

# The Aztecs



Stone seated figure of Xochipilli  
Aztec, Mexico  
AD 1325-1521

Visit resource for teachers

Key Stage 2

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## **Before your visit**

## Background information

The Mexica (later known as the Aztecs) were a migrant people from the desert north who arrived in Mesoamerica in the 1300s. This previously nomadic tribe was not welcomed by the local inhabitants who viewed them as inferior and undeveloped. Legend tells that as a result the Aztecs wandered waiting for a sign to indicate where they should settle. It is said that in AD1325 this sign, an eagle and serpent fighting on a cactus, was seen at Lake Texcoco prompting the Aztecs to found their capital city, Tenochtitlan.

By AD1430 the Aztecs had assimilated aspects of the surrounding tribes and developed into a structured society. Their military became powerful and campaigns were fought and won. The Triple Alliance was created with the lords of Texcoco (situated on the eastern shores of Lake Texcoco) and Tlacopan (sometimes referred to as Tacuba, situated on the western shores of Lake Texcoco) further strengthening Aztec power.

The Aztecs went to war for two main reasons; to exact tribute and to capture prisoners. They needed prisoners because they believed that the gods must be appeased with human blood and hearts to ensure the sun rose each day. Conquering new regions brought the opportunity to capture slaves who were an important part of Aztec society.

Prosperity and unity within the Aztec peoples brought confidence. Under a succession of rulers armies were sent further across Mexico. By the start of the 1500s the Aztec empire stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific and into Guatemala and Nicaragua. The arrival in AD1521 of Hernan Cortés with Spanish soldiers brought about the end of the empire.

## Tenochtitlan

The Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlan, was founded on a small piece of land in the western part of Lake Texcoco. The city was contained within high mountains and surrounding lake and marshes. To create living and farming space the Aztecs sank piles into the marshes and formed small land masses called chinampas, or floating gardens. Tenochtitlan was highly developed with causeways between islands for transport, aqueducts to carry fresh water and sewers to dispose of waste. The city developed into a metropolis led by a ruling leader and supported by noble classes, priests, warriors and merchants. By the early 1500s it contained an array of pyramids, temples, palaces and market places.

## Trade

The Aztecs designed roads for travel by foot because there were no draught animals. These roads were well maintained and boosted trade both for the Aztecs and for the tribes under their control. They also enabled the Aztecs to be informed of events across their empire. Trade was an important activity. The Aztecs exported luxury items such as jewellery and garments manufactured from imported raw materials. They also exported goods such as lake salt and ceramic goods. Exotic luxuries such as animal skins, feathers, rubber and jade came from the distant southern tropics. Beautiful manufactured goods such as jewellery, textiles and pottery came from craft centres, a famous example of which is Cholula (in the modern Mexican state of Puebla). Traded goods even came from as far away as southern New Mexico and raw materials from Central America appeared in the markets of Tenochtitlan.

## Resources

### British Museum websites

#### Teaching history with 100 objects

Free online resources to support teachers working in the new history curriculum through object-based learning. Access information, images, and video as well as teaching ideas for lessons at Key Stages 1-3.

[www.teachinghistory100.org](http://www.teachinghistory100.org)

### Books

#### For adults

McEwan, C., Middleton A., Cartwright, C. and Stacey, R., *Turquoise Mosaics from Mexico*, The British Museum Press, 2006

#### For children

Bateman, P., *The Aztecs Activity Book*, The British Museum Press, 1994

Bezanilla, C., *Pocket Dictionary Aztec and Maya Gods and Goddesses*, The British Museum Press, 2005

## **Gallery information**

Room 27 displays material from Mexico ranging in date from 2000 BC to the 16th century AD. The objects originate from Mesoamerica and reflect cultures such as the Olmec, Maya and Mixtec people as well as the Aztecs. This gallery contains objects from a range of cultures in Mexico and Central America. Huastec, Isla de Sacrificios, Classic Veracruz, Olmec, Mixtec, Zapotec, Teotihuacan, West Mexico, Yaxchilan and Maya. Large sculptures are located in the central areas of the room with smaller objects in the wall cases.

The objects that you will be concentrating on are the Aztec objects. These are located in the large blue case with the turquoise serpent and in the cases behind it and to the right. Aztec freestanding sculptures are located towards the centre of the gallery on a circular plinth. There is also a sculpture of a fire serpent opposite the south exit doors.

## **What is it like to visit this gallery?**

Room 27 has been designed to reflect the architecture of a Mayan temple. It is a small room and will only accommodate one class of students at a time. Please ensure you have booked your group into the gallery through the British Museum Box Office. It is advisable to split the class into groups and ask them to complete their worksheets in different orders to avoid overcrowding a particular object or case.

There are two exits from the gallery. One leads to the East Stairs and Room 1 (Enlightenment Gallery); the other leads to Room 26 (North America) and through to Room 24 (Living and Dying Gallery). It is important to make the children aware before your visit that other cultures are represented here and to highlight the location of the Aztec objects when you enter the gallery. You may also find it of benefit to combine your study of the Aztecs with the other cultures.

## **Case Numbers**

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

## Preliminary activities

### General introductory activities

- Locate the region known as Mesoamerica in an atlas and look at the modern countries which now cover this area: Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and parts of Honduras and El Salvador.
- Provide a general introduction to the Aztec Empire; looking at its place in time, geographical area, peoples, rulers and religion.

### Activities to support gallery activities

- Look at specific aspects of life in the Aztec Empire. Topics to explore include daily life, religion, trade and warfare. Illustrate these with images of objects, written sources and modern evidence.
- Discuss how animal symbolism is used in societies both ancient and modern. Use examples from your local area, such as a sports team, school crest or a country's flag.
- Talk about materials that the Aztecs had access to and used for ceremonial or everyday items. Use images or examples to illustrate these materials. Ideas include turquoise, obsidian, feathers, shell, wood, pottery and granite. Discuss which materials the students expect to see more of in the gallery and why.

## **During your visit**



## Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Room 27. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

## **Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers**

### **Gallery activity: People in Mesoamerica**

- There were many different peoples who lived in Mesoamerica. They are represented in this gallery; information about them can be gained by studying figures of people.
- This activity asks the students to record information about figures in the gallery.

### **Gallery activity: Aztec Life**

- Aztec life had many aspects and the objects in this gallery reflect many of these.
- This activity asks students to use prior knowledge and independent thought to categorise objects into themes.

### **Gallery activity: Animals**

- Animals were used as symbolic motifs. The type of animal was chosen for its characteristics, for example the jaguar was often associated with warriors.
- This activity requires students to use observational skills to locate animals in Aztec designs, whether that be an animal shaped object or an animal carving.

### **Gallery activity: Material Evidence**

- Students are asked to look for three kinds of materials: earth, animal and plant.
- This activity asks the students to categorise objects and their materials.

### **Gallery activity: Turquoise Serpent**

- The serpent played an important role in Aztec religion and was associated with many gods and goddesses.
- This activity encourages close observation to build a written and pictorial description of an object.

### **Gallery activity: Aztec Gods**

- The Aztecs worshipped many gods and goddesses who ruled over aspects of human life and of nature.
- This activity requires the students to use images and written descriptions to find objects located in the gallery.

## People in Mesoamerica

- This gallery contains objects which tell us about the other people who lived in and around modern Mexico. Find the three figures shown below, look at them carefully and then answer the questions by circling the right answer.
- This sculpture was carved by the Huastec people



What does the sculpture show?

- |       |         |         |
|-------|---------|---------|
| a man | a woman | a child |
|-------|---------|---------|

What parts of the body are not shown in the statue?

- |      |      |           |
|------|------|-----------|
| legs | arms | shoulders |
|------|------|-----------|

What size is the sculpture?

- |                        |                       |           |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| smaller than life-size | larger than life-size | life size |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|

- This small pottery whistle comes from Veracruz



What does the sculpture show?

- |       |         |        |
|-------|---------|--------|
| a man | a woman | a king |
|-------|---------|--------|

What clothing is the figure wearing?

- |          |       |       |
|----------|-------|-------|
| trousers | skirt | cloak |
|----------|-------|-------|

What material is the whistle made from

- |       |         |       |
|-------|---------|-------|
| glass | pottery | metal |
|-------|---------|-------|

- This pottery figure was made by the Olmec people



What does it show?

- |       |         |         |
|-------|---------|---------|
| a man | a woman | a child |
|-------|---------|---------|

How is it posed?

- |          |         |            |
|----------|---------|------------|
| standing | sitting | lying down |
|----------|---------|------------|

How would you describe the person?

- |         |      |       |
|---------|------|-------|
| excited | calm | happy |
|---------|------|-------|

## Aztec Life

- Below are four Aztec activities. Look around the gallery and find objects connected with them. When you have found an object draw a picture or write a short description of it in the box.

Activity	Description or drawing
daily life	
religion	
trade	
war	

- Discuss your findings with your group.

# Animals

- There are many Aztec objects in the shape of animals or with carvings of animals on them. Look in the cases which contain Aztec objects and at the sculptures on the circular platform.
- Below is a list of animals. Tick each animal when you have spotted it. You may not be able to find them all.

rabbit	jaguar	eagle
snake	butterfly	monkey

- Now choose one of the objects that you found with an animal on it and draw a picture of it in the box below.

- What type of animal is on the object you have chosen?

.....

- What colours are on the object?

.....

- What material is the object made from?

.....

## Material Evidence

Objects are very valuable in helping us to find out about the Aztec Empire. But which objects survive depends on what material they are made of.

- Look at the Aztec objects in the room and fill in the sheet below.

Type of material	tally of objects made from this material	Total
earth material: stone		
earth material: pottery		
earth material: jade		
earth material: copper		
earth material: turquoise		
earth material: gold		
animal material: feathers		
animal material: ivory		
animal material: leather, skin		
animal material: bone		
plant material: wood		
plant material: flowers, reeds		

Total earth materials

Total animal materials

Total plant materials

- Based on your results circle the correct answer to the following questions:

Which type of material has survived best?

earth	animal	plant
-------	--------	-------

Which type of material has survived worst?

earth	animal	plant
-------	--------	-------

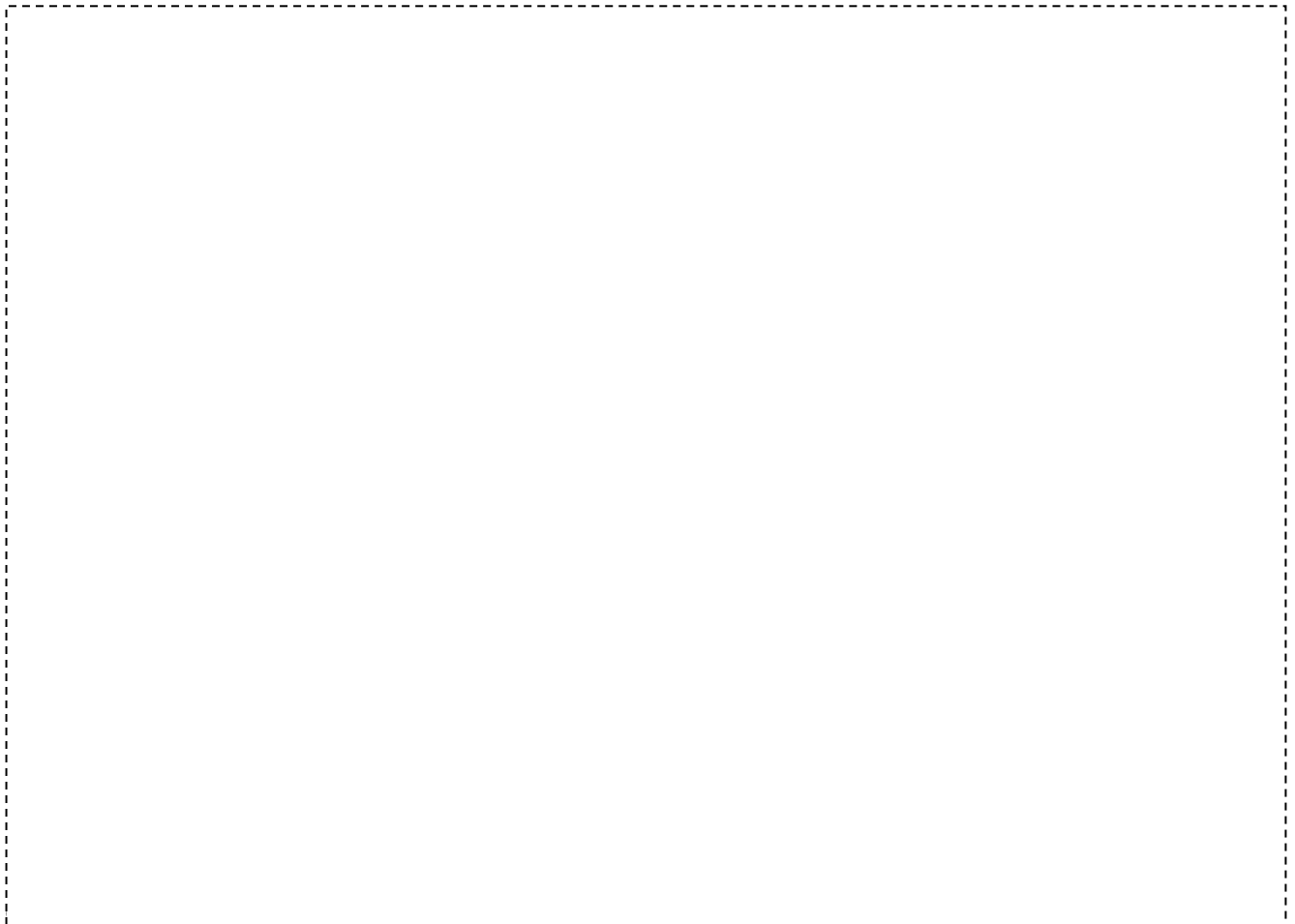
- What do you think are the reasons for this?

# Turquoise Serpent

- Go to the large blue case. Look in the side of the case which faces into the gallery. Find the turquoise mosaic which is in the shape of a serpent.
- How many heads does the serpent have?.....
- Read the words below. Tick the words that you think describe the serpent.






calm	angry	colourful
strong	smooth	shiny
scary	bold	active
powerful	tired	sad

- Draw a picture of the serpent in the box below.



## Aztec Gods

- Below are five Aztec gods with drawings of the object they can be found on in the gallery. When you have found each one tick the box next to it.

Drawing of object	Information about the god	Tick when found
	<p>Quetzalcoatl is the god of nature, the earth and the sky. His name means 'Quetzal-feathered snake'. Snakes move quickly and so were believed to be connected to lightning.</p>	
	<p>Chalchiuhtlicue is the goddess who watches over lakes, oceans and running water. She wears a headband with ear tassels and a cape.</p>	
	<p>Chicomecoatl is the goddess of maize (corn on the cob). She is standing up and wears a large rectangular headdress.</p>	
	<p>Mictlantecuhtli is the god of the dead. His statue is shown with a skull as his face. He has his arms folded and wears large round earrings.</p>	
	<p>Tezcatlipoca is the god of the night sky and of the night wind. He is linked with obsidian, a black stone.</p>	

- Discuss which god was the easiest and which the hardest to find.



**After your visit**

## Follow-up activities introduction

Follow-up will encourage students to reflect on the work undertaken in the Mexico gallery during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the students to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.

## Follow-up activity: People in Mesoamerica

Curriculum links: history, literacy, art and design

- Explore other cultures the students saw in the Mexico Gallery. The cultures could be plotted onto a timeline or marked on a map.
- Look at how statues, figurines and objects showing people can be used to understand more about a culture. Look for sculptures in your local area. What do they reveal?
- Examine the material used, the poses adopted and types of carving.
- Collect information on each statue using a digital camera and written notes. Back in school create a chart comparing the different examples found.

## Follow-up activity: Aztec Life

Curriculum links: history, literacy, art and design

- Discuss the objects that students chose to illustrate each theme on the worksheet. Write notes on the board adding objects to the themes.
- Ask the students to research these aspects of Aztec life individually or in groups. They can record their observations as notes or sketches. When they have finished ask students to present their findings to the class.
- Use the notes and sketches to produce wall panels for each topic.
- You could link this research to an exploration of life in Tudor England. Explain to the students that the Aztecs and Tudors were cultures that existed at the same time.

## Follow-up activity: Animals

Curriculum links: history, literacy

- Ask the students which animals they managed to find in the gallery.
- Look at the objects the students chose to draw. What animal is pictured? Discuss the use of animals as symbols. Why might the Aztecs have chosen those particular animals? What qualities do they have that the Aztecs may have wished to reflect? For example the jaguar is powerful and strong, seen as the king of the jungle whereas a rabbit is timid and cuddly. Ask the students to write a list of descriptive words for each animal.
- Give the students the task of designing a motif for a place, team or group using an animal as the main symbol. Ask the students to reflect on what they would like to portray about their group before choosing an animal.

## Follow-up activity: Material Evidence

Curriculum links: history, literacy, science

- Review the list of materials the students were asked to find during the visit. Re-examine the three categories of materials (earth, plant and animal). What materials survived and why?
- Provide the students with a sample of each material. Ask them to record details about each material, for example its look, colour, feel and weight. You could use this as a link into testing materials for properties such as whether they are magnetic or whether they float.
- Ask the students to explore their classroom and find an object made out of each of the categories of materials they used in the gallery. Ask the students to write a report on each object, what it is made out of, what it looks like now and how well it may survive into the future.

## Follow-up activity: Turquoise Serpent

Curriculum links: history, art and design

- Remind the students of the turquoise mosaic they saw in the gallery. Return the sheets they used to draw their picture. Discuss the words they used to describe the serpent.
- Explain that the Aztecs used a variety of material in their mosaics. Provide the students with an outline of the serpent or ask them to draw their own mosaic outline. Give the students a mixture of natural and artificial materials to decorate their mosaic.

## Follow-up activity: Aztec Gods

Curriculum links: history, literacy

- Redistribute the gallery activities. Ask the students if there was a god or goddess that they found hard to find. Do they remember what types of objects the gods were depicted on?
- Write a list of the gods from the sheet on the whiteboard. Add any extra gods to the list that you would like the students to learn about. Ask individuals or groups to research the gods. They can record their observations as notes or sketches. When they have finished ask students to present their findings to the class.