

Aztec Notes

1300 – 1519 (1521)

I. General

Strictly speaking the Aztecs did not call themselves Aztecs, but rather Mexica. (Throughout this class both terms, Aztec and Mexica, will be used to refer to this dominant people of late pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.) Also, the Mexica who founded their capital on an island in the lake in a high valley in central México called themselves the *tenochca*; hence, their capital city—roughly, present-day Mexico City—was known as Tenochtitlán. Because of their late arrival in the center of Mexico, and because of their nomadic and aggressive culture, their culture—and their humanities—were a fusion of many previous cultures; i.e., those (and many others) that are listed on this website's [Index for Aztec Humanities](#). The technical term for such fusion is syncretism / *sincretismo*.

II. Language

The Aztec language was Náhuatl (*náhuatl*). It belongs to the Uto-Aztecan family of languages, which means it is related to native languages that were spoken as far north as the present-day state of Utah in the United States of America. For more information on Náhuatl see the notes on the language page of this website: [Languages of Latin America](#).

III. Religion and Cosmology

In general terms, the Aztecs discovered and promoted the rhythms of nature for communal survival. Rituals aimed to instill fear and trembling in the face of the dramas of nature. Think, for example, of the threats of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and hurricanes. Aztec society was theocratic, meaning that religious authorities ruled (theo = god; cratic = rule). The religion was polytheistic (many gods), with sun worship at its center. Religion, and hence society, was dominated by a priestly cast, and the divinity of the emperor was unquestioned. Furthermore, Aztec cosmology, society, and politics depended for their continuity on human sacrifice. (See this course's definition of culture on the [Definition of Humanities](#) page.) In other words, Aztecs thought that the gods must be strong and satisfied for humans and society to survive, and for the gods' satisfaction they had to be offered human hearts and blood. The best sacrifices were people captured in the Aztecs' constant military conquests. A balance, therefore, was achieved by a closed loop by which the state's prosperity depended on military conquest and human sacrifice in order to face and overcome threatening nature—and other threatening or invading peoples.

According to Aztec cosmology, the universe was divided in a double axis of horizontal and vertical. The horizontal axis featured the four cardinal points around a center with a god for each point and another god for the center. The vertical axis was

divided with an Upper world and a Lower world. In the Upper world there were 13 heavens for the gods and below there were 9 levels of what the Western world calls hell, but in the Aztec concept there was no moral differentiation between the levels of hell. The underworld was for the dead and for women who died in childbirth. The Aztec compass pointed east just as the early medieval compass did. East is where the sun rises, and it represented the male principle. West is where the sun sets, and it is the female principle where the sun begins its fight through the underworld so that it can rise again the next morning.

Time progressed in 52-year cycles. Each cycle was known as a Sun Cycle. Notice that there are two approaches to the notion of "Suns" and sun cycles according to the Aztecs' conception. According to one calculation, when the Spaniards arrived in Aztec territory, the Aztecs were in the early years of the Fourth Sun, which cycle was, of course, interrupted by the Spanish conquest in 1519-1521. According to the European calendar, the cycle of the Fourth Sun began in 1507 CE. (Incidentally, according to Chicano activists who understand the concept of Aztlán, contemporary Chicanos are living in the period of the Fifth Sun: See this course's cultural webpage for [Aztlán](#)). Counting backwards and using the European calendar, the period of the Third Sun B ran during the years 1455-1507 and Third Sun A ran from 1403-1455. The Second Sun existed in an undetermined, mythical, pre-empire period, and the First Sun existed in a mythical period two centuries earlier. In addition to the sun calendrical cycle, the Aztecs also had a lunar cycle of 13 months with 20 days each. (For Aztec drawings representing each of the 20 sacred days in the lunar months, see: => [Aztec days](#).) The two cycles coincided on the first day of the next sun cycle after 52 solar years.

According to another calculation, when the Spaniards arrived at Tenochtitlán, Aztec civilization was already in the Fifth Sun (Nahui Ollin in Náhuatl). The god of the Fifth Sun was Tonatiuh. In the famous Aztec Calendar Stone (or Sun Stone), the face in the stone's center is Tonatiuh. Aztec mythology says that this last age, which was interrupted, and in which we are still living, will be destroyed by earthquakes. According to this calculation, the age of the Fifth Sun began in 1479, the last year of Axayácatl's reign and the first year of emperor Tízoc's reign. The previous "sun" did not specifically cover, however, a 52-year period. Even so, the period of the Fifth Sun was defined as the Sun of full human civilization. In this mythological system of Aztec "Suns," the first Sun was created when the gods threw themselves into a fire in Teotihuacán. This First Sun was immobile. The sacrifice of more gods in this first sacred fire set the sun in motion. The order of the four mythological sun periods varies according to different authorities and traditions. According to one tradition, the Third Sun was the Sun of the Rain of Fire, which fire consisted metaphorically as a light volcanic rain. In reality, the myth of the Third Sun may have been referring to the eruption of the Xitle volcano (see: => Cuicuilco), which triggered the emigration of its survivors to Teotihuacán. In any case, the order of the Sun periods according to the famous Aztec Calendar Stone (Piedra del Sol) now housed in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City is as follows: First Sun (Wind Sun; Quetzalcóatl was the god of wind); Second Sun (Rain Sun, whose god was Tláloc); Third Sun (Water Sun); Fourth Sun (Jaguar Sun). According to Aztec mythology (cosmology and religion), each Sun was destroyed and the entire cosmos and Aztec civilization would

have ended had not massive blood sacrifices been made on the night before the next Sun was to appear, first by the gods, then by the emperors and priests, and finally, by captives, slaves, and virgins.

From a pre-Columbian, Aztec perspective, the end-of-epoch ritual was a model of symbolic beauty. Aztec priests ascended the Hill of the Star (i.e., Venus, the morning star) on the extinct volcano of Cuicuilco (see the [Cuicuilco pages](#)). The sign for the world of a new epoch to begin was when the star reached the center of the night sky (i.e., the heavens). Then a new fire was set ablaze in the chest of a freshly killed sacrificial victim. Runners lit their torches in this new fire and ran to spread the light from these torches in houses, temples, towns, etc. Joy among the people increased, it is said, whereupon personal bloodletting and the immolation of captives was carried out in many places throughout Aztec-controlled lands.

Some of the main Aztec gods are:

- Quetzalcóatl (name means “feathered serpent;” god of wind, creation, fertility, and patron deity of the Aztec priesthood): For an Aztec codex illustration of the Quetzalcóatl facing Tezcatlipoca, see: => [Codex Borbonicus](#). For his legendary birthplace, see: => [Tepoztlán](#). For his stay at Tula, see: => [Tula](#). For his stay at Chichén Itzá, see: => [Chichén Itzá](#). For his relationship with Hernán Cortés, see: => [Cortés Chronology](#).
- Tláloc (god of rain and corn; parallel to the Maya god Chaac)
- Huitzilopochtli (name means “hummingbird of the south;” original Mexica war god and god of sacrifice and the sun; patron deity of the Mexica/Aztecs)
- Tonatiuh (name means: “he goes shining forth;” sun god)
- Tezcatlipoca (name means “smoking mirror;” war god and god of total power; Tezcatlipoca, who was transformed into the first sun, is also the patron deity of Mexica/Aztec kings; this god ran Quetzalcóatl out of Toltec Tula); see: => [Tezcatlipoca](#)
- Coatlicue (the demi-goddess mother of Huitzilopochtli, the goddess of creation and destruction, birth and death, beginning and end, light and darkness)
- Coyolxauhqui (demi-goddess of the moon and Huitzilopochtli’s brother; she and her other siblings tried unsuccessfully to kill her mother Coatlicue and her brother).

Note on the effigy of Huitzilopochtli recreated annually in the seventh phase of the temple dedicated to this god in the [Templo Mayor](#) in Tenochtitlán. It was made from amaranth seeds and glued together with honey and the blood from human sacrifices made in front of the statue. Inside the effigy were bags containing jade, bones, and amulets, the purpose of which, according to the Aztecs, was to provide sustenance for the god. The effigy was reconstructed each year and was dressed in rich clothing; its head was covered in a mask made of gold. When the annual ritual celebration dedicated to Huitzilopochtli ended, the effigy was torn apart and thrown down the pyramid for the worshippers to eat.

One of the most dramatic artifacts of Aztec cosmology is the famous Calendar Stone (*el calendario azteca*). In fact and more accurately, it is now known as the *Piedra del Sol* (Sun Stone). This polychrome stone disk is as intricately carved as an small jade carving, but, instead, it is monumentally huge. The stone was painted with 20 different colors. At its center is the Sun (a god: Tonatiuh). Flanking the face of Tonatiuh are four more or less square boxes indicating the four suns. In a circle around the four boxes are symbols of the 20 named days of the 20 days in the 13 months of the Mesoamerican lunar calendar. Farther out from the day symbols there are symbols of the heavens and the stars. The outer circle shows two fire serpents meeting at the base of the stone disk. For pictures of the Calendar Stone and more commentary, click on the following image:



IV. The great temple (*Templo Mayor*) in myth and history

The myth and the history of the founding of Tenochtitlán overlap. At the heart of the Aztec capital is the great temple (*el Templo Mayor*), which, in effect, was the city's combined power center of their religion and their government. According to objective history, the Mexicas migrated from a place either near or far to the northwest of the present-day Mexico City to a place they called Coatepec (the serpent hill), which was reputed to be the birthplace of Huitzilopochtli. Here they settled. The Mexica band belonged to a larger tribe called the Huitznahua. The Mexica band was led by a human chieftain, Huitzilopochtli. The Huitznahuas were led by a woman warrior named Coyolxauhqui, but, led by her, the Huitznahuas attacked their chieftain. In the internecine fighting Huitzilopochtli defeated the Huitznahuas and he killed and decapitated Coyolxauhqui. Huitzilopochtli had the hearts of the defeated Huitznahuas cut out.

On the basis of this legendary/historical event, it appears, the myth of the Aztec war god Huitzilopochtli was elaborated over time. In the Aztec origins myth, the name of the historical leader Coyolxauhqui was the daughter of a woman named **Coatlícue** (also, see below). According to the myth, Coatlicue, who had already given birth to 400 "Southerners" became pregnant by means of feathers that fell on her from the sky and that she hid in her bosom. The son that she bore from this miraculous conception was Huitzilopochtli. Seeing that her mother Coatlicue was dishonored, Coyolxauhqui conspired with the 400 children to kill their mother. One of the 400 alerted Huitzilopochtli about the conspiracy. The boy dressed for battle: a shield covered with eagle

feathers, a blue dart weapon, face painted with diagonal stripes, earplugs, feather-covered sandals, and blue paint on his legs and arms. One of his companions killed and decapitated Coyolxauhqui on Coatepec hill, and her body was thrown to the bottom of the southern side of the hill—which mythical event was recreated in the Templo Mayor site. (For the giant stone disk of Coyolxauhqui, see: => [Museo del Templo Mayor #3](#)). Meanwhile, Huitzilopochtli alone annihilated the 400. Huitzilopochtli's identification with the eagle makes him a sun symbol. The defeated woman Coyolxauhqui makes her a moon symbol.

When the Mexicas settled on the island of Tenochtitlán, they built a small shrine to their war god. For them this shrine became the "navel of the world." From this sacred central space they developed their city and they attempted to reproduce their view of the cosmos. The full design of the Templo Mayor, then, became their axis mundi and the center of their empire and the center of the cosmos. In this cosmology, the horizontal plane with the temple at its center was the plane of the earth (Cemanáhuac) in the shape of a disk. Around the edge of the disk was water. The earth's four cardinal points radiated from this center, each point having its own color, symbol, and god. On a vertical plane below the disk of the earth were congruent disks on nine successive levels; above the earth disk were congruent disks on thirteen levels. The souls of the dead descended through the lower levels until they reached the deepest level (Mictlan). At the top level above the earth resided the dual god, Ometecuhtli-Omecíhuatl. The Mexicas duplicated this cosmology in the design and architecture of the great temple pyramid. They believed that the dead had to travel between two hills that fought each other (the two giant volcanoes?) so that they could reach Mictlan. It is possible that the twin temples that sit atop the pyramid (see: => [Templo Mayor Model](#) in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City) symbolized these twin hills and therefore acted as the vertical access point to the nether world of the dead. Aztec duality is clearly seen in these twin temples, one dedicated to the rain god Tláloc (symbol of sustenance, food, life) and the other dedicated to the war god Huitzilopochtli (symbol of war, death). Hence, in the Aztecs' religious ceremonies they reenacted the origin myth of both the structure of the cosmos and their ethnic and cultural origins. Furthermore, on the platform at the foot of the war god temple was a stone statue representing Huitzilopochtli's defeated and decapitated sister, Coyolxauhqui. The religious ceremony focused the war god's victory over the 400 brothers by sacrificing warriors conquered in the Aztecs wars. Their hearts were cut from them and their heartless bodies were thrown down the steps of the Templo Mayor, where they became a meal for the victors.

V. Aztec history

In the European year of 1325 CE, the Mexica tribe discovered and settled on

an island in Lake Texcoco, in the middle of the Valle de Anáhuac, where the present-day capital of México, the Distrito Federal (D.F.), is located. This tribe had arrived in the Valle de Anáhuac about twenty-five years earlier. The Mexica/Tenochca called their new city-state Tenochtitlán (in Nahuatl, "city of Tenochcas"). The war god Huitzilopochtli was their principal deity. According to their oral history, Huitzilopochtli told them in a prophecy to leave their original island land of Aztlán (some where in the American southwest) to migrate to an island in a lake where they would find an eagle with a serpent in its beak and sitting on a cactus. They saw this prophecy fulfilled on the island in Lake Texcoco.

In the Aztec historical period, the emperor (*tlatoani*: the one who speaks, the maximum Mexica ruler) Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (Moctezuma I: 1440-1469) extended the Mexica's region of power. The following Aztec emperor, Axayácatl (1469-1479) extended the power area even more, and he stimulated Aztec religious arts fully. During Axayácatl's reign the Aztec Calendar (Sun) Stone was created.

During the time of Axayácatl, Nezahualcóyotl (died 1472), the king of a rival kingdom on the edge of Lake Texcoco (called the kingdom of Texcoco), was renowned as a great poet, politician, artist, priest, philosopher, and orator. He constructed many temples and palaces, and, tellingly, he ordered his people to worship a single god and to avoid the blood-letting of the Aztecs. In this way, then, Nezahualcóyotl prefigured and prepared the way for the arrival of the monotheistic Spaniards a half century later. The Texcoco emperor following Nezahualcóyotl was Nezahualpilli (1472-1516), who was Nezahualcóyotl's son. Among other talents, this Texcoco emperor was an expert in astrology, religion, and necromancy (divination).

Following the Aztec emperor Axayácatl was emperor Tizoc (1479-1486). He supervised the construction of the great pyramid in the heart of Tenochtitlán with a double temple on its top tier. This temple was dedicated to the war god Huitzilopochtli and the rain god Tláloc. In addition, during his reign the famous sacrificial stone of Tízoc was carved. After Tízoc comes Ahuizotl (1486-1503), who led Aztec conquests down to Oaxaca in southern Mexico. During this military campaign Ahuizotl's soldiers took 20,000 prisoners, all of whom were sacrificed to the Aztec war god in Tenochtitlán. This event was the high point of the Aztec sacrificial ritual. The last emperor of the Aztecs was Motecuhzoma (Moctezuma II, 1503-1519). He presided over the new fire ceremony in 1507, a sacrificial ceremony the purpose of which was to ignite a new fire on the last night of the concluding 52-year cycle. With this new fire, the Aztecs were told that the sun would rise the next morning beginning a new 52-year cycle. Moctezuma II was an adept at divination and interpreting Aztec prophecies, one of which foretold the return of Quetzalcóatl. Moctezuma II thought that the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés was the reincarnation of the demi-god Quetzalcóatl, and he thought

that Cortés's second-in-command, Pedro de Alvarado, was Tonatiuh, the sun god. When Cortés entered Tenochtitlán he took Moctezuma II prisoner in his own palace. In 1521 he was killed by stones thrown at him in his palace by his own people when, as ordered by Cortés, he was attempting to dissuade the Tenochcas from rioting while they were trying to free him. Moctezuma's death precipitated the uprising by the Tenochcas against Pedro de Alvarado (while Cortés was absent from the city). The result of this uprising was the complete Spanish victory over the Mexica of Tenochtitlán, the destruction of Aztec culture, the razing of Tenochtitlán, and the subsequent construction of a new order. In 1521, a new empire, the Spanish empire, began in Mesoamerica.

Here is a list of the known Aztec emperors, with Common Era (C.E.) dates and Aztec dates at the Great Temple in Tenochtitlán:

Acamapichtli	1372-1391
Huitzilihuitl	1391-1415
Chimalpopoca	1415-1426
Itzcóatl	1426-1440 (4 Reed, 1431 C.E.)
Moctezuma I	1440-1468 (1 Rabbit, 1454 C.E.)
Axayácatl	1468-1481 (3 House, 1469 C.E.)
Tízoc	1481-1486
Ahuizotl	1486-1502
Moctezuma II	1502-1520
Cuitláhuac	8 days in 1520; Moctezuma II's brother
Cuauhtémoc	1520-1521 (Ahuizotl's son and Moctezuma's half brother)

V. Aztec Society and Economy

The Aztec capital was called Tenochtitlán, located in **Lake Texcoco**, which now is covered by most of Mexico's Distrito Federal (Mexico City). Prior to the Spanish conquest by Hernán Cortés and his soldiers, Tenochtitlán was a city of canals, bridges, lakeside palaces and residences, gardens, and markets. It was dominated by well-to-do Aztec nobles, artists, artisans, priests, soldiers, and merchants. The population grew to a height of about 300,000, which, in the fifteenth century, made it one of the largest cities in the world. In a phrase, it represented the culmination of imperial and urban civilization, and, as such, was many times more impressive and imposing than any city in

Spain. Tenochtitlán was at the power center of a virtually omnipotent and invincible state, and it has often been called the "Rome of America" because of an apt comparison with the capital of the Roman Empire. At the city's center was the great temple, which was a copy of the temple at Tenayuca, which itself was the Toltec center after Tula was abandoned. Along with Tenochtitlán's grandeur is the fact that it prospered based on a culture of violence. (Once again, see this course's definition of culture on the [Definition of Humanities](#) page.). It was a conquest-oriented society: conquer first, then assimilate other peoples' culture, religion, language, industry, and commerce. The major source of income for the capital was tribute from conquered tribes. Interestingly, the most precious substance for the Aztecs was jade, not gold. Unity in the Mexican Empire was centered on highly developed urban planning in the capital city, and at the city's center was the great pyramid, with its stairway, sloping motif, and multilevel, stepped construction.

The *tenochcas* lived by a lake for protection, isolation, survival, and power. Floating gardens (the famous *chinampas*) were created to produce food and flowers. As the population expanded, as the empire grew more powerful and successful, the island-city expanded into the lake, where housing neighborhoods were constructed. Bridges and aqueducts were maintained in excellent condition to the mainland. For example, two channels were maintained to the hilly area at Chapultepec (then on the mainland, now near the city center): one was always kept functional while the other was being constantly upgraded and repaired. Sanitation boats carried refuse away from the city and reprocessed it for fertilizer. Every house maintained special pots for human elimination. Tellingly, after the conquest of 1521, the new Spanish rulers abandoned the Aztec sanitation system. The result, after the conquest, was the rapid spread of a number of diseases.

VI. Aztec Arts

Aztec art contains the following distinctive characteristics: (1) a wide range from austere realism to total abstraction; (2) careful proportion in all arts and crafts; (3) non-secular themes and images; (4) natural elements that complement religious concepts (i.e., there is no European emotionalism or individualism); and (5) synthesis and appropriation of art of conquered peoples. For example, from the Toltecs the Aztecs got images of eagles and devoured hearts and walls of serpents and skulls. In very general terms, artistic features rather unique to the Aztecs are obsidian knives, rock-crystal skulls (for rituals and for art), and jade statues (especially of Xólotl, Quetzalcóatl's brother, the god of lightning and death often depicted as a skeleton, a man with a dog's head, or a monstrous animal with reversed feet; also, Xólotl was the god of the ballgame). Variety was added to distinctively Aztec art by baroque complexity imported from Monte Albán (archeological site in Oaxaca, southern Mexico), realism from the peoples of western Mexico, and other expressionistic plastic arts. Aztec architecture typically

showed painted surfaces and a focus on majestic religious buildings. Notable among the latter was the Sun Temple of Teotihuacan, which was adapted by the Aztecs when they found it burned and abandoned by an earlier civilization. This Sun Temple demonstrates gigantic harmonious masses and planes, an architectural illusion of mass and height, and nearly perfect proportions. The Aztecs were also excellent sculptors who were known for awe-inspiring, frightening, forbidding, and monumental works. In the area of the fine arts, the Aztecs accomplished finely wrought drawings on codices; their dances were more advanced than either their music or literature; and their oratory was renowned and effective. Unfortunately, most of the Aztec codices were destroyed by the first Spanish conquistadors and priests.

One of the finest achievement the Aztecs made in the arts was in the literary genre of poetry. The Aztecs wrote in their language, Náhuatl. Since their civilization was at its peak of development and achievement when the Spanish discoverers and conquistadors arrived in Mesoamerica, it follows that their theater, dance, and poetry were also at a peak of quality, content, and expression. There were dance schools in the cities of Texcoco, Tenochtitlán, Tlacopán, and Tacuba. One of the principal theaters was in the plaza of Tlatelolco (=> [Plaza de Tlatelolco](#), Mexico City). Poetry was "published" mainly through oral transmission, although some of it was written on the Aztecs' version of paper or parchment. When the Spanish missionaries arrived, a small portion of the Aztecs' oral literature was written down. Among the most famous of the poets was **Nezahualcóyotl** (1402-1472), who was a major philosopher king of the separate kingdom of Texcoco, on the edge of Lake Texcoco in whose center was the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. For two poems by Nezahualcóyotl, click here: => [Náhuatl poems](#).

Museums and private collectors all over the world have collections of Aztec art. However, the most important collections of such art is found in the Museo Nacional de Antropología de México (MNA) —one of the greatest museums in the world—in México, D.F. The research arm of the MNA is the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). Click on the following initials for their official website: [MNA.INAH](#). For the professor-photographer's photo tour of this museum, click on the following image:



For a photo tour of highlights of Aztec art in the Museo Nacional de Antropología click on the following image:



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