



The Aztecs

AD 900-1521

The *Aztec* empire is often the first thing people think of when they talk about Mexico. It conjures up images of huge pyramids, brightly coloured costumes, and a brave people who fought hard to resist their conquest by the Spanish. Visitors to today's Mexico City are thrilled to see remains of the beautiful Aztec capital, **Tenochtitlan**.



The word "Mexico" comes from the other name for the Aztecs which was Mexicas. Their original home was in Aztlán, thought to be a place in the west or northwest of Mexico. A legend says that their God of the sun, *Huitzilopochtli*, guided them to find a new place to live.

He told the Aztecs they would know they had arrived, when they saw an eagle standing on a *nopal* cactus with a snake in its beak. This would be the sign for them to start building their new home. They left Aztlán in the 12th century, settling in various places before finally, in the 13th Century, arriving in the Valley of Mexico.



They fought some of the other peoples who occupied this territory, and were eventually taken prisoners by several tribes who had joined forces against them. Later, the Mexicas were freed and left to live in a poorly populated area of marshland near a group of lakes, the largest of which was Texcoco.

According to the legend, it was here that they witnessed the eagle with the snake in its beak, exactly as *Huitzilopochtli* had described it to them, so they settled on one of the islands.

This eventually became the city of **Tenochtitlan**, later called **Mexico City**.

Tenochtitlan

In those times, it must have been an impressive sight to arrive in the city of Tenochtitlan and see the Great Temple towering over the surrounding buildings and houses. This pyramid had twin temples on the top. One of these temples was dedicated to the God of rain, *Tlaloc*, and the other to the God of the sun, *Huitzilopochtli*.

Also in the central area of the city was a ball court, where spectators watched a game between two teams trying to propel a ball through a hoop. The skulls from sacrificial victims were strung on rows of wooden bars on a construction called the *Tzompantli*.



The Aztec noblemen usually lived in palaces beyond the ceremonial district. The craftsmen and farmers lived on the outskirts of the city. The city and other islands were linked to the shore of the lake by causeways. People walked along footpaths beside canals, which took the place of streets.

The Mexicas did not have much land to cultivate so they created man-made islands where they grew vegetables, herbs, medicinal plants and flowers. These islands were known as **chinampas**, and were made by weaving rushes together then covering them with layers of mud.

The Mexicas planted trees called *ahuejotes* (a type of willow tree) on the *chinampas*. As the trees grew, their roots helped to hold everything together, and gradually the Mexicas expanded their land. This system of *chinampas* is still used in places like Xochimilco in Mexico City.

Agriculture and food

The Aztecs cultivated all sorts of things, but mainly maize, beans, chilli, tomatoes, squashes, tobacco, cacao and the *nopal* cactus. The average diet consisted of tortillas eaten with sauces prepared from chilli and tomatoes, along with boiled beans. Mexicans today still love to eat tortillas.

Luxury foods included cocoa drinks, meat (from game or from the only two domestic animals of importance: the turkey and the hairless

dog), and fish that was brought from the coast using a system of runners. They also ate fish from the lake, as well as frogs, water snakes, ducks and herons.

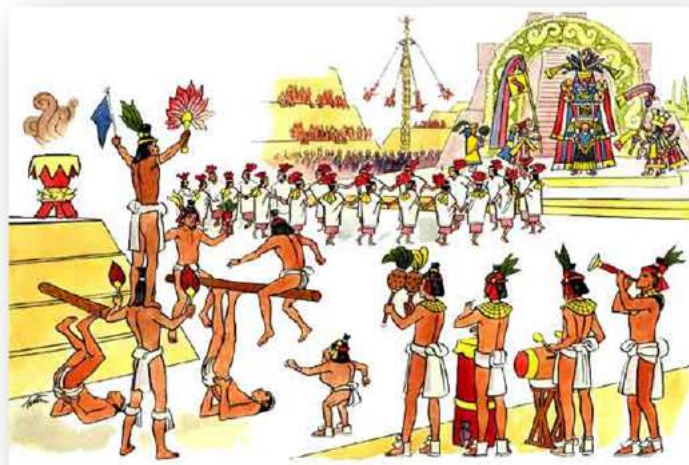
Aztec Numerical System

The Aztecs counted in units of twenty instead of tens, as we do. A flag represented twenty so four flags equalled eighty. They used other symbols for larger numbers, such as a feather for four hundred.



The Aztec Empire

By the time the Spaniards arrived in 1519, Tenochtitlan occupied almost 13 square kilometres and had about **80,000 inhabitants**. It was the centre of the Aztec Empire, which by then stretched throughout central and southern Mexico. The Aztecs were considered the most powerful group in the region, which included some countries of present day Central America. Conquered peoples had to pay tribute to the Aztecs, such as goods or services. These tributes helped to support Tenochtitlan and other cities.



For trading, there were local markets as well as merchants (called *Pochteca*) who traded their wares throughout the Empire.

The Sun Stone



The Aztecs believed that the world had been destroyed four times, once by jaguars, once by the wind, once by fire, and once by flood.

A huge carving in stone depicts these four worlds as well as a fifth world, the present one, which is supposed to be destroyed by an earthquake. You can still see this magnificent sculpture, called the **Sun Stone**, at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

Education

Aztec children started their education at home, from the age of three, with boys being educated by their father and girls by their mother. In Tenochtitlan, the sons of Aztec noblemen enrolled in a school called the *Calmecac*, at the age of 15.

Here they were trained as priests or political administrators. They were taught medicine, astronomy, calendric calculations, writing, history, literature, philosophy, law, government, and military strategy.

The sons of the middle class went to another school called *Telpochcalli*. In this school children learned how to make ornaments with feathers, work stones, sculpt, and trained to become warriors. Girls were trained to become priestesses, and learnt how to knit and work with feathers to make religious objects.



Religion

Religion was a very important part of Aztec culture. They worshipped a great number of gods and goddesses. They believed there was a Sun God and a Moon God, and also a God of Rain, a God of Fertility, a God of War and many others. The Aztecs built temples on the top of pyramids to worship their gods.

According to their beliefs, some of the gods needed to be fed with human blood, so priests conducted human sacrifices for some of the temples in special occasions. *Huitzilopochtli* (God of the Sun) had to be fed with human blood to continue shining and giving life. War was not only a favourite activity of the Aztecs, it gave them prisoners to sacrifice in order to ensure the sun would rise every day.



It is thought the victims may have felt honoured to be sacrificed. For the Aztecs, the cycle of life and death was continuous - those who were sacrificed were giving life to others.

Codices

The Aztecs wrote *codices*, ancient manuscripts which still survive today. **Codices** were made up of pictorial symbols, written on strips of bark or deer skin and they were used to educate children and to record historical events. Through the codices, we can learn a lot about the Aztec's life.

End of the Aztec Empire

The Spanish, led by **Hernán Cortés**, arrived to the coast of Mexico in 1519. Hearing of the great city of Tenochtitlan, he and his army marched toward it, forming alliances with other tribes on the way.

Several things contributed to the success of the conquistadores over the Aztecs: The Emperor **Moctezuma II** was expecting the return of a God called *Quetzalcoatl*. He mistakenly imagined that Cortés could be the returning God.



The unusual dress of the Spaniards, which included metal armour, their strange animals (horses had never been seen in the Americas before), and their explosive weaponry, all added to the suspicion that the arrivals were "god-like". So, when the

Spaniards arrived, Moctezuma welcomed them openly and treated them with respect, instead of attacking them.

The other tribes, such as the Tlaxcalans, were happy to give Cortés their military support as they considered the Aztecs their enemies.

Also, the Spanish brought European diseases with them, such as smallpox, which killed many of the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan.



All these factors contributed to the defeat of the Aztecs, despite one heroic battle when they chased the Spaniards from the city. Unfortunately for them, Cortés gathered together more tribes to support him and attacked Tenochtitlan again.

On August 13th, 1521, the new Emperor, Cuauhtémoc, finally surrendered. The Aztec Empire was no more. Mexico's colonial era had begun.

The Aztecs had great influence on the development of Mexican culture. Their language, *Nahuatl*, is still spoken in several regions of Mexico and many festivals which are celebrated around the country come from Aztec traditions.