



◀ 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.

**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.

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

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

## 25.3 Marriage

**dowry** a gift of money or goods presented to a man or a woman upon marriage

**polygamy** marriage in which a man or a woman has more than one spouse

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 the age of 20, while young women tended to marry around 16.

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**.

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 retired 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**, or to marry more than one wife. 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.

If 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 poor temper, or did not bear children. A woman could divorce her husband if he beat her, deserted her, or failed to support her and her children. Aztec society encouraged divorced women to remarry.

This page from the *Codex Mendoza* shows a young couple's marriage festivities. Can you identify the bride, the groom, and the matchmaker?



## 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.

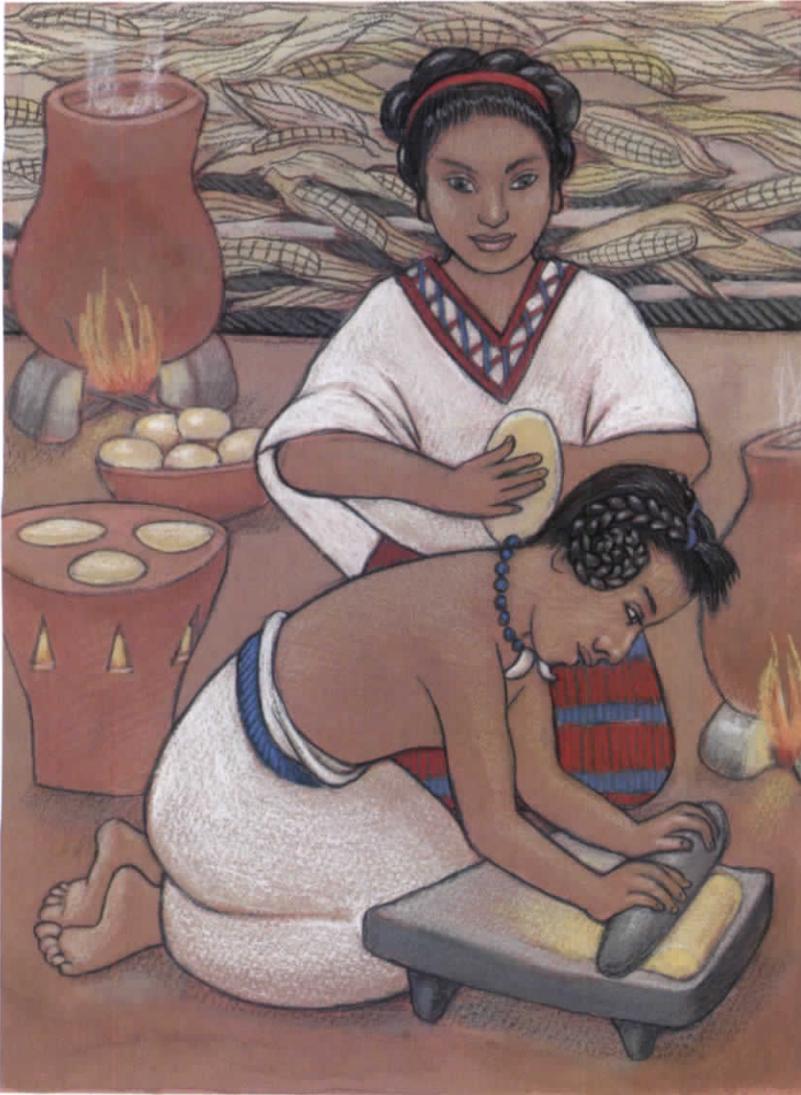
The daily routine of Aztec commoners shows the importance of maize. After working for several hours, commoners ate a simple meal in the late morning. The meal usually consisted of a maize porridge called *atole*. The porridge was often seasoned with peppers or sweetened with honey. At midday, commoners 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,

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.



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



## 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 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 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.

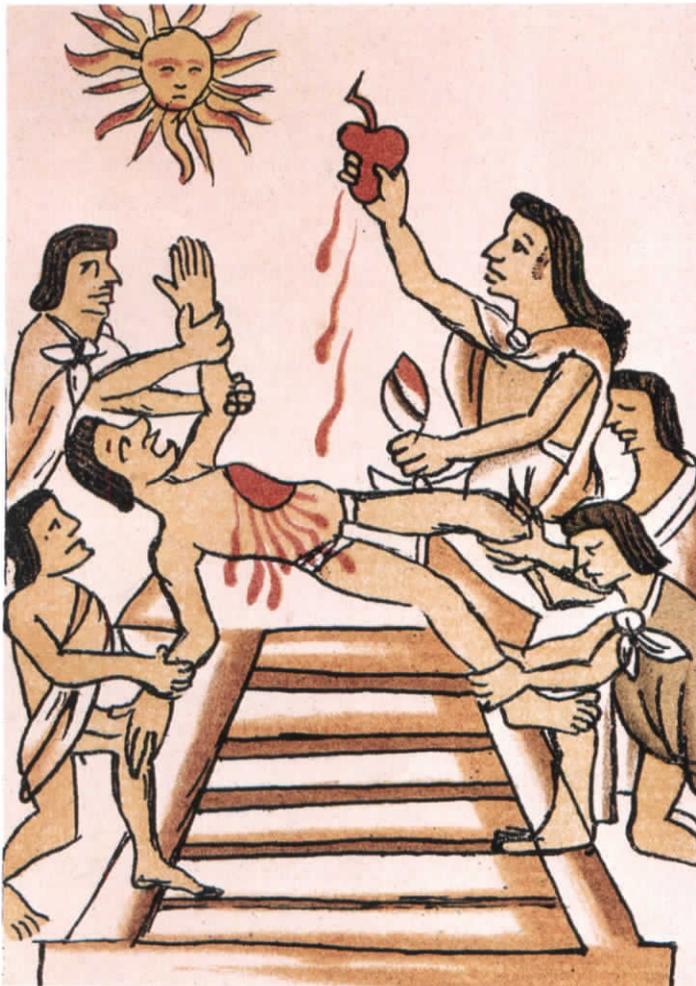
For this reason, most Aztec rituals included some form of blood sacrifice. Every morning Aztec priests sacrificed hundreds of birds to Huitzilopochtli. Priests also pierced their skin with cactus spikes to offer their own blood.

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

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.



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

## 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.



*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.

## 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.