

Brief History of the Aztec Empire



The last of the indigenous civilizations to dominate Mesoamerica, the Aztecs attribute their origins to an elaborate creation myth. The Aztecs, also known as the Mexica, were supposedly one of seven wandering tribes called the Chichimecs, who inhabited the Sonora Desert region in the far northwest of Mexico. When they witnessed a tree being ripped apart by a bolt of lightning, they took it as the gods' mandate for them to fulfill a destiny of conquest, so they left their homeland and the other six tribes. Wandering throughout Mexico for many years and occasionally settling down in various locations, they only reached Lake Texcoco after the

collapse of the Toltec Empire in the 13th century. In the year 1325, after being forced to take refuge from the attacks of Toltec warlords on an island in the lake, the Aztec witnessed an eagle devouring a snake while standing on a cactus growing from solid rock on the island. This was their sign that this island—which would become the great city of Tenochtitlan—would be their final destination from which they would build a great empire.

The Aztec began to build their empire by offering their services as mercenaries to the warring factions of Toltecs surrounding Lake Texcoco, building their reputation as ferocious and disciplined warriors. The Aztec also began the construction of the elaborate island city of Tenochtitlan, and organized themselves under emperors known as *huey tlatoque* or “great speakers.” From 1372 to 1427, the Aztec emperors served as vassals under the Toltec lord Tezozomoc, ruler of the city of Azcapotzalco on the western shore of Lake Texcoco, under whose protection they began to gradually expand their rule to the south and east of the lake. When Tezozomoc died in 1427, he was succeeded by his son Maxtla, who had the Aztec emperor Chimalpopoca assassinated. The Aztecs appointed a new ruler in the form of Chimalpopoca’s uncle Itzcoatl, who arranged alliances with the cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan, also on the shores of the lake, and led an army to besiege Azcapotzalco and force Maxtla into exile. The victorious cities then

declared the Empire of the Triple Alliance, and pooled their resources to dominate lands far beyond the shores of Lake Texcoco.

Lake Texcoco and Surrounding Cities

In 1440, the emperor Itzcoatl was succeeded by Moctezuma I, who began the Triple Alliance's expansion into a great empire. Moctezuma began by demanding that all city-states in the Valley of Mexico contribute materials to the construction of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, dedicated to the rain god Tlaloc and the Aztecs' patron god Huitzilopochtli. When the city-state of Chalco refused, Aztec armies conquered its kingdom in 1453. They soon followed with the Huastec and Totonac cities of the Gulf Coast, conquering the historical lands of the Olmecs and gaining control of rich resources and trade routes of gold, cotton, cacao, and exotic feathers and shells. In 1458, the Aztecs moved south to subdue the Mixtec kingdom of Coixthlahuaca in the Oaxaca region, organizing a force of up to 200,000 soldiers to storm the city before its allies could come to its aid. Moctezuma I's son Axayacatl, succeeding to the throne in 1468, continued his conquests, cementing Aztec control over the Gulf Coast and Oaxaca and surrounding the kingdom of Tlaxcala, which was now the only major opposing state in central Mexico. Axayacatal overstretched the empire, however, by invading the Tarascan Empire to the west. The defeat he suffered against the Tarascans

discredited the emperor and led revolts to break out amongst the empire's subject city-states, but these were suppressed by the later emperor Ahuitzotl. Ahuitzotl led Aztec armies on campaigns as far as the border of modern Guatemala, and organized a tenuous peace with the Zapotec Empire to the south through a diplomatic marriage.

Current State of the Empire

Upon the accession of the current emperor Moctezuma II in 1503, the empire had reached unprecedented heights of power, ruling over as many as 25 million people. However, the empire is also embroiled in a state of turmoil. The demand for tribute and sacrifices from the lesser cities of the Empire has led to resentment and unrest. Moctezuma was already a proven military commander and had led campaigns in Tehuantepec and Xoconochco to the south to expand the empire. Upon his coronation he led another operation against the city called Nopolon. The campaign provided sacrifices and loot to keep the empire healthy and appease the empire's subjects for a while. Moctezuma would also increase the power the emperor held by taking some of the powers of the Tlacaellel, a sort of chief of internal affairs. He placed a much greater emphasis on titles, giving the highest offices only to nobles of certain lines and creating a larger separation between the upper and lower classes of the Empire. Many of the client states

rebelled around 1515, and after suffering a disastrous defeat to the Tlaxcala and Huexotzingo, Moctezuma cracked down harshly on all rebelling cities, especially the Tlaxcala. A full-on revolt has been squashed but the seeds of rebellion still ferment among the state.

The Spanish Empire

Spain recently finished the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, and by the sixteenth century was experiencing an unparalleled growth in power. The Ottoman Empire was still a looming power on the horizon and the Barbary pirates of the North Africa may have hampered trade but Spain nevertheless gaining wealth and land. In Europe, Spain also held territory in Italy and the Navarre region of Northern France, along with the freshly conquered Canary Islands off the west coast of Africa. The negotiation of a strong alliance with Portugal has led to prosperous trade with much of the world. This alliance was made possible by the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, brokered by the Pope, which designated which parts of the world would be open to Spanish conquest and which to the Portuguese. The Treaty specifically drew a line down the North Atlantic and through the center of South America, giving Portugal access to everything to the east and Spain free reign to the west. Accordingly, Portuguese explorers and

conquerors have targeted Brazil, the coasts of Africa, India, and the East Indies (modern Indonesia), while Spain has advanced into the New World.

Spanish and Portuguese colonization was initially spurred by the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, which limited European access to the now Islamic controlled Silk Road, and encouraged European kingdoms to seek out new trade routes by sea. The sponsoring of Christopher Columbus by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain in 1492 allowed the Spanish to make some of the first claims in the New World and the resources therein. The first European colony in the New World on Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic) called Santo Domingo was established in 1496. Jamaica was colonized in 1509, though the site would eventually prove unprosperous and the colony would be moved. The first settlement on the mainland was Darién in Panama, settled by Vasco Núñez de Balboa in 1512. The colonies founded in the Americas produced silver and other resources that were sent back to fund more Spanish expansion. Now private individuals sponsored by the crown have begun to take expeditions to the new world on quests for God, gold, and glory. Spain will continue to grow and the New World is a new bounty to be exploited.

Letter from Montezuma II

I recount to you now, my trusted council, what we know of the pale strangers that arrived on our shores two years prior. Hernan Cortes, in an act of defiance against the Spanish crown, has set sail beginning his conquest with the legal status of a mutineer. On 11 ships he brings 630 men. Our spires have spotted crossbowmen, arquebusiers, doctors, carpenters, slaves, and a few women. First word of Cortes came from sources on the island of Cozumel, where he gained the trust of the indigenous people. These connections have yielded a translator. Upon arriving on our shores from Cozumel, Cortes looks to establish a permanent settlement. We have received reports that in order to prevent his men from returning home, Cortes has sunk all 11 of his ships. We have sent delegations bringing gifts and treasures, though this does not seem to dissuade the Spaniards from the power and gold they lust after. Insatiable, they are! Whispers have been spoken that the surrounding cities dissatisfied with our rule are conspiring with Cortes. The greatest threat being the Tlaxcala confederacy: a conglomeration of about 200 towns and different tribes, lacking central leadership.

We stand at the dawn of war and the existence of our people depends on our victory. Two years prior, the pale faced stranger arrived at your shores. You are tasked with defending against an enemy far stronger than you, your only advantage a familiarity with the land, your clever minds, and a drive to protect our homeland.

Positions

This list of positions just gives a short description of each delegate in the committee. Specific personal powers will be distributed on the day of the conference.

1. Altepetl

Commander of the jaguar warriors. A awe inspiring general known for his brutality.

2. Acozac

The high priest. The gods have allowed for fruitful harvest under his guidance. Has an affinity for human sacrifice.

3. Amaquemecan

Influential merchant. Has travel to the far edges of the empire and cultivated an expansive network.

4. Azcapotzalco

Head of the emperors gaurd. Tasked with protecting the royal family and noblemen.

5. Coyoacán

Resound orator. People come for ever corner of thing Kingdom to hear his thoughts.

6. Colhuacan

The royal spy master. Has little birds scatter across the empire. Be careful who you confide in.

7. Ecatepec de Morelos

The smuggler. Jaguar feet, tree frog venom, anything you want he can get it. Or something akin to it.

8. Huitzilopochco

A priest. Fond of the sciences: astrology, biology, chemistry.

9. Mecliclan

Master of Beasts. Previously a circus trainer, now the royal master of beasts from the rainforest.

10. Ocotelolco

A priest. Tasked with training the medics and other physicians. Works closely with the other priests.

11. Otompan

A pale warrior. It is said he was found the wreckage of a wooden serpent on the coast.

12. Quiahuiztlan

A nobleman. Known for his grand parties.

13. Cuzcatlan

A wealthy farmer. Known as the voice of the agricultural community and common people.

14. Tepeticpac

Diplomat. Tasked with traveling to city states to keep the peace.

15. Tepetlaoztoc

Head of tax collecting and the royal reserve. Universally hated.

17. Texcoco

High council member. Aids in the decisions of the emperor. A pacifist.

18. Tizatlan

High council member. Aids in the decisions of the emperor. Enjoys to witness the demise of his enemies.

19. Tlacopan

High council member. Self consumed and suspected embezzler.

20. Tlatelolco

Warden of the prison camps. Aids deciding how to allocate the prisoners: manual labor, human sacrifice, etc.

21. Xaltocan

Royal record keeper. Tasked with documenting history and learning for past endeavors.

22. Huitzilopochtli

The leader of a vigilante militia. A decisive figure amongst the Aztec government, but praised by the people.

Omens from the High Priest

1. A column of fire that appeared from midnight until dawn, and seemed to rain fire in the year 1517 (12-House)
2. Fire consuming the temple of Huitzilopochtli
3. A lightning bolt destroying the straw temple of Xiuhtecuhtli
4. The appearance of fire, or comets, streaming across the sky in threes during the day
5. The “boiling deep ,” and water flooding, of a lake nearby Tenochtitlan
6. A woman, Cihuatcoatl, weeping in the middle of the night for them (the Aztecs) to "flee far away from this city"
7. A two headed man, tlacantzolli, running through the streets
8. I, Montezuma II, have seen the stars of mamalhuatzli, and images of fighting men riding "on the backs of animals resembling deer", in a mirror on the crown of a bird caught by fishermen