

The Aztecs: Should Historians Emphasize Agriculture or Human Sacrifice?

At the same time that the Renaissance was unfolding in Europe, the Aztecs were creating a remarkable world-class society in the Americas. The years were 1350 to 1519. The place was roughly the site of present-day Mexico City.

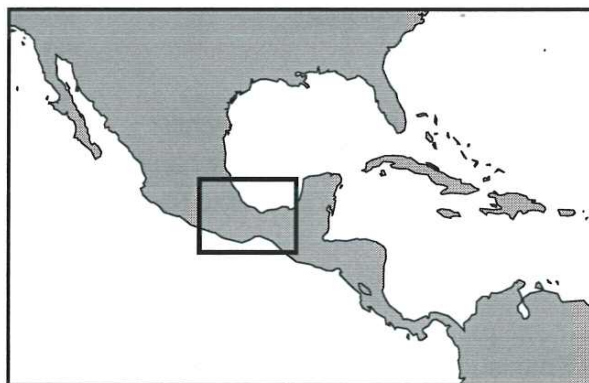
Frequently, we begin our study of the Aztecs in 1519 because that is the year Hernan Cortes and 500 Spanish **conquistadors** (“con-kees-ta-doors”) first entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (“ten-och-teet-lan”). However, we are interested in Aztec culture before the Spanish arrived. It is the **pre-conquest** Aztecs that will be the focus of this Mini-Q.

Understanding any civilization is challenging because civilizations are complex. We should not expect a smoothly ironed history. There will be wrinkles – some triumphs, some losses; some beauty, some ugliness. And historians will disagree about what to emphasize.

On the basic geography, there is no disagreement. The Aztecs lived in a geological **basin** in central Mexico that is about the size of Rhode Island. Surrounded by high mountain peaks, the basin extends 80 miles from north to south and 49 miles from east to west. In Aztec times, the basin collected water that formed five interconnected shallow lakes which provided splendid irrigation for farming. In the middle sat Tenochtitlan, an urban island built on landfill, and home to 300,000 people. Climate in this high region was unpredictable, with wet summers and dry, frost-filled winters. However, with the help of their calendars and their gods, the Aztecs managed to cope quite well.

The Aztecs first migrated to the shores of Lake Texcoco around 1100 CE. At the time they numbered about 10,000 people. When

they arrived, there were already many groups of farmers living in the lake area of central Mexico. The Aztecs were distrusted and disliked because they tended to push others out of their way. Eventually, after centuries of aggression, they were totally in charge. By 1434, they were demanding **tribute** and military support from people throughout the region. They were also busy developing a remarkable agricultural system called **chinampas** (“chin-ahm-pahs”). Because of their strong military and agricultural success, Aztec leaders were able to rule some ten million people.



Religion gave the Aztecs direction and purpose. Their religion included at least 128 major **deities**, including gods of rain, fire, water, corn, the sky, and the sun. The gods were recognized by a cycle of festivals and ceremonies that involved feasting,

dancing, and human sacrifice. The most important god, **Huitzilopochtli** (“weet-zee-lo-poch’-tlee”), was the Aztec sun god, who struggled to keep the night at bay and to bring warmth to the world. Huitzilopochtli needed strength in order to carry out his duties and the Aztecs believed that human blood and hearts provided the necessary nourishment. This led to some disturbing practices.

And so we come to our task. It is stated above that history has its wrinkles, its dark moments. Examine the five documents that follow and draw your own conclusions about the Aztecs. Then develop your answer to our question: *The Aztecs: Should historians emphasize agriculture or human sacrifice?*

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Background Essay Questions

1. During what years was Aztec society at its height? In what year did the conquistadors arrive from Spain?
2. What does it mean that we should not expect a “smoothly ironed” Aztec history?
3. Why has Tenochtitlan been described as an “urban island”? What was its population?
4. About how many deities did the Aztecs worship?
5. Why do you think that the Aztecs worshipped Huitzilopochtli?
6. Define these terms:

conquistadors

pre-conquest

basin

tribute

chinampas

deities

Huitzilopochtli

Timeline

- c. 1100 CE** – Aztecs arrive on shores of Lake Texcoco.
- 1200-1300** – Aztecs use rubber to make balls for game.
- 1325** – Aztecs found Tenochtitlan (modern-day Mexico City).
- 1348** – Black Death ravages Europe and North Africa.
- 1400s** – Aztec culture is at its height.
- 1492** – Christopher Columbus lands in the West Indies.
- 1519** – Spanish conquistador Heran Cortes enters Tenochtitlan.