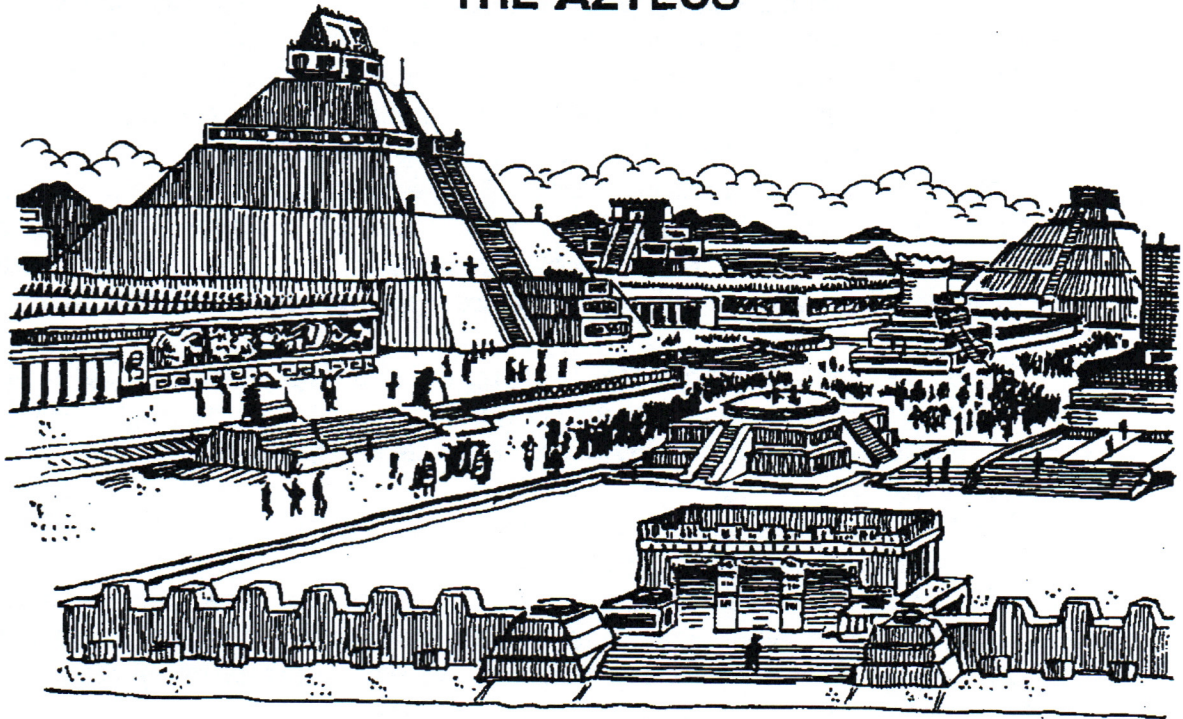


Yo Puedo #1

THE AZTECS



The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, was built on an island in the Lake Texcoco.

The Aztec Indians had already built one of the most advanced civilizations in the western hemisphere by the time Columbus made his first voyage to the Americas. Archaeologists believe that the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan may have had a population of over 200,000. This was larger than any city in Spain or England during the same time.

Mythology tells that the Aztecs began as wandering tribes in the north or northwest part of Mexico. This territory, called Aztlan, is the source of the name Aztec. Today we refer to the people as Aztecs, but they called themselves Mexica or Tenochca.

The ancient tribes wandered for many years. In the 1200s they began to settle in the Valley of Mexico, which is in the central part of the country. The area rises about 7,500 feet above sea level. It is surrounded by tropical rain forests, but the high altitude gave the region a mild climate.

Nahuatl was the language spoken by the Aztecs. Many words we use today came from this ancient language. Aztec words include Acapulco, Mexico, avocado, chocolate, and tomato. The Aztecs developed a form of picture writing. Some pictures represented ideas; other pictures stood for sounds. They did not develop an alphabet, so their writing was limited in what it could express.

The Aztecs soon founded their greatest city, Tenochtitlan, on an island in the Lake Texcoco. This is the site of the Mexico City, the modern capital of Mexico.

By the early 1400s, the Aztecs had gained control of their region and established a number of city-states. Each city-state had its own government and distinct culture. The three major city-states—Tenochtitlan, Texaco, and Tlatelolco—formed an alliance that became the Aztec empire. At one time 489 cities paid tribute and taxes to the empire.



A council of nobles always chose the emperor from members of the royal family. The greatest emperor, Montezuma I, ruled from 1440 to 1468/9. His name is also spelled Moctezuma and Motecuhzoma. He expanded the empire from the Atlantic to Pacific coasts and from Central America to what is now Guatemala. His grandson, Montezuma II, became emperor in 1502. He ruled when the empire was at its peak.

The Aztecs made no attempt to unify the area they commanded or to change the customs of the conquered peoples. The emperor stationed military units throughout the empire to maintain control. A great noble commanded each army and also served as governor. Most offices were hereditary, but service to the emperor was also a way to obtain a high office.

Aztecs belonged to a large family group called a *calpolli*, a word that meant "big house." Each *calpolli* owned a plot of land to meet the needs of its members. In addition to providing necessities for their own members, each *calpolli* presented the government with part of the harvest as a tribute.

There were four main social classes in Aztec society. The upper-class nobles owned land in addition to the land of their *calpolli*. The commoners farmed the *calpolli* land or made crafts and gave tributes to the nobles in return for protection. Serfs who farmed land of the nobles formed the third major class. Slaves were the lowest class. They had either been captives in war, criminals, or citizens who became unable to pay their debts. Slaves became household servants or worked alongside the serfs in the fields.

Spaniards, under the leadership of Hernando Cortés, invaded Mexico in search of gold. Many of the smaller city-states helped the Spanish destroy the Aztec empire in 1521. They helped the Spanish because they resented paying tributes to the Aztec empire.

The glory of the Aztec empire vanished during the Spanish invasion, but today Aztec designs still have a strong influence on Mexican art, and thousands of modern Mexicans can trace their ancestry to the Aztecs.



The glyph for the leader Tenoch

In the 13th century, the Aztec, or Mexica, Indians came to the Valley of Mexico from their original home on a northern lake island called Aztlán, from which the name they are popularly known by is derived. A primitive nomadic people, they nonetheless conquered the last of the autonomous nations of the Valley of Mexico and absorbed into their own culture much of the ritual, religion, mythology and lore of the great civilizations that had gone before. They settled on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco and erected their capital city of Tenochtitlán, named after their semi-legendary priest and leader Tenoch. There they raised a giant pyramid on which stood twin temples honoring Huitzilopochtli ("Hummingbird Wizard"), their founding god who was also the God of War, and who symbolized powerful natural forces; and Tláloc, the ancient rain god. Close by was the round temple of Quetzalcoátl, "The Feathered Serpent" and bringer of the arts of civilization, also an ancient god who had been worshipped for centuries in Mesoamerica.



The glyph for the city of Tenochtitlán

Two centuries the Aztec Empire flourished before Hernán Cortes conquered Mesoamerica for the Spanish in 1521, destroying the capital city and building upon its ruins what is today Mexico City.

On December 17, 1790, workers excavating a street alongside Mexico City's main plaza found a huge twenty-six-ton monolith buried face down near what was once a corner of the ceremonial center of Tenochtitlán.

The stone, carved with symbols depicting the Aztec universe, calendar, history and lore, was brought out and attached to one of the towers of the Cathedral where it remained until 1885. It was then moved to the city museum, and from there to the National Museum of Anthropology and History in Chapultepec Park, Mexico City, where it stands today as the centerpiece of Aztec culture.

Fray Diego de Durán mentions in his writings that it was the second archbishop of Mexico who ordered the stone buried in December of 1559. This means that the stone, sculpted in the 1400s, survived the destruction of Tenochtitlán (with only the human faces on it mutilated) and was apparently left on view as an object of curiosity for conqueror and conquered alike for thirty-eight years.

While many Indians came to accept the new religion brought by the Spanish, the old rituals and beliefs were not so easily erased. A sacred period of time, according to the Aztecs, was fifty-two years, and they held a New Fire ceremony to mark the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one. A New Fire Ceremony had taken place in 1507, and in 1559 another was due to be celebrated. It might

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well have been the preparations for this ceremony by unchristianized Indians, or the thought that the stone "reminded the Indians too much of their solar cult," that pushed the archbishop to bury the colossal sculpture.

Since its carved face saw the sun again almost two hundred years ago, this stone has been the most studied and written about single example of Mesoamerican art.

It is commonly known as the Aztec Calendar or the Sun Stone, but in this booklet it will be referred to as the Aztec Cosmos, as it is much more than a calendar, astronomical guide or sun symbol: it is the depiction of the great and venerable mechanism of the universe and of Aztec concepts of their place, both terrestrial and celestial, in it.

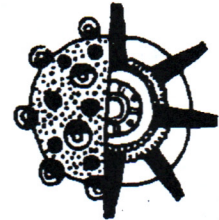
The poster illustrates the Aztec Cosmos in colors the Indians themselves might have used. The booklet serves to isolate and explain the main elements, symbols, and concepts. In addition, they are illustrated with drawings (which can be colored in using the poster as a guide) adapted from other works of art, and from the ancient picture manuscripts, the codices, which tell us much about Mesoamerican history and culture.

The Aztec, like the Mesoamerican cultures that preceded them, did not have an alphabet as we know it. Rather than using a set series of letters or signs to form the elements of a written language or to stand for the sounds of language, they used pictographs or hieroglyphs—glyphs—to represent or express an idea. Those glyphs depicting names, places, numbers, objects are easy enough to decipher. But there are other glyphs that are more difficult to translate as they are abstractions themselves, or refer to intangibles or abstract concepts.

There are two glyphs that are important to an understanding of the Aztec Cosmos. One is the glyph for star, drawn as an eye and recognizable because of its eyelid and pupil. This glyph appears many times, both as an eye on the face of a god and as a star brightening the dark sky. The other is the glyph for light, *Tianixtelotl*, which combines a star/eye glyph (*Ixtelotl*) on a flint knife and a drawing of clenched teeth representing the sound "tlan" in the spoken language of the Aztec, *Náhuatl*. The glyph has several meanings—flint, spark, light, knowledge, sacrifice among them.



The glyph for Chapultepec, "the hill of the grasshopper," includes a stream at the foot of the hill



Star glyph



Light glyph

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And thanks to my parents who marked my destiny by giving me birth at Chapultepec.

Tomas J. Filsinger