Aztec

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The Aztec /əˈztek/ people were certain ethnic groups of central Mexico, particularly those groups who spoke the Nahuatl language and who dominated large parts of Mesoamerica from the 14th to 16th centuries. The Nahuatl words aztecatl /asˈtekatʃ/ (singular) and aztecah /asˈtekaʔ/ (plural) mean "people from Aztlan", a mythological place for the Nahuatl-speaking culture of the time, and later adopted as the word to define the Mexica people. Often the term "Aztec" refers exclusively to the Mexica people of Tenochtitlan (now the location of Mexico City), situated on an island in Lake Texcoco, who referred to themselves as Méxihcah Tenochcah /meˈʃiʔkaʔ teˈnoʃkaʔ/ or Colhuah Mexihcah /koˈɬwaʔ meˈʃiʔkaʔ/.

Sometimes the term also includes the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan's two principal allied city-states, the Acolhuas of Texcoco and the Tepanecs of Tlacopan, who together with the Mexica formed the Aztec Triple Alliance which controlled what is often known as the "Aztec Empire". In other contexts, Aztec may refer to all the various city states and their peoples, who shared large parts of their ethnic history and cultural traits with the Mexica, Acolhua and Tepanecs, and who often also used the Nahuatl language as a lingua franca. In this meaning it is possible to talk about an Aztec civilization including all the particular cultural patterns common for most of the peoples inhabiting Central Mexico in the late postclassic period.

From the 13th century, the Valley of Mexico was the heart of Aztec civilization: here the capital of the Aztec Triple Alliance, the city of Tenochtitlan, was built upon raised islets in Lake Texcoco. The Triple Alliance formed a tributary empire expanding its political hegemony far beyond the Valley of Mexico, conquering other city states throughout Mesoamerica. At its pinnacle, Aztec culture had rich and complex mythological and religious traditions, as well as reaching remarkable architectural and artistic accomplishments. In 1521 Hernán Cortés, along with a large number of Nahuatl speaking indigenous allies, conquered Tenochtitlan and defeated the Aztec Triple Alliance under the leadership of Hueyi Tlatoani Moctezuma II. Subsequently the Spanish founded the new settlement of Mexico City on the site of the ruined Aztec capital, from where they proceeded with the process of colonizing Central America.

Aztec culture and history is primarily known through archaeological evidence found in excavations such as that of the renowned Templo Mayor in Mexico City; from indigenous bark paper codices; from eyewitness accounts by Spanish conquistadors such as Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo; and
especially from 16th and 17th century descriptions of Aztec culture and history written by Spanish clergymen and literate Aztecs in the Spanish or Nahuatl language, such as the famous Florentine Codex compiled by the Franciscan monk Bernardino de Sahagún with the help of indigenous Aztec informants.

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Definitions

Aztec people

When used about ethnic groups the term "Aztec" refers to several Nahuatl speaking peoples of central Mexico in the postclassic period of Mesoamerican chronology, especially the ethnic group that had a leading role in establishing the hegemonic empire based at Tenochtitlan, the Mexica. Other ethnic groups associated with the Aztec empire are the Acolhua and Tepanec ethnic groups and some of the ethnic groups that were incorporated into the empire, and the term is also sometimes used about them. In older usage the term was commonly used about modern Nahuatl speaking ethnic groups, as Nahuatl was previously referred to as the "Aztec language". In recent usage these ethnic groups are rather referred to as the Nahua peoples.[4][5] Linguistically the term "Aztec" is still used about the branch of the Uto-Aztecan languages (also sometimes called the yuto-nahuan languages) that includes the Nahuatl language and its closest relatives Pochutec and Pipil.[6]

To the Aztecs themselves the word "aztec" was not an endonym for any particular ethnic group. Rather it was an umbrella term used to refer to several ethnic groups, not all of them Nahuatl speaking, that claimed heritage from the mythic place of origin, Aztlan. In the Nahuatl language "aztecatl" means "person from Aztlan". In 1810 Alexander von Humboldt originated the modern usage of "Aztec" as a collective term applied to all the people linked by trade, custom, religion, and language to the Mexica state and the Triple Alliance. In 1843, with the publication of the work of William H. Prescott, it was adopted by most of the world, including 19th century Mexican scholars who saw it as a way to distinguish present-day Mexicans from pre-conquest Mexicans. This usage has been the subject of debate in more recent years, but the term "Aztec" is still more common.[7]

Aztec culture

Aztec culture is the culture of the people referred to as Aztecs, but since all ethnic groups of central Mexico in the postclassic period shared most basic cultural traits, many of the basic traits of Aztec culture cannot be said to be exclusive for the Aztecs. For the same reason the notion of "Aztec civilization" is best understood as a particular horizon of a general Mesoamerican civilization.

The culture of central Mexico includes maize cultivation, the social division between noble pipiltin and
macehualli commoners, a pantheon (featuring Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl), and the calendric system of a xiuhpohualli of 365 days intercalated with a tonalpohualli of 260 days. Particular to the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan was the Mexica patron God Huitzilopochtli, twin pyramids, and the ceramic ware known as Aztec I to III.[8]

Aztec Empire

The Aztec Empire was a tribute empire based in Tenochtitlan, which extended its power throughout Mesoamerica in the late postclassic period.[9] It originated in 1427 as a triple-alliance between the city-states Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan who allied to defeat the Tepanec state of Azcapotzalco, that had previously dominated the Basin of Mexico. Soon Texcoco and Tlacopan became junior partners in the alliance which was de facto led by the Mexica of Tenochtitlan.[10] The empire extended its power by a combination of trade and military conquest. It was never a true territorial empire controlling a territory by large military garrisons in conquered provinces, but rather controlled its client states primarily by installing friendly rulers in conquered cities, by constructing marriage alliances between the ruling dynasties, and by extending an imperial ideology to its client states.[11] Client states paid tribute to the Aztec emperor, the Huey Tlatoani, in an economic strategy limiting communication and trade between outlying polities making them depend on the imperial center for the acquisition of luxury goods.[12] The political clout of the empire reached far south into Mesoamerica conquering cities as far south as Chiapas and Guatemala and spanning from the Pacific to the Atlantic oceans. The empire reached its maximal extent in 1519 just prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors led by Cortés who managed to topple the Aztec empire by allying with some of the traditional enemies of the Aztecs, the Nahuatl speaking Tlaxcalteca.

History

Migrational period

The Nahua peoples began to migrate into Mesoamerica from northern Mexico in the 6th century. They populated central Mexico dislocating speakers of Oto-Manguean languages as they spread their political influence south. As the former nomadic hunter-gatherer peoples mixed with the complex civilizations of Mesoamerica, adopting religious and cultural practices, the foundation for later Aztec culture was laid. During the Postclassic period they rose to power at such sites as Tula, Hidalgo. In the 12th century the Nahua power center was in Azcapotzalco, from where the Tepanecs dominated the valley of Mexico. Around this time the Mexica tribe arrived in central Mexico.

Rise of the Triple Alliance

The true origin of the Mexicas is uncertain. According to their legends, the Mexica tribe place of origin was Aztlan. It is generally thought that Aztlan was somewhere to the north of the Valley of Mexico; some experts have placed it as far north as the Southwestern United States.

Based on these codices as well as other histories, it appears that the Mexicas arrived at Chapultepec in or around the year 1248.[13]
At the time of their arrival, the Valley of Mexico had many city-states, the most powerful of which were Culhuacan to the south and Azcapotzalco to the west. The Tepecs of Azcapotzalco soon expelled the Mexicas from Chapultepec. In 1299, Culhuacan ruler Cocoyotl gave them permission to settle in the empty barrens of Tizapan, where they were eventually assimilated into Culhuacan culture.

According to Aztec legend, in 1323, the Mexicas were shown a vision of an eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus, eating a snake.\(^{[14]}\) This vision indicated that this was the location where they were to build their home. In any event, the Mexicas eventually arrived on a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco where they founded the town of Tenochtitlan in 1325. In 1376, the Mexicas elected their first Huey Tlatoani, Acamapichtli, who was living in Texcoco at the time.

For the next 50 years, until 1427, the Mexica were a tributary of Azcapotzalco, which had become a regional power, perhaps the most powerful since the Toltecs, centuries earlier. Maxtla, son of Tezozomoc, assassinated Chimalpopoca, the Mexica ruler. In an effort to defeat Maxtla, Chimalpopoca’s successor, Iztcoatl, allied with the exiled ruler of Texcoco, Nezahualcoyotl. This coalition was the foundation of the Aztec Triple Alliance, which defeated Azcapotzalco in 1428.

The triple-alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan would, in the next 100 years, come to dominate the Valley of Mexico and extend its power to both the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific shore. Over this period, Tenochtitlan gradually became the dominant power in the alliance.

Two of the primary architects of the Aztec empire were the half-brothers Tlacaelel and Montezuma I, nephews of Iztcoatl. Moctezuma I succeeded Iztcoatl as Huey Tlatoani in 1440. Although he was also offered the opportunity to be tlatoani, Tlacaelel preferred to operate as the power behind the throne. Tlacaelel reformed the Aztec state and religion. According to some sources, he ordered the burning of
most of the extant Aztec books claiming that they contained lies. He thereupon rewrote the history of the Aztec people, thus creating a common awareness of history for the Aztecs. This rewriting led directly to the curriculum taught to scholars and promoted the belief that the Aztecs were always a powerful and mythic nation; forgetting forever a possible true history of modest origins. One component of this reform was the institution of ritual war (the flower wars) as a way to have trained warriors, and created the necessity of constant sacrifices to keep the Sun moving.

**Spanish conquest**

The empire reached its height during Ahuitzotl's reign in 1486–1502. His successor, Moteuczōma Xocoyotzin (better known as Moctezuma II or Moctezuma, or Montezuma), had been *Hueyi Tlatoani* for 17 years when the Spaniards, led by Hernándo Cortés, landed on the Gulf Coast in the spring of 1519.

Despite some early battles between the two, Cortés allied himself with the Aztecs’ long-time enemy, the Confederacy of Tlaxcala, and arrived at the gates of Tenochtitlan on November 8, 1519.

The Spaniards and their Tlaxcallan allies became increasingly dangerous and unwelcome guests in the capital city. In June 1520, hostilities broke out, culminating in the massacre in the Great Temple and the death of Moctezuma II. The Spaniards fled the town on July 1, an episode later characterized as *La Noche Triste* (the Sad Night). They and their native allies returned in the spring of 1521 to lay siege to Tenochtitlan, a battle that ended on August 13 with the destruction of the city. During this period the now crumbling empire went through a rapid line of ruler succession. After the death of Moctezuma II, the empire fell into the hands of severely weakened emperors, such as Cuitláhuac, before eventually being ruled by puppet rulers, such as Andrés de Tapia Motelchiuh, installed by the Spanish.

Despite the decline of the Aztec empire, most of the Mesoamerican cultures were intact after the fall of Tenochtitlan. Indeed, the freedom from Aztec domination may have been considered a positive development by most of the other cultures. The upper classes of the Aztec empire were considered noblemen by the Spaniards and generally treated as such initially. All this changed rapidly and the native population were soon forbidden to study by law, and had the status of minors.

The Tlaxcalans remained loyal to their Spanish friends and were allowed to come on other conquests with Cortés and his men.
Colonial period population decline

In 1520–1521, an outbreak of smallpox swept through the population of Tenochtitlan and was decisive in the fall of the city. It is estimated that between 10% and 50% of the population fell victim to this epidemic.

Subsequently, the Valley of Mexico was hit with two more epidemics, smallpox (1545–1548), and typhus (1576–1581). The Spaniards, to consolidate the diminishing population, merged the survivors from small towns in the Valley of Mexico into bigger ones. This broke the power of the upper classes, but did not dissolve the coherence of the indigenous society in greater Mexico.

The population before the time of the conquest is unknown and hotly contested,[nb 1] but disease is known to have ravaged the region; thus, the indigenous population of the Valley of Mexico is estimated to have declined by more than 80% in the course of about 60 years.[15]

Cultural patterns

Government

The Aztec Empire was an example of an empire that ruled by indirect means. Like most European empires, it was ethnically very diverse, but unlike most European empires, it was more of a system of tribute than a single system of government. In the theoretical framework of imperial systems posited by Alexander J. Motyl,[16] the Aztec empire was an informal or hegemonic empire because it did not exert supreme authority over the conquered lands; it merely expected tributes to be paid. It was also a discontinuous empire because not all dominated territories were connected; for example, the southern peripheral zones of Xoconochco were not in direct contact with the center. The hegemonic nature of the Aztec empire can be seen in the fact that generally local rulers were restored to their positions once their city-state was conquered and the Aztecs did not interfere in local affairs, as long as the tribute payments were made.[17]

Although the form of government is often referred to as an empire, in fact most areas within the empire were organized as city-states, known as altepetl in Nahuatl. These were small polities ruled by a king (tlatoani) from a legitimate dynasty. The Early Aztec period was a time of growth and competition among altepetl. Even after the empire was formed (1428) and began its program of expansion through
conquest, the altepetl remained the dominant form of organization at the local level. The efficient role of the altepetl as a regional political unit was largely responsible for the success of the empire's hegemonic form of control.[18]

**Tribute and trade**

Several pages from the Codex Mendoza list tributary towns along with the goods they supplied, which included not only luxuries such as feathers, adorned suits, and greenstone beads, but more practical goods such as cloth, firewood, and food. Tribute was usually paid twice or four times a year at differing times.[19]

Archaeological excavations in the Aztec-ruled provinces show that incorporation into the empire had both costs and benefits for provincial peoples. On the positive side, the empire promoted commerce and trade, and exotic goods from obsidian to bronze managed to reach the houses of both commoners and nobles. Trade partners included the enemy Tarascan, a source of bronze tools and jewelry. On the negative side, imperial tribute imposed a burden on commoner households, who had to increase their work to pay their share of tribute. Nobles, on the other hand, often made out well under imperial rule because of the indirect nature of imperial organization. The empire had to rely on local kings and nobles and offered them privileges for their help in maintaining order and keeping the tribute flowing.[20]

**Economy**

The Aztec economy can be divided into a political sector, under the control of nobles and kings, and a commercial sector that operated independently of the political sector. The political sector of the economy centered on the control of land and labor by kings and nobles. Nobles owned all land, and commoners got access to farmland and other fields through a variety of arrangements, from rental through sharecropping to serf-like labor and slavery. These payments from commoners to nobles supported both the lavish lifestyles of the high nobility and the finances of city-states. Many luxury goods were produced for consumption by nobles. The producers of featherwork, sculptures, jewelry, and other luxury items were full-time commoner specialists who worked for noble patrons.

In the commercial sector of the economy several types of money were in regular use. Small purchases were made with cacao beans, which had to be imported from lowland areas. In Aztec marketplaces, a small rabbit was worth 30 beans, a turkey egg cost 3 beans, and a tamal cost a single bean. For larger purchases, standardized lengths of cotton cloth called quachtli were used. There were different grades of quachtli, ranging in value from 65 to 300 cacao beans. One source stated that 20 quachtli could support a commoner for one year in Tenochtitlan. A man could also sell his own daughter as a sexual slave or future religious sacrifice, generally for around 500 to 700 beans. A small gold statue approximately 0.62 kg (1.37 lb) cost 250 beans. Money was used primarily in the many periodic markets that were held.
in each town. A typical town would have a weekly market (every 5 days), while larger cities held markets every day. Cortés reported that the central market of Tlatelolco, Tenochtitlan's sister city, was visited by 60,000 people daily. Some sellers in the markets were petty vendors; farmers might sell some of their produce, potters sold their vessels, and so on. Other vendors were professional merchants who traveled from market to market seeking profits. The pochteca were specialized merchants organized into exclusive guilds. They made long expeditions to all parts of Mesoamerica, and they served as the judges and supervisors of the Tlatelolco market. Although the economy of Aztec Mexico was commercialized (in its use of money, markets, and merchants) land and labor were not commodities for sale.[21]

**Transportation**

The main contribution of the Aztec rule was a system of communications between the conquered cities. In Mesoamerica, without draft animals for transport (nor, as a result, wheeled vehicles), the roads were designed for travel on foot. Usually these roads were maintained through tribute, and travelers had places to rest and eat and even latrines to use at regular intervals, roughly every 10 to 15 kilometres (6 to 9 mi). Couriers (paynani) were constantly travelling along those ways, keeping the Aztecs informed of events, and helping to monitor the integrity of the roads.

**Mythology and religion**

The Mexica made reference to at least two manifestations of the supernatural: teōtl and teixiptla. Teōtl, which the Spaniards and European scholars routinely mistranslated as "god" or "demon", referred rather to an impersonal force that permeated the world. Teixiptla, by contrast, denoted the physical representations ("idols", statues and figurines) of the teōtl as well as the human cultic activity surrounding this physical representation. The Mexica "gods" themselves had no existence as distinct entities apart from these teixiptla representations of teōtl.[22]

Veneration of Huitzilopochtli, the personification of the sun and of war, was central to the religious, social and political practices of the Mexicas. Huitzilopochtli attained this central position after the founding of Tenochtitlan and the formation of the Mexica city-state society in the 14th century. Prior to this, Huitzilopochtli was associated primarily with hunting, presumably one of the important subsistence activities of the itinerant bands that would eventually become the Mexica.

According to myth, Huitzilopochtli directed the wanderers to found a city on the site where they would see an eagle devouring a snake perched on a fruit-bearing nopal cactus. (It was said that Huitzilopochtli killed his nephew, Cópil, and threw his heart on the lake. Huitzilopochtli honoured Cópil by causing a cactus to grow over Cópil's heart.) Legend has it that this is the site on which the Mexicas built their capital city of Tenochtitlan. This legendary vision is pictured on the Coat of arms of Mexico.

According to their own history, when the Mexicas arrived in the Anahuac valley (Valley of Mexico)
The Aztec Sun Stone, also known as the Aztec Calendar Stone, at National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.


around Lake Texcoco, the groups living there considered them uncivilized. The Mexicas borrowed much of their culture from the ancient Toltec whom they seem to have at least partially confused with the more ancient civilization of Teotihuacan. To the Mexicas, the Toltecs were the originators of all culture; "Toltecayōtl" was a synonym for culture. Mexica legends identify the Toltecs and the cult of Quetzalcoatl with the mythical city of Tollan, which they also identified with the more ancient Teotihuacan.

As all other Mesoamerican cultures, the Aztecs played a variant of the Mesoamerican ballgame, named tlachtli or ollamaliztli in Nahuatl. The game was played with a ball of solid rubber, called an olli, whence derives the Spanish word for rubber, hule. The players hit the ball with their hips, knees, and elbows and had to pass the ball through a stone ring to automatically win. The practice of the ballgame carried religious and mythological meanings and also served as sport.

Human sacrifice

While human sacrifice was practiced throughout Mesoamerica, the Aztecs, if their own accounts are to be believed, brought this practice to an unprecedented level. For example, for the reconsecration of the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan in 1487, the Aztecs reported that they sacrificed 80,400 prisoners over the course of four days, reportedly by Ahuitzotl, the Great Speaker himself. This number, however, is not universally accepted.

Accounts by the Tlaxcaltecas, the primary enemy of the Aztecs at the time of the Spanish Conquest, show that at least some of them considered it an honor to be sacrificed. In one legend, the warrior Tlahuicole was freed by the Aztecs but eventually returned of his own volition to die in ritual sacrifice. Tlaxcala also practiced the human sacrifice of captured Aztec Citizens.

Social structures

Class structure

The highest class were the pīpiltin or nobility.[nb 2] Originally this status was not hereditary, although the sons of pillis had access to better resources and education, so it was easier for them to become pillis. Later the class system took on hereditary aspects.

The second class were the mācehualtin, originally peasants. Eduardo Noguera[23] estimates that in later stages only 20% of the population was dedicated to agriculture and food production. The other 80% of
society were warriors, artisans and traders. Eventually, most of the mācehuallis were dedicated to arts and crafts. Their works were an important source of income for the city.[24]

Slaves or tlacotin also constituted an important class. Aztecs could become slaves because of debts, as a criminal punishment or as war captives. A slave could have possessions and even own other slaves. However, upon becoming a slave, all of the slave's animals and excess money would go to his purchaser. Slaves could buy their liberty, and slaves could be set free if they had children with or were married to their masters. Typically, upon the death of the master, slaves who had performed outstanding services were freed. The rest of the slaves were passed on as part of an inheritance.

Traveling merchants called pochtecah were a small, but important class as they not only facilitated commerce, but also communicated vital information across the empire and beyond its borders. They were often employed as spies.

**Education**

Until the age of fourteen, the mandatory universal education of children was in the hands of their parents, but supervised by the authorities of their calpōlli. Part of this education involved learning a collection of sayings, called huēhuētlatolli ("sayings of the old"), that embodied the Aztecs' ideals.

There were two types of schools: the telpochcalli, for practical and military studies, and the calmecac, for advanced learning in writing, astronomy, statesmanship, theology, and other areas.

**Arts**

Song and poetry were highly regarded; there were presentations and poetry contests at most of the Aztec festivals. There were also dramatic presentations that included players, musicians and acrobats.

A remarkable amount of this poetry survives, having been collected during the era of the conquest. In some cases poetry is attributed to individual authors, such as Nezahualcoyotl, tlatoani of Texcoco, and Cuauauhtzin, Lord of Tepechpan, but whether these attributions reflect actual authorship is a matter of opinion. Miguel León-Portilla, a well-respected Aztec scholar of Mexico, has stated that it is in this poetry where we can find the real thought of the Aztecs, independent of "official" Aztec ideology.[25]

"Poetry" was in xochitl in cuicatl a dual term meaning "the flower and the song" and was divided into different genres. Yaocuicatl was devoted to war and the god(s) of war, Teocuicatl to the gods and creation myths and to adoration of said figures, xochicuicatl to flowers (a symbol of poetry itself and
Huastec. Life-Death Figure, 900-1250. This sculpture of a man carrying a human skeleton on his back exemplifies the dualism of life and death that permeates Huastec and Mexica (Aztec) art. Representing life, the human figure is the Aztec wind god, Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, who created humankind and is identifiable by his J-shaped ear pendants. Representing death, the skeletal figure with a protruding heart wears a collar and skirt decorated with a half-circle motif that was associated with the sun and the planet Venus. Brooklyn Museum

Huastec. Life-Death Figure, 900-1250. This sculpture of a man carrying a human skeleton on his back exemplifies the dualism of life and death that permeates Huastec and Mexica (Aztec) art. Representing life, the human figure is the Aztec wind god, Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, who created humankind and is identifiable by his J-shaped ear pendants. Representing death, the skeletal figure with a protruding heart wears a collar and skirt decorated with a half-circle motif that was associated with the sun and the planet Venus. Brooklyn Museum

This ornament features a turquoise mosaic on a carved wooden base, with red and white shells used for the mouths. Probably worn across the chest, this ornament measures 20 by 43 cm (8 by 17 in). It was likely created by Mixtec artisans from an Aztec tributary state. 1400–1521, from the British Museum [2] (http://www.bmimages.com/preview.asp?image=00034381001&imagex=6&searchnum=0001).

City-building and architecture

The capital city of the Aztec empire was Tenochtitlan, now the site of modern-day Mexico City. Built on a series of islets in Lake Texcoco, the city plan was based on a symmetrical layout that was divided into four city sections called campans. The city was interlaced with canals which were useful for transportation.

Tenochtitlan was built according to a fixed plan and centered on the ritual precinct, where the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan rose 50 m (164.04 ft) above the city. Houses were made of wood and loam, roofs were made of reed,[26] although pyramids, temples and palaces were generally made of stone.

Around the island, chinampa beds were used to grow foods as well as, over time, to increase the size of the island. Chinampas, misnamed "floating gardens", were long raised plant beds set upon the shallow lake bottom. They were a very efficient
Agricultural system and could provide up to seven crops a year. On the basis of current chinampa yields, it has been estimated that 1 hectare of chinampa would feed 20 individuals and 9,000 hectares of chinampas could feed 180,000.\[^{27}\]

Anthropologist Eduardo Noguera estimates the population at 200,000 based in the house count and merging the population of Tlatelolco (once an independent city, but later became a suburb of Tenochtitlan). If one includes the surrounding islets and shores surrounding Lake Texcoco, estimates range from 300,000 to 700,000 inhabitants.\[^{27}\]

**Agriculture**

The pre-conquest Aztecs were a society that had four main methods of agriculture. The earliest, most basic form of agriculture implemented by the Aztecs is known as “rainfall cultivation.” The Aztecs also implemented terrace agriculture in hilly areas, or areas that could not be used for level ground farming. In the valleys irrigation farming was used. Dams diverted water from natural springs to the fields. This allowed for harvests on a regular basis. The Aztecs built canal systems that were longer and much more elaborate than previous irrigation systems. They managed to divert a large portion of the Cuauhtitlan River to provide irrigation to large areas of fields. The network of canals was a very complex and intricate system.

In the swampland regions along Lake Xochimilco, the Aztecs implemented yet another method of crop cultivation. They built what are called chinampas. Chinampas are areas of raised land, created from alternating layers of mud from the bottom of the lake, and plant matter/other vegetation. These “raised beds” were separated by narrow canals, which allowed farmers to move between them by canoe. The chinampas were extremely fertile pieces of land, and yielded, on average, seven crops annually. In order to plant on them, farmers first created “seedbeds,” or reed rafts, where they planted seeds and allowed them to germinate. Once they had, they were re-planted in the chinampas. This cut the growing time down considerably.

The Aztecs are credited with domestication of the subspecies of wild turkey, *Meleagris gallopavo*, which is native to this region.\[^{28}\]

While most of the farming occurred outside the densely populated areas, within the cities there was another method of (small scale) farming. Each family had their own garden plot where they grew maize, fruits, herbs, medicines and other important plants.

Of the various crops grown by the Aztecs, maize was the most important. Aztec diets centered on it. Maize was grown across the entire empire, in the highland terraces, valley farms and also on the chinampas. Women ground maize into a coarse meal by rubbing it with a grinding stone called a *manos* against a flat stone called a *metate*. The Aztecs made tortillas from the corn meal. Other crops that the Aztecs relied upon were avocados, beans, squashes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, chia, amaranth and chilies. These crops were also grown everywhere. Crops that were specific to the lowland regions were...
cotton, fruits, cacao beans and rubber trees.

**Relationship to other Mesoamerican cultures**

Aztecs admired Mixtec craftsmanship so much that they imported artisans to Tenochtitlan and requested work to be done in certain Mixtec styles. The Aztecs also admired the Mixtec codices, so some of them were made to order by Mixteca for the Aztecs. In the later days, high society Aztec women started to wear Mixtec clothing, specifically the *quexquemeltl*. It was worn over their traditional *huipil*, and much coveted by the women who could not afford such imported goods.

The situation was analogous in many ways to the Phoenician culture which imported and duplicated art from other cultures that they encountered.

Archaeologists usually do not have a problem differentiating between Mixtec and Aztec artifacts. However, the Mixtec made some products for "export" and that makes classification more problematic. In addition, the production of craft was an important part of the Mexica economy, and they also made pieces for "export".

**Legacy**

Most modern-day Mexicans (and people of Mexican descent in other countries) are mestizos, of mixed indigenous and European ancestry. During the 16th century the racial composition of Mexico began to change from one that featured distinct indigenous (Mexicas and members of the many other Mexican indigenous groups) and immigrant (mostly Spanish) populations, to the population composed primarily of mestizos that is found in modern day Mexico.

The Nahuatl language is today spoken by 1.5 million people, mostly in mountainous areas in the states of central Mexico. Local dialects of Spanish, Mexican Spanish generally, and the Spanish language worldwide have all been influenced, in varying degrees, by Nahuatl. Some Nahuatl words (most notably *chocolate*, derived from the Nahuatl word *xocolatl*, and *tomato*) have been borrowed through Spanish into other languages around the world.

Mexico City was built on the ruins of Tenochtitlan, making it one of the oldest living cities of the Americas. Many of its districts and natural landmarks retain their original Nahuatl names. Many other cities and towns in Mexico and Central America have also retained their Nahuatl names (whether or not they were originally Mexica or even Nahuatl-speaking towns). A number of town names are hybrids of Nahuatl and Spanish.

Mexican cuisine continues to be based on and flavored by agricultural products contributed by the Mexicas/Aztecs and Mesoamerica, most of which retain some form of their original Nahuatl names. The cuisine has also become a popular part of the cuisine of the United States and other countries around the
world, typically altered to suit various national tastes.

The modern Mexican flag bears the emblem of the Mexica migration story.

**Historiography**

Before the development of archaeology in Mexico in the 19th century, the historians mainly interpreted the ancient written sources to reconstitute Aztec history. Archaeology allowed to reconsider and criticize some of those interpretations and contradictions between the primary sources. Now, the scholar study of aztec civilization is most often based on scientific and multidisciplinary methodologies.

**Aztec codices**

There are few extant Aztec codices created before the conquest and these are largely ritual texts. Post-conquest codices, like Codex Mendoza or Codex Ríos, were painted by Aztec tlacuilos (codex creators), but under the control of Spanish authorities. The possibility of Spanish influence poses potential problems for those studying the post-conquest codices. Itzcoatl had the oldest hieroglyphics destroyed for political-religious reasons and Bishop Zumarraga of Mexico (1528–48) had all available texts burned for missionary reasons. 

**The conquistadors**

The accounts of the conquistadors are those of men confronted with a new civilization, which they tried to interpret according to their own culture. Cortés was the most educated, and his letters to Charles V are a valuable firsthand account. Unfortunately, one of his letters is lost and replaced by a posterior text and the others were censored prior to their publication. In any case, Cortés was not writing a dispassionate account, but letters justifying his actions and to some extent exaggerating his successes and downplaying his failures.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo accompanied Cortes, and he later wrote a book named: The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico. In his book, Capitan Bernal Díaz del Castillo provides his account of the Conquest of Mexico, in which he describes the events leading up to the conquest of Mexico, including accounts of the human sacrifices and cannibalism that he witnessed first hand. However, Bernal Díaz wrote several decades after the fact, never learned the native languages, and did not take notes. His account is colorful, but his work is considered by historians to be erratic and exaggerated.

Although Francisco López de Gómara was Cortes' chaplain, friend, and confidant, he never visited the New World so his account is based on hearsay.

**Priests and scholars**
The accounts of the first priests and scholars, while reflecting their faith and their culture, are important sources. Fathers Diego Durán, Motolinia, and Mendieta wrote with their own religion in mind, Father Duran wrote trying to prove that the Aztec were one of the lost tribes of Israel. Bartolomé de las Casas wrote apologetically about the Indians, accusing the Spanish conquistadors of committing unspeakable atrocities in their subjugation of the Aztecs and other indigenous groups. Some authors tried to make a synthesis of the pre-Hispanic cultures, like "Oviedo y Herrera", Jose de Acosta, and Pedro Mártir de Anghiera.

The most significant source about the Aztec are doubtless the manuscripts of Bernardino de Sahagún, who worked with the surviving Aztec wise men. He taught Aztec tlacuilos to write the original Nahuatl accounts using the Latin alphabet. Because of fear of the Spanish authorities, he maintained the anonymity of his informants, and wrote a heavily censored version in Spanish. Unfortunately the Nahuatl original was not fully translated until the 20th century, thus realising the extent of the censorship of the Spanish version. The original Nahuatl manuscript is known as the Florentine Codex.

Native authors

Other important sources are the work of native and mestizo authors, descendants of the upper classes. These authors include Don Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, Juan Bautista de Pomar, and Fernando de Alva Cortés Ixtlilxochitl. Ixtlilxochitl, for example, wrote a history of Texcoco from a Christian point of view. His account of Netzahualcoyotl, an ancestor of Ixtlilxochitl's, has a strong resemblance to the story of King Solomon and portrays Netzahualcoyotl as a monotheist and a critic of human sacrifice.

Diego Muñoz Camargo (1521 – c. 1612), a Tlaxcalan mestizo, wrote the History of Tlaxcala six decades after the Spanish conquest. Some parts of his work have a strong Tlaxcala bias.

See also

- History of Mexico
- List of Mexico-Tenochtitlan rulers
- Maya civilization
- Mixtec people

Notes

1. ^ By one series of estimates, the population before the time of the conquest is estimated at 19 million; by 1550, the estimated population was 4 million and by 1581 less than two million
2. ^ singular form pilli
3. ^ This volume was later translated into Spanish by Ángel María Garibay K., teacher of León-Portilla, and it exists in English translation by John Bierhorst
4. ^ Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España, Escrita por el Capitan Bernal Diaz del Castillo,
Footnotes

4. ^ Lockhart 1992
5. ^ Smith 1997, p. 2
6. ^ Campbell 1997
10. ^ Smith 1997, pp. 49–58
15. ^ Silent Killers of the New World (http://web.archive.org/web/20071102074155rn_1/www.millersville.edu
    /~columbus/papers/orlow-e.html)
18. ^ Smith, Michael E. (2000), Aztec City-States. In A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures, edited
    by Mogens Herman Hansen, pp. 581–595. The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, Copenhagen.
21. ^ (Smith, The Aztecs, 2nd edition, chapter 5)
22. ^ Boone, 1989
24. ^ Sanders, William T., Settlement Patterns in Central Mexico. Handbook of Middle American Indians, 1971,
    vol. 3, p. 3–44.
25. ^León-Portilla, Broken Spears.
27. ^a b Eduardo Noguera (1974). "Sitios de Ocupacion de la periferia de Tenochtitlan". Anales de
Antropologia,UNAM (XI ed. ed.).
(http://www.globaltwitcher.com/artspec_information.asp?thingid=2199)
Truth Society.

References


Primary sources, available in English


## External links

- Aztecs at Mexicolore (http://mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/): constantly updated educational site specifically on the Aztecs, for serious students of all ages.
- Aztecs / Nahuatl / Tenochtitlan (http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/troufs/anth3618/maaztec.html): Ancient Mesoamerica resources at University of Minnesota Duluth
- Aztec history, culture and religion (http://www.history-aztec.com) B. Diaz del Castillo, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico (tr. by A. P. Maudsley, 1928, repr. 1965)
- Demographic Disaster in Mexico 1519-1595 (http://www.hist.umn.edu/~rmccaa/mxpoprev/table2.htm) at the Department of History at the University of Minnesota
- Article: "Life in the Provinces of the Aztec Empire (http://www.public.asu.edu/~mesmith9/MES-05-SciAm-.pdf) PDF (538 KiB)
- Tlahuica Culture Home Page (an Aztec group from Morelos, Mexico) (http://www.public.asu.edu/~mesmith9/tlahuica.html)
- "The Aztecs-looking behind the myths" (http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime/inourtime_20030227.shtml) on BBC Radio 4’s In Our Time featuring Alan Knight, Adrian Locke and Elizabeth Graham
- Pre-columbian Aztec Collection (http://worldmuseumofman.org/aztecartifacts1.htm): photographs of Aztec tools and weapons


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