

CHAPTER
16

Summary

CHAPTERS IN BRIEF *People and Empires in the Americas, 500–1500*

CHAPTER OVERVIEW *Native North Americans followed several ways of life. Yet, they shared trade links and religious and social practices. The Maya of Central America developed a complex civilization of independent city-states. The Aztec of Mexico had a huge empire, but their harsh rule over conquered people caused bitterness. The Inca of South America built a vast empire in the Andes Mountains.*

1 North American Societies

KEY IDEA *Complex North American societies were linked to each other through culture and economics.*

Between about 40,000 and 12,000 years ago, hunter-gatherers moved from Asia to North America. (At that time the two continents had a land connection.) These were the first Americans, and they spread down throughout North and South America. They followed many different ways of life, each suited to the environment in which they lived.

The peoples of the Pacific Northwest, from modern Oregon to Alaska, lived in an area with many resources. They hunted whales in the sea and gathered food from the forests on the coast.

The peoples of the Southwest lived in a more difficult region. Still, they began farming the land. The Anasazi built cliff dwellings. Later, they built large apartment-style compounds. They used stone and clay baked in the sun for these buildings. They used irrigation to bring water to their crops. Later peoples living in this area continued the traditions of the Anasazi.

In the woods east of the Mississippi River, another culture arose. These people are called the Mound Builders. They built large mounds of earth that were filled with copper and stone objects. Some mounds were made in the shape of animals when seen from above. The Mississippians were a people who lived later in this area. They built a small city that was the center for their culture. It had a flat-topped pyramid with a temple on top.

The peoples of the eastern woodlands had many different cultures and spoke many different languages. They often fought over control of land. Some groups formed alliances to put an end to this fighting. The most successful of these was the Iroquois League, which linked together five different tribes in upper New York.

While these North American groups had many differences, they had some features in common,

too. Trade linked people of all regions of North America. Religious ideas were similar across the continent as well. Nearly all native North Americans thought that the world was full of spirits and that people had to follow certain rituals and customs to live in peace. They also shared great respect for the land, which they did not believe that people could own. They also shared an emphasis on the family as the most important social unit. Family included parents, children, grandparents, and other relatives. In some tribes, families were linked together with others who shared a common ancestor. These larger groups, called clans, were identified with something in nature, such as an animal, called totems.

2 Maya Kings and Cities

KEY IDEA *The Maya developed a highly complex civilization based on city-states controlled by dynasties of kings.*

A great civilization arose in what is today southern Mexico and northern Central America. This was the Maya civilization, and it appeared around A.D. 250. In their Classic Period—from 250 to 900—the Maya built large cities such as Tikal, Copán, and others. Each city was independent and ruled by a god-king. Each city was both a religious center and a trade center for the area around it. These cities were large, holding tens of thousands of people, and were full of palaces, temples, and pyramids. Archaeologists have found at least 50 Maya cities.

Trade linked these many cities. Among the trade goods were salt, flint, feathers, shells, cotton cloth, and ornaments made of jade. Cacao beans—which are used to make chocolate—were sometimes used as money. Farming of maize, or corn, beans, and squash provided the Maya's main source of food. Maya society was divided into social classes. The best warriors and priests were at the top, followed

by merchants and craft workers. Peasant farmers—the majority of the people—were at the bottom.

The Maya had a complex religion that was the center of their society. There were many gods, including one for each day. The actions of the day's god could be predicted, they thought, by following a calendar. The Maya sometimes cut themselves to offer their blood to the gods in sacrifice. Sometimes they killed enemies and sacrificed them.

To understand their gods, the Maya developed knowledge of mathematics, calendars, and astronomy. Maya math included the idea of zero, which was used to help make calendars. They had two calendars, a religious one that had thirteen 20-day months and one based on the sun that had eighteen 20-day months. They linked the two together to identify days that would bring good fortune. Maya astronomy was very accurate. The Maya observed the sun, moon, and stars to make their calendars as accurate as possible. They calculated the length of the solar year—the time it takes the earth to revolve around the sun—almost perfectly.

In the late 800s, the Maya began to decline. Historians do not know why. One explanation may be growing war between the different city-states, which drove many people out of the cities into the jungle. Another may be that the soil became less productive due to intensive farming over a long time. Whatever the cause, the Maya became a less powerful people. They continued to live in the area, but their cities were no longer the thriving trade and religious centers they had been.

3 The Aztecs Control Central Mexico

KEY IDEA *Through alliances and conquest, the Aztecs created a powerful empire in Mexico.*

The Valley of Mexico is a mountain valley more than a mile above sea level. Full of lakes and fertile soil, it was a good place for people to settle. In this area, an early city-state called Teotihuacán (“City of the Gods”) arose in the first century A.D. At its peak in the sixth century, the city had as many as 200,000 people, many of whom were involved in the trade of obsidian. This hard green or black volcanic glass was found nearby and could be used to make very sharp weapons. In the city was the huge Pyramid of the Sun, larger at its base than the largest pyramid of Egypt. By 750, Teotihuacán was abandoned for reasons that are not clear.

The next people to dominate the area were the Toltecs, who rose to power around 900 and ruled over central Mexico for about 300 years. The Toltecs worshiped a fierce war god. They were very warlike and based their empire on conquest. Around 1000, a ruler named Topiltzin encouraged the Toltec people to worship a peaceful god, Quetzalcoatl. Followers of the war god rebelled, however, and drove Topiltzin away. In time, Topiltzin and Quetzalcoatl became one in the legends of the people of the Valley of Mexico. According to these legends, he would return one day, bringing a new reign of light and peace. The legend of Quetzalcoatl lived on in central Mexico for centuries.

Around 1200, as the Toltecs were losing control of the region, another people arrived on the scene—the Aztecs. The Aztecs founded a city and grew in power. By the early 1500s, they controlled a large empire that included somewhere between 5 and 15 million people. This empire was based on military conquest and collecting tribute from conquered peoples.

Military leaders, who owned huge amounts of land, led the Aztec nation along with government officials and priests. Below them were commoners—merchants, craft workers, soldiers, and farmers who owned their land. At the bottom of society were the slaves taken as captives in battle. At the top was the emperor, who was treated as a god as well as a ruler.

The capital city—Tenochtitlán—was built on an island in a lake. The Aztecs made long causeways to connect the city to the land. The city was large, with between 200,000 and 400,000 people. It was well-planned and had a huge government and religious complex at its center.

Religion played a major role in Aztec society. Their cities held many temples built for the different gods they believed in. Priests led rituals, and the most important was for the sun god. Priests had to make the sacrifice of human blood to ensure that the sun god was happy and the sun would rise every day. People taken captive in war were sacrificed. So the need for a steady supply of victims helped push the Aztecs to fight their neighbors.

When Montezuma II became emperor in 1502, the Aztec empire began to have problems. The Aztecs ordered the other peoples they had conquered to hand over even more people for sacrifice. These other peoples finally rebelled

against the Aztecs. In the midst of this conflict, the Spanish arrived and made first contact with the Aztecs. Some Aztecs saw the Spaniards' arrival as the legendary return of Quetzalcoatl.

4 The Inca Create a Mountain Empire

KEY IDEA *The Inca built a vast empire supported by taxes, governed by a bureaucracy, and linked by extensive road systems.*

Another great civilization—the Inca—arose in the Andes Mountains of South America. It was built on the foundations made by several earlier cultures. This culture, though, united much of the Andes under one rule.

The Inca first settled in the Valley of Cuzco, in modern Peru. It had a kingdom there by the 1200s. They believed that their ruler was related to the sun god, who would bring wealth and power to them. Only men from one of 11 noble families could serve as king.

In 1438, Pachacuti became the ruler of the Inca, and he launched a campaign of conquest that expanded the empire's size. By 1500, the Inca ruled an empire that stretched along the Andes Mountains from modern Ecuador all the way south to Chile and Argentina. It held about 16 million people. The empire did not grow only through military conquest. Often the Inca offered new peoples the chance to join the empire peacefully as long as they swore loyalty to the emperor. Many peoples became part of the empire in this way. When force was needed, though, the Inca were fierce fighters.

The Inca had a very organized system for the government of their empire. Families were placed in groups of 10, 100, 1,000, and so on. Each group was led by a chief. The Inca usually let local rulers stay in place when they conquered a people—as long as the ruler and the people met key Inca demands. The most important was the need for all adult workers to spend some days each year working for the state. They might work on state farms or state building programs.

The Inca built a complex network of roads to link all parts of the empire. The Inca also built all government buildings in the same style to create a common identity for the government throughout the empire. They made all people speak a common language—the Inca tongue, called Quechua.

The Inca controlled the economy, telling people what to grow or make and how it would be distributed. They used irrigation to ensure that farmlands got enough water. They also found a way to freeze-dry potatoes—a staple crop—for times when food was scarce. The government also took care of people who needed help, such as the very old or ill.

In spite of all these advances, the Inca never developed a system of writing. All records were kept in peoples' memories. They did have a system of counting. They also had day and night calendars for information about their gods.

The Inca religion played a central role in Inca life. They believed in fewer gods than the peoples of Mexico. The most important of them were the creator god and the sun god. Cuzco, the capital, was the most important religious center. It was decorated with gold and other precious objects.

Review

1. **Clarifying** What divided and what linked native North Americans?
2. **Determining Main Ideas** What Maya cultural advances were connected to their religious beliefs? Why?
3. **Comparing and Contrasting** Compare and contrast the Maya and the Aztec in terms of government.
4. **Drawing Conclusions** Were the Aztec people good engineers? Explain your answer.
5. **Summarizing** What steps did the Inca take to unify the different peoples in their empire?