



Aztec Period Temple, Tenayuca



Plaza of Three Cultures: Aztec, Colonial, and Modern Mexico City

NGCSU E-Text for History 1112

Essay Module

New World Empires: The Aztecs

Unit Goals

After reading this essay you should be able to:

- 1) Describe the origins and early development of the Aztec civilization and the formation of the empire.
- 2) Identify important features of the Aztec political, military, and religious structures.
- 3) Explain and discuss features of different Aztec socioeconomic groups and gender roles.
- 4) Understand the foundations and important features of the Aztec economy.

Introduction

When the Spanish *conquistadores* encountered the Aztec and Inca Empires, they were battling against fully-formed, very complex societies of huge dimensions, with masses of people. These empires were organized under the rule of law, and driven by a complex religious system that required their daily input to keep the world in operation. These were not just simple hunting tribes with gold around their necks that the Spaniards had expected. The *conquistadores* were up against major nation-states: empires made up of many different peoples and political units, with massive armies of seasoned warriors. *Conquistador* Hernan Cortés gave us the first, if somewhat distorted, look at the Aztec society, in his famous *Letters from Mexico*, originally published between 1522 and 1525. One of his soldiers, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, published his *Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* in 1601, though there were apparently copies circulating well before that (Garcia, 1956:xix).

Empires world-wide have several things in common, although they differ in many ways. D'Altroy, in his work *The Incas*, describes these characteristics as follows: large populations with vast territories, incorporating many smaller states around their centers and within their domains. They are sedentary, theocratic, have complex cosmologies, highly stratified societies, large standing militaries,

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advanced technologies, and are intensive agriculturalists. All these traits are present in Aztec civilization.

The Aztec Empire

The Aztec Empire incorporated territories nearly the equal of Spain, and over three million people in many large, powerful city-states (*altepetl*), stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, in coastal and highland environments from central Mexico to Guatemala. They were one of many cultures within the larger area called Mesoamerica, spreading from the central Mexican highlands to Costa Rica in Central America. They had spent two hundred years extending their military, political, and economic control. The Aztecs expanded their territory by conquests of neighbors under one ruler (*tlatoani*). Then, the next ruler would consolidate control over the conquered people, incorporating them better under Aztec rule, with bureaucrats in place to oversee obedience and tribute collection.

The Aztec Empire was spread over at least three major ecological zones, with many smaller segments of each one. The *Tierra Caliente* (tropical lowland) was hot and humid, with regular, heavy rainfall, under 1,000 meters in altitude. *Tierra Templada* (temperate land) was an intermediate zone of 1,000-2,000 meters altitude, with pleasant living conditions and temperatures, occupied by many complex societies, including southern parts of the Valley of Mexico. The *Tierra Fria* was found in the Central Mexican Highlands, including most of the Central Valley and the surrounding mountain peaks above 2,000 meters.

One Aztec expansion technique was to send their long-distance traders (*pochteca*) to spy on a potential target state through their market systems, and send back to the capital city of Tenochtitlan for assistance. They might even foment some sort of local disruption. Then the mighty Aztec army would descend to “pacify” the upstart state, and incorporate it into the expanding empire. This process of imperial expansion and pacification was nearly constant for most of the 200 years since the establishment of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan about 1325. Further trade relations connected the empire with other states well into Central America.



Map of Aztec Empire within Mesoamerica

The Aztecs were recent arrivals on the Mesoamerican political scene. There had been large, complex state-level societies in Mesoamerica as far back as twenty-five hundred years ago. Expanding states began to appear in the Valley of Oaxaca up to the year 750, and in the Maya areas from 250 to 900. Some were still in operation in 1500. The Classic **Teotihuacan** Empire was expanding between 200 and 800, with trade relations as far as Central America, and including the Maya lowland city-states of Guatemala and the Yucatan. The military state of the **Toltecs** from Tula spread their trade contacts in similar locations between 800 and 1100, but without the intensive political control of lands and peoples.

The Aztecs demanded huge tributes of wealth and foodstuffs from a newly conquered state, and sent tribute collectors and administrators to oversee the production of surpluses for tribute from the new peoples. Tribute could consist of many kinds of goods: regional resources such as **obsidian** (volcanic glass for cutting tools and ornaments), grinding stones, luxury goods such as quetzal feathers, gold dust, and precious stones, raw materials such as cotton, and finished goods such as woven cotton cloth and elaborate pottery items. The tribute city states supplied food to the capitol city of **Tenochtitlan**. Like most densely populated urban areas today, the city's people could not raise enough crops and livestock to feed themselves.

Finally, tribute also consisted of supplying masses of laborers to the Aztecs. The labor of young men all over the empire built the infrastructure of the city-state of Tenochtitlan. For the most part, however, the Aztecs left local leadership in place, and let conquered peoples run their own governments. The Aztecs did impose one religious requirement on their new subjects: they were allowed to keep worshipping their own gods, but had to build a temple dedicated to **Huitzilopochtli**, the Aztec god of the sun and war. In return, the Aztecs expanded their own pantheon, by including the new people's gods with their own, until there were around two hundred gods worshiped in the empire by 1519.

Legends told the early Aztecs that their god Huitzilopochtli had made the ultimate sacrifice for them to create the sun, and set it moving across the heavens. Humans in turn were to repay that sacrifice by offering human blood and human hearts to the sun, in order to keep it rising each day and supporting human life. As their empire grew, Aztec sacrifices became more extensive, sometimes offering hundreds or even thousands of human hearts to the sun on the altars to Huitzilopochtli. Those sacrifices were usually captives taken in warfare, which raged almost constantly. The capture of an enemy in battle raised a warrior's status in the military, and in society, where he was allowed to live better and wear more elaborate clothing in recognition of his prowess.



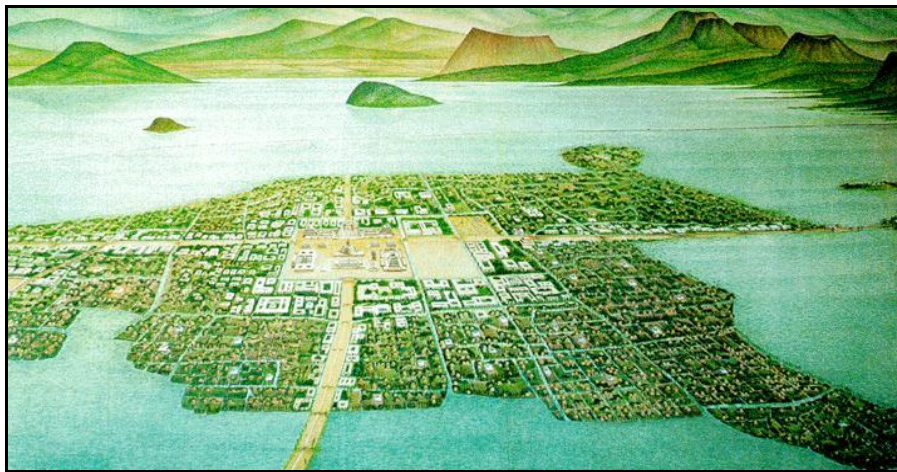
Human Sacrifice to Huitzilopochtli



Massive Aztec "Calendar Stone"

Aztec religion was polytheistic, since the people worshipped many gods, and each had a special interest in some activity or social group, such as a community. The Aztecs were also millennial, in that they expected an end of time, when the world would be either ended or revived in a different form. The human and other blood sacrifices were absolutely required to keep things on an even keel until that end day came. If people did not do the rituals properly, the world would come to an early end. Elaborate calendars helped keep track of rituals and events. Every 52 years, all fires were extinguished and people awaited the end of the world. Priests high on the mountains kindled a new fire in the chest of a specially chosen human sacrifice, and the fire was spread to the city and everyone's home and hearth as the new year and new "century" began.

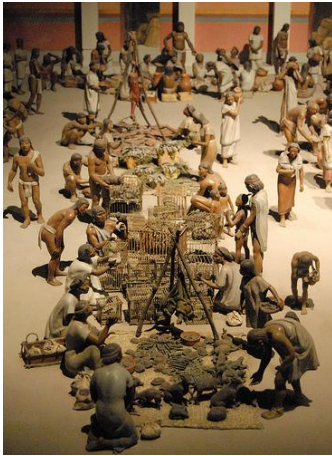
Some of the strongest impressions for first-time visitors were the vast size, complexity, and engineering of the capital city of Tenochtitlan. It was built on an island in Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico, reached by three long causeways. Building and maintaining the city's massive temples, walls, canals, aqueducts for fresh water, roads, bridges, and other construction projects required huge amounts of labor. There were no draft animals to plow, carry, or pull wagons for burden, so all materials were moved by human labor, or floated on the lakes. This draft labor requirement was part of the annual public taxation, similar to the tribute paid by the conquered states. Each man from the city and the tribute states was trained and served as needed for the military, which was in almost constant battle. In addition, each family contributed many days of labor for the state and the gods to produce the massive public works.



"Aerial view" painting of Tenochtitlan as it would have looked in 1519, showing central plaza, causeways, and canals.

Further, the city was protected by a long dike across the lake which prevented salt water from contaminating the extensive raised-field *chinampas* ("floating gardens") that lined the southern lake edges. Farmers on this elaborate irrigation system's fields provided several crops a year to feed the city dwellers, from nobles to commoners. The Aztecs were heavily dependent on what's been called the "Mesoamerican Triumvirate": corn (maize), beans, and squashes. These basic foods were augmented by chilis, maguey and prickly pear cactus, various seeds and roots, and popular high-protein algae from the lakes called *tecuitlatl*. Animal foods included deer, rabbits, amphibians, fish, and turkeys, supported the city and rural populations. Domesticated Muscovy ducks and small dogs were raised and fattened for popular food as well.

Tenochtitlan's population in 1519 was over *two hundred thousand* people, making it larger than any city in Spain, and larger than even London at the time. The Valley of Mexico, with many city-states in addition to the capital, has been estimated to have had over one million people before the conquest. Tenochtitlan was, like Venice, approached by canoes, and drained by canals, which aided transport of food and other goods in to the Great Market at Tlatelolco and to residential areas throughout the city.



Model of Aztec market at Tlatelolco, 1500



Modern *Chinampas* ("Floating Gardens") at Xochimilco

The city had been expanded from the original small island by bringing in stone and soil to create a foundation for more and more structures. Tenochtitlan was composed of many neighborhoods, representing various areas of the Empire. Structurally, there were four main segments, divided by main streets, each thought of as a separate city because Tenochtitlan was so big. There were central places like the Plaza Mayor, where the huge double main temple to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc was placed. The *Templo Mayor* was high enough to be seen from all over the city. This area is now called the *Zócalo*, Mexico City's giant government square. Another major plaza was occupied by thousands of merchants daily: this was the Great Market at Tlatelolco, where goods came in nightly from all over the Empire to feed, clothe, and provide for the city's residents.

Aztecs had a highly stratified society with very little social mobility. At the top were the nobles (*pilli*), a hereditary group that controlled most of the resources. They dominated much of Aztec life. The Aztec nobility claimed common descent from the gods. Because of their status, they had a special set of rights, lived in restricted areas, wore special regalia such as elaborately feathered capes, and occupied the uppermost political, military, and religious offices in Tenochtitlan and ruled in the subject city-states.

The well-to-do merchants (*pochteca*) and crafts people (*tolteca*) were in the middle of the social and political pyramid. These were sometimes from different ethnic groups, and had their own sets of rules within the Aztec political system. Both dealt with objects and people from outside the Aztec empire, and thus had different viewpoints than the commoners, or many of the nobles. Priests came mostly from the nobility, and served the many temples dedicated to the numerous gods. It was possible for the commoners to aspire to upper class status within the priesthood. Men dominated the priestly class as religious leaders and teachers in the noble schools, but some women also were religious leaders. The Aztec writing system was taught in the schools, but was of limited use, mostly in ritual contexts.



Codex Bodley: Aztec Lady 1 Monkey 'Jade Garment' (R) marries Lord 12 Rain 'Fire Serpent with Bloody Claw' (L) of Ndisi Nuu (Tlaxiaco), before 1521.

The commoners (*macehualtin*), slaves, and criminals were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They did the work that kept the empire operating: farming and other manual labor. There were ranks within the commoners as well, depending on military successes, captives taken, political marriages, occupations, and wealth. Slaves were used mostly as servants until they took their turn as sacrifices.

The Aztec nobility controlled not only huge common labor reserves for public works construction, but also the labor of the crafts people, to make exotic items for their personal adornment. The *tolteca* produced elaborate work in gold, silver, copper, ceramics, wood, precious stones, basketry, textiles, and feathers. Nearly every noble woman was a weaver of exotic clothing. Commoner women also provided cloaks (mantles) and other clothes used as everyday wearing apparel and as money for exchange in the markets. Common crafters prepared the everyday pottery, basketry, clothing, obsidian cutting instruments, ground stone and wood tools, and other materials required by the thousands of city dwellers. This was a fabulously wealthy empire, with riches flowing in daily from all portions to glorify the nobility and as sacrifices to the gods.

Goods were brought in regularly from the outskirts of the empire: 300 miles from the middle Gulf Coast, 500 miles from the middle Pacific Coast, and as far as 1000 miles from Central America. Fistfuls of bright feathers from exotic birds (and the quetzals, macaw, and parrots) came along with bright textiles, pottery jars filled with cacao (chocolate) beans, and exotic stones, gold, silver, woods, and other items brought by the *pochteca* and their captive slaves.

The near-constant state of warfare between the Aztecs and the surrounding city-states was a rapid expansion of their overall territory, and the numbers of people who paid tribute to Tenochtitlan. This involved a full-time military establishment, with required service by all adult males. Additional products of warfare were the battlefield captives who were brought back to Tenochtitlan for sacrifice to the Aztec sun god, Huitzilopochtli. A warrior did not seek to kill his enemy. Each battle was between individuals, like European knights' battles, but the Aztec warrior tried to capture his enemy, thus winning himself great honor and status.

Several results came from the Aztecs' warfare:

1. Captives for sacrifice to the gods to keep the earth turning.
2. Increased resources, both exotic items and basic foods, from the tribute states.

3. Expanding bureaucracy to keep track of tribute, trade, and other activities.
4. Increased status for the rulers and warriors, both nobles and commoners, who fought and brought home captives.
5. Additional gods for the Aztec pantheon.

A result of this conquer-for-tribute system, however, was that the many formerly independent tribute states were left on their own for the most part. Beneath appointed Aztec lords, local leadership continued for local concerns. The tribute states were required to produce large surpluses for the great city of Tenochtitlan, and had the cream of their warriors and other youths, male and female, dragged off to be sacrificed to the Aztec gods. Thus the tribute states were less than willing participants in the empire, so when Cortes arrived offering an alternative, they were more than happy to oblige—after serious encouragement by the Spaniards at the points of their swords!

Sources and Further Reading

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Online Resources

For more on the Aztecs, see the sites located at <http://www.plu.edu/~qinya/home.html> and <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/aztecs.htm>. On Aztec architecture, particularly the engineering and architectural marvel of Tenochtitlan, see Manuel Aguilar-Moreno's essay, "Aztec Architecture, Part I," part of the vast range of online materials at www.famsi.org, at http://www.famsi.org/research/aguilar/Aztec_Architecture_Part1.pdf. Also check out Mesoweb at <http://www.mesoweb.com/> for another vast repository of online materials devoted to Mesoamerican cultures.