

◀ These drawings were created in Mexico around 1540 to show details of Aztec life.

# The Aztecs

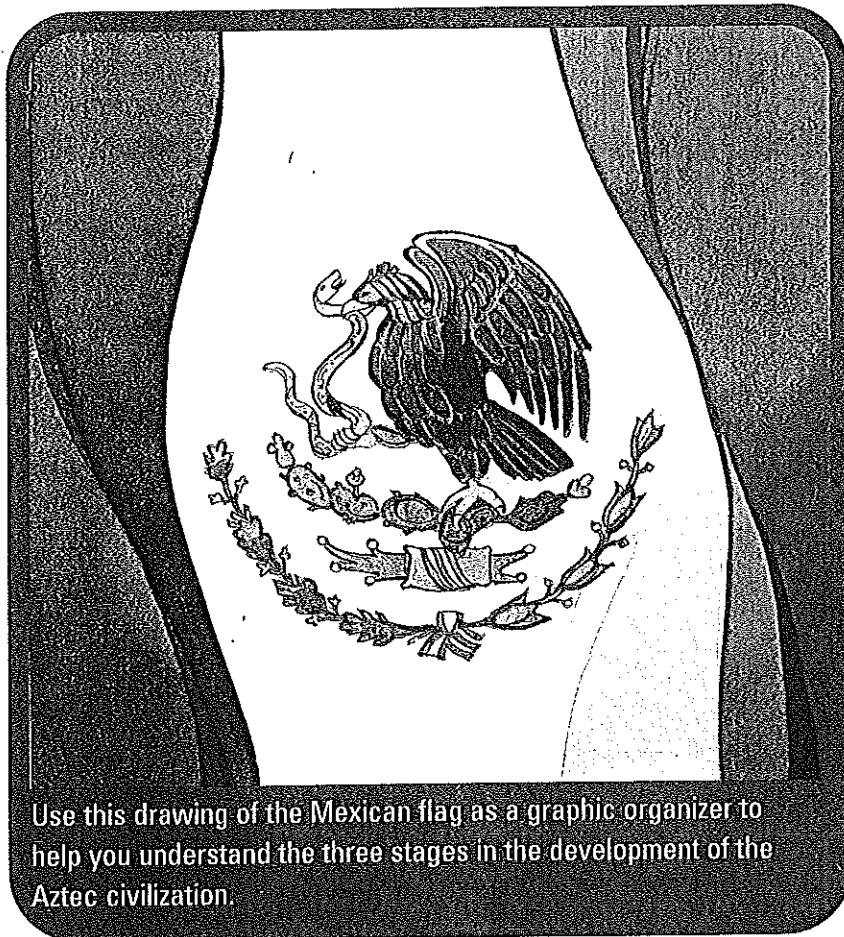
## 24.1 Introduction

In Chapter 23, you read about the Mayan civilization of southern Mexico and Central America. In this chapter, you will learn about the **Aztecs**, a Mesoamerican people who built a vast empire in central Mexico. The Aztec Empire flourished from 1428 to 1519 C.E., when it was destroyed by invaders from Spain.

The Aztecs had a colorful **legend** about the beginnings of their empire. Originally a wandering group of hunter-gatherers, the Aztecs had a belief that one day they would receive a sign from the gods. They would see an eagle perched on a great cactus with “his wings stretched toward the rays of the sun.” In its beak, the eagle would hold a long snake. When they saw this eagle, the Aztecs would know they had found the place where they would build a great city.

In the mid 1200s C.E., the Aztecs entered the high Valley of Mexico, a fertile basin in central Mexico. Several times other groups in the valley pushed the Aztecs away from their lands. In 1325, the Aztecs took refuge on an island in Lake Texcoco. There Aztec priests saw the eagle, just as the gods had promised. And so the Aztecs set about building a city they called **Tenochtitlan**, which means “the place of the fruit of the prickly pear cactus.” In time, the island city became the center of the Aztec Empire.

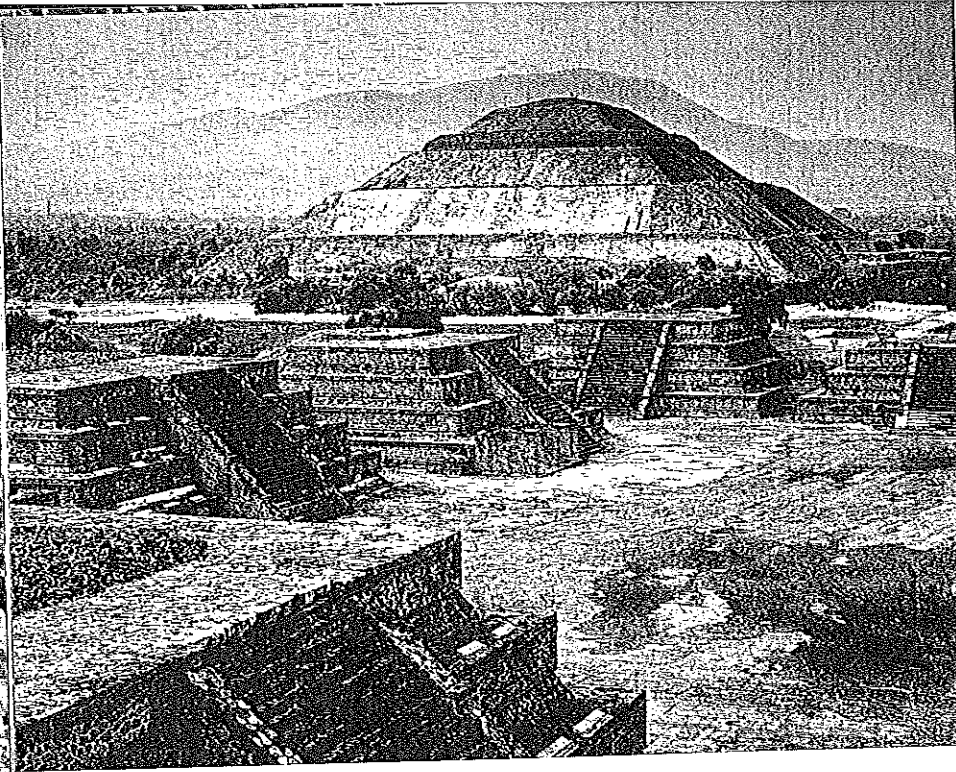
In this chapter, you will learn more about where the Aztecs came from and how they built their magnificent capital city. You’ll also discover how this humble band of nomads rose to become the masters of a great **empire**.



Use this drawing of the Mexican flag as a graphic organizer to help you understand the three stages in the development of the Aztec civilization.

## 24.2 The Aztecs in the Valley of Mexico

The Aztec Empire arose in the Valley of Mexico, a fertile area nearly 8,000 feet above sea level. By the time the Aztecs arrived in the mid 1200s C.E., the valley had been a center of civilization for more than a thousand years. Two groups in particular had built civilizations there that strongly influenced the Aztecs. Let's take a brief look at these civilizations. Then we'll see how the Aztecs came to the valley and gradually rose to power.



Teotihuacan, the "City of the Gods," was an expansive city of plazas, pyramids, and avenues. The Pyramid of the Sun, shown above, was constructed of volcanic rock and limestone.

**Civilization in the Valley of Mexico** From about 100 to 650 C.E., the Valley of Mexico was dominated by the Teotihuacans. These people built an enormous capital city, Teotihuacan. One of the city's buildings, the Pyramid of the Sun, was more than 200 feet high.

After Teotihuacan's collapse around the 700s, a group from the north, the Toltecs, migrated into the valley. Toltec civilization reached its height in the 10th and 11th centuries. The Toltecs built a number of cities. Their capital, Tollan, boasted large pyramids topped with temples.

During the 1100s, new groups invaded the valley. They took over Toltec cities and established new city-states. But the influence of the Toltecs and the Teotihuacans continued to be felt in the culture that was developing in the valley.

**The Arrival of the Aztecs** Sometime around 1250 C.E., a new group arrived in the Valley of Mexico. A nomadic band of hunter-gatherers, they called themselves the Mexica. We know them today as the Aztecs.

The name Aztec comes from Aztlan, the Mexicas' legendary homeland. According to Aztec tradition, Aztlan was an island in a lake to the northwest of the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs had left the island around 1100 C.E. They wandered through the deserts of northern Mexico for many years before coming to the Valley of Mexico.

When the Aztecs came to the heart of the valley, they found lakes dotted with marshy islands. Thriving city-states controlled the land around the lakes.

The Aztecs had a difficult time establishing themselves in the valley. The people living in the city-states thought the Aztecs were crude barbarians. But the Aztecs were fierce warriors, and the city-states were willing to employ them as **mercenaries**.

**mercenary** a soldier who is paid to fight for another country or group

After settling in the valley, the Aztecs began to be influenced by the legacy of the Teotihuacans and the Toltecs. They made pilgrimages to the ancient ruins of Teotihuacan. They adopted Quetzalcoatl, the Teotihuacans' feathered serpent god, as one of their own gods.

The Aztecs viewed the Toltecs even more highly, as rulers of a Golden Age. Aztec rulers married into the surviving Toltec royal line. The Aztecs even began to claim the Toltecs as their own ancestors.

In 1319, stronger groups forced the Aztecs to move away from Chapultepec, a rocky hill where they had made their home. The Aztecs fled to the south, where they became mercenaries for the city-state of Colhuacan. But trouble came again when the Aztecs sacrificed the daughter of the Colhua chief. This led to a war with the Colhuas, who drove the Aztecs onto an island in the shallow waters of Lake Texcoco.

It was here, the Aztecs said, that they spotted an eagle perched atop a cactus with a long snake in its beak. Grateful for the sign they had been waiting for, the Aztecs set to work building the city they called Tenochtitlan.

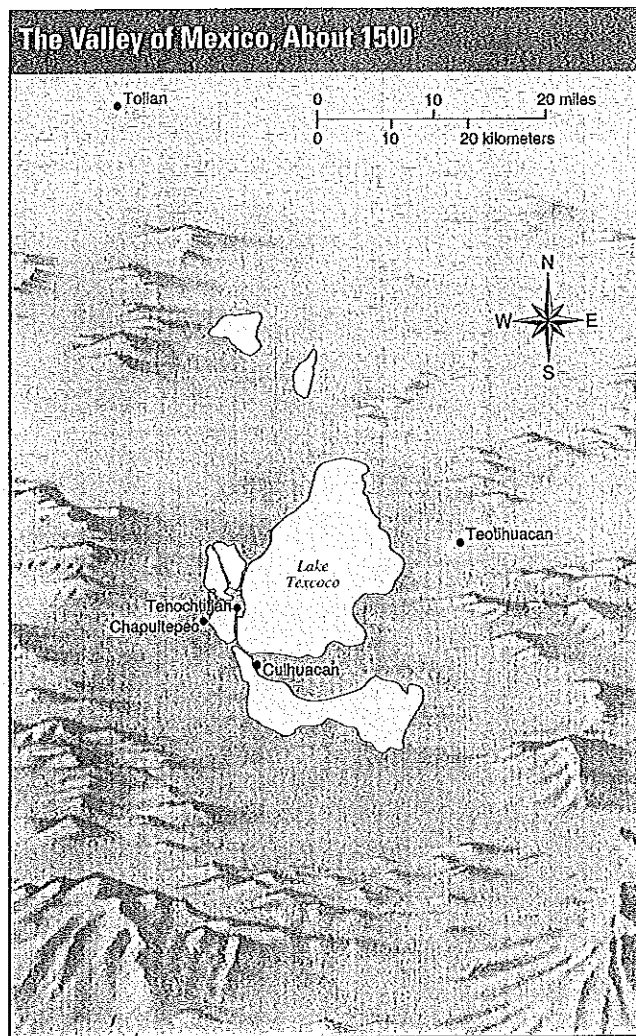
The island turned out to be a good site for the Aztecs' city. The lake provided fish and water birds for food, and the island was easy to defend. Over time, the Aztecs' new home would grow into one of the great cities of the world.

**From Mercenaries to Empire Builders** The Aztecs started building Tenochtitlan in 1325 C.E. For the next 100 years, they served as mercenaries for a powerful group called the Tepanecs. Through this **alliance** the Aztecs gained land, trading connections, and wealth.

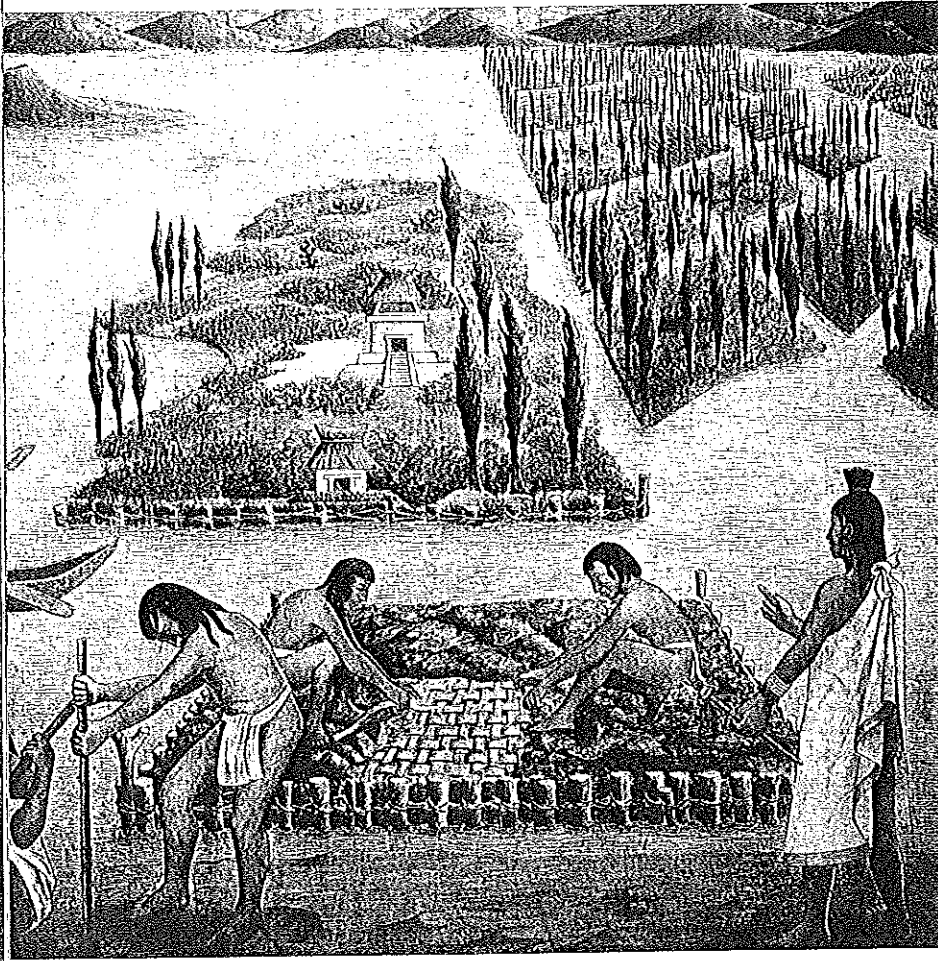
Eventually, however, the Aztecs rebelled against the heavy-handed rule of the Tepanecs. Under the Aztec leader Itzcoatl, Tenochtitlan joined with two other city-states in the Triple Alliance. In 1428, the alliance fought and defeated the Tepanecs. Together the allies began a series of conquests that laid the foundation for the Aztec Empire.

As Tenochtitlan became a great power, Itzcoatl set out to reshape Aztec history. He burned records that referred to his people's humble origins. Instead, he connected the Aztecs to the distinguished Toltecs.

With their growing power and a glorious (though legendary) past, the Aztecs were ready for their new role as empire builders. Let's look now at the great city that would become the center of their empire.



**alliance** a group of countries, city-states, or other entities who agree to work together, often to fight common enemies



The Aztecs of Tenochtitlan farmed on chinampas, small floating islands they constructed from mud and plants.

**plaza** a public square or other open area in a city where people can gather

## 24.3 Tenochtitlan: A City of Wonders

As the Aztecs' power grew, their capital city of Tenochtitlan developed into one of the largest cities in the world. When Spanish explorers first glimpsed Tenochtitlan in 1519, they were amazed to see a majestic city crisscrossed by canals and boasting impressive temples and palaces. With a population of between 200,000 and 300,000 people, Tenochtitlan was larger than London, Paris, or Venice.

How did the Aztecs turn an unwanted island into such a great city? First they reclaimed land from the lake by sinking timbers into the water to serve as walls and filling in the area between the timbers with mud, boulders, and reeds. In this way they created small islands called *chinampas*,

or "floating gardens." Eventually the Aztecs expanded the city's land surface until it covered over five square miles. They even merged Tlatelolco, originally a separate island, with Tenochtitlan.

Gradually, Tenochtitlan grew into the magnificent city that so amazed the Spanish. At the center of the city—both physically and spiritually—lay a large ceremonial **plaza**. Here the Aztecs gathered for religious rituals, feasts, and festivals. A wall about eight feet tall enclosed this area. The wall, which was called the Coatepantli ("snake wall"), was studded with sculptures of serpents. The palaces and homes of nobles lined the outside of the wall.

Inside the plaza, a stone pyramid called the Great Temple loomed 150 feet into the sky. People could see the pyramid, which was decorated with bright sculptures and murals, from several miles away. It had two steep stairways leading to double shrines. One shrine was dedicated to the chief god, Huitzilopochtli. The other was dedicated to Tlaloc, the rain god. In front of the shrines stood the stone where priests performed human sacrifices. An altar called the *tzompantli* ("skull rack") displayed the skulls of thousands of people who had been sacrificed. (You will learn more about the role of human sacrifice in the Aztec religion in the next chapter.) Other structures in the plaza included



more shrines and temples, the ritual ball court, military storehouses, and guest rooms for important visitors.

Just outside the plaza stood the royal palace. The two-story palace seemed like a small town. The palace was the home of the Aztec ruler, but it also had government offices, shrines, courts, storerooms, gardens, and courtyards. At the royal **aviary**, trained staff plucked the valuable feathers of parrots and quetzals. Wild animals captured throughout the empire, like pumas and jaguars, prowled cages in the royal zoo.

The city's main marketplace was located in the northern section, in Tlatelolco. Each day as many as 60,000 people came from all corners of the Aztec Empire to sell their wares. Goods ranged from luxury items like jade and feathers to necessities like food and rope sandals. Merchants also sold gold, silver, turquoise, animal skins, clothing, pottery, chocolate and vanilla, tools, and slaves.

Although Tenochtitlan spread over five square miles, people had an easy time getting around. Four wide avenues met at the foot of the Great Temple. A thousand workers swept and washed down the streets each day, keeping them cleaner than streets in European cities. At night, pine torches lit the way. People also traveled by foot on smaller walkways or by canoe on the canals that crossed the city. Many of the canals were lined with stone and had bridges.

Three **causeways** linked the island to the mainland. The longest of them stretched five miles. The causeways were 25 to 30 feet wide. They all had wooden bridges that could be raised to let boats through or to protect the city in an enemy attack.

The city boasted other technological marvels, like the aqueduct that carried fresh water for irrigation. Twin pipes ran from the Chapultepec springs, three miles away. While one pipe was being cleaned or repaired, the other could transport water. A **dike** 10 miles long ran along the east side of the city to hold back floodwaters.

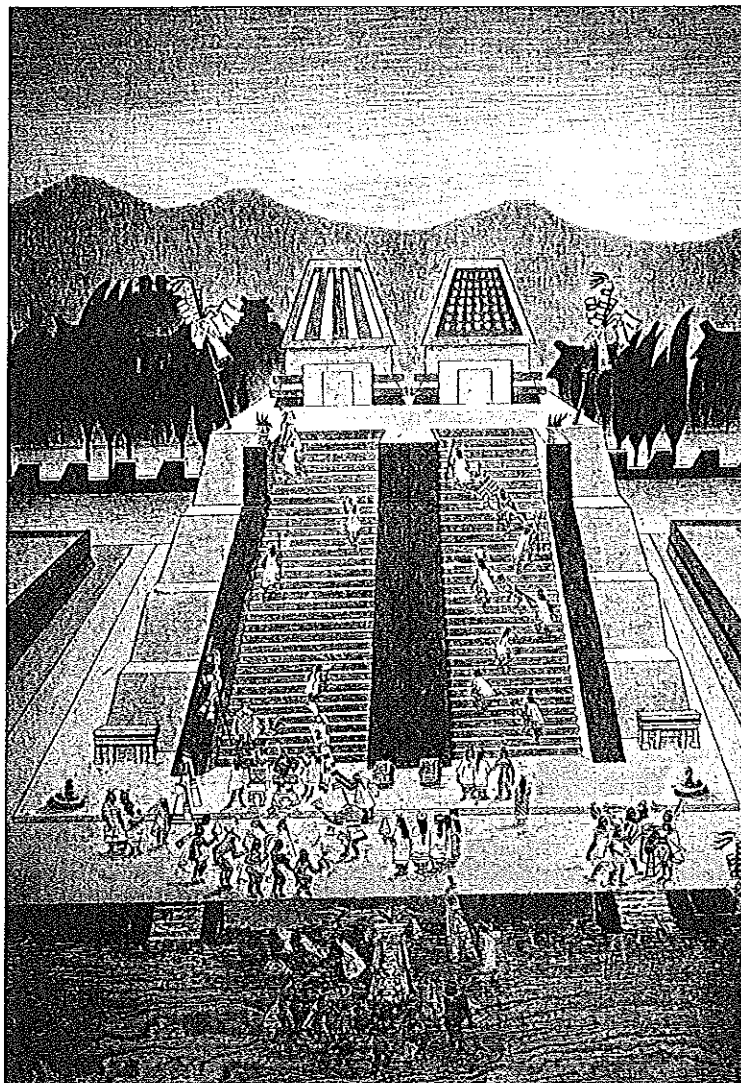
Thousands of people visited Tenochtitlan each year. Some came to do business. Others came as pilgrims. Still others came simply to gaze in wonder at the capital of the Aztec world.

**aviary** an enclosed space or cage for keeping birds

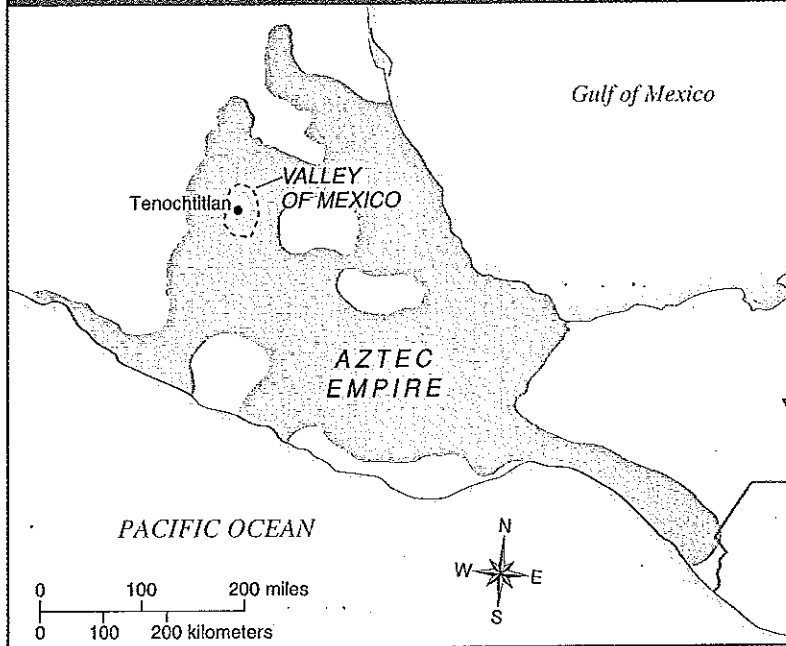
**causeway** a raised road built across water or low ground

**dike** a wall or dam built to hold back water and prevent flooding

Temples dedicated to various gods rose along the streets and canals of the city of Tenochtitlan.



### The Aztec Empire, Early 1500s



## 24.4 The Aztec Empire

Tenochtitlan began as simply the Aztecs' home city. After the Aztecs and their allies defeated the Tepanecs in 1428 C.E., the city became the capital of a growing empire. Under Moctezuma I in the mid 1400s, the Aztecs extended their empire to faraway regions.

By the early 1500s, the Aztec Empire stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. It covered much of Central Mexico and reached as far south as the current border with Guatemala. At its height, the empire included more than five million people.

### An Empire Based on Tribute

Unlike other empire builders, the Aztecs did not start colonies. Nor did they force conquered peoples to adopt their ways. Instead, the Aztec Empire was a loose union of hundreds of city-states that were forced to pay tribute to the Aztecs.

Collecting tribute was the empire's most important business. The Aztecs relied on tribute to support Tenochtitlan's huge population. Tribute took the form of whatever valuable items a city could provide. Cities might pay in food, cacao, gems and stones, cotton, cloth, animals, animal skins, shells, building materials, or even soldiers. Tax collectors stationed around the empire made sure that cities paid regularly.

Each year, huge amounts of goods flowed into Tenochtitlan. An average year brought 7,000 tons of maize; 4,000 tons each of beans, seed, and grain; and at least 2 million cotton cloaks. Warriors, priests, officials, servants, and other workers all received payment in tribute goods.

**Warfare** The demands of the empire made war the center of Aztec life. Successful battles allow the Aztecs to increase their sources of tribute. They also gained more territory, laborers, and sacrificial victims. As you will learn in the next chapter, the Aztecs believed that their chief god, Huitzilopochtli, required human blood for survival, so in war they took as many prisoners as possible to use in sacrifices. They also used the threat of human sacrifice to frighten city-states into paying tribute.

Every male Aztec was trained to be a soldier. In battle, the Aztecs used weapons such as bows and arrows, spears, clubs, and wooden swords with sharp stone blades. Warrior knights carried shields decorated with figures of animals such as the jaguar and eagle. The figures



# CHAPTER 25

◀ The Great Market in the city of Tenochtitlan was a center of daily life for the Aztecs.

## Daily Life in Tenochtitlan

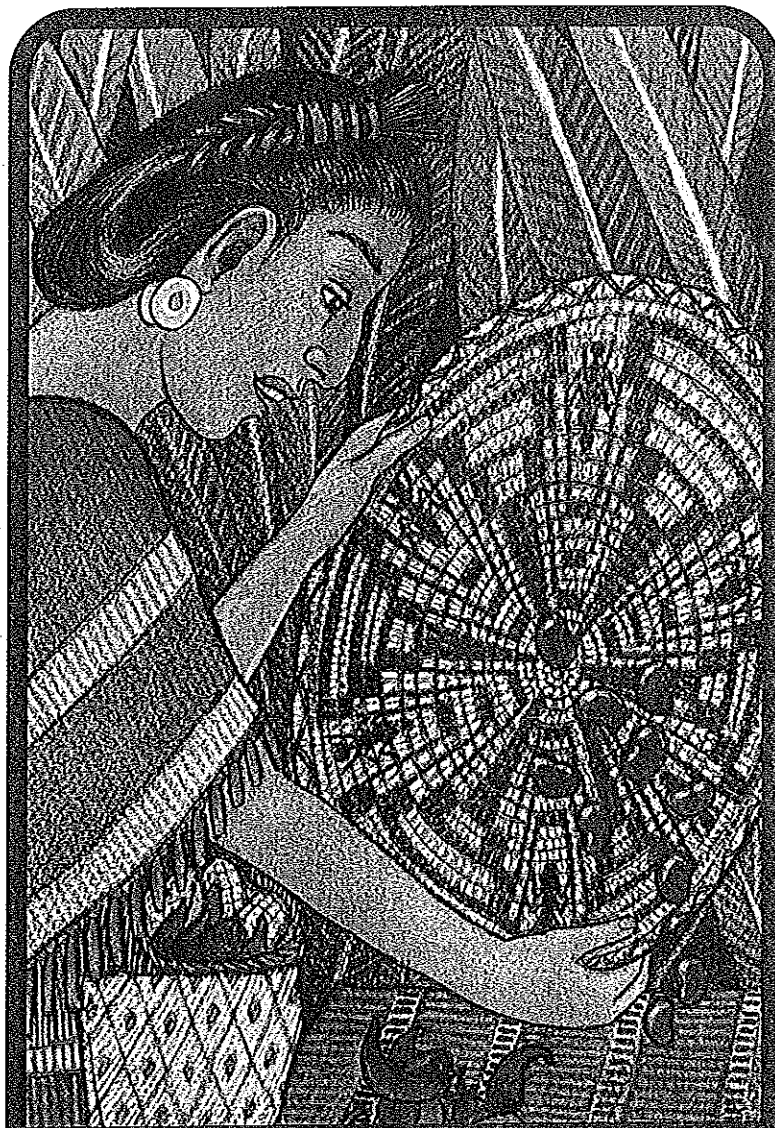
### 25.1 Introduction

In Chapter 24, you learned how the Aztecs built their empire in central Mexico. Now you will explore what life was like in the Aztecs' capital city of Tenochtitlan.

Imagine that you are an Aztec child living outside Tenochtitlan in the 1400s C.E. One morning your father, a chili pepper farmer, takes you to the great market at Tenochtitlan. Your father finds the vegetable section, where he spreads out his mat and displays his peppers. 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 long stroll 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 where noble families live and the splendid palace of the Aztec ruler. After the long walk home, you hungrily eat a simple mush made of maize before going to sleep.

This imaginary trip to Tenochtitlan suggests many aspects of **daily life** for Aztecs in the 1400s. In this chapter, you'll learn more about how the people of Tenochtitlan lived. You'll explore Aztec **class structure, marriage, family life, food, markets, religious practices, and recreation.**



Use this drawing as a graphic organizer to help you collect information about Aztec daily life.



## 25.2 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. And a noble could fall in rank if he failed to live up to his responsibilities. Let's look at the role of each class, beginning with the ruler and his family.

**semidivine** more than human but not fully a god  
**hereditary** passed on from parent to child; inherited

**The Ruler** The Aztec ruler, or emperor, was considered **semi-divine**. Called *tlatoani*, or "he who speaks," the emperor maintained the empire and decided when to wage war.

The position of ruler was not **hereditary**, as it was in many other societies. When an emperor died, his son did not automatically become ruler. Instead, a group of advisors chose the new ruler from the emperor's family. Each new ruler was expected to acquire new possessions of his own. This was an important motive for constant warfare.

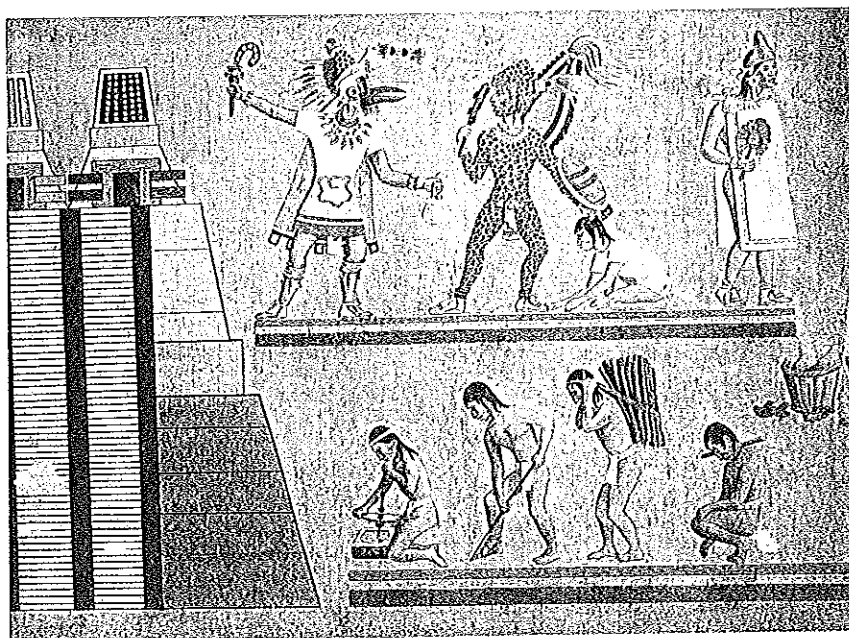
### Government Officials, Priests, and Military Leaders

The emperor was supported by a noble class of government officials, priests, and military leaders. Officials in Tenochtitlan counseled the emperor, worked as judges, and governed the city's four districts. Other nobles throughout the empire ruled cities, collected tribute (payments), or erected public buildings and roads.

The emperor appointed government officials for life. Noble status was not hereditary, but 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 rose this high. Girls could become priestesses.

This artwork shows people from various classes of Aztec society. Use the information from the text and visual clues in the image to try to identify which group in the Aztec class structure each figure represents.



Commoners could also rise to become military leaders. All Aztec men were trained to be soldiers, and 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* had their own god and lived in a separate section of Tenochtitlan. 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 noble status, membership in this class was hereditary.

Below the *pochteca* came craftspeople and artisans, like 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 specially for the emperor.

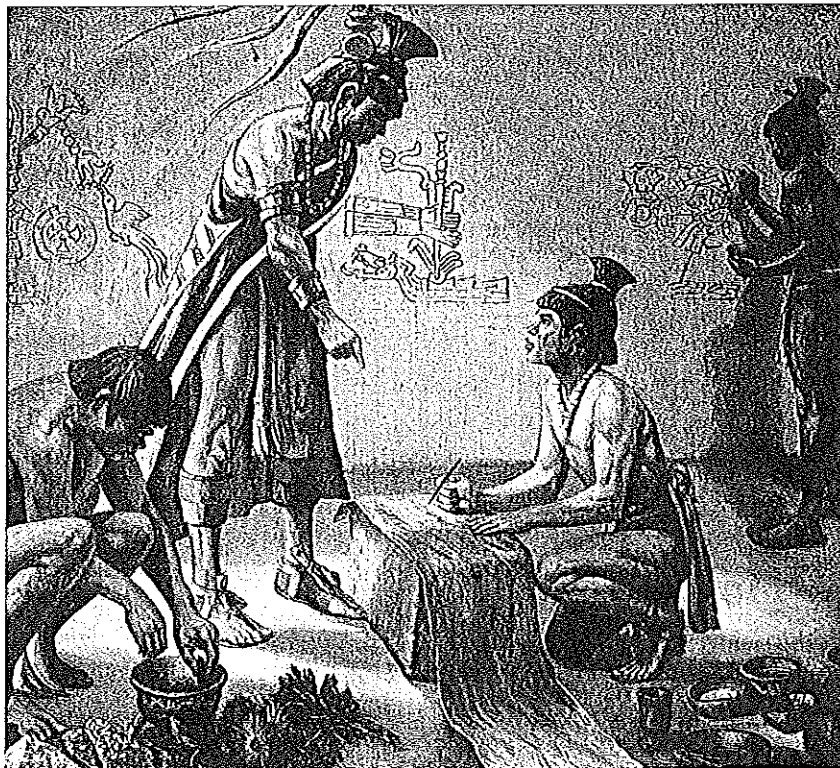
Most commoners worked as farmers, fishers, laborers, and servants. Instead of owning land, they were loaned plots of land for homes and farms by their *calpulli*, or **ward**. All commoners paid tribute to the nobility in the form of crops, labor, or manufactured goods.

**Peasants** About 30 percent of the Aztec people were peasants. Unlike slaves, people in this class were free, but they 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 gained their own freedom after working off a debt, upon completing their term of punishment for a crime, or when their masters died.

Now let's look at what daily life was like for the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan, beginning with marriage customs. We'll focus mostly on the majority of Aztecs, the commoners.

Aztec painters created beautiful murals for emperors and other high-ranking Aztec officials.



**ward** a neighborhood that is a political unit within a city



## 25.4 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 clothes 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 bear 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. Little 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 of being priests, government officials, or military commanders.



Parents taught their sons and daughters important skills, such as fishing, canoeing, weaving, and cooking.



## 25.5 Food

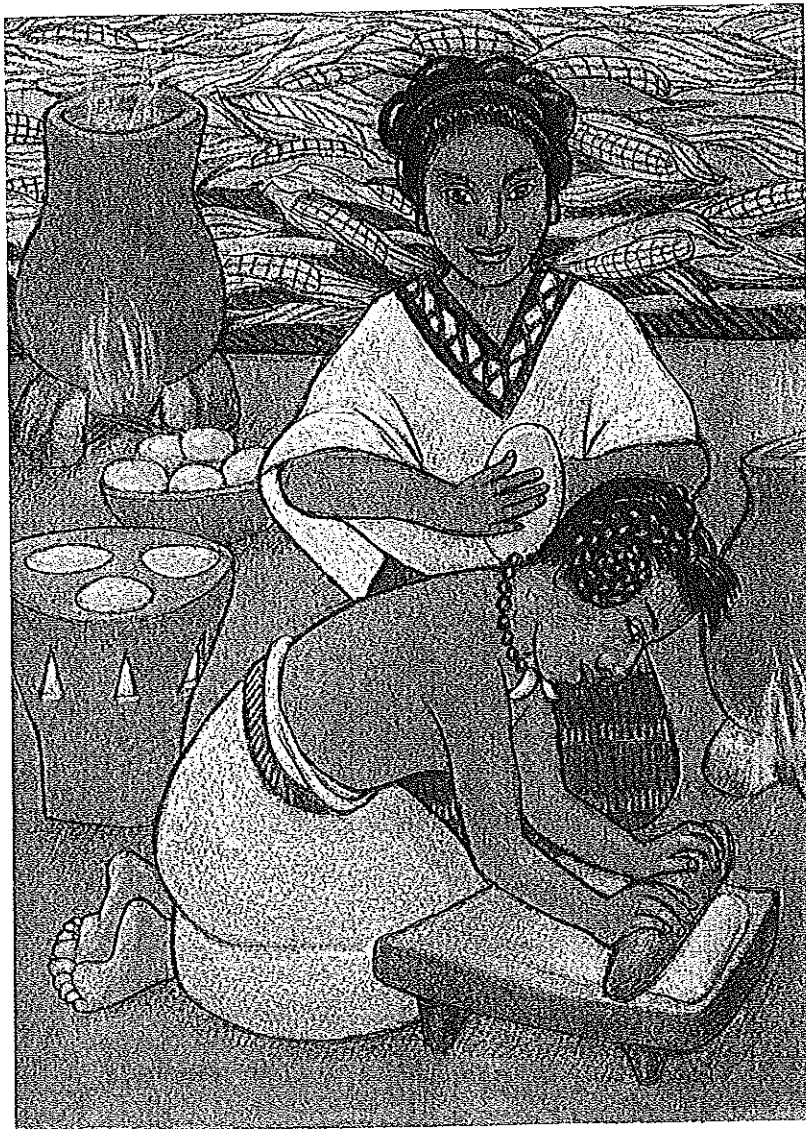
The Aztecs of Tenochtitlan ate both homegrown foods and foods that were imported from distant places. The mainstay of the Aztec diet, however, was maize. The Aztecs found maize so useful because it could be dried and then stored for a long time. Women boiled and skinned

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 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 or a hairless breed of dog. Or they might hunt wild game, such as rabbits and pigeons.

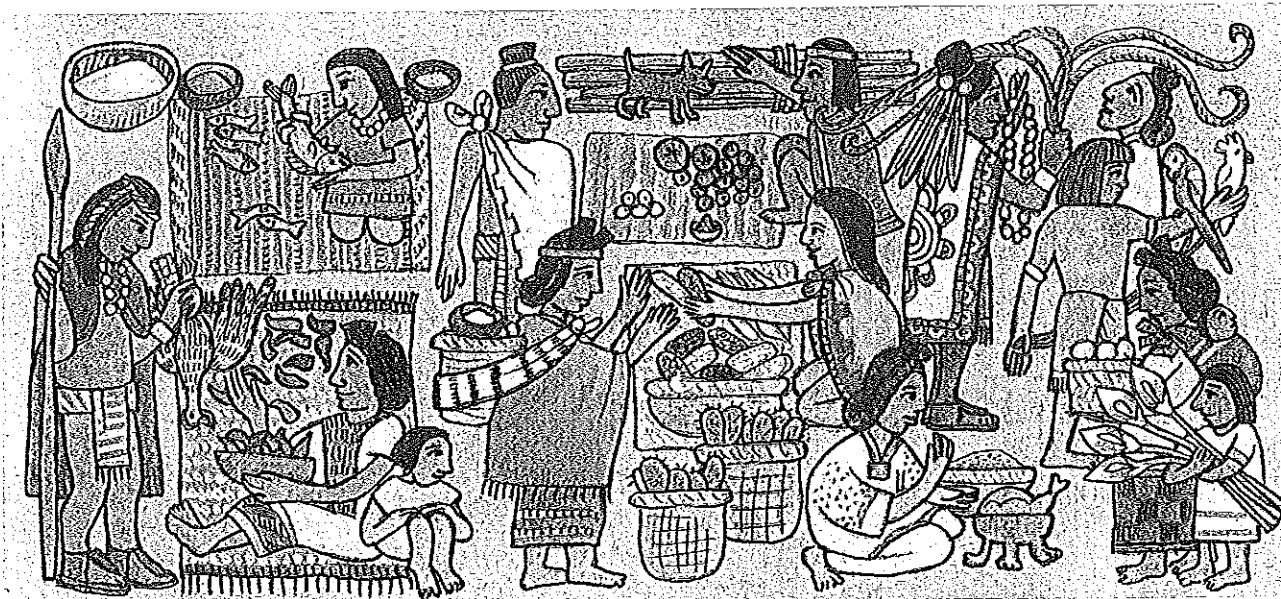
Aztec farmers also grew such crops as red peppers, tomatoes, sage,



The preparation of tortillas and other foods was a daily task for Aztec women.

squash, green beans, sweet potatoes, and avocados. When crops were bad, the Aztecs turned to other sources of food. They caught water creatures, such as 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 like winged ants and a lizardlike creature called an *axolotl*. The upper classes also ate exotic imported foods. They enjoyed cocoa with their morning meal and pineapples, oysters, and crabs at their banquets.



## 25.6 Markets

Markets were an important part of the Aztec economy. Each city in the empire had its own market, usually located in the square 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 Tenochtitlan might travel to nearby Texcoco for fine cloth and to faraway Acolman to buy dogs for meat.

At Tlatelolco, the bustling market in Tenochtitlan, people bought and sold everything from food and utensils to warrior costumes, quetzal feathers, and slaves. Instead of using money, Aztecs used a *bartér* 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 extra crops they had grown, while craftspeople brought handmade goods. The *pochteca* had a special place in the markets, since they brought exotic goods from faraway places. They supplied fine green jade and quetzal feathers. They also provided raw materials that were unavailable around Tenochtitlan. For example, they sold metals like gold and silver, as well as tortoiseshells for making spoons.

Guards watched over the market to make sure sellers acted honestly. When a problem arose—for example, a person accusing a seller of cheating—the guards took the parties to a court located at one end of the market. There three judges sat, waiting to hear the story and render their verdict.

The market also had a social purpose. People came 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 seeing all the wonderful things the sellers had to offer.

People bartered, or traded, in the marketplace for the things they needed.

## 25.7 Religious Practices

Religion was central to Aztec life and society. The Aztecs believed that humans needed the gods to survive. It was the gods who granted a good harvest or, if they were displeased, sent earthquakes and floods. Consequently, 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, while the people sang and danced.

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 worshiped

by the Teotihuacans. But the Aztecs’ own chief god was Huitzilopochtli, the sun god and the god 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. And 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 richest 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. Scholars think the Aztecs also used human sacrifice to frighten other cities into accepting their rule.

In Tenochtitlan, 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



This illustration from the 1500s shows Aztecs making a human sacrifice to the sun god.

another cut out the living 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 goddess of corn, they cut off women’s heads. Overall, the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice on a much larger scale than any other Mesoamerican group.

## 25.8 Recreation

While work, warfare, and rituals 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.

Another 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 Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples. Five times around the board equaled 260 days. To move around the board, players threw several white beans marked with holes. The holes told them how many spaces to move the colored stones that served as game pieces. The first person around the board five times was the winner.

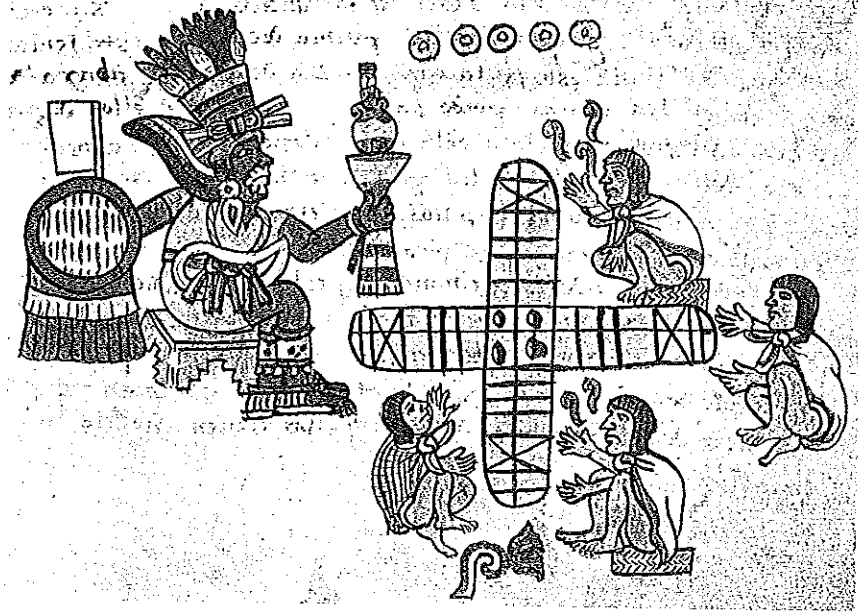
All social classes played *patolli*, but it's likely that only members of the nobility played the ball game *tlachtli*. Similar to Mayan ball games, *tlachtli* was played on a long, narrow court shaped like the letter I and surrounded by high walls. A small ring projected over the court from each side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

Hundreds of spectators gathered to watch each game. They often risked clothes, feathers, and gold by betting on which team would win. Some people lost all their wealth in such bets and had to sell themselves into slavery.

*Tlachtli* had religious meaning as well. The Aztecs believed that the *tlachtli* court represented the world and the ball represented a heavenly body. Because of these religious ties, the Aztecs built their *tlachtli* courts near the most important temples, like the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan.

## 25.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about daily life in the Aztecs' capital city of Tenochtitlan. You read about the structure of Aztec society and the customs governing marriage and family life. You discovered what the Aztecs ate, how they traded goods in their markets, and how they worshiped and played. In the next chapter, you will travel to South America to learn about another people who built an empire in the Americas: the Incas.



*Patolli* was a popular game among Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples. White beans marked with holes were thrown like modern dice to tell players how many spaces they could move on the cross-shaped board.