

Chad Philip Johnson

HIST2, Pedeva-Fazlic

May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011

### The Aztec and Inca Empires

The Western Hemisphere is home to a number of mankind's earliest civilizations. Academics propose that peoples migrated from parts of Asia to Alaska over the temporary land bridge Beringia that covered the Bering Strait, perhaps as early as 20,000 BCE. This occurred three times: first with a group from northeast Asia called the Amerindians, whose ancestors include many of the Native American peoples found in all habitable areas North to South; second with a group from central Asia, whose descendents can be found today in western Canada and also includes the Navajo and Apache peoples; third with a group, also from northeastern Asia, whose modern day ancestors consist of the Inuit Eskimo peoples of northern Canada and Alaska. Many different civilizations were established in the places where these peoples settled, including the Olmecs in Mexico, the Maya in the Yucatan Peninsula, and the Chavin in the northern Andean highlands of Peru. However, two of the greatest pre-Columbian American states, the Aztec in Mexico and the Inca along the west coast of South America, rose to power around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, both of which eclipsed any European state in size and population at the time.

The Aztecs were a militaristic civilization that began to take the shape of a state in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, after groups of warlike nomads migrated to the Central Valley area of Mexico. The new capital city Tenochtitlan was established nearby the longstanding metropolis Teotihuacan. This area formed the heart of the Aztec Empire,

which included most of central Mexico and stretched into Guatemala. Millions of Amerindians lived in and around these two cities and, by the 1400s, Tenochtitlan became one of the largest cities in the world.

The Aztec ruling elites were focused on conquest and warfare and ran the state with brutality and intimidation. This served to stifle rebellions in the local population and instill fear in neighboring communities. The emperor was the primary ruler and was elected by male members of the ruling family. Assisting the emperor in administering the populace were his officials—ex-warriors of distinction who governed like feudal lords—and a group of priests, some of whom advised the emperor directly. As an example of Aztec aggressiveness, the state religion's chief war god was believed to survive on human blood. Human sacrifices were abundant and ritual cannibalism also existed.

Society was structured in a way so that ordinary freemen could become warriors, after proving their abilities in battle, and earn the right to share in the treasures obtained through the state's war efforts. Women were held in high regard for the ordeal of childbirth. Merchants traveled throughout Mesoamerica and some of them served as spies for the emperor or as vanguards for future conquests. The majority in the population were freemen and filled various roles in civic life. Those in the lowest class were the serfs, who were usually prisoners from previous conquests or victims of debt. Sometimes these people would be used for human sacrifice if selected by the priests.

Like the Aztecs, the Inca were also a militaristic civilization, but located some distance away in Southern America. Isolated from Central America, the peoples of this region began to take the shape of a state in the beginnings of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, roughly

one century before the Aztecs. One of the many tribes found near the city of Cuzco and Lake Titicaca, referred to as the Inca, began to conquer neighboring tribes, towns and cities. Over time, these Inca would come to conquer a stretch of land along the Andes from Ecuador to Argentina, forming the Incan Empire. Many millions of people lived in these lands.

In the 1450s, the ruler Pachacuti Inca both strengthened his empire and increased the warlike nature of the Incans by adopting the practice of split inheritance. This required a succeeding emperor to conquer new territories in order to establish his authority. Already excellent at organization and administration, Incan rulers were effective at maintaining control over their vast amount of land. One strategy was to deport inhabitants of conquered lands to unfamiliar parts of the empire. Another was to break up allyus, or clans, and restructure them based on residence instead of kinship. The new leaders of these changed allyus then served the central government. Colonies were sometimes established to assist in securing the loyalty of conquered peoples and to suppress rebellions.

Class divisions existed, like many societies of the time. Incan subjects gave in to the needs of the state and were exploited for their labor. The Incan government did, however, display a concern for social welfare. Grain was distributed after poor harvests and relief funds were available to assist areas affected by natural disasters. There was even a pension system for the destitute and the old. A small elite of nobles helped rule with the emperor. Large armies were on hand to maintain obedience and keep authority.

Both the Aztec Empire and Incan Empire were ultimately conquered by the Spanish, first in 1521 by Hernan Cortes and a decade later by Francisco Pizarro, respectively. Similar means were used in both feats: Native Americans perceived their deities and leaders were powerless against the Spanish which, consequently, broke their loyalties to the established rulers. Both civilizations shared many similarities in their societal traits and timelines. Each was mutually isolated from the other and yet telling characteristics of the Amerindian people still overlapped.