



Aztec Emperor  
Moctezuma



# The Inca and Aztec Empires

Reader

Machu Picchu



Inca messenger



City of Tenochtitlán



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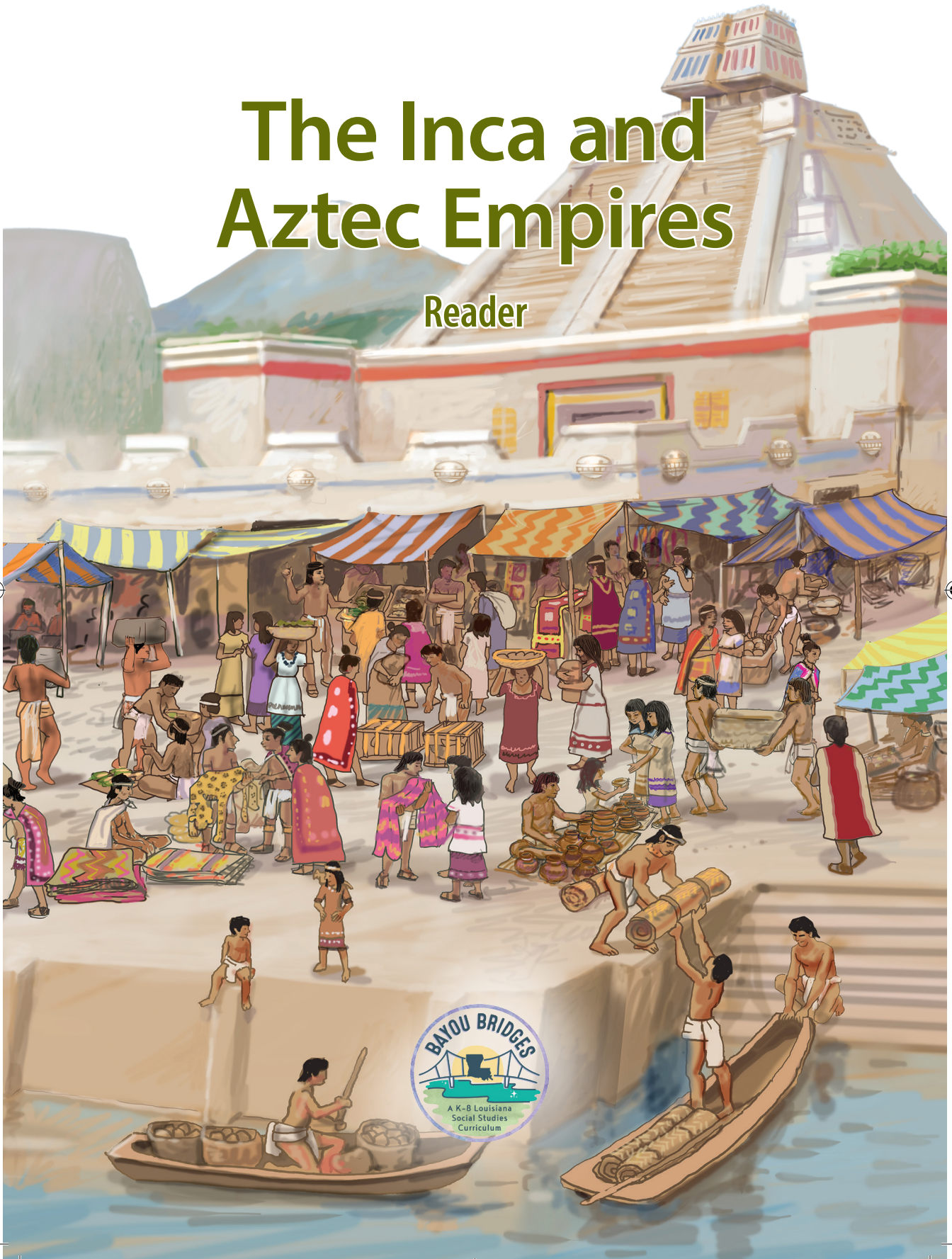
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# The Inca and Aztec Empires

Reader



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# The Inca and Aztec Empires

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# Chapter 1

## The Inca Empire

**Here Comes the Sun** Imagine you are standing on a roadside in South America, surrounded by an excited crowd of people. It is the year 1500 CE. You are attending a parade. You look down the road and see a gleaming, golden **litter** carried on the shoulders of several men. Inside the litter is a man wearing furs and golden jewelry.

### The Framing Question

How did the Inca manage and grow their empire?

### Vocabulary

**litter**, n. a chair attached to two beams and carried on the shoulders of several people

**emperor**, n. the ruler of an empire

As the litter gets closer, the people around you kneel and touch their foreheads to the ground. Coming toward you is the Sapa Inca, the **emperor** of the Inca people, and the reason why the people are bowing. Long ago, the Inca believed that the Sapa Inca was the son of Inti, the sun god, and no one was allowed to look at this powerful emperor.



The Sapa Inca was the ruler of the vast Inca Empire, which stretched more than two thousand miles (3,200 kilometers) along the South American coast.

## The Empire of the Sun

Who were the Inca? They were people who built a great civilization on the western coast of South America. The first Inca people lived in the area around Cuzco in present-day Peru. In the early 1400s CE, these people began conquering neighboring lands and extending their **empire**. The Inca Empire became the largest in the Americas. The Sapa Inca ruled over more than twelve million people.

His territory stretched for more than two thousand miles (3,200 kilometers) along the Pacific Coast. The empire covered an area so large that most of present-day Peru and parts of Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina lay inside its borders.

This is a region of great **geographical diversity**. An arid plain extends along the western coastline. This plain is so dry that not even a cactus can grow. Farther east, the twin ranges of the snowcapped Andes Mountains rise toward the skies. Between the ranges lies a high **plateau**. Land here is sizzling hot by day and freezing by night. East of the Andes are thick forests where heavy rains feed the mighty Amazon River. All these lands were ruled by the Sapa Inca.

### Vocabulary

**empire**, n. a group of countries or territories under the control of one government or one ruler

**“geographical diversity”** (phrase) the presence of many different kinds of landforms, waterways, or other geographic features in a region

**plateau**, n. a large area of high, flat ground

## The Inca Civilization

The Inca people were organized into clans, or family groups. Every Inca family was part of a clan. At the top of Inca society were ten



## The Inca Empire



The Inca Empire ran along the western coast of South America.

clans of nobles. They ruled along with the emperor. Beneath the noble class were another two levels, each with ten more clans. Under these groups of families were people who carried out the day-to-day business of the empire. The empire was divided into four parts, and each part was overseen by a governor. These governors ensured that people were counted and taxes collected. Because the Inca had no system of money, taxes were collected in the form of goods and labor. For example, textiles were woven and given to Inca rulers as tax payments. These fabrics featured distinctive styles often characterized by geometric shapes.

Each clan in the empire farmed a piece of land. Cuzco was the heart of the Inca Empire. Several different rivers meet in the valley where Cuzco was located. The rivers and the valley meant that the land surrounding this city was very fertile and could be intensively farmed. Families who were not part of the noble class lived in windowless, one-room stone huts with thatched roofs. Inside their homes, families sometimes burned dried animal waste as fuel. Parents and children slept together on animal skins spread on the bare floor. A few wall pegs were the only furnishings.

Boys followed their fathers' trades, and girls learned domestic skills from their mothers. Most Inca were farmers. They grew corn, squash, tomatoes, peanuts, cotton, and more than a hundred varieties of potatoes. The potato was the main crop of the Inca. It grew well even at high altitudes on the slopes of the Andes Mountains. Inca farmers also raised

livestock, including guinea pigs, **alpacas**, and **llamas**. The guinea pigs were raised for food. The alpacas were a source of wool. The Inca used llamas for many things, but especially as pack animals.

The llama is truly an amazing animal. A smaller cousin of the camel, a llama stands about four feet (1.2 meters) high at the shoulder and weighs about 250 pounds (113 kilograms). Like its camel cousin, the llama has great strength and endurance. Llamas can carry loads up to 125 pounds (fifty-six kilograms) for fifteen to twenty miles (twenty-four to thirty-two kilometers) a day.

### Vocabulary

**alpaca**, n. a South American mammal valued for its long, woolly coat

**llama**, n. a South American mammal valued for its endurance, woolly coat, and meat

The Inca used llamas to transport goods. They also used the llama's wool for cloth, its hide for rugs and coats, its waste for fuel and fertilizer, and its meat for food. When a llama died, the Inca cut the meat into strips and dried it in the sun. They called these strips *charqui* (/chahr\*kee/). This is the source of the English word for dried meat, *jerky*.



The llama is a useful animal that served the Inca people mainly as a pack animal.

Inca women were skilled weavers. They made clothing from the cotton they grew and from the wool of their llamas and alpacas.

## For the Good of the Empire

In addition to working for their families, Inca men were required to spend part of their time working for the Sapa Inca and the empire. They had to work on construction projects, build roads, or serve in the military. The mandatory work of the Inca men helped maintain the empire and its network of roads. Because this labor resulted in protection for them and their families, many worked willingly.

Inca farmers raised crops for their families and also for the empire. The Sapa Inca and the priests used only a small part of the goods produced. The rest were stored in warehouses and given to those who were too old or too sick to work. When crops failed and times were hard, food and goods were given to the working people, too. This system ensured that no one went hungry.

The rule of the Sapa Inca was absolute. Government **officials** traveled throughout the empire to make sure his laws were obeyed. One of those officials was known as *He-Who-Sees-Everything*. He-Who-Sees-Everything was responsible for visiting Inca villages and making them pay their taxes. Oddly enough, he also served as a matchmaker. He-Who-Sees-Everything would arrive in an Inca village every few years and order the villagers to gather so that he could take a **census**. The more people in the village, the more the village had to pay in taxes.

### Vocabulary

**official**, n. a person who has authority from a ruling power to carry out a specific duty

**census**, n. a count of the number of people living in a certain area

Once the counting was over, He-Who-Sees-Everything asked unmarried women over a certain age to step forward. The official interviewed each young woman, and if one was found especially worthy, she was sent to Cuzco to become one of the Sapa Inca's many wives. Once these chosen few had been selected, He-Who-Sees-Everything called all the unmarried young men before him. He proceeded to pair off the young men and women. He could make dozens of marriages on the spot. No questions were asked. After all, He-Who-Sees-Everything was a servant of the Sapa Inca, and the marriages he was arranging were for the good of the empire.

## Inca Engineering

The Inca did not just conquer people. To keep their empire unified, they changed every place they conquered in some way. The rulers of the empire used the labor and resources of their conquered

## Vocabulary

**infrastructure**, n. the public works system that includes roads, bridges, irrigation, public transportation, etc.

**terrain**, n. the landforms of a piece of land

peoples to build an **infrastructure** of roads and bridges. This infrastructure connected the empire's cities and regions across the difficult **terrain** of the Andes. The roads made it possible for government officials to travel around the empire. They also encouraged trade. Most importantly, the roads allowed the army to travel quickly. This way, it could

put down a rebellion or enforce the emperor's rule. The main road through the empire, called the Royal Road, stretched more than two thousand miles (3,200 kilometers). It ran from the northern end of the empire to the southern tip. It was the longest road in the world until the 1800s.

The Royal Road was twenty-four feet (seven meters) wide in most places. Although it crossed mountains, valleys, deserts, and swamps, long stretches were straight. Markers measured distances along the road. Trees shaded the road. A canal provided water for travelers. There were even roadside storehouses where travelers could get food at the end of the day.

Parts of the Royal Road were made of packed dirt.



This fountain built by the Inca in Cuzco, Peru, shows the precision and skill involved in their engineering projects.

Other parts were paved. Inca **engineers** fitted paving stones together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Modern builders use **mortar**, a cement-like material, to keep stones together. The Inca did not use any mortar. Instead, they cut stones so exactly that they fit together snugly. This is the same technique the Inca used for constructing buildings. It had the advantage of being very resistant to earthquakes, which are common in the Andes.

### Vocabulary

**engineer**, n. a person who uses science and math to design useful objects or buildings

**mortar**, n. a material used in building that is soft at first but then gets hard and rocklike

The Royal Road of the Inca Empire shows the great skill of Inca builders. These builders had no earthmoving machinery. They did not have horses or oxen to pull wagons. They did not even have the wheel. Everything was done by hand, yet the Inca were able to build roads so sturdy that not even heavy rains or flash floods could destroy them.

The Royal Road was the main Inca highway, but there were others. At every valley, east-west roads crossed the Royal Road. The Royal Road was like a spine, and the crossroads were like nerves branching out from it. This network of roads linked all parts of the empire together.

## Bridges Built for the Centuries

To build roads from mountain to mountain and across streams, the Inca had to construct many bridges. Like their roads, Inca bridges are marvels of engineering. A bridge built over the Apurímac

(/ahp\*uh\*ree\*mahk/) River in Peru is a fine example. It was built over a steep river gorge around 1350 CE. It was a suspension bridge, held together by heavy strands of rope. The ropes were replaced every two years. This amazing bridge was in service from 1350 CE until 1890 and still exists today! It is one of the greatest achievements of the Inca engineers.



The Q'eswachaka bridge hangs over the Apurímac River in Peru.

## Mountain Staircases

The Inca also used their engineering know-how to help them farm in the Andes. Farming on a mountainside is challenging. The incline makes every task—plowing, planting, and harvesting—very difficult. In heavy downpours, water runs downhill and washes out crops.

The Inca had to find a way to grow crops on the slopes of the Andes. Their solution was to cut **terraces** into the sides of the mountains.

### Vocabulary

**terrace**, n. a flat piece of land carved out of the side of a mountain or hill

The terraces created level fields that could be planted and harvested just like valley fields. The Inca also built irrigation systems. This allowed them to bring water to the terraced fields.

## Keeping It All Together

The Inca had an advanced road system, but they had no written language. How could they possibly run an empire of twelve million people that spanned the length of a continent without writing? The Inca came up with some clever strategies. For instance, they invented a means of counting and record-keeping using a *quipu* (/kee\*pool/). A quipu was a piece of string that had shorter strings of various colors dangling from it. Some quipu had as many as 1,500 strings! By tying knots in a certain pattern on a quipu, an official could record how many warriors were headed to a village or how much corn was in a storehouse.



The quipu allowed the Inca to carefully track and keep records of the amounts of troops, food, and other goods moving through their vast empire.

The Inca also used messengers trained to run short distances to carry news. Because the Inca had no written language, these messengers did not carry written notes. Instead, a runner memorized the message and sprinted to a station a mile or so away. There, the next runner would be waiting. Without slowing



the pace, the second messenger ran alongside the first messenger to hear the message. Then the second messenger continued on.

The system was fast! A message could travel 150 miles (241 kilometers) in a day. This meant news could travel all the way from Quito (/kee\*toh/) to Cuzco in a little over a week. That is a distance of more than 1,500 miles (about 2,500 kilometers).

## City in the Clouds

Another marvel of Inca engineering is the famous city of Machu Picchu (/mah\*choo/pee\*choo/). Machu Picchu is a mountain fortress seven thousand feet (2,133 meters) above sea level, located about fifty miles (eighty kilometers) northwest of Cuzco. It sits in a high valley between two peaks of



Inca runners were able to move messages quickly over the full length of the empire.



Machu Picchu is in modern-day Peru.

the Andes. Today, visitors can stand in the center of Machu Picchu. From there, they can see the ruins of an open plaza, a temple, and a place where archaeologists discovered Inca skeletons. The surrounding hillside is terraced for farming. Archaeologists estimate that Machu Picchu was built in the mid-1400s CE. The exact purpose of Machu Picchu is not known, but it might have been a vacation spot for Inca emperors. It is also possible that it was used as a fortress. It appears that Machu Picchu included a shrine to worship the Inca sun god, Inti.

## Expanding the Empire

The Inca built their empire by conquering other peoples. They sometimes sacrificed some of these people for religious purposes, but they focused more on turning conquered peoples into loyal subjects. When conquered peoples were cooperative, the Sapa Inca only made a few changes. Inca architects and managers were sent to newly conquered regions. Their job was to oversee the building of roads and temples. The Inca taught their language to the local people. They also asked them to adopt the Inca religion and worship the sun god Inti. The worship of local gods was allowed. Sometimes those gods were even made a part of the Inca religion.

If conquered peoples were uncooperative, the Sapa Inca moved swiftly. He shipped troublemakers from their homes to established Inca villages. There, they were surrounded by local Inca. He also shipped loyal Inca to live among the conquered people.

In these ways, the Sapa Inca was able to quickly build a large and unified empire.

## PRIMARY SOURCE: INCA ARTIFACTS



# Chapter 2

## The Aztec Empire

**Empire Builders** According to ancient myths, the mighty Aztec Empire began on an island in the middle of a lake after the god of the sun spoke to the people. The sun god told them to look for a sign—an eagle with a snake in its beak, perched on a cactus. On the spot where the eagle perched, the Aztec were to build a great city. The legend goes on to describe how the Aztec finally received the sign the sun god had told them about. The eagle appeared on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco (/tesh\*koh\*koh/). On that day, the Aztec,

### The Framing Question

What were the main characteristics of the Aztec Empire?

### Vocabulary

**nomadic**, adj. moving around often, usually in search of food and water; not settled in one place

who had been **nomadic** until this point, stopped wandering. They settled down and began building a city. The Aztec people called their new home Tenochtitlán (/tay\*noch\*tee\*tlahn/), which means the place of the prickly pear.

Even today, the eagle and serpent are shown on the flag of Mexico.



According to legend, the Aztec built their capital on the spot where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus while holding a snake in its beak.

Historians note that the roots of the Aztec begin with the Mexica, a group of people from northern Mexico. The Mexica migrated south around the 1100s CE. Eventually, they intermarried with peoples from central Mexico. The people who became the Aztec wandered the land, setting up temporary homes here and there, fighting off attackers, and surviving on snakes and lizards. Then, as in the legend, the Aztec were drawn to the middle of Lake Texcoco to build a permanent settlement.

## Conquering City-States

Whether or not the myth is true, we do know that the Aztec established Tenochtitlán by 1325 CE. The city became an important center of trade and power for the Aztec civilization.

By the 1400s CE, the Aztec began to expand through military successes. They proved to be strong warriors and conquered neighboring city-states one by one and added them to their empire. By the early 1500s CE, the Aztec Empire included four hundred to five hundred city-states and controlled much of present-day Mexico. The Aztec emperor ruled more than five million people. Tenochtitlán alone probably had between 150,000 and 200,000 residents, making it one of the largest cities in the world at this time.

Tenochtitlán stood where Mexico City is today. It was a place of towering pyramids built on an island in the middle of a lake. It began as a small settlement but grew into a large city. There were three wide **causeways** that connected the city to

### Vocabulary

**causeway**, n. a raised road built over water to connect an island to a mainland

the mainland. Two aqueducts were built to supply fresh water to the city's inhabitants. A network of **canals** designed using a grid-like pattern linked different parts of the city. People used canoes to get around the island city by way of these canals and to travel between the island and the mainland's coast.

### Vocabulary

**canal**, n. a channel dug by people, used by boats or for irrigation

Along the coast of Lake Texcoco, the Aztec built gardens on raised beds. Chinampas (/chee\*nahm\*pahss/), or floating gardens, were stationary artificial islands created by digging up mud from the bottom of the lake and piling it up in shallow areas. Layers of vegetation were mixed in with the dirt and mud, creating highly fertile soil. Then the piles were shaped into long, narrow gardens. The gardens were surrounded by water, so they stayed moist. The Aztec kept the soil fertile by scooping new mud and vegetation onto the gardens every year. The rich soil was perfect for growing corn, squash, and beans. Not only did this kind of farming save space in the populated city of Tenochtitlán, but the constant supply of moisture for the soil helped yield large crops in spite of the arid climate of the area. This agricultural technique is still used in Mexico today.

## Aztec Home Life

Aztec culture was visible through daily life at home. Aztec men dressed in loincloths and cloaks. Women wore long skirts, blouses, and ponchos. They lived in small houses that were sometimes built with thatched roofs and mud walls and other times made of mud bricks.

## The Aztec Empire



The Aztec civilization was located in present-day southern Mexico.

Skills such as weaving were passed down from generation to generation. Customs and traditions were important to the Aztec. For example, during a wedding ceremony, the bride's blouse was tied to the groom's cloak. This tying together was a symbol of the connection between a husband and wife. The Aztec had a calendar system that told them when to perform certain



The lives of Aztec women usually revolved around caring for the family.



ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals, blessings for the harvest, and requests for good luck.

## Aztec Schools

In Aztec schools, boys received moral instruction—rules about the right and wrong ways to behave. They also learned military drills and practiced with miniature weapons. The boys threw spears and carried special wooden clubs studded with sharp pieces of a natural glass-like rock called obsidian.

In certain schools, Aztec priests were the teachers. They painted their faces black, did not wash their hair for religious reasons, and performed human sacrifices! These priests trained their students to become priests and **scribes**. Students studied the Aztec religion and astronomy and learned how to read and write Aztec hieroglyphs.

They also learned how to record information in a special kind of book called a **codex**. This was a long strip of tree bark that folded up like an accordion. The pages of the codex were covered with pictures and **pictograms**. These codices (/koh\*duh\*seez/) were used to keep lists of rulers, record mythic histories, and keep track of religious holidays.

### Vocabulary

**scribe**, n. a person whose job is copying written information

**codex**, n. an ancient book with handwritten pages or parts

**pictogram**, n. a picture or drawing that stands for a word or phrase

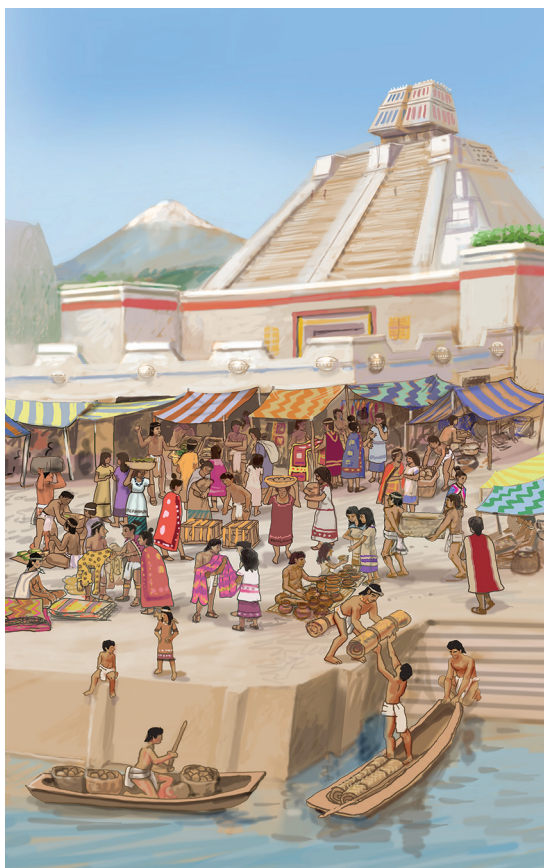
## The Market

Another important place in Tenochtitlán was the central market. Here, people traded cacao (chocolate) beans and cotton blankets

for other items. The sound of thousands of Aztec people trading created a ruckus that could be heard a mile away.

At the market, there were people who traded rabbits, deer, and small dogs that were bred for food. There was also pottery, as well as sandals, feathers, seashells, turkeys, wood, corn, bananas, pineapples, honeycombs, and fabrics.

In some markets, one section was set aside for trading enslaved people. But slavery was not a common practice among the Aztec. Although the Aztec did not have coins or printed money, they used several valued goods as currency, including copper axes and the seeds from the cacao tree.



Tenochtitlán had a thriving market where people traded goods from around the empire.

## Aztec Warriors

The Aztec highly valued skilled soldiers and built up a large fighting force. Every town in the empire had to supply soldiers when called to do so. In order to be prepared, young men were trained to use weapons and to fight in units so that when they were called to serve, they would know what to do. Soldiers from

the same village were usually kept together. These groups formed the building blocks of larger armies. Soldiers were well equipped with shields, bows, clubs, spears, and a deadly device called an *atlatl*. This weapon could throw darts at high speeds. Some elite warriors who had been involved in several conflicts were identified as Eagle warriors and given special equipment.



This is an Eagle warrior dressed for battle.

When other peoples were defeated by the strong Aztec warriors, they were made to accept Aztec rule. By conquering other peoples, the Aztec gained wealth and power. The Aztec required that conquered peoples send items such as cloth, animal skins, jade, feathers, or everyday goods to Tenochtitlán. People who lived by the ocean might also have to send seashells, fish, or turtles. Farmers might send corn, beans, peppers, squash, or fruit. Groups with access to specific environments might have to give animal skins and feathers from their unique regions. Craft-working communities might send pottery or blankets to Tenochtitlán.

## The Legend of the Five Suns

Victorious Aztec warriors sent more than food and precious metals and stones back to Tenochtitlán. They also sent back soldiers

captured in battle. The captured soldiers sometimes were used in an important religious ritual of the Aztec people: human sacrifice. To understand the importance of human sacrifice, we need to take a closer look at Aztec religion.

According to Aztec beliefs, life was uncertain. Their belief was that the world would one day come to a terrible, violent end. In fact, the Aztec believed that the world and the sun had been created and destroyed four times in the past. Under the first sun, a race of giants roamed the world. This world ended when a jaguar devoured the giants. The world under the second sun was swept away by a great wind. People under the third sun died in the fire and ash of volcanoes. Those living under the fourth sun drowned in floods.

The Aztec of Tenochtitlán believed they were living under the fifth sun. But they believed that this sun would also someday die. "There will be earthquakes and hunger, and then our end shall come," the priests said. The Aztec people believed these predictions and planned their lives in response to them. So the Aztec awaited their fate. But they did not simply accept it.



**The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, was one of the largest cities in the world.**

They believed that each night, the sun god battled the forces of darkness. Each morning, the god had to find the strength to make the sun rise again. The Aztec believed they could help their god by offering human sacrifices in their temples.

Most of their victims were foreign soldiers captured in war. Aztec priests believed that the heart was the most important thing to sacrifice. They preferred to offer up the strong heart of a soldier.

## Religious Sacrifice

The Aztec ceremonial center was an important location in the middle of the city. Human sacrifices took place at the largest temple in the city, the Great Temple. Aztec emperors were also crowned there. This massive pyramid was almost one hundred yards (ninety one meters) wide at its base. That's roughly the length of a football field! It also rose almost ninety feet (twenty seven meters) in the air and had two shrines at the top. One shrine was dedicated to the god of rain, and the other was dedicated to the god of the dry season. This latter god is the one believed to have guided the wandering Aztec to the site of Tenochtitlán. The top steps of the Great Temple were stained with the blood of human sacrifices. Surrounding the Great Temple were several smaller temples. Each of these was dedicated to a different god.

When a human sacrifice was about to take place, a big drum sounded as attendants led the victims to the top of the pyramid. The hearts of the victims were removed from their bodies and burned on an altar.

The Aztec believed human sacrifices were necessary to keep the sun rising and moving across the sky. They could even point to

events that seemed to prove that the sacrifices worked. Once, when a long drought threatened the Aztec corn harvest, priests offered a number of human sacrifices. A day or so later, rain came. To the Aztec, this was no coincidence. It was proof that the gift of blood had saved the crop. Experiences like this convinced the Aztec of the power of human sacrifice. As a result, Aztec offerings to the gods were regular and generous.

## Success at War

Priests and soldiers were key elements of Aztec life. Priests used human sacrifice to please the gods. Aztec soldiers held the empire together and provided the victims for sacrifices. As in many societies until recent times, Aztec people were born into certain social classes. Most people had relatively little chance to advance out of their class. The army provided one opportunity for brave men to better themselves. Success in battle was rewarded with advancement and honor. The Aztec people believed there was no greater honor than to die in battle. No doubt about it—the Aztec were fierce warriors. Their capabilities in warfare and skill at fighting helped them create a rich empire and a remarkable civilization.

## Moctezuma II

Moctezuma II (/mawk\*te\*soo\*mah/), sometimes written as Montezuma, was the Aztec emperor in the early 1500s CE. In the court of Moctezuma II, no one was allowed to look the emperor in the eye. When he entered a room, even the nobles threw themselves face down on the ground. When he left the palace,

he was carried in a fancy litter. When Moctezuma wanted to walk, nobles laid mats on the ground so he would not dirty his golden sandals.

### Vocabulary

**reign**, n. a period of time in which a ruler is in power

Moctezuma was a powerful leader. But during his **reign**, some disturbing things happened. There was a drought. A comet appeared in the sky. Lightning struck one of the temples in Tenochtitlán. Then, fantastic rumors began to spread. Some people said that a ghostly woman was walking the streets of the capital at night. She wailed, “My children, we must flee far away from this city!”

The Aztec believed the world might end at any moment. Moctezuma and his priests worried that the strange events might be a warning from the gods. They feared that the end of the world might be near. As it turned out, a form of doomsday was coming, but it was not coming from the gods. It was coming from Europe.



Moctezuma II ruled the Aztec Empire at the height of its great power.

# PRIMARY SOURCE: PLATE FROM THE CODEX BORBONICUS





# Glossary

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## A

**alpaca, n.** a South American mammal valued for its long, woolly coat (6)

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## C

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**empire, n.** a group of countries or territories under the control of one government or one ruler (4)

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## N

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## R

**reign, n.** a period of time in which a ruler is in power (27)

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## S

**scribe, n.** a person whose job is copying written information (21)

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## T

**terrace, n.** a flat piece of land carved out of the side of a mountain or hill (11)

**terrain, n.** the landforms of a piece of land (9)





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