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978-1-107-14277-0 - The Aztec Economic World: Merchants and Markets in Ancient Mesoamerica

Kenneth G. Hirth

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The Aztec Economic World

This study explores the organization, scale, complexity, and integration of Aztec commerce across Mesoamerica at Spanish contact. The aims of the book are threefold. The first is to construct an in-depth understanding of the economic organization of precolumbian Aztec society and how it developed in the way that it did. The second is to explore the livelihoods of the individuals who bought, sold, and moved goods across a cultural landscape that lacked both navigable rivers and animal transport. Finally, this study models Aztec economy in a way that facilitates its comparison to other ancient and premodern societies around the world. What makes the Aztec economy unique is that it developed one of the most sophisticated market economies in the ancient world in a society with one of the worse transportation systems. This is the first book to provide an updated and comprehensive view of the Aztec economy in thirty years.

KENNETH G. HIRTH is Professor of Anthropology at Penn State University. His research focuses on the origin and development of ranked and state-level societies in the New World. He is especially interested in political economy and how forms of resource control lead to the development of structural inequalities within society.

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Preface

This volume has grown out of my long-term interests in precolumbian Mesoamerican and the cross-cultural study of ancient economy. As an Economic Anthropologist I have always felt that New World societies are poorly understood and rarely incorporated into a systematic comparative discussion of economic complexity of ancient societies. Interest in the industrial revolution together within the broad theoretical framework of World Systems Theory has led to the impression that the indigenous societies incorporated into European colonial systems were simple suppliers of raw materials for the more complex Euro-centric economies of the Old World. The result is that the economic complexity of indigenous New World societies is often overlooked or underplayed. Furthermore as a Mesoamerican archaeologist, I feel that many students and colleagues have an incomplete understanding of how the precolumbian economy was organized. Archaeologists in Mesoamerica, like those in other areas of the ancient world, are keenly interested in the origin and development of complex society. While investigators have placed a great deal of attention on reconstructing the scale and organization of political structure, the complexity of the economic infrastructure that supported it is either not addressed or under studied.

The development of an evolutionary approach for studying complex society requires a comprehensive understanding of the society's socio-economic structures and how they changed over time. Understanding the structure of the Aztec economy is the goal of this study. In the process I hope to take a step closer to identifying the structure and the complexity of highland Nahua economies at the time of the Spanish conquest. Only then can the Mesoamerican economy be compared in terms of scale, level

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of trade, and forms of production to that found in other state level societies of the ancient world. The development of a comprehensive picture of economic activity both here and by future investigators will bring us one step closer to incorporating this important region into a broader cross-cultural and comparative study of ancient economy.

The structure of the Aztec economic world is examined using the ethnohistoric and early colonial written sources. A small amount of archaeology information is used but only as supplemental data. Although I have worked in Mesoamerica as an archaeologist my entire career, my goal was to focus on the written sources and construct a model of Aztec economic structure that could be tested systematically using archaeological data. Had I incorporated all of the available archaeological data into the discussion it would have produced a very different type of volume. Instead, I have chosen to push the historic sources to their interpretable limit with the goal of developing as complete and comprehensive model of prehispanic economic behavior as realistically possible. This avoids the problem of equifinality in archaeology where it is difficult to identify specific forms of behavior and organization because of an incompletely preserved material record. The focus on historic sources has made it possible to produce what I feel is an archaeologically informed model of Nahua economy that can be directly evaluated in future research using the direct historical approach.

A short note on presentation format used in this volume is in order. The volume employs Cambridge University Press guidelines. A glossary is included at the end of the volume to assist readers who are unfamiliar with Nahuatl and colonial Spanish terminology. Following format guidelines all glossary terms are placed in italic typeface along with other foreign words that are defined where they occur within the text. The exceptions to this practice are words of Nahuatl origin that refer to the names of precolumbian rulers, modern states and regions in Mexico, archaeological sites and contact period towns which are located on maps within the volume. Italicized words in English are generally for emphasis only. Finally, a detailed Index is presented at the end of the volume to assist readers in finding topical information specifically related to their individual interests.

I want to thank a number of individuals who have directly or indirectly contributed to the completion of this volume. Mark Christensen of Assumption College was my primary *consigliere* for Nahuatl orthography, grammar, and philology; Mark, it would have been impossible to develop an understanding of the Nahuatl view of economic gain and

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profit without your help. I appreciate the patience of my students in my Ancient Economy seminar for our productive discussions of different aspects of domestic and institutional economy. I especially want to thank the students in my lab for help on different aspects of the volume: Sarah Imfeld for paleographic work in both sixteenth-century Spanish and Nahuatl from the *Matrícula de Huexotzinco*, Sean Carr and Tara Mazurczky for maps and GIS work, and Karin Dennison and Mary Vinciguerra for preparing line drawings, photography, and illustrations. My greatest debt of gratitude goes to my family, especially my wife Susan for reading endless drafts and tolerating all of my eccentricities. Finally I especially want to thank Frances Berdan and Gerardo Gutierrez for reviewing the final draft of the manuscript. Over the years I have benefited from numerous conversations with both of them on different aspects of Aztec economy. I took all of their helpful comments into account to the best of my ability. The errors and inconsistencies that remain are a testimony to where my ability to address them fell short.

The initial sparks that fired my interest in cross-cultural economic comparisons can be traced to the diversity of books that I've read on ancient and premodern economies over the past two decades out of curiosity and for leisure. Penn State University supplied the sabbatical leave that allowed me to read extensively on the cross-cultural practices of merchants. Anastasia Graf and the editorial staff of Cambridge University Press have been very helpful guiding me through all the steps of preparing the final draft for publication. Finally, I want to thank Bridget Gazzo and all of the staff at Dumbarton Oaks for access to their outstanding library. There is no better place in the world to conduct research on Mesoamerican archaeology and ethnohistory and I am fortunate to have spent a summer in residence there as a senior fellow during 2010.

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Abbreviations

CIESAS	Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
INAH	Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia
UCLA	University of California Los Angeles
UNAM	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México