

◀ 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.



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.

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.

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.

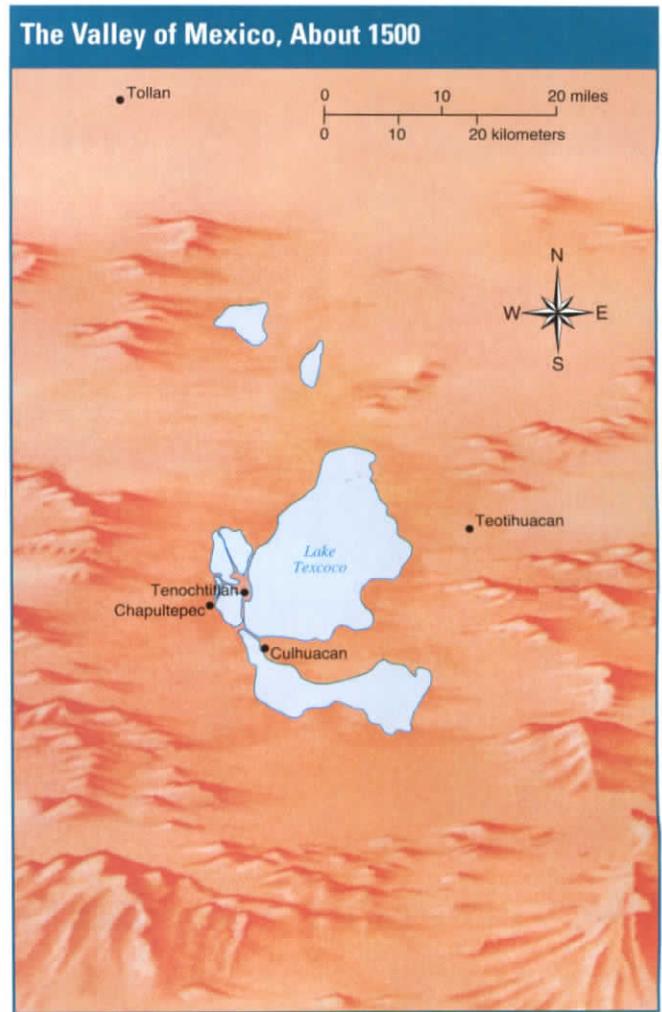
The island turned out to be a good site for the Aztecs' city. The lake provided fish and water birds for food, and the island was easy to defend. Over time, the Aztecs' new home would grow into one of the great cities of the world.

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.

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

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

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

