

The Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest

Life in the Aztec World

Transcript



Narrator: The city of Tenochtitlán was the crowning glory of the Aztec Empire in the early 1500s. From here, the Mexica people ruled over an empire that stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, across much of modern Mexico, and down to Guatemala in Central America. Aztec culture was sophisticated and well-organized. They had a rigid social structure, and daily life was governed by many rules. They also placed great value on education and skills.

Let's take a look at life in the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán. At the heart of Tenochtitlán was Huei Teocalli, a temple honoring Huitzilopochtli, the sun god, and Tlaloc, the god of water and rain. This is where human sacrifices took place. Nearby was the emperor's grand palace, which had a zoo and two aquariums: one saltwater, one freshwater. As the population grew, new suburbs pushed further out onto Lake Texcoco. Each neighborhood, or *calpulli*, was organized around a group of families that specialized in a certain craft or skill. They were led by a nobleman and a council of commoner elders who looked after their basic needs. There were strict building regulations and only nobles were permitted to build above one story.

After severe flooding in 1452, the city was rebuilt in a grid pattern. They also constructed a huge levee to keep the city safe from future floods, as well as a five kilometer long aqueduct that transported clean water from the Chapultepec springs on the mainland to the city. This impressive engineering achievement shows just how technologically advanced they were. The emperor Montezuma II even had running water in his palace, and he bathed up to four times a day. Local marketplaces were a hive of activity, brimming with fresh food, and arts and crafts. Historians believe that around 60,000 people visited the marketplaces each day.

Every part of Tenochtitlán was connected by streets and canals. Three main roads linked the city to the mainland, so trade with neighboring city-states and tribes was easy. Most cities in Europe at this time were filthy, stinking, and plague-ravaged. Compared to them, Tenochtitlán was not only awe-inspiring, it was clean, and its citizens were healthy.

Aztec society was based on a hierarchical or pyramid structure, much like European society. At the top of the Aztec pyramid was the emperor, who was known as tlatoani: "the speaker." The tlatoani made the laws and calculated how much tribute the cities and tribes under his rule should pay. He was also high priest and performed many religious ceremonies, including daily sacrifices. Residing in the luxurious grand palace, the emperor had many wives and mistresses, as well as hundreds or possibly thousands of servants.

Nobles were below the emperor. They were wealthy, they inherited their position, and they were expected to set a good example for commoners. If a noble broke the law, they were severely punished, more severely than a commoner would be for the same offense. Children of nobility could be sentenced to death just for disrespecting their elders.

Then came the merchants. They had more freedom than most people, traveling the empire in search of rare and exotic goods, and sometimes acting as spies. Their positions were also inherited, and they often became wealthy.

Commoners were the largest group, and the base on which Aztec society was built. They included farmers, craftspeople and warriors.

Slaves were the lowest level of society. People became slaves to pay off debts, but once the debt was paid, the slave was freed. But slaves could still be paid money, and they were allowed to marry. Unlike the slavery system that existed in the US centuries later, a person could not be born into slavery. Captives taken in war became slaves, if they weren't used for human sacrifice.

The Aztecs placed a high value on education. They were one of the first civilizations to make it compulsory for all young people. There was a school in every neighborhood for children aged five to fifteen years. They studied reading, writing, religious rituals, and the Aztec calendars. After early learning, education split into two main schools. Children of nobles were educated to become priests, government officials, teachers, and doctors. Children of commoners learned about Aztec culture and religion, as well as a trade. They learned from their parents too. Sons learned their father's trade and mothers taught their daughters how to cook, clean, weave, and care for the family. All boys trained to become warriors, a role that was central to the Aztec male identity. A great warrior could improve his social status.

Everyone in Aztec society played a vital role in maintaining not only their cultural traditions, but also their empire.