

3 The Aztecs: Soldiers of Blood



The Eagle and the Cactus About 300 years after the decline of the Maya, another great civilization sprang up. This was the civilization of the Aztecs, in central Mexico.

According to legend, the Aztecs were originally a nomadic tribe. They wandered Mexico, camping here and there, fighting off unfriendly strangers, and surviving on a diet of snakes and lizards. Then one day the powerful god of the sun spoke to the people. "Search for an eagle perched on a cactus," commanded the god. "The great bird will hold a snake in its beak. Where you find the eagle and cactus, build your city."

The legend goes on to describe how the Aztecs searched for this sign and finally discovered it on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco (tesh KOH koh). On that day, the Aztecs' wandering ended. They settled down and began building a new city on the island. The Aztecs called their new home Tenochtitlán (tay noch tee TLAHN), which means "the place of the prickly pear" or "the place of the cactus." Even today the eagle and serpent are shown on the flag of Mexico.

Conquering City-States

Whether or not the myth is true, we do know that the Aztecs established Tenochtitlán in the year 1325. By the 1400s the Aztec civilization had begun to expand. The Aztecs proved to be



This Aztec drawing illustrates the legend of the founding of Tenochtitlán. Note the eagle standing on a cactus.

fearsome, ruthless warriors. One by one they conquered the neighboring city-states and incorporated them into their empire. At its height, in the early 1500s, the Aztec Empire included 400 to 500 city-states and controlled much of present-day Mexico. The Aztec emperor ruled more than 5 million people. Tenochtitlán alone probably contained between 150,000 and 200,000 people, making it one of the largest cities in the world at this time. Indeed, no city in the United States would grow so large until the 1800s.

The Aztecs grew strong and wealthy by conquering other people. When Aztec soldiers conquered a neighboring city-state, they forced the inhabitants to send gold, silver, jade, and turquoise to Tenochtitlán. If the conquered people didn't have such valuable items, they would be forced to send whatever they did have. People who lived by the ocean might send seashells, fish, or turtles. Those in agricultural regions might send corn, beans, peppers, squash, or fruit. A hunter might have to give animal skins and feathers, while a craftsperson might send pottery or woven blankets to Tenochtitlán.

The Legend of the Five Suns

Every empire needs supplies to grow strong. It needs food and building materials. What made the Aztec Empire different was its need for captured soldiers brought to Tenochtitlán.

Why did the Aztecs need captured soldiers? Because human sacrifice was the most important religious ritual of the Aztec people. To understand the importance of human sacrifice, we need to take a closer look at the Aztec religion.

According to Aztec beliefs, life was uncertain. The only thing that was certain was that the world would eventually come to a terrible, violent end. This sense of doom was based on a myth. The Aztecs believed that the universe and the sun had been created and destroyed four times in the past. Under the first sun a race of giants roamed the world. This world ended when a jaguar devoured the giants. The world under the second sun didn't do much better. Its people were swept away by wind. People under the third sun died in the fire and ash of volcanoes. Those living under the fourth sun drowned in floods.

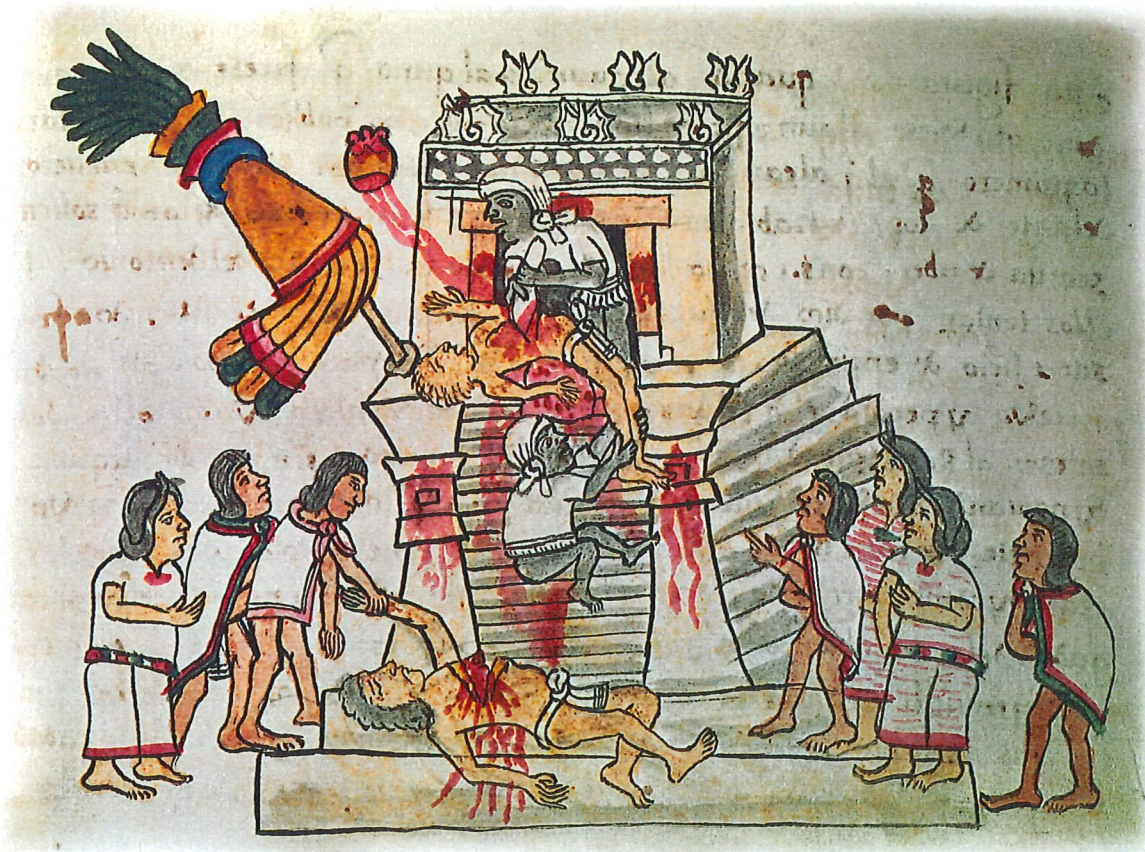
The ancient Aztecs lived under the fifth sun. But they believed that this sun would also die: "There will be earthquakes and hunger, and then our end shall come," the priests told the people. The Aztecs took these myths so seriously that they planned their lives in response to them.

The Aztecs believed that the end of the world was sure to come, but they didn't know when. They figured the best way to guard against this disaster was to keep the gods happy.

The Aztecs believed the sun god had an awesome task. Each night he battled the forces of darkness. Each morning he had to find the strength to make the sun rise again. The Aztecs believed that they could help their god find that strength by offering human sacrifices on the altars of their temples.

But the Aztecs preferred to sacrifice someone other than their own family members and neighbors. Most of their sacrificial victims were foreign soldiers, captured in wars and sent to Tenochtitlán. Since Aztec priests believed that the heart was the most important thing to sacrifice, they preferred to offer up the strong heart of a soldier.

Human sacrifice was part of the Aztec religion. This illustration by an Aztec artist shows priests sacrificing prisoners at the altar of a temple.



Religious Sacrifice

The Aztecs held their sacrificial ceremonies on top of pyramids not unlike the Maya pyramids. A big drum would beat ominously as attendants led sacrificial victims to the top of the pyramid. Five priests with long, natty hair and faces painted black would lay a victim face up on a special altar stone. Two of the black-faced priests would hold the victim's legs and two would hold his arms. The fifth priest used a special necklace to hold down the victim's head. Once the victim's limbs were secured, a sixth priest would cut out the victim's heart with a razor-sharp stone knife. The priest held the still-beating heart up in the air, showing it to the spectators below and then offering it to the god. The victim's heart was burned on an altar; his body was allowed to tumble down the steps of the pyramid.

This process was repeated for each victim, until the top steps of the pyramid were literally covered with blood. When all the sacrifices had been completed, the victims' heads were placed on large racks and displayed in the plaza in front of the pyramid.

The Aztecs were fierce warriors ready to go to battle against their neighbors on a moment's notice.



The Aztecs believed that human sacrifices were necessary to keep the gods happy. They could even point to events in the past that seemed to prove that such sacrifices really did please the gods. Once, when a prolonged drought threatened to ruin the Aztec corn harvest, Aztec priests offered a number of human sacrifices in order to regain the favor of the gods. A day or so later, rain came. To us, this might seem like a pure coincidence, but to the Aztecs it seemed like a proof that human sacrifice worked: The gifts of blood had saved the corn crops. Experiences like this convinced the Aztecs of the power of human sacrifice and ensured that their offerings to the gods would be regular and generous.

Love of War

Aztec society was ruled by priests and soldiers. Priests used human sacrifice to deal with the gods. Aztec soldiers held the empire together and provided the victims for the sacrifices.

In Aztec society, as in many societies until recent times, people were born into a class and had little opportunity to advance. The army provided the one opportunity for brave men to better themselves. Success in battle was rewarded with advancement and honor. The Aztecs believed

there was no greater honor than to die in battle.

No doubt about it—the Aztecs were fierce warriors. But their love of war and skill at fighting created a rich empire and a remarkable civilization. Read on to learn more about the civilization the Aztecs built and their fabulous capital city of Tenochtitlán.