

had only about two centuries of life—from the seventh to the ninth centuries of the Christian Era—but it was outlived for a century or so by another predecessor: Tiahuanaco, near Lake Titicaca, which in the first few centuries of the Christian Era became an impressive city of raised temples, sunken courtyards, and daunting fortifications. Earlier still—dating, in the highlands of Cajamarca, to the second half of the second millennium B.C.—are the remains of ceremonial centers, some of which may have had cities or protocities clinging to them, or at least the warehouses of a paternalist state, where food for redistribution was stored. Some, at least, seem to deserve the name of kingdoms, like Kuntur Wasi, established by about 1000 B.C., with its gold-rich tombs and crown of dangling heads of sacrificial victims modeled in gold.¹²

Peruvian lowland sites of still-imaginable splendor are earlier still: La Florida in the Rimac Valley, where construction began about 1750 B.C., had a raised platform of twenty-seven acres, and even its ruins stand fifty-six feet high today.¹³ By the fourteenth century, in the arid Moche Valley, huge jaguar masks guarded a complicated arrangement of courtyards, chambers, and colonnades built of river cobbles.¹⁴ But it would be premature, in the present state of knowledge, to claim that a tradition of monumental building ascended inland by way of migration, conquest, or the spread of influence.

Almost all the sites of the first millennium B.C. display so many common features of decoration—from the Lambeyecode Valley, in the North to Paracas, on the Pacific coast in the South, as if all were adorning the same pantheon of gods—that they have inspired speculations about some sort of early superstate anticipating the empire of the Inca. At least it is possible to speak of a “culture area” which embraced highlands and lowlands alike. Its focus was on the crushingly vast shrine of Chavín de Huántar, in the Callejón de Conchucos, a mountain oracle-seat which seems to have been equipped as a place of universal pilgrimage.¹⁵

Almost wherever it occurred, the building imagination was fed by maize, which gradually spread through the highlands as suitable strains were developed and irrigation systems devised to make double cropping possible and lift effective cultivation into previously inaccessible latitudes. Grain storage was one of the functions of ceremonial centers such as Chiripa, deep in the interior, on the far shore of Lake Titicaca.¹⁶

The limits of a maize-fed society were transcended, indeed, by the most impressive city of all: Tiahuanaco, which, during a sustained period of building from the third century to the eleventh, spread over forty acres at a higher altitude than Lhasa. This was a real-life Nepheloccygia—a counterpart of the impossible “Cloud-Cuckoo-Land” imagined by Aristophanes to parody the city-founding obsessions of the Greeks. Its gateways are too grand to be less than triumphal, its monoliths too vast and crushing to be less than self-aggrandizing, its façades too threatening to be less than immortal. Tiahuanaco fed up to forty thousand in-

habitants from the produce of mound agriculture, on platforms built of cobbles topped with clay and silt, watered and protected from violent changes of temperature by surrounding channels of water drawn from Lake Titicaca. Beds in this form stretched more than nine miles inland from the lakeside and were capable of producing up to thirty thousand tons of potatoes a year: more than enough to feed the entire city.¹⁷ At Tiahuanaco, it was also possible to grow enough maize for ritual needs at least, in the most sheltered and pampered of the gardens, as well as large amounts of a grain called quinoa, which was formerly despised but now fashionable, I am told.

Between the fall of Tiahuanaco and the rise of the Inca, only relatively modest essays in civilization were attempted in the highlands, as far as we know. It is therefore fanciful to see the Inca as heirs or custodians of a continuous tradition bequeathed by Tiahuanaco. Yet the ruined labors of giants were still there to be seen. The relevant precedents might have been remembered, or locally retained, for creating the environment: by adapting crops, exploiting environmental diversity, and maintaining colonies in compatible ecotones. The Inca experiment was in many ways a re-enactment, on an unprecedented scale, of old techniques of taming nature.

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Places for the Gods: The Context of the Aztecs

In their culture area, meanwhile, the Aztecs were heirs to a similarly long record of impressive and aggressive city-states. Like the Inca, they could behold the ruins of earlier civilizations, and the cultures of subject or victim peoples, stacked below them at lower altitudes—at every level down to the coast. In the first century B.C., for instance, the most intensive indigenous urban experiment in the Americas took shape at over six thousand feet above sea level, at Teotihuacán, where the dwellings came to cover more than eight square miles. Its elaborately carved platforms and pyramids seem to have played in the Aztec imagination a role similar to that presumed for Tiahuanaco among the Inca. It was almost certainly, too, a precedent of sorts for the Aztec imperial enterprise. It is hard to resist the impression that Teotihuacán was the capital of a gigantic state. Its diplomatic reach is recorded at Maya cities nearly a thousand miles away. In the fifth century, King Stormy Sky of Tikal, in the lowlands of the Petén, was carved with Teotihuacano bodyguards at his side. The buildings of Teotihuacán include some apparently adapted to house people from distant lowland sites—like the pavilions of colonial communities at a World's Fair.

The inhabitants surrounded themselves with imagery still visible in fragmentary murals. Their world was dominated by a sky reimagined as a feathered serpent of rich, fertile tints, with cosmic jaws that drooled fertility, and sweat that fell like rain. Below him, sprouting trees curled huge, fat roots and bloomed in

lush colors. Speaking birds uttered thunder and flung darts like lightning bolts from under their wings. A feathered jaguar struck sparks from his claws. Sacrificers in serpent masks scattered blood from hands lacerated with maguey spikes, or impaled human hearts on bone knives. In an apparent analogue of human sacrifice, coyotes tore the heart from a deer that seemed—still seems, in the surviving painting—to scream in anguish.¹⁸ This is the art of an ecologically fragile way of life, dependent on rainfall and unreliable gods to deliver fertility.

Meanwhile, a regional state of a sort seems to have been centered at times on Monte Albán, in the Valley of Oaxaca, to the southwest of the Valley of Mexico. This was lower ground again, located between forty-seven and fifty-seven hundred feet above sea level; but lack of rainfall forced the inhabitants into elaborate expedients of irrigation, including wells, floodwater conservation, and canals.¹⁹ It sprang to life late in the third quarter of the last millennium B.C. in a sudden "urban revolution" associated with the fortifications of the hilltop site. It remained a center of high culture in a more-or-less continuous line of development until its greatness was extinguished, with baffling suddenness, after an occupancy of some twelve hundred years. The builders (conventionally, and perhaps misleadingly, called by the same name as the modern Zapotecs) left monuments of wonderful dexterity and inscriptions in still-undeciphered writing; they nourished imperial ambitions, gruesomely suggested by the paintings and carvings of the butchered genitals of captive warriors. But further speculations about the nature of the state and fantasies about the breadth of its rulers' sway are unjustified by the evidence. The name glyphs of victim communities carved on a building refer to places up to eighty-five or 150 kilometers away in various directions, and the influence of Monte Albán's ceramic style had spread over a similar area by the time of the city's demise.²⁰

Even if permanent political relationships are implied by this evidence, it represents at most a compact regional state hardly comparable with Teotihuacán for breadth of sway. The frailty of the resources on which the city was founded make it surprising that it did so well; but, unlike Teotihuacán and Tenochtitlán, it never stretched its rule or influence very far.

The inhabitants of the same region in Aztec times, Mixtec and Zapotec, lived in relatively small communities, renowned more for their goldwork, featherwork, and manuscript-painting than for monumental art. Recent work on the decipherment of the painted genealogies of Zapotec rulers has revealed the overlapping elites shared by the two peoples, with common ancestors, like the Zapotec hero known by his calendrical name of 5-Reed.²¹ Also well represented is the greatest of all Mesoamerican culture heroes, who is conventionally called by the elements of his name glyph, Eight-Deer Tiger Claw. His life can be dated with some confidence from the genealogies to 1063–1115 A.D.²² He figures prominently in all surviving Mixtec histories, exemplifying the life of a Mesoamerican monarch—marrying frequently, procreating profusely, visiting shrines, mediat-

ing between gods and men, consulting ancestors, sending and receiving ambassadors, playing the ball game, negotiating peace, and, above all, making war. He died as he had lived—the very model of a Mesoamerican king—sacrificed, dismembered, and entombed in an episode vividly recorded in the genealogy of the rulers of the small towns of Tilantongo and Tetzacoalco, who wanted to be remembered as his descendants. He was a lowlander from Tututepec, and most of his career was spent among Mixtec communities of the coastal region. His conquests, vividly depicted in the painted genealogies, have encouraged scholars to believe in an "empire of Tututepec," but they are best understood in the context of a violent power-game which generated patterns of deference, exchanges of tribute, and accumulations of victims for sacrifice without necessarily leading to extensions of territorial power or of direct rule. Empires in Mesoamerica, it seems, were best founded on high ground.

In measurable ways, the upper-highland states excelled neighbors or predecessors established at lower altitudes. They lasted longer, grew bigger, or reached farther, or effected some combination of the three. When, for unknown reasons, in the eighth century A.D., the influence of Teotihuacán withered, a new metropolis arose at Tula, which was remembered with awe in Mexico for centuries after its own, equally mysterious collapse towards the end of the twelfth century. Tula was known as "the garden of the gods," and its glades of columns and neat ceremonial spaces, irrigated by the blood of sacrifices, must have justified the image. But it was surrounded by a precarious environment in which irrigation was essential and prolonged drought fatal. Ecological disaster almost certainly played a part in its abandonment.²³ The Aztecs regarded themselves as in some sense the heirs of its inhabitants.

Contrasting Worlds: The Aztecs and Inca Juxtaposed

Scholarship has seen the civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes from an immense distance, from a place where the differences between them seem to fuse. Their respective environments have been characterized as evincing crucial similarities, some of which indeed deserve emphasis—the defensibility of mountain fastnesses, the moderation of high-altitude climates in tropical zones, the limited availability of animal proteins, the near-ubiquity of the same ritual food-source, maize. The cultures of the peoples who inhabited the two regions have also tended to get lumped together in observers' minds. It has often been noted, for instance, that they shared a remarkably paradoxical basic technology. Both regions were home to peoples who built monumentally in stone without developing the arch, and who traveled and traded across vast distances without making use of the wheel and axle. Both favored cityscapes apparently symbolic of cosmic order, neatly geometrical and symmetrical. In both, only soft metals