Chapter 3
The Aztec: Empire Builders

The Eagle and the Cactus

About three hundred years after the Maya abandoned their cities, another great civilization arose. They were the Aztec people, who lived in what is today central Mexico.

Vocabulary

Aztec, n. a civilization that thrived in present-day central Mexico from 1325 to 1521 CE

nomadic, adj. moving around often in search of food; not settled in one place

According to legend, the Aztec were once a nomadic tribe. They wandered the land, setting up temporary homes here and there, fighting off attackers, and surviving on snakes and lizards. One day, the god of the sun spoke to the people. The god told the Aztec people to look for a sign—an eagle with a snake in its beak perched on a cactus. On the spot where the eagle perched, the Aztec were to build a great city.

The Big Question

Why did the Aztec make human sacrifices?
In legend, the Aztec built their capital on the spot where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus while holding a snake in its beak.
The legend goes on to describe how the Aztec finally received the sign the god had told them about. The eagle appeared on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco (/těsh*koh*koh/). On that day, the Aztec’s wandering ended. They settled down and began building a city. The Aztec people called their new home Tenochtitlán (/tay*noch*tee*tlahn/), which means “the place of the prickly pear.” Even today the eagle and serpent are shown on the flag of Mexico.

Conquering City-States

Whether or not the myth is true, we do know that the Aztec established Tenochtitlán by 1325. By the 1400s, the Aztec
Civilization had begun to expand. The Aztec proved to be fearsome warriors. One by one they conquered neighboring city-states and added them to their empire. By the early 1500s, the Aztec Empire included four hundred to five hundred city-states and controlled much of present-day Mexico. The Aztec emperor ruled more than five million people. Tenochtitlán alone probably had between 150,000 and 200,000 residents, making it one of the largest cities in the world at this time. No city in the United States would grow so large until the 1800s.

The Aztec capital Tenochtitlán was one of the largest cities in the world.
The Aztec were well-known warriors. By conquering other people, they were able to gain wealth. Aztec warriors then forced conquered peoples to send their gold, silver, jade, and turquoise to Tenochtitlán. Those who had no valuables could send food, cloth, or other goods. People who lived by the ocean might also have to send seashells, fish, or turtles. Farmers might send corn, beans, peppers, squash, or fruit. Groups with access to specific environments might have to give animal skins and feathers. Craft-working communities might send pottery or blankets to Tenochtitlán.

**The Legend of the Five Suns**

Victorious Aztec warriors sent more than food and precious metals and stones back to Tenochtitlán. They also sent back soldiers captured in battle. The captured soldiers sometimes were used in an important religious ritual of the Aztec people: human sacrifice. To understand the importance of human sacrifice, we need to take a closer look at Aztec religion.

According to Aztec beliefs, life was uncertain. The one thing people could count on was that the world would one day come to a terrible, violent end. In fact, the Aztec believed that the world and the sun had been created and destroyed four times in the past. Under the first sun, a race of giants roamed the world. This world ended when a jaguar devoured the giants. The world under the second sun was swept away by a great wind. People under the
third sun died in the fire and ash of volcanoes. Those living under the fourth sun drowned in floods.

The Aztec of Tenochtitlán believed they were living under the fifth sun. But they believed that this sun would also someday die: “There will be earthquakes and hunger, and then our end shall come,” the priests said. The Aztec people believed these predictions. They planned their lives in response to them.

So the Aztec awaited their fate. But they did not simply accept it. They believed that each night, the sun god battled the forces of darkness. Each morning, the god had to find the strength to make the sun rise again. The Aztec believed they could help their god by offering human sacrifices in their temples.

The Aztec preferred to sacrifice someone other than their own friends and family. Most of their victims were foreign soldiers captured in war. Aztec priests believed that the heart was the most important thing to sacrifice. They preferred to offer up the strong heart of a soldier.

**Religious Sacrifice**

The Aztec held their sacrifices on top of pyramids not unlike those built by the Maya. A big drum sounded as attendants led the victims to the top. The priest killed the victim by removing his heart. The heart was then burned on an altar. The victim’s body was then allowed to tumble down the pyramid’s steps. The process was repeated for each victim.
The Aztec believed human sacrifices were necessary to keep the sun rising and moving across the sky. They could even point to events that seemed to prove that the sacrifices worked. Once, when a long drought threatened the Aztec corn harvest, priests offered a number of human sacrifices. A day or so later, rain came. To the Aztec, this was no coincidence. It was proof that the gifts of blood had saved the crop. Experiences like this convinced the Aztec of the power of human sacrifice. As a result, Aztec offerings to the gods were regular and generous.

Success at War

Priests and soldiers were key elements of Aztec life. Priests used human sacrifice to please the gods. Aztec soldiers held the empire together and provided the victims for the sacrifices.

As in many societies until recent times, Aztec people were born into a certain social class. Most people had relatively little chance to advance out of it. The army provided one opportunity for brave men to better themselves. Success in battle was rewarded with advancement and honor. The Aztec people believed there was no greater honor than to die in battle.

No doubt about it—the Aztec were fierce warriors. But their capabilities in warfare and skill at fighting helped create a rich empire and a remarkable civilization. Read on to learn more about the civilization that the Aztec built and their fabulous capital city of Tenochtitlán.
The Aztec were fierce warriors ready to go to battle against their neighbors at a moment’s notice. This is an Eagle warrior dressed for battle.
Chapter 4
Tenochtitlán: City of Wonder

A Lakeside Paradise The first Europeans who came to America did not expect to find a great civilization. Imagine how surprised they must have been when they came upon the city of Tenochtitlán, with its towering pyramids and its population of perhaps two hundred thousand.

Tenochtitlán was more than the heart of a great civilization. It was unlike anything the Europeans had ever seen. The city was built on an island in the middle of a lake. Three wide causeways connected the city to the mainland. A network of canals linked different parts of the city. The Aztec traveled around their capital in canoes.

The Big Question
What does the description of Tenochtitlán reveal about the Aztec civilization?

Vocabulary

causeway, n. a raised road built over water to connect islands to a mainland

canal, n. a channel dug by people, used by boats or for irrigation
Tenochtitlán was built on an island on the waters of Lake Texcoco. It was connected to the mainland by causeways.
City Tour

Imagine that you have hopped into a canoe to tour Tenochtitlán as it was in the early 1500s. First, you see the “gardens” on raised beds built on Lake Texcoco. The Aztec created these gardens by digging up mud from the bottom of the lake and piling it up in shallow areas. Then they shaped the piles into long narrow gardens. The gardens were surrounded by water, so they stayed moist. The Aztec also kept the soil fertile by scooping new mud onto the gardens every year. The rich soil was perfect for growing corn, squash, and beans.

Aztec Home Life

As you glide toward the center of Tenochtitlán, you see Aztec men dressed in loincloths and cloaks. Women wear long skirts, blouses, and ponchos. You also see hundreds of one-room houses with thatched roofs and mud walls. Inside one, you meet a girl who is learning to weave from her mother. A few houses away, mothers and daughters are preparing for a wedding feast. During the wedding ceremony, the bride’s blouse will be tied to the groom’s cloak. This tying together is a symbol of the connection between a husband and wife.
Suburbs and Schools

You also visit an Aztec school. There, boys receive moral instruction—rules about the right and wrong way to behave. They also learn military drills. The boys practice with miniature weapons. They throw spears and carry special wooden clubs studded with sharp pieces of a natural glass-like rock.

A visit to a school for the sons of Aztec nobles turns out to be a hair-raising experience. You quickly realize that the teachers in this school are Aztec priests. You’ve had some tough teachers over the years. But you’ve never had one who painted his face black, did not wash his hair for religious reasons, and performed human sacrifices!

The priests train their students to become priests and scribes. Students study Aztec religion and astronomy and learn how to read and write Aztec hieroglyphs. They also

Vocabulary

scribe, n. a person whose job is copying written information
learn how to record information in a special kind of book called a **codex**. This is a long strip of tree bark that folds up like an accordion. The pages of the codex are covered with pictures and **pictograms**. The priest explains that the codices (/koh*duh*seez/) are used to keep lists of rulers, to record payments made by conquered people, and to keep track of religious holidays.

The Market

The next stop on your tour is the central market. Here, people trade cacao (chocolate) beans and cotton blankets for other items. The sound of thousands of Aztec people trading creates a ruckus that can be heard a mile away.

In one corner of the market, a man is trading rabbits, deer, and small dogs that are bred for food. Across the way a woman displays pottery. You notice all sorts of other goods, including sandals, feathers, seashells, turkeys, wood, corn, bananas, pineapples, honeycombs, and fabrics.

One section of the market is set aside for trading enslaved people. Here you see human beings with wooden collars around their necks. Noblemen mill around, inspecting them.

**Vocabulary**

- **codex**, n. an ancient book with handwritten pages or parts
- **pictogram**, n. a picture or drawing that stands for a word or phrase

Aztec boys were raised from an early age to be skilled and fearsome warriors.
The Ceremonial Center

In the heart of the city is the ceremonial center. Here you find the largest temple in the city, the Great Temple. This massive pyramid is almost one hundred yards wide at its base. That’s roughly the

Tenochtitlán had a thriving market where people traded goods from around the empire.
length of a football field! It rises almost ninety feet in the air. The top steps are stained with the blood of human sacrifices. Surrounding the Great Temple are several smaller temples. Each of these is dedicated to a different god.

Not far from these religious buildings stands the palace of the Aztec emperor. You will have to admire the palace from the outside: commoners are not allowed to enter. The palace has hundreds of rooms and more than a thousand servants.

**Moctezuma II**

Moctezuma II (/mawk*te*soo*mah/) (sometimes written as Montezuma) was the Aztec emperor in the early 1500s. In the court of Moctezuma II, no one was allowed to look the emperor in the eye. When he entered the room, even the nobles threw themselves face down on the ground. When he left the palace, he was carried in a fancy *litter*. When Moctezuma wanted to walk, nobles laid mats on the ground so he would not dirty his golden sandals.

Moctezuma was a powerful leader. But during his *reign*, some disturbing things were happening. There was a drought. A comet appeared in the sky. Lightning struck one of the temples in Tenochtitlán. Fantastic rumors began to spread. Some people said that a ghostly woman was walking the streets of the capital at night. She wailed, “My children, we must flee far away from this city!”

**Vocabulary**

- *litter*, n. a chair attached to two beams and carried on the shoulders of several people
- *reign*, n. a period of time in which a king or queen rules
The Aztec believed the world might end at any moment. Moctezuma and his priests worried that the strange events might be a warning from the gods. They feared that the end of the world might be near.

As it turned out, a form of doomsday was coming, but it was not coming from the gods. It was coming from across the Atlantic Ocean. Spanish soldiers were sailing from Europe in search of riches and glory. In the final chapter, you will learn what the arrival of these pale-skinned men meant for the mighty Aztec Empire.