

1. Introduction



The Aztecs built their large empire in central Mexico. In this chapter, you will explore what life was like in the Aztecs' capital city of Tenochtitlán.

Suppose you are an Aztec child living outside Tenochtitlán in the 1400s C.E. One morning your father, a chili pepper farmer, takes you to the Great Market at Tenochtitlán. Your father finds the vegetable section, where he spreads out a mat and displays the peppers on it. Then he begins to shout out prices. He gladly trades with a noblewoman, exchanging peppers for precious cacao beans. Later he trades his remaining peppers for a handmade clay cooking pot for your mother.

After all the peppers are gone, your father takes you on a walk around the city. You see the Great Temple, where priests perform sacrifices, and the ball court where nobles play a game called *tlachtli*. You gaze in wonder at the beautiful houses of the noble families and the splendid palace of the Aztec ruler. When you return home, you eat a simple mush made of maize before going to sleep.

This imaginary trip to Tenochtitlán shows aspects of daily life experienced by many

Aztecs in the 1400s. In this chapter, you will learn more about how the people of Tenochtitlán lived. You will explore Aztec class structure, marriage, family life, food, markets, religious practices, and recreation.



2. Class Structure

Aztec society was divided into five main social classes. At the top of the class structure were the ruler and his family. Next, came a noble class of government officials, priests, and high-ranking warriors. The third and largest class was made up of commoners, citizens who were not of noble rank. Below the commoners were the peasants, who were neither slaves nor citizens. At the bottom of the class structure were the slaves.

Each class had its own privileges and responsibilities. However, an Aztec's status was not fixed. Commoners could move up in social class by performing brave deeds in war or by studying to be priests. A noble could fall in rank if he failed to live up to his responsibilities.

The Ruler The Aztec ruler, or emperor, was considered **semidivine [semidivine: half-human and half-god]**. Called *tlatoani*, or "he who speaks," the emperor maintained the empire and decided when to wage war.

The position of ruler was not **hereditary [hereditary: passed on from parent to child; inherited]**, as it was in many other societies. When an emperor died, his son did not automatically become ruler. Instead, a group of advisers chose the new ruler from the emperor's family. Each new ruler was expected to acquire new wealth of his own. This was an important motive for constant warfare.

Government Officials, Priests, and Military Leaders The emperor was supported by a noble class of government officials, priests, and military leaders. Officials in Tenochtitlán counseled the emperor, worked as judges, and governed the



city's four districts. Other nobles throughout the large empire ruled cities, collected tribute, or managed the construction of public buildings and roads.

The emperor appointed government officials for life. Although noble status was not hereditary, most sons of nobles earned high offices themselves.

Priests conducted all religious rites and served individual gods. Some priests ran the schools that trained boys for government jobs and the priesthood. Other priests studied the skies and made predictions about the future. Generally, only nobles became priests, but sometimes an Aztec from lower classes was **elevated [elevated: to raise]** to this position. Girls could become priestesses.



Commoners could also rise to become military leaders. All Aztec men were trained to be soldiers. A common soldier could become a leader by capturing enemies in battle. Military leaders commanded groups of soldiers and took part in war councils.

Commoners The broad class of commoners included several smaller classes. The highest-ranking commoners were professional traders called *pochteca*. The *pochteca* led caravans to distant lands to acquire exotic goods. Some also served as spies for the emperor, reporting what type of tribute a city could provide.

The *pochteca* worshipped their own god and lived in a separate section of Tenochtitlán. They paid taxes with rare goods. They enjoyed many privileges. For example, they could own land and send their children to the nobles' schools. Unlike the nobles, membership in this class was hereditary.

Below the *pochteca* came craftspeople and artisans, such as potters, jewelers, and painters. Some worked in their homes and traded their goods at the market. Others worked in the royal palace and made items especially for the emperor.

Most commoners worked as farmers, fishers, laborers, and servants. Instead of owning land, they were loaned plots of land for homes and farms by their *calpulli*, or **ward [ward: a political unit within a city, often a neighborhood]**. All commoners paid tribute to the nobility in the form of crops, labor, or manufactured goods.

Peasants About thirty percent of the Aztec people were peasants. Unlike slaves, people in this class were free, but were considered inferior to commoners. Peasants did not belong to a *calpulli* and were not loaned land to farm. Instead, they hired out their services to nobles.

Slaves At the bottom of Aztec society were the slaves. Prisoners of war, lawbreakers, or debtors might be forced into slavery. Unlike slaves in many societies, Aztec slaves had a number of rights. They could own property, goods, and even other slaves. In addition, slaves did not pass their status on to their children, who were born free. In fact, the mother of the emperor Itzcoatl was a slave. Many slaves could be **emancipated [emancipated: to free]** after working off a debt, upon completing their term of punishment for a crime, or when their masters died.

3. Marriage

Marriage and family life were important to Aztecs of all social classes. Marriage marked an Aztec child's entry into adulthood. Most men married around age twenty, while young women tended to marry around sixteen.

Marriages were arranged by the families of the bride and groom. The young man's family chose the bride. They then engaged the services of a matchmaker, an older woman who approached the bride's family. It was customary for the bride's family to refuse at first. The matchmaker then returned a few days later. This time the bride's family usually accepted the union and set the dowry, or the money or goods a woman brought to her husband upon marriage.

Even among commoners, an Aztec wedding was as elaborate as the families could afford. The festivities began at the bride's house. Relatives, friends, the groom's teachers, and the important people of the *calpulli* enjoyed a banquet with the bride and gave her presents.

That evening, the guests marched to the groom's home for the wedding ceremony. An old woman, usually the matchmaker, carried the bride on her back. To symbolize the bond of marriage, during the ceremony the matchmaker tied the groom's cloak to the bride's blouse.

After the ceremony, the young couple went to the bridal chamber to pray for four days, while their guests celebrated. On the fifth day, the couple emerged and attended another grand banquet. Then they settled down on a piece of land in the groom's *calpulli*.



The Aztecs permitted men to practice **polygamy [polygamy: having more than one spouse at one time]**, or to have multiple wives. An Aztec man could take as many wives as he could afford. However, only one of the wives was considered the primary wife, and only marriage to the primary wife was celebrated with special rites and ceremonies.

When a marriage was unhappy, either spouse could ask for a divorce. A man could divorce his wife if she neglected her duties at home, had a bad temper, or did not bear any children. A woman could divorce her husband if he beat her, deserted her, or failed to support her and her children. However, Aztec society encouraged divorced women to remarry.

4. Family Life

Men had higher status than women in Aztec society, and, within the family, the father was the master of the house. Aztec women, however, had their own rights and responsibilities. Married women could own property and sell goods. Some older women also practiced a profession, such as matchmaking or midwifery.

Among commoners, the skills of both men and women were necessary to care for the household and the family. Men built the house and worked as farmers or at a craft. Women fixed meals, tended the garden, and looked after livestock. Many Aztec women wove beautiful cloth of many colors. Some made cloaks in patterns of sun designs or with images of shells, fish, cacti, snakes, or butterflies. Women traded these cloaks for other goods at the market.

One of a woman's most important jobs was to have and care for children. The Aztecs believed that the purpose of marriage was to bring children into the world, so they honored a woman's role in giving birth as much as they did a man's role in fighting wars.

Aztec parents began training their children at a young age. All children of commoners helped out around the house. Young boys fetched water and wood, while older boys learned how to fish and handle a canoe. Eventually, boys accompanied their fathers to work or to the market. Girls' tasks centered on running a home, and included cleaning house and grinding maize. When they were about seven years old, girls began learning to weave from their mothers.



In addition to working, all boys attended school. Commoners probably started school around the age of six, but they only attended part-time. At the *telpochcalli*, or "house of youth," boys mostly trained to be soldiers. The sons of nobles went to the *calmecac*, instead. There, they learned the skills to become priests, government officials, or military commanders.

5. Food

The Aztecs of Tenochtitlán ate both homegrown foods and foods imported from distant places. The mainstay of the Aztec diet, however, was maize. The Aztecs found maize so useful because it could be dried and then stored for a long time. Women boiled and skinned maize kernels and ground them into flour. Then they baked fresh tortillas for each meal on clay griddles. They also made tamales by wrapping maize in its husks and steaming it.

The daily routine of Aztec commoners shows the importance of maize. After working for several hours, commoners ate a simple meal in the late morning. The meal usually consisted of a maize porridge called *atole*. The porridge was often seasoned with peppers or sweetened with honey. At midday, commoners ate their main meal of tortillas, maize cakes, boiled beans, or tamales. Pepper or tomato sauce sometimes spiced up these dishes. Most families had only two meals. But some people ate a thin porridge, usually made of maize, just before going to bed.

Aztec commoners had occasional variety in their meals. To provide meat for special occasions, families might raise a few turkeys. They might also hunt wild game, such as rabbits and pigeons.

Aztec farmers also grew such crops as red peppers, tomatoes, sage, squash, green beans, sweet potatoes, and avocados. In periods when crops were bad, the Aztecs turned to other sources of food. They caught frogs and shrimp and collected insect eggs. They even skimmed algae, a type of plant, off the surface of the lake and formed it into small cakes.

The wealthy ate quite a different diet, both on a daily basis and at the feasts they attended. They prized delicacies, such as winged ants and a lizardlike creature called an *axolotl*. They enjoyed cocoa with their morning meals and pineapples, oysters, and crabs at their banquets.

6. Markets

Markets were an important part of the Aztec economy. Each city in the empire had its own market, usually located in the plaza in front of the town's temple. Large towns held markets every day, while small villages held them about every five days. Some towns had their own specialties. The people of Tenochtitlán might travel to nearby Texcoco for fine cloth and to faraway Acolman to buy meat.

At Tlatelolco, the bustling market in Tenochtitlán, people bought and sold everything from food and utensils to warrior costumes, quetzal feathers, and slaves. Instead of using money, Aztecs used a barter system, trading one kind of good for another. Some expensive goods had an agreed-upon value. For instance, a warrior's costume and shield were worth about 60 cotton cloaks.

Many individuals brought their wares to market. Farmers brought their surplus crops, while craftspeople brought goods they had made. The *pochteca* had a special place in the markets, since they imported goods from faraway places. They provided raw materials that were unavailable around Tenochtitlán. For example, they sold metals, such as gold and silver, as well as tortoiseshells for making spoons.

Guards watched over the market to make sure sellers acted honestly. When a **dispute [dispute: disagreement]** arose—for example, if a buyer accused a seller of cheating—the guards took the parties to a court located at one end of the market. Three judges sat there, waiting to hear each case and to give their verdict.

The market also had a social purpose. People went there to meet friends, gossip, and hear the news of the day. Some people simply enjoyed strolling up and down the aisles, buying snacks and browsing among all the items the sellers had to offer.

7. Religious Practices

Religion was central to Aztec life and society. The Aztecs believed that humans needed the gods for survival. It was the gods who granted a good harvest or, if they were displeased, sent earthquakes and floods. So it was important to please the gods through elaborate rituals and ceremonies. Priests presented the gods with flowers, ears of maize, clothing, or images made of wood.

The Aztecs adopted some of their gods from other Mesoamerican groups. For example, Tlaloc, the rain god, was an ancient Mesoamerican god. Quetzalcoatl (“feathered serpent”) had been worshipped by the Teotihuacans. But the Aztecs’ own chief god was Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun and of war. In fact, the Aztecs called themselves the “people of the sun.”

The Aztecs saw the sun as a warrior who fought each night against the forces of darkness. In Aztec belief, the survival of the universe depended upon the sun winning these battles. The way to keep the sun strong was to offer him nourishment in the form of blood.

For this reason, most Aztec rituals included some form of blood sacrifice. Every morning, Aztec priests sacrificed hundreds of birds to Huitzilopochtli. Priests also pierced their skin with cactus spikes to offer their own blood.

The highest form of sacrifice, however, was that of humans. The Aztecs particularly valued the sacrifice of warriors captured in battle, because they believed that the blood of strong warriors was especially nourishing to Huitzilopochtli. Scholars think the Aztecs also used human sacrifice to frighten other groups into accepting their rule.

In Tenochtitlán, up to several thousand people may have gone to sacrificial deaths each year. Four priests pinned the victim to the stone in front of Huitzilopochtli’s temple, while another cut out his heart. Some victims may have died willingly in the belief that they would accompany the sun god in his daily battle across the sky

The Aztecs also made sacrifices to other gods. They threw the sacrificial victims of the fire god into a great blaze. To honor the corn goddess, they cut off women’s heads. Overall, the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice on a much larger scale than other Mesoamerican groups.

8. Recreation



While work, warfare, and ritual were all important to the Aztecs, they also had some time for recreation. They enjoyed music and dancing, and nobles liked to go on hunts.

One entertainment was *patolli*, a game played on a cross-shaped board divided into 52 squares. The board symbolized the 260-day calendar, which the Aztecs shared with the Mayas and other Mesoamerican peoples. Five times around the board equaled 260 days.

To move around the board, players threw beans marked with holes, similar to dice. The holes told them how many spaces to move the colored stone game pieces. The first person around the board five times won.

All social classes played *patolli*, but it’s likely that only members of the nobility played the ball game *tlachtli*. *Tlachtli* was played on a long, narrow court shaped like the letter I and with high walls. A small ring projected over the court from each side wall. Two teams faced each other across a line that ran between the rings. The object was to get a rubber ball through the ring on the other team’s side. Players could not touch the ball, so they threw themselves on the ground to hit the ball with their elbows, knees, and hips.

Along with its entertainment value, *tlachtli* had a religious meaning. The Aztecs believed that the *tlachtli* court represented the world and that the ball represented a heavenly body. Because of this, the Aztecs built the *tlachtli* courts near the most important temples, like the Great Temple in Tenochtitlán.

Summary

In this chapter, you learned about daily life in the Aztecs’ capital city of Tenochtitlán.

Class Structure Aztec society had five classes. At the top was the ruler and his family, followed by the nobles, priests, and high-ranking warriors. Next came the commoners. Below them were the peasants. Slaves were the lowest class, but their children were born free.

Marriage and Family Life Aztec marriages were arranged; men married at about 20 and women at about 16. Men had higher status, but both spouses worked to run the home, and women were honored for their ability to give birth. Men farmed and hunted. Women raised the children and wove cloth. Children did chores around the house.

Food and Markets Maize was the main food, but the Aztecs enjoyed other local and imported foods, as well as fish and game. Markets were an important part of the Aztec economy. In daily or weekly markets, using a barter system, the Aztecs bought and sold everything from food and armor to clothing and slaves.

Religious Practices Religion was central to the Aztecs. They believed that their chief god, Huitzilopochtli, god of the sun and of war, needed blood for nourishment. Because of this, the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice more than other Mesoamerican groups.

Recreation The Aztecs enjoyed games, including a board game called patolli and a ball game called tlachtli.

Suppose that you are an Aztec teenager visiting relatives in Tenochtitlán. This is the first time you have visited them, and today they took you to the Great Market. Create a three-paragraph journal entry in which you describe what you saw and what you learned about how Aztecs live in Tenochtitlán. You should include information on at least three aspects of daily life that you learned about in this lesson.