EARLY AZTEC HISTORY

The exact origins of the Aztec people are uncertain, but they are believed to have begun as a northern tribe of hunter-gatherers whose name came from that of their homeland, Aztlan (or “White Land”). The Aztecs were also known as the Tenochca (from which the name for their capital city, Tenochtitlan, was derived) or the Mexica (the origin of the name of the city that would replace Tenochtitlan, as well as the name for the entire country).

When the Aztecs saw an eagle perched on a cactus on the marshy land near the southwest border of Lake Texcoco, they took it as a sign to build their settlement there. They drained the swampy land, constructed artificial islands on which they could plant gardens and established the foundations of their capital city, Tenochtitlán, in 1325 A.D. Typical Aztec crops included maize (corn), along with beans, squashes, potatoes, tomatoes and avocadoes; they also supported themselves through fishing and hunting local animals such as rabbits, armadillos, snakes, coyotes and wild turkey. Their relatively sophisticated system of agriculture (including intensive cultivation of land and irrigation methods such as floating chinampas) and a powerful military tradition would enable the Aztecs to build a successful state, and later an empire.

THE AZTEC EMPIRE

In 1428, under their leader Itzcoatl, the Aztecs formed a three-way alliance with the Texcocans and the Tacubans to defeat their most powerful rivals for influence in the region, the Tepanec, and conquer their capital of Azcapotzalco. Itzcoatl’s successor Montezuma (Moctezuma) I, who took power in 1440, was a great warrior who was remembered as the father of the Aztec empire. By the early 16th century, the Aztecs had come to rule over up to 500 small states, and some 5 to 6 million people, either by conquest or commerce. Tenochtitlán at its height had more than 140,000 inhabitants, and was the most densely populated city ever to exist in Mesoamerica.

Bustling markets such as Tenochtitlan’s Tlatelolco, visited by some 50,000 people on major market days, drove the Aztec economy. The Aztec civilization was also highly developed socially, intellectually and artistically. It was a highly structured society with a strict caste system; at the top were nobles, while at the bottom were serfs, indentured servants and slaves. The Aztec faith shared many aspects with other Mesoamerican religions, like that of the [Maya](http://www.history.com/topics/maya), notably including the rite of human sacrifice. In the great cities of the Aztec empire, magnificent temples, palaces, plazas and statues embodied the civilization’s unfailing devotion to the many Aztec gods, including Huitzilopochtli (god of war and of the sun) and Quetzalcoatl (“Feathered Serpent”), a Toltec god who served many important roles in the Aztec faith over the years. The Aztec calendar, common in much of Mesoamerica, was based on a solar cycle of 365 days and a ritual cycle of 260 days; the calendar played a central role in the religion and rituals of Aztec society.

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