



### CHAPTER 14 | SPANISH DOMINION AND THE NEW WORLD: AZTECS AND INCAS

#### INTRODUCTION

Having taken in the full scope of the Age of Exploration, we will now return to the time right after Columbus' expeditions, when more Spanish expeditions followed Columbus across the Atlantic. These men were explorers, but they were also soldiers. Their goal was to find new resources and carve out a new empire for Spain. They didn't care that the Aztecs and Inkas already called Central and South America home.

#### GEOGRAPHY

As we work our way through the history of the world, we get a lot of chances to study geography. This week we'll touch on Central and South America.

Central America is the land bridge between Mexico and South America. The land is rugged—swampy lowlands near the coast rise up to steep mountains in the middle. The high mountains in the tropics can be cool even when the sun is straight overhead—which is why people in some parts of Central America call their homes the “Land of Eternal Spring.”

Volcanoes dot this landscape, and earthquakes are common. The jungles are full of exotic creatures: bats, monkeys, and jaguars—not to mention spiders, scorpions, and mosquitoes carrying tropical diseases! There are also parrots, snakes—some of which are huge—while others are deadly poisonous, and the amazingly beautiful Quetzal bird with its red belly, shiny green feathers, and long tail. In your kitchen you might find food from Central America, such as coffee, chocolate, bananas, and spices.

The western coast of South America is a lot like Central America. The low land near the coast quickly rises up into the Andes, a chain of high mountains that stretches all the way down to the frigid ocean surrounding Antarctica. There are glaciers in these snow-covered mountains, and llamas graze in the alpine meadows. East of the Andes, the land falls down and down to the vast jungles of the Amazon basin.

#### AZTECS

The Aztecs had a huge and complex civilization that centered on a city, Tenochtitlan, which was built on an artificial island in Lake Texcoco, in the Valley of Mexico.

#### Aztec Society

There were four classes in Aztec society: nobles, commoners, serfs, slaves. Land-owning nobles had serfs working for them. Free families of commoners owned land and lived in extended family groups called *calpollis*. They made up bulk of population and farmed *calpolli* plots. Slaves were considered property, but their children were born free. Slaves were bought, captured, or were criminals.

Husbands supported their families, usually by farming, and wives made clothes and cooked food. Boys were educated by their father until age ten, then put in a school run by *calpolli* or in temple school (these were reserved for the nobility). Girls were educated at home or perhaps went to a temple school. Both genders married young: boys at age twenty and girls at age sixteen.





### Homes, Technology, and Food

Aztec homes were usually built of dried-mud adobe bricks. They were simple structures, built more for function than for form, and minimally decorated. This does not mean the Aztecs lacked aesthetic tastes or skills: they were skilled sculptors and quite musical. They also had a pictographic system of writing consisting of pictures that could be combined to represent some sounds. It wasn't sufficient to express complicated concepts, but it was good enough for keeping records.

The Aztecs invented the wheel, but only used it on toys. Without wheeled vehicles or beasts of burden, every load had to be carried by human hands. They had no plows, but they terraced and irrigated. Aztecs also farmed plots of land recovered from the lakes on which their cities were built. They ingeniously reclaimed swamp and lake land, producing fertile silt gardens called *chinampas*.

In their gardens, the Aztecs raised corn to make thin pancakes called *tlaxcalli*, which the Spanish re-named *tortillas*. The Aztecs ate these by themselves or wrapped them around other foods as tacos. They hunted for meat (deer, rabbits, birds) and raised dogs and turkeys for food. Aztec cooking was spicy, using lots of chili peppers. They drank juice of maguey plants and chocolate, but only rich people could afford it; they also made an alcoholic beverage called *octli*.

Since the Aztecs never invented money, they used cacao beans as one system of payment. Though they had no metalwork (eating utensils, cooking utensils, cars, large machinery, weapons, transportation, etc.) except jewelry, they built large stone temples. Among their achievements are the Calendar Stone sculpture, oral literature and poetry, the invention of water filtration systems using porous stones, pictographic writing, and a 365-day calendar.

### Government

The Aztec empire included many cities and towns, but their main capital was Tenochtitlan, which was built on a lake. The Emperor of the Aztecs ruled, but he had to consult a council of high ranking officials about all important decisions. Nobles had private land or administered government land. Government officials supervised trading. The Emperor was chosen by the nobility, and the nobility also kept their people in subjection by force, for the Aztecs ruled their unified empire with a tight fist. Their discontented subjects and vassal states eagerly joined the Spaniards at the prospect of overthrowing the Aztecs.

### Warfare and Military

The Aztecs had military units stationed throughout key points of the empire to keep it secure. Great nobles were commanders and governors. Many top positions in the military were hereditary, but a man could rise through ranks if he performed notable services to the emperor.

The Aztecs were a warlike society who created and maintained their empire through frequent fighting, which also allowed them to obtain people for their human sacrifices. I should note, however, that Aztec war clubs were designed to capture, not to kill. Their goal was to bring back prisoners alive for human sacrifice, and this way of fighting may have helped to explain why Europeans, who fought to kill, were able to defeat some of them in battle.



## Religion

The Aztecs were polytheists who worshiped hundreds of gods and goddesses of nature. Creation myths often featured gods like Ometeotl (the dual cosmic energy) and the primordial couple, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl, who were considered the first creators of the gods. Tlaloc was the god of rain and fertility. Quetzalcoatl was a feathered serpent god associated with creation, culture, and the wind. There were also Centeotl (the corn god), Tonatiuh (god of the sun), and Mictlantecuhtli (ruler of the dead). Huitzilopochtli, perhaps the most important god of all, was the special protector of the Aztecs and of Tenochtitlan.

These gods made up part of a complex cosmology that explained the creation of the world through a series of divine cycles and mythological stories. In addition to war, Huitzilopochtli was the god of the sun's daily journey, and sacrifice. Tlaloc was essential for agriculture, and his worship involved offerings and ceremonies to ensure abundant crops. Finally, Quetzalcoatl was often depicted as a kind god who appeared often in the Aztecs religious stories.

You might assume that, when Cortés and his men arrived in Mexico, it was their shiny metal armor, firearms, cannons, and (perhaps most of all) horses that made the Aztecs think they were gods. True, such weaponry, and the sight of mounted soldiers, may have been interpreted by the Aztec peoples as divine or otherworldly. However, the sophisticated Aztecs had a much more serious and (for them) worrisome set of reasons for thinking that Cortés might be a god.

Aztec legend included a prophecy about the return of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent deity. According to this prophecy, Quetzalcoatl would come back from the east. Cortés and the Spanish arrived from the east, which aligned with the prophecy.

On top of that, Quetzalcoatl was often depicted as light-skinned and bearded. Cortés, along with the Spanish conquistadors, had these physical features. Cortés also seemed to come in peace, yet opposed human sacrifice. Quetzalcoatl, too, was a kindly god who did not like human sacrifice.

Cortés had with him La Malinche (Doña Marina), a native woman who spoke Nahuatl and Maya, as a translator and advisor. The fact that a native person was aiding the Spanish may have seemed consistent with the idea of Quetzalcoatl returning with native allies.

Finally, according to the complex Aztec system of timekeeping, Cortés arrived at a time of great significance. By a one-out-of-fifty-two chance, the year in which the Spanish arrived coincided with 1 Reed, the year of the god Quetzalcoatl's birth.

The Aztec ruler Montezuma II faced political unrest and was uncertain about how to interpret the arrival of the Spanish. Fearing the fulfillment of prophecies, he may have been cautious and initially tried to appease Cortés with gifts. It proved a fatal mistake, but also a deeply ironic one.

The Aztecs had spent many years trying to predict the future and remain in harmony with their demanding gods through complicated mathematics and extreme sacrifices. Now, their own religious practices betrayed them, for Cortés seemed to fit their predictions and demanded much of them, even as they believed their own gods had always done.



The Aztecs developed complicated mathematics and sophisticated astronomy because they thought it would help them divine the future. They also had a complex ceremonial calendar based on a combination of a 260-day ritual calendar (tonalpohualli) and a 365-day agricultural calendar (xiuhpohualli) on a 52-year cycle. Ceremonies were conducted on specific days corresponding to both calendars. The Aztecs celebrated various festivals throughout the year, honoring different gods and aspects of life.

These festivals involved music, dance, processions, and offerings. Some major festivals included Toxcatl, celebrating Tezcatlipoca, and Panquetzalitli, honoring Huitzilopochtli. The most significant ceremonies, such as the New Fire Ceremony, involved large-scale sacrifices at the Templo Mayor in the capital city of Tenochtitlan, which was the main religious and ceremonial center of the empire. It was dedicated to both Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, symbolizing the duality of Aztec religious beliefs. The temple complex featured two separate shrines for each god, and regular rituals took place there.

Aztecs believed that the ritual of human sacrifice nourished the gods and maintain the balance of the universe. The sun, for example, needed human blood to continue its course across the sky. Therefore, horrible things would happen if human blood ceased to flow plentifully in sacrifice. As a result, scholars estimate that between 20,000 and 250,000 human sacrifices took place across the Aztec empire each year. Every Aztec city had temples, and human sacrifices took place in each of them.

The Aztecs believed that whatever happened was fated to be so by the gods, and so they sought good crops by means of many ceremonies that were supposed to appease the gods, most famously through human sacrifice. Aztec priests, who were highly influential in their society, slashed open a living victim so they could tear the still-beating heart out of his chest. The Aztecs believed the gods needed human hearts and blood to stay strong. Aztec worshippers partook of the “food of the gods” by ceremonially eating human hearts as well.

The Aztecs sacrificed children to Tlaloc, god of rain and fertility, but most of their victims were prisoners of war. That is why war was a religious duty for the Aztecs. The ultimate goal for any young man was to be a war hero. Men who took many enemy captives for human sacrifice in battle were rewarded back home with property, prestige, and power.

### **Aztec Art**

Much of Aztec art was deeply rooted in their religious beliefs and cosmology. Symbols, gods, and stories were common, as were pictures of serpents, eagles, jaguars, and masks representing various gods or goddesses. Aztec pottery was also characterized by intricate designs and a range of shapes decorating bowls, plates, and figurines. Designs often featured geometric patterns, animals, and mythological symbols in both earthy tones and rich colors.

Aztecs were also renowned for their intricate featherwork, known as amaranth mosaic or “feather mosaics.” Skilled artisans used brightly colored feathers from tropical birds to create stunning works of art, often depicting religious or ceremonial scenes. These featherworks were highly prized and served as luxury items. Moctezuma II, the Aztec emperor, might have been puzzled because the Spaniards preferred gifts of gold to gifts of featherwork!



Aztecs also created picture books such as the Codex Mendoza and Codex Borbonicus—illustrated manuscripts made of bark paper or deerskin. These documented religious rituals, historical events, and genealogies. Historical accounts also describe the Aztecs as skilled weavers. Like their books, Aztec textiles featured intricate patterns and symbols, and garments were often adorned with featherwork and precious stones.

Aztec goldsmiths created elaborate ornaments, jewelry, and ceremonial objects. Gold and copper alloys were commonly used. Some artifacts featured complicated filigree work and semiprecious stones. The famous Aztec “Ocelotl-Cuauhxicalli” (jaguar vessel) is a remarkable example of Aztec metalwork. They also made masks for ceremonies and religious rituals. These masks often represented deities, animals, or supernatural beings. Ritual objects, such as incense burners and ceremonial knives, were crafted with artistic precision.

Aztec sculptors created stone monuments and statues representing gods, warriors, and mythological creatures. The colossal stone sculpture known as the “Coatlicue,” for instance, shows the earth goddess. Aztec artists also made complex sculptures and murals for their buildings. The Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan featured carved stone reliefs showing gods, mythical creatures, and historical events. Murals often adorned the walls of important buildings in the capital city of the Aztecs, showcasing scenes from Aztec life and rituals.

Tenochtitlan might well remind the Europeans of Venice. In its day, Tenochtitlan was the equal of Venice in Italy—perhaps even the superior of Venice, though with extraordinarily different artwork that perhaps had more in common with Florence or Rome than with Venice. You see, art in Florence or Rome was more concerned with perspective and precise drawings filled in with color, but art in Venice was more concerned with layers of color and had less distinct perfection of drawing.

Although Aztecs and Romans or Florentines would not have seen eye to eye in matters of realism or perspective, they might have appreciated one another’s use of color in precise drawings. Aztec artists were skillful in their use of colors. They could create vibrant and visually striking palettes using cochineal for red, indigo for blue, and so forth. Like their European counterparts, Aztec artists skillfully applied these pigments to pottery, cloth, books, and murals. Aztec artwork is known for its rich symbolism, vibrant colors, and intricate details.

The Aztecs were more like the Romans or Florentines and less like the Venetians in one other way, too. One set of WorldBook scholars has commented that “Renaissance painters of Rome and Florence were concerned with telling stories and portraying religious scenes. The painters of Venice stressed a poetic mood and the mystery of nature.”<sup>1</sup> Aztecs, like the artists of Rome and Florence, used art to tell stories and show scenes from their religion and history. They do not seem to have been particularly concerned with poetic moods or mysteries of nature.

1. Excerpted from a *World Book* article entitled *Painting*. Contributors: Ann Friedman, Ph.D., Education Specialist, J. Paul Getty Museum; Elizabeth deS. Swinton, Ph.D., Curator of Asian Art, Worcester Art Museum; Henry M. Sayre, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Art History, Oregon State University; Joseph F. Lamb, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Art History, Ohio University; Marilyn Stokstad, Ph.D.; Judith Harris Murphy, Professor of Art History, University of Kansas; Marjorie S. Venit, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Art History and Archaeology, University of Maryland; Michael Plante, Ph.D.; Jessie J. Poesch Professor of Art History, Newcomb Art Department, Tulane University; Valerie Lind Hedquist, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Art, Central College, Pella, Iowa; and Vernon Hyde Minor, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Art History and Humanities, University of Colorado.



The Venetian artist Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), for instance, “used bright colors, applied his paint in bold brushstrokes, and made one color seem to blend into another, as in *Crowning with Thorns*. This style of painting influenced many great artists, including El Greco, Rembrandt, and Peter Paul Rubens.”<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to imagine what Titian, who lived from approximately 1488 or 1490 until 1576, would have made of Aztec art if he could have visited their cities.

Titian began his artistic training in Venice under the guidance of the mosaic artist Sebastiano Zuccato. Later, he studied under the renowned painter Giovanni Bellini and then worked alongside Giorgione, another influential Venetian artist who died untimely in 1510, leaving Titian a leading figure in Venetian art.

Titian became known for his innovative use of color, particularly (like the Aztecs) his mastery of rich and vibrant hues. His bold and expressive application of paint set him apart from his contemporaries because he developed techniques such as the “Venetian method,” which involved using layers of translucent glazes to achieve luminosity and depth in his paintings. Imagine what the Aztecs would have made of that!

Titian was a popular portraitist, capturing the likenesses of royalty, aristocrats, and members of the church. Titian’s portraits are known for their psychological insight, naturalism, and technical brilliance. “Portrait of Pope Paul III” and “Portrait of Charles V with a Dog” are notable examples. Paul III and Charles V both issued decrees sympathetic to the Native American peoples—can you imagine if they had sent Titian to complete a portrait of the Aztec ruler Moctezuma II?

Like the Aztec artists, Titian painted many religious and mythological themes such as his “Assumption of the Virgin,” “Pesaro Madonna,” and “Bacchus and Ariadne.” His religious paintings often combined a deep spirituality with a celebration of the human form. The Aztecs might not have known what to make of his celebration of the human form, but they might have enjoyed the spirituality of his work!

Titian received numerous official commissions, and in 1533, a little over twenty years after the destruction of the Aztec empire, he was appointed the official painter of the Venetian Republic. His works adorned various public and religious buildings in Venice. In fact, one of Titian’s late masterpieces is “The Last Supper” (painted in 1563), located at the Convent of San Salvador in Venice. This composition, characterized by dramatic lighting and emotional intensity, showcases Titian’s continued innovation late into his career.

Of course, the Aztecs did not use the realism or perspective so prized by humanists—instead, they used “hierarchic” perspective as the ancient Egyptians did. The size and placement of figures in their composition were not realistic, but instead were often determined by the importance of those figures or their role in a story. Thus, important gods or people might be drawn larger than less important figures. An Aztec conception of The Last Supper would, in all likelihood, differ quite a bit from Titian’s composition.

1. From a *World Book* article entitled *Titian*. Contributor: David Summers, Ph.D., Wm. R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of the History of Art, University of Virginia.



## DEFEAT OF THE AZTECS

In 1519, the Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés (1485-1547) landed on the coast of Mexico. He planned to conquer the Aztec civilization in Mexico in order to establishing the Spanish empire in the New World. All that stood between him and victory was one of the world's most fearsome armies, made up of tens of thousands of holy warriors seeking human sacrifices. Cortés arrived with 11 ships, 100 sailors, 508 soldiers, and 16 horses. He brought a few small cannons that shot round rocks, plus the normal weapons of his day: muskets, crossbows, pikes, and swords.

The armor and weapons of the conquistadores were made from iron, while the armor and weapons of the Aztecs (and, incidentally, the Inkas, about whom I will have more to say in a few minutes) were made wood, stone, obsidian (a sharp but brittle black glassy stone) and leather. The swords of the Spaniards easily cut and pierced through the armor of the natives, while the clubs of the natives just bounced off the Spaniards' armor.

Still, 500 soldiers, however good their armor and weapons were, couldn't possibly hope to defeat an empire with tens of thousands of warriors. Also, I must note that these early guns and cannons were *not* particularly good—it is questionable whether many of the guns could hid the broad side of a barn. In a real battle, Native American warriors armed with arrows and good aim, or even with clubs, could have overwhelmed the Spaniards through sheer force of numbers.

Fortunately for Cortés, the Aztec warriors were probably focused on capturing the Spaniards, rather than trying to kill them—at least at first. Also, they Aztec practice of turning captives into human sacrifices had made all the other native peoples hate them. As Cortés marched west, the oppressed subjects of the Aztec empire rose up to greet their liberators. That kept the Spaniards from being annihilated on the way to Tenochtitlan, but even the help of the native tribes wouldn't have been enough to save their little army from an all-out war in the heart of the Aztec Empire.

I do not mean to say that even their Native Americans allies were entirely comfortable with the Europeans. For one thing, they all practiced human sacrifice, and here came the Spanish preaching that they must stop such practices at once! (This would have been unsettling, for, however much the other Native Americans might resent the Aztecs for taking so many of their people captive, they would also likely have agreed that human sacrifice was necessary.)

Then, too, the Spaniards' hairy faces, heavy layered clothing, strange language and food, metal armor and weapons, lack of interest in bathing (phew!), and horses (which were the first such animals the Native Americans had never seen), would all have seemed strange. True, the strangers matched the Aztec prophecy and caution was advisable, but were these truly gods?

As time went on, the Native Americans traveling with Cortés would have noticed two other things. First, though the Spaniards were cautious at first, they soon revealed an obsession with gold that must have seemed almost like a deadly illness. Also, the Spaniards could be as roughly cruel as the Aztecs, who would themselves soon be on the receiving end of a ruthless violence at least equal to their own.

When the Spaniards reached Tenochtitlan, they were astounded at this city on the water. They compared it to Venice in Italy, and no wonder! Tenochtitlan was a marvel of engineering that rivaled Venice and may have had a population that exceeded any city in Europe at the time the Spanish arrived there. It also rivaled or exceeded Spanish cities in its governmental social sophistication, plumbing, innovation, and organization.







Tenochtitlan was literally a floating city. Extending outward from an island in Lake Texcoco, it was connected to the mainland by causeways and canals. The city had an advanced system of aqueducts to supply fresh water to its inhabitants. The causeways, raised walkways, and roads, connected different parts of the city and enabled the movement of people and goods. The city's layout featured a grid pattern, with canals also serving as both transportation routes and drainage systems.

At its height, Tenochtitlan was one of the largest and most populous cities in the world, with estimates suggesting a population of several hundred thousand people. The city's infrastructure and resources were designed to support this large population. The Aztecs' *chinampas* (artificial islands created by layering mud and vegetation) were floating gardens used to cultivate crops, providing a sustainable food source for the population. Xochimilco, located near Tenochtitlan, featured extensive networks of floating gardens similar to *chinampas*.

Tlatelolco, a large marketplace in Tenochtitlan, was one of the most vibrant and bustling marketplaces in Mesoamerica. Traders from various regions brought a diverse array of goods, including textiles, pottery, and exotic items like tropical birds and precious stones. Tenochtitlan was also home to the Calmecac, a school for nobles, and the Telpochcalli, a school for commoners.

At the heart of Tenochtitlan stood the Templo Mayor, the massive pyramid dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. Its construction involved multiple layers built over time, and it was decorated with carved stone reliefs of gods, creatures, and historical events.

The Aztecs thought this island city would be easy to defend, but the Aztec Emperor, Moctezuma II, did not even try to keep the Spaniards out. Nobody is really certain why. As I described for you earlier, Aztec legend said the god Quetzalcoatl had sailed across the sea and would return someday. In 1519, Moctezuma may well have thought that Cortés was a god. All the records of their first encounter make it look that way.

Whatever the reason, Cortés entered the capital city without a fight and then took Moctezuma II prisoner. He didn't kill him, though—for several months, Cortés used the emperor as his puppet. The next year, the Aztecs rebelled and drove the Spaniards out of Tenochtitlan. Moctezuma was wounded in the battle and soon died. Cortés had to retreat, but he later reorganized his troops and laid siege to the island city.

That was when the Aztecs began to realize the power of the Europeans—the city that seemed invulnerable crumbled beneath the bombardment of cannons. Montezuma's heir surrendered to Cortés in 1521. Cortés now ruled the Aztec Empire—and what an empire it was! Wealth beyond the dreams of the greediest of men began to flow back to Spain. The Spanish defeated, dominated, and destroyed Aztec civilization from then on.

Other Spaniards dreamed of finding golden cities of their own. Ten years later, another conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, did just that. With an army only one third as big as that of Cortés, Pizarro conquered an empire that was larger, richer, and more advanced than the Aztecs. He took over the South American empire of the Inkas.



### INKAN EMPIRE

The Inkas (they spell their name with a “k”, whereas we English-speakers often spell it “Incas” with a “c”) were a remarkable people. The Inca Empire stretched more than 2,500 miles along the coast of South America. It was big, but not particularly ancient—the Inca Empire began to expand around 1438 and was conquered by the Spanish less than 100 years later, in 1532.

The Inca empire began to grow in 1438, when Emperor Pachacuti put down an invasion by a neighboring tribe. That seemingly minor conflict began a series of actions that extended the realm from what is now Columbia down into Argentina. Some of these were armed conflicts, but others were gradual economic conquests that involved relatively little overt show of force.

Each time the Inka (“Inka” was a title, but could be incorporated into a ruler’s name as well) conquered a people, he left the old rulers in charge as long as they submitted to Inkan rule. These subjugated rulers were rewarded and made honorary Inkas. Their peoples tended to be much more loyal as a result. (The Romans used some similar techniques to build their empire.)

#### Life in the Inkan Empire

Emperors, who ruled from the city of Cusco in central Peru, governed according to a complex political system that balanced power between central and local governments. (In fact, Inkas practiced a form of socialism long before Marx invented the idea, controlling all trade and dividing crops among three groups: local, state, and state religious activities. All commoners paid work taxes in labor.)

The Inkan people were grouped in *ayllus* or extended families based on kinship and land ownership. They held land in common which was apportioned by need at the command of the government. Nobles owned spacious, richly decorated stone palaces, and commoners owned smaller mud-thatched homes. Social rank, which was determined by birth, dictated roles for life.

They had some polygamy, and marriage was within social rank only. For example, The Inka emperors were believed to be divine, and they married their sisters in an effort to keep their line pure. There were no schools, but children learned from parents. Boys became men at fourteen and married a little later. Inkan women were occupied with family weaving, often alpaca or llama wool.

The Inka ruled over what might be described as a “vertical economy” consisting of many pockets. Different crops could be grown at different elevations, or in different regions, of his long, skinny, high-rising empire. Main crops were: corn, cotton, potatoes, oca, and quinoa (grain). They also ate freeze-dried potatoes called *chuno* and drank corn-based beer called *chicha*.

The Inkan empire was an agricultural society, and they farmed the mountainsides and deserts of their empire with an ingenuity similar to that of the Aztecs. They were skilled engineers and craftsmen. Without wheels, plows, or metal tools, they built roads that ran up and down in marvelously designed stone staircases, linking the distant ends of the empire. (Commoners walked; nobility had litters; llamas were the beasts of burden, and they could climb steps.)

The buildings of the Inkas were huge and skillfully constructed stones fitted without cement. Some of them stand to this day despite the frequent earthquakes in the region. Inkas also irrigated dry coastal lands and terraced steep mountain hillsides to reduce erosion and provide irrigation for farming. They even built suspension bridges over rivers.





Given the length and varying heights of the Inkan empire, you will not be surprised to hear that the Inkas wore regional clothing. In the highlands, they wore wool of alpacas or llamas, while on the coast, they wore cotton. Men might wear as little as loincloths, and women wore long dresses. They wove fine cotton and woolen cloth, some with elaborate geometric designs. The nobility wore such fine cloth and also gold and silver jewelry. Gold and silver were also used in some craftsmanship of other kinds.

The Inkas preferred fibers to metals for many things, and they never invented money, but they made beautiful jewelry out of metal. Instead of money, they used valuable items like cloth as a system of exchange. They never developed writing, yet they used smoke signals to communicate over long distances. They used knotted cords to keep track of things—different colors meant different items, and the size and placement of knots indicated different quantities.

### Inkan Religion

The Inka religion was polytheistic. Like most polytheistic worldviews, it involved the worship of many gods and goddesses of nature, heavenly bodies, and harvest cycles. For instance, Inti was the principal god in the Inka pantheon. He represented the sun. The Inka emperor, or Sapa Inka, was considered the “Son of the Sun,” emphasizing the divine connection between the ruler and the sun god. Inti was honored with grand ceremonies, including the Inti Raymi festival, which celebrated the winter solstice and the sun’s rebirth.

Inkans also worshipped Viracocha and Pachamama. Viracocha was a universal creator god whom they believed to be the origin of all things. Viracocha was considered the ultimate source of life and the creator of the Inka civilization. Pachamama, the Earth Mother, was a fertility goddess of farming and fertility.

Although they did not practice ritual cannibalism, as the Aztecs did, and although they did not sacrifice nearly so many victims as the Aztecs, the Inkas were known to conduct child sacrifices, often involving the ritual sacrifice and burial of children along with various offerings at high-altitude locations like mountain summits (known as *capacocha*). These were called Capacocha ceremonies.

As among the Aztecs, human sacrifices in the Inkan empire were part of larger ceremonial events that involved elaborate offerings such as textiles, pottery, food, and other valuables. These offerings were considered necessary for maintaining harmony with the divine and ensuring the well-being of the empire. Also, scholars speculate that *capacocha* sacrifices could have been a way of asserting control over distant regions in the empire and reinforcing imperial authority through the offering of elite children. To the Inkas, human sacrifice was an honor to the victim; they did not use captives for this ceremony. Priests played a major role.

Inkans they held many places and things sacred: mummies, temples, historic places, springs, stones, etc. They relied heavily on divination for all decisions. In fact, daily divination performed by priest, determined all decisions in Inkan society, no matter how minor. The Inkas had household idols and frequent religious ceremonies besides those involving human sacrifice.

### SPAIN AND THE INKANS

When Emperor Huayna Capac died about 1527, his two sons fought for the throne. Huascar was the official heir to the empire, but his brother Atahualpa had his own army because he happened to be with it when Huayna Capac died. After five years of civil war, Atahualpa’s army defeated Huascar in 1532. That



same year, the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro met Atahualpa in Peru.

Pizarro had 167 men with him, but they had horses and were armed with the latest European weapons. The Spaniards invited Emperor Atahualpa to visit their camp. Atahualpa knew about the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, ten years earlier, but he told the Spanish he was not a coward like Montezuma. He came to see the Spaniards on their own ground.

Pizarro concealed his pitiful forces from his Inka visitors. They were hidden in a ring around what appeared to be an empty town square. When the emperor arrived there, a Catholic priest gave him a Bible and, through a translator, told him it was God's word. Emperor Atahualpa allegedly held the Bible close to his ear and said, "Why doesn't it speak to me?" Then he threw it to the ground.

The Spaniards attacked and overwhelmed 4,000 Inka warriors. They captured Atahualpa and held him for ransom. The Emperor paid the ransom—one room filled with gold and two rooms full of silver. However, the Spaniards killed him anyway, leaving the Inka Empire without a head. All the complex machinery of Inka government ground to a halt without an emperor. Pizarro moved into the vacuum and took over the empire. The Inkans never recovered their sovereignty.

#### THE SILVER TRADE

As the Spanish explored their new South American possessions, they discovered massive deposits of silver in Spanish America, most notably in Potosí (modern-day Bolivia) and Mexico. Since silver was almost the *only* commodity that interested Chinese merchants in the idea of trade with Europeans, American silver became the solution to Spain's long-standing desire to do business with the East.

Through its monopoly on American colonies, Spain controlled the majority of this silver production. Beginning in 1565 (and lasting all the way up to 1815), Spain established the Manila Galleon trade route, connecting Acapulco in Mexico with Manila in the Philippines. The galleons carried American silver across the Pacific to trade for Chinese goods such as silk, porcelain, and tea. The Spanish silver dollar, also known as the "piece of eight," became a widely accepted currency in international trade. Its standardized weight and quality made it a preferred form of silver for transactions.

#### CONCLUSION

For all that they created great cities, beautiful works of art, and made interesting discoveries, the Aztec and Inka peoples who once lived in Central and South America also did things that God calls abominations. They murdered and enslaved their neighbors. They sacrificed living human beings made in the image of God, including children, to their idols. Many people today have chosen to forget their wickedness and instead see them only as victims, but that is an oversimplified picture.

If I were to compare the Spanish persecution of Jews, their Inquisition practices, and the ambitious desire to rule natives of other lands, with the Aztec practices of human sacrifice and the enslaving of their neighbors, you might conclude that the Spanish and the Aztecs were not very far apart in their respective degrees of cruelty.

Despite their knowledge of the Bible, Spaniards of the Age of Exploration were also similar to the Aztecs in their obsession with empire-building. The Aztecs had gained their empire by force and deception, overpowering other natives and exploiting and enslaving their subject peoples. The Spaniards did the same to



the Aztecs. The Spaniards knew the religion of the one true God, and yet they badly misrepresented His character, believing that they could extend His kingdom by force.

Aztec and Inka treasures provided enough wealth to make Spain the greatest power of Europe—and the world—for a little while. Spain dominated world affairs from 1521, when Cortés took Tenochtitlan, until 1588, when the Spanish Armada failed to take over England. But what kind of greatness can really be built from the ability to steal, to kill, and to destroy? Conquest on its own creates nothing of any lasting value.

We have seen this pattern before, and we'll see it again. In Old Testament times, one empire succeeded another with monotonous regularity. During the Middle Ages, the Mongols conquered the largest land empire of all times, then vanished away with hardly a trace. Similarly, the Spanish conquistadores accomplished God's purposes in their time—and then passed on, leaving little behind them but ruins.

The Bible says that those who live by the sword will die by the sword, and that often seems to be true for cultures as well. The prophets contain many references to God raising up one or another sinful nation as His "rod of judgment" on His people. Later, when the judgment was complete, He would often break His "rod." (See Isaiah 10:5-34 and Zechariah 10:11 for instance). God may have used the Spaniards to end the wicked practices of the Aztecs and Incas, but He also judged Spain for its acts of wickedness.

In the case of the Aztecs, it seems reasonable to suppose that if God would judge His own chosen people by means of the nations of Assyria and Babylonia, He might use the Spaniards to judge the Aztecs, and then judge the Spaniards in turn. The historical record can, in fact, be interpreted this way. Since the 1600's, the Spaniards and their South American colonies have never had a major role on the world stage. When Spain's Armada was crushed in 1588, their decline began.

Let me broaden the picture, now, to include all men in the Age of Exploration. They discovered continents, endured hardships, founded colonies, and conquered nations. The results of these efforts were long-lasting. Brought into contact with new people and lands, European culture was changed. New foods and goods entered European markets, and new ideas began to influence European thought. Despite mixed motives, the gospel spread, too, as Europeans brought the faith to the New World.

If European culture was affected, however, it would be accurate to say that native cultures were radically uprooted. Many were destroyed. Others were transformed by the introduction of European inventions and lifestyles. Ethnic slavery came on the scene in a new way as Europeans came into contact with Native Americans.

Though these sins were terrible, there are still important lessons to be learned from studying this sad thread of human history. The story of world exploration is also important to understand because it is a precursor of much that I have to tell you in the unfolding story of history. For example, yes, one immediate result was that Spain became a world power, and England and France would soon follow suit.

In the long term, however, European nations established colonies around the world, particularly in North and South America. These colonies—including those that would become the United States of America—were important in European history and would eventually be world-shaping in their own right. They would influence each other, learn from each other, and grow up into the Gospel together.

The story isn't over yet. We won't see the reason for all the dark threads in the tapestry until Heaven, but that is no reason to ignore the many bright threads that we can see already tangled with them. Take heart.