

The Aztecs

1. Arrival of the Aztecs

The Aztecs came from north Mexico around the 13th century. They were migratory people struggling to survive. In the year 1325, however, they stopped their migratory pattern on the border of Lake Texcoco as they beheld an eagle sitting on the stem of a prickly cactus. He was holding a serpent in his talons and his wings were open to the sun. They saw this as an omen, announcing the location of their future city and capital, Tenochtitlán. In order to build their city, the swamps and standing water around them had to be drained and artificial islands were constructed to form gardens.

The Aztec maintained their survival by utilizing fishing, hunting, gathering and gardening techniques. The Valley Rivers were rich in fish, insects, and tadpoles. Those near the ocean ate crabs, fish and turtles. The water was a major source of food for the Aztecs. Among the wild animals were rabbits, snakes, deer, pumas, wild turkey and coyotes.

To supplement the lack of agricultural land, the Aztecs created plots of land called *Chinampas*. These floating plots were constructed of intertwining reeds and vines upon which the Aztecs deposited fertile soil dredged from the bottom of the lake. Like other Mesoamerican societies, the staple crops of the Aztecs were maize, beans and squash.

2. Aztec Society

Tenochtitlán was self-supporting; the village was small and agriculture was managed through the *chinampa* method of agriculture, practiced widely in Mesoamerica. In this way, the Aztecs reclaimed much of the lake for agriculture. A large part of the city's population was farmers; around 200,000, at least half the population would leave the city in the morning to go farm and return in the evening.

The city itself consisted of a large number of priests and craftspeople; the bulk of the economy rested on extensive trade of both necessary and luxury items. Another key to their wealth was the tribute they received from other neighboring peoples. They received exotic items like jade, emeralds, animal skins, and cacao and vanilla beans, which helped their trade with other areas.

Tenochtitlán was a true urban center. It had a permanent population, it had a large market, and it had the beginnings of economic class. For the kinship groups of the city were divided up into *Calpulli*, many of which practiced a specific craft or trade, such as rope-making or pot-making. In addition, the *Calpulli* seemed to be arranged in ranks. The Aztecs did have two clearly differentiated social classes. At the bottom were the commoners, and at the top the *pilli*, or nobility. These were not clearly defined by birth, for one could rise into the *pilli* by virtue of great skill and bravery in war.

All male children went to school. At the age of 15, each male child went to learn the history and religion of the Aztecs, the art of war and fighting, the trade or craft specific to his *Calpulli*, and the religious and civic duties of everyday citizenship. School was for males, women were not allowed. In Aztec society, women were regarded as the subordinate of men. Women were required to behave with chastity and high moral standards. For the most part, all government and religious functions were closed off to women. In fact, one of the most important religious offices, the Snake Woman, was always filled by men. There were temples and gods that had priestesses; they had their own schools and training.

Aztec laws were simple and harsh. Almost every crime, from adultery to stealing, was punished by death and other offenses usually involved severe corporal punishment or mutilation (the penalty for slander, for instance, was the loss of one's lips). There was a strong sense of community among the Aztecs and these laws, harsh as they seem, were supported by the community.

3. Aztec Religion

The Aztecs had many beliefs. They believed the sun fought darkness every night and rose to save mankind. They believed that if they fed the sun blood, it would rise. The Aztecs respected their gods and put great efforts into making beautiful temples to please their gods. They drew pictures and recorded religious events with hieroglyphics and number symbols. The Aztecs worshipped 1,000 gods, but they worshipped the sun god the most. Religious ceremonies took place in a temple that had sacred pools for ceremonial cleansing, gardens, living quarters for a priest, and racks to hold the skulls of victims.

Sacrifice was one of the main events in the Aztec religion. Priests made human sacrifices to please the sun god. Aztecs fought in wars to capture men to sacrifice. On God's Feast Day, they killed their slaves for the gods. Human sacrifices were offerings to the sun and earth so that food would grow. On a special night, when the evening star reached the top of the sky, the priests would stretch the captive over an altar. Then the high priest would light a fire on the victim's heart and tear it out. After the heart is cut, the priest would hold the heart to the sun, and then put it in a sacred dish. Finally, the bodies were rolled down the temple stairs to lie in a heap. Most victims believed they would go straight to heaven.

The Aztecs strongly believed in the afterlife. It was the way the Aztecs died rather than the way they lived that determined whether they would go to the sun god or go to the dark and dismal underworld. If a person died a normal death their soul would have to pass through the nine lives of the underworld. A warrior who died in battle or a woman that died in childbirth would go straight to the sun god. The head of the gods was Huitzilopochtli, god of war and god of sun. The Aztecs worshipped Tlaloc, the rain god, in the main temple. This god was very important to farmers because drought was a threat in the area. Quetzalcoatl was a feathered snake who represented arts, crafts, and self-sacrifice.

Priests and priestesses were very important people. They acted as doctors, and taught science, art, writing, music, dance, history, and counting. They also had to know astronomy and astrology. They had to perform difficult ceremonies. Religion played an important part in Aztecs' lives, and human sacrifice was used to pay homage to their gods.

4. Spanish Conquests: The Decline of the Aztecs

In 1519 Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés and more than 500 Spaniards landed in eastern Mexico in search of land and gold. Advised by Malinche, his Native American mistress, Cortés formed an alliance with one of the rivals of the Aztec and set out for Tenochtitlán. The Aztec ruler Montezuma II allowed Cortés to enter the city in order to learn more about him and his intentions.

Finding large amounts of gold and fearful that the Aztec would attack his Spanish force, Cortés seized Montezuma as a hostage and demanded a ransom. The Spaniards melted down gold ornaments for shipment to Spain and forced Montezuma to swear allegiance to Spain. The Spaniards remained in the city without opposition until about six months later, when, in Cortés' absence, the Aztecs revolted. The Aztec warriors tore up the city's bridges and chased the Spaniards into the canals, where three-fourths of them, weighted down with stolen gold drowned. Montezuma was killed during the revolt.

Cortés retreated and gathered more Native American allies for a siege of Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs' crude weapons were no match for the iron, steel, and gunpowder of the Spaniards, who also had the advantage of a large number of indigenous allies. After three months of desperate and bloody fighting, the Aztecs surrendered in August 1521. The Spaniards conquered the remaining Aztec peoples, whose population was decimated by about a third due to a smallpox epidemic triggered by one of the Spanish soldiers, and took over their lands, forcing them to work in gold mines and on Spanish estates.

The fall of Tenochtitlán marked the end of the Native American civilizations that had existed in Mesoamerica since the first human settlement of the region. On the ruins of Tenochtitlán, the Spaniards built Mexico City. The city's present-day cathedral rises over the ruins of an Aztec temple, and the palace of the Mexican president stands on the site of the palace of Montezuma.

Directions: In the chart below, discuss the most important facts about the Aztecs.

1. Arrival of the Aztecs	
2. Aztec Society	
3. Aztec Religion	
4. The Decline of the Aztecs	

Hernán Cortes describes Tenochtitlán

The great city of Tenochtitlán is built in the midst of this salt lake, and it is two leagues from the heart of the city to any point on the main land. Four causeways lead to it, all made by hand and some twelve feet wide. The city itself is as large as Seville or Cordoba. The principle streets are very broad and straight, the majority of them being of beaten earth, but a few and at least half of the smaller thoroughfares are waterways along which they pass their canoes. Moreover, even the principal streets have openings at regular distances so that the water can freely pass from one to another, and these openings which are very broad are spanned by great bridges of huge beams, very stoutly put together, so firm indeed that over many of them ten horsemen can ride at once. Seeing that if the natives intended any treachery against us they would have every opportunity from the way in which the city is built, for removing the bridges from the entrances and exits they could leave us to die of hunger with no possibility of getting to the mainland, I immediately set to work as soon as we entered the city on the building of four brigs, and in a short space of time had them finished so that we could ship 300 men and the horses to the mainland whenever we so desired.

The city has many open squares in which markets are continuously held and the general business of buying and selling proceeds. One square in particular is twice as big as that of Salamanca and completely surrounded by arcades where there are daily more than 60,000 folk buying and selling. Every kind of merchandise that may be met with in every land is for sale there, whether of food or victuals, or ornaments of gold and silver, or lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, shells, snails and feathers; limestone for building is likewise sold there, stone both rough and polished, bricks burnt and unburnt, wood of all kinds and in all stages of preparation... There is a street of herb-sellers where there are all manner of roots and medicinal plants that are found in the land. There are houses as it were apothecaries where they sell medicines made from these herbs, both for drinking and for use as ointments or salves. There are barbers' shops where you may have your hair washed and cut. There are other shops where you may obtain food and drink...

Finally, to avoid being wordy in telling all the wonders of this city, I will simply say that the manner of living among the people is very similar to that in Spain, and considering that this is a barbarous nation shut off from knowledge of the true God or communication with enlightened nations, one may well marvel at the orderliness and good government which is everywhere maintained.

The actual service of Montezuma and those things which call for admiration by their greatness and state would take so long to describe that I assure your Majesty I do not know where to begin with any hope of ending. For as I have already said, what could there be more astonishing than that a barbarous monarch such as he should have reproductions made in gold, silver, precious stones, and feathers of all things to be found in this land, and so perfectly reproduced that there is no goldsmith or silversmith in the world who could better them, nor can one understand what instrument could have been used for fashioning these jewels; as for the feather-work its like is not to be seen in either wax or embroidery; it is so marvelously delicate.

Source: Hernán Cortes, *Letter the Emperor Charles V*

1. How does Cortes describe the city?
2. Why do you think he is so amazed by the things he sees?
3. Why do you think he destroyed the Aztec civilization?