

## THE EARLIEST EVIDENCE OF HUMAN COCOA CONSUMPTION

The earliest evidence of humans using cocoa was found in a small village in the Ulua valley in Honduras, Central America. The valley flooded on a regular basis, but, lured by the rich supply of cocoa trees that grew here, people repeatedly rebuilt their homes on top of ruined villages for more than three thousand years – from 2000 BC to 1000 AD.

The Ulua valley was an ideal place to grow cocoa. Cocoa is a crop that needs tropical heat, the shade of other trees, such as palms and banana trees, and rich soil. The valley floor was home to cocoa plantations spanning thousands of acres.

Modern day scientists working in Ulua valley discovered an interesting collection of ancient pottery shards. What could these pots have been used for? The scientists ran some tests on the drinking cups and found evidence of caffeine and a special feel-good chemical called theobromine on the inside. These two components are found in cocoa beans, indicating that the vessels had held a drink made from cocoa. This turned out to be the very earliest form of chocolate consumed: Xocoatl.

## A GIFT FROM THE GODS: THE COCOA WARS AND THE AZTECS

- Chocolate is often referred to as the "food of the gods". The phrase may have its roots in the Mayan religion. The belief of the magical powers of cocoa was so important to the people of Central America that it caused the Aztecs, Mayans and other Central and South American peoples to fight over controlling it for over 1500 years.
- The Olmecs, who lived in what is now Southern Central America from around 1200 BC, are believed to be the first tribe to actually farm the cocoa tree. They also believed the seeds of the plant held an almost mythical quality, guaranteeing health and power.
- The Olmecs were succeeded by the Mayans, who began cultivating cocoa trees on organised plantations in the lowlands of South Yucatan (now modern Mexico) from around 600 AD. This tribe and others were to fall under the control of the Aztecs - a civilisation that gradually became more powerful than any other and came to dominate the region completely, becoming 15 million strong.
- The Aztec economy was based upon trading with cocoa beans.
- The Aztecs worshipped the feathered god, Quetzalcoatl, who they believed brought cocoa to earth as a gift to humans. Quetzalcoatl was banned from the land after serious quarrels with a high priest. Aztec Mythology says he escaped on a raft to the open sea.
- For many years, the Aztecs believed in a prophecy that said Quetzalcoatl would return to his country in the year equivalent to 1519.

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## STOLEN FROM A DISTANT LAND: THE CONQUISTADORS

- 1519 was a fateful year but not for the reasons the Aztecs had predicted. This was the very year the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, and his men first landed in Mexico in the 'new world', on exactly the same spot that Quetzalcoatl was believed to have escaped from as he sailed out to sea.
- Seeing this as a special sign from the gods, the Aztec emperor, Montezuma, mistakenly took Cortés for the returned Quetzalcoatl. Since it was their custom to offer cocoa to Quetzalcoatl, this was exactly what they did to the surprised and somewhat disappointed Cortés, who had hoped for large quantities of gold instead. It didn't take long for Cortés to discover the economic value and the cultural importance of cocoa to the Aztecs; it started with a gift from the new world to the old, but what events it set in motion!
- Unfortunately the Conquistadors eventually brought the downfall of the Aztecs and Montezuma was killed in 1519. Cortés had by then brought cocoa back to Spain and just 100 years later it had arrived in English ports.

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