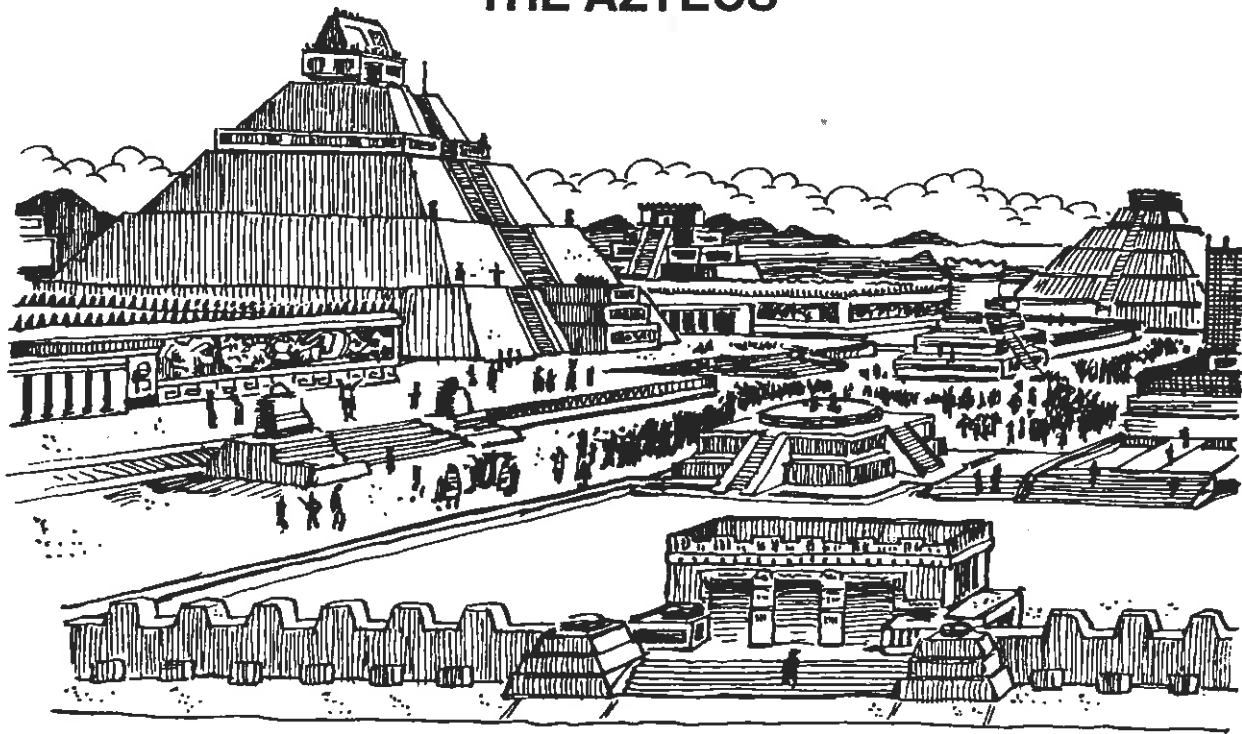


THE AZTECS



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 Aztlán, 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.

AZTEC DAILY LIFE

Huetzin woke up an hour before the Sun appeared. He rolled his sleeping mat into a small bundle and put it into the corner of the room. He was still sleepy as he went into the small steam bath attached to his house. He threw some water onto the hot rocks to make the steam. As the steam subsided, he went outside and dove into the canal that ran along beside the house. He shivered at the cold water of the canal. Now he was fully awake.



Aztec women baked cornmeal pancakes (tortillas) twice a day in the kitchen areas of their houses.

A small house made of adobe brick was home to Huetzin. The house had a roof made of thatched straw. Aztec homes had little furniture. They used woven straw mats that were placed on the dirt floors instead of beds and chairs. The only pieces of furniture Huetzin's family owned were a few wooden chests to hold valuables and kitchen utensils.

Some of the houses were large because many family members lived together. Households included the husband and wife and their unmarried children, as well as other relatives of the husband. The rooms of the house surrounded a patio. The kitchen and eating area was the largest room in the house. The fire was in the middle of the room. Each morning Huetzin's mother would rekindle the fire and begin her chores of preparing the family's food for the day. She packed a special lunch for Huetzin and his father to eat at the workshop. Huetzin had a pouch filled with food just like the one his father carried. Huetzin carried his own lunch to the workshop. Aztecs expected the children to share in all of the work.

Most of Huetzin's relatives were farmers in the nearby fields, but his father was a craftsman. His father carved jade and other precious stones into small decorations. Every day Huetzin would go to the workshop with his father. His father taught him many things. He learned how to hunt and fish as well as how to use the tools to create beautiful objects to be sold in the market. He also learned the stories of his ancestors from his father.

Huetzin looked forward to his next birthday. Then he could attend the Telpuchcalli. This was a school sponsored by his family's tribe. Both boys and girls attended the Aztec schools. Training at the school included lessons in citizenship, history and tradition, religious ceremonies, and arts and crafts. In addition to these classes, the boys learned about methods of warfare. The girls learned singing and dancing skills. Some students also went to the Calmecac, which was a special school to train priests.

All of the children helped with the household chores. Huetzin's sisters remained at home with their mother. The girls learned cooking, spinning cotton, weaving, and other household skills. The women of the household prepared the meals and made the clothing for the family.

Huetzin and his family wore cotton clothes with some decoration sewn on. His family was wealthy enough to afford cotton. The poorer Aztecs wore cloth made of fibers of the

maguey plant. Decoration on clothing indicated the wealth and social rank of the person. Members of the upper class wore colorful and highly embroidered clothing.

Men wore a loincloth wrapped around their hips. Some men also wore cloaks tied over one shoulder. Aztec women wore loose, sleeveless blouses and wraparound skirts. People went barefoot most of the time, but some wore sandals made of leather or woven maguey fibers.

All day, Huetzin helped his father at the workshop. He looked forward to the time when he would be a master stone carver and work alongside his father. He and his father ate lunch with the others at the workshop. That afternoon Huetzin went to the marketplace and helped sell the carvings that had been made during the week.

Huetzin and his father returned home just before sunset. They washed in the canal and then joined the rest of the family for supper. The women served the meal to the men of the household and then ate their own meals separately.

The Aztecs had a variety of food available. Members of the family brought maize (corn), beans, squash, chili peppers, and tomatoes from the fields. The men hunted to provide deer, rabbits, ducks, and geese. The Aztecs raised dogs and turkeys for additional meat.

Corn was the main part of the Aztec diet. Twice daily, the women baked the cornmeal pancake, which the Spanish later called a tortilla. The Aztecs filled the tortillas with other foods much like our tamales and tacos today.

The Aztecs did not have cattle or pigs so they had little fat in their diets. The food was baked or boiled. Since they used many peppers in their cooking, the food was often spicy and hot.

Two special treats at the end of the meal might include chicle-zapoil or chocolate. Chicle came from a gum tree and is the basis for modern-day chewing gum. Chocolate was processed from the cacao bean. It was a delicacy and not served often. Many times the Aztecs flavored their chocolate with vanilla and other spices.

After the meal, all members of the family worked on various chores. Huetzin's father mended tools for tomorrow's work. His uncle repaired a broken planting stick. The women continued working at their looms.

This was Huetzin's favorite part of the day. As they worked in the dim glow of the fire, Huetzin listened to his grandfather tell stories of battles of the old days. Grandfather seemed to like the old days. Huetzin knew many of the stories by heart, but he enjoyed hearing his grandfather tell them again.

Soon it was time for Huetzin to go to bed. He went to his room and unrolled his sleeping mat. He was tired from his busy day, and it was not long before he fell asleep.

AZTEC SOCIETY

The clan was the basis of all Aztec society and government. Each person was a member of an extended family. The extended family included grandparents, aunts, and uncles, as well as parents, brothers, and sisters. Groups of the extended families joined to form clans. Twenty clans combined to form a tribe.

Calpolli was the Aztec word for a clan. *Calpolli* came from the Aztec word *calli*, which meant "house." Although some nobles owned their own land, the *calpolli* owned most of the land. The clan divided its land among the families.

Each *calpolli* elected its own officers to run its business. The *calpolli* was a true democracy. Most of the important decisions were made by popular vote. Aztec women did not have the right to vote, however.

Aztec tribes met together often to take care of common needs. Each tribe chose a leader to be in the council. The members of the council then chose one of the leaders to be its chief. The chief was in charge of civil and religious affairs. The council enforced the laws of the clan. They also punished wrong doers. The council elected a second chief to be in charge of war matters.

The *calpolli* expected all of its able-bodied men to fight in any wars. The men considered it an honor in addition to a duty to fight for their clan.

All aspects of its members' lives were governed by the *calpolli*. At the birth of a child, the parents consulted the *calpolli*'s priest. The priest looked in the book of fate to see if the birth date was lucky. Four days later, the family held a feast to celebrate the birth and give the child a name. During the celebrations, family members showed weapons and tools to baby boys. They showed weaving items and musical instruments to the baby girls.

The Aztecs taught the children in their homes. They taught the boys methods of hunting and fishing or crafts. The women taught the girls spinning, weaving, cooking, and other household duties. At about age 13, the children went to schools operated by their clans. There, the boys learned about weapons and methods of war and the girls learned additional homemaking skills as well as music and dance.

The family arranged for all marriages. The boy and girl involved usually gave their consent to be married. A young person could only marry someone outside the clan. During the wedding ceremonies, the priest tied the cloaks of the bride and groom together. This was a symbol of the joining together of the two. The bride then became a member of her husband's clan.



At age 13, Aztec children began attending the *Telpuchcalli*, a school operated by the clan.

THE CITY OF TENOCHTITLAN

The greatest city of the Aztecs was Tenochtitlan. The early settlers built the village on an island in Lake Texcoco. They chose the island since the lake protected them against attacks from the mainland.

A twin village, Tlaltelolco, was on another island to the north. The natives soon built a bridge between the two villages, but the two villages then became rivals.

After a short battle, Tenochtitlan defeated and absorbed Tlaltelolco.

As the villages grew into a city, the people needed more land. They dug mud from the lake bottom and piled it into mounds. The city became criss-crossed by canals. Tenochtitlan reminded the Europeans of Venice. The canals became the major streets of the city. Soon three large earthen causeways linked the city to the mainland. These causeways became the major entrances into the city. The three causeways joined at the great plaza in the center of the city.

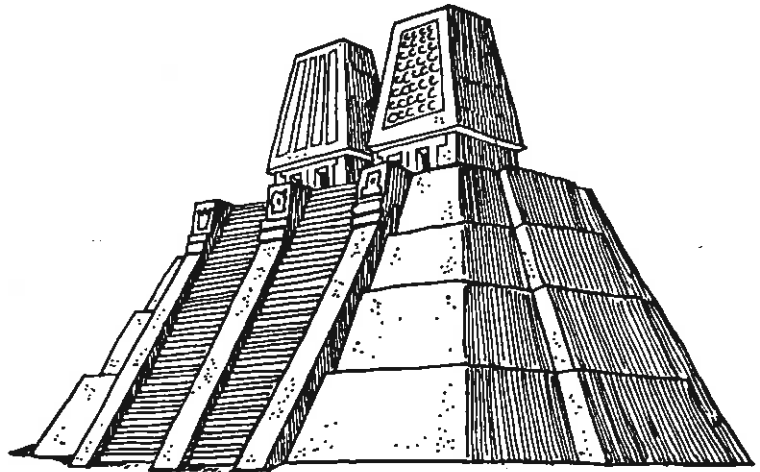
Tenochtitlan had four major units. These units had a total of 20 sections. Each clan had its own section of the city that contained the houses and gardens of the clan members. Each clan also had its own temple and school.

The great plaza was in the center of the city. It measured 520 by 600 feet and had over 60 buildings. The most impressive structure in the plaza was the pyramid and double temple to the gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. It was over 200 feet tall.

Four other temples and the sacred ball court were built in the great plaza. Other buildings in the plaza included the home of the priest, the house of a military unit, and the great palace of the ruler Montezuma. A large market place and the now-famous calendar stone were also in the great plaza.

The Spanish first arrived in Tenochtitlan in November 1519. Hernando Cortés led the Spanish invaders. Tenochtitlan amazed them when they entered. One of the men wrote that he thought what he saw was a dream. The population of the city when the Spanish arrived is estimated at between 200,000 and 300,000 people. It was larger than any city in Europe at the time.

Cortés and his men soon defeated the Aztecs, and Tenochtitlan became a Spanish city. It continued to change after the Spanish conquest. In the 1600s the Spanish drained the lake. Today Mexico's capital, Mexico City, lies on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. The Mexican president's palace is on the location that was once Montezuma's palace.



The great pyramid and double temple to the gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc was the most impressive structure in the plaza of Tenochtitlan.

THE AZTEC CALENDAR

The Aztecs, like the Mayas and ancient Egyptians, used two different calendars. The first calendar was similar to the one created by the Mayas and handed down through the ages. It was a lunar calendar based on the phases of the Moon. The lunar calendar had 260 days. The Aztecs divided their calendar into 13 months, each having 20 days. They thought this calendar was magical. The priests used the lunar calendar to decide which days would be used for religious ceremonies and rituals. Priests also used this calendar to decide which days were lucky and should be used for important activities such as planting crops or going into battle.



The image of the Sun god Tonatiuh is carved in the center of the Aztec calendar stone. Others carvings represent the Aztec days and religious symbols.

A number of dots represented the months, and each of the 20 days had a name. Each of the days also had a hieroglyph (picture word). The days' names and their hieroglyphs are shown below:



Cipactli
Crocodile



Ehecatl
Wind



Calli
House



Cuetzpallin
Lizard



Coatli
Serpent



Miquiztli
Death's-head



Mazatl
Deer



Tochtli
Rabbit



Atl
Water



Itzcuintli
Dog



Ozomatli
Monkey



Malinalli
Grass



Acatl
Reed



Ocelotl
Ocelot



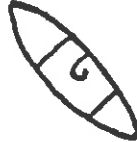
Cuauhtli
Eagle



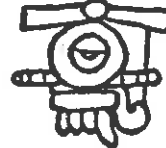
Cozcaquauhtli
Vulture



Ollin
Motion



Tecpatl
Flint Knife



Quiauhtl
Rain



Xochitl
Flower

Our New Year's day would have appeared on the Aztec calendar as:



(one dot = first month crocodile = first day)

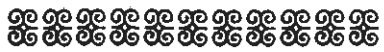
The Aztecs established their second calendar on the movement of the Sun. Similar to our calendar today, it had 365 days based on the time it took the earth to orbit the Sun. They divided their solar calendar into 18 months each containing 20 days. The extra five days were "nothing" days added to the end of each year. The Aztecs thought these five days were unlucky, so they did not give them names. The Aztec stopped all activities during the five "nothing" days. At the end of the five days, they gave a sacrificial victim in tribute to the gods.

Our calendar has centuries using 100-year divisions. Both of the Aztec calendars used 52-year divisions. The Aztecs had a major celebration at the start of each new 52-year cycle. Part of the celebration included the New Fire Ceremony. The priests extinguished the temple's altar fires, and the citizens let their household fires go out. At midnight of the new era, the priest would light a fire on the chest of a sacrificial victim. The people would then light a fire stick from the altar fire and use it to light their home fires.

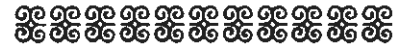
One of the important artifacts from the Aztecs is the famous calendar stone. Discovered in 1790, the stone is about 12 feet in diameter and weights 20 tons. In the center of the stone is an image of the Sun god Tonatiuh. Other carvings on the stone represent the Aztec days and religious symbols. Aztec priests may have placed the hearts of sacrificial victims on the stone's center during religious ceremonies.

Stone of the Sun

Aztec



Historical Aid



One of the most important Aztec objects that has survived is the very elaborately carved *Calendar Stone* or *Stone of the Sun*. This massive, circular stone sculpture was discovered in 1790 beneath Mexico City's central square. It is four feet (1.22 m) thick, 13 feet (4 m) in diameter and weighs more than 24 tons (21.7 metric tons)!

The stone is edged with symbols for the 20 days of the Aztec calendar. In the center is the face of the sun god Tonatiuh with a protruding knife blade for a tongue. Other carvings on the stone are religious symbols related to the worship of this powerful god.

This stone was not just a calendar. It told when the world was supposed to have begun and when it would end. The Aztecs believed they were living in the fifth and final era. They believed that the four previous worlds had been destroyed by jaguars, hurricanes, volcanic fires, and torrential rains. The Aztec world ended far sooner than expected—with the arrival of the Spanish in 1519.

Project

- Study the beautifully detailed carvings of the Stone of the Sun while coloring the designs.
- Get a feel for its size with a measuring activity.

Materials

- Pattern page, following
- Colored pencils
- Tape measure

Directions

1. Reproduce the pattern to be used as a coloring page.
2. Try to identify the symbols for the Aztec months.
3. Look near the center of the stone. Try to identify the jaguars, hurricanes, fires, and rains—the destroyers of the earlier worlds.



How Big is Big?

1. Measure your height and the height of some friends. How many of you could lay end to end across the Stone of the Sun? Lay on the ground to demonstrate the size of this massive sculpture.
2. How much is 24 tons (21.8 metric tons)? If the average family car weighs about 4,000 pounds (1,814 kg), figure out how many cars you would need to equal the weight of the The Stone of the Sun.

AZTEC AGRICULTURE

Aztec methods of farming were similar to those of the Mayan and Incan tribes. The Aztecs used a pointed stick to plant the crops. One person would make a hole in the ground with the stick. Another person would put the seeds in the hole and then cover the seeds with soil. The Aztecs never invented a plow to turn the earth.

The slash and burn method of agriculture was used by the Aztecs.

They chopped down forest areas and left the trees and brush to dry in the heat of the Sun for many days. The farmers then burned the areas to clear them. The ashes of the burnt trees provided fertilizer. The farmers then planted the new crops in the clearings.

Chinampas were the most interesting development of Aztec agriculture. *Chinampas* were small islands formed in lake and swamp areas. The farmers made them by digging the mud at the bottom of the lake or swamp and piling it into little mounds or islands. The Aztecs then planted crops and gardens on the *chinampas*. They are sometimes called floating gardens even though they did not really float.

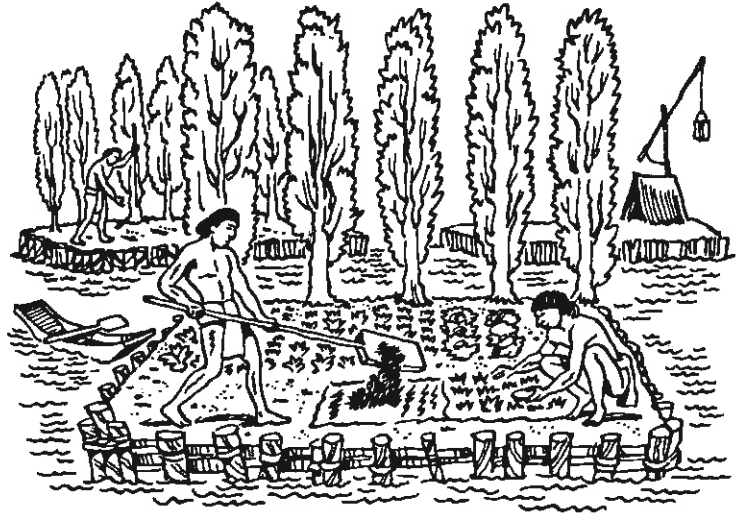
The Aztec farmers also cut terraces into hillsides to create more farm land. They made many canals to help carry water to the fields.

Corn, called maize by the Indians, was the main crop. The Aztec farmers also grew avocados, as well as many varieties of beans, squash, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes. Different crops came from the lowlands. Major lowland crops included cotton, papayas, rubber, and cacao beans, from which chocolate is made.

After the harvest, farmers brought the crops to the marketplace in the nearest city. The Aztecs did not use animals or wheeled vehicles to move crops. The men carried everything to the market on their backs. In some of the distant villages, farmers used dugout canoes to move crops over rivers and canals.

The market was in the center of each town. Some of the markets were very large. The market in the city of Tlatelolco was the largest. The Spaniard Hernando Cortés wrote that over 60,000 persons visited the market each day.

The Aztecs, like other Indian tribes, did not use money. They used a barter system. Barter is trading objects rather than buying and selling them. The markets contained many other things for barter. Other items traded included weapons, animals, household goods, rare colorful feathers, and even slaves.



The Aztecs created more farmland by forming small islands called *chinampas* in swamps and lakes.

AZTEC MEDICINE

Ancient Aztec medicine was a combination of religion, belief in magical powers, and the use of plants and herbs to make medicine. The Aztecs believed that illness had one of three causes. They believed that some illnesses were punishments sent from an angry god or goddess. They also thought that an enemy could use



Aztec doctors made medicines out of plants, roots, herbs, and barks.

black magic to cause an illness. The third source of an illness might be from natural causes.

Aztecs practiced magic to avoid illnesses. They often wore amulets as protection. An amulet is a good luck charm. It is a small ornament worn to keep away harm and evil.

The priests often tended the sick. If the illness was serious, the *ticitl* was called in. The *ticitl* was a "cure doctor" or a "shaman." The *ticitl* rubbed the body of the patient to remove the "magic dart." The magic dart was an object that they believed entered the body and caused the illness.

Aztec doctors also used plants, roots, herbs, and barks to make medicines. Most of the plants and herbs used were sacred to the rain god Tlaloc. The two plants used most often were *yauhtli* and *iztauhyatl*. They used both plants to cure fevers, epilepsy, stiffness, swelling, colds, and coughs. The Aztecs also believed the plants had magical powers to cure love sickness.

The doctors used the plants and herbs in many ways. They often rubbed parts of the plants on the skin to relieve aches and pains. Sometimes the doctor had patients inhale the fragrance of a plant or smoke from the burning plant. Often the doctors ground dried plants or combined them with liquids into medicines. Another favorite source of medicine was the sap from the maguey plant. They used the sap in the treatment of battle wounds and other injuries.

Ticitl were also skilled surgeons. They used knives made of volcanic glass to perform surgery. After doctors cut out a tumor, they covered the wound with crushed plants to speed its healing.

The Spanish invaders studied Indian medicine. Between 1547 and 1585, Bernardino de Sahagún wrote about Aztec medicine. Indian doctors treated Hernando Cortés' wounds after a battle. Cortés later wrote to King Charles V of Spain that the Indian doctors were just as good as the Spanish doctors.