

# THE AZTEC CIVILIZATION

## ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

*Where, when, and how did the Aztec civilization rise in Central America?*

The Aztec Empire began in the Valley of Mexico. When the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico, other tribes were already in residence. They had already taken the best land. The Aztecs had to make due with the swampy shores of Lake Texcoco.

But this did not bother the Aztecs. Not only were they very clever people, but they had every faith that their main god had sent them to the swampy shores of Lake Texcoco, so obviously this place was perfect. The Aztecs had to find the eagle with a snake in its mouth and that is the city where they lived for the rest of their lives. The Aztecs found the eagle with the snake in its mouth and they named that city Tenochtitlan. The city Tenochtitlan was one of the biggest cities in that time.



Figure 1 The Eagle with the Snake in its mouth

They ADAPTED to their environment.

They built canoes, so they could fish and hunt birds that lived near the water. They created floating gardens for growing food. They created more land for agriculture by filling in the marshes. They built dikes to hold back the water.

After they settled in, they began to conquer the neighboring tribes. They conquered first one tribe, and then another, and then another.

Each conquered tribe had to pay tribute to the Aztecs in the form of food, clothing, jewels, and of course, captives to feed the hungry gods. That made the Aztecs very happy and very rich.

The Aztecs expanded and expanded until they had built an empire.

By approximately 1520, many Soldiers from Spain arrived in the Valley of Mexico. They were amazed at what they saw. One soldier said, “There were soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople and Rome and all over Italy, who said that they had never before seen a market place so large and so filled with people.”

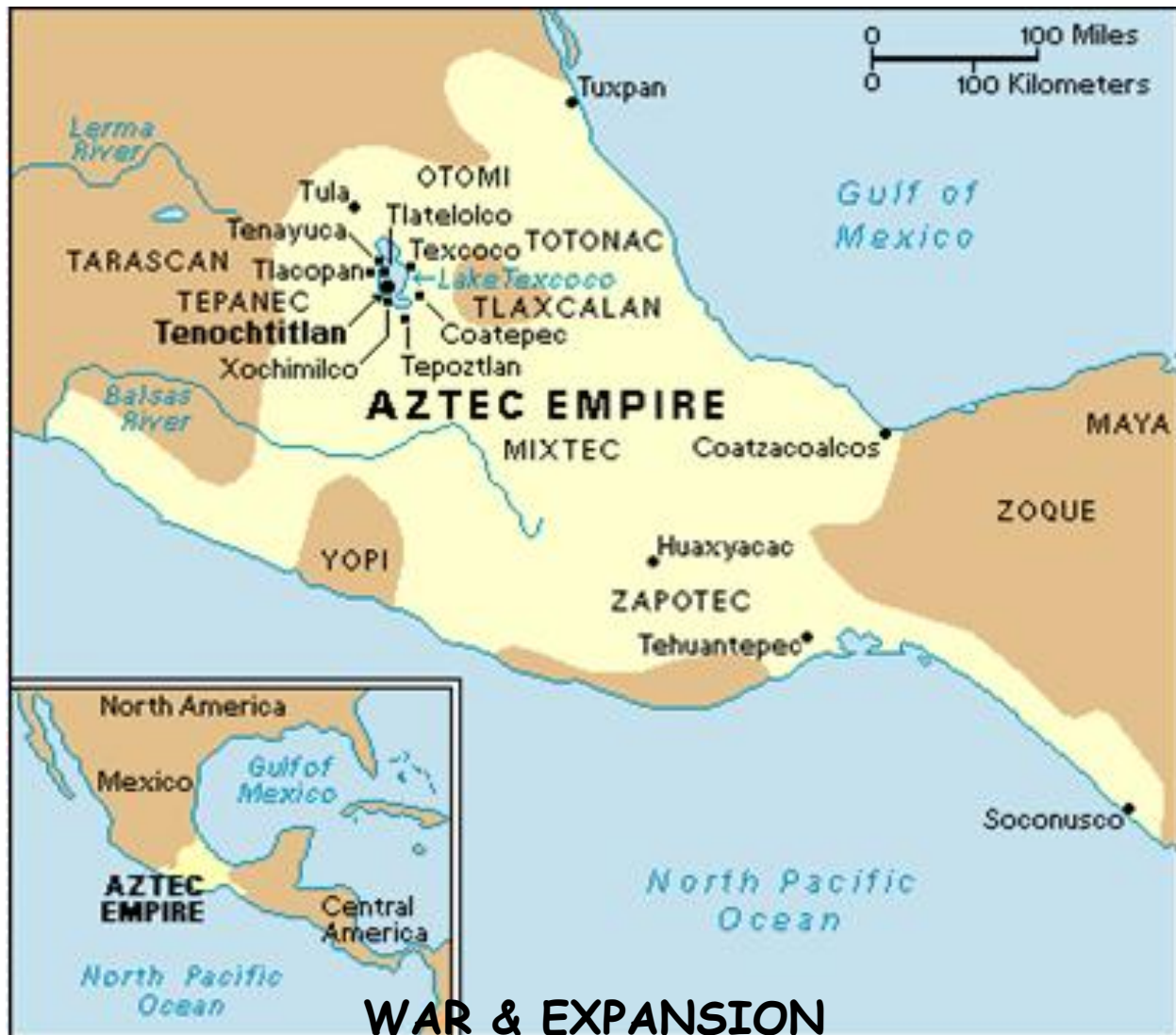
However, that friendly relationship didn't last long. In a matter of years, the Spanish Conquistadors conquered the Aztecs. The arrival of the Spanish brought guns, horses, huge fighting dogs, and disease. Because the Aztecs were such fierce warriors, they might have had a slim chance of survival against guns and horses and huge fighting dogs. But they had no defense against disease. They had never been exposed to childhood diseases like measles. Many became ill once the Spanish arrived; many died.

The Spanish also received help from the other tribes in the area. These tribes saw a chance to get even with the Aztec, and perhaps even to rid themselves of the feared and hated Aztecs. These tribes did not expect to be conquered themselves, which they were. Nor did they know how harshly the Spanish would rule their people.

By the mid-1500's, the Aztec Empire had collapsed, and the Spanish had taken over the entire region.

Today, there are around 1,000,000 (one million) descendants of the ancient Aztecs living and working in Mexico. Human sacrifice is no longer part of their festivals. But the beautiful art and clever games the Aztecs created are still enjoyed and collectors items today.

Religion was a staple in the Aztec culture. The Aztecs worshiped hundreds of gods and goddesses; each represented a different aspect of life. Ceremonies were very important to the Aztecs during the agricultural year ensuring good crops. During these ceremonies human sacrifices were given to the gods. Many of the sacrifices were war prisoners or children. They felt that human hearts and blood gave the gods strength. Large temples were built to perform these sacrifices.



**Expansion:** Around 1400 CE, the Aztec government began conquering neighboring tribes. The Aztec population had grown. They needed many things to manage their growing population. They needed new cities to house their population. They needed new lands to feed their population. They needed new captives to feed their hungry gods. Schools needed to be run. Storehouses needed to be filled. Temples

needed to be built. The government had its hands full trying to satisfy all these needs.

**Tribute:** War was the answer. When the Aztecs conquered a tribe, they demanded tribute in the form of food, clothing, precious stones, building supplies, and captives. The first four the Aztecs kept for themselves. The last they gave to their gods. Other tribes hated and feared the Aztecs. Sometimes, they simply ran away in fear rather than fight.

## **AZTEC GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE**

The Aztec empire was advanced for its time. It had an elaborate government and society that consisted of four classes. The four classes were nobles, commoners, serfs, and slaves. These classes showed a hierarchy of power with nobles being the most powerful and slaves being the least powerful. In government most of the office positions were hereditary, but one could obtain a high office by serving the emperor. Slaves were obtained through war and people who couldn't pay their debts were also enslaved. Commoners made up the majority of the population and survived by farming. Serfs worked the land for nobles.

The Aztecs had an emperor, known in Europe as a king, who ruled over all the people. The emperor lived in the capital city of Tenochtitlan. The palace was huge. It even had its own zoo. The ground floor of the palace housed government offices and the shops of the most talented craftsman in the Aztec empire.

**City-States:** As the Aztec empire grew, under the direction of government officials, Aztec engineers built many fine cities. A noble family controlled each city. Although the noble family was supposed to assist the emperor, the truth is that each noble family pretty much ran things in their own city the way they wanted. Thus, the Aztecs, like the Mayas, were governed by city-states.

## **AZTEC ECONOMY**

Aztec economy was based upon agriculture, corn being the most important crop. They practiced slash-and-burn agriculture and many times achieved crop surpluses. These surpluses were stored and used during hard times. They also had elaborate irrigation systems, which allowed them to farm dry lands. They farmed shallow lakes by

scooping up mud and forming islands called chinampas (i.e., floating islands). These islands made for very fertile land that was effective for growing crops. At Tlateolco they had an extensive market that was the largest of its time. Interestingly the Aztecs had no money system; rather they traded goods and services.



Figure 2 Illustration of the Aztec market at Tlateolco

## AZTEC LAW & ORDER

**Home Rule / Crime and Punishment:** With their own people, the Aztec rulers were quite severe. Aztec courts decided on the punishment those who broke the law would receive. Drunkenness was the worse crime. The punishment for being

drunk was death. Thieves were put to death. Laws were tough, and they were written down. **Codices** warned of the punishment you would receive for breaking the law.

**The One Time Forgiveness Law:** The Aztecs had an interesting law. Once, and only once, you could confess your crime to the priests of Tlazolteotl and you would be forgiven. No punishment could be given to you. Timing was everything. You could only do this once. And you had to do it *before* you were caught. If evidence came to light after you confessed, you were safe. You had already been excused from punishment for that crime. However, if you ever committed other crime, you would be punished to the full extend of the law. Aztec laws were very harsh.

**Correct Behavior:** The Aztecs were very concerned that all their citizens behave correctly. This code of behavior was written down. And it was the law. Children were taught correct behavior in the Aztec schools.

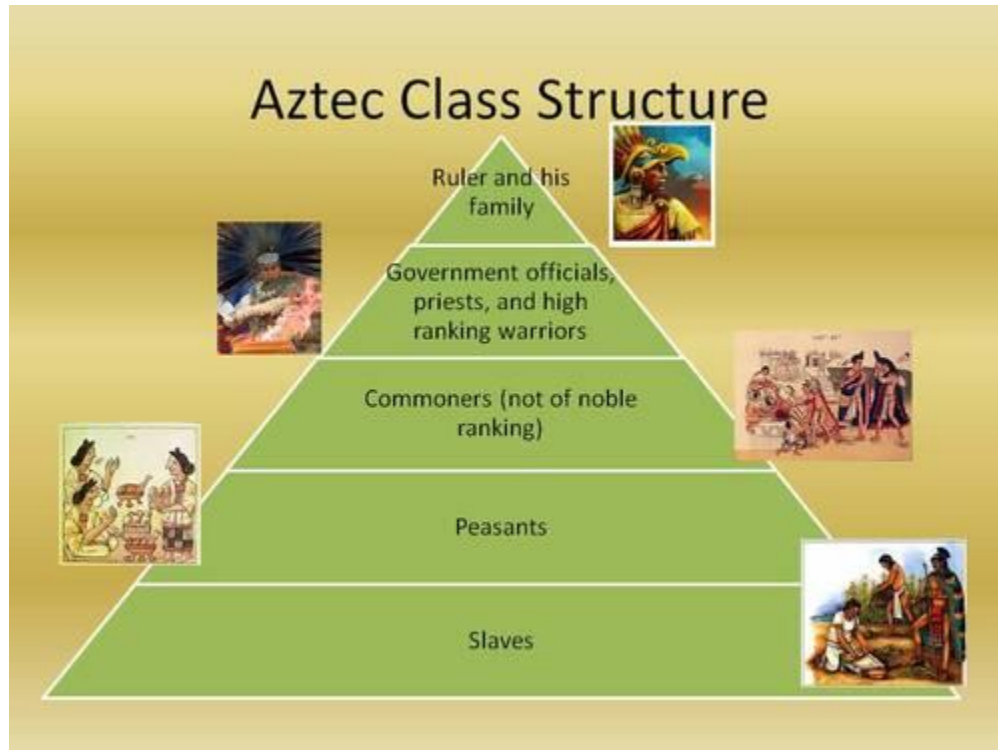
How to behave correctly was written down. These were not guidelines. Correct behavior was the law. Should you break the law, you could be killed.

The Aztecs had a code of behavior for everything. Here is a list of some correct behavior:

- Do not mock the old
- Do not mock the sick
- Do not mock one who has sinned
- Do not set a bad example
- Do not interrupt the speech of another
- If you are asked something, reply soberly and without affection or flattery or prejudice to others
- Do not make wry faces
- Wherever you go, walk with a peaceful air
- Only nobles may carry a fan
- Do not complain

## **AZTEC SOCIETY**

Like nearly all of the ancient civilizations, the rich lived in luxury and the poor worked. In the Aztec civilization, class structure was very important.



## Marriage and Family Life

Marriage and family life were very important to the Aztecs. Weddings were arranged, usually with the help of a matchmaker. Men married in their 20s and women were married by sixteen. The men had to give the woman's parent's money. Men had a higher standing in Aztec society than women. Women had some rights and different responsibilities than men. A man could have more than one wife as long as he could support her.

**Matchmakers:** were usually old women. The bride's family gave a party for three or four days before the wedding. The day of the wedding, the bride rode piggyback on the matchmaker to her new home. There, while they were wearing them, in the front the hearth (the fireplace), the bride and groom's coats were tied together. From that point on, they were married.



Figure 3 Traditional Aztec Wedding Ceremony

***New Babies:*** The birth of a baby was a really big deal. The Aztecs welcomed all life. The birth of a boy or a girl was celebrated. This was true for nobles and commoners.



# AZTEC HOMES

## The Rich:

Homes of the nobles and wealthy were made of sun-dried brick. If you were very wealthy, your home could be made of stone. All homes were whitewashed to make them look clean and shiny. Each noble's home had a separate room for steam bathing. Water was poured over heated stones. Bathing was an important part of daily life and of religion. Bathing was believed to clean both the body and soul.

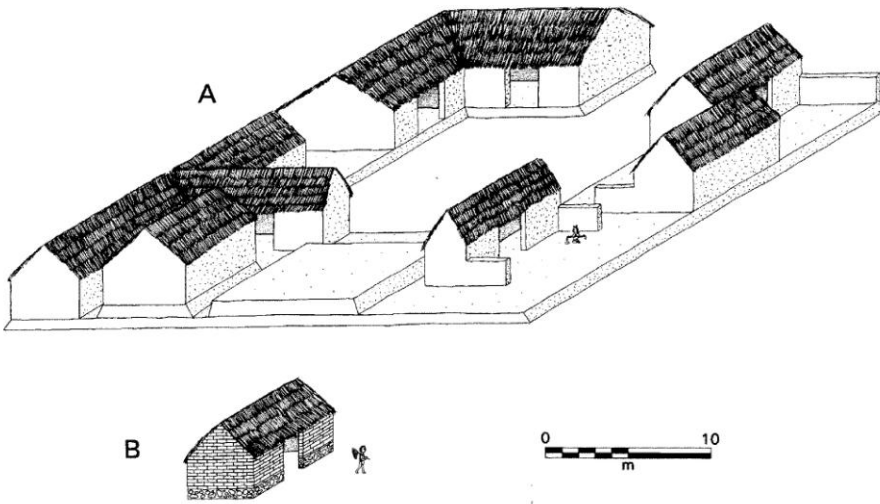


Figure 4 Rural Home of a Wealthy Noble

## The Poor:

Homes of the farmers and other commoners were huts with thatched roofs. Furniture was limited. They might have mats on the floor and woven trunks to hold belongings. They had blankets and pottery for cooking. Everyone had a garden of their own, including farmers.



Figure 5 A typical home of a poor Aztec

## **CLOTHING:**

**Montezuma, one of the kings of the Aztec civilization** was an influential part of Aztec dress. Many of the things he wore were often passed down to lower cultures and represented power. Montezuma wore a mantle, which was white and blue called a tlimatli. This mantle folded over his shoulders and was held together by a green clasp called a chalchivitl. He wore precious gems set in gold on other parts of his dress. His feet were adorned with golden sandals. Montezuma's dress was mainly for adornment and to show his high-ranking status.



Figure 6 Montezuma, a famous Aztec Emperor

**Upper Class:** To achieve noble status one could become a religious leader or inherit the status. A common material used in noble clothing was cotton. The dress included symbols of their high rank. For example, the more one's clothing was decorated the higher rank they were perceived to have. Gold was an important adornment to a noble's dress. Another accessory to noble dress was feathers on the head and on their robes. Bright colors were also a sign the individual was of high rank.

The function of noble dress was adornment and modesty. They often dressed to draw attention to themselves. The noble dress also communicated the status they had obtained. Another function of noble dress was to show that they were involved in government and many times showed their role as religious leaders.

**Common People:** Commoners and serfs dressed much alike. They dressed with much less accessories and the colors used were less bright. For men of these ranks a loincloth was often all that was worn, while women often wore a simple cotton dress. The major reason for dress for these ordinary people was modesty. They also dressed for convenience and utility on the job. For example, they dressed differently for agricultural work and hunting.

It was against the law for commoners to wear feathers. It was against the law for commoners to carry fans. If commoners broke these laws, they were killed.

**Slaves** often wore very little clothing. Slaves did wear jewels in holes in their face and had feathered mantles that were admired for their workmanship. A skirt of feathers completed their attire. Slave clothing didn't have much purpose. The main purpose was modesty and for general work functions. Figure 2 shows the feathered mantle of a slave.

**The Aztec Army:** dressed much differently than the rest of the culture. The main reason for this was for protection in times of war. The dress of higher warriors was very elaborate. Their bodies were covered with a close vest of quilted cotton. Although impenetrable the garment was very light. The wealthier chiefs often wore a thin layer of gold or silver instead of the vests. Covering this inner layer was a coat of extravagant feathers. Helmets were often made of wood and fashioned to look like the heads of animals. They also carried shields to fend off arrows and spears. The shields were made of woven reeds with feathers lining the outside. On the cover of some shields there were figures of some animals that represented different strengths that the Aztecs believed they received from these animals. Figure 3 shows a typical Aztec shield. Often the warriors waved a panache of feathers dusted with stones and precious metals. They often wore collars, bracelets and earrings of the same materials. Commoners wore body paint, which was the color of the banner of the chief who they followed. They wore very little clothing other than a simple girdle around the loins. Warriors could earn the right to wear costumes of animals for the amount of prisoners they capture. Figure 4 shows a warrior costume. As one can see, the main function of army dress was for protection. The dress allowed for proper protection against the weapons of the time. Another function of the dress was to show the chief that they followed. The Aztec warriors did this by painting the color of the chief's banner on their body. For upper soldiers dress also showed role and rank. While for common soldiers, it was used for modesty.

# AZTEC GARMENT STYLES



Open-sewn



Draped



Slip-on



Closed-sewn



Limb-encasing

## **AZTEC EVERYDAY LIFE**

***Poetry:*** For all their love of war, the Aztecs had a softer side. They loved to write and to read poetry. Much of their poetry was about a heroic act of love, war, or religion.

***Games:*** The Aztecs loved games. They loved to give people a sporting chance. Some of the games they played included a [ball game](#) similar to one played by the ancient Maya. In fact, the game probably was borrow from the Mayas (who most probably borrowed it from the Olmecs, the people before them.)

***Schools:*** KIDS went to school. To build the city they wanted, they knew that they would need many engineers, builders, and traders. To solve this problem, the Aztecs created schools for their children. Attendance at school was mandatory.

All Aztec children had to attend school, even girls and slaves. The Aztecs were the only people in the world at this time in history to have free schools that every child had to attend by law.

**Arts, Sciences & Entertainment:** The Aztecs expressed themselves through music, arts, crafts, and the sciences. Music played an important role in Aztec religious rituals. The most important instruments were flutes, drums, and rattles. These were played along with chanting to help worship the gods. A popular way to pass the time was through art. Some of the Aztec art is still around today. One such piece is the Calendar Stone. This stone, which was twelve feet in diameter, represented the Aztec universe. It is thought that the hearts of human sacrifices were placed on this stone and presented to the gods. Feathers were used for head dresses, cloaks, and masks. Other crafts were woodcarving, pottery, and weaving. Showing their knowledge in the sciences, the Aztecs had a 365 day calendar that is accurate by today's scientific standards.

# AZTEC SOCIAL GROUPS

## Slaves:

The Aztec nobles had slaves, but slaves were not captured people. They were Aztecs.

In the Aztec world, there were two ways you could become a slave. You could become a slave as punishment for a crime you had committed. You could be voluntarily sold into slavery to pay family debts. These were the *only* two ways.

The life of a slave was pretty much like the life of a freeman. Slaves could marry other slaves and could even a freewoman. Children of slaves were not slaves themselves. You could **not** be born into slavery in the Aztec world.

It was difficult to get rid of slave once you bought one. If your slave refused to do your bidding, you had to bring your slave to a plaza, and in front of witnesses, *prove* your slave would not do what they were supposed to do. You could not just do this once. You had to do this three times, using three different acts of refusal. After the third time, you could bring your slave back to the slave market. The slave would then be resold to someone else. A slave had to be sold and resold three times to three different masters before a slave could be sold for sacrifice.

Slaves could buy their freedom. All they needed to do was find the money to pay their owner what he had paid to buy them.

The Aztecs had another interesting law about slavery. On the way to the slave market, when the slave was about to be sold or resold, if a slave got away and managed to run to the palace without being stopped, that slave was immediately free. The only person who could chase that slave was the master's son. If anyone interfered with the race, that person became a slave.

**Fishermen, Hunters, Farmers:** Most people in the Aztec world were farmers. Farmers were taught how to be good farmers in the Aztec schools. Farmers were in charge of building the floating gardens. Fisherman fished. Hunters hunted.

**Soldiers:** Aztec soldiers were very fierce. Aztecs fought nearly constant wars, once they started to expand their empire. Soldiers also protected the empires trade routes. Soldiers were highly respected. If they lived long enough, they were able to retire in style.

**School Teachers:** The job of teacher was highly respected. All Aztec children, including slaves, had to attend school. Click here to learn more about [kids in school](#).

**Priests:** Priests were religious leaders. They were also important in government. They conducted the many ceremonies and sacrifices needed to feed the hungry Aztec gods. The priests created the calendars, and kept records written on codices in hieroglyphics. Some priests taught in the schools.

**Traders:** Because the Aztecs were feared and powerful, traders could travel in safely along the waterways and shoreline. Many traders became very rich. They bartered for luxury goods, jewelry, cocoa beans, jaguar skins, gold, silver and art. The traders brought their goods back to the Aztec marketplace where they were sold to merchants.

**Merchants:** Merchants typically specialized. One merchant might sell only woven baskets. Another might sell only jewelry. There were many markets in the bustling capital city of Tenochtitlan. There were very few robberies or incidents of theft. Aztec laws were very severe as was their punishment for breaking a law.

**Doctors:** Aztec medicine was quite advanced. Doctors were trained in Aztec schools. They made about 1000 different medicines. They healed wounds, set broken bones, and provided medicine to cure a stomach ache. They also offered dental care.

**Engineers and Builders:** Trained in the Aztec schools, both engineers and builders were highly respected. It was their job to design and manage the construction of temples, pyramids, plazas, and palaces.

**Craftsmen:** Aztec craftsmen created works of art. Their art was colorful and typically religious in nature. They used gold, silver, clay, paints, and textiles to create beautiful things.

**Matchmakers:** Matchmakers were soothsayers (i.e. a person who is supposed to be able see and predict the future). They studied omens and signs to make sure two people would be happy together. The matchmaker stayed involved in the marriage until the couple “tied the knot”.

**Ballplayer:** One of the most highly respected professions in the Aztec world was that of ballplayer.



# **AZTEC INVENTIONS & ACHIEVEMENTS**

**Volador:** The ancient Aztecs invented a game called Volador, **the flying bird game.**

Wearing costumes designed with beaks and feathers, Aztec athletes would complete to see who could complete the round trip with the most style and speed.

The game went something like this - First, all the players climbed a 60-90 foot pole. After they reached the top, they each tied a rope to the top of the pole. Hanging on tightly with their legs, they spread their arms wide, kicked off, and sailed around the pole like eagles until they reached the ground again.

In olden times, many spectators gathered to watch the flying birds. It was a very dangerous sport.

Still today, well-trained Mexican acrobats perform this wonderful spectacle. If you ever get a chance to see a performance, don't miss it. It's absolutely fabulous.

## **Floating Gardens:**

As the Aztec population grew, more food was needed. To solve this problem, Aztec engineers created "floating" gardens. First, they built a series of rafts and anchored each to the lakebed. Vegetation and reeds were piled on top of a raft. Then, they piled on enough dirt to be able to grow crops.

To further secure the floating gardens, mud retaining walls were built up around the raft to hold it in place. These also acted as walkways that connected the many floating gardens of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan.

The floating gardens were quite successful. The Aztecs used the gardens to grow chili peppers, squash, corn, tomatoes, and beans.

The Aztecs created more land by filling in marshlands and swamps. They created even more by designing dikes to hold back the water.

**Causeways and Bridges** that linked the islands of their great capital city of Tenochtitlan together.

**Structures:** – Statues, Pyramids, Temples, Memorial pillars commemorating their gods and major events

**Codices (Sacred Texts)** - The Aztecs had a written language of hieroglyphics, similar to but not the same as the Maya writings.

**Judges** who wrote laws and rules of society.

Woven fabrics

Basket weaving

Aztec Ball Game

Popcorn

Chocolate

Mandatory Schools