

The Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest

Origins of the Aztec Empire

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Narrator: The Aztecs sacrificed humans to their gods, were artists and poets, fierce warriors, and skilled builders who turned a small, marshy island in Lake Texcoco into the grand city of Tenochtitlán, capital of the vast Aztec Empire. Today, Mexico's national flag displays an Aztec symbol: a golden eagle perched on a cactus as it eats a serpent. Where did this magnificent civilization come from? And how did they establish an empire so quickly?

The Aztecs built their empire in the Valley of Mexico, but they weren't originally from that area. Historians know this because their language, Nahuatl, is more similar to languages of south-western America. Sometime in the 12th century, the Aztecs left their homeland, perhaps driven by drought or war, or a vision from their god Huitzilopochtli telling them to search for a new place to live. For generations, they journeyed south, encountering trouble and hardship each time they arrived in well-settled regions. The Aztecs were always forced to move on because nobody wanted this homeless tribe to live on their land.

Eventually they formed an alliance with the Culhuacán city-state who gave them land to settle on. Here, they worked as mercenaries, paid warriors, for nearby city-states. By the 1300s, they had gained a reputation as fierce fighters. According to some historians, the Aztecs embraced much of the Culhuacán culture. In 1323, they asked King Achicometl for his daughter so they could make her their goddess. The king agreed, unaware that to become an Aztec goddess, his daughter had to be sacrificed. After they sacrificed King Achicometl's daughter, the Aztecs peeled off her skin. It was worn by a priest to the ceremonial dinner that night. Enraged, the king drove the Aztecs off their land.

The Aztecs fled to a small, marshy island in Lake Texcoco. It hadn't been settled because the soil was poor, and there were few building materials. There, the Aztecs saw an eagle with a snake in its mouth perched on a cactus. It was a sign from the gods. This was the place to found their grand city.

Around 1345 CE, the Aztecs, who called themselves the Mexica people, began the construction of Tenochtitlán. Over the next 200 years, they constructed pyramid temples and grand palaces, engineered aqueducts for clean drinking water, and built floating gardens to grow food.

The Aztec Empire started taking shape around 1427. They had been paying tribute, a form of taxation, to the ruling Tepanecs. Tiring of this, Mexica leader Itzcóatl formed a triple alliance with the nearby city-states of Texcoco and Tlacopan. And when the Triple Alliance conquered the Tepanec in 1428, the Mexica became the most powerful people in the valley.

Their empire grew rapidly. By the early 16th century, the Aztec Empire was the largest and most powerful in Mesoamerica. Ruling over an estimated five to six million people, the Aztec Empire stretched across most of present-day Mexico, from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico and down to Guatemala in Central America.

The Aztec civilization was made up of many different peoples and cultures from across the Valley of Mexico. Each conquered city-state was left to govern its own people, as long as they paid tribute to the Mexica. Tribute goods included feathers, animal skins, and precious stones, as well as cooking pots, spears, and warrior uniforms, and captives for human sacrifice.

The Mexica people, which is where the name “Mexico” comes from, ruled the Aztec Empire from their capital city, Tenochtitlán. By the early 1500s, Tenochtitlán’s population had grown to about 250,000 people living within a 5 square miles area. In comparison, London’s population was about 60,000 at this time. And when the Spanish saw Tenochtitlán for the first time, they would describe it as “the Venice of the New World.”