

ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

ANCIENT
AZTECS





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THE MARKETPLACE

PLAZA DE LAS TRES CULTURAS, TLATELOLCO



A boy walks toward the open-air Tlatelolco marketplace with his father. They hear a rumble of noise from thousands of people inside. The boy and his father pass by rows of spices, meat, gold jewelry, and feathers. His father stops to hand over **cacao beans** in exchange for corn.

4

The grand Templo Mayor towers over Tenochtitlán as the boy rushes home. He cannot wait to show his mother their purchases. Market day is always busy in the Aztec Empire!

5

WHO WERE THE ANCIENT AZTECS?

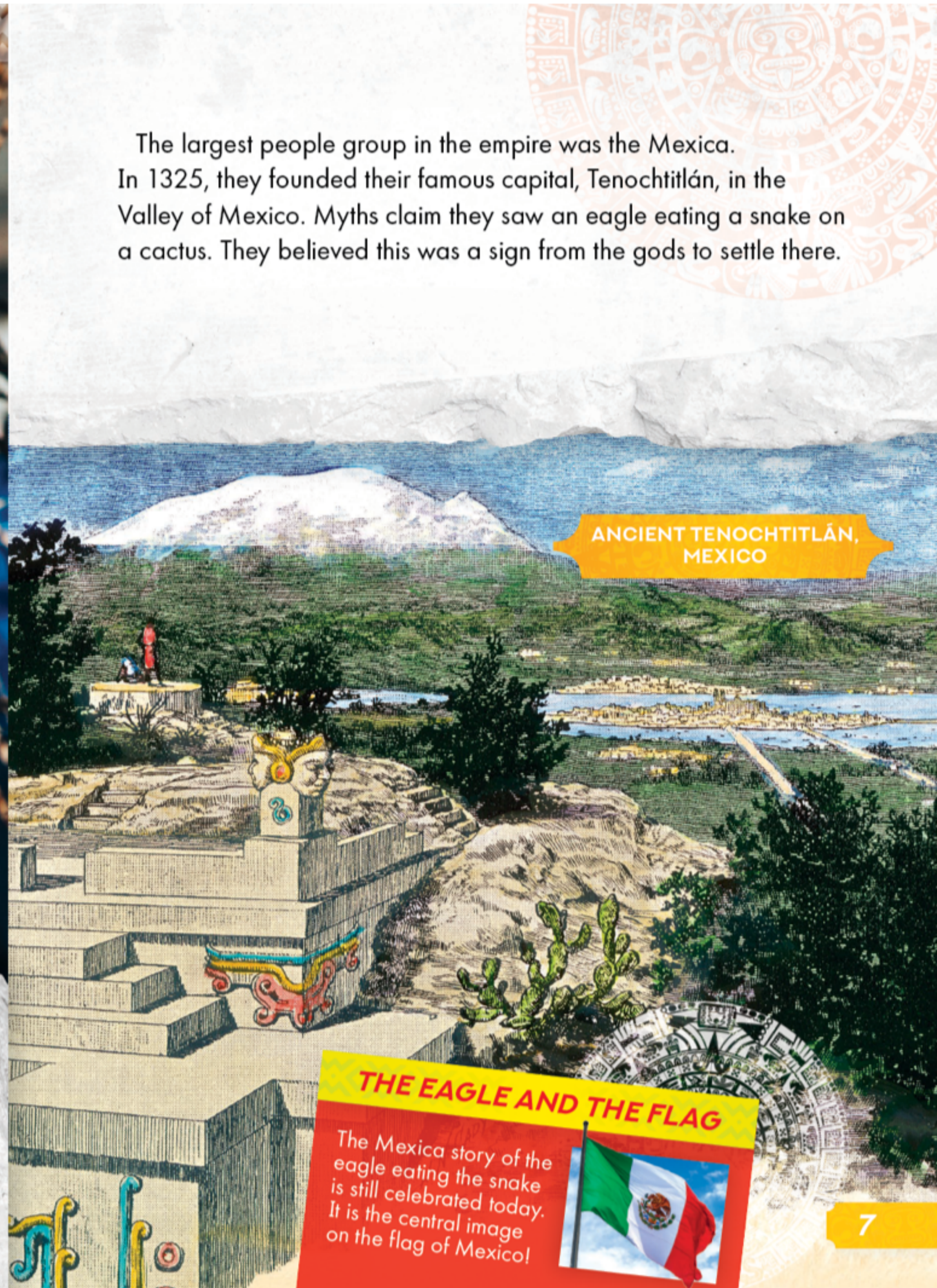


CEREMONIAL AZTEC OUTFIT

The Aztecs ruled an empire in present-day Mexico from 1325 to 1521. At its height, the empire stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic. It ruled around 6 million people. Today, the Aztecs are remembered for their grand cities and fierce warriors.

6

The largest people group in the empire was the Mexica. In 1325, they founded their famous capital, Tenochtitlán, in the Valley of Mexico. Myths claim they saw an eagle eating a snake on a cactus. They believed this was a sign from the gods to settle there.



ANCIENT TENOCHTILÁN, MEXICO

THE EAGLE AND THE FLAG

The Mexica story of the eagle eating the snake is still celebrated today. It is the central image on the flag of Mexico!



7

There were many **city-states** in the Valley of Mexico when the Mexica arrived. The Mexica began to develop vast trading routes around the region. Tenochtitlán's location on Lake Texcoco gave them many items for trade, including fish and frogs.

Growing wealth turned Tenochtitlán into the region's center for religion and trade. Its towering pyramids celebrated the gods. Huge markets brought buyers and sellers from all over. Two **aqueducts** supported the growing population. They carried water from the lake through the city for its citizens.

1519 AZTEC EMPIRE



CHAPULTEPEC AQUEDUCT,
MEXICO CITY

The Valley of Mexico was filled with wetlands and steep hillsides. But the Aztecs' agriculture practices helped their civilization gain strength as the population grew.

「CHINAMPAS」

The first chinampas in the Valley of Mexico date to before the Aztecs. But the Aztecs' large-scale use of chinampas helped the civilization rise to power. These "floating gardens" are still used in Mexico today!



HOW CHINAMPAS HELPED THE AZTEC EMPIRE GROW

- ✓ increased farmland by converting unusable areas
- ✓ provided more land to build homes
- ✓ increased crop variety for trade with support of up to seven crops each year
- ✓ increased food production to support a growing population

CHINAMPAS



CORN



AVOCADOES



TOMATOES



The Aztecs carved **terraces** into hillsides to create more room for crops. Large **irrigation** systems carried water into fields. On island gardens called *chinampas*, Aztecs grew corn, avocados, tomatoes, and many other crops. Chinampas surrounded Tenochtitlán and filled nearby Lakes Chalco and Xochimilco.

HOW THE ANCIENT AZTECS RULED



STATUE OF
TEXCOCO RULER
NEZAHUALCOYOTL

THINK ABOUT IT

What did Tenochtitlán, Texcoco, and Tlacopan have to gain by banding together?

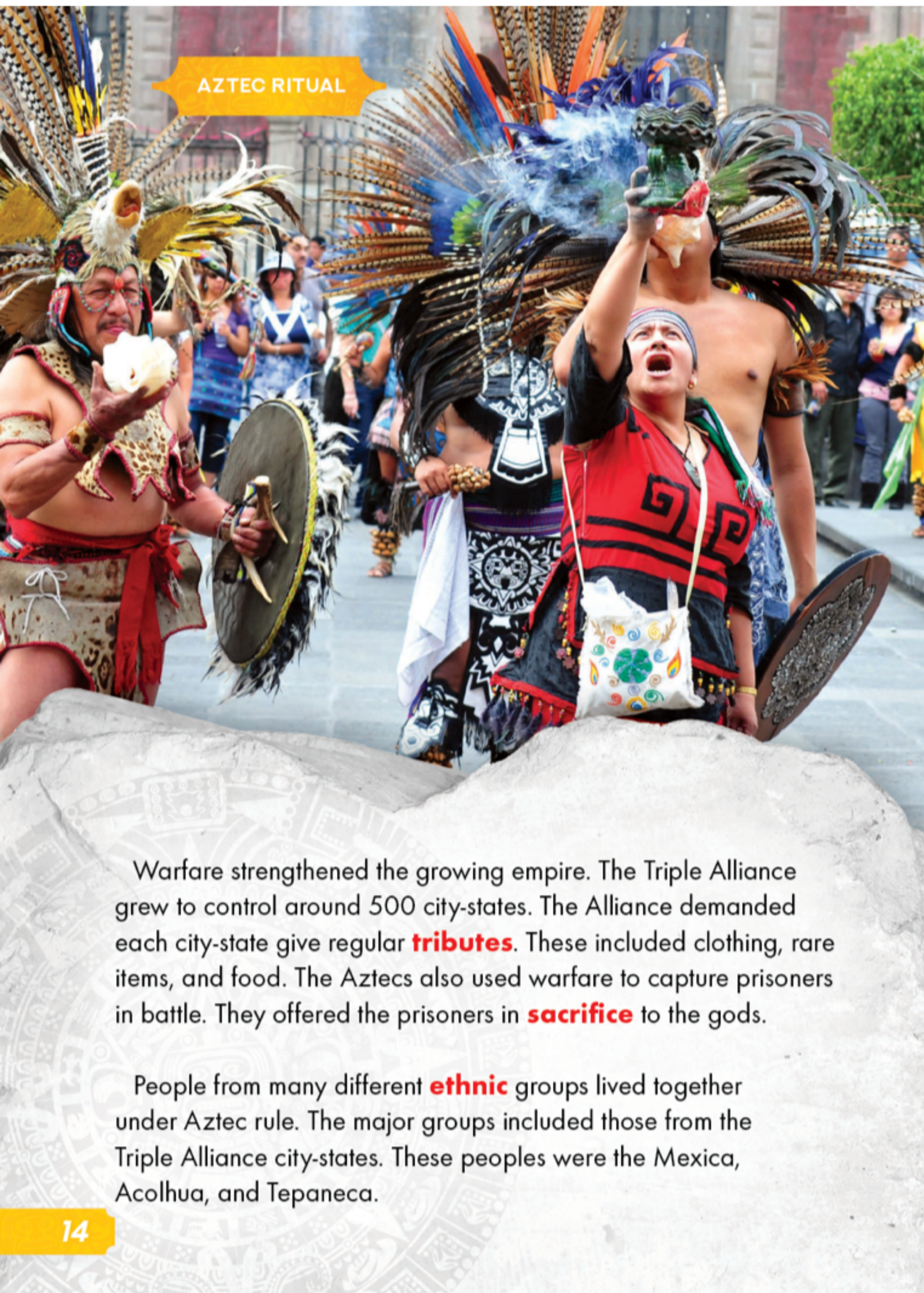
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The Aztec Empire was made up of many city-states. Each city-state had a king from its ruling family. A group of four nobles chose an emperor, or *huey tlatoani*, to rule the entire empire from Tenochtitlán.

The city-state Atzacapotzalco controlled Tenochtitlán early on. But in 1428, Tenochtitlán joined forces with Texcoco and the weaker Tlacopan. These city-states formed the Triple **Alliance** and overthrew Atzacapotzalco. Soon, the Triple Alliance took control of large areas of the Valley of Mexico. The Aztec Empire was gaining power.



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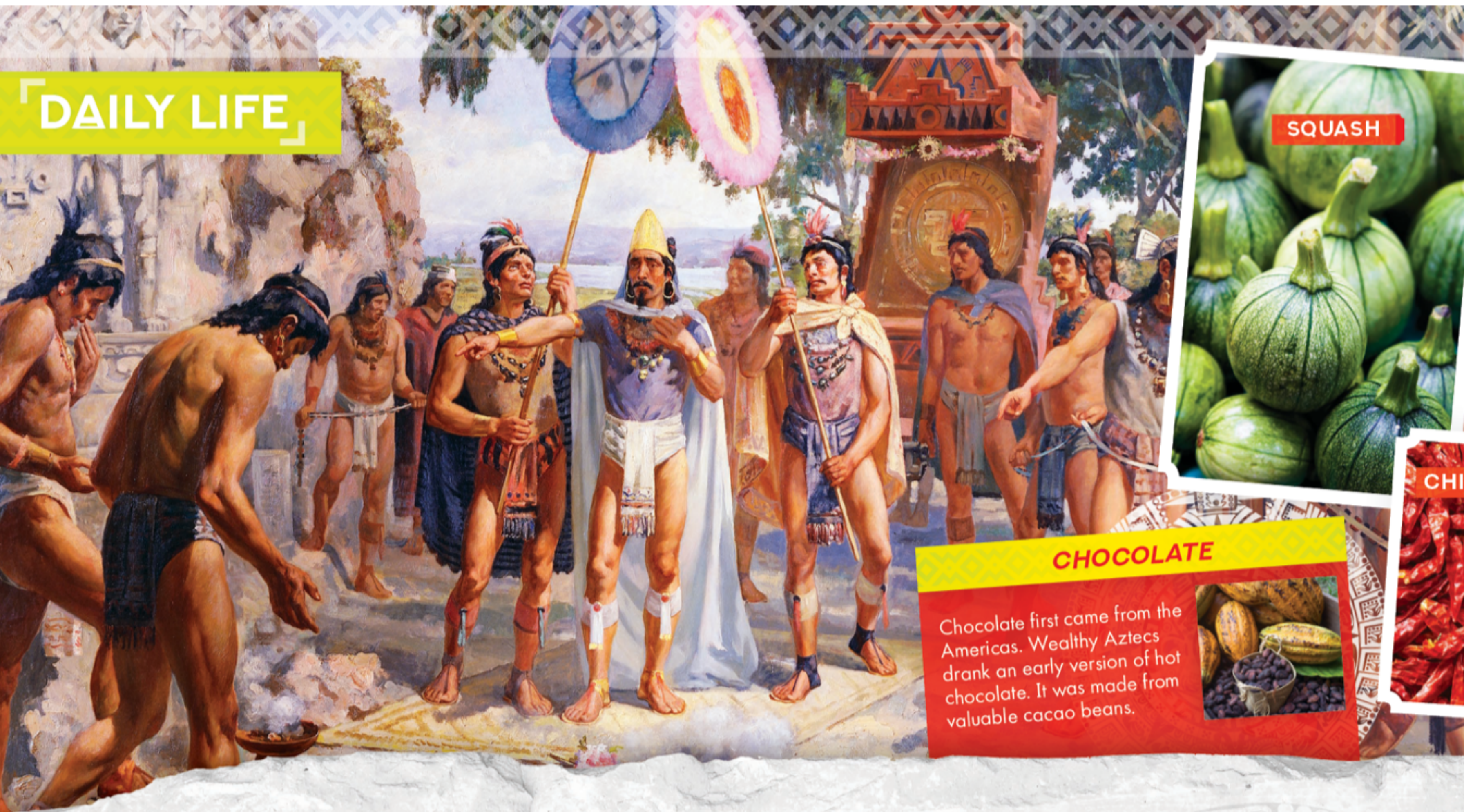
AZTEC RITUAL

Warfare strengthened the growing empire. The Triple Alliance grew to control around 500 city-states. The Alliance demanded each city-state give regular **tributes**. These included clothing, rare items, and food. The Aztecs also used warfare to capture prisoners in battle. They offered the prisoners in **sacrifice** to the gods.

People from many different **ethnic** groups lived together under Aztec rule. The major groups included those from the Triple Alliance city-states. These peoples were the Mexica, Acolhua, and Tepaneca.

TENOCHTITLÁN VS. TEXCOCO, 1519

TENOCHTITLÁN	
KNOWN FOR	religion and military strength
GOVERNMENT	capital of the Aztec Empire and home of the empire's emperor
LOCATION	on an island in Lake Texcoco
POPULATION	more than 200,000 people
POWER	worked to gain more power over Texcoco and Tlacopan
TEXCOCO	
KNOWN FOR	advanced arts and engineering
GOVERNMENT	city-state governed by a king, called a <i>tlaotoni</i>
LOCATION	eastern edge of Lake Texcoco
POPULATION	around 24,000 people
POWER	worked to stay independent of Tenochtitlán's growing power



DAILY LIFE



SQUASH



CHILI PEPPERS



CHOCOLATE

Chocolate first came from the Americas. Wealthy Aztecs drank an early version of hot chocolate. It was made from valuable cacao beans.

Four classes separated Aztec society. The highest was nobility. It included priests, lords, **scribes**, and government and military leaders. Commoners worked as farmers, traders, warriors, and craftsmen. Scribes, craftsmen, and talented warriors were especially important roles. Below commoners were serfs. They lived and worked on nobles' land. Slaves made up the lowest class.

Aztecs grew their own food or bought food at markets. Corn was a **staple** in Aztec diets. The Aztecs used it to make tamales and tortillas, called *tlaxcalli*. Other common foods included squash, chili peppers, and beans.

Children learned at home until around age 15. Young men then received religious or military training. Young women studied household skills, religious **rituals**, and music. Aztecs' schooling ended when they married.

Young families moved in with the husband's family to raise children. Large extended families of peasants often all lived together. Nobility enjoyed grand, beautiful homes built with stone. Peasants had far simpler houses made of adobe or clay.

AZTEC HOME



ULLAMALIZTLI COURT



THE BALL GAME

The Aztecs often played a ball game called *ullamalitzli*. It was like a mix of basketball and soccer! Players had to get a rubber ball through a ring without using their feet or hands.

BELIEFS AND CULTURE

AZTEC RELIGIOUS CEREMONY

The Aztecs believed many gods and goddesses watched over them. Some had also been worshipped by past **Mesoamerican** groups. During religious ceremonies, Aztec priests often practiced human sacrifice. They believed this pleased the gods and prevented the universe's end.

Two calendars guided Aztec life. Their 365-day calendar was based on the sun. The other was a 260-day religious calendar. Every 52 years, the two calendars shared the same first day. On this day, the Aztecs held the New Fire Ceremony. This ensured the world would continue.

AZTEC GODS AND GODDESSES



COATLICUE

- earth goddess of agriculture and childbirth
- mother of Huitzilopochtli



HUITZILOPOCHTLI

- god of war
- protector of Tenochtitlán

MICTLANTECUHTLI

- god of the underworld



TEZCATLIPOCA

- creator god

QUETZALCOATL

- god of learning
- protector of craftsmen



TONATIUH

- sun god
- appears on the Aztec Sun Stone



Most Aztecs spoke a language called Nahuatl. Scribes painted the language using **pictographs**. They recorded descriptions of Aztec life, religion, history, and government. Most scribes came from the noble class and were highly educated.

「NAHUATL IN ENGLISH」

Nahuatl began as pictographs. By the 1500s, words were also written with letters. English speakers have the Aztecs to thank for some common words.

NAHUATL

chocolātl ●

āhuacatl ●

coyōtl ●

chilli ●

ENGLISH

chocolate ●

avocado ●

coyote ●

chili ●

SCRIBES CREATING PICTOGRAPHS

Music was also very important to the Aztecs. Religious ceremonies featured flutes, drumming, dancing, and singing. Songs also helped share Aztec history and myths. Nobility learned these songs and dances as teenagers from schools called Houses of Song.

AZTEC SUN STONE

WHO CARVED IT?

craftsman directed by Aztec emperor Montezuma II

WHEN WAS IT MADE?

early 1500s

WHAT WAS IT?

- carved, circular stone
- features the sun god, Tonatiuh, at its center
- 20 different symbols around the edges stood for each day of the month in the 260-day Aztec calendar
- carvings include jaguars and snakes

WHY WAS IT CREATED?

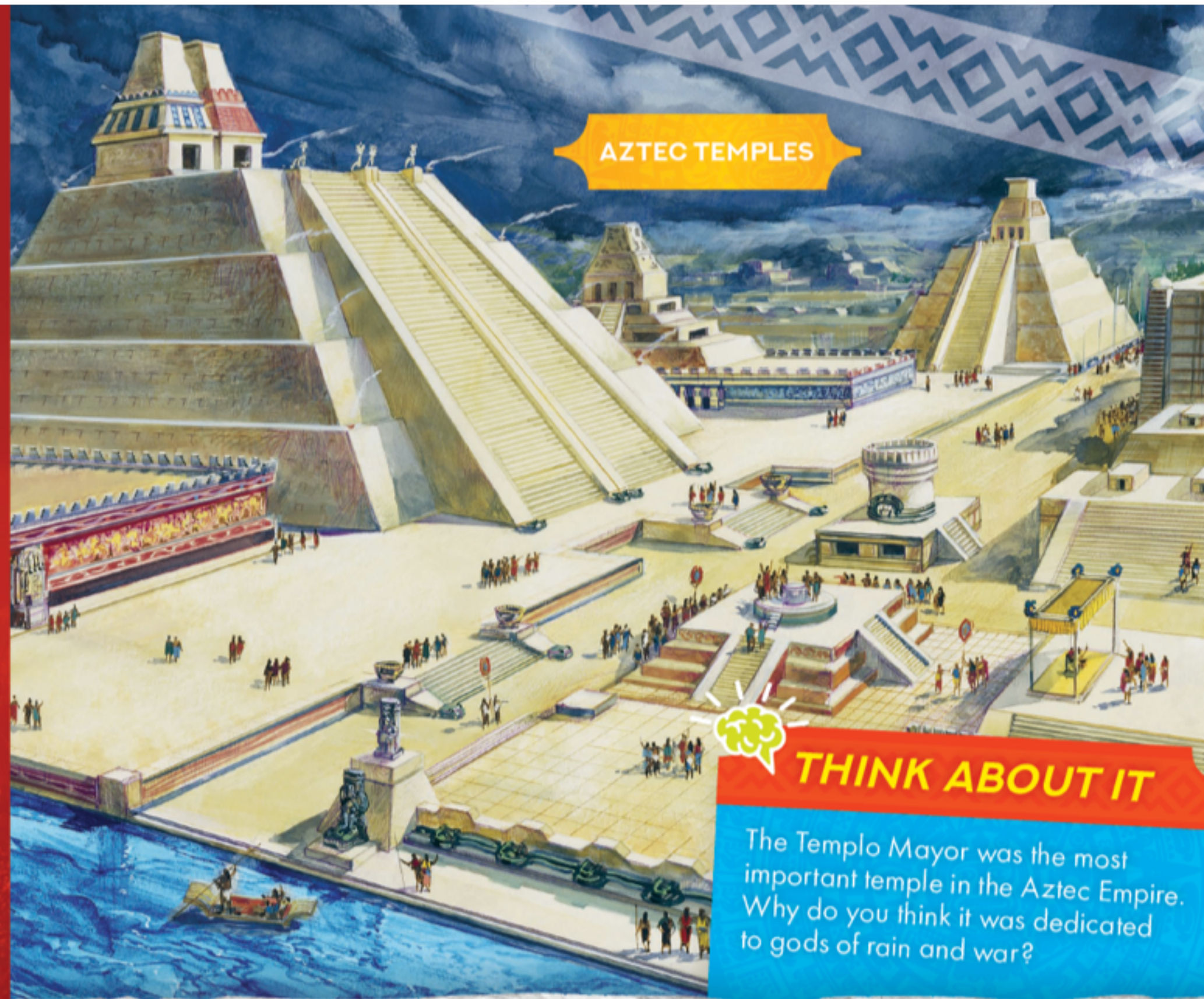
- honored Tonatiuh
- may have been an altar for priests to perform human sacrifices
- sacrifices honored and fed Tonatiuh to slow down the universe's end

WHERE WAS IT?

Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán

SIZE

12 feet (3.7 meters) across; more than 40,000 pounds (18,144 kilograms)



AZTEC TEMPLES

THINK ABOUT IT

The Templo Mayor was the most important temple in the Aztec Empire. Why do you think it was dedicated to gods of rain and war?

Much Aztec art was religious. The detailed Sun Stone honored Tonatiuh. The Aztecs also built beautiful temples to draw favor from the gods. In Tenochtitlán, the Templo Mayor towered about 197 feet (60 meters) tall. It honored the rain god, Tlaloc, and the war god, Huitzilopochtli.

Other art was meant to be worn. Metalworkers made jewelry from silver and gold. Craftsmen created headdresses and shields with valuable feathers from quetzals and other birds. Artists were also known for their detailed sculptures. These often showed the gods or the natural world.

THE FALL OF THE ANCIENT AZTECS



ATZECs BATTLEING THE SPANISH, 1521

In 1519, explorer Hernán Cortés led 600 Spanish men into the Aztec Empire. At first, Aztec emperor Montezuma was wary of the Spanish. He offered Cortés gifts of gold and silver to keep the peace. But the Spanish wanted the Aztecs' wealth and territory for themselves.

In 1521, the Spanish gathered allies from Tenochtitlán's enemies and rivals. Together, they attacked Tenochtitlán. Tenochtitlán's army fought back, but their spears were no match for Spanish guns. New diseases from Europe also weakened the population. On August 13, the empire fell.



HERNÁN CORTÉS

Few Aztec buildings stand today. The Spanish destroyed Tenochtitlán and built Mexico City in its place. They used stones from the Templo Mayor to build a grand church. But scientists continue to unearth sculptures, pottery, and other **artifacts** from Aztec lands. These help researchers understand Aztec life.

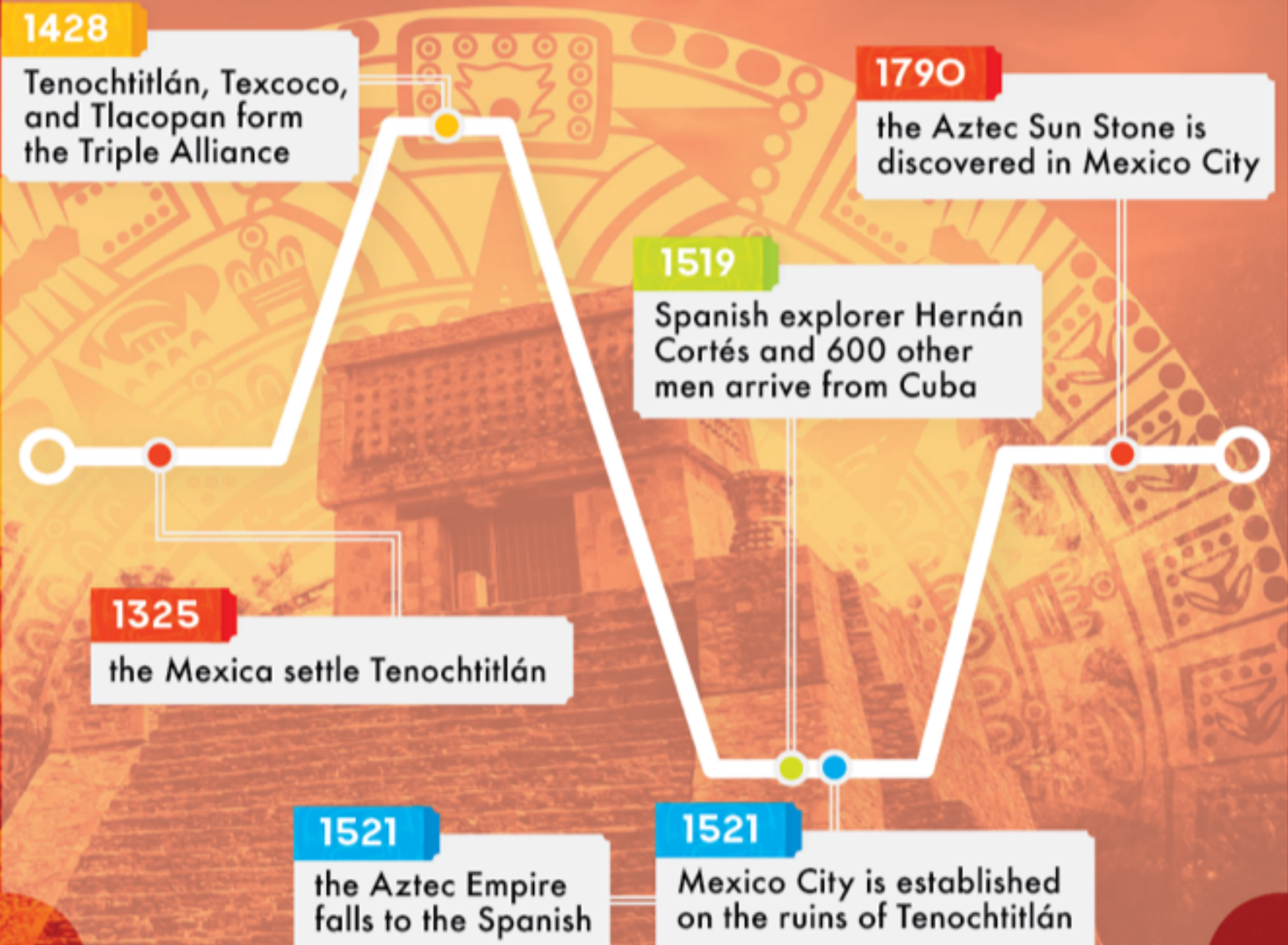


THINK ABOUT IT

Tenochtitlán and its Templo Mayor were important symbols in the Aztec Empire. Why do you think the Spanish decided to destroy them so quickly after the empire fell?

RUINS OF THE TEMPLO MAYOR

AZTEC TIMELINE



At least one million Aztec **descendants** still call Mexico home. They even continue some ancient practices. Like the Aztecs, they leave out food and drink during Day of the Dead celebrations. Some tend chinampas. People even speak Nahuatl. Five hundred years after the empire's fall, the Aztec world lives on.

GLOSSARY

alliance—a relationship in which countries or groups of people agree to work together

aqueducts—human-made channels that bring water from one place to another

artifacts—items made long ago by humans; artifacts tell people today about people from the past.

cacao beans—seeds from cacao trees that are used to make chocolate

city-states—self-governing cities and their surrounding areas

descendants—people related to a person or group of people who lived during an earlier time

ethnic—related to a group of people who share customs and an identity

irrigation—the act of bringing water to crops through human-made channels

Mesoamerican—from a region covering central Mexico to El Salvador; groups such as the Aztecs and Maya lived in Mesoamerica before the Spanish arrived.

pictographs—pictures used to communicate in place of words or phrases

rituals—religious ceremonies or practices

sacrifice—an offering of something valuable to please the gods

scribes—people who record information through writing

staple—a widely used food or other item

terraces—flat areas carved into a hill to grow crops

tributes—payments to rulers

TO LEARN MORE

AT THE LIBRARY

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ON THE WEB

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