

Aztec Achievements

Standards Preview

H-SS 7.7.4 Describe the artistic and oral traditions and architecture in the three civilizations.

E-LA Reading 7.1.2 Use knowledge of Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon roots and affixes to understand content-area vocabulary.

Reading Preview

Reading Skill

Use Greek Roots You can use Greek roots in the same way that you used Latin roots. Find a root that you recognize. Define it, and then consider how its meaning fits in the context of the sentence. This will help you distinguish roots that look similar but have different meanings.

Vocabulary Builder

High-Use Words

unique (yoo NEEK), p. 252

classic (KLAS ihk), p. 254

Key Terms and People

causeway (CAWZ way), p. 249

shrine (shrĭn), p. 250

fine art (fĭn ahrt), p. 252

orator (OR uh ter), p. 253

Background Knowledge You have read about the importance of war and human sacrifice to the Aztecs. But the Aztecs also excelled at many creative arts. In this section, you will learn about Aztec art, architecture, and oral and written traditions.

Art and Architecture

The Aztecs were accomplished artists and architects. They made beautiful objects from gold, feathers, and other natural materials. They also designed and built an extraordinary capital city. Scholars have used historical accounts and archaeological remains to depict the Aztec capital at its height.

The Island City While the Aztecs built their empire, their capital, Tenochtitlán, also grew. By the early 1500s, it had become a great city of about 200,000 people.

The island city was divided into four quarters, crossed by avenues and canals. Long causeways connected the island to the lakeshore. A **causeway** is a raised road across a body of water. The Aztecs built aqueducts to bring fresh water into the city. They also built dikes to prevent flooding and to circulate fresh water to the chinampas spread around the lake.

Main Idea

The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán was one of the world's great cities.



E-LA 7.1.2 Use Greek Roots

What is a cylinder?
Consider that the Greek word *kylindein* means "to roll."

The Central Plaza The heart of Tenochtitlán was a large walled plaza in the center of the city. This was a sacred space used for public ceremonies and festivals. Dozens of pyramids, temples, and other buildings were scattered around the plaza. Facing the plaza on one side was the emperor's palace.

The largest structure in the plaza was the Templo Mayor (TEHM plo mī YOR). This was a huge pyramid painted in bright colors. At the top of the pyramid stood two shrines. A shrine is a place of worship that is dedicated to a sacred object or person. Another temple was built in the shape of a cylinder and had a huge door resembling a serpent's mouth.

Markets The residential districts of the city were spread out around the plaza. Each district had its own small temples and markets.

The greatest market was in the district of Tlatelolco (tlah teh LOHL koh). The Spanish soldier Bernal Díaz described the scene:

“On reaching the marketplace . . . we were astounded at the great number of people and the quantities of merchandise. . . . You could see every kind of merchandise to be found anywhere in [the Aztec Empire]. . . . If I describe everything in detail I shall never be done.”

—Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*

Templo Mayor

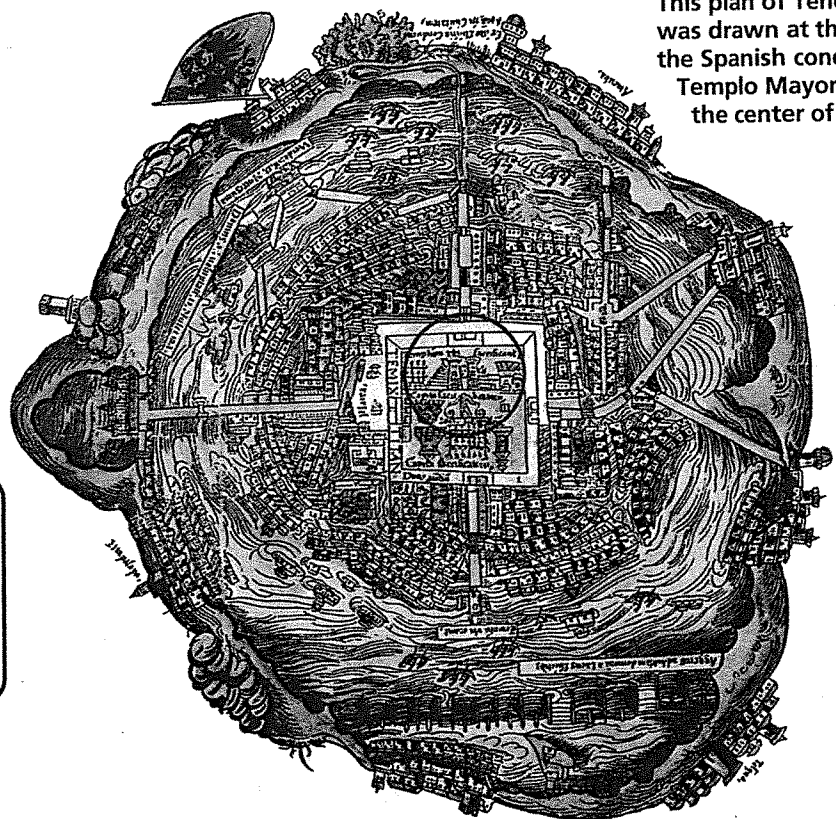
The most important Aztec religious building was the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán. The original temple was built in about 1325, but it was rebuilt and enlarged many times over the next 200 years.

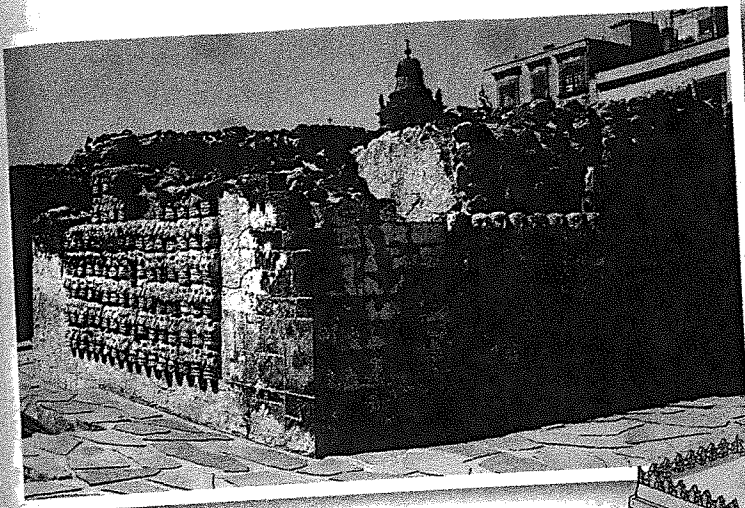
Critical Thinking: Draw Inferences What do the images on these two pages suggest about the role of religion in Aztec life?

History Interactive
Explore the
Templo Mayor

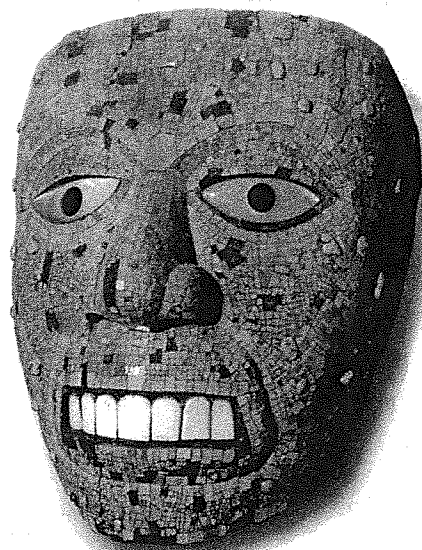
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This plan of Tenochtitlán was drawn at the time of the Spanish conquest. The Templo Mayor stood at the center of the city.



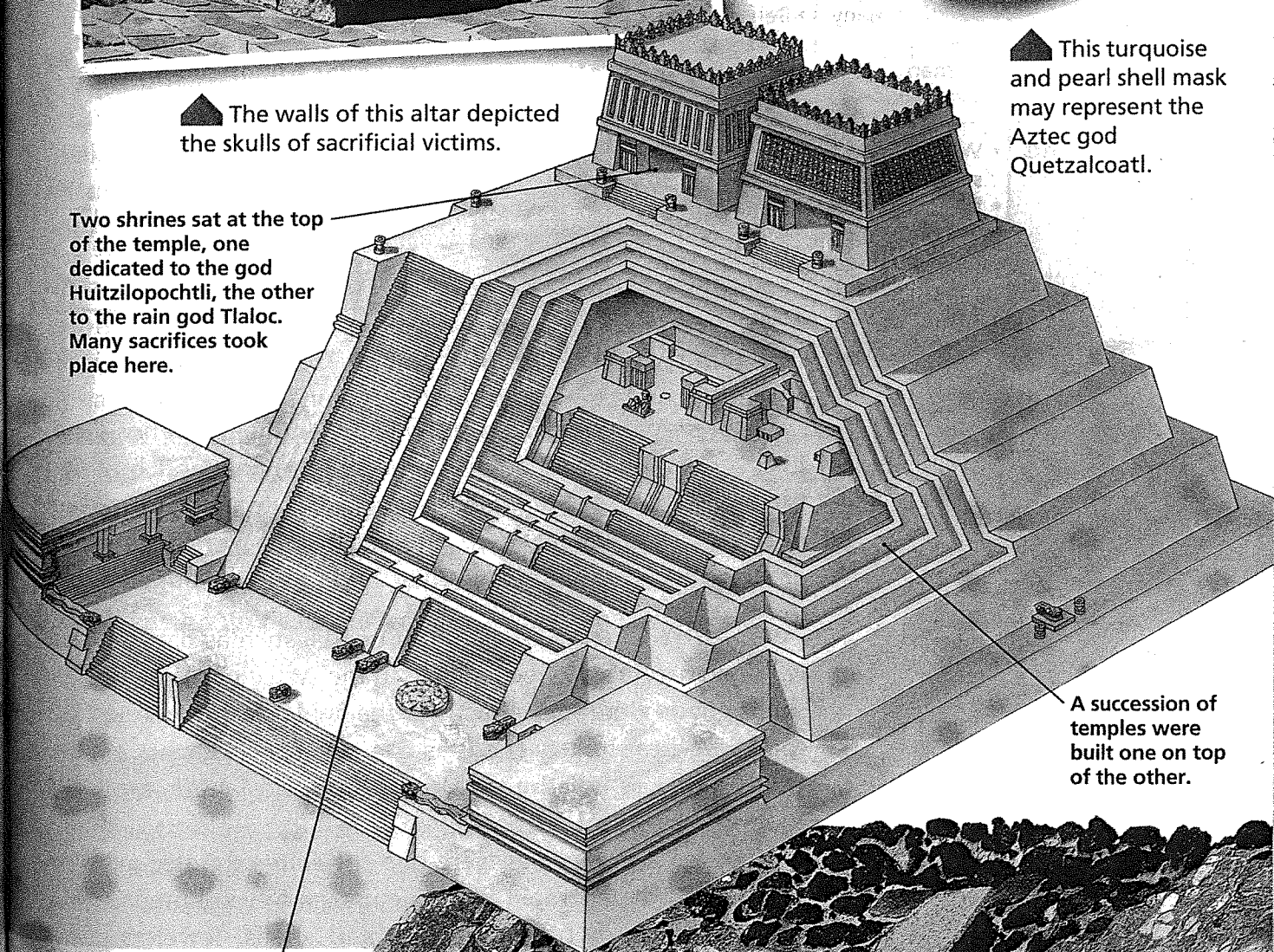


▲ The walls of this altar depicted the skulls of sacrificial victims.



▲ This turquoise and pearl shell mask may represent the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl.

Two shrines sat at the top of the temple, one dedicated to the god Huitzilopochtli, the other to the rain god Tlaloc. Many sacrifices took place here.



A succession of temples were built one on top of the other.

Two stone snake heads stood guard at the foot of the main staircase.



Civilizations in the Americas

	Maya*	Inca	Aztec
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City-states with separate rulers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emperor • Empire divided into sections with separate rulers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • King assisted by officials • City-states governed by local chiefs
Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farming; trade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farming; trade
Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief in many gods • Human sacrifice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief in many gods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief in many gods • Human sacrifice
Achievements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing system • Discoveries in astronomy, mathematics • Calendar • Architecture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irrigation system • Terrace farming • Road system with bridges, tunnels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing system • Irrigation system • Poetry • Sculptures

Reading Charts

The Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs built complex civilizations. Although they shared many features, they also differed in important ways.

- (a) **Read a Chart** Which civilization made discoveries in astronomy and mathematics? Which civilization used terrace farming?
- (b) **Compare** Based on the chart, do you think that daily life among the Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs would be more similar or more different? Explain.

Every type of product was available in the market of Tlatelolco, from food and medicine to live animals and building materials. Like the Mayas and Incas, the Aztecs had no system of money. Instead, they used cacao beans as a form of currency, along with cotton cloth, gold dust, and pieces of copper.

Arts and Crafts Basic craft goods, such as baskets, pottery, and sandals, were available in the Aztec markets. But the finest goods were sold directly to the noble class. Today, collectors view these luxury goods as *fine art*, or works that are created mainly to be admired. In contrast, most crafts are made to serve a practical purpose.

Jewelry and mosaics were one specialty of Aztec artisans. Mosaic artists decorated knives, cups, and even human skulls with tiny bits of colorful stones and shells. Jewelers made unique rings, necklaces, and other jewelry from gold, silver, and semiprecious stones.

One of the highest forms of Aztec art was feather work. Specialists made fans, headdresses, capes, and shields from the brightly colored feathers of tropical birds. This magnificent art was very fragile, however, and only a few pieces have survived.

Vocabulary Builder

unique (yoo NEEK) *adj.* unusually good and special

The Aztecs also carved beautiful stone sculptures. Some were small figures or masks made of jade or quartz crystal. Others were huge, like the great Aztec Calendar Stone. This circular sculpture weighs 25 tons. Carved into the stone are glyphs for the names of months and key dates in the Aztec calendar. (See the picture on page 248.)

✓Checkpoint How were Aztec accomplishments in art and architecture evident in Tenochtitlán?

Language and Literature

The Aztecs valued words and language. They created beautiful bark-paper books, similar to a Maya codex. Aztec writing was less advanced than the Maya system, so these books mainly contained lists of names and dates. Though their writing system was important for record-keeping, it was the spoken language that mattered most to the Aztecs.

The Spoken Word The Aztecs were skilled *orators*, or public speakers. One of the titles of the Aztec emperor was *tlatoani*, or “great speaker.” Orators performed at both public and private gatherings. Their favorite topics were stories from the past and legends of the gods. In this way, Aztec history and religion were passed down from generation to generation.

Sometimes, orators held competitions to determine the best speaker. A great speaker was said to have “flowers on his lips.” Even today, the Aztec language, Nahuatl (nah oo AHL), is known for its beautiful sound. In fact, the word *Nahuatl* means “elegant speech.”

Aztec Poetry Given their love for language, it is no surprise that poetry was the most popular form of Aztec literature. Poets were highly respected in Aztec society. Even kings composed poetry. The most famous of the royal poets was Nezahualcoyotl, the great ruler of Texcoco. In one of his poems, he reflects on the fleeting nature of life:

“Is it true that on earth one lives?
Not forever on earth, only a little while.
Though jade it may be, it breaks;
though gold it may be, it is crushed;
though it be quetzal plumes, it shall not last.
Not forever on earth, only a little while.”

—Nezahualcoyotl

Main Idea

The Aztecs were great orators and poets.


Vocabulary Builder

classic (KLAS ihk) *adj.* considered important and of high quality, with a value that lasts for a long time

Aztec poetry could be joyful, too. Flowers and the beauty of nature were classic themes of Aztec poetry. The following poem by an unknown poet compares poetry and the role of the poet to flowers in bloom:

“The flowers sprout, they are fresh, they grow;
they open their blossoms,
and from within emerge the flowers of song;
among men You scatter them, You send them.
You are the singer!”

—Aztec poem

 **Checkpoint** How did the Aztecs express their love of language?

Looking Back and Ahead In this section, you have read about Aztec achievements in art and architecture. Aztec engineers built aqueducts and dikes in and around Tenochtitlán to enhance their capital city. You also learned that the Aztecs loved the spoken word and poetry. Aztec poets were important members of society. In the next chapter, you will study a great civilization on the opposite side of the world from the Americas: China.

Section 3 Check Your Progress



Standards Review

H-SS: 7.7.4; E-LA: Reading 7.1.2

Comprehension and Critical Thinking

- (a) Recall** What was at the heart of Tenochtitlán?

(b) Draw Conclusions Why was it a sacred place to the Aztecs?
- (a) Recall** What was the main literature of the Aztecs?

(b) Draw Inferences Why do you think death was a common theme of Aztec poetry?

Reading Skill

- 3. Use Greek Roots** Use the Greek roots *archae*, meaning “ancient or primitive,” and *logy*, meaning “the study of,” to help you build the meaning of *archaeological*.

Vocabulary Builder

- 4.** Draw a table with four rows and three columns. In the first column, list the key terms from this section: causeway, shrine, fine art, orator. In the next column, write the definition of each word. In the last column, make a small illustration

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that shows the meaning of the word.

Writing

- 5.** When you create a bibliographic entry for a magazine article, the proper format is Author's Last Name, First Name. “Title of Article.” *Title of Magazine* Date: page numbers.

Put the following in proper bibliographical format: “Where the Aztecs Came From” by Susan Carlos in *Arqueología Mexicana*, June 17, 1999, pages 45–56.