

READING #4

The Aztecs

The *Aztecs*, also known as the Mexicas, claimed the legacy of the Toltecs, but in fact the Aztec originated from a different part of Mexico. They were originally hunter-gatherers who migrated to central Mexico from the north in the 1200s C.E. In 1325, they founded their capital *Tenochtitlán* on the site of what is now Mexico City. Over the next 100 years, they conquered the surrounding peoples and created an empire that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. (Test Prep: Write a brief outline comparing the conquests of the Aztecs to those of the Mongols. See page 241.)

Capital City The Aztecs used geography for protection and defense by locating Tenochtitlán on an island in the middle of a swampy lake. As the city grew, they scooped up mud from the lake bottom to create more land for buildings and for fields to farm.

Tenochtitlán eventually grew to almost 200,000 people, making it not only the largest city in the Western hemisphere but also one of the largest in the world. At the center of the city, the Aztecs built a pyramid that rose some 150 feet into the air. This *Great Pyramid* and other pyramids, temples, and palaces were made of stone. The Aztecs built their houses mainly of wood, with roofs made from reeds.

Agriculture On *Lake Texcoco*, the Aztecs built floating gardens called *chinampas* to increase the amount of space for food production. The structures were constructed by fencing off a section of the lake bed with woven sticks. Mud and weeds were then added to bring the level of the soil up to the height of the lake. Crops grown in the chinampas supplemented the maize and other staples grown with traditional agricultural practices elsewhere.

The Aztecs dug ditches to use lake water to irrigate their fields and to drain parts of the lake for more land. They used plant and animal wastes as fertilizer and built stone terraces on the sides of the surrounding mountains to prevent erosion. They harvested trees, grown at altitudes too high and cold to farm, in order to provide wood for fires and building materials. To carry out all these tasks, they used only hand tools. Like other early American peoples, the Aztecs did not use wheeled vehicles. And like most groups outside of the Andes, they had no pack animals, either, so they walked between settlements and carried everything themselves. (Test Prep: Create a graphic showing the technology

Government, Economy, and Society As the Aztecs conquered much of Mesoamerica, they developed a *tribute system* that insured their dominance in the short-run. Conquered people were forced to pay tribute, surrender lands, and perform military service. Tribute included practical goods such as food, cloth, and firewood, as well as luxury items such as feathers, beads, and jewelry. Most of the luxury goods were distributed to the Aztecs noble class. The Aztecs allowed local rulers to stay in their positions to serve as tribute collectors. This allowed for Aztec political dominance without direct administrative control. In exchange, the conquered people were extended Aztec protection.

To administer the empire, the Aztecs grouped city-states into provinces. They moved warriors and their families to each province's capital to make sure the province remained under Aztec control. In addition, an Aztec official was stationed in each capital to collect tribute from local officials.

Aztec government was a theocracy (rule by religious leaders). At the top was the emperor, known as the *Great Speaker*, who was the political ruler as well as a divine representative of the gods. Next in the social hierarchy were land-owning nobles, who also formed the majority of Aztec military leadership. These nobles owned all Aztec lands, renting some to commoners to farm. The rest was farmed for landowners by slaves. Next in rank were scribes and healers, followed by craftspeople and traders. A special merchant class called *pochteca* traded in luxury goods. Below the traders were the peasants and soldiers.

At the bottom of Aztec society were slaves, many of whom were war captives. Aztec people could be enslaved as well, usually because they did not pay their debts or were being punished for crimes. Besides being used for labor, slaves were also offered up as sacrifices in religious ceremonies.

Religion The intricate and complex religion of the Aztecs was central to their society. They worshipped an ever-evolving pantheon of hundreds of deities, many of whom were considered to have both male and female aspects. Among the most important gods were Huitzilopochtli, a sun god and also a god of war; Tlaloc, a rain god; Quetzalcoatl, a god of wind and of knowledge; and Xipe Totec, a god of agriculture and fertility. Worship among the Aztecs involved a great many rituals and feast days as well as *human sacrifice*. The Aztecs believed that the gods had sacrificed themselves in order to create the world—thus human sacrifice and blood-letting, also called auto-sacrifice, was a sort of repayment and atonement for human sin. Human sacrifice probably had a political component, in the sense that it demonstrated the great might of the Aztec Empire in dramatic fashion. The number of human sacrifices may never be known. Much of the information about Aztec society comes from Spanish invaders, who may have exaggerated the extent of human sacrifice in order to make the Aztecs seem more deserving of conquest.

Culture The Aztecs had a 365-day calendar that they adopted from the Maya. Like the Maya, they used it to mark their religious ceremonies. The Aztecs made beautiful objects out of gold, silver, and precious stones, and also wove fine cloth. They had a system of picture writing that resembles the ideographs of the Maya.

Trade Network Utilizing and extending trade routes established by the Maya and other groups before them, the Aztecs traded as far north as present-day San Luis Obispo and as far south as present-day Costa Rica. They also traded along the Pacific coast as well as the Gulf and Caribbean Sea coasts. They traded goods obtained from tribute, such as cloth, cacao, and rubber balls, for shells, feathers, and precious stones.

Role of Women Women played an important role in the Aztec tribute system since they wove the valuable cloth that local rulers demanded as part of the regular tribute. As the demand for cloth tribute increased, an Aztec husband might obtain more than one wife in order to be able to pay the tribute. While most Aztec women worked in their homes, some became priestesses, midwives, healers, or merchants. A few noble women worked as scribes to female members of royal families. Therefore, at least these few women knew how to read and write.

The Decline of the Aztecs By the late fifteenth century, the Aztec Empire was in decline. The Aztecs' comparatively low level of technology—such as the lack of wheeled vehicles and pack animals—meant that agriculture was arduous and inefficient. Food preparation was similarly difficult; the basic act of grinding maize by hand consumed 30 to 40 hours per week per family. The Aztecs' commitment to military victory and constant need for more human

sacrifices induced the leadership to expand the empire beyond what it could reasonably govern. Finally, the extraction from conquered people of more and more tribute, not to mention sacrifice victims, served to inspire more resentment than loyalty. The Aztecs ruled an empire of unwilling subjects who were ready to revolt when given a chance. The arrival of Europeans in the Americas gave them that chance. The combination of European diseases that killed hundreds of thousands of Aztecs, the strength of the invading army of Spaniards led by Hernán Cortés in 1519, and the readiness of conquered people to rebel against Aztec rule brought the empire to a rapid crash.

The Inca

In the early fifteenth century, *Cuzco*, in what is now Peru, was a small center of one of several competing tribes. In about 55 years, through a series of military victories, Cuzco became the capital of the Inca Empire, which extended from present-day Ecuador in the north to Chile in the south.

Origins In 1438, the son of a tribal ruler conquered the Chanca peoples. He assumed control from his father and gave himself the title *Pachacuti* (ruled 1438–1471), which means “transformer” or “shaker” of the earth. Pachacuti's military victories transformed the Incan state into a full-fledged empire. Pachacuti's son *Yupanqui* took control in 1471 and expanded the empire even farther, conquering the state of Chimú in the north. Yupanqui's rule ended in approximately 1493, and his successor *Huayna Capac* focused on consolidating and managing the many lands conquered by his predecessors.

Government, Economy, and Society In order to rule the extensive territory efficiently, the Incan Empire was split into four provinces, each with its own governor and bureaucracy. Conquered leaders who demonstrated loyalty to the empire were rewarded. In contrast to the Aztec methods, conquered people did not have to pay tribute; rather, they were subject to the *mita system*, mandatory public service. Men between the ages of 15 and 50 provided agricultural and other forms of labor, including the construction of roads.

The Inca required that all conquered peoples adapt to their ways. They established schools to teach them *Quechua*, the Inca language, as well as religion and history. Conquered peoples were sometimes moved to new lands far away to weaken their resistance to Inca rule.

As in feudal Europe, the Inca Empire had few market towns and little trade conducted by individuals. However, the government engaged in some long-distance trade. The Inca economy was based on agriculture. The main crops included maize, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, peanuts, coca, and cotton. Most Incan families produced their own food and clothing, but they were required to turn over a portion of their crops to their local ruler. The ruler stored these crops in warehouses that the Inca built across the empire. In times of famine, people were fed from these warehouses. (Test Prep: Write a paragraph comparing the Inca economy with the economy of feudal Europe. See page 223.)

Religion A central part of Incan religion involved *royal ancestor veneration*, a practice sometimes referred to as a *royal ancestor cult*. Dead rulers were

mummified and continued to “rule” as they had in life and were thought to retain ownership of their servants, possessions, and property. Thus, Inca rulers could not expect to inherit land or property upon assuming power. This practice was a partial motivator for the constant expansion of the empire.

The name Inca means “people of the sun,” and indeed *Inti*, the sun god, was arguably the most important of the Inca gods. Inca rulers were considered to be *Inti*’s representative on the earth. As the center of two critical elements in Inca religion—honoring of the sun and royal ancestor veneration—the Temple of the Sun in Cuzco formed the core of Inca religion.

Each god had his or her own temples and priests. Most temples were small, so priests conducted religious ceremonies outside them. The Inca followed a 30-day calendar, each month featuring its own religious festival.

Priests were consulted before important actions. To the Inca, the gods controlled all things and priests could determine the gods’ will by studying the arrangement of coca leaves in a dish or by watching the movement of a spider. Priests diagnosed illnesses, predicted the outcome of battles, solved crimes, and determined what sacrifices should be made to which god.

Sacrifices were offered on every important occasion. Corn, guinea pigs, and llamas were burned as sacrifices. Serious events such as famines, plagues, and defeat in war called for human sacrifices—although scholars do not believe that human sacrifice was practiced with the same frequency as it probably was with the Aztecs. Many of those sacrificed were provided by conquered peoples.

Inca religion also had an element of animism, in the sense that Incas believed that elements of the physical world could have supernatural powers. These *huaca*, as they were called, could be large geographical features such as a river or the peak of a mountain, or they could be very small objects such as a stone, a plant, or a built object, such as a bridge.

Achievements In mathematics, the Inca developed the *quipu*, a system of knotted strings used to record numerical information for trade and engineering and for recording messages to be carried throughout the empire. Inca artisans created beautiful everyday ceramic objects as well as tools and weapons from copper and bronze. The Inca were also skilled stone workers. They made remarkable structures using a mortarless technique of precise-fitted stones.

In agriculture, the Inca developed sophisticated terrace systems for the cultivation of crops such as potatoes and maize. The terraces utilized a technique called *waru waru*, raised beds with channels that captured and redirected rain to avoid erosion during floods and that stored water to be used during dry periods.

The Inca were especially good road-builders. Using captive labor, they constructed a massive roadway system called the *Carpa Nan*, with some 25,000 miles of roads used mainly by the government and military. Runners were sent to and from Cuzco and outlying parts of the empire to carry official messages. Like the roads constructed by the Romans, Persians, and Chinese, the Inca roads united a far-flung empire. However, the *Carpa Nan* would also greatly assist the Spanish when they invaded in the sixteenth century.

Decline Upon the death of the

Decline Upon the arrival of Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro in 1532, the Incan Empire was in the midst of a civil war of succession after the death of emperor Huayna Capac. Some scholars believe that the civil war weakened the Incan army, thus making it easier for Pizarro's forces to prevail. Others believe that other factors such as diseases introduced by the Europeans led to the decline. By 1572, the Spanish had killed or enslaved the native populations, thereby ending the Incan Empire. (Test Prep: Make a timeline tracing the fall of the Aztec and Inca Empires in the sixteenth century.)

Political Changes

In the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century, the *Aztec* and *Inca Empires* collapsed relatively soon after the arrival of Europeans. (Test Prep: Write a brief outline of the Aztec and Inca Empires on the eve of the European conquests. See pages 258–264.)

The Fall of the Aztec Empire The Aztecs had accumulated numerous enemies throughout Mesoamerica as a result of the empire's militaristic actions toward its neighbors. In 1519, *Hernán Cortés* and his small band of conquistadors easily exploited the divisions among Mesoamerica's indigenous groups and marched on the Aztec capital of *Tenochtitlán*. The Aztecs offered Cortés gold to go away, but this gold made him even more determined. Helped by peoples that the Aztec ruled, Cortés's forces conquered the Aztec by 1521. Smallpox also aided his victory. The disease swept through Tenochtitlán, killing thousands and weakening the Aztecs' ability to defend their capital. Cortés quickly took control of the entire Aztec empire and founded the colony of *New Spain*. The Spaniards melted down the Aztecs' treasures and sent the gold back home. They destroyed Tenochtitlán and built their own capital, *Mexico City*, on its ruins.

The Demise of the Inca Empire In 1532, *Francisco Pizarro* and his crew attacked the Inca in Peru and captured their ruler, *Atahualpa*. Pizarro

offered to release Atahualpa if the Inca would fill a large room with gold. The Inca complied, but in 1533 the Spanish killed Atahualpa anyway. By 1572, the Spaniards had completed their conquest of the Inca empire, which at its height had a population of 12 million. Some historians believe that European germs were more of a factor than guns and swords in drastically reducing the population of the Inca. The Spanish established a colonial capital in *Lima*, Peru, that administered lands from as far north as present-day Panama to as far south as Argentina.

Emergence of the Modern Nation State Under New Monarchs

The *new monarchies* of the Renaissance developed in Europe as a result of the desire of certain leaders to centralize power by controlling taxes, the army, and many aspects of religion. The new monarchs included the Tudors in England, the Valois in France, and *Queen Isabella* and *King Ferdinand* in Spain. In each area, bureaucracies increased and the power of the middle class grew at the expense of lords and the churches. For example, the new monarchies moved to curb the private armies of the nobility.

...and the private affairs of the nobility.

By the end of the sixteenth century, this centralization coalesced into a system of government that led to absolute sovereignty in England and France. In England, the Stuart king *James I* (ruled 1603–1625) wrote *The True Law of Free Monarchy*, asserting that the monarch was free to make the laws—an assertion with which Parliament did not agree. In France, Henry IV (ruled 1589–1610) listened to his advisor *Jean Bodin*, who advocated the *divine right of the monarchy*, the claim that the right to rule was given to a king by God. These developments foreshadowed the developments of a national monarchy and the modern, centralized nation-state in these areas. Yet by the eighteenth century, Parliament predominated in England, and divine-right monarchy predominated in France until the French Revolution.

English Civil War and Evolution of Constitutionalism

The *English Civil War*, sometimes called the *Puritan Revolution*, broke out in 1642 between supporters of the Stuart monarchy and supporters of Parliament, many of whom were Puritans. The dispute was mainly over what powers Parliament should have in relation to those of the monarch. However, the roots of the conflict can be traced back to the Magna Carta (1215) and the foundation of the English Parliament in 1265. A more recent document, the *Petition of Right* (1628), restated the proposition that the monarch could not levy taxes without Parliament's consent, imprison persons without charge, or quarter soldiers in a private home without permission. Although *Charles I* signed the document, he proceeded to ignore it and did not call a meeting of Parliament for 11 years. By 1642, he was at war with Parliament, a war in which he would lose both his throne and his head.

Although Parliament and its leaders *Oliver Cromwell* and his son Richard Cromwell were in the ascendancy during much of the Civil War, in 1660 a compromise was reached to allow for the return of the monarchy. *Charles II*, who had been in exile in France, became the new Stuart king.

His son, *James II*, succeeded Charles in 1685, resulting in a complete break with Parliament once again. Many in England feared that James II was about to convert to Catholicism and force the country to follow suit. In 1688, a group of lords invited *William and Mary*, the Protestant monarchs of the Netherlands, to become joint rulers of England. As a result of this event,

known as the *Glorious Revolution*, James II fled the country. In 1689, William and Mary signed the *English Bill of Rights*, which assured individual civil liberties. For example, legal process was required before someone could be arrested and detained. The Bill of Rights also guaranteed protection against tyranny of the monarchy by requiring the agreement of Parliament on matters of taxation and raising an army. Although the *Toleration Act of 1689* granted freedom of worship to non-Anglicans, the law said that the English monarch had to be Anglican since he or she would be head of the Church of England.

Two philosophers explored the idea of a *social contract*, an agreement under which people gave up some of their rights in exchange for the benefits of living in a community under the protection of a government. In *The Leviathan* (1651) Thomas Hobbes feared weak government. He emphasized the need for a government that was strong enough to protect people from each other. In *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) John Locke feared excessive government. He emphasized the need for a government with enough restraints on it to protect people from tyranny. Locke argued that people had a right and even a duty to rebel against a government that exceeded its legitimate power.

Absolutism Increases in France

In contrast to developments in England, the French government became more absolute in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Building on the ideas advocated by Jean Bodin, advisor to Henry IV, Louis XIII (ruled 1610–1643) and his minister *Cardinal Richelieu* moved to even greater centralization of government and development of the system of *intendants*. These intendants were royal officials sent out to the provinces to execute the orders of the central government. The intendants themselves were sometimes called “tax farmers” because they oversaw the collection of various taxes in support of the royal government. During the reign of the “Sun King,” *Louis XIV* (ruled 1643–1715), the intendants helped to implement the financial system put into place by his finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert. Among other reforms, Colbert sought to make French manufactured goods more competitive by creating the *Five Great Farms*, an area free from internal taxes.

Louis XIV strongly espoused a theory of divine right and ruled as a virtual dictator. His aims were twofold, just as those of Richelieu had been: he wanted to hold absolute power and expand French borders. Therefore, the spacious and elegant palace at *Versailles* became a political instrument where he entertained the nobles and kept them from conducting business elsewhere, such as fomenting rebellion in their home provinces. Like Peter the Great’s city, Saint Petersburg, Louis XIV’s grand buildings at Versailles helped to highlight his power. The palace at Versailles, for example, could accommodate hundreds of guests in its apartments and gardens. During the rule of Louis XIV, some ten thousand employees worked in the palace or on the grounds. Louis declared that he was the state: “L’etat, c’est moi.” He combined in a very real sense both the lawmaking and the justice system in his own person—he was absolute. In

the long run, his and his successors’ refusal to share power with the nobility weakened the French government. (Test Prep: Create a table comparing Louis XIV and Peter the Great. See page 338.)

Desiring to expand the borders of France, Louis XIV reorganized his army to carry on a number of wars. For example, he gained the throne of Spain for the Bourbon family, thereby precipitating the *War of the Spanish Succession* (1701–1714). However, the *Peace of Utrecht* (1713) stipulated that the same person could not hold the thrones of France and Spain simultaneously. In paying for his wars, Louis XIV contributed to the economic problems of France—financial woes that contributed to the French Revolution of 1789. (Test Prep: Create a cause/effect chart linking the policies of Louis XIV to the French Revolution. See page 399.)

France and Russia, 1750

One way to understand Russia during the period is to compare it with France. Such a comparison reveals important similarities. Each country was led by a well-known ruler: Louis XIV in France and Peter the Great in Russia. Unlike Britain, neither France nor Russia had an effective legislative body at this time; indeed, in France the Estates General did not meet once between 1614 and 1789. In Russia, no such body existed at all; Tsarina Elizabeth (ruled 1741–1762) ruled by decree and obtained advice from appointed advisors. Another similarity between France and Russia was the ruler's ambition for land expansion, which led each country to become involved in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), with all its resulting financial burdens.

Differences between France and Russia are marked, however. Russian culture had not yet focused on the ideals of the Enlightenment, such as progress, reason, and natural law. There had been no Reformation in Russia, and Russian serfs would not be set free for another century. Consequently, the famous revolutions of each nation (1789, France; 1917, Russia), while sharing common causes, would be separated in time by more than a century. The chart below shows these comparisons in graphic form.

i

ⁱ *World History: Preparing for the Advanced Placement Examination* (Des Moines, Iowa: AMSCO Publishing, 2015).