

22 New Spain



Legend told the Aztecs to build their city on the spot where an eagle perched on a cactus.

In Europe the year was 1519. In the New World the Aztec Indians of Mexico had their own calendar. It was even more exact than the calendar in use in Europe at the time. The Aztec calendar predicted dire events during this year.

The Mexican prophets said that Quetzalcoatl (ket-zal-KOH-atl) would come from the east—from the rising sun—to take back land that was his. Quetzalcoatl, a feathered serpent, was a god-hero of the common people. It was said that when he appeared in human form, kings would fall. The prophets even predicted the exact day he would come. So when the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortés came on that very day, many believed he was the god whose coming had been foretold.

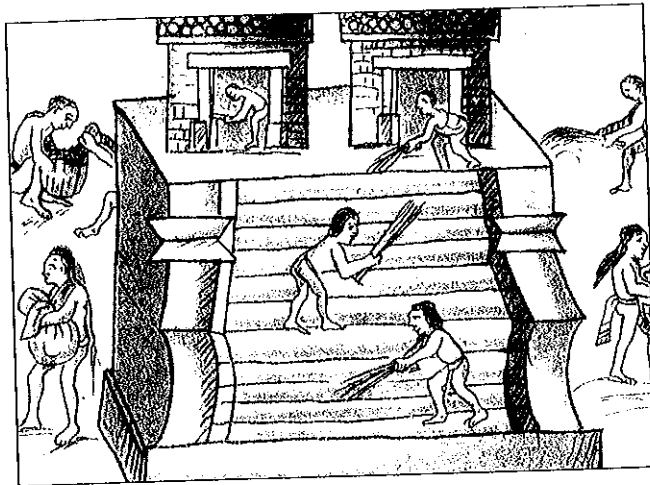
Hernando Cortés—tall, regal, with a face the color of chalk—was carried on a ship with sails as bright as birds' wings. Strange animals came with him, and men sat on their backs. Never had anyone seen a man on horseback. Some thought that horse and rider, both wearing glistening armor, were one creature—a splendid man-horse, a shining centaur (SEN-tore).

There were 16 of those animals and they snorted and bellowed, and when they ran, their hooves made the earth tremble. As to people, there were close to 900: 550 soldiers, 100 sailors, 200 Cubans, some Africans, and a number of women. All had come on 11 ships. Natives called them "small mountains floating on the waves of the sea" and sent word to Moctezuma, ruler of the great Aztec kingdom.

Moctezuma II was the ninth Aztec ruler and the most powerful leader in North America; more than 10 million people were his subjects. His name meant "angry lord." The Spaniards could not pronounce it properly, so they called him "Montezuma."



The **centaur** is a mythological creature we know from ancient Greek stories. He is half man, half horse.



The Templo Mayor (Spanish for "great temple") stood in a sacred area in the center of Tenochtitlán. At the top were twin shrines, dedicated to the two most powerful Aztec gods.

The Spaniards are astonished to find out that Moctezuma bathes twice a day. They hardly bathe at all, and they sleep in their clothes. Sometimes—hold your nose—they keep their shoes on for days.

The Spaniards are lucky to find a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked eight years earlier. His name is Jerónimo de Aguilar and he has learned a Mayan language. At first Doña Marina translates the Aztec language into Mayan and Aguilar then translates that to Spanish. Later Doña Marina will speak and translate Spanish directly.

Moctezuma was in his favorite palace—it had 100 rooms, 100 baths, walls of marble and rare stone, and courtyards filled with singing birds, flowers, and fountains—when messengers who had run from the coast told him the astonishing news: a small army of men and animals, like no men or animals seen before, was now standing on Aztec soil.

At first, Moctezuma was sure Cortés was the great god Quetzalcoatl, so he sent gifts of gold and precious jewels. The next day he wondered: perhaps they weren't gods. Reports from the scouts made the strangers seem like men, so he threatened them. Were they gods? Were they men? Moctezuma, who was tall, slim, and about 40, was more than a king; he was worshiped as a god. Actually he was a thoughtful man and he didn't know what

to do. So he hesitated. That was his mistake.

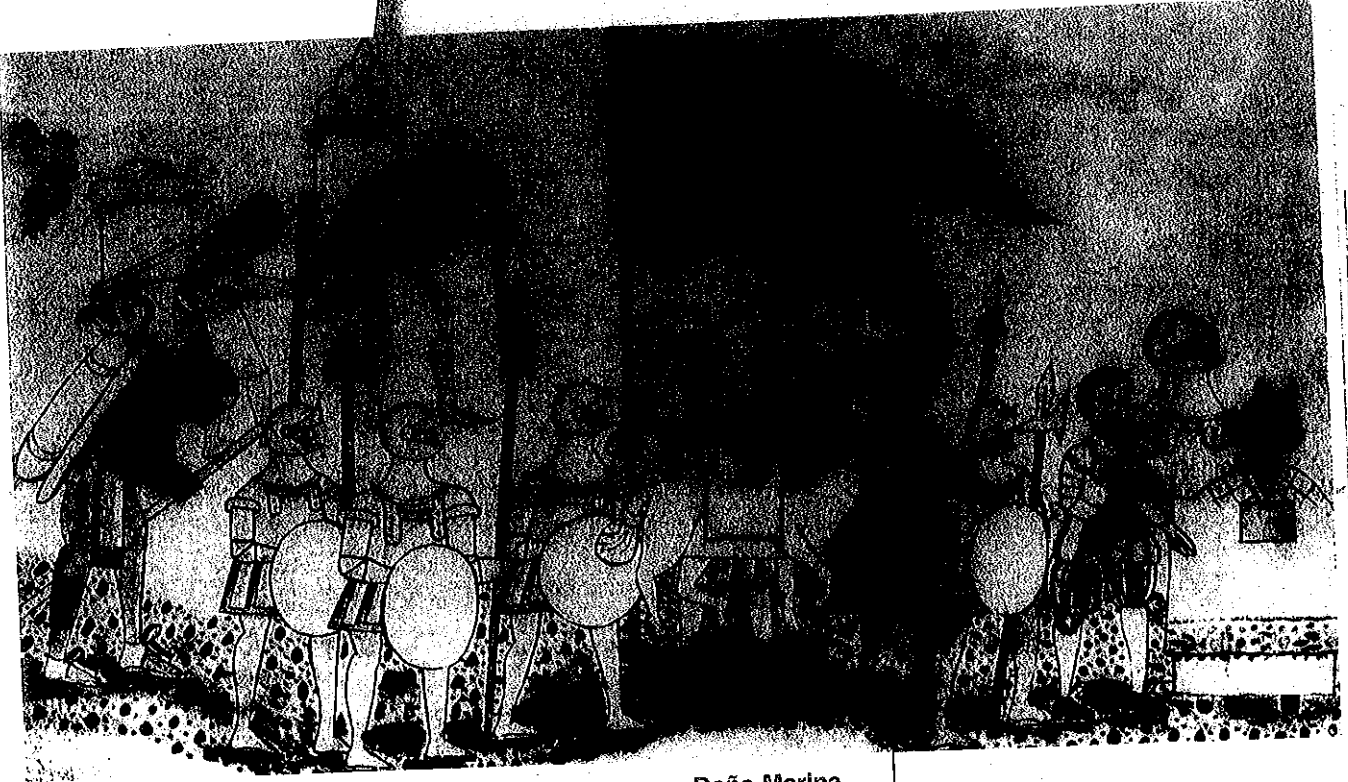
Cortés was not a man to hesitate; he was a man of action. Sometimes he compared himself to Alexander the Great, the mightiest warrior of the ancient world. There was no modesty in the comparison, but much truth. Cortés became one of the world's greatest conquerors. Moctezuma told him to stay on the coast. Cortés marched toward Moctezuma's capital. When some of his men were fearful and wanted to turn back, Cortés sank his own ships. Now there was no way to go but forward.

He marched through a countryside filled with people and villages and cities. An Indian woman marched with him; she had become a Christian and taken the name Doña (DON-ya—it means "lady") Marina. "She was a princess...as her appearance and bearing clearly showed," wrote a soldier who was with Cortés. Doña Marina

The Aztecs watched from canoes as Cortés's army entered Tenochtitlán along a causeway. The city was built on a lake that protected it like a moat.



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Cortés was helped by many Indians including a woman, Doña Marina. Later, some Mexicans would call her a traitor.

could talk to the Indians, and so, through her, could Cortés. "The help of Doña Marina was of the highest significance to us," the soldier added.

Cortés was heading for the greatest city in the Americas; the Indians called it Tenochtitlán (tuh-nock-tit-LAN). As he marched, messengers came from Moctezuma. Cortés asked if they had gold. "Send me some," he demanded, "for I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart that can be cured only with gold." They gave him what he asked for.

Moctezuma sent gifts of gold, robes of parrot feathers, embroidered cotton cloth, food—and orders. "Do not come to Tenochtitlán. Turn back," ordered Moctezuma. Cortés marched on.

From the villagers he heard awesome stories of the power of the warrior Aztecs (their army, with 200,000 soldiers, was the largest in the world). For 90 years, Aztecs fought and dominated a vast empire and then taxed their subjects heavily, demanding crops, gold, jade, and cloth. They had many enemies. The Spaniards, with their fierce dogs, prancing horses, and ferocious weapons, are seen as liberators. Cortés soon added thousands to his fighting force.

Stand with Cortés and his soldiers. They are approaching the Aztec capital. They shiver as they march through a high mountain pass. There is snow underfoot, even though they are between two volcanoes. One of the volcanoes, Popocateptl (poh-puh-ka-TEP-tul), is spitting smoke and flame and bits of rock and ash. It roars a welcome—or is it telling the invaders to leave?

Cocoa Nuts

According to an ancient tale, Quetzalcoatl stole the cocoa tree from his brother and sister gods, gave it to the Toltecs, an Aztec people, and taught them to make chocolate. Wherever it came from, chocolate was prized. The Aztecs demanded cocoa from other peoples as a form of tribute. During the reign of Moctezuma, almost 50,000 pounds of cocoa beans were brought to Tenochtitlán every year. Sometimes the beans were used like money; sometimes they were offered to the gods.





Indians who hated the Aztecs helped the Spanish build ships small enough to sail into Tenochtitlán. The ships were carried over the mountains to the lake. Their cannon fire was deadly.

Artisans are craftspeople: potters, weavers, metalworkers, wood-carvers, basket makers.

To **covet** (KUV-it) means to want something badly.

Cortés's expedition included a conquistadora—a woman named María de Estrada.

Mexico is an Indian word meaning "the place of the Mexica." The people we know as Aztecs called themselves Mexica.

Cortés is not about to leave. As he nears the city he rubs his eyes. He can hardly believe what he sees. Tenochtitlán is more beautiful than any city on earth, he says. It is an island city, five miles square, surrounded by a glistening lake. Canals, filled with canoes, are used as streets. Three great causeways lead in and out of the city. Bridges on the causeways can be raised to keep the capital safe from invaders. More than 200,000 people live in Tenochtitlán. They are artisans, warriors, priests, merchants, and government officials. Farming is done on the surrounding lands.

Cortés and his men are dazzled. The lake shines turquoise in the morning sun. Houses and public buildings are chalk-white or earth-red. Some are gilded, as if made of the gold the Spaniards covet.

There is more to see: gardens floating in the lakes, houses with patios and fountains, and, in one of Moctezuma's palaces, a private zoo. The market amazes the Europeans. Cortés says it is "twice as big as that of Salamanca [in Spain], with arcades all around, where more than 60,000 people come each day to buy and sell." A pyramid, the Templo Mayor, towers over the scene. Flowers are everywhere. So are birds. Thousands of herons, parrots, hawks, and egrets squawk and chatter from huge cages. No city they have seen has prepared the Spaniards for this place. Madrid, Spain's largest city, smells like a sewer. Tenochtitlán is not only splendid, it is clean.

The Aztec empire is glorious. It encourages art, music, poetry, and crafts. But it has a terrible flaw: the flaw is a religion that demands the sacrifice of thousands of people each year. The stones of the Great Temple are stained black with their blood.

The Aztecs believe in other gods besides the creator Quetzalcoatl. They fear some of their gods and believe they demand what is most precious—life. So they kill people and give their hearts to the gods in religious ceremonies. They think the gods will bring earthquakes and other disasters if they aren't fed enough lives. It is the sons and daughters of their neighbors whom the Aztecs sacrifice to the gods. You can see why those neighboring peoples are eager to help Cortés.

At first he doesn't need help. The Aztecs do what he asks. It is not enough. Cortés wants to control this land, and he knows only one way to do that: with strength. Besides, there are just a few Spaniards in this empire of Indians; the Spaniards believe they must be ruthless to survive. Do you think they are right? What would you do?

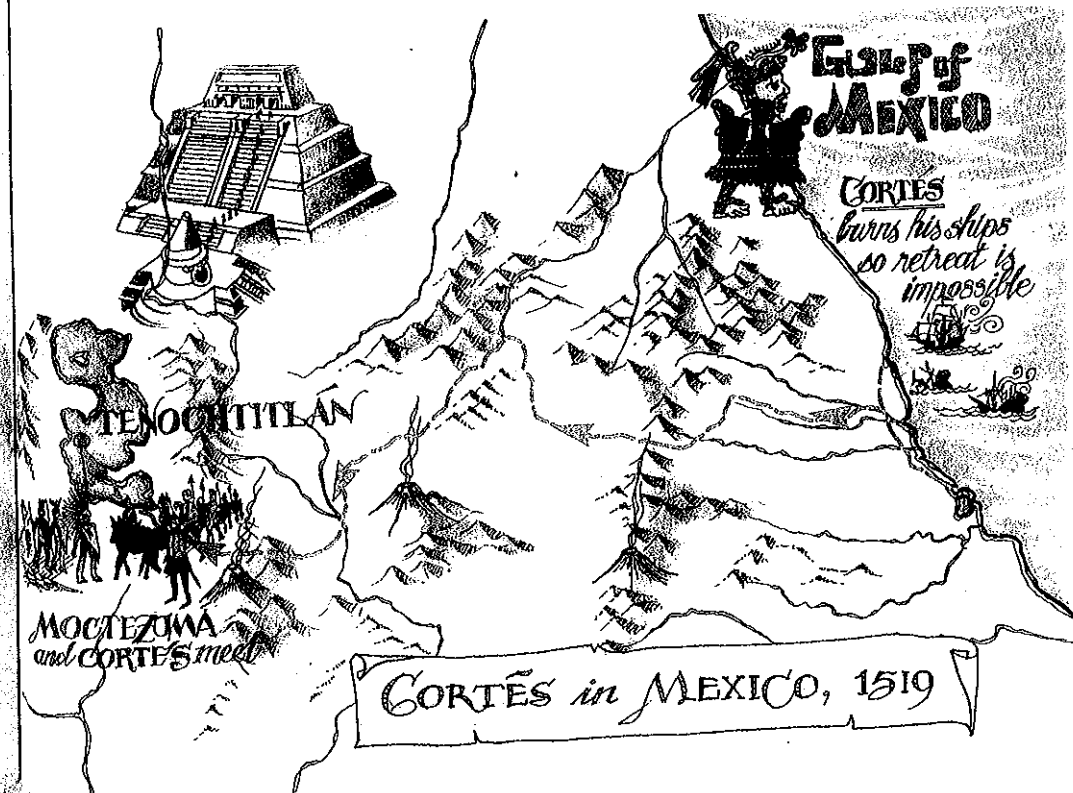
Cortés captures Moctezuma and holds him hostage. Then, because Cortés intends to conquer this nation, he fights. He fights brilliantly. Of course, he has guns and the Indians don't. They have never even seen guns before. And there is something else: the Europeans have brought smallpox germs with them. When the Indians catch smallpox, they usually die. Those who are left are weak and sick. A terrible epidemic rages in Tenochtitlán, yet the Aztecs fight on. Most would rather die than give in to conquerors who intend to destroy their empire and the world they have known. Soon there is almost nothing left of that world. Cuauhtemoc, the new leader, finally surrenders. (See the next page.)

Moctezuma is dead. Tenochtitlán is leveled. The Spaniards use Aztec stones to build their own civilization. Of the complex, brilliant, powerful Aztec culture almost nothing remains to threaten the new order.

The Spaniards build a Catholic cathedral where an Aztec temple stood. They fill the lake with earth, proclaim Tenochtitlán a Spanish



The Europeans have an immunity to smallpox. It can make them sick, it causes some of them to die, yet most survive. But the natives have no immunity. Estimates suggest a Mexican population of 25.2 million in 1518. Fifty years later it is 2.65 million.



“Cuauhtemoc, the last Aztec ruler, stood before Cortés and said: ‘I have done everything in my power to save my kingdom from your hands. Since fortune has been against me, I now beg you to take my life. This would put an end to the kingship of Mexico, and it would be just and right, for you have already destroyed my city and killed my people.’ He spoke other grief-stricken words, which touched the heart of everyone who heard them.

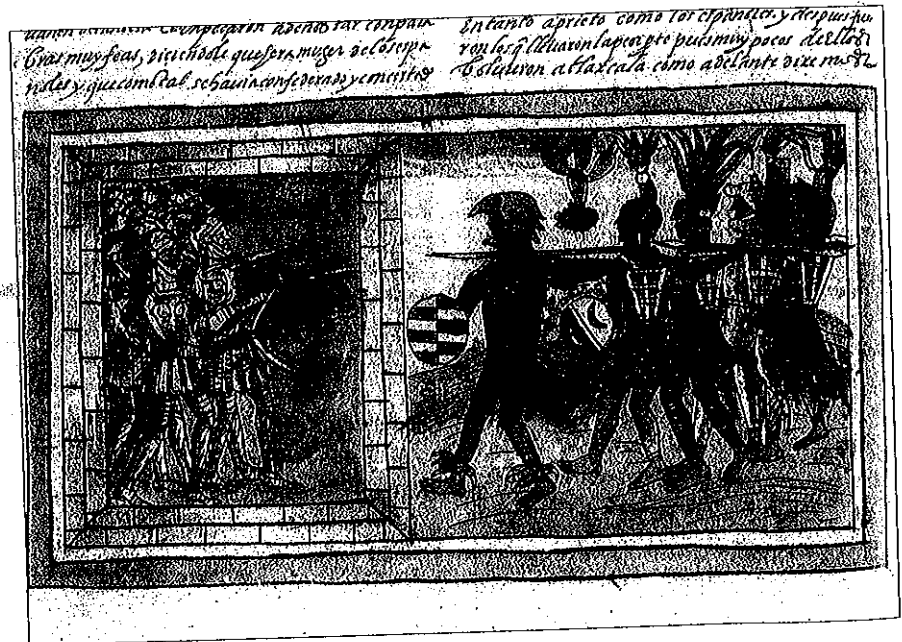
“Cortés consoled him and asked him to command his warriors to surrender. Cuauhtemoc immediately climbed onto a high tower and shouted to them to cease fighting, for everything had fallen to the enemy. Of the 300,000 warriors who had defended the city, 60,000 were left.... That same day, after looting the city, the Spaniards apportioned all the gold and silver among themselves, leaving the feathers and precious stones for the nobles of Tezcoco.” These words were written by a Tezcoco historian.

possession, and call it Mexico City. They send Mexican gold and silver back to Spain—boatloads and boatloads of it. From Mexico, which is now called New Spain—Nueva España—the conquistadors subdue South America and eventually explore North America from California to Virginia.

Why did they destroy a great empire? Why did they steal a nation’s riches? Were the Spanish evil and ruthless? Or were the times so different that it is difficult for us to imagine them?

Life in the 16th century was cruel; and punishment was often swift and horrible. That was true all over the world—in America, in Europe, in Asia, and in Africa. The piles of skulls in Tenochtitlán—left from the sacrifices—horrified the Europeans. They said that was the reason they had to destroy the Aztec empire. Was it a good reason—or just an excuse? In European cities criminals were hanged and left to rot in public view. That would have horrified the Aztecs. Suppose Cortés had come without his guns. Would he have lived? Do we have injustices and cruel practices in our country today? What are they? What can we do about them?

Reading history is not always easy. It is hard to make judgments about the past. But it is worth trying. It helps us make judgments about the world we live in.



Ways of Reading and Writing

Have you ever read a rebus? It's writing that uses pictures to convey words. In a rebus, a drawing of an eye, a saw, and a house means "I saw a house." Some early forms of writing are *pictographs*, like a rebus; the symbols on the page stand for sounds or ideas or things.

Pictographs were a big advance over pure pictures. Some Eskimos tried a form of writing in which each picture stood for a different word, but none stood for sounds. Reading meant memorizing thousands of pictures. That didn't work.

The Mayas—who were an advanced civilization in Middle America long before the Aztecs came to power—developed a partly pictographic system that allowed them to record events, give directions, identify objects, and tell stories. It was harder to learn than a system that uses an alphabet—but it worked well enough to help the Mayas develop a complex culture. The Aztecs used Mayan writing as a guide. Their books, written and painted by hand, are called "codices" (CO-duh-sees). The singular is *codex*.

A scroll, which is drawn on long, rolled strips of paper or

animal skin, is not a codex. The first European codices were made of rectangular wood slabs strapped together and covered with wax on one side. You scratched symbols in the wax. (The Latin word *codex* means all these things: "tree trunk," "wooden tablet," and "book.") In about the 4th century, codices—now leaves of paper bound between covers—became popular in the Mediterranean world for learned texts. They replaced scrolls written on papyrus or animal skins. After 1454, those handwritten codices began to be replaced by printed books (why 1454?).

In America, Aztec codices were handcrafted and painted on paper made from plant fibers or animal skins. The Aztecs had books of poetry and stories; books about astronomy, religion, law—even history! Some of that history was carved on monuments and buildings or painted on vases. Several illustrations in this chapter come from codices.

Most of the Aztec books were kept in a huge library in the capital. When Cortés and his army destroyed Tenochtitlán, they burned down that library, and all the books inside it.



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1, *him*



2, *ca*



3, *ox*



4, *can*



5, *ho*

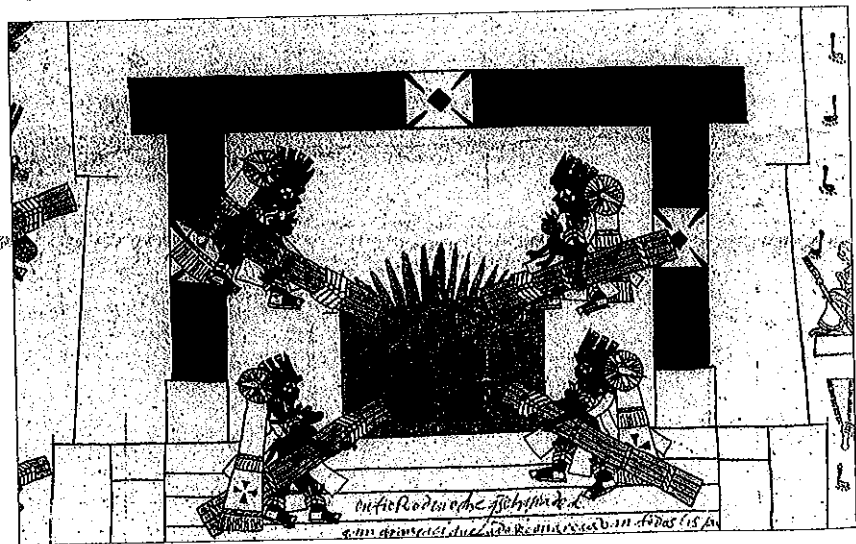
Count to 5 in Mayan!

The Mayas sometimes used signs (called glyphs) to write numbers. They also had a dot and bar system. A dot stood for one unit, a bar for five units. On the right you can see some number glyphs and their pronunciation in Yucatec, a Mayan language.

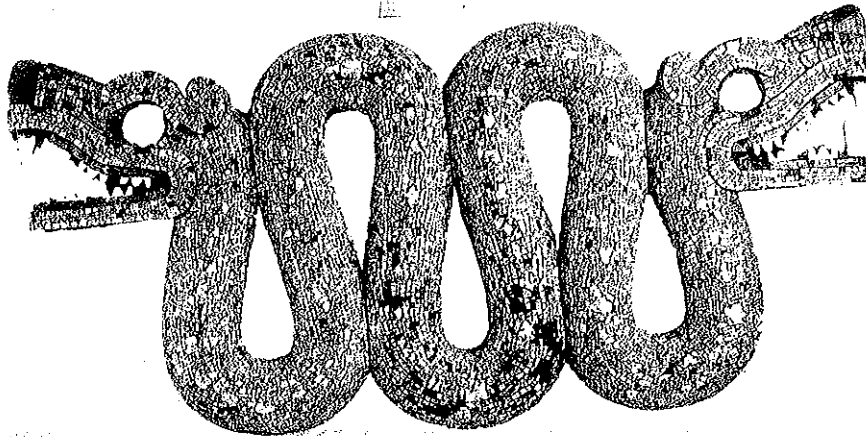
A Very Short History of Mesoamerica

The Aztecs were the last of a remarkable series of Middle American (Mesoamerican) civilizations that began with the Olmecs about 1200 B.C.E. (It was the same time that Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai.) The Olmecs sculpted 20-ton stone heads, carved fine masks and figures, played ritual ball games, domesticated maize (corn), and created a sophisticated society with priests, warriors, traders, and a strong ruler. Around the year 1, the Teotihuacanos began building a splendid planned city on Mexico's high central plain. Not far from future Mexico City, it became home to more than 100,000 people (which was larger than any European city). In mountaintop kingdoms to the south, Zapotec and Mixtec farmers built cities, developed irrigation agriculture, and became master goldsmiths. Monte Alban was a great Zapotec city; Mitla was Mixtec. Ballplaying was central to the religion of those who lived at El Tajin (on the Gulf Coast at Vera Cruz), with its temples, houses, and sculptures. The spectacular Mayan civilization (250–900) stretched from Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to the Pacific coast and included at least 60 city-states, a writing system, knowledge of astronomy, an elaborate calendar, and math that made use of zero (zero was known in Arab lands but wasn't used in Europe until later). The warrior Toltecs settled down in the city of Tula and built monumental pyramids. The rough Mexicas moved from the north, conquered, traded, learned from their neighbors, and became Aztecs. The Mesoamerican cultures were theocracies: religion and government were bonded together. Everyone had to participate in religious ceremonies.

Every 52 years the Aztecs began a new calendar cycle by putting out all the fires in the realm. Their chief priests then went to a mountaintop for the New Fire ceremony. There they kindled a flame and brought that sacred fire to temples throughout the land. This codex picture shows priests lighting the New Fire at the Temple of Huitzilopochtli. Their religion taught that failure to do all this meant the end of the world.

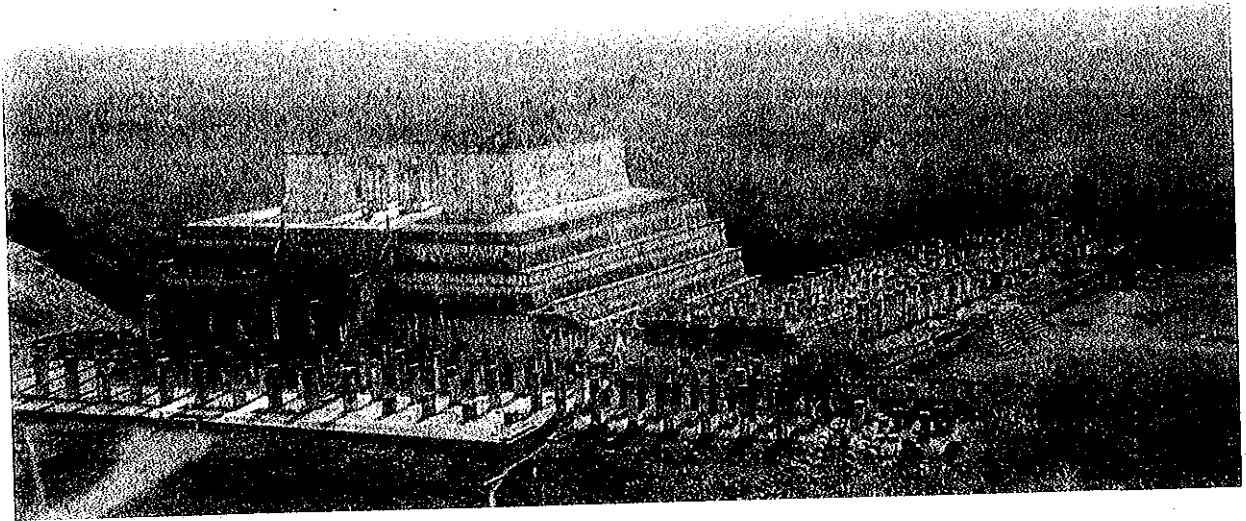


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The serpent was the god Quetzalcoatl's symbol of power, a bit like a coat of arms. So Aztec serpents are often gorgeous works of art. Check out this Miztec-Aztec snake made between 1350 and 1520. It is turquoise mosaic, about 43 cm. (16 inches) long. You can see it in the British Museum in London.

The Olmecs, who lived in Mexico way back between 1300 and 400 BCE, were an American "mother culture." Their ceremonial centers held huge altars, thrones, and colossal stone heads. At their burial sites we've found delicate greenstone statues, jewelry, and stone tools. We think the heads are portraits of their leaders.



This huge Mayan temple was built at Chichén Itzá on the Yucatan Peninsula in the 12th century. The columns, which are carved with scenes of Mayan warriors and their captives, once held up a wooden roof.



Tenochtitlán: "Place of the Prickly Pear Cactus Fruit"⁹⁹

These words are by a conquistador, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who was with Cortés in Mexico. His book is called The Conquest of New Spain.

All about us we saw cities and villages built in the water, their great towers and buildings of masonry rising out of it. On dry land were other great towns, and with the straight, level causeway leading toward Mexico it seemed like the enchantments they tell of in legend. Some of our soldiers even asked if it were not all a dream.

At Iztapalapa, half the houses stood in the water, half on dry land. As we approached, splendid chiefs came to meet us, with a [magnificent] present of gold.... They lodged us in spacious palaces of beautiful stonework and fragrant woods. There were great rooms, and courts wonderful to behold, all covered with awnings of cotton cloth. We wandered through gardens where I never tired of looking at the different trees, each with its own scent. There were paths full of flowers and there were

orchards and ponds. A lake of clearest water was joined to the grand lake of Mexico by a channel capable of admitting the largest canoes. All was ornamented, painted, and admirably plastered, and delightful with singing birds. When I beheld the scenes around me I thought within myself, this was the garden of the world. And of all the wonders I beheld that day, nothing now remains. All is overthrown and lost.



This is Tenochtitlán, as pictured by the 20th century Mexican artist, Diego Rivera.