

## ACTIVITY 20.3

**The Rise and Fall of Tenochtitlan<sup>1</sup>****THE AZTEC EMPIRE AND THE RISE OF TENOCHTITLAN**

Mexico City was once called Tenochtitlan.<sup>2</sup> It was the capital of the empire of the Aztec people. In 1492, Tenochtitlan had a population of about 250,000. The city was on an island in Lake Texcoco. Canals and causeways<sup>3</sup> moved goods and people. Dikes controlled flood waters and aqueducts carried water to the city. The waterways also provided protection from attackers.

The Aztecs did not have iron tools, wheels or work animals to help grow food and make clothing and other goods. They increased their standard of living through specialization and trade. A worker would grow one crop, make one type of good, or provide one service. He would then trade some of what he produced for goods that others produced. Spanish explorers found a central market located near Tenochtitlan that was visited by 60,000 people a day. The market had separate trading areas for building materials, clothing, jewelry, and other goods.

The Aztecs developed a legal system that protected property rights. People were allowed to own and sell property. There were rules against dishonest trade. It was illegal to trade stolen goods. Judges settled disputes between traders. A large population made large-scale trade possible. The legal institutions allowed trade to grow.

However, the Aztec government also imposed heavy taxes on its subjects. In addition to paying taxes, people were required to provide the government with goods and labor services. Governments of tribes conquered by the Aztecs were also required to pay steep taxes. When Hernán Cortés, a Spanish conquistador,<sup>4</sup> led an expedition to conquer the Aztec empire in 1521, some of these tribes fought alongside Cortés. Exposure to diseases, such as smallpox, brought to the New World by the Spanish, caused sickness and death among the Aztecs. The Spanish had horses and steel weapons; the Aztecs did not. These factors helped Cortés to conquer the Aztecs.

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this activity was taken from the following two sources: Daron Acemoglu, Daron, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson. "Understanding Poverty: Geography, Institutions and the Reversal of Fortune," <http://team.univ-paris1.fr/teamperso/sponcet/SciencesPo/AJRreversal.pdf>. Grennes, Thomas. "The Columbian Exchange and the Reversal of Fortune." *Cato Journal*, Vol. 27 No. 1 (Winter 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Tenochtitlan is pronounced "Tay-nōch-teet'-lan."

<sup>3</sup> A causeway is a road built above a body of water.

<sup>4</sup> Conquistador means "conqueror" in the Spanish language. This word refers to Spanish soldiers and explorers who conquered large parts of the New World for Spain between the 15th and 19th centuries following the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492.

## ACTIVITY 20.3, CONTINUED

### **THE FALL OF TENOCHTITLAN**

The Spanish conquistadores destroyed Tenochtitlan and filled in the lakes surrounding the city. Tenochtitlan was rebuilt and renamed Mexico City. Mexico City became a center of the Spanish colonial empire.

The conquistadores required all trade with Spanish settlements in the New World to pass through Seville. Seville is a city located in Spain, far from Mexico. The government gave control over foreign trade to the Mexico City merchant guild. The guild was a small number of people who benefited from their ties with the Spanish government. The guild favored workers born in Spain over workers born in Mexico. The Spanish allowed land to be owned by a small number of people. The landowners became wealthy by forcing workers to toil long hours for low wages. Limits were placed on the rights of Mexicans to own their own businesses.

In some colonies, Europeans created governments similar to the government of Mexico. They did not protect the property rights of citizens. These colonies were often located in areas where few Europeans settled. In these colonies, natives were forced to work for low wages. The natives had to pay taxes to the government of the home country.

In other colonies, different governments were established. There were many settlers from Europe, and their governments protected private property. These colonies included Canada and the United States. Over time, the standard of living of people in these colonies surpassed the standard of living of people in Mexico.

In addition to resources and goods, the Columbian Exchange led to an exchange of legal institutions between the Old World and New World. This exchange had an important impact on the future standard of living in the New World.