

The Aztecs

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. The Aztecs built a rich and powerful empire in central Mexico.
2. Life in the empire was shaped by social structure, religion, and warfare.
3. Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztec Empire in 1521.

The Big Idea

The strong Aztec Empire, founded in central Mexico in 1325, lasted until the Spanish conquest in 1521.

Key Terms and People

causeways, p. 474

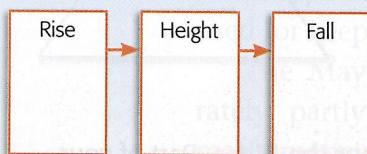
conquistadors, p. 478

Hernán Cortés, p. 478

Moctezuma II, p. 478

TAKING NOTES

As you read, take notes on the founding of the Aztec Empire, life in the empire at its height, and the fall of the Aztec Empire. Use a diagram like the one here to help you organize your notes.



If YOU were there...

You live in a village in southeast Mexico that is ruled by the powerful Aztec Empire. Each year your village must send the emperor many baskets of corn. You have to dig gold for him, too. One day some pale, bearded strangers arrive by sea. They want to overthrow the emperor, and they ask for your help.

Should you help the strangers? Why or why not?

BUILDING BACKGROUND The Aztecs ruled a large empire in Mesoamerica. Each village they conquered had to contribute heavily to the Aztec economy. This system helped create a mighty state, but one that did not inspire loyalty.

The Aztecs Build an Empire

The first Aztecs were farmers who migrated from the north to central Mexico. Finding the good farmland already occupied, they settled on a swampy island in the middle of Lake Texcoco (tays-KOH-koh). There, in 1325, they began building their capital and conquering nearby towns.

War was a key factor in the Aztecs' rise to power. The Aztecs fought fiercely and demanded tribute payments from the people they conquered. The cotton, gold, and food that poured in as a result became vital to their economy. The Aztecs also controlled a huge trade network. Merchants carried goods to and from all parts of the empire. Many merchants doubled as spies, keeping the rulers informed about what was happening in their lands.

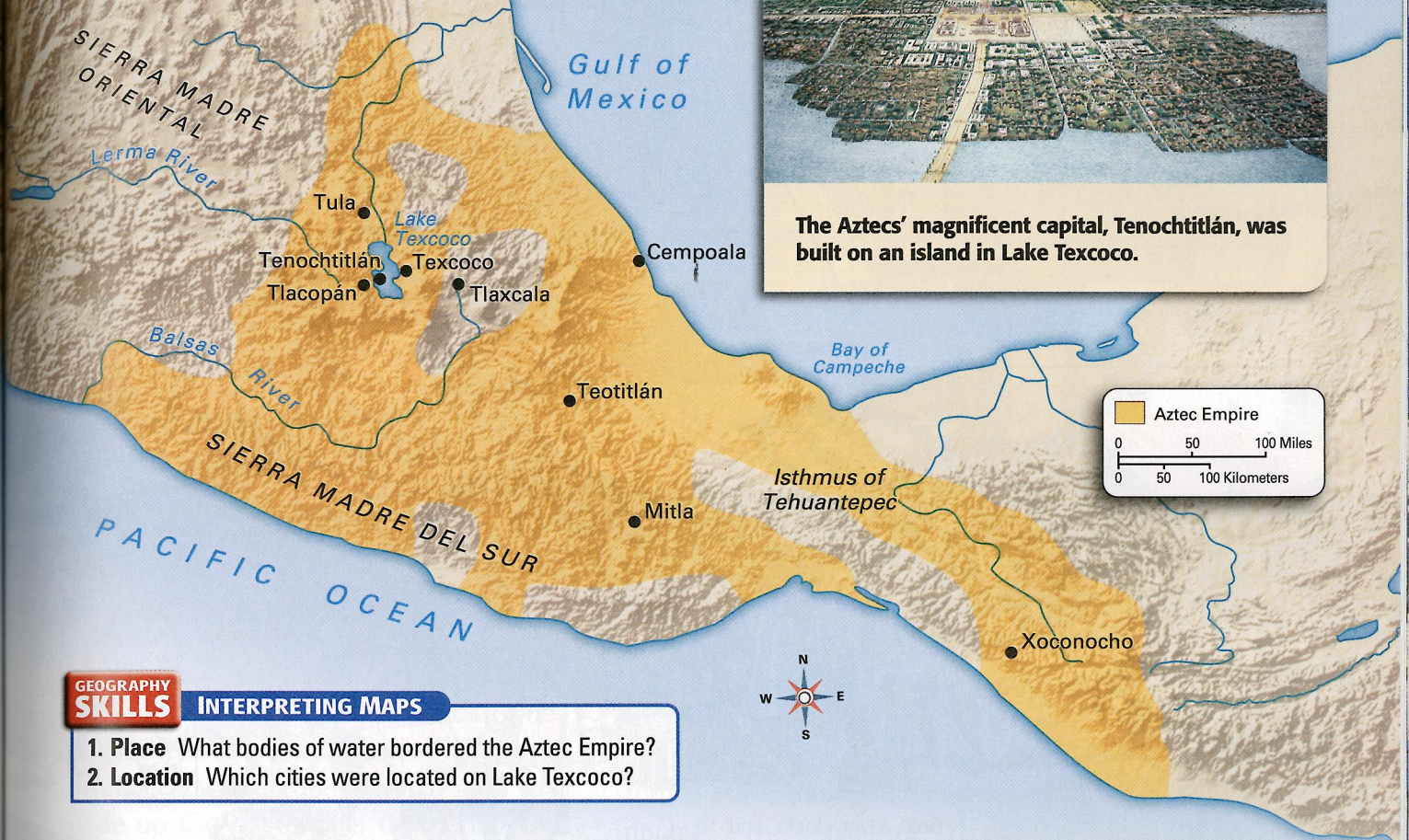
War, tribute, and trade made the Aztec Empire strong and rich. By the early 1400s the Aztecs ruled the most powerful state in Mesoamerica. Nowhere was the empire's greatness more visible than in its capital, Tenochtitlán (tay-NAWCH-teet-LAHN).

To build this amazing island city, the Aztecs first had to overcome many geographic challenges. One problem was difficulty getting to and from the city. The Aztecs addressed this challenge by building three wide **causeways**—raised roads across water or wet ground—to connect the island to the lake shore.

The Aztec Empire



The Aztecs' magnificent capital, Tenochtitlán, was built on an island in Lake Texcoco.



GEOGRAPHY SKILLS

INTERPRETING MAPS

1. **Place** What bodies of water bordered the Aztec Empire?
2. **Location** Which cities were located on Lake Texcoco?

They also built canals that crisscrossed the city. The causeways and canals made travel and trade much easier.

Tenochtitlán's island location also limited the amount of land available for farming. To solve this problem, the Aztecs created floating gardens called *chinampas* (chee-NAHM-pahs). They piled soil on top of large rafts, which they anchored to trees that stood in the water.

The Aztecs made Tenochtitlán a truly magnificent city. Home to some 200,000 people at its height, it had huge temples, a busy market, and a grand palace.

READING CHECK **Finding Main Ideas** How did the Aztecs rise to power?

Life in the Empire

The Aztecs' way of life was as distinctive as their capital city. They had a complex social structure, a demanding religion, and a rich culture.

Aztec Society

The Aztec emperor, like the Maya king, was the most important person in society. From his great palace, he attended to law, trade, tribute, and warfare. Trusted nobles helped him as tax collectors, judges, and other government officials. Noble positions were passed down from fathers to sons, and young nobles went to school to learn their responsibilities.

THE IMPACT TODAY

Mexico's capital, Mexico City, is located where Tenochtitlán once stood.

Tenochtitlán

The Aztecs turned a swampy, uninhabited island into one of the largest and grandest cities in the world. The first Europeans to visit Tenochtitlán were amazed. At the time, the Aztec capital was about five times bigger than London.

The Great Temple stood at the heart of the city. On top of the temple were two shrines—a blue shrine for the rain god and a red shrine for the sun god.



Gold, silver, cloaks, and precious stones were among the many items sold at the market.

A network of canals linked different parts of the city.

Aztec farmers grew crops on "floating gardens" called *chinampas*.

ANALYSIS SKILL ANALYZING VISUALS

What is the most important building in this picture? How can you tell?



Aztec Arts: Ceremonial Jewelry

Aztec artists were very skilled. They created detailed and brightly colored items. This double-headed serpent was probably worn during religious ceremonies. The man on the right is wearing it on his chest.



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



Just below the emperor and his nobles was a class of warriors and priests. Warriors were highly respected and had many privileges, but priests were more influential. They led religious ceremonies, passed down history, and, as keepers of the calendars, decided when to plant and harvest.

The next level of Aztec society included merchants and artisans. Below them, in the lower class, were farmers and laborers, who made up the majority of the population. Many didn't own their land, and they paid so much in tribute that they often found it tough to survive. Only slaves, at the very bottom of society, struggled more.

Religion and Warfare

Like the Maya, the Aztecs worshipped many gods who were believed to control both nature and human activities. To please the gods, Aztec priests regularly made human sacrifices. Most victims were battle captives or slaves. In ritual ceremonies, priests would slash open their victims' chests to "feed" human hearts and blood to the gods. The Aztecs sacrificed as many as 10,000 people a year. To supply enough victims, Aztec warriors waged frequent battles with neighboring peoples.

Cultural Achievements

As warlike as the Aztecs were, they also appreciated art and beauty. Architects and sculptors created fine stone pyramids and statues. Artisans used gold, gems, and bright feathers to make jewelry and masks. Women embroidered colorful designs on the cloth they wove.

The Aztecs valued learning as well. They studied astronomy and devised a calendar much like the Maya one. They took pride in their history and kept detailed written records. They also had a strong oral tradition. Stories about ancestors and the gods were passed from one generation to the next. The Aztecs also enjoyed fine speeches and riddles such as these:

"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.

READING CHECK Identifying Cause and

Effect How did their religious practices influence Aztec warfare?

Cortés Conquers the Aztecs

In the late 1400s the Spanish arrived in the Americas, seeking adventure, riches, and converts to Catholicism. One group of **conquistadors** (kahn-kees-tuh-DOHRZ), or Spanish conquerors, reached Mexico in 1519. Led by **Hernán Cortés** (er-NAHN kawr-TAYS), their **motives** were to find gold, claim land, and convert native peoples.

The Aztec emperor, **Moctezuma II** (MAWK-tay-SOO-mah), cautiously welcomed the strangers. He believed Cortés to be the god Quetzalcoatl (ket-suhl-kuh-WAH-tuhl), whom the Aztecs believed had left Mexico long ago. According to legend, the god had promised to return in 1519.

Moctezuma gave the Spaniards gold and other gifts, but Cortés wanted more. He took the emperor prisoner, enraging the Aztecs, who attacked the Spanish. They managed to drive out the conquistadors, but Moctezuma was killed in the fighting.

Within a year, Cortés and his men came back. This time they had help from other Indians in the region who resented the Aztecs' harsh rule. In addition, the Spanish had better weapons, including armor, cannons, and swords. Furthermore, the Aztecs were terrified of the enemy's big horses—animals they had never seen before. The Spanish had also unknowingly brought deadly diseases such as smallpox to the Americas. These diseases weakened or killed thousands of native people. In 1521 the Aztecs surrendered. Their once mighty empire came to a swift end.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

motive
reason for doing something

READING CHECK **Summarizing** What factors helped the Spanish defeat the Aztecs?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW The Aztec Empire, made strong by warfare and tribute, fell to the Spanish in 1521. Next you will learn about another empire in the Americas, that of the Incas.

Section 2 Assessment

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Online Quiz

KEYWORD: SNG HP16

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Recall** Where and when did Aztec civilization develop?

b. Explain How did the Aztecs in Tenochtitlán adapt to their island location?

c. Elaborate How might Tenochtitlán's location have been both a benefit and a hindrance to the Aztecs?
- a. Recall** What did the Aztecs feed their gods?

b. Rate Consider the roles of the emperor, warriors, priests, and others in Aztec society. Who do you think had the hardest role? Explain.
- a. Identify** Who was **Moctezuma II**?

b. Make Generalizations Why did allies help **Cortés** defeat the Aztecs?

c. Predict The Aztecs vastly outnumbered the **conquistadors**. If the Aztecs had first viewed Cortés as a threat rather than a god, how might history have changed?

Critical Thinking

- 4. Evaluating** Draw a diagram like the one shown. Use your notes to identify three factors that contributed to the Aztecs' power. Put the factor you consider most important first, and put the least important last. Explain your choices.

1.	2.	3.
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FOCUS ON WRITING

- 5. Describing the Aztec Empire** Tenochtitlán would certainly be described in your article. Make notes about how you would describe Tenochtitlán. Be sure to explain the causeways, *chinampas*, and other features. What activities went on in the city? Your article should also describe the events that occurred when the Spanish discovered the Aztec capital. Make notes on the fall of the Aztec Empire.