

America: A.D. 1401 to 1500
Jack E. Maxfield

MEXICO, CENTRAL AMERICA, AND THE CARIBBEAN

A number of city-states had arisen as heirs of the Mexican Toltec priest-state, including the Totonac, Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya and then the Circun-Caribbean groups. One of these, Tenochtitlan, along with two lesser cities gained military predominance and held a loose power over most of central Mexico. After A.D. 1431, under the chieftains Itzcoatl and Moctzuma I, the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan mastered the other tribes of the valley and then crossed the mountains and dominated southern Mexico, as well. These Aztecs attained a high degree of development in engineering, architecture, art, mathematics and astronomy, whether through their own endeavors completely or through adoption of culture from pre-existing societies. Picture writing, rapidly approaching phonetics, was developed and agriculture, gold and silver workings, pottery and textiles were advanced. Moctezuma I and Nezahualcoyotl, king of Texcoco, an allied city-state, built a 9 mile long dam in Lake Texcoco, to separate salt water from fresh. Aztec aquaculture harvested spirulina, a high protein algae, carried as rations by warriors. It is still exported to Japan as a condiment, in the amount of 700 tons a year. The Aztec language was Nahuatl and 1,200,000 Mexicans still speak it today. Such world words as "chocolate", "tomato", "tamale" and "chili" have come directly from this source.

It is well known that the Aztecs used human sacrifices as a part of their religious activities, in the form of ceremonial cannibalism. Tenochtitlan priests ripped open chests of living victims with flint knives, tore out still beating hearts and ate them. The heads were hung on racks (perhaps the brains were eaten also) and the remainders of the bodies were tumbled down the steep-sided temple steps for the populace to eat. At times one thigh was given to the Supreme Council and other choice cuts to other nobles and then the remainders given to the victim's captor, who took it home and had it cooked into a maize and man stew, to be eaten by all the family. A subsidiary nation, Tlaxcalan, may have been preserved simply as a "stockyard" to supply human meat for Aztec raiders. One possible explanation for the cannibalism, according to Michail Harner, is that human flesh was the only source of some essential amino-acids needed by man. He explains that there were few or no domesticable herbivores in pre-Columbian Mexico and the poor could neither import game nor get the needed combinations of amino acids in their limited diets, so that cannibalism became their salvation. This is not accepted by the majority of Aztec specialists. Some have estimated that 250,000 people were sacrificed each year, although other authorities say that on the eve of the Spanish conquest, there were only about 50,000 human victims a year. Still another estimate has been given by Bart McDowell, who wrote that after the great Tenochtitlan was dedicated in 1487 between 10,600 and 70,400, depending on the source, were sacrificed with the ritual killings continuing without pause from sun-up to sun-down, four at a time, for four days. At least on some occasions, once captives

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were killed their bodies were flayed and the skin worn by priests for 20 days. Multiple pictures drawn by Aztec artists, under Spanish supervision, show these skin enrobed priests.

Mexican writers tend to indicate that the cannibalism was entirely a religious rite, re-enacting a mythical battle between the God Huitzilopochtli and his sorceress sister, Coyaxauhqui, whom he dismembered. Anawalt writes that as children of the sun the Aztecs felt a heavy responsibility to keep the sun (representing Huitzilopochtli in his daily battle) strong, by giving it the most sacred of all foods - human blood. The most common blood offerings were from auto-sacrifice from every man, woman and child, from ear lobes, tongues, extremities, chest or genitals. Human sacrifice, however, was the most holy rite and took place on one or more days of each of the 18 months in the Aztec year. Most of these were captives or specially selected and prepared individuals.

The Aztecs did not have the wheel, but they had an intensive agriculture and probably some 12,000,000 peasants were expected to grow a surplus of some 20,000 tons of food for the city and its trading network. They had inherited techniques for quarrying and moving large blocks of stone, as manifested in their so-called calendar stone, a basalt disk 3.6 meters in diameter, 72 centimeters thick and weighing 24 metric tons. It was quarried with stone hammers and chisels, with wooden wedges inserted into cleavage planes.

On the Goodman-Martinez-Thompson correlation dating system used by the National Geographic Society, the Aztecs did not turn on their previous superiors, the Tepehecs, until 1428 and then by 1519 had a tribute empire that covered most of central Mexico and stretched as far as Guatemala. The other dating correlation system is the "Spinden", which makes all Central American dates about 260 years earlier. The problem is not with relative dates in the American scene, which are consistent by the old Mayan calendars, but with relating these to the Christian calendar. A discovery in Vera Cruz in 1972 seems to confirm the former method to be the most accurate. A map will be found under this same section in the next chapter, showing the progression of the Aztec state and its relationship to other Central and South American empires.

The exact population of Mexico before the arrival of the Spaniards is, of course, unknown. Some have given well thought-out estimates as high as 25,000,000. But, as Braudel has pointed out, the Indian population of this 15th century suffered a demographic weakness because of the absence of substitute animal milk, a feature which necessitated breast feeding for 3 or 4 years, thus reducing the fertility. This was a factor in the failure of rapid revival of the Indian population after the devastating onslaught of the diseases and firearms of the Spaniards. Outside the Aztec area, Yucatan and the Mayan area of Guatemala were politically divided between petty, rival states. Yucatan continued to remain separate from Mexico until the time of the Mexican revolution.

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No reader needs to be reminded that Christopher Columbus reached the Caribbean in 1492, claiming territory for his backer, the Spanish monarchy. All may not know, however, that he had previously sailed far down the coast of Africa and to Iceland and beyond in the north Atlantic, in earlier days. He certainly knew of the presence of Greenland and contrary to some reports, there never was any question about the earth being flat among the sailors of that time. The navigation problem originated, at least in part, from the fact that scientists of the day had accepted Marco Polo's location of Japan as being 1,500 miles off the China coast. This, added to Columbus' adoption of a markedly wrong diameter of the earth, resulted in his assurances throughout his western voyages that he had reached the Indies and was very near China and Japan. On each of his western trips, Columbus rode the Canary Current and the prevailing Atlantic trade-winds. On the first, he required 36 days from the Canary Islands to his Caribbean landfall. It is of interest that Curtis and Kathleen Saville made essentially the same trip in a rowboat in 1981 in 50 days. The return trip to Europe, however, cannot be made without going first north with the Gulf Stream, or with power.

Columbus' misconception regarding the land he found is worth a little more detail. There are 360 degrees of longitude in the circumference of the earth and we know today that each degree is very close to 60 nautical miles, thus making the perimeter of the globe some 21,600 nautical miles. Eratosthenes, many centuries before Columbus, had estimated a degree of longitude at 59.5 miles, but Columbus accepted the calculations of a Moslem geographer, Alfragan, who postulated this figure at 56.667 Arabic miles. Columbus further misinterpreted this as the equivalent of 45 western, nautical miles thus making an error of 25%. This, plus his erroneous placement of Japan from the writings of Marco Polo, resulted in great confusion. The Canary Islands are on the same latitude as the southern tip of Japan and that was his reason for leaving from that point. He was unaware, apparently, that it was the Canary Current at that latitude that really allowed him to make the crossing. The true air-line miles from the Canaries to Japan number about 10,600, but Columbus' calculations were that it should be only 2,400.

At any rate, the Genoese Columbus, whose Spanish name was Don Cristobal Colon, took off on his first cross-Atlantic voyage with the famous Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria vessels, leaving Spain for the Canaries on August 3, 1492. Rough water had made him take 6 days between Spain and those islands, where the warlike Guanches were only partially conquered but were gradually being reduced to slavery. We know something about his ships. The Nina, about 60 tons probably had a 6 feet draught, an overall length of 70 feet, a 23 feet beam and a hold depth amidships of about 9 feet. It was square rigged with a lanteen sail on the mizzen and was provisioned for a year. For the seamen, the chief foods were wine, olive oil and bread in the form of sea biscuits or hard tack. They had some fish, salted meat, legumes and garlic. They sailed by dead reckoning, which means estimating the speed of the ship and then calculating the distance travelled. Columbus repeatedly tried some celestial navigation but he made

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bad errors and actually relied almost completely on dead reckoning, at which we was apparently a master. One could not really tell longitude at that time, because there was no reliable maritime clock. The compass was the only fairly dependable instrument and even its variations from the pole star tended to be confusing. Nevertheless, the first crossing was not difficult, running on the trade winds and with the Canary Current, with the best day's run being 174 nautical miles. Columbus landed on the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas.

The adventurers immediately encountered Taino Indians, speakers of what was later to be identified as an Arawak language. They used dugout boats, some carrying 40 to 45 men and they used hammocks for sleeping, a trick soon adopted by the Spanish seamen. Deeper on the island many of the Taino were kept captive for eating purposes by the cannibalistic Caribs. Taino boys were castrated and the girls were kept to raise babies, which the Caribs thought to be particularly tasty. The Indians went essentially naked, wearing a few trinkets of gold leaf. The latter, of course, greatly excited the Europeans and they sailed through the Bahamas to Hispaniola (Haiti) in pursuit of gold, as well as Japan and the Grand Khan of China. They decided Cuba was the Asiatic mainland and it was there that the Santa Maria went aground. By this time friction had developed among the ships' captains and Columbus and the skipper of the Pinta sailed her away, leaving Columbus with the Nina and the grounded Santa Maria. A fort was built on Cape Haitian Harbor and 39 men were left there while the Admiral and the Nina sailed on January 16, 1493 for Spain, going first north and then east. Again Columbus' attempts at celestial navigation were somewhat ludicrous, but with luck and dead reckoning he hit the Azores and finally, after some trouble with the Portuguese there, he went on to Lisbon in a storm. All thought that they had found Asiatic islands.

The follow-up to the discovery voyage of Columbus is not so well known. Queen Isabella sent him back to the Indies in September of 1493, with 1,500 men in a fleet of 17 ships, with the declared prime object of conversion of the Indians to Christianity and a second object of establishing a trading colony, with Columbus as governor. The ships sailed through the smaller leeward islands to Porto Rico and finally to Haiti, where it was found that the men left there on the previous voyage were dead. The first battle with Indians took place on St. Croix Island on November 13th. Columbus was able to take some of these vicious, cannibalistic Caribs as prisoners and made them slaves. Then he explored southern Cuba, which he thought was part of China, and/or islands of Malay and then he went on to Jamaica. On this voyage he established another colony on Haiti, but his men, who had no women on their ships from Spain, raped, robbed and enslaved the Indians. Fray Buil, who had been sent as the Christian priest, participated in the Indian enslavement and Columbus, himself, eventually returned with some 500 Indians for the slave markets of Seville, when he got home again in the spring of 1496. Colonists who were left in the Caribbean built the city of Santo Domingo in 1496 or 1497, as the first American urban community. It has been estimated that the total population of Hispaniola (Haiti) in 1496 was 4,000,000, chiefly Indians, of course.

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Since the Spanish royalty was not too happy with the paucity of gold and silver brought back from the New World after 2 trips, Columbus had real difficulty in arranging his third. Finally in 1498 he sailed again, to land in Trinidad and Venezuela on the South American coast. Another fleet supposedly went directly to provision the colony on Santa Domingo. In Venezuela the men did find *guanin* or *tumbaga*, an alloy of gold, silver and copper, with the amount of gold varying from 9 to 89% and the copper from 11 to 74%. They also found more cannibalistic Caribs and big fighting-canoes, with cabins amidships, which may have been factors in making the Spaniards just miss an area of great pearl fisheries. Returning to Santo Domingo, Columbus found 160 of the European colony (20 to 30% of the total) ill with syphilis. The natives had been shamefully exploited, the provision fleet hadn't arrived and some mutineers had been hanged. Francisco de Bobadilla, who had been sent to the island by the Spanish monarchs as Chief Justice, blamed Columbus for the various problems, arrested him and had him returned to Spain in chains. The year was 1500.

This section would not be complete without further comment concerning the much debated question of the origin of syphilis. Morison states that there is abundant evidence of syphilis occurring in a mild, endemic form in the pre-Columbian American Indians, but it was not until after the arrival of Columbus' sailors that the disease became rampant on both continents. For whatever reason, the interaction of the European men and the Indians made the disease violent on both sides of the Atlantic.

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