

# Early Americas

## *Aztec Empire*



Maya Civilization

Aztec Empire

Inca Empire

## Thematic Icons



Economics



Geography



Historical concepts



Government

## Icons



Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page

For more instructions, see the *User Guide*.



# Where was the Aztec Empire?





# Development of the Aztec Empire



The Aztec Empire developed in northern **Mesoamerica**, in what is now southern Mexico. Aztec legend states that the original Aztecs migrated south from Aztlán, a mythical city that may have been located in the southern U.S.A.



Most of the major Aztec cities were centered around their capital, **Tenochtitlán**, which was built on a huge lake known as Lake Texcoco.

Today, Lake Texcoco has been drained and is the location of Mexico City, the capital of Mexico.

Can you find Mexico using a globe or map of the world?





# The founding of Tenochtitlán

Tenochtitlán was founded in 1325 AD. It was located on a small island in Lake Texcoco, and was connected to the mainland in three directions by wide causeways and bridges.

Legend states that when searching for a place to build their city, the early Aztecs saw an eagle perched on top of a cactus, holding a snake. This was the sign they had been waiting for and Tenochtitlan was founded on that spot.

Today, this symbol is still used on Mexico's national coat of arms.





Before 1428, the Aztecs were not a single unified people. Instead, their territory was made up of many independent city-states, which often warred among themselves.

The **Tepanec War** broke out in 1428 between the Tepanecs and several neighboring city-states. After the Tepanecs were defeated, a union known as the **Triple Alliance** was formed.

The Triple Alliance was made up of three city-states:

- **Texcoco**, which was the dominant state at the time
- **Tenochtitlán**, which would become the Aztec capital
- **Tlacopan**, a rebel Tepanec city.

How do you think the Triple Alliance benefited the city-states involved?



The Triple Alliance had enough military power to begin expanding their territory. They quickly took control of nearby smaller cities and incorporated them into their new empire.

The three cities shared the riches they gained from war and demanded tribute from people they had conquered.

Eventually, Tenochtitlán emerged as the most powerful of the three cities. Its ruler became the emperor, or *huey tlatoani*, and the city became the capital of the **Aztec Empire**.

At its peak, Tenochtitlán was the largest city in Mesoamerica and had around 200,000 inhabitants. The Aztec Empire itself had a population of several million people.



**How might a large empire have been problematic?**





Although the Aztec Empire was made up of many city-states sharing a similar culture, they did not have a **central government** like contemporary European empires.

Instead, Aztec city-states paid **tribute** to the emperor and governed themselves independently. Once a new city-state had been conquered, its old rulers were allowed to keep their positions as long as they paid a required tribute to Tenochtitlán.

Various administrators were appointed to ensure that tributes were not withheld. Most conquered cities, however, were successful integrated into Aztec culture.



Why do you think this was?





The Aztecs operated a **barter economy**. This means that they did not have an official currency and instead traded items of equal value. Valuable trading items included:

- cacao beans
- tropical feathers
- gold nuggets
- cotton cloth.



Cities had a large **marketplace** that was an important center for commerce and trading. Aztec merchants were highly respected for the precious items they brought back from foreign or dangerous regions to sell in the cities.

Merchants, farmers and laborers paid taxes on the goods they produced and sold. This was a source of **revenue** for Aztec rulers.

Who might have been exempt from paying taxes?

Aztec farmers were important because they provided food for the population. They grew a range of crops, including:

- cacao (cocoa)
- chilli peppers
- tomatoes
- sweet peppers
- maize
- amaranth.



Raised soil beds, called **chinampas**, were constructed to allow farmers to grow crops near the city. These were also used in the two smaller lakes south of Texcoco. They helped supply the city with a reliable food source.

Two large **aqueducts** were constructed to transport fresh water into the city for drinking and bathing.

Why were chinampas and aqueducts important?

Aztec society was centered around individual city-states. In Tenochtitlán, most common people lived on land around the edge of the city itself. The emperor lived in a palace in the center, near to the temples and government buildings.

Priests and nobles were second only to the emperor in importance. They were powerful and well respected. Below them were warriors, merchants, artisans and finally commoners.



At the bottom of the social hierarchy were slaves (*tlacotin*). However, Aztec slaves could marry, buy their freedom and even own their own slaves. They could also be set free if they were mistreated by their owners.



Aztec women had very different roles to men. However, their roles were considered equal. For example, women who died in childbirth were given the same honors as warriors who died in battle. Women had a number of rights and freedoms:

- they could own land and property
- they could earn money and have jobs
- they had a say in who they married.



Women also took care of the home, prepared food and raised children. Their work was considered as important as men's, as both men and women worked together to please the gods. However, women were not allowed to be warriors.

**How does this compare to the status of women in Europe during the Middle Ages?**

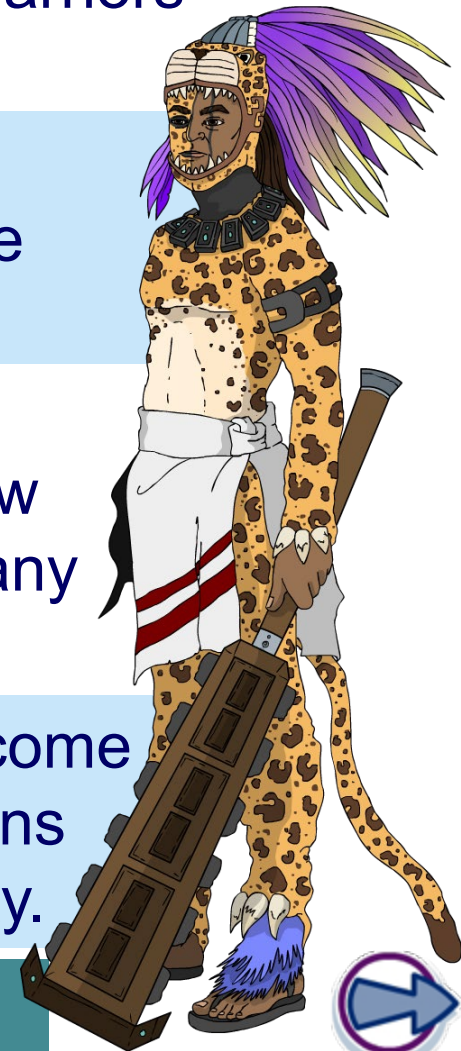


All men could be required to fight in the army. Boys trained from a young age and carried supplies for the warriors until they were old enough to fight themselves.

Warriors were equipped with an obsidian-blade sword, called a **macuahuitl**. A few warriors were stiffened cotton armor or carried shields.

The military was one of the few ways in which common men could earn status: not through how many enemy soldiers they killed, but by how many they took captive.

Elite soldiers who took many captives could become eagle or **jaguar warriors**. They wore animal skins and feathers and were highly regarded in society.



Why were captives so important?



Religion was an important part of Aztec daily life. It was believed that the gods must be appeased to avoid disaster.

Priests made sure that offerings and sacrifices to the gods were performed correctly. The emperor also had a ceremonial role and took part in religious rituals.

The Aztecs worshiped a large **pantheon** of gods and goddesses, including:

- Tlaloc, god of rain and storms
- Huitzilopochtli, god of the sun and warfare
- Coatlicue, earth-goddess queen of the gods
- Quetzalcoatl, feathered serpent god of the wind.



What religious rituals do you think took place?

This illustration shows the god Quetzalcoatl devouring a person whole.

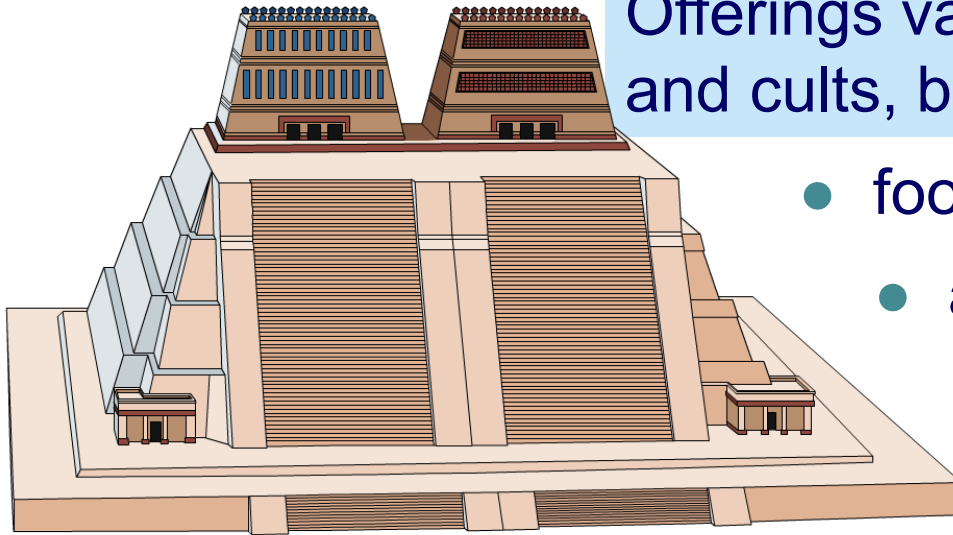
Quetzalcoatl was associated with:

- the wind
- resurrection
- learning
- life.



**What might this image tell us about how the Aztecs viewed their gods?**

Aztec rituals took place at temples, which were built at the top of huge pyramids. Inside, priests placed offerings near **altars** to specific gods and goddesses.



Offerings varied between different gods and cults, but could include:

- food and drink
- animal sacrifices
- human or animal blood
- human sacrifices.

One of the most famous Aztec temples is the **Templo Mayor** in Tenochtitlán. Hundreds of people would gather in the square below to watch a sacrifice take place.

How do you think human sacrifices were chosen?



# Aztec achievements





# The arrival of the Spanish



In 1519, Spanish **conquistador Hernán Cortés** arrived in Tenochtitlán. The Aztec emperor **Moctezuma II** gave Cortés gold and gifts, but within a month, violence erupted.



Moctezuma was killed in 1520 and the Spanish were driven from the city by the outraged Aztecs in what is known as **La Noche Triste**.

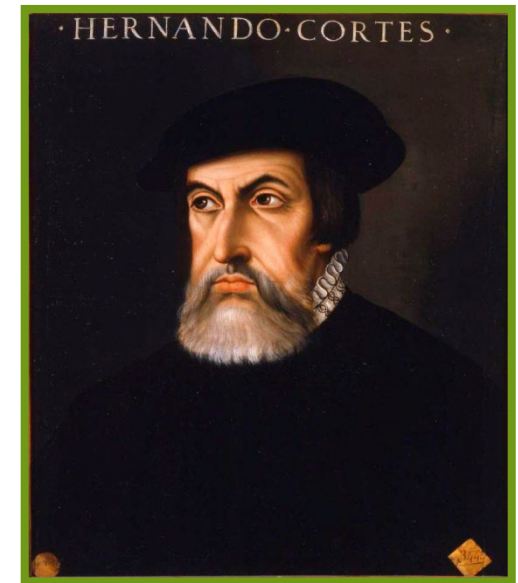
However, the Spanish soon attacked Tenochtitlán again. They finally took the city in 1521 when **Cuauhtémoc**, the last of the Aztec emperors, was forced to surrender.

Why do you think the Spanish were victorious in 1521?

# Why did the Aztec Empire end?

The Spanish were able to defeat the Aztecs at Tenochtitlán for several reasons:

- They had far superior metal armor and weapons, including **arquebuses** and crossbows.
- Their siege of the city caused severe shortages of food and clean water.
- They allied themselves with Tlaxcala, an enemy of the Aztecs.
- The Aztec population was decimated by European diseases such as **smallpox**.



After the fall of the Aztec governing power at Tenochtitlán, the rest of the empire gradually came under Spanish rule.

**What do you think was the main reason for the fall of the Aztec Empire?**

# Keywords

