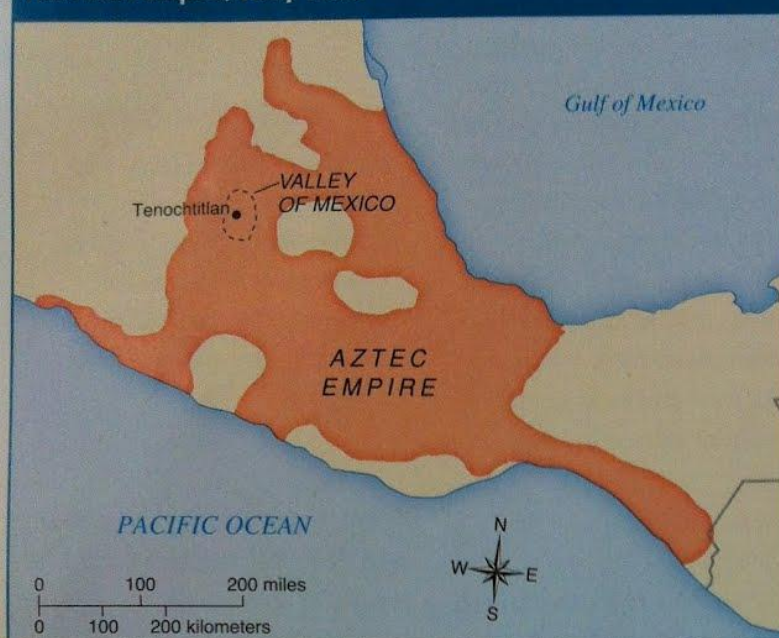


The Aztec Empire, Early 1500s



24.4 The Aztec Empire

Tenochtitlan began as simply the Aztecs' home city. After the Aztecs and their allies defeated the Tepanecs in 1428 C.E., the city became the capital of a growing empire. Under Moctezuma I in the mid 1400s, the Aztecs extended their empire to faraway regions.

By the early 1500s, the Aztec Empire stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. It covered much of Central Mexico and reached as far south as the current border with Guatemala. At its height, the empire included more than five million people.

An Empire Based on Tribute

Unlike other empire builders, the

Aztecs did not start colonies. Nor did they force conquered peoples to adopt their ways. Instead, the Aztec Empire was a loose union of hundreds of city-states that were forced to pay tribute to the Aztecs.

Collecting tribute was the empire's most important business. The Aztecs relied on tribute to support Tenochtitlan's huge population. Tribute took the form of whatever valuable items a city could provide. Cities might pay in food, cacao, gems and stones, cotton, cloth, animals, animal skins, shells, building materials, or even soldiers. Tax collectors stationed around the empire made sure that cities paid regularly.

Each year, huge amounts of goods flowed into Tenochtitlan. An average year brought 7,000 tons of maize; 4,000 tons each of beans, seed, and grain; and at least 2 million cotton cloaks. Warriors, priests, officials, servants, and other workers all received payment in tribute goods.

Warfare The demands of the empire made war the center of Aztec life. Successful battles allow the Aztecs to increase their sources of tribute. They also gained more territory, laborers, and sacrificial victims. As you will learn in the next chapter, the Aztecs believed that their chief god, Huitzilopochtli, required human blood for survival, so in war they took as many prisoners as possible to use in sacrifices. They also used the threat of human sacrifice to frighten city-states into paying tribute.

Every male Aztec was trained to be a soldier. In battle, the Aztecs used weapons such as bows and arrows, spears, clubs, and wooden swords with sharp stone blades. Warrior knights carried shields decorated with figures of animals such as the jaguar and eagle. The figures

represented different strengths that the Aztecs believed they received from these animals.

An Aztec declaration of war followed a ritualized pattern. First, the Aztecs asked a city to join the empire as an ally. The city had 60 days to agree. If the ruler refused, the Aztecs declared war.

The battle began when thousands of Aztec warriors descended upon the city. As the armies faced each other, a general gave the signal to attack. Aztec warriors excelled at hand-to-hand fighting. Most wars ended after one battle, usually with an Aztec victory.

After the city had fallen, the Aztecs brought their captives to Tenochtitlan. Some became slaves, but most were sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli.

The Aztecs made only a few demands on the defeated city. The people had to pay tribute, honor the god Huitzilopochtli, and promise obedience to the Aztec ruler. Otherwise, conquered cities remained independent. They kept their religion, customs, and language. They usually even kept their leaders.

These lenient conditions made it easy for the Aztecs to rule. But most of the conquered people never thought of themselves as true Aztecs. They wanted their freedom. These feelings led to a lack of unity in the Aztec Empire. Eventually, the Spanish would take advantage of that weakness by making allies of the Aztecs' enemies when they invaded Mexico in 1519. You will learn more about the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs in Unit 7.



These modern drawings of Aztec life show some of the forms of tribute paid to the Aztecs, such as feathers, jade, and tiger skins.

24.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about the rise of the Aztecs from a band of nomads to the masters of a great empire. The Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico in the mid 1200s C.E. In 1325, they began building their capital city of Tenochtitlan. But the Aztec Empire only began to emerge in 1428, when the Aztecs and their allies rebelled against the Tepanecs.

Over the next 100 years, the Aztecs expanded their empire through warfare and alliances. Eventually the empire included hundreds of cities and millions of people. In the next chapter, you will learn about the daily life of the Aztecs at the height of their empire.