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# The Native Societies of the Americas Before Contact

## The Coming of Humans to the Americas and the Agricultural Revolution

Humans first came to the Americas at least 15,000 and possibly as early as 20,000 years ago as part of the vast and long-lasting migration of peoples into northeast Asia and then across a strip of land subsequently covered by the Bering Sea, separating Siberia from Alaska (a region commonly termed "Beringia". Like their contemporaries in the Old World, for thousands of years these peoples subsisted primarily as big-game hunters. They spread across both continents and reached the southern tip of South America about 12,000 years ago.

As they dispersed, new languages and ethnic identities developed, leading over time to great cultural diversity and intense rivalries. At the arrival of the Europeans, North America alone contained over 200 languages.

With the inundation of Beringia, the American peoples lost contact with, and eventually knowledge of, the Old World. They were as ignorant of Europe and the rest of the globe as the peoples there were of them. The Americas were briefly and tentatively connected with the rest of the world before the time of Columbus when the Vikings explored the North Atlantic around 1000 A.D. Norse ships almost certainly reached Newfoundland on several different occasions, but they fought with the natives and were never able to establish a stable settlement.

With their decline in subsequent centuries, the Norse ended their expeditions into the western Atlantic. Because they left few written records, knowledge of their discoveries faded rapidly into vague legends that circulated in Northern Europe. Hence these early contacts had no effect on the later initiation of European exploration across the Atlantic at the end of the fifteenth century.

Around 8,000 years ago, in central Mexico and in the Andes, human societies quite independently began to domesticate plants and to improve their yields, commencing America's agricultural revolution. The primary foods cultivated in the Americas differed from those found in the Old World. Maize quickly emerged as the most important grain in the Western Hemisphere. While maize cultivation developed independently in several widely separated regions, it spread very slowly. Although it was grown in central Mexico as early as 7,000 years ago, maize did not appear in the American southwest until around 1500 B.C. The peoples of eastern North America did not adopt it until nearly 2,000 years later.

Maize was generally cultivated with beans and squashes, commonly in the same fields. Collectively these vegetables provided a nutritious diet. In the highlands of the Andes, where the climate prevented the cultivation of these crops, native peoples raised potatoes as their staple. On some Caribbean islands, along the Atlantic coast, and extending well into the interior, manioc—a tuber—constituted the primary agricultural product. After being soaked, drained, ground up, and baked, manioc flour rendered an acceptable bread with high caloric value. More than any other factors, the nature and productivity of a region's agriculture, in combination with its environmental setting, shaped the organization and material cultures of the Native American peoples.

These societies had no durable metal tools; they refined and shaped gold, silver, and copper, but never iron nor any other hard metal suitable for tools and weapons. Andean societies did refine copper alloys, but they could not match the sharpness and resilience of bronze and steel. The Americas also lacked large draft animals for use in hauling or plowing. The near absence of domesticated animals limited the use of manure to fertilize fields. So agriculture prospered only where the land was inherently fertile or where humans could be organized to construct massive public works projects, such as terraces, irrigated fields, or drainage adjustments, to put more land into cultivation.

Crops, animals, and even cultural attainments tended to spread rather slowly across the Americas. The two continents in the Western Hemisphere run primarily North-South, unlike Europe and Asia, which extend far more along an East-West axis. This latter orientation means that vast expanses of the Old World share common environmental and climatic conditions, whether the frigid north, the temperate central zone, or the warmer south of Europe that extend eastward into the Middle East and then Central and East Asia. These vast zones broadly shared common or similar plants, animals, diseases, and cultural practices. Even when societies widely separated along the same parallel of latitude cultivated different grains (such as wheat and rice) or raised different animals (perhaps cattle and yaks), they still shared roughly similar growing seasons, and hence could depend equally on agriculture for their sustenance or could domesticate large animals to provide power, meat, skins, and milk.

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No draft animals

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Such wide distributions of similar patterns and practices could not prevail as readily in the Americas, for the North-South orientation dictated that the natives of that Hemisphere lived in a wide variety of incompatible environmental and climatic zones. The Americas were even further divided by some sharply defining geographical features, such as the Rocky Mountains of North America, the extensive northern desert of Mexico, and the Andean chain that runs down the entire western side of South America.

In this much less conducive physical setting, the indigenous peoples could not readily adopt the crops, animals, and even cultural attainments of other peoples who lived in quite distinct or distant environments. As already discussed, maize spread slowly into and across North America because of the very different environmental settings that marked that continent. Only considerable adaptation enabled the peoples in one zone to adopt the crop from the inhabitants of another. Potatoes could not be readily transferred from their ecological niche in the upper elevations of the Andes. The buffalo of western North America could not pass across the massive desert to populate Mexico or Central America. Likewise, the llamas, alpacas, and vicuñas of the Andean highlands could not thrive in the quite distinct environments even found quite nearby. The great civilizations and empires of the Aztecs and Incas, although exact contemporaries of each other, seemed unaware of each other, or only in the most hazy fashion. Metallurgy proliferated throughout the Andes for many hundreds of years before it was finally introduced in Mexico.

### Sedentary Imperial Societies

About 3,500 years ago, sedentary agricultural communities emerged in both Mesoamerica and the Andean zone. Mesoamerica refers to the region of central Mexico, southern Mexico, Guatemala, and parts of Belize, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The Andean zone comprises the Andean highlands from northern Chile into Colombia, the coastal zone of Peru rendered fertile by narrow river valleys, plus the extensive High Plain that reaches into central Bolivia from the west. Each of these separate, massive regions contained peoples who shared broadly comparable high cultures. These culture zones relied on agriculture for the maintenance of their heavy population densities, although modest amounts of animal and fish protein complemented their diets. The steady, intense cultivation of land in these areas yielded reliable, substantial food surpluses, enabling a minority of people in each community to become full-time craft specialists, transporters and traders, priests, and professional military men. Hereditary local nobilities and ruling families arose within each ethnic group as well. Some of the most important ethnic provinces contained cities of substantial size: cities with populations in the tens of thousands were not unusual, and at least two cities with over 200,000 people arose in Mexico, the most densely settled region of size in the pre-Columbian Americas. These sedentary societies also constructed monumental architecture—palaces, temples, and pyramids—and elaborate, exquisitely laid out ceremonial and governmental complexes.



Major Indian cultures of Latin America in 1500 (Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.)

At least 2,000 years before the arrival of Europeans, the agricultural societies of Mexico began to organize themselves into states—political units with recognized boundaries administered by permanent officials who received incomes for their services, and with formal systems of justice, supervised by judges who imposed rulings and punishments dispassionately according to established codes of law. Mayan polities emerged in the area of the Yucatan Peninsula about two millennia ago. The Olmec civilization, located to the west of the Peninsula, predates the Maya by a millennium and may have developed its own political

conclusion

3,500 years ago  
large agricultural communities

2000 years ago states

structures. State-organized Teotihuacán appeared in central Mexico 500 years after the Maya.

Organized states apparently emerged centuries later in the Andean region. Tiahuanaco, which clearly had state structures, appeared 1,500 years ago and ruled much of the central highlands for 5 centuries. Too little is known about such significant coastal cultures as Paracas, Nazca, and the Moche, all of which developed more than 2,000 years ago, to determine whether they had state structures.

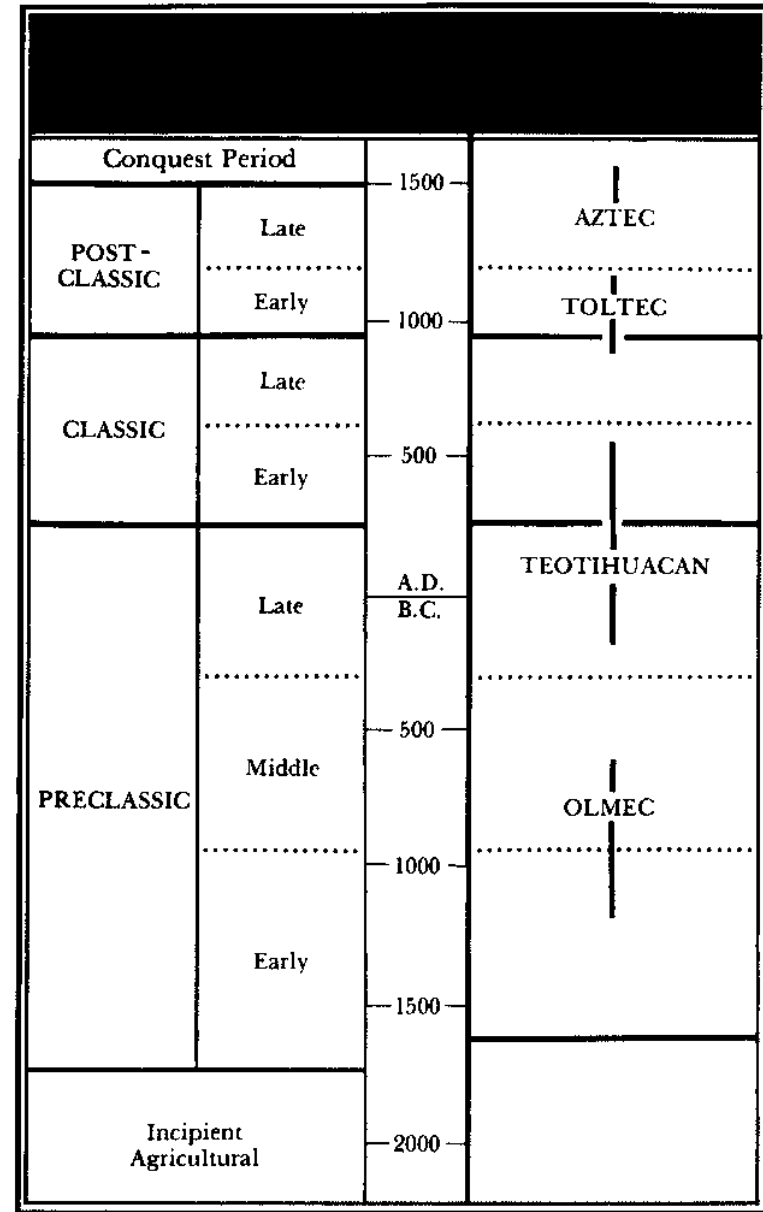
No state-organized indigenous societies existed in North America when Europeans made their initial contacts in the sixteenth century. However, between 800 and 1500, a series of temple-mound builder cultures had proliferated throughout the greater Mississippi River basin and in the Southeast. These were characterized by urban sites centered around temple platforms and massive mounds constructed over many decades. Each of these sites was populated by thousands of residents, with the several largest containing some tens of thousands.

The city of Cahokia in southwestern Illinois, with its huge ceremonial mound, thrived between 1050 and 1200, numbering approximately 30,000 inhabitants, and dominating some 50 surrounding communities. Apparently the introduction of new varieties of maize and beans from Mexico had provided the additional nutrition needed to sustain this notable population increase. But all such early cities inevitably developed unhealthy living conditions due to the lack of efficient waste-disposal systems, exacerbated by the unprecedented population density. These deficiencies may have caused the collapse of such civilizations.

Sedentary societies were organized into ethnic provinces. A permanent council made up of representatives from the most distinguished noble families typically governed these polities. Each had a ruler whose power varied greatly from case to case. Sometimes these ethnic lords held virtually absolute authority and claimed descent from the gods, but other times they functioned more as spokesmen for their polities, and needed support from the noble families to carry out policies.

The cultural attainments of these sedentary agricultural peoples were manifold. Perhaps most dramatic were the many physical improvements that they carried out to put more land under cultivation and to improve crop yields. They terraced hills and mountainsides, dug canal systems, maintained intricate irrigation complexes, raised artificial fields alongside water sources, utilized decaying vegetation as fertilizer, and in lake regions, constructed fields along the shores just above the water line and used the currents to bring nutrients to the crops. These fields, called chinampas in Mexico and often misrepresented as "floating gardens" (they were built into the lakebeds and never floated), could render two to four harvests a year and supplied large amounts of food to urban areas, which otherwise would have had difficulty obtaining adequate food from the countryside.

The densely settled peoples also designed massive urban complexes and residential and ceremonial structures. Some 3,000 years ago, the Olmecs of Mexico, who inhabited the tropical coastal region along the Gulf of Mexico in parts of the modern states of Veracruz and Tabasco, had already constructed large and elaborate ceremonial centers that consisted of complexes of pyramids,



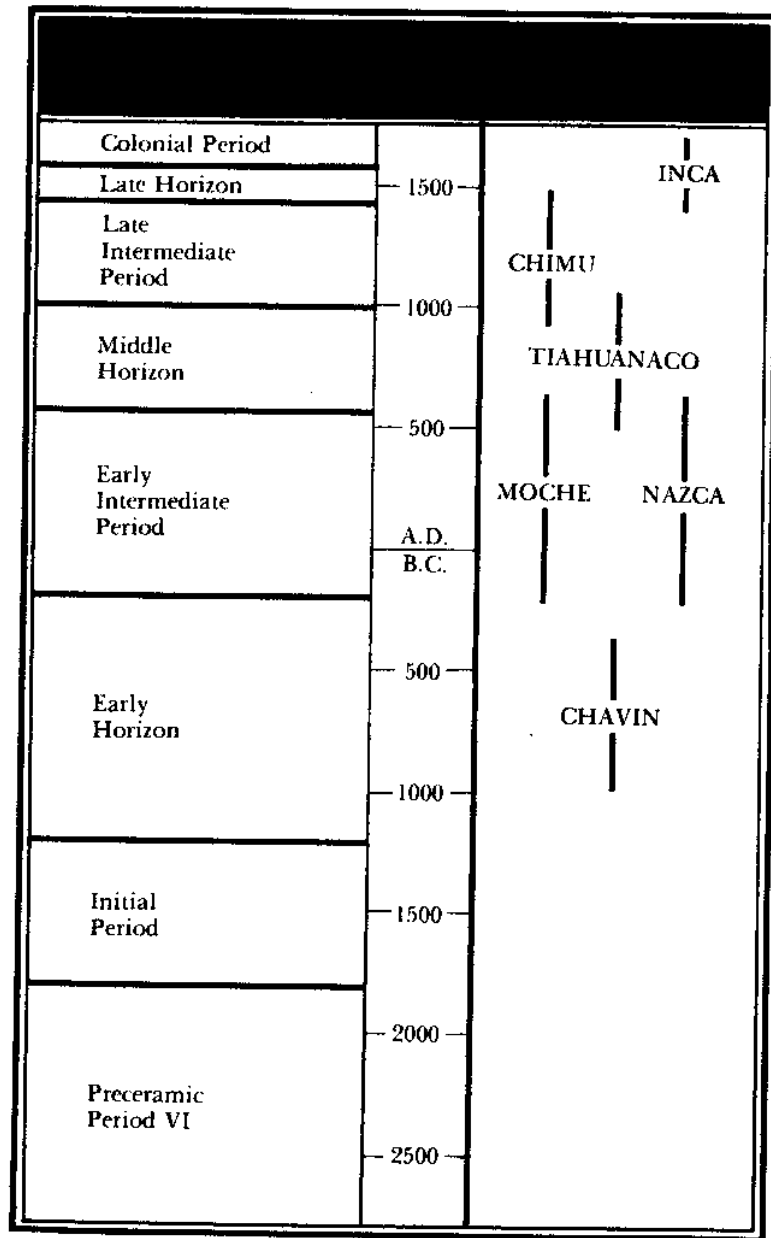
Chronology of Central Mexican history up to European contact (Geoffery W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 14. Reprinted with permission of University Press.)

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North America

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9000

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physical improvements

12  
Olmec



Chronology of Central Andean history up to European contact (Geoffery W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 87. Reprinted with permission of University Press.)

mounds, altars, and mosaic inlaid floors. The scale and magnificence of Olmec monumental architecture reflect the Olmecs religious beliefs (to be motivated to erect these massive arenas of devotion), the ability to marshal regular agricultural surpluses to feed the thousands of builders of the sites (who required vast amounts of food, while not themselves being engaged in productive agriculture), and the stability and efficiency of social and occupational hierarchies (to build these structures over decades under the supervision of rulers and to require a variety of specialized artisans).

The civilization based in the enormous city of Teotihuacan that blossomed in central Mexico emerged some 2,000 years ago and thrived for more than 800 years. Teotihuacan contained dozens of temple complexes located over 20 square kilometers of territory. Far from being just a religious center, it constituted a city of around 200,000 people, who lived in more than 2,200 residential compounds apparently organized around kinship groups. Teotihuacan enjoyed a formal empire in central Mexico, but its cultural influence and trading circuits extended throughout virtually all of Mesoamerica.

Urban orientation characterized the societies in the sedentary agricultural zones of the Americas for many hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans. Members of the first Spanish expeditions spoke admiringly of the cities of Mesoamerica and the Andes, noting the regularity of the streets and canals and the symmetry and quality of the large structures. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who was a member of Cortés's expedition when it entered Tenochtitlan, the vast island capital of the Aztecs in 1519, remarked in his history of the conquest,

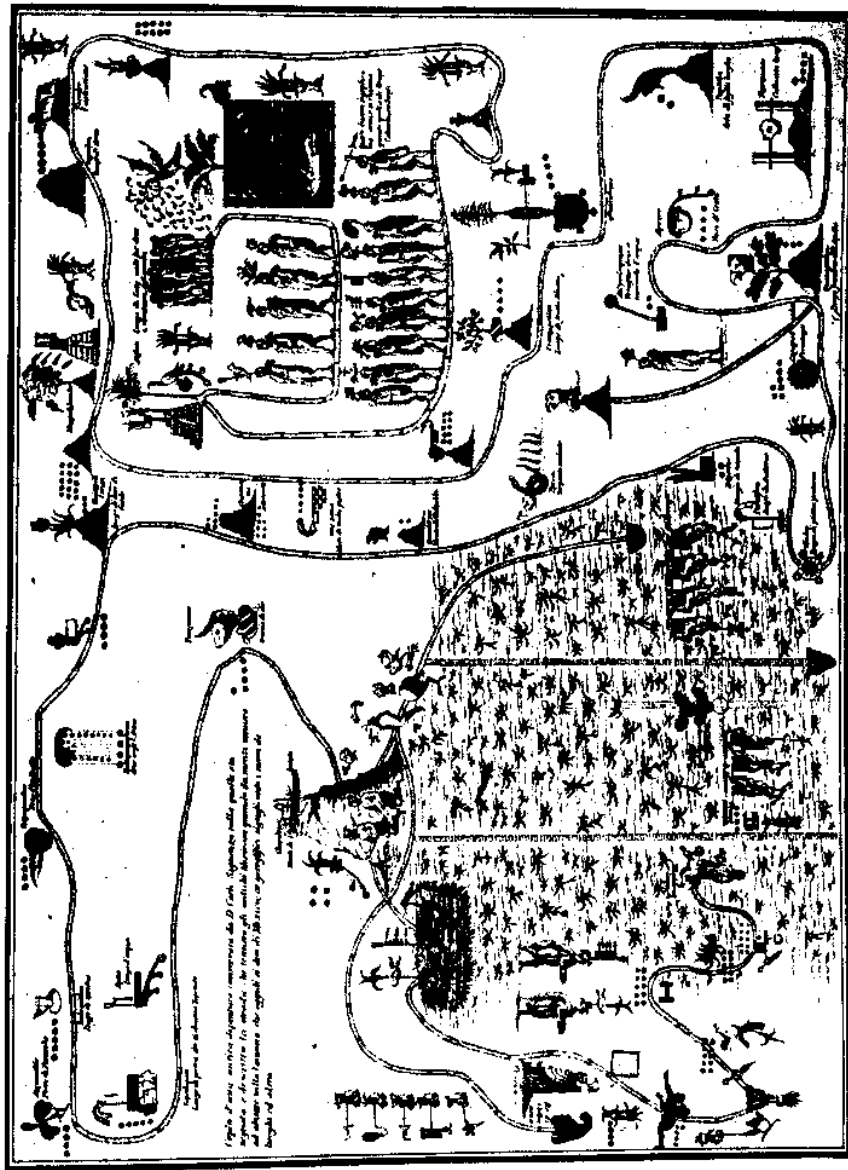
Next morning, we came to a broad causeway and continued our march towards Iztapalapa. And when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. These great towns and *cues* (temples) and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis (a famous late medieval romantic novel). Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream.<sup>1</sup>

The population of the largest cities in the Americas far exceeded that of their counterparts in Spain, and probably all cities in Europe except for London, Paris, and Rome. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan contained perhaps 250,000 inhabitants; Cuzco, the Inca counterpart, held around 60,000. Aqueducts provided clean water to the urban population, and dependable urban services removed both human waste and garbage safely away from contact with people and potable water sources. Pedro Sancho described Cuzco as follows:

Most of the buildings are built of stone and the rest have half their facade of stone. There are also many adobe houses, very efficiently made, which are arranged along straight streets in a cruciform plan. Their streets are all paved, and a stone-lined water channel runs down the middle of each street.<sup>2</sup>

13  
Teotihuacan

14  
Urban...



An early colonial Mexican Codex depicting the Aztec migration myth (Geoffery W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 21. Used by permission.)

The sedentary peoples also devised scientific advances, including highly accurate annual calendars that were as accurate if not more than those of Europe at the same time. They made considerable use of numerical systems, generally with "twenty" rather than "ten" serving as the base number. Skilled astronomers, they understood and graphically represented the movement of the moon, sun, and stars. The peoples of central Mexico, though not those of the Andes, had developed symbolic representation systems and illustrated long scrolls (called codices) that had begun to approximate a writing system based on letters and syllables. This tradition of writing probably explains why the peoples of Mexico quickly learned to write their own languages and hence their own literature and historical records in the Spanish alphabet after the arrival of the Europeans. Michael Coe, Dean Snow, and Elizabeth Benson describe the complexity of Maya writing as follows:

The Maya script was the only complete writing system in the ancient New World: that is, only the Maya could express in writing everything that was in their language. It was a complex mixture of ideographic and phonetic elements, similar in structure to certain scripts of the Old World, such as Sumerian, Egyptian, and Japanese. Since the system included a complete syllabary (i.e. a symbol for each syllable), they could in theory have written everything phonetically, but like the Japanese they did not because the ideographs continued to have immense prestige and probably even religious overtones.<sup>3</sup>

Because some pre-Columbian written sources have been preserved, we have learned about aspects of Mesoamerican history that examination of the physical remains of these civilizations alone would not have yielded. Instead, modern scholars compose accounts of these peoples that address rulers, dynasties, priests, migrations, the foundation and abandonment of cities, and military campaigns, among other topics.

The sedentary imperial peoples all developed profound and complex religious systems, virtually always including a spectrum of gods, with each god identified with certain attributes and natural functions. The gods of different ethnic groups generally resembled each other in important ways, but each society had one or two gods who were distinctive to it and who were worshiped with special fervor. People expected direct benefits from their gods, anticipating healthy births, good harvests, and military victories in return for the proper performance of religious rituals. Failures in important aspects of life would cause the devotees first to question whether they had followed proper ceremony and then even to doubt the effectiveness of the god being beseeched. Commoners were extremely devout and obedient to both their gods and their own secular rulers as long as events developed favorably, but a reversal of fortune could quickly make them question the rightfulness of either a god or a particular ruler.

15  
Science

16  
Religion

In Mesoamerica the concept of time was very much caught up in religious belief. The peoples there believed that the gods had already created and destroyed four worlds, and they were living in the fifth age, whose survival was tenuous. Moreover, they were prone to think of time—and of the sequence of events embedded in it—as cyclical rather than linear. They sought to discern patterns in their individual and collective lives that had been prefigured in an earlier period to understand what was likely to occur next—or as important, what *should* occur next.

The historical traditions that have survived say much about how the preconquest and conquest-era peoples of central Mexico viewed the workings of their complex society and cosmos. Their reality, as they conceived it, was acknowledged and understood as the outcome and hence the repetition of past events, by which it was endowed with the legitimacy of antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

Mesoamerican peoples, like many others in the Americas, practiced limited forms of human sacrifice, offering the lives of a few victims—typically the most valiant and respected—to their gods. The Aztecs, however, made human sacrifice the centerpiece of their worship to the sun god named Huitzilopochtli. The annual number of victims seems to have been in the thousands.

This practice should not be confused with cannibalism, the consumption of human flesh, which was very limited both in the number of peoples who practiced it and the types of occasions when it was permitted. The sedentary agricultural societies did not consume human flesh for nutrition. However, during certain rituals designated individuals ate small amounts of cooked human flesh. These were usually the remains of recently slain enemy warriors of exceptional valor. The belief was that their personal qualities were absorbed along with the flesh.

### Landholding Patterns and Forms of Production and Distribution

Much of the agricultural land in Mesoamerica and the Andean zone was held collectively by individual communities, which would periodically redistribute it among their member households as they grew or shrank in size and as new ones were formed through marriage. These lineage-based communities that owned land collectively were called *calpullis* in Mesoamerica and *ayllus* in the Andes. The assigned plots seem to have been worked by individual households, though the community cooperated as a group during planting and harvesting. Further, if one household was short of food, the others shared with it to ensure that no residents starved.

Rural villagers, however, practiced private ownership of land as well, and many maintained individual plots beyond the boundaries of the central village lands that were held in common. In addition, nobles owned lands as individuals

### The Origins and great migration of the Mexica

Juan de Tovar lived his entire life in Mexico. After entering the Jesuit order in 1573, some fifty years after the conquest of Mexico, he became noted for his preaching among the Indians and for his knowledge of their language, Nahuatl. He gathered indigenous historical writings and interviewed contemporary native scholars about the pasts of their peoples. From them he composed his own "Account of the Origin of the Indians Who Live in this New Spain According to their Histories," from which the following passages derive.

The Indians of this New Spain, according to the usual account given in their histories, proceed from two different nations: one of these they call Nauatlaca, which means "people who express themselves and speak clearly," unlike the second nation, which in those times was very savage and barbaric, and whose sole occupation was hunting. The Nauatlaca called them Chichimeca, which means "hunting people," those who live from that rude and rustic occupation; and they also call them Otomi. The former name was given them because they all dwelt among the crags and in the most rugged places of the mountains, where they lived like beasts, lacking any civilized traits and going completely naked. . . . By the time the Chichimeca had acquired some civilized traits and the land was colonized and filled with the six tribes already mentioned, three hundred and two years had passed since they left their caves and ancestral seats. Now those of the seventh cave, which is the tribe of the Mexica, arrived in this land; they, like the others, came from the lands of Aztlan and Teoculhuacan. They were a warlike and hardy people who fearlessly undertook great deeds and exploits, and were civilized and refined. They brought with them an idol whom they called Huitzilopochtli, which means the left claw of a bird of shining plumage native to their land, from whose feathers they make figures and other beautiful things. They declare that this idol ordered them to leave their homeland, promising that he would make them princes and lords of all the provinces which the other six tribes had colonized, a land abounding in gold, silver, precious stones, feathers, and rich mantles, and all imaginable wealth. . . . When they had reached this hill of Chapultepec, near the great lagoon of Mexico, they established their camp with no little fear and apprehension because it was within the frontiers of the Tepaneca, a famous people who at that time were masters over all the other tribes, whose chief city and court was called Azcaputzalco, meaning "anthill," owing to the large number of people it had, as has already been explained. The Mexica settled in this place and built their rude houses, preparing to defend themselves as best they might. They asked their god what they ought to do; he answered that they must await the event, that he knew what they were to do and would let them know in good time.

Source: Juan de Tovar, "Relación del origen de los Indios que havitan en esta Nueva Espana segun sus historias," trans. by Frances López-Morillas, in John H. Parry and Robert G. Keith, eds., *New Iberian World*, Vol. I (New York: Times Books, 1984), pp. 52, 55, 57. Reprinted by permission of Edward J. Joyce, trustee.

17

Human sacrifice

18

Land ownership

(really as representatives of their lineages) and supervised permanent retainers who worked exclusively for them.

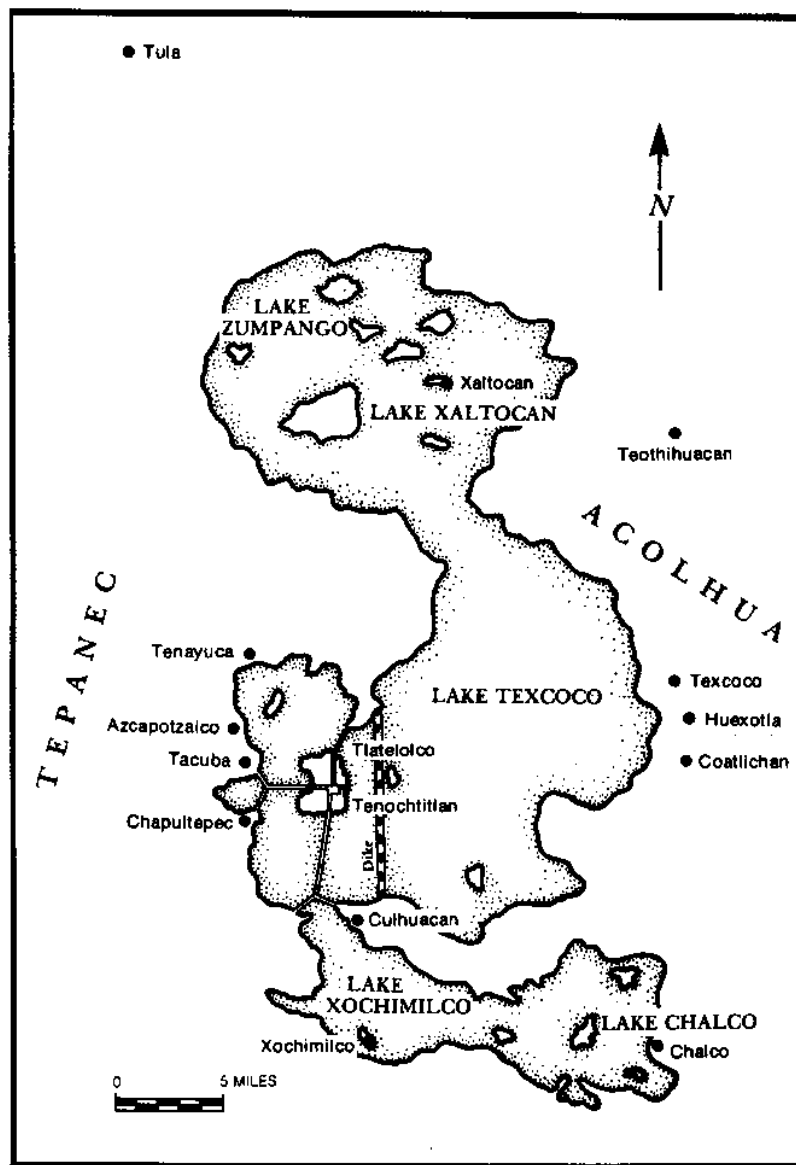
Such important entities as government posts, priesthods, temples, and the military had lands assigned to their support. Commoners routinely cultivated these plots as part of their rotary draft labor service (performing labor in predictable turns as directed by their leaders). The harvest was used to maintain the officeholder, religious structure, military unit, or the like.

In these sedentary societies, men dominated work in the fields, although women seem to have assisted them at particularly busy times such as planting and harvesting. Women operated the households, often clustered into residential compounds, prepared and stored foods, and wove cloth, a crucial function in their economies.

These cultures were highly patriarchal, practicing a doctrine of masculine priority in politics and household governance. The senior man in any family lineage generally headed up the group compound in which other members of his descent group resided. When a compound grew overlarge, it would spin off a new one, itself focused around another senior man from the same lineage. Wives did not invariably move into their husband's compound after marriage, though they did frequently. Sometimes the husband moved into the family compound of the wife, or more rarely they both moved to that of a distant relative of one of them. Individuals of both sexes often measured their descent lines through both their mother and father.

Mesoamerica differed greatly from the Andean zone in the distribution of goods. Mesoamerica had long enjoyed vibrant exchange systems and marketplaces, some local and others regional in scope, in which people bartered a great variety of goods and foods. These events were held regularly on certain days in different communities. Women dominated the local markets both as buyers and sellers; special long-distance merchants, who were predominantly men, monopolized at least some types of trade in high-value goods. While no currency ever developed as a standard medium of exchange, the value of trade goods was sometimes expressed in numbers of cacao beans (for they were rather uniform in size and greatly valued for the chocolate drink they rendered, a taste Spaniards quickly adopted after their arrival) and units of standard woven cloths.

Highly distinct ecological zones dominated much of the Andean region, imposed by the sharp verticality of that massive mountain range. Each elevation produced distinct commodities. For example, the Pacific lowlands produced cotton, the medium lowlands were suitable for maize cultivation, even higher elevations supported the cultivation of potatoes, and the highest arid plains afforded suitable pasture for llamas and alpacas. To avoid the uncertainty of trading with members of different ethnic and kinship groups, *ayllus* typically stationed to a branch at each distinct ecological zone. The exchange of vital goods then proceeded to within the framework of the larger kinship group without reliance on outsiders. Hence the formal markets and long-distance trade and the larger process of open exchange between different localities and ethnic groups that long typified Mesoamerica were quite underdeveloped and tenuous in the Andes.



Important sites in the Valley of Mexico on the eve of European contact (Geoffery W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 12. Reprinted by permission.)

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land  
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priest

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men  
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trade

22  
monarchs

Monarchs governed the city-states that typified political organization in the ethnic provinces that dominated the sedentary agricultural zones. Although these rulers presented themselves as absolute dictators, in fact, they relied substantially on support from their extended kinship groups. These determined who would succeed to the throne, and they staffed many of the highest posts in the government. Royal family members appreciated that their own interests suffered when a weak ruler held power. They might lose parts of their empire, and consequently some of the tribute payments and labor service that produced most of their wealth. Therefore, they acted surreptitiously at times to remove flawed or ineffectual leaders. An early colonial chronicle from Mexico directly refers to such an act.

During this time Tlacaélel (a revered, powerful member of the Aztec royal lineage) urged Tizoc (the emperor) to finish the building of the Great Temple because only a small part had been constructed. But before the work could begin, members of Tizoc's court, angered by his weakness and lack of desire to enlarge and glorify the Aztec nation, hastened his death with something they gave him to eat. He died in the year 1486, still a young man.<sup>5</sup>

Ascension to the throne did not generally pass to the late ruler's eldest son. Rulership more commonly passed from one brother to another until all suitable candidates within the generation had filled the post, whereupon it moved to the next generation, usually from uncle to nephew. Because noblemen in these societies had multiple wives (most of them arranged to establish political alliances), a royal family generally had a number of contenders—and considerable rivalry—for the throne. While the ruling family maintained the public image that the late ruler had chosen his successor before dying, considerable rivalry and coalition-building among the major contenders and their supporters seems to have preceded each transition. The victor sometimes had to execute disgruntled losers or face the possibility of revolts organized by them. Nonetheless, members of the royal lineage typically united when an external threat challenged their collective preeminence.

23  
service

These political elites routinely demanded labor service from their subjects to construct and maintain the vast infrastructure—buildings, roads, bridges, religious complexes, irrigation works, terraces, and the like—of their provinces. The commoners delivered these services in rotation, working for a period of some months under the direction of community leaders. Their task completed, they returned home not to be summoned again for a few years. This widespread practice can be termed rotary draft labor service. During their turn, workers expected to be treated well by the lords for whom they worked, receiving appreciation, housing, feasts, and drink. The participants viewed this as community service and reciprocal in nature. Rulers were expected to protect and sustain their people, leading the defense of their province if necessary and providing food from storehouses during times of shortage.

### Prehispanic labor service patterns

In the mid-seventeenth century, some 125 years after the Spanish conquest of Peru, Father Bernabé Cobo, resident in that colony, set about to assemble material for a history of the New World, with considerable emphasis on the Andean region. He assembled a considerable library of information on the local peoples, which he used to compose a history of the Inca empire. In this passage, he describes the labor service system utilized by the empire.

Apart from the work the people did in place of tax or tribute by cultivating the fields and raising the livestock of the Inca and religion and by doing the other jobs and tasks that we have told about, they had to make a very great contribution of men and laborers for all of the jobs and work done throughout the kingdom for the service and utility of the king as well as for the republic. The taxpayers came to these jobs by turns of *mita* (as they say), when each person was called; and they all took part in the occupations and chores that the Inca and his governors assigned to them.

Source: Father Bernabé Cobo, *History of the Inca Empire*, trans. by Roland Hamilton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), p. 231.

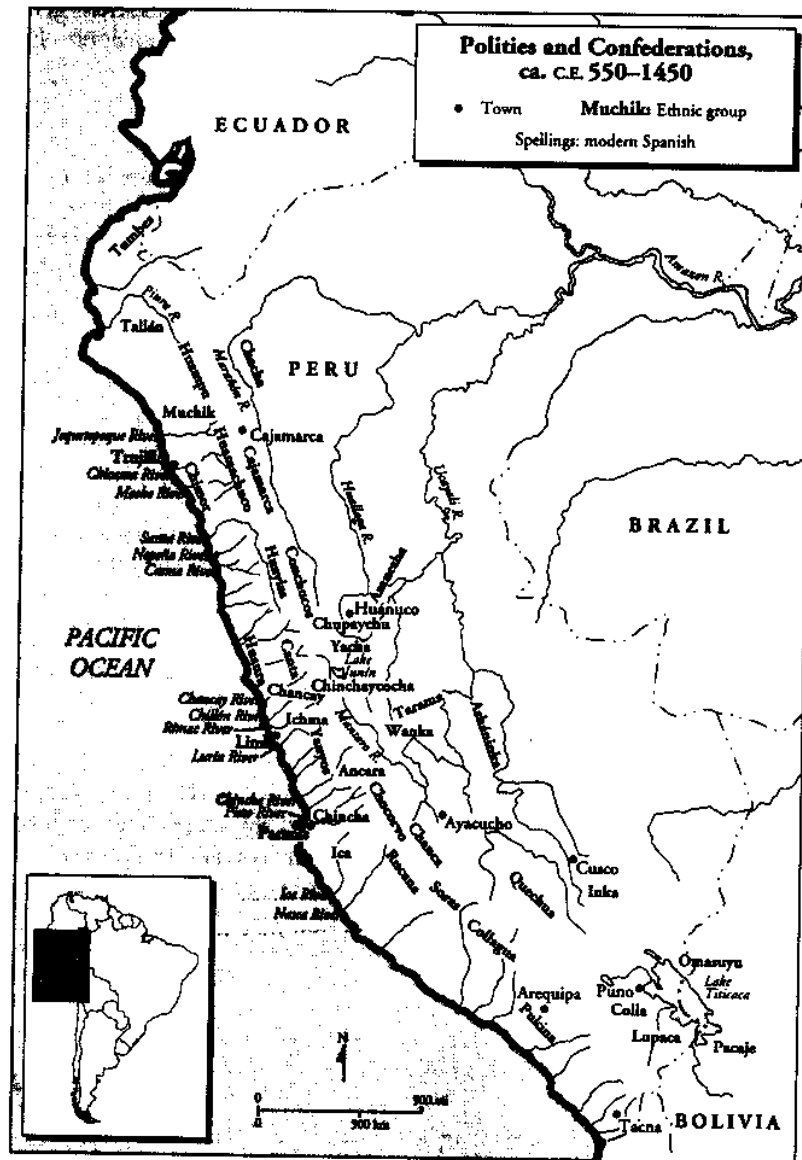
### Empires and Warfare

24  
war

The autonomous ethnic provinces of the sedentary agricultural zones produced both healthy surpluses of food and specialized craft goods, such as wood carvings, fine metalwork, and feather work, sometimes made into entire garments or headdresses. Rival ethnic states habitually launched military campaigns against each other to impose political control and to demand labor service and tribute payments in the form of stipulated amounts of scarce commodities or finely crafted goods. They rarely demanded basic agricultural products, for each people generally produced a surplus of the same items.

Pedro de Cieza de León, an inquisitive early settler of Peru, provides this description of the Inca method of expansion.

They marched from Cuzco with their army and warlike materials, until they were near the region they intended to conquer. Then they collected very complete information touching the power of the enemy, and whence help was likely to reach them, and by what road. This being known, the most effective steps were taken to prevent the succor from arriving, either by large bribes given to the allies, or by forcible resistance. . . . They sent chosen men to examine the land, to see the roads, and learn by what means they were defended, as well as the places whence the enemy received supplies. When the road that should be



Important towns and ethnic groups in the Andes, 500-1500  
 (Luis Lumbreras, "Andean Urbanism and Statecraft" (C.E. 550-1450),  
 in Frank Salomon and Stuart B. Schwartz, eds., *The Cambridge History  
 of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, volume III, South America,  
 part I, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Reprinted by permission.)

taken and the necessary measures were decided upon, the Inca sent special messengers to the enemy to say that he desired to have them as allies and relations, so that, with joyful hearts and willing minds they ought to come forth to receive him in their province, and give him obedience as in the other provinces; and that they might do this of their own accord he sent presents to the native chiefs.<sup>6</sup>

In Mesoamerica, empires reached back fully 2,000 years. In its central region, a succession of powerful empires emerged, each of which lasted hundreds of years. The last empire—the Aztecs—was conquered by Cortés's expedition in 1521.

The conquering powers did not normally demand that their newly subject provinces abandon their local cultures and distinctive ethnic identities, including their pantheons of gods. However, the conquered peoples considered the victorious power to have benefitted from the superiority of its primary god or gods, so often added one or two of the new gods to their existing set. Imperial centers even permitted subordinated provinces to retain their traditional ruling families. They utilized them to extract labor service and, in the case of Mexico, tribute payments of specialized products and craft goods from their people. Subject provinces often rose up against these impositions, and conquering states then had to use their armies to subdue them anew, and not just to expand the boundaries of the empire.

These densely populated states could amass enormous armies. They maintained expeditions that numbered in the tens of thousands in the field for months at a time, making use of storehouses they placed along their routes. However, organization of these armies was very hierarchical and inflexible. For example, when a unit's commander was killed or captured, his entire force withdrew from action, considering that it had failed in its mission. Commoners participated in campaigns as part of their expected labor service to the state. Hence most warfare occurred in the months that followed harvest. Some military powers established battalions of professional soldiers, but they were quite limited in number.

The approach to warfare stressed formal announcement of a campaign, quite limited use of battlefield tactics, the preservation of the opponent's cities, fields, and noncombatants, and—in combat itself—emphasis on the taking of captives over the slaying of the enemy. Certain exceptions must be acknowledged, however. For example, the Incas devastated the Cañari people located in the northern Andes. But as settlements and civilians were generally secure from attack, the sedentary peoples did not fortify their cities with walls and other defensive apparatus. The militaries made only very limited use of bows and arrows and lances, perhaps because the lack of metal tips made them rather ineffectual weapons in the large-unit operations that characterized warfare in these sedentary zones. The basic weapon was a carved wooden club commonly imbedded with obsidian or flint chips. Of course, as the Americas lacked horses, no cavalry existed.

25  
losers

26  
armies

27  
type of war

### The Aztec army at war

Diego Durán came to Mexico as a child shortly after the conquest and lived his life there as a Dominican friar. He was an acute student of Aztec culture and history, composing two massive books based heavily on indigenous writings. In this section from his detailed history, Durán gives a close account of an Aztec military campaign.

News came that the Huastecs had attacked and killed all the merchants and traders who were active in that area, leaving not one alive. Most of these men had come from Tenochtitlan and its provinces. . . . The news of the Huastec rebellion and the death of merchants, who had been cast from great heights into ravines below, was brought to Motecuhzoma [the first of that name, who ruled some fifty years before the one defeated by Cortés] by people of Tulantzinco. The king thanked them and ordered that they be attended well. Then he summoned Tlacaelel [his senior advisor] and asked him to send envoys to Tezcoco, Tacuba, Chalco, Xochimilco, and all the neighboring towns. Since the aggression had been directed at the people of all these cities, retaliation must be taken by all of them. They were ordered to prepare for war, to obtain provisions and all the necessary arms, tents, and fighting equipment that they would need for the conflict. . . . Then some seasoned warriors began to marshal the troops and prepare them for battle. These men, who had authority in thus ordering the soldiers, were very well armed and they carried staffs in their hands and wore headbands, long shell earrings, and labrets. . . . All these soldiers were ordered to lie down upon the earth with their shields and swords in their hands, as if in an ambush. There were about two thousand men from all the provinces, and in this way they were covered with grass until not a man could be seen. Then the captains and seasoned soldiers were formed into squadrons, and next to each experienced soldier was placed a youth, one of those new recruits who had never been to war before. Orders were given to the soldiers to take care of these younger men and give them protection. . . . Once the battle had begun, the Aztecs, seeing this ferocious, frightful enemy, and hearing the ghastly howls that issued from their throats--which made their hair stand on end--pretended to retreat. They went back to the place where the great warriors waited in ambush. When the enemy had entered the trap, the men concealed by the grass stood up and, with great fury, surrounded them, taking many prisoners and killing others. Not one Huastec escaped. Even the youths took many captives and all the prisoners were taken to Tenochtitlan.

Source: Fray Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. by Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), pp. 160, 161, 164, 165. Copyright © 1994 by the University of Oklahoma Press. Reprinted by permission.

### Semisedentary Societies

Although the sedentary imperial peoples of the Americas attained the most complex civilizations, semisedentary peoples who practiced a less intensive form of agriculture imposed by the limitations of their natural environments inhabited much more territory in the two continents. They had to move their settlements to nearby fresh lands every few years and supplement cultivation with hunting, fishing, and trapping to round out their dietary needs. A major consequence of their limited agricultural output was a substantially lower population density than the fully sedentary peoples.

In North America virtually the entire region south of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River and east of the Mississippi River was inhabited by semisedentary peoples. Given the general expanse of forests throughout this region before the coming of Europeans (though the types of forests varied considerably from one locality to another), the peoples who lived there—though representing a diversity of ethnicities and languages—shared a broadly comparable material culture and way of life and hence are commonly referred to as Eastern Woodlands Indians. (Do recall, however, that a series of densely populated and urban-based civilizations prospered in the Mississippi River basin and the nearby Southeast for centuries before they collapsed over the several hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans.) West of the Mississippi, the land was much less forested and of significantly lower agricultural quality, so most of the peoples who inhabited its vastness were hunters and gatherers. Exceptions include the ancient agricultural societies situated in certain parts of the American southwest (today known as the Pueblos), and the societies located along the Pacific coast who thrived from fishing and some limited agriculture.

Semisedentary societies inhabited Central America south of the Mesoamerican-boundary and roughly the northern half of South America east of the Andes, the area that now encompasses much of Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Bolivia. The vast Amazon River basin contained many such semisedentary peoples; it was much more densely populated than is the case presently. Even Chile and Paraguay included substantial semisedentary communities, though they were surrounded by less inviting terrain inhabited by hunters and gatherers.

Tremendous cultural variation existed among these semisedentary societies. They all practiced agriculture, but their dependence on it varied greatly according to the local environmental setting. Also, those peoples situated near the complex civilizations of the sedentary agricultural zones were inevitably influenced by their cultural achievements. Such was not the case among those who lived in areas more distant and less accessible to these complex societies.

Semisedentary societies did not generally attempt permanent improvements, such as terraces or raised fields, to increase agricultural productivity. Rather, they depended almost exclusively on swidden agriculture (also known as slash and burn). With swidden agriculture the members of an entire community cut down the brush and small trees in a certain area and then burned them. The site was then suitable for cultivation, with the ash providing fertilizer.

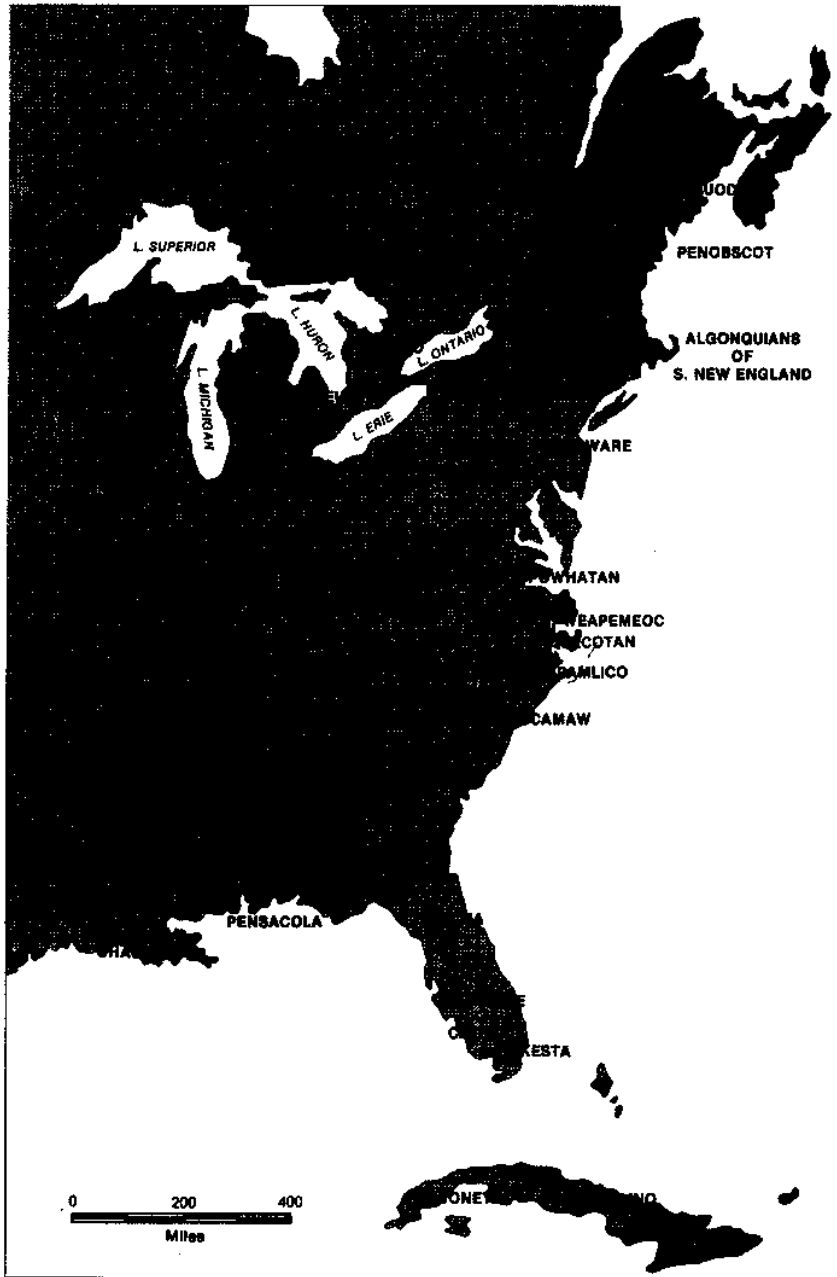
28  
Semi-  
definition

29  
Eastern  
woodlands

30  
Central  
and  
S.A.

31  
variation

32  
Swidden  
agriculture



Indian tribes of Eastern North America on the eve of European contact (Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America*, 3rd ed., 1992. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.)

Generally, such a field provided three to five years of good harvests before output declined drastically because of the decrease of nutrients in the soil. The community then moved to the next promising location a short distance away and carried out the same procedure. The process continued time after time within a circumscribed zone until the earliest cultivated area was once more fully overgrown with foliage that could be cut down, burned, and cultivated anew, a period of time usually around twenty-five years. Thus the community's mobility took place within a well-delimited region within boundaries that the community and nearby groups recognized (which is not to say that a rival might not encroach on it or raid into it). Hence all these periodic community migrations took on a predictable character, following a certain circuit that would take the inhabitants to fields that they or their parents had worked about a generation before.

The many semisedentary peoples scattered across such vast and distinctive territories developed a great variety of social and cultural practices. Among the Eastern Woodlands peoples of North America, the men worked to clear and burn down fields, but only women actually cultivated the crops, generally working in gangs in the fields and assisting each other with child care.

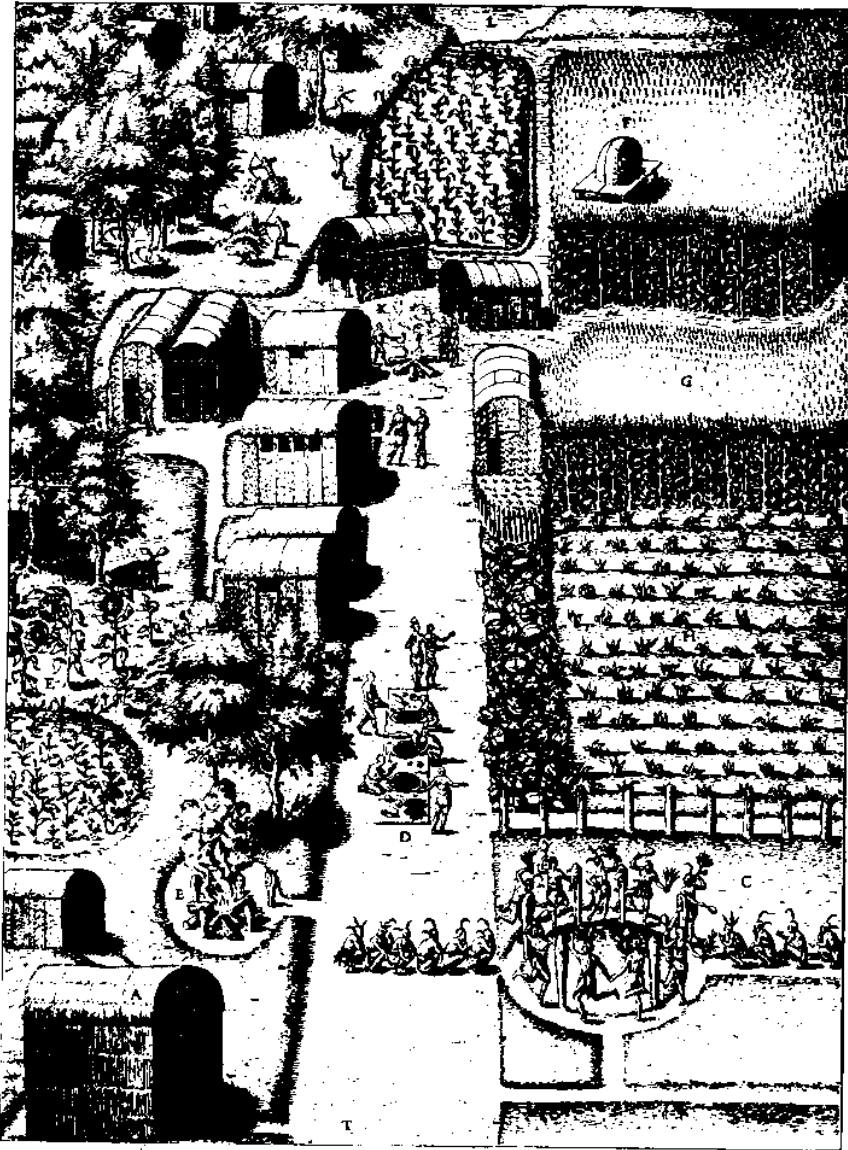
Anthony F. C. Wallace describes the practice of agriculture among the Seneca people of the Iroquois Confederation as follows:

The responsibility for carrying on this extensive agricultural establishment rested almost entirely on the women. Armed with crude wooden hoes and digging-sticks, they swarmed over the fields in gay, chattering work bees, proceeding from field to field to hoe, to plant, to weed, and to harvest. An individual woman might, if she wished, "own" a patch of corn, or an apple or peach orchard, but there was little reason for insisting on private tenure: the work was more happily done communally, and in the absence of a regular market, a surplus was of little personal advantage, especially if the winter were hard and other families needed corn. In such circumstances hoarding led only to hard feelings and strained relations as well as the possibility of future difficulties in getting corn for oneself and one's family.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps because they produced most of the nutrition, women enjoyed considerable political power in some of these semisedentary societies. They had to approve policies and diplomatic arrangements worked out by chiefs before they could be implemented. Lineage was measured through the female line, and residence in longhouses and family compounds was organized around one's relationship to the senior female who headed the residential complex. When daughters married, their husbands moved into the longhouse with them. Divorces were common and easily arranged. Unmarried sons remained in their mother's house. The senior female of the clan assigned men's work and their participation in blood feuds on its behalf. Men spent great amounts of time away from their villages and families, hunting, trapping, fighting, and conducting diplomacy, all of which took them into the uninhabited countryside.

33  
gender and agr. culture

34  
women in politics



The community of Secota in Carolina as represented by Theodor De Bry (*Ernest and Johanna Lehner, How They Saw the New World, New York, Tudor Publishing Company, 1966.*)

Such arrangements were present in South America as well, most particularly among the Guaraní in what is now Paraguay. There, too, women dominated

agriculture, headed lineages, organized work and warfare, and had considerable voice in political deliberations.

The decreased nutrition that this way of life provided, together with the required periodic movement of the community, determined that semisedentary peoples maintain a significantly lesser population density than the fully sedentary peoples. Further, semisedentary societies had somewhat less occupational and social elaboration. Few if any full-time artisans and other specialists could maintain themselves; virtually everyone engaged in agriculture most of the time. As there were few specialized craft items or local commodities, trade among communities was rudimentary and regular markets as they existed in Mesoamerica were little known.

Some semisedentary peoples practiced cannibalism for nutrition. The most notorious were the Caribs of the southern Caribbean islands and the northern shoreline of South America and the Tupinambá located along the Atlantic coastline of Brazil. Most of their victims were captives taken in raids by one settlement against another as part of longstanding campaigns of vengeance against traditional enemies.

### The Primacy of Community and Lineage

Few social institutions or loyalties existed above the village level. In fact, even the community endured a certain instability, as lineages within it might spin off to found their own hamlets. The numerous semisedentary societies in the Americas never organized themselves into states with true political structures and institutions. At the time of the European arrival, the most complex alliance among such peoples was the Iroquois confederation of five tribes who saw themselves as sharing a common ethnicity. But this confederation functioned primarily as a nonaggression pact among the participants. It provided neither for coordinated military operations in the event of warfare against other peoples nor for a council of representatives from the five tribes to set policy.

Some civilizations that had once been sedentary agricultural and state organized in character later became semisedentary and tribally organized after their cultures faded due to some combination of famine, environmental exhaustion, disease, and warfare. Such was the case with the Mississippi mound builders, but an even more dramatic episode caused the dissolution of the highly accomplished Maya civilization.

This civilization—never an empire—in southern Mexico and Guatemala thrived for well over a millennium before it collapsed in the ninth century A.D. Its achievements include writing, sophisticated mathematics and astronomical knowledge, and the construction of substantial, beautiful cities and ceremonial centers in the rugged jungle of the Yucatan Peninsula. In the classic period at least several cities had populations that numbered in the tens of thousands. The integrated cultural sophistication, urban focus, and dynamic trade networks of the classic Maya were based on substantial agricultural engineering, using networks of canals and raised fields. When the Maya abandoned these agricultural

35  
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36  
village

complexes because of the still incompletely understood combination of internecine warfare, famine, and internal revolts during the ninth century, they did not disappear. In fact, some ethnic provinces, such as Mayapan and Chichen Itza, endured over subsequent centuries, but they were nonetheless pale imitations of the previous broad-based civilization.

Most areas reverted to village-based, subsistence-oriented, swidden agriculture (in other words they became semisedentary), and ceased to calculate their calendars and to write their histories (enterprises that must have been the domain of the elites who were repudiated in the collapse). Likewise the cities and ceremonial centers lost their purpose and were left to become overgrown. With the abandonment of artisan craft and regional commodity production specialization, the elaborate trade systems (and market towns, transporters, and merchants that had been sustained by them) dried up. Hence when Europeans arrived in the region of the Maya, they were mystified by such great, overgrown temples, palaces, and complexes lying ignored throughout the peninsula in the midst of scattered, locally oriented, villages.

Communities of semisedentary peoples tended to be led by chiefs who spoke for their people and who led rituals and war parties but who lacked political authority. Instead, these communities—desperately needing to maintain internal cohesion—practiced consensus politics, wherein virtually every family had to agree to any important decision. Chiefs could not insist on tribute payments or labor service from their people. No permanent nobility existed. Chiefs were selected for particular diplomatic or military campaigns, but their authority did not generally persist after their conclusion. Nor could the offspring of chiefs anticipate succeeding their fathers.

While warfare against other lineages, communities, and sometimes entire tribes was common (perhaps endemic) among the semisedentary peoples, conquest, long-term subordination, and the delivery of tribute or labor service were unknown. These societies provided no basis for empire—each community would have to be subjugated in turn, and its members could always flee into the hinterland. As among the sedentary imperial societies, the warfare of semisedentary peoples typically involved few casualties and did not emphasize the taking or destruction of the opponent's community or the slaughter of noncombatants. Groups undertook warfare to right a perceived wrong or injury inflicted on them by outsiders or to enable their men to gain honor and status through their military accomplishments. (As all of the peoples in a given region produced essentially the same basic goods and few if any specialized or luxury items, the possibility of plunder did not incite attacks.) The men of a lineage or a community assaulted their counterparts in the forest or open country. The rugged countryside lent itself to ambushes and quick retreats. Greater prestige was afforded to the capture of an opponent than killing him, even though the commonality with which these peoples used bows and arrows—when compared to sedentary societies—made them more lethal. Some of these groups, particularly in more tropical areas, used poisoned arrows, the single indigenous weapon the Europeans would truly fear.

Captives brought back to the village were usually ritually tortured to death (in the process, supposedly righting the wrong inflicted) or were—somewhat less

often, it seems—adopted into the lineage to replace the person whose death or injury engendered the warfare in the first place. Many societies in both North and South America adopted outsiders—and sometimes entire remnant communities or tribes—into their midst, a practice often witnessed (and probably more often needed) when the arrival of Europeans brought with it both more deadly warfare and the decimation of entire villages and tribes.

### Nonsedentary (or Nomadic) Peoples

Lands unsuitable for any kind of cultivation—deserts, plains (whose hard-packed soils would require plows for productive agriculture), high mountains, and some tropical zones—were inhabited by nonsedentary (or nomadic) peoples. These rugged peoples lived rudimentary lives based on hunting and gathering. Completely dependent on the unimproved resources of their surroundings, the nomadic bands could not achieve a substantial population density. They clustered in small bands organized around descent groups and moved about within a circumscribed area, as the seasons and animal migrations dictated that grains, berries, nuts, and game could be found. (The most notable exception to this general pattern is the extensive desert region in the North American Southwest, where such complex cultures as the Anasazi and the Hohokam thrived for centuries, practicing extensive agriculture through careful use of the limited water sources.) Most of the hunters and gatherers of North America west of the Mississippi River except for some close to the Pacific Ocean fit this description, as do those in or near the Arctic region. So also do those of the deserts and mountains of northern Mexico and of the pampas and scrubland of Argentina, western Brazil, and eastern Bolivia. The northern and southern extremes of Chile also contained such peoples.

The nonsedentary peoples had no craft or social differentiation, only task specialization by gender, with the men as hunters and warriors and the women as gatherers and food processors. Their inherent mobility required that they have few possessions, and of course they erected no permanent structures. Highly egalitarian, they selected leaders for particular war campaigns or diplomatic undertakings, after which they enjoyed no special authority. Nor was there a special rank of priests; any man who felt that he had spiritual or healing powers could be accepted as a shaman as long as he found persons who accepted him as such.

With their ruggedness, mobility, knowledge of the land and climate, and stress on ambush, bows and arrows, and killing rather than capture in warfare, these nomadic tribes were formidable opponents against each other—for they typically had deep-set animosities against at least some of their neighbors—and against any semisedentary or sedentary peoples near whom they might reside. Of course, the nonsedentary would raid, loot, and withdraw, but they could not conquer and subordinate. However, sometimes a nomadic band ventured into a sedentary zone and remained; numerous such migrations are recorded (and, of course, semisedentary peoples could do much the same thing). They served as mercenaries in warfare and were assigned to live on marginal lands by the sedentary people they served. Over time, they became increasingly acculturated to the

more sedentary way of life, but they might retain special pride in their origins and exploits in battle and hence a distinctive history and sense of themselves as a people. This process is well recorded in Mesoamerica, where the Mexica—the most powerful group in the Aztec alliance—were one such group.

When they first arrived, the Mexicas, like the Chichimecs of Xolotl and even the early Toltecs, were by all accounts part-civilized and part-nomad. After settling in the Valley of Mexico, they would at times proudly proclaim their Chichimec, or nomad, ancestry, while at others they laid equal stress on their descent from the city-dwelling Toltecs. More probably, like so many of their neighbours, they were a fusion of two elements, migrant and sedentary.<sup>8</sup>

Migration of bands, villages, and complete ethnic groups was common in the history of the Americas, as was the reorganization of communities and the formation of new ones from disparate parts. The migration of groups and the creation of new communities seem to have long been characteristic of Andean societies; the Inca empire used the practice to its own advantage, locating contingents of friendly peoples among those with a heritage of hostility to the empire. The prehispanic Americas constituted a dynamic world in which new communities and alliances were constantly being formed.

### The Native Population of the Americas on the Eve of Contact

I have left discussion of the population of the Americas on the eve of the arrival of the Europeans to last because of the impact that agriculture has on population densities. Sedentary peoples enjoyed much more substantial populations than semisedentary ones (and particularly large ones because of the commonality of urbanism among the fully sedentary societies of the Americas) and that in turn semisedentary peoples greatly outnumbered nonsedentary ones.

The population of both continents probably totalled approximately 60 million persons on the eve of contact with the rest of the world. The zone of greatest population was Mexico, with up to 20 million people. The Aztec empire embraced the majority of them. The Andean region, with more rugged country though agricultural as well, contained perhaps 12 million, with a very high percentage of them part of the Inca empire. The Caribbean and Central America were inhabited primarily by semisedentary peoples, yielding populations of around 5 million each. South America outside of the Andes contained mostly semisedentary peoples in its northern and central parts and nonsedentary ones more in the south, totalling altogether around 9–10 million people. North America held perhaps 7 million inhabitants, 5 million of those in what became the United States and an additional 2 million or so in what became Canada. Of

these over two-thirds lived as semisedentary peoples east of the Mississippi River—the Eastern Woodlands Indians. The peoples of the western plains were, of course, largely dependent on hunting and gathering for their subsistence.

Two notable factors help to explain the significant population density achieved by the American peoples. First, maize was the primary grain cultivated in very substantial parts of both continents. It yielded more calories per acre than did any of the grains in the Old World at the same time. Second, having been cut off from the Old World for over 10,000 years, the Americas avoided exposure to some of the worst epidemic diseases that regularly ravaged other parts of the world.

Some comparison with figures for other parts of the world in 1500 is revealing. Europe west of Russia totalled 60–70 million; China alone reached 100–150 million. The Indian subcontinent totalled 75–150 million. All of Africa had a population of 36–72 million. The regions of most intensive agricultural cultivation in the Americas—central Mexico and some parts of the Andes—attained population densities that rivalled those of the Eastern Hemisphere's most populated regions located in China and the South Asian peninsula.

### Conclusion

This portrait of the salient features of the vast number of distinct societies in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans demonstrates that it was truly an ancient land containing peoples who had a profound sense of their own history and intense pride in and identification with their particular ethnic identities. Some of the most famous native confederations and empires that the first colonists encountered—the Iroquois, Powhatans, Aztecs, and Incas, for example—proved to be relatively recent developments, ranging from several decades to several centuries of age when initially discovered. But these rather recent phenomena had built on centuries, even sometimes millennia, of cultural practices, interactions, and historical development in both North and South America. For if the peoples of the Americas possessed ancient histories and traditions, they were likewise dynamic, adaptable, and opportunistic by nature. Just a few of these precursors from earlier centuries include Cahokia, the Anasazi, the Olmecs, and the Moche. The nature of this study prevents mention of numerous advanced pre-Columbian civilizations that thrived for centuries, influenced enormous territories, and left behind extensive physical remains, and sometimes a record of their histories.

Their agricultural achievements and environmental settings (of course, inextricably interconnected) dictated the broad characteristics of the peoples of the Americas more than any other factors. The grouping of widely dispersed and ethnically distinct native societies into the encompassing classifications of sedentary, semisedentary, and nonsedentary, therefore, provides one of the fundamental units of organization of this present work. The substantial population density that characterized many areas in the Americas reflects the productive and cultural accomplishments of the inhabitants. Even certain semisedentary

regions, such as central Colombia, the Amazon River basin, the major islands of the Caribbean, and the Mississippi River basin extending into the American southeast, are now understood to have maintained dense populations, with sizable communities and religious sites common in many areas.

Thriving, vigorous, and productive in the late fifteenth century, the peoples of the Americas had no reason to be cowed by the arrival of explorers and settlers from lands never imagined. Though afflicted in many cases by the devastating impact of colonization, the indigenous cultures responded creatively and dynamically, both shaping the colonial societies installed and adapting their own to their best advantage. Their histories over the subsequent five centuries, the first half or so of which is related in this volume, demonstrate time and again the validity of describing these peoples as "resilient cultures."

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