

# The Aztec Empire

A GUIDE TO THE EXHIBITION FOR TEACHERS

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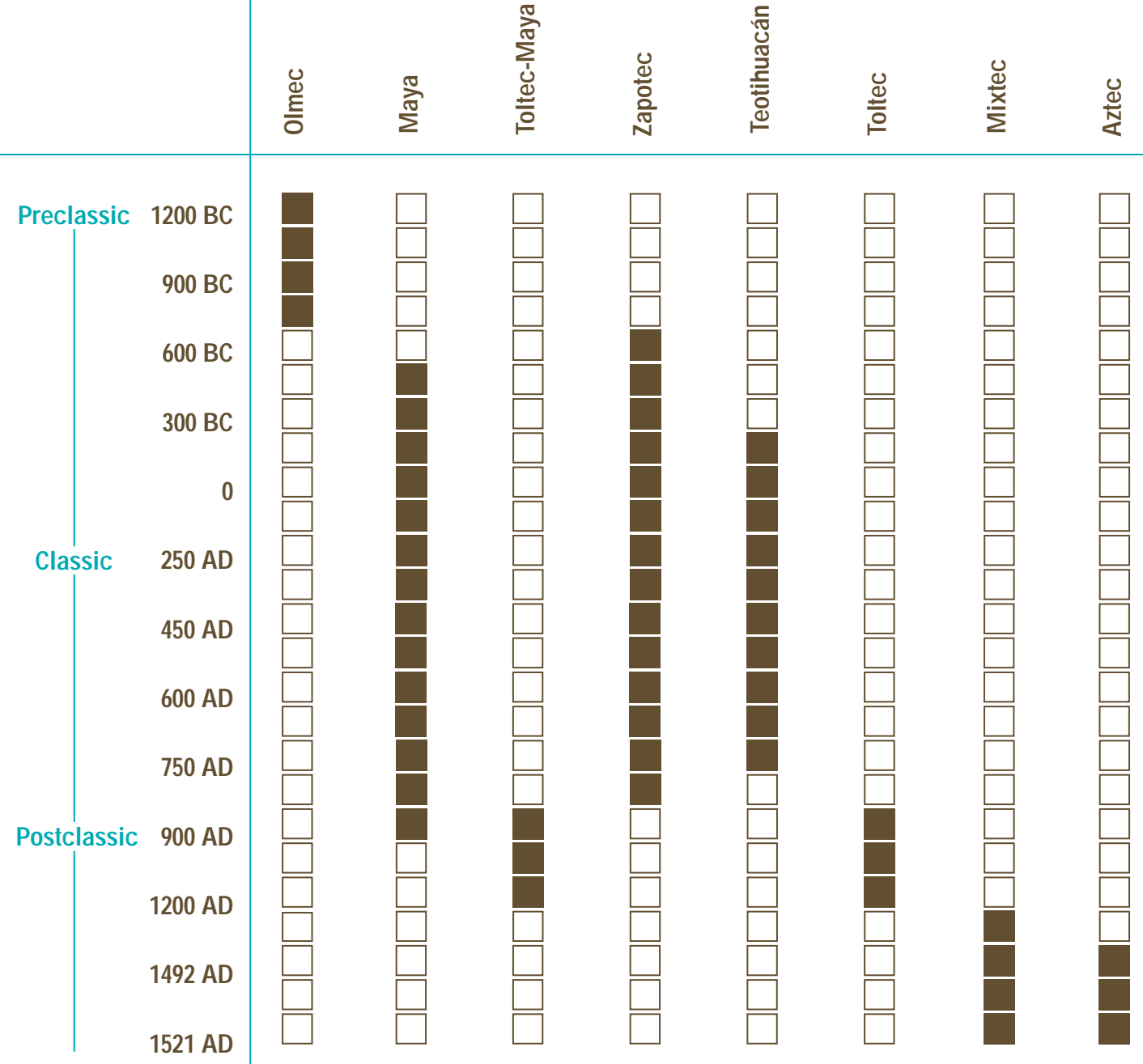
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# Timeline



Map



TARASCAN  
EMPIRE

TENOCHTITLAN  
(MEXICO CITY)

AZTEC EMPIRE

VERACRUZ

GULF OF MEXICO

PACIFIC OCEAN

This guide, which accompanies the Solomon R. Guggenheim exhibition *The Aztec Empire*, is designed to provide ideas, activities, and resources that explore issues raised by this exhibition. The exhibition and guide focus on the varied historical and cultural influences that have contributed to Aztec art and its development as culturally rich, visually engaging, and emotionally compelling.

For Aztecs, art was a material manifestation of their vision of the universe; its symbols were the reflection of their religious, economic, political and social concepts. The objects that they created were designed to be used and integrated into daily life. Although visitors can appreciate these works for their beauty, expressive qualities, and workmanship, they are fragments dislocated from their past.

*The Aztec Empire* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, on view October 15, 2004 – February 13, 2005, represents the largest survey of Aztec art ever to have been staged outside Mexico. It brings together more than 430 works drawn from public and private collections, including archaeological finds of the last decade never before seen outside Mexico. Organized thematically, the exhibition explores all aspects of Aztec religious, social, and economic life through the sheer diversity and range of artifacts on display: from monumental stone sculpture to miniature gold objects, and from intricate turquoise mosaics to rare pictorial manuscripts (or codices).

This guide is not intended as a comprehensive overview of Aztec art or history; rather it focuses on an important work selected from each of the major themes in the exhibition, and provides suggestions for discussion questions and classroom activities (Further Explorations) intended to encourage students to speculate and develop hypotheses both about Aztec society and the objects they left behind. It is hoped that students will be able to relate much of the material to their own lives – citing both

similarities and differences. The back of the guide includes vocabulary and phonetic spellings for selected Aztec words, as well as a list of additional resources. The guide is available in printed form and on the museum's Website at [www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org).

The design and content of these materials have a three-fold purpose:

- To assist educators in developing classroom units focusing on *The Aztec Empire*, and aspects of Precolumbian North America
- To provide educators with the tools to conduct a self-guided museum visit
- To expand upon, themes and ideas imbedded in the exhibition

By examining these representative works, a cultural context emerges to highlight the modes of expression that are the hallmarks of Aztec culture. Although the guide is designed to support the exhibition and will be most useful in conjunction with a trip to the museum, it is also intended to serve as a resource long after the exhibition has closed. Before bringing a class to the museum, teachers are invited to visit the exhibition, read the guide, and decide which aspects are most relevant for their students.

The exhibition has been organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in collaboration with the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA) and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). Guest curator is Felipe Solís, Director of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, co-curator of the large-scale survey *Aztecs* at the Royal Academy in London in 2003, and one of the world's foremost authorities on Aztec art and culture. Exhibition design is by Enrique Norten of TEN Arquitectos + J. Meejin Yoon.

# Introduction

*With such wonderful sights to gaze on we did not know what to say, or if this was real that we saw before our eyes.*

Bernal Diaz, a 26-year-old conquistador (Spanish conqueror), who fought in Cortés's army. *The Conquest of New Spain*, 1580s.

The Aztecs were a mighty civilization that flourished in Central America between 1325 and 1521, when they were forced to surrender to an invading Spanish army led by Hernán Cortés. From their magnificent capital, Tenochtitlan, they governed a vast empire that stretched from present-day Mexico to Guatemala, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans (see map). They are often remembered as a fierce and bloodthirsty race, aggressive in battle and engaging in human sacrifice to appease their various gods. However, as this exhibition shows, the Aztecs were also extremely civilized and sophisticated. They produced highly skilled and sensitive art, conceived perhaps the most advanced calendar of their time, and built extraordinary temples in clean and well-organized cities.

The Aztecs or Mexica (as they called themselves and are referred to by historians), migrated through Mexico in search of land to settle. According to the myth, the Aztecs' tribal leader, Huitzilopochtli

foretold that his people should settle where they saw an eagle on a cactus with a snake in its beak. After a long journey, the Aztecs arrived at a lake, called Lake Tetzaco, in Mexico's central highland basin. In the middle of the lake was an island, and on this island they saw the strange sight that Huitzilopochtli had predicted.

Having arrived at their promised land, the Aztecs claimed the island and its surrounding fertile land, and, in 1325, founded a city they named Tenochtitlan, "the place of the stone cactus." They built a temple in the center of the city (later called the Templo Mayor, or Great Temple, by the Spanish), which they dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, their patron god. In time, Tenochtitlan would grow to become a beautiful and prosperous city of about 250,000 inhabitants, the heart of a vast Aztec empire. When the Spanish arrived to conquer the Aztecs in 1519, they were awestruck by the great pyramids towering over the sacred center, the dazzling palaces and colorful markets

selling a bewildering variety of food and luxuries.

Fearless warriors and pragmatic builders, the Aztecs created an empire during the 15th century that was surpassed in size in the Americas only by that of the Incas in Peru. As early texts and modern archaeology continue to reveal, beyond their conquests, there were many positive achievements:

- the formation of a highly specialized and stratified society and an imperial administration
- the expansion of a trading network as well as a tribute system
- the development and maintenance of a sophisticated agricultural economy, carefully adjusted to the ecology
- and the creation of an intellectual and religious outlook that held society to be an integral part of the cosmos.

The yearly round of rites and ceremonies in the cities of Tenochtitlan and neighboring Tetzaco, and their symbolic art and architecture, gave expression

to an awareness of the interdependence of nature and humanity.

When the Spanish defeated the Aztecs they destroyed much of Tenochtitlan and rebuilt it as Mexico City, the capital of modern-day Mexico. The legacy of the Aztecs remains, however, in the form of archaeological ruins such as the Templo Mayor, the heart of Aztec religious activity and the symbolic center of the empire.

Today's Mexicans are very proud of their Aztec past and continue to remember the traditions and practice the art forms of their ancestors. More than two million people still speak the indigenous language of the Aztecs, Nahuatl. However, perhaps the most poignant reminder of the Aztecs is the Mexican national flag, which features the legendary eagle, cactus, and snake emblem of the long-buried heart of the mighty Aztec empire, Tenochtitlan.

## 2 Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Axis Mundi of the Universe



121  
Fragment of an  
anthropomorphic brazier  
Aztec,  
ca. 1300  
Fired clay and pigment,  
18 x 22 x 9 cm Museo  
Universitario de Ciencias y  
Arte, UNAM, Mexico City  
08-741814  
Photo: Michel Zabé, assistant  
Enrique Macías

The great temple known as the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan symbolizes the *axis mundi*, the Aztec center of the world, where the sky, the earth, and the underworld met. According to Aztec worldview, the universe consisted of three layers. The middle layer was the earthly one, inhabited by humans. Above that world, the Aztecs imaged thirteen levels or heavens, Omeyocan, the “place of duality,” being the uppermost. Below the earthly layer, there were the nine levels of the underworld. The lowest of these was the realm of Mictlantecuhtli, the Lord of the Land of the Dead.

Each of the four cardinal directions radiated out from the Templo Mayor and was associated with a deity, a bird, a color, and a glyph. The dual temple rose above all other buildings in the Sacred Precinct. The southern half was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, solar and war god, while the northern half was dedicated to Tlaloc, the god of rain, water, and the earth's fertility. Together Tlaloc and

Huitzilopochtli, encompass the natural and social universe of the Aztec empire. While Tlaloc was a god of earth and rain, Huitzilopochtli stood for the sun and the sky. Tlaloc marked the time of rains; Huitzilopochtli scorched the earth, with sun and war, in the dry months. Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli together represent the cycle of life and fertility, and mark the geographic, ritual, and symbolic heart of the universe, uniting old and new, center and periphery, in the sacred artificial mountain looming over the Aztec capital.



### FRAGMENT OF AN ANTHROPOMORPHIC BRAZIER

The Aztec were known not only for their sculpture, but also for their expressive and sensitive poetry. The sculpture and poem below provide a glimpse into ways that the cycles of life were portrayed. Look carefully at the sculpture. The three faces represent the cycle of life. In the middle we can see the face of a young man, with all his teeth and wearing an ornament between the nose and upper lip. On either side are two halves of the face of an old, toothless man; these two faces are framed by the symmetrically divided face of a corpse with its eyes closed. The thirteen decorative rings (four on the young man's head, nine on the corpse's) represent the parts of a calendar cycle.

Nezahualcoyotl, the poet-king of Texcoco writes:

*I, Nezahualcoyotl, ask this:  
Is it true one really lives on  
the earth?  
Not forever on earth, only a little  
while here.  
Though it be jade it falls apart,  
though it be gold it wears away,  
Not forever on earth, only a little  
while here.*

Michael D. Coe, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002), fifth edition, p. 223.

### Discussion Questions

- After reading the poem, describe its meaning in your own words.
- What similarities can you find in the poem and the sculpture. What differences?

### Further Explorations

- The artist who made the Mask with *Three Faces* chose to represent the life cycle in three stages. How would you choose to portray the cycle of life? What phases of life would you include? Why?







## 3 Templo Mayor and its Symbolism

This part of the exhibition is devoted to the wealth of extraordinary artifacts excavated from the most significant religious building in Tenochtitlan, the great Templo Mayor. When the Aztecs founded their capital, they built a temple. Between 1325 and 1521, each Aztec ruler added a new outermost layer to the temple out of respect to the gods and to ensure that his reign would be immortalized within the great stone structure. This imposing structure lay at the ritual heart of the city. It was here that public rituals, including human sacrifice, took place. Like most buildings of the time, the Templo Mayor was covered in stucco, a type of plaster, and painted. Large sculptures further decorated the building.

Recognizing its importance to the Aztec people, after the conquest the Spanish quickly dismantled the Templo Mayor, and reused some of the stone in their construction of a cathedral, which still occupies one side of Mexico City's main square (or *zócalo*) today. They also

recorded their awe upon seeing this amazing building.

In 1978 workers carrying out routine maintenance work on electric-lighting equipment uncovered a large circular sculpture that was identified by archaeologists as a representation of the dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui, goddess of the moon. This find led to the eventual unearthing of the Templo Mayor's long-buried foundations. During the excavation, it was discovered that the preceding versions of the pyramid complex had been preserved intact with each subsequent ruler's rebuilding, and so archaeologists were able to identify seven different layers, peeling each away like an onion skin. Over 100 sacrificial deposits or offerings containing more than 6,000 objects have been discovered built into the structure.

154  
*Eagle warrior*  
Aztec,  
ca. 1440–69  
Fired clay, stucco, and paint,  
170 x 118 x 55 cm  
Museo del Templo Mayor,  
INAH, Mexico City 10-220366  
Photo: Michel Zabé, assistant  
Enrique Macías

The excavations of the Templo Mayor also yielded objects from older Mesoamerican cultures that the Aztecs had held in high regard. The exhaustive range of offerings suggests that the Aztecs created the Templo Mayor as a model of everything that could be found in the universe, both past and present. The organization of the four-sided temple structure is also thought to reflect the Aztec worldview, in which the earth is understood to be a disk, surrounded by water and divided into four quarters.

### **EAGLE WARRIOR**

The most prestigious military societies or orders were those of the eagle and the jaguar. These warriors wore either eagle or jaguar costumes. This life-size sculpture represents an eagle warrior. It is one of a pair that was found flanking a doorway to the chamber where the eagle warriors met, next to the Templo Mayor. The eagle was the symbol of the sun, to whom all sacrifices were offered. This is one of the finest examples of large, hollow ceramic sculptures ever found in the Valley of Mexico.

### **Discussion Questions**

- The eagle is one of the greatest predators in the skies. To the Aztec it represented the strength and bravery essential to a warrior. What characteristics do you associate with eagles?
- How do you imagine the jaguar warrior costumes looked? What characteristics would a jaguar warrior possess?

### **Further Explorations**

- Choose another animal and design a costume that utilizes its characteristics. What traits would this costume lend to its wearer?





## 4 Legendary Cultures — Aztec Ancestors

The Aztecs were not the first people to settle in Mexico. For 2,500 years before their arrival, the area had been home to many civilizations, including the Olmecs, Toltecs, and the people of Teotihuacan. The Aztecs were the last of these great cultures to settle there, and, as a result, were heavily influenced by the already established groups. In order to integrate themselves into the area, they adopted the native language, Nahuatl, and copied artistic styles and techniques from other Mesoamerican cultures. (Mesoamerica is the term used to describe the central region of the Americas inhabited by native civilizations before the arrival of the Spanish.) The warlike Aztecs also formed alliances with nearby communities to consolidate their military strength and expand their empire.

Perhaps the two greatest influences on Aztec art and culture came from the ancient cities of Teotihuacan and Tula. Before its decline in A.D. 700, Teotihuacan had been a wondrous city of about

200,000 people, with extensive temple complexes and specialized craft districts. Historically, it was a site of vital importance to the Aztecs, who revered it as the City of the Gods (“Teotihuacan”). They also incorporated a number of Teotihuacano gods into their pantheon (family of gods), including Tlaloc, the rain god, and Chalchiuhtlicue (“she of the jade skirt”), the goddess of lakes and streams. A principal deity, the ruler-priest known as Quetzalcoatl (“feathered serpent”), was adopted from the Toltecs.

Tula (“place of reeds”) and home to the Toltecs, thrived a few hundred years after Teotihuacan, and left a similarly influential legacy to later Mesoamerican cultures. The Aztecs believed the Toltecs were the founders of civilization and credited them with the invention of painting and sculpture. Aztec craftsmen held a privileged position in society, working for the nobility. Although they were extremely important, artists never signed their work, which was considered collective.

86  
Mask  
Teotihuacan,  
ca. 450,  
Stone, turquoise, obsidian,  
and shell,  
21.5 x 20 cm  
Museo Nacional de  
Antropología, INAH,  
Mexico City.  
Photo: Michel Zabé



The Aztecs took their inspiration from Teotihuacan, Tula, Mixtec, Olmec, and other ancient Mesoamerican cultures, adopting everything from stone-cutting techniques to calendar systems. The discovery of objects from other Mesoamerican cultures during the excavation of the Templo Mayor suggests that, Aztec rulers brought artists from other areas, including goldsmiths from the Mixteca (near present-day Oaxaca), to work in Tenochtitlan. Over time they would develop their own original style and iconography, which sprang from a uniquely Aztec perspective on warfare, religion and cosmology.

### **MASK**

This burial mask is from Teotihuacan, a distinctive civilization that reached its peak around the sixth century, five hundred years before the Aztecs migrated from northwestern Mexico. The skilled craftsmanship and the exquisite mosaic patterning would have been greatly admired by the Aztecs, as it is by people today. This mask is acknowledged as one of the great treasures of Pre-Hispanic art in Mesoamerica. Masks were commonly placed over mummy bundles to protect the deceased from the dangers of the afterlife. Made of stone, its surface is covered in bits of turquoise, obsidian, and shell.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Experts have determined that this mask was probably not meant to be worn by a living person, but was attached to a funerary bundle. What attributes of this mask lead to that conclusion?
- In Aztec society craftsmen passed their skills on to their sons, who took up their trade upon reaching manhood. What tools and skills and materials would have been required to make this mask? In contemporary society what skills are passed from parent to child?
- For hundreds of years, masks made from many different materials, have been fashioned by people in the Americas. Precolumbian people were known to use clay, gold, stone, obsidian, wood, bone, shell, turquoise, jade, hair, cloth, emerald, alabaster, coral, greenstone, diorite, onyx, and leather for masks. Where would they have found each of these materials?

- The technique of mosaic has been used for decoration in many cultures and continues to be popular today. Where have you seen the mosaic technique?



### **Further Explorations**

- Mosaics can be executed in a wide range of materials from paper to marble. Some readily available and inexpensive choices include seeds, pebbles, small shells, buttons and beads. There are many excellent books that provide step-by-step instructions on the design and execution of this decorative art form.

# 5 Mexican Bestiary

The great variety of sculpted animal forms, from minuscule fleas to large coiled serpents, highlight the importance of the natural world in both daily life and, more profoundly, in Aztec religious and cosmological beliefs. The Aztecs created carefully observed sculptures of domesticated animals such as turkeys and dogs, as well as wild coyotes, snakes, and jaguars. The intensity of their observations and their ability to create naturalistic forms are exemplified by the stone sculpture of an insect thought to be a flea. The Aztec artist has magnified this tiny creature many hundreds of times, so that features barely visible to the naked eye are fully discernible.

The Aztecs explained the distinguishing features and roles of different animals through elaborate and often entertaining myths. One such story tells how, when the moon was born, it was so bright that one of the gods threw a rabbit at its face to dull its glow. This is why, for the Aztecs, a full moon appears to contain the silhouette of a rabbit.

There are many examples in Aztec art in which gods such as Quetzalcoatl, the “feathered serpent,” take a hybrid form, in his case a snake-bird, combining the features or qualities of two animals to emphasize aspects of the deity’s mythical or supernatural powers.

## AGRICULTURE

In addition to the animals that they coexisted with, the Aztecs were also reliant on the plant world to provide food for sustenance and fibers from which to weave cloth, baskets, and mats. As Aztec society was largely agricultural, it was reliant on the weather, which was sometimes unpredictable or harsh. When the Aztecs first settled around Lake Tetzoco, farmland was relatively scarce and so they created floating fields called *chinampas*, which were arranged in a grid pattern with canals between each block. Here they cultivated pumpkins, avocados, and tomatoes (from the Nahuatl *aguacatl, tomatl*), sweet potatoes, chillies, and beans, as well as corn, which they used to



80  
Flea  
Aztec,  
ca. 1500  
Stone, 22 x 21.5 x 36.5 cm  
Museo Nacional de  
Antropología, INAH  
Mexico City,  
10-594039

make pancakes known as tortillas. The market – a bustling, vibrant, and noisy place central to Aztec daily life – was where farmers, traders, and craftsmen came to exchange their produce. One Spanish conquistador later commented: “We were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise it contained” (Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, 1580s). Valuable items such as gold dust, quetzal feathers, and cacao beans were used to barter for goods of equal value: turkeys, quail, rabbits, and deer; ducks and other water birds; maguey (cactus) syrup, and honey. Cacao beans were also used by the Aztecs to make a special chocolate drink, which only nobles could afford. Until the arrival of the Spanish in 1519, chocolate was unknown beyond the Americas.

### Discussion Questions

- As a class, generate a list of things you know about fleas. Look carefully at the sculpture. What other information about fleas can you learn from careful observation?
- Why might someone focus on something as tiny as a flea and create a sculpture of it magnified hundreds of times? Why might this theme have been important to Aztec artists? What animals are important in contemporary society? What artifacts might later explorers find from the 21st century that include references to animals?

### Further Explorations

- This sculpted flea, on a monumental scale, reflects the skill of Aztec stone carvers and their ability to capture minute details of insect anatomy using only stone tools. Both artists and scientists learn about the natural world through close observation. Select a small, complex natural object. A dead insect is best for this exercise, but a small flower or seed can also serve as a model. Closely observe your subject, using a magnifying glass if you have one. Then make a detailed drawing on a piece of paper that is at least 9 x 12 inches (larger is better). Your drawing should fill the entire page. Once you are done, make a list of the things you learned about your subject by drawing it.

- Students can experience the process of carving by using a soft material like a bar of soap or a potato. A butter knife, plastic or wooden clay tools, and toothpicks can be used as implements. Choose simple forms such as vegetables and fruits to model. The Aztecs created excellent examples in the form of pumpkins, squashes, and cacti carved from stone. This project is best done outdoors under adult supervision.
- Aztec gods such as Quetzalcoatl, the “feathered serpent,” frequently take a hybrid form, in his case a snake-bird, combining the features or qualities of two animals to emphasize aspects of the deity’s mythical or supernatural powers. What two animals would you combine to create a supernatural being? Sketch your creation and write a description of the qualities that this new creature would possess.





## 6 Peoples and Societies of the Aztec World

By examining Aztec sculptures depicting the human form, we see a vivid and immediately recognizable portrait of daily life in a thriving metropolis. In stone and clay sculptors have depicted an urbane people in an ascendant society in a variety of poses: standing, seated, kneeling, crouching, or wearing an elaborate headdress. Some are *stylized* such as fertility figures or figures of warriors; other like the stone sculpture of a hunchback (ca. 1500) are more *naturalistic*, savoring the particular.

Aztec artists rarely, if ever, created realistic portraits of individuals, instead they relied on a standard repertoire of figure types and poses: seated male figure, kneeling woman, standing nude. Since the primary function of Aztec art was to convey meaning, the imagery was conventionalized. Standardized types of human figures represented rulers, warriors, priests, and a kind of everyman for commoner figures. Deities were identified by their dress and other

accoutrements. Because Aztec sculpture was standardized, it is sometimes interpreted as being rigid, expressionless, stylized, conforming to a set artistic formula and established “rules” of representation.

At the same time, the Aztecs had an extensive and highly scientific understanding of the human body, and some Aztec sculptures are very naturalistic, displaying wrinkled foreheads, hunched backs, and gap-toothed grimaces as evidence that Aztec artists carefully observed their subjects.

Aztec artists did represent the human form in a wide variety of media and in a surprising range of styles. Among the most common representations in this exhibition are three-dimensional sculptures of the human form in stone and clay. These sculptures in the round represent commoners, warriors, gods, and goddesses.

13  
*Hunchback*  
Aztec,  
ca. 1500  
Stone, 33 x 17 x 12 cm  
Museo Nacional de  
Antropología, INAH,  
Mexico City 10-97  
Photo: Michel Zabé, assistant  
Enrique Macías



For the Aztecs, the human body and spirit were intimately linked to the natural and supernatural world around them, so the state of their own being could have a direct impact on their surroundings. The aim, in all aspects of Aztec life, was to maintain natural harmony. A balanced body and life ultimately led to a balanced society and universe. Therefore moderation was advised in everything and excesses avoided for fear of upsetting the cosmic equilibrium.

### **HUNCHBACK**

This old stone hunchback with his bony rib cage and short limbs is a particularly good example of the honest and often humorous realism for which Aztec artists are today admired. He wears a loincloth and sports the hairstyle characteristic of warriors, with a lock of hair tied with cotton tassels on the right side of his head.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What is meant by the words *stylized* and *naturalistic*? Are there aspects of this work that seem stylized? What are they? Which aspects seem more naturalistic? Explain.
- Compare this human figure with sculptural images of Aztec gods included in this guide. How do they differ? What are some reasons that they might be so different in appearance?

### **Further Explorations**

- Look through a magazine or newspaper and find examples of both naturalistic and stylized images. Discuss what attributes you considered in putting them in each category.
- Choose a single subject. It can be a person, but it can also be any other natural form, a flower, fruit, leaf, or animal. Create two works based on this subject, one stylized and the other naturalistic. The work can be three-dimensional or it can be a drawing. Which approach did you prefer? Why?



## 7 Noble Life and Everyday Life

Like many civilizations, Aztec society was hierarchical and a person's social position, and therefore one's way of life, was largely determined by birthright. Commoners worked as farmers, fishermen, or craftsmen. Noblemen served as government officials, scribes, and teachers. Although the class structure was reasonably rigid, some social mobility was possible through entry into the priesthood, achievement in warfare, or success in trade. The Aztec ruler, however, had to have been born into the right family. As the only figure allowed to wear the precious color turquoise, he lived in a sumptuous palace with spectacular gardens, a banqueting hall, a large zoo, and gold cutlery. Attended by an abundance of bodyguards and beautiful women (who had to approach him with downcast eyes and bare feet), the ruler possessed an almost godlike status. The ruler at the time of the Spanish invasion was the ninth Aztec emperor, Motecuhzoma II, who could trace his ancestry back to the first ruler, Acamapichtli. To maintain his luxurious lifestyle,

the great Motecuhzoma demanded one-third of everything his people produced in taxes. He also demanded regular payments, known as tribute, from the subjects of conquered provinces.

At the opposite end of the social hierarchy were peasant farmers, landless commoners, and slaves. They had few rights or luxuries and spent their lives growing crops for food and tribute. A privileged upper class was formed by nobles and priests, both of whom played an important role in government and lawmaking. The higher classes were distinguished by their fine decorated textiles and sandals, which were important symbols of rank. They lived in palatial complexes and enjoyed objects of the finest quality. Only nobles were allowed to wear clothes made of cotton, and they frequently adorned themselves with intricate ornaments – pendants, lip plugs, and earspools. Commoners wore clothes woven from the much coarser fiber of the maguey plant. Below the nobles were the merchants and skilled craftsmen.

401  
*Pendent in the shape of a warrior*  
Aztec,  
after 1325  
Cast gold-silver-copper alloy,  
11.2 x 6.1 cm  
The Cleveland Museum of Art,  
Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund  
1984.37  
Photo © The Cleveland  
Museum of Art

It was to this middle class that professional warriors belonged. Young boys would be educated at home by their parents until the age of 15, at which point they would either be trained in warfare or sent for priestly instruction in writing, philosophy, and astronomy. (Girls were educated at home until 15 as well, but then married.) Although already respected members of society, warriors could improve their rank by capturing an ever-greater number of victims, and were rewarded with increasingly impressive costumes and precious tribute items.

Although we tend to think of gold as the most precious of materials, as did the Spanish conquistadors, the Aztecs did not. They worked the gold into exquisite pieces of jewelry, but referred to it as the excrement of the gods. Perhaps surprisingly to us, the most venerated material was feathers. Brightly colored plumes were gathered, often from farmed birds, and sent to Tenochtitlan as tax payment or tribute. They were fashioned into objects of great

beauty, such as fans, shields, and headdresses. Featherworks were insignia of wealth and power, and an important element of the ritual outfit of warriors. Mosaics made of shell, turquoise, and other stones were also highly prized.

### Discussion Questions

- This figure represents a warrior who holds a serpent-headed spear-thrower in one hand and a shield, darts, and banner in the other. Experts believe that he represents someone of elite status. How can you tell that this warrior is part of a respected group within his society?
- Stone figures, clay pots, and jade ornaments are some of the objects that preserve our knowledge of Aztec civilization. What objects or images would you select to represent life today? Why do these objects serve as a valid representation of contemporary society?
- Although only nobles had objects made from precious metals and stones, all Aztec homes had small shrines to the gods that might help to protect the family. Do you have religious objects in your home? Describe what they are, where they are placed, and how they are used.

### Further Explorations

- Within Aztec society a person's status and social class were clearly delineated. Look through magazines and newspapers for indications of how people from various levels of contemporary society are depicted. Cut out your examples and have a class discussion about current indicators of status. What are contemporary "status symbols"?
- Read over the section above and write a parallel essay about social class and status in contemporary society.



# 8

## Gods and Rituals



311  
*Dead warrior brazier*  
Aztec, ca. 1500  
Fired clay and paint,  
91 x 76 x 57.5 cm  
Museo Nacional del  
Virreinato, INAH,  
Tepotztlán 10-133646  
Photo: Michel Zabé, assistant  
Enrique Macías

The Aztecs had hundreds of different gods and goddesses – one for every aspect of their lives. The various deities were believed to exert immense power and influence over everything people did and, as a result, were worshipped devoutly by all levels of society, both at domestic shrines and also in elaborate public rituals. These ceremonies, led by priests who often “became” gods during the ceremony, were highly theatrical and dramatic affairs, integrating festive dancing in fantastic costumes with bloody human sacrifice, which was thought to be necessary to continue and keep in balance the cycle of life and death.

Underlying Aztec religious beliefs was the Legend of the Suns, the explanation of the origin of the universe. According to legend, the universe had been created and destroyed four previous times, and each creation formed an age called a “sun.” The fifth epoch began in darkness. The gods gathered at Teotihuacan, and two of them sacrificed themselves by jumping

into a fire and rising as the sun and the moon. The remaining gods then sacrificed themselves, their blood setting the sun and moon in motion. From then on, the daily movement of the sun, and therefore the continuation of life itself, depended on the nourishment of the gods with human blood.

Although Aztec deities can be broadly divided into male and female, those of life and death, and those of creation and destruction, they were far more complex than being either purely good or evil. Many were dual in nature, incorporating a particular quality, gender or role, with its opposite. This duality (double nature) reflected one of the dominant principles of Aztec religion and thought: that the cosmos was organized into binary opposites, such as night and day, fire and water, cold and heat.

In many ways, Aztec gods and goddesses were just like ordinary men and women. They each had their own personality and well-defined role. Humans impersonated

the gods at religious ceremonies, becoming them for that time. Because the gods could transform themselves into earthly forms, almost everything was considered divine, from the lowliest insect to the largest mountain. Among the Aztec gods and goddesses was a supreme deity called Ometeotl (“two god”), who, as both female and male, was the embodiment of the Aztec idea of duality and was responsible for creating both humans and gods.

The Aztecs had no concept of heaven and hell as places of reward and punishment. Instead, they envisioned the cosmos as divided into layers, both above and below the earth, each of which received people who had died a particular death. If you had died by drowning or been struck by lightning, for example, you ended up on the celestial (heavenly) plane governed by Tlaloc, the rain god. The nine levels beneath the earth, collectively known as Mictlan (the underworld), were less welcoming and were where the majority of Aztecs went when

they died. Although it wasn’t quite as grim as the Christian concept of hell, the people banished here had to brave such hazards as clashing mountains and flying knives made from obsidian, a black volcanic glass that is so hard and sharp that the Aztecs used it to make swords.

In Aztec art, deities can be identified through a standard set of accoutrements, including dress, headwear, face markings, jewelry, or ornamentation, and other accessories such as weapons. Tezcatlipoca, for example, an ancient Mexican sorcerer and the god of night and destiny, is generally depicted with a black band across his nose and face and a withered foot that ends in a mirror made of obsidian. Tezcatlipoca’s name actually means “smoking mirror” and it was said that, with this instrument, he could see and control what was happening throughout the universe.

### DEIFIED WARRIOR BRAZIER

This ceremonial brazier, or fire pot, was discovered during the construction of the Metro in Mexico City, near where the Templo Mayor had previously stood. It depicts the fiercely expressive form of a warrior crossing the threshold of death, either killed in battle or sacrificed to the gods. Such a death was honorable and the souls of dead warriors went to their own celestial plane, where they were thought to accompany the sun on its daily path across the sky. The figure wears an enormous eagle helmet with an open beak, identified with eagle warriors, one of the most distinguished military orders that could be awarded to a brave Aztec fighter. The black, red, and yellow decoration and facial paint identify him as a patron of youthful energy and military victory, while the “halo of nine feathers” around the upper part of his face evokes the planes of the underworld. Like many other Aztec sculptures (and many buildings), this brazier would have been lit during religious ceremonies.

### Discussion Questions

- Which characteristics of this sculpture seem warrior-like? How would you depict a brave warrior who had been killed in a battle?
- Compare this figure with the other eagle warrior pictured in this guide. In what ways do people today honor the memory of those who have been killed in war?



### Further Explorations

- The exhibition contains many examples of vessels decorated with images of gods and people. With self-hardening clay create a vessel adorned with a personage. When dry, paint can be applied. Remember that self-hardening clay can never be used as a container for food.



# 9 Manuscripts and Calendars



335  
*Xiuhmolpilli (1 Death)*  
Aztec,  
ca. 1500  
Stone,  
l. 61 cm, diam. 26 cm,  
Museo Nacional de  
Antropología, INAH,  
Mexico City 10-220917  
Photo: Michel Zabé, assistant  
Enrique Macías

Aztecs were greatly concerned with the passage of time and devised sophisticated calendars and elaborate counting systems that regulated their religious, economic, political, and social lives. Two interrelated calendars were used to measure time. The 365-day solar or yearly calendar was closely linked to the seasons and to agricultural activities such as harvesting. It was made up of 18 “months” of 20 days (360). The remaining five days were tacked onto the end of each year and considered very unlucky. Each ‘month’ was dedicated to a particular deity and was distinguished by a different feast. Although it also regulated human activities, the 260-day ritual calendar was more religious in nature, particularly concerned with fate and destiny. This calendar consisted of two wheels, or rounds. One round had 13 numbered positions. The other had 20 positions, each with a named sign, such as rabbit, house, or crocodile. The interlocking of these two rounds produced a number-name for each day,

such as “1 Rabbi,” “2 Water,” or “3 Jaguar,” each of which was associated with a different fate. Aztec people were named after the day of the ritual calendar on which they were born. It was thought that the fate of this day would affect their personal destiny.

When the various numbers and signs of these two different calendars were integrated, they produced a combination that would occur once every 52 years and might be considered equivalent to our century. This was a time of terrifying uncertainty for the Aztecs. It was marked with a New Fire Ceremony. All fires were extinguished and household pots smashed, ready for renewal. Priests waited on the outskirts of Tenochtitlan. At midnight they lit a new fire in the chest cavity of a captive warrior, and its flame was distributed to temples and eventually to households. This ceremony epitomized the concept that out of human sacrifice came life, a sacred aspect of the duality of death and rebirth.

### XIUHMOLPILLI

The *xiuhmolpilli*, meaning “year bundle,” is a stone monument created to commemorate a New Fire Ceremony. As its name suggests, it represents a bundle of 52 reeds, tied with rope and covered with a symbol of the final year. During the ceremony, 52 of these bundles were burned.

The Aztecs believed that the world had already been created and destroyed four times before, and that their Fifth World was also doomed. It was thought that this ritual of renewal would prevent the destruction of the world a fifth time. The last New Fire Ceremony before the arrival of the Spanish took place in 1507.

### Discussion Questions

- When the millennium year 2000 was approaching, there were speculations about possible catastrophes, as well as major celebrations. Research both aspects of the commemoration of the recent millennium. How did contemporary observances parallel or differ from Aztec traditions?
- In many ways the description of Aztec beliefs about the fate of people being determined by the calendar seems similar to astrology. Do you believe that the month, day, and time when a person is born affects their fate? Do you think there are lucky and unlucky days? Explain your answer.
- This stone monument commemorated a special ceremonial event in the lives of the Aztecs. What special events have occurred during your lifetime? How have they been commemorated?

### Further Explorations

- The end of each 52-year Aztec “century” was considered a period of terrible danger when the world could come to an end. No one was sure if the sun would rise again. Although today we may view such beliefs as irrational, superstition continues to pervade, even in contemporary culture. With your class, brainstorm a list of superstitions. Some examples include, “Friday the thirteenth,” and “the curse of the Bambino.” Research and report on the history behind these ideas and why they continue.





# 10 Cultures Subjugated By the Aztecs



526  
*Life-Death figure (Apotheosis)*  
Huastec,  
ca. 900 – 1250  
Stone,  
158 x 67 x 22.9 cm  
Brooklyn Museum of Art,  
Henry L. Batterman Fund and  
the Frank Sherman Benson  
Fund, 37.2897PA  
Photo © Brooklyn Museum  
of Art

From the 14th through 16th centuries Aztecs dominated central and southern Mexico and established an elaborate and wide-ranging empire. As the Aztecs grew in number, they developed superior military and civil organizations.

The Aztecs formed military alliances with other groups, creating an empire that extended from central Mexico to the Guatemalan border. By the end of the reign of Motecuhzoma II in 1520, 38 tributary provinces had been established; however, some of the tribes at the fringes of the Aztec empire remained fiercely independent.

Aztec rulers approached war somewhat differently than we do today. There were varied reasons for warfare. An insult, a tribute that had not been paid or an attack on Aztec traders could trigger a military response. The Aztecs did not launch surprise attacks, nor did they fight during certain seasons or at night. Declarations of war began by sending

ambassadors to the city they planned to attack. They would ask the city leaders to become allies by paying tribute, trading with the Aztecs, and putting a statue of their god Huitzilopochtli in their temple. They had twenty days to decide whether they would comply. If the city refused, more ambassadors arrived. This time the talk was tougher, less about the advantages of joining the Aztecs and more about the destruction and death, which came to any city that did not submit. To show how confident they were about the outcome of any future war, the Aztecs gave the enemy chief weapons, and more warnings. If this did not work, a third embassy arrived twenty days later. Polite talk was replaced by bloodcurdling threats about what would happen after the city lost the war. This included destruction of the city's temple, enslavement of population, and a promise that crippling tribute would be demanded for years to come. If the city still refused to join the Aztecs, the war began. Through all of these negotiations,

the Aztecs had time to gain information and plan how to best attack the city. Priests decided on the luckiest day to start the battle, soldiers prepared for war, the army set out, and the battles began. Usually the Aztecs won quickly. They took as many prisoners as possible for sacrifice, destroyed the local temples and decided on the tribute to be paid. Then they made the local people worship Huitzilopochtli and respect the Aztec emperor. Tribute was paid regularly, or else another battle would occur.

#### Discussion Questions

- How do Aztec war tactics and strategies differ from those used today? Are there parts that seem effective? Ineffective? If you were counseling the Aztecs on military strategy, what suggestions would you make?
- If you were part of a neighboring group what tactics would you suggest to avoid being conquered?

#### LIFE – DEATH FIGURE

This Life – Death figure was created by the Huastec, a people who were defeated by the Aztec armies around 1450 and henceforth paid tribute to the Aztec empire. It is an excellent embodiment of a concept that ran through Mesoamerican cultures; the concept of duality. This life-size sculpture represents a youthful male wearing ornaments and a cloth knotted around his waist, but when we examine the other side of this figure we find a skeletal figure with its rib cage and internal organs exposed.

The Huastec language is still spoken in Mexico today, especially in rural areas, and the people retain characteristic traditions in their music and dance. It is estimated that the Huastec population in Mexico numbers approximately 80,000 people.

#### Discussion Questions

- Divide the class into two groups. Each group should compose a list of words that describe one side of the sculpture. When complete, post both lists. Are there words in each list that can be combined to demonstrate the concept of duality? Are there other combinations that suggest other qualities in this sculpture?
- Are some dualities still part of our contemporary life? Do you feel this concept is still important or has it been replaced by other ideas. Explain.

#### Further Explorations

- Although we see the front and back of this work in the photograph, make a drawing that shows how it might look from the side – in profile. If you are visiting the museum during the exhibition, bring the drawing with you, so that you can compare your conception with your observations in the gallery.
- Consider the concept of duality and create a drawing, poem, essay, sculpture, or other personal expression of this pervasive theme.





## The Tarascan Empire



625  
*Chacmool*  
Tarascan,  
ca. 1250–1521  
Stone,  
84 x 150 x 48 cm  
Museo Nacional de  
Antropología, INAH,  
Mexico City 10-1609  
Photo: Michel Zabé, assistant  
Enrique Macías

To the west, the Purepecha people, called Tarascan by the Spanish, flourished from 1100 to 1530. The center of the Tarascan Empire was their capital city of Tzintzuntzan. From this religious and administrative center, the Tarascans waged war against their enemies, the Aztecs.

Products such as honey, cotton, feathers, salt, gold, and copper were highly prized by the Tarascans. Neighboring regions that possessed these commodities quickly became a primary target of their military expansion. When conquered, the peoples of these regions were expected to pay tributes of material goods to the Tarascan lord.

The Aztecs attempted more than once to conquer the Tarascan lands, but never succeeded. This left the Aztecs with a major rival on their western border. In combat they repeatedly suffered grievous losses to the Tarascan armies. For example, in 1478 the ruling Aztec lord, Axayacatl, marched against the Tarascans. He found his army

of 24,000 confronted by an opposing force of more than 40,000 Tarascan warriors. A ferocious battle went on all day. Many of the Aztec warriors were badly wounded by arrows, stones, spears, and sword thrusts. The following day, the Aztecs were forced to retreat, having suffered the loss of more than half of their elite warriors.

The arrival of the Spanish captain Hernán Cortés and his men on the east coast of Mexico in April 1519 led to the end of both the Aztec and the Tarascan Empires. Knowing that the Spaniards were on their way to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs sent emissaries to the Tarascans to ask for help. Instead of providing assistance, they sacrificed the Aztec messengers. Tenochtitlan fell in 1521 after a bloody siege. The Tarascans' turn came in 1522. The last Tarascan king, Tangaxoan II, offered little resistance. Once he submitted, all the other Tarascan realms surrendered peacefully. After the conquest, Spanish missionaries organized the



Tarascan Empire into a series of craft-oriented villages, and today the area abounds with craftspeople skilled in wood, copper, cloth, and clay.

Why isn't the Tarascan empire better known? Unlike the Aztecs, the Tarascans left no personal documentary histories. Without the assistance of Spanish missionary-historians dedicated to writing down their story, much of their history was lost. However, archaeological excavations and a significant body of pottery, copper, and stone objects affords us a glimpse into the lives of this strong and highly developed civilization.

### Discussion Question

- With new technologies there are many ways to preserve history. Name some of the institutions and technologies that help preserve history for future generations. Also consider ways that even today important histories can be lost or obliterated.

### CHACMOOL

The term *chacmool* refers to a style of sculpture, representing a male figure in a specific pose: seated on the ground with its upper back raised, the head is turned to a near right angle, the legs are drawn up, elbows rest on the ground. The receptacle held on the stomach is thought to be for sacrificial offerings. Chacmool figures have been found at temples throughout Mesoamerica suggesting that this sculptural form was important to several civilizations, including Mayan, Toltec, Aztec, and Tarascan.

### Discussion Question

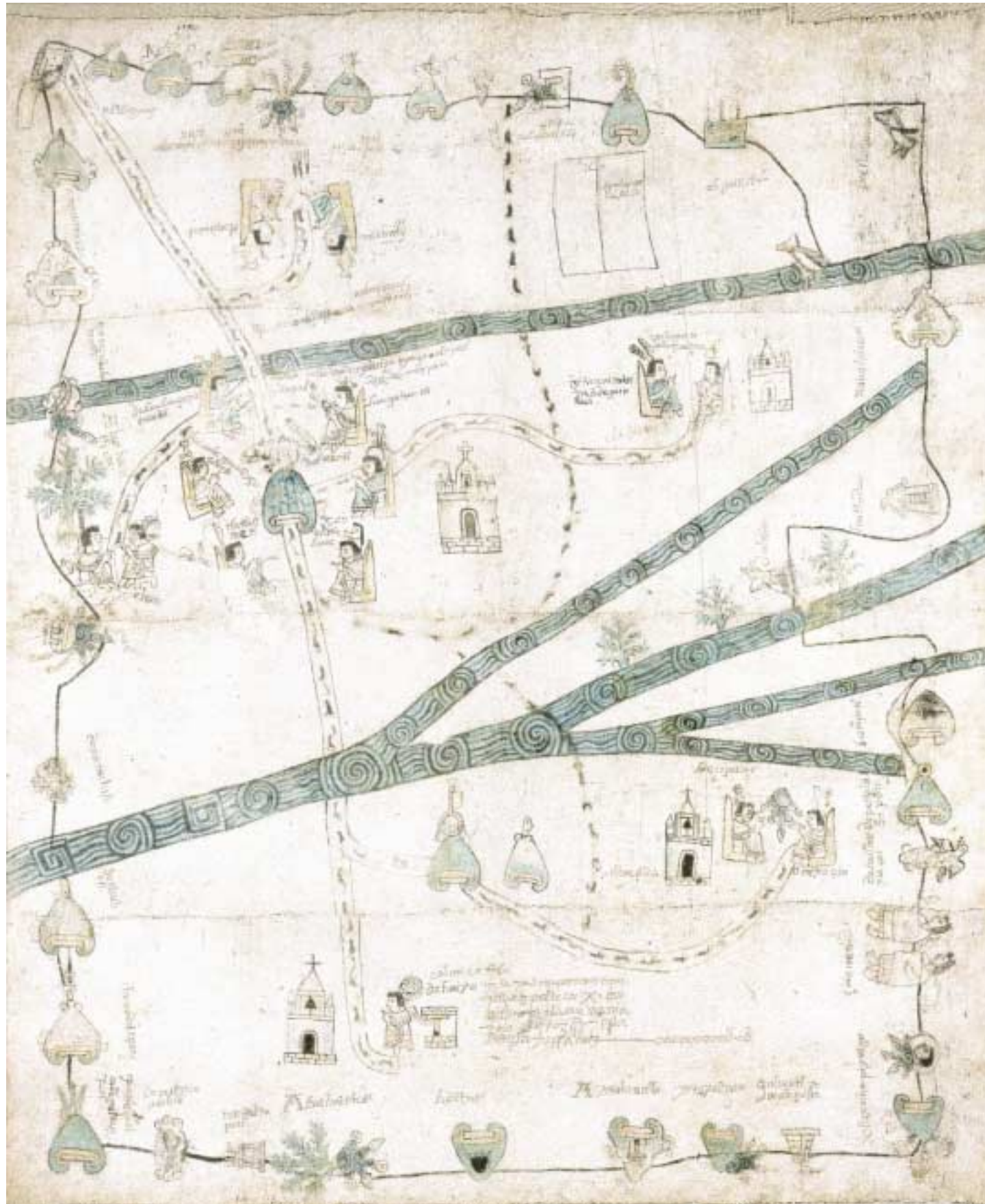
- The style of this Tarascan figure differs from those of the Aztecs. Choose another figure in this guide and compare and contrast the style of the two works.
- Take the pose of the chacmool figure. Describe how it feels to assume this pose. What areas of your body are in tension? Even though you are reclining, do you feel relaxed? What words can you find to describe your associations with this pose?



### Further Explorations

- Although they display a similar pose, chacmool figures in different styles have been found in many Mesoamerican cultures. Research other chacmool figures and, using that information, design one that you think might be discovered in future archaeological excavations.

# 12 The Twilight of the Empire



598  
*Lienzo de Quetzpálan*  
Colonial-Puebla,  
late 16th century  
Cotton and pigments,  
154 x 183 x 53 cm  
Fundación Cultural Televisa,  
Mexico City REG 21 PJ 403  
Photo: Michel Zabé, assistant  
Enrique Macías

On November 8, 1519, the Aztec world changed forever when a group of Spanish conquistadores, led by Hernán Cortés, arrived at Tenochtitlan to meet Motecuhzoma II. The ninth Aztec ruler had known of the impending arrival of white men from the east for a number of years and had sent messengers to the Gulf Coast to bring news of these strangers, whose approaching ships appeared to the Aztecs as houses floating on the sea. Upon his arrival, Motecuhzoma invited Cortés to Tenochtitlan, perhaps in the belief that he was Quetzalcoatl, the ruler-priest and god who had been banished and who, according to legend, would return from the east.

Cortés and Motecuhzoma met on one of the causeways that linked Tenochtitlan to the mainland. Here they exchanged words and gifts. Treated like gods, the Spanish were welcomed in Tenochtitlan, a city whose beauty and sophistication overwhelmed them. They were uncertain of Motecuhzoma's intentions however, and, aware that they were

outnumbered, they soon betrayed the Aztec ruler and took him hostage. In response, the Aztecs attacked the Spaniards, resulting in a war in which both sides sustained heavy casualties. Motecuhzoma died during the fighting, possibly killed by his own people as they threw stones at the conquistadores. In desperation, the Spanish finally fled the city by moonlight on late June 1520, an occasion that has come to be known as the Noche Triste (Sad Night) by the Spanish.

The following year a 900-strong Spanish army returned, beginning a nearly 3-month-long siege that claimed many Aztec lives through intense fighting, starvation, and disease. After fierce resistance, the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan finally fell to Cortés on August 13, 1521.

The Spanish conquest can be attributed to several factors, among them were their superior weapons, which included firearms and steel swords, and their military tactics, which, unlike Aztec warfare,

focused on actually killing the enemy (rather than capturing them alive to be sacrificed to the gods later). Cortés also exploited underlying tensions between Tenochtitlan and other cities. He was helped in his negotiations with the Aztecs by an interpreter, an indigenous woman, Malintzin, whom the Spaniards renamed Marina and is known today in Mexico as La Malinche.

As might be expected considering the conviction with which they had practiced their own religion previously, the Aztecs' conversion to Christianity was a slow and gradual process. For a while, the two religions existed somewhat uneasily together as the Aztecs were forced to relinquish their many gods and goddesses in favor of one supreme deity. Despite the eventual success of the Christian mission, some Aztec idols were still being worshipped more than 300 years later.

### Further Explorations

- The meeting between Cortés and Motecuhzoma II marked the encounter between two different civilizations who knew little of each other. Divide the class in half: one half will represent how Motecuhzoma II and his armies saw the invaders; the rest should imagine themselves as the Spanish expedition. Write scripts that demonstrate disparate points of view, and then stage a meeting envisioning what took place in November 1519, along the causeway leading to the Aztec capitol.

### CODICES

Much of what we know about the Aztecs comes from their beautiful, hand-painted manuscripts, or codices (singular: codex).

In their codices, Aztec painter-scribes used a form of picture writing, which resembled the ancient Egyptians' hieroglyphics or the modern-day comic. This "writing" included pictograms, phonetic signs, religious emblems, and even mathematical symbols.

During the initial years of Spanish rule, many codices were destroyed, especially those that documented Aztec rituals. Today only a few pre-Hispanic painted books from Mexico survive.

This codex, known as the Lienzo of Quetzpалан, was produced as part of a large-scale geographic survey of Mexico ordered by the Spanish government in the 1570s.

### Discussion Questions

- Examine the page from the codex, Lienzo of Quetzpалан. How many symbols (glyphs) can you decipher? Which symbols are difficult to equate with a meaning? Try to construct a narrative that describes what is being depicted.



### Further Explorations

- To practice communicating using glyphs, try a game of Pictionary® (picture charades). Divide the class in half. Each team should write a set of secret words that the other team will try to guess. Movie, play, and song titles are some possible categories. A player tries to draw symbols that will get their team to guess correctly. No talking or written words allowed.
- Many codices document historical information and events. Choose a subject and create a set of graphic symbols (glyphs) to illustrate your codex.



**CACAO** Chocolate.

**CALPULLI** (cal-PUL-li) A form of kin-based communal living practiced in Tenochtitlan.

**CAUSEWAYS** Raised roads or pathways across water.

**CHINAMPAS** (chi-NAM-pahs) Aztec floating gardens made from reclaimed swampland.

**CODEX** An Aztec book of picture symbols. The plural is codices.

**EMPIRE** A group of countries or states, ruled by a single government or emperor.

**GLYPH** A picture symbol standing for a word or idea.

**HUITZILPOCHTLI** (huit-zi-lo-POCHT-li) Sun god and god of war.

**MAGUEY** (MA-guey) A type of cactus plant that provided cloth and food for the Aztecs.

**MESOAMERICA** Term used to describe the central region of the Americas inhabited by native civilizations before the arrival of the Spanish.

**MEXICAS** (Mah-SHEE-kahs) People of the Aztec empire.

**MICHLANTECUHTLI** (mict-lan-te-CUH-tli) Lord of Mictlan, the underworld.

**MOSAIC** A design made from small pieces of stone or colored glass.

**MOTECUHZOMA II** (mo-te-cuh-ZO-ma) The ninth Aztec ruler at the time of the Conquest.

**NOBLE** A person of high birth, such as a lord.

**NAHUATL** (NAH-hua-tl) The language spoken by the Aztecs and still spoken today by some groups of Central Highland Mexico. Avocado (*aguacatl*) and tomato (*tomatl*) are Nahuatl words.

**NATURALISTIC** The suggestion, in a work of art, of the direct observation of a scene or figure.

**OBSIDIAN** Hard volcanic glass that the Aztecs used for weapon blades.

**PRECOLUMBIAN** The period of time before the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the New World in 1492.

**QUETZALCOATL** (quet-zal-CO-a-tl) "Feathered serpent," important pan-Mesoamerican deity.

**SACRIFICE** To kill an animal or person as an offering to the gods.

**SCRIBE** A person who writes documents and books by hand.

**STYLIZED** The simplification or generalization of forms found in nature.

**TEMPLO MAYOR** (TEM-plo may-OR) The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan.

**TENOCHTITLAN** (Te-noch-TIT-lan) The capital city of the Aztec empire.

**TLALOC** (TLA-loc) God of rain.

**TRIBUTE** A type of tax paid in food and other goods.

**UNDERWORLD** The place where the Aztecs believed people went when they died.

**XIPE TOTEC** (Shee-pe TOH-tec) God of renewal and rebirth.



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Provides audio pronunciation for selected Aztec gods and Nahuatl words

### Videos

*In Search of History: The Aztec Empire*

New York: A&E Television Networks, 1997

Color, 50 min

*Empires of the Americas: A Journey Back in Time*

New Jersey: Kultur, 2000

Color, 50 min

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