

# Aztec Empire

## Origins and Background

The Aztec Empire was located in what is today called the Mexico Valley region of Mexico. In fact, Mexico City was built right on top of the ancient Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlan, located in the middle of Lake Texcoco. The Aztecs built their empire by conquering surrounding peoples one by one and forcing them to pay tribute to the Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlan. The more they conquered, the more tribute they got, the richer the Aztecs became.

The city of Tenochtitlan itself eventually grew to the same size as some of the largest cities in Europe (though, remember, the Aztecs knew nothing of Europe or the people there yet). Records of Tenochtitlan describe its very wide, stone streets and a great marketplace where the riches of the area were on display and sixty thousand people would visit every day to buy and sell. The stone buildings were ornamented with gold, silver, brass, lead, copper, tin, bones, and feathers. The city had an aqueduct (a canal system) that delivered clean, running water throughout the city. The city also had a very impressive defense system, including a massive wall surrounding most of it. In addition, the city was located on an island (surrounded by water) which added an extra element of defense.



## Society

At the time of the Spanish arrival, the total Aztec population had topped 7 million people. In addition, the Aztecs had conquered about 500 smaller cities. The people were divided into rigid social classes with the emperor at the top and slaves at the bottom. Under the emperor were the nobility, then merchants, then the common people, and, finally, the slaves. The Aztecs had very strict rules that managed how the social classes were allowed to interact with each other, how they were allowed to dress, and how rich each was allowed to get.

## Religion

Aztecs were polytheists (meaning, they believed in many gods). Warfare and religion were closely tied for Aztec people. The Aztec religion demanded human sacrifices as a means of appeasing their many gods. For example, human blood would ensure the sun god would bring the sun up every morning. At the center of the city stood a massive stepped pyramid temple standing 90 feet high, today known as the Templo Mayor. This temple was also where many human sacrifices were held. Most human sacrifices were enemies conquered in battle.



For the Aztecs, how they died determined where they would go in the afterlife. Dying bravely in battle would guarantee a man would make it to paradise. Dying in childbirth had the same guarantee for women. Cowardice, disloyalty, or disrespect were all punishable by death and would mean the individual would suffer for eternity.

At the time of the European's arrival, the Aztecs were waiting for the foretold return of the god of wind, air, and learning, Quetzalcoatl, who was believed to be light-skinned.

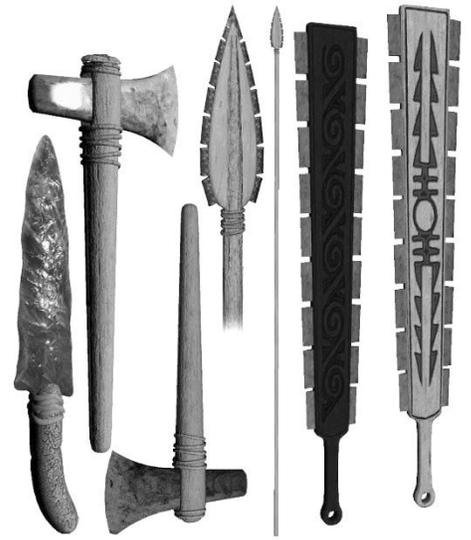
## Military

The Aztecs had universal conscription—the entire male population was the Aztec military. The Aztecs ruled their empire through force and constant shows of strength. If a conquered city stepped out of line, a massive army

would be sent to put them back in their place. Any Aztec man could be called on to go to war at any time and each man was required to master a weapon. Some Aztec weapons included a “sword” with razor-sharp obsidian shards embedded in the sides for close combat, spears (thrown with an atlatl) for long-range combat, lances with a stone blade measuring a foot wide sharp enough to pierce metal armor, bows and arrows, and slings that were so powerful and accurate they could knock a Spaniard off his horse at 650 feet away.

### **Science/Education**

The Aztec were advanced in astronomy and math. However, they are better known for their advancements in medicine. In fact, the Aztec had the best medicine of all the Native American cultures at the time. Their medicine was based on herbal remedies. The Aztec were also a very clean people. Education was fairly universal among the Aztec. Even common people (not including slaves) were guaranteed a basic level of education. How much education you received depended on your social class.



# Maya Confederation

## Origins and Background

The Mayan civilization was made up of a group of cities working together in a confederation. This means that each city had its own government and ruled itself. However, each city also formed an alliance with the other cities where they agreed to not go to war with each other, to share their wealth, and to protect each other if any one of them were attacked.

## Society

At the time the Spanish arrived, the Mayan population was just under 2 million people. While this seems like a massive number, the Mayan population had actually been shrinking for a number of years. It is unknown exactly why, but historians and archeologists speculate that it had something to do with either instability within the confederation, climate change, or social unrest.



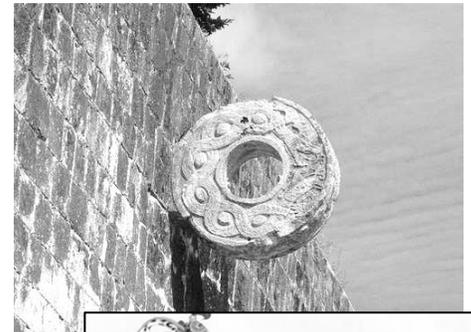
The Mayan people lived either in large cities or smaller farming villages. They were expert at carving stone, obsidian, and jade. The area is covered in hills and dense forest. Mayan society was divided into different classes. The nobility was at the top (remember, the Maya didn't have a single emperor or king because they were a confederation of cities), then priests, then the common people, then slaves at the bottom. The Mayan had very strict laws enforcing the different levels of society.

## Religion

Mayans were polytheistic (meaning, they worshipped many gods). In fact, Mayans worshipped more 160 different gods. However, they did not believe these gods were immortal—they were born, grew up, and died and had very human-like behaviors.

The people built massive stepped temples, the ruins of many of which are still around today, to give offerings to their patron gods.

The Maya believed that they could communicate with the gods, as well as keep the gods happy, through human sacrifices. Like the Aztec, Mayans believed that how a person died determined where they would go in the afterlife. There were two ways to guarantee that your soul was not banished to the underworld: die in childbirth (which, of course, was not an option for the men) or be sacrificed (unlike the Aztec who only sacrificed their enemies and it was not an honorable death).



Today, the Maya are well-known for the ball game they played as part of their ritual worship and military training. The ball game consisted of two teams, a rubber ball (rubber comes from trees), and a stone circle much like a basketball hoop turned sideways and without the net.

## Military

Most, but not all, Mayan cities were well defended with walls or earthen works. The primary goal of the Maya was to capture, rather than kill, as many of the enemy as possible. Those captured were put into slavery or slated for sacrifice. Mayan warriors ornamented themselves with paint, headdresses, jade jewelry and piercings, and jaguar-skin capes. The more skill a warrior had, the more enemies he was able to capture. The more enemies a Mayan warrior captured, the more honors that warrior was given. In a sense, warfare became a competition. While capturing an enemy earned you honors, being captured was not exactly looked down on either. If you were captured, chances are, you were sacrifice, which guaranteed your soul a place in paradise. This enabled Mayan warriors to enter the battlefield without any fear of the outcome of the battle.

Each city in the Mayan Confederation had its own army. The head of the army was elected by the other warriors. Most warriors served full-time (war was their profession) and they practiced war constantly. One way to practice war strategy and stay physically fit was through ball game competitions. In addition, Mayan warriors had a special diet and workout routine that built endurance. This was especially good since the Maya had to travel long distances on foot if they wanted to attack an enemy.

### **Science/Education**

The Maya people had an in-depth knowledge of astronomy and mathematics. They understood the movement/rotation of the planets and had detailed charts of the stars for every season. The Maya also created a calendar that went all the way to 2012 (even though the Mayan Civilization disappeared long before that date). A Mayan year, like our own, had 365 days. One year had 18 months and one month had 20 days, plus five unlucky days.



# Inca Empire

## Origins and Background

The Inca Empire was located in South America and centered mostly on what is today the country of Peru. In all, the Inca Empire covered 3,400 miles, with 40,000 Inca governing 10 million subjects speaking over 30 languages. The ancient empire hugged the western coast of the continent, bound in on one side by the Pacific Ocean and spilling over the Andes Mountains on the other.

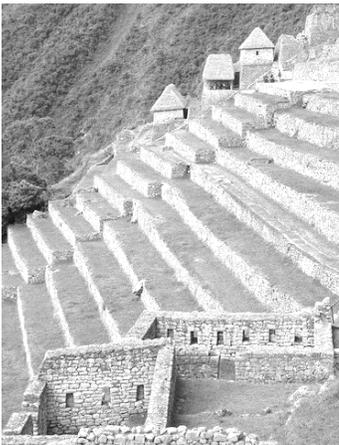
Actually, the Inca became quite good at living at high altitudes in the Andes. Of the three ancient Central and South American Empires, the Inca were the largest. In order to govern such a spread-out empire, the emperor divided the empire into 4 regions and governor over each who reported directly back to him. They even had a mail-carrier and intricate highway system. These two things meant the Incan Empire was uniquely united. While the capitol of the Incan Empire was the city of Cuzco (located on Lake Titicaca),

the most famous of the cities today is Machu Picchu. The ruins of this once thriving city are located high in the Andes Mountains. Modern historians and archeologists are not sure how the Inca were able to mine the stone for the buildings and transport it to the site. Even with thousands and thousands of slaves, such a feat would have been impossible given the altitude, the steep slopes, and sheer cliffs. Keep in mind, neither the Inca, nor any other of the ancient civilizations, had beasts of burden to rely on. Horses did not exist in the Americas until they were brought by the Spanish and other European Explorers.



## Society

Incan society was divided into four social classes: the Emperor, other royalty, nobility and priests, and finally, the common person. Slaves were not considered part of society and were not given any social status. Since the empire covered such a large area and varying altitudes (from sea level to mountain-top), different parts of the empire were able to grow different types of foods. To guarantee that all people had access to food year-round, each region would pay part of its harvest in tax to the empire and government agents would re-distribute that food to other parts of the empire. The Inca were also master farmers and were able to cut terraces into mountain sides to create farmland out of steep cliffs (called **terrace farming**). The Incan people rarely faced an attack on their main cities. Since the cities were built in the mountains, the Inca always had the high ground, which was much easier to defend.



## Religion

The Inca were polytheist, like the Aztec and Maya. The image to the right is a gold idol depicting the Incan Sun God, Inti. Incan religious practice was mostly concerned with controlling nature and avoiding catastrophe like earthquakes, floods, and drought. Incan holy days were based on an astronomical calendar (a calendar based on the rotation of the stars, moon, and sun). In fact, the Inca had developed an amazingly detailed chart of the Milky Way.

An important element of Incan religion was ancestor worship. The dead were mummified and the living would offer food, drink, and precious materials to the deceased ancestors. Sacrifices, both animal and human, were also an important part of Inca religion. A sacrifice was meant to pacify the gods and honor the emperor.

While Incan sacrifices were similar to that of the Aztec and Maya, they also had an added element of child sacrifice. The sacrifice of children (infants to teenagers) was considered a great honor and the individual was chosen from the local community.

## **Military**

The Incan military was very organized and based on units of men, much like modern militaries. Hand-to-hand combat was the most common form of fighting, making use of battle axes, lances, and clubs. Axes and lances had razor-sharp shards of obsidian and other rock embedded in them. The Inca made use of both professional warriors and peasant soldiers. If the need arose, the Inca could turn any or all of its massive population into an army and send them to the battlefield. Incan battle strategy was fairly straightforward. They would surround their target, cutting off all supplies, and simply overwhelm it with numbers and sheer force. The Inca used earsplitting screams as a means of intimidating their enemies.

## **Science/Education**

The Inca had no writing system—not even one based on pictographs like the Aztec and Maya. The Inca did, however, have a numbering system very similar to ours today. However, they had no written numbers. Instead, the numbering system was based a system of knots and string (see image to the right). Though this may sound primitive, the system allowed the Inca to record decimals out to 10,000. This is another mystery to modern historians: how a single emperor was able to maintain control and effective communication through the empire without a writing system or written numbering system.

