



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## The Aztecs: A Pre-Columbian History

Guide for Curriculum Unit 99.02.01  
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This synopsis outlines the curriculum unit contents that will provide a series of lessons for a High School World Ancient Cultures course or for Spanish Level I, II, III and IV courses. It is my intention to provide a short history of the Aztecs prior to the Spanish conquest, an insight into their culture and religion, and a graphic interpretation of the "calendar stone" (La Piedra del Sol) as a final class project.

The Aztecs of ancient Mexico are generally the most widely known of all pre-Columbian peoples of the Americas. The dramatic and heroic story of their conquest and eventual destruction at the hands of the Spanish *Conquistadores* and the rediscovery in 1790 of the *Piedra del Sol*, the Sun Stone or Aztec Calendar, are known throughout the world. In 1978, when municipal workers laying underground electrical cable near the Cathedral in the center of Mexico City discovered the ruins of the *Templo Mayor*, the Great Temple, the recovery of a huge stone portrait of *Coyolxauhqui*, the rebellious sister of *Huitzilopochtli*, ignited a serious interest in Mexican archeology and the study of Mesoamerica history. Hidden under the soft soil of the capital city was a prodigious record of the sophisticated Aztec culture written in the blood-soaked stones.

Let us use the H.G.Wells Time Machine to visit Tenochtitlán, the Place of the Cactus, once the capital city of the Aztecs, now the heart of Mexico City. It was in its time one of the largest urban areas in the world. The end result of a long migration of the Mexica tribe, as the Aztecs were called then, the city was founded on a marshy island in Lake Texcoco in 1325. Eventually the entire area was to become known as the Valley of the Mexica, or Mexico. From here on, let us agree that Mexica will refer to the ruling tribe in Tenochtitlán, and the Aztec will be the generic term for the period and population under their rule. The Aztecs and the Mexica also spoke closely related languages. The students in this curriculum unit will be introduced to certain rules of pronunciation related to the Aztec language, Nahuatl, in order not to offend the gods and any living Aztec.

Of religion, one can say that the Mexica implanted firmly their war deity as the chief god of their trading empire, but also honored the various gods and goddesses of the subject cities and temples to many deities were raised in Tenochtitlán.

The Aztec Calendar (Piedra del Sol) is a massive disk of carved basalt, three feet thick and 12 feet in diameter, weighing some 24 metric tons. A veritable monument to art and science, the monolith is the depiction of the great and venerable cosmology of the Aztec universe. Students will produce a model of the *Piedra del Sol* as a final class project to be displayed inside the classrooms or on their school's interior walls.

(Recommended for World Cultures and Spanish I-IV, grades 9-12.)

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