

## The Americas in the age of indigenous empires

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On November 8, 1519, the history of the Americas was forever changed. For a quarter-century, three empires had been aggressively expanding in the hemisphere, and on that day two of them met. The meeting took the form of a diplomatic encounter between Moctezuma, the emperor of the Aztecs, and Fernando Cortés, the dominant captain of a Spanish expedition of invasion.

As told by some of the Spaniards who were there—most notably Cortés himself—the Aztec ruler came with a vast entourage to the edge of his capital city of Mexico-Tenochtitlán to welcome the foreign visitors, who for several months had been working their way across the empire from the coast. Upon first meeting, the two leaders exchanged greetings and necklaces, before the Spaniards were led to their guest quarters in the palace of Moctezuma's late father. There, the emperor delivered a speech to Cortés, who a year later repeated it in a letter to the king of Spain, styled as a statement of surrender. Cortés's strategic interpretation of the speech found a ready audience; it was echoed in subsequent Spanish and indigenous accounts of the conquest years, working its way into chronicles, histories and paintings, becoming an elemental part of the traditional narrative of the conquest that survives to this day.<sup>1</sup>

In my view, the meeting of November 8 was defined not by Moctezuma's alleged surrender, but by misunderstanding. A symbolic moment came when

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous primary sources, textual and visual, on this meeting (they underpin a book project of mine with the working title of *The Meeting*), but good starting points are: Anthony Pagden, *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 83–7; and James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 114–19. Starting points in secondary sources are Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), pp. 277–85; and Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 77–82.

Cortés attempted to put his arms around the emperor. In the conquistador's own words, "when we met, I dismounted and went to embrace him alone, but those two lords who had come with him stopped me with their hands, so that I could not touch him."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the meeting was replete with miscommunication. As a diplomatic encounter, it was doomed to fail, with conflict bound to follow.

Inevitable conflict has tended to be a common theme in the history of the Americas in the age of indigenous empires. The historiography of the Aztec and Spanish Empires is heavy with assumptions not only regarding the predictability of events, but also the contributing attitude of contemporary actors. For example, Moctezuma surrenders only because he sees Spanish victory as predetermined; and Cortés's bold vision is driven by his belief that God is on his side. But from 1492 through the 1510s, the European discovery and knowledge of the Americas was limited to Caribbean islands and portions of the circum-Caribbean; likewise, the vast majority of Amerindians had not yet discovered Europeans or been impacted by their existence. The parallel, completely separate development of three empires in the Americas during that quarter-century reflected the limited nature of Spanish colonialism prior to 1519 (see Map 9.1). Eventual contact between two or more of these empires may have been inevitable, but nobody knew that at the time, nor was the post-1519 sequence of events preordained. The "real discovery of America" was thus arguably not the day in 1492 when Christopher Columbus saw land; it was the day Moctezuma met Cortés on the causeway leading into Tenochtitlán.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter explores imperial history in the Americas from the early fifteenth to late sixteenth centuries, with particular attention paid to the 1492 to 1519 years. Although contextual attention is paid to earlier periods and other indigenous groups, such as the Maya, the chapter's focus is on the parallel lives of the three empires—the Aztec, Inca and Spanish—each developing unbeknownst to the others. The period of the early fifteenth to late sixteenth centuries was an era of intense conflict and change, albeit with the (sometimes surprising) persistence of certain patterns. It began with the rise of the Aztec and Inca Empires in the 1420s to 1430s; it spanned the rapid

<sup>2</sup> My translation of the original passage on f. 44 of the 1522 Seville edition of the letter; but see Pagden's translation in *Hernán Cortés*, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> As Hugh Thomas put it at the time of the Columbus quinqucentennial: Hugh Thomas, *The Real Discovery of America: Mexico, November 8, 1519* (Mount Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell, 1992), p. 19.

expansion of those mainland empires in the 1490s to 1510s, while Spaniards were forging a fledgling empire in the Caribbean; and it concluded with the Spanish-initiated partial transformation and partial destruction of the Aztec and Inca Empires from the 1510s to 1570s. The story after 1519 is not a simple one of sudden conquest, of one empire destroying another; but nor is it one solely of cooperation and collaboration. It is all of the above—a muddled, messy, mix of misunderstandings.

### Categorizing Native Americans

The conquerors of the New World were mostly illiterate adventurers, destitute of all the ideas which should have directed them in contemplating objects, so extremely different from those with which they were acquainted. Surrounded continually with danger, or struggling with hardships, they had little leisure, and less capacity, for speculative inquiry. Eager to take possession of a country of such vast extent and opulence, and happy in finding it occupied by inhabitants so incapable to defend it, they hastily pronounced them to be a wretched order of men, formed merely for servitude.

Thus did William Robertson, the eighteenth-century Scotsman who wrote the first modern English-language history of the Americas, characterize that thwarted embrace of Spaniards and native peoples in the age of discovery, invasion, conquest and resistance.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Robertson realized that not all Spanish newcomers were so destitute of ideas, and he himself tended to dismiss many indigenous peoples as culturally wretched. That is, he was the heir to a European tradition that struggled to understand Native American civilizations, a complex engagement with the indigenous past and present that—paradoxically—denigrated native cultures, admired their achievements, and simplified or ignored the post-conquest processes of their survival and transformation.

The first generations of European travelers to the Americas, from Columbus in the 1490s to Sir Walter Raleigh a century later, carried with them preconceived ideas about indigenous peoples and their cultures. Columbus reported to the Castilian queen that one Caribbean island was inhabited by cannibals, another by people with tails and a third by Amazons—women warriors who lived in communities entirely without men. The Governor of Cuba instructed Cortés to find out if there were men with heads of dogs in

<sup>4</sup> William Robertson, *The History of America* (London: Thoemmes Press, 1777), vol. 1, p. 285.



9.1 Map of Native America before 1492

Yucatan or Mexico. Raleigh looked in vain in South America for acephali, or headless people, described to him by Spaniards and Amerindians as having “their eyes in their shoulders, and their mouths in the middle of their breasts.”

We may no longer hunt for such monsters, yet arguably Native Americans continue to be viewed primarily through the prism of the non-native imagination; the Mexica, for example, have repeatedly been invented and reinvented as the “Aztecs” (as we shall call them here), alternately derided as cannibalistic savages and celebrated as symbols of Mexican national glory. Despite the immense amount of knowledge that archaeologists, ethnohistorians and other scholars have compiled on the native peoples of central Mexico, the popular and common image of them still centers on so-called Aztec human sacrifices—as did the prejudiced first impression by conquistadors such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Díaz’s account of the Spanish-Aztec war, first published in 1632, has remained until today one of the foundational cornerstones of how that war and its protagonists are perceived.<sup>5</sup>

The reluctance of sixteenth-century Spaniards to believe that Native Americans built their own civilizations is thus part of a thread of Western thought that survives to this day. In the decades after Columbus, it was argued that Amerindians were descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel or refugees from Atlantis, or they were “taught” civilization by Egyptians and Carthaginians. We may not take such theories seriously, but they were as popular in their day as were late-twentieth-century notions of alien assistance or a lost ten-thousand-year-old global civilization.

Some sixteenth-century Europeans were willing to credit Amerindians with the civilizational developments that were very much still visible after the Spanish Conquest. One of these was the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa, who asserted that the pyramids and other buildings he saw in the Yucatan Peninsula “were not made by any peoples other than these Indians.”<sup>6</sup> Landa was right. He was referring to the Mayas, but he would have been equally correct making the same observation anywhere in the Americas.

We might forgive early modern observers for failing to grasp the deep temporal roots of settlement and civilization in the Americas; it has taken scholars many decades to construct an understanding of what preceded the Aztecs and Incas, an understanding that continues to evolve. As detailed elsewhere in these volumes, some Native American populations began to

<sup>5</sup> Among many editions of Díaz’s book, a fine recent one is Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, David Carrasco (ed.) (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2009); for an argument that Cortés was the real author of Díaz’s *True History*, see Christian Duverger, *Crónica de la Eternidad: Quien escribió la Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España?* (Mexico City: Taurus, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, ch. 5. My translation from the manuscript in the Royal Academy of History, Madrid.

abandon nomadic hunting in favor of a more settled and permanent existence some 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. The earliest evidence of this transition is found in the Andes region of South America and in Mesoamerica; there, beginning about 3000 BC, native peoples developed more sophisticated societies and distinctive styles of art and architecture. Andeans developed the great Chavín civilization in the northern Andes, while Mesoamericans produced the great Olmec civilization of Mexico's Gulf Coast. Between 200 BC and AD 1300, a number of distinct civilizations rose and fell in the Andes and Mesoamerica, some of them reaching imperial status and all of them building on and borrowing from their predecessors. Before the period of the Incas, the Moche and the Sicán civilizations stand out in northern Peru, while to the south there rose the Nazca, Huari and Tiahuanaco. The two greatest civilizations to develop in Mesoamerica before the fifteenth century were those of Teotihuacán in central Mexico and, to the south, the Classic Maya. All of these civilizations centered on large, ceremonial cities with substantial stone temple complexes.<sup>7</sup>

The Aztecs and Incas evolved from deep cultural roots in Mesoamerica and the Andes. So too did the Mayas, yet the Mayas (as we think of them) were part of neither empire, nor had they ever forged their own. Neither had the Taíno and indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, whose society was different in crucial ways from those of the Mesoamericans. Native American societies were complex and varied, but can be divided into four categories: "concentrated sedentary," "segmented sedentary," "semi-sedentary" and "non-sedentary."<sup>8</sup>

The first two categories refer to permanently settled societies whose members lived in built communities, typically in the valleys or plateaus of the tropical Americas, rather than in densely forested areas. Sedentary societies relied on permanent, intensive agriculture for their survival. This required irrigation and other complex and labor-intensive water control systems, but it also allowed populations to swell; the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, with perhaps as many as 100,000 people, was one of the largest cities in the world. Intensive agriculture also fostered social stratification;

<sup>7</sup> See chapters by Gerardo Gutiérrez, *Cambridge World History*, vol. v, and Michael Smith, *Cambridge World History*, vol. vi, and also William T. Sanders, Alba Guadalupe Mastache and Robert H. Cobean (eds.), *Urbanism in Mesoamerica* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia; University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> This passage is based in part on Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 12–16. I am grateful to Kris for permitting me to draw freely from our book here and elsewhere in this chapter.

while the majority of subjects in sedentary Native American societies farmed, a minority lived and worked as merchants, artisans, warriors, nobles and royalty. Sedentary societies are built to expand. This was true in the Andes and Mesoamerica, the two most densely populated regions of the Americas and the location of concentrated sedentary societies; expanding polities or empires of some kind rose and fell in concentrated sedentary societies for centuries prior to the European invasion.

Other sedentary peoples—segmented societies—occupied lands where there were no empires or large polities. Key examples of segmented sedentary societies could be found to the north of the Inca Empire and in southern Mesoamerica. In northern Colombia, the Tairona and the Muisca built stone temples and palaces in their city centers; they traded in gold, emeralds and cotton textiles with each other and their neighbors. Segmented Mesoamerican societies included the Zapotecs, Mixtecs and other smaller groups to the south of the Aztec Empire, as well as the Mayas of the Yucatan Peninsula and smaller Maya polities in Guatemala. These peoples were all fully sedentary, and many had in previous centuries been part of larger regional polities, some of which had developed into incipient empires of sorts, centered on such cities as Tikal (at the Yucatan's southern end) and Chichén Itzá (to its north). But at the time of the Spanish invasion, the Mayas were at the segmented stage of a cycle marked by periods of expansion and centralization followed by eras of political and demographic collapse.

For example, as recently as the early fifteenth century, much of the Yucatan Peninsula had been organized into a mini empire centered on the city of Mayapan; had their invasion of the peninsula been delayed by a century or so, the Spaniards might have encountered a similar such polity instead of the two dozen loosely delineated city-states (i.e. segmented societies) they in fact found in the sixteenth century (see Map 9.2). Not that segmentation facilitated invasion and conquest from outside. Some Mayan kingdoms, due to their size and location, escaped violent invasion, but were gradually absorbed into New Spain (such as the Chontal kingdom of Acalan); others fought off repeated invasions, but eventually accommodated Spanish colonization (such as the Xiu, Pech and other polities in northern Yucatan, whose conquest took almost two decades; and the rival kingdoms of highland Guatemala, the Cakchiquel and Quiché, whose conquest took a bloody decade); others successfully prevented Spanish settlement, accepting Christianity on their own terms and even without non-Mayan priests, but suffered massive population decline and gradually faded away as viable polities (such as those in what is now western Belize); and, finally, others persisted, even



9.2 The Maya area at the turn of the sixteenth century

expanded, for generations (such as the Itzá Mayan kingdom in the Petén region of northern Guatemala, not destroyed by Spaniards until 1697).<sup>9</sup>

In terms of total population, the vast majority of Native Americans living at the time of European contact were sedentary agriculturalists, yet it was

<sup>9</sup> On the varied Spanish conquests in the Maya region, see the sources cited in Matthew Restall, *Maya Conquistador* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998); Matthew Restall and Florine Asselbergs, *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahuatl, and Maya Accounts of the Conquest Wars* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); and Matthew Restall, "Invasion: The Maya at War, 1520s–1540s" in Andrew K. Scherer and John W. Verano (eds.), *Embattled Bodies, Embattled Places: Conflict, Conquest, and the Performance of War in Pre-Columbian America* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2013), pp. 93–117.



semi-sedentary peoples, the third category, who occupied the most territory. Semi-sedentary societies relied only partially on agriculture, requiring them to hunt and forage to meet the remainder of their dietary needs. Semi-sedentary peoples were not nomads, but their subsistence needs and sometimes cultural or religious factors caused them to move to new areas for fresh land. Periodic movement, sometimes over great distances, prevented semi-sedentary peoples from developing dense populations and, since they had to carry their belongings with them, it also reduced the complexity of material culture and craft specialization. Semi-sedentary groups could and did expand. The Tupi, for example, were still moving north along the coast of Brazil when Europeans reached them around 1500. The Tupi planted crops as they moved, and mostly fought with each other, but many other semi-sedentary peoples expanded at the expense of sedentary neighbors, acting partly as parasitical raiders. This seems to have been true of the Caribs, who had expanded from the northern coasts of South America into the southern Caribbean, displacing the Taíno from some islands—a process halted by the arrival of Spaniards and the diseases they brought.<sup>10</sup>

A great number of semi-sedentary peoples occupied two vast portions of the Americas. In the south, groups such as the Lucayans, Taíno, Caribs and Tupi inhabited the Caribbean islands plus eastern and central South America. The Taíno and Lucayans (both an Arawak people) are particularly relevant here, because while the Aztec and Inca Empires expanded and thrived for two to three decades after 1492, the Arawaks suffered invasion, enslavement, epidemic disease and catastrophic demographic decline. Their semi-sedentary character exacerbated the negative impact of the European invasion. Spread across the Greater Antilles, or larger Caribbean islands, the Taíno seem to have been influenced by Mesoamerican civilization; their towns were centered on plazas, featured large ball courts, and housed up to several thousand residents. But such communities lacked the social stratification, political centralization and material complexity of Mesoamerican societies.<sup>11</sup> (For more on the Caribbean, see the chapter by Alan Karras in this volume.)

<sup>10</sup> Although note that the long-held view, based on early European observations, that the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean were bifurcated into Taíno or Arawaks and Caribs, has been overturned in recent decades; scholars now believe there were many ethnic groups, “nearly all of them” speakers of “mutually unintelligible” Arawakan languages; Samuel M. Wilson, *The Indigenous People of the Caribbean* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> See Wilson, *Indigenous People*; Samuel M. Wilson, *Hispaniola: Caribbean Chiefdoms in the Age of Columbus* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1990); William F.

To the north, at least half of North America was inhabited by semi-sedentary peoples, with the densest settlements around the Great Lakes, Mississippi basin, Eastern Woodlands and Pacific Northwest. Some semi-sedentary peoples there came close to forming fully sedentary societies. The Ancestral Pueblo of northern New Mexico built substantial adobe and stone dwellings and ritual complexes sustained by maize agriculture, and the Mississippian culture centered on the Cahokia ceremonial site boasted populations in the tens of thousands. Both the Ancestral Pueblo and Mississippian cultures traded with Mesoamericans, but for reasons that remain disputed, their population densities dropped before the arrival of Europeans.

In the Amazon and neighboring Orinoco basins, semi-sedentary and non-sedentary, or nomadic, peoples (the last of the four categories used here) often competed with one another for access to waterways and forests, and some groups went back and forth between the two life ways. Truly non-sedentary peoples were most prevalent in the non-tropical Southern Cone of South America. The same was true in the vast deserts, plains and arctic regions of North America. Although their numbers were small and their material goods relatively modest and portable, the Americas' non-sedentary peoples were everywhere masters of adaptation to demanding environments. Such societies, including the Tehuelche of southern Argentina, were highly mobile, and often followed the seasonal movements of game. Compact, itinerant, hunting bands were typical, and many non-sedentary peoples preyed on sedentary neighbors in times of stress. Nomadic or non-sedentary societies had few material possessions, yet nearly all passed down elaborate oral histories and complex spiritual beliefs. Their medicinal practices, which often drew from long experience with plants, insects and animals, were sometimes sought out by sedentary peoples as well.

Native American settlement patterns and categories might be imagined as concentric circles emanating from two centers. The centers constituted the two core regions of sedentary population—the Andes, with some 15 million people, most within the Inca Empire, and Mesoamerica, with about 30 million people at the time of European contact, most of them in central Mexico. The first circles around them encompassed semi-sedentary peoples, surrounding

Keegan, *Taino Indian Myth and Practice: The Arrival of the Stranger King* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007); José R. Oliver, *Caciques and Cemi Idols: The Web Spun by Taino Rulers between Hispaniola and Puerto Rico* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009); and Scott M. Fitzpatrick and Ann H. Ross (eds.), *Island Shores, Distant Pasts: Archaeological and Biological Approaches to the Pre-Columbian Settlement of the Caribbean* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010).

Mesoamerica to the north (North America), to the east (the Caribbean) and to the south (the lower half of Central America), and adjacent to the Andes, to the north and the east. Beyond these were larger circles encompassing non-sedentary peoples, those who dwelt mostly in interior regions of South America and at the most southern and northern edges of the Americas. These circles made up roughly another 20 million people. Thus, the total Native American population at European contact was approximately 65 million, similar to that of Western and Central Europe at that time, and probably not so different from that of Atlantic Africa. The analogy of concentric circles should not be taken to suggest that civilization emanated out from the Inca and Aztec Empires. Nor should the circles be thought of as some sort of judgmental scale, with the core superior and civilized and the outer limits inferior and savage. Instead, it is more useful to think of differences among indigenous groups (and between them and Europeans or Africans) in terms of geographical constraints and opportunities. In short, as elsewhere in the world, Native Americans built the kinds of societies that their environments best sustained.

### The Aztecs: a Mesoamerican empire

The broad and deep roots of civilization in the Americas meant that a culture such as that of the Aztecs was merely the latest in a sequence of empires, and the heir to a great regional cultural tradition. This tradition had certain characteristics or defining features, set out below as a list of ten. (For more on Mesomerica in the period 500 to 1500, see the chapter by Michael Smith in Volume V of this book.)

Many Mesoamericans lived in (1) cities that featured monumental urban architecture, in particular pyramidal structures and other impressive buildings facing large, open plazas. The Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlán was a striking example of this phenomenon, and one of the greatest urban achievements in human history. As Gerardo Gutiérrez notes in Volume III of this book, the lacustrine metropolis embodied “the spirit of the Aztecs” and was “the most refined expression of Mesoamerican urbanism.”<sup>12</sup> Mesoamerican

<sup>12</sup> Gutiérrez, *Cambridge World History*, vol. v, p. 2; Sanders *et al.*, *Urbanism in Mesoamerica*; Pedro Carrasco, *The Tenochca Empire of Ancient Mexico: The Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlán, Tetzaco, and Tlacopan* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Leonardo López Luján, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Michael S. Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008); and a forthcoming book on Tenochtitlán by Barbara Mundy.

cities also tended to contain (2) ball courts and (3) specialized markets, which operated both at local and regional levels. Such markets featured consumer products and material goods of numerous kinds, but (4) included items of particular cultural and economic importance—most notably, jade (used decoratively), obsidian (used decoratively and to create blades for tools and weapons) and cacao (the chocolate seed used sometimes as currency, in bean form, but more widely as a highly prized beverage, in liquid form). More commonly available in markets were the everyday items that formed the basis of the Mesoamerican diet: (5) maize (corn), squash and beans. Of these, maize was the most important, both nutritionally and culturally.

The Mesoamerican world-view (6) was oriented towards two principles, that of the cardinal directions and that of duality (whereby everything in the universe formed part of a pair, such as day and night, life and death, supernatural and natural, and male and female). These principles were also part of (7) Mesoamerica's complex pantheistic religion, which included such features as nature deities, deified royal ancestors, and a multi-tiered heaven and underworld. Not all gods were equal. Among the many deities of the Aztec variant on Mesoamerican pantheism, two were of primary importance, acting as patron deities of the empire: Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the gods of war and water. Atop the Templo Mayor, the great pyramid on Tenochtitlán's plaza, were twin temples to this pair of gods. The Aztecs had probably migrated into Central Mexico in the eleventh or twelfth centuries, and according to Aztec political mythology, Huitzilopochtli had guided the ancestors from northern Lake Aztlán south to Lake Texcoco, where the site of an eagle with a snake in its mouth alighting on a prickly-pear cactus was the divine sign of arrival. On that spot in 1325, according to Aztec tradition, Tenochtitlán was founded.

At times, human communication with the gods involved (8) sacrificial rituals, ranging from the offering of animals to self-sacrificial bloodletting and the ritualized execution of human captives through decapitation or heart removal. The latter has been especially associated with the Aztecs, since Spanish conquistadors witnessed it. It is possible that the Aztecs did indeed develop a more violent, bloody and macabre culture than did their predecessors in Mexico, as many have argued.<sup>13</sup> Or perhaps the exaggerations and value judgments of Spaniards and other Europeans have distorted our view

<sup>13</sup> See studies ranging from George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise and Fall of the Aztec Nation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1941) to Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

of Aztec human “sacrifice,” and that in reality the Aztecs practiced forms and levels of ritual execution on a scale similar to that of the cultures from which they inherited such traditions (or, for that matter, on a scale no greater than that of Europeans at the time). Either way, it seems clear that while Mesoamericans had ritually executed war captives and other select victims for millennia, only with the rise of the Aztecs did such executions become central to imperial expansion and maintenance. Huitzilopochtli was typically offered the hearts of war captives, whose heads were placed on the skull rack in the plaza of Tenochtitlán. Much more rarely, Aztec children were sacrificed to the water god Tlaloc, a ritual intended to provoke much sadness and offerings of tears.

The Aztecs may have believed themselves responsible for carrying out all these sacrificial rituals in order to maintain cosmic harmony by paying debts to the gods. If that was true, they were not the only polity to pay such a debt; the same culture of ritualized violence was shared by other Nahuas (Nahuatl-speaking peoples of Central Mexico). Aztec neighbors and enemies such as the Tlaxcalans, for example, also tore the hearts from prisoners of war atop temple-pyramids. It even appears that such enemies as Tlaxcala and Tenochtitlán shared larger ritual dramas. According to some sources, conventional warfare between the Aztecs and enemies such as the Tlaxcalans was sometimes replaced, sometimes supplemented, by the “flowery wars” (*xochiyaoyotl*), in which scattered red blossoms represented the blood of warriors and selected warriors were traded as captives to be sacrificed; casualties in flowery wars died a *xochimiquiztli*, a “flowery death” or “fortunate death” (because it was an honorable way to sacrifice one’s life). Tlaxcala was never conquered, but its inhabitants lived on constant alert, their daily existence hemmed in and overshadowed by the looming Aztec tributary apparatus that surrounded them. In the end, Tlaxcalan resentment of Aztec aggression greatly enabled the Spanish invasion.<sup>14</sup>

Related to religious beliefs, but also to Mesoamerican understandings of agricultural cycles, was (9) a sophisticated knowledge of the celestial bodies and their movements. This formed the basis of a complex permutation calendar that featured a 365-day solar year (like our year), and an additional cycle of 260 days; the Mayas of the Classic period maintained a long count (rather like our years, centuries and millennia), but a fifty-two-year cycle was

<sup>14</sup> See Carrasco, *Tenochca Empire*; and Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), pp. 7–10, 130, 213 and 256.

the longest calendar tracked by the Aztecs. Calendrical knowledge, religious beliefs and—above all—political and historical records were all carved or written down on materials ranging from fig-bark paper to bone and stone; for Mesoamericans had developed (10) a complex writing system. The system actually comprised three related systems, named (by us) after the three cultures that were maintaining them when the Spaniards invaded: the Aztecs, Mixtecs and Mayas. These systems were partly pictographic and partly syllabic. The most complete system, and the only one that was a fully developed hieroglyphic script, was that of the Mayas, which meant that the literate Maya minority could express anything they wanted in writing. The sophistication and cultural significance of writing also meant that, in the sixteenth century, Nahuas, Mixtecs, Mayas and some other Mesoamerican groups would easily make the transition to the alphabetic writing brought by the Spanish.

One vivid example of Aztec writing and calendrical recording is the extraordinary monolith known to us as the Calendar Stone (Figure 9.1).



Figure 9.1 Aztec Calendar, known as Stone of the Sun, from Tenochtitlán, now in the National Museum of Anthropology and History, Mexico City (De Agostini Picture Library / G. Dagli Orti / Bridgeman Images).

The stone was carved and placed in Tenochtitlán's central plaza, probably during the reign of Moctezuma in the early years of the sixteenth century, although some scholars have suggested it might have been created late in the previous century. In the violent collapse of the city in 1521, the stone was buried, and not discovered again until street-paving workers uncovered it in 1790. At its center is a deity, most likely the monstrous Earth deity, Tlaltecuhli, representing the Aztec capital's own position as the fearsome, sacred center of the world. Tlaltecuhli's tongue is carved as a flint knife, the symbol for war in the Aztec writing system. The concentric circles of the image depict the five creations of the world, the twenty day signs that constituted an Aztec month, and a series of icons representing the movement of the sun, indirectly evoking the fifty-two-year calendar. The stone was a political and religious statement about Tenochtitlán's centrality in time and space—and the sacrificial warfare it would take to ensure the sacred role of the city and its rulers.<sup>15</sup>

That role went back almost a century, to 1428, when Itzcoatl, the fourth Aztec king and the first we might reasonably call an emperor, forged an alliance with the lakeside cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan. The city-state that had previously been dominant, Azcapotzalco, was defeated, and the empire was born. That same year, Itzcoatl and his chief minister and general, a nephew named Tlacaélel, collected and burned all hieroglyphic books that recorded the history of the region. That history was then rewritten with the Aztecs at its center, as the heirs to the legacy of the Toltecs (whose city of Tula had dominated the valley four centuries earlier) and as the divinely sanctioned rulers of the known world. The power that emperors would exercise for 100 years over the Aztecs themselves and their neighbors was justified by the claim of privileged access both to the regional great tradition of the Toltecs and to the will of the gods, especially Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc.

Although a few city-states were able to avoid defeat by the Aztecs and incorporation into their tribute-paying imperial network—most notably Tlaxcala, and the small Tarascan Empire to the west—the Aztecs rapidly came to dominate highland Mexico. Moctezuma Ilhuicamina succeeded his uncle Itzcoatl in 1440, followed by three sons: Axayácatl, Tizoc and Ahuitzotl. At Ahuitzotl's 1486 coronation, visiting rulers from many of the empire's tributary cities (according to an early colonial account) "saw that the Aztecs

<sup>15</sup> See Khristaan D. Vellela and Mary Ellen Miller (eds.), *The Aztec Calendar Stone* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2010).



were masters of the world, their empire so wide and abundant that they had conquered all the nations and that all were their vassals. The guests, seeing such wealth and opulence and such authority and power, were filled with terror.”<sup>16</sup>

The last independent Aztec emperor, an aggressive and able ruler, was the namesake grandson of the first Moctezuma, Moctezuma Xocoyotl. This second Moctezuma consolidated and extended the empire from 1502 until 1520, when he was murdered by Spanish invaders or (according to most Spanish accounts) by his own people. Despite his numerous successes as a ruler, Moctezuma Xocoyotl would be blamed by both Spaniards and Nahuas for his empire’s demise. The emperor became a scapegoat, and his alleged speech of surrender became an accepted fact. History’s Moctezuma thus became a myth, a caricature of ineptitude.

### The Incas: an Andean empire

Are there coincidences in history? At the same time that the Aztecs were forging their empire in Central Mexico, the Incas were developing theirs in Peru. Yet, there is no evidence that Mesoamericans and Andeans knew of each other’s existence, just as empires in other parts of the world developed in isolation from one another.

In 1438, a secondary Inca prince named Cusi Yupanqui repelled an attempt by his neighbors, the Chancas, to seize control of the Inca capital of Cuzco and surrounding territory. Exultant, Cusi Yupanqui forced his father to retire and took the Inca crown, with its distinctive fringe, from the designated heir. The first true Inca emperor, Yupanqui renamed himself Pachacuti, which means “world-changer” or “time-turner.” The new emperor quickly established a mythological history that seemed to predict his arrival and also justified his aggressive vision of the future. Pachacuti reorganized the Inca system of rule from one centered on stability and reproduction to one that sought to encompass as much territory and as many subjects as possible. The justification for Inca expansion was ethnocentric but not unusual: Pachacuti claimed he wanted to “civilize” all Andean peoples after the Inca fashion.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See Carrasco, *Tenochca Empire*; Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*; and Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexico’s History* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> See Catherine Julien, *Reading Inca History* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2000); and Alan L. Kolata, *Ancient Inca* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 28–48.



(For more on the Inca state, see the chapter by Sabine MacCormack in Volume V of this book.)

In fact, the Incas were heirs to the great tradition of civilization in the central Andes. They were not outside invaders, but a Cuzco-based, Quechua-speaking people who conquered and administered what they called Tawantinsuyu, or the Union of the Four Quarters. (“Inca” was the emperor’s title, a term we now use for the whole empire.) By the 1520s, the Inca Empire was far larger than the Aztec one had been – perhaps four times as large (see Map 9.3).<sup>18</sup> Its capital of Cuzco was smaller than Tenochtitlán, however, although its role as a sacred center to the empire (and the world) was similar.<sup>19</sup>

The Incas may be compared with the Aztecs on the ten points noted above. Like Mesoamerican urban centers, Andean cities (1) were also carefully planned and oriented, and they contained similarly oriented stone or adobe temples of great size, some of them pyramidal, but more often U-shaped. As in Mesoamerica (and unlike ancient Egypt), the enormous monuments served as stages for religious-political drama rather than personal sepulchers for elites. There were (2) no ball courts to compare to those in Mesoamerica. But Andean cities were (3) places of material exchange and craft specialization. Items traded over great distances included (4) *Spondylus* and other marine shells, salt, fine textiles, and a variety of utilitarian and decorative metal items.<sup>20</sup> Andean metallurgy was in fact far more advanced and widespread than that of Mesoamerica; long before the rise of the Incas one finds arsenical bronze tools, copper currency, and even platinum jewelry.<sup>21</sup>

It is worth noting here one important difference between Inca and Aztec Empires: the migration of peoples within the empire and the role played by such movements in the empire’s creation and maintenance. The Incas were like the Aztecs in quickly growing their empire by using threats and strategic alliances to augment violent military conquests. But once subject peoples

<sup>18</sup> See Brian S. Bauer, *The Development of the Inca State* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992); Michael A. Malpass, *Daily Life in the Inca Empire* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996); Terence N. D’Altroy, *The Incas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); Gordon F. McEwan, *The Incas: New Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006); and Kolata, *Ancient Inca*.

<sup>19</sup> On Cuzco, see Brian S. Bauer, *Ancient Cuzco: Heartland of the Inca* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004); Craig Morris and Adriana Von Hagen, *The Incas: Lord of the Four Quarters* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 2011), pp. 102–32; and Kolata, *Ancient Inca*, pp. 45–8 and 58–71.

<sup>20</sup> Kolata, *Ancient Inca*, p. 226.

<sup>21</sup> McEwan, *The Incas*, pp. 161–78; and Morris and Von Hagen, *The Incas*, pp. 48–64.

were conquered, the Incas favored centralized control over the indirect rule and tribute-collecting mechanism used by the Aztecs. Inca rule was distinct from that of the Aztecs in at least four ways. The Incas exacted tribute, but more in the form of labor rather than goods. The imperial labor system, or *mita* (in Quechuan, *mit'a*—literally “turn,” a system revived under Spanish colonial rule), required local farmers to work lands taken over by the Inca state as well as their own plots. Male subjects also had to rotate into the Inca army and serve in various construction levies.<sup>22</sup> Rotational labor systems existed in Central Mexico, such as the *coatequil* draft (literally “snake-work,” because the labor draft circled in turn to each of a town’s neighborhoods, symbolized by a snake curled up in a circle). But these were not run by imperial officials or formalized for long-term purposes.<sup>23</sup>

Mita workers supplied labor for the empire’s extensive, 14,000-mile network of royal roads (a system that had no Aztec equivalent) (see Map 9.3). The Inca road, or *capac ñan*, included everything from broad desert avenues to grass-fiber suspension bridges spanning mountain gorges. The bridges had to be strong enough to sustain relay messengers, llama herds, streams of tribute-bearing porters and even armies. The road system also included a series of carefully located inns and warehouses. Stored goods were used to feed mita workers, supply troops and keep luxury goods flowing to the wealthy Inca elite. The road system also facilitated the forced migration of entire communities—a technique of imperial and labor control used increasingly by the Incas to build public works projects or defend frontiers. The Incas officially required migrant communities to keep their original identities, but they also demanded that all subjects use the Quechua language for exchanges and imperial affairs. All this had an impact on the look and function of urban spaces. Inca cities and towns tended to be more polyglot and multiethnic than those within the Aztec empire. But unlike the Aztecs, with their large marketplaces dominated by regional traders, the Incas managed most exchanges at the state level in a redistributive way, suppressing free market activity.<sup>24</sup>

Continuing with the ten-point comparison: (5) the Andean diet varied considerably, but generally consisted of potatoes and other high-altitude tubers, maize, beans, squash and capsicum peppers. At lower altitudes,

<sup>22</sup> Kolata, *Ancient Inca*, pp. 104–21.

<sup>23</sup> The *coatequil* did become more formalized, however, in the Spanish colonial period; see, e.g., Rebecca Horn, *Postconquest Coyoacan: Nahuatl-Spanish Relations in Central Mexico, 1519–1650* (Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 39–42, 91, 101–7 and 230.

<sup>24</sup> Kolata, *Ancient Inca*, pp. 139–45.



9.3 The Inca Empire and road system

manioc, seafood and freshwater fish were equally important. Guinea pigs, or *cuyes*, and llamas, the only domesticated animal of any size in the Americas, were eaten on special occasions. Tobacco was sometimes employed in ritual healing ceremonies, but from Colombia to Chile, mildly stimulating coca leaves and maize beer were the preferred stimulants. Intensive agriculture entailed complex terraces, long aqueducts and extensive raised fields. These human-constructed features in the landscape, along with many natural ones,

were—like the ubiquitous ancestor mummies of the Andes, a cultural phenomenon inherited and maintained by the Incas—regarded as deeply sacred.

Unlike that of Mesoamerica, the Andean world-view tended to conceive of the landscape in (6) radial rather than strictly cardinal terms. Surviving temples contain sculptures of fierce, semi-human feline and reptilian creatures, suggesting (7) religious themes still evident in lowland South American shamanism. Religion and politics were not separate concerns, however, as Andean temples from the earliest to latest times were clearly sites of (8) ritualized human execution (like their counterparts in Mesoamerica). Some Inca sacrificial practices have inevitably drawn modern attention—most notably the depositing of children to die of exposure in high altitude locations, such as Aconcagua, the hemisphere's tallest mountain. Nonetheless, human sacrifice was practiced on a relatively small scale, both generally speaking in Andean societies and specifically by the Incas.<sup>25</sup>

Like Mesoamericans, Andeans gave considerable attention—and mythic weight—to (9) astronomical phenomena. However, Andean peoples appear not to have developed writing systems of the traditional kind, instead employing (10) knotted strings, called quipus (khipus), which they used to record numbers, lineages and possibly some historical events. Runners, carrying quipus, used the road system to relay information across thousands of miles with amazing speed.<sup>26</sup>

The net effect of the structural development of Inca imperialism was a kingdom that stretched from what is today northern Chile to Ecuador. It was on Tawantinsuyu's northern frontier, near the modern Ecuador–Colombia border, where the Inca Huayna Capac was told of an epidemic sweeping through the empire. The year was 1525, and the emperor was told that the new illness was already ravaging the capital of Cuzco. Within a few years, possibly in 1527, the disease seems to have killed the Inca himself. Although descriptions of the symptoms are hazy, and were only related to the Spanish after the conquest, this was probably the first wave of smallpox to penetrate South America. It had most likely begun with the arrival of Europeans in the region of what is now Buenos Aires. The disease also appears to have killed Huayna Capac's preferred heir—all this before a single Spaniard set foot in Tawantinsuyu. The deaths produced a succession crisis between two brothers, Atawallpa and Huascar, sons of Huayna Capac by different mothers. Their feud soon grew into a full-blown civil war, splitting the Inca Empire in

<sup>25</sup> McEwan, *The Incas*, pp. 137–59; and Morris and Von Hagen, *The Incas*, pp. 230–3.

<sup>26</sup> Kolata, *Ancient Inca*, pp. 89–93.

half. When Francisco Pizarro sought to conquer the Incas in 1532, he had epidemic disease and internal division on his side.

### More danger than profit: the Spanish Caribbean

“This Empire consisted not so much in any Thing real, as in the Hopes they had conceived from several Discoveries and Inroads made by some of our Captains with various Success, but more Danger than Profit.”<sup>27</sup> Thus did Antonio de Solís sum up the Spanish possessions in the Caribbean prior to the Spanish discovery of the Aztecs and Incas. Writing almost two centuries later, as the official chronicler of the conquests, Solís captured the perception by Spaniards—which had deepened with hindsight—of the chasm between expectations and the reality of colonization in the early Caribbean.

What were those expectations, and how did they shape the Spanish Empire in the Americas before the meeting between Moctezuma and Cortés? European and indigenous societies are generally compared on different terms, but they may also be compared on the same terms, within the framework of the ten characteristics used above. I use the shorthand term “Spaniards,” but my broad frame of reference is Iberian civilization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and my narrower subject is the experience of Spaniards (and small numbers of Portuguese and Italians) in the Caribbean from the 1490s to the 1510s.

We begin again with cities. Spaniards prized (1) monumental urban architecture as much as Aztecs, Mayas and Incas did. It was equally essential to their sense of political and religious ritual and the ordering of society. Although Spanish cities did not have stone ball courts (2), the use of stone for other buildings was symbolically important, and stone buildings tended to face and define ceremonial plazas.<sup>28</sup>

However, the kinds of cities Spaniards were to find on the mainland—with urban spaces like Tenochtitlán and Cuzco not just meeting but surpassing their expectations—were not to be found among the Taíno. Nor did the early decades of the colonial Caribbean economy support the construction of more

<sup>27</sup> Here I have used Thomas Townsend’s 1724 English translation of Solís: Thomas Townsend (trans.), *History of the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards* (London: Printed for T. Woodward, J. Hooke and J. Peele, 1724), pp. 11–12 (copy in John Carter Brown Library).

<sup>28</sup> Spanish urbanism has been broadly studied, but a good starting point, especially as it emphasizes Spanish American cities, is Richard L. Kagan, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493–1793* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

than the palest, small-scale imitations of a Spanish city. Indeed, the first European “city” created in the Americas lasted less than five years; founded by Columbus in 1493 and named La Isabela, after the queen of Castile, it was located on the coast of Hispaniola adjacent to a Taíno village.<sup>29</sup>

Bartolomé de las Casas wrote later of the Spaniards’ gratitude to God for giving them a “very fertile and beautiful” place to plant their city.<sup>30</sup> Columbus saw it as a base for regional expansion and trade with Asia (which he believed was close by), and a capital city for the governorship that he would pass on to his descendants. But rather than transform a Taíno village into a regional capital city, La Isabela merely destroyed the village. By 1500, its handful of brick buildings were abandoned and Columbus was under arrest and shipped back to Spain. A new capital, Santo Domingo, fared better, but in its early decades came nowhere close to the Spanish urban ideal. When, in 1518, Judge Alonso de Zuazo reported to the king on the modest nature of the Hispaniola colony, there was a stone church and some stone houses in Santo Domingo, but otherwise in the city and throughout the island, “there are only houses of straw . . . like a poor village in Spain.”<sup>31</sup>

Within their cities, Spaniards, like Aztecs and Incas, expected to see (3) the flourishing of specialized markets, in which a wide variety of goods were exchanged. That meant not just local products and foodstuffs, but also (4) items whose cultural significance imbued them with particular value. While the Aztecs and other Mesoamericans prized jade, obsidian and cacao, and Andean peoples fine textiles and worked metal objects, rare and high-value goods sought by Spaniards included fine textiles, precious stones and spices, but above all—and in the earliest stages of exploration and conquest almost exclusively—precious metals. Gold and silver were non-perishable, easily transported and divided, and underpinned the European-Mediterranean economy. By the turn of the sixteenth century, Iberians were already accustomed to finding West African merchants willing to trade gold, ivory, pepper and slaves for textiles, horses, ironware and other goods. However, the Spaniards in the Caribbean found no merchants or markets to compare with those of

<sup>29</sup> See Kathleen Deagan and José María Cruxent, *Columbus’s Outpost among the Taínos: Spain and America at La Isabela, 1493–1498* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> From Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, quoted in Restall and Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times*, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> Zuazo’s letter of January 1518 is reproduced in Joaquín Francisco Pacheco, Francisco de Cárdenas y Espejo and Luis Torres de Mendoza (eds.), *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y colonización de las posesiones españolas en América y Oceanía* (Madrid: Madrid Imprenta de Manuel B. de Quirós, 1864), vol. 1, p. 311.

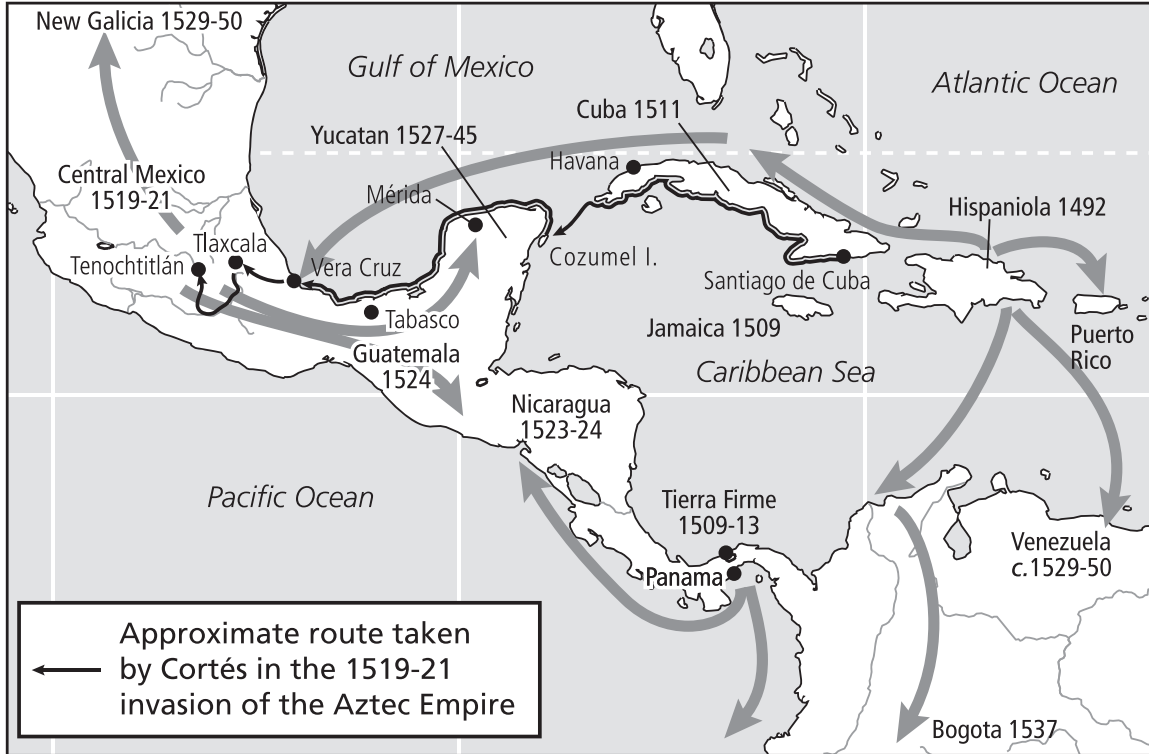
West Africa or the sedentary societies of the American mainland. The Taíno did not trade in luxury commodities or in slaves. They did possess some gold, but they used wood and stone tools, and were local-minded subsistence farmers and fishing folk, not habitual consumers or producers of exports. Frustrated by their failure to mold the Taíno on Hispaniola into cooperative colonial subjects, the Spaniards resorting to slave raiding and plundering as they moved from island to island—to Puerto Rico in 1508, Jamaica in 1509 and Cuba in 1511 (see Map 9.4). Efforts to impose Spanish systems of rule and economic exploitation foundered or met with open resistance; massacres occurred, and local agriculture was disrupted or destroyed.<sup>32</sup>

The first generations of Europeans in the Americas were amazed by (5) the variety of unfamiliar foods, plants and herbs. But despite that amazement, and the early appreciation of some indigenous foods by some Spaniards, the newcomers were generally slow to value or adopt local staples such as manioc and maize—generally derided as “Indian food.” Latin America’s new regional cuisines took many generations to develop. Spaniards in the early Caribbean took what food they needed or wanted from the Taíno, but they also initiated, beginning in the 1490s, the process of importing whatever domestic animals and food crops they could. Cattle were especially important to Spaniards—for dairy products, meat and leather goods—and cattle ranching was already fairly well developed on Hispaniola and Cuba by 1519. Cortés was, in fact, a cattle rancher in Cuba in the 1510s. Pigs flourished too; Cuba’s conqueror and first governor, Diego de Velázquez, told the king in 1514 that the swine brought to the island in the conquest campaign of a few years earlier already numbered some 30,000.<sup>33</sup>

In terms of their (6) world-view and (7) religion, Spaniards in the early Caribbean brought with them a deep-rooted sense of ethnic and cultural superiority, bolstered by an aggressively exclusionist monotheistic faith. Their god, Dios, was the only God, albeit manifested in the Holy Trinity and the cult of saints in ways that would strike Native Americans as familiarly pantheistic. Following the model of recent conquest and colonization in Granada and the Canary Islands, Spaniards believed that God had guided them to settle and rule the New World; the papal grant of 1493, whereby Pope Alexander VI “donated” the Americas to the Iberians, confirmed that

<sup>32</sup> Wilson, *Hispaniola*, pp. 74–142.

<sup>33</sup> Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), pp. 68 and 133; and the chapter by Alan Karras, “The Caribbean region: crucible for modern world history” in this volume.



9.4 The Caribbean, Mexico and Central America in the early decades of the Spanish conquests



conviction. Each new province discovered and conquered was to be part of a new kingdom, making the Spanish Empire the sum of all its kingdoms; the Caribbean islands were eventually part of the viceroyalty or kingdom of New Spain, the first new kingdom in the Americas.

Spaniards expected that the conquered local peoples would be converted to Christianity, allocated to work on the land or in the mines, and required to pay tribute (a basic head tax) to the Spanish crown. This system was to be administered by Spanish settlers, who were as crucial to the imagined colonies as converted local subjects. As Francisco López de Gómara put it in his history of the early empire in Spanish America, “without settlement there is no good conquest, and if the land is not conquered, the people will not be converted.”<sup>34</sup> This essentially medieval European model for an American empire failed in the early Caribbean even more dramatically than La Isabela had foundered in the 1490s, and for the same reasons: it was not well suited to the region and its native peoples. The Taíno produced no significant surpluses for tribute payment, did not use gold as currency, and had no experience with harsh labor regimes or religious persecution. These gaping cultural differences frustrated ambitious, wealth-seeking Spanish settlers to no end, leading them to violently enslave native peoples throughout the Caribbean in order to force them into a recognizably Western economic system. Mass enslavement soon proved counterproductive. World-views clashed. The Taíno population collapsed.

Demographic disaster in the Caribbean was shocking even to Spaniards at the time. Bartolomé de las Casas, the most vocal Spanish defender of indigenous peoples in the era of contact and conquest, estimated that Hispaniola was home to between 1 and 4 million Taíno when Columbus first reached the island in 1492. The real number was probably close to 1 million, but Las Casas’s claim that the Taíno population had fallen 90 percent by the mid-sixteenth century is more or less accepted today. The friar’s claim, however, that this decline was entirely due to the “egregious wickedness” of the Spaniards ignored the massive impact of epidemic disease—a factor not fully grasped by Spaniards at the time. Most likely, most Taíno deaths were from smallpox, measles or influenza. Nonetheless, conquest violence, displacement, enslavement, overwork and other brutal colonial

<sup>34</sup> From López de Gómara, *Historia General de las Indias* (Madrid: Impr. de la Real academia de la historia, 1852), p. 181 (first published in 1553) in J. H. Elliott (trans.), *Spain, Europe, and the Wider World, 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

impositions certainly played a central role in devastating the Caribbean's native populations.<sup>35</sup> The Spaniards did not consider themselves to practice anything like the (8) ritual executions or human sacrifices of the Aztecs and other native groups. Yet, their violent efforts to impose their world-view in the Caribbean—not to mention the ritual executions later carried out in the mainland colonies by the Spanish Inquisition—must have struck indigenous people as horrifyingly brutal in the way that Aztec heart-sacrifice stunned conquistador witnesses.

The final two points of civilizational comparison—(9) planetary and calendrical knowledge and (10) writing systems—do not need explanation, but it is worth making the following observation: The European understanding of the night skies and resulting navigational technology of the fifteenth century, combined with alphabetic writing and the recently developed technology of printing, allowed the Spaniards to reach the Caribbean islands and communicate what they learned about its natural and human environment. In other words, they made the Spanish presence possible. It is highly debatable, however, whether they made conquest and colonization possible. Claims that literacy gave Spaniards a decisive advantage are not, in my view, persuasive.<sup>36</sup>

### Imperial afterlives

Imagining the three empires of the Americas as they stood in the 1500s, and casting a comparative eye from one to the other, a conundrum emerges. The Aztec and Inca Empires appear as impressive examples of expansionist imperialism, driven by powerful political-religious ideologies and institutions of central control, supported by adaptable and deeply rooted organizational systems, arguably yet to reach their apex, let alone their decline. In contrast, the Spanish Empire in the Caribbean seems to be in a constant struggle, undermined from the very onset by the contradictions between colonial expectations and the realities of the natural and human environment on the islands. Paradoxically, the early Spanish Caribbean both lacked a center (despite a series of small capitals, no imperial metropolis emerged in the

<sup>35</sup> Bartolomé de Las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*, Franklin Knight (ed.), Andrew Hurley (trans.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003); and Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and the New World Conquest, 1492–1650* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For an argument against the assumption that the indigenous population on Puerto Rico collapsed completely, see Tony Castanha, *The Myth of Indigenous Caribbean Extinction: Continuity and Reclamation in Borikén (Puerto Rico)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> For a brief discussion of these claims, see Restall, *Seven Myths*, pp. 90–3 and 137–9.

islands as a large and dynamic controlling hub) and simultaneously suffered from too much of a center (Spain itself dominated, and yet was so distant). So, therefore, why was it the marginalized failure-of-an-empire that expanded to destroy the two aggressively successful ones?

This, of course, is a version of the question that has been raised and answered—usually in simplistic and misleading ways—for the past five centuries (how was the Spanish Conquest possible?). Let us dispense with the traditional explanations (the Spaniards had God on their side; European civilization was more sophisticated than that of native peoples; European technology was superior),<sup>37</sup> and focus on a nexus of explanations tied to the themes of this chapter.

First, the paradox of the absent yet distant center meant that Spanish colonialism in the Caribbean had either to collapse completely or find itself a local center capable of supporting regional empire. That it found that center in 1519—on November 8, the day of Cortés's thwarted embrace of Moctezuma—was not as inevitable as is usually assumed. Had the Spanish presence in the Caribbean been truly dynamic, well funded and driven hard from Spain, that center—and the subsequent imperial center in South America—would have been found years, even decades, earlier. But it was not dynamic, and it would not have been surprising had the Spanish Caribbean limped on for another decade or so, unaware of the Aztecs and Incas—with Spain increasingly distracted by territorial and religious conflict in Europe, Cortés and his generation leading mediocre lives on the colonial margins, while the Aztecs expanded into Mayan kingdoms and the Incas consolidated their hold on the Andes. However, once imperial centers in the Americas were found, the existence of Spain as a distant but dominant center became crucial. The mechanisms of imperial control were fully activated. The three separate spheres of the 1510s disappeared. The trunk lines that carried administrators, migrants, African slaves, fungible goods and merchandise and precious metals, ideas and beliefs, quickly developed to link the three centers: Madrid and Seville; Tenochtitlán-Mexico; Cuzco and Lima. The Caribbean ceased to be merely the margins and gave up its weak attempt to be a center, instead becoming an all-important link in the imperial chain—a position cemented by its geographical location and the wind systems of the Atlantic Ocean.

<sup>37</sup> Such explanations can be found both proposed and criticized, in historical literature stretching from conquistador reports up to the very present; one might begin with the summaries in Restall, *Seven Myths*, pp. 131–40; Matthew Restall and Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *The Conquistadors: A Very Brief Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011); and Restall and Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times*, pp. 88–9 and 102–5.

Second, the very failure of the early Spanish Caribbean led to continued Spanish exploration of the circum-Caribbean. This point is closely related to the one just made, but here I mean failure in terms more specifically of the Spanish relationship to the region's native peoples. A "good conquest," as López de Gómara put it, was understood by Spaniards to mean pacification, settlement, and conversion—a peaceful transition to a colonial life that required both indigenous subjects and Spanish settlers.<sup>38</sup> It is true that, almost from the start, the colonial model allowed for the interpolation of black African slaves and their descendants into its middle, and that African slaves would come to replace the indigenous population of the islands. But the early sixteenth century was too soon for that pattern to be clearly seen by contemporaries, nor would it have necessarily been perceived as a solution. In short, Spaniards needed people, local people, sedentary people; they needed Mesoamericans and Andeans.

As mentioned earlier, a primary—arguably *the* primary—cause of native demographic collapse was disease, the lethal epidemiological side to the Columbian Exchange. This, the third explanatory factor, led to the extinction of indigenous populations on most Caribbean islands, with disease spreading to the mainland faster than Europeans did. While fatal illnesses cannot alone explain the Spanish conquests, there is no doubt that the outbreak of epidemics shortly before or during Spanish invasions had a negative effect on indigenous abilities to resist—and motivated elites to seek to accommodate the newcomers sooner than they otherwise might have.

Fourth, and finally, the impression that I have given above of the Spaniards of the Caribbean moving on to destroy the Aztec and Inca Empires is misleading. Certainly, the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean was a staging ground for mainland conquests, central to the chain or stepping-stone system of conquest. The years that Cortés spent in Hispaniola and Cuba before going to Mexico, like those spent by Francisco Pizarro in Panama before going to Peru, made them more typical than the minority of conquistadors who came directly from Spain (like Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada). However, every Spanish encounter with indigenous groups and kingdoms expanded the conquest cast of characters, permitting the complex participation of some native elites and polities in the process of expansion and colonization.

<sup>38</sup> For what is arguably a book-length discussion of how López de Gómara and his compatriots viewed "good conquest," see Cristián A. Roa-de-la-Carrera, *Histories of Infamy: Francisco López de Gómara and the Ethics of Spanish Imperialism* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2005).

The workings and implications of the phenomenon are complex—their analysis arguably underpins the recent wave of scholarship sometimes called the New Conquest History<sup>39</sup>—but for our purposes three factors can be identified.

Factor one: most of the people directly involved in the conquest wars were indigenous. The majority of conquest fighting was done by indigenous warriors, and the support personnel—spies, porters, cooks and so on—were also native. As is now well known, Spanish conquistadors were outnumbered not just by enemy forces, but by their own, invaluable, indigenous allies.<sup>40</sup>

Factor two: Spaniards did not so much destroy the Aztec and Inca Empires as appropriate them. In 1521, for example, while Tenochtitlán was in ruins and the Aztec leadership was mostly dead or captive, the empire's framework of trade routes, tribute lists and diplomatic relations between ruling families remained in place. In the 1520s and 1530s, Spaniards, accompanied by Aztec and other native warriors, used the same chain of conquest that the Aztecs had developed in previous decades. The Aztec Empire was turned into New Spain, often through the non-violent negotiation and confirmation of prior political and tribute arrangements; in some cases, Spaniards were not even present when these initial confirmations were made. In addition to reconfirming the Aztec Empire, the Spanish and indigenous creators of New Spain also expanded it. They began by invading regions that the Aztecs had already attempted to subdue, or had planned to, and likely would have attacked according to a similar timetable had the Spaniards not yet arrived—most notably, the Tarascans and the Mayas of highland Guatemala and northern Yucatan.<sup>41</sup> A slightly different, but similar, pattern emerged in Peru in the wake of Pizarro's capture of the Inca capital of Cuzco in 1534. The Inca Empire was in disarray, but its structure was intact, and an incumbent emperor, the Inca Manco Capac, was recognized by the conquistadors. Again, the Spaniards were only able to create a colony in Peru and the Andes by appropriating, not destroying, what the Incas had built. The complex imperial networks of the

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Restall, "The New Conquest History," *History Compass* 10 (2012), 151–60, <http://history-compass.com/caribbean-latin-america>.

<sup>40</sup> Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk (eds.), *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Michel R. Oudijk and Matthew Restall, "Mesoamerican Conquistadors in the Sixteenth Century" in Matthew and Oudijk, *Indian Conquistadors*, pp. 28–64; and Michel R. Oudijk and Matthew Restall, *Conquista de Buenas Palabras y de Guerra: una visión indígena de la conquista* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2014).



Figure 9.2 The execution of the Inca Tupac Amaru in 1571, by order of the Spanish Viceroy of Peru, lamented by watching Andean nobles. Facsimile of a drawing by Felipe Guaman Poma from his *El Primer Nueva Coronica y Buen Gobierno* (Universal Images Group / photograph by Werner Forman / Getty Images).



Aztecs and Incas were exactly the kind of thing the Spaniards had sought and needed, but not found, in the Caribbean.

Manco Capac takes us to the third factor constituting the process whereby native protagonists played active, Complex roles in the conquest: Manco symbolized the simple fact that the Spanish Conquest did not end as suddenly and completely as Spaniards claimed. Elsewhere, I have characterized this theme as “the myth of completion” and “the incomplete conquest,” and articulated various elements and manifestations.<sup>42</sup> Here, let us take the example of the Incas, and use it to conclude the chapter.

Manco Inca was later derided by Spaniards as a puppet of Pizarro. But Andeans saw him as the legitimate ruler, and his son Titu Cusi Yupanqui—who succeeded him as Inca—insisted that Manco had been the legitimate emperor since before Spaniards reached the Andes.<sup>43</sup> Manco almost succeeded in expelling the Spanish interlopers in 1536. He failed and was driven south down the Urubamba River. But in the wet lowlands at Vilcabamba, he was able to maintain a modest version of the Inca state, where he and his sons ruled until 1572, when the Inca Túpac Amaru was captured and executed (see Figure 9.2). Nonetheless, large portions of the Andes remained outside Spanish control for centuries, while the Inca nobility maintained status and privilege within the Viceroyalty of Peru.<sup>44</sup>

Long gone, then, was that brief era of unwitting, parallel imperial lives—the age of indigenous empires in the Americas, when, for a quarter-century, a foreign empire was born and struggled to survive in the hemisphere. But the two indigenous empires that were partially destroyed and profoundly transformed after the 1520s and 1530s had afterlives. Aztec and Inca imperial stories of triumph and tragedy persisted within the forms of New Spain and Spanish Peru.

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<sup>42</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, pp. 64–76; and Restall and Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times*, pp. 109–28.

<sup>43</sup> Julien, *Reading Inca History*, pp. 41–6; Restall and Fernández-Armesto, *Conquistadors*, pp. 33–6; and Kolata, *Ancient Inca*, pp. 260–3.

<sup>44</sup> Julien, *Reading Inca History*; and David T. Garrett, *Shadows of Empire: The Indian Nobility of Cusco, 1750–1825* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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