

# 10.5

## Who were the Aztecs?

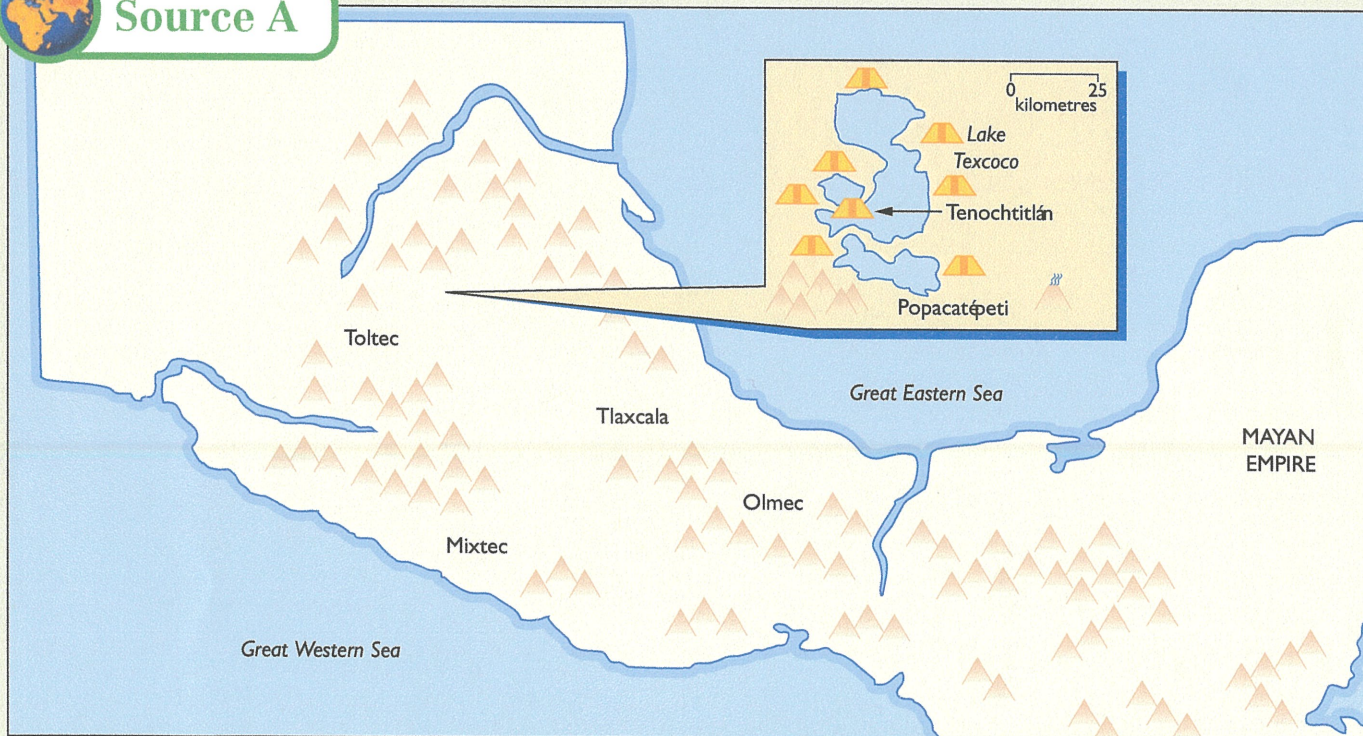
The Aztecs were a group of Native Americans who ruled a large empire in Central America. This empire was made up of many different tribes, who were ruled by the Aztecs because the Aztecs had defeated them in battle. The Aztecs did not control the people of their empire by making them obey their government. Instead, they ruled through the collection of tribute, or taxes. By the time the Spanish made contact with the Aztecs in the early 1500s, 371 cities paid tribute to the Aztecs. Any city that failed to pay the tribute every six months was attacked.

### The capital: Tenochtitlán

The capital of the Aztec Empire was Tenochtitlán, which was an island. The Aztecs had first come there as a small, warlike tribe in 1325. As they defeated the surrounding tribes, the city grew from two small islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco to the largest city in the world by the time the Europeans discovered it. At least 90 000 people lived in Tenochtitlán in 1500. London had around 40 000 people at that time. Wide 'roads', each protected by a fort, were built across the lake to reach the city. There was a large market in the city, since Tenochtitlán was the main trading centre of the empire. The city was extremely well organised, with a sewerage system, aqueducts for running water, a rubbish disposal system (waste was taken from the city to be made into fertiliser) and even cleaners, who were employed to keep the streets clean.



### Source A



The Aztec Empire.





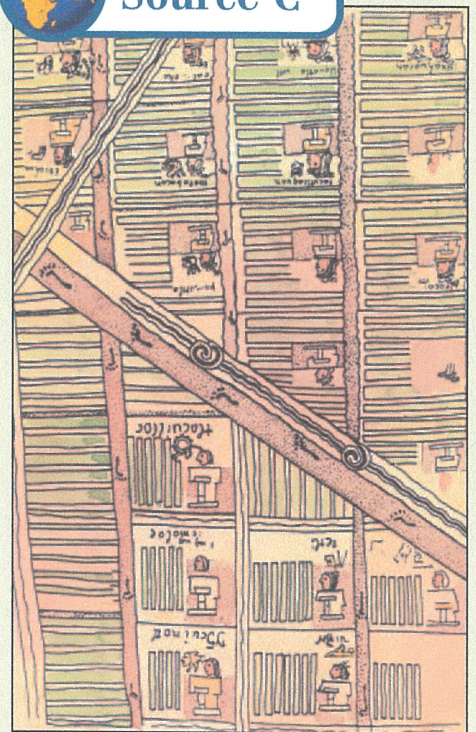
## Source B



The Aztec capital Tenochtitlán.



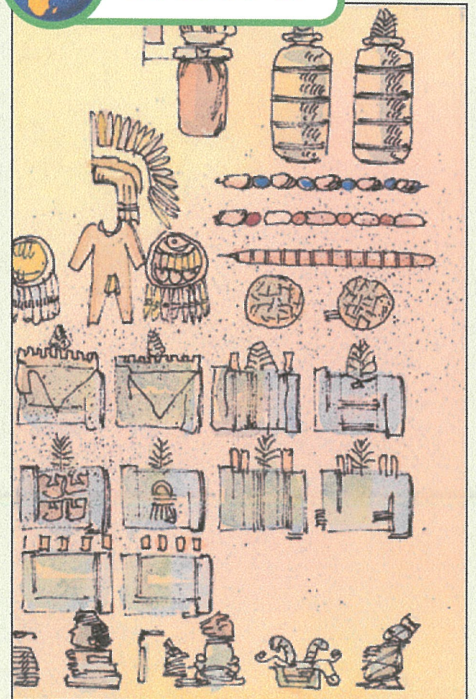
## Source C



A map of a farming district just outside Tenochtitlán.



## Source D



A tribute list.

When the Conquistadors (Spanish) arrived in the city they were amazed by what they saw. In 1519, the city of Tenochtitlán was approximately six times bigger than the largest city in Spain. The city had a postal system (couriers would carry items across the city using their system of roads). The buildings were highly decorated with paintings, wall hangings, gold finishes and timber ceilings. They even had hot water systems, fragrance sprayers to freshen the rooms and hot plates for food.

The people who lived in Tenochtitlán wore beautiful gold, silver and jade jewellery. Men wore fine woollen cloaks and leather, and the women skirts and blouses. They had a varied diet that included turkey, seafood, fish, chilli, tortillas, waffles and preserved fruits. They drank chocolate—chocolate—which they drank cold and smoked tobacco in pipes or rolled into cigars.

### Understanding the text

- 1 How many cities were part of the Aztec Empire in the early 1500s?
- 2 What was the name of the capital of the Aztec Empire?
- 3 When did the Aztecs first come to their capital city?
- 4 Describe the way in which the Aztecs ruled the tribes in their empire.





### Source E



The education of young Aztecs.

## Aztec government

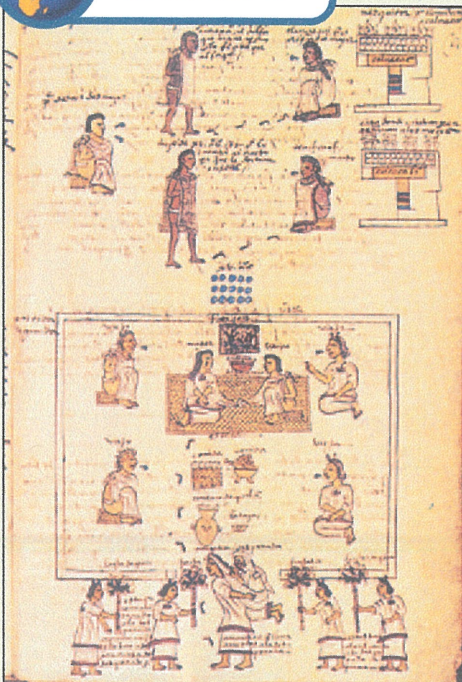
The Aztecs lived in a highly organised society. They were governed by a male ruler (like a king) who was chosen from a royal family. They organised their society strictly, with the ruler and royal family at the top, followed by the nobles, officials, common people and, finally, the slaves. The Aztecs also had a strong legal system with local and senior courts.

## Aztec society

The Aztecs had two social classes and clearly defined roles for men and women. The nobility were the pilli and the commoners were the macehualles. A commoner could rise to become a noble by bravery in war. All boys had to go to school at the age of 15. These schools were called 'the house of youth' or telpuchcalli. They learned the history and religion of the Aztecs, the art of war, a trade, religion and citizenship.



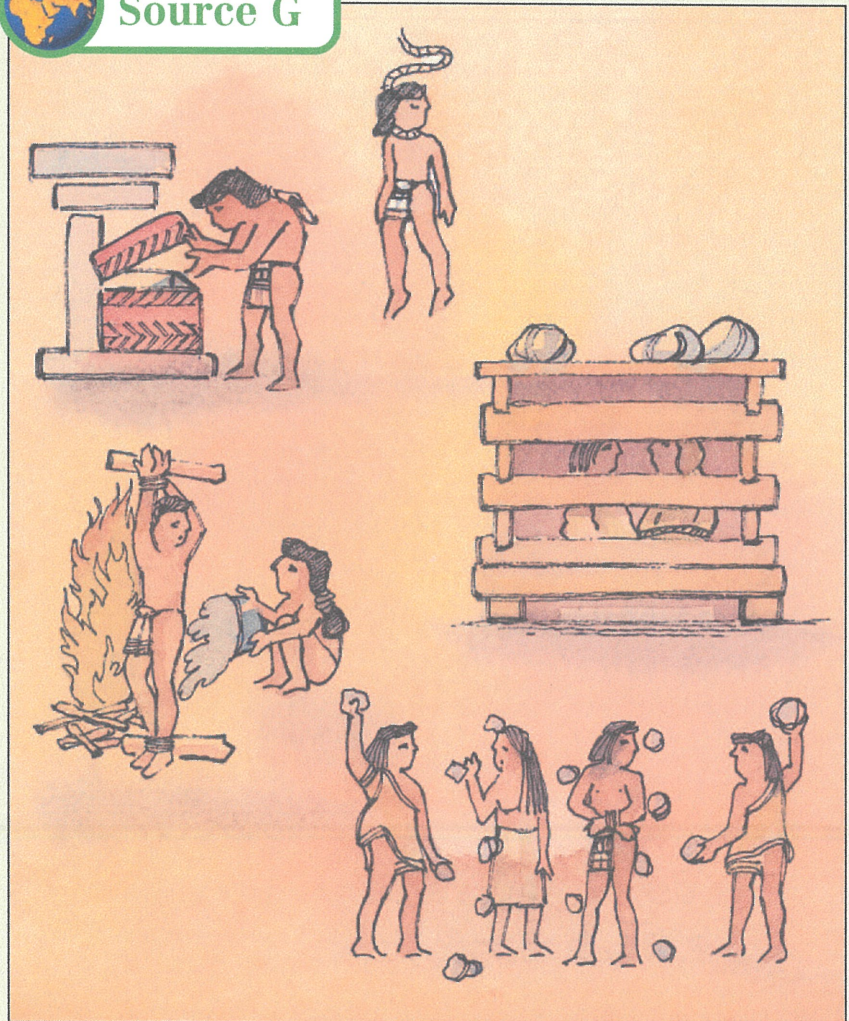
### Source F



An Aztec marriage ceremony.



### Source G



Rules for punishing crimes used in Tetzcoaco and copied in Tenochtitlán.



Aztec women were expected to obey men and behave with chastity and high moral standards. It is thought that women did not participate in Aztec government. There were some temples and gods that had priestesses, who had their own schools, but little is known about them.

Aztec law was simple and harsh. Many crimes were punished by death and others were punished by mutilation. For example, slander, or ruining a person's good name, was punished by having one's lips cut out. The Aztecs had a strong sense of community and it seems that these harsh laws were supported by the people. There seems to have been little crime in Tenochtitlán and the nobility were usually given harsher punishments than the commoners.

## Aztec beliefs

More than 300 different gods and goddesses were worshipped by the Aztecs. Each one was responsible for a different part of life, such as the weather or war or learning. Tenochtitlán had great temples where priests and priestesses carried out ceremonies. In order to keep the gods happy, the Aztecs made sacrifices to the gods. Human sacrifices were believed to be the greatest, because the gods gave people the gift of life, the greatest gift they could give. A human life, therefore, was seen as the best gift to give in return.

## Aztec writing

The Aztecs used calendars and developed writing. They used **glyphs** in their writing, which means that they used pictures instead of letters. They made books (called **codex**) out of long strips of paper or animal skins, which were folded in a zigzag, so that the book would unfold two pages at a time. It is thought that the Aztec government used up to 480 000 sheets of paper per year.

## Armies and warfare

The Aztec army was made up of units from local towns. Each town was required to provide 400 men as soldiers. Every Aztec male youth had military training as part of his schooling. Soldiers did not wear a uniform, but high-ranking soldiers such as the Jaguar or Eagle Knights wore special clothes. The object of Aztec warfare was not to kill the enemy but to take as many prisoners as possible. Warriors were rewarded according to the number of prisoners they had taken. Prisoners were taken to the city to be sacrificed to the gods.

### Understanding the text

- 5 Write a summary of Aztec religious beliefs.
- 6 What foods did the Aztecs eat?
- 7 Define the following terms:
  - pilli
  - macehualles
  - telpuchcalli.
- 8 Explain the main features of Aztec education.
- 9 Describe the role played by women in Aztec society.
- 10 Create a diagram, such as an illustrated mind map or cartoon, showing the main features of Aztec society. **SKILLS BANK**

**UTT Worksheet 60**

### Did U know?

The Aztecs made human sacrifices to the gods, sometimes by cutting out the heart of a person while he or she was still alive. They believed that the most precious gifts the gods made to them was life, so a human life was the best gift that they could offer to the gods in return.

## Working historically

- 1 **WWS** Look at Source A. Which modern countries does the old Aztec Empire cover?
- 2 **Research** Use your library or the Internet to find out what the city of London was like in the 1500s, and compare it with Tenochtitlán. Look for the following information:
  - how many people lived there
  - how people got water and dealt with sewage and rubbish
  - what types of buildings were there.
- 3 **WWS** Look carefully at Source C. What was the importance of farming for the Aztec Empire?
- 4 **WWS** What items in Source D were given to the Aztecs as tribute? Why do you think the Aztecs demanded tribute?
- 5 **WWS** List what you think are the punishments shown in Source G. What do they show you about Aztec laws?
- 6 **WWS** Use Source E to describe the differences between the education of boys and girls in Aztec society.
- 7 **WWS** Using Source F, try to describe Aztec marriage customs.

**Extension Worksheet 69**



## 10.6

# Gods or invaders? Montezuma and the Conquistadors

At the beginning of 1519, which was the Aztec Year One Reed, Montezuma, the Aztec ruler, called together his chief priests and advisers to make their predictions for the year ahead. The omens (or signs) were not good. The chief priests told Montezuma that One Reed would be a very bad year for Montezuma. The omens included a fire in the Great Temple; fire and bright lights seen in the daytime sky; a birth of a two-headed child; the appearance of a strange bird; the flooding of Tenochtitlán; and strange voices being heard at night through the city.

Soon after these predictions, a messenger came from the coast with news of 'floating towers' (Spanish ships) and men with white skins who wore armour and had frightening weapons. This worried Montezuma, who remembered the Aztec legend of Quetzacoatl. According to this legend, a white-skinned god left Aztec land by raft and promised that he would return from the east in the year One Reed. So Montezuma was not sure if he was dealing with enemies who might attack or gods who would bring peace and plenty. Montezuma sent the strangers gifts, but he would not let them into Tenochtitlán.



### Source A



An illustration of the meeting of Cortés and Montezuma.



## Who were these strangers?

The men who had sailed to the Aztec lands were the **Conquistadors**. This was a group of Spanish adventurers. Their leader was Hernan Cortés, one of the more successful Spanish settlers in the New World. Born in 1485, Cortés was a soldier who, like many others, came to the New World to seek his fortune. After being an officer in the successful Spanish invasion of Cuba, Cortés was given a large estate in 1511 but he was determined to find more wealth. He knew that most of the wealth went to the men who led expeditions and had heard the rumours of the riches that were said to be on the mainland. As soon as he heard that the Governor of Hispaniola wanted to send an expedition to explore the unknown mainland, he sold his estate and made sure that he got the job.

In 1519, Cortés was in charge of 11 ships and over 600 men and sailed to the mainland. The Native Americans who lived there were ready to fight the Conquistadors when they landed. Although there were many more Native American warriors than Conquistadors, the Spanish used guns and rode horses into battle—two things that were unknown to the Native Americans—and this meant that the Spanish were able to defeat them.

After the battle the Spanish were given peace offerings of food, gold and slaves by the Native Americans, including the first chocolate ever seen or eaten by a European. Cortés claimed the country for the King of Spain and soon learned

### Understanding the text

- 1 What did the Aztecs call the year 1519?
- 2 Who was the leader of the Aztecs?
- 3 List the signs or omens that made the Aztecs think that they would have a bad year in the Year One Reed.
- 4 What were 'floating towers'?

UTT Worksheet 61

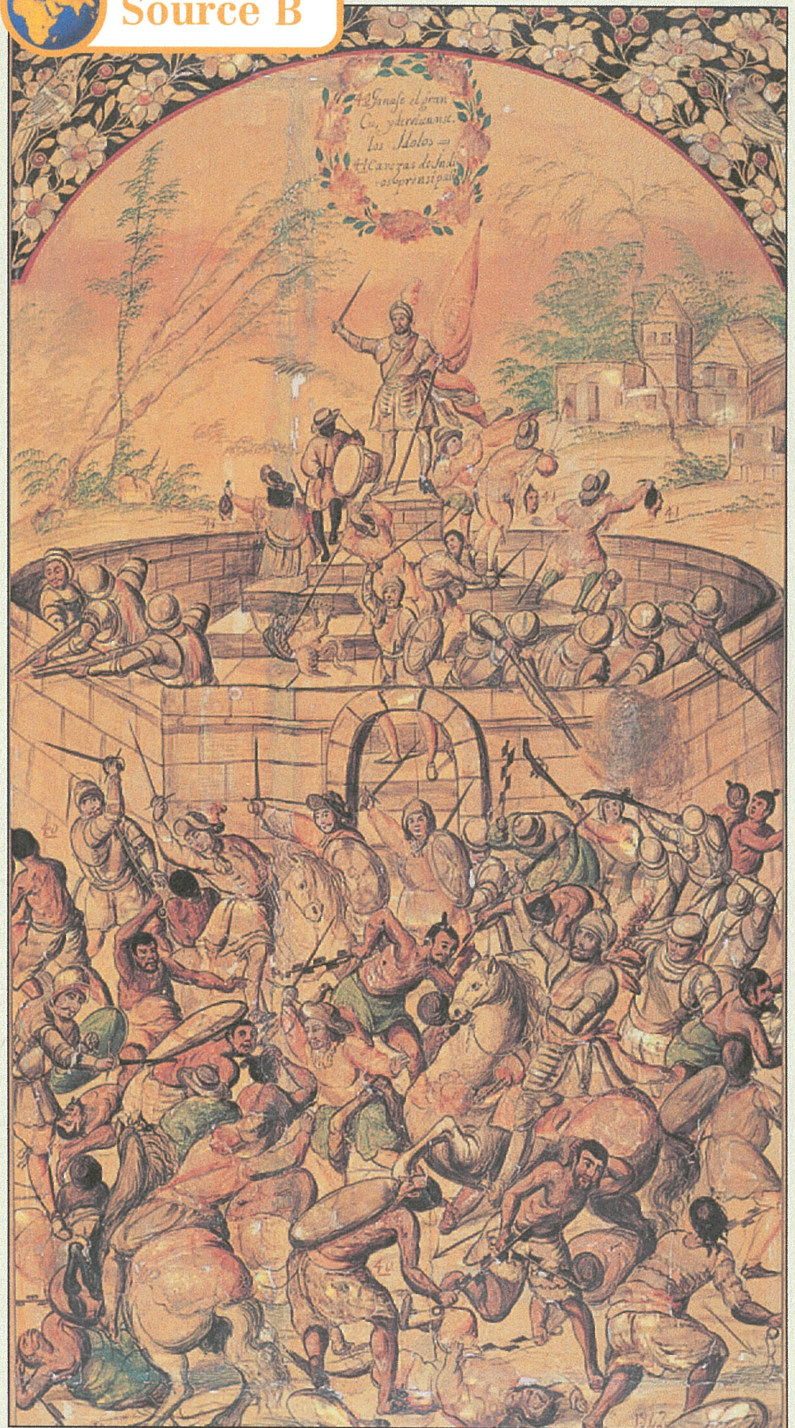
about the powerful warriors called the Aztecs who controlled the whole area.

He decided to move inland towards their capital. As they travelled towards Tenochtitlán, the Conquistadors were able to convince the tribes who were under Aztec control to join them to defeat the Aztecs.

The Aztecs allowed them into Tenochtitlán on 8 November 1519. Montezuma let himself to be taken hostage. There was no conflict



### Source B



A painting of the destruction of Tenochtitlán.





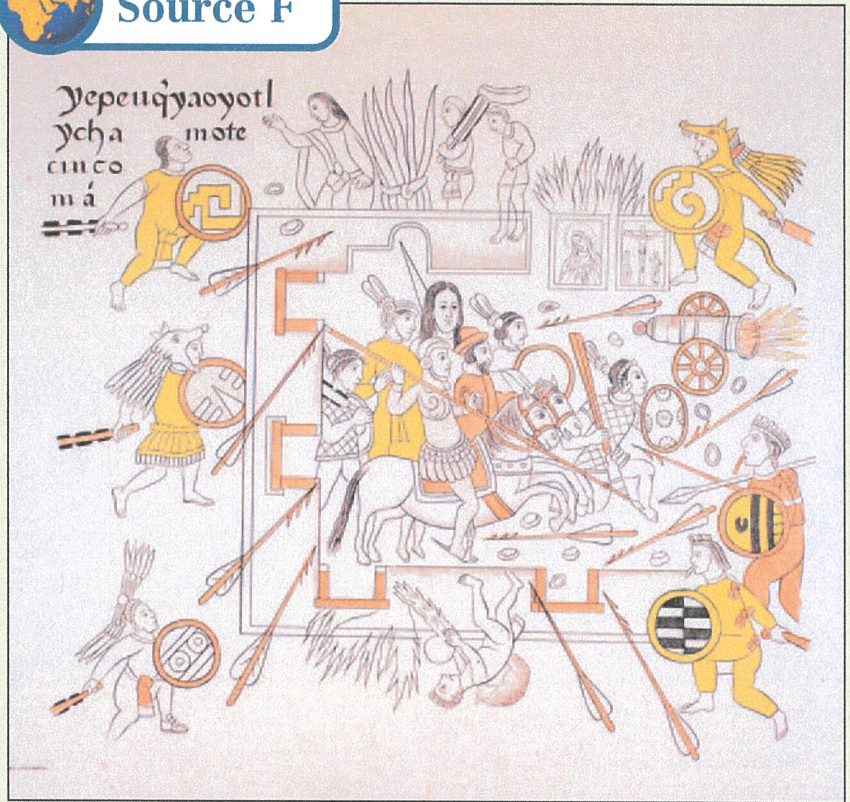
## Source D

We were taken onto the strangers' ship and presented the [gifts] to the leader ... The leader then asked if these were the all the gifts we had brought. When this had been done a great thing was fired off. A thing like a ball of stone came out of its entrails [insides]. It came out shooting sparks and raining fire. The smoke that came out of it had an evil smell like rotten mud ... The strangers dress in iron ... Their deer carry them on their backs ... These deer, our Lord, are tall as the roof of a house.

The report of Montezuma's messengers after meeting the Conquistadors for the first time. From Chris Jordan, *Old World, New World, 1480-1600*, John Murray, 1987.



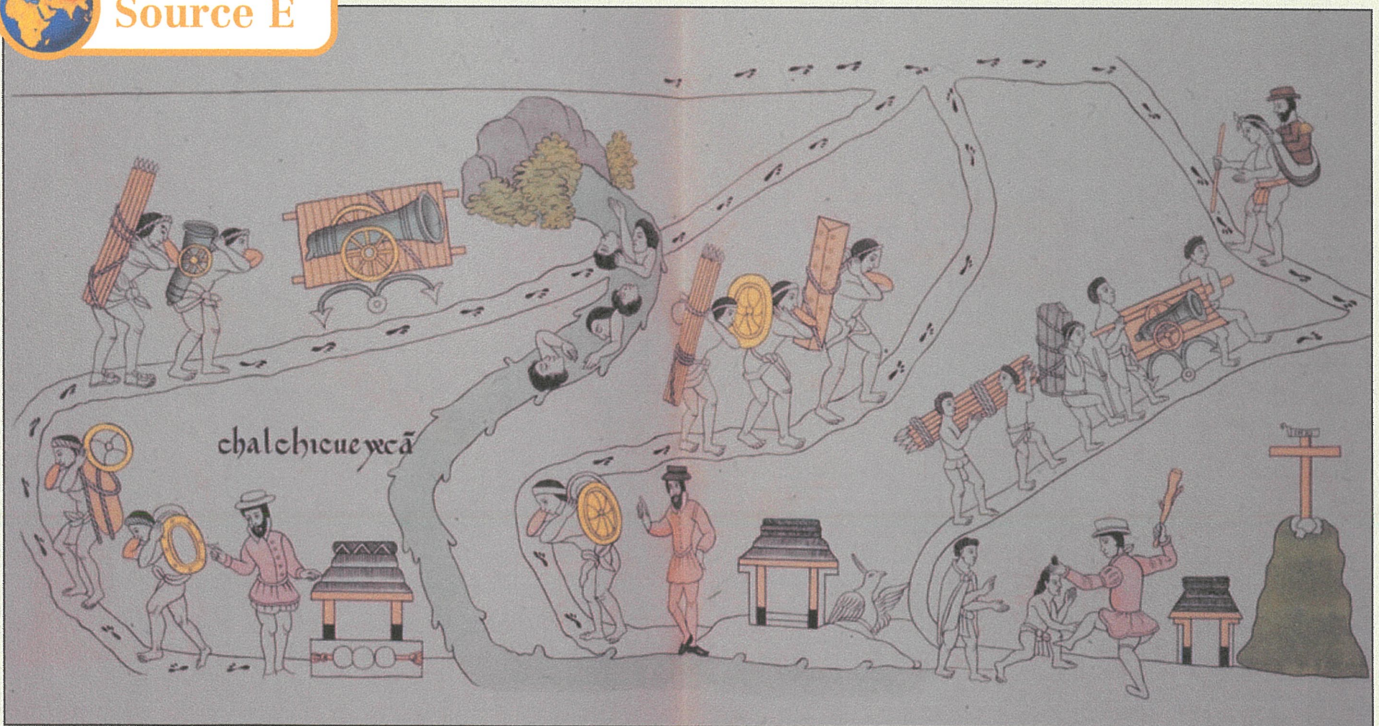
## Source F



An Aztec illustration showing the Spanish trapped in the palace.



## Source E



Aztecs working under the Spanish.



## Working historically

between the Aztecs and the Spanish until Cortés left the city. When the Aztecs gathered for a peaceful religious festival, Cortés's deputy ordered his army to attack the crowd. The Aztecs rose up in revenge for the massacre that followed, trapping the Spanish in the palace. When Cortés returned, his troops tried to leave the city secretly by night. They were seen, however, and the Aztecs attacked the Spanish. Only a quarter of Cortés's men survived.

The Spanish fled and Cortés spent the next few months rebuilding his forces to defeat that Aztecs. When he returned to Tenochtitlán in May 1521 he had a force of nearly 1000 Spanish soldiers and 25 000 Native Americans.

The Spanish set up a blockade of Tenochtitlán, using cannons to destroy the city's water supply and to block any food from entering the city. This siege lasted for 80 days. It has been estimated that 240 000 people died in the city before the Spanish eventually entered the city to take control after they had almost destroyed it. This defeat meant the end of Aztec civilisation.

The Aztecs were defeated for a number of reasons. Most of the leaders of the Aztecs had been killed in the attack on the religious festival and when the Aztecs drove the Spanish from the city. Although they fought the Spanish fiercely the Aztecs were not organised. Diseases unknowingly brought by the Spanish were also taking their toll, killing thousands. The fact that the other tribes were willing to fight with the Spanish against the Aztecs was another important factor. Finally, the Aztecs simply could not stand up against Spanish guns and cannons.

## The new Spain

In 1522, Cortés was made governor of New Spain (the Spanish name for the area) and the Spanish began to build a new city, Mexico City. The Spanish had destroyed the city that had amazed them

Life changed for ever for the Aztecs and their neighbours. The Spanish were the new masters, and they began to change every part of society in order to make it like their own. They took advantage of the great riches, particularly gold, they had seen.

The Aztecs, known as Indians to the Spanish, were no longer allowed to own land; their religion was outlawed and they all had to become Catholics; they no longer ruled themselves—they were now ruled by the Spanish king with a viceroy, who represented him, in New Spain; many were forced to work in mines or on new building projects. European diseases such as the common cold, influenza (flu) and smallpox killed millions of Aztecs.

### Understanding the text

- 5 Recount the legend of Quetzacoatl.
- 6 Explain the meaning of this legend for the Aztecs and the problem that this created for Montezuma.
- 7 Using the information in the text write a short biography of Hernan Cortés.
- 8 Create a time line of events from the landing of the Conquistadors on the mainland to the final defeat of the Aztecs.
- 9 Explain the reasons why the Conquistadors were able to destroy the Aztec Empire.
- 10 Describe the impact of Spanish colonisation on the Aztecs.

UTT Worksheet 61

- 1 **WWS** Look at Source A. Imagine that you are Montezuma. You have just heard news of the strange visitors who have arrived. You have been told about the bad omens for the Year One Reed and you remember the legend of Quetzacoatl. Write a diary entry for that day, in which you describe how you must decide what to do and the problems that you face. (Hint: what would be the consequences of either letting the strangers come to the city or of telling them to go away?)
- 2 **WWS** Look carefully at Sources B and D. Compare the weapons and equipment of the Aztecs with those of the Spanish soldiers shown in Source D. What differences can you see?
- 3 **WWS** What evidence from all the sources can you find to show why the Aztecs were defeated?
- 4 You are the leader of a village that is part of the Aztec Empire. Write a speech that you will give to your village that explains why you will make friends with the Spanish against the Aztecs.
- 5 **Research** Find out about other places that the Spanish colonised during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
  - a Why did they want colonies?
  - b How did they behave in each place?
  - c What were the main influences that the Spanish have left behind in these countries today?
- 6 **WWS** Read Source C carefully. Rewrite the report from Cortés's point of view.
- 7 **WWS** Who do you think drew Source E? Give reasons for your answer.

Extension Worksheet 70