Introduction: The Mythic Origins of the Mesoamerican and Andean Worlds

During the sixteenth-century of the Common Era, conquistadors from Spain toppled two of the greatest cultures in the western world, the Aztec and the Inca. By the time Hernán Cortez and his troops arrived in the great Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1519, extraordinary Pre-Columbian Empires, including the Olmec, the Maya, the Toltec, and finally the Aztec, had controlled most of what is now known as Mesoamerica for some three thousand years. Today this sprawling area includes the central valley region of Mexico, the southern Mexican and Pacific Coast states of Puebla, Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas, the Yucatán Peninsula states of Yucatán, Quintana Roo, and Belize, the Gulf Coast region of Mexico, and the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. A decade after the collapse of the Aztec Empire in 1521, Spanish troops led by Francisco Pizarro overcame the forces of the Incas. By the time of this second major Spanish invasion in the Americas in 1532, the influence of the incredible Inca Empire stretched across what is today Peru, and parts of Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. Given that the Aztec and Inca empires were both so vast and so powerful, how was it that the Spanish conquistadors were so easily able to conquer them? This is a question that cannot be answered without examining in detail the histories of the peoples of the Amerindian world, an examination that properly begins with a discussion of the mythic origins of the Mesoamerican and Andean worlds.

Between the fall of the great city of Teotihuacán, somewhere around 600 BCE, and the rise of the amazing Aztec Empire, toward the end of the fourteenth-century of the Common Era, groups of fierce warriors swept down from the northern reaches of Mesoamerica into the Valley of Mexico. Loosely divided into diverse assemblies of tribal peoples, these invaders from the north were collectively known as Chichimecs, literally “People of Dog Lineage,” a title that was meant to define both their skill in fighting and their barbarism. Foremost among these groups was the Tolteca-Chichimeca, or Toltecs, a tenth-century society, legend tells us, led by the ferocious warrior and gifted leader Mixcóatl, or Cloud Serpent. Swiftly subduing his opponents, Mixcóatl eventually established his capital at Culhuacán. A victim of familial jealousy, Mixcóatl was soon assassinated by his brother, who assumed leadership of the Toltecs for himself. Fearing for her life, and for the life of her unborn child, the slain king’s widow fled into exile,
where in due course she gave birth to a son, Ce Acatl Topiltzin. During his adolescence, the boy became a devotee of the god Quetzalcoatl. After establishing himself as the high priest of the cult of the deity, Topiltzin ultimately took the name of this Feathered Serpent god, becoming Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl.

Upon reaching manhood, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl, seeking to avenge his father’s death, killed his uncle in single combat and made himself ruler of the Toltecs. He eventually moved his capital from Culhuacán to an area some fifty miles northwest of what would become the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán, located in what is present-day Mexico City. There, probably around 968 CE, he founded the extraordinary city of Tula, the most important Mesoamerican capital developed between the fall of Teotihuacán and the rise of Tenochtitlán. From Tula the Toltecs extended their authority throughout the valley region until they became the greatest power in central Mexico. Although their empire lasted for little more than two centuries, they would continue to maintain an almost mythical hold on Mesoamerican consciousness for some five hundred years after their collapse.

Of particular significance for later Mesoamerican cultures was the effect that the Toltec legends would have on the Aztecs themselves. For the Aztecs, the magnificent city of Tula was understood as a paradise on earth. Its palace interiors were said to have been adorned with brilliantly colored feathers of exotic birds and lined with sheets of gold, jewels and rare seashells; its fields were described as bursting with produce of gigantic proportions. Perhaps of even more importance to the Aztecs, though, were the stories surrounding Topiltzin and the Feathered Serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. Topiltzin, after all, had been the wise and benevolent leader who was reputed to have given his people the gift of writing, the ritual calendar, and the ability to produce the architectural wonders of Tula; while Quetzalcoatl had been the powerful yet compassionate god who had been satisfied with sacrifices of butterflies, birds, and snakes, and offerings of jade, incense, and even tortillas.

There was, then, much to be admired about Topiltzin and Quetzalcoatl in the eyes of the Aztecs. Among their own Toltec peoples, however, it appears that even the divine gifts of these two generous figures could not prevent the emergence of rebellious factions within the capital city. Scholars believe that the insurgent groups that emerged in Tula most probably arose from the ranks of both the unassimilated tribes living in the city and from indigenous peoples who were adherents of the invisible, unpredictable god
Tezcatlipoca. The latter peoples are thought to have been particularly troublesome, as they came to resent the exaltation of Topiltzin’s god, Quetzalcóatl, and thus the king himself. These followers of Tezcatlipoca ultimately sought to discredit Topiltzin, who, it must be remembered, was not only their king but the high priest of Quetzalcóatl, as well. According to one particularly telling story regarding the political intrigue that ensued in Tula and finally led to the downfall of Topiltzin, one night Tezcatlipoca disguised himself and stole into the house of the king, where he offered the ailing monarch what he said was a strong medicinal mixture, but which was really *pulque*, a distilled cactus juice. Although Topiltzin initially refused to partake of the mixture, in the end he was convinced by Tezcatlipoca to take a sip of the special drink. Finding it pleasing to the tongue, the king preceded to consume five cupfuls, finally becoming drunk and passing out. When he awoke the next morning, his sister was found lying beside him on his royal sleeping mat. Outraged, the people of the empire accused their king of breaking his priestly vows and disgracing himself by indulging in drunkenness and incest. After almost twenty years of enlightened rule, Topiltzin was forced into exile.

Although his rule ended in disgrace, the great king of Tula did not disappear from Mesoamerican history. According to one particularly important account, as Topiltzin and his partisans left Tula they fired arrows through saplings in order to mark their way, creating cross-like directional signs. Once in exile, the light-skinned, bearded Topiltzin sent word that he would return in the year Ce Acatl, the fifty-second anniversary of his birth year, and reclaim his rightful throne. Five centuries later, great floating mountains with bellowing white clouds appeared on the waters of the eastern horizon of the Aztec Empire. These enormous ships, the like of which had never been seen in this region, were carrying Spaniards who were white, bearded, and wearing crosses. The year was 1519, Ce Acatl.

The arrival of the Spanish would also affect the Andean neighbors of the Aztecs, the South American Incas of Peru. A decade after the fall of Tenochtitlán and the Aztec Empire, on November 15, 1532, a small force of Spanish conquistadors made their way into the very heart of what was perhaps the most powerful empire in the Americas. Led by Francisco Pizarro, the group entered the plaza of Cajamarca, an important Inca center in the Peruvian highlands, and demanded to see the king. Nearby, surrounded by what is said to have been an army of some 80,000 warriors, the prince Atawallpa was
completing a ritual fast and enjoying his military victory over his brother, Prince Waskhar, a victory that had made him ruler of the Incas. Refusing to be taken away from his sacred duties, Atawallpa declined to meet his unwanted guests, but agreed to see them the next day. Astonishingly, by the following evening he was the prisoner of Pizarro. Over the next eight months, Pizarro would extract some $50 million worth of treasure as a ransom for Atawallpa. Once he had collected all that he could from the Inca people, Pizarro ordered that their ruler should be tried and executed. By July of 1533, Atawallpa was dead and the monumental Inca Empire was in decline.

The Incas experienced the death of Atawallpa and their eventual imperial collapse as a cataclysmic event, what they called a *pachakuti*, a “turning over of time and space” during which one history ended and a new historical cycle began. Like the Aztecs, who believed that when the Spanish arrived they were living in the period of the “Fifth Sun,” the most recent of the cosmic time cycles that had begun only after the devastating collapses of the cycles of the previous four “Suns,” the Incas understood their sixteenth-century destruction at the hands of the Spanish as merely the latest in a series of tragic, historical “ends of the world.” As with the Aztecs, Inca chroniclers wrote that four previous rounds of creation had been destroyed in the past, each after a period of one thousand years. The first period had been a barbaric age of “wild men.” During the subsequent three periods, humanity had become increasingly civilized, learning how to farm and developing advanced political, economic, and religious societies. The “fifth sun” was that of the Incas, a glorious age that had seen the chaos of the previous four time cycles finally brought under control. It was only fitting, then, that the figure who had created the empire should take the title of *Pachakuti*, the “son of the Sun,” who, as a god-man, was himself powerful enough to turn over time and space.

Less than a century after the world had been remade under *Pachakuti*, Atawallpa completed his struggle against his brother and declared that the time had arrived to usher in a new *pachakuti*. To facilitate the birth of the new temporal cycle, Atawallpa had the entire, extensive family of Waskhar, and other kin groups who had allied themselves with him, taken away and slaughtered. He also had the historians killed and destroyed their records, ensuring that “time” would begin anew freed from the past. Before he could
launch the new historical cycle, though, he fell into the hands of the Spanish and for the Incas the rule of the gods on earth came to a tragic end.

Creating the Foundations of Mesoamerica: The Olmecs, The Maya, and the Toltecs

Urban, organized societies appeared in Mesoamerica long before the Spanish arrived in 1519, emerging over the course of the three thousand year period that stretched from roughly 1500 BCE to the point at which the Aztec Empire was overthrown in 1521 CE. As with cultures in other parts of the world that started out as smallish tribal bands and family groups before finally evolving into advanced societies, the ancestral cultures of Mesoamerica began as hunters and gatherers, pursuing deer and other small game, fishing in lakes and streams, and foraging for such things as fruits, seeds, and wild roots. Anthropologists believe that sometime around 7000 BCE certain of these ancestral Mesoamericans “discovered” agriculture, coming to understand that seeds and roots could be planted in order to produce foodstuffs. Over the course of hundreds of years, these early agriculturalists slowly domesticated several plants, including squash, beans, chili peppers, and most importantly maize, or corn.

In due course, the development of more and more sophisticated agricultural practices allowed some nomadic tribes to break free from their constant search for food, which in turn permitted them to settle into increasingly sedentary, village communities. The peoples of these nascent farming communities were able to develop larger tracts of cultivable land by burning off underbrush and jungle areas, terracing slopes, and draining and filling unsuitable wetlands, all of which led to the production of greater surpluses of food. Gradually, advances in agriculture, population growth, and the complexification of village life led naturally to the creation of political and social systems, law codes, and, of particular significance, religious systems.

Built on the foundational elements of polytheistic pantheons, pyramid temple structures, and rituals carried out by communal priests, or “shamans,” the religious systems of ancestral Mesoamerican peoples became central components of their cultures. Properly performed under the leadership of the priests, religious rituals were thought to bind together human beings and the gods, ultimately guaranteeing the stability of the community. Priests were considered holy persons in these communities, as they filled the vastly important role of a special being that was able to move back and forth between the human and
spiritual realms of existence. Because of the unique abilities possessed by the priests, they were responsible both for keeping the rulers and other people of their villages safe as well as for ensuring that the many gods and goddesses of the various Mesoamerican pantheons looked favorably upon their respective communities. Toward this end, priests developed and performed sacred rituals, including human sacrifice, by which they sought to placate the gods and goddesses of such things as the sun, the moon, the annual harvest, rain, fertility, and war. They also presided over important community ceremonies related to birth, illness, and death, and were instrumental in guiding the construction of flat-top, pyramid-shaped structures that were considered sacred and served as centers for the worship of the gods.

It was out of these early, increasingly complex village cultures that the first so-called “civilized” societies emerged in Mesoamerica. Scholars generally define civilized cultures as those that achieve high levels of social and technological development. Key features of these highly developed cultures include: social stratification, advanced political structures, sophisticated religious systems, labor specification, monumental public architecture, intensive agriculture, and writing. As we have just seen, the early village cultures of Mesoamerica were already marked by some of these features. The Mesoamerican societies that began to emerge sometime between 1500 BCE and 400 BCE would be characterized by all of the key features of civilization listed above.

Archeologists and historians generally divide pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures into three distinct periods of development: the Pre-Classic, or Formative period, extending from approximately 2000 BCE to 100 CE; the Classic period, extending from 100-200 CE to approximately 900 CE; and the Post-Classic period, extending from 900 CE until the overthrow of the Aztec Empire in 1521. Although the different cultures that emerged in Mesoamerica during the Pre-Classic period all had distinctive features, they also had many things in common. All of these cultures, for instance, depended on maize as a food staple, as Mexicans still do today. They also cultivated agave plants for fiber and in order to produce a beer-like drink called octli or pulque; they developed religious systems that were polytheistic, with gods and goddesses that were generally connected to nature; they built truncated mound or step-pyramids that served as platforms for their temples; they had dual calendars; they developed highly stylized art and architecture; and most of them had outside “ball courts.”
The oldest of the “civilized” Mesoamerican cultures is known as the “Olmec,” a somewhat mysterious people often understood as a sort of “parent” society for those that came after. Archeologists had long known about hundreds of small jade figurines that were characterized by a distinctive carved style emphasizing what appear to be infants with snarling, jaguar-like features, perhaps depicting the union between a primal woman and an earthly animal. These exquisite pieces were linked to the “Olmeca,” or “rubber people,” who were said by the Aztecs to have inhabited the Gulf Coast regions of what is today southern Vera Cruz and neighboring Tabasco.

Although it is difficult to determine the exact date at which Olmec culture emerged, historians and archeologists believe that by the twelfth-century before the Common Era the area around San Lorenzo, Vera Cruz, was civilized by these enigmatic peoples. Emerging out of a village culture that was probably settled around 1700 BCE by Mixe-Zoqueans, but which had become thoroughly Olmec by 1500 BCE, the San Lorenzo community eventually grew into a sort of “state society” that included an administrative hierarchy, a standing army, calendar and writing systems, markets, and a large population of peasants who allowed the community to be grown. Beyond the creation of the small, delicate figurines that were already mentioned, the Olmecs are probably best known as carvers of massive stone pieces, such as stelae (commemorative slabs or pillars), altars, and colossal heads, some of which were produced in San Lorenzo. The last of these, the colossal stone heads for which the Olmecs are perhaps most famous, are thought to be likenesses of certain rulers. Standing over nine feet high, the largest of these massive stone works weigh in excess of forty tons.

By 900 BCE the San Lorenzo site was eclipsed by the one at La Venta, Tabasco. Here, while the Olmec peoples continued to create their superb carvings, they also began to produce a style of massive architecture. Of note in regard to this Olmec architectural style is La Venta’s huge clay pyramid. Stretching to 110 feet, the mound-like structure was original thought to have been built as a reflection of the nearby volcanic mountains. However, further archeological research has shown that the edifice was in fact initially a rectangular pyramid with stepped sides and inset corners. That this soaring pyramid was produced at this time, the largest to that point in Mesoamerican history, is significant, as it appears to
indicate that the Olmec people were seeking to raise their temples to the sky in order to get nearer to the
gods.

Although La Venta was surely the most powerful and sacred of the sites in the Olmec heartland, it
ultimately declined in influence, giving rise to other prominent Olmec centers during the Pre-Classic
period. Perhaps the most important of these was Tres Zapotes, located approximately 100 miles northwest
of La Venta. The site is marked by as many as fifty earthen mounds that stretch along the bank of a stream
for over two miles. Dating of pottery and clay figurines discovered there indicates to archeologists that
Tres Zapotes was occupied during the time that La Venta was at its height, although the former center did
not reach its zenith until the late Pre-Classic period. Following in the tradition of the Olmec cultures that
preceded it, the peoples of Tres Zapotes continued to create colossal heads and beautiful figurines. In
addition, though, they also left us with a particularly important stela, a fragmentary basalt monument
known as “Stela C,” one of the oldest dated pieces of the New World period. Significantly, on one side of
the work is an abstract were-jaguar mask, on the other, a date in the calendar system of the “Long Count.”

The inscription of a Long Count date on this Stela is of particular note, as it not only gives us a
sense of when the work was produced, but also connects the Olmecs to other Mesoamerican peoples in
regard to the development and the use of a calendar system. The essential dating system of virtually all
Mesoamerican cultures was based on the fusion of a solar and an “Almanac” calendar. Identified by
scholars as a “Calendar Round” system, for the Olmecs this temporal fusion brought together the 365 days
of the “Vague Year” (so-called because the true solar year is actually a quarter day more than 365, a reality
ignored in the Mesoamerican world) and the 260 days of the “almanac” year. The 365 day solar year was
divided into 18 months of 20 days each, to which a period of five “unlucky days” was added. Each of the
twenty days was identified by its own sign; day of the crocodile, day of the wind, and so on. The years
were numbered from 1 to 13, and when combined with four of the named day-signs produced a 52 year
temporal cycle during which none of the individual year-names is repeated. The 260 days of the almanac
year consisted of 20 day-signs combined with a number from 1 to 13, with the combination of a particular
number and sign indicating a day that rendered either good or bad luck. By bringing together the two
calendars, which meshed perfectly once every 52 years, the Olmecs created a system in which each of the
18,980 days of the cycle carried its own unique characteristics.

Although the two parts of the sacred Calendar Round mesh every 52 years, because the complex
dating system has no established point of departure it is not much help in determining dates outside of its
own limited arrangement, as special knowledge would be required in order to know in which century an
event occurred. Clearly, a much more effective way of expressing dates would be to choose a starting
point, such as the founding of Rome, the birth of Christ, or the conquest of Mecca by Muhammad, and
build the system out from there. This process was fulfilled in the Long Count plan, which had a beginning
point for the current “Great Cycle” of 13 August 3114 BCE (Gregorian) and fixed its dates in relation to
periods of time of varying lengths that had elapsed since the system’s present historical cycle began. The
longest of these time periods was 144,000 days; the next, 7,200 days; then 20 days; and finally 1 day.

The Long Count system would be given its most significant refinement among the civilization of
the Maya, considered perhaps the greatest of the “Golden Age” cultures of the Classic Period. Maya
culture, though, was not born during the Classic Period, but began to develop during the Late Pre-Classic
Period, ultimately spreading across a vast unbroken area including all of the Yucatán Peninsula, Guatemala,
Belize, parts of the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas, and the western portion of Honduras and El
Salvador. In regard to their adoption of the Long Count system, this ingenious culture was able to
overcome the problem of the limiting fifty-two year cycles of the Calendar Round by utilizing a series of
temporal cycles that were so large that any event could be reliably fixed within the span of historical time
once a firm beginning point had been established. Interestingly, instead of using the 365-day “Vague
Year” as the temporal foundation of the Long Count, the Maya used a 360-day period they called a tun.
The cyclical arrangement of the Long Count system used by the Maya, then, was structured as follows:

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\begin{align*}
20 \text{ kins} & \quad 1 \text{ uinal or 20 days} \\
18 \text{ uinals} & \quad 1 \text{ tun or 360 days} \\
20 \text{ tuns} & \quad 1 \text{ katun or 7,200 days} \\
20 \text{ katuns} & \quad 1 \text{ baktun or 144,000 days}
\end{align*}
\]
Once this structure is understood, it becomes apparent that the Long Count dates that were inscribed by the Maya on their monuments were established by adding together the number of “small cycle” days that had elapsed since the inception of the current Great Cycle, which, again, was given as 13 August 3114 BCE. Thus, once the Long Count system had been created, dates could be fixed in relation to its “internal” small cycles and then connected back to temporal points based on the Calendar Round arrangement, producing an incredibly sophisticated and accurate astronomical dating system. With this system in place, a Long Count date of 9.10.19.5.11 Chuen 4 Cumku would be expressed as follows:

9 baktuns 1,296,000 days
10 katuns 72,000 days
19 tuns 6,840 days
5 uinals 100 days
11 kins 11 days

This series indicates that 1,374,951 days have passed since the beginning of the current Great Cycle, and that the Calendar Round position of Chuen 4 Cumku had now been reached.

Although admittedly difficult to understand, the significance of the development and use of Mesoamerican calendars in general, and of the Maya version of the Long Count calendar in particular, cannot be understated. This is so for at least two reasons: First, the sophistication and accuracy of these dating systems reveals just how advanced these ancestral cultures really were; and second, the use of an alternative “beginning of history” in the Long Count plan makes clear that dating systems that utilize a fixed historical starting point are always arbitrarily constructed around great moments in a particular peoples’ cultural experience.

The Maya, then, should be understood as an extremely advanced civilization, one which envisioned itself as existing within the latest of a vast number of historical time cycles. According to scholars, it is difficult to determine precisely when the unique “high culture” of the Maya began to emerge, as during the Late Pre-Classic Period the Maya were heavily influenced not only by the Olmecs but also by
other cultures that also existed at this point in Mesoamerican history. One of these was the Izapan, a people who are characterized by historians as occupying a sort of “middle ground in time and space” between the Pre-Classic Olmec and the Early Classic Maya. The creative hallmarks of the Izapan people included the production of over eighty temple mounds at their capital city of Izapa and the development of an elaborate style of art, examples of which have been found spread over a wide ranging area from Tres Zapotes on the Vera Cruz coast to the Pacific plane regions of Chiapas and Guatemala. The Izapan style of art is distinguished by ambitiously conceived scenes carved in bas-relief (flat sculpture with slightly raised design), many of which are gruesome depictions of foes being decapitated, suggesting that even as early as the Late Pre-Classic Period, Mesoamerican peoples involved themselves in war and conquest. There are also images of deities, though, such as a “Long-Lipped God” who is part human and part fish. This peculiar divinity is thought to be the prototype of the God GI of Palenque, and thus may be the ancestral form of Chac, the Maya god of lightning and rain.

Perhaps the most important figure to find his way from the Izapan pantheon to that of the Maya is the monstrous form of Vucub Caquix, who emerges in the Maya myth of the Popol Vuh as the arrogant “Sun” of the time cycle preceding the current one. The Popol Vuh, is one of the foundational sources of Maya mythology, presenting us with a detailed cosmogony (birth of the cosmos), in which the universe is conceived of as existing as a three part, interrelated formulation, consisting of the underworld, the middle, or earthly world, and the realm of heaven. In the myth, the corners of the world are said to be supported by four deities, who are designated by four distinct colors: Mulac-white-north; Kan-yellow-east; Cauac-red-south; and Ix-black-west. Running through the center of this cosmic form is the great Ceiba tree, which connects the three levels of the universe together, providing a thoroughfare on which the souls of the dead and the gods could travel.

Thus, according to historians and archeologists, Izapa should be understood as a major Late Pre-Classic center that was distinguished by certain features that would become typical of the Maya. Although the use of writing and the calendar, which would ultimately become characteristic of Maya civilization, are absent in Izapan culture, archeologists have found inscribed and dated monuments at other Pre-Classic sites in the Pacific region of Guatemala. One of these Guatemalan centers was at Abaj Takalik, which, like
Izapa, is characterized by earthen mounds, here rather informally scattered around the site. Perhaps what makes Abaj Takalik most significant in regard to the notion of the culturally interrelated development of Maya civilization is the discovery there of Izapan style stelae bearing inscriptions using the Long Count calendar system of dating. “Stela 2,” for instance, is carved with two “richly attired Izapan figures with tall, plumed headdresses, facing each other across a vertical row of glyphs, below a cloud-like mass of volutes from which peers the face of a sky god.” As archeologists point out, the uppermost sign on the column is “beyond doubt” a very early form of the “Introductory Glyph,” which in later Classic inscriptions, like those of the Maya, “stands at the head of the Long Count date.”

In examining Pre-Classic cultures like those of the Olmecs, the Izapans, and that of Abaj Takalik, it becomes apparent that the Maya civilization did not arise in a vacuum, as it was clearly influenced by the ideas of other peoples. By the end of the Late Pre-Classic Period, however, during the second and third centuries of the Common Era, Maya culture was on the threshold of what would become the Classic Maya civilization. As we seen, by this point the Maya were already making use of writing and the Long Count system. In addition, they had already produced great temples and pyramids, involved themselves in tomb building, and begun to create frescoes and cravings with naturalistic subjects. The zenith of Maya civilization, though, would be achieved during the Classic Period, roughly between 250 CE and 900 CE.

Within the vast geographical area occupied by the Maya, archeologists distinguish three regions where relatively diverse yet related cultures existed. In the “highlands” of central Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, the Maya found fertile soil, a gentle climate, and sufficient resources to support a large population. The “low-lying” areas of the Yucatán peninsula, although a tropical plane that was virtually treeless and suffered from low soil deposits and little rainfall, still had enough sub-surface water and natural wells to make cultivation possible. Between the highlands and the Yucatan lies the third Maya region, the central lowlands with its Petén jungle core and the adjacent upland area of Chiapas. This last area, seemingly the least hospitable for human settlement, as it is mostly covered by tropical forests interspersed with rivers and swamps and subject to heavy rainfall and humidity, turned out to be the area where Maya civilization flourished.
Because the Maya had adopted the Long Count dating system by the end of the Pre-Classic Period, we are fortunate enough to have a consistently dated archeological record, inscribed on stelae and other monuments, spanning the Classic Period. It was during this period that the Maya built the great ceremonial centers at sites such as Bonampak, Copán, Palenque, Piedras Negras, and Tikal. Archeologists point to an elaborate series of causeways that connected some of these sites, facilitating the collection of tribute and allowing for trade. Significantly, these “cities” were not merely urban communities, but instead functioned as “civic-religious centers.” Maya societies were hierarchical, with a small group of elite hereditary nobility, made up of priests and ranking officials and their families, at the top; the majority of the population, consisting of craftsmen, commoners, and peasant farmers, in the middle; and at the bottom, a large contingent of slaves, which was made up of convicted criminals, prisoners of war, or sometimes people who had sold themselves into servitude.

There is still debate among scholars as to whether Maya societies were theocratic, in other words, controlled by officials, usually priests, who were thought to be divinely inspired by the gods. Although there may certainly have been a secular ruler and a high priest who served him, there was undoubtedly a privileged hierarchy of priests within these societies whose responsibilities included prophesy, medicine, the education of candidates for the priesthood, and the performance of religious rituals. The last, the performance of religious rituals was particularly important, as Maya civilization gave expression to a fully developed pantheon of gods and goddesses who needed to be placated in order to assure the safety and stability of the community. As with earlier Mesoamerican cultures, the Maya pantheon was dominated by nature divinities. The most ubiquitous of these were the Rain God, which some scholars believe may have been a transformation of one of the Olmec were-jaguar’s, and his consort, the Water Goddess. There was also a creator divinity, who was often depicted as an ancient Fire God, or sometimes as an old man and woman. In addition, there were the Sun God, the Moon Goddess, Ix Chill, and the Feathered Serpent, who would come to be known among the Aztecs as Quetzalcóatl.

Perhaps the greatness of Maya civilization is most profoundly expressed in the construction of their city sites during the Classic Period. Of particular note at these Classic sites are the soaring pyramids that most often served as bases for temples, the cut-stone buildings that were probably used as civic
headquarters and residences for officials, and the ball courts, plazas, stelae, and water-reservoirs, all of which were produced without metal tools. It is interesting to note the evolutionary variations in construction among the sites that were produced by the Maya over the span of this period. When speaking about the Classic Period in regard to the Maya, historians and archeologists generally divide this time span into two shorter periods: the Early Period, running roughly from 300 to 600; and the Late Period, running from 600 to 900. The major difference between these two Classic Maya “mini-periods,” scholars suggest, is that during the first, the Maya peoples of the eastern regions of Mesoamerica were profoundly influenced by the peoples of the extraordinary central valley culture of Teotihuacán.

As scholars point out, no other site of the early Classic Period, not even those of the Maya, rivaled the influence of the great capital city of Teotihuacán. Located some 40 miles northeast of Tenochtitlán, the ruins of Teotihuacán became a vastly important pilgrimage site for Aztec kings. This was so because Teotihuacán played an important part in the creation myths of the Aztecs. Understanding that they were clearly not the first peoples to have occupied the central valley region, the Aztecs believed that they and the peoples who had come to Mexico before them traced their heritage to the mystical, primal land of Tamoanchan, a paradisiacal place inhabited by the gods and the ancestors of humans. The original civilization of Tamoanchan, the Aztecs believed, was ultimately transferred to Teotihuacán, where the gods met to determine which of them would sacrifice himself in order to become the new, Fifth Sun. The most humble of the gods, Nanahuatzin, was said to have cast himself into the cosmic flames, becoming the sun. For some reason, though, the heavens did not move, requiring all of the gods to sacrifice themselves as a gift to human-kind so that the era of the Fifth Sun could begin.

The Aztecs ultimately found the ruins of what was the fully urbanized capital city of Teotihuacán when they arrived in the central valley of Mexico. The city had emerged in the first century of the Common Era as the largest site in the Pre-Columbian world. Covering some eight square miles, Teotihuacán was split by a major axis known as the Avenue of the Dead. Today, a two-mile long avenue extends from the Pyramid of the Moon at the northern end of the site, past the monumental Pyramid of the Sun lying to the east of the avenue, all the way to the Ciudadela (“Citadel”) complex dominated by the Temple of Quetzalcóatl at the southern end of the site. Scholars now know that this main avenue originally
extended up to four miles and was bisected in front of the Ciudadela complex by an east-west avenue of equal length, creating a city structure that, like the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, was laid out in quarters.

Although much smaller than the Pyramids of the Moon and the Sun, the Temple of Quetzalcóatl is of particular significance in relation to the Maya due to its architectural style and the lavish façade decoration that adorns its seven-tiered step-pyramid exterior. The Temple itself is built in a stepped platform style with the typical talud-tablero motif (a rectangular, inset panel, the tablero, placed over a low, sloped wall, the talud). Carved around the tiers of the structure are Feathered Serpents that carry mosaic headdresses, which in other places in Teotihuacán are shown on the heads of warriors. Seashells are also carved into the background of the tiers, suggesting that the scene is taking place in a watery environment; perhaps a primal ocean in which the Temple’s opposing serpents, one representing life, greenness, and peace, the other, heat, the desert, and war, frolic and converse with each other.

From the capital city site in the central valley of Mexico, Teotihuacán influence radiated out into the Early Classic Maya areas of Mesoamerica. Scholars suggest that shortly after 400 CE, for example, the Maya highlands fell under the control of peoples from Teotihuacán. Most probably, a powerful group of intruders from the central Mexico city overwhelmed the Maya site of Kaminaljuyú and there built a scaled down version of their own capital. Interestingly, the elite central valley rulers that administered to the captive Maya population in Kaminaljuyú were eventually “swayed by native cultural tastes and traditions,” becoming “Mayanized” to the point where they began to import pottery and other wares back to the central valley in order to stock their tombs at Teotihuacán. Yet this “hybrid” culture, controlled by Teotihuacáns and known as the Esperanza, produced temple complexes in Kaminaljuyú that were not in the least typical of what would become the unique Maya architectural style. These Esperanzan structures are reflective of the stepped temple platforms of Teotihuacán, with a talud-tablero motif. A single stairway ran up the front of the structure, while the temple sanctuary on top carried either a thatched roof or more often the flat-beamed-and-mortar construction characteristic of Teotihuacán.

In the central Petén area, the Maya civilization was in full bloom by the Early Classic Period. Here, archeologists have found enormous ceremonial centers filled with masonry temples and “palaces” that look out on to plazas covered with white stucco; stelae and altars that are inscribed with dates and
embellished with images of men and what appear to be gods; and polychrome pottery emphasizing Maya style images of cranes, parrots, or men on bowls with a “kind of apron” encircling the lower part. Along with these purely Maya ceramics, though, are vessels that are marked by the imprint of Teotihuacán: the cylindrical vase, supported by three legs, and the small spouted jug. In Tikal, a major center in the Petén area, a great Maya conquest during the Early Classic Period was celebrated by the construction of what archeologists point out is a very “non-Maya structure.” Here, once again, there is an altar-platform in the purest Teotihuacán style, complete with the talud-tablero.

All of this would begin to change for the Maya civilization with the mysterious fall of Teotihuacán sometime around 600 CE. Scholars are still unsure what caused the collapse of this great capital city, but at some point the city was deliberately burned, the blaze destroying mainly the temples and palaces along the Avenue of the Dead. Perhaps internal crises, or disruption of trade and tribute routes, or what historians suggest may have been a “long-term political and economic malaise,” caused the collapse of this important central valley site. Whatever the cause, though, scholars believe that by the early seventh century of the Common Era, “almost all Teotihuacán influence over the rest of Mesoamerica ceases.”

The fall of Teotihuacán would have important implications for the development of Late Classic period Maya civilization. In Tikal, for instance, where we have just mentioned the construction of a Teotihuacán style altar-platform, we now find six temple-pyramids, which, according to archeologists, are “veritable skyscrapers among buildings of their class,” the largest stretching to 229 feet in height. The core of Late Classic Tikal, though, is its grand plaza, flanked on the east and west by two of Tikal’s temple-pyramids and connected to other of the city’s architectural groupings by causeways. The “palaces” of the site are also impressive, with plastered rooms and vaulted ceilings.

Another important Late Classic Maya site is to be found at Palenque. Lying at the foot of a chain of low hills and covered with a tall rain forest, Palenque is considered by some as the most beautiful of the Maya sites. Visiting the site today, one finds brightly colored macaws and parrots in the high trees, and on rainy days one may be treated to the strange roar of “howler monkeys” near the ruins. Of the temple-pyramids built at the site, those dedicated to the Sun, the Cross, and the Foliated Cross are of particular note. These structures are arranged around a plaza on the eastern side of the site, each resting on a stepped
platform with a frontal stairway and an inner and outer vaulted room. In the rear of each of the inner vaulted rooms is a low relief tablet inscribed with long hieroglyphic texts and carved in the same motif: “two Maya men, one taller than the other, facing each other on either side of a ceremonial object.” In the Temple of the Sun, “the most perfect of Maya buildings,” the centrally placed object is the mask of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, “the sun in its night aspect, before two crossed spears.”

One more of the uniquely Maya structures of the Late Classic Period located at Palenque is the incredible palace that graces the site. This palace is a labyrinthine structure, extending some 300 feet in length and 240 feet in width, and consisting of a series of “vaulted galleries and rooms arranged about interior courtyards or patios,” which are dominated by a “unique four-story square tower with an interior stairway.” Of particular significance in regard to this ruin are the “grotesque reliefs” that are arranged along the sides of the palace’s two patios. These reliefs bear the images of prisoners showing submission to their captives in the usual way, one hand raised to the opposite shoulder, indicating that the palace may have been the place to which captives were taken to be tortured and sacrificed.

Of the discoveries in the Maya area, few can rank with the murals that were found at the site at Bonampak. The site was revealed to non-Maya eyes only in 1946, when two “American adventurers” were taken there by Lacandón Indians with whom they had been living. A short time later, a photographer named Giles Healey was taken to the site by another group of Natives, becoming the first “outsider” to view the extraordinary paintings that adorn three of the walls of one of the center’s structures. As scholars point out, the Bonampak murals, which, based on Long Count inscriptions and stylistic considerations, can be dated to approximately 800 CE, give expression to a single narrative: “a story of battle, its aftermath, and the victory celebrations.” As Maya expert Michael D. Coe says, “No verbal description could do justice to the beautiful colors and to the skill of the hand (or hands) which executed these paintings. Suffice it to say, Bonampak has thrown an entirely new light on the warlike interests of the Maya leaders, upon social organization and stratification in a Maya center, and upon the magnificence of the Late Classic Maya culture in general, before time destroyed most of its creations.”

Ironically, although Maya civilization in the Central area reached its greatest heights during the eighth century, the causes of its collapse must already have been apparent during this period. For in “the
hundred or more years that followed,” all of the area’s magnificent cities had declined sharply and were ultimately abandoned. This was not the case in all areas, as during this period the Maya exerted an incredible influence over the Gulf Coast, an influence that even spread into the central highlands of Mexico. Interestingly, in the northern Maya regions, cities achieved a “remarkable florescence” during this period, finally falling only to foreign invasion. The period from CE 800 to roughly 925, then, proved to be a era of both “tragedy and triumph,” an era in which “thrones toppled in the south as a new political order took shape in the north, in which southern cities fell into the dust as northern ones flourished.” Ultimately, this would be a time of the widespread movements of peoples; a time during which the fate of Mesoamerica and the Maya areas was determined, setting the stage for the rise of the next great power in Mexico, the Toltecs.

In many ways, the Toltec Empire binds together the cultures of the Classic Period with those of the Post-Classic, and in particular with the Aztec Empire. Not a great deal is known about who the Toltecs actually were, for although we have some archeological evidence and legendary historical information about these peoples, the myths about them tend to be inextricably woven through what has come down to us as their “history.” The creation of this mytho-history, unfortunately, has left us with conflicting accounts about the Toltecs, some of which appear to have been borrowed from other cultures. In addition, a number of the Toltec leaders bore the same name, a problem that is further complicated because as priest-kings, many of them took the name of the god they served and whose attributes they assumed. This makes it difficult to distinguish between actual historical figures, some of whom were deified after their deaths, and figures that existed for the Toltecs only as transcendent beings.

As was mentioned in the introduction, between the fall of Teotihuacán and the rise of the Aztec Empire, bands of warriors known as Chichimecs swept down from the northern sections of Mexico into the central valley region. Foremost among these nomadic peoples were the Toltec-Chichimec, or the Toltecs, who originally settled in Culhuacán. Under their enlightened and peaceful king Topiltzin, they relocated their capital city to Tula, a site about fifty miles north of what would become Tenochtitlán and not far from the ruins of Teotihuacán. Scholars believe that with the rise to power of the more militant factions in Tula, which again were comprised mainly of the followers of Tezcatlipoca, who, as we have seen, eventually
toppled the monarchy of Topiltzin, the Toltecs became much more fearsome in character. This new sense of Toltec ferocity was given expression in both the bas-relief friezes depicting the military orders of the jaguar and the eagle that adorned their pyramids, and in the towering statues of impasse yet frightening warriors that were mounted on top of these pyramids.

It is probably under the bloody rule of the Tezcatlipoca party in Tula that the Toltecs experienced their greatest period of expansion, ultimately creating a tributary empire that stretched across most of central Mexico. Historians and archeologists point to the years between CE 950 and 1150 as the time during which the capital city, which was certainly one of the largest, if not the largest in Mesoamerica at the time, experienced its principal occupation and when the construction of the monumental civic-religious center called Tula Grande was carried out. At some point during the twelfth-century, scholars believe, Tula seems to have suffered a series of catastrophic events leading to the dispersal of many of its inhabitants and the decline and eventual collapse of its imperial power. It is not clear what these destructive events were, although we do know that the ceremonial halls of the city were burned to the ground and that its great Serpent Wall was toppled. Perhaps the death of the city was due to invasion and conquest by one or more of the bands of Chicimecas who were again pushing down from the northwest. Whatever happened at Tula, the Toltecs finally fell, giving rise to an extended period of bloody conflict, one that did not end until the Aztecs brought together one of the world’s most powerful confederacies during the fifteenth century.

The Aztecs

The accounts provided to us by Aztec historians depict the initial stages of a nation that are so “humble and obscure,” with a culture only a few generations removed from “abject barbarism,” that it is difficult to understand how these people eventually came to dominate most of Mexico. Although the origins of the Aztec rise to power are still not clear, scholars generally agree on the broad outlines of the narrative. With the fall of Tula, a power vacuum was created in the central valley region of Mexico. Nahuatl-speaking Chichimecas from the north poured into the valley, creating an extremely populous region in which invading groups attempted to stake their claim to particular territorial areas. The invading Chichimecas probably settled in urban areas that initially had been settled by Toltec peoples who had been dispersed after the collapse of Tula, but who had kept their cultural heritage alive. As has happened over
and over, the nomadic groups gradually assimilated to the culture of the more advanced and sedentary peoples they encountered.

Of these *Chichimec* groups that made their way south into the valley of Mexico, one, of course, concerns us above all others. Calling themselves the “Mexica” (pronounced Mesheeka), this nomadic assembly came to be known as the Aztecs. Latecomers on this turbulent scene, the Aztecs were the last important group to enter the valley. Although they began to be recognized as a significant people some two hundred years before the Spanish arrived, their real rise to power did not occur until the century before the invasion of Cortez in 1519.

As with the Toltecs before them, it is difficult to tease apart the “history” of the Aztecs from the mythology that has grown up around them. Some of this is due to the unreliability of the historical legends that were created about the Aztecs beginning during the years immediately following the Spanish conquest. Much of it, though, is due to the Aztecs rewriting of their own history once they became secure in the central valley. This was done in order both to depict themselves in a more favorable light in regard to their conquest of other peoples, as well as in an attempt to define a dynastic line that linked the Aztecs back to the Toltecs.

Aztec historians tell us that the earthly roots of the Mexica can be traced back to the mythical land of Aztlán (“Place of Reeds”), which was said to exist somewhere on the northwestern coast of Mexico. In the year 1111 CE, spurred on by the terrible god of the sun and war, Huitzilopochtli (“Hummingbird of the Left,” or “Hummingbird of the South”), who claimed that they would ultimately subdue all others and conquer the world, the Aztecs left Aztlán and began to make their way down toward the valley of Mexico. Their arrival in the central valley proved less than auspicious, as by the time the Aztecs appeared there in the late thirteenth-century, the entire region had already been carved up and claimed by other groups. The new band of wanderers was perceived by those who had previously settled the area as a group of uncultured squatters, and they were urged to move on. Particularly disturbing to the much more refined inhabitants of the valley area were the Aztec practices of stealing the wives of their neighbors and, especially, the bloody human sacrifices they performed in order to placate their god Huitzilopochtli.
However repulsed the inhabitants of the valley were by the Aztec intruders, they eventually came to respect them, if only because they were forced to by these young, militant peoples. From the last third of the thirteenth-century until 1319, the Aztecs existed on the margins of Mexican society, occupying the hill of Chapultepec, which is today a park in Mexico City. Continuing their fierce practices, they finally angered the leaders of several of the surrounding towns, leading them to form a coalition of forces that was used to drive the intruders from Chapultepec. To ensure that they understood completely that they were no longer welcome in the area, the Aztec chieftain and his daughter were executed. The survivors of the coalition attack hid themselves in the rushes along the shores of the lakes that dotted the valley region, where they remained until it was safe to emerge.

Upon emerging from their hiding places, the Aztecs found themselves subject to the rule of Coxcox, the king of Culhuacán. Displaying his beneficence, Coxcox gave them the dubious gift of a dusty, rattlesnake infested plot of land on which to settle. Legend has it that the Aztecs were undaunted by this turn of events, actually enjoying the rattlesnake meat that the area provided. Biding their time, they waited for an opportune moment to assert themselves. This moment came when Coxcox promised them their freedom and better land if they assisted him in subduing the rival city of Xochimilco. The Aztecs proved how valuable they could be, and how frightening, when they presented a much disturbed Coxcox with sacks containing the ears of eight thousand Xochimilcas.

Making good on his promise after Xochimilco was defeated, the king promptly freed the Aztecs and gave them better land to settle. Pressing their newly won advantage, the Aztecs prevailed upon Coxcox to give them his daughter. She would become the Aztec queen, they said, and be made into a goddess. Coxcox agreed and his daughter was given over to his new allies. Seeking to demonstrate their independence, though, the Aztecs sacrificed and flayed the princess. To the horror of her father, he found himself at a celebratory banquet, given in his honor, at which the entertainment included the dance of a priest who presented himself to the king dressed in the skin of his slain daughter.

The outraged Coxcox raised an army and attacked the Aztecs. Defeated and dispersed, the Aztecs again proved resilient, once more hiding themselves in the reeds that bordered the central valley lakes. This time, though, they took advantage of their situation. Realizing that no one paid much attention to
them in their marshy lakeside abode, the Aztecs sustained themselves by way of the abundant fish, fowl, and other game that populated the region. Unmolested, they finally claimed a small island area at the southwestern edge of Lake Texcoco in 1325. Through trade, they quickly started to acquire the materials needed to expand their tiny, burgeoning empire. Dredging the lake bottom in order to provide more surface soil and building causeways that stretched to the mainland, the Aztecs now began to put down the foundations of what would become the glorious city of Tenochtitlán.

The development of the Aztec island, no matter how humble, eventually drew the attention of Tezozómoc, the ruler of Anáhuac. Concerned by the activity of the Aztecs, he brought them under his control and used them as mercenaries. Although he made unreasonable tribute demands on the Aztecs, Tezozómoc was wise enough not to push these dangerous peoples beyond their limits. Gradually the Aztecs were accepted as minor partners, and were finally given permission by Tezozómoc to establish a “royal dynasty.” In 1376, Acamapichtli became the first ruler of the Aztecs; and until the death of Tezozómoc in 1426, the two groups maintained a peaceful, if cautious relationship.

By the time of Tezozómoc’s death, the Aztecs were prospering; and it was around this time that they elected the powerful Itzcóatl as their ruler. Although his strong leadership led to Aztec independence and the expansion of trade, a power struggle ensued among the central valley communities, ultimately necessitating the establishment of a triple alliance among the cities of Tenochtitlán, Texcoco, and the weakest of the three, Tlacopan. Together, the cities of Tenochtitlán, Texcoco, and Tlacopan would come to control all of central Mexico. Although for a time Texcoco proved to be powerful enough to maintain a position of equality with Tenochtitlán, in the end the Aztecs would finally come to dominate the alliance. Indeed, from their capital city of Tenochtitlán, they would eventually expand their influence over most of Mexico. Of particular importance in regard to this expansion was the rise to power of Moctezuma I, who became the ruler of his people after Itzcóatl’s death in 1440. Even before he began his twenty-eight-year rule as king, Moctezuma I had already won the respect of his people; for as a ferocious general, he had won a series of devastating victories as the Aztecs extended their imperial control to the south and northeast of Tenochtitlán. Once he became king, Moctezuma I was also instrumental in pushing the Aztecs toward becoming a cohesive, formalized state “society.”
Aztec society would, of course, flourish in the capital city of Tenochtitlán. Although the architecture of the great capital was basically derivative, building on forms that stretched all the way back to Teotihuacán, by all accounts Tenochtitlán was still a magnificent city. By the time the Spanish conquered it in 1521, Tenochtitlán had grown to the point where it probably housed as many as 200,000 residents, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time. Given that by the early sixteenth-century only four cities in Europe—Paris, Venice, Milan, and Naples—had populations that exceeded 100,000, it is not surprising that Cortez and his men were overwhelmed when they first set eyes on Tenochtitlán.

By the beginning of the sixteenth-century, the densely populated island site of Tenochtitlán covered roughly five square miles, occupying most of what is today the center of Mexico City. Alive with activity, the city had numerous market places, which historians believe accommodated up to sixty thousand people every day. It was also home to a vast zócalo, or square, where daily thousands gathered to barter or simply to visit with each other. The square bordered the Templo Mayor, the extremely important double pyramid dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tláloc. When the Spanish arrived in Tenochtitlán they were both mesmerized by the lavish temples of the gods and the royal palaces of the nobles and horrified at the sight of the tzompantli, the giant stone rack on which thousands of human skulls were displayed.

From the central district of Tenochtitlán the city extended out to the residences of the nobles. The rulers of the Empire, as well as their families, were naturally part of the noble class, which existed at the highest level of the Aztec state society. Royal offspring were numerous, as the leading nobles often took many wives and produced many children. The wives of royals were considered privileged persons in the community and their advice was taken seriously and appreciated at court. Emperors were always chosen from the royal family, although unlike in most monarchies, it was not always the king’s son who became the next ruler, but the best male candidate, a policy in keeping with the Aztec notion of the “recognition of merit over birth.” This notion of the “recognition of merit” was particularly important to the Aztecs, who looked to the members of the royal family to be examples of communal dignity and morality. Indeed, the noble class as a whole, which included not only the royal family but also high priests, prominent military men, and influential government officials, was expected to demonstrate a powerful sense of “noblesse
"oblige"; in other words, they were thought to have an obligation, a duty, to treat the people of the other classes with compassion, consideration, and even mercy.

The vast majority of the Aztec population was identified with the community’s huge “middle class,” which was principally made up farmers, laborers, minor craftsmen, and servants. These Aztec “commoners” were divided up into wards or districts called *calpulli*—what the Spanish called *barrios*—which consisted of several thousand households and a local temple dedicated to the patron deity of the community. Each *calpulli* represented a close-knit unit that lived, fought, and worshipped together. The unit was responsible for portioning out commonly held land to family heads for their use, as well as for choosing a “captain” who served as both an administrative leader and a military commander and who was responsible for keeping the order and maintaining the safety of those who lived in the district. Below these commoners on the socioeconomic scale were the slaves. Slavery in Aztec culture was different from that which marked the United States, as slaves in the Aztec world had certain rights, one of those being that their servitude was not passed down from generation to generation. In fact, some slaves entered into contractual agreements with their masters, much like the system of indentured servitude that characterized colonial America, allowing them to serve for a certain length of time before they were freed. In the end, most forms of Aztec slavery did not lead those who served, or their children, to be stigmatized; a prime example of this was the rise to power of Itzcóatl, a king who was born to a mother who had once been a slave.

A different category of servitude existed for those who were captured in battle and destined for sacrifice. As we have seen, human sacrifice was certainly not unique to the Aztecs, as a number of other Mesoamerican cultures had involved themselves in this practice long before the “Mexica” arrived on the scene. But again, even as the Aztecs were making their way to what would become Tenochtitlán, they sacrificed humans to their god Huitzilopochtli in order to ensure their safety. The mythology that informed this practice is interesting. First, the Aztecs understood the beginning of their cycle of the Fifth Sun to have been brought about by the beneficent gift of the cosmic sacrifice of the gods. If the gods were willing to sacrifice themselves for the people, they reasoned, how could the people not be willing to sacrifice themselves for the gods? Second, it should be remembered that the Aztecs believed that the cycles of the
four Suns that had proceeded the age of the Fifth Sun had ended in cataclysmic moments during which the entire universe was destroyed. The recreated universe of the Fifth Sun was destined to suffer its own traumatic end, an event that could only be delayed by way of the intervention of the gods. Human sacrifice, then, was necessary in order to appease powerful divinities such as Huitzilopochtli, Tláloc, Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcóatl, and to keep them on the side of the Aztecs in the great cosmic war that was being waged over the Fifth Sun.

Significantly, the rapid growth of the Aztec Empire had been checked during the middle of the fifteenth-century by natural disasters that caused a “catastrophic famine.” Believing that their lack of food was a result of divine wrath, the Aztecs expanded their practice of human sacrifice in order to placate the gods. When the situation did not abate, and in fact became worse as desperate animals came down out of the mountains and began to feed on humans, people went so far as to sell themselves as slaves to the Totonacs of the Gulf Coast, an area that had not been affected by the famine. The increasingly desperate plight of the Aztecs led the priests to perform still greater numbers of human sacrifice. Once the famine ended, the priests attributed the community’s reversal of fortunes to their own sacred sacrificial practices.

Having defined the sacrifice of humans as a foundational element of their communal and even cosmic existence, it is not surprising that the Aztecs came to believe that sacrificial blood was necessary in order to carry out their imperial expansion. This was especially the case as Aztec rule passed through three of the sons of Moctezuma I, Axayácatl, Tizoc, and Ahuitzotl. The last of these, Ahuitzotl, who came to power in 1486, was a particularly fierce ruler. Leading a series of wide-ranging military expeditions, he stormed into and conquered the valley of Oaxaca, drove down the Pacific coast to Guatemala, and finally forced his way into the Gulf Coast region of Mexico. His merciless rule allowed the Aztecs not only to expand the area that they controlled, but also to extract greater tribute payments from those who had been conquered. The gruesome character of Ahuitzotl was demonstrated in a powerful way in 1487, when, during a dedication ceremony for a grand new temple to Huitzilopochtli that had been built in Tenochtitlán, he ordered one of the most infamous acts of bloodletting in the history of the world. Over the course of four days, sacrificial victims who had been taken in battle were lined up in rows that stretched out from the temple for some three miles. Legend has it that as many as twenty-thousand still-beating hearts were torn
from the chests of the sacrificial victims in order to please Huitzilopochtli. The king invited guests from
allied and tributary towns to witness the spectacle, both impressing and intimidating them.

By the time Ahuítzotl died in 1502, Aztec rule extended over several hundred city-states or “ethnic
kingdoms.” Interestingly, while the peoples of a city state, or altepetl, paid tribute to their Aztec rulers,
Aztec imperialism was really a system of “conquest without consolidation.” As historians Geoffrey Conrad
and Arthur Demarest point out:

. . . the “Aztec Empire” was not really an “empire” at all, at least not in the usual sense of
the term. Rather, it was a loose hegemony of city-states pledging obedience and tribute
to [Tenochtitlán]. After defeating the armies of a region, the Mexica would take
hundreds or thousands of the foreign warriors as captives to be sacrificed at Tenochtitlán.
Then they would install a ruler—often of the very dynasty they had just defeated—on the
throne of the subjugated province. No real attempt was made to assimilate the conquered
peoples, either culturally or politically. The only real change in the vanquished state
would be the onerous periodic tribute payments that had to be paid. . . . By leaving the
local leadership structure intact, the Aztecs minimized their administrative problems, but
they also increased the possibility of rebellion. Indeed, such insurrections, usually
initiated by murdering the local Aztec tribute collectors, were common occurrences.
Previously subjugated regions had to be reconquered again and again.

When the ill-fated Moctezuma II came to power after the death of Ahuítzotl in 1502, then, he
ruled over a vast, but relatively unstable imperial region, one which consisted of the modern states of
Mexico, Morelos, Puebla, Hidalgo, most of Vera Cruz, much of Oaxaca and Guerrero, and the coastal areas
of Chiapas. If, as some historians and archeologists believe, the “empire” of Moctezuma II consisted of a
population of nearly thirty million people, it means that he ruled over a country that was larger than any in
Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth-century, as France at this time had only 20 million people and
Spain probably not more than 10 million. His enormous power and prestige allowed him to lead a lifestyle
that can only be described as perversely luxurious. Three thousand servants attended him in his huge
palace; and although it is said that when he ate, he “ate sparingly,” taking his meals alone and behind a
screen, each day he was presented with one hundred different dishes from which to choose. He also had his
choice of women, and for his pleasure, he was entertained by dwarfs, jesters, tumblers, acrobats, musicians,
and dancers. His subjects were not allowed to look directly at him, nor could they turn their back on him.

Heralded for his bravery in leading successful military campaigns into Mixtec and Maya areas,
Moctezuma II was also highly respected for his comprehensive knowledge of Mexican history. Ironically,
although it was admirable that the king was so well informed in regard to his peoples’ past, possessing the particulars of this historical narrative may have proved troubling for Moctezuma II. After all, knowing what he knew, the king must have been well aware both that the cataclysmic destruction of the Fifth Sun was inevitable and also that the great Quetzalcóatl had promised that he would one day return to reclaim his rightful throne. Strange phenomenon, interpreted by his priests as “evil portents,” must also had disturbed the king: “Lightening, unaccompanied by thunder, ‘like a blow from the sun,’ damaged a temple; a strange bird was found with a ‘mirror in its head,’ in which Moctezuma saw a host of foreign warriors. In 1517 a comet appeared ‘like a flaming ear of corn . . . it seemed to bleed fire, drop by drop, like a wound in the sky.’” Most chillingly, Moctezuma’s agents reported seeing “towers or small mountains floating on the waves of the sea.” Then, in 1519, the Aztec year of Ce Acatl, Moctezuma experienced a profound sense of dread when “a courier arrived bearing ominous paintings—they depicted the encampment on Aztec shores of bearded white men with crosses.”

**The Incas**

The southern neighbors of the Aztecs, the mighty Incas, trace their roots back to peoples who found their way to the rugged regions of western South America thousands of years before the Common Era. Wandering along the Pacific coast, certain of these peoples finally settled in the Andes mountain region of what is today Peru. It was here that the Incas would ultimately build their great capital city of Cuzco. Like the ancestral peoples of the Aztecs, the ancestors of the Incas initially formed into family groups and tribal bands of nomadic hunters and gatherers; and, as with the peoples of Mesoamerica, those who wandered in and around the Andean region of Peru gradually became agricultural.

Historians and archeologists divide Andean history across an evolutionary chronology that is similar to that which they use to define the early history of Mesoamerica. This Andean chronology is defined in relation to the following, sometimes roughly dated periods: the Preceramic, extending from 2500-1800 BCE; the Initial, extending from 1800-800 BCE; the Early Horizon, extending from 800 BCE into the first century of the Common Era; the Early Intermediate, extending from 100-700 CE; the Middle Horizon, extending from 700-1000 CE; the Late Intermediate, extending from 1000-1400/1500 CE; the Late Horizon, extending from 1500-1532 CE; and the Colonial, after 1532 CE. Somewhere around 2500 BCE, at
the beginning of the Preceramic Period, nomadic groups in the Andean region were increasingly settled into more and more complex village communities. As early as this Preceramic Period, the peoples of western South America had domesticated crops, created Chiefdomruled political organizations, and constructed their first “monumental” architectural structures, such as small pyramids. Not long after this, during the Initial Period, between 1800 and 800 BCE, certain groups settled the inland parts of Andean valleys and began to create incredibly elaborate ceremonial complexes, in addition to developing the agricultural systems that would eventually feed the huge populations of the Inca Empire. Significantly, similarities in design among as many as forty-five of these ceremonial centers indicate that the architects and builders of the structures on these sites shared a certain homogeneous understanding of the cosmos. As scholars point out, the “visual imagery of the pyramids was truly imposing,” displaying “pillared entrances, stairwells, brilliant friezes,” and, at the site of Cerro Sechín, a “gruesome parade of warriors and dismembered human bodies.” From examples such as that at Cerro Sechín scholars conclude that even before the beginning of the Common Era, war and human sacrifice were important elements in solidifying political power across the Andean region. The Early Horizon Period, stretching over the last centuries before the Common Era from roughly 800 BCE to 100 CE, was marked by the creation of religious iconography, now increasingly oriented around sacred cults, as well as by a significant growth in “craft technology,” including advances in the production of “ornately modeled and incised pieces” and the development of metallurgy that allowed for “soldering,” and “silver-gold alloying.” It was also during this period, some suggest, that the most “dazzling” of the Andean textiles were produced.

As Andean cultures evolved from the Early Horizon to the Early Intermediate Period, we begin to see the appearance of the first true state and urban communities. A number of unique “state societies” emerge during this era, among them those at Nasca on the southern coast of Peru, at Recuay in the northern highlands, and in particular, at Moche on the northern coast. Archeological evidence from Moche suggests that here priestly, political, military, and social roles were woven together without the people of the community defining distinct administrative positions. Moche was also home to the greatest adobe pyramid ever raised in the native Americas, containing as it did 143 million bricks. Pyramid structures like that at Moche were extremely important in Andean communities, as they represented some of the most elaborate burial sites found in South America.
Around the same time that Moche was flourishing, two other important cities emerged in the Peruvian highlands. Wari came to power in the Ayacucho Basin between 500 and 750 CE, expanding its influence by constructing “planned settlements” through which it could control the transportation of goods and communications. By this time the *khipu*, or “knot-record,” which we will discuss in more detail later, was already being used in Wari as a precise way to store data. Centuries later, the Incas would adopt this knot-record storage system, as well as some of the Wari principles of statecraft. They would even appropriate some of the roads built by the people of Wari. In addition to this regional center, the city of Tiwanaku, which lies to the south of Lake Titicaca, became fully urban around 375 CE. It extended its influence by founding colonies on the coast, in the Bolivian lowlands, and into northwest Argentina. In this capital city, archeologists have discovered temples, a pyramid, and a sizeable residential area.

Tiwanaku, and its companion Lake Titicaca, were revered by the Inca, as the latter believed that the Creator God, the sun, the moon and the stars all emerged from the lake. As the Inca scholar Terence D’Altroy points out, “the city’s Gateway of the Sun and outsized human statues were incorporated into Inca mythology, while the town was recognized as one of the two symbolic capitals on a level just below Cuzco.”

That unique cultures, such as those at Moche, Wari, and Tiwanaku, developed in the Andean world during the first thousand years of the Common Era is significant in relation to the Incas. As scholars point out, by 1000 CE the political environment in the region was extremely fragmented and diverse; and as late as 1200 CE, war raged from southern Ecuador to Argentina. In order to protect themselves from these conflicts, many peoples in the region settled in isolated villages well above the best valley farmlands. A number of the most powerful of these societies, such as the Lopaqa and the Qolla, established themselves in the areas around Lake Titicaca. Although these peoples reported to the Spanish that their rulers were kings, it is doubtful that these societies ever attained a “state” level of organization. Groups that settled in the populous region of the Peruvian sierra may have produced village communities with as many as 4500 domiciles, housing up to 10,000 people. Most of the villages in the area of the southern Andes probably contained no more than 1,000 residents, with the largest, regional centers consisting of perhaps 20,000 people. Interestingly, by 1200 CE the area around what would become the capital city of Cuzco may
already have been integrated into an organized state society, setting the scene for the meteoric rise of the Inca.

Scholars have had a difficult time establishing an historical timeline in regard to the Incas. This is so for several reasons, including the lack of an indigenous writing system, the reconstruction of history for political reasons, and the way that the Andean peoples envisioned time. Even so, most scholars believe that the reign of the Inca, for all its magnificence, was a short-lived phenomenon, extending for no more than a century between the 1430s CE and the 1532 Spanish invasion. Most authorities point to the 1586 chronicle of the cleric Miguel de Cabello Valboa to substantiate this claim. Valboa suggested that Inca imperial rule began in 1438 when the Incas repelled an attack by the Chankas, a group that lived in the areas around Cuzco. He calculated that the next three Inca successions occurred in 1471, 1493, and 1526. Although the sources used by Valboa are not known, there is independent corroboration of his dates, as other chroniclers reported that Inca rule extended from the reign of Pachakuti Inka Yupanki beginning in 1438, through that of Thupa Inka Yupanki beginning in 1471 and Wayna Qhapaq beginning in 1493, to the period of the civil war between Wayna Qhapaq’s sons, Atawallpa and Waskhar, somewhere around the time of the Spanish invasion.

Use of these dates by historians, though, may have as much to do with “convention” as it does with any sort of “conviction” that they are actually historically accurate. Indeed, Spanish accounts that utilized Inca narratives in order to establish their timelines present us with four dating sequences that differ from that of Valboa. Much of this is a result of the peculiar method by which the Inca recorded time. As Spanish chroniclers pointed out, when asked about events that happened more than four to six years before, the response would usually be “the incident occurred ñaupapacha,” or “a long time ago.” This was generally the response whether the event took place a decade, a century, or even a thousand years before. In addition, the Spanish listened to differing accounts of Inca history based on the organization of khipu knot-records. Looking much like a cloth abacus, the khipu was a mnemonic tool, most often consisting of a “longitudinal primary cord” to which a “multi-colored series of knotted cords were tied.” Usually made of cotton, or occasional wool, the cords were “twisted in different directions and a variety of knot forms were employed.” Dyed in hundreds of colors, with each shade indicating a “specific meaning in a particular
context,” the khipu presented an enormous range of options for recording information. The accounts that the Spanish were given were recited by “mnemonic specialists” in the Inca community who used the khipu to assist their memories. However, as Terrence D’Altroy makes clear, because the khipu were partially organized by “hierarchies of power and space as well as by time, some scholars judge that translating the oral sagas into European histories is a futile endeavor.”

With all of this in mind, one turns to a history of the Incas cautiously. As with the Aztecs, Inca history is based in large part on genealogies and legends connected back to “primordial time.” According to the Incas themselves, their imperial origins can be traced back to the deified Manqo Qhapaq, who was said to have come to power somewhere around 1000 CE. Consistent with the mythologies of other Andean peoples, the Incas believed that their ancestors emerged from earthly, sacred places. In ancient times, Inca legend tells us, a cave called Tampu T’oqo (House of Windows) existed at Pacariq-tambo (Inn of Dawn). The Creator God called forth from a central cave called Qhapaq T’oqo (Rich Window) the four brothers and four sisters who would become the Inca ancestors. From two adjoining caves, called Maras T’oqo and Sutiq T’oqo, he also summoned the Maras and Tambos peoples. At some point, the eight Inca peoples were paired off, finally becoming husband and wife. Almost immediately the Inca couples decided to seek fertile lands by which they could enrich themselves. The principle couple, significantly named Manqo Qhapaq and Mama Oqllu, allied themselves with the Tambos and formed two sets of five ayllu, or “descent groups.” This newly formed clan set off in search of abundant lands, although they initially found no suitable locale at which to settle. At one point during their wandering, Mama Oqllu gave birth to a son named Zinchi Roq’a, who would become the second Inca ruler. The group eventually found themselves on top of a mountain, from which they could see a “fruitful valley graced by a rainbow—a manifest sign of their long-sought homeland.” Before they descended the mountain, Mama Waqo cast two golden rods into the valley below. The first did not stick, indicating that the soil was not fertile. The second, however, “plunged did into the earth at Wanaypata,” revealing to the group that they had at long last found their home. Upon entering Cuzco, the group marked their claim to the site; but they were forced to displace the peoples of the valley in order to take firm control of their new homeland. Although they suffered occasional setbacks, the Inca finally established themselves at Cuzco. Having accomplished this, they divided the world into four parts and built the first house of the Sun at Indicancha.
It is clear from this legend how thoroughly Inca mythology is woven through the history of the people. As in the legend, the Inca literally divided their world into four parts (suyu), with the political and social center at Cuzco. Indeed, the Inca name for their realm, Tawantinsuyu, means the “four parts.” The upper level of the Inca political structure was comprised of four “lords” who ruled over the respective divisions of the empire and who acted as advisors to the emperor in Cuzco. The most populous of the four parts of the Inca realm was Chinchaysuyu, which was named after the highly respected Chincha etnia, or ethnic group, of the south-central region of Peru, an area that stretched across the Peruvian coast, the adjacent highlands, and the north Andes. Antisuyu, which was named for the “warm forests of the montaña, known in Hispanic form as the Andes,” was located to the northeast of Cuzco. Kollasuyu, which extended from Peru’s southern highlands “through the antiplano all the way to central Chile and adjacent Argentina,” represented the largest geographical part of the empire. The smallest part of the realm was Cuntisuyu, which claimed only a small stretch of land extending from Cuzco to the Pacific.

Beyond the basic political units of the monarch and his lords, the Inca world was defined by a complex hierarchical system that “fused Inca kinship and ancestor worship with ethnicity and a rigid class structure.” Interestingly, in the Inca realm, both mummies of “long-dead kings and queens” and “oracular idols” participated in communal activities by way of cults formed by their descendents. Although the Spanish would point to this practice as a clear example of the “handiwork of the Devil,” the Incas understood it as perfectly natural, as the world was certainly “shared by the living, the dead, the gods, and the spirits.” As with the Aztecs, the king, along with his royal family, was granted a position at the apex of the Inca social order. Although two classes of “aristocratic Inca kin” and an “honorary class of Inca nobility” existed along side the royal leader, the king was considered not only to be the absolute ruler of the Inca state, but also to be a divine being that possessed a heavenly mandate to govern the world. Yet even though accorded this special status, each of the all-too-human Inca rulers was forced to rely heavily on his advisors and to work closely with what proved to be a “contentious aristocracy” in order to maintain control of his realm.

Unlike the Aztecs, the Incas drew no distinction among positions of power, and thus the king generally “melded political, social, military and sacred leadership in a single person.” For the Incas, the
ideal ruler would pass through three stages during his lifetime: initially he would prove himself to be a brave warrior, earning the respect and support of the “noble kin” of Cuzco; once he had been anointed the “Sun to rule the land,” he would be revered as a god who had been blessed with powers greater than those of any other being who “walked the earth”; finally, in death, he would be exalted as a being with “great vitality,” one who “feasted and conversed with the quick and the dead by day and retired to his quarters for repose at night.” Again, from his “sanctified plane,” an Inca emperor who had died continued to participate in his community’s political and social activities, a point to which we will return momentarily. The mummies of rulers, although for a time stored in specially constructed chapels, were ultimately kept either in the houses of their descendents or in “sanctuaries on royal estates.”

By the time the Spanish arrived in 1532, the High Priest of the Sun was probably the second most powerful person in the Inca community. According to several chroniclers, the position was elevated during the reign of Pachakuti. Although part of the power of the High Priest came from his role in selecting the next king, the priests of both Atawallpa and Manqo Inka were also “field marshals in the last dynastic war and the neo-Inca era, respectively.” Again, although the king was the absolute ruler of the Inca realm, he was surrounded by royal kin groups, or panaqa. Because the panaqa were also instrumental in choosing the next ruler, they possessed a great deal of power in Inca society. Significantly, the highest ranking of these aristocratic Incas were those who were kin to the current king, not kin to the most ancient ruler.

The vast majority of the Inca population, as many as 95-98%, consisted of peasant families living in towns and villages. This group was made up farmers, herders, fishers and artisans. Again, above the level of the basic family unit, the people of the community were divided into kin groups known as ayllu. Generally, the ayllu was a group of people that traced its line of descent to a particular common ancestor. The men of the kin group were arranged “patrilineally,” the women “matrilineally”; and there were certain marriage taboos that defined the ayllu. In addition to defining Inca kin groups, the term ayllu was also used to describe basic landholding groups in the community. Each ayllu owned a designated tract of land and members of individual families within the group cultivated as much of this land as they needed to sustain themselves. The members of each ayllu maintained a series of “reciprocal obligations,” which they were
required to honor. These included helping other members of the group build houses and cultivate land, and also providing communal support for the elderly, the infirm, widows, and orphans.

Of particular significance in regard to the *ayllu* was the responsibility that its members bore for cultivating land in order to provide food both for sacrifices and to support the group’s shrines and deities. In an interesting way, these “sacred” uses of property reveal an important connection that the members of Inca *ayllus* had to the pan-Andean practice of ancestor worship. Most typically, when an individual died in Andean cultures, some of his or her property was burned and some was buried with the deceased. After the burial ceremony, descendants of the deceased visited the tomb in order to renew offerings of food, drink, and clothing. The bodies of the deceased were taken from the tombs so that these revered beings could participate in the processions and festivals for the dead. A kin group that ignored these rituals would risk angering the ancestors, possibly bringing harm upon the community. This was certainly the case in regard to the Inca *ayllus*, as these kin groups were responsible for supporting the ancestors by designating for cultivation certain parcels of land “inherited” from the deceased in order to support the dead. This practice, termed “split inheritance,” was especially important in relation to the property rights of kings after they died. Because Inca rulers were thought to be divine beings, they possessed vast amounts of personal wealth, which split inheritance allowed them to retain even after they were dead. When a king died, his “principal heir,” a son or another qualified family member, would take over his governmental position and all of the duties that went with it, but would acquire no “material legacy from his predecessor.” Rather, the ruler’s personal wealth would be given over to his “secondary heirs,” the members of his royal kin group, or *panaqa*, not as their own, but in “trust” where it remained vested in the dead king.

Again, when the Spanish entered Cuzco in 1532, they found mummified kings still occupying their palaces. This, it may be said, can be understood as a literal expression of both the Inca practice of ancestor worship and of split inheritance, as the dead king was still thought to be a “living,” and vital member of the community who needed to be supported in death as he was in life. The Spanish found this practice so strange that they spent a good deal of time describing it in their reports and diaries. As one chronicler said about the way the “royal mummies” were treated in Cuzco:

They brought them, lavishly escorted, to all their most important ceremonies. They sat them all down in the plaza in a row, in order of seniority, and the servants who looked
after them ate and drank there. In front of the mummies they lit a fire of a certain kind of wood that they had cut and carved until it was very even. In the fire they burned the food they had set before the mummies for them to eat; it was the same meal that [the panaqa members] themselves ate. In front of the mummies they also placed large vessels with maize beer and toasted the dead with it, after first showing it to them. The dead toasted one another, and they drank to the living, and vice versa; this was done by their ministers in their names. . . . Their descendants were continually offering [the dead rulers] large quantities of things, not only in the frequent sacrifices they made to them of all the things they sacrificed to their gods, but in the offerings they made for the everyday support of the mummies, which their souls ate. . . .

Clearly, the Inca notion of death, and, we must say, of the “sacred,” was quite different from that of the Spanish. A ruler who had died was not considered “dead” in the traditional Christian sense of that term, a point that was made evident to the Spanish by the way the members of his panaqa treated the deceased king. The descendants of the king “maintained him in state,” making elaborate and expensive sacrifices to him, seeking his advice during difficult moments faced by the community, and actually bringing him, in mummified form, to state ceremonies. Quite simply, the panaqa of the deceased king treated him as a sacred being.

The significance of this communal treatment of dead kings as sacred beings cannot be overstated in regard to understanding the Inca. Indeed, it has everything to do with what may be considered the “great integrating concept of Inca religion,” the notion of huaca, or “embodied holiness.” Understood in its most specific sense, the term huaca refers to a person, place, or thing with sacred or supernatural connections. In a more generally way, though, the concept was used to identify almost anything that was considered odd or abnormal. Because of this, the number of huaca in the Inca world was staggering. All huaca, whether people, alive or dead, shrines, or sites in nature, were considered to possess “oracular powers,” and they were “worshipped with prayers and sacrifices.”

As one might expect, the notion of huaca was inextricably bound to the Inca vision of the gods. By the time the Inca imperial world began to be defined in the fifteenth-century, these peoples had come to believe that their rulers and their culture in general had descended from a divine being named Inti. Spanish chronicles identify Inti as the Sun God, but contemporary scholars believe that the Inca idea of divinity did not necessarily distinguish discrete deities. Rather, the Inca pantheon was conceived of as a complex group of overlapping, interrelated divine beings. Thus, although the Spanish tended to identify three powerful
and unique members of an Inca divine trinity, which consisted of the Creator God, Wiraqocha, the Sun God, Inti, and the Thunder God, Inti-Illapa, this was clearly an imposition of the Christian notion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit upon the Inca pantheon. As Geoffrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest point out in regard to the Sun God:

> Among other things, Inti represented the conceptualization of a specific subcomplex of the sky god, the sun, as the national patron of the Inca state. This solar cluster itself could be unfolded into subcomplexes, of which three predominate: Apu-Inti (‘the Lord Sun’); Churi-Inti, or Punchao (‘the Child Sun’, or ‘Daylight’); and Inti Guauqui (‘Brother Sun’). Apu-Inti and Churi-Inti/Punchao could be separated from one another along an astronomical axis, since they were associated with the summer and winter solstices respectively. Inti-Guauqui, in contrast, unfolded from the other two solar aspects along a sociopolitical axis: he represented the sun in its specific role as the founding father of the Inca dynasty and the center of the state’s ancestor cult.

Because the sun, particularly as some formulation of the Sun God Inti, was understood as the “founding father of the Inca dynasty,” the cult dedicated to this deity was particularly important in Inca culture. This became obvious to the Spanish almost immediately when they arrived in Cuzco, as it was clear to them that the most important temple complex in the city was the Qorikancha, or Golden Enclosure, commonly identified as the Temple of the Sun. Although the designation “Temple of the Sun” is a bit of a misnomer, as all of the major Inca deities, in all their complex manifestations, were worshipped there, and although the structure housed many different images of the multifaceted Inca gods, the most important statue to be found there was clearly that of Punchao, the image of the Sun itself.

These references to the cult of the Sun bring us naturally to the place of the Inca practice of human sacrifice. Although the numbers of persons sacrificed by these Andean peoples never reached the extraordinary levels attained by their northern imperial neighbors the Aztecs, the Incas nevertheless did involve themselves in this ritual activity. Their victims were usually boys or girls, chosen for their beauty from throughout the empire, and sometimes captives who were taken in battle. As one would expect, the Incas paid homage to the Sun, seeking to assure his ascendancy and general well-being, by offering this deity human sacrifices. They also offered up the “ultimate sacrifice” during times of great calamity, such as earthquakes, eclipses, and epidemics.
This was the state of affairs of the Inca Empire when the Spanish appeared in South America in the sixteenth-century. Atawallpa and Waskhar, the two powerful sons of Wayna Qhapaq, had involved themselves in a savage internecine war that ended just as the Spanish arrived in 1532. Indeed, Pizarro’s men captured Atawallpa in Cajamarca even as Waskhar was being taken north into exile. Atawallpa, as we have seen, after his people had been bleed for a “king’s ransom” over the course of eight months, was ultimately executed by the Spanish. In the end, the dynastic war between Waskhar and Atawallpa “split the Andean peoples, providing a wedge that the conquistadors quickly recognized and exploited.”

**Food For Thought: Why were the Spanish successful as conquerors?**

What led to the downfall of the Aztecs and the Incas? Why were these incredibly powerful empires conquered so easily by the Spanish? In regard to the Aztecs, it may be argued that one of the elements that led to their collapse in the face of the Spanish invasion was the greatness of their empire itself; for as the number of territories dominated by the Aztecs grew, it became more and more difficult to control the outlying regions of the empire. Much of this can be attributed to the way in which the Aztecs went about the process of expansion. Once they had defeated the armies of a particular group, instituted their rule of tribute upon that community, and taken thousands of captives to be sacrificed in Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs basically left the conquered peoples alone. As we have seen, this gave rise to an “empire” that must properly be understood as a loose confederation of diverse city-states. The Aztecs made no attempt to bring the peoples they had conquered into their world by making them citizens or including them in making decisions about the empire. This situation was complicated by a foundational mythology that envisioned the Aztecs and the gods as being involved in the great cosmic conflict that was being waged during the era of the Fifth Sun; a mythology that pushed the Aztecs to wage brutal war and to perform increasing numbers of human sacrifices as they expanded their influence throughout their ever growing empire. Finally, it may be that Moctezuma II was sufficiently influenced by the legend of the return of the light-skinned, bearded Quetzalcóatl that he waited too long to act once Cortez and the Spanish arrived in Mesoamerica. All of this, it seems, created the possibility for the Spanish to ally themselves with groups of disaffected people who had been conquered and oppressed by the Aztecs. This resulted in the forces of Cortez swelling from
a few hundred Spaniards to the point where they numbered in the thousands. Add to this the devastating effects that European diseases had on the helpless Aztecs and it is easy to see how the situation became ripe for conquest.

In regard to the downfall of the Incas, this had much to do with the ill-timed civil conflict that was waged between Atawallpa and Waskhar in 1532. This internecine struggle split the empire, leaving the followers of the respective princes alienated from each other. During the eight months of Atawallpa’s captivity, the Spaniards came to understand that they could exploit the divisions that had arisen between the two Inca factions. In addition, the relatively lengthy period during which the Inca prince was held captive—a tension filled span that left Atawallpa’s followers afraid to attack because they feared their king would be killed and Waskhar’s followers heralding the invaders as liberators—allowed Spanish reinforcements to arrive on the South American mainland. Although Atawallpa did everything in his power to secure his release, including turning over enough gold to his captors to provide a half a million dollars worth of the precious medal to each Spanish horseman and seven times that amount to Pizarro, by the summer of 1533 he knew that the end was near.

The execution of Atawallpa in July of 1533 gave rise to all manner of response from the peoples of the realm. Those in Cajamarca, where the prince had been held captive, were distraught over the death of Atawallpa and outraged at the insignificant Christian burial he was given by the Spanish. On the other hand, Waskhar’s supporters, and a large number of ethnic groups which had been brought into the empire through conquest, were overjoyed at the news of the execution. Perhaps the most significant consequence of Atawallpa’s death was that it removed the greatest barrier to Inca attacks on the Spanish. Realizing this, Pizarro installed one of Waskhar’s younger brothers, Thupa Wallpa, as a puppet ruler in Cajamarca and led his troops toward the capital city of Cuzco. The Spaniards met their first resistance near Hatun Xauxa in the Mantaro Valley, and this engagement demonstrated the fierce and destructive divisions that existed among the Incas. While Atawallpa’s army attempted to burn down the town and made their stand on one side of the river, the native Xauxa and Wanka populace, who had sided with the army of Waskhar, danced in the streets. These locals quickly allied themselves with the Spanish, supplying them with goods taken from the royal storehouse, a practice they kept up for the next two decades. Although the Spanish were
repelled on a few occasions, in the end the demoralized Incas finally gave up: “Unopposed, Pizarro’s men marched into the navel of the universe on November 15, 1533, a year to the day after marching into the Inca camp at Cajamarca.”