

THE AZTEC EMPIRE BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF THE SPANISH



Source 16.9 The Aztec Empire showing the location of its major cities Tenochtitlan, Tlacopan and Texcoco

The rise of the Aztec Empire was very rapid. (The word *Aztec* can refer to the civilisation itself, the people, or just the ruling class. The term that the Aztec people called themselves was the *Mexica*.) The Aztecs expanded their control of territories now in present-day Mexico from around 1428, by conquering other tribes. They also formed an alliance between its major city, Tenochtitlan and the cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan. Of these three cities, Tenochtitlan was by far the largest and most dominant. Tenochtitlan was the centre of Aztec civilisation.



Source 16.10 The Aztec king Montezuma

Social groups in Aztec society

Aztec society was organised according to a strict **hierarchy** (which means that people had a particular place or class in society). There were five major social classes: the emperor, nobles, warriors, commoners and slaves, and there was little chance of movement out of the class into which one was born.

Emperor

At the top of the hierarchy was the emperor. When the Spanish arrived in 1519, the empire was led by Montezuma II (also known as Moctezuma), who had been in power since 1502. The emperor was an absolute ruler, selected as leader by a council of nobles. He was regarded by the people as a god and the 'Great Speaker'. He lived in a highly decorated palace and enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle.

Nobles

The nobility included high-level priests, military leaders, landowners, judges and heads of government. Noble status was passed down from parents to children. Nobles could receive tribute (something given as a mark of respect) from commoners and were the only class other than the emperor allowed to wear decorated capes and jewellery. Wealthy people and heroes of war dressed elaborately, with intricate headdresses (often made of feathers), necklaces, earrings and bangles made of gold, silver, copper and precious stones. Their body art included holes in the ears and split bottom lips. The nobility would also show their

wealth and dominance through extravagant feasts and expensive gifts to each other.

Warriors

Warriors were highly respected in Aztec society. Most males in Tenochtitlan were trained to be warriors. Women could not be warriors. At puberty, most young men left their families and went to live in the local warrior house. There was a formal hierarchy within the warrior group based on how many live captives (who were later sacrificed to the gods) a warrior had taken in battle. Successful warriors could expect to receive gifts and riches, but for most it was a part-time profession. Most warriors had to practice another trade for their livelihood.

Commoners

Commoners included farmers, craftspeople, merchants and low-level priests. They were expected to pay tributes to the nobles who owned the *calpulli* (neighbourhoods) that they lived in. Commoners usually ate basic foods and lived in simple homes. They were not allowed to wear cotton, wear cloaks longer than the knee, or wear sandals in the presence of people with higher rank. Commoners could sometimes become nobles through marriage or bravery in war.



Source 16.11 The long feather headdress worn by an Aztec noble.

Slaves

Slaves were owned by nobles or wealthy merchants and had few rights. Typically, people became slaves if they were criminals, could not pay their debts or had been captured in war. Slaves could marry with their master's permission and could also buy their freedom. Slave status was not passed down to children; the children of slaves were born free.

The role of men and women in Aztec society

An Aztec family was made up of a man, his chief wife, his other wives, his children, and other relatives such as his parents. Older people were highly respected in Aztec society. Marriages were arranged with help from priests, who would consult the stars to check for suitable matches. Girls married at around 16 years of age and men at around 20 years of age. Both boys and girls went to school, although they were destined for very different lives. Women were expected to care for children, cook and weave cloth. They helped to tend home gardens and any other plots the family was given to work. They had almost no public role. Men were expected to become warriors and seek glory by capturing enemy warriors.

The role of men and women in Aztec society

In the 16th century, Spanish explorers commissioned illustrated histories (called codices, which is the plural of codex) to provide information to people back in Spain. Each codex was a collection of animal skin pages, bound together to form a book. These codices (such as the Florentine Codex and the Codex Mendoza) have provided valuable information to historians.

Source 16.12

Midwife's address to newborn boys:

My precious son, my youngest one ... heed, harken: thy home is not here, for thou art an eagle, thou art an ocelotl [a jaguar] ... Thou belongest out there... Thou hast been sent into warfare. War is thy desert, thy task. Thou shalt give drink, nourishment, food to the sun, the lord of the earth. Perhaps thou wilt receive the gift, perhaps thou wilt merit death by the obsidian knife [be killed as a sacrifice to the gods].

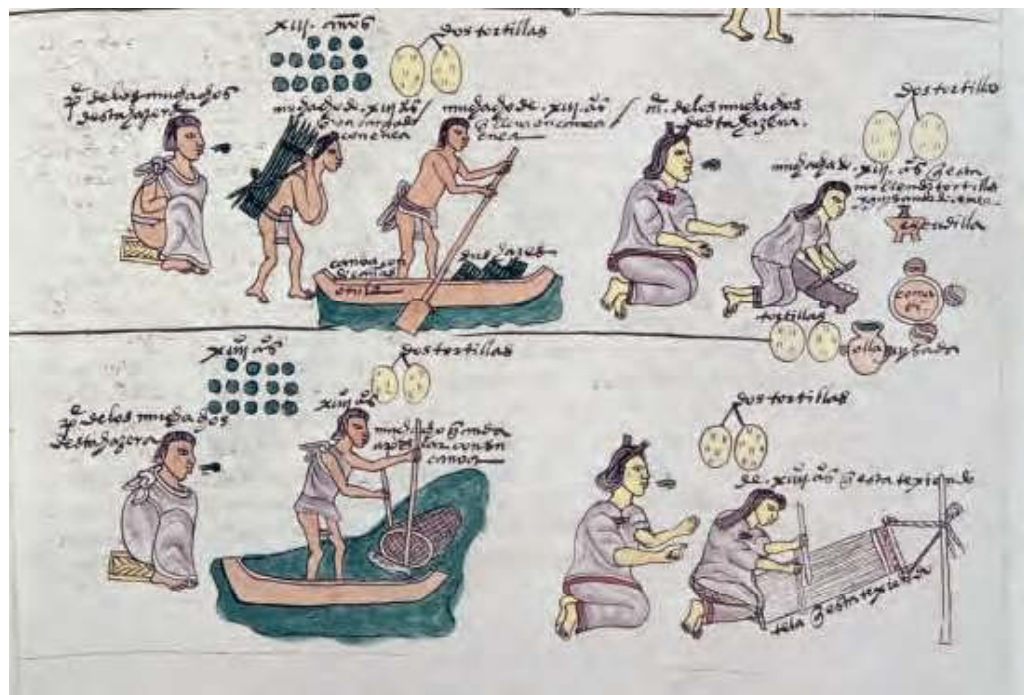
Midwife's address to newborn girls:

Thou wilt be in the heart of the home, thou wilt go nowhere, thou wilt nowhere become a wanderer, thou becomest the banked fire, the hearth stones ... And thou wilt become fatigued, thou wilt become tired; thou art to provide water, to grind maize, to drudge; thou art to sweat by the ashes, by the hearth [the floor of a fireplace].

Part of the addresses given by midwives to newborn boys and girls as described in the *Florentine Codex*

INTERPRET 16.1

- 1 What do the sources tell you about the role and expectations of men and women in Aztec society?



- Source 16.13 Illustrations from the 16th-century Codex Mendoza provide an account of Aztec life. These illustrations show the meal ration (two tortillas) and typical tasks for children. On the left hand side, a 13-year-old boy carries a load of rushes on his back and transports them in his canoe, and a 14-year-old boy goes fishing in his canoe. On the right hand side, a 13-year-old girl grinds maize (corn) for tortillas, and a 14-year-old girl is weaving.

Aztec discipline

For Aztec children, discipline was very strict, both at home and at school. Punishments included being speared with the sharp spines of a cactus, being left bound and naked in the dark in a cold puddle, or being bound and held over a fire to inhale smoke from burning chillies. Girls were awakened in the middle of the night to sweep the house, and had their fingers cut if they made a mistake in tasks such as weaving. These stories may have been exaggerated by the Spanish, but certainly discipline was physical. Children were being prepared for an unforgiving world dominated by demanding gods.

APPLY 16.3

- 1 Why do you think the Spanish may have exaggerated stories about the Aztec's discipline of children?



Source 16.14
Illustrations from the 16th-century Codex Mendoza shows punishments for disregarding parental advice: being forced to inhale dry chilli smoke and being forced to lie on damp ground with bound hands and feet.

Religious beliefs

Religion played a very important part in Aztec society. The Aztecs worshipped a variety of gods, some of which were adopted from conquered tribes.

- Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun and of war. The Aztecs believed that Huitzilopochtli battled with the forces of darkness every night so that the sun would come up the next morning. If ever he grew weak the sun would not rise and the universe would come to an end, so man had to provide nourishment for him in the form of blood sacrifice.
- Tlaloc, the god of rain, agricultural fertility and water. Tlaloc was welcomed as a god who gave life and sustenance, but he was also feared for his ability to send hail, thunder and lightning
- Xipe Totec, the god of springtime and new crops. Every spring the priests flayed (skinned alive) sacrificial victims and paraded in their skins. This symbolised the annual spring renewal of vegetation or the renewal of the earth's skin.
- Quetzalcoatl, the god of nature, earth and air. The name means 'the feathered serpent god'. The temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan was decorated with large sculptures of feathered serpents.
- Tezcatlipoca, the god of the night sky, giver and taker of all life on earth.
- Mictlantecuhtli, the god of the dead.



Source 16.15
A drawing of the god Quetzalcoatl 'the feathered serpent god' from the Codex Borbonicus

The Aztecs believed in life after death. The way that Aztecs died, rather than the way they lived, decided what would happen to them in the afterlife. If a person died a normal death, his or her soul would pass through the nine levels of the underworld before reaching Mictlan, the realm of the death god. However, warriors who died in battle and women who died in childbirth joined Huitzilopochtli. The dead were buried with goods of all descriptions that would be of use to them in the next life.

Human sacrifices

Most human sacrifices were performed in honour of the gods of the sun, rain and earth. The most common form of sacrifice among the Aztecs involved stretching the victim over a sacrificial stone. Four priests held the limbs of the victim while another priest cut open the chest and took out the heart. The heart was placed in *chacmool* (see Source 16.18) and the victim was then thrown down the steep temple stairs. The body was picked up and part of it, such as the thigh, was given as a reward to the victim's captor, to eat. Those who were sacrificed were considered to be fortunate, since they were guaranteed a place in the highest heaven reserved for warriors who died in battle.

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Sometimes human sacrifice was carried out on a massive scale. In 1487, when the temple of Huitzilopochtli was finished, as many as 20000 captives were sacrificed. A companion of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés counted 136000 skulls on the rack that stood beside the same temple in 1519.



Source 16.16 A stone sculpture of the god Huitzilopochtli, c. 1500



Source 16.17 A knife used by Aztec priests for human sacrifices



Source 16.18 An Aztec *chacmool* – a reclining human figure with a sacrificial tray on his lap, where the hearts of sacrificed victims were placed

LIFE IN TENOCHTITLAN – THE AZTEC CAPITAL

Tenochtitlan was founded around 1325 in the Valley of Mexico, now the site of modern-day Mexico City. As the power of the Aztec Empire grew, the entire urban area of Tenochtitlan was carefully rebuilt. By 1519, it housed 200 000 inhabitants on an island of about eight square kilometres. This was at a time when Spain's largest city, Seville, had a population of 70 000.

The rebuilt city was laid out on a grid pattern, with 'roads' running north-south and east-west (see Sources 16.2 and 16.19). In Aztec mythology each of the four main points of the compass had important religious significance, each with its own gods, rituals and colours. Because it mirrored the path of the sun, the east-west axis was the most important one.

Many of Tenochtitlan's 'roads' were in fact canals. Six major canals – and many smaller ones – criss-crossed the entire city. It was possible to travel virtually anywhere in the city by boat. The city was divided into four districts. Each district was composed of neighbourhoods called *calpulli*, inhabited by commoners such as craftspeople and farmers. The crops cultivated by farmers included maize (corn), tomatoes, potatoes, beans, chillies, peanuts, limes and avocados. They farmed on an ingenious system of artificial islands called *chinampas*, built on the shallow parts of the lake and joined together. Canoes took sewage from the city's public toilets to be used as fertiliser on the *chinampas*.

The centre of commerce was the huge market square, where 60 000 people a day came to buy and sell. There was a sacred precinct in the centre of the city, surrounded by walls to limit access to ordinary people. Within this precinct were temples, public buildings, palaces, and plazas. Over everything, the Great Temple or Templo Mayor loomed. The blood on its stairs from human sacrifices was visible from a great distance.



EXTEND 16.2

- 1 Conduct research about the Aztecs *chinampas*, and draw a labelled diagram to show the methods used to construct them.

STRANGE BUT TRUE

According to legend, the Aztecs were guided to the site on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco by their chief god Huitzilopochtli. It was pointed out to the Aztecs by an eagle sitting on a cactus (Tenochtitlan means 'the place of the prickly pear cactus').

Source 16.19 A copy of an illustration taken from a manuscript shows the *chinampa* system used by the Aztecs to construct the city of Tenochtitlan.



1 The *Templo Mayor* (Great Temple) dominated the city. Huge numbers of people – and sometimes animals – were sacrificed at an altar atop this pyramid to please the gods.



2 A popular game involved the use of elbows, knees and hips to flick a rubber ball through a stone hoop on the wall. Sometimes the defeated team lost their lives as well as the game!



3 Maize (corn), the staple food of the Aztecs, was ground into a coarse flour to make tortillas, flat bread to wrap around vegetables and meat.



Source 16.20 An artist's impression of daily life in Tenochtitlan.

4 A poor farming family's home on a *chinampa* (artificial island) was made of mud brick, and its roof was made of reeds.

5 The markets were the lively centre of the city. Merchants travelled great distances to the markets, by foot or canoe, to sell goods such as feathers, rubber, animal skins and foodstuffs.

6 Nobles dressed elaborately, with colourful clothing, jewellery and headdresses. For the poor, clothing for men was typically a length of plain cloth wrapped around the body and knotted on one shoulder. Women wrapped a piece of cloth around their hips and legs (much like a skirt), and added a loose top.

REVIEW 16.3

- 1 Draw a diagram that shows the social hierarchy in Aztec society.
- 2 Why did Aztec warriors capture, rather than kill, enemy warriors?
- 3 Outline the role of men and women in Aztec society.
- 4 What were some of the punishments given to Aztec children who did not perform their tasks properly or were disobedient?
- 5 What did the Aztecs believe would happen if sacrifices were not made to Huitzilopchtli?
- 6 Explain the meaning of these terms: *calpulli*, *chacmool*, *chinampa*.

16.1

CHECKPOINT

In these Rich Tasks, you will be learning and applying the following historical skills:

- » Comprehension: chronology, terms and concepts
- » Analysis and use of sources
- » Perspectives and interpretations
- » Research
- » Explanation and communication.

For more information about these skills, refer to 'The historian's toolkit'.

CHECKPOINT

WHAT WERE KEY FEATURES OF SOCIETIES IN THE AMERICAS BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF THE SPANISH?

» Locate and identify the major civilisations and cities of the pre-Columbian Americas

- 1 On a blank map of the Americas, use shading and labels to show the territories of the Maya, Aztec and Inca civilisations. Add the locations of key cities for each civilisation. (3 marks)

» Outline the organisation of society in pre-Columbian Americas

- 2 Identify the people at the top of the social hierarchy in the Maya, Aztec and Inca societies. (2 marks)
- 3 Outline the different groups in Aztec society, in order of highest to lowest status. What were their roles or occupations? (5 marks)
- 4 Explain the differing roles of men and women in Aztec society. Refer to sources in your response. (5 marks)

» Describe the beliefs of the Aztec society

- 5 Explain Aztec beliefs about the role of gods, including examples. (10 marks)
- 6 What did Aztecs believe about death? (5 marks)
- 7 Explain how their religious beliefs influenced Aztec rituals and warfare. (5 marks)

» Describe key aspects of Pre-Columbian life in the Aztec city Tenochtitlan

- 8 Describe the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, including aspects of daily life for its inhabitants. Use images and sketches to illustrate your response. (15 marks)

TOTAL MARKS [/50]

RICH TASKS

Investigating Aztec culture and daily life

- 1 In your group, allocate one or two aspects of Aztec life and culture to each student to research individually. Present the results of your research to the rest of the group and share your presentation and source material. Examples of topics to investigate include:
 - agriculture
 - calendars and related beliefs
 - daily life of rich and poor Aztecs, including clothing, housing, food and leisure
 - trade and commerce, including valued products
 - warfare, including weapons and tactics
 - gods and religious rituals.

Sacrifice at the Great Temple

- 1 Write an account of the sacrifice depicted in Source 16.21, from the perspective of one of the Aztecs nobles watching the ritual.



Source 16.21 An illustration of a ritual killing from the Codex Magliabechiano, showing victims being sacrificed on the steps of a temple

16.2

SECTION

WHAT IMPACT DID THE SPANISH CONQUEST HAVE ON THE AMERICAS?

The discovery of lands in the Caribbean by Christopher Columbus started a wave of exploration and conquest throughout the Americas. Many hundreds of thousands of Indigenous peoples died through disease and warfare, and their traditions and cultures were almost entirely lost.

OVERVIEW OF SPANISH CONQUEST AND SETTLEMENT IN THE AMERICAS



Towards the end of the 15th century, great voyages of exploration were being undertaken by the Portuguese and the Spanish, as they sought new sea routes between Europe and Asia. While the Portuguese sailed southward towards the tip of Africa, the Spanish looked to the west, across the Atlantic Ocean. Explorers such as Christopher Columbus (an Italian commissioned by the Spanish royalty) were eager to reach the fabled lands of Cathay (China) and Cipango (Japan).

On 3 August 1492, Christopher Columbus set sail from Palos in Spain with three ships – the *Niña*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria* – hoping to find a shortcut to the ‘spice islands’ of the East Indies. In October of that year, however, he landed in the Caribbean islands that are the present-day Bahamas, Cuba and Haiti. He thought that Cuba was Cipango (Japan) or perhaps part of the mainland of Asia. In further voyages between 1493 and 1504, he landed on other islands in the Caribbean, and searched the Orinoco River in South America for a fabled passage into the Pacific Ocean. Having failed to find the passage, Columbus returned home in poor health. He died in 1506, still believing that he had achieved his aim of discovering a western route to Asia.

Source 16.22

An artist's impression of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas

Spanish exploration and conquests – key events

After the journeys of Columbus, more than 200 ships brought other explorers and wealth-seekers from Spain to the Caribbean between 1506 and 1518. Spain sent *conquistadors* – conquerors such as Hernán Cortés and Francesco Pizarro, who took huge risks to explore new territories in the hope of enormous reward. Source 16.23 outlines key events in the Spanish exploration and conquests in the New World.

EXTEND 16.3

- 1 Conduct further research on the life of Columbus. Then write an obituary for him in which you assess his personality and achievements.

Source 16.23 Spanish exploration and conquests – key events

1492	Columbus establishes a settlement at Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic), which becomes a launching ground for subsequent Spanish expeditions.
1508–1510	Puerto Rico and Jamaica captured, settlement established in Panama
1511	Cuba invaded by Diego Velázquez
1513	Florida, on the northern coast of the Caribbean, is discovered but not colonised by Juan Ponce de Leon
1517–18	The Yucatán Peninsula, the lands of the Maya, are discovered by Hernández de Córdoba Mexico's east coast explored by Juan de Grijalva, who brought back gold trinkets and stories of rich and civilised tribes in the interior
1518–21	An expedition led by Hernán Cortés reaches the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. His soldiers are driven out of the city in 1521, but with the help of Aztec allies the Spanish capture and destroy the city. This marks the end of the Aztec Empire.
1522	Colonies established in Venezuela ('little Venice'), in South America
1528	The Inca coastline of South America is explored by Francisco Pizarro.
1530–33	Francisco Pizarro sails from Panama with a force of 180 men to conquer the Inca lands. Pizarro's forces capture the Inca ruler and sack the Inca's largest city of Cuzco. Resistance to the Spanish invaders finally ends in 1572.



Source 16.24 Aztec gold jewellery

EXTEND 16.4

- 1 Conduct research to complete a table similar to Source 16.23, to outline Spanish exploration and conquests in North America.

Spain's government and its people were motivated to explore and conquer new territories in the Americas for several reasons, outlined in Source 16.25

Source 16.25 Reasons for Spanish exploration and conquest



Expanding empires: The Spanish and other European powers sought to expand their power and wealth by adding new colonies to their empires. New colonies created wealth for empires through increased trade and taxation, and by using the labour of indigenous peoples.

New trade routes: Explorers searched for new trade routes to reach China and the Indies by sea.

Spreading Christianity: Supported by the Pope, the Spanish and other explorers wanted to convert pagan peoples (those who did not worship the Christian god) to Christianity.

The lure of adventure and riches: Younger sons of the nobility who would not inherit property and men from ordinary families became conquistadors in the hope of finding adventure and wealth, both for the Spanish Empire and for themselves.

The quest for gold: In the 15th century, there was an increased European demand for gold to make coins, jewellery and gold thread for tapestries.

APPLY 16.4

- 1 The Tainos society on Hispaniola, Spain's first settlement in the region, were wiped out as a result of their treatment by Spanish colonisers. In a group, conduct research to find out the impact of Spanish colonisation of the societies of present-day Venezuela, the Yucatan Peninsula and the Caribbean islands mentioned in Source 16.23.

REVIEW 16.4

- 1 Which island did Columbus mistake for Japan?
- 2 Explain why the Americas were not named for Columbus.
- 3 How long did it take the Spanish to conquer the Aztec and Inca civilisations following the discovery of the Americas?

APPLY 16.5

- 1 Use a graphic organiser, that includes illustrations, to explain the reasons for Spanish exploration and conquest.



Source 16.26 Hernán Cortés

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Cortés was also instructed to find the Amazons, a fabled race of warrior women said to live in the region. He was also sent to find out if it were true that there were people with gigantic ears or faces of dogs.

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Initially, Spanish horses were a terrifying sight to the Aztecs. It is said that the first Native American to see an unhorsed Spaniard fled, believing that the strange animal had come apart to form two separate beings.

THE EXPEDITION OF CORTÉS TO TENOCHTITLAN

Hernán Cortés was chosen by the governor of Cuba to lead an expedition to the mainland of South America. Like other *conquistadors*, Cortés had come to the West Indies to escape the poverty of his home town in Spain and to seek fame and fortune. In 1519, he set sail with 11 ships and 530 *conquistadors* – including 30 crossbowmen and 12 men armed with arquebuses (an early form of rifle) and cannon. They also took 16 horses and several large fighting dogs. Cortés intended to conquer and colonise on behalf of the king of Spain and in the name of Christianity. His intent was also to find the strait that separated the ‘island’ of Yucatán from the ‘mainland’ in the hope of finding a route to Asia, as it was still believed that China and India were close by, towards the west.

The expedition landed at present-day San Juan de Ulua on the eastern coast of Mexico. Here, the *conquistadors* heard tales of the powerful Aztec king called Montezuma, who ruled from his capital at Tenochtitlan, high in the mountains and several days’ march from the coast. When news reached Montezuma that strangers had landed on the coast, he was unsure how to deal with them, not knowing whether the newcomers were men or gods. He sent splendid gifts, including gold trinkets in the shapes of various animals, a snake’s head made of gold with eyes inlaid with precious stones, and two huge discs as big as cartwheels, one of gold and one of silver and covered with figures and designs. Along with these gifts he sent a message that it would be impossible for the Spaniards to see him and he tried to dissuade them from attempting to come to the capital.

In Aztec culture, giving lavish gifts was a sign of power. Montezuma’s first splendid gifts were intended to show his dominance of Cortés. However, Cortés would have interpreted the gifts as signs of weakness or an attempt to bribe the Spanish. In return, he sent small gifts such as glass ornaments, bracelets and an embroidered cap. These simple gifts were designed to insult Montezuma.

APPLY 16.6

- 1 Draw cartoons of Montezuma and Cortés, with speech bubbles that show their reactions to the gifts they received from each other. Remember to think from the perspective of both the giver and the recipient of the gifts.

The *conquistadors*’ journey to Tenochtitlan

The distance to Tenochtitlan from San Juan de Ulua was around 400 kilometres. Cortés first moved up the coast to establish a settlement and entered the territory of the Totonac people, who were subjects of the Aztecs. The Totonacs promised to support Cortés in an overthrow of their Aztec masters (the support of tribes who resented the domination of the Aztecs was an important aspect of Spanish conquest). Cortés set out for Tenochtitlan in August 1519 with a force of around 300 *conquistadors* and 800 Totonacs.

The climate was hot and humid, and the first part of their journey was through a flat, heavily forested region, dotted with maize plantations. The land then rose sharply to 1800 metres, where the climate was milder. The next stage was over a cold, bleak plain dominated by a large salt lake. Between the plain and Tenochtitlan, was a chain of high mountains that included the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, both over 5000 metres high. A pass lay between them at around 4000 metres, after which the land fell away to a valley, and the great lake and the city of Tenochtitlan. Cortés passed through this valley in the summer, when rain fell every afternoon. The paths were deep in mud and rest stops were impracticable.