

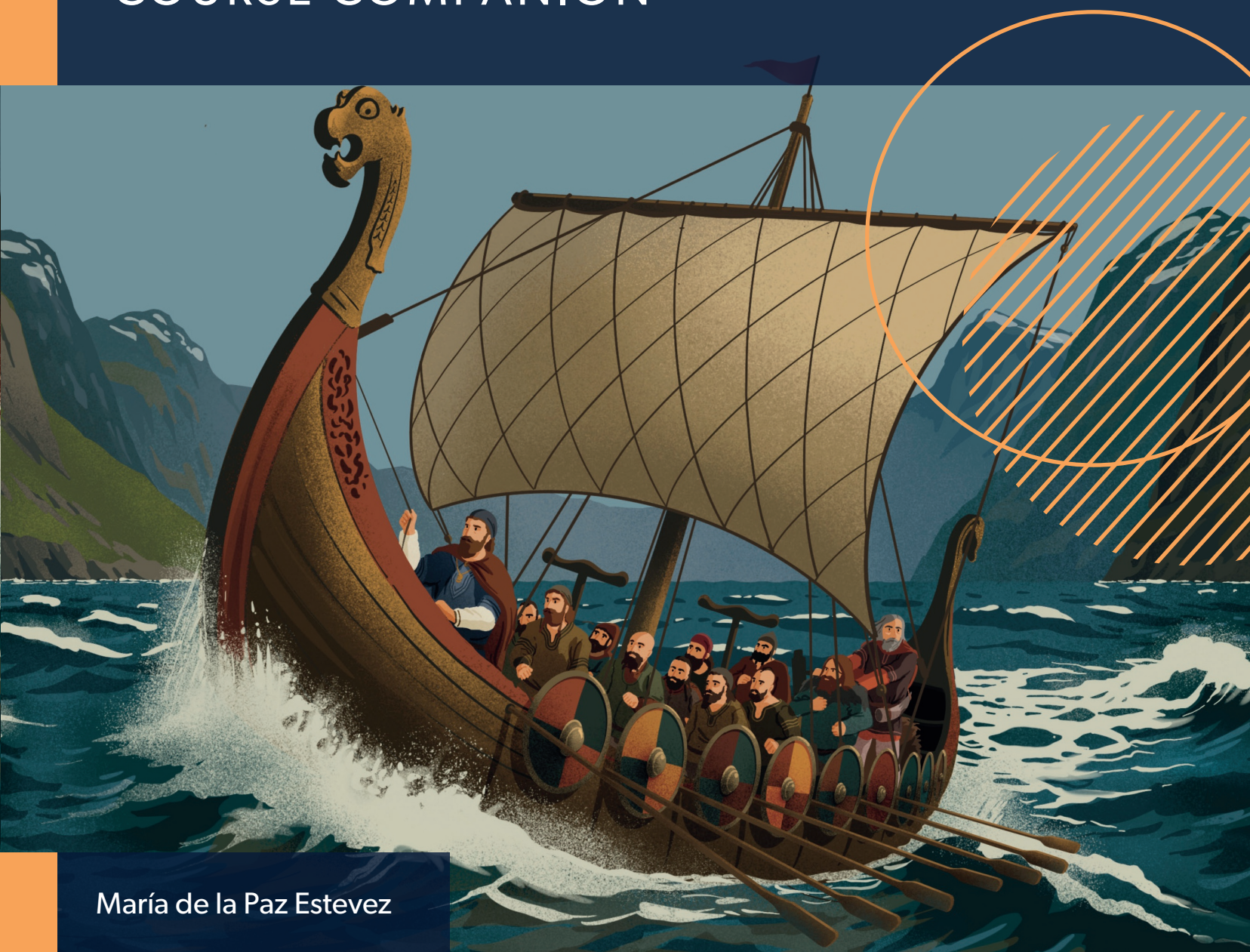
Oxford Resources for IB  
Diploma Programme



HISTORY 2026 EDITION

# CLIMATE AND INNOVATION

COURSE COMPANION



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## The Aztlán migrations

The beginning of the Aztec Empire is usually dated to the year 1428, when three communities in the central valley of Mexico united in the Triple Alliance. However, Aztec history started centuries before, in the north of the country we know as Mexico today.

### Key term

**Plateau:** A high, flat area of land.

Indigenous legends describe how communities of nomadic hunting peoples migrated from their homelands on the northern Mexican **plateau** to the central valley. These migrations may have started in 1064 CE. The communities were originally Chichimeca people, but as they migrated, they mixed with communities such as the Toltecs.

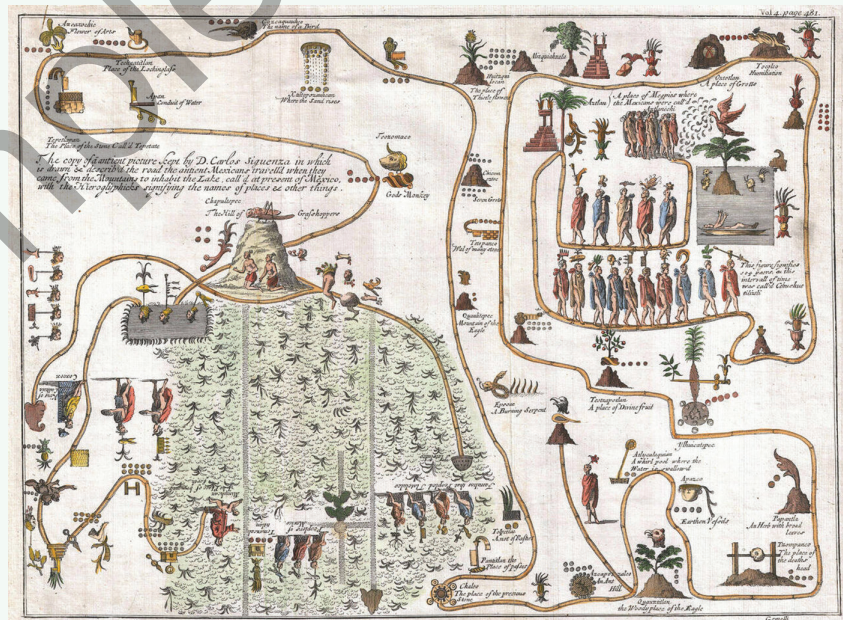
The indigenous narratives say that these people originally came from a place called Aztlán, and call these displacements the Aztlán migrations. In some stories, people were told to leave by their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli. Later, they came to be called Aztecs, meaning the people from Aztlán, although this is not the name they called themselves—they used the term “Mexico” to refer to themselves.



### Source skills

#### Source F

**The Gemelli Map (1704) shows the Aztec migration from Aztlán to Chapultepec. It includes both physical and spiritual elements of the migration.**



#### Questions

Find out more about the context of the Gemelli Map. As a group, discuss:

- how accurate it was
- what features it shows
- what it tells us about the Aztecs.

Historians and archaeologists have not found any conclusive evidence that confirms whether Aztlán was a real place and, if so, where it was. From the descriptions in indigenous and Spanish sources, Aztlán seems to have been a mythical place. However, the codices record that the Mexica people migrated from the north to the central valley. Although the starting point of the migrations has not been identified as a real place, other places mentioned have been confirmed as real. For example, Chicomoztoc was real and mentioned in the codices.

This has been confirmed by other forms of evidence:

- Linguistic evidence: The Mexica spoke Nahuatl, which is part of a group of languages called the Uto-Aztecan family. These languages were found in northern and western Mexico, as well as in the south-western states of the United States.
- Archaeological evidence: Sites in north-western Mexico have uncovered pottery, weapons, and tools that were characteristic of the earliest Mexica culture.
- Ethnographic evidence: Spanish authors such as Bernadino de Sahagún interviewed Aztec people and recorded their oral histories that describe the migration from the north.

#### Genetic testing

Genetic testing has, as yet, been unable to confirm whether the Mexica people migrated from the north. Several studies have tested different genetic markers to see whether Nahua people are genetically close to central or northern Mexican people, but the results have been contradictory. This form of testing may not be helpful to us as the Aztec Empire ended over 500 years ago, and people have moved around a lot since then.

It is difficult to give a historically accurate description of the experiences of these communities during the migration since the sources available blend natural and supernatural events. According to some sources, the Mexica community had to follow the orders of their gods while also taking part in battles and fighting natural disasters.

During the migration, the Mexica encountered the Toltec people, who lived in central Mexico. Their capital, Tula, was a well-developed city that included pyramids, temples, public buildings, and private homes. The arrival of the Mexica seems to have triggered, or coincided with, the decline of Tula, although the reasons for this are not known.

From the beginning of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th century, the migrations continued, until a group under the leadership of Xólotl established a capital in Tenayuca and later in Texcoco. They joined with the remaining Toltecs, who were based in Culhuacán. This was the start of a period of relative peace and cultural progress in the Valley of Mexico and the communities were able to make some advances in agriculture and technology.

However, they did not stay here for long. According to the Nahua histories, they received a new message from their god Huitzilopochtli ordering them to leave again. Their pilgrimage finally ended in the year of "Two House" according to

## Key term

**Gregorian calendar:** The civil calendar used worldwide today, introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. It is a solar calendar that accurately accounts the Earth's orbit around the sun.

their calendar (1325 in the **Gregorian calendar**) when they arrived at a small island in Lake Texcoco. On this island, the elder members of the community saw what they believed was a message from the god Huitzilopochtli showing them the place where they were supposed to settle and where the city of Tenochtitlan was to be built.

### Aztec calendar system

The Aztecs used a complex calendar system with two cycles: a 260-day cycle for ritual purposes, and a 365-day cycle for civil events. Days and years were signified with a number and a symbol, so a day could be called One Jaguar or Five Flower, and a year could be called Two House or One Rabbit, for example. Understanding the Aztec calendar helps historians date events according to the Gregorian calendar, which is the calendar many countries use today.

## Theory of knowledge

Research what makes a 'myth' and answer the following questions.

1. Do you think myths were early forms of history for ancient and medieval societies?
2. Can you identify a mythical narrative still in place today?
3. What kind of information can we infer about the Aztec Empire from myths, even though they aren't accounts of real events?

## Stories about the migrations

The tales about the migration from the mythical Aztlán to Tenochtitlan represent the origins of the people who would be known as the Aztecs. The stories describe their blessing by the gods, the key events of their history, some of their heroes and leaders, and, finally, their building of Tenochtitlan, from where they would eventually dominate large portions of Mesoamerica. Although some of the stories may be myths, they help us understand how the Aztecs viewed themselves and their world.

## Source skills

### Source G

**In this extract from a textbook on mythology, historians Jessica Mellenthin and Susan O. Shapiro describe how myths about a people's history can help us understand how they view the past.**

"Historical myths are told about a historical event, and they help keep the memory of that event alive. Ironically, in historical myths, the accuracy is lost but meaning is gained."

### Questions

Hold a classroom discussion about these questions:

1. Why would it be ironic that myths help us gain meaning?
2. Think of some traditional myths from your own culture or country. They can focus on people, places, or important events. What do they mean? How do they help you understand the culture or country?

## The myth of Aztlán

According to some Aztec stories, Aztlán, also known as "the Place of Whiteness" or "the Place of the Heron", was an opulent place located on a large lake. Its inhabitants were immortal and lived happily among abundant resources. In the middle of the lake where Aztlán was believed to be located, there was a steep hill called Colhuacan with seven caves in it; this was where the ancestors of the

migrants lived and was called Chicomoztoc. The Mexica were one group of people who lived in Chicomoztoc before they began their migration.

Some codices state that the Aztec ruler Moctezuma assembled an expedition of 60 sorcerers and magicians to search for Aztlán. The travellers were given gold, precious stones, feathers, cacao, vanilla, and cotton from the royal treasure to be offered as gifts to the people of Aztlán. In the stories, the travellers arrived at a place named Coatepec after wandering for ten days. There, they transformed themselves into birds and animals to make the last part of the journey to Aztlán. When they arrived, they re-assumed their human forms and reached the hill in the middle of the lake. There they met an old priest, a guardian of the goddess Coatlicue, and an ancient woman, the mother of the god Huitzilopochtli. The old man declined the gifts, explaining that the consumption of cacao and the rest of the luxurious items was the reason why the people in Tenochtitlan were no longer immortal. Before they left, he gave the travellers some waterfowl and plants native to Aztlán to take back with them to Tenochtitlan.

### The sun god

One of the most important deities in Aztec religion was the sun god Huitzilopochtli (see Figure 2.3). Every day, he moved across the sky. At night, he returned to the bosom of the earth, his mother, to renew his strength and re-start the fight against darkness.

The Aztecs considered themselves the “people of the sun”, and believed that it was Huitzilopochtli who ordered them to start their migration to the central valley of Mexico, and to establish the city of Tenochtitlan. According to the legends, the god sent a message to the Mexica through an eagle perching on a *nopal* cactus with a serpent in its beak. When the Mexica people saw this, they knew that that place was the site of the city they should build.

This story is still significant as a legend today: five centuries later Tenochtitlan's foundation story was depicted and memorialized on Mexico's national flag (see Figure 2.4).



▲ **Figure 2.3** Huitzilopochtli, as shown in the Codex Borbonicus, which was written by Aztec priests. He is shown with hummingbird feathers on his head, and a sceptre in the shape of a snake.

### Theory of knowledge

The modern Mexican flag shows how the Aztec Empire is still important to the people of the region.

1. Think about the history of your own country. Are there any important historical stories or mythical narratives that still play a role in its culture?
2. Why do you think historical stories and myths are important to study?



▲ **Figure 2.4** The modern Mexican flag includes the image of the serpent, eagle, and cactus that was central to the founding of Tenochtitlan

### Key term

**Calpul (plural calpulli):** A group of people that was the smallest unit in the Aztec society.

### Key terms

**Tribute:** Payment made by a dependent or subordinate country or state to another, more powerful one.

**Altepetl:** City-state in Mesoamerica: an independent political unit.

### Key terms

**Centralization:** When activities are controlled by one authority, such as a central government.

**Tlatoani:** The ruler of an *altepetl*.

### The calpulli

The sources that describe the migration also include information that allows us to understand how the communities of migrants were organized. The stories mention the **calpulli**, a Nahuatl word that means “big houses”. This concept refers to the fundamental unit of Aztec society. A *calpul* was a group of people who lived close to one another, whether in the countryside or in the cities. They were extensive groups united in different ways: some *calpulli* were made of members of the same family, some were made of unrelated members of the same ethnic group, and others were groups of artisans who worked with specific materials and techniques. In some cases, the members of a *calpul* had multiple ties that bound them together.

Each *calpul* was managed by a leader who was selected locally. The calpulli had their own patron deities and ceremonial districts with administrative buildings and temples. Some even had small markets where they traded goods. They also had their own military schools where young men were trained. In a time of war, the men of a *calpul* entered combat as a unit.

The calpulli also functioned as administrative and economic units. Each *calpul* kept a census of their members, made maps of their lands, and paid **tribute** to the city-state or **altepetl** to which they belonged. The tributes took the form of agricultural products, raw materials, manufactured goods, and services like working on public works, maintaining the court, and military service.

#### City-states

City-states were independent political units and have existed in many parts of the world. Over centuries, city-states unified to form countries as we understand them today. In the time before and during the Aztec Empire, there were many city-states, called *altepetl*, in central Mexico.

## The rise of the Triple Alliance

From about 1350, the Mexican basin underwent a period of rapid **centralization** of political authority as the city-states formed political alliances. At the beginning of this period, the basin and its nearby surroundings areas were divided into about 60 city-states called *altepetl*. An *altepetl* included an administrative centre: a town that was surrounded by a number of dependent villages. The villages were the *calpolli*, as described previously. Each *altepetl* was governed by a ruler called a **tlatoani**, who came from a dynasty of rulers.

### Conflict in the region

As you have already learned, the Mexica people settled on an island in Lake Texcoco, and began building the city of Tenochtitlan. Over some decades, this city became the largest in the region, and was the most powerful in terms of its military, economy, and religious influence.

One of the ways in which the Mexica gained power was by acting as mercenaries and warriors for societies nearby. For example, they worked as

warriors for the Tepanec people, taking part in their battles and campaigns against other rival communities. In return, the Mexica were given a portion of the wealth that the Tepanec took from those rivals.

As a result, Tenochtitlan grew in importance and wealth. At the same time, Aztec rulers formed strong alliances with other communities around Lake Texcoco, which helped them to increase their position of growing power.

The relationships between some of the *altepetls* were hostile, and they engaged in constant wars. Even when they sustained friendlier relations, usually based on trade, they still competed for local prominence.

## Rebellion against the dominant power

By the late 14th century, two dominant confederations emerged. One was led by the Tepanec people from Azcapotzalco, on the western side of the basin. The other was led by the Acolhua people from Texcoco, on the eastern side. By 1418, Azcapotzalco was in control of most of the basin and increased its tribute demands.

Three city-states rose in rebellion against these demands. They were Tenochtitlan, Tlacopan, and Texcoco (see Table 2.2). In 1428, they launched a war of expansion over their neighbouring powers.

Two Mexica leaders from Tenochtitlan played a critical role in this independence movement: the *tlatoani* Itzcoatl (his name means “Obsidian Snake”), and his skilful chief adviser, Tlacaelel. Itzcoatl became the leader of Tenochtitlan in 1427, being the fourth *tlatoani*.

After the war was won, the three *altepetls* formalized their alliance (see Figure 2.5). The three rulers, Itzcoatl, Netzahualcoyotl and Totoquihuaztli, divided the Azcapotzalco land between them, and formed the Triple Alliance. This was the basis of the Aztec Empire, which ruled the Mexican basin until the arrival of the Spanish conquerors in 1519.

**Itzcoatl**



▲ Relief sculpture of Itzcoatl in the Garden of the Triple Alliance in Mexico City

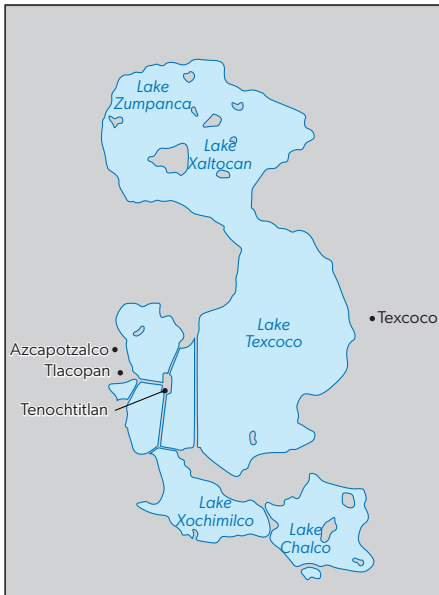
Itzcoatl (“Obsidian Snake”) is regarded as the ruler who started Aztec expansion. He led the war against Maxtla, the ruler of the Tepaneca, and allied the Mexica with the city-states of Tlacopan and Texcoco. He ruled the Aztec Empire from 1428 to 1440.

<b>Altepetl</b>	Tenochtitlan	Texcoco	Tlacopan
<b>Ethnic group</b>	Mexica (a Nahuatl-speaking people)	Acolhua (also Nahuatl-speaking)	Tepanec (related to the rulers of Azcapotzalco)
<b>Location</b>	On an island in Lake Texcoco	Eastern shore of Lake Texcoco	Western side of Lake Texcoco
<b>Pre-alliance status</b>	A rising power, but politically subordinate to Azcapotzalco	A major cultural and scholarly centre that had been weakened by the Tepanecs	Subordinate to Azcapotzalco, but seeking autonomy and influence
<b>Leader at the time of the alliance</b>	Itzcoatl (ruled 1427–1440)	Netzahualcoyotl (ruled 1431–1472)	Totoquihuaztli I (ruled 1430–1469)

▲ Table 2.2 Key facts about the three *altepetls* in the Triple Alliance

## The alliance is formalized

Tenochtitlan became the dominant partner in the alliance. After formalizing the alliance and gaining control of the northern valley and lakes, Itzcoatl moved south towards the lakes Xochimilco and Chalco. He defeated the *altepetls* of Culhuacan and Coyoacan, and then Cuitlahuac, Mixquic, Xochimilco and Tezompa. The south was conquered by 1432, the west by 1435, and the east by 1440.



▲ **Figure 2.5** A map showing the members of the Triple Alliance and the lake system in the Mexican basin

Ultimately, its forces reached as far as the province of Chiappan, on the border with what is today Guatemala.

### Tlacaelel

Itzcoatl did not achieve everything alone. He had the invaluable advice and military aid of one of the most influential men in Aztec history: Tlacaelel. According to some indigenous sources, Tlacaelel's father was Huitzilihuitl, who was the ruler of Tenochtitlan before his brother, Itzcoatl, took power. This made Tlacaelel the nephew of Itzcoatl. Other accounts suggest that Tlacaelel was the son of Acamapichtli, the first ruler of Tenochtitlan and founder of the Aztec dynasty. Neither of these claims can be supported with conclusive evidence.

Born around 1398, Tlacaelel served several Aztec emperors, including Itzcoatl, Moctezuma, Axayacatl, and Tizoc, mostly as *cihuacoatl*, a title that could translate as "chief advisor" or "chief minister". Tlacaelel played a vital role in the creation of a new political and religious alliance, and was also responsible for the implementation of educational, political, and religious reforms. Together, Itzcoatl and Tlacaelel shaped a new governing structure that became more hierarchical and structured.



Tlacaelel, as shown in the Codex Mendoza

## ATL Approaches to learning

### Self-management skills

The IB DP History Guide specifies four historical concepts that "focus historical inquiry with powerful, persuasive and debatable ideas". Find out what the IB DP History Guide has to say about the concept of "significance". Then consider how significant the role of individual Aztec leaders is in our understanding of Aztec history.

In most of these cases, the conquerors established an additional layer of leadership and a tribute system over the local authorities and communities that already existed. However, in some cases, like the city of Xaltocan, the archaeological evidence indicates that the Triple Alliance replaced some of the population, perhaps because the defeated people fled.

With the entire valley under control, Itzcoatl established new titles and districts. The rulers of the newly formed Aztec Empire became known as the *Huey Tlatoani*, which means "Great Speaker" or "Supreme Leader". This title was first given to Itzcoatl, and then the later leaders of Tenochtitlan, who were all members of Itzcoatl's family. The emperor's status grew as the *altepetl* of Tenochtitlan became more established as the dominant city-state in the alliance.

### Succession

The Aztec emperors were related, but succession was not strictly hereditary. In other words, the son of an emperor was not guaranteed to become the next emperor. A council of nobles selected the next emperor, and they generally chose a son, male cousin, or nephew of the emperor, basing their decision partly on the candidates' experience or proven leadership.



### Source skills

#### Source H

**Itzcoatl as shown in the Tovar Codex. His name-glyph, an obsidian serpent, is shown over his shoulder.**



#### Question

What elements and items in the image show us that Itzcoatl was a significant person?

## Power relations within the Triple Alliance

The Triple Alliance was initially a military agreement, and the three city-states sometimes operated independently and sometimes together (see Figure 2.6). By 1431, each group controlled certain city-states. Tenochtitlan dominated the south, Texcoco the north-east, and Tlacopan the north-west. Each of the partners was politically independent and each ruler acted as the head of their own *altepetl*.

However, it soon became clear that the three partners were not equals. The division of the loot obtained through wars marked a first difference: while Tenochtitlan and Texcoco shared equal parts, Tlacopan received smaller portions because it joined the alliance later. Although Texcoco and Tenochtitlan began as equals, Tenochtitlan soon became the dominant military power.