

FLASHBACK

THE AZTEC EMPIRE

INVASION OF TENOCHTITLAN

Five hundred years ago, Spain brutally seized the capital of the Aztec Empire—conquering Mexico and changing the history of the Americas forever

BY BRYAN BROWN

AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT

How were the indigenous people of the Americas affected by the arrival of European people?

Just after midnight on July 1, 1520, a woman was gathering water at the edge of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (*tay-nawch-TEE-tlan*). Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a suspicious movement. She knew immediately what it was. The Spanish invaders who had brought violence and destruction upon her city were trying to sneak out with their lives.

“Come quickly! Our enemies are running away in the night!” the woman shouted.

Only months before, the Aztec emperor, Montezuma, had welcomed the Spanish strangers into the city as guests. But his people soon came to despise them.

The Spanish men, known to history as conquistadores, had demanded piles of gold from their Aztec hosts. They eventually turned violent, slaughtering worshippers at

a religious festival. Enraged, the people of Tenochtitlan had risen up against the invaders—setting off a series of deadly battles.

Perhaps Montezuma might have been able to stop the mounting violence. But he had been mysteriously killed just days before. With the emperor gone, the Spanish commander, Hernando Cortés, had realized his men would all die if they remained in the Aztec capital. So he had hatched a plan to get them out.

Escaping was complicated, however. Tenochtitlan sat in the middle of Lake Texcoco (*see ancient map, p. 25*). It was joined to the mainland by a few narrow bridges. Now, as Cortés and his men inched across one of those bridges in the dark—gold bars stuffed under their armor or loaded onto the backs of horses—they had been caught.

As soon as the Aztec woman raised the alarm, the cry began to

spread. The drum of war atop the Great Pyramid sounded. Within minutes, people of the city sped to the scene in canoes, raining arrows down on the conquistadores.

Hundreds of Spanish men and horses fell into the marshy water, dead or drowning. Those left standing tried to cross on the fallen bodies. Much of the gold they’d attempted to take with them was lost. By the night’s end, the Aztec people thought the invaders were gone for good. But many of the Spanish men made it to safety—including Cortés. In time, he would return with many more forces and brutally conquer Tenochtitlan—paving the way for the European conquest of the Americas.

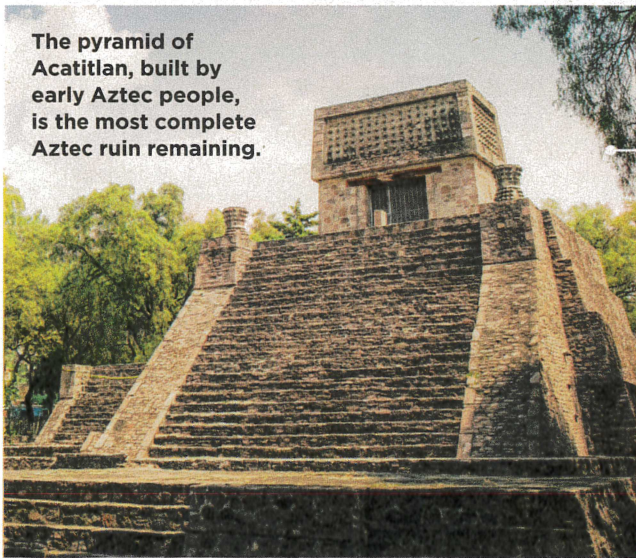
PRIMARY SOURCE

Learn more about the last days of Tenochtitlan. Go to junior.scholastic.com to read an Aztec account of a clash with Spanish invaders.

The Aztec Empire

Once a nomadic group that moved throughout Mesoamerica, the Aztec people settled in central Mexico in the 12th century. There they →

The pyramid of Acatitlan, built by early Aztec people, is the most complete Aztec ruin remaining.



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

MESOAMERICA A historical region that included Mexico and much of Central America. Indigenous peoples including the Aztecs and the Maya created civilizations with large cities and advanced farming methods here.

AGE OF EXPLORATION A period starting in the 15th century when Europeans traveled throughout the Americas in search of natural resources and indigenous people to exploit.

built a great civilization with advanced systems of farming and writing. All Aztec children, rich or poor, were educated. That was rare in any society at the time.

At the center of the Aztec world was Tenochtitlan. A marvel of culture and engineering, it featured magnificent palaces, temples, and gardens. The city grew to a population of 200,000, one of the world's largest then. Its residents called themselves Mexica (*muh-SHEE-kuh*), the origin of the name *Mexico*.

By the time Montezuma came to power as emperor in 1502, the Aztec Empire had spread to the Gulf of Mexico (see map, p. 26).

With his army, Montezuma expanded the area to include some 400 city-states—mostly of other indigenous cultures.

Tenochtitlan was a marvel of culture and engineering.

Yet resentment toward the empire was building. Montezuma made conquered territories provide him with enslaved workers and regular supplies of food and clothing. And he had enemies, such as the city-state of Tlaxcala to the east, which he had been unable to defeat. But trouble was also coming from farther away.

Conquer or Die!

By 1519, the era known as the Age of Exploration was in full swing in the Americas (see “*What You Need to Know*,” p. 23). Spanish conquistadores controlled much of the Caribbean

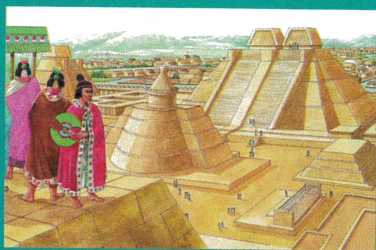
Sea, including the island of Cuba. But they were desperate for gold and to conquer more territory—in part to enslave more indigenous people, who they did not see as fully human.

The governor of Cuba tapped Cortés to explore the landmass to the west (what today is Mexico). Cortés quickly began gathering up men and supplies—so many, in fact, that the governor worried he planned to set up his own colony. Ordered to stop, Cortés instead ignored the governor and sailed west.

By the time Cortés landed on the eastern coast of Mexico in April 1519, he was already hearing tales of a great inland city rich in gold: Tenochtitlan. That August, Cortés and about 300 conquistadores set off for the Aztec capital, vowing “to conquer the land or die.”

KEY MOMENTS

The Roots of Mexico



1325

Tenochtitlan Is Founded

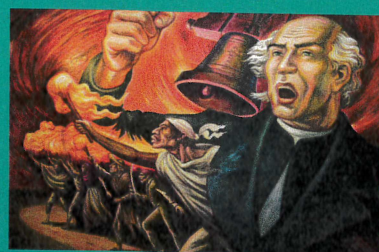
The Aztec people establish what will be their capital on Lake Texcoco. Today, Mexico City sits on the ruins of that great city of the Aztec Empire.



1492

Columbus Arrives

Christopher Columbus claims Hispaniola in the Caribbean Sea for Spain. His voyage opens the way for European conquest and rule in the Americas.



1810

The Cry of Dolores

In the Mexican city of Dolores, Catholic priest Father Hidalgo issues a call for independence from Spain. His “cry” finally leads to Mexico’s freedom in 1821.

Along the way, the group reached Tlaxcala, Montezuma's sworn enemy. Seeing a chance to defeat their old foe, the Tlaxcalan leaders sent Cortés on his way to the Aztec capital with 1,000 or more of their people.

Montezuma, who had spies everywhere, was alarmed. Several times during Cortés's 250-mile journey, the emperor sent messengers with gifts, politely asking him to stay away. Yet on November 8, 1519, Cortés and his forces started over the main southern bridge to Tenochtitlan.

A Waiting Game

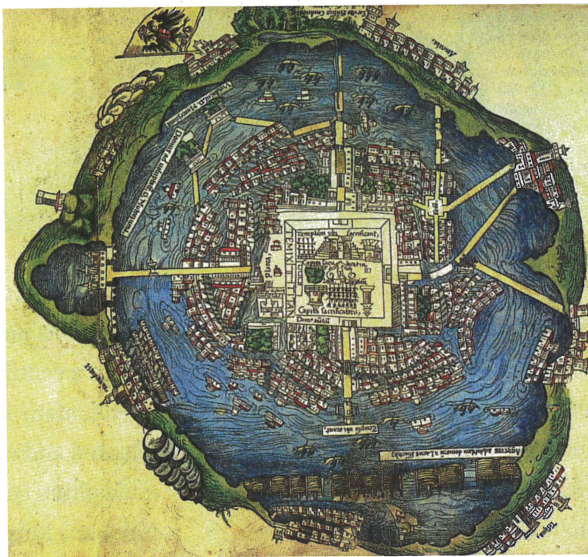
Despite his misgivings, Montezuma greeted the strangers and put them up in a palace. The Spanish men were amazed to see a city of such size and splendor. At first, they maintained an uneasy peace with the city's residents. Yet their actions eventually doomed it to fail.

The Aztec people were very religious. Their holy festivals often featured ritual human sacrifices—a common practice in some Mesoamerican cultures. Cortés was horrified by this. He later wrote to the king of Spain about such "evil practices"—using them to justify the conquering of the Aztec people.

For their part, the city's residents resented the intruders' nonstop



Above: Access to armor, steel swords, and horses helped Spanish forces conquer the Aztec Empire. **Left:** This ancient map shows the bridges leading from the city of Tenochtitlan to the mainland.



demands for food and gold. The conquistadores had many Aztec treasures, such as gold rings, melted down into bars that they could take with them. They seemed to look at *everything* as if it were something they could take. The people of Tenochtitlan were also disgusted to discover that the conquistadores almost never bathed.

Why didn't Montezuma simply throw Cortés and his men out? Historians have debated that question for centuries. Many experts believe that Montezuma was being very cautious with the armed

strangers until he could find the right way to defeat them. As time passed, Cortés began to fear he had walked into a trap. He realized that Aztec warriors could easily attack and defeat his men. Like Montezuma, he began to play an anxious waiting game.

All-Out War

Then, in April 1520, Cortés got word that Cuba's governor had sent soldiers to arrest him for defying orders. He rushed off to confront them, hoping to avoid such a fate.

The armed Spanish men he left behind were convinced that they would soon be attacked by their hosts. They went on a rampage, slaughtering many Aztec worshippers at a religious festival.

Finally, the people of Tenochtitlan rose up against the invaders, →

determined to defend the city against their violence. By the time Cortés returned, the capital was in the midst of an all-out war.

Then, suddenly, Montezuma died. Many historians believe he was killed by a Spanish captain. Whatever the truth, the emperor's death further inflamed the uprising.

Cortés saw that his men would all be killed if they did not get out immediately. Many didn't survive the midnight escape attempt. It seemed like a total Spanish defeat.

Tenochtitlan Falls

Cortés retreated to Tlaxcala. But he vowed to return to Tenochtitlan—and this time to conquer it. He sent out requests for more arms and men, rebuilding his fighting force.

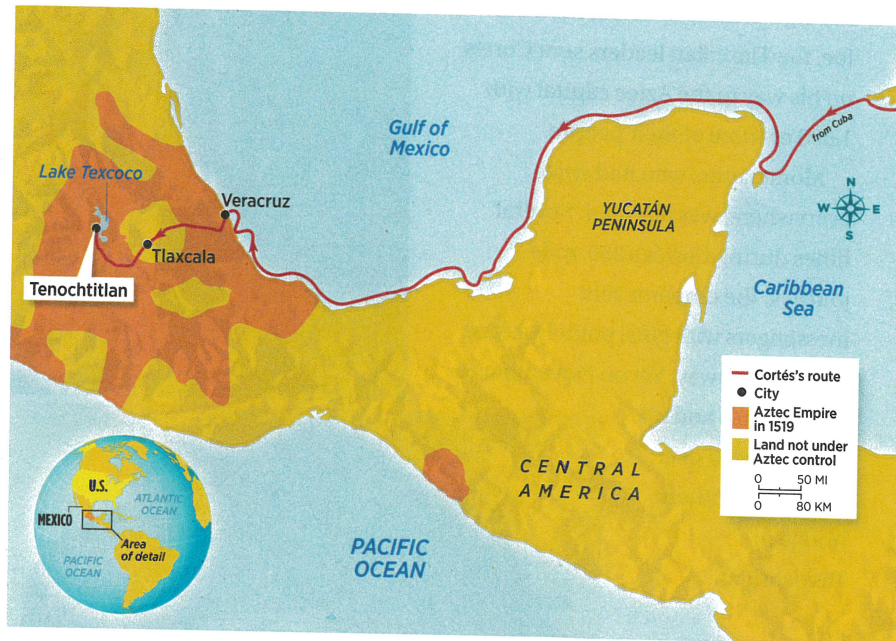
Importantly, he also found new allies among the leaders of other indigenous cities. Some had long hoped to be rid of the Aztec Empire. Others had been Aztec allies but now chose to back Cortés because they believed his army would likely win the coming war.

At the same time, an epidemic of smallpox brought by the Spanish forces swept through Tenochtitlan. It killed up to half the city's people, leaving them vulnerable to attack.

About 10 months after he had fled Tenochtitlan, Cortés returned with nearly 1,000 Spanish men and tens of thousands of indigenous warriors. His forces had steel swords, guns, and horses, which gave them an advantage over the Aztec warriors. After three brutal months of battle, Tenochtitlan finally fell.

The Aztec Empire

The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was located at the heart of what would later become Mexico.



A New Empire

The defeated Aztec Empire would become the heart of a European territory called New Spain. Within decades, it grew to contain all of Mexico. Eventually, Spain's empire included part of the future United States and much of South America.

Aztec history and culture continue to strongly influence Mexican life.

The result was disastrous for indigenous people. As the conquerors expanded their territory, they enslaved millions of people. Millions of others died through warfare and from European diseases. Historians estimate that up

to 90 percent of the Americas' indigenous people were wiped out within a century of Spanish rule.

Still, many indigenous people adapted and survived. Aztec history and culture continue to strongly influence Mexican life. Today many of the remains of Tenochtitlan lie under Mexico City, the capital of Mexico. There, archaeologists carefully excavate the Aztec past.

In 1981, a worker unearthed something startling: a bar of gold. Earlier this year, scientists determined that it had been lost in the water during the conquistadores' desperate escape 500 years ago—a ghostly reminder of the conquest of one of the world's great civilizations. ♦

WRITE ABOUT IT!

How was the establishment of the Spanish empire "disastrous for indigenous people"? Explain the effects of Spanish conquest, using details from the article as evidence.