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Social Studies

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Genre	Comprehension Skills and Strategy	Text Features
Expository nonfiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Draw Conclusions</li><li>• Sequence</li><li>• Answer Questions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Maps</li><li>• Diagram</li><li>• Heads</li><li>• Glossary</li></ul>

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# The Aztec

by Jesse McDermott

## Vocabulary

benefits

campaigns

comrades

enrich

foreigners

invaders

Word count: 2,193

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Note: The total word count includes words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in chapter titles, captions, labels, diagrams, charts, graphs, sidebars, and extra features are not included.



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In the region known as Mesoamerica—today’s Mexico and Central America—great civilizations had replaced simple farming cultures long before Europeans arrived. Olmec civilization began developing around 1000 B.C., the Zapotecs and Mixtecs were building great cities by around 700 B.C., and the rise of Mayan civilization started around A.D. 250. In many cases, the descendants of these people still live in Mexico, but their civilizations did not survive. The reason for the end of some civilizations is still a mystery, although famine or **invaders** may be to blame. But Zapotec and Mixtec civilizations were swept away by the last great civilization of pre-Columbian times: the Aztecs.

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farmed using an advanced system of dams and canals.

Much like the Aztecs who would follow them, the Toltecs spread their empire through both warfare and trade. Professional soldiers were common. They were organized into groups named after animals, such as the Eagle Warriors and the Jaguar Warriors. Traders also spread Toltec influence. Toltec artisans made beautiful objects out of obsidian, a black volcanic glass. By around A.D. 1200, however, the Toltec Empire had collapsed, possibly due to a fierce civil war and disease.

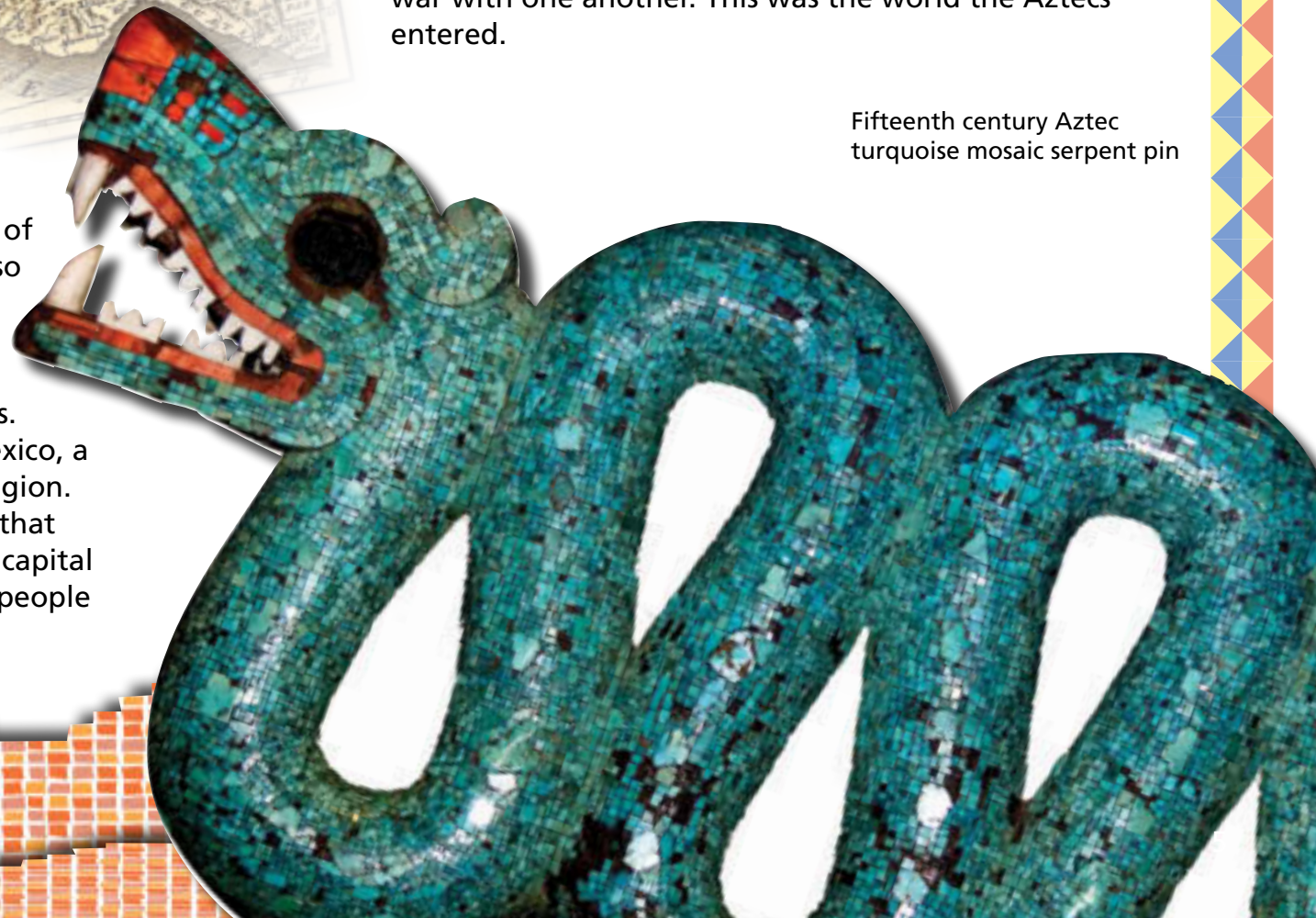
After the fall of the Toltec Empire, independent states in the Valley of Mexico were constantly at war with one another. This was the world the Aztecs entered.

Fifteenth century Aztec turquoise mosaic serpent pin

## Origin of the Aztecs

Possibly as early as the twelfth century, a group of people now called the Aztecs moved into Central Mexico. Over time, they built one of the largest cities of the ancient world. They also created a civilization with advanced forms of art, religion, and warfare. Today, the Aztecs are remembered for their warlike behavior, but their culture was remarkable in other ways.

Before the Aztecs came to the Valley of Mexico, a group of people called the Toltecs ruled the region. By A.D. 970, the Toltecs had created an empire that spread throughout most of central Mexico. Its capital city, Tula, had around 40,000 inhabitants. The people



There are no records of the origin of the Aztec people, but Aztec tradition suggests that they were a tribe of hunters and gatherers who once lived on the northern Mexican plateau. The name Aztec comes from the word *Aztlán*, which means “White Land” in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. It refers to a place of origin for the Aztecs. Some scholars think that Aztlán is legendary, while others think it may be a general reference to the north.

The Aztecs seem to have been part of a general movement southward by various groups. It is not known whether this movement came after the fall of the Toltec Empire or whether it contributed to it.

The lands the Aztecs left behind were arid and desertlike, but the Valley of Mexico was well watered and surrounded by mountains. In the valley, the Aztecs came across a great ruined city from a civilization older than that of the Toltecs. Within the ruined city was a huge religious center with temples to many gods. The Aztecs named this place Teotihuacán, or the place where the gods were made.

Much of Aztec culture was inspired by what they found here, in Teotihuacán.





sun worship, human sacrifice, and their tribal god Huitzilopochtli. Their legends relate that Huitzilopochtli commanded them to return to wandering until they saw an eagle perched on a cactus, grasping a snake. This would be a sign that they had found a permanent home.

The Aztecs believed that in A.D. 1325 older members of their tribe saw the eagle resting on a cactus, holding a snake. While the tale is legend, the accuracy of Aztec calendars makes the date reliable. The Aztecs settled on the island in Lake Texcoco, where the elders saw the eagle and began to build the great city that would become the capital of their empire.

When they first arrived in the Valley of Mexico, the Aztecs had a fairly undeveloped culture. In their legends, they described themselves as barbarian invaders. They arrived during a time of chaos, when many groups of hunters and gatherers were taking advantage of the fall of the Toltec Empire. It was a time of violence and warfare, but a series of kings and remaining Toltecs established some stability, and the Aztecs settled for a while near these people. According to Aztec legend, it was during this time that they developed their knowledge of technology and agriculture.

It was also during this time that Aztec religion began to develop, with key elements being



The Aztecs founded their city on a small island where, legend says, they saw an eagle perched on a cactus, holding a snake. This legend is reflected in art (top left) and on the Mexican flag above.

## Tenochtitlán and the Aztec Empire

The city the Aztecs built was called Tenochtitlán. As the city grew, it took over another island. But even more important for the spread of Tenochtitlán was the building of *chinampas*, small, artificial islands.

Chinampas were designed for farming. The Aztecs layered lake mud and vegetation, often reinforced with reeds and wooden posts, until the chinampas were a few feet above the surrounding water. This created fertile land where beans, maize, tomatoes, and chiles could be grown, to supply the needs of the city. Before long, the chinampas closest to the city were being used for expansion, rather than farming.



Aztecs building a *chinampa*



The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, was built in the middle of Lake Texcoco, with causeways connecting it to the lakeshore.

Causeways—raised roads or paths built across wet ground—connected the city to the lakeshore. Aqueducts brought drinking water to the city from the surrounding mountains. A system of canals allowed people to travel around the city by canoe.

Tenochtitlán was divided into districts called *calpulli*. Each capulli was generally inhabited by families of the same social class and profession. Poor families lived in small thatch or adobe houses, while wealthy or noble families lived in stone mansions with many rooms.



Tenochtitlán, at the time of the Spanish arrival, was already well established.

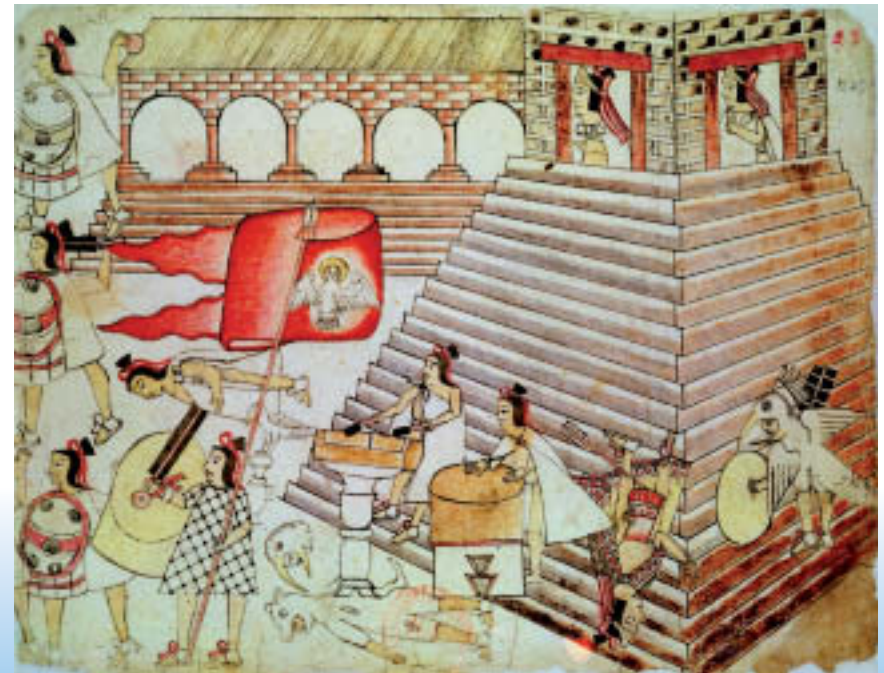
Over time, Tenochtitlán grew into a large, beautiful, and highly organized city. When Spanish **foreigners** came to the area in 1519, the city spanned more than five square miles and was inhabited by more than 300,000 people. There were palaces, a royal zoo, and a large open-air marketplace. Here, as many as 25,000 people would gather to buy and sell all kinds of food and goods.

The city amazed the Spanish. One explorer reported, "All about us we saw cities and villages built in the water, their great towers and buildings of masonry rising out of it. When I beheld the scenes around me, I thought within myself, this was the garden of the world."

At the center of Tenochtitlán was the Temple Precinct. This was the political and spiritual center of the Aztec Empire. Special celebrations were held there to honor the various gods.

Towering over all these structures, stood a giant pyramid topped by two 40-foot-high towers. This building was the temple to the most important of the Aztec gods, Huitzilopochtli, the sun and war god, and Tlaloc, the rain god.

Aztec warriors defend the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán.





The Aztec Empire was ruled by a king with the title of Huetlatoani, or Great Speaker, because he was the interpreter of the will of the Aztec people. Unlike European monarchs, the Aztec king was not always the son of the previous Huetlatoani. Instead, a council of four nobles chose the new ruler from the family of the previous king.

By the 1440s the Aztecs controlled the entire Valley of Mexico. This was accomplished through both warfare and a kind of diplomacy. As the Aztecs had a reputation of being fierce in battle and ruthless with prisoners, they were able to convince some of the neighboring lords to surrender rather than fight. For a while, the Aztecs formed an alliance with two powerful neighboring states. The triple alliance began **campaigns** to conquer the regions surrounding the Valley of Mexico.



Conquered peoples had to pay tribute to the Aztecs.



The region controlled by the triple alliance around 1440

There were two major reasons for the Aztecs' constant warfare against everyone around them. First and foremost, their religion required it. The Aztecs believed that their battles made their gods more powerful.

The second reason was tribute. The Aztecs demanded that conquered people pay tribute. The Aztec nobility in particular relied on tribute for textiles, precious metals, and food. But even more important, the Aztec religion demanded a tribute of humans. The Aztecs sacrificed thousands of people every year during their many religious festivals. It is because of the constant demands for humans for sacrifice that the Aztecs became so widely hated.

Aztec warriors fought in groups of 8,000 men. These large groups were further divided into companies of a few hundred men, each with its own commander.

Just like the Toltec, the bravest and most skilled Aztec warriors wore costumes to make them resemble animals. Among the best known were the Jaguar Warriors and the Eagle Warriors.



The Jaguar Warriors were among the best of the Aztec warriors.



This map of the Aztec Empire at its height shows present-day city and country names. Mexico City was built on the site of Tenochtitlán.

In 1446 Tenochtitlán was severely flooded. The emperor ordered a large embankment to be built to prevent this disaster from happening again. Several years of bad harvests followed, and many people starved. The emperor decided to expand Aztec control to include areas outside the valley, where there were rich farmlands. In this way the ruler sought to **enrich** the kingdom and prevent another disaster.

The Aztecs spread their influence to the Gulf of Mexico and as far south as present-day Guatemala. There was resistance, however, to this expansion. The state of Tlaxcala, in the Valley of Mexico, resisted the Aztecs for 15 years. Later, the people of Tlaxcala joined the Spanish to bring about the fall of the Aztec Empire.

## Life Among the Aztecs

There was more to Aztec life than warfare, though. From an early age, children learned to farm. Boys also began to learn their father's craft or trade while young. Girls learned from their mothers how to weave and work in the house. When a child reached 12 years of age, he or she left home to attend school. The kind of education a child received depended on the family's social class.

The highest class in Aztec society was the nobility, called the *pipiltin*. They filled the most important positions in the government, military, and priesthood. Being a member of the nobility had many **benefits**, including better food and housing. Most nobles were born into this class, but it was possible for people of the lower classes to gain noble status. They could do this by performing great deeds in battle. Children of the *pipiltin* attended a temple school, called the *calmécac*. This school was meant to train the city's next generation of leaders.

This diagram shows the levels of Aztec society, with the king on top, followed by priests, officials and military leaders, craftspeople and merchants, and, on the bottom, farmers, serfs, and slaves.



Commoners worked the land owned by their *calpulli*.

The biggest social group were the *macehualtin* or commoners. These were the merchants, farmers, and craftspeople. The farmers worked the land owned by their *calpulli*, or district. The merchants and craftspeople, who stayed in the city, enjoyed higher status than the farmers. The craftspeople who worked with gold or made weapons had higher status than those who made simple items such as baskets.

Children from the *macehualtin* attended schools, called *tepochoalli*, which were run by their districts. Here, boys were given military training, while girls were trained to ensure the welfare of their homes.

At the lowest level of society were the *mayeques*. These were serfs and slaves who worked the land on private estates or carried heavy loads.

The Aztecs were an advanced people. One of their most remarkable achievements was the creation of an accurate calendar system.

The Aztecs actually had two calendars. The first was the civil calendar, which was used to track the seasons and seasonal events such as planting and harvesting. This calendar had 18 months, each with four weeks of five days. There were five extra days that did not belong in any month. These were considered unlucky.

The second calendar was the religious calendar, used only by the priests. It had 13 months, each with 20 days. Every 52 years, the first day of both calendars was the same. This marked the beginning of a new cycle. When this happened, the Aztecs celebrated with a great festival.

In addition to calendars, the Aztecs kept detailed records of events. The painting at right is of the Sun Stone, a famous Aztec history unearthed in 1790. Because Aztec calendars were accurate, scholars can determine the years in which the recorded events took place.



## The End of the Empire

Montezuma II became emperor in 1502. He expanded the government and conquered more tribes. He was ambitious, but he worried about a prophecy that said Quetzalcóatl, enemy of the Aztec gods, would return in the form of a bearded white man and end the empire. Then, in 1519 a bearded white man, Hernán Cortés, landed on the coast with about 600 men and 16 horses.

Cortés found eager **comrades** among the local tribes, who hated the Aztecs. Spurred by stories of Aztec wealth, Cortés turned inland. Soon he had more than 200,000 Indian allies. Montezuma, who feared the prophecy, tried to keep Cortés away from Tenochtitlán but received him with honor when he arrived. In order to control the city, Cortés took Montezuma captive.



It took the Spanish three months of hard fighting to capture Tenochtitlán.

Due to political problems at the coast, Cortés left Tenochtitlán in 1520. On his return, he found that the small group he'd left behind was under attack. They escaped but with heavy loss of life.

Cortés returned in 1521 with his small group of Spanish soldiers and 15,000 native warriors. Despite the fact that the Aztecs feared the Spaniards' few horses, which they'd never seen before, Cortés and his allies would probably have had little chance against the fierce Aztec warriors if disease had not already spread through the city. With no immunity to European diseases, many Aztecs died from the diseases they caught from Spanish soldiers. Even so, it took three months of fighting street to street before Tenochtitlán fell. The Aztec Empire had ended, and the Spanish colonization of Mexico began.



Montezuma welcomed Cortés.

# Glossary

**benefits** *n.* advantages

**campaigns** *n.* series of military operations for some special purpose

**comrades** *n.* people who share a common interest

**enrich** *v.* to enhance, make fuller, more meaningful, more rewarding, richer

**foreigners** *n.* outsiders; people from an outside country or place

**invaders** *n.* people who enter by force to conquer

# Reader Response

1. Why were many neighboring people willing to ally with the Spanish to bring down the Aztec Empire?
2. How did the lives of wealthy Aztecs differ from the lives of poorer Aztecs? Where in the book did you find your answer?
3. What were the main purposes of Aztec military campaigns?
4. Draw a web like the one below to organize what you learned about the Aztecs.

