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## The aztec empire was located in the valley of

Learning Objective Describe distinguishing factors of Aztec life Key Points The Aztec “empire” was more of a collection of city-states than an empire. Mexico City today is built on the ruins of Tenochtitlan, which was the capital of the Aztec empire. Agriculture played a key role in the Aztec civilization. Irrigation and floating garden beds allowed people to grow several crops a year. Small, mostly independent city-states that often paid tribute to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Nahuatl The language spoken by the Mexica people who made up the Aztec Triple Alliance, as well as many city-states throughout the region. flower wars The form of ritual war where warriors from the Triple Alliance fought with enemy Nahua city-states. The Aztecs were a pre-Columbian Mesoamerican people of Central Mexico in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. They called themselves Mexica. The Republic of Mexico and its capital, Mexico City, derive their names from the word “Mexica.” The capital of the Aztec empire was Tenochtitlan, built on a raised island in Lake Texcoco. Modern Mexico City is built on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. From the 13th century, the Valley of Mexico was the heart of Aztec civilization; here the capital of the Aztec Triple Alliance, the city of Tenochtitlan, was built upon raised islets in Lake Texcoco. The Triple Alliance was comprised of Tenochtitlan along with their main allies of Acolhuas of Texcoco and Tepanecs of Tiacopan. They formed a tributary empire expanding its political hegemony far beyond the Valley of Mexico, conquering other city-states throughout Mesoamerica. At its pinnacle, Aztec culture had rich and complex mythological and religious traditions, and reached remarkable architectural and artistic accomplishments. In 1521 Hernán Cortés, along with a large number of Nahuatl-speaking indigenous allies, conquered Tenochtitlan and defeated the Aztec Triple Alliance under the leadership of Hueyi Tlatoani Moctezuma II. Subsequently the Spanish founded the new settlement of Mexico City on the site of the ruined Aztec capital, from where they proceeded to colonize Central America. Basin in the Valley of Mexico. Circa 1519, at the time of the arrival of the Spanish. Politics The Aztec empire was an example of an empire that ruled by indirect means. Like most European empires, it was ethnically very diverse, but unlike most European empires, it was more of a system of tribute than a single system of government. Although the form of government is often referred to as an empire, in fact most areas within the empire were organized as city-states, known as “altepetl” in Nahuatl. These were small polities ruled by a king (tlatoani) from a legitimate dynasty. Two of the primary architects of the Aztec empire were the half-brothers Tlacaélel and Montezuma I, nephews of Itzcoatl. Moctezuma I succeeded Itzcoatl as Hueyi Tlatoani (or king) in 1440. Although he was also offered the opportunity to be tlatoani, Tlacaélel preferred to operate as the power behind the throne. Tlacaélel focused on reforming the Aztec state and religious practices. According to some sources, he ordered the burning of most of the extant Aztec books, claiming that they contained lies. He thereupon rewrote the history of the Aztec people, thus creating a common awareness of history for the Aztecs. This rewriting led directly to the curriculum taught to scholars, and promoted the belief that the Aztecs were always a powerful and mythic nation—forgetting forever a possible true history of modest origins. One component of this reform was the institution of ritual war (the flower wars) as a way to have trained warriors, and the necessity of constant sacrifices to keep the Sun moving. Economics The Aztec economy can be divided into a political sector, under the control of nobles and kings, and a commercial sector that operated independently of the political sector. The political sector of the economy centered on the control of land and labor by kings and nobles. Nobles owned all land, and commoners got access to farmland and other fields through a variety of arrangements, from rental through sharecropping to serf-like labor and slavery. These payments from commoners to nobles supported both the lavish lifestyles of the high nobility and the finances of city-states. Many luxury goods were produced for consumption by nobles. The producers of featherwork, sculptures, jewelry, and other luxury items were full-time commoner specialists who worked for noble patrons. Several forms of money were in circulation, most notably the cacao bean. These beans could be used to buy food, staples, and cloth. Around thirty beans would purchase a rabbit, while one father was recorded as selling his daughter for around 200 cacao beans. The Aztec rulers also maintained complex road systems with regular stops to rest and eat every ten miles or so. Couriers walked these roads regularly to ensure they were in good working order and to bring news back to Tenochtitlan. Aztec headdress. The feathers most likely came from a tropical rainforest far away, and the headdress was probably owned by an elite or noble. Trade also formed a central part of Aztec life. While local commoners regularly paid tribute to the nobles a few times a year, there was also extensive trade with other regions in Mesoamerica. Archeological evidence shows that jade, obsidian, feathers, and shells reached the capital through established trade routes. Rulers and nobles enjoyed wearing these more exotic goods and having them fashioned into expressive headdresses and jewelry. Architecture and Agriculture The capital of Tenochtitlan was divided into four even sections called campans. All of these sections were interlaced together with a series of canals that allowed for easy transportation throughout the islets of Lake Texcoco. Commoner housing was usually built of reeds or wood, while noble houses and religious sites were constructed from stone. Agriculture played a large part in the economy and society of the Aztecs. They used dams to implement irrigation techniques in the valleys. They also implemented a raised bed gardening technique by layering mud and plant vegetation in the lake in order to create moist gardens. These raised beds were called chinampas. These extremely fertile beds could harvest seven different crops each year. Some of the most essential crops in Aztec agriculture included: Avocados Beans Squash Sweet Potatoes Maize Tomatoes Amaranth Chillies Cotton Cacao beans Most farming occurred outside of the busy heart of Tenochtitlan. However, each family generally had a garden where they could grow maize, fruits, herbs, and medicinal plants on a smaller scale. The Aztec Empire is among the most famous Mesoamerican cultures that existed before the arrival of Europeans in the early 16th century. Formed after a 'Triple Alliance' of city states in the valley of Mexico - namely Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tiacopan - the empire was the dominant force in the region for almost 100 years. While many aspects of Mexican culture are Hispanic, there are also many ties to the Aztec civilization as well as other Mesoamerican cultures, making the modern country a true blend of New and Old World. 1. They called themselves the Mexica The word 'Aztec' would not have been used by the people themselves. 'Aztec' refers to the 'people of Aztlán' - the ancestral home of the Aztecs, thought to be in northern Mexico or the southwestern United States. A map showing the maximum extent of the Aztec Empire c.1521. Despite dominating the area of central Mexico, the Aztecs had migrated from the north. The Aztecs actually called themselves the 'Mexica' and spoke the Nahuatl language. Some three million people continue to speak the indigenous language in central Mexico today. 2. The Mexica originated from northern Mexico Nahua speaking people began to migrate to the Basin of Mexico around 1250 AD. The Mexica were one of the last groups to arrive, and most of the fertile farming land had already been taken. 3. They founded Tenochtitlan in 1325 AD They moved to an island in Lake Texcoco, where an eagle nested upon a cactus eating a snake (the symbol in the middle of the modern Mexican flag). They saw this as a prophecy and founded Tenochtitlan on this island on 13 March 1325. The Mexican flag features an emblem of an Eagle eating a snake on a cactus - the Aztec prophesy. 4. They defeated the Tepanecs to become the most powerful state in Mexico From 1367, the Aztecs had been militarily supporting the nearby state of Tepanec and benefited from the expansion of that empire. In 1426, the Tepanec ruler died and his son Maxiatzin inherited the throne. He sought to reduce Aztec power, but was crushed by the former ally. 5. The empire wasn't strictly an empire as we might think The Aztecs didn't directly rule their subjects in the same way a European empire like the Romans did. Rather than direct control, the Aztecs subjugated nearby city states but left the local rulers in charge, then demanded regular tribute - leading to great wealth for Tenochtitlan. 6. Their combat became focused on capture over killing on the battlefield Folio from the Codex Mendoza showing a commoner advancing through the ranks by taking captives in war. Each attire can be achieved by taking a certain number of captives. While the Aztec did fight pitched battles, from the mid-1450s fighting became something rather more like a blood sport, with ornately dressed nobles attempting to make their enemies submit so they could be captured and then sacrificed. 7. The 'flowery wars' prioritised military training and religion over conquest The ritualised 'flowery war' was practiced against enemies like Tlaxcala and Cholula - whereby the Aztecs could have conquered the cities, but decided not to as the constant war helped train Aztec soldiers and served as a source for gathering sacrifices. 8. Their religion was based on existing Mesoamerican belief systems The polytheistic pantheon that the Aztec religion was based upon had existed for thousands of years prior to their own civilisation. For instance, a feathered serpent - which the Aztecs called Quetzalcoatl - were present in Olmec culture which dated to 1400 BC. The ruins of Teotihuacan north of Mexico City. This well preserved site was one of the world's biggest cities in 500 AD, but fell into decline around 250 years later and was abandoned. The Aztecs believed its giant structures to be the work of gods. In this photo, the huge Pyramid of the Sun is shown next to the 3km long Avenue of the Dead. Photo by the author. The pantheon of the Teotihuacan city state, which was one of the world's largest cities between 200-600 AD, had many similarities with the Aztec pantheon. Indeed, the word 'Teotihuacan' is Nahuatl language for 'birthplace of the gods'. 9. There were over 200 deities within their Pantheon Aztec gods were divided into groups, such as for the weather, agriculture and warfare. The patron god was called Huitzilopochtli, who was associated with war and sacrifice. Tlaloc, the god of rain, and Quetzalcoatl, the god of knowledge and wisdom are other prominent gods common in art and stonework. An Aztec pot paying homage to the rain god Tlaloc, housed in the Templo Mayor Museum in Mexico City. Tlaloc was a common feature of pots because they would be used to catch rain water. Photo by the author. 10. Their religion practiced human sacrifice Captives would be sacrificed to please the gods, which was common throughout Mesoamerican religion. While the Aztecs certainly increased the amount of sacrifice that occurred in the region, the true extent of how much it occurred is unclear. Spanish sources are almost certainly exaggerated. Aztec human sacrifice Human sacrifice as shown in the Codex Magliabechiano. 11. They lacked metallurgy for warfare In terms of military technology, the peoples of the Mexico region was a long way from the Europeans at the time - they had not developed either bronze or iron for widespread battle use and most metalwork was for jewellery or small ornaments. Most Aztec weaponry was based on a volcanic glass called obsidian, which was sharp and strong enough to fashion primitive weapons. Militarily they were only as advanced as European peoples in the Neolithic (Stone Age) period. 12. ...and pack animals for building There were no horses, cows or sheep native to the region. This meant armies could not be easily supported and all of the structures in the region were built purely by man power. Communications in central Mexico could only run as fast as a man. An large Aztec stone sculpture in the Templo Mayor museum in Mexico City. The creation of large Aztec stone works is all the more remarkable due to the stone having to be shifted by manpower alone. Photo by the author. 13. They were advanced in architecture, art and astronomy Despite primitive technologies and the lack of load bearing animals, the Aztecs constructed many great religious buildings - notably the large Templo de Mayor complex at the heart of Tenochtitlan. Aztec society placed great emphasis on skilled masonry, and intricate stonework is a regular feature on many of their buildings. The remarkable 24 ton Aztec Sun Stone consists of detailed motifs and the heart of Aztec cosmogony. The colossal Aztec Sun Stone, housed in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. Photo by the author. 14. They were agricultural innovators For centuries prior to the Aztec arrival the Valley of Mexico had complex irrigation systems called chinampas. The Aztecs developed these for large scale cultivation. Soil from the bottom of the shallow Lake Texcoco was piled up to create ridges between ditches, and small rectangular fields were formed. The rich soil combined with a constant water supply and a favourable climate meant there were three harvests every year, leading to a very high population density. 15. Maize was the principle Aztec crop Cultivation of maize - as shown in the Florentine Codex. Maize (corn) was the staple of the Aztec diet - similar to rice in Asia or wheat in Europe. This could be eaten on the cob, in corn tortillas or in a gruel. Maize was so important to the Aztecs that they had a god for it - Centeotl - which translates to "Maize cob Lord." 16. Tenochtitlan was one of the largest cities in the world by 1500 The city's population was over 200,000 by the early 16th century - only Paris and Constantinople were bigger cities at the time. 17. Montezuma was emperor of the Aztecs when they met the Spanish conquistadors under Hernan Cortes He was the ninth rule of the Aztecs, reigning from 1502 until his death in 1520. Under his rule, the Aztec Empire reached its greatest size, but was also conquered. He first met the Spanish expedition led by Cortez in 1519. 18. Montezuma was already facing internal problems when the Spanish arrived Many subdued tribes under Aztec rule were very discontent. Having to pay regular tribute and provide sacrificial victims built up resentment. Cortes was able to exploit the poor communications and turn city states against the Aztecs. The strange ruins of Zempoala, near Veracruz on east coast of Mexico. The city was the first major settlement Hernan Cortes encountered on his expedition to the Americas. Photo by the author. His first meeting with indigenous people, with the Totonacs at Cempoala near modern day Veracruz, quickly informed him of the resentment towards the Aztec overlords. 19. The empire was crushed by the Spanish conquistadors and their allies in 1521 Cortes was initially cordial towards the uncertain Montezuma, but then took him hostage. After an incident when Montezuma was killed, the Conquistadors were forced out of Tenochtitlan. They rallied with indigenous allies like Tlaxcala and Texcoco, to build a vast force which besieged and sacked Tenochtitlan in August 1521 - crushing the Aztec empire. The ruined Templo Mayor complex in the heart of Mexico City. After the Spanish sacked Tenochtitlan, they destroyed the central temple complex, built houses over it and later used it as a rubbish dump. Photo by the author. 20. Spanish brought smallpox that devastated the Aztec population The defense of Tenochtitlan was severely hindered by smallpox, a disease from which Europeans were immune. Very shortly after the Spanish arrival in 1519, between 5-8 million people in Mexico (about a quarter of the population) died from the disease. It subsequently ravaged the indigenous population of the Americas at a greater scale than even the Black Death in Europe during the late 14th century. 21. There were no revolts in favour of the Aztec empire once it had fallen Unlike the Incas in Peru, people in the region did not rebel against the Spanish conquerors in favour of the Aztecs. This is possibly indicative of the empire's fragile and fractured power base. Spanish rule of Mexico ended exactly 300 years later - in August 1821. Main image: Mural by Diego Rivera in the Palacio Nacional showing life in Aztec times.

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