

Elements of Culture Worksheet

Find examples of as many elements of culture from the Aztec civilization worksheet provided.

Culture being studied:

Aztec Empire

1. Food & drink: _____
2. Tools: _____
3. Shelter: _____
4. Language: _____
5. Trade (Commerce) _____
6. Beliefs: _____
7. Education: _____
8. Weapons: _____
9. Medicine: _____
10. Laws: _____
11. Recreation: _____
12. Art & Music: _____
13. Relationships: _____
14. Transportation: _____
15. Clothing: _____

Aztec Empire

Guide to the Aztec Empire

The Aztec Empire was a group of allied but ethnically different city states who lived in central Mexico and controlled much of central America from the 12th century AD until the Spanish invasion of the 15th century. The main political alliance creating the Aztec empire was called the Triple Alliance, including the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, the Acolhua of Texcoco, and the Tepaneca of Tlacopan; together they dominated most of Mexico between 1430 and 1521 AD.

The capital city of the Aztecs was at Tenochtitlan-Tlatelco, what is today Mexico City, and the extent of their empire covered almost all of what is today Mexico. At the time of Spanish conquest, the capital was a cosmopolitan city, with different ethnic groups from all over Mexico. The state language was Nahuatl and written documentation was kept on bark cloth manuscripts (most of which were destroyed by the Spanish). A high level of stratification in Tenochtitlan included both nobles and commoners. There were frequent ritual human sacrifices, part of the military and ritual activities of the Aztec people, although it is possible and perhaps likely that these were exaggerated by the Spanish clergy.



A Few Important Facts about the Aztec Empire

Population: In 1519, the population of the Basin of Mexico was estimated at 1 million inhabitants, between 100,000 and 200,000 in the capital city alone

Extent: Thirty-eight provinces were submitting tribute to Tenochtitlan in 1519, according to the Codex Mendoza

State Language: Nahuatl, a Uto-Aztecan language

Life Expectancy: 37 years, due to high birthrates and high infant mortality rates

Writing: State documents concerning administrative details such as the amount of tribute paid to the capital city by each province were preserved on colorfully painted bark cloth paper, made by soaking and pounding the inner bark of the fig or mulberry tree.

Calendars: Like the Maya and other American civilizations, the Aztecs had two cycles to their calendar, one a 365-day solar year and one a 260 ritual year. Combined, they made a 52-year 'Calendar Round'. The Aztecs believed bad things happened at the end of a Calendar Round.

Marriage: Men could take as many wives as they could afford. The first wife was principal, but all wives spun thread and wove cloth, both sources of wealth for Aztec families.

Ethnographic Data: The most complete information we have on the Aztecs today comes from members of the Spanish colonization force, such as Bartolome de las Casas and Fray Diego Duran.

Aztecs Ritual and the Arts

Intoxicants: Pulque, from fermented agave sap; peyotl buttons, datura, psilocybin, black nightshade, tobacco, morning glory seeds, chocolate in a drink, sometimes flavored by chili peppers and/or vanilla

Lapidary Arts: Jadeite, obsidian, chalcedony, spondylus shell

Metallurgy: Two bronzes, one of combined copper and tin, and one of copper arsenic; cast bells, rings and tweezers; some gold and silver. Much was imported from west Mesoamerican mines and metalworkers; craft work in Tenochtitlan included hammering, filigree and lost wax methods.

The Feathered Serpent: This pan-Mesoamerican fantastic creature was called Quetzalcoatl in the Aztec language.



Tlachtli Ball Game: Played with a rubber ball in a masonry court, the ball game called tlachtli was so important to the Aztecs that 16,000 balls were imported from the Maya lowlands into Tenochtitlan annually.

Aztecs and Economics

Markets and Trade Network: Cortes reported that he found a large market system in place in the Aztec capital city, where 60,000 people came to trade goods. During the Aztec Empire (1325-1520), the distribution of goods was so widespread that many of the materials traded were mass-produced in villages. A long-trade exchange system was in place throughout the Aztec Empire, with professional traders called pochteca carrying goods such as bird feathers, cacao beans and, most importantly, information.

Currency: Gold jewelry, textiles, cacao beans, and beaten copper axes.

Cultivated Crops: Maize, beans, salvia, squash, tomatoes, cactus, cotton, chile, manioc, goosefoot, amaranth, cacao (chocolate), avocado, agave

Domesticated Animals: Turkey, duck, dog

Agriculture: The chinampa system of agriculture used by the Aztecs consisted of a raised planting platform built in a shallow swampland and irrigated through a series of dikes.

Aztecs and Warfare

Weaponry: Bow and arrow, atlatl, oak broadswords with obsidian blades, thrusting spears, round shields of fire-hardened cane, quilted cotton armor, and shield and armed canoes.

Ritual Sacrifice: According to written records by the Spanish, prisoners of war were led to the top of the Great Pyramid in Tenochtitlan and sacrificed by having their hearts cut out. Their bodies were then thrown down the steps of the pyramid, where they were decapitated, dismembered and eaten by Aztec warriors. This may have been exaggerated by Sahagun, but there is no doubt that ritual sacrifice was part of the rituals of Aztec war.



Ritual Bloodletting: Bloodletting, or auto-sacrifice, was a personal ritual performed by Aztec elites.

Empire: The Aztec mode of imperialism was to conquer a new territory, and then put in a leader over the existing system, rather than replace the entire ruling leadership. This unique blend of force and bribery was extremely effective in maintaining a far flung empire.