

The Aztec Empire Forms in Mexico

Sometime shortly after about A.D. 1200, bands of nomadic people from the north migrated into the **Valley of Mexico**, which lies in the high plateau of central Mexico. These people identified themselves as separate tribes, such as the Mexica (may SHEE kah), from whom Mexico gets its name. All the tribes spoke one language—Nahuatl (NAH hwaht el)—and believed their origins began in the same legendary birthplace, Aztlan. Together, these tribes are known as the Aztecs.

The Aztecs Settle in the Valley of Mexico In A.D. 1325, the Aztecs founded their capital city, **Tenochtitlán** (teh nawch tee TLAHN). According to Aztec legend, the gods had told the Aztecs to search for an eagle holding a snake in its beak and perching atop a cactus. When they saw this sign, they would know where to build their capital. Indeed, they finally saw the sign on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco (tesh KOH koh), and there they built their city. Today, Mexico City sits atop this same site.

As their population grew, the Aztecs found **ingenious** ways to create more farmland in their lake environment. They built **chinampas**, artificial islands made of mud piled atop reed mats that were anchored to the shallow lake-bed with willow trees. On these “floating gardens,” the Aztecs raised maize, squash, and beans. They gradually filled in parts of the lake and created canals for transportation. Wide stone causeways linked Tenochtitlán to the mainland.

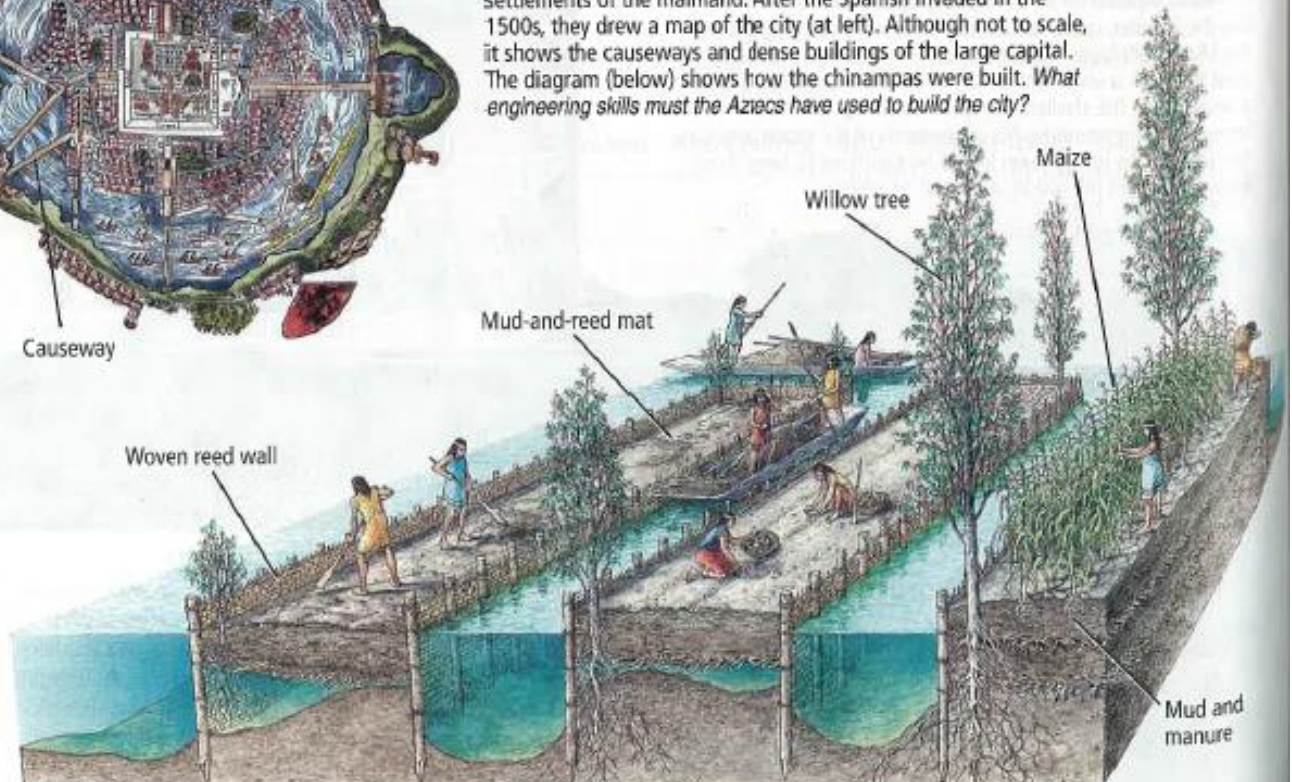
Vocabulary Builder

ingenious—(in JEEN yus) *adj.* clever, original, and effective




Tenochtitlán: Building an Island City

The Aztecs built causeways to connect Tenochtitlán to the rural settlements of the mainland. After the Spanish invaded in the 1500s, they drew a map of the city (at left). Although not to scale, it shows the causeways and dense buildings of the large capital. The diagram (below) shows how the chinampas were built. *What engineering skills must the Aztecs have used to build the city?*



The Empire Expands In the 1400s, the Aztecs greatly expanded their territory. Through a combination of fierce conquests and shrewd alliances, they spread their rule across most of Mexico, from the Gulf of Mexico in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west. By 1517, the Aztec empire numbered an estimated five to six million people.

 **Checkpoint** What are some advantages and disadvantages of building a city on an island in a lake?

Aztec Society Takes Shape

War brought immense wealth as well as power to the Aztec empire. **Tribute**, or payment from conquered peoples, helped the Aztecs turn their capital into a magnificent city. From its temples and royal palaces to its zoos and floating gardens, Tenochtitlán seemed a city of wonders. It was also the center of a complex, well-ordered empire.

Structuring Government and Society Unlike the Maya city-states, each of which had its own king, the Aztec empire had a single ruler. A council of nobles, priests, and military leaders elected the emperor, whose primary function was to lead in war. Below him, nobles served as officials, judges, and governors of conquered provinces. Next came the warriors, who could rise to noble status by performing well on the battlefield. The priests were a class apart. They performed rituals to please the gods and prevent droughts or other disasters.

A powerful middle class included long-distance traders, who ferried goods across the empire and beyond. With goods from the highlands such as weapons, tools, and rope, they bartered for tropical products such as jaguar skins and cocoa beans.

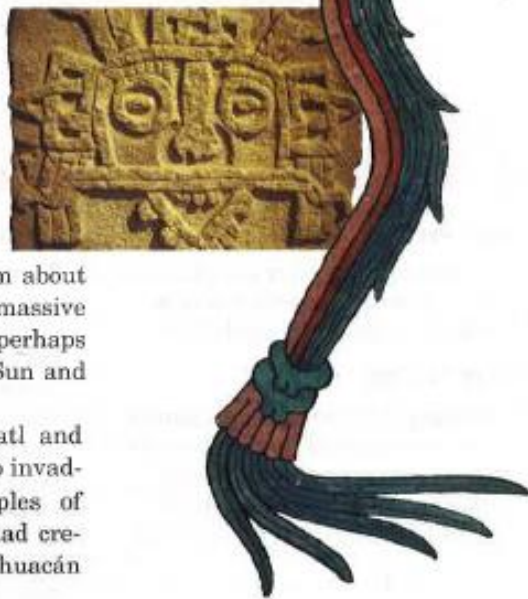
The majority of people were commoners who farmed the land. At the bottom of society were serfs and slaves, who were mostly prisoners of war or debtors. Despite their low status, slaves' rights were clearly established by law. For example, slaves could own land and buy their freedom.

Religion and Mythology Influence Culture The Aztecs believed in many gods, including Huitzilopochtli (weets ee loh POHCH tlee), whom they revered as the patron god of their people. His temple towered above central Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs also worshipped Quetzalcoatl (ket sahl koh AHT el), the feathered serpent who reigned over earth and water, plus the other powerful gods of an earlier culture that had been centered at the city of Teotihuacán (tay oh tee wah KAHN).

Teotihuacán had dominated life in the Valley of Mexico from about A.D. 200 to A.D. 750. The city was well planned, with wide roads, massive temples, and large apartment buildings to house its population of perhaps 200,000. Along the main avenue, the enormous Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon rose majestically toward the sky.

Citizens of Teotihuacán worshiped gods such as Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc (TLAH lohk), the rain god. After Teotihuacán fell, possibly to invaders, its culture survived and greatly influenced later peoples of Mesoamerica. The Aztecs, for example, believed that the gods had created the world multiple times. In their mythology, it was in Teotihuacán that the gods created the world in which the Aztecs lived.

Representations of Tlaloc (left) and Quetzalcoatl (right)



In this translation from an Aztec text, Nanahuatzin's bravery is underscored as he proves willing to sacrifice himself where another god, the moon, was not.

Primary Source

“It is said that when the [sun] was made, . . . there was fasting for four days. It is said that the moon would be the sun. And when four days were completed, it is said, the [sun] was made during the night. . . . a very great fire was laid . . . into which was to leap, was to fall the moon—where he was to gain renown, glory: by which he would become the sun. And the moon thereupon went in order to leap into the fire. But he did not dare do it; he feared the fire. Then all the gods shouted, they said: “When [is this to be], O gods? Let the sun stop!” But little [Nanahuatzin] had already dared; he thereupon had leaped into the fire. Thus he became the sun.


And the moon, when he was deprived of the renown, the glory, was much shamed.”

—Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain*

In Aztec mythology, the gods frequently sacrificed themselves for the good of the people. They believed a god named Nanahuatzin (nah nah WAHTS een) had sacrificed himself to become the sun. To give the sun strength to rise each day, the Aztecs offered human sacrifices. Most of the victims were prisoners of war, who were plentiful because the Aztecs carried on almost continuous warfare.

Aztec Knowledge Expands Priests were the keepers of Aztec knowledge. They recorded laws and historical events in the Aztec hieroglyphic writing system. Some priests ran schools. Others used their knowledge of astronomy and mathematics to foretell the future. The Aztecs, like the Maya, developed a 260-day ritual calendar and a 365-day solar calendar.

Like many other ancient peoples, the Aztecs believed that illness was a punishment from the gods. Still, Aztec priests used herbs and other medicines to treat fevers and wounds. Aztec physicians could set broken bones and treat dental cavities. They also prescribed steam baths as cures for various ills, a therapy still in use today.

 **Checkpoint** How was Aztec society structured?

Looking Ahead

The Aztecs developed a sophisticated and complex culture. But among many of the peoples they conquered, discontent festered and rebellion often flared up. At the height of Aztec power, word reached Tenochtitlán that pale-skinned, bearded men had landed on the east coast. When the armies from Spain arrived, they found ready allies among peoples who were ruled by the Aztec empire. In a later chapter, you will read about the results of the encounter between the Aztecs and the newcomers from far-off Spain.