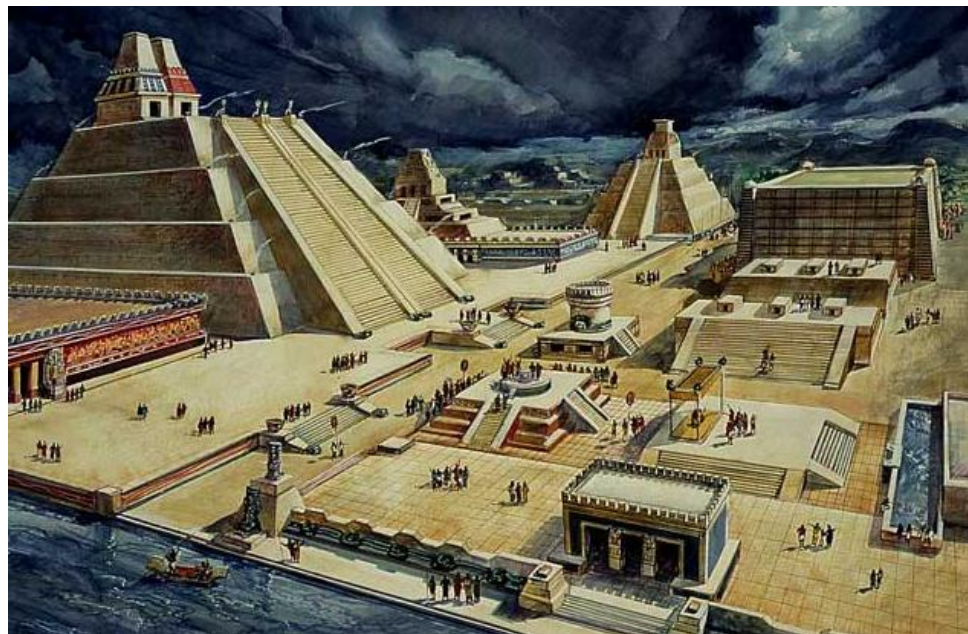


Today I'll tell you about what happened on this day, August 13, all the way back in 1521. For it was on this day in 1521 that HERNAN CORTES (pronounced 'Core - tez') the SPANISH CONQUISTADOR (or 'conqueror') captured the AZTEC EMPEROR CUAUHEMOC (pronounced 'Kwa - temok') and brought the 100 year old AZTEC EMPIRE under Spanish rule.



The Aztec Empire was made up of three cities, based around what we now know as CENTRAL MEXICO. The Aztecs had a highly developed civilisation, with cities, farms, markets, sophisticated calendars for keeping track of time and the stars, amazing art, and sophisticated poetry and music. The capital city of the Aztec Empire was TENOCHTITLAN (pronounced 'Tenok - tit - lan'). The city still exists today, but it is now MEXICO CITY, the capital of MEXICO. Up to 400,000 people were living in it by 1519, which made it one of the biggest cities in the world. (By comparison, about 50,000 people lived in London.)

At the centre of Tenochtitlan was a large pyramid - the Great Temple, where Aztecs worshipped their gods, and human sacrifices were carried out - probably the thing that most people associate with the Aztecs today. The Aztecs were really fanatical



about human sacrifices - they killed 80,000 people in just four days to dedicate the Great Temple to the gods, and believed that a regular supply of human sacrifices to the gods was absolutely necessary to persuade the gods to allow the sun to continue to come up.

So it was into the middle of this great empire that Hernan Cortes arrived in August 1519. At the time, he was only 34 years old. Columbus had discovered America in 1492, when Cortes was seven years old, and everyone living in Spain started obsessing about the New World that the Spanish were helping to uncover. Cortes got his chance to sail to the Americas in 1504, travelling to HISPANIOLA - which is now divided between HAITI and the DOMINICAN REPUBLIC. He was given some land to look after, and started helping out with the governor of Hispaniola's attempts to conquer the nearby island of CUBA. Cortes became mayor of the capital of Cuba, but soon got itchy feet. The Spanish started to hear stories about how much gold there was in Mexico, and Cortes decided he wanted a bit of the action, putting together some ships and men to sail to Mexico. And that's how in March 1519, Cortes landed in Mexico, with just 500 men. His first act was to burn the boats in which they



had sailed to Mexico - giving his men no choice but to stick with him and press on with conquering Mexico. Cortes soon met some Aztecs, and they told him about their great civilisation - and Cortes decided that he liked the sound of Tenochtitlan. He tried to get the then Aztec emperor MOCTEZUMA II (pronounced 'Mok - ay - toh - soma') to invite him to Tenochtitlan, but when no invite came, he marched on the city in August 1519, with just a few hundred soldiers - just a few hundred soldiers marching into a city which was lived in by 400,000 people.



Moctezuma II tried to be friendly to the Spanish, showering them with gold. This only made the Spanish more greedy for gold, and they took Moctezuma II prisoner, and occupied his palace. The rest of the Aztecs must have been wondering what was going on - but Moctezuma II told them everything was okay and the Spanish were his guests. But things got worse and worse between the Aztecs and the Spanish, and came to a head in May 1520. Cortes had been forced to leave Tenochtitlan with some soldiers because he had heard that the governor of Hispaniola had sent a Spanish force to Mexico with orders to arrest Cortes (probably because the governor wanted the Mexican gold that Cortes was after). While he was away, the Aztecs held a big ceremony in their Great Temple and the Spanish ended up killing a lot of the Aztecs taking part in the ceremony - why they did this is hard to know. But when this happened, the Aztecs rebelled. Cortes was now back in the capital, and Moctezuma II told Cortes that he and the rest of the Spanish needed to leave.

Cortes said, 'Fine - but tell your people to allow us to leave in peace.' Moctezuma II tried to do this, but this enraged the Aztecs and they attacked Moctezuma II and killed him. Cortes and the Spanish were now alone in the city with hundreds of thousands of Aztecs who wanted them dead. On July 1 1520, Cortes and his men tried to slip out of the city quietly but they were discovered - and they had to fight their way out. 150 Spaniards died in the fighting - maybe many more - and Cortes lost most of the gold they had been given by Moctezuma II.

Cortes and his men eventually got to the city of TLAXCALA, which was on the Spaniards' side (probably because the people there didn't like the Aztecs - they might have lost quite a few people to the Aztec human sacrifices), and they rested up there and Cortes planned how to get back to Tenochtitlan and finally conquer it. But unknown to Cortes, the Aztecs were already suffering devastating losses from having come into contact with the Spanish, without him having to lift a finger to kill them. The Spanish were carrying the SMALLPOX virus, which the Spanish were immune to because they were used to it - but the Aztecs had never encountered smallpox before, and it was fatal for them. Moctezuma II's successor as Aztec Emperor, CUITLAHUAC (pronounced 'Kweet - lau - ak') only ruled for 80 days before he died of smallpox - and that's how Cuauhtemoc became Emperor. About 50% of the Aztec population died of smallpox (they didn't have an EDWARD JENNER (May 14) to help them discover a vaccine against smallpox) - which made Cortes' job hugely easier.

With about 900 Spanish soldiers, and the assistance he could get from lands around the Aztec Empire, he besieged Tenochtitlan, surrounding it and cutting off the Aztecs' food and water supplies. Finally, he broke through and the Aztecs surrendered on August 13 1521. The Aztec



Empire was no more, and Mexico now belonged to Spain - creating a link between Mexico and Spain (particularly the Spanish language) that lasts to this day.

Within just two years, and with just a few hundred soldiers, Cortes conquered one of the great civilisations existing in the world at that time. He was 36 years old and would live another 25 years - but nothing he would do in the rest of his life compared to this achievement.

