

# The Toltecs

## Brief History

The Toltec civilization emerged in northern Mesoamerica, in the present-day state of Hidalgo, between 800 CE and 1100 CE. They were the forbearers of the Aztecs. The Toltecs were a Pre-Columbian civilization whose culture is suspected to have been an offset from the previous Teotihuacan culture (100 BCE – 8<sup>th</sup> century CE) that also resided in the Mesoamerican region.

The Toltecs used both trade and conquests to expand their territory. At their height of power and prosperity (c.950 CE), there were an estimated 40,000 Toltecs in Mesoamerica.

The collapse of the Toltec Empire is enigmatic. According to legends, the city of Tollan was abandoned because of a civil war; however, other possibilities include agricultural and commercial problems, and overcrowding due to continued immigration. In any case, by 1100 CE the Toltec Empire disintegrated.

## Geographical Extent

Geographically, the Toltec Empire was not very large; at its height it encompassed an area of 386 square miles (around 1000 square kilometers). The center of the Toltec Empire was their capital, Tollan, now-a-days Tula, in the state of Hidalgo.

## Culture

The term "Toltec" has several meanings. Originating in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, it derived from the name "Tollan," meaning "place of reeds" or "metropolis," but it was also used to refer to "skilled artists."

## Economy

The Toltec economy depended upon agriculture and trade. Their main crops were maize (corn), beans, and chili peppers. Toltec artisans used obsidian – volcanic glass similar to granite – to create weapons, which they exported to nearby civilizations. Other exports included textiles and ceramics. Their main imports were beans, cacao, and mushrooms.

## Social Structure

All information about the Toltec Empire is shrouded with mystery. Little is known about their social structure, apart from the fact that the Toltec society was militaristic, with a

warrior aristocracy. In fact, Aztec kings and aristocracy were “proud” of their Toltec blood, and they used their Toltec descent for their claim to power.

## Religion

Toltec theology and mythology were based on polytheism, centered on the deity Quetzalcoatl, “the feathered-serpent,” which later became the central figure of the Aztec pantheon. Their religious ceremonies included human sacrifices.

The Toltecs interacted with most of the societies of Mesoamerica, and it is probable that their religious beliefs were influenced by, and in turn influenced, many other cultures.

## Art and Architecture

Toltec architecture was heavily influenced by religion and war. Their temples were flat-roofed with square column halls and built using limestone. As expected of a militaristic society, the murals that adorned these temples depicted gruesome battle scenes, “bird warriors,” and representations of the god Tezcatlipoca, who was the patron of warriors that demanded human sacrifice. The best example of Toltec architecture is at the site of Chichen Itza, a blend of the architectural elements of the Toltec and Mayan cultures. Toltec stone sculpture was monumental (meaning massive/enormous), and depicted their religious beliefs and the militaristic society.

Their pottery included both ceremonial (i.e. ceremonial vessels) and practical (i.e. cooking pots, tableware, and storage jars) items, and it was one of their most important exports.

## Contributions

The Toltecs used several agricultural techniques including irrigation and hill terracing to grow their crops, which were adapted by the Aztecs. The Toltec god, Quetzalcoatl, was adopted by the Mayas and the Aztecs. The Aztecs credited the Toltecs as their “teachers” for herbal medicine.

Culturally, they are said to have discovered *pulque* or *octli*, a traditional Mexican drink made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant.