



24.3 Tenochtitlan: A City of Wonders

How did the Aztecs build their capital in the middle of a lake?

Name at least one important building in Tenochtitlan, and describe what happened there.

Describe at least two aspects of Tenochtitlan that allowed so many people to live there comfortably.

Leave this section of the flag white.

24.4 The Aztec Empire

What kinds of goods did the Aztecs receive in tribute from conquered peoples? Why was tribute so important to the Aztecs?

Typically, what happened before, during, and after an Aztec declaration of war?

What did the Aztecs demand of cities they defeated? Name one advantage and one disadvantage of this Aztec policy.

Lightly shade this section of the flag red.

24.3 Tenochtitlan: A City of Wonders

As the Aztecs' power grew, their capital city of Tenochtitlan developed into one of the largest cities in the world. When Spanish explorers first glimpsed Tenochtitlan in 1519, they were amazed to see a majestic city crisscrossed by canals and boasting impressive temples and palaces. With a population of between 200,000 and 300,000 people, Tenochtitlan was larger than London, Paris, or Venice.

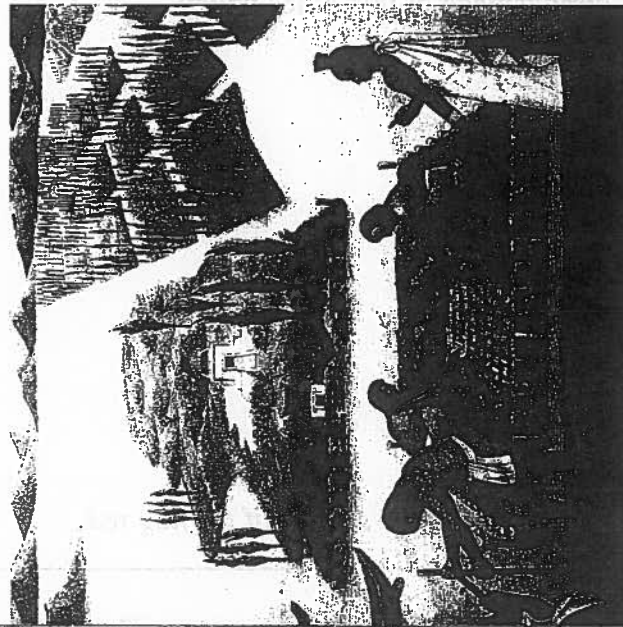
How did the Aztecs turn an unwanted island into such a great city? First they reclaimed land from the lake by sinking timbers into the water to serve as walls and filling in the area between the timbers with mud, boulders, and reeds. In this way they created small islands called *chinampas*, or "floating gardens." Eventually the Aztecs expanded the city's land surface until it covered over five square miles. They even merged Tlatelolco, originally a separate island, with Tenochtitlan.

Gradually, Tenochtitlan grew into the magnificent city that so amazed the Spanish. At the center of the city—both physically and spiritually—lay a large ceremonial plaza. Here the Aztecs gathered for religious rituals, feasts, and festivals. A wall about eight feet tall enclosed this area. The wall, which was called the *Coatepantli* ("snake wall"), was studded with sculptures of serpents. The palaces and homes of nobles lined the outside of the wall.

Inside the plaza, a stone pyramid called the Great Temple loomed 150 feet into the sky. People could see the pyramid, which was decorated with bright sculptures and murals, from several miles away. It had two steep stairways leading to double shrines. One shrine was dedicated to the chief god, Huitzilopochtli. The other was dedicated to Tlaloc, the rain god. In front of the shrines stood the stone where priests performed human sacrifices. An altar called the *tzompantli* ("skull rack") displayed the skulls of thousands of people who had been sacrificed. (You will learn more about the role of human sacrifice in the Aztec religion in the next chapter.) Other structures in the plaza included

plaza a public square or other open area in a city where people can gather

The Aztecs of Tenochtitlan farmed on chinampas, small floating islands they constructed from mud and plants.



more shrines and temples, the ritual ball court, military storehouses, and guest rooms for important visitors.

Just outside the plaza stood the royal palace. The two-story palace seemed like a small town. The palace was the home of the Aztec ruler, but it also had government offices, shrines, courts, storerooms, gardens, and courtyards. At the royal aviary, trained staff plucked the valuable feathers of parrots and quetzals. Wild animals captured throughout the empire, like pumas and jaguars, prowled cages in the royal zoo.

The city's main marketplace was located in the northern section, in Tlatelolco. Each day as many as 60,000 people came from all corners of the Aztec Empire to sell their wares. Goods ranged from luxury items like jade and feathers to necessities like food and rope sandals. Merchants also sold gold, silver, turquoise, animal skins, clothing, pottery, chocolate and vanilla, tools, and slaves.

Although Tenochtitlan spread over five square miles, people had an easy time getting around. Four wide avenues met at the foot of the Great Temple. A thousand workers swept and washed down the streets each day, keeping them cleaner than streets in European cities. At night, pine torches lit the way. People also traveled by foot on smaller walkways or by canoe on the canals that crossed the city. Many of the canals were lined with stone and had bridges.

Three causeways linked the island to the mainland. The longest of them stretched five miles. The causeways were 25 to 30 feet wide. They all had wooden bridges that could be raised to let boats through or to protect the city in an enemy attack.

The city boasted other technological marvels, like the aqueduct that carried fresh water for irrigation. Twin pipes ran from the Chapultepec springs, three miles away. While one pipe was being cleaned or repaired, the other could transport water. A dike 10 miles long ran along the east side of the city to hold back floodwaters.

Thousands of people visited Tenochtitlan each year. Some came to do business. Others came as pilgrims. Still others came simply to gaze in wonder at the capital of the Aztec world.

aviary an enclosed space or cage for keeping birds
causeway a raised road built across water or low ground
dike a wall or dam built to hold back water and prevent flooding

Temples dedicated to various gods rose along the streets and canals of the city of Tenochtitlan.

