**Emperor**

The emperor of the Aztec Empire was the highest-ranking person in all of Mesoamerica. When an emperor died, a group of high-ranking **nobles** (wealthy, high-ranking members of society) were charged with deciding who the next emperor would be. Usually, the nobles picked a relative of the previous ruler, but it did not have to be his son. It could be a brother or other close relative whom they believed would make a good leader.

Once chosen, the Aztecs believed the new Emperor was given a **divine right** to rule over the empire. This meant that the gods gave the new leader their blessings and allowed to have **absolute** rule. He was even seen as almost a god himself! After being chosen, he would spend the first four days of his new rule fasting, meditation and praying to the gods. As emperor, the ruler was given power to decide when to make war and with whom to fight. He decided how much tax would be collected and to devise military strategy.

The emperor of the Aztec Empire controlled his territory from the capital city of **Tenochtitlan**. However, the emperor did not directly rule over the Aztecs. The emperor appointed *tlatoani* (rulers) to control the many territories and tributary states of the empire. These rulers were given complete autonomy (right to rule) over their land as long as they offered tribute to the emperor. If the tribute was made, the region operated largely independently of the emperor himself.

A succession of less than a dozen rulers carried the Aztec people through from an obscure early history to empire-builders. The later rulers from 1440-1520 included Montezuma I, Axayacatl, Tizoc, Ahuitzotl, and Montezuma II. These men were all powerful leaders with multitudes of conquests. Each ruler contributed toward cultural works, such as the famous Aztec calendar, an aqueduct, and a ten-mile dyke to control the waters of Lake Texcoco.

-What might have been the benefits of allowing *tlatoani* to rule over local villages and territories?

-What does having less than a dozen emperors tell you about the state of Aztec society? What would it mean if they had many emperors in the same time span?

**WARRIORS**

Aztec warriors were a select group of exceptionally brave young men, who were well trained in the use of weapons for use in combat, battle, and war. They were the core of the Aztec Empire’s very powerful military.

At age 17, Aztec boys officially became men and could begin in the lower ranks of the army. They were servants, who basically just carried weapons and supplies.  Then there was the youth in training, who had not yet captured his first prisoner.  That first capture was an ***initiation*** into the world of the *real* Aztec warrior. They would use clubs and bows and arrows as weapons and sometimes marched up to 20 miles per day in order to reach the battlefield. Uniforms of the warriors varied, but the highest ranking would wear animal skins and feathers to mimic the god Quetzalcoatl

Few Aztecs were as privileged as the military men and even young cadets had the respect of royalty and the priesthood. This career was made rewarding by not just societal rank but also good wages that were given by the emperor. They were also granted access to food normally kept for the nobility. But one of the most important rewards was ***land*.**  The land was tax-free, and any profit made was his to keep. The land was awarded for life.  The warrior was encouraged to have a family, and the estate could be passed down as an inheritance.  Once a son had inherited the land, he could keep it or sell it.

Obviously these estates had an impact on Aztec society.  Warriors and their families soon rose to a very important place in society, and became a kind of *elite*. Warriors of particular valor could enter fraternal orders (exclusive groups), which practiced various rituals and bestowed privileges. Eagle and Jaguar warriors were the elite and performed secret dances and received additional grants of land.

-Why might capturing a prisoner be such an important part of the military and military training?

-What why was the military so important in Aztec society?

**NOBLES**

Rich and wealthy families of noble blood, well bred and respected by the rest of society composed the nobility class. The nobles were firmly in control of society. They ran the government, owned the land, slaves, and servants. They also commanded the army. Power and wealth of Aztec nobility rested on control of land, labor, and tribute.

The rich lived in homes built of sun-dried brick and sometime stone. The homes had a coating of white wash to make them sparkle in the sun. Homes had a separate place for steam baths. Water was poured over hot stones to generate steam. Bathing was an important part of daily life. Steam baths were taken every day. Their clothes were colorfully embroidered and decorated with features. They carried fans made of feathers. Feathers were a sign of status. Men would marry around age 20 and women would marry around age 15. The marriage was usually arranged by a matchmaker, who was generally an older woman. The older woman would carry the new bride to her husband’s home as a matter of tradition.

There were three ranks of nobles. The *tlatoani*, or ruler; *Tetecuhtin*, the high lords and the *Pipiltin* who were the regular lords. Each had a different position in society. The nobles enjoyed great wealth and privileges which were rigidly specified by law. The net that held the Aztec empire together was its noble class - individuals of high birth who governed, administered, and gained the greatest rewards from imperial expansion.

**PRIESTS AND PRIESTESSES**

The life of an Aztec priest was very hard and uncomfortable even though they were treated as nobles and were very important to Aztec society. Aztec priests had many responsibilities including: watching the planets and stars to prophesize and sound the time, keeping track of eclipses and other planetary events, naming certain constellations, computing the movement of stars and planets for predictions of their future positions in the sky, reading the calendar, divining the incantations to the gods and horoscopes, divining horoscopes for newborns to see if their sign was lucky or not, and checking the horoscopes of engaged couples to see if they were compatible, making offerings and sacrifices to the gods, sacrificing victims on the sacrificial stone, and drawing blood.

The priests of Tlazolteotl (the goddess of both filth and rebirth) heard confessions, went to war with the warriors to hear their confessions, and took the boys in training out into the dark on nightly walks to gather dangerous creatures. The life of an Aztec priestess was equally very hard and uncomfortable. Priestesses also performed many ceremonies, prayers, songs, incantations, and divinations in honor of the gods as well. Their responsibilities included reading the calendar and interpreting the Sacred Calendar, divining the incantations to the gods, reading horoscopes, and making sacrifices and offerings to the gods.

One of the most important jobs of the priests was to perform ritual sacrifice. The Aztecs believed that offering blood to the gods allowed for the cycle of life to continue. In order to do this, the priests would be the members of society who would perform the sacrifices near stone temples to the gods.

**FARMERS**

There were different types of farmers in central Mexico at this time.  You could describe some of them as **laborers**, and others as **specialists**. Laborers were of various types, some who basically worked as farm hands or even slaves, others who were responsible for the community farms.

**Specialists** would be responsible to know what seeds were the best, how the crop rotation should work, and what would grow best on what land.  Fertilization and irrigation was also important, and the land would often be fertilized with human "manure".

Aztec agriculture in the heart of the empire used ***chinampas*** for their crops.  Chinampa is a method of farming that used small, rectangular areas to grow crops on the shallow lake beds in the Mexican valley.  Chinampas were essentially artificial islands created for the crops.  An area was staked out in the lakebed, usually about thirty by two and a half meters.  Once the area was fenced off, the farmers layered it with mud, sediment, and decaying vegetation until it was above the level of the lake.  Trees were also often planted in the corners to help secure the area. These islands then provided rich soil for crops with easy access to water.  The farmers used channels between the islands to get to each area by canoe. In addition to chinampas, the Aztec farmers practiced **terracing** to provide more usable land.  In terracing, walls of stone were created in hillsides, then filled in to create deeper soil that could be used, even if the land wasn't flat. People also often created their own gardens to grow fruits and vegetables for their families, although commoners were expected to give tributes to the nobles of their land, according to the societal hierarchy.

The most common crop grown by the Aztecs was **maize**, also known as corn, and it was also the most important.  Maize could be stored for long periods of time, and in addition to being eaten, it could be ground into flour and made into other foods.  **Squash** was another important crop in Aztec agriculture.  There are many varieties of squash that were utilized by Aztec farmers based on how they could be best used as a food source.  The pumpkin, for example, was used often because its seeds provided a great deal of protein.  And the bottle gourd was grown because after being eaten, it could be used as a water container.  Beans are another crop that provided protein for the Aztec people, so this crop was commonly found in chinampas.  However, the Aztec farmers also grew avocados, tomatoes, and guavas, among others, as food sources, and used cotton plants and rubber trees to create products they needed like clothing and latex balls.

**SERVANTS AND SLAVES**

Servants were people who, although the nobility owned them, were not considered to be property the way a slave was, for they were free to marry and their children were born free. They could also own property, slaves, and even their own servants. However, they could be sold just as easily as slaves unless the owner had a document written freeing them from their bondage. They were also allowed to have businesses or trades of their own in order to support their families and themselves.

Slaves were a class of people who were **owned** by the **nobility** and those of the merchant class who had amassed some wealth. Generally, slaves were sometimes captured prisoners of war or, more likely, criminals. You could be made a slave as punishment for a crime you had committed. Since most crimes were punished by death, this actually was a good alternative to most punishments. The other way was if your family sold you into slavery to pay family debts. Your period of slavery was over when your punishment was over. You could buy your way out of slavery once you paid off the debt.

Unlike the servants, they were considered property and could be sold over and over again. A slave was considered to be the legal property of their master who could do whatever he wanted with them within certain limits because even slaves had certain rights. If slaves chose to marry, they could with their master’s permission, and any children they had were born free unless their spouse was also a slave. A slave could buy his or her freedom, or his master could write a letter releasing the slave from bondage.

Having a slave could be very expensive. And it could be difficult to get rid of a slave once you bought one. If you slave refused to do your bidding, you had to drag that slave to a plaza, and in front of witnesses prove that the slave refused to obey you. You had to do this on three separate occasions with three separate examples. Only then could you take your slave to a slave market for sale. A slave had to be sold three times in the slave market before a slave could be sacrificed.

There was another risk attached to having a slave. On the way to a plaza, to prove a slave had disobeyed, slaves had the chance to run away. The only person who could chase them was the master's son. If the slave managed to get the palace before the master's son caught them, they were free. If anyone interfered with the race, they became a slave themselves.

**MERCHANTS**

The merchants or *pochteca* had their own guild and were very choosy and particular about who could join their ranks. They led a different lifestyle to those of other Aztecs for they lived in a separate area of the city, belonged to a merchant guild and had their own laws and judges. Access to these guilds was highly controlled and hereditary. Only a few cities in the Aztec empire could claim to be the head of a Pochteca guild. They even worshipped their own god called Yacatecuhtli (pronounced ya-ka-tay-coo-tli), who was the patron of commerce. His name means “the lord who guides” to whom they made offerings so that he would protect them on their dangerous journeys for trade. The *pochteca* went on very long, dangerous trading expeditions to all corners of the Aztec Empire.

Even if their position provided them with wealth and prestige, the Pochteca were not allowed to show it in public, in order not to offend the nobles. However, they could invest their wealth in the ceremonies for their patron god, organizing rich [feasts](http://archaeology.about.com/od/fterms/qt/Feasting.htm) and carrying out sophisticated rituals. The Pochteca could travel freely all over the empire even in lands not subjected to the Mexica emperor. For this reason they **also worked as spies** or informants for the [Aztec state](http://archaeology.about.com/od/aztecarchaeology/a/aztec_sg.htm) reporting to Aztec generals about the wealth of other cities and the size of their armies.

In order to obtain precious and exotic items such as jaguar pelts, [jade](http://archaeology.about.com/od/jterms/a/Jade.htm), quetzal plumes, [cocoa](http://archaeology.about.com/od/caterms/qt/cacao.htm), and metals, they had special permission to travel across foreign lands and were often escorted by armies along with servants and carriers. They were also trained as warriors since they often suffered attacks from the population who saw in the Pochteca another aspect of the yoke of the Aztec Empire.

**ARTISANS**

An **artisan** is a skilled craftsman who sell his or her product in order to make a living. Artisans in the Aztec Empire were part of the middle class, which was one of the largest groups in Aztec society. It mainly consisted of the accountants, lawmakers, merchants, quarriers, feather workers, potters, weavers, sculptors, painters, goldsmiths, and silversmiths.

**Metal workers** worked with gold, copper, and silver for they had no iron. These metals were used to make jewelry and religious objects. They came from the far reaches of the empire either as trade goods acquired by the *pochteca* or tribute. Goldsmiths and silversmiths first made a clay model of what they wanted to make, which they covered with beeswax and then coated with more clay. A small furnace which was heated by charcoal into which air was blown into through a metal tube was used to melt the metal. The molten metal was then poured into a hole in the top of the mould of the desired object, and the heat melted the wax which was replaced by the metal. After the mould was left to cool, the clay was then smashed leaving the finished metal object.

**Feather workers** had their own guild and they made many very beautiful objects, which have unfortunately almost all been destroyed. The most highly prized feathers came from the brilliant plumage of the Quetzal bird. There was a huge aviary in Tenochtitlan where three hundred workers cared for many thousands of brightly colored birds. As these birds molted, their feathers were collected, graded, and then taken to the feather workers.

