

# NATION PROFILE: THE AZTEC (1)

The Aztec lived over 500 years ago in the region that is today called **Mexico**. They called their land **Anahuac** meaning “the land on the edge of the waters.”

The Aztec were a powerful people who believed it would please their gods to sacrifice people. They built a huge city called **Tenochtitlán** on a **plateau** high in the mountains. It was located on an island in the middle of a lake. They constructed a main temple that was over 164 feet tall. Aztec priests held ceremonies and made sacrifices on the top of the Tenochtitlán



temple, Human sacrifices were the most important part of the Aztec religion. The Aztec believed that the heart and the blood of their victims kept their gods strong and powerful. Because the Aztec were always fighting with neighboring people, many of their victims were captured enemy soldiers. But sometimes they sacrificed their own people, including women and children.

The Aztec belief in hundreds of gods controlled their lifestyle and culture. Each god represented a different part of the natural world or human activity. The Aztec used stone tools to carve intricate clay (or

sometimes gold and copper) statues of their gods. They also carved soft volcanic rock. They used knives made of volcanic glass called **obsidian**.



Aztecs were divided into small family groups called **calpollis**. Each group had a headman who met with other headmen at a council. They selected one to be the **Great Speaker**. He had to be not only a priest but also a warrior because fighting was such an important part of Aztec life. The Great Speakers wore huge and elaborate feather headdresses at ceremonies. Two famous Great Speakers were **Itzxoatl** and **Montezuma**.

Many Aztec were farmers who lived in or around the main cities. Corn was their most important crop. They also grew squash, avocados, beans, sweet potatoes, peppers, and tomatoes. The farmers had no plows. They used a small **digging stick** to form trenches to plant the seeds. They grew their crops either on land or on little islands called **chinampas**. These floating

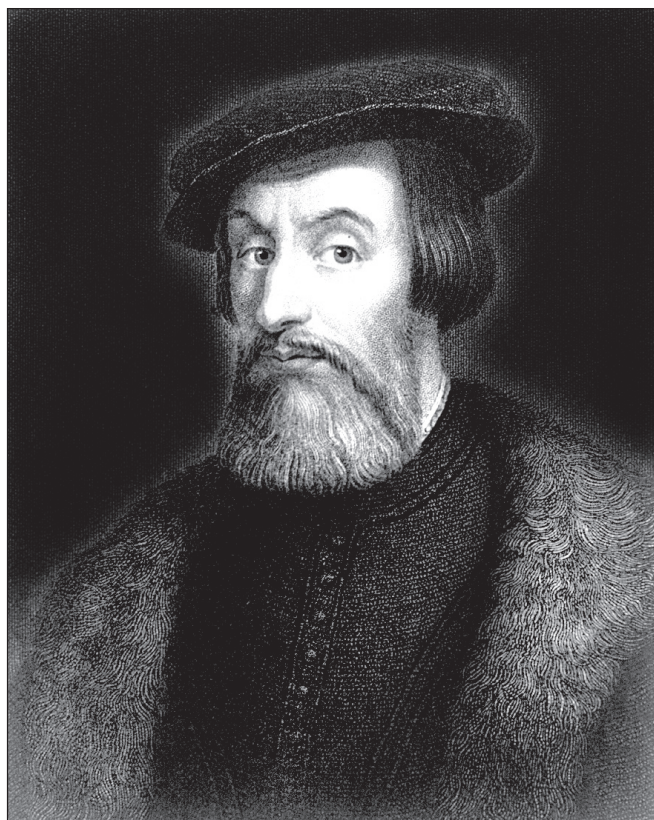


## NATION PROFILE: THE AZTEC (2)

gardens were made from lake mud heaped on top of woven plant material. The Aztec raised chickens and turkeys. There were few large wild animals to hunt. The vegetables they grew supplied protein.

An Aztec's wealth determined what kind of home he would live in. Poorer Aztec lived in small, one-room houses made from branches held together by mud with thatched roofs. The wealthier people lived in larger townhouses. These were often built on raised platforms and made of volcanic stone that was carved and shaped. There was little furniture and people slept on mats. The main room had a fireplace used both for cooking and as a shrine to gods.

The Aztec wrote with a system of pictograms. It was used for records, history, and religious books. These books of deerskin or bark paper were called **codices**. The Spanish *conquistadors* destroyed many codices. Fortunately, some were spared. These codices have greatly helped historians to learn more about Aztec civilization.



Aztec believed in a legend about an ancient Aztec ruler. This ruler would someday return in a great white bird that flew over the water. When the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortes arrived with his ships, the Aztec thought Cortes might be this ancient ruler. Unfortunately Cortes was a greedy ruthless man who just wanted the Aztec riches. He tricked the Aztec emperor Montezuma and attacked. The Aztec weapons were no match against the Spanish guns, cannons, swords, armor, and horses. The Aztec fought hard and well but were defeated.