NO PREP

Aztec Daily Life

Markets, Schools, and Chocolate

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Aztec Daily Life: Markets, Schools, and Chocolate

Life Beyond the Pyramids

When most people think of the Aztec, they think of pyramids, sacrifice, and conquest. The archaeology of daily life tells a different and equally fascinating story. Tenochtitlan was not just a ceremonial capital — it was a living, breathing city of hundreds of thousands of people who woke up, went to work, raised children, argued with neighbors, and navigated a complex social world with its own rules, hierarchies, and pleasures. Understanding what ordinary Aztec life looked like requires moving past the monuments to examine the more fragile, perishable evidence of everyday existence: food remains, household objects, school records, and market inventories. The Aztec social structure was organized into two broad classes: the pipiltin, or nobility,

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The Calmecac and Telpochcalli: Two Kinds of School

Aztec education was divided into two parallel systems. The calmecac was attached to temples and educated the children of the nobility and those destined for the priesthood. Students there learned reading and writing (in the Nahuatl pictographic script), astronomy, religion, law, and the calendar. Training was rigorous and included physical hardship, fasting, and extended periods of ritual practice. The calmecac produced the administrators, priests, and military leaders who ran the empire. The telpochcalli, or 'house of youth,' educated commoner boys in practical skills including

warfare, agriculture, and community service. Girls attended separate schools where they learned weaving, cooking, religious ritual, and household management. The education system also included a third, more informal institution: the cuicacalli, or 'house of song,' where young people of both classes learned music, dance, and oral history. These schools were not optional. Parents who failed to enroll their children could face penalties from the state. Archaeological evidence for these institutions is largely indirect: references in codices (the pictographic books the Aztec produced), Spanish descriptions written after the conquest, and occasional architectural remains. The telpochcalli in particular may have left physical traces in residential districts of Tenochtitlan that have not yet been fully identified beneath Mexico City.

The Market at Tlatelolco

If Tenochtitlan had a heart, it was the Templo Mayor. But if it had a circulatory system, it was the great market at Tlatelolco, the neighboring island city that was absorbed into the Aztec capital in 1473. Spanish accounts describe a market so large that Cortes himself claimed it was twice the size of the market in Salamanca, Spain, and Salamanca was a major city. Bernal Diaz del Castillo described sellers organized by commodity: one section for gold and silver jewelry, another for textiles, another for slaves, another for medicine, another for freshly cooked food. He counted specific stalls for pepper, tobacco, dogs for eating, eagles and other birds for sacrificial use, timber, tiles, and pottery. Archaeological evidence from Tlatelolco corroborates this diversity. Excavations have recovered obsidian tools from Teotihuacan and the Pachuca region, pottery from distant provinces, marine shells from both coasts, cacao residues, and the carbonized remains of diverse food plants. The market was not just a local exchange but an imperial clearing house through which tribute goods from across Mesoamerica moved. A dedicated judicial presence, market judges who heard disputes and imposed penalties, helped maintain order.

Cacao: Currency, Drink, and Status Symbol

Cacao — the source of modern chocolate — was one of the most culturally significant commodities in Aztec society, and archaeology has confirmed its central role. Cacao beans served as a form of currency: historical accounts describe paying for goods with a set number of beans, and legal documents mention fines assessed in cacao.

Chemical analysis of pottery vessels from elite contexts in Tenochtitlan and throughout the Aztec realm has detected theobromine — the signature chemical of cacao — confirming that cacao beverages were consumed in ceremonial and elite contexts. The Aztec cacao drink (chocolatl) was nothing like modern hot chocolate. It was prepared cold or at room temperature, often combined with chili peppers, vanilla, and achiote (a red dye plant), and described as bitter and spicy. It was consumed from elaborately decorated cylindrical vessels that were often poured from one container to another to create a frothy head. Access to cacao was a marker of status: commoners could drink it in limited quantities, but the finest preparations were reserved for nobility, warriors, and religious ceremonies. When cacao reached Europe through Spanish traders, it was sweetened with sugar and became the foundation of the modern chocolate industry — a direct result of the Aztec trade system.

Gender, Clothing, and Social Rules

Aztec society had elaborate sumptuary laws — legal regulations governing who could wear what, based on social rank. The type of cloak (tilmatli) a man wore, the length and embroidery of a woman's blouse, the materials used in jewelry — all of these were legally defined by class. Wearing cotton was a privilege of the nobility; commoners wore clothing of maguey fiber. Feathers from specific birds were reserved for elites and warriors. Archaeological finds of spindle whorls (used in weaving), textile fragments, and jewelry across domestic contexts give us material evidence for this complex dress code in practice. Women's lives varied enormously by class. Noble women managed large estates and could own property independently. Commoner women were central to the household economy through weaving — cloth was itself a form of currency and tribute commodity — and to the market economy as traders. Archaeological evidence from domestic contexts in the Tlatelolco area includes spindle whorls, bone needles, and ceramic storage vessels in patterns consistent with intensive home textile production.

Key Information: Aztec Daily Life

Aspect	Details
Social Classes	Pipiltin (nobility), macehualtin (commoners), mayeque (rural laborers), tlactin (enslaved people)

Aspect	Details
Education — Noble	Calmecac: attached to temples; taught astronomy, law, writing, religion, calendar
Education — Commoner	Telpochcalli: taught warfare, agriculture, community service; mandatory for all boys
Education — Girls	Separate schools; weaving, cooking, household management, religious ritual
Tlatelolco Market	Largest market in the Americas; goods organized by commodity with market judges
Cacao as Currency	Cacao beans used for small transactions; confirmed by chemical analysis of pottery
Cacao Drink	Bitter, cold or room temp, mixed with chili and vanilla; status marker
Sumptuary Laws	Legal dress codes based on social rank; cotton restricted to nobility
Key Textile Evidence	Spindle whorls, bone needles, textile fragments from domestic excavations
Archaeology Challenge	Most daily life evidence is perishable; survives mainly in refuse deposits and middens

Case Study: Xochitl at the Market

Xochitl is seventeen and has been coming to the Tlatelolco market with her mother since she was small enough to be carried on her back. Today she is here alone for the first time, with a bundle of cotton cloth her mother wove over the past three weeks and a list of what they need: dried chili, a new metate (grinding stone), and if the price is fair, a small amount of cacao beans — enough for a single festival cup, which her mother has been promising her father since the maize harvest. The market is almost unbearably loud and crowded. Xochitl knows to go to the textile section first, where the cloth can be evaluated by the professional traders who specialize in exactly this kind of exchange. She is nervous. Her mother told her the cloth is worth twelve cacao beans or equivalent, and not to take less than ten. A trader examines the weave for longer than Xochitl is comfortable with, running it through his fingers, checking the evenness of the thread. 'Eight,' he says. 'My mother's work is better than eight,' Xochitl says, in a voice steadier than she feels. He looks at her for a moment and says eleven. She takes it. Walking away with the cacao beans in a pouch at her belt, she thinks she probably could have gotten twelve.

1. What does Xochitl's experience reveal about the economic role of women — specifically commoner women — in Aztec society? Use evidence from both the case study and the reading to support your answer.

2. The reading describes cacao as both a currency and a status symbol. How does this dual role show up in Xochitl's story, and what does it suggest about how economic systems and social hierarchy were intertwined in Aztec life?

Multiple Choice

1. What made the Aztec education system unusual compared to most societies of its time?

a) Education was optional but strongly encouraged by priests and by community leaders

b) Boys and girls attended the same schools with identical curriculum

c) Only the nobility were required to attend formal schools

d) All children regardless of class or gender were legally required to attend school

2. How has archaeology confirmed cacao's importance in Aztec society?

a) Large cacao plantations have been found inside the borders of Tenochtitlan

b) Chemical analysis of pottery has detected theobromine in vessels from elite contexts

c) Written Aztec codices describe cacao as the most important crop in the empire

d) Cacao seeds have been found in the burial chambers of every known Aztec ruler in Mexico

3. What were sumptuary laws, and why did the Aztec state enforce them?

a) Rules limiting how much property commoners could own without noble permission

b) Restrictions on which religious ceremonies different social classes could attend

c) Laws regulating how food was prepared and shared at public markets

d) Legal regulations governing clothing and jewelry based on social rank

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Calmecac	A) A 'house of youth' school for commoner boys teaching warfare, agriculture, and community service
2. ___ Telpochcalli	B) The commoner class that made up the vast majority of the Aztec population
3. ___ Macehualtin	C) A temple-attached school for noble children teaching astronomy, law, writing, and religion
4. ___ Sumptuary laws	D) The chemical signature of cacao, detected in archaeological pottery by modern analysis
5. ___ Theobromine	E) Legal regulations governing what people of different social ranks could wear or use

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The great market at _____ was described by Cortes as twice the size of the market in Salamanca, Spain, and organized sellers by commodity with dedicated market judges.

2. In Aztec society, wearing _____ cloth was a legal privilege restricted to the nobility; commoners were required to wear clothing made from maguey fiber.

3. The Aztec cacao drink called chocolatl was nothing like modern hot chocolate — it was prepared cold or at room temperature and often combined with chili peppers and _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Describe the two main types of Aztec schools and explain what each was designed to produce for Aztec society.

2. The reading calls cloth 'a form of currency and tribute commodity.' What does this tell us about the relationship between women's household labor and the larger Aztec political economy?

3. Why is the archaeology of Aztec daily life particularly challenging, and what kinds of evidence do archaeologists rely on most to reconstruct ordinary life in Tenochtitlan?