

Student Handout #2 - Civilization and Empire in the Americas

The Mayans – A Quick Review

The Mayan civilization began to develop in the area of the Yucatan peninsula in Mesoamerica sometime around 2000 BCE. Their society began as small agricultural villages that, over time, grew into large, organized city-states. Chichen Itza, Tikal, and El Mirador were some of these cities. The period of their greatest power was between 250 and 900 CE.

The homeland of the Maya was in the area of what is now southern Mexico and the Central American nations of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras. Across this region, the Mayans built a network of cities connected through trade and religion. These cities had many large, stone structures - including pyramids - that were built as religious sites where ceremonies honoring different gods were held. There were also large public plazas and even stone courts for Mayan ball games.

Culture:

The Mayans also developed a complex system of writing using glyphs, or hieroglyphic symbols. In this writing system, they had logograms – symbols used to express an idea or concept, and syllabograms- symbols that represented a sound in their language. They created amazing works of art as well, including pottery, statues, carved stone decorations, and paintings. The Mayans were also very advanced in astronomy, math, and architecture. They had a very accurate yearly calendar as well.

Mayan religion centered on the worship of many different gods, most of whom were tied to the natural world. Priests were considered very important and had more power and influence than most people. Their religion was tied to astronomy and the movement of the sun and moon. They practiced many rituals, including some human sacrifice, and built large temples that were the centers of their cities.

Government:

The Mayans had a clear power structure, and their governments were ruled by kings and priests. The larger cities were ruled as independent city-states. Outside of the large cities were smaller farming communities that were connected to the city-state. City-states traded, and sometimes fought, with each other, but they did not share governments. City-states formed armies when they needed them, but didn't seem to have permanent, organized military forces. Religion was key to political power, and kings were seen as connected to the gods.

Economy:

The Mayan economy was based on the trade of different types of goods, including both basic necessities like food and clothing, and luxury items like cacao, gold, jewelry, and obsidian. The city-states of the Maya were self-sufficient early on, and they produced all of the food and basic goods they needed. Corn, beans, and squash were important crops, and most people worked as farmers. Goods like pottery and clothing were generally made in people's homes for their own families. As Mayan cities got larger however, they needed increased food production, and trading food products across regions also increased. Some things like fish, salt, or stone tools were more easily found or produced in specific areas, and these would then be traded to areas that needed these products. Powerful members of the elite particularly wanted special goods like gold and jade objects that showed how rich and powerful they were, and they traded to get things not produced in their cities. Mayan trade extended across the whole region, and into other parts of Mexico and Central America.

Mayan city-states declined in their power before 1000 CE, and many of the people who lived in them moved away. The Mayan civilization didn't completely disappear as some people claim, but the level of organization and the size of their cities certainly did. Historians and archaeologists aren't certain why this happened, but they do know that the Mayans had conflicts with the Toltec people at times. They also know the Mayans sometimes faced epidemic diseases, and there was a drought in Mesoamerica during this period of time as well. Also, the Mayans may have used up too many resources in too short a time to support their cities. Although nobody knows exactly what happened, the decline of the Maya was probably caused by some combination of these problems.

The Aztec Empire

The Aztecs developed their empire in the central valley of Mexico in the 1400's. They arrived in this region during the early 1300's as nomads migrating from an area in the north they called Aztlan. They fought with different groups in this region, were almost wiped out at one point, but survived and managed to build a capital city called Tenochtitlan, located on an island in Lake Texcoco. From this capital, they expanded and came to rule a large part of what is now Mexico in the 1400's. At its largest, the population of Tenochtitlan was estimated to be as much as 200,000 people, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time. The city was centered around a religious complex with temples, pyramids, and the king's palace. The Aztecs constructed these elaborate temples to honor their gods, and at times, they even sacrificed people captured in battle as a sacrifice to these gods. The other areas of the city were planned out and organized into a grid system. There were bridges built to connect the island city to the mainland, and fresh water was carried to the city through a system of aqueducts that brought water from the mountains.

Culture:

Like the Maya, the Aztecs had a very accurate calendar with 365 days that was used to keep track of time for planting, and also to keep track of religious events and ceremonies. The Aztecs also had a writing system similar to the Mayan system that was based on glyphs, symbols that represented either sounds or words. They wrote books called codices that described their belief systems and their society.

Religion was very important in Aztec society, and the emperor was seen as directly connected to the gods. The Aztecs were polytheistic, meaning that they worshipped many different gods. These gods were associated with different activities – such as farming – or with different parts of the natural world. The sun god was particularly important, for example.

Government and social structure:

The Aztec government was ruled by an emperor or king who was seen as directly connected to the gods. The Aztec empire was a bit different from empires like Rome though, as it consisted of connected city-states. The Aztec emperor did not directly rule every aspect of these city-states as long as the city-states paid tribute to the emperor. City-states were left to manage their own affairs as long as they kept the emperor paid and happy. The emperor of the Aztecs was called the Huey Tlatoani, and he was the final authority in Aztec government. The Huey Tlatoani was believed to have been chosen by the gods to rule, and he had the authority to go to war and to demand tribute from other groups,

Besides the emperor, there were other officials in the government. The emperor had a main advisor who oversaw the daily running of the government, which included a complex bureaucracy with many different officials. There was also a sort of city-council in each city-state, and these councils made decisions about basic issues and consulted with the emperor.

Priests also had power and were in charge of religious ceremonies, and they advised the emperor with respect to religious issues, which were very important in Aztec society. There were also judges who made legal decisions and managed the Aztec's advanced legal system of laws and codes. There was also a system for military leadership.

Aztec society was controlled by a class of nobles; there were also commoners, most of whom were farmers, as well as slaves. Slaves in Aztec society were generally criminals or people who had been captured in war with other societies. Slaves in Aztec society could improve their conditions and move up, particularly if they performed well in battle.

Economy:

Although Aztec society was centered in cities, the economy was based on farming in rural areas outside the cities. The Aztecs were skilled farmers and were able to produce enough food for their large urban centers; they used crop rotations and even created floating beds of reeds in the lake where they planted additional crops. Aztec crops included beans, squash, tobacco, peppers, avocados, and corn. In large markets in their cities, people traded food products, raw materials, and a wide range of crafts and other goods including jewelry, medicine, and tools. Their trade networks extended well beyond the borders of their empire. The Aztecs bartered for goods, but also used things like cacao beans as a form of currency.

The Inca Empire

The Inca people settled in a valley in the mountains of what is now Peru around the year 1200 CE, and they developed their kingdom around the city of Cuzco. Around the year 1400 CE, they began to transition from a local kingdom into a regional empire. In 1438, the prince Pachacuti led his people in battle and defeated a neighboring kingdom. Pachacuti then became the Sapa Inca, emperor, and led a period of expansion. He helped to organize the government and he also had the famous city of Machu Picchu built high in the mountains. Pachacuti's son Tupac Inca Yupanqui became the next emperor, and he expanded the empire even more as he defeated and took over other kingdoms. Under the rule of Tupac's son, Huayna Capac, around 1493, the Inca empire reached its height.

Centered in Peru, their empire eventually spanned 2,500 miles along the Andes mountains and the western coast of South America, and it had a population of more than 10 million people. The Inca developed a complex bureaucracy to control this vast territory, as well as a system of roadways with 14,000 miles of roads, even though they did not have wheeled vehicles.

The Incans perfected means of farming in the steep mountainous terrain of the Andes, using complicated irrigation systems and terraced farming.

Culture:

The Incans did not have a writing system, but they did use a system of knotted cords called quipus to keep track of goods produced and/or traded.

The Inca also practiced a polytheistic religion (with many gods). Like the Aztecs, their gods were connected to the natural world and also to human activities. There were gods that represented the sun, the moon, the wind, lightning, rain, and other elements of nature. The Inca did believe in a first, creator god called Viracocha. Viracocha was worshipped in this area before the Inca established their empire. There were many festivals that were connected to different deities and the natural changes connected to these gods.

Government:

The Incan government had a strong military to maintain control across the empire, and they also developed a system of laws, an official language, and a calendar. The emperor, the Sapa Inca, was seen in many ways as a god, and he had almost total authority which he exercised through his representatives, many of whom were his family members. There was a high priest, usually related to the emperor, who served as the top religious leader after the emperor. The

empire was sectioned into four main areas, each controlled by a governor and divided into smaller political regions. The nobility of Inca society played a key role in the bureaucracy that controlled these regions and collected taxes from people. In many local areas, local leaders were allowed to keep their power and influence as long as they were loyal to the emperor.

The Incan government required people to provide tribute in the form of labor, and this labor was used to build temples, other structures, roads, and massive irrigation projects that provided water for farming in the mountains. These projects were so large that they depended on this type of forced labor. The road system was very important in keeping information moving across the empire. Way-stations were built in many places along the road system, and these served as supply stations for armies as well as relay spots for messengers.

The Inca also used their language and culture to bring different parts of the empire together, making Quechua the official language of the empire. They even sent out groups of people from the capital and central region to colonize other, more far-away areas.

Economy:

The Inca traded agricultural products as well as precious metals like gold, silver, and copper that they mined in the mountains. They used caravans of llamas to carry the goods that they traded over this network of roads. Trade was regulated and controlled by the government, and government officials kept track of production. The maintenance of the road system, also important for government, was key to the economy. The roads were used to spread not only information, but also goods, from one part of the empire to another. Incan runners even carried fresh fish from the coast into inland areas.

Student Handout #3 – Primary Accounts of the Aztecs and Incas

AZTECS:

Hernan Cortez, a Spanish conquistador, wrote this account of the Aztecs after he visited their capital city. He was viewing the city as an outsider, and also as a soldier and explorer who was looking to take over new lands in the name of the king of Spain.

Modern History Sourcebook:

Hernan Cortés: from Second Letter to Charles V, 1520

This great city of Temixtitlan [Mexico] is situated in this salt lake, and from the main land to the denser parts of it, by whichever route one chooses to enter, the distance is two leagues. There are four avenues or entrances to the city, all of which are formed by artificial causeways, two spears' length in width. The city is as large as Seville or Cordova; its streets, I speak of the principal ones, are very wide and straight; some of these, and all the inferior ones, are half land and half water, and are navigated by canoes. All the streets at intervals have openings, through which the water flows, crossing from one street to another; and at these openings, some of which are very wide, there are also very wide bridges, composed of large pieces of timber, of great strength and well put together; on many of these bridges ten horses can go abreast. Foreseeing that if the inhabitants of the city should prove treacherous, they would possess great advantages from the manner in which the city is constructed, since by removing the bridges at the entrances, and abandoning the place, they could leave us to perish by famine without our being able to reach the main land, as soon as I had entered it, I made great haste to build four boats, which were soon finished, and were large enough to take ashore three hundred men and the horses, whenever it should become necessary.

This city has many public squares, in which are situated the markets and other places for buying and selling. There is one square twice as large as that of the city of Salamanca, surrounded by porches, where are daily assembled more than sixty thousand souls, engaged in buying and selling; and where are found all kinds of merchandise that the world affords, embracing the necessaries of life, as for instance articles of food, as well as jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, shells, snails, and feathers. There are also exposed for sale wrought and unwrought stone, bricks burnt and unburnt, timber hewn and unhewn, of different sorts. There is a street for game, where every variety of birds in the country are sold, as fowls, partridges, quails, wild ducks, fly-catchers, widgeons, turtledoves, pigeons, reed-birds, parrots, sparrows, eagles, hawks, owls, and kestrels; they sell likewise the skins of some birds of prey, with their feathers, head, beak, and claws. There are also sold rabbits, hares, deer, and little dogs [*i.e.*, the chihuahua], which are raised for eating. There is also an herb street, where may be obtained all sorts of roots and medicinal herbs that the country affords. There are apothecaries' shops, where prepared medicines, liquids, ointments, and plasters are sold; barbers' shops, where they wash and shave the head; and restaurateurs, that furnish food and drink at a certain price. There is also a class of men like those called in Castile porters, for carrying burdens. Wood and coal are seen in abundance, and braziers of earthenware for burning coals; mats of various kinds for beds, others of a lighter sort for seats, and for halls and bedrooms.

There are all kinds of green vegetables, especially onions, leeks, garlic, watercresses, nasturtium, borage, sorrel, artichokes, and golden thistle; fruits also of numerous descriptions, amongst which are

cherries and plums, similar to those in Spain; honey and wax from bees, and from the stalks of maize, which are as sweet as the sugar-cane; honey is also extracted from the plant called maguey, which is superior to sweet or new wine; from the same plant they extract sugar and wine, which they also sell. Different kinds of cotton thread of all colors in skeins are exposed for sale in one quarter of the market, which has the appearance of the silk-market at Granada, although the former is supplied more abundantly. Painters' colors, as numerous as can be found in Spain, and as fine shades; deerskins dressed and undressed, dyed different colors; earthen-ware of a large size and excellent quality; large and small jars, jugs, pots, bricks, and endless variety of vessels, all made of fine clay, and all or most of them glazed and painted; maize or Indian corn, in the grain and in the form of bread, preferred in the grain for its flavor to that of the other islands and the main land; meat paste of birds and fish; great quantities of fish---fresh, salt, cooked and uncooked; the eggs of hens, geese, and of all the other birds I have mentioned, in great abundance, and cakes made of eggs; finally, everything that can be found throughout the whole country is sold in the markets, comprising articles so numerous and because their names are not retained in my memory, or are unknown to me, I shall not attempt to enumerate them.

Every kind of merchandise is sold in a particular street or quarter assigned to it exclusively, and thus the best order is preserved. They sell everything by number or measure; at least so far we have not observed them to sell anything by weight. There is a building in the great square that is used as an audience house, where ten or twelve persons, who are magistrates, sit and decide all controversies that arise in the market, and order delinquents to be punished. In the same square there are other persons who go constantly about among the people observing what is sold, and the measures used in selling; and they have been seen to break measures that were not true.

This great city contains a large number of temples, or houses, for their idols, very handsome edifices, which are situated in the different districts and the suburbs; in the principal ones religious persons of each particular sect are constantly residing, for whose use, besides the houses containing the idols, there are other convenient dwellings. All these persons dress in black, and never cut or comb their hair from the time they enter the priesthood until they leave it; and all the sons of the principal inhabitants, both nobles and respectable citizens, are placed in the temples and wear the same dress from the age of seven or eight years until they are taken out to be married; which occurs more frequently with the first-born who inherit estates than with the others. The priests are separated from female society, nor is any woman permitted to enter the religious houses. They also do not eat certain kinds of food, more at some seasons of the year than others.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1520cortes.asp>

Primary Accounts of the Inca

Modern History Sourcebook:

Pedro de Cieza de León:

Chronicles of the Incas, 1540

Another view of the Incas, from a conquistador. It provides quite a lot of information about the Incan economy--a redistributive typical of all early civilizations.

It is told for a fact of the rulers of this kingdom that in the days of their rule they had their representatives in the capitals of all the provinces, for in all these places there were larger and finer

lodgings than in most of the other cities of this great kingdom, and many storehouses. They served as the head of the provinces or regions, and from every so many leagues around the tributes were brought to one of these capitals, and from so many others, to another. This was so well-organized that there was not a village that did not know where it was to send its tribute. In all these capitals the Incas had temples of the Sun, mints, and many silversmiths who did nothing but work rich pieces of gold or fair vessels of silver; large garrisons were stationed there, and a steward who was in command of them all, to whom an accounting of everything that was brought in was made, and who, in turn, had to give one of all that was issued. ...The tribute paid by each of these provinces, whether gold, silver, clothing, arms and all else they gave, was entered in the accounts of those who kept the *quipus* and did everything ordered by the governor in the matter of finding the soldiers or supplying whomever the Inca ordered, or making delivery to Cuzco; but when they came from the city of Cuzco to go over the accounts, or they were ordered to go to Cuzco to give an accounting, the accountants themselves gave it by the *quipus*, or went to give it where there could be no fraud, but everything had to come out right. Few years went by in which an accounting was not made....

At the beginning of the new year the rulers of each village came to Cuzco, bringing their *quipus*, which told how many births there had been during the year, and how many deaths. In this way the Inca and the governors knew which of the Indians were poor, the women who had been widowed, whether they were able to pay their taxes, and how many men they could count on in the event of war, and many other things they considered highly important. The Incas took care to see that justice was meted out, so much so that nobody ventured to commit a felony or theft. This was to deal with thieves, rapists, or conspirators against the Inca.

As this kingdom was so vast, in each of the many provinces there were many storehouses filled with supplies and other needful things; thus, in times of war, wherever the armies went they drew upon the contents of these storehouses, without ever touching the supplies of their confederates or laying a finger on what they had in their settlements....Then the storehouses were filled up once more with the tributes paid the Inca. If there came a lean year, the storehouses were opened and the provinces were lent what they needed in the way of supplies; then, in a year of abundance, they paid back all they had received. No one who was lazy or tried to live by the work of others was tolerated; everyone had to work. Thus on certain days each lord went to his lands and took the plow in hand and cultivated the earth, and did other things. Even the Incas themselves did this to set an example. And under their system there was none such in all the kingdom, for, if he had his health, he worked and lacked for nothing; and if he was ill, he received what he needed from the storehouses. And no rich man could deck himself out in more finery than the poor, or wear different clothing, except the rulers and the headmen, who, to maintain their dignity, were allowed great freedom and privilege.

Source:

From: Pedro Cieza de León, *The Second Part of the Chronicle of Peru*, Clements R. Markham, trans. & ed., (London: Hakluyt Society, 1883), pp. 36-50, *passim*.

<http://www.fordham.edu/HALSALL/MOD/1540cieza.asp>