

History

1492 - Lesson 2 of 4

## **The Conquistadors**

***Why have historians described 1492 as a ‘turning point’ in world history?***

Mr Wallace



# The Aztecs

The best way to think of the Aztecs are as a network of cities and settlements that are linked together through **tribute**. The most powerful city was Tenochtitlán, built on a lake. They focused on trade and war, and because they did not have many resources of their own, they demanded them from others. This meant raiding or intimidating other cities so that they would supply them with things like cotton, prisoners for human sacrifices, food, animals and shields. Some cities joined the Aztecs willingly. Cities that chose to join the Aztecs did so because the Aztecs offered protection and were well organised, or because they shared the same religious beliefs. However, groups such as the *Tlaxcala* hated the situation but were not strong enough to go against it. Tenochtitlán was just too powerful.



## Building support

A Spanish soldier called Hernán Cortés was determined to break apart the Aztecs and take their land for Spain. However, Cortés had arrived with only around 500 soldiers and 16 horses. He needed more support if he was going to defeat them. As he made his way to Tenochtitlán he began to divide the Aztec Empire by either defeating smaller cities in battle, or persuading them to join his side and go against the city of Tenochtitlán. Cortés had realised that the Aztecs were not truly united. These cities often supplied him with soldiers, and the biggest supporters were from *Tlaxcala*. They gave Cortés thousands of soldiers and were determined to get revenge on Tenochtitlán after countless years of attacks and intimidation.



# Montezuma

When he felt strong enough, Cortés marched his forces into Tenochtitlán and captured the emperor, Montezuma. The Spanish tried to control the city, and demanded that the tributes were paid to them. As Montezuma did this, he became more and more unpopular and the people of Tenochtitlán began to hate the Spanish invaders. At one point, the Spanish tried to stop ritual sacrifices during a religious event and attacked the people. This led to a wave of violence in which Montezuma was killed. Both sides blamed the other, and it is not clear who was responsible. The violence forced the Spanish out of the city and they were nearly destroyed. They regrouped outside of Tenochtitlán and planned their next attack.



# The attack on Tenochtitlan

While the Spanish were planning their next attack, there was an outbreak of **smallpox** which devastated the Aztecs and killed thousands of warriors, nobles and farmers. This meant they were weaker when the Spanish did attack. The assault on Tenochtitlán began in April 1521 and lasted over 90 days. Cortés had learned that controlling the lake was key to taking the city, so he had built ships. These helped protect his soldiers as they advanced on the narrow **causeways** that led to the city. Gradually they broke down the Aztecs, who were beginning to starve. The Aztecs were weakened by smallpox, cut off from any supplies, and their tributes had dried up. Eventually the fighting reached the city and it was attacked and destroyed by the Spanish and their Tlaxcala allies. Thousands were killed in brutal massacres.



# New Spain

On the site of the destroyed city of Tenochtitlán, Cortés **founded** Mexico City. He had the Aztec temples taken apart and rebuilt his city over the top of the ancient land. This represented Spain's total victory over the Aztecs. Eventually the lake was covered by this new settlement. Mexico City became the capital city of **New Spain**, the Spanish colony formed in 1521. This was loyal to the Spanish crown and spread across all of modern-day Mexico, and other parts of Central America. Christianity continued to be spread across New Spain and the old Aztec beliefs became weaker. The population of this colony was mixed between **indigenous** people from the area and Spanish **colonists**. However, groups like the *Tlaxcala* were given a large amount of freedom, in return for their support.



# Glossary

**Causeway** - a narrow path or walkway across water

**Colonist** - someone moving/settling in an area that they are not from, as part of a new colony

**Founded** - created or formed

**Indigenous** - people who are naturally from a particular place

**Smallpox** - a deadly disease

**Tribute** - the forced payment of goods or food or weapons to someone





# Questions

1. What was the most powerful city in the Aztec world?
2. How did this city get resources?
3. How did Cortés divide the Aztec Empire?
4. Why were the Aztecs weakened before the Spanish attacked?
5. Why was Cortés victorious over the Aztecs in 1521?
- 6. Challenge:** What was the importance of Mexico City?

