

EXPANSION OF THE AZTEC EMPIRE

In little less than two centuries, the Mexicas went from being a panah tribe on the Mexican plateau to sovereigns of a great empire.



They are seen as a small tribe (around a thousand people) guided by a bloodthirsty god that promised them glory, wandering aimlessly in a valley where other cultures flourished and the cornfields that fed the cities were abundant and the towns prosperous. Their cruel character, emanating from being forced to base themselves in provisional areas like the Chapultepec forest and to conduct themselves as mercenaries, an activity that suited them well, meant that they were universally shunned. However, the tribe was ambitious; its God had promised them shining glory. Not content with their status as mercenaries under the power of others, the Mexicas conspired to improve their position by means of a political marriage. This practice was very common everywhere in the world, particularly between the European monarchies. Therefore, they asked the Chief of Culhuacan, of Toltec lineage, whose name was Achitometl, for the hand of his daughter for their God, Huitzilipochtli. The father could not foresee the tragic end for his daughter. Fulfilling their word, the Mexicas offered the young girl to

MEXICA CODEX

The Aztecs had a hieroglyphic script, allowing them to paint codices, or ancient manuscript texts. Just a few of these escaped the destruction of the Spanish friars.



their God. They sacrificed her on his altar and, once skinned, the priest, to impress the Divine, wore the maiden's skin. To escape the wrath of Achitometl, the tribe were forced to flee and place themselves under the protection of the Chief of Azcapotzalco. Their new masters, to whom they had to pay homage and tribute, gave them a home on a desert island in the middle of Lake Texcoco. It was an inhospitable place that seemed more an exile than a home but, around 1325, the Mexicas found their promised land because, upon a prickly pear they saw an eagle with a serpent in its beak. It was the sign prophesied by Huitzilipochtli.

THE EAGLE DEVOURING A SERPENT, PERCHED ON A CACTUS

This was the prophecy indicating the place from where the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan had to rise and the end of the pilgrimage.

THE FOUNDATION OF TENOCHTITLAN

The Azcatitlan manuscript shows these first Mexicas in canoes, fishing with rods or nets surrounded by rushes and aquatic birds. Their neighbours knew them as *Ataca Chichimeca*, the lacustrine savages. In all, they were pretty poverty stricken. When they needed wood and stones to build Huitzilipochtli's first sanctuary, (the first steps to the future Tenochtitlan) they had to go and get them from the urban tribes living on the banks of the lake in exchange for fish, aquatic birds and animals. Little-by-little, they increased their small settlement through an ingenious system of man-made islands. These were a type of enormous oval-shaped wicker baskets, anchored to the bottom of the shallow lake and filled with earth to act as receptacles suitable for sowing. Thus, Mexico-Tenochtitlan was being born through forced manual labour.

The small barren island, inhabited by a primitive people, went through a process of change influenced by the surrounding cultures with a strong Toltec inheritance. Around 1427 A.D., Tenochtitlan had become a consolidated city that viewed their neighbours on equal terms. The *Tlatoani* (sovereign) Itzacoatl, supported or rather inspired by its 'prime minister, *cihuacoatl* Tlacaelel, decided to shake off the repression inflicted by the epaneca Lords of Azcapotzalco. To do so, he proposed an alliance with the other lakeside cities. This was the origin of the Triple Alliance, which took control of the region and marked the beginning of what continues to be known as the Aztec Empire. The Triple Alliance was composed of the cities of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan. The latter of these was the most modest of the three and was, in reality, little more than a Mexican colony on the lakeshore. The supremacy of the two first cities was obvious by the agreement of distribution of war booty and taxes from other villages. Two fifths were for the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan, two for Texcoco and one for Tlacopan. On the arrival of the Spaniards, Tenochtitlan was the unquestionable leading city of the alliance.





ARMAMENT

The basic armament of the Mexican warrior (1) consisted of a round shield, *chimalli* (2), made of wood or cane and covered with feathers or fabrics painted with the colours of the clan, and a *macquahuitl* wooden club (3). This was the most effective weapon as it was encrusted with sharpened obsidian blades. The Mexican warriors looked upon it as their most dangerous weapon, but it proved ineffective against Spanish armour. The war axe (4) was also made of wood with a sharpened obsidian blade.

The bow, or *tlautlioli* (5), was a Toltec weapon used by the Aztecs, but it was not as accurate or as robust

as the European bows.

The *atlatl* thrower (6) could project arrows (*mitl*) (7) or javelins (*tlacohitli*) (8).

A weapon that caused most damage to the Spaniards was the sling (9) that came from the mallatzincas of the Toluca valley. The half-wild chinantecs from the mountains of Oaxaca used lances with stone points (10).

As armour or body protection they wore the *ichcaupilli* (11), a tunic of quilted cotton or a vest hardened with brine. The helmets had a decorative, prestigious and distinct function. They were made of wood, extravagantly decorated with feathers, paper or colourful zoomorphic figures.



The everyday clothes worn by the peasants consisted of the *maxtlatl* or loincloth and the multi-purpose *tilmatli* or cloak, which also served as a coverlet, awning or clothing. Veteran soldiers wore fitted suits with sleeves and trousers (12) that clearly distinguished them from the others. These suits could be multi-coloured, either associated with the wearer's clan or to their personal taste, except those of the Jaguar knight (13). These were made from Jaguar skin while those of the Eagle knight (14) were covered with eagle feathers.

The banners and flags (15) that the commanders tied to their backs were very important in the battle, as well

as for the organization and training of the armies. These were made of cane because of its light weight, and were decorated with multi-coloured feathers, jewels and gold. Documentation shows that the Mexicas were very imaginative when designing the banners. Figures of different birds, especially birds of prey, parasols and feathered fans were used. It appears that any design was valid as long as it was bright, clearly distinguishable and multi-coloured. In accordance with the aforementioned regulations, it should be understood that only those who were distinguished for military merit used the banners and adornments. The inappropriate use of such items was severely punished.



tion. What use was the fleet now that they had to go inland? If they conquered, more boats would arrive. However, if they failed, they would be too far inland for the ships to be of any use. In addition, by releasing the ship's crew of the care of the naos, they could count on extra troops for the coming battle.

'As for me,' he concluded, *I will remain here all the while at least one person accompanies me. Those cowards, who do not wish to share the dangers of our glorious challenge, go in the name of God. There is one ship left, take it and return to Cuba. There, you will be able to tell them how you deserted your commander and his companions and wait until we return loaded with the loot of the Aztecs.*' A single shout rose from the camp 'To Mexico, to Mexico.'

EN ROUTE TO TENOCHTITLAN

The force that departed for the Mexican capital on the 16th of August 1519 consisted of four hundred Spaniards on foot, fifteen cavalry and seven pieces of artillery. There was also one thousand three hundred Totonac warriors and all supported by a thousand 'tamanes' or porters. A small contingent of troops remained at Villa Rica de Veracruz under the command of the bailiff, Juan de Escalante.

Little by little, the column left behind the flat coastal plain and headed into the mountains and ascended the Mexican central plateau. A few days into the trek, they arrived at the city of Tlataulitepec, where they were given a warm welcome.

Cortés, with his customary zeal, and not very diplomatically, wished to immediately convert the Indians. He had already forced the Totonacs of Cempoala to smash their idols and take up the Cross. Cortés wanted to repeat this in the new city, but the prudent intervention of father Olmedo saved the Spaniards. The priest explained that to force the indigenous people to accept the Cross was to assure that they would humiliate him as soon as his back was turned. He asked the commander to contain his religious zeal and wait for a more propitious moment. Cortés agreed. The faultless reasoning of the father prevailed over the intolerant passion of the military man.

It was necessary to continue the journey and, after seeking advice from his Indian friends, Cortés decided to go through Tlaxcala, a small country that, despite being situated at the doors of the empire, remained fiercely independent. The Spaniard thought that it would be of benefit to have them as friends, so he sent an ambassador ahead and headed for the Tlaxcaltec country.

TLAXCALA

The ambassadors that were sent to Tlaxcala did not return. Still, Cortés continued his advance until confronted by a colossal stone wall surrounding the territory. They crossed it and entered the land of Tlaxcala.

SCUTTling THE SHIPS

With the destruction of the ships, returning to Cuba was impossible. For Cortés and his men, their only hope was to succeed with their mission.