

3 The Aztecs Control Central Mexico

TERMS & NAMES

- obsidian
- Quetzalcoatl
- Triple Alliance
- Montezuma II

MAIN IDEA

Through alliances and conquest, the Aztecs created a powerful empire in Mexico.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

This time period saw the origins of one of the 20th century's most populous cities, Mexico City.

SETTING THE STAGE While the Maya were developing their civilization to the south, other high cultures were evolving in central Mexico. Some of the most important developments took place in and around the Valley of Mexico. This valley, where modern Mexico City is located, eventually became the site of the greatest empire of Mesoamerica, the Aztec. The Aztecs were preceded by two other important civilizations who traced their ancestry to the Olmec and Zapotec.

The Valley of Mexico

The Valley of Mexico, a mountain basin 7,000 feet above sea level, served as the home base of several powerful cultures. The valley had several large, shallow lakes at its center, accessible resources, and fertile soil. These advantages attracted the people of Teotihuacan (TAY·oh·TEE·wah·KAHN) and the Toltecs. They settled in the valley and developed advanced civilizations that controlled much of the area. (See the map on page 395.)

Teotihuacan: An Early City-State The first major civilization of central Mexico was Teotihuacan, a city-state whose ruins lie just outside Mexico City. In the first century A.D., villagers at this site began to plan and construct a monumental city, even larger than Monte Albán, in Oaxaca.

At its peak in the sixth century, Teotihuacan had as many as 125,000 people, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time. In the heart of the city was the giant Pyramid of the Sun. This 200-foot-tall pyramid was larger at its base than Egypt's Great Pyramid. The city also included numerous apartment compounds and artisan workshops.

Teotihuacan became the center of a thriving trade network that extended far into Central America. The city's most valuable trade item was **obsidian** (ahb·SIHD·ee·uhn),

Background

The Olmec civilization was located further south in Mexico and was the first major civilization in all of Mexico.

Below is the Street of the Dead at Teotihuacan. Along the sides of the mile and a half long street are pyramid platforms that were originally topped with temples. The Pyramid of the Sun is visible in the distance.





a hard, glassy green or black rock found in the Valley of Mexico and used to make razor sharp weapons. There is no evidence that Teotihuacan conquered its neighbors or tried to create an empire. However, evidence of art styles and religious beliefs from Teotihuacan have been found throughout Mesoamerica.

After centuries of growth, the city abruptly declined. By 750 it was virtually abandoned. The vast ruins astonished later settlers in the area, who named the site Teotihuacan, meaning “City of the Gods.”

Toltecs Take Over After the fall of Teotihuacan, no single culture dominated central Mexico for decades. Then, around 900, a new people from the southwest, the Toltecs, rose to power. For the next three centuries, the Toltecs ruled over the heart of Mexico from their capital at Tula, just north of Mexico City. Like other Mesoamericans, they built pyramids and temples. They also carved tall pillars in the shape of armed warriors.

In fact, the Toltecs were an extremely warlike people whose empire was based on conquest. They worshiped a fierce war god who demanded blood and human sacrifice from his followers. According to legend, an early Toltec king, Topiltzin, tried to replace this war god with a god of peace. That god was named **Quetzalcoatl** (keh-t-SAHL-koh-AHT-uhl), the Feathered Serpent. Magically, Topiltzin and Quetzalcoatl merged, becoming a single god-king and ruling in peace. Followers of the war god rebelled, however, overthrowing Quetzalcoatl and returning the Toltecs to their warlike ways. Through trade and conquest, Toltec power spread as far as the Yucatan, where it influenced late-Mayan culture. By the early 1200s, however, the Toltec reign had ended.

The Quetzalcoatl legend lived on, though, taking on the power of myth. According to legend, after his exile from Tula, the god traveled east, crossing the sea on a raft of snakes. It was said that he would return one day, bringing a new reign of light and peace. That myth would come back to haunt the greatest empire of Mexico, the Aztecs.

Aztecs Build an Empire

The Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico around A.D. 1200. It was home to a number of small city-states that had survived the collapse of Toltec rule. The Aztecs, who were then called the Mexica, were a poor, nomadic people from the harsh deserts of northern Mexico. Fierce and ambitious, they soon adapted to local ways, finding work as soldiers-for-hire to local rulers.

According to an Aztec legend, the Aztecs’ sun god, Huitzilopochtli (wee-tsee-loh-POHCH-tee), told them to found a city of their own. He said to look for a place where an eagle perched on a cactus, holding a snake in its mouth. Part of the legend is captured in these words:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The place where the eagle screams,
where he spreads his wings;
the place where he feeds,
where the fish jump,
where the serpents
coil up and hiss!
This shall be Mexico Tenochtitlan
and many things shall happen!

Cronica Mexicayotl

SPOTLIGHT ON



Quetzalcoatl: Feathered Serpent God

The story of Quetzalcoatl is found throughout Mesoamerican culture. This god, as seen above, was a combination of a snake and the brightly colored quetzal bird. He had his origins in Teotihuacan, where he represented the earth and rain.

He was later adopted by the Toltecs, who saw him as the god of the morning and evening star, Venus, and as a bringer of culture. The Maya also worshiped Quetzalcoatl, as did the Aztecs. They saw him as a god of learning and a symbol of death and rebirth.

The quetzal bird that represents the god is found throughout the forests of Central and South America. Its three-foot-long emerald green tail feathers were highly valued by the Maya and the Aztecs, who traded to obtain them.

Today, the quetzal bird appears on the coat of arms of the country of Guatemala. Also, the currency of that country is called the quetzal.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

A. Making

Inferences Why would the followers of the war god rebel against the king?

Background

The eagle on a cactus with the snake appears on the national flag of Mexico.



They found such a place on a small island in Lake Texcoco, at the center of the valley. There, in 1325, they founded their city, which they named Tenochtitlan (teh·NOCH·tee·TLAHN).

Aztecs Grow Stronger Over the years, the Aztecs gradually increased in strength and number. In 1428, they joined with two other city-states—Texcoco and Tlacopan—to form the **Triple Alliance**. This alliance became the leading power in the Valley of Mexico and soon gained control over neighboring regions. By the early 1500s, they controlled a vast Mesoamerican empire, which stretched from central Mexico to the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and south into Oaxaca. This empire was divided into 38 provinces. It had an estimated population of between 5 and 15 million people.

The Aztec state based its power on military conquest and the tribute it gained from conquered people. The Aztecs exercised loose control over much of their empire. They often let local rulers govern their own regions. The Aztecs did demand tribute, however, in the form of gold, maize, cacao beans, cotton, jade, and other products. If local rulers failed to pay tribute, or otherwise defied the Aztecs, the Aztec warriors would respond brutally. They would destroy villages and capture or slaughter the inhabitants.

Nobles Rule Aztec Society At the height of the Aztec Empire, military leaders held great power in Aztec society. Along with government officials and priests, these military leaders made up the noble class. Many nobles owned vast estates, which they ruled over like lords, living a life of great wealth and luxury.

The other two broad classes in Aztec society were the commoners and the slaves. Commoners included merchants, artisans, soldiers, and farmers who owned their own land. The merchants were a special type of elite. They often traveled widely, acting as spies for the emperor and gaining great wealth for themselves. The lowest class, the slaves, were captives who did many different jobs.

The emperor sat at the top of the Aztec social pyramid. Although he sometimes consulted with top generals or officials, his power was absolute. He lived in royal splendor in a magnificent palace, surrounded by servants and his wives. Visitors had to treat him like a god. They entered his presence in bare feet and cast their eyes down so as not to look at him.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

B. Compare How are the Aztecs' methods of controlling the empire like those of other empires you have read about?

Background

The Aztec emperor's palace grounds included a zoo.

CONNECT to TODAY

Aztec Ruins Unearthed

On February 21, 1978, electric company workers broke through a thick layer of concrete on a street in Mexico City. Underneath the street was an enormous piece of carved rock. It was the statue of the Aztec moon goddess. The location of the accidental find proved to be the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, the most sacred Aztec shrine.

The world's largest city, Mexico City, is built on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. Although the lake that surrounded the Aztec capital is gone, many of the ruins of Aztec civilization remain. Most of these ruins lie buried beneath city streets, but a few major sites such as the Great Temple have been excavated and rebuilt.

Trade Brings Wealth The Aztecs controlled an extensive trade network, which brought many products from faraway regions to the capital at Tenochtitlan. The economic heart of the city was the huge market of Tlatelolco (TLAĤ·tehl·AWL·koh). According to Hernando Cortés, the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, this market was larger than any in Spain:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Day after day 60,000 people congregate here to buy and sell. Every imaginable kind of merchandise is available from all parts of the Empire, foodstuffs and dress, . . . gold, silver, copper, . . . precious stones, leather, bone, mussels, coral, cotton, feathers. . . Everything is sold by the piece or by measurement, never by weight. In the main market there is a law court in which there are always ten or twelve judges performing their office and taking decisions on all marketing controversies.

HERNANDO CORTÉS, *Letters of Information*

Much of the agricultural produce sold at the market was grown on *chinampas*, farm plots built on the marshy fringes of the lake. These plots, which spread out from Tenochtitlan in all directions, were extremely productive. They provided the food needed for a huge urban population.

Background

Chinampas, sometimes called "floating gardens," were an agricultural practice passed on from the earliest settlers thousands of years earlier.



Tenochtitlan: A Planned City By the early 1500s, Tenochtitlan had become an extraordinary urban center. With an estimated population of 200,000 people, it was larger than London or any other European capital of the time. Tenochtitlan remained on its original island site. To connect the island to the mainland, Aztec engineers built three raised roads called causeways over the water and marshland. Other cities ringed the lake, creating a dense concentration of people in the Valley of Mexico. One of Cortés's soldiers, Bernal Díaz, was amazed to find a bustling urban civilization in the heart of Mexico:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

When we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. These great towns and cues [pyramids] and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision. . . . Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream.

BERNAL DÍAZ, *The Conquest of New Spain*

In Tenochtitlan, palaces, temples, markets, and residential districts were connected by streets and avenues. Canals divided the city, allowing canoes to bring people and cargo directly into the city center. Aqueducts funneled fresh water in from the mainland.

At the center of the city was a huge, walled complex, filled with palaces, temples, and government buildings. The main structure in this complex was the Great Temple. It was a giant pyramid with twin temples at the top, the Aztec religious center.

Background

The twin temples were dedicated to the sun god and the rain god.

Religion, the Center of Aztec Life

Religion played a major role in Aztec society. In Tenochtitlan there were hundreds of temples and religious structures dedicated to the gods. The Aztecs adopted many of their gods and religious beliefs from other Mesoamerican peoples, particularly the Toltecs.

Aztec religious practice centered on elaborate public ceremonies designed to communicate with the gods and win their favor. At these ceremonies, priests made offerings to the gods and presented ritual dramas, songs, and dances featuring masked performers. The Aztec ceremonial calendar was full of religious festivals, which varied according to the god being honored.

Sacrifices for the Sun God The most important rituals involved the sun god, Huitzilopochtli. According to Aztec belief, Huitzilopochtli made the sun rise every day, but only when he was nourished by human blood. Without regular offerings of blood, the sun would fall from the sky and all life would perish. For that reason, Aztec priests carried out human sacrifice on a massive scale. Thousands of victims, usually prisoners of war, were led to the altar atop the Great Temple, where priests carved out their hearts using obsidian knives.

To fulfill this sacred duty, the priests required a steady supply of war captives. This in turn pushed the Aztec military to carry out new conquests. The battle tactics of Aztec warriors were designed to provide live prisoners of war for the sacrifices.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY
C. Clarifying Why were so many war captives taken?

Men on a flying wheel and dancers entertain warriors on a festival day. Sacrificial offerings are carried to the top of the pyramid. The picture is a detail from a fresco at the National Palace in Mexico, painted by Diego Rivera in 1950.



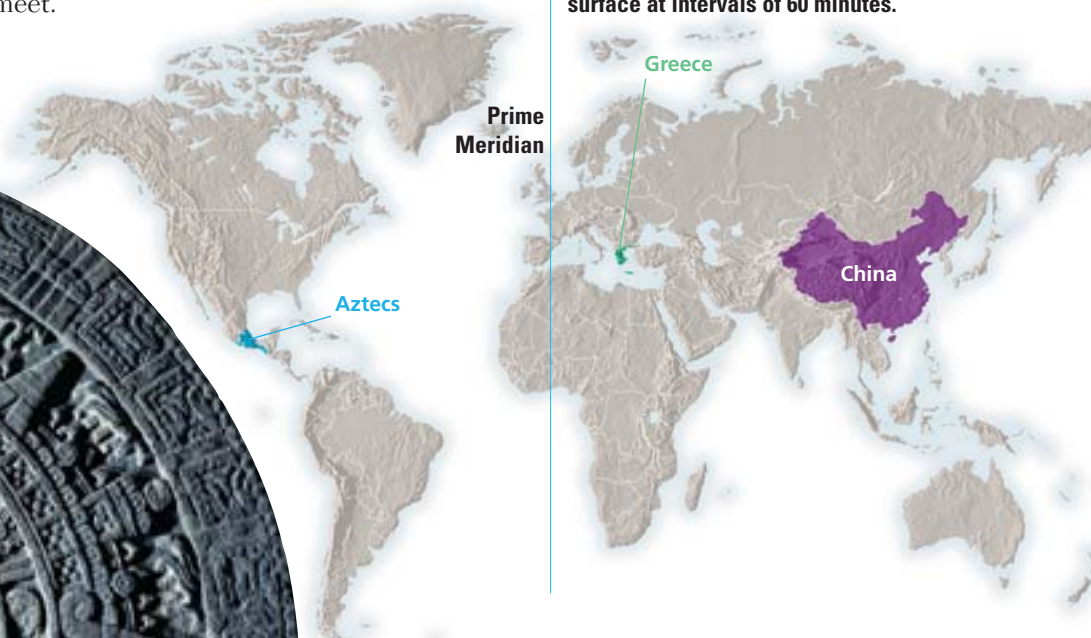


SOMETHING IN COMMON *across cultures*

Measuring Time

Personal experiences and changes in the environment force all humans to sense time. How that passage of time is measured is a cultural characteristic that reflects the needs of the society. For example, if the society needs to know when a yearly flood will take place, the measuring of time will provide an answer. The need to get many people to work together at an identical time requires a different measurement of time. Cultures have devised a variety of ways to measure time to meet their needs. As you compare and contrast the methods of measuring time on these pages, think about what needs each of these timepieces helps meet.

In 1884, nations around the world agreed to set standard time zones. They begin at the Prime Meridian. There are 24 standard zones that cover the earth's surface at intervals of 60 minutes.



Aztec Sun Stone at Tenochtitlan

Religious activities in the 14th century surrounding both the day and the year required a method of identifying the time period and the god who controlled it. Originally located in the main ceremonial plaza of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec calendar stone measures 13 feet in diameter and weighs 24 tons. In the center is the sun god Tonatiuh. He is surrounded by symbols of movement and the four worlds preceding the time of the Aztecs: Tiger, Water, Wind, and Rain of Fire. In the ring just outside these panels, 20 segments represent the 20 days that make up each of the 18 months of the Mesoamerican year. The year was composed of 360 days plus 5 extra days that were considered to be unlucky.

a
closer
look AZTEC CALENDARS

The Aztec gods pictured here were closely associated with the calendar and the passage of time. Since gods ruled specific periods of time, it was important to know which gods controlled the day. During the time they ruled, offerings were made to them.





Sundial

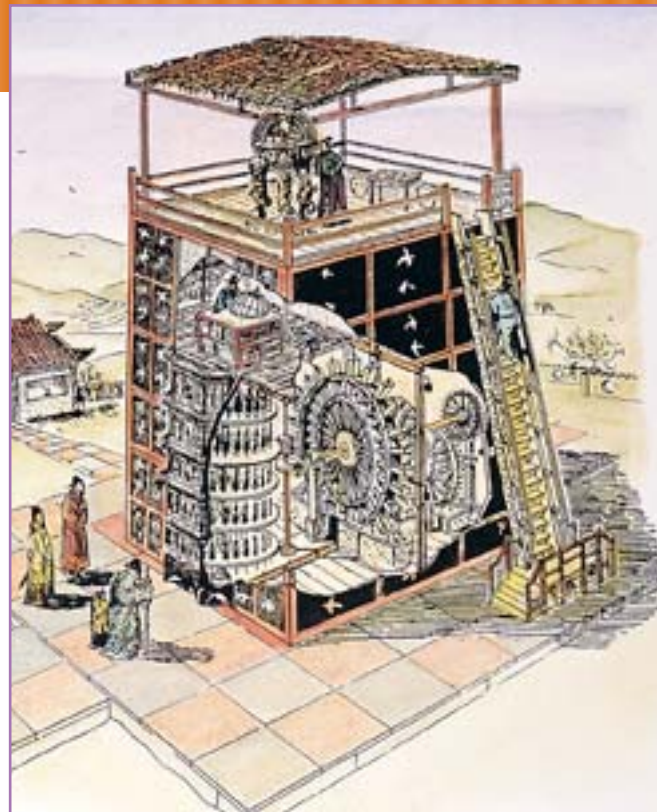
The need to know which part of the day to pray or assemble created a need for a timepiece with more exactness. The earliest known sundial dates from about the eighth century B.C. The style pictured above was used by the astronomer Ptolemy in Alexandria in A.D. 125–141.

A sundial tells time by measuring the angles of a shadow cast by the sun. A flat triangular piece of metal is set in the center of the dial. The shadow it casts on the dial face tells the time. The dial face is divided into hours, and sometimes half and quarter hours. Many sundials have faces numbered from 5 A.M. to 7 P.M. in Roman numerals.



Wristwatch

Wristwatches became popular during World War I when soldiers and pilots needed both convenience and precision in measuring time. This modern navigator style chronograph shows the time, acts as a stop watch, and can calculate miles per hour.



Chinese Mechanical Clock

Built in A.D. 1090, during the Song Dynasty, this clock's movements were driven by water flowing into buckets on a waterwheel inside the clock tower. As each bucket filled, a lever tilted, the wheel turned, and a new bucket was filled. Every 15 minutes, bells and gongs rang. To chime the hours, revolving figures appeared at the clock windows. For accuracy, the mechanical movement was coordinated with the celestial globe at the top of the tower.

Connect to History

Contrasting For which need for measuring time were the majority of the clocks/calendars invented?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R7

Connect to Today

Reporting Find out the reasons for the origin of daylight-savings time. Also try to find out what impact daylight-savings time has on the use of electricity in the United States. Write a brief report on your findings.

For an Internet activity on Counting: Calendars and Cords . . .



NET ACTIVITY
CLASSZONE.COM



The Aztecs, like the Maya, used two calendars to calculate time—a 260-day religious calendar and a 365-day solar one. They meshed as if they were a pair of wheels. Once every 52 years both cycles started on the same day.



Masks such as this were sometimes placed on the head of a dead person. The mosaic pattern dates from the Teotihuacan era and was repeated in Aztec masks. The mosaic pieces are jade, coral, and shell on an obsidian base.

Problems in the Aztec Empire

Eventually, the Aztecs' need for an ever-expanding empire created problems for them. In 1502 a new ruler, **Montezuma II** (MAHN-tih-ZOO-muh), was crowned emperor. Under Montezuma, the Aztec empire began to weaken. For nearly a century, the Aztecs had been demanding tribute and sacrificial victims from the provinces under their control. Now, with the population of Tenochtitlan growing ever greater, the emperor called for even more tribute and sacrifice. A number of provinces rose up against Aztec oppression. This began a period of unrest and rebellion, which the military had to put down.

Montezuma tried to reduce pressure on the provinces caused by great demands for tribute payment. He froze and reduced the number of government officials. But resentment continued to grow. Then, as domestic problems simmered, another threat appeared: the arrival of the Spanish. To many Aztecs, the strangers from across the sea brought to mind the old legend regarding the return of Quetzalcoatl.

Further south in the high mountain valleys of the Andes, another empire was developing, one that would transcend the Aztec empire in land area, power, and wealth. The Inca, too, worshiped the sun and had large armies, but the society they built was much different from that of the Aztecs, as you will see in Section 4.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

D. Making Inferences Why would freezing the number of government officials reduce the need for tribute money?

Aztec		
Traits of Civilization	Strength Leading to Power	Weakness Leading to Decline
Religious beliefs and theocracy	United culture Loyalty to the king	Many physical and human resources funneled into religious activities
Powerful army	Adds land, power, and prisoners for religious sacrifice	Need for prisoners changes warfare style to less deadly and less aggressive
Empire of tribute states	Provides wealth and power and prisoners for religious sacrifice	Tribute states are rebellious and need to be controlled

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

- How was the tribute system both a strength and a weakness?
- How are the army and religious beliefs linked in the Aztec Empire?

Section 3 Assessment

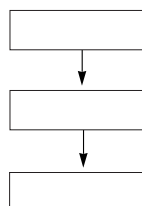
1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- obsidian
- Quetzalcoatl
- Triple Alliance
- Montezuma II

2. TAKING NOTES

Draw a chain of events diagram like the one below and fill in the main events that led to the establishment and growth of the Aztec Empire.



3. RECOGNIZING EFFECTS

How did the Aztec need for victims for sacrifice lead to problems controlling the empire?

THINK ABOUT

- reactions of the conquered peoples
- changes in army tactics

4. THEME ACTIVITY

Power and Authority With a small group of students, write a short play in which Montezuma discusses with his advisers how to gain control of rebellious provinces of the Aztec Empire. Be sure one adviser wants to keep peace at all costs.