **cosmic mission theory** that justified a program of human sacrifice. According to this theory, the sun, the source of all heat and light and therefore of all life, grows weary during its journey across the heavens. It must be sustained by the repeated offering of a life-giving elixir, found only in beating human hearts. For this purpose, human beings were sacrificed on a regular schedule, their hearts torn from their bodies by priests and offered to the sun while still beating. Failure to perform this essential ritual was believed to doom the entire world to perpetual darkness and extinction. Human sacrifice was practiced by other early Amerind cultures, but usually only on important ceremonial occasions or in dire emergencies, such as drought or earthquake. For the Aztecs, human sacrifice was a routine program that allowed elites to legitimize their position and ensure social control.

Aztec religion provides a mechanism of social control

The cosmic mission theory justifies Aztec expansion

The cosmic mission theory was, in fact, a political and religious hoax devised by the ruling elite of the Aztec Empire. Warriors and priests both had a stake in it: warriors obtained prisoners of war for the slaughter, while priests sacrificed the victims in the proper manner. Both classes used the theory as a mechanism of social control, employing it to keep Aztec commoners subservient to the regime and to terrorize subject peoples. If ordinary Aztecs doubted its validity (and there is no reason to assume that they did), their doubt was never substantial enough to produce revolt. Other tribes were highly skeptical, however, particularly since they were expected to furnish the prisoners of war, but they could do little to alter the situation. This theory also provided a spiritual justification for the perpetual expansion of the Aztec Empire by conquest. Indeed, the Aztecs had so terrorized neighboring tribes that conquest was not always necessary to secure prisoners of war. The tribes themselves, out of self-preservation, sometimes selected the victims, who were then forced to participate in mock combats staged to make it appear that they had been captured by Aztec warriors.

## Society and Culture

The Aztec Empire was founded on blood. But this obsession with human sacrifice did not prevent the Aztecs from developing a carefully stratified society with a standard of living that many throughout the world would have envied.

**SOCIAL CLASSES AND GENDER ROLES.** At the top of Aztec society was the ruling class, or *Tecuhitli* (*teh-COOT-lē*), drawn from the leading generals, high officials of Tenochtitlán, chiefs of outlying districts, judges in the capital, and priests. This class elected the emperor, a nonhereditary position. The emperor was almost always a distinguished warrior; only once was a priest elected, and even he had been a general too. Thus, although sons of the *Tecuhitli* were nobles by right of birth, leadership in the empire was ultimately determined by success in warfare.

The lords of Mexico were wealthy men, but only because of their rank and obligations. Aztec society considered riches to be a result of increasing power and official expenses, not a method of obtaining that power. Priests lived in chilling austerity, and the leading generals and political officials spent money on everything and everyone except themselves. This meritocracy offered the chance for social mobility. Commoners could rise into the *Tecuhitli* through exceptional skill in combat, while nobles could descend to common status just as readily through incompetence or cowardice. And the empire paid a great deal of attention to the training of both its leaders and its workers: no Mexican child, whatever his or her rank or wealth, was denied an education.

The love of profit for its own sake that was rejected by the nobility was embraced by the *Pochteca* (*pōsh-TECK-ab*), the merchant caste. Utterly inbred, with marriage restricted to those within the caste and with fathers passing businesses on to their sons, the merchants spent their lives on the road selling manufactured goods and luxury items throughout Mexico and Central America. On their continuous journeys they dispensed justice within their own ranks, defended themselves against bandits without the help of warriors, and prayed without the intercession of priests. They sold jewelry, household implements, and elegant mosaics made of quetzal feathers. The Aztec Empire relied on the *Pochteca* for its material needs and left them alone.



Human sacrifice.

Aztecs develop a complex social stratification

Below the Pochteca were the *Tolteca* (*tōl-TECK-ah*), a caste of artisans practicing trades such as goldsmith, jeweler, salter (a specialist who preserved food by salting it), and quarryman. Here too skills remained within families. This caste had its own chiefs, who represented Tolteca interests within the highest councils of the empire.

Most Mexica were commoners, or *Macehualtin* (*MAH-sā-wahl-tēn*). Full citizens of the Aztec Empire, they enjoyed certain civil rights. Men could own land, send their children to school, share in the spoils of conquest, vote for local chiefs, and if they were intelligent and courageous, rise out of their class to become honored and wealthy. On the other hand, if a *macehual* did nothing to distinguish himself in the first years of his adult life, he was subject to weighty obligations, including communal labor and the payment of taxes (from which nobles were exempt).

At the bottom of the social structure were the *Tlatlacotin* (*TLA-tla-cō-tēn*), or slaves. They were owned by others, but were housed, clothed, and fed like ordinary citizens. They could sell their labor in their spare time, accumulate savings, buy land or houses, or even buy slaves for their own service. Marriage between a slave and a free person was permitted, and all children of such unions were born free. Unlike the Atlantic trade that later enslaved Africans, slavery as practiced in the Aztec Empire was based not on race but on bad conduct. Enslavement was a punishment for certain crimes or for chronic indebtedness. It also served as a form of welfare: people who were unsuited by temperament to earning a living, who drank too much, or who were mentally or emotionally unstable could sell themselves into slavery in order to obtain food, clothing, and shelter. Giving up the rights and duties of freedom, they were able to survive.

Slavery in Aztec Mexico had no racial basis

While men in Aztec society engaged in the governance of the empire and its expansion through battle, women were almost completely confined to domestic roles. The remarkable cleanliness of Tenochtitlán and other Aztec cities was largely women's responsibility. Women also wove the elaborate costumes, cotton armor, and everyday clothing worn throughout central Mexico. Marriage and childbearing were expected and were welcomed with joyful festivities. An unmarried woman was an oddity attributable to some sort of mental or emotional defect. Some women served as physicians and accumulated extensive knowledge of herbal remedies and medical procedures.

**LAW, HEALTH, AND DEATH IN AZTEC MEXICO.** Governing this complex society was a highly effective legal system. There were no lawyers; judges examined defendants directly and used a wide variety of methods to determine the truth. Judges were drawn from the finest graduates of Aztec schools and took up their posts after years of success as warriors.

In keeping with a society that used the cosmic mission theory as a form of social control, punishment for offenses was harsh. Acts considered serious crimes, such as treason, homicide, espionage, adultery, and homosexuality, were punishable by death, a sentence that was carried out immediately. Minor crimes such as theft were punishable by slavery or mutilation. A judge found to have delivered a false verdict based on bribes or favoritism would be executed. No citizens could take the law into their own hands; nor was there any need to do so, since the administration of justice was so swift and severe. The Aztec Empire wanted to control its people, not rehabilitate them, and it succeeded.

Aztecs develop a legal system based on punishment

Despite its harshness, life under the Aztecs had its advantages. Cleanliness was a cultural expectation, people bathed several times a week, and Aztec medical practices were advanced for their era. Healers knew how to set broken bones and treat dental cavities.

Aztecs practice sophisticated medical procedures



The Aztec goddess Coatlicue.

Aztec concepts of the afterlife reinforce the cosmic mission theory

Occasionally they even performed brain surgery. Like their medical counterparts elsewhere, they did not understand the causes of diseases, but they developed effective cures and medicines, many of which are still used in Mexico today.

But no medicine, however effective, could stave off death indefinitely, especially in a society so obsessed with hurrying it along through war and sacrifice. When the end arrived, all Aztecs understood that it was ordained by fate, part of an unavoidable pattern of birth, death, and afterlife. Warriors who fell in battle were reborn as colorful hummingbirds; women who died in childbirth were transformed into goddesses. The hummingbirds escorted the sun from its rising to its zenith, while the goddesses accompanied it from its zenith to its setting. Farmers who were struck by lightning or drowned (the latter a frequent occurrence in a city built in the midst of a lake) were led by Tlaloc, the god of rain and water, to a paradise of flowers, springs, and gardens. These beliefs mirrored the cycles of nature itself: the sun comes up each morning after passing the night in the Underworld; corn dies in autumn and is reborn in spring; the luxuriant wild plants of Mexico do the same.

For those unfortunates who died an ordinary, undistinguished death, however, the outlook was much less attractive. Their destination was Mictlan (*MICK-tlahn*), the Underworld, presided over by the god and goddess of the dead. This ghoulish couple ruled a cold, dark realm of dust and bones, seated on thrones surrounded by spiders and owls. The prospect of this afterlife made death in battle welcome rather than something to be feared. In contrast, the sacrificial victims, whose beating hearts nourished the sun, became one with it and lived forever as part of the source of heat and light that made life on earth possible.

## The Inca Empire

The Inca civilization of western South America developed even later than Aztec society. Covering a much larger range of territory than Aztec Mexico, the Inca Empire extended from what is today northern Ecuador into central Chile, some three thousand miles from north to south. It also differed from the Aztec realm in many other ways since, although these two empires existed at the same time in the same hemisphere, the barriers to travel between them were so great that they developed in isolation from one another.

### A Unified Empire

The Inca creation story asserts that the Inca people emerged around the year 1200 from three caves 18 miles southeast of the city of Cuzco (*COOZ-kō*), Peru. Other Amerind peoples lived in the region, including the Huari, the Chanca, and the Chimú. The Inca did not at first challenge any of them, gradually building Cuzco and developing their political and social institutions. During this time the Inca were apparently ruled by seven legendary emperors, about whom nothing can be known with certainty. But the eighth ruler, Viracocha (*vē-rah-KŌ-chah*) Inca, laid the foundations of an empire. Between 1400 and 1438 he expanded Inca control over a 25-mile radius from Cuzco, reaching as far south as Lake Titicaca (*tih-tē-KAH-kah*) (Map 18.2).

Viracocha was followed by two remarkable rulers who enlarged the small Inca domain into one of the world's biggest empires. Pachacuti (*pah-chah-COO-tē*), who ruled from 1438 to 1471, gave the realm its official name, **Tahuantín-Suyu** (*tah-wahn-tin*

The Inca's creation story portrays them as a people emerging from the earth

The Inca create an extensive empire in difficult terrain

SOO-yoo), the Empire of the Four Quarters. He also made his native language, Quechua (*KEH-chwah*), the language of official business and organized the administrative structure of what was becoming a very large state (see page 433). By the time of his death in 1471 the Inca ruled all of present-day Peru. Then Topa Inca Yupanqui (*TŌ-pah IN-kah yoo-PAHN-kwē*), who ruled from 1471 to 1493, extended the empire to the north and south, defeating the Chimú kingdom in Ecuador and conquering the northern half of Chile. Together, given the territory they amassed, he and Pachacuti are ranked with Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan among history's great empire builders.

The Inca conquered in an unusual way, always announcing their attacks in advance and never using force except when persuasion failed. Once defeated, a conquered population was assimilated into the empire through the process of *mitima* (*mē-TĒ-mah*), or resettlement and integration. Within a generation, families resettled in Inca towns had lost their original cultural identities and become Inca, a transition made smoother by the complete absence of discrimination against them.

In 1493 a new ruler, Huayna Capac (*HWAH-nah KĀ-pack*), consolidated Inca gains and focused on the administration of the empire. Further territorial advance was blocked—to the East by the Andes mountains and the dense rain forests of their eastern slopes, and to the South by the Mapuche (*mah-POO-chā*) Amerinds, warlike and hostile to outsiders. Still, at the beginning of the sixteenth century the Inca Empire, just one hundred years old, encompassed a great expanse of land and a great many peoples, much like ancient Rome and the concurrent Ottoman Empire.

## Society and Economy

Inca society contained fewer distinct social classes than did Aztec society. At the top of its political pyramid stood the emperor, called the **Sapa Inca** (*SAH-pah Inca*), a man who claimed to rule by divine right because of his direct descent from the sun god, Inti (*ĒN-tē*). He was worshiped as divine during his lifetime; after death he was carefully embalmed and mummified, and became a god like his ancestor, Inti. Because he claimed divinity, the Sapa Inca was compelled to keep the royal line pure; he could not defile it through marriage to a mortal. Thus he always chose one of his full sisters as his principal wife. From among her sons, he chose his heir. The practice usually brought the most competent son to power but also set

### Map 18.2 The Inca Empire, 1438–1525

The Inca Empire of Tahuantín-Suyu was carved out of the Andes Mountains between the highlands of Quito and the Atacama Desert. Note the empire's shape, dictated by Andean geography: it was three thousand miles north to south at its longest point, but only four hundred miles east to west at its widest. The Aztec Empire enjoyed the advantage of compactness (Map 18.1), while the Inca Empire struggled successfully with geographic disadvantages. How did the Inca overcome those disadvantages?



The Sapa Inca exercises enormous power, even after death

brothers against one another. When the Sapa Inca died suddenly without designating a successor, a brutal power struggle followed.

The Sapa Inca's authority was so great that some of it actually survived him. After death, the emperor's body was embalmed with fragrant resins and dried in the sun in the arid highlands around Cuzco. Then his mummy was enshrined in one of the palaces in which he had lived. Servants attended the mummies of each successive Sapa Inca, deciding when to offer him food and drink, occasionally taking one mummy to visit another or to visit living people in their homes. On great ceremonial occasions, or if the empire faced challenges or dangers, all the mummies would be assembled in the great squares of Cuzco. People would pay them homage, and the ruling Sapa Inca would formally consult them, asking their advice on affairs of state. Thus the emperors were revered after death as living spirits equal to most of the other gods of the empire.

Below the Sapa Inca, the empire was governed by a two-class nobility, the Inca Caste and the Curacas (*coo-RAH-kahz*). The Inca Caste was composed of blood relatives of the Sapa Inca, usually numbering several hundred people. Curacas were all other governmental officials and their families. Both components of the nobility were exempt from taxes and were supported by produce from government-owned fields tilled by commoners. Sons of the nobility were the only Inca subjects to be educated, in contrast to the Aztec practice of universal education for boys and girls. Since there was no written language, instruction was entirely oral.

Inca nobility dominates a free people

Beneath the Sapa Inca and the nobility, all were commoners and all were free; slavery was unheard of in Tahuantin-Suyu. Commoners provided all the labor for public works. Since no money existed and payments in kind were unknown, commoners paid taxes through labor service. This duty furnished recruits for the army, laborers in mines and on public works, and messengers who traveled the remarkable system of imperial roads.

The Inca base their society on agriculture

Most commoners were farmers, and Inca agriculture was highly advanced, benefiting from centuries of development by earlier societies in the region, and supported by extensive irrigation. Peasants grew a wide variety of crops, most significantly the potato, which they had developed through selective breeding from a hard, unappetizing nut-like root into one of the world's most nutritious foods. Later, after the Spanish conquest of Peru, the potato was taken to Europe, where it became the staple crop of areas such as Ireland and Poland and was eventually grown almost everywhere.

In the Inca Empire, as in Aztec Mexico, most men spent their days farming, while most women, who played exclusively domestic roles, spent their days doing farm chores, housework, and cooking. Married life was the normal state, and the raising of children was considered woman's sacred task. Sexual intercourse before marriage for both genders was relatively common and not frowned upon, although some women selected for highly favored positions at Inca religious shrines remained virginal for life. These virgins wove the elaborate garments worn by Inca idols, swept and beautified the shrines, and were forbidden to speak to men.

## Adaptation to the Andes

The Inca connect their empire by a network of roads and bridges

The Inca were ingenious in adapting to their physical environment and in keeping the empire connected. The extensive network of roads and bridges that they built made it possible to carry a message from one end of the empire to the other in about 12 days. Since the

Sapa Inca ruled from the centrally located capital of Cuzco, he rarely had to wait more than six days for the latest news from outlying areas. The roads were smoothly paved with great blocks of stone and lined with retaining walls. Even in the narrowest mountain passes, a dozen men could walk along them side by side. Across the dizzying gorges formed by swiftly flowing Andean rivers, the Inca threw suspension bridges made of thick fibers and secured at each end by stone pylons. In a kind of postal system, a succession of sure-footed runners traveled these roads and bridges. The messages they carried, in the absence of writing, were composed of a series of knots in cords dangling from a piece of wood called a **quipu** (*KĒ-poooh*).

Physically, the Inca had evolved over the years to meet the demands of their harsh environment. To handle the stress caused by the lack of adequate oxygen at high elevations in the Andes, their lung capacity was 40 percent greater than that of sea-level dwellers, with much denser capillary beds. Their bodies also contained 25 percent more blood of very high viscosity, with a far greater number of oxygen-carrying red corpuscles. To handle that sort of load, their hearts were enlarged by 40 percent, and their bodies tended to be short and compact, with low centers of gravity. These characteristics are still found today in the Andean peoples of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.

## Governance and Religion

Politically, Tahuantin-Suyu was the product of centuries of South American cultural development. Before the Inca became the dominant force in Peruvian life, Peru had experienced a long tradition of centralized political control that made possible extensive public works, road-building, and intervalley irrigation systems. Ceramics and metallurgy were mastered, and commercial relations linked the farthest reaches of the Pacific coast. On this foundation the Inca built new concepts of military organization, colonization, and total state control. Their well-trained ruling class possessed the foresight and skill needed to manage so extensive an empire.

The Inca Empire was divided into four provinces (the “four quarters”), each ruled by a governor from the noble Inca Caste. Each significant city was ruled by a lieutenant who reported directly to the provincial governor. Below these leaders were hereditary governing positions filled by Curacas. These local officials, the basic governing personnel of the empire, handled matters such as taxation, public works, minor crimes, complaints, and institutions such as the imperial mass marriage, announced periodically by the Sapa Inca in order to ensure a ready supply of children for the empire. During this ceremony, all single men and women would line up opposite each other, after which the Curaca assigned mates on the basis of physical condition. For obvious reasons, the day before the imperial mass marriage was usually filled with weddings.

Tahuantin-Suyu’s division into four provinces somewhat reduced the imperial power of the Sapa Inca. Although this power was theoretically absolute, in practice it was exercised by many governors and local officials. These men were given considerable latitude in the interpretation and execution of imperial commands, provided that their loyalty was beyond dispute. To guarantee that loyalty, the Sapa Inca occasionally sent from Cuzco a special official known as the *Tocoyricoc* (*tō-COY-rē-cōke*), or “he who sees all.” This official was actually an informer charged with reporting on the loyalty and competence of the governor and on the general state of affairs within the province. He was



A Quipu.

The Inca centralized their far-flung empire



Inca buildings in the former imperial capital of Cuzco. Stones were fit together with such precision that mortar was unnecessary.

Inca religion is polytheistic and tolerant

usually a close relative of the Sapa Inca, fearless and incorruptible, and the ever-present possibility of his arrival helped keep administrators honest.

Inca religion, like Aztec religion, was founded on sun worship. It combined nature worship and magic, all centered on Inti, the sun god. Behind the sun, and indeed behind all things, stood Viracocha, Creator of the Universe; but he was invisible to men and women, while Inti appeared in the heavens every day. The Inca worshiped other deities, too, such as the Storm God. Like the ancient Persians and Romans, they tolerated the gods of those they conquered, insisting only on a place of honor for Inti in all rites and festivals. Such tolerance was essential to the practice of *mitima*.

These gods were believed to be pleased by sacrifice, usually of food, coca leaves (later to become the base for cocaine), and animals. In serious emergencies, such as drought or earthquake, or on important occasions, a pure white llama or a beautiful child might be killed to win the gods' favor. But the Inca never developed any equivalent of the Aztec Empire's "cosmic mission theory" to justify human sacrifice.

## Aztec and Inca on the Eve of Invasion

Aztec and Inca political systems develop similarly to those of Europe

For all their differences, the Aztec and Inca Empires had in common certain institutions that affected their encounters with Europeans. First, authority resided in an emperor whose power was absolute. No assemblies or councils existed to restrict his decisions, and unquestioning obedience to the emperor was demanded. Theoretically, the emperor could respond quickly to emergencies, and at the head of an army of dedicated warriors, he would be difficult to defeat. But if either empire were ever defeated, the stress on unquestioning obedience to leaders would make it easier for the conqueror to rule. Unconditional obedience was readily transferable from one set of masters to another.

Second, in considering the clash of civilizations that began with the European invasions, the youth and isolation of the Aztec and Inca Empires proved to be disadvantages. The invaders came from societies whose extensive intercultural contacts had furnished them with methods, technologies, animals, and immunities unknown in the Americas. It was not a fair contest. The early American civilizations, remarkably rich in their cultural development in comparison with other cultures in the hemisphere, were about to meet their match. No one can say how the Aztec and Inca societies, so highly developed in comparison with other cultures in the western hemisphere, might have evolved had Europeans never arrived.

## The Invasion and Conquest of Mexico

Montezuma II (1502–1520), emperor when the Spanish arrived, was the first priest to rule the Aztec Empire. Thirty-four when elected, he was a valiant warrior as well as a pious man. He was fascinated by magic and omens, or signs about the future, and by 1519 had come to prefer contemplation and diplomacy to action. These priestly tendencies did not, however, make him gentle: he terrified both his court and the general public and was the most feared ruler in the history of Tenochtitlán. His commitment to consolidating his empire rather than continuing to expand it was based not in weakness but in realistic calculation.

Unlike the Inca, the Aztecs had never attempted to integrate conquered peoples into their culture. Their empire was held together by coercion and fear, not by any form of assimilation that might have developed loyalty in the defeated. Therefore it was not surprising that during the reign of Montezuma II two inferior but significant regional powers challenged the supremacy of Tenochtitlán. In the west, the Tarascan (*tah-RAHS-cahn*) Empire united several ethnic groups hostile to Aztec expansion into a small but heavily fortified realm defended by skilled archers. In the east, the **Tlaxcallan** (*tlash-CAHL-lahn*) Confederacy knitted together several city-states that spoke Nahuatl (*na-WHA-tl*), the language spoken by the Aztecs and some of their neighbors, into a potent alliance that could have badly injured the Aztec Empire in an all-out war. Cautiously, Montezuma II encircled both sets of enemies as part of a long-range strategy that would yield results in decades rather than years. By 1519 the Aztecs had made substantial progress on both fronts, despite a persistent series of omens that worried their ruling elite and left the emperor perplexed.

The Aztecs base their rule on coercion

## The Arrival of the Spaniards

In 1517 disturbing events took place in Mayan territory well to the East of Tenochtitlán. Bearded men with white skin, riding in what appeared to be mountains floating on the sea, began to come ashore on the Yucatan peninsula. More such events took place the following year, accompanied by omens in Tenochtitlán itself. A comet streaked across the sky at midday, temples burned for no apparent reason, and an invisible wailing woman cried out every night. These events were mysterious and unsettling to a people accustomed to searching for messages from the gods. As the Aztecs eventually learned, the strangers in floating mountains were Spaniards in sailing ships following those who had first come to the Caribbean 25 years before, looking for a sea route from Europe to Asia.

Aztecs are perplexed by the arrival of the Spaniards

The Spaniards who came in 1517, however, were no longer looking for Asia; instead they were inspired by tales of gold and glory to be found in Mexico itself. Their leader, Hernán Cortés, was an ambitious Spanish lawyer who left Spain to seek his fortune in the Caribbean. Fifteen years later, in 1519, Cortés accepted a commission from the governor of Cuba to lead an expedition to Mexico to determine the location and strength of a large and reportedly fabulously wealthy empire. He sailed for Mexico with 550 men, including a number of Africans and Cuban Amerinds, and 16 horses.

In the early spring of 1519, as Cortés was arriving in Mexico, the reports reaching Montezuma became more precise and factual. From the Gulf of Mexico, peasants reported sighting white men catching fish with nets and rods. Montezuma and his advisors decided to have the coast and the strangers watched; in the meantime, their arrival was kept secret from the people.

In the summer of 1519, news arrived that the strangers were moving inland. Aztec officials met them and spoke with them through a 15-year-old Mayan girl whom the Spaniards had baptized Marina and who spoke both Nahuatl and Spanish. The Spaniards rode on huge animals and carried and dragged long-barreled sticks that could be made to explode, discharging fire and noise. At this point the ruling elite began to consider the possibility that these people, or at least their leaders, might be gods.

Aztec legend stated that Toltec god-king Quetzalcóatl (*kwet-zahl-KŌ-ah-tul*), expelled from Tula (Chapter 5), had vowed to return one day from his eastern exile and



Dona Marina and Cortes.

The legend of Quetzalcóatl affects the Aztec view of the Spaniards

reclaim Mexico for himself. He and his forces would appear in boats in the guise of light-skinned men. Given the apparently supernatural capabilities of these strangers' boats, animals, and weapons, the possibility that Quetzalcóatl was returning could not be ruled out. Even if they were mere mortals, their arrival could not be prevented: their boats could land anywhere without warning, and their weapons seemed deadly. Under such unprecedented circumstances, watchful waiting seemed the only sensible course.

The Spaniards insisted on meeting with Montezuma. In response, the emperor sent them more than a hundred porters carrying luxurious gifts normally sacrificed to gods. Included with these presents was Montezuma's order that the Spaniards remain in the East and advance no farther inland. The Aztec emperor was trying either to gain favor with a vengeful god or to deal with powerful invaders in a way that would ensure the survival of Aztec power. In either case, the empire was clearly in danger.

Spaniards exploit Aztec perplexity

Cortés knew nothing of the legend of Quetzalcóatl, but, upon listening to Marina's translations and advice, he realized that Montezuma considered him some sort of god and feared him. He also interpreted the emperor's gifts as an offer of vassalage and therefore a sign of weakness. In Europe, vassalage involved an oath of personal loyalty that gave the lord contractual rights over the actions of the vassal. In Mesoamerica, however, vassalage involved the payment of tribute in return for being left alone. This was a very significant distinction. By interpreting Montezuma's actions in a European context, Cortés seriously underestimated the power of the empire he would encounter. He ignored Montezuma's instructions, accepted the gifts, and pressed on.



A 1524 map of Tenochtitlan.

Tenochtitlán's size intimidates the Spaniards

## Encounter Between Aztecs and Spaniards

Cortés moved his forces west and concluded alliances with peoples such as the Totonacs (*tō-TŌ-nacks*) and Tlaxcaltecs (*tlocks-CAHL-tecks*), who paid tribute to the Aztec Empire. These Amerinds believed Cortés' promises of liberation from Aztec dominance and sent thousands of warriors to accompany the Spaniards inland. In Tenochtitlán, warriors were still engaged in the harvest; otherwise Montezuma would have had hundreds of thousands of warriors ready to defend the empire. Instead, Montezuma arranged for the Spaniards to be escorted into the city, where, without their allies, they would be far more vulnerable.

Nothing had prepared the Spaniards for what they saw on November 8. The road to Tenochtitlán was straight, 11,500 feet above sea level, flanked by two immense active volcanoes; the altitude, solitude, and strangeness of it all began to unnerve the Spaniards. But even this impression paled when compared to the sight of the city itself. Not only was it spectacularly beautiful, it was colossal, with at least 80,000 inhabitants, the capital of an empire of more than a million people. Cortés suddenly realized the magnitude of his miscalculation. He had dismissed as exaggerations Amerind stories of the size and glory of Tenochtitlán, interpreting them in the contexts of his familiarity with Europe and of the modest size of the Mexican towns he had encountered thus far. Now he stood before an Amerind metropolis significantly larger than anything he had ever imagined, at the head of an army of a few hundred men. The success of his mission and the lives of his men hung by threads (see “Entry of the Spaniards into Tenochtitlán, November 8, 1519”).

**Document 18.1 Entry of the Spaniards into Tenochtitlán, November 8, 1519**

**Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of the men who accompanied Cortés to Mexico, wrote an eyewitness account of that expedition fifty years after it occurred. Here he describes what the Spaniards saw and felt as they entered Tenochtitlán, which he refers to as “Mexico” or “the city of Mexico.”**

Early next day we left Itzapalapa with a large escort . . . and followed the causeway, which is eight yards wide and goes so straight to the city of Mexico that I do not think it curves at all. Wide though it was, it was so crowded with people that there was hardly room for them all . . . and we could hardly get through the crowds that were there. For the towers and the passages were full, and they came in canoes from all parts of the lake. No wonder, since they had never seen horses or men like us before!

With such wonderful sights to gaze on we did not know what to say, or if this were real that we saw before our eyes. On the land side there were great cities, and on the lake many more. The lake was crowded with canoes. At intervals along the causeway there were many bridges, and before us was the great city of Mexico. As for us, we were scarcely four hundred strong, and we well remembered the . . . many other warnings we had received to beware of entering the city of Mexico, since they would kill us as soon as they had us inside. Let the interested reader consider whether there is not much to ponder in this narrative

of mine. What men in all the world have shown such daring? . . .

When we came near to Mexico, at a place where there were some other small towers, the great Montezuma descended from his litter . . . many more lords walked before the great Montezuma, sweeping the ground on which he was to tread, and laying down cloaks so that his feet should not touch the earth. Not one of these chieftains dared to look him in the face. All kept their eyes lowered most reverently . . . And as they accompanied their lord we observed them marching with their eyes downcast so that they should not see him, and keeping close to the wall as they followed him with great reverence. Thus space was made for us to enter the streets of Mexico without being pressed by the crowd.

Who now could count the multitude of men, women, and boys in the streets, on the roof-tops and in canoes on the waterways, who had come out to see us? It was a wonderful sight and, as I write, it all comes before my eyes as if it had happened only yesterday . . .

So, with luck on our side, we boldly entered the city of Tenochtitlán or Mexico on 8 November in the year of our Lord 1519.

SOURCE: Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*, translated by J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Publishers, 1963) 216–219.

Operating in Cortés' favor, however, was Montezuma's behavior. Meeting the Spaniards face to face should have convinced the emperor that they were men, not gods. But even after they entered the capital, in the narrow streets where they could have been trapped, the emperor publicly embraced Cortés and continued to lavish gifts upon him. In the next months, the Aztec military elite pressed for the destruction of the strangers, but Montezuma's subservience prevented any such action. Cortés recognized that he held the advantage, and he soon placed the emperor under a form of house arrest in his own palace.

Montezuma's acceptance of this treatment remains inadequately explained. Some historians assert that he continued to believe that Cortés was divine, but the Spaniards did not behave like servants of a Mexica god. They were horrified at the practice of human sacrifice, especially the Aztec custom of presenting their guests with delicious

food liberally sprinkled with human blood. They smashed images of Aztec gods and generally behaved in a manner indicating their complete disgust with Mexican culture. This was a strange way for gods to behave. Other historians speculate that Montezuma may have been clinging to whatever measure of power he could still exercise while hoping that events would turn out in his favor. Had he refused to cooperate with the Spaniards, he would have been taken by force, the imperial elite would have split among potential successors, and the Aztec empire would be leaderless in its hour of maximum danger. This explanation is more likely than that he still considered Cortés to be Quetzalcóatl.

The Aztecs finally fight the Spaniards

But if Montezuma hoped to preserve his authority by cooperating with the Spaniards, he was soon disappointed. His subservience to Cortés eroded his support among both the elite and the common people. It vanished completely in May 1520, when the Aztecs took the offensive at last. They surrounded the Spaniards in central Tenochtitlán, and Cortés proved unable to negotiate his way out of the city. Cortés then ordered Montezuma to direct the Aztecs to stop fighting. Cortés did not understand that the emperor ruled *with*, not *over*, the nobility that was now attacking the Spaniards, and could not simply tell his nobles what to do. Montezuma tried anyway but was killed as he attempted to address Aztec forces from the roof of a palace, apparently by a rock thrown by one of his own people.

## The End of the Aztec Empire

Denied food and water, under assault from every side, the Spaniards eventually broke out of Tenochtitlán at midnight on June 30, 1520, during a heavy downpour. Some were killed by Aztecs attacking from canoes, but Cortés escaped with most of his men. The Spaniards fought their way through the neighboring hostile regions to Tlaxcaltec lands, which gave them refuge and an opportunity to regroup.

Smallpox cripples the Aztecs

Aztec forces did not launch a full-scale attack against the retreating invaders, in part because their armies were not at full strength due to agricultural duties, but primarily because of political instability. During the fighting in Tenochtitlán, the imperial elite replaced Montezuma with his younger brother Cuitlahuac (*quit-LAH-wock*), who had argued from the first that the invaders must be killed. But within three months Cuitlahuac was dead of smallpox. An infected Spanish soldier carried the disease, and because the peoples of the western hemisphere had never been exposed to European diseases and had no immunity to them, this smallpox outbreak killed more than a third of the population of central Mexico in less than a year.

Smallpox is a disease that kills through high fever, dehydration, and debilitation. The dying suffer terribly, and the survivors often are disfigured by scarring from pustules. The Aztecs concluded that this unknown plague was either a sign of the wrath of their gods or a punishment sent by the gods of the Spaniards. Certainly, since the strangers did not suffer from the disease (having survived it in childhood, they had immunity), their gods were protecting them. In any case, to the Aztecs the epidemic clearly demonstrated Spanish superiority. It also, of course, killed many warriors and made others unfit for battle.

The Aztecs find a strong leader in Cuauhtemoc

In February 1521, however, Cuauhtemoc (*kwow-TĀ-mock*), the son of a former emperor, succeeded Cuitlahuac and rallied his forces to attack the Spaniards. The Aztecs fought in closely packed ranks, using archery, spears, and swords with edges of polished

## Document 18.2 Two Elegies on the Fall of the City of Tenochtitlán

Immediately after the fall of Tenochtitlán to the Spaniards, the surviving Aztecs reacted with shock and grief. Both emotions are vividly captured in these excerpts from two elegies, or memorial poems, written by survivors.

### FIRST ELEGY

Broken spears lie in the road;  
we have torn our hair in our grief.  
The houses are roofless now, and their walls  
are red with blood.  
Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas,  
and the walls are splattered with gore.  
The water has turned red, as if it were dyed,  
and when we drink it,  
it has the taste of brine.  
We have pounded our hands in despair  
against the adobe walls,  
for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.  
The shields of our warriors were its defense,  
but they could not save it.

### SECOND ELEGY

Our cries of grief rise up  
and our tears rain down,  
for Tlatelolco [*tlah-tā-LAHL-kō*, a city adjacent to  
Tenochtitlán] is lost.  
The Aztecs are fleeing across the lake;  
they are running away like women.  
How can we save our homes, my people?  
The Aztecs are deserting the city:  
the city is in flames, and all  
is darkness and destruction.  
Weep, my people:  
know that with these disasters  
we have lost the Mexican nation.  
The water has turned bitter,  
our food is bitter!  
These are the acts of the Giver of Life.

SOURCE: Miguel Leon-Portilla, editor, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, translated from Nahuatl into Spanish by Angel Maria Garibay K., and from Spanish into English by Lysander Kemp (Boston: Beacon Press, Little, Brown, 1962).

obsidian. The Spaniards countered with cannon, muskets, and swords fashioned from Toledo steel. Their metal armor was much more protective than Aztec armor made of cotton, and their horses terrified Aztec foot soldiers.

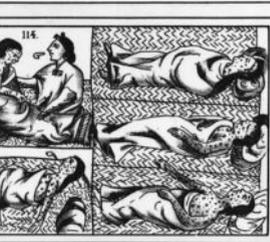
Spanish firearms killed 25 Aztecs for every one Spaniard killed by the Aztecs, but with more than one hundred thousand warriors in his armies, Cuauhtemoc's forces could sustain such losses. The Aztecs won a number of engagements and sacrificed captured Spaniards, but in late July Cortés received reinforcements from Cuba. The Aztecs' desperate subjects, now believing that the Spaniards would win, flocked to their ranks by the tens of thousands.

Cuauhtemoc requested peace talks in early August, seeking to learn how much tribute the Spaniards would demand as the price of surrender. But it quickly became apparent that Cortés was interested only in total victory, not in turning the Aztecs into vassals of the Spanish Empire. Trapped in the midst of the lake, the Aztecs fought to the end. They finally surrendered the ruins of Tenochtitlán on August 13, 1521. The Spanish invaders took possession of the city and buried the dead. The most powerful empire in the history of Mesoamerica had been destroyed (see “Two Elegies on the Fall of the City of Tenochtitlán”).



Spanish firepower.

Several factors account for Spain's victory



Smallpox victims.

## Reasons for the Spanish Victory

Spain's victory in this epic confrontation of European and Mesoamerican civilizations can be explained by a number of factors. First, the Toltec legend of Quetzalcóatl distracted and confused the Aztecs before Cortés entered Tenochtitlán. Second, the Spaniards arrived in early November, when many warriors, who might have been able to hold off the invaders, were busy with the harvest. Moreover, Spanish military technology was clearly superior and, together with European tactical insights, gave the invaders a significant, although not decisive, advantage. Smallpox proved even more significant. This contagious disease weakened the Aztec population and nearly eliminated its elite, but had no effect on the Spaniards. As it also killed most of the political elite of the Spaniards' native allies, it gave Cortés the opportunity to name loyal commanders in their place. Cortés' leadership tactics were also important, especially compared to the indecisiveness of Montezuma. And although each side misinterpreted the actions and motives of the other, Aztec misinterpretations proved the more serious and weakened their resistance.

All of these factors gave the advantage to the Spaniards. Overriding them all, however, was the Aztec policy of enslaving, persecuting, and sacrificing the people it conquered. Had the Aztecs assimilated those they defeated and sought to gain their loyalty, Cortés would never have been able to enlist more than one hundred thousand Amerind warriors as his allies, and without them he could not have conquered the Aztec Empire.

## The Invasion and Conquest of Peru

The collapse of the Aztec Empire, a momentous event in Mexico, went unnoticed in Peru. The Inca, unaware of Mesoamerican civilizations, would have been more surprised by news of the existence of the Aztecs than by their defeat.

## Upheavals Among the Inca

Huayna Capac, who became Sapa Inca in 1493, at first concentrated on consolidating his empire. Then in the early 1520s he began to extend Inca control into northern Ecuador. While fighting there, he received word that a raiding party of Amerinds had crossed into present-day Bolivia in search of tools and jewelry. Huayna Capac sent a detachment of soldiers to drive the raiders back into what is now northern Argentina and fortify the frontier. He did not know that their war leader was a Portuguese adventurer named Aleixo (*ah-LĀ-shō*) García. Had he known, he would not have understood what the arrival of Europeans signified.

The Sapa Inca continued his campaign in Ecuador. Several months later, in 1526, he received terrifying news: an unknown plague was sweeping through Cuzco, killing the strong and weak alike. By forced marches he returned to his capital and soon fell ill himself. The plague, the symptoms of which suggest smallpox, may have been introduced into Tahuantin-Suyu by merchants from Colombia, who had been exposed to Europeans, or by soldiers fighting the raiders from Argentina, who had taken in Europeans like García. Whatever its source, it killed the Sapa Inca and threw his entire empire into disarray.

Europeans begin to encounter the Inca Empire

Before he died, Huayna Capac had time to consider two matters of supreme importance. First was a series of disturbing reports from the coast. Bearded men were floating southward on the waves, riding in a house of gleaming white. Huayna Capac believed that these visitors, together with the unexplained plague, foretold great trouble for the empire. Second, he changed his mind about which son should succeed him. His principal wife being childless, he had originally designated Huascar (*WHASS-car*), a son by one of his other wives, as his successor. But when the fever came upon him, Huayna Capac selected another son, Ninan Cuyochi (*NE-nahn coo-YO-chē*). The Sapa Inca soon died, and a few days later Ninan Cuyochi died as well. Huascar now claimed the throne, but the fact that his dying father had passed him over emboldened yet another brother, Atahualpa (*ah-tah-WHALL-pah*), to contest his right to rule. Huascar seized power in Cuzco, while Atahualpa did the same in Quito, the empire's second largest city. Tahuantin-Suyu descended into civil war.

Smallpox throws the Inca Empire into disarray

Huascar was tactless, willful, and immature, and he alienated so many in Cuzco that the empire's capital gradually lost the will to defend him. Atahualpa, by contrast, earned the allegiance of the two foremost war chiefs of the realm and conducted himself in battle with dignity and courage. The rugged terrain ensured a long, difficult struggle, but when conflict ended early in 1532 the empire was in the hands of Atahualpa. One year earlier he had first learned of an actual landing by the Spaniards, who followed the orders of a man named Francisco Pizarro (*pē-ZAH-rō*). Pizarro, a Spanish adventurer, had set sail from Panama in 1531 with about 180 men to conquer what they had heard was a rich land to the South.

Atahualpa wins the civil war and becomes Sapa Inca

## Encounter Between Inca and Spaniards

When Pizarro's forces reached the Inca city of Tumbez, they seized it and learned at once that the Inca Empire had been torn by civil war for four years. The Spaniards, unlike the Inca, understood clearly what smallpox was and knew that they had little to fear from it. They also understood that a physically weakened population distracted by internal turmoil was exactly what Cortés had encountered and conquered in Mexico in 1521.

Spaniards understand the usefulness of smallpox in conquering Amerinds

Atahualpa reacted to the seizure of Tumbez with a mixture of caution and interest. He concluded, incorrectly, that the newcomers were interested in taking sides in the civil war; if so, they might be worth meeting. After he captured Huascar and ended the civil war, he sought information concerning the invaders.

Unlike the Aztecs, the Inca had no Quetzalcóatl legend to distract them, and the fact that several Spaniards had been killed at Tumbez indicated that they were not gods but humans. The Sapa Inca sent an envoy to assess the situation. This man reported that Pizarro had landed with a very small number of men, that his horses were nothing more than large dogs, that his soldiers lacked fighting spirit, and that he himself could defeat them with two hundred warriors. Now feeling that he could easily rid his domain of these outsiders, Atahualpa sent them several virgins, escorted by a war chief who promised them silver and gold if they agreed to return home.

Atahualpa underestimates the Spaniards

In the eyes of the Inca, Pizarro reacted strangely. He accepted the women but declined to leave, marching inland instead. At Tumbez he had killed the governor and other high officials, replacing them with Inca who swore loyalty to him. Yet he continually sent messages to Atahualpa acknowledging the latter's rights as ruler of

### Map 18.3 Pizarro's Third Expedition to Peru, 1531–1533

Pizarro did not simply invade the Inca Empire without familiarizing himself with the terrain and its inhabitants. He was well aware of the imposing size of the empire and the challenging terrain his soldiers would have to cross. Observe that the length of his route was nearly fifteen hundred miles, forcing him to expose his forces to the possibility of hostile assault over a distance four times the width of the Iberian Peninsula, where he was born. His third expedition placed his forces unexpectedly in the midst of an Inca civil war. How did Pizarro use that conflict to disrupt the Inca Empire?



Tahuantín-Suyu. The Sapa Inca sent word to Pizarro of his recent victory over Huascar and pointed out that the visitors were far from home in a foreign and hostile land. Still the Spaniards continued inland by a route leading to the provincial city of Cajamarca (*kah-yah-MAR-kah*), populated by several thousand Inca and guarded by a large fortress. Pizarro hoped to capture or kill the Sapa Inca and take over the Inca Empire without engaging in a long military campaign like the one Cortés had waged against the Aztecs.

### Cajamarca and the End of the Inca Empire

Atahualpa's attitude and tone differed substantially from Montezuma's approach to Cortés in Mexico. However, the Sapa Inca was no less confused about the Spaniards' intentions than Montezuma had been, and he held a much lower estimation of their military potential. Still, the Spaniards might be useful as allies in pacifying the areas previously held by Huascar, and their recognition of his authority suggested that they could become his vassals and eventually be assimilated into the empire through mitima. In any event, they could not be allowed to march around the countryside unsupervised. Atahualpa resolved to go to Cajamarca (Map 18.3) and see them for himself.

Atahualpa arrived ahead of the Spaniards, residing at a compound built around warm springs a short distance from the city. On November 15, 1532, the Spanish entered Cajamarca. The Sapa Inca and his courtly entourage entered the city the following afternoon, as two thousand Inca swept the road before him. Carried on a litter, he

was greeted by a single black-robed Spanish priest, who directed him to submit to two men called Jesus Christ and the King of Spain. Declaring that there was only one god in the heavens and that all Inca idols were to be destroyed, the priest presented Atahualpa with a small black book of Christian devotions. The emperor examined it curiously, but since no one in a culture lacking writing could interpret the symbols on its pages (or even realize that they were intended to be read), he assumed the book was a flimsy idol and threw it on the ground. The priest then retrieved it and fled toward one of the houses surrounding the square, calling out in Spanish.

### Document 18.3 An Inca Account of the Conquest of Peru

**Diego de Castro Titu Cusi Yupanqui, the son of Manco Inca and the nephew of Atahualpa, was born in 1530, two years before Pizarro's victory over Atahualpa at Cajamarca. Titu Cusi became Sapa Inca of the unsubdued state of Vilcabamba in 1560. In 1570, he dictated to a Spanish missionary this account of the conquest.**

At the time when the Spaniards first landed in this country of Peru and when they arrived at the city of Cajamarca, my father Manco Inca was residing in the city of Cuzco. There he governed with all the powers that had been bestowed upon him by his father Huayna Capac. He first learned of the Spaniards' arrival from certain messengers who had been sent from there by one of his brothers by the name of Atahualpa, who was older but a bastard . . . They reported having observed that certain people had arrived in their land, people who were very different from us in custom and dress, and that they appeared to be Viracochas (this is the name that we used to apply to the Creator of All Things). They named the people as such because they differed very much from us in clothing and appearance and because they rode very large sheep with silver feet (by which they meant horseshoes). Another reason for calling them so was that the Indians saw them alone talking to white cloths as one person would speak to another, which is how they perceived the reading of books and letters . . .

When my uncle [Atahualpa] was approaching Cajamarca with all of his people, the Spaniards met

them at the springs of Conoc, one and a half leagues from Cajamarca . . . After having heard what they had to say, my uncle attended to them and calmly offered one of them our customary drink in a golden cup, but the Spaniard poured it out with his own hands, which offended my uncle very much. Having seen how little they minded his things, my uncle said, "If you disrespect me, I will also disrespect you." He got up angrily and raised a cry as though he wanted to kill the Spaniards. However, the Spaniards were on the lookout and took possession of the four gates of the plaza where they were, which was enclosed on all its sides.

The Indians were thus penned up like sheep in this enclosed plaza, unable to move because there were so many of them. Also, they had no weapons as they had not brought any, being so little concerned about the Spaniards . . . The Spaniards stormed with great fury to the center of the plaza, where the Sapa Inca's seat was placed on an elevated platform . . . After they had taken everything from him, they apprehended him, and because the Indians uttered loud cries, they started killing them with the horses, the swords or guns, like one kills sheep, without anyone being able to resist them. Of more than ten thousand not even two hundred escaped . . .

SOURCE: Titu Cusi Yupanqui, *An Inca Account of the Conquest of Peru*, translated by Ralph Bauer (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005).

Atahualpa instructed his entourage to punish the Spaniards. But just then musket fire burst forth from the houses, and great numbers of Spaniards, some on horses but most on foot, poured into the square. The perplexed Inca elite stood transfixed until the Spaniards fell upon them with swords and began cutting off their arms and heads. Then the panicked survivors tried to escape, but the Spaniards killed freely, as none of the Inca in the imperial entourage were armed. After the Inca guarding his litter were killed to the last man, Atahualpa was taken prisoner. Learning what was happening in Cajamarca, the thousands of armed Inca warriors outside the city, who could certainly have intervened, fled in terror (see "An Inca Account of the Conquest of Peru").

The Spaniards attack the Inca at Cajamarca

Pizarro deceives  
Atahualpa

Having learned from his envoys that the Spaniards lusted for gold and silver, Atahualpa offered at once to pay a huge ransom for his freedom. Pizarro demanded that two large rooms be completely filled with precious objects, one room with silver and the other with gold. He was soon presented with an amazing treasure: 26,000 pounds of pure silver and 13,420 pounds of 22-carat gold. To make this plunder portable, the Spaniards melted down priceless Inca artworks of great beauty and value, turning them into bars of gold and silver. But Atahualpa had erred in assuming that he could trust Pizarro. Once the ransom was paid, the Sapa Inca was tried on charges of raising armies to overthrow Spanish rule, murdering his brother Huascar, and marrying his own sister. He was strangled in 1533.

In deciding to kill the Sapa Inca, Pizarro had reasoned treacherously but well. The Inca Caste, after so many years of infighting, was profoundly divided. Civil war, smallpox, and the Cajamarca ambush had killed most of the experienced leaders of the empire. By 1535 the conquest was complete. The Inca Empire had offered no significant resistance.

### Reasons for the Spanish Victory

Spain's victory in this confrontation with this greatest of all Amerind empires can be explained by a number of factors. First, the demonstrated success of Spanish weaponry and tactics in Mexico, coupled with Inca ignorance of what had taken place there, gave Spain a decisive advantage at Cajamarca in 1532. As in Mexico, smallpox proved advantageous, killing the Sapa Inca in 1527 and touching off a civil war over the succession that Pizarro interpreted accurately and exploited skillfully. Third, Atahualpa underestimated the Spanish, especially following the mistaken reports of his envoy. Then, after Cajamarca, the Inca practice of mitima worked to Spain's advantage, as the Inca, assuming the Spaniards would assimilate them as equals, did not resist. Most significant, perhaps, was Pizarro's deception. Pizarro led Atahualpa to believe he would be freed upon payment of a huge ransom, and so the Sapa Inca did not order his massive armies to attack the invaders. When the extent of this deception became obvious, the Spaniards had been heavily reinforced.

In Peru as in Mexico, Spanish greed for gold and silver led bold men to take risks that, in retrospect, seem incredibly dangerous. But the invaders capitalized on every advantage that came their way, destroying the two greatest Amerind empires in the western hemisphere. On the ruins of those empires, other Spaniards would build a European empire of their own.

## Chapter Review

### Putting It in Perspective

The civilizations built by the Aztecs and Inca developed in distinctive environments, totally isolated from each other and from the eastern hemisphere. Both were based on political hierarchies headed by emperors and dominated by warrior elites, settled economies balanced between agriculture and trade, and polytheistic religions. These two civilizations created large cities, extensive transportation networks, and intricate social structures. Neither had yet completed its second century of existence when the Spaniards arrived.

Aztec Mexico was clearly the more coercive of the two. Raising human sacrifice to the level of a divine obligation and conducting it with mechanistic efficiency, Tenochtitlán terrified all those who lived in central Mexico. Disdainful of other Amerind cultures, the Aztecs sought not to govern them but to dominate and exploit them. Many of their vassals welcomed the prospect of Spanish rule. The possibility that the Spanish could be more oppressive than the Aztecs seems not to have occurred to the elites of central Mexico.

Tahuantín-Suyu was no less ruthless in its expansion than Tenochtitlán, but it developed into a militaristic empire that aimed to gain the loyalty of conquered peoples rather than slaughter them. The Inca practice of mitima gave subject peoples a stake in the empire. Human sacrifice, while not unknown, was practiced primarily during emergencies or on important occasions.

When Atahualpa was captured at Cajamarca, the Spaniards found it easy to rule the general population of the empire. Most Inca appear to have believed that the newcomers would integrate all peoples into their new empire with some degree of equality. Like the Aztecs, however, the Inca interpreted new experiences in terms of old customs and were mistaken regarding the conquerors' intentions. They faced a situation completely unlike anything they had ever imagined: conquest by aliens from another world.

## Reviewing Key Material

### KEY CONCEPTS

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### KEY PEOPLE

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Huayna Capac, 441	Atahualpa, 451
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### ASK YOURSELF

1. How did the cosmic mission theory shape Aztec society?
2. How did the Inca and Aztec empires differ in their attitudes toward conquered peoples?
3. In the encounters between Europeans and Amerinds, what difference did it make that Amerind civilizations had developed more recently than European civilization?
4. How did Aztec and Inca ignorance of the existence of European civilization handicap them in responding to European invasion?

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## Key Dates and Developments

- |                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <b>ca. 1111</b>  | The Aztecs move into central Mexico                |
| <b>ca. 1200</b>  | Inca ascendancy begins in the central Andes        |
| <b>1325</b>      | Foundation of Tenochtitlán                         |
| <b>1400–1438</b> | Inca expansion under Viracocha Inca                |
| <b>1438–1471</b> | Pachacuti founds Tahuantin-Suyu                    |
| <b>1440</b>      | Aztecs dominate the Valley of Mexico               |
| <b>1471–1493</b> | Topa Inca expands the Inca Empire                  |
| <b>1502–1520</b> | Reign of Montezuma II                              |
| <b>1519</b>      | Cortés leads an expedition from Cuba to Mexico     |
| <b>1521</b>      | Fall of Tenochtitlán                               |
| <b>1527</b>      | Death of Huayna Capac; civil war in Tahuantin-Suyu |
| <b>1531</b>      | Pizarro leads an expedition from Panama to Peru    |
| <b>1532</b>      | Capture of Atahualpa at Cajamarca                  |