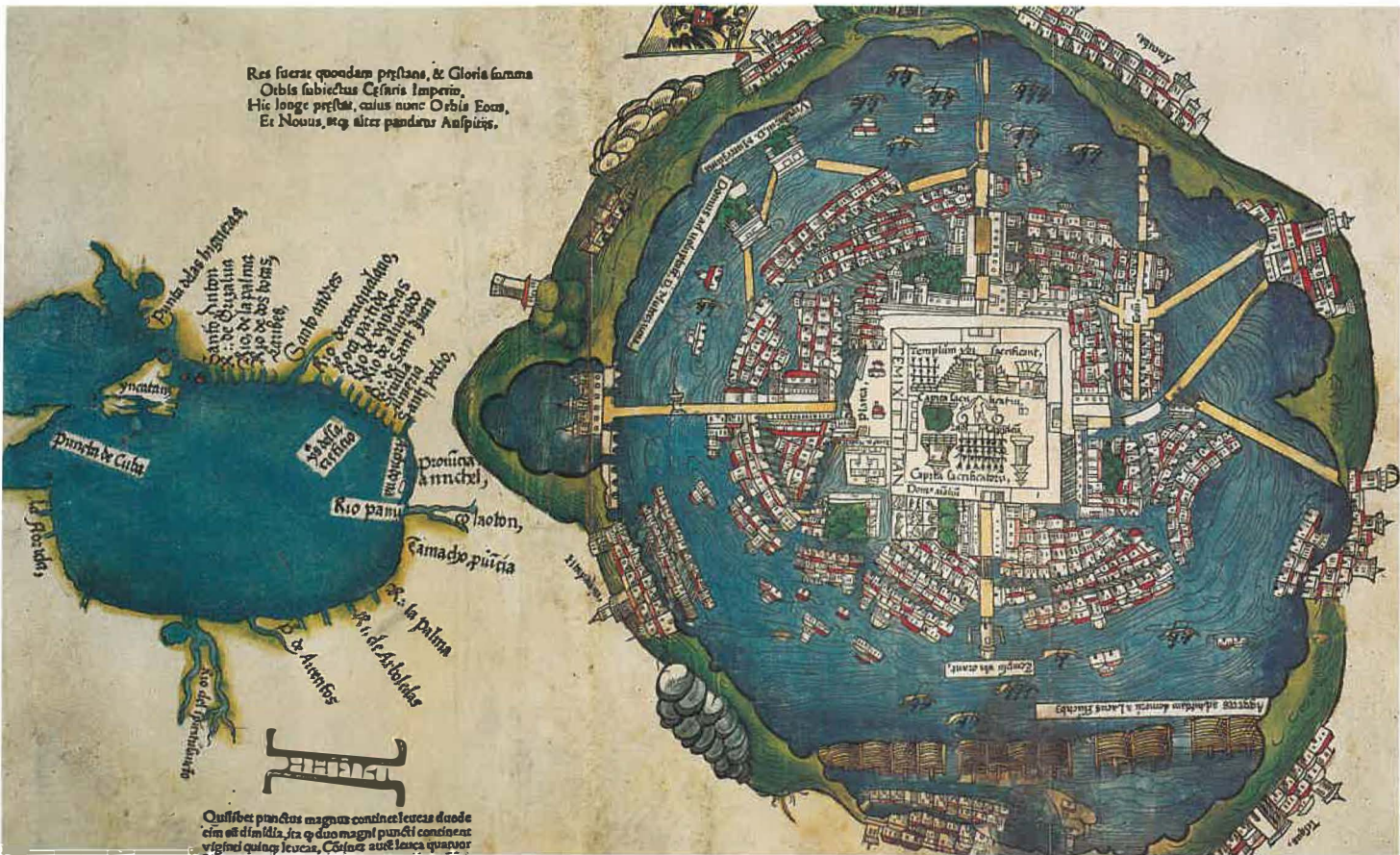


Alvin Josephy, *500 Nations*  
 (New York:  
 Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 82-94

During their migration, the Mexicas—so their legends later told them—had been guided and comforted by their god of war, Huitzilopochtli, who had said that when they saw an eagle standing on a cactus growing out of a rock, their journey would end. There they should stop and build their city, calling it Tenochtitlán (the Place of the Cactus in the Rock). Until the year 1325, the story goes, they had not seen the sign. Huitzilopochtli was a demanding god, and that year the Mexica priests declared that they needed to offer him a special sacrifice. Thinking they would be honoring the Colhuacán king, they asked him to send his daughter to become a Mexica goddess. Flattered, and not understanding the implications of the request, the lord of Colhuacán complied. Days later, when at the invitation of the Mexicas he and

A map of Tenochtitlán, published in Europe in 1524, soon after its fall. Although it is a Spanish version, with European-style houses, it shows the Aztec temples and many of the city's distinctive features, such as the causeways across Lake Texcoco.





*A life-sized ceramic figure from A.D. 1450–1500, wearing the wings, beaked helmet, and claws of an Aztec eagle warrior.*

other lords of the valley journeyed to the Mexica town to honor the new goddess, he saw not his daughter but a priest dancing in the girl's skin. Enraged, he demanded revenge.

The Colhuacán lord and his allies attacked the Mexicas and drove those whom they did not kill back into the swamps and islands of Lake Texcoco. The Mexicas were almost annihilated, but again they proved resilient. As they gathered on one of the islands, they saw an eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus on a rock, the sign that their god had told them they would see when they reached the end of their journey—the place that would be called Tenochtitlán.

Now we have found the land promised to us. We have found . . . peace for the weary Mexican people. Now we want for nothing. Be comforted, children, brothers and sisters, because we have obtained [the promise of our god].

Time and again, the Mexicas—or the Aztecs, as history would soon know them—had almost been destroyed. Now they had reached the place to which their god had led them. At Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City), their future was also long foretold—this time by a prophecy with a dark side.

### **The Rise of the Aztecs**

For a hundred years, the Aztecs improved the island and a neighboring one which they called Tlatelolco, reclaiming land and building temples and other public structures while living in rudimentary housing. They gradually acquired wealth by trade and by working as mercenary warriors for the strong city-states in the valley, and they arranged marriages that brought their families honored Toltec bloodlines. An ambitious, driven people, they built causeways of hewn stone across Lake Texcoco to the north, south, and west, connecting the islands with the mainland. Early in the



fifteenth century, they constructed an aqueduct to bring fresh water to Tenochtitlán from a mainland spring four miles away and dug canals throughout the island to serve as the city's principal arteries of transportation and commerce.

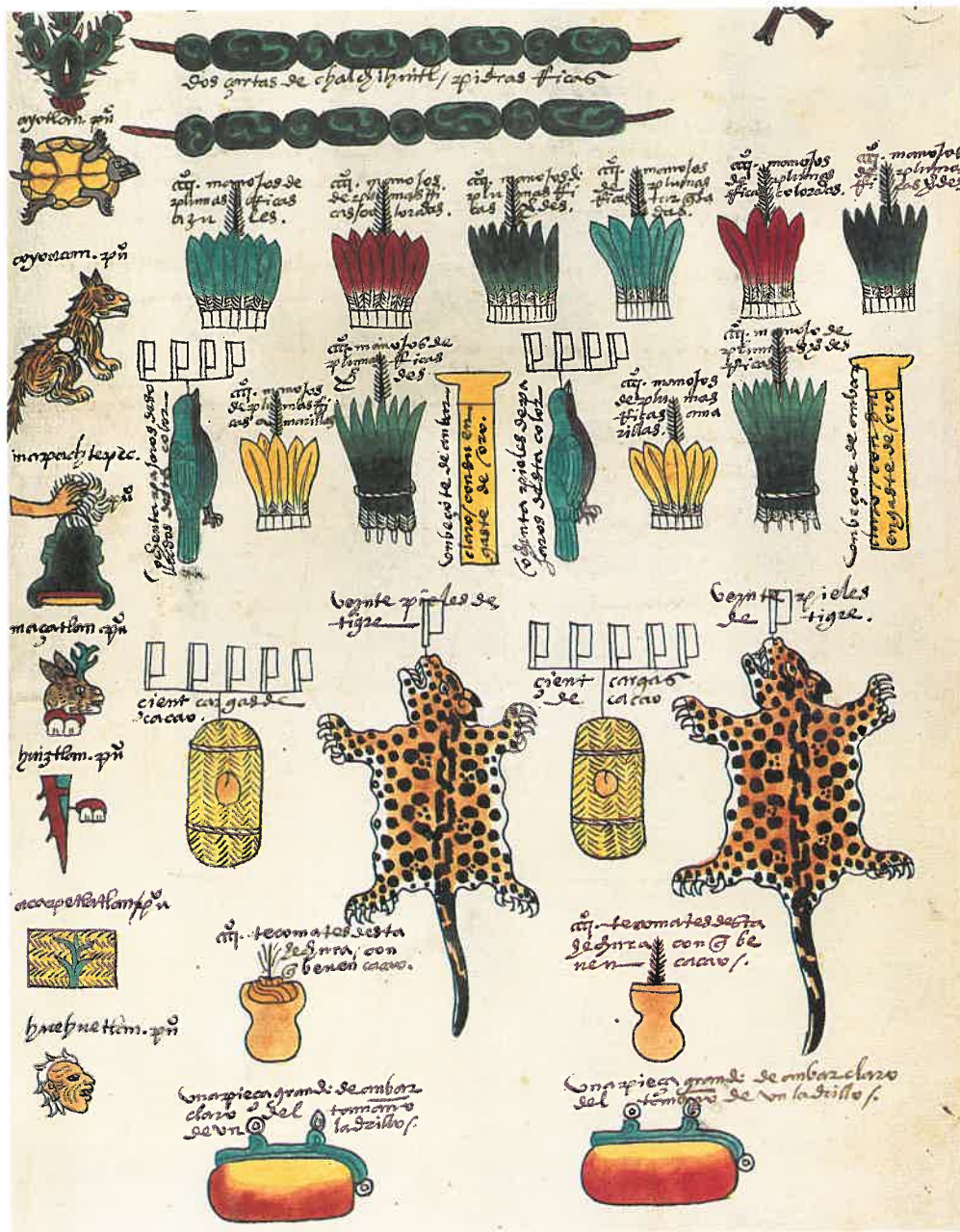
Meanwhile, they were gaining political and military strength. Becoming auxiliaries of Tezozómoc, the powerful ruler of Azcapotzalco, they helped his forces of Tepanec Indians destroy Colhuacán, one of Azcapotzalco's two rival city-states. Soon their growing prestige induced Tezozómoc to give his daughter in marriage to the Aztecs' leader, which further increased their status in the valley. With the support of Aztec armies, Tezozómoc launched expeditions of conquest that extended his power beyond the valley, unifying different peoples into the initial stage of another empire. Finally, in 1416, when Tezozómoc was in his nineties, he conquered Texcoco, the last of his rivals in the Valley of Mexico. Again, the Aztecs were among the vassals fighting for him. In the battle, the king of Texcoco was killed, but his son, a poet and philosopher named Nezahualcoyotl, escaped.

Tezozómoc finally died in 1427 at the age of 106. Because of intrigues, plots, and assassinations among those who tried to take over his empire, Azcapotzalco almost immediately lost power. Its strongest subject state, that of the Aztecs, rose in revolt and formed an alliance with Nezahualcoyotl and his followers in Texcoco. Together, they conquered Azcapotzalco and emerged as the two strongest states in the valley. Gradually, by conspiracies and conquests, Tenochtitlán gained leadership over Texcoco and, after

*King Nezahualcoyotl, a poet and philosopher whose name meant "fasting coyote," was ruler of the kingdom of Texcoco before the Aztecs' rise to dominance.*

*The geometric design on the face of this Aztec shield was created with parrot feathers. Feathers were prized by Aztec artisans in much the same way as Europeans coveted oriental silk. The demand for feathers was so great that special gamekeepers were enlisted to trap and pluck parrots in the wild so that there would be no danger of extinction.*





the death of Nezahualcoyotl in 1472, became the most influential state in central Mexico. By the end of the fifteenth century, the once-rude and humble Aztecs had become the successors of the Olmecs, Teotihuacáns, and the Toltecs and ruled the most powerful empire in the history of North America.

From their island city of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec rulers commanded an army of more than two hundred thousand warriors, including those of many vassal states. It was the largest army anywhere in the world at that time, and even today would be among the biggest. From Tenochtitlán, the heads of the Aztec state launched far-reaching campaigns that virtually never stopped for over ninety years. Fighting epic battles with city-states and nations, the Aztec forces conquered most of their adversaries and turned them into tributary countries, allowing them to keep their own governments, but requiring that they pay Tenochtitlán a high tribute, or taxes, in commodities or other goods.

In the Codex Mendoza, one of the pictographic records painted by scribes of the Aztec empire, the taxes of many tribute-paying states are listed: bolts of fine cotton cloth; military raiment, including feathered headdresses; disks of hammered gold; exotic plants; strings of jade beads; precious gems; and bundles of blankets. In addition, all of the vassal states maintained warehouses of food for the Aztec army so that the huge force would not be dependent on the Valley of Mexico for supplies. If a tributary rebelled and ignored or refused to pay its taxes, it faced stern punishment by Aztec warriors and then a doubling of its tax levy. Boasted the Aztecs:

The Aztecs demanded heavy tribute from the vassal kingdoms they conquered. On this tribute roll of one of the emperors, reproduced from the Codex Mendoza, are representations of the vassal states (the vertical row of glyphs at left) and the variety of exotic goods they were expected to pay, among them strings of jade beads, bundles of colored feathers, and jaguar skins. The European writing on some of the codices is that of Spaniards who were studying the ways of the Aztecs after they had toppled their empire.



Aztec officers, portrayed in the Codex Mendoza, wore tall emblems of their rank affixed to their backs to make them more visible to their followers in the confusion of battle.

The might of our powerful arms and the spirit of our . . . hearts shall be felt. With them we will conquer all nations, near and far, rule over all villages and cities from sea to sea, become lords of gold and silver, jewels and precious stones, feathers and tributes, and we shall become lords over them and their lands and over their sons and daughters, who will serve us as our subjects.

War had been refined for centuries in Mesoamerica. On the battlefield, the Aztecs, armed with spear-throwing atlatls, clubs edged with razor-sharp blades of flint or obsidian, and other weapons of their time, were as skilled as, and considerably more seasoned than, any contemporary fighting force. They had ranks equivalent to those of modern armies and wore uniforms designed for specific groups of fighters so that their commanders could identify them and direct their actions from a distance. An elite class of warrior knights—honored for having taken captives to be sent to Tenochtitlán for sacrifice—wore uniforms of jaguar skin and eagle feathers. The common soldiers went into battle in padded cotton suits soaked in brine to make them harder and more resistant to enemy weapons and carried shields of wicker covered with painted hides or colored feathers. Not all nations and cities fell before the



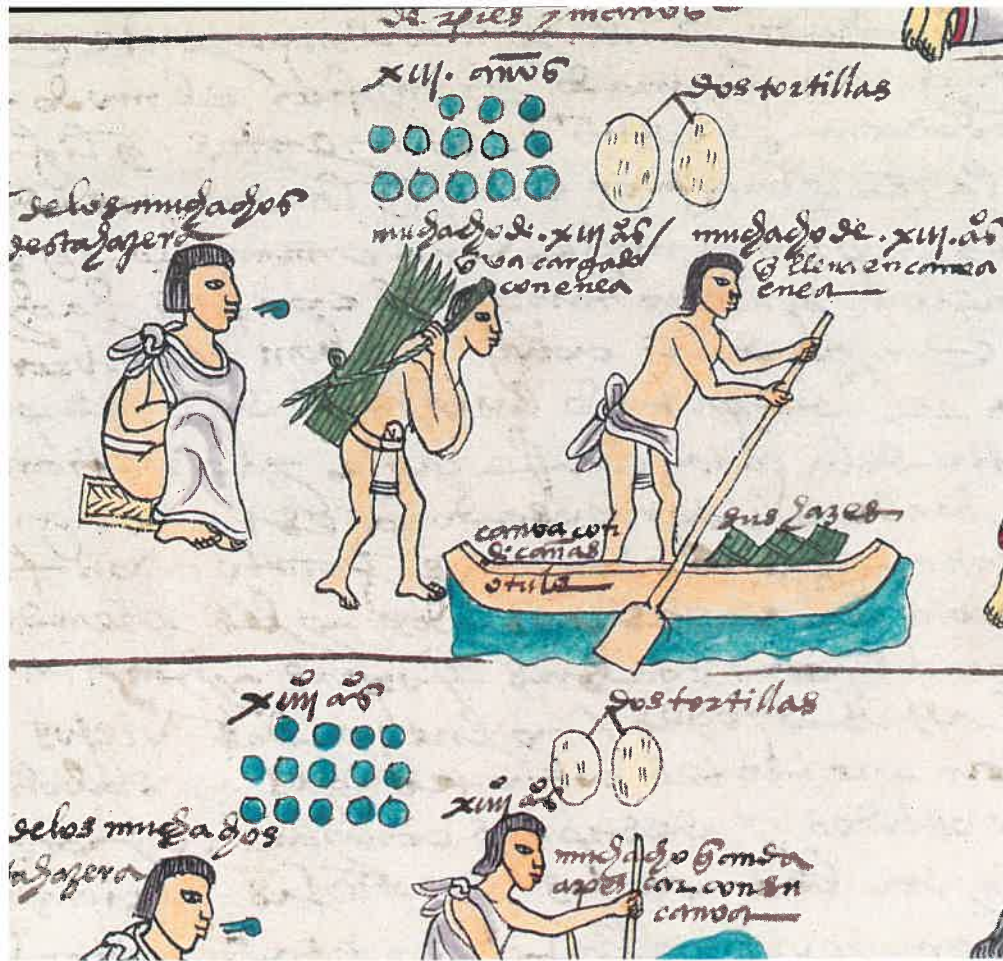
This Aztec pictorial accounting from the Codex Mendoza shows military supplies, including warriors' uniforms and richly decorated shield as tribute paid to an emperor by one of his vassal kingdoms.

OVERLEAF: As depicted in the Codex Tudela Aztec noblewomen wore huipils, richly embroidered blouses that hung from the shoulders to the knees. At the same time, the Codex Tudela showed the common outer garment of Aztec noblemen, a draped cloak called a tilmatl, worn fastened over the right shoulder.







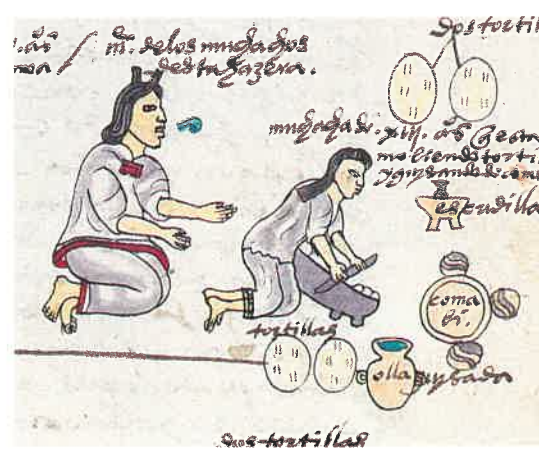


Aztec fathers commonly instructed their sons in trades they had inherited from their own fathers. Here, two youths have gathered firewood and are transporting it across Lake Texcoco in a canoe to sell in Tenochtitlán.

ous, stressing discipline and personal sacrifice. He might become a government official, a scribe, or a teacher. During his military service, he was expected to be a leader on the battlefield. If he became a government official, he could live in a palace or have a large estate.

For commoners, life was considerably less comfortable, but no less structured. Most of them were farmers, laborers, fishermen, loggers, or stonemasons. If they became traders or artisans, they might amass enough wealth to rival that of the nobles, but they could never change their class. The commoners also made up the bulk of the military forces, and serving with distinction could improve a man's status.

Women of both classes learned to weave cloth and were expected to take care of the household. But there the similarities ended. Noble persons dressed in fine,



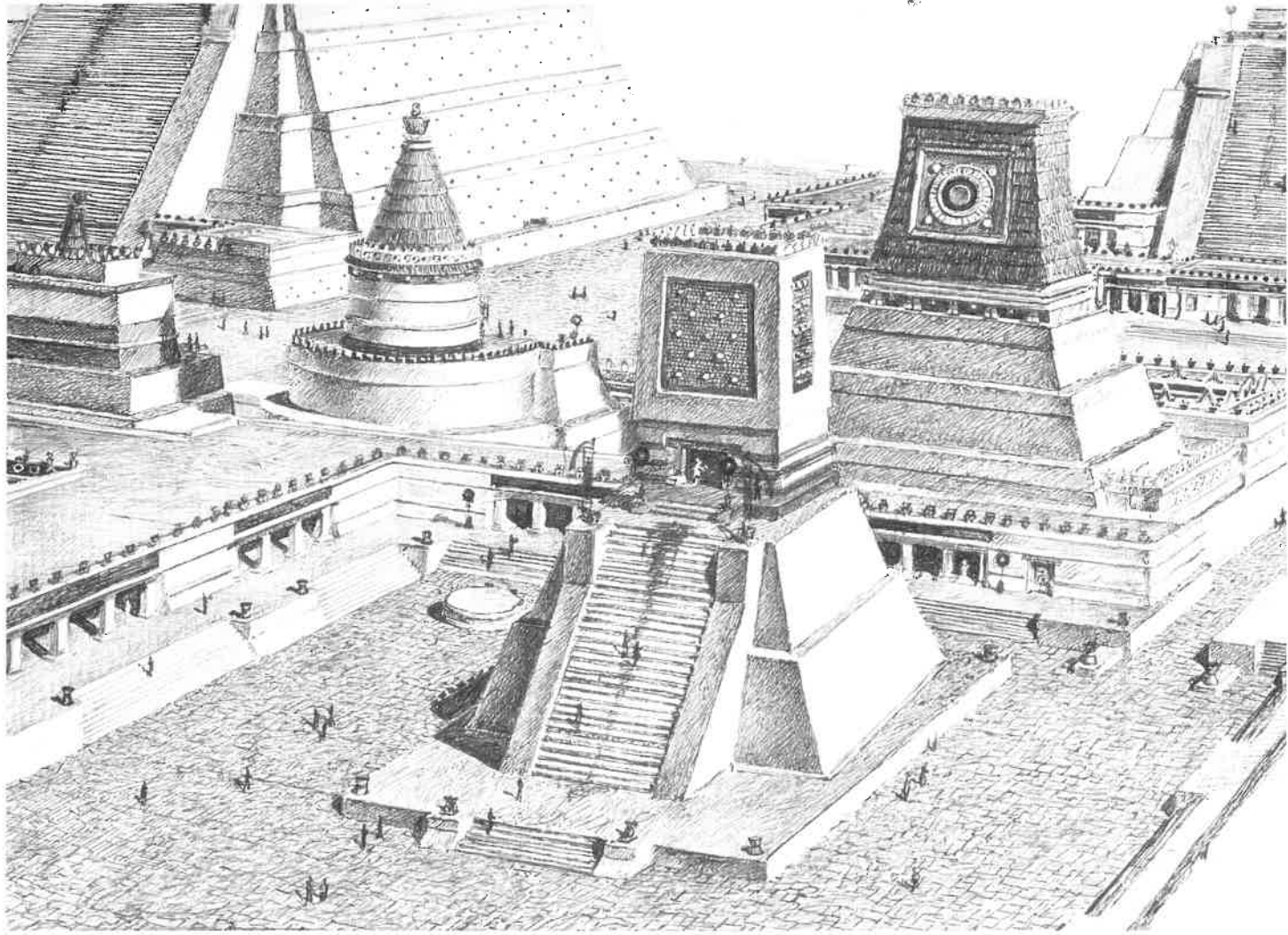
Aztec women trained their daughters in household duties from an early age. Here, a girl is taught to grind corn and make tortillas, a staple of Aztec meals.

Aztecs. Their armies could never defeat the city-state of Tlaxcala, which was located only fifty miles to their east. The Tlaxcalans were an enemy which—like the prophecy of the return of the god Quetzalcoatl—would haunt the Aztec future.

At Tenochtitlán, laws, codes of conduct, and social position dictated almost every aspect of Aztec life. A boy born to a noble family would go to school and possibly to the university in the heart of the city. His training would be rigorous,

soft cotton, while commoners usually wore coarse fabrics made from yucca or maguey. The drinking of alcohol was prohibited to everyone under the age of seventy except on special ceremonial occasions. After persons reached seventy, they were allowed to drink the potent pulque whenever they pleased.

Tenochtitlán's population of about 250,000 made it the largest



city in Mesoamerica, if not in the world, in the fifteenth century. Its ceremonial center boasted more than twenty-five major pyramids of various heights, surmounted by temples dedicated to a pantheon of deities and culture heroes. Around the plazas and gardens that lay between these shrines were numerous public buildings in which the emperor, his assistants, and a large body of nobles and civil servants administered the affairs of the empire. The city was divided into sixty residential wards, or clan districts, called *calpulli*, each one represented by a headman and containing the homes of all members of a clan and their families. In addition, each *calpulli* had its own ceremonial complex and agricultural *chinampas*.

It was a bustling metropolis with arsenals for military stores; monasteries for the priests who served in the temples; workshops for goldsmiths, feather workers, and

*At the heart of Tenochtitlán were monumental public buildings, among the most important of which were temples, raised on platforms and dedicated to the major gods in the Aztec pantheon, as shown in this re-creation.*



*Xochipilli, shown sitting cross-legged in this stone sculpture, was the Aztec deity of youth, gaiety, feasting, and dancing.*



*An elaborate painted ceramic vase depicting Chicomecoatl, or Seven Snake, the young goddess of the corn harvest.*



*A masterpiece of monolithic Aztec stone carving from about A.D. 1500 depicts the moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui, who was decapitated by her half brother, the Aztec war god, Huitzilopochtli, for conspiring in the death of their mother.*

members of other guilds; and schools for the professions. The streets and public buildings were cleaned daily by thousands of sweepers, and the city's refuse was collected and shipped away on barges. Beautiful gardens of roses and fragrant tropical flowers adorned the two-story houses of the elite; royal aviaries housed thousands of rare birds; canals laced the island; and the city's storehouses swelled with the wealth of the empire. At the start of the sixteenth century, an Aztec could truly write:

Proudly stands the city of Mexico—  
Tenochtitlán.

Here no one fears to die in war . . .

Keep this in mind, oh princes . . .

Who could attack Tenochtitlán?

Who could shake the foundations of heaven?