

Notes on Anderson 1990-The Aztec

Why Study the New World Civilizations?

Difference between "diffusion" & "independent, convergent development" ("parallel evolution")

1,500 B.C.-1st civilization, the Olmecs, probably with a more ranked society on the Veracruz coast.

900 A.D.-Collapse of the Classic Maya civilization centered in the jungles of Mexico and Guatemala, more like city states than true empires

950 A.D.-The Collapse of Teotihuacán, the 1st major Valley of Mexico truly urban power built on trade, probably an empire. Barbarians from the northwest intrude (they may have been one of the causal agents). The most successful of these warlike peoples were the Toltecs. They founded a capital of Tula in Hidalgo; a stepped pyramid was built to honor Quetzalcoatl, but in the style of Teotihuacán, 2 elements of older cultures.

987 A.D.-A traditional date for the outlawing of Quetzalcoatl's cult, and Topiltzin, its leader, banished. This was the last gasp of the theocratic élite. He journeyed to Chichén Itzá, in the Maya area of the Yucatan Peninsula to inaugurate a central Mexican-inspired hybrid style at that site.

He was replaced by followers of the old tribal deity, Texcatlipoca, lord of life and death & patron of the military orders of eagle, jaguar & coyote; triumph of more secular power and the cult of human sacrifice.

1170 A.D.-Tula is destroyed by another barbarian intruder, the Chichimecs, & another interregnum of warring city states & intrusive barbarians.

1345 A.D.-The last of the newcomers, the Aztec, found their city on a previously-unoccupied swampy island in the middle of Lake Texcoco. It will become the "Venice" of the New World, Tenochtitlán. At its height it had 200,000 inhabitants-greater than London of the same period; the city was destroyed by the Spaniards & the lake drained to form the current Mexico City.

1400 A.D.-They perfect the chinampa, so-called "floating gardens" (actually ridged fields that became artificial islands within canals) that are exceptionally fertile (up to 7 harvests per year) + a system of tribute that brings in up to 10s of millions of pounds of corn & beans per year, as well as feather cloaks, shields, precious stones, etc. "A Tribute State" that will become an Empire

1500 A.D.-The social structure of the Empire took the form of 20 ranked clans, each with many ranked lineages, ranging from the family of the rulers (the Emperor) to the élite families, from whom the priesthood were drawn (the nobles), to the land-holding farmers (the commoners). Next were the merchant class, the pochteca, peripatetic traders who also acted as spies for the Emperor. Below them were the guilds of artists & craftsmen (drawn from conquered peoples like the

Mixtec) and then the non-Aztec laborers, who were not quite slaves since they could own property, maintain families & see their children grow up to be free.

1502 A.D.-By this date their empire included nearly all of Mesoamerica, but of a curious "Swiss Cheese" appearance, with gaping holes of non-conquered territories right near the capital! The reason behind this was the "Flower War", a ritual battle, that guaranteed prisoners for human sacrifice to the tribal god Huitzilopochtli ("Hummingbird-on-the Left"), a god of War & the Sun. The Aztec Empire was highly militarized, with all males, even priests, bearing arms. Two knightly orders existed: the Eagle & Jaguar Knights who fought in animal & bird's skins respectively, mimicing the ferocity of those apical predators. Their weapons were of sharp obsidian flakes (volcanic glass set in wood) & their armor of quilted cotton. Sufficient for native weapons (darts hurled by atlatls= spear throwers), these weapons proved woefully inadequate to face Spanish steel plate armor & steel cutting spears & swords, not to mention mounted armored horses, armored attack Spanish Mastiffs, guns & cannon! The Aztec maintenance of enemy groups near their capital for "harvesting" also aided, however, their conquest as the Spanish recruited these disaffected peoples as allies to swell their numbers & help conquer the Aztec.

1520 A.D.-Cortéz conquers the Aztecs; most of their temples were destroyed, their codices burned as works of the Devil and their goldwork melted down for bullion. The canons of Aztec art were too different from those of Europe ("cultural incongruence"), hence not recognized as "art".

1528 A.D.-A 29 yr. old Franciscan missionary, Fra Bernadino de Sahagún, arrives in "New Spain" to begin 2 decades of systematically recording the beliefs & culture of the Aztecs using young "Research Assistants" who would have been trained for the priesthood had not the Spanish conquest occurred, this compensated, in part, for the destruction of the aboriginal codices.

1650 A.D.-By this date about 80% of the population had died off due to a combination of warfare, disease & slavery.

Albrecht Dürer-one of the few exceptions, tellingly an artist from northern Europe who had made the pilgrimage to Italy to learn the Renaissance arts, was the only one to respond positively. On seeing an exhibit of the spoils of war in Spain he wrote in his journal:"All the days of my life I have seen nothing that rejoiced my heart such as these things, for I saw amongst them wonderful works of art and I marveled at the subtle ingenuity of men in foreign lands".

Ethnohistory & Codexes: The Aztec had a hieroglyphic writing system that combined pictographs (a progression of little footprints indicating a path) with the phonetic values of the signs, and wrote texts using them on deer hide books that fan-folded out accordion-fashion. These brightly painted & beautiful books were called "codexes" or codices. Most were burned by the

Spanish friars as works of the Devil, but a few have survived, while others were commissioned by clerics after the conquest. They record the ethnic view of their own past, as well as the European view of the Indians: together these 2 perspectives form "ethnohistory", the history of non-European peoples, an important resource, in addition to archeology, for studying the Aztec.