

**JOURNEY INTO CIVILIZATION**  
**THE AZTECS**

by Robert Nicholson and Claire Watts



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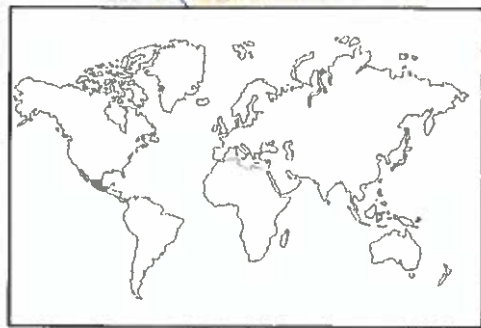
Turquoise serpent of Tlaloc



Turquoise mask of Quetzacoatl



Stone carving of Tenochtitlan Eagle



ANAHUAC

Lake Texcoco

Tenochtitlan

ATLANTIC OCEAN

PACIFIC OCEAN



Temple at Tojin

# The Aztec World

Over 500 years ago a powerful people called the Aztecs lived in the region we now call Mexico. They built a huge city there called Tenochtitlan, as large as any city in Europe at the time. They called their land **Anahuac**, which means the land on the edge of the waters. Many of the Aztecs were fearless

warriors who set out to capture people to **sacrifice** to please their gods. They also fought the people who lived in the neighboring areas, stole their crops and livestock and carried them off to use as slaves.



# Aztec Lands

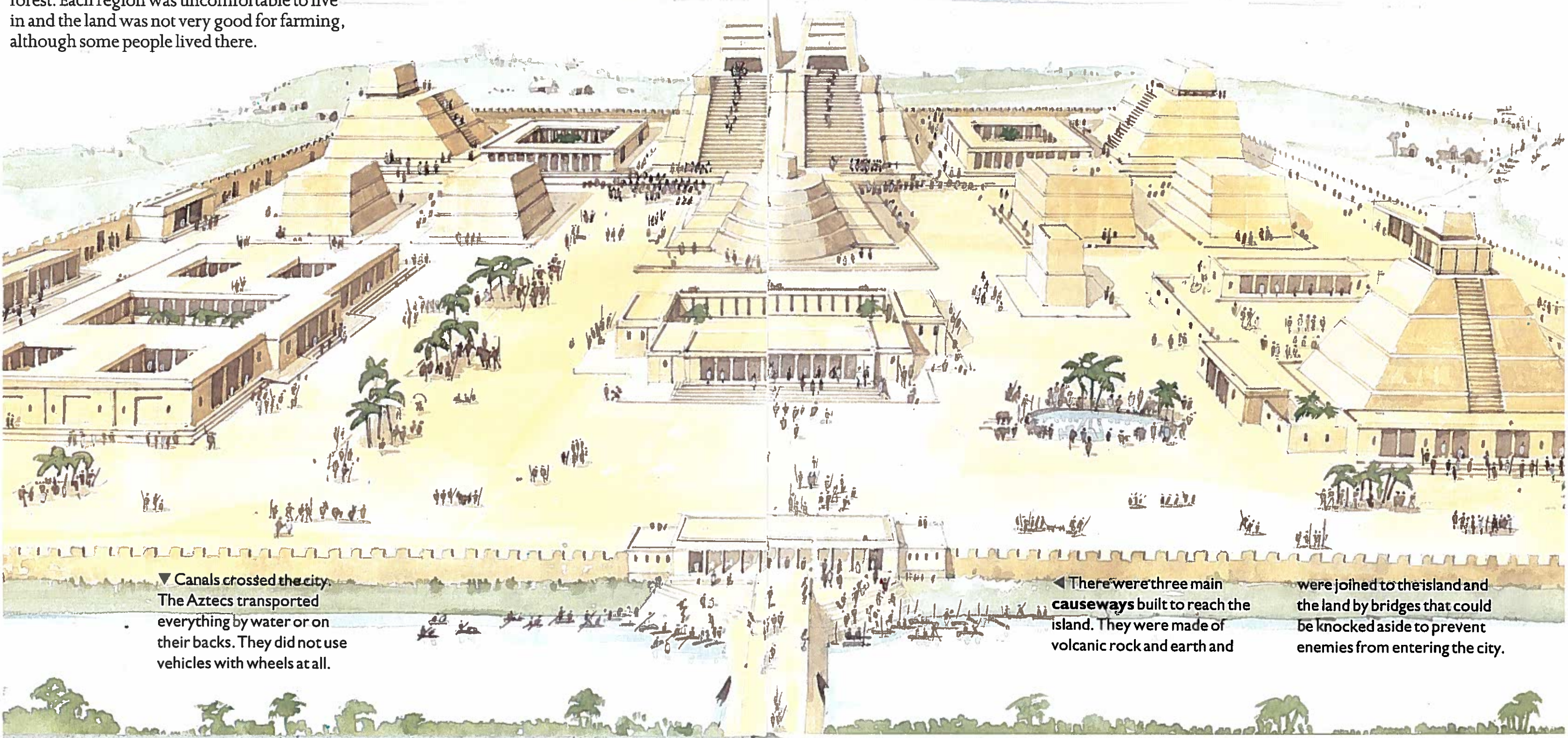
The Aztecs built their city, Tenochtitlan, on a **plateau** high in the mountains that divided Anahuac across the middle. Other smaller villages were built there, too.

In the lower land on each side of the mountains lay a thick, steamy, tropical rain forest. Each region was uncomfortable to live in and the land was not very good for farming, although some people lived there.

The weather in Anahuac followed a very regular pattern. At the beginning of the year, there was a dry growing season, then a hot, wet summer from May to October, followed by a short, cold winter.

▼ The main temple dominated the city. It was over 164 feet tall.

▼ Tenochtitlan was built on a big island in the middle of a lake.



▼ Canals crossed the city. The Aztecs transported everything by water or on their backs. They did not use vehicles with wheels at all.

◀ There were three main **causeways** built to reach the island. They were made of volcanic rock and earth and

were joined to the island and the land by bridges that could be knocked aside to prevent enemies from entering the city.

# The Great Speakers

The Aztecs were divided into small family groups called **calpollis**. Each had a head man who represented the group whenever decisions had to be made.

The head men of the calpollis of noble families made up a council that elected a ruler called the Huey Hatoanni, which means **Great Speaker**. He was a nobleman who had been trained as a priest, but he also had to be a brave warrior because fighting was such an important part of Aztec life.

The Great Speaker also led his people to war. The Aztecs were constantly at war with neighboring peoples. They fought battles to capture people rather than kill them, in order to provide victims to sacrifice to their gods.

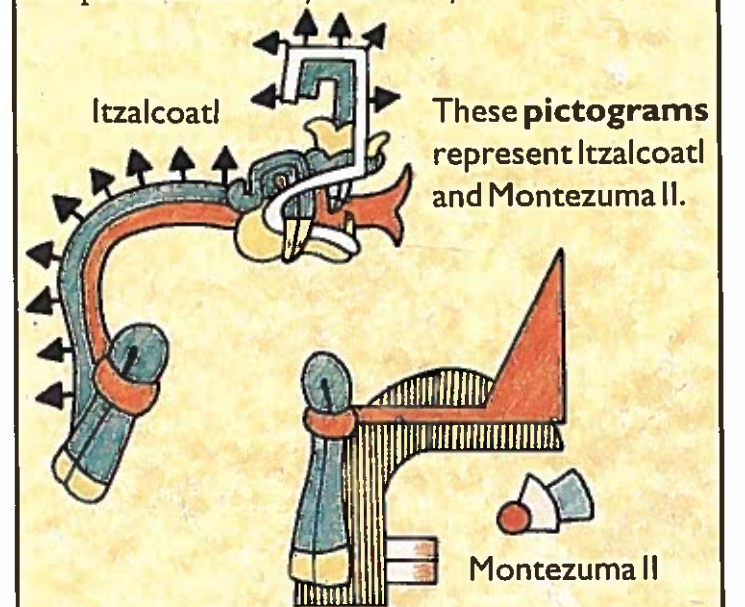
► Montezuma wore this huge and elaborate feather headdress at ceremonies and processions.

▼ This carved stone box contained the ashes of one of the Great Speakers.

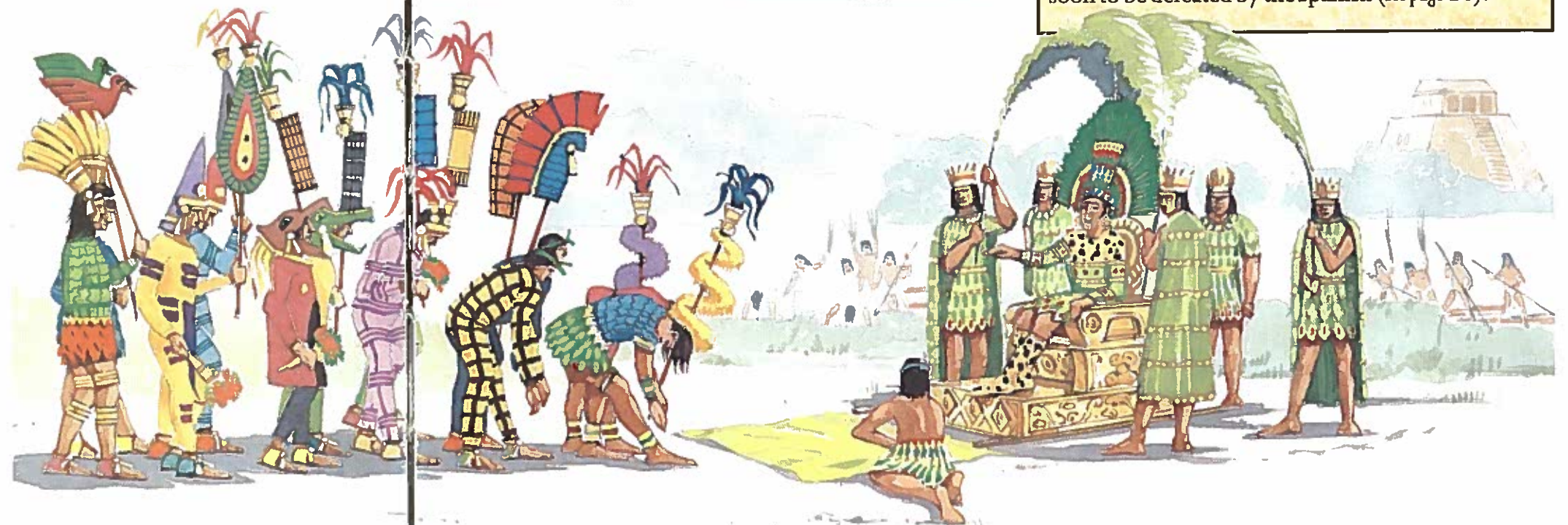


## Some Important Leaders

**ITZCOATL** was the first great leader of the Aztecs. He became Great Speaker in 1426. He spread Aztec power far beyond Tenochtitlan. He also built new temples and causeways in the city.



**MONTEZUMA II** became Great Speaker in 1502 and made the empire bigger than it had ever been before. Unfortunately, the Aztecs were soon to be defeated by the Spanish (see page 24).



# Aztec Gods

Religion affected every part of Aztec life. There were hundreds of gods, and each one represented a different part of the natural world or human activity. The Aztecs believed very strongly that the gods had decided what would happen to each person before he or she was born. They also believed that priests could predict events in the future.

The other peoples in Mexico believed in many of the same gods as the Aztecs. All these gods were linked by a complicated set of **myths** and histories.

The Aztecs had two calendars. In the religious calendar the year had only 260 days, but the solar calendar had 365 days, like ours. Their solar year was divided into 18 months, each with 20 days, and 5 extra days.

## The Fifth Sun

The Aztecs believed that the world had lived through the destruction of four suns before the coming of the present, fifth sun. The first sun had been destroyed by jaguars, the second by hurricanes, the third by fire and the fourth by floods. The fifth was to be destroyed by earthquakes.



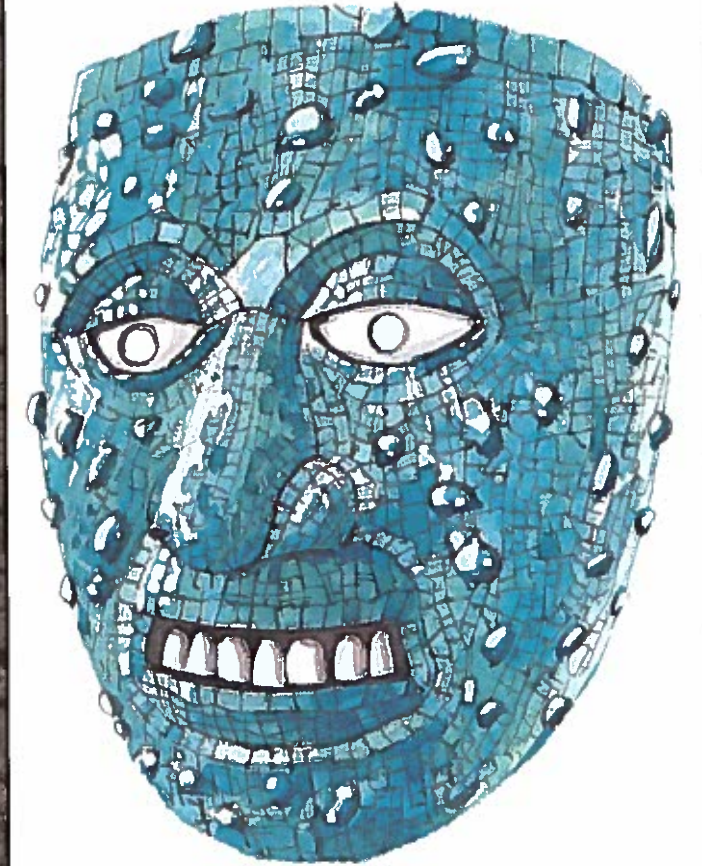
► The Aztec calendar stone shows the sun god surrounded by symbols of the final earthquake. Around this are the days of the Aztec year.

◀ This stone statue is Coatlicue, the goddess of the earth.



## Important Gods

**HUITZILOPOCHTLI** was the patron god of the Aztecs. His name means *blue hummingbird*. He was the god of war. The Aztecs fought a special war every year called *The War of the Flowers* in order to capture victims to sacrifice to Huitzilopochtli.



▲ Quetzalcoatl was shown with a much friendlier face than many of the other gods.

**QUETZALCOATL** was the god of learning, hope and healing. His name means *feathered serpent*. The original Quetzalcoatl was probably a king of the Toltec tribe who ruled Mexico long before the Aztecs. According to legend, one day Quetzalcoatl would appear to decide the fate of the Aztecs.

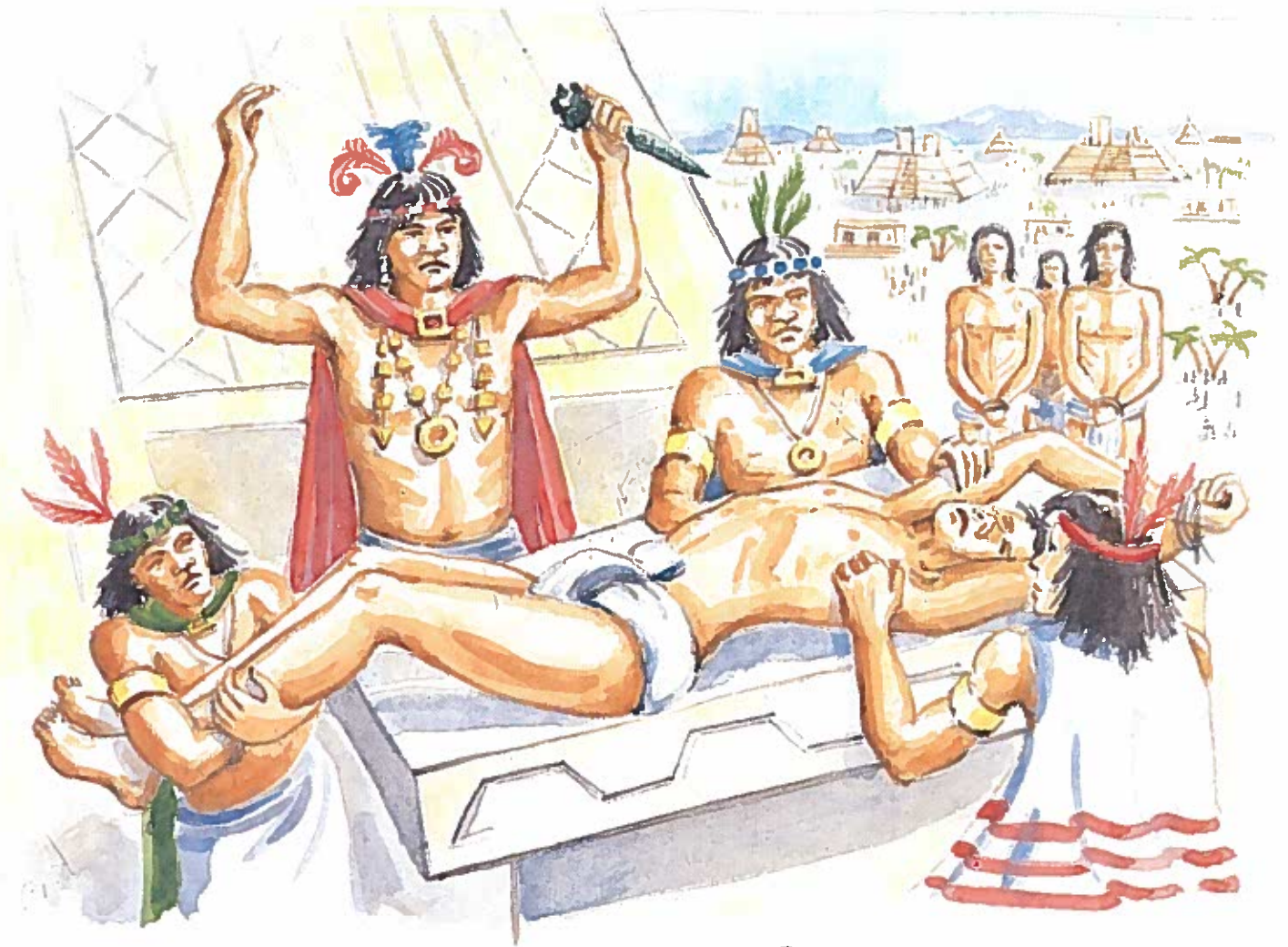
# Aztec Temples

The Aztecs built large four-sided **pyramids** for their gods. At the top of each pyramid was the temple where ceremonies took place and sacrifices were made.

Near many temples there was a sort of basketball court for playing a ceremonial game with a hard rubber ball. Players had to move the ball using only their hips and knees.

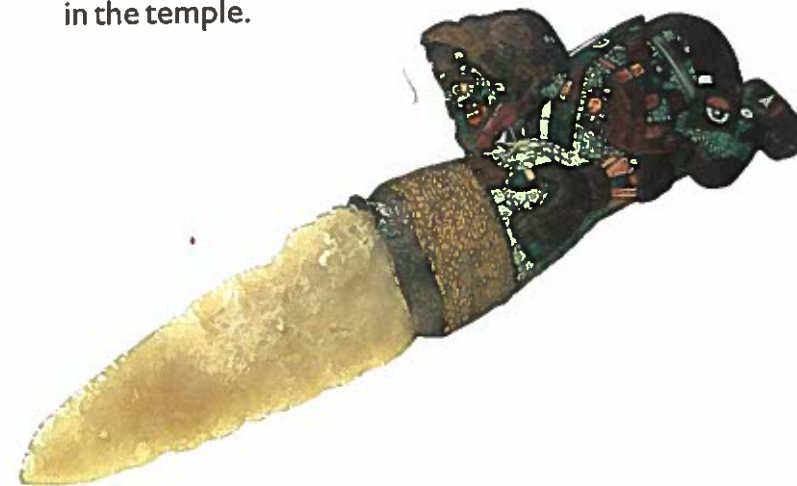
Priests were respected by the Aztec people, but they led a very hard life. They had to

fast regularly, and were not allowed to cut or wash their hair. Their hair usually stuck out all over their heads, and was covered with insects. Priests and the women helpers in the temple were not allowed to marry. The priests studied the stars and predicted future events. Only the priests would dare venture out after sundown, because the spirits of the dark, which were believed to steal people's souls, were thought to have no power over them.



◀ Many steps led up to the temple on top of a pyramid.

▼ A heavy, sharp stone knife like this would be used to cut out the victim's heart. The heart was then burned on a fire in the temple.



## Sacrifices

Human sacrifices were the most important part of Aztec religion. The Aztecs believed that the heart and blood of victims kept their gods strong and powerful, making them able to protect the people and cause their crops to grow. They also thought that when they sacrificed a brave soldier his strength would pass to their warriors.

Most victims were captured enemy soldiers, but at some ceremonies Aztec men, women and children were sacrificed. The biggest sacrifice was in the reign of Montezuma II when 12,000 enemy soldiers were sacrificed at once.

Every morning each person made a small sacrifice by pricking his finger or earlobe with a cactus needle and letting a drop of blood fall and soak into the ground.

# Farming

Many Aztecs, even those who lived in or around the main cities, were farmers. Each farmer gave the Great Speaker a little of his crops. This was stored until the people needed extra food in times of famine.

Corn was the most important crop grown, but the Aztecs also grew squash, avocados, beans, sweet potatoes, peppers and tomatoes.

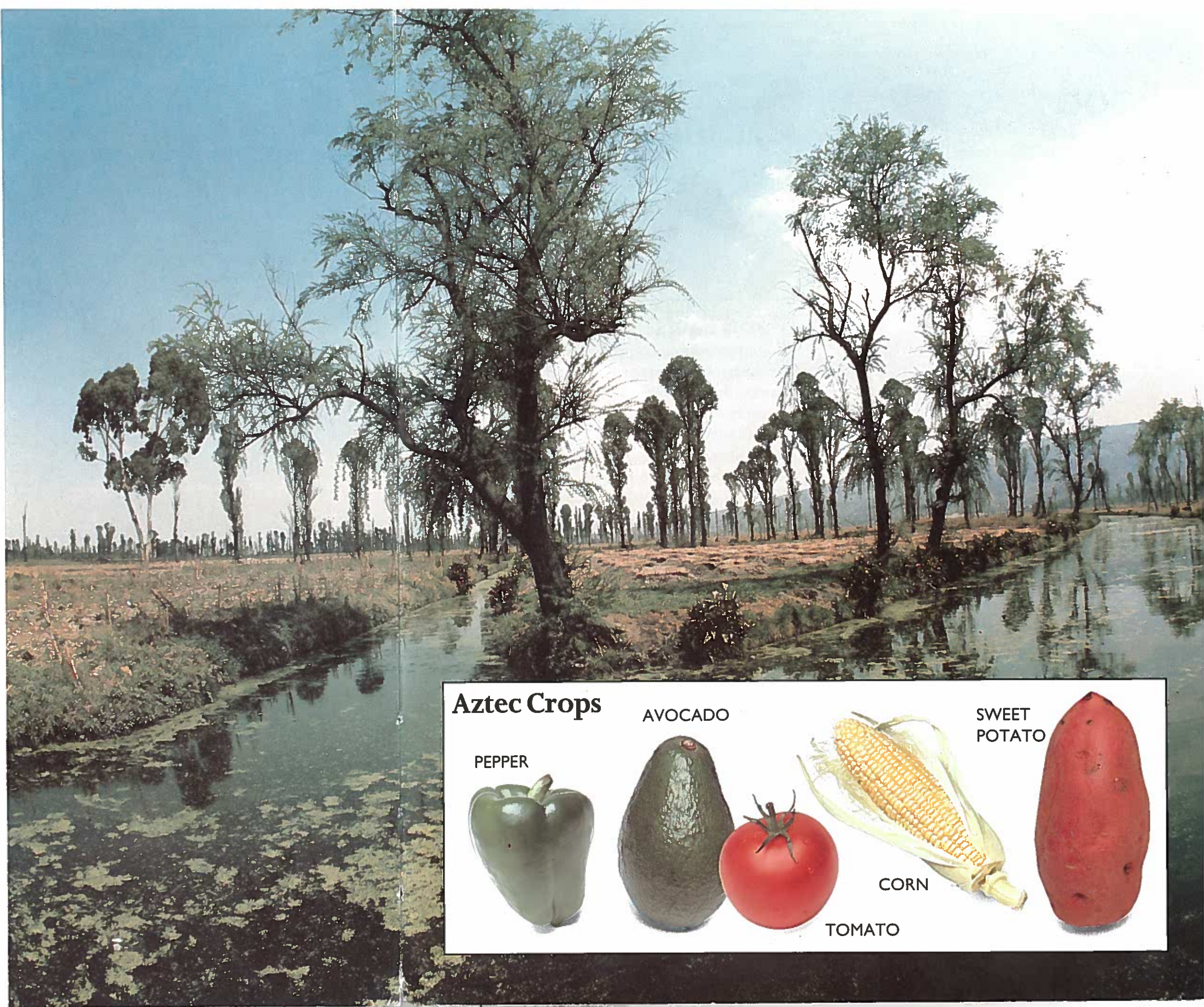
## Farmland

Aztec tools were very simple. There were no ploughs and the main tool was a small **digging stick**. The Aztecs used it to dig trenches to plant seeds in.

There were two types of farmland. Some Aztec farmers cleared a small part of the land or forest by burning down the vegetation. They would then plant crops in the fertile ashes. After a few years, when the land became less fertile, they would move on to burn another area.

Around Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs dug up fertile mud from the lake bottom and heaped it on top of woven plant material to make little islands. On these they planted their crops. The islands were called **chinampas** or floating gardens.

► Sometimes trees were planted to anchor the chinampas to the lake bottom.



### Aztec Crops

PEPPER



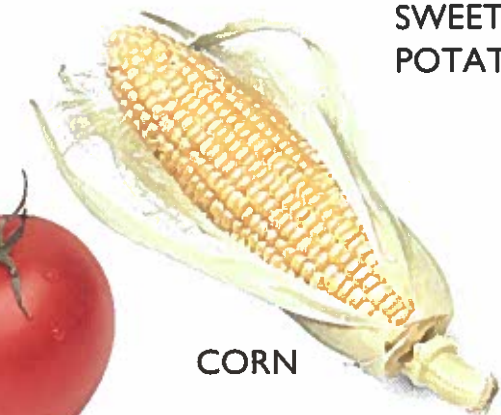
AVOCADO



SWEET POTATO



CORN

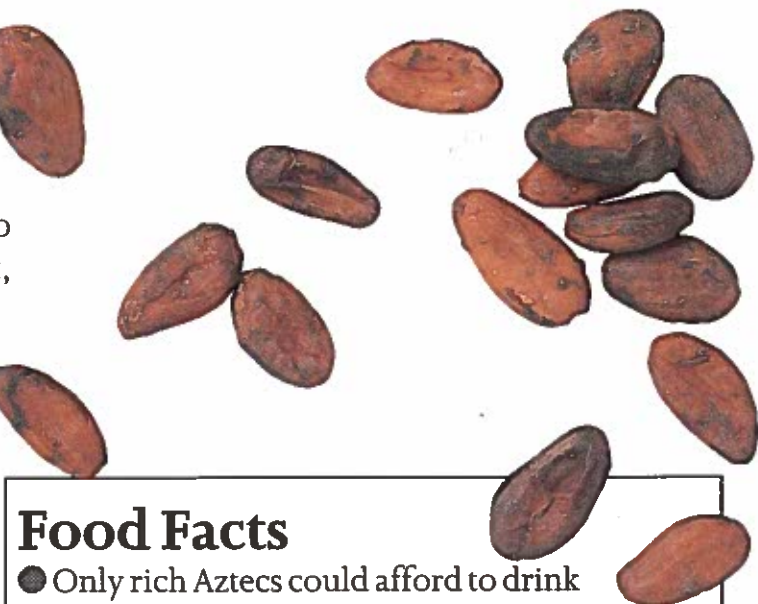


TOMATO



# Food

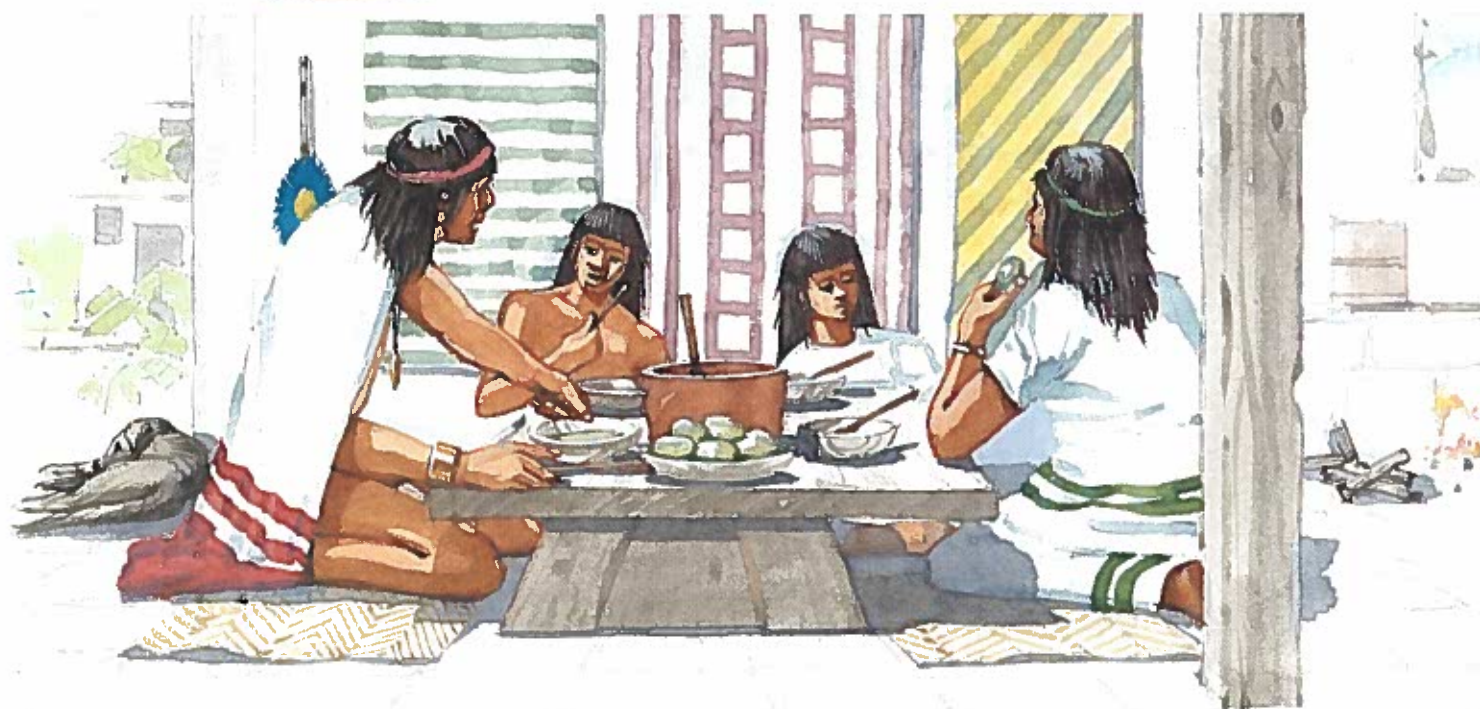
The Aztecs ate a lot of different vegetables, but hardly any meat. There were few large wild animals to hunt in Anahuac, and the Aztecs kept no cattle or sheep. They didn't need meat in their diet, though, because the vegetables they ate, such as corn and beans, were full of protein. A sort of corn pancake, called a **tlaxcalli**, was eaten with most meals.



## Food Facts

- Only rich Aztecs could afford to drink chocolate, because **cacao** beans, which chocolate is made from, were also used as money!
- A very strong drink called **pulque** was made out of a sort of cactus.
- At religious ceremonies special little cakes were made in the shapes of the gods.
- The Aztecs bred chickens, turkeys and even dogs to eat, and also caught fish and wild rabbits.

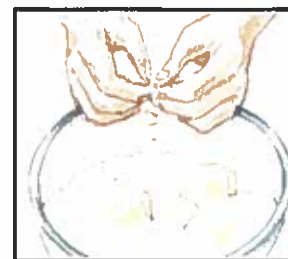
◀ The Aztecs ate from pottery bowls like this one, using their fingers.



## Make your own tlaxcallis

### Ingredients

- 2 cups flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 ½ tbsp margarine
- 175 ml cold water



1. Mix the dry ingredients together. Mix in the margarine until the mixture resembles bread crumbs.



2. Gradually add the water and stir in with a wooden spoon until the mixture forms a stiff dough.

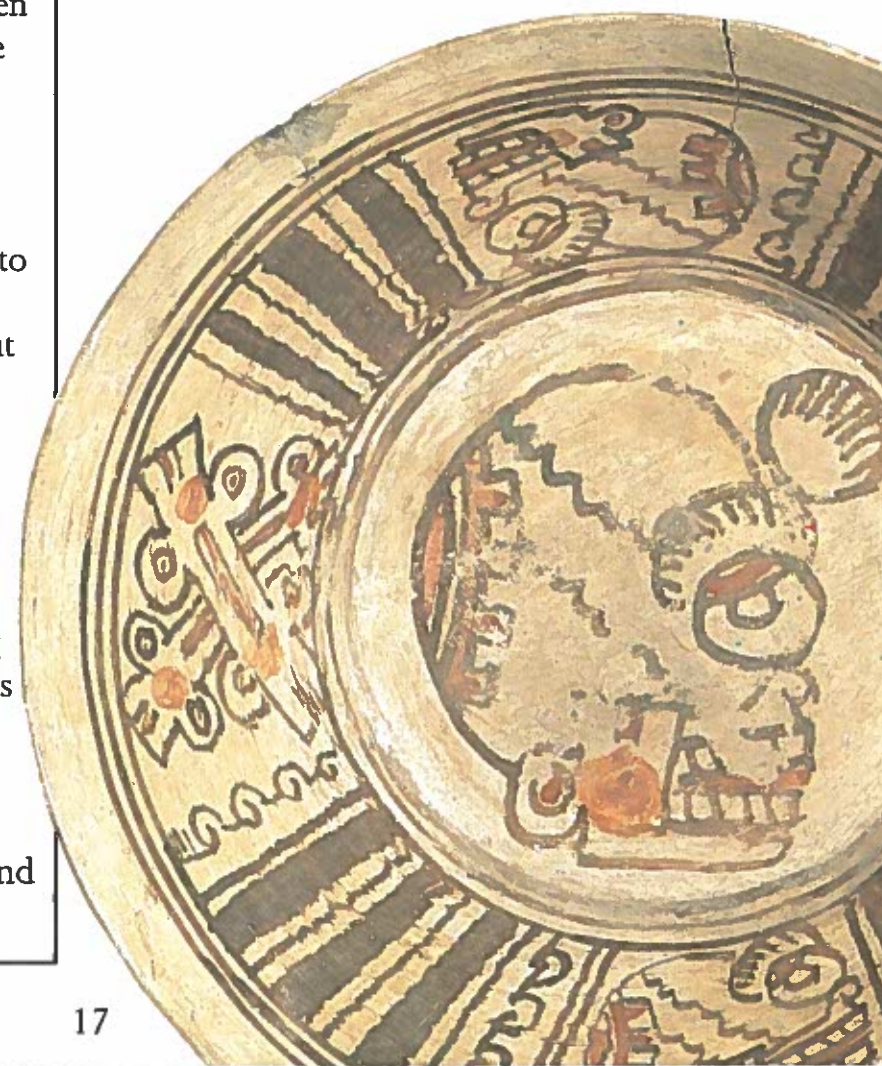


3. Divide the dough into 12 balls. On a floured surface, roll the balls out into thin circles with a rolling pin.



4. Ask a grown-up to help you put a little vegetable oil in a frying pan and fry the tlaxcallis for 1 minute each side.

Serve your tlaxcallis warm. Fill them with chili, avocado, cheese, chopped tomato and lettuce and roll them up.





# At Home

Poor Aztecs lived in small, one-room houses, which were made from branches plastered with mud. The roofs were thatched.

Town houses, owned by more wealthy people, were usually bigger. They were often built on raised platforms and had walls made of volcanic stone, which is easy to carve and shape. The walls were then covered with cement made from limestone, which made the outside of the house white and shiny. Several rooms opened on to an internal courtyard.

Instead of a bathroom, many houses had a separate sweat-room. These were built from stone, which could be heated by building fires around the outside walls. Inside, the Aztecs would splash water onto the hot walls to make them steam. A person would stay inside until he began to sweat, and then dash out and plunge into the nearest stream or pool.

▼ A statue of Xiuhtecuhtli was placed in the hearth of each house.



## Furniture

The Aztecs had little furniture. They slept on mats in the corners of the room and sat on straw cushions during the day. The focus of the room was the fireplace, where all the cooking was done. It was also used as a shrine to Xiuhtecuhtli.

# Learning

Aztec children were taught mostly at home by their parents. All boys had to go to a school run by their calpolli where they learned how to be warriors. Girls did not have to go to school. There were also temple schools where boys of noble families could learn the duties of a priest and girls could learn to be temple assistants or healers.

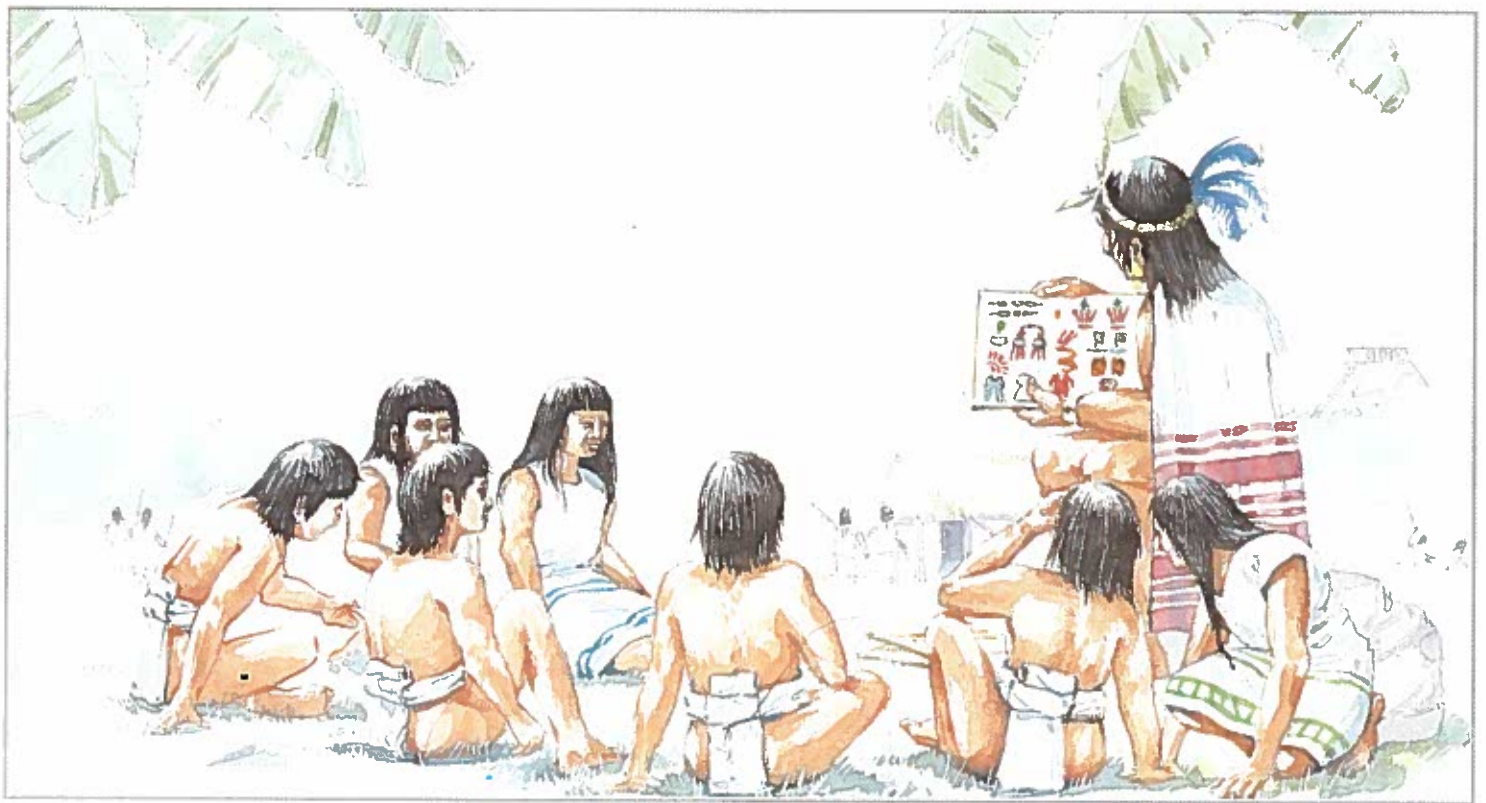
## Writing

The Aztecs did not use letters to write as we do. Instead they used pictograms, which use pictures to represent a word. Several could be joined together to make a sentence. This form of writing was very simple and was used mainly for records, although some history books and religious books were written using pictograms. Aztec books, or **codices**, were written on folded deerskin or bark paper.















▲ Many Aztec children were taught to play small flutes like these.

▶ This codex shows offerings made to the sun god at the top and the god of darkness at the bottom.



### Some Common Pictograms

Like handwriting, pictograms varied depending on the person who drew them. Can you spot any of these in the codex above?

- |   |           |   |             |   |         |
|---|-----------|---|-------------|---|---------|
|  | alligator |  | jaguar      |  | rabbit  |
|  | snake     |  | movement    |  | eagle   |
|  | death     |  | flint knife |  | deer    |
|  | monkey    |  | reed        |  | vulture |

# Crafts

Because the Aztecs did not use money, a person's wealth was judged by the beauty of his possessions. A rich man could afford to have a skilled craftsman make the things he needed. Craftsmen were paid in food or other goods.

## Metal

The Aztecs did not use metal for tools or weapons. They did not have iron or any other very strong metal. They used gold and copper to make delicate statues.

▼ This golden ornament was worn through the lip.



## Pottery

The Aztecs made fine pots, decorated in gold and black. These were made by building up coils of clay and then smoothing them out, because the Aztecs did not have pottery wheels.

## Stone

The Aztecs used stone tools to make detailed carvings and statues from soft volcanic rock.

# Featherwork

Brightly colored feathers were trimmed and bound together to make extraordinary collages. These were used to decorate soldiers' shields and headdresses.

▼ This featherwork disc shows the symbol of a whirlpool.



## Obsidian

Volcanic glass called obsidian was used to make blades for knives. It was also made into vases and mirrors.

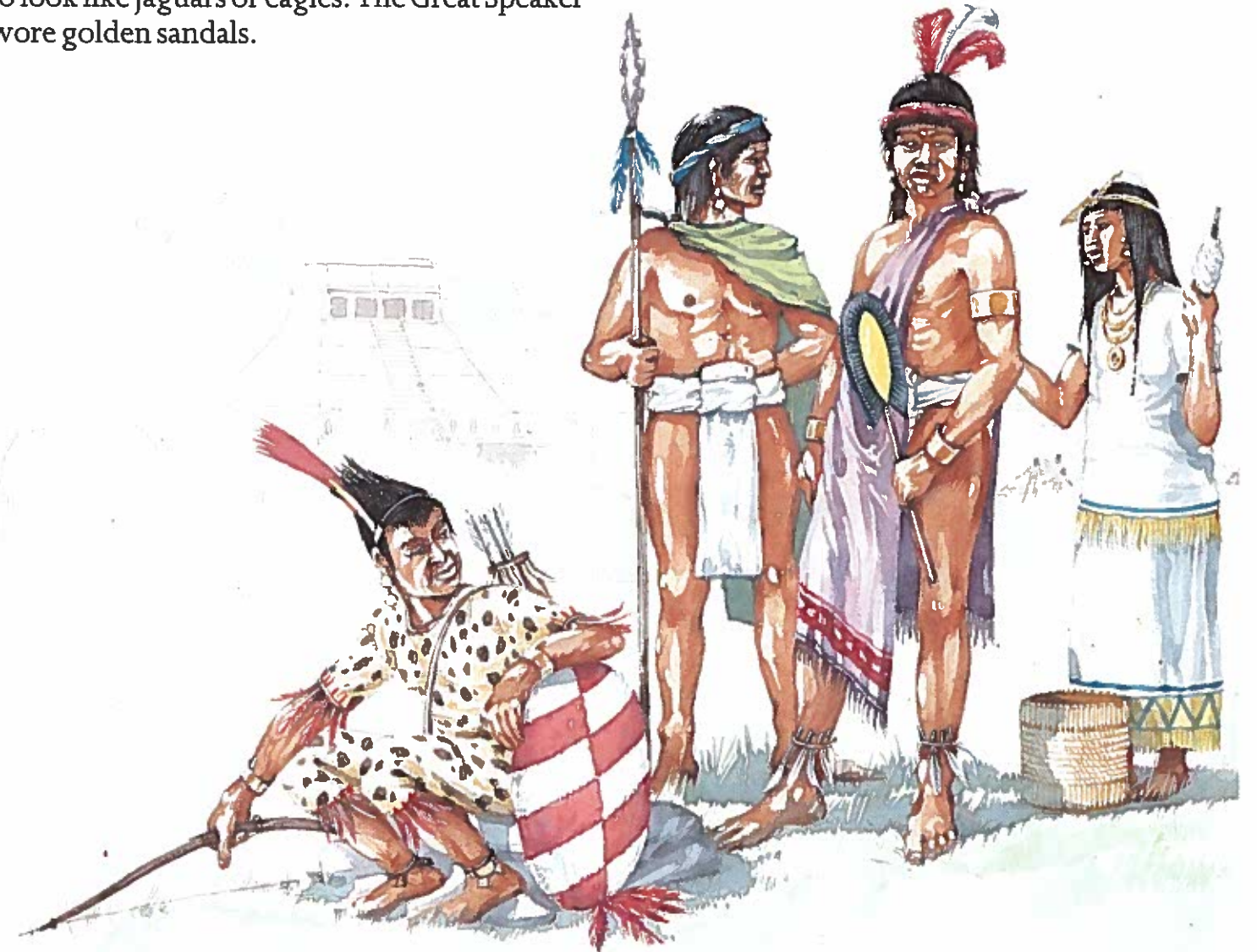
▼ This mirror is made from polished obsidian.



# Clothes

Aztec clothes were usually made from fiber from the **maguey plant**. Only the rich could afford cotton. Their garments were often brightly colored and beautifully embroidered. An Aztec's clothes reflected his age and position in society. Ordinary tribesmen wore a simple loincloth called a **maxtli** and a cape over one shoulder. The head man of a **calpolli** had a brighter cape. Warriors wore ornate feather headdresses, and some wore costumes made to look like jaguars or eagles. The Great Speaker wore golden sandals.

Women wore a skirt wrapped around their waists and tied with a belt. On top they wore a loose sleeveless tunic. Most braided their hair. Both men and women wore jewelry made from jade, emeralds and opals. They also wore a lot of bright make-up; yellow and red for the women and black, white and blue for the men.



# The Coming of the Spanish

When Montezuma II was Great Speaker, Aztec civilization reached its peak. Far away in Europe, however, the **Spanish Empire** was looking for new lands to conquer. In 1519, Hernán Cortés, the Spanish governor of Cuba, arrived in Mexico with just 400 soldiers.

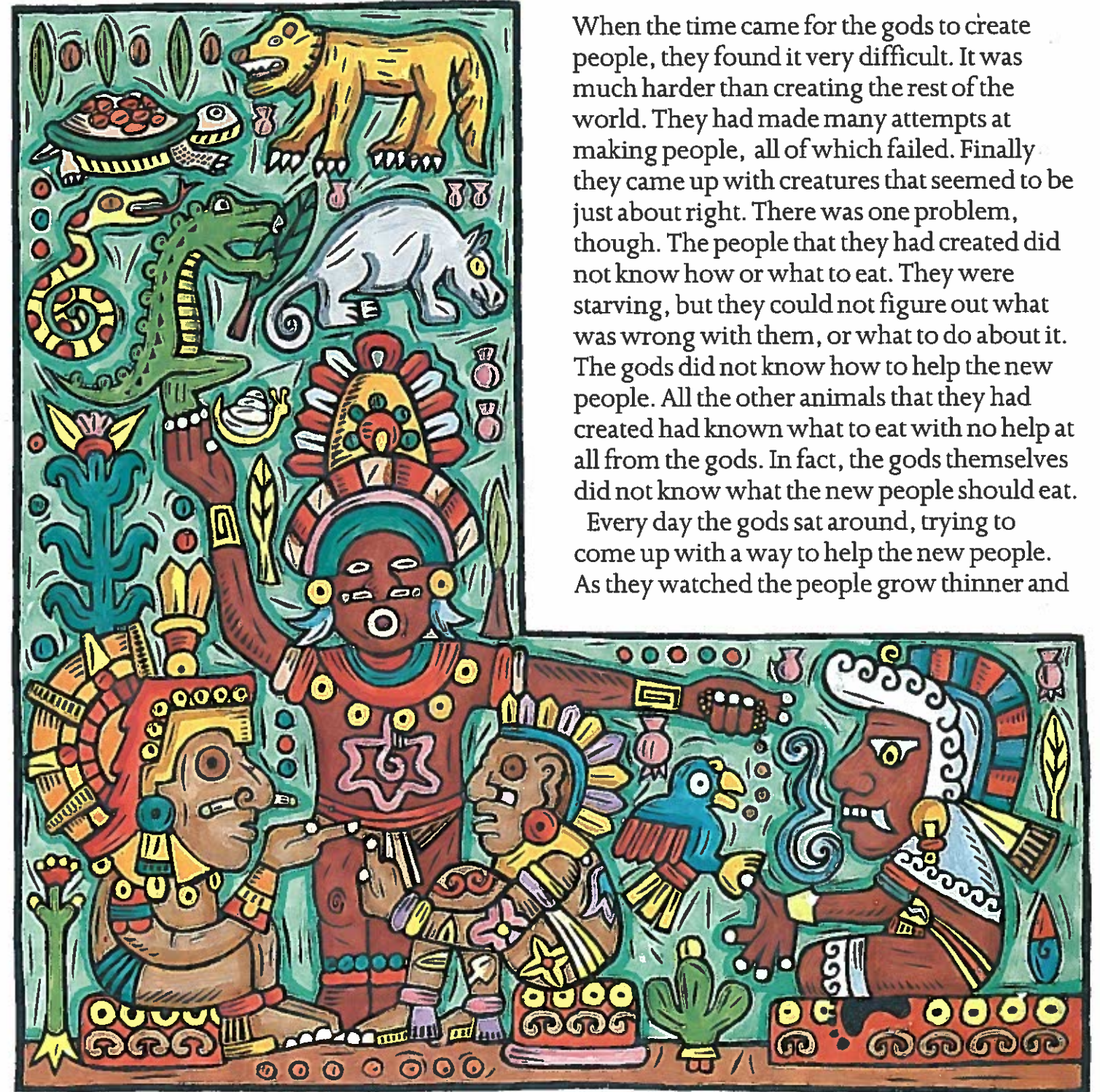
At first the Aztecs believed that Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl, come to decide their fate as had been predicted. They did not know whether to welcome him or be careful of him. Within two years the Spanish had defeated the Aztecs, killed most of their population and completely destroyed their main city. The Aztecs had no weapons which were effective against the guns, armor and horses of the Spanish.

▼ Aztec legend said that when the god Quetzalcoatl returned, he would have a pale face, a dark beard and dark legs. To the Aztecs, Hernán Cortés – with his heavy beard and black leggings – even looked like the returning god.



# Quetzalcoatl Gives Food to the People

The Aztecs told many stories about their gods and about the world around them. Often these stories would try to explain something that the people did not really understand. This is the story of the discovery of corn.



When the time came for the gods to create people, they found it very difficult. It was much harder than creating the rest of the world. They had made many attempts at making people, all of which failed. Finally they came up with creatures that seemed to be just about right. There was one problem, though. The people that they had created did not know how or what to eat. They were starving, but they could not figure out what was wrong with them, or what to do about it. The gods did not know how to help the new people. All the other animals that they had created had known what to eat with no help at all from the gods. In fact, the gods themselves did not know what the new people should eat.

Every day the gods sat around, trying to come up with a way to help the new people. As they watched the people grow thinner and

thinner, the gods began to worry. If these people died, they would have to figure out how to create them all over again.

One day, the ants came to the place where the gods sat yet again discussing what to do about the starving people.

"We know what kind of food the people should eat," said one of them. "We will carry it

here for you to give to the new people."

"Wonderful," said the god Quetzalcoatl, who was more worried about the people than any of the other gods. "But why don't you just tell us where the food is, and we will tell the people?"

"No, no, no!" said the ants. "We can't possibly do that. It's a secret."

The ants did not want the people to die. They

had a feeling that people might be useful to them in the future. And they also saw a way to make sure that the gods would never forget them, even though they were such tiny creatures. They would force the gods to rely upon them to supply the people with food. So, the next day, the ants carried food to the gods. This food was very hard and the pieces

of it were so tiny that each of the ants could carry one grain easily. The gods had never seen anything like it. They chewed the hard grains until they were soft and then placed them on the lips of the people. The people swallowed the grains and felt better.

Again and again the ants did this, but they would not tell the gods where the food came from. Every day, the gods had to wait for the ants to bring the grains, then chew it for the people and place it on their lips.

But as much as Quetzalcoatl loved the people, he was tired of feeding them. And the other gods were falling behind in their responsibilities. While they were chewing food for the people that they had created, they could not make the sun shine or the rain fall or the rivers flow. Each day, when the ants arrived with the grains, the gods sighed deeply, and grew more irritated.

Once again Quetzalcoatl asked the ants to tell him where the food came from, but they refused. Their secret was much too valuable. So Quetzalcoatl decided to find out for himself.

He turned himself into a black ant and sat waiting at a place where he knew the ants passed every day. As the line of ants marched past, he slipped into the line and marched with them. The procession headed straight toward a huge mountain and went into a crack in the side. In an enormous cavern, Quetzalcoatl saw heaps of food. Copying the other ants, Quetzalcoatl picked up a grain and stepped into line.

When the ants reached the place where the other gods were, Quetzalcoatl turned back into his own form.

"You thought you were very clever to keep the secret of the grain, but I have been cleverer still!" he said to the ants.

"You may know where the grain is, but you cannot give it to the people without our help," said one of the ants. "The people are much too big to fit in through the tiny crack in the mountain that we squeeze through." All the





other ants nodded in agreement.

Quetzalcoatl looked down at the ants and gave a knowing smile. He turned to the thunder god, and whispered in his ear.

The thunder god stood up and raised his hand. A flash of lightning came from the clouds and struck the mountain where the food was hidden. A huge crack appeared in the mountain and the grains of food spilled out.

When the people saw the mountain split they ran to see what had happened. One of them picked up a grain and put it in his mouth. He chewed, swallowed and picked up another grain. Gradually the other people began to copy him.

The people ate their fill of the food, but there were many grains left over. Quetzalcoatl showed them how to plant the grains, so that

more food would grow. These first plants had only two seeds on them, but, as time passed, they grew and grew until today each plant has many grains. We now call these plants corn.

The gods were happy because the people could now take care of themselves. The people were happy because they now knew what to eat and how to grow it. Quetzalcoatl was happy because it seemed that these people would survive.

As for the ants, they found that the people were much more useful to them now that they could feed themselves. The people began to find new and delicious foods to eat, which the ants could also share.

# How We Know

Have you ever wondered how, although the Aztecs lived over 400 years ago, we know so much about their daily lives?

## Evidence from the Ground

The Spanish invaders leveled Tenochtitlan, destroying most of the evidence of the Aztec way of life, but some Aztec artifacts remain. A few temples and cities were not pulled down and still stand today.



▲ It is amazing to think that the Aztecs who built this huge temple did not use wheels or metal tools.

## Evidence from Books

The Spanish destroyed many Aztec books but some survived. One Spaniard, Bernardino de Sahagun, asked Aztec nobles to help him decipher Aztec books soon after the conquest. Other members of Cortés's invading forces wrote accounts of Aztec life in Tenochtitlan as it was before they destroyed it.



▲ Some Aztec codices have not yet been translated.

## Evidence Around Us

Descendants of the Aztecs still live in Mexico. Some of their daily customs date from Aztec times. Many still speak a form of the Aztec language, Nahuatl. Certain words of Nahuatl have passed into other languages, particularly those for types of food originally found only in Mexico, such as tomatoes (*tomatl*), chocolate (*chocolatl*) and avocados (*ahuacatl*).

# Glossary

## Anahuac

The name given by the Aztecs to the land they ruled.

## cacao

A type of bean used to make chocolate and cocoa.

## calpollis

Groups of people made up of closely related Aztecs. (Aztec word)

## causeways

Raised roads across water

## chinampas

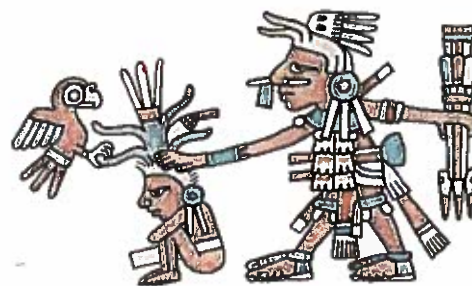
Islands made from mud taken from the bottom of Lake Texcoco piled on top of plant material. (Aztec word)

## codices

Name given to ancient books. Aztec codices were usually written on folded deerskin or bark paper.

## digging stick

The only farming tool used by the Aztecs. A simple, long, straight stick used to dig trenches in the earth.



## fast

To eat very little or no food.

## Great Speaker

The leader of the Aztecs. The Great Speaker was a nobleman who had usually been trained as a priest.



## maguey plant

A plant with spiky leaves, part of the cactus family.

## maxtli

Loincloth worn by Aztec men. (Aztec word)

## myths

Traditional stories about gods or heroes. Myths reveal what the people who tell them think about the world and how it works.

## pictogram

A symbol representing a word.



## plateau

A large area of high, flat land.

## pulque

An alcoholic drink made from the sap of the maguey plant.

## pyramids

Buildings with sloping triangular sides. The Aztec pyramids were usually built as temples.

## sacrifice

The killing of an animal or person as an offering to the gods.

## Spanish Empire

In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain sent Christopher Columbus on the journey that took him to America. For the next 100 years Spain spread its empire over most of South America and part of North America.

## tlaxcalli

A flat corn pancake eaten with most Aztec food. Tlaxcallis are eaten today, although they are usually known by the Spanish word *tortilla*. (Aztec word)