

TLAXCALAN: THE INDIGENOUS DEMOCRACY OF MEXICO



Rodrigo Gutiérrez painted "The Tlaxcalan Senate" in 1875. It depicts the republican government in central Mexico from 300 years earlier.

In the 16th century, the Aztecs led a powerful empire in central Mexico. The history of the Aztecs' defeat by the Spanish Captain-General Hernán Cortés and his *conquistadores* (soldiers) is well known. Lesswell known are the Tlaxcalans (pronounced *Tuh-lash-kallanz*). As the Aztecs built their empire, conquering other native peoples of central Mexico, they never conquered the Tlaxcalans. The Tlaxcalans also had something very rare in the world at that time: democracy.

To understand the Tlaxcalans' story, we can first look at the growth of their rivalry with the Aztecs (who called themselves the Mexica). Sometime in the 1200s, several waves of migrants traveled south from northern Mexico and/or the American Southwest. (Archaeologists tend to agree on this.) They settled in central Mexico. Among them were the Aztecs and the Tlaxcalans, who spoke the same Nahuatl language as each other.

The Aztecs built the city of Tenochtitlan (pronounced *Teh-nosh-titlan*), which is now the site of Mexico City. The Tlaxcalan people built the city of Tlaxcala, roughly 76 miles east of Tenochtitlan. The name Tlaxcala refers to "place of maize." Maize was a type of corn that the people may have brought to the area.

Tlaxcalan and towns around the city formed one city-state. A city-state is a sovereign (self-ruling) city. In ancient Greece, the city-states of Athens and Sparta were rivals. In Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries, cities like Venice and Florence were city-states, too.

The Italian city-states were also republics. In a republic, leaders are elected by a group of people. This contrasts with monarchy in which kings and queens inherit their power. In a democratic republic, like the United States, the people rule through their representatives. All eligible voters have the right to vote for candidates in regular elections.

While the city-states of Italy established their republics, halfway around the world Tlaxcala established its own kind of democratic republic. Let's look at how their republic worked.

Elections and Government

We have evidence of the democracy in Tlaxcala from the writings of Spanish priests and writers. The Tlaxcalans chose men to be candidates for governing who showed accomplishment. They favored military heroes. Even immigrants of a different ethnicity could become candidates for leadership.

The Tlaxcalans valued responsibility to the people and service to the city-state. Candidates had to appear before the public and endure insults and even physical abuse. The purpose was to uncover anything that would make them unfit for office. Personal ambition would be a disqualifying characteristic. Candidates underwent ordeals of fasting, bloodletting, as well as moral instruction.

Scholars are still not sure who voted to confirm a candidate. But even the common people had a voice in

choosing or rejecting candidates. Sometimes 4,000 people participated in making political decisions.

The Tlaxcalan Council administered the government. They appointed military leaders, voted on important matters like war and peace, and served as judges. The Council was made up of 50 to 200 men. They relied on speeches and persuasion and strived for consensus (general agreement) to make decisions. They did not follow the orders of the wealthy and powerful as the Aztecs did.

Archaeologists are still excavating the site of Tlaxcala. Perhaps we will learn more about the people who voted for the city-state's government. In Mesoamerican societies, women played important roles in religious rituals. (Mesoamerica is the region that extends from present-day central Mexico through Central America.) Women were also master weavers, which was important to the economy. At least one woman served as a chief of an indigenous town. Through archaeology, we may learn more about the role of women in Tlaxcala, too.

Equality in Tlaxcalan

Archaeological evidence shows that Tlaxcalan society was an egalitarian society. An egalitarian society is one in which people have equal power or equal wealth. There were different social classes in Tlaxcala, but they were not far apart in wealth. The Aztecs, Mayans, and other peoples of Mexico at the time were not egalitarian.

Tlaxcalans built the wealth of their city-state through taxes on citizens. The Aztecs and other empires built their wealth mainly through collecting tribute, or a heavy tax, from the indigenous people they conquered.

The equality among the Tlaxcalan people can be seen in their houses. Archaeological evidence shows that virtually all Tlaxcalan houses were roughly the same. Each home had two or three rooms built of similar stonework, with packed-earth floors and a patio. Ornate, good-quality pottery and stone tools were common in all the households. Luxury items like gold jewelry were rare.

Unlike Tenochtitlan, there were no pyramids, huge temples, monuments to rulers, or palaces in Tlaxcala. Every home there — even those of the leaders — was about 2,700 to 3,000 square feet. On the



other hand, the Aztec elite also lived in luxurious, large palaces. The Aztec Emperor Moctezuma II's palace in Tenochtitlan was enormous. It is estimated to have been about 160,000 square feet or more. (Moctezuma II was the emperor at the time of Cortés's invasion.)

Each neighborhood in Tlaxcala, too, had its own small temple or shrine built from simple platforms where local festivals took place. The priests in each neighborhood would be visible to the residents. Tenochtitlan was different. It had large, monumental pyramids as temples in which the priests conducted secret rituals.

Some scholars today believe that Aztec attempts to dominate them contributed to why the Tlaxcalans were egalitarian. Archaeologist Lane Fargher says that Aztec pressures made the developers of Tlaxcalan, "build their society in its neighborhoods." They wanted to strengthen their Tlaxcalan identity.

Read on to see how the Aztecs and Tlaxcalans clashed.

Wars and Rituals

The Aztecs were successful in conquering other indigenous peoples. By the 14th century, they had established a large empire. From Tenochtitlan, they expanded their territory through central Mexico. They demanded tribute.

The Tlaxcalans were strengthened when they welcomed refugees of different ethnic groups who had been defeated by the Aztecs. Many of these thousands of refugees then served in the Tlaxcalan army. With this strength, the Tlaxcalans resisted the Aztecs and could not be conquered.

The Aztecs blocked trade to the city of Tlaxcala by surrounding it and cutting off the flow of supplies into the city. They controlled trade of the Tlaxcalans' basic necessities, particularly salt and cotton. As hard as that was for the Tlaxcalan people, they still managed to survive and keep their independence. They produced plentiful corn and maintained trade networks for obsidian, a highly valued stone, with other indigenous people in the region.

After many wars, it was clear to the Aztecs that Tlaxcala would not fall. The Tlaxcalan people were powerful rivals rather than subjects of the Aztecs. Over the years, both sides then settled into a sort of ritual combat known as "flower wars."

In these wars, the object was not for both sides to destroy each other. Instead, small armies showed off their military power through a combination of elaborate rituals and some real fighting. Fewer people died than in full-scale combat. The Aztecs also frequently captured prisoners who would then be used as human sacrifices in religious ceremonies.

The Arrival of Cortés

In 1519, Hernán Cortés launched an expedition from Cuba. Driven by a desire for gold, Cortés sought to verify stories about the fabulous wealth of the Aztecs.

In April, he landed at a place he called Veracruz with about 450 Spanish conquistadores, 16 horses, cannons, and muskets. He first encountered the Totonac people who inhabited their own city-state near Veracruz. The Totonac *cacique* (chief) agreed to help Cortés overthrow the Aztecs. He told Cortés how the Aztecs had conquered and cruelly oppressed the Totonacs. He also warned Cortés of the fierce army of Tlaxcala.

In August, Cortés began to march inland toward Tenochtitlan. The Tlaxcalans came to meet him with an army of 30,000 or more soldiers. Cortés and about 400 conquistadores were joined by about 1,300 Totonac warriors. The Tlaxcalans battled Cortés with bows and arrows, spears, darts, and other stone-age weapons. The Spanish fought with firearms and soldiers on horseback who charged at the enemy with steel swords and lances.

After three days of fighting, the vastly outnumbered Spanish lost more than 40 men, but they burned Tlaxcalan villages, killing thousands. Cortés and his men then set up camp outside Tlaxcala.

The Tlaxcalan Council Debate

Surprised by the military power of the Spanish, the

Tlaxcalan Council debated what to do next. In the 1550s, the Spanish scholar Francisco Cervantes de Salazar recounted the dialogue of the debate. He was not an eyewitness, so he based his writing on the available sources at the time.

De Salazar wrote that the military leader Xicotenga (pronounced *Shi-ko-tenga*) spoke to the Council. Xicotenga told them how an alliance with the Spanish would be good. It would help the Tlaxcalans "take on Moctezuma, our capital enemy!"

Another member of the Council rose to support Xicotenga. He thought that surely the Spanish had come "in the name of a powerful god!"

But the Council had not reached consensus, yet. Xicotencatl (pronounced *Shi-ko-ten-katuhl*) was an elderly, respected member of the Council. He distrusted the Spanish and thought they were "given to vices," which are immoral habits. "They are lazy and like to sleep in their clothes," he said.

Xicotencatl added that an alliance would cause other peoples to look down on the Tlaxcalans. He said they would lose their independence and their "good name." According to him, they would no longer strike "so much fear in the hearts of our enemies."

In the end, Xicotenga won the argument. About 60 men came through the gates of the city to negotiate with Cortés. This surprised Cortés who was used to negotiating with single monarchs or chiefs.

Cortés wrote that Tlaxcalan government "resembles very much the [Italian] republics of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa for there is no supreme overlord." He estimated the population of the Tlaxcalan city-state at 150,000. Today's scholars believe the population could have been more like 300,000.

The Defeat of Moctezuma II

Cortés left Tlaxcalan in November 1519. He was accompanied by several thousand indigenous warriors. Many of them were Tlaxcalans. They engaged the Aztecs in combat. Wounded Spanish soldiers could find refuge in Tlaxcalan. A smallpox epidemic devastated Tenochtitlan.

Cortés organized a siege on Tenochtitlan in August 1521. Around 20,000 Tlaxcalan warriors joined the few hundred conquistadores. Tens of thousands of other indigenous enemies of the Aztecs joined, too.

Roughly 250,000 Aztec nobles, warriors, and civilians died. They succumbed to disease, starvation, and combat. Relatively few Spanish soldiers died. But many Tlaxcalan warriors were killed.



This image is part of a larger canvas depicting the history of the conquest of the Aztec empire from the Tlaxcalan perspective. It was made at the request of the Spanish colonial city council of Tlaxcalan in the late 1500s.

Tlaxcalan Democracy After the Conquest

The Tlaxcalans continued their alliance with the Spanish. They helped the Spanish in their conquest of greater Mexico and Central America. In exchange, the Tlaxcalans received Spanish military protection.

The Tlaxcalans built themselves a new capital city, too. They based it on a Spanish plan with a grid of streets and a central plaza. The plaza was surrounded by shops, government buildings, a monastery, and a church.

The first Franciscan friars arrived from Spain in 1524. Unlike in other Spanish colonies, most Tlaxcalans willingly accepted conversion to the new Catholic religion. Tlaxcalan nobles learned to read and write Spanish.

In the new capital city, the Tlaxcalans had a remarkable degree of independence. The candidates for governor came from the surrounding towns. The governor and officials were all native people, and they were elected by native people. They were in charge of the local government, economy, celebrations, and courts.

A class of Tlaxcalan nobles arose who adopted Spanish ways. Like the Spanish, many became slaveholders. In the 1530s, however, the Tlaxcalans outlawed slavery.

In the capital, there was a great marketplace used by natives and Spanish alike. Maize was

used to make tortillas and became the basis of the economy. Poor people made a coveted red dye from an insect that they sold in the marketplace.

The End of Tlaxcalan Self-Rule

Tlaxcalan democratic self-rule lasted only a few decades in the mid-1500s. Epidemics of European diseases like smallpox and measles caused the Tlaxcalan population to decline.

Meanwhile, Spanish colonists increased. They introduced cattle that ran wild, ruining Tlaxcalan crops. They also demanded tribute. When Tlaxcalans were unable to pay the tribute, the colonists took control of more of their land.

To pay off their debts to colonial landlords, the Tlaxcalans frequently became laborers. By 1600, the Spanish representative of the monarchy appointed the indigenous governor of Tlaxcala. As direct colonial rule took hold, the Tlaxcalan republic faded away.

Mexico declared its independence from Spain in 1810. At that time, many Mexicans looked upon the Tlaxcalans as traitors because they had allied with Cortés. Some still hold this view.

Today, the city of Tlaxcala sits on the site of the old city-state. The region is the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico's smallest state. Only recently have historians and archaeologists uncovered the indigenous democratic republic that once flourished there.

ACTIVITY: Rival Societies

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. What elements of democracy did the Tlaxcalans exercise before and after the Spanish conquest of Mexico?
2. Was Xicotencatl right when he warned that alliance with Cortés would cause the Tlaxcalans to lose their independence and their “good name”? Why or why not? Use evidence from the article in your answer.
3. What do you think are the advantages of democracy over hereditary monarchs? Use examples from Tlaxcalan society in your answer.

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Central Mexico of the 16th century was a diverse place. In a small group, discuss the similarities and differences between the Aztecs with the Tlaxcalans in the following areas:

Government Economy
Religion City life

Be ready to have a spokesperson for your group present your findings to the class.

After each of the above areas have been discussed, write two paragraphs that explain the differences between the Aztecs and the Tlaxcalans.

Enrichment Activity

Compare and contrast Tlaxcalan democracy with ancient Athens in Greece or the Republic of Florence in Renaissance Italy.

Sources

Atwood, Roger. “City Politics.” *Archaeology*, July/August 2022: 34-39. • Fargher, Lane E., et al. “Egalitarian Ideology and Political Power in Prehistoric Central Mexico: The Case of Tlaxcalan.” *Latin American Antiquity*, Vol. 21. No.3 (September 2010):227-251, www.jstor.org. Accessed 11 Aug. 2022. • Foster, Lynn V. *A Brief History of Mexico*. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2007. • Gibson, Charles. *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967. • Graeber, David and Wengrow, David. “Hiding in Plain Sight, Democracy’s Indigenous Origins in America.” *Lapham’s Quarterly*, Fall 2020, www.laphamsquarterly.org. Accessed 10 Aug. 2022. • Schmal, John P. “The History of the Tlaxcalans.” *Houston Institute for Culture*, 2004, www.houstonculture.org/Mexico.Tlaxcala.html. Accessed 9 Aug. 2022. • “Tlaxcala.” *Wikipedia*. 17 Aug. 2022, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tlaxcala. Accessed 27 Aug. 2022. • Wade, Lizzie. “It Wasn’t Just Greece: Archaeologists Find Early Democratic Societies in the Americas.” *Science*, 15 Mar. 2017, www.science.org. Accessed 9 Aug. 2022.

Standards Addressed

HSS Framework, Ch. 11 (Grade Seven), p. 214: The Aztec Empire emerged in the fifteenth century. Initially, students focus on the following question: Why did the Aztec Empire gain power over people and territories? The Aztecs, a people who originally migrated from northern Mexico, owed a strong cultural debt to the Maya, Teotihuacán, and the Toltec cities in Mesoamerica. The Aztecs won their power by warfare. They unified much of central Mexico by defeating all other powerful cities and states.

They created a state based on ingenious methods of farming, collection of tribute from conquered peoples, and an extensive network of markets and trade routes.

California HSS Standard 7.7: Students compare and contrast the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Meso-American and Andean civilizations. (3) Explain how and where each empire arose and how the Aztec and Incan empires were defeated by the Spanish.

McREL World History Standard 29: Understands the economic, political, and cultural interrelations among peoples of Africa, Europe, and the Americas between 1500 and 1750. **Middle School Benchmark 1:** Understands the consequences of European interaction with indigenous populations of the Americas.

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Thanks to CRF Senior Program Director Gregorio Medina for his editing assistance.