

## AZTEC CULTURE: AN OVERVIEW

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This essay is based on several encyclopedia entries I have written over the past few years. One reason for posting this work on the internet is the poor quality of the entry for "Aztec" in the Wikipedia.

Aztec culture flourished in the highlands of central Mexico between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, AD. As the last in a series of complex urban civilizations in Mesoamerica, the Aztecs adopted many traits and institutions from their predecessors such as the Maya and Teotihuacan. The Aztecs also devised many innovations, particularly in the realms of economics and politics. Aztec civilization was destroyed at its height by the invasion of Spanish conquerors under Hernando Cortés in 1519. The Aztec peoples, who spoke the Nahuatl language, survived and intermarried with the Spaniards; today there are still over one million speakers of Nahuatl in rural areas of central Mexico.

### Sources

Modern knowledge of the Aztecs comes from both archaeological fieldwork and historical documents. The Aztecs, like many other Mesoamerican cultures, used a limited form of writing that consisted of pictorial representations painted on bark paper and animal hides. Although very few authentic pre-Spanish examples have survived, these manuscripts (called codices) continued to be painted in the indigenous style well into the colonial period. There are three main types of codex: historical accounts, ritual almanacs, and tribute records. The dynasty of each Aztec city-state kept written histories of the deeds of past kings and other important events, using the native year-count calendar to provide dates for events. Most of the surviving examples come from the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, rulers

of the Aztec empire; as a result we have far more information about the history of the Mexica than about the other Aztec city-states. Ritual almanacs such as the *Codex Borgia* and the *Codex Borbonicus* were consulted by priests for use in rituals and divination. These documents, rich in imagery of gods and sacred events, were structured around a second Aztec calendar, the 260-day ritual cycle. Tribute records were used to record local payments to lords and kings as well as the imperial tribute of the Mexica empire. The best-known Aztec codex is the *Codex Mendoza*, a composite document from 1541 with a history section (depicting the conquests of the Mexica kings), a tribute section (province-by-province tribute of the empire), and a section showing daily life and the Aztec life cycle from birth to death.

Other important documents on Aztec culture include first-hand accounts of the conquerors Hernando Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo; the systematic descriptions of religion, social customs, and other topics by early Spanish priests such as Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego de Durán; and a wealth of Spanish colonial-period administrative documentation in both the Spanish and Nahuatl languages.

Because Spanish cities were built over the top of the ruins of conquered Aztec cities, it has been difficult for archaeologists to excavate these sites. Construction work in Mexico City, built over the ruins of the Mexican capital Tenochtitlan, has turned up many important finds. In 1790 some of the major Aztec monumental stone sculptures

were excavated, including the so-called calendar stone. The uncovering in 1978 of the giant Coyolxauhqui stone led to the excavation of the central temple-pyramid of Tenochtitlan, the Templo Mayor. Other Aztec remains have been excavated in Mexico City, particularly during the expansion of the underground metro system. Outside of Mexico City, several large Aztec temples were excavated in the 1930s, including Tenayuca, Malinalco, Calixtlahuaca, and Teopanzolco. Since 1980 excavations and intensive surface survey at smaller Aztec sites has provided much new information on Aztec culture in rural and provincial areas.

### Origin and Development

The roots of Aztec civilization go back to the large, Classic-period city of Teotihuacan (AD 200-700). Teotihuacan was the capital of a small empire in central Mexico, and its merchants traded with cities all over Mesoamerica, including the Classic-period Maya cities. All of the buildings in this city of 150,000 inhabitants were arranged in a strict grid pattern aligned to the cardinal directions. The collapse of Teotihuacan initiated a period of warfare and conflict (AD 700-900), and several smaller fortified cities rose to prominence, including Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, and Teotenango. This period was followed by the Toltec period (AD 900-1150). The Toltec peoples, whose capital was Tula, maintained trading relationships with distant areas of Mesoamerica, although they did not dominate central Mexico as their Teotihuacan ancestors had. The collapse of Tula coincided with the arrival of Nahuatl-speaking Aztec immigrants in central Mexico during the twelfth century AD. The Aztecs adopted many characteristics from these earlier civilizations, including gods, rituals, economic institutions, and principles of kingship and city planning.

In their pictorial histories the Aztec peoples claimed to have migrated to central Mexico from a place in the north called Aztlan. This account matches the linguistic history of Nahuatl, which is an intrusive

language in central Mexico related to languages of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States. These migrants arrived in central Mexico at a time of low population and abundant land, and people settled throughout the rich valleys of highland central Mexico spreading the Nahuatl language. This influx of new population signaled the start of the Early Aztec period, AD 1150-1350. The leaders of the immigrant groups established dynasties and traced their legitimacy back to the Toltec kings. A system of numerous small city-states developed, each with a hereditary king (called a *tlatoani*) who ruled from a town or small city, a hereditary nobility who aided the king, and a mass of commoners who lived scattered throughout the farmland that surrounded the capital.

The Early Aztec peoples were divided into a number of different ethnic groups, each located in its own region of central Mexico. The Mexica of Tenochtitlan were the best-known of these groups, which also included the Acolhua of Texcoco, the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco, and other groups such as the Chalca, Xochimilca, Tlahuica, and Tlaxcalteca. These Aztec ethnic groups all spoke Nahuatl, and they shared a common central Mexican Aztec culture that was expressed in religious, economic, social, and political institutions and practices.

The start of the Late Aztec period (AD 1350-1520) was marked by a population explosion. The Aztec population grew from around 500,000 persons to over 3,000,000. The entire landscape of central Mexico was filled in by settlements, and agricultural practices were greatly intensified to feed the growing population. Competition among city-states escalated, and by 1400 much of central Mexico came under the control of small-scale empires centered at Azcapotzalco, Texcoco, Cuauhnahuac, and a few other cities. In a major war in 1428, Tenochtitlan overthrew Azcapotzalco and joined with Texcoco and Tlacopan to form the Triple Alliance or Aztec empire. The empire immediately began a

process of expansion by military conquest. By the time Cortés arrived in 1519, the Mexica had emerged as the dominant force behind the empire and vast quantities of tribute flowed into Tenochtitlan from all parts of northern and central Mesoamerica.

### **Social Organization**

The basic principle of Aztec social organization was the division of society into two social classes, the nobility and the commoners. The nobility was a hereditary group whose members occupied most of the important political positions and controlled most of the economic resources in Aztec society. The king (*tlatoani*) occupied the highest level of the nobility. Lords with the title *tecuhtli* were high-ranking chiefs with important political and military roles. Other nobles were called *pilli*. This social hierarchy within the nobility was marked by tribute payments (lower-ranking nobles paid tribute to kings) and by the sizes of the houses or palaces of the nobles. Nobles formed social and political alliances with nobles in other city-states through arranged marriages and other ties, and the entire Aztec nobility of central Mexico became enmeshed in a network of kinship and cooperation that transcended political boundaries.

The majority of the Aztec peoples (over 90%) were commoners, and as in the case of nobles there was wide variation in wealth and status within the commoner class. Most commoners belonged to a *calpolli*, a territorially-based social group whose members cooperated economically and socially. Although nobles owned the land, rural *calpolli* were responsible for allocating plots to individual farmers. In contrast to *calpolli* members, other commoners were subjected more directly to nobles and had less control over their own lives; these individuals were similar in many ways to European feudal serfs. At the bottom of the social scale were slaves (*tlacotin*), a non-hereditary group of persons typically engaged in personal service

to their owners. Although commoners could never cross the hereditary line to become nobles, several lines of social mobility allowed commoners to raise their position in society. Success on the battlefield brought status and privileges, and merchants and priests could advance to higher levels of wealth or status.

### **Economics**

The Aztec economy was based on agriculture. Staple crops included maize, beans, amaranth, and squash. The population explosion of the Late Aztec period brought about widespread intensification of agriculture throughout central Mexico. Stone terraces were built in hilly locations, rivers were dammed for canal irrigation, and the shallow swampy lakes of the southern Valley of Mexico were converted into highly fertile fields through the construction of raised fields (*chinampas*). In spite of the increasing yields of Aztec agriculture, famines and food shortages became regular events in the Late Aztec period, resulting in periods of social unrest and a general pattern of malnutrition for commoners. A variety of alternative food sources were exploited, including fish, algae, and insect larvae from the lakes.

Aztec artisans produced a variety of utilitarian and luxury goods. Cotton textiles, produced by women of all social classes, were the most important craft product, both numerically and socially. In addition to their use as clothing, textiles were the primary item of tribute payment and also served as a form of money in the marketplaces. Ceramic cookware and ritual objects were produced throughout the Aztec realm. The volcanic glass obsidian was one of the most remarkable crafts in ancient Mesoamerica. Prismatic blades of obsidian, manufactured by specialists using a difficult and sophisticated method, had the sharpest edge known to science. These tools were used for a variety of domestic and production tasks, and they were one of the most important trade goods in the Aztec economy.

Goods were circulated throughout the Aztec realm by professional merchants who bought and sold in marketplaces. Every city, town, and village had a marketplace that met periodically following the Aztec 5-day week. The central marketplace at Tlatelolco (Tenochtitlan's twin city) was a huge daily market whose 60,000 participants greatly impressed Cortés and his soldiers. Cotton textiles served as money for valuable purchases, and cacao beans (imported from tropical lowland areas) served as money for smaller purchases. Although the Aztec economy was highly commercialized, land and labor were not commodities to be bought and sold.

### City-States and Empire

The basic Aztec political unit was the city-state, or *altepetl*, ruled by a king, or *tlatoani*. These kings were selected by a high council of nobles who chose from the male members of the city-state's royal family. Only proven military leaders were considered for kingship, and newly-selected kings had to undertake a successful campaign of conquest before they were fully invested in the office. As previously noted, most of the Aztec city-states had their origin in the Early Aztec period, and these continued to be important through the time of the Spanish conquest. Even when conquered by stronger polities or by the Mexica empire, city-states remained important local political units. Kings were generally left in power and local government continued without much interruption. Even after the Spanish conquest, city-states retained many of their functions of local administration and the Spaniards modeled their system of territorial organization after the pre-existing Aztec city-states.

The Mexica empire conquered over 500 city-states in northern and central Mesoamerica and forced their subjects to pay tribute in textiles, foodstuffs, and many other goods (described in the *Codex Mendoza*). The Mexica followed a policy of indirect rule of

their provinces. So long as conquered kings acknowledged the superiority of the Mexica emperor and paid their tribute quotas, they were left in power. In fact, the Mexica even supported local kings who cooperated with the empire. The basic goals of Aztec imperialism were economic: the generation of tribute payments and the encouragement of commerce.

The Mexica were not able to conquer all of their enemies. Tlaxcala, a defiant Aztec (Nahuatl-speaking) region east of the Valley of Mexico completely encircled by the empire, was on the verge of being conquered when the Spaniards arrived. The strongest Aztec enemy was the Tarascan empire, a powerful state centered at the city of Tzintzuntzan west of central Mexico. In a major battle the Tarascans defeated the Aztec armies, and after that the two empires constructed a series of fortifications along their border, which was the setting for continual low-level fighting until the Spanish conquest. In spite of this animosity, the Aztecs and Tarascans traded with one another, as attested by Tarascan goods excavated at Aztec sites and goods from the Aztec area at Tarascan sites.

### Settlement Patterns

The Aztec peoples lived in many types of settlement. Farming methods and demography influenced the nature and locations of houses and villages. In the Early Aztec period people settled in the best agricultural areas. As populations grew in Late Aztec times settlement expanded into less desirable hilly and mountainous zones. In many rural areas the houses of farmers were scattered among their terraced fields in a dispersed fashion. The archaeological remains of these settlements consist of continuous distributions of artifacts and features across the hilly landscape. In other environmental zones farmers lived in nucleated villages and towns. The houses of commoners were small simple dwellings of adobe bricks. In some areas houses occurred in patio groups of three or

four dwellings arranged around a central cleared patio. Most Aztec settlements had considerable open land between the houses that was probably dedicated to gardens.

Aztec towns and cities consisted of several clusters of commoner houses arranged around a zone of larger and more elaborate buildings. The center of these urban settlements was a public plaza with a temple-pyramid on its eastern edge. The height of the pyramid reflected the political and religious importance of the settlement. A palace for the leading noble family occupied one of the other sides of the plaza, and often a ballcourt took up another side. The plaza and the large stone buildings around it were carefully planned and often oriented to the cardinal directions. Outside of the central area, Aztec towns and cities were not planned or carefully arranged. When the Mexica came to power in the fifteenth century, they rebuilt their capital Tenochtitlan to resemble the ancient imperial cities of Teotihuacan and Tula rather than the previous Aztec towns.

### **Religion**

Aztec religion was polytheistic, but deities did not exist as discrete, easily-identifiable individuals. The hundreds of named gods and goddesses were seen more as forces or spirits, each possessing a number of distinctive attributes of clothing and regalia. Stone or clay sculptures would be dressed with a deity's clothing and thereby became its incarnation. The deities and their attributes were painted in the ritual codices, but it is not always possible to identify them because separate deities shared many attributes. Another cause of confusion for scholars is that many deities were closely-related transformations of one another. The most prominent deities included Tezcatlipoca, a powerful creator god who was the patron of kings; Quetzalcoatl, the god of learning and patron of priests; Tlaloc, an ancient central Mexican rain god; and Huitzilopochtli, the patron god of the Mexica people.

Professional priests supervised many public and private rituals in honor of the gods. According to several Aztec myths, the gods had offered their own blood and some gods had sacrificed themselves in order to create the earth, the sun and moon, and humans. People therefore owed a huge debt to the gods, and offerings and sacrifices were the means of repayment. Offerings of food, incense, and other goods were commonplace. Priests engaged frequently in rituals of autosacrifice in which they pierced various parts of their body to offer blood, which was then spattered on paper strips and burned.

Human sacrifice was practiced extensively by the Aztecs, although the actual extent is difficult to gauge because early Spanish observers systematically exaggerated the number of sacrifices as part of their attempts to make the Aztecs seem more savage-like. The most common form of sacrifice involved cutting open the chests of victims on altars atop tall temple-pyramids. Special sacrifice priests removed the heart and offered it to the gods, and then the body was thrown down the pyramid steps. Most victims were enemy soldiers captured in battle. They were dressed in the clothing of a god, and lived their last weeks being worshipped as that god. The actual sacrifice was a reenactment of one or more myths and the victim was seen as the god, not as a mere human. The skulls of sacrificial victims were displayed in public places on long wood racks. Beyond its manifest religious role, Aztec sacrifice also served social and political ends as a form of propaganda or even terrorism directed against the lower classes and the enemies of the city-state.

Human sacrifices were major components of a series of twenty monthly ceremonies that involved all sectors of Aztec society. Each ceremony, organized and presided over by priests, was planned in advance and lasted several days. There were public processions as sacrificial victims (dressed as gods) paraded through the streets;

dances and music; offerings of many kinds; theatrical presentations and speeches, usually leading up to a climax with a series of sacrifices atop a town's central pyramid. Alongside the public religion was an active program of domestic ritual that escaped the notice of most Spanish observers. Archaeological excavations of Aztec houses have turned up domestic altars, several forms of incense burners, and clay figurines probably used in curing ceremonies and other household rituals.

### Arts and Sciences

Most Aztec science served practical ends. Technological knowledge contributed to advancements in areas such as obsidian tools, agricultural methods, and building practices. The Aztec writing system was a form of pictographic representation whose use was limited to a narrow range of ritual, historical, and economic works (see discussion of codices above). Astronomical observations led to accurate descriptions of the heavens and the development of several calendars. Although Aztec concepts of health and medicine were based on religious and magical beliefs, medical practice was based upon empirical knowledge. Treatments for wounds, many diseases, and broken bones were highly effective and the early Spanish invaders quickly abandoned Spanish doctors for Aztec medical specialists who were seen as having superior methods.

Several forms of artistic expression were highly developed among the Aztecs. Stone sculpture was particularly notable. Many monumental, state-sponsored sculptures have survived, including the so-called Calendar Stone and other major works in Mexican museums. Smaller sculptures of gods, people, plants, and animals were abundant in temples, homes, and other contexts. Pictorial art in a style known as the Mixteca-Puebla style was expressed in the codices and in mural paintings. Aztec poems, speeches, and ritual chants recorded by Spanish priests include

many beautiful expressive works. Music using drums, flutes, rattles, and other instruments was played at many rituals but we know little today about Aztec melody and harmony.

### Spanish Conquest and Beyond

Aztec civilization was brought to an abrupt end by Hernando Cortés and his invading army between 1519 and 1521. The primary cause of the Aztec defeat was the introduction of smallpox from Spain; millions of Aztecs died during the final months of resistance in 1521 and for the first five decades of the Spanish Colonial period. Although the Mexica empire and imperial institutions such as sacrificial rituals were quickly extinguished by the Spaniards, life for the Aztec peasants continued with little interruption well into the Colonial period. Nahuatl is still a vital language in rural central Mexico, and aspects of many traditional village customs today can be traced back to Aztec times.

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