

The Aztecs

The Aztecs ruled a large empire in central Mexico from the 1300s until 1519. They ruled until Hernando Cortes, a Spanish explorer, arrived in their land. The Aztecs were a great warrior nation. Their most impressive city was called Tenochtitlan, and most of their power was centralized in this city. The city of Tenochtitlan now lies under modern-day Mexico City.

The Aztec culture began as a group of hunters and gatherers. The Aztecs had a legend that said that a god told the people to stop wandering the land when they found an eagle holding a snake in its mouth and sitting on a tenochtli. A tenochtli is a prickly-pear cactus. According to this Aztec legend, the people found the eagle as described. The cactus the eagle was sitting on was on an island in the middle of a lake. After finding the eagle, the Aztecs immediately began building their city on the island. This city was the city of Tenochtitlan. Tenochtitlan grew to have almost 150,000 inhabitants.

Tenochtitlan had a great temple at its center. The city was planned very carefully, and avenues led out of the great temple in all directions. There were other temples within the city that were used for training priests and warriors.

Since the lake surrounding the island city was shallow, the Aztecs were able to build streets and also created a system of canals within the city. The main roadways had a dry lane for walking and a canal for canoeing or rafting through the city.

The Aztecs were a powerful people. They maintained their power by conquering their neighbors and demanding tribute from them. The tributes they received consisted of things like corn, gold, and cloth. In some cases, young men were given in tribute. These young men were later sacrificed to the Aztec gods.

At one time, the Aztec empire stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. They had many people that traveled in disguise to spy on their neighbors, and the Aztecs exacted their tributes with a fierceness that made many enemies for them.

Religion was an important aspect of life for the Aztecs. In fact, religion was not seen as being separate from school or work. Their religion was present in all aspects of life and society. The Aztec emperor was thought to be a god, and the high priests had a lot of power over the people. The priests would often predict the future by reading the sky or the stars.

The Aztecs believed in several different gods. The two most important ones were the god of the sun and war, and the god of rain. The Aztecs believed that the gods were responsible for bringing good or evil to the people. They frequently depicted their gods in animal forms, like serpents or jaguars.

Name _____

Date _____

The Aztecs (Cont'd)

In Aztec society, warriors of exceptional distinction were members of the knightly order of the Jaguars and the Eagles. When in battle, they would wear animal pelts or feathers. They believed that these items would give them prowess in battle.

The Aztecs also believed in blood sacrifice. They would sacrifice human slaves or prisoners of war in order to appease their gods. Some sacrifices that the Aztecs performed were horrifying, because they would sacrifice humans in large numbers – sometimes thousands at a time! Their method of sacrifice was also gruesome since they would rip out their victim's heart while it was still beating in order to offer it to the gods.

Name _____

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The Aztecs Questions

Multiple Choice:

1. A tenochtli is a:

- a. Native American dwelling
- b. type of fish
- c. spice
- d. prickly-pear cactus

2. In Aztec society, warriors of exceptional distinction were members of the knightly order of the:

- a. Tigers and Cranes
- b. Jaguars and the Eagles
- c. Sun and Moon
- d. Sword and Fist

3. The city of Tenochtitlan now lies under this modern-day city:

- a. Acapulco
- b. Miami
- c. Mexico City
- d. Dallas

True or False:

___ 4. Tenochtitlan never had more than 50,000 inhabitants.

___ 5. At one time, the Aztec empire stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Indian Ocean.

___ 6. Religion was very important to the Aztecs.

___ 7. The Aztec emperor was thought to be a god, and the high priests had a lot of power over the people.

___ 8. Some sacrifices that the Aztecs performed were horrifying, because they would sacrifice humans in large numbers.

___ 9. The city of Tenochtitlan was poorly planned and extremely disorganized.

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The Aztecs Answers

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