

The Aztecs

Section 1 - Introduction

In this reading, you will learn about the Aztecs, a Mesoamerican people who built a vast empire in what is today central Mexico. The Aztec Empire flourished from 1428 C.E. until 1519 C.E., when it was destroyed by invaders from Spain.

The Aztecs told a legend about the beginnings of their empire. Originally a wandering group of hunter-gatherers, the Aztecs believed that one day they would receive a sign from the gods. They would see an eagle perched on a great cactus with “his wings stretched out toward the rays of the sun.” In its beak, the eagle would hold a long snake. When they saw this eagle, the Aztecs would know they had found the place where they would settle and build a great city.



In the mid-1200s C.E., the Aztecs entered the Valley of Mexico, a fertile basin in present-day central Mexico. Several times, other groups in the valley pushed the Aztecs away from their lands in the valley.

In 1325, the Aztecs took refuge on an island in Lake Texcoco. There, Aztec priests saw the eagle on the cactus, just as the gods had promised. The Aztecs set about building a city on the site, which they called Tenochtitlán (tay-nawh-tee-TLAHN). Its name means “the place of the fruit of the prickly pear cactus.” In time, the island city became the center of the Aztec Empire.



In this reading, you will learn where the Aztecs came from and how they built their magnificent capital city. You will also discover how the Aztecs rose to power.

Section 2 - The Aztecs in the Valley of Mexico

The Aztec Empire arose in the Valley of Mexico, a fertile area nearly eight thousand feet above sea level. By the time the Aztecs arrived, in the mid-1200s C.E., the valley had been a center of civilization for more than a thousand years. Two earlier groups, in particular, had built civilizations there that strongly influenced the Aztecs.



Civilization in the Valley of Mexico From about 100 to 650 C.E., the Valley of Mexico was dominated by the Teotihuacáns (TEH-aw-tee-wah-KAHNZ). These people built an enormous capital city, Teotihuacán. One of the city's buildings, the Pyramid of the Sun, was more than two hundred feet high.

After Teotihuacán's collapse around the 700s, a group from the north, the Toltecs (TOHL-teks), migrated into the valley. Toltec civilization reached its height in the 10th and 11th centuries. The Toltecs built a number of cities. Their capital, Tollán (toh-LAHN), boasted large pyramids topped with temples.

During the 1100s, new groups invaded the valley. They took over Toltec cities and established new city-states. But the influence of the Teotihuacáns and the Toltecs continued to be felt in the new culture that was developing in the valley.

The Arrival of the Aztecs Sometime around 1250 C.E., a new group of people arrived in the Valley of Mexico. This nomadic band of hunter-gatherers called themselves the Mexica (meh-HEE-kah). We know them today as the Aztecs.

The name Aztec comes from Aztlán (az-TLAN), the Mexicans' legendary homeland. According to Aztec tradition, Aztlán was an island in a lake northwest of the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs left the island around 1100 C.E. They wandered through the deserts of northern Mexico for many years before coming to the Valley of Mexico.



When the Aztecs came to the heart of the valley, they found lakes dotted with marshy islands. Thriving city-states controlled the land around the lakes.

The Aztecs had a difficult time establishing themselves in the valley. The people living in the city-states thought the Aztecs were crude barbarians. But the Aztecs were fierce warriors, and the city-states were willing to employ them as **mercenaries** (a soldier who is paid to fight for another country).

After they settled in the valley, the legacy of the Teotihuacáns and the Toltecs began to influence the Aztecs. They made pilgrimages to the ancient ruins of Teotihuacán. They adopted Quetzalcoatl (ket-sahl-koh-AHT-l), the Teotihuacáns' feathered serpent god, as one of their own gods.

The Aztecs thought even more highly of the Toltecs, as rulers of a golden age. Aztec rulers married into the surviving Toltec royal line. The Aztecs even began to claim the Toltecs as their own ancestors.

In 1319, stronger groups forced the Aztecs to move away from Chapultepec (chuh-PUHL-teh-pek), a rocky hill where they had made their home. The Aztecs fled to the south, where they became mercenaries for the city-state of Culhuacán. But trouble came again when the Aztecs sacrificed the daughter of the Culhua chief. This led to a war with the Culhuas, who drove the Aztecs onto an island in the shallow waters of Lake Texcoco.

It was here, the Aztecs said, that they spotted an eagle perched atop a cactus with a long snake in its beak. The Aztecs took this as a sign that they should stay in this place, and set to work building the city they called Tenochtitlán.

The island turned out to be a good site for the Aztecs' city. The lake provided fish and water birds for food, and the island was easy to defend. Over time, the Aztecs' new home would grow into one of the great cities of the world.

From Mercenaries to Empire Builders The Aztecs started building Tenochtitlán in 1325 C.E. For the next 100 years, they again served as mercenaries for a powerful group called the Tepanecs. Through this **alliance** (a group who agrees to work together, often to fight common enemies) the Aztecs gained land, trading connections, and wealth.

Eventually, however, the Aztecs rebelled against the heavy-handed rule of the Tepanecs. Under the Aztec leader Itzcoatl (itz-koh-AHT-l), Tenochtitlán joined with two other city-states in what was called the Triple Alliance. In 1428, the alliance fought and defeated the Tepanecs. Together, the allies began a series of conquests that laid the foundation for the Aztec Empire.

As Tenochtitlán became a great power, Itzcoatl set out to reshape Aztec history. He burned records that referred to his people's humble origins. Instead, he connected the Aztecs to the distinguished Toltecs.

Section 3 - Tenochtitlán: A City of Wonders

As the Aztecs' power grew, their capital city of Tenochtitlán developed into one of the largest cities in the world. When Spanish explorers first arrived at Tenochtitlán in 1519, they were amazed to see a majestic city crisscrossed by canals and boasting impressive temples and palaces. With a huge population for the time, of between 200,000 and 300,000 people, Tenochtitlán was larger than London, Paris, or Venice.

How did the Aztecs turn an island into such a great city? First, they reclaimed land from the lake by sinking timbers into the water to serve as walls. Then, they filled in the area between the timbers with mud, boulders, and reeds. In this way, they created small islands called chinampas, or “floating gardens.” Eventually, the Aztecs expanded the city's land surface until it covered over five square miles. They even merged Tlatelolco (tlah-TEH-lohl-koh), originally a separate island, with Tenochtitlán.



Gradually, Tenochtitlán grew into the magnificent city that later amazed the Spanish. At the center of the city lay a large ceremonial **plaza** (public square). Here, the Aztecs gathered for religious rituals, feasts, and festivals. A wall about eight feet high enclosed this area. It was studded with sculptures of serpents. The palaces and homes of nobles lined the outside of the wall.



Inside the plaza, a stone pyramid called the Great Temple loomed 150 feet into the sky. People could see the pyramid, which was decorated with bright sculptures and murals, from several miles away. It had two steep stairways leading to double shrines. One shrine was dedicated to the chief god, Huitzilopochtli (wee-tsee-loh-POHCH- tlee). The other was dedicated to Tlaloc (tlah-LOHK), the rain god. In front of the shrines stood the stone where priests performed human sacrifices. An altar, called the tzompantli, (“skull rack”) displayed the skulls of thousands of sacrificial victims. Other structures in the plaza included more shrines and temples, the ritual ball court, military storehouses, and guest rooms for important visitors.

Just outside the plaza stood the royal palace. The two-story palace seemed like a small town. The palace was the home of the Aztec ruler, but it also had government offices, shrines, courts, storerooms, gardens, and courtyards. At the royal **aviary** (an enclosed space or cage for keeping birds), trained staff plucked the valuable feathers from parrots and quetzals. Wild animals captured throughout the empire, such as pumas and jaguars, prowled cages in the royal zoo.

The city's main marketplace was located in the northern section, in Tlatelolco. Each day, as many as sixty thousand people came from all corners of the Aztec Empire to sell their wares. Goods ranged from luxury items, such as jade and feathers, to necessities, such

as food and rope sandals. Merchants also sold gold, silver, turquoise, animal skins, clothing, pottery, chocolate, vanilla, tools, and slaves.

Although Tenochtitlán spread over five square miles, people had an easy time getting around. Four wide avenues met at the foot of the Great Temple. A thousand workers swept and washed down the streets each day, keeping them cleaner than streets in European cities. At night, pine torches lit the way. People also traveled on foot on smaller walkways or by canoe on the canals that crossed the city. Many of the canals were lined with stone and had bridges.

Three **causeways** (a raised built across water or low ground) linked the island to the mainland. The longest of them stretched five miles. The causeways were 25 to 30 feet wide. They all had wooden bridges that could be raised to let boats through or to protect the city in an enemy attack.

The city boasted other technological marvels, like the aqueducts that carried fresh water for irrigation. Twin pipes ran from the Chapultepec springs, three miles away. While one pipe was being cleaned or repaired, the other could transport water. A dam ten miles long ran along the east side of the city to hold back floodwaters.

Section 4 - The Aztec Empire

Tenochtitlán began as simply the Aztecs' home city. After the Aztecs and their allies defeated the Tepanecs in 1428 C.E., the city became the capital of a growing empire. Under Moctezuma I in the mid 1400s, the Aztecs extended the area under their control.

By the early 1500s, the Aztec Empire stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, as you can see on the map on this page. It covered much of Central Mexico, and reached as far south as Mexico's current border with Guatemala. At its height, the empire ruled more than five million people.



An Empire Based on Tribute Unlike other empire builders, the Aztecs did not start colonies. Nor did they force conformity on their subjects. Instead, the Aztec Empire was a loose union of hundreds of city-states that had to pay tribute to the Aztecs.

Collecting tribute was the empire's most vital business. The Aztecs relied on tribute to support Tenochtitlán's huge population. Tribute took the form of whatever valuable items a city could provide. Cities might pay in food, cacao, gems, cotton, cloth, animals, animal skins, shells, building materials, or even soldiers. Tax collectors stationed around the empire made sure that cities paid regularly.

Each year, huge amounts of goods flowed into Tenochtitlán. An average year brought 7,000 tons of maize; 4,000 tons each of beans, seed, and grain; and at least 2 million cotton cloaks. Warriors, priests, officials, servants, and other workers and craftspeople all received payment in tribute goods.

Warfare Warfare was the center of Aztec life. Successful battles allowed the Aztecs to increase their sources of tribute. They also gained additional territory, laborers, and sacrificial victims.

Every male Aztec was trained to be a soldier. In battle, the Aztecs used bows and arrows, spears, clubs, and swords with sharp stone blades. Warrior knights carried shields decorated with figures of animals, such as the jaguar and eagle. The figures represented different strengths that the Aztecs believed they received from these animals.

An Aztec declaration of war followed a ritual pattern. First, the Aztecs asked a city to join the empire as an ally. The city had 60 days to agree. If the city's ruler refused, the Aztecs declared war.

Most wars ended after one battle, usually with an Aztec victory. Afterward, the Aztecs brought the soldiers they had captured to Tenochtitlán. Some became slaves, but most ended up as sacrifices.

The Aztecs made only a few demands on the defeated city. The people had to pay tribute, honor the god Huitzilopochtli, and promise obedience to the Aztec ruler. In most other ways, conquered cities remained independent. They kept their religion, customs, and language. They usually even kept their leaders.

These conditions made it easy for the Aztecs to rule. But most of the conquered people never thought of themselves as true Aztecs. They wanted their freedom and resented paying tribute. These feelings led to a lack of unity in the Aztec Empire. Eventually, the Spanish would take advantage of that weakness by making allies of the Aztecs' enemies when they invaded Mexico in 1519.

Summary

In this reading, you learned about the rise of the Aztecs from a band of nomads to the masters of a great empire.

The Aztecs in the Valley of Mexico The Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico in the mid-1200s C.E. For a long time, they served as mercenaries for, and adapted the gods and culture of, more powerful groups, such as the Teotihuacáns, Toltecs, and Tepanecs.

Tenochtitlán In 1325, the Aztecs began building their great capital, Tenochtitlán, in Lake Texcoco. They chose the location based on a sign from the gods—an eagle perched on a cactus, with a snake in its beak. At its height, the impressive city boasted huge stone temples, canals, and a population greater than any European city of the time.

The Aztec Empire The Aztec Empire began in 1428, when the Aztecs and their allies won a victory against the Tepanecs. The Aztecs went on to conquer most of the Valley of Mexico. Over the next nearly 100 years, the Aztecs expanded their empire through warfare and alliances. Eventually the empire included hundreds of cities and millions of people, who supported the Aztecs through vast amounts of tribute goods.