

- Have students research the geographical location of the Aztec empire, from its beginning to its peak. Students can then make a classroom map, showing geographical features and landforms as well as the locations of major cities and groups of people.
- The Aztecs did not have a written alphabet for Nahuatl, but they did use a system of pictures, or glyphs, to communicate and record events. Collections of these glyphs are called *codices*, some of which have been preserved in libraries around the world. Print copies of some of these authentic glyphs for students to examine (for examples, see [www.famsi.org/research/pohl/pohl\\_aztec6.html](http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/pohl_aztec6.html)). Ask students to note their observations of Aztec life, as shown in the codices. In pairs, have students create dioramas featuring Aztec culture and tradition.
- The Aztecs developed a number system, counting by 20. They used glyphs to represent the numbers: a dot for 1, a flag for 20, a feather for the 400 and a pouch carrying incense for 8,000. Share this number system with students. Challenge them to write numbers using the Aztec symbols and make up problems to decipher and solve. (For images of the glyphs, see [www.learning-connections.co.uk/curric/cur\\_pri/aztecs/handson/hands\\_5.html](http://www.learning-connections.co.uk/curric/cur_pri/aztecs/handson/hands_5.html)).
- The Aztecs developed two calendar systems: one to describe the agricultural year and the other, a sacred "day-count" calendar, to divide the days between the gods. Have students research the Aztec symbols for each of the 20 days in the Aztec month (a resource is [www.azteccalendar.com/](http://www.azteccalendar.com/)). Share with the students pictures of the Aztec Calendar Stone. Ask them to look for the day symbols. Explore how the Aztecs used the stone to keep track of the days. As an extension, challenge students to create their own "calendar stones" with symbols for days, months and holidays.

### Suggested Internet Resources

Periodically, Internet Resources are updated on our web site at [www.LibraryVideo.com](http://www.LibraryVideo.com)

- [library.thinkquest.org/27981/](http://library.thinkquest.org/27981/)  
A student-friendly ThinkQuest site with sections on Aztec life, rulers, gods, culture, technology and the Spanish conquest, plus student-created puzzles and games.
- [mexicolore.co.uk/azt\\_wel\\_new.htm](http://mexicolore.co.uk/azt_wel_new.htm)  
This web site by Mexicolore, a London-based group, provides educational resources on the Aztecs, including photos and images of artifacts, Aztec stories and a Nahuatl pronunciation guide.

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- [edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=436](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=436)  
A complete lesson guide on the legend of how the Aztecs chose the site for the capital, Tenochtitlán. Includes reproducible materials and links to museum models and archaeological ruins.
- [archaeology.la.asu.edu/tm/index2.htm](http://archaeology.la.asu.edu/tm/index2.htm)  
The official web site of the Templo Mayor museum, with links to images of artifacts and computer models of Tenochtitlán.

### Suggested Print Resources

- Kimmel, Eric A. *Two Mountains: An Aztec Legend*. Holiday House, Inc., New York, NY; 2000. This Aztec legend explains the formation of two mountains overlooking the Valley of Mexico.
- Steele, Philip. *The Aztec News: Invaders Flee City!* Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA; 2000. Written as a newspaper, *The Aztec News* shares information about the Aztec civilization based on archaeological findings.
- Stout, Mary A. *Aztec*. Gareth Stevens Publishing, Milwaukee, WI; 2003.

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#### TEACHER'S GUIDE

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|---|-----------------------|
| • Ancient Aegean                        | • Ancient Egypt       |
| • Ancient Africa                        | • Ancient Greece      |
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| • Ancient Aztec: The Fall of the Empire | • Ancient Maya        |
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# ANCIENT AZTEC EMPIRE

Grades 3–7

This guide is a supplement designed for teachers to use when presenting this program. The guide provides you with a summary of the program, pre-viewing and follow-up questions, activities, vocabulary and print and Internet resources.

**Before Viewing:** Give students an overview of the program. Use the program summary to help provide this introduction. Select pre-viewing discussion questions and vocabulary to provide a focus for students when they view the program.

**After Viewing:** Review the program and vocabulary and discuss what students learned. Use followup questions and activities, and encourage students to research the topic further with the Internet and print resources provided.



## Historical Overview

Over 550 years ago, the Aztec Empire was a flourishing, stable and advanced society, spanning much of present-day Mexico. According to Aztec legend, about a thousand years ago the Mexica people left their homeland, Atzlán, and began a nomadic journey in search of a more suitable place to live. In the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, they reached the Valley of Mexico, near Lake Texcoco, and began to build settlements on islands in the lake. The island-city of Tenochtitlán would become the economic and spiritual center for the Mexica. Through battle, the Mexica incorporated neighboring Nahuatl-speaking tribes into their growing empire and developed an expansive trading network and tribute system. By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the Mexica had established a strong, wealthy empire, the Aztec Empire. Today, archaeologists piece together aspects of Aztec life and culture from ruins and remains, including ancient temples, carvings and clay figures. A rich culture of legends and religion is evident through art and architecture.

## Vocabulary

**Aztecs** — An indigenous Central American people who established an advanced civilization and powerful empire in the area of present-day Mexico that existed for approximately two centuries (1325-1519 CE) before the Spanish arrival in 1519.

**empire** — A number of nations or peoples united under one central power.

**archaeologists** — Scientists who study historical artifacts to learn more about past cultures.

**Templo Mayor** — The “Great Temple” of Tenochtitlán.

**Mexico City** — The capital of present-day Mexico, built atop the remains of the ancient Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán.

**Atzlán** — The mythical homeland, believed to be in northwest Mexico, of the Mexica people.

**Mexica** — The name the Aztec people used to call themselves.

**Lake Texcoco** — A lake in central Mexico with small islands, one of which became the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán. Today, Mexico City covers Lake Texcoco.

**Tenochtitlán** — The island-city capital of the Aztec Empire.

**causeway** — A raised roadway across a body of water.

**tribute** — A payment of useful and valuable objects, which the Mexica demanded from other tribes after defeating them in battle.

**maize** — A type of corn cultivated by the Aztecs and used to make tortillas.

**Nahuatl** — The language spoken by the Aztec people.

**Huitzilopochtli** — The Aztec god of the sun and war.

## Time Line

**c. 1100–1300** Nomadic Mexica people embark on period of migration in search of a more suitable place to live. By the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, they arrive at the Valley of Mexico.

**1325** The Mexica establish the city of Tenochtitlán.

**1428** The Mexica form alliances and begin a series of conquests of neighboring groups.

**c. 1450** The Aztec Empire thrives, with Tenochtitlán as the spiritual and economic trade center.

## Pre-viewing Discussion

- Locate Mexico on a world map. Inform students that the video will convey information about the Aztec people, who built an advanced civilization and wealthy empire in what is now present-day Mexico. Encourage students to share what they know about Mexico and its people, culture, history and geography. From the map, ask students which places in particular seem like good regions, geographically-speaking, for people to have settled over 500 years ago and why.
- Discuss why people of today are interested in the lives of people who lived long ago. As a class, brainstorm a list of questions that historians and archaeologists might ask about the Aztec people and their culture. Then, as students view the video, they can keep track of which questions remain unanswered for further inquiry.
- Consider some of the challenges archaeologists face in finding out about the life and culture of people who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago. Ask students why the science of archaeology is like a puzzle.

## Focus Questions

1. Where did archaeologists find remains of Aztec buildings? What was special about where the ruins were located?
2. What was the Templo Mayor?
3. List three Aztec artifacts that archaeologists found near the Templo Mayor ruins.
4. According to legend, what was Atzlán?
5. What name did the Aztec people call themselves?
6. Describe Tenochtitlán. Why did the Aztecs build causeways to the city?
7. What happened after the Mexica defeated other tribes in battle?
8. What was daily life like for an Aztec boy or girl?
9. Why did the Aztecs use steam houses?
10. Which animals were symbols for warriors?
11. What is Nahuatl?
12. Why did the Aztecs believe in making sacrifices to their gods?

## Follow-up Discussion

- As a class, make a list of the kinds of Aztec artifacts archaeologists have found, like the carvings, stone knives and decorated masks. Discuss what sorts of artifacts from a society are likely to survive in the ground for hundreds of years. Which kinds of things might be preserved? Which would not last over long periods of time?
- Based on the Aztec ruins and artifacts found, what can we determine about the Aztec people? Which questions are still unanswered?
- Discuss the significant challenges the Aztecs overcame to settle and build the thriving capital of Tenochtitlán. Brainstorm the pros and cons of building a city on an island. Compare the ancient island-city to present-day island-cities. In these places, what challenges do people still encounter today?

## Follow-up Activities

- Assign students to groups and have each group research a particular aspect of Aztec life (e.g., mythology, rulers/government, agriculture, food, work, warfare, games, clothing). Encourage students to use art materials (e.g., clay, paints, cloth, feathers) to create “artifacts” or pictures for a class museum to share what they have learned about Aztec society and culture. As a culminating project, each group can write a description of its artifacts for a class museum guide.
- Encourage students to research the many Aztec gods and goddesses and the myths associated with them. Students can retell the stories aloud or they can create graphic novels to share the legends.
- Jaguars and eagles were important symbols for Aztec warriors, appearing in hieroglyphics, legends and artifacts. Invite students to research the animals native to Central America. Which other animals were used in Aztec art? As an extension, have students pick animals to represent themselves and create animal masks or shields using papier-mâché, feathers, beads and other materials. Encourage students to explain, in writing, what they learned about their animals and why they chose them.
- According to Aztec legend, the Mexica were to look for a sign — an eagle holding a serpent in its beak, seated on a cactus plant — to know where to build their capital city, Tenochtitlán. Today, this symbol appears on the flag of Mexico. Show the students the flag. Then ask students to design their own flags for the Aztec people, based on what they have learned about Aztec culture.
- Have students find pictures and descriptions of Tenochtitlán. Then ask students to develop a model, draw a map or blueprint, or create a mural to show the buildings, temples, farming areas, floating gardens (*chinampas*), canals and markets of the city.

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