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Introduction



We never think of the great city of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire, which five centuries ago was bigger than London at that time. We never imagine sullen teenagers in some pre-Columbian Zona Rosa dive in that fabled Aztec metropolis, bad-mouthing the wretched war economy and the ridiculous human sacrifices that drove their empire.

Aztec culture provides a gateway to Mesoamerican studies because it represents the connecting point between the prehispanic past and the globalized present.

This book presents a concise overview of Aztec *civilization*. The use of the term “civilization” is not without controversy given its connection to outmoded ideas of cultural evolution and unwarranted implications of cultural superiority. It appears here not to imply that superiority or that a single pathway toward civilization has ever existed. Instead, the term acknowledges the complex, class-based, and culturally diverse practices encompassed by the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the Basin of Mexico region and its surrounding areas (see Map 1.1). Before explaining more about the Basin of Mexico, Aztec ethnicities, and the Nahuatl language, there is a question to answer: Why write such a book when a number of overviews exist?

How I wish I could find out what those sullen Aztec teenagers mentioned above thought about their world. While I cannot approach that granular, micro-level of information, there is still a lot to be learned about how

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MAP 1.1 Basin of Mexico with important Postclassic altepeme
 From Geoffrey W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism*, 1984, p.12,
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they lived, thought, and represented their world to themselves and others. Beyond the micro-level of analysis, their macro-level importance to world history as the “connecting point” between the prehispanic Americas and an early modern Europe that would birth our “globalized present” should be more widely recognized. We know a great deal about the Aztecs. Nonetheless, conveying who they were, how they lived their everyday lives, and how their ideas and ways of being lived on in people and images in Mexico through their own creativity is still challenging because so many misperceptions, even misinformation, circulate about them.

To further undermine all the misinformation, this book has three goals:

- To provide a concise overview of Aztec history and civilization. It represents my attempt to make sense of their ways of being in a holistic way using the insights of a broad array of primary sources and scholarship (older and recent) – some of which emphasizes the economy, some of which highlights language, thought, and intellectual and artistic trends – to understand Aztec societies and its people, men, women, and children, commoner, and noble.
- To explain in some detail the great number and range of sources about these people but also to describe the limitations of this source base, especially when either the material or the cultural and linguistic is emphasized at the expense of the other.
- To reemphasize the way material life and the economy functioned relative to politics, philosophy, religion, and

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intellectual and artistic developments. Aztecs created *value*, material and symbolic worth, every day. That value allowed them to survive and thrive. Value was created through *transformations* of bodies, things, and ideas. The overall goal of value creation and transformation was to keep the Aztec world – the cosmos, the earth, its inhabitants – in *balance*. These three concepts, value, transformation, and balance, are key to describing their civilization.

In this book, I discuss both material and symbolic value. Aztecs created material value (*patiuhтли* referring to something that has a price or specific value) for use and exchange and clearly intended to do so.

Molina's Dictionary

How do we know what words of the Aztec language, Nahuatl, mean? Our best source goes back to the sixteenth century and was written by Fray Alonso de Molina. He produced the first dictionary of the Nahuatl language, the *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana y mexicana y castellana*. This dictionary represents the essential foundation for the translation of Nahuatl, the language spoken by Aztecs. Born in 1513, Molina came to New Spain as a child where he learned Nahuatl. He died in 1579. One of the great early linguists among the Franciscans missionaries, he wrote a Spanish–Nahuatl dictionary published in 1555 and republished as an enlarged, more detailed edition in 1571, that included a Nahuatl–Spanish section. Other dictionaries exist and are discussed in the Bibliographic Essay.

They bartered, used money, and sought profits. Not to be mistaken for a nascent capitalist society, the Aztec economy nonetheless was partly market based, with the

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creation and exchange of material value an important activity for men and women. For Aztecs, symbolic value involved accruing and using sacred power. It was also useful for demonstrating, maintaining, or improving social status. Aztecs paid a great deal of attention to the transformations that unfolded in human, plant, and animal life. Cosmic time, history, and sacred forces were rooted in transformations of energy, humans, food, and weather. People could change into spirits, animals, or deity forms, and deities manifested themselves in many different ways. Raw materials could be transformed into everyday and luxury items. Value creation, transformation, and never-ending cycles of cosmic creation and destruction fueled the Aztec search for order, harmony, and balance. The Aztec world sought to find a balance between order and chaos. Falling (to fall, *buetzti*) and slipping (to slip or slide, *alabua*) conveyed disorder and loss of balance and were to be avoided physically, socially, and morally. Balance and reciprocity could also be maintained by debt payment or *nextlabualiztli* through offerings and sacrifice. Exchange, transformation, and reciprocity helped to maintain or restore order. Aztecs put vast effort into keeping their physical and spiritual world in balance, a balance that could only fleetingly be achieved.

The chapters of this book feature these ideas. Before discussing its contents, I explain why they are important and what sources exist to document Aztec history. Then the introduction discusses who the Aztecs were and describes the terminology for referring to the peoples of the central region of what is today Mexico, especially the area known as the Basin of Mexico. It also reviews the earlier history of the Aztecs.

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Why Are These Ideas Important?

First, two approaches have dominated Aztec studies over the past four decades. One approach, carried out mainly by archaeologists, examines the Aztec economy, how its market, trade, and tribute systems worked, and how these funded and empowered the political system of kingdoms, confederations, empire building, and war that characterized the late prehispanic-era central area of Mesoamerica. The other approach highlights language, writing, intellectual and artistic developments, religion, as well as sociocultural patterns, especially emphasizing gender and sexuality, done primarily by ethnohistorians working with texts rather than material remains. In actuality, value creation depended upon both economic activities and the ideas and beliefs about transformation and balance that gave the material realm meaning for Aztecs. A shorthand term for those patterned ideas and beliefs is *culture*.

Why try to examine the interplay of economy and culture? Material approaches help us understand how people *survive* in the world; cultural studies help us understand how people *perceive* their world. Material approaches do not always consider how people think, strategize, or create. Cultural studies often deemphasize the material and social and therefore give a misleading impression about everyday life and the critical role of the mass of population, non-elites or commoners, and how they lived. Cultural approaches need to recognize the importance of the material realm that provided the means through which Aztec religion, intellectual life, social statuses, and governance and war functioned. Recently, both more materially centered and culturally focused scholarship have begun to

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problematize the relationships among people, things, and thought through the materiality studies approach mentioned in the Preface and to which I refer in places in this book. It is important to acknowledge the interplay among objects, environments, language, and culture in shaping how Aztecs thought about, organized, and carried out the work necessary for familial, community, and state survival.

Second, a great deal of literature about the Aztecs, specifically about the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, the largest Aztec city-state in the Basin of Mexico, focuses on religion, especially their most spectacular practice, that of “human sacrifice.” As a result, in both scholarly and popular literature, Aztecs are quite often seen as freakish and exotic, a perspective this book challenges. If native peoples are thought of as the “other,” Aztecs are the *other* of the other. They are regularly trotted out as some humorous or horrifying human oddity. Here is just one example in the “humorous” mode: In his much lauded book, *The Secret History of Emotion*, which examines how seventeenth-century European philosophical rhetoric about feelings became part of common ideas about emotion, Daniel Gross says in the very first line, “If you are tickled to learn that Aztecs located passions in the liver ...” to make a point about something else entirely. The ridicule embedded in this throwaway line dismisses Aztecs as people and, at a minimum, treats their beliefs as ludicrous, placing them somehow outside the range of intelligent ideas about how emotions work. Hundreds, if not thousands, of horrifying examples exist, virtually all written to highlight the Aztecs’ supposed propensity for human sacrifice. This term and the killing rituals connected to war and fertility Aztecs practiced will be discussed in later chapters.

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Because so many colonial written sources describe Aztec religion, this has led to an outpouring of scholarship on that topic. A great deal of interest in human sacrifice as mentioned above – important though the topic is – has the unfortunate and unintended consequence of reinforcing a tendency to see the Aztecs as almost beyond the pale of human cultures. A religious practice that has taken on an almost unquestioned and definitional status, it became intertwined with the political and military goals of empire building of some Aztec groups and intensified as a result. While it appears bizarre and cruel to modern western eyes, Aztecs were far from the only Mesoamerican people to carry out ritual killings, and the world history of religion provides many examples of terrible violence performed either in ceremonial contexts or motivated by religious beliefs. Rather than engage in rationalization or the distancing scholars often do when describing Aztec religious beliefs and practices, I heed religious scholar David Carrasco's call to examine such violence carefully and deeply to argue that these killings and Aztec religion more broadly must be placed in their historical, cultural, and everyday contexts. Only in that way can we achieve a fuller picture of a people who are often depicted as so odd, so appalling. Yet these same people played a critical role in world history, not only for their agricultural, architectural, and artistic achievements, but because of the way they encountered and responded to Europeans upon their arrival.

With some exceptions, surprisingly few scholars really focus on this issue of finding the humanity of the Aztecs. Inga Clendinnen, relying primarily on a source discussed in detail in this chapter, the *Florentine Codex*, highlights the alien and the bleak in her well-known, oft-quoted

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book, *The Aztecs*. This type of exoticizing description is unfortunately too common. A scholar who does better is Caroline Dodds Pennock. She writes in her book *Bonds of Blood* that her goal is “to reinvest the Aztecs with a humanity and individuality which has frequently been denied to them” because of the mortal violence in which they engaged. Theirs was a “culture of contradictions,” bloody *and* beautiful. “Pity, sorrow, love, grief and joy were all deeply felt” and expressed in Aztec ways.

Whether drawing on material or cultural frames of reference to interpret Aztec history and culture, the immense source base they generated through their own writings, architectural presence, and art as well as through the ways they stimulated, even aided, Spanish writing about them has generated much attention. The Aztecs, in conjunction with their colonizers, created what is perhaps the largest written source base about any Native American people at the point of contact with Europeans and thereafter. However complex the task of interpreting the many different written texts that exist and which are complemented by a valuable but more fragmentary material base of archaeological remains, the fact is that written and archaeological sources offer an unparalleled amount of evidence about them.

Sources

The Aztecs are therefore intriguing not only because their civilization is complex and fascinating but also because the corpus of written materials directly concerned with their culture, history, and “conquest” is so remarkably deep. The clash between Aztec peoples and Spaniards,

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provoked by the Spanish invasion, gave rise to an immense number of written sources. If the archaeological material is not as rich as that which exists for the Maya, there is nevertheless an abundance of material remains, especially from outside of Tenochtitlan. But even for that *altepetl* (*altepeme*, pl., water-mountain, a city-state or kingdom, and the basin's largest) lying under today's Mexico City as it does, there is ancient material evidence that has been recovered. It is to the vast and intriguing written source base that I turn first.

While many written primary sources fall into two basic categories, Indigenous, native-language texts and Spanish-authored texts in that language, some represent what might be considered hybrids between the two. Consider Indigenous-authored texts: One important category of these consists of the pictorial codices, few of which actually date from the prehispanic period.

Codices

There are many codices relating to Aztec groups. In this book, I rely primarily on four that provide a great deal of information about prehispanic life and give an idea of the range of information available. The earliest is the *Codex Borgia*, believed by most investigators to be prehispanic. Its exact place of origin is unknown, but the eastern basin or areas to the southeast are possibilities. It consists of a deer-skin screenfold, meaning the panels have an accordion-like form whereby they fold out and in, with seventy-six leaves that represent a 260-day ritual calendar count (the *tonalpohualli*, discussed in Chapter 2) as well as sections covering prognostication for birth, marriage, climate, and ceremonies for a variety of deities (www.famsi.org/research/graz/borgia/thumbs_o.html).