

ESSAYS IN WORLD HISTORY

ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS *of the* NEW WORLD



Richard E. W. Adams

Ancient Civilizations of the New World



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*To the memory of my grandparents,
Charles K. Wood and Mary K. Wood*



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Richard E.W. Adams



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1

Introduction: Complex Cultures, Cities, and a Rapid Survey of the Earliest Old World Civilizations

During the morning, we arrived at a broad causeway and continued our march towards Iztapalapa, and when we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land and that straight and level causeway going towards Mexico, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis, on account of the great towers and cues [temples] and buildings rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of the soldiers even asked whether the things we saw were not a dream.

**Bernal Diaz del Castillo,
The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico, 1956**

In many of the Inca's houses there were large halls some two hundred paces in length and fifty to sixty in breadth. They were unpartitioned and served as places of assembly for festivals and dances when the weather was too rainy to permit them to hold these in the open air. In the city of Cuzco I saw four of these halls, which were still standing when I was a boy . . . and the largest was that of the Cassana, which was capable of holding three thousand people.

**Garcilaso de la Vega,
Royal Commentaries of the Incas, 1966**

Bernal Diaz was a product of the European Renaissance and had seen the grand cities of Moorish Spain. He was not easily impressed, but the first sight of the great Aztec capital overwhelmed him and his comrades with its extraordinary setting and grandeur. He retained this sense of wonder at what they had seen and done for the next sixty years of his long life and transmitted it to us by way of his memoirs, written in his old age. Similarly, the Spanish conquerors of the Inca realm, eleven years later, experienced difficulty in comprehending such a different and yet remarkable cultural tradition. As the colonial period continued through 350 years, and as the mixture of Iberian and Native American cultures produced a new set of civilizations, memories and information about the original high cultures were largely reduced to the status of legend or myth, and the achievements of the natives were discounted and denigrated. However, eyewitness accounts survived, both of the conquest itself and of the native cultures. Spanish churchmen were largely responsible for writing about the latter, but even these books and manuscripts were relegated to dusty archives in Spain or to decrepit monastic repositories and libraries in Spain's former colonies, the new national states of Latin America.

Fortunately, historical research and archaeological work of the last 150 years have enabled us to recover a great deal of what seemed irretrievably lost—for instance, information on periods so remote that even the sixteenth-century Native American descendants had lost track of what had happened. This book is intended to present a synthesis of some of the new information now available about the two New World areas of civilized societies. It is by no means exhaustive, and it may not be agreeable to many specialists. However, it is hoped that the book will provide a summary of most of the important happenings in the prehistoric past as well as of perspectives given us by comparison with Old World civilizations and various theoretical views. Before going farther, it is necessary to define the concepts of culture and civilization.

New World archaeologists are trained as anthropologists, which means that we share with the social anthropologists a great many common views. One of the most basic is that of culture itself. Cultures are composed of traditional patterned behaviors that are systemically related and that are transmitted from generation to generation in a social group. The many components of cultures may be broken down as institutions. Major cultural institutions common to all cultures, no matter how simplified, include kinship, social structure, associations, economics, ideology (including religion), legal systems, and political systems. All cultures have sets of

motivating beliefs; some have called these “core values.” The belief in the superiority of social status achieved by individual effort (as opposed to inheritance) is a typical core value in the United States. For the purposes of this book, it should be pointed out that patterned behavior often leaves material traces. Traditional houses built of adobe or stone will still be detectable centuries after they fall down. Varying social statuses are often reflected in the different styles of housing found in an ancient community, with the rich living in larger and better-made structures, and most people dwelling in smaller houses made of less costly materials.

As a field, archaeology has inherent limitations. We cannot observe an ancient culture in action. Everything is over—the people are dead and buried; their houses, temples, workshops, markets, defenses, roads, and the like have deteriorated into ruins. Therefore, an archaeologist must reconstruct a culture by means of the tools, pottery, and other artifacts that are excavated. Buildings, caves, trash heaps, and many other sites are places that will yield data. Not all information can be picked up or photographed, so data on matters such as ancient climate or the patterns of farmhouses in the ancient countryside are very useful. In the end, however, an archaeologist must interpret what is found and then reconstruct what appears to be the most likely series of events to produce the patterns in the data. Only then, when fieldwork is done, can patterns be defined and analyzed and explanations offered. Explanation, or theory, must try to make clear all the patterned information and the exceptions to it. For example, we know that the ancient Maya civilization collapsed, as have many other civilizations. We now understand why this happened to the Maya, and part of our confidence in the explanation is that similar events happened elsewhere. However, as we will see, the Maya did not make a demographic or cultural recovery, something that is very unusual in world history and prehistory. Therefore, our explanation in this case must also cover the unique aspect of this event.

Cultures can be as simple as those hunters and gatherers living in deserts or the Arctic, in which the kinship system is really an all-purpose organization used in various ways to solve legal, political, social, hunting, and other problems. Until about 8000 B.C. all of our ancestors lived in such cultures. After that date, people in several parts of the world began to experiment with animals and plants and eventually became stock breeders and cultivators. The development of a secure form of agriculture was usually a process that took two to three thousand years. It led to settled life in villages with larger social groups. It also laid the economic basis for civilization.