

Aztec Life and Society

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Aztec society was divided by social roles and by class.
2. Aztec religion required human sacrifice for keeping the gods happy.
3. The Aztecs had many achievements in science, art, and language.

The Big Idea

The Aztecs developed complex social, religious, artistic, and scientific systems in their empire.

Key Term

codex, p. 420

If YOU were there...

You belong to an important family of Aztec artisans. You make fine gold jewelry and ornaments for the emperor and his nobles. Your brother wants to break this family tradition and become a warrior. Your family is upset by this news. Your brother asks what you think of his plans.

What will you tell your brother?

BUILDING BACKGROUND Most Aztec children grew up to be what their parents were. The artisan family described above would enjoy many privileges of the upper class. Warriors played an important role in Aztec society, so many young men wanted to be warriors.

Aztec Society

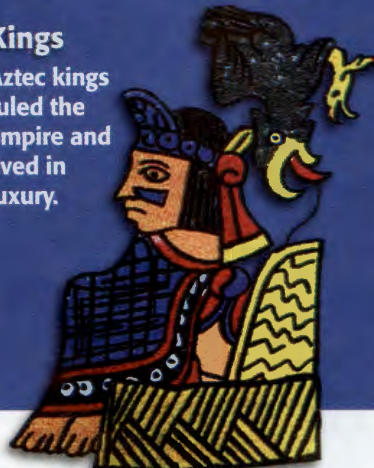
People in Aztec society had clearly defined roles. These roles, along with social class, determined how Aztec men and women lived. Aztec society was organized into groups called *calpullis* (kahI-POOH-yees). A *calpulli* was a community of families that

People in Aztec Society

QUICK FACTS

Kings

Aztec kings ruled the empire and lived in luxury.



Nobles

Nobles served as important officials, such as tax collectors and judges.



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HSS 7.7.2 Study the roles of people in each society, including class structures, family life, warfare, religious beliefs and practices, and slavery.

7.7.4 Describe the artistic and oral traditions and architecture in the three civilizations.

7.7.5 Describe the Meso-American achievements in astronomy and mathematics, including the development of the calendar and the Meso-American knowledge of seasonal changes to the civilizations' agricultural systems.

shared land, schools, and a temple. Each *calpulli* elected a leader who took orders from the king.

Kings and Nobles

The king was the most important person in Aztec society. He lived in a great palace that had gardens, a zoo, and an aviary full of beautiful birds. Some 3,000 servants attended to his every need. Of these servants, 300 did nothing but tend to the animals in the zoo, and 300 more tended to the birds in the aviary! Other servants fed and entertained the emperor.

The king was in charge of law, trade and tribute, and warfare. These were huge responsibilities, and the king couldn't have managed them without people to help. These people, including tax collectors and judges, were Aztec nobles. Noble positions were passed down from fathers to their sons. As a result, young nobles went to special schools to learn the responsibilities they would face as government officials, military leaders, or priests.

Priests and Warriors

Just below the king and his nobles were priests and warriors. Priests in particular had a great influence over Aztecs' lives. They had many duties in society, including:

Primary Source

BOOK

An Aztec Festival

The Aztecs often used the occasion of the crowning of a new king to remind the leaders of their conquered territories just who the true masters were. An observer in Tenochtitlán recalled one such event:

“The intentions of the Mexicans [Aztecs], in preparing a festival . . . was to make known their king, and to ensure that their enemies . . . should be terrorized and filled with fear; and that they should know, by the . . . wealth of jewels and other presents, given away at the ceremonies, how great was the abundance of Mexico, its valor and its excellence. Finally, all was based on ostentation [extravagance] and vain glory, with the object of being feared, as the owners of all the riches of the earth and of its finest provinces. To this end they ordered these feasts and ceremonies so splendidly.”

—Fray Diego Durán, from *Historia de Las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra Firme*

ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Do you think Fray Diego Durán admired the Aztecs? Why or why not?

- keeping calendars and deciding when to plant crops or perform ceremonies,
- passing down Aztec history and stories to keep their tradition alive,
- performing various religious ceremonies, including human sacrifice.

Priests

Priests performed many important duties, such as keeping calendars.



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Warriors

Warriors fought to conquer other peoples and capture victims for sacrifice.



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Merchants

Aztec merchants traded goods like food, clothing, and tools.



Aztec warriors also had many duties. They fought fiercely to capture victims for religious sacrifices. Partly because they played this role in religious life, warriors had many privileges and were highly respected. Warriors were also respected for the wealth they brought to the empire. They fought to conquer new lands and people, bringing more tribute and trade goods to enrich the Aztec civilization.

Merchants and Artisans

Not really members of the upper class, merchants and artisans fell just below priests and warriors in Aztec society. Merchants gathered goods from all over Mesoamerica and sold them in the main market. By controlling trade in the empire, they became very rich. Many used their wealth to build large, impressive houses and to send their sons to special schools.

Like merchants, most artisans were also rich and important. They made goods like beautiful feather headdresses and gold jewelry that they could sell at high prices. Many of the richest artisans lived in Tenochtitlán. Other artisans, who lived outside the capital and made items for everyday use, lived more like the lower class. Artisans from other tribes often sent crafts to the Aztecs as tribute.

Farmers and Slaves

Farmers and slaves were in the lower class of Aztec society. However, some people could improve their lives and positions by becoming warriors in the army or studying at special schools.

Most of the empire's people were farmers who grew maize, beans, and a few other crops. Farmers did not own their land, and they were very poor. They had to pay so much in tribute that they often found it tough to survive. Farmers lived outside Tenochtitlán in huts made of sticks and mud and wore rough capes.

No one in the Aztec Empire suffered as much as slaves did. Most of the slaves had been captured in battle or couldn't pay their debts. Slaves had little to look forward to. Most were sold as laborers to nobles or merchants. Slaves who disobeyed orders were sacrificed to the gods.

READING CHECK Summarizing What groups of people were in the upper class in Aztec society?

Aztec Religion

The Aztecs believed gods ruled all parts of life. Their gods' powers could be seen in nature, such as in trees or storms, and in great people, such as kings or ancestors.

People in Aztec Society (continued)

Artisans

Skilled artisans made a wide variety of goods that people needed.



Farmers

Most Aztecs were farmers who lived in simple huts.



Slaves

Prisoners of war became slaves. They were forced to work or were sacrificed.



Like other Mesoamericans, the Aztecs always tried to please their gods. They believed sacrifice was necessary to keep the gods strong and the world safe.

Aztecs made their greatest number of sacrifices to the war god Huitzilopochtli (wee-tsee-loh-POHCHT-lee) and the rain god Tlaloc (TLAH-lohk). The Aztecs believed the former made the sun rise every day, and the latter made the rain fall. Without them, their crops would die, and they would have no food.

To prevent this, Aztec priests led bloody ceremonies on the top of the Great Temple in Tenochtitlán. These priests cut themselves to give their blood to the gods.

Priests also sacrificed human victims to their gods. Many of the victims for these sacrifices were warriors from other tribes who had been captured in battle. Priests would sacrifice these victims to “feed” their gods human hearts and blood, which they thought would make the gods strong. Aztec priests sacrificed as many as 10,000 victims a year in religious ceremonies.

READING CHECK Finding Main Ideas Why was human sacrifice part of Aztec religion?

Science, Art, and Language

The Aztecs valued learning and art. Aztec scientific achievements, artistic traditions, and language contributed to their culture.

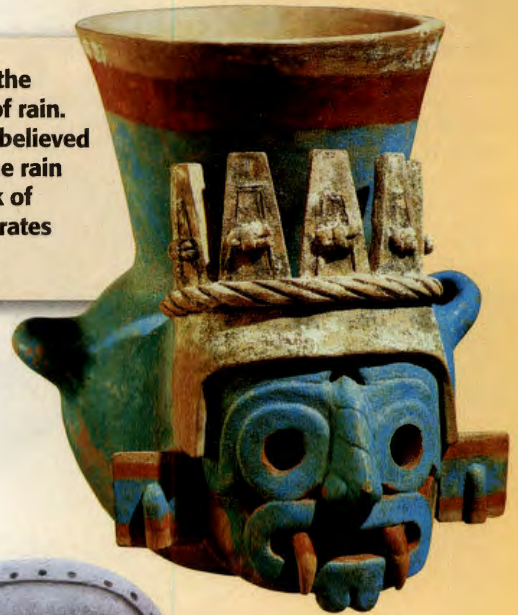
Scientific Achievements

The Aztecs made several advances in science. Many of these they accomplished by building on the achievements of the peoples they conquered. The Aztec system of tribute and their large trading network allowed them to learn skills from people all over the empire. For example, they learned how to build their floating gardens called *chinampas* from neighboring tribes.

Aztec Gods

The Aztecs worshipped hundreds of gods. Two of the most important were Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli, who are shown below.

Tlaloc was the Aztec god of rain. The Aztecs believed he made the rain fall. A mask of Tlaloc decorates this vessel.



Huitzilopochtli was the Aztec god of war. The Aztecs believed he made the sun rise. The eyes of this statue of Huitzilopochtli are made of shell and obsidian.

Aztec Arts

Aztec artists were very skilled. They created detailed and brightly colored items like the ones you see here. Many were used in religious ceremonies.

What are some features of Aztec art that you can see in these pictures?

Ceremonial Mask

This mask represented the god Quetzalcoatl. It is made of turquoise, shell, and wood.



Ceremonial Jewelry

This double-headed serpent was probably worn during ceremonies. The man above is wearing it on his chest.



The Aztecs also studied astronomy and created a calendar much like the Maya one. The calendar helped the Aztecs choose the best days for ceremonies, for battles, or for planting and harvesting crops. The Aztecs also knew many different uses for plants. For example, they knew of more than 100 plants that could be used as medicines.

Artistic Traditions

In addition to their achievements in science, the Aztecs had a rich artistic tradition that included architecture, sculpture, and jewelry. Both the architecture and the sculpture made use of stone. Workers built bridges and lined canals with stone. Carpenters and stonemasons built huge pyramid-shaped stone temples. Hundreds of such temples stood in Tenochtitlán.

Talented Aztec artisans used turquoise mosaics to decorate knife handles and masks. Artisans also used gold and colorful feathers to make jewelry. Aztec women wove cloth from cotton and other fibers and embroidered it with colorful designs.

Writing and Literature

The Aztecs had a complex writing system. They kept written historical records in books made of separate pages. **Another name for this type of ancient book is a codex** (KOH-deks). Many pages of Aztec books were made of bark or animal skins.

In addition to their written records, the Aztecs had a strong oral tradition. They considered fine speeches very important, and they also enjoyed riddles. These were some popular Aztec riddles at the time when the Spaniards arrived:

“What is a little blue-green jar filled with popcorn? Someone is sure to guess our riddle: it is the sky.

What is a mountainside that has a spring of water in it? Our nose.”

—Bernardino de Sahagún, from *Florentine Codex*

Knowing the answers to riddles showed that one had paid attention in school.

Stories about ancestors and gods formed another part of the Aztec oral tradition. The Aztecs told these stories to their children, passing them down from one generation

FOCUS ON READING

What information supports the main idea of this section?



Aztec Calendar

This modern drawing shows the Aztec calendar with brightly painted colors.

to the next. After the Spanish conquered the Aztec Empire, these stories were written down. Much of what historians know about the Aztecs they learned from these written stories.

READING CHECK Summarizing What was one purpose of the Aztec oral tradition?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW The Aztec Empire had a strict social structure, an influential religion, and strong scientific and artistic traditions. In the next section you will learn about another empire of the Americas—the Inca Empire—and the vast area that it included.

Section 2 Assessment

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People **HSS** 7.7.2, 7.7.4, 7.7.5

- a. Describe** How was it decided when the Aztecs should plant crops or hold ceremonies?

b. Rate Who do you think had the most difficult social role in Aztec society? Why?
- a. Identify** What did the Aztecs feed their gods?

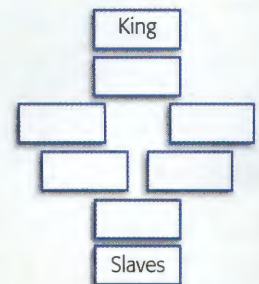
b. Explain Why did the Aztecs think human sacrifice was important?
- a. Identify** What might you find in an Aztec codex?

b. Make Inferences Why do you think the Aztecs used so much stone in their art and building?

c. Develop Make up a riddle like the Aztecs would have had in their oral tradition.

Critical Thinking

- Categorizing** Copy the graphic organizer on the right. Write the names of the different social groups in Aztec society in each of the empty boxes.



FOCUS ON WRITING

- Describing Aztec Society** To which social class do you want the Aztec child in your dialogue to belong? Make a list of details about Aztec social structure, religion, and culture that he or she might describe to a friend.

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Online Quiz

KEYWORD: SQ7 CH15