
The Pre-Hispanic Period

Here at the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era, most Westerners can barely imagine a worldview reliant on myth and cyclical time. Although it has been a mere five hundred years since the majority of human societies relied on narratives of a mythic past and ostensibly timeless rituals to explain and define reality, today we inhabit a very different ideological moment. But we cannot fully comprehend the texts and images of this first section without trying to recover the distinctive worldview that generated them. While many factors shaped the self-conception of pre-Hispanic societies in the Americas, two prominent features are particularly distinctive from our own. The first is their identification of natural phenomena with personified divinities; the second is their conception of labor both as a means of survival and as a form of worship.

While the Mediterranean cultures that generated the Western world were roughly contemporary with pre-Hispanic civilizations, their geographical conditions were decidedly different. Arising on the perimeters of an inland sea, saturated and intersected by numerous trade routes, the Greek, Jewish, and Roman civilizations were, from their inceptions, characterized by frequent contact with other cultures and different worldviews, including Hindu and Persian as well as Egyptian and other African empires. As a result of such interactions, these great Western civilizations developed distinctive ways of appropriating and transforming foreign values and even oppositional attitudes as they sought to resolve the tensions of living with—or surviving—cultures different from their own. Because pre-Hispanic societies in the Americas were largely isolated from such cultural interactions by two vast oceans, they never developed the adaptive skills and flexibility that were fundamental to surviving the utter foreignness of the Spanish invaders.

The major pre-Hispanic cultures that the Spanish encountered—the Inca, the Nahua, and the Mayan—were, in fact, the products of centuries-long

cultural evolution, not constant cultural interaction. By the time of the conquest, the ancient Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations had been slowly transformed into the dominant (and dominating) military and economic power structures of the Incas and the Aztecs. But the relatively recent emergence of those powerful “empires”—barely over two hundred years in either case—only confirms that they were building on earlier cultures that had been tested and solidifying for centuries.

Though we often think of culture as limited to religious and artistic structures, culture is in fact a way of understanding the world that permeates all the social and economic aspects of a community and that is reflected in both individual and group behaviors. Religious rites, everyday life, food production, the construction of temples and artifacts, the exchange of goods and the transmission of knowledge—all were interrelated in these pre-Hispanic cultures, and separating out any of these elements would have threatened the integrity of the society as a whole.

When the Spanish arrived in America, there were, of course, many cultures, not just the three or four that we usually recall. But the processes of Spanish conquest and evangelization encouraged an identification of “major” cultures, distinctions that greatly facilitated the imposition of a colonial power that persisted for over three centuries. One immediate consequence was the misleading image of a handful of paramount, pre-Hispanic cultures that were “more civilized” and thus worthy of preservation. The first generation of missionaries clearly held such a view, regarding these “major” cultures as superior to others who were deemed “minor” simply because they had been subjugated by those dominant groups or who merely had smaller populations. Another constructed measure of that superiority was the similarities with Christianity that the missionaries thought they perceived in the history and organization of these “major” civilizations, thus aligning these American cultures with their own model of superior civilization.

Among the most consequential of those perceived similarities were mythological and legendary figures that, for many Spaniards, demonstrated an early Christian presence in the Americas. The widely known god Quetzalcóatl, for example, was frequently identified with St. Thomas, the apostle renowned for his global wanderings after the death of Christ. By linking Thomas with this popular Mesoamerican god, the missionaries could reaffirm the veracity and fulfillment of the Gospel’s injunction to spread the news of Christ throughout the world. That those Christian teachings had apparently been abandoned for fifteen centuries merely helped to explain

away the many disparities in these symbolic figures and social customs as the effects of temporal erosion from their obvious Christian origins.

Another crucial explanation of these similarities was the notion of providential evolution; that is, any society worthy of survival would necessarily evolve the social and mental organizations appropriate to Christianity. Accordingly, the Nahuas, the Incas, and the Mayans were judged to be just those kinds of societies, having arrived at the stage of civilization where all that was lacking to achieve full humanity was espousing the true religion: a perfect opening for energetic evangelizing. That the many accounts of similarities between Christianity and the “major” pre-Hispanic cultures included flagrant logical and obvious factual contradictions did little to discourage their widespread adoption by these eager interpreters.

The Spaniards, for example, simply could not imagine that the cross would represent anything but Christ’s crucifixion—even among non-Christians. Accordingly, when they found crosses in the Americas, they could only conclude a Christian presence. Some missionaries thought that the change in the meaning of the cross since the first Christianization could only have been the work of the devil. Only evil forces would explain the shift from signifying Christ’s sacrifice to representing the four cardinal points, which the cross meant in Mesoamerican cultures. Such determined reconstructions of native cultures frequently recur throughout the many Hispanic texts by historians, chroniclers, and missionaries of the period.

One of the most famous instances of these reconstructions and its effects concerns the figure of Quetzalcóatl in Mesoamerica. While the Spanish were quite experienced at adapting unfamiliar experiences to their own cultural frameworks, the isolation of pre-Hispanic cultures essentially rendered members of the latter unable to question many of their basic convictions. Thus when confronted with anomalies they could not at first explain—like pale men with beards and guns mounted on horses—they simply fit them into one of their own familiar categories, such as divinities. In the case of the Aztecs—one of the many peoples that made up the more extensive Nahua culture—the conquistador Hernán Cortés even became identified with a very specific god, Quetzalcóatl.

The mythological history of this god made the transfer plausible. Though Quetzalcóatl had left his people, he had promised to return from the East. He would be known by his whiteness (a color identified with the East) and the bulge under his chin (a well-known characteristic of the god of the wind). As the various chronicles note, Cortés’s pale skin and beard were duly recognized as markers of the god. Moreover, his heavy Spanish armor

and helmet, which would have looked like a mask to the Indians, further confirmed Cortés's deity: the Nahua gods never appeared with their true faces, but only disguised.

Even as the chronicles confirm the identification of the Spaniards as gods, they also record the Indians' realization that these strangers were not really divine. Such profound psychological oscillations between identifying a human figure with a god and then fully appreciating its human status have not yet been adequately explained. Nonetheless, this conflation represents one of the most decisive moments in the conquest and eventual colonization of America.¹ It also helped to define the unique way that Catholicism developed in Spanish America, fusing Christian and pre-Hispanic images and beliefs into a distinctively syncretic system, one that shapes faith and religious conviction in profound ways even today.

That syncretism is manifest in another key misidentification of Quetzalcóatl—not by the natives, but by the Spanish themselves. Many missionaries were convinced that Christianity must have arrived in America with one of the original disciples, and the belief soon became widespread that behind the divinity of Quetzalcóatl lay Saint Thomas, the man who supposedly brought the gospel to the Americas. The chronicles of Meso- and South America abound with references to the supposed traces of St. Thomas, including the “footprints” of his sandals in stone. The importance of Quetzalcóatl as a founding presence even survives in the official Mexican flag: the eagle devouring a serpent is a common representation of Quetzalcóatl, whose name means “plumed serpent.”

If Quetzalcóatl was a particularly noteworthy divinity, his representation was hardly uniform among pre-Hispanic cultures. While the Aztec and others considered him a god, some Meso-American societies viewed him simply as a legendary figure, specifically a ruler of Tula,² whose kingdoms flourished in central Mexico between the tenth and twelfth centuries. For

1 That many missionaries believed in St. Thomas's American presence is confirmed by an anonymous author of the appendix titled “Noticias cronológicas del Cuzco” [Chronological notes on Cuzco] in Manuel Mendiburu's *Apuntes históricos del Perú* [Historical Sketches of Peru] (Lima: Imprenta del Estado, 1902). The lives of both CARLOS DE SIGÜENZA Y GÓNGORA and FRAY SERVANDO TERESA DE MIER were shaped by their belief in St. Thomas's American mission. See also Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531–1813* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

2 Located a few miles north of Teotihuacán, northeast of Mexico City, Tula was the Toltecs' principal city, reaching its prime between the tenth and eleventh centuries. Tula and its royal lineage were appropriated by other cultures as part of a legendary golden age, surviving in Mayan and Nahua lore well after the twelfth century.

them, Quetzalcóatl was a particularly merciful king who, having been exiled for opposing human sacrifice, promised to return. A similar myth occurs in Andean culture, where Quetzalcóatl is known as Wiracocha, a god who became identified with the local conquistador, Francisco Pizarro.

This conflation of divine, legendary, and semihistoric qualities in both Quetzalcóatl and Wiracocha is instructively manifest in the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Quiché culture, located in what is now Guatemala. While the narrative of the *Popol Vuh* begins with purely mythological accounts of the formation of the universe, it shifts readily into legends and concludes with datable historical references. This progression from the mythical to the historical, through the legendary, clearly exemplifies how knowledge accumulates in these pre-Hispanic cultures. Since there are no divisions among these varied types of information (myths, legends, facts), there is no basis for doubting their patently mythical foundations. Instead, myths become the frame of reference for the next (legendary) stage of comprehension, while the legends then establish the credibility for the final stage, which we understand as history. These successive framings do not imply a misunderstanding of the essential differences between myth and legend or between legend and history, but their interdependence does foreclose the kind of questioning or self-consciousness that would allow those distinctive ways of knowing to function more flexibly and more independently as information.

Associated with these interrelated accounts of the past is the decisive role of tradition in pre-Hispanic societies, which, in turn, offers a clue to one of its most disquieting features, the prominence of human sacrifice. In a civilization in which mere survival entailed enormous challenges, the crucial role of the past in sustaining all life is directly apprehended. Such a thin margin of survival demanded continuing gratitude to the ancestors, a gratitude embodied in the myths themselves, which manifested an appropriate devotion to the ancestors and to their stories. But the interlinking of gratitude for survival with the immediate fear of extinction also helps to explain the complexity of sacrificial rites in pre-Hispanic culture. For how can one thank the gods for the grace of survival if not with its most precious result, human life? And how does one suppress the growing fear of extinction, if not with sacrifices that emphasize the fragility and tenuousness of that life?

In addition to such primal motivations, sacrifice in pre-Hispanic cultures is also related to their notions of divinity. The Mesoamerican pantheon is a complex family of gods, differentiated not only by the natural elements

(including sun, moon, planets, stars, water, fire, earth, air, sky, underworld, wind, night, and day) but also by the different forms that these elements assume: thus the god of rain water is distinct from the god of lake water, or that of river water or the water of the ocean. Even physical phenomena, such as movement or earthquakes, are represented by separate divinities. Such distinctions are even further refined: in the Incan pantheon, for example, there were discrete gods for the sound of thunder, for the appearance of lightning against the sky, and for lightning's impact as an electric discharge.

However, the significance of perhaps the most critical figures in the Inca pantheon, the stellar objects, remains largely mysterious to us. Of course, every civilization has sought, in the scattered and chaotic distribution of stars in the sky, some order that would explain both origins and destiny. But while Western culture has inherited a fairly similar version of those heavenly arrangements, Mesoamerican and Andean cultures viewed the starry sky quite differently and, indeed, from the southern hemisphere, the Andean peoples literally saw “another” sky altogether. While dissimilar constructions of the firmament are most obvious in the Incan pantheon, such differences are equally significant for Mesoamerican cultures since their mythologies are also shaped by their way of “seeing,” that is, of arranging and ordering the stars in the sky. The shape and implications of these images are described in several of the texts included in this section.

One instance of this “seeing” the heavens so differently involves one of the most moving and dramatic accounts in Mesoamerican mythology, the narrative that explains the creation of the world as the sacrifice of many gods jumping into a fiery pit. Such sacrifice on the part of the gods underlines the enormity of the debt that these peoples perceived toward their precursors. If the gods sacrificed themselves, how else could people thank them for the creation of the world, except by comparable sacrifice? Moreover, the two most critical inhabitants of the skies, the sun and the moon, were not simply passive creations (as in many Western religions) but transformations of gods. Two divinities who jumped into the universal fire were miraculously changed into the two fundamental stars that give life to the world. Any failure of those heavenly bodies would be testimony to the death of the gods themselves—thus intensifying the sense of debt and fear on the part of the humans who had to rely on those luminaries for their very survival.

From these twinned emotions of debt and fear and their implications for understanding the divine, however, emerges the second critical dimension