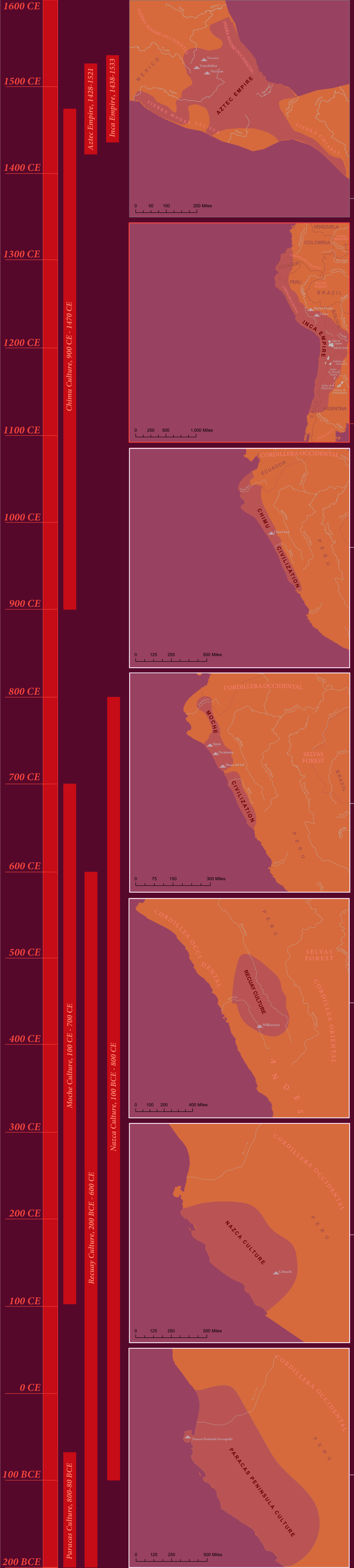
"Valued Second Only to Silver,"

Diachronic Pre-Hispanic Cochineal Use In Cultural & Geographic Contexts

In the pre-Hispanic Americas, cochineal, a colorant produced from the dried bodies of female Dactylopius coccus insects, was used to create vibrant red, orange, and pink dyes for textiles and feather works, ink for codices and tribute documents, and body paints. Surviving textual sources reveal that cochineal was a prized and labor-intensive component of tribute and mercantile economies in the Aztec Empire. Subjugated settlements throughout Mesoamerica (modern-day Mexico) paid Aztec Triple Alliance rulers over 800 pounds of cochineal nocheztlaxcalli (dye cakes) annually. The economic and cultural significance of cochineal continued into colonial times, with European markets valuing the insect second only to silver.

The significance of cochineal among earlier societies lacking textual records is largely unknown, primarily because perishable goods such as fabrics and dyes do not preserve well in archaeological contexts. Select exceptions to this rule have been found in South America. Cochineal use in South America has been tentatively dated to 200 BCE using garments found in monumental necropolises on the Peruvian Paracas Peninsula. Between 200 BCE - 1532 CE, a handful of examples of cochineal use have been identified in Nazca, Recuay, Moche, Chimu, and Inca archaeological sites. Cochineal dyes in these cultures seem to have been reserved for royal or elite religious objects.

These limited examples of cochineal use in the archaeological record reveal a practice that spanned at least seven cultures, 1,800 years, and two continents. The value, beauty, and prestige of cochineal colorants in ancient societies highlights the importance of developing new techniques for exploring this industry through archaeological analysis. This map illustrates the geographic and temporal spread of all known instances of pre-Hispanic cochineal use, with the end goal of helping archaeologists conceptualize the emergence, transmission, and environmental contexts of cochineal use in new ways.



Lakes, Rivers & Playas

Modern Country Boundaries

Ancient Culture Territories

Modern Country Areas

Ancient Capitals & Key Settlements

N

0 500 1,000 1,500 2,000 Miles

Data from Natural Earth Data, Harvard WorldMap Project, Wikipedia SVG files, the Noun Project, Projections: South America Albers Equal Area Conic, Azimuthal Equidistant (world), Mercator (world) - Megan Binkley, Geography 370