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Religion in Latin America

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Ancient Religions

- Term usually used in relation to Aztec, Maya, Inca or other groups that developed an empire, left ruins of buildings such as temples, in some cases even developed a form of scripture (e.g., for tax purposes)
- And do not exist any longer (though their descendants do, though often converted to Catholicism)

Latin America



Information about Ancient Religions

- Reports sent by Spanish officials to the Spanish Court, justifying their actions against the local population
 - Reports written by descendants of Spanish and Indigenous parents (so-called mestizos) about their lost heritage
 - Reports by missionaries sent to the Vatican or the Court (e.g., debate about the “humanity” of the population which led to the move to the import of enslaved Africans)
- -> But how reliable were these reports?

Example



- Hernán Cortés and his report of the conquest of Mexico
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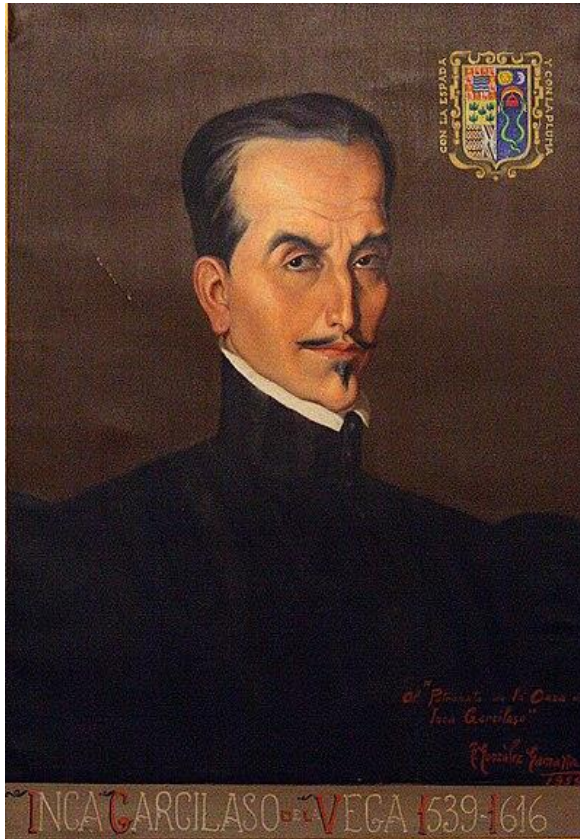


Bernal Díaz del Castillo (c.1496–1584)

- Spanish conquistador
- wrote his memoir *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* (1568) in order to gain favours from the Court, later expanded



Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616)



- son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca woman
- Also known as El Inca
- sailed to Spain as a young man and wrote a report about the culture of his mother

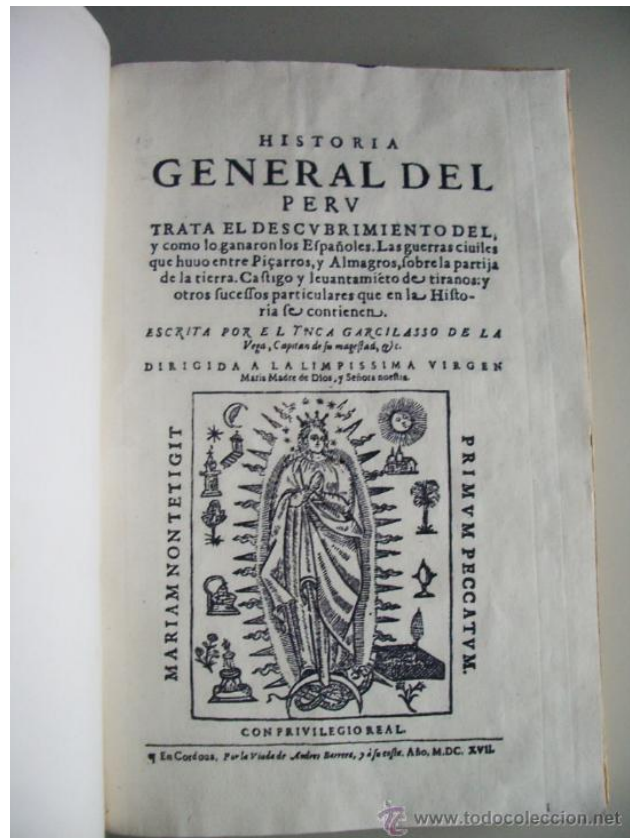
Comentarios Reales de los Incas

(1609)



- based on stories and oral histories
- In 2 volumes, with the second focusing on the conquest
- Translated into English 1685
- After the uprising in Peru 1758 banned (until 1918)
- [Link to the digital copy](#)

Rich with images



Jean de Léry (1536–1613)



- French pastor and adventurer who published (after returning from Brazil to France) his report
- *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Also Called America (1578)*

Hans Staden (c.1525–c.1576)



- German soldier
- Captured by the Tupinambá
- Wrote his report of his time after his release

*"True Story and Description of a Country of Wild,
Naked, Grim, Man-eating People in the New World,
America" (1557)*



- With many illustrative engraving that capture the imagination of his readers

Other resources

- Historical documents during the first decades of the colonial empire, for instance from Inquisition cases or other court cases
- Archaeological finds -> interpretation?
- Also a few handwritten manuscripts (so called Codice), written before or shortly after the conquest (about Mesoamerica)

Archaeological finds

- Monuments of early Mesoamerican culture and religion appeared as early as 1000 BCE in Mexico
- Colossal heads, up to nine feet high, stone altars, jewelry, and ceremonial objects of jade and other materials have been excavated, along with evidence of the Mesoamerican calendar system.

Olmecs (1500 BCE to about 400 BCE)



Chavin (900 BCE to 200 BCE)

- A religious system of symbols, practice, and iconography developed in the northern Andean highlands of Peru
- rediscovered during the excavation of the archaeological site of Chavin de Huantar



- with indications of an early oracular system associated with pilgrimage, a diverse repertoire of spirits and gods represented as hybrids between humans and animals
- and the ritual use of hallucinogenic substances



Time of European conquest

- The empires of the Aztecs and Incas, which European explorers encountered upon their arrival in the Americas in the early sixteenth century, were the late cultural heirs of these religious developments

Characteristics

- clear social stratification and hierarchical organization
- led by representatives of ruling dynasties, who united political and religious functions in the same position
- priesthood oversaw ritual life, as well as the preservation and progress of religious traditions

Mesoamerica

- The Mesoamericans developed a complex and sophisticated calendar system that specified the arrangement of the ritual annual cycle.
- Prophecies, healing rituals and sacrificial ceremonies were oriented to the specifications of the cyclical ritual calendar, which the Maya called tzolk'in and the Aztecs tonalpohualli.

Maya

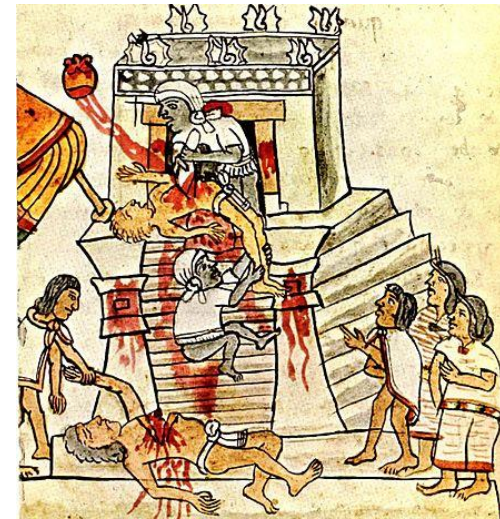
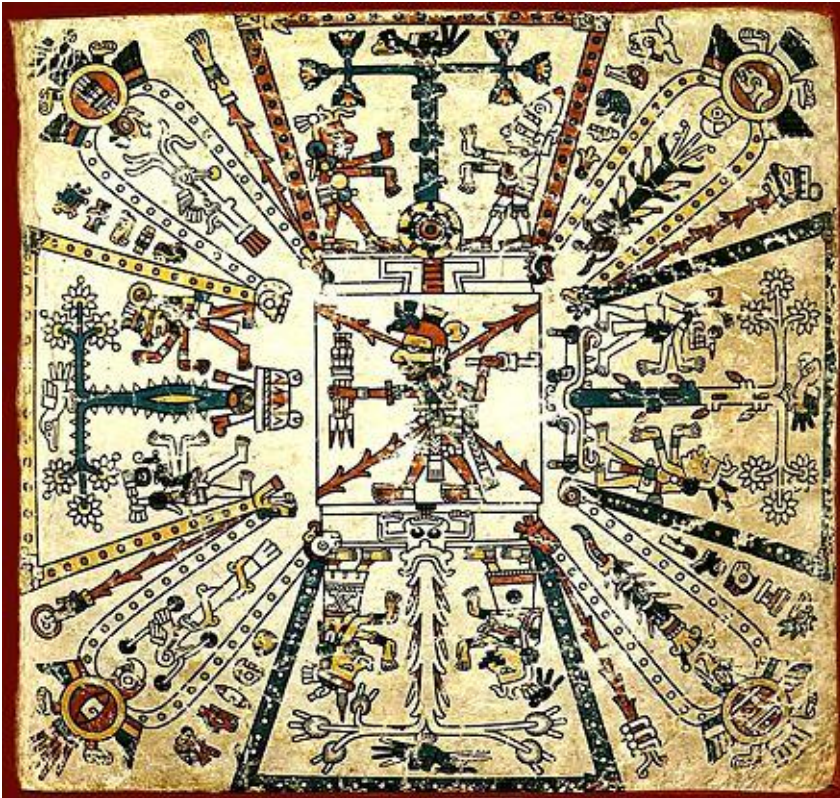


- First cities from 750 BCE, by 500 BCE monumental architecture such as large temples with elaborate stucco façades
- Hieroglyphic writing used the 3rd century BCE

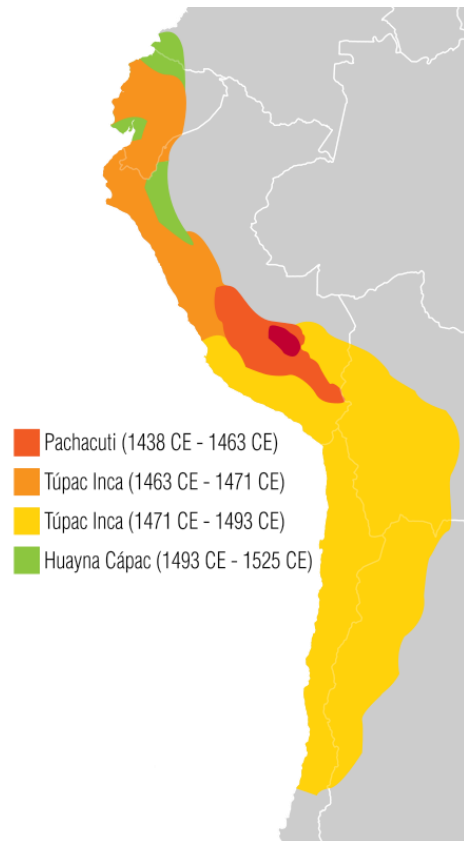
Aztec (1300 to 1521)



Religion (and sacrifice)



Inca (1438-1533)



Andean Ancient Religions

- In the Andes, people undertook pilgrimages to oracular sites of great religious significance.
- Large crowds of pilgrims regularly traveled to places like Pachacamac, located in the middle of the Peruvian coastline, and Lake Titicaca on the Peruvian-Bolivian plateau.

Central characteristics of Ancient Religions

- central themes in the religious life of ancient American peoples were fertility, sacrifice, the continuation of life after death, and the position of humankind in relation to the cosmos.

Mythical creatures

- The belief systems that developed in the ancient Americas, especially in their late manifestations, such as among the Aztecs in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, were occupied with the images of an enormous range of mythical creatures, deities and other cosmic forces.



Different Forms of Conquest

So-called “civilisations”

- Examples: Aztec, Maya, Inca and more
- Due to strict political hierarchy rapid conquest after the capture and killing of the political leaders

So-called “tribal groups”

- Examples: Tupi-Guarani, Yanomani, Huichol, and more
- Slow conquest that could have lasted decades and centuries (e.g., in the Amazonas) due to the ability to retreat into “undesirable” land (undesirable for Europeans)

Evangelisation

- Forced baptism to Christianity (Catholicism was usually the only allowed religion in Spanish and Portuguese colonies)
- Suppression of pre-conquest religions

Syncretism

- Blending of Christian elements with pre-conquest traditions
- For example: Our Lady of Guadalupe
- According to Church accounts the Virgin Mary appeared before Juan Diego in 1531, speaking in Nahuatl language
- Linked to the worship the mother goddess Tonantzin

