

Blood and Tribute: The Rise and Fall of the Aztec Empire

The Aztec Empire rose to its peak of power and then collapsed under the assault of Cortes and his Indian allies, all in less than 100 years. The very ideas that drove the Aztecs to create a powerful empire ultimately caused its destruction.

Although he had been trained for war since childhood, the warrior could fight no more. He had been knocked senseless and dragged off the battlefield by an Aztec noble from the capital city of Tenochtitlan. The captured warrior expected to be executed on the spot by Aztec priests. Instead, he was marched back to Tenochtitlan. There, his Aztec captors dressed him in lavish clothing and worshiped him as a god. The captured warrior-god danced and sang in special rituals. He led processions through the city. Priests gave him delicacies to eat and brought him women to satisfy his sexual desires.

After months of preparation, the priests took the warrior-god to the Great Temple. The ultimate honor awaited him at the top of the pyramid stairs. Soon he would join Tonatiuh, the sun god. The warrior's whole life had prepared him for this glorious moment.

At the top of the pyramid temple, the warrior-god was greeted by the nobleman who had captured him. The sacred ritual was about to begin. Four priests seized the warrior-god's arms and legs and spread him on a stone altar. He stared up into the infinite blue sky. The chief priest raised his arm high and plunged a knife deep into the warrior-god's chest. With practiced motions, the priest thrust a hand into the wound, grabbed the warrior-god's heart and ripped it from his chest. He offered the still-pulsing heart to Tonatiuh, the sun god. Others shoved the lifeless body down the bloody stairs of the Great Temple. At the bottom, more priests cut off the head to display it with hundreds of others on a skull rack.

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The nameless warrior described above represented hundreds of thousands of humans who were sacrificed to the gods during the time of the Aztec Empire. The Aztecs believed that the gods had given their blood to create human beings. They believed that in order to maintain the empire, they were obligated to return the blood to the gods. They sacrificed warriors captured in battle and other men, women, and even children to satisfy what they believed was the gods' voracious blood appetite. But the very beliefs that were intended to maintain the Aztec Empire contributed to its downfall.

The Mexica

The people who would become the Aztecs were latecomers to the Valley of Mexico, the area that now surrounds modern Mexico City. These fierce, Nahuatl-speaking people from the Chichimec culture began to arrive around 1200 A.D. from the north, a place they called Atzlan. Calling themselves the Mexica, these

nomads from the north found most of the land already occupied by a sophisticated agricultural-based culture that dwelt in and around well-developed cities.

A Pronunciation Guide to Some Aztec Names

Tenochtitlan (tay-noch-tee-TLAHN)
Tonatiuh (toh-NAH-ti-uh)
Nahuatl (NAH-wah-tl)
Mexica (meh-SHEE-kah)
Tepanecs (TEH-pah-neks)
Itzcoatl (eets-koh-AT-tl)
Huitzilopochtli (wee-tsee-loh-POHCH-tee)
Moctezuma I (mohk-teh-ZOO-mah)
Ahuitzotl (ah-weet-ZO-tl) *****

These city-dwelling agrarians, the Tepanecs, the Acolhuas, and the Culhuas, had already established themselves around Lake Texcoco and competed against one another for dominance in the region. These established groups shunned the Mexica as snake-eating barbarians. After they foolishly sacrificed the daughter of a Culhua king, the Mexica were punished and driven into exile. For years they were forced to wander in the wilderness. According to legend, their warrior god Huitzilopochtli led the Mexica to an island in a swamp. There they saw an eagle perched on a cactus with a snake grasped in its beak. Huitzilopochtli told the Mexica that this would become their homeland.

The Mexica drained the swamp and began to build an urban center that would soon become the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Meanwhile, the Mexicas, known for being ferocious fighters, worked as hired soldiers for the powerful, well-established Tepanecs. But a new Tepanec king, fearing the military prowess of the Mexicas, initiated a series of attacks. The Mexicas, under their king, Itzcoatl, formed a war alliance with two other city-states and defeated the Tepanecs in 1428. The victory of this city-state trio, called the Triple Alliance, marks the beginning of the Aztec Empire. Today, use of the term Aztec usually refers to the Mexica and the empire they created.

Itzcoatl

The Mexica king Itzcoatl became the first of six Aztec emperors. He introduced revolutionary changes in Aztec life that drove the expansion of the empire for almost a century. Itzcoatl created an Aztec feudal system, much like that of Europe, that concentrated wealth, privilege, and political power in the hands of the emperor, his warriors, and other nobles. Itzcoatl distributed lands from the defeated Tepanecs to his warrior elite. He established a new structure of noble titles and privileges to reward warriors who took captives in battle. To support

the new titled classes, Itzcoatl decreed that the common people owed them economic tribute, labor, and military service.

Itzcoatl rewrote history and altered the Aztec religion to justify an expanding empire. The warrior god of the Mexica, Huitzilopochtli, was elevated in importance to represent the sun god, Tonatiuh. The Aztecs became the "chosen people of the sun." Itzcoatl gave them the responsibility of keeping the gods and the world alive with a constant supply of human blood. The Aztecs and earlier peoples in Mexico had performed human sacrifices as part of their religion for many years, but Itzcoatl demanded much larger numbers of captive warriors to satisfy the blood thirst of Tonatiuh and other gods.

How the Empire Worked

With his feudal and religious changes in place, Itzcoatl spent the rest of his life engaged in conquering other Aztec city-states in the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs had no standing army. Instead, all Triple-Alliance males were pressed into service whenever a war began. Noble warriors gained status and wealth based on how many captives they took in battle.

Aztecs fought to kill, but more importantly, they fought to take captives. They believed that, if they died in battle, their souls would join the gods. Warriors usually fought one-on-one with spears and wooden swords embedded with deadly rows of sharpened obsidian (a form of volcanic glass).

When he was victorious, Itzcoatl—and the emperors who followed him—would dictate an amount of tribute to be collected from the defeated city-state and install a trustworthy local noble as its new king. Under this system of indirect rule, life usually continued unchanged in a conquered city-state—as long as tribute flowed to the Aztec capital. Because the emperor controlled the Aztec kingdom so loosely, defeated city-states frequently revolted and had to be reconquered.

Most of the revolts against the empire took place because of resentment caused by the burden of the tribute system. Conquered city-states near Tenochtitlan were usually called upon to feed the Aztec capital's growing class of nobles. Other common tribute items included warrior's uniforms, animal skins, building materials, pottery, and firewood. The Aztecs also required conquered states to supply gold and copper, feathers, incense, paper, and cocoa beans, which were used as money. In addition, the Aztec emperor would demand laborers from the conquered city-states to build temples, aqueducts, and other public projects.

Expansion and Collapse of the Empire

After Itzcoatl's death in 1440, a group of Mexica royal advisers chose Moctezuma I to become the next Aztec leader. A nephew and close ally of the former ruler, Moctezuma I carried on Itzcoatl's warlike policies.

Moctezuma I strengthened the tribute system and began construction of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan. He also issued a new legal code that emphasized the great differences between the nobility and the commoners. In addition, he organized a system of compulsory schools for all Mexica boys and girls. These schools helped indoctrinate them into the beliefs and rituals of the Aztec religion. Depending on their class, schooling prepared boys to become priests, government office holders, merchants, farmers, and craftsmen. All boys were trained to be warriors. Girls learned song, dance, and the skills necessary to become the mothers of Aztec warriors.

Toward the end of his reign, Moctezuma I had achieved what amounted to a Pax Azteca (Aztec Peace) in the Valley of Mexico. Because he and Itzcoatl had conquered so many city-states in the area, warfare among these lesser states ended. This enabled a widespread trade and market system to flourish. Aztec *pochteca*, or merchants, traded with people as far away as Central America, exchanging textiles, obsidian tools, medicinal herbs and dyes for unfinished goods that could be sold to Aztec artisans. This trade greatly increased the standard of living, even among the commoners.

The Aztec Empire reached its peak in size and power under Ahuitzotl, the fifth emperor. He also presided over the completion of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan.

The Great Temple consisted of a massive pyramid topped by two temples: one for Huitzilopochtli, the warrior god and representation of the sun, and the other for Tlaloc, the god of rain, water, and fertility. Twin staircases went up one side of the pyramid to each temple where human sacrifices were performed. The Aztecs sacrificed more than 10,000 individuals in a dedication ceremony that lasted four days. The Great Temple was completed in 1487, five years before Columbus set out on his voyage of discovery.

By the time of Ahuitzotl, Aztec human sacrifices had taken on an additional political purpose. Kings and diplomats from the conquered city-states and the common people of Tenochtitlan were all forced to witness the gruesome rituals. These awesome demonstrations of Aztec power prevented many from challenging the elite class that ruled an empire of 3 million people.

When Moctezuma II, the sixth and last Aztec ruler, became emperor in 1502, the empire was already beginning to weaken. Moctezuma II spent much of his time attempting to reconquer city-states that had revolted against demands from the capital. The Mexica nobility increasingly denied any decision-making powers to Aztec commoners. This caused the commoners, who supported the nobility with payments of tribute and military service, to lose faith in their rulers.

The Aztecs had accomplished a great deal in a relatively short time. In less than a century, they built a city, extended existing trade routes, and devised an elaborate market system. They fed, clothed, housed, and educated millions of citizens. But

finally, the empire simply began to bleed to death. Aztec wars and sacrifices to the gods had reduced the numbers of farmers, craftsmen, and other producers necessary to keep the empire thriving.

When Spaniard Hernando Cortes reached Tenochtitlan in 1519, he was amazed to find an island-city of 200,000 people with stone temples, royal palaces, and great houses all dwarfed by the sacred pyramid. The capital of the Aztec Empire was five times the size of London at that time. Yet, this impressive Mexica city only briefly hid the weaknesses of the empire from the Spanish. Cortes soon discovered that he could enlist the aid of other resentful Aztec city-states to defeat the "people of the sun."

It took a year of deal-making, intrigue, and warfare for Cortes to assemble an army large enough to assault the Aztec capital. In 1521, Cortes and his allied forces surrounded the island city. "It was useless to tell [the Aztecs]," Cortes wrote, "that we would not raise the siege. . . that there was nowhere whence they could procure maize, meat, fruit, water. . . . The more we repeated this, the less faintheartedness they showed."

For 85 days, the Aztec warriors fought the Spaniards and their Indian allies through the streets and canals of Tenochtitlan. Cortes estimated that the Aztecs lost over 100,000 soldiers. The fighting ended only after the last defenders were cut down. Today, the streets and buildings of Mexico City have engulfed the former capital of the Aztec empire.