

# 9.5

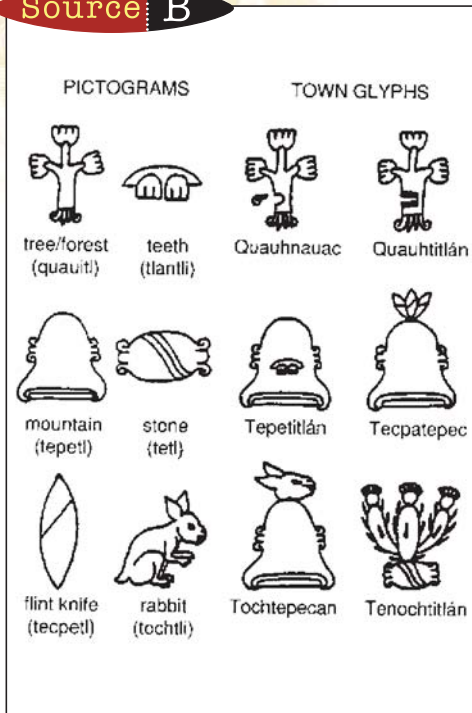
## THE AZTECS

The Aztecs were a group of Native Americans who ruled a large empire in Central America. The empire was made up of many different tribes, who were ruled by the Aztecs because the Aztecs had defeated them in battle. The Aztecs did not control the people of their empire by making them obey their government. Instead, they ruled through the collection of **tribute**, or taxes. By the time the Spanish made contact with the Aztecs in the early 1500s, 371 cities paid tribute to the Aztecs. Any city that failed to pay the tribute every six months was attacked.

### The capital: Tenochtitlán

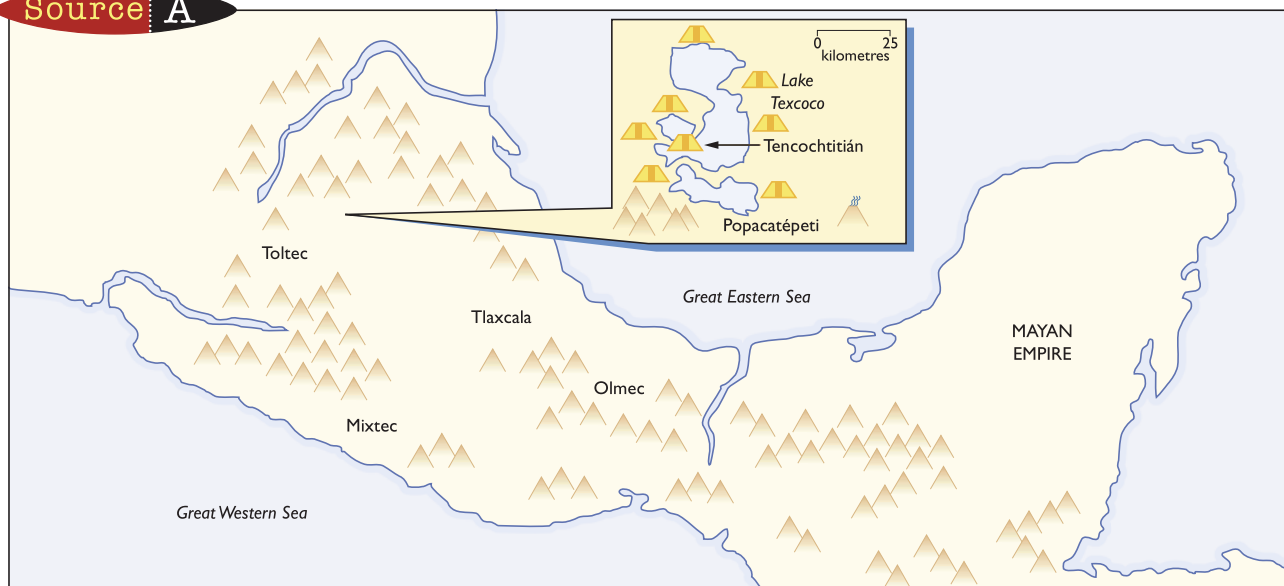
The capital of the Aztec Empire was Tenochtitlán, which was an island. The Aztecs had first come there as a small, warlike tribe in 1325. As they defeated the surrounding tribes, the city grew from two small islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco to the largest city in the world by the time the Europeans discovered it. At least 90 000 people lived in Tenochtitlán in 1500. London had around 40 000 people at that time. Wide 'roads', each protected by a fort, were built across the lake to reach the city. There was a large market in the city, since Tenochtitlán was the main trading centre of the empire. The city was extremely well organised, with a sewerage system, aqueducts for running water, a rubbish disposal system (waste was taken from the city to be made into fertiliser) and even cleaners, who were employed to keep the streets clean.

### Source B



Examples of Aztec writing.

### Source A



The Aztec Empire.

**Source C**



The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán.

**INQUIRY QUESTION**

What were some of the significant social, economic and environmental features of the indigenous culture prior to colonisation?

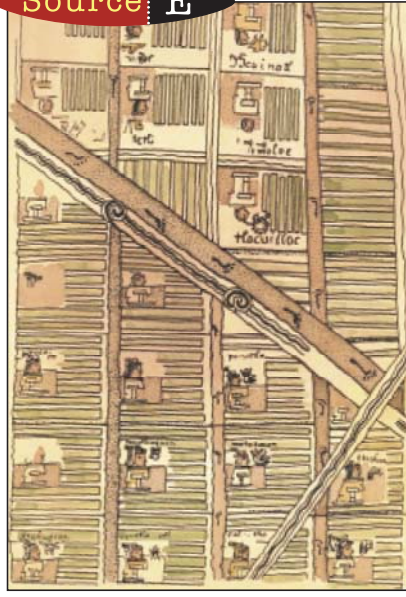


**Source D**



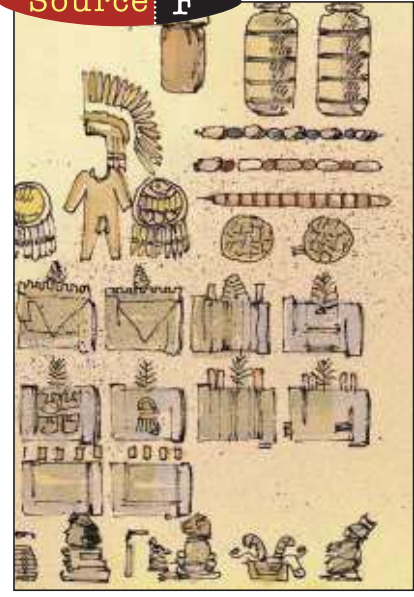
The legend of the founding of Tenochtitlán.

**Source E**



A map of a farming district just outside Tenochtitlán.

**Source F**



A tribute list.



## Aztec government

The Aztecs lived in a highly organised society. They were governed by a male ruler (like a king) who was chosen from a royal family. They organised their society strictly, with the ruler and royal family at the top, followed by the nobles, officials, common people and finally, the slaves. The Aztecs also had a strong legal system with local and senior courts.

## Aztec beliefs

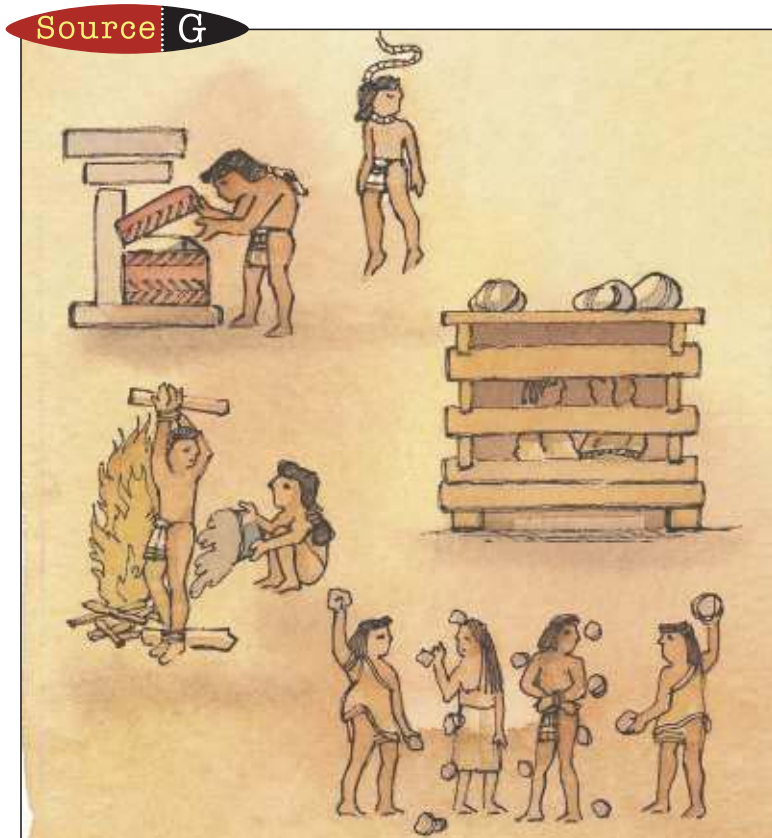
More than 300 different gods and goddesses were worshipped by the Aztecs. Each one was responsible for a different part of life, such as the weather or war or learning. Tenochtitlán had great temples where priests and priestesses carried out ceremonies. In order to keep the gods happy, the Aztecs made sacrifices to the gods. Human sacrifices were believed to be the greatest, because the gods gave people the gift of life, the greatest gift they could give. A human life, therefore, was seen as the best gift to give in return.

## Aztec writing

The Aztecs used calendars and developed writing. They used **glyphs** in their writing, which means that they used pictures instead of letters. They made books (called codex) out of long strips of paper or animal skins, which were folded in a zigzag, so that the book would unfold two pages at a time.



The education of young Aztecs.



Rules for punishing crimes used in Tetzaco and copied in Tenochtitlán.

## FASCINATING FACTS

The Aztecs made human sacrifices to the gods, sometimes by cutting out the heart of a person while he or she was still alive. They believed that the most precious gifts the gods made to them was life, so a human life was the best gift that they could offer to the gods in return.

## Armies and warfare

The Aztec army was made up of units from local towns. Each town was required to provide 400 men as soldiers. Every Aztec male youth had military training as part of his schooling. Soldiers did not wear a uniform, but high-ranking soldiers such as the Jaguar or Eagle Knights wore special clothes. The object of Aztec warfare was not to kill the enemy but to take as many prisoners as possible. Warriors were rewarded according to the number of prisoners they had taken. Prisoners were taken to the city to be sacrificed to the gods.

### Source I



A reconstruction of the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlán in Mexico City.

### Source J



An Aztec marriage ceremony.

## QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- 1 Look at Source A. Which modern countries does the old Aztec Empire cover?
- 2 Investigation and Communication**  
Using Source B to help you, make up a glyph for your name. Choose pictures that say something about you. Try to write a story using only glyphs and draw it on a codex.
- 3 Investigation and Analysis**  
What does the information given in the text and sources about Tenochtitlán tell you about the skills the Aztecs had?
- 4 Research**  
Use your school library, local library or the Internet to find out what the city of London was like in the 1500s, and compare it with Tenochtitlán. Look at the following information:
  - a How many people lived there?
  - b How did people get water and deal with sewerage and rubbish?
  - c What types of buildings were there?
- 5 Investigation and Analysis**  
Look carefully at Source E. What was the importance of farming for the Aztec Empire?
- 6 Investigation and Analysis**  
What items in Source F were given to the Aztecs as tribute? Why do you think the Aztecs demanded tribute?
- 7 Investigation**  
List what you think are the punishments shown in Source G. What do they show you about Aztec laws?
- 8 Investigation and Analysis**  
Use Source H to describe the differences between the education of boys and girls in Aztec society.
- 9 Research**  
What evidence would historians need to discover in order to create the reconstruction of the pyramid in Source I?
- 10 Investigation**  
Using Source J, try to describe Aztec marriage customs.