

Early Peoples Activity Sheet:
The Aztecs

Pre-Columbian life in the Americas: Social organisation, city life and beliefs

1. Where did the Aztec live?

The Aztec lived in an area centred on the Valley of Mexico, which is a huge, oval region surrounded by mountains and volcanoes. The valley is the site of present-day Mexico City.

2. What was the name of the city at the centre of the Aztec empire?

Tenochtitlan was the city at the centre of the Aztec empire.

3. What did the Aztecs believe the gods needed to keep them strong?

The Aztecs believed that the gods needed fresh blood to keep them strong. Many Aztec religious ceremonies included the killing of prisoners and other victims. Often, these ceremonies took place in temples at the top of pyramids.

4. Why did Montezuma I conquer new lands?

A drought caused the crops to fail. Many thousands of the Aztec starved to death in the resulting famine. Montezuma was determined that that his people should not starve again so he set out to conquer lands to the south and east, where there was plenty of rain and crops grew well.

5. Under which ruler did the Aztec empire reach its height?

The Aztec empire reached its height during the reign of Ahutizotl. He made the borders of the Aztec empire stronger and seized control of land to the north and west to protect his territory from the Tarascan. He also invaded areas to the south and east.

Roles of key groups in society

6. Who was the Tlatoani?

The tlatoani was a male member of the royal family who was chosen from a council of noblemen to rule all the land and people inside the Aztec empire.

7. What other roles did the tlatoani play in society?

The tlatoani was also the religious leader, and he played a major part in religious ceremonies. He was the military leader, organising wars and even commanding his soldiers in battle. He was also considered responsible for protecting his people from famine or invasion.

8. Who ruled the country when the ruler was absent?

The tlatoani had a deputy who ruled the country when the ruler was absent. The deputy was the "Snake Woman", even though the person who held this position was a man. They controlled the law courts and the wealth of the royal palace.

9. Who advised the tlatoani?

Before making important decisions, the tlatoani got advice from his council. The four members of the council were always nobles and were usually senior army leaders. When a tlatoani died, the same council chose someone to replace him.

10. Who were the highest rank of people in Aztec society behind the tlatoani?

The highest rank of people in Aztec society were the nobles, they made up most of the powerful positions in government; they made up most of the priesthood; and they controlled nearly all of the empire's wealth.

11. What special rights did nobles have?

Nobles had special rights that set them apart from the rest of the people. They could wear fine jewellery and clothing made of cotton. Nobles were allowed to build houses of two stories. They could have more than one wife and children were educated in special religious schools.

12. Who were the commoner class?

The commoner class contained workers of all kinds, including fishermen, craftsmen, farmers, and merchants. Commoners paid taxes each year to the tlatoani or to their local lord.

13. What was the Calpolli?

Most commoners lived in groups of families called calpolli. These groups lived near each other and shared a piece of land. There might be 20 houses in a small calpolli, though some were much bigger.

14. What was the role of the Calpolli?

In the towns, the calpolli was the most basic form of government. Each calpolli elected its own leader.

15. How did a commoner rise to a more powerful position?

Commoners very rarely became nobles, but they could rise to more powerful positions in their own social class. A commoner could achieve this by showing great bravery in battle, merchants and craftsmen could become rich or well known for their skills.

16. What position was a very important position in Aztec society?

Becoming a high priest was a very important position in Aztec society.

Warfare and Soldiers:

1. What were the two main reasons Aztecs fought wars?

Aztecs fought wars for two main reasons. One reason was to defeat other states and force them to hand over their wealth. The second, was religion. The Aztecs needed a steady supply of prisoners to sacrifice to their gods.

2. What was the military tactic used by the Aztecs?

The Aztec army would spread out in a long line across the battlefield. The soldiers would mock the other side, daring them to charge. Then the two ends of the Aztec line would move forward and try to surround the enemy army.

3. What was the significance of the hair style on young soldiers?

When young boys began their military training, they grew a lock of hair on the back of their head. They were not allowed to cut this off until they had captured a prisoner in battle.

4. What was the role of a young soldier in their first war?

At first, they carried equipment for other soldiers. Once they had gained experience, they were allowed to fight.

5. Explain the type of weaponry used by Aztecs.

Aztec soldiers wanted to capture their enemies alive, so their weapons were designed to wound people rather than kill them. Their main weapon was a macuahuitl, a club made of wood, with pieces of hard, naturally formed glass (obsidian) fixed to the edge. They also used bows, arrows and spears. The atlatl allowed them to throw their spears over long distances.

Everyday life:

1. Who were the pochteca?

The Pochteca were merchants that brought in vital goods and raw materials from other states and from distant countries. They also sold Aztec goods abroad.

2. What rank did the pochteca have in society?

Many pochteca became very rich through their work. They were not of the noble class but were at the top of the commoner class.

3. Why did the pochteca have to hide their wealth?

As commoners, merchants were not allowed to show off their wealth. They therefore tried to look poor. They usually returned from their expedition at night and hid their goods so that no one would see how successful they had been.

4. What did merchants travel in on long expeditions?

Merchants often travelled in a caravan, travelling with a group for safety. The caravan travelled on foot.

5. What other roles did merchants play for the tlatoani?

Merchants travelled from town to town and often through warring states. For this reason, they often acted as spies for the tlatoani. He paid them to bring back information about a possible enemy, such as the size of their army.

6. How did Aztecs purchase goods and services?

Aztecs used cacao beans or rolls of cotton cloth as forms of money. Some people also bought things by bartering.

7. List the types of goods that Spanish explorer, Hernan Cortes saw available for sale in the market place at Tlatelolco.

Food, gold, silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, shells, bones and feathers. A street sold

chickens, partridges, and quails, wild ducks, pigeons, parrots, eagles, falcons, sparrow hawks and kestrels. There were streets of herbalists that sold herbs and roots.

8. What was the approximate population of those living in the Valley of Mexico in the early 1500's?

At least 1 million people lived in the Valley of Mexico in the early 1500's.

9. How did farmers stop their soil from being washed away on steep slopes?

On steep slopes, farmers built terraces, small stone walls to keep the soil in place on steep slopes in the mountains.

10. What are chinampas?

The Aztec grew crops on the shallow lakes and swamps. To do this, they created artificial islands called chinampas. They did this by scrapping up mud from the lake bottom and piling it into mounds mixed with reeds. They then drove wooden posts or planted willow trees to hold the edges of the island.

11. What did the chinampas produce?

The chinampas produced large amounts of vegetables, fruit, and flowers. The lake mud was very fertile.

12. What were the main crops grown by the Aztec?

Bean, corn, squash, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes were the main crops grown by the Aztec. Farmers also grew cotton, cactus, and maguey (a plant used to make cloth, sewing needles, medicines and an alcoholic drink).

13. What type of livestock were on Aztec farms?

Livestock on Aztec farms were primarily turkey, ducks, and rabbits.

Women:

1. What was a woman's role in Aztec society?

Women spent most of their time in the home. Men were in charge of Aztec society by making the laws, fighting wars, and heading the household. Women were expected to obey their husbands, look after the home and raise children.

2. What tasks did women perform in the home?

Women kept the house clean and looked after the children. Daily, they spent up to six hours grinding corn to make tortillas and other food. They purchased food from the market and spun fibres and wove them into cloth. Sale of cloth was an important source of income.

3. What role did women play in religious worship?

Women played an important part in religious worship. They took food to the local temple to offer to the gods. In addition, every home had a little shrine, which was the woman's job to look after and burn copal there.

4. Describe a marriage ceremony?

On the day before the ceremony, the bride's parents held a grand feast. The wedding

itself took place the next evening. The bride dressed in red feathers and special clothes, and an old woman then carried her to her new home.

5. Who was Ayopechcatl?

Ayopechcatl was one of the goddesses protecting newborn babies. The Aztec believed that special goddesses protected women who were giving birth.

6. Where did the midwife bury the umbilical cord of a girl and why?

The midwife would bury the umbilical cord of a baby girl in the house. The midwife usually buried the cord under the floor or under the stone used for grinding corn, to signify a daughter's attachment to the home.

7. What respect was given to a woman who died in childbirth?

An Aztec woman who died in childbirth was given the same respect as a warrior who died in battle. Aztecs believed that both warriors who died in battle and women who died in childbirth would, instead of going to the underworld, rise to the sun god Tonatiuh.

Slaves:

1. What kind of tasks did slaves complete?

Male slaves worked in the fields or as servants in the house. Female slaves wove cloth, made clothing, or prepared food. Slaves were not paid for this labour, but they were given food, shelter, and clothing.

2. Who were slaves?

There were many ways of becoming enslaved in Aztec culture. Prisoners captured by the Aztec in battle who were not offered for sacrifice became slaves. Foreigners seized by traders from other countries also became slaves. Aztec citizens could become slaves as well, slavery was used as a form of punishment for many types of crimes, including robbery, kidnapping, and plotting against the tlatoani. Some sold themselves into slavery to pay off debt.

3. What rights did a slave have?

Slaves who were Aztec had some rights, such as own land and marry free citizens. Children born to one freeborn parent were freeborn and not slaves.

Law:

1. Why were punishments for breaking the law so severe in Aztec society?

The tlatoani made the laws, therefore anyone who broke a law was seen as having disobeyed the tlatoani. A noble was often punished more harshly than a commoner.

2. Explain the court system.

Each town or big village had its own court which dealt with less serious cases. More serious cases went to courts in the large towns. People could appeal their cases to the supreme council which was made up of 12 judges that gave a verdict within 80 days. The case could then go to a higher level where the judges consulted with the tlatoani. A ruling from this court was final.

3. What was considered one of the worst crimes to commit?

Theft was one of the worst of all crimes. As a punishment, the thief might be condemned to death by strangling.

4. What were the types of punishments given to those who broke the law?

The Aztec had no prisons. People who were found guilty of serious crimes were put to death by stoning or beating. Lesser punishments included destroying a person's house, taking away his property, or shaving his head.

5. Name one of the laws that Montezuma I issued?

- The tlatoani must never appear in public except on important occasions
- Only the tlatoani and his half-brother may wear sandals inside the palace
- Only nobles may wear gold jewellery in their lips, ears, and noses
- All of the calpolli are to have schools where young men can learn religion and good behaviour

Religion and beliefs:

1. How was the sun created according to Aztec beliefs?

One of the gods threw himself into a fire as a sacrifice and then rose out of the fire as the sun. However, he could not move unless other gods gave their blood, so they too burned on the fire, and the sun was able to move around the sky.

2. What does this myth tell us about Aztec religion and beliefs?

This myth shows how Aztec religion was based on the idea of sacrifice. Humans had to repay the gods for their sacrifice with their own blood. If they failed to do this, the sun might stop moving and disaster would follow.

3. What age did the Aztecs believe they were living in according to the idea of the Five Suns?

The Aztec believed they were living in the age of the fifth sun.

4. Match gods and goddesses with what they represented.

Answer:

Huitzilopochtli	God of war and protector of the Aztec
Quetzalcoatl	God of learning and of the wind
Tlaloc	God of rain, water and fertility
Coatlicue	Goddess of Earth and the mother of Huitzilopochtli
Teteoinnan or Toci	Goddess of fertility and healing
Tezcatilpoca	God of the night and all material things
Tonatiuh	Fifth sun god and in charge of Aztec heaven

5. What was the purpose of smaller ceremonies?

The purpose of many of these ceremonies was to pray for fertile land and good harvests.

6. What was at the centre of most religious ceremonies?

At the centre of most religious ceremonies was human sacrifice.

7. How were victims sacrificed?

One common way that sacrificial victims were killed was through removal of the heart. The priests took the victim to the temple, which was on a pyramid at the top of the giant flight of steps. They laid the person on a special stone and cut open his or her chest with a knife. A priest pulled out the victim's heart, as an offering to the sun. Then the victim rolled down the steps to the bottom.

8. Who were the victims?

Aztec priests used different types of victims for certain ceremonies. For example, one important feast called for the sacrifice of an elderly noblewoman. Ceremonies for the rain gods required children. Most sacrifice victims, however, were enemies captured in battle.

9. Who attended the calmecac?

Boys of the noble class went to the calmecac, a school run by priests.

10. If a young man decided to become a priest, what did this mean?

The decision to become a priest meant he would not be able to marry, and he would become a full priest for life.

11. Who was the "fire seller"?

The "fire seller" or fire priest performed the human sacrifices. Only some priests rose to the position.

12. What were some of the daily duties carried out by priests?

Priests had to keep the sacred fires burning, burn copal and make offerings of food to the gods. They also organised the running of the temple, such as cleaning, maintenance, taking care of temple treasures. Priests also assisted with the training of new priests and kept records of daily events.

13. What was the dish on the chac mool statue possibly used for?

The dish on the chac mool statue was possibly used for holding blood or other offerings.

14. What did the Aztecs use two calendars for?

The Aztecs had two different kinds of calendars. They used these calendars to record important moments in the year and to help them mark out what would happen in the future.

15. Who did the Aztecs believe controlled time?

People believed that the gods controlled time. The Aztecs believed that time was something sacred. Different gods were thought to guard the days, the months, the years, and even the centuries.

16. How many days and months in an ordinary calendar year?

The ordinary Aztec calendar had 365 days, which were divided into 18 months. Each month had 20 days and a month was divided into 4 weeks (5 days to a week). 5 extra days at the end of the year were considered unlucky days.

17. What was the ordinary calendar used for?

The ordinary calendar set out the dates for ordinary events such as correct times for planting and harvesting crops, regular ceremonies and markets.

18. How many days and months in a religious calendar?

The religious calendar used by the Aztec were very different from their ordinary calendar. It had 260 days divided into 13 months. Each month had 20 days and each 20 days had a different name.

19. When did the Binding of the Years, or the New Fire Ceremony occur?

The New Fire Ceremony occurred when the ordinary and religious calendars ended on the same day.

Everyday Life:

1. Approximately how many people lived in the city of Tenochtitlan and the surrounding area?

About 200,000 people lived in the city of Tenochtitlan.

2. What was located at the centre of the city?

At the centre of Tenochtitlan stood the main religious buildings. These were the temples to the most important gods, as well as the calmecac.

3. What was the tallest and most splendid building in the city?

The tallest and most splendid building was the Great Temple pyramid, the Templo Mayor which held shrines to the two most important gods, Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli.

4. How regarded were artists and craftsmen in the commoner class?

Artists and craftsmen had a special place in the commoner class. They ranked just below the merchants.

5. How many family members lived in a common household?

About six family members lived together in most Aztec households. This included a husband and wife, their children and several of the husband's relatives. Sometimes, two married couples from the same family shared a house.

6. Describe a typical day for an Aztec family.

The day started at sun rise and begun with a wash in the nearby pond or lake. The women in the house would start the fire and begin grinding the corn into flour. Meanwhile, the men went out into their fields or workshops. Everyone stopped to eat at midday, which was the main meal of the day, followed by a short sleep, before returning to their labour. Work only ended when the sun went down. They would go to bed soon after dark.

7. What were most houses made of?

Most Aztec houses were made of adobe, or sun-dried bricks.

8. What was the layout of Aztec homes?

The homes of most Aztec were all the same design. They had only one room that was divided

into four areas: a sleeping area, a kitchen, a small shrine and a main living area. Many had a separate bathhouse.

9. Describe the features of a home owned by a wealthy Aztec?

Wealthy Aztec had much larger homes, which were sometimes made of stone. These homes were sometimes more than one storey high, and some stood on raised platforms.

10. What type of clothing did the Aztec wear?

Aztec men wore a loincloth with a cape knotted over the right shoulder. Women wore a skirt, wrapped around the waist and tied with a belt, and a sleeveless blouse.

11. What were their clothes made from?

The most common cloth was made from the fibres of the maguey plant.

12. What was the law regarding clothing for commoners?

Commoners wore simple clothing with little or no decoration.

13. What did priests wear?

Priests wore black or dark green cloaks. These were often decorated with pictures of human bones and skulls.

14. Look the image on page 45 of the man and woman. Based on what you read about the dress code, what social class are they from and how do you know?

The couple depicted are most certainly from the noble class because both are wearing coloured clothing and jewellery and are wearing some kind of sandal.

15. What was the main ingredient of most Aztec dishes?

Corn was the main ingredient of most Aztec dishes.

16. List the types of foods the Aztec ate.

Porridge, tortillas, and tamales. Vegetables and fruits: beans, tomatoes, squash and chili peppers. Meat: turkeys, ducks, rabbits and a special breed of small dogs. Other foods included, wild birds and animals, fish, frogs and insects.

17. List the types of food Montezuma II ate.

Montezuma II chose from over 300 dishes to eat from, daily. The dishes were made from fruits and vegetables, and items featuring duck, rabbit, crow, and pigeon.

18. What was a popular drink among the wealthy?

Chocolate was a very popular drink. It was very expensive so only wealthy people could drink it.

19. What gifts did parents give to their new born babies?

If the baby was a boy, they gave him a little shield, a bow, and four arrows. These symbolised that the baby should grow up to be a warrior. If the baby was a girl, the parents gave her a brush, a basket, and a spindle. These symbolised that she would grow up to be a housewife.

20. Explain the different type of educations boys and girls received.

Children were educated at home until about age 15. Boys and girls were treated very differently. The father educated his son on how to handle a canoe, catch fish, and other skills. The mother educated the daughter and taught her how to spin thread, how to sweep floors, and how to grind corn.

21. What was the telpochcalli?

The telpochcalli was the local school that most boys went to. At the telpochalli they learned about being warriors and how to build roads and repair canals.

22. Where did boys from wealthy families go to school?

Boys from noble or wealthy families usually went to a calmecac or religious schools. They were trained to become priests or government officials.

23. What kinds of sports and games did nobles enjoy?

Nobles enjoyed hunting wild birds using a blowpipe to shoot tiny clay balls. They also hunted deer, coyote and small rabbits.

24. What type of amusements did commoners enjoy?

One of their favourite games was patolli. This was played on a board divided into squares. The players threw beans marked with dots (like dice), moved coloured stones across the squares, and made bets about who would win.

25. Explain the ball game, ullamaliztli.

The game was played between two teams in an I-shaped, walled court with a carved stone ring on each side wall of the court. The aim was to put a heavy rubber ball through one of the rings. The players were only allowed to touch the ball with their knees or hips. When a team scored, they won the game.

26. How did the Aztec transport goods?

The Aztec did not use wheels or carts to transport goods. Human beings were the main form of transportation – porters carried goods over long and short distances. Goods were also transported via boats along lakes and canals.

Spanish arrival in the Americas:

1. Why did the Aztec have so many enemies?

The conquered peoples hated the harsh rule under the Aztec, and they were tired of sending huge amounts of tribute to Tenochtitlan and providing victims for sacrifices.

2. Why did the empire start to weaken?

The Aztec empire had become so big it was difficult to control. The Aztec forces were defeated in a battle by forces of Tlaxcala, a city in the east. Soon afterward, there was a drought in the Valley of Mexico, which caused terrible famine.

3. What excited Europeans about the Americas?

The Europeans were excited by stories of gold and other treasures in the Americas.

4. Based on the supplies and crew Hernan Cortes brought with him on his expedition to the coast of Mexico, what do you think the aim of the expedition was?

Cortes had 11 ships, about 100 sailors, and 500 soldiers, armed with muskets and cannons. He then set off inland toward Tenochtitlan which indicates the goal of the expedition was to conquer Tenochtitlan.

5. How did Cortes get the numbers needed to take on the 250,000 strong Aztec army?

Cortes called on the enemies of Montezuma II to join his campaign. He did this by either defeating or making friends with these groups. Cortes was able to create an army of hundreds of Spaniards and thousands of Indians.

6. Look at the map of Tenochtitlan on page 55. What does it tell you about the city?

The map shows how the city was completely surrounded by Lake Texcoco and how complicated it would be to attack.

7. How did Montezuma II's gesture of sending gifts to the new Spanish force in the hope of getting them to leave go wrong?

Montezuma II was alarmed when he got news about the new Spanish force. He sent messengers with rich gifts for Cortes and a message ordering the Spanish to leave. Cortes and his men were delighted with the gifts, which were made from gold and other precious materials. Now they were certain that Mexico was rich in treasures.

8. What events unfolded when Cortes and his forces reached Tenochtitlan?

Montezuma II let Cortes and his forces enter the city. Whilst meeting with Cortes, Montezuma was taken captive and the Spanish raided the city stealing treasures. The Aztecs fought back. After a week of bitter fighting, the Spaniards try to sneak out of the city but the Aztec discovered them. Many Spaniards were killed and Montezuma died during the fighting.

9. According to Bernal Diaz del Castilo, how was Montezuma II killed?

Montezuma was killed by a barrage of stones and darts as he stood on the roof giving a speech to his people. He was hit by three stones. Montezuma refused, to have his wounds dressed and eat food, despite begging from his people. The Spanish forces were then informed he was dead.

10. According to the Aztec, how was Montezuma II killed?

The Aztec claimed that Montezuma was murdered by the Spaniards.

11. What epidemic broke out in Tenochtitlan killing thousands of Aztec and weakening the empire?

A smallpox epidemic broke out in Tenochtitlan. The Spaniards had brought the disease to the New World.

12. After the surrender of the new tlatoani, why did the Spaniards destroy many of the Aztec cities?

The Spaniards destroyed many of the Aztec cities because they believed it was their duty as Christians to wipe out all traces of Aztec religion, which they believed was inspired by the devil.

13. Look at the image on page 57. What does it tell you about Spanish rule?

The image depicting the execution of the Aztec who refused to convert to Christianity, demonstrates the harsh tactics that the Spanish employed to stamp out Aztec religion and replace it with Christianity.