Aztec

Empire



Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Aztec Empire**

**Timeline**

[History](http://www.ducksters.com/history/) >> [Aztec, Maya, and Inca for Kids](http://www.ducksters.com/history/aztec_maya_inca.php)

**1100** - The Aztecs leave their homeland of Aztlan in northern Mexico and begin their journey south. Over the next 225 years the Aztecs will move many times until they finally settle down at the city of[Tenochtitlán](http://www.ducksters.com/history/aztec_empire/tenochtitlan.php).

**1200** - The Aztecs arrive in the Valley of Mexico.

**1250** - They settle in Chapultepec, but are forced to leave by the Culhuacan tribe.

**1325** - The city of Tenochtitlán is founded. It will become the capital of the Aztec Empire. The location is picked by the priests because it is where they see the foretold sign of an eagle holding a snake while standing on a cactus.

**1350** - The Aztecs begin to build causeways and canals around Tenochtitlán.

**1375** - The first dominant ruler of the Aztecs, Acamapichtli, comes into power. They call their ruler the Tlatoani which means "speaker".

**1427** - Itzcoatl becomes the fourth ruler of the Aztecs. He will found the Aztec Empire.

**1428** - The Aztec Empire is formed with a triple alliance between the Aztecs, the Texcocans, and the Tacubans. The Aztecs defeat the Tepanecs.

**1440**- Montezuma I becomes the fifth leader of the Aztecs. His rule will mark the height of the Aztec Empire.

**1440 to 1469**- Montezuma I rules and greatly expands the empire.

**1452** - The city of Tenochtitlán is damaged by a great flood. The next few years are filled with famine and starvation.

**1487** - The Templo Mayor (Great Temple of Tenochtitlan) is finished. It is dedicated to the gods with thousands of human sacrifices.

**1502** - Montezuma II becomes ruler of the Aztec Empire. He is the ninth of the Aztec kings.

**1517**- The Aztec priests mark the sighting of a [comet](http://www.ducksters.com/science/physics/comets_and_meteors.php) in the night sky. They believe the comet was a sign of impending doom.

**1519** - Spanish conquistador [Hernan Cortes](http://www.ducksters.com/biography/explorers/hernan_cortes.php) arrives in Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs treat him as an honored guest, but Cortez takes Montezuma II prisoner. Cortez is driven from the city, but Montezuma II is killed.

**1520** - Cuauhtémoc becomes the tenth emperor of the Aztecs.

**1520** - Cortes forms an alliance with the Tlaxcala and begins to attack the Aztecs.

**1521** - Cortes defeats the Aztecs and takes over the city of Tenochtitlán.

**1522** - The Spanish begin to rebuild the city of Tenochtitlán. It will be called Mexico City and will be the capital of New Spain.

**Aztec Empire**

**Daily Life**

Life for the typical person living in the Aztec Empire was hard work. As in many ancient societies the rich were able to live luxurious lives, but the common people had to work very hard.

**Family Life**

The family structure was important to the Aztecs. The husband generally worked on a job outside of the home as a farmer, warrior, or craftsman. The wife worked at home cooking food for the family and weaving cloth for the family's clothes. Kids attended schools or worked to help out around the house.


An Aztec family eating a meal

**What type of homes did they live in?**

Wealthy people lived in homes made of stone or sun-dried brick. The king of the Aztecs lived in a large palace with many rooms and gardens. All of the wealthy had a separate bathing room that was similar to a sauna or steam room. Bathing was an important part of the Aztec daily life.

Poor people lived in smaller one or two room huts that had thatched roofs made from palm leaves. They had gardens near their homes where they would grow vegetables and flowers. Inside the house, there were four main areas. One area was where the family would sleep, generally on mats on the floor. Other areas included a cooking area, an eating area, and a place for shrines to the gods.

**What did the Aztecs wear for clothes?**

The Aztec men wore loincloths and long capes. The women wore long skirts and blouses. Poor people generally wove their own cloth and made their own clothing. It was the responsibility of the wife to make the clothes.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| aztec_woman_clothesWomen's clothing | aztec_man_clothesMen's clothing |

There were rules in Aztec society regarding clothing. These included detailed laws specifying what clothing decorations and color different classes of people could wear. For example, only nobles could wear clothing decorated with feathers and only the emperor could wear a turquoise colored cloak.

**What did they eat?**

The main staple of the Aztec diet was maize (similar to corn). They ground the maize into flour to make tortillas. Other important staples were beans and squash. Besides these three main staples the Aztecs ate a variety of foods including insects, fish, honey, dogs, and snakes. Perhaps the most valued food was the cocoa bean used to make chocolate.

**Did they go to school?**

All Aztec children were required by law to attend school. This even included slaves and girls, which was unique for this time in history. When they were young, children were taught by their parents, but when they reached their teens they attended school.

Boys and girls went to separate schools. Girls learned about religion including ritual songs and dancing. They also learned how to cook and make clothing. Boys usually learned how to farm or learned a craft such as pottery or feather-work. They also learned about religion and how to fight as warriors.

Aztec children were instructed early in life about manners and correct behavior. It was important to the Aztecs that children did not complain, did not make fun of the old or sick, and did not interrupt. Punishment for breaking the rules was severe.

**Marriage**

Most Aztec men got married around the age of 20. They typically did not choose their wives. Weddings were arranged by matchmakers. Once the matchmaker chose two people to be married, the families would both need to agree.

**Games**

The Aztecs enjoyed playing games. One of the most popular games was a board game called Patolli. Just like with many board games today, players would move their pieces around a board by rolling dice.

Another popular game was Ullamalitzli. This was a ball game played with a rubber ball on a court. Players had to pass the ball around using their hips, shoulders, heads, and knees. Some historians believe the game was used in preparation for war.

**Interesting Facts about Aztec Daily Life**

* The elderly members of the family were well taken care of and respected in Aztec society.
* The punishment for breaking a law regarding clothing was often death.
* The word chocolate comes from the Aztec word "chocolatl".
* The name for the ball game Ullamalitzli comes from the Aztec word "ulli" which means "rubber".
* The sons of nobles went to a separate school where they learned advanced subjects such as law, writing, and engineering. The students at these schools were actually treated rougher than at the commoners' schools.
* Slaves were generally treated well and could buy their way out of slavery.

**Aztec Empire**

**Government and Empire**

**Empire**

The Aztec Empire was made up of city-states. At the center of each city-state was a large city that ruled the area. For the most part, the Aztec Emperor did not interfere with the ruling of the city-states. What he required was that each city-state paid him a tribute. As long as the tribute was paid, the city-state remained somewhat independent of Aztec rule.


Map of the Aztec Empire
Click picture to see larger version

**The Emperor or Huey Tlatoani**

The Aztec government was similar to a monarchy where an Emperor or King was the primary ruler. They called their ruler the Huey Tlatoani. The Huey Tlatoani was the ultimate power in the land. They felt that he was appointed by the gods and had the divine right to rule. He decided when to go to war and what tribute the lands he ruled would pay the Aztecs.

When an emperor died, the new emperor was chosen by a group of high ranking nobles. Usually the new emperor was a relative of the previous emperor, but it wasn't always his son. Sometimes they chose a brother who they felt would be a good leader.

**Aztec Emperors**

Here are a few of the more famous Aztec Emperors or Huey Tlatoani:

* Acamapichtli - The first emperor of the Aztecs, he ruled for 19 years starting in 1375.
* Itzcoatl - The fourth emperor of the Aztecs, he conquered the Tepanecs and founded the Triple Alliance.
* Montezuma I - Under Montezuma I the Aztecs became the dominant power of the Triple Alliance and the empire was expanded.
* Montezuma II - The ninth emperor of the Aztecs, Montezuma II was the leader when Cortez and the Spanish arrived. He had expanded the empire to its greatest size, but was killed by the Spanish.

**Other Officials**

The second in command of the Aztec government was the Cihuacoatl. The Cihuacoatl was in charge of running the government on a day to day basis. He had thousands of officials and civil servants who worked under him and kept the government and the empire running smoothly.

There was also the Council of Four. These were powerful men and generals of the army who were first in line to become the next emperor. They gave advice to the emperor and it was important that he had their agreement in major decisions.

Other important officials in the government included the priests who oversaw the religious aspects of the city, the judges who ran the court system, and the military leaders.

**Law**

The Aztecs had a fairly sophisticated code of law. There were numerous laws including laws against stealing, murder, drunkenness, and property damage. A system of courts and judges determined guilt and punishments. They had different levels of courts all the way up to a supreme court. Citizens could appeal rulings to a higher court if they did not agree with the judge.

One interesting part of the law was the "one time forgiveness law". Under this law, a citizen could confess a crime to a priest and they would be forgiven. This only worked if they confessed the crime prior to being caught. It also could only be used once.

**Tenochtitlan**

The center of the Aztec government was the capital city of Tenochtitlan. This was where the emperor as well as the majority of the nobles lived. At its peak under Montezuma II, Tenochtitlan is thought to have had a population of 200,000 people.

**Interesting Facts about Aztec Government**

* Huey Tlatoani meant "Great Speaker". The leader of other lesser cities was called the Tlatoani of that city.
* Cihuacoatl meant "Female Snake" even though the office was always held by a man.
* The priests were also responsible for running the schools.
* When a new emperor came into power he had to spend four days fasting, meditating, and worshiping the gods.
* The punishments for breaking a law were severe with death being a common punishment. Other punishments included having your head shaved or being sold into slavery.

**Aztec Empire**

**Religion, Gods, and Mythology**

The Aztecs worshiped many gods. When they took over a new tribe or culture they often adopted the new tribe's gods into the Aztec religion.

**The Sun**

One of the most important aspects of Aztec religion was the sun. The Aztecs called themselves the "People of the Sun". They felt that in order for the sun to rise each day the Aztecs needed to perform rituals and sacrifices to give the sun strength.

**Main Gods**

Despite worshiping many gods, there were certain gods that the Aztecs considered more important and powerful than the others. The most important god to the Aztecs was Huitzilopochtli. Here are some of the most important gods to the Aztecs.


The god Huitzilopochtli

* **Huitzilopochtli** - The most fearsome and powerful of the Aztec gods, Huitzilopochtli was the god of war, the sun, and sacrifice. He was also the patron god of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan. The Great Temple in the center of the city was built in honor of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. His name is thought to mean "left-handed hummingbird". He was often drawn with feathers and holding a scepter made from a snake.

* **Tlaloc** - Tlaloc was the god of rain and water. While Tlaloc helped the Aztecs much of the time by sending rain and causing plants to grow, he also could get angry and send thunder storms and hail. Tlaloc was worshiped at the Great Temple in the city of Tenochtitlan and also at the top of a tall mountain named Mount Tlaloc. He was often drawn with fangs and big goggle-like eyes.

* **Quetzalcoatl** - Quetzalcoatl was the god of life and wind. His name means "feathered serpent" and he was usually drawn as a serpent which could fly, very much like a dragon. When Cortez first arrived at the Aztecs, many thought that he was the god Quetzalcoatl in human flesh.

* **Tezcatlipoca**- Tezcatlipoca was a powerful god associated with many things including magic, the night, and the earth. He was a rival god to Quetzalcoatl. According to Aztec mythology, he was the first god to create the sun and the earth, but was struck down by Quetzalcoatl and turned into a jaguar. There was a large temple built to him in the city of Tenochtitlan just south of the Great Temple. His name meant "smoking mirror".

* **Chicomecoatl**- Chicomecoatl was the Aztec goddess of agriculture, nourishment, and corn. She was often drawn as a young girl carrying flowers or a woman using the sun as a shield. Her name meant "seven snakes".


The gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca

**Priests**

The Priests were responsible for making sure that the gods were offered the correct offerings and sacrifices. They had to perform all sorts of ceremonies in the temples to make sure that the gods were not angry with the Aztecs. Priests had to undergo extensive training. They were well-respected and powerful in the Aztec society.

**Human Sacrifice**

The Aztecs believed that the sun needed the blood of human sacrifice in order to rise each day. They performed thousands of human sacrifices. Some historians think that more than 20,000 people were killed when the Great Temple was first dedicated in 1487.

**The Afterlife**

The Aztecs believed in a number of levels of heaven and the underworld. Depending on how you died would determine where you went. Those who died in battle would go to the top level of heaven. Those who drowned would go to the underworld.

**Interesting Facts about the Aztec Religion, Gods, and Mythology**

* Sometimes people were selected to impersonate the gods. They would dress like the gods and then act out stories from the Aztec mythology.
* The Aztec calendar played an important role in their religion. They held a number of religious ceremonies and festivals throughout the year.
* The largest of the Aztec festivals was the Xiuhmolpilli, which meant "new fire". It was held once every 52 years in order to prevent the world coming to an end.
* The Aztecs often went to war in order to take captives that they could use in their sacrifices.
* The Aztecs believed they were living under the fifth, or final, sun. They feared the day when the fifth sun would die and the world would come to an end.

**Aztec Empire**

**Writing and Technology**

When the Spanish arrived in [Mexico](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/mexico.php), the Aztecs had not yet developed iron or bronze metals. Their tools were made from bone, stone, and obsidian. They also did not use beasts of burden or the wheel. However, despite their lack of these basic technologies, the Aztecs had a fairly developed society. They also had some writing and technology of their own.

**Aztec Language**

The Aztecs spoke the language Nahuatl. It is still used to today in some parts of Mexico. Some English words come from Nahuatl including coyote, avocado, chili, and chocolate.

**Aztec Writing**

The Aztecs wrote using symbols called glyphs or pictographs. They didn't have an alphabet, but used pictures to represent events, items, or sounds. Only the priests knew how to read and write. They would write on long sheets made of animal skins or plant fibers. An Aztec book is called a codex. Most of the codices were burned or destroyed, but a few survived and archeologists have been able to learn a lot about Aztec life from them.


Examples of some Aztec glyphs

**Aztec Calendar**

One of the most famous aspects of Aztec technology was their use of calendars. The Aztecs used two calendars.

One calendar was used for tracking religious ceremonies and festivals. This calendar was called the tonalpohualli which means "day count". It was sacred to the Aztecs and was very important as it divided time equally among the various gods and kept the universe in balance. The calendar had 260 days. Each day was represented by a combination of 21 day signs and thirteen day signs.

The other calendar was used to track time. This calendar was called the Xiuhpohualli or "solar year". It had 365 days divided up into 18 months of 20 days each. There were 5 days left over that were considered unlucky days.

Every 52 years the two calendars would start on the same day. The Aztecs were afraid that the world would end on this day. They performed the New Fire Ceremony on this day.


The Aztec calendar stone

**Agriculture**

The Aztecs used agriculture to grow food such as maize, beans, and squash. One innovative technique they used in swampy areas was called the chinampa. A chinampa was an artificial island that the Aztecs built up in the lake. They built many chinampas and used these manmade islands to plant crops. The chinampas worked well for crops because the soil was fertile and the crops had plenty of water to grow.

**Aqueducts**

A major part of Aztec culture was bathing at least once per day. They needed fresh water in the city to do this. At the capital city of Tenochtitlan the Aztecs built two large aqueducts that carried fresh water from springs located over two and a half miles away.

**Medicine**

The Aztecs believed that illness could come from natural causes as well as supernatural causes (the gods). They used a wide variety of herbs to cure sickness. One of the main cures doctors suggested was steam baths. They thought that by sweating, the poisons making the person sick would leave their body.

**Interesting Facts about Aztec Writing and Technology**

* Aztec codices were made from one long sheet of paper that was folded like an accordion. Many of the codices were over 10 meters long.
* The chinampa farms were often called floating gardens as they appeared to float on top of the lake. They were built in rectangles and the farmers would travel between the fields in canoes.
* The Aztecs used canoes for transport and carrying goods around the waterways of the Valley of Mexico.
* Aztec doctors would use splints to help support broken bones while they healed.
* The Aztecs introduced the world to two of our favorite foods: popcorn and chocolate!
* One of the innovations the Aztecs had before much of the rest of the world was mandatory education for all. Everyone, boys and girls, rich and poor, were required by law to attend school.

**Aztec Empire**

**Society**

**The Aztec Family**

The basic unit of Aztec society was the family. The family was very important to the Aztecs and marriage was considered sacred. Men could marry more than one wife, but there was usually a primary wife who was in charge of the household. Marriages were arranged by matchmakers.

**Calpulli**

Families belonged to a larger group called the calpulli. Families and individuals did not own land in Aztec society, the calpulli did. A calpulli was like a clan or small tribe. Many of the families in a calpulli were related to each other. Calpullis had a chief, a local school, and often had a trade in which they specialized.

**City-state**

Above the calpulli was the city-state, also called the Altepetl. The city-state included a large city and its surrounding areas. The largest city-state and capital of the Aztec Empire was Tenochtitlan. Other city-states in the Aztec Empire had to pay tribute to the emperor who lived in Tenochtitlan.

**Social Classes**

There were different social classes within Aztec society. At the very top of society was the king along with his family. The king was called the Huey Tlatcani and he was very powerful.

* Tecuhtli - Just below the emperor, who ruled the capital Tenochtitlan, were the rulers of the other city-states. They were very wealthy and lived in large palaces within their cities. They had complete power over their cities as long as they paid tribute to the emperor.
* Pipiltin - Below the Tecuhtli were the pipiltin or the noble class. Only the noble class could wear certain types of clothes and jewelry such as feathers and gold. The pipiltin held the high ranking positions in the priesthood, the army, and the government. They formed the city council which helped to rule the city-states. The king was always chosen from the pipiltin.
* Pochteca - There was a special class of Aztec merchants called pochteca. They were treated like the nobility in society because their jobs were considered very important to the Aztec Empire. The pochteca traveled long distances in order to bring back luxury goods that were treasured by the nobility.
* Macehualtin - The common people in Aztec society were called the macehualtin. This included the farmers, warriors, and craftsmen. Later on in the history of the Aztecs, craftsmen and warriors began to have a higher position in society than the farmers.
* Slaves - At the bottom of Aztec society were the slaves. In Aztec society, the children of slaves were not slaves. Aztec people became slaves by selling themselves into slavery to pay for debts or as punishment for crimes. The slaves had certain rights. They were not to be mistreated by their owners, they could buy their freedom, and they could not be sold by their masters unless they agreed.

**Interesting Facts about Aztec Society**

* In the Nahuatl language calpulli meant "big house".
* The Aztec nobility, or pipiltin, claimed that they were direct descendents from the legendary Toltec people.
* The merchants had their own patron god named Yacetecuhtli who they believed watched over them and kept them safe on their journeys.
* Two common ways to move up in the ranks of society were through the priesthood or through the military.
* Slaves who escaped their masters and made it to the royal palace would be set free.
* Slaves could have possessions including other slaves.
* The traveling merchants were often employed by the Aztec government as spies.
* Although the merchants were allowed to be rich, they were not allowed to dress as the nobility. They had to dress as the commoners.

**Aztec Empire**

**Tenochtitlan**

Tenochtitlan was the capital city and center of the Aztec Empire. It was founded in 1325 and served as the capital until the Aztecs were conquered by Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes in 1520.

**Where was it located?**

Tenochtitlan was located on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco in what is today south central [Mexico](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/mexico_history_timeline.php). The Aztecs were able to settle there because no one else wanted the land. At first, it wasn't a great place to start a city, but soon the Aztecs built up islands where they could grow crops. The water also worked as a natural defense against attacks from other cities.


Map of Tenochtitlan
Click picture for larger view

**Causeways and Canals**

Early on in the history of the city the Aztecs built causeways and canals for transportation to and from the city. A causeway is a raised road that allowed the people to easily travel over the swampy and wet areas. There were three major causeways that led from the island city to the mainland. There were also bridges built into the causeways that allowed small boats and canoes to travel under them. These bridges could be removed when the city was being attacked.

The Aztecs also built many canals throughout the city. The canals acted like water roads that allowed people to easily travel around the large city in boats. The city was well planned and laid out in a grid that made traveling around the city easy.

**City Center**

At the center of the city there was a large area where many of the public activities took place. The temples to the Aztec gods were built here as well as a court where they played a ballgame called Ullama. The largest temple was a pyramid called the Templo Mayor. It was the tallest building in the city in order to be closest to the gods. Other buildings in the city center included the priests' quarters, schools, plus a rack of human skulls called the Tzompantli.

**Marketplace**

There were markets throughout the city where people would trade goods and food. There was one main marketplace where up to 40,000 people would visit during feast days to buy goods and food for celebrations.

**Why did the Aztecs settle on a swampy island?**

When the Aztecs were driven from their valley home by the Culhuacan they needed a new place to stay. The priests said they had a sign from the gods. The Aztecs should settle where they saw an eagle holding a snake while standing on a cactus. They saw this sign on a marshy island in the lake and began to build a new town on the spot.

**How big was it?**

Tenochtitlan was a large city that covered around 5 square miles. Some historians estimate that nearly 200,000 people lived in the city during its peak.

**Is it still there today?**

Most of the Tenochtitlan's buildings were destroyed by the Spanish and Hernan Cortes. The current capital of Mexico, Mexico City, is located at the same location. Archeologists have uncovered the ruins of Tenochtitlan near the center of Mexico City.


Model version of how Tenochtitlan looked at its peak

**Interesting Facts about Tenochtitlan**

* There were two aqueducts over 2.5 miles long leading into the city that provided fresh water to the people living there.
* Large crowds of as many as 8,000 people would sometimes gather in the central area.
* The city was divided into four zones and twenty districts.
* The Aztec Emperors built their palaces near the temple district. They were large stone structures with as many as 50 rooms as well as their own gardens and ponds.
* The Aztecs built a 10 mile long dike that sealed off a portion of the lake. It helped keep the water fresh and protected the city from flooding.

**Aztec Empire**

**Spanish Conquest**

History Between 1519 and 1521 the [Spanish](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/spain.php), under the leadership of conquistador [Hernan Cortés](http://www.ducksters.com/biography/explorers/hernan_cortes.php), conquered the Aztec Empire.


The Spanish Conquer the Aztecs

**Bad Omens**

During the reign of King Montezuma II, the Aztecs had seen several bad omens. According to [Aztec religion](http://www.ducksters.com/history/aztec_empire/religion_gods_and_mythology.php), these omens meant that something bad was going to happen. There were eight bad omens that were recorded later by a Spanish missionary.

* Fire in the sky
* The temple of Huitzilopochtli burned down
* A lightning bolt struck one of their temples
* They saw fire across the waters
* A lake appeared to be boiling
* They heard the sound of a weeping woman at night
* A strange animal was caught by some fishermen
* A two headed man was seen

**Arrival of Hernan Cortés in Mesoamerica**

Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortés and his men landed on the Mexican coast on April of 1519. Montezuma II sent Cortés gifts of gold and chocolate to welcome the Spanish. Although Montezuma II did not trust Cortés, he also was worried that Cortés was the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. Aztec mythology said that Quetzalcoatl would come to Earth as a man and Cortés had arrived on Quetzalcoatl's birthday.

Cortés arrived with around 500 men, 16 horses, and some cannon. He founded a small settlement that would eventually become the city of Veracruz. He also began to get to know the natives. He brought along an American Indian woman named Dona Marina who worked as his interpreter. Cortez created alliances with some of the local tribes including the Totonac and the Tlaxcalans.

**Cortés Travels to Tenochtitlan**

Cortés began to march inland towards the city of Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Aztec Empire. He conquered some cities along the way and made alliances with others. The Tlaxcalans became his closest allies. They hated the Aztecs because they had raided their cities for people to sacrifice to their gods.

Montezuma II tried to keep Cortés from getting all the way to Tenochtitlan, but Cortés continued his march. He destroyed the Aztec religious city of Cholula along the way.

**Cortés Arrives at Tenochtitlan**

When Cortés finally arrived in Tenochtitlan he was welcomed with gifts and invited inside. Montezuma was still concerned that Cortés might be a god. Eventually tensions mounted between the two sides and a fight broke out. Cortés and his men took King Montezuma captive.


Cortés meets Montezuma II

**Montezuma II is Killed**

At some point during his captivity, Montezuma II was killed. Historians still aren't sure how he was killed or why, but after he died the Spanish soldiers tried to flee from Tenochtitlan. They were attacked by the Aztecs as they fled and nearly two-thirds of the soldiers were killed.

**Cortés Conquers the Aztecs**

Cortés managed to escape with some of his men from Tenochtitlan. He gathered a large force of natives including the Tlaxcalans to fight the Aztecs. He returned to Tenochtitlan and laid siege to the city. After three months of fighting, he finally took control of the city and completed his conquest of the Aztec Empire.

**Interesting Facts about the Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs**

* Cortés became worried that some of his crew would steal his ships and desert him so he sunk his fleet before marching to Tenochtitlan.
* After Montezuma II was killed the Aztecs elected Cuauhtemoc as their new king. Cortés eventually had him executed.
* The Aztecs were severely weakened by diseases that the Spanish brought such as smallpox, influenza, and malaria. Over time, around 80 percent of the people living in the Valley of Mexico died from these diseases.
* Cortés founded Mexico City on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. Today it is the capital of Mexico and one of the largest cities in the world.
* The night that Cortés and his men escaped from Tenochtitlan is often referred to as "La Noche Triste" or "The Sad Night".

**Aztec Empire**

**Art**

Art was an important part of Aztec life. They used some forms of art such as music, poetry, and sculpture to honor and praise their gods. Other forms of art, such as jewelry and feather-work, were worn by the Aztec nobility to set them apart from the commoners.

**Metaphors**

The Aztecs often used metaphors throughout their art. For example, the hummingbird represented the sun god, the eagle represented the warrior, and flowers represented the beauty of life. Metaphors like these were used in their drawings, sculpture, and poetry.

**Poetry**

The highest form of art in the Aztec culture was poetry. The Aztecs wrote lots of poems. Many of their poems were about the gods and mythology, but others were about everyday life. They called poetry "flower and song".

The poetry and stories of the Aztecs were passed down verbally from generation to generation. They didn't begin to write down their poetry until after the Spanish arrived. The largest collections of Aztec poems were put together in the 1500s. These books include the *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España* and the *Cantares mexicanos*.

Here is an Aztec poem about fishing:

*help me
White Spirit

soon here
you will embrace
the red chichimec

am I calling just one?
indeed all of them I call

the child fish
the man fish
the woman fish--
dwellers of meanders*

Here is a poem that is a prayer to the sun:

*come help me Nanahuatzin

I'll go first
I'll be on the road first--
then you'll go
then you'll follow the road

I'll be the first to cross
all the desert lands
all the canyon lands

I'll pass swiftly over
the Earth's smooth face--

she won't hinder me
no matter what truly lies
on her smooth face

up in the sky
I shall go
I shall walk*

**Music**

The Aztecs also enjoyed music. They played various instruments such as flutes, shells, whistles, and drums. They played their music for the gods and used it to make requests such as asking the gods for rain or for the harvest to be good.


An Aztec musician

**Sculpture**

The Aztec carved a lot of sculpture from stone of all types. They carved small items as well as huge statues of their gods that were placed in public areas and the temples. A lot of their sculpture had similar features. Male statues were usually shown sitting with their knees up and their arms crossed. Female statues were generally shown kneeling with their hands on their knees. The facial features were often similar with the main differences being symbols that were unique to each god.


An Aztec sculpture

**Pottery**

The Aztecs took pride in creating a variety of beautiful pottery. Other nations from around the lands often traded for the prized Aztec pottery. They made everything from small simple bowls to tall jars that were heavily decorated and painted. The pottery makers of the Aztecs were very sophisticated, mass producing pottery in large shops using a potter's wheel.

**Feather-work**

Perhaps the most prized art during the time of the Aztecs was feather-work. Using this art form, artisans wove brightly colored feathers together to make beautiful cloaks and headdresses. Only the nobility and wealthy were allowed to wear feather-work items.

**Jewelry**

The Aztecs also made a variety of jewelry. Jewelers used different materials including gold, silver, copper, jade, and obsidian. Jewelry made from precious stones and metals was generally reserved for the nobility.

**Interesting Facts about Aztec Art**

* Every 52 years the Aztecs destroyed all of their household items in a religious ceremony. This included their pottery. Archaeologists are able to track changes in Aztec pottery over time because of this.
* The Aztec women were responsible for weaving cloth for clothing and blankets. They often used detailed and artistic designs in their work.
* Feather-workers were called amanteca. They were some of the most respected artisans in all of the Aztec Empire.
* One of the most famous Aztec sculptures is the calendar stone. It is twelve feet in diameter and weighs around 24 tons.
* There were poetry contests at many of the Aztec festivals.

**Hernan Cortes**

[**Biography**](http://www.ducksters.com/biography/) >> [**Explorers for Kids**](http://www.ducksters.com/biography/explorers/)


Hernan Cortes

* **Occupation:** Conquistador and Explorer
* **Born:** 1485 in Medellin, Castile, Spain
* **Died:** December 2, 1547 in Castilleja de la Cuesta, Castile, Spain
* **Best known for:** Conquering the Aztec Empire

**Biography:**

**Where did Hernan Cortes grow up?**

Hernan Cortes was born in MedellÃ­n, [Spain](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/spain_history_timeline.php) in 1485. He came from a fairly famous family and his father was a captain in the Spanish army. His parents wanted him to become a lawyer and sent him to school to study law when he was fourteen. Cortes wasn't interested in becoming a lawyer and returned home when he was sixteen.

Cortes heard of Christopher Columbus' discoveries in the new world. He wanted to travel and see new lands. He also wanted to make his fortune and fame.

**Going to the New World**

Cortes sailed for the New World in 1504. He first arrived on the island of Hispaniola at the city of Santo Domingo. He got a job as a notary and over the next five years made a name for himself on the island.

**Conquest of Cuba**

In 1511, Cortes joined Diego Velazquez on an expedition to Cuba. When Velazquez conquered Cuba, he became governor. Velazquez liked Cortes and helped Cortes to rise in the government. Soon Cortes became a powerful and wealthy figure on the island of Cuba.

**Conquest of Mexico**

In 1518, Cortes was put in charge of an expedition to the mainland of [Mexico](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/mexico_history_timeline.php). This was something that he had wanted to do for many years. At the last minute, Governor Velazquez became worried that Cortes would become too powerful and he ordered Cortes not to sail. Cortes disobeyed the order and set sail anyway.

**Arriving in Mexico**

Cortes and his men landed at the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico in April of 1519. He had 11 ships, around 500 men, some horses, and some cannon. He soon met a native woman named Dona Marina. Dona Marina spoke the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs and could help to interpret for Cortes.

Cortes heard of the gold and treasures of the Aztecs. He wanted to conquer them and take their treasure for Spain. He requested a meeting with the Aztec Emperor, Montezuma II, but was repeatedly turned down. He then decided to march to the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan.

**March to Tenochtitlan**

Gathering his small force of 500 men, Cortes began to march to Tenochtitlan, the heart of the Aztec Empire. Along the way he met with other cities and peoples. He found out that a number of other tribes didn't like their Aztec rulers. He made alliances with them, including the powerful Tlaxcala people.

**Massacre at Cholula**

Cortes next arrived at the city of Cholula. It was the second largest city of Mexico and a religious center of the Aztec Empire. When Cortes found out that the people at Cholula planned to kill him in his sleep, he killed around 3,000 nobles, priests, and warriors. He also burned down a portion of the city.

**Meeting Montezuma II**

When Cortes arrived at Tenochtitlan on November 8, 1519 he was welcomed by the Aztec Emperor Montezuma II. Although Montezuma did not trust Cortes, he thought that Cortes might be the god Quetzalcoatl in human form. Montezuma gave Cortes and his men gifts of gold. He thought that these gifts would keep Cortes from taking over the city, but they just made Cortes want more.


Map of Cortes' march to conquer the Aztecs

**Montezuma II is Killed**

Cortes took Montezuma captive within his own city. However, Governor Velasquez from Cuba sent another expedition under conquistador Panfilo de Narvaez to take command from Cortes. Cortes left Tenochtitlan to fight Narvaez.

After taking care of Narvaez, Cortes returned to Tenochtitlan. He found out that his men had killed King Montezuma. He decided to flee the city. On the night of June 30, 1520 Cortes and his men escaped from the city. Many of them died. The night is called La Noche Triste, or "The Sad Night".

**Conquering the Aztecs**

Cortes soon returned to Tenochtitlan with a large army of his allies, the Tlaxcala. He laid siege to the city and eventually conquered the city and with it the Aztec Empire.

**Governor of Mexico**

After conquering the Aztecs, Cortes renamed the city of Tenochtitlan to Mexico City. The city became the Spanish capital of the territory which was called New Spain. Cortes was named governor of the land by King Charles I of Spain.

**Later Life**

Later in life Cortes fell out of favor with the King of Spain. He was forced to return to Spain to defend himself. In 1541, he participated in an unsuccessful expedition to Algiers where he nearly drowned when his ship was sunk. He died on December 2, 1547 in Spain.

**Interesting Facts about Hernan Cortes**

* Although most people call him Hernan today, he went by Hernando or Fernando during his lifetime.
* He was the second cousin once removed to conquistador Francisco Pizarro who conquered the Inca Empire in Peru.
* Cortes married the sister-in-law of governor Velasquez while living in Cuba. He also had a child with his interpreter Dona Marina.
* While in Mexico he went on an expedition to the north and discovered Baja California.
* The Gulf of California was originally named the Sea of Cortes.

**Aztec Empire**

**Glossary and Terms**

**Adobe** - A building material made from mixing sand, clay, and water together and then letting it dry in the sun. Some of the Aztec homes were built from adobe.

**Amanteca** - Aztec craftspeople who worked with feathers. They made clothing and headdresses for the nobility.

**Aqueduct** - A manmade channel used to transport water over a long distance.

**Calmecac**- A school for the nobility where they trained to become government officials, military leaders, and priests.

**Calpulli**- A group of families like a clan. It was the division of the Aztec government below the city-state.

**Causeway** - A road across a waterway. There were causeways across the lake leading to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan.

**Chinampa**- Manmade islands used for growing crops. The Aztecs built these around the city of Tenochtitlan because much of the land was swampy.

**City-state** - An independent government that consists of a main city and the lands around it.

**Codex**- A book made up of a number of pages folded in a zig-zag pattern. Much of what we know about the Aztecs comes from codices.

**Conquistadors**- Spanish explorers, adventurers, and conquerors. They colonized much of Central and South American for the Spanish Empire.

**Empire** - A group of states or peoples united under one leader or monarch called an emperor.

**Huitzilopochtli**- The primary Aztec god, he was the god of the sun and war. He was also the patron god of Tenochtitlan.

**Macehualtin**- The commoner class of the Aztec Empire.

**Maize** - A vegetable like corn. It was the main staple food of the Aztecs.

**Mesoamerica** - A region of southern North America that stretches from Mexico to Costa Rica.

**Mexica** - A name for the people who lived in the Valley of Mexico.

**Montezuma**- Two of the most important emperors of the Aztecs were named Montezuma. It is also sometimes spelled Moctezuma.

**Nahuatl** - The language spoken by the Aztecs. It is still spoken by some people in central Mexico today.

**Obsidian** - A hard, brittle rock that can be used to make sharp edges for tools.

**Ollama**- An Aztec game played with a rubber ball.

**Omens**- Events or phenomena that some people believe tell the future.

**Pictograph** - A symbol that conveys meaning and has a resemblance to a physical object.

**Pipiltin**- The upper or noble class of the Aztec Empire. They held the top positions in the priesthood, military, and government.

**Pochteca** - A class of merchants that traveled long distances to bring luxury goods to the Aztecs. They were an important and respected class of people.

**Pyramid**- A building that has the general shape of a geometric pyramid with four sides on the bottom that taper to a point on top. Aztec pyramids were built with large steps and had a flat top. They were built as temples to their gods.

**Sacrifice** - An offering to the gods, usually food or an animal. The Aztecs also offered human sacrifices.

**Smallpox**- An infectious disease that often causes death.

**Tenochtitlan** - The capital city of the Aztec Empire.

**Tlatoani** - The king of a city-state, the word Tlatoani means "speaker". The emperor of the Aztec Empire was the Huey Tlatoani or "great speaker".

**Tlaxcala** - An enemy city-state to the Aztecs, the Tlaxcala allied with Cortes to conquer the Aztecs.

**Toltecs** - An early civilization that came before the Aztecs. The nobility claimed to be descendents of these legendary people.

**Tribute** - A tax paid by the city-states to the Aztec Emperor in the capital city of Tenochtitlan.

<http://www.ducksters.com/history/aztec_maya_inca.php>