



Aztec Empire

The Aztec Empire emerged from a bunch of Aztec city-states. One of these city-states, Tenochtitlan, was kind of an underdog. But in the context of a civil war, it formed a strategic alliance with other city-states to form the famous Aztec Empire—with Tenochtitlan as its seat. For a while, this system worked. But when the empire was invaded from outside, the city-state system could not hold the empire together.



00:01

A map shows the location of the Aztec empire; a photo of an elaborate Aztec temple

We've already talked about the Aztec civilization in several videos, but what we're going to focus on in this video is the Aztec Empire, which shouldn't be confused with the Aztec civilization. The civilization is referring to the broader groups of people over hundreds of years, but the Aztec Empire is a very specific entity that formed in the 100 years before Spanish colonization.

00:29

Zoomed in map shows the locations of Aztec city-states

What you see here is a zoomed-in version of what today would be Southern Mexico and right over here on the globe, and you can see many city-states formed here. A city-state is a city that is also, considers itself a state that has its own political organization, its own way of functioning. It's not dependent on any other government forms, and it's analogous to what we see in Classical Greece, where we have the city-states of Athens and Sparta.

00:58

Map shows the location of Lake Texcoco and the cities that surround it.

Now, what's particularly interesting is what's going on around Lake Texcoco in the 14th century. In 1325, you have the city of Tenochtitlan form on this island in Lake Texcoco. And initially, Tenochtitlan is one of the weaker city-states around Lake Texcoco. You see many of these city-states, some of the stronger ones. You have Texcoco right here, and in particular, you have Azcapotzalco, but as we fast-forward roughly 100 years, you get to a situation where Azcapotzalco falls into a civil war. Their ruler dies, and there's a succession battle, and the various city-states around Lake Texcoco take sides. What eventually happens is, Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan form what is known as a triple alliance, or the Triple Alliance, and are able to conquer the Azcapotzalco. And so in conquering the Azcapotzalco, what you have forming is known as the Aztec Empire.

02:16

Now, it starts as an alliance between these three city-states, and other city-states in the area, but over time, Tenochtitlan, which is sometimes referred to as Mèxico-Tenochtitlan, because it is a city-state of the Mèxico people—and this is where the name Mèxico, or Mexico, actually comes from. Now, even though it's an alliance, over time, Tenochtitlan essentially becomes the capital of this alliance, or the capital of this Aztec Empire, which continues on for roughly 100 years, until 1521, when it is defeated by Hernando Cortes.

02:58

Portrait of Hernando Cortes

Now, the story of how Hernando Cortes is able to conquer this empire is fascinating, and I'm not going to be able to go into all of the details in this video. But needless to say, he's able to convince several hundred conquistadors to come and try to conquer the empire, and he's able to do so by recruiting tens of thousands—some estimates I've seen are 100,000 soldiers—from neighboring city-states who had issues with the Mèxico, or with the Aztec Empire. And so he's eventually able to take over the famed city of Tenochtitlan.

03:35

"this lake" – Lake Texcoco

And it's really important to recognize how advanced they were at the time. You see these causeways, these bridges leading into the island. They had a fairly advanced dam system to collect fresh water from the rain, while also to control flooding. In fact, a lot of that was destroyed when the conquistadors came. And Mexico City, which eventually gets founded over this lake, is going to have issues with flooding for some time in the future. In fact, the Spanish, in order to control the flooding, end up draining this lake, and this is where Mexico City forms.

04:07

*Empire, formed by the
city-states Texcoco,
Tlacopan, and Mèxico-
Tenochtitlan*

But the big takeaway here is, near the end of the Aztec civilization, as we get to the 100 years before the conquistadors arrive, you have this empire form—this empire which starts as an alliance of city-states, but eventually becomes a tributary empire. Unlike the neighboring Mayans, which were on the Yucatan Peninsula—on this map, they would be in this region right over here—the neighboring Mayans were autonomous city-states. Some might have had more power, more influence at different times, but the Aztec tributary state means the other city-states are paying tribute to Tenochtitlan. They are paying revenue, they are paying service to what essentially is the capital, or the seat of that empire, until it is conquered by the Spanish with—and remember, the Spanish are able to do this with several hundred conquistadors with the help of neighboring city-states and a smallpox epidemic, which kills 50% of the population of the region.