

# The Aztec Empire: An Overview

Native Americans first arrived in the Americas over ten thousand years ago by traveling over a land bridge from Asia. Many civilizations arose, but the three most dominant and advanced prior to the arrival of the Europeans (or pre-Colombian, before Columbus) were the Aztecs, the Maya, and the Inca.

## Origins

Aztlan, or "White Land," was a perhaps mythical area in northern Mexico that was believed by different groups to be where their civilization began. The group of people that eventually are named the "Aztecs" took their name from this place.

The Aztecs began as hunters and gatherers, who traveled from place to place to obtain food and other things they needed. As they traveled, they learned from the people who lived in various cities and lands they passed. Over time, the Aztecs began to develop their own culture and traditions. In 1250, the Aztecs settled around present day Mexico City but were forced to leave by another tribe.

Years later, the Aztecs saw an eagle perched on a cactus on the marshy land near the southwest border of Lake Texcoco, which they took as a sign that the land would be their new home. They drained the swampy land, prepared the land for crops, and overall did what was needed to start a new city, Tenochtitlán, which became their capital city. This was done in 1325 and the city started to expand.

## Empire

By the end of the 14th Century, the Aztecs had their first powerful ruler or "Tlatoani," which means "speaker." The Aztecs then joined with two other tribes to defeat their most powerful rivals.

Montezuma, who took power in 1440, is remembered as a great warrior and founder of the golden age of the Aztec Empire. The empire was made up of mostly independent city-states that had to pay a tribute (tax) to the leader of the empire. By the early 16th Century, there were around 500 small city-states with about five or six million people. The capital city had around 140,000 inhabitants.

## Aztec Life

Aztecs had a complex form of agriculture called "chinampa," which used man-made islands to grow crops, assisted by complex irrigation methods. Aztecs built two

large aqueducts to carry fresh water into their capital city from springs located over two miles away. Aztecs had maize (a corn-like vegetable) as a staple food, but also grew beans, squashes, potatoes, tomatoes, and avocados. There was also a diverse number of local fish and animals to add to their diet.

Aztecs also used pictograph writing, but only priests generally knew how to read or write. Aztecs believed in many gods and built temples, palaces, and statues to honor gods such as Huitzilopochtli (god of war and of the sun) and Quetzalcoatl ("Feathered Serpent"). Aztecs believed human sacrifice was necessary to satisfy the gods. And, the leader of the Aztec Empire itself was believed to have been appointed by the gods and had the divine right to rule.

The social system ran by a caste system; at the top were nobles, while at the bottom were serfs, indentured servants, and enslaved workers.

### **Spanish Conquest**

Montezuma II came into power in 1502 and was emperor when the Spanish arrived in Mexico fifteen years later. Lacking immunity from European diseases, contact led to great sickness and death from smallpox. Many bad omens were seen.

The Spanish conqueror Hernan Cortes in 1521 ultimately defeated the Aztecs with the help of local allies unhappy with the Aztec brutal control of the area. Tenochtitlán was destroyed. The Spanish built Mexico City, the capital of New Spain, on its ruins. The Aztec people continued to live in the area, but their empire was no more.

