Lesson 1

MAIN IDEAS

1. **Geography** The Aztecs developed an agricultural society and founded a great empire in the Valley of Mexico.

2. **Government** The Aztecs had a highly structured society, with authoritarian rulers.

3. **Culture** The Aztecs made advances in art, architecture, and astronomy.

TAKING NOTES

Reading Skill:
Explaining Chronological Order and Sequence

Sequence is the order in which events follow one another. Use a “chain of events” diagram to identify the sequence of events in the rise and fall of the Aztec empire.

![Aztec God Quetzalcoatl](image)

Quetzalcoatl, whose name means “feathered serpent,” was the important god of wind. Quetzalcoatl was sometimes pictured as a serpent.

CALIFORNIA STANDARDS

7.7.1 Study the locations, landforms, and climates of Mexico, Central America, and South America and their effects on Mayan, Aztec, and Incan economies, trade, and development of urban societies.

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

7.7.3 Explain how and where each empire arose and how the Aztec and Incan empires were defeated by the Spanish.

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.
The Aztecs

**Build on What You Know** Did you ever have to look for a new place to live? Well, the Aztecs did in the 1200s. And they turned their new home into the greatest empire of Meso-America.

**Aztecs Settle in Central Mexico**

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** How did the Aztecs adapt to the Valley of Mexico?

The Aztecs were nomadic hunters and gatherers. They lived in what is now the northwest desert of Mexico. In the late 1200s, they began to move south. Eventually, they came upon the Valley of Mexico, a mountain basin about 7,500 feet above sea level.

**Settling in the Valley of Mexico** When the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico, there was no major power in the region. A people called the Toltecs had ruled there from about 900, but they had lost control in the late 1100s. Now the region contained a number of small city-states ruled by various peoples.

These city-states held the most fertile land. So the Aztecs had to settle for what was left. A legend says that the Aztec sun and war god told them they would find a new home where they saw an eagle sitting on a cactus. In 1325, they found such a place. It was a small island in a large lake (later called Lake Texcoco). There they built the city of **Tenochtitlán** (teh•NOHCH•tee•TLAHN), or Place of the Prickly Pear. (See story on pages 404–407.) This is the site of Mexico City today.

The Aztecs now had a land of their own. As they adapted to the land, they also adapted to their neighbors. They carved out a place for themselves as paid warriors for local rulers.
Adapting to the Land  The lands around Tenochtitlán were swampy. The lake was in a valley surrounded by high mountains, with little level land for farming. There also was little wood or stone nearby for building. But the Aztecs adapted. They learned to construct chinampas, or raised garden beds, on the lake. (See pages 394–395.) The chinampas enabled them to grow many crops, including corn, squash, and chili peppers. They also hunted animals that lived in and around the lake.

With a plentiful food supply, the population of Tenochtitlán grew. Soon, the Aztecs spread out from the island to new communities on the lakeshore. At its height, between 200,000 and 400,000 people may have lived in the urban area of Tenochtitlán.

Trade was important to the Aztec economy. The Aztecs traded for goods they could not get locally, especially wood and stone for building. They dug canals to provide routes into the city for canoes loaded with trade goods. Aztec builders also engineered bridges and causeways to tie the city to the mainland.

Building an Empire  As the years passed, the Aztecs made alliances with some city-states and used their warrior skills to conquer others. By the early 1500s, their empire stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean and from the Valley of Mexico to what is now Guatemala. (See map on page 393.) Between 6 and 12 million people lived under Aztec rule. From the peoples they conquered, the Aztecs demanded tribute. This forced payment took the form of goods such as corn, gold, and jade.

Vocabulary Strategy

The word *tribute* has multiple meanings. It can mean “a forced payment in goods or labor.” It also can refer to something given or said to show great respect.

**How did the Aztecs build a powerful empire?**
Aztec Society and Beliefs

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What was the structure of Aztec society?

As the Aztecs’ power grew, their society became more complex. It was organized into tightly structured groups, or classes.

Aztec Class Structure Three main classes formed Aztec society—the nobles, the intermediate class, and the commoners. Each class was divided further. At the top was the emperor, who belonged to the noble class. His power came from control of the military and was supported by Aztec religious beliefs. The emperor lived a life of luxury.

As in most societies, the nobles made up the smallest class but held the most power. They owned large estates and ran the government and the military. Priests, too, came from the noble class. Below the nobles was an intermediate class. Merchants and skilled artisans made up this group.

Most people in Aztec society were in the third class, the commoners. Some commoners were landowning farmers, fishers, craftspeople, and soldiers. Also included were landless workers, or serfs, who labored in the fields of the nobles and could not move off the land.

Enslaved persons were at the very bottom of this class. They were usually prisoners of war. Slaves worked at many different tasks. In all classes, women’s roles were restricted.

Family Life and Religious Practices The Aztecs lived in family groups in large land-based communities. Most men farmed their own or nobles’ lands. The women cooked the meals, tended the children, and did other domestic chores. Boys began formal education at about age 10. They learned about religion and were taught fighting skills. As in many societies, girls were usually taught at home.

Aztec life was dominated by religion. It was central to the daily lives of all members of society. The Aztec religion was based mainly on the worship of agricultural gods. Aztecs believed in about 1,000 gods.

Priests in the temples used a complex calendar to set the times for many public religious ceremonies each year. The most important ceremonies were held to ask the gods for a good harvest. Humans, usually war prisoners, were sometimes sacrificed to the gods. Families also worshiped at small altars in their homes.
Aztec Warriors and Warfare  To the Aztecs, war was a sacred duty. Territory and peoples had to be conquered for the empire to expand. Most boys had begun intensive training to become warriors by 15. In battle, the Aztecs were fearsome. During an attack, they might kill everyone in an enemy village who was not a warrior. The warriors would be taken as prisoners to be used as slaves or human sacrifices.

Fall of the Aztec Empire  As the empire’s population grew, so did the need for farmland. The emperor and the nobles also demanded more tribute. To meet these needs, the Aztecs were almost always at war. The empire was at its height in 1502 when a new emperor, Montezuma II, came to power. He demanded more tribute and victims for sacrifice. His harsh treatment and endless demands for tribute caused bitter hatred among Aztec subjects. Some began to rebel. Montezuma tried to repair the damage by asking for less tribute. But unrest had weakened Aztec power.

In 1519, a Spanish expedition led by Hernán Cortés (ehr•NAHN kaw•TEHZ) arrived in the Aztec empire. It was seeking gold and glory for Spain. Montezuma met with Cortés in the hopes of avoiding war. But he was soon taken prisoner. He was later killed in the fighting between the Aztecs and the Spaniards.

The Spanish eventually were victorious. Diseases brought by the Europeans weakened the Aztecs. The invaders also had superior weapons, including muskets and body armor, and the help of thousands of rebels. In 1521, Cortés conquered Tenochtitlán. The capital’s fall signaled the end of the Aztec empire.

REVIEW  Why did the Aztec empire fall?
The Cultural Legacy of the Aztecs

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  What cultural advances did the Aztecs make?

The Aztecs had a rich culture that produced distinctive works of art and architecture. They also made advances in astronomy.

Art and Architecture  Thanks to discoveries by archaeologists, we know that the Aztecs built huge and unique structures. Visitors to Tenochtitlán and other Aztec cities would have marveled at the temples, palaces, and city walls. Evidence of Aztec achievements in building can still be seen in Mexico City. The Spanish built the city over Tenochtitlán, but part of the Great Temple remains.

Along with the remains of the temple and other buildings, archaeologists have also found everyday objects. These include gold beads, pottery, and stone urns. Aztec artisans also produced beautiful feather headdresses, stone sculptures, and jewelry set with precious stones.

The Aztec Codices  The Aztecs’ writing system did not represent the sounds of their spoken language. Instead, they used pictures and symbols, called glyphs, to represent words and ideas. The Aztecs collected their writings in books called codices. Each codex was made of a long folded sheet of bark or deerskin, filled with colorful pictures showing details of Aztec life. Historians have learned much about the Aztecs from these records.

Primary Source

Aztec Codices

Aztec codices are illustrated books. Brightly painted pictures cover both sides of these long folded sheets of bark or deerskin. Each codex illustrates scenes from Aztec life or contains official government records. There once were hundreds of these codices, but many were destroyed. The panel at right shows the funeral of a noble (wrapped in a cloth). His family prepares him for the afterlife.

DOCUMENT–BASED QUESTION

How might you tell from the picture that the deceased was a noble?
Advances in Astronomy  To predict planting and harvesting times, early peoples studied movements of the sun, stars, and planets. They used this information to make calendars. The Aztecs created two calendars—one for farming and one for religion. The farming calendar let them know when to plant and to harvest crops. The religious calendar was used to plan religious ceremonies. An Aztec calendar stone dug up in Mexico City in 1790 includes information about the months of the year and pictures the sun god at the center.

**Lesson Summary**

- The Aztecs adapted to the environment of the Valley of Mexico and built an empire there.
- The Aztecs’ harsh treatment of their subjects weakened their empire and made it easier for the Spanish to conquer them.
- The Aztecs made contributions in art, architecture, and astronomy.

**Why It Matters Now . . .**
The Aztecs ruled much of what is now Mexico and built their capital where Mexico City, one of the world’s largest cities, now stands.

**Terms & Names**
1. Explain the importance of
   - Tenochtitlán
   - Montezuma II
   - Hernán Cortés

**Using Your Notes**

**Explaining Chronological Order and Sequence** Use your completed “chain of events” diagram to answer the following question:

2. How do you think the Aztecs were able to build a large empire so quickly? (7.7.3)

**Main Ideas**

3. What challenges did the Aztecs face when they settled in the Valley of Mexico? (7.7.1)
4. How did the rule of Montezuma II cause unrest among the peoples of the Aztec empire? (7.7.2)
5. What were the purposes of the two Aztec calendars? (7.7.5)

**Critical Thinking**

6. **Drawing Conclusions** Why are Aztec codices important to historians? (7.7.4)
7. **Understanding Causes and Effects** How were the Aztecs able to develop large urban centers, such as Tenochtitlán? (7.7.1)

**Activity**

**Internet Activity** Research the *chinampas*, or “floating gardens.” Then make a cross-sectional diagram of a *chinampa*, with labels showing its features. (7.7.1)

**INTERNET KEYWORD:** *chinampas*