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CHAPTER

THE SPANISH CONQUEST OF THE AMERICAS

The story of the Spanish conquest of the Americas has all the attributes of a big Hollywood movie—brave men, beautiful women, rivalries, greed, heroism, cruelty and fabulous wealth. Hernan Cortés led his **conquistadors** against the Aztecs of modern-day Mexico from 1519 to 1521, while Francisco Pizarro and his men conquered the Incas of Peru from 1531 to 1534. For the Spaniards, these conquests brought fame and riches beyond their wildest dreams. But for the local people they brought catastrophe: huge numbers died in battle, from disease brought by the Spanish, or from mistreatment afterwards.

An Aztec mask depicting one of their gods, Quetzalcoatl

KEY WORDS AND TERMS

caciques	The name given to tribal lords in the Americas
calpolli	Family groups or clans in Aztec society
census	A count of people, animals and other resources in an area, by a government
conquistadors	The name given to Spanish conquerors such as Cortés and Pizarro
coronation	The ceremony to crown a new king or queen
encomienda	The system of land distribution in the new territories, when land was given to loyal subjects (known as *encomenderos*) by the Spanish king
infidels	The Latin term for 'unbelievers', used to describe people who were not Christians
litter	A carriage for transporting people that is carried on the shoulders of bearers
Quinto	The 'Royal Fifth'; the 20 per cent tax payable to the Spanish king by conquistadors when conquering new lands
quipu	A device used by the Incas for record-keeping
Sapa Inca	The Inca title for their king, meaning 'Unique Lord'
Tawantinsuyu	The Inca name for their empire, meaning 'The Four Parts Together'
tribute	A payment of money, valuable materials or work to someone who is your master
viceroy	The title given to Spanish governors of territories like Mexico and Peru

THE AZTECS OF CENTRAL AMERICA

INQUIRY QUESTION

What can we learn about indigenous people?

The origins of Aztec civilisation

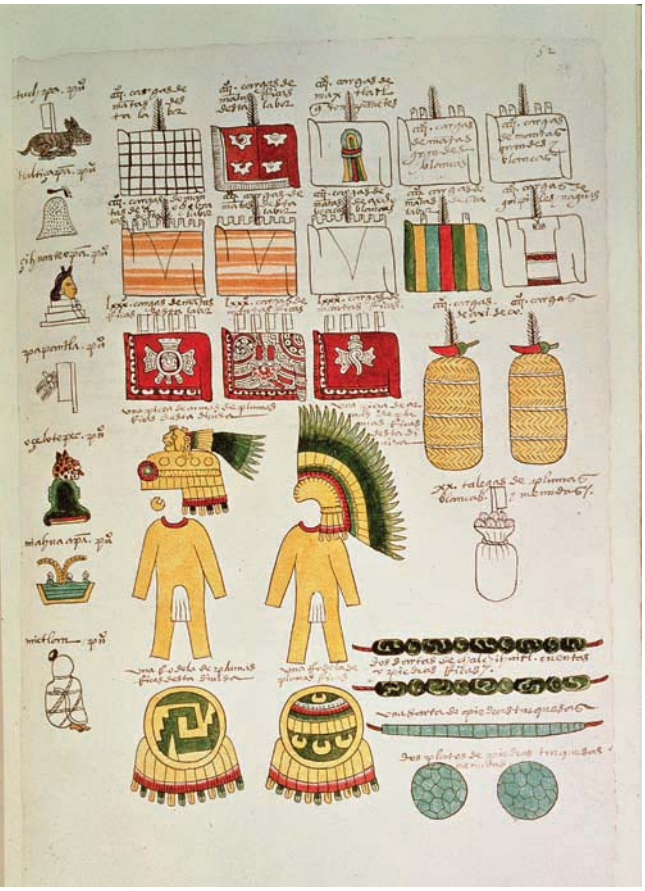
For the Aztec creation story, see
www.indians.org/welker/aztecs.htm

According to Aztec legend, the Aztecs were a nomadic people from north-west Mexico who wandered through the Valley of Mexico to Lake Texcoco in the twelfth century. The Aztec God Huitzilopochtli guided them to an island in the

Contemporary Central America

middle of the lake, where they saw an eagle holding a serpent in its claws. It was here that they built the city of Tenochtitlán in 1325. The Aztec Empire grew rapidly, either by conquering other tribes through war or by persuading them to become allies, often by threats. By the time of Cortés's arrival in 1519 the empire covered thirty-eight provinces, which had to pay **tributes** to Tenochtitlán in the form of money, feathers, animal skins, goods, food crops, or people who would be sacrificed to the Aztec gods. If a town paid the necessary tributes, it would largely be left alone.

The Aztecs created a sophisticated civilisation in a relatively short period of time. We can learn about it from the large amount of written evidence or pictures left by Spanish conquerors such as Cortés, who wrote many letters to the Spanish king, and Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who wrote an account of the conquest several years later. The perspective of the Aztec people themselves can be found in the 'Codex Mendoza', which was named after a Spanish viceroy, and the 'Florentine Codex', which was compiled by Father Bernadino de Sahagún. These books are called 'codex' because of their construction. A codex is folded like an accordion and usually consisted of both words and pictures.



A scene from the 'Codex Mendoza' showing the tribute paid by a town to the Aztecs. It includes warriors' clothes, dried chillis and bags of feathers.

TIMELINE

1492	Christopher Columbus becomes the first European to land on the American continent
1503	Montezuma II becomes king of the Aztecs
1519 (Feb)	Pizarro sent by Velásquez to explore the lands west of Cuba
1519 (Nov)	Cortés arrives in Tenochtitlán
1520 (Apr)	Cortés flees Tenochtitlán in 'La Noche Triste'
1521 (Aug)	The Spanish defeat the Aztecs and capture Tenochtitlán
1532	Pizarro arrives in Tumbes and sets off for Cajamarca
1532 (Nov)	Atahualpa captured in Cajamarca
1534 (June)	Atahualpa executed by Pizarro, despite the ransom having been paid
1536	Manco Capac revolts against Spanish rule but is defeated

Aztec society and government

The structure of society

When Cortés arrived in 1519, the Aztec king, Montezuma, had ruled since 1503. The Aztec nobility had chosen Montezuma as their king, which is significant, since it meant that he might lose his position if he lost the support of the nobility. The nobility consisted of nobles, priests and warriors, and it was possible for ordinary people to become members of the nobility if they showed great bravery on the battlefield.

Below the king and the nobility in society were the headmen of the clans (which were known as **calpolli**). The calpolli were groups of families that ran their own affairs, under the overall control of the king. They had their own temples, schools and councils. Officially the headmen were elected, but in practice their positions were hereditary. The majority of the population were commoners or labourers. They paid tribute to the king in goods and by working on government buildings or land; the merchants paid their tribute in valuable goods. The lowest level in society consisted of the serfs, called *mayeques*, and the slaves, called *hatlacohtin*. The mayeques worked on farms for the landowners; the slaves occupied an even lower position in society.

THAT'S ODD
Believe it or not, some people actually chose to become slaves. They sold themselves as *hatlacohtin* in order to pay off their debts.

The role of Aztec women

As in most ancient civilisations, Aztec women were limited in the roles they could play in society. They could either look after the household or they could become priestesses. Girls learnt how to run a household and how to weave clothes and other textiles. From about six years of age a girl would learn how to use a loom

to weave cotton or the fibres of the maguey plant into cloth, and to use feathers for decoration. Aztec women wore wrap-around skirts and highly decorated sleeveless blouses in a variety of colours, sometimes woven with animal patterns and decorated with materials such as animal fur. Rich women could afford to have expensive feathers sewn onto their clothes as decoration, and to wear jewellery made of gold or precious stones.

If parents wanted their daughter to become a priestess, she would join the temple when she was about five years old. There she would help to keep the temple clean, before being taught writing, poetry and oratory. Once her learning had been completed, the young priestess would begin to play a role in the important religious festivals.

Marriage was an important occasion, with formalities to be observed and partying to enjoy. Men could marry at age 20, while girls usually married at age 16. A man could have many wives, but the first wife was the most important and only her children could inherit from him. Women did have rights; for example, they could own property and could go to court to seek justice. A woman could be divorced by her husband if she was unable to have children, but she could also divorce her husband if he failed to support her, did not arrange to educate their children, or physically assaulted her. However, these rights were inferior to those of men.

A married woman's most important responsibility was to have children. The evidence suggests that the Aztecs had midwives who used massage, warm baths and a herbal anaesthetic to help women through the pain of childbirth.

A Mexican woman today weaving with an Aztec loom. A strap around her back keeps it taut. Examples of her work hang behind her.

An Aztec woman who was considered to be highly attractive would probably have had long hair, be very clean, use a small amount of make-up (or better still, none at all), wear bright and expensive clothing and fine jewellery, and she would be very modest in her behaviour. It was not considered attractive for an Aztec woman to be thin.

Leisure activities

Like many ancient and medieval civilisations, the Aztecs enjoyed leisure activities such as singing and dancing, and hunting using a bow and arrow or blowpipes. Tenochtitlán had flower gardens to walk around in and the king was said to have a jester to make everyone laugh.

However, young men were frequently warned about the dangers of succumbing to gambling on two popular Aztec leisure activities: a ball game called *hachtli* and

a board game called *patolli*. Hachtli is similar to the contemporary game of pelota, which is played in Spain and Central America. Players stood in a ball court that had two walls and a line across the middle. Each wall had a stone ring and the object of the game was to get the small rubber ball into the ring on the opponent's wall, using the hands or hips. Players wore gloves and hip guards made from heavy leather.

To play patolli you needed several large fava beans and a board with lines drawn on it. A player would throw the beans onto the board and, depending on the way the beans fell, the player would be able to move their counter along the board a certain number of moves. The player who was first to move their counter to the end of the board was the winner.

A scene from the 'Codex Magliabechiano' showing Aztec men playing patolli with the god Xochipilli

Look at patolli on the Internet:
http://www.xmission.com/~psneeley/Shareware/aztecpat.htm

CHECK YOUR HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

1. Explain how the Aztecs increased the size of their empire.
2. Describe what a codex looks like.
3. Explain how an Aztec king was chosen.
4. Why would the method of choosing an Aztec king make him listen carefully to his nobles?
5. Explain how an ordinary person could be promoted into the Aztec nobility.

ACTIVITY 1

Aztec society

1. Draw a pyramid to represent Aztec society like the medieval European feudal system. Include each group in society and label your diagram with the Aztec names for each group.
2. What do you think about the way Aztec women were treated? Draw a table with two columns headed 'Positive' and 'Negative', and list points about the treatment of Aztec women.
3. Imagine that you are an Aztec girl being trained to look after the house and to weave. Write a diary entry about a day in your life.

The Aztec army

Cortés wrote that the Aztecs were formidable warriors and that Montezuma commanded a powerful, well-organised and successful army. Young men were educated in military skills in their schools, which were run by each *calpolli*. The sons of noblemen received the best military education and the most supervision in their early battles, so it is not a surprise that they dominated the ranks of the top warriors. Students were taught how to handle weapons such as the wooden club and the bow and arrow, how to throw darts using a spear thrower (called an *atlatl*), how to hold a wood and leather shield correctly, and how to use a sword. The Aztecs did not have steel swords; rather they used wooden ones with strips of the sharp stone obsidian set into them.

The students went into their first battle at around 20 years of age. Veteran warriors closely supervised them so that they survived and so that they learnt how to take captives. The object of Aztec war was not to kill the enemy; it was to capture them so they could be sacrificed later. If a student failed to take a captive after three or four battles, he would have been ashamed. However, if he had failed to even help take a captive, his head would be shaved to shame him and he would never achieve high military status.

A young warrior who showed courage and had taken captives would be taken before the king, his face would be painted with red ochre, and he would be given warrior clothes to show his new status. Bernadino de Sahagún wrote that these clothes consisted of an orange cape with a striped border. Such rewards grew as the warrior took more captives and carried out more acts of bravery. However, the rewards did take into account who the warrior had fought. If an Aztec captured a warrior from the Atlixco, Huerotzinco or Tiliuhqui-Tepec tribes, his rewards would be enormous, as these warriors were thought to be the most aggressive people anyone could face in battle.

The famous Eagle or Jaguar Knights were from military orders of very high status, with entry offered only to those of proven courage and with many captives against their names. In battle they wore distinctive outfits covered in eagle feathers or jaguar skins. These military orders had houses in the king's palace and they were ready to fight at short notice.

A scene from the Stone of Tizoc, showing Aztec warriors taking captives

A scene from the 'Codex Duran', showing conquistadors led by Pedro de Alvarado being besieged and attacked by Aztec warriors, including an Eagle Warrior

The Aztec economy

Trading

There were two types of merchants: *pochteca*, the professional merchants who often travelled long distances well beyond the borders of the Aztec Empire, and the *tlanecuilo*, the regional merchants, about whom little is known. The *pochteca* were very valuable people in Aztec society. All the luxury goods that Aztecs could buy to display their wealth—jewellery, stone carvings, bright clothes and exotic feathers—were either bought from the *pochteca* or made from materials provided by them.

There were *pochteca* guilds in each of the major Aztec cities, with strict rules of conduct, enforceable by their own courts. The merchants were also trained warriors,

and they wore full fighting dress and carried weapons when they went on their longest journeys. On these journeys the *pochteca* often acted as spies, observing those tribes that the Aztecs wished to conquer.

The markets

Father Bernadino de Sahagún wrote in great detail about the markets of the Aztecs, and we also know from Cortés's letters how amazed the Spanish were when they saw them. The markets were filled with traders and stalls selling a wide range of goods and produce. The bright colours, the smells and the produce that Europeans had not seen before fascinated Cortés and his men.

There was a wide variety of food available: cacao, which could be used to make chocolate but was very expensive; seeds of different types including amaranth, chía and gourd; fruit and vegetables such as tomatoes, tuna cactus fruit, plums, custard apples, tropical fruit called *sapotas*, sweet potatoes and cherries; and grains such as maize. There were many different types of chilli, from mild red chillies to hot green chillies, yellow chillies, water chillies and even smoked chillies. Meats for sale included rabbit, turkey, venison, duck, crane and goose. Useful materials could also be purchased, like tough maguey plant fibres, beeswax candles, medicines, cotton,

THAT'S ODD
At an Atzec market you could buy a tortilla filled with tadpoles!

Aztec markets

gourd bowls, paper, clay water jugs, bowls, baskets, and obsidian for making knives.

People wanting a snack could choose from the many different types of tortilla. There were tortillas filled with turkey or rabbit, tortillas made with fish or frog, and vegetable tortillas filled with tomato or mushroom. They might be flavoured with chillies, seeds or salt.

Farming

The Aztecs practised a variety of techniques for growing food, depending on the surrounding countryside. In mountainous areas they made stone terraces, stabilised with maguey plants. In dry areas, canals were dug to irrigate the soil, and aqueducts carried water across valleys. There were even aqueducts to carry clean drinking water to the city of Tenochtitlán across Lake Texcoco.

However, the Aztecs are most famous for their solution to the problem of using swampy areas, like Lake Chalco and Lake Xochimilco, for growing food. They created plots of land called *chinampas*. First they dug large ditches to drain the swamp, and then they built up long, narrow islands using the mud, muck and organic material from the floor of the lake. These new islands were held together by driving wooden stakes into the lake floor, and trees were planted to stabilise the soil. The chinampas were very productive; the muck and the organic material acted as fertiliser and they drew water from their surroundings very effectively. Chinampas are still used in Mexico today.

Aztecs building a chinampa

CHECK YOUR HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

1. Explain why Aztec warriors were meant to take captives rather than kill their opponents.
2. How did the Aztec king show his gratitude to warriors who took captives?
3. Give two reasons why the *pochteca* were useful to an Aztec king.
4. What Aztec vegetables do we commonly use today?
5. Explain how a chinampa was made.

ACTIVITY 2

Rewards and trading

1. Write a short play about being an Aztec warrior, taking captives and being taken to the king for your reward. Make sure your script helps the audience to understand what is happening.
2. Draw an Aztec market.
3. Imagine you are one of the conquistadors. Write a letter home to Spain explaining what you saw when you walked round an Aztec market.
4. Make a model of a chinampa with labels explaining each part.

To get around the chinampas, farmers used canoes. While farming they used their wooden digging sticks, or *coa*, to turn the soil over for planting. The staple Aztec crops were maize, squash, beans, chillies and cacao (the basic ingredient of chocolate).

Religion

Aztec calendar

The Aztec religious year lasted for 260 days, operating on a repeating 52-year cycle. At the end of each cycle all the fires in Tenochtitlán were allowed to burn out and the city would become completely dark. The Aztecs believed that they would have to sacrifice a human being in order to encourage the gods to grant them a new cycle. So a sacrifice was carried out, the victim's heart was removed and a new fire was lit in the chest cavity. This fire would then be carried around the empire to signify a new start to the calendar. The sun would rise and a new 52-year cycle would begin. The last such event occurred in 1507.

Historians have learnt a great deal about Aztec beliefs from the famous Calendar Stone, which was found in 1790. This massive piece of carved rock, about 3.7 metres in circumference and weighing roughly 25 tonnes, was dug up from the ground in what is now the main square of Mexico City. It is covered in carvings showing different Aztec gods and scenes from the Aztec Empire.

WWW.

Aztec Calendar Stone:
http://www.crystalinks.com/aztecalendar.html.

The Aztec gods

The Aztecs believed in many gods. Three of their most important were Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl and Teteo Innan:

- **Huitzilopochtli** was the god of war and destruction and, according to Aztec legend, he played a key role in helping the wandering Aztecs to settle in Tenochtitlán. Huitzilopochtli was normally shown as a hummingbird with an ear pendant of cotinga feathers or as a warrior with armour and a helmet made

of hummingbird feathers. In the fifteenth month of the religious year, there would be a large festival dedicated to Huitzilopochtli with dancing, processions and human sacrifices.

- **Quetzalcoatl** was depicted as a feathered serpent. One legend said that he had built a raft of snakes and had sailed away across the eastern sea, and that in the year 'One Reed' Quetzalcoatl would return to claim his kingdom. Quetzalcoatl was also shown as a bearded man with white skin. As we will see later, both of these beliefs would have enormous consequences for the Aztecs in 1519.
- **Teteo Innan** was the mother of the gods, and she had special significance for doctors and nurses in Aztec society. She was shown with cotton flowers, a shell-covered skirt and eagle feathers on her blouse.

Human sacrifices

A famous aspect of Aztec religion was the use of human sacrifice. The Aztecs believed that, in return for bringing them wealth and success, their gods demanded human hearts and blood. The Aztecs therefore sacrificed people in huge numbers, particularly captives taken in battle. Each religious month contained a festival or religious event, which would culminate in a sacrifice.

For example, in the first month, or *Atl caulo*, many children were sacrificed to honour the gods of water and rain. In the fifth month, a young man was sacrificed to honour *Titlacauan*, the god of temptation. The young man would have enjoyed a year filled with temptation—festivals, music, dancing and the company of beautiful women—and at the end of this period he would mount the temple steps himself and be placed on the altar. Once there, his heart would be cut out and his head cut off and mounted on a skull rack.

When Cortés threatened the survival of the Aztec Empire, the priests were said to have sacrificed hundreds of captives, desperately hoping that this would encourage their gods to help them.

A scene from the 'Codex Magliabechiano' showing the Aztecs sacrificing a person to their sun god

THAT'S ODD

It was considered a good sign if the children being sacrificed during *Atl caulo* cried on their way to the altar, as it was thought that this meant there would plenty of rain that year.

SOURCE 9.1

Using historical evidence

BERNAL DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO WAS ONE OF THE CONQUISTADORS WHO FOUGHT WITH CORTÉS. HE WROTE ABOUT WHAT HE HAD SEEN WHEN MANY OF HIS FELLOW SPANIARDS WERE SACRIFICED AFTER FAILING TO ESCAPE FROM TENOCHTITLÁN IN 1520:

… there was the dismal drum of Huitzilopochtli and many other shells and horns and things like trumpets and the sound of them all was terrifying, and we all looked towards the lofty Cue where they were being sounded, and saw that our comrades whom they had captured … were being carried by force up the steps … they immediately placed them on their backs on some rather narrow stones which they had prepared as places for sacrifice, and with stone knives they sawed open their chests and drew out their palpitating hearts and offered them to the idols that were there, and then kicked their bodies down the steps.

Source: Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, Da Capo Press, 1996, p. 436.

1. **Explain which god the Spanish soldiers were being sacrificed to.**
2. **What evidence is there in the source to suggest that the Spanish soldiers did not go voluntarily to their deaths?**
3. **What happened to the bodies once their hearts had been cut out?**

The need to capture people for human sacrifice was one of the many reasons why the Aztecs were frequently at war. Defeated tribes were also expected to provide people for sacrifice, and this helps to explain why Cortés was able to win the support of so many tribes in his fight against the Aztecs.

Aztec language and writing

For information on Nahuatl:
http://www.acoyauh.com/Nahuatl.html.

Like many tribes of central and western Mexico, the Aztecs spoke the language Nahuatl. This language was based on speaking rather than writing, and stories of the Aztecs' ancestors had to be passed down in tales and songs. In fact, the Aztecs' ability to communicate in writing was limited. They used pictographs or glyphs for writing; for example, the word 'Tenochtitlán' was drawn using a stone (or *tena*) with a nopal cactus (or *nochtli*) sprouting from it. Other words were very literal—footsteps to say 'travel', a club and shield for 'war', or a wrapped corpse for 'death'.

The Aztecs counted in twenties rather than tens. Counting up to twenty was done using dots, a flag meant 20, a feather meant 400 (20 × 20), and a bag of incense meant 8000 (20 × 20 × 20).

This page, called Tonalamatl, from the 'Codex Borbonicus' shows the Aztec gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. In the smaller boxes around the outside are many Aztec glyphs.

CHECK YOUR HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

1. How long was the Aztec religious year?
2. Explain how the Aztecs encouraged their gods to grant them another 52-year cycle.
3. Why did the Aztecs carry out human sacrifice?
4. Explain how the need for human sacrifice meant that the Aztecs fought many wars.
5. How were Aztec stories passed down from one generation to the next?

Be an Aztec writer

ACTIVITY 3

1. Draw one of the glyphs from the 'Codex Borbonicus' into your book.
2. Make up your own glyphs for the following sentence: 'The Spanish are travelling towards us and want war'.
3. Write a letter to Pope Leo X (who was the Pope in 1520) that explains the Aztec religion.