



# The Aztecs Control Central Mexico

## MAIN IDEA

### POWER AND AUTHORITY

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.

## TERMS & NAMES

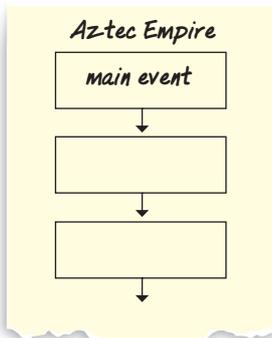
- obsidian
- Triple Alliance
- Quetzalcoatl
- Montezuma II

**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 that traced their ancestry to the Olmec and Zapotec. You learned about the Olmec and Zapotec in Chapter 9.

## TAKING NOTES

### Following Chronological

**Order** Use a “chain of events” diagram to list events in the establishment and growth of the Aztec Empire.



## The Valley of Mexico

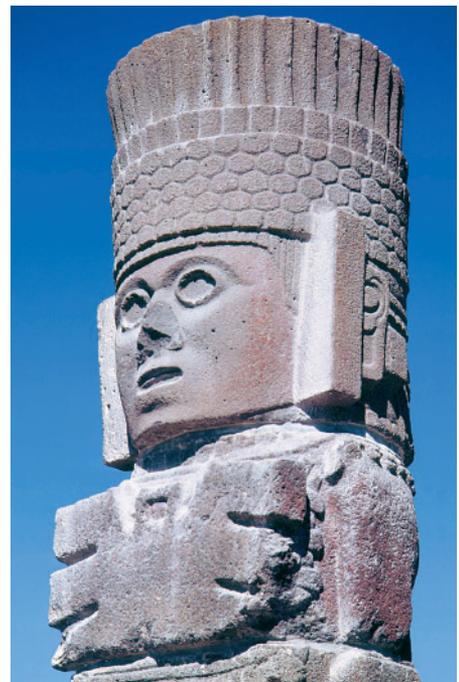
The Valley of Mexico, a mountain basin about 7,500 feet above sea level, served as the home base of several powerful cultures. The valley had several large, shallow lakes at its center, accessible resources, and fertile soil. These advantages attracted the people of Teotihuacán (TAY•oh•TEE•wah•KAHN) and the Toltecs. They settled in the valley and developed advanced civilizations that controlled much of the area. (See the map on page 447.)

**An Early City-State** The first major civilization of central Mexico was Teotihuacán, 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, Teotihuacán had a population of between 150,000 and 200,000 people, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time. The heart of the city was a central avenue lined with more than 20 pyramids dedicated to various gods. The biggest of these was the giant Pyramid of the Sun. This imposing building stood more than 200 feet tall and measured close to 3,000 feet around its base. The people of Teotihuacán lived in apartment-block buildings in the area around the central avenue.

Teotihuacán became the center of a thriving trade network that extended far into Central America. The

▼ Quetzalcoatl was a god for many ancient Mexican civilizations.





▲ The Pyramid of the Sun (left background) dominates Teotihuacán's main highway, the Avenue of the Dead.

city's most valuable trade item was **obsidian** (ahb•SIHD•ee•uhn), a green or black volcanic glass found in the Valley of Mexico and used to make razor-sharp weapons. There is no evidence that Teotihuacán conquered its neighbors or tried to create an empire. However, evidence of art styles and religious beliefs from Teotihuacán have been found throughout Mesoamerica.

After centuries of growth, the city abruptly declined. Historians believe this decline was due either to an invasion by outside forces or conflict among the city's ruling classes. Regardless of the causes, the city was virtually abandoned by 750. The vast ruins astonished later settlers in the area, who named the site Teotihuacán, which means "City of the Gods."

**Toltecs Take Over** After the fall of Teotihuacán, no single culture dominated central Mexico for decades. Then, around 900, a new people, the Toltecs, rose to power. For the next three centuries, the Toltecs ruled over the heart of Mexico from their capital at Tula. (See the map on page 447.) 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. Sometime after 1000, a Toltec ruler named Topiltzin (toh•PEELT•zeen) tried to change the Toltec religion. He called on the Toltec people to end the practice of human sacrifice. He also encouraged them to worship a different god, **Quetzalcoatl** (keht•SAHL•koh•AHT•uhl), or the Feathered Serpent. Followers of the war god rebelled, however, forcing Topiltzin and his followers into exile on the Yucatán Peninsula. There, they greatly influenced late-Mayan culture. After Topiltzin's exile, Toltec power began to decline. By the early 1200s, their reign over the Valley of Mexico had ended. **A**

In time, Topiltzin and Quetzalcoatl became one in the legends of the people of the Valley of Mexico. According to these legends, after his exile from Tula, the god traveled east, crossing the sea on a raft of snakes. He would return one day, bringing a new reign of light and peace. The myth of Quetzalcoatl would come back to haunt the greatest empire of Mexico, the Aztecs.

## The Aztec Empire

The Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico around A.D. 1200. The valley contained 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.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Making Inferences

**A** Why might the followers of the war god rebel against Topiltzin?



According to one of the Aztec legends, the god of the sun and warfare, Huitzilopochtli (wee•tsee•loh•POHCH•tlee), 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. These words capture part of the legend:

#### PRIMARY SOURCE

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 Tenochtitlán  
and many things shall happen!

*Crónica Mexicayotl*

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 Tenochtitlán (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, the alliance controlled a vast empire that covered some 80,000 square miles stretching 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 Aztecs based their power on military conquest and the tribute they gained from their conquered subjects. The Aztecs generally exercised loose control over the empire, often letting 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 offered any other kind of resistance, the Aztecs responded brutally. They destroyed the rebellious villages and captured or slaughtered the inhabitants. **B**

**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.

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

The emperor sat atop the Aztec social pyramid. Although he sometimes consulted with top generals or officials, his power was absolute. The emperor lived in a magnificent

## Global Patterns

### Warriors and Animal Symbols

Some of the highest-ranking Aztec leaders were eagle warriors. (A statue of an eagle warrior is shown above.) In battle, they wore eagle costumes in honor of the sun god, Huitzilopochtli, who often took the form of an eagle.

The use of animal symbols by warriors was a widespread practice in ancient times. The eagle was a favorite among Roman soldiers because they thought it symbolized victory. In many cultures, warriors adopted an animal so that they would inherit the animal's qualities. Celtic fighters, for example, wore boars' heads on their helmets so that they, like the boar, would be strong and fearless. Similarly, many African warriors adopted the lion for its fighting ferocity.

### INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY

**INTERNET ACTIVITY** Plan a Web page that identifies and explains some animal symbols used by ancient warriors. Go to [classzone.com](http://classzone.com) for your research.

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Comparing

**B** How were the Aztecs' methods of controlling the empire like those of other empires you have read about?

palace, surrounded by servants and his wives. Visitors—even nobles—entered his presence in bare feet and cast their eyes down so as not to look at him.

## Tenochtitlán: A Planned City

By the early 1500s, Tenochtitlán had become an extraordinary urban center. With a population of between 200,000 and 400,000 people, it was larger than London or any other European capital of the time. Tenochtitlán 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 smaller cities ringed the lake, creating a dense concentration of people in the Valley of Mexico.

Streets and broad avenues connected the city center with outlying residential districts. The canals that intersected with these roadways allowed canoes to bring people directly into the city center. Canoes also brought goods from the farthest reaches of the empire to the economic heart of the city, the huge market of Tlatelolco (TLAH•tehl•AWL•koh). Visitors to the market also found a great deal of local agricultural produce on display, including avocados, beans, chili peppers, corn, squash, and tomatoes. Most of the fruits and vegetables sold at the market were grown on *chinampas*, farm plots built on the marshy fringes of the lake. These plots, sometimes called “floating gardens,” were extremely productive, providing the food needed for a huge urban population.

At the center of the city was a massive, walled complex, filled with palaces, temples, and government buildings. The main structure in the complex was the Great Temple. This giant pyramid with twin temples at the top, one dedicated to the sun god and the other to the rain god, served as the center of Aztec religious life.

### > Analyzing Primary Sources

#### The Market at Tlatelolco

Hernando Cortés, the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, noted that the market at Tlatelolco was twice the size of the market at Salamanca, the Spanish city where he had attended university.

#### PRIMARY SOURCE

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*

#### Tenochtitlán—A Bustling City

Bernal Díaz, one of Cortés’s soldiers, was amazed to find a bustling urban center in the heart of Mexico.

#### PRIMARY SOURCE

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*

#### DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTIONS

1. **Contrasting** How do the descriptions of Cortés and Díaz differ?
2. **Making Inferences** How do you think Cortés and Díaz feel about Aztec accomplishments?

## Religion Rules Aztec Life

Religion played a major role in Aztec society. Tenochtitlán contained hundreds of temples and religious structures dedicated to the approximately 1,000 gods that the Aztecs worshiped. The Aztecs adopted many of these gods, and religious practices related to them, from other Mesoamerican peoples. For example, the Aztecs worshiped the Toltec god Quetzalcoatl in many forms. They saw him as the god of learning and books, the god of the wind, and a symbol of death and rebirth. The Aztecs pictured Quetzalcoatl not only as a feathered serpent, but also as a pale-skinned man with a beard.



▲ This mural, in the National Palace in Mexico City, shows Quetzalcoatl in many forms.

**Religious Practices** Aztec religious practices 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 a sun god, Huitzilopochtli. According to Aztec belief, Huitzilopochtli made the sun rise every day. When the sun set, he had to battle the forces of evil to get to the next day. To make sure that he was strong enough for this ordeal, he needed the nourishment of human blood. Without regular offerings of human blood, Huitzilopochtli would be too weak to fight. The sun would not rise, the world would be plunged into darkness, and all life would perish. For this reason, Aztec

priests practiced human sacrifice on a massive scale. Each year, thousands of victims were led to the altar atop the Great Temple, where priests carved out their hearts using obsidian knives.

Sacrificial victims included enslaved persons, criminals, and people offered as tribute by conquered provinces. Prisoners of war, however, were the preferred victims. As a result, the priests required a steady supply of war captives. This in turn pushed the Aztec military to carry out new conquests. In fact, the Aztecs often went to war not to conquer new lands, but simply to capture prisoners for sacrifice. They even adapted their battle tactics to ensure that they took their opponents alive. 🕒

### MAIN IDEA

#### Clarifying

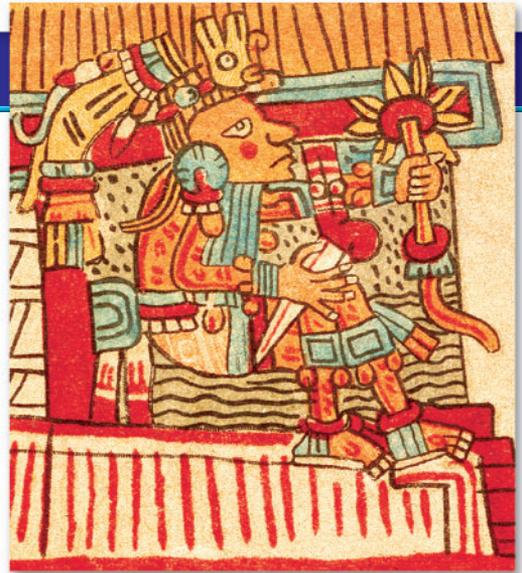
🕒 Why did the Aztecs take so many war captives?

## Problems in the Aztec Empire

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 Tenochtitlán growing ever greater, Montezuma called for even more tribute and sacrifice. A number of provinces rose

## The Aztec Calendar

The Aztec system of tracking the days was very intricate. Archaeologists believe that the Aztec calendar system was derived from the Maya system. The Aztecs followed two main calendars: a sacred one with 13 months of 20 days and an agricultural or solar one with 18 months of 20 days. (Notice that this comes to 360 days. The Aztecs then had an unlucky five-day period known as *nemontemi*, making their solar calendar 365 days long.) Every 52 years, the two calendars would start on the same day, and a great ceremony of fire marked the occasion.



### ▲ Aztec Gods

The Aztecs worshiped many different gods. They were a vital part of the Aztec calendar and daily life. The Aztecs paid tribute to different gods depending, in part, on the day, week, month, year, and religious cycle of the Aztec calendars. The god shown here is a sun god, Tonatiuh.

### ◀ Aztec Sunstone

Originally located in the main ceremonial plaza of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec calendar stone measures 13 feet in diameter and weighs 24 tons. It was uncovered in Mexico City in 1790. The Sunstone, as it is called, contains a wealth of information about the days that began and ended the Aztec months, the gods associated with the days, and many other details.



This is an artist's rendition of the inner circle of the Sunstone. In the center is the god Tonatiuh.

The four squares that surround Tonatiuh are glyphs or symbols of the four ages preceding the time of the Aztecs: Tiger, Water, Wind, and Rain.

In the ring just outside the symbols of the previous ages, 20 segments represent the 20 days that made up an Aztec month. Each day had its own symbol and a god who watched over the day. The symbol pointed to here is Ocelotl, the jaguar.

### SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Visual Sources

- Hypothesizing** Why do you think the Aztecs put Tonatiuh, a sun god, in the center of the Sunstone? Explain your reasons.
- Comparing and Contrasting** How is the Aztec calendar different from the calendar we use today? How is it similar?

Rise and Fall of the Aztecs		
<b>Traits of Civilization</b>	<b>Strength Leading to Power</b>	<b>Weakness Leading to Decline</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious beliefs and theocracy</li> <li>• Powerful army</li> <li>• Empire of tribute states</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• United culture</li> <li>• Loyalty to the emperor</li> <li>• Adds land, power, and prisoners for religious sacrifice</li> <li>• Provides wealth and power and prisoners for religious sacrifice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many physical and human resources funneled into religious activities</li> <li>• Need for prisoners changes warfare style to less deadly and less aggressive</li> <li>• Tribute states are rebellious and need to be controlled</li> </ul>
<p><b>SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts</b></p> <p><b>1. Drawing Conclusions</b> How was the tribute system both a strength and a weakness?</p> <p><b>2. Clarifying</b> How are the army and religious beliefs linked in the Aztec Empire?</p>		

up against Aztec oppression. This began a period of unrest and rebellion, which the military struggled to put down.

Over time, Montezuma tried to lessen the pressure on the provinces. For example, he reduced the demand for tribute payment by cutting the number of officials in the Aztec government. But resentment continued to grow. Many Aztecs began to predict that terrible things were about to happen. They saw bad omens in every unusual occurrence—lightning striking a temple in Tenochtitlán, or a partial eclipse of the sun, for example. The most worrying event, however, was the arrival of the Spanish. For many Aztecs, these fair-skinned, bearded strangers from across the sea brought to mind the legend of the return of Quetzalcoatl. **D**

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. Like the Aztecs, the people of this Andean empire worshiped the sun and had large armies. However, the society they built was much different from that of the Aztecs, as you will see in Section 4.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Making Inferences**

**D** Why would cutting the number of government officials reduce the need for tribute money?

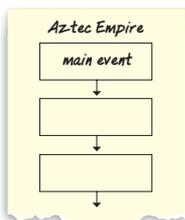
**SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT**

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- obsidian
- Quetzalcoatl
- Triple Alliance
- Montezuma II

**USING YOUR NOTES**

2. How do you think the Aztecs were able to establish an extensive empire in such a relatively short period of time?



**MAIN IDEA**

3. On what was Teotihuacán's power and wealth based?
4. How did the Aztecs rule their empire?
5. Why did the Aztecs think it was necessary to make blood sacrifices to the sun god, Huitzilopochtli?

**CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING**

6. **IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS** How were the Aztecs able to overcome the problems associated with Tenochtitlán's island location?
7. **ANALYZING MOTIVES** Why do you think the Aztecs allowed some conquered peoples to govern themselves with relatively little interference?
8. **RECOGNIZING EFFECTS** How did the Aztec need for victims for sacrifice lead to problems controlling the empire?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **POWER AND AUTHORITY** Write a short play in which Montezuma discusses with his advisers how to gain control of the empire's rebellious provinces.

**CONNECT TO TODAY** **CREATING A MENU**

Many of the foods eaten by Mexicans today date back to Aztec times. Conduct research to discover more about the Aztec origins of Mexican food. Use your findings to create a **menu** for a modern "Aztec" meal.