

25.2 Class Structure

Aztec society was divided into five main social classes. At the top of the class structure were the ruler and his family. Next came a noble class of government officials, priests, and high-ranking warriors. The third and largest class was made up of commoners, citizens who were not of noble rank. Below the commoners were the peasants, who were neither slaves nor citizens. At the bottom of the class structure were the slaves.

Each class had its own privileges and responsibilities. However, an Aztec's status was not fixed. Commoners could move up in social class by performing brave deeds in war or by studying to be priests. And a noble could fall in rank if he failed to live up to his responsibilities. Let's look at the role of each class, beginning with the ruler and his family.

The Ruler The Aztec ruler, or emperor, was considered **semi-divine**. Called *tlatoani*, or "he who speaks," the emperor maintained the empire and decided when to wage war.

The position of ruler was not **hereditary**, as it was in many other societies. When an emperor died, his son did not automatically become ruler. Instead, a group of advisors chose the new ruler from the emperor's family. Each new ruler was expected to acquire new possessions of his own. This was an important motive for constant warfare.

Government Officials, Priests, and Military Leaders

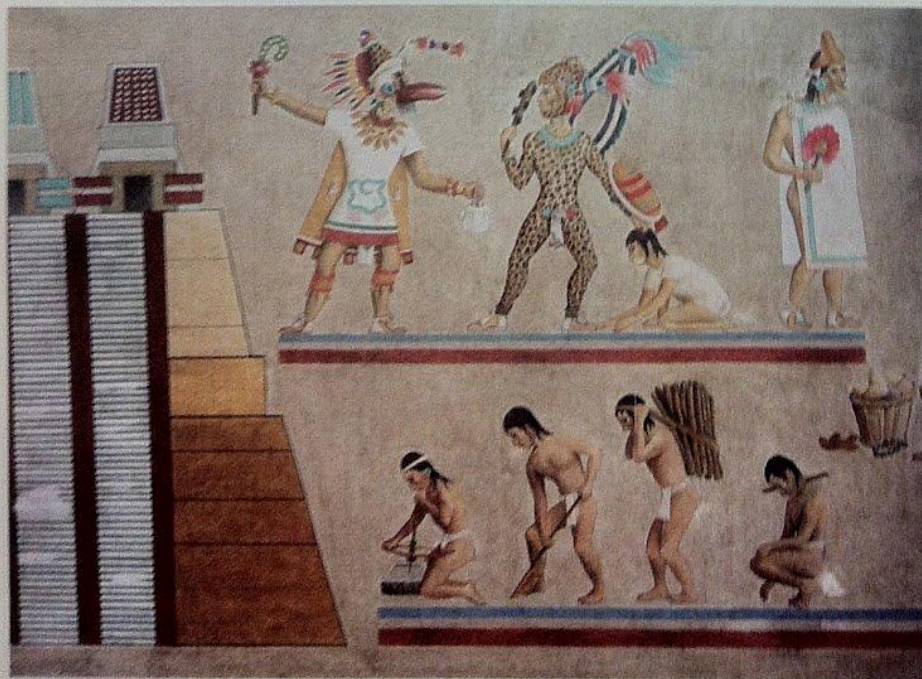
The emperor was supported by a noble class of government officials, priests, and military leaders. Officials in Tenochtitlan counseled the emperor, worked as judges, and governed the city's four districts. Other nobles throughout the empire ruled cities, collected tribute (payments), or erected public buildings and roads.

The emperor appointed government officials for life. Noble status was not hereditary, but most sons of nobles earned high offices themselves.

Priests conducted all religious rites and served individual gods. Some priests ran the schools that trained boys for government jobs and the priesthood. Other priests studied the skies and made predictions about the future. Generally only nobles became priests, but sometimes an Aztec from lower classes rose this high. Girls could become priestesses.

semidivine more than human but not fully a god
hereditary passed on from parent to child; inherited

This artwork shows people from various classes of Aztec society. Use the information from the text and visual clues in the image to try to identify which group in the Aztec class structure each figure represents.



Commoners could also rise to become military leaders. All Aztec men were trained to be soldiers, and a common soldier could become a leader by capturing enemies in battle. Military leaders commanded groups of soldiers and took part in war councils.

Commoners The broad class of commoners included several smaller classes. The highest-ranking commoners were professional traders called *pochteca*. The *pochteca* led caravans to distant lands to acquire exotic goods. Some also served as spies for the emperor, reporting what type of tribute a city could provide.

The *pochteca* had their own god and lived in a separate section of Tenochtitlan. They paid taxes with rare goods. They enjoyed many privileges. For example, they could own land and send their children to the nobles' schools. Unlike noble status, membership in this class was hereditary.

Below the *pochteca* came craftspeople and artisans, like potters, jewelers, and painters. Some worked in their homes and traded their goods at the market. Others worked in the royal palace and made items specially for the emperor.

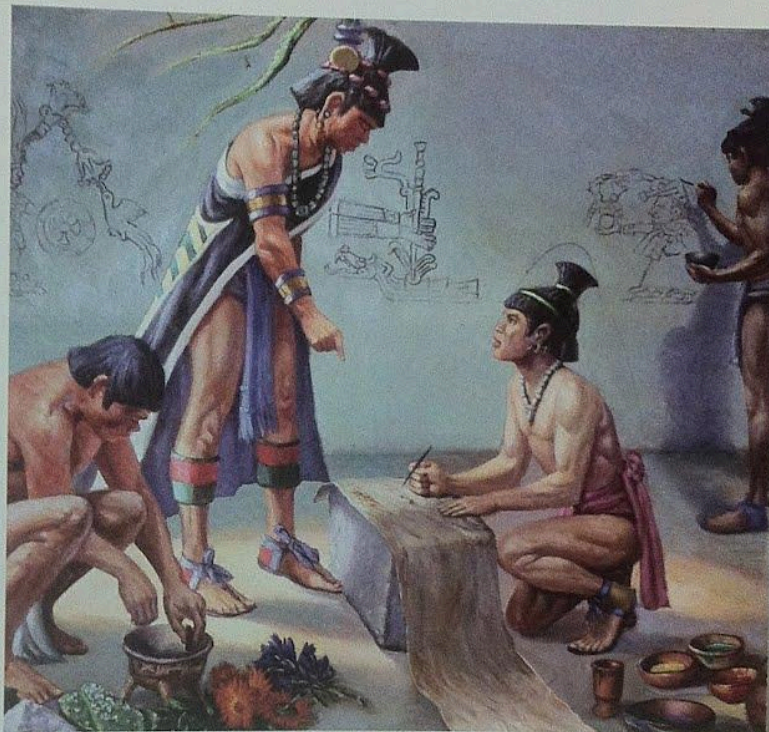
Most commoners worked as farmers, fishers, laborers, and servants. Instead of owning land, they were loaned plots of land for homes and farms by their *calpulli*, or **ward**. All commoners paid tribute to the nobility in the form of crops, labor, or manufactured goods.

Peasants About 30 percent of the Aztec people were peasants. Unlike slaves, people in this class were free, but they were considered inferior to commoners. Peasants did not belong to a *calpulli* and were not loaned land to farm. Instead, they hired out their services to nobles.

Slaves At the bottom of Aztec society were the slaves. Prisoners of war, lawbreakers, or debtors might be forced into slavery. Unlike slaves in many societies, Aztec slaves had a number of rights. They could own property, goods, and even other slaves. In addition, slaves did not pass their status on to their children, who were born free. In fact, the mother of the emperor Itzcoatl was a slave. Many slaves gained their own freedom after working off a debt, upon completing their term of punishment for a crime, or when their masters died.

Now let's look at what daily life was like for the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan, beginning with marriage customs. We'll focus mostly on the majority of Aztecs, the commoners.

Aztec painters created beautiful murals for emperors and other high-ranking Aztec officials.



ward a neighborhood that is a political unit within a city