

# The Aztecs

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## Abstract

An introductory text to Aztec's culture and empire.

## Origin and development

The Aztec culture flourished in the highlands of central Mexico between the thirteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century when it was destroyed by the troops of the conqueror Hernando Cortés. In their accounts they had come from a northern place called Aztlan [3] arriving and settled in the highlands valleys on a time where the population's density was low and the land abundant.

Most of them were peasants having their leaders established a city state system where each city was ruled by a hereditary king chose among the male members of the royal family by a nobles' council <sup>1</sup>. In less fertile areas their houses were spread along the crop fields, and in the fertile ones, they lived in nucleated villages or in the city surrounds in a structure similar to the barrios [6].

These urban centres were composed by a public plaza with a pyramid on its eastern side<sup>2</sup>, a palace of a noble family and a field of ball game occupying two of the other sides, being all the buildings carefully planned and frequently oriented by cardinal references.

Between 1350 and 1520 there was a demographic explosion with the population growing from 500,000 inhabitants to more than 3,000,000. The geographic location of settlements changed being the hills occupied and all the Central Mexican area filled with hamlets. The agriculture intensified and new techniques of irrigation and drainage were developed but sometimes not enough to avoid the food shortages and hungers[4]. The city states competition rise to a new level and circa 1428, Tenochtitlan joined with Texcoco and Tlacopan to hammer

<sup>1</sup>This king had to already been proved his military value, with a successful conquest campaign.

<sup>2</sup>Which height reflected the political and religious importance of the settlement

out the triple alliance habitually designed as the Aztec Empire [5].

The Empire expanded but the initial city states maintained their territory<sup>3</sup> along it and even after the Spanish conquest <sup>4</sup>. Despite its power the Aztecs were unable to conquer all of their rival states, like Tlaxcala on the eastern part of Mexico valley or the state of Tarascan on the western region.

## Social organization

Aztec society was divided in three classes:

- Nobility, a hereditary group that controlled the biggest percentage of economical resources and occupied the key positions, with the king on the top of the hierarchy;
- The common, a class composed, as like in the nobles, by members with a great variety of status and wealth. Most of its members were from a group that distributed and use crop areas despite those areas being nobles' propriety, others however, had a with the nobles a working relation closer to feudalism;
- Slaves, a non hereditary group of people.

Land weren't commercialized and many individuals, especially from the lower stratus of society, tried to suppress low agricultural production selling handicraft materials in many of the markets realized periodical in cities and hamlets [4]. As an example, the daily market of Tlatelolco had more or less 60,000 participants and strongly impressed Cortés that described it in detail, indicating the use of cotton textiles as currency exchange for the big transactions and cacao seeds for the small ones [1].

<sup>3</sup>Generally the kings from conquered cities kept power as long as they recognize the emperor's supremacy and pay their tributes, being the goals of the Aztec imperialism the generation of tributes and commercial expansion

<sup>4</sup>The Spaniards modelled their territorial organization based in the Aztec, which had more than 500 tributary city states.

Concerning education, the fathers had the obligation of training their sons to war while the mothers prepared their daughters to maternity<sup>5</sup>. At the age of five the children starting the frequency of a school in one of their two types of public schools, which becomes a full time occupation when they reached fifteen.

Nobles and the gifted ingress on Nobles school nickname as the House of Tears and the commons in the Youth House with both schools having distinct classes for genders. The former was a religious academy linked to a temple and commanded by a high priest where the students learn to write and disciplines with scientific and religious content and in the last, the students don't learn to write or read and the education were more versed to military activity although assisted with lessons of history and religion [6].

The ones who entered the House of Tears could be certain they will go to have a bad time which includes nights out in remote locations with rituals of self-sacrifice, a daily night bath in a freezing swimming pool and the conjugation of learn activities with the domestic and agricultural ones. In the Youth House life was easier and at the end of the day the young could meet with the opposite sex for dancing and singing[6].

## Technology

Aztec's writing system which had its most visible representations in the codex's, that were almost all burned by the missionaries, isn't considered complete due to its incapability in translate everything that was said and is believed that it acted more like a mnemonic system. Painted in animal skins or in paper done with tree scorches it was mainly constituted by pictographic representations of rituals, historical or economical records.

Concerning time division, the Aztec had two calendars<sup>6</sup>, one based on the solar year, named the counting of the days, and other based in a 260 days cycle named the counting of destiny. The first of those calendars was used to determine the periods of sowing and harvest and the date of festivals<sup>7</sup>, the last supposedly created by the god Quetzalcoatl was used in ceremonial life and divination,

<sup>5</sup>The women's role on society was weakened by polygamy and conception was the most important way that woman had to gain social acceptance and respect.

<sup>6</sup>Habitually carved in a stone they had in its constitution besides the counting of the days, astronomical information about phases of Moon and Venus, the years of Mercury and Mars and the historical record of the five eras of mankind.

<sup>7</sup>In it the year had 365 days grouped in 18 months of 20 days being the remaining 5 days considered harmful and in which the Aztec made the less activity as possible.

being consulted by the priests before the beginning of an important activity of any kind.

Medical knowledge was based on religious beliefs, and the diagnostics made with divination, however, the medical practice was empirical and the illness treatments effective, most of the times superior to the practised in Europe on that time. In fact, Spanish conquerors quickly adopted the Aztec treatments<sup>8</sup> and in 1570 the Spanish king sent one of his physicians, Francisco Hernandez, to study the flora of New Spain and Peru<sup>9</sup> well represented in the botanical gardens that Aztec had<sup>10</sup>.

## Religion

A religious system is connected with the perception that its believers had from the World and the Aztec thought the Earth was flat and surrounded by a sea supported by four gods in different cardinal directions. Like the Mayan they believe in thirteen skies above the earth and nine hells under it, all of them populated with mythological beings. On its polytheistic religion the divinities couldn't be easily identified, being the hundreds of gods and goddesses more perceptible as forces or spirits that possess diverse attributes of dressing or insignias<sup>11</sup>, anyhow, their predominant gods were:

- Tezcatlipoca, the protector of kings;
- Quetzalcoatl, the protector of priests;
- Tlaloc, the rain god;
- Huitzilopochtli, the protector of the Mexica people.

Sacrifices were necessary to maintain the motion and order in the world and the universe [3][6]and a form of retribution for the gods in the mishaps they pass on men and earth creation. The priests and members of the nobility often commit self sacrifices piercing various body parts with the spilled blood

<sup>8</sup>Like the one for healing battle wounds. On that time the European treatment consisted exclusively in the cauterization with boiling olive oil while the Aztec implied the washing of the wounds with fresh urine, the application of an anti-haemorrhagic herb, and the use of Agave sap to prevent infection and to accelerate healing.

<sup>9</sup>Hernandez stays until 1577, interrogating the native physicians while doing his own diagnostics but the volume of work was so big that he never reaches Peru.

<sup>10</sup>With the first created by the emperor Montezuma I in the fifteen century, these gardens were well cared and continuously augmented by the specimens bring from the new lands they conquered.

<sup>11</sup>Clay or stone figures when dressed with the divine clothes reincarnate the gods.

and the usual mode to effectuate human sacrifice was the removal of victims heart<sup>12</sup>[2].

The sacrifices of captives, slaves and sometimes women and children, were the major component of a series of ceremonies that last several days which included dances, songs, offerings of various types, theatrical performances and speeches. Organized and presided by priests, involving all sectors of Aztec society and held on fixed dates of the eighteen months of the Aztec calendar, with each month dedicated to a deity and sacrifices occurring on a specific day[2].

For them the New Year begins in February, being in the first month of the new cycle held ceremonies, sacrificed many children and prisoners in honor of the gods of rain. Children were sacrificed in different times<sup>13</sup>, and if they wept a lot was considered the auspicious sign of a rainy year.

On the second month was realized the festival of man skinning, celebrated in honor of XipeTotec, beginning the ritual much early before the sacrifices occur. So, forty days before, the prisoners were clean and adorned in order to mimic the divinity [2], and in previous night a temple's vigil held by the captors<sup>14</sup>.

In the morning the priests dragged the prisoners to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli, located on top of the temple of the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan, and laid them in the ceremonial stone where six priests were in charge of extracting their hearts with a flint knife and offering them to the sun as food. The hearts were placed in a ceremonial vessel and the bodies skinned, being the skins sheeted by the priests who roamed the city while simulated waging battles with young warriors or receiving gifts from people while the skinned bodies were taken to the house of their captors, dismembered, cooked and eaten, leaving however a piece for the Emperor[2].

In the fifth month was performed in honor of the god Tezcatlipoca, the festival Toxcatl. For this festival a young man without physical defects was chosen to incarnate the deity for one year, among which was treated as the god and lived in plenty surrounded by four women. When the day came he was drove up to the town of Chalco and voluntarily walks the stairs of a small temple where his heart was ripped off and offered to the Sun. After his head severed was placed in a stripped

<sup>12</sup>Most of sacrificed were prisoners of war dressed as gods and spending his last week to be worshipped as such. Finally the skulls of sacrificed were displayed publicly in wooden structures called tzompantli.

<sup>13</sup>t appears that sacrifices occurred until the raining season during the first four months of the year.

<sup>14</sup>On it the captors cut part of the victim's hair in the top of the head to facilitate the release of one of the souls the people had.

tzompantli being immediately his place taken by another young man, but unlike the other sacrifices, his remains were carefully transported by four people instead of being thrown down the staircase of the pyramid[2].

In the eleventh month they danced up eight days in silence and a woman dressed as the goddess Toci was taken to a temple with the promise of having sexual relations with the emperor. When she came to the top of the pyramid was quickly severed and skinned and her skin placed in a young man who became by his turn the embodiment of the goddess. After, this young accompanied prisoners to the temple of Huitzilopochtli and there take the heart of four of them be the remaining prisoners killed by a priest[2].

However, the one that is considered the most important festival occurred every 52 years, signalling the start of a new pre-Colombian century, when the Aztec thought that the world could end. In this way, each turn of a century was celebrated by an elaborate festival in which the sacred fire that had burned along it was extinct, people destroyed their furniture, utensils and clothes and even idols were thrown into rivers and lakes.

In the century's last night the priests, dressed as gods and accompanied by the population of Tenochtitlan, marched silently for about five miles up the hill of the Star, in the city of Ixtapalapan, while in the other towns and remote villages, people flocked to the hills and nearby mountains trying to take a glimpse of it.

While on the top of the Star's hill the priests waited until the Pleiades<sup>15</sup> reached the zenith and then deposed the sticks in the open chest of a sacrificed. Then a chosen priest rubbed them and when the softer wood fuelled, a large fire was lit. People in jubilation bled themselves with thorns and threw them in the direction of the new fire, as messengers carrying torches left for all cities and towns of the empire rekindling the fires in the temples.

## The Spanish conquest

The Aztec civilization was an abrupt end when Hernando Cortés and his army from 1519 to 1521 invaded the it territory. Although the empire and its institutions as the sacrifice have been quickly extinguished by the colonizers<sup>16</sup>, peasants life re-

<sup>15</sup>Also called Messier 45 they are a group of stars, visible to naked eye, located at 391,456 light years in the constellation of Taurus.

<sup>16</sup>When Cortés arrived in 1519 was received with gifts and a human sacrifice, but instead of be covenant he kills the priest with his sword. Also in Tenochtitlan during a dedicate Huitzilopochtli's celebration when they prepare to sacrifice

mained virtually unchanged during the colonial period.

It is true that the victory cannot be attributed solely to the Spaniards, because they have always been helped by the indigenous<sup>17</sup>, but to a combination of factors among them:

- The indecision of the Aztec leader Montezuma that to the despair of his advisers, delayed a military action against the Spanish, even subject himself to be a hostage of Cortés in his own palace[1]. When finally the Aztec remove him from power it was already too late;
- The diseases introduced by the Spaniards;
- The weakening of the Aztec army due to previous campaigns;
- The non-military occupation of conquered territory[6]. When the Aztec conquered a new territory they only impose a regime which pays the taxes, only keeping a military presence when the leaders fail with their duties. This enabled large armies, as Tlaxcala's army, to cross over extensive regions with virtually no opposition.
- A different philosophy inherent to the concept of war[6]. While one of the mainly war goals of the Aztec was the capture of prisoners for religious ceremonies, to the Spaniards there wasn't such objective and their purpose was the complete conquest and subjugation of political and religious structures to their emperor.

## References

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- [2] B Sahagún, Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain [ca. 1540–85].
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- [4] M. E.Smith, Life in the Provinces of the Aztec Empire, *Scientific American* 277, PG. 56-63, 1997.
- [5] M. E.Smith, *The Aztecs*, Oxford, 2003.
- [6] J. Soustelle, *La vie quotidienne des aztèques à la veille de la conquête espagnole*, Hachette, 1955.

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a victim Pedro de Alvarado, order to kill everyone present, mainly nobles and priests.

<sup>17</sup>Like in Tenochtitlan's siege where they had the help of 70,000 Tlaxcala's troops.