THE AZTECS

The Aztec Indians had already built one of the most advanced civilizations in the western hemisphere by the time Columbus made his first voyage to the Americas. Archeologists believe that the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan may have had a population of over 200,000! This was larger than any city in Spain or England at the time.

Mythology tells that the Aztecs began as wandering tribes in the north or northwest part of Mexico. This territory, called Aztlan, is the source of the name Aztec. Today we refer to the people as Aztecs, but they call themselves Mexica or Tenochca.

The ancient tribes wandered for many years. In the 1200s they began to settle in the Valley of Mexico, which is in the central part of the country. This area rises about 7,500 feet above sea level. It is surrounded by tropical rain forests, but the high altitude gave the region a mild climate.

Nuhuatl was the language spoken by the Aztecs. Many words we use today came from this ancient language. Aztec words include Acapulco, Mexico, avocado, chocolate, and tomato. The Aztecs developed a form of picture writing. Some pictures represented ideas, while other pictures symbolized sounds. They did not develop a written alphabet, so their writing was limited in what it could express.

The Aztecs soon founded their greatest city, Tenochtitlan, on an island in the Lake Texcoco. This is the site of modern-day Mexico City, the capital of the country of Mexico.

By the early 1400s, the Aztecs had gained control of their region and established a number of city-states. Each city-state had its own government and distinct culture. The three major city-states – Tenochtitlan, Texaco, and Tlateloico – formed an alliance that became the Aztec Empire. At one time, 489 different cities paid tribute and taxes to the Aztec Empire.

A council of nobles always chose the emperor from the members of the royal family. The greatest emperor, Montezuma I, ruled from 1440 to 1468. His name is also spelled Moctezuma and Motecuhzoma. He expanded the empire from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean and from Mexico to Central America into modern-day Guatemala. His grandson, Montezuma II, became emperor in 1502. He ruled when the empire was at its peak.

The Aztecs made no attempt to unify the area they commanded or to change the customs of the conquered peoples. The emperor stationed military units throughout the empire to maintain control. A great noble commanded each army and also served as governor. Most of the time, power was passed from father to son, but if they served the emperor faithfully, they could gain higher offices.

Aztecs belonged to a large family group called a calpolli, a word that meant “big house.” Each calpolli owned a plot of land to meet the needs of its members. In addition to providing necessities for their own members, each calpolli presented the government with part of the harvest as a form of tribute.

All of this empire came under threat when Spaniards, under the leadership of Hernando Cortes, invaded Mexico in search of gold. Many of the smaller city-states helped the Spanish destroy the Aztec Empire in 1521. They helped the Spanish because they resented paying tributes to the Aztec Empire.

The glory of the Aztec Empire vanished during the Spanish invasion, but today, Aztec designs still have a strong influence on Mexican art, and thousands of modern Mexicans can trace their ancestry to the Aztecs.
AZTEC RELIGION

Xochitl had a difficult time falling asleep. The excitement of tomorrow's festival kept her mind occupied until she finally became drowsy. Tomorrow, she would attend Ochpaniztli, the festival of the eleventh month. This celebration honored Tlazolteotl, the earth mother goddess. Each month of the calendar had a festival with music, dancing, processions, and sacrifices.

The Aztecs worshipped many gods and goddesses. Each village and each occupation had its own patron god. A different god also watched over each day and each part of the day. The people worshipped the various gods and goddesses to attract the good forces of nature and to repel harmful powers.

Just before the Sun rose, distant sounds of the temple drums woke Xochitl. She dressed quickly, and as she went into the main room of the house, she saw that the rest of the family was already awake and making preparations to go to the temple for the festival of Ochpaniztli. Her mother gave her a basket of corn to place on the temple altar as a tribute to the goddess Tlazolteotl.

Xochitl was glad that her family arrived as soon as they did. Even though it was still early, hundreds of people had arrived and were lining the road leading to the temple. Xochitl's family was still able to find a location that would give them a good view of the procession.

The crowd quieted down as the beat of the drums stopped. Though they were too far away from the temple to hear what was said, Xochitl knew that the priests were now presenting the sacred chants. The chants provided magic to avoid rains at harvest and to celebrate the refreshment of Earth Mother Tlazolteotl. Xochitl knew that the next part of the ceremony would be a human sacrifice to appease the gods.

In this ceremony, a young woman impersonating the goddess of ripe corn would be the sacrifice. This was one of the few Aztec ceremonies that sacrificed a young woman. Usually the victims of the sacrifices were men who were either captives of wars or slaves. Many of the Aztec religious festivals included human sacrifices. The priest cut open the victim's chest and tore out the heart. He then placed the victim's heart on the altar of the god or goddess. In one ceremony to the god Tlaloc, sacrifices even included children. Xochitl's mother had explained the Aztec belief that the blood given in sacrifice gave the gods new strength and energy.

When Xochitl heard the drums and other music begin, she knew it was time for the grand procession. First came the young men of each clan, dressed in their finest ceremonial outfits. Xochitl enjoyed the colorful display of brightly painted clothing and fancy feather work that decorated the clothes. Each clan member also carried a military weapon and shield decorated with the insignia of the clan.

Xochitl watched closely until she recognized her clan's group. Pride filled Xochitl's heart as they passed. She especially enjoyed seeing her uncles and cousins in the procession. She knew that when he was older, her brother would also march with them.

After the last clan passed groups of warriors with special rank and privileges walked by. Two of the special groups, the Knights of the Eagle and the Knights of the Jaguar, wore animal skins to represent their mascot. These two groups then staged a mock battle to entertain the crowd.

The rest of the festival day was spent visiting friends and feasting. Occasionally other special events provided entertainment and excitement. Other contests and games filled the afternoon. The most important of the games was Tlachtli. This was a fast-moving game using a rubber ball. Each team tried to score points by putting the ball through rings on the sides of the playing field.

The festival was over by sunset. Xochitl and her family returned home. After the evening meal, Xochitl went to bed early. She had had a busy and tiring day, but in 20 days she would be ready to celebrate the next festival.
AZTEC GODS AND GODDESSES

The ancient Aztecs worshipped over 60 gods and goddesses. This is a list of the more important ones.

TEZCATLIPOCO:
  Sun god, most powerful of all gods, chief god of the town of Texcoco

HUITZILOPOCHTLI:
  Sun god and god of war, chief god of the town of Tenochtitlan

TLAZOLTEOTL:
  Mother of gods, earth goddess

TLALOC:
  Rain god, most important to the farmers

QUETZALCOATL:
  God of learning and the priesthood, also god of arts and crafts

CHICOMECOATL:
  Goddess of crops

CENETEOTL:
  God of corn

XIPE TOTEC:
  God of spring, planting, and re-growth

TONATIUH:
  A Sun god

MICTLANTECUHLI:
  God of the dead

XIUHTECUHTLI:
  Ancient fire god

CHALCHIHUITLICUE:
  Our Lady of the Turquoise skirt, lakes and rivers
THE CITY OF TENOCHTITLAN

The greatest city of the Aztecs was Tenochtitlan. The early settlers built the village on an island in Lake Texcoco. They chose the island since the lake protected them against attacks from the mainland.

A twin village, Tlaltelolco, was on another island to the north. The natives soon built a bridge between the two villages, but the two villages then became rivals. After a short battle, Tenochtitlan defeated and absorbed Tlaltelolco.

As the villages grew into a city, the people needed more land. They dug mud from the lake bottom and piled it into mounds. The city became criss-crossed by canals. Tenochtitlan reminded the Europeans of Venice in Italy. The canals became the major streets of the city. Soon three large earthen causeways linked the city to the mainland. These causeways became the major entrances into the city. The three causeways joined at the great plaza in the center of the city.

The great plaza was in the center of the city. It measured 520 by 600 feet and had over 60 buildings. The most impressive structure in the plaza was the pyramid and double temple to the gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. It was over 200 feet tall!

Four other temples and the sacred ball court were built in the great plaza. Other buildings in the plaza included the home of the priest, the house of a military unit, and the great palace of the ruler Montezuma. A large market place and the now-famous calendar stone were also in the great plaza.

Tenochtitlan had four major units. These units had a total of 20 sections. Each clan had its own section of the city that contained the houses and gardens of the clan members. Each clan also had its own temple and school.

The Spanish first arrived in Tenochtitlan in November 1519. Hernando Cortes led the Spanish invaders. Tenochtitlan amazed them when they entered. One of the men wrote that he thought what he saw was a dream. The population of the city when the Spanish arrived is estimated at between 200,000 and 300,000 people. It was larger than any city in Europe at the time!

Cortes and his men soon defeated the Aztecs, and Tenochtitlan became a Spanish city. It continued to change after the Spanish conquest. In the 1600s the Spanish drained the lake. Today Mexico's capital, Mexico City, lies on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. The Mexican president's palace is on the location that was once Montezuma’s palace.
AZTEC ART

Two serpents form her head. She has claws instead of hands and feet. Her skirt consists of many twisting snakes, and she wears a necklace made of human hearts and hands. Coatlicue, the goddess of the earth, stands nine and one-half feet tall. This shocking sight is one of the most famous Aztec sculptures.

The best remaining examples of Aztec art are its architecture and sculpture. Aztec sculpture remains among the most elaborate in the Americas. Almost all Aztec art used religious subjects and themes.

The temple was the most magnificent structure in each Aztec town. It was visible from miles away and stood on the top of huge pyramid structures. Great staircases rose up the sides of the pyramid. The great pyramid at Tenochtitlan had two temples at its peak!

Most of the sculpture came from decorations of the temple. The sculpture used a variety of subjects. Animals and representations of the gods were favorite subjects. We still can see examples of sculptures of spiders. Some of the sculpture is huge, like the calendar stone weighing over 20 tons, and some is very small and delicate.

The Aztecs used a variety of material for their sculpture. Stone was the most often used material. However, examples of Aztec art remain that were made of wood, jade, turquoise, emerald, and volcanic glass.

The Aztecs also made items of metal. They used metals easily found in nature. They did not know how to use iron or how to mix metals for great strength. Aztec workers used stone instead of metal tools. The craftsmen shaped gold, copper, and some silver into beautiful jewelry and decorations. Most of the Aztec gold treasures no longer exist. After conquering the Aztecs, Cortes and the Spaniards took the gold art works to Europe. The king of Spain had the treasures melted down to reuse the gold.

Aztec craftsmen also made clay pottery. Some of it was plain and for everyday use. The Aztec kitchens contained many clay jars and other utensils. They also created elaborate and brightly colored ritual pottery.

Aztec women spent much of their time weaving cloth. They dyed, embroidered, and decorated the cloth. The higher a person’s social status, the more elaborate the decorations that appeared on his clothing. The Aztecs also excelled at feather weaving. Weavers raised exotic birds in cages to get brightly colored feathers. The weavers attached the feathers to a net to make cloaks, headdresses, and other decorative items. Only one example of Aztec feather weaving survives today. A headdress given by Montezuma to Cortes is preserved in a museum in Vienna.
AZTEC AGRICULTURE

Aztec methods of farming were similar to those of the Mayan and Incan tribes. The Aztecs used a pointed stick to plant the crops. One person would make a hole in the ground with the stick. Another person would put the seeds in the hole and then cover the seeds with soil. The Aztecs never invented a plow to turn the earth.

The slash and burn method of agriculture was also used by the Aztecs. They chopped down forest areas and left the trees and brush to dry in the heat of the Sun for many days. The farmers then burned the areas to clear them. The ashes of the burned trees provided fertilizer. The farmers then planted the new crops in the clearings.

Chinampas were the most interesting development of Aztec agriculture. Chinampas were small islands formed in lake and swamp areas. The farmers made them by digging the mud at the bottom of the lake or swamp and piling it into little mounds or islands. The Aztecs then planted crops and gardens on the chinampas. They are sometimes called floating gardens even though they did not really float.

The Aztec farmers also cut terraces into hillsides to create more farm land. They made many canals to help carry water to the fields.

Corn, called maize by the Indians, was the main crop. The Aztec farmers also grew avocados, as well as many varieties of beans, squash, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes. Different crops came from the lowlands. Major lowland crops included cotton, papayas, rubber, and cacao beans, from which chocolate is made.

After the harvest, farmers brought the crops to the marketplace in the nearest city. The Aztecs did not use animals or wheeled vehicles to move crops. The men carried everything to the market on their backs. In some of the distant villages, farmers used dugout canoes to move crops over rivers and canals.

The market was in the center of each town. Some of the markets were very large. The market in the city of Tlatelolco was the largest. The Spaniard Hernando Cortes wrote that over 60,000 people visited the market each day.

The Aztecs, like other Indian tribes, did not use money. They used a barter system. Barter is trading objects rather than buying and selling them. The markets contained many other things for barter. Other items traded included weapons, animals, household goods, rare colorful feathers, and even slaves.