Aztec Arrival in Tenochtitlan

About 1200 AD, when the Mexica finally arrived in the Valley of Mexico, both Teotihuacan and Tula had been abandoned for centuries but other groups were already settled on the best land. These were groups of Chichimecs, related to the Mexica, but who had migrated from the north in earlier times. The Mexica were forced to settle on the inhospitable hill of Chapultepec, or Grasshopper Hill. They became vassals of the city of Culhuacan, a prestigious city whose rulers were considered the heirs of the Toltecs. As acknowledgement for their assistance in battle, the Mexica were given one of the daughters of the King of Culhuacan to be worshipped as a goddess/priestess. When the king arrived to attend the ceremony, he found one of the Mexica priests dressed in the flayed skin of his daughter: the Mexica reported to the king that their God Hutzilopochtli had asked for the sacrifice of the princess.

The sacrifice and flaying of the Culhua Princess provoked a ferocious battle, which the Mexica lost. They were forced to leave Chapultepec and move to some marshy islands in the middle of the lake.

Tenochtitlan, "The Place of the Fruit of the Prickly Pear Cactus"

After they were forced out of Chapultepec, according to Mexica myth, the Aztecs wandered for weeks, searching for a place to settle. Huitzilopochtli appeared to the Mexica leaders and indicated a place where a great eagle was perched on a cactus killing a snake. This place, smack dab in the middle of a marsh with no proper ground at all, was where the Mexica founded their capital, Tenochtitlan. The year was 2 Calli (Two House) in the Aztec calendar, which translates to AD 1325.

The apparently unfortunate position of their city, in the middle of a marsh, actually facilitated economic connections and protected Tenochtitlan from military attacks by restricting access to the site by canoe or boat traffic. Tenochtitlan rapidly grew as a commercial and military center. The Mexica were skillful and fierce soldiers and, despite the story of the Culhua princess, they were politicians who created solid alliances with the surrounding cities.

The city grew rapidly, with palaces and well-organized residential areas and aqueducts providing fresh water to the city from the mountains. At the center of the city stood the sacred precinct with ball courts, schools for nobles, and priests’ quarters. The ceremonial heart of the city and of the whole empire was the Great Temple of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, known as the Templo Mayor or Huey Teocalli (the Great House of the Gods). This was a stepped pyramid with a double temple on top dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the main deities of the Aztecs.

The temple, decorated with bright colors, was rebuilt many times during Aztec history. The seventh and final version was seen and described by Hernan Cortes and the Conquistadors. When Hernan Cortes and his soldiers entered the Aztec capital on November 8, 1519, they found one of the largest cities in the world.

The largest city of the Aztec culture was called Tenochtitlan, located in what is now Mexico City. Mexico City is one of the largest cities in the world, and it is in a very odd place for a capital city; on a marsh in a lake bottom ringed by mountains, and prone to earthquakes and some of the worst smog on the planet. How the Aztecs selected the location of their capital in this miserable place is part legend, part history. Tenochtitlan was the home of the immigrant Mexica, one of the names for the Aztec culture people who founded the city in AD 1325 on an swampy island in the middle of Lake Texcoco, in the Basin of Mexico. According to legend, the Mexica were one of seven Chichimeca tribes who came to Tenochtitlan from their fabled city of origin, Aztlan (Land of the Heron). They came because of an omen: the Chichimec god Huitzilopochtli, who took the form of an eagle, was seen perched on a cactus eating a snake. The leaders of the Mexica interpreted this as a sign to move their population to an unpleasant, mire, buggy, mess; and eventually their military prowess and political abilities turned that mess into the central agency of conquest, the Mexica snake swallowing most of Mesoamerica.