

AZTEC ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOHISTORY

This book provides an up-to-date synthesis of Aztec culture, applying interdisciplinary approaches (archaeology, ethnohistory, and ethnography) to the reconstruction of a complex and enigmatic civilization. Frances F. Berdan offers a balanced assessment of complementary and sometimes contradictory sources in unraveling this ancient way of life. The book provides a cohesive view of the Aztecs and their empire, emphasizing the diversity and complexity of social, economic, political, and religious roles played by the many kinds of people we call “Aztecs.” Concluding with three integrative case studies, the book examines the stresses, dynamics, and anchors of Aztec culture and society.

Frances F. Berdan is Professor Emerita of the Department of Anthropology at California State University, San Bernardino. She won the Outstanding Professor Award for the California State University system in 1982–1983. She is author or editor of twelve books, including *The Aztecs of Central Mexico* (2005, 2d ed.), *The Codex Mendoza* (1992, co-authored), *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (1996, co-authored), and *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World* (2003, co-edited). Her articles have been published in *Scientific American*, *American Antiquity*, *Latin American Antiquity*, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, and *Arqueología Mexicana*.

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FRANCES F. BERDAN

California State University, San Bernardino



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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	page viii
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>List of Cases</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>A Word about Terminologies</i>	xvii
<i>Nahuatl Pronunciation Guide</i>	xix

PART I. SETTING THE STAGE

1 Discovering, Uncovering, and Interpreting the Aztec World	3
2 The Aztecs as Mesoamericans	31

PART II. AZTEC SOCIETY AND CULTURE

3 Living on the Land	49
4 Craft Specialization, Commerce, and Trade	89
5 City-States and Imperial Rule	135
6 Living as an Aztec: Social Status and Daily Life	176
7 Religion, Science, and the Arts	215
8 The Aztec World: An Integrated View	259
<i>Glossary</i>	295
<i>Notes</i>	297
<i>References</i>	313
<i>Index</i>	335

FIGURES

1.1	Regions of Mesoamerica: Postclassic period	page 5
1.2	Aztec-period Basin of Mexico city-states mentioned in Chapter 1	6
1.3	Existing steps of the final two stages of Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor	7
C1.1	The founding of Tenochtitlan as depicted in the <i>Codex Mendoza</i>	8
1.4	A phonetic glyph, <i>tzinlli</i> , identifying a feather prepared for an elaborate mosaic by a skilled featherworker	11
1.5	Schematic layout of Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct	14
1.6	Vessels for drinking <i>pulque</i> and cacao	17
1.7	Golden eagle bones and decorated knives in offering 125, Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor precinct	17
C1.2	The renowned Aztec Calendar (or Sun) Stone	18
1.8	Bark beater currently in use in San Pablito, Puebla, Mexico	22
C1.3	A twentieth-century Nahua woman weaving on a backstrap loom in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico	24
2.1	Map of the boundaries of Mesoamerica	32
2.2	Classic-period Teotihuacan	35
2.3	The Teochichimeca	37
2.4	Sculptural reliefs from (a) Tula and (b) Tenochtitlan	40
2.5	Totonaca from the eastern Aztec Empire	45
3.1	Mesoamerican topography	50
C3.1	A central Mexican landscape	51
3.2	Map of the Basin of Mexico in 1519	53
3.3	A stair-step schematic of the central Mexican plateaus	57
3.4	A hilly landscape of eastern Mexico	58
3.5	(a) An Aztec-period commoner house excavated at Capilco, Morelos; (b) a twentieth-century peasant house in central Mexico	64
3.6	<i>Icnocalli</i> : a humble or poor commoner's house	65
3.7	(a) A <i>molcaxitl</i> (<i>molcajete</i>) for grinding up chiles and other foods; (b) a tripod serving dish	66
3.8	Generalized layout of a noble's palace with large central courtyard and royal dais	67
3.9	Decorated spindle whorls	68

Figures

ix

3.10	(a) Small bowl for steadying a lively spindle; (b) a young wife spinning, using spinning bowl; (c) a woman today spinning brown cotton	73
C3.3	The Chapultepec aqueduct	78
4.1	Tribute sources of precious materials	91
C4.1	(a) Finely crafted turquoise mosaic disk; (b) detail	93
4.2	(a) Pottery molds with figures; (b) pottery stamp	95
4.3	Black on orange pitcher	96
4.4	Map of notable craft communities in the Basin of Mexico	97
4.5	A father teaching his son the fine art of lapidary work	98
C4.2	Coyote-designed shield crafted of feathers and gold	100
4.6	(a) Softening the bark for making <i>amate</i> (<i>amatl</i>) paper today in San Pablito, Mexico; (b) a girl embroidering in San Pablito	105
4.7	A cloak designed Ocuilteca style	106
4.8	A Cuextecatl (Huasteca-style) warrior costume	107
4.9	Maguey (agave) plant	112
4.10	(a) Map of documented sixteenth-century weekly markets in the Basin of Mexico; (b) a twentieth-century Nahua woman selling her produce in a Mexican marketplace	119
4.11	(a) Cacao pod with beans; (b) large cotton capes, or <i>quachtli</i> ; (c) copper axe money	124
4.12	Map of imperial and international trading centers	129
4.13	Map showing <i>pochteca</i> presence in the Basin of Mexico	132
5.1	Basin of Mexico ethnic groups	139
5.2	Royal genealogy of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan	145
5.3	Twelve conquests of Axayacatl as depicted in the <i>Codex Mendoza</i>	157
5.4	Imperial tribute from the rich province of Tepequacuilco	162
C5.3	Imperial tribute from the Gulf coast province of Tochpan	167
5.5	Map of the Aztec Empire in 1519, with tributary and strategic provinces	172
6.1	Lords with exalted titles and insignia	181
6.2	Commoners receiving orders for corvée labor	182
6.3	A wealthy deceased merchant wrapped in cloth and expensive adornments, accompanied by his precious feathers, stones, gold, and a jaguar pelt	187
6.4	Mexica kinship terminology: consanguines	192
6.5	The elder brother favored over the younger	195
6.6	Mexica kinship terminology: affines	196
6.7	Childhood punishments and tasks, ages 11–14	201
6.8	A young couple tying the knot in marriage	204
6.9	Judges meting out punishments to offenders	213
7.1	A priestly astronomer	218
7.2	A recently excavated monolith of the earth deity Tlaltecuhlti, unearthed near the Templo Mayor in Mexico City	231
7.3	Tlaloc, god of rain	232
7.4	Macuilxochitl presiding over the game of <i>patolli</i>	233
7.5	(a) A priest offering incense; (b) a ceramic censor	236

7.6	A whistle or flute	239
7.7	A human heart sacrifice	240
7.8	Doctoring a head wound	247
7.9	Herbal medicines for sale in a twentieth-century Mexican marketplace	250
7.10	Aztec glyphs: (a) cave, (b) palace, (c) deer's foot, (d) the name Atonal	253
C7.3	Glyphic versions of the name Moquihuix	254
C8.1	Rewards in cloaks and military devices earned by courageous warriors	261
C8.2	Maps of world systems commodities and their movements	273–5
8.1	(a) An indigenous tailor wearing a cape over Spanish clothes in colonial times; (b) a modern Nahua woman sewing trousers for her husband	284
8.2	A native warrior wielding a Spanish sword during the war of conquest	287
8.3	A modern Nahua woman weaving wool on a backstrap loom	288
8.4	Modern paper image of the native maize god Chicomechitl (Seven Flower)	291

TABLES

2.1	Chronology of Central Mexico and the Basin of Mexico	<i>page</i> 34
6.1	Aztec Social Class Structure	185
7.1	The 260-Day Ritual Calendar	217
7.2	Cosmic Principles in the Aztec Worldview	220
7.3	Tenochtitlan Sequence of the Five Ages, or “Suns”	224
7.4	Ceremonies of the Monthly Calendar	226

CASES

1.1	How It Survived 1: The <i>Codex Mendoza</i>	page 8
1.2	How It Survived 2: The Aztec Calendar Stone	18
1.3	How It Survived 3: The Backstrap Loom	24
2.1	The Aztec Migrations: Prelude to Tenochtitlan	38
2.2	Mexica Development Strategies: Prelude to Empire	40
3.1	Geographical Zones in the Aztec World	51
3.2	Famines, Frosts, and Floods: Aztec-Period Disasters in the Basin of Mexico	54
3.3	An Engineering Marvel: The Chapultepec Aqueduct	78
3.4	Thinking Like an Aztec 1: The Natural World	84
4.1	Thinking Like an Aztec 2: The Luxury Artisan	92
4.2	Making a Fancy Feather Object	100
4.3	The Value of Things 1: Some Subsistence Goods	126
5.1	Imperial Personalities	142
5.2	How to Move a Rock (Imperial Style)	149
5.3	Imperial Tribute Payments: The Province of Tochpan	166
6.1	Behaving Like a Proper Noble or Commoner	178
6.2	A Merchant's Feast	188
6.3	After the Wedding, Then What?	197
6.4	The Exemplary Life	202
7.1	The Creation of the Fifth Sun, According to the <i>Florentine Codex</i>	221
7.2	Medical Issues and Cures: A Sampler	248
7.3	How to Write a Ruler's Name: Moquihuix of Tlatelolco	254
8.1	The Value of Things 2: Rewards for Warriors	262
8.2	Foreign Goods and What They Tell Us	273
8.3	Desperate Rivals and the Fate of a World	278

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xv

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A WORD ABOUT TERMINOLOGIES

This book is about the Aztecs. Or, more precisely, it is about the Mexica. In Mesoamerica. During Late Postclassic times. These terms may seem straightforward, yet they suffer quite variable use and therefore require some clarification.

AZTECS

This term is particularly troublesome. Found scattered about in various documents of the sixteenth century, it achieved general usage after Alexander von Humboldt popularized it following his 1804 journey to Mexico and the subsequent publication of his adventures (see von Humboldt 1995). While used variously today, *Aztec* usually refers to the inhabitants of the Basin of Mexico during the *Late Postclassic* period (as I use the term here), although it also appears in reference specifically to the *Mexica*. Sometimes the use is restricted to Nahuatl speakers (as it is in this book), sometimes not. The *Aztec Empire* is equivalent to the empire of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, which dominated central Mexico from 1428 to 1521. *Aztec* also refers to imperial architectural and artistic styles, as well as to specific chronological periods. Nicholson (1971: 116) reviews its use, finally concluding that its “continued use ... is probably justified by convenience and tradition, even if not, in the most technical sense, correct.”

MEXICA

Mexica were inhabitants of the sister-cities of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. Those of Tenochtitlan also came to be called *Tenochca* or *Culhua-Mexica*, the latter in recognition of their marriage ties to an honorable dynasty of nearby Culhuacan. These and other similar names of self-identification reflected history, heritage, and cultural and group affiliations.

MESOAMERICA

This term refers to a culture area, encompassing the parts of Mexico and Central America that relied on maize agriculture and experienced the rise and

fall of sophisticated civilizations in pre-Columbian times. The area's boundaries necessarily shifted over time, its northern extremity roughly at the fringe of the northern deserts, and its southern area reaching into present-day Honduras and El Salvador.

LATE POSTCLASSIC (OR LATE AZTEC)

Late Postclassic designates a time period generally defined as 1350 AD to the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs in 1521. Immediately preceding this time of Aztec domination were the *Middle Postclassic* or *Early Aztec* period (1150–1350 AD) and the *Early Postclassic* (950–1150 AD) (see Table 2.1; Hodge 1998: 198–199; Smith 2003d: 30).

NAHUATL PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

The language spoken by the sixteenth-century Aztecs was Nahuatl (NA-watl), called Classical Nahuatl by modern linguists. This language has persevered, albeit with five hundred years of linguistic change, and today is spoken by approximately 1.5 million persons in Mexico, many of whom call their language Mexicano (Me-shee-KA-no). The various dialects of this modern language, along with colonial written sources, offer clues to the pronunciation of the earlier language.

The word *Nahuatl* is one of a cluster of words referring to good sounds (for instance, “*nauatini*: cosa que tiene claro y buen sonido” – “something that has a clear and good sound”; Molina 1970: 63v). In essence, it means clear and understandable speech. The pre-Spanish Aztecs used a glyphic writing system that contained some phonetic elements (see Chapter 7), and after the Spanish arrival the Roman phonetic alphabet was applied to Nahuatl. The earliest Nahuatl alphabetic records derive from the Cuernavaca region (late 1530s, early 1540s) and were probably based on canons developed by a Franciscan friar but actually written by various indigenous individuals (Lockhart 1992: 335). A profusion of Nahuatl alphabetic documents of many types followed during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (see Chapter 1). These documents help us interpret actual speech patterns, since although “the system the friars taught the Nahuas was far from a perfect vehicle for recording the spoken language ... it was nothing to be ashamed of” (Lockhart 1992: 337).

On the basis of ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources, Classical Nahuatl pronunciation would have followed these general rules:

1. With very few exceptions, stress or emphasis was on the next-to-last syllable of a word.
2. Vowels were pronounced approximately as indicated here (this is considerably simplified, as Nahuatl vowels were, additionally, long and short):

a as in English *palm* *acatl* (A-catl): reed
e as in English *bet* *tepetl* (TE-petl): hill

i as in English **see** *chilli* (CHEE-lee): chile
o as in English **so** *tochtli* (TOCH-tee): rabbit

(Note: **o** and **u** often appear interchangeably in written documents, and the actual pronunciation may have been intermediate between the two sounds: e.g., *tochtli/tuchtli*, *Colhuacan/Culhuacan*.)

Combinations of *hu-* and *qu-* with another vowel were common. These were pronounced as follows:

hua as in English **wander** *huacalli* (wa-KA-lee): large basket
hue as in English **way** *huexolotl* (way-SHO-lotl): turkey
hui as in English **week** *ihuítl* (EE-weetl): feather
qua as in English **quality** *qualli* (KWA-lee): good
que as in English **kept** *quechtli* (KECH-tee): neck
qui as in English **key** *quiahuítl* (kee-A-weetl): rain

3. Most consonants were pronounced as in English or Spanish. Significantly different ones were:

ll similar to English **fill** *calli* (KA-lee): house

but held longer

tl is a single sound, a **t** *coyotl* (KO-yotl): coyote
 followed by a soft **l**

tz as in English **cats** *tzontli* (TSON-tee): hair

x as in English **she** *xochitl* (SHO-cheetl): flower

z as in English **silly** *mazatl*, *maçatl* (MA-satl): deer

c before an a, o, or *cacahuatl* (ka-KA-watl): cacao bean
 consonant = **k**

c before an e or i = **s** *ticitl* (TEE-seetl): physician

The **tl** at the end of words posed particular difficulties for the early Spaniards in Mexico, who often replaced it with their more comfortable Spanish **te**. So, for example, *ocotl* (O-kotl; pinewood) became *ocote*, *tecolotl* (te-KO-lotl; owl) became *tecolote*, and *xitomatl* (shee-TO-matl; tomato) became *tomate*.

4. Nahuatl has a glottal stop. This is a “catch” in speech sounding like “uh uh” in English. In many cases it appears that the early Spaniards in Mexico did not hear or recognize the sound, as it only occasionally appeared in written form. When they did include it, they typically indicated it with an *h*. For instance, *ohtli* (road) is most often written *otli*, *ozomahitli* (monkey) as *ozomatli*, and so on.

In sixteenth-century Europe, spelling rules were, to say the least, rather flexible. Colonial documents written in Nahuatl also followed this spelling fluidity. For example, the name of the ruler Motecuhzoma (Mo-tek’w-SO-ma) is variously seen as Moctezuma, Montecuzoma, Mohtecuzoma, Motecuhzoma, and Montezuma, among other creative spellings.