

# THE AZTECS

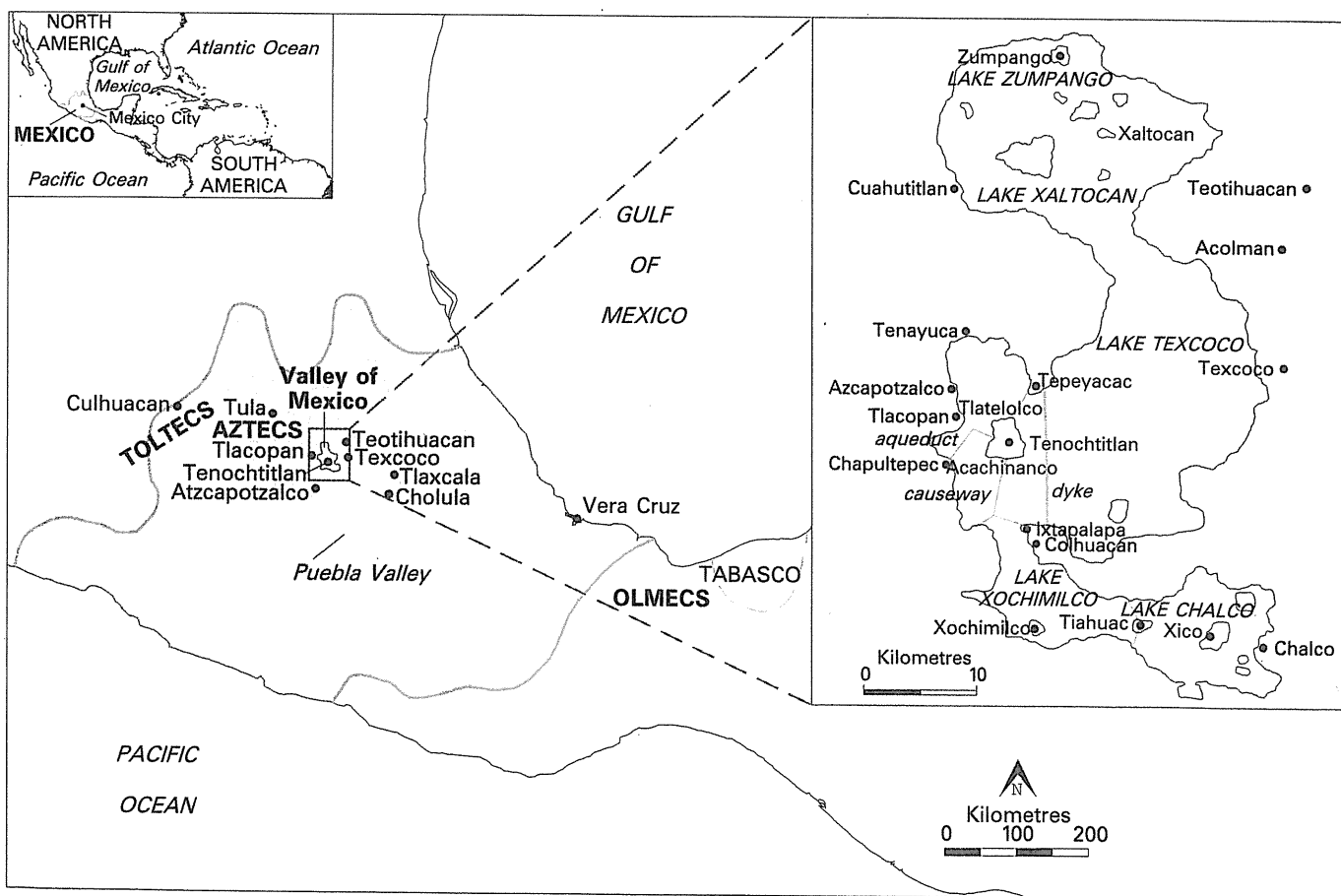
## Last but not least

The Aztecs were the last of a number of ethnic North American Indian groups to move into the region we now call Mexico. Long before the Aztecs arrived from the drier north, the Olmecs and the Toltecs had settled in this area.

The Aztecs formed a number of settlements in the Valley of Mexico. The valley is a huge depression measuring 100 kilometres from north to south and 60 kilometres from east to west in Central America. It is surrounded by mountains

more than 5000 metres high. Some of these mountains were active volcanoes at the time the Aztecs lived. This basin-shaped land was heavily eroded and dotted with lakes and marshes in the lower areas. This was caused by an annual rainfall of between 500–1300 millimetres. These natural conditions should have been good for farming but the rainfall was unreliable and washed much of the soil and the crops away. When the Aztecs first moved into this region in the thirteenth century AD the best land for settlement was already occupied.

### SOURCE 1



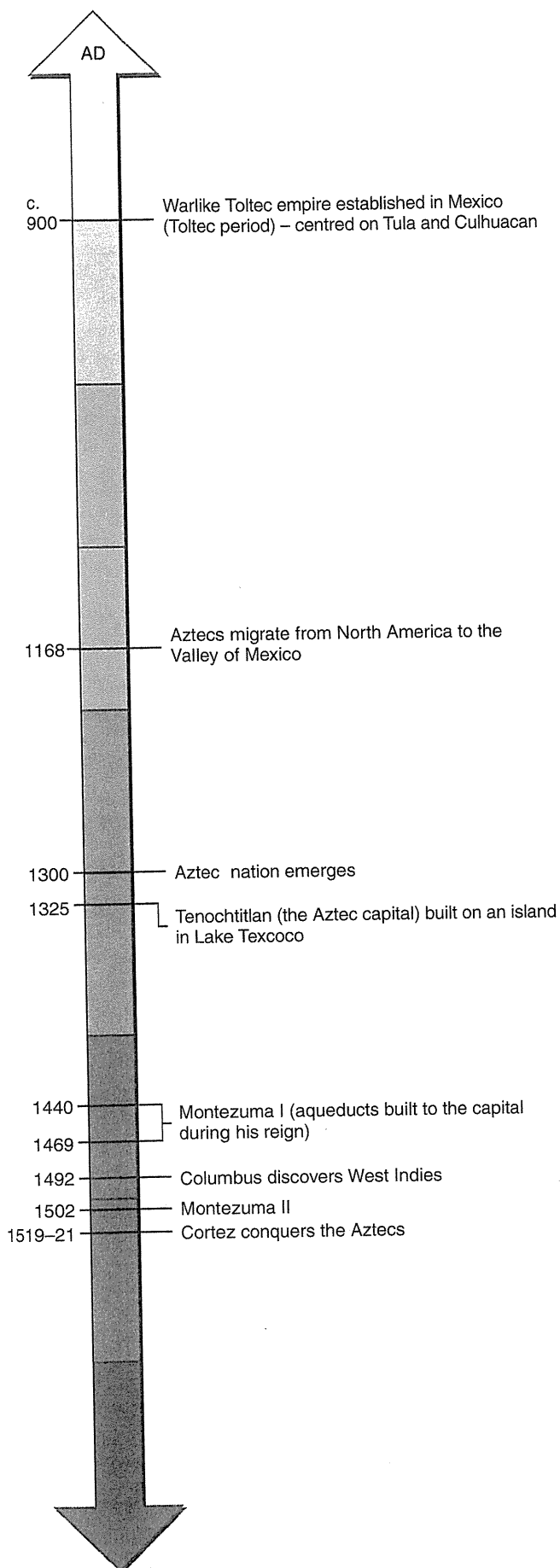
Aztec territory, c. AD 1500, and a timeline (page 193) of significant events in Aztec history

12 THE AMERICAS

## SOURCE 2

Main culture	Period	Detail
The Olmecs	c. 1200 BC	Came from North America to Mexico and spread inland up the valleys from the eastern coastal region; by c. AD 750 they had created a great cultural centre, called Teotihuacan, on the eastern edge of the Valley of Mexico
The Toltecs	c. AD 900–AD 1100	Created a small 'empire' centred on Tula and Culhuacan
The Aztecs	c. AD 1300–AD 1521	Claimed descent from the rulers of Tula and Culhuacan; defeated all their rivals by 1428; capital (Tenochtitlan, located where Mexico City now stands) and nation destroyed by the Spanish in AD 1521

*The main Mexican civilisations c. 1200 BC to c. AD 1500*



## ACTIVITY 1

- Using sources 1 and 2 and the text, answer the following questions.
  - Which group migrated to the Mexico region from the North American continent over 3000 years ago?
  - Which areas did they first occupy? Why might they have chosen these areas of land?
  - Which area did they later occupy? Suggest a reason why they might have expanded in that direction.
- According to source 2, the Aztecs 'claimed descent from the rulers of Tula and Culhuacan'.
  - If this is so, to which group are they related?
  - There is no firm historical evidence to support this claimed relationship. Suggest a reason the Aztecs might wish to make this claim. (Remember, they were aggressive and were the last to arrive in the region.)
- Does the text suggest that the Valley of Mexico is good land or poor land? Explain your answer.
- Look carefully at the map in source 1. Assume that Aztec messengers ran at an average speed of 6 kilometres per hour. How long would it take for a message to be sent from Tenochtitlan to:
  - Vera Cruz?
  - Culhuacan?
  - Texcoco?
 Why is the last calculation difficult to do accurately?

## Clever farmers

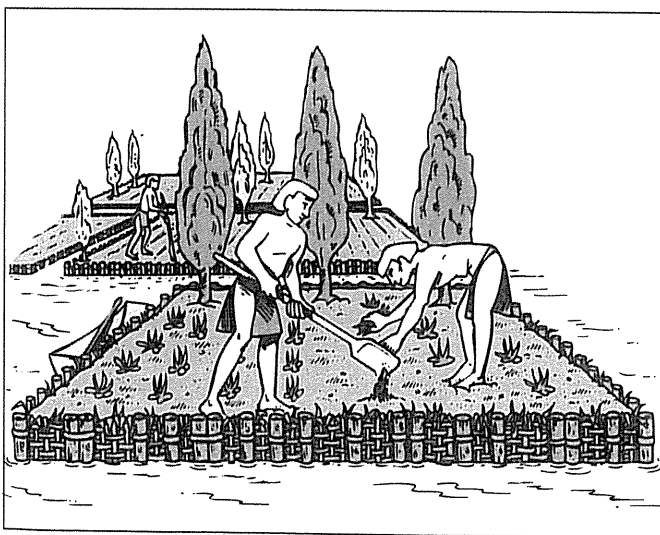
The Aztecs had to use their skills and intelligence to ensure their food supplies and safety. They had no farm animals so never developed ploughs or carts. Instead they used a digging stick with a blade, similar to a spade and hoe combined. Where it could not penetrate the thick foliage of the valley, the Aztecs turned to the hillsides for crop growing.

Over time, the Aztecs cleverly solved the problem of land shortage and erosion. They dug terraces, filled in and reclaimed a lot of the swamp-land, occupied islands in the lakes and worked out a system of flood control by digging canals. They even made part of Lake Texcoco, which was salty, a freshwater area. They did this by building a **dyke** 16 kilometres long across the western part of the lagoon where Tenochtitlan was sited. This separated area received water from its own freshwater springs.

The Aztecs improved on the idea of irrigation by creating *chinampas* in swampy areas. These were 'island' platforms made of wood, smothered in thick layers of mud and held together by fences of timber and woven reeds. **Aquatic plants** were then grown on the platforms. The soil or mud was held in by the roots of trees planted around the edges of the *chinampas*.

Sometimes, *chinampas* were built on rafts and towed from place to place. Some of the *chinampas*, or floating gardens, in one part of Lake Texcoco expanded in time to link with an island in the lake. This became Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital.

### SOURCE 3



Many chinampas like this surrounded the Aztec capital

Maize was the main crop grown by the Aztecs but they also gathered wild cotton and a very useful plant called the maguey cactus. They used the leaves of this cactus to make a kind of paper. Its fibres were used to make a thread and its thorns made good needles. The Aztecs also made alcohol from its juice and its roots were edible.

### ACTIVITY 2

1. Examine source 3 carefully.
  - (a) What is the man in the background doing?
  - (b) What is the object beside the *chinampa* fence in the foreground? Explain how this object has been made.
  - (c) What purpose do the small trees serve?
2. Explain why the Aztecs would choose to locate their capital on an island in a lake.

### TIME TO BE HEARD

Imagine you are the son of an Aztec farmer. You think that farming is not very exciting, and you desperately want to be a warrior. Role play the discussion between you and your parents when you voice these opinions.

## Transport and trade

Walking was the main means of transport for the Aztecs. Loads were carried on people's backs because no wheeled vehicles existed. The Aztecs developed the dugout canoe, which they used to travel along their canals and to cross lakes and rivers.

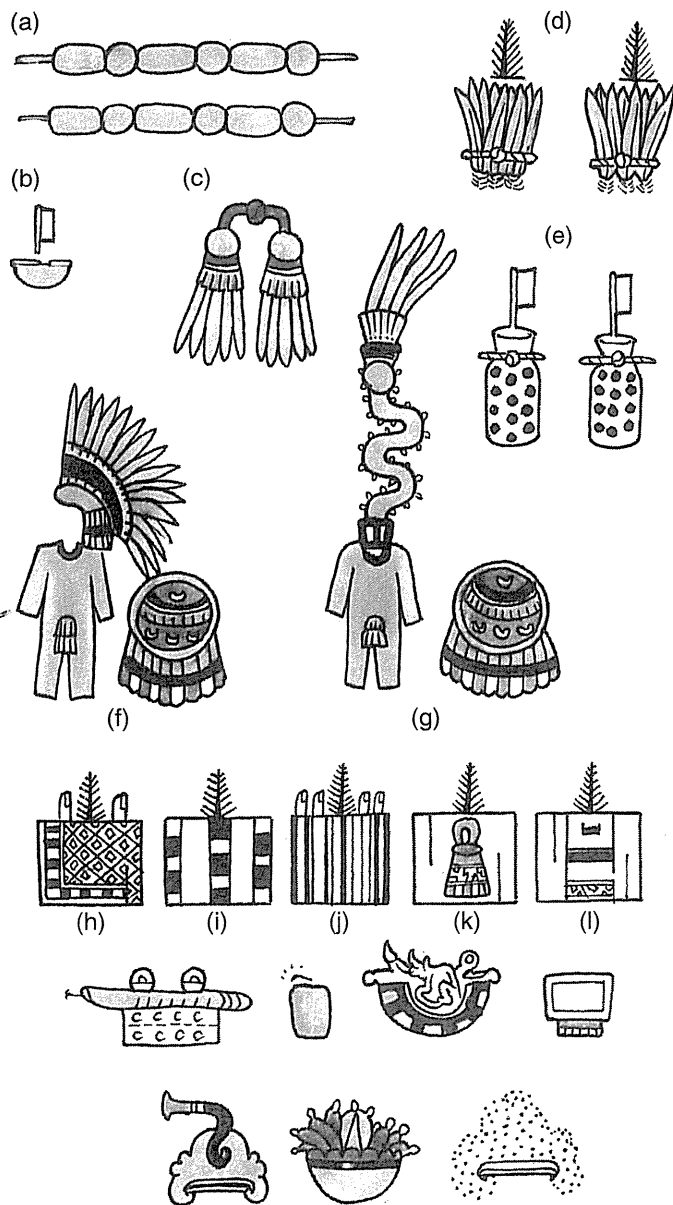
As time went by, a class of merchants (*pochtecas*) developed. They organised town markets and also acted as spies, reporting back to Tenochtitlan on suitable places to attack. They identified places with poor defences and those which could afford to pay a good **tribute** to a conqueror. *Pochtecas* made good spies because they dressed poorly and behaved very humbly towards strangers.

Some market towns were known for their 'specialities' such as birds and slaves (Azcapotzalco), featherwork (Cholula), textiles and painted goods (Texcoco) and edible dogs (Acolman).

Merchants and craft workers were important members of Aztec society. Feather workers, goldsmiths and jewellers seem to have been the most important, but writers or painters of manuscripts,

tailors, potters and sculptors were also important. A select few of the *pochtecas* were allowed to own land and to send their sons to the schools for those of highest rank. However, they were expected to *appear* humble. They would try to return from successful trading missions at night when they could quietly off-load their trading goods at a friend's house. Soon afterwards they would throw a huge banquet to honour the ruler and his advisers.

#### SOURCE 4




An Aztec tribute list. Glyphs (pictographs) are as follows: (a) jade beads; (b) dishes of gold dust; (c) royal headdress; (d) bunches of feathers; (e) bags of cochineal dye; (f) and (g) two warriors' costumes; (h) cotton blankets (of this pattern); (i) blankets; (j) blankets; (k) blankets; (l) blankets.


#### ACTIVITY 3

1. Examine source 4.

(a) What are the objects drawn beside the warriors' costumes?

(b) If a flag (  ) = 20,

a feather (  ) = 400

and a finger (  ) = 1,

calculate the following from source 4.

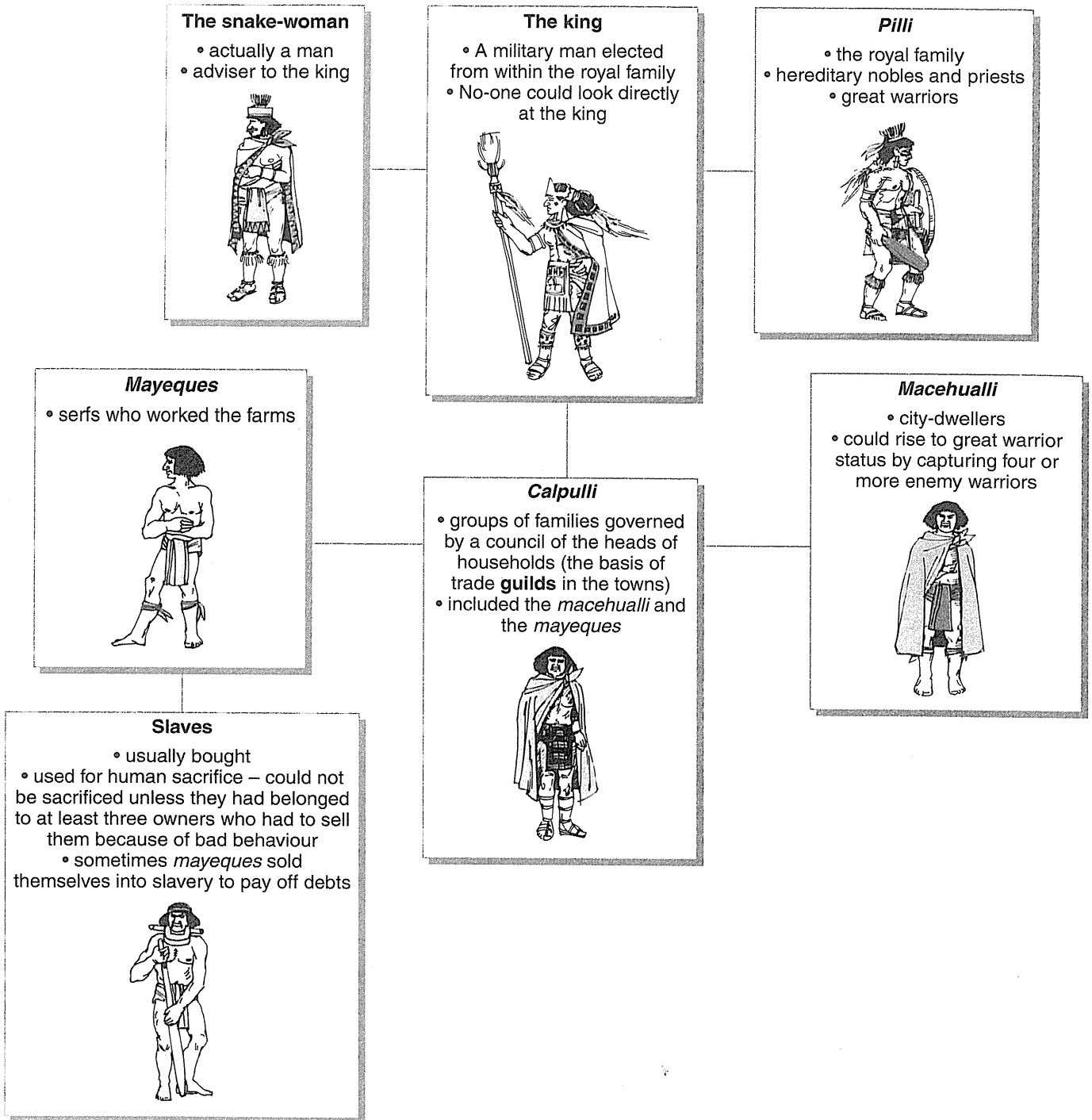
- (i) How many blankets of vertical stripes are to be paid?
  - (ii) How many bushels (an imperial unit of measurement) of feathers are to be paid?
  - (iii) How many bowls of gold dust are to be paid?
  - (iv) What do you think the glyphs along the bottom stand for? (*Hint*: A black swan is the 'glyph', or symbol, for Perth in Western Australia.)
- (c) From the information in source 4, which trade or craft seemed to be most valuable to the Aztecs? Explain your choice.
- (d) Explain the purpose of a tribute list such as the one in source 4; that is, what was it for? what did it show?

### Social organisation and government

Aztec society was not a free society. Everyone owed service — to the deities, to the ruler, to the **clan**. Chances of promotion were very limited. A simplified diagram of how the social classes were organised is shown on page 196.

The Aztec attitude towards slavery is very interesting. Their slaves were not treated brutally, and even had rights. Slaves could own other slaves, own property and even have families. Their children were regarded as 'free', but disobedient or badly behaved children over 8 years of age suffered severe punishments. Historians believe that, sometimes, children convicted of drunkenness were put to death.

No society can prosper without laws and a fair means of settling disputes. Source 6 (page 196) is a simplified version of how the Aztec legal system was administered. Notice how it is a mixture of 'noble-power' and 'people-power'.

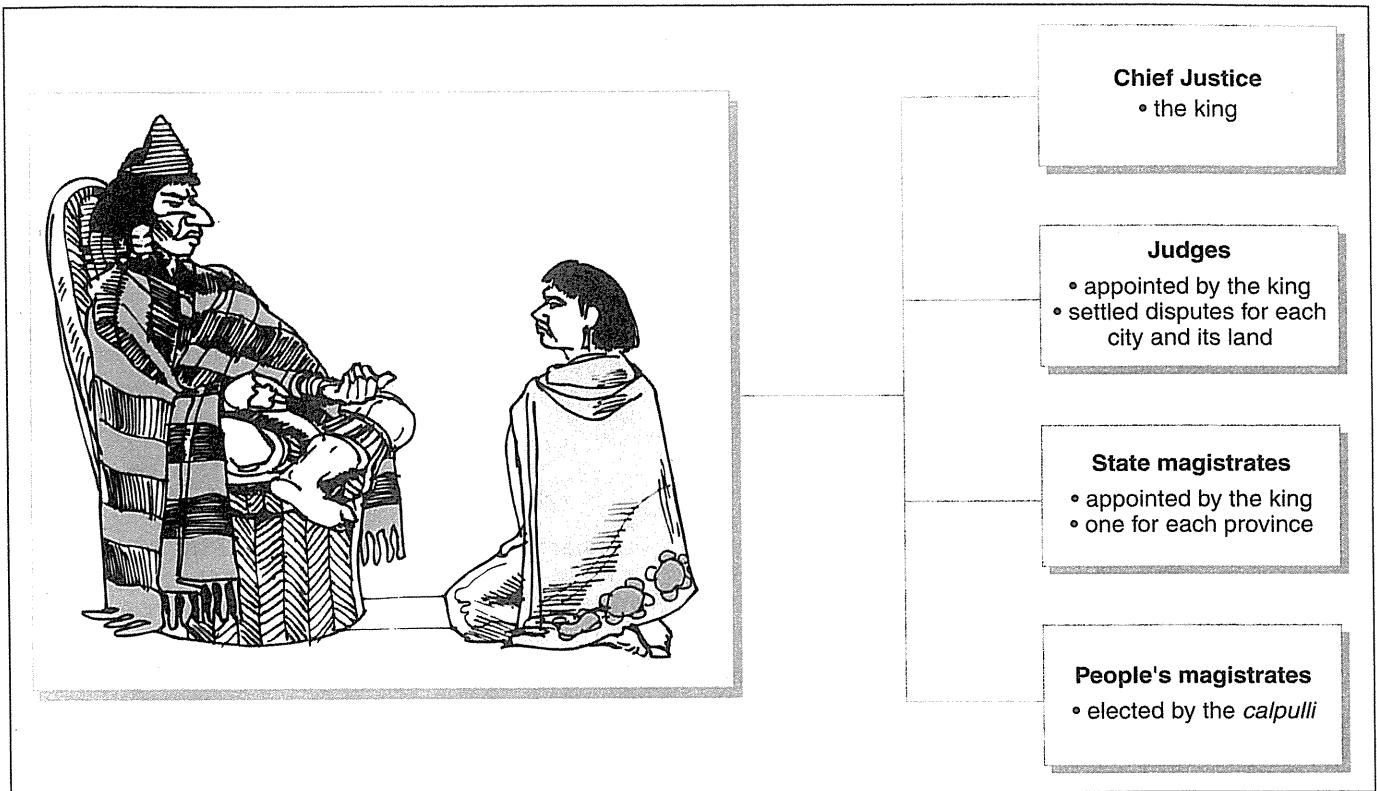


The Aztec social system

The Aztecs did not use imprisonment as a punishment for crimes, as we do in our society. They sometimes preferred that the offender 'repay' the victim if possible, but where they felt that the offence, if it became widespread, could damage their whole society, they were brutally severe. Here are some examples of crimes and Aztec punishments:

- general theft — repay double the value stolen
- theft from a marketplace — death by stoning
- stealing corn — death or slavery
- murder (or leading a rebellion) — death
- kidnapping — slavery
- impersonating a very important official — death
- spreading lies about another person — lips and/or ears cut off.

SOURCE 6



Elements of the Aztec legal system

**ACTIVITY 4**

1. Look at source 5.
  - (a) What social advantage did *macehualli* have over *mayeques*?
  - (b) How do you know that the *mayeques* were the poorest class of citizen?
  - (c) Give an example from source 5 of 'promotion by birth'.
2. (a) Look at source 6. One aspect of the Aztec legal system is more 'democratic' than the others. Which one? How is it more democratic?  
 (b) Give an example from source 5 of 'promotion by talent'.
3. The Aztecs dominated the Mexico region for over 300 years. What aspects of the legal and social systems help to explain why this was so?

**Home comforts**

Country people lived in small **adobe** or stone houses with thatched roofs. The houses were built around a central courtyard. Sometimes these houses were divided into apartments where up to three families might live. People slept on reed mats

on the floor and stored their possessions in baskets or wooden boxes.

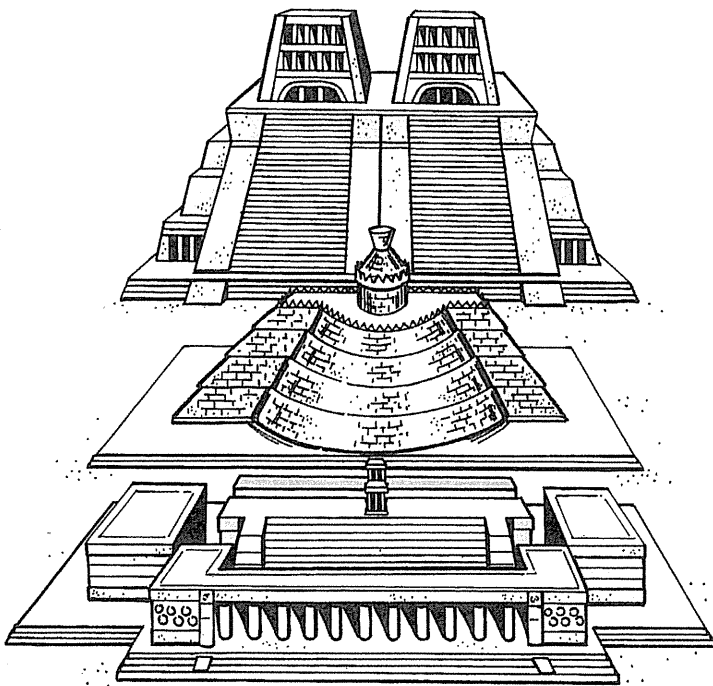
In the towns, people lived in one- or two-storey houses built on platforms. Roofs were flat and sometimes contained gardens. The houses and gardens faced inwards to a central courtyard. All the outer walls of the houses were blank. Town houses contained occasional stools, carved wooden gilded screens as room dividers, lacquered wooden bowls and cups, and baskets and boxes for storage.

**In the city**

A certain part of the city of Tenochtitlan was reserved for temples and the (divine) rulers' palaces. This district was called 'Teopan' — the place of the gods. It contained the Great Square. The Aztecs kept skull racks, for the heads of sacrificial victims, here. The Square also contained a ball court and the palaces of Axacayatl, Montezuma II and Nezahualcotyl. The most impressive building was the pyramid-shaped Great Temple, which stood on a base measuring 80 metres by 100 metres. On the top were the shrines of both the rain god and the war god, which took the total height of the temple to nearly 28 metres!



SOURCE 7



Part of the Great Square of Tenochtitlan, showing the great temple pyramid of the gods Huitzilopochtli (the sun and war god) and Tlaloc (the rain god), and the circular temple of Quetzalcoatl (who was carried over the sea by the wind)

School time!

Children from wealthy families were taught by temple priests and priestesses about the workings of the temple and the government. They also learnt astronomy and how to read pictographs. Poorer children were taught at *calpulli* schools. They learnt about religious practices, social behaviour, Aztec legends and skills such as how to make bricks and handle weapons.

Women

Women were an important part of the Aztec economy. There were even female *pochtecas*. They did not travel on expeditions but they invested in them. Women also worked on farms where they spun and dyed wild cotton and a linen-like fabric made from the fibres of maguey cactus leaves. The beautifully patterned and dyed cloth they produced was often used to pay state taxes. They obtained their dyes from insects such as the cochineal bug (which, when crushed, produces a bright red dye), plants, shellfish and substances within the ground.

Clothing was significant in Aztec society. It reflected a person's rank. For example, only nobles were allowed to wear cotton garments.

SOURCE 8



A modern artist's impression of Aztec women

DID YOU KNOW?

- When the Spanish saw the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, for the first time they were amazed — it was 10 times larger than a typical Spanish city. It contained more than 200 000 people.
- Roads in the towns and cities always ran north–south and east–west. Even rivers were diverted into canals to keep lines straight.

ACTIVITY 5

1. Look at source 7.
  - (a) What three aspects of nature are represented by the three temples shown?
  - (b) Suggest why these three aspects were important to the Aztecs.
  - (c) What is 'different' about the temple of Quetzalcoatl?
  - (d) Suggest why the temple of Quetzalcoatl is shaped the way it is. (*Hint: Quetzalcoatl is associated with the wind.*)
2. What information is there in the text and sources 4 and 8 that women played an important role in Aztec society?
3. Look at the clothing of the women illustrated in source 8.
  - (a) What aspects of fashion are similar for all the women?
  - (b) What aspects of fashion show individual variation?
  - (c) Would a historian regard source 8 as reliable evidence? Explain your point of view.

## TIME TO BE HEARD

Debate the topic: 'It was the warrior class which made the Aztecs great.'

## Fabrics and fashion

Wealthy Aztecs wore sandals and elaborately woven cloaks embroidered with feathers and furs. Poor people wore plain cloaks and went barefoot. Cloaks were rectangular in shape. They were wound around the body, then taken under the left arm, over the right shoulder and knotted.

The colour of these garments showed a person's importance. The royal colour was turquoise. Priests wore black and also painted their bodies black for some ceremonies. Some historians believe that the paint contained chemicals that enabled the priests to dance for days at special ceremonies.

Aztec men wore their hair cut in a fringe across the forehead and hanging no longer than the neck at the back. Warriors wore tufts or pigtails, and priests had special hairstyles. Ears and lips were pierced at childhood to take plugs and, later,

ornaments. The nose was pierced to take gold rods or jewels. Poorer people used shells instead of jewels.

Women wore long skirts — plain for daily use, richly embroidered for festivals. Around their waist they wore an embroidered belt. On the upper body they wore a sleeveless one-piece blouse embroidered at the neck and hem. A woman would wear her hair long and either loose (if unmarried) or plaited (if married) and tied with ribbons as shown in sources 8 and 9.

## ACTIVITY 6

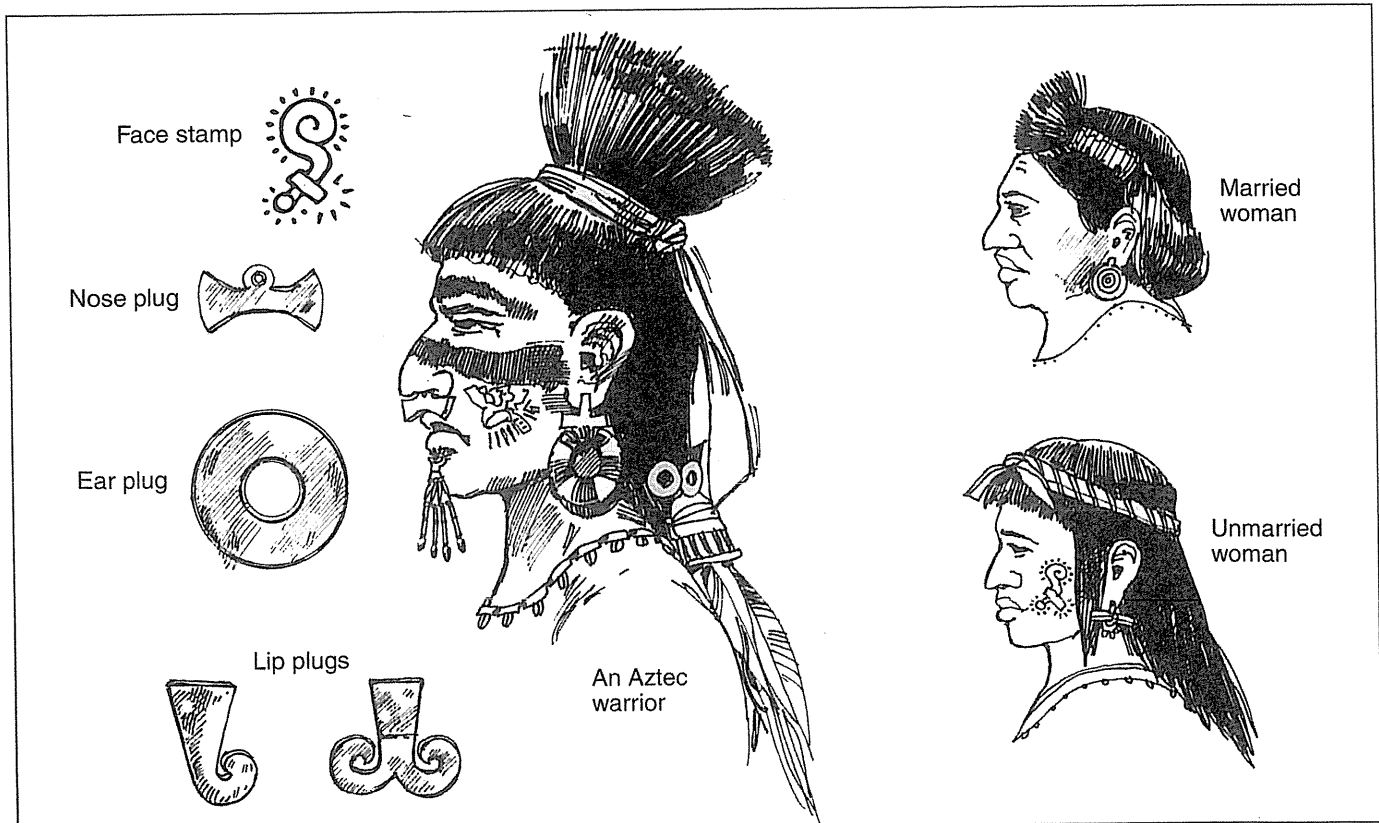
Look at source 9.

1. Warriors like to look tough. What aspect of this warrior's appearance make him look tough?
2. Do you think a warrior would wear all his jewellery when going into battle? Explain your opinion.

## Fun and games

Music was important to Aztec religion but was suppressed by the Spanish conquerors. No Aztec music survives today because it was never written down.

## SOURCE 9



Aztec 'style'

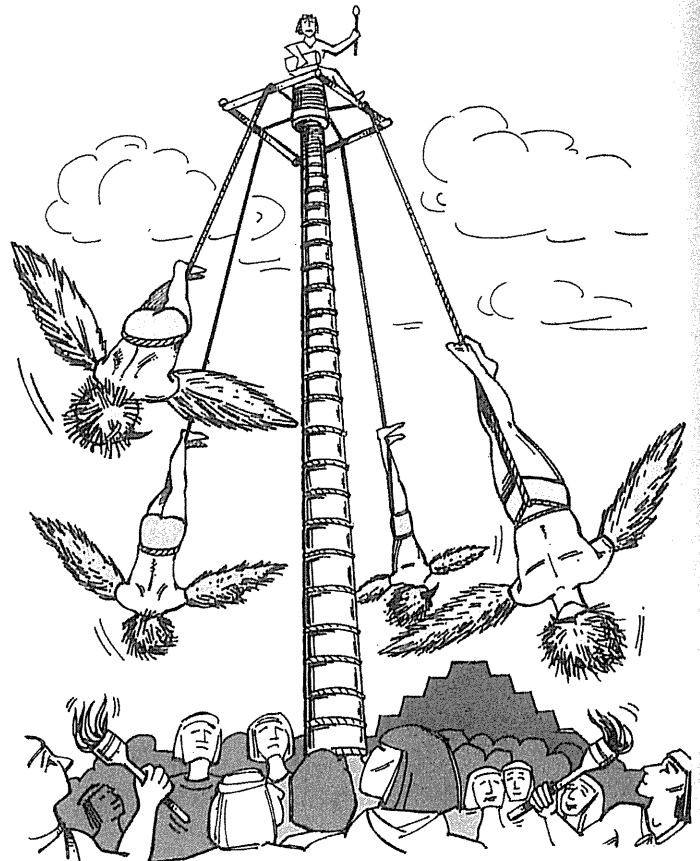


However, we do know something about Aztec instruments. The Aztecs played clay and bone whistles and flutes and large upright and tunable drums. They also played two-toned gongs and rattles made from clay and wooden discs and gourds filled with pebbles and seeds. At religious festivals, the Aztecs would hold feasts, sing, dance and play music. Dancers wore copper bells attached to their clothing during these celebrations.

A game played with a rubber ball in a long stone court was popular amongst Aztec nobles. The ball had to be passed through a stone ring set vertically into each of the longer (opposite) walls. Spectators sat above these high walls. Opposing teams, made up of one to six players each, used only their hips, knees and elbows to shoot the ball through the ring. Many players received internal injuries to the stomach even though they wore protective clothing such as leather tunics, face masks, knee pads, chin protectors and leather gloves to protect other parts of the body. It was an exhausting and violent game and winners were well-rewarded. Sometimes the game was played as part of a religious ceremony. On these occasions the losers were executed!

The most lasting and spectacular Aztec entertainment was the *volador*, which is still practised today in South America. It was a bit like the modern sport of bungee-jumping. A drummer sat on a seat on top of a high pole, with his feet resting on a rectangular frame which swivelled. Four men dressed as birds climbed the pole, each taking a rope over the frame and winding it around the top of the pole. Each man then tied the rope to his ankles and the men dived outwards from the pole together. The drummer beat the drum and kept the 'flying' men swinging around the pole 13 times before slowing them down so that they touched the ground.

## SOURCE 10



The volador

## Sacred stones, superstition and science

Aztecs, like our modern astrologers, believed that a person's future was influenced by the date that person was born and named. Certain days were considered particularly unlucky. The Aztecs thought that they could avoid disaster if the priest delayed the naming ceremony until a 'luckier' day.

### ACTIVITY 7

Look at source 10 and answer the following questions.

1. What helps the flying men climb the pole to begin the ceremony?
2. How do you think they ensure that their rope will unwind to the desired length?
3. How do you think they know the number of circles they have completed?

#### EXTENSION

1. Imagine you are a young warrior. You have volunteered to participate in the *volador*. Write a

paragraph describing your experience and feelings as you climb the pole and dive!

2. Make a wall chart showing the protective clothing of both:
  - (a) an Aztec ball player
  - (b) a modern sportsperson — for example, a cyclist, ice-hockey player, cricketer, fencer, grid-iron player etc.

Your chart should explain which types of injuries each item protects against.

## Aztec calendars

The Aztecs used two calendars. One was the ordinary (solar) 'calendar' of 365 days to mark off things like festival days, planting and harvesting and drought periods. They also used a Sacred Calendar of 260 days for fortune telling and to keep historical records about such things as wars, when temples were built and the **accession** of kings. The Aztecs did not invent this calendar. Other American Indian groups in the region had been using this calendar for more than 1000 years before the Aztecs appeared.

The Sacred Calendar consisted of thirteen 'months' of 20 'days'. Each day had its own sign: crocodile, wind, house, lizard, snake, death, deer, rabbit, water, dog, monkey, grass, reed, jaguar, eagle, vulture, motion, flint, rain and flower. Each sign appeared on the same day on the solar calendar only once every 52 years. The Aztecs believed that when this happened the world would become dark and be devoured by monsters. To 'live' again, they had to conduct a fire ceremony to bring back light to the world. This involved cleaning their houses, smashing their pottery and throwing out any imperfect items.

On the last night of every 52-year cycle, all fires were put out and everyone waited. The priests had already selected a 'perfect' human victim for sacrifice. The victim was dressed and drugged and laid on the sacrificial table. The priests cut open the victim's chest, cut out the heart and offered it to the sun god Tonatiuh. The priests then kindled a fire in the victim's chest from which sacred torches were lit. Runners then carried the sacred flame to all parts of the Aztecs' territory. Many people watched anxiously for the sun to rise the next morning. When it did so, the Aztecs knew that life would continue for another 52 years. To understand how the calendar worked, complete Extension activity 2 on page 202.

## The Stone of the Sun

In AD 1790 an amazing piece of Aztec religious art was dug out of the ground in the main plaza of Mexico City. It is called the Stone of the Sun and is often referred to as the 'Calendar Stone'. It weighs more than 25 tonnes and is approximately 3.6 metres in diameter. Although it is not truly a calendar, it does contain the 20 day signs, the sun god in the centre and glyphs of the four previous worlds which the Aztecs believed had existed — the jaguar, wind, sun and water worlds. Historians have argued about the meaning of this stone. Some believe it

shows the birth of the sun (the god of the fifth world of motion). Others believe it portrays the end of the world. They claim that the symbols are grouped to form the sign 'Four-Motion' — the day on which, according to Aztec legend, the fifth world (our world) will be destroyed by earthquakes.

## SOURCE 11



*Detail from the Stone of the Sun*

## True believers

The Aztecs adopted gods from religions of other tribes. Conquered people were allowed to keep their own deities if they agreed to worship the main Aztec deities Quetzalcoatl (the feathered serpent and god of learning and the priesthood) and Huitzilopochtli (the sun and war god).

The Aztecs practised human sacrifice. Blood was 'food' for the sun. Priests would sometimes cut their own ears or tongues to offer their blood to the gods.

Some Aztec beliefs included that:

- the god Xolotl and his twin brother Quetzalcoatl created the first men and women. This creation took place at the time of the fifth sun (the world of 'motion' — our world).
- an earthquake would again destroy the earth, which had been destroyed four times before: by jaguars who attacked and ate giants who first inhabited the earth and ate acorns; by hurricanes which reduced people to monkeys; by fiery rain; and by a great flood which reduced people to fishes. (These four calamities had caused the sun to die each time.)

## ACTIVITY 8

Examine source 11 and answer the following questions.

1. Where is the sun god shown?
2. What do you think his tongue represents?
3. On each side of the god's head is a panel showing a claw grasping a heart. To which Aztec ceremony and belief do these refer?
4. The sign for the world of motion is located directly above the sun god's head, between the signs for the worlds of rain and jaguar. Sketch the sign for the fifth world in your exercise book.
5. Around the outer edge of the stone are two serpents whose open mouths face each other. With which Aztec god are they associated?
6. Why might some historians believe that this stone was a calendar?
7. For what purpose do you think this stone was made? Offer a reason for your opinion.

### EXTENSION

1. The Aztecs believed that the centre of the earth was fire and that outer space was very cold. What observations could they have made from the world around them that might explain why they believed these things? (*Hint: Aztec territory was mountainous and volcanic.*)
2. Using information in the text make a model of the Aztecs' Sacred Calendar. Cut two circles of cardboard. The edge of one should have 20 (day) teeth; the edge of the other should have 13 (month) sprockets. Each 'tooth' should be given a day name and each sprocket should have a number from 1–13. Place the wheels together and revolve the months clockwise and the days anti-clockwise. Explain:
  - (a) how this creates a 260 day year
  - (b) how 'Four-Motion' comes around only once every 52 years
  - (c) why this calendar was of no use to farmers.
3. The Sacred Calendar was the only type of calendar the Aztecs used to keep historical records. What problem does this calendar cause for historians?

## The healing arts

Religion and superstition played a major role in how the Aztecs viewed medicine and sickness. Colds, influenza, bronchitis or rheumatism were all believed to be the result of evil spirits. The 'doctor' had to know the best way to address the deities and to understand the nature of the deity who caused the disease.

Despite this, much of the Aztecs' knowledge and methods were medically sound. Because the Aztecs

were experts at the different ways of killing their human sacrifices, they had a far greater knowledge of **anatomy** than that of the Spaniards who conquered them. The Spanish might have learnt a lot if they had not rejected Aztec knowledge as evil.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- Women developed high levels of skill as chiropractors. Dislocated joints were fixed and massage was considered very healing.
- The Aztecs had toothpaste — a mixture of salt and powdered charcoal. Bad teeth were extracted.
- Open wounds were stitched with human hair.
- The Aztecs used drugs extracted from mushrooms. Modern medicine also recognises the usefulness of these drugs. For example, psilocybin is now used as a cure for certain types of amnesia.

## Write it down

The Aztecs did not develop an alphabet. They used a system of picture signs (**glyphs**) combined with a colour code to convey information. For example, the same glyph might be painted in a different colour to show grass (yellow), cane (blue) and reeds (green). Because writing was basic, **abstract** ideas could not be expressed. Aztec poetry shows this.

### SOURCE 12

#### An Aztec war poem describing a battlefield:

'Where the burning, divine liquor is poured out,  
where the divine eagles are blackened with smoke,  
where the tigers roar,  
where gems and rich jewels are scattered,  
where precious feathers wave like spume [spray or foam],  
there, where the warriors tear each other  
and noble princes are smashed to pieces.'

The Aztecs kept written records of population numbers, locations, trade, births and deaths, rulers, religious ceremonies, festivals and laws. These records were written on strips of maguey paper or deer skin folded like concertinaed packs of cards — in other words, Aztecs developed **codices**.

Aztec writing developed through three stages. These were:

1. pictographs (picture writing) — simple pictures of real objects such as rabbits, houses and mountains

- ideographs (picture ideas) such as a burning temple for conquest or defeat and footprints for a journey
- phonographs (pictures of objects that sounded the same as the word required). For example, the town of the Cuauhuan people (Cuauhtitlan or Quauhtitlan) was made up of the pictograph for the word 'tree' (*cuauhuitl* or *quauhuitl*) and the pictograph for 'teeth' (*tlantli*).

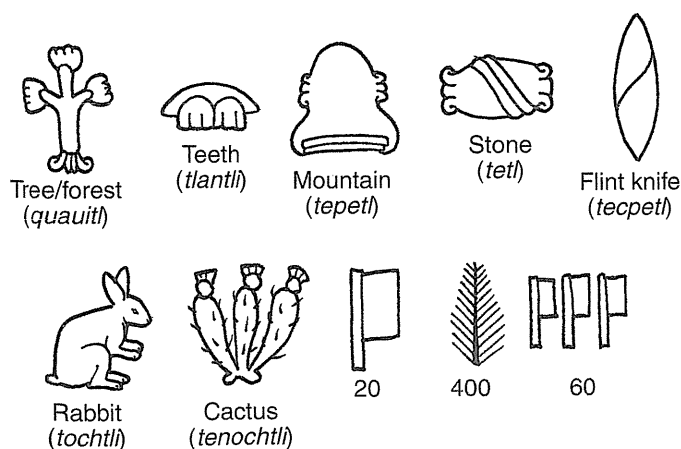
In AD 1521, when the Spanish invaders destroyed Tenochtitlan and its many palaces and temples, they also destroyed any religious books they could find. The Spanish archbishop Juan de Zumarraga regarded such books as the devil's works and made a huge bonfire of them. This knowledge might have been lost forever. Fortunately, however, a number of **chronicles** of Aztec history and way of life were written by Spaniards and non-Aztec natives who spoke or understood **Nahuatl**. These chronicles were written in Spanish.

### Aztec numbers

The Aztecs used their number system for trade, taxes and military purposes. This system was based on 20s, not 10s as ours is. Numbers 1 to 19 were written as dots (or fingertips), 20 as a flag, 20 × 20 as a feather (or fir tree) and 20 × 20 × 20 as a bag (or pouch).

The Aztecs measured length by hand span or arm span and bought or sold items by number or volume. **Barter** was the usual method of payment for goods but cocoa beans were generally accepted as 'money' for small items. The Aztecs also used cloth cloaks, goose quills and gold dust as payment.

### SOURCE 13



Aztec pictographs and number signs

### ACTIVITY 9

- Read source 12.
  - To what do you think line 1 refers?
  - What is being described in lines 4 and 5?
- Using the text, source 13 and your own imagination, write a simple sentence using pictographs. See if a classmate can translate it.
- Write a simple equation (e.g.  $22 + 5 = 27$ ), using Aztec number signs. See if a classmate can translate it.

### Mighty warriors

The Aztecs' main concern was war. When boys reached the age of 10 their hair was cut, leaving a tail hanging down the back. They were not allowed to let the rest of their hair reach the same length as the tail until they had taken a prisoner in battle. When they did so they became full warriors. If, after a given time, they failed to take a prisoner, they returned to their farms disgraced and were forbidden to wear decorated clothing or jewellery.

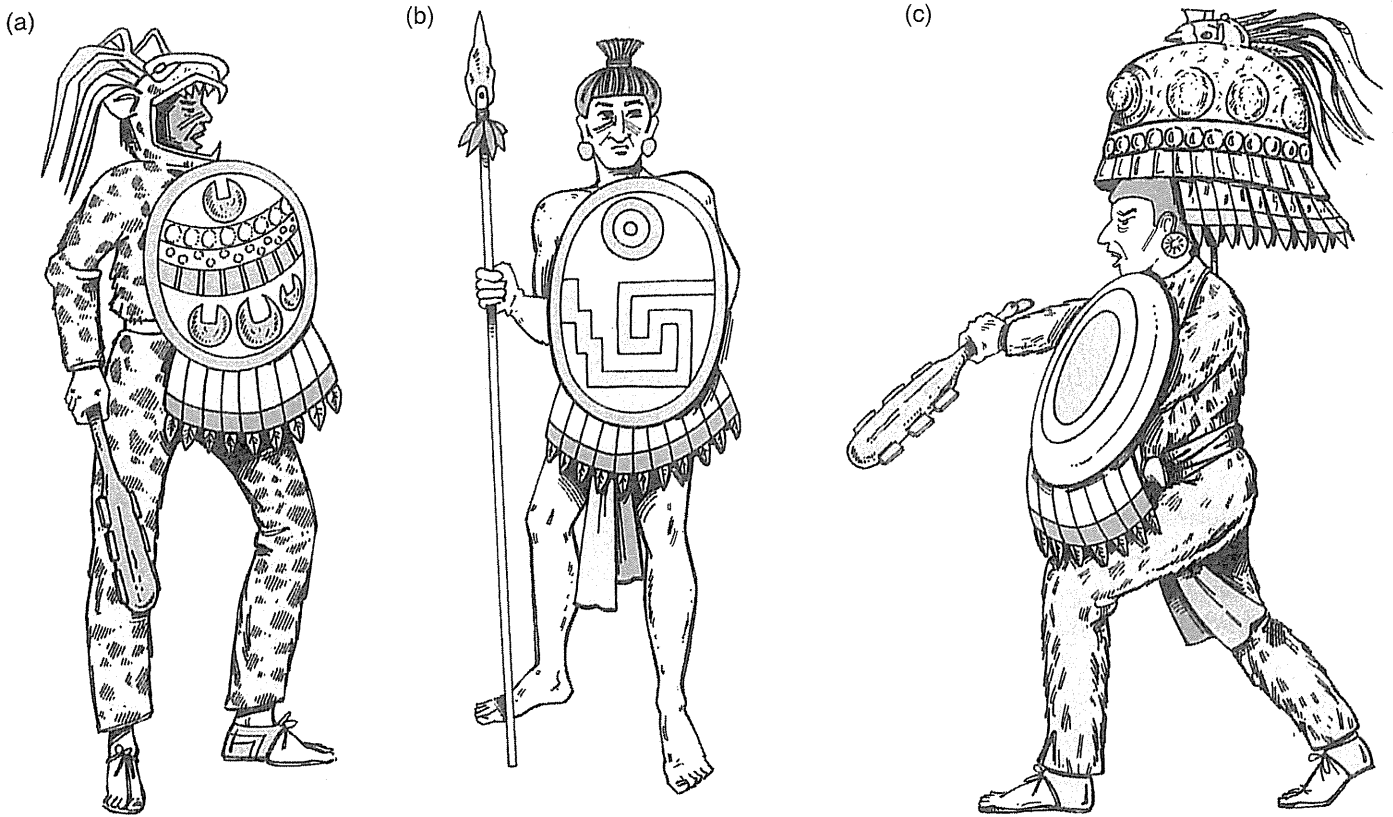
Warriors who captured or killed at least four of the enemy were promoted from *lyak* (soldier) to *tequinnua* (great warrior). War chiefs were chosen from this group. Warriors were also allowed to wear certain feathered headgear and draw an 'allowance' from public taxes. The higher the warrior rose in rank, the greater his wealth and privileges. These were shown by the type of clothes and jewellery he wore. Any man could rise from the lowest rank to the highest rank if he had ability.

Special warriors became knights and joined Orders such as the Jaguar Knights (who wore jaguar skins) or the Eagle Knights (who had an eagle head at the front of their headdress). Headdresses were intended to be decorative, not protective.

Warriors' weapons included:

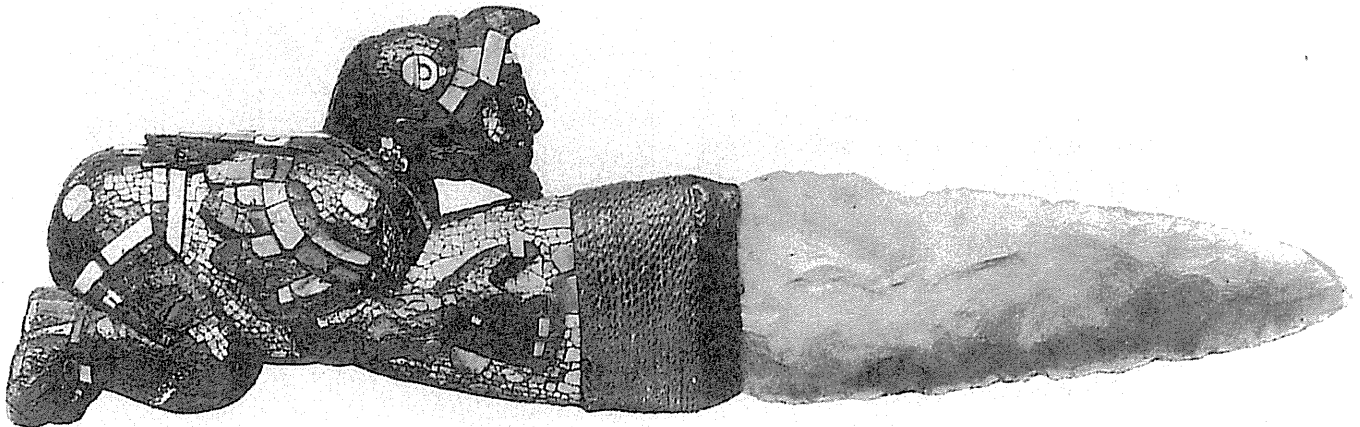
- a spear or a bow with stone-tipped arrows
  - a round wooden shield which was sometimes gold-plated and decorated with feathers
  - a wooden sword with an **obsidian** cutting edge.
- Knights wore tunics of tough, padded cotton which were light and cool and provided some protection against light spear thrusts or arrow impacts.

## SOURCE 14



Aztec warriors: (a) a Jaguar Knight (b) a soldier (c) an Eagle Knight

## SOURCE 15



An Aztec knife

Aztec war plans generally involved the following steps.

1. Send greetings and gifts to the targeted people.
2. Demand land in return (which would be refused).
3. Ambush and capture as many of the enemy as possible.
4. Surround the enemy's city and attack with great ferocity. The knights would lead these attacks.
5. Make sure that the enemy's fields (and city) were damaged as little as possible.
6. Take the city by fighting or by burning the temple (which was always in the centre of the city).
7. Take the enemy's warriors as prisoners to be sacrificed.
8. Force non-warriors to agree to pay tribute and become part of the Aztec **confederation**.



## ACTIVITY 10

1. Study source 14. How would the soldier's fighting style be different from the knights'?
2. Is the type of sword shown in source 14 designed for stabbing, hacking or thrusting? Explain your answer.
3. Do you think the knife in source 15 was designed to be used in battle? If not, what else could it have been used for? Support your opinions with comments on the features of the knife.

### EXTENSION

Imagine you are the Aztec ruler Montezuma. Your *pochtecas* have reported to you that there is a tribe in a valley 150 kilometres to the west of the Aztec capital. The valley is fertile and the people seem peaceful. You decide that if you don't capture this area and its resources, your enemies will. Write a letter of greetings (in modern English) to the chief of the valley and make him an offer he can't refuse. Make your offer attractive but forceful.

## Legends and losers

The Aztec way of life came to an end in AD 1519 when 11 Spanish ships carrying 508 men led by Hernando Cortes sailed from Cuba and landed on the shores of Mexico. From there Cortes either defeated or made alliances with all the tribes between the coast and Tenochtitlan. His most valuable companion was a Tabascan slave girl whom the Spanish called Dona Marina. She could speak the Tabascan and Aztec languages as well as other American Indian languages. She learned Spanish very quickly and became Cortes's translator and adviser.

### SOURCE 16

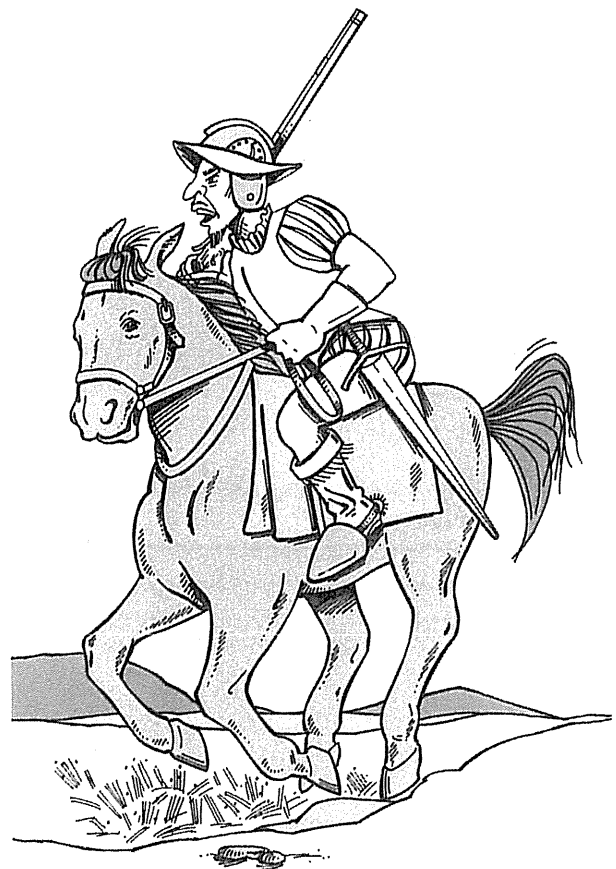
*'In the distant past the great God Quetzalcoatl, Lord of wind and life had come to live among humans in order to set up a new kingdom in which there would be no human sacrifices. The god was tall with pale skin, blond hair and a beard. But although he was a magician the other gods held greater magic and he was unable to change the old ways. Before he sailed away eastwards he promised the Aztecs that he would return from the direction of the rising sun in the Year One-Reed.'*

An Aztec legend about the Year One-Reed

By the Aztec calendar it was the Year One-Reed when Cortes arrived. Montezuma II had been ruling the Aztec empire for 17 years and there was an old Aztec legend about the Year One-Reed (see source 16).

Reality had caught up with Aztec legend. Within three years Aztec society was shattered by disease (smallpox) and the more powerful military technology brought by the Spanish **Conquistadors**. Although many Mexicans today claim Aztec descent, the Aztec way of life has gone forever.

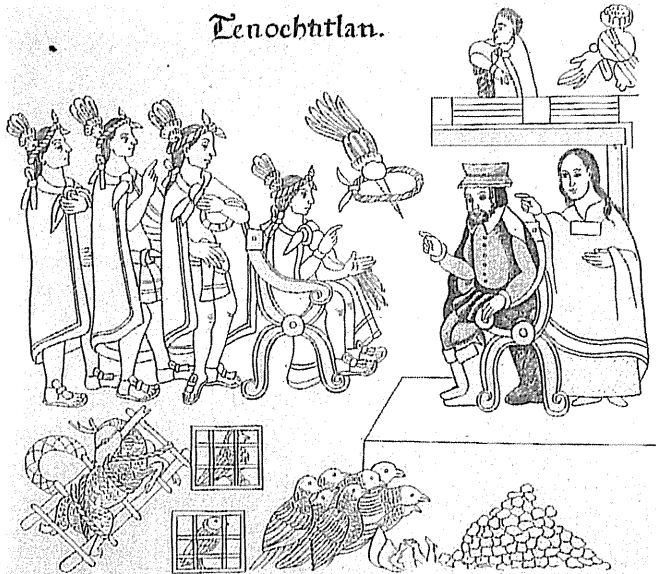
### SOURCE 17



An artist's impression of a Spanish Conquistador



Tenochtitlan.



Montezuma meets Cortes

## ACTIVITY 11

- Study source 17. Describe the military equipment used by this soldier. What disadvantages would the Aztec soldier and knights in source 14 face if they had to fight this Spanish soldier? Explain your answer.
- Look at source 18.
  - We know it is Montezuma seated on the left because of his personal sign. Draw his sign and explain what you think it contains.
  - What do you think the finger pointing is meant to tell us?
  - Who is standing behind Cortes and what is she doing?
  - What are the objects at the bottom of the picture? Why are they included in the picture?
  - How useful is this kind of source to historians? Is it totally reliable? Explain your point of view.

## EXTENSION

- Read source 16 carefully. What does the legend imply about:
  - what has happened in the past?
  - the god Quetzalcoatl?
- Imagine you are a Spaniard with Cortes. You have captured an Aztec. You have heard a lot about the Aztec way of life but you want to know more. Write four questions you would like to ask your prisoner about Aztec society.  
or
  - Imagine you are an Aztec captured by the Spanish. Your guard seems friendly. You are amazed that he is not a god, but human. Ask him four questions about Spanish society.
- Write an answer to at least one of the questions you wrote in 2(a) or 2(b).

## The fall of Tenochtitlan

Many students of Mexican history have been puzzled about how such a small number of Spanish adventurers could destroy the most feared and powerful nation in the Mexican region. To solve the puzzle we must understand both Montezuma's superstitious mind and Cortes's determination.

Shortly before the Spaniards arrived in Mexico in AD 1519 strange happenings had been reported to Montezuma. Fire was seen in the sky every night for a year. A temple had been destroyed by lightning without the sound of thunder. A comet was seen during the daytime... but the most mysterious of all was a bird brought to Montezuma by some hunters. The bird had a mirror on its head in which Montezuma could see the stars and planets. Then the picture changed and Montezuma saw a group of armed men travelling over the countryside. Before Montezuma could summon his priests to explain this mystery, the bird disappeared.

Rumours began to reach the Aztecs that four-legged monsters with human bodies growing out of their backs had recently arrived on the coast. Montezuma began to feel uneasy. He sent spies who returned with more accurate information. The strangers were not monsters — they could be killed like anyone else. They had noisy and strange weapons, large savage dogs and they made war in a very strange way.

As other tribes were conquered or won over, and Cortes made his way inland, Montezuma became very alarmed. The stranger did not seem to be the Quetzalcoatl of Aztec legend — he and his followers made war and killed. Therefore, how could he be the 'lord of life'? However, he came from the east, was fair-skinned and commanded like a god — and he had arrived in the year that was predicted.

Montezuma was in a dilemma. He needed more time to think about the situation and to observe the Spaniards... from a distance! He decided to try to keep Cortes away from Tenochtitlan by sending rich gifts of jade, gold, silver and embroidered cloth and telling him not to advance any further. The Spaniards were now more determined than ever to find this 'city of gold'.

Dona Marina, who acted as interpreter for Cortes, now proved how valuable she was. She persuaded both the Tlaxcalans and another strong

tribe, the Totonacs, to join Cortes. She also spread the belief among the tribes that Cortes was a messenger of the gods. This made the journey towards Tenochtitlan much easier. Tribe after tribe gave way as Cortes advanced.

When Cortes finally arrived at Tenochtitlan, Montezuma had made up his mind and came out to meet him. They exchanged greetings and Cortes was led into the city.

## SOURCE 19

### **An Aztec version of the first meeting between Cortes and Montezuma:**

... one of Montezuma's servants arrived with two collars, wrapped in a cloth, which were made of coloured shells ... and from each of the collars hung eight golden shrimps [the symbols associated with Quetzalcoatl] ...

[Montezuma] 'came forward, bowed his head low and addressed him [Cortes] in these words: "Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy ...

No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams ... I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again.

This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky. Rest now, and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords!

From H. Innes, *The Conquistadors*, Collins, London, 1969. Reproduced by permission of Curtis Brown Ltd on behalf of the author.

## SOURCE 20

### **Cortes's diary version of part of the speech of welcome given by Montezuma:**

'... and according to the direction from which you say you came, which is where the sun rises, and from what you tell us of your great lord, or king, who has sent you here ... you may be sure that we shall obey you, and hold you as the representative of this great lord of whom you speak ... all we possess is at your disposal.'

From H. Innes, *The Conquistadors*, op. cit.

Shortly after this meeting, news arrived that two Spanish messengers had been killed by Cualpopoca, one of Montezuma's generals. This was the excuse Cortes needed. He and his officers placed Montezuma under house arrest.

Montezuma sent orders to Cualpopoca to come to Tenochtitlan. Cualpopoca obeyed and Montezuma handed him over to Cortes who publicly executed him shortly afterwards. The Aztecs of Tenochtitlan watched the execution in stunned silence.

In the meantime, Montezuma (who was accused by Cortes of ordering Cualpopoca to murder the Spanish messengers) was put in chains. Montezuma was bewildered and shocked at this treatment. Then, suddenly, Cortes ordered that Montezuma was to be set free. To the Aztecs this looked like Montezuma had bought his own freedom by offering Cualpopoca's life. Montezuma saw the mood of his people changing and insisted on remaining a hostage.

A revolt broke out among Spaniards on the coast and Cortes and some of his men went to deal with the problem. Cortes left Pedro de Alvarado in charge of Tenochtitlan. Alvarado foolishly misinterpreted an Aztec religious parade as an attack. He and his soldiers descended swiftly on the parade and killed many of the surprised Aztecs as they tried to flee. The Aztecs recovered from their shock and counter-attacked with great fury, beating back Alvarado and his men. Surprisingly, when Cortes returned he was allowed to re-enter the city without interference.

More attacks then followed and when Montezuma attempted to calm the situation by speaking to his people from the top of a Spanish defensive wall, he was showered with arrows and stones. The Spaniards quickly pulled him down but he was badly injured. Three days later he suddenly died.

Cortes now saw how hopeless the situation was. He ordered an escape under cover of darkness but his soldiers were seen and attacked. Many Spaniards, loaded down with armour and gold, died as they tried to swim to the mainland. However, Cortes and a large part of his force escaped.

In the following weeks, Cortes's surviving soldiers defeated several tribes in the area. When the Texcocans (long-time allies of the Aztecs) changed over to the Spanish side Cortes at last had a base on the edge of the lake from which to attack Tenochtitlan.

SOURCE 21



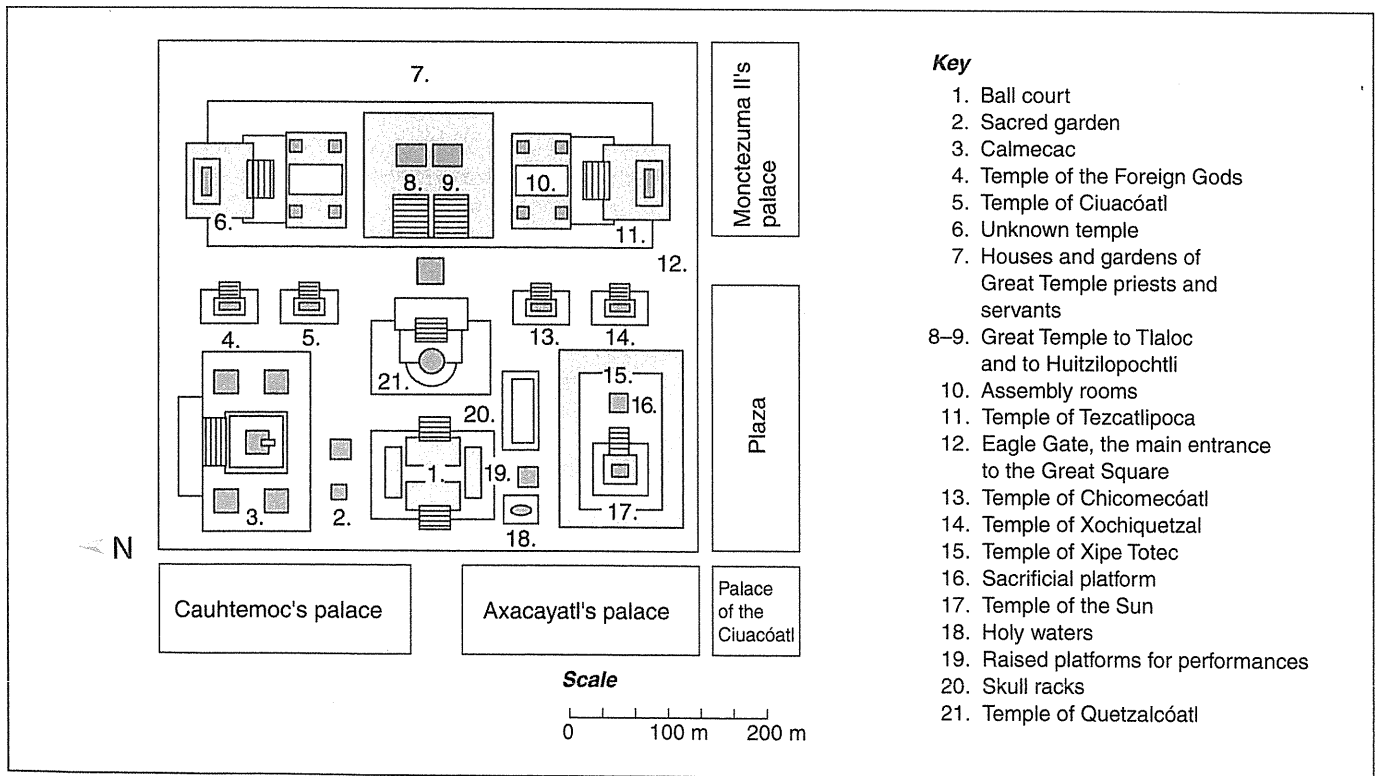
The Spanish attack Tenochtitlan with small gunboats. Their aim was to blast pathways for the cavalry.

SOURCE 23



The Spanish are attacked from the rear

SOURCE 22



A ground plan of the Great Square of Tenochtitlan at the time of Montezuma II. This area has now been built over by modern-day Mexico City.

For 75 days the Spanish attacked along the causeways and from their heavily-armed boats. They gradually destroyed more and more of the city. By the time they reached the Great Square, where Spanish heads (and the heads of their horses) were on public display, there was little further resistance from the Aztecs. The defenders were starving and dying from smallpox and measles — diseases caught from the Spaniards. The last Aztec chief,

Cuauhtemoc, was captured trying to escape in a canoe. When he was executed the last symbol of the once mighty Aztec civilisation was destroyed.

### TIME TO BE HEARD

Debate the statement that: 'Might was right in Mexico in 1521'.

### ACTIVITY 12

1. Read sources 19 and 20. What is the difference between the Aztec version of what Montezuma said and Cortes's version of what Montezuma said?
2. Give reasons why sources 19 and 20 differ in their interpretation of the same event.
3. The accounts in sources 19 and 20 do not agree with each other. Does this mean they are of no value to historians? Explain your point of view.
4. Study sources 21 and 23. What military advantages do the Spaniards have?
5. Are the drawings in sources 21 and 23 biased in any way? Explain.
6. In what way are sources 21 and 23 useful to historians?
7. Study source 22. Where would the Aztecs have displayed the Spaniards' heads?
8. The area shown in source 22 is built over today. How could a historian check the accuracy of this (modern) ground plan?
9. Imagine that the buildings in source 22 have been preserved and that you are a Mexican tour guide. Your job is to explain to tourists about the buildings in the Great Square.
  - (a) Design a poster advertising your tour and some aspects of Aztec culture.
  - (b) Use a library to research the history and construction of at least three of the buildings in the Great Square.
  - (c) Prepare a script for an audiotape that will be hired out to tourists.
  - (d) Research and make a model (or a large wall-chart) of the Great Square. On it mark a recommended tourist route. The route should indicate the three 'stops' referred to on your audiotape.

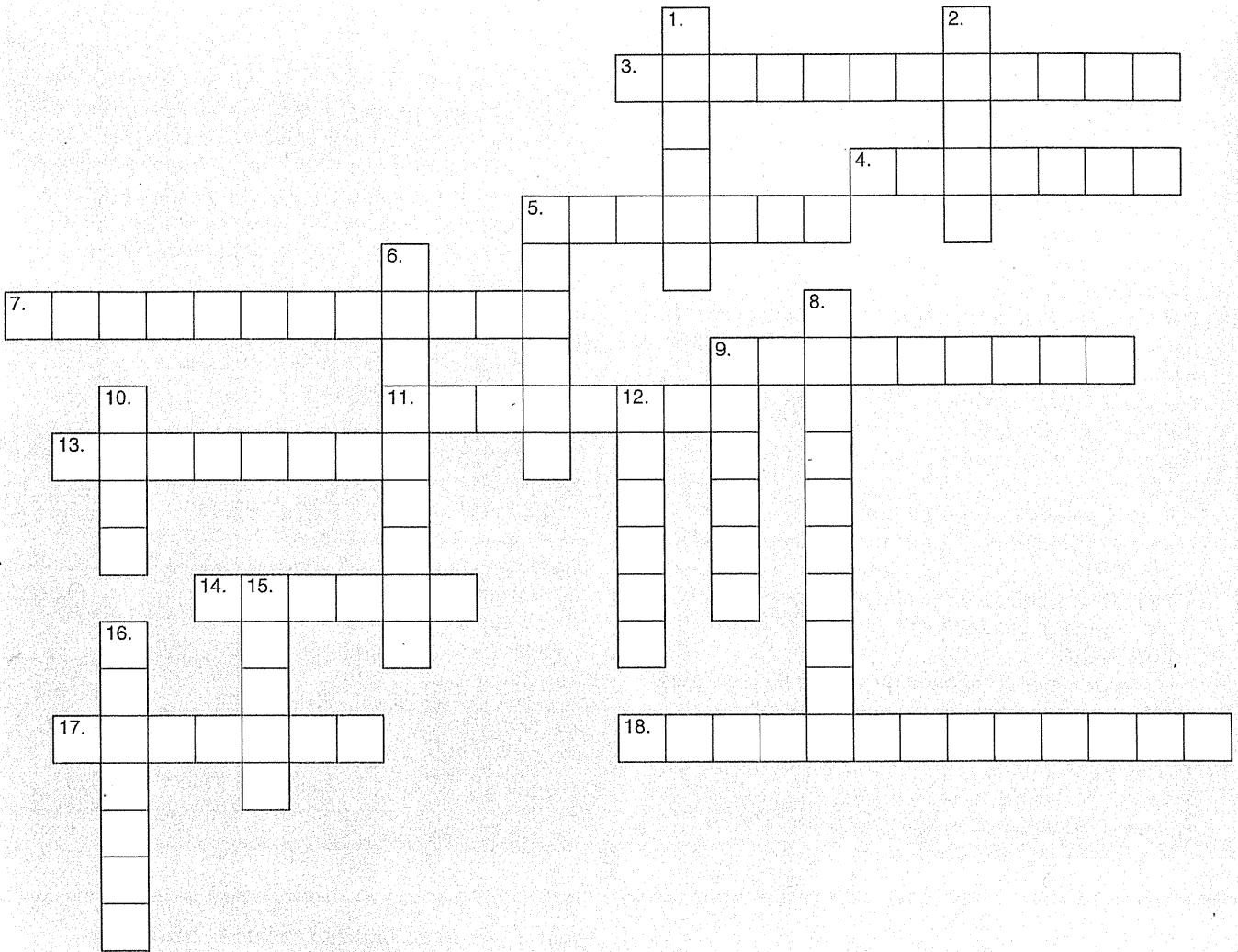
## Detective work

### TEST YOUR SKILLS

1. Answer these questions in a sentence in your exercise book.
  - (a) For how long were the Aztecs at their most powerful?
  - (b) To whom did the Aztecs claim to be related?
  - (c) What is:
    - (i) a *chinampa*?
    - (ii) a *pochteca*?
    - (iii) a glyph?
  - (d) Explain how the *volador* works.
  - (e) How many days did the Aztec Sacred Calendar have?
  - (f) What is the 'world of motion'?
  - (g) Why were certain warriors called 'Jaguar' Knights?
  - (h) Why was the Year One-Reed important to the Aztecs?
2. Write a brief statement about:
  - (a) Dona Marina
  - (b) Cualpopoca
  - (c) Pedro de Alvarado
  - (d) Cuauhtemoc.
3. Make a model of any of the following:
  - (a) a Sacred Calendar
  - (b) a typical Aztec farmer's house
  - (c) a *chinampa*
  - (d) an Aztec temple
  - (e) a *volador*.
4. Dress as either an Aztec warrior, an Aztec woman or a Spanish soldier and give a class talk about your life.
5. Design and make an Aztec shield and sword.
6. Make a replica of an Aztec knight's headdress or a mobile of an Aztec warrior in full costume.

(continued)

7. Try this crossword.



**Clues**

**Across**

- 3. A floating city
- 4. Birdman spectacular
- 5. Lake home
- 7. Important Aztec god
- 9. The indecisive one
- 11. Mobile garden
- 13. Political trader
- 14. No god
- 17. Aztec neighbours
- 18. Contains prophecy of doom (2 words)

**Down**

- 1. Modern region
- 2. Ruling group
- 5. Aztec forbears
- 6. Active near the lake
- 8. He was no female! (2 words)
- 9. Bilingual
- 10. Edible quadrupeds
- 12. Useful plant
- 15. First main culture
- 16. Protection money/tax

## INVESTIGATE FURTHER

1. Organise a *pochteca's* banquet for the class. Choose someone to be Montezuma and make some trading goods to present to him. Appear humble and tell stories of your experiences.
2. The Aztecs separated fresh water from salt water in Lake Texcoco. How do we make fresh water from salt water today? (Research desalination.)
3. Are there any aspects of Aztec religious beliefs that are similar to modern religious beliefs? Identify two and explain their similarities.
4. Prepare biographies on: (a) Montezuma II (b) Hernando Cortes.
5. Some things that helped Cortes defeat the Aztecs were:
  - getting enemies of the Aztecs to join him and turning Aztec allies against them (CORTES GAINS ALLIES)
  - Montezuma's indecision and willingness to believe the legend of Quetzalcoatl (MONTEZUMA'S MISTAKES)
  - Cortes's superior technology and battle tactics and his persistence before finally overwhelming Tenochtitlan (THE SEIGE OF TENOCHTITLAN)
  - having the help of Dona Marina (THE VALUE OF DONA MARINA)
  - having Cualpopoca arrested and executed (RESISTANCE IS CRUSHED).
6. All societies have strengths and advantages that can act in their favour in times of trouble. Make notes on the strengths of Aztec society, such as:
  - their education system
  - religious beliefs
  - promotion by talent
  - unity as a people
  - organisational and fighting skills etc.Write an essay explaining why these strengths should have helped the Aztecs defeat the Spanish. Make up your own title.
7. The Aztecs invented something they called a 'War of Flowers'. Research and explain this idea.
8. (a) Research and list the Aztec medical techniques that are used in medicine today.  
(b) Which method would not be used today because of the risk of possible secondary infection (sickness caused because of weakness resulting from the first infection — for example, influenza developing into pneumonia)?

## Glossary

**abstract:** things that do not exist in physical or concrete form. Love, bravery, justice etc. are abstract things.

**accession:** the time at which a person becomes ruler of a country

**adobe:** bricks made of mud and straw, dried in the sun

**anatomy:** the bones, skin and organs that make up the body of any living creature

**aquatic plants:** plants which grow in watery conditions (unlike ordinary plants that grow in drier soil)

**barter:** payment in goods rather than money

**chronicles:** historical accounts

**clan:** a group of families related through a common ancestor

**codices:** ancient bound books (singular: codex)

**confederation:** a union of states

**Conquistadors:** the Spanish conquerors of Mexico and Peru

**dykes:** walls constructed in low-lying areas to hold back water from higher levels

**glyphs:** simple drawings to represent an object, action or idea

**guilds:** early forms of trade unions for craftspeople — for example a goldsmiths' guild

**Nahuatl:** the Aztec language

**obsidian:** a volcanic rock, like thick, brownish glass

**tribute:** a form of tax or 'protection money' paid to a conqueror