

The Americas on the Eve of Invasion

Postclassical Mesoamerica, 1000–1500 C.E.

- After the collapse of Teotihuacán, the **Toltecs** moved into the political power vacuum and established a culture with a strong military ethic and a cult of human sacrifice and war.
- Toltec influence spread over much of central Mexico. The legend of **Topiltzin/Quetzalcoatl**, which claimed that a Toltec faction would one day return and claim the throne, was well known to the **Aztecs** (successors to the Toltecs) and may have influenced their response when the Europeans arrived.
- The Aztecs gained control of the important **Lake Texcoco** region in the post-Toltec era, and made their capital at **Tenochtitlan**. The Aztecs had a reputation as tough warriors and fanatical followers of their gods.
- By the time of **Moctezuma II**, the Aztec state was dominated by a king who represented civil power and served as a representative of the gods on earth. The **cult of human sacrifice and conquest** was united with the political power of the ruler and the nobility.
- Aztec religion, which incorporated many traditional Mesoamerican elements, was a vast, uniting, and sometimes, oppressive force in which little distinction was made between the world of the gods and the natural world. Major deities included **Tlaloc**, god of rain, and **Huitzilopochtli**, the Aztec tribal god. **Nezhualcoyotl**, an Aztec king and poet, promoted a kind of monotheism, but the idea did not last. Human sacrifice increased considerably.
- To feed their people, the Aztecs used an ingenious and successful system of irrigated agriculture highlighted by **chinampas** (beds of aquatic weeds, mud, and earth that had been placed in frames made of cane and rooted to the lake floor). A special merchant class, the **pochteca**, regulated markets, and the state oversaw a vast tribute network.

Aztec Society in Transition

- As the empire grew, a new social hierarchy replaced the old **calpulli** (kinship-based clan) system of social organization.
- The rights of **Aztec women** seem to have been fully recognized, but in political and social life their role, though complementary to that of men, remained **subordinate**. Lack of technology meant women were required to spend significant time hand-grinding **maize**, a staple crop. The area controlled by the Aztecs may have included 20 million people.

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- Each city-state was ruled by a **speaker** chosen from the nobility. In many ways, the Aztec Empire was not unlike the subject city-states over which it gained control. These city-states, in turn, were often left unchanged if they recognized Aztec supremacy and met their obligations.

Twantinsuyu: World of the Incas

- With a genius for state organization and bureaucratic control over peoples of different cultures and languages, the **Incas** achieved a level of integration and domination previously unknown in the Americas.
- The coastal empire of **Chimor** preceded the Incas. With the help of their leader, **Pachacuti**, and his successors, **Twantinsuyu** (the Incan Empire) spread from modern-day Columbia to northern Argentina.
- The Incas adopted the practice of royal **split inheritance**, which required new land and wealth. This may have caused the empire's growth. The **Temple of the Sun** at **Cuzco** was the center of Incan religious life.
- The Incas developed a state bureaucracy, headed by an **inca** and four regional governors (who, in turn, divided their realms). They spread their language, **Quechua**, used colonists, and built extensive road networks (dotted with **tambos**, or way stations) to encourage unity. The empire also demanded **mita**, mandatory labor on church and state lands. Andean people practiced **parallel descent**. In addition to local **ayllus** (clans), a class of **yanas** (people living outside their ayllu) provided important service. Though the empire was a masterpiece of statecraft, a **system of royal multiple marriages** as a way of forging alliances created rival claimants for power and the **possibility of civil war** on the eve of the Spanish invasion.
- Incan **cultural achievements** included beautiful pottery, art, and metalworking, the **quipu** (a system of knotted strings for recording numerical information), land and water management, extensive road system, statecraft, and architecture.
- The Incan and Aztec empires are best viewed as **variations of similar patterns and processes**, of which sedentary agriculture is the most important. Basic similarities underlying the variations can also be seen in systems of belief and cosmology and in social structure.

The Other Indians

- The **diversity of ancient America** forces us to reconsider ideas of human development based on Old World examples.
- Population figures are difficult to pin down, but in 1500 the Americas may have had roughly the **same number of inhabitants as Europe** (between 57–72 million people).
- **Chieftainships based on sedentary agriculture** could be found outside the major American empires. Cultural diversity was particularly great in North America. Most American societies (outside the Incas and Aztecs) were **strongly kin-based**, unlike in Europe and Asia.
- The Americas contained a broad range of societies, from great civilizations with millions of people to small bands of hunters. In many of these societies, **religion played a dominant role** in defining the relationship between people and their environment and between the individual and society.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Although later civilizations in Mesoamerica borrowed and built on the previous accomplishments of the Olmecs and Maya, later civilizations
 - (A) were not as war-like as their predecessors had been.
 - (B) rarely surpassed their intellectual predecessors.
 - (C) failed to improve on the political institutions and types of Olmec and Maya states.
 - (D) abandoned polytheism in favor of monotheism.
 - (E) abandoned trade.
2. The Aztecs rose to power through all of the following means EXCEPT:
 - (A) control of water and irrigation.
 - (B) political alliances with neighboring cities.
 - (C) marriage alliances.
 - (D) warfare.
 - (E) trade.
3. For the Mesoamericans of the Aztec period, religion
 - (A) was increasingly monotheistic.
 - (B) developed into idealistic philosophies and intellectual discussions.
 - (C) taught that humans should live ethical, moral lives.
 - (D) declined and atheism began to spread widely.
 - (E) was oppressive and made little distinction between the sacred and secular.
4. In order to supply food to Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs
 - (A) obtained food through tribute from conquered city-states.
 - (B) relied largely on trade for foodstuffs.
 - (C) used slave labor.
 - (D) built floating agricultural islands on the lake.
 - (E) filled in Lake Texcoco to obtain agricultural lands.
5. Around 1500 C.E., membership in Aztec society was hierarchically defined by all of these methods EXCEPT:
 - (A) social classes.
 - (B) gender.
 - (C) clans or tribes.
 - (D) ethnicity.
 - (E) occupational groups.
6. Because of their level of technological development, Aztec work and production
 - (A) relied heavily on tools and machines.
 - (B) relied heavily on the physical labor of humans.
 - (C) utilized domesticated beasts of burden extensively.
 - (D) richly rewarded intellectual invention and innovation.
 - (E) were performed by slaves and conquered or tributary states.
7. Demographic evidence of the Aztec Empire around 1500 C.E. indicates
 - (A) a falling population base when the Europeans arrived.
 - (B) decreasing birthrates.
 - (C) women outnumbered men due to the losses during the frequent wars.
 - (D) most Aztecs lived in cities.
 - (E) an extremely high population density.
8. One reason offered for the expansion of the Inca state was
 - (A) a need for humans to sacrifice to the state gods.
 - (B) overpopulation and the need for new crop land.
 - (C) each new Inca ruler had to secure new land and wealth for himself.
 - (D) changing environment and climate that drove the Incas from their homeland.
 - (E) superior technologies made it easy for the Incas to conquer other peoples.

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9. Religious practices of the Incas included all of these attributes EXCEPT:
- (A) animism.
 - (B) ancestor worship.
 - (C) monotheism.
 - (D) sun worship.
 - (E) theocratic government.
10. All land in the Inca state
- (A) belonged to the priests.
 - (B) was owned by merchants and traders.
 - (C) belonged to the oldest woman of the family.
 - (D) was owned by those who worked the land.
 - (E) was owned by the state but assigned and redistributed to others.

Free-Response Question

To what extent were the Incas and Aztecs similar?

ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

Multiple-Choice Questions

- **1. (B) is correct.** Later civilizations built on past achievements, rarely offering substantive improvements.
- **2. (E) is correct.** The Aztecs rose to power through political and military means; controlling the lakes was a major aspect of their success.
- **3. (E) is correct.** Aztec religion included a cult of human sacrifice. Little distinction was made between the gods and the natural world.
- **4. (D) is correct.** The chinampas were a successful agricultural innovation.
- **5. (D) is correct.** The Aztecs, like the Incas, recognized local ethnic groups and often let regional leaders stay in place so long as tribute was offered.
- **6. (B) is correct.** For example, women were needed to grind maize because mills did not exist.
- **7. (E) is correct.** As many as 20 million people may have lived under Aztec control.
- **8. (C) is correct.** This need to expand was driven by the concept of split inheritance.
- **9. (C) is correct.** The Incan faith was polytheistic.
- **10. (E) is correct.** The Incan state claimed all resources and redistributed them. The Incas divided conquered areas into lands for the people, lands for the state, and lands for the sun.

Free-Response Essay Sample Response

To what extent were the Incas and Aztecs similar?

Though the two major American empires on the eve of European conquest had key variations, they are best seen as variations on the same theme. Both were based on cultures that preceded them. Both excelled militarily, controlled agriculture, and were relatively benign overlords so long as sovereignty was acknowledged and tribute was paid. In both, older kinship-based social orga-

nization (the calpulli and ayllu) decreased in importance as the empire grew. Essentially, the empires were created by the conquest of sedentary agricultural peoples and the extraction of tribute and labor from them.

