

# The Aztecs

From the moment Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes first found and confronted them, the Aztecs have fascinated the world, and they continue to hold a unique place both culturally and in pop culture. Nearly 500 years after the Spanish conquered their mighty empire, the Aztecs are often remembered today for their major capital, Tenochtitlan, as well as being fierce conquerors of the Valley of Mexico who often engaged in human sacrifice rituals.



Ironically, and unlike the Mayans, the Aztecs are not widely viewed or remembered with nuance, in part because their own leader burned existing Aztec writings and rewrote a mythologized history explaining his empire's dominance less than a century before the Spanish arrived. Naturally, Cortes and other Spaniards depicted the Aztecs as savages greatly in need of conversion to Catholicism. While the Mayans are remembered for their astronomy, numeral system, and calendar, the Aztecs have primarily been remembered in a far narrower way, despite continuing to be a source of pride to Mexicans through the

centuries. As a result, even though the Aztecs continue to interest people across the world centuries after their demise, it has fallen on archaeologists and historians to try to determine the actual history, culture, and lives of the Aztecs from the beginning to the end, relying on excavations, primary accounts, and more.

### The History of the Aztecs

When the origins of the Aztecs were historically revised by Montezuma I during the middle of the 15th century, it obscured the fact that the Aztecs were relative newcomers to the lands that eventually formed their vast empire.

The Aztecs, or Mexica as they called themselves, arrived in the valley of Mexico in the mid-13th century. These Nahuatl speaking people, according to their own recorded history, came from an apparently mythical city named Aztlán to the north. Aztlán was located on a beautiful island in a lake, which was convenient since Tenochtitlan was built on an island in Lake Texcoco. Given that the Aztecs were adept at rewriting their history to suit current needs, the story of Aztlán may very well have been concocted long after their settlement in the Valley of Mexico. It is likely that the Aztec people came from somewhere in the modern state of Nayarit in Mexico, which is on the country's west coast, touching the Pacific Ocean.



In 1325, the wandering Aztecs came upon an island in Lake Texcoco where, according to their history, they saw an eagle roosting on a cactus devouring a nopal or prickly pear. They identified the eagle as Huizilopochtli, their war and hunting

deity, and the red fruit of the nopal as a heart. The island, again according to the Aztec history that was rewritten at the height of their power, was a twin to their original home of Atzlan.



The territory over which the Aztecs held control expanded quickly under the rule of the all-powerful kings. This was the period of what has been called the Aztec Empire, though calling it an empire is somewhat a misnomer. Unlike other historical empires, the Aztecs did not actually occupy or govern the people they conquered within their empire. When they conquered a city, the Aztecs acquired captives and the right to tribute, which was to be sent to Tenochtitlan according to a regular schedule. Since the Aztecs did not leave behind administrators or a garrison but merely went home with their captives, it was left up to the conquered city to render **tribute** when it was due.



Those cities that reneged would be subject to a renewed attack in which more captives were taken and more tribute was demanded. Making this

arrangement even more unique, the Aztecs did not maintain a standing army; their empire was controlled or policed by warriors assembled on an **ad hoc** basis. That they proved so successful and conquered such a large area is all the more remarkable.



The Aztecs' expansion was out of necessity. When Tenochtitlan suffered food shortages caused by increased population and / or crop failures, their warriors were dispatched to subjugate new territories and win more tribute. Of course as time went, on the new tribute cities were located further and further away from the capital, and the Aztecs found the land to the west and north was not productive enough to warrant imperial expansion. To the south, the tribute cities provided luxury goods but were too far distant to provide a source for food. So it was to the east that the Aztecs began expanding their empire. But the increasing distances of the tribute cities made the food distribution system less and less efficient as the empire expanded, because the Aztecs lacked wheeled vehicles and customary beasts of burden.

As a result, the Aztecs had to rely on human **porters** to transport the incoming tribute, which posed a unique problem of its own. The further these human porters had to carry food, the more of it they consumed along the way. Thus, the most important cities within the empire that supplied food to the Aztecs were within easy reach of Lake Taxcoco. Given this system, the Aztec Empire was essentially an **agrarian** one. The tribute delivered to Tenochtitlan was the property of the elites, who also received an "in kind" tax from the common farmers and fishermen of the city. They distributed the surplus in the form of gifts to the populace to keep everyone happy.

## The Aztec City of Tenochtitlan

Today Tenochtitlan is mostly remembered for being a floating island city, made all the more ironic by the fact that it was essentially the forerunner of Mexico City, one of the biggest cities in the world today. Lake Texcoco was part of a closed river basin consisting of shallow lakes, lagoons and marshes that formed during the period of glaciation and received additional waters during the annual rainy season. It was on this lake that the floating city was created.

By the time Tenochtitlan was taken by the Spanish, it spanned some 1,000 hectares, the equivalent of 10 million square meters. The incredible size and organization of Tenochtitlan was so impressive to the conquistadors that some of them compared it to Venice. The population size also astonished the conquistadors, who found one well organized market in which 60,000 people were carrying on business. The market had a huge variety of goods for exchange, and nearby were a number of studios where highly skilled artisans worked and sold their goods.

The city centered on the walled square of the Great Temple and adjacent residences of the king, priests and elite warriors. The streets were laid out in a grid pattern interspersed by canals in each of the quarters and their constituent calpulli or wards. **Causeways** connected the city to the mainland, alongside which ran the aqueducts.



Estimates of the population of Tenochtitlan vary considerably, but it is likely that the total population of the city was in the range of 200,000 to 300,000 most of which would have been of the common class. It is probable that the second largest segment of the population were slaves. The sheer number of people in Tenochtitlan amazed the conquistadors, who compared the size of the city to some of the largest municipalities at home in Spain. Incredibly, the city had amenities that were unthought of even in Europe. For example, there were schools for children of all

classes, even commoners. Adjacent to the local temple the schools provided instruction for children from 7 to 14 years in age with boys and girls taught in separate rooms. Children were taught the history of the Aztecs, dancing, singing, public speaking and were even given religious instruction. The schools for children of the elite were located in the center of Tenochtitlan. There they were taught a broader curriculum that included astronomy, arithmetic, oratory, reading and writing.

The priestly and elite warrior class dwelt in more luxurious palaces located near the royal palace around the central temple precinct. These buildings were presumably highly decorated with relief sculptures and may have been colorfully painted outside and inside.

The king lived on the second floor of his palace with two wives and 150 concubines as well as a great number of servants, guards and attendants. To feed this vast crowd the palace had extensive kitchens and store rooms. Celebratory banquets included a variety of tempting dishes, including frogs with green peppers, sage locusts and nopal with fish eggs. As many as 300 guests were fed at special banquets. While the king ate with his guests, he was hidden behind a screen during the meal.

The highly **stratified society** of the Aztecs involved the regulation of various rights and privileges of the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan. For example, Montezuma I enacted a series of precise **sumptuary laws** prohibiting commoners from wearing cotton or a cloak falling below the knee. Commoners were also forbidden to wear sandals in the city streets, while specific kinds of cloaks, jewels and decoration were prescribed as appropriate to various levels of society and different ranks of warriors.

## The Aztec Religion and Human Sacrifice Rituals

More is known about Aztec religious practices than any other aspect of their culture, mostly because the major element in the public ceremonies was focused on human sacrifice. The rituals were apparently so gruesome that they horrified even the Spanish, who were not exactly known for their gentility when it came to war and religious fervor. And human sacrifice in and of itself would not have been particularly upsetting to the Spanish; nor would it have been of great interest to generations of readers on the Aztecs.



However, the brutality, quantity and method of disposal of human remains as practiced by the Aztecs almost defy the imagination. An example of the rite of human sacrifice at its height was that performed for the dedication of the new Templo Mayor in 1487. The ceremony lasted four days, during which anywhere from 4,000 to 20,000 humans were sacrificed. As proof of their zeal, Aztec accounts themselves placed the number over 80,000, which would have required sacrificing over a dozen people a minute. Captives from the Huastec region to the east of Tenochtitlan were paraded through the temple square joined by ropes threaded through their pierced noses. They climbed one by one up the steep steps of the pyramid to the temples at the top where they were laid over a stone. A priest wielding an obsidian-bladed ritual knife hacked open the victim's chest, tore out

the still beating heart and placed it in a basin where it was incinerated. The body of the victim was kicked off the temple platform and rolled down to the square below. Here it was dismembered. The skull was installed on a rack and the limbs were distributed to the crowd assembled in the square.

The ceremonial dedication of the Templo Mayor may have been on a grander scale than day to day ritual sacrifice, but the number of victims of Aztec religious practices was always high. When Cortés' men were shown into the temples of Tenochtitlan in 1519, they were nauseated by the stench of the burning hearts and the blood soaked walls. Bernal Diaz described what he saw in one of the temples:

On these altars were idols, with evil looking bodies, he reported, and every night five captives were sacrificed before them. Their chests were cut open, and their arms and thighs were cut off. The walls of the temple were covered with blood. "We stood greatly amazed and gave the island the name isleta de Sacrificios (Island of the Sacrifices).



Describing one sacrifice in detail, he wrote:

They strike open the wretched Indian's chest with flint knives and hastily tear out the palpitating heart which, with the blood, they present to the idols. They cut off the arms, thighs and head, eating the arms and thighs at ceremonial banquets. The head they hang up on a beam, and the body is given to the beasts of prey.

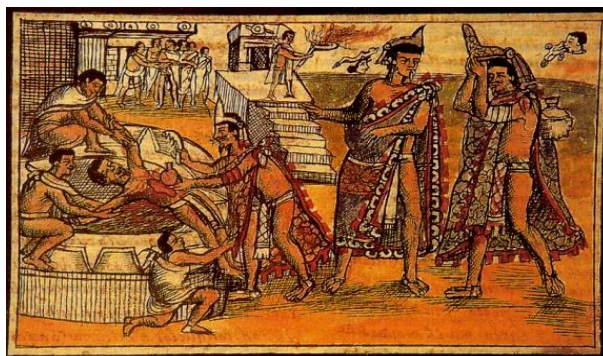
*(The beasts of prey were the animals in Montequma's zoo.)*



Diaz continues:

They have a most horrid and abominable custom which truly ought to be punished and which until now we have seen in no other part, and this is that, whenever they wish to ask something of the idols, in order that their plea may find more acceptance, they take many girls and boys and even adults, and in the presence of these idols they open their chests while they are still alive and take out their hearts and entrails and burn them before the idols, offering the smoke as sacrifice. Some of us have seen this, and they say it is the most terrible and frightful thing they have ever witnessed.

The disposal of the remains from the temple rites has been the subject of heated debate among academics who study the Aztecs. What is indisputable is the fact that they were carried to the homes around the city and cooked up and eaten, leaving scholars to perform all kinds of academic gymnastics attempting to explain Aztec cannibalism. Current studies suggest that the Aztecs were cannibals because this was the only reliable source of protein in their diets. Completely lacking domesticated animals, with the exception of birds, and suffering from periodic food shortages, the Aztecs for their very survival required a constant supply of human flesh. This came not only from the temples in the central complex but also from neighborhood temples in the *calpulli*.



Whatever the case, the supply of sacrificial victims was clearly a constant concern for the Aztecs. It is possible that one of the reasons the Aztecs did not

have a standing army and did not install **garrisons** in the conquered towns around the empire was that they needed the people who would've occupied those cities to capture and bring back as many captives as possible for sacrifice. There must have been a constant coming and going of warriors who marched off to the cities and towns in the empire and captured as many prisoners as were required. This periodic harvesting of victims required that outlying cities not be pacified nor included within an organized Aztec administration.

Aztec warriors, literally fighting for dinner, sometimes engaged in battles with the consent of the opposition. In these cases, it seems the conflicts were a form of recreation. If they were not fought for entertainment, then battle was a way for warriors of both sides to enhance their status.

The Aztecs called their expeditions to gather sacrificial victim *flower* or *flowery wars* because the captives were rounded up and carried home like a garland of blooms. In the 1400s, the Aztecs conducted many campaigns of flowery wars. Tlacaélel, brother of Moctezuma I and his chief military advisor or *cihuacóatl*, is reported to have said these expeditions were like buying food in a market. He was of the opinion that, when faced with the need for victims to serve in the inauguration of the Great Temple, the god Huitzilopochtli did not need to wait for a quarrel to instigate a war. For the market, said Tlacaélel, the Aztecs did not need travel to the far realms; instead they could capture their victims from cities close at hand. This required that the battles should not be decisive so that Huitzilopochtli could feed at pleasure just like a man enjoying a freshly baked tortilla.

When the Aztec army was on a "hunting" expedition, they marched in a long ordered procession behind scouts. The first combatants were the warrior priests, who carried a banner or images of Huitzilopochtli. Following them were the warrior elite, including the *tlatoni* (commander in chief) or king. Trailing this group were the ordinary warriors. In battle, the Aztecs fought with short javelins and clubs fitted with obsidian blades. Since captives for sacrifice were the objective, the best warriors did not kill or seriously maim their opponents.

The victims taken to Tenochtitlan were well taken care of before suffering their fate. Warriors might claim a special victim that they had personally captured, and that captive would be well fed and tended in a cage. When he was **dispatched** by the priest, his limbs would be given to the warrior who had captured him. The warrior, who would have been among the 400 men put forth by each *calpulli* and

who fought under a ward banner, celebrated his skill by inviting a number of people to join him in partaking of the special meal. The poor might also crowd into the party in the hopes that some scraps would be given to them.



The execution of captives varied depending on the god to which they were sacrificed. For example, in the temple dedicated to Mixocoatl, the god of hunting, a victim was shot full of arrows before his heart was removed and he was dismembered.



The festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli (**flaying** of men), celebrated annually just before the rainy season, was held at the temple of Xipe Totec, "our lord the flayed one", the sun god. The victims who had been well treated, perhaps even revered prior to the festival, were dressed in costumes to appear like Xipe Totec. They were tied to large stones and armed with feather encrusted weapons to fight off the advances of five warriors who were armed with spears and obsidian bladed clubs. The blood of the victims fed the earth and ensured a good planting season. The victims' bodies were flayed, and the priests of the temple wore their skins for 20 days.

## The End of Aztec Civilization

**Hernán Cortés**, the conqueror of Mexico, like his fellow conquistadors, was an opportunist. Not waiting for orders from his superior, Velázquez de Cuéllar, Governor of Cuba, he surreptitiously set sail from Havana to enrich himself with the gold of the new world.

With a flotilla of about 11 ships, he explored the Yucatan and then moved on to Tabasco, where he fought and quickly defeated the natives. Included in the tribute he demanded of the vanquished were some 20 young native women. One of them, called La Malinche, was fluent in Maya and the Aztec language, Nahuatl. She would serve as his translator as he rampaged over Mexico, eventually becoming his mistress and the mother of his child, Martin.

Cortés sailed up the east coast of Mexico and assumed absolute control over the Spanish outpost at Veracruz. In this grab for authority over Mexico, he separated himself from the command of the Governor of Cuba and placed himself under the direct command of King Charles V. Having learned of a rich kingdom in the interior, Cortés burned his ships to make retreat impossible and set off with 500 men, a few cavalry and 15 cannons. On the way into the interior, Cortés fought and negotiated alliances with tribes he encountered. Among them were the Tlaxcalteca, who supplied some 3,000 mercenaries to the expeditionary force. Understandably, the Aztecs had many enemies in the area as a result of their own conquests, and across much of Mexico, the Spanish were viewed as liberators, not conquerors.

After arriving in the Valley of Mexico, Cortés attacked the large city of Cholula, massacred many of its 100,000 inhabitants, and burned it down, destroying perhaps as many as 365 temples. He then marched to the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, impressively situated on an island in Lake Texcoco. When his men arrived at the lakeshore they were astounded at the sight.

Much later one of Cortés' soldiers, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, wrote:

"We saw so many cities and villages built both on the water and on dry land, and a straight, level causeway (to Tenochtitlan), we couldn't resist our admiration. It was like the enchantments in the book of Amadis (de Gaula, a popular Spanish chivalric romance of the late middle ages), because of the high towers, pyramids and other

buildings, all of masonry, which rose from the water. Some of our soldiers asked if what we saw was not a dream."

Cortes was greeted by emissaries of the Aztec king, Montezuma II and invited to enter his great city of Tenochtitlan. Whether Montezuma was fearful of a repeat of the butchery at Cholula (as Cortés had planned) or, as was reported in the Aztec account of the event, he thought Cortés was an incarnation of the ancient Toltec god Quetzalcóatl who it was foretold would come from the east to destroy the Aztecs, the hospitality Montezuma offered to the Spanish was ill advised. The Aztec king made a second error by putting up his guests in the palace Axayácatl. Wandering about the magnificent guest quarters, the conquistadors discovered a room full of treasure. With their appetite whetted by this sight, they began to spoil for conflict.

The eager conquistadors soon found their excuse when they interrupted an Aztec religious ceremony, and, appalled by the sight of human sacrifice, massacred the Aztecs in the main temple of Tenochtitlan. In the subsequent riot, Montezuma who, by this time was being held hostage by the Spanish, was paraded before his subjects to quell the unrest. Whether he was killed by a rock thrown by one of his own people or murdered by a Spanish soldier is still unclear, but upon his death the riot turned even uglier. Cortés and his troops viciously fought their way out of Tenochtitlan and crossed a causeway to the mainland. They then laid siege to the Aztec city, cutting off the food supply. In the final attack, the conquistadors, along with their mercenary soldiers, massacred a great number of Aztecs, removed all the treasure they could put their hands on, and began to level the city.

Having subdued and destroyed Tenochtitlan, Cortés then attacked and destroyed the cities in the Valley of Mexico that had been allied with Aztecs. To top it all off, smallpox epidemics that were transferred to the natives from the Spanish wiped out an untold number even after the conquistadors left, with an estimated 10-50% of the remaining inhabitants killed. The numbers dwindled so much that the conquistadors actually merged smaller societies by forcibly transferring natives into larger population centers.

In the span of just a few years, the Aztec empire had been completely wiped out.

Cortes and his men may have quickly conquered the Aztecs and put an end to their empire, but he never could erase their existence. The magnificence of the Aztec civilization that Cortez and his Spanish colonial followers tried so hard to

obliterate from history has remained an essential part of modern Mexican identity. The current national flag of Mexico, adopted in 1984, bears the Aztec pictogram for Tenochtitlan. It shows an eagle devouring a snake perched atop a cactus with ripe prickly pears. The cactus grows on an abstract rectangular island.



The flag is one glaring reminder of the fact that Mexico City, one of the largest cities in the world, was built up out of Tenochtitlan's ashes, in a sense carrying on the Aztecs' legacy. In recognition of that fact, some of the city's landmarks and districts still have Nahuatl names, using the Aztecs' own language. Furthermore, the non-human staples of the Aztec diet continue to be prominently featured in Mexico, and now across the entire world, from maize to tortillas. Fittingly, some of these foods continue to go by their original Nahuatl names.

Beyond honoring their Aztec heritage in these ways, Mexicans are fond of celebrating their ancestral roots by dressing up as Aztecs and performing dances that are intended to recall those of their forefathers. Recreational and competitive Aztec dancing is a part of national celebration in many communities.

It is significant in the context of the evolution of modern Mexican national identity that the most important contribution to understanding Aztec civilization was inaugurated in 1978 as a huge, government sponsored project. In that year municipal workers in Mexico City by chance municipal unearthed an enormous stone disk with a relief of the dismemberment of the Aztec moon goddess. The nation was enthralled by this discovery. Thus began a major excavation of the site that has since revealed the remains of the temple precinct of Tenochtitlan and

yielded thousands of artifacts that are now housed in a museum adjacent to the ruins.

That the government of Mexico spent so much of the Mexican taxpayers' money to reveal more of the city underneath the center of the modern capital is perhaps the strongest indicator that this once glorious civilization forged the foundation of a modern nation.