A few hundred years after Maya civilization flourished, a new power emerged in central Mexico. In this section, you will learn about the Aztec empire and its civilization.

The Land of the Aztecs

The Aztec empire developed in the highlands of central Mexico. The highlands’ geography was different from that of the Maya lowlands.

The Valley of Mexico  A broad, high plateau stretches across the central highlands. Because of its high elevation, this plateau has cooler temperatures than the hot Maya lowlands. Volcanoes rise above the plateau. Some of the best farmland in this plateau is located in highland basins below volcanoes. A basin is a bowl-shaped area.

One of these basins—the Valley of Mexico—was the center of the Aztec empire. Fertile volcanic soils and water flowing from the mountains around it made the valley a good place to settle. At the center of the Valley of Mexico was a large lake, Lake Texcoco (tays koh koh).

Building a City  The Aztecs came to the Valley of Mexico from the north during the 1200s. They first settled on a hill called Chapultepec but later moved to a small island in Lake Texcoco. There they built the city of Tenochtitlan. They built causeways to connect the island city to the lake shore.

This setting had several advantages. Although other city-states surrounded the island, the Aztecs could easily defend it from attack.
The water in the lake and the canals the Aztecs built made it easy to move goods and people. The lake was rich with fish and ducks. The land around the lake was ideal for farming.

The Aztecs added to their farmland by building chinampas, or artificial islands. Farming the chinampas helped the Aztecs feed a growing population.

Because the water of Lake Texcoco was at the bottom of a basin, it had no outlet that drained it. Over hundreds of years, it had become brackish, or partly salty. The Aztecs built a dike—a wall to hold back water—across the middle of the lake. Mountain streams brought fresh water to Tenochtitlan’s side of the dike, which kept the brackish water away from the city.

**Conquering an Empire** Fierce warriors, the Aztecs began to take on their enemies in the early 1400s. The powerful Aztec army rarely suffered defeat. Soldiers swung heavy wooden clubs spiked with sharp obsidian blades. By 1440, the Aztecs ruled an empire that extended beyond the Valley of Mexico.

During the late 1400s, the Aztec empire continued to grow. By the early 1500s, the empire extended from central Mexico to Guatemala. Around ten million people lived within its borders.

By this time, the Valley of Mexico had become a great urban area of about one million people on and around Lake Texcoco. Goods and people from around the empire flowed into the valley. In the center of Lake Texcoco stood the rich island city of Tenochtitlan, with its magnificent pyramids and glittering palaces.

**Reading Check** What advantages did the Aztecs gain from living on an island?
**Aztec Government**

The Aztec king, or the king of Tenochtitlan, was part of a Triple Alliance that included the kings of Tlacopan and Texcoco. They agreed to support each other with troops and to share control of the Aztec empire. After 1428, the Aztec king was the most important ruler in the Triple Alliance. The Aztec king made all decisions having to do with war.

The three kings of the Triple Alliance controlled the kings of the city-states they conquered. These city-states had to send tribute, or regular payments of valuable goods, to the Triple Alliance kings.

Tribute goods ranged from clothing, food, and military supplies to jewelry, chocolate, quetzal feathers, and building materials. A Spanish visitor in the early 1500s wrote that “vast quantities” of tribute flowed into Tenochtitlan every day.

The Aztec king had total power over the people of Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs had an **absolute monarchy**, a system in which one person from a ruling family has unlimited powers.

When an Aztec king died, a Supreme Council of nobles chose a member of the ruling family as the new king. Sometimes kingship passed from father to son, but sometimes it passed to other blood relatives. Three councils advised the king. These included the Supreme Council that chose him and a War Council of warriors. The third, the Council of Four, was led by a chief minister who ran the everyday operations of the government. However, the king made all major decisions.

**Reading Check** Who chose the Aztec king?
Aztec Society

Aztec society revolved around farming, warfare, and religion. It also had a rigid class structure that shaped people’s lives.

Religion  The Aztecs worshiped many gods. They believed that the gods gave them life and controlled everything on Earth. The most important Aztec gods were Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. Aztecs believed that Huitzilopochtli brought success in battle and made the sun rise. Without human blood, they believed, Huitzilopochtli would grow weak, and the sun would disappear.

The Aztecs sacrificed thousands of victims every year, cutting out their hearts and offering them to Huitzilopochtli. Most victims were prisoners captured in war. The Aztecs also sacrificed young children to Tlaloc.

The Aztecs waged war partly to capture prisoners for sacrifice. The Aztecs also hoped to terrify conquered peoples, making them easier to control. Revolts were common in the Aztec empire, however.

Nobles and Commoners  Like the Maya, the Aztecs had two classes: nobles and commoners. Nobles belonged to families descended from the first Aztec king. They lived in large homes and ate the best food. Many were government officials.

Nobles owned slaves. Some were commoners who had sold themselves into slavery to escape poverty. Other slaves were war captives. Slaves could marry and could buy their own freedom. The children of slaves were born free.

Most Aztecs were commoners. Commoners lived simply. Extended families lived in small houses around a shared courtyard. Commoners ate mainly corn, beans, and chili peppers.

The Great Temple

The drawing above is a reconstruction of the Templo Mayor (тём пёх мё эм), or Great Temple, in Tenochtitlan. The stone serpent at the left lies in front of the temple’s ruins today.
Agriculture and Economy  For most commoners, life centered around farming or household duties. Men tended the fields, while women cooked, cleaned, and raised children. Aztec farmers planted corn and beans together, since they helped each other grow. Farmers also grew tomatoes, chili peppers, and squash, and they raised dogs and turkeys.

Some commoners worked as artisans. Artisans made fine craft goods for noble families, including jewelry and feather-decorated capes and headdresses.

The wealthiest commoners traveled the empire as traders. They traded Aztec craft goods for exotic feathers and precious stones. Trade let each town specialize in a particular craft. In each town, traders would purchase goods made in that town and sell goods made in other towns.

Reading Check  Why was warfare important to the Aztecs?

Aztec Achievements
You have read about the dike the Aztecs built across Lake Texcoco. The Aztecs made other achievements in engineering, urban planning, and the arts.

Engineering and Architecture  The Aztecs designed and built an extraordinary capital city. Canals within the city and causeways across Lake Texcoco helped people move goods. The Aztecs built aqueducts—canals or pipes that carry fresh water—across Lake Texcoco from the hills surrounding the lake.

At the heart of Tenochtitlan was a large walled plaza. Palaces and temples surrounded the plaza. The largest structure was the Templo Mayor, or Great Temple.

Arts  Jewelry was a specialty of Aztec craftsmen. Jewelers made rings, necklaces, and other jewelry from gold, silver, and semiprecious stones.
One of the finest forms of Aztec art was feather work. Specialists made fans, headdresses, capes, and shields from the brightly colored feathers of tropical birds. The Aztecs also carved beautiful stone sculptures. One of the best-known examples is the great Aztec Calendar Stone.

The Oral Tradition The Aztecs did not have a well-developed writing system. They had symbols to represent some ideas, but not an actual written language. Oral, or spoken, language was more important to the Aztecs than writing. The Aztecs were skilled orators, or public speakers. One of the titles of the Aztec king was “great speaker.” Orators told stories from the past and legends of the gods. In this way they passed down Aztec history and religion from one generation to the next.

Poets were highly respected in Aztec society. Even kings composed poetry. The most famous of the poet kings was Nezahualcoyotl (nay sah wahl kooy ohtl). In one of his poems, he reflects on the passing nature of life:

“Not forever on earth, only a little while
Though jade it may be, it breaks;
though gold it may be, it is crushed;
though it be quetzal plumes, it shall not last.
Not forever on earth, only a little while.”
—Nezahualcoyotl

Historical Influence The Aztec empire fell in the 1500s to an alliance of European conquerors and native peoples who resented Aztec rule. Still, the Aztecs had a lasting impact. Tenochtitlan became Mexico City, the capital of Mexico. To this day, Mexicans cook with corn, beans, and chili. Words such as chocolate, tomato, and avocado passed from the Aztec language, Nahuatl, through Spanish and into English.

Reading Check Who preserved Aztec history?

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**Section 2 Assessment**

**Key Terms**
1. Explain the importance of chinampas to the Aztecs.
2. What is an absolute monarchy?
3. Use the word aqueduct in a sentence about Tenochtitlan.

**Key Ideas**
4. What areas did the Aztec empire include?
5. How did nobles play a role in Aztec government?
6. How did people become slaves under the Aztecs?
7. What were some of the Aztecs’ engineering accomplishments?

**Think Critically**
8. Analyze Cause and Effect Explain how tribute could have strengthened the Aztec empire and led to more conquests.
9. Draw Conclusions How did the Aztecs’ location and environment help them conquer an empire?

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Aztec jewelers made necklaces and other ornaments from gold, silver, and gemstones.

What distinguishes one culture from another?

10. How was Aztec civilization similar to and different from Maya civilization? Go to your Student Journal to record your answer.