

**KIDS  
DISCOVER**

# Aztecs



**DEAD  
BUG  
BODY  
LOTION**

What are  
You doing?

Nothing.  
What are  
You doing?

**5  
DAYS  
OF  
NOTHING**

**SOLDIERS  
OF A FEATHER  
FLOCK TOGETHER**

**MEET THE FOLKS WHO BROUGHT YOU HOT CHOCOLATE AND TURKEY**





## Welcome to the City in a Lake

Buried beneath what is now Mexico City, below the corridors and tunnels of the subway system, lie the ruins of the greatest city of the Aztec empire—Tenochtitlan (ten-och-tee-TLAN). In 1325, after years of searching, the Aztecs chose a site in the middle of Lake Texcoco for their new capital. Within two centuries, this island in a swampy, shallow lake had become the center of an empire of over five million people that covered most of central and southern Mexico. By the early 1500s, Tenochtitlan was one of the world's largest cities. More people lived there than in London or Paris at that time. How did a mighty empire rise from an island in a lake? What did its people believe? How long did the empire last? Why did it fall? Let's unlock the mysteries of the Aztecs.

▼ **MUCH OF WHAT** we know about the Aztecs comes from glyphs. These are picture drawings painted on a paperlike material made from strips of deerskin or tree bark. A group of glyphs is called a codex. This drawing shows a woman weaving. Today, historians use codices to learn about the religion, history, laws, customs, and daily life of the Aztecs.



► **IN LEGEND, THE** Aztecs' first home was Aztlan, "Place of Reeds." It was probably in north-west Mexico. The word "Aztec" comes from Aztlan. According to myth, the Aztecs left there



► **THE AZTECS WAN-**dered south until they saw an eagle atop a prickly pear cactus eating a snake. According to Aztec legend,



in the 1100s to look for a new home. Eventually they reached the Valley of Mexico in Central Mexico. This early drawing shows them leaving Aztlan.





this was a sign from the sun god that they had finally found their home. Tenochtitlan means "Place of the Prickly Pear."



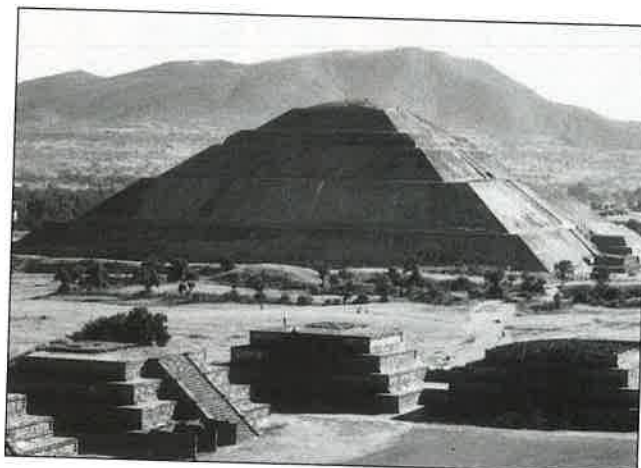
► **THE AZTECS MAY** have modeled their new capital city on Teotihuacan (tay-oh-tee-wa-CAN), a city east of the northern part of Lake Texcoco. Teotihuacan flourished between A.D. 1

and 750. It had roads, many palaces, and two massive pyramid temples. Today, one is called the Pyramid of the Sun (right). It is four times bigger than Egypt's Great Pyramid.

▲ **THE AZTECS** wanted a secure site for their new home. With water on all sides, Tenochtitlan was easily defended. It could be reached from the mainland

only by one of the three connecting causeways. The city had many canals. Dugout canoes and flat-bed barges carried goods and people down the

waterways. The Aztecs enlarged their home by making *chinampas*, artificial islands created with rich soil dug out of the lake beds.





# Up and Down the Social Ladder

Who was hot and who was not in Aztec society? The Aztec social system had different classes. At the top of society was the all-powerful ruler known as the Great Speaker. Just below him were members of the royal family and the nobles, who owned most of the land and oversaw local government. Royals and nobles were set apart in several ways. Rules governed how they dressed, what kind of houses they lived in, and what they ate. Priests also ranked high in Aztec society because religion was a big part of daily life. So did especially valiant warriors. Most people were commoners. This group included craftspeople and laborers. At the bottom of society were the slaves.

## Nobles & Commoners



◀ **THE AZTECS** treated their leader almost like a god. He traveled on a stretcher carried by servants. The ground where he walked was swept. Not even the richest nobles were allowed to look him in the eye. The Aztec ruler commanded the army, headed the government, and took part in many important religious ceremonies.

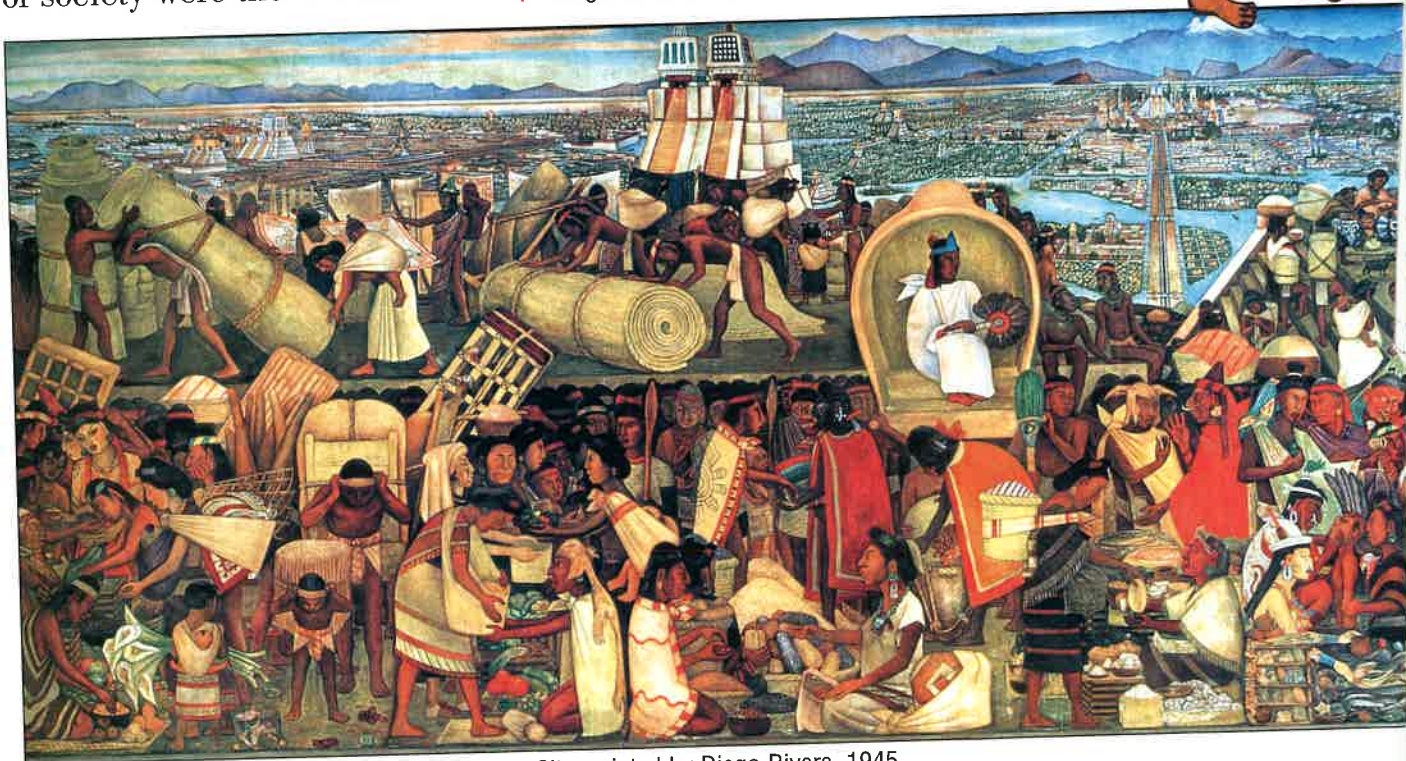
▼ **THIS FEATHERED** shield belonged to Montezuma II, the last Aztec ruler. In the Aztec language, his name is Motechuhzojma Xocoytzin.

▼ **NOBLES COULD** wear gold ornaments, fancy jewelry, capes with bright feathers, and clothes made of cotton, but they had to take off their fancy cloaks when they came before the Aztec ruler. Commoners wore simpler clothes, often made of coarse cactus or palm fibers. Rules also governed the length of clothing.



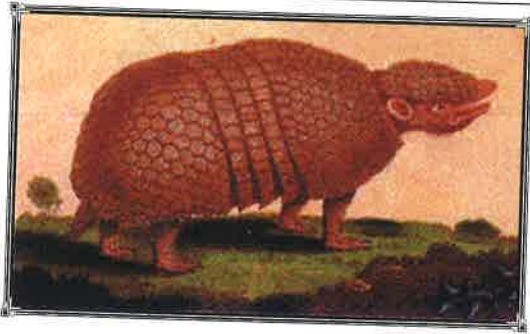
JAGUAR WARRIOR

▲ **SKILLED** metalworkers created jewelry like these nose plugs and ear spools worn by nobles.



"The Great City of Tenochtitlan," mural in Mexico City, painted by Diego Rivera, 1945





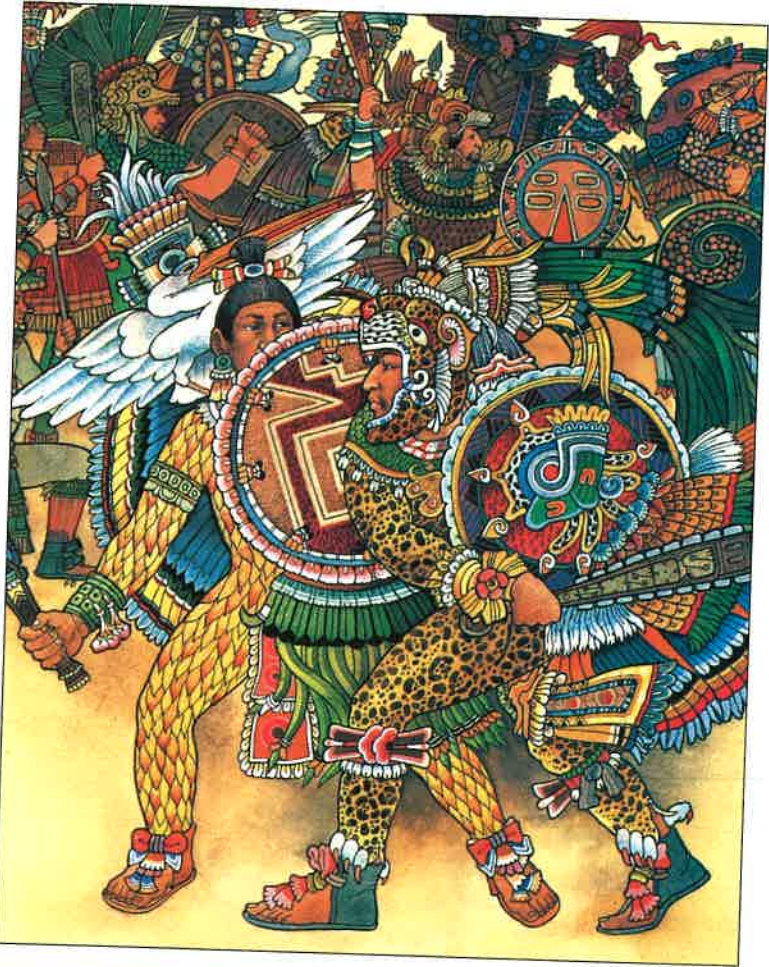
◀ **AZTEC COMMONERS** ate beans, corn, and squash. They also trapped rabbits, deer, ducks, and even armadillos, but some of what they caught had to be given to the nobles.



◀ **NOBLES ALSO** dined on rare foods brought in from other villages, such as sweet potatoes, oysters, and pineapples. One specialty was a small hairless dog roasted on a spit!

▼ **JOINING THE** military was the fastest way for commoners to get ahead. Warriors fought enemy tribes to capture prisoners for religious rites. Every soldier hoped to enter the elite fighting forces known as Jaguar or Eagle warriors.

► **JAGUAR WARRIORS** dressed in the skins of ocelots. Known for their skills as scouts and spies, they were called the Soldiers of the Night. Eagle warriors dressed in brightly colored feathers and chanted loudly to frighten their enemies. They were called the Soldiers of the Sun.



**EAGLE  
WARRIOR**

## Warriors



▲ **THE AZTECS BUILT** their empire by conquering other peoples and forc-

ing them to pay tribute. From some they demanded cloth-

ing, precious feathers, maize, beans, cacao, or jaguar skins. From others, they called for gold, turquoise, or jade. Aztec officials came about four times a year to collect tribute. As long as the provinces paid, the Aztecs usually left them alone. Local rulers could govern their people as they pleased.

However, if they rebelled and failed to pay, they were punished. Aztec rulers sent their warriors to put down rebellions, and tribute payments might double or triple. This codex is a record of tribute collected.



# Sacrifices and Smoking Mirrors

For the Aztecs, religion was as much a part of daily life as eating or breathing. The city of Tenochtitlan was filled with huge open-air temples. The largest, the Great Temple, was in the center of the city. The priests at the temple were important in Tenochtitlan's religious life. The Aztecs believed they lived in the era of the fifth sun and that the world would one day end violently. To postpone that day, human sacrifices were performed.



Quetzalcoatl

▲ **EACH NEW RULER** wanted to leave his mark on the Great Temple, so it was rebuilt seven times. Each ruler tried to make the temple more impressive than the last one.

► **THE AZTECS HAD** many different gods, each with different powers and purposes. Quetzalcoatl (kay-tsal-ko-WATL), the Feathered Serpent, was the god of music, education, farming, and art. The Aztecs believed that he would someday return to Earth. His return would mark the end of the Aztec peoples.



## Huitzilopochtli

► **HUITZILOPOCHTLI** (we-tseal-oh-POCH-tli), the god of war, was one of the most important gods. The Aztecs believed that Huitzilopochtli and the sun god Tonatiuh were owed a debt of human blood, because the gods' own blood had given birth to human beings.

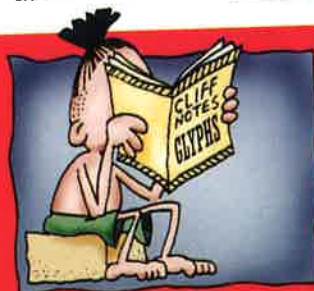


► **THE QUETZAL** (KAY-tsal) bird had to be imported from the jungle. Craftspeople used the bird's long tail feathers to make clothing and jewelry worn during the ceremonies to honor Quetzalcoatl.



## PRIESTLY PURSUITS

► **BOYS TRAINING TO BE PRIESTS** started at an early age learning to read and write glyphs so they could understand religious calendars and writings. Girls could go to school, but they could not become priests.



► **TO LEARN DISCIPLINE**, priests-in-training fasted for days, bathed in icy cold water, and pricked their ears with sharp thorns.





### ◀ HOLY SMOKE!

This mirror was one of the tools that priests used to predict the future. A priest would stare into the mirror and see clouds of smoke. Hidden in the clouds was a vision, or a holy message, that only the priest could see.

▶ **AT THE HEIGHT OF** the Aztec empire, priests sacrificed thousands of people in one year. The priests killed their victims and ripped out their hearts, offering them as a sacrifice to the gods.

Most victims were captives from subject states or criminals, although some Aztecs sacrificed themselves willingly, considering it an honor. The dagger below was used for human sacrifices.



**IN THIS CODEX,** a man's soul is rising up from his body toward the gods. Aztecs often went on raids to find victims to sacrifice. These raids were known as "wars of flowers."



▶ **THEY ALSO PAINTED THEIR** bodies black and sometimes covered their skin in a paste made of dead bugs. Chemicals in the bugs helped them stay awake for days.



▶ **PRIESTS RAN THE SCHOOLS,** organized religious ceremonies, kept temple fires burning, and carried out sacrifices. They also predicted the future for people by looking at the stars.





# The Mystery of Time

For the Aztecs, keeping track of time was essential both for religious reasons and for the planting of crops. They had two separate calendars—a solar calendar and a sacred calendar. The Aztecs divided their history into 52-year time periods. Each 52-

year period was a “sun.” The Aztecs believed that they lived in the time of the fifth sun. The dates on the solar and religious calendars came together once every 52 years. Near the end of each sun, the Aztecs feared the sun would set and never rise again. If that happened, their world would end.

## Solar Calendar

► **THE AZTECS'** solar calendar, like our own, was 365 days long. It was based on Earth's yearly movement around the sun. The Aztecs used it to determine when to plant and harvest crops. The days of the year were divided into 18 months of 20 days each. The remaining five days were added at the end of each year.



▲ **THE FIVE DAYS** at the end of the year were known as *nemontimi*, or “nothing” days. The Aztecs believed that babies born

during these days would never grow up to be any good. Arguments started at that time could last forever.

► **ASTROLOGERS** studied the stars and used the sacred calendar to decide which times of the year were lucky and to predict the future. Aztec priests con-

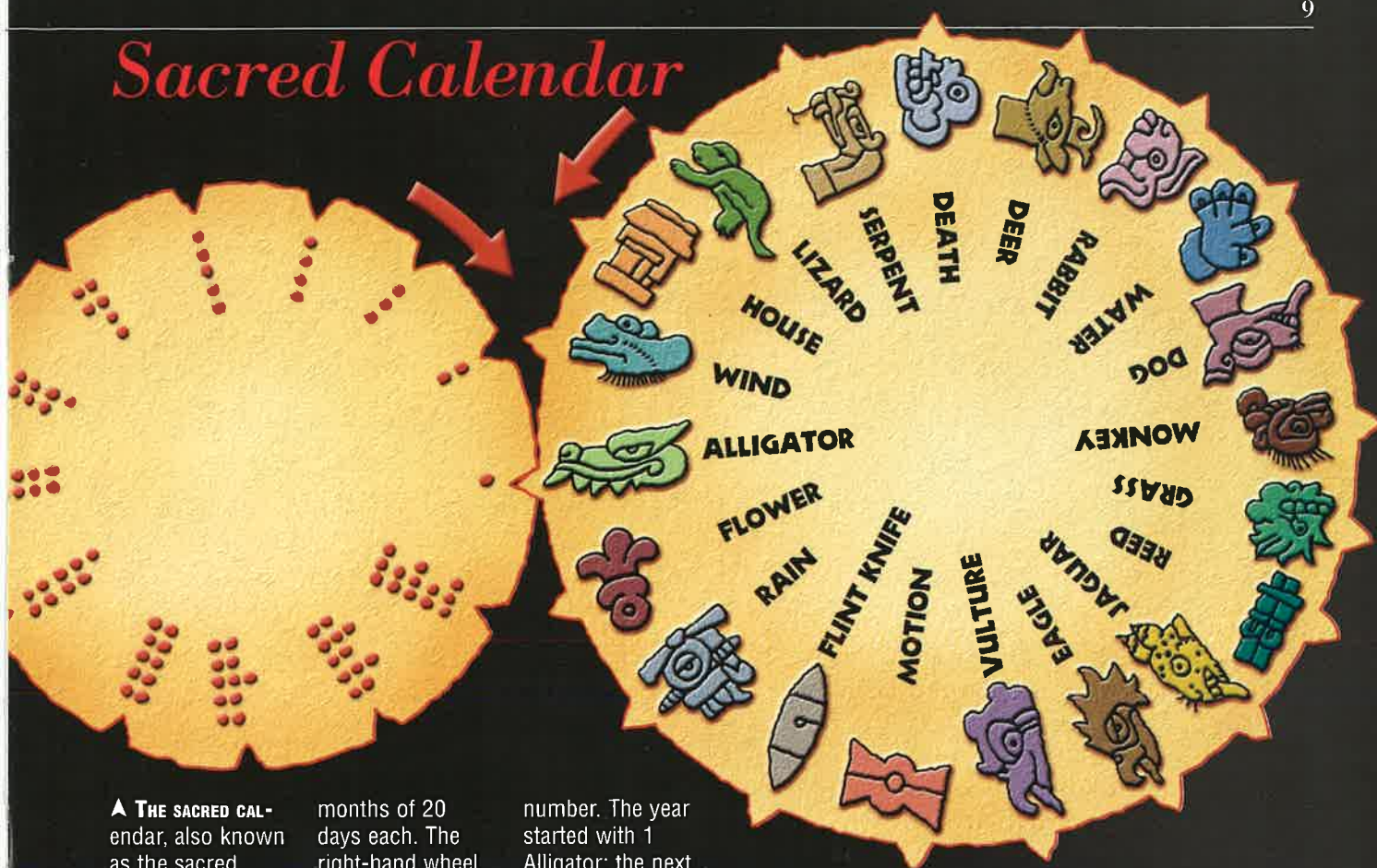
structed the calendar by watching the movement of stars. They were also aware of the solar, lunar, and planetary cycles. Here, the god of the Evening Star

looks at the heavens through a crossed stick. Priests used these sticks to calculate the distance of the stars from each other and the horizon.





# Sacred Calendar



▲ **THE SACRED CAL-**endar, also known as the sacred almanac, was 260 days long and consisted of two parts. The left-hand wheel was divided into 13

months of 20 days each. The right-hand wheel had 20 named days. The two wheels of the calendar turned together so that each day fit with a

number. The year started with 1 Alligator; the next day was 2 Wind; and then 3 House. After 13 days, the wheel on the left had moved 13 notches. The

new week began on 1 Jaguar, then 2 Eagle. What is the next day?



▼ **AT THE END OF** every 52 years, the first day of the solar and the sacred calendar occurred at the same time. The 12 days at the end of the 52-year cycle were a very dangerous time, because the world could come to an end then.

▲ **ALTHOUGH THE** Aztecs studied the night sky for knowledge of the future, most people did not go out after dark, when they believed evil spirits walked the Earth.

▲ **AT MIDNIGHT ON** the twelfth day, priests sacrificed a human victim, lit a fire, and carried the flame to light torches that

rekindled sacred temple fires throughout the countryside. The world was now safe for 52 more years.





Does one really live upon the earth?  
Not forever on the earth, only for a short time here.  
Even jade shatters  
Even gold breaks  
Even quetzal plumes tear  
Not forever on the earth, only a short time here.

FRAGMENT FROM A NAHUATL POEM





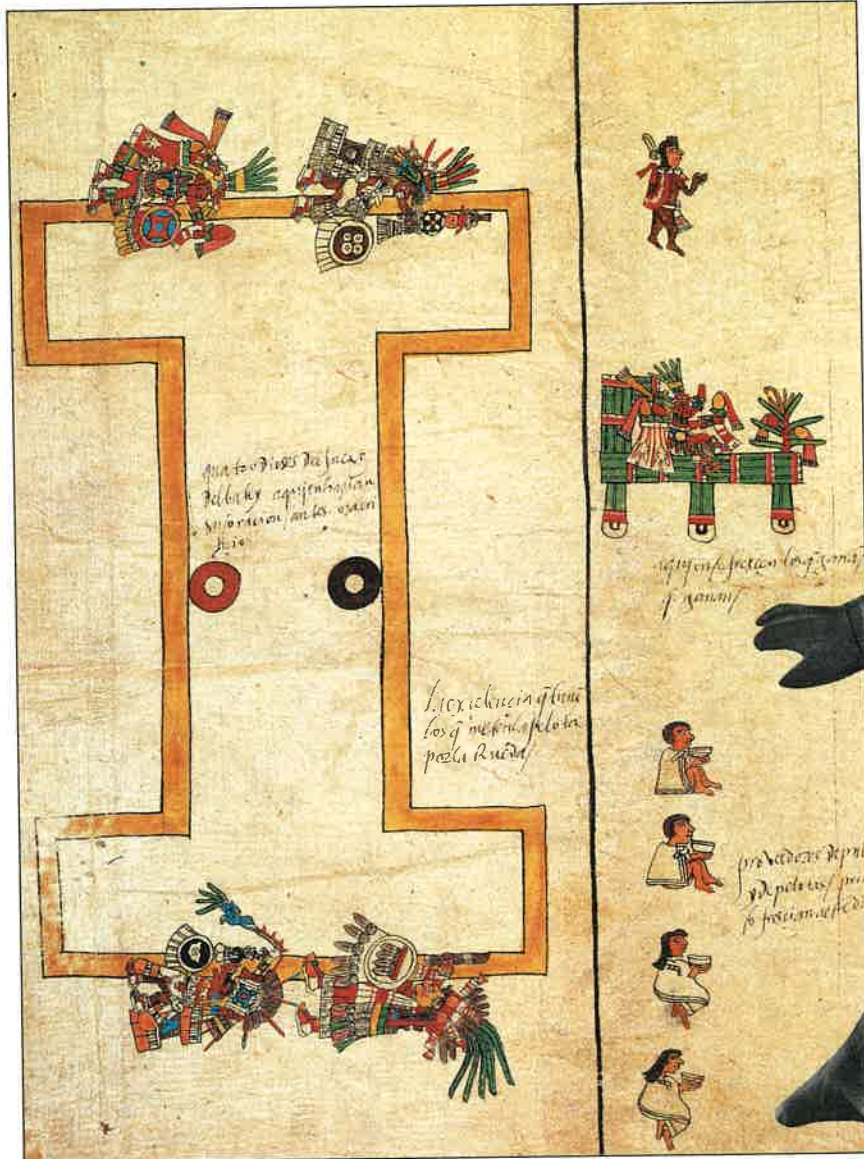




# Fun and Festivals

When Aztecs wanted to kick back and unwind, they danced, sang, ate, drank, and played sports. Nobles would throw huge banquets. Even the poor were included in the many festivals held to celebrate happy times. Special events in

Aztec life included the opening of a new temple, welcoming warriors back from a victory in battle, and the death of a ruler or the appointment of a new one. Aside from religious rituals, other important ceremonies included the birth and naming of an infant, entering and leaving school, marriage, and death.



◀ **PLAYERS FOUGHT** hard in the ball game called *tlachtli* (TLACH-tee). Spectators enjoyed gambling on the outcome, and betting was often heavy. People bet everything from precious stones to clothing, feathers, houses, land, and slaves.

▼ **ATHLETES WORE** padding made from deerskin on their arms and thighs to protect them from the solid rubber ball. They also wore helmets and deer-skin gloves. Even so, players got hurt or even killed when the ball hit them.



► **IN TLACHTLI**, each team tried to knock a hard rubber ball, made from tree sap, into a small doughnut-shaped hoop in the middle of the ball court. Most of the

game consisted of players hitting the ball back and forth to each other. They could hit the ball with any part of their bodies except their hands. The team that hit the

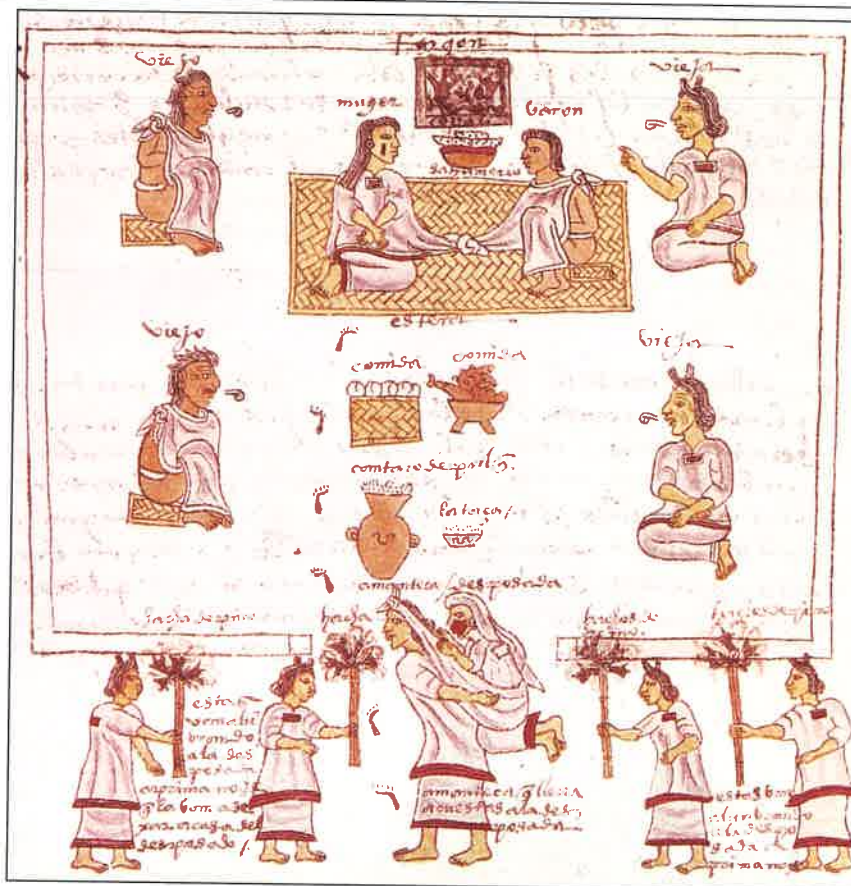
ball through the hoop won. Crowds didn't boo the umpire and eat hot dogs back then, but they did come out to cheer and bet on the games.





### ▼ RICH NOBLES

enjoyed another gambling game, called *patolli*. It was a lot like the game of Parcheesi. It was played with pebbles on a game board or mat. Players used four dried beans marked with white dots for numbers as dice. Players took turns throwing the beans to move six pebbles on the board. A player could gamble away his shirt, his home, or even himself into slavery!



### ▲ EVERY BAND

needs a backbeat. These drummers keep time for dancers while other musicians shake rattles made from gourds. Some religious ceremonies were community-wide affairs. Everyone, including the commoners, fasted, danced, sang, made offerings, and watched parades and processions.



▲ **GIRLS MARRIED AS** young as 12 years old; boys around 18. A go-between helped families pick marriage partners for their chil-

dren. Weddings took place at night. The bride's blouse was tied to her husband's cloak as a sign of their marriage.



► **WHEN AZTECS** celebrated, they put on makeup. They liked to stain their teeth red or black. Men and women used these stamps to apply face paint for festivals. They dripped the paint onto the stamp, then pressed the design onto their cheek.



▲ **MUSIC WAS OFTEN** heard during religious festivals and on special occasions, such as weddings. Priests beat large drums (above), played flutes

made from clay, blew conch shells, and played the ocarina, an ancient woodwind instrument in the form of a turtle.

▲ **EVERYONE NEEDED** to know the dances performed at religious festivals. This whistle helped dancers mark time. Some boys and girls were specially trained as professional dancers.

