

Listen and Learn

Consider ►

What can we learn from the inventions and cultural practices of ancient civilizations?

What parts of daily life in Tenochtitlán were similar to our lives today?

HISTORICAL NONFICTION

Accounts of real events or people from the past are called historical nonfiction. Unlike fictional stories, these articles or essays are nonfiction because all of the details are true. They are historical because the events happened in the past, whether ten years ago or ten thousand years ago. What real people or events is this historical nonfiction article about?

CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

Chronological order is the order in which events happen in time. Historical nonfiction is usually organized in chronological order: events are described in the order in which they happened. This is often important for understanding how one event can cause another thing to happen. Look at paragraph 2. Did the Aztec become powerful before or after they settled on a marshy island?

Life in the Aztec Capital

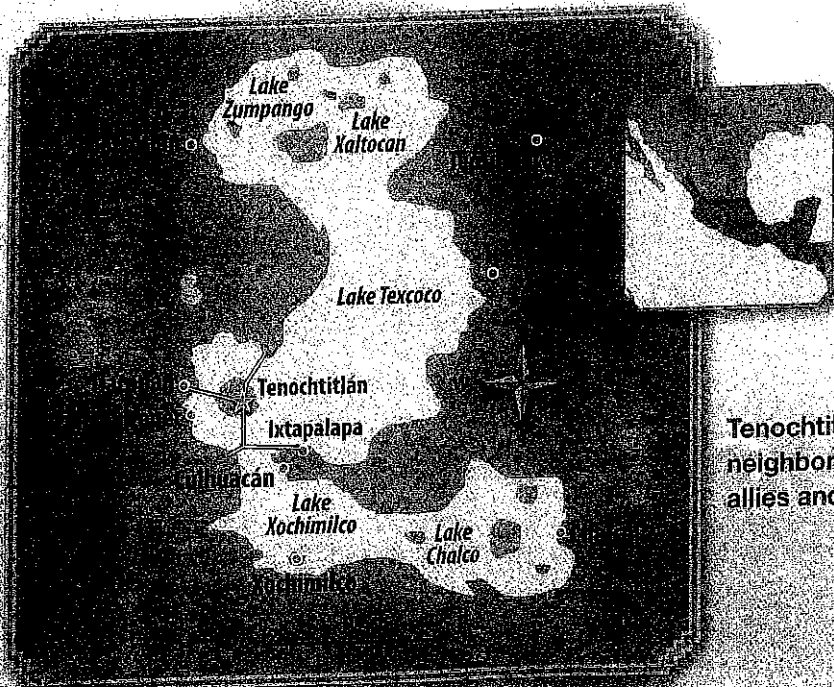
Five centuries ago, Tenochtitlán (teh-nosh-teet-LAHN) was the grandest city in the Americas. It boasted a population of more than 200,000 residents. Its wildly colorful buildings and monuments rivaled those of Europe's great cities. It was also a center of power. The city was the capital of an empire that stretched across Mexico. Although its destruction was sudden and complete, Tenochtitlán has lived on as one of the greatest cities in history.

The founders and builders of Tenochtitlán were the Aztec. In the twelfth century, this group began to move into the Valley of Mexico from what is now northwestern Mexico. Other, more powerful groups already lived in the area. These groups forced the Aztec to move repeatedly. Then, in 1325, the Aztec built a settlement on a marshy island in Lake Texcoco. They could protect themselves there, and they soon grew powerful. Within one hundred years, Tenochtitlán grew into a tremendous city. From there, the Aztec were able to take control of the vast valley surrounding the lake.

And what a stunning city Tenochtitlán was! It featured a mighty central pyramid, as tall as a ten-story building. Monuments, palaces, and parks added splendor. Huge marketplaces were filled with people buying and selling goods from near and far. Long causeways, or raised roads, extended for miles and connected the island with the mainland. Two aqueducts brought fresh water to the island. Canals traversed the area, with canoes transporting people and goods. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Tenochtitlán surpassed many capitals of Europe in both size and beauty.

Constructing the City

The construction of Tenochtitlán was an amazing feat. The soil it was built on was extremely spongy. The Aztec had to create a special foundation system. Buildings were constructed on platforms to prevent them from sinking into the muck. The nearby areas offered no building materials. Wood and stone had to be brought in from far away. Most remarkably, the city was built without the help of metal tools or wheeled vehicles. Nor did the Aztec use pack animals, such as oxen or horses. Instead, they hauled supplies by hand over great distances.



Tenochtitlán's many neighbors included both allies and rival groups.

AUTHOR'S POINT OF VIEW

An author's choice of words often reflects his or her point of view, or attitude, about a topic. An author may be positive and enthusiastic about a topic or may be negative and critical about it. Reread paragraphs 3 and 4 to determine the author's attitude, or point of view, about the Aztec. Does the author have a positive or negative view of the Aztec? Which words tell you the author's viewpoint?

READING MAPS A map is a visual representation of an area showing its physical features, such as cities, roads, or rivers. Maps can often help you understand geographic information better than text alone can. The map on this page shows Tenochtitlán's location on Lake Texcoco and the location of the city's neighbors. What city could be reached the fastest from Tenochtitlán?

MAIN IDEA The most important point in a piece of writing is called the main idea. It is often stated at the beginning of a paragraph or article. Look at paragraph 5. What is the main idea of this part of the article?

MAKE INFERENCES Authors do not always state everything directly. Sometimes you must use details from a selection and what you already know to make an inference, or figure out something that is not stated directly by the author. The author does not say whether Tenochtitlán had a large amount of farmland or not. What evidence in the text tells you how much farmland the Aztec had in the city?

Floating Islands

5 The Aztec built a number of floating islands around the city. These islands were called *chinamitl* (CHEE-nah-MEE-tuhl) in the Aztec language, Nahuatl. They were used to increase the city's farmland. To build one of these floating islands, a mass of small branches and grasses were formed into a raft. The island builders then drove stakes into the ground around the raft's edges. Earth and stones were added to the raft. This sank the base of the new island well below the lake's surface. Fertile soil was then laid on the top, perfect for raising crops. Trees planted along the edge of each island helped hold the land together.



Floating islands allowed the Aztec to maximize the amount of farmland in the city.

Farming in Tenochtitlán

Most farmers in Tenochtitlán had only small plots of land. On these plots, they grew mainly corn and beans. They also grew squash, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and chili peppers. Farmers in drier areas on the mainland grew cotton and cactus. Some also grew agave, a plant used to make cloth, sewing needles, and drinks.

Houses and Palaces

Most houses in Tenochtitlán were made of adobe (ah-DOH-bee), or sun-dried bricks. These houses were usually one-room buildings. Aztec families divided the space into separate areas for cooking, eating, and sleeping. Families ate around a central fire. They sat on woven mats. These houses were built in groups, facing a central courtyard. Farmers on the floating islands lived in wooden huts with thatched roofs.

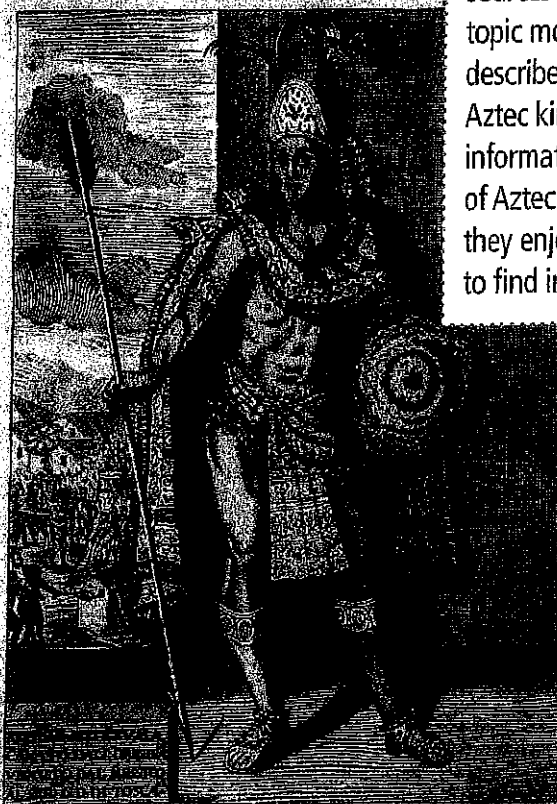
The nobles lived closest to the city's center. These wealthy officials lived in two-story stone houses. Many of these houses had flower beds, pools, and fruit orchards. However, these houses could not compare to the palaces that the Aztec kings lived in. One of the royal palaces in Tenochtitlán had more than three hundred rooms. The grounds around it featured ornate gardens and highly decorated fountains. This palace was also home to the royal zoo. There, one could see eagles, jaguars, snakes, and other animals from throughout the empire.

Aztec Kings

Aztec kings were known as *tlatoani* (tla-toh-AH-nee). This means "great speaker." The king was chosen by a council of four nobles. When a new king was needed, the council would choose the wisest and bravest of the last ruler's brothers, sons, or nephews. The Aztec king had control over the army. However, he relied on local nobles to govern throughout the city and surrounding areas.

- 10 Aztec kings enjoyed the privileges that came with their power. For example, each day, King Moctezuma II had cooks prepare more than three hundred dishes, from which he chose only a few. Acrobats, jugglers, singers, and dancers performed during the king's meals. Musicians also played day and night in the royal palace.

Aztec kings, such as Moctezuma II, enjoyed tremendous wealth and power.



CONTEXT CLUES You can often figure out the meaning of a word you don't know by looking for clues in the words around it. These context clues can help you understand the unknown word. Look at the sixth sentence in paragraph 8. What context clue can help you figure out the meaning of *ornate*?

INTEGRATING INFORMATION Readers of historical nonfiction often look at multiple sources about a single topic. They then integrate, or combine, the information from these sources to understand the topic more fully. This article describes the power of the Aztec kings. What additional information about the lifestyle of Aztec kings and the luxuries they enjoyed would you want to find in another source?

SUPPORTING DETAILS

Supporting details are reasons or information that support, or back up, an author's main idea. The main idea of this section is that education was important to the Aztec. One supporting detail is that commoner boys went to school at age twelve. What other details support the author's main idea?

MAKE INFERENCES

Based on the description of Aztec education, what inference can you make about the role of girls and women in Aztec society?

PARAPHRASE

When you paraphrase, you restate something you have read or heard in your own words. Reread the first sentence in paragraph 14. How would you paraphrase this sentence?

Education and Professions

Education was highly valued in Aztec society. Aztec children were taught practical skills at home until about age twelve. Boys learned how to fish and handle a canoe from their fathers. Mothers taught their daughters how to spin thread and how to grind corn for tortillas. Manners were also very important and were taught to children at an early age.


At age twelve, the sons of commoners went to live at boarding schools. There they learned how to work in the fields, build roads, and repair canals. They also learned how to become warriors. Both boys and girls went to a "House of Song" from ages twelve to fifteen. There they were taught the songs, dances, and music of the Aztec religion.

The sons of the nobles went to a temple school when they were twelve years old. At these schools, they studied to become priests. Priests were very important and powerful in Aztec society. Students in these schools learned about Aztec customs and the Aztec religion. They also received military training. Few of them knew how to read, but students learned important texts by heart.

As they grew up, young men in Tenochtitlán usually did the same type of work as their fathers. Many worked as builders and stonemasons. Others worked as metalworkers, potters, weavers, and canoe makers. Male commoners also had to serve in the army during times of war. Women worked mostly in the home. They looked after the children and prepared food for their families. Women also wove cloth.

Aztec daughters learned many valuable skills from their mothers.





Goods from throughout the Aztec Empire were traded in Tenochtitlán's bustling markets.

Tenochtitlán's Markets

15 Tenochtitlán featured grand markets full of gold and silver items. One could also find gems, rare feathers, and medicines there. Other merchants sold clothing, pottery, and even live animals. Farmers used the city's canals to bring goods to the markets in canoes. The Aztec had no coins or paper money. Instead, they used rolls of cotton cloth as currency. Some used rare cacao beans as currency as well. These beans were valuable imported goods in Tenochtitlán. Many people also bartered, or exchanged goods directly.

Aztec Food

Most people ate a type of corn cereal for breakfast. Dinners were cooked on a hot stone or a clay griddle. These usually consisted of corn tortillas, sometimes served with chili peppers or tomatoes. Occasionally dinners included small amounts of fish, duck, turkey, or rabbit.

Aztec kings and nobles ate much more fancily. Their meals included deer, turkey, quail, and fish. They also ate tamales, tortillas, and beans. They enjoyed desserts made from tropical fruit. They also drank chocolate drinks made from expensive cacao beans.

CONTEXT CLUES

Paragraph 15 says that the Aztec often used cacao beans or rolls of cotton cloth as currency. What context clues help you understand what *currency* means?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Authors sometimes organize their writing by comparing and contrasting information. When they compare, they point out things that are similar. When they contrast, they point out things that are different. On this page, the author describes the food of ordinary Aztec people and contrasts the food of the kings and nobles with it. How was the food of kings and nobles different from the food of the rest of the people?

CITE EVIDENCE Good writers of historical nonfiction provide evidence, or information that supports their ideas. The author states that the clothing the Aztec wore depended on their position in Aztec society.

One piece of evidence that supports this idea is that only rulers and priests could wear turquoise jewelry. What other evidence in the passage can you cite, or refer to, that supports this idea?

Aztec Clothing

The clothes people wore in Tenochtitlán depended on their social class. Only rulers and priests could wear turquoise jewelry. Likewise, only nobles and officials were allowed to wear cotton clothes. Commoners made yarn from agave fibers and knitted clothes from this fabric. Women wore skirts and sleeveless blouses. The men wore loincloths and tied capes over their shoulders.

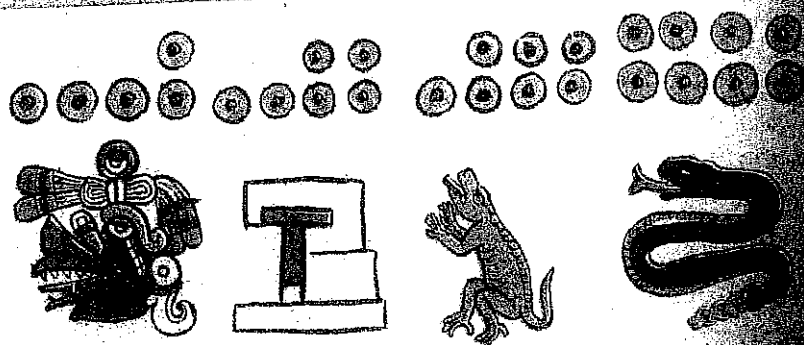
The Aztec Calendars

The Aztec used two different calendars. Their ordinary calendar had 365 days each year, just like the calendar that we use today. This helped people know when to plant crops and to remember when ceremonies would occur. Their religious calendar had only 260 days per year. This year was divided into thirteen months. Thirteen was a sacred number for the Aztec. They believed that a different god or goddess ruled each of the thirteen months.

Writing System

20 Aztec writing was not done with letters. Instead, the Aztec used symbols known as glyphs. These small pictures could be combined to convey a message. Writing skills were rare. Specially trained craftsmen called scribes performed most writing. The Aztec made paper from tree bark. A long strip of this paper was folded repeatedly to form a type of book called a codex. Some of the Aztec codices (plural of codex) survive today and help us understand this ancient culture.

Rather than using an alphabet, the Aztec created a system of pictorial symbols to express ideas in writing.





The Aztec Legacy

The Aztec civilization came to an abrupt end after the Spanish invaded Mexico in the sixteenth century. The Spanish destroyed Tenochtitlán. They founded Mexico City on top of the city's ruins. However, many aspects of Aztec culture remain visible to us today. The jaguar was a sacred animal for the Aztec. This remains a popular symbol in modern Mexico. Many words we commonly use in English come from the Aztec language, including *avocado*, *chocolate*, *coyote*, and *tomato*. The Mexican national soccer team plays its home games in Estadio Azteca, or Aztec Stadium. And the Mexican flag features an eagle with a snake in its mouth, perched on a cactus. This image comes from an important Aztec myth about the founding of Tenochtitlán.

SUMMARIZE To summarize means to briefly retell the main points of something you have read. Summarizing can help you organize and remember the most important ideas in a text. Look back at paragraph 21. How would you summarize this paragraph in one sentence?

GLOSSARY A glossary is a list of difficult or special words and their meanings, often placed in the back of a book. A glossary might give one of these meanings for *legacy*: 1. *Property that is inherited*; 2. *Something passed down from earlier generations*; 3. *Status acquired through birth*.

Which meaning of *legacy* best fits the way the word is used on this page?

Comprehension Check

Look back at "Tenochtitlán: Life in the Aztec Capital." How was life different for Aztec commoners from how it was for the powerful nobles? Complete the chart below to show the ways that daily life differed between these groups.

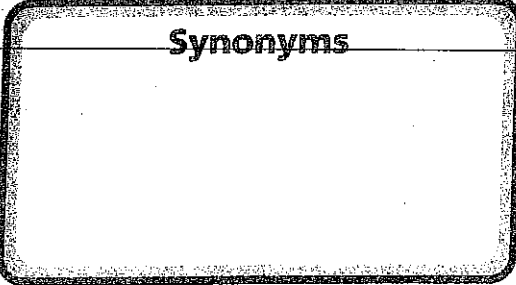
Commoners	Nobles
lived in one-room houses	lived in two-story houses

Vocabulary

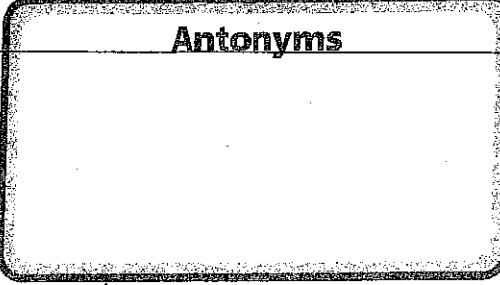
Use the word map below to help you define and use one of the highlighted vocabulary words from the Share and Learn selection you are about to read or another word you choose.


mythical alliance expedition
conquistador immunity heritage

Synonyms

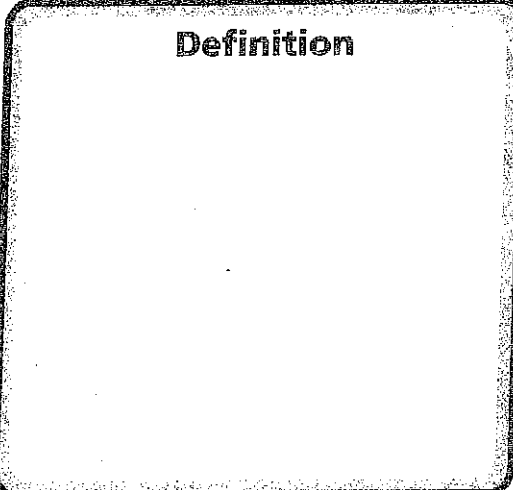


Antonyms

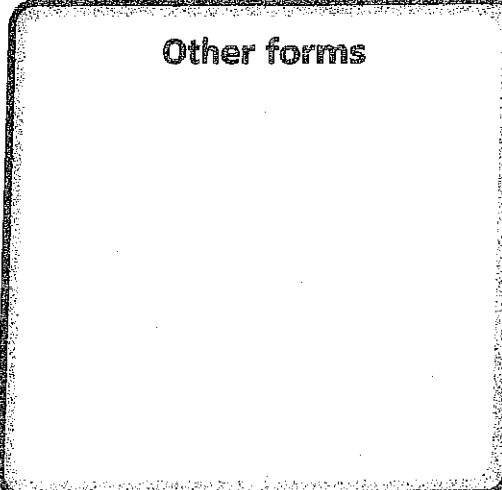


My word 

Definition



Other forms



My sentence

