

Becoming Visually Literate: Reading and Writing An Aztec Codex

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The Aztecs and their Language

The Aztec Civilization began flourishing around 1325 and remained a major power until Hernán Cortés defeated them in 1521. The Aztecs were a warrior people, allowing them to rise to prominence and remain in control of much of what is now Mexico for nearly one hundred years. Tall step pyramids and temples built by the Aztecs can still be seen around Mexico today and are one of the civilization's greatest achievements. The Aztecs are also known for doing human sacrifice, which is based on a belief system of the world being delicately balanced on opposites such as life and death.

Today we know these people as "Aztec," but this civilization mainly referred to themselves as the "Mexica" (Meh-SHEE-kuh). Look familiar?



Pyramid of the Sun, Tenochtitlan, Mexico

Modern-day term "Mexico" derives from this name! The name "Mexica" comes from the Nahuatl (NAH-wah-tl) language spoken by the Mexica before the arrival of the Spanish. Many words in English and Spanish derive from Nahuatl including the following: coyote, chili, chipotle, avocado, and chocolate.

However, the Mexica only *spoke* Nahuatl, and the language they *wrote* in is very different. Rather than writing with a phonetic alphabet like we do in English and Spanish and many other Latin-based languages, the Mexica wrote in *pictograms*. Pictograms are pictures or symbols that stand for a word, phrase, or idea. This idea may also sound familiar if you think of the visual symbols in your own culture that convey a message such as traffic signs, instruction manuals, and emojis! In the following pages, we will learn how to read some of the Mexica's pictograms and then you will begin creating your own visual language with symbols of your own creation and your own meaning! The Spanish destroyed all of the Aztecs written records, but we do have some writings from neighboring civilizations like the Mixtec (MEESH-tek) who wrote with very similar pictograms. We will look at some of their writings before creating our own.

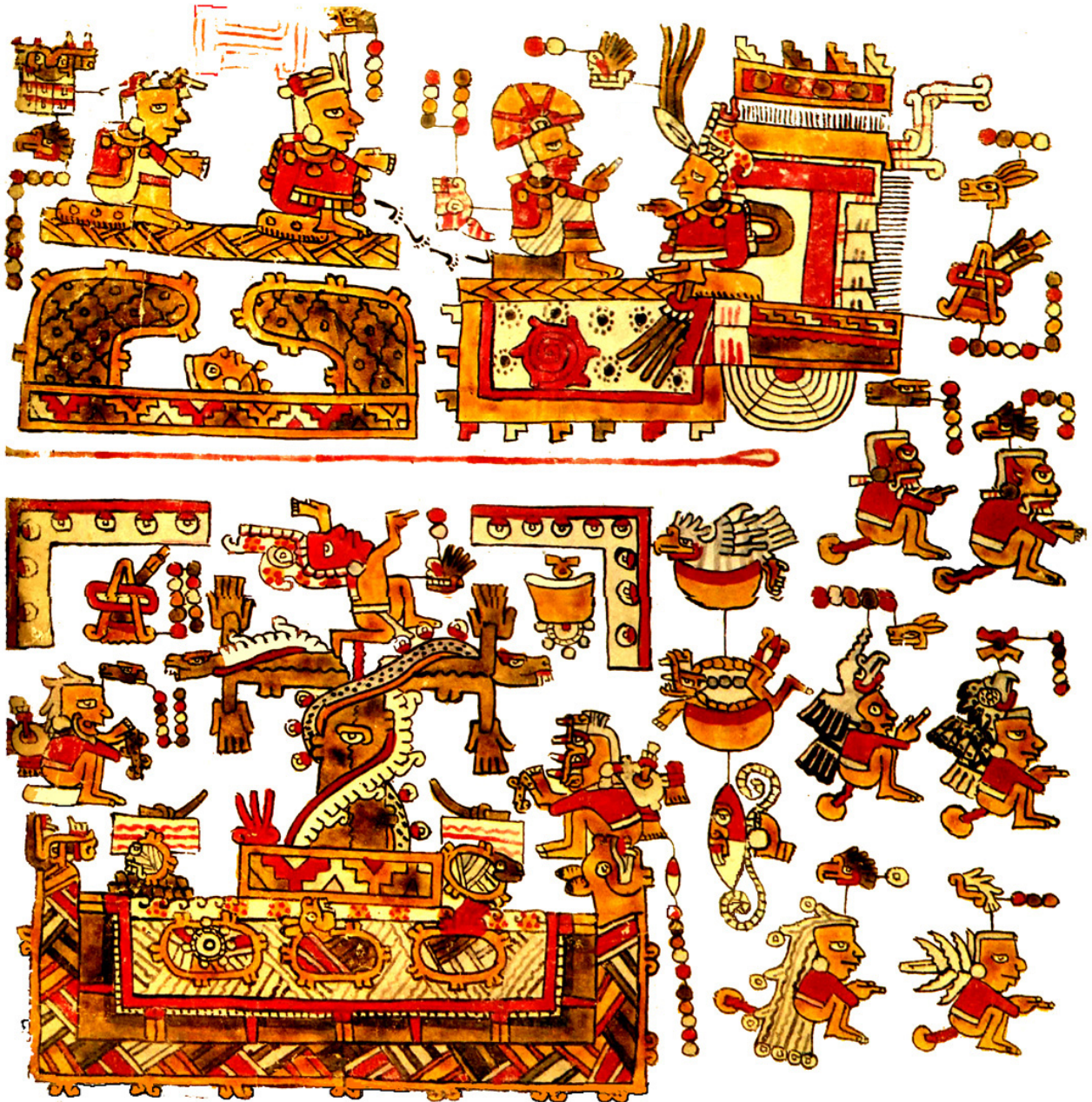
Key Vocab:

Mexica Nahuatl Pictograms Mixtec

Key Vocab:
Codex

Reading a Sample

Below is a page from a Mixtec history book, or “codex.” As you can see, there are a lot of pictograms conveying a lot of meanings in this image so we will just look at a few key pictograms. Before revealing the answers on the next page, see if you can figure out some of the meaning of the story.



Guided Reading

See if you can answer the questions in the boxes to begin deciphering the writing!

What do you think these L-shape boxes mean?

What do you think these footprints mean?

What do you think two people point at each other means?

What do you think this structure is?

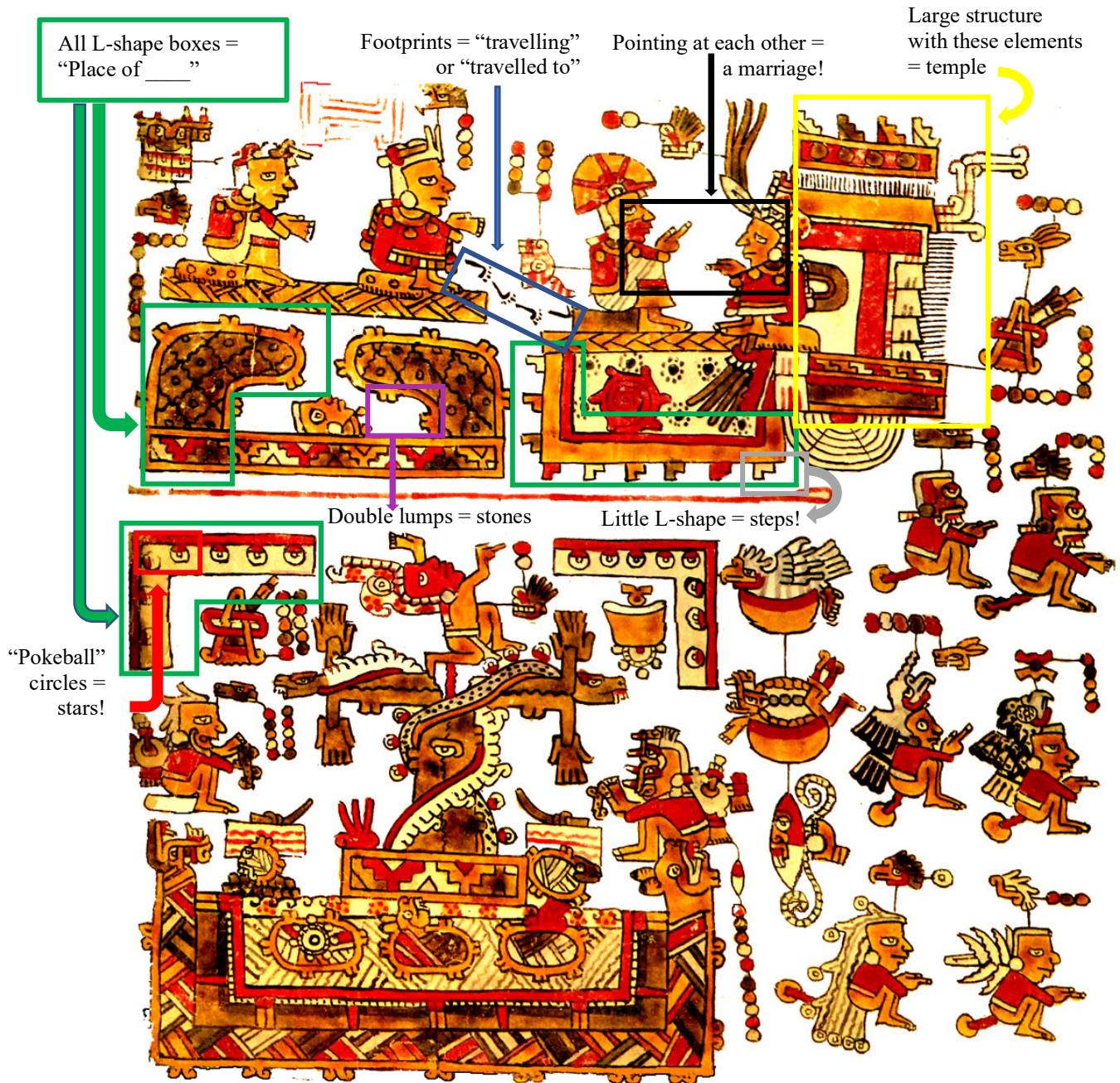
Double lumps?

Little L-shapes?

What do you think these "Pokeball" symbols represent?

The illustration depicts a vibrant scene with several figures in traditional attire. At the top, two figures are seated on a platform. Below them, a large structure with a prominent 'T' shape is visible. To the right, a figure is shown in a dynamic pose. The bottom section features a large, ornate structure with a central figure and various symbols. The entire scene is annotated with colored boxes and lines pointing to specific elements, each accompanied by a question. A green box highlights L-shaped boxes, a blue box highlights footprints, a black box highlights two figures pointing, a yellow box highlights a structure, a purple box highlights double lumps, a grey box highlights little L-shapes, and a red box highlights 'Pokeball' symbols.

Codex Sample Explained



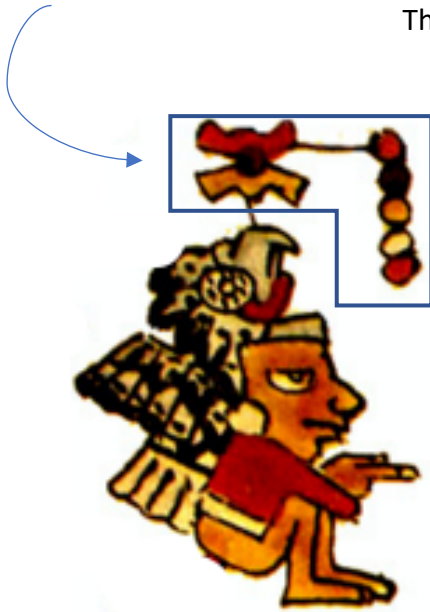
With this info we can begin putting together the story in the upper half:

"These two people travelled to the wedding of these two people at the place of the stepped temple."

NOW... do you notice something that every person has in common on this page?

Aztec Names

Every person has a string of dots and a small symbol attached to them.
These are NAMES!



Aztec names are given names based on birthday, and the name sign is shown attached to the figure with lines. The chart on page 10 will help you figure out this figure's name!

Use the chart on page 10 to figure out this figure's birthday.

An illustration of an Aztec figure with a name sign. Two blue boxes highlight parts of the name sign: one around the red bow symbol and another around the vertical string of five dots. Arrows point from these boxes to explanatory text on either side.

This symbol tells us on which day of the month this person was born. The chart on page 10 tells us this is the symbol for "movement," which is the sign for the 16th day of the month.

Each figure is accompanied by big dots that tells you the **month** in which they were born. This person was born in May because it has 5 dots, and May is the 5th month of the year! (See page 10)

This person's birthday is May 16th!

This is how we write this person's name in Aztec pictograms:



To write this person's name in English, we use this layout:

_____ _____ _____
(Title) (Month number) (Day sign)

Let's write this person's name in English! First use any title from this list or make up your own!

1) Choose any title from this list or make up your own:

- Lord
- Lady
- Warrior
- Warrior Princess
- Princess
- Prince

_____ _____ _____
(Title) (Month number) (Day sign)

2) Write the Month number!
(Hint = May is the 5th month!)

3) Write the Day sign!

You could write this person's name like this:

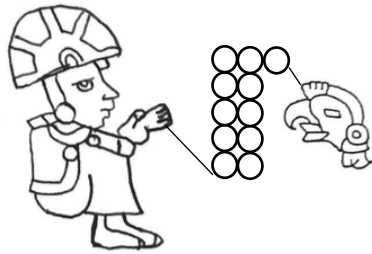
Warrior 5 Movement
(Title) (Month number) (Day sign)

Here's another example!

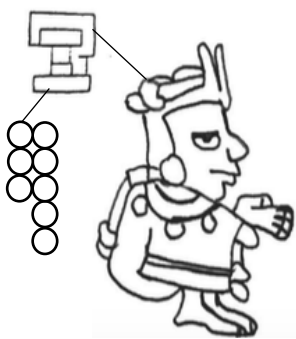
A person with the birthday November 15th could write their name in English: "Lady 11 Vulture".

- 1) She chose the title Lady
- 2) She writes the number 11 because November is the 11th month of the year.
- 3) She writes "Vulture" which is the day sign for the 15th day of the month (see chart on page 10).

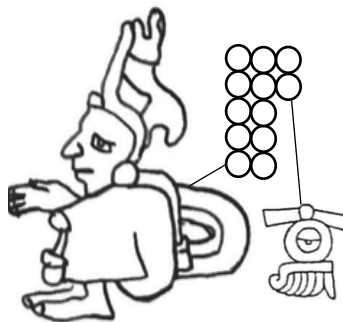
She could also write her name in pictograms. She uses 11 dots because November is the 11th month in the year. She uses this vulture symbol because it is the day sign for the 15th day of the month:



Let's practice a few more! Using the chart on page 10, see if you can figure out the names of the people below:



Name: Lady
Birthday: _____



Name: Lord
Birthday: _____



Name: Lord
Birthday: _____

(hint: answers at the bottom of the page)

Your Turn!

Using your birthday, you can create your own Aztec name!

Write your Aztec name in English!

Choose a **title**, write your **month number**, then write your **day sign**. (See page 10)

_____ _____ _____
(Title) (Month number) (Day sign)

Now write your Aztec name in pictograms!

- 1) Using the figures on page 11, draw, cut out, trace an Aztec **figure**—or create your own!
- 2) Using the chart on page 10, draw the number of dots that corresponds with birth **month (month number)**
- 3) Using the chart on page 10, draw or cut out the **Day Sign** that corresponds with birthday














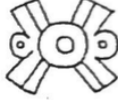

















Titles

- Lord
- Lady
- Warrior
- Warrior Princess
- Princess
- Prince

Month Numbers

- 1 - January ○
- 2 - February ○○
- 3 - March ○○○
- 4 - April ○○○○
- 5 - May ○○○○○
- 6 - June ○○○○○○
- 7 - July ○○○○○○
- 8 - August ○○○○○○
- 9 - September ○○○○○○○
- 10 - October ○○○○○○○○
- 11 - November ○○○○○○○○
- 12 - December ○○○○○○○○

Day Signs

1 st Crocodile		12 th Reed		23 rd Snake	
2 nd Wind		13 th Jaguar		24 th Deer	
3 rd House		14 th Eagle		25 th Rabbit	
4 th Lizard		15 th Vulture		26 th Water	
5 th Snake		16 th Movement		27 th Dog	
6 th Deer		17 th Flint		28 th Jaguar	
7 th Rabbit		18 th Rain		29 th Eagle	
8 th Water		19 th Flower		30 th Vulture	
9 th Dog		20 th Crocodile		31 st Flower	
10 th Monkey		21 st Wind			
11 th Grass		22 nd Lizard			

Drawings by John Montgomery
(See Codex Vienna, Codex Borbonicus)

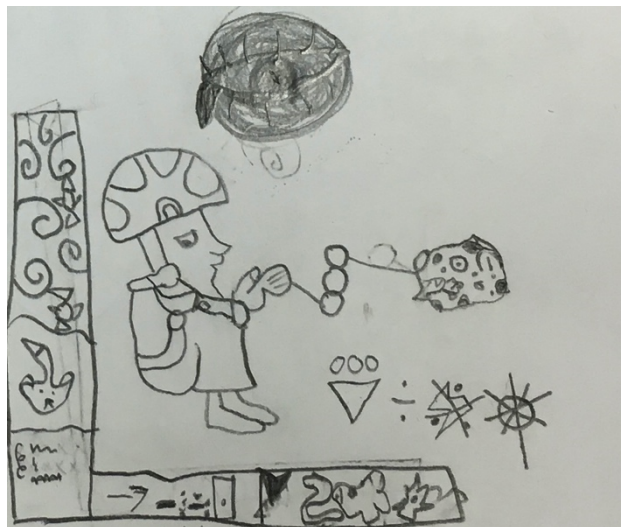
Figures

Cut and paste, trace, copy, or use as inspiration!
These are non-gendered and can be used with any title.



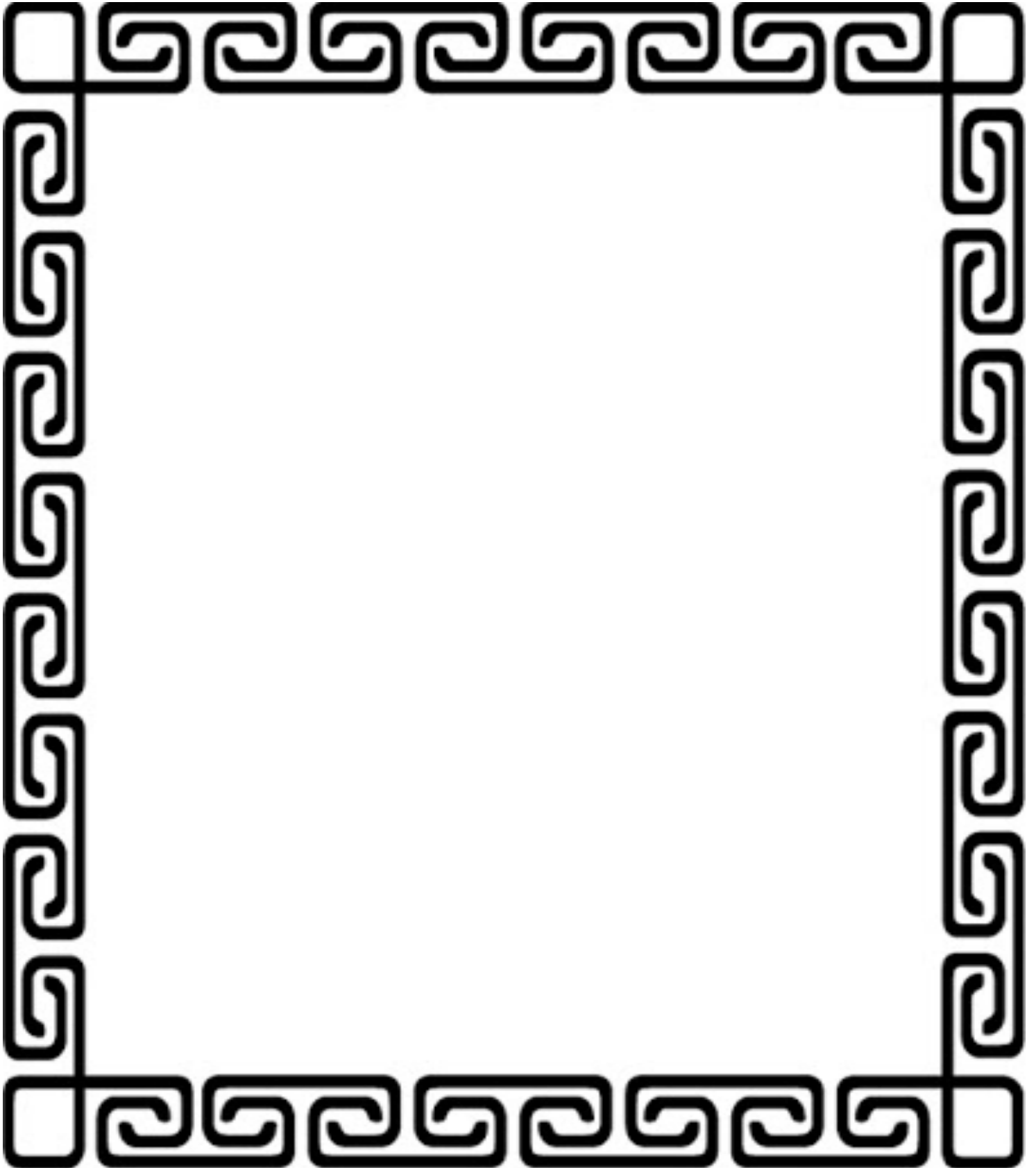
Examples

Here are some examples of other people's creations. Can you figure out what they say?



Your Turn!

Tell your story here using your own pictograms! Try writing your name in Aztec pictograms



Your Friend's Name

Using a friend's birthday , you can create an Aztec name for your friend!

Write your friend's Aztec name in English!

Choose a **title**, write your friend's **month number**, then write your friend's **day sign**. (See page 10)

_____ _____ _____
(Title) (Month number) (Day sign)

Now write your friend's Aztec name in pictograms!

- 4) Using the figures on page 11, draw, cut out, trace an Aztec **figure**—or create your own!
- 5) Using the chart on page 10, draw the number of dots that corresponds with birth **month (month number)**
- 6) Using the chart on page 10, draw or cut out the **Day Sign** that corresponds with birthday

Aztec Headdresses

Maybe you noticed that many of the figures in this workbook have different headdresses. These headdresses tell you something unique about this person!

For example, Lord 1 Eagle was known for his knowledge of the stars, shown by the stars on his headdress.



Now write your name in Aztec pictograms, and create your own headdress to show something unique about yourself. What do you like doing? What big events have happened in your life? Do you have any special skills?

Color in Aztec Life

The Aztecs believed that the water and the ocean were sacred and powerful as the sources of all life. Because of this, the Aztecs thought blue or greenish-blue materials that looked like the water and the ocean were extremely valuable. In fact, blue or greenish-blue materials like jade, turquoise, glass, and even feathers were more valuable than gold!



Head of Serpent (detail), *Mosaic of a Double-headed Serpent*, c. 15th-16th century, cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, oyster shell, hematite, and copal, 20.5 x 43.3 x 6.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

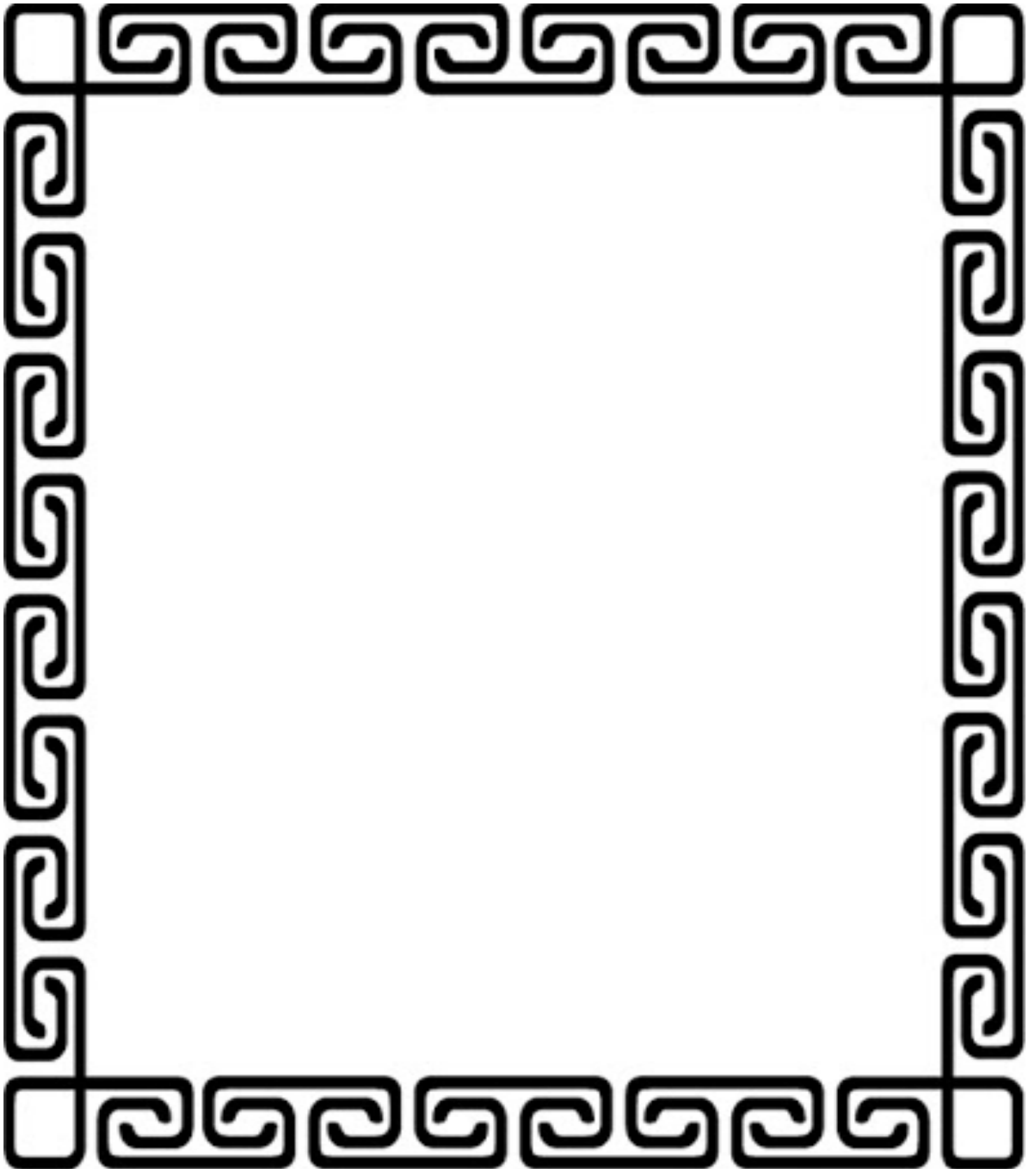
List five things that you can find or see in your house or classroom that are blue or greenish-blue.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

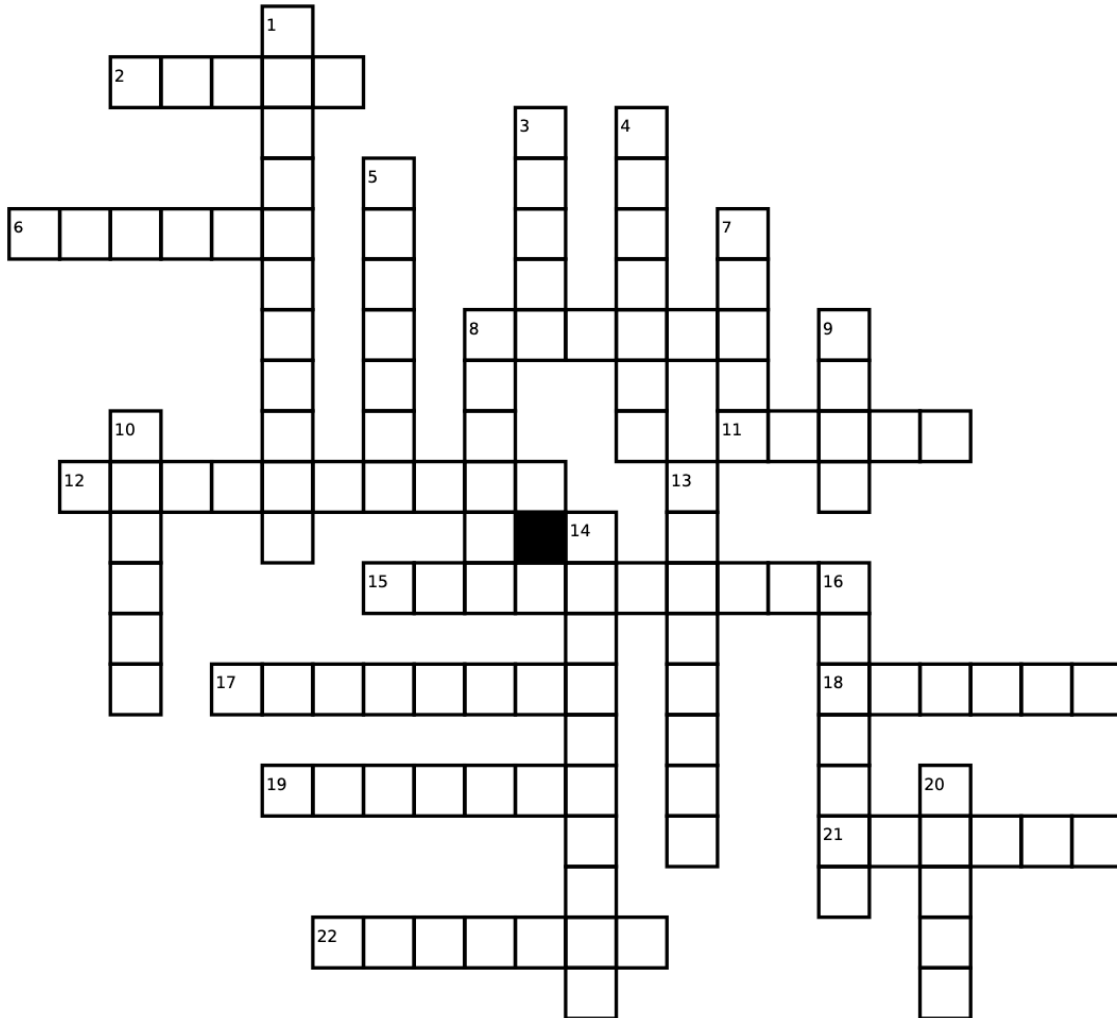
The Aztecs did not have blue ink to draw or write with. But you do! On the next page, try adding blue or greenish-blue to your pictogram story!

Your Story

Tell a story about you and your friend using your own pictograms. What headdresses will you use?
What colors will you use?



Bonus Crossword Puzzle



Down:

1. Flint is the day sign for which day of the month?
3. Day sign for 3rd day of the month
4. A title that is seven letters long
5. Day sign for 30th day of the month
7. What do the 'poke-balls' symbolize on the sample page?
8. The sample page isn't actually Aztec but...?
9. Day sign for 12th day of the month
10. Day sign for 4th day of the month
13. Aztec names are given based on what?
14. What symbol is used for travelling in Aztec writing?
16. Who destroyed all of the Aztec's written records?
20. The dots in an Aztec name tell you what part of a person's birthday?

Across:

2. Another word for 'book'
6. Month number for November
8. What did the Aztecs call themselves?
11. What do little L-shapes symbolize in Aztec writing?
12. Rain is the day sign for which day of the month?
15. What do we call the Aztec writing system?
17. Day sign for the 16th day of the year
18. Which month has the month number of 8?
19. Which month has the month number of 10?
21. What do the 'double-lumps' symbolize in Aztec writing?
22. What language did the Aztec speak?

Crossword Key

Down

1. seventeenth
3. house
4. warrior
5. vulture
7. stars
8. Mixtec
9. reed
10. lizard
13. birthday
14. footprints
16. Spanish
20. Month

Across

2. codex
6. eleven
8. Mexica
11. steps
12. eighteenth
15. pictograms
17. movement
18. August
19. October
21. stones
22. Nahuatl