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# I

## Introduction

A line of men moves slowly up a steep staircase toward the summit of a pyramid. As each man reaches the top, he is seized and pinioned across an altar. A priest approaches, holding a stone-bladed knife with both hands. Raising the knife above his head and concentrating his strength in the blade, the priest intones a prayer, then plunges the knife downward. The man on the altar dies in a shower of his own blood. His heart is torn out and placed in a bowl. His body is carried to the edge of the steps and dropped. As it rolls and bounces toward the bottom, another man is brought forward and stretched across the altar. Hundreds of people have perished since this ceremony started; hundreds more will die before it ends.

Beside the pyramid stands a rack displaying the skulls of tens of thousands of previous victims. Like the broken bodies accumulating at the foot of the staircase, the skulls are those of captives taken in battle. They have been sacrificed to feed the sun. If the sun is not nourished with the vigorous blood of warriors, he will grow too weak for his daily struggle against the forces of darkness, and the universe will be destroyed.

Today the sun is bright and strong, obviously fit for combat. But what of tomorrow? next week? next year? The threat of destruction never passes, and the demand for blood is unrelenting.

\* \* \* \* \*

An old man sits unmoving in a dimly lighted room. Everything about him attests to his wealth and power. The clothing he wears and the room's furnishings are of the finest quality. Servants come and go, attending to his wishes. Several aides are conferring with him, their voices subdued and postures deferential. One of them asks questions and the others answer; the old man himself does not speak aloud. The interrogation concerns the crops growing on his farmlands and the preparations under way at one of his country estates, where he plans to spend the summer. Everyone can sense that he is deeply pleased, even though he does not smile or shift his gaze as he listens. Instead, he remains aloof and dignified, the perfect image of lordliness.

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Indeed, this awesome elder is a king. He claims to be descended from the sun, and his subjects revere him as a god. He has been married several hundred times, but his first and most important wife is his sister. At the moment his happiness stems from the impending visit of his favorite son, the one he has chosen to inherit the throne.

This aged and incestuous ruler, presently conducting a normal day's business, has been dead for thirty-five years. His son, who succeeded him and will dine with him tonight, died three years ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

Living men die to feed the sun, and dead men live to rule a nation. Surely we have wandered into the realm of nightmares, where everything familiar turns grotesque, and what we hope not to dream about comes to pass.

Quite the contrary. While the events described above are generalized reconstructions, they lie well within the limits of documented fact. Each episode is drawn from a culture that existed less than five hundred years ago. The scene of human sacrifice and skulls mounted on a rack portrays the Mexica Aztecs of Mexico.<sup>1</sup> The vision of a living corpse sitting in his palace depicts the Incas of Peru. As bizarre as these images may seem to twentieth-century Western minds, they were everyday realities for the Mexica and Inca, the two great imperial powers of the Americas on the eve of European discovery.

For sheer historical drama, few ancient civilizations can match the Mexica and Inca. Both cultures emerged during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries A.D.—times of turmoil in Mesoamerica and the Central Andes.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this period powerful regional states clashed in contests for political and economic supremacy. In these viciously combative settings the Mexica and Inca appeared as small societies with unsophisticated cultures. Ignored or scorned by their potent and prestigious neighbors, they seemed destined to perish as obscure, almost accidental victims in the struggles of the mighty.

Yet the Mexica and Inca not only survived the bitter conflicts surrounding them, they prevailed. In the early 1400s these two peoples, hitherto so backward and unpromising, suddenly transformed themselves into the most efficient war machines in New World prehistory. Their armies began to march outward in campaigns of conquest. By 1500 they dominated the largest states ever formed in the native Americas—the Aztec and Inca Empires. From the depths of insignificance the Mexica and Inca had vaulted to unrivaled heights of power and affluence.

Still the dramas were unfinished. Only a few decades later, in final acts worthy of Sophocles or Shakespeare, each empire collapsed. In both cases the fall was so swift as to be measured in months. Ostensibly the Aztec and Inca Empires were destroyed by military force, but their defeats had a wildly improbable air. The conquering armies contained

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only a few *hundred* Spanish adventurers. In lands where soldiers could be mustered by the tens of thousands, the invading forces were so puny that they should have been negligible.

The significance of these events extends far beyond their histrionic quality. For archaeologists and anthropologists, the Mexica and Inca raise a series of highly important questions. Why were vast empires formed in Mesoamerica and the Central Andes in late prehistoric times? Why were the Mexica and Inca the peoples who formed them? Why did their empires collapse with such stunning rapidity? And finally, what do the rise and fall of the Aztec and Inca Empires tell us about the evolution of culture in general? It is these questions that we are setting out to answer.

### **Religion and empire**

Our two opening vignettes are directly relevant to the problems posed above, for those episodes are glimpses into the state religions of the Mexica and Inca peoples. Massive human sacrifice to feed the sun and the treatment of dead kings as living beings may strike us as irrational in the extreme, but they were completely logical in their own ideological contexts. Furthermore, these practices and the beliefs underlying them were deeply implicated in the rise and fall of the Aztec and Inca Empires. The historical and anthropological questions we have asked cannot be answered without a consideration of Mexica and Inca religion.

No doubt these claims will seem surprising to many readers. In general, contemporary archaeology takes a limited approach to prehistoric ideologies. Most archaeologists simply disregard the topic. This neglect stems from a widespread view of religion as an essentially conservative force serving to maintain the status quo. Religious beliefs, runs the argument, are passive elements that react to other factors; they are non-causal and 'epiphenomenal'. Therefore, ideology can be safely ignored in studies of prehistoric culture change.

Archaeologists who disagree with this position in the abstract have had little success in providing counter-examples. Most archaeological investigations of religion have been iconographic analyses of prehistoric art styles. Despite the dangers inherent in the attempt to link symbols with their referents—the connections can be highly esoteric—iconographic studies have sometimes provided convincing identifications of specific deities or beliefs. However, the gods or concepts so identified have been isolated particulars whose relations to other aspects of culture remain vague. Hence ideology does indeed tend to appear as passive and static, even in the works of scholars who profess otherwise.

We contend that religion can in fact be a dynamic element in cultural transformations, and that the Mexica and Inca are concrete examples of such a process. In so doing we are trying to redress current

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inadequacies in archaeological explanations of culture change, but we are not proposing religion as a universal ‘prime mover’. Instead, we are explicitly advocating a multicausal view of cultural evolution.

In brief, we will argue that manipulations of traditional religious concepts and rituals played crucial roles in the rise and fall of the Aztec and Inca Empires. In the second quarter of the fifteenth century Mexica and Inca leaders instituted specific ideological reforms. While these changes were intended to serve certain limited purposes, they also proved to be highly effective adaptations to the natural and cultural environments of Mesoamerica and the Central Andes, at least in the beginning. The new state religions gave the Mexica and Inca decisive advantages over their competitors and enabled both peoples to conquer vast territories in a remarkably short time. However, in the long run the very same ideological factors created internal cultural stresses—economic and political strains—that could not be resolved. In less than a century the problems had reached the point of crisis, and what the Spaniards toppled were two states destroying themselves from within.

After presenting the basic data, we will develop our models of ‘ideological adaptation and maladaptation’ by examining other hypotheses that have been advanced to explain the origins of the two empires. All of them are ultimately inadequate, and we will try to identify exactly where each one goes wrong. We will also pay close attention to the Mexica and Inca collapses, events which most archaeologists seem content to treat in purely descriptive terms. Our goal is to explain both the origins and the collapses in a manner that incorporates the strong points of previous hypotheses while avoiding their flaws and limitations.

**Some basic definitions**

Up to this point we have been scattering the words ‘religion’, ‘ideology’, and ‘empire’ around without defining them. We cannot continue to be so cavalier; vague terms lead only to confusion. On the other hand, overly specific definitions distort reality by creating artificially sharp distinctions between overlapping and interlocking cultural phenomena. We want to find a middle ground for our terms: precise enough to be meaningful, but not so precise as to be deceptive.

Religion and ideology are perhaps the most difficult terms to define. One source of confusion is that there are many kinds of ideology (e.g., political ideology or religious ideology). Throughout this work, whether explicitly stated or not, when we refer to ideology we invariably mean *religious* ideology—including not only formal religion, but also the various metaphysical beliefs, values, and behaviors that lie outside of the guidance of formalized religious institutions or dogmas. In this sense an *ideology* is a set of interrelated ideas that provides the members of a group with a rationale for their existence. It tells the members who they are

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and explains their relations to one another, to people outside the group, to the natural world, and to the cosmos. It also establishes rules for acting in accordance with those relationships. A formal *religion* is a particular kind of religious ideology, one based on beliefs in supernatural beings or forces, with a more standardized presentation of these beliefs and, generally, an institutional structure.

For the Mexica and Inca we can in many instances use the words religion and ideology interchangeably. In the modern world there are political and philosophical ideologies that are wholly divorced from religion. Such was not the case in native Mesoamerican and Central Andean civilizations, for which ideology was ultimately religious. In Mexica and Inca culture religious, political, and philosophical thought formed an integrated whole united by belief in a supernatural order. Sometimes subdivision of that whole into discrete categories can result in misleading impositions of modern Western ideology on native systems of belief.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, analyses of the Precolumbian ideologies must proceed with extreme caution and a constant awareness of the continuity and unity of Precolumbian belief systems.

We define an *empire* as a state encompassing a large territory and incorporating a number of previously autonomous, culturally heterogeneous societies, one of which dominates the others. The dominant society, which has achieved its position by military force, exploits resources formerly controlled by the subordinate societies. While this definition of empire implies some sort of overarching administrative framework, that framework may take various forms, and it may be tightly organized or relatively loose. The exploitation of conquered peoples and territories may be continuous or sporadic.

We have added these qualifications because persons whose notions have been shaped by Old World examples may find that the Mexica state does not quite fit their concept of empire. 'Aztec Empire' is a traditional name in New World archaeology, and we think it is appropriate. The Mexica Aztecs did extend their authority over a vast territory, conquer other societies, and exploit their defeated enemies. Nonetheless, their provincial administrative system was very loose, and some readers may favor the designations 'macro-state' or 'hegemony'. Those who do should feel free to make the substitution. We will use these terms ourselves as synonyms for 'empire'.

**Documentary sources**

Most of our primary data on the Mexica and Inca are drawn from so-called 'ethnohistorical' documents, written accounts dating to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These documents fall into three broad categories: Spanish chronicles, official administrative records, and the works of native Mesoamerican and Andean authors. The classes

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overlap with one another, and the divisions are to some extent arbitrary. Here we wish only to give a brief characterization of the sources, and precise distinctions are unnecessary.

The chronicles are descriptive accounts of Aztec and Inca history and culture written by Spaniards of varying backgrounds. Many of the earliest chroniclers were conquistadors.<sup>4</sup> Some of them had taken part in the first battles in Mexico and Peru; others had arrived shortly thereafter and had done their fighting elsewhere. Examples of these conquistador-authors include Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Andrés de Tapia in Mexico, along with Pedro Pizarro and Pedro de Cieza de León in Peru. Other chroniclers were officials of the Colonial governments (e.g., Francisco López de Gómara in Mexico; Juan Polo de Ondegardo and Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa in Peru). Still others were priests (Bernardino de Sahagún, Diego Durán, Miguel Cabello Valboa, Bernabé Cobo, etc.).

The second group of sources, official records, consists of reports and other documents prepared for Colonial civil and religious administrations. This body of evidence includes such items as the reports of census-takers (the Mexican and Andean *Relaciones Geográficas*, Alonso de Zorita, Iñigo Ortiz de Zúñiga, etc.). There are also descriptions of local religious beliefs and rituals submitted by parish priests engaged in the attempt to convert the natives to Christianity (e.g., Francisco de Avila, Pablo Joseph de Arriaga, etc.). In addition, archives in Mexico, Peru, and Spain contain huge numbers of depositions taken in legal cases—disputes over land tenure, rights to irrigation water, and so on. These legal papers contain valuable anthropological data, and during the past few decades ethnohistorians have begun to publish and analyze some of them. Also compiled for official purposes were early dictionaries of native languages, which constitute another useful set of data.

If one considers the Aztec and Inca Empires separately, the Spanish sources are not entirely equivalent. In general, the Aztec data are much better. In Mexico the Spaniards consolidated their power and established a stable colonial government within about two years, and they began to record their observations of indigenous cultures almost immediately. In contrast, the first few decades of Spanish rule in Peru were full of factional disputes, political assassinations, and civil strife among the colonists. In this atmosphere of violence hardly anyone was interested in collecting data on the Inca Empire. Aside from a few brief narrations of the conquest itself, accounts of Inca culture did not begin to appear until about twenty years after the Spaniards' arrival. During that interval, short as it was, native societies had been severely disrupted, and a great deal of information was lost.

However, the most striking difference between the Mesoamerican and Central Andean data lies in the works of native authors. In Mesoamerica native sources are both more numerous and much closer in time to the

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Precolumbian world. There are accounts of the Aztec Empire written after the conquest in Spanish by Indian authors drawing on older native records (e.g., Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Alvarado Tezozomoc, Chimalpahin). We also have the codices, records set down on bark paper in the traditional Aztec picture-writing. Some of them date to the first few years of the Colonial era (e.g., Codex Mendoza, Codex Magliabecchiano, Matrícula de Tributos). Others may even be *pre-conquest* (e.g., the Borgia, Borbonicus, and Nuttall Codices). In Mexico the Aztec peoples began to speak for themselves at an early date, and they spoke relatively often.

In the Andean world native voices were fewer and later. In fact, there were only two full-blooded Indian chroniclers, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala and Joan de Santacruz Pachacuti, neither of whom was ethnically Inca. Both of them wrote their works some eighty years after the conquest, around 1610-15.<sup>5</sup> The only other figure who might be assigned to the category of 'native author', Garcilaso de la Vega, fits uncomfortably. He was born in Peru, the son of a Spanish father and an Inca mother. However, he did not set down his description of Inca culture and history until the early seventeenth century, by which time he was an old man who had lived most of his life in Spain.

All of the sources present difficulties, which we will discuss in more detail later. Here it is enough to say that the Spanish documents show varying degrees of consistency and reliability. Even the most careful writers did not fully understand Mexica or Inca culture, and they sometimes reinterpreted and Europeanized alien concepts presented to them by their informants. The works of native authors can be used to balance ethnocentric Spanish distortions, but comparative study has shown them to be full of historical inaccuracies. Some of the native chroniclers compounded the problem with confusing styles, ambiguous remarks, and internal factual inconsistency. Therefore, the ethnohistorical data must be used with great care; interpretation requires constant comparison and weighing of the evidence.

**Archaeology, ethnohistory, and anthropological theory**

Of course, ethnohistorical accounts are not the only kind of information at our disposal: we also have the rich archaeological records of Mesoamerica and the Central Andes. We intend to use both types of data in our analyses. If we must depend primarily on documentary sources for some questions, for others we will rely heavily on archaeological evidence and interpretations—especially in Chapter 4, where we will examine conflicting interpretations of the rise of the Aztec and Inca Empires. Our goal is to use archaeology and ethnohistory as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, approaches to the past.

Indeed, in the past twenty-five years it has become obvious that the

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written records of ethnohistory and the material remains of archaeology can be profitably combined in the study of late prehistoric New World civilizations.<sup>6</sup> The two sets of data can serve as cross-checks on one another, with each helping to increase our understanding of the other. This statement is particularly applicable to investigations of social, political, and religious institutions, where the fragmentary documentary record has the limitations noted above and the archaeological remains are less readily interpretable than materials relating to technology or subsistence economy. By interdigitating the two kinds of evidence, we can arrive at a much fuller picture than either alone can provide.

However, the value of combining documentary accounts and archaeological evidence extends far beyond their ability to cross-check and reinforce each other in the investigation of specific aspects of Mexica and Inca society. Taken together, archaeological and ethnohistorical data can be a powerful test for evaluating anthropological theories of cultural evolution. In Kent Flannery's words:

Most recent evolutionary studies by ethnologists are *synchronic*: they take a series of unrelated, contemporary societies on different levels of development and, by comparing them, try to imagine which institutional changes could have turned the simpler into the more complex... The ethnologists quite rightly point to the richer amounts of detail available in their contemporary societies; yet all their reconstructions amount to 'just so' stories, because there is almost no society for which time depth and rigorous proof of evolutionary causes are available.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, archaeological and ethnohistorical data are both *diachronic*. When we can combine them, we can get a richly detailed view of the ways in which a single society or cultural tradition changed through time. We can then provide a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of change—the 'rigorous proof of evolutionary causes' Flannery demands. In this way we can identify the strengths and weaknesses of competing theories on cultural evolution.

Specifically, we believe that a combination of archaeological and ethnohistorical data is the best way to begin working toward a general statement of ideology's role in cultural evolution. This problem is one of the thorniest in anthropology, and at present there is no truly satisfactory solution. Nonetheless, by reviewing a wide range of anthropological theories in the light of the Aztec and Inca case studies, we will try in Chapter 5 to show just how crucial the question is. In the end, every theory that purports to explain cultural evolution fails—almost invariably because of its inability to deal with ideology. Conversely, those current theories that are directly concerned with ideology have been unable to explain cultural evolution. If anthropological theory is to progress, we must find a new synthesis.

As we shall see (Chapter 5), in recent years several anthropologists



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from very different schools of thought have reached exactly the same conclusion. As a result, these scholars are paying increased attention to ideology as an active element of culture. Their numbers are few, and the Aztec and Inca data show that they have not yet gone far enough in their analyses. Nonetheless, these cultural anthropologists do at least seem to be moving toward a new synthesis. If archaeologists want to understand cultural evolution, we must do likewise. We cannot continue to treat ideology as static or passive. We must recognize that ideology can be a dynamic force, and we must seek new generalizations about its role in cultural change. While it may be too early for definitive statements, we hope that this comparative study of the Aztec and Inca Empires will be a step in the right direction.

### Notes to Chapter 1

- 1 'Aztec' is a generic term for the late prehistoric cultures of the Valley of Mexico. The Mexica were the foremost of the Aztec peoples at the time of the Spanish Conquest.
- 2 Mesoamerica and the Central Andes are archaeological culture areas. They include large parts of Mexico and Peru, respectively, but their borders do not follow modern national boundaries. More precise definitions are given in Chapters 2 and 3.
- 3 We are speaking here only of ideas. For analytical purposes the religious and political *behaviors* of the Mexica and Inca peoples are somewhat more separable. Nonetheless, they were tightly interwoven, and any separation is to some degree artificial. In the end, the Aztec and Inca Empires can only be understood if religious and political ideas and behaviors are viewed as an integrated whole (see Chapters 4 and 5).
- 4 The conquistadors never referred to themselves as 'soldiers' (*soldados*). The word did exist in sixteenth-century Spanish, but it was used for men who had sold their services to professional military leaders and were bound to obey those leaders' commands. The men who toppled the Aztec and Inca Empires were taking a chance at wealth and glory, not drawing a salary, and they felt free to argue with their leaders. They called themselves 'people', 'men', 'Spaniards', 'Christians', 'horsemen', 'footmen', and 'conquerors'—'first conquerors' if they had taken part in the initial decisive battles. In their minds 'soldier' was a derogatory term combining the negative connotations of 'mercenary' and 'servant' (Lockhart 1972: 17-22).
- 5 Guaman Poma's (1936) copiously illustrated, 1200-page letter to the King of Spain is the closest thing we have to a Peruvian codex.
- 6 For example, see Menzel 1959; Rowe 1967; Murra 1962; Morris and Thompson 1970; Morris 1972, 1974; Murra and Morris 1976; Conrad 1977.
- 7 Flannery 1972: 404.

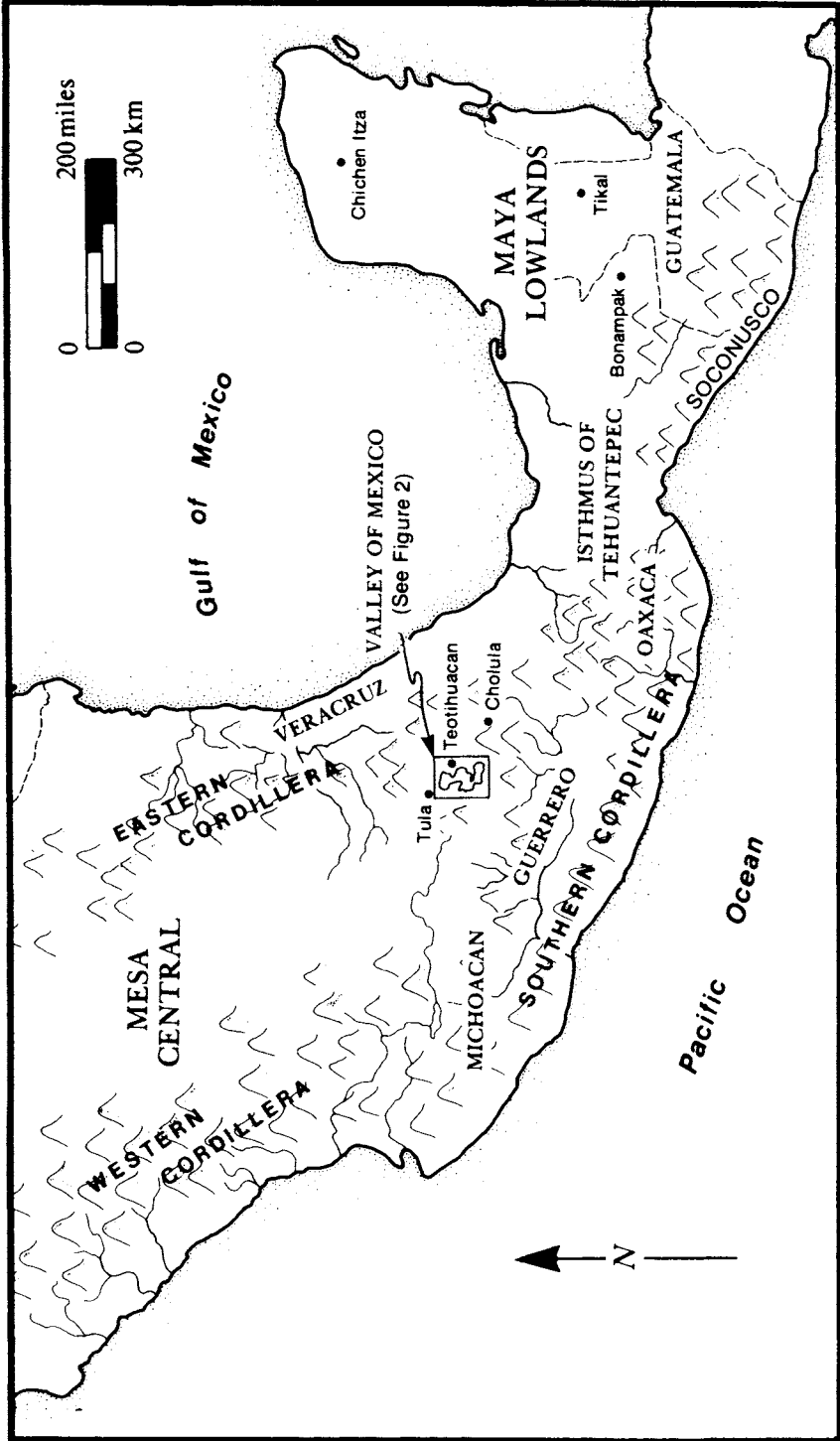


Fig. 1. Mesoamerica