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## The Civilizations of the Americas

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**Presenters:** Stephen Blaha, Roscoe Hinkle, Michael Palencia-Roth, Robert V. Riordan, and Anthony Stevens-Arroyo with comments from David Wilkinson, Jeremy A. Sabloff, Norman C. Rothman, Dario Fernandez-Morera, Urbiratan D'Ambrosio and J. Randall Groves.

Most civilizationists have agreed that there have been two civilizations that have originated in the New World, one along the West Coast of South America, the other in Central America. There have been disagreements about whether and how these two civilizations should be further divided.

Anthony Stevens-Arroyo suggests that American civilizations have been “inferiorized” in comparison with the ancient “Cradle of Civilization.” One reason for this may be that the civilizations were so quickly conquered by the Spaniards. He suggests, however, that people may be conquered but still preserve collective identity as a civilization (2008: 1-2)

A major reason for the perception of inferiority, Stevens-Arroyo says, is the idea that neither civilization had developed a system of writing. Yet both civilizations had writing adequate for internal communication and record keeping, the Mayan and Aztec pictorial language and the Inca *quipu*. The lack of need for exchange beyond the hemispherically divided civilizations eliminated the need for

accommodation that was necessary in Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Mediterranean. European and Chinese languages, on the other hand, like those of Mexico and Peru, “evolved in mutually unintelligible fashion.” When the Spaniards arrived and communication between Central and South America became necessary, Castilian and Latin proved more flexible than pictorial or woven writing (2008: 2-5).

One civilizationist, John Sedgwick (1962), has suggested, on the basis of art, that the two civilizations were linked, two manifestations of the same worldview. Others, however, have noted that the Mesoamericans had no draft animals, while the Andeans never used the wheel for transportation (*e.g.*, Diamond 1997: 190). It would seem that if connections between the civilizations were well established, the Andeans would have hitched their wheels to their llamas while the Mesoamericans would have imported draft animals for their wheels.

Roscoe Hinkle treats the Incas with several Mesoamerican societies as on the same developmental level. All permit mobility within constituent cultures; have monarchical political structures, at least skeletal bureaucracies; enact regulations; and may include states that are units of a larger entity. At the top is an omnipotent, sun-descended emperor (*e.g.*, Aztec, Inca). All have formalized class structures, means of maintaining permanent recorded records, similar technologies, and a binding religion (2008: 18-21).

### **The Andean-Mayan Connection**

Recently Stephen Blaha (2007) has provided more evidence of trade connections between the two civilizations as well as suggested that these contacts may have influenced style.

Blaha, who perceives multiple American civilizations, begins by describing a sequence of civilizational centers near the coast of Peru, beginning in Caral, north of present day Lima, around 2700 BCE. He describes Caral as “arguably the mother of Andean civilizations and perhaps even the grandmother of the civilizations of Central America and Mexico. (2007: 73)”

Blaha thinks that while Mayan and Andean civilizations are “distinct and separate,” there is evidence that there had been trade between the two areas going back to the third or fourth millennia BCE. While the two areas are separated on land by jungles and mountains, coastal travel was relatively easy. He records evidence not only of material trade, but of influence of Andean styles in the architecture of pyramids and tombs as well as pottery in the second millennia along the Pacific coast of Guatemala and Mexico. Metallurgy appears to have started in Peru about 1500 BCE, reaching the Pacific Coast of Colombia around 200 BCE and of Mexico by 800 CE.

Though evidence is fragmentary, trade appears to have been conducted in metals, minerals, gems, pottery, cloth and medicinal plants. But even the importation of material goods may carry with them influences in style and techniques, for instance, the technique of pottery making. Even ideas concerning religion and daily life could be transmitted by the traders. Blaha notes particularly that the earliest known pyramidal structure in Central America was at Ojos, on the present coast of Guatemala. He wonders if this structure could have been the prototype for later pyramids of the Maya (2007: 81-83).

Indeed the traders could also bring back Mayan ideas to the Andean communities, as Western traders brought home Chinese goods and ideas. But this comparison may also serve

as a caution that the importing of goods and ideas does not constitute a civilizational transmission, even if it indicates a systemic linkage.

David Wilkinson is not persuaded. "No," he writes, "these cultural-economic features are neither necessary nor sufficient to meet the appropriate defining criterion. What is missing is the tight politico-military network linking the Andean and Mesoamerican areas. (email 1 Dec. 2007)"

Norman Rothman, on the other hand, thinks that anthropologists "have established these connections" and that there are also "culture patterns as there are in the Sudanic states in prehistoric Africa and in Medieval Europe." He adds, however, that "the patterns also reflect the given ecologies of the regions (email, Dec. 2007)."

Anthony Stevens-Arroyo thinks that communication between Mexico and Peru was only "sporadic and ineffectual" although "there was trade of luxury goods between the two spheres." Moctezuma, for instance, offered Cortez a Peruvian *quetzal*-feathered helmet in a symbolic exchange. He suggests, for comparison, Marco Polo in the China of the Great Khan. He notes, however, that the two civilizations were similar in that religion in both was combined with mathematics, astronomy and history. (2008: 2-6)

Roscoe Hinkle argues that diffusion plays a major role in cultural development, and believes that some controversial diffusionist views should be taken seriously, not only north and south borrowing, but pre-Colombian trans-Atlantic influences from Africa, Egypt and Phoenicia as well as early 15<sup>th</sup> century contacts from China (2008: 22-24, 32-33).

### **The Spanish Overlay**

"The Spanish conquest," writes Wilkinson, "ended the isolated historical autonomy of the Mesoamerican and Andean Civilizations. It did not end the numerous American

cultures, but added another strand to the polycultural mix (1 Dec 07).”

While concerns about race and class do not in themselves demonstrate the continuance of culture, Michael Palencia-Roth notes that by the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Spaniards were making elaborate distinctions of class based on various possibilities of mixture among Spanish and native populations. A person born to parents who were Spanish and Indian was considered a *Mestizo*, but there were also numerous classifications, *e.g.*, a *Mulatto* as the child of a Spaniard and a Negro. By this time too, census figures indicated that there were more persons classified as *Mestizo* than either Spanish or Indian.

Palencia-Roth records, however, that by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Simon Bolivar was moving toward abolishing such distinctions. His view coincided with “similar legal actions of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, which may be called the New World’s ‘affirmative action’.” For instance, a marriage registry in a Mexico City church recorded that the government had ordered that registrants would no longer be referred to as Spaniards, Indians, or *Mulattoes*, but all were to be recorded as Americans (Palencia-Roth, 1986).

Does this process resemble those of other situations, such as the Mongol conquest of China, in which the conqueror is ultimately conquered by the conquered? Could the period of elaborate classification be one in which the conquering class was attempting to retain its superiority while, after another century, elites came to see themselves as part of the melded civilization, so that the classifications had lost their meaning?

Anthony Stevens-Arroyo writes that ecclesiastical writers as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century Council of Trent were arguing “for an American civilization since the Spaniards and the Catholic faith provided new structural linkages

among the Aztec, Incan, Mayas and other civilizations, now transformed (email, 10 Dec., 2007).”

Stevens-Arroyo says Spain, much more than the rest of Europe, was influenced by Islamic civilization. Because of interaction between Moors, Catholics and Jews, there was a greater emphasis on finding “a common set of principles for interfaith dialogue.” (2008: 6-7) This would have a major effect on the Spanish approach to rule in Latin America.

The Spaniards saw the Americans of Central and South America as civilized, and the area they ruled as a “*mestizaje*” of civilizations. Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas argued for feudal model of “kingdoms with their own rulers, customs and languages.”

The predominant languages in colonial Latin America were Castilian for official documents and urban conversations and Latin for theology and liturgy, while the native population spoke various native tongues well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Catholicism included both the clerical leaders and the mass of believers (2008: 9, 14-15).

But the Spanish overlords were obliged to preach the Gospel. The acceptance of the Gospel, however, would endow the Native Americans with full legal protections. Catechisms were promulgated in various native languages and in this way the natives of Mexico and Peru became aware of each other. Moreover, religious promulgation made use of native rituals, images, processions and music as “local American variants of hallowed European traditions.” “There was a deliberate examination of native beliefs and practice” to find elements that had resonance with Catholicism. Incan prayers to the Earth Mother were interpreted as “inchoate monotheism.” The use of the cross in various ways was widely seen as part of God’s plan to prepare the way for the Gospel. Thus the Spaniards were often in effect tolerant

enough to allow the preservation of many local religious practices (2008: 11, 20-25}.

Stevens-Arroyo concludes that the uniqueness of the Iberian approach, influenced by doctrines of the Council of Trent and Islamic and Jewish impact on Iberian thought, led to tolerance of American civilized ideas and a unique blending in post- Columbian times (2008: 28-29).

Could it be then that The Civilization of the Americas has its origins no earlier than the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Would there be other situations in history in which a civilization had more than one point of origin? Perhaps Mesopotamian civilization?

### **Mississippian Culture**

Robert Riordan (1991) describes the Anasazi culture of the North American southwest reaching a peak by 1100 CE. These people occupied about 25,000 square miles of territory in northern New Mexico. They were “maize agriculturalists, linked with each other by social and economic ties, and physically held together by hundreds of miles of roads. It is believed that some sort of central control was exerted by the large towns located in Chaco Canyon.” By 1400 the successors of these people “had founded new towns along the upper Rio Grande valley in New Mexico.” By the end of the century “their focal points were about 70 large pueblos housing a few hundred to about 2,000 people.” They developed complex religious cults, produced elaborate wall paintings and glazed their pottery. “Contacts with Mexican traders had been going on since at least the twelfth century, and were probably maintained (1991: 8-10).”

An even more elaborate culture, the Mississippian, developed along the Mississippi Valley. The inhabitants lived in settled agricultural communities, with a stratified social organization. Politically they lived in chiefdoms “of

which there were probably hundreds.” The power of a chief rested “upon a mixture of religious reinforcement, economic redistribution, prowess and success in warfare, occasional coercion, and the luck of good environmental conditions.” Several towns of a few hundred to several thousand people “were typically united into the fluid political unit of the chiefdom.” The dominant town would be surrounded by a stockade, within which were a plaza surrounded by flat topped mounds supporting wooden council houses, temples and other public buildings. Population estimates for this highly developed but decentralized culture ranged between 12 and 18 million (Riordan 1991: 10-15). There does not seem to be evidence of interaction between the Mississippians and the cultures of the Southwest.

But could the Native American societies have left a cultural underlay receptive to a resurgence of Central American immigration? By the 21<sup>st</sup> century Latinos, most of them Mexicans, had become the second biggest ethnic group in North America. Much more than other ethnic immigrants, the Mexicans retain contact with and revisit their mother country (2007, “A Blended People”). Might this not be perceived as the Civilization of the Americas permeating its lost territory?

### **The Civilization of the Americas**

Wilkinson writes that if the radiating exchange “we are supposing takes the form of armies, envoys, diplomats, wars, treaties between Mesoamerican and Andean and/or Mississippian states, then this supposition (which I think is unsupported by the evidence) would require us to accept the existence of such a civilization of the Americas in the past, *i.e.*, before the Spanish conquest, though not afterwards. Otherwise, not (1 Dec. 07).”

Jeremy A. Sabloff writes: "I have to say I disagree with the final paragraph of the abstract. My reading of the current empirical archaeological evidence is that trade connections between Pre-Colombian Mesoamerica and both the Andes and Southeast North America were minimal at best. There certainly were contacts, but there is scant evidence for significant, regular trade, let alone a "Civilization of the Americas (email 11 Dec. 2007)."

Might Latin America then be perceived as a unique civilization as we perceive Islamic, Byzantine and Western Civilizations arising from Classical and Mesopotamian? Or were Mesoamerican and Peruvian sufficiently linked, or at least similar, to consider the civilization of South and Central America, now spreading northward, as the Civilization of the Americas?

## Notes

### *Editing This Article*

Editing of necessity involves simplifying and directing the ideas of the contributors, none of whom were writing specifically about this question. In so doing, the editor has tried to remain as neutral as possible in presenting the relevant data. All ideas have been contributed by members of the ISCSC who, of course, have drawn on a multitude of sources.

### *Andean and Mesoamerican Civilizations*

Agreement that these were civilizations can be widely documented. Toynbee, like Blaha, wanted to make further divisions, but as his *Study* progressed he moved toward seeing the Andean and Mesoamerican as single civilizations.

### *Sedgwick's Conflation*

Sedgwick didn't provide much support for his view concerning art linkage between Andean and Mesoamerican civilizations. Roger Wescott, who knew him, sometimes referred to his views on the subject, and may have heard more than Sedgwick actually wrote.

### *Wheels*

One argument for considering Mesoamerican and Andean as separate civilizations is the failure to transmit wheels southward and draft animals northward. Hinkle suggests that both had wheels, but neither used them for transportation (2008: 40). We assume that the wheel was invented out of need. But the idea of using wheels for transportation may never have been perceived, and hence could not be diffused. But as Stedman Noble has argued that you can't effectively transmit the idea of planting wheat without the wheat (1999), so while you can convey the idea of llama without the llama you can't reinvent the animal. And Jane Jacobs, of course, has shown, with plenty of evidence, that inventions create need as often as need creates inventions (1969).

### *The Brazilian Disconnection*

Blaha wondered why Andean Civilization, which was gradually heading southward, never reached Argentina or Brazil. Urbiratan D'Ambrosio and Dario Fernandez-Morera, two of our Brazilian members, responded by email that the question deserved further research, but pointed out that there would be little incentive for mountain people to try to penetrate many miles of thick jungle, and that the natives who lived along the Atlantic coast, having rich fisheries and other sources of food, would not have much motivation to change their life style.

Fernandez-Morera was then asked if civilization in Brazil began with the Portuguese or had Mesoamerican civilization filtered through Colombia and Venezuela. He replied that the Brazilian situation was similar to the North American: a lower level culture was replaced, absorbed or destroyed by European immigrants. There was no visible penetration via Colombia or Venezuela.

### *How Do We Know?*

Fernandez-Morera (2008) points to the way in which information about the Incas may have been skewed by the position of Inca Garcilaso, who was well placed under his Spanish rulers and did not want to displease his overlords while at the same time wishing to portray the Incas as generous rulers. But beneath this are evidences that Garcilaso himself was limited by his education, and that achievements accredited to the Inca have been found to have been those of the societies they had conquered. So there are at least six layers of perception here with which the civilizationist must cope: those of Fernandez-Morera, who tells us what is necessary for the purposes of his article; those of Garcilaso as limited by the Spaniards; those of Garcilaso as limited by his aims and education; those of historians who interpret the findings of the archaeologists; those of the archaeologists; and those of the civilizationist, who has hypotheses about the achievements of the earlier Andean societies that are influenced by his general perceptions of feudal and state systems as they relate to imperial systems.

It is a wonder that we know anything, if indeed we do.

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