

READING 1

Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), selections from chapter 6, "Trade, Transport, Temples, and Tribute: The Economics of Power."

Abstract: This essay focuses on the role played by belief systems in making sense of the material world and in explaining or justifying the distribution of both power and material goods. It focuses specifically on the Aztec and Incan Empires in the Americas, and suggests that religion can provide the ideological glue that makes an economic system – as well as a political system – work.

Political Economy

In considering interrelated material conditions such as economic systems, physical environments, or technology, we make use of the concept of political economy, the relationship between material wealth or resources and power that shapes economic and political systems. Supply and demand are not simply objective conditions dependent on the amount of material resources in relation to population. Distribution systems that dictate the allocation of economic resources are directly tied to the structure of power relations. For example, tribute describes a system of economic exchange in which goods or services are provided according to the demands of a ruler or a state in return for protection or religious favors, or simply to avoid punishment. Trade can take place between equal partners but is always subject to the influence of political forces as well as conditions of production, markets, and transportation systems. Technologies of land and sea transport, such as the horse, llama, camel, bridge and ship, are vital determinants of the efficiency of exchange.

Trade and Tribute: Empires in the Americas

Earlier in this century, historians wrote of trade as "the great civilizer." Definitions of civilization aside, there is no doubt that trade has supported increasingly complex social and political orders throughout the world. As we have seen with the Southeast Asian empires of Funan and Srivijaya, maritime and riverine trade was the basis of the knotting of political ties that bound diverse communities together under centralized rule. Though based on overland rather than maritime or riverine trade, both the Aztec and Incan Empires of the fifteenth century were the culmination of empire building based on complex systems of trade and tribute in central Mexico and in the Andean highlands of South America. As Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam in Southeast Asian empires, and both Islam and indigenous beliefs in Mali,

provided sanctions for rulers, for both the Aztecs and the Incas, religion played a central role in legitimizing the power of ruling elites and in sanctioning warfare and the exaction of tribute from conquered territories.

The Aztec Empire

The Toltecs and the Rise of the Aztecs

With the demise of the great city of Teotihuacán in the Valley of Mexico (ca. 750 C.E.) and the abandonment of Mayan cities in the Yucatán peninsula by around 800 C.E., the Toltecs rose to power. The Toltec Empire grew to be extensive, stretching over much of central Mexico and the former Mayan territories. Evidence of trade between the Toltecs and their neighbors to the north suggests that the Toltecs' influence reached far beyond the limits of their political control, perhaps even to regions as distant as the Mississippian culture in North America.

Following the collapse of the Toltecs in about 1150, city-states in the Valley of Mexico competed with one another to become the Toltecs' heirs. Known for their skill as warriors, the Aztecs (or "Mexica," as they called themselves) gradually established dominance over rival groups in the Valley of Mexico, where in the aftermath of the Toltec collapse the population was concentrated around a string of life-sustaining lakes. Claiming Toltec ancestry to legitimize their conquests, the Aztecs continued the Toltec concerns with genealogy and militarism, along with religious rituals, including human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism.

The Aztec Religion

The Aztec religion drew on common Mesoamerican traditions, including those of the Olmecs, the Mayas, and the Toltecs, providing an identity rooted in the past that could be adapted to the needs of a new political order. The most important ideological change associated with the Aztec transition from wandering warrior groups to empire was the elaboration of ancient Mesoamerican religious beliefs and practices relating warfare to human sacrifice. Combining the Aztec patron god Huizilopochtli (the sun) and their own military ambitions with an ancient vision of a constant struggle among the forces of the universe, Aztec belief made the regular appearance of the sun dependent on the continuation of military exploits and human sacrifice. The sacrifice of humans was tied to the sun god's demand for ritual offerings, and war was necessary to provide sacrificial victims. Warfare was imagined as the earthly reenactment of the titanic battle waged across the skies, the sacred war of the sun, which daily had to fight evil to make its way from east to west. Only human sacrifice could assist in the positive outcome of this sacred event and thus ensure the daily rising of the sun.

The Aztec ruler eventually became identified with both secular authority and divine power, a representative of the gods on earth. In Aztec theology, human sacrifice and wars of conquest were combined with the political authority of the ruler as aspects of a state cult. Aztec rulers believed that two things were necessary to maintain the empire: tribute in food and raw materials from conquered peoples in outlying provinces, and sacrificial victims. Warfare provided both. The tribute gained was a major consequence of the warfare waged on behalf of the empire, which included most of Mesoamerica. It has been estimated that millions of pounds of maize, beans, and chocolate, and millions of cotton cloaks, war costumes, feathers, shields, and precious stones, were drawn to the Aztec center at Tenochtitlán each year.

Aztec Society

Aztec society was profoundly urban. In the fifteenth century, approximately one-quarter of the population of the Valley of Mexico resided in cities and towns. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, the site of modern Mexico City near the ancient center of Teotihuacán, was built on swampland in the Valley of Mexico. This and other urban centers were supported by the rural populations of the surrounding areas, who were required to pay tribute and engage in trade. A specialized class of long-distance traders functioned as “advance men,” or merchant-spies, on behalf of the state. They would be followed by warriors whose military success ensured a steady flow of goods. The successful maintenance of the relationship between the urban center and the hinterland, compelled by military control exercised by Aztec warriors, was essential to the empire’s survival. The administration of the Aztec Empire was carried out by an elaborate bureaucracy of officials, including tax collectors, judges, priests, ambassadors, treasurers, and a security force. Occupants of such positions were appointed by the Aztec ruler from either the nobility or warrior classes. Each status carried with its title well-defined privileges, duties, and powers. They were distinguished by observable differences in dress, accommodation, diet, and the respect accorded them.

A good way of assessing the distribution of power and the allocation of social status is by comparing the tribute commitments of various groups. In Aztec society, which may be visualized as a pyramidal structure, tribute was based on class affiliations and economic specialization. The nobility, at the apex of the pyramid, provided military service, as did the class of professional warriors, who through bravery could achieve a higher status than the one into which they had been born. Further down the pyramid were commoners and farmers. Their labor and production supported those above. Merchants and craft specialists provided the goods that flowed through the arteries of the empire. In the more distant reaches of the empire, trade was conducted and tribute paid in regional specialties, such as feathers or obsidian. The

much larger population at the pyramid's base was composed of persons with limited or almost no rights. Slavery existed as both a temporary condition, into which destitute individuals voluntarily sold themselves or their children to pay debts or were sent as punishment for crimes, and as the permanent status of prisoners of war. Prisoners of war often became the unfortunate victims of ritual torture and sacrifice by the state.

The Aztec Economy

The Aztec economy was based on a system of highly intensive agriculture. Agricultural workers were attached to large rural estates, where they labored in fields belonging to the nobility and warrior classes. Irrigation works, effectively controlled rural labor, and an elaborate series of canals, dams, and terraces helped to feed the empire. While the grandeur of large monumental architecture and the rich, colorful material culture of the upper classes have impressed and captured the attention of scholars, the Aztec Empire was sustained by the agricultural labor of the masses, who received from the empire little protection or spiritual sustenance in return.

The rulers of the Aztec Empire explained the need for wars as a means of obtaining slaves for sacrifice, rather than as an economic enterprise. A kind of circular logic maintained that sacrificial victims could be obtained through war, while war could be waged successfully only by sacrificing victims. Equally important were the complex systems of roads and waterways that brought goods and peoples to central markets. The complex tributary empire was a violent world in which war was deemed necessary and duly glorified.

The Incan Empire

Like the Aztecs in Mesoamerica, the Incan Empire in South America rose to power in the fifteenth century by building on earlier cultures in the region between the Pacific Ocean and the chain of Andes Mountains extending along the western flank of the continent. The Incan Empire covered a highly diverse topographical area as it descended from mountains as high as three or four miles, down upland basins and plains, and across a narrow desert strip transected by small rivers to the ocean shore. In the uplands, terraces and spillways were necessary for cultivation; in the desert, canals were essential. These differing environments required and enabled a variety of human activities and gave rise to the organized exploitation of these activities through a centralized political order. Systematic authority was essential for managing reciprocal production, and the movement and exchange of goods necessitated a hierarchical political organization.

Efforts by other Andean people to control the area of the Incan Empire, six times the size of modern France, were made as early as 800, but they were unsuccessful. The two centuries before the establishment of Incan dominance

in the fifteenth century were, in fact, a period of political fragmentation. In 1400, the Incan state, one of several small states, was about 200 years old. During the reign of the Pachacuti ("he who remakes the world") Inca (r. 1438–1471), the expansion that created the Incan Empire began after a vision in which Pachacuti was told that he would conquer many peoples. The Incan Empire was vast but short-lived; it is considered to have ended with the Spanish conquest in 1536.

Expanding from their center, Cuzco, the Incas created a vast state spread along the western coast of South America for more than 2500 miles (4300km), from modern Colombia to modern Chile. The area contained an estimated 9 to 13 million inhabitants who, prior to the Incan conquest, had resided in agricultural communities under the leadership of local chieftains. The Incas' success in establishing control was only partially the result of their military prowess.

Inca Conquest and Rule

If the Incas' success at empire building cannot be wholly explained by their military power, it can be understood in terms of their organizational skill and by the power of their religion. As they conquered, they co-opted, organized, and converted. They aimed to be beneficent, lenient conquerors, preferring peaceful incorporation of local communities to the destruction of those who resisted. Those who acquiesced to Incan control avoided being plundered. Chieftains of conquered areas who did not resist were adopted into the structure of the empire as it emerged. Some were co-opted by marriage into the royal family; blood and lineage ties were important. By contrast, those who resisted the Incas or rebelled were harshly dealt with and subject to severe penalties ranging from mass removal and redistribution to slaughter. The ideology of conquest claimed that Incan rule brought reason; that is, it saved people from themselves and lifted them out of savagery and war, out of the chaos that had existed before the conquest.

Those who accepted Incan conquest also adopted the cult connected with the Incan ruler, for the Incas propagated their religion as they conquered. The founders of the Incan Empire called their supreme god Viracocha ("Lord"), after an earlier ruler, and they considered him equivalent to the sun. According to the legends transmitted by the court historians, the first Inca was created to propagate and spread the cult of the sun. Pachacuti, who consolidated the empire, worked out a ceremonial order and theology that elevated Viracocha to a position of supremacy over other gods and that justified expansion in ways that appeared to serve the interests of both conqueror and conquered.

The Sapa Inca

Like the Aztec rulers, who claimed descent from the god Huizilopochtli, the Sapa Inca, or “Sole Ruler,” was believed to be a descendant of the sun god and his representative on earth. Incorporating the Andean traditions of ancestor worship, the mummified bodies of dead kings became the tangible link between the Incan people and their pantheon. To preserve this link and to ensure the continuity of their own political order, the Incas had to maintain the royal dead in fitting splendor for perpetuity; thus a constant income was necessary, and this could be supplied only by continual conquests. Upon every conquest, the Incas made a thorough inventory of the people, land, and resources they had conquered, all of which accrued to the Sapa Inca.

The cult of the sun was an integral part of the imperial apparatus; it had elaborate ritual, a large priesthood, and many shrines. The Temple of the Sun built by the Inca Pachacuti at Cuzco was the center of state religion and housed the mummified bodies of former rulers. As a basis of imperial control, the Incan religion worked together with the all-encompassing bureaucracy, which the cult sanctioned and sustained. For example, Incan law, which was orally transmitted, was in the hands of judges. Breaking an Incan law was sacrilege, punishable by death. Priests, as guardians of morals, confessors, and imposers of penance, maintained the close connection of religion and law, of cult and state.

The Incan Theocracy

Such an empire was a theocracy, in which virtually everything belonged to the Sapa Inca, the personification of the state: all land, all gold and silver, all labor (a form of tax as well as a duty), all people. As in many other societies, women were considered a form of property. Adultery, therefore, was punished as a crime against property. Subjects of the Sapa Inca were all provided land, although they might be moved from place to place according to bureaucratic inventories of people and resources, as a guarantee against sedition and rebellion. The state did its best to keep people busy and well fed, storing large quantities of food and clothing against years of hardship and need. Administrative officials were held responsible if anyone went hungry.

Private property, with the possible exception of clothing and houses, did not exist. Taxes were levied in labor, and trade seems to have consisted largely of barter on the local level and a government monopoly over long distances. Indeed, for ordinary people, mobility was minimal; they were expected to stay at home and work. Guards controlled entry and exit to towns; crossing a bridge was allowed only when one was on official business.

The Sapa Inca’s authority was maintained by an elaborate hierarchical administrative system, by blood lineage ties, and by his religious function. All his subjects were divided into groups, arranged in an orderly fashion of

responsibility; for example, fathers were responsible for their children's actions. Another organizational pattern had to do with labor: all subjects had assigned tasks. The major labor obligation was cultivation of the land, which was divided into three types: what was necessary for the state, what was necessary for the cult of the sun, what was necessary for the people. Other general labor duties included keeping llama flocks, which were state-owned, and keeping up roads, bridges, and public monumental buildings.

Incan Highway System

The vast Inca state was spread over a mountainous territory of more than 3,000 miles (4,830 kilometers), linked together by an elaborate system of roads and bridges. It is possible that some of these roads date from the time of earlier Andean civilizations, perhaps even Chavin de Huantar, but under the imperial structure of the Incas these and other highways became a lifeline for the political and economic integration of the state.

Roads ranged from narrow footpaths to terraced and fortified structures with pavements, walls, and canals. Bridges were woven and sometimes suspended structures spanning rivers and mountainous chasms. Government messengers, armies, and trading caravans traveled their length, stopping at one or more of the several thousand roadside lodges or rest stops that also served as local seats of government, spread along the imperial highway. Few Incas could have traveled all the roadways by foot in a single lifetime, but many journeys were no doubt facilitated by the use of the domesticated llama, which carried loads of 100lbs (up to 45kg) at high altitudes.

The Incan Government

Controlling this highly organized society required an elaborate bureaucracy, one that continued to grow as the empire expanded. Closest to the person of the Sapa Inca, at the center of power, was a council, though its somewhat vague authority decreased as the empire grew. Also important was a corps of learned men and poets whose regular responsibility was putting together the official version of Incan history, an important task in maintaining authority. As there was no system of writing, these men memorized their political-historical accounts, which were modified when necessary to create versions effective for indoctrinating and controlling conquered peoples.

At its height, the Incan Empire was divided into four vicerealties subdivided into provinces, each of which contained 40,000 families. Viceroys and provincial governors ranked with imperial court officials as the dominant aristocracy of the empire. These aristocrats had their own style of dress and their own language, but they were charged with imposing the ideology of Incan rule on their subjects. It was their duty to unite the remnants of earlier local cultures that functioned under the Incan imprint. Beneath the high

aristocracy were intricate, hierarchically connected cadres of people, ending with family units. Fathers were responsible for their families and cadre leaders for their respective cadres. The empire remained an amalgam of different units, each contributing to the whole through tribute and trade.

Summary

In the cases of the Aztecs and Incas, we encounter empires constructed on trade and tribute networks. The Aztec and Incan Empires relied on the supply of tribute goods from territories they conquered to support their ruling elites. Military expansion was dependent on both religious sanction and on the economic incentives provided by expanding population. Religious ideologies were **also** crucial to the construction of the Aztec and Incan Empires. However, religious ideologies that supported military expansion and economic exploitation in these Mesoamerican and Andean empires were based on shared traditions inherited from common predecessors, rather than from the integration of indigenous beliefs and practices with new ones imported from other cultures.

In the Americas, Aztec expansionism was fueled by the desire for goods to feed the growing needs of an increasingly complex culture and society, as well as an expanding population. The relatively loose, far-flung empire of the Aztecs was well suited to their purpose of gaining captives for sacrificial purposes, since populations in outlying areas could be viewed as distinct and separate enough to fit the role of sacrificial victims. The Incas exacted tribute from territories they conquered not only to meet the demands of growing cultural complexity but also to sustain their religious ideology through the wealth necessary to support dead kings as links between the human and cosmic orders. The primary function of religious ideology in such highly stratified societies as those of the Aztecs and Incas was to justify the existing order, including the unequal distribution of both power and property.