

The Aztecs

Early History

The Aztecs were originally seven related tribes that migrated into the Valley of Mexico around AD 1350. Ultimately, the Mexica aggressively secured control of this area, beginning what became the Aztec Empire. During the next 100 years, the Aztecs secured control of a large area stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific. They were heavily influenced culturally by the Toltecs, whose culture spanned several hundred years and ended about AD 1200. The Toltecs were centered in the city of Tula, which was north of today's Mexico City. Their religion was centered on human sacrifice and linked to aggressive expansionism. The Aztecs greatly admired the Toltecs and absorbed much of their culture.

The Capital City

Tenochtitlan—today's Mexico City—was the capital city of the Aztecs. It was thought to be founded in the mid-1300s and became a major urban center with a population of over 200,000 people by the early 1500s. Originally built on a low-lying island in Lake Texcoco, Tenochtitlan was expanded by artificial islets into a Venetian-like city. It had broad causeways, palaces, pyramidal temples, and two aqueducts that brought fresh water from the mainland. The Aztec economy was based on a variety of domesticated crops including corn, sweet potatoes, peppers, squash, beans, avocados, and tomatoes, as well as cotton and tobacco. Chocolate, vanilla, and pineapples were imported from the east. Domesticated animals included dogs, turkeys, ducks, geese, and quail. A common food was the *tlaxcalli*, which was used to scoop up meat and vegetables in sauces—much like today's tortillas and tacos.

Aztec Social Organization

Like their predecessors, Aztec society was divided into nobles, priests, warriors, commoners, serfs, and slaves. But this was not a strict class society: the children of slaves were born free, slaves could purchase freedom, commoners could marry nobles, and achievement could alter position. Public schools existed for all children and the Aztec shared the complex mathematical and astrological calendars of other Mesoamerican cultures. Aztec culture developed sophisticated ceramics, stone sculpture, weavings, and other arts, including metallurgy, poetry, and music.

Warfare was a religious obligation and all men were warriors. Among the warriors' duties was to obtain captives for human sacrifice (human blood was the most precious of all sacrificial elements). These sacrifices were required to maintain the continuity of the world from each sunrise and for major periods of world renewal every 52 years.

Religion

Religion was integral in every part of daily life and there were many Aztec gods and goddesses. Songs and dances were common parts of rituals to the gods, and major celebrations were devoted to planting and harvesting seasons and other events in the agricultural cycle. Gods of both earth and death were key to these and other celebrations, including Tlazolteotl, the goddess of dirt and eater of filth (i.e. the sins of people).

Death Customs and Beliefs

Death was a common feature of Aztec religious art and was starkly realist in nature. Quetzalcoatl, the god of death and rebirth, traveled to Mictlan (the underworld) seeking the bones of the dead in order to make living men. The idea



of resurrection was applied to all of nature and to man. Life and death were both a part of reality, and life emerged from death. Warriors who died in battle or in sacrifice and women who died in childbirth automatically entered a special paradise. Those who drowned, were struck by lightning, or died of what they considered a water related disease (e.g. dropsy), went to another happy afterlife. These dead were buried. All others were cremated and went to the underworld Mictlan after a four-year journey filled with dangers. The wealthy or notable might be accompanied by wives or servants. Offerings by the family were made to the deceased 80 days after death and then each year for at least four years.

The End of the Aztec Empire

The Aztec Empire was conquered by the Spanish under Hernan Cortes in AD 1521. Spanish conquest effectively eliminated most architectural features of Aztec life, but many elements of Aztec culture survive in today's Mexico. This is especially true in the merging of many pre-Spanish religious concepts with the Christian beliefs introduced by the Spanish. The idea of sacrifice to gain salvation was inherent in pre-Spanish beliefs, as was resurrection—a key feature of Quetzalcoatl, whose mother, Omecihuatl, was the principle female spirit. The cross was seen as the five directions symbol important in traditional belief (the center is the fifth direction) and Christian communion was analogous to the Aztec practice of eating dough representations of the gods.

