Who Were the Aztec People?

We look back in awe at the accomplishments of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans who all lived around the Mediterranean Sea. We also need to be amazed at what was happening on the North American continent, especially in Mexico, thousands of years ago with the advanced civilization of the Aztec people. Historians know a great deal about the Aztecs because of their own writings plus the accounts of them written by the Spanish conquerors who destroyed their civilization around 1519 CE. Aztecs is name for all the people who lived in the Aztec Empire created by the Mesheeca or Mexica people.

Like other Native American groups in North America, the Mexica have a legend about where they came from. The story says that their god Huitzilopochtli instructed them to travel to a new place and the Mexica tribe wandered around the central portion of present-day Mexico in search of a new home for two hundred years. Finally, when they reached the Valley of Mexico, their god gave them a sign. This sign, an eagle devouring a snake while sitting on a cactus, is shown on the Mexican flag of today. Around 1325 CE the Mexica build their settlement on an island and called it Tenochtitlan.

The Mexica converted the marshland of their island to fertile soil and also used reed mats to create floating gardens for growing crops. Tenochtitlan was divided into four sections; each section was occupied by families and craftsmen. In order to create political relationships with other cities in the valley, the sons of Mexica ruling families married princesses of other tribes. Through trade and political alliances, the Mexica grew in power and by 1500 CE they ruled the entire Valley of Mexico. This is called the Aztec Empire and the Mexica are usually called Aztecs along with all the tribes in the empire they created.

The Aztec leader was called the Emperor who was aided by four generals who commanded four armies, one from each district of the city. The next class was the great nobles, the wealthy who ruled Aztec provinces, followed by the lesser nobles who were city officials. Ordinary people were divided into clans, family groups who owned land. A clan’s land was further divided among family members. The lowest group in Aztec society was the slaves; slaves were bought and sold as the property of their masters.