

Colonial Latin America

TENTH EDITION

Mark A. Burkholder  Lyman L. Johnson



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MARK A. BURKHOLDER
University of Missouri–St. Louis

LYMAN L. JOHNSON
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

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PREFACE



Since the first edition of *Colonial Latin America* in 1990, numerous scholars have published valuable works on the colonial and early national periods. From them, we have drawn new material included in the tenth edition. Our debt to our colleagues' recent books can be found in the revised suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter.

New to This Edition

- Revised discussion of conquest and early settlement in Chapter 2. Revised slave trade estimates in Chapter 4. Improved and expanded discussion of labor and wages in Chapter 5.
- Revised examination of plantation slavery in Chapter 6.
- Improved and expanded discussion of *mayorazgos* and family life in Chapter 7.
- Improved discussion of rural and urban settings and daily life in Chapter 8.
- Updated suggested readings throughout the book.

We again call students' attention to the valuable five-volume reference work *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture*, edited by Barbara A. Tenenbaum, and to an important volume of bibliographical essays, *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. XI, *Bibliographical Essays*, edited by Leslie Bethell. The periodicals listed in "A Note on Periodical Literature and Suggested Readings" after the Epilogue continue to enrich the study of colonial Latin America. We strongly recommend that student readers use these wonderful resources when they begin their research.

We remain grateful for the assistance of Kenneth J. Andrien and Allan J. Kuethe in revising and expanding our treatment of the early eighteenth century. For this edition Kendall Brown has helped guide additional revisions to our discussion of late colonial administrative reforms. In recent editions we have relied heavily on colleagues who have specialized knowledge. We are also very grateful

to Camilla Townsend and Susan Kellogg for improving our understanding of Mesoamerica and the era of conquest. Christon I. Archer and Jaime E. Rodríguez O. encouraged us to rethink the process of revolution and independence for the seventh edition. Marcela Echeverri provided a perceptive and constructive critique of several chapters, and we are grateful for her assistance. Karen Graubart and Peter Villeda were very helpful in guiding our revision of the discussion of *limpieza de sangre* in Chapter 6. Alex Borucki generously assisted our efforts to modernize our estimates of the slave trade. We also thank colleagues and students who have used the book in classes and offered suggestions for improvement. We alone are responsible for the results.

We are indebted to the institutions and individuals that have supported our efforts by granting permission to use images from their collections. We are especially grateful to the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas Libraries, the Denver Art Museum, and the Collection of Frederick and Jan Mayer of Denver, Colorado. Finally, we want to thank again Sue Johnson and Carol Burkholder for their unflagging support. With great appreciation and love we again dedicate this revision to them.

St. Louis, Missouri
Charlotte, North Carolina

M.A.B.
L.L.J.



Map 1 Topographical Map of Latin America.

CHAPTER 1



America, Iberia, and Africa Before the Conquest

CHRONOLOGY

c. 100 B.C.–A.D. 750	Emergence and prominence of Teotihuacan in Mesoamerica
250–900	Maya Classic period
718–1492	Christian Reconquest of Iberia from Muslims
c. 900–1540	Maya Postclassic period
c. 1325	Mexica begin to build Tenochtitlan
1415	Portuguese capture Ceuta in North Africa
1426–1521	Triple Alliance and Aztec Empire
c. 1438–1533	Inka Empire
1469	Marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabel of Castile
1492	Columbus's first voyage; fall of Granada; expulsion of Jews from "Spain"; first Castilian grammar published
1493	Papal donation; Columbus's second voyage (1493–96); "Columbian Exchange" begins with Spanish introduction of sugarcane, horses, cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, chickens, wheat, olive trees, and grapevines into Caribbean islands
1494	Treaty of Tordesillas
1500	Pedro Alvarez Cabral lands on Brazilian coast
1502	Nicolás de Ovando takes about 2,500 settlers, including Las Casas, to Española; Moctezuma II elected <i>tlaotoni</i> of Mexica
1510–11	Diego de Velázquez conquers Cuba
1512	Laws of Burgos
1513	Blasco Núñez de Balboa crosses the Isthmus of Panama to Pacific

AMERINDIAN CIVILIZATIONS ON THE EVE OF EUROPEAN CONQUEST

The Western Hemisphere's history begins with the arrival of its first inhabitants. Most scholars agree that the hemisphere was settled in a series of migrations across the Bering Strait from Asia. There is less consensus about when these migrations took place. Hunting populations expanded rapidly along the west coast of the hemisphere

after 14,000 B.C. Some evidence suggests, however, that human populations may have been present in South America as early as 35,000 B.C. If this is verified by additional research, then some humans probably reached the hemisphere using small boats.

Regardless of the date of first arrivals, it took millennia to occupy the hemisphere. Societies in Mexico, Central America, and the Andean region had initiated the development of agriculture and complex political forms before 5000 B.C. On the other hand, the Caribbean Basin and the plains of southern South America were inhabited less



The main temple at Chichen Itza, near the modern city of Merida, Mexico. Chichen Itza was the major Postclassic-era Maya city.

than 2,000 years before Columbus's arrival. The hemisphere's indigenous population at the moment of contact in 1492 was probably between 35 million and 55 million.

Although the Aztecs and Inkas are the civilizations best known during the age of conquest, the inhabitants of these empires constituted only a minority of the total Amerindian population and resided in geographic areas that together represented only a small portion of Latin America's landscape. Aymara, Caribs, Chichimecas, Ge, Guaraní, Mapuche, Maya, Muisca, Otomí, Pueblo, Quibaya, Taíno, Tepaneca, Tupí, and Zapotec joined a host of other peoples and linguistic groups who inhabited the Americas; together they formed a human mosaic whose diverse characteristics greatly influenced the ways in which colonial Latin America developed.

By 1500 over 350 major tribal groups, 15 distinct cultural centers, and more than 160 linguistic stocks could be found in Latin America. Despite the variety suggested by these numbers, there were, essentially, three forms or levels of Indian culture. One was a largely nomadic group that relied on hunting, fishing, and gathering for subsistence; its members had changed little from the people who first made stone points in the New World in about 10,000 B.C. A second group was sedentary or semisedentary and depended primarily on agriculture for subsistence. Having developed technologies different from those of the nomadic peoples, its members benefited from the domestication of plants that had taken place after about 5000 B.C. The third group featured dense, sedentary populations, surplus



Inka ruin, Machu Picchu, Peru.

agricultural production, greater specialization of labor and social differentiation, and large-scale public construction projects. These complex civilizations were located only in Mesoamerica and western South America. The civilizations of Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, Tiwanaku, Chimú, and several Maya cultures were among its most important early examples.

Mesoamerica is the term employed to define a culturally unified geographic area that includes central and southern Mexico and most of Central America north of the Isthmus of Panama. Marked by great diversity of landscape and climate, Mesoamerica was the cradle of a series of advanced urbanized civilizations based on sedentary agriculture. Never more than a fraction of this large region was ever united politically. Instead, its inhabitants shared a cultural tradition that flourished most spectacularly in the hot country of the Gulf of Mexico coast with the Olmec civilization between 1200 and 400 B.C. While linguistic diversity and regional variations persisted, common cultural elements can be traced from this origin. They include polytheistic religions in which the deities had dual (male/female) natures, rulers who exercised both secular and religious roles, the use of warfare for obtaining sacrificial victims, and a belief that bloodletting was necessary for a society's survival and prosperity. The use of ritual as well as solar calendars, the construction of monumental architecture including pyramids, the employment of a numeric system that used twenty as its base, emphasis on a jaguar deity, and the ubiquity of ball courts in which a game using a solid rubber ball was played were additional characteristics of complex Mesoamerican societies. Long-distance trade involving both subsistence goods and artisanal products using obsidian, jade, shell, and feathers, among other items, facilitated cultural exchange in the absence of political integration. This rich cultural tradition influenced all later Mesoamerican civilizations, including the Maya and the Aztecs.

Following the decline of the Olmecs, the city of Teotihuacan (100 B.C.–A.D. 750) exercised enormous influence in the development and spread of Mesoamerican culture. Located about thirty miles northeast of modern Mexico City, Teotihuacan was the center of a commercial system that extended to the Gulf coast and into Central America. At its height its urban population reached 150,000, making it one of the world's largest cities at that time. One of the most important temples at Teotihuacan was devoted to the cult of the god Quetzalcoatl, or Feathered Serpent. Commonly represented as a snake covered with feathers, Quetzalcoatl was associated with fertility, the wind, and creation. Following Teotihuacan's decline in the eighth century, the Toltecs dominated central Mexico from their capital at Tula.

Although not clearly tied to Teotihuacan's decline in the eighth century, the Toltecs came to dominate central Mexico by the tenth century. The Toltecs used military power to extend their influence and manage complex tribute and trade relationships with dependencies. Tula was both an administrative and a religious center. It was constructed on a grand scale with colonnaded patios, raised platforms, and numerous temples. Many of the buildings were decorated with scenes suggesting warfare and human sacrifice.

In the Andean region, geographic conditions were even more demanding than in Mesoamerica. The development of complex civilizations after 1000 B.C. depended



Representations of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent at Teotihuacan. Teotihuacan was the largest of the Classic-era cities in Mexico. In the background is the Temple of the Moon.

on the earlier evolution of social and economic strategies in response to changing environmental, demographic, and social conditions. Along the arid coastal plain and in the high valleys of the Andes, collective labor obligations made possible both intensive agriculture and long-distance trade. Irrigation projects, the draining of wetlands, large-scale terracing, and road construction all depended on collective labor obligations, called *mit'a* by the native population and later *mita* by the Spanish. The exchange of goods produced in the region's ecological niches (lowland maize, highland llama wool, and coca from the upper Amazon region, for example) enriched these societies and made possible the rise of cities and the growth of powerful states.

The chronology of state development and urbanization within the Andean region was generally similar to that in Mesoamerica. However, there was greater variation in cultural practices because of the unique environmental challenges posed by the arid coastal plain and high altitudes of the mountainous regions. Chavín was one of the most important early Andean civilizations. It dominated a populous region that included substantial portions of both the highlands and coastal plain of Peru between 900 and 250 B.C. Located at 10,300 feet in the eastern range of the Andes north of present-day Lima, its capital, Chavín de Huantar, was a commercial center that built upon a long tradition of urban development and monumental architecture initiated earlier on the Peruvian coast. The expansion of Chavín's power was probably related to the introduction of llamas from the highlands to the coastal lowlands. Llamas dramatically reduced the need for human carriers in trade since one driver could control as many as thirty animals, each carrying up to seventy pounds. Chavín exhibited all the distinguishing

characteristics found in later Andean civilizations. Its architecture featured large complexes of multilevel platforms topped by small residences for the elite and buildings used for ritual purposes. As in the urban centers of Mesoamerica, society was stratified from the ruler down. Fine textile production, gold jewelry, and polytheistic religion also characterized the Chavín civilization until its collapse. By the time that increased warfare disrupted long-distance trade and brought about the demise of Chavín, its material culture, stonework, architecture, and urban planning had spread throughout the Andean region. The Moche, who dominated the north coastal region of Peru from A.D. 200 to 700, were heirs to many of Chavín's contributions.

In the highlands two powerful civilizations, Tiwanaku and Wari, developed after A.D. 500. Tiwanaku's expansion near Lake Titicaca in modern Bolivia rested on both enormous drainage projects that created raised fields and permitted intensive cultivation and the control of large herds of llamas. At the height of its power, Tiwanaku was the center of a large trade network that stretched to Chile in the south. Pack-trains of llamas connected the capital to dependent towns that organized the exchange of goods produced throughout the Andean region. Large buildings constructed of cut stone dominated the urban center of Tiwanaku. A hereditary elite able to control a substantial labor force ruled this highly stratified society. Wari, located near present-day Ayacucho, may have begun as a dependency of Tiwanaku, but it soon established an independent identity and expanded through warfare into the northern highlands as well as the coastal area once controlled by the Moche. The construction of roads as part of Wari's strategy for military control and communication was a legacy bequeathed to the Inkas who, like the Aztecs in central Mexico, held political dominance in the populous areas of the Andean region when Europeans first arrived.

The Maya

Building in part upon the rich legacy of the Olmec culture, the Maya developed an impressive civilization in present-day Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, southern Mexico, and Yucatan. Although sharing many cultural similarities, the Maya were separated by linguistic differences and organized into numerous city-states. Because no Maya center was ever powerful enough to impose a unified political structure, the long period from around A.D. 200 to the arrival of the Spaniards was characterized by the struggle of rival kingdoms for regional domination.

Given the difficulties imposed by fragile soils, dense forest, and a tropical climate characterized by periods of drought and heavy rains, Maya cultural and architectural achievements were remarkable. The development of effective agricultural technologies increased productivity and led to population growth and urbanization. During the Classic era (A.D. 250–900), the largest Maya cities had populations in excess of 50,000.

From earliest times, Maya agriculturalists used slash-and-burn or "swidden" cultivation in which small trees and brush were cut down and then burned. Although this form of cultivation produced high yields in initial years, it quickly used up the soil's nutrients. Falling yields forced farmers to move to new fields

and begin the cycle again. The high urban population levels of the Classic period, therefore, required more intensive agriculture as well. Wherever possible, local rulers organized their lineages or clans in large-scale projects to drain swamps and low-lying river banks to create elevated fields near urban centers. The construction of trenches to drain surplus water yielded rich soils that the workers then heaped up to create wetland fields. In areas with long dry seasons, the Maya constructed irrigation canals and reservoirs. Terraces built on mountainsides caught rainwater runoff and permitted additional cultivation. Household gardens further augmented food supplies with condiments and fruits that supplemented the dietary staples of maize (corn), beans, and squash. The Maya also managed nearby forests to promote the growth of useful trees and shrubs as well as the conservation of deer and other animals that provided dietary protein.

In the late Preclassic period, the increased agricultural production that followed these innovations helped make possible the development of large cities like El Mirador. During the Classic period, Maya city-states proliferated in an era of dramatic urbanization. One of the largest of the Classic-period cities was Tikal, in modern Guatemala, which had a population of more than 50,000 and controlled a network of dependent cities and towns. Smaller city-states had fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. Each independent city served as the religious and political center for the subordinated agricultural population dispersed among the *milpas* (maize fields) of the countryside.

Classic-era cities had dense central precincts visually dominated by monumental architecture. Large cities boasted numerous high pyramids topped by enclosed sanctuaries, ceremonial platforms, and elaborately decorated elite palaces built on elevated platforms or on constructed mounds. Pyramids also served as burial locations for rulers and other members of the elite. The largest and most impressive buildings were located around open plazas that provided the ceremonial center for public life. Even small towns had at least one such plaza dominated by one or more pyramids and elite residences.

Impressive public rituals held in Maya cities attracted both full-time urban residents and the rural population from the surrounding countryside. While the smaller dependent communities provided an elaborate ritual life, the capital of every Maya city-state sustained a dense schedule of impressive ceremonies led by its royal family and powerful nobles. These ritual performances were carefully staged on elevated platforms and pyramids that drew the viewers' attention heavenward. The combination of richly decorated architecture, complex ritual, and splendid costumes served to awe the masses and legitimize the authority of ruler and nobility. Because there were no clear boundaries between political and religious functions, divination, sacrifice, astronomy, and hieroglyphic writing were the domain of rulers, their consorts, and other members of the hereditary elite.

Scenes of ritual life depicted on ceramics and wall paintings clearly indicate the Maya's love of decoration. Sculpture and stucco decorations painted in fine designs and bright colors covered nearly all public buildings. Religious allegories, the genealogies of rulers, and important historical events were familiar motifs.



The Nunnery complex at the Classic-era Maya site of Uxmal.

Artisans also erected beautifully carved altars and stone monoliths (stelae) near major temples. Throughout their pre-Columbian existence, the Maya constructed this rich architectural and artistic legacy with the limited technology present in Mesoamerica. The Maya did not develop metallurgy until late in the Classic era and used it only to produce jewelry and decorations for the elite. In the Postclassic period, the Maya initiated the use of copper axes in agriculture. Artisans and their numerous male and female assistants cut and fitted the stones used for palaces, pyramids, and housing aided only by levers and stone tools. Each new wave of urban construction represented the mobilization and organization of thousands of laborers by the elite. Thus, the urban building boom of the Classic period reflected the growing ability of rulers to appropriate the labor of their subjects more than the application of new or improved technologies.

The ancient Maya traced their ancestry through both male and female lines, but family lineage was patrilineal. Maya families were large, and multiple generations commonly lived in a single residence or compound. In each generation a single male, usually the eldest, held authority within the family. Related families were, in turn, organized in hierarchical lineages or clans with one family and its male head granted preeminence.

By the Classic period, Maya society was rigidly hierarchical. Hereditary lords and a middling group of skilled artisans and scribes were separated by a deep social chasm from the farmers of the countryside. To justify their elevated position, the elite claimed to be the patrilineal descendants of the original warlords who had initiated the development of urban life. Most commonly, kings were selected by primogeniture from the ruling family; on at least two occasions during the Classic

period, however, women ruled Maya city-states. Other elite families provided men who led military units in battle, administered dependent towns, collected taxes, and supervised market activities. Although literacy was very limited, writing was important to religious and political life. As a result, scribes held an elevated position in Maya society, and some may have come from noble families.

In the Classic period and earlier, rulers and other members of the elite, assisted by shamans (diviners and curers who communicated with the spirit world), served both priestly and political functions. They decorated their bodies with paint and tattoos and wore elaborate costumes of textiles, animal skins, and feathers to project secular power and divine sanction. Kings communicated directly with the supernatural residents of the other worlds and with deified royal ancestors through bloodletting rituals and hallucinogenic trances. Scenes of rulers and their consorts drawing blood from tongues, lips, ears, and even genitals survive on frescos and painted pottery. For the Maya, blood sacrifice was essential to the very survival of the world. The blood of the most exalted members of the society was, therefore, the greatest gift to the gods.

In the Postclassic period, the boundary between political and religious authority remained blurred, although there is some evidence that a priestly class distinguishable from the political elite had come into existence. Priests, like other members of the elite, inherited their exalted status and were not celibate. They provided divinations and prophecies, often induced by hallucinogens, and kept the genealogies of the lineages. They and the rulers directed the human sacrifices required by the gods. Finally, priests provided the society's intellectual class and were, therefore, responsible for conserving the skills of reading and writing, for pursuing astronomical knowledge, and for maintaining the Maya calendars.

Although some merchants and artisans may have been related to the ruling lineages, these two occupations occupied an intermediate status between the lords and commoners. From the Preclassic period, the Maya maintained complex trade relationships over long distances. Both basic subsistence goods and luxury items were available in markets scheduled to meet on set days in the Maya calendar. Each kingdom, indeed each village and household, used these markets to acquire products not produced locally. As a result, a great deal of specialization was present by the Classic period. Maya exchanged jade, cacao (chocolate beans used both to produce a beverage consumed by the elite and as money), cotton textiles, ceramics, salt, feathers, and foods, especially game and honey taken from the forest. Merchants could acquire significant wealth and the wealthiest lived in large multiple-family compounds. Some scholars believe that by the Postclassic period rulers forced merchants to pay tribute and prohibited them from dressing in the garments of the nobility.

A specialized class of urban craftsmen produced the beautiful jewelry, ceramics, murals, and architecture of the Maya. Their skills were essential for the creation and maintenance of both public buildings and ritual life, and, as a result, they enjoyed a higher status than rural commoners. Although the evidence is ambiguous, certain families who trained children to follow their parents' careers probably

monopolized the craft skills. Some crafts may also have had a regional basis, with weavers concentrated in cotton-growing areas and the craftsmen who fashioned tools and weapons from obsidian (volcanic glass) located near the source of their raw materials. Most clearly, the largest and wealthiest cities had the largest concentration of accomplished craftsmen.

The vast majority of the Maya were born into lower-status families and devoted their lives to agriculture. These commoners inherited their land rights through their lineage. Members of lineages were obligated to help family members in shared agricultural tasks as well as to provide labor and tribute to the elite. Female commoners played a central role in the household economy, maintaining essential garden plots, weaving, and managing family life. By the end of the Classic period a large group of commoners labored on the private estates of the nobility. Below this group were the slaves. Slaves were commoners taken captive in war or criminals; once enslaved, the status could become hereditary unless the slave were ransomed by his family.

Warfare was central to Maya life and infused with religious meaning and elaborate ritual. Battle scenes and the depiction of the torture and sacrifice of captives were frequent decorative themes. Since military movements were easier and little agricultural labor was required, the hot and dry spring season was the season of armed conflict. Maya military forces usually fought to secure captives rather than territory, although during the Classic period Tikal and other powerful kingdoms initiated wars of conquest against their neighbors.

Days of fasting, a sacred ritual to enlist the support of the gods, and rites of purification led by the king and high-ranking nobles preceded battle. A king and his nobles donned elaborate war regalia and carefully painted their faces in preparation. Armies also included large numbers of commoners, but these levies had little formal training and employed inferior weapons. Typically, the victorious side ritually sacrificed elite captives. Surviving murals and ceramic paintings show kings and other nobles stripped of their rich garments and compelled to kneel at the feet of their rivals or forced to endure torture. Most wars, however, were inconclusive, and seldom was a ruling lineage overturned or territory lost as the result of battlefield defeat.

Building on the Olmec legacy, the Maya made important contributions to the development of the Mesoamerican calendar. They also developed both mathematics and writing. The complexity of their calendric system reflected the Maya concern with time and the cosmos. Each day was identified by three separate dating systems. As was true throughout Mesoamerica, two calendars tracked the ritual cycle (260 days divided into 13 months of 20 days) and a solar calendar (365 days divided into 18 months of 20 days, with 5 unfavorable days at the end of the year). The Maya believed the concurrence of these two calendars every fifty-two years to be especially ominous. Uniquely among Mesoamerican peoples, the Maya also maintained a continuous "long count" calendar that began at creation, an event they dated at 3114 B.C. These accurate calendric systems and the astronomical observations upon which they were based depended on Maya contributions to

mathematics and writing. Their system of mathematics included the concepts of the zero and place value but had limited notational signs.

The Maya were almost unique among pre-Columbian cultures in the Americas in producing a written literature that has survived to the modern era. Employing a form of hieroglyphic inscription that signified whole words or concepts as well as phonetic cues or syllables, Maya scribes most commonly wrote about public life, religious belief, and the genealogies and biographies of rulers and their ancestors. Only four of these books of bark paper or deerskin still exist. However, other elements of the Maya literary and historical legacy remain inscribed on ceramics, jade, shell, bone, stone columns, and monumental buildings of the urban centers.

The destruction or abandonment of many major urban centers between A.D. 800 and 900 brought the Maya Classic period to a close. There were probably several interrelated causes for this catastrophe, but no scholarly consensus exists. The destruction in about A.D. 750 of Teotihuacan, the important central Mexican commercial center tied to the Maya region, disrupted long-distance trade and thus might have undermined the legitimacy of Maya rulers. More likely, growing population pressure, especially among the elite, led to environmental degradation and falling agricultural productivity. This environmental crisis, in turn, might have led to social unrest and increased levels of warfare as desperate elites sought to increase the tributes of agriculturalists or to acquire additional agricultural land through conquest. Some scholars have suggested that climatic change contributed to the collapse, but evidence supporting this theory is slight. Regardless of the disputed causes, there is agreement that by A.D. 900 the Maya had begun to enter a new era, the Postclassic.

Archaeology has revealed evidence of cultural ties between the Toltecs of central Mexico and the Maya of the Yucatan during the early Postclassic period, but the character of this relationship is in dispute. Chichen Itza, the most impressive Postclassic Maya center, shared both architectural elements and a symbolic vocabulary with the Toltec capital of Tula. Among these shared characteristics was a *tzompantli*, a low platform decorated with carvings of human heads. Bas-relief carvings of jaguars, vultures holding human hearts, and images of the rain god Tlaloc were also found at both cities. Other key architectural elements of Chichen Itza appear to have central Mexican antecedents as well. The Temple of Warriors, a stepped platform surmounted by columns, was embellished with a *chacmool*, a characteristic Toltec sculpture of a figure holding a bowl on his stomach to receive sacrifices. Finally, while Maya cities had ball courts from early days, Chichen Itza's largest court was constructed and decorated in the style of the Toltecs.

Sixteenth-century histories written by Spanish priests suggest that the Toltecs conquered the Maya of the Yucatan. Based on native informants, these histories claim that the Toltec invasion was led by the prince Topiltzin, who had been forced to leave Tula by a rival warrior faction associated with the god Tezcatlipoca. Defeated by the powerful magic of his adversary, Topiltzin, called Kukulcan by the Maya, and his followers migrated to the east and established a new capital at Chichen Itza after defeating the Maya.

Recent archaeology has confirmed cultural parallels between the Maya and the Toltecs, but the direction of cultural exchange remains unclear. It is even possible that changes in Maya iconography and architecture reflected the impact of cultural intermediaries. The Putun Maya from the Tabasco region on the Gulf of Mexico coast had deep and sustained relationships with the Maya of Yucatan and the Toltecs. Culturally and linguistically distinct, the Putun Maya lived on the northwestern periphery of Classic-era Maya civilization. They had strong trade and political connections with central Mexico and spread elements of Toltec cultural practice. As their influence expanded, they established themselves at Chichen Itza. It is also possible that a small number of Toltec mercenaries reinforced this expansion and contributed to the transmission of central Mexican cultural characteristics.

Chichen Itza was governed by a council or, perhaps, a multiple kingship form of government. The city's rulers exercised economic and political influence over a wide area, imposing tribute requirements on weaker neighbors by military expansion. Although the reasons are not yet clear, it is known that Chichen Itza experienced significant population loss after A.D. 1100 and was conquered militarily around A.D. 1221. Following this catastrophe, the city retained a small population and may have remained a religious pilgrimage site.

By the end of the thirteenth century, a successor people, the Itza, had come to exercise political and economic authority across much of Yucatan. The origin of the Itza is unclear. As their name suggests, they claimed to be the people of Chichen Itza. Their elite claimed descent from the Toltecs and were linguistically distinct from the region's original population. It seems more likely that they were related in some way to the Putun Maya.

The Itza eventually probably established the important city of Mayapan, but many Maya groups remained independent. At its peak, Mayapan had a population of approximately 15,000. The size of the city's population and the quality of its construction were far inferior to that of either the major Classic centers, like Tikal, or Postclassic Chichen Itza. Unlike the major Classic period cities that had served as centers for agricultural and craft production and as markets, Mayapan served as the capital of a regional confederation that compelled defeated peoples to pay tribute. This oppressive economic system probably provoked the warfare and rebellion that led to the end of Itza domination and the destruction of Mayapan about A.D. 1450. The Itza persisted, despite these reversals, continuing an independent existence in the Peten region of Guatemala until defeated by a Spanish military force in 1697.

From the fall of Mayapan until the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century, the Maya returned to the pattern of dispersed political authority. During this final period, towns of modest size, some with no more than 500 inhabitants, exercised control over a more dispersed and more rural population than had been the case in earlier eras. The cycles of expansion and collapse experienced by Chichen Itza imitated in many ways the rise and fall of important Maya centers during the Classic period. Although no powerful central authority existed in Maya regions when the Spanish arrived, Maya peoples retained their vitality and sustained essential elements of the cultural legacy inherited from their ancestors.

The Aztec

When the Spaniards reached central Mexico in 1519, the state created by the Mexica and their Nahuatl-speaking allies—now commonly referred to jointly as the Aztec—was at the height of its power. Only the swiftness of their defeat exceeded the rapidity with which the Aztec had risen to prominence. For the century before the arrival of Cortés, they were unquestionably the most powerful political force in Mesoamerica.

Among the numerous nomadic and warlike peoples who pushed south toward central Mexico in the wake of the Toltec state's collapse were the Mexica, one of many aggressive invading bands from the north that contemporary Nahuatl speakers referred to as Chichimec. Ultimately the most powerful, the Mexica adopted elements of the political and social forms they found among the advanced urbanized agriculturalists. After 1246 this emerging Chichimec elite forged a dynastic link with the surviving Toltec aristocracy of Culhuacan. This infusion of the northern invaders invigorated the culture of central Mexico and eventually led to a new period of political dynamism. The civilization that resulted from this cultural exchange, however, was more militaristic and violent than that of its predecessors.

The Mexica became important participants in the conflicts of the Valley of Mexico while the city of Atzacapotzalco was the dominant political power. Valued for their military prowess and despised for their cultural backwardness, Mexica warriors served as mercenaries. They initially received permission to settle in Chapultepec, now a beautiful park in Mexico City, but jealous and fearful neighbors drove them out. With the acquiescence of their Tepanec overlords in Atzacapotzalco, the Mexica then moved to a small island in the middle of Lake Texcoco where they could more easily defend themselves from attack. Here in 1325 or soon afterward they began to build their capital of Tenochtitlan. Despite their improved reputation, they continued for nearly a century as part-time warriors and tributaries of Atzacapotzalco.

By 1376 the Aztec were politically, socially, and economically organized like their neighbors as *altepetl*, complex regional ethnic states, each with a hereditary ruler, market, and temple dedicated to a patron deity. *Altepetl* were, in turn, typically made up of four or more *calpulli*, which also had their own subrulers, deities, and temples. These subdivisions originally may have been kinship based, but by the fourteenth century they functioned primarily to distribute land among their members and to collect and distribute tribute. The ethnic group called the Mexica had only two *altepetl*—the dominant Tenochca and the less powerful Tlatelolca.

The Mexica's first king (*tlatoani*), Acamapichtli, claimed descent from the Toltec dynasty of Tula. After a period of consolidation, the new state undertook an ambitious and successful campaign of military expansion. Under Itzcoatl, the ruler from 1426 to 1440, the Mexica allied with two other city-states, Texcoco and Tlacopan, located on the shores of Lake Texcoco. In a surprise attack the Triple Alliance conquered the city of Atzacapotzalco in 1428 and consolidated control over much of the valley. During the rule of Moctezuma I (Motecuhzoma in Nahuatl) from 1440 to 1468, the Mexica gained ascendancy over their two allies, pushed

outward from the valley, and established control over much of central Mexico. Following an interlude of weaker, less effective rulers, serious expansion resumed during the reign of Ahuitzotl from 1486 to 1502, and Aztec armies conquered parts of Oaxaca, Guatemala, and the Gulf coast. By the early sixteenth century, few pockets of unconquered peoples, principally the Tarascans of Michoacán and the Tlaxcalans of Puebla, remained in central Mexico.

When Moctezuma II took the throne in 1502, he inherited a society that in less than a century had risen from obscurity to political hegemony over a vast region. Tenochtitlan had a population of several hundred thousand persons, many of them immigrants, and the whole Valley of Mexico was home to perhaps 1.5 million. Social transformation accompanied this rapid expansion of political control and demographic growth. Before installing their first *tlatoani*, Mexica society had a relatively egalitarian structure based within the *calpulli*. *Calpulli* leaders, in addition to managing land administration and tribute responsibilities, supervised the instruction of the young, organized religious rituals, and provided military forces when called upon. Mexica *calpulli* resident in Tenochtitlan were primarily associated with artisan production rather than agriculture. The ability of a *calpulli* to redistribute land held jointly by its members was more important to rural and semirural areas than to urban centers. There also were noteworthy differences in wealth, prestige, and power within and among *calpulli*. The *calpulli*'s leader, however—most typically elected from the same family—handled the local judicial and administrative affairs with the advice of a council of elders.

After the Triple Alliance conquered Atzacapotzalco—the critical event in the evolution of the Mexica and the Aztec Empire—Izcoatl removed the right of selecting future rulers from the *calpulli* and *altepetl* councils and gave it to his closest advisers, the newly established “Council of Four” from which his successors would be selected. The power and independence of the ruler continued to expand as triumphant armies added land and tribute to the royal coffers. In the late fifteenth century, the ruler also served as high priest: Moctezuma II took the final step by associating his person with Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica's most important deity.

Among the Aztec in general was a hereditary class of nobles called the *pipiltin*, who received a share of the lands and tribute from the conquered areas, the amount apparently related to their administrative position and rank. They staffed the highest military positions, the civil bureaucracy, and the priesthood. Their sons went to schools to prepare them for careers of service to the state. Noblemen had one principal wife and numerous concubines. This polygyny resulted in a disproportionate growth in the number of nobles and helped promote military expansion and political alliances through intermarriage.

Except for those in Tenochtitlan itself, the *macehualtin*—commoners who owned land or who lived in urban *calpulli*—benefited comparatively little from conquest. Instead, as the backbone of the agricultural labor force, they remained subject to work demands by the state and the nobility as well as to military service. Moreover, the advent of a powerful hereditary nobility reduced the commoners' ability to influence political decisions. Although a few *macehualtin* advanced in