# Part I

## Lives

This section of the book is about people. People from another time and place. People long-gone. But people, nonetheless. Some are remembered today by their given names: famous emperors, warriors, or poets come to mind. Many more remain nameless. Yet in their time they were well-known by others – perhaps loved, perhaps despised; maybe admired, enjoyed, reviled, tolerated, or ignored by those around them.

For this viewing we have chosen an emperor, a priest, two featherworkers, a professional merchant, a farmer's family, and a slave. One, the emperor Ahuitzotl, is a pretty well-documented individual. The others we present as composite lives, reconstructed from a wide array of sources. We have given them names, purely of our own invention but consistent with the naming practices of the day. Likewise, the acts, musings, fears, and hopes with which we have endowed these fictional persons are in harmony with Aztec culture.

Let's take a look at these persons, whether their real names are known today or lost to history.

1

# The Emperor

*It was a privilege to be in his company at that moment. The entire city was cheering his return, and we could hear the drums and conch shells announcing his victory from the temple heights. Behind me, Ahuitzotl sat regally on his litter, the platform dripping with shimmering feathers and aromatic flowers, and carried by four stout men. Ahead of us trudged long lines of wailing and dejected war captives, for we had vanquished our rebellious foes to the northeast: the belligerent Huaxtecs. The celebration will go on for days with feasting, dancing, singing, gift-giving, visits from neighboring kings, and ultimately the sacrifice of these captives. With these extravagant celebrations, all the world will be reminded that Ahuitzotl is the all-powerful king and emperor.*

*This day is his, but once I see to the proper observances at the temple and palace, I will not turn down a good meal and a little leisure time in the temazcalli, the cleansing sweat bath. It will help clear my mind. It is an honor to serve my cousin Ahuitzotl as Tlacateccatl. I carry the same military title as he did under his brother Tizoc, and as Tizoc did under his brother Axayacatl. Perhaps I will continue this tradition and someday become lord of these rich lands. It is in the hands of fate and the gods.*

So mused Tzontemoc Tlacateccatl as the Mexica army triumphantly entered Tenochtitlan. He was Ahuitzotl's cousin and an extremely important man in the Mexica government, so important that his exalted title, Tlacateccatl, was attached to his name. He was of noble blood, scarred in wars abroad, and skilled in diplomacy. He served Ahuitzotl in the empire's capital city and in his ruler's military campaigns, but harbored his own ambitions. And he knew Mexica politics, and his ruler, very well. Nonetheless, his own ambitions will not be fulfilled.

## MEXICA RULER AND AZTEC EMPEROR: AN INDISPUTABLE PEDIGREE

Ahuitzotl was the eighth ruler (*tlatoani*) of Tenochtitlan, king of his people the Mexica and emperor of vast regions beyond his home city from 1486 until his death in 1502. He arrived in this enviable and exalted position honestly, descending from the earliest rulers of Tenochtitlan, most recently his grandfather the legendary ruler Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (r. 1440–1468) and his two brothers Axayacatl (r. 1468–1481) and the ill-fated Tizoc (r. 1481–1486). Motecuhzoma had died in 1468 without a suitable male heir. In a strategic political marriage, his daughter Atotoztli had married Tezozomoc, son of Motecuhzoma's uncle Itzcoatl, who had ruled Tenochtitlan earlier, from 1426 until 1440. This union produced the three rulers, Axayacatl, Tizoc, and Ahuitzotl (Figure 1.1).

Ahuitzotl was intricately related to kings, queens, and high-ranking nobles from other cities. By the time he acceded to the throne, Ahuitzotl's royal forebears had provided him with a multitude of lordly relatives situated in powerful positions in city-states in and around the Basin of Mexico. Generations of aristocratic kinship ties were expanded and complicated by the practice of polygyny whereby a noble man acquired many (sometimes very many) wives also of noble blood. Much as noble women from other city-states entered Ahuitzotl's palace as his wives, his own sisters and half-sisters married into neighboring noble lineages. It was a tangled web indeed, one that had been unfolding over several prior rulerships. Ahuitzotl had numerous important cousins of varying genealogical distance ruling in sometimes-allied, sometimes-enemy city-states. Most notably, the second-most powerful king in the realm, Nezahualpilli of Texcoco, was his cousin.

Ahuitzotl's bloodline was impeccable. But it was not sufficient by itself to elevate him to the most powerful position in the land. He also needed the support of the highest-ranking royal advisors, a rather vaguely constituted (to us) noble council, and "the people." But he especially needed affirmation by the two kings who were his primary allies: his cousin Nezahualpilli of Texcoco and Totoquihuaztli of Tlacopan (of unclear genealogical relation to Ahuitzotl).

As *tlatoani*, Ahuitzotl inherited long-standing traditions from his predecessors. His grandfathers, Itzcoatl and Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina,

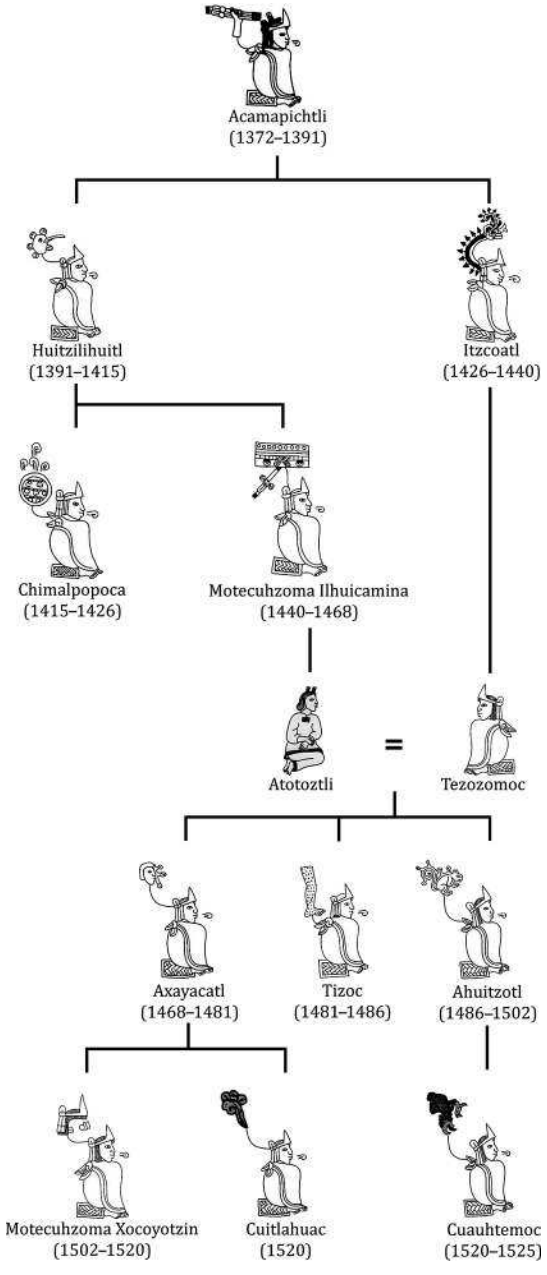


FIGURE 1.1. Genealogy of the kings of Tenochtitlan. Source: Jennifer Berdan Lozano; reproduced with permission. Based on Berdan (2014: 145).

had initiated the military expansion of Tenochtitlan. Itzcoatl had been at the forefront of the power shift that established Tenochtitlan as the primary military power in the Basin of Mexico. He had achieved this in collaboration with Nezahualcoyotl of neighboring Texcoco; the two had overthrown the most powerful Basin of Mexico city-state, Azcapotzalco, by 1430. Itzcoatl then extended that alliance to include Tlacopan to the east, the three city-states unifying as a Triple Alliance (see Map 2). Together, these three succeeded in subduing most of the city-states within the Basin of Mexico. Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina completed those conquests and began Tenochtitlan's imperial expansion well beyond the Basin. Each successive ruler was expected to further these ambitions and continually expand the territorial boundaries of the imperial domain. They considered it their destiny.

In addition to military expectations, Ahuitzotl inherited weighty domestic responsibilities and ritual duties. His title was *tlatoani*, or "speaker," and he spoke often and eloquently. He was responsible for the safety and protection of his people and city, for motivating nobles and commoners in Mexica enterprises, and for punishing them when they fell short. He also took center stage in the grandest and most flamboyant religious celebrations, dancing in elegant attire and at times personally performing human sacrifices.

Ahuitzotl also inherited some significant problems from his immediate predecessors, especially his two rather ill-starred brothers Axayacatl and Tizoc. Their grandfathers' impressive reigns had been, reportedly, times of steady and irrepressible military expansion. However, some of that power, might, and respect had been diminished by Axayacatl and Tizoc, and the formidable reputation of the Mexica had been damaged under their reigns. Ahuitzotl's brothers had not lived up to the military expectations of their royal predecessors and had exposed the empire's vulnerabilities. Specifically, Axayacatl had suffered disastrous losses in a poorly conceived war against the powerful Tarascans to the west (see Chapter 10). Tizoc had only minimally extended the imperial domain, too often losing more warriors in battle than returning home with prisoners: in his military campaign against Metztitlan to obtain prisoners for his own coronation, he skulked back into Tenochtitlan with a meager forty captives, having lost 300 of Tenochtitlan's finest warriors (Durán 1994: 301). These failures (and non-expansion was considered a failure nearly as much

as utter defeat) put considerable pressure on Ahuitzotl to excel in the military arena. Both of his immediate predecessors left Ahuitzotl with quite a bit of cleaning up to do to restore the prestige and power of the Mexica and their allies.

Still, Ahuitzotl benefited from existing, well-honed strategies for handling both positive and negative issues of office. Like the rulers before him, he had vast resources at his command, both human and material. He could amass enormous armies for distant conquests and extract massive quantities of tribute from his subjects. He glorified his city through majestic architecture and spectacular public rituals. He orchestrated political alliances through intimidation and the hosting of lavish feasts, collected strategic information through his association with merchants and merchants-as-spies, and rewarded loyal, valorous, and steadfast warriors. He took center stage in specified, intensely theatrical religious ceremonies. In short, he was a powerful presence at home and abroad. In all of this, Ahuitzotl placed his own personal stamp on coping with royal problems and furthering the goals of his city and empire. How did he do this, all the while staying within the bounds of his exalted office and the confines of his cultural expectations.

## THE PALACE AND ITS PEOPLE

Ahuitzotl lived in a grand, sumptuous palace located in the center of Tenochtitlan, at the hub of urban life. To the east the palace faced the ceremonial precinct dominated by the Huey Teocalli, or Templo Mayor, or Great Temple. Ahuitzotl, along with his periodic distinguished visitors, had premier views to the flamboyant ceremonies performed at the temple's twin sanctuaries. To the southeast bustled Tenochtitlan's marketplace where palace servants and artisans could easily acquire foods, materials, and manufactured goods for the palace's daily needs. The broad causeway to Tlacopan, linking Ahuitzotl's administrative center directly to his western subjects and lands beyond, ended close to the palace (Figure 1.2).

Ahuitzotl inherited the palace from his two immediate predecessors, and we do not know what, if any, modifications he personally made to the vast structure when he moved in. Nature had taken its shots at this building: a flood in 1449 necessitated rebuilding in the

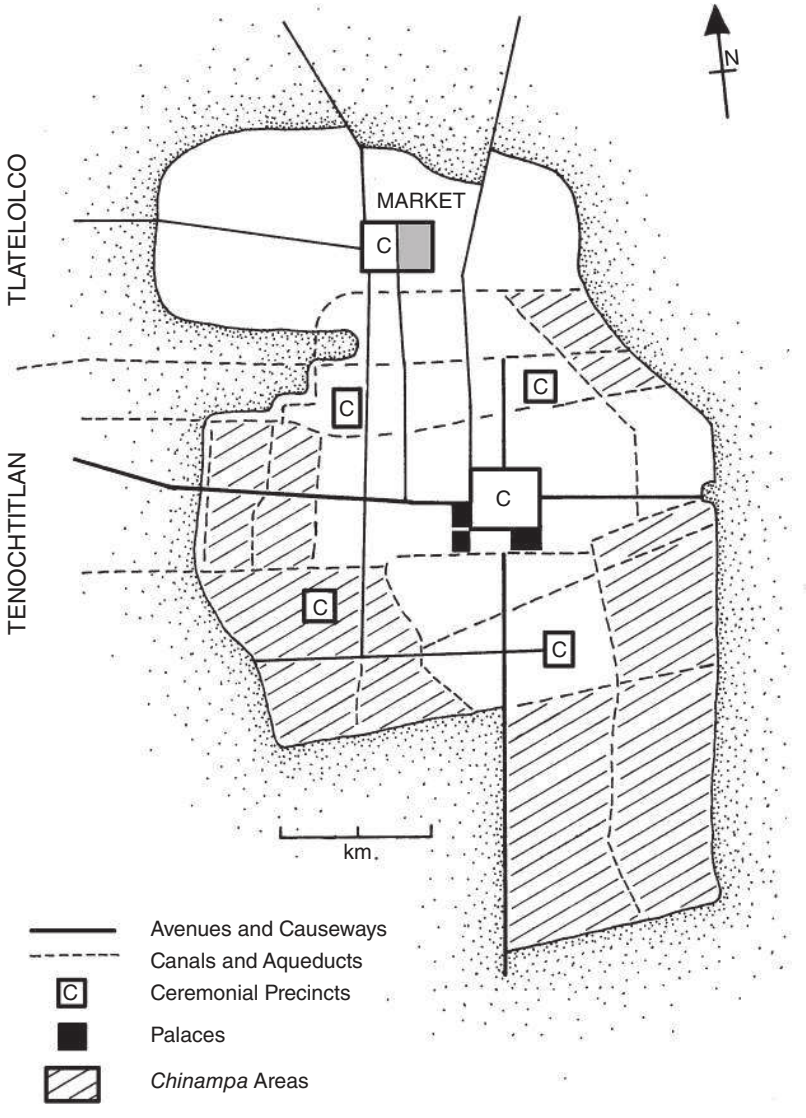


FIGURE 1.2. Plan of Tenochtitlan, showing the locations of the imperial palaces surrounding the sacred precinct. Source: Michael E. Smith.

early 1450s (Evans 2004: 21), and repairs were made to the palace by Axayacatl following a damaging earthquake in 1475. The disastrous flood of 1500, during Ahuitzotl's reign and at least partially due to his own pride and stubbornness, required a great deal of rebuilding

throughout the city. Temples and houses were immersed in about half a meter of water and "The palace and the homes of the lords were not habitable" (Durán 1994: 372). Ahuitzotl saw this urban disaster as an opportunity to upgrade the city and his own palace: "the city was rebuilt with better, finer, and more splendid structures" (Durán 1994: 373). As expected, his palace was the first building to be rebuilt (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1975: 567), and he surely spared nothing in the refurbishing of his already ornate edifice. Although we have no specifics, it is likely that he selected finer stones, renewed fading wall paintings, and planted grander gardens.

If the Great Temple was the spiritual heart of the Aztec universe, the ruler's palace was its political nerve center. It was called *tecpancalli* ("lord's house") in Nahuatl. While we know precious little of the details of Ahuitzotl's palace, this vast structure would have followed the patterns of other better-known Aztec palaces. Comparable buildings provide us with some basics. Any *tecpancalli* worthy of its name sat on a walled, stone platform; the high stone walls were broken by a single main entry. The building would have looked immense and impenetrable from the outside, although while the Spaniards were besieged there in 1520, Mexica attackers demolished and breached the walls in several places (Díaz del Castillo 1963: 290, 292–293). Estimates of the size of Ahuitzotl's palace range from 11,439 to 34,200 square meters (Evans 2004: 20; Smith 2008: 117).

Only the finest materials and most masterful craftsmanship were used in the construction of royal palaces. The palace at nearby Ixtapalapa was constructed of "magnificent stone, cedar wood, and the wood of other sweet-smelling trees, with great rooms and courts" (Díaz del Castillo 1963: 215). Stone was the primary construction material, and López de Gómara (1966: 148), while never setting foot in Mexico, provides a long list including marble, jasper, and alabaster. Sahagún (1950–1982: book 11: 270–271) describes palaces as "smooth," "burnished," and "shining," a tribute to the high quality of stonework. Nonetheless, a substantial amount of wood must also have been used, since during that same siege of the Spaniards in Ahuitzotl's palace in 1520, parts of the palace were severely burned (Cortés 1928: 110). In addition to its extraordinary size, exceptional quality of materials, and construction care, the palace was readily identifiable as such by a string of decorative circles above the entry lintel. This was perhaps more symbol than decoration since it signaled

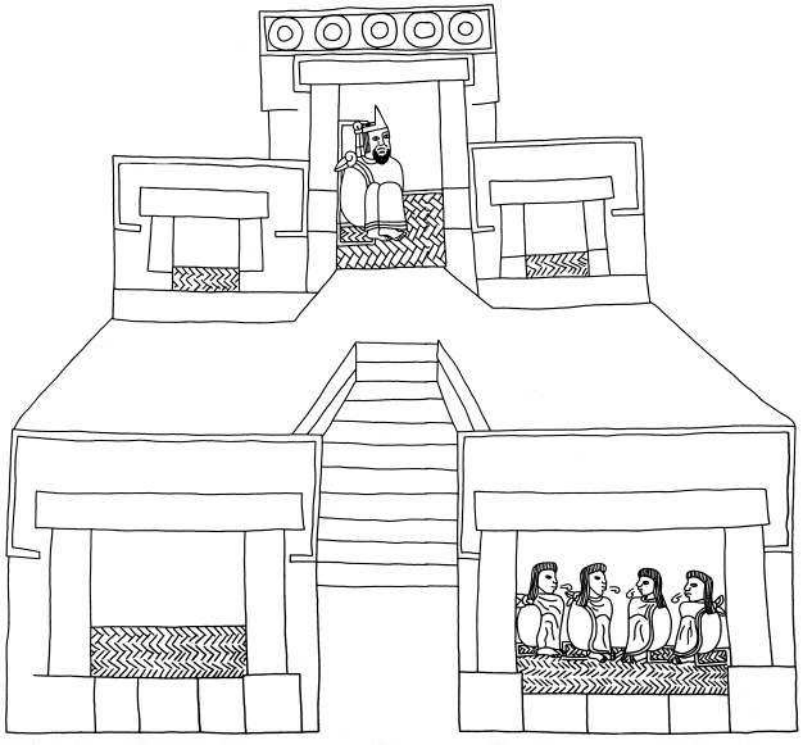

FIGURE 1.3. The palace of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, who is shown in the top room. Reproduced from Berdan and Anawalt (1992: vol. 4: f. 69r).

the nobility of the structure (as seen in Figure 1.3). The discs may have been painted over stucco, but probably more often consisted of pumice cones about 10 centimeters wide by 30 centimeters long and "daubed with plaster and embedded, tenon fashion, into the wall surface" (Evans 1991: 71–72).

Entering the palace by climbing several steps onto the platform, the (usually intimidated) visitor walked onto a large open courtyard (*tecpanquiahuac*) surrounded by numerous roofed rooms dedicated to the administration of the ruler's city and empire (Figure 1.4). There was a courtroom for nobles and a separate one for commoners. The accumulated wealth of the empire was housed in extensive depositories, and consisted of tributes (including abundant foodstuffs) delivered from conquered subjects as well as palace-made goods. This