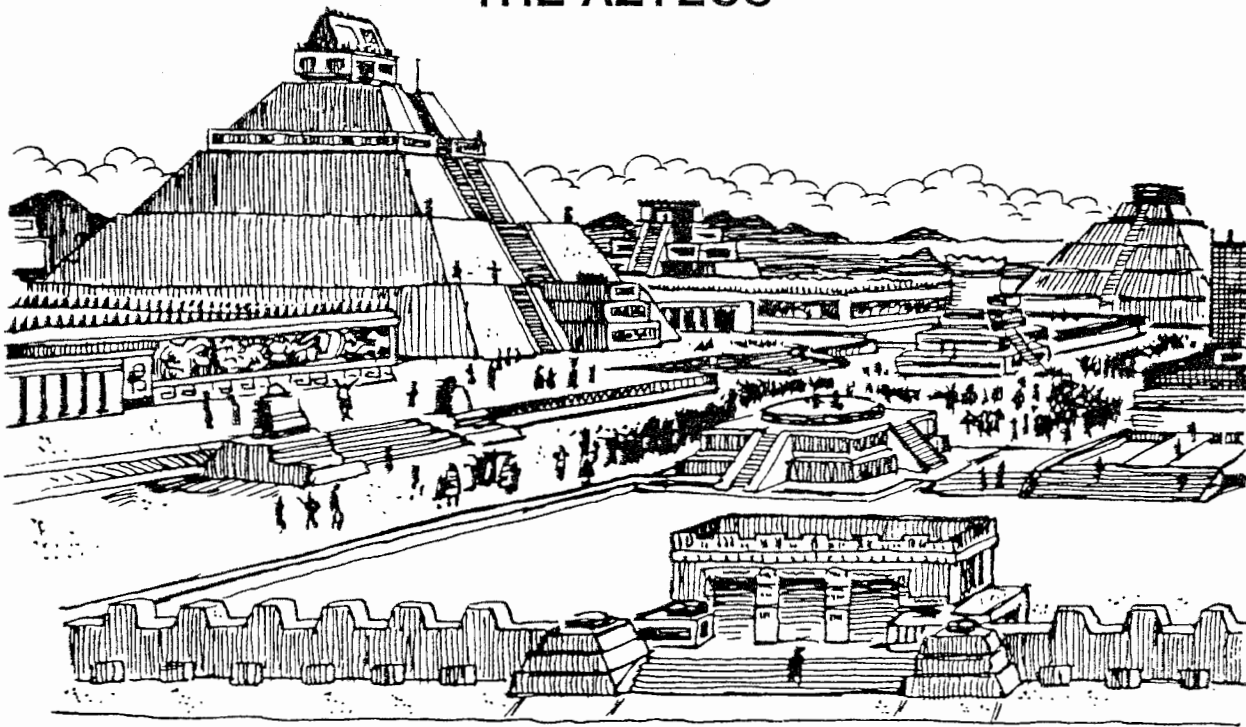


## THE AZTECS



The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, was built on an island in the Lake Texcoco.

The Aztec Indians had already built one of the most advanced civilizations in the western hemisphere by the time Columbus made his first voyage to the Americas. Archaeologists believe that the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan may have had a population of over 200,000. This was larger than any city in Spain or England during the same time.

Mythology tells that the Aztecs began as wandering tribes in the north or northwest part of Mexico. This territory, called Aztlan, is the source of the name Aztec. Today we refer to the people as Aztecs, but they called themselves Mexica or Tenochca.

The ancient tribes wandered for many years. In the 1200s they began to settle in the Valley of Mexico, which is in the central part of the country. The area rises about 7,500 feet above sea level. It is surrounded by tropical rain forests, but the high altitude gave the region a mild climate.

Nahuatl was the language spoken by the Aztecs. Many words we use today came from this ancient language. Aztec words include Acapulco, Mexico, avocado, chocolate, and tomato. The Aztecs developed a form of picture writing. Some pictures represented ideas; other pictures stood for sounds. They did not develop an alphabet, so their writing was limited in what it could express.

The Aztecs soon founded their greatest city, Tenochtitlan, on an island in the Lake Texcoco. This is the site of the Mexico City, the modern capital of Mexico.

By the early 1400s, the Aztecs had gained control of their region and established a number of city-states. Each city-state had its own government and distinct culture. The three major city-states—Tenochtitlan, Texaco, and Tlatelolco—formed an alliance that became the Aztec empire. At one time 489 cities paid tribute and taxes to the empire.

A council of nobles always chose the emperor from members of the royal family. The greatest emperor, Montezuma I, ruled from 1440 to 1468/9. His name is also spelled Moctezuma and Motecuhzoma. He expanded the empire from the Atlantic to Pacific coasts and from Central America to what is now Guatemala. His grandson, Montezuma II, became emperor in 1502. He ruled when the empire was at its peak.

The Aztecs made no attempt to unify the area they commanded or to change the customs of the conquered peoples. The emperor stationed military units throughout the empire to maintain control. A great noble commanded each army and also served as governor. Most offices were hereditary, but service to the emperor was also a way to obtain a high office.

Aztecs belonged to a large family group called a *calpolli*, a word that meant "big house." Each calpolli owned a plot of land to meet the needs of its members. In addition to providing necessities for their own members, each calpolli presented the government with part of the harvest as a tribute.

There were four main social classes in Aztec society. The upper-class nobles owned land in addition to the land of their calpolli. The commoners farmed the calpolli land or made crafts and gave tributes to the nobles in return for protection. Serfs who farmed land of the nobles formed the third major class. Slaves were the lowest class. They had either been captives in war, criminals, or citizens who became unable to pay their debts. Slaves became household servants or worked alongside the serfs in the fields.

Spaniards, under the leadership of Hernando Cortés, invaded Mexico in search of gold. Many of the smaller city-states helped the Spanish destroy the Aztec empire in 1521. They helped the Spanish because they resented paying tributes to the Aztec empire.

The glory of the Aztec empire vanished during the Spanish invasion, but today Aztec designs still have a strong influence on Mexican art, and thousands of modern Mexicans can trace their ancestry to the Aztecs.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Where does the word Aztec come from?

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2. Where did the Aztecs settle in the 1200s?

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3. What was the name of the Aztec capital?

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4. What is located where the Aztec capital once was?

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5. What was the language of the Aztecs known as?

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6. What type of writing did the Aztecs use?

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7. Who was the greatest Aztec emperor?

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8. What was an Aztec family group called?

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9. Why did the Spanish invade Mexico?

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10. Who was the leader of the Spanish invasion?

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