

Ancient Middle America was home to a series of different peoples who influenced one another. The last to arrive, before the European conquest, were the Aztecs. Until fairly recently, people knew little about the early history of the Americas. Gradually, new sources were found and translated, giving a colorful picture of heroes such as Nezahualcoyotl. ♦ *As you read, think about the qualities that rulers needed during this period of history. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Nezahualcoyotl (1402–1472)

Poet, philosopher, warrior, and statesman—Nezahualcoyotl was known to his people as both “the Great” and “the Wise.” In the mid-1400s he became the most powerful tlatoani, or ruler, in the Valley of Mexico.

Throughout the late 1300s and early 1400s, central Mexico was the scene of frequent bloody wars between rival cities, their kings, and each tribe’s allies or vassals. Nezahualcoyotl, who was heir to the Aztec kingdom of Texcoco, was born in 1402, in the midst of these wars. When he was 16, most of his family was slaughtered by the king of the Tepanecas, but he escaped.

In 1427 he gathered a group of followers still loyal to his family. With the support of several neighboring states, they began a rebellion against the Tepanecas. Nezahualcoyotl captured several towns and gained new allies. In the spring of 1429 he captured Texcoco itself, taking back the throne to which he was entitled. He continued the war and by the next year had crushed the Tepanecas.

As king of Texcoco, Nezahualcoyotl, with his allies, was now the most powerful force in the valley. The Three City League included the kings of

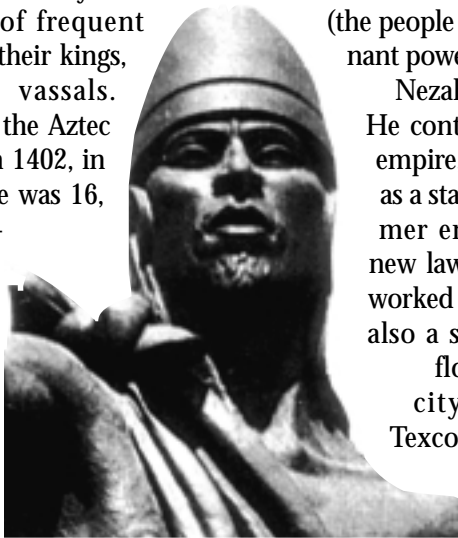
Tenochtitlán and Tlacopan as well as Texcoco. (All three cities were on Lake Texcoco; present-day Texcoco is northeast of Mexico City.) This alliance brought some political unity to the region and became the basis for the growth of the Aztec empire.

After Nezahualcoyotl died, in 1472, the Tenochca (the people of Tenochtitlán) became the dominant power.

Nezahualcoyotl reigned for forty years. He continued his wars and expanded the empire, but his achievements and wisdom as a statesman were so great that even former enemies admired him. He passed new laws about property and tribute and worked for his subjects’ well-being. He was also a skillful engineer, who designed a flood-control system for the island city of Tenochtitlán. The city of Texcoco led Aztec culture. It had gardens, temples, and a great library of Aztec manuscripts.

What made Nezahualcoyotl most unusual as a ruler was his love for poetry. He is considered the most important poet in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. One poem of the time praised him:

“The splendor of a bracelet weighted down with jade stones is your word and your thought, O you kings, Moteuczoma and Nezahualcoyotl.”



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Questions to Think About

1. When and how did Nezahualcoyotl become king of Texcoco?
2. What was the lasting importance of his three-city alliance in the history of Mexico?
3. **Making Comparisons** Make a list of the different types of accomplishments that made Nezahualcoyotl an outstanding ruler. How are the qualities he exhibited like and unlike the qualities a leader needs today?
4. **Activity** Find a map of Aztec Mexico and locate the cities that took part in the wars and the Three City League. Then look at a modern map of the Mexico City area. Make a list of the modern town names that reflect Aztec history.