

Apt successors to and purveyors of infamous Toltec legend, the Mexica (who in the 15th century were instrumental in forming what is popularly called the Aztec Empire), or Aztecs, as they came to be known, were among a series of newcomers to central Mexico in the 13th century. According to native annals, they were one of several groups (the Chalca, Xochimilca, Tepaneca, and other peoples) who set out from the legendary remoteness in the north called Chicomoztoc, "Place of Seven Caves," in A.D. 1064. The cosmogony of the Mexica and their contemporaries was similar to that at Teotihuacan, where both deities and humans symbolically emerged from caves. The stories about the Mexica and their odyssey across the land and waters from the north are the best known, but all seven groups of Chichimeca travelers eventually made their way to Mexico's fertile central basin and established themselves in or near locales many of which have similar place-names today.

Mexica men, women, and children made up the party. Along with a succession of leaders, one or more priests carried their principal god from one place to

another, appeasing the spiritual pantheon with appropriate ceremonies as they journeyed. These rituals did not exempt the travelers from hardship, however, which included warfare with other groups as well as horrific, competitive battles among their deities. At a site called Coatepec, near Tula, the god Huitzilopochtli prevailed, but only after first being forced to slaughter his malicious sister, Coyolxauhqui, immediately after his birth, when he was already a fully outfitted adult warrior, then consume the heart of their priestess-mother, Coatlicue, whom his sister had killed. According to their legends, it was through Huitzilopochtli's counsel that the Mexica ultimately arrived at their promised land and later established their rule as the Aztecs over much of Mexico from 1428 to 1521. The Mexica were thus obliged to their god thereafter.

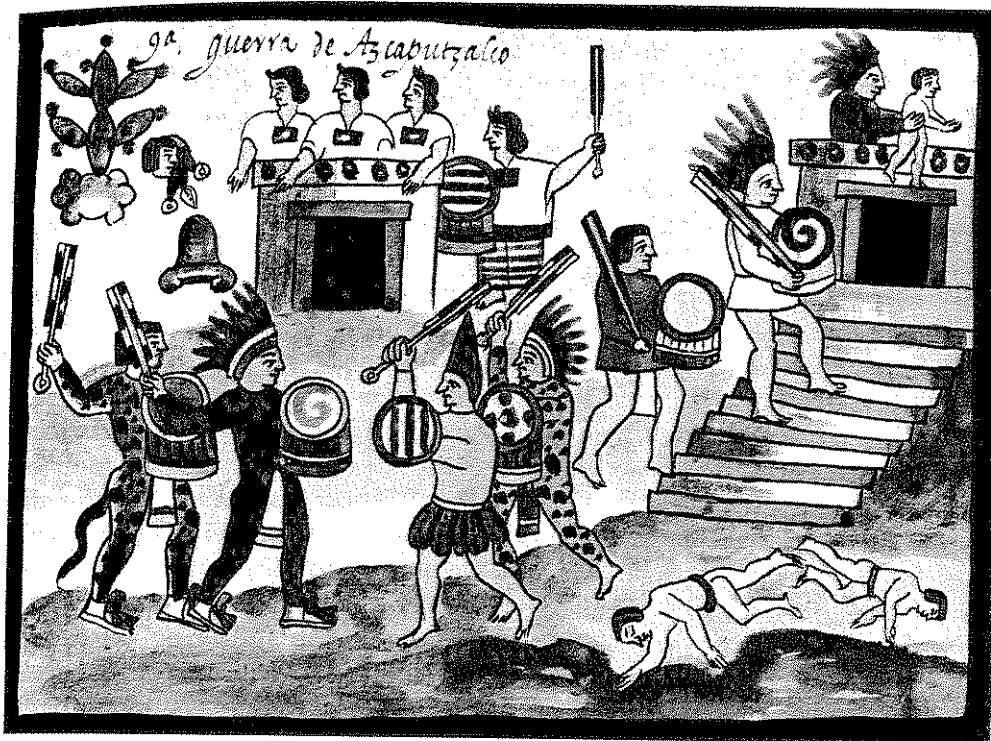
But the Mexica had to prove themselves first, for as crude Chichimeca they were not welcomed by the long-settled, culturally refined peoples in any region. Accordingly, among various strategies to secure themselves a prime place to live, the Mexica offered themselves to the rulers of Toltec-connected Culhuacan (Colhuacan) as mercenaries against a rival government, and as proof of their prowess they brought back bags filled with the ears of their victims.

The records are legion regarding the Mexicas' exploits during these early years. The following example of an attempt to secure their relationship with Culhua royalty, while surely the most vivid, also foreshadows things to come. Subscribing to the popular myth of Toltec supremacy, the Mexica aspired to try to establish an ancestral affiliation with them through a marital alliance of one of their young men with the daughter of the king of Culhuacan, only to sacrifice the bride-princess, flay her, and have one of their deity-impersonator priests don her skin and display himself before her terrified father at a ceremony in honor of Xipe Totec. Of course, all the Mexica were banished from Culhuacan.

Undaunted, the Mexica followed Huitzilopochtli's prophecy that they should persist until they saw the symbol of an eagle with a serpent in its beak perched on a tall cactus. Thus, in A.D. 1324, while still much in disfavor, they settled on a rattlesnake-infested island, apparently the only place left for them. They named their home Mexico Tenochtitlan, "Place Next to the Prickly Pear Cactus," and the serpent and the eagle became permanent icons of Mexica culture.

But now that they were subject to the powerful rulers of the Tepanecas, whose capital was at Azcapotzalco, the Mexica were obligated to pay tribute and supply warriors to aid the Tepanecas in their conquests of additional peoples and territories. The Mexica also labored diligently to gentrify their Chichimeca ways by emulating the social manners of others with whom they came in contact.

Yet all the while the Mexica were developing their own social and economic situation at Tenochtitlan by means of *chinampa* agriculture. *Chinampas* were raised fields usually located in swampy areas or on the margins of lakes surrounding an island. Raised fields were formed from muck scooped from the lake bed and piled high in rows that could be easily irrigated and cultivated. This was an intensive form of agriculture, and since the soil was unusually fertile, specialty crops often were the preferred produce.



The Mexica conquered the kingdom of Azcapotzalco under the leadership of Itzcoatl and Tlacauelel Cihuacoatl. The artist depicts weapons, warrior attire, and battle protocol along with the defeated, stripped warriors at the foot of the conquered ruler's palace. In this painting, even women take up arms.

It is likely that by the mid-1350s Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, was the dominant language in central Mexico, although Otomi, Pinome, and numerous other languages were also spoken. Best described as Nahuas in a general sense and because their language was largely the lingua franca of Mesoamerica, all the peoples in central Mexico nonetheless cultivated ethnic-based group identities. The independent Nahua political groupings were known as the *altepetl*, a compound of *atl* (water) and *tepetl* (mountain) that metaphorically signified the indigenous concept of kingdom or ethnic state, each with its own distinct name, territory, rulership, and society. These sovereign Nahua polities sought to enhance their wealth and prestige through trade, marital alliance, warfare, and subjugation.

The Mexica, still striving to establish their legitimacy through pointing up their Toltec ancestry, once again solicited a royal marriage with a Culhua woman. The offspring of this union, a son named Acamapichtli, thus ennobled, became the founder of and the first *tlatoani*, "He Who Says Something," in effect the king of the Mexica dynasty (see Table 2, page 77, for a list of the Mexica and Aztec leaders and kings). Acamapichtli enriched Mexico Tenochtitlan's human and material resources considerably, making it possible for his son Huitzilihuitl and then his grandson Chimalpopoca to succeed him and continue to expand the *altepetl*.

But it was Chimalpopoca's uncle, Itzcoatl, who took the kingdom to its apex while laying the foundation for the Aztec empire. With the assistance of other

rulers, Itzcoatl conquered Azcapotzalco and created new alliances with the Tepanecas, the former overlords of the Mexica. Under this new regime succession to Mexica rulership depended not only on meritorious personal character and stalwart behavior on the battlefield but on the official approval of one's royal cohorts as well.

It cannot be said that the Mexica were necessarily innovators. Rather, their genius lay in appropriating established ideologies and practices and employing them for their own exaggerated purposes. The Mexica worldview—whether in religion, politics, economics, or society—fundamentally mirrored that of their predecessors. Theirs was a fourfold universe as well; they structured their lives after that sophisticated and complex cosmic principle.

Ideally, and following established Mesoamerican precedents, Mexica society was composed of two classes: nobles and commoners. But success as a warrior or merchant, or a good marriage, afforded considerable social mobility, and there were many exceptions to the rule. Likewise, Mexico Tenochtitlan was divided into four ranked cardinal Mesoamerican quadrants: Moyotlan in the southwest, Teopan in the southeast, Atzacualco in the northeast, and Cuepopan in the northwest. However, east, always the principal Mesoamerican direction, no longer ranked first.

The quarters of the altepetl were further divided into subunits called *calpolli*, which are more generally thought to be made up of commoners. Each *calpolli*, usually four or six in number, was headed by a lord-ruler who saw to the general well-being of the community, the collecting of tribute, the fulfillment of *calpolli* religious obligations, and the periodic channeling of required goods and labor to the *altepetl tlatoani*, or king, who in turn directed a portion of the commoners' obligations on to the *huey tlatoani*, or great king, the Aztec emperor. Each subunit was a self-contained, separate, equal unit with its own name, space, leader, deity, and society that mimicked the kingdom writ small. Efficiency in organization and operation was achieved by ranking the polities and the rulers of each constituency and systematically rotating their duties.

The Nahua household was the *calpolli* and *altepetl* in microcosm. The Nahua lacked a term for the family. At this most intimate level Nahua social organization was typically based upon a cluster of any number of houses opening onto a common patio, with sometimes several generations of occupants related by blood and marriage. Kinship, then, in one way or another bound the unit together, with an adult male probably serving as head of the overall household. Grandparents and parents, possibly widowed, with their children, siblings, nieces, nephews, and orphans (in no set pattern, it seems) might live in a particular house. Grouped together in a common territory, several clusters could make up a *calpolli*.

Marriages within and across group boundaries created as well as helped to maintain confederations of households, subunits, and kingdoms intact. Even in the grandest manifestation of the Aztec empire, its nexus was in large part its bringing of royal daughters from distant altepetl as brides for imperial kings,

with their offspring often becoming rulers in the newly affiliated polity. Aztec kings reportedly had dozens of wives and at least as many children, but such practices were the privilege of the nobility, monogamy being the rule among the Nahua majority.

Indeed, marriage was a key event in the Nahuas' life cycle. Because marriage was considered to be a sacred covenant, brokers representing the families of the prospective bride and groom negotiated on their behalf. Such things as property, residence, and the ceremony itself were doubtless among the topics considered. Once all were in agreement, the bride was secluded and prepared for her marriage. A significant part of the wedding ceremony was the ritual "tying the knot"—literally joining together the bride's blouse or shirt and the groom's cape in a common knot at the shoulder.

The husband's responsibilities included providing for his family—whether by tending to his fields or working as a merchant or an artisan—and, of course, being ready to serve as a warrior when called upon. The wife's duties were just as important, for she had charge of the household, which included nurturing the family, planting and harvesting some crops, maintaining the home, performing certain sacred domestic rituals to foster prosperity, and weaving the textiles to clothe her family, satisfy tribute obligations, and perhaps exchange at the market.

The birth of a child was occasion for celebration and more ceremony. Among the rituals was one of burying the placenta in the dirt floor of the house. In the case of daughters, their umbilical cords were buried adjacent to the hearth. A priest was consulted to divine the baby's future and name her, and there was a presentation of symbolic gender-related tokens as gifts. Baby girls received kits of cooking tools and weaving swords; boys received farm tools, weapons, and other items to ensure success in the battles that likely lay ahead.

Children were cherished among the Nahuas, and most had strict upbringings. Both boys and girls attended school during their formative years. There was a school for commoners and another for children of noble families. Their parents instructed them as to their respective household roles. Females interested in serving as temple priestesses might attend a special school. Education was to ready one for the many responsibilities in life, and noble children especially were to prepare themselves for leadership as rulers, priests, scholars, scientists, jurists, or artists.

The Nahuas' social protocol was such that their language was rich in formulas and modes of eloquent high speech. Males used a special linguistic style to address one another. In their formalized speeches, elders admonished children to practice moderation in all behavior and to be respectful of their superiors. The ideal personality was described as a well-formed "face and heart." During the 15th and 16th centuries, Mexica society was nearly overburdened with well-bred nobles, intellectuals, and other specialists whose influence and contributions were believed critical for the continued well-being of the kingdom.

Mexica society had benefited extraordinarily from the political collaboration of King Itzcoatl and his half-brother Tlacaehel, a wizard of sorts when it came to setting the altepetl on course for greater expansion. Tlacaehel quickly earned the ominous title Cihuacoatl (woman snake), because he helped mastermind the interplay of Mexica theology, economics, and warfare to generate unheard-of wealth and prestige. It was under the joint leadership of Itzcoatl and Tlacaehel Cihuacoatl that the Aztec empire was established. The king and his Cihuacoatl even rewrote history as they launched new, extensive trade networks that brought in not only the supplies needed to sustain the Mexica, with a surplus for redistribution, but also a greater store of luxury items than had been known before.

Access to such resources most often depended on an elite cadre of merchants called *pochteca*, who traveled to both known and unknown territories to gain strategic intelligence and promote trade. Inevitably, warfare became necessary when alien peoples resisted Aztec intrusions. Once conquered (and only a few were able to withstand Aztec warfare over the long term), new subjects were required to furnish tribute in the form of whatever local specialty goods were desired and to provide allocations of young men and women for labor or ritual sacrifice. For example, by the 16th century 16,000 rubber balls from Tlachtepec, near Veracruz, were required annually for games with them in the empire. Otherwise, except for an occasional exaction to support extraordinary imperial events in Mexico Tenochtitlan, apparently little else changed.

One major benefit of the extensive Aztec empire was the development of local and regional markets. Food, crafts, textiles, medicines, exotica, and slaves are only a few of the items available there for sale or exchange. By far the largest and most important market was at Tlatelolco, a co-kingdom of sorts on the island of Mexico Tenochtitlan. Some 50,000 people visited on major market days, and there was such an abundance and variety of items available that magistrates were appointed to guarantee their fair exchange. Currency was most often in the form of lengths of woven cloth or given quantities of cacao beans, which on more than one occasion were discovered to have been counterfeited, with soil or meal substituted for the flesh of the beans.

In addition to enjoying ostentatious displays at the markets, the Aztecs patronized guilds of artists and craftspeople to fashion many of the most precious items into exceptional works of art. The Aztecs likened their style and subject matter to those of Toltec arts, but in truth Aztec artists had as distinctive a style as any of their predecessors. Firsthand accounts by conquerors as well as native survivors attest to an Aztec signature style in the decorative arts. For example, work with feathers from many regions of Mesoamerica was exhibited in exquisite headdresses, shields, fans, and courtly attire, and no doubt feather tapestries and the like decorated palaces, temples, and residences. Other luxuries were finely worked ceramics, mosaics, gold, silver, and copperware, and precious stones, jade and turquoise being among the most coveted.

Almost in deliberate contrast to their delicate fine art was the Aztecs' stone statuary. Great numbers of massive—usually terrifying—images of some of their

more haunting deities were sculpted with nothing but stone tools. Their representation of Coatlicue, Huitzilopochtli's mother, for example, is estimated to weigh as much as 16 tons. These imposing sculptures were then strategically positioned to reaffirm the Aztecs' devotion to their gods. Their street corners, temple plazas, and most other landmarks were adorned with such creations as enormous fanged serpent heads, stone skulls, skeleton figures, and tall, stark human standard-bearers.

Without doubt, the highest Aztec aesthetic expression came in literature and music. Each Nahua *altepetl* had its own literary tradition derived from annals; philosophical, theological, and astronomical treatises; dynastic genealogies; and oral histories. Moreover, it exalted its own heritage and accomplishments to the exclusion of almost everyone else's. *In tlilli in tlapalli* (the black the red) was the Nahuatl metaphor for writing, but in truth their books were filled with brightly colored pictorial images. Recorded on paper made from the bark of a native tree (the *amaquabuitl*, or "paper tree"), the Nahuas stored their precious books, along with maps, tribute records, and other official and personal accounts, in royal libraries.

But notwithstanding their other literary accomplishments, the Aztecs became masters of history and oratory. Among the population at large, the prevailing wisdom of their sages was presumed to supersede that of everyone else. Rulers, priests, scholars, scribes, and artists collaborated to create an Aztec literary canon. Success in war, the installation of a new king on the throne, festivities in honor of a particular deity, and events called for by the ceremonial calendar were all occasions when the books were brought before the public and the privileged information contained therein was revealed. The images in the texts were memorized and, in concert with instrumental music, dancing, and burning incense, the Nahuatl song-liturgy repeatedly brought to life the full pageant of Aztec culture.