

## The Aztecs

### **Background**

- Originally named Mexica
- Located in what is now central Mexico
- The empire lasted during the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE
- Tenochtitlan was the capital city and is located in what is now present-day Mexico City
- Claimed to have live in the area originally → actually, nomads from the North
- Took advantage of the Toltec collapse – c. 1150
- *Wrote history to suit their purposes*

### **Government**

- The Aztecs were ruled by a single emperor called the *Huey Tlatoani* which roughly translates to “The Great Speaker” and was located in the capital city of Tenochtitlan
- There was also a ruling council comprised of the wisest and most powerful leaders from the *Calpulli*
- *Calpulli* is a group of extended families that controlled the use of local lands and performed other territorial and social functions
- Each urban settlement had a *calpulli* and four main leaders would be selected to a governing board - the most powerful being named *Tlatoani*
- The *Tlatoani* from all over the empire would then comprise the main ruling council in the capital city

### **EXPANSION**

- The Aztecs grew rapidly by conquering nearby cities and would force them to pay tributes → subject peoples paid tribute, surrendered land, and did military service
- These tributes would eventually result in the increased welfare of the common people

### **Social Structure → stratified society**

- The Aztec society was divided into three social classes:
  - the *macehualli* (people) or peasantry
  - the *pochteca* or merchants and traders
  - the *pilli* or nobility
- Slaves or *tlacotin* consisted as a large part of the Aztec society
- Though people were born into a certain class it was possible to move up the ranks within a life time

### **Religion**

- Main deity in the Aztec religion was *Huitzilopochtli* and was known as both the sun god and war god
- Human sacrifice was practiced heavily in the Aztec religion -- means of political terrorism

- **The Aztecs believed that by performing these sacrifices that it gave power to the gods which in turn would ensure the survival of the Aztec universe → the gods need nourishment = human blood and hearts**
- **War captives were used in the sacrifices; in times of peace the Aztec would have to resort to ritualistic warfare or flower war**
  - **the objective was not to kill enemies or conquer territory, but rather to capture as many prisoners as possible, who would then be sacrificed in religious ceremonies and maybe eaten**
- **In the year 1487 the Aztecs reported killing 84,400 war prisoners in four days at the great pyramid of Tenochtitlan!!!**
- **After a town was conquered the inhabitants were no longer eligible for sacrifice and became Aztec citizens**

### ***Economy***

- **The Aztecs increased agricultural production in the capital area by undertaking land reclamation projects and constructing irrigated fields and *chinampas*.**
- **These *chinampas*, or “floating gardens”, increased the land area available for cultivation and served as settlement extensions for lakeside cities.**
  - ***Chinampas* were constructed from alternate layers of mud and vegetation which were secured by posts and the roots of willow trees.**
  - **Plots were systematically planned and arranged in the lake, and each was typically bordered on one side by a canal and on the other by a footpath adjacent to another field.**
  - **Fertility was enhanced by intensive cultivation techniques: fresh mud was always added before planting to maintain fertility of the earth, and water for irrigation was supplied by dipping into adjacent canals, a process which also dredged the canals and kept them clear for canoe transport.**
- **Nonetheless, grain and other food tribute met nearly one quarter of the capital’s food requirements.**

### **Art**

- **The favored form of art in the Aztec empire was sculpture**
- **Most Sculptures were made from limestone, which is still abundant in Mexico today**
- **Aztec sculpture was like most other Mesoamerican cultures and was mostly directly related to religion**
- **The Aztecs also made other religious and non-religious artifacts such as jade masks**
- **Clothing was also a popular art form and women from around the empire would use bead, flower, and metal decorations**
- **These artifacts were sold in markets by visiting merchants**

### **The Fall:**

- **appearance of the Spanish + alliance of Spanish + Aztecs’ traditional enemies + disease and European military technology**