

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51636-5 — Everyday Life in the Aztec World
Frances Berdan , Michael E. Smith
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Everyday Life in the Aztec World

In *Everyday Life in the Aztec World*, Frances Berdan and Michael Smith offer a view into the lives of real people, doing very human things, in the unique cultural world of Aztec central Mexico. The first part focuses on people from an array of social classes – the emperor, a priest, a feather worker, a merchant, a farmer, and a slave – who interacted in the economic, social, and religious realms of the Aztec world. In the second part, the authors examine four important life events where the lives of these and others intersected: the birth and naming of a child, market day, a day at court, and a battle. Through the microscopic views of individual types of lives, and interweaving those lives into the broader Aztec world, Berdan and Smith recreate everyday life in the final years of the Aztec Empire.

Frances F. Berdan is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at California State University, San Bernardino. She is the author or co-author of fourteen books on aspects of Aztec culture, most recently *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*. Her four-volume co-authored *The Codex Mendoza* won the James R. Wiseman Book Award from the Archaeological Institute of America in 1992.

Michael E. Smith is Professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. Director of the ASU Teotihuacan Research Laboratory, he is the author of twelve books, including *At Home with the Aztecs: An Archaeologist Uncovers Their Daily Life*, which won the Best Popular Book award from the Society of American Archaeology in 2017.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51636-5 — Everyday Life in the Aztec World
Frances Berdan , Michael E. Smith
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Everyday Life in the Aztec World

FRANCES F. BERDAN

California State University, San Bernardino

MICHAEL E. SMITH

Arizona State University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51636-5 — Everyday Life in the Aztec World
Frances Berdan, Michael E. Smith
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi - 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521516365

DOI: 10.1017/9781139031844

© Frances F. Berdan and Michael E. Smith 2021

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2021

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ Books Limited, Padstow Cornwall.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Berdan, Frances F., author. | Smith, Michael E., author.

TITLE: Everyday life in the Aztec world / Frances Berdan, California State University, San Bernardino; Michael E. Smith, Arizona State University.

DESCRIPTION: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2019052440 (print) | LCCN 2019052441 (ebook) | ISBN 9780521516365 (hardback) | ISBN 9780521736220 (paperback) | ISBN 9781139031844 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Aztecs—Social life and customs—Juvenile literature. | Aztecs—History—Juvenile literature.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC F1219.76.S64 B47 2020 (print) | LCC F1219.76.S64 (ebook) | DDC 972—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019052440>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019052441>

ISBN 978-0-521-51636-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-73622-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Pronunciation Guide</i>	xiii
<i>A Little Background</i>	xv
<i>A Note on Sources</i>	xxiv
<i>List of Fictional Characters</i>	xxix
PART I LIVES	1
1 The Emperor	3
2 The Priest	34
3 The Featherworker	54
4 The Merchant	83
5 The Farmer	106
6 The Slave	126
PART II INTERSECTING LIVES	145
7 A Child Is Born	147
8 Market Day in Tlatelolco	170

9 Judgment Day	192
10 A Battle Far Afield	208
<i>Epilogue</i>	232
<i>Glossary</i>	237
<i>References</i>	239
<i>Index</i>	247

Illustrations

Maps

1 The Aztec Empire in 1519	<i>page</i> xvi
2 The Basin of Mexico in 1519 with the three Triple Alliance capital cities	xvii

Figures

1.1 Genealogy of the kings of Tenochtitlan	<i>page</i> 5
1.2 Plan of Tenochtitlan	8
1.3 The palace of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin	10
1.4 The Texcocan royal palace	11
1.5 The game of <i>patolli</i> with wagered goods	16
1.6 The ruler presents goods to the poor	17
1.7 The rulers Tizoc and Ahuitzotl on a dedication stone	25
1.8 Sacrificial offerings at the Great Temple dedication	27
1.9 Ahuitzotl's conquests	28
2.1 Priests traveling with the god Huitzilopochtli	36
2.2 A twin temple	37
2.3 The sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan	39
2.4 A circular temple dedicated to Quetzalcoat	40
2.5 A curer	41
2.6 Priest observing the heavens	45
2.7 Novice priest being punished	49

2.8	Priests gaining rewards as warriors	50
3.1	High-ranking nobles with feathered devices	55
3.2	Macuil ocelotl, a featherworker god	56
3.3	The ruler's military array	59
3.4	Featherworker working in a residential patio	64
3.5	Professional merchants in the Tlatelolco marketplace	66
3.6	Feathered "coyote" shield with gold embellishments	69
3.7	Featherworker tying feathers	70
3.8	"Motecuhzoma's headdress"	71
3.9	Boys making glue for featherworking	75
3.10	Colonial feathered triptych	78
3.11	Merchants bestowing captured feathered devices on Ahuitzotl	80
4.1	Basin of Mexico <i>pochteca</i> towns	85
4.2	Merchants with luxury goods in the Tlatelolco marketplace	86
4.3	Major trading centers, in and out of the empire	87
4.4	Merchants killed on the road	89
4.5	A colonial merchant's house in Tenochtitlan/ Mexico City	90
4.6	Preparations for a lavish merchant feast	93
4.7	<i>Pochteca</i> on the road	96
4.8	A merchant accepts the admonitions of his elders	98
4.9	A deceased merchant with his wealth	103
5.1	A modern agricultural terrace with maize	108
5.2	Aztec <i>chinampa</i> still being farmed in 1905	109
5.3	Kinship diagram of the members of Epcoatl's household	111
5.4	An excavated rural house	112
5.5	Settlement hierarchy	114
5.6	Stalls for pottery in a street market, Cuernavaca, 1980	116
5.7	Childhood training for boys and girls	121
5.8	Tying the knot at an Aztec wedding	123
6.1	A rebellious king is strangled and his family is captured and enslaved	127
6.2	Slaves for sale in a marketplace	129
6.3	Nearly complete excavated <i>metate</i>	132
6.4	Producing cotton textiles	134
6.5	Spinning and weaving equipment	135
6.6	Selling children into slavery during a famine	139

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
6.7 Arraying a bathed slave for sacrifice	140
6.8 Archaeological site of Calixtlahuaca	142
6.9 Finely woven and decorated cotton textiles	143
7.1 Sweat baths, ancient and modern	150
7.2 Midwife massaging an expectant mother's belly	152
7.3 <i>Cihuaopatli</i> plant, "women's medicine," in the Badianus herbal	155
7.4 Female deities, the <i>cihuateteo</i> , descending to earth	158
7.5 The goddess Chalchiuhtlicue	160
7.6 Visiting and feasting in honor of a new birth	162
7.7 Divination: a mother consults the <i>tonalpouhqui</i> , or reader of the book of days	163
7.8 Children receiving instruction, ages five and six	166
7.9 Children being punished, ages ten and eleven	167
8.1 A bean seller in the Tlatelolco marketplace	171
8.2 Marketplace with slaves and other goods	174
8.3 Paddling a canoe	176
8.4 The tamale seller	179
8.5 Copal for sale in the Tepoztlán market	182
8.6 Cacao beans	184
8.7 A sample of clothing paid to the Aztec rulers	185
8.8 Offerings during the ceremonies of Huey Toçoztli	189
8.9 The tailor	190
9.1 A thief	194
9.2 Drunkards	197
9.3 Stoning an adulterous couple as punishment	198
9.4 Strangling and beating as punishments	199
9.5 Levels of Aztec courts	200
9.6 An Aztec jail	204
9.7 The Calixtlahuaca royal palace	205
10.1 Totonacs from the eastern part of the Aztec Empire	209
10.2 Human sacrifice	211
10.3 Warriors capture enemies and win rewards	213
10.4 Jaguar warrior in ceremonial combat	214
10.5 Titled warriors	215
10.6 Merchants assaulted on the road	218
10.7 Aztec warriors surround an enemy city	219
10.8 A burning temple, symbol and reality of military conquest	227

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51636-5 — Everyday Life in the Aztec World
Frances Berdan , Michael E. Smith
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Preface

Many books have been written on the ancient Aztecs. Some are scholarly, some are specialized, some are general-interest. But the authors of this book, having contributed to that pile over many years, have decided on a somewhat different approach, as much as possible taking a look at these people as they saw themselves, and each other. In the pages that follow, we offer a selection of six lives and four events or circumstances as *entrées* into discussions of more general aspects of daily life in the Aztec world.

The first section of this book provides in-depth views into the lives of a selection of Aztec persons: an emperor, a priest, a featherworker, a professional merchant, a farmer, and a slave. We embed vignettes inside each chapter to provide a more intimate sense of what it was like to live in Aztec Mexico around 1500 CE. While these vignettes and their characters are fictional, everything about them – the people’s names, activities, roles, relationships, even their thoughts and prayers – is based on what we know about Aztec culture. Our first “life” is a real historical figure, King Ahuitzotl, who ruled Tenochtitlan and the Aztec Empire from 1486 until his death in 1502. The other “lives” are representative, composite figures of particular occupations and social positions. Even Ahuitzotl, while a unique personality with his own considerable achievements, was typical in many ways of the rulers who preceded and succeeded him. For a taste of diversity, some vignettes are set within the city of Tenochtitlan, while others are set in other locales of the Aztec domain. In all, the vignettes provide backdrops for more general discussions of Aztec daily life based on current archaeological and ethnohistorical research.

While this perspective of dissecting individual lives is valuable, it tends to encapsulate and isolate these persons in their own little

worlds. Yet all of these people interacted in the broader economic, social, political, and religious realms of the Aztec world. So the second section of the book is devoted to four specific and particularly important events through which these and other people intersect: the birth and naming of a child, a market day, a day at court, and a war. These microscopic views of individual types of lives, and the subsequent integration of them into the broader Aztec world, offer both depth and breadth to a view of everyday life in the late years of the Aztec Empire. Of course, every day new and exciting tidbits (and often more than tidbits) of information are unearthed and revealed – these turn our heads inside out and make us rethink things we thought we knew for sure. This book is built on what we know as of this moment.

Our hope is that you, the reader, leave with both a current understanding of Aztec culture and an intimate “sense” of its people – Aztec civilization was not just abstract social arrangements or economic exchanges or military conquests. It was real, live people doing very human things in their unique cultural world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was written at the behest of Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press. We owe a large debt of gratitude to her for her vision and her gentle prodding when we lagged. We are grateful to Jennifer Berdan Lozano for constructing expert maps and other images. Arizona State University anthropology majors Ciara Bernal, Molly Corr, and Leah Moyes helped process graphics. We also appreciate the kind advice of Emily Umberger and Karl Taube on individual images and artifacts. We are very fortunate to draw on the expertise of Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, who prepared the index. We are also grateful to Alan Sandstrom for contributing his keen eye and vast ethnographic experience. We thank our spouses, Cynthia Heath-Smith and Bob Berdan, for putting up with us during the writing and preparation periods.

Pronunciation Guide

The Aztecs spoke Nahuatl (NA-watl), which means, in essence, clear and understandable speech. Other people around them, and in more distant regions of their imperial domain, spoke a wide array of other languages including Otomí, Matlatzinca, Mazahua, Tlapanec, Popoluca, Mixtec, Zapotec, Totonac, Huastec, Tepehua, and others.

The Nahuatl of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica is called Classical Nahuatl by modern-day linguists. This language has survived to the present day, retaining its essential structure, speech patterns, and vocabulary; it has also adapted to nearly 500 years of linguistic, cultural, and historical change. Today, 1.5–2 million people still speak one or another dialect of this tenacious language; many of these speakers call their language Mexicano (Me-shee-KA-no). Sixteenth-century documents written in Nahuatl, along with present-day spoken versions of Nahuatl, provide us with clues to understanding the speech patterns of Classical Nahuatl. Here are some general rules to follow (several examples are personal names you will encounter in this book).

1. *Stress* or emphasis was always on the next-to-last syllable of a word, with very few exceptions.
2. *Vowels* were quite nuanced (with long and short variations), but they were essentially pronounced as follows:
 - a** as in English **calm**: *Yaotl* (YA-otl): war, or enemy
 - e** as in English **get**: *Tlexico* (tle-SHEE-Ko): Fire-Bee
 - i** as in English **bee**: *chilli* (CHEE-llee): chile
 - o** as in English **slow**: *Tototontli* (to-to-TON-tli): Little Bird

Note: In the colonial documents, **o** and **u** are often used interchangeably, and may actually represent an intermediate sound. So, for example, we see Tenochtitlan/Tenuchtitlan or calpolli/calpulli.

You will also encounter vowels attached to a preceding *hu-* or *qu-*:

- hua** as in English **wash**: Cihuacoatl (See-wa-KO-atl): Woman-serpent, a goddess
 - hue** as in English **waiter**: *huexolotl* (way-SHO-lotl): turkey
 - hui** as in English **weak**: Ahuizotl (a-WEE-tsotl)
 - qua** as in English **quantity**: *qualli* (KWA-lee): good
 - que** as in English **kennel**: Quetzalcoatl (Ke-tsal-KO-atl): Feathered-serpent, a god
 - qui** as in English **keep**: *oquichtli* (o-KEECH-tli): man
3. For the most part, *consonants* resemble those in English or Spanish. The following are the others:
- c** before a, o/u, or a consonant = **k**: *cacahuatl* (ka-KA-watl): cacao bean
 - c** before e or i = **s**: *cipactli* (see-PAC-tli): alligator
 - ll** as in English **fall**, but held longer: *ollin* (O-lleen): movement
 - x** as in English **shelf**: *xochitl* (SHO-cheetl): flower
 - z** as in English **sink**: *mazatl* (MA-satl): deer
 - tz** as in English **bats**: *centzon* (CEN-tson): plenty, lots
 - tl** is one sound, a *t* followed by a soft *k*: *coyotl* (KO-yotl): coyote

Note: The Spaniards who met the Aztecs in the early sixteenth century had particular difficulty with the **-tl** sound, especially at the ends of words. The Spaniards were more at ease ending such words in **-te**, so *xitomatl* (shee-TO-matl) entered Spanish as *tomate* (tomato), *tecolotl* (te-KO-lotl) became *tecolote* (owl), and *zopilotl* (tso-PEE-lotl) became *zopilote* (vulture).

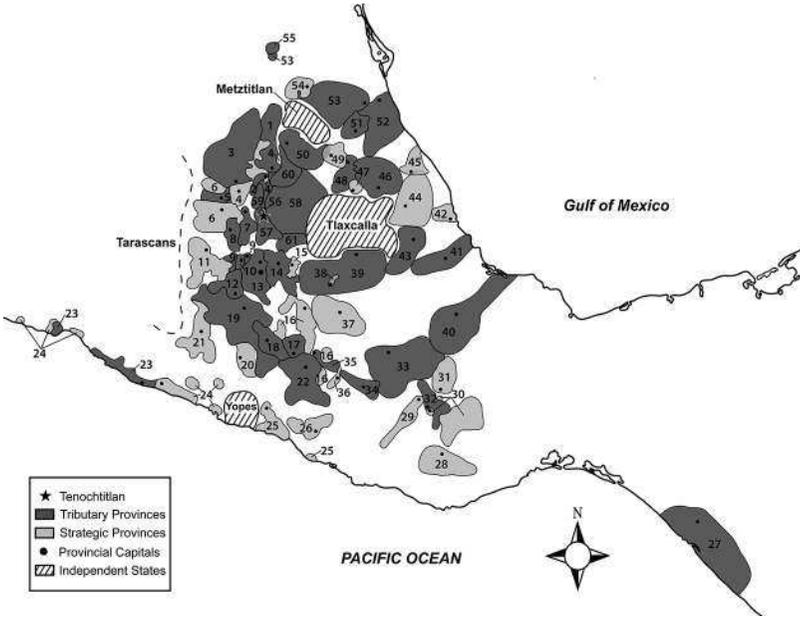
4. Nahuatl also had a *glottal stop*, like *uh-uh* in English. It was often missed in the early documents, but where it was recognized it was written as an *h*. So, for example, *ohkli* (road) is often seen as *otli*, and *ozomahkli* (monkey) usually appears as *ozomatli*.
5. Spelling rules in sixteenth-century Europe were rather fluid, and this is reflected in colonial Mexican documents. This is why the Mexica ruler Motecuhzoma (our preferred spelling) appeared variously as Moctezuma, Montezuma, Montecuzoma, Mohtecuzoma, and so on. Similarly, Texcoco, neighboring city of Tenochtitlan, was spelled at least sixteen different ways in the early Spanish documents (Johnson 2017: xiii).

A Little Background

The year is Chicueye Tecpatl (Eight Flint Knife), or 1500 in the Christian calendar. The Aztec Empire has grown into the most powerful force in central Mexico since its inception in 1430. During the intervening seventy years the military might and political prowess of three allied Basin of Mexico cities have extended their dominion from the Gulf coast to the Pacific coast, and as far south as the present-day border between Mexico and Guatemala. By the time of the Spanish arrival in 1519, the empire had expanded even further (Map 1). The three allied imperial capitals are Tenochtitlan, home of the Mexica; the Acolhua's primary city of Texcoco; and the Tepaneca city of Tlacopan (Map 2). Together, they have created the vastest empire ever seen in Mesoamerica. They have achieved this through military conquest and royal diplomacy, holding their vast domains through a combination of intimidation, fear, cajoling, outright military force, strategic trading, and promises of economic and social rewards.

The Aztecs were the last in a long series of great civilizations in the prehistory and history of Mesoamerica (a region stretching roughly between central Mexico and Central American countries adjacent to Mexico in the south and east). Among the best known of these are the Olmec (ca. 1200–600 BCE), Classic Maya (250–900 CE), Teotihuacan (150–700 CE), and the Toltecs of Tula (950–1150). These civilizations and cities were in ruins by the time the Aztecs arrived in central Mexico to make their own mark on history.

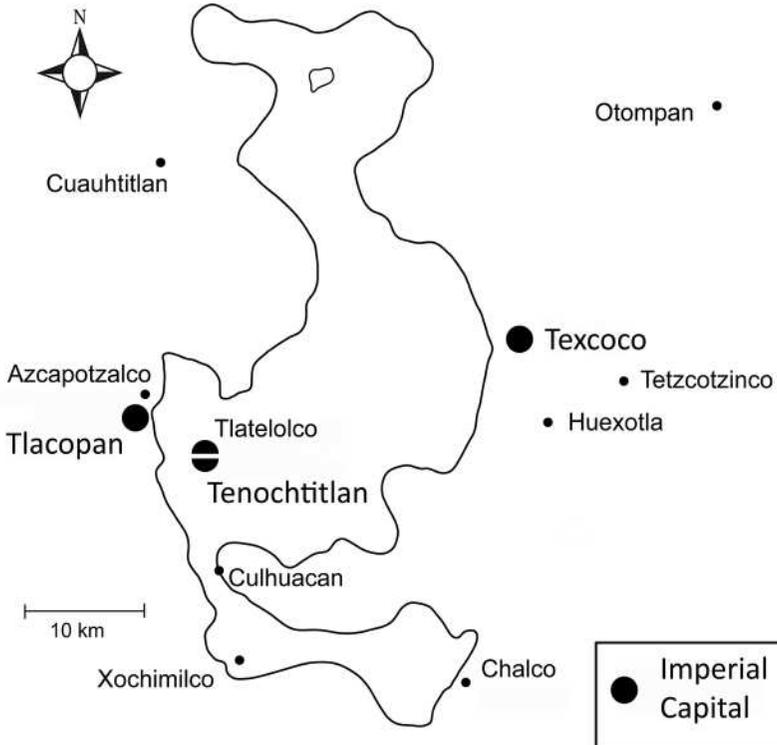
From around the eleventh to fourteenth centuries several separate but related groups, collectively called *Chichimeca*, migrated from the deserts of northern Mexico into the highland plateaus and valleys of central Mexico. The last of these to arrive were the people usually referred to as “Aztecs,” who actually called themselves Mexica or



MAP 1. The Aztec Empire in 1519. Source: Jennifer Berdan Lozano, based on Berdan et al. (1996); reproduced with permission.

Culhua-Mexica. Other migrants included the Matlatzinca, who settled to the west of the Basin of Mexico; the Tlahuica, who settled just to the south; the Mexica's future enemies the Tlaxcallans, who settled to the east; and several groups such as the Chalca and Xochimilca, who preceded the Mexica into the Basin of Mexico. While all these groups spoke Nahuatl and shared a basic cultural core, they each fiercely defended their own separate identity and political autonomy. When we use the term "Aztec" here, we refer to the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of highland central Mexico during the Late Postclassic period (1350–1521 CE). Otherwise, we will focus on specific identified groups. Other peoples inhabited central Mexico during this period as well, notably the Otomí, who shared some of the Basin of Mexico with the Nahuatl-speaking groups.

In the year Two House (1325) the Mexica established themselves on a rather unpromising island in the midst of Lake Texcoco, a lake that dominated the highland Basin of Mexico (and now largely covered by Mexico City). Upon entering this basin, they encountered



MAP 2. The Basin of Mexico in 1519 with the three Triple Alliance capital cities. Source: Jennifer Berdan Lozano; reproduced with permission.

a scene left behind by the dissolution of Tula: a landscape divided into competing dynastic city-states, a rapidly growing population, and a flourishing economy based on intensive agriculture and lacustrine resources. They were not particularly welcomed, but they did become useful as mercenaries in the internecine wars among the Basin city-states. Gaining repute as stalwart and fierce warriors, they acquired resources and lands beyond their humble and rather impoverished island.

By the time a hundred years had passed the Mexica had orchestrated an alliance with two other prominent polities, Texcoco and Tlacopan, and had managed to gain political and military preeminence in the Basin. This was in 1430. From that date until their conquest by the Spaniards in 1521, the Mexica and their allies forged

an empire of unprecedented scope in Mesoamerica. That empire stretched through ecologically diverse and resource-rich lands – from highland valleys to semi-tropical mountains to luxuriant lowland forests and coastal zones. Military and political control of these regions funneled resources and wealth into the bulging coffers of the Mexica and their allies. Food staples such as maize, beans, and chia arrived from highland and temperate lands; cacao and cotton were transported from the lowlands; massive amounts of clothing and ornate feathered warrior costumes were delivered from throughout the conquered provinces; and a wide diversity of goods and products such as exquisite feathers, gold, wild animal pelts, copper objects, turquoise masks, precious greenstone beads, wood and reed products, dyes, lime, and shells came from hither and thither about the imperial domain. Collectively, this wealth underwrote the exceptional lifestyles of the rulers and other elites, rewarded valiant warriors, financed future wars, and helped feed the burgeoning dominant populations in times of environmental stress or agricultural disaster.

THE YEAR 1500

In the year 1500, Tenochtitlan, the political and military capital of the empire, is a city of unprecedented size and grandeur. Its population approaches 200,000–250,000 people, its great temple dominates the urban landscape, its nearby market is the grandest and liveliest in the realm, and its island location attracts multitudes of travelers and traders, crowding the lake with canoes and the causeways with pedestrians. It is home to a vast array of people of different occupations, ethnicities, and stations in life. It is, in a word, cosmopolitan. But Tenochtitlan is not the only city in the region, although it is by far the largest and most powerful. The many other cities around the Basin of Mexico lakeshore are dwarfed by Tenochtitlan – the next largest are Texcoco at 25,000 and Huexotla at 23,000 (Smith 2008: 152). But most range from around 1,200 to 12,000 residents.

These concentrated urban populations are supported by intensive agricultural systems that produce large surpluses of staple foods (especially maize, beans, chia, and amaranth), vegetables (such as tomatoes, squashes, and chiles), and ornamentals (there were constant demands for flowers in rituals). The shallow, spring-fed lakes of the

Basin of Mexico allow farmers to build and cultivate *chinampas*, or artificially raised fields. Ranging from 2–4 meters wide and 20–40 meters long, they are built up in fairly regular fashion, resulting in an efficient network of canals. In this fashion, Tenochtitlan and the lakeshore cities have grown beyond their landed foundations. Despite the high altitude of the Basin of Mexico (around 7,000 feet above sea level), these plots provide high sustained productivity through multi-cropping, crop rotation, staggered seedbeds, and augmentation of natural fertilizers and water from adjacent canals (Berdan 2014: 80–81). Beyond the lakeshore and in other regions of the Aztec world, people draw on other agricultural techniques such as canal irrigation, terrace agriculture, household gardens, and check dams (Chapter 5) to make a living. People complement agricultural food supplies with domesticated dogs and turkeys (and their eggs), fish, wild animals (such as rabbit, deer, and waterfowl), and a plethora of wild plants for food and medicines.

Like every other economic enterprise in the Aztec world, agriculture is very labor intensive. There are no beasts of burden, iron or steel tools, or practical uses of wheels. Domestic economies dominate – while farmers toil in nearby fields and fishermen cast their nets in the lakes, their wives and daughters spin and weave cloth from maguey and cotton fibers. This industry should not be underestimated. All women learn to spin and weave, and clothing and cloth are universally needed. Cloths serve a multitude of purposes, from tortilla covers to ritual hangings to corpse wrappings. Decorated clothing serves as status symbols, gifts, and rewards; cloth is traded for other goods in the marketplaces; vast amounts of clothing are paid in tribute/taxes; and specific cotton cloths serve as money. The slave in Chapter 6 is undertaking a typical and important economic activity.

There is also a great deal of economic specialization in the Aztec world. Some specialists produce high-demand, commonplace objects such as pottery, reed mats, obsidian knives, and farming implements. Others manufacture high-status luxury goods. These include workers in gold and fine stones, in addition to the featherworkers highlighted in Chapter 3. And many people provide specialized services, from ambassadors, scribes and zookeepers to teachers, merchants (Chapter 4), midwives (Chapter 7), prostitutes, and porters. Many of these people work “at home,” while others are employed in palaces by noble

patrons or spend a great deal of time on the road (such as merchants and porters). Frequent and lively marketplaces (Chapter 8) bring together the producers of these many specializations, allowing individual people and households to diversify their diet, household goods, and social and ritual needs.

The world of the Mexica and their neighbors is divided into numerous *altepetl* (“water-hill”), or city-states, that normally contain a dominant city and adjacent rural areas. These are the essential building blocks for political life in pre-Spanish central Mexico. The Basin of Mexico contains from 30 to 50 *altepetl*—the entire landscape is divided up into these polities. To qualify as a city-state, a polity must have “a legitimate ruling dynasty, a sense (if not the actuality) of political autonomy, control over local lands and labor, a well-established founding legend, often with mythological underpinnings, and a patron deity complete with temple.” Some also contain a dominant ethnic group, feature an economic specialization (such as featherworking or ceramics), and “may have enjoyed renown as extraordinary market or pilgrimage destinations” (Berdan 2014: 135–136). Each city-state is headed by a *tlatoni*, a ruler who commands the allegiance and loyalty of the *altepetl*’s residents who go to war on its behalf. While city-states vary considerably in size and influence, “a typical *altepetl* in the Basin of Mexico had a population of 10,000–15,000 and covered an area of 70–100 square km” (Smith 2008: 90) – so in 1500 the entire Basin of Mexico is crammed with these polities. It is a volatile environment, with wars set off by the barest social slight and alliances sought to strengthen political and social positions. There is constant posturing and jockeying through deft diplomacy, clever elite marriages, ostentatious feasting, threats of force, treacherous assassinations, and outright war.

Altepetl are divided into smaller segments, called *calpolli* or *tlaxilacalli*. These districts appear to have hierarchical internal structures, and unsurprisingly the ruler’s *calpolli* was considered more important than the others (Johnson 2017; Lockhart 1992: 16–20). Each of these city sections boasts its own name, local leader, military school, patron deity, temple, and portion of city-state lands. Labor duties owed to the city-state are apportioned by *calpolli*. The merchants and featherworkers in this book live in particularly well-defined *calpolli*, and our warriors also go to war in line with their *calpolli* membership.

In Tenochtitlan and other city-state capitals, rulers and other nobles build sumptuous palaces, adorn themselves with exquisite clothing and jewelry, and command a multitude of slaves, servants, and even other nobles to serve them (Chapter 1). Their extraordinary lifestyle is supported by the vast majority of the population: commoners who work the land, fish the lakes, and manufacture everyday needs such as pottery, baskets, and stone tools. Birthright defines a person's place on the social ladder. Nonetheless, some people born as commoners can attain wealth and prestige through achievements in commerce and on the battlefield, and some born as nobles are becoming less and less "noble." The seemingly bald distinction between noble and commoner is becoming nuanced and complicated by persons in a fluid and dynamic middle range, especially professional merchants and luxury artisans.

Regardless of their occupation or social position, Aztec people experience similar life-cycle paths and are socialized into a strict set of cultural codes, social expectations, and behavioral etiquette. Virtues of obedience, moderation, and hard work are highly valued and instilled in children from an early age, from fathers to their sons and from mothers to their daughters. Formal schooling picks up where the parents leave off (probably around age fifteen). The culture's fundamental values continue to be reinforced into adulthood, when breaches of the society's norms are met with severe punishments in formal judicial institutions (Chapter 9).

Beyond the mundane, much of peoples' daily lives revolve around the world of the religious. People are exposed to the symbols and realities of Aztec religion at every turn. The Aztec religious world is populated with a grand assortment of gods and goddesses prevailing over just about every realm of nature and humanity. Myths and legends validate rulerships and *altepetl*; temples dominate the urban landscapes; sculptures, decorations, and even clothing depict the supernatural; and a trained hierarchy of priests (Chapter 2) performs daily and periodic ceremonies. Some of these ceremonies are amazingly theatrical and flamboyant, and may include sacrifices of human beings. This is the public arena, but individuals also frequently perform rituals in their own homes, whether as separate events or as part of larger public ceremonies (Berdan 2017).

The practice of human sacrifice among the Mexica and their neighbors is embedded in potent religious beliefs. One of these is the endless cycle of life and death, with death necessary for the continuation and rejuvenation of life. This is linked to the mythologically supported belief that the people have a debt to pay to the gods for their very existence, and they pay in their most precious commodity, human blood. In one important myth, Huitzilopochtli, a god of the sun and war and patron of the Mexica, battles his sister Coyolxauhqui (the moon) and brothers (the stars) for celestial primacy. This battle is reenacted daily at dawn – who can dispute that the sun fights off the forces of night (the moon and stars) every day? And how is Huitzilopochtli to gain the strength to prevail, to provide the world with heat and light? The Mexica inserted themselves into this essential battle, believing they are obligated to offer blood, notably human blood, to energize their patron god. They provide blood for this and other ritual necessities through autosacrifice as well as terminal human sacrifice. As the empire grows, human sacrifices increasingly come into the purview of rulers' political motives – some sacrificial ceremonies, while always performed ritually, are intentionally massive in order to intimidate friends and enemies alike.

By the year 1500, the Aztec Empire has held sway over central Mexico for only about seventy years – fewer than three generations. Some people have lived in this imperial world almost from beginning to end. During that short span, the small island city of Tenochtitlan has spread into its surrounding lake and grown into an enormous metropolis. The empire now fields impressive and well-equipped armies, expanding its political dominance into rich and exotic lands. Luxurious goods and ordinary foodstuffs flow into the palaces and marketplaces of Tenochtitlan and its neighboring cities. The magnificence of adornments and clothing dripping from rulers and nobles is unprecedented. People's everyday lives pivot around making a living, relating to one another, and maintaining good relations with the many deities that populate their supernatural world. In this environment, exuberant and flamboyant ceremonies punctuate a person's daily grind. Part of life is predictable, ordinary, and repetitive; part of life is so extremely different (especially with theatrical ceremonies) that the contrast must have jarred one's senses. Maybe that is the point.

A Little Background

xxiii

This, then, is the setting in which the people highlighted in this book lived the mundane and spectacular moments of their lives. This is their world. It has a history. It has a landscape. It has hopes and dreams, tensions and conflicts. It has an intricate web of social and political relations. It has an ideological foundation. It has codes of conduct and rules of morality that guide each individual's life. Within this universe any person has occasion to see and perhaps interact with people of different languages, customs, styles of clothing, occupations, and social standing. We are fortunate to glimpse this colorful, vibrant world.

A Note on Sources

The Aztec Empire came to an abrupt end with the Spanish conquest nearly 500 years ago. How do we reconstruct a way of life in some ways obliterated by a foreign conquest, and in other ways surviving but transformed? The Mexica city of Tenochtitlan was quickly overlain by the Spanish colonial City of Mexico; much of the native population was decimated by disease; and the trauma of conquest interrupted some native institutions and transfigured much of native culture. Still, many native languages and customs survived through the three centuries of colonial rule and up to the present day. We therefore have the luxury of studying, ethnographically, present-day descendants of the ancient Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples. Revealing tenacious customs, these studies shed a good deal of light on life in ancient times: modern native women weave on looms mirroring those of the Aztecs; men continue to cultivate the age-old crops of maize, beans, chia, chiles, and many others; men, women, and children undertake devoted and lengthy pilgrimages to honor artfully blended Christian and ancient gods (see Sandstrom 1991; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2017). So there are some *ethnographic analogies* that we can draw on, keeping in mind the sometimes-dramatic effects of 500 years of intervening history. But this is only one of three primary keys to unlocking the ancient world of the Aztecs. Here we lean most heavily on two other major types of sources: *written documents* and *archaeological investigations*.

The Aztecs were literate. They had scribes. They had paper. They had books. They had enormous collections of books. These books were pictorial in presentation and their content ranged from histories and economic accounts to religious manuals and maps (see Chapter 2). Very few of these pre-Spanish pictorial codices remain from

throughout Mesoamerica, and arguably only one that we may call “Aztec” (the *Matrícula de Tributos*). However, scores of pictorial documents, copied from or based on their pre-Columbian antecedents, were produced in the early colonial period. Among these, we rely most heavily on the *Codex Mendoza* (Berdan and Anawalt 1992), a seventy-one-folio pictorial codex with Spanish annotations and commentaries that documents Aztec military conquests, taxes or tributes paid by thirty-eight conquered provinces, and daily life from infancy to old age.

Some other colonial documents, such as the accounts written by the Dominican friar Diego Durán, derived from their authors’ access to now-lost ancient pictorial codices. In a class by itself is the *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain* compiled by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún. This Franciscan intellectual mastered the Nahuatl language and recorded an impressive compendium of Aztec cultural and historical knowledge; this information was communicated to him, about fifty years after the Spanish conquest, by native “informants” as text in Nahuatl and as visuals in hundreds of pictorial images.

Among the myriad other colonial documentary sources are accounts of the Spanish conquest itself by Hernando Cortés in his five letters to his king, and the “true” history of the conquest by one of his *conquistadores*, Bernal Díaz del Castillo. We also can draw on many secular writings, ranging from the mid- to late sixteenth-century *Relaciones geográficas* to the 1570s natural history of Francisco Hernández to historical chronicles written in Spanish by mestizos such as Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a descendant of the rulers of Texcoco. In addition, many documents were composed in Nahuatl during the colonial period; these begin to appear as early as a decade after the Spanish conquest and range from poetry and chronicles to censuses, wills, and minutes of town council meetings. They encompass land disputes, inheritance, and even personal letters – all intriguing windows into lives played out on a daily basis. These are the major types of documentary sources, but it is a very rich and diverse corpus; a more detailed rendition of ethnohistoric sources can be found in Berdan (2014: 5–15).

We must, of course, look carefully at any written source – all too frequently they contain hidden (and not so hidden) biases of all sorts.

Some of these are overt, such as Spanish religious documents explicitly condemning native religious beliefs and practices. Others are more nuanced, reflecting perspective or attitude: Alva Ixtlilxochitl sees native history from his noble Texcocan viewpoint, the *conquistadores* perceive the exotic Aztec world through their familiar Spanish cultural lenses, and Hernando Cortés at the head of the Spanish contingent is clearly a self-promoter. Other matters sometimes peek through the pages: for instance, the *conquistador* Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1963: 238) apologizes for an incomplete report during the Spaniards' tense visit to Tenochtitlan ("I had other thoughts in my head at the time than that of telling a story. I was more concerned with my military duties"); the Spanish interpreter of the *Codex Mendoza* offers excuses for his rough and crude writing style since he was in a great hurry; and Hernando Cortés (1928: 89) gave up describing market commodities because of "their very number and the fact that I do not know their names." But we can be optimistic: these sorts of pitfalls and limitations permeate the documentary record, but careful and critical readings and interpretations have yielded (and continue to yield) a wealth of detailed information and nuanced understandings of the Aztec way of life on the eve of the Spanish conquest. As a general rule, the more that different types of unrelated sources corroborate one another, the more they can be believed. Furthermore, documents do not bear the total burden of this cultural reconstruction; this load is shared with archaeological findings.

Archaeological investigations complement the documentary record and constitute a particularly significant source of information on the ancient Aztecs. Archaeologists researching the Aztec civilization are relatively fortunate: the Aztecs built grandly and often with permanent materials; they produced massive amounts of pottery, stone tools, and other goods; and the elite were rather enamored of an extravagant lifestyle that required exquisite adornments of fine stones, metals, and other imperishables. In other words, there is a great deal for archaeologists to work with, since they focus on material remains. And these material remains and their histories often complement and have some advantages over historical documents. In the first place, archaeological remains do not suffer from the kinds of biases that are the bane of historical documents: "a commoner trash heap was not intended to impress or deceive, and the archaeologist will find

it much as it was deposited in antiquity” (Berdan 2014: 20). In addition, archaeological investigations can reveal considerable time depth and changes over time. And furthermore, the material remains that are the “stuff” of archaeology often encompass areas of life largely neglected by the documents, especially the lives of commoners. For instance, based on archaeological remains, Michael Smith (2008: 172–173) has determined that the lives of Aztec commoners were similar in urban and rural settings; we could only guess this by reading the historical documents.

This is all well and good, but on the flip side, the archaeological record is still incomplete and uneven. Many objects produced by the Aztecs and their neighbors were perishable and fragile, and few of these have survived to be analyzed by modern scientists. These include huge quantities of paper (and the books made from paper); cloth, clothing, and sandals; reed baskets and seats; feathers and feathered objects; and so on. Some Aztec perishables that survived the conquest and the intervening 500 years include the seven (only seven!) pre-Spanish feathered objects held today in museums in Mexico and Europe; unfortunately, they resemble many other objects in museums by falling short in provenience information. So while they are technically interesting, they are historically wanting. Beyond material impermanence, archaeological explorations are sometimes impeded by settlement histories: it was common practice for colonial Spaniards to build their cities and towns on top of existing native cities and towns. Many native buildings were razed or ravaged as their stones were often pillaged for the new Spanish buildings. The placements of colonial and modern buildings all too frequently impede the possibility of tantalizing archaeological investigations. For instance, today Mexico’s National Palace largely sits atop an inaccessible Motecuhzoma’s palace. But there is cause for optimism: Aztec archaeology has never been so exciting and productive than in the past few decades. Among its shining stars is the continuing excavation of Tenochtitlan’s Templo Mayor in downtown Mexico City; since 1978 numerous religious and civil buildings have been uncovered and more than 200 ritual caches have revealed thousands and thousands of artifacts. Analyses of these buildings and artifacts, along with archaeological investigations in other Aztec urban and rural settings, continue to change our views and refine our understanding of Aztec life. Our progress on these fronts is far from over.

For general modern-day syntheses of the Aztecs and their civilization, we refer you to Frances F. Berdan's *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (2nd ed., 2005) and *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (2014), Michael E. Smith's *The Aztecs* (3rd ed., 2012) and *At Home with the Aztecs: An Archaeologist Uncovers Their Daily Life* (2016), Richard Townsend's *The Aztecs* (2009), David Carrasco's *Daily Life of the Aztecs* (1998), Jacques Soustelle's *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (1970), Warwick Bray's *Everyday Life of the Aztecs* (1968), Deborah L. Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría's *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs* (2017), and Manuel Aguilar-Moreno's *Handbook of Life in the Aztec World* (2006).

List of Fictional Characters

(in order of appearance)

Tzontemoc	(Descending-Head Keeper-of-Men): Advisor to
Tlacatecatl	Ahuitzotl (r. 1486–1502)
Malinalli	(Grass): Commoner and a widow
Ollin	(Movement): Priest of Tezcatlipoca in Texcoco
Tlexico	(Fire-Bee): Assistant priest to Ollin
Atapachtli	(Water-Shell): Priest of Tlaloc in Texcoco
Chimalchiuhqui	(Shield-maker): Independent featherworker
Centzon	(Plenty, Accomplished): Palace featherworker
Xochitl	(Flower): Fifteen-year-old daughter of featherworker
Quetzalhua	(Feather-owner): Professional merchant (<i>pochtecatl</i>)
Icnoyotl	(Poor): Terrace farmer
Ayotochton	(Little Armadillo): Neighbor of Icnoyotl and a farmer
Citlalin	(Star): Icnoyotl's wife
Xilotl	(Tender maize): Female slave
Ce Ocelotl	(One Jaguar): Male slave and absent husband of Xilotl
Quauhtli	(Eagle): Potter
Cihuacomitl	(Woman-Pot): Wife of Quauhtli
Tototontli	(Little Bird): Daughter of Quauhtli and Cihuacomitl
Chilpapatl	(Red Butterfly): A recently delivered mother
Coyochimalli	(Coyote Shield): Husband of Chilpapatl and a warrior who goes to war
Cuicatototl	(Singing Bird): Midwife known for her soothing voice
Yaotl	(War): Newborn baby and later, at age seven
Centzonxihuitl	(Many Turquoises): Daughter of Chilpapatl and Coyochimalli
Huilotl	(Mourning Dove): Basketmaker's daughter, fifteen years old

Cihuatlapalli	(Woman-Colors): Pigment and copal seller in Tlatelolco market
Ce Mazatl	(One Deer): Turquoise worker
Xoxoacatl	(Green Reed): Farmer, going to court
Ozomaton	(Little Monkey): Ce Mazatl's son and a turquoise worker
Tecolotl	(Owl): Rank-and-file warrior from Texcoco and a farmer