

Agriculture in History

1502-1520:

Aztec Agriculture and Tribute Systems Reaches Its Pinnacle

The reign of the last preconquest Aztec emperor, Montezuma II, witnessed the culmination of imperial control over the Central Mexican Plateau. The urban capital of Tenochtitlán boasted a dense, socially diverse population, sustained through a unique productive economy and raised-plot agriculture and augmented by tribute from conquered peoples, before it fell to the Spanish.

Locale: Tenochtitlán, Aztec Empire (now Mexico City, Mexico)

Cateogries: Government and politics; colonization

Key figures

Montezuma II (1467-1520), Aztec emperor, r. 1502-1520

Ahuitzotl (d. 1503), Aztec emperor, r. 1486-1502, and uncle of Montezuma II

Hernán Cortés (1485-1547), Spanish conquistador and conqueror of the Aztecs

Summary of Event

Montezuma II was the ninth emperor of the Mexica, or Aztec, a militaristic culture that had resided in the Valley of Mexico since the early fourteenth century. Montezuma II inherited the territorial acquisitions, diplomatic alliances, and economic institutions that had evolved under his predecessors.

The populations of the Valley of Mexico maintained an uneasy relationship with one another. Political alliances were constructed through marriages and trade networks and functioned to maintain stability. Warfare in earlier centuries was common, as it was under Montezuma II, as individual states attempted to absorb one another.

The Aztecs, from their capital city of Tenochtitlán on Lake Texcoco, united in 1428 with the Texcocans and the Tacubans to form the Triple Alliance, a political-military union designed to conquer and extract tribute. When Montezuma II ascended the throne in 1502 the empire was at its zenith. The previous ruler, Ahuitzotl, Montezuma II's uncle, was an aggressive warrior whose reign was noteworthy for territorial expansion and public works projects.

Ahuitzotl's campaigns included expeditions to the Gulf Coast, the Valley of Oaxaca, and south to the region of the modern Guatemalan border. Most of the Central Mexican Plateau was subdued by 1500. Policy focused on indirect rule, local chiefs being responsible for carrying out Aztec directives. In 1487, the great temple complex was completed, and it would serve as the center of the Aztec world through the reign of Ahuitzotl's ill-fated nephew. The chronicles suggest that more than eighty thousand persons were sacrificed to commemorate the completion of the temple: most likely only a fraction of these sacrifices were realized.

Population growth during the fifteenth century spurred the need to intensify productive agriculture. Fresh water for agriculture and other purposes was directed into Tenochtitlán by an aqueduct, built during Ahuitzotl's reign with a large conscript labor force.

The empire under Montezuma II extended south to the Guatemalan border, northwest to the modern Mexican state of Michoacán on the Pacific coast, and due east to Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico. This vast region of about 77,000 square miles (200,000 square kilometers) contained eleven million people.

Population estimates for Tenochtitlán range from 200,000 to 300,000 individuals. Tribute flowing into the city included foodstuffs, a wide range of luxury goods such as animal skins and feathers, and sacrificial victims. Records from the reign of Montezuma II indicate that 7,000 tons of maize (6,363 metric tons) and 4,000 tons of beans (3,636 metric tons) and other consumables were transported annually into the capital. Endemic warfare ensured a flow of sacrificial victims destined as offerings to the Aztec divinities.

The Aztec pantheon consisted of more than two hundred gods and goddesses. In Tenochtitlán, a great temple complex was dedicated to Tlaloc, the god of rain and water, and to the war god, Huitzilopochtli, a divinity that symbolized the sun. As a powerful celestial force, Huitzilopochtli required consistent sacrifices to ensure his daily movement across the sky. For an agricultural economy, lacking both the benefits of scientific prediction and advanced technology, the appeasement of these divinities was a perennial preoccupation. Plainly, the religious complex and the ways in which it was integrated with the productive economy meshed with the spectrum of Aztec social institutions. For example, young warriors could elevate their status and earn prestige in the military hierarchy by capturing potential sacrificial victims, rather than annihilating them, on the battlefield.

Intensive cultivation was essential, along with tribute, to provision the great numbers of priests, warriors, and artisans. Nutritional needs were satisfied in part through the chinampa system, which provided four or five crops annually. Chinampas were raised plots of drained land in the lake, filled with vegetation and mud and defined around their perimeters with stakes and trees. The rich soil was easily tilled with hand tools. Supplementing chinampa technology were terraces and irrigation works, all of which functioned to produce maize, squash, varieties of beans, and chili peppers.

At the apex of society was the emperor, or *Tlatoani*, who was elected from the aristocracy on the death of the previous ruler. The ruler and nobility enjoyed privileges withheld from the great mass of commoners: increased land control and the use for their children of the *Calmécac*, a prestigious, strict, religious school. The ruler was advised by a royal council consisting of four aristocrats. Priests and warriors were organized into powerful and prestigious groups. The free commoners, or *macehuales*, while serving important economic functions for society, were denied access to the benefits enjoyed by the groups superimposed above them. For example, dress codes were enforced, as were regulations pertaining to the consumption of certain foods. Beneath the commoners were the serfs who were tied

to the lands of the nobility. The *mayeques*, or slaves used in transportation, were positioned beneath the serfs, and this group resulted from bad fortune or warfare.

A select group enjoying substantial prestige was the *pochteca*, or long-distance merchants. Their travels to different lands provided the imperial sector with luxury items and information that could influence military strategy and diplomacy.

The basic unit of Aztec culture was the *calpulli*, a corporate kinship-linked land-holding group. It functioned in religious rituals and provided warriors for imperial aggression. The *calpulli*, of which there were about twenty in Tenochtitlán, provided a patronage system in which wealthy members provided less fortunate kinsmen with economic opportunities. Repayment of benefits was usually in labor and tribute.

Aztec norms, mores, and values reflected a rigid religious and militaristic society. Parents inculcated children with the value of subordination to all in institutions of society: the family, the religious culture, and the state. Formal education either in the *Calmécac* or in the school for commoners, called the *telpochcalli*, emphasized discipline and religious codes, and in the *Calmécac*, leadership skills. The values of respect, reverence for traditions, and self-restraint were taught to children through a range of devices. Punishments varied in intensity. Drunkenness, for example, usually carried a death penalty. The issues of social chaos and disrespect would appear to underlie this penalty. Generosity, in the forms of gifts and food, was exhibited at all levels of Aztec society. An emphasis on natural beauty permeated Aztec culture, exemplified in flowers. Oratorical skills, poetics, and stone sculpture were appreciated and highly sophisticated.

The death knell of traditional Aztec culture sounded on November 8, 1519, when Hernán Cortés, a Spanish conquistador, and five hundred soldiers marched into Tenochtitlán. Montezuma II's indecisiveness and his policy of ingratiating the Spaniards facilitated the conquest. During street fighting in June, 1520, Montezuma II was injured, apparently by his own people, and subsequently died. In the end, he had lost the respect and confidence of his people.

Multiple causes led to the collapse of Aztec civilization: diseases to which the Aztec lacked immunity, Spanish persistence and superior organizational skills, steel weapons and cannons, and the invaluable aid of an indigenous interpreter and adviser, Doña Marina. The Aztec practice of indirectly controlling subjugated peoples maintained a loose empire. These dissatisfied peoples became allied with the Spanish and contributed 100,000 warriors in the final assault on Tenochtitlán on August 13, 1521.

Significance

The Aztec Empire was the largest and most complex of the Mesoamerican civilizations. Spanish accounts, in addition to Aztec books, or codexes, detail the growth, expansion, and florescence of an urban society that lacked the technological benefits of early Old World agrarian states: sophisticated metallurgy, draft animals for power and traction, and the wheel, which was important in warfare and agriculture. Discipline grounded in religious principles, as well as conformity to norms that elevated the needs of society over those of the individual, allowed the Aztecs to

transform from a wandering tribe to a military state in a brief two-hundred-year period.

Rene M. Descartes

Further Reading

Berdan, Frances F., et al. *Aztec Imperial Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996. A description of Aztec culture that relies upon textual and artifactual sources.

Davies, Nigel. *The Aztecs*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. A general discussion of Aztec political evolution by an ethnohistorian.

Díaz del Castillo, Bernal. *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*. Translated by A. P. Maudslay. Introduction by Hugh Thomas. New York: Da Capo Press, 1996. Written in the 1560's and first published in 1632. Díaz del Castillo wrote his vivid memories of the conquest of Mexico and his observations of the Aztecs and of Montezuma II.

Longhena, Maria. *Ancient Mexico: The History and Culture of the Maya, Aztecs, and Other Pre-Columbian Peoples*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1998. An examination of Aztec history and culture, alongside the cultures of the Maya, the Olmecs, and other ancient civilizations, emphasizing the importance of religion in every aspect of indigenous people's behavior and experience.

Smith, Michael E. *The Aztecs*. 2d ed. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003. A well-illustrated discussion of the evolution of the Aztec state, based primarily on archaeological research of the late twentieth century.

Townsend, Richard F. *The Aztecs*. Rev. ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000. An overview of Aztec culture, incorporating illustrations of Aztec art and their environment.