Aztec History

The Aztecs were the last group of native people whose civilization dominated the Valley of Mexico. The Valley of Mexico is located in central Mexico where the country narrows as the land between the Gulf of Mexico on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west narrows. The Valley of Mexico is a high plateau, around 7,000 feet above sea level, surrounded by volcanic mountains.

The first people to influence culture in the Valley of Mexico were the Olmecs whose civilization began around 1200 BCE in the jungles of eastern Mexico. The Olmecs are known for their finely crafted artwork, especially giant heads that are 10 feet tall. The Olmecs invented a system of writing and were well-versed in astronomy and mathematics. As their culture evolved, it spread to the Valley of Mexico even if they didn’t officially rule the area.

Somewhere at the very beginning of the Common Era, native people built a city from stone called Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico. The name Teotihuacan means “Place of the Gods” and the city contained religious pyramids that were constructed by 200 CE. Scholars believe that Teotihuacan was the 6th largest city in the world when it was flourishing. After about 200 years, the great city declined from famine and revolts.

The Toltecs, who also built pyramids, controlled the Valley of Mexico from about 1000 to 1200 CE. Their capital city was Tula which was attacked and destroyed around 1200 CE. Meanwhile the Mesheeca or Mexica people, later called Aztecs by the Spanish, lived as nomads throughout central Mexico, without a home territory, but seeking a land for themselves. The Aztecs finally settled on swampy island in Lake Tecoco in the Valley of Mexico around 1325 CE.

The Aztec people named their settlement Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs converted their swampland to fertile crop fields and the people developed skilled crafts. They began trading food and goods with neighboring tribes. Over the years Tenochtitlan became a city and the Aztecs spread to other islands. The nobles and rulers of Aztec society began to intermarry with the royal families of neighboring tribes and eventually ruling their territory. By 1500 CE the Aztec Empire controlled the entire Valley of Mexico, only to be destroyed by Spanish conquerors under Cortez beginning in 1519.