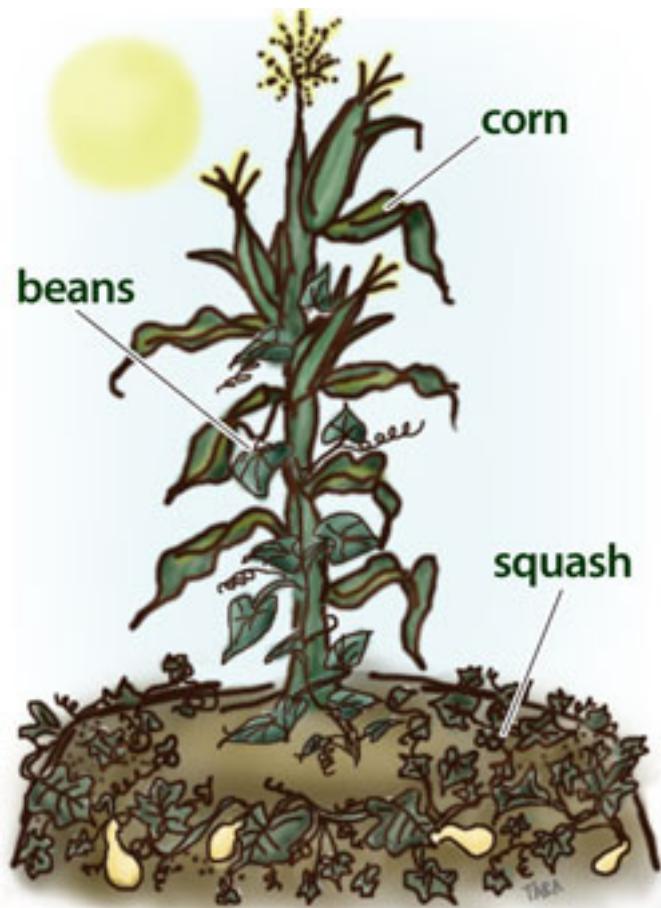


## Agriculture

The Aztecs were very dependent on growing food to eat. The three major crops that constituted the majority of an Aztec's diet were maize (or corn), beans, and squash. These three native vegetables were the backbone of Aztec meals. They are known as the Three Sisters because, when grown together, they thrive. Beans need support which cornstalks provide. Corn absorbs nitrogen in soil while beans replenish it. Squash leaves shade the soil, keeping it moist to hydrate the others.



*Direct-Sow, Easy-to-Grow:  
The Ancient **Three Sisters** Method*

Figure 1: Diagram of the Three Sisters

## Birth

The Aztecs thought that birth was a very significant event. They day of a baby's birth was believed to influence the child's life. Parents were to choose a name for the child based on the day of the year the baby was born. This tended to result in babies being reported after they were born to be 'born' on a luckier day.



Figure 2: Baby in a basket

## Chinampas

Chinampas were crucial to sustaining the Aztec Empire. A chinampa is a small plot of land created by putting up posts in water, building walls up to the surface of the water, and then filling in the box with soil. These buildings provide extremely fertile farmland where farmers can grow corn, beans, and squash with a very plentiful harvest. Chinampas were often separated by wide canals so that canoes could easily travel throughout the city.

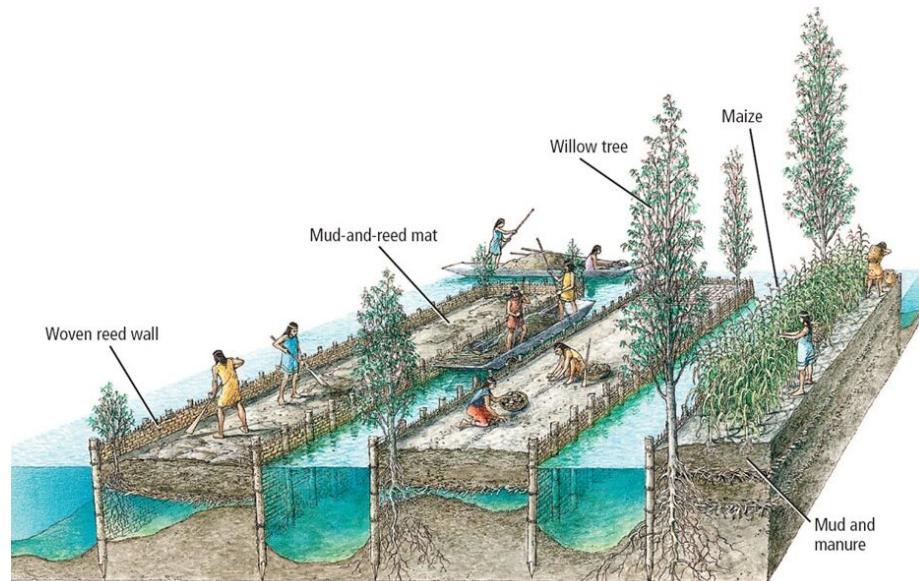


Figure 3: Chinampa diagram

## Downfall

All empires end eventually (except China for some reason.) Many different causes can result in the downfall of an empire. In the Aztecs' case, that cause was Spanish Colonialism. A man named Hernán Cortés arrived from Spain in the year 1519. His arrival and decimation of the Aztec people and culture would result in the end of the empire in the following years.



Figure 4: Portrait of Hernán Cortés

## **Empire**

The Aztec Empire controlled their territory using a system called a tribute system. This means that each kingdom that they conquered was allowed to self govern with whatever laws they want, but to keep that privilege the kingdoms were made to pay a price of human sacrifices and goods.

## Family

The Aztec family structure was very important to their culture. Men were to marry around twenty years old and women at sixteen. Women were tasked with the more homely responsibilities and the men were supposed to take on a job to support the family. Children were taught many everyday tasks and were legally required to attend school once they were fifteen.

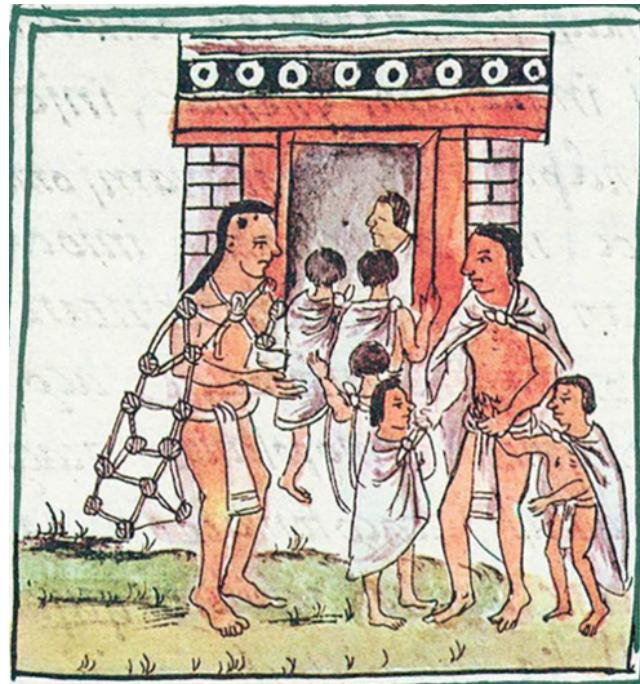


Figure 5: Children at school

## Geography

The Aztec Empire was located in what is now modern-day Mexico, in fact the word Mexico comes from Nahuatl. The Aztecs controlled the majority of the land from the twenty-fourth parallel (Durango Mexico) to the Yucatán Peninsula. This region is known as the Valley of Mexico because it is surrounded by mountains and lakes. This caused a very temperate, warm climate which the Aztecs thrived in.



Figure 6: Aztec Empire Map

## **Huitzilopochtli**

Huitzilopochtli was the patron gods of the Aztecs and represented the cardinal direction South. He was also the patron of their capital city, Tenochtitlan. Before the Aztec empire rose to power, it was Huitzilopochtli who guided the Aztecs to settle in Lake Texcoco and establish the city of Tenochtitlan, a choice that would prove very significant.



Figure 7: Huitzilopochtli

## Island of Tenochtitlan

Tenochtitlan is the floating island-city that served as the capital and birthplace of the Aztec Empire. The Aztec people settled here upon seeing an eagle perched atop a cactus while eating a rattlesnake, the exact sign that the god Huitzilopochtli told them they would find in the place they were to live. At its height Tenochtitlan had two hundred thousand residents and covered 5 square miles.

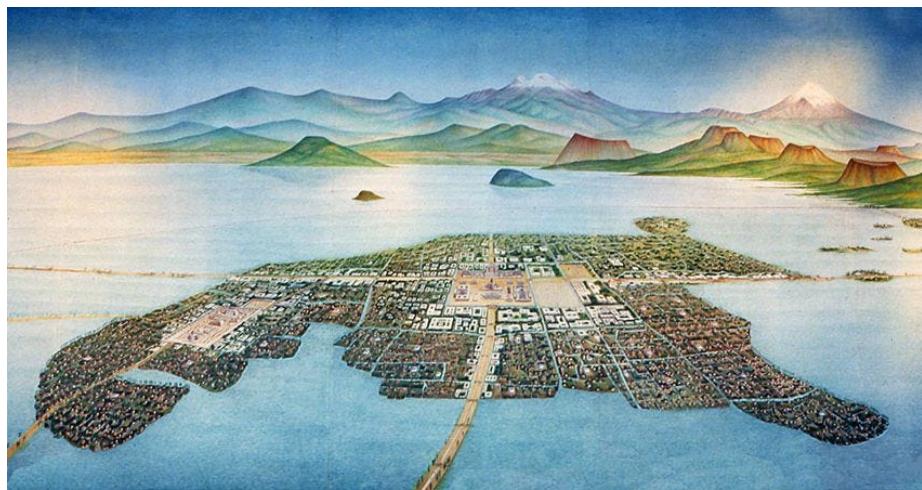


Figure 8: Painting of Tenochtitlan

## Jaguar Warriors

The Aztecs were known for their elaborate military uniforms. A key example of this are the uniforms of the Jaguar Warriors. The Jaguar Warriors were the highest, most elite military rank that a commoner without a noble bloodline could wish to achieve. The predominant feature of their attire was the pelt and head of a jaguar that was worn into battle.

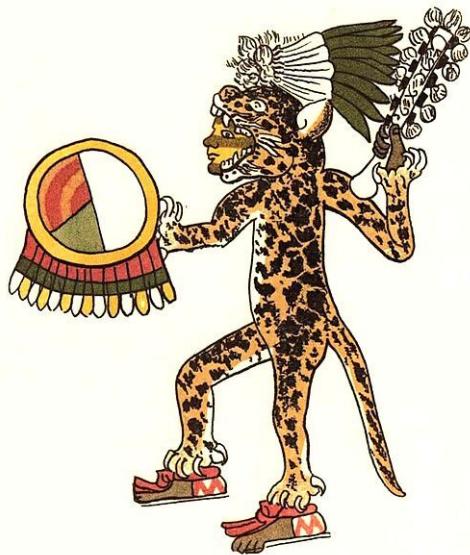


Figure 9: Jaguar Warrior

## King

The Aztec Empire was a religious monarchy. This means that there was a king who had the blood of the gods, and the government was run by other priests and religious figures. The king or emperor at the time of the Spanish Conquest was Moctezuma II (his Nahuatl name was Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin.) When Hernán Cortés overtook the Aztec Empire, he did so by kidnapping Moctezuma which caused chaos.



Figure 10: Motecuhzoma

## Language

The Aztecs spoke a language called Nahuatl (pronounced in English like NAH-waht-uhl.) A very similar variant of the language called Modern Nahuatl is still spoken in some parts of Mexico today. Classical Nahuatl did not have an alphabet, however. Similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics, each word was represented by a picture or group of pictures. The written form of the language was primarily inscribed in stone, although it was rarely written in documents called *amatl* or *amoxtli* and later in codices when the Spanish made them document their way of life.



Figure 11: Codex Mendoza

## Money

The Aztecs used cocoa beans as a form of uniform currency. One cocoa bean could buy a large tomato, eight could buy a rabbit, and a hundred could buy a turkey hen. These values were constant throughout the Aztec Empire, much like how a dollar has roughly the same spending power in different parts of the United States.



Figure 12: Cocoa beans

## Nopal

Nopal is the Spanish word for a prickly pear cactus, the type of cactus found in the region where the Aztecs lived. It comes from the Nahuatl word *nohpalli*, meaning cactus. Nopal was significant to the Aztecs because it was used for medicinal purposes and was the cactus that Huitzilopochtli told them they would find when the original Aztec people were looking for a place to settle.



Figure 13: Prickly pear cactus (nopal)

## **Obsidian**

Obsidian is a dark black, shiny, volcanic glass that occurs naturally throughout Mexico. The Aztecs used obsidian to make tools and weapons. Obsidian is especially useful for making knives because it is strong but brittle and can be shattered predictably to make extremely sharp edges.



Figure 14: Obsidian knife

## Polytheism

The word ‘polytheism’ means to believe in multiple, separate gods. Many religions such as Hinduism and Shintoism are polytheistic. The Aztec religion was polytheistic as well. The Aztecs worshiped four principal gods, each representing a cardinal direction. Tezcatlipoca, Xipe Totec, Huitzilopochtli, and Quetzalcoatl representing North, East, South, and West respectively.



Figure 15: Aztec gods

## Quetzalcoatl

Quetzalcoatl was the Aztec god of knowledge and the patron of Aztec priesthood. The name Quetzalcoatl is made of two parts. Quetzal-, meaning feathered and -coatl, meaning snake. Logically, he was often represented as a flying feathered serpent. Statues of his head were commonly carved into religious buildings such as temples. The largest flying animal ever - a pterosaur called Quetzalcoatlus - was named after this god.



Figure 16: Statue of Quetzalcoatl's head

## Recreation

The Aztecs - like any culture - had free time to fill. Some activities that the Aztecs engaged in included dancing, playing music, hunting and fishing, and playing board games. The Aztecs had a board game called *patolli*. It was a two player strategic game where each player tried to remove all of their pieces from the board before the other could.



Figure 17: A game of patolli

## **Sacrifice**

One of the most famous parts of Aztec history was the practice of human sacrifice. The Aztecs believed that to keep the gods happy they must sacrifice human life to them. When the Aztecs went to war, they would attempt to capture as many enemies as possible, careful not to waste precious human life. Then once the enemies were in the hands of the Aztecs they were sacrificed to the gods in various religious ceremonies.

## Tezcatlipoca

Tezcatlipoca was the god of the North to the Aztecs. He was the god of nighttime and revenge. He was originally worshiped by the Toltec people, making him one of the older deities that the Aztecs worshiped. His name means ‘Smoking Mirror’ in Nahuatl, and he was a shape-shifter.



Figure 18: Tezcatlipoca

## Underworld

The Aztecs believed in an afterlife that souls were transported to after they die. This land was called Mictlan and was believed to be under the earth. They journey was strenuous for the people traveling and took four years (the time that it took for a body to decompose.) There were nine levels that the dead had to pass through before completing their journey.



Figure 19: Mictlan

## Valuables

Gold was one of the most valuable Aztec possessions. It was very abundant and significant to the Aztec empire. It was called *teocuitlatl* in Nahuatl. This translates directly to ‘excrement of the gods’. They believed that the gold they found was the sweat of the sun as he exerted himself rising every morning. Only people with permission of the emperor were allowed to own gold, primarily in the form of jewelry.



Figure 20: Gold Artifacts

## War

The Aztecs are well-known for their ability to conduct warfare. They mastered many techniques such as ambushing their opponents as well as spying on them for intel. The Aztecs also had complex military ranks which you climbed based on the number of captives you brought back from the battlefield. Every rank had different attire, your clothing, weapons, and even hairstyle were changed according to your rank.



Figure 21: Aztecs at war

## Xipe Totec

Xipe Totec was the Aztec god representing the East. He encompassed the concept of the life → death → rebirth cycle which was a prominent concept in Aztec culture. He was the connection between replenishing (agriculture) and destruction (warfare.) His name means ‘The Flayed One’ because in Aztec mythology he flayed himself to give food to humans. This is an analogy to how corn seeds lose their outer shell and how snakes shed their skin.



Figure 22: Xipe Totec

## Yarn

Yarn and thus weaving played a significant role in Aztec culture. Yarn was typically made from cotton that the Aztecs grew rather than from animal fur. Skilled craftsmen would then weave yarn into elaborate designs and clothing for special religious ceremonies. Thick cotton fabrics were also used make armor for men going off into war.



Figure 23: Weaved carpets

## Zapotec People

The Zapotec people were a group living in Mesoamerica at the same time as the Aztecs. They coexisted with each other and interacted to trade often for things like textiles and ceramics. Due to proximity, the Zapotec and Aztecs fought over territory on numerous occasions.



Figure 24: Zapotec pyramids