

THE AZTECS

After 200 years as the dominant power in Mexico, the Aztecs were defeated by the Spanish in 1521. Did human sacrifice contribute to their demise?

In July 1520, a Spanish soldier named Bernal Díaz del Castillo found himself in a strange land more than 5,000 miles from home. Looking toward the Great Temple of the Aztecs, the native people who controlled much of southern Mexico, he watched in horror as some of his comrades were forced up the temple's stairs to be sacrificed to the Aztec gods.

"With stone knives, [Aztec priests] sawed open their chests and drew out their [still-beating] hearts and offered them to the idols," Díaz later wrote. "They kicked the bodies down the [temple stairs], and Indian butchers below cut off the arms and feet and stripped the skin off the faces."

Díaz was part of the European **conquest** and colonization of the Americas starting in the 1500s.

Words to Know

- **conquest** (*n*): the act of overcoming by force
- **indigenous** (*adj*): native to a region or environment
- **tribute** (*n*): a payment to a dominant nation or power



SKULL MASK

Found at the site of the Great Temple, this mask may have been made from the skull of a sacrificial victim.

Following Christopher Columbus's historic voyage of 1492, Spain settled the Caribbean islands of Hispaniola (today the Dominican Republic and Haiti) and Cuba. In February 1519, an ambitious commander, Hernán Cortés, hearing of

great cities and gold in the land to the west, left Cuba and set off for Mexico with about 500 soldiers.

That November, Cortés reached Tenochtitlan (*tay-noch-TEE-tlahn*), capital of the Aztec Empire (*see map*). The Aztecs were the most powerful of the **indigenous** societies, including the Mayans, that dominated Mexico for centuries before Columbus. Their capital (the site of today's Mexico City) was a bustling, prosperous city larger than any city in Spain at the time.

The "great towers and temples" of Tenochtitlan filled the Spaniards with awe, Díaz wrote. "Some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream."

Montezuma, the Aztec Emperor, at first greeted the newcomers with guarded hospitality. But soon the two powers were at war. In August 1521, Cortés defeated the Aztecs, bringing the great empire to an end.

A Debt to the Gods

How did such a small Spanish army overcome tens of thousands of Aztec warriors? The most important factor was the alliances that Cortés forged with the Aztecs'



RITUAL SACRIFICE

Aztec priests remove a victim's beating heart as an offering to the gods. Performed at temples and other holy sites, ritual sacrifices were also used to intimidate neighboring peoples.



Indian enemies, who were fed up with paying **tribute** to or fighting the area's great power.

The Aztecs, originally a wandering tribe, settled Tenochtitlan in 1325 A.D. According to their myths, some deities had sacrificed themselves to create the world. "Humans realized they were indebted to the gods," says historian David Carrasco of Harvard Divinity School—and sought to repay the debt with animal and human sacrifices.

But there was also a more practical reason for human sacrifice, anthropologist Ross Hassig tells *JS*: "To keep everybody in line." In 1487, Emperor Ahuitzotl (*ah-WEE-saw-tul*) raided surrounding tribes that had refused to pay him trib-

ute, taking thousands of captives and sacrificing them at the Great Temple. Ahuitzotl got his tribute.

A half-century later, when Cortés made his final attack on Tenochtitlan, at least 100,000 native warriors fought the Aztecs with him. The Aztecs' years of domination had come back to haunt them.

No Good Guys

The battle for Tenochtitlan ended in August 1521, when Cortés conquered the city. Díaz was horrified by the devastation. "The streets, squares, houses . . . were filled with bodies so that it was almost impossible to pass," he wrote.

After the conquest, the Spaniards portrayed the Aztecs as bloodthirsty savages. In more recent times, his-

torians have denounced the evils of the conquerors. The real story, Carrasco says, had no good guys. "The Spaniards killed more people in one month than the Aztecs in five years in their sacrifices."

Tenochtitlan was renamed Mexico City and became the capital of an empire called New Spain. At its peak in the early 19th century, it stretched north into the future U.S., including much of the present-day Southwest. —Bryan Brown

Think About It

1. Why did the Aztecs perform human sacrifice?
2. What factors led to the Aztec Empire's defeat?