



The Americas 1200-1450

By William H. Beezley

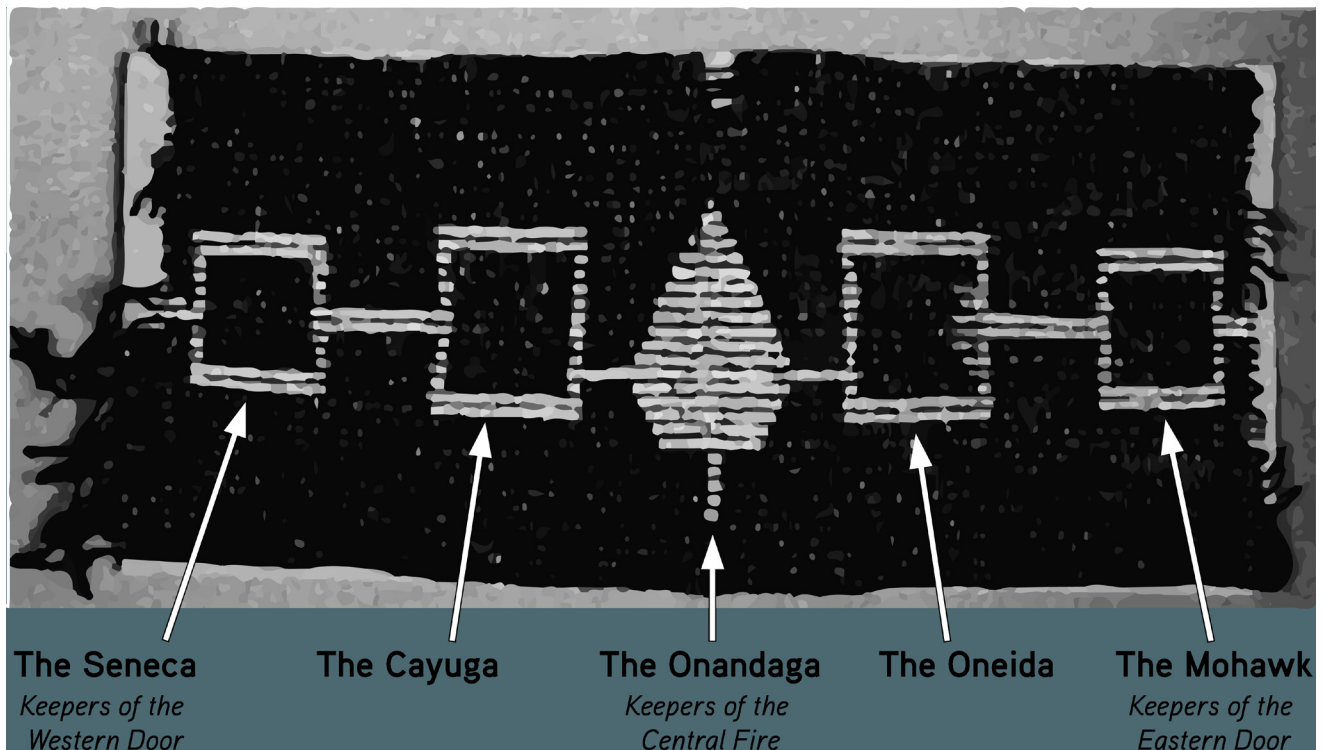
Prophecies, legends, community crops, pottery, tools, and ecological knowledge provided the basis for the founding of major cultures.



From 1200-1450, there were enough varied and complex human societies in the Americas to fill several books. This short essay offers several examples of what life was like back then on these two big continents. Like ducks before winter, the narrative starts in the north and works its way southward.

Haudenosaunee

There was a landmark meeting in North America traditionally dated to 1200, though some historians say it could have been later. Iroquois chiefs of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk—who had often been in deadly conflict with each other—pledged to live in peace and to unite in a confederation. It was known in the Iroquois language as the *Haudenosaunee*, and would also come to be known as the Five Nations. The symbolic “Great Tree of Peace” where they celebrated this agreement was inspired by a white pine, whose characteristic bundle of five needles represented the tribes. Iroquois tradition attributes the meeting and its success to a man named Dekanawida, the peace-giver, with assistance of a woman named Jigonhsasee and the orator known as Hiawatha. Each tribe in the confederation pledged not to fight, ending what had been a long cycle of conflict. The agreement was recorded in the Hiawatha wampum belt.



[*Hiawatha Wampum belt*](#). depicts all five tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy and how they were all woven together. Original image by Junuxx, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Haudenosaunee is sometimes translated as “The People of the Longhouse,” which members of the confederacy saw as a symbol of their unity. They envisioned the longhouse, with the Mohawks at the eastern door in the lower Mohawk Valley; the Oneidas occupied the upper Mohawk Valley near modern day Oneida; the Onondagas kept the council fire in the center in the greater Syracuse area; the Cayugas occupied the finger-lakes area and the Seneca guarded the western door in the modern Rochester-Buffalo area. Each tribe relied on a matriarchal hierarchy and a men’s council to govern its people. Around 1720, the Tuscarora nation was admitted into the league as the sixth member.

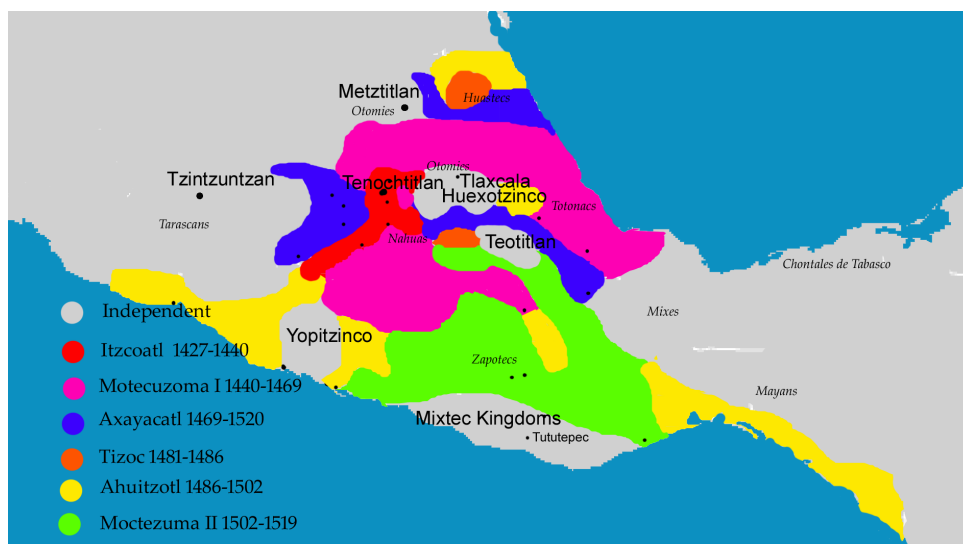
Aztec

The Haudenosaunee Confederation was the most powerful force in North America until European colonial expansion in the 1700s. Other peoples of the Americas during this era shared some general aspects in how they lived, such as traveling for trade or conquest, how they interacted with the environment, and their worship of polytheistic deities often related to the sun, earth, and water. Three major cultural groups, Aztecs (often called the Mexica), Incas, and Mayas created wondrous societies, with complex beliefs that included impending apocalypse, and the first two powerful military and tribute empires. They each developed calendars, weaving, record-keeping, music, and rituals that all expressed cultural, community, and individual attitudes. Critical in decision making in these cultures was the practice of divination and divine signs.

The Aztec people, according to their origin story, left their ancestral home, Aztlan (assumed to be in the southwestern US), and traveled south seeking a sign—an eagle with a snake its mouth perched on a nopal cactus—that they had arrived at a new home. The Aztecs over years moved through other communities such as the Toltecs with their religious center at Tula, where they assimilated beliefs, crops, weapons, and the legend of Quetzalcoatl, a feathered serpent who sailed away in stone boat, promising to return. The Aztecs fled from the Toltecs to an island in one of the three lakes in the valley of Mexico. There they received the sign, seeing an eagle on a cactus with a snake in its mouth. In 1325, they began to build their home, Tenochtitlan.

The Aztecs built pyramids in the Mesoamerican style, dedicated them with human sacrifices, and created city zones for priest-leaders, artisans, families, and merchants, and major markets. Their religion included careful calculation of calendars with a 52-year cycle which predicted an impending apocalypse that had to be postponed with the blood of human sacrifices. Food included hydroponically grown vegetables, and such delicacies as avocados.¹

The need for food and bodies for sacrifices pushed the Aztecs on campaigns to conquer neighboring peoples. They took prisoners to sacrifice and also collected tribute—payments in forms such as food, weaving, feathered art, and precious stones. The Aztecs made little attempt to integrate these people into their culture beyond demanding tribute. Priests, administrators, and merchants required accurate records, so they developed account books, calendars, and record systems written in a text made up of complex pictures. Music, dance, and oral poetry contributed to life, but the threat of an apocalypse—perhaps initiated by Quetzalcoatl—always loomed.



Expansion of the Aztec Empire. Public domain.

¹ If you grow something *hydroponically*, you don't use any soil. Some plants, as long as they get water and sun, can grow in sand, gravel, or liquid.

Aztec merchants trekked for long journeys across Central America, reaching Panama, perhaps even Colombia, and may have gone as far north as Texas.² The merchants carried on trade, but also gathered intelligence for potential conquests. Two cultures survived Aztec conquest, in Tlaxcala and in modern Michoacán; perhaps the Aztecs allowed them to remain independent in order to provide nearby opponents for warfare that supplied prisoners to sacrifice. Within a century, the Aztec capital had a larger population than any city in Europe, and a splendid culture.

Mayapan

To the south, in Yucatán, most of the Classic Maya cities had collapsed by 1200. In some Maya cities such as Mayapan, invaders arrived. These were the Toltec, who were neighbors of the Aztec state. Their arrival brought new practices, culture, and even new gods. Remember the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent in the stone boat who may or may not control the doomsday button? He was adopted as a deity. Mayapan was built with a typical plaza, pyramids and ball courts, and it became increasingly important as a trading power dealing in cotton, salt, and other products of the Caribbean. During 1250-1450 AD, Mayapan served as the cultural and political center of the Yucatecan Maya civilization. Maya culture achievements—especially its mathematical, calendrical, astronomical, writing, and artistic development—continued in Mayapan, with clear influences from the Toltec culture. Nevertheless, the city was abandoned about 1450 AD.



Pyramid to Kukulcan at Chichen-Itza, at what used to be the city of Mayapan. By Wikivoyage, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Inca

The most successful and significant empire in the Americas in this period was established by the Incas around 1100. The legend of their origin begins with the god Viracocha, who came from the Pacific Ocean to Lake Titicaca, where he created the sun, the gods, and the different peoples. The Incas believed they were created at Tiahuanaco by the sun god called Inti, so they were his children. The first were Manco Capac and his sister (also his wife) Mama Oqllu. Three more brother-sister siblings were born, and the group went to the Valley of Cusco to create the Inca capital, Cusco.³

² With geographical mentions like Texas, and Panama, and so on, we're not going to keep saying "the place *now* known as", but realized that pretty much every time you see the name of a place you've actually heard of, that's what we mean.

³ If you're thinking about the animated movie *The Emperor's New Groove* right now, yes that was set in sort of the same place, but historically

The ruler of this society, called Sapa Inca, was Inti's representative on earth. Around 1250, the Incas began to expand through military conquest. They invaded villages, scattered some residents to other communities and introduced colonists. They forced conquered people to worship Inca gods—without giving up their own—and to pay tribute. Tribute included cotton, potatoes, maize, alpacas, llamas, pottery, wool tapestries, and objects, some from gold, silver, or copper.

This imperial system relied on a network of officials and of well-constructed roads that equaled or possibly surpassed Roman engineering. Messengers called *chasqui* ran the roads with information and instructions, up to 250 kilometers in one day and could reach from Cusco to Quito (1500 km) within one week. Strings in knotted systems called *kaipu* preserved records that no longer can be read. Eventually the Inca ruled the Andes from today's Colombia into Argentina, from the Pacific coast into the Amazon rainforest.

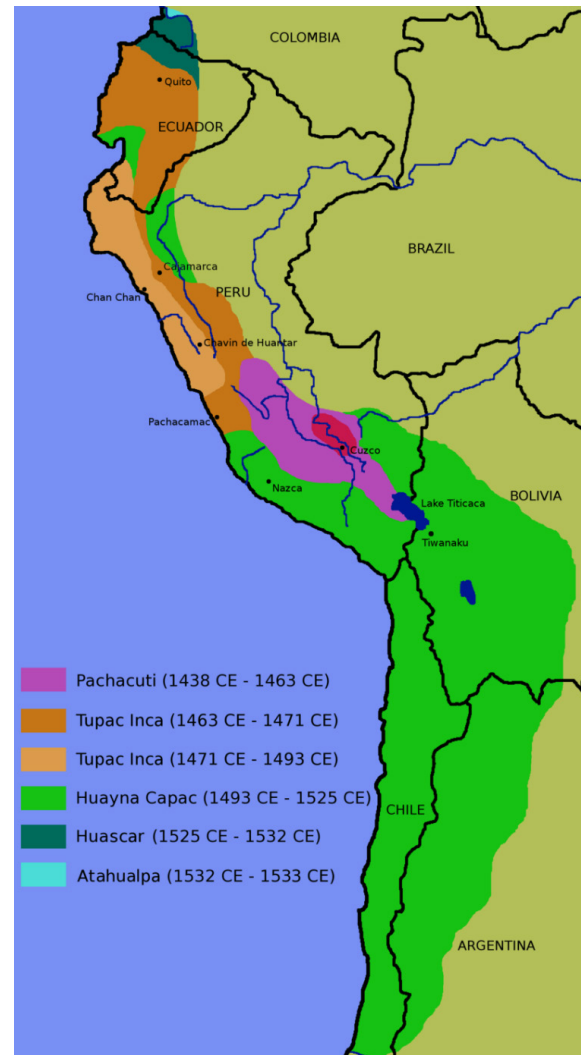
Religious and agricultural festivities marked daily life. The Inti Raymi festival on June 24 of each year, celebrating the sun, was their most significant fiesta. The Incas built magnificent temples to honor Inti. Cusco's best temples were restricted to elites. Priests maintained these buildings and made sacrifices to the gods. Young women served as priestesses, wove clothes for the Sapa Inca, prepared food for the gods, and those deemed the most beautiful were sacrificed. Rocks, streams, mountains, and trees could be identified as holy places, called *huacas*, and people and individuals would leave offerings such as maize beside them. The Inca believed that each crop had a protective spirit and offered the best of the harvest to the gods. Domestic animals also had spirits represented in stone miniatures buried in pens to increase reproduction.

We use the modern word shaman to describe Inca spiritual leaders, because they performed cures and warned communities of natural disasters. Their knowledge of healing practices has survived to the present. The shaman might inhale ground cactus through a hollowed animal bone to interact with the spirit world and make prophecies. Shamanism remains important in modern Andean society and the Inca heritage is vital to the nationalism of modern Peru.

Connections

The communities of the Americas—from political organization to cultural practices—remained diverse before 1450. No “single story” can cover the history of this vast area in this period. Overall, it was an era of increasing connections between societies. It was also an era, as these three stories reflect, in which some very large states emerged in several separate regions.

speaking, the movie creators may have taken a few liberties.



The expansion of the Inca state. Public domain.

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William H. Beezley teaches Latin American history at the University of Arizona. The Mexican government awarded him the Ohtli medal for his contributions to the nation's culture. His books on Latin America have been translated into Spanish and Mandarin, and he has appeared a cultural expert on "The Desert Speaks" and "In the Americas with David Yetman." He just completed a documentary on Mexican women who used embroidery to express their domestic, civil, and human rights.

Image credits

Cover image: Panoramic view of Tenochtitlan, the ancient capital of the Aztec empire, and the Valley of Mexico, Mexico. © DeAgostini / Getty Images.

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