Crime and Punishment

Laws in the Aztec Empire were based on religious beliefs. They governed every aspect of a person’s life: business, marriage, family, and personal behavior. Because most people were trying to lead good lives and please the gods, crime was not a big problem. When someone did commit a crime, it was considered fate (inevitable, predestined by the gods), so the punishment was also seen as part of the gods’ plans, and not as cruelty.

In local villages, groups of elders met to settle arguments. Serious legal disagreements were settled in courts with elected judges. This illustration shows the king, his judges, and people petitioning the court. When the courts decided someone was guilty, the punishment was carried out that same or the next day. If a trader was selling poorly made goods, the goods were taken away and destroyed. If a person stole something, he had to pay back three times the price or become a slave for a time. Many crimes, such as repeated stealing, adultery, and public drunkenness by young men or any women, were punished with the death sentence. (After the age of 70, however, men and women were allowed to be drunk and not punished as long as they had given the empire children and grandchildren.)

There were no jails, only cages in which people waited to be put to death. Depending on the crime, death could be by drowning, or by being skinned alive. No criminals were to be used in a human sacrifice, because this might displease the gods. For warriors who ran away from battle, or for women who were unfaithful to their husbands, death was by drowning in the swamps, and the individuals lost the right to be buried or cremated.

Discussion Question: What were some crimes and their punishments in the Aztec Empire?
Sacrifices

Aztecs were known as “the people of the sun.” They believed that their gods threw themselves into the sun at the beginning of time to fuel its fire and keep it burning. They knew the earth would continue to exist only if the sun continued to rise each day. Aztecs believed the sun needed to be given “precious water”—blood from sacrifice of animals and humans—to be reborn daily. People who were sacrificed helped keep the world alive, they thought.

To be sacrificed was to become like the gods; in fact, the person to be sacrificed was often dressed to resemble the god being worshipped. Aztecs believed that they honored the sacrificial victim by recreating the god’s death, by making this man or woman a messenger to the gods. No cruelty or hatred was meant toward them by the priests who carried out the sacrifices. However, in practice, priests often used slaves and prisoners of war to be sacrificial victims.

The Aztec religion had many different holy days and specific rituals for each day. Some rituals included sacrifice; others did not. For example, in some rituals, the king and priests pierced their skin with cactus spikes and offered their own blood to the gods. When a human was to be sacrificed, the method of death depended on the god being worshipped that day. A victim could be drowned, beheaded, given a pain-killing drug and then burned, or shot with arrows and then skinned. In this illustration, a man is being held down while his heart is cut out. After the sacrifice, the priests cannibalized (ate the flesh of) the victim, which was to them like eating the body of their gods. In one year, up to 4,000 human victims—more than 10 a day—could be put to death as sacrifices.

Discussion Question: What was the religious meaning of the Aztecs’ human sacrifices?
Recreation

Aztecs valued a life of hard work. They did not like people to have much free time because they were afraid it would lead people into crime and bad habits. During the little time off they had, Aztecs enjoyed music, ball games, and board games, each of which is illustrated here.

Aztecs made music with flutes, drums, and their voices. To be a musician was a serious occupation—musicians were not supposed to make mistakes or sing off-key, or they could be punished by being put to death. Music was played in the markets, at religious ceremonies, and other celebrations.

*Ollamaliztli,* a game that looked like a combination of soccer and basketball, was played throughout the Aztec Empire. It was the main entertainment for people, and Aztec rulers scheduled games whenever people needed a break from long stretches of work. The court was long and narrow, divided lengthwise, and enclosed with walls that were 11 feet high. High on each side wall a small ring that projected into the court. Teams scored by putting the rubber ball through the ring on their side. Players could touch the ball only with their thighs, knees, and buttocks, as the player in this placard is doing. The ball could not touch their hands, arms, feet, or calves. Players were fast and skillful, and the best players could keep the ball from touching the ground for an hour.

Board games were like today’s backgammon. They were played on the ground in the village square or market. The boards were made of mats with designs drawn in rubber, and beans were used for markers and dice. A crowd often gathered around the players and placed bets on the outcome.

Discussion Question: What were the forms of entertainment among the Aztecs?
Warfare

Aztecs saw war as a way to show the superiority of their way of life and their gods. Through war, the Aztecs extended their empire and became wealthier, showed Aztec power, spread the Aztec religion and way of life, and found prisoners who could be used in religious sacrifices. Because of this, Aztecs honored war and its warriors.

From the age of 12, all Aztec boys received training in how to fight and accompanied older warriors into battles. At the age of 17, an Aztec boy was required to be a warrior for five years at no pay. By fighting in battles, a boy from a peasant family could become an army commander, earning honor and wealth, so many stayed for more than the five required years.

These illustrations shows the progression of a soldier's training and awards. He started out, as did all warriors, with simple clothes, a wood or leather shield, and a club or spear. Because he captured a prisoner, he earned the white feather suit he is wearing in the next picture. As he continues to fight well and capture enemy soldiers, he earns the right to wear more decorated uniforms. An especially brave and talented warrior would earn a jaguar skin uniform, eagle feathers, and a cape with a colorfully decorated border.

Battles started with loud war cries and drumming. Then the first wave of warriors threw their spears and arrows. They were followed by soldiers with clubs and shields engaging in hand-to-hand combat, trying to capture the enemy, not kill him. The battle was over when the local temple was burned, showing that their god was not as powerful as the Aztec gods.

Discussion Question: Why were war and warfare important to the Aztecs?
Education

Aztecs had two kinds of schools: *calmecac* (monasteries), run by priests, for the sons of the nobles; and *telpochcalli*, where the sons of the peasants and merchants were trained to be good warriors and citizens.

Boys in the calmecac were taught to be rulers and high priests. They learned warfare, singing, dancing, religion, citizenship, mathematics, law, writing, astronomy, and medicine. The priests were strict and punished boys who didn't behave by shaving their heads or sticking them with cactus spines, as shown in the illustration. The students learned to be disciplined by fasting (not eating), taking only cold baths, getting up in the middle of the night to pray, and doing menial tasks, such as digging ditches and sweeping floors.

The students in the telpochcalli were taught warfare and how to participate in religious ceremonies by singing and dancing. They were also strictly disciplined and taught to be obedient to the rulers and priests. When they left school, their training was taken over by their fathers, who taught them in the skills they had, as shown in the illustrations of the metal worker and son and painter and son.

Girls were taught at home by their mothers to be skilled in household tasks, such as weaving, cooking, and keeping a clean home. Any child who disobeyed a parent was also harshly punished, such as being held over a fire of burning chilies.

**Discussion Question:** How were Aztec children educated?
Food

The Aztec diet was mostly vegetarian. Corn was the main crop. It was wrapped into corn husks and called *tamales*, ground with water into a nourishing drink, and cooked on a *comal* (a large, flat stone) to make flat bread called *tortillas*. Tortillas were the main food of the Aztec diet, and it was important for young women to learn how to make them, as shown in this illustration.

People went to work in the morning without breakfast. The first meal of the day was eaten at about ten o’clock. For most people, it was a porridge made of corn. Most people drank water with their meals; only the rich could afford to drink chocolate. A little after midday, the second meal of the day was eaten. This was tortillas, beans, and sometimes tamales with a tomato sauce. This was eaten in the fields before an afternoon of work if one was a farmer, or at home before a siesta, if the family were wealthy. Just before bed, there might be one more meal: a corn drink spiced with sage. Only those attending a special banquet or party would have dinner.

In addition to corn, Aztecs ate beans, sweet potatoes, green beans, tomatoes, cactus, red peppers, and chilies. Common fruits were apples, guavas, and cherries. They skimmed a type of algae from the tops of lakes and made it into small cakes to eat. Because meat was rare, Aztecs ate insects, water-fly eggs, and worms for protein. Sometimes they caught frogs, iguanas (giant lizards), and wild birds. A family might raise turkeys or dogs for meat, too. Food was spiced with sage, coriander (also known as cilantro), vanilla from orchids, and chocolate. Between meals, people could chew *tzictli*, a chewing gum.

Famine (starvation) was common. Sometimes there was not enough rain or too much snow, or rats and insects destroyed their crops. Then Aztecs were forced to hunt for wild animals and plants or to sell themselves into slavery for a while. When the famine was over, the family could buy its freedom with handmade blankets or pottery.

**Discussion Question:** What foods did the Aztecs eat?
Clothing

The national dress for Aztec men was a *maxtlatl*, or loincloth. This fabric wrapped around the man’s waist, between his legs, and had decorated embroidery or fringe that hung in front. Over this, a man might wear a plain white cape, tied over his right shoulder. Only nobles or warriors could wear a decorated cloak. Warriors were also given special uniforms to wear according to their rank. Most men wore their hair long with short bangs. Soldiers could wear a short ponytail on top, after they had captured three prisoners. Priests shaved the front and sides of their heads.

Women were considered to be beautiful if they were clean, so bathing was important. After their baths, they used dye to make their skin yellow, another sign of beauty in Aztec culture. Some women tattooed their chests and arms with intricate, blue designs; others dyed their teeth red or black. All of these were signs of great beauty. The national dress for women was a *cueitl*, a long skirt tied around the waist. Some women also wore a *huipilli*, a simple white blouse. For everyday use, these skirts and blouses were white, but for special occasions, women of all classes wore colorful clothing, decorated with fringes and embroidery. A woman’s hair was tied into two loops, over her forehead, looking like two horns.

**Discussion Question:** How did Aztecs dress?
Social Classes

Aztec society was extremely structured and organized along class lines. People belonged to one of seven classes and usually stayed in that class their entire lives.

The highest class was the ruler, his family, and other nobles. They owned the empire and were responsible for making all decisions about the government. Below them were the priests. They were the most educated class and ran schools to train rulers and priests. The warriors were the third-highest class. They carried out the wishes of the rulers and priests, helping to expand the empire. Many soldiers came from the lower classes, but earned privilege and honor by being good warriors. This was one of the few ways to rise to a higher class.

Tradesmen were in the middle class. Through their traveling, buying, and selling, the empire and its rulers grew richer. The next class were the craftsmen, who made jewels, built homes, quarried stone, and performed other skilled labor. They were organized into guilds, similar to those of the Europeans, which trained new craftsmen and maintained the high standards of their craft.

In the lower class were the peasants. Most people belonged to this class and worked as farmers, growing food for themselves and the empire. They had the right to lifetime ownership of their land, which really belonged to the king. Peasant men could vote for local rulers and participate in religious rituals that were important to the state.

The lowest class was made up of slaves. People were enslaved if they were prisoners of war (as shown in the illustration), people owing money to someone, or criminals being punished. Though they were owned by another and forced to work, they were not treated poorly. They were given food, shelter, and clothing equal to any citizen’s. They could earn money doing extra work; own goods; and buy their freedom, plots of land, and even slaves of their own. They were allowed to marry anyone, even a free woman. Children born to slaves were always born free, not slaves. If slaves tried to run away, no one but their owners could try to hunt them down. Usually, after some years of work or after their master’s death, slaves were set free.

Discussion Question: What were the seven classes of Aztec society?