The Aztecs

The Aztecs originally were a small, nomadic tribe in Mesoamerica. The Aztecs had come from the north and spent several years wandering around the Mexican Valley. Sometime during the 13th century they stopped their wandering and settled on the border of Lake Texcoco. They drained swamps and built artificial islands to make gardens. They founded the town of Tenochtitlán, which is now Mexico City.

Expanding the Aztec Empire

During the 15th century, the Aztecs expanded their empire by conquering several tribes to the south and extending their boundaries across Mesoamerica. When the Aztecs conquered a tribe, they did not burn their villages or try to destroy the tribe as other empires often did. They made them part of the Aztec Empire. However, those who were conquered by the Aztecs had to pay them tribute in the form of food, precious metals, jewels, textiles, pottery, decorative feathers, cocoa, rubber, and other items to support the Aztec priests and rulers of Tenochtitlán.

Human Sacrifice

The conquered tribes also had to provide victims for human sacrifice. Like other Mesoamerican cultures, the Aztecs sacrificed humans to please the gods. It is estimated that 20 to 50 thousand people were sacrificed each year. Many were slaves or war prisoners. Sometimes, Aztecs were used. It was considered an honor to be chosen to be sacrificed, and the victim felt that he or she would be granted eternal life in return. The sacrificial ceremony was performed by priests at altars on top of layered pyramids. Great crowds would gather to watch the ceremony.

Aztec Crafts and Knowledge

The Aztecs borrowed a great deal from the Mayas and other cultures. Parts of their religion, scientific achievements, calendar, building style, irrigation, astronomy, mathematics, the arts, sculpture, and weaving can all be traced to earlier civilizations. While the Aztecs had the wheel, they did not use it to make vehicles. They used copper and bronze for tools but not iron or steel. Their artisans made beautiful jewelry from gold, silver, and from their alloys, but they did not have glass, plows, gunpowder, or alphabetic writing. They kept written records of their history, religious practices, and other administrative information of their empire in books called codexes or codices, made of tree bark or leaves. Their writing was a kind of hieroglyphic.

The Aztecs created art and architecture that were very complex and sophisticated. They were also efficient farmers who used irrigation, terracing, and fertilization in their fields. When the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, Tenochtitlán, the administrative and religious capital of the Aztec Empire, was an impressive city.

AZTEC EMPIRE AT A GLANCE
WHERE: Mesoamerica
WHEN: A.D. 1200–1521
ACHIEVEMENTS:
- Created art and architecture
- Efficient farmers who used irrigation, terracing, and fertilization
- Schooling and training in martial arts was compulsory for boys
- A centralized government controlled every aspect of the Aztecs' lives
The Spanish Arrive and Conquer

It was the arrival of the Spanish that brought an end to the Aztec Empire. Christopher Columbus reached the Caribbean in 1492. This gave the Spanish a base in Cuba and other islands. Other Spaniards, called **conquistadors**, came to Mexico. The conquistadors continued their exploration in search of gold, land, and people to convert to Christianity. One of the Spanish conquistadors was **Hernando Cortés**.

Cortés landed on the Yucatán Peninsula in 1519 with 600 men. This was a small force, not nearly as many as the Aztecs had. However, as Cortés marched toward Tenochtitlán looking for gold, natives who had been conquered by the Aztecs joined him. These natives hated the Aztecs and wanted to be free of their domination. Cortés was able to get over 150,000 natives to join him.

When Cortés and his army arrived in Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs were cautious but welcomed them. The Aztec emperor, **Montezuma II**, gave them gold and other valuable gifts. Cortés took Montezuma hostage anyway. Montezuma was killed, supposedly by the Aztecs, and the Spanish attacked Tenochtitlán. Cortés' huge army, armed with gunpowder, armor, and horses, was too much for the Aztecs, but they continued to resist. Then Tenochtitlán became infected with smallpox, and the **epidemic** wiped out half of the city. Cortés seized Tenochtitlán in 1521. Within five years, Cortés had conquered all of the Aztec territories. The Aztec civilization was over. The Spanish destroyed much of Tenochtitlán and put up many new buildings. They changed the name of Tenochtitlán to Mexico City. Spanish rule soon spread throughout the newly conquered land.
The Incas

While the Aztecs and other civilizations were thriving in Mesoamerica, a unique civilization was developing in the Andes Mountains in South America. It was the largest civilization during this period, and its population was about twice that of England. This was the Inca civilization, and it lasted from about A.D. 1400 to 1532.

Origins of the Incas

The origins of the Inca civilization are not clear. The Incas had no written language, so what we know about their history is based on what the Incas told the Spanish conquistadors. Some of this may have been a mixture of fantasy and legend. It is likely that the beginnings of the Inca civilization were in about 1100 when a small tribe settled in the Cuzco Valley in the Andes Mountains of South America. They spoke a language called Quechua. In their language, they used the word Inca to refer to their rulers. Today, Inca refers to their civilization. For many years, the Incan culture was very similar to other cultures in the area. They had a strong state with the city of Cuzco as its capital. However, in the late 1300s, the Incan Empire, under the leadership of Pachacuti, began to expand from the Cuzco region of the Andes Mountains.

Expanding the Empire

Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui was an excellent ruler and military leader. While he reorganized the government and rebuilt the capital, he began to attack and defeat nearby tribes. The battles of conquest were brutal invasions, and resistance was crushed. Some tribes realized they were not strong enough to defeat the Incas, so they joined them and fought on their side. Soon, the Incan army was so large that most tribes offered little resistance. As the empire grew, the Incas built roads and established military strongholds in order to maintain their newly gained territory.

After about ten years, Pachacuti's son, Topa Inca Yupanqui, took over the army and continued the Incan expansion. Under Topa Yupanqui's leadership, the Incan Empire expanded along the western coast of South America and even into the rain forests. The Incas required those who were conquered to accept the Incan culture. They had to learn the Quechua language and worship the Incan gods, and they were subject to the Incan laws. In order for the conquered people to learn the Incan culture, the Incas supplied teachers to instruct them in such things as how to grow crops and how to build villages the Inca way. Those who would not comply either became slaves or were sent somewhere else to live. The land of those who were banished was given to those who accepted the Incan culture.

Ruling the Empire

The Incas did not directly rule the conquered tribes. They would let local rulers retain their positions if they were loyal to the Incas and if they fought on their side. Each tribe was independent and was ruled by a council of elders. The tribe was loyal to the ruler of the empire who was called the "Inca." They believed he was descended from the sun god. While

**INCA EMPIRE AT A GLANCE**

**WHERE:** The Andes Mountains of South America  
**WHEN:** A.D. 1100–1532  
**ACHIEVEMENTS:**  
- Created beautiful art  
- Developed a method of counting and record keeping by using a process of tying knots in strings  
- Great advances in medicine  
- Built a large network of stone roads  
- Expert builders who cut stones by hand and built structures without mortar
the conquered tribe became an Incan tribe, they still maintained local control. The Incan Empire was more like a group of independent tribes that shared the same culture.

**Incan Medicine**

Some of the most notable achievements of the Incas were in the field of medicine. While the Incan view of disease could be called primitive, their treatments were remarkably effective. They believed that sickness was either a punishment from the gods or the result of evil magic. When someone was sick, the first treatment was to make a sacrifice to please the gods. They also used amulets, spells, and chants to rid the patient of evil. This often worked. We know today that a patient’s confidence in his doctor and his treatment are very important in recovery.

The Incas used herbs to treat many diseases, such as dysentery and ulcers. One of the medicines, **quinine**, which the Incas used to cure fever, is used today in the treatment of malaria and heart irregularities.

The Incas performed many medical feats that were remarkable for their time. Surgeon-priests performed brain surgery and amputated limbs when needed. Prior to the surgery, the surgeons would have patients chew coca leaves in order to dull the pain. **Coca** is a shrub native to South America. After the surgery, the surgeon would burn or cauterize the wound to deaden the feelings and prevent infection. Then they would bite off the heads of large ants and use the jaws of the ants to clamp the wound shut. Surgeon-priests also performed blood transfusions hundreds of years before scientists in other parts of the world did. Since many Incas shared the same blood group, these transfusions were usually successful.

**The Spanish Arrive**

In the early part of the 16th century (1500s), when the Incan Empire was at its height, Spaniards started exploring the Americas. **Francisco Pizarro**, a wealthy Spaniard living in Panama, had heard of how Hernando Cortés had conquered the Aztecs in 1521. Pizarro also wanted to gain more wealth and fame. He had heard of a rich empire that existed on the coast of South America. When King Charles V of Spain appointed Pizarro the governor of Peru, he took about 200 soldiers into the Andes Mountains searching for this wealthy civilization. He found the Incan Empire in turmoil. Over 250,000 Incas had died of smallpox, a disease unknown in their land before Europeans had arrived. There had also been a civil war between two brothers, Huascar and Atahualpa, who fought to become the ruler of the Incan Empire. Atahualpa had won, but the empire had been weakened.

In 1532, Pizarro marched into the Incan city called Cajamara and met with **Atahualpa**, the new Incan leader. Since there were so few Spanish and so many Incas, Atahualpa felt he had nothing to fear. When he arrived, however, Pizarro’s men attacked and massacred the Incas. This was easy to do since the Incas were unarmed, and Pizarro had cannons, muskets, steel swords and spears, and soldiers on horseback. With Atahualpa as a hostage, the Spaniards were able to loot the Incan camp.

**The End of the Incan Empire**

Atahualpa offered to buy his freedom with a room full of gold. Pizarro agreed, but after the ransom arrived, Pizarro broke his promise. He put the Incan ruler on trial. Atahualpa was charged with killing his brother, worshipping idols, and having several wives. Atahualpa was found guilty and was executed. Without a leader, the Incas were unable to organize well enough to defend themselves. Pizarro was eventually able to conquer the Incas.